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WHITLEY STRIEBER

THE WAR FOR SOULS

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BY

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EPILOGUE

PART ONE

AND A DARKNESS OVER THE EARTH

*The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.*

-WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

"Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood"

There is no supernatural. There is only the natural world, and you have access to all of it. Souls are part of nature.

-The Master of the Key

PROLOGUE

NOVEMBER 21
DARK LENS

MARTIN WINTERS HAD BEEN IN the Pyramid of Khufu a number of times, and he'd always felt the same wonder and the same claustrophobia. The work he was doing here was revolutionizing archaeology, and that was exciting, but this particular journey into the tiny pit beneath the structure was one he had been dreading.

His mission was to collect stone facing from the interior of joins, so that the new technique of mass-average decay dating could be applied and a final mystery solved. Over the past three years, his lab at Kansas State University at Uria had dated a dozen sites in South America using the technique. For the past nine months, they had been working on the Great Pyramid, and the results were so inconsistent that archaeologists worldwide, eager to dismiss findings that had devastated their theories about the past, were howling that the technique was defective.

What they had found was that the pyramid had not been built in just a few years, but that the work had been done in at least four stages over thousands of years, beginning at least six thousand years ago. The Fourth Dynasty pharaoh Khufu had indeed built the section where his glyph had been found, but the pyramid rested on a base that had been laid three thousand years before Khufu's reign.

Now it was time to address the pit beneath the pyramid, believed to be an earlier burial chamber. It was here that he expected to finalize his study of the Giza plateau, because this was thought to be the first human work that had appeared on it.

He had also worked on another site, a very ancient building called the Osirion, where rituals involving the Egyptian resurrection deity Osiris had been practiced.

His findings were so explosive that he had not yet published them. He wasn't willing to expose his technique to the howls of criticism that would

come when his proof that it had been constructed between 18,000 and 20,000 years ago was revealed. He'd also explored dating the Sphinx, but it was carved out of a solid block of limestone, which left him without anything to sample. He needed tiny fragments of stone that had been struck by quarrymen's tools, then soon after pressed against other stone and not moved since.

Before him, the descending passage awaited. The government did not allow the public to go into the pit, and for good reason. More than one visitor had been carried out in a state of panic, and the air was so bad that suffocation was a definite issue. Legends about the place suggested that it had been used by some of the Egyptian priesthoods as an initiatory chamber, presumably where people were taught to overcome whatever fears it caused.

"Okay," he said, testing his flashlight. Then again, "Okay."

Ahmad Mahfouz chuckled. "Okay."

"You bastard, you go down."

Ahmad laughed aloud. "It's not my machine that's driving everybody crazy."

Ahmad was not only one of the finest archaeologists in Egypt, he had an excellent mind for technology, so he understood why it was most unlikely that mass-average decay dating was wrong. It was, in fact, the holy grail of dating techniques: it could tell when stone was last worked, as long as the stone had not been exposed to air, thus the need to go deep into structures like this and drill into joined stones in order to get samples.

In Peru, where the Incas had fitted their stones with a jeweler's precision, this had been easy. In the pyramid and the Osirion, it had entailed careful drilling using sonar guidance. Here, also, so he was loaded with equipment.

The descending passage was narrow, it was pitch black, and madness stalked the people who went down.

"Radio check," he said as soon as he was ten steps in.

"We don't need it yet, Martin. I'm right here."

"I'm sorry, Ahmad. Look, if I get out of here alive, you're buying."

"It's been there for thousands of years-far longer than anybody thought, according to you. So why would it pick today to collapse?"

Feeling like an idiot, Martin headed deeper. Soon, a silence enveloped him that was unlike anything he had ever known, and he had been in some very quiet holes in the ground.

What was different about this silence was that it felt, he thought,

aggressive. Like it knew you were there and had been waiting, and now it wanted you. Like it knew.

But, of course, that was all in his mind. There was no malign presence here-or anywhere else, for that matter. No ghosts, no gods. This was simply what happens when you descend a narrow tunnel beneath six million tons of stone.

One thing the ancient Egyptians had not been were fools. They had understood this effect, which might be why the pit was here. The conventional wisdom was that it was an old tomb, but that wasn't at all clear. Half of it was an odd, roughly constructed platform with rocky knobs on it. Certainly no place for a sarcophagus, and the rest of the room was just as strange, being dominated by a diagonal cut in the floor about six feet deep. It was, in fact, in the walls of this pit that Martin hoped to find the fitted masonry that was crucial to his success.

He reached the chamber itself. He was now eighty feet beneath the pyramid's foundation. The air was thick and cool, clammy, even. His multi-gas detector was telling him that although carbon dioxide levels were high, he was basically safe. He carried an emergency respirator with an hour's supply of oxygen, more than enough to enable him to withdraw if he used up all the air in the confined space. Or, if the worst were to happen, to suffocate more slowly.

"I've arrived," he said into his radio.

There was a silence. A long silence.

"Mahmoud!"

"Oh, sorry, effendi. I was taking my lazy tea."

"I'm scared down here, man!"

"And I know it, and I'm trying to make some fun for you."

He was a great guy and a fabulous scientist, but there was a cultural gulf between a Moslem who had grown up when this was still Turkish territory, and now had to deal with the Brits. "Remember, I'm an American," he said. This was not the time for practical jokes with the radio.

He took a deep breath, then another. Then he opened his equipment bag and pulled out the radar. It could penetrate limestone to a depth of ten feet, and return detailed imagery of what was there. It could, in other words, locate the joins in masonry construction.

His plan was to send his tiny drill in about an eighth of an inch behind a join, then collect stone right off the join itself.

He did not shine his light around. He knew what was there, and he didn't want to see just how close the walls were. The ceiling was ten feet, though, so he was no longer being forced to hunch as he had when he was in the passage itself.

Back problems were the archaeologist's curse. You couldn't work without hunching and bending, often for hours, often in confined spaces, and the older you got, the more you became aware of this. At thirty-four, he wasn't feeling it much, not with swimming, squash, tennis and-well, Lindy. No, he worked his back plenty, and had two children to show for it at home. He also had a wife who was working to get one of the most extraordinary jobs in the world. Since 2010, when NASA had announced that some UFOs were indeed intelligently guided craft, perhaps extraterrestrial or perhaps from a parallel universe, the International Advanced Propulsion Physics Seminar had been working overtime to understand how they worked.

She was deeply involved in the politics of science, because she wanted to be on that seminar.

How that might be done by a professor from a college so low on the U.S. News list that it was at the bottom of a fold-down page he couldn't imagine. She was driven, though, obsessed with getting us off the planet in a very major way.

For his part, Martin worked deep within the archaeological establishment, which was why the revolution he was, in his own small way, creating was so fiercely opposed. But, in fact, the numbers were clear: human history had to be revised, for the simple reason that all of the most mysterious ancient structures so far tested were far older than had been assumed.

He watched as the radar's computer finally found itself and the tiny screen began to return a sensible image. "I've got picture," he said into the radio.

"Right. You're good on time."

The Imperial Department of Antiquities had given them an hour, from four to five in the morning, when the Pyramids at Dawn tours started. They did not want activity in this area of the pyramid during the time it was open to tourists. Inevitably, somebody would buy their way down, and that would mean big trouble for the poor archaeologist in here trying to work, not to say danger for the rubes with the bakshish coming down here to chant or whatever.

He glanced at his watch. It was exactly four-thirty. It would take a little more time to penetrate the drill, secure the sample and withdraw it. He was

not good on time, he was okay on time.

Only a practiced eye could understand the readout that presented itself on the tiny screen of the scanner. He was pressed up against the confined second stage of the pit, attempting to avoid the twenty-foot-deep hole that had been dug in the nineteenth century by Caviglia and after him the English explorer-or was that plunderer?-Howard-Vyse. The green readout shimmered, growing lighter where the stone was more dense, darker where the density was less.

Then he found what he was looking for-a dark, straight line. This was undoubtedly a join of some kind. He couldn't tell, looking at the surface of the wall. For years, it had been assumed that it was carved out of the virgin limestone. Not until radar imagery from above had revealed that there were structured walls down here had it been realized that this particular pit facing was made of quarried stone.

"Commencing drilling."

"Roger that."

He took out the long, thin bit and fixed it into the drill itself. The bit was worth thirty thousand dollars, being diamond tipped and made of the hardest tool steel there was, with a Knoop hardness rating of 920. It was only about the diameter of three pins, so it had to be hard in order to penetrate.

As he worked with it, he wondered how in the world the Egyptians had hollowed out diorite jars with drills that must have been not much thicker than this. This drill would not stand up against diorite. In fact, it was being challenged by this granite, and he stopped to let it cool. Although he carried three of the bits, he certainly didn't want to chew budget by using them up. He had plans for digs all over the world. Lindy might be taking us to the stars, but he was revising history, and that was important, too.

It was then that he noticed the vibration. The sensation was coming up through his shoes.

"Ahmad?"

"Go ahead."

"There's something...happening. I feel a vibration."

"The drill set up a harmonic?"

"Possibly, but it's off now."

As he stood there, the vibration became a pulsation. It was quick, regular, machinelike. If he did not know it to be an impossibility, he would have said that a compressor of some sort had turned on somewhere beneath this chamber.

What he must be feeling was some factory in Cairo starting its motors for the day. The entire limestone plateau might be set to vibrating by something like that. "I got it, it's a city sound. Some factory."

"A new machine tool plant is a kilometer from here."

"That would be it." Vibration, a new variety of pollution. He predicted that it was going to be playing hell with the archaeological district. He returned to his work.

Now, with the bit cooled down, he made better progress by just touching it to the surface, rather than pressing. Farther in, also, the stone was softer. He had been working for some time before he realized that there was dust coming down from above. Once again, he stopped the drill. He shone his light around, following the dust to its source, which proved to be the ceiling.

He was astonished to see that the finished ceiling of the chamber was spitting little geysers of dust, as if it was being compressed, or pressed from above.

"Ahmad?"

"Yes."

"Anything going on topside?"

"Interestingly enough, I saw a jackal. I thought Cairo had run them all out by now."

He returned to his work. He was bare millimeters away from getting his sample-and the drill was moving-and there! Now to withdraw and go in with the collecting tool, a tiny claw made of the same hardened steel.

He took the silver tool out of his case and plugged it into the zinc-air generator he was using for power, then inserted it into the narrow hole made by the drill. Or rather, tried. The pulsations made it harder than threading a needle.

"Do we know if that machine shop ever shuts down?"

"Come out, Martin."

"Why?"

"Because I'm starting to feel it up here, and that should not be."

Bits of stone were now dropping from the ceiling, and he knew that this was no ordinary event. The reason he knew was that the floor was clean and the room intact. Therefore, this was something new and Ahmad was right, he needed to get out of here right now.

He was millimeters from finishing, though. He watched the now vibrating screen, manipulated the instrument.

"Martin, are you coming up?"

"Hold on."

"Are you pulling out? What are you doing?"

He didn't answer. The pulsations got bigger, whoomp...whoomp...whoomp and he struggled, trying to catch just the tiny bit of stone he needed.

There was a crash and a piece of ceiling that must have weighed a quarter ton plunged past him into the Caviglia pit.

"The police are here, they are saying come out."

"On my way."

But still the instrument wasn't set. Watching the screen, he maneuvered it frantically now. The weight of what was above pressed down on him like a great, suffocating hand.

He thought of Lindy and Trevor and Winnie, and drew the instrument out. Another block fell, and he knew that it was over. He started to gather his equipment.

Whoomp! Whoomp! Whoomp!

This wasn't an earthquake, no earthquake felt like this. There was a machine down there, there had to be.

A series of sounds like shots being fired came echoing down the passage. In the dust, his light revealed cracks appearing along the walls.

He dashed for the passage, hunched, half running, half crawling, tearing his knees and hands to ribbons, racing along as the whole tunnel twisted and swayed like a rubber tube in the hands of a mad giant.

Screaming now, he burst upward. The floor crumbled beneath his feet, showers of stone fell around him, his progress slowed. The pulsations were huge now, great, shuddering seizures of the ground itself.

And then there were arms, people dragging at him, and he was coming out, he was free-and they were outside the pyramid. Coughing, his eyes closed by a thick layer of dust, he staggered and tried to collect himself.

What in the name of all that was holy was going on here?

"Run, Martin!"

He felt somebody tug at him, managed to wipe his eyes enough to see, turned and observed the strangest thing he had ever seen in his life.

Looking up the north face of the gigantic structure, he found himself watching huge ripples. It was as if the stone blocks themselves were liquefying and threatening to pour down on them like some kind of bizarre

flood.

He mouthed the words, too astounded to speak them: The pyramid's collapsing.

Sirens started wailing, one and then more, until the sound filled the air. In the distance, a line of tour buses on their way to a Pyramids at Dawn experience began making clumsy attempts to turn around in the roadway.

Martin followed Ahmad and the three policemen, running toward the wall that controlled access to the archaeological zone. Behind them there was a noise. It was a howl from the very throat of the world, screaming like a jet going down, like a million madmen burning alive.

Martin turned and saw that the pyramid was now bulging, as if it was becoming a huge block, its pyramidal shape disappearing as the stones that had been there for thousands of years burst from their rest and flew out into the sweet of dawn.

All across Cairo and up and down the Nile, people looked toward the sound, toward Giza. What they saw was unrecognizable to them and completely incomprehensible, a great, black column gushing into the sky, its walls flickering with tan dots.

Each of these dots was a stone weighing between one and three tons. Each was the size of a large automobile. And all were about to fall on the helpless millions of people who jammed the city of Cairo.

Martin understood this quite clearly. His belief, at this point, was that terrorists had detonated an atomic weapon under the pyramid. It had been his extraordinary misfortune to be inside it during the moment when the ages-old structure, the most important construction on earth, met its end.

As the great fountain of stones reached its apogee at an altitude of over two miles, Martin lay down beside the wall. He was not a religious man, and was surprised by the deep feeling of peace that had come over him. Death had come to him. This was quite certain.

But then a paroxysm of fear made him grab his head, made him scream into the continuing, expanding roar of the vast unfolding explosion.

Then he stopped. He brought before him an image of Lindy, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, one of the wisest human beings he had ever known. He decided that he would die like this, with her filling his mind.

And then he heard Trevor's voice as clearly as if he had been standing there say, "When's Dad coming home?" And Winnie replied with prim care, "Trevor, you're so impatient. He'll be home when he's finished."

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to be able to hear them, and then the big clock in the hall was ringing the hour, eight deep bongs.

A whistling sound turned to a scream turned to a hoarse roar, and a stone crashed down into the desert thirty feet from where he lay. The ground leaped and knocked the breath out of him. He saw Ahmad, his eyes glazed with shock, his lips pulled back from his teeth, staring straight at him.

Another block hit, then another, then it was raining stones and there were screams and above them the clanging crunch of stones as they struck buses and cars, and the distant roar of the ones hitting the Nile, and explosions as they bombed Cairo. A row of houses a quarter of a mile away disappeared in dust, the road was smashed, cars ran into the desert weaving crazily, a bus, careening away from the scene, was struck in the rear and lifted up as if begging for deliverance, and then exploded in flames and desolate, shattering screams.

It went on and on and on, for what seemed like hours, then days, then it was as if it entered a sort of eternity, an endless explosion. Always, there would be another stone from the sky. Always, another chorus of screams, always another bone-shattering jolt.

Until that was no longer true. What he heard now was a silence even deeper than the one that had oppressed him in the pit. In part, it was because of his stunned left eardrum and the ringing in his right ear that would not go away for days. In part it was the shock of seeing what looked like a cliff where Ahmad had been, just feet from his face. Beside it, one of the policemen lay sprawled on his back, sightless eyes staring at the sky, dead from shock. A German tourist wandered about calling out, "Morgen hat gebrochen, Morgen hat gebrochen."

Morning has broken. And, like thunder out of the east, the sun rose behind the storied plateau of Giza, wreathed now in smoke, choked by rubble.

Martin got to his feet. He was staying at the Mena House just across from the pyramids, and he began walking toward it now. He realized that he was staggering, but it didn't matter, the other ghosts on the ruined plateau were just the same.

In contrast to the plateau, the gardens of the Mena were still verdant. Half a dozen huge blocks were embedded in the golf course, looking as if they had been there forever.

The hotel itself was undamaged, the staff and guests outside, looking up

at the great, black column that hung in the sky, blowing slowly south with the prevailing winds of the season. The British and Egyptian Royal flags flew in stately splendor, as unaffected as the hotel itself.

November in Egypt could be so lovely, with even Cairo enjoying a few crystal days.

Martin went through the upper lobby and into the Khan el Khalili. There was a waiter there, standing at a window. "I would like a cup of coffee," Martin said. The waiter did not move. Then he did, he turned. His eyes streamed with tears. Martin realized that he was crying, too. They embraced, and the two men wept together like children. "I lost my friend," Martin said.

"I lost my Egypt, our heart is broken now, sir."

Later that day, Martin went onto the roof of the hotel, to see for himself what everyone was talking about, everyone who was not fighting fires or cleaning up the bombed city, or looking helplessly at the great stones that had shattered her.

Before him stood the plateau, and where the pyramid had been there was a new object, a gigantic black lens. It was afternoon now, with light made delicate by the dust.

He stared out across the space that separated the hotel from the pyramid complex. Here and there, figures could be seen moving around it, for the most part Royal Egyptian Police in their green uniforms, and British soldiers in khaki. A resplendent Rolls Royce stood in the road in front of the Mena, and the Governor General could be seen striding amid the huge blocks, followed by a crowd of officers.

Martin gazed long at that lens. It appeared to be perfectly round and convex, perhaps twenty feet high at its center. He cast across his memories of the past, trying to find in the encyclopedia of his mind some point of reference.

There was nothing. The past had not portrayed this. But he did not think it an accident that it had emerged immediately beneath the Great Pyramid. Of course it wasn't an accident.

Had the pyramid, then, been built to block it, or perhaps to conceal it?

These were mysteries, but the even greater mystery was, what was it for? Clearly, it was the product of an advanced technology-and not only that, a very old one. The Giza Plateau had not been disturbed in thousands of years. Certainly, nothing this large had been buried here after the pyramids were built.

It was old, it had to be, but its construction must have presented more than just a structural challenge. The energy needed to blast all of those stones into the sky would have to be enormous. And yet, in all the years that the ground beneath the pyramid complex had been probed with tunnels and shafts, and examined with sonar and radar, no sign of the lens or of any sort of explosive device had been observed.

In fact, very little had been found. In the 1950s, the two so-called "solar boats" had been found buried in the boat-pits along the southern side of the Great Pyramid. But nothing else had ever been located-a few shadowy areas that suggested caves, but that was all.

God, but look at it! Gleaming in the light. Ominous as it could be.

The air was filled with the mourning of sirens. He thought of the British Empire as being ramshackle and overextended, but the Cairo Emergency Service was certainly well supplied with vehicles. He wondered about the hospitals, though. Had they as yet extended the National Health System to the protectorates, as well as the outright colonies? He didn't know, but if not, then the hospitals here were liable to be primitive and he was damned lucky not to have been hurt.

Even his ears had stopped ringing.

He turned away, unwilling-or unable-to stare any longer at the gaping dark eye that had replaced that great wonder. Eternal pyramid, built for the ages.

How long had it taken to destroy it? No more than five minutes.

He'd started back downstairs when he hesitated. This was a nightmare of some kind. He wasn't awake.

But he was.

He turned back, and there it was again. Nothing to call it but a lens. Huge, glaring darkly upward at sky into which it had spit the pyramid.

As old as it must be, it seemed perfect, fresh and new, come up out of the earth like some demon's eye that had opened after a sleep that had crossed the ages.

Which was exactly what had happened.

ONE

NOVEMBER 22
DANCING IN THE DARK

GENERAL ALFRED WILLIAM NORTH ENTERED his superior officer's luxurious suite in the Pentagon. General Samson had been appointed Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff last year, and had taken Al with him into the stratospheric world of high-level military politics.

General Samson's orderly had not been present to announce him. Given the present state of chaos within the military, that wasn't too surprising. He was probably on some detail or other within the vast building, and there hadn't been anybody available to spell him.

They were due at the White House in ten minutes, so Al didn't stand on ceremony. Knocking once, he entered the office. Al had met Tom Samson when he'd been promoted to Air Force Chief of Staff. He'd been a very efficient officer, and personable.

That, however, turned out to apply only to superior officers. Now that he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and Al was still vice chairman, things had changed. Tom was a cold, charmless yeller, he was intolerant of failure, he was extremely demanding. Al still believed him to be a good officer, but his approach to the job was often too rigid. Truth to tell, Al had expected this promotion to be his. Counted on it, actually. What had happened had been a serious humiliation and a sad end to a great career. He had known the president for years, and he could not understand why he'd chosen Tom over him, frankly. He'd carried out his responsibilities with excellence.

The difference between the two of them was that Tom had served in fighters and Al had trained in them but served his entire career as a staff officer. Tom had a Purple Heart and an Air Medal. Did Al, who had never heard a shot fired in anger, envy Tom his participation in the Cuban Troubles?

Short answer: damn right. If it had been him, his career would not have stopped just short of the pinnacle.

"Tom, I'm here," he said. Tentatively.

Silence.

The bathroom door was ajar, so Al walked toward it. "Tom?" he repeated. There came a shuffle of sound from inside the bathroom.

"Excuse me," Tom replied, an angry challenge in his rumble.

"Tom, I'm sorry, Lenny's not out front-"

"Get out of here!"

"Sorry!"

As Al headed for the door, he noticed, open on Tom's desk, a silver box about the size of an old-fashioned cigarette case. Inside were six narrow golden cylinders. Lying beside them was a hypodermic, silver, that tapered seamlessly from a wide back with a socket in it that would obviously fit one of the cylinders, to a needle with a point so fine it almost appeared hairlike.

Al hurried out, his mind racing. That outfit-was he an addict of some sort? A cancer victim? And what strange looking equipment.

A moment later, Tom slammed his office door with such force that the entire room shook.

Al hardly heard. If Tom was an addict, very frankly, that could be good. Worth knowing.

At that point, Lenny reappeared.

"General, let me announce you," he said.

"He knows I'm here."

Lenny went white. "He does?"

Al nodded. Nothing more was said, and a moment later Tom strode out, resplendent in his uniform, his gray eyes staring straight ahead, his face expressionless.

Lenny snapped to attention.

"We need to talk," Tom snarled at him as he passed his desk.

"Yessir!"

"You bet, yes sir, young fella." He went stomping off into the outer part of the suite.

Al followed him, and together they descended in his private elevator to the basement garage, where his staff car awaited them, rear door open. All of this was done in silence. In point of fact, you just plain did not talk to Tom unless he spoke first. He wasn't responsive to social chatter, jokes, gossip-anything like that. In fact, the most amazing thing about him was that he held this most political of all military appointments. How the bastard had managed it, every single general on his staff would have loved to know-if only to help

find a way to hurt him.

Historically, the Joint Chiefs was a solid, smooth-running organization. Not under Tom. Tom had made it into a rat's nest full of spider webs. Men who had worked together for years now fought like what they were-creatures in a trap.

In the year since Tom had come, there had been five "resignations." All, in fact, firings, brutal, mean spirited, often mysterious. Worse, they had been followed by vindictive little appointments to posts designed to humiliate the victims. General Halff had been Army Chief of Staff. He was now serving out his time as commander of Fort Silker in Mississippi. Fort Silker was being decommissioned, so Harry's basic job was to arrange for environmental cleanup and the sale of assets.

Al settled into the car. He knew that this meeting was important, but he wasn't quite sure what it was about. He supposed that Tom knew, but Tom wasn't saying. Perhaps Al was on the chopping block. Perhaps Al was due to be caught unprepared in front of the president, a certain prelude to destruction.

Except for one thing: Al had known James Hannah Wade since they were roomies at the Academy. In recent years, the friendship had necessarily become arm's-length, but the two men were still close enough that Jimmy would on occasion invite Al to hammer squash balls with him. This usually happened when the going in this very difficult presidency got really rough. But Jimmy was flying high right now, so no squash with his old friend. And, as both of them knew, betrayed friend.

The car turned onto Fourteenth Street, headed past the familiar emerald arches of a McDonald's, then entered the White House grounds.

"We're listening today," Tom said. "An intelligence report."

"What's the general area, sir?"

Tom turned toward him, then turned back again. A moment later, the car stopped, and they were walking through the White House to the Cabinet Room-but then they passed the Cabinet Room and the Oval and headed through Deputy Chief of Staff Morrissey's office into the Presidential Study.

It was an improbable place for a large meeting-except that it wasn't a large meeting.

"Hi, Al," the president said. Al could feel Tom stiffen. Good sign, maybe the president had finally realized that the appointment had been the mistake that Al had told him it was-practically the only political thought he'd ever

shared with him. He turned to Tom. "Good morning, General."

"Good morning, Mr. President."

A moment later, National Intelligence Chief Bo Waldo came in, followed by two aides, who proceeded to hover over the TV.

Waldo spoke. "Yesterday, there was a massive explosion in Cairo that resulted in at least a hundred thousand deaths and property damage on an extraordinary scale. The explosion destroyed the Pyramid of Cheops."

"And?" Tom snapped.

The president gave him a sharp look.

But his impatience was understandable. The Cairo disaster was on every news channel in the world. You couldn't find anything else on TV, radio, the Internet-you name it. Al thought, they know the terrorist group responsible, and they're about to inform us that the Brits are going in with a hit. We were being asked to provide some sort of support, no doubt, and the problem with this kind of thing was always the same: how did you do what one empire wanted without angering another?

Waldo cleared his throat. "We haven't had another one in half an hour, Mr. President," he said.

Al's mind whirled. Another one? What was he saying, here?

"How many are there, at this point?"

"Including the one that just came up in Cambodia, that would be fourteen."

Al wanted to ask what in the world they were talking about, but he couldn't without revealing his ignorance. Tom's glare showed that he was thinking along exactly the same lines. The Joint Chiefs controlled no fewer than five uniformed intelligence services, in addition to the Philippines Colonial Agency and the Cuban Intelligence Corps, so how was it that they hadn't been briefed by their own people? Tom would want that looked at, and for once Al would be in total agreement with him. It was an inexcusable lapse.

The president said, "And they're all-it's the same? Distance, all that?"

"Each one is exactly six thousand two hundred twenty miles from an axis point eleven hundred miles from the north pole. They've all appeared in the middle of ancient ruins. The Institut Indo-Chinois de Culture has already started testing the one in Preah Vihear. Thus far, it has a hardness number of at least three thousand, just like Cairo. Clearly, the same substance, and by far the hardest thing on earth. The only weapon that might affect these objects

would be a hydrogen bomb."

"Do we have any of those?"

"We do, Sir," Tom said. "Well hidden from Royal Air Force mandatory inspections, but we do."

The Brits were rigorous enforcers of the Non-Nuclear Pact between the five empires, of which the U.S. was the smallest and the most lightly armed—and therefore the only one that actually needed to obey the damned pact. Certainly, the French didn't. And as far as the Czar was concerned or the secretive Japanese Emperor, who knew what they might be doing in their hidden lairs? There might even be a Chinese warlord with a nuke of some sort.

The president went to the window. "I've worried about one coming up here in Washington. Should I?"

"Unless there's another phase," Waldo responded, "this thing has the look of being completed. But you know, of course, what's odd—every single location was an ancient sacred site."

"So they knew," the president said, turning suddenly, staring first at one of them and then another.

Al saw a plea in his eye, as if the American people were there, pleading through him for knowledge.

"Lenses," Al said. Tom gave him a sharp look, but he continued. "Lenses reflect and they refract. Do we have any idea which it is that these are supposed to do?"

Waldo shook his head. "So far, they're simply there. According to MI-3, the one in Cairo isn't emitting or absorbing any known energy. The Institut says the same about the one in Cambodia."

"Any idea if they're natural, then?"

"We don't think they're natural, Mr. President." Waldo replied.

"But it's a good question," Al said. "If they're manmade, who constructed them and why?"

"That is an urgent question," President Wade snapped. "Possibly the most urgent question in the history of the world." He looked from one of them to the other. "You seem unimpressed, Tom."

"Sir, if we don't know anything about them, how can we make that assessment?"

The president stiffened. "It's instinct, goddamn it!"

"There's something else you need to see," Waldo said hurriedly. "Roll the

imagery, please."

The TV screen flickered, came to life. Al saw people walking through a rather pretty countryside. They were dressed oddly, some in night-clothes, others in underwear, one or two in coats, one completely naked. There were men, women, and children.

The group was being followed by green and white checked police cars, with their blue light bars flickering.

"What are we looking at, here?" President Wade asked.

"This is in Gloucestershire," Waldo said.

"Shot when?"

"It's live," Waldo replied. "During the night, these people were struck by a bright light that emanated from objects overhead that were disk-shaped in structure. They've been walking due north ever since. They've come fourteen miles in eleven hours."

"Are these things related to the disks we've been seeing for years? The ones NASA claims are intelligently controlled?"

"We don't know. We really don't know much of anything."

"Bottom line, though, these people can't be stopped, am I right?" Tom asked, his voice full of sarcasm.

"They cannot be stopped, General Samson," Waldo snapped back. "They can be demobilized only by being drugged. An examination of one of them completed at a hospital in the area showed a normal physical specimen. But a brain scan revealed a different picture. The brain function was about a third normal."

"They've lost something, then," Tom responded. "Their intelligence?"

"We don't know," Waldo replied.

"Do we have any imagery of the attack?" the president asked.

"Witnesses report disks glowing dull orange."

Al had a thought. "Where is the nearest lens, in relation to Gloucestershire?"

"What relevance does that have?" Tom asked. "If I may be so bold, General?"

"No, it's a good question," Waldo replied, "and the answer is, the nearest lens in the Tassili Desert in Algeria. And what I was about to add is that there's a Foreign Legion report that a burst of orange fireballs was emitted from the lens there. But the event took place just four minutes before the Gloucestershire attack, so-

"They're related," Al said. Instantly, he regretted it. He'd spoken in haste.

"General, I fail to see-" Tom began.

The president interrupted him. "I agree. Whether the things that struck in Gloucestershire came out of the lens in Algeria, God only knows. But there is obviously a relationship of some kind between all of these things-the disks we've been seeing for fifty years, the ones that attacked those people, and the lenses, and I might add that I think we need to assume the worst, here."

"All I see are British and French problems," Samson said. "Unless some of these things are in the Japanese Empire. Are they?"

"No, so far only British and French imperial territory is involved, and some South American countries."

"Then I say we wait," Tom announced, his voice taking on the tone of the pulpit. "Maybe it's some kind of a secret weapon. Nothing to do with us. The Czar's supposed to have some doozies, and he wants African possessions. He'd like Egypt, in fact, to annoy the Turks, if nothing else."

The president turned on him. "Why are you here, Tom? Why in hell do you think you're here? Something is wrong. Goddamn wrong." He gestured at the screen. "This will spread, you know."

Tom held his ground. "We have no evidence of that, Sir."

"It will spread!"

"It's not an attack on the United States. And there's no evidence that such an attack is imminent."

"Tom," the president responded, "as soon as you get back to your office, you are to go to DEFCON 1 and issue a War Warning to all commands, worldwide."

"Sir, I-"

"We're under attack, you damn fool," the president said. "The blue, white, and red, damn you! Not just a couple of the empires and a few banana kingdoms. Us!"

Tom went stiff. His eyes seemed literally to glitter with murderous rage.

But the president wasn't finished. "Gentlemen, I've got a military background, and I know when my enemy is probing my defenses. That's what happened in that little town in the very heart of the most powerful empire on earth. Bo, I want you to liaise with the Brits, the French, all the empires on this, and I want CIA to watch the streets worldwide for other, similar incidents."

Al could smell the fear in the room, and found himself hoping that

President Wade was not acting in the haste of panic.

"Al, you're to organize a task force. You are ordered to find a way to destroy those lenses, all of them. I want it fast, and I want a one hundred percent certainty of success."

"Sir," Tom asked, "is an attack on them wise? We're in the region of the unknown here."

"The man with the medals suggests retreat," the president said. "Okay, I hear you. Al, when you're ready to attack these things, inform me at once. Directly." He pointed to a telephone. "Directly," he repeated.

"Yes, Sir. We only have four bombs, Sir. We'll need British and French support."

The president sighed. "Waldo, how many nuclear bombs do I have?"

"Twenty-three, Sir. Four in the hands of the military, the rest underground at-"

"Tom, Al, you understand that you had no need to know on this."

"Sir, I beg to differ," Tom said. Al could see that his neck was red, his veins pulsing. "We had a need to know. Strategic planning, war games-of course we had a need to know!"

"And I have a need not to find myself face to face with a quartet of outraged imperial ambassadors all demanding that I hand over my nukes. You leak, Tom. Nobody on your staff likes you, and that makes for security issues, doesn't it?"

Al fought his face. The least trace of the smile that his enjoyment of this was urging to his lips would get him fired before sunset.

One of Waldo's aides listened to his earpiece. He nodded to the intelligence chief.

Waldo said, "Mr. President, we have a party present at this time who might be able to help us. There was an archaeologist inside the pyramid as the explosion developed. His working party was killed, but he got out. He's here."

"Excellent work, Bo," the president said. "Now, you listen and learn, Tom. Bo here wants to impress his president. This is what I like to see. You might take that under advisement."

Tom bristled, then plastered a rigid grin on his face. A dusty young man, handsome but looking profoundly exhausted, came wide-eyed into the room.

MARTIN HAD BEEN GIVEN EGGS and a whole lot of coffee on the plane. It was quite incredible-Air Force private jets all the way from Cairo to

Le Bourget, then here. He had been able to talk to Lindy and the kids via videophone from the plane. In normal times, incredibly fun. Now, not so fun. He was heartsick about what had happened, still trying to accept it as reality. The Great Pyramid, gone, replaced by that...thing. Lens, they called it-he'd called it that, in fact, for the BBC, which had interviewed him just before he left Cairo. In fact, he'd probably started the use of the word.

Now here he was in the White House, in the West Wing, no less. He was a reeking mess, he supposed. Nobody had bothered him with such niceties as a change of clothes or a shower. He still had Giza dust in his hair, as a matter of fact.

A man in a black suit took him to a book-lined study. He'd hoped to see the Oval Office, but this was apparently the inner sanctum of the Great American Fool, President Jimmy Wade. He'd gutted National Academy of Science budgets, he'd pulled grant money out of dozens of universities, Uriah included. He was a man willing to spend billions supporting American trade associations in their perpetual war with the larger imperial economic systems, but his education program was a sham, his entitlement system was a mess, and his interest in the sciences appeared to be, if anything, negative.

Under Wade, even NASA's exobiology and alien culture programs were languishing, and now that it was known that UFOs were intelligently guided, these two programs seemed to be doing some of the most important science in the world. Not to mention the Advanced Propulsion Physics Seminar.

Still, he was the president, the leader of the American people and one of the more powerful world leaders, and seeing him here, all human and vulnerable, was an odd experience. He came to his feet and put out his hand. Martin shook it, and looked into the strange, empty eyes of the professional leader.

Another man, bald, big-dominating the room, in fact, despite the presence of two resplendent generals-pumped his hand, drew him past the president, and sat him down. "We know you've had a shock," he murmured. His hands were soft, his eyes were not full of fear like the president's. They sparkled. They watched. Martin recognized Bo Waldo, of course, he was all over the news all the time.

"Doctor Winters-may I call you Marty-"

"Martin."

"Okay, Martin is a distinguished member of our country's archaeological community. He's managed to cause a small revolution of his own."

It wasn't small, it was huge, but Martin couldn't say that.

"You lived through the pyramid?" the president asked. "Where were you, because I've been in that thing, and it's not easy to get around."

"I was in the burial chamber a hundred feet beneath the surface."

"How could you have been there and survived?" one of the generals asked. This was a man with a narrow, almost cruel face, and small, ugly eyes, gleaming as black as obsidian.

Martin decided not to even address the question, it was so impertinent and, frankly, so stupid.

"What General Samson means is--"

"I meant what I asked, Al!"

The other general went instantly silent. Obviously, the tall man with the mane of white hair was the lesser of the two. He had a better face, aquiline, aristocratic, and, Martin thought, sad.

"I survived because I was so deep. We picked up unusual pulsations about three minutes before the structure blew, so I had time to withdraw."

"Doctor Winters, if I tell you that these same lenses have appeared around the world at fourteen different sites, all the exact same distance from an axis point near the north pole--"

The room became distant, the voices like memories.

"Doctor Winters?"

He fought to pull himself together. The first one of them he saw was the beady-eyed general, gazing at him like a guard might at a dangerous prisoner. He swallowed, looked around for water, saw none. "All right," he said, "I know what that would be. That's the Sacred Circle. You'd have Ollantaytambo, Easter Island, Preah Vihear--are you telling me that all of these sites have been destroyed?"

"All," the president said. "Our interest is this. Are these lenses a matter for concern, as I certainly think they are. If so, would you be willing to speculate on defense implications?"

Wade was portrayed by the media as an idiot, but that was an impressive question. "Sir, we know that there was some sort of advanced civilization on earth fifteen thousand years ago, that abruptly disappeared in a catastrophe. All of those sites except the pyramid are later structures built at specific geodesic points. The why of that, we have never known."

The snake-like General Samson almost spat his words. "I think this is largely speculation."

"General Samson," the president retorted, "you're here to gather information that'll help you execute your orders. Thank you, General."

"This man's work is highly controversial," Samson snapped.

"Actually, um, it's not," Martin said.

"Well, I read my share of science journals and I say it is!"

Martin didn't know how to react to a yelling general. It made him mad, though, the rudeness of it.

The president asked, "Doctor Winters, tell us what you think these lenses might be?"

"From strictly an archaeological point of view, I don't know. But if you read old chronicles, a lens like this could have been the mechanism of destruction."

"Of what?"

"The civilization. It ended in a day, you know. In a matter of minutes. It happened on an afternoon in June, actually. Over five minutes, perhaps a little less."

That silenced even the blustering general.

"What is our risk now?"

Martin recognized his responsibility here. "I've been, frankly, a little thrown, here. I-you know-the shock, and now this..."

"Let me rephrase," the president said. "Do you see a possible risk now, and, if so, on what do you base your speculation? Is that a little easier to handle?"

"There is a calendar-the Mayan-that marks the end of this age as being this coming December 21. The winter solstice occurs on the day earth crosses both the galactic equator and the solar ecliptic. A highly unusual conjunction."

"What's so absurd about this," Samson said, "is that it assumes that the ancient Maya knew about galaxies. A bunch of blood-soaked head-hunters. The very idea is ridiculous."

Martin decided that he loathed this man, a rare intensity of emotion for him. He reserved his intensity for love of wife and kids. He did not indulge hate. But General Samson invited it. "The date is there," he said. "And no matter what the Maya knew or didn't know, the position of the earth is there, too."

"What does it mean," the president asked. "You're telling me a whole human civilization was killed in a day, Doctor. What should that be saying to

me in the here and now?"

An aide finally produced water and Martin drank all of it at once. "I've still got the desert in my throat," he said.

"All right," the good general said. "You can do this, you can say it."

"Yes. This prophecy-the 2012 thing-it's always been a mystery that it was so exact. And it required tremendous calculational ability-the whole Mayan long-count calendar-and apparently a knowledge of the position of the earth in relation to the rest of the galaxy-and I'm sorry if that gives offense-

"Which astrophysicists are still arguing about," Samson said.

"Tom, will you stop interrupting him?"

"I'm trying to help, here, Mr. President!"

"Doctor Winters, please continue," the president said.

Martin swallowed. His throat was dry again. He was not used to intensity like this. There was terror in every eye, and the stink of sweat rising in the room. "Yes. I'm looking at these things coming up out of the ground, and thinking about the fact that so many ancient cultures speak of beings that came through gateways-

"Aliens, as per NASA?"

"Not aliens, as from another planet. Given the distances involved, present thought leans more in the direction of UFOs being projections of some sort from parallel universe or universes. All right here, right around us. Now."

"Aw, come on! Mr. President, we don't need this kind of speculation," Samson said.

The president exploded. "General, for God's sakes, will you shut up!"

Samson would not be silenced. "I think this man needs to be removed, he's obstructing-

"You listen to him, Tom, god damn you!" The president roared.

Samson's mouth snapped shut.

"Go on, Doctor," Bo Waldo said softly.

"Uh, the, uh-the Sumerians called them Annunaki, the Babylonians Akpallus, the Hebrews Nephilim-the list is long. Always, they were powerful, dominating people-somewhat human looking, but with a reptilian cast of eye-who came from another reality. Some were hostile, others more benevolent. Almost as if there were two warring factions, with different agendas for us. They fought among themselves, at one point, and then were no longer present here."

"And this relates to our situation?"

"Maybe the reason that the end-of-world predictions in the old calendars are so exact is that there is something in the astrophysical situation that opens these gateways. Maybe that's what the lenses are. If so, then we can expect that they're the worst things it is possible to imagine."

Silence.

He didn't say it, but as he spoke the words, they just tasted right. He paused, then decided to take the plunge. "Um, I would therefore say that a machine has been turned on. I think, between now and December the twenty-first, we can expect them to become increasingly active, and on that day, to destroy human civilization. Attempt to."

The president stood up, went to the window. "Bo?"

"Sir, we don't have any information like that."

"Tom?"

"This is-I can't call it a fantasy, obviously. The things are there. But I think we need to wait a little longer. If we have to fight, we also need to know what to fight, and how."

"Al, I want to revise your orders. I want you to do the following. You execute a nuclear strike against the most isolated of these things-"

Tom Samson leaped to his feet. "That's out of the question!"

"Tom, you already have your orders."

"Sir, not if I'm seeing this dangerous, impetuous tack you're taking-no, sir, I will not!"

"Al, will you execute?"

"Sir, I'm a notch down in the chain."

"I want you people to understand something here. I am not hearing what I need to hear. And I'm not just going to be asking for resignations. In just another minute, I'm going to be carrying out arrests. Here. My Secret Service, your ass!" He glared straight at Tom, and Martin thought that he would not like to be in that man's shoes.

Al came to his feet. "Sir, I'll get the strike going at once."

"And you'll continue to fulfill your oath, Tom?"

"As I understand it."

"I will faithfully execute lawful orders...' That's the part that's relevant here."

"Sir, I will issue the alerts and the War Warning. But I urge you to address this other matter to the National Security Council and to Robbie. Don't leave your Secretary of Defense in the dark. And for God's sake, let the

British and the French know-all the empires. Don't surprise them, Sir."

"Nobody's gonna be in the dark," the president muttered. "Now, let me tell you something incredible. You know what I have to do right now? I have to go out into the Rose Garden and slap a smile on my kisser and pardon a goddamn turkey! Happy Thanksgiving."

He left the room, and Martin thought he would follow that man anywhere. He had completely revised his opinion of the president. He was smart, decisive, and a master of the art of managing powerful men like the ones in this room.

They followed him out. Martin was left behind, completely forgotten. His role in this meeting would probably be lost to history, but he understood what he had done. If they were going to stop what was about to happen, immediate, decisive action was essential.

It had been a year since NASA had made its announcement about UFOs, and he wondered, now, if that had been a good idea. If they were aliens from another planet, it appeared a harmless enough thing to say. But if parallel universes were involved, whether or not we believed they were real might have a lot to do with their ability to enter our world. The mind might play a part here, a very unsuspected part. Our belief might be essential to their ability to use their gateway, meaning that NASA could have unwittingly opened a door that had been closed by the wisdom of the past, then sealed with the sacred sites that had just been destroyed.

He pulled out his cell phone. Would there be a signal in this place? Yes, good. He called Lindy. "I'm coming home, baby."

"I thought you were on a plane!"

"I took a detour. A quite incredible detour." He looked around, saw a man in the doorway, a Secret Service agent, apparently his minder. "Excuse me, I need to get to Kansas City," he said.

"National Airport. TAT and Braniff both go to K.C."

"Actually, I was brought here on an Air Force jet, and I thought-"

The agent smiled. "Our job was to get you here. You're here."

"And that's it?"

"That's it."

"Martin, what's going on?" Lindy asked. "Who are you talking to?"

"I'll call you from the airport, let you know when I'm getting in."

He swallowed the terror that had been building in him. He just hoped to God he could make it home, that there was still time.

TWO

DECEMBER 6

THE LAST GOOD NIGHT OF WYLIE DALE

WYLIE DALE TRIED TO STOP shaking, could not. He thought he might be more scared right now than he ever had been in his life. He was exhausted, his story had been running through his mind like some kind of out-of-control hallucination and he thought that it was not a story, it was real.

This was because of the fact that he'd been unable to stop his hands from hitting the keys. He'd watched them like an outsider. No control.

At least they were no longer moving. He glanced over at the clock. "Holy shit!"

"What?" came Brooke's sleepy voice from the bedroom.

"I'll be there in a sec."

Wiley had been in front of his laptop writing for an incredible sixteen hours. He knew what had been written, but not as if he had been the author. It wasn't creation, it was transcription. He wasn't creating a novel, he was writing a history and it was a very scary history and he was afraid it was real, and it wasn't just a history, it was a warning.

He turned on the little TV set that sat on the corner of his desk. He watched Fox News for a while, then went up to MSNBC, then back down to CNN.

Just more of the usual bullshit, an actor gunned down by a posse of outraged fans, a combination hailstorm, tornado, and flood that seemed to have flattened every trailer park in Arkansas. The European empires were gone, and there was nothing about any weird lenses coming up out of the ground anywhere at all, and certainly not under the Great Pyramid.

He flipped through what he'd written-and found over fifty pages.

What the hell, you don't write like this, nobody does.

What in God's name had happened to him? It's hard to create fiction, it takes hours, sometimes, to get a single sentence out.

His damn knuckles hurt from the pounding.

He read more. If this wasn't fiction, then what was it? There was no

President Wade, there was only one moon in the sky, and there was certainly no czar.

This was reality from a parallel universe, somehow bleeding over into a susceptible mind-his.

The creatures he'd seen in his woods five years ago-the subject of his notorious book *Alien Days*-had been scaly, and Martin had described the ancient biblical Nephilim as having a reptilian appearance. There was nothing like that in our Bible, but he'd certainly seen scaly faces, right here in these woods, not a quarter of a mile from here.

Brooke slipped into the room and put her hand on his cheek. "Wiley, it's time to come to bed."

The spell broke, and his body took over. It had been in this chair for a damn long time, and there was a bladder involved and the bladder had just come to its senses.

He ran like hell.

"Wiley?"

He hit the john just in time and opened up. "Thank you, God."

She followed him in. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, now!"

"You've been in there since breakfast, do you realize that?"

He finished his business, opened the medicine cabinet, and drank a couple of slugs of Mylanta. Chased it with Pepto Bismol. "Nectar of the gods," he said.

"It's late, it's time to go to bed." She caressed him from behind.

"I need a breath of air. I'm gonna take a walk."

"The book is making you crazy."

"No."

"Yeah, it is, and I'm not ready to go through that again, Wiley. That alien book, that was enough for one lifetime."

She referred, of course, to the hated *Alien Days*. He hated it, too, for that matter. It wasn't fun, being a laughingstock. "The book I'm writing is not about aliens."

"I know you, Wylie Dale, it's about something weird or you wouldn't be so crazed. No more saucer crap, that's bedrock, boy!"

"It isn't about aliens, and neither was the other book. I only thought it was."

"*Alien Days* was about a writer being very crazy in public.

Embarrassment, that's what it was about."

"There are no aliens."

"At last, he faces the truth."

"What's happening is much stranger than the arrival of aliens from another planet. And this book, it's-wow-it's possessing me."

"You write fiction that you come to believe is real and in the process you drive this entire family crazy, and I'm sorry, no more."

"Brooke-"

"No more! End of story! Books that possess you, that drive you nuts-no, I'm finished, I've had it!"

"Mom? Dad?"

Nicholas appeared, looking bleary and pissed off.

"Wonderful," Wiley said.

Brooke said to their son, "Dad has a sour stomach."

"You're fighting."

"I love your mom too much to fight with her. I just obey." He made a steeple of his hands and bowed toward her.

"Except you don't, Daddy." Now Kelsey had arrived, his gorgeous little girl. "He has cigars hidden in the woods."

"That is not true!"

Brooke folded her arms. So did Kelsey. Brooke glared. "The aliens you go looking for in the woods, Wiley Dale? Would they be from Cuba?"

"The cigars are Matt's," he said.

"And he's out there right now, isn't he, smoking a Monte and sucking on a bottle of Beam, and that's the real reason you want to take a walk-to make yourself sick on cigars and hootch."

"Cubans are the best cigars in the world."

"You're coming to bed with me. And scoot, you two, the sandman's gonna be furious."

"I'm past the sandman," Nick said.

"I'm not," Kelsey told him. "I'm just a little girl, and I still believe."

"Meaning, don't rain on your sister's parade."

"No, Sir."

Wiley went into the bedroom and fished his flashlight out from under the bed where he kept it alongside his shotgun. "I need some space, hon. This thing I'm writing, it's getting to me, for sure, and I agree with you, we need that not to happen. It's about us and about people who live in another version

of this house in a parallel universe. I think that's what it's about, anyway. I'm sort of more of a reader than a writer, here. Reading as my fingers write, as it were."

"About us in what sense?"

"Well, like this conversation. This will be in the book. Because we're part of the story, somehow. I'm not sure how, yet, but we're part of it."

"Not our names again!"

Uh-oh. He had to tread carefully here. "Well, uh...hm. The people in the parallel universe aren't us. They have different names. They live in their version of this house and the town is called Harrow, too, but the people are not the same."

"I am so tired of this."

"Whoa, slow down. The parallel universe is obviously different. Their McDonald's has emerald arches. Their Target target is blue. The president's named James Hannah Wade and the family's named Winters. We're the Dales, if you hadn't noticed. And here, McDonald's has golden arches, obviously. Plus there is no British Empire, among numerous other things. They have two small moons rather than one large one."

"In the part of it that's set in our universe, what are the characters' names?"

She knew him well and she was not dumb. Far from dumb. "Well, of course, I'm using ours-"

"NO!"

"Well, uh, it's us. They're us."

"My kids' names will not be in another one of your books. You know what Nicholas said? He said you really are the most embarrassing father in the world, and he was right! Saying you were taken aboard a UFO was bad enough, but you included him! When he was all of seven years old. Wiley, where do you get off?"

"The names are-are-like, they're just place markers. After I'm done, I'll change them."

"Because it's an act of vanity to write novels about yourself!"

"Brooke, goddamnit, that's a betrayal. You know it happened."

"It hurt this family so much, honey. I just can't go through it again. The kids can't. Especially not your son. He is so brave but he suffers."

"What do you mean?"

"The kids eat him alive! His dad got a rectal probe. You try living that

down at the age of twelve."

"The laughter is the failure, not the book. It happened." He paused. "It just wasn't what I thought." There came to him, then, a feeling—a sort of pull, really. To go back to the office, to sit down...

But not after sixteen straight hours, he'd be in heart attack country. Stroke country.

"Thing is, this book—I'm not its author, babes, I'm its prisoner."

"You will be responsible, Wylie Dale. You will be!"

"All right, that's it! I'm going walking. You'll be asleep when I get back, God willing."

"If I smell the least trace of cigar smoke—"

"Kelsey's gotta have Indian blood, the way she follows me and I never see her. But neither one of us is an Indian, my dear, so how do you explain that?"

"By the fact that you're two hundred percent hot air and half baked." She came to him. "Which are two of the many reasons that I'm so damn crazy about you."

She kissed him. He was furious at her, but he kissed her back, and she felt so vulnerable and so-so Brooke. He held her tight.

Noisy though it was, this marriage was a good fit for Wiley Dale. He needed someone willing to come up the side of his head on occasion, and Brooke had no compunction about that. But he was not going to change any names in any part of the book, this one included. "You're so nice," he said.

Little feet went scurrying away. Kelsey could be heard whispering, "We have a kiss. Gawd!"

Wylie and Brooke managed to swallow their laughter.

When he went downstairs, she sort of tried to stop him, but he promised to come back soon. He really did need that air. If he didn't get away from that keyboard and let this thing die down, he'd be up all night.

He left the house, glad to enter his familiar woods beneath the familiar starry sky—and that good old moon up there, good old friend. It couldn't be very romantic to have two moons.

He sucked the air deep to rid his head of the fog that the writing had invoked. He shuddered. It was a mild night, but he felt cold in his blood.

He had lived Martin's sense of suffocation down under the pyramid, had cringed in anguish of terror with him as the blocks smashed down around him, had actually not known whether or not he was going to be annihilated.

Creepy enough, but even creepier was the fact that he could still feel

Martin's presence. See him, sort of. He was down in Harrow, and things had gone very bad since his visit to the White House just-what was it-eleven or twelve days ago?

He was down in Harrow and he was living in absolutely amazing terror, and Wylie knew that, as soon as he returned to his office, he was going to live that terror, too.

Thing was, he could sort of see into the lenses, and what he saw there was another parallel earth, a third one, and it was bad news. Real bad.

He couldn't see it clearly, but he could feel that it was a fallen world, a real, living hell, and it was seeking to escape itself. He could sense its ravaging hunger to escape the ruin it had made of itself.

Amazingly enough, they'd done even worse than we had. "They're old," he muttered to himself, returning to one of the lines of thought that he'd been worrying for years. He thought he might now know the secret of the bizarre creatures he had encountered in these woods a few years back, that were the subject of Alien Days. They weren't aliens at all. They were from here. But in their version of earth, the dinosaurs had never gone extinct. Instead, that dark reptilian brain had grown and evolved and changed until these sleek creatures had come about-tough, brilliant, and utterly heartless.

Oh, God. God help the human beings.

With our compassion and our softness of spirit, we were not going to be a match for brilliant reptiles, not in Martin's universe or in this one.

They were going to take it all. They really, really were.

The woods were dead quiet, the early December night touched by just an edge of crispness. As always, he found himself moving along the old foresters path that crossed the top of the little draw where, five years ago almost to the day, he'd noticed that odd light.

He stopped, looked down the draw. He had encountered them just there, just fifty feet down. It had looked like an old witch's cottage that he'd never seen before. Glowing, infinitely sinister.

Curious, thinking maybe he had squatters in his woods, he'd walked up to it, and the next thing he knew, he was grabbed by scaly hands, he was being glared at by the most terrible eyes he had ever seen, he was being manhandled-and yes, the infamous rectal probe had taken place-and then he was on the ground, the little cottage was gone, and there was a crackling electricity in the air.

At least, that's what he remembered in his conscious mind. His dreams

were a different story. In his dreams, there were towering emotions of loss and longing, and Brooke was involved, but she had sworn that she'd seen nothing that night, heard nothing.

He moved up the dark path, shining his light ahead, looking for the cigar cave. A smoke was what he needed. He had a gargle station in the garage, which he'd use before he got in bed with Brooke. Cigar breath and he'd be on the couch, and he was way too tired for that.

He shone his light on the trees that loomed around him, the oaks with their golden leaves, the red maples, the gnarled pitch pines that began to appear as he climbed farther up the ridge.

He was maybe fifty yards from the cave when he became aware of a more solid shape up ahead.

He stopped, peered into the dark. Matt was on duty tonight, so maybe it was a deer. And yet, the form-it looked like a man standing real close to the trunk of that oak.

Oh, shit, what if the reptilians knew that he was writing about their invasion, and they didn't like it?

Hardly daring to do it, his hands shaking so much he could barely manage it, he got the flashlight pointed in the direction of the figure.

-which did not move.

Was it a branch? What was that?

He stepped closer. "Hello?"

It leaped out at him.

He fell back, he lost the light, and then the figure was on him, glaring down at him-and laughing.

"Godddamn it!"

"Oh, man, Wiley, Wiley, oh Christ, this is rich! It's rich!"

Wiley got to his feet. "You call yourself a cop? Out here wasting taxpayer money like this-what if there's a lost kitten or something down in the town? What will you do?"

"That flashlight! How many batteries in that thing?"

"A few."

"Beka says to me, who's got a searchlight up on the ridge behind the Dale's house? That's what it looks like. I mean, they were concerned over in Holcomb, they thought we had a fire goin' up this way."

"Holcomb is fifteen miles from here."

"I rest my case."

"You saw my flashlight from your house?"

"Absolutely."

"And you got out here in what-five minutes? I don't think so. You've been out here for a while, because you're raiding the Cubans, you shit."

"You're raiding 'em, too, you shit. Otherwise, why would you be out here yourself?"

"Bastard."

"You're the bastard, because you can afford the damn things and they're a precious luxury to a poor cop."

"I'm hardly rich."

"Your kids are in an exclusive private school in K.C. Not to mention the Jeepazine with which you convey them to said school daily."

"It's moderately customized."

"TV in a Jeep is very froufrou for rural Kansas, buddy. Look, let's go down to my wife's roadhouse and get hammered. We can take cigars with us, the place is closed, nobody's gonna know."

"Brooke's gonna get suspicious if I stay out here too long. And as for coming home drunk, that's been done one too many times."

"Man, I have to admit I'd like to be pussy-whipped by your ball and chain."

"You think?"

They began to wander back, both of them planning future cigar raids, hopefully more successful ones. The point was to smoke more than half of the cigars. The guy who did that was the winner.

As they reached the ridge that overlooked Wiley's house, he noticed, in his office, a light. It came, glowed bright, then went.

He stopped. "You see that?"

"Actually, yeah."

"Given that my family's asleep, I'm concerned."

The light came again, flickered, and was gone.

"Looks like you got a short workin' in there."

As he scrambled down the ridge to the house, Matt stayed right with him. He was a reprobate, but he was also a dutiful cop.

They arrived at the edge of Wiley's yard. His pool stood still and silent. The light flashed bright, and there was a sputtering sound from the open window.

They went in through the screen door. Matt dug the fire extinguisher out

of the closet while Wiley dashed up to his office.

He looked at the desk, at the cords running down behind it. Nothing was sparking.

"So what is it?" Matt asked, coming in.

Could it have been the reptilians, maybe here to wreck the book? They'd broken through before, for sure. Sort of broken through.

Matt bent down and brought up a frayed cord. He shook it and it sparked. "Sadie do this?"

Their Burmese cat was a notorious cord chewer. "I forgot to close the door."

"She could've burned down your family, buddy."

"Thanks for helping me, Matt."

They said their good-byes, and Matt went clomping off down the stairs.

Wiley started to leave the office, but was stopped by sounds that should not be there. Footsteps. Somebody pacing in the bedroom. But Brooke was asleep.

He realized that he was hearing Lindy Winters.

Their world was not an inch away, not a millimeter. If the physicists were right, they were infinitely close, and yet it would take more energy than existed in both universes together to enable them to make contact.

Except...the physicists appeared to be wrong, didn't they?

Wiley sat down in his chair. He leaned back and closed his eyes, and when he did, Martin's universe seemed to settle around him, caressing him like a living, complex fog.

The lenses were hooks, and they had hooked into Martin's world, and it would not be long before they hooked into this one, too.

When he opened his eyes, nearly two hours had passed. It was nearly one. He needed to sleep, but he felt kind of sick inside, like somebody in a crashing plane would feel, waiting for the impact.

They were coming. That's what this was all about.

In the other human world, NASA had announced that UFOs were real. Apparently, that had changed the balance, enabling the reptilians to enter on a tide of belief.

So far, that did not seem like anything our NASA was likely to do.

Now he understood why the government denied the obvious UFO reality. Somebody down deep in its secret corridors must know that belief counts, that it is the oil in the hinges of the doors between the worlds.

He heard another sound, coming in from outside. Metallic. Very faint, though. What was that?

It came again, faded again. He went to the window, leaned against the screen, trying to hear more clearly.

And there it was again, more distinct this time, and this time he could tell what it was—the unmistakable ringing of church bells. On a good day, you could hear them from out here in the hills, but who would be ringing them at this hour?

Matt lived closer to town, maybe he could hear better.

He picked up the phone, then hesitated. It was late and he was going to make Matt mad. But how could he not? Matt was the police chief and, at the moment, the town's only cop. If somebody was ringing the bell of one of the churches, maybe it was because he couldn't make a call.

He dialed, listened.

"Yeah?"

"Hey, I wake you up?"

"I sit by the phone all night waitin' for you, you stupid fuck. So what in hell do you want?"

"Would you do me the favor of going to your window and tell me what you hear?"

" 'Course not."

"You're a cop, aren't you at least curious?"

"Not at all. Good night."

"Matt! MATT!" And suddenly it wasn't funny. He had to know.

"Yeah?"

"Just do it."

There was a silence. It extended. Eventually, Matt came back. "Nothing."

"You must have heard something."

"The faint plink of leaves falling. Possibly, the snuffling of a possum, or it could've been a coon."

"No church bells?"

"No, but I did hear something connected with church bells, actually. With belfries. Bats. In your belfry, squeaking like sonembitches."

"Somebody is ringing bells down there, my friend."

"You wake me up again, I'm gonna come out there and cuff your ass and put you in the tank."

"The drunk tank's rusted closed. You told me so yourself."

"For you, I will apply Liquid Wrench."

Wiley hung up. He flipped on his police scanner and watched the red LED race across the little screen. The scanner emitted a slight burp of static each time it crossed the county sheriff's carrier wave.

Lonely sound. Lonely out here.

He'd damn well heard those bells.

Not in this version of Harrow, Kansas, though. If Matt had heard them, he would have gone down into town to check things out. He was too conscientious to dismiss something as odd as that. At best, it was going to be vandals, but at worst-well, maybe a fire, who knew?

If he could sit down at the laptop-if he dared to do that-he might find out. He turned it on. His hands stirred, moved. His fingers fluttered above the keys. Then they touched them. It was like watching a machine turn on. The hands were not his.

His fingers pounded keys. Stopped.

Then he looked down at what he'd written. "The masters of the sky were on the earth in those days-and also afterward-when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them."

Was that a quote from the Bible? Or an ancient Hebrew text, maybe?

He googled the passage, came up empty.

But the masters of the sky had been the Nephilim, creatures who had come out of the air to rape and pillage, who had caused the devastating war portrayed in the ancient Indian Vedas, with their stories of sound-guided missiles, flying saucers, and nuclear bombs.

In legend, the coming of the Nephilim had marked the end of the last age.

As, indeed, according to the ancient Maya, December 21, 2012, marked the end of this one. The Mayan date 13.0.0.0.0.

All the new-age gurus were howling that it was going to completely blow the mind of man. Wiley figured it was another Y2K, when the coming of the year 2000 had been expected to cause an outbreak of chaos, but which had actually been a lot of overhyped nonsense.

When he closed his eyes, it seemed as if the office did not have his desk in it. Instead, there were two recliners with reading lights beside them. Where he kept his little TV, they had a bookcase full of science tomes, archaeology and physics. He saw the books so clearly that he could almost read the titles.

The bells were now joined by the long wail of a warning siren.

He found himself uttering a prayer for the other Harrow, and all whom

she was losing on this night, right here, right now, December 1, 2012.

Near him, he could sense movement.

He tried to open his eyes, couldn't. Really tried. Could not. He called Brooke, but nothing came out.

The room in Martin and Lindy's house became more clear.

He could see a woman-Lindy. Kind of pretty. Scientific looking. Not gorgeous like Brooke.

She, also, had heard the bells ringing, and had come in to listen at the window. She was haggard and had a shotgun in her hands-not a good one like his, but rather an old ten-gauge that had seen better days-much better ones.

Then he noticed that he was typing. The damndest thing, he hadn't even realized it. His eyes were closed, but he could hear it. Feel it in his fingers.

He tried to draw his hands away from the keyboard, couldn't.

"Lindy," he said. Sweet name. She drew her head back from the window and started out of the room.

The phone in her version of the room rang. Wiley couldn't see it, but he heard it so clearly that he froze, his fingers stopping just above the keys. He could hear her breathing, gasping almost, between the insistent rings.

From down the hall, he heard a murmured sigh as his Brooke tossed and turned. Was she aware, at least dimly, of the sound of Lindy's phone?

Lindy put her hand on it. She tightened her grip. Her face reflected a torment that was horrible to see. She picked it up.

THREE

DECEMBER 1
THE NIGHT WATCH

ON NOVEMBER 29, 2012, WHAT had started so strangely in Gloucestershire on the 21st had become a great terror that had, on that night, struck millions of cities, towns, and villages across the world, and expanded from there. Now, on December 1, the White House that Martin had visited was long since evacuated, Washington was in chaos, the world was in chaos. The stories from the great cities were beyond horror. Rather than face what was happening people by tens of thousands had gone out of windows in New York and Chicago, leaving heaps of untended bodies in the streets. The country's communications had broken down, fuel and food had ceased to move along highways choked with refugees, and worse had happened, much, much worse.

Harrow, Kansas, however, had not been struck. All the towns in the area had organized themselves and were as prepared as they could be, but so far the problems had not affected Kansas—at least, not this part of it. However, with communications down, they really had very little idea what was happening past thirty miles away.

Martin was on watch in the steeple of Third Street Methodist when, just before one in the morning, he saw light flicker in the clouds that choked the dark west. As he looked more carefully, the clouds lit up briefly. But there were thunderstorms out there, so there would be lightning, of course.

Another flash slowly dwindled and was gone. He knew archaeology, not meteorology, but he had never seen lightning that lingered like that.

He turned on the little radio that he'd brought up with him, just in case there would be some signal from somewhere, but the world remained as silent as it had been these past three days. No radio, no TV, no Internet, GPS mostly not working. Landline telephones were sporadic, cell phones were local only, and then only occasionally. There was no TV, and even the shortwave radio consisted of static, and in the higher frequencies, endless streams of what sounded like some sort of singsong code, a machine

language.

Another flash, this one going close to the ground, then expanding and getting brighter.

He became aware that his heart had begun to thutter. He faced the fantastic reality: They had come to Lautner County. That light was over Holcomb, not twenty miles away.

Nobody had ever seen them. The only thing known was that the fourteen lenses, when night fell on them, disgorged thousands of dully glowing bloodred disks, which fanned out spreading the most appalling and bizarre form of death ever known to man.

He picked up his cell phone and called the town's police officer, his friend Bobby Chalmers. "Got some bad-looking flashes in those clouds, Bobby."

"I'm lookin' at 'em."

Next, he phoned Lindy. Attempting not to alarm her, he kept his voice casual. "Hey, Doctor Winters."

"Hey, Doctor Winters."

"Sorry to rouse you from your beauty sleep, but, uh, why don't you go ahead and get the kids ready? I think you need to come over here. Looks like we could have some activity coming in from the west."

She didn't get a chance to react before his phone started beeping in another call. He clicked over. "Hi, Bobby. Where are you, BTW?"

"On my way to you. Ron Turpin over in Parker--"

Parker was between here and Holcomb, a scattering of trailers and a tumbledown convenience store at a crossroads. "I know Ron."

"Yeah. He's sayin' there's a formation he can see in the flashes, moving with the clouds. And nobody's answering the phone over in Holcomb."

"But they're working? The phones are working?"

"They're ringing. No cops, no sheriff, no paramedics picking up, nothin'."

"Dear God."

"You better get down outta there, now, Martin."

Immediately, he clambered down the four flights to the choir loft, glanced out across the dark church, and then went down the stairs to the entrance. Bobby had arrived and was going into the electrical closet as Martin reached the foot of the stairs. Bobby hit the power switches, lighting up the nave, then all the external lights.

Martin flipped open his cell phone and called the minister. "Reg, we could be getting hit tonight, looks like."

"That can't be true."

"It looked like Holcomb was getting it a few minutes ago and now Bobby can't raise them on the phone. Disks passed over Parker coming this way. We're the only town in this direction for eighty miles, Reg."

"I'm on my way."

Martin stepped outside. "I called Dennis Farm," Bobby said. "We-" His phone buzzed. He flipped it open, listened a moment, then closed it. "That was Larry Dennis screaming for help, they got Sally, the light's coming down like rain-then the line-" He held out the silent cell phone.

In both of their minds was the same thought: it couldn't be happening here, it was something you heard about, a big city thing, a European thing, a Chinese disaster.

"Wake 'em up," Bobby said, "we're under attack."

Martin went back into the church and started the bell. There was a whirring sound as it began ringing, its stately tones trembling off into the night. His finger hesitated over the siren. It hadn't been sounded since September, when it had been turned on for the tornado that had taken out the Conagra silo and the Kan-San Trailer Park.

He flipped the switch, and the siren began as a low growl, quickly increased its volume, then filled the air with its wailing. Across the street, Sam Gossett came to the door in his pajama bottoms and yelled, "Is it for real?"

"Holcomb and Dennis Farm just got it," Bobby said. "It's for real, all right."

The Wilsons and a family Martin didn't know except to nod to arrived in SUVs and went hurrying into the church. They must have been sleeping in their clothes. As he passed, Timmy Wilson said, "They're coming up Six Mile, slow and low."

His words made Martin feel literally sick. He telephoned Lindy. "Hi, hon, what's your situation?"

"We're leaving the house."

"You need to hurry, Lindy, they're over Six Mile Road."

"Oh, God, Martin."

According to Homeland Security, people alone did not survive, none of them, not ever. Groups supposedly had a better chance. They still got flyers dropped from time to time. He speculated that Bo Waldo might have something to do with that. There was a man who was not going to be beaten,

unlike those two generals, who'd been edgy, bitchy thoroughbreds.

"Lindy, cut across the Walker place to the highway."

"I'll wreck their garden."

"Do it now!"

She closed the phone-unless something else just happened. A wave of nausea almost made Martin gag.

"You okay?" Bobby asked.

"Lindy's out there with the kids. Where's Rose?"

"Same thing, coming in fast as she can."

"But not down Six Mile Road."

"Goddamn, buddy, that's right."

Bobby, who had been his friend since their boyhood in this community, met his eyes. Bobby had stayed, Martin had gone on to university. But he'd returned in the end, discovering after Berkeley and Stanford that one did not leave Kansas so easily.

"I never thought this would come," Bobby said as the two of them watched the sky and the people now hurrying into the church.

"We're not in Kansas anymore, Bobby. Kansas is gone with the wind, I'm afraid."

"You think it's gonna be all of us, Martin?"

A wave of what could only be described as woe swept over Martin. He said, "The pamphlet says that more survive if we congregate." It had been dropped by Homeland Security last week.

"What I feel like doing is hiding. That's what feels right."

"I would assume that we can't hide."

The pamphlet, which had been dropped from a Goodyear blimp, of all things, was the only defense the government had offered. In fact, the most terrifying thing about the whole business was the silence from Washington and Topeka.

George and Moira Fielding came huffing up, she in a slip and bra, he in baggy boxer shorts and flip-flops. "There's screaming coming from down the end of Constitution," he gasped.

Serenity Lodge. Forty old folks. Martin looked at Bobby. "You want to go over there?" He thought to himself that Lindy and the kids must pass right in front of the place on their way in.

"I'm needed here."

It wasn't cowardice, it was simple truth.

Across town, Martin could see the steeple of the First Church of Christ light up, and heard its bell join theirs. Saint Peter's was invisible behind the huge oaks that stood along Evans behind Main, but he knew they'd be lit up, too. They didn't have a working bell.

Emma Heard got out of her car. "There was that light just like they say, it was horrible, horrible!"

"You were at the home?"

"I was in my office when-oh, Jesus, I tried to help them, they were all in their rooms-" She broke down in sobs and Martin looked off down Third, looking for some sign of Lindy's blue Dodge truck.

"Did you see any actual attacks?" Bobby asked.

"When I ran out, I saw the light coming down on the building, out of one of those things, the disks. It looked like some kind of goop, a glowing membrane-really bright-like on Nightline that time, that video of it. I got the hell out of there, lemme tell you." She lowered her eyes. "I saw it slide down in the windows, and I heard-I heard-oh, Bobby, the screaming." She paused, then added in a tiny voice, "They're all headed north now, every single one of them that can walk, and in their pajamas, poor things."

Then she noticed Martin. She came close to him. At forty, she was still beautiful. She'd been his older woman when he was fourteen and she twenty. They had cuddled and touched, and he'd learned mysteries from her that still inspired the deep, deep joy he took in women. In Lindy, now, only her.

She clutched at his shirt. He took her by the shoulders and turned her toward the church. "Go inside, do it now." She walked away with a curious, gliding motion. Martin watched her. "You sure she's not...affected?"

"Nah, that's just shock," Bobby said. "Right outta the book."

"Jesus will help us," Mrs. Oates said as she came up the walk. "Never you mind, Jesus will help us." She went past them, unseeing, glassy-eyed with terror.

"The Lord sure hasn't been helping us much lately," Bobby said, but softly, as if it was a kind of dirty secret-or, what he was more likely to think, a blasphemy.

As a scientist, Martin had grown past his childhood piety. Nowadays, while he wasn't against religion, he just didn't see the mechanism of the spiritual.

Bobby and Rose brought their kids here to Methodist every week. Martin and Lindy had chosen not to visit the burden of organized religion on Winnie

and Trevor. Trevor had been delighted at not having to join the acolytes of the Anglican Communion in America. He'd dreaded Latin.

People everywhere were taking the horrific business that was unfolding in the world to mean that the soul was real. No less a luminary than the physicist Sir Roger Penfold had called it "the profound organ" because of the way it appeared to control memory and emotion. Given that it consisted exclusively of electrons, the belief that it was immortal had turned out to be entirely correct. Energy is indeed immortal. But could it be conscious in its own right outside of the body, or remain a coherent structure after death? Martin didn't understand how that could be, and he doubted that anybody else did, either.

He did understand the extraordinary irony that the attack on the soul was what had led to its discovery. The scientific community's soul blindness had only been lifted when the human soul began to be taken, and we could see, hear, and feel the consequences.

To Martin, as a scientist, this did not mean that the gods were therefore real. But the average person had taken proof of the soul to mean that his particular gods, also, existed. So churches and temples across the world were jammed day and night with people pleading for help from their deities.

Martin viewed things differently. He was fascinated that this plasma could be drawn out of a human body, as shocked as everybody else at the changes that resulted. But as far as it being the ka of the Egyptians, the jiva of the Hindus, the hun of the Chinese-any of those concepts-the folkloric soul-well, that remained unproven. It was simply an organ of a type they had not previously recognized, with a profound function, most certainly-in fact, a function that explained why we were different from animals, because of the way it preserved memories and delivered them to the brain for processing. But it had not confirmed the reality of the gods, at least not for this intellectual, nor was it clear that it survived in any coherent way after death.

Clearly, though, the removal of the soul was hell on the organism, and it was hell here in Kansas tonight, and maybe across the entire country, but before communications had failed, the real hell had been unfolding in the jam-packed, exposed third world, with swarms of the disks gushing each night like vast formations of locusts out of the fourteen great, black lenses that ringed the world, and people by the millions being torn apart in this strange new way night after hellish night.

He pulled his worn copy of the Homeland Security pamphlet from his

pocket. "Approach damaged individuals with extreme caution. Their state is unknown and, while generally passive, they can be unexpectedly violent."

Martin had seen some of the people who'd been disensouled, as the media had called it when the media still existed, a cluster of six of them ragged on the roadside, stragglers up all this way from the Garland, Texas attack that, for America, had signaled the beginning of the nightmare. They'd been walking in a rough line. They were filthy and stinking, sewer drinkers, carrion eaters, muttering and growling to each other as they shuffled aimlessly along, aware, perhaps, of some loss, but no longer understanding what it was.

He had stopped his car because he hadn't been able to resist at least observing them from a little closer, despite the Homeland Security warnings. They hadn't seemed dangerous at all. Far from it. Up close, they were more like migrating elk or something.

He'd spoken to them. Nothing. There had been two men, three women, some children, one on the back of one of the men, the others hand in hand with their mothers. He'd walked beside them, touched a woman's shoulder, and asked her, "Could you tell me your name?"

She had turned to him, and what had happened was the most dreadful thing-she had smiled at him. But such a strange, strange smile. All wrong-so bright that it was empty. Not cruel at all, but relentlessly innocent, like the smiles of poor Jim Tom Stevens had been when they were kids. Jim Tom was retarded, though, and he had not had the feeling that these people had been made stupid.

No, it was much stranger than that. They had not lost their intelligence, but rather their information, and not how to count or how to read-oh, no, the information they had lost was much deeper. What they had lost was what distinguishes us from animals-the arrow of consciousness that points inward. They still knew and saw the world. The information that they had lost was that they were, and for this reason had ceased to be human. They had become brilliant animals.

For all of Jim Tom's intellectual poverty, he was not this lost. He knew that he was. When you called his name, he did not simply come to a familiar sound as an animal might. He turned to you with an expression in his face-the fundamental human expression that says, This is me.

Martin had been reminded of a line of poetry, "With its whole gaze a creature looks out at the open..." and sees nothing of himself at all. Has no

self.

They'd hurried off, moving in the general direction that all wanderers moved, at least around here, which was north-northwest.

He had sat on the terrace all afternoon watching the leaves run in the yard, and trying to make sense of what he had seen.

He had told Lindy that they had reminded him of Jim Tom, who had been so innocent that he would eat raw roadkill if he happened upon it hungry.

"If you taught them," she had asked, "do you think they could learn?"

"How to drive a truck or something, sure. But not concepts. No."

"Then they've been made stupid."

"I didn't get that impression."

"What impression did you get, then?"

He'd considered his reply for some time. Finally, he said, "The difference between us and a brilliant animal is that the animal understands what is, but not what it means. I think they'd been returned to what we were before the discovery of our being made us human. They weren't human, Lindy. They were just sort of...there."

As a scientist specializing in the past, he was well aware that the human body and brain had evolved a hundred thousand years before civilization had appeared. We'd been brilliant animals for a long, long time, and in the dark back of his mind, he feared that whoever was here was not really destroying or capturing souls like people believed, not at all-it was much simpler: they were manufacturing slaves, and the reason the wanderers all went off in the same direction was that they weren't wandering at all, they were moving to a collection point.

As far as the souls were concerned, pulling them out of the body was like letting the air out of a balloon. They became part of the general electromagnetic flux. In effect, they disintegrated.

People swarmed into the church now, in pajamas, in underwear, in whatever, coats thrown over shoulders, hats jammed onto heads. The one thing they all carried was a gun, many of them more than one. Pistols, rifles, shotguns, a few assault weapons. A formidable arsenal.

May Whitt got the organ started. It burbled for a moment, then blasted into a brave rendition of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

A moment later a scream pealed in the street, the sound rising above the wail of the siren, the tolling of the bell, and the hymn. Ten-year-old Chrissie Palen pointed at the sky. At first Martin saw only first moon, pale and serene,

speeding in ragged clouds. Then Tom Palen raised his 30-06 and fired, and Martin's eyes followed the muzzle flash to a simple ovoid, dull orange against the sky, as motionless as if it was fixed to the ground.

Martin scoured the street for Lindy's Dodge. He put in a call to her, but could not get a signal.

"We need to get out of the street," Bobby cried. "Everybody, run, run NOW!"

Despite his lack of religious belief, Martin found himself begging God in his heart to bring his family to him safely. He breathed the words in and out, in and out: God, please, God, please, and tried to send some sort of protection to his beloved and their kids, his striving preteen boy and his darling little girl.

The object slid over Rite Way Drugs, then backed off to the Target end of town.

Then Lindy was there, getting out of the car with Winnie and Trevor-and the disk was there, too, sliding back across the sky as if it was on a tabletop.

"For God's sake, RUN," Martin screamed at them. "Shoot at the goddamn thing, Tom, shoot at it!"

The rifle cracked, cracked again-and the thing slid away into the darkness. Bullets were rumored to slow them down, but not for long.

Lindy and the kids came toward Martin as if in a slow motion nightmare, like ballet dancers executing a pas de deux, like a little boat drifting in a calm.

The thing reappeared, speeding into view at rooftop level. Electric fire crackled along its edge, spitting sparks into the air. The Palens raced into the church, and Martin realized that his family was not going to make it. He ran toward them, his blood pumping, his legs going fast but not fast enough, as the thing dipped low over Main Street not a hundred yards behind them, and began moving forward. It was about to hit them with the light, he knew it.

"Run, Lindy!"

Whereupon Lindy, God love her, turned and shouldered her bird gun and let go four blasts of buckshot.

The thing seemed unaffected-bullets delayed them slightly, but buckshot apparently not at all.

The kids reached him. "Get in the church!" he shouted to them, pushing them toward the lighted door. Lindy, he saw, had returned to the car for a backpack of provisions.

The bell tolled, the siren moaned, and the congregation sang in ragged chorus, "...he'll take and shield thee; thou wilt find a solace there."

Bobby yelled, "MOVE! MOVE! MOVE!"

Lindy came out of the car. She seemed to be under water, she was moving so slow. And then Martin saw why: she was falling, she'd tripped. He ran toward her.

Reg Todd called, "We're closing the doors!" Winnie and Trevor realized what was happening and began to shout, "Mom! Dad!"

"Martin, it's right over you, it's starting to glow!" Bobby pulled out his service revolver and fired at it. The street around Martin began to turn red. Still he ran toward Lindy, he could not conceive of abandoning her.

Her skin was red in the red light from above. He threw an arm around her and began pulling her forward. As they got to the church steps, she gained her footing and began to help him. As she fell into the foyer, Maggie Hastert came to her rescue, and the two women staggered into the last pew as Bobby and Martin slammed the doors.

"Mom," Trevor shouted.

"Mommy!" Winnie shrilled, the littlest finally realizing that something was not right in her world.

"Momma is all right," Lindy managed to gasp.

"You're crying," Trevor said.

"We're all crying, Trevor," Martin said.

"Are we supposed to be crying?" Winnie asked.

Martin moved into the pew with Lindy, with their kids clinging to them, and the Hasterts made room for them. Given that Rose had arrived with their kids, Bobby and his family were okay, too-for the moment.

Reg Todd went into the pulpit. Martin liked him, had hunted with him when they were boys. "Everybody's praying now, all over the world, calling on the power of God to defend the soul. There is wisdom for us in the Bible, the book of the soul written by God, written for this time when we are discovering our souls because we are losing them. So you listen now. If the light comes--"

There was a scream. Everybody looked around, but it had come from outside, from above the building. It was repeated, and children all over the small nave began screaming, too, and Peg Tarr cried out, and Bobby tried to calm her down and she shook him off. "It's my husband," she screamed, "I know it's him, I can feel it!" She backed away from her neighbor, pushing

into Doctor Willerson. "Where's the Air Force? Where are the planes?" she bellowed. He shrank away from her, fumbling as his glasses flew from his face. "The planes," she screamed, "the planes!" She grabbed his shoulders and yanked at him so hard she ripped his coat, and he reached back and slugged her, which snapped her head to the side and made spit fly, and made a sound like an exploding lightbulb.

Then the scream outside repeated. It was a human sound, and involved such extraordinary anguish that everyone in the church screamed with it, a roaring agony that, in embracing it, only made it more terrible. Children collapsed, their mothers going down with them. Ron Biggs of Biggs John Deere, fourth generation in tractors, emptied his twelve-gauge into the ceiling, a Remington notched with the lives of forty-one bucks and happy days.

As bits of plaster and angels and clouds rained down, a hideous scraping sound slid along the shingles, ending with a thud in the side yard.

Silence, then, followed by little Kimberly Wilson singing: "A-hunting we will go, a-hunting we will go, heigh-ho the derry-o..." until her mother hushed her.

Total silence. This was not what they had been expecting. Now, a murmur among the congregation. Bobby looked to Martin. "Any idea?" Martin shook his head. This wasn't supposed to involve people being dropped onto roofs, but that's what it had sounded like. "Doctor," Bobby said, "let's you and I go out and take a look around."

Rose said, "No!"

"Rose, I-"

"Bobby, no! You stay in here."

There was a silent look between them. She knew Bobby's duty, and finally turned away, her eyes swimming.

Bobby and Doctor Willerson crossed the room, went out the vestry door. The body-if that's what it was-had fallen down that side of the church.

The congregation stood in silence, waiting, some bowed in prayer, other people simply staring.

When they returned a moment later, the doctor said into the silent, watching faces, "I believe it is Mayor Tarr. He's dead from a fall. He had a rifle. I believe he was on the roof trying to defend us, and lost his footing."

Peg fainted.

As Ginger Forester and her boyfriend, Lyndon Lynch, who had been

sitting with her, moved to help, there came more screaming, fainter, but from many more throats.

One of the other groups was under attack. Bobby went to the main door, opened it for a moment, then returned. "It's Saint Peter's," he announced.

Mal Holmes said, "This is insane! What are we doing just waiting like this. Tarr had a point, let's go outside, let's put up a fight. For God's sake, let's fight!"

"Our fight is in our prayers," Reg shouted.

Mrs. James cried out loudly, then, and shook her fist, a gesture that must have been repeated billions upon billions of times on earth over these past terrible weeks.

"I want to read now," Reg called out. "I have a text. And then we will pray. We will pray all night and the children can sleep in the pews."

"No way am I going to sleep," Trevor said.

"Me neither!" Winnie added.

"Okay, kids, hush," Lindy whispered.

Winnie pulled on Martin's pant leg. "I'm real thirsty," she whispered.

"I've, uh-oh, it's in the street," Lindy said. "When that thing-"

"We have plenty," Jim said, producing a bottle of Ayers water.

"This is from the Book of Isaiah," Reg announced. "Listen to this. Isaiah fifty-five, you can turn to it in the pew Bibles, it's page four hundred and thirty-five." He read, "'So shall you summon a nation you knew not, and nations that knew you not shall run to you, because of the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, who has glorified you. Seek the Lord while he may be found, call him while he is near. Let the scoundrel forsake his way, and the wicked man his thoughts; let him turn to the Lord for mercy; to our God, who is generous in forgiving.'"

At that moment, the lights went out. There was a roar from the whole congregation, ringing loud, shrill with terror.

"Let us pray," Reg called into the din. "LET US PRAY!" Voices dropped, flashlights came on.

But there also came another light, crawling along the tops of the stained glass windows of the birth, youth, and ministry of Jesus that lined the west wall.

Martin watched, unable to turn away, transfixed with horrified fascination.

As the congregation realized that it was there, silence slowly fell. Became

absolute. They watched it coming down, this most terrible weapon that had ever been in the world, and yet so strange, so unexpected.

As a scientist, Martin tried to use what skills of observation he could muster. It moved like a thick liquid, this light. We had slowed light down, stopped it, reversed it, but had never created anything like this.

When it began to come in, there was a sigh in the room, just the softest of sighs, no more, and a little girl's voice piping, "Look at the pretty, Mommy, the pretty is on Jesus!"

The painted glass with the bearded figure on the cross, the rough rocks, and the praying virgin in her chipped blue glittered with new life as the light ran along them, seemed to pause as if it was looking out across the congregation, evaluating them, scanning them, tasting of them...and then it came on, glaring on their upturned faces.

"Dad, is this an alien being?" Trevor asked.

"It's Lucifer," Winnie said. "Be quiet or he'll come after us."

Some children began to cry, and a ripple of panic spread. Parents held them.

Martin saw immediately that the thing moved like something alive-and something that felt no need to be careful, not the way it came surging in the windows, filling the room with its slicing glare. He was fascinated by its motion, he couldn't help himself. It was a little like the spread of a membrane, he thought. But then it came forward so quickly that there were shrieks of literal agony, the terror was so extreme.

Old Man Michaels dropped to the floor with a thud. He went gray, and Martin thought he'd probably died. A stench of urine and feces filled the air. Children broke away from their parents and began running toward the doors, in their terror imagining that they could escape. Mamie Leonard dashed after Kevin, but the boy reached the vestry door and threw it open.

Glare literally gushed in. The boy cried out and jumped back, but the light swept around him. Martin observed only a flicker, and the child went still, standing in the body of it, surrounded by it, his jaw agape. His mother raced to the far side of the nave, and stood there shrieking again and again, sorrowing cries that dominated the room.

Reg cried out, "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,' says the Lord. 'As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.'"

The light moved and expanded, crossing the sanctuary and flowing down

into the nave. People got up on the pews to keep their feet out of it, but Martin knew it was useless, it would do its infamous bloom any second, and then, well he could not imagine it. He just could not.

There was no sign of any biological material. It was definitely a plasma, he could see that. But it had the stability of a highly organized membrane. He tried to think of any bas-relief, any wall painting, any sculpture anywhere in the world that reminded him of this, and could not.

This was new, he was pretty sure, to the experience of mankind.

"Pray now," Reg said, "pray and hold the children and be ready with the guns."

Martin put his arm around Trevor and Lindy picked up Winnie, and Martin felt the pistol in his pocket. He'd loaded it with hollow points. A shot to the head would destroy a child instantly, but Martin did not frankly know if he could do it. God willing, Homeland Security was right about the value of congregating and they would survive.

"Shoot it," a voice said. "God help us, shoot it!"

"Don't do that!" Bobby shouted. "That spreads it, we all know. That-"

They were suddenly surrounded by the strangest thing any of them had ever experienced, a flickering mass of colors that hurt and felt good against the skin at the same time...and felt like somebody was watching you, not with malice, but with a sort of evaluative skill that seemed almost...professional.

Martin thought, we are destroyed, a destroyed species. This is how we end, killed in a way we do not understand by something beyond our knowledge. And then also thought, But it's the way cattle die every day, or used to.

He glimpsed a man, lean, dark hat over his eyes, face of a snake, sliding toward him. He shook the hallucination off. They'd all heard stories about this phenomenon, it was the mind trying to force the impossible into some form that it might be able to understand and thus to fight.

Now Trevor closed his eyes. "Dad, I'm seeing a sort of snake." He opened them. "In my mind. Watching me in my mind."

Children's voices were raised, "There's a cobra, Mommy, a dragon, Daddy, a python..." and he knew where the ancient tale of the snake originated. It was how the mind of man gave form to disincarnate evil.

There came a dull sound, like one of those deep thuds that never seem to find an explanation, that one sometimes hears back in the woods. But something had changed. Reg had changed. Where he had been in his pulpit

with his Bible in his hand, wearing an old gray suit with no tie, now stood a man who appeared to be wearing the most intricately beautiful colored coat ever devised. But it was not cloth, the colors came from tiny, exquisitely detailed memories, each one full of life and motion, swarming around him like living jewels. He threw back his head and roared like a maddened gorilla.

A passage from the Bible occurred to Martin, the one about the coat of many colors. He understood the message: Joseph's coat had been his soul. The old biblical authors, therefore, had known what souls looked like. They were seeing Reg's soul being sucked from his body the way a monkey might suck the pulp from an orange.

Nobody made a sound now, nobody dared. But every single one of them hoped in his heart that this would be enough for it, this would be an end of it, after Reg it would go.

Reg began to physically distort, his face growing long, his eye sockets stretching into bizarre vertical ovals, his lips opening, mouth gaping-and then all over the room others did the same, their faces twisting, colors oozing like gorgeous pus out of their bodies. They pissed and shat and howled and writhed, sinking down, tearing at their throats.

There was a deafening wham as Milly Fisher blew her boy Tim's head apart.

"Mother," Winnie shouted into Lindy's face, "what is this, what is this?"

Crackling became screeching became sucking, deep, the sucking of a chest wound, of a woman of the night, and the congregation became a blur of light and struggling, writhing people, some of them clawing at themselves and howling, others with guns in their shaking hands, trying to kill the ones who were being destroyed-as if it mattered, as if it would help.

It remained like that, people crawling, leaping over one another and running for the light-choked doors, wading in it, pushing against the warmth of its ghastly fleshiness.

Then came darkness, then silence, broken by a single wracking sob.

The chandeliers flickered, and with their return came the sense of a storm having passed.

The minister still stood in his pulpit. From a middle pew somebody asked, "Reg? Reg are you okay?"

The Bible dropped from Reg's hand, hitting the floor beside the pulpit with a crack like a shot. In the pews, some people shook others, calling into blank faces, shaking them until the spittle flew.

"Angie, honey, Angie, you're okay! She's okay, it didn't do her-"

Martin saw Angie Bright, Carl Bright's wife of thirty years, looking at him with the blank innocence of a newborn.

Others began to growl, to laugh, to back away toward the walls. As the minister did this, he laughed softly. His face was still his own, but it was empty, the eyes glassy, staring.

Bobby came to the center aisle, then trotted up to the pulpit. "Okay, we have the law on our side, we need to do this, people."

"My baby, my baby is fine. Lucy, you're fine. She's fine!" Becky Lindner shook her twelve-year-old. "Lucy! Lucy, don't you playact!"

The girl, who had been plastic like a catatonic, lunged at her mother, biting as a dog bites when it is cornered and cannot get away. Becky cried out, falling back into the Baker family, and young Timothy Baker caught her in his arms.

Then Carl Bright screamed as he realized that his teenage son Robert, also, was among the wanderers. Martin's heart was torn by all he was seeing, but the families like this one were the hardest. The Brights lived back in the hills in a comfortable house. In fact, it was only a few miles from their own place. He was a technical writer, she ran an online crafts business.

Without so much as a murmured warning, Mrs. Haggerty leaped on Lindy's back like a lioness leaping on a wildebeest, and she lurched forward into Martin, and the three of them went down with Mrs. Haggerty ripping Lindy's hair out in handfuls while her husband, crying out, dragged her off and took her into the aisle.

"Kids, don't look," Martin shouted as young Haggerty shot his mother dead.

Lindy and Winnie and Trevor turned and moved to the back of the church. Martin was confused by this. "Lindy? Hey."

Another shot from the back of the sanctuary, and one of the Desmond boys stood over his father's body, looking down out of tear-flooded young eyes. "Momma, I did it, I did it," he cried, and his mother took him to her, and buried him in her embrace.

Phil Knippa, whose wife was gathering at the back of the church with the others who had been ruined, asked Martin, "What happens?"

Martin ran to his family. "Hey, this-"

His Lindy had reached the door. She stood with the others. "Lindy? Oh, no!"

Bobby came up to him. "Hey, come on, guy."

"But they didn't-nothing happened to them!" He laughed. "She's in shock. Hey, Lindy!" He went down to his kids. "See, they're fine, Bobby, they're just following their mother. Winnie! Trevor! Stop this! Stop this!"

Phil said, "In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea."

The new wanderers crowded the entrance, pressing against the doors, slapping them and Lindy and Trevor and Winnie were doing it, too, and then Bobby put his hand on Martin's shoulder. Martin turned, and when he saw the gun that his dear old friend was offering him, the anguish that ripped his heart caused him to throw his head back and cry out, and in that quiet part of him that is in us all and sees and knows all, a voice said, "This has happened. This is what you have, now."

Lovers, wives, husbands, children-all circulated among them, trying to communicate with them, and the church was filled with their tears.

Bobby got the door open for them, and they went out into the street...and joined many others, a shocking number, all walking away into the night. Martin thought that it was more than half the town. Three quarters.

They shuffled silently off toward the low water crossing and the back roads that led up into the Smokey Hills, hardly hills at all, but wilder than they looked from a distance.

A few people ran after them, two husbands, a wife, some others who had exchanged death promises. "If it happens to me, don't let me be like that." Pacts made in blood and love.

Martin ran, too, touching his love, calling to her, calling to his babies, "Kids, come back here, this is Dad, this is an order!" And to his wife, "Oh, Lindy, wake up, love, wake up, love."

But they did not wake up, none of them woke up. An arm came around Martin's shoulder, the arm of somebody he knew vaguely but who now seemed like a savior, and he leaned against this man and wept, and in the street the little clusters of those left behind wept, and the wanderers went on down the street, disappearing into the dark.

Martin ran after them again, and then he stopped, and he went to his knees and he howled her name, "LINDY!" He cried in rage and in anguish as she went off without even a backward glance, taking his babies and his love and all that meant anything to him with her into the night.

The shattered town sank away into the horrible small hours, with weeping in the churches, and the bodies of the destroyed dead lined up with what little dignity could be managed on the lawns. Most of the ruined, though, were not killed, because people did not have it in their hearts to rip the life out of the familiar and the beloved, no matter their state. So they went away, absorbed by the night. When daylight came, people would seek them out, taking water and food to the empty shells of their loved ones, trying to feed them, to talk to them. And they would smile, the wanderers, or sometimes lash out like scared animals, but the followers would stay with them, begging, pleading, praying, trying anything to bring them back. It is an extraordinary anguish to say good-bye to your dead while they are still alive, and many, many people could not do it.

Martin went to his feet. He would not be a follower. He vowed that. He would be a fighter. Somehow, he was going to rescue his love and his children, he was going to go out there into that darkness, and whatever it took, whatever was needed, if he give his blood or his life or his own soul, it mattered not a bit, he would rescue his family.

Toward dawn there was a fall of dew, and morning came pearled with it, on the leaves of autumn and the yellowing late grasses, on the neat houses, the empty streets, and on the wanderers, too, far out in the rustling fields, shining on their pale skin, pearl upon pearl.

FOUR

DECEMBER 2
THE POISONER

WILEY LEAPED UP FROM THE computer, threw open the bottom drawer of the desk, grabbed the booze he kept in there, and just plain poured it down. "Christ, you dummies, can't you see it's a damn trick?"

But they had not seen, not even Martin and Lindy. They'd gone to the church, too, they'd made themselves sitting damn ducks and they'd-oh, God, the poor Winters family, and poor Harrow. All those good, decent people.

Wanderers. It was worse than dying. But why was this being done to them and where were they going? He thought that Martin was right about one thing-they were certainly on their way to designated locations. Collection points, though-he was just guessing about that. Maybe they were going to gas chambers or something, God forbid that such a fate would befall Lindy and Winnie. He was crazy about them, that sweet, bright little girl, her mother so full of love and brilliance.

"This is not real," he said, "I refuse to let this be real."

Maybe he wasn't recording events in the other human universe, but creating them. Maybe he was an instrument of the reptilians, and maybe that was why they had come into his life five years ago. They had done something to him. Prepared him. But how?.

He knew that supple movement between parallel universes was involved with belief and the lack thereof. By continuing to deny that UFOs were something real, our own version of NASA had saved us-at least, so far. But not him. Maybe not him.

Thing was, the closer we got to December 21, the easier it became to get through the gateways. And on that day, all hell was going to break loose in the other human universe. That had to be what this was all about. Preparing for the invasion...and maybe here, too, no matter what our version of NASA denied or did not deny.

He clicked through the pages he had written. He knew both more and less than was in the laptop. For example, he knew what was happening in the Far

East in Martin's world, which was a catastrophe so vast that it was, quite simply, unimaginable. He knew, but he couldn't access any detail. Couldn't see much. Could feel it though, the terror being experienced by billions.

What would happen if everybody became a wanderer?

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Damn Brooke and her rules. A cigar would go very, very well right now.

Maybe Martin was right and it was a harvest of slaves. Might not six billion slaves be worth something in the parallel earth of the reptilians? But if the souls were being taken out, then what was happening to them? Martin thought they were just disintegrating, but Wiley wasn't so sure of that. He had no idea what to think. He'd never really believed in the soul or God or any of that stuff. Like Martin, he'd been to Stanford, and had come away, also, with a strong rationalism and fundamental disrespect for unprovable assertions.

Those monstrous creatures wanted the bodies, he was convinced of it.

Unless...how many parallel universes might there be? If the Many Worlds interpretation of Hugh Everett was correct, then this oppression could be coming from any one of literally uncountable numbers of parallel universes.

He thought not, though. He thought that the reptilian forms that the people in the church had glimpsed were the final telltale. He was right about the creatures and he was right about their world. He could feel their need, could see their glaring, relentless eyes the same way he had on that night five years ago when they'd tried to-what had they tried to do? Had they really somehow captured him?

No, something was wrong with that picture. He'd written a whole book about it, but he was increasingly aware of a missing element. Because what had happened to him on that night had been hard, but-there was just something missing. Tip of the tongue. Couldn't quite remember.

Maybe it had something to do with the fact that there were three earths involved. A triad.

Buckminster Fuller had called the triangle the building block of the universe because of its structural integrity. There was a reason in conscious life, also, that notions of trinity made structural sense. A triad had a positive side, a negative side, and a balancing side. If the two-moon earth was the positive side, then the negative side was the reptilians with their evil hungers.

Oh, Christ, he was not the balancing factor. I mean, well, let's face it, a middling writer with a burr up his ass about aliens is not the right guy to bring things into balance.

In other words, not up to the job of-what? So far, he wasn't really doing a whole lot beyond writing a history that his world would take to be fiction. He wasn't helping anybody.

He closed his eyes. If there was a god anywhere out there, may he now deliver his servant Wylie Dale from the curse of this writing.

But even as he tried to push away the other human world, his mind slipped back toward its suffering. There, this house was now cold and dark, not nicely heated and cozy with a lovely family inside.

As dawn broke here, the phoebes started their sweet calling, the very essence of peace in the country. Over there, though, the people left alive were crying together, their sorrow unspeakable. Wylie was crying, too-in silence, though. Brooke and the kids mustn't hear.

Then Brooke was there. She had come quietly and he had not heard her, but she was there, standing in the door of his office, and he thought she was an angel come down, and he turned to her in his creaky old chair, and slid out of it and to his knees, and embraced her waist, and buried his face in the sweet and sour scent of her.

Her hands came around his head, and he felt cradled. She said, "You need to come to bed, love."

"What time is it?"

"The phoebes are starting."

He'd been in here for close to twenty-four hours. "Oh, man."

"Wiley?"

He looked up at her in her nightgown, so pale in the thin light that she might have been a ghost or a memory. "We're travelers on the long water," he muttered, "you and me, sweets, you and me." Her hand came into his and it was warm, and he kissed it and it smelled like sweat and remembrance.

He went to his feet and took her into his arms, and she settled there. He closed his eyes and sailed in the comfort of her closeness.

"You were crying," she said.

"Mm. My story."

"It's really getting to you, Wiley."

He nodded against her shoulder.

"Your imagination is supposed to be a tool, not a weapon, especially not against yourself."

"Oh, honey," he said.

"Wiley, it's not real, remember that this time. Don't get yourself

confused."

He nodded again. Her hands swept his thighs, then her long fingers probed at his pants, but playfully, quickly. He felt himself stir. She was his home, Brooke was, the home of his soul.

She'd been there that night five years ago. It had been the two of them. And it was it-not what it seemed?

"Let me show you a little reality," she whispered in his ear. "Let's do dawn patrol."

That's what they called it when they made love in the early hours, which they often did. This is the time when childrens' sleep is deepest and parents are least likely to be disturbed, and, for Wiley, when his body called him to the ocean of his wife.

But as they walked arm in arm to the bedroom, he heard a door open and close downstairs, and then the voice, low and full of sorrow, of an invisible man. The man went into the living room and became silent there. "Did you hear that?"

"The warbler? He just started in."

"Not the warbler."

She guided his hands to the familiar pink ribbon that was tied behind her neck, and he untied it, and the nightgown floated down. Her matchless curves shone in the rising light, her nipples blushed pink and coming tight, and she was the loveliest thing that he knew, a beauty that, when it surrendered itself to his big hands and arms, seemed as if it must bear some sort of strength in it that was connected to eternity, or it would have melted into shadow at his touch.

As she unbuckled his belt, she made a familiar tune in her throat, "Never grow old, never grow old," a line from the old hymn that was a theme in the music of her life. And they would not, not in a love like the one that had possessed the two of them. And had possessed Martin and Lindy, too, and been destroyed, just freshly, along with the children that had been woven out of its flesh.

They lay with the windows open, their bodies close in the cool morning breeze, and came together while the birds called softly, the phoebes and the tanagers and the doves, and the first sun spread across the floor.

When he should have been completely absorbed in her, when his body was radiant with pleasure, his eyes drinking her face, his powerful hips pumping and making her cry out softly, then, at that grand private moment,

he heard another voice cry out, and knew that it was his own and not his own, a broken, bereft voice from downstairs and a universe so close and so very far away.

He went plunging on, but then heard the back door slam and the voice screaming, but faintly, faintly...and yet so terribly that it shattered everything and caused him to go twisting off her.

He flopped onto his back, gasping.

"Honey," she said, "oh, honey," and came to him. But he leaped out of the bed.

"It's him," he said.

"Who?"

Out in the back yard, he was screaming. Wiley ran downstairs. "Martin," he yelled, "Martin!"

He went through the living room and out the back door into the dewy grass.

"Wiley, for God's sake!"

Then he heard them, their shuffling walk, the wanderers coming up from Harrow. He stood in a shaft of hazy light as they came closer, and saw the branches shake, and then heard their voices murmuring, and heard Martin screaming and screaming.

The murmuring came closer, got louder. "Hear it, Brooke?"

"What?"

They were right in front of him now, murmuring, breathing, their feet shuffling. "Brooke, look at the grass!"

"Honey, oh, for God's sake!"

The footprints came closer and closer.

Then he reached out, and he touched the air where one of them must be. He felt a shoulder, part of an arm.

And then he saw them. Where he touched them, he could see a knit shirt, part of a neck, then a muscular forearm. "My God, look, look!" He reached, he touched the face-and saw glazed, empty eyes, a slack mouth-male-but the man went on, the man did not seem to be aware of him at all. "Winnie," he cried, "Lindy! Trevor!"

Then he heard Martin, heard him close, heard him whispering "baby, baby please, please wake up baby-"

He reached out-and there, under his hand was a khaki jacket, then a face-Martin, richly alive, totally there! "Martin! Martin, you can't help them, you

were all tricked, you should hide, you need to hide! Oh, Christ, somebody in the government is on the dark side, Martin, can't you see that, they want this to happen!"

But Martin was gone. All around him, the wanderers continued passing, and he kept reaching out to them. He touched Mrs. Sweet from the drugstore, her gaping face, and the old pastor Reginald Todd, and then Doctor Willerson-the town doctor, reduced to this. "Oh, Jesus, Jesus-"

Then Brooke was there, and she slapped him so hard there was a flash and pain.

He grabbed her wrist. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"With me? You're naked in the back yard, for God's sake, and look, you have an audience-"

There, face pale in his bedroom window, stood Nick, staring down on the scene. His expression was grave, like a judge at a sentencing. Martin took the robe she'd brought and covered himself, and went in through the shuffling sounds of the wanderers, and Martin's cries, and the pleading, praying voices of the followers, and the last thing he heard was a child's voice calling for his mother and his father to stop, in the choked tones of a twelve-year-old trying to be brave.

"Get in here, Wiley, you're scaring me!" She tugged at him and he went with her. As they returned to the house, he waved up at his son. Inside, she threw her arms around him. "Wiley, what is it? What's happening to you?"

"The story's got me. It's drowning me."

"Wiley, you were warned."

"I can't stop it!"

"I want you to see Doctor Crutchfield. I want you to see him today."

"He's a wanderer."

"A what? What does that mean?"

"No, of course not, that's Doctor Willerson in the two moon world, I'm sorry. I'll call him."

"What in hell is a two-moon world?"

"A place of great beauty, my wife, that is being raped by creatures without mercy." He grabbed her shoulders. "And they are coming. They are coming here."

She stepped back. She went pale.

"In your heart," he said, "you know."

"I do not know!"

Then Nick came downstairs. He looked up at them. "I dreamed awful things," he said, "then I woke up and it was worse."

"What was your dream, son?"

"I dreamed we left, Dad. You tried, but you couldn't go where we were going, and we couldn't stop, and then I woke up and you were in the yard, and what's wrong, Dad?"

Brooke gave Wiley a hard, hard look, and coming from his gentle Brooke, that meant a lot. It meant she thought he had hurt her boy.

Then Kelsey came down, flitting along in her pink nightie, her curls bobbing. She looked just as darling as the most wonderful little girl picture ever taken, and he opened his arms and lifted her to him. "I had a bad dream," she said, "I dreamed me and Mommy got leashes put on us and we had to walk all night and forever and I got so tired but I couldn't stop, and you ran along behind us praying and he had a bottle of Ayers water. I thought we didn't get bottled water. I thought it was too expensive."

"Now, see," Brooke said, "that proves it was just a dream, because there's Evian and Perrier and Ozark and lots of other kinds of water, but there is no Ayers water."

"There isn't?"

"Not in this universe," Wiley told her, and kissed her button nose. As best he could, he concealed what was almost a sickness of fear. In the other universe they had Ayers water, he'd seen bottles among peoples' provisions in the church.

But how had Kelsey known about it? How indeed, unless the wall that separated the two human universes was also breaking down, just as he had feared it would, and hell was getting closer fast.

They all went into the kitchen, and he turned on the radio and he and Brooke made breakfast. His mind was completely focused on one thing-how had Kelsey known? What might be about to happen?

"You're staring," she said.

He shook his head. "Don't be mad at me."

"No."

"It's not even a big deal in physics. Parallel universes are real."

"I'm sure they are. I'm also sure that they don't cause people-just generally speaking, I mean-to leap around naked in their backyards. Your appointment with Crutchfield is at eight-thirty, so you'd better get rolling."

"Eight-thirty? You're kidding."

She looked at him, and the fire in her eyes actually reassured him. He wanted to feel like somebody was in control, because he was not in control.

He gobbled down the last of his eggs and went up to dress. Maybe this would be actually be good, maybe all that was happening here was that he was losing his grip-which, frankly, would be a hell of a lot better than what he feared.

Moving fast, he managed get to town just in time.

As he drove along the familiar streets, he kept expecting to see little knots of tragic people, but all he did see was a small Kansas community in its mild prosperity, a gentle bustle in the streets, even a recent addition, the Starbucks. Nobody seemed strange, nobody had a vacant look.

He drove past Third Street Methodist. The church was closed, but it looked perfectly normal. Sylvester was on the walkway with a trowel, turning soil in a flower bed. Wiley slowed down and waved. "Hey there, Syl."

Syl waved back. Nothing unusual.

Of course not, you fool. Things are fine in this universe-for now.

When he arrived at Crutchfield's office, which was a walk-up above the Danforth Meat Market, one of the few small businesses hanging on in downtown, it was twenty to nine. "Sorry I'm late, Marla."

"Brooke says you've gone around the bend."

"That would be true."

"Then I'll remind you that I've got Mace."

He'd come on to the girl with the porcelain skin and the bright green eyes. But all in fun, of course. He would never cheat on Brooke. But with that black hair and that creamy skin, Marla did inspire.

Crutchfield looked normal, also. White hair, tiny glasses, a sense of therapeutic fog clinging to him.

"So you were capering around in the back yard naked. What say we start there?"

"Look, I've got-oh, Christ. I've got something happening that I can't even begin to understand."

"I think Brooke is having exactly the same problem."

"It feels to me as if something enormous is happening that has to do with what I am writing, and it is not good, this huge thing, but I cannot stop writing about it even if I want to. I'm a sort of infernal machine."

"You're a machine?"

"Not in control of my own body. Not channeling, it's not like that. I sit

there and I type. Automatic typing. I've abandoned my Corona and I'm just working on the computer. But the book isn't mine. I can write without thinking. Read, watch TV, close my eyes, it doesn't matter. My fingers just type away on their own."

"If your work isn't yours, whose would it be?"

"That's a hell of a good question. The answer is, I have no idea."

"But you're not involved in the writing?"

"Well, I am, of course, sort of. In the sense that I can see their world, hear their voices. Shit! You moron. Moron!"

"I'm a moron?"

"I'm a moron! You don't tell a shrink you hear voices."

"The voices don't want you to tell me about them?"

"Aw, shit. Sheee-ut! Goddamn it, the voices don't care."

"So what do they say?"

"They cry. They're suffering. Some of them came up through the yard, and when I touched them I could see them-see the hands, the faces that I touched. Does that sound plain crazy, or spectacularly crazy?"

"Sounds like I might as well get that new Lexus I've had my eye on."

"Do you know what a parallel universe is?"

"Something that exists deep inside the CERN supercollider for a few billionths of a second?"

"I'm not paying you to bait me, Henry. We're deducting three minutes of money for that little flippancy."

"You're afraid I'm laughing at you, but that isn't what's going on."

"What is?"

"I'm trying to make sense of what you're saying."

"Would it disturb you to know that in a parallel universe a doctor very much like you called Frank Willerson is currently walking off toward the northwest with most of the other people in this community, and he has no soul?"

"We're probably all better off without that soul mythology, anyway. Let's you and me deal with who and what we know we are, which is us in this room together. Or are you here? Are you a projection from a parallel universe, Wiley? Is schizophrenia the problem, here?"

"Look, I had a close encounter with creatures from a third parallel universe a few years ago, and because that happened-well, I'm doing what I'm doing."

"Which is?"

"I'd say I have no fucking idea, but I'm beginning to have an idea. I'm the balancing force between the positive and negative earths."

"Ah, of course, that makes complete sense. Would you be God, then, or just Jesus?"

"I'm Napoleon, you fuck."

"Not interested, Wylie. Every psychiatrist reaches a point in his career where he has to draw a line. No more Napoleons. I reached that point a while back."

"Am I insane?"

"Of course you're insane."

"What can I do about it?"

"Come here a lot. Keep paying your bill."

"You are a cynical man."

"Yes I am."

"Look, I'll apologize to my wife for going out in the back yard naked. If that's a compromise, here."

"Is it a compromise?"

"When you're bored, you turn the patient's statements into questions. You're doing that now."

Henry lifted his arm, drew back his sleeve, and looked at his watch. "I'm relieved to say that we've come to the end of our time, Wiley. You can reschedule with Marla."

"Can I fuck her, too?"

"If you want to continue treatment with me, no."

"You don't like me very much, do you?"

"Do you want me to like you?"

He left the office without making another appointment. What was the point? The good doctor didn't believe a word he said. Hell, he didn't believe a word he said.

Driving back in the Jeepazine, he made a decision. He would change it. He'd simply go back and alter the text. Because if he changed it, maybe he would also change events. No more ruined Winters family, no more ruined world.

He drove faster, and faster still, thinking only of his computer, of the urgent need return to his writing-which was returning to him and fast, roaring into his head like some kind of a dam-break flood blasting down the stream

behind his house, a flood of words-

-and then there were lights, bright, back windshield.

Damn, he did not need another ticket, he was gonna need to take a damn compulsory driving course, which would take hours and piss him off in a mighty way.

"Hey, there, Matt, I'm sorry, I guess I was a little fast, there."

"Wiley, you were doing a hundred and eleven."

"Oh, that is bad."

"Well, you know, I don't usually stop town people. But-"

"How's Beka?"

"Aw, shut up."

"Uh, I could buy you a box of Partagas? Or just hand over the fifteen hundred bucks they cost? Cash, now?"

"I'll take money and smokes. But I'm still gonna have to write this up."

"Aw, fuck, Matt. Damn it, fuck."

"Why were you going so fast? I mean, damn."

"What can I tell you? I'm crazy."

Matt wrote the ticket and handed it in for Wiley to sign. "This is gonna four-point you, but this is town, you're in town, and we just-a hundred and eleven is not good, Wiley, I'm sorry."

Four points added to the eight he already had would mean not only compulsory driver's ed, but also a court appearance.

"I'm gonna call George Piccolo and tell him you harassed me."

"You do that and I'll beat your ass, boy."

When they were kids, Matt had always won. He was heavier, he was faster, but Wiley was capable of getting more pissed off, as he did now. "Gimme the goddamn ticket, and for the love of God don't tell Brooke or I'll get my ass whupped, serious."

"Well, you might like that."

"Tell you what, I'm gonna drive home at thirty miles an hour and then I'm goin' back to the cave for a smoke. I'll call you on your cell to share my enjoyment with you."

"Smoke my cigars, you're gonna eat the butts. Remember that, because I get off duty in an hour and I will check."

Hiding the ticket carefully, he drove on. He'd find a way to hide the fat check to the county in Quicken. Somehow or other.

Once back in his office, he pulled out the bottle of Woodford Reserve he

kept in his bottom-drawer liquor stash and sipped at it.

What seemed like the next moment, voices caused him to come awake. Had he been sleeping? What had just happened? For a disoriented moment, he had the horrifying sense that he'd crossed into the parallel universe. But then the voices resolved into familiar ones. Brooke was coming in from the garage with the kids. She'd brought them home from school.

He looked at his watch in stunned amazement. It was four-thirty and the sun was on its way down. He'd been sitting here all day. Writing? He had no idea.

He listened to Brooke, to Kelsey's high voice full of excitement about a snake in show and tell, to Nick's thumping tread on the back stairs.

Then silence fell, and what he listened to now was the silence. Soon, the words came again, the words-whispering, shouting, demanding, from the other universe.

It was Martin, and he was talking to himself, and Wiley knew why. The poor guy had stayed here at the house, and was trying to force himself not to follow his family, and was agonized about that.

Martin was crying out, Martin was more desperate than any human being Wylie had ever known.

FIVE

DECEMBER 3
THE BUNKER

AND NOW, SUDDENLY, WYLIE WAS looking at trees. At grass. He knew that he was far from Harrow, Kansas.

He wanted to return to Martin. He could feel the poor guy's mind just racing for solutions, could feel his hunger to give up and blow his poor damn brains out, and his agony that he could not because those he loved could not.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and saw that he was in a dark meadow in a pine woods. There were vents low to the ground, humming softly. Two deer, their ears turning this way and that, ventured out from the shadows.

Then he thought maybe he knew what this was. Martin had followed his family after all. He would have loaded his car up with food and water and set out through the woods and across the fields of his beloved Kansas, and that's where this was.

But no, it was too quiet and too-well, the word was creepy. It had an evil feel to it. Nasty. The deer were uneasy, flipping their tails, their great eyes wary.

Night was falling here, the west was dense with clouds...and there was flickering in the clouds. A sign, he feared, of the disks.

Then he wasn't in a meadow anymore, he was in a gray place that was softly rumbling. There were walls here, a long corridor lit by bulbs in wire cages.

Footsteps came, somebody moving fast, and a man in uniform wheeled around a corner. General Al North moved along the hallway in what appeared to be a military bunker of some sort. As the general came closer, Wylie could see that his fatigues were dirty, his face was sheened with sweat, his eyes, which had been gray and full of resolve in Washington, were now the flitting eyes of a rat.

So, he had survived the attack. Wiley had wondered about what had happened to these people. This was a huge thing, involving the whole world,

and Washington had taken one of the early hits.

Al burst into Tom Samson's office. "Does the president know about this?" he shouted, throwing a crumpled sheet of paper down on his superior officer's desk.

"How dare you!"

"You're telling them to congregate? To gather in groups? Are you insane?"

"God damn you."

"Oh, shut up with your bluster, Tom. You're in way over your head and you never should've been appointed and we both know it. But this-this isn't just executive ineptitude. This is treason and I want an explanation that satisfies me, or I'm gonna arrest you, General."

"You? You don't have the authority."

"This is war. We're out of touch with higher authority."

"The president of the United States is two offices away."

"And I'm carryin' and you're not, and I'll shoot you as soon as look at you unless you explain this goddamn thing. How many people have received this?"

"Pitifully few, given that I'm forced to deliver it with blimps, trucks, Cessnas, and word of mouth."

"Let me go in another direction with this. We got a communication from Fort Riley about three hours ago, to the effect that a group of small towns northwest of Topeka took a terrific hit last night. They had your pamphlet. They congregated in their churches. And eight out of ten of these people are now wanderers. Thank you, Tom. I thank you for them, for their families, for the country. And what's this Kansas deal? Why did you even leaflet these people? Did you somehow know that Lautner County was gonna take a hit?"

"Of course not."

"Oh, no, you did. Because you singled it out. Two days ago, you directed a blimp run over the whole area."

"Routine."

"Really? Why not hit Topeka? Why not hit K.C.? But instead, you just go to this one little county. So I have to ask you, Tom, who's side are you on?"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Our chains of command are busted all to hell, Tom. We're going down in damn flames, worldwide. Bases raided by the disks time and again, desertions by the tens of thousands-we're done, man."

"We have a weapon."

"What? Stealth bombers? Nukes like the one that failed to do jack shit to the lens on Easter Island? Now, there was a good move. We nuke 'em and as a result they pick up their pace a hundredfold. So I'm not so sure I even want to hear about this damn weapon."

"You want to hear about it."

He picked up the crumpled pamphlet. "I want to hear about this, Tom."

"Aw, Christ. Has anybody ever actually told you what an extreme asshole you are?"

"Please," Al said.

"You talk about failure of discipline-speaking of Kansas, you belong in Leavenworth."

Should Al just draw the gun and shoot? How would the president react to that? "Tom, you should've told them to hide, seal themselves in spaces where no light can reach. Force the attack to be executed in detail. Takes more time that way, and we already know that they withdraw at dawn."

"Fish school because mathematically the survival rate among large populations being attacked by predators is greater than that for isolated individuals. Same goes for herding animals. And under these circumstances, my friend, the same exact principle applies to us."

"Let's put it to the president."

"The pamphlets are being distributed as fast as we can manage it, and that's going to continue. Do you know why we were concerned about Lautner County?"

"No."

"Your friend, the little man, the archaeologist-he's there. And they want him dead, I can assure you."

"They? I'm dealing with lenses that emit these bursts of disks every night that go out and wreak havoc. There is no 'they.'"

"Somebody's behind the lenses and behind the disks, never doubt it, and your man is a danger because he has the smarts and the knowledge of the deep past to maybe figure this out, and maybe-just maybe-to figure out a vulnerability. And they know it, and they are after that man."

"Did they get him?"

"Don't know. The place is in chaos, communications are down."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"You still ready to shoot me?"

Al was silent.

"Then you start respecting my command. You salute me, and you call me sir."

Al shook his head, laughing to himself.

"Do it now, goddamn you!"

The two men glared at each other. Al did not salute.

"I'm doing my job, Al. Best I can. Under the worst conditions any American general has ever experienced."

Slowly, as if his arm itself was unwilling, Al raised his hand and saluted. "Yes, Sir," he said.

"Okay, I have an appointment with the president. I want you in attendance, Al."

That surprised him so much he almost gagged. He'd seen himself as being on the way to Diego Garcia for a tour managing the fuel dump. As if there still was a Diego Garcia, let alone a base, let alone fuel.

Face time with the president was a gift. Normally, he couldn't go on his own unless called, and Wade was not in the mood for squash, although there was a good court down here, he'd looked it over when they first came in and this was all exciting and interesting, and they were gonna nuke those suckers to glowing dust balls and go back home in triumph.

As they went along the hall together, Tom put a hand on Al's shoulder. "We're not friends."

"No."

"But we need to put our personal battle on hold. We've got warfighting to do, and we are in trouble. You're about to hear a report that is going to disturb you. Maybe also give you a ray of hope. But I want you to maintain strict military discipline in there. He will ask for your opinion. It will mirror mine."

"Yes, Sir." He realized that this was how it had to be. He just hoped to God that Tom was right. That business about congregating still sounded wrong. It sounded like intentional sabotage.

They went through the outer office. No pretty furniture here, this place was constructed for work and work only. If the president was here, a catastrophe was unfolding. Communications equipment dominated. Secret Service agents with machine guns lined the halls, young men with stricken eyes, all watching the generals pass. Angry, bitter eyes. Mostly, the families of these people lived in places like Arlington and Bethesda, and those communities had been worked for a full week, all of them, and the fleeing

lines of cars had been worked out on the interstates.

Whoever was doing this knew exactly how to proceed. If you break the enemy's organization, you neutralize his warfighting capacity even before he's aimed a weapon. Of course, down here there was no question of the light being a threat, but this was obviously a special place.

There were numerous corporate and private bunkers as well, he knew, not to mention government facilities all over the planet, but with all satellites fried and most land-based switching stations so loaded with atmosphericics that they'd shut down, there was little communication except by messenger-and they could only run during daylight hours.

They entered the presidential office, and Al was horrified at what he saw. The president looked like he'd lost fifty pounds. His eyes were dark, brooding shadows. Trapped, animal eyes.

He looked mean, in the same way a struggling cur looks mean when you're trying to stuff it into a cage and be done with it.

He raised his head, and at once the misery in the face was replaced by a beggar's grin. Now he was a used car salesman who'd spun his last lie. "Sorry," he said, gesturing at papers on his desk. "Signing death warrants. Line of duty desertions, hundreds of them."

"You're ordering executions, sir?"

"Do me a favor, Al. Call me Jimmy. You guys. Should I, you think? Yeah, it's total bullshit, isn't it. They came from CIA, not DoD. There is no DoD, of course. And Bo Waldo's gone. This shit's from staffers." He crumpled one up. "Kids like to kill."

"They're operating out of a unit in Maryland," Tom said. "Above-ground, so it won't matter much longer, be my guess-Jesus, what was that?"

The president looked up, they all looked up. There had been a sound coming out of the ceiling, a low noise, loud enough, though, to drown conversation.

"Call the contractor," the president said, acid in his voice. "Try flushing my toilet sometime, you want a hell of a damned surprise." He sighed. "I wish I knew where my wife and kids were. Do you fellas know where your families are?"

"I've been divorced, Jimmy-oh, long time," Al said. Sissy had packed it in when they were still base bums, shuffling around the world. He'd never bothered to remarry. The air force was his wife, his kids, his mistress, all that and more. As far as his rocks were concerned, he got them off the way monks

did.

"My wife is whereabouts unknown," Tom said.

They'd worked together a long time for Al not to know that Tom was married. But it had never come up. Come to think of it, they'd never even shared a round of golf together, or a game of squash, or had a drink. Then again, maybe Tom didn't drink. Addicts don't, do they?

The sound came again, and this time it was in the wall-moving down from above.

The president stood up. "Is that normal?"

"It's the plumbing," Tom said. "What we need to talk about is I want to reach out to this man, Martin Winters. I want to reach out to other people with knowledge of the deep past. I have a list, Graham Hancock, William Henry, Laurence Gardner, John Jenkins-all leading experts who used to be considered wrong. I want them all located."

The president went to the wall, felt it. "There's heat," he said. "That should not be."

"Call security," Al said.

Tom gave him a look that said he had just overstepped his bounds. Don't speak unless spoken to.

"I have come to believe that what's happening has to do with the deep past," Tom continued.

"That's not news," the president snapped. "Tell me something I can use, please! And don't ask me for permission to convene meetings. I don't care who the hell you talk to, just save our asses, here, Tom! For God's sake, Homeland Security-what's left of it-tells me we're losing a half a million people a night just in this country. Wanderers-well, they aren't wandering. They're all heading to three points: northern Nevada, central Nebraska, and northern Indiana. Now, why? You might ask, right, Al?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, sir...The FBI is in total meltdown, so that leaves military intelligence. So, here's my question to you fellas, do you have any assets working?"

"We've got assets," Al said.

"Oh, good. Then reach out and get me reports." He laughed a little. The beaten-dog look returned-beaten dog turned mean. "Or just tell them to fucking nuke themselves. I mean, why wait around? Wandering's hard on the tootsies, I hear." He took a fabulous silver-clad forty-five automatic out of a

desk drawer. Laid it on the desk. "Can you guys imagine what it is like to be a pregnant woman now? Out there?" He sucked air through bared teeth. His color had deepened so much that Al thought he might be having a coronary. "My God, but it was all so very, very beautiful. And how odd that we didn't know it. All that yelling, all that scheming, the money, my dear heaven, the money-and what was it, in the end? I have come to this: a single child seeing one single leaf that has turned in the fine autumn air means more than all of that. A child clapping because the leaf is red and it was green."

"Mr. President-

"Of course I've gone mad, Tom. For God's sakes, in this situation, madness is sanity. Millie, where are you, baby, are you out there walking the dark path with all the others? Oh, Millie. Forty-four years she walked beside me, fellas. Forty-four years. She gave it all. Everything she had to give. And I can't even think about Mark. Somewhere, I trust. My poor boy." He picked up the gun. "Gentlemen, would you like to join me in a bite of bullet?"

"Mr. President!"

"Al, you know what? You are the nicest man I have ever known." He laughed. "That's why I gave shiteel here your job. He can do it, he's a real bastard. I'm sorry, Al, but you came along at the burnt-out end of the age. No more room for good men." He sighed. "'What rough beast slouches toward Bethlehem...! I had a great-uncle who knew Yeats. Met him by simply going up to his door in Dublin and knocking. Oh, my God, the voice of the man! The voice of Yeats!" He wept, and Al almost wept with him.

There came, then, a sort of chuckling sound. It was really a very strange sound, so strange that Al knew at once that it was no noise ever heard on this earth before-at least, not in this cycle of history.

The president's head snapped to the left. He stared at the wall. Then he turned back, his eyes liquid with pleading. "Why?"

He was pleading with Tom. But Tom didn't need to be pleaded with, he was an underling.

Something then happened that must have looked to Al like the arrival of the Spaniards on their horses must have looked to the Aztecs. Something was in the room that could not be there, that had come from nowhere-not out of the wall, but out of the sound in the wall. He could not say exactly what it looked like-a shell so black that it absorbed light, or a machine propelled on enormous legs, or a gigantic spider, even. The sort of thing that comes out of the closet when you are four, and eventually recedes on the expiring tide of

childhood.

He heard a voice, "Agnus dei," Lamb of God, sounding so pure that it was as if sounded from the highest, the farthest of all voices—a voice beyond telling. Wade ascending.

"Qui tollis peccata mundi," the president whispered, "who takes away the sins of the world."

The roar of the gun was like a blast of Satan's breath, so ferocious that it made Al cry out, so enormous that it seemed to gather the whole bunker in its strength and crush it to rubble.

Al had him in his arms before his body, which had slapped into the wall, had even begun to slide to the floor. He stank of raw blood, his left eye was shuddering like the wing of a wounded fly, then green and bloody vomit pumped out of him with a furious, questing seizure that parodied sexual passion.

Secret Service poured into the room. One of them lifted his machine gun, braced it at Tom, who stood quite calmly, the very least of smiles on his face. He did not even glance at the young man with the gun, or any of the young men frozen in the doorway.

"I have a mission for you, Al," he said. "Put him down, you'll need to leave at once."

Al laid the president-Jimmy—on the thinly carpeted floor. He went to attention. "Yes, sir," he said. He saluted his superior officer, now the leader of the free world.

SIX

DECEMBER 3
WANTED

MARTIN DROVE HARD, IGNORING THE thudding of his tires and the screech of harvest stubble scraping the sides of his truck. In the east, dawn burned orange, so he didn't have much time before the lights of followers would become invisible and he'd lose his chance to catch up, maybe forever.

Last night, he'd driven out to his house to be in their path, but hadn't been able to find his family. Wanderers had gone past, but there had been so many of them, far more than he'd realized, and his family had escaped him.

He consulted his compass. He was no navigator, but was trying to drive as straight in a north-northwesterly direction as he could. Wanderers went in straight lines, so people said.

At first, he'd tried to reason with Lindy. He had picked up Winnie and carried her to the car-and been bitten for his trouble. He had not been able to find Trevor at all, which had only added to his sorrow.

All around him, there had been screaming people, begging their loved ones not to go, trying to wake them up.

They'd gone off down Third Street and between two boarded-up stores. Behind those stores was Oak Street, then behind it Linnert Lane, then the plains, and ten miles out, the Smokes, and beyond them the high plains, then Canada. And somewhere, he felt sure, whatever fate was in store for them.

Martin had trotted over to his jeep and got in-and then Bobby was there. "Hey, guy, we need to do this another way."

Martin had looked at him, and it was like looking across a great, black river to a man whose life was unfolding on a better shore. He fought the tears down, but when his friend reached in and put a hand on his shoulder, he broke down. Bobby stayed with him until there were screams, then shots, off in the direction of Oak Street. A follower was killing a wanderer, probably based on an agreement. It was a common thing, these days, not considered murder. "Gotta go," Bobby said. "You stay right here, you're comin' home with us."

Martin had waited for a couple of minutes, but then he had turned on his car and moved off toward Linnert Lane. He had seen, out in the fallow fields, a slowly moving cluster of lights, disappearing into the night. There were voices, too, cries and pleas echoing in the silence, and then a voice, high and full of something Martin guessed must be faith, "Yea, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." then lost to an errant wind and long thunder out of the west.

Martin had not returned to Third Street Methodist. He had not been able to face going home with the Chalmers family.

Instead, he had driven out into the night, going up 1540 into the Smokes. He knew every inch of the hills where he lived. As a boy, he'd hunted the Smokes with his dad, taking whitetail deer and turkey. He'd hunted across the very land where he'd built his house. Nowadays, he didn't hunt, largely because Trevor wasn't interested. He preferred the intricacies of fishing, and just Saturday before last they'd driven over to the Kaw River and fished for cats with cut shad and done well...except, of course, Lindy and Winnie had thought them insane to use shad as bait in order to eat catfish, but they were women and-oh, hell, he'd had to pull over, he was just plain overcome.

By the time he'd gotten home, he'd known that he was in serious shock. He needed medical attention. But Willerson was the only doctor in town and hadn't he gone out with the wanderers? Martin had taken a couple of the Xanax he used to mainline during bill-paying time.

He'd wandered his own home like a ghost, pacing from room to room, hugging Winnie's beloved stuffed elephant she had named Bearish and burying his face in Trevor's pillow. He had ended up in his own bed clutching one of Lindy's nightgowns to his face, and had stayed there until the sun was well up.

There had come a buzz from the front door. It was Rosie with food, the sort of casserole you brought to the bereaved.

"Harrow's formed a committee," she had said. "Followers. You're welcome to join. They're going to be taking food and water. Some plan on going all the way."

"Do we still know where they are?"

"Helen's out there with a walkie-talkie. They're about twelve miles out, moving at three miles an hour. North-northwest, just like all the rest. They're about a mile from Holcomb's wanderers, and it looks like the two groups're gonna meet up about noon. That'll put it up to about two thousand people."

"Two thousand!"

"Hon, there's just eighteen intact families in Harrow. None in Holcomb. In fact, Bobby drove over there and he's telling us the place is entirely empty."

Then she added, "We also lost some kids. Children of folks who got hit. The little ones stayed around, but a lot of the older kids-fifteen to twenty or so-we can't find them. They aren't wandering and they aren't here anymore."

Another unknown was a cold, frightening thought.

Rosie had helped him pile the jeep with every bit of everything edible and drinkable in the house-a six-pack of Dr Pepper, two bunches of celery, beer, milk, half-and-half, orange and cranapple juice, Winnie's soy milk, all the cereal, the Lean Cuisines, everything he could find, even unbaked refrigerator cookies, and seeing the Pillsbury Doughboy on a half-used tube of cookies had brought more tears, angry tears.

He had driven out just after noon, going down 205 to the Holcomb crossroads and then out into the fields. He'd crisscrossed the countryside for hours, finding not a sign of anybody. Increasingly afraid and frustrated, he'd driven harder and harder, bounding through fields, screaming around bends, and in all that time not come upon a single human being, wanderer, follower, or free.

Now he was here, sitting on a bare quarter of a tank of gas with the sun going down. He realized that he was at Dennis Farm, one of the places that had been hit before the strike on Harrow. Well, he knew the Dennises, and he decided that he could go ahead and borrow some of their tractor gas. He drove the jeep over to the pump and tried to turn it on. No good. He went around the side of the barn and fired up the generator, then returned and filled his tank. He looked across at the dark house, and after he'd cut off the pump and the generator, got in the jeep to continue his quest.

He thought he heard something, though, and went over to the house. He approached it warily, not sure what to expect. The Dennises had raised about ten kids, but they were all gone, doctors and lawyers and corporate executives and other things that were not farmers.

He heard it again, a sort of mechanical chuckling sound. Was it coming from inside? He couldn't be sure. Could be around the side of the house. "Hello? Anybody there?"

No response. Then the sound returned, more distinct this time, and he realized that it was coming from two directions, out behind the low hill that

separated the house from their north fields, and then again from down near the pretty little stream that was one of the reasons they'd put the house here.

For all the world, it sounded like two dirty old men chuckling at him over his plight. "Hello?"

Then he heard something in the sky, whoosh...whoosh. He looked up, but clouds were coming in and it had turned inky black.

His mouth went dry, his heart began the peculiar, twisting beat that came when his fear increased. He ran to his car and jumped in and locked the doors. Who knew what might be out there? Aliens, even, the concealed architects. What was it some old scientist had said, "Aliens when they come will be stranger than anything we have ever imagined, or can possibly imagine." Words to that effect. Beings from a parallel universe might be even stranger...or strangely similar.

He got out of there fast, driving as close to northwest as he could, blasting his way through the stubble-choked, furrowed fields. How very ordinary it had all seemed just a month ago. Driving out this way to pick out a Thanksgiving turkey at Smeal's, he had seen Old Man Dennis working his harvest, thought how sad it was that, out of all those kids, he couldn't find a single one willing to continue the tradition. Word was they were going to sell out and move to Florida, but he'd thought at the time, No, the Dennises are gonna die on that land.

The sun slid behind the clouds, and with night came an increase of loneliness that was so deep it amounted to a new kind of emotion for him.

He drove on, searching blindly, trying his best to stay on course.

It was some moments after he'd seen the glow on the horizon that he realized that it meant headlights in the distance. He stopped the jeep, got out, and clambered up on the roof. About two miles ahead, there was a slowly moving cluster of lights-the cars and trucks of followers. Couldn't be from Holcomb, they had all been disensouled. So that had to be the Harrow contingent.

Lindy was out there somewhere, his Lindy and his Winnie and maybe Trevor. He looked up into the black sky and wondered if those were dead bodies out there, and if his family's souls had gone somewhere better. Oh God, please help them. Help me help them, God. If only you're there, we need you. We need you.

He got down and drove ahead, keeping his own lights off so he could see the caravan. He closed quickly. They weren't going fast, obviously. Soon, he

was in among them, about five vehicles. It had been more. The wanderers had lost many followers.

"Hey, bone collector," a woman's voice yelled.

"Helen!"

She leaned out the back of the Turpins' mangled Buick. "Got supplies?"

"I got 'em!"

"My Reg likes Oreos, you got Oreos?"

"I've got some Pillsbury chocolate chip cookie mix."

"Well, hell, I'll try it on 'im. I think he sorta recognized John Twenty-four by the way, so I'm lookin' for a comeback."

"You folks seen Lindy?"

Another voice called, "Sure thing, Martin. We fed your family twice. Your girl's happy when she gets soy milk." That was right, oh God, that was Winnie's favorite.

He scoured the backs that were visible in the car lights, but there were so many of them, it wasn't a small crowd, it was enormous, it stretched on and on.

He stopped and got out. He grabbed soy milk and orange juice, they would need strength and fluids, they would be in shock and they'd been walking continuously now for close to twenty hours.

"Be careful, there," a voice said as he sprinted among the vehicles, then out into the darker crowd of wanderers. "Winnie," he called, "Soy milk, soy milk! Trevor Winters, Dad's here, Dad's got cranapple."

Then he saw a back, familiar hair. He doubled his speed, pushing past people who were breathing hard, who were staggering. What was going to happen, would they be walked to death? Why not kill them outright and save everybody this terrible, terrible suffering?

"Lindy! LINDY!"

A head turned, and he found himself looking into the empty grin of Beryl Walsh, the local bank manager. He went on. "Lindy! Trevor! Winnie!"

There was her hair again, and this time he was sure. "Oh, Lindy, hey, hey, it's me, babes, I'm gonna take you home, I've got the truck, I'm gonna take you guys home!"

He came up beside her, and it was definitely Lindy of the green eyes and the straight, proud nose, Lindy of the bobbing blond hair. "Oh baby, I got you. Thank the Lord." He looked around. "Where are the kids? Winnie? Where's Winnie?"

Not a glance, not a word. He sprinted in front of her, walked backward as he talked. "The kids, Lindy, where are the kids?"

She came straight on, her face expressionless. Unlike some of them, she didn't even have a smile left in her. She strode like a Valkyrie, though, a powerful, healthy woman...whom, he thought, was going to make an excellent slave.

Would they be taken to another world, like the slavers took people from Africa? How similar that must have felt to this, to the people who watched the ships sail away. It had been history to him before, but those millions of lost families were now part of his heart.

And he thought, the Nephilim, those strange rapists mentioned in Genesis, called the fallen ones, they had enslaved us before biblical times, had they not? Enslaved us, and then gone. Mysteriously.

In recent years, as his data piled up, he had become more and more willing to entertain the notion that there might have been some sort of human-alien interaction in the distant past, which had led to the catastrophe of 12,000 B.C., when the makers of the great stone monuments had abruptly vanished.

Had it been a war? Had it been, perhaps, something like this? And therefore were these people going to some far place destined to suffer a fate that maybe not even God could know?

Then, a miracle. He saw Winnie. She was trundling along, she had a bit of a limp. He ran to her, swept her up in his arms, cried out, buried his face in her little-girl sweetness-and then realized that her legs were still moving. She was still walking, in fact, she hadn't stopped walking even when she was picked up.

Pointing her back toward the car, he put her down. She took a few steps, then, as if she was controlled by some sort of inner gyroscope, she turned abruptly and continued on with the others. He hurried along beside her. "I've got some soy milk for you, honey," he said. He fumbled in his pocket for a box of it and held it out to her. She took it and drank it down. "Thank you, baby," he found himself saying, "thank you." Then he cried out, "Trevor! Trevor Winters! Dad's here, I've got cranapple. Dad has cranapple." His throat constricted and he had to stop. He controlled his emotions, fought them back, and kept on. "Trevor Winters, Trevor Winters."

He moved back and forth in the crowd, and suddenly there was a light in his eyes. "Martin! Hey, buddy!"

"Uh-you're-"

"George Matthews, I'm that damn plumber."

"Oh, George, for the love a-yeah!"

"You're looking for Trevor?"

"Yeah, actually. I got Winnie to drink some soy milk."

"That ain't Winnie anymore, and Trevor's not here."

"Not here?"

"Nah, Trevor's not wandering."

He grabbed the man's shoulder. "George! George, are you sure!"

"There's something else going on. There's kids gone."

"Are they-are they okay, George?"

He could feel George's eyes on him. "Dunno. But my girl's one of 'em. Wife's out here."

"And you're sure they're not-Trevor is definitely not here? You're certain of it?"

"Not certain of anything in this world, bro, but I've been out here all day with my Molly, and I've seen Winnie and Lindy plenty, but not him, and I did see him-you know, after the church-and he was going out toward the Smokes with my daughter and some of the middle-schoolers. He wasn't wandering, Martin."

Martin turned around with the intention of going back to the house immediately-and it was then that he saw the thick column of light drop down like some kind of bright shroud on the cars of the followers.

"Oh my God," he said.

George turned, too, and saw it. "God almighty." He began to run, loping ahead to the wanderers, who continued on at their steady and oblivious pace. Martin's first impulse was to follow him, but a golden shaft came down, razor-thin and quick, and George sparkled for a moment, and then dropped back, joining his pace to that of the other wanderers.

It had been that quick. Martin forced himself not to run, he forced himself to fall in with the wanderers, to pretend to be one of them. As he had on many a hike, he walked beside his wife. The screaming behind him told him that the light was doing all the followers. Their compassion and their love had been used to trap them.

Then he saw little Winnie fall and cry out, and his whole heart and soul longed to help his child, but he kept on walking.

The wanderers never slowed their pace, but every so often, he saw one or

another of them fall down. The others simply walked over them.

It was a brutal-and brutally efficient-selection process, he thought. Only the strong would make it, and only the strong, obviously, would be wanted. Overhead, he once again heard the whoosh, whoosh of...something. Could it be that a big old barn owl was shadowing them? But the owl's wing is silent.

Ahead and to his left there was leaping movement. A voice rose in a frantic salad of words, babbling and shrieking, then going silent. He looked neither left nor right, but kept on, leaving the struggle behind him. Soon the voice was silent, replaced by that odd, mechanical chuckling he'd heard in the woods around his house. Eventually, the sounds faded.

He was aware that Lindy was just beyond his touch, and that Winnie maybe had fallen aside. He forgot all his careful intellectualizations about God and prayed the Jesus Prayer over and over again, the prayer out of J. D. Salinger's Franny and Zooey, which had been a favorite of Lindy's. It was the repetitive prayer from The Way of the Pilgrim, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner."

As the stars wheeled in their generous majesty, Martin walked to the rhythm set by repetitions. From time to time the light dropped down on another follower it had discovered in the mass of wanderers, and ripped out a soul.

The rhythm made it easier for him, but by the time two hours had passed, he knew that he could not keep up with the pace of the wanderers much longer. He was contemplating this danger, letting the prayer drop into the back of his mind, when he heard a distant voice. It had an echoing, mechanical quality to it. He listened-and then, incredibly, saw its source. A police car stood on a roadside ahead, its light bar flashing. Beside it stood a state policeman with an electronic bullhorn. He raised it to his lips and blared, "You are trespassing on a wildlife preservation zone. You are required to leave this area immediately. Please come up to the roadway, ladies and gentlemen. You are trespassing-"

A tongue of light snicked down out of the clouds and there appeared around him the loveliest spreading glitter of little stars that Martin had ever seen. From this distance, you could see exactly how the light made the soul literally burst out of the body. He thought that a human soul was truly a universe all its own, as the stars that had been that man's memories, dreams, and hopes fluttered into oblivion. The trooper dropped his bullhorn and turned northwest.

Martin had reached a point of crisis. He had to stop. No choice. Already, he was visibly dropping back, he couldn't help it. "Good-bye, Lindy," he said in his heart, "good-bye my love, and good-bye Lindy's soul, wherever you are, and god rest you, my baby Winnie, my poor little girl never even had a life." Then he let himself fall forward like an exhausted wanderer. He did not close his eyes, but rather continued staring straight down at the ground.

Soon, the last of the wanderers had passed him by. He heard the intimate whistle of a night bird. Then something else-that chuckling again. It was close, and there was a lot of it. Now he thought it was like a flock of geese in flight, honking back and forth to one another as they ploughed the sky.

The aliens. That must be it. This sound represented the elusive aliens, coming along behind their human herd. Drovers. Cowboys.

Then something stepped on his back. It was heavy, and it had a sharpness that penetrated his jeans and entered his thigh. He had to force himself not to move as this sharpness very painfully twisted inside his flaring muscle.

Then it was gone, and he could just glimpse what looked like the leg of an insect touching the ground beside his face, then another, and then the chuckling had gone on ahead, and with it the faint whooshing and whistling in the sky.

Then he knew that there was light all around him. He felt the most incredible rage at his defeat, and then waited to feel the light, to know what it was like to lose your soul. Did you go with it, or stay in your body-or, as he thought-just disappear?

But then there was something in his ear. Snuffling. And an odor, a familiar one. He opened his eyes, turned his head, and found himself face to face with a very large skunk.

As the tail rose, he rolled, then jumped up and ran like hell, and the skunk ran, too, wobbling off into the light, which was not the light of death, but that of dawn.

He stood up in the sunlight. It was golden, low still on the horizon, but so pure that it must be as sacred as the old Egyptians had thought, and he turned toward it and knelt as he might to God.

Then he went back along the long series of low folds in the land, heading toward his truck, hoping to find Winnie's body somewhere, a little snatch of clothes somewhere in the prairie.

But he found an adult instead, blood-soaked, dead. This was no fallen wanderer, this person had been done violence. He looked down. The school

jacket, the smoothness of the backs of the hands-this was just a kid. He turned him over, and leaped back when he realized what he was seeing, and when he fully realized it, screamed.

Instantly, he stifled it. The light did not come during the day, apparently being rendered ineffective by the sun, but there had been other things out there and he wasn't so sure that they were particularly nocturnal.

He thought that this pitiful ruin must have been a boy. He was, at most, fifteen or sixteen, and he had been horrifically mutilated. His lips were gone, his mouth open and his tongue removed. His eyes had been gouged out, and his lower body was bloody. Martin didn't examine him too closely, but it looked as if he had been castrated, too.

He forced himself to open the shirt, to look for the familiar mole that would mean he had found his son.

The cool gray skin was unblemished.

Martin stood up and ran a short distance, then came back and picked the poor kid up, and carried him in his arms. He carried him across a field and into an empty farmyard, and put him down in a porch swing.

"Hey! Anybody home? Hey!"

Not a sound. He went inside and found eggs in the fridge, and cracked six of them raw into his mouth. He also ate cheese and crunched into a head of lettuce. He drank warm grapefruit juice that nearly made him puke.

Then he went on, walking until the sun was high and warm, and the gladness that it brings even to the most oppressed human heart made him close his eyes and lift his face to it. "Lucky old sun," he said.

Whereupon he found his truck...which he had left running. He jumped in and pulled the key out.

He'd damn well burned out all his gas, damned fool that he was. Fool!

Well, not quite all. There was a hairline between the edge of the gauge and the red line, so there was still a mile or so in it.

He walked back to the farm, but this was a hobby place, there was no gas tank here. Returning to the jeep, he got in and started it. He headed back toward Harrow, and had the town in sight when he ran out of gas.

He never passed Dennis Farm, but he'd been looking for it. Never saw a trace of it, must have been too far east of it, he figured.

He walked for half an hour, finally crossing the last field and climbing a final fence. Then he was in a backyard. He went down the driveway beside the house and into the dead-empty streets. A flicker of curtain in this house or

that was the only indication of life here.

He was passing the bank when a familiar car pulled alongside him.

"Bobby!"

Bobby just looked up at him. His eyes were strange, and for a moment Martin had a horrible thought. "Bobby?"

"Yeah?"

"Your family okay?"

He stopped his car.

Jesus, his family had gotten it in the night. "Oh, buddy, did you lose 'em?"

He shook his head.

"Bobby, what's the matter?"

He held out a flyer. Martin took it. He was astonished to find himself staring at his own face. "This man is wanted dead. Name: Martin Trevor Winters. Last seen in the area of Lautner County, Kansas. This man is extremely dangerous, and carries a bounty of ten million dollars, upon satisfactory proof of death being provided."

Martin looked at Bobby, met his eyes, saw them flicker away. His face said it clearly: this was not a joke. "Homeland Security dropped them about half an hour ago."

"But I-there must be some mistake!"

"Buddy, you know I love you. But I got this job, here, and half the town, they are looking for your blood."

"But what did I do? Why has this happened?"

"It doesn't say what you did, but we all know you were over there in Egypt when the pyramid went, and it must have something to do with that, which is why I'm arresting you, buddy."

"Bobby?"

"I'm not gonna read you your rights. Because it's a patriot arrest, you don't have any rights."

"Bobby, hey!"

But Bobby cuffed him and took him off to the sheriff's substation, and put him in the one cell, which had been cleaned of file boxes for the occasion. He drove through town telling them that Martin had been caught, and they had to meet at First Christ to vote on what to do with him.

SEVEN

DECEMBER 4
THE TRAP

WILEY STARED AT THE WORDS on his computer screen. This damn nightmare was way out of control.

He'd come back from the shrink determined to just erase the whole thing, but he hadn't done it, and now look what had happened, it had gotten so much worse so fast. Winnie was probably dead and Trevor-God knew what had happened to him, and look at poor Martin. He was going to be killed by his friends.

But it wasn't only what was happening to this one little family, it was the whole vast scope of the thing, an entire world being destroyed.

That bastard Samson was part of it. Al North was right, he was a traitor. But the fool hadn't shot him. Stupid fool. Nice guys sure as hell finish last, General North.

Wylie had CNN on continuously now, waiting for any sign of anything odd happening at any sacred site in his own world.

So far, this dear old place was quiet. But would it be forever? They knew we were here, or we wouldn't see UFOs. They just needed one more little push, he suspected, and they'd be in. Let NASA announce that UFOs were real. Let the Air Force admit that it couldn't explain some sighting or other—and bang, here come the lenses, dark goddamn things blowing the same fourteen sacred sites to hell here as they did in the two-moon world.

When he wasn't writing, he did research and he thought. He thought about the number fourteen. It was the Osiris number, the Jesus number, the resurrection number. Seven was a complete octave and a complete life. Fourteen was a life and a life beyond. It was the number of the goal of man, which was the projection of human consciousness into eternity. Osiris had been cut into fourteen pieces. The passion of Christ had fourteen stations.

Destroy the man, build the man.

Might that be true, also, of whole worlds?

He sighed, blew air out. Was he tired? He was beyond tired. More

exhausted than he'd thought it was possible to be.

He did not think he could imagine what the suffering going on Martin's world was like. By now, every single human being on the planet who was not himself a wanderer had lost at least one loved one. The sheer scale of it was beyond imagination. Appalling.

What could he write about it? That it brought tears to his eyes, made his mouth dry, made his stomach fill with fire?

Describing this was beyond even a great novelist's skill, and certainly beyond his.

Fourteen. He kept going back to it. The fourteen sacred places were there to enable us to recover the knowledge that made man immortal. Giza, Tassili, Ollantaytambo, all the way around to Easter Island, Sukothai, Persepolis and Petra-to enable us to recover the knowledge, and also to protect us from our ignorance.

In Martin's world, they had failed. Too late-just. He had been close, but not close enough, not in time. That was why Samson was after him. The knowledge he possessed was still dangerous.

It was evening now, on this earth, on Martin's earth, presumably on all the earths in all the universes that filled the unimaginable firmament-including the world of the reptilians.

He'd never seen it. Glimpsed it, perhaps, down in the draw that night-felt the delicate hands of the monsters, felt them raping him.

He thought he knew why it had been done. They needed a communicator to spread belief in them. Problem was, they chose the wrong guy. They needed a Nobel prize winner or a great political leader, not a horror novelist.

Too bad, suckas!

Voices shrill with excitement reassured him that all was still well, at least in his neck of the woods. Nick and Kelsey were playing normally outside. Brooke was downstairs making one of her stunning pot roasts.

The kids sounded very happy together, and that was not always the case. Even though she was eight and he thirteen, there was still plenty of sibling rivalry to cut through.

In another year, Nick probably wouldn't be willing to run around like that with his little sister, but he was having old-fashioned childhood fun now, oblivious for once to the fact that he would soon, at thirteen, no longer be a child.

It was a dark afternoon, with some heavy fall weather on its way in from

the northwest. Typical Kansas, a little late for the season was all. He glanced at his weather radio. The light glowed green, meaning that it was on and hadn't picked up any alerts.

Still, blue flickering came from the sky, and thunder rolled in from far away. The storms were still the other side of Holcomb, maybe fifty miles out. Probably they'd arrive during the night.

He didn't like storms. He feared that the disks might come, might be hiding in them.

But no, the lenses were the anchors. Hooks in the gills of the fish, as it were. And there were no lenses here. He kept telling himself that.

Then he would think, what if there were just one or two? Tassili was in the middle of the desert. Nazca was isolated; so were a number of the other sites. Most of them. They had been created so long ago that they were all centered on a north pole from God only knew how far back in the past.

He wanted a drink so badly that he dared not open the liquor drawer. No way.

He stared at his words on the screen. Lindy and Winnie destroyed, Trevor gone, Martin about to be locked up...which he could still see taking place. Even though he had stopped writing, the story still unfolded in the bright hell of his mind. In it, Martin was watching his old friend lock the cell door, and Bobby had tears in his eyes as he did it.

No, this was too much, this had to go, and now was the time.

He selected the chapter and erased it-and wow, there were some blood, sweat, and tears down the drain. So okay, that was done and it should be done. He'd rewrite it with a more bearable scenario.

The blank page confronted him, and he told himself that he actually preferred blank pages.

Bullshit, this was awful, killing his work like this. But he had to, he could not see his people suffer this much.

So he started a new chapter. Then he stopped. He didn't feel like just plunging into it like this, and he was sick of using the laptop, which he closed. Writing on the computer was an addiction, and he already had too damn many of those, drinking the way he did and sneaking cigars, and wanting to do a lot more than that.

He put his beloved old Corona back in her place of honor. Now, this was a writer's tool. She clattered like an old freight train, churning out the words, engraving every mistake in stone. Everything he had done-everything real-

had been done on this fine old typewriter. Early days, he would lie in bed writing through the night on yellow pads, then transcribe them onto her in the morning. Civilized way to work.

As he rolled in a sheet of paper, he noticed that the laptop hadn't gone off as he closed it. A defect due to the short, no doubt.

Intending to shut it down manually, he opened the clamshell.

There were words. He scrolled down. It was all there, right up to-her. He typed. These words appeared on the page. He erased them. As he did so, they reappeared. He did it faster, but the faster he worked, the faster they came back.

Okay, this appeared to be insanity at work here. This could not be. He erased the chapter again.

The process sort of made the words bounce, then they were back. He erased it again, then yet again and again, until erasure did nothing at all. Not even a flicker.

All right, this was crazy. This was not a possible thing.

He closed 2012. Time to go nuclear. On his computer, he had a program called Zztz, which would destroy any file completely. It used the same sophisticated techniques approved by the Defense Department for the destruction of classified files.

He opened Zztz and dragged the entire 2012 file into it.

"Neutron bomb," he muttered, setting Zztz to Defcon 12, its ultimate destruction level.

So, he'd write another novel, big deal. Late or not, he'd come up with something.

Even as he watched Zztz work, the file came back. He destroyed it again. It came back again.

There was no level in the program higher than Defcon 12. But there was one other way to go about this. He went into the DOS prompt and typed "erase *.*"

By the time he was back in Windows, it had all returned.

He stared at the screen. This was proof of something, because if you can't make the erase function on your computer work, things are crazy.

"Brooke," he called.

From their kitchen, "Yeah!"

"Could you come up to my office for a second. It's important."

"Wiley, I've got a million balls in the air."

"Brooke, please!"

"In a minute!"

He found himself shaking, feeling the clammy coldness of fever or fear. Because this was proof, right here staring at him, that all these nightmares and all this craziness had something real about it. It was exactly as real as he had feared.

He jumped up and got out of the office like the place was on fire. He ran downstairs and threw his arms around Brooke. He kissed her forehead, her lips, her neck.

"Hey! I'm cuttin' up a stew, here, fella."

"Never leave me, for the love of God, never leave me!"

He took her in his arms, and this time he kissed her hard, pushing her head back, pulling her body to his until she was collapsed against him, her breasts compressed against his chest, their genitals pressing through their clothes.

When he let her go, her eyes were soft with pleasure. "We're gonna have a long night, I hope."

"I'm gonna break you in half, you gorgeous thing." Then all of his fear surfaced, and he held onto her as he might to a life preserver in the wild ocean. "I love you with all my soul," he whispered, his voice hushed in his truth.

Probably she didn't quite understand what had inspired this, but she didn't need to, the intensity and the honesty were there. She stroked his head, and her hand against his advancing baldness felt as soft as the wings of a butterfly. He remembered the yellow porch lights of his boyhood, and the moths there, their fluttering the only sound in the quiet of a summer night.

Thunder rumbled, long and low. It was accompanied by a distant flicker of lightning-and he reacted with a surge of terror so great that he all but pissed himself. He raced into the living room, cutting off lights as he went. The sky was alive with flickering.

He went out onto the porch, looked up into roiling high canyons of madly flickering clouds. And then at his kids running around in the eerie light.

"Kids, come inside, please."

"Aw, Dad."

"It's lightning, it's dangerous."

They continued to play.

"What's going on?" Brooke asked.

"Look at the sky!"

"Yeah, so what?"

"You don't understand!"

"Honey, it's miles away, you can hardly even hear it. Let them play."

"No, please, for me. Because I'm so scared for them, Brooke. I am scared for my kids and you need to help me."

"I think Crutchfield needs to help you."

"Okay, look, if you would deign to come upstairs for just a few minutes, I can prove to you that something is wrong around here. Very wrong."

She followed him.

"Okay, now. I erased Chapter 7 of my book just now. And it reappeared. Then I erased the entire book. And it reappeared."

"You erased your book?"

"Absolutely. From the DOS prompt. Absolute erasure."

"Goddamn it, we need that money."

"We need-I don't know what we need, here, exactly, but I do know that these people on the other side, they're having a hell of a bad time, and if I can erase this and rewrite it, maybe things will get better for them, and maybe for us, too, because there is a nightmare over there, and it is about to invade us, too."

She sat down at his desk. "Oh, this is nonsense. Here's your book right here."

"Erase it."

"I will not!"

"Okay, then, watch this-" He moved in front of her-and she grabbed his wrist. Her grip was strong, shockingly so.

"You will not, Wiley Dale. You will finish this and turn it in or you will lose me and your children."

"Excuse me?"

"How much self-indulgent bull crap can one woman take? Answer me that? Because I am personally at the end of my tether with you. I can't handle this anymore. How dare you bring me up here and terrorize me playing games like this. We could lose everything! End up on the street! I'm sick of being the wife of the rich writer who is actually a poor bastard."

"Never tell anybody I'm broke."

"Then write a book that sells and you won't be. Put food on the table, God damn you!"

She got up and stalked out. "Dinner in ten minutes," she called over her shoulder.

"There's obviously food on the table," he muttered-but very softly. Then he went back to his desk, put the Corona aside, and opened the laptop. He began to type.

Outside, the electric sky flashed.

He worked steadily. Thunder began rolling, as the source of the lightning swept closer, rumbling across the gathering night. Outside, the kids, now wearing sheets, swooped in the dark.

It was as if death echoed in the thunder, for he knew that this same storm, across the divide between the worlds, brought with it the body thieves.

Downstairs, Brooke began singing, as she usually did after they'd fought, "Listen to the mockingbird sweetly singing, singing over her grave..."

She knew, that was why she was singing a death song like that. That was also why the kids were playing ghost, they knew in their secret hearts that their counterparts in the other universe had lost their souls.

"Supper's ready," Brooke yelled, "and you might think about coming down in a reasonable time for once, Wylie."

He thought of Martin in his prison cell. Looked, in his mind's eye, and saw him standing there, just standing in the steel and concrete chamber.

He knew that Martin could hear his friends, most of whom he had known all his life, in the next room-what was left of the town crowded into that small space-arguing about whether or not to kill him.

They didn't care about the ten million bucks. What was that, anyway, at this point? But they had this warning from the authorities, and they still trusted their authorities.

"You idiots," he yelled, "he knows something, that's why General Samson wants him dead. The man knows!"

"Shut up and get down here, your supper's getting cold!"

"Yessum!"

Texas Max, the local contrabandista, had gotten in some fine absinthe recently, which Wiley had bought, of course, and put in the back of his desk drawer after giving it a taste. Hideous stuff, but it did pack a pop. He got it out now, unscrewed the bottle, and chug-a-lugged.

Fuckaroo.

He went down to his dinner, and ate in silence.

"What's that smell, daddy?"

"What smell?"

"Ew, Daddy's been eating licorice."

Brooke eyed him, but said nothing. In hope of disguising the smell, he gobbled pearl onions. He'd left the damn absinthe on his desk, too. He needed to get that back out of sight. In the past, there had been serious fights over his various excursions into the world of drugs. After discovering that there was not a single official opium den left on earth, he'd set one up in the garage. He'd needed to see what opium was actually like for a book. When she'd found him and Matt out there stupefied, and Matt still in his cop getup, she'd hit the ceiling. And as far as his crack pipe was concerned, even he wasn't crazy enough to try the stuff, but he had the pipe. Again, research. Like the dominatrix. It had taken some real fast talking when that damn Amazon had burst in on them one night demanding cash for pictures. But it hadn't looked like him in the contraption, thank God.

Lila hadn't fazed Brooke. "If you want to get into leather, I'm your girl," she'd said. "But be careful, because once I start, I ain't stoppin'."

She was back in the kitchen starting in on his job, which was the washing up. Kelsey joined her, still in her ghost robe, and their voices as they worked together created in him a joy so gorgeous that he thought he might levitate. He loved this family of his so very, very much.

"Let me do that," he said, getting up. He took the stew pot from her and set about scouring it. She was not a Teflon user, she preferred iron and copper-anything, in his opinion, that increased the workload of the cleanup crew.

So be it, though, she was one master cook, she could turn twelve carrots and a few pounds of beef into manna, as she just had.

As he worked, he did not see the face that appeared at the window so briefly, the dark mirrors of eyes, the terrible eyes. None of them saw it.

EIGHT

DECEMBER 6
IN THE DEEP OF A MAN

GENERAL AL NORTH WOKE UP to find that his head had been forced back and something was being shoved down his throat. It was a struggle just to draw breath.

Instinct made him try to scream, but he gagged against what tasted sour and cold, and must be metal. His eyes focused on the only thing he could see, which was a white film of some sort. He looked at it, trying to understand what it might be. It undulated slightly, perhaps being moved by a draft. And then he realized that it was a white sheet-that his own bedsheet was drawn over his face.

Every muscle in his body twisted and tightened, until he thought they were going to knot and pop like rubber bands. His lungs bubbled, he began to feel air hunger, and then was lost in a hell of gagging, as the thing in his throat was twisted round and round.

It got dark. There was no warning, no flicker of lights. It simply got dark. Al couldn't tell if he'd been blinded or the lights had been turned out.

Then he saw a small red glow. He smelled tobacco smoke.

"Who are you?" he tried to ask around the thing in his throat. His voice was a pitiful, choked gabble.

Something brushed against his naked body, first on his face and neck and chest, then his shoulders, his arms, legs, genitals. A soft tickling, like the fingers of a mischievous woman. Then came the most exquisite sensation, an extraordinary, profound relief: the hard, pulsing thing was drawn out of his throat. He felt air roar in, heard gargling, then there came a sound, high, shattered-which stopped when he snapped his mouth closed, determined not to shriek like that, not a general in the United States Air Force.

In the thousand places on his body that the tickling was present, there began a stinging. This sensation deepened fast, and as it did, subtle fire seemed to race through his skin. He groaned, willing the raping fingers to quit, but they would not quit.

Voices murmured in an unknown language, a strangely soft tongue with a twanging music in it, full of lisps and peculiar whistling sounds mixed with ugly gutturals. It was complex with nuance, trembling with emotion, not human.

A face came into view, peering at him, waxy with makeup. The face was female, but the eyes-gold, oddly metallic-stared with a reptile's empty fury. Implacable. He thought it must be a mask. Yes, plastic. Or no, it was pliant, it was alive, but once again there was a reptilian effect-a shimmering smoothness that suggested that it was composed not of skin, but scales, very delicate ones. The eyes began snapping back and forth like the weak eyes of an albino. They looked like actual metal, like gold teeth might look. They were sickening.

As the figure moved in and out of view, black, curly hair bobbed prettily. It was a woman, he was sure, and she'd just had her hair done.

He did not want to die like this, in ignorant agony, like some lab animal being dissected alive on behalf of an experiment that it could never hope to understand.

He tried to speak, but nothing came out but puffs of air. Then he felt something against his head-spikes. They seemed to drive into his skull. The golden eyes fluttered and darted, the voices pattered on, rapid-fire. He felt, then, something entering his rectum, more as if it was crawling into him than being thrust in.

She said something-"Waluthota." Said it again, louder. Speaking to him.

"I can't-"

The thing was pushed back into his mouth, down his throat, he could feel it in his stomach, could feel it meeting the thing that had been sent up his colon, and now there was a sizzling sound and a taste like burnt bacon, and smoke came out of the sides of his mouth. It didn't hurt, but he thought they must be killing him and he struggled, thrusting himself up, trying to somehow expel either of the things that were doing their work inside him.

Laughter came, high, quick, unmistakable for what it was.

And then there was something-yes, plans. He saw plans. Now they came into clearer focus: pages and pages of reports, of e-mails, of orders. I'm downloading, he thought. He was seeing every report he'd read over the years, every plan he'd examined, every specification he'd approved.

He thought they were looking for something in his mind, but he could not follow the pattern of the search. He'd overseen a lot of construction in his

career, most of it innocuous, but not all, and they were soon in his memories of work done at the Cheyenne Mountain facility, and that was very secret.

Stifling heat was what woke him, a great wave of sweating misery drawing him out of what felt like death itself, a sleep so deep that it had no door.

What had just happened?

He crouched in the humming silence, feeling the pressure of the air-conditioning against his back. Then he stood up, went into the head, and stared at himself in the mirror. Hollow-eyed, haunted man.

His mouth tasted of something toasted and sour. Burnt vomit.

He opened the medicine cabinet and found some mouthwash, swilled it, and spit it-and watched in loathing as hundreds of writhing black threads went swarming down the drain. He spit again, a mass of them, ferociously alive, squirming and struggling, making a sound like spaghetti being poured from a pot.

He cried out-and then saw that the sink was clean and the mouthwash still in the cabinet. He was dreaming, that was what was going on here. He started to feel relief-but then noticed that his billet was thick with tobacco smoke, and he did not smoke, he loathed smoking.

He sat down on the side of his bed. The smoke seemed real, but maybe it wasn't, maybe he was still in the nightmare. Or maybe somebody nearby was smoking, and the odor was being carried into his room. It was possible, of course. In just the short time they'd been in occupation, it had become obvious that the place had been constructed out of cut corners.

The smell was fading and he was beginning to feel a little better. He tried to think back on what just happened, and see if there had been some pattern in what had been looked at in his mind.

When he tried to inventory the flashes of memory, though, he found something odd. They really were not very important, just the debris of his years as a military executive. Of course, some of them were secret, such as the floor plan of the Cheyenne Mountain facility, but they were easily obtainable without revealing to a senior officer like him that they were of interest.

What was odd was the curious feeling that it was something other than the information that was important. He looked down at his own hands-craggy now, once as soft as a surgeon's. He'd never flown in combat, but he'd read that great aces like Albert Ball and Bubi Hartmann had such hands.

Hands reveal people, he'd always thought that, and he wondered now why this thought was even passing through his mind. But as soon as he did ask himself the question, he knew.

He almost cried out, then he felt a gnarled agony in his gut and understood that his soul had not been stolen from him, but rather that it had been raped.

And he knew that his loves and his secrets had been turned inside out, that his most private places had been seen, that what he was had been violated.

It wasn't a nightmare. They'd been here, and they hadn't been looking at floor plans. They'd made a map of his naked soul. His lips twisted, he sucked breath, forced back the screams. This was violation at its deepest, its most profound, violation of the secrets of the sandbox and the playground and the blushing first love, of the sweaty experiments, the discovery of girls and the long descent of his wife, and his losses, so precious to him, mocked and tossed aside by snake-faced monsters.

He had been evaluated and measured by somebody so darkly evil that their most neutral touch was a corrosive horror.

He thought, It's a negative civilization, a whole world ancient in its days, that has become corruption.

And it had work for him to do.

NINE

DECEMBER 8
HUNTER'S NIGHT

WHEN MARTIN HEARD BELLS, HE leaped off the cot in horror, thinking that the disks had come again. It took another moment for him to become aware that sunlight was slanting in the barred window of the little cell. Despite everything, he had been asleep.

The bells were being rung over at Third Street Methodist, bells that Martin had been responsible for ringing just a few nights ago. And now here he was in this hideous situation, and with no idea why this had happened to him. Somebody in the government had done this, but who? And why ever would anybody consider an archaeologist dangerous?

He had thought all night about it, reviewing his published work, his experiences in the pyramid and in the White House, and he had reached the tentative conclusion that there must be something in his knowledge of the past that made him potentially dangerous. So dangerous that, even when their world was collapsing around their ears, they would still reach out for him.

It wouldn't be supposition. They would know.

His thought was that the lenses and the disks represented some sort of machine. He knew that a great human civilization had fallen in about 12,000 B.C. It had not been a technological civilization like ours, but it had possessed profound scientific knowledge, including-and especially-a science of the soul. It had also left a very precise prediction, that the present age would end on December 21, 2012. The Maya, possessing fragmentary knowledge from this far more ancient culture, had integrated this date into their system of calendars. In fact, they had started with that date and worked backward, that's how important they believed-or knew-that it was.

They had gotten the date, he felt sure, from a city that was now deep underwater off the coast of Cuba. This immense metropolis was probably the capital of what legend called Atlantis, and there was something quite strange about it. What was strange was that the British Navy had been guarding the site, and the Canadian archaeological group who had made the discovery ten

years ago had been prevented from returning.

It should have been a scandal, but the profession was just as happy that the discovery was being suppressed. Its revelation would overturn a hundred years of theory and wreck dozens of important careers.

Martin had lobbied various institutes to open research in the area. He'd even published a letter condemning the military action in the *Archaeological Record*. He'd demanded explanations.

They weren't trying to kill him because they thought he was to blame for the disaster. They were trying to kill him because he was one of the few people in the world who had any chance of understanding it.

The bell stopped with a suddenness that seemed almost to shudder the dew that clung to the three yellow leaves he could see through his bars. He saw cars go past, heading for the church. They were gathering there, then they would come for him.

He felt like a rat, exactly like a rat, except that a rat only wanted to escape, and he was tormented by thoughts of his family. All night, he'd suffered over Lindy and his poor little Winnie who had been limping, and his lost son.

The things that had appeared behind the wanderers after dark—he thought that they must be a sort of cleanup crew, destroying the stragglers. That mangled boy had been their work.

Was Trevor, also, a mangled boy?

Sounds came from the office, a voice raised, then dropping. Bobby's voice. Sounded angry. Then he blustered in. "Fifty-six to fifteen," he said, not looking at Martin.

"Hey," Martin said.

"I have no idea how to hang anybody."

"Use your pistol."

"Martin—" He had to stop. He swallowed, pulled himself together. "We gotta go now. We're gonna do it over by the bank. There's that tree there."

"Christ, you're not serious about this?"

"They're getting rope. I'm sorry. So damn sorry."

This was actually going to happen. "Bobby, I haven't done anything."

"I know it." He raised his eyes. "But what if you have?"

"Oh, for God's sake!"

"Martin, please don't make me—you know, drag you."

As Martin came out, Bobby took his cuffs off his belt.

"Bobby, come on."

"Martin, it's regs."

"Okay, if you put the cuffs on me, I am going to need to be dragged every inch of the way, and I am going to scream, goddamn it, because I have lost everything, and now even my life. My life, Bobby, and for nothing. Not a thing. Zip."

Bobby put a hand on Martin's shoulder. "Come on, let's deal with this."

They would not know how to hang anybody, and so would tie the rope around his neck and drag him up, where he would die in a slow fugue of suffocation.

Bobby had been a friend not to cuff him, and he noticed, also, that he wasn't exactly holding onto him as they crossed the square where, in happier days, the Lautner Super-Regional High School band had performed in the bandstand.

Those afternoons had been so damned good, with kids and dogs running around underfoot, and women from the churches selling brownies in the shady park. World without end, amen.

They approached a sullen, miserable little crowd. Nobody wanted this to happen, Martin could see that. They were looking away from him. "Bobby, you gotta shoot me, don't try this hanging thing, nobody knows what they're doing."

"Martin, I can't."

A car door slammed, and Rosie got out. She strode over to them. "Come on, Bobby, we're going home right now."

"Rosie, this is law, here," Bobbie said.

"It's murder!"

"I have a wanted notice. It's official. So this is law."

"Then something's wrong, because Martin's probably the one person in the world who can help 'em get this thing straightened out, so why do they want him dead? It doesn't make sense." She turned to the others. "Go on home now. Go on, all of you!"

Malcolm Freer and his wife and two boys went over to their old station wagon and got in. They drove off without a word.

"See, at least somebody around here has some sense." Then, in a lower voice, "Bobby, this is wrong, this is just dead wrong."

His hand dropped away from Martin's shoulder. Bill West stood waiting, wearing his butcher's apron, with a big coil of rope in his hands. Nobody

spoke.

Martin realized what Bobby had done. He knew that he had a few seconds, but only a few.

He had also understood something back in that cell. He was indeed unique in the world. Something he knew, or could potentially do, was so dangerous to the enemy that they wanted him dead. That's why this little corner of Kansas had been scraped the way it had, and why the leaflet had been dropped.

He was not a runner. He'd never even been in the army, or run a marathon or-well, he didn't even jog.

Bill and Mary West both jogged, he saw them all the time. Will Simpson was a black belt.

Nevertheless, Martin took his chance. He turned and ran wildly toward the far side of the square.

A shot, shockingly loud, whinged off into the trees.

Rosie's voice rang out. "Bobby, don't you dare!"

Bobby was too good with a pistol to have missed at this range, and Martin reached the corner of the bank still intact. Behind him, though, he heard engines start up and feet slam on pavement. They all had guns, too, and most of them were skilled hunters.

He sprinted across to Harper's Café where he'd eaten a thousand hamburgers, then went out the back and into the alley. He was completely at a loss. Then he saw a pickup sitting next to the wall, its bed full of sodden boxes of what he thought had once been vegetables, and he realized that there must be dozens of abandoned vehicles around town. He went up to the truck, but there were no keys. He heard an engine snarl nearby. A car was turning into the alley.

He jumped into the cab of the truck and crouched down. The car came slipping quietly along. In it were Bill West and his son Coleman, both with deer rifles.

How could Bill set a boy of thirteen to hunting a man? But they were so scared now, they weren't themselves, none of them, that's why they were willing to engage in this insanity. The savage was never far from the surface, not in anybody, and frankly, he needed a gun, too. And a damn car.

The best place to find a car with keys left in it would be around one of the churches. People arriving late would have been in a panic, and might well have left their keys, and might well have ended up wandering.

The nearest was First Christ, and that was where he would try to go. He didn't think he was capable of eluding them long enough to get farther away, over to Saint Pete's, for example.

He was just getting out of the truck when another vehicle appeared, nosing along even more quietly than the Wests' Lincoln. It was Mrs. Tarnauer's Prius. He thought that he might get her out of it, he even thought that he could snap the old woman's neck, but he stayed below the edge of the window as she passed. She wanted to kill him, too, did Jesse Tarnauer. She'd been a teacher, then a librarian.

As soon as she'd gone, he crossed the alley and went into the back of the Darling Dixie children's store, long since driven out of business by big chains. Nobody bought lacy dresses for their girls anymore, and boys wore T-shirts six sizes too big, not little gabardine suits with fake handkerchiefs in the breast pockets.

Carefully, he approached the display window. Across the street was the First Christ parking lot, which was indeed full of cars. There were a number parked askew, doors opened, as if the occupants had been very late and had jumped out and run in.

He heard a sound, then, the snarl of a really big engine. He listened. What could that be? Nobody would be chasing him on a tractor, surely.

He trotted across the street and got into one of the badly parked cars, a Buick Lucerne that smelled of cigarettes and the floral perfume that Louise C. Wright wore. Her daughter Pam worked as a manager at the Target. Louise was a lush, professional grade.

The car started normally, thank God. He drove out of the parking lot and headed north up Elko. He turned down the Makepeaces' driveway and went through their backyard, then across the Morgans' east field, with the car slipping and sliding in the dusty furrows. He broke through a barbed-wire fence and drove onto the same dirt road where he and Lindy had come to neck when they were kids.

As he went down the road, he floored the gas, then hit the brakes to make a turn onto 215. Anybody who saw him would assume that he was heading toward the interstate. Two-fifteen ran straight for about five miles to a long bend, and he forced the car to give all it had. It accelerated to ninety, then a hundred, then 106.

As soon as he reached the bend and was out of sight of anybody behind him, he braked, then took Farm Road 2141, which headed toward the Smokes

and home.

Yet again, he made a turn, this time onto Six Mile Road. He followed it up into the Western Division where Louise lived. Her little place was familiar enough to him. She tutored French, of all the improbable sidelines, and Trevor had been among her pupils. Like his father, he was not good at languages.

And suddenly Martin was screaming and hammering the steering wheel and kicking like a lion in a net. He was stunned, he had no idea that this rage was in him. For a moment, it seemed as if it was happening to somebody else, but when the car began swerving across the highway, it didn't, and he had to fight to regain control.

He caught his breath, choked back another roar, and thought, There are deep things inside us that we aren't even aware of. Deep, deep things. He was extremely sad, but it was a dullness in the pit of his stomach, not the savagery that had come boiling up just now. He thought, Not only can I kill, I want to kill.

His people had turned against him so easily, just on the strength of a piece of paper dropped either by the enemy himself or by traitors in his employ.

Unfortunately, he was fairly sure that the enemy was overreacting. He had no idea what he might do to defeat them. In fact, the modern world was about as prepared to deal with all this as the Aztecs and Incas had been prepared to deal with the Spaniards. It had taken the Aztecs weeks just to figure out that the horses and the men riding them were two different creatures, and they had not understood how guns worked at all. Of course they had considered their adversaries gods. They had observed them working magic.

The Aztec was overwhelmed by the gun, we by the light. We did not understand what we were seeing, either, any more than the Aztecs had understood the actual way the horse and man worked together.

The Aztec-also using a version of the Mayan calendar-had first encountered the Spaniards on the day that their revered god Quetzalcoatl had been prophesied to return. So they were even more certain that they were gods. They fit right in to the Aztecs' cosmology.

Somebody, working thousands of years in advance, had known when that would happen. But who? How?

Did the answer lie a mile beneath the sea off the coast of Cuba, and had the Brits been obstructing exploration to make sure it was not found?

This, he thought, was true. Had to be. Coupled with the attempt to take him out, there was now no question in his mind but that the enemy had subverted world government, and had done so years ago.

What had been that general's name? Samson. General Samson, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. That man had been evil.

But there was another, deeper truth, wasn't there? It was that the Spaniards were far more vulnerable than they had seemed. They hadn't defeated anybody. The Aztecs had been defeated not by the Spaniard's strength, but by their own ignorance. In fact, Spanish technology had not been that far in advance of Aztec technology, and in many ways behind that of the Incas. Perhaps far behind. Perhaps we were still behind.

He pulled into Louise's driveway and was careful to park the car in its usual place. Then he got out and went around the house and back into the stand of trees behind it. He needed to get out of sight and stay out of sight, but this was Kansas and these hills were low, their woods were sparse, and they were full of meadows and grassy glades. If anybody realized he'd come this way, they would be likely at some point to spot him.

He moved through the trees and up toward the ridge line that would lead him, after about half a mile, to the old road where he used to bring his archaeology students to search for remains of the stagecoach that had crashed there in the nineteenth century.

He'd also searched the area for fossils and arrowheads, which he'd found by the dozens, even some Folsom points ten thousand years old. He'd searched these hills with Trevor, teaching him the skills that he knew, of finding things that normally would not be found.

He clambered up the ridge, and from here had a long view across to town. He could pick out the white steeples of the churches, the roof of the bank, the roofs of houses, and the top of the Burnside Building above the tree line. He knew this spot well, he'd been coming to it since he was a boy and out hiking alone, come and wondered here about time and chance, and what life might bring.

He thought, Whoever is here is stripping away the people but leaving everything else intact. What the enemy was going to have was an empty but intact world, and millions upon millions of slaves.

Thus he knew that the enemy might be more technologically advanced than we were, but he had a more primitive culture. No modern human society used slaves, or even needed them.

He wondered what manner of creature might come to this same spot in the future, and contemplate those steeples.

Then, incredibly, he heard a familiar but unexpected sound. Somewhere nearby, a helicopter was moving slowly from east to west, paralleling the ridgeline but out of sight, therefore below it in the draw where the Saunders River flowed.

Who would have a helicopter? Certainly not Lautner County. Could it be the state police? That had been a state cop who'd showed up last night, completely oblivious to the danger, so maybe they were still functioning.

The sound faded. He waited a moment more, then moved along the ridge. If Trevor had survived, Martin thought there was a good possibility that he would have gone home. No question. If he had been able to make it, he'd be there right now waiting for the family to reassemble.

The helicopter came roaring up as if out of the ground, not five hundred feet away. He dove off the ridge, down into the tumble of rocks that bordered the path. He hit heavily, felt pain clutch his left hip and leg.

The thing thundered overhead. Sweat broke out all over him, and his muscles literally twisted against themselves, so strong was the urge to run. He told himself that fear, above all things, kills. Fear makes you a fool. And so he did not do what he so desperately wanted to do, which was to roll another few feet down and run crouching along to see if he might find one of the shallow caves that honeycombed the ridge.

No, they would have motion sensors. In among these sun-warmed rocks, infrared spotting devices would not work. So he stayed still, and the helicopter went slowly off along the ridge.

It was black, and the windows were black. He'd hardly dared look, but what he had seen was nothing but reflective glass.

For twenty minutes, he waited. Finally, he could bear it no longer. The chopper had been gone for a long time, and he was so eager to find Trevor that he almost couldn't bear it.

His worry now was dogs. If they were indeed looking for him, they might have understood that he'd parked Louise's car in her drive and come on foot. If so, dogs would follow soon.

Warily, he got to his feet. His thigh ached, but he hadn't broken anything, thank God.

He knew that he would not be able to stay at his house. He thought he might not even be able to approach it. But he had to know if Trevor was

there, he could not leave the area without knowing that.

As he trotted steadily on, his thirst increased fast, and his fatigue exploded into a crippling weight. He thought that his only chance was speed. There was too much power arrayed against him. The people of Harrow were more than enough to defeat him, but there was yet more strength here, and he thought that it wasn't the state police or the U.S. military, and he thought that they might have a lot more dangerous things than highly sophisticated helicopters.

Then his house was there, his and Lindy's beautiful home which they'd built when he got tenure. He was proud of it, the lovely new house, Craftsman style, that blended so well with the older houses in the area.

The windows were dark, but the house was not silent. No, there were vehicles there—two pickups. He didn't recognize them.

So people were waiting for him. Well, he could wait, too. He'd wait until the locals left. He'd wait until the military left. And they would leave. In time, they would all leave.

As he moved closer to the house, he heard the sound of breaking glass. Then he saw a window shatter and his reading chair come through and smash into one of Lindy's flower beds.

They were looting, of course. Oh, God, please don't hurt Trevor if he's in there. He stared across at the storm cellar. Could Trevor have gone down there? It was certainly possible. But there was fifty feet of yard between here and there, and he didn't dare cross. He thought that the people in that house would shoot him on sight, no question.

Then the helicopter came back. It hovered over the house. The people inside did not appear. It came lower, and when it did, he thought for a moment that it was not a helicopter at all, that it had another configuration entirely. It also made a strange sound, he noticed, hissing like escaping gas rather than chuffing like helicopters usually do.

He watched the helicopter circle the house, then fly off fast in the direction of Harrow.

They hadn't even landed. But surely they weren't in radio contact with the people in the house, not with townspeople. So what were they really doing?

The destruction inside his house went on and on. At least he was fairly sure they wouldn't set it on fire. It was the dry season, and a fire would spread up and down the ridge. The volunteer fire department would be in a shambles, if it even still existed, so no, they wouldn't do that.

He saw books coming out of Winnie's bedroom window, her old treasures, The Winter Noisy Book and Cat in the Hat and Jennifer and Josephine. He heard clanging as Trevor's Yamaha keyboard was smashed.

The day wore on, the sun crossed the sky, and still Martin lingered, unable to leave the sacking of his home, in despair, in sorrow, and wondering-hoping-all the while that Trevor was hiding in the crawl space or the attic or the storm cellar.

Finally, at a quarter past three, the two trucks departed.

He waited. He scanned the sky methodically, all of it he could see. He was practiced at spotting tiny objects in sand, and the sky was not so different from a featureless wasteland in Tunisia or Libya.

He was just starting toward the house when he heard, from very far off, a sort of sighing sound. Immediately, he faded back into the stand of trees.

High in the afternoon sky, there was a black dot.

They were still up there.

He waited, listening to the faint sound of the thing, never moving from behind the tree where he hid.

By the time the sound had gone, the sun was setting. He stepped out to the edge of the yard he'd mowed a thousand times.

Maybe they had left somebody hiding in the house. He hadn't really seen them, after all, just the trucks.

He moved across the grass, aware of its whisper beneath his feet. Dear God, but an abandoned home is a lonely place.

Martin searched the storm cellar. He pulled open the door and peered down inside. Then he climbed in. Things appeared unchanged-there was the lantern, there were the candles in their box, the two gallons of water, the box of PowerBars, all untouched.

Martin was surprised at how much sadness weighed on him to know that his son had not been here.

He crossed the yard to the front porch. The door stood open. He entered, careful to look first for wires across the entryway, and not to move the door at all.

He looked, amazed at what confronted him. "Trevor," he whispered. Then shouted, "Trevor, it's Dad! Are you here? Trevor!"

He bent down to the ruins of the dining room table. How could this be, wood destroyed like this? He ran his hand over the lumpy, twisted mess.

The wood had been melted, there was no other explanation.

This hadn't been done by townspeople, or any people. People couldn't do this, we couldn't melt wood. And look at the books, all turned to powder, and the knives in the knife rack, drooping like melted candles.

"Trevor!" He opened the crawl space, looked inside. "Trevor?"

No sign of his boy.

He went upstairs and opened the hatch to the attic. "Trevor, are you up here? It's Dad." He pulled down the steps and went up. It was a complicated attic, and he was careful to look in every nook and cranny. A twelve-year-old could make himself very small if he wanted to, and Trev was expert at hiding.

When he understood for sure that he wasn't there, Martin felt himself just run out of steam. He sat down on the floor. He was suffering now more deeply than he would have thought a human being could suffer. This was what they called anguish, this searing, agonized sense of helplessness. Every time he thought of Lindy walking and walking like that, and his precious little Winnie toddling and limping, his insides twisted against themselves. And Trevor-the sense of him being somewhere in the wind, scared and alone, made him feel more helpless than he'd felt in the jail.

He suppressed an urge to go up on the roof and scream his name, even though that might actually work.

Trevor knew these woods well. He could be hiding back in there somewhere close enough to hear.

Martin headed downstairs, and as he passed their little office, he stopped. He stared in confusion. What was this? Increasingly confused and amazed, he went inside. His papers hadn't been taken, they'd been methodically shredded, and not simply ripped up, but turned into masses of what looked like thread. Books turned to dust were strange enough, but this was just bizarre.

His laptop lay on his desk. He touched it-and snatched his hand back when the edge of the screen collapsed under his fingers. He touched the keyboard, and the whole laptop simply disintegrated. He was left with more dust.

He understood that he was seeing firsthand the work of the enemy. Whoever had been in those two pickups had not been human.

He raced downstairs, threw open the gun closet-but Lindy had taken their only gun, her little shotgun. It was still at Third Street Methodist.

He cursed bitterly, and as he did so heard something. At first, it sounded like that strange chuckling he'd heard when he was among the followers, and

it came from the woods behind the house. But then that sound was covered by another, the rumble of a huge engine, the same sound he'd heard briefly in the streets of the town.

He ran into the hall and down to his and Lindy's bedroom where he could look out into the driveway.

As he watched, three huge, black Humvees came trundling up to the house, and black-clad soldiers jumped out, their faces covered by dark plastic. It looked like a Ranger team right out of some military movie, but he knew that these were not Rangers.

He was face to face with his enemy.

TEN

DECEMBER 11
INNOCENT

WILEY CAME HOME TO A very subdued household. "What gives?" he asked Kelsey as he carried his new laptop into the kitchen.

She called out, "Mommy, he's back."

Nick appeared, his eyes scared. "Why did you chop up your computer, Dad?" There were tears in his voice.

"It had to die. Its life was over."

"Children, go upstairs."

As they hurried off, Kelsey said, "Daddy is insane."

Brooke lifted a box onto the kitchen table. In it were the remains of his old laptop.

"What's the big deal?" he asked.

"The big deal is, you went after this thing with a hatchet, and I want an explanation for that behavior, because it's too far from the norm and I'm considering getting my children out of here. That is the big deal."

He tried to sound reasonable. He even smiled. "The hard disk was fried. Nothing would erase."

"So you went after it with a hatchet?"

"I did that to make sure the files could never be recovered. You can't put a computer loaded with files you can't erase in the landfill. Next thing you know, your life is gonna be on the Internet. So, my love, I have acted rationally, and I do not think I've given you reason to take my kids away from me."

She shook her head. "Oh, Wiley, it's so hard. It is so hard, honey, and I'm getting tired in my soul."

"Now, hey, this is us! Me and my girl!"

"Goddamnit, go upstairs and set up your computer!"

He went to her instead, and took her in his arms. She felt pliant and indifferent, but did not try to pull away. "Please, Brooke, bear me. You're all I have. Bear me."

She shuddered all over, then buried her face in his shoulder and sobbed bitterly.

"Don't start yelling," he whispered, "remember the kids...remember the kids."

And slowly, there in his arms, she composed herself. She drew back from him. They met each other's eyes. They kissed.

From halfway up the back stairs came Kelsey's excited whisper, "We have a kiss!"

So the troubled ship of the Dale family sailed on, tossed on a dark ocean, lost to navigation, but still afloat.

He'd bought a top-of-the-line laptop, fast processor, huge memory, massive hard disk, every bell and whistle known to man.

"It's nice," Brooke said as he put it on his desk and plugged it in.

"It was actually somewhat inexpensive. Ish. But it has room to grow."

She sat down at the desk as he crawled around hooking it up to their home network. He had an Ethernet. Out here, wireless was unstable because of all the electrical storms.

"What's this?"

"What?" He came up from behind the desk.

"2012," she said.

"Died under the hatchet, I'm afraid."

She stood up, gestured. He looked at the screen and saw words there, neatly typed: 2012, The War for Souls. It was his title page.

He reached out, ran his fingers down the screen.

"But you-you-oh, Wiley, this is weird, this is scaring me!"

"It's scaring you? I went at that hard disk with a hatchet, and this computer has never been near this house before. It's brand new, look at it, I just took it out of the box."

"Now listen, because I am going to believe you. I am about to believe you. And if you are lying, and you did this to impress me or make me crazy or for whatever convoluted Wylie reason, then we are over, no matter how much we love each other, because I can't-I can't-I don't like things that are weird like this, Wylie, I do not handle this stuff well. As you know."

"Brooke, on my honor, on my soul, on all that I hold sacred, I brought this machine in here clean and clear and empty. I made no effort whatsoever to put those words on it, and I really and literally cannot imagine how they got there."

She nodded. Then she kissed his cheek. "Wylie, I choose to believe you. Because I saw you hack that computer up and the hard disk is still in it, and you are telling me-assuring me-that you didn't first put 2012 on an external drive-"

"Absolutely not. What external drive? I don't even own one."

"I know that. So I think we have to now escalate this whole thing. This is genuinely strange, it isn't just Wylie weirdness. And my instinct is this. It is to protect my kids. Very, very carefully."

"I can't argue with that."

She sighed. "I want to show you something that I wasn't planning to let you see. But I think you need to see it and I'm sorry I hid it from you."

She passed him the second section of the Lautner County Recorder, and there, on the first local news page was a fantastic and disturbing story. A man who lived about thirty miles south of there had disappeared while riding a four-wheeler near Coombes Lake. "Local residents who wish to remain anonymous claim that he was seen ascending in a shaft of extremely bright light. A search thus far has turned up no sign of William Nunnally. Dogs have been unable to gain a scent except from the abandoned vehicle itself."

He read it. Read it a second time. Then he grabbed his phone. "I gotta make a call."

Matt was off his cell, so he called him on the official line.

"Police emergency."

"It's me."

"Not on this damn line!"

"Then turn on your cell, damnit!"

"I don't want to turn on my cell, you'll call me and call me and bother me with trivia while I'm trying to work."

"This isn't trivia."

"I'm out there gettin' that drunken shit Joe Wright to stop going after his sainted wife with a cheese grater of all the damn things, and you call. Happens every time. Or I'm trying to eat. Then, for certain, it's gonna be you."

"Speech over?"

"I'm hanging up."

"I have a police report."

"If this is about a skunk, possum, or coon, please call the FBI."

"It's about a possible UFO attack down in Melrose County."

"I'm hanging up."

"Call down there and then call me back, can you do that?"

" 'Course not. It's not police business."

"A man has disappeared. That's police business."

"The fact that this tragedy is of interest to you is what isn't police business. Now, I've gotta go, seriously. I've got a call out on Mr. Leonard's god-for-damned-big fuckin' snake got away again."

"Don't hang up, damnit, do this! Hello? Shit!" He slammed down the phone. "He has to go catch a snake."

"That thing. Who in the world would want a fifteen-foot python for a pet?"

"I thought about a python at one point."

"And then I had children."

The phone rang. Brooke picked up. She listened, handed it to Wiley. "Look, the truth is I got an assignment down there, and I'm leaving in a few minutes and I guess you can tag."

"You're kidding."

"No, and I'm not waiting, either. They want me to look over the dogs, the dogs are acting up and I've run a fair number of 'em. So I'll pick you up in fifteen."

"What about the snake?"

"Screw the snake. A man's life is at stake here. I'll pick you up in fifteen."

He hung up the phone. Brooke looked at him. "And?"

"I'm going down there with Matt."

For a moment, she returned to the paper. Then she looked up. "You know that I love you very much," she said. "Never forget that."

He reached out to her and took her hand. "I've thought-lately, you know...it's been hard. I know I've been tough to live with."

"You have yet another book that's making you crazy and I'm a writer's wife. My skill is to keep you from going around the bend until it's finished and we've got our money. Then you can go around the bend until I miss my guy, then you have to come back."

"Do I come back?"

She squeezed his hand. "You come back."

He looked up, looked at Brooke. "Where are the kids?"

"The kids are in their rooms cowering."

"Oh, yeah."

She put her hand on his forehead. "You're not going anywhere, you're on fire."

Matt honked.

"I'll take a couple of aspirin, I'll be fine."

"You've been up working almost continuously for days, and a couple of aspirin aren't gonna do it."

Matt came in. "Hey, Wiley, I haven't got all day!"

Brooke went between them. "He's sick as a dog, he's not coming."

"Jeez, musta come on all of a sudden."

"He's exhausted, he won't sleep!" She took him under the arm. "You're taking a pill and going to bed, and that's final."

"Sorry, Wiley, feel better."

He shook her off.

"Wiley, you can't do this!"

"I have to! HAVE TO!"

"You don't belong getting mixed up in this."

He gestured toward the computer. "I need to look into it. It could be related."

"YOU LEAVE IT THE FUCK ALONE!"

Silence. The faint sound of plaster falling from the ceiling. And a decision of stunning intensity. "I have to do this," he said quietly, "or it will be my soul."

She wept, shook away the tears, and nodded. "Good-bye," she said in a whisper.

"Brooke-"

She shook her head, stepped back, then suddenly turned to the sink and started in on the dishes.

As they rolled out, he heard them clanking, and saw her in the window and thought to himself that something, indeed, was being lost between them. It was like a quicksand pit had appeared in the middle of the marriage. Everything you did to save yourself made you sink a little deeper.

He rode in silence beside Matt, who also said nothing. They'd been friends a long time, and there are times when friends just don't talk.

They drove through Harrow, then into the cropland to the south. "Storm's comin'," Wiley said, "look at that mutha."

The western sky was choked with great towers of clouds, and Wiley knew that, if there was a storm in this universe, then in the other universe there

would be one ten times worse, and he felt for them, he worried about the wanderers out there in the rain and the wind, he wondered about Martin on his desperate quest, a brilliant archaeologist who sensed that he could save his dying world if only he could connect a few more dots, who now wanted only to reconnect with his son, and somehow save them both.

The worst of it was that he couldn't help them. He could know of their suffering, but could not lift a finger.

He could not warn Al North about Samson. He could not help Martin find Trevor. He could not give a single wanderer back his soul.

So why in the name of all that was holy was this happening to him?

They drove in silence. Matt followed the GPS onto more and more isolated back roads.

"Where is this place?"

"Middle of nowhere. I've got them figured for trailer trash."

"Trailer people."

"Still trash in my business, buddy, till I've actually pulled the knives outta the gizzards. Then they're perps and vics."

Wiley heard the voice, but only vaguely. He wasn't interested in banter anymore. He was beyond banter. "The guy went up in a column of light?"

"And the dogs can't catch a scent off anywhere except the seat of the four-by-four."

"Which means it did happen."

"Which means the dogs need checking out, which is what I am doing."

They turned into a driveway.

"Here we are," Matt said.

They pulled up in front of, not a trailer, but an exquisite, ultramodern house, an architectural gem. There were half a dozen police vehicles of various kinds parked in the yard, a couple with their light bars still flashing. Other than the clicking of their switches, the silence was profound.

"Nice place," Wiley said.

"I'll say."

As they came to a stop, a woman appeared. She was as stark as her ultramodern home, reminding Wiley of one Andrew Wyeth's immeasurably sad paintings of the model Helga Testorf.

Closer, Wiley saw that her face was a tear-stained shambles. A teenage boy appeared in the doorway behind her. He wore baggy jeans and a black T-shirt.

She came up to Wiley. She stood silently, so close to him that he could smell sweat and the sourness of her breath. She leaned into his chest and clutched him.

"I'm sorry for you," Wiley said, "I'm so sorry for you."

She looked into his eyes. "I know you."

Holy Christ, this was not what he needed. "I'm from Harrow. You've probably seen me around."

"No, from your book. You said they were good. In your book, you said they were."

"I said they were very strange."

"They are not good. No, Mr. Dale, they are not good. He had all your books, you know. He was trying to come into contact. He went up the ridge to meet them. And this is what happened."

"Mrs. Nunnally, we have to understand that we have very little idea about what's going on with the aliens-even if they are aliens. That's why my book doesn't give answers, it asks questions. Because we do not understand."

She put her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes were like fire burning into his soul. "There was light," she whispered. "Two nights ago, the whole house was surrounded by it."

Oh, Jesus. "And this light," he asked, "what did it do?"

"Lit up everything. Then suddenly it's gone and there's this clap of thunder but no clouds, see. When it went away he says, 'It's them,' and the next afternoon he went up the ridge, and it came again, and he went up in it."

This wasn't the killing light, then, it was something else. But what? "And that's what the farmers saw?"

She nodded. "You're in touch with the aliens, it says so on your Web site. I want you to call them!"

Nick and his friends had created a Wylie Dale website. It was very slick, but he hadn't seen anything on it about him still being in touch with aliens, and there had been many books since the one about the close encounter.

The boy came out. "Please, Mr. Dale, tell them to bring my dad back home." He was perhaps seventeen, a gangling kid with anguish in his face. He looked like he was in physical pain-as, Wiley felt sure, he was.

Wiley realized that he'd been a damned fool to come here.

"Call them," the boy hissed.

"I don't think I can."

"Don't say that!"

At that moment, a state policeman appeared around the side of the house. He came up, his face grim. "Mrs. Nunnally-

"No! NO!"

"Ma'am-

"Oh, God...God..." She twisted as if at the end of a rope, and then turned and clutched her boy.

They came out then, from a wetland a thousand feet behind the house. Wiley watched the play of sunlight along the silver bars of the gurney, and the blackness of the body bag in the sun.

"Mrs. Nunnally, we need to get an identification."

She heaved with grief, but made no sound, which made it more awful, somehow, this silent, gagging, shuddering woe.

A man in soaking jeans unzipped the bag, and Wiley then saw something so unexpected that he cried out. He saw the head of a man, but with black sockets where the eyes should be, and teeth grinning from a lipless mouth. "Can you recognize him?" one of the troopers asked.

"Dad," the boy shouted. "What happened to my dad?"

"It's rapid deterioration...because of the wetland he was in."

"Don't be ridiculous," Mrs. Nunnally shrieked, "it's a mute, Mr. Dale, a mute! They mutilated my husband just like they do the cattle!"

Wiley was well aware of the mysterious cattle mutilations that had been going on for fifty years. Cattle would be found by farmers and ranchers with their lips, eyes, tongues, and genitals removed and their rectums cored out. Often, they looked as if they'd been dropped from above, and huge lights were seen in the fields the night before they were found. Between 1970 and 2010, over fifty thousand cases had been reported, all blown off by the government as coyote attacks, which was clearly a lie, and now here was this human being, killed in exactly the same way.

A hideous thought came tickling into his mind, I have a beautiful home in an isolated area. What if they were looking for me?

One of the state cops said, "Ma'am, you need to say if this is Mr. Nunnally."

She nodded. Nodded harder. "I think so. I think so. Ohh God, God-" She clutched at Wiley. "Help me! Help me!" It was horrible to be near her, he could smell her sour sweat. He feared that he would throw up on her.

The boy, his face streaming with tears, said, "What if they come back, what happens to us then, Mr. Dale?"

What, indeed?

He could not be silent, but he had no idea what to say or do. He remembered the creatures he had seen, and the figure Al North had seen in his room, that delicate, hard face, and he knew what this was, what it must be: they were trying to cross the barrier into a universe that had not accepted them as real, and this was a side-effect of their struggle.

The boy leaped at him and suddenly he was on the ground being hammered by powerful fists. He tried to protect himself, but the kid got through his flailing, incompetent arms.

Matt and one of the state cops pulled him off.

"My dad wanted to meet them! Well, he sure did, he sure did, you bastard. Liar! Liar! BLOODY LIAR!"

"Get him out of here," one of the cops said to Matt. "For God's sake, get that freak out of here!"

"I thought it would help. He knows about this stuff."

"Come on, Matt, please," the state cop said. Then he confronted Wiley. "There's no law against the kind of crap you dish out, Mister, but I have to tell you, there has to be a special place in hell for scum like you, lying scum! This man died we don't know how, but it wasn't little green men, God damn you!"

"No," Wylie said, and the quietness in his voice drew the attention of all of them. "I am not a liar. And the real shame is, maybe if I had understood this better, or taken it all more seriously, this man would not have died."

He went to the car, got in, and closed his door. For good measure, he locked it.

Matt drove them away. Wiley looked back at the fabulous house in the middle of nowhere.

"I saw somebody," Matt said, "at your house."

"You're kidding."

"Last night, buddy."

"I didn't see anybody."

"You were downstairs."

"But-where were you?"

"On the ridge. I was goin' out to see if you were fuckin' with the cigars, and I just happened to see this guy come across your yard. Came right up to the house, looked in the window at you, then went around the back, and a few seconds later your computer comes on."

"When was this?" Wylie asked.

"About eight."

"Eight! The whole family was up!"

"Nobody did a thing. He was quiet, man, and fast."

"Was it an alien? Could you tell?"

"It was a person."

He turned onto the highway. The storm was closer now. He punched a couple of buttons on his police radio, and a mechanical voice began to deliver National Weather Service warnings. High winds in Hale Center, roofs off houses in Holcomb, tornado sighted in Midwood County, fast moving, dangerous storm.

He increased speed.

"You think we're gonna take a hit, Wylie?"

"That's a big mutha out there, you got that right."

The storm towered, its base black and flashing with lightning. "Matt, I'm so scared it's beyond scared."

"I hear ya."

"You say he was a person? Like us kinda person?"

"He looked like a kid. Nick's age, twelve, thirteen."

"So it was a townie? Or someone looking for Nick? Some friend of his, maybe."

"No. This kid, he steps back, he looks at the house, he peers in windows."

None of the town kids would do that. There were only maybe a hundred twelve-year-olds in the whole community, and Wylie knew them all. "No kid from around here, then," he said.

"Absolutely not. He looked-I don't know, Wylie, but the word is confused. Looking and looking at that house. Like he was trying to figure something out and couldn't."

"He couldn't've been trying to get in. The place is unlocked until late. He could've just walked in."

"He went in and went into your office and came out. Then he went down toward the Saunders. So I followed him. I'm right behind him. I thought he was some kid from town, was my impression. But when he walks up to the river bank, he did not cross the stream. He disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Swear to God."

"Why didn't you come into the house?"

"You guys were doin' a screamer."

"But he disappeared? I mean, in what sense?"

"He took three or four steps into those little rapids. The shallow place where it's easy to cross. Right in the middle of it, he just simply was gone. Gone, Wylie."

Dear heaven, it had been Trevor. He'd crossed the boundary between the worlds and he probably didn't realize it. He'd been going home, but come here instead.

For a long time, Wylie had entertained the notion that the weir-cats people saw around here-the black panthers you saw back in the woods every once in a while-were from a parallel universe. They were animals that had evolved an ability to pass between the worlds as a defense mechanism.

There'd been a book called *The Hunt for the Skinwalker*, written about a ranch in Utah where scientists had documented the movement of such animals-not between this earth and Martin's world, but yet another parallel universe, one in which creatures from our ice age still roamed freely.

Wylie's mind wanted to race, but he didn't know where it should go.

Silence fell between them. Wylie's thoughts turned to the poor mutilated guy. What was that about? Something they were doing in their effort to enter this world. No question, but what was it?

They'd cut the guy up-therefore, had taken parts of him.

He shuddered. He had a feeling, if he waited, he was going to find all this out, and it wasn't going to be good, not at all.

The storm, when it came, brought long, heavy gusts of wind, and the police radio began to burp trailer calls, as they were known. As everybody in Tornado Alley knows, trailers actually attract twisters, which was why the Kan-Sas Trailer Park had been the only thing destroyed by that tornado back in September.

"I know something's wrong," Matt said at last. "I just don't want it to be this-oh, crap, Wiley, this weirdness that seems to follow you everywhere you go. I never told you this, but when we were kids-eleven, twelve, about-I was out on my bike late. I used to like to ride past Sue Wolff's house and hope I'd see her on the porch and we'd get to talking or I'd get up the courage to ring the bell or whatever, and I turned onto Winkler, and there is this goddamn huge light over your house."

"Jesus."

"I thought the place was on fire. But then I felt the thing, Wiley. I felt it

looking back at me. And, you know, it did not want me there."

"When was this?"

"Summer of, uh, eighty-eight, I guess."

"No, what time?"

"Oh, late. Coulda been after midnight, even. 'Cause I couldn't risk her actually seeing me, of course. Not fat me, mooning after a cheerleader and all."

They arrived at Wylie's place. As he got out of the car, he saw that Matt had tears on his face. He said nothing about them, only thanked him for the ride and watched him leave.

Storm or no storm, he clambered down to the Saunders, moving among the heaving trees.

The little stream flowed normally. Some rain along its path somewhere had sped it up a bit, but that was the only thing in the slightest out of the ordinary.

"Hi, Dad."

"Nick!"

"I saw you coming down here."

"Yeah, I-"

"The kid is from the other world."

He was absolutely so stunned that he couldn't talk.

"I've read your book, Dad, and I know it's real."

Nick was a private sort of a kid. Smart, as his grades revealed, but not by nature very social. Wylie and he had a good relationship, though.

"You've been reading my book?"

"I read all your stuff."

"And this kid? You've seen him?"

"Come over here, Dad."

Nick led him a short distance away. They were right before the little rapids. Thunder rolled and wind gusted. Leaves raced past, yellow and red. It was quite amazingly beautiful, Wylie thought, but also completely normal.

"Watch," Nick said. He picked up a river stone and sailed it out over the water, as if he was trying to skip it but coming in too high.

In its flight, the stone did a very strange thing. It sort of jumped. Not a lot, but it jumped in the air.

Nick tossed another one, and this time his aim must have been better, because the stone completely disappeared. Never hit the water. Was gone.

"My God, Son, when did you discover this?"

"He did it this afternoon."

"He was here?"

"In your office, Dad. Dad, he's all dirty and he looks really scared, and I think he's Trevor. He started reading your book."

The world heaved, and it wasn't the storm. "Oh, my God," Wylie said.

He turned and ran back to the house, Nick following.

"What's going on," Brooke yelled as they burst in, "don't you two know it's raining?"

"They can use it!" Wylie shouted as he dashed upstairs. "They can use the book!"

"Who? Nick, what's going on?"

Nick hesitated on the stairs. "The closer we get to the twenty-first, the wider the gateways are opening, and there's one down on the Saunders, right at the rapids. It's between our world and Martin's, and they're using it. We think his son is. We think it's Trevor. He tried to come home last night, and came through the gateway instead."

Wylie said, "If they can read the book, honey, think how it can help them! We can let them know that Samson's evil-"

"Dad-"

"-we can help them find the wanderers, maybe they can turn this thing around!"

"Dad, I think Trevor came here by accident. That's why he was so confused and afraid. He thought he was going home. He couldn't understand why all the furniture had changed, why there were strange people in the house, any of it. Then he stumbled on the book."

"But he'll be back. Of course."

"We can't know that, Dad."

Wylie went into the office. Sat before the laptop. "There's something larger at work, here. Whatever created that gateway. Whatever prevented me from destroying this incredibly precious book."

"Um, Dad, that would be me and mom."

"Excuse me?"

Nick nodded. "She has a USB drive she keeps in her pocket. She saves it on that." He paused for a moment. "Don't be mad at me, but I wrote the code that prevented you from erasing it."

"You can program? I didn't know that."

"It's a few lines of code."

"We need to find Trevor. I need to write about him. Tell him where his dad is, give them a plan of action."

"It's better not to talk about this." Brooke stood in the doorway. She had the drive in her hand.

"But you-we-"

She put her finger to her lips. "Don't talk about it, either of you. Just let it lie."

Kelsey came in. She came to her daddy, crawled into his lap.

Silence fell among them. Wylie understood that all was not as it seemed. In fact, nothing was as it seemed. "What's going on?"

"Wylie..."

Kelsey stuck her face in his. She held him by the ears. "That's what we don't ever, never talk about, Daddy." She shook her head. "Ever, never." Then she gave him a wet kiss and ran off laughing down the hall.

Nick and Brooke gazed steadily at him. He thought again of poor Nunnally, and how very close to this house that attack had been.

The reptilians had reached Nunnally, and they could come here, too. Five years ago, they'd opened a gateway not far from this house. What would prevent them from following Trevor through the gateway on the river? "We could be in trouble, here," Wylie said.

"You've got that right," Brooke said.

"But I don't know what to write about. I don't know where to take it."

Brooke said softly, "Trevor. Just think about Trevor."

Wylie closed his eyes.

"Let yourself happen," Nick said. "Just let it flow."

He saw a face. White hair, gray eyes, all crag and grandeur. "Christ, I don't need Al North!"

Then it came, a flood that blanked his mind, that broke his thought and his will and took him over completely.

Throwing back his head as if he had been slugged hard, he started to type. He watched his fingers fly across the keys. He stared, finally, at the words that were pouring out of him. "Al," he whispered, "it's you, it's gonna be you."

Outside, the thunder rumbled and sheets of hail came bouncing down, and the trees moaned. Inside, Wiley's helpless shouts at a man who could not hear him echoed through the house, in the dark of the storm.

Brooke got water for him, and tended him as she always did, while he worked.

Nick went downstairs and saw to the guns.

ELEVEN

DECEMBER 11
MOUNTAIN OF LIES

THE DEEPER INTO CHEYENNE MOUNTAIN Al went, the better he felt. This mission mattered, it was progress, and it might yet bring them a win. He'd had a hell of a time getting out here, but he'd made it at last. The problem hadn't been finding a jet that worked or even a crew. It had been gathering enough fuel.

But this place, this was the Air Force as it ought to be. These people didn't feel a constant sense of threat, and you could hear the difference in the firmness of a step, or an easy ripple of laughter in the canteen. Morale here was very far from the redoubt in West Virginia, where the whole dismal picture was on everybody's mind all the time. These people were winners. They were used to victory. They had no idea they were on the damn Titanic, and he tried to project confidence he did not feel. Nothing must disturb morale like this.

A young captain led him down into the test area. She looked maybe thirty, she was clean and well groomed, she smiled and she moved along ahead of him, her static-free shoes whispering against the pavement.

It was in this test bed that human beings would, today for the first time, remove a living soul from the body that contained it. Once the soul was extracted, they would find its frequency and destroy it. This would be the first such execution. The prisoner was a monster, presumably from the Federal ADX in Florence, Colorado, and after this death, not even what of him that had been eternal would remain.

This might have extended benefits, because if reincarnation was real, it would mean that this horrible soul would never return to life. Maybe the reason that crime was always with us was that the souls of criminals returned just like everybody else, and were criminals again. Maybe, if the war was won, we could learn to pick and choose who would survive in eternity and who would not.

But this was only one aspect of the experiment. Of greater importance

was understanding just how souls and bodies connected, so that some defense against the light could be devised. The disks were methodically following the night around the world, striking the entire planet all the time, and so far no attack, not with hydrogen bombs, not with neutron bombs, not with any form of conventional weapon, had affected them.

The British and French had concentrated on the most isolated lenses, exploding nuclear ordnance over them, in the ground near them, pulsing them with electromagnetic waves, even firing artillery shells into them.

The U.S. had concentrated on the one on Easter Island, going back again and again and with full imperial approval, but with equally dismal results.

A unit of Marines had deployed around the lens and opened fire when the disks came out, but they were themselves made of light and ordnance simply passed through them.

Now, however, all that was ended. Communications had been jammed, planetwide. Satellites were dark, broadcast transmitters had been disrupted by artificially induced changes in the earth's ionosphere, and landlines by powerful electromagnetic pulses being continuously emitted from deep space. The objects responsible ringed the planet, fourteen of them, each one twenty-two thousand miles above one of the lenses. Even though they weren't in precise geostationary orbit, astronomers using old-fashioned backyard telescopes, which were the only ones that still worked, said that they showed no sign of moving off course. Military communications had been reduced to single sideband radio-sometimes-and a couple of fiber-optic networks that had pulse-hardened switching stations that so far were impervious to the electromagnetic energy being beamed from above.

The beautiful young captain paused before a steel door, input a number code. The door slid open.

Beyond it was a tunnel with a pronounced downward slope. At the head stood a small stainless steel car. It was mounted on a black strip that descended, it seemed, into oblivion.

"This is the railhead," she said as she got into the car.

It looked like an amusement park ride, he thought, but when she closed the door, the seal seemed very tight. He found himself looking out a small windshield at a concrete tunnel with conduit running along its ceiling.

She pressed a button, and the car began moving with startling silence and smoothness.

"What propulsion?"

"Maglev."

He'd never seen any of this before, but just the scope of it all, riding this silent, efficient little train deeper and deeper, made him dare to consider again the possibility of victory.

"We've reached cruising speed, Sir."

"Which is?"

"Two hundred and eighty clicks, Sir."

"You're kidding!"

"Sir, you're gonna see a lot of wonderful machinery today. I mean, some of the stuff down here-Sir, this is a new world."

He glanced at his watch, calculating in his head. Two hundred and eighty clicks an hour was a little over four and a half kilometers a minute, so they'd gone almost three miles. He made a note of the time.

"What's your first name, Captain?"

"Jennifer, Sir. General Burt Mazle's my old man. I'm third-generation Air Force, Sir."

He'd never heard of Burt Mazle, but all generals were supposed to know each other. The mythical first name club. "Old Burt," he said. "Sure."

Whoever he was, old Burt had surely produced a handsome specimen of a daughter. Bright, too, or she wouldn't be in the Mountain. Al had not thought about sex in a long time. He'd been attracted to many women, but every time he tried to start a relationship, he just lost direction.

He still kept his picture of his Sissy in his wallet, with her brightness and her smile, looking up from their table in the Wright Pat Officer's Club where they used to go dancing. Her expression held surprise at being photographed, her eyes joy. Her skin shone with sweat, because they'd just come back from a vigorous rumba. A year later she had said, "Al, I need you," and fallen over in the middle of the bedroom, dead before she hit the floor. It had been a massive aortal aneurysm. She was thirty-eight years old.

"You doing okay, General?"

"I'm fine."

"You weren't need-to-know on this part of the project, were you?"

"Apparently not. I thought I was need-to-know on everything."

She smiled at him. "Then look at this as the adventure of a lifetime, because that's what it's going to be."

"What about our prisoner?"

"Gonna die die, that's what we call it."

"What's his crime?"

"Dunno, sir. Bad boy, though. Not a friend of ours."

"No, I suppose not. Do we know for sure that the soul persists outside the body?"

"For sure, Sir. We've taken them out and put them back in."

"Really!"

"We're making strides, Sir. Catching up fast. We know for certain that when the body is killed, the soul does not die or lose its integrity. It can be destroyed, though."

"How?"

"Certain frequencies make it fly apart. Trillions of electrons. All organization gone, tiny bits of consciousness flying off into space forever."

He had to think that this progress was brilliant. They were racing against time down here, but at this rate they might just learn enough to actually win this thing. "Could we give the wanderers back their souls?"

"It's conceivable."

"That would be a hell of a victory, right there."

"It'd ruin somebody's day, for sure."

"The God-for-damned enemy's day."

"That would be true."

Another glance at his watch: they'd traveled seven miles, meaning that they weren't under Cheyenne Mountain anymore.

He put his foot against the footrest and leaned back. The little transporter, about the size of a jeep, was now passing under the thickest conduit he'd ever seen, a black, endless river affixed to the cut stone of the wall with heavy steel wrapping that flashed past hypnotically as they sped along. On either wall were light fixtures about every fifty feet, but glowing so softly that they did not completely penetrate the darkness. Looking ahead through the windshield, it was as if an endless stream of lit portholes were coming up on either side, then speeding past the side windows as a continuous streak.

"That conduit carry power?"

"A lot of power. You need it to change the patterns of the electrons. Disrupt the frequency of a soul, it becomes confused. Then you just keep ratcheting up the power until-bang, it flies apart. Humpty Dumpty."

"You've killed some down here before?"

"Couple dozen."

"But just the bodies? Not the souls?"

"Taken them out. Soul surgery. Today's our first try at a kill."

"But the ones you took out-where did they go?"

Her face clouded, and she fell into what he could only interpret as a sullen silence. It was as if he'd insulted her, but how? What was the big deal if there was some part of the thing they didn't understand yet?

They were now eighteen miles in. Eighteen goddamn miles! Where was this place? Who had built it and when? He recalled that on September 12, 2001, the Secretary of Defense had announced that the Defense Department had "lost" a trillion dollars, and he thought that projects like this might be an explanation.

They'd been working on this a long time, then, because facilities like this take years to construct. Hell, generations. And trillions of dollars, for sure.

Twenty-two miles.

"We're also descending, aren't we?"

"Yes, sir."

"And?"

"We're at six thousand meters at this time, sir."

Holy God, that was twenty thousand feet! Eighteen miles in and four down. "Why so deep?"

"You don't want the souls getting away. And they are slippery, sir. Very slippery."

"They know what's happening to them, then?"

"They're alive. Never forget that. If you start messing with a soul, it wants to get away from you. And it's smart. If one escaped, the enemy would see it immediately and know what we were up to. So we're deep. Best place for us to be."

"What kind of lookdown do you have?"

"Sir?"

"Satellite lookdown. Guardianship."

"None since last week. But we're guarded by a unit of Air Police and fully sensor protected."

In other words, the facility was totally exposed. If the enemy got so much as an inkling of what was happening down here, they were coming around, and right now.

The car slowed to a stop.

"We've reached stage two, sir. Time to move to the lift for the rest of the trip. Stay seated, there's gonna be an equalization."

The door sighed, and there was a jarring pop, and Al's ears rang. "What in hell is this?"

"We're at four atmospheres down here, Sir."

When they stepped out, the ceiling was so low that Al had almost to crouch. The chamber was hewn out of solid basalt-gleaming black walls scarred by drill trenches. It was also very, very confined. He was aware of the miles of stone overhead and all around him. It was like being in a coffin.

How could anything have been drilled this deep in a military facility without the Joint Chiefs being told?

"How long have you been down here?"

She glanced at him, but said nothing. She ushered him into an elevator that looked like some kind of meat locker. It was heavily insulated, with a very small cab. It contained bench seating for four people around its steel walls. There were seat belts.

He asked her, "Are these needed?"

She buckled herself in. "Advisable."

There was a clank and a whirring sound, then a sucking whine and Al was practically lifted against the ceiling. Scrabbling hard, he got the ends of his belt and managed to strap himself in.

"We're going down a further three miles," she said.

Three miles straight down, after another thirty-five laterally and nine down-it was inconceivable. There was no technology he knew of that could accomplish this. But, obviously, somebody did know, and they had been experimenting on souls down here for a long time.

"It's a Manhattan Project for the soul instead of the A-bomb," he said.

"That's right on the money, sir. Need-to-know's spread very thin."

"Samson?"

"Project director."

The man was a shit, but he surely knew how to keep a secret. "Impressive. I never guessed."

The elevator hummed and jostled slightly as it descended. Confinement disturbed him. And, truth to tell, the closer they got to actually doing it, the more uneasy the idea of killing a soul was making him. He was not really seeing how even the worst criminal deserved destruction like this. It felt like they were intruding into God's business.

Actually, he wished he could call Samson and request that this be at least postponed. Even if he'd somehow managed the call, though, Tom would

never allow it. He'd consider the request treason, and he wouldn't be wrong. We had to learn everything we needed to learn to defeat that light, and if some criminals were denied eternal life in our quest for answers, then that was too damn bad.

The elevator stopped. "Gonna be another pop," she said. "Open your mouth."

She pressed a button and the door slid back. This time there was a loud thud and a sensation of being hit in the chest with a medicine ball.

"Wow!"

"Seven atmospheres," she said.

They walked out into a tiny chamber with black, sweating walls. It was maybe five feet wide, seven high. Not much bigger than the interior of a coffin. On the far side was a door, equally black. "What is this, the entrance to hell?"

She laughed. "It is."

He followed her down a steep corridor, then deeper still, down a winding metal staircase so narrow that he could hardly manage to negotiate it. They descended for easily twenty minutes, and he thought that coming back up was going to be a battle.

Now the two of them were in a chamber that really was the size of a biggish coffin. Embedded in one wall was another black door, this one with a round window in it like the bulging eye of an insect.

"You'll need to disrobe, please."

"Excuse me?"

"Take off your clothes, General. You'll be provided with a special suit. So it won't kill your soul, too, General."

"What about you?"

"I stay out here, sir."

He took off his tunic, his tie, his shirt, while she watched impassively. He waited, but she did not turn around. Finally, he removed his shoes and trousers. He waited again. "Ma'am, could you give me some privacy?"

She turned, then, and faced the wall. He could understand her reluctance—she now had a face full of basalt.

When he was naked he faced the door. It was eerie, the way the dark porthole seemed almost like something alive.

"The prisoner is ready," she said. And the door began slowly to open.

Before him there appeared the most astonishing thing he had ever seen.

The room was painted vividly, with images right out of the interior of a fabulous Egyptian tomb, lines of men, a god in a golden head-dress, prisoners standing stiffly, strange objects that looked like giant vacuum tubes.

"What the hell is going on here?"

Then he saw a stack of what looked like the same vacuum tubes in real life. There were men in the room, too, dressed in black uniforms without insignia.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but I need something to wear."

Nobody took any notice of him. They were clustered around the vacuum tubes, which were attached to thick cables that came out of the walls. He saw only backs.

Some of the rigid figures in the relief painting had cables thrust down their throats, and the tubes attached to the other ends of these were brightly lit. Others still were being intubated, their heads thrown back, their guts distended as black-painted soldiers just like these men pushed the cabling down their throats. Others waited, their faces turned away.

"Look, I need that coverall now, please, gentlemen."

Behind him, he heard a loud thunk. He turned toward the sound, which proved to be the door closing.

The young captain had come in after all. Ready to explode in her face, he turned around-and just plain stopped dead.

Her eyes regarded him with a doll-like emptiness that did not look alive. Immediately, he remembered his dream of two nights ago-that face, geisha-like, staring at him.

It was her.

She smiled a little. "Hello again."

He threw himself past her. She didn't try to stop him. On the contrary, she stepped aside with the grace of a matador.

He sought some way of opening the door, sweeping his hands across its smoothness. There was no handle, there was no lock. She watched, completely impassive.

He stopped. His heart was hammering so hard that he thought he might simply drop dead from the shock. He tried to talk, but his mouth was too dry. He hesitated to think who these people must be-but he did think it, they were the enemy, that was why the blackness of the uniforms was so bizarre, as if they were literally dressed in night.

A powerful realization came to him, of the sort that will come to a dying

man. It told him that it was sin that generated that blackness, that they were not in uniforms at all, but were as naked as he was.

"Your soul isn't going to be killed," she said from behind him. Her voice was-well, it was musical. And yet, there was something else in it, something that he could only think of as rage, and maybe deeper rage than he had ever heard before.

Or no. He had heard that rough, bitter tone before. "Samson is one of you."

"Indeed."

She put her hand on his shoulder. "Come on," she said. "You can make this easy or you can make it hard."

She was wary. She knew that he was dangerous. "I don't want you to imagine you have any chance to get out of this," she said.

And then she shuddered for all the world like a dog shaking its hide.

The uniform fell away, and he saw that it wasn't actually a uniform at all, but something thin and now dry. It looked like skin shed by a snake.

Her real skin shimmered, and her face changed. She blinked her eyes, and the sockets were round, blinked them again and they were long. Now a nictitating membrane came across the eyeballs, and when it retracted he found himself face-to-face with the most beautiful and awful thing he had ever seen.

The face was that of a snake or a lizard, but flattened and extended so that it covered the front of a human-sized head. It was softly angled, sleek, with a snake's fixed lips. There was a smile, though, sparkling in the golden eyes, which were an incredible contrast to the human eyes she'd been exhibiting a few moments ago. These eyes were sparkling with life and humor and, he could see it so clearly-glee.

There was an earthly equivalent to these creatures. They were chameleons. But these-they were far, far more evolved than any earthly shape-shifter. And he suspected, also, now, why Samson carried his syringe. He wasn't an addict. To live on the surface, they must need some kind of support. Allergies, diseases-he'd probably never know what endangered them there.

"Now, I want you to try to stay calm, Al. The less you fight, the less this will hurt. You need to understand that we have no mercy, Al. We have no mercy." The eyes twinkled. "So it's up to you. This can be a terrible agony for you, or it can go smoothly. Up to you, Al, up to you."

The others were working with their equipment. Al watched the nearest one turn toward him. He was as black as night, his skin had the polish of a jewel. It shimmered as he moved, sleek muscles rippling within. He drew a black tube out of the wall and approached Al. As he moved forward, the tube made a faint hissing sound. The end, which appeared to be made of copper, glowed with a curious green light.

"We've already tested you on this," 'Jennifer' said. "We know it's going to work."

A huge emotion filled him. This wasn't just death, it was worse, it was the absolute end of his being. Soul murder.

He hadn't practiced his martial arts in years, but he called his old skills up from the very depths of his being, moved to a back stance and tried a side kick.

The creature caught his foot and slammed him to the floor.

He took the hit, tried to shake it off, failed. The female made a string of sounds. And then, unmistakably, they all laughed. It was quiet, easy laughter, the laughter of men running a slaughter line, joking about something else as they slit the throats of the pigs.

The one who had taken him down turned away and continued his work, which involved screwing a copper fitting onto one of the strange glass tubes.

Al got to his feet. He was feeling a dull, hopeless sort of determination. His own greed had brought him here. He'd taken the assignment from Samson despite the fact that he knew damn well that something was very wrong. He had done this out of eagerness for promotion, and that even though the entire system was hopelessly broken and none of it made a bit of difference.

They had seen his ambition, and used it against him to lure him very neatly into this trap.

He had been more than willing to come down here and kill another human being's soul, so why was he now being so careful of his own?

But he was. He had a touch of eternity in him, he could feel it clearly, and he did not want it to die, he did not want it so much that this time he really lashed out at the female, who had come close to him. His blow connected, and her head bounced to one side as he gave her the hardest knuckle slap he could manage. Then he waded in, fists pounding. But each time he struck a blow, less seemed to happen. It was like fighting wet cotton, and she watched him impassively as he slowly became unable to move at all. Just like the

victims in the relief, he was soon standing frozen, arms at his sides.

One of the males now strolled over to him.

The female pointed at a particular painting and spoke a few words. The painting showed a prisoner having his eyes gouged out.

One of his captors went to it, looked at it for some moments, then opened a black case like a thick pocketknife. There was a pop, followed by hissing. The thing became like a tiny star in his hand, fiercely bright.

He approached Al. His eyes were emptier than hers, narrow and yellow-green, not gold. As Al watched, the nictitating membranes slid quickly over the pupils, then disappeared back into the orbits.

The star was brought close to his face. It was hot, and he tried to turn away but could not move a millimeter. Now it began to burn around his lips. Then there was a sizzling sound and he tried to cry out, but instead found himself gagging on his own blood.

When the light was withdrawn, blood poured down, spattering on the floor, washing his feet and the fleshy remains of his lips in thick, red sheets.

His mind blanked. He knew that he was being slaughtered. Was aware of it but distantly. Shock does that, even to a soldier.

An instant later, what appeared to be a red serpent's tongue darted out of the object, striking his left eye, causing a bright red flash in his brain. He heard muscles pop and felt torment in his neck as his body literally tore itself to pieces in its effort to move against the invisible restraints that bound it. He did not understand that he had been placed on an electrically charged plate that neutralized his nervous system, stopping all communication between brain and body. He also did not understand that all this equipment was not only old but simple-simpler by far than most man-made circuitry. He did not understand that these creatures were not advanced beyond man in most science, but only in one science, the science of the soul, which made these exhausted, half-starved and poverty-stricken beings appear like dark gods to him, as the Spaniards-sick, starving, and far from home-had once appeared to the Aztecs.

He never dreamed that the operators were tired and bored and longing to be home with their own wives and lovers, and did not, themselves, fully understand why they were here or what they were doing. He did not know that the young female's happiness came from the fact that she would get a great deal of credit and power if the monster she was creating was successful. He didn't even begin to understand what it was-that it would be used to

penetrate into another universe and end a threat that had appeared there.

It was a human universe, and one that they had known about for thousands of years. They could even enter it, to some extent, but not so completely that they could actually do something there as complex as finding a computer file and destroying it.

They could enter that universe only with clumsy thrusts, not with the kind of precision they now needed.

The world went black and he wanted to howl out his rage and his absolute terror, but those abilities were not available to him. Nothing was available to him. He was a bright spark called Al, that was all-that, and pain, waves of it, gushers of it, boiling oceans of it.

Then he felt fingers moving his genitals, and then yet more pain, this time radiating up from there, and he knew that he had been castrated.

Through the agony, Al began to get the odd feeling that he was rocking, as if he was in a boat or on a swing. He had no way to know that the surgery he had just undergone had shattered the specialized nerve-endings that bound the electromagnetic organ that was the soul to the physical one that was the body. This was one way to do it. The shearing light was another.

The moment the coring and cutting was complete, the rocking became a bizarre, sensationless lurching and the room seemed to race past him, the figures in it whizzing and spinning as his vision, freed from the limitations of his eyes, saw everything around him at once. He was manipulated as casually as if he had been a moth captured between the fingers of a cruel child.

And yet, the connections between body and soul remained strong, and when one of the creatures thrust his thumbs into the base of Al's jaws, he felt it pop as his blood-gushing mouth gaped.

The next sensation Al felt was very like what he'd experienced during his nightmare the other night-the same choking, gagging sense of being invaded down his gullet. One of the thick cables with its frayed, cracking insulation was being brought up and pushed down his throat. It hurt a thousand times more than what had been done the other night, and what happened to his mind was similar but a thousand, thousand times more powerful. He gagged, his body tried to choke the thing out of him, but strong hands pushed it deep.

The other night, they'd been sifting his thoughts to see if he would come to understand who they really were and what they were doing, and therefore if he might betray their plans on his way into their trap.

He gagged furiously, he tried to make sounds, he tried to scream out

warning to the world, that the United States was actually under the leadership of the invaders.

That traitor Samson's flyers were indeed intended to deceive people into congregating, and Samson had used some sort of mind control to induce the president to commit suicide, and now Al was down here being destroyed, the one person who might have been able to get in Samson's way.

He was here because he'd been about to figure out that Samson was one of them.

Like pages from a book, the living pages of his soul swept from his body and into a new state. Around him, he saw blue glass, and beyond it, the lithe and gleaming figures moving in the extraction chamber where his body now lay in a bleeding heap. He saw them take the parts they had cut off and push them into a hole. He was stuck to the filament inside one of the huge glass tubes. The filament was inside him, and his whole soul was on fire, his soul was burning.

"Nice," the female said in English. "We're done, General."

The tube was now filled with him: a plasma of electrons that shimmered with a million different colors, sparking and recoiling when it hurled itself against the glass wall again and again.

The captain made a series of statements, speaking in her soft, swift voice. Two of her helpers lifted the tube as the third pulled the cable out of its worn bronze socket. They placed the tube into a larger socket in the floor. Al could see them, but he could not speak, he could not scream out, above all, he could not get out of the tube.

He watched them slide his body into an ordinary military issue body bag. Then two of them lifted it onto their shoulders and carried it out. As the door slid closed behind them, Al saw them taking it off into the depths of the facility.

When the door closed, darkness came, absolute. Then, not quite. There was a glow, fitful, that he realized came from this tube. What light was left in this dark chamber of hell, was the light of his soul.

PART TWO

THE RUIN OF SOULS

Saint Michael, the archangel, defend us in battle, be our defense against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits, prowling throughout the world, seeking the ruin of souls.

-POPE LEO XIII

Prayer to St. Michael the Archangel

This is the Hour of Lead-Remembered, if outlived, As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow-First-Chill-then-Stupor-then the letting go.

-EMILY DICKINSON "After Great Pain, A Formal Feeling Comes"

TWELVE

DECEMBER 18, EVENING
CHILDREN OF MYSTERY

MARTIN HAD BEEN LYING SO still for so long that he had lost sensation from the waist down. His legs were not there at all, his torso was as cold as a corpse. He was famished and freezing. He'd been on the move for days, going from house to house, sleeping in attics and storm cellars, anywhere that offered a decent seal against the return of the light.

He was home now, hiding in his own crawl space.

All of this time, he'd been looking for Trevor. He'd given up on Winnie and Lindy. They were beyond his help now, given that following was a trap.

As an American, he had not felt vulnerable in the same way that so many people did in this world, perpetually frightened that their loved ones might simply disappear some night.

That didn't happen here, and he had not anticipated the extraordinary emotional wear and tear that losing your loved ones brought. It was so emasculating that he had to fight just becoming passive.

He did this by creating a goal for himself. His goal was Trevor. He'd searched half the houses in the Smokes by now. He was planning a night raid into the town, soon, too. Night after night, the light had scoured Harrow, Kansas, and he doubted that many people were left by now. The same was true of the Smokes. It came here every night, seeking and probing, and those other things came, too, the shadowy things that he'd encountered when he was a follower.

Thunder bellowed. Another storm was coming. Soon, there would be more rain. Methane releases from permafrost, the collapse of the Greenland and Antarctic glaciers, the flooding of polar oceans with fresh water from the melt, the wild state of the sun—all of these things were combining to make the weather turn dangerous just when this horrific attack occurred.

For years, the U.S. had pleaded with the empires to curtail pollution, but they would not touch their development zones. Industrializing regions of Africa and South Asia had completely overwhelmed the planet's ability to

maintain balance.

More planning on the part of these invaders? He feared so. He feared that they might have infiltrated every colonial administration on earth. No doubt they would turn out to be comfortable in an atmosphere choked with what we thought of as pollution.

Despite the sodden cold of the crawlspace, he sweated.

The silence was deep, now. His watch told him that sunset was not far away. He had a mission tonight-aside from avoiding the light and the other menaces. He intended to track down a sound he'd heard off and on, that came from down toward the Saunders. Drumming, he thought. Somebody down there, perhaps.

Of course, in this world it was impossible to tell. Could be anything. Some creature from hell, or an alien machine. Or it could be people, and if so, there were more than one or two of them.

He stirred a little, just moving his body slightly. Then he waited. There was no sound from above. He raised his left hand and pressed it against the trapdoor.

After a moment, he pressed harder, causing the door to move just slightly. When there was no reaction, he pushed the door all the way open.

He made his way through the dining room, then the living room where he had spent so much time in his chair reading, where he had read to his kids, where he had listened to the music he loved.

The front door gaped. As he went through, he tried to push it closed, but it was no use, they'd torn it off its hinges. He stepped into the grass, in the long shadows of evening. He listened, heard nothing.

No, it was a night sound, that drumming, and finding its source was about the only thing he could conceive of that would draw him outside after the sun went down.

Then he heard another sound, a great whooshing overhead that was familiar to him from his night as a follower. He glimpsed, turning hard against the clouds that raged above, what looked like a gigantic bat.

He could feel it watching him. Knew that it was. And then he heard from the woods behind the house that familiar mechanical clatter.

The sun was not yet down, but the alien animals were already stalking him. The bird was the spotter, and whatever was in those woods, he suspected, was there to tear him apart.

He scrambled down the hill toward the stream, and then moved along its

bank, rattling the dry autumn brush as he went through it. Tears swarmed his eyes, he was that afraid, as above him the wheeling bird wailed, and the woods behind him and around him echoed with the noise of whatever monstrosities were there.

He came to the little lake, really just a widening of the Saunders, where he sometimes swam in the summer, and ran out onto its pier. Forcing himself not to dive, he slipped into the frigid water and moved under the pier, clinging to one of its slippery pilings, concealed by the three rowboats that were there, old Mrs. Lane's little white dingy that she used to fish for crappies, and his boat that could be fitted with a small sail and go racing across the thirty-acre lake, and the third boat, a duck hunter's craft, camouflaged, that had not been used by anybody in years.

Then he heard his pursuers, their feet splashing softly, and heard their sounds, mutterings, clatterings, small whistles that he realized were a language and a complex one, and he wondered, then, if these might be the real aliens, or if they were creatures that had been trained like dogs or were smarter than dogs, and then if they might be constructed things, machines brought to life.

There came tapping, a claw tip on the wooden dock above his head. He heard the eager whisper of their breath, and the more intimate clattering of what he thought now must be mouth parts. There was a whisper in that clattering that suggested knife blades, steel against steel. From high overhead there came the long wail again, and he could hear in it quite clearly a tone of angry question.

Had they lost him?

Something slid into the water. It was clear and deep, the little lake, with tall water weeds that rose up from its darkness, and he saw, sailing below him, a huge shadow, blacker than black, with eight great legs outstretched around it.

He watched it sailing above the gently waving fronds, coming toward him, and felt as it came closer, more frozen, more helpless.

This was his death, then, his ugly destiny, and he'd done nothing to deserve it.

The thing in the water made a graceful turn and then came back toward the dock. He watched the shadow glide closer.

He'd lost, he'd been captured, and now, he thought, his lot must be to share the fate of the mangled boy he'd seen in the field. Perhaps he should

fight more, but he didn't know how. If he swam, the thing would be on him in a second. If he got out, he'd have to confront the ones crowding the dock.

Something brushed his leg, feeling like a whipping frond of water weed, and he saw the shadow darting there. It was closing in, it was about to strike.

He shut his eyes. Waited. Heard a sloshing sound, very light. Sick with fear but unable to bear the feeling that he was about to sustain an attack he opened them again.

There was a girl in the water beside him.

She cocked her head and raised her eyebrows, then held a long finger across her lips. She looked sketched by a Dutch master, she was so flawless, so full of glow. And also, she looked familiar, very much so, but he couldn't place her.

He was trembling with the cold of the water. She reached a hand like a sparrow to his shoulder, and warmth came from it, soothing him and bringing him a startling sense of protection.

She raised a finger beside her ear and shook her head. Don't listen, the gesture said. Then she held her hand out before her, palm toward him. The message was clear, don't listen and don't move a muscle.

But how could he not listen to that hideous wailing in the sky? It was the most terrifying sound he'd ever heard. And the mechanical chuckling of what appeared to be gigantic spiders gnashing their mouth parts-it caused sickening dread, visceral terror as it conjured thoughts of agonizing mutilation.

She frowned at him. What was she getting at, and who was she? So familiar, the face.

She smiled softly, and he thought that certain female looks define the very essence of beauty for the male, and she reached out as if she had heard that thought, and touched his cheek so very kindly, and his mind went to Lindy, and his heart almost broke in half.

This all happened in an instant, during which time she touched her temple and nodded and smiled, and that gesture, one he had seen her make before, caused him to realize who she was. This was Louise Wright's daughter Pammy, manager of the Target...and he thought she could read his mind.

He noticed, also, that as he had become distracted by her, the things in the water seemed to have lost track of him.

There was a crackle, a huge noise. Electronic crackle.

Pammy Wright frowned.

A voice echoed, electronically amplified. "Martin Winters, I am Captain Jennifer Mazle of the United States Air Force. Please come up on the dock."

Pammy shook her head. Then she pointed downward, and disappeared.

"Doctor Winters, I am Captain Jennifer Mazle of the United States Air Force. The situation has been stabilized and it's safe to come out. Please come up on the dock."

He saw Pammy's pale body disappearing down among the water weeds. She swam right through a line of black shapes, which simply hung there, not moving.

He followed her, going deep, swimming as hard as he could, struggling and, he was sure, drawing attention to himself. He swam toward the creatures, which all spread their legs and began closing in on him. He dropped down into the water weeds, into the dark and the pressure among their roots, glimpsing a great fish, then Pammy again, far ahead, deeper yet in the lake.

How could she do it? How could she possibly manage? Waves of frantic air hunger were already coursing through his body and he was going to have to surface, he had no choice, it was essential to life, he could not manage another second-

-and then she was there, coming up from below, and she had with her a blue cylinder. She offered him a rubber tube and turned it on when it was in his mouth. As he gulped oxygen, tingling, exquisite relief filled his lungs, his blood, his crashing heart.

She flitted away as a great, rough something whipped his back. He didn't turn to look, he just followed her. He couldn't suppress his fear now, not when he was swimming for his life.

But what had that voice been? Was the Air Force really out there? Maybe he would've been safe if only-

Pammy stopped, turned, and yelled in bubbles: NO!

He went deeper, following the disappearing form. The water was dark here, the pressure was making his ears ring, and his lungs were bursting again.

Somebody else was beside him, a young man as naked as Pammy had been, swimming hard, his eyes behind goggles also. He had the oxygen, which Martin took in huge gulps.

He was being rescued by the town kids who had disappeared, and Oh, God, maybe that meant Trev.

He swam hard, and soon found himself in a narrowing, dark space, a tunnel. Where he was he didn't know, but they were ahead of him and he swam for all he was worth.

Then something like steel springs grabbed both of his legs, and he began to be dragged back out of the tunnel, and he knew that it was one of the things and he kicked and kicked but the harder he tried, the tighter its grip became. Also, air was getting short again and he was in too confined a space, nobody could reach him here. As he began to be dragged back, he clawed at the walls, he kicked with every ounce of his strength, but still the grip on him tightened and he knew that he had lost this struggle.

He began to be pulled backward out of the tunnel. Going faster by the second, he could soon see again. As he was pulled back into the body of the lake, light grew around him.

The walls of the tunnel were stone, he could see them now, and he had a last chance, here. He understood spaces like this, tunnels, tombs, and such. With all the strength that was in him, he thrust out his arms and the leg that wasn't in the grip of the thing that was dragging him. As the thing met sudden and unexpected resistance, he felt a flash of pain in the ankle it had been gripping. Immediately, he kicked. Kicked again. Kicked a third time, and felt himself come free, then kicked harder as the legs or grippers or whatever they were scabbled around his feet.

He pulled himself back into the blackness and narrowness of the tunnel, until he could barely move and had to breathe and knew that it would be water.

And he did breathe and it was water, it came sluicing down his throat and gagged him, causing him to cough and involuntarily draw in more.

It hurt to drown, it was not magic, he saw nothing of his life before his eyes as he died, only agony, only a frantic need that could not be fulfilled and then dark.

Dark. Dark.

Air, sweet in him, filling him, air but maybe only the air of wishes, the air of dreams.

"Come ON!"

"CPR him, hurry!"

Pressure on his back, a cough, water coming out, flowing out, then another breath, deep and good and he was fully conscious again, wet, aware of how miserably cold he was.

Dappled autumn woods, larks singing in the last, high light, Little Moon racing in the clouds, beloved star wanderer. And her-Pammy-standing over him and the young man, the boy-also familiar but no name, not yet.

They dragged him to his feet. "Hurry!"

High overhead, a long, chilling wail shattered the noise of the larks.

"Don't listen!"

"Why not?"

"They home in on fear. If you're not afraid, they can't find you. Come on." As she spoke, the young man sprinted away.

She tugged at his arm. "We've gotta go. They're realizing they made a mistake." She smiled shyly, her cheeks and neck turning pink. "Somebody just said, 'Who's back at the lake?' and now they're all looking at each other." She lowered her eyes.

"You understand their language?"

She hauled at his hands, then slipped away as easily as if she had been born to the forest, her pale face glowing in a dark that was being brought by clouds that were speeding out of the north like hungry panthers, flashing and bellowing.

She had already disappeared, and he ran to follow her-and was stopped by a devastating blow from behind. And then he saw the ground, felt cold leaves in his face.

"I want you to be calm." It was the Air Force officer, Jennifer Mazle.

He cried out in the direction the girl had gone. "Help! Help me!"

"I'm a scientist, too, Doctor Winters, I'm not going to hurt you."

"Then let me up."

The weight lifted, and Martin pulled out from under her. She wore a camouflage vest, a ruffled hat, and heavy glasses with a split lens. Her eyes were big with sadness. "This mission isn't going right," she said. "I need you to come back and help us."

"What are those things? My God-"

"You need to help us understand, Doctor Martin."

"They were trying to kill me. The government was, too."

She touched his hand, then gripped it. "There's a lot of fear out there."

He glimpsed movement behind her. She started to turn, but was struck, and hard, by a piece of wood. She turned quickly back.

Her face was distorted, the skin on the cheek where she'd been hit imprinted by the wood.

She moved to one side, her skin rippling, turning cream-colored, red where the board had hit.

What in the world was wrong with her?

She snarled, came quickly toward him. Seen full on like this, her face was-oh, holy Christ, it was-the skin was ripping like a crazy jello, the eyes were weird in the eerie cloud light, weird and gold.

He turned and ran. He didn't think, he was beyond that. He just ran because what he had seen was so terrible that his mind had been completely stripped away, replaced by a terror so raw and so deep that this educated, civilized man was thrown back in an instant to the days when men were hunted things.

A thunder of slashing jaws rose up all around him, as overhead the wails came again and again, exultant now, joyous now, the sky, the very air vibrant with their triumph.

His fear was the beacon, but he couldn't help it, she'd turned into a monster when that kid had hit her, and that had been the single most shocking thing Martin had ever seen, more shocking even than the explosion of the pyramid, which involved an inanimate thing, not the face of a living creature like that.

And then Pammy was there, looking down at him from a ledge. She motioned to him and he clambered up beside her.

She lay flat and he did the same.

"Blank your mind," she said calmly. "Concentrate your attention on your body. Don't think."

Lying on the sun-warmed stone, he concentrated on his aching lungs, his crashing heart. Below them, he heard movement, then quiet voices. Above, the wailing came and went as the great birds began to patrol.

"Come on," she whispered, "fast!"

The instant she spoke, there was a rustling sound, and a black-gloved hand gripped the ledge from below. He turned and ran, following her, putting all the strength he had left into his effort.

The trees shuddered and the thunder echoed, and great gusts of wind swam down from the north. Martin ran behind the fleeing girl, deeper and deeper into the woods, and rain came in sheets, a yellow deluge. Behind him he heard the cries of the strange birds and the crackle of alien voices.

"Come on," Pammy urged.

He could remember this part of the woods. They were past the Saunders

and about a mile down from his house. This was state land, part of the Prairie Heritage program. The forest here was as thick as it got in Kansas, and when you dropped down into the hollows, dense with brush. The hunting back in here had been excellent when he was a boy. Wild pheasant, plenty of turkey.

Times gone by. He'd discovered here that Trevor was not going to be a hunter, that he felt too bad for the animals. He and Lindy had come back in here when they were first married, and walked naked here, hand in hand, in some sort of sacred contact with the land that they could not articulate.

It was miserable here now, though, soaking, the rain pounding down, wind roaring. A storm like this could easily bring a tornado, too.

Then she seemed to drop down, as if into a hole. When he followed her, he discovered a tiny glade, and in it a camouflaged tent. He recognized it. They'd been on sale at Hiram's Sporting Goods. She darted in. He approached more warily. Close to it, he could hear drums in the sound of the rain. Then the flap opened and she gestured frantically. He went in.

The first thing he noticed was that the drumming was much louder, the second that the air was stifling. As his eyes adjusted, he saw that the space was filled with children and young people, perhaps twenty in all. He knew at once that these were the kids who had disappeared when their parents and siblings had become wanderers.

He looked from face to face, seeking recognition, not willing to taste again of his hope.

When he did not see Trevor, he swayed, staring, helpless to either stand or sit. He had reached the end of his tether, he was going to collapse.

Unable to defend himself from his own tears, he dropped to his knees and covered his face, and fought to keep his tears silent.

A hand came onto his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry." And the tears became a helpless, humiliating flood.

"Dad?"

He'd heard the word, but-

"Dad?"

He raised his face and saw standing before him somebody he did not recognize.

"Dad, I'm Trevor."

Then he did-behind the dirt, behind the dark cast of his eyes, behind the wild hair and the muddy camouflage suit, he knew that it was his son.

Trevor had changed fantastically. He was not a boy, not at all. His expression contained an adult's knowledge of the world-that and more-and the change had been so abrupt and so total that in just these few days he had become unrecognizable to his own father.

The heart, though, the heart sees, and Martin's heart saw his son before him. He opened his arms and Trevor came to him, and he closed them around his son's narrow body. His heart and mind may have grown, but this was still the same boy, fragile, almost, but with the long legs and big shoulders that said that he would soon grow much taller.

"Trevor," he managed to rasp. "Trevor."

Trevor pushed gently at him but he clung more tightly. He could never let him go, not ever, he could not do that again. "Dad-um-" He managed to look up into his father's eyes. "Dad, nobody else here has any parents left."

For a moment, Martin didn't understand. Then he did. He was the only parent who was not wandering. He looked out across the expectant faces, the eyes that he was realizing all had the same strange shadow in them, some of them touched now by tears, others wide with sorrow, others resigned.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm George," one of the older boys replied. "Glad to meet you." George held out his hand, shook formally. Others followed, most of them teens, some as young as ten. There were twenty-two of them, two more boys than girls. Each in turn introduced himself. It was so formal. Oddly formal. But there was no precedent for such a meeting, was there?

Through all of this, the drumming did not stop.

Trevor glanced away from him, then murmured, "It drowns out the sound of the night riders, so the little ones won't get scared."

Just hearing his son's voice, Martin felt another wave of joy.

"Dad!"

"He can't help it," a little girl said.

"Can you hear me thinking, kids? Is that it?"

"We sort of pick up thoughts, but it's not like you'd imagine, Dad. People don't think alike and thought patterns are even more different than faces. You can't figure out what somebody else is thinking unless they know how to organize their thoughts to communicate, and we're still learning. But they can all feel your feelings, and you're...it's embarrassing me, Dad."

"I can read thought," George said. "I'm getting kind of okay." He looked quickly at Martin. "Not you, sir! I'd never do that."

"I better not catch you in my mind," a girl warned him.

"Oh, I'm not, Sylvie! I'm not!"

"Of course you are. Anyway, we have no trouble reading you morons, any girl can do it, you don't need to have gotten zapped. You're transparent from birth, gentlemen." She leaned her head against George's shoulder. George crossed his legs.

"What's this getting zapped?" Martin asked.

Silence fell. "Dad, we want you to try."

"Try what?"

"Don't ask him, Trev, he has to!"

"Shut up!"

"What's going on here?"

"Dad, you remember the night when it happened?"

"How could I ever forget it?"

"Mom was holding Winnie and I was standing beside them. You had your hand on my shoulder, you were squeezing so hard you nearly broke it."

"I'm sorry."

"No, no, it was good. The light missed you. It hit Mom and sort of splashed on me. I went out of my body and up in the air. I saw you down there, I saw us all. Then I was out in the sky, up above the church. I saw Mom and Winnie, they were gold in the light-gold masses of sparks-and they were rising fast. But my shoulder hurt so much, I went back down.

"At first, I was in shock. I went to the back of the church with Mom. I saw you but you seemed far away. You were hollering at us. You-I never saw you like that, Dad. I felt so sorry for you. So sorry!"

"I want your mom back. I want my girl."

Another boy shook his shoulder. "We're gonna win, Doctor Winters."

Martin recognized him as Joey Fielding, son of George and Moira, who ran Octagon Feed. "That doesn't seem possible," he replied, trying to keep his bitterness and his resignation out of his voice.

"Every one of us had the same thing happen. We were in pain when the light hit us, and it didn't take all the layers. Who we were stayed with our bodies. What we lost were the lies, the hopes, most of our education, what we wanted, what we thought of ourselves, our hopes. We lost all the baggage."

One of the little ones said, "We're like, fresh. We're new again, like we were-"

"Look at him, you're scaring him," a girl hissed.

"I'm not scared," Martin said.

"Yes, you are. We're weird and you're scared!"

"He doesn't scare easy," Trevor snapped. "My dad has courage."

"He's gonna need it if we do this."

Martin was aware that this conversation was happening on two levels, one he could hear and another that he couldn't. "I think I need to know what's going on."

"What's going on is we need you to try to become like us."

How would he do that? It seemed like some sort of side effect of a failed attempt by the aliens to strip away a soul.

"That's it," Trevor said.

"I thought you couldn't read minds."

He looked down at the smashed grass that made up the floor of the tiny chamber. "Um, you're easy, Dad. 'Cause I know you..."

George said, "It's getting dark."

Trevor looked at him sharply, shook his head.

"Trevor, no. NO!"

"What is this?"

Trevor threw his arms around him. "Dad, they want you to leave!"

"Leave? I can't leave!"

A boy of perhaps ten or eleven produced a pistol. He handed it to one of the older kids. Martin saw that it was a .45 automatic. He didn't exactly point it at Martin, so much as leave it visible.

Martin stared at it. He looked from the barrel to the young face. Those eyes again, all shadowy. These kids had changed. He gentled his voice. "Look, I need a break here."

The boy thrust the gun toward him.

"Trevor! Trevor, tell them, I'm a good father, I'm-I'm-kids, listen. I'm needed. You need me. Yes. Oh, yes. I can be-can replace-replace..."

The boy racked the slide.

"You helped me, Pammy! Hey, you just helped me escape, now you want to do this? This is crazy!"

"Dad, if you don't go-" Trevor pulled in his words. He was choking with tears, Martin could see it.

"Trevor, tell them, I can't survive out there. Nobody can!"

The boy got to his feet. He had a dusting of beard, barely visible in the gathering dark. He held the gun in Martin's face. "Doctor Winters," he said

quietly, "you get out of here."

"Oh, God, listen, please-I've been running and running, I can't run anymore. Trevor, please help me! Help your dad!"

Trevor looked at him out of his strange new eyes, and Martin saw the truth of it: the horror they had seen had made them monsters, all of them, and Trevor was a monster, too.

But then Trevor reached out a hand and touched his father's cheek. It was not the gesture of a boy, but of a man of maturity. "Dad, it's survival of the fittest. The reptilians are going to find you. You can't hide from them, not anywhere, not like we can. If you stay here, you'll lead them right to us."

Martin backed away from the gun. "Get that thing out of my face!"

"Dad, you have to do this." Trevor threw his arms around his father. Martin held him, felt his body shaking.

He looked to Pammy. "Why did you save me? How could you be so cruel?"

"She's a damn asshole," the boy with the gun spat.

"Ride the storm," a voice said from the back. "Same as we did."

"Doctor Winters-"

"Pammy, call me Martin, please."

"Doctor Winters-"

She pulled back the flap of the tent. Outside, Martin saw rain sweeping in almost continuous lightning, and shadows in the nearby clearing that did not look like any shadows he cared to see. "This is crazy. I can't."

"Dad, do it!"

"Trev, no, absolutely not!"

His son was standing before him, looking up at him, his face stained with tears. "Get out," he said. He turned to the boy with the gun. "Give it to me," he said.

"Why?" the boy asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Because I'm the only one who can handle this!" He took the gun and held it to his father's face. "Decide," he said.

Martin looked straight down the barrel. He could see muscles working in Trevor's hand, could see his finger tightening. "Trevor?"

Trevor screwed his eyes shut. "Now, Daddy!"

Martin tried to think-some argument, some appeal, but there were no more arguments, there were no more appeals. That weapon was going to go off in another second, and Trevor was going to have to spend the rest of his

life an orphan like all these other orphans, but knowing, unlike them, that he had taken the life of his own father.

Martin raised his hand. "I'm going," he said softly. "I'm going, son, and I want you to know that I don't understand, but I don't blame you."

"Just go."

"I know you have to look out for each other, that you can't risk the group-
"

"Damn you, GO!"

Trevor's voice was not the same now. He'd been so gentle a boy that he couldn't shoot a pheasant. Now here he was ready to kill his father, and his voice was low and hard, scorched with the pain of somebody who could.

Martin went out into the lightning.

THIRTEEN

DECEMBER 18, MIDNIGHT
A FAMILY AFFAIR

WYLIE STOOD BY THE QUIET waters of the Saunders, trying to get the courage up to try and cross into the other world. If Trevor could come here, then surely he could go in the other direction, and that was urgently necessary, obviously.

He paced, he looked for some sign of the gateway. Martin was out there right now in those deadly woods, and somebody had to save the guy, and Wylie thought it might as well be him.

He could bring Martin across. If nobody over there wanted him, he could live here. Impractical though he was, professorial in a way that Wylie found infuriating, nevertheless the guy didn't deserve this to happen. His own son, doing that to him? Good God.

Why would they save him, then just discard him? And how could Trevor—too gentle to hunt birds, for the love of Pete—ever be that hard on his dad?

Over there, it was storming. Over here, the sky was clear. The moon near the half rode high. It was close on to midnight, and from the house he could hear Brooke singing. She'd once had vocal ambitions, but life and children and a certain lack of volume had kept her away from an operatic career. Her voice was too delicate for the stage, but on a quiet night like this one, it was an angelic wonder.

He knew that she was sitting in a window looking at the moon, waiting for her man to return. She never protested his midnight walks, but they made her uneasy. It was as if her voice was meant as a kind of lifeline, reaching out to him in case he strayed too far from home.

She sang an old lullaby, one that she had sung to Nick and still sang to Kelsey, a song from her deep past, his woman of the tribe of the Celts. It was called "Dereen Day," the little song, and it floated across the softly muttering water like a breeze.

He tossed a stone into the moonlight, listened to it splash in the deeper river. Where was the gateway now? Did it open and close? According to

some of the more outre stuff he'd been reading about 2012, there were gateways all over the world, especially at the points where what were called ley lines met. He was not sure what these lines were. Planet Energy Lines would probably be the simplest definition. New Age Bullshit Lines was another contender.

He stood just where he and Nick had been, and tossed another stone. It gleamed in the moonlight, then splashed gently down.

"Damn."

He heard something, though. He listened. It was on the other side of the river. He'd never heard anything quite like it before.

He listened again.

What was that?

Then he knew, and his blood all but froze in his veins.

That slashing noise could only be an outrider, and it was actually in the gateway, hanging between the worlds.

He hadn't brought a gun, he'd been afraid that shooting it in the other universe would bring on some sort of catastrophe. He'd read all he could about parallel worlds, but little was actually known, except that experiments showed that they were actual, physical places. There was no scientific speculation about what might be in them. He thought that he was the only person who had ever speculated that certain animals must be able to cross this divide, that they had evolved the ability as a threat avoidance mechanism.

Had to be true. He'd seen a weir cat himself, and not far from here, when he was a kid. Damn big, damn black, and damn scary. Then gone-pooof-right before his eyes.

The slashing sound grew louder. Came toward him.

Brooke stopped singing. Her voice floated across the night. "Wylie?"

Jesus, he needed to get back to the house, he needed to get his hands on a gun. Nick had been right to get them ready. That was a smart kid there. He had foresight.

The slashing was now right in front of him-but he couldn't see it. It was loud, it was deafening-and then he could feel tickling, then pricking against his face, his neck. Crying out, he lurched back.

He fell against what felt like iron bars. Where he touched them, they became visible, and he saw that they were not bars, but the legs of what the kids called an outrider. And now the slashing sound was overhead. He was under the damn thing!

He rolled. The slashing came down toward him. He lashed out at it, kicking furiously toward the sound. Where his foot struck, he saw a section of the creature—a gleaming abdomen striped yellow, then a complicated eye, then a hooked claw on the joint of a leg.

Screaming now, he rolled.

There was a pneumatic, liquid hissing and boiling yellow sludge sprayed the ground around him. A stinger the size of his arm slashed his jacket and was gone.

But it was coming back, he could hear the mechanical slashing of the jaws, but more he could feel the thing probing with its legs, and he knew that the next time it attacked, that stinger would impale him.

A roar, huge, echoing off into the woods.

Silence.

Nothing there. Nothing at all.

"Dad?"

"Nick!"

His son scrambled down the hill that dropped to the riverbank. He carried his 10-gauge. He wore pajama bottoms and one house shoe. Behind him came Brooke. "Wylie! Nick! What's happening?"

The moon sailed in splendor, the night birds called, the sacred peace of the Kansas night enclosed them, and the sweet little river rolled on.

Nick threw his arms around his father as Brooke came running up, seeking with her hands, almost hitting him, enraged with fear, then choking back sobs, then holding both of her men.

"An outrider," Nick said. "I heard it and I saw it attacking Dad. Sort of."

Brooke nodded.

"Martin's in trouble," Wylie said.

"We know," Brooke responded.

"We just read it, Dad."

"I was trying to get to him. To cross over."

Faintly, from the house, they all heard Kelsey's voice call out, "Is anybody home?"

"We're coming, Baby," Wylie called, and they all trooped back to the house, where she waited at the kitchen door, her hands on her hips.

She hugged her brother. "Thank you for saving our daddy." Then she went into her mother's arms.

Wylie was not too surprised at what his family knew. Kelsey was eight

and an excellent reader. She was probably reading the book in everybody else's downtime.

Brooke put on water for coffee. "I think we need to tell Matt," she said. "We need some support out here."

"Fighting them is acknowledging them. Believing in them. And the more we do that, the stronger the link to their reality becomes. So getting a posse out here might not be such a good idea."

Brooke poured water into the coffee maker. "Then we need to not try to use that gateway at all."

"She's right, Dad," Nick said.

"But Martin-he's dying out there. Right now."

Nick gave him a long, searching look.

"What?"

"Dad, just let it happen. You're fighting and we can't fight. We have to just write and hope they find it, and hope that it helps them. If one of us takes so much as a single step into that world-"

Kelsey's eyes were wide, and Nick dropped it.

Brooke poured three mugs of coffee and sat down. Kelsey came into her lap.

"Nick, should you-this late?"

Nick gave him another of those searching looks. "You don't remember?"

"He doesn't," Kelsey said. "He can't."

"Remember what? What am I missing?"

So softly that it was almost inaudible, Nick said, "I'm the guardian, Mom is the facilitator, you're the scribe." He glanced toward Kelsey, whose eyes were heavy. "She's the sentinel." He raised his eyebrows. "Remember?"

It didn't make a bit of sense, any of it.

Nick stared into his coffee. "Our sentinel woke me up when she heard the outrider. If she hadn't, you'd be dead now."

He owed them his life. The bond that he felt with his family at this moment was the strongest thing he had ever known, the biggest emotion he had ever had. "Thank you," he said.

Then he heard from upstairs, low voices.

Kelsey had closed her eyes now, and Brooke began singing "Dereen Day" again, her own voice as soft as a breeze, too soft to drown out the conversation Wylie was hearing.

He looked toward the dark stairs, then toward Nick-who jumped up and

ran upstairs.

"Nick!" Wylie followed. Brooke only glanced at them, then continued singing.

Nick stood in front of Wylie's office, his shotgun ported in his arms.

Wylie had known that there wouldn't be anybody there. He went into the office. The voices were louder here, more distinct.

But nothing was breaking through, not here, not this far from a gateway.

"It's my story," he said to Nick. "My story's calling me."

FOURTEEN

DECEMBER 18, LATE
THE MONSTER

WYLIE SAW REPTILIANS, GORGEOUS LIKE snakes are gorgeous, their scales shimmering in a bright room with white tile walls, fluorescent tubes lining the ceiling, a metal autopsy table.

Where was it?

Then he knew, and he wrote: The entrance to their lair is in Cheyenne Mountain, but the place itself is right here, right beneath us. It has to do with the mass of the planet and the power coursing through its veins, which are the ley lines, and the great confluence of lines in this place.

Twelve miles from this house lay the geographical center of the continental United States. In the other human world, their base was beneath it. And in this world, if there was anywhere that they could break through, it would be in this area, where the veil between universes was thinnest.

Wylie's hands flew. He hardly noticed that Nick and Brooke stood behind him, with Kelsey asleep in her mother's arms.

The little team rode thus deep into the night, on the tide of Wylie's words.

He watched his own hands, then watched the screen as the words appeared:

General Samson injected himself, sucked air through his teeth as the familiar agony spread up his arm, then burned through his chest, then invaded his face and head, his whole body. It was a hateful, miserable thing to have to do every day.

Today, he did not expect to expose himself to the human earth's atmosphere, but he was doing it under an order that he could quote precisely: "You will maintain a physical state that allows you free movement in existing planetary conditions at all times." There was nothing about not being prepared for a day because he didn't expect to be in their raw damn air.

"Time?" he barked as he entered the abattoir. His feet squished in blood. The place stank of raw human meat.

"01044," Captain Mazle replied.

Lying before them on a steel table was a body. Samson looked down at it dispassionately. General Al North, big deal. He'd despised the eager creature with its idealism and its pathetically uninformed mind.

He looked at the mouth, noted the drying along the raw line where the lips had been removed and the clotted blood in both eye sockets.

"Mazle!"

"Yessir!"

He gestured. "If you fail-"

"We won't fail."

"It's you, Captain. You. You will fail or you won't."

"Don't threaten me, General."

She came from a powerful family. He didn't like it, but he must not forget it. "I'm doing nothing of the kind."

"You'd like to, though. Anyway, I've already told my father what a complete piece of shit you are."

He tried not to take her threat to heart. Her father could order death to a man in Samson's position. "Captain, I'm sorry if you don't like my style."

"Your style? You have all the charm of a skerix, and you smell a lot worse."

"It's the anitallergens, as I'm sure you are aware. Please be reminded that my responsibilities leave me no choice." He gestured toward General North's ravaged body. "If we're going to get this thing through that gateway, we have no time, so let's get started, Captain, if you don't mind."

"You'd be delighted if I failed, General, of course. But I'm not going to fail."

"This whole operation is in danger of failing, and if it does, not even your father will be able to save you. We still don't have enough slaves and we can't get the personnel in to control the ones we do have because the lenses are old and barely functional. We're losing 20,000 humans a minute and we need another billion in four days."

"Well, that's not my issue, General. My issue is this little writer sitting in the other human earth-you know, the one you people haven't been able to enter usefully for the past fifty goddamn years!" She strode over and slapped the chest of the inert human. "If we don't succeed in this, we will both stand before Echidna herself. You and me, General Samson, and not all the power of Abaddon will save us."

She crossed the room, moving toward a male who stood in silence,

waiting. "Doctor," she said to him, "it's time for you to do your duty. Assuming that you can."

The doctor gleamed in the light, his scales tiny and creamy. She didn't know his name, but his appearance confirmed his class. She would be polite to him. He'd no doubt paid a lot for this job, in hope of sharing in the spoils of earth.

However, the doctor didn't do anything.

"Let's get moving, okay?"

Samson chuckled. "The loyal retainer. Your personnel are as promising as your plans."

"I need more power," the doctor said. "Forty thousand volts at least."

"Do it with twenty."

"Captain-"

"You do it, all you have to do is use care instead of brute force to cover your incompetence. So do it with twenty or you're going on punishment report. I'm sick of your excuses."

"Captain, for this to last-"

"We don't need it to last, we need it to work for a few hours."

The doctor threw a look of desperation toward General Samson, who did not react.

"Okay," Captain Mazle said into her phone, "how much can you give him?" She looked at the doctor. "Compromise: you can get your forty, but only for one minute."

"I applied for two, Captain."

"Do it! Now!"

The doctor drew a narrow silver case from his pocket, opened it, and took out an instrument with a black, tapering handle and a long blade so thin that it was no more than a shimmer in the air. "This specimen has mild arterial damage from cholesterol," he said, "typically associated with advance of age in this species. Do we want to invest-"

"This species," Jennifer snarled. "Where do you get off? It's the only other intelligent species we've found across a billion parallel universes and throughout our own." She gestured toward the remains of Al North. "This creature, if it can successfully do what it's being designed to do, could save us all."

"I hardly think-"

"Because, Doctor, have you heard the news from home? Have you heard

what's happening there?"

"It's an aged specimen."

Samson broke in. "I don't want you two sniping at each other, not when we're working against time and there's so much at stake. We are behind schedule so MOVE."

"I won't be responsible if I'm rushed!"

"Doctor, I'll hand you over to the soultechs."

The doctor's scales shuddered and flushed yellow. Everybody feared the soultechs and their skills to capture the soul and to destroy the soul.

"Under what regulation? You have no right."

"Maybe and maybe not, but I will do it, of that you can be sure."

"You ought to do it anyway," Mazle added.

"Shut up, bitch," Samson said, his voice deceptively mild.

"How dare you!"

"Gonna tell on me again? Daddy's getting old. Daddy's not who he used to be. So maybe Daddy loses his power soon, and I get to kill your fucking little prune of a soul."

"Talk about a hollow threat."

"Are you willing to take the risk?"

"All you do is talk, but the clock doesn't stop, does it, General? You're easily distracted. You're failure prone. Daddy says." She curtsied.

"This thing of yours probably won't even work."

"A mix of biological material from both earths. It's bound to."

"Well, great, because if it doesn't we can all kiss our asses good-bye. We fail here and we die here-in this facility, fifteen hundred cubits beneath gorgeous Kansas."

The doctor began to set out his instruments. "Get support services in here," he said, "if you want this done."

"I'll be your support services. This is extremely classified."

"Nothing like a military idiot for a nurse-assistant," the doctor muttered.

"Maybe I'm better than you think. Maybe I've even been trained."

"I bought my job and your Daddy sure as hell bought yours. If I'm lucky, I might be able to flush a child's craw. Very lucky."

Jennifer opened the small box she had brought in with her, in which there was red liquid. "Look at it, Doctor. This is living material from the one-moon earth."

"You're kidding."

"There are humans crossing between the two worlds," Samson said miserably.

"That's ridiculous," the doctor replied.

"We believe it was a lucky accident. But that might not be the case. The union's hand might be in the matter somewhere."

Mazle, suddenly interested, strode up to him. "You didn't tell me this."

"You didn't need to know," he replied.

"This casts everything in a very different light."

"In what sense?" the doctor asked. He had a stake in the matter, too. They all did.

"If we're defeated by enemy action, Echidna might not be so-well, so hard."

"Harder, never doubt it," Samson said. "I've had experience in the palace."

"I grew up with her last crop of children," Mazle said. "My egg was honored with a place in her basket."

"I've seen them running eggs through that exalted basket. A new clutch every ten seconds."

Mazle turned on her hireling doctor. "Get to it," she shouted at him. "Get to it now!"

He lifted the lid of the black lacquer box, looked at the blood-covered material within. "Won't this explode, if it touches this air?"

"It's not going to happen."

He drew out a long, wet object. A lip. "This is dead."

"So is the cadaver, but we've got its soul."

General Samson thought of the millions of them collected deep under this room. The harvest of bodies had a certain value when terraforming began, but the harvest of souls was truly valuable plunder. It wasn't the doctor's business, though, or the Captain's. For Samson, it was a guarantee of wealth beyond imagination, the kind of wealth that bought an endless supply of perfectly cloned bodies, and with them the sort of eternal life that only the highest nobility enjoyed.

The doctor unrolled his instruments, taking a fleam in his long, narrow fingers, and drawing it along the line of one of General North's eye sockets, removing the dried flesh from the edges of the wound.

Then, using instruments like two golden chopsticks with splayed ends, he drew out a bloody ball. "This eye is not in acceptable condition."

"Acceptable for what, Doctor?" Mazle asked.

"For use!"

"It won't see?"

"Oh, it'll see. For a while. Somewhat. But-look at it, look how it's deteriorating."

"Why is that?" General Samson asked.

"General, I know you go topside because I prepare your allergy kit. Think if you entered their world without your serums. You'd disintegrate, and this eye is disintegrating."

"But if we get it back to its home world, then the rot will stop, won't it?" Mazle asked.

"This is all ridiculous. This can't work."

She persisted. "Can you attach it to the cadaver?"

"Um, sure."

"THEN DO IT NOW GOD DAMN YOU!"

He began using his instrument to touch the left eye socket, gingerly, experimentally. As the doctor touched the socket just with the tip of his probe, his fingers working with a pianist's virtuosity, immense generators that drew their energy directly from the planet's core started up deep beneath the facility.

Tiny sparks appeared around the eye, until the whole rim of the socket was shimmering as if with millions of little stars, each one of which was actually an enormously complicated object in itself, a whole miniature universe consisting of billions upon billions of stars no bigger than dust motes on a gnat's toe.

"Is the tissue going to explode?" Samson asked.

"No," Jennifer said.

"I can't be sure," the doctor responded. "We'll have to see."

"We'll have to see? We could all be killed!" Samson shouted, backing away from the table where the operation was taking place.

"Good," the doctor said. He then rested the instrument in its case and took the eyeball between the gloved fingers of his left hand.

"How dare you say that!" Samson hissed.

"Look, I'm here because I have to be. This whole thing-taking this planet like this-it's wrong. These creatures don't deserve this kind of treatment because of the avarice of a bunch of developers, and to be drafted by the military to do the work of a greedy few, it's sick and it's evil, General, and I

don't give a rat's ass who knows what I think." He inserted the eyeball, which settled into the socket with a sucking plunk. "Well, whaddaya know, it didn't explode. Too bad, we live on."

"I ought to have you disensouled," Samson muttered.

"Ah, the hollow threat again. You two are certainly expert at tossing those around. Problem is, you can't do without a doctor, therefore I'm not in any danger, am I?"

He inserted the second eyeball, then attached the lips. The doctor stared for some time at a photograph.

"Hurry!"

"The lips are too fat."

"Thin them, then!" Samson glared at Mazle. "Time?"

"01048."

Still staring at a photograph of Al North, the doctor pressed a glittering cloth against the lips, the contours of which gradually grew more and more to resemble those of the general.

He then addressed his attention to the genitals and rectum, which were taken out of the box and attached to the body. In the end, it appeared fresh and undamaged.

Finally, he stood back. "It's completed," he said.

"Bring up the soul," Samson said.

Jennifer Mazle spoke into a fist-sized walkie-talkie, and in a few moments two of her soultechs appeared carrying between them the enormous glass tube that contained the living soul of Al North. The light inside the tube no longer flashed and twisted, but clung close to the copper filament, which glowed deep red. "You think this will actually work?"

"Postoperative reensoulment isn't exactly gravitic science," the doctor said. "If you could stuff him for me, Captain."

Jennifer drew Al's body up, and hung the head back over the end of the table until his mouth lolled open. She sprayed into it from an aerosol can gaily painted with hieroglyphics, in colors familiar to anybody in any of the three parallel worlds, because all three of them had evolved Lysol spray. Then she lifted a thick, black cable that was coiled on the floor at the head of the operating table, and pushed it deep down Al's disinfected gullet.

"This soul's been cut the way you want it cut, right, General Samson?" the doctor asked.

"I approved your pattern."

"Because with all these shittily completed new connections, once the soul goes in, the only way you're gonna get it out again is by tearing this body to pieces."

"Am I going to want to do that, Mazle?"

"It's been debrided of every thread suggesting independence."

"And the brain?" Samson asked.

"Its memories have been erased back to two days before it entered Cheyenne Mountain," Mazle replied.

One of the soultechs held the tube, which was about four feet across at its top, tapering to a diameter of perhaps nine inches at its base. Another inserted the cable into the socket.

"How old is that equipment, Mazle?"

"My dad's company buried it in the Egyptian desert, at a place called Dendera."

"When?"

"Eight thousand years ago."

"What cheap bastards you people are. What if the humans had found it?"

"Not too likely."

"Still, eight thousand years, and we have to rely on it. That's criminal irresponsibility, in my opinion."

"The objective is to create wealth for garbage like you to enjoy, General, not spend it on extravagant equipment we can do without. And I can't help it if my family has been running a successful enterprise for twenty generations and you're a propertyless consumer."

The body began heaving. "Don't lose this, Mazle."

She raised her eyebrows. "Doctor?"

"Normal," he snapped.

"Fill it," she said to her soultechs.

One of them began raising the impedance in the tube until the soul was a purple spark dancing on the end of the filament.

The body heaved again, then again.

"You're sure these seizures aren't a problem?" Mazle asked the doctor.

"You can't expect this to work like modern equipment."

Samson snorted derisively, but made no comment.

Slowly, the color of the filament went from purple to violet, then to white. The body's eyes flickered open, the chest gave a great, oily heave. The muscles rippled, the skin flushed, and there came from the gaping mouth a

noise, earsplitting, like a hiss of gas escaping a broken pipe. A scream, Samson realized. That had been a scream.

And then Mazle said, "Look."

The tube that had contained the soul was as black as a shroud. Al North's eyes were open, though, wide open.

General North was crying.

FIFTEEN

DECEMBER 19, PREDAWN
THE STALKER

THEY'D MADE A SORT OF evil Golem, a monster that would be incapable of disobeying its orders. But it was more than that. Wylie saw the idea behind it. They had used the eyes and lips and tongue and the other parts they had managed to cut out of poor John Nunnally from down the road, and grafted them into the body of Al North. Because the result was mixed of flesh from the two earths, they probably hoped that it could move more freely in our world, and get around the fact that, because we ignored them, they could not enter freely here.

Unlike the outrider and the wanderers from the other earth, it would be able to enter this world fully.

So far, the only person who had managed that, seemingly without any restriction, was Trevor. But now there would be another, and this one would come with blood in his eye, a monster in the truest definition of the word.

Wylie wanted to stop writing, he wanted to warn his family, but his fingers moved relentlessly on, taking him where they chose to take him, on a journey he could not stop and could not control.

He was aware that dawn was coming, but he could not stop, he could not speak. He couldn't even turn away from the keyboard. Nick slept in the easy chair that stood in the corner. Brooke, he thought, was in their bedroom.

The problem was that this monster was intended to cross the gateway and come up that hill and come to this house and kill them all, and now they were asleep and they were not reading and so they could not see this warning, and as hard as he tried, he could not call out to them, and he knew that time was of the essence.

Then he was swept away, far away, to the last place he cared to go, almost as if some larger force was at work, a silent wizard controlling the whole horrible catastrophe.

Here, he saw dark, complicated heaps up and down sidewalks, bits and tatters of paper and clothing and all manner of debris blowing in a north

wind, and there was a smell, thick, sweet, that he recognized as the odor of many dead.

He was in New York, the New York of the two-moon earth, and these were people who had leaped from their apartments up and down Fifth Avenue, and there were more of them, Wylie was sure, on every single street everywhere in the city.

Detail struck him-an Armani purse lying open on the sidewalk, a doorman who had shot himself at his post, his brains hardened on the wall behind him, his kind old face crossed by a path of busy ants, a bicycle lying neatly against a lamppost.

He moved with a dreamer's gliding ease but the horrible precision of reality, into a side street. Here was a little restaurant called Henri's, all of its sidewalk tables bare, a full bottle of Cliquot champagne standing on a waiter's station beside a copy of the Times for the day New York got hit, December 6. Headline: BIZARRE TRAGEDIES SHOCK WORLD.

There was a flag snapping before a brownstone, and he could see that it was an art gallery, but he didn't go in, not in this storm-tossed, broken morning.

He fought to stop his hands, to pull away from the laptop. He could feel Al North standing, moving on wobbling legs, coughing, gasping, staggering, see him held up by sleek, creamy Mazle and black, gleaming Samson with their lithe bodies and long claws and their cruel reptile faces.

New York gave way to the ocean, big green waves involved with complicated little waves, and off through the bounding whitecaps the heeling dark shape of a great liner. She wallowed in the storm, and as he drew closer he saw that her bows were well down, and every time a wave struck her streaming flank, a great spray of water shot up, pushed across her by the driving wind like her own private rainstorm.

The people had disappeared from the deck like so much sea foam, but he was not long there, he was inside in the great sweep of a restaurant with chairs waltzing to the roll of the ship. But there were also others there, men in tuxedos, women in long dresses standing at the tall windows of what he supposed was the main restaurant. What was so appalling was that they had been made wanderers here, and had simply starved to death. He could see trenches in the carpeting under their feet. They had continued to walk after hitting the wall. He could see their sunken, gray faces.

I have to get home! Somebody help me!

And then he was on a twisting street, there were pushcarts everywhere, little motor bikes, signs in an unknown language and dogs barking and monkeys chattering in the blaze of day. But the streets were empty, and not only that, water was coming, and the buildings were heaving like women beneath the plunging weight of the night. And small, intricate waves came farther each time the place shook, the careful water licking the motorbikes and the paper signs and the cold sidewalk bakeries where naan had been sold for a few rupees.

India, some great city, and it was dead and it was sinking.

He was alive in it completely. Standing at an intersection. Down the street a luxury building in the chaos-a Four Seasons hotel with curtains blowing out the windows. He looked down at the sloshing water, how very carefully it licked his bare feet, how clear it was despite being floated with cigarette ends and Fanta bottles and plastic bags and sodden, gray disks of naan from the dead bakery.

Then he was in woods. His woods. And he saw a man.

Nick! Brooke! Kelsey! For the love of heaven, wake up!

Al North was walking and his movements were strange, purposeful but odd. He was flickering as he walked, like he wasn't entirely there. When he blundered into brush, he would mutter and groan, and there would be blue flashes all around him. Where his feet touched grassy places, there was flickering blue fire.

"Mommydaddy! Mommydaddy!" Kelsey flew in, throwing her arms around Wylie-who still could not stop typing. And Nick slept on.

"Daddy, Papa Bear is in the woods."

At last Nick woke up. He shook his head. "Hey, Baby," he said to his sister. "Daddy's busy."

Look at the book, Nick! Look this way!

Kelsey went into her brother's lap. "Yeah, Kelsey, it's Papa Bear," Nick said. He reached over and shook Wylie's shoulder. "Dad, you want to stop for a second? A little girl wants to say good morning."

"There's a papa bear in the woods, Daddy."

With every ounce of strength in him, Wylie tried to react. But his hands swept the keys and his voice remained as paralyzed as it always was when this seizure-like state was upon him.

Look at what I'm writing, for the love of all that's holy. He tried all caps, LOOK AT THIS! HELLO, NICK, IT'S AL NORTH IN THE WOODS!!!!

"Why don't we pull out the guns today, Dad," Nick said, the sleepy calm of his voice revealing that he had NOT looked.

"Oh, no, Nick, it was just Papa Bear!"

"We need the guns to be ready, Kelsey."

"Mommy, Nick is scaring me!"

"Nick!" Brooke came in. She glanced at Wylie. He could feel her looking at the screen-but then Kelsey ran to her and she was distracted.

DANGER DANGER DANGER!!!!

There was a change, he thought, in the way they moved.

"Dad, we're gonna go downstairs now."

The three of them left. A moment later, the clattering of the keyboard stopped. He tried to move his hands-and they pulled away.

At last!

He leaped up and dashed down the stairs. "Get the guns out," he shouted, "Al North is in our woods!"

They were in the family room, the three of them. The gun cabinet was open. The Magnum lay on the coffee table. Kelsey sat on the couch with her thumb in her mouth and her knees pulled up under her chin. She had saved them all, Wylie thought. He went to her. "What did Papa Bear look like, honey?"

"He'd been eating strawberries!"

"And how do you know that?"

"His mouth was all red."

The crude surgery.

"Dad," Nick said, "He was just here. He came right up to the house. I thought he was going to come in but something either went wrong or he changed his mind or something."

"Because he didn't come in? You're sure?"

"Of course I'm not sure! Maybe he's in the crawlspace, maybe he's in the attic, maybe he's invisible or something. I have no idea."

"But you didn't hear him come in?" Wylie went to the window.

Nick came beside him. "There," he said after a moment.

"I don't see him."

Then he did-a splash of red in the shadowy woods. His crude surgical wounds. Then he saw also a flash of metal.

There was a figure back among those trees, most certainly, and in its hand was a very big, very ugly gun.

SIXTEEN

DECEMBER 19, MORNING
SOUL HUNT

MARTIN HAD CIRCLED AROUND AWAY from the clearing where he'd seen the moving shapes of the monstrous spiders the kids called outriders. He'd gone up along the ridge line that led eventually to his house. But not in that direction, no way. The idea of going anywhere near that misshapen ruin sickened him.

It had been raining hard, but now that had stopped and second moon was low on the horizon, casting its glare over the tumble of rocks and twisted little trees that he could see below him.

He was trying very hard not to think about the future, of which he obviously had none, and above all not to feel angry at Trevor.

Of course, the son he'd loved, little Trevor, was no more. The strange being who had taken his place knew the world in a whole new way. "But I love you," Martin whispered to the silence. He always would, the little boy whom he had held tight in the scary nights, who had looked at him with joyous, dependent eyes, who had so admired his dad.

No matter how far beyond the edge of the known world Trevor went, Martin would follow in his heart, trying to understand, trying still to give what he could of love and support.

Then it hit him again: He threw me out. He did it. And he asked himself, what could set a son to do such deep evil?

He had never believed in the devil myth. He'd seen that the Christian devil was the horned god of the old witch cult of Northern Europe, nothing more than that, and the horned god was the old Roman god of festivals, Pan. In other words, a pagan deity had been made into the enemy of the new god. Similar things had been done throughout the history of religion, the gods of yesterday becoming today's demons.

Still, it did seem as if something had tipped the balance against the good of the world, and that was why Trevor had done what he had done, and why his own soul was about to be captured or, more likely, to die, and his body to

become somebody else's property.

Thunder clapped and the rain came again, and in the lightning Martin saw deer. Then he heard, high above, the cry of a nighthawk. Dawn was coming, but these new clouds were so thick that it was, in effect, still night.

He clapped his hands over his ears, then turned and pressed his face against the rock. The cleft he was in wasn't even two feet deep and hardly longer than he was tall. Rain splashed against his back, and the wind, now wintry cold, now storm heavy, came in under his torn windbreaker.

He was as miserable, he thought, as it was possible for him to be. And maybe, he thought also, with an upwelling of sorrow, maybe it was, quite simply, time for him to go.

Lindy and little Winnie were gone, something that he was beginning to think of as an always. It had been hard to accept, and Trevor's rejection on top of it was rawest agony.

But how do you manage to commit suicide when you dare not move a muscle? Perhaps if he tried to force his way back into the tent, the kids would shoot him. But how could he make Trevor participate in such a thing?

Another cry came, full of eagerness now, trembling above the rumble of the thunder. Martin shifted, and looked out across the clearing. Somewhere out there was the Saunders, and the Saunders might be running high. When it flooded it was as dangerous as hell, and with this rain it was going to be doing just that.

If he dove in, the rocks would knock him senseless before they broke him to pieces. Hard, but better than gnawing his wrists open.

In relation to the stream, then, where was he? Directions were guesswork, but if he moved down the long slope of the land and stayed in the folds and meadows rather than crossing the ridges, eventually he had to reach the Saunders. Unless, of course, he was taken first.

He looked out across the dark land, and it was an alien place, the surface of another planet, it seemed-this little woodland where he had hiked and hunted all his life, where he lived.

These same trees, these rocks, this speeding storm-all would continue after he ceased to exist. Beetles, hungry in the grass now, would soon find a feast.

He stood up into a sheet of rain, then set off running into the roaring dark. The wind made him stagger and the thunder made him cringe as he plunged along. He would have been blinded because of the rain and the dark, but there

was so much lightning that it enabled him to find his way. He heard another sound, then, that he could not quite make out. It was deeper than thunder, an enormous sound but with hiss in it, and booming, faint but strong enough to shake the lungs.

Lightning flashes revealed a wall of haze. He stopped running, because he was going toward it. Then he glimpsed its shape-it was a thick funnel cloud, immense, and probably not more than a few miles away, whipping toward him across the broken prairie.

He threw back his head and screamed and laughed at the same time, and saw in the storm a black shape sailing easily, a nighthawk. It seemed to be circling him, and he ran toward a stand of trees, to get in where a thing like that couldn't go.

"Oh, God, Lindy, I'm so sorry. I am so damn sorry." He should never have taken them to that damned church, he should have followed his own instincts and hidden his whole family in the storm cellar.

Another flash revealed shapes around him. It was only the briefest vision, but it made him howl like a frantic dog. He whirled round, but they were behind him, too, and closer there. But also, rising into the sky now like a great wall, was the tornado, a looming pillar of death, with darker objects speeding in its funnel. He saw cars, roofing, trees, bodies like akimbo swimmers. He ran toward the storm-then saw just ahead what appeared in the inky rain to be tall bars, and slung among them, a black thickness striped with yellow. A claw of lightning flailed in the clouds, revealing by its silver flicker that he was looking at the raised forelegs of a spider the size of a small horse.

Then he was down, his breath gone, his head smashed against the ground so hard the crack of his jaw sounded like a shot and he saw flaring stars in his stunned eyes.

What breath he had left was sucked out of him as the ground shook, and in another flash of lightning he saw the thing that had been menacing him shoot off into the sky like a demon flying, or rather, sucked away by the advancing tornado.

Light slipped down from the darkness with the shuddering grace of an aurora. Lying on his back, the rain swarming in his eyes, he nevertheless saw his death coming in the great detail with which legend tells us we see our ends, the way the light quested downward like syrup dropping quickly, white and alive, and raindrops when they touched it making hurrying patters of smoke.

But no peace came, not with this strange numbness-and then the seeing, the seeing-a great alteration of vision, and he felt a kind of ecstasy in his skin, and saw a forest of tapered furniture legs, and knew that he was seeing out of his own infant eyes, his mother's room where he had taken his first steps, and it was like flying, this wonderful new state of walking on two legs, and the happiness, oh dear Lord in heaven, childhood is the kingdom, it is the kingdom.

And he saw how very valuable this commodity called memory was, all the gold of his life capable of being tasted, touched, and smelled, feeling just as if it was happening again and always, and he knew that the human being is a device that records perfectly the rustle of every leaf and every sweated passage, the happy flying days and the gray ones, and his last thought was how grand, how incredible, what a miracle and no wonder it took the old earth five billion years to create us.

And then: I am to be boxed, cataloged, and sold like dope to somebody who has lost all happiness, all joy, all decency, and is more hollow inside than death and the zero cold of space. I-my eternal being-is to be sold.

Red. Voices-a voice, a voice of gold, an angelic, perfect voice.

The red became noise, rushing, slapping. Became fire. Fire on his hip. Somebody sanding his skin, no, worse, cutting. They were cutting and they were sliding the knife between the muscle and the skin.

He was being butchered in the field.

Trevor's face beaded with rain, swimming with tears. Trevor, ancient being, journeyer.

Like me.

Journeyers together, father and son.

The wind screamed, rain and hail struck like bullets, and Trevor screamed, "Dig in, Dad, dig in!"

He clutched the ground. All grew silent. It seemed as if the last possible bit of air was pulled from his lungs. He felt his legs rising, heard the deepest rumble he had ever known, and saw the ground just ahead suffused by electric green light.

Whereupon there was an earsplitting roar and a truck crashed down from the sky, its lights as they flashed drilling into the rain. It was huge, an articulated thirty-two-wheel poultry mover.

Then chickens were everywhere.

The clucking, squawking, crowing clumps of feathers and terror flounced

like great, fluffy snowballs in the rain.

The weight left his back. He turned, and a figure was helping him up, a strong male figure. He could not see the face.

"They'll be back any second, they won't stop!"

Trevor ran off into the dark and Martin did not stop to think or even try to understand what had just happened. He followed, running with all his might, and he found that he could see in the dark of the storm just by wanting to, and could run like an angel with the wind at his back, and he could go and go, his heart ticking like a slow engine.

Trevor stopped, grabbed a couple of chickens, and ran on. Martin did the same.

They went into deep and deeper woods. The storm passed, bringing with it first moon, tiny and bright and with it stars, but also, to the north and west, another massive tower of clouds. They never seemed to end, the storms, as if the unbalanced universe itself must expend energy at every level until equilibrium once again prevailed.

Martin heard drumming, and it was soon clear that they were moving toward the tent.

"Trevor, they'll shoot-"

"No, they won't." He snapped the necks of his chickens and laid them next to the tent wall. Martin did the same, then put them beside the others.

At that instant, there was a soul-freezing scream, then another and another and another, and a dozen great shadows dove at them. One of them swooped right into Trevor's face. It screamed, its red eyes burned-and it flew around him, wheeling tight, as another made the same maneuver.

Then Martin was enclosed in cold skin that reeked like garlic and embalming fluid, and claws came against his chest, slicing his jacket and his shirt and slipping into his skin as a knife does into hot wax.

It was fear, they had said, fear that the things used as their beacon. Very well, he would take his fear and put it in a box inside him, and close it.

The thing glared at him, its eyes so close he could see the fire inside, its mouth open, the white tongue shuddering as a maggot does in the sun.

He found, somehow, Franny Glass's Jesus prayer and breathed it again and again, and it took him away from his fear, no matter that he was not a believer, it still bore its power to distract a terrified heart.

The thing leaped back, giving him a look out of the side of its eyes that was mixed of regret and rage, and a touch, even, of humor that this miserable

little man had bested it.

Pam held the tent flap for them as they went into the candlelight and the drumming. There was not a lot of light, but Martin could make out Len Ward and Claire James beating the drums. He noticed Harrow Cougars emblems on the skins.

He saw so clearly, every detail, the eyes of the others gleaming in the candlelight, and he recognized their youth in their scent, the young, powerful smell of his son, the blooming scent of the girls, and he saw them, really saw them-and he knew that only at a few moments in his life had he ever seen people with this clarity, this love, and the abiding compassion that he felt now.

Michael Ryan, the Cougars' star tackle said, "Hey," and looked up at him with those strange, shadowed eyes they all had.

Then Pammy began to clap. Trevor threw his arms around his dad. Except for the drummers, they all clapped.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Dad," Trevor said, "please try to understand" Tears streamed down his face. Martin embraced him. Then a girl he thought was called Crystal something came over. She had a mirror in one hand and a candle in the other.

A face looked back at him. It was dirty, wet, thin and covered by a day's old growth of beard. It was the face of a street person, a hobo, somebody from the lower depths, a miner in the dark of the earth.

The eyes looking back at him gleamed darkly, very darkly, in the yellow candlelight. In fact, they were as black as coals, his eyes, just like those of the kids around him, and his son.

His soul seemed to fill the air of the tent, to mingle with their souls, and it was like picking up a song you'd known always, and singing again.

Martin understood, now, what had been done to him-the same thing that had happened to these kids when the light tried and failed to take him.

Something was gone, though. It had certainly taken something. Not his essence. He was still Martin Winters. He felt lighter, though, and far more in touch with the world-not the world of streets and companies and archaeological digs, however. Rather this world of the here and now. The rain, the trees, the kids in the tent.

He was alive, Martin was, more alive than he had ever been before.

They hadn't discarded him, not at all. Rather, they had done to him what natural human societies had always done to their shamen and their priests,

their healers. They had made him face death, and so come free.

That was the difference. The kids in this tent had not been captured by the light, but rather made free by its failure to capture them.

Martin was free, too. Trevor was smiling at him. His son's face was soaked with tears. It had been a near thing out there. It had been real. He might not have made it.

"Thank you," he said to them all, and to his son. Trevor came to him, and leaned against him, and instantly the exhausted boy was asleep in his father's arms. Martin slept, too, and the lives of the kids swept on, racing toward the destiny that awaited them, now, in just a matter of hours, that would bring them new life, or extinguish forever these last few sparks of the human soul.

PART THREE

ABADDON

And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails: and their power was to hurt men five months. And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon, but in the Greek tongue hath his name Apollyon. One woe is past; and, behold, there come two woes more hereafter.

-Revelation 9: 10-12

*With an host of furious fancies
Whereof I am commander,
With a burning spear, and a horse of air
To the wilderness I wander.
By a knight of ghosts and shadows
I summoned am to Tourney,
Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end-
Methinks it is no journey.
-ANONYMOUS "Tom O'Bedlam's Song"*

SEVENTEEN

DECEMBER 20
TERROR

GENERAL SAMSON HAD GOTTEN THE summons back in the daily packet from Abaddon. As usual, it had been choked with demands and threats. But this time, on top of the bundle that had been thrown through the small, highly stable gateway that was here beneath the geographic center of the Northern Hemisphere on all three worlds, was a sheet of thick yellow paper.

He had known instantly what it was: a summons from Echidna.

He now sat miserably on a packed bus, on his way to the sort of meeting from which one should not expect to return.

He had come back not only to his own beloved form, the marvelous darkness of his scales, the proud flash of his bright red eyes, but also to a world where he did not need to dose himself with antiallergen, then remained rigidly shifted for hours, all the while itching like mad in every stifled scale on his body.

He didn't want to die. But more, he was afraid of torture. And they would torture him, of course, as a lesson and warning to others. It would happen in some auditorium full of laughing, cheering underclass, delighted to witness the abnegation of an overlord.

They would rip off his still-living skin and make him dance in the cold, and kids would come up and rub salt into his white, exposed musculature. They would roast his haunches and force him to attend the banquet dressed, no doubt, as a clown.

It was she, that damned high-born Captain Mazle, she and her accursed father who had engineered this.

He had hoped that a victory over the humans would bring him real wealth at last, and the power that went with it.

Instead, the starving billions who were marked to go swarming through the fourteen huge gateways when they opened tomorrow would instead have to be kept here, and their rage and their rebellion would only become worse.

And he, of course, would have no souls to sell.

But he wasn't defeated, not just yet. He might be able to talk his way back to earth, because even if he couldn't open the gateways to the people of Abaddon, he could bring back all those millions of souls, full of memories of love and joy, treasures that were not available to anybody here.

But not right now. Right now, he was just another miserable, frightened man riding a rickety bus down the Avenue of the Marches to Government House, one among fifty in the old vehicle. He listened to the gas hissing uneasily out of the tank on the roof-coal gas, supposedly less polluting than the powerful fuels available to the elite. Actually, nobody cared about the brown sky. What they cared about was the fact that coal gas was cheap and, like sails at sea, therefore the best way to transport underworlders.

On both sides of the broad street stood government buildings, and ahead the grandest of them all, where he was supposedly to receive new orders.

There was a lot of traffic in the jammed bus lanes. Occasionally, also, an authority vehicle raced past in the restricted lanes. From time to time, an aircar whistled past overhead. He didn't even look up. He deserved that life. He deserved a place among the elite, even on the Board of Directors itself.

They finally came to the Street of Joy, marking the center of the long government esplanade. The wailing cry of a siren caused the bus to stop with a jerk. Children in white-suited rows sang an anthem praising the achievements of some committee or other. The tune was always the same, but the committees changed with the political climate.

The Standing Space was crammed with as many as five thousand naked underworlders, all bound, some screaming their innocence, others in tears, others stoic. Lawyers in the bloodred hoods that signified their profession moved about among the committeemen and their friends trying to get various orders signed, buying and selling the condemned. Every so often, one of them sent a runner into the rows of prisoners, generally coming back with a young woman to be raped to death at a party later.

The stench of prisoners' vomit was sour on the air. A platoon of Young Leaders in their sky-brown uniforms and black caps marched up to the first row, swinging their arms and singing with the choir, then began slitting throats, causing one and then the next prisoner to spray blood and writhe, then slump. The boys were getting kill badges.

There'd been a battle with the Unionists last night, a ferocious encounter at the wall, which we appeared to have won. Of course, it was always

impossible to be certain, but such a cheerful Execution Morning did suggest that the news was true.

The Union was nearly finished, reduced to a few hills, nothing more than a park, really. It was surrounded by the vast planetary city that was the Corporation in all its might, its wealth beyond imagination, its poverty beyond belief.

That was why they had to expand into two-moon earth. That population pressure had to be relieved, or there was going to be an explosion here and Echidna and her class were going to have their own throats slit.

Having each done ten or fifteen victims before their parents' cameras, the boys withdrew. One, who had been urinated on, remained kicking his victim to death. After he went strutting back to the grandstand, a soldier like Samson himself, also a general, squeezed the bulb that activated a Multi Projectile Delivery System that stood on a rickety army wagon. Instantly and without a sound, the five thousand condemned were turned to meat. Then he snapped his whip, and his great orange syrinx warbled and hooted angrily, but trundled off happily enough when it realized they were headed back to the Central Vehicle Pool.

In the bus, total silence. These were all blue-pass people, all from the underworld neighborhoods just like the people who were now being harvested by the bone spiders that had come lumbering up out of their warrens at the first scent of blood. The animals would strip off the meat and leave it behind, and carry the bones into their lairs.

Every underworlder alive was afraid he would end up in the next collection. After all, the executed had been tortured, most of them by having capsicum injected under their skin and into their anuses, or pellets of plutonium pressed into their eyeballs. He'd seen the globular orange messes that had replaced many of their eyes, had watched the steam curling up from their bobbing heads.

You'd say anything, given that kind of pain. And "anything" would invariably include implicating anybody you were asked to implicate in whatever plot might be imagined.

He might have been implicated. Maybe it wasn't political at all. Maybe that was why he was here.

The bus started with a jerk and a loud mechanical whine. The roadside was littered with the remains of exploded buses, inside some of which could be seen the pale green bones of the dead. Behind them, shrill screaming

began. The elite had flitted away in their aircars, and now people rushed out of side streets, their scavenging permits flapping on their backs, meat bags in their arms. There would be soup tonight.

The bus shuddered and popped. Would it explode?

He found himself wondering what he wanted more, an end to this misery of a life, or a chance to talk his way out of whatever trouble he was in.

Now came the four tones that preceded Morale Service announcements. Sick though everybody was of Morale Service and its lies, they all clapped and cheered.

The bus's speakers crackled. There was a brief hiss, then a moment of earsplitting feedback. "Are you on your way to your designated earth station?" a woman's recorded voice shrieked, crazed with delight. "Attention please, earth stations are now receiving colonists. You must be at your earth station by midnight tonight."

All the screens on the bus came to life with children singing and dancing in some green fantasy of a world. "Yes, more and more people every day are buying their tickets. Earth is huge and it's rich and there's room for all. Room for all in the new lands. Room to dream."

Samson knew the reality, of course. Much of the existing landmass was being sunk into the sea, exposing vast ocean flats that would be where these poor fools would have to build. The reason was simple-the sea floor was full of methane and sulfur hydrates, which would melt in the air and change the atmosphere to the same richly sulfurous mix enjoyed here on Abaddon.

Cheap terraforming, in other words.

Each family that went would receive a gaggle of human slaves, which would die in a few weeks or months.

At least human meat was edible, if you could manage to get used to that creamy texture.

"Building One."

Samson got to his feet, then stepped out. He hurried across the wide, black tarmac. Somewhere in the depths of the city, there was the roar of an explosion, followed by wailing sirens and the appearance of hundreds of bright red police aircars hovering like great wasps, their grapples dangling ominously. Do anything that appeared menacing, and they were liable to snatch you up and drop you a hundred leagues out at sea. They'd go in low so that you'd drown instead of die of impact, and the press would show up to tape the spectacle. Or they'd drop you amid pleasure craft, and people would

use you for target practice.

The reason for all the brutality was simple: fear works. Ten thousand years ago the Corporation had been a loose confederation of free companies, even some tribes and even more ancient political units. But with growth had come mergers, and then the disastrous battle over the two human earths that had been lost, in the end, by all the combatants. This had been followed by long years of population growth coupled with a gradual consolidation of power, until now, when an elite million ruled a land jammed with three billion underclass.

Attempting to seem confident, he strode up the steps, brushing at his uniform, trying to remind himself that it meant something in a government context. Here, a general's service stripes were important. After all, they'd put him in charge of what was arguably the most important project in corporate history.

So why was his craw filling with vomit?

"Samson, General," he managed to mutter when he reached the desk. He handed over his orders, his passport, his clearances. The young clerk was a pureblood, dressed in the blue silk uniform of the intelligence service. He had fine, white scales, and eyes that had been surgically altered from piercing gold to a much more genteel eggshell blue.

He read the documents, then pressed a button on his desk. Two guards appeared, one an underworlder like him in a black uniform, the other upper class and dressed in the lovely green that the fashionistas called Memory of the Sky. In a military uniform, it indicated serious power.

The only place you could still see a green sky on Abaddon was in the very heart of the Union, amid the fields and the streams.

The clerk handed them Samson's papers. He followed them back through the lift area to a private elevator that had an ominous, even legendary, reputation. Many a soldier had ascended to these highest floors and never returned. As he stepped into the pink marble interior, he entered another world, where every detail was sumptuous and perfect. The lift had no controls. It was controlled from elsewhere, and he stood to attention as it rose.

He thought to review his life, but could not stop his mind from imagining torture and how he would fail in its rigors, and they would all see and know the cowardice that, in his most secret being, he felt defined him. He thought about death constantly, wondered at what it would mean no longer to be, and

feared above all things the destruction of his soul.

This was why he had risen so extraordinarily high. It was his willingness-which he detested in himself-to do anything he needed to do to prove his loyalty to his betters, even if it involved lies, cruelty, and pointless killing. His journey upward was a desperate flight to safety.

The doors opened and bright light glared into his face. He tried to control his hearts, but could not. The rhythms synchronized into panic mode, and he knew that his state of fear would be flaring alarms in some nearby monitoring center.

What he thought might be a board member came and stood before the light, so that he was a black shadow to Samson, his face unrecognizable. "You have twenty hours before the gateways open. You're not even close to being ready."

Samson took a breath. He thought he knew that voice. He thought it was Beleth himself, the master of all the males, Echidna's husband. In effect, the king of the world. "We're right on schedule, Sir."

"You're a liar, of course."

He thought as quickly and carefully as he could, considering that his mind was racing with fear. "They can't defeat us, they're only human."

"That's your mistake and I'm surprised at you. We knew you were arrogant and venial, but who isn't? I had not taken you to be stupid."

"No, Sir."

"And neither are the earth people. The full-blooded earth human is smarter than we are, as you know. They lack only experience, this new species, to make themselves masters of the three worlds. Remember that they already have two, which we do not."

He seemed to want to engage in conversation. Samson was compelled to respond. He cast around for something positive to say. "They are a more advanced form than us, it's true, Sir. But they have no idea how easy it is for them to pass through gateways. They're ignorant."

"Thanks to the work of our forebears. Can you imagine what a human army would do here? Bringing hope, happiness even, to people who cannot be controlled except by fear?"

"That would be an extraordinary misfortune. But I don't think it's one we need to worry about. They are far from realizing that they can use gateways at will, at any time."

"How about the Union intelligence agent in the one-moon universe?"

"That's going well, Sir."

"In what sense, General? Have you killed him?"

"I expect that to be confirmed on my return," Samson replied.

"But it's not confirmed now?"

"No, it's confirmed, in the sense that we got an assassin through. So, yes, I can confirm that."

"How did you get an assassin into a place that we can't penetrate, General?"

"Well, we are able to, in a limited way. And remember, the closer to the moment of passage we come, the easier it is."

"So the agent is definitely no longer a problem? You can guarantee this?"

Samson forced acid back out of his craw and into his churning stomach. This agent had been placed only a few leagues from the center of the whole operation, and not only that, had somehow been penetrated into the inaccessible one-moon universe where he lived in direct parallel to the single most dangerous human being on the two-moon earth, Martin Winters.

It was quite an achievement. And the problem was, he had no idea at all whether or not the agent was dead. But North was a brilliant achievement, too, and he had to believe that the attack had worked.

"Can you guarantee it, General Samson?"

The only acceptable answer was "yes." Anything less could bring torture and death. "The agent is dead."

"Then let me report the good news to my wife. She's been very concerned about this aspect of the situation."

Samson fought for air. He needed to sit down, but there were no chairs here. As it was supposed to, the piercing light was making him feel naked and exposed. It was forcing him to shiver his scales, lest his body temperature rise and make him slow.

There came, from behind the horrible shadow, piercing female laughter.

It could only be her.

Then the light went out. As Samson's eyes got used to the dimness, he had a great surprise: he saw that the entire Board of Directors was present. All of them, even Mazle's father, he noted.

Behind the assembled Board, an enormous window overlooked the Sea of Anubis, and a great longing entered Samson when he saw a ship, a pearl-white jewel tiny in the sun, its red sails rotating slowly in what must be a light breeze. How lovely their lives must be, those simple sailors, even the

ones whose jobs would make their time short, the pitch makers and the rope weavers and the scrapers. At least they did not risk their souls, not like a politician or a general.

"Come," Echidna said. She actually took his hand. Up close, she was dazzling, a shimmering complex of the smallest imaginable scales, blushed pink under her high cheekbones, delicate blue around her smiling, sparkling, delightfully pale pink eyes. Her body, easily visible beneath a floating gown of gossamer gold thread, was superbly curved, breathtakingly desirable. She was so vastly, incredibly different from the humble women on the bus with their dull scales, sagging with untended molt, that she might as well have been an entirely different species, not a seraph at all, but something from some grander and more extraordinary world than Abaddon.

He followed her past the boardroom and into the private apartments, feeling her strong, cold hand in his. He forced his neck scales as tight as he could, but the musty scent of his desire still oozed from his pulsing glands. It made her throw back her head and laugh, and made Beleth nudge him from behind, and hiss.

Children's toys littered the legendary floor of pure gold, and kids playing darted between the feet of their elders. In the family shrine at the far end of the great room, the mistress's women attended their business, some sewing quietly while warming her latest clutch of black eggs, others listening discreetly to the proceedings.

"He will sit," Echidna called as they approached her ladies.

Chairs were brought by two young fashionistas, so highly bred that their scales were like white cream, almost as pale as hers.

He found himself surrounded by gorgeous women. These really high aristocrats made even a highly bred noble like Mazle seem dreary.

He strove not to appear as he felt, thunderstruck.

Some of the children gathered, interested, no doubt, to watch whatever was about to befall him. Because he had only won the first round.

He looked across the impassive faces of the board members. Nobody was readable. All eyes stared straight ahead. The ultimate power rarely acted, and when it did, all were silent. Whatever she did, there would be absolute approval. Debate would end.

She glared down at him, then leaned forward slightly and stroked his neck. "Such interesting scales," she murmured, and he saw something in her eyes other than the contempt he had expected. It crossed his mind that the old

Echidna might have died and been replaced by another clone, and perhaps also another soul, one that might use the memories stored in the brain quite differently. With the high born, there was no way to tell who actually possessed a given identity at a given time, so this might not even be the person who had favored him and promoted him in the first place. She might consider that her memories of doing those things represented a mistake on the part of a predecessor.

She looked into his face. "I've seen no lying from you, but I have seen impetuosity and arrogance. I see that you despise us of good blood. You do, don't you?"

What should he say? The light was low, so any nervous fluttering of his scales would not be seen.

"Of course I hate you. But I am loyal to you and to us all. I am loyal to our beloved Abaddon."

She tightened her grip on his neck. He began to feel his throat closing. She knew just what she was doing, the way she dug her thumbs down into the sack of his craw, pressing it up so that it would be sucked down into his windpipe and make the throttling require less force. Easier on the hands.

He could no longer breathe. He waited. His penis stirred. Sex and death were so close. He felt his sheath draw back. Two of the girls giggled. One of them stretched herself. Children gathered closer.

Time passed. She wasn't allowing even a trickle of air. Flashes came into his eyes, and air hunger now caused his body to torsion, throwing his abdomen forward and his head back. Amid peals of childish laughter, his bladder evacuated.

Air rushed in, sputtering as the sac of his craw fluttered in his windpipe, then snapped back where it belonged. He coughed, tried to gain control of himself, then flounced back, helplessly kicking the air.

As he gagged and spat mucus, everybody laughed. Kids ran up and spat on him and slapped him as he crawled to his feet.

"He pissed on us, Momma," one of them yelled. Then another, older one, "Kill him, damn you, you old hag!"

"Nobody kills him," she muttered.

A boy, his face flushing with eagerness, came toward him with a throating knife. "Let me! Let me get blooded, Mom!"

"Stay away from him, you little shit."

"Dad, listen to her!"

"Obey your mother," Beleth said.

"You people are such assholes."

"Watch your mouth, boy," Beleth said. "I'd just love to beat the shit out of you."

"You don't have the right."

"Shut up, both of you," Echidna snarled. She spat. "I'll let your sisters whip you senseless, Marol."

Little girls swarmed her, dancing around her, pulling at her skirts. "Oh, mommy, mommy please! Yes, he deserves it, please!"

"Later, we'll talk it over." She clapped her hands once, and all the children withdrew. "Now listen to me, Samson. We need you to go back there and win this thing."

"I will, ma'am."

"How dare you lie to me!"

His blood literally dropped to his feet.

"Look at him," one of the fashionistas hissed, "he's scared to die."

He thought he'd passed this hurdle. But the agent was small stuff compared to the larger problem, which was that nothing close to a billion people were going to make it through the gateways, because two-moon earth was not ready, not even close, and that was the real reason he'd been called back. "I will not get a billion people onto earth, it's true. But I have something else that I am going to bring out. Echidna, I have the greatest treasure in history, and I lay it at your feet."

"This had better be good, Samson. Hyperbole annoys me."

"I have human souls in captivity. Beautiful, healthy ones."

Her eyes widened. The only ones Abaddon ever captured were ugly, and had to be sifted for the good bits, a sweet memory here, a compassionate act there—the things that smelled and tasted so good, that could be relived endlessly, like a delicious food that would never be finished.

"A few souls changes nothing." She sighed. "Let's get him stripped. Get the skin off, I haven't got all night."

Somebody grabbed him from behind. The boy who had wanted to kill him came forward, a silver molting hook in his hand. He smiled up at Samson. "This is not gonna be fast, you shit."

"Ma'am! Wait, ma'am. I have more than a few. More, ma'am!"

She gestured toward the eager boy, dismissing him.

"Mom!"

"How many do you have, Samson?"

"Ma'am, I have ten million of them."

The silence that fell was absolute. This was, indeed, the greatest treasure in the history of the world.

"Ten million good souls?"

"Ma'am, any one of them is better, more fulfilling, more delicious than the best you have ever eaten in all your memory. Fabulous, rich emotions. Delight, love, sweetness, all the best stuff, ma'am."

He saw the calculation in her eyes. "Where are they?"

He could feel the boy getting ready, could see his scales shimmer with eagerness. He had to be careful, here, or she would kill him for insolence. "Ma'am, they are under the stable gateway, ready to be brought through. I have them connected to two-moon earth's core. They cannot escape. I can bring them through."

She gestured toward the boy, who swiped the air in front of Samson's torso, then hurled the molting hook at one of the board members, who dodged it, hissing and spitting.

The boy glared at him as he adjusted his uniform. "You'll be back, bitch," he said. "And when you get back you an' me, we got a date, do." He ran his fingers across Samson's throat.

Samson backed away, bowing until he was off the gold floor and onto the marble. When he saw its blackness, he almost wept with relief.

On the way down in the lift, fear became rage. How dare they, those grunting, greedy oru. He'd like to tear their living skin off their bodies with a molting hook, even her, yes, especially her. Tear it right off!

The elevator opened and he stepped out into the lobby. As he crossed it toward the great steel doors, he gloried in the fact that the guards were now indifferent to him. Delightfully indifferent.

The doors slid open to the wide esplanade of freedom, and he went through. So beautiful, life, despite the pain, the losses, the struggle, all of it. Life itself unfolding, so sweet.

How dare they throw away his life for the amusement of a mere child! His life! As he descended the steps, part of him wanted to cry out to the brown sky, "I lived, I went to the top on a black ticket and I lived!" He did not cry out, though. As befitted a general, he strode.

He was walking toward the bus stop when a wonderful Shu, the best aircar in the world, came swooping down so close that he had to duck, lest he

be clipped by it.

It stopped, though, and hung there, its yellow surface gleaming, its black windows revealing nothing of the interior. Then the passenger door went up and a pureblood leaned out. "Hey, you Marshal Samson?"

"I'm General Samson."

"I've got orders to deliver this to a Marshal Samson. You got your number ID?"

Samson produced it.

The salesman thrust the ID card into the slot. Samson heard the car's confirming bell. The salesman hopped out. "She's yours, Marshal. Ever driven before?"

He forced himself not to gape. It was stunning: instead of killing him, she'd given him a gift of one of the finest sports vehicles in the world, a wonderful, beautifully made creation that belonged only to the highest of the upper classes. Merely possessing such a thing raised you into the aristocracy.

He entered the car. The fine interior gleamed with exotic metals, greens and silvers and golds. The leather was pale and as supple as cream. Human, without a doubt, and young.

He glanced across the dashboard, a forest of gleaming gold buttons, none of which he understood. Apparently, the car had every option you could imagine. "I have no idea how to run this."

"You don't need to know. It's ensouled."

He was momentarily too amazed to speak. Shu ensouled perhaps a thousand vehicles a year. Such a car would cost a man like him ten lifetimes of income. Driving it identified him as one of the world's most powerful, most elite people.

"Is the soul...human?"

The salesman laughed. "Maybe next time, mister. It's a good one, though. Very smart, very compliant. You need to ride a human ensouled vehicle very carefully, you know. They're fast and really, really clever, but they can be tricky."

Indeed, they'd been known to smash themselves to bits in the hope of getting release. It didn't work, of course. They couldn't release themselves.

But they ran a vehicle superbly.

Experimentally, tentatively, he asked the car, "Are you there?"

There was a pause, then, "Who are you?"

"The new owner. Take me home."

It hesitated a moment as it read his ID. "Yes," it said. He did not ask it why it had been put into a machine. He didn't really care, as long as it did its work. It was his now, that was all that mattered.

As he soared upward, his engines singing, he called Echidna.

"You're welcome," she said into his ear.

"How can I ever thank you?"

"I can think of two ways."

"Which are?"

"Open both human worlds, and I will grant you an entire city. I will break the law of blood, and let you wear Sky."

The car swooped low into the dark streets of the back city, the real city. People looked up, some knelt, all bowed, pulled off hats, raised their open hands to sign loyalty to the Corporation, for nobody but an owner could be driving such a vehicle, a car glowing with the violet light of a soul.

The door opened. He got out. Wide, amazed eyes. Smiles everywhere, then cheering as his neighbors came to their windows, looked down, and saw his triumph. Success honored all.

He climbed the narrow stair, thick with the smell of boiling soup, and went into his apartment. There were meat parties everywhere in the street. The day's executions had favored his neighborhood, and they all thought he was the reason, and he was cheered from every door.

Who knew, maybe Echidna had given such an order.

The gateway was open, waiting. He walked up to it. The stress waves shimmered evenly. It was as clear as he had ever seen. The approaching date was really having an effect now.

Then he realized what he was looking at. Mazle stood in their cramped headquarters space beneath two-moon earth. She was looking down at the autopsy table. On it lay the body of Al North.

He felt sick. That should not be.

He stepped through. "Is the agent dead?"

"You lived!"

"Is the agent dead?"

She gestured toward North. "This needs fixing."

"I told her-" His mind returned to the sick, vicious boy, waiting for him with his molting hook. He shuddered. "Never mind what I told her."

"We're going to try replacing the brain entirely," she said. "This almost has to get rid of the residual will. Then it's going to work."

"It had better work."

"Yeah, because if it doesn't Daddy's gonna take away all your toys. And if you ever lie to my aunt again, I'll help my unpleasant little cousin take off your skin, and I'll eat it before your eyes." She smiled. "You're nothing, Samson, you and your ugly little car."

He bowed to her.

EIGHTEEN

DECEMBER 19
ORIGINS UNKNOWN

NICK SAT READING THE PAGES his father had just finished. Over the past two weeks, Dad had slept maybe six hours, but he was asleep now, sprawled like a corpse across his keyboard. Of course, corpses don't snore.

It was four in the morning and two weeks ago he wouldn't have dared to get out of bed and venture into the dark, but things had changed, hadn't they?

"What's going on?"

"Hi, Mom."

"What're you doing up?"

"Dad's written about being an intelligence agent."

"Anything more than what we've already remembered?"

"Not really. When I came in here he was sound asleep and snoring, and he was writing." He gestured toward the laptop. "This. It's a description of Samson going to the demon earth. It's horrible, Mom, really horrible."

"Wylie, wake up."

"Mom, leave him."

"I don't want him like that, he needs a bed."

"Look, if you disturb him, he's just gonna start writing again. He's gonna have a heart attack. Let him sleep."

She leaned over and read a few pages. "God, what a place. Abaddon."

"I googled it, it means 'the abyss.' At least, it does in our language. In seraph, it probably means 'Home,' or 'Nice Place' or something. They're cannibals, and even the children torture and kill. It's, like, play for them. Like a video game to them, to skin a real person alive. They're loathsome, Mom, and we do not want them here."

She looked down at her husband. "I'm gonna get him a blanket at least." She went to the linen closet and pulled one down. They covered him together, mother and son, and Nick slid the cushion from his chair under his head.

"I'm sober, I swear," he murmured.

"It's okay honey, it's good."

"Let's fuck, baby."

"Sh!"

He gave a long snore and smacked his lips.

"I grew up with him, remember, Mom."

She tried to laugh, almost succeeded.

"Mom, the thing we have to ask ourselves is, not only who Dad is and who we are, but what we're supposed to be doing, because I have to tell you, I am starting to realize that I feel this incredible kinship with somebody in his book, and I want to understand what's going on. Trevor is, like, my soul brother or something. And another thing-this is dangerous. What happened with Al North trying to come in here, and that thing that came after Dad-it's very, very dangerous."

At that moment, there came a thin sound, almost like the wail of a smoke alarm, and for a split instant that's what they all thought it was. Then Nick was running, they were all running. Kelsey stood in the hall outside her bedroom clutching Bearish and making this terrible sound, a noise Wylie had never heard his little girl make before, and which he had not known she could make.

Brooke leaped to her and enclosed her in her arms, and Kelsey sobbed the ragged sob of a child so terrified that not even her mother could comfort her. "There's hands in my room and they were touching me and touching me, and when I threw Bearish at them, I saw a face and it was awful."

"Oh, honey, honey, there's nothing in your room, look, it's empty in there, the light is on and it's empty."

"You saw just hands, Kelsey?"

"Yes, Daddy. They tried to grab me, and when they touched me I saw them. Then they were gone."

"And the face, you saw it-"

"When Bearish hit it. It was bloody and awful, Daddy, it was horrible."

He looked at Nick. Nick looked back, his eyes steady with understanding. But he said nothing.

No, and that was right. They had to be careful here, extremely so, because there was a person in the house that they could not see, who had one goal, and that was to kill.

"Let's go downstairs and make cocoa," Nick said. "We need some cocoa."

"Nicholas, it's late and Kelsey's tired."

Kelsey threw her arms around her mother's waist. "Mommy, yes!"

"Just one cup, then, and we have to make it quick. Because my girl needs her beauty sleep." She picked Kelsey up, and her little girl snuggled into her arms.

As they trooped downstairs, Nick asked Wylie, "Are we going hunting in the morning?"

"Hunting," his mother said, "on a school day?"

"Not for middle school," Nick replied smoothly. "Teacher's Day."

Wylie understood exactly what his son was doing. He could not communicate openly, not if somebody was in here and they couldn't see him and they were listening. "We could go for pheasant," he said quickly. "Maybe we'll put a bird on the table. The guns are ready, so we can get an early start."

"Let's pull 'em out, then," Nick said.

Wylie could feel the presence in the house just as clearly as Nick apparently could. An invisible something, and it was close, it was right on top of them.

He unlocked the gun cabinet and pulled out one of their birders and tossed it to Nick, then got himself a 12-gauge. "Get behind us," he said to Brooke.

"Excuse me?"

"Mom, get behind us!"

Wylie saw movement, very clear, not ten inches from his face. An eye, part of a face. And he knew something about who was here: it was a man, and he was horribly scarred. Al North was back for a second try.

Then there was a hand around his wrist. He looked down at it, felt the steel of the grip. "It's on Daddy," Kelsey screamed, and this time Brooke saw it and she screamed, too, and not just screamed, she howled.

Nick fired into the seemingly empty space where the figure had to be, and there were a series of purple flashes in the general shape of a man, but the buckshot passed through him and smacked the far wall of the family room, shattering the big front window and leaving a trench in the top of the couch.

The hand had gone.

Nick grunted and he was up against the wall, he was being throttled, and where the body of the intruder touched his, you could see edges of a black, tattered uniform. Wylie was not a huge man, not as big as Al North, but he waded in. From behind, he put his arms around North's neck and pulled his head back, gouging into his face, and as he did that, the face and head appeared, the stretched neck, arteries pulsing hard, and the eyes, surrounded

by scar tissue and dripping blood.

Seeing this, Brooke went into the gun cabinet and brought out the big silver magnum she'd fussed and fretted for years about him even having. She waved it, not having any idea how to use it.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

Amid a showering mass of sparks, the figure flew across the room, slamming against the TV with a huge crash. It lay there, the left half of the head and face visible down to the left shoulder. Both hands and most of the left arm could be seen, also, until the hand moved across where the stomach would be, slipping into an envelope of invisibility, then coming out again with blood on the fingers.

The one visible eye was gray, glaring ferociously out of a blood-ringed socket. The surgery was crude and cruel. Until now Wylie had not realized just how poor their doctor had been.

The hand shot toward him again, like the head of a snake, and there was a knife in it, and the knife sailed at him, spinning, flashing metal, and clanged against the wall. There was a spitting, sparking sound and a burst of blue electric fire, and where it hit, reality seemed to peel back.

Where there had been a blank wall, there was now a door with a blue-shimmering frame, and beyond it a kitchen with a twisted, melted countertop, a toaster that looked like melted wax, a Sub-Zero fridge that had been clawed and melted and was hanging open.

There were people there, and one of them looked in this direction. Wylie knew what he was seeing, and it was even more terrible than he had imagined when he was writing about these humanoid reptiles, because it was so sleek, so beautiful with its shimmering pale skin, and so terrible with its empty, hard eyes, quick eyes that focused fast on this room, then came alive with a glitter that could only reflect eager delight.

Seraph, they called themselves, but we had names for them, from every culture in the world, from every time in history, but all these names amounted to the same thing, the one word that described something so exquisite and yet so ugly: he was looking straight into the eyes of what mankind in both human universes had identified as a demon.

Kelsey ran-toward it. She ran with a child's blindness and raw, instinctive hunger to find safety. No doubt, she didn't realize what she was seeing. Maybe she saw a policeman-black uniform, silver buttons, red collar patches-or maybe some other form of deliverance, but she ran to the thing, right

through the opening and into the other universe. The dying universe. The place where they tore souls out of bodies and made wanderers of little girls.

Wylie tossed Nick the twelve-gauge. "Blast it," he yelled, "it's getting up."

"KELSEY," Brooke screamed, running after her, leaping, trying and failing to grab her flying nightgown before she went through the door-which made a faint, wet sound, a sort of gulping, as she passed through. She stood shimmering with bright violet light, as if she'd been trapped in some kind of laser show.

The creature waiting for her went down and opened its arms, but the smile revealed rows of teeth like narrow spikes, and the golden eyes were not eyes of joy, they had in them the look of a famished wolf.

Wylie dove in behind his daughter, feeling a hammering electrical pulsation over his whole body, followed by gagging nausea as he landed beside her. She was icy cold, her skin gray, and he had the horrifying thought that her soul was already gone.

The demon had white hair, thin and soft, waving around its head like a halo. "Hi," it said, "I'm Jennifer Mazle. It's good to meet you, Wylie."

The words were like blows delivered with a silk-clad hammer, so soft were they, so vicious the tone.

He turned-and faced a blank wall. The door was no longer visible.

"You'll need to come with me," the demon snapped, "you're here to stay."

But Wylie remembered the wisdom that has come down from one human age to the next, the whispered knowledge, and knew that she could only lie, and therefore threw himself and his daughter at the wall anyway.

Behind him he heard a cry, "Shit!" and then he was home again, Nick was blasting the shotgun into the assassin, and Brooke was rushing to them, now grabbing her baby, now throwing both of them down behind the couch.

"Stay behind me, Dad," Nick said.

"Use the magnum for Chrissakes!"

"No bullets!"

Another blast of the 12-gauge rocked the world. Behind them there was a crackle and a hiss of rage, and the demon stepped through into the room. As it did so, it became human. "You're under arrest, Wylie," Jennifer Mazle said softly.

What the hell universe did she think she was in? "Not here, sweetheart," Wylie snarled. He'd picked up the empty magnum, and now hurled it at her

head. There was a flash of white-purple energy when it struck her. She turned away, her skin spurting red smoke. She gasped, gasped again, put a long hand up to her jaw, then straightened up and produced a weapon of her own. It was blacker than night, this thing that was in her hand, with an ugly, blunt snout.

Somehow he knew that he mustn't allow her to fire it, that it wouldn't tear them apart, not physically, that what it would do would be to splash out that light of theirs, and rip the souls out of the whole family, and hurl them into the control of the soul catchers, and make this little family of his the first wanderers in this universe.

He threw himself at her, and as Nick kept Al North back with blasts from the 12-gauge, he waded into her, his fists hammering, delivering blow after blow to what turned out to be a body hard with some sort of armor. Somewhere in there, he knew there would be something soft and vulnerable, a lizard's delicate meat, and he hit where seams might be, at the waist where she had to bend, and then the face, he hit the face, and it was just as hard, like steel, this structure of scales.

She was like a thing made of garnet or steel, not a living creature at all.

He went for an eye. Grabbing the skull with his fingers, he gouged his thumb into it and found there a softness that made him snarl with pleasure. Beat the devil, Wylie, why do you think you've got that name?

Behind him, WHAMWHAM, WHAMWHAM. Nick had had the presence of mind to reload the magnum, and he knew how to use it, too, holding it in both hands to compensate for his size and its power.

Wylie routinely cleared him on all the guns. If they were going to be in the house, the kids were going to know their proper use and safety. Kelsey, too, when the time came.

Whatever he was doing, though, it wasn't helping, because something had just jumped on Wylie's back. Shot up though he might be, Al had one hell of a lot of staying power.

Then Wylie had an eye under his thumb. He damn well had an eye! Jennifer Mazle reeled back, hissing like the most enraged possible cobra, HRRSSTT! SSTT! Her mouth opened wide, the teeth glittering, the interior as white as a snake's. The tongue gleamed black, was as thick as a finger and as long as a rope, and it came up slowly out of the throat.

He'd never seen anything so menacing. Never imagined menace like this being possible.

Then the thing on his back let go, and he turned and saw Nick and Brooke

standing over it. Nick had one of Wylie's superb Abba Teq hunting knives, and was thrusting and pulling expertly, and deep purple guts were spilling, and North's mouth gaped wide.

The general's whole body shimmered, then began flickering like a light turning on and off, and there came great thunder, and outside and inside blue flashing light, and then they were both gone, him and Jennifer Mazle.

"They're here," Wylie shouted, "still here!"

Nick thrust his knife at the air. Wylie picked up the 12-gauge and delivered a random blast into the ceiling, which rained down like the ceiling of Third Street Methodist had when Ron Biggs had emptied his 12-gauge into it, in the two-moon world.

Outside, there was long thunder. Then he heard shouts, voices crying out in an unknown tongue, voices and the clatter of machinery.

"What is it?" Brooke hissed.

"Sh!"

They could see shadows cast on the floor, on the walls, big shadows, but not the people and machines making them. The physical people were in the version of the house that belonged to the Winters family, but as the twenty-first approached, the fabric that separated the universes, in this very unusual corner of the world, was becoming thin indeed.

Wylie listened, he watched the shadows-one in particular as it crossed the wall, something low being moved by two hunched figures. Then the figures bent over even further, and lifted something that looked like a long sack and merged its shadow with the shadow of the object, then moved off.

"What is it, Dad?" Nick asked. "What's going on?"

"I believe that seraph medics are carrying them out on gurneys."

"Oh, Christ, you're right," Brooke said. "That's what that is, all right. My God, what we're seeing here-I mean...just, my God."

The shadows were gone now. The house was quiet. The family came together, the children and the parents, struggling each in his own way with a trauma almost too intense to be borne.

"Mommy, can Bearish have a drink? Because Bearish would like an absinthe."

"Absinthe?" She gave Wylie a careful look.

"Be it far from me."

"Daddy has a bottle of it in his liquor drawer in his office."

"Wylie?"

"There is no liquor drawer. There is no absinthe. I mean, it's illegal."

"Come on, baby, show Momma the absinthe."

"Excuse me, we just nearly got killed here!"

As if this return to their old life was the most welcome thing she could know-which it probably was-Brooke marched off to his office, followed by her little girl.

"Oh, come on," Wylie muttered, hurrying after them.

"Dad, don't lose focus now. This is not over."

"Brooke, there is no absinthe!"

"Dad, come back!"

"Watch our backs," he yelled to Nick.

He entered his office behind Brooke, who was opening the desk drawers.

"It's behind the fake back in the file drawer," Kelsey said.

Wylie saw the empty desk. Saw that there was no laptop there. Saw that his old typewriter was melted like the Winters' toaster had been melted, his beloved old Corona oozing down the side of the desk like molten plastic.

"The computer is gone," Brooke said. She looked at him. Her eyes were practically bulging out of her head, tears were flowing.

"Dad, get down here, please," Nick called.

"What do you mean, gone?" Wylie said. "It can't be gone."

But it was, and with it their window into the other world.

He felt suddenly numb. As if lobotomized. As if soul-robbed. "Do you have that copy?" he asked.

She thrust her hand into the pocket of her jeans. She shook her head. "They got it."

"They have blinded me..."

Brooke said, "Which is what they probably came here to do."

"Dad, you better get to the front window right now."

Coming from outside, from the front, he heard it, a deep rumbling sound, regular, the unmistakable noise of a big engine.

He went to the window, looked down. Initially, he saw only blackness. Then he understood.

What stood at their doorway was the most ominous thing he had ever seen.

"It's just sitting there, Dad," Nick said.

The huge Humvee gleamed black. Its windows were as dark as a cave, its engine growled on idle.

They had gotten one of their vehicles through the gateway.

The engine stopped. There was movement behind the black windows. The doors began to open, and what they saw coming out was not human, not even remotely.

NINETEEN

DECEMBER 20
GATEWAYS

ALL NIGHT THE LIGHT HAD worked the town and the outriders had patrolled the woods and the rain had come in endless sheets, and the drums had muttered on. The kids were in a trance, Martin thought at first, then later that they were beyond trance, they were in a space that despite all that had happened to him he could never reach. From time to time, though, Trevor's hand would come through the dimness and touch his own, and he would know that there are things that never will change no matter how much we change, that a child needs his parents, that there is love in families that is beyond understanding.

In the late hours he found himself under a pile of little ones, all of whom were trying to be close to the largest male in the place. Mike and George and the other older kids tried to control them, but eventually everybody gave up and he contented himself with holding the little beings in his arms as best he could.

The beauty of mankind touched him as they did, softly with their little hands, and looked at him with their great, admiring eyes. One of them, a little girl called Tillie, who reminded him so much of Winnie that it made his blood ache, said to him, "You have to be our soldier. We need one and we ain't got one." Her eyes had studied his, and he had felt her mind enter his mind, and it felt like smelling flowers feels, or lying in grass. She'd tossed her head, this tiny, perfect girl, then raised her hand to his cheek and tapped it. "Soldier," she had said.

Morning brought new necessities. There were twenty-two human beings here, they needed food and water, they needed decent sanitation and children are not good at sanitation. They were growing up fast, but as nobody could leave the tent at night, they used things like an old plastic bucket they'd brought with them and plastic bags which they seemed to have in abundance, and these tended to get spilled. They were not modest, the little ones, but the poor teens were desperate for privacy, the boys trying to control their vital

young bodies, the girls trying to put them at their ease.

It was altogether the kindest, most forgiving, and smelliest group of people Martin had ever known. The roughest dig he'd ever been on did not even begin to compare to this.

There were two kids called flap guards who remained at the door of the tent, making certain nobody opened it after dark and, above all, nobody went outside. The drumming was loud enough to drown the sounds generated by the outriders and the nighthawks, so the little ones might cry for their parents, but they did not experience the kind of fear that would have brought the things leaping down on the tent.

As the hours slid past, Martin felt more and more trapped in the damned thing. The kids absolutely refused to stop their drumming or go outside even for a few seconds, not until dawn. They wouldn't let him leave either, not that he wanted to. Trevor clung to him. His bevy of little ones did, too, and he would never deprive them of that comfort, no matter how illusory he feared that it was.

After they had forced Martin into initiation, and to some extent to be transformed himself, he had found Trevor with strange, pink sweat on his face and staining his filthy shirt. Martin thought he knew what it was—from the stress of sending his father to face that test, capillaries on the surface of his son's skin had burst. His boy had sweated blood.

Over the long night, Martin had tested his new mind and found true changes. He still thought as he always had, but there was new information and there were new things he could do with his thought.

Trevor had spoken of another world he had seen, a world a lot like this one but with other people, and no evidence that it was under attack. He had gone through a gateway, he said, and there had read a book, and it was the book of their suffering and the secrets of their days.

Martin was familiar with the multiverse concept, of course, and he was aware of the recent discoveries at the Four Empires Supercollider in Switzerland that had suggested that parallel universes were real. But that there would be gateways that you could just walk through—well, this was going to be interesting to see.

There was a stirring in the tent as the sun rose. The drumming became haggard, then stopped. Then it got very quiet.

"What's up?" Martin asked Trevor.

"I think something's wrong with Wylie. I think the seraph have broken

through to his world," he replied.

Martin realized that he could see, in his mind's eye, a shimmer hanging over the Saunders river. It could as easily be a spiderweb gleaming with dew as an entrance into another universe. He saw, also, that outriders were pacing there, looking for all the world like enormous tarantulas. They had been designed by the seraph to strike terror into the human heart, and even seeing them in this way touched him with fear, and made them lift their forelegs and eagerly test the air.

He withdrew.

"Any thoughts, Dad?"

"It's a gateway. If it wasn't it wouldn't be so heavily guarded."

"Okay," Pam said, "we're gonna take the opportunity to move the tent off this sludge factory, then I'm taking a supplies detail into town." She glanced at Martin. "You stay here."

He couldn't disagree with that.

Martin followed the others into the kind of morning that comes after great storms, when sunlight washed pure seems to cleanse the world. Golden columns of light marched among the pines, and when they walked out and it fell on Martin, he had a shock, because it was just the sun but it felt as if somebody was there.

A couple of the kids, aware of his thoughts, glanced at him. He was going to have to somehow get used to this lack of inner privacy-and the deep sense of belonging that came with it.

Gentle, probing fingers seemed to be touching him, the fingers of a being that was deeply accepting of him, of life, of everything.

Who was this? Was the sun alive?

"It's all alive," Trevor said. "Everything is alive and everything is conscious. All the stars, all the grass, the trees, every little animal there is. And some of them have high consciousness. The bees do, Dad. When you're in a glade with them, you'll see."

"The brain of the bee is microscopic, son, so they couldn't really be all that conscious."

Trevor smiled a little. "Just let yourself happen, Dad. You'll be fine."

Watching the chaos of kids moving here and there with stakes, with boxes and ropes, singing, laughing, you would never think that they were working together, and carefully organized at that. But they were, and exactly at the moment the tent shuddered and collapsed, four of them came out carrying all

the bags and buckets of refuse that had accumulated inside.

Not a word was said as it was rolled and folded and carried off, followed, improbably, by a little boy who was completely overshadowed by the huge Cougars bass drum balanced on his head.

Their efforts looked a lot like those of worker bees, Martin thought, and then that a shared mind would naturally be far larger than any single component.

It hit him then—all mind is shared. That's the way things work. Just surrender to it. Let yourself happen, like Trevor said.

"Okay, Dad, let's go."

Of course, Trevor could read his thoughts.

"Don't let it bother you."

"But I can't read you."

"Sure you can." He headed off into the caressing sunlight.

Following him, Martin did see into his son's thoughts, which were of that gateway, and going through it. But that wasn't possible, look at the river!

"It's possible, Dad. But you have to not think about it and not worry about it. Concentrate your thinking on your body, the way your feet feel as you walk, your hands, every physical sensation."

-Why?

-This is why, what you're doing right now.

Martin was stunned. The exchange had been so perfect. Of course, he understood the recent advances in mind-to-mind communication that were being achieved at Princeton, but that was with the help of implanted microchips.

-No implants here, Dad.

Trevor headed up the sharpening rise that separated them from the Saunders and the gateway. Martin looked ahead in his mind, and saw the outriders still guarding the gateway, and the water just a literal torrent. As soon as his mind touched them, though, every outrider turned this way and raised its forelegs. Some of them began to march.

"Blank your mind, go to your body!"

He forced his awareness into his flexing muscles, his feet, his heart and lungs. Although he could no longer see the outriders in his mind's eye, he could still have clear awareness of them, and he knew that their alarm had subsided.

To do this successfully, you had to be like animals were, looking out at

the world without looking in at your thoughts. Not easy for a professor.

-If you start to hear that rattling noise, stay in your body. Do not let your mind go out to it or they'll be on you.

Why was nobody else coming? This was obviously extremely dangerous and more would be safer.

Trevor glanced over at him. His eyes said it all: this is my job. Our job.

At that moment, they came up the rise, and Martin saw that the Saunders, even in just the past few minutes, had risen more. It had been bad before, but now it was a great, surging mass of gray-black water full of trees, roofs, walls, floating staircases, even a car's wheels appearing and disappearing as it went tumbling downstream.

Across the stream, he could see their house, the windows dark, empty, and forlorn. The water extended almost to the front door. And water wasn't the only problem, five outriders lay curled up on themselves halfway down the ridge, ready to spring into action if anybody came into their range. And the ones on this bank still patrolled.

"This is impossible," he said aloud.

He was confused to see the water getting closer, looming up toward him. Then he realized that he was seeing it through Trevor's eyes. His son was scrambling down the bluff right toward the patrolling outriders and the thundering river.

Martin raced down behind the last of his children, throwing himself forward, trying to reach him, to at least get his attention-whereupon one of the outriders on this bank turned from its patrolling and came straight toward him...but past Trevor, whom it did not seem to see.

And indeed, Martin felt a surge of fear, he couldn't help it. The thing's metal fangs moved so fast that they sparked.

"Run downstream, son," Martin bellowed. He picked up a rock and threw it at the thing. It bounced off the head, causing it to rear back and hiss, and making two more of them come prancing toward him.

To his utter horror, Trevor walked right into the flood. "Son! SON!"

He could not escape the outriders and Trevor was about to be killed. But he could escape, all he had to do was to leave his fear, leave his mind, let himself happen. He paused in his headlong dash, closed his eyes, and emptied his mind. He put his thought on his roaring blood and the roaring water. His prayer came to him then, Franny's prayer, and joined itself to the whisper of his blood.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself face to face with an out-rider. Its eyes stared straight at him, its jaws moved slowly. Carefully, he stepped around it, then past another, so close that he could see that there was venom caked to its abdomen, and a stinger tucked in the size of a butcher's meat hook.

Trevor was now well out into the flood. Martin threw himself in and began swimming.

The water grabbed him as a giant would, and he saw a great oak, stately, from somebody's yard over in Harrow, no doubt, come sweeping toward him and with it death in the tangle of branches, drowning as he was swept away.

Trevor still waded forward, though-and then seemed not to be wading but walking. He was visible inside the water-but not affected by it. Walking inside it. "Trevor!" Martin forced himself to dive to avoid the oncoming tree, forced himself to swim, felt the water ripping at him-and then saw Trevor beside him walking easily as water and limbs and pieces of cars and houses and bodies and drowned cattle went not only around him, but through him. In the other world, of course, the stream wasn't in flood, so crossing this way would be easy.

He looked down at his own body, and saw that a great limb of the tree was moving through him, and a human arm, white and bloated, and a spatula and dozens of poker chips, all passing right through him and leaving not the slightest sensation. A lawnmower went through him, then theater seats, a TV, a tangle of shrubs.

He took another step forward and the flood was gone. Instead, he was on the far side of the Saunders. Behind him, the little river flowed quite normally, tinkling faintly where it hurried across some stones.

"Be very, very careful, Dad. I don't know what's going on up there."

"I can't hear your thoughts."

"Not over here, it doesn't work."

Martin looked back toward the Saunders. The bluff was there, but everything was quiet, washed with golden early sun. It was a view he'd looked at a thousand times, and on summer Sundays heard from here the faint bells of the town.

They had gone through the gateway, and on this side, in this universe, the Saunders wasn't in flood.

"Come on, we've gotta see what gives with that Hummer."

"It looks like typical army issue."

"Their military's Hummers are all camouflaged. This is something the seraph brought here."

"They're here?"

"Apparently."

Trevor started off, moving quickly up the familiar hill toward the familiar house. As he walked behind his son, Martin experienced a sense of déjà vu so powerful that it was actually disorienting, even painful. This looked like home and it felt like home but it was not home. It was not home.

Trevor stopped. "They're noisy," he said.

"It's dead quiet."

"That's the problem. His car is in the garage, but it's just really quiet."

He saw what looked like a Saab in the open garage. "It's blue."

"Their cars have all sorts of different colors. Blue, red, white."

Martin had never heard of anything so outlandish. Who would be willing to drive around in a colored car? Cars were black. This Wylie must be an eccentric, which fit the literary pretensions, he supposed.

Trevor approached the place cautiously, moving up the steep hill, his eyes always on that Hummer.

Martin whispered as loudly as he dared, "Trevor!"

His son motioned at him furiously. The message was unmistakable: Shut up!

Trevor dropped down on all fours, then onto his stomach. The Hummer was between him and the house, but he could almost certainly be seen if anybody looked closely enough. From the Hummer, definitely.

Then he motioned again, this time indicating that Martin should come forward.

Eagerness flashed through him. He jumped to his feet. Trevor's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open-and then there was a terrific crash and something went whanging off into the woods. "Get your ass outta here," a voice crackled. "We got you in crossfire, shitheel!" A shot whipped past him so close that he felt a hot blast of wind.

He threw himself to the ground. "No," he called, "we're friends!"

Another shot kicked up gravel beside his head. He tried his best to back away, attempting to reach the brow of the hill so that he could slide back down.

But then a shot rang out behind him, and this one was closer, much closer. There was only one thing to do. He stood up and raised his hands.

"Okay," he said, "okay."

From the woods came a boy's voice, "It's a guy, Dad. A guy and a kid hiding by the Hummer. Back wheel."

Silence.

"We mean no harm," Trevor called. "Please, we need to talk."

The boy appeared coming up the far side of the driveway. He carried a big rifle, hefting it expertly. Martin realized what was happening here, that this was an historic meeting, the first contact between human beings from two different universes.

"Hello," Trevor said as he stood up. He walked out from behind the Hummer, into full view of the house. "Mr. Dale, I'm Trevor."

"You got the laptop?" Wylie Dale asked.

"No."

"This is my dad, Martin," Trevor said. "We need to look at the book again."

"The laptop was stolen. Plus, it's been rough around here. Real rough. I haven't even thought about writing."

Martin realized that the smell he had been noticing was meat, and it was coming from the Hummer. As he walked closer, he could see blackened ruins in it, the shattered bodies of seraph. And then, around the side of the house, one of the outriders. For a moment, he froze, but then he understood that they had destroyed it, too.

"So you're Trevor," Wylie said. "Hey, Brooke, here's the people from my goddamn book, come to life!"

The boy had walked up to Trevor. "Hiya, Nick," Trevor said.

"Hey." Nick put his hand out.

Trevor looked at it. "Can we?"

"Dunno."

Martin watched. Wylie watched. His wife Brooke watched. A little girl's voice said from behind the very lovely mother, "Bearish thinks it's okay."

Bearish! Winnie had called her stuffed toy Bearish, too. As the mother and daughter came closer, Martin saw that her Bearish wasn't a zebra but an elephant.

"He's cryin', Mommy."

"They've lost Winnie and Lindy," Brooke said, "you know that, honey, you know what they've lost."

"What happened here?" Trevor asked.

"You better get inside with us," Wylie said.

The house showed signs of a terrific fight. Martin was quietly astonished. These people were unhurt, obviously, but there had been a lot of killing around here, a lot of it. The rugs had blood on them, and he thought he saw a bloody body wrapped in a sheet behind the couch.

"There's been a spot of bother around here, boys," Wylie said. "But me an' mine, we did 'em." He drew a long brown object out of a pocket of his heavy leather jacket. "Cigar?"

Martin watched in silence, unsure of what, exactly, was meant. The intonation of the unfamiliar word had suggested a question. Was it some sort of offering? There must be differences between the universes, obviously there would be-look at the colored cars-but this was perplexing. Surely it wasn't a sacrificial offering, they must be past that.

"I think I've earned house rights," Wylie said.

"Wylie." Brooke strode to him, threw her arms around him. "You are the most amazing damn man," she said, "smoke your lungs out, lover."

"Ew, Mommy!"

He inserted the thing in his mouth, produced a book of matches, and lit the free end of it. He gave Martin another glance. "It's a Partagas straight out of Fidel's humidor."

"It's tobacco," Trevor explained. "They burn it and eat the smoke."

"But...it's powder. Snuff is powder."

Nick said, "Dad, I don't think they have cigars." Nick regarded Martin. "You, do you know what he's doing?" Then he frowned. "Jesus, look at their eyes."

"You haven't read my book as well as you imagine, son," Wylie said as he ate smoke. Or rather, breathed it. Martin enjoyed snuff, but he didn't care to join the hordes with cancer of the sinuses, so he'd sworn off. No doubt this method eliminated that problem. They could smoke the tobacco, he guessed, without fear of health problems.

"Your friend Fidel makes those things?"

"Well, he's dead, but yeah, they're genuine Cubans, imported all the way to Kansas City."

"Tobacco is legal in our world, but it's dangerous. It's sold in a powder called snuff."

"Dangerous here, too. These suckers are really cancer sticks. But I do love 'em."

"Ask him about Fidel Castro," Brooke said.

"I have no idea who that would be," Martin replied. "Do you know, Trev?"

"No."

Nick said, "Cuban dictator, died a few years back. Communist."

"Communist, as in, uh-Trev, can you help me, here?"

"A nineteenth-century philosopher called Karl Lenin invented a system of labor management that became a huge movement in this universe. Dad, they've had total chaos here for over a century. That's why they're so tough. It's why there are dead seraph and outriders all around this house and these people put fire in their mouths. In this universe, human beings have been at war so long they've become incredibly strong."

"No wars in your universe?" Wylie asked.

"No, Wylie, not really. The British and the French bicker over their African holdings, of course. And the Boer Contingent is an irritant for the British in South Africa. The Russians had a war with the Japanese."

"Wait a minute." He puffed on the cigar. "Sarajevo. Mean anything?"

Martin couldn't think what it might be. He shook his head.

"World War One?" Wylie asked. "World War Two?"

Martin was mystified.

"Dad," Trevor said, "they have huge wars here." He pointed to a blood-spattered bookcase. "War books," he said. "I've read some of them."

"Look, we've been at war on this little earth of ours ever since the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in 1914."

"An archduke? Assassinated? That's hard to credit."

"You still have them, don't you?"

"Of course. And Cuba is an American colony and there is no Fidel in the colonial leadership, and this business of an obscure historical figure's gimcrack philosophy meaning anything--"

"Communism was the scourge of our world for seventy years," Wylie said. "It took half a billion lives, and the world wars three hundred million more. It's been carnage."

Martin looked at the wall of the family room, dominated by its gun case. "We have too few of these."

"You're not wrong there," Brooke said. "Violence attracts violence."

Nick picked up what looked like a hand cannon that was lying on a table. He blew on the barrel. "Doesn't it, though, Mom?" he said.

No child would ever address an adult like that at home, least of all one of his parents. "Wylie," Martin said, "I'm wondering if you have any specific ideas about what we might do? Given your own toughness."

"The shitheels are tough, too, and we're likely to take a beating from 'em, big time. And soon."

"But you'll-you'll shoot."

"Buddy, I seem to recall that your president tried a hydrogen bomb on Easter Island and it didn't do jack shit. That isn't exactly a lack of aggression, there, not by my definition. But the fact that it didn't work-when I wrote those words, I have to tell you that I felt sick. Real, real sick. Because a hydrogen bomb is the best we've got, too."

"However, if your world is at war all the time, you won't have a British Battle Group demanding an explanation, will you? Not like us. By the time we got the superpowers to take an interest, it was all over."

"The first wanderers were in England."

"It takes a big empire like that a long time to act. In this case, too long, even if there was anything they could've done."

"Wylie," Trevor asked, "do you know why we're here?"

"You had a conference last night and decided that you wanted to open up direct communications. Problem is, I have no more idea than you do what's gonna help. I mean, you are already looking at one hell of a megadisaster. I don't see how you can do anything. I have to tell you, I think you folks are done."

Trevor asked, "Without the computer, can you still write?"

"No kid, I cannot. I tried using Nick's laptop and Brooke's laptop and Kelsey's pink Mac, and nothing came. Nothing at all. Whatever magic there was, there ain't."

"Which we sensed," Trevor said, "and why we came. Because we knew that things were going wrong for you."

"You people are so-I don't know, precise. The way you go about things, moving slowly from A to B to C-do you think you might be a little slower than we are? Mentally. Not quite as smart?"

"We're not as aggressive," Martin said. "Obviously, given all your wars, the communists, the smoke breathing, which I interpret as domination-symbolic-"

"Speak Greek. Your English is for shit."

"Actually, I do have a little Greek. I've done some dig dating there, you

see. Dating the Acropolis, which turned out to be noncontroversial, unlike some of my other work."

"Which I know all about, of course. We have strange ruins here, too. Same ones. Plus very similar legends. A war in the sky, a great flood, all of that."

"Meaning that they were here, too."

"Momma," Kelsey asked, "when are we gonna kill the man in the crawl space?"

"What man?" Trevor asked quickly.

"Dad's got this really fucked-up guy from your universe trapped in our crawl space. He's human, so we have this cop we know, he's on his way to take a look."

"It's Al North, isn't it? General North?"

"He's in rather iffy shape," Wylie said. "But I'm not gonna go killin' people without the cops say it's okay. If you get my drift."

"Could we question him?" Trevor asked.

"Sure, waterboard the fucker, for all I care." He sucked on the cigar, pulled it out of his mouth. "Use this on his eyes. Make 'im chatty as hell, be my guest."

Trevor took the thing from him, held it. "How would we?"

Nick laughed.

Wylie said, "Waterboarding is a form of torture, makes the chappie you're curious about think he's drowning. And as far as that cigar you're holding is concerned, boy, you stick the business end of that thing in the sore eyesocket General Al is nursing, my guess is he'll tell you more than his address."

Trevor thrust the thing away from himself.

Wylie caught it before it could touch the floor. "Cuban, remember?" He sucked it, made a great cloud of smoke. "A thing of beauty." He got up and strode across the room and into the kitchen.

Martin reflected that he might be a writer by trade, but he had the speed and power of a soldier about him. The boy did, too, and with her hard-set lips, the woman looked as if she could kill a man as soon as look at him. Only the little girl seemed vulnerable, or perhaps that was just because her cuddle toy was also called Bearish, and Winnie had been such a gentle child.

Wylie opened a trapdoor. "Howya doin' down there, General? We're gonna torture you in a min', just wanted to let you know." He closed the trap. "It's called softening 'em up."

"He's not playing with a full deck, Dad," Nick said.

"Always remember this son, if they're just playing with a half a deck it don't matter as long as it's your half, or even one card, if it's the card you need."

"We have no idea how to deal with Al North," Nick said. "And neither do they."

Silence followed. It was true enough.

Wylie opened his cell phone, dialed. "Where in fuck's name are you, Matthew? I just finished your last Partagas, incidentally." He listened. "Well, I'm telling you, the weirdness index up here has just shot through the roof. You need to put the fricking donut back in the fricking box and get your ass moving." He hung up. "You know, I'm not saying a whole lot on the phone, so he thinks I'm bullshitting him some way, but I gotta tell you-" He stopped. Suddenly the bravado blew away like so much sea foam. He closed his eyes. Shook his head. "I saved my family," he said softly, "me and my boy did." Then he sat down. He took a long drag on the cigar.

A truck came bounding up to the house, its gears grinding as it negotiated the steep driveway. It came to a stop. "Ah, wait until the gentleman of the law does his body count."

A tall man in a police uniform opened the front door and came in, using the same striding, aggressive walk that, it seemed to Martin, characterized them all.

"What in hell kind of a Hummer is that," he said as he entered. Then he sniffed the air. He looked toward Brooke. "He dope you up or something?"

"He's getting a reward for saving our lives."

"From what? Some drug dealer's fancy Hummer? Man, that's a U.S. Army vehicle, full scale. You don't see many of those puppies around. And in limo paint, no less." He looked at Wylie. "Don't tell me you purchased that thing? Buddy, that is gonna piss me off."

"Matt, I want you to turn around and look at that man standing in front of the fireplace trying not to wet his pants. I want you to look into his eyes and tell me what you see there."

The lean, narrow-faced man turned, and as he did, Martin saw that he did not carry a small firearm like Bobby, but a gun almost as big as the family's hand cannon. Martin looked to the pistol and the great ham of a hand dangling beside it, then, reluctantly, up to the face. He let Matt look into his eyes.

"What happened to you?"

"I-it's-"

"It's a rapid evolutionary change induced by extreme species stress," Wylie said. "That would be correct, wouldn't it, Martin?"

"I would say so."

"But, uh, excuse me, I don't think we've been introduced." He thrust out his hand. "I'm Matt. Uh, hi."

"Hi."

"You-" He motioned with his chin, an expressive gesture.

"That's right, we're from over there. This is my son, Trevor."

"So you're the one lost Lindy and Winnie. Oh, Jesus, you poor guy."

"Matt, I would recommend a very stiff scotch, but we don't have time. What we do have is one of his compadres tied up in our crawl space. A very weird, very altered piece of work that used to be a general over there in their version of the U.S. Air Force, but is now a sort of monster designed to be able to function freely in both universes, apparently by being made into a cut-up mess. You wouldn't believe it. I mean-you remember the guy downstate with the mutilated face?"

"Nunnally. Sure do."

"The missing pieces have been sewn onto this man."

"What?"

"Sewn onto him to provide a physical connection with our universe. Give him greater freedom of action. The theory. In fact, bullshit. It's the seraph who have trouble moving around in our universe, not people. And he's people. Was."

"Okay, I'm getting an occasional word. There is a man in your crawl space that has-Nunnally-Nunnally's body parts-"

"In a misbegotten attempt to enable him to function more freely in our universe."

"And this is Martin and his kid."

"Yessir."

Matt looked at them again. He held out his hand. Martin shook it. "Wow," Matt said. "You sure this is for real, Wylie?"

"Oh, yes, and what we need is for Frankenstein down in the cellar to tell these people something-what, Martin? What might he know that would help you?"

"If we could stop the seraph coming through, that would help us. If we

could understand how to close their gateways, that would help us. Anything at all."

"You've read the part about Samson's journey to Abaddon?" Wylie asked. "Do you see a vulnerability there anywhere?"

"They're in a hurry. So we need to slow them down," Martin replied.

"Thing is, I also keep seeing an ending to my book, and in it I see these filthy huge cities full of starving seraph, and they are in your world. I do not see New York and Washington and London. Sorry, fellas, but I just don't. What I see there is open ocean. Right now, looks like you lose."

"Can this man extract information? Does he know these techniques?" Martin asked.

"He knows 'em, Martin," Wylie said. "He's served in the Mideast in his time."

"So you'll torture General North for us?" Martin asked.

"I can't do that!" Matt burst out.

"You gotta, buddy," Wylie said. "Because once the seraph finish with these guys, we're next."

"We'll cut their hearts out," Matt muttered.

"What we've been through here, believe me, it will be mutual. No, we don't wanna have them show up here, believe me. And this North cat is the key. So you are gonna help us. You are gonna devote five minutes to this effort."

"It's totally illegal!"

"He doesn't exist in this universe, therefore has no legal standing. Therefore, Nick, go get your skateboard. I think we can do this with a skateboard and a towel."

"I am not going to waterboard a goddamn general in any goddamn air force!"

"Yeah, you are." Wylie pulled the trapdoor open. A stench of urine and blood rose from the crawl space. He looked inside. "Good morning, again, General. Visitors!"

General North's eyes stared. His chest did not move. Wylie knew it at once: Al North was dead.

TWENTY

DECEMBER 20
THE GOOD SOLDIER

GENERAL AL NORTH HAD NEVER experienced pain like this. Although he had seen torture in Lebanon-men getting phosphorus splinters jammed under their fingernails and lit-he did not think for a moment that their pain, as awful as it was, approached this.

He was screaming, he knew that objectively, as if from a distance, but he also knew that no sound was coming out. He'd come into this strange place-a parallel universe, he had come eventually to realize-faithful to his orders, to carry out an assassination. He'd never expected to be asked to do such a thing, but this was war and we were desperate and the military and intelligence communities were in chaos, so, yes, he got why he had been called upon, and he resolved to do his duty.

Something is wrong!

He lay listening to the voices overhead. The man he had been sent to kill had proved to be a tiger, and his son was just as ferocious. Very frankly, they had overpowered Al, who was not a small man, and had excellent personal combat skills. He had not expected an adversary ready, willing, and able to gouge out eyes with his bare hands, or a child who would pick up a damn handgun the size of an anvil and just literally blow a grown man's guts out. A child!

They're not the enemy!

What was that? It was like part of his mind was yelling at him from behind a closed door. He had to get the hell up and get back out there, because those folks needed killing and they were still walking around. He was going to do them all. Massacre them, the women, too. Kill them all.

Don't!

Yeah, that's great, disobey a lawful order transmitted to you in person by your commanding officer, who also happened to be the acting commander in chief. He did not like Tom Samson, never had. The president had made a grave mistake giving him his appointment. But this was wartime and they'd

just about had it, and under such circumstances you have no choice but to trust your superior officer.

You trust your own soul!

That voice-it was saying something. "Soldier," perhaps. "Soldier, you're dying," that's what it was saying.

He had not completed his mission and he had to get out of this hole and do the damn deed!

He fought to rise, could not. He closed his working eye, took a breath, then pressed downward with both hands. Rivers of agony swept up and down his arms and through his bubbling chest. His head went light. He fell back. His heart was thundering. Below the waist, no sensation at all.

He'd seen others in the house, he'd seen a Hummer come up.

It was them. THEM!

It had been some kind of an enemy unit, he could see that, but even they had taken a hell of a beating from these people. The mother cut up some of their exotic weaponry with a damned axe, and the little girl-what, seven, eight-stood there watching and laughing. "Mommy's killin' a big spider." Tough sonembitches.

That was an outrider and outriders belong to the enemy, soldier, and you are working for them, and you need to FACE THIS!

The trapdoor was opened again. Light swamped his eye for a moment. Then he saw a silhouette.

"This man isn't dead! This man is breathing!"

Another head appeared, disappeared. "Fuckaroo, he's right."

The woman's voice: "Kill him!"

"You can't do that, Brooke! I gotta call EMS, I gotta try to save his life. And-Kee-rist, you got a man all shot to hell in your crawl space, so nobody leaves. Got that? Nobody leaves!"

"It was self-defense, he attacked us."

"I know that, but I got procedures, buddy. This is serious."

"He's from our universe," another voice said.

General North listened to them up there, murmuring together. Those bastards had figured out how to get through a gateway, and they were gonna mess this whole operation up.

You're not sad about that! You're glad! It's good, it's a triumph, for God's sakes, listen to your soul!

His mind cast about, trying to find a way to carry out his orders. There

had to be one, there always was.

There were guns upstairs, plenty of them. But down here there was nothing, only dirt. His own gun was long gone. So, did he have anything else that might cause damage? Belt-sure, but he wasn't going to be able to garrote anybody. Pins on his medals, big deal. Teeth. He could bite, maybe damn hard. So there was that. He could bite through one of their cheeks. And clutch with his left hand. He tested it. Yes.

So he needed them to pull him out. He'd take it from there.

He waited. Nothing. No more voices that he could hear. Stomping that faded, then faint shouts. They were looking at whatever the intelligence unit had done.

So they'd called EMS and now that was done, they were showing the cop the rest of the damage around the house. Not good. He needed them to pull him up before some EMS bunch showed up to spirit him away.

He took a breath, deep as he could, and let his pain possess him. He knew how to manage pain, and he'd been doing that, but now it was time to change his approach. As he let out the breath, he made himself scream.

It worked amazingly well. Damned well. He took another breath, did it again. The sound was odd, a lost, bansheelike howl, and it caused the river of pain to start flowing again.

It also caused the trap door to open. "EMS'll be along directly," the new voice said.

Then that other voice again, somehow gentler, thinner, "He's from our world and he's evil, you have to let us-"

"I don't have to let you do one damn thing, Doctor Winters! This man is shot, he is here, and what you have to do is let me do my job."

"He's a criminal in our world. Wearing a military uniform but working for the enemy. He belongs to us."

"Don't you push me," Matt said.

"Hey, guys, knock it off," Wylie responded. "Martin, you've got gumption, after all."

"We need to take that man back with us," Martin insisted.

"Sounds like you need to take the whole damn Marine Corps."

"We had a Marine Corps, too, did you know that? And they are gone. Gone! The military was done in the first wave. Worldwide. Done. So unless we can stop the seraph, they are coming here tout de suite."

"Matt-"

"Fellas, I'm gonna show my piece here in a second, and I do hate to do that."

"Did you know that you have an equivalent in our universe? Who is also a lifelong friend of mine, just like you are of Wylie's? His name is Bobby. He's disappeared and we think he's wandering-alive but without a soul."

"And you will be, too," Trevor added, "if they come here. Wandering with your soul locked up just like Wylie has seen-or worse, you'll be like that man down there, so twisted and turned around that he works for the enemy and thinks he's working for his own kind. You'll be just like that, and possibly within days."

"Look, this shooting is the most serious thing to happen in this town in my entire career."

"You should see the one my mommy shot. It looked like a big spider and when she blasted it, it sent out hot stuff that smelled like when you burn bacon."

Listen to them! They're your friends.

He sucked another breath, howled another howl.

"Let us take him back," Trevor pleaded. "Let us find out what we need to know."

"You can question him in the hospital," Matt offered.

Wylie laughed scornfully. "Oh, for shit's sake, Matthew, this cat needs to be waterboarded at the very least. He needs a live rat stuffed in that eye socket. At the very fricking least. Hospital. Do you put a goddamn cobra in a hospital?"

"If you're me, you sure as hell do. In an animal hospital. Departmental requirement, all injured animals are provided treatment."

"That is not what I meant."

The ambulance was coming soon, so Al had to make a maximum effort here, a supereffort, or this was not going to come out right. He had more than one job to do, he knew that now, because he had to kill every one of these damn people, especially the ones from the his own universe.

How had things gone so wrong? He had to kill them and get back and warn General Samson that things were out of control, they were way out of control.

Then the cop came down into the crawl space. Just like that, he was standing over him. This was his chance, his only chance.

As the fool bent down, he reached up and pushed the pistol out of the

holster with the heel of his hand.

It hit his thigh with a thud that shook him but which he didn't feel.

"Excuse me," the cop said, reaching down.

Al was faster. Al got the butt of the weapon between thumb and forefinger. He felt along the side of it, and got his finger around the trigger.

He raised the weapon.

"Shit, he's got my gun! He's got my fucking-"

He shot upward wildly, through the floor. There were cries from above. He had no way to know if he'd hit anybody, so he shot again and again, until there was only one bullet left.

By now, the cop had skittered back up there, too, and they were all yelling.

He knew what he had to do because he knew the stakes. They needed information that he did indeed possess and it sounded as if they were going to drag it out of him with pliers. They would succeed, too. Our expertise at torture was child's play compared to what these bastards sounded capable of.

Give it to them! Tell them everything!

There was one gateway they knew nothing about. But he knew about it, because he'd been taken through it, and they were not going to find that out.

They couldn't destroy the seraph, not even close, but they might slow things down, and that was the issue, wasn't it, because every day after the twenty-first, things were going to get harder, and around the twenty fifth, the gateways would once again close, and Abaddon would be denied all but minor access for another thirteen thousand years. They'd have to go back to sending through agents provocateurs to derange human civilization, cause wars, spread starvation and greed and confusion, and keep the bastards weak.

Keep YOUR people weak, you mean. Listen to yourself, General, you're thinking with the enemy.

He got the barrel of the gun nestled under his chin, prayed to the good lord above that he had killed the man he'd been sent to kill, and pulled the trigger.

Then he climbed up out of the crawl space and into the kitchen. Wylie, whom Al had been sent to kill, was unhurt. They were all unhurt.

And Al was elated.

The next second, he understood that the person still lying down there in that crawl space with a splayed head was him. And, all at once, he realized what he had done. "Uh, hey! Oh, Jesus, I'm sorry. Sorry!"

He remembered the Mountain, going down into the rock with that woman, Captain Mazle. He realized that she had been seraph. Samson was one of them, too. They were heavily disguised and they used drugs to enable them to live in our air, and they had stolen his will.

Needles, sharp scissors, clipped flesh wobbling in silver trays-brain being removed, brain being installed.

They had stolen his memory. They had subverted his honor.

This soldier owes his duty to his country, NOT TO THEM!

He'd been working for the enemy.

As he watched, EMS technicians came running in. He watched them jump down into the crawl space.

"I can tell you what you need to know," he said.

The cop hurried out behind the EMS doctors. Wylie and his family came together, holding each other. Martin and Trevor left, and began to move off down the hill.

Al ran outside. "Wait! Listen to me! I made a mistake, but I can help you!" He went up to them. He shouted into Martin's face, "Listen to me! I can help you!"

Nothing. He grabbed Martin-and his hands went through him. Martin shuddered and said, "I feel like a goose just walked over my grave."

"Dad, we have a problem here, because when we go back, we're gonna hit really fast water. Remember, in our world, the Saunders is in flood."

Al could hear every word. "Can you hear me?" he bellowed.

"Yeah, that's right, we can't cross, not with the flooding on the other side."

"What about the Hummer?"

"Yeah!"

No! NO! You fools, it'll float right down the river!

They started back up the hill. "It's full of dead seraph."

"Take 'em with us, save Wylie and Matt a lotta trouble."

"Plus, the back's caked with venom. They must've brought that busted up outrider with them in it."

Al had followed them. He was right with them, just inches away.

LISTEN TO ME! LISTEN NOW!

They set about pushing reptile bodies into the back of the Humvee.

Al inventoried his situation. You still exist, you can think, you can see and hear, you can move effortlessly wherever you want to go. But how in hell

do you communicate? A quick review of his knowledge of ghosts and such, and the answer was immediately clear: you don't.

He was a damn ghost, was what he was.

But no, this ghost was no cute little Casper and-he hoped-no raging banshee. He had a much larger vision of his life than before. His conscience was very, very powerful now. He saw deep into the arrogance that had made him who he was, the entire falsity of it, and how profound feelings of worthlessness were the foundation of the ego that had led him across all his life, all the way to this final predicament.

He knew now who he was, he knew the mistakes he had made, and he knew just exactly how to help the people of his world turn everything around. They could completely defeat Abaddon-these people, this man and this boy, if only they knew what he did. He had to tell them-but he couldn't make them hear him or see him.

Martin and Trevor opened the doors of the Hummer and shoved two gray, lifeless seraph bodies into the back, then, as an afterthought, Trevor pocketed one of their hand weapons. Al knew those weapons, electrical-centrifugal handguns that could propel thousands of light-weight plastic rounds at five thousand clicks an hour. The only sound they made was the crackle of the rounds breaking the sound barrier, but they could slice a man in half a mile away. Or a dozen men...or a thousand.

"How do these work?" Martin asked.

"Let's test 'em."

Holy shit, be careful!

"It doesn't look very lethal," Trevor commented.

Martin held one of the black disks away from his body, pointing its three short barrels in the direction of some trees. He pressed the two triggers, top and bottom. There was a brief snarl, and three of the trees literally flew apart, a foot-wide chunk of their trunks turned instantly to sawdust.

"What is this thing?"

The U.S. military has the same thing. Bigger, vehicle mounted.

"It's a seraph weapon," Trevor said, producing a dark blue box with seraph hieroglyphics on it. "Here's some ammo."

"Wylie and Nick would love this."

"You like them. Their macho and their guns and all."

"They're winners, Dad. This whole universe-it works better than ours, it's more dynamic."

"It's been at war with itself for a hundred years."

"And we live in a world of kingdoms and empires where nobody's really free."

"We're free."

"We are and the French are and the English are, at least at home. But look at the rest of it, Dad, it's a vast system of slavery-orderly, easy to live in, but"

The Hummer roared to life. Al watched, no longer trying to stop them. He knew that he couldn't. The dead did not communicate with the living. Just didn't.

So when you finally understand and you can tell them everything they need to know, this happens.

They closed the doors and drove the Hummer down toward the bank of the Saunders-here, flowing gently. There were places where you could jump across it, even, but certainly not into another universe.

They needed to know about the seraph headquarters, deep underground and just a few miles from here, had to be told what he had remembered about being in there.

If they could enter it, they could free millions of trapped souls, they could wreck the power systems, maybe even stop the lenses from functioning. They could cause core damage to Abaddon's plans, maybe kill Mazle and Samson, even.

He raced down to the Hummer, shot into it right through one of the windows. "Hear me! HEAR ME!"

"There's the gateway," Martin told Trevor.

"Is it big enough for this thing?"

"They got it through."

Maybe this was good, maybe the gateway was too small, maybe the Hummer wouldn't fit and they wouldn't kill themselves, the damn fools.

"Do we just aim at it or what? I'm not sure I know how to go about this."

"I'm not sure, either, Dad."

Don't try, please.

"We have to try."

Please.

As Martin backed the Hummer up, Al did everything he could think of, attempting to project his thoughts into Martin's mind, actually going inside his body where his organs were sloshing and his blood was surging. He went directly into the brain, but even that didn't help. He could perceive the gray

matter like a pulsating, sparking fog all around him, but he couldn't do anything to affect thought from in here, either.

The Hummer went roaring toward the gateway. Al saw the diamond-shaped crystalline object much more clearly than he'd been able to in life, and saw it expand smoothly, almost obediently, to accommodate the Hummer. So it was going to go through, they were going to be in it, and they were going to be drowned.

He saw black water, roiling, churning, and in it what looked like people, swimming hard. Then the Hummer hit with a huge splash, and the gateway closed and was gone.

He was moving fast, and sailed right across the stream and into the woods beyond. But he was still in this universe.

He rushed back across the river, looked for the gateway, could not find it. But he didn't belong here, this wasn't right.

He rushed up and down the river bank, trying to find a flicker of the gateway.

Even when he'd seen the president die and known-known-that Samson had somehow done it, he had not acted. Instead, he'd gone to Cheyenne Mountain to take a new job, because he'd wanted the promotion.

What had he been thinking? How could he have so blinded himself?

In this state, he was finding that he was becoming naked to himself, seeing past the self-deception that had defined his life.

He was seeing how loveless, how empty it had been. A useless, silly journey, his wife dead early and no further attempt to find love, and love all that mattered.

In this state, he was revealed to himself, and he saw clearly that his willful blindness had led to a great catastrophe, and there was no way for him to justify himself.

He found himself back a very long time ago, sitting on the side porch at home on a night in July, with music drifting across the evening air. He saw a girl he had known then, a girl called Nellie, who had been full of love for him.

Had he let himself accept her, had he chosen the humble life that being with her offered, he would be soaring now, flying above all these cares instead of sinking into this pit of regret.

He wasn't just sinking into despair, either, he was becoming involved with the actual ground. He was sinking into the earth itself. Above him, he

could sense realms past imagining, where things like the walls between universes had no meaning and time itself was only a memory.

He was falling, but he wanted to rise.

He had to rise, it was heaven, he was seeing heaven and he had to rise!

Then he thought of the souls Samson had trapped. They belonged there, they were part of heaven, but they had literally been stolen from God to be bought and sold, their memories and emotions stripped from them like ripe fruit and consumed into the darkness of demon hearts.

It was the greatest of all evils, to kidnap the good into hell, but that's what they were doing-or rather, trying.

He would fight. He would do battle with Samson.

But he was already lower, sinking into the grass, and below him he could see black halls and hear desolate cries.

He strove, he struggled, he fought. Above him, love and forgiveness shimmered, above him freedom beckoned. He tasted the greatest agony there is, that of being unable to rise to heaven.

But then, he thought, perhaps he could save himself. There was something he could do, perhaps. One thing. Wouldn't work, probably. But he could try.

TWENTY-ONE

DECEMBER 21, DAWN
THE DEPTHS

AS SOON AS MARTIN AND Trevor had left, Wylie had found himself able to write again. He and Brooke read over what he had just completed.

"Did they drown?" she asked.

"God forbid. The key thing here is that Al North knows something that can help them but his soul is here, still on this side, so if he thinks about it clearly enough, I'm going to pick up on it, I think."

She sat reading the screen, scrolling, then reading more. "Is he...what's happening to him? What's he sinking into?"

"My best guess is the core of the planet. Maybe the way you live makes your soul weigh more or less. If you weigh too much-have too little love and too much greed, essentially-you sink. And then I guess you just stay there, trapped. Cooking, given that the core is hot."

"But the universe has an end. What then?"

"I think the evil are forgotten."

"But we need him. We need him now!"

Outside, dawn was breaking. The last phoebes were calling, the last tanagers chirping. Winter, such as it was, would drive them south any day now. They were very late to leave this year. But there was not much winter now, so they would return by February.

She came closer to him. He closed the laptop.

"Nick?" she called softly.

No answer.

"Kelsey?"

Silence.

But then she moved away. "I can feel him. He's not going down. He's here."

"The world is full of watchers. We're all on stage all the time."

"I want privacy."

These past days had isolated them from each other. But he had learned

something from what he was seeing of Al North's miserable afterlife. Love is the great treasure, it is what we come here to feel, and every bit of it that can be taken must be taken, because it isn't like the other acts of life. Most everything is forgotten in death. The names, the facts, the achievements, the failures, all are left behind. But love is not left behind. Jacob's Ladder has another name in heaven. It is Love.

She folded her arms, their signal that it wasn't the right moment. "I feel too exposed," she said.

"We are but players," he said.

"I can't do it onstage! Anyway, I'm-oh, my mind is blown. Martin and Trevor, my dear God, what's happening to them now?"

He took her in his arms. She lay against him, and it was good for a time, in the quiet.

Soon, though, he felt something other than the beat of her heart. He raised his head. "What is that?"

"Trembling. I think, uh...the fridge?"

But it got stronger. Things began to rattle.

"Dad!"

"All right, everybody stay calm," he shouted.

In her room, Kelsey began crying.

"Hold on, Honey!"

He wasn't going anywhere, the house was now shaking and shuddering so hard that he couldn't take a step. There was a tremendous crash from downstairs. He thought that the chandelier in the dining room must have collapsed, or the gun cabinet gone over in the family room. "Try to get out," he shouted. Behind him, Brooke vomited. He grabbed her and forced one foot in front of the other, dragging her toward the bedroom door and the stairs.

Nick appeared-incredibly, with Kelsey in his arms. The sight of them galvanized Brooke, who took her little girl, and they went lurching down the back stairs. The family room was in chaos. It had indeed been the guns.

Now windows began shattering, their glass exploding into the house. Nick got the back door open, and they struggled out onto the deck, which was soaked because the pool had heaved most of its water out and the rest was splashing crazily. The woods presented a chilling spectacle, with all the limbs swaying, and a continuous thunder of cracking trunks and the sighing rumble of falling trees.

They got to the middle of the backyard, well away from the house, well

away from the woods. The quake had been going now for at least two minutes, maybe three, but it felt like years, it felt like forever. There was another crash from inside the house, and the lights in Nick's room flickered. Wylie put his arm across his son's shoulders. His bunk bed had just collapsed.

Just one sound, then-choking, astonished sobs. Brooke. Staring at her house in horrified amazement.

The quake had ended.

"This is Kansas," she said, her voice an awed whisper.

"Bearish had a heart attack," Kelsey announced. Then, her voice careful, "I'm quite concerned about him."

Wylie was looking back into the woods, where he was seeing flickering. "I think we have a fire going back in there," he said.

"Call the fire department," Brooke responded as she headed toward the house.

He watched his family go in, heard Brooke scream her rage when she saw the mess, heard Kelsey start to cry, then Nick's calmer voice giving instructions.

The flickering was along the draw that drifted south down from the ridge they were on. For their view, they had paid a price, because if there was ever a fire in that draw, it would be here in minutes. Knowing this, he had prepared himself with a portable water tank, which he kept in the garage. He'd tested it and it worked well, but it was not huge, so the key was to reach the fire early.

The tank was behind his car, wedged against the wall. Worse, the garage door was jammed. Fine, he was ready for that, too. He strode across the garage and got his axe, which was lying in a heap of other tools. When he'd bought this, he'd imagined that he would take out a few trees himself, thin his woods by the sweat of his brow.

Not.

He hefted it and smashed it into one of the doors. The mechanism shook, and Nick appeared. "What're you doing?"

"I gotta get down to that fire."

"Here-" He reached up and pulled a lever Wylie hadn't even known was there. Then he lifted the door. The mechanism had been locked up because the power was out.

Nick began pulling the fire pump out.

"Look, you stay with the girls. I'll go down."

"Dad-"

"Nick, please. You have to. They need one of us."

"What just happened, Dad? We don't have earthquakes here."

"I know it. Whatever it was, it's got to do with that fire down there."

Nick went in the house, reappeared immediately with the magnum. "Take this, Dad. I've got everything loaded up and we're gonna be in the family room."

Wylie took the magnum, stuffed it in his belt, and headed out to fight the fire. He loped down the rough little draw, the pumper bouncing along behind him on its two bicycle wheels. As he got closer, the glow became more distinct. Would fifty gallons of water be enough? And in any case, what was burning? The electrics came up the road on the other side of the ridge.

He pushed his way along a jumbled path, slowing down as he got closer to the glow. When he broke through into the clearing, he didn't even bother to unhook the hose, let alone pump up the tank.

For a good half minute, he had to struggle to make sense of what he was seeing. It looked like a doorway into a little room. He walked closer, his feet crunching in the dry autumn grass.

It was a little room, he could see it clearly. But what the hell was it doing out here? It was like an opening into a tiny cottage, and he thought maybe he knew where the stories of the witch house in the forest came from.

It had come with the earthquake, this strange opening. Perhaps because of the quake. Or maybe its coming had caused the quake.

It was about six feet high and three wide. From inside, there glowed hard light that came from a single bulb hanging down from the room's ceiling. He went closer yet. He was now standing directly before the room. Another step, and he would be inside. On the right, he saw a rough table with a bowl on it. The bowl was filled with hot soup, he could see it steaming. To his left was a narrow bed covered by a gray, damp looking sheet. On the opposite wall there was a window, which was blocked by a thin drape. Beyond it, he detected movement, but could see no detail through the frayed cloth.

It seemed very sad, the little room. Somebody's little hutch. But...where was it, exactly?

Experimentally, he pushed his hand in the doorway. There was a faint pop, nothing more. Immediately, though, his hand felt warm. It felt damp. Slowly, he moved it back and forth, and observed what was without question one of the most bizarre things he had ever seen. His hand moved more slowly

than his wrist, meaning that, when his moving arm reached the center of the doorway, his hand was a good two feet behind it. There was no pain and there was no sense of detachment, but the hand simply did not appear to keep up with the arm.

He snatched his hand back.

Was he, perhaps, looking into a room in Abaddon?

If so, then this might be a major opportunity. There were controls in Abaddon that kept the fourteen huge lenses that were the main gateways open into the other human world. Tonight, the seraph would pour through them in their billions.

Disrupt those controls, and you would set the seraph back. The gateways, which would be wide open tonight, would begin to close. By the twenty-fifth they would be closed entirely, not to re-open again for all those thousands of years.

The secret of Christmas was that the birth of goodness came on the day that the door to evil was closed.

This was a gateway and that little room was in Abaddon. He knew where, of course. It was General Samson's apartment.

The "earthquake" had been local. It had involved the opening of this gateway.

Should he go through? Dare he?

It must be a trap. A temptation.

Then he noticed that the glow was less. This very unusual gateway was closing.

It could be an opportunity.

It was here that the seraph had originally attacked him.

Except, no, there was something wrong with that picture. As soon as his memories flitted back to that night, he saw Brooke and Nick and Kelsey coming up from the draw with him. And everybody was happy. They were thrilled. He was thrilled.

What?

He'd been raped by seraph marauders in this draw, trying to claw their way into a human universe that had rejected them.

The glow was dropping fast.

He stepped up to the gateway. The room on the other side looked now more like a photograph than an actual opening.

He stepped forward-and found that the surface was now thick, that it felt

like stepping into a molten wall. He pushed against it, pushed harder. It was like squeezing through a mass of rubber.

And then he was stumbling forward. He tried to check himself, but windmilled across and hit the far wall hard. He sank down, feeling as if all his blood had been drained right out of him.

Then the noise hit him. Coming from outside was the most ungodly screeching and roaring he had ever heard in his life. Machinery howled, voices squalled and screamed, high and rasping and utterly alien-but not the voices of animals, no. They were shouting back and forth in a complex language, oddly peppered with any number of human words, English included. Worse, they were close by. This was a ground floor apartment.

A greasy stink of sewage and boiled meat came from the bloodred soup. The fact that it was still steaming worried him, of course, because whoever's dinner it was would be back for it at any moment. It must be Samson's food, meaning that he was here.

Recalling the story of the Three Bears, and the little girl who had entered their woodland cabin and found their meal ready to eat, he thought that others had passed through gateways like this before. In fact, if you read it right, you could reconstruct the entire fairy-faith of northern Europe as a chronicle of contacts with Abaddon.

He could either leave here now and try to make his way to Government House, or he could lie in wait for that monster.

Maybe he should try to steal Samson's car. But it had a soul, didn't it, so maybe it wouldn't be so willing to let itself be stolen.

The safest thing would be to lie in wait.

There weren't many places to hide in the room-just a curtain that concealed a still toilet full of puke-yellow goop that was being swarmed by flies as fat as ticks and as red as a baboon's ass. Or no, look at the things, they weren't flies at all, they were tiny damn bats.

He could not hide in there. He could not be near that toilet, which had, among other things, part of a rotting seraph hand in it. He knew that they were cannibals, of course, he'd seen this place before, had heard Samson think to himself that the execution fiesta he'd witnessed from the bus would mean lots of soup.

So this was some of that soup. But where was Samson? It had to be getting cold, even in the jungle heat they had here. Maybe he'd been arrested. Could've happened in a heartbeat. Maybe he was being tortured to death right

now by that sociopathic kid of Echidna's.

The shrieking rose, and with it came thudding from above. There were crunching noises, more cries, then a sound outside the door of somebody running downstairs. The sobs were unmistakable. A short silence followed. Then, more slowly, a heavier tread. It moved past the door.

This was not good. If somebody came in here, they'd raise the alarm and well, he dared not allow his imagination to go there.

He decided this had been a fool's errand. The soup was a trick. Samson was actually on the other side, and he was going to be menacing Brooke and Nick and Kelsey.

It was obvious, and what a damn fool he'd been.

He turned to go back through the gateway.

Except there was no gateway. For a moment, he simply stared at the blank wall.

The door clicked. He watched the crude wooden handle rise slowly. There was a flicker and a sputter, and he realized that the sharp light wasn't even electric. It was carbide, a type of gas that had been used at home a hundred and fifty years ago.

They didn't even have electricity.

The door swung open.

A gleaming creature stood there, shimmering purple-black. The vertical pupils in its eyes were bright red, the irises gold. It had in its hand a small disk with two barrels on the business end. Wylie knew what that was, and he decided not to show the magnum just now.

Slowly, carefully, he raised his hands.

The creature smiled a little, a tired smile. "I've been waiting for you," it said in a rasping voice. Its English was good enough, but spoken with a curious singsong lilt that made Wylie think of the voice of a car.

Wylie had been outmaneuvered.

"Where's Samson?"

"He is with your loved ones, Mr. Dale."

Wylie knew what the phrase to die a thousand deaths really meant. In a situation like this, it was no cliché, but a dark expression of truth.

The creature made a very curious sound, a sort of smacking. It watched him with ghastly eagerness. He thought that they might be allergic to human dander, but they could eat human flesh, and this thing was hungry.

"At this time, come with me."

What else was there to do? Wylie followed the creature down a steep, narrow staircase that reeked of something that had rotted dry. The walls were covered with graffiti-squiggles and lines that looked at first meaningless...and then didn't.

They were drawings, all at child level, but done with the light and dark backward, like photographic negatives. For the most part, they were scenes of torture and murder and orgy. Some drawings showed male seraph with sticklike penises, others females with bared teeth guarding black eggs.

And as they came to the street, he saw some of them. One that looked up was the same color as Jennifer Mazle, creamy and pale, her scales glittering. Her eyes were the same as those of his captor. She gave Wylie a long, melting look as she slowly ran her tongue out and touched it with her fingers.

"A whore," his guard said. Then some boys appeared, wearing hugely oversized T-shirts painted with images of crocodile-like creatures so perfectly rendered that they seemed about to leap off the cloth and into his face. Some of them. One had a New Sex Pistols T-shirt obviously from home, another a shirt with a big green fruit on it in the shape of a bitten apple, and in the bite, an image of a squeezed human face. This one carried a brutal weapon, an Aztec sword made of steel with obsidian blades jutting out of it. The squeezed face was instantly familiar. It was Adolf Hitler.

They watched him with their brilliant, dead eyes, their heads moving with the clipped jerks of lizards. As he walked, he saw that the street was made of wood-in fact, of cut tree trunks fitted together with an Inca's skill. Before them was a vehicle looking something like a horse-drawn hearse, but with a tiny barred window in the back instead of glass to reveal the coffin.

Standing in its equipage was a brown animal with fearsome, glaring eyes and purple drool dripping from its long, complex jaw. The jaw itself was metal, and appeared to be partially sprung, the way it dangled. The animal was smaller than a horse by half, but seemed made entirely of brown, wiry muscle, with the narrow, ever-twisting neck of a snake. When it saw them, it began to burp and stomp pointed, spikelike feet, which made it look as if it was dancing. Others just like it, pulling various wagons and carriages, moved up and down the street.

The door at the back of the wagon was open, and his captor made a brisk little gesture toward it and bowed. A twisted smile played on his almost lipless mouth, and his spiked teeth glittered in the brown light.

There was a hissing sound overhead, and he saw soaring past, a gorgeous

green machine shaped like a horizontal teardrop with a gleaming windshield at the front of its perfectly streamlined shape. It was so different from the miserable mess in the street that it was hard to believe that it even belonged to the same world.

Then he got a terrific push, which caused him to bark his shins painfully against the edge of the wagon's floor. He tried to turn toward his assailant, but a powerful blow brought whizzing confusion.

The door shut behind him with a dry clunk. For a moment, he could see nothing. As his eyes got used to the dimness, he examined the space he was in. It was like nothing so much as the interior of an old, zinc-lined ice chest. It was at most three feet high and five long. There were claw marks gouged in the roof and walls, and in the wooden floor, places-many of them-that had been gnawed.

He drew out the magnum, cradling it in his hand as he would the rarest diamond. This was hope.

He twisted himself around until he could see out one of the tiny, barred windows. They were not going up the great esplanade he had seen through Samson's eyes, but along the city's back streets. There were neon hieroglyphics everywhere, and flags overhead with more unreadable slogans on them. The place was ancient Egypt on steroids. Martin would have loved it, but he wasn't the sucker on the spot, was he?

No, indeed, and the fear had a funny quality to it. The fear had to do with more of the knowledge he had gained. He had a soul. These people could take out your soul and put it in a damn glass tube. They could remove your memories and graft them into their own souls-eat them, as it were. They could use you for crap like running a car, and God only knew what else. In this place, the phrase the soul in the machine had a ghastly new meaning.

They went around the corner-the animal was not fast-and began to pass what appeared to be a restaurant. Behind the lighted windows, he could see gleaming red walls and a gold ceiling. Balls of light floating in midair provided illumination. Sitting in large chairs were seraphs in beautiful, shimmering suits, tight against their bodies.

Then he got what could probably and with accuracy be called the surprise of his life: there were human beings in there, too. As they trundled slowly past, he strained to see more. There was a man in a fur jacket and a white ermine fedora, not recognizable to him but obviously some kind of entertainer, maybe a rapper or rock star, there were women in silks and furs.

Other men wore tuxedos, some business suits, others caftans and gallabias. Then he saw a cardinal, distinguished by the red zucchetto on his head and the red-trimmed black cassock.

On the tables before them were golden dishes beautifully decorated with garlands of greenery and white flowers. Heaped on them were roasted body parts, both seraph and human. The diners were eating busily.

Then it was gone, replaced by more of the endless gray city and its hurrying, oblivious hordes of seraph.

A stunned Wylie Dale sank down to the floor. For a time he lay there listening to the creak of the axles, feeling the steady swaying of the wagon. His blank mind held an image of that cardinal. Of the men in tuxedos, the women in evening gowns.

Who in the name of all that was holy WERE THEY?

Rich, to be sure, compared to the starved horde that crowded these streets. Human beings, movers and shakers all, living large in hell.

Or was that the whole answer? The seraph were chameleons. So maybe these weren't human beings at all, but seraph spending time at home. Two-moon earth must have been plagued by them. It had totally ignored air pollution, and global warming was running wild there, even worse than at home.

Shape-shifted seraph had probably been running the place for centuries. They were the cardinals, the big personalities, the ministers and the kings. Like Samson. He'd ended up in control of the United States itself, and he was a shape-shifted reptilian seraph maintaining himself on drugs.

He wondered, Who in his own world might be a seraph in disguise? Who sought the ruin of souls? Who encouraged greed? Who lived by the lie that pollution didn't matter?

Who, indeed?

He realized that he was not far from insanity, here. His mind just wanted to go inside itself. Walk in the green fields of dream, smell the flowers, above all shut this horrible world out, scrub his brain free of all knowledge of it and memory of it.

Every trembling cell of his body, every instinct that he had, every drop of his blood said the same thing: You are not supposed to know this, you are not supposed to be here, and you cannot get away, and to keep their secret, they are going to kill not just your body but your immortal soul.

But now that he had fallen into the trap, he must not freeze, he had to do

everything possible to turn their trick back on them. He had to try.

Oh God, he prayed, what is the universe? How does it really work? Above all, how can I save this situation? A memory came to him of Martin and his ceaseless prayer, and he began to pray that way, also. He prayed to the healing hand that had raised Osiris after his brother had cut him to pieces, and Jesus after his passion had ended. The unseen one who bound the good by the cords of love.

They were arriving somewhere, the wagon turning, stopping. He looked out first one window and then the other, but saw only skeletal trees, huge once, no doubt rich with leaves and life, now gray and dead, clawing at the brown sky. "Mr. Dale, if you don't mind?"

As Wylie came down, the creature added, "I was wondering if you'd autograph Alien Days for me?"

For the love of Pete, it had a paperback of the damn book and a pen in its clawed hand. Too stunned to do anything else, he took the book. Opened it to the title page. "Do you want me to personalize it?"

"Oh, hey, yeah. Make that out to me."

Confused, he looked up, to find himself staring into a very human, and very familiar face-Senator Louis Bowles, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, senior senator from Utah.

Senator Bowles smiled, then shuddered and shifted back into a long-faced vampiric horror, its scales glistening, its eyes glaring with evil energy.

He finished the inscription-to Senator Bowles...and as he did so, saw the hand that was doing the writing, and then also the hand that was holding the book. He saw long, thin fingers of the palest tan, ending in black claws, neatly manicured.

He saw the wrists where they were visible outside the sleeves of his jacket. Narrow, scaled, shimmering with the gemstone sheen of snake-skin. He looked at the hand that held his Mont Blanc, turned it over, watching the light play on the scales. Then he raised his fingers to his cheek, and felt beneath their tips the delicate shudder of more scales.

He hadn't come to an alien earth at all.

He was a shape-shifter himself.

He had come home.

PART FOUR

THE BLUE LIGHT

He found the blue light, and made her a signal to draw him up again. She did draw him up, but when he came near the edge, she stretched down her hand and wanted to take the blue light away from him. "No," said he, perceiving her evil intention, "I will not give you the light until I am standing with both feet upon the ground." The witch fell into a passion, let him fall again into the well, and went away.

-THE BROTHERS GRIMM, "The Blue Light"

How long, Yahweh?

Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, Having sorrow in my heart every day? How long shall my enemy triumph over me?

-Psalm 13: 1-2

TWENTY-TWO

DECEMBER 21, EVENING
THE CHAPEL PERILOUS

OUTSIDE THE TENT, THE NIGHT bellowed. Earthquakes had started right after they had come back from Wylie's universe and were continuous now, a low shuddering that never stopped. On other parts of the planet, Martin and Trevor knew from reading Wylie's book, this meant that hell was unfolding. The seraph were racing to sink the great human cities and most of the human lands, and raise the ocean floors that would be their new continents. They had only hours left until the fourteen artificial gateways they had constructed around the world opened wide and a billion hungry seraph came swarming through.

Three times now, the little band had heard the unearthly scream of tornadoes in the sky, then the bone-shaking thudding that followed when they hit and went marching off across the prairie.

Pam and George had had the presence of mind to locate the tent close to the foot of a small hill, meaning that they were unlikely to take a direct hit from a tornado. But if a big one should sweep this clearing-well, then it was over for them.

Thunder snapped, the wind screamed, and Ward and Claire James drummed on their drums. Outriders chuckled and rasped nearby. Martin believed that they probably didn't even want to attack the tent at this point. They wanted this little band of evolved humans right where they were, because as long as they were here, what problems could they cause?

He and Trevor had almost been drowned when the Hummer passed through the gateway and hit the flood on this side. But the other kids had anticipated what might happen, and were waiting with ropes in the slow water near shore. It had been a near thing, but the both of them had managed to ford the swollen, raging river.

Trevor slept with his head on his dad's shoulder. Another kid had the other shoulder. Two little ones shared his lap.

And he thought, working in his mind with Pam and George and Mike.

The kids were getting expert at this, their minds racing much, much faster than his. The change had affected children and adolescents because their minds were more supple and less informed with the weight of civilized knowledge.

There was a name for the state they were in-many names, in fact. It was called bhodi, satori, many things. But it was not as if the soul was lit from a higher power-enlightened. They weren't enlightened, they simply were.

Man had left the forests of Eden an animal, but these kids had found their way back, bringing none of the debris of civilization, but all of its compassion, its consciousness of the value of the individual, its ability to balance personal and collective need. They had returned to Eden as true human beings. They understood how to be as lilies of the field. For them, it wasn't impossible to live in the rain. They had each other. They had love.

But they were still just this tiny, little band in a great and frightened world.

It had been this way, before, he thought, in the lands of southern France and northern Spain thirty thousand years ago, when the spirit had been on the children, and adolescents had begun to paint the walls of caves with the magic animals of the mind.

Pam shook him. She frowned at him.

He'd allowed his mind to drift while they were reading his memories of Wylie's book.

"See them?" Trevor asked suddenly. His voice was curiously flat, as if he was dreaming.

"Are you asleep, Son?"

"I'm out of my body, and if I keep having to talk, I'm going to be back in, so come out, I need to show you something."

Pam nodded. They could read the information stored in his brain in peace if he wasn't there, so he took a deep breath, let it out and with it let his soul out of his body. When he moved out of the tent, he found Trevor and some of the other kids together. The rain whipped through them, the outriders did not react to them. He saw them as their ordinary selves, but knew that this was only his mind filtering their essences into familiar forms. Their bodies were still inside the tent.

Trevor pointed, and he followed the direction. Moving slowly, he tried to clear himself of all expectation, to so empty his mind that the actual appearance of the world over which he was flying would come through.

It was hard, though, in this state, to see anything except what you expected to see, or wanted to. He saw cities brightly lit in the night, Wichita and Kansas City, and the smiling prairie farther on dotted here and there with the lights of smaller communities.

He saw, in other words, a safe world, and so one that was not real. So he told himself, You will close yourself to this. You will blank your mind. And when you look again, you will not see your memories or your hopes, you will see only what is part of the actual, physical world.

He saw Lindy. He was right in front of her and she was still walking, but she was so thin and tired, she looked like she had only a few more steps left in her. Her eyes were glazed as if dead, but still she walked, and not far ahead were lines of fourteen wheelers, Continental Van Lines, Murphy's Stores, Gap Leaders, an ad-hoc assembly of vehicles. Other wanderers were getting into them and she was eager, he could see it, because it would mean no more walking on her blistered clumps of feet.

Soldiers, some of them in standard issue G.I. uniforms, others thin and sleek, seraph in gleaming black, their hands gloved in white, their heads hidden by visored helmets, were separating the arriving wanderers into two groups. Seraph and human soldiers worked together, and he knew that the human soldiers were themselves wanderers.

There was a crackle, and a group of wanderers who had just been moved into a small field blew apart, their legs, arms, and heads flying in every direction.

Sitting in the back of a nearby pickup was a soldier manning a peculiar, disk-shaped weapon, and he knew what that was, too, because back in the tent Trevor had the smaller one he'd taken from Wylie's house.

As he watched, more wanderers approached the ruined bodies with knives and saws and began harvesting the meat. The ever-thrifty seraph must be feeding their captives to themselves. It made ugly sense. How could you find a cheaper way to keep them going than that?

He tried to scream at Lindy, but his voice could not be heard by her or anybody else. And look at her poor feet, surely she wouldn't be set to work, surely they would select her. And his poor Winnie, God only knew what had become of her.

The sorrow was so great, the helplessness almost enough to drive him mad.

A warmth came over him, then, so kind, so surpassing in protective

compassion that he allowed himself to hope that at last the deity he had been praying to constantly for all these days had come. But it was not God, it was another soul. He had a sense of a soldier's heart, determined, disciplined, and a soldier's face, tight with effort.

When he tried to open himself to this soul, though, the way you do when you are practiced in out-of-body travel-and he was getting somewhat okay at it-the other soul threw up a memory from its childhood, a boy riding a bicycle up a driveway on a summer's night, a yellow porch light with moths flying around it, an elderly dog standing up on the porch, then coming down to greet the boy, his tail twirling.

Martin recognized it as an attempt to say, in the multilayered language in which soul speaks to soul, that this visitor who was trying to contact him now had been a boy beloved of an old dog. And with the high-speed insight that characterizes thought unencumbered by the electrochemical filters built into the brain, Martin saw that this meant that he had once been good and gentle, but it was a long time ago. But he had seen his error and now longed to return to his boyhood state.

He had done evil, this interloper, but he was trying to say that he was not, himself, evil.

Then Martin saw hieroglyphics. They were extremely vivid, but were they coming from the soul or were they in the physical world? Telling the difference took an expert, and he was no expert.

Trevor's mental voice said, This is what I wanted you to see. Let General North continue to guide you.

Martin saw the face of their guide again, just the eyes. The eyes were pleading.

Martin could, of course, read hieroglyphics. But there were over two thousand hieroglyphic symbols, and translation could be an extraordinary challenge, and the farther back in time from the date of the creation of the Rosetta Stone, which was the basis of all hieroglyphic translation, the less accurate translation became. He saw immediately that these were Old Kingdom if not even older, and that they were a mix of words and numbers, with bits of quickly scribbled hieratic notes here and there along the edges.

These were the most complex hieroglyphics he had ever seen, but as with all complex texts, there were simpler words, and he thought to start with these. They were lovely glyphs, really well executed. He read ur, the swallow glyph, then udjat, the Eye of Horus that has become the familiar © of modern

prescriptions. He read on, recognizing the name Narmur, the first pharaoh of the Old Kingdom. Then a bit of the hieratic text became clear: the connection. This was followed by an unknown number that had been scribbled beside the hieroglyphic for copper.

Incredibly, this appeared to be a set of instructions about making electrical connections.

The souls of the kids were filling the chamber now. Pam had come, and was signaling an image of a long tunnel with some kind of a car in it. Then George showed a picture of the Rockies, then the entrance to the Cheyenne Mountain facility, easily recognizable by its huge steel doors.

This image agitated Al North. Martin could feel his sorrow. But why? They knew that somewhere the human souls were stored, and maybe what they were learning here was that it was under the Rockies.

A map was thrust into his mind as if into his hand, accompanied by a red flush of anger. It was a Google map centered just west of Holcomb.

A shock went through him. "Zoom," he said. "Again." The map now pointed to a particular crossroads.

And he at once understood why the seraph had scoured this part of Kansas the way they had. It wasn't only because he was there and the gateway to the other human world was there, it was because the repository where the souls were hidden was there, at the geographic center of the continental United States, which was a few miles from the town of Lebanon, just over the county line from Holcomb, just at the crossroads he was looking down at right now.

This spot must be of enormous geomagnetic significance. But the men who had made the casual measurements that had located it, had been innocently playing around with a cardboard map.

But they hadn't. They had been under seraph mind control and doing the work of seraph engineers.

He could feel Al North's delight as a sense of dancing. Music came out of him, joyous chords. He had been working and working to communicate this. He had been struggling to be seen, to be heard, but until now nobody had noticed him.

Martin had not noticed that they'd gone down into the earth to find this place, but they had, they'd gone deep, and as they returned, traveling through so much stone was eerie, to feel yourself in the pull of it, to feel your sensitive electromagnetic body negotiating the smaller spaces in the dense

matter-it was claustrophobic and they were deep, very deep.

Without warning, he burst up into the storms of the night and went rocketing into the sky. For an instant he saw the wide plains of Kansas whirling beneath him, then the clouds, then he was above the clouds and the second moon was high, its soft light making castles of the cloud tops from horizon to horizon.

He felt a pull upward, strong, and he saw laughing, singing children looking down from a tower above him, pleading with him to come. But he looked only for one face in the tower of song, and he did not see that face, he did not see his Winnie.

Above the tower were spreading mansions and roads in the high sky, great, flowing blue spaces, and the clouds were gone and the moons were gone and waves of pure pleasure were pouring through his body with such intensity that he could not believe that he had anything even approaching such a capacity for delight.

It was the pleasure of great love, mature and rich and filled with the resonance of long companionship, an exalted version of the love he had known with Lindy, but also there was somebody there who wanted him and to enter him and become him, too, and there was the laughter of children, and the perfect voice of a great choir.

Then something stung him. Hard. On the cheek.

"Dad! Dad!"

What was that? Well, it wasn't heaven, so he wasn't interested.

Another sting, harder. No, go away.

Another one, harder still. "Damn you!"

"Dad!"

Trevor was there. Physically there, because souls don't have beads of sweat running along their upper lips. Trevor shut his eyes tight and whap, Martin saw stars.

"What the hell, you hit me!"

His son fell on him sobbing and laughing, hugging him. "Finally! Dad, you almost didn't come back!"

He had never in his life felt as heavy as he did now. Returning to your body was putting on a lead overcoat.

"How long have I been..." He bowed his head. He could not bear to say it. He had been in heaven.

His son's hand touched his shoulder. "I went there, too, Dad."

Martin shook his head. He didn't want to think, to talk, to listen to those damn drums anymore, to be here in this awful place, he wanted to be there, where flowers that bloomed forever never stopped surprising you. Eternity was not living in the same old world forever, it was discovering the world anew forever.

"Where's the monument," Trevor asked. "Who knows where it is?"

A few hands went up. "It's off the roadside, near Smith Center," Tim Grant said. "There's a chapel there that can seat, like, twenty people. It's all sort of nothing, actually."

"Except for the millions of souls that are trapped under there."

"According to Wylie's book, it's where General Al North was taken," Trevor said. "It might be under Kansas, but the entrance is in Colorado, at that base."

Martin felt that Cheyenne Mountain didn't matter. It was just another seraph trick, a diversion.

No, the chapel would be the key. If they went there, they would find the vulnerability that the seraph were trying to hide. "Thing is, the way they've scoured this part of Kansas, how interested they are in us-and we're just a quiet little corner of the world, after all-I'd say that if the monument is right above the center of their repository, then that's where we need to go to reach it. That's got to be their weak point."

The atmosphere in the tent became electric. "It's not very far," a voice said.

"We have to go in the physical," George added, "or we won't be able to do anything in the physical."

From outside came the chuckling clatter of the jaws of outriders. The drummers started drumming.

"I'm going with you," Trevor said softly.

Martin did not reply, not verbally. There would be no way to keep Trevor here. He stood up, and so did Trevor and so did Pam. But the others did not stand. He could sense something among them, a kind of mutual agreement, but it wasn't clear exactly what was in their minds.

Mike stood. His girl cried out, but stifled her cry. She came to her feet and threw her arms around him. They stood like this, the young couple, and Martin saw that their hearts were married.

She stayed behind, though, surrounded by the little ones.

The woods were quiet now, the outriders having gone off when they

failed to smell fear here. To the west, lightning flickered. Would the storms never end? No, not as long as the seraph tortured this poor earth, Martin knew. All of that seafloor that had risen would be gushing with methane from hydrates and billions of tons of dead marine life, and hydrogen sul-fide and other gasses he couldn't even name. In a matter of days, it would change the atmosphere, and the seraph would be able to breathe easily here, and all the humans and most of the animals and insects would die.

First moon now rode in the high sky, its light bright and bitter, and the night was so still that you could hear the whisper of grass when breezes touched it. It was a sound familiar in Kansas when the crops were high and the night wind ran in them, sighing and whispering.

"Stop," Mike said softly.

Sensing trouble, Martin drew his prayer back into his mind.

Trevor pointed upward. For a moment, Martin saw only the sky. Then, against the moon, a flash of darkness, ugly and ribbed like the wing of a bat. Then he saw another and another, and as his eyes began to track the movement in the sky he understood that there was not one nighthawk circling up there, but dozens, no, hundreds, in a soaring column that seemed to go up forever.

Thousands in the moonlight.

Something slid into Trevor's hand, and Martin knew what it was, that seraph gun, even more fearsome than Wylie and Nick's arsenal.

"All right," Mike said, "right now, you're thinking away as usual, Doctor Winters, and the rest of us are absolutely not afraid. And the reason is, we're doing what you keep thinking about doing. You have to use the prayer, Doctor Winters, you have to keep it in your head all the time-and now you're about to think about the Valley of Death and comfort yourself with the psalm but please don't even do that."

He recalled Franny's prayer, took it to his mind, and began repeating it. Of course, he was not even a believer. If anything, he was a Jeffersonian Christian, an admirer of the man but not a believer in the resurrection. And, in any case, Zooney had been right, had he not, that the prayer was itself a form of egotism?

He realized that Mike was looking at him. They were all looking at him.

-The fourteen parts of Osiris.

-The fourteen Stations of the Cross.

-The fourteen sacred sites.

-The fourteen black lenses.

"Do you understand now, Doctor Winters?"

He nodded, but he did not understand. The great magic number of the past was seven, the number of a completed octave and a completed life. So what was fourteen?

"The number of resurrection, the key to heaven," Trevor said, "and it's the resurrection energy that the seraph hate, because it's what they can't have. That's why they steal souls, to find in their goodness a taste of heaven. That's why they're really here. It's not for bodies and land, it's for souls."

They walked through the wrecked forest, past uprooted trees, through the yards of ruined houses, and he could see the white steeple of Third Street Methodist still standing. Also, they walked out from under the great column of nighthawks, which could not see them because they could not see any fear.

They reached Pam's yard, and he saw that her house had been torn apart just as theirs had, by seraph who had not anticipated that some of their victims would gain power from the attack, and sought any crumb of information they might find about these dangerous little viral particles.

Pam broke into a run, and disappeared into the house. Martin saw in his mind's eye a flashing image of a car key, but knew that her heart was taking her to her old room, and the rooms of those she loved, and he saw her looking at the melted, deranged ruin of her home and knew that she was feeling the same horror that he had, the same anguish at seeing something so much a part of herself made so ugly.

Nobody spoke, nobody needed to, they could hear her rage in their minds, even Martin could hear it, and a moment later could also hear the increasing roar of wings, and the forlorn, eager cries that grew louder as the nighthawks, seeing her terror like a bright star in a void, found them again.

From the house, then, silence. She'd become aware of what her emotions were doing.

Nobody moved. Not a hundred feet overhead, the creatures swarmed. And from the dark woods all around now came the chuckling of outriders. They had begun marching this way, working their steel fangs.

The truck stood in the drive, but when they drew near it, they found that it was peppered with tiny craters. Farther down the driveway were heaps of something-the remains of people, there was no way to tell.

As they got into the double cab, Pam tried the key. "We need a miracle, thanks," she muttered.

The truck's engine growled.

There was a huge crash and the ceiling was crushed enough to knock Martin's head forward-which was fortunate, because enormous claws came ripping through the metal, ripping and clutching.

"Keep down, Dad!"

The engine ground again. "Come on," Pam said.

It was a double cab, and Trevor and Mike had gotten in the back. Trevor came forward between the seats as more of the huge nighthawks landed around them, their great heads thrusting, their beaks, lined with narrow teeth, opening wide when they bellowed, then snapping closed with a lethal crack.

More landed, and more, until Martin could smell their breath, a mixture of hydrogen sulfide and rotting meat that made your throat burn.

Then one of the heads thrust forward and crashed through the windshield, and the teeth slashed toward Martin. From between the seats, Trevor fired the disk-shaped weapon.

There was no report. The head simply flew apart, the upper and lower halves of the beak whirling against the opposite doors, the eyes exploding into a dust of glass and gelatin, and the tongue fluttering in the ruined face as the creature shot backward and ended up squalling on its back in the driveway, its fifty-foot wings flapping furiously, hammering the ground so hard that the truck rocked with every great convulsion.

With a thunder of howls, the rest of them took off, rising as mayflies do from a spring brook, but monstrous.

"Thank you, God," Pam said as the truck finally started. She put it into drive and accelerated toward the street, driving over the creature, which snapped and crackled and squalled beneath the bouncing vehicle.

"Sorry about that," she said.

They went down to Harrow in the ravaged truck, and changed there to another one-Bobby's police car, which stood open on Main and School. The keys were still in the ignition, and it had a quarter tank of gas. Also, between the front seats, a sawed-off shotgun. They got in, Martin behind the wheel.

They rode in silence down an empty Highway 36, passing an occasional motionless car, but otherwise meeting not the slightest sign of life. "That's a terrible weapon," Martin said to Trevor.

"It's nearly empty," Trevor replied.

"The light is coming," Mike said. "We need to hurry."

Martin scanned the sky, looking for some sign of an orange disk. He saw

nothing, but he stepped on the gas, driving the police interceptor up to a hundred and twenty, then a hundred and thirty. Bobby kept the thing in good shape.

"Take a right," Mike said.

"I thought it was in Smith Center."

"The monument's on 191."

Martin turned north on 281. The fields were fallow, the country totally empty.

"Left," Mike said.

Another mile and Martin saw the little monument just off the road. A short distance from it was a small building.

"Okay," Mike said, "you got it. Now what?"

They got out. Martin carried the shotgun.

Mike took it. "That's an eight-shot semi," he said, "not seven."

"It's loaded?"

"I know that."

Martin went to the chapel, a white portable building, its siding weathered. The door was unlocked. He pushed it open. Inside were a few pews, a table, and a cross on the wall behind it. He noticed that this was not an ordinary Christian cross. Christ lay upon it, but the four limbs of the cross were of equal length. He wondered who might have done that in rural Kansas, made it into such a very ancient symbol, for the solar cross marked the solstices and the equinoxes, and related to the greatest depths of human memory and knowledge, from the time when we did not think like we do now, but made wonders in the world because we were surrendered to God, and thus acting on exquisite instinct, not plodding thought.

"Who is she?" Pam asked.

For a moment, Martin was confused. Then he saw her, too, a shadow standing in the corner of the chapel, so still that she at first appeared to be little more than a thickening of the dark. But he could see her eyes there in the corner of the room, her gleaming eyes, and her slimness.

Jennifer Mazle sprang at him. One second, he was wondering if the figure was even alive, the next he had been slammed to the floor.

Her hands came around his throat, closed. His head felt as if it was going to explode. At that same moment thick light surged in the windows and the door with the force of a tidal wave, causing the glass to shatter and the door to slam all the way across the chapel, where it hit the wall and dropped the

cross to the floor.

Martin looked directly into Mazle's face, into eyes that bulged until the contact lenses popped out, revealing the reptile eyes of the seraph. In the light that was all around them, he could see the kids moving with method and direction, and could hear the whispering of their minds.

Mike pulled Mazle's head back. Her mouth opened and her long, black tongue came out as she screamed. Trevor thrust the shotgun into her mouth and pulled the trigger, and her lithe body shot backward in a shower of green blood. The head burst.

"But the light!"

"Don't think, Martin!" Pam yelled.

"Just let yourself happen, Dad!"

As he took his attention away from his mind and into his body, he felt his soul return also, and knew that the light had been taking him so stealthily that he hadn't even realized it.

Then Pam marched into the corner where Mazle had been standing and simply disappeared.

For a moment, Martin thought she'd gone through a concealed gateway, but when he heard echoing footsteps, he understood. Cunning doors like this were seen in some Egyptian temples he'd worked on, but especially in Peru, where there were many of them in old Cuzco, doors that to this day only the Inca knew. But to find one here in Kansas-well, he would have been surprised once.

Concentrating on his breath, on the way his body felt as he moved, leaving his thoughts and his fears behind, he found that he could move through the light easily and without danger. The kids weren't even concerned by it.

He crossed the ruined chapel with the others, walking straight into the corner, feeling it give way, seeing the darkness, then finding his footing on steep black steps.

They had defeated the light, and if only mankind had recognized his own soul before it was too late, the whole world would have been able to do the same thing. But the seraph had infiltrated us with the lie that we were a body only, that there was no soul that was admissible to understanding and to science, and that science itself was a strange exploration having nothing to do with the kingdom of God, when, in fact, there was no real science that did not address heaven and satori.

As they went down, the air changed, growing thicker and warmer, beginning to smell stifling. This was the air of Abaddon, air as it would be everywhere in this world of theirs very soon. It was heavier, their air, and would be filling low places first.

He was last in line, going down the iron steps. Faint light came from below. From above, now only darkness.

They went down for a long time, and Martin remembered the part of Wylie's book about Al's descent. He had been taken miles into the earth.

As the light from below got brighter, it took on a blue cast, and the narrow shaft they were descending became more distinct. "It's our guide," Mike said.

Martin knew that the blue light of souls was also the color of good worlds, and that Abaddon was brown, but the human earths were palest blue, the color of their waters and their skies, and the glow of their dead.

"Are we sure?" Martin asked. They were a good two hundred steps down, and he was beginning to feel a distinct sense of claustrophobia in the narrow space. He forced himself not to think of the depth or the closeness. He'd found reading Wylie's description of Al's descent beneath Cheyenne Mountain to be almost unendurable, so vivid was the sense of being enclosed in rock, and he could never forget the feeling he'd had here earlier.

"Oh, my God."

It was Pam, calling up from below. "What?"

He reached the bottom of the steps. At first, he was only aware of color—gold, green, red, tan. He couldn't understand what he was seeing. Then he could. "This is the most extraordinary room in the world." He'd seen it before, of course, but not in the body, not with all the vividness of his living eyes.

"Back down, Dad. Try to put your mind away."

"I can't put my mind away! Don't you see what this is? It's where we saw the hieroglyphics. But now we're here in the flesh, and it's all so-so vivid and so real. This is the most superb example of Old Kingdom bas-relief on the planet. And it's in the middle of the United States!"

"Dad, listen to me. If you don't just let it take you over, we're in trouble. Because we're not in the United States, dad. This is Abaddon, and the second they realize that we're here, we are done."

"We've come through a gateway?"

"We're still on earth, but in the physics of Abaddon."

"Come on," Mike said. "We've got work to do. Stuff to figure out."

Martin followed him across the room where Al North had been deprived of his life and his soul. He followed them through a low doorway, which was the source of the light, which was a living light that penetrated the flesh and made you weep to feel it upon your body.

Then he saw why. He was in a cavern, blue-lit like a submarine cave just touched by sun from the surface. Before them stretched a sea of glass tubes, each three feet long, all plugged into huge black sockets, all living, exact replicas of the images on the wall of the temple of Dendera. Except these tubes were sparking with life, and you could see the lights inside them leaping and jumping and struggling, causing the whole room to flicker continuously.

Slowly, Trevor, then Pam and Mike went to their knees. Martin followed them, because the light shining on them was not just alive, but richly alive, and they could see millions of summer mornings, dew on the flowers of the world, signs of struggle and happiness, and hear, also, a roar of voices that was vast.

The flower of mankind was here.

"What do we do now, Dad?"

"I have no idea."

TWENTY-THREE

DECEMBER 21,
THE FINAL HOURS ON ABADDON: THE UNION

WYLIE HAD REALIZED THAT HE was being die-seled when he saw that they were crossing the same sodden shopping street again. There were piles of yarn, there were farm implements, there were baskets and paint-brushes, and hatchets polished to a high shine.

He might be a shape-shifter like the rest of them, but he was not on their side. No, he was a Union man, he had remembered that. They were right about him being an intelligence agent. He was, but not a very good one, given that he'd gotten his sweet ass caught just when that was the worst possible thing that could have happened.

Wylie had examined every inch of the wagon, but it was made like a fucking safe. The goddamn driver would open a little hatch from time to time and shit and piss into it. Wylie stayed well back, but the place stank. He wondered if his own shit was yellow now, too?

The wagon had been stopped for some time before he understood that it wasn't going to be moving again. There was a series of clicks, and the door went hissing open. Even in this place, with its dirty brown sky, coming out hurt his eyes.

He was coming to the crisis of his failure now, he knew.

"Ready for lunch," his captor said. "Your hands are comin' to me and mine, I hear."

His hands. What a place. Trapped in the wagon with nothing to do but think, he had remembered more of his real life. If you looked-really looked-you wouldn't find a trace of Wylie Dale before December 26, 1995, the day he'd made his transition into a human life that had been painstakingly constructed for him to enter. "Wylie Dale" had already been established as a novelist by the organization that had sent him to the human earth, but the first book he'd written himself was *Alien Days*, his story of his abduction, which had actually been a looking-glass memory of his arrival on one-moon earth.

As Wylie's eyes adjusted to the light, he found himself standing before a

gigantic version of a building familiar to him. It was the model for the Tomb of Skull and Bones on the campus of Yale University. But the Tomb was not large. This building was two hundred feet tall, a great, ugly monolith.

Compared to the rest of the city, which echoed with roars, screeches, discharges of steam, the rumbling of wagons, and various unidentifiable hoots, laughs, and howls, the silence here was total.

Bones had been founded by William Huntington Russell, whose step-brother Sam had carried opium into China for the British when they were trying to get back the gold they'd spent on Chinese tea. British captains hadn't been willing to do it. It might have been the 1850s, but drug running was still drug running. Russell had no problem with addicting the Chinese.

"Are you happy?" he asked his grinning captor.

"Yeah, I'm happy."

"Then fuck you."

"Could I season your fingers?"

"You going to two-moon earth?"

"I should be so lucky. No can afford."

Wylie thought of the shithole the seraph hordes were being sent to. "What does it cost?"

"Whatever you have. Which assumes you have something. They don't consider an artificial syrinx with a busted jaw and this old wagon worth a ticket. I live in it, you know. When it's not otherwise occupied."

"So you're poor?"

"Poor as shit, which is why-" He stopped. He listened, so Wylie listened, too. Keening came, heart-freezing, getting louder fast. "Knees!"

Wylie didn't argue. As he went down to the hard earth and little knots of mushrooms like small, exposed brains, a line of flying motorcycles with silver fenders, ridden by figures in gold metallic uniforms and gleaming gold helmets and face masks, came speeding out of the sky and hung dead still a foot or so above the ground, their motors revving as the riders worked to keep them stable.

This was followed by a smooth whoosh of sound, and a jewel of an aircar appeared.

He knew who it belonged to, of course: Marshal Samson. His escort bowed, and he bowed, too. There was a click and he could sense somebody getting down, coming over.

"Hello, Wylie." The voice positively bubbled. "I knew it from the first. It

had to be this. Actually, I'm impressed. I'll never tell her that, of course, but it was a brilliant operation."

"Thank you."

"I just came from raping your wife, incidentally. Bring him."

He was kicked from behind, and ended up scuttling through the huge doors, which had opened soundlessly and now presented the appearance of a gaping cave.

As Wylie walked through the darkness of the anteroom and Samson opened the inner door for them both, the enormous golden floor struck him with a powerful sense of remembrance. That floor had been a source of scandal at home, a symbol to the Union of the greed of the autocrats who ran this side of the planet.

A tall woman loaded with jewels, her hair sleek and white, dressed in the richest clothing Wylie had ever seen, came striding forward. Her face was so white that it glowed, the scales attractively tiny, the features delicate. He knew that this was the infamous leader of this world, Echidna, whose family had held controlling ownership of the Corporation for uncountable millennia.

All the females in the line were called Echidna. When one wore out, a new clone replaced it seamlessly, without any public awareness. There was never an issue of succession, unlike the Union, which was a simple democracy and in turmoil all the time.

"Come, Spy," she said, "I want to gloat before dinner."

As they crossed the great room, he saw Lee Raymond, Robert Mugabe, and Ann Coulter playing a game involving dice on what appeared to be a table made of emeralds, rubies, and a great, gleaming expanse of pure diamond. He recognized the game. It was senet, the Egyptian pre-decessor to backgammon. In the human worlds, the rules of senet had been hidden away by the seraph, but here, where they had not, players at senet gambled for souls.

He was not sure if they were human, or simply proud of their achievements as human, and showing off their forms.

"I had no idea your penetration of human society was so extensive."

"But not of both human worlds, not as much as I hoped. This time around, we're only getting the one, I fear." She shot him a twinkling glance. "But we are getting it, you Union shit!"

Coulter now shifted into a sallow reptilian form with big, beady scales. Her black tongue darted behind spiked teeth made yellow from too much

tobacco. Wylie realized that she was lusting after him. Mugabe, who was apparently her seraph husband, scurried behind her, trying to keep a cloak around her.

"Ann wants to bed you before we eat," Echidna said. "It's a particular pleasure of hers, to fuck her food."

They arrived at a tall window, curtained. "Open it," Echidna snapped at Samson. "I just want you to see this, Union man."

Wylie realized that she had brought him close to a great, black wall with huge levers on it. Scalar controls, he knew, that worked the gigantic lenses that were deployed on two-moon earth. But then the curtains swept open, and he saw a lawn so bright green it must have been painted, awash in splendid people, some of them reptilian, others human, or seemingly so. There were politicians, of course, great, grinning hordes of them, military officers in the uniforms of a dozen countries, representatives of various royal families, rock stars, CEOs, television personalities, preachers, mullahs, gurus-in fact, every sort of human leader and person of power. Among them strolled naked seraph girls and boys, their scales bleached so white they looked new-minted, carrying trays loaded with barbecued fingers, ears and toes, and flutes of hissy champagne.

To one side was a line of elaborate gas grills, all black and chrome. He recognized that they were Strathmores from home, the brand he had on his own deck, except that these were limousine models, with twelve burners instead of the usual four. Most of them were rolling spits, and on them some of the victims still twisted and squirmed. Behind each grill hung a complete body molt on a tall spike, a pale skin attesting to the youth and therefore tenderness of the person under preparation.

Echidna pointed to an empty grill. "That'll be you," she said.

He wanted to try to run, anything to avoid what seemed inevitable. But there was more, because he saw that this party was not to celebrate his capture, or not only that, it was also to celebrate an enormous event that was unfolding in a valley behind the building.

In the center of this valley was a gigantic circular lens of purest black, its surface reflecting the wan midday sun. And around it, stretching to every horizon, were what must be millions and millions of seraph, ready to pour through the moment the signal was given. He saw men, women, children, heard the booming of syringes, the chatter and whoops of other animals, and above it all the excited, argumentative shrieking of the seraph themselves as

they jostled for position and accused one another of trying to break the baskets of black, oblong eggs the women all carried.

He assumed that he would die here today. He'd been living for years in an extremely dangerous situation with a wiped memory, and that made you vulnerable-so vulnerable, in fact, that it was probably just a matter of time before you ended up going through the funny little door in the woods. He loved his poor family, though, his striving, brilliant, lovely family. What would happen to them? Could they shift, he wondered? Did they, perhaps in secret, the children under their covers at night, Brooke in the privacy of her early mornings?

Ann had sidled closer, and he thought maybe he could cause a little confusion. In this class-ridden society, she was bound to have some prerogatives. Time wasn't on his side, obviously, but distraction might be.

He turned to her. "Must I?"

She squared her shoulders. "Of course you must."

He went toward her, and thus also toward the wall behind her.

"Guards," Echidna said mildly. "Stay with him."

Samson came, and with him his heavily armed escort.

Wylie was still bound, of course, but he came to Ann Coulter and looked down at her. Her scales fluttered and surged, and a black substance that smelled of sulfur began to ooze from under her eyelids.

"Ann," her husband hissed, "you're compromising yourself."

She was really steaming. She loved a man in bondage, that was clear.

Wylie saw that he had a moment, and only one, and it was this moment. He opened his mouth and drew his tongue along the backs of his teeth in the best imitation of a whore that he could imagine.

She tittered. Her breath had in it the flat muskiness of death.

"Will somebody please remove these children?" Mugabe shouted. A number of them had foregathered to watch the fun.

"Part of their education," Echidna said. Her husband now joined her. Wylie had forgotten the name of this huge being, but he was peerlessly imposing in his sleek black suit, with his shimmering skin and brilliant, watchful eyes. Another ancient ruler riding the ages on a foam of clones.

He tilted his head and felt Coulter's kiss invading his mouth like a soaked chaw of somebody else's tobacco.

With all the power in him, his every muscle singing, his whole heart and soul and mind devoted only to this one movement, he sprang upward. These

lizard forms were not as earthbound as human bodies. They didn't feel as much, either, not pain, not love, not pleasure. But they were ferociously strong, and he was strong, he had kept himself well, understanding now the obsessive hammering away he had done at Gold's in Wichita. He'd scared people, the way he would swim laps like a machine. He hadn't known why his body was like this, just that he needed the swimming, the running, the boxing, the karate, all of it, needed it and devoured it.

The guard had made one mistake, early on. He'd seen him as human and bound him as human, careful of the delicate skin of a much more fragile creature than a seraph. He ripped his arms free with ease.

Unfortunately, the gun had gone. They'd left it with him only to amuse themselves with his disappointment when it was taken. "These sell for a nice price," the guard had said as he removed it.

For a moment, there was nobody between him and the great control panel. He grabbed a lever, pulled it. Grabbed another, did the same. The action was so damn satisfying that he growled, he screamed, as he pulled another and another.

Echidna roared, her husband-Beleth, that was the name-leaped toward him-and came crashing into Mugabe, who threw himself into his path. Samson turned, and Ann Coulter slashed him with a molting hook, drawing his skin open and revealing the muscles beneath. He shrieked in agony. It felt good to draw off dry molt, of course, but raw like this, it was torment.

Coulter Union! Her human disguise was brilliant-a spokesman for the aims of the Corporation so extreme that she made them look ridiculous.

Wylie leaped, giving Beleth a head kick that he could feel smash the skull. Gabbling, his brains flying, he pitched back into his own onrushing guards.

"Samson's aircar," Ann shouted. "Go!"

"It's ensouled!"

"Of course it is, you damn fool, go!"

There was a whispering crackle and Ann flew into a thousand red chunks. One of the guards now turned his weapon toward Wylie, who hit the floor as he pushed Echidna into the line of fire.

Her legs and bottom half, spurting fountains of blood, ran a few steps and collapsed at the feet of the surprised guard, while the top half, which had hit the floor smack on its bloody, waist-level base, uttered whistling gasps, waved its arms, and tore at its hair as shrieking, laughing children, who had

mistaken the whole thing for a game, surrounded it, running in and pinching and squealing and then running away.

As Wylie crossed the floor, he heard the snicker of more guns. Then a dozen outriders came swinging down from above on webs like thick ropes dripping with glue. But he was outside now, and the aircar was waiting there, its now unattended motorcycle escort lined up neatly on the ground.

He kicked them over and dove into the interior. Expecting the car to resist the entry of what would be a known enemy, he yanked the door down with all his might.

"Hello, Brother," the car said, and the voice hit Wylie with a shock like freezing water and the joy of the first morning of the world.

He hadn't heard his brother speak aloud in over thirty years, but he recognized his voice instantly.

When Wylie was just a tiny boy, his beloved older brother had been killed by Corporation marauders and his soul kidnapped. His brother had been a great soldier. They'd kept his Medal of Valor and his various orders in a glass case in the family room, proud mementos. Wylie had gone to the human world because it took courage, and he wanted to show that he, also, had the ability to fight well for the Union.

They swept into the air. "Brother," he said, "did they steal your soul?"

The car did not answer, and a flash of unease went through him. Abaddon was a place of deceptions, so maybe-

But then he looked down at what they were circling, and saw that the lens below him was now surrounded by as vast a crowd as he had ever seen. But things were not going well. The blackness of it had turned angry red, and it was boiling like a lava pool, and the surging crowd, in trying to escape, was instead falling in from all sides. Smoke and steam rose from the massive pyre.

"Are they dying?" Wylie asked.

"I think they're going through. But it's not right. It's very not right."

"Brother, has your soul been trapped in this car all this time?"

"Hell no, I stole the car yesterday. I've got a lot of bodies. I use them like scuba gear, to dig into the physical whenever I need to. And-uh-oh!"

There was an angry rattle against the vehicle, which proceeded to shoot upward so fast that Wylie blacked out momentarily. When he came to, flashes were speeding past the windows. "Pulse/Strider," his brother said.

This was a weapon that delivered pulses of discrete superexcited electron

plasmas that could instantaneously incinerate a car like this.

"Fly me, Brother."

"Me? I don't know how!"

"You were a hell of a pilot as a boy."

"How could you know? You were...dead."

"I'm an operative just like everybody else in the family. They were tricked into believing they'd captured my soul."

Mean red light filled the car, and it tumbled wildly through the air.

"Brother, I need you to remember your piloting skills! Do it now!"

The words cause memory to flood Wylie's mind, of being at the controls of a machine like this, of handling the twin sticks, of firing its weapons at sky targets, of having a glorious time in mock dogfights and evasion training.

He'd expected to be a pilot, but his aptitude tests were what had gotten him dragooned into intelligence. That, and he now also realized, the fact that his brother was already an agent. He remembered it all now, his whole life as a Union kid, his training...and something so poignant that he could almost not bear the recollection. He'd had a girl. He'd married her. He had a wife here on Abaddon, in the Union, the one good place that remained.

The car rattled, there was a flash, and this time the cabin filled with smoke and the fire alarm started.

"Fly me!"

Wylie gripped the controls. He swung the car from side to side, spotted the telltale sparkle of the Pulse/Strider installation on the ground. He turned hard, thrust the nose down, opened the throttle and slammed both sticks hard over.

The car shot like a diving eagle straight toward the installation. Pulses poured out. They would be forced to go on continuous triangulation, and his random jiggling of the controls meant that not even he was sure of the trajectory.

He was nearly on top of them when they began to try patterns. Now, this was bad, this might work for them. "Are you unarmed?" he asked his brother.

"Of course I'm unarmed, I'm a sports car!"

"Just asking. Hold on!"

"My keel hurts, I can feel my keel going!" If an ensoulable machine's nervous system was properly designed, the soul inhabiting it would sense it the same way it did a body.

Wylie leveled out. He was now speeding across open land, directly

toward some aristo's hunting estate. It was fashionable, he could see the house like something out of the English countryside. His brother said, "I see twelve bogies coming down on us."

Wylie went into the forest, among the trees.

"You'll wreck me!"

He took some advice from Martin's son, Trevor. Just let yourself happen. His hands moved as they shot down a forest path, then up a stream. This far from the city, it wasn't so polluted, not even on the Corporation side where mentioning global warming drew a death sentence. But then again, practically everything drew a death sentence. Executions were not only a form of population control, they kept the masses both entertained and fed.

Then he saw a wall. The wall, the one the Corporation had built around the Union. It was gray, immense, and dead ahead. He pulled back on the sticks and hopped it, and suddenly everything changed.

Here were fields of swabe and borogrove and orchards full of trees heavy with lascos and spurls and nape. Everything was green, the sky was dusty blue rather than dirty brown, and he knew that there would be stars at night, a few stars. Here, it was illegal not to mention global warming.

"I'll take me back," his brother said.

"Yeah, since I don't know where I'm going."

"I'm pulsing our code but we could get a look-see from the Air Force, so if we do don't take evasive action. We are home, Brother."

Wylie's heart ached as he watched the rich green Union land speed below them. Home. And look at the houses, he could even see pretty shutters. Most unionists farmed. He had farmed, and he could see that the harvest was still coming in here and there. "Harvest is late."

"Winter's late, it's too warm. If only an eighth of the planet fights the good fight, we can't win, we can only lose slowly. The Gulf Stream stopped for four months this year. Avalon nearly froze while here in Aztlan, most of the maize crop burned."

"What about the Corporation? They must be feeling it, too."

"Farming's illegal there now." He paused for a long time. "I suppose you noticed what they're eating."

"I noticed."

They came down on a pebble driveway before a modest old sandstone, its worn carved serpents of luck and joy barely visible in its ancient walls. But this was home, all right, a place he now realized that he had felt as an absence

in his spirit for his whole time away.

He got out. "I wish you could come in, Brother."

"When this tour's over, I go back to my natural body forever, and I am looking forward to that, Wylie."

"I don't want to rattle around in the house alone!"

The arched wooden door opened. A figure stood back in the shadows, one lovely, tapering claw on the doorjamb.

Oh, it was impossible.

"Talía?"

"Aktriel?"

"Yes." His response was so automatic that it required no thought. Aktriel was his real name, and he was a Department of Defense information officer. After pilot training, his work had been involved in the issuance of directives and proclamations, and he'd been sent to the human world because of his writing ability and his communications skills.

As she came out into the light, the car's horn beeped twice and it took off into the sky, turned, then raced back toward Corporation territory. For a moment, Aktriel watched it go, watched sadly, wishing that his brother would come out, understanding why he could not bear to live in the freedom of his real body even for a short time, only to have to return to that miserable thing and go back to his hellish work.

She came to him, her eyes lowered, tears flowing. He took her in his arms, and truly he was home again, and from such a far, far place. "I'd forgotten everything," he said.

She nodded against his shoulder.

"But where's your husband, Talía? Your family? Surely you have one. It's been years."

Arm in arm, they went into the dim, comfortable interior of the house. Memory flooded him as he walked into the broad central room with its white walls and sky blue ceiling, and the climbing flowers painted everywhere. His mother's hearth was here, his father's tall harvest boots still by the closet where he'd always kept them. Beside them, smaller, shorter boots. When he'd waded for the tender swabe, he'd worn them.

"Do you still farm?"

"It will always be a farm."

"Of course." The Union's goal of environmental balance meant that changing land use patterns was not done without major reason.

She took his hand. "Do you want me?"

He threw his arms around her, felt her heart beating against his. This love-how had he ever managed to leave it? She was his dear, dear one, the alpha and omega of his soul. When he could have farmed here forever and never left her side, why had he ever gone?

Then he remembered his little Kelsey and proud, strong Nick, children of two worlds. His kids, and they were out there on the front line with their mom, and if he stayed here they would be abandoned.

It was as hard a moment as he had ever known. The beauty of his wife was stunning, her scales so tiny and so pale that she looked like a doll, her hair a wisp of delicate white smoke around her head, her eyes bluer than a fine earth sky, and deeper than the deepest ocean.

How he loved this woman, his friend of his youth and childhood, his dear companion.

But there were vows of the lips and vows of the blood, and his vow to those children on one-moon earth was a vow of the blood.

"I'm so glad it's over," she said. She gazed into his eyes. The Corporation seraph were remembered by man as nephilim, as archons, as demons. Mankind called Union folk angels or daikini, sky dancers.

"I'm glad it's over, too."

"But you sigh, husband."

He drew her close to him. These were simple houses, a central great room, with kitchen, dining, and storage in one wing and sleeping quarters in the other. They had been living in these houses forever, almost literally. They had no age, nothing here did. The Union was with God. There was nothing to count.

But he had forgotten how good a woman's hair could smell, sprinkled as hers was with the dust of flowers. It fell, sometimes, on that brilliant, glowing brow, that was almost as soft as human skin. She was almost as beautiful as Brooke, really, but the truth was that even to seraph, the humans were incredibly beautiful. It was why Corporation types had gone to rape them in the first place. It was why Unionists cherished and protected them as best they could. There was something about the humans that was close to God, very close, and you felt toward them both a desire to protect and a desire to worship.

Kelsey, Nick, Brooke. His buddy Matt. Cigars and absinthe. The fun of it all, of being in the human form, of looking like them and being able to kiss

human lips and walk their pretty streets, to look up into the sacred blue of their skies, to lift his face to clean rain and listen to wind in the night, to watch TV, to go to the movies and eat popcorn, to feel warm human hands on his human skin, to sink into the dark of her.

"You're far away," Talia said.

"I'm just in shock. Seeing you again. Remembering you. Realizing-oh, my Talia, all that I've forgotten." He took her again, held her close. "All that I've missed."

She saw the truth, though. She knew him so well. They had been children together, born in the same basket, their eggs warmed by the same egg ladies. Their families had entwined their destinies long before they were born.

Trying to hide his tears, he turned away from her. "I belong to you," he said, feeling the twin pulls of his fiercely divided loyalties. Again, he hugged her, and again felt Brooke's absence in his arms.

Her eyes met his. The question that flickered in them now was a dark one. Then she held up her hand.

Her Electrum ring glowed softly. His ring. He took her hand and kissed it. She laughed a little, deep in her throat, and he wanted her. He wanted her so badly that he began to exude from under every scale on his neck. She brought a towel and wiped it gently. Her hands touching him evoked desire so great that it seemed beyond his trembling flesh, beyond belief, beyond body itself, a longing that was literally fantastic.

But if he did this then he could not leave her, not a second time, it was too cruel. And yet he had the children, the vow, and the other dear wife. And he knew, as soon as he was with Brooke again, he would lose himself in the wonders of human life and human love.

"It's only a few minutes," she said softly. She drew up the wooden blinds, and he saw in the evening light a diamond hanging in midair. In its facets, he could see another house, lights just coming on in the windows, and a small form at one of those windows looking out.

Kelsey was waiting for her daddy to come back.

"I have the permanent salve," she said. "Choose."

He took her hands. "We always knew the danger of the mission. I have a life there, now. I have children who need their father." And he wished-he just wished.

"You won't remember me."

"You'll find somebody else," he said.

"Don't mock my love, please."

He would leave her forever wanting him. If only he had known it would be this hard.

He had known. She had known.

She began to apply the salve, and he let her. It sank deep into him, into the most secret corners of his deepest cells, and as it did, this old homestead began to look stranger and stranger. He noticed that blinds closed up here, that there were no chairs but only these strange, three-legged stools. He saw the spinning wheel and the loom, ancient and obviously heavily used, but who used looms nowadays? And the grate and the big iron cook pot, so strange and archaic, and candles instead of electric lights, all so just plain weird.

But then she did an odd thing. She applied salve to herself.

"But no, you mustn't."

"Look, the sun is setting and Kelsey's gotta be getting scared. And Nick's liable to blow our heads off if we come up in the dark."

"Brooke?"

"Yes? Hello?"

Talia had been with him all along. Now, as they changed from seraph to human, fixed by the DNA salve, he threw his arms around her. "It's you, it's always been you! Did you know?"

"Not until I followed you through Samson's little gateway. Then I knew."

"But you escaped from the Corporation, you came home, you came to meet me even though you could've stayed back."

"To protect you. Remember what I am."

"The Guardian Clan." He laughed a little. "You really are a guardian angel."

"Who you need, Mr. Drinker and Smoker and hell-raising daredevil-the idea that any sane person would volunteer for an assignment like this!"

"It had to be done."

"Which is why I love you so." She smiled up at him, and as she did, her face shimmered, the scales smoothing in blurry waves, the brow widening, the cheeks growing less narrow, the eyes deeper, less wide, more human, the nostrils opening more, the lips softening and becoming red, the teeth thickening into human teeth. And he could feel by his own internal shivering that he was doing the same.

This was not shape-shifting. This was fundamental DNA transformation.

When his brother ended his tour of duty, this would be his house. He would reenter his old body here, he would find his wife and bring her here, and there would be eggs here, and the egg ladies would brighten the house with their laughter again, in the coming years, in the ages.

But Talia and Aktriel were dying into the human form.

She took his hand more firmly. "Ready?"

"How do I look?"

"Perfect. Or no, you're missing that mole under your left ear."

"Whose gonna notice?"

"You know your daughter. She's inherited your following and watching instincts."

"Do we need to take salve for them?"

"Born of earth as they were? They have the DNA to shift, but not the skill. They'll stay as they are, with their good seraphim hearts in those lovely human forms."

"Are you gonna be on my case again?"

"Always."

Then they were in their familiar woods, and for a fleeting moment his soul was in both worlds. Brooke said, "I've got something on the tip of my tongue."

He shook his head. "I feel like I just woke up from a dream I thought I'd never forget."

"Which was?"

"I forget."

She came to him and kissed him. "We've all been through too much. And it has to end. It ends here." She looked toward the house. "It's time to return to normal life."

"Can we?"

"I think we can. I mean, have you noticed that it's six and nothing's happened yet? No 2012 shift here."

The moon was yellow in the eastern sky, coming toward full now, rising in splendor.

They both fell silent, and both for the same reason. "Why are we out in the woods, Wylie?"

"We're-" He stopped. Why were they out here? "I came looking for you," he said at last. "That's it."

"And I came to find you."

"I was in the cave?"

"Well, you're here."

"I feel like I was on Mars or something. A million miles away."

Suddenly she threw herself on him. In the gathering dark, he felt very alone. Odd. Homesick even, but for where? His house was a quarter of a mile away. His only house.

"I think our kids are gonna be missing us," she said.

They headed up the hill.

The love that is so great that it cannot be seen, that seems not even to exist, but is in fact the silent binding that confirms the world, followed them, lingering close as if to enjoy the warmth of what they had found together.

"Where have you guys been?" Nick yelled as they came up out of the woods. "It's getting darker and darker around here!"

"I got lost," Wylie said.

"And he got found."

"You got lost? How? I thought you'd been killed." Nick threw his arms around his father, and Wylie felt his surging youth and his love for his dad and then Kelsey's, also, from farther down by his knee, holding Bearish up like an offering to her household god.

As he entered with his children into the calm light, he heard the calling of another father whose desperation began pouring into his mind the moment he was inside the house.

He remembered the book and Martin and Trevor, and their quest to recapture their invaded world. "I've got work to do," he said.

Nick followed him upstairs. "They're in terrible trouble," he said. Then he added, "I've written some."

Wylie stopped. He turned to his son. "Oh?"

"Do you imagine that I don't know what I am, Dad? After what I've been through? What I've done for you?"

He looked at his son, he thought, as if for the first time. "What you are?"

"What we are, as a family. We're not the same, Dad, we're in communication with other worlds, we have powers and I know it and you can't say otherwise. That's why they tried to kill us, and why they failed. I defended us, too, dad, and I'm owed."

"Owed what?"

"You have to take me into your confidence, and you will never go into a gateway again like that without me to help you!"

A memory flashed, of a cottage in the woods. Funny memory, like a dream. Less than a dream, just a daytime imagining, the stuff of a story, no more.

"I, uh-"

"The solstice is coming and Martin and Trevor need us, Dad. But you're, like, lost in your own mind all of a sudden, and right now is the worst possible time for you to lose the thread." He paused. "Actually, I've written a lot. I've written the entire story of what you and Mom just did on Abaddon and who you are, and you can read that later, because right now we have a huge emergency and Dad, there is no time!"

He went into the office.

From downstairs, Brooke called, "What's going on?"

"Nick just wrote his first short story." He sat down at the laptop. "Talia," he said, "it's a beautiful name. But who's this Aktriel? You've got to find a better name than that."

"Dad, you'll read that later. Right now, it's time to write, because when you do write, something new is gonna happen."

"Nothing's there. I can't write."

Nick grabbed his hands, thrust them onto the keyboard. "Do it!"

After a moment, there was a whisper in his mind. He typed a few words.

"Trevor, Dad, you need to write about Trevor."

It was as if lightning had blasted him and shattered him, and he had a vivid image of a vast room lit by a curiously affecting, even disturbing, glow, a light that was blue and very alive, and communicated more clearly than any scream that it was in terrible trouble.

His fingers moved on the keys, then sped.

"At last," Nick said. "Trevor, buddy, listen up."

Wylie was at his desk, but at the same time in another place deep underground, and there was heard as another voice. "And the seventh angel poured out his vial into the air; and there came a great voice out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, 'It is done.'"

But it was not done, not for the seven people who were struggling in that dark underground hell for their lives and the life of an entire world.

"There's a gateway down there and they don't see it, Dad."

"I know."

"Then write it! Say where it is if you know!"

"But they can't come here, they can't read this!"

"Just do it!"

Silently, in the dark of the great cavern where Martin and his little band struggled to break the soul traps, the hidden gateway to Abaddon slid slowly into focus, and began to open.

TWENTY-FOUR

SOLSTICE 2012 ON THE TWO EARTHS A TALE OF SEVEN SOLDIERS

AS MIDNIGHT APPROACHED, THE FOURTEEN great lenses ranged around two-moon earth shimmered darkly. There was nobody to see, though, but for a scattering of seraph soldiers, and gangs of wanderers lined up, waiting to conduct their new masters into the cities that still stood, and out into the flats of the new lands, where enormous shantytowns were still under feverish construction, amid heaps of dead sea creatures and dead wanderers.

"Dad!"

He stopped. Came back to the world of his office. Turned to Nick, tried not to shout at him, which was what he wanted to do, to tell him to just shut up!

"Dad, you need to focus on Martin and Trevor."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, just do it!"

His fingers shot back to the keys, began flying.

Downstairs, little Kelsey also ranged across the night of the other world, looking for Winnie. Lindy, Brooke had found. She was on a truck that was running down to Denver, which was intended to become a major resettlement area for the Corporation's starving billions. There her destiny would be simple: like all wanderers, she was to be worked to death.

On the sunlit side of the earth, the gigantic flats that had replaced much of the mid-Pacific were covered by an impenetrable fog, as trillions of tons of gasses boiled up out of the drying soil. Where India and China had been was a new ocean, stormy and unsettled, floating with what appeared to be islands that were actually made of furniture and ice chests and logs and carpeting and toys and siding and plastic doors, flowerpots, Styrofoam cups, shipping beads, any container that was closed and would float, and on these islands were rolling hills of the corpses of cattle and dogs and monkeys and all manner of beast, and human corpses with pale-glazed eyes, and swarming masses of gulls and crows, and hordes of pelicans flying from place to place,

their craws bulging.

They all saw this, the Dale family, in their new free minds, and as she watched, Kelsey sang softly to Bearish, whom she cradled as if he was the whole world. She sang the ancient lullaby her mother had taught her, "Dereen Day," that had come up from the quiet hearths of the Union and into the quiet hearths of Ireland a very long time ago, a song shared between angels and men. Her voice came up the stairs from the lonely pool of light where she sat carrying in her arms not only Bearish but all the dead of a whole world. She hummed to them and sang in her little voice. "Dereen Day, the nightjar calls upon the heath..."

Outside, night swept on and the evening star shone on the peaceful horizon.

She had been sending her mind down the roads of the other earth for a long time, had this very private child called Kelsey, for she shared with Winnie the same bond that her brother did with Trevor. So she sang not only to her Bearish but to Winnie's, whom she had found in a cradle of snow, the night flakes whispering along his fur, as they whispered across all the little corner of Nebraska where Winnie had given everything she had to give, and laid down.

Now, as Kelsey sang to Bearish and Winnie's Bearish, she sang also to Winnie, to the silver of the ice that crusted her cheeks, and her red car coat that was being worried by the winter wind, and to all the little lumps in the ocean of little lumps that were left everywhere on earth that wanderers had passed, each one somebody whose strength had not been enough to meet the Corporation's cruel test. Survival of the fittest-the Corporation's way-was not the way of the true of heart, human or not.

In the office, Nick and now Brooke along with him, struggled to get Wylie to concentrate on the place that counted, the soul prison where Martin and Trevor and their few struggled for the life of their world.

"The souls," Brooke whispered, "can you see?"

Wylie sighed like a weaver does working on a difficult knot. The only sound in the house was Kelsey's singing coming up from below.

"Okay," he said. He began to type again.

But he saw the lens that stood in the ruin of the Giza plateau. It glowed angry red now, and red light leaped out of it, a huge column that reflected off the shattered city and the desert, making it appear as if the whole landscape was on Mars.

With it came a sound, at first a crackling like the rattling of a great curtain, and then another sound, a snap, then another louder one, and the lens seemed to shimmer, to shudder within itself, and seraph were suddenly walking away from it, each carrying a little bundle or a suitcase, some carrying briefcases or rolling bags, some in black, some like hurrying officials in hats and coats, some carrying their babies or baskets of eggs, or with their childrens' hands in theirs. They came clutching receipts for the tickets they had bought, and began to stream out past the Mena hotel toward Cairo, and up and down the banks of the Nile.

Another sound came, then, the gigantic spitting noise, a volcano makes when it vomits lava. Some of the colonists turned, others kept on, intent on getting to whatever corner of the new lands they had bought. Already, some were boarding buses that had been smashed in the explosion of the pyramid and trying to get them started, while others threw out the skeletons of the tourists who had died there, and marveled over their delicate, colorful clothes.

With a roar so huge that it would over the next few hours echo around the entire world, a massive red column of material shot out of the hole where the lens had been. The lens itself arced into the stratosphere, turning over and over, and as it turned changing shape, twisting and melting and then falling and becoming black, then blacker still, and landing in the Arabian desert not far from Mecca, a city of corpses of those who had died praying, surrounded by a desert coated with wanderers who had fallen beneath the sun.

None saw it strike, but Wylie and Brooke did, and Nick and so also Trevor and Martin. Deep in their traps, the souls of Lindy and Winnie sensed some signal from the outside, and for the first time since she had been pulled from her body, Lindy realized that she was not buried alive in a coffin, hideously and inexplicably unable to die. She began to call the name of the strongest and most trusted person she knew.

"I hear my wife," Martin said. "Lindy is calling me!"

At the same time, though, diamonds began to appear in the air, shimmering black, as Samson prepared to move the souls that would make him rich in Abaddon.

Winnie, who had been alone and cold and feeling drawn to some great joy she could not reach, now felt herself in the arms of her friend Kelsey, and heard a lullaby her mom had sung her every night of her life, "the nightjars calling upon the heath..." and rested in the knowledge that somebody was at last saving her from the monsters who had bound her here.

In Mecca, a new black stone now lay not far from the Alhajar Al-Aswad, and of the same material and the same shape and color, for the last one that fell here had started from exactly the same place thirteen thousand years ago, as Abaddon failed in its last attempt to steal the human worlds, and the raw hole it had left had been filled, and the pyramid built to close the wound, and remain as a warning-one that Abaddon had spent thirteen millennia tricking and deceiving mankind into forgetting.

The rest of the material that had blasted like lava from the huge gateway came to the top of its trajectory and began sailing back down. Far below, the seraph began to see arms and legs of their own kind, torsos, heads, shoes, falling around them, striking one and then another of them and causing their yellow brains to splash out. Heads bounded along like great hailstones, or rocks catapulted down by a siege army. As they bent to protect children or possessions or eggs, they were smashed, they were all smashed in a maelstrom of destruction from above that seemed never to end, a storm made of body parts.

A roar of terror and woe rose up from their throats, but was quickly buried in the wet thudding, as the living seraph disappeared beneath the mountains of their own dead.

Brooke lay her hand over Wylie's for a moment. He glanced up at her, and in that glance they shared exultation, perhaps also sorrow at the suffering that was being experienced, but it was nothing compared to the rage of battle that was breaking out in the lands of the Corporation, gnashing so intense that it was shaking even the pearly walls that enclosed the Union, and rustling the leaves in the peaceful lands they protected.

They were being torn apart, the minions of Echidna, who had ruled for so long. Wylie looked for Samson, but did not see him. He wanted to identify him, because Samson, who knew human customs and understood gateways, was not defeated until he was destroyed.

"They need us," Nick said from behind closed eyes. "They need us now, Dad."

"I can't help where the story goes."

Nick pushed his father away from the laptop.

"Hey."

"Dad, it's another deception! They're fascinating you with their own destruction, so you won't go where you're needed."

He began to type, and when Wylie tried to stop him, Brooke intervened

with a sharp shake of her head.

Nick's eyes closed. His fingers flew.

Before him was a huge room. It was lit by faint blue light that dwindled in the massive space to a blue haze on the distance. The haze flickered slightly, and then he saw why. It was coming from millions upon millions of lozenge-shaped tubes, each emplaced in a socket that was connected to thick, black cables that ran between the hundreds and hundreds of rows.

Martin was quite familiar with the large cartouches that were depicted on the walls of the Temple of Hathor in the Dendera complex. He had not dated this temple, but he had known since he'd read of Al North's ordeal, that the accepted explanation for the oblong cartouches, that they were simply borders meant to enclose hieroglyphics, was not correct.

In each one, a multicolored light flickered along a copper filament. It twisted and turned, flying now against the glass of the tube, now twisting itself around the filament, now flashing in a million colors.

The light was souls, and he understood now what Abaddon's ages-long propaganda had done to us. It had made us forget the science of the soul so that we would be helpless when the three earths again crossed the plane of the galaxy and they would have their chance-this chance-to return. It had made us forget what these tubes were, which were soul prisons. It had given us generations of scientists who considered the soul a "supernatural" idea and so stayed away from any study of it. But there was no supernatural, there were only phenomena that had been understood, quantified, and measured, and phenomena that had not. That the patterns induced in fields of electrons by changing conditions in a body would persist after death and become a sort of plasma, conscious and richly aware of its memories, had never been imagined. It had been assumed, if it was thought about at all, that any electromagnetic activity in the nervous system simply ceased when the body died.

And so Martin's earth had been defenseless when the seraph returned-as ours will be, also, on the inevitable day when in their greedy, starved fury, they come bursting in on us in whatever cunning new way they may devise.

Above the ocean of Samson's soul traps, the long lines of gateways were sparking and shimmering. It would only be moments before it was too late. The souls, seeming to sense this, flickered frantically in their prisons.

There came from along the narrow path between two rows of soul traps, a clanging. It was young Mike in the gloom, hammering at one of the tubes

with a rock he had found on the way in.

The sound echoed up and down the great space, rising in intensity until it was the ringing of a great bell, then falling again as he grew tired, finally stopping.

Trevor said, "I think there's a seam here." He was down between two rows, where the tubes were connected to the sockets that held them.

"What's next, Dad?" Nick asked his father.

"You're the writer now, son."

"They're running out of time!"

"And you're frozen. It happens."

"Dad, pick it up."

"I can't pick it up, it's yours now!"

Nick sat. Nothing happened. Wylie waited. His mind remained blank.

Brooke said, "What about Al North?"

That did it. Nick's fingers began to type.

Al North had done wrong and been wrong, but he had never wavered from his duty as he understood it. He knew where his fault lay and what it would inevitably do to him, but also as long as he had consciousness in him, he would strive to right the wrongs he had created.

Even so, those wrongs had led to a horrible catastrophe and billions of deaths, and no small act of heroism could rectify such a tremendous mistake. He could no longer reach the surface of the earth, but this desperate place was far beneath it, and here he could still maneuver.

"Look!" Martin pointed to what appeared to be a star in the vault of the space. At that same instant something rushed past beneath his feet. He looked down in time to see scales, iridescent purple in the blue light, but then the thing was gone.

An instant later Mike screamed as coils surged up around him.

Al North saw all this with the clarity-and, indeed, the peace-of somebody who had accepted his life in full, and was prepared to pay the debt he had incurred. He understood the secret of hell, that souls who go there forfeit their right to be. They no longer have a place in this universe or any universe, not until time ends, and a new idea comes to replace the one that is the present creation.

And then, maybe.

He who had done evil accepted the rightness of this.

Still, he wanted to repair what he could, and there was something he

could do here. They had all forgotten, in their terror, to just let themselves happen, to trust the grace that was immediately and always ready to support them. He forgave them. He hoped for them.

Which was a very great thing, that he could surmount his anger and his disappointment and his arrogance long enough to do that one tiny thing, to feel hope.

It seemed small, but the energy of such an act on the part of a lost soul is huge, and the tiny spark of goodness that was still within him was easily enough to open ten million soul traps in one flashing, electric instant.

A roar of voices burst out, the faint blue light became a million times brighter. Memories, thoughts, pleas, cries of relief—a huge, gushing roar of human surprise and joy—flew at Martin and his little band in the form of pictures of happy moments, loving in the covers, running by the sea, leaves whirling in autumn, Christmas tree lights, girls dancing, men in blue water, hamburgers, the faces of happy dogs, and song in a million verses of hallelujah.

In this mass, a thousand great serpents came screaming up from the depths of the place and down from the shuddering gateways, their bodies burning from the goodness around them that they could not bear, and they flew into the air like great pillars of fire, writhing and screaming in the sea of song.

They were another design like the outriders and the nighthawks, especially fashioned to terrify human beings, but they had been unleashed too late to save Samson's wealth. No doubt, the huge snakes were a rental, and he hadn't wanted to spend the money unless he had to.

The song ended. The hot bones of the serpents tumbled down through the ruined masses of shattered tubes. The gateways shimmered and went out.

Samson's enormous cry of rage echoed, faded, and died away. He dropped to a stool in his simple room, his narrow head bowed. Outside, the city roared. Another revolution, another aristocracy burned, and now this, his fortune lost.

So it went, in the unsettled misery of this age.

Unnoticed by the raging crowds, the hour of midnight had passed. The weak had won the day.

With a quick swipe of his hand across his face, Samson shifted into his human form. Outside, torches flared. Feet pounded on the stairs, fists pounded on his door.

He stepped through his quickly closing gateway, but not into his old world, not into Martin's world. He had a plan. If there was vengeance to be tasted, he intended to drink deep.

"Dad, he's in our woods!"

They got their shotguns and took off after him, both of them, and Brooke and Kelsey agreed that they'd gone mad.

The woods, though, were empty. From along the ridge above the house, they could see the lights of Harrow. Faintly, one of the church bells sounded. Snow was falling, whispering in the woods, drawing pale lines along the dark branches of the winter trees. The peace here was so deep that it seemed impossible that Samson could have passed this way.

They went back to the house, the two of them. They lingered on the deck.

"The Belt of Orion," Wylie said, gazing up as the snow clouds made a window for the stars.

"And his bow," Nick said, pointing.

"You did good, Nick."

"Thanks, Dad. Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Is it real? The book?"

"I thought Samson was in our woods. But he wasn't."

They went inside, then, and made a fire for the girls. Popcorn was popped, and hot chocolate produced, and Wylie even managed to slip a goodly shot of whiskey into his.

They spent the remainder of this quiet night speaking of the things of ordinary life. "Past midnight," Nick said. "I think we won."

Nothing more was said, and after a time, Nick played cards with Kelsey and Wylie, and Brooke broke out the celebration cognac, a hundred-year-old bottle that was sipped at moments of victory.

Tomorrow, Christmas vacation began for the kids, and in the very late hours, Wylie went into his wife's arms for what felt like the first time in an age.

At breakfast, the radio said, "The world ended last night, but it seems that nobody noticed. New Age gurus from China to Scotland stood on mountaintops and chanted, but guess what, Chicken Little stayed home. We are now living on the first day beyond the end of the ancient Mayan calendar, a date that has no number in their measurement. But then again, they went extinct a long time ago."

Later in the morning, Nick found boot prints back in the woods, where Samson's gateway had been.

"Could've been left by us," Wylie told him.

"I was wearing sneakers when we came out here. You had on a sock. One sock."

"I went out in the woods without shoes? In the dead of winter?"

Nick nodded. "We did not make these tracks, Dad."

They'd put a throw rug over the bullet holes in the floor above the crawl space, and they both looked at it at the same time, and for the same reason. It was now gone and the floor was unmarked.

"Brooke, what about that little rug in the kitchen?"

"I put that horror back in the mudroom where it belongs and leave it there please. In the future, if you want to rearrange my house, submit your request in writing."

"Dad, it was all real! It happened! And we're-" He stopped. Frowned a little, shook his head. "I lost it," he said. "It was right on the tip of my tongue."

Wylie called Matt, but nobody had reported anybody strange wandering around in Harrow, or anywhere in Lautner County, for that matter.

"What about the body in my crawl space? Is that resolved?"

"You want me to come out there with a net?"

"I thought you were gonna arrest me."

There was a silence. Then, "Oh, yeah, you've got that absinthe, not to mention the cigar theft issue."

He had no memory whatsoever of Al North, then.

They talked, then, about the state of the pheasant population, which was excellent. "Matt wants to hunt tomorrow," Wylie called to Nick, "you game?"

Nick looked at him. "He doesn't remember a thing, does he?"

"You want to go or not?"

" 'Course I do."

Wylie made plans to meet with Matt before dawn, and go to some of the walk-in land over in Smith County. "You sure there's been nothing odd, Matt? No cars stolen around here, say?"

"In your neck of the woods? There hasn't been any crime of any kind over there at all, ever. What the hell's the matter with you today, anyway? Is this some new insanity? I don't hunt with crazy people."

"Read me the blotter for last night."

"The blotter?"

"Look, it's not gonna kill you, now read the damn thing!"

"Okay! 16:32, Miss Wicks's chickens are in Elm Street again. Ticketed. 18:05, car fire, put out by occupant. 20:22, kids smoking and playing loud music behind Wilson's Feed and Seed, sent home."

"That was it? That was what we paid you for last night?"

"We got a possible stolen truck. Jim Riggs can't find his farm banger. But it's probably gonna be that Willie of his, hid it for a joke. That kid's got an unfortunate sense of humor."

So nothing strange had happened in this quiet little corner of Kansas for a long time, unless it was Samson who had gotten that truck, of course.

Or no, there was one thing: the miserable accident that had befallen poor William Nunnally.

"So, what's new in the Nunnally case?"

"Nothin.' Coroner's report says it was exposure. He was high, it seems. Got a lotta meth heads down that way. Damndest thing. The family's not gonna sue you, for some strange reason, going down there and terrorizing them like you did."

"So it was just one of those things?"

"That would be true, crazy man."

The night passed uneventfully, Wylie and Nick got up at four-thirty, and as the sun rose, they were hunting. True to form, Wylie over-or undershot every rise he got, and all his pheasants lived to see another day.

Nick, however, bagged Christmas dinner.

EPILOGUE

THE INHERITORS

NEW WORLDS ARE MADE IN two places: the ruins of the old and the minds of the survivors.

The captured souls had instantaneously returned to their wandering bodies-all but those of the dead, who had begun another kind of journey.

Those who returned to life found themselves waking like sleepwalkers are known to do, in unaccustomed and impossible places. Lindy discovered herself riding in a jammed truck that was being driven by people who were equally mystified by where they were going and why.

At the first town they came to, they stopped the truck. Everybody was thirsty and hungry, and many of them were hurt, mostly with injured feet, which Lindy certainly had. They pulled over in Lora, Colorado, which they found empty. There was no power. All phone lines were dead.

Lindy remembered up until they had entered Third Street Methodist. The rest-she just had no idea. None at all. But she knew who she was and where she was from, and she also knew that she was going home. No matter what, she was returning to Harrow and to Martin and Trevor and her dear little Winnie.

This was far from impossible, as there were abandoned cars and trucks everywhere. She found a serviceable-looking hybrid that was full of gas. Her idea was that she was about three hundred miles west of home, so the hybrid would get her there with gas to spare.

She and some of the others from the Truck Gang, as they called themselves, broke into a place called the Lora Cafe. The milk was rotted, the eggs were higher than a kite, and there was no gas to cook with, so she contented herself with Cheerios washed down by water. They shared out the breakfast cereals, the cans of beans and soup, and took off in their various directions, all of them obsessed with the same thing: home.

Lindy did not care to travel with anybody else. She wasn't sure what might happen. The world had collapsed. Then, for whatever unknown reason, her coffin nightmares had ended and here she was. She had obviously been

walking for miles and miles, but she had no memory of it at all.

The car had a GPS but it didn't manage to pick up any satellites, so she simply drove east on 70. Frequently, she had to go around abandoned vehicles, some of them in lines miles long, and travel cross country in the bounding car. It held together, though, well enough, and soon she was heading into familiar little Harrow.

There were people here and there, looking for the most part like they'd just come up after a tornado had passed, to see what was left.

Winnie said, "I can come back."

The voice was so clear that for a moment she thought that her daughter was sitting in the backseat. She shook her head. Seeing Third Street Methodist, she experienced a surge of terror so great that she had to stop the car right there in the middle of the street.

"Mom?"

She did not open her eyes. She'd lost her kids, her husband, everything. There was no more Winnie and that voice had not been Trevor.

Then the car door opened.

She looked up into the smiling face of the most beautiful, most wonderful man in the world. She could not get out of the car. She tried, but she was shaking too hard, her hands just went out and went clutching toward her Martin, and then his arms were coming, they were strong around her, they were taking her and lifting her, and she felt his lips upon her lips and heaven came and lifted her.

There were a thousand whispered words, but no words could express the meaning of this meeting. Her husband's and her son's eyes were strangely dark, and hers were, too, they told her, and they told her that this was good, it was a miracle, it was the future of mankind in their eyes, dark still, but there would be light.

"What happened to us?" she asked as they drove out toward the Smoke Hills and home.

"There was an earthquake," Martin said at last. "That affected the entire planet. And we're not out of the woods yet. But we're learning how to work in new ways. How to fix things."

"A lot is wrong," Trevor said.

Home was one of them, she soon discovered, and it was very wrong, so wrong that when she saw it, she burst into tears. "We can't clean this up," she wailed. She looked in disbelief at the melted, crazy furniture, at the twisted

ruins of her kitchen. "What did this? This was no earthquake."

"2012 came and went," Martin said at last. "It turns out that the old Maya knew a lot. They calculated the return of-well, of-"

"Evil," Trevor said simply. "Evil was here, but it failed." He paused. "And it had a good effect, because fighting it transformed us. I guess that's why you're supposed to love your enemy."

He fell silent, then, and in his silence and with it, she could hear something that was a voice and yet not a voice. It was more than a voice. She could hear engineers and physicists like herself and architects and workmen all gathered in a great chorus of plans and work and effort. "We're going to put the world back together again," she said.

Martin said, "We've changed. The human mind is not the same, and a lot of people-the bad ones, I guess-are they gone? Could they be gone?"

They knew, then, that this terrible attack had also been a cleansing, because they could feel by its absence that the weight of wicked souls had been lifted.

Lindy was the first to utter the words that had been on all of their lips unspoken, from the moment they had found each other. "What about Winnie?"

Martin shook his head. "We believe that she didn't make it."

"What do you mean?"

"Mom, you just need to let yourself happen. Don't think. Just-be with us. Part of us."

"My daughter is missing! Where's Bobby? Where are the state police, the FBI? The FBI gets involved in child disappearances. And what about our Jenny Alert? Where's our Jenny Alert!"

He came to her and she didn't want to do it, but she let him hold her because she had spent what seemed like an eon trapped in that strange somewhere-or-other trying to find him and to feel him where he ought to be and wasn't. "My baby's not bad, there's nothing wrong with her, she's hardly had a chance to live!"

She had to accept. But it wasn't going to be easy, because it was unfair that her dear little girl suffer the same fate as the wicked, it was just really, really unfair!

Night fell, and Trevor made a place for himself on the floor of their little office, because his room was destroyed, and they did not want to disturb Winnie's room.

It was cold and without electricity it got dark early on the twenty-second of December, and as it got dark, Lindy agonized over her lost child. But under their quilt that she had made when she was first married, it was wonderfully warm. They were dirty, though, and the warmth was ripening them. There was no water to wash but that, also, did not prevent her from being Martin's wife again, and their bodies in the night were glad.

Mommy?

Lindy's eyes flew open. She cried out. Martin's hand caressed her cheek. "Sleep, my love." He came close and kissed her. "From hell to heaven," he murmured. Her whole heart, her blood, her soul took deepest joy in those words.

Mommy?

She leaped from the bed, ran to the window. "It's her!"

Martin came to her, put his arms around her waist from behind. She pulled away from him. "Honey-"

"Shut up!"

Hi, Mommy.

"Oh, baby, my baby, I hear you! Where are you?"

Silence.

"She's out there somewhere! Martin, she's out there and we have to find her. Martin, the nighthawks-"

"Sh! Sh! There are no nighthawks, they're gone."

"How in hell do you know?"

Martin tried again to hold her, but she pulled away. "Listen!"

"Lindy, love..." She was hurt. Everybody was hurt. So hurt.

Then Trevor was there. Listen to her, Dad.

He turned around. Trevor came to them, nodded toward the window.

Then Martin heard it, the ticking of an engine out in the dark. An electric surge of fear went through him. They had no gun. They still had no gun!

Then he saw it, moving slowly closer to the house, a rattling old car with only the single light.

"That's Bobby," he said.

Then she was running, Lindy was running, and Martin, and behind them Trevor.

The car stood in the driveway, its engine guttering. Then the driver's door opened, and Martin saw in the light from within a tiny form prim in the passenger's seat.

Lindy leaped at Bobby's car, threw the door open and there was her little girl, who came out into her arms, and Lindy danced, whirling round and round with her child silent in her arms, her child smiling a soft smile.

"Baby, baby, baby," Lindy cried, then cradled her and covered her with kisses.

Hi, Winnie said, and it echoed like a song in them all.

"Buddy, she came in half an hour ago."

Martin looked at him. Embraced his old friend. "I thought you were a goner for sure."

"I thought you were." He looked at Lindy and Winnie. "I don't know how to tell you this, or even exactly what I am telling you."

"I know she's dead," Martin said. "I saw her body."

Daddy, it's all changed. Winnie and Trevor's thoughts echoed as one.

He had a son who could read minds, now a daughter returned from the dead. They took her inside, loving her, touching her, and she was full and normal flesh in every way.

Bobby lingered. "Boy, they did a number around here."

"Oh, yes."

"I don't know quite what happened, but I know you were a big part of it. I can hear people thinking. Thinking about what happened, and a lot of them are thinking about you, Martin."

We can all hear each other, Trevor said in their minds.

Gonna be interesting times for cops, Bobby thought. He glanced around, then laughed a little. He took Martin aside. "She isn't the same," he whispered.

I'm all different, Winnie added. Then, This house is a mess!

They-Lindy threw a picture of the glaring reptilian features of Mazle into their minds-did it.

Winnie reached into the air, and her old friend Bearish came flopping into her hands. He was soaked and crusted with ice and mud. You got lost.

As she moved through the house, everything she touched came back to its previous condition. She opened the fridge. We still have to go to the store. Then, in words, "Except for these apples. I din steal 'em. They were grounded."

She brought out five small apples. They were cold, a little old, obviously falls. Martin was famished, they all were, and they ate silently. He wondered where they'd come from, and saw in his mind a picture of the Wright's apple

tree, it's fruit all fallen.

She came and hugged his legs. He lifted her and thought that she was not quite as heavy as she had been, not quite as solid. He knew that he held a great miracle in his arms, and that there must be millions of such miracles over all the earth right now. He kissed his miracle and she laughed, and he thought he was holding the promise of the whole future in his arms.

You are, Trevor said as he crunched into his apple.

The little family was taking a journey into a new world, and this journey was being repeated all across the planet, as a new mankind rose up from the ruins of the old, and the risen and the living joined together in a new chorus, and the long ages of illusion that there is a curtain between the living and the dead were ended.

The undiscovered country had been discovered, and the explorers were returning.

Winnie settled into the deep comfort of her father's arms. Bobby reached out and touched her, and she felt the energy in him that was a little sharp in places, and smoothed it out. Tears came to his eyes. He stared at her, drank her in. She let him clutch her, she laughed, she had been on such a long journey. "You smell like roses," he whispered.

She ate her apple, thinking of what life is-what it really is. She thought of her old body still lying where it had fallen, giving itself back to dust and memory. Life is the mystery of the world, she told them.

The minds around her fell silent.

Death had ended, they just didn't know it yet. She understood what had really been done here, and who had done it, and the real reason, that only the good remained, because only the good could find the next secret, the true meaning of life without death.

Over time, she would tell them everything, that there was a new humanity born and a whole new way of living to be discovered, but now she laid her very tired head against her daddy's shoulder.

She would sleep on this night the sweetest of all sleeps, deep in her home, surrounded by her family, at one with their love and all love, in a world that had been saved.

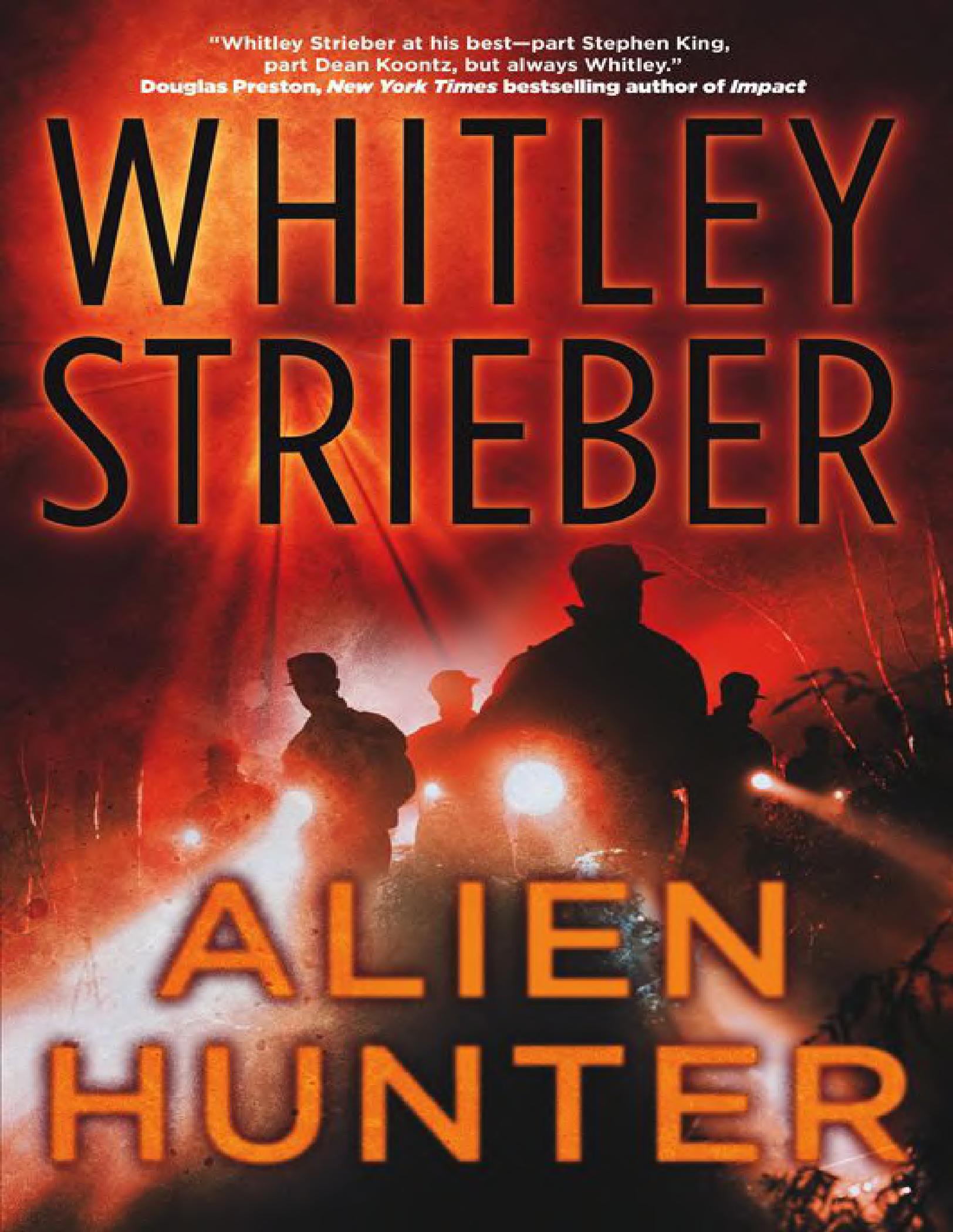
*A little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look for them, they will not be found.
But the meek will inherit the earth and enjoy great peace.*

-Psalm 37: 10-11

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*This book, and the Alien Hunter series, are dedicated to the people who
work behind the scenes to keep our world safe.*

Thank you.

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Beware the bearers of false gifts and their broken promises. Much pain but still time. There is good out there. We oppose deception.

—message in a crop formation found on a farm in the United Kingdom, August 2002

CHAPTER ONE

2002

Flynn reached for her and she wasn't there. Her side of the bed was cold and he was a detective, so he came immediately awake.

“Abby?”

He rolled out of bed, slid his feet into his slippers, and set off into the midnight house. It was November 16, 2002, the time was twelve-forty, the house was cool but not cold, there was no obvious sign of foul play.

“Abby?”

Hurrying now, he went downstairs, turning on lights as he passed the switches. By the time he reached the kitchen, he knew that she wasn't in the house and that there was no point of entry that would suggest a forcible kidnapping. In any case, he couldn't imagine why she would be kidnapped or by whom. But he'd been a cop for six years, a detective for two. In that time, he'd made a couple of hundred very bad people very mad, and some of them were people who might do just about anything.

Going back over his cases in his mind, though, he couldn't see a revenge kidnapper, at least, not one that was presently at large.

Just to be thorough, he checked the basement. They were in the process of finishing it, and it was full of boxes of ceiling tiles and Pergo flooring.

She wasn't there.

All doors were locked, all windows were locked. The alarm system was

armed. So nobody could've come in here, not without all hell breaking loose.

She'd gone out. Had to have.

He called her cell—and heard it ringing upstairs. He went up. It was on the dresser but not in its usual place in her purse. Her purse was gone.

The first cold tremble of fear passed through him. Something was obviously very wrong here. Abby didn't get up in the middle of the night and go out. Never, not without telling him.

Following the rules, he dialed 911. "This is Detective Errol Carroll. I'd like to report my wife, Abigail Carroll, missing. Probable foul play."

The 911 operator responded, "We have a car moving, Flynn."

Next he called his boss, Captain Edward Parker. "Eddie, it's me, I'm sorry about the time. Abby's gone missing."

As the reality set in, a terrible, frantic urgency swept him.

"Okay," Eddie said. "Okay. Any evidence of an entry?"

"The alarm system is still on. Nobody broke in."

Silence. Flynn could practically hear Eddie thinking. They'd known each other since they were kids and they'd both known Abby almost as long. Both had dated her. Flynn had won.

"You guys doin' okay?" Eddie asked. It was his way of broaching the question that was going to be on everybody's mind.

"Eddie, this isn't a marital thing. Somebody got Abby." He knew that every word had to be measured tonight, because if he wasn't careful, this would get knocked down to an adult missing person real fast. "Look, I can't stay in here. I gotta roll."

"Wait for the uniforms. I'm sending a detective right now. Mullins. Tom Mullins, he's duty."

He didn't much like Tom and Tom didn't much like him. But Tom did his job. Sort of. "Okay, I'm gonna back him up, though. He's not gonna drop this down to an MPA because it's not an MPA, Eddie."

"You got it."

There came a knock at the front door. Decisive, loud, the way cops knock.
Where are you, baby?

He disarmed the alarm system and let the uniforms in. It was Willy Ford and a deputy sheriff he didn't know, name of Menchaca. "Hey guys, thanks for doing it so fast. I got a missing wife. Almost certainly a kidnap."

"Jeez, Flynn, Abby's been kidnapped?" Willy had flirted with Abby at the Memorial Day barbecue last year. Lots of laughs.

"Looks like it."

"Is there a point of entry?" Menchaca asked.

"Not that I can see."

A car pulled up and Eddie got out. He hurried up the walk, his belly bouncing, his gray hair fluttering in the night wind. His fly was down. You could see pajamas in there. Flynn had a damn good friend in Eddie.

"Anything?" he asked as he came in.

"We need prints out here," Flynn said. He shuddered. He was freezing cold on a hot night. "Look, I can't stay here. I'm gonna drive."

"No you aren't. I got the troops moving. Every car's on, everybody's looking."

Eddie was right. Flynn's going off into the night wasn't going to help anything.

"Who comes in through an alarm system?" Eddie asked.

"A professional."

"You drop time on any professionals? Time that they may have served?"

Cops were routinely informed when their collars were released from prison. "Nobody."

"What about ever?"

"You know my collar history."

"Yeah, you got a fair number, buddy. Some bad'uns."

"Nobody special, Eddie. Nobody—" He gestured toward the emptiness of the house. Another wave of fear was hitting him. He imagined Abby being

tortured, buried alive, raped.

He wanted to run through the streets calling her name. He wanted to drive and drive, searching every crack house, every flop, every crib he knew. She was out there right now. Abby was out there and suffering *right now*.

Detective Charlie Mullin came in. "Where are we?"

"Doing an APB," Eddie replied. "Get me a picture."

Flynn strode across the living room and grabbed the photograph that stood on the mantel. It was a studio portrait taken two years ago, for her father while he was dying in St. Vincent de Sales, choking out his lungs, poor damn guy with his cigarettes and his unfortunate opinion that the dangers were overblown.

Eddie put the picture down under a lamp and took a few shots of it with his cell phone. He then took a verbal description from Flynn and inside of three minutes the all-points bulletin was appearing on police computer networks all across the state.

Flynn knew the statistics. Every hour that passed, it was less likely that she would be found.

"You have any idea when this happened?"

"I might." He went to the side table in the hall and dug out the alarm system's instruction book. "The system might tell us the last time it was disarmed and rearmed." He glanced at Eddie and Mullen. "He had the code. Had to have."

"Who had it?" Mullin asked.

Flynn shook his head. "Me and her, far as I know."

"Parents? Brothers and sisters?"

"No brothers and sisters. My mom and her folks have passed. My dad doesn't have it."

"You're certain?"

"Unless she gave it to somebody, which I very much doubt."

"She didn't," Eddie said. "She was way too smart and too careful."

Flynn input his code, then followed the instructions. In a moment, the answer appeared on the system's LED screen. "Three thirty-two," he said. Then the next figure flashed, the time it had been re-armed. One minute later. "This can't be right," he said.

"What time?" Mullen asked.

"Within the minute. Three thirty-three."

There was a silence. Then Mullen said, "We need an inventory, Flynn."

"She was kidnapped!"

"Somebody came in here and took her in under a minute? Who would that be?"

"Hell if I know!" He turned to Eddie. "For God's sake, don't cancel that APB, don't cancel anything!"

Eddie held out his hands, palms up. "Hey, I got the county choppers up. I'm goin' all out, Flynn."

This was a small police force in a small city, with a compliment of just thirty personnel. They liked to think that they were good, but at the same time, there were a limited number of challenges. A murder every six weeks or so, a meth lab or crack house a week on the south side, a thin but steady stream of family disturbances, assaults, burglaries and robberies.

"I gotta admit, I can't remember the last time we had a kidnapping," Eddie said.

"Nineteen ninety-six. Kid named Angela Dugan, fifteen years old. Turned out to be her boyfriend. They were brought back from Tijuana—married."

"So, you got any ideas yet?"

He didn't. "Let's canvas," he said. "Before people take off for work."

"It's five."

"Let's canvas."

It was cool and still outside, the silence broken only by the busy clatter of lightbars left running. The morning star hung low in a blood-red eastern sky. Up and down the street, lights were coming on. Across the street, Sarah

Robinson stood on her front porch in her robe, her arms crossed on her chest.

Flynn gazed across at her. “She and Abby are planning to have their babies together.”

“Abby’s pregnant?”

He started across the street. “She hadn’t said anything.”

In times of extreme stress, details come crowding in, the crisp scent of the air, the soft crunch of grass under your sneakers, the distant pumping clatter of one of the county choppers patrolling above the silent streets.

“Are you guys okay?” Sarah asked, her voice constricted, her smile choked back into her face.

“Abby’s missing.”

“Oh, Flynn, oh my God.”

“Did you see or hear anything?”

She shook her head. “The cars woke me up. Let me get Kev.”

“I’m here,” Kevin said, coming out from behind her. “Same story from me. Nothing.”

They did the Monteleones, got nothing but sadness from this gentle, elderly couple.

“The next house is Al Dennis,” Flynn said. “He’s often up at this hour. I’ve seen his lights on when I come in off night duty.”

“Good.”

This time, though, Al had been sound asleep, and he came to the door bleary and blinking, pulling a terry-cloth robe on over his pajama bottoms.

“Flynn?”

“Al, Abby’s missing. She’s been kidnapped. We’re trying to find out if anybody noticed anything unusual during the night.”

“Unusual?”

“Lights, voices, a vehicle passing the house more than once, anything like that.”

Flynn saw him look into himself, a sign that detectives come to know, that

somebody is genuinely searching their memory.

“Lights about three. A car out there.” He gazed at Flynn. “I thought it was you, Flynn.”

“Why was that?”

“I just assumed it was you coming off duty. I guess it was like, you know, the car stopped there. At your place. I didn’t hear your garage opening, though. I do remember that.”

“Did you see the car?” Eddie asked.

Dennis shook his head. “Sorry. I just—a car came up and stopped.”

“Did you hear it pull away?”

Again, he shook his head. “I got the impression the lights had gone out. Like I said, you coming home. That’s what I thought.”

“A time, Dennis?”

“After three. In there.”

He’d heard the car but hadn’t seen it. “Do you remember anything about the engine noise? A large car, maybe? A truck? Could you tell?”

“God, Flynn, I am so sorry. I wish I could help.”

As he thanked Dennis, he realized that he was beginning the rest of his life, and it would be a time of wondering and suffering and the pain of love that has been stolen, but not lost.

As he expected, the rest of the canvas turned up nothing.

Late in the morning an FBI agent came up from Austin to Menard, a kid named Chapman Shifley. Agent Shifley wore a suit, cheap but carefully pressed. He had a burr haircut and the fast eyes of someone who might have a special forces background. He introduced himself, jamming his hand out and pumping Flynn’s arm, the gesture an unconvincing parody of manly sympathy.

Only one assignment mattered to the FBI in Texas, and it wasn’t this. Either you were on drugs and gangs or you were essentially nowhere. This assignment was nowhere.

The first thing he asked for was an inventory.

“I haven’t done that. Except that her purse is missing.”

“Could we just do a little looking around,” Shifley said, not unkindly. He wasn’t insensitive.

“Please be my guest.”

The house was filling up with forensics personnel, “Lady” Christopher with her careful hands, her supervisor Jamie Landry, who hailed from the Evangeline Country over in Louisiana and made remarkable crawfish bisque.

It would take hours, but the two of them would methodically work over the entire house, looking for fingerprints and subtle evidence of some kind of skilled break-in.

As he climbed the stairs, followed by Eddie and Shifley, Flynn found that he didn’t want to go back into their bedroom. He never wanted to go back in, not until Abby was safely home.

The cheerful curtains, the soft blue wallpaper, the sleigh bed—it was all as familiar as ever, but it now seemed miraculously beautiful, like a room from some past world found in a museum.

Landry came up and handed out latex gloves. “Don’t move things more than you absolutely have to,” he said.

Nobody replied.

Flynn rolled on his gloves and opened Abby’s top drawer.

Immediately, he saw that clothes were gone, two or three bras, socks, underpants.

“Everything in place?” Shifley asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Because that looks like somebody took stuff outa there.”

“It sure does.”

In the closet, he found her backpack missing. Also, her white sneakers were gone, and some shirts and jeans.

If he’d been working this case on a stranger, he would have said that

they'd left voluntarily.

"Flynn," Shifley said, "were you guys doing okay? I mean, the marriage?"

"She didn't run out on me."

"I have to ask."

"Yes, okay! Yes. We're happy."

"Because that's not what this looks like."

"Then it's a setup! She'd never walk out on me. She—we—we're in love. It's a happy marriage."

He knew the Bureau. He knew that they were going to back this down to an adult missing person, probable walkout. That would give the case maybe two more days of search time.

Eddie said, "They're happy."

"Yeah, I get it."

His tone said that Flynn was right, and in that terrible moment, he could almost feel her soul flying away from him.

Of course, the locals didn't quit. Eddie didn't quit. But police forces live in a strange sort of a straitjacket. A local Texas police force has access to information from other Texas authorities, but not other states, not other countries. To really pull down a sophisticated kidnapper, you need the reach of the FBI with its connections around the world, and the co-operation of Interpol. The motive for stealing beautiful young women, if it was not perverted, was often nowadays for sale into slavery abroad. A twenty-two-year-old blond like Abby could bring big money in hidden slave markets.

By the time Landry and company had finished, Flynn had been awake for more than fifty hours. He was not in grief, but desperation. It wasn't as if Abby was dead, it was as if she was waiting for him. Abby trusted him. She would believe that he would do anything to find her. She would have faith that he would come.

By sunset on the third day, the house was empty and quiet. Not a single trace of useful evidence had been found. Abby, her backpack, her purse with

her ID and a little money in it were all gone, along with three changes of clothes.

His wife had not walked out on him. His wife was out there somewhere, in the hands of a monster. He chose not to consider the possibility that she might be dead, and in so doing joined many thousands of people waiting every day of their lives for closure that never comes.

He had nightmares that she had been buried alive.

He had nightmares that she was being starved.

He had nightmares that she had been sold to some Arab prince.

On and on and on it went.

Every morning at five, he ran. He ran through the quiet streets of his neighborhood and down into the Railroad District where the great grain elevators stood, past their ghostly immensity, past the long lines of hopper cars dark in the early dawn, past the heaving engines with their great, staring lights, past the café with its warm windows and steaming coffee. He ran like a man under threat. Over time, he became narrow and hard, his body steel cable.

He became a master of the handgun, he learned fast shooting and target shooting and he became known among the shooters of West Texas as a competitor to be aware of. He learned tae kwan do and karate, and learned them well. He went beyond the normal investigative skills of a police detective, venturing into areas as diverse as wilderness tracking and the use of sophisticated bugging devices.

His colleagues admired his skills and feared his obsessive dedication to his cases. When he was on a kidnap, he routinely worked twenty-four hours at a stretch and slept three. He could have risen in the department to a captaincy, but he prevailed on Eddie to leave him a lieutenant so that he wouldn't get sucked up into administration.

As the years wore on, he gradually turned his den into what became known on the force as the Abby Room.

Even though the FBI had abandoned the investigation before it was three days old, Eddie did not abandon it. Far from it, he hid Flynn's case time for him, allowing him to continue looking for his wife for two more years.

Finally, he quietly and sadly eased it into the cold case file. This meant that nobody could be assigned to it without his personal approval.

Still, though, Flynn's investigation continued. He became the most knowledgeable expert on kidnap in the State of Texas. Every force in Texas consulted him. The Texas Rangers consulted him. He solved case after case after case. But the Abby Room only grew more full of clippings, of clues, of false leads. He slid his unending search for her ever deeper into his caseload, accepting Eddie's silent compliance with equally silent gratitude.

Their bond of friendship deepened. Eddie had loved Abby, too. He had sat on the summer porches of youth with her, also. He had never married. Instead, his love affair with her had continued down its own lonely path, and he had watched with pain and joy as she and Flynn made their life together. When he went to their house for cop nights, he'd watch her out of hooded eyes. She'd had a dancing heart, had Abby Carroll, and looks and ways that no man could ever forget.

Not often—maybe once or twice a year—Flynn ran into a case similar to Abby's, an apparent walkout that seemed to him to be something else. Time and again, the FBI abandoned these cases after a few days.

Flynn did not abandon them.

Somebody was out there taking people, he knew it, somebody very clever and very skilled.

Somebody was out there.

CHAPTER TWO

The Night had come and gone, November 16, as always, the worst night of Flynn's year.

As he always did on the anniversary of Abby's disappearance, he had spent it in the Abby Room, pouring over files, seeking some new lead hidden in some record he hadn't considered before.

As always, he'd found nothing. Her case was dead cold. Still, though, she lived on within him. His side of the conversation of life continued.

Sarah Robinson's little girl Taylor was in grade school now. He had never asked her if Abby, also, had been pregnant, but every time he saw Taylor, a question came into the edge of his mind: were there bones somewhere of the woman he had loved, and tiny bones tangled within them?

He'd never remarried, never even considered it. After seven years it would have been legal, but he would never do it, not until he knew for certain that she was no more.

Eddie came out of his office and headed his way. His gut was rolling, his dark glasses bouncing in his breast pocket. He was coming fast, his scowl as deep as a grave.

Flynn was hoping that he was headed anywhere else, but he did just what it looked like he was going to do, and dropped down into the old chair beside his desk.

He said, "Special Agent Diana Glass wants to talk to you regarding an investigation you've been pursuing."

"The Mercedes case? The meth lab on Fourteenth Street?"

"The Carroll Case. Abby."

Flynn said nothing.

"She even knows about the Abby Room," Eddie continued. "She knows you were interviewing Charlie Boyne again yesterday."

The Boyne case was one of the other disappearances that were mirror images of Abby's. "I wasn't."

"Course you were."

"Dallas PD and the FBI closed the Boyne case years ago. So I wasn't interviewing him, as there is no case on the books."

"Then let's say you were pursuing your hobby of refusing to drop closed cases."

"Who the hell told her?"

"Not me. I just sit in my office and wait for the parade to go by. Which it never does."

"There was a parade. When the Tomcats won the semi-finals."

Eddie looked blank.

"The Tomcats. Menard High's football team on which you once served as a wide receiver. Last year they reached the semi-finals and the school decided on a parade. You were there. You rode in the lead pickup. In a uniform with a big cap. Very impressive."

"Is that sardonic or sarcastic?"

"Both. Anyway, where is Agent Glass from, Dallas or San Antonio?"

"She emailed me for permission to talk to you about disappearance cases in general. Pick your brain, be my guess."

"Okay."

"Could be a break, Flynn, if the Bureau's gonna finally do something." He paused. "Thing is, she's got a Gmail account."

That was odd. “So she’s not the Bureau? Did she name an agency?”

“She did not.”

But who else would it be? ATF? No, no interest in missing persons there. Border Patrol? Possibly. “I’ve looked for evidence of border transport for years. So maybe she’s Borders.”

Eddie Parker said, “You’re gonna find out. Right now.”

A woman in a suit stood in the doorway of the squad room.

“My God,” Flynn muttered.

Her hair was so dark it made her skin look as pale as marble. She wore a black, featureless suit that shimmered like silk. Her eyes moved to Flynn, then to Eddie, then to back to him again. Then the most beautiful woman Flynn had ever seen in his life strode through the dead-silent squad room. She stopped at his desk.

Eddie had taken off. His office door was already closing.

“Lieutenant Errol Carroll?”

He stood up and shook an unexpectedly powerful hand. Her eyes, emerald green, drilled into him. She was all job, this woman. Beauty, yes, but in service to a cause, which was very clear.

“Lieutenant, we need to talk.”

He gestured toward his chair.

“Privately.”

Silently, he led her toward the conference room. He could see Eddie lurking way back in his office, watching through the blinds, not wanting to get anywhere near this. He didn’t want a single thing to do with this ice sculpture, either. She might as well have “Bad News” tattooed on her forehead in big red letters. Expensive clothes like hers did not go with garden variety FBI personnel, or any ordinary personnel at all. No, this lady came from way up high where the dangerous people lived.

After they were in the conference room, she shut the door. She turned the lock with a decisive click. He hadn’t ever seen that lock used before.

“Sit down, please.”

“What’s this about?”

She reinforced her statement with a sharp gesture, and he found himself dropping into one of the old wooden chairs that were scattered around the scarred conference table.

She went into her briefcase and pulled out a tablet computer. She tapped a couple of times and he could see a file appear. Like many a detective, he was good at reading upside down. He saw his own name on it, and his picture.

She began flipping through the file, touching the screen with a long finger every time she turned a page.

“Do I need a lawyer?”

She stopped reading and looked up. “You have investigated twelve of them, starting with your wife. Each time, you’ve put in a request for more investigative support. May I ask you why?”

“May I see a cred?”

“You’re suspicious of me?”

He did not reply.

She held out an FBI credential that identified her as Special Agent Diana Glass.

“Satisfied?”

Not in the least, but that was beside the point. First off, the credential could be rigged. Second, he would never know the truth—at least, not until it was too late to save himself from whatever dire fate she had in mind for him.

“What do you want from me, Agent Glass?”

“First off, you’re not in any trouble. And I’m Diana, Errol.”

“Flynn. People call me Flynn.”

“Flynn? That isn’t in your file.”

“Errol Carroll? My folks had a tin ear. Flynn is a joke, as in Errol Flynn.”

She gave him as blank a look as he had seen in some time. His guess was that she’d never heard of Errol Flynn.

“Just call me Flynn without the joke.”

“We want you to help us nail the bastard whose been doing this, and we want you to start right now.”

“Sure,” he said carefully. “I’m ready to start any damn time. But why the change of heart?”

She got up and went to the door. “Tomorrow morning at eight. Be prepared to travel.”

“Travel? Where? For how long?”

She froze. She turned. “This is going to happen again, Lieutenant, and soon. With all the effort you’ve put into your investigations, the expertise you have developed, we believe you can help us prevent the next crime. So to answer your question, we’ll be going wherever we need to go, and it’s going to take however long it takes.”

She left.

He stood staring at the door. What the hell had just happened? As he walked out into the squad room, he saw her striding toward the front lobby.

Guys were being careful, pretending not to be absolutely fascinated with whatever had just gone down.

“I don’t know,” he said into the silence. “I have no idea.”

Eddie burst out of his office. His neck was pulsing, his face was crimson. This was not a man with a temper, but he was on full burn right now.

“What in goddamn hell’s the matter with you,” he snarled.

“Nothing.”

He held up a fax. “They’re telling me you’ve requested an indefinite leave. Thanks for this, ole buddy, ole pal. Next time just damn well tell me. Discuss it with me. Because we’ve been friends for years, jerkoff that you are.” As he talked, he waved the fax.

Flynn snatched it from him. And his jaw nearly sank out of sight.

“I didn’t know about this.”

“You didn’t ask for a leave?”

“Course not. Why would I? I like to put creeps in jail. It’s my damn vocation.”

“So if I tear this up, you’re back here in the morning?”

At that moment, his phone vibrated with an incoming text. He read it. “You have a chance to catch the man who kidnapped Abby.”

Her timing was excellent, he had to say that.

“No, Eddie, actually the request is good.” He could hardly believe what he was saying, but he was doing it and as he did so, his conviction was growing. “The request is good.”

“I can’t pay you. I’d like to but I can’t.”

He didn’t spend much money, hadn’t since Abby. So he could handle the absence of a salary. “I’m sorry, Eddie. I have to do this.”

“Yeah, I get it. But clean out your locker. If the janitor has to scrape any rotted doughnuts outa there, you’re gettin’ a bill.”

Their eyes met. His friend was there for him and nothing more needed to be said. Eddie turned away and Flynn did the only thing left for him to do. He gathered up his few personal items and left the way cops always left on their last day, with a cardboard box in their arms and a few good-byes. A police force is like a lake. When you get out, you don’t leave a hole.

By the time he was unlocking his car, another guy would already have his current cases. But not the Abby Carroll case, of course. Not the Boyne case, and not any of the other missing persons cases that had gone cold.

He drove home in the quiet of the midday. This was all insane, of course. He never should have done this.

“Abby,” he said into the rattling of his old Malibu, “I’m coming, babes, I’m coming.”

CHAPTER THREE

As soon as he got home, Flynn texted Diana Glass that he was ready to go, but received no reply. He did an Internet search on her and found nothing. No Facebook page for a Diana Glass that looked like her. No Twitter account. A check of the National Law Enforcement Roster also turned up no Diana Glass, meaning that she'd never been in a local or state police force. His access to FBI records was limited, of course, but he'd emailed their personnel department a verification check on her from the office. Usually, you got an answer in a few minutes, and usually it was "verified." FBI creds were not easy to come by and not easy to forge. If hers had been false, he would have gotten an urgent call, he felt sure. They would investigate an imposter immediately.

So she was for real, but for whatever reason, they weren't going to be releasing any information about her.

He went into the Abby Room. He'd spend the rest of the day looking over his cases. Of course, there had been many thousands of adult missing persons in the years since he'd lost her, but only twelve fit the precise criteria that interested him: an apparent walkout without any sign of forced entry, and a spouse or loved one who insisted that there had been no motive for the person to leave, and had credible support for the assertion.

It was a surprisingly rare situation, so rare that to Flynn it was an M.O.

On the walls were pictures of Abby, of the house as it was then, photographed in methodical detail, of the neighborhood, all the cars, all the houses.

There were maps of the other cases, blueprints of each house from which a victim had been abducted, with all the information from every crime scene intricately cross-referenced.

Abby smiled down at him, her hand shielding her eyes. The shot had been taken at Kitty Hawk in 1999, the summer of their courtship. She had been wearing her blue shorts and tank top. She'd been laughing and you could see it in her face. Later, back at their rental, he would unsnap that tank top and slip it off and stand on the tan carpet in the bedroom. She would seem, when she came close to him, to move with the lightness of a woman made of air, and the moment he had looked down into her eyes on that warm afternoon would remain engraved in his memory forever.

Sitting in meditation, he closed his eyes. "To study the self is to forget the self," he whispered into the silence. That was where he always started. Then he took his attention out of his mind and placed it on his body.

He felt his heart rate slowing until the beating seemed almost to stop. The cool of the room touched him so closely that it felt as if fingers were caressing him, fingers that were both intimately alive and as stiff as death.

He had understood the deep message of martial arts training: you cannot gain the freedom to fight at your best until you make friends with your death.

Beyond fear lies the balance that enables the blow to be perfectly struck, or deflected with perfect grace.

You never quite reach that spot, but you never quite fail.

He sat among his records, a naked man in a cold room.

He sat for a long time, letting go of his thoughts, his concerns, his questions.

As the stars made their nightly journey, he traveled deep within himself, sitting and flying at the same time. His heartbeat was now little more than a

memory.

Other names and other faces came back to him: Claire Marlow, Hank Feather, Lucinda Walters, Gail Unterwager, George Nathan Chambers, Kimberly Torgelson—the list that haunted his dreams.

All had disappeared at night. All had taken a small number of personal belongings. Gail Unterwager left three young children and a devastated, uncomprehending husband. So had Lucinda Walters. George Chambers had two sons and a seven-figure bank account, a wife that loved him and a flawless life. Kimberly Torgelson's little boy had been two and her husband had been completely shattered.

Yeah, buddy, I get it. Welcome to hell.

Three o'clock came. Outside the wind whipped the big old trees that surrounded the house, causing skeletal shadows to dance on the lawn. In the distance, an owl hooted, its voice flying in the gale.

When the hour grew late and still sleep did not come, he did what he always did at times like this, and walked through the house thinking and remembering, trying to understand how somebody could have come in and taken her out of bed like that and then carried her off, and all without her police officer husband noticing a thing.

Flynn was not a heavy sleeper now and he hadn't been then. So how had it been accomplished? To this day, he didn't even have a theory, not for any of them and especially not in Abby's case.

Once or twice, he had dreamed of her so vividly it was as if she was back. Once, the kitchen door had opened and he'd heard her voice calling up, "I'm home," her tone bright. He'd run downstairs, run like the wind, to find her standing in the dining room. "I'm all right," she said, and there had been a mixture of sadness and love in her face that had made him ache.

He had woken up, then, still in his bed.

Just before dawn his cell rang, startling him so thoroughly that he almost dropped it and lost the call.

It was Diana Glass.

“Can you come to a meeting?”

“Now?”

She gave him an address in the warehouse district near the grain elevators. He agreed to go and ended the call.

He called Eddie. It rang. Again. Again.

“Whassa matter?”

“It’s me. Glass just called. She wants me to meet her on Avenue Twenty.”

Silence.

“A warehouse, Eddie, at four in the morning.”

“So you called to wake me up?”

“I did.”

“You want a squad car? Protection?”

“I want you to know where I went and when.” He gave him the address.

“Okay, got it.”

“In other words, if I disappear, it is not voluntary. You got that? *Not* voluntary.”

“If you have reason to be suspicious of this woman, don’t go alone.”

“I ran a verification check on her and I’m not sure what to think. The Bureau never came back to me.”

“That is odd.”

“Yeah, and she said eight in the morning. It’s four in the morning.”

“I noticed.”

“So don’t send anybody, but watch my back for me.”

“You’re gonna carry, I assume.”

“Oh, yes.” He headed upstairs, pulled on some jeans and a sweatshirt, then strapped on his gun and threw a jacket over it. He splashed his face, but didn’t take the time to shave. Then he took an equipment pack off its shelf in the closet and took it with him. It was all stuff he’d put together himself, a manhunter’s kit.

It was still deep night, and colder than he'd thought it would be, with wind coming steadily down from the north. As he opened the garage, the rattling of the door echoed through the silent neighborhood. No lights came on, though. Everybody knew that he kept irregular hours.

The predawn air was icy silver, and the tires crunched on frost as he backed down his driveway. The Malibu's heater screamed.

Cold, hot, his body could absorb whatever came its way.

He had worked himself into a new man, as hard as stone, as quick as the air, a man too silent inside to feel fear. He'd practiced with his pistol until it seemed an extension of his body. He did not push, he did not heel, and hours of exercise ensured that his wrist would never break in anticipation of recoil. He was comfortable with the standard issue Glock, but also with the .357 Magnum, and, of course, with the old Colt Positive, known as the Police Special.

He did not go straight to the warehouse—never that—but rather made his way through the streets of Menard, the pretty, average city that had been his born home and would always be his home.

He passed Abby's girlhood house, now owned by the Dickson family. Along with Eddie and half the other guys in town, he'd courted her on that porch. He'd come to it at midnight, his adolescent body filled with desire, and swung alone on the old porch swing until her dad had come out and swung with him. Bill Baumgartner had understood a lot of things. When he gave Abby away, tears had touched his eyes as a smile had wreathed his face.

Good people, Abigail and her folks.

Bill and Amy were in Menard Memorial now, and when he went to see them on Sundays, he always told them the same thing, "I am searching."

For the kidnapper and killer.

For Abby's soul.

For the unlived life of the child she might have been carrying.

For the truth, cold and clean.

The warehouse was one of the tin-siding jobs that looked like a gigantic barn. On its side was a faded sign, unreadable.

He pulled his car up and got out. There were no other vehicles around.

This was looking more and more wrong. Very wrong. But if she wasn't law enforcement, who could she be? Surely the kidnapper wasn't a woman—this woman.

He been a detective long enough to know that the unexpected is usually the thing most to be expected.

He walked up to the door, which was unchained, the locks thrown back.

There was danger here, no question.

He went in.

CHAPTER FOUR

The air was cold and thick, smelling of mold and wet cardboard. His eyes were good in darkness, but not this good, so he put on the infrared glasses he had designed himself, cutting the lenses from a couple of Hoya RM9s. Then he pulled out his infrared illuminator and methodically swept his surroundings. A sodden mass of cardboard boxes appeared like a distant mountain range. Closer, he saw a jumble of ruined bicycles. Behind them were rows of dead Christmas poinsettias in plastic pots, also dry aquariums.

There used to be light manufacturing here in Menard, little factories that used wetback labor to make cheap goods that would be sent out to California on the railroad. No more.

Debris was what he had expected. It was what he did not see that was troubling him. The sense of abandonment had changed. Now, he felt the presence of watchers. So far, he hadn't spotted them, but he knew that this was only because he hadn't looked in the right place.

With a movement as smooth and natural as taking a breath, he slipped his gun into his hand. Out of habit, he'd brought his Glock. Should have taken the Magnum instead. He was off duty and officially on leave, so it had been his choice.

"Hello," he said. "My name is Flynn Carroll. You asked me to come here."

Then he knew that somebody was behind him. It wasn't a hunch this time, or an instinct. He'd heard the whisper that jeans make when they rub against each other.

Sucking in breath, then slowly releasing it, he went deep into himself, blanking his chattering mind by concentrating his attention on the sound. In another moment, he was going to need to move very, very fast. He would have one chance only.

Another sound came, this time off to his right. So there were at least two of them, and they were maneuvering to place him in crossfire.

"Let's stop this right now," he said aloud. His words were followed by a silence. Were they surprised? He thought not. He thought they were very far from surprised, because he could see a third one off to his left, a figure that was more slight than the other two. Could be Diana. "Look, I'm gonna end up using this thing if somebody doesn't show themselves real soon."

Outside, the wind shook the thousand windowpanes and made the tin roof jump and rattle. The massive late season blizzard that was bringing the arctic to Montana was now also plunging southward into Texas.

"Flynn, listen carefully."

Diana's voice filled the room, a whisper from everywhere.

"Everything is good, Flynn. We're all friends here. We just need to be very, very careful. This is all routine safe practice in this unit."

"You'll get used to it," a male voice drawled.

A hand came down on his shoulder—and he took the guy down with a standing grapple, a simple jujitsu maneuver for which his assailant was, to Flynn's surprise, entirely unprepared.

"Keep back," Diana snapped. "Don't challenge him."

The guy he'd taken down got up. His face was hard to see in the darkness, but Flynn sensed a scowl of rage.

"Sorry," he said.

All he could see of the eyes were shadowy sockets, but he could feel the

anger.

“Flynn,” Diana said, “please give Captain Larsen your pistol.”

“No.”

“Flynn, you’ve come in here heavily geared and with a drawn weapon. Of course we’re being careful. Now, calm down. Give him the gun.”

Flynn thought about it. He didn’t move.

“We need to fly before dawn. We have a long way to go and time is of the essence. If you want to help prevent another disappearance and maybe stop this perp, now’s your chance.”

“I don’t like total strangers coming up on me in dark rooms.”

“This is a special unit, Flynn. We’re operating under our own set of protocols. We’ve set up an orientation for you downstairs.” She turned on the lights.

He lost his night vision equipment. Nobody else was showing a pistol, so he put his away. But he did not give it up.

“Thank you,” she said.

At the far end of the space there was an old iron spiral staircase that had probably been ordered from the Sears Catalog a hundred years ago. He followed the rest of them down, and found himself in a basement that was just as dark as the floor above had been, but felt smaller. Not for long, though. A match flickered as Diana Glass lit a gasoline lantern—and hung it on the barrel of some kind of old tank. The thing wasn’t in US livery and it was dusty, but it looked like it had never been driven.

“The Korean War,” she said, waving a dismissive hand toward it. “They were on their way to San Diego when the conflict ended. Great shielding if you worry about listening devices.”

“Which you do?”

“That would be correct. Flynn, first off, I want you to understand that there are many things that make this unit special. The first of these is that we’re all just the same as you. We all have a missing loved one.”

“None of ’em walked out,” a male voice said. “My Cindy did not walk out.”

“Louie Lander, LAPD,” Diana said. “Just like you, just like the rest of us, he’s done a hell of a job on a lot of missing persons cases.”

Louie Lander had a tight-to-the-skull faces and a hard, sad smile. “Just like me,” Flynn thought, “I smile like that.”

“Can you explain this security, because this is the most unusual damn unit I’ve ever come across.”

“Flynn,” Diana replied, “we’re dealing with the most unusual damn thing that’s ever happened. Mike, why don’t you tell him your story?”

The second of the three guys standing in the light said, “Sure, Diana.” He regarded Flynn with eyes full of pain. “We were having a cookout. It was just after dark. My wife and my little boy were out in the backyard playing hide-and-seek. I was cooking on the grill. I noticed it was kinda quiet.” He paused. “That was in 2008. I never saw them again.”

Flynn thought about this. “You were there? Right there?”

“I was standing twenty-three feet from my wife when it happened. My boy was playing near the back fence. Forty feet. I heard nothing, saw nothing. Finally I ran out into the alley. Up and down. Went to the neighbors.” He stopped. “Called the precinct.” He looked toward Diana Glass. His voice dropped. “A missing roller bag did the investigation in. Plus, the way they disappeared. No sign of an intruder. The local Bureau decided it was a walkout.”

“Your son—his case wouldn’t have been abandoned.”

“He’s on goddamn milk cartons,” Mike muttered. “Nothing.”

The same thought came into Flynn’s mind that must have come into the mind of every investigator on the case: she left and took the boy with her, open and shut. No way could they have been abducted right out from under the nose of the father.

Mike’s grin was eloquently bitter. “I can see what you’re thinking,” he

said. “We were very much in love.” He sighed heavily. “We still are. At least, inside me. Inside me, my family goes on.”

“I hear that loud and clear,” Flynn said. He looked to the third guy. “What about you?”

“First, my wife’s sister, six years ago. She was a talented woman, a violinist with the St. Louis Symphony. We all thought she walked out on her life, all except her boyfriend. The locals did a good workup. Went nowhere. Then, two years ago last month, I got hit. My Lynn. She comes out of the Costco near our place at ten at night—she worked there nights—gets in her car. *And it just sits there.* Eleven, I can’t get her on her cell so I drive over. There’s the damn Altima, empty. I call in the troops but nobody can find her. We get the security video. Two cameras. She crosses the parking lot, gets in the car, and it just sits there. Except.”

“Yeah?”

“There was a power failure at the store. One minute after she got in. Lasted twelve minutes.” The locals—my buddies—figured that’s when the kidnap took place. But when the Bureau found that a couple of changes of clothes and six hundred dollars in cash were gone with her, they got a different idea.”

“So we’re all in the same situation. Cases abandoned as walkouts. The operative word here is ‘abandoned.’ These are dead cases. So why are we here?”

“Last year, the Bureau finally upgraded its relational databases,” Diana said. “The first thing I did was to look for cases similar to my husband’s.” In the hard light of the gasoline lantern, her face had taken on a startling brightness, as if her skin was on fire inside. “What I discovered is that he wasn’t alone. Real walkouts are common, but almost always associated with domestic disturbance. Some of them are genuine, some of them are murders. There are a number of them like our cases, with no domestic trouble, and the spouse insisting that he or she would never, ever do this.”

“How many?”

“Flynn, over the past ten years, I’ve found eight thousand unsolved disappearances, two hundred thirty-six of which involve people who continue to claim that their loved one was kidnapped, despite all evidence to the contrary.”

“Anything linking them?”

“Nobody was a criminal, nobody was sick, nobody was disabled. Everybody had some sort of notable talent—musician, artist, electronics expert, you name it. It’s a highly functional group of people.”

“Abby was a musician.” He sighed. “So the FBI finally realized that something was up. A serial kidnapper. But why organize the unit now? Just because they got a new database?”

She glanced at her watch. “We need to move. The reason we pulled you in now is we’ve got the best case we’ve ever had, and we want the best team that can be deployed.”

“Where are we going?”

“There’s always an element of risk in this work, Flynn. We don’t want to talk about it until we’re off the ground.”

“You’re saying we’re not secure?” He looked around. “You’re not sure of these guys?”

“There could be extremely sophisticated surveillance,” Mike said.

“We’ve set a trap for the perp,” Diana added. “He’s taken two sisters. The third sister has moved in to live with her father. It’s an easy stakeout, and we intend to be waiting, starting tonight.”

“How long? Do you know when he’s gonna show up?”

“We think he’ll use the blizzard to cover his tracks.”

“So it’s in Montana. And we’re sure he’ll show?”

“Nothing is certain, obviously. But this is the most talented of the three sisters. She plays the piano and the violin, she’s a novelist, she’s a dancer. We have a target profile, and she’s way up at the top. Her sisters were good,

but she's outstanding." She strode to the rickety spiral stair and went pounding up, oblivious to its creaking and swaying.

What the hell was going on here? What kind of a perp were they dealing with, who could steal this many people and do it so well?

They had an ancient minivan, white and caked with dirt, its side panels scratched deep from a lot of overland work. The interior had once been luxurious, but the leather was now full of scuffs and tears, and the windshield was intricately cracked.

He sat behind Mike, who drove, consulting a handheld GPS as he maneuvered through the empty predawn streets. If they didn't want to ask the local guy for directions, that was their business.

It was six, shift change, and he saw a cruiser heading toward headquarters, the uniforms inside sipping coffee. Quiet time, six o'clock. The druggies have crashed, the citizens are just waking up, the whores are in the diners or in their motels. Quiet, good time, the eastern sky glowing with promise, dew gleaming in the summer, frost in the winter, here and there a jogger. Your city's most intimate moment.

"You aren't gonna get a flight at this hour," he finally said. "You're gonna need to take the Southwest at eight to Denver, then there's probably a United up to Billings. Assuming anything's flying." The late news had mentioned that the blizzard was setting records for snowfall and wind speeds. They'd called it a snow hurricane.

She drove toward the low buildings of the Menard Airport, now called Menard International since the Mexico City flight had been added. As a teenager, he'd come here to watch the planes taking off. In those days, there'd been a United 737 that headed for San Francisco at seven in the evening, and he and Abby had watched it and dreamed of what it would be to live there in a house in the Marina District or Nob Hill, and listen to the mourning of the buoys and watch the rolling fog. One night she'd said, her voice soft and shy, "What do you want first, a girl or a boy," and he had

slipped his hand into hers and replied with silence, and known that she was to be his wife, and it would be good.

They passed the main terminal, which was unchanged from the way it had been all of his life, two low wings and a central tower. Inside were the six gates, now crushed behind a wall of security, but the Airflight Restaurant was exactly the same, and still served the chicken fried steak dinner on Thursdays, and you could watch the planes while you ate.

Down at the end of this road was the hangar where Donald Douglas had once repaired an early Cloudster, and which now sheltered the ten or twenty private aircraft that called this place home.

“You have your own plane?”

“Yes.”

“So somebody’s a pilot?”

“I’m a pilot,” Charlie said. His tone reminded Flynn more of a funeral director.

They pulled around to the small parking area beside the hangar and got out. They moved as a team, he had to give them that. There was a practiced smoothness that he liked to see in a team.

As Diana entered the hangar through the weathered side door, she turned on the interior lights. Mike trotted over to the main door and rolled it open, revealing the empty concrete apron and equally empty runway.

There were two planes in the hangar, one a gleaming turboprop, the other a twin engine thing that was just that—a thing. Old. Grease on its landing gear. Bald tires.

Charlie hopped up onto the wing and opened a door.

“We can’t fly into a blizzard in that,” Flynn said.

“Charlie can,” Diana said.

Flynn was normally an unconcerned flyer, but this situation was not reassuring. “You’re looking at seventy-mile-an-hour winds in that storm,” he said.

Charlie, who was standing on the wing, said, “It’s got new engines compliments of the US Air Force, plus a classified antifriction coating and the most advanced avionics in the world.”

“It’s too light. No way. I thought you guys had Gulfstreams and things like that. Real planes.”

“This is the real world, not TV. I had to fight like hell for this. We’re travel-rated for commercial only.”

Flynn was the last to climb in.

He saw cracked insulation along the doorframe. He smelled gasoline. Mike and Louie had pulled the hangar door back and the morning sky was red with menace, the north wind already brisk. Billings was a thousand miles away, deep in the vastness of the storm.

CHAPTER FIVE

The more he saw, the less he liked. The little curtains on the windows were threadbare. Under his feet, the carpeting was worn through to bare metal. “I have to say, I don’t think this thing is airworthy on a good day. And this is not a good day.”

“If Charlie says he can take it into the storm, he can. Now, I want to brief you in procedures, because they’re not Bureau standard.”

That mattered little to Flynn. He was only vaguely aware of standard Bureau procedures anyway.

Charlie began turning on the electrics. His doubts seething, Flynn strapped himself into his seat, the rearmost in the plane.

Beside him, Diana sat paging through a file on her iPad.

When he realized that the plane was moving, he was shocked. He hadn’t heard the engines start or felt the slightest vibration, and yet they were heading out onto the apron.

“Boy, this thing is quiet,” he said.

“New engines,” Charlie said.

They moved swiftly across the apron. Charlie spoke into his mike, and after a moment the tower’s clearance crackled through the confined cabin. The controller’s voice, sharp with surprise and concern, made it clear that he’d been taken by surprise.

“Have you filed a flight plan?” came his voice, sharp in the silent cabin.

“We’re not required to.”

“Sir, if you’re heading north, I’d advise filing.”

Charlie’s reaction was to click off the radio.

“You oughta file a flight plan,” Flynn shouted over the engine noise, which was rising as they taxied onto the runway.

“Flynn, we can’t afford to leave tracks. Please understand that.”

“*Tracks?* It’s a flight plan, for God’s sake! The perp doesn’t have access to FAA records, surely.”

She dropped her iPad down on his lap. “You need to do a little studying on the way up. See what you make of the cases. Try to form in your mind an idea of the kind of capabilities the perp possesses. I guarantee you, they are awesome.”

The takeoff pressed Flynn back into his seat. In under five minutes, they were leaving ten thousand feet behind.

“This is the damnedest thing,” Flynn said. “What is this? Because it sure as hell ain’t no fifty-year-old Piper Apache.”

“The friction-free coating makes it a different airplane. And the turbos. The airframe’s been strengthened. And the avionics, like I said—you can’t find better. Plus, it’s pressurized. Convenient in a storm. We can do forty thousand feet.”

“It’s not a Piper Apache, is it? It’s camouflaged as a Piper Apache.”

She smiled. “I could answer that question for you. But if I did, I’d have to kill you.”

There had been humor there—a little. It was clear, though, that Diana Glass really would kill to keep her secrets. It was understandable, though. This was a crack unit. These people were dedicated. Maybe people like this could actually win, even against a genius psychopath ... assuming they lived through the damn flight.

He watched home slip away beneath the speeding plane. Ahead, the sky

was big and dark and mean, and the distant purr of the engines meant that he could hear the wind screaming around the airframe, like a voice from another world, mad and wild.

As the land slid past far below, it became more and more snow-choked. The silence that had settled over the cabin spoke to him in a clear voice. These people were all doing the same thing most people in police work do when they're heading toward danger. Each one considers his life and wonders what will come, and grows silent, seeking within himself for his deepest strength.

Half an hour passed in this silence. Flynn read case files, one after another, more than he'd ever had access to before.

"I notice a pattern," he said. "The same articles of clothing every time. Three changes of underwear, three shirts or blouses, two pairs of pants."

"Interesting," Mike commented.

"Damn interesting," Diana said.

"I wish we could access Behavioral Science resources, Diana."

"Louie, no."

"I know—'until we know what we're dealing with, no leaks.'"

Flynn said to Charlie, "You came out of Behavioral, so what can you add?"

The engines drummed. The plane, now enveloped in grayness, was being steadily buffeted.

"Charlie?"

"I gotta fly an airplane," he said at last.

Soon the snowy fields below disappeared into a gray gloom. Flynn could hardly see the strobes on the wingtips. He craned his neck, looking up at the instrument cluster and seeing gleaming flat panel displays. An autopilot was operating, the plane banking and changing altitude on its own. Charlie didn't even have his hands on the stick. The plane, on its own, was navigating its way through the storm.

These avionics were ten years ahead of the airlines, maybe more.

Flynn thought he should feel safer, but he really wished that Charlie had his hands on the controls instead of reading files on his own iPad. And what about “I gotta fly this plane?” Apparently what it really meant was, “I decline to answer your question.”

He watched the wing strobes disappear into the muck. Then the wings.

He leaned forward. “Shouldn’t you descend into visual?”

Charlie didn’t react.

“Hey, Charlie, I can fly a damn airplane well enough to know we need visual.”

Again no answer. Flynn turned to Diana. “Look, this is dangerous. No general aviation aircraft is up to this kind of flying, no matter what kind of avionics it has. What about deicing equipment? It has to be minimal.”

“I just did a statistical analysis on the cases,” Charlie called back, “and he’s right. There’s a very fixed pattern to the things that are taken.”

“We know our perp has a team. He has to,” Diana said. Then, to Flynn, “Just relax, let him do his thing. We wouldn’t be up here if the plane couldn’t do its job.”

“What the hell is it, a drone with seats?”

She laughed a little. “The military’s got some very good autopilots, obviously. Look, the computer’s a lot better pilot than he is, right, Charlie?”

“Right. I’m looking at the site on the looksee. Snow’s really building up around the house.”

“What’s a looksee?”

“We have surveillance cameras deployed around the target’s home,” Diana said.

As he paged through case after case, Flynn wasn’t seeing a single indication that any witness had ever identified any person, vehicle, sound, or light that seemed to them to be unusual during the times the kidnappings had taken place. “My case is the only one with any sort of witness at all?”

“It is.”

Flynn tried to relax. He hadn't slept much and he was tired. Looking at a rough day ahead, probably a stakeout tonight. Stakeout in a blizzard. Lovely. He closed his eyes—and immediately felt a sensation of falling. Then the stall horn howled.

“Jesus!”

“No big deal,” Charlie yelled. “I'm on it.”

The horn warbled a last time, then stopped.

Flight became steady again, the engines now droning, the wingtip strobes faintly visible. Flynn had not realized until this moment how tired he actually was. Still, though, he clung to the arms of his seat.

More time passed. Finally, he found himself once again closing his eyes.

What seemed just a few moments later, he heard Diana saying, “Good morning.”

“I've been asleep?”

“Deep. Three hours.”

It felt like three minutes. “I can't believe that.”

“Big changes, lotta stress, it's natural. Healthy.”

The plane was still deep in the storm system, but flying smoothly, banking gently from time to time.

He saw that Diana had a readout of the plane's position on her iPad.

“What's our ETA?”

“About twenty minutes,” she said.

“We've made good time, then.”

“The autopilot has an intelligent seek function. It finds the smooth air, so we don't have to cut back our speed.”

When he was younger, he'd flown his dad's plane between ranches, taking the old man from one of his properties to another. He still had his license and kept up with the field. “A hell of a nice toy.”

“That it is.” She raised her voice. “ETA upcoming, gentlemen. Just to be

on the safe side, let's do a weapons check."

Flynn knew the law, and the law said that he wasn't a police officer in Montana or anywhere except Texas unless in hot pursuit, and flying in to a town and looking for a bad guy was hardly that.

"If you're asking me to check my weapon, that means you're expecting that I might need to use it. So I need to know where we are in the chain of command. Am I legal here?"

"We're not in the Bureau's chain of command at all. Me and Charlie are FBI, but this unit is seconded to the National Security Council."

"*Seconded?* And since when did the NSC have any enforcement powers?"

"Okay, now I'm gonna tell you something that's classified. You need to sign, though." She took her iPad back from him, turned a few pages, then handed it back. "Electronic signature. Use the keypad."

He read the letter, which was under the logo of the National Security Council and signed by the chairman. It granted him a Sensitive Compartmented Clearance under the code name Aurora. It was listed as a Human Intelligence Control System clearance and seemed to have something to do with the National Reconnaissance Office.

"I don't understand this."

"It's an above top secret designation. Officially, we're part of the National Reconnaissance Office, but that's not where our actual chain of command runs."

"Okay, so when you send a memo, who do you send it to?"

"My boss."

"Not good enough."

"All I can tell you."

"And if I sign?"

"A little more."

"Not a hell of a lot," Louie said over his shoulder.

"Look, people, this does not look like a police unit to me. National

Security Council? I was looking for a serial kidnapper and probable killer. Where's the national security issue?"

"And the answer is the same, sign and find out."

"Do it, buddy," Mike said. "You need this. Heart and soul, man."

"First I want to know if I discharge my weapon in Montana, what happens?"

Diana explained, "We're operating under a National Security Letter. You fill out a discharge report and forget it."

"A National Security Letter? For a serial killer? How? Why?"

She pointed at the iPad. "It will make sense, Flynn. It really will."

He brought up the keyboard and signed his full name, then added his police ID number and his social security number in the blanks provided.

"Okay, so what have I done to myself?"

The airframe creaked loudly as the plane banked. The wing roots crackled. He could practically feel the tail torsioning, sense the metal weakening, the whole assembly getting ready to come to pieces. No matter how juiced up a small plane was, weather conditions like these were dangerous.

Snow seemed to gush at them. Charlie continued his maneuvers. He hadn't even turned on the wipers, so he was still relying on full IFR. That was absolute confidence, or absolute stupidity.

The ground suddenly appeared below them, a spreading, featureless vastness of snow. When they banked again, Flynn could see roofs buried in the white desert, smoke whipping away from their chimneys. Nearby was a single dark line that looked like runways look when you should definitely not land there.

They banked yet again, and as they did, Flynn saw that there was a sign on the roof of the larger of the two hangars that marked the airport. It said, "Ridge, Montana."

As they lined up on the runway and began to descend, he stopped asking questions. No time for that now.

In the end, he'd discover every secret thing about this damned operation, he was confident of that, but not just now. Just now, it was time to let this thing unfold and hope that the blood that would fall in the snow on this day would not be his own. There would be blood, he felt, most certainly.

CHAPTER SIX

They taxied to the smaller hangar. There wasn't anybody around, of course. Why would there be on a visual flight rules airport during IFR weather?

Moving with lubricated precision, the team got out and pulled the plane into the shelter of the hangar.

"Diana, I need to talk to you."

"We're behind schedule."

"Look, I want to know what we're dealing with and I want to know right now."

"No problem," Diana said, "when the time is right."

The others began unpacking weather gear, warm jackets, hats, boots.

"You didn't get airsick, Texas," Charlie said. "I'm impressed."

"Flight was smooth. Anyway, I slept."

"And yelled."

"A little."

"We need to move," Diana said.

"When do we meet the local cops?" Flynn asked.

Silence fell.

"Five personnel can't run a stakeout in a blizzard!"

Diana continued as if he had not spoken. "What we're looking at is a relatively isolated house. About a mile from the nearest neighbor."

“Hey. You don’t go past the locals.”

“Lieutenant Carroll, I’ll tell you what you need to know. That’s all I can legally do. Read your secrecy agreement.”

“I thought there was going to be a big reveal when I signed it.”

“As soon as possible.”

Impasse. He had no choice but to accept the situation.

“They’re in a house about four miles outside of town. Armed to the teeth. Scared shitless.”

“In weather like this, that’s total isolation,” Flynn said. “Do we have a read on the local power grid? Because if they don’t have power, that’s going to look like a real vulnerability to the perp.”

“Exactly,” she said. “Which is why we’re going to cut their power at some point if he doesn’t show up. Use their helplessness as a lure. We hope it’ll prove irresistible.”

“Why is he going after sisters, anyway? Explain that.”

“He got the first two, so we’re thinking he could try the third. What his motive is, we don’t know. There is a selection process, though. High-functioning people, that’s clear. Not too old, not too young.”

They began putting on the warm jackets, gloves, and boots that they’d pulled out of the plane’s rear cargo bay.

“I need gear.”

“There’s an Army-Navy outlet,” Diana said.

“Good stuff, I hope.” In weather this cold a stakeout would get dangerous fast.

“Far as I know. Let’s pull out the electronics, guys.”

Mike and Louie opened the plane’s nose cargo bay and Mike drew out a black, hard sided briefcase. Mike carried it to a workbench and released the elaborate lock that sealed it.

Flynn recognized night vision equipment and in-ear radios. But there were five blunt black wands, devices he could not place.

“Ranger equipment,” Diana told him. “Mike will check you out on one.”

Mike said, “First, you gotta know that it has a self-destruct system built in. And a fingerprint reader. Once you’re printed to it, if it gets more than ten meters from your body, acid’s going to spray all over its interior. So you don’t want to forget your little friend, and Uncle Sam really does not want you to do that. You’re holding a million dollars worth of his computing power in the palm of your hand.”

He pressed a button on the side, then pointed the narrow end of the device at Diana. A moment later, a reading appeared on a tiny screen.

“First, any reading at all tells you that a human being is out there somewhere, whether you can see him or not. Now, let’s evaluate the state of the *commandante*’s beautiful mind.”

“Careful,” Diana said.

“She’s reading eighty-four,” Mike said. “Anything over fifty is telling you the target’s awake. Over seventy, the target’s alert. Over ninety, the target has an elevated heart rate and high-level brain activity. In other words, your target is probably aware of your presence and your day is shortly going to be ruined.”

He thrust it into Flynn’s hand. Flynn looked down at it.

“It’s a sensitive radio receiver and a computer that can read and interpret what it picks up. The thing draws a couple of milliamps and has the computing power of maybe a hundred thousand laptops. The receiver is tuned to pick up brain wave frequencies. It works the same as a garden variety electroencephalograph, only without leads. It has an effective range of ninety meters line of sight.”

Flynn said, “Police departments could really use this.”

“And it’s also why we’re not going to be calling in the locals. It’s as classified a piece of equipment as the United States of America possesses. MindRay saves lives but it’s easily defeated. Word gets out, no more trick pony.”

“Defeated how?”

“Headgear that suppresses radio frequencies kills it. Embed a copper grid in a cap, and this device cannot read you.”

So cops couldn’t have it. Word would get out. He saw that. But he also had a question that he didn’t ask: did this thing make them more effective than the addition of some local bodies would?

“What’s to say the perp won’t be wearing a hat like that?”

“The classification of this item is very, very strict,” Mike said.

“Okay,” Diana came back, “we need to move right now.”

Flynn thought that they would have been better off leaving these things behind and going in with local support. If he was in command of this operation, the MindRays would be headed straight back to the Pentagon.

Outside, the wind was now howling down the runway, blowing a sheer white torrent of snow. They’d gotten in just under what was exactly what the weatherman was predicting: a snow hurricane.

Transport was a weathered Cherokee with chains, a tight fit for five people, especially when one of them was as big as Flynn Carroll.

There was no visible road. The only sign of any activity was a light, faint in the distance, appearing and disappearing as the snow gusted.

Charlie drove, Flynn navigated with the handheld GPS that was part of each equipment pack.

“He has a team,” Flynn said to Diana. “You indicated that.”

“Has to. At least one accomplice, probably more.”

They came out onto a plowed road. Now there were more lights, a snow-clad Motel 6 sign, beyond it a place called The Swashbuckler, a bar of the kind that grew like mushrooms in little places like Ridge, one mushroom per town. Inside, there’d be a bartender and a waitress snapping gum, in the back a cook. Along with the customers, they would have grown up here. In small towns, everybody had everything on everybody. Bitter places. Could also be murderous, especially on hard winter nights when you couldn’t escape from

those you loved and despised.

They pulled up at a big tin structure lit by a barely visible sign: “Rosen Surplus.”

He got out and pushed his way into the store, which turned out to be cave-like. There was an elderly woman with a tight gray bun sitting in a chair in front of rows of surplus fatigues. Hunter stuff.

“I need some warm clothes,” Flynn said.

The old woman looked up at him. “You sure do,” she said. Her face blossomed into a big, open smile. “Where’d you come from in that stuff, anyway?”

“Nowhere close by.”

She didn’t inquire further. She was too old to be curious about strangers anymore. She wanted his money, not his story.

“We got parkas on sale, thirty-six bucks. US Army mountain gear. Good stuff.”

He bought a parka, found a pair of boots that almost fit, some lined gloves, a hat, and an olive drab scarf that knew the services of moths. She showed him a dressing room behind a curtain where he put on two pairs of long johns and the rest of the clothes.

“Now you might live a while,” she said when he came out.

“Let’s hope.” He paid her a hundred and sixty bucks in cash and got a receipt for his expenses.

It was warm in the Jeep. Nobody spoke. Charlie backed out into the snow-swept street.

Flynn could feel the mission closing in. The absolute silence in the truck told him that these people sensed a whole lot of danger. Not sensed, knew. They *knew* that they were in great danger.

They drove off into a rampage of snow.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Louie was stationed a hundred yards away from Flynn, but he might as well have been in another state for all the good it did in this hell. The others were on the far side of the Hoffman house. The storm had come on even stronger than the Billings weatherman had said it would, and the snow rushed in the sky, pelting Flynn's parka and hood and working its way in under his scarf.

They'd been watching the house now since seven fifteen, and it was pushing nine o'clock. It was an excellent night for a perp who suspected he was under observation to make a move.

He had proven, however, that he could take them any time of year, from any kind of a dwelling, and never leave a trace of himself behind.

Off to his right, Flynn heard a distinct sound. A throaty growl.

It came again, and this time he thought maybe it was a tree scraping. Or could it be a car on the road, its engine straining?

The wind roared around him and the cold invaded his sleeves, the seam of the hood, anywhere it could get in, and that was pretty much everywhere. The scarf was a joke, the socks were a joke. The boots were waterproof, but no boots could keep out cold like this. It made him worry that he wasn't feeling enough pain from his feet, it numbed his hands and made his face burn.

When it comes to cold, after the pain ends is when death begins, and it is a line you can cross without ever knowing it.

The Hoffman place was a prairie Victorian with lighted windows downstairs, looking as warm and inviting as it could be. From time to time, he caught a whiff of oil smoke from what had to be a blazing furnace. In the living room, he could see a fire flickering in the fireplace, and that smoke would drift this way, too. Professor Hoffman, Gail's father, sat in a wing chair before the fire, from time to time sipping at a mug that stood on a small table beside him.

Gail was cleaning up in the kitchen, moving elegantly about, her long arms putting away dishes. Girl-perfect, she reminded him powerfully of Abby.

Flynn was a snow-covered bulge in the earth and that was good. He was well concealed from the road, and the snow would insulate him a little. From time to time, he raised a stealthy, gloved hand and blew into it to warm his nose and face. He rocked from side to side, dipped his knees a little, keeping moving just enough to avoid becoming stiff.

If they weren't properly cleaned and oiled, guns could freeze solid in weather like this, even in your pocket. So he gripped his pistol. He also tried the MindRay. Once, he might have picked up a signal from the direction of the house. Another time he might have detected Louis. Out here, though, the display that had been clear and steady in the hangar flickered and changed so quickly that it meant, essentially, nothing. He was sure now that the thing was high-tech junk. Maybe the Rangers trusted it and maybe they didn't. He didn't.

He also tried the beautifully compact night vision equipment, only to find that the snow made it crazy. All he saw were flashes. He would've been better off bringing his own homemade scope.

He kept old-fashioned naked eye watch and nursed his Glock.

About fifteen minutes later, the living room went dark, then a front bedroom lit up. Professor Hoffman was heading up to bed at nine twenty-five.

Flynn had about decided to make an approach. As far as he knew, the Hoffmans didn't even know they were being staked out, and that was ridiculous. Also, the decision not to involve the local police was wrong, especially when the reason given was to protect the secret status of a piece of equipment that belonged in the garbage. The whole plan was borderline incompetent.

Flynn's worry was that the perp was already in the Hoffman's lives, someone they had come to trust. Was that how he worked—he was the grocery clerk, the night man at the convenience store, getting under the skin of the vic so skillfully that there was never a flicker of suspicion?

He shook the snow off and started toward the house, but there was motion to his right, at about one o'clock. Something low and big. A car? No, impossible off the road in this snow. Anyway, it was living movement, stealthy and low to the ground.

Almost on its own, his gun came out. He stayed where he was, though. Don't move until you understand.

A minute passed, then another.

This perp had once taken a forty-year-old woman who'd weighed two hundred pounds out of a farmhouse in Oregon on a rain-soaked night and left not even a footprint. He had taken mothers from shopping mall parking lots, fathers from backyard barbecues, nurses from their rounds, priests from their rectories.

He had killed them all, Flynn believed. Of course he had, killed them without remorse, lost as he was in whatever fantasy drove him.

Now there was another sound. What the hell was that? Something tinkling.

No, it was music. It floated like a spirit on the storm. There were windows downstairs with drawn curtains, and he thought that was where the music was coming from. It stopped, then started again. Soaring out above the roar of the storm, the hiss of the snow. Dear God, she could play that piano. What was it? Beethoven, maybe? Beautiful, anyway.

Rocking from side to side, checking his feet, blowing into his hands, Flynn began pressing forward again.

Another sound came, this time to his left. This was a very strange sound, a muffled sort of whistling. It went on and on, this sound, a kind of noiseless screaming.

Finally, it ended and did not repeat. The music swelled and the wind moaned in the eaves of the old house. Low clouds plunged out of the north. The only light was from the house and the glowing snow.

He was going down to that house and he was going to announce himself to those people. He was well under way, slogging through drifts as deep as six feet, when he observed the moving shape again. It came from the right this time, and therefore had crossed his field of vision without him seeing it. So there must be a low area between him and the house, probably the snow-covered road. But it wouldn't offer more than a couple of feet of protection, so whatever that was out there, it wasn't a man.

He called on the reserves of inner silence that twenty years of intensive martial arts training had given him. "All things come to him who waits." The defender has the advantage, always.

He watched as the wind picked up a long stream of snow and blew it off into the darkness. The eaves of the house wailed, the music swelled, and bright scars of moonlight whipped across the desert of snow. Behind the storm would come brutal cold and behind that, they said, another storm.

The moonlight revealed a low form with a long back and tail—an animal. The instant the light hit it, it became so still that many people wouldn't have noticed it. A moment later, though, darkness engulfed the shaft of moonlight, and the animal with it. He fought to control his breathing, fought to stay where he was and not follow the flight-or-fight instinct, which was telling him to get the hell out of here.

He tried the night vision goggles. They hadn't been adjusted to work in snow.

Activate the radio, then? No. The others were all armed professionals, too, and a single spatter of communication could cause the perp to pull out—assuming, of course, that he was here.

The house was still dark. When the moon broke out of the clouds, it stood still and silent. Were they asleep? Could they sleep? He could see an LED in there, glowing red in the downstairs hall. They had an alarm system. Certainly guns, too. So they probably felt safe.

The snow was now coming down in long, howling flurries punctuated by periods of driving wind. He waited, his hands clutching his gun. He'd stuffed the MindRay into his backpack. The equally useless night vision binoculars hung around his neck.

He was peering into the dark and thinking about trying them again when the moon appeared and he found himself looking into the face of a goddamn puma, which was not ten feet in front of him.

He gasped, choking back a shout of alarm.

How in the world had it gotten this close this fast? A certainty: it was the master of conditions like this. A possibility: it saw him as prey.

The eyes were steady. They were careful. To his amazement, they followed his stealthy movement to his pistol. Since when did pumas understand pistols? But this one sure did.

He wished that he had an Anaconda or a Model 29, because it was going to take some accurate shooting with the Glock to stop this creature if it charged from this close. Worse, it was a Glock Nineteen and not an Eighteen with its greater capacity and automatic fire option. He needed a perfect head shot or the animal would still be very much alive when it connected with him.

Carefully, he tightened his hand around the pistol and began to pull it up into firing position. If the animal leaped before the gun was aimed, he was going to be torn to pieces.

Its eyes shifted to his face, then back to the rising pistol, which was uncanny. How smart could it be?

It pulled its shoulders forward. It was about to leap. But then there was a slight hesitancy.

The eyes—so steady, so alien—returned to his face. In the stare Flynn could see a raw lust to kill. But then they flickered again, and in the next instant the animal was gone. He had gotten the gun into position just in time, and it had clearly understood that it had been outmaneuvered.

Amazing. He'd never seen anything like it. No animal was that smart.

The puma's tracks faded into the snow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Louie was approximately two hundred yards to his right, covering the house from an angle that gave him a different view. Flynn wanted to warn him on the radio, but he didn't want to be the one to blow this mission, misconceived though it was. He had to warn the guy, though, so he'd go over there. This would leave the house uncovered from this angle for a few minutes, but it had to be done. It was one damn smart cat, and the guy needed to know this.

The piano had started again, the music slipping and sliding in the wind. Abby, also, had played. His dad had played. He'd tried to learn, but he hadn't inherited that gene. What he could do well with his hands was shoot. He could turn even an old snub-nosed Police Special into a useful weapon. A good pistol felt like an extension of his hand. Any pistol, for that matter.

Pushing through the snow, he was tempted to call Louie's name, but even that might destroy the stakeout. Many a cop had wrecked a good collar with an ill-timed whisper.

He was sweating under his layers of clothing when he began to ask himself if he'd gone in the right direction. But he had, no question. So where was Louie?

The snow seemed less, so he tried the night vision goggles again. He could see a little better, but they didn't reveal Louie ahead. Instead, what Flynn saw was a strange, formless shape in the snow.

Was that a rock? A gnarled bush?

He tried working with the goggles, increasing the magnification.

The material was jagged, gleaming darkly. He still couldn't tell what it was.

Another patch of moon glow sped by. In it, he could make out a pale ripped edge protruding from the shape. Bone, maybe? If so, then that was a chunk of something the lion had just killed—a deer, hopefully.

As a precaution, he got his pistol back out and held it alongside his parka. If that was a kill, then the lion was protecting it, and that's why it was hanging around.

As he crunched along, he stepped on something just beneath the frozen surface. It was hard and irregular and it shifted under his foot.

He bent down and pushed away the snow.

What first appeared was a pallid slickness. He kept brushing. Something just below it, hard tufts of material. Frozen hair, he thought. So this was a kill and that was why the puma had menaced him. It had been worried about having its food stolen.

It took all of his training not to cry out when he found the staring eyes and gaping mouth of Louis Hancock looking back at him. The eyes flashed with moonlight when there were rips in the clouds.

The guy had been taken down by the mountain lion, which was about the damndest thing Flynn could imagine happening. As he pushed more snow away, he discovered that Louie had been hit from behind and thrown forward, then—incredibly—ripped in half.

The legs and abdomen were nearby, a knee and booted foot jutting up from the snow. So the lion must be big. Huge.

This stakeout was over. He reached up and pressed the call button on his radio. "There's been an accident. Detective Hancock is dead. Come in, please."

Silence.

“I repeat, Louis Hancock has been killed, apparently by a mountain lion. We need to close this thing down, we have a dead officer here.”

Silence.

He was coming to really not like these people. “You can’t continue the stakeout, you have a dead officer! I repeat, *dead officer!*”

The hell with it, he’d go in himself. He’d been on his way anyway, interrupted by this horror show. He went plunging toward the house.

The going was extremely hard, and he had to fight his way through some flurries so high that he was forced to lie forward and push himself ahead.

Every time he was forced to do this, he was very, very aware that he was entirely helpless.

He moved slowly, guided by the music. There were no lights showing in the house. When he finally stumbled out into the road, the going was a little easier, but not much. The house loomed ahead of him, tall and completely dark except for a single strip of light leaking from around the curtains of the room where Gail Hoffman was playing.

He was going up the snow-choked front walk when he saw the lion again. It was standing on the porch, back around the far edge, where it curved around under the living room windows. It was absolutely still, and it was watching him.

Once again, it had maneuvered brilliantly. He thought to back off, but any movement whatsoever was going to be a major risk. The animal could react a whole lot faster than he could. Certainly, trying to turn around and run would get it on him in an instant.

The puma was not protecting its kill. It was still hunting, and he was its quarry.

He calculated its distance from him at fifteen feet.

Its eyes were as still as glass. If the nostrils hadn’t dilated slightly as it breathed, it would have appeared frozen. The jaw hung slightly open, the enormous incisors visible.

Was that the face of a mountain lion? He didn't know enough about big cats to tell, but it seemed somewhat longer and narrower. He decided that his best move was to edge in close enough to guarantee a fatal head shot. With luck, it wouldn't react in time.

Another step, then another, as he slowly came up out of the snow and into the compact front garden. Gail played on. The lion watched him.

He saw its eyes close for a moment, then come open again. The message conveyed was clear and it was shocking: the animal was so sure of itself that it was *bored*.

Again he stopped, because he had understood why. The game was already over. It had been since before he'd started his maneuver. The animal was waiting for him to realize that he was caught. No matter what he did, it was going to make its move while he was still too far away for a reliable shot.

Bored did not mean careless. The face remained a picture of attentive patience.

He noticed a flickering light in the sky. Lightning, he thought, which would mean that the blizzard was about to intensify. Could that help him? Would a really powerful flurry give him a chance to return to the road, perhaps to make his escape?

Then he heard a noise even more inexplicable than the earlier one, which had obviously been Louie's death whistle. This was a whispering sound overhead, a big, rhythmic whisper of wind, too regular to be part of the storm. As he listened, it slowed and then settled, dropping down behind the house.

The rhythm was that of a helicopter blade, but it was too quiet. Way too quiet.

A moment later, the light in the front yard changed, and he saw why. The curtained room had just gone dark. The piano had fallen silent.

The lion, also, was gone, slipping away in absolute silence.

He stood still, listening, watching. Could it have jumped up on the roof?

Carefully, moving slowly and as little as possible, he raised his head. There was no telltale shadow along the roofline. So it had retreated, backing down the porch until it was out of sight.

Was it trying to escape him or was it still hunting him? Since he couldn't know, he had no intention of going around the corner of that porch. He needed some spot where he could still see the house, but which would give him protection for his back.

Fifty feet to his left was a tree, its trunk thick enough to enable him to lean against it, making attack from behind much more difficult. The lion would have to charge him from some point that he could see, and it would need to start far enough away to make the pistol useful.

The snow in the yard looked deep, and the slower he had to move, the greater the risk. But if he stayed here, the lion could get behind him.

He raised his gun up beside his shoulder where it could be aimed and fired in just over a second, then plunged off the snow-covered sidewalk and into the deeper drifts of the yard itself. He was at his most vulnerable now.

An enormous splash of snow hit him in the face, temporarily blinding him. He pulled a gloved hand across his face to clear his eyes.

The lion was beside the tree and it was already crouched, ready to leap at him.

Once again, it had outmaneuvered him. Yet again, he was too far away to risk a pistol shot. It, however, was close enough to take him.

Years ago, Menard had recorded a case of a mountain lion stealing a three-year-old out of the bed of a pickup, but he'd never heard of anything like this.

He'd probably been damn lucky to have seen it when he had, or he would have suffered the same fate as Louie.

He took deep, careful breaths, centering his attention on his body, letting his emotions race off down their own frightened path. "You're here, you've survived so far," he told himself. "You can win this."

How had the lion ever gotten over to the tree? How had it concealed itself

in the snow? He was having a hard time believing that an ordinary puma could function like this.

Once again, he had to fight the impulse to turn and run.

The lion moved off past the tree, carefully keeping the trunk between itself and Flynn, and once again he had the uncanny sense that it understood guns.

He asked himself, “Do I have any chance at all of getting to the house?”

From where he now stood, the tree was thirty feet away, the porch and front door twenty.

The door had a glass window in it backed by a curtain. Breaking in would take ten seconds.

When a path looked easy, that was usually because it wasn't.

The moment he started back up onto the front walk, he had to assume that the lion would know his intentions.

He made a quick survey of the scene. The house was now completely quiet and completely dark.

Could it be that the lion was trained? Because another way of looking at this situation was that it was not only trying to kill him, it was also trying to keep him from getting to the house.

No, don't even go down that road. The perp didn't have a damn pet lion with a genius level IQ. The creature was bad luck, nothing more. Had to be.

Nevertheless, his cop's intuition screamed at him: secure your position. You don't know where that animal is and you don't know *what* it is, not really.

Once again, he tried the radio. Once again, there was no response, which was completely unacceptable. When this stakeout was concluded he was going to file a red hot report with whoever was in charge of this outfit, about its leadership and its shitty procedures and its worthless equipment.

Six feet to the left of the front door, the porch ended. Beyond it were lumps along the side of the house that indicated the presence of a flower bed. Behind the house, just visible, he could see the dark bulk of what must be the

garage.

Somewhere back there Diana and Charlie and Mike were deployed—unless, of course, their radio silence was unintentional.

He would need to find them, but not right now. There was another thing that had to be done, which was that the Hoffmans needed to be warned and they had to be offered the close protection they should have been given in the first place.

Angrily jabbing the transmit button on his radio, sending out call after unanswered call, he approached the house.

He pushed his fist through one of the small panes of glass midway up the front door. Working fast because he had lost track of the puma, he pulled the remaining shards of glass out of the bottom of the frame, then leaned in, twisted the deadbolt, and opened the door.

The alarm sounded its warning buzz, but he didn't even try to cut it off. He wanted it to trigger. Surely that would bring Diana and Mike and Charlie in on the run—assuming, of course, that they were still alive. But surely—*surely*—they were. No matter how clever, a mountain lion simply could not slaughter four police officers. Someone was going to get to his gun in time.

The buzz of the alarm rose to a warble. Thirty seconds to go. “Miss Hoffman, Doctor Hoffman, police! Please disarm your system! Police!”

No reaction. They could have retreated to a safe room. They could be waiting there, guns at the ready. Hopefully, they were calling the locals.

His first order of business was to find such any safe room they might be in. It would most likely be in the basement, so where was that door?

He went into the living room. In the big stone fireplace, the fire that had blazed up earlier still sparked and muttered. Beyond this was the music room. With its drapes still closed, it was pitch black. Inside, he could see the darkly gleaming surface of a grand piano, its keyboard a pale grimace.

The alarm triggered, its horn blaring up from under the stairs. Returning to the front hall, he opened the door of the understairs storage, then waited

another full minute before disconnecting it. If it was set to make a distress call, he wanted to make sure that happened before he disabled anything. Finally, he pulled out its power line. Silence followed.

“Is anybody here?”

He detected not the slightest sense of movement, not the whisper of a footstep or a breath or the faintest creak of shifting weight from upstairs.

The wind rose in the eaves and snow swept past the windows.

He examined the alarm system’s control box and was horrified to see that the jack socket was empty. It had no phone connection.

Stepping into the hall, he tried his cell phone, but there wasn’t even the hint of a bar. In the kitchen he snatched up the receiver of a wall phone, but there was no dial tone. Lines were down, of course, in weather like this.

If that flash of light had been the perpetrator in some sort of helicopter, no matter how incredible it seemed, the brilliant puma had been part of it, deployed as an assassin and a decoy.

He looked out the kitchen window, across the bleak pale desert of the backyard.

He shifted frequencies on the radio, emergency calling again and again, but nobody came back. Field communicators like these were adjusted to a range of just a couple miles. You didn’t want them being picked up on bad-guy scanners.

To be certain that he was right about the Hoffmans, he went through the house checking bedrooms, closets, bathrooms, even under the beds.

He pulled down the attic door. As soon as the stairs unfolded, though, he knew they weren’t up there. Nobody had trod on these dusty steps in a long while. Still, he shone his light up. “Doctor Hoffman, police! Miss Hoffman!”

No reply.

He climbed the old steps, feeling the slanted ladder give under his weight. “Doctor Hoffman, I’m a police officer. I’m here to help you.”

If he was wrong and they were up there, he might be about to get his head

blown off. “Doctor Hoffman!”

Shining his light ahead of him, he went up two more rungs. He spotted a couple of cardboard boxes, but mostly the space was filled with loose insulation. Turning, he shone his light to the far end. The house had two wings, but there was no point in crawling any deeper. Anybody coming up here would have disturbed this insulation.

He backed down and closed the stairs, then spent some time in the master suite. The bed had been slept in, but it was cold now. The master bath revealed that this had been Doctor Hoffman’s room. It also revealed missing items. There was no toothbrush in the holder and a shelf of the medicine cabinet was empty.

There were too many clothes in the closet to tell if any were missing, but the way that the hangars had been pushed back, it looked possible. He observed no luggage, so that was another question.

He went down the hall to Gail’s room and found a similar situation. The bed was undisturbed, but there was evidence that cosmetics had been removed from the bathroom.

In the hallway, he found a closet that held luggage, but it was unclear if any had been taken.

Still, the evidence was sufficient to at least suggest that these people had left of their own accord. Nobody was going to believe that, though, because their cars were still going to be in the garage and there were no tracks around the house.

He knew damn well what had happened here. The Hoffmans had been taken. No question, it was exactly the same as all the other cases. So the kidnapper had managed to take the third sister right out from under the noses of a stakeout team, which was damn well amazing.

That most criminals were stupid was part of the shorthand of police work. The vast majority of them were going to be too dumb to get away, but also too dumb not to shoot. Catching the average crook was like herding a bull—

dangerous, but not exactly what you'd call an intellectual challenge.

What they had here was a lurid genius with a bizarre imagination. To even think of training a big cat the way he had was extraordinary. To succeed was phenomenal.

He went downstairs and looked out the back door. He needed to locate the remaining members of the team. He observed the snow-packed back garden carefully, but saw no sign of any human presence. But he wouldn't, not from here. They'd be back in the tree line.

That damn cat was probably still out there, but he had to do this. He unlocked the kitchen door and drew it open.

The wind-driven snow slammed him so hard that he lurched off balance and had to grab the doorframe to keep from being swept backward.

There were major gusts in this thing, fifty, sixty miles an hour.

Lowering his head, he pushed his way out into the storm.

CHAPTER NINE

The brief shafts of moonlight that had helped him earlier were now gone, replaced by scudding clouds and a literal wall of snow being driven directly in his face by the brutal wind. Out much more than five feet, he was blind. So what about the cat? Was it blind, too?

Despite this, the perp had come in here and taken his victims. Flynn knew when, too. It had happened just after Gail had stopped playing the piano and just before he'd entered the house—when Flynn had been dealing with the puma. It had disappeared because the kidnap had been accomplished and the perp had called it back.

The whole thing had taken roughly ten minutes and had been accomplished without a sound, without a trace of anything being left behind and without a hitch. *In this.*

He reached the garage and shone his light through one of the small windows that lined the two doors—and felt a shock with the power of a fist in the face. There was blood everywhere, blood and ripped clothing. He saw a hand, a leg—pieces of two people, maybe three.

The Hoffmans? The team? All of them?

He raised one of the doors, which came up with a massive creaking and a tinkle of shattering ice.

This door hadn't been opened in at least an hour, and the other one was

caked with ice. So who were these people?

Stepping in, gun in one hand and flashlight in the other, he went to where a bloody jacket lay against the door of an old pickup.

North Face, black. High-intensity penlight in the right pocket.

Mike had worn a black North Face. The light was the same one all the team members carried.

Against the back wall, there was an old-fashioned pitchfork. On it was a rounded mass of bloody hair. It was Charlie, his distorted face just barely recognizable in the mess.

The perp may have originally intended to take the Hoffmans in the usual way, leaving behind evidence that they'd departed on their own. Flynn's best guess was that these two men had somehow succeeded in surprising him—whereupon they had paid the same price as Louie.

So this was now a major crime scene. There could be forensic studies done here. Maybe there would be prints, bits of hair, even blood. DNA, even.

Looked at one way, this was a scene of extraordinary violence and tragedy. Looked at another way, it could be a treasure-trove of evidence, the first one in the history of this case.

A quick survey of the remains turned up evidence of only the two men. Diana was not here. He made a quick decision to report this crime first and worry about her later. His guess was that she was beyond saving anyway, probably back there in those woods right now, in the form of frozen remains.

His duty was very clear. He had to get out of here alive and give the state criminal investigators all the help he could.

But how to accomplish that? The perp was going to definitely want him dead. He had effective weapons, including the lion, and probably skills and capabilities that Flynn knew nothing about. Given that he was able to train a wild animal to near-human hunting skills, it had to be assumed that he was well provided with extraordinary assets.

Could Flynn manage to walk out of here? No, the perp would not let that

happen. At some point, the lion would reach him or something else would reach him.

Even if he did reach the Cherokee, which was half a mile back along the road, he didn't have keys. So he would need to wire it. Not difficult, but it would take a few minutes that he was unlikely to have.

He was trapped here, that was clear. But he wasn't going to give up. That was also clear. The odds were against him though, seriously against him. In fact, he didn't really think he had any measurable odds. So what he had to do was to leave a record behind, giving all the details of the crime as he had observed them.

A moment's thought brought him an idea. He set about searching the ruins of the two men for a phone. He could use it to record a detailed account of the crime as he had seen it unfold. He'd return it to the pocket it had come from. At some point, forensics would find the recording and listen to it.

Handling the corpse of a person who has just died is as intimate an experience as there is. Not many people do it—nurses, policemen, emergency medical service personnel—and those who do never get used to it. It's as if a living person has surrendered himself to you so completely that he is lost to your touch.

Largely because Charlie's corpse was the least maimed, Flynn approached it first. He'd taken a shattering blow to the head and sustained deep gouges. A man had delivered the blow, but the rest of it had been done by the lion.

The body lay at a twisted angle, its face turned away as if in some eerie excess of modesty. One arm lay across the chest, the other angled backward, obviously broken. Long gouges had reduced his heavy parka to rags that bulged with tufts of white wool insulation. Mike felt in the pockets, soon coming across the familiar shape of an iPhone. Grasping it, he withdrew it and turned it on.

It took a long time, but finally the opening screen appeared. Charlie didn't use a password, which was useful but not smart for a man who obviously

dealt with a lot of classified material.

As Flynn pressed the logo of the recorder app, he found himself watching the battery indicator with increasing amazement. The phone got hot, quickly becoming almost painful to hold. He tried to turn it off but it was no use. He watched helplessly as the battery indicator moved across the face of the thing, reducing it in a matter of seconds to a dead, useless brick. Immediately, he pulled out his own cell phone and found it to be hot, also, its battery drained.

He went to Mike's shattered remains, dug his fingers into a blood-soaked pants pocket, but did not find his phone. He patted the other pocket. Same result. Had it been lost in the battle that had taken place in here? He shone his light around the room.

Mike's jacket was so badly ripped apart that the contents of the pockets had been strewn all over the room. After a few more moments of searching, he found his MindRay under the truck. On the far side of the vehicle was a small black object, which proved to be not his cell phone, but an old Police Special. Flynn pocketed it.

At that moment, he heard a sound, a fluttering in the rafters.

He braced his pistol, but saw nothing. He used his flashlight. Still nothing. Could have been a possum or a coon. Not a lion, though, thank God, not up there.

Continuing his search, he soon located another pistol, this one a Magnum. At least one of these guys had been decently armed. The pistol had been fired until it was empty.

Charlie and Mike had fought for their lives in here. He hadn't heard the shots, so the battle must have taken place while he was still on the rise overlooking the house. That would have been at least half an hour ago.

He thought the situation over. Louie had been done by a big cat that had been expertly trained. Best trained animal in the world, no question. It hunted like a master tracker of the human kind, not like an animal. What had happened in here was that the lion and its human minder had worked

together.

The shadow dropping down from above was almost on him by the time he saw it. There were eyes—huge, glaring—and he was firing his pistol again and again, aware that he was emptying it just like Mike had.

Then silence. Nothing was there but a wreath of smoke.

He took a long step toward the truck—and saw something moving on the far side. Reflex made him brace the empty pistol.

No more movement. No sound.

He went closer, then around to the front of the truck. Shining his light into the darkness between the vehicle and the wall, he saw a mass of something on the floor. A closer look revealed that it was feathers.

“Shit,” he said quietly. He’d shot at a poor damn barn owl. Fortunately for the owl, all he’d done was to separate it from part of its tail.

It was time to get out of here. He had one hell of a dangerous journey ahead. Reluctantly, he approached Mike’s body again and felt for a reload for the Magnum. He didn’t find one. He’d never know if the guy failed to bring extra bullets, or used more than one cylinder. Not that it was that important. Dead is dead, and they certainly hadn’t been killed by any barn owl.

It was time to do this, maybe lose his life and maybe not, but the longer he waited the more certain he felt that whoever had done three experts to death would find a way to kill a fourth—or was that a fifth? Diana had yet to be accounted for.

He turned out his light, went to the door, twisted the handle, and raised it onto the storm.

The wind was roaring steadily now, the snow gushing out of the sky in a horizontal cataract. He took his compass out of his pocket and oriented himself, then turned and closed the door.

He started off, pushing his way through snow that was two feet deep at a minimum. When he reached the road, he consulted his compass again, then turned and headed toward the town.

He'd find the Cherokee. He'd survive. He'd get this perp and see him take the needle.

The wind howled around him, clutching him, shaking him with the full power of nature at its most wild.

He struggled off toward the town, his compass his only guide.

CHAPTER TEN

Flynn's struggled to stay on the road, to see any possible attacker, to somehow make progress against a storm that was like a living creature. He timed himself, hoping that he could get at least a rough idea of when he might be approaching the jeep. He also watched as best he could for the puma or for any other sign of danger.

When a flicker lit the snow, his first thought was that it was lightning. There was no thunder, though. Then, for the briefest moment, a neat pool of light crossed a drift to his right.

He reacted by dropping and rolling off the road. He let himself sink into the snow. Face up, he lay absolutely still, breathing as lightly as possible. Heat sensing equipment worked particularly well in conditions like this and he did not want his breath to reveal him to infrared detectors.

He reached for the Glock with his right hand, Mike's Special with the left. He'd worked for years to shoot effectively with his left hand, and was able to hit targets firing from it at eighty percent of his right-handed proficiency.

If anything came at him, he was going to do his best to shoot it and the hell with the police self-identification mandate, this was kill or die. As always in moments like this, he took his attention away from his mind and even his problem, and concentrated it on his body. You'd think that paying attention to the problem was what you needed. But what you needed was a hunter's

form, and that was a physical discipline. As he emptied his mind, cocked silence filled him. His breathing became deep, his heartbeat slowed.

After a moment, a more intense light appeared, growing at first brighter, then slowly dimming. It was moving up the road, and it seemed to be coming from above, like a searchlight shining down from a helicopter.

As had been the case at the Hoffmans', there wasn't the slightest sound of an engine. A helicopter produces noise in two ways. There's the engine sound, but the distinctive chopping is caused by the rotor, or wing, breaking the sound barrier for a moment each time the engine drives it forward.

There was no engine noise. There was no chop. So could this be one of the rumored silent wing choppers the air force had been working on? *Was* it the air force, then? Could it therefore mean safety?

No, this same type of aircraft had been used to kidnap the Hoffmans.

So the perp had a trained lion and a helicopter with a silent wing.

He waited, breathing evenly, letting the snow settle around him. He was freezing cold but must not allow himself to shiver. His face burned from cold, but he would not move to push the snow away.

The light flashed down again and again, continuing on past him, growing slowly fainter until it was finally absorbed by the darkness.

Did the possession of an advanced helicopter mean a defense connection of some sort?

If he got out of this alive, that would be another line of inquiry worth pursuing. Right now, though, it was all he could do not to let his mind frantically game survival options. From long experience and study, he knew that in conflict the body is a better master than the mind. He concentrated his attention on his senses, mostly his hearing.

From yoga, he'd learned a practice of containing his body heat, and he regulated his breathing carefully. He needed to remain here for an unknown amount of time, but without intense physical discipline he was going to have to move in a few minutes or be frozen.

He took in breath, held it deep, then expelled it slowly, retaining as much heat as he could.

The light returned, brighter this time. It was definitely coming from above, no question about that. If he had a helicopter with a silent wing, then maybe he also had a MindRay, maybe even a better one. Certainly heat sensors and night vision equipment. But would any of it register the presence of a mind in deep trance?

He concentrated his attention on his inner silence. His mind became totally quiet. He waited. They might get him, but there would be death among them.

Slowly, the light faded once again. Whatever equipment they had, they hadn't found him. Unless, of course, they were waiting for him to stand up into an ambush. If they were certain that he was here, they might realize that the snow was concealing him from their detectors. Therefore, he had to remain hidden until they concluded that he was dead.

He couldn't see his watch and dared not bend his arm, so he began to count. He needed to stay here at least half an hour, but how was he going to do that without freezing to death?

The cold penetrated deeper and faster than he'd thought possible, coming in through his double ply of long johns, making his bones ache and his skin go numb.

Time passed. He remained still. Methodically, he moved his fingers and toes.

When he'd heard nothing for what he hoped was at least fifteen minutes, he moved slightly.

No light flickered, no sound came but the wind.

He moved more, lifting his head until he could hear the intimate whisper of snow as it slid out of the sky.

As he came to his feet, he did an immediate reconnaissance up and down the road. It appeared that he was alone. To the east, the sky was slightly brighter, but darkness still dominated. He glanced at his watch. Five fifteen.

He had not been under the snow for ten or twelve minutes. He had remained here for more than two hours.

He struggled back up onto the road and turned south, then resumed plodding.

Walking was hard work and extremely slow and even without his pursuers to capture him, it was clear to him that he might not make it out of this. If he didn't find the jeep and then also missed the crossroads and therefore didn't find the town, he would die within the hour. In fact, unless everything went perfectly and he had luck, one way or another, he was going to die in this place.

Ahead, a frozen road sign danced in the wind. It was caked with ice and unreadable, but he could see that it contained an arrow pointing to the right.

It was the way to the town. Even better, sometime in the past two or three hours, it had been plowed. Snow was blowing again, but when he put his feet down they hit tarmac, not crunching ice. He was able to safely increase his speed, which he did, forcing more and more out of himself, but at the same time getting his body into the same kind of rhythm that enables animals to lope for hours, checking his breathing, his heart rate, going for the long pull.

He began to allow himself to think that he might have escaped.

The road, though, seemed to go on forever. How long had they driven to get from the town to the Hoffman's turn off? He recalled ten minutes at most. The snow had kept them to twenty miles an hour, perhaps a little faster. So his best guess was that he had about five miles to go. He set his walking speed at four miles an hour, very fast for these conditions, but possible. He knew how each speed felt, from two to six miles an hour. The fact that the road had been plowed was a major plus. If he'd had to slog through the same depth of snow that had choked the side road, he wouldn't have made more than two miles an hour at best.

By the time he could finally see the town's streetlight, putting one foot in front of the other had become a struggle. Beyond it was the Motel 6, a strip of

twelve rooms, two cars in front, most likely salesmen sheltering from the storm. He needed to inform the local authorities about the disaster at the Hoffmans', but he had no idea where the police station was located. He headed for the motel. They'd have a phone.

The office was lit by a single storm candle guttering in a saucer on the counter. The room was empty and it was cold. So they'd lost power.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

There was an area map glued under plastic, beside it a stand with brochures promising hunting, fishing, and hot-air balloon rides. They touched him with a strange nostalgia, and he found that he understood the look he'd seen in the eyes of cops who had seen carnage. They longed for the time before, and now so did he.

"Excuse me? Hello?"

Still nobody.

He went around the counter and leaned into the office. An ancient woman sat slumped behind a weathered old desk.

"Excuse me, ma'am?"

When she still didn't respond, he went around the desk and touched her shoulder. Her blouse was dank, the bones beneath dry and light.

Finally, there was a sort of subsurface shudder and she slowly unfolded. She looked up at him out of eyes that had once been tiny with cunning, but were now tired old beads of suspicion. She blinked. Blinked again. Then her face lifted itself from its wrinkled depths, the eyes suddenly full of flicker, and he saw ancient loves reflected there.

"Well, what do I have but a fine-looking young man in here," she said, then she smiled and the whole room lit up. "My God, where'd you come from?"

"Broke down 'bout a mile out."

"Lucky it wasn't more. Lucky we got room, night like this." She unfolded

from the desk, her face briefly rigid with pain. Then the smile came back and she glided into the front like the dancer she must once have been.

He followed.

“Can’t run a card till we get the juice back. You good for forty bucks?”

He pulled out his wallet. “I’ve got the cash.”

“Well, that’s fine then.”

“Where’s the local police station?”

“You in trouble?”

“I’m a policeman from Texas. I need some information.”

“You lookin’ for the rustlers, aint’cha? It’s Mexicans, I’m tellin’ you. Them illegals. They got trucks, Texas. Big trucks. And guns, too. Big’uns. You’re carryin’ two pistols, Texas. Ain’t enough.”

The eyes were sharp, no question there. “Where’s the station?”

“There’s no police here in Ridge, we got about fifty people living around here is all. You’ll have to go on down to the town of River City. There’s a state police barracks there. Four fellas. This is Montana. We ain’t got a lotta police.”

“Is there a bus through here?”

“Eight in the morning, if it’s on time. Stops at the café. But you’re gonna sleep like an old dog, you lie down on a bed, boy. Want a call?”

“Yeah, that would be good.”

With no computer, she didn’t record the registration, which was just as well. The more he thought about it, the less sure he was that he would stop at that barracks. He really did not want to explain the Hoffman place to the state cops, how he had gotten there, what he had been doing, any of it. What he wanted to do was to get to an FBI office, and that would mean going all the way to Billings on that bus.

Somebody had to have a record of the men who had died on this operation, who they reported to, who they were, for that matter. Because he didn’t think he’d been told a straight story, not any of it. But somebody

would know in Washington or wherever, and the FBI office in Billings would be the place to start locating that person. He didn't want to try to involve the locals anymore, not when he was the only survivor. God only knew where things might go, when some smart detective realized that he was the only witness and the only person who had come out of there alive.

"Look," the old lady said, "I can't get the keycard machine to print a key, so here's a maid's key. It works on all the rooms but please don't take advantage of that."

"No ma'am."

"All we got here is a meat broker, some kinda pesticide salesman, and a couple of them gay cowboys keep comin' around here since that damn movie. Ten years and they're still comin'. Gay cowboys, my God, how could there be so many?"

"It's a solitary life," Flynn said.

He left her shaking her head as she negotiated the snow-swept walk that fronted the line of rooms. It was ungodly cold. If his cell phone had been working, he would have pulled up the weather app, but he made a guess that it was no more than zero, and probably below.

There was no heat in Room Seven, but also no wind and no snow. He did not undress, but wrapped himself in the thin blanket and stretched out on a mattress that wasn't long enough for him.

He lay there, his mind turning over what had happened. But what *had* happened? A lion, a helicopter in a raging windstorm?

"Oh, Abby," he said in the privacy of the inner dialogue that he carried on with her, "what secrets do you know?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

He slept like an animal sleeps, with just enough awareness left behind to rouse him if there was trouble. Sometime toward dawn, he heard the snarl and clank of a gang of plows passing outside. Later, a woman sang to herself on the other side of one of the cardboard walls. Or was that Abby come to him?

A little after seven, thin light woke him. He was washing his face in a chilly memory of hot water when the old lady called. He thanked her and headed out.

The sky was ribbed steel, cold and low, and the wind was blowing what felt like a pretty steady forty miles an hour out of the northwest. There was no snow falling, but streams of it rose from the drifts and pummeled his parka and face. His two-day growth of beard provided welcome insulation.

The café was closed. “No Juice,” said a sign scrawled on the door. He needed to eat. There were pies in a case on the counter, bags of Fritos on a stand. He could drink raw eggs without a problem. Plus, the lock was simple. The problem was, if he got caught, there’d be a ridiculous hassle to deal with, and more trouble for him if those bodies had already been found.

He stood on the stoop of the café, looking for the bus. He didn’t know where it was coming from or where it was going. It didn’t really matter, though. Away from here, that was all that mattered.

He was stomping and blowing on his hands when it finally showed up at nine twenty. It was like an angelic apparition, the big, muddy, slab-sided Greyhound. It had been in a war with the elements, but it was here, rumbling and clattering and shaking, brown ice dripping along its windows, shadowy travelers within.

When he got on, he found it packed. Probably a lot of people were cold. Probably they were looking for shelter in Billings. Well, so was he.

He went to the back where there were still a few seats, and took one beside a huddled red parka.

With a hiss of air brakes and a rumble from the engine, the bus started off. A few minutes passed, and the red parka stirred. "How long to Montana?" its occupant asked as she raised her head.

"We're in Montana," he replied. He turned to her.

It was Diana, and he was too surprised to speak.

"Help me," she said.

"Of course. I thought—"

"I don't know how I escaped." Her hand came toward his. He looked down at it. She withdrew it, entwining it with the other, twisting them together.

"What happened?"

She glanced toward the seat in front of them. "Not now."

"I understand. Where are you going?"

"Billings. I've got to make a report and I want a secure line, not a cell phone." She took a long breath. "This is unprecedented." She returned to her previous hunched posture. "How did they do it?"

"That's not my question to answer." She'd sent three men to their deaths. How they had been killed or by whom were not the issue. The fact that they'd been exposed to the danger, that was the issue. Her issue.

She turned to him. "You don't want to talk about it?"

"No."

“But you would have handled things differently?”

“Yes.”

“You need to know more. Then you’ll understand more.”

“Who’s going to tell me?”

He felt her cold fingers brush his wrist. He did not react, but he also found that he did not move away. “I don’t have that authority,” she said.

“Then there’s something wrong in your chain of command, lady. I’m what you got left on the front line, and you can’t tell me my mission? That’s poor.”

“You’re furious.”

“Too goddamn much secrecy. Lives wasted. So, yeah.”

“And I wasted them?”

“If I get to submit a report, that’s part of what I’ll say. You shouldn’t be doing this work. Sorry.”

She sucked in breath. There was anger in her eyes, a flush in her cheeks. Not used to criticism, that was clear. “I didn’t know he had a tiger,” she said. “Nobody could know that.”

“It was a lion.”

She whirled in her seat, eyes now flashing. “That was a Siberian tiger.”

“Oh?”

“Gray with darker gray stripes. It was a Siberian tiger in its winter coat.”

He thought about that. He hadn’t seen the flanks. The face had been strange. She could be right. “If that’s true, we might be able to use it to track him down.”

“How?”

“A Siberian tiger is an endangered species. A zoo had to get a license to import it. If it was sold, that had to be approved. A rare animal like that, there’s gonna be a paper trail, and it’s gonna lead to our target, or damn close.”

“What if it was born here?”

“Whatever, the animal has papers. This could be a break.”

The bus wheezed along. Tough buggies, these Greyhounds. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Not tired anymore. Ready for action, but sitting in a damn bus.

Once again, he went over in his mind the details of what had happened, the tiger, the helicopter, the carnage in the garage.

“After they entered the garage, what happened?”

“Mike went in. Then we heard him firing his pistol. Charlie was nearest, so he ran after him.” Her voice dropped to a near-whisper. “When nobody came out, I went in. The smell of blood was so strong that I knew they were dead before I saw them.” She fell silent.

He felt for her. This was a conscientious officer and she was suffering. You lose a man, you’re changed forever. You lose three, and you are left in an agony of self-doubt and self-blame. If you’re good, that is. Still, though, he couldn’t change his opinion, not only of her but also of whatever organization she belonged to. Bad planning, bullshit electronics, excessive secrecy—it was not a workable system.

The bus crossed the great American distance, crawling through the endless, featureless snowscape with its big engine roaring and its windshield wipers creating a hypnotic rhythm.

Diana sat in silence. From time to time she turned to the window. He assumed that she was crying. He said nothing.

“What about the Hoffmans?” she asked. “Do you know?”

“They’re gone. I checked the house. A helicopter took them. I saw its lights.”

“More traceable than an animal.”

“You’d be surprised. Radar coverage out here isn’t gonna go much below six thousand feet. Stay under it, then the FAA isn’t gonna find out jack about you.”

“Homeland Security, surely.”

“You come up off of one of these ranches, you stay low, you’re free and

clear.”

“You heard it?”

“Yep. It did not sound like a helicopter. But that’s what it had to be.”

The bus pulled into another small town. Nameless place. Flynn watched the comings and goings of the passengers. Two left, three got on. He wasn’t expecting a problem, but the last of them seemed to check folks out a little more carefully than would be normal.

“You see that?”

“No.”

“The guy in the camouflage. He’s got busy eyes.”

She lowered her head.

He pressed her. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know. How would they know we were here?”

“That’s not the right question. The right question is, ‘Do they want us dead?’ I think we both know the answer.”

The bus started off. From back here, Flynn couldn’t see much of the other passengers. He flagged the guy in the camouflage, though. He was wearing a khaki cap with fur earflaps. When he took it off, his burr haircut was sprinkled with gray. Forty-five years old, maybe. Flynn watched the back of the head, which never moved. “That’s a professional up there,” he said.

“What kind of a professional?”

“Don’t know. But whatever he’s doing, he’s on duty.” Flynn took a breath and released it slowly. Contemplating. He needed to evaluate the situation, so he got up and went to back of the bus. As he stood, he got a chance to take a better look at the man, who was sitting two rows ahead of them. He could just see his profile. The man’s eyes were closed but his body language said he was nowhere near asleep.

Flynn stepped into the toilet, waited a short time, then emerged. Returning to his seat, he nudged Diana, then pointed with his chin. Her only response was another slight touch to his wrist.

“We have to assume that he’s a threat,” Flynn said.

“I agree.”

The bus rumbled on, the snowscape outside so total that Flynn could have easily believed they were on another planet.

The guy could be anybody, an insurance salesman, who knew? Except that was not what he was. Flynn had known such men, quiet like that, contained. You couldn’t see him watching you, but you could feel it.

“He’s here to kill,” Flynn said.

“I know it.”

You talk about a high-grade hit, what had gone down back at the Hoffmans’ was that and more. It was certainly the most exotic hit he’d ever seen, and one of the most effective.

The bus pulled into a town called Waco like the town in Texas except this was in Montana. Waco was basically a cluster of hills of snow with an occasional neon sign sticking out. There was a grain elevator and a gas station. The gas station was the bus stop. There wasn’t even a place to get a hamburger. Or no, there was. You could buy a microwave burger in the gas station.

The bus hung there for a minute. Nobody got off or on. Another minute. Still no action. The driver’s hand went for the door lever. The air brakes hissed.

Flynn grabbed Diana by the wrist and pulled her down the aisle. “Sorry,” he called out to the driver, “didn’t recognize it.”

They got off and the bus pulled out, and Flynn saw the face of the guy staring out at them, a face as blank as a tombstone.

“What are we doing,” Diana said, “we can’t stay here!”

“What we’re doing is surviving. Buying time. We’re clean now, for a while.”

They went into the gas station. “When’s the next bus through?” he asked the guy behind the counter, a lanky kid with the swift, unsure eyes of a dog

that can't figure out why it gets kicked.

“Two hours, but it's going the other way. Next one through to Billings is gonna be tomorrow.”

“We're going the other way. Our car broke down. We flagged him and had him drop us here.”

“I got coffee. The meatball hero over there's not gonna kill you, you're hungry. Avoid the burger.”

“What about the Philly?”

“I wouldn't eat it.”

The kid's eyes flickered away, and Flynn turned, following them toward Diana.

Snapshot: Diana's eyes, staring straight at him.

Snapshot: the guy from the bus coming in behind her. Camouflage. Professional movements. He'd gotten the driver to stop a second time. Flynn dropped his hand into his pocket, closed on the Glock. Behind Diana, the assassin's hands came up toward his chest. He was going for a gun, going into action.

Flynn threw himself at Diana, hurling her to the floor with so little room to spare that he felt the heat of the bullet sear the back of his head as it passed. Maybe an eighth of an inch, maybe less.

He rolled, pushing over a shelf of candy, sending Snickers bars and Kit Kats and PayDays flying.

The killer was bracing his weapon, a big long-range pistol with a laser sight. A red dot appeared in Diana's hair. Flynn pulled her into the heap of candy and shelving as the second round smashed into the floor where she'd been lying. Cement shrapnel ripped at them.

He got the Glock out, felt for the trigger, found it, and fired through the parka.

Then he had the guy. And the guy had him. Gun to gun, the guy with the Glock was going to have to be good. Real good.

Gun fighting is speed and math, but mostly math. Flynn was good at math. Instead of dropping his pistol, he changed his angle of attack. An iffy head shot became an easy heart shot.

The guy had done the same. Heart to heart. Impasse.

But then the guy backed off a step.

Flynn couldn't see Diana, but she had to be the reason. The clerk was hiding behind the counter hammering at the keypad of his cell phone. Not gonna work today, Flynn thought. Cell towers need power, too.

The assassin turned and ran. Flynn followed immediately.

"Stay together," Diana cried. "That's an order!"

The hell. He took off across the pump island and out into the highway. The guy was running hard, about fifty yards ahead. Flynn continued after him, letting the long hours of endurance training he'd done propel him forward despite the wind and the blowing snow. Ahead, the guy's back was visible as a dark smudge in the sea of snow.

"Stop! Police!" Except he wasn't the police, was he, not in Montana, and maybe not even in Texas if he'd pissed Eddie off enough to get himself fired.

The guy did not stop, of course, so he quit wasting breath. He could get off a shot, but there was no chance it was going to connect. He ran harder but did not gain. In fact, the smudge became more and more indistinct. Finally, it was gone. Flynn ran on for another minute, but in the end he did the only logical thing he could and stopped. He stood staring out into the gloom of the storm. He had maybe two hundred yards of visibility. Even as fast as he'd been running, the guy had continued to outstrip him.

Diana came up, her breath surging out of her nose in blasts of fog. "We gotta get out of here."

"How could he run like that? How could anybody?"

"I don't know."

He turned to her. He took her collars. He pulled her close to his face. "Yeah, you do. You've killed three men with this bullshit secrecy, so why

don't you give me some kind of goddamn chance and come clean. Tell me what you know."

"What I know? That we're up against a team. That they have excellent equipment and skills."

"They have a helicopter with a silent rotor."

"A silent rotor exists. It can be retrofitted to a number of different helicopters, including some general aviation models."

"So they've been able to steal classified equipment. What about their victims? What's the point of all this?"

"We don't know where they take people. We don't know why. The third sister was the closest we've ever gotten to one of their operations." She gestured. "Obviously, we weren't ready."

They began walking back toward the gas station. "How many of them are there? What's their maximum area of activity? US? Other countries as well?"

"Primarily US as far as we can tell. Concentrated in rural areas near urban population centers where there's lots of turnover and lots of young, well-educated, healthy people. They favor low-density suburbs like you live in. Like we did, me and Steven."

"Your husband?"

"Yes. But let's not go there right now."

"No."

The cold was so intense that the sweat he'd generated running was now flaking off him like an icy powder.

"Okay, one useful face. We've got the Siberian tiger involved. That's traceable."

They had reached the gas station. The clerk had closed it down and gone home, so they stayed close to the front window, using the station to shelter them from the wind and the pumps to interrupt the sightlines of possible snipers. Flynn didn't like it, but it was what they had.

"We're way too vulnerable here," he said, "so keep low and keep watch."

Then he asked her a question that had been troubling him. He already knew the answer, but he asked it anyway. “You’re not a field officer, are you?”

After a moment, she shook her head. “I come from the world of probability theory. I’m an analyst.”

“You couldn’t find a pattern, but then the third sister came along and you grabbed a few pros and off you went.”

“Don’t, please. No more.”

“He could’ve taken her any damn time, but he wanted to teach you a lesson. So he chose the night you were there.”

A cold silence fell between them. An analyst. An ad-hoc team. Equipment that didn’t work as advertised. Who the hell did the thinking?

The wind kept the snow blowing, reducing visibility. Flynn wondered what would come first, the bullet or the bus? Or maybe it would be the tiger.

He didn’t like it when his choices were limited to just one, especially when it was bad. Worse, all this flurrying was going to play hell out on the highway. Buses were going to stop in towns and stay there until they could follow plows.

“We need to find shelter. We need to either break into this place or we need to find somebody to help us. We can’t stay here.”

“The bus is due in forty minutes.”

He stood up. “Too long,” he said. He gestured toward the highway. “Outside of town, flurries are sweeping that road. So any traffic is stopped wherever it happens to be, and that’s where it’s gonna stay until it gets plowed out.”

“If we miss the bus—”

“You let the sun set on us, we do not survive the night. Period. If the cold doesn’t take us, he will. He will not miss again.”

She looked up at him. “It’s my decision,” she said.

He set off, intending to knock on doors until somebody let him in. Who knew, maybe they’d have a truck, maybe with chains.

She caught up with him. Good. He didn't want to see her killed. Whatever she did, though, he intended to survive and he intended to win. This bastard had done enough.

"He's gonna die or I'm gonna die," Flynn shouted into the wind. "But not here, not now. I want my shot at him and I haven't got it. But I will, lady. I will get my shot, and I'm not stopping until I do."

They moved slowly along, huddled shapes in a blowing, frozen haze. They couldn't go far, so Flynn intended to get to the first inhabited house they could find.

Slowly, they passed a bank, its tan brick front encased in ice, its interior dark. Next came a bar, its neon out, its door padlocked.

"Hold on," she said, "don't leave me behind."

He put an arm around her and drew her forward.

"You're strong," she said.

He said nothing. They might be moving slow, but the reality of their situation could not be more clear. They were running for their lives with death by cold close behind them, and closer yet an even more dangerous enemy, who they could not see, let alone fight.

Flynn might not be able to see him, but he was out there, no question, and he intended to end this, and soon.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The house was small and trim, with green shutters and gray siding. It had started life as a double-wide trailer and had been added to over the years. It was set north to south on its lot, so the wind surged down the porch, which was buried so deep in a rippling snowdrift that Flynn had to dig through it to reach the front door. He knocked.

Silence.

“It’s empty,” Diana said.

“Nope.” He pounded.

From inside there came a cry, “Clara! What’re you doin’ out there?”

The inner door swept open to reveal a man of about sixty in a wheelchair.

“We need shelter,” Flynn said. “We need a phone.”

“Where’s Clara? Where’s my wife?”

Flynn felt Diana tense. He said, “We need to get in out of this.”

The man rolled his chair back away from the entrance as they struggled in.

“Who the hell are you? You ain’t from around here.”

“We were waiting for the bus.”

“No, that’s not the answer. You DEA lookin’ for meth labs. Every other house has a meth lab out here. State don’t care. They let it go. They have to.” He whipped the chair around and rolled toward the back of the house. “Clara! Where in hell is she?”

Briefly, Diana's hand squeezed Flynn's. He was thinking the same thing: maybe the whole town had been raided. Maybe the old and infirm were the only ones left.

"She went out?"

"To the barn, see to the horses. The intercom's down, the cell phones don't work, the landline is down and she's been out there more'n a hour."

"We're cops," Flynn said, "but we're not looking for your meth lab."

"I told you, I ain't got any damn meth lab! None! Natha! Find my girl, you two, you're a damn gift from God."

There was no time to get warm, they went directly out the back. Flynn pointed to the faint trench in the snow that led to the barn. Diana nodded.

"Guns," he said.

"Guns."

"Are you proficient, Diana?"

"I score okay."

They pushed the door open together. "Clara," Flynn called into the dark interior. "Clara!"

A horse whickered, that was all.

The barn was unheated, but the two horses in their stalls had been expertly blanketed. A couple of big electric heaters stood in the center of an area of the concrete slab that had been carefully swept of anything that might catch fire. Their cords led to an orange cable that hung from an overhead socket attached to a rafter. No power, though.

"Clara!" he said again, then, "Oh, shit."

"What?"

"Smell that? That's blood." He looked into the darkness. "Over there." He moved deeper.

A third horse was up against the back wall, deep in the shadows. It lay on its side.

He went to it. Looking down at the maimed animal, he wasn't sure what to

make of its condition.

“You ever see anything like this?” he asked Diana as she came up.

“Oh, no.”

The lips had been sheared off, the eyes cut out, the genitals removed. A large section of the exposed flank had been flayed down to the bone. Where the rectum had been, there was a neat round wound.

“So you have.”

“Only in pictures. Animals mutilated like this have been found for years. None in the context of the kind of disappearances we’re investigating, though, not as far as I am aware.”

“You know more about this whole damn mess than you’re telling me, and I’m getting to really not appreciate that.”

“I can’t—”

“Yeah, you can, and you will, and you’ll do it soon.”

Flynn had seen something like this before, too. Some case file. Then he remembered. It was a rural crime down near Alice, Texas. “I saw some of these. Cattle, not horses. A rancher got the hell knocked out of his herd. Two prize bulls and three breeder cows. Fifteen thousand dollars worth of prime beeves. Sheriff thought it was coyotes. We wrote it up as vandalism so the poor guy could collect on his insurance.”

He remembered that place. Alvis something-or-other had been leasing that property. He’d run it with Aussie cattle dogs. Good beasts, but not good enough to prevent the loss.

“I have a feeling that the help does most of the heavy work. The kidnappings. But this is him,” Flynn said. “Him personally. His help isn’t going to be cutting animals like this.” He looked toward the rafters, then reached back and pulled his night vision goggles from his backpack.

The upper reaches of the barn were empty. He took off the goggles. “Let’s go out the back,” he said.

“Three guys are down, remember that.”

He said nothing.

This door also slid on rollers, but wasn't as large as the one in the front. Similarly, it wasn't kept up, and it took Flynn an effort to get it to grind open. As he did so, ice showered down on him.

Behind the barn was a mostly bald hill, topped by a few twisted trees. Close in, he could see a faint indentation in the snow. Further out, it was deeper. "That's a buried track," he said, moving forward. He drew his gun.

The further up the hill they went, the deeper and clearer the track became.

"Why would she come out here?"

"She was running. She saw that horse, and when she did, she ran."

As they approached the trees, Flynn felt the same indefinable sense of menace that had saved him in deceptive situations before. "Let's take our time. We want to watch those trees pretty closely."

They were taller than they had appeared from the barn. The snow made distances seem longer, but the trees were under a hundred yards from this end of the barn, and he was soon among them. He was careful, though, never to lose sight of her. He didn't want to lose her, God no, but she wasn't only important as a human being and a fellow officer. Without her, he had no idea who he was working for because she was too secretive to tell him. Probably didn't even have the authority.

In among the trees there was less snow, but every movement brought a fall of the stuff off overhanging branches. It got in around his hood and dripped through his clothes in the form of freezing cold water.

Just beyond the stand of trees they found an area about thirty feet in diameter where the snow had been blown away right down to the grassy hillside.

"Something landed here," Diana said.

He estimated the grade of the hill at a good thirty degrees. "Wasn't a chopper," he said, "not on a slope this steep."

"It must have hovered."

“The pilot is a real expert, then,” Flynn said. “Very well trained.”

“You think she was taken from this spot?”

“Maybe. Thing is, the snow was blown back from here well after these tracks were made. Hours. If they took her, they took her frozen solid.”

“We’ll need to tell him she’s lost in the snow.”

He had his doubts about that. “Maybe.”

Flynn turned and headed back through the trees. Diana stayed close.

As they walked, he said, “I don’t think we’re forming an accurate picture of what’s going on here. If you think about it, it just doesn’t make sense. Not a damn bit of sense. Some kind of cult group in possession of highly classified equipment, including an exotic aircraft? Hardly seems likely.”

“That’s what it looks like, though.”

They reached the back door. “It’s what you’ve been telling your team. It’s not what you know. Question is now, what do we tell this old guy?”

“His wife is lost in the snow. Won’t be found till the melt. If then.”

He entered the house. The old man sat in his wheelchair. He looked up with the dead eyes of a man who already knows that he’s defeated.

“We didn’t find her,” Flynn said.

“She’s dead. Froze by now.”

“We don’t know that. Could she have gone to a friend’s house?”

“She’s not in that barn, she’s froze.”

“There’s been predator action in the barn, sir,” Diana said.

“Oh, Lord.”

“One of the horses has been killed. Looks like coyotes.”

“The hell, it’s them damn wolves! The Fish and Wildlife owes me for that horse.” His face suddenly screwed up. Flynn knew the way tragedy can roll past you at first, then come back and hit you like a boulder dropping from the sky.

“She’s still breathing, mister,” he said. “Count on it.”

Diana glared at him.

“What’s she shaking her head for? Don’t hold out on me!”

Flynn heard noises on the front porch, the crunch of boots in snow. “She’s back,” he said.

Diana’s eyes widened.

A voice called through the door, “Hey, Lar, I got your thermos refilled, the Katz’s’re running their genny.” Then, “Get this door unlocked, you damn nut!”

Lar wheeled himself off into the front room. A moment later, a tall woman, Montana lean, came striding in on a blast of cold air, snow falling off her boots.

“Hi, where’d you folks stray in from on a day like this?”

“We’re police officers,” Diana began.

“Well, I got me a horse up in my barn got cut up by space aliens, so you better go up there.”

“We’ve been up there.”

“It was them wolves,” Lar said.

“Ha! That’s what you people told him? Why do cops lie? It’s space aliens. We all know it. Been goin’ on for years.”

“That damn yearling,” Lar said. “Too young and foolish to stay away from wolves. Probably didn’t even know what they were.”

“They took my Bill, you senile old fool. Left the two yearlings just fine. They ain’t even spooked.”

“What about Jenny?”

“*Your* horse? Nobody’s gonna take that ole bag a bones. You couldn’t even sell that thing to a glue factory. What’s ’is name down the road, that weird beard, offered fifteen dollars. He wanted to make pillows outa the hair.” She swung away from her perch looming over her husband, and trained tight eyes on Flynn and Diana. “So what in hell are you doin’ invadin’ my home, officers? If I may be so bold?”

“Our vehicle failed,” Diana said, the very picture of smoothness. “We’re

looking for a ride into Billings. We can pay.”

“You will pay. No question there. You must be feds.”

“DEAs lookin’ to bust up some meth labs,” her husband said.

“That ain’t hard to do around here. ’Cept the state police, you talked to them lately? ’Cause they don’t share their turf, not to put too fine a point on it.” She spread her hands. “I mean, this is not a threat. Far be it from me.”

“We’re not in drug enforcement.”

“Oh. Well, do you do something useful, then? ’Cause maybe then nobody’s gonna gut you and throw you out in the snow for your wolves to drag away.”

The threat was delivered with the kind of smile that said it had meaning. So this little ole couple were indeed involved in drug operations. He wondered where she had her lab. Probably one of the sheds he’d seen out there. Normally, he would’ve been interested, just automatically. No more.

“Look, how much is it gonna take to get us to FBI Headquarters in Billings?” he asked.

“Well, let’s see. If you tell me why you’re here, that’s one price. If you don’t, then it’s another. Which you ain’t gonna be able to afford. And, lady, will you please stop thinking about that ridiculous little pistol you got in the right pocket of your parka? In fact—” An impressively quick hand reached in and withdrew Diana’s pistol. “Man, who do you work for, you get crap like this as your issue gun? What shit.”

She was right about that. An officer carrying a Beretta without a tracking light was not well equipped.

Flynn said, “We’re working on a kidnapping. We were overtaken by the storm.”

“Who’d kidnap trailer trash? What’re they gonna get for ransom around here, twenty bucks and a pair of used boots? This whole town ain’t got enough cash to ransom a donkey.” She chuckled.

“We tracked the person of interest to Black Canyon City,” Diana said.

“Then the storm hit, we lost contact with our vehicle and took the bus.”

“The wrong way. You’re toward Bozeman.”

“We were too cold to wait. We had to get on it.”

She was quiet for a good minute. She looked down at Diana’s gun. “First off, I know you’re not a cop, lady. This ain’t a cop pistol and here I am holding it and you ain’t pissing your pants, which means you ain’t gotta file a missing weapon report.” She looked at Diana. “Three hundred bucks and I’ll take you to Billings. Cash now.” She turned her head toward Flynn. “That’s apiece.”

Flynn could have taken the gun out of her hand and made her eat his own. But he said, “Pay the lady, Ossifer.”

A silently furious Diana produced a checkbook.

Clara barked out a mirthless laugh.

Diana put away the checkbook and counted out six one-hundred-dollar bills from what looked to be a narrow stash.

Clara was good at driving in snow, and so the truck clanked along at a steady thirty miles an hour. “Animals get cored out like that around here. Nobody but the poor rancher gives a shit. The cops lie. Insurance company probably pays ’em off, ’cause if it’s predator action or act of God, they don’t gotta pay, see.”

“Space aliens would be what?” Flynn asked.

“God only knows. Whatever, they ain’t gonna pay anyway. Bastards.”

There was a world of hurt in the way she spat that word. He didn’t want to hear the story of her life, though, so he remained silent.

The truck moved steadily along. Flynn watched the road, what he could see of it. He kept an eye on the sky, which was darkening again.

Time crawled. Flynn could almost feel the perp’s frustration that they were getting away. Feel his bitter rage. With his trained animal and his fabulous chopper, he had to feel that a couple of dumb cops had no damn business escaping from him.

They arrived in the snow-choked city, finally reaching a recently plowed street where the going was a little better.

After a couple of turns, Clara pulled up in front of an office building, small, on the same scale as all the buildings around here. A small, trim city, the kind of place Flynn favored. Menard with snow.

When they got out, Clara sped off immediately.

“She’s glad to be gone,” Diana said.

“Probably with good reason.”

They entered the building.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Nobody will have heard of us,” Diana said as they went down the hall toward the FBI office.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She opened the door and went in, Flynn behind her. Two agents and a clerk were on duty, sitting at desks in a single, large room. Along a side wall there were three offices, all closed.

Diana walked up to the clerk and spoke quietly. She produced a small leather folio and laid it on the desk. Inside, Flynn could see a badge and an unfamiliar identification card with a pink sash across its surface.

The secretary stared down at them. “Bill,” she called, turning in her chair, “what is this?”

One of the two agents got up from his desk, a tall man in his fifties. He had a tightly neutral expression on his face, the habitual mask that many field officers wore.

Flynn had never gotten much support out of the FBI. Down in Menard, their office was such a revolving door that nobody ever really got to know the community. Menard was just a way station in the drug wars. The agents who were going somewhere in the organization were all further south along the border.

The first agent took Diana’s credential to the second.

“They never know what it is,” she said.

“So how does this help us?”

“Just wait.”

He watched as the agents, their faces sharp with suspicion, huddled over a phone.

“Who’re they calling?”

“It’s a nonstandard ID. They’ve never seen one like it before.”

“Because of the secrecy bullshit?”

She nodded. “It’s not bullshit, Flynn.”

The second agent came striding over. “You can use office two,” he said. He handed Diana back her ID.

“That worked, at least,” Flynn said as they crossed the room.

“I’m sorry, Flynn, I’m going to need to do this alone.”

There were chairs along the wall, and Flynn took one of them. The plaster was thin enough to enable him to hear that she was talking to somebody, but he was unable to make out the words. Once or twice, she raised her voice. He still couldn’t discern specific words, but he could hear the emotion in them. She was reporting the deaths of her men.

Her voice stopped. He waited. The silence extended.

She came out. Her face was rigid, her lips compressed.

“You reported,” he said. “They were not happy.”

“They were not.”

“So what happens next?”

“Flynn, you’re still going to be with me, but very honestly I asked to have you relieved and was turned down on the theory that you’re all I have left. So my problem now is that you’re clueless and I don’t have the authority to bring you up to speed.” She glanced across the room at the agents. “We need transport,” she snapped.

One of the agents got up and sauntered over. “Yeah? Can I help you?”

“Get us out to Logan.”

“Call a cab.”

“There’s no time for a cab, Delta’s about to leave. We need to move right now.”

“We have motels. Not up to your standards, I’m sure, but you’ll live.”

“If you don’t want a complaint in your file, I’d advise you to stuff your ego up your ass and do what you’re told.”

Flynn was as surprised as the agent, who glared at her.

“Right now, Agent.”

He jerked his head toward a side door. They followed him down a couple of flights of interior stairs and out to a well-plowed parking lot.

There were two sedans parked in it and three black SUVs, immediately recognizable as federal cars.

“I wanta take my Subaru,” the agent said. “Better in the snow.”

Once they were in the car, a dense silence settled. Nevertheless, Flynn thought he would try asking the agent some questions that could be useful.

“What kind of crimes do you guys cover out here?”

“Us guys cover the waterfront.”

“I mean, specifically?”

“I know I don’t have any hotshot National Security clearance, but that’d be privileged information.”

An asshole for sure. He kept going anyway. “Any kidnapping cases?”

“Kidnapping? No. Is that what this is about?”

“I can’t answer that. My hotshot National Security clearance prevents me.”

This brought a slight chuckle. “We had a disappearance four months ago. Not a kidnapping case. The vic packed a bag.”

Diana glanced at Flynn, who said nothing.

They pulled up to the departure gates and the agent let them off and sped away.

“Are federal officials always so helpful to each other?” Flynn couldn’t

resist asking, but he knew the answer.

“Yes.”

“So where are we going?”

“Just stay with me.”

The airport was small and intimate, a reminder to Flynn of another America, one that still clung to life, just barely, in little places like this and Menard. Steady, settled, and safe—assuming, of course, if you ignored things like the meth industry that drove lots of local economies in poor areas.

Security was no problem, just a single TSA agent with an old-fashioned X-ray device and nobody ahead in line. Not surprising, since Delta to Salt Lake was the last flight out to anywhere, and they had just a couple of minutes to go before the doors were closed. They showed their creds and got their guns passed for hold stowage without trouble. Unlike the FBI agents, the TSA worker accepted Diana’s credential without question. He passed his Menard Police Department ID card with equal disinterest.

As they walked down the aisle, Flynn took careful note of the other passengers. He didn’t want a repeat of what had happened on the bus, and he thought they should assume that this perpetrator was capable of almost anything.

He was surprised to identify a Federal Air Marshal three rows behind him. Normally, you found these guys on long-haul flights in big planes. So why was he here? He slid into his seat between a businessman and a kid sealed up in an iPod. The FAM was carrying, which is what had identified him. There was a pistol, small, probably a .38, under the left arm of his thick jacket.

The flight was hot and cramped and seemed longer than it had any right to be. Twice, Flynn went back to the john so that he could pass the FAM. Nothing out of the ordinary, except for the fact that he was there.

Toward the end of the flight, Flynn closed his eyes for a few minutes, waking up when the aircraft shuddered as it began to land.

On the way to the next flight, he commented, “There was a FAM a couple

of rows behind me.”

“Really?”

“No, I made it up.”

“Well, don’t.”

“Odd that he was there.”

“A coincidence, as far as I’m concerned.”

“You’re sure?”

She stopped. She turned to him. “We are alone, you and I. I know one other person, the individual I report to.”

He continued walking easily. Inside though, he was dealing with a major shock. *Only her immediate superior officer?* What in holy hell was going on here?

Their next flight turned out to be to Chicago. They were seated in first class.

“I could get used to this,” he said to her. The seat actually had room for him.

“Don’t. These were the only seats left. The storm’s headed east, and folks want to get in before it closes O’Hare. The flights are packed.”

“Why are we going to Chicago? If I may be so bold.”

She opened her mouth, seemed about to speak. Remained silent.

“We’ve got a choice of prime rib or mahi-mahi,” the steward said after they took off.

As Flynn ate, he saw that silent tears were running down Diana’s face. He said nothing. What was there to say, that it would be all right? It would not be all right, it would never be all right.

Maybe she was going to be relieved or disciplined. Maybe she already knew that. But what was most likely was that she was remembering the men she had lost, and feeling a torment of regret.

“You need to eat,” he said.

Listlessly, she took a bite of her fish and chewed.

“Flynn,” she said. Then she stopped. He’d seen grief many times, the way it takes a while to hit. Hers had hit. “Flynn,” she said again, “you’re a good cop and you have some outstanding skills and a lot of investigative experience in our area of concern, but things have changed, Flynn. We’re going to need to take a different approach now.”

“I’m not leaving voluntarily, if that’s what you’re driving at.”

She closed her eyes and he saw the tears well again, and realized to his astonishment that she was crying not for her lost men, but for him. She leaned toward him. “It’s a trap,” she whispered. “It’s always been a trap and I’ve gotten you tangled up in it, too.”

He added this to the long list of things about this case that he did not understand.

“They feel that you’ve gotten too deep. You can’t be released.”

He waited, but she said no more. “Well that’s certainly damn mysterious.”

“Security is very, very tight and for good reason, Flynn, as you will find. The thing is, there’s no going back from this. It’s marriage with no divorce allowed. You didn’t get a chance to make a decision and that’s not fair.”

“I made my decision when I walked out on the Menard Police.”

She turned to the window. But not for long. Very suddenly she turned back and said to him, “You’re going to meet people different from any you’ve ever encountered.”

“And you can’t tell me one more thing.”

“I want you to prepare yourself for the unexpected. I don’t need you gaping like a hick and asking little boy questions.”

“Do I do that?”

“When you’re in there, you may. This is going to be the strangest experience you’ve ever had. Beyond imagination.”

“I have to admit, I’m curious.”

She said no more, and the flight continued uneventfully, a plane swimming in featureless darkness.

Once they'd landed and collected their weapons and equipment, Flynn found that they had a rental car waiting. She drove, and he noticed that she didn't use a GPS. She'd been here before. A lot.

He watched the gray sky and the gray of Lake Michigan, and wondered if there was any way to prepare to face a total unknown.

They'd been on Lake Shore Drive for some time before he understood from reading road signs that their destination was Evanston, just north of Chicago itself.

"I think you need to talk more, Diana. I'm a pro but I'm not a psychic. Narrate this a little bit."

"We'll be there in ten minutes."

"Excessive secrecy and compartmentalization just killed three men. And yet you keep it up."

"I have orders, I follow my orders."

"Following orders is good. But what that means is making them work. Your orders were to stop a dangerous criminal. You didn't make those orders work, so whatever it was you thought you were doing, it wasn't following them."

After a few turns in Evanston, she drove down a street lined with big old houses that looked like they were worth a lot ... and Flynn became concerned. There were no official buildings around here.

They passed those houses and drove into a less grand neighborhood. Here, there were stark oaks lining the street, and the tall row houses were as dreary as the sky.

They pulled up in front of one of the houses. In the driveway there stood a Chrysler 300. Other than that, the place was silent, the windows dark.

"So where are we? Not your ancestral home, surely?"

"Police headquarters."

"Not a good answer."

He got out of the car when she did, and followed her up the front walk.

The air was bitterly cold, tinged with the sharpness of chimney smoke, a gusty breeze coming off the lake.

When she pressed the doorbell button on the jamb, there issued from deep inside the house the faint bonging of an old-fashioned bell.

This was not a police headquarters of any kind, but there was certainly something unusual involved here, because as Flynn had stepped out of the car, he'd seen a flicker of movement from a window in the house across the street.

“Does it bother you that we're in gun sights?”

“You're very observant.”

“Always been my problem.”

She rang the bell again.

“What're they doing, sending our faces to Washington?”

She glance at him, frowning.

He continued, “There's a camera in the door. Another one between the bricks to the right. Whoever's in there has been able to watch us since we turned onto the block.”

“I did not know that.”

“Yet you've been here before.”

“As I said, this is our headquarters.”

He thought, “you look, but you don't see,” but didn't comment further. No point. Noted, though, was the fact that her lack of practice as an observer was a liability that must never be overlooked.

The door swung open on a woman of perhaps thirty. She wore an orange jumpsuit and had a plastic net on her hair. Her skin gleamed and Flynn realized that her face was covered with a film like petroleum jelly. On her hands she wore latex gloves.

He was still trying to make sense of this when she stepped back and let them in. She ushered them into a living room with an old couch, a coffee table, and a couple of easy chairs. A gas log burned in the fireplace.

“Sorry,” she said, “we’ve been working on him.”

“Anything?”

Whoever they were interrogating, her expression said it all: they were getting nowhere.

“Flynn, just try to be open. I can’t tell you anything about what’s going to happen because no explanation would do it justice. I can’t even answer any questions, because any question you would have would be unanswerable.”

“I know what it is.”

“I don’t believe that. Tell me what you think.”

Flynn said nothing.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Two more of the jumpsuits lay folded on the couch. On the coffee table was a silver canister about a foot tall.

“We need to put these suits on over our clothes,” Diana said. “And do this.” She dipped her hand in the canister and scooped out clear gel. “Put this on your face and neck. Make sure you’re well covered. Don’t forget your ears.”

“What is it?”

“Something that’s necessary.”

He wasn’t objecting. He was here to learn. He slathered the stuff on himself.

“First, you’re going to meet the person our agency has managing this case.” She paused. “This is a unique person.”

He pulled on the jumpsuit, which was supple and light and felt like paper. But it was a lot stronger than paper. Sort of like silk with a paper-like finish, he decided.

Diana slathered herself with the salve and put on an elastic cap of the silken material.

Flynn finished by putting on his own cap.

The woman reappeared. Flynn said, “Hi, we didn’t get introduced. I’m Flynn Carroll, Menard City Police, Menard, Texas.” He put out his gloved

hand.

She looked down at it, then back up at him. Usually, people's faces told him something. Not this time.

"Follow her," Diana snapped.

Shuffling along in his baggy jumpsuit, his face covered with Vaseline that smelled like cinnamon, he followed the woman down the central corridor of the old house, past an umbrella stand and a photograph of a family from about fifty years ago.

"Whose house is this, anyway?"

"A sublet," Diana said. "We found it on Craigslist."

"*Craigslist?*"

"We move a lot."

The woman opened a big oak door at the end of the hall. He followed her into a large room that Flynn guessed must have once been a solarium. It was on the back of the house and full of tall windows, but as dark as a cave. The expansive windows were covered by curtains.

In the middle of the room there stood a man of significant height, six three at least. As they came in, he glared down at them out of eyes sunken so deep in his head that they were like craters. His hair was completely white.

"Sorry to be meeting under these tragic circumstances," he said. "And I apologize for the—" He gestured, indicating the costumes. "I'm allergic to everything." He sighed. "I can't even leave the house."

Slowly, then, he turned to Diana. Some kind of electricity passed between them, and Flynn thought that this was the person she had reported to from Montana. He also thought that they were more than coworkers.

"My name is Oltisis," he said, and at that moment he walked into a shaft of light, and Flynn saw that he had compound eyes, many-lensed like the eyes of a fly.

He sucked breath, but instantly controlled it. Let it out slow. As he did, the face turned toward him. Unhurried. The eyes seemed blank. But they also

told Flynn that this was an alien. Okay, that explained all the secrecy.

“I don’t surprise you?”

“You do.”

“You’re very contained, then.”

“As are you.”

“I’m a cop, Lieutenant Flynn.” Oltisis crossed the room in two sleek strides. Flynn saw more than cop in the way he moved, he saw military. Lethal military. This alien might or might not be a cop, but he was certainly a professional killer.

As he sat on a broad leather couch that almost fit him, he gestured toward two wing chairs.

Flynn could hardly tear his own eyes away from that face. The lips were narrow and precise, the skin was as slick and featureless as plastic, and the deep-set eyes gleamed in the thin yellow light that filled the room.

No question, this was not a disguise. He was face to face with a real alien. But he also had a case to deal with. Men were dead. He said, “We need more people, and we need them now. We need help.”

Oltisis looked toward Diana. “I put together a cleanup crew to go back to the Hoffman place. Air Police. They’re totally out of the loop.” His English was perfect. Not the slightest accent.

“Did they find any trace of Hoffman and the daughter?” Flynn asked.

“Doctor Hoffman was in a snowdrift two hundred yards from the house. Frozen to death. Looked exactly like he’d wandered away and gotten lost. Nice touch, he had a bag of garbage with him.” He made a gravelly sound that Flynn realized was laughter, but it was bitter, that was very clear. In fact, it sounded like defeat.

“We need to break this case,” Flynn said.

“Ah?”

“You look beaten. Sorry.”

“And you don’t, Flynn.”

“Am I a fool, then?”

Oltis met his eyes with his own glittering jewels. “No,” he said carefully, “you are not. Flynn—may I call you Flynn—this is a new kind of police operation. We’ve got a criminal element operating here and we can’t move freely among you. Thus the liaison effort.”

“You could surely devise some sort of disguise.”

“The allergic response is too deep. We’d need to create human bodies for ourselves.”

“So do it. You must be loaded with high tech.”

“If one of us is to acquire a human body, one of you has to die.”

“I see.”

“Criminals steal bodies.” He lowered his head. “That’s what happened to your wife.”

Flynn went silent inside. For the first time, he knew that she was dead. Believed it. Images of her raced through his mind, too fast to track, but of her in her happiness. He swallowed his thrashing sorrow. “Did she suffer?”

Oltis stared into Flynn’s pain, his eyes as blank as a shark’s. Flynn thought, “This alien has seen a lot of violence, a lot of death.” He continued to question him. “How many other field units do you have? How many officers on your side of the fence?”

“We need more, I agree.”

What the hell? Could this be true? “Don’t tell me it’s just the three of us.”

Diana said, “If it gets out that this is happening and not even the aliens can put a stop to it—”

“Jesus Christ, you need a whole damn division on this! The FBI and Interpol, at the least!”

“This gets out, mankind panics and contact gets set back fifty years. No, Flynn, secrecy is essential.”

Cops sure as hell couldn’t keep secrets, that was true enough, and the public would sure as hell panic, no question there, either. “People need to be

warned. Otherwise they have no chance.”

“Help us get this cleaned up.”

“My wife was kidnapped eight years ago! So how long is it going to take? There are hundreds of people dead. You’re wired into the government, you just moved around a unit of Air Police, so put some resources on this or I’m going public.” But even as he said it, he knew that it was hopeless. Nobody would believe him, not without this creature in tow, and that was obviously not going to happen.

“You signed a secrecy agreement, Flynn. Don’t forget that.”

“He’s fine,” Oltisis said. “He just figured it out.”

“But he said—”

“You’re on board, aren’t you, Flynn? You’ve seen the problem.”

Flynn nodded. Oltisis was so sharp, it was almost like having your mind read. “I understand the need for secrecy. But there have to be more resources.”

“Rebuild your team. I can do that.”

“Bigger. And top people. Delta Force operators. CIA field officers. The best of the best. And better equipment. Jesus, you people must have some incredible equipment, not crap like that MindRay.”

“That’s one of ours.”

“Is it a toy, because if that’s the best you can do, I have a real problem with your technology.”

Again, Oltisis laughed, and this time Flynn got it loud and clear, the cynical laughter of the cop who knows only one truth: every single piece of equipment he possesses is inferior to what the crooks have.

“What’re you, fifty years ahead of us? I expected aliens to be, like, a million years ahead of us. But you’ve got powerful crooks and shitty equipment just like we do.”

“Budgets are budgets, Flynn. And we’re about a thousand years ahead of you, if you want to know. Among other things, we can manipulate gravity

and you can't. But you will. We're helping you speed up your development, because there needs to be an alliance between our species. We're similar and that's rare and valuable. It's strange out there and it's dangerous. We need a friend, and so do you."

Flynn said, "You use your connections to get us the best cops and the best operatives you can find, and I am with you."

Oltisis said, "We've been doing that."

"So you came up with a small-town police officer like me. I think I'm a good cop, but let's face it, my skill set is limited because my department's needs are limited. We don't train up supercops in Menard, Texas."

"You have an IQ of two twenty. Did you know that?"

"I did not."

"And you're also highly motivated. We are doing our job, Lieutenant."

"So let's get on with it."

"We have someone in custody."

He was stunned. Then he wasn't. "But he's not the perp we're looking for?"

"No," Diana interjected. "This is one of his customers. My unit got him." She paused for a long moment. "My old unit."

Oltisis said, "He was a thrill seeker. Among us, life is all too predictable. It's one of the major reasons we explore as we do. In any case, he came here, bought a human body and just basically went wild, indulging his every fantasy, and he doesn't have pretty fantasies."

"I thought aliens would be—well, different."

"There's greed and self-indulgence everywhere."

"And the crime committed?"

Oltisis looked steadily at Flynn. "He raped fifty-six of your women, killing forty of them in the process."

"Jesus."

"If he's sent home with the evidence we have, he's going to walk. We

have a real problem on Earth gathering forensics to a level our courts accept. In our system, a case cannot be presented until guilt is certain. The only judicial issue is the sentence. We need a confession out of him, Flynn.”

“Now, are you saying that this thing—being, excuse me—has *two* bodies, one human and one like you?”

“Let me explain a little further.”

“That would help.”

“Every living body contains an incredibly dense plasma that bears all its memories, even every detail of its physical form. It’s the template, and it’s effectively eternal. In our world, doctors can move this plasma from an aged body to a young one. It’s also possible to cross species, but it’s highly illegal. I could enter a human body. I could live among you. At home, I’m just another person. But here, with my knowledge and my power, I’d be a god.”

“So what about death? Do you die?”

“If you wish.”

“If you *wish*?”

“When a human dies, your soul will linger on Earth if you have unfinished business here. Eventually, a new body will come along—an infant—that fits it, and you’ll enter the new body and return to life. With us, the process is no longer natural. I have a stem cell packet that can be grown into a new body.” He gestured toward himself. “If this dies, I can simply move to a new version of myself.”

“Will you?”

The face—horrible and strange and yet somehow deeply human—took on an eerie, concealing expression. “You can’t have known this, but that’s as rude a question as one of us can be asked.”

“Rude? I don’t get it. Why rude?”

“Let’s move on, shall we? Body theft is a major crime, as you may imagine. And when it involves interfering with an alien species, especially a less advanced one like yours, it’s actually our most serious crime.”

“But the exterior identity—what we can track—that remains the same, am I right? So this guy has a human ID. A human past.”

“The process works like this. A person is kidnapped. Then the heart is stopped and the whole body transformed into stem cells, which are grown on a new template. The new body fits the purchaser’s soul, and he enters it. The new ‘person’ won’t look the same as the one who was used to construct him. He won’t have the same DNA signature, either.”

“You can do all that?”

“At home, by law your new body would need to be an exact replica of your old one. But here, well, you don’t have body switching yet. So no law and no local enforcement infrastructure. Which is why there’s a ring operating, selling my species human bodies so they can live on Earth.”

“That’s a motive?”

“For marginal types like would-be criminals, it is. They’re free here. The local authorities aren’t going to catch them on their own, and our police force is hamstrung, obviously.”

“So what can they do that’s so special?”

“As I said, live like gods. The last one we caught busted the bank at a casino in Vegas, then used predictive techniques you won’t discover for five generations to game your markets. Inside of a year, he was vastly rich.” He paused. His voice dropped an octave. “This guy wasn’t so interested in money, obviously.”

“When they’re finished, they can go home?”

“If they’re ever finished. The one in custody would probably have stayed here for a very long time, maybe across the span of more than one life. You can help us with him, Flynn.”

“And what do you want me to do?”

“If the body he’s in now were to die here on Earth without access to his dealer, he’d be in trouble. No new body, so his soul would be left to wander until it got drawn into a human fetus. He’d lose his memory of himself

entirely. Become, in effect, human. Trapped forever in a primitive species.”

“Turn him over to our courts. Let us threaten him with the needle.”

“He was careful not to commit any of his crimes in death penalty states.”

“Drop him in a supermax.”

“He’ll escape. But he wouldn’t want to be tried in Texas.”

Flynn thought about that. Understood what Oltisis was driving at. “Okay,” he said, “let me spend some time with him. What’s his name?”

“Roger Ormond is what it says on his driver’s license.”

Diana said, “The identity’s perfect. It’s been built from deep within the system.”

“Take me to Roger Ormond. We’ll need to chat for a couple of minutes.”

They left Oltisis to his dark office and whatever thoughts a creature like that must have, and have to live with.

“We can disrobe,” the assistant said. “Roger isn’t allergic.”

“What’re you going to do?” Diana asked as she pulled off her jumpsuit.

“What Oltisis asked me to do.”

“He didn’t ask you anything.”

Flynn looked at her. “Oh, yeah, he did.”

They descended into a cellar that smelled of dust and heating oil. There was an ancient black velvet painting of JFK against one wall, beside it a rusting bicycle. There was also an old portable record player, and in one corner a dust-covered electric wheelchair, its seat well worn. Whoever had lived in that thing was probably damn glad to leave this life.

Across the room, a man sat in a cage made not of bars, but of a sort of shadowy haze that, as Flynn went closer, proved to be a mesh of fine wires. He was under a flood of glaring white light. His eyes were closed, his skin was flushed red, and he was covered with a sheen of sweat.

Flynn went into action immediately. “Mr. Ormond, I’m your attorney. We’re going to be getting you moving within the hour.”

“Excuse me.”

“You’ve been extradited to Texas.”

The face, which had been open and questioning, shut down tight. So he was scared. Good.

“I didn’t commit any crimes in Texas.”

Flynn remained affable. “Tell them that. I’ll stay with you as far as the airport, but after that you’re on your own. You’ll be assigned legal aid counsel at Huntsville.”

“A prison?”

“Guarded by cops like us. Who know the truth. You won’t escape. You’re gonna die in Texas, Mr. Ormond.”

He started to stand up. The cage around him glowed and sparked. He fell back into his seat. “I didn’t commit any crimes in Texas!”

“So, Michigan, Illinois, New York.”

“I avoided death penalty states.”

Bingo. There was the confession. He revealed nothing of the small triumph that he felt. “Well, take it up with your lawyer there. You’re moving in an hour.”

As he left, the man in the cage erupted, screaming and thrashing. The cage sparked and sizzled.

Oltisis was waiting, his face filling the screen of an iPad.

“Will that do it in your legal system?”

“Oh yes, he’s confessed. We’ll start processing him off planet immediately. He’ll take the full hit.”

“Which is?”

Oltisis broke the connection.

Diana said, “They take them out of the body and put them in a sort of trap, is the way I understand it. They don’t like to talk about it.”

“A trap?”

“It’s prison. In this one’s case, permanent prison. They’ll never let him out.”

Flynn thought about that. This plasma they were talking about was the soul. “Soul prison. That’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard of. To be dead, but still in jail.”

“I think their name for it says it all. They call their permanent prison ‘Dead Forever.’”

They left then, and Flynn could not remember ever feeling so happy to leave a place in his life. The world of Oltisis might be full of wonders, but it also sounded like a kind of hell. No mystery of life. No mystery of death. Imprisonment that could last for eternity. “What do you think of them, Diana?”

She was silent. “Let’s do our job, okay. Better to just put the whole thing out of your mind. Concentrate on the work.”

They got into the car. “I’ll tell you what I think.”

“No! I don’t want to hear it.”

“They’ve made themselves into monsters.”

She started the car and pulled away from the curb.

“Where are we going?”

“I got us a hotel. We’ll want to get cleaned up.”

“Then what?”

“Once they break it to Ormond that he’s been nailed, they’re expecting to get some more information for us about the perp. He’ll want to bargain, it’ll be his last hope. So we’ll get a call from Oltisis. There’ll be a second meet.”

“That’s good and bad. We need the information.”

“But you don’t want to go back there?”

“Nope.”

“Neither do I, Flynn. Neither do I.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

She'd gotten them a room at a hotel in the loop. They were traveling as man and wife, James and Diana Exeter. Flynn came out of the five minutes he'd actually allowed himself to wash off the oil and the itching that had come from being near the alien. He'd put on some fresh clothes in the bathroom. They were coworkers, not lovers.

He lay back on one of the beds, looking at the new identity pack he'd been given as they left the HQ. "This is well done."

"We're piggybacking on the Witness Protection Program."

He gazed up at her long neck, her full lips, her sad, dark eyes.

"Don't assume they're from another planet," she said. "Don't assume anything about them at all."

"Where would they be from, then?"

She was silent for a long time.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, well, it's damn mysterious, all of it."

"How much does the government know? What about UFOs? Is any of that real? And alien abductions—I mean, the kind where the people get brought back? There's websites, books, claims of millions of abductions."

"We just don't know."

At that moment, he saw something on the ceiling. A light. It moved down

the wall ... toward Diana.

It trembled red on her forehead.

Leaping up, he threw her to the floor. As she screamed, recoiling from what she obviously assumed was an outburst of rage, he hauled the curtains closed. "We're leaving."

"What? Why?"

"You just got painted with a laser."

She started to stuff her backpack.

"No time for that. We're outa here." He confirmed that the hallway was empty, and left the room. After a moment, she was with him.

"Hey," she said as he passed the elevator bank. When he didn't respond, she kept on behind him.

He entered the stairwell and started up.

She stood watching him.

He pointed downward. "Death." He pointed upward. "Life. You choose."

Seconds counted now, so he took the stairs three at a time. After a brief pause, he heard her behind him once again.

He pushed his way onto the roof through a stiffly hinged door, then stepped behind its enclosure, keeping close to the wall as he did so.

"As much as possible, keep something between you and the view. If you have to expose yourself, stay below the level of the parapet. One flicker of infrared return from up here, and our evening is over."

Somewhere there was going to be access to the elevator bank, there had to be. He could see the elevator's roof structure, but no outline of a door.

By moving directly toward the back of the building he could keep the door enclosure between himself and the view, and still get a look at the hidden wall of the elevator bank's roof structure.

Crouching, he ran to it—and soon found the opening he needed. He turned to motion to her to follow.

Once again, there was a laser on her. "Drop!"

She stared. He pulled her down. "I need somebody with field skills!" For an instant, the laser touched the wall of the building behind the hotel, and then was gone.

"Sorry!"

"Always do what I tell you. Always!"

"Okay!"

He got the hatch open. "We're going to wait for an elevator to come up, then ride it down. They're on their way to the roof but they won't find us here, so it'll be a near thing."

"I screw everything up!"

"Everybody screws everything up. It's the nature of cop work."

An elevator came up, stopped three floors down, then continued its cycle. "That'll be them," he said. "When the car stops, get on it."

"Jesus!"

"Don't look down."

With a loud click from above, the car halted. Flynn hopped on. Leaping carefully, Diana followed him.

"Now we're going to wait until it passes below fourteen, then drop down into the cab. When we're there, don't touch any buttons."

From this side, the roof hatch was easy to pull up, and they were soon inside the car. He didn't bother to try to replace the hatch. Their pursuers would know what they'd done. Probably already did. This wasn't about deceiving them, it was about getting just far enough ahead of them to escape.

She leaned against the wall of the descending car. "Thank God."

"If we don't encounter them in the lobby, we need to grab a cab to the nearest El station. We've put them maybe three minutes behind us. If we're lucky."

"And if we're not?"

"We'll need to try another casino."

"Who are they? How did they find us?"

“It’s the perp. He undoubtedly followed his client when he was captured. He’s probably been watching that house for a while, waiting to see who was going to turn up.”

“We have to warn them.”

“If we live.”

The doors opened onto the ornate lobby.

He could see a second car just passing twelve, on its way down. “Here they come,” he said. He wished that he could get a look at them, but there were too many ways to lose control of that situation. He drew her toward the main doors.

He’d tracked people across the plains of north Texas, he’d chased them through the streets and alleys of Menard, and he was reasonable at both things. He could not recall a time, though, when he’d been the runner. The truth was, he had to fall back on spy novel stuff, and he didn’t like spy novels. Hadn’t read one in years.

“Okay, quick—” He grabbed her wrist and jumped into a taxi. “Water Tower Place,” he told the driver. It was the only name that came to mind. He had no idea what it was or where it was. Just something he happened to remember.

“Why Water Tower Place?” she asked.

“Why not?”

“You don’t even know what it is, do you?”

“I do not.”

“You don’t know Chicago at all, then?”

“I don’t.”

“Water Tower place is a shopping center in the Loop. That’s downtown.”

Flynn fell silent. The perp had gone after them first because they were sure to go to ground as soon as Oltis was taken out. “We need to get to a pay phone.”

The mall was enormous and filled with shops. It took a surprising amount

of time, but they finally found a public phone.

She made a call and told whoever answered what had happened.

“Let me talk.”

She handed him the phone. “You’re in immediate danger. You need to get out of there right now.”

Oltisis said, “I can’t move that quickly. Something has to be prepared, and transport is complex.”

“You don’t have a fallback prepared?”

There was a pause. “I do not.”

“I’d get out of there even if you have to be carried in a bag. There’s an immediate threat.”

“I’ll do my best. I assume we won’t be seeing you tonight.”

“Have you questioned your suspect?”

“I’ve just begun. I know that your perpetrator has human helpers. Ormond’s never seen him in person, so he says.”

“And you’re inclined to believe him?”

“He’s ready to open up.”

“Get out of there and take him with you. For God’s sake don’t lose him.” Flynn hung up the phone. “Meeting’s off, obviously.” He looked out along a long, empty corridor. The mall wasn’t closed but it was almost empty, and most of the stores were dark.

“We need to hunt up ATMs. We need all the cash we can get. And I assume you have a cell phone?”

“I do.”

“Throw it away. First, take out the battery.”

They ran the ATM cards until they each had around six thousand dollars in cash.

“Do they ever run out?”

“I don’t know. Not soon.”

“Too bad this is our last chance to use them.”

“Why?”

“The cards will be made.”

“Bank databases are well secured.”

“No they aren’t.”

It was now pushing eleven P.M., so there was no point in going to an airport. Like it or not—and he didn’t like it at all—they’d have to stay in Chicago overnight.

Outside the building, they found long rows of cabs, and more of them at the entrance to the Ritz Carlton that soared above Water Tower Place. Flynn hailed one, and they got in.

“Days Inn,” Flynn said.

“Uh, Lincoln Park?”

“That’s the one.”

“I’ll get a reservation ahead,” Diana said.

“No cell phones.”

“They won’t see me.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m a hacker. It’s what I do.”

“A hacker? You have some useful skills, then.”

“I like to think so.”

As the cab negotiated the sparse traffic, Flynn watched behind them, using what he could see of the rearview mirror. He thought he was dealing with a team of about four individuals with some very good equipment. They had a long-range rifle scope with a state-of-the-art laser sight. The way they had followed their targets, the rifle had to be on a chopper, which had been hovering out over Lake Michigan. Not great marksmanship, though. A good sniper would not have missed.

They also had that animal. Would they be able to make use of it in a city? He didn’t see how. They hadn’t tried yet, at least.

The Days Inn was in an older building in a neighborhood that was active

even at twelve thirty at night. Which was fine. Activity was good.

The cab pulled up and stopped. Diana started to get out, but a gesture from Flynn stopped her. She didn't speak, she didn't turn to him. Good, she was getting the hang of it.

After he'd finished evaluating their surroundings, he said, "Let's go."

They exited into a driving wind. The air had grown noticeably colder. The storm that had paralyzed Montana was getting closer fast.

At the motel, Flynn paid cash. The clerk took the money and directed them to their room. He'd been doing this too long to bother to ask for ID and listen to the bullshit.

The room was stark but clean. Flynn was tired, too. Not a good time for it, though.

The bed was a double, too narrow to avoid the touch of bodies. Silently, she threw off her clothes. She kept nothing on. Her skin shimmered, her curves swept elegantly about as she moved. Steve Glass had been a lucky man.

They lay side by side, as still as two scared birds.

When he closed his eyes, he saw Oltisis, the thin face and deep, dead eyes.

Lights from outside glowed on the ceiling. The distant rumble of a great metropolis in its uneasy sleep lulled them.

Flynn slipped into one of those sleeps that comes so stealthily that they seem more like a state of altered awakening. Diana refocused as Abby, and the dreary hotel room became their old bedroom. The curtains swayed in the summer breeze, the leaves whispered, and Flynn became aware that they were not alone. He thought, oddly, that it was all right that the man was there, that he was slipping his arms under Abby's legs and shoulders, that he was lifting her like a leaf.

He saw the man's face in the moonlight, the intent eyes, the lips slightly parted, the chin a little pointed and yet a little heavy.

And then Abby sighed, and he turned to her but she was gone, and the

breeze swept through the room, and a new kind of silence came with it.

He leaped out of the bed.

“What’s the matter?”

“Abby!” He ran toward the window. “No!”

She shook his shoulder. And he was back in the bed in the motel room. He hadn’t jumped up at all.

“It’s a dream I’ve had before. I see the guy take her.”

“Did you?”

“Probably not. We did an Identi-Kit years ago. Posted the Wanted all over Texas. Nothing.”

They held each other in the dark ocean of the night, in the unknown. Eventually, they slept again, each clutching the other as a lifeline. Flynn woke before dawn and checked the hotel corridor. Empty and silent. He watched the street for a time, standing back from the window. An old woman in a black coat walked a Collie mix. A bus passed.

He looked back at Diana sprawled on the bed. Circumstances had thrown the two of them together, but he still belonged to Abby. He’d always belong to Abby. For the first time, he found himself imagining her death. Had she known what was happening? And what *did* happen? Was it slow, fast, painful? He should have asked Oltisis. Or maybe not. No, best not.

Finally he sat in the room’s threadbare easy chair and turned on CNN, and watched the crawl on silent. A tanker had gone aground in the Azores. A movie star had gone berserk. Ford had a new computer system in its cars.

And *what the hell had just happened?* He was working with a cop from another damn planet, holy God. Secret as hell and the stakes were high. If the criminal elements could be stopped, there would be open contact. Open. Everybody would know. The world would change, and look at that Oltisis, look at the way he was. That had to be the strangest and most wonderful person he’d ever met, and the most sinister. They’d defeated death. What did that mean? Conscious plasmas—is that what we were?

Wonderful. The secret of the ages, and maybe the whole world was going to find out. Maybe we were going to defeat death.

Except for one problem. Small problem. It was that this whole damn thing was going south. Way south. And the worst part of it was, he had no clear idea of a next move. More than anything that had happened so far, that disturbed him.

He closed his eyes, but sleep didn't come, not really. At best, it was the uneasy sleep of the soldier who can see the flicker of artillery on the horizon. Or it was the sleep of the condemned, the mind searching for last dreams that did not come.

In its gradual, stately way, the light changed, dawn rolling in from the east. Diana snored softly. The minutes passed, one by one.

So he was a big genius. Wonderful, he was so glad. Too bad that he had run out of ideas.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The glow from the signs outside finally faded into the uniform ray light of a cloud-choked sunrise. When Flynn parted the curtain again, he saw flecks of snow tumbling past.

It was six twenty, meaning that they'd been here for over five hours. They would have to go soon, but she was still sleeping. Her fists were clenched, the blanket pulled tightly around her neck.

When he'd first met Diana, she'd seemed out of her depth and too arrogant to know it, but now she looked small and tragic, lying on the bed all clutched into herself.

"I'm not asleep," she said. She opened her eyes. "Did you sleep?"

"Some. Not a lot."

"Same here. Not a lot."

She got out of bed, indifferent to her nakedness. He was not indifferent to it. She crossed into the bathroom, lithe and perfect, a dancer.

The shower came on. He listened to it, but as he watched her shadow behind the curtain, he thought of Abby in the shower. She'd liked to sing, Abby. Her voice was a peal of bells.

The shower curtain flew back and Diana came out. "Yours," she said.

When he undressed, she took no notice.

He showered in silence. He was mapping out an exit strategy from

Chicago. Keep it simple, make it quick. But where to go?

“I need a laptop,” she told him as he dressed.

“We can do that at a Best Buy or a Staples.”

“That’s numero uno. We also need disposable cell phones. Every time we use one, we need to bust it up and toss the remains. No more than twenty-second calls, and only if absolutely, absolutely necessary. NRO can pull down a cell call in about thirty seconds from anywhere in the world, and we need to assume that our guys are even better.”

“Okay, here’s my part of this. First, if our friend doesn’t get out of that house fast, he’s done. If it hasn’t already happened. The perp is ahead of him and way ahead of us, and the frank truth is, survival is the issue. So I’ve been thinking about transportation. What’s the safest way to run like hell? Planes are out. No way through security without showing some kind of ID. The train is better. They take cash and we can hide out in a compartment. But a compartment is also a trap, so that’s out. Obviously buses are too vulnerable. My bottom line: we buy a car off a lot for cash. There’ll be no record of the transaction until the title hits the state department of transportation. So we’ve got about two days to go as far as we can.”

“Then the car becomes identifiable.”

“If we’re still in Illinois it does. But that’s not where we’re gonna be, not unless the trail of that tiger leads here, which I very much doubt.”

“The trail of the tiger?”

“I think it’s our best shot. That animal has records. Where we’re gonna go is where it was last in the hands of its real owners. That’s our starting point.”

“Let me ask you this. What if we absolutely, completely and totally cannot find the tiger? What then?”

“We go to Plan B.”

“Which is?”

“I have no idea.”

“Jesus.”

“Ninety percent of detective work is having no idea, eight percent is being wrong, two percent is luck. You enter a crime scene, there’s a dead guy. His wife, the usual suspect, is alibied and clueless. It feels like there’s no next step. But you find one. You take it. Usually small, and usually a dead end. So you feel your way along until you locate another step, if there is one, which usually there is not. That’s it. That’s being a detective.”

“But you solve your crimes?”

“We have a good closing rate in Menard. Better than a lot of places. Mostly you solve the crime because the perp is a moron, which is why this case is such a problem. Our guy is not only better equipped than we are, he’s smarter.”

Dressed, they went downstairs. In the elevator he said, “We walk in opposite directions on Diversey. You go north, I go south. Get on the first bus you see. I’ll get on it, too, next stop. Do not sit together. We both get off at the El.”

The doors opened, they entered the compact lobby and checked out. She left while he looked at leaflets. Then he left. He made no effort to case the street. If they were made, there was no point. Escape would not be possible, not a second time.

As he walked, he looked for a bus stop, found one, then waited. In a few minutes a bus pulled up. It was packed, which was all to the good. When he got on, for a moment he didn’t see her. Then he did, standing toward the back, deep in the crowd. He grabbed a bar and stayed in the front. They traveled four stops to the El, then he got off, along with most of the other passengers.

He saw her again on the El platform. They didn’t acknowledge each other. When the El came, they both entered the same car. Three other people did, too, a man in a gray overcoat with a fur cap on his head, a woman with a blanket-covered stroller, and a girl being led by a Seeing Eye dog. Ordinary people or hit squad?

Farther down in the car, Diana sat reading a paper. That was a nice touch, he hadn't thought of that.

Looking up at the route map, he decided to get off in Skokie. No idea why. It was just a random name. No plan was the best plan.

Stops came and went. All of the people who'd gotten on with them were now off, which was good. Hopeful. Unless they'd been cycled out, of course. Who knew what level of resources they were dealing with? Did the perp have ten confederates or fifty? No way to know.

When the train stopped in Skokie, he got off. She followed. Downstairs, there was a coffee shop. He took a seat at the counter. In a situation like this, it was always a mistake not to eat, so he ordered eggs, toast, and sausage. At the far end of the counter, she ate, too.

She'd probably seen the same dealership from the windows of the train that he had, but he left first anyway. If there was another one he hadn't spotted, he didn't want to take the chance that she'd go there instead.

It was a twenty-minute walk, and he didn't like the way it exposed them. Nothing to do about it, though.

As he pushed his way into the warm dealership showroom full of gleaming Chryslers, the only salesman in the place appeared, an Indian man with tired eyes and a cranked-up smile.

"I'm looking for something I can drive off."

The salesman sized him up. "Well, let me show you your car," he said. The plaster smile didn't change. The tiredness in the eyes maybe got a little deeper. This man was far from home with a blizzard on the way, and Flynn could see his wife and kids around him, needy ghosts. Most of the world was like this man, keeping on because what else were you going to do? Flynn knew that there would be no savior for Mr. Asnadi.

Mr. Asnadi tried to get him to look at some recent models.

"I got a budget, man. Two grand."

"We can do that. There's a Dynasty—"

“You can do better. What about that Shelby over there?”

There was a Mitsubishi V-6 in the Dodge Shelby, and it was turbocharged. A fast car if you needed it and he would need it, that he knew.

“This is a fine car. We’ve certified it, you can see. But there’s not much wiggle room.”

The sticker said three thousand one hundred dollars. There was wiggle room. The way the tires were sitting told Flynn that there was massive amounts of it. The car hadn’t rolled in at least six months, and you weren’t even going to get a kid to buy an old gray Shelby.

“I’ll give you two grand cash now. That’s my only offer.”

“For two grand, we have this Avenger—”

“The Shelby. Two grand. Or I walk right now.”

He sighed. “I have to clear it with my manager.”

“No you don’t. You’re the only guy here. You want to try sitting in a back room drinking coffee while I stew, then come out and bullshit me more? Ain’t gonna happen.”

“Let’s do the paperwork.”

Twenty minutes later, Flynn and Diana were driving away. “Beautiful,” she said, looking at the cracked dash.

“It’s fast and we might need that. Plus front-wheel drive and reasonable tires. It’s worth about eight hundred bucks, but I paid two grand to do the deal quickly.”

His instinct was to travel, but they went back into the Loop and spent an hour dipping more ATMs. Under no circumstances could they use plastic once they were outside of Chicago.

When they had sixteen grand between them, they headed out Eighty toward Fifty-Five. He wanted to get far away from here as fast as possible, and also out from under the storm, which was fast approaching.

In Joliet, they found a Best Buy. They picked up laptops. She also purchased a hardware firewall. “We leave the wireless connections turned

off. When we take these online, it can only be with a wired Ethernet with the firewall between us and the connection.” They got a GPS. “We use it only if necessary.”

“It doesn’t emit a signal,” he said.

“Everything emits a signal. Our signals detection units routinely reproduce the images on GPS instruments being used by the Taliban. It’s one of the ways we aim our drones.”

“I’m an old-fashioned cop, don’t forget that. Gumshoeing around asking people questions. So don’t let this electronic crap trip me up.”

“That’s why I’m telling you.”

At a 7-Eleven, they got disposable cell phones.

Back in the car, she explained, “Any time we use any phone, the computers or the GPS, anything that connects us to the world electronically, we immediately move on. So don’t, like, decide to surf the net before bed or whatever.”

“Good enough.” When it came to computers and computer security, she was, thank God, clearly in control. “Now I have a question for you. It’s time to open up. We’re past the bullshit. I know the big secret. So now I want to know if there are any support personnel anywhere who could help us.”

“I don’t think there’s a single soul.”

“What about the stakeout team across the street?”

“Garden-variety FBI surveillance unit. Don’t know a thing.”

“Not very good, either, given that they let a hostile tail pick us up. What about your NSA supervisor? You’re not in the office. He must be aware of that.”

“Neither are you, and what does Captain Parker know?”

“Point taken.” He drove on southward under the deepening sky. Snow blew across the road in writhing ribbons. The car’s heater screamed. As he drove, he watched both the sky and the road behind them. The cloud cover looked to be at about two thousand feet, so any chopper that might be

shadowing them would stay in the cloud. The road was a different story, the road he could see.

In an excess of caution, he pulled the car off suddenly, tires screaming.

“What’s happening?”

He said nothing. Ahead was a crossroad anchored by an Exxon Station, a Jack in the Box, and a Holiday Inn Express.

He pulled into the gas station.

“How about a warning once in a while? You scared the hell out of me.”

“We don’t need gas. I’m watching our back.”

For eleven minutes, nothing else came in off the interstate. Then an eighteen-wheeler appeared, air brakes hissing, and headed for the truck pumps.

“Okay, I think we’re clean and we’re in an isolated area. Now what we need to do is this. First, we’re gonna go online, both of us, and see if we can find any report anywhere of a lost or stolen Siberian tiger. At the same time that we do that, we’re gonna put these people in front of us where we can see them.”

“Put them in front of us?”

“We’re going online flying flags. Wifi. No firewall. Looking for a Siberian tiger.”

“They’ll find us.”

“What they’ll find is the motel. We’ll be backed off, watching. But first there’s another couple of chores.”

“Which are?”

“You’re going to learn some new driving techniques. A few moves, as much as I can get across in an hour. And you are damn well going to become proficient with that little popgun you’ve got.”

“I don’t like guns. But I’ll use it if I have to.”

“You will fall in love with it. Worship it. Because right now, Diana, our guns are our gods.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He'd taken them down a long country road and pulled off in a tree-choked dip just beyond a small bridge. "Let me explain this vehicle."

"I'm a good driver."

"This is a front-wheel-drive vehicle. Better for winter, but you're not going to be able to do certain maneuvers. Normally, rear-wheel drive is the way to go, but this has an advantage in bad weather. It's fast, but it also has a lightweight steering pump. This means that the fluid is going to foam if we do tight turns at high speed. Expect the steering to become extremely heavy. Also, rubber brake lines. They could expand and so you need to assume that you could lose your brakes, too."

"So it'll be unsteerable and it won't stop. You'd better drive."

"If I'm incapacitated, you'll have to. Or if I'm done."

"What do you mean 'done'?"

"You got a sixty-six percent casualty rate going so far, Diana."

"I'm sorry. I'm just—" She shook her head.

He changed seats with her, then taught her a few basics, such as how to find the apex of a turn and when to start accelerating out of one, and how to execute a reasonable 180.

On a quiet country road she was barely passable. Under pressure, she was going to forget everything. He didn't even mention the bootlegger's turn. If

she needed to execute a maneuver like that, she was already caught, so what was the point?

He gave up on driving and went to handgun skills. They walked a short distance into a frozen field. “You ever fired your pistol? At all?”

“Yes. No. Once. One session.”

“The most important thing in pistol shooting is understanding just how inaccurate your weapon is. People are accurate with pistols from distance only in the movies.”

“How close do you need to be?”

“With the weapons we’re using, a few yards is the outside.”

“That’s *all*?”

“Targets will be in motion and so will we. You need to get in as close as you can, is the bottom line. A couple of feet, or even a contact shot, is best.”

“I did my shooting on a range. There was a trainer.”

“The range is a dream world. If you’re shooting, your mind is going to be too focused on the act to remember much of anything else. That’s what practice is about. When you’re under pressure, you’ll go on automatic pilot, not lose your head.”

“What’s the most important thing I need to know, then?”

“Avoid lifting the barrel as you pull the trigger. But you won’t, not entirely, so you need to aim for the largest part of your target that’s worth hitting. This is the chest just below the neck. The advantage of this shot is that it does anatomical damage that affects the arms. With a heart shot, your opponent can get off one, maybe two trigger pulls before he’s done. Not with this one.”

“What about the head? Just shoot him in the head.”

“You’re going to miss, and once you have missed, you are going to manage the weapon badly. That’s what happened to Mike.”

“He was highly trained.”

“So am I. That’s why I know what happened to him.”

He kept her shooting until she appeared to be comfortable with her PPK.
“Who issued this gun to you?”

“I bought it at Wal Mart.”

“It’s an okay choice. Just remember exactly how many bullets you have. Count as you shoot. Know, always, whether or not you’ve got one in the firing chamber. This is absolutely critical, because it is going to take you more than a second to fire if you don’t. In an exchange of gunfire, close range, that extra half second is a lifetime—yours.”

She looked like she wanted to cry. As they returned to the nameless little cluster of franchises and gas stations, sunset was a dull red streak on the western horizon. Ahead, the black outline of the motel was now dotted with fitful lights. Flynn felt a familiar sadness rolling over him, the great, tragic surge of the human sea, and now, also, the greater sea of intelligent life of which mankind was only a part.

They got takeout at the Jack in the Box, then checked in to the Holiday Inn Express.

He tossed his backpack on the bed, then put the Best Buy bag down more carefully and pulled the computers out. He ate a chicken sandwich while he checked out one of the laptops.

“It works,” he said. He followed the instructions on the desk and was soon online with it. “I’ve got webcams in my house. I’ll just go on my website and click through them all. Then I’m going to surf YouTube looking for video of Siberian tigers.”

“If they know what they’re doing, you’ll get noticed for certain.”

“Let’s hope.”

“I don’t quite get this. We’re giving ourselves away.”

“We want them to come to us in a place of our choosing. We’ll be standing off, watching from a distance. When they show up and don’t find us, they’ll leave. Then we’ll be where we need to be—behind them. We’ll start calling some shots.”

Once online, he stared into his own living room, dark and still. For him, home was the center of his heart, and his loneliness. He did their bedroom, then the kitchen. Finally, steeling himself, he moved to the Abby Room—and just sat there staring, for the moment too astonished to talk. When he found his voice again, he said, “The Abby Room’s been torn apart.”

She came beside him and looked at the image. “My God.”

The walls had great gouges ripped in them, the furniture had been broken apart, the couch torn to pieces, all the photographs scattered. He felt kind of sick, looking at the violence of it.

“Can you rewind?”

He hit the reverse button, and the image began to flicker back. “I’ve got it set on thirty-second intervals, so it’s choppy. It goes back forty-eight hours.”

Twenty-one hours ago, there were blurred frames indicating movement. He clicked forward.

In the center of the room, there was a figure. The body was blurred almost to invisibility, but you could see that it was a man.

“It’s posed, you know. On purpose. You’re intended to see this.”

The man ripped down maps, tore up pictures. His fury was extraordinary.

He killed his browser. He couldn’t bear to see more. “That’s the perp,” he said. He tried to fight down the sick horror, but he could not. He choked back his emotions. “Goddamnit. Sorry.”

“Everybody in this cries.”

“Okay, fine. Siberian tigers. They can’t be imported, so the ones presently in the country are the only ones available.” He reopened his browser, being careful not to bring up his home security system again. “There is no national database of stolen property. The individual police departments each keep their own records.”

“So what do we do?”

“Look for break-ins at zoos and animal shelters that house these animals. The fact of the break-in will be recorded in the National Crime Information

Center Database. Although, I don't have a password."

"Not a problem." Her fingers flew. "We have a master access program. It can basically break into any password protected system there is. One with as many different passwords as this one has is gonna be a piece of cake."

He saw numbers flickering across the database's access point. "Okay— one, two, three—"

The entry was allowed.

"That's impressive."

"Give me something hard. The Federal Reserve's master password. Want a billion dollars? I could wire it into your account within fifteen minutes."

"That might be a tad difficult to explain." As much grief as was in her own heart, he was grateful that she was trying to lighten his mood.

She worked through the data. "Here's an animal shelter in Austin, Texas, that was broken into last month. It's reported as a case of vandalism. Chimpanzees were shot. You gotta ask why people do crap like that. And another one. Santa Barbara, California. A lion was killed with a high-powered rifle."

"Nope, if we're on the right track at all, it's gonna be Austin."

"You're sure?"

"They have one of the worst burglary clearance records in the country. A criminal this smart is going to factor that in."

"They logged the chimps as animal cruelty. There are pictures. Ugly. So nothing stolen."

"Maybe and maybe not. Let me take a look." He read aloud, "'Fencing was breached in a large holding area that contained a Siberian tiger called Snow Mountain.'"

"It doesn't say the tiger is missing."

"Say you're a cop. You investigate a break-in at an animal preserve. Of all the animals that are left unharmed, you mention only one in your report. Why?"

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do I. But I do know that Texas is full of wealthy ranchers who love to stock their places with exotic wildlife. Texas being Texas, maybe you know that the tiger has been illegally taken by such a rancher or sold to one, and you know exactly who did all this—took the tiger and vandalized the facility as a cover—and because of who it is, you have no desire to pursue this individual.”

“Is it worth a trip, then?”

“You follow the leads you have.”

“I thought we were going to wait here. Try to induce a confrontation. I mean, by now they almost certainly know where we are. I mean, if they have the skill to watch for relevant searches.”

“I didn’t expect such a good lead. I think we need to run after it.”

They were close enough to St. Louis to reach the airport in a couple of hours.

They didn’t check out. Why leave behind any more information than you had to? What was the hotel going to do, send a bill?

They were south of the storm now, and the winter sky was vivid with stars. Cars passed now and again, not many though. People were getting their dinner, life was winding down for the night.

He watched the road behind them, but one set of headlights looks much like another, and distances are hard to gauge at night.

“What do you think will happen in Austin?” Diana asked.

“What will happen in Austin is the unexpected.”

“If the tiger is gone?”

“Then we’re close. The case starts giving up some gold.”

“Will they catch us this time?”

He thought about that. “If they don’t, it’ll be a miracle.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Using one of the throwaway cell phones, Diana had made some calls to airlines and determined that the next flight to Austin wasn't until five forty-five in the morning, so Flynn pulled into a Homewood Suites he happened to see near the St. Louis airport.

Once again, they checked in with cash. There was a stack of *USA Today*s on the counter, and he took one. He planned to look at the weather forecast. Big weather had a tendency to loop down over the country's midsection. If they were going to run into the storm again in Texas, he wanted to know that.

He went into the bedroom, tossed the paper on the bed, and turned on the TV. "Will it bother you?"

"I'm not sleepy."

He could feel a more intense electricity between them. She wanted to take another step, he could feel that. He said, "Outside of Menard, there's an area called the Staked Plain. When I was a boy, I used to ride there, and in the summer of my twelfth year a girl rode with me. Abby." He did not add that they had danced together naked in the grass.

"I'm here," Diana said.

His body went to her and his lips kissed hers, and then his heart kissed her. She was small in his grasp, surprisingly so for someone who occupied so much space in his life. They took their pleasure together then, two people

who were tired and confused and afraid, but for this moment were able to find something like shelter in one another.

Then it was over, a memory flying back into the past. They lay side by side in silence. Flynn felt gratitude. He wanted to thank her, but that seemed like another form of rejection. Abby haunted him.

Diana slipped quickly away into sleep. She was soon snoring softly. Flynn envied her the ability she had to drop off like that. For him, night was a prison. He dreaded the feeling of vulnerability that sleep brought. Since the incident, his doctor had explained to him that he was suffering from something called guarded sleep, which means that at some level, you're always awake.

He turned on the TV. For a while, he surfed, watching the Weather Channel, then CNN, then a Judge Judy rerun. Hitler strutted on the Military Channel. On Nick at Night, crazed cartoon figures cavorted.

His nakedness began to make him feel exposed and he put his clothes back on. Cradling his gun, he returned to the living room of the small suite.

For a time, he meditated. His gun lay in front of him, so he also closed his eyes. A few minutes vacation from it would be okay.

Abby whispered his name.

He gave up meditating and went into the bedroom and got the paper, which was lying on the floor beside the bed.

Back in the living room, he turned the pages, looking for the national weather. As he flipped through it, his eyes rested for a moment on the word "tiger."

He read the brief story, then stopped, too shocked for a moment to move.

He went into the bedroom, shook Diana and said, "Forget Texas, we're going to Vegas."

Diana stirred but didn't wake up.

"Look at this," he said, holding the paper out, then rattling it.

She moaned.

“Wake up, Diana, this is important.”

She sighed, stretched, then started to turn over and go back to sleep.

“No, you need to see this.”

“What?”

“A tiger is on the loose in a casino in Las Vegas.”

For a moment she was absolutely still. Then she sat up. She grabbed the paper and read. “A coincidence?”

“This was yesterday. They’d lost us. My guess is that this is bait.”

“It doesn’t say anything about it being a Siberian.”

“It’s not a coincidence.”

“If you say so.”

“We need to catch the first flight out.”

“Flynn, I can understand investigating the place that lost the tiger. But the casino makes no sense. If it’s a coincidence, we’re wasting our time. If it’s not, they’ll be waiting for us.”

“I see a break in the case. Among other things, casinos are loaded with cameras. Think if we got the perp identified. Think of that.”

“It’s a trap, Flynn.”

“Of course it is, that’s the whole point. But we know that. We understand.”

They left the hotel and went on to Lambert, driving through the post-midnight world, past glowing fast-food restaurants and dark, silent strip malls.

“Once I watched a rat get cheese out of a trap,” he said.

“That’s impossible.”

“If you’re a smart rat it’s not. What he did was push the trap along the floor with his nose until it sprung. Then he ate the cheese. We need to approach this the same way, exploiting the unexpected vulnerability.”

“What is it?”

“It’s unexpected, so I don’t know. Yet.”

The earliest Vegas flight left just after six, so they spent a few more hours in the next hotel, letting the night wear slowly into predawn. There was no trouble with tickets, and the plane wasn't crowded.

After taking off, it turned into the dark western sky. Flynn looked at Diana beside him. Was she capable? No.

Better question: was he?

Same answer.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

They pulled around the gigantic lion that guards the MGM Grand's porte cochere and got into the valet parking line. Nobody cared, of course, not about a couple of dismal little tourists in a rented Camry. Which was good. A noticeable detective is a bad detective.

He hadn't walked into this building in five years. As he approached the gleaming doors, the old itch came back. He fought it off. You don't start, that's how you control an addiction.

"What do we do now?"

"Find the tiger."

"If it's still here."

"It's gonna be a major production for them to get it out of the building. Security is all over the place, not to mention the press. This place is loaded with cameras, believe me. If security hasn't spotted the tiger being taken out, then odds are that it's still here."

"He could've used the helicopter to take it off the roof."

He thought about that. Then he said, "Possibly, but he still has to get it up there. Somewhere, some camera will have seen that."

This was the Grand, where the Skylofts had private butlers. How much would it take to convince his butler to help him get the tiger out? A couple hundred bucks would probably do it. Still, could a butler control the cameras?

They passed the huge golden lion in the lobby, heading for Skyloft check-in. They'd booked one, too, top floor.

He could hear the casino and smell the casino. From here, he couldn't see the blackjack tables, but he could imagine the dealers standing behind them, waiting. He'd known a couple of those guys. They loved to see players burn, but they loved even more to see them win. Big wins meant big tips.

He slid the door back and entered the exclusive Skyloft check-in area.

"Reservation for James Carroll."

"Yes, Mr. Carroll! Just a mo—."

The receptionist's smile turned to plaster.

"Get ready for company," Flynn told Diana as the door behind them slid open and a howitzer shell in a black suit came in.

"Excuse me," the shell said, his steel cranium gleaming.

"We're here on official business," Flynn responded. "No gambling."

"Please come with me, Mr. Carroll. And you, too, Miss Glass."

He looked at her in astonishment. "You're booked, too?"

She did not reply.

As they headed toward security, the officer asked, "Are you two a team now?"

"Not really," Diana said.

He led them into a familiar space, scuffed beige walls, no windows, a steel desk and a couple of wooden chairs. Not the sort of room you expect to see in the Grand. It was even more stark than the service areas and the maze of access tunnels that Flynn knew ran under the huge complex.

He thought he might recognize the security chief, but it was a new, short, stocky bullet-headed bald guy. The new howitzer shell said, "Diana Glass. Welcome back. Leaving, I presume?" He looked at Flynn. "And who're you supposed to be, Mr. Carroll, Hecuba's sidekick?"

"I'm a police officer," Flynn said. He pulled out his badge. "Texas."

"Doesn't make a shit here, Mr. Carroll, this is Nevada. The message

remains the same. Get out.”

“Look—”

“I’m lookin’ at a lot of losses between the two of you, now get off the premises or I’ll have to turn you over to some real cops, which will not amuse you.”

Unless there was a criminal charge, in cases like this the Vegas cops basically just yelled at you. It wasn’t against the law to win money from the casinos. It was just annoying to them.

“You have a tiger in here and I know this, and I know how to find it and get it out of the resort.”

He heard Diana suck in her breath.

“Your help isn’t needed,” the security chief said. “We’ve got eyes on every camera in the structure.”

“Why haven’t you evacuated?”

“Because we don’t think some eccentric high roller is gonna unleash his pet on the guests. We just want him quietly to leave. Like you.”

“What hasn’t been on the news is why you can’t find it, which I know you can’t. Or why we can. That hasn’t been on the news, either.” He flipped his badge wallet closed. “We’re not here to gamble.”

The security chief came closer to him. Flynn noted that he had a complete set of choppers. Not good with his fists, then.

“Wait here,” Choppers said. He left the room.

Flynn looked up at the camera and waved his fingers. “He’s gone to get the general manager.”

“I really didn’t want to come here.”

“Are you booked all over town, or just here?”

“Look, in a previous life I built illegal software, okay?”

“For the casinos?”

“Against the casinos.”

“All I did was count cards.”

“They don’t like that, either.”

“They do not.”

He looked at her with new eyes. From casino hacker to government super spy. “You’ve had an interesting career.”

She smiled a tight smile. “It has been interesting.”

The general manager came in. He was not smiling. “I’m told you won’t leave.”

“We’re not here to gamble. We’re here to help you with your tiger problem.”

“We don’t have a tiger problem.”

“You have a half-empty casino is what you have. Because of the bad publicity regarding said tiger. That’s a tiger problem.”

The guy was young, no more than five years older than Flynn, but he had the dead eyes of somebody who’d worked tables too long. Under the flinty, hostile surface was a deeper level of what Flynn sensed was real nastiness. So he had to be beaten about the head and shoulders a little. Not a problem. He said, “Okay, fine, we’re gonna leave. But we’re also going to let the press know that you refused our help.”

“A cop from the beautiful little town of Dead, Texas, and his hacker girlfriend? Nobody cares.” He turned his glare on Diana. “Why aren’t you in jail? You’re supposed to be serving time. Or dare I ask? ’Cause I can see you’re carrying heat, both of you. But then again”—he gestured toward a uniformed guard who had quietly entered the room—“so is he.”

“I’m not in jail because I cut a deal with Uncle Sam, Willard.”

“Willard?” Flynn asked.

“What kind of a deal would the feds cut with a sleazeball like you, Diana? You went down for four years.”

She pulled out her documentation. “When there’s only one person who can do a job, they’re gonna deal.”

He looked at her ID card. “As if this was real. Please don’t bore me. You

either bribed your way out or fucked your way out or both. Or you did something to their computers. Probably hacked your own release and just walked.”

“Look, Willard, we’ve been sent here by our bosses for reasons that we cannot tell you to do a job that you are not going to be able to do yourself.”

“We’ve got security patrolling every floor. We’ve entered and searched every guest room in the complex.”

“But you haven’t found the tiger or seen it leave the structure. Not on any camera. So what does that tell you?”

“LVPD SWAT are standing by.”

“Hordes of cops in black Darth Vader outfits. International media attention. That would not be good.”

“Whatever, I fail to see what a card shark and a jailbird hacker are gonna bring to the table.”

“Go the SWAT route. Or let us do our thing. Nice and private. You see the tiger, then you don’t.”

“Do we get an ID on the shithead who brought it in?”

“I guarantee the tiger. The shithead if we’re lucky.”

“And what does this cost?”

“Not a penny. We really do work for Uncle Sam.” He looked at Diana. “She’s been scared honest.”

“That would be false. So let me put it this way. If this fucks up in some way—if it turns out to be some sort of bass ackwards scam, I’m not bothering with the cops. I’m gonna just go ahead and brass you two until your faces are but a memory.”

“You beat up ladies now?”

Willard focused on Diana. “I saw this ‘lady’ here toss an armed man twice her size-fifteen feet into a glass wall.”

“I’ve only seen her geek side,” Flynn said.

Willard stared at her for a while. “That was her geek side. Don’t even get

me started about her skill at ripping marks.”

Her face was scarlet. She did not reply.

A long sigh from Williard. “What do you need to get started?”

“Smart move,” Flynn said.

“Nope, it’s a case of curiosity killing the cat. Why would a big-time hacker team up with a small-time counter? I’m fascinated.”

“Let’s roll some videotape.”

Willard took them to the security complex, which Flynn saw was fitted with state-of-the-art cameras watching the gaming area. Every corridor on every floor was also covered. “Any penetration into the rooms?”

“Not legal.”

“Detectives, maybe? Police investigation?”

“It happens, but nothing’s going down at present.”

He introduced Scott Morris. Flynn saw a graying former cop, probably a retiree. Sincere, capable, dedicated. “Scott supervises the system. He’ll give you what you need.”

“I have all the incidents edited together,” he said. “This is the first one that was noticed.” He touched a button, which froze an image.

They were looking at a blur stretched along the floor line in one of the access tunnels. Diana said, “You can tell what that is?”

“I can tell that it isn’t supposed to be there.”

“Could be a big cat,” Flynn said.

The security officer returned the camera to real time. The shadow was now gone.

“What was it then?” Flynn asked.

“Nobody could figure it out, so it got kicked up to me. I did a little work on the image, but it’s unresolvable.”

“What’s the refresh rate on these things?”

“Eighteen fps.”

“So whatever it is was moving really fast.”

“Faster than a man can run.”

“Where’s that tunnel?”

“Right under us, actually. Access to the lion habitat is through there.”

The MGM Grand’s lions were a world-famous tourist attraction. When he was here gambling, Flynn had passed by the habitat often enough. Even the floors were glass, so it was going to be a hard place for a tiger to hide.

“Street access? Is that where they bring the lions in from the ranch?”

“Yeah, there’s access out onto Tropicana. A couple of hundred feet.”

“Let’s see the best image of the tiger that you have.”

“This is from the tower. Sixteenth floor. Three twenty this morning.”

The animal came down the hall, stopped, and looked up at the camera.

“My God,” Diana whispered.

Brilliant eyes sparked in a sea of gray-orange fur. The animal’s face seemed almost to smile. Then it slowly turned around and, switching its tail, ambled down the corridor and around a corner.

“Next camera?”

Scott Morris pushed another button. “This is all there is. A blur again.”

“It displayed itself intentionally,” he said. “And it’s still here. And not alone.” He asked Scott, “Do you cover the Mansion? With cameras?” This was an exclusive facility behind the Grand itself, reserved for high rollers and people willing to pony up \$5,000 a night for accommodation.

“We cover the whole facility.”

So there would be no reason for the perp to prefer the Mansion over the Skylofts, and perhaps a good reason to favor the lofts, because he would have arrived the same way he’d arrived at the Hoffman’s, from above, using that high-tech aircraft of his.

In any case, MGM was going to know a lot about the people who stayed in the Mansion. You didn’t just walk in, you had to be invited.

“What about the roof of the tower?”

“There’s time lapse video of all roof areas. We’ve examined every foot of

it.”

“How long is the delay?”

“Sixty seconds.”

Easily time enough for someone to land, drop the animal and its support crew, and leave. Working at night, staying below FAA radars, using that soundless helicopter or whatever it was, it would have been easy.

“What we need to do is concentrate on the top floor of the tower, not the roof, the roof cameras are too slow. But I want to look at every inch of interior footage.”

A few minutes later, Flynn was watching one camera, Diana the other. “You’re looking for a blur,” he said. “They know the frame speed of the cameras, so the animal is moving fast.”

“It’s that well trained? Tigers are hard to train.” Morris said.

Flynn said nothing.

It took three hours, and during that time neither of them saw a single sign of anything unusual. Butlers and room service waiters came and went, guests came and went, but nothing else happened.

“Like I said, it’s still here,” Flynn said.

“Which surprises me,” Diana replied. “If it’s bait. Wouldn’t they have exposed it, then pulled it out as soon as they could?”

“Gotta let the fish swallow the bait, then you can set the hook. That’s what we’re doing now. We’re swallowing the bait. Next step, the hook will be set.”

“How will it be done?”

Flynn thought about that. “We shall see.”

“Look, it’s not in this complex,” Morris repeated. “I’m sorry.”

“If it’s not anywhere you’ve looked, then it has to be somewhere you haven’t. I suggest we start at the point of entry and we move through every space where the animal has been observed.”

“And?”

“We shall see.”

“Flynn,” Diana said, “that’s just blatantly taking the bait.”

“A smart fish wants to get the fisherman to go home. So he plays a game with him. He wants to frustrate him. He takes the bait, but he’s careful. He’s not greedy. He nibbles. So the fisherman up there thinks, ‘have I got a bite or is it just the current?’ Finally, he hauls in his line and finds a clean hook. This happens a few times, and the fish is finally left in peace. Full, too.”

“So he leaves and we get nothing. Stalemate.”

“Oh, no, he’s gonna get something.”

“What?”

Flynn made a gun gesture. “The fish, in this case, is gonna follow the line right back to the fisherman in his little boat.”

“Flynn, you’ll get killed.”

“Somebody will, most likely.”

“Remember Montana. The animal is extremely dangerous, and whoever’s behind it is even more so.”

Flynn said nothing.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The lion habitat was immediately beside the security area, and it took them only a few moments to reach it with their latest minder, a young guy called Josh who apparently thought they were celebrity guests looking for an insider's tour.

He nattered away about the facility's history and its considerable prowess as one of the most popular exhibits in Las Vegas.

The walls and floors were clear glass, so it was easy to see the lions, but not entirely. There was a small area where they could stay out of view.

There was a crowd in front of the habitat, and a line full of kids formed up along the wall. It was a happy situation, calm and orderly. No problems here. There were cubs in the habitat, and the children were eager to have their pictures taken with them. Farther down the corridor, more people were filing into Studio 54. The casino was humming, too, and a show was letting out of the Cirque de Soleil's KÀ Theater.

This was a chess game with no board and more than one expert opponent. Or perhaps it was better to say it another way: a chess game with the perp and some other kind of game with the tiger, played by tiger rules, whatever they were.

He asked Scott, "Did you check the whole habitat?" He knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it from the man who had done the work.

“What’s there to check? Six lions, two cubs, glass floors, end of story.”

Obviously, Scott was not aware of how the habitat was laid out. Flynn went to the door. “I need to enter the space,” he told their minder.

The man blinked. His expression of surprise said that it wasn’t a frequent request. Finally he said, “No.”

“It’s okay, Ricky,” Scott said.

“Don’t we need a release or something?”

“I need to do this right now.”

Scott spoke into his radio, then listened. Willard, no doubt. Flynn waited. At a nod from Scott, Rickie unlocked the heavy door and stepped aside.

“Hey,” the trainer who was handling the animals said, “You know what you’re doing?”

“I need to see into the enclosed area.”

“There’s nobody in there. We’re all out here.”

This guy was tight with his lions, which was good. It meant that he could control them. Flynn was fast enough to deal with one lion, but six would be a definite problem, and lions weren’t like tigers, they worked in packs.

The public was now aware of his presence in the enclosure and was watching him. He moved through the visible space, then took a few steps up into the hidden area.

It was exactly as he expected. He called out to the trainer, “There’s another animal in here.”

The trainer’s head turned. “*What?*”

“Back in here. And I don’t think it’s a lion.”

The man came to Flynn. “That’s empty. It has to be.”

Flynn moved a little deeper into the dimness. “Get security over here.”

“This is impossible!”

“Look for yourself,” Flynn said. “Carefully.”

“Jesus, you’re right. What is that?”

“We need somebody who’s able to work with tigers. And this one is very

damn smart.”

The trainer had taken out a small LED flashlight. The yellow of the tiger’s eyes reflected back. “What the hell ... how did that get in here?”

“We need to get it contained.”

“There’s tigers at the Secret Garden in the Mirage. Is this one of their animals?”

“No. But they have experts, for sure.”

“Yeah, Siegfried and Roy. *The* experts.”

“Aren’t they retired?”

“If they’re in Vegas, they can advise. Plus, the Mirage has a good group of trainers. It’s a top-notch operation.”

One of the lions roared, then another. From outside there was excited babble, kids squealing.

“They’ve been restless as hell, and this is why. How long as that thing been in there?”

“That’s unclear.”

Behind them, Ricky opened the access door. “You guys okay?”

Immediately, there was a stirring from within the enclosure. “Close it,” the trainer shouted.

The lions erupted, roaring and striding, and at the same moment the tiger emerged. It was easily as big as two of the lions put together.

It fixed its stare on Flynn.

“It knows you. Is this your animal?”

Flynn said nothing.

The tiger came into view of the public, causing an immediate round of applause. The next second, it leaped, and Flynn had never seen anything quite like it. The movement was smooth and swift and covered a good fifteen feet.

As the tiger slammed into Ricky, he went down with a surprised grunt.

“Holy God!” the trainer shouted.

From outside there came a confused babble, then an eruption of screams.

Perhaps because of pack instinct, but also due to curiosity, the lions followed the tiger through the door.

“Goddamnit!” the trainer shouted.

“Stay cool, we’ve got work to do,” Flynn said. He grabbed Scott’s radio. “The animals are in the casino,” he said on the emergency channel, “you need crowd control and all the wranglers you can get.”

He followed the trainer out into the broad hallway between Studio 54 and the casino. The lions were close together, moving down the center of the hall toward the casino, and the large crowds still exiting KÀ were parting like the Red Sea. But not all of them. An elderly lady who looked like a pile of bags with a face clapped her hands and confronted them, smiling happily. “Oh, how cute,” she gushed.

Another voice shouted, “It’s an act,” and there was a smattering of uneasy applause.

“Oh, God,” the trainer moaned.

Security was pouring into the corridor from both directions. Then a little boy with a toy ray gun burst through the crowd and took a firing stance. The next thing Flynn knew, he was spraying the lions with a super-soaker.

They remained silent and still, shaking their heads, annoyed by the water, unsure of themselves.

“It’s not gonna last,” the trainer shouted back at Flynn.

“I know it.”

A guard appeared with a gun.

The situation was three seconds from trample panic. “Don’t fire that,” Flynn shouted, “don’t let people see it!” The guard holstered it and stationed himself in front of the lions and spread his legs and arms, attempting to block their progress.

Now other people joined the old lady, attempting to attract the lions to them. One man succeeded in petting one of them.

“Lay off,” the trainer shouted, “don’t confuse them!”

“Folks,” Flynn said in his most commanding voice, “we need you to back out of here. Nobody run, just move out of the corridor, please. Stay away from the animals.”

The old lady was lifting the dewlaps of a lioness and shrilling at her husband to take a picture. Flynn’s warning did not stop her. Then a man with a cigar in his hand burst around the guard, roaring and thrusting it at the lions.

One of the them charged this sudden movement. The old woman was knocked over.

In three strides, Flynn moved among the lions, then past them. Quickly, he confronted the man with the cigar, lifted his arm and shook it out of his hand, and twisted the arm back behind him. Then he took the guy’s legs out from under him, whirled him around and pushed him away. He turned to the old woman and drew her to her feet. “Put her back together,” he said to another security guard who had just come up.

The lions, now afraid, began running. More screams erupted. Flynn’s trained ears counted ten sirens immediately outside the building, just beginning to wind down.

“Call your pros,” he shouted to Scott. “Right now!”

“It’s been done!”

Willard burst onto the scene. “SWAT’s deploying.”

Flynn took off after the lions.

They invaded the casino, moving fast. Their fear was escalating fast. At this point, they were highly likely to lash out at anybody who confronted them.

This was a huge space, and most of the patrons still weren’t aware of what was happening. But then one of the lions jumped up onto a blackjack table and roared. Nobody could mistake that sound, and every head in the casino turned this way. Then the rest of them ran deeper into the room, and were lost to Flynn’s view amid the high-roller slots. Roars and cries of terrified surprise followed immediately.

“Stay with this animal,” Flynn shouted to two guards. “Send SWAT into the slots with nets, not guns. No guns, do you get that?”

“Yessir!”

He also ran toward the slots, vaulting the nearest row of them and landing in the lap of a spectacular young woman. Her chips scattered, mice on the run.

People were jumping up from their machines, shouting, flapping their hands at the lions, trying to leave the area.

Flynn knew about as much about lions as he did about tigers, which was just enough to know that they were efficient killers, but would only attack for food or in self-defense. For them, violence was a tool, and right now what he needed to do was to convince them not to use it.

“Clear the area,” he shouted into the panicking crowd. “The police are on their way. Just take it easy, back out, don’t make sudden movements.” They slowed down, clustering, getting quiet. “That’s it, that’s right. Now just back out. Security will escort you to safety.”

In moments, fully equipped SWATs appeared, and they had animal control nets. There was going to be some roaring and some resistance from the lions, but basically this was over.

Diana came up beside him. “This is what the perp’s been waiting for. His tiger’s going to take us out somehow, and right now.”

“He’s going to try. Listen, I need you out of here.”

“No way.”

“They must not take both of us. So you get out of here, you get in the car, and you drive, Diana. You drive far.”

He spotted the tiger. It was making its way behind the high-roller slots, moving fast, staying low.

“The perp could be leaving the facility about now. You go out to the front and make a note of every vehicle that pulls away.”

“He’ll use his chopper.”

“In broad daylight? He’s gotta have permits, he’s got to get clearance to use the helideck. No, he’ll use a car and this is a chance to see him or see somebody who works with him. Get some basic detective information.” The tiger disappeared from view. The animal was going somewhere. It would be picked up, and Flynn intended to still be alive when that happened, and to be there.

“You come with me,” Diana said.

“The tiger’s going somewhere to be picked up. If I’m there, I can call in support from the local cops. Maybe round up some of these people.”

“You will not survive this, Flynn.”

“Go!”

She turned.

“*Now!*”

She left.

Flynn trotted to where the animal had been, but there was nothing there. He looked ahead and saw an access panel. Loose. It must have gone through, and it must have been helped, otherwise the panel wouldn’t just be loose, it would be open. Smart as the damn thing was, the tiger didn’t have hands. Fortunately.

As he slid the panel aside, he reflected that he’d seen the tiger’s face more clearly this time. He’d had the uncanny sense that a person had been looking back at him through the eyes of an animal.

On the other side of the panel he found an access area that led to a forest of ductwork. It was a ventilation management shaft. The interior was unlit.

This was the moment when he needed to nibble the bait, not swallow it. The smart fish also had the discipline to defeat his own eagerness, and that was not easy, not when you were as hungry as he was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

He stood waiting for his eyes to get used to the dark. His night vision was decent, and this was always preferable to a flashlight. He could use his night vision equipment, which was still in his backpack, but it projected infrared and that would not be wise. For all he knew, tigers could see into the infrared, or this one could.

Soon, he was able to make out the shapes of ducts. There was light coming from his left. Also, on the floor, smears in the dust that could only be tracks. Instead of hiding, this tiger had gone toward the light, and that was very damn strange, especially because light changes the hormone mix in the human brain but not in the brains of predators. More visual information makes our other senses less acute. Could the tiger sense this, or somehow even know it? Or was it just a coincidence that it was going against its own instincts in such a way that gave it an advantage, but would look to most human pursuers like a mistake?

Flynn made his way under a long series of ducts, skirting the lighted area, moving as swiftly and silently as he could. He listened for any and every sound, and soon began to hear noises coming from the deeper dark. He stopped moving. Stopped breathing. Closed his eyes to concentrate on his hearing. Finally, he cupped his hands over his ears and turned slowly. As he did so, he was gradually able to make out a voice. Then that it was a female

voice. Then that it was the voice of a child.

“Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town, upstairs and downstairs, in his nightgown...”

Incredibly, what he was hearing was a little girl telling a Mother Goose story.

“Rapping at the window, crying through the lock, are the children in their beds ... are *you* in *your* bed, Jerry?”

He got his gun into his hand and went down on his stomach, drawing himself forward slowly enough so that the sliding sound was barely audible. As he moved ahead, the little girl’s voice grew steadily more distinct. Also, he began to see flickering light, very dim. A candle?

The voice continued, “Hush-a-bye, baby, mommy is near, hush-a-bye, daddy is near...”

There came another voice, even smaller, hardly even articulate, whimpering.

“Hush ... hush.” The little girl was comforting an even smaller child.

Using the voices as a guide, he felt his way along, soon discovering an iron hatch that was standing open. As he felt the edge, he could detect neat slices in four heavy lock tongues. This door had been cut open, and not by any tiger, no matter how clever it was.

This was the work of the perpetrator or his people, the first overt sign of their presence he had found. So his instinct had been right. It wasn’t just the tiger under here. Somebody with a powerful tool was here, too, and not a blowtorch. The edge was absolutely smooth to the touch. A torch would have left a much more irregular surface. No, this had been cut by a very good blade—as a matter of fact, no blade Flynn had ever heard of.

Could this be their lair? Was that the real reason they were in Vegas? Maybe he’d overestimated their cunning, and blundered into their most secret place.

He told himself, no, don’t make that mistake, that’s nibbling the bait too

hard. One more like that, and you taste the hook.

From the beginning, he had known that he would come to this point. Maybe the child wasn't even real, and maybe something else was happening entirely. He was in a labyrinth, after all, a real one. Who could tell what the truth of such a place might be?

It was an easy step through the door, whisper quiet sneakers on hard concrete. As he stepped through, he felt the thickness of the wall. It was a good four or five inches of steel reinforced concrete. So this was an access hatch, not intended to be opened often, if at all. But what was it for? What was this space he was now in?

The little girl was now silent, but the candle still flickered. As he moved toward it, he became aware of dampness underfoot, and at once understood. He was in the city's storm drain system, and that hatch was not a hatch at all, it was a gigantic relief valve. An enormous structure like the Grand would be served by massive risers from the city water system. If one of them burst, this and other valves up and down this outer wall could be opened to let the water out into the drainage system.

But what in the world were children doing in a storm drain? Were they runaways?

Flynn had been born helpful. It was part of who he was and a big part of why he'd become a cop. Even as a kid, he'd rendered aid whenever the situation arose. When it came to putting bad people in jail, Flynn's motive was protective, not vindictive. He didn't care so much to punish wrongdoers as to keep innocent people safe.

He was in a tunnel perhaps fifteen feet high and twenty wide. The candle, guttering now, was a hundred yards further on. As he drew closer, he began to make out a bed, then a table against a wall, then what amounted to a small room built entirely inside the drainage tunnel.

People lived down here. They were raising children down here.

He walked into the tiny area. There was a mattress set on a rusty box

spring, with two children sleeping on it. A tattered paperback of Mother Goose lay near the hand of an exquisite little girl, her blond hair a tangled mess, her face in sleep like something one might see through a keyhole into heaven. Cuddled beside her was a snatch of brown hair, all that could be seen of the smaller child she had been reading to.

Standing on the far side of the bed, just at the edge of the light, was the tiger. The eyes bored into him, but not with lust for the kill or even with hate. There was something like a frown there, not much of an expression really, but Flynn thought that it communicated clear meaning. The tiger's face was not angry. It was not murderous. The tiger's face was asking a question: "Who are you?"

Flynn had a shot—not much of one, but he could safely fire across the kids and maybe hit the animal. Moving as slow as oil, he raised the Glock. Quite calmly, the tiger watched it come up.

If he hit his target, the shot would be nothing short of a masterpiece. He breathed deep and set his feet.

The tiger disappeared as the shot blasted out, the noise rocking the tunnel, then echoing away in a series of thunderous slaps. Distantly, there were shouts, "shot fired, shot fired," then the thutter of feet running in the thin water that filmed the floor of the tunnel.

Other people lived down here, obviously a whole community. They were the kind of people who knew the sound of a gun when they heard it.

He had not hit the tiger. The tiger was gone.

The little girl lay with her eyes opened, her lips twisted back away from her teeth as if she was in pain. Her eyes were fixed on him. In the hand that had held the Mother Goose was a flying Taser. It was armed. The LED was glowing. A C2 like that could fire its electrodes twenty feet.

He realized that he had swallowed the bait, taken it deep into his gut. And now, in the form of a Taser in a child's hand, came the hook.

As he shifted and dropped, she fired. He felt one of the electrodes hook

into the sleeve of his jacket, then the floor seemed to turn into the ceiling, and he knew that she'd hit her mark.

In training, he'd taken Taser hits. He knew to expect the confusion and the out-of-control muscle spasms that followed, also the way sounds became tinny and the world distant.

Somebody was there, a dark figure standing over him. "What you doin' down here, topsider, you lookin' fer little girls." A blow hit his back. "That yo sweet, topsider?"

The effect wore off enough for Flynn to pull one of the hooks out of his clothes. He fought to respond to the voice, but could only manage a gobbling sound.

"You done good, Becky," the voice said. "Now we gonna kill us a topsider."

Flynn had been tricked into getting himself killed by a completely unconnected party for a reason that had nothing to do with anything.

"No," he managed to croak, "there's an animal down there." It came out as a series of gobbles.

"Zap him again, Becky." The man pulled a switchblade out of his pocket and snicked it open. "Gonna start with your balls, you piece a shit."

Flynn managed to suck a breath. "Animal in here! Dangerous!" He fought to get an arm up. Even though the little girl was standing on the trigger, there was no second pulse from the Taser.

"You're the goddamn animal."

Flynn pointed. "There's an animal back there in that tunnel!"

"What?"

"I'm a police officer. I was driving an animal away from your kids."

"You're a cop? Down here?"

Flynn had recovered himself enough to raise both hands. The Glock lay before him on the ground. "Swear."

"Shit a friggin brick, what the hell're you doin' down here? Cops don't

come down here.”

“To warn you ... an animal—big cat—escaped from the Grand. In the tunnels.”

“Jesus. Becky, you seen it?”

She shook her head.

“She ain’t seen it.” The blade reappeared.

“She was asleep.”

At that moment, a light shone the tunnel, bright, a professional-quality flashlight. It moved closer, coming down the same shaft that Flynn had used.

“You’re a lucky man,” Diana said. “I thought I was gonna find meat.”

“What in fuck’s name is going on around here?”

“You watch your trap around those kids, buddy,” Diana said to the guy.

“My kids are my business.”

“Well, you better get ’em outa here until the SWATs track down that tiger.”

“You’re kidding.”

“You heard me. This officer probably saved their lives. ’Cause the animal went right through this tunnel.”

“I saw it,” Flynn said. He pointed. “Just there. Which is why I fired my weapon.”

“Come on,” Diana said. “SWAT’s coming down the tunnels and we have work to do.”

Flynn was perplexed. What had just happened here? Instead of the perpetrator’s goons, Diana had shown up. It wasn’t surprising that she’d ignored his request and followed him, but still, something was wrong.

As they made their way back toward the Grand, she said, “We misread this situation totally.”

“It looks like it.”

“This had nothing to do with us. They were on one of their missions.”

“Oh?”

“During the confusion, while the entire staff chased the tiger, which you can be assured will not be seen anywhere near here again, the assistant manager of the resort disappeared from her office without a trace.”

Flynn did not reply. What could he say? What could either of them say?

When they had emerged back into the now-closed casino, she said, “There’s worse.”

“Hit me.”

“Flynn, there’s been a fire in Chicago, a bad one. A gas explosion leveled four row houses. Seventeen people were killed.”

He stopped. Looked at her. It was dark, but not so dark that he couldn’t see the shock in her face, or share her stunned horror.

“Oh my God, they got him.”

She nodded. “Flynn, we’re on our own.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The assistant manager's office was neat as a pin, except for the exquisite antique snuff box the Las Vegas detectives had found, which turned out to contain cocaine. They had also discovered that her credit rating was through the floor and she had a long string of dismissed cases that the Grand wouldn't have been able to see on her record before she was hired. The publicly available part of it showed only a traffic conviction.

Flynn breathed the room. Felt it. He noticed a curtain that had been pulled abruptly, but that was all. It looked out onto a distant view, so it was unlikely that somebody had been concerned that the window was under incidental surveillance.

According to the available tapes, she'd left the office when she'd gotten the alarm about the problem with the animals. She had never arrived on the scene.

"What is it?" Diana asked.

"What it is, is nothing."

"You sense something."

"You know, I'm not really thinking about this office. I already know that we're never going to find Elizabeth Starnes or Gail Hoffman or Abby or your Steve or any of them. What I can't get out of my mind is that tiger. I saw its face again."

“And?”

“It was intelligent, Diana. Like a person. It was like seeing a person wearing the face of a tiger.”

“You wondering the same thing I am?”

“A human mind put into the body of an animal. Yes I am. You could see curiosity. Like it was wondering who I was.”

“Feline curiosity?”

“Like it was asking me if we really needed to be enemies.” He shook his head. “I think it’s part human, and I have to wonder if it would change sides.”

“We’ll never get close enough to it to find out. Especially with Chicago gone. We need help.”

“You gotta have contacts above that level. Who does Oltisis report to? Did?”

She shook her head.

“*What?*”

“I was seconded to Oltisis. Sent to him on an origin-blocked order.”

“What the fuck is that?”

“A legal order that comes from a code-protected source. You can verify the code, but not identify the source. Could’ve been anybody. Most likely some agency that’s so classified even I’ve never heard of it.” She paused. “Or them.”

“Why are they so damn secretive?”

“If the alien presence is revealed and the public goes nuts about the disappearances—”

“Yeah, yeah, but this goes deeper than that.”

She sighed. “I know it. Mirrors reflecting mirrors. No damn end to it.” She paused. “The thought has crossed my mind that the bad guys might be in control at home. It could be that the ones helping us aren’t the police at all. Maybe they’re dissidents or revolutionaries or something.”

For a moment they were both silent, each contemplating the enormous

stakes involved, and the mysteries they faced, and the responsibility they bore.

“We have to just keep pushing,” Flynn said, “and hope whomever Oltis reported to catches up with us.”

“That would be true.”

Flynn continued, “They did Miss Starnes during the day, so no helicopter.”

Willard had become more cooperative. The company very badly wanted to find and prosecute the people who had caused the mayhem. The LVPD already had a blizzard of warrants out for them, not to mention a massive hunt for the tiger. They weren’t looking for Elizabeth Starnes, though not very hard. Given cocaine use and the kind of police record that would belong to a clever junkie, the resort was just as glad to be rid of her. In any case, it looked more and more to the police as if she’d walked out on her job, not been abducted. In other words, the old story.

Flynn and Diana had been given a small office in the security area, and computers with access to the property’s floor plan, its registration records, even the casino information.

They both worked the records, looking for things that didn’t add up, and in the back of both of their minds there remained the same hollow thought: we’re alone.

Flynn traced Elizabeth Starnes’s movements, picking her up in a stairwell, then again in the main lobby. There, she met an elderly man. She greeted him with what looked like professional courtesy, then walked out with him.

“Go into her family history,” he said. “See if she has any older relatives.”

“Her father lives in Crescent Manor. Charles Starnes. He’s a slot machinist.”

“A picture?”

“DMV probably has one.” Her fingers flew across the keyboard. “Got it.”

“That was a couple of seconds.”

“Fast hands.”

“No wonder Oltisis wanted you, you’re a friggin’ genius.”

“Always been my problem,” she said tightly. “Makes you think you can get away with any kind of shit. If that hack I did on the Grand had gone down the right way, I’d be in Tahiti now, not a worry in the world.”

“Tahiti’d get old, be my guess.”

“No older than catching car thieves and pushers.”

“Yeah, as screwed up as this is, it’s better.”

They laid the driver’s license photo side by side with a blowup of the face of the man Elizabeth had met in the lobby.

“It’s close,” she said.

“It’s a maybe. Let’s talk to the father.”

“We lose time.”

“A little.”

“What do we gain?”

“You never know.”

Leaving the Grand, Flynn thought that they were entering a new and far more dangerous world. How had the baddies ever taken out Chicago?

“You did warn them in that call?”

“Absolutely. Oltisis said he was aware of the problem and all over it.”

Flynn said nothing.

As they walked through the port cochere, past the line of parking valets, Vegas was gold with late sun, the neon just gaining definition against the blazing western sky. Looking toward the mountains to the west, blue now, he thought of the tiger on its strange journey, and what it had seen and what it knew.

They were alike, him and the tiger, two hunters. The only difference was in their choice of prey.

Diana sat beside him in the car, her hands folded in her lap, her face as pale as a cloud, her eyes hard and quick and scared. The eyes of the hunted.

“Where were you in prison?”

“Lesbian Island.”

“But you’re not one.”

“I was put there, okay? End of subject. I do not wish to talk about old lives that are dead.”

“After I lost my wife, I left Menard. Couldn’t stop going. I’d dip in here to hit a few casinos for money.”

“You counted good enough to get booked. That’s impressive.”

“I have a trick memory.” His mind was a warehouse full of file cabinets, full of details that he could never escape. “I recall every hand I ever played. And not just cards. I can tell you about the breeze on the night of August 14, 1997. I can tell you about the T-shirt Abby wore on June 11, 2006. You name it, I’ve got the details.”

“Details suit a detective.”

He turned onto Thirtieth. “I guess. At least I don’t need a GPS. Saves a little money.”

“What if you’ve never been there before?”

“I’ve seen a map.”

The father lived in a single-family home on Langdon, a short street that dead-ended into a condo complex. They pulled up in front and got out of the car.

“It’s empty,” Flynn said.

“You’re a mind reader, too? Do you have a cape? Some kind of leotard?”

“Yeah, I have a leotard. Asshole Patrol.”

She knocked on the door. As he expected, there was no answer.

She said, “You’re sure this is going to be productive, because now we’ve got to look for him.”

“If it wasn’t him at the Grand, then we have a picture of a member of this group, so yeah, it’s going to help.”

“He’s not here and we’ll never find him.”

“Let’s go back to the car.”

“And go where?”

“Nowhere. Wait.”

“Wait?”

“What a detective does, mostly.”

They said little, and that was how he preferred it. You chatted during a stakeout, you missed things. It was all about focus.

The sun went down, the sky to the west raged with the light of the strip. Bats darted past the car. The air turned cool, then cold. Diana rolled up her window. “I hate the cold,” she said. Her hand went to her neck. He knew that she was remembering the Hoffman stakeout.

It was nine twenty when a man came walking slowly down the street.

“It’s him and don’t get out of the car until he enters the house and closes the door. If he’s gonna run, you want him to start from a confined space.”

“Why would he run?”

“No idea.”

He was old and stooped and used up. Whatever he’d had, Vegas had taken it. Flynn watched him go up the walk, enter the house, and close the door.

“Okay, now.”

They got out of the car and followed him. Flynn put his hand on his badge wallet. The big star on his badge was a giveaway for Texas, but if he flashed it fast, maybe the guy wouldn’t notice. Diana’s credential would likely work better.

He knocked, then again, then the door was drawn open. Mr. Starnes stood there in a black undershirt.

“Yeah?”

Flynn did his badge. “May we come in?”

“You’re cops so it’s about Lizzie. I’m finished with her. Whatever she’s done, she’s done. Not my problem.”

“When did you last see Elizabeth?”

“Dunno. Three years? Five? Last time she showed up high. Sick of it. Sick of her.”

Flynn thanked him and returned to the car, Diana following.

“You hardly asked him a thing. I think he knew something.”

“He knew nothing and he’s not the man she met in the lobby.”

“Oh. Is that good?”

“It’s good. Now we have a face. A real face, of somebody we know is involved, maybe the perp himself.”

She followed him to the car and they headed back to the Grand.

“With a face,” he added, “we have a shot at finding a name.”

“How would we do that?”

“The old-fashioned way. We get the picture fixed up as clear as the computer genius can make it, then we hand it out to the staff. We show it to maids, bellmen, valets, anybody who might be able to help.”

“What if he doesn’t have an identity?”

“There’ll be something somewhere. There always is.”

“You know that? Despite how careful they are.”

“I know it.”

They returned to their small office. Willard came in. “I’m getting my hotel fixed. Nobody can figure out how that hatch was cut. You guys got anything for us?”

“Not our lookout,” Flynn said.

“But you’re government. You’ve got resources.”

“Report the kidnap to the FBI. Get them involved.”

“No, thank you. I’ve got the LVPD to worry about already.”

“Then don’t ask.”

“Don’t ask? Fine. I got a front office that’s about to wring my neck and your only fucking response is *don’t ask*?”

Flynn sighed. “If we told you, we’d have to kill you.”

“That bullshit line. Is that from a movie?”

“No doubt. Look, tell your front office that it’s classified and it’s all under control and they will never hear from us or the asshole with the tiger again. Or the tiger.”

“I hate the government so much I’m even afraid to vote Republican,” Willard said.

“Get out.”

He left, slamming the door behind him.

“You were nice.”

“Thank you.”

As Diana passed the image through a software photo processor in her laptop, it became clearer and clearer.

“It’s a disguise.”

“How can you be sure?”

“The hairline’s too perfect. The face is too tan. Likely, it’s makeup.”

“One that you can see in a picture, but that Elizabeth Starnes bought from three feet away? I don’t think so.”

“For whatever reason, she wanted to buy it.”

“Well, it doesn’t help us, Flynn.”

“There’s more information out there.”

Parking valets at places like the Grand sometimes remember things, so their first stop was the port cochere.

The encounter in the lobby had taken place just after noon. He’d already looked at a list of the Grand’s shift patterns, and the shift that was on right now would have seen anyone who left at that time.

He said to Diana, “I need you to fade while I do this. Unless these guys think I’m a private dick, they’re going to clam up, and PIs don’t roll with beautiful assistants.”

“And cops do?”

“Question marks do, and that’s what they don’t like.”

She stalked off down the port cochere. Traffic was light, so there were six

valets waiting. He wasted no time, he knew the drill.

“I need some help,” he said, holding up the picture.

Eyes moved toward it. Brains calculated. Flynn knew the question that these guys were asking themselves: could this asshole be stripped of a c-note with a lie? He headed that one off at the pass. “I know the man’s name, that’s not the problem. What we need to know is if he was in a Hertz car.”

Interest dropped a little. Not a divorce case, so less money was going to be involved. But then again, Hertz was a big outfit.

“We don’t like our cars getting boosted,” he continued, “so anything you know.” He rubbed two fingers together.

One of the guys took the picture and looked at it. “This wasn’t a rental car,” he said.

“You closed it out?”

“I worked a double shift today. I opened it, too.”

Flynn watched the other guys. No trace of a suppressed smile anywhere. “So, okay, what’ve you got?”

“Nightlights Limo both directions. Two passengers inbound, three outbound.”

Another of the valets sighed as if he was a tire losing air. The fool had just given up the money.

“That’s one of them in the picture,” the fool added. Then he fell silent.

Not a fool, then. Pretty good at what he did, actually. “Okay, so give.”

Silence. Not a gesture, not a sound. He’d been doing this job for a while. Discreetly, Flynn showed a hundred-dollar bill. The guy rubbed his cheek with three fingers. Was the Grand this strict about this kind of tipping? He hadn’t thought a casino would be. Live and learn.

Flynn played the game, rubbing his own cheek with two fingers.

“See ’em,” the guy said.

He took out two hundred-dollar bills. They changed hands.

“That’s the second passenger in the picture. Obviously not the lead guy.

The boss was wearing about five grand, one of those suits where the guy's name is woven into the pinstripe."

He fought down his excitement. "And the name was?"

"Morris. In the pinstripes."

"Morris looked how?"

"He looked rich is how."

"Give me a description. Hair, eye color, anything you remember."

"He stayed well back in the car. I'm guessing at five eleven, say. Full head of black hair. Suit and tie, unusual around here. You're looking at a film star, sort of, but old-fashioned. Am I helping you?"

"Names?"

"Morris in the pinstripe. And he might have said 'Jay.' Might have said that name."

"Like he was talking to somebody or about somebody?"

The valet shook his head.

"Anything more you can tell me?"

"Look, we're deep into this and obviously it has nothing to do with Hertz, so I'm gonna need another couple of memory sticks."

"Anybody else got anything, now's the time." He put his hand on his breast pocket where he kept his wallet.

Another of the men said, "I put number two back in the vehicle. One of our managers was with him."

"That we know."

It took a hundred-dollar bill to get him to go any further. "The guy who went and got her was well dressed."

"This was Jay?"

"I didn't hear that. He thanked me for opening the door, that was it."

"And your manager? How did she act?"

"Drunk. High. Couldn't tell. Not walking the walk, that was for sure."

That was all they knew, so Flynn walked out of the port cochere and back

into the hotel. Diana caught up with him in the corridor.

“I have good descriptions of two persons of interest. And a couple of names. Last name of Morris. And Jay. Somebody named Jay was with him.”

“Can you find them?”

He considered that. He had descriptions. He had the name of the limo company they'd used. “Yeah,” he said, “I can find them.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The least impressive vehicle Starlight Limos offered was a stretch Mercedes 300, and that's what Morris and company had used. It didn't take long to identify the driver, a part-timer called Ronald Brewster. The boss gave him up for twenty bucks. He lived in a weekly rate motel off the strip.

"On an approach like this, you need to follow procedures that I'm sure you aren't familiar with."

"What sort of procedures?"

"When a cop knocks on a door, anything can happen. So you stay behind me. Don't try to engage at all. Just stay out of it."

"I'm here to do my work, just like you are."

"Yeah, fine. This isn't your work. You're here because you're safer with me than alone. With me, you might live. Without me, you won't."

They walked around a swimming pool full of brown water that smelled of dead chemicals and drowned rats. A half-inflated Batman toy floated in it. The exotic orange mildew on the chaise lounges could have come from another planet.

It was dark now, and some of the rooms showed lights behind drawn curtains. Most did not.

He'd probably been in motels like this hundreds of times over the course of his career, sometimes to convince some guy not to push some girl through

a wall, sometimes to arrest him for doing it. The Tara in Menard was the same sort of place, where sleazebag lawyers took their nooners and people went to live out their final acts.

He ran his eyes along the roofline, along the balconies, looking for threats. It was possible that they'd finally broken through a significant barrier on the case. For the first time, they were actually investigating real, solid human beings. In all likelihood, they'd never been expected to get this far. So the strikeback, when it came, was going to be sudden and hard.

"Why are we standing here?"

"I'm looking for something."

"May I know what?"

"Danger."

That silenced her.

"You make a move in a place like this, everybody thinks you're coming for them, and they all generally have reason to think that. Knock on the wrong door, you're liable to get blown away for nothing."

"And the right door?"

"You're likely to get blown away for a reason. Let's go."

Brewster was downstairs, in room 103. The lights were on.

"Wouldn't it have been safer to call ahead?"

"Then the lights would be off, because Mr. Brewster would be gone." Here and there, Flynn saw a curtain part. Here and there, lights went out. There was a rasping click from two doors down. "Somebody in 121 racked a pistol," he said. "Be aware of this."

He knocked on Brewster's door.

Silence.

"Mr. Brewster, we're PIs. We need a little information."

Silence.

"I got a c-note for you, you open the door."

Nothing.

“Okay, I’ll push it under the door. You still don’t want to talk, you can keep it.” Then, to Diana, “Gimme a hundred-dollar bill.”

She handed him the cash. “I hope this is worth it,” she said.

He slid the bill under the door. “There’s more where this came from, buddy.”

“No,” she whispered.

“Five minutes, Mr. Brewster.”

The silence extended.

“Nobody there,” Flynn said.

“You’re sure?”

“The place isn’t breathing. Look, I’m gonna pop the lock, so stand away from the door. If there’s gonna be shooting, this is when.”

“But the man with the gun is two doors down.”

“Exactly.” He gave the door a slightly harder knock. “Come on, Mr. Brewster, there’s money out here, but it can’t wait forever.” With his free hand, he slid a credit card into the doorjamb. “They make these easy, so cops can pop them without damaging the premises.”

When Flynn opened the door, a cloud of smoke came out—crack smoke. “Not good,” he said. Then he saw the body. “We have a problem.”

The face was purple, the fists clenched against the throat.

“Is he ill?”

The man had been murdered, but this was no time to get into that. “Back out.”

“But—”

“Do it now!”

She remained rooted, staring. He took her by the shoulders and pulled her out. He pulled the door closed until the tongue of the lock clicked. There would be little evidence of their presence here, unless the next door decided to yap them to the locals. Hopefully it was some paranoid, not a cop-talker.

“Is he asleep?”

“Get to the car.”

They crossed the courtyard. Once they were in the car, he said to her, “The man was dead.”

“My God.”

“They made it look like he popped himself on crack. He didn’t.”

“You know that? How?”

“Trust me.”

Unless they were very lucky, the two of them were made and this time they were going all the way down.

“What does it mean?”

“They were cleaning up a loose end. We’re the other one.”

“Why not just blow us away?”

As he drove, he glanced at her. “I like to think it’s because we’ve been a little too slippery for them. But that guy hadn’t been dead for fifteen minutes, so they’re moving fast and we’re their top priority, you can be sure.

“What do we do next? Do we need to get out of here?”

“Ever been to Phoenix?”

“No.”

“You’re going. Right now. Phoenix, Salt Lake, wherever we can get to fast.”

He drove to shake a tail, but he doubted that it mattered. They’d have a box on the car, no question.

“What are you doing?”

“Driving fast. Hoping to live through the next few minutes.”

“Is somebody following us? What’s happening?”

He saw an underpass and headed for it. His chief concern was overhead surveillance.

“Why weren’t we in this much danger an hour ago?”

“I think that the tiger was meant to kill us. Me, at least. For whatever reason, it didn’t. Doing this guy was cleanup. He’d seen too much and heard

too much. Now they're probably frantic to get us. We've slipped through a few of their traps. No more. And we need to ditch this car right now. We're taking a bus."

"No buses!"

"A city bus like in Skokie. Couple of miles. So don't bark at me."

"I don't bark!"

"We're going to steal a car and find a small private airport and steal a plane."

"Come on."

"Or we're done. Understand, even though we can't see them, they are right on top of us and if we make a single wrong move we are dead. They haven't been baiting us or playing with us. They've been trying hard to get to us, but we've had a lot of luck. That has to run out. Maybe already has."

"We shouldn't have come to Vegas at all, then."

"We have a face. We have two names. It was worth it."

She fell silent, which was just as well, because he had to think.

He saw what he needed, a restaurant. "We're going in," he said. He repeated, "Stay close."

It was a seafood place, Christie's it was called, a low building looking like a mushroom in the middle of a sparsely occupied parking lot. A big neon trout danced in a pan on a tall sign near the building. They got out of the car into a faint scent of hot cooking oil. The sign buzzed and flickered.

"May we help you?" the hostess asked as they crossed the plant-filled entrance hall. It was late, close to closing time. Her plastic smile could no longer conceal the exhaustion in her eyes. How many jobs did she work, he wondered.

She guided them to a table amid a sea of tables. A waitress, Susan by her nametag, came and slid them menus.

"Go toward the ladies' room, the kitchen will be back there. Keep going through it, when you reach the parking lot, stay out of sight. I'll be there in a

couple of minutes in a vehicle.”

Without a word, she got up and headed to the back. In a moment, he followed her. As he exited into the lot, he saw her standing in shadows near the restaurant’s Dumpsters. He wondered how close this thing was actually cut at this point. If he kept her with him, would that slow him down enough to make capture certain? He couldn’t forget the way she’d frozen at Brewster’s place. On the other hand, she’d had the presence of mind and ability to follow him into the tunnel.

He decided that he didn’t care, he needed her. And it wasn’t just to work this case. He needed her for reasons he could not put into words. She had a right to live and be safe. He wanted to make sure that happened.

He spotted a Ford about ten years old. He went to it and quickly popped the door lock, then entered it and worked under the dashboard, feeling along the wiring harness for the right leads.

The car came to life and he drove around to Diana.

“This isn’t a good idea, Flynn, I have to tell you.”

“It’s the only idea. Everything else gets us killed.”

“If we get caught, we’re car thieves. Nobody has our backs. Remember that.”

“Use one of the throwaways to track down a small general aviation airport somewhere in the area, closed at night, big enough to have a few planes parked there.”

“Searchlight Airport,” she said immediately. “Seventy miles south off Ninety-Five.”

“You just happen to know this?”

“It’s in New Vegas. The videogame.”

“You play videogames?”

“I play with videogames. Crack them. Fool around with them.”

“There’ll be planes on this field? Flyable planes?”

“I have no idea, but I know it’s there.”

As they headed down Ninety-Three toward the turn onto Ninety-Five, he saw the Boulder City Municipal Airport. Plenty of planes, but it was also a busy facility, visibly active right now. The only way this was going to work was if they took a plane off an unmanned airport and stayed low and well outside of traffic patterns and radar coverage. Driving a hot car wasn't going to work, because they were too likely to get stopped. If the Menard City Police had onboard computers that automatically ran every plate they saw, which they did, the Nevada State Police certainly did, not to mention the LVPD. A stolen plane, on the other hand, was even better than a stolen boat. It wasn't expected. Homeland Security or not, there was little infrastructure to stop them. Plus, planes sat on general aviation fields for a long time. Until the pilot reported it, there wouldn't even be anything in police files. Add to that the fact that they could manage some serious distance, and it was the best option, no question.

Once they were on Ninety-Five traffic thinned out. Soon, the nearest vehicle was miles behind them. The only lights overhead were stars. Not that this meant much. If you had a silent helicopter and kept it below the radar ceiling, you could turn out the lights and the FAA would never know. But he had gained some confidence in his ability to lose them. Between Chicago and Vegas, he was now convinced that they'd been further behind them than he'd thought.

Still, there were loose ends. There always were, and one of them was bothering him a good deal.

“Let me ask you this, Diana. You're aware of bioactive tracking devices?”

“Sure. We put them in people like Rangers and pilots who're flying into hostile territory. They're injected under the skin. They're the size of a grain of sand.”

“Were you ever given one?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“But it could have been done without your knowledge?”

“During a physical or something, maybe.”

“How effective are they?”

“The signal has to be picked up by a satellite. You need the codes. If you know what you’re doing, you can basically pick one up from anywhere in the world.”

He did not like to hear that. “I don’t think an unknown cop like me would have one.”

“You’re hardly unknown. First off, you’re part of a classified database that contains every detail on record about every US citizen with an IQ over 190. You’ve been in that database since you took that IQ test in high school. And we watched you for three months before we brought you in.”

“What the hell is a database like that used for?”

“We watch for math skills and logic skills. The intelligence community eats geniuses like candy. We’re addicted to them.”

“So now I know why you got recruited. But why not me? I’m reasonable at math.”

“The Abby Room stopped any recruitment track you might have been on.”

“I wanted to rescue my wife.”

“It was evidence of obsessive behavior, the curse of the very bright.”

“I am obsessive. Damn obsessive. And cursed, of course, or I wouldn’t be here doing this, I’d be in Menard and I’d still have Abby and be living the life I was born to live.”

“If she hadn’t been kidnapped and you hadn’t gone off the deep end, you’d be working at NSA or someplace like that right now, and you’d be very happy and very well paid like I was. Like me and Steve were.” She fell silent.

“You don’t have a Steve Room, but you think it’d be a good idea.”

“I will have a Steve Room. I like the idea of the Abby Room. Comforting.”

He thought about that. “The hell with it,” he said, “sometimes I hate the

world. I hate life.”

“Join the damn club.”

He wished he had some way to definitely tell if either or both of them was trackable. “What frequencies do implants operate on?”

“Ours are FM. High on the band.”

“But addressable?”

“If you know what you’re looking for, sure. An ordinary scanner held close to the body will pick up the signal.”

“We’ll stop at a Radio Shack tomorrow.” He did not add, “if we live.” “Would we be able to remove them?”

“Size of a grain of sand, usually lodged in deep tissue. We’d have to dig them out.”

“Nice.”

When they reached Searchlight, there was not much to see. A single casino, like a ship lost in a black ocean. Worse, they had to drive up and down the highway four times before they finally found the tiny, weathered sign that marked the airport.

He turned onto what proved to be a dirt track.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“No, it’s good. As long as there’s a plane, we’re good.”

“An airworthy plane.”

“A flyable plane.”

He didn’t bother to tell her that it had been years since he’d flown anything. His license wasn’t even up to date. And he hated landings.

There were no planes visible, but there was a large hangar.

“I wish we had that thing we flew into Oregon. What was that?”

“Provided. No idea except that it worked.”

“It was a damn fine airplane.” He got out of the car and approached the old hangar. A lizard rushed out from under his feet as he shuffled through the sand.

“It’s locked up tight,” she said.

He didn’t bother to respond until he discovered that she was exactly right. The lock on the access door was a good one. Not only that, it was new.

“Drugs are probably moving through here,” he said as he examined the mechanism. “This is going to need brute force.” He returned to the car, opened the trunk, and took out the tire iron.

“What if it’s alarmed?”

“It’ll be a bell or siren so who’s going to hear it?”

“Maybe somebody lives nearby.”

“It’s your airport, Diana, you tell me.”

“Go to hell.”

As he worked the tire iron into the doorjamb, he said, “Sorry, that was uncalled for.”

“It was.”

He gave the tire iron a shove, hard, with his whole body.

He needed to be less harsh with her. She was out here for Steve the same way he was for Abby, and it was just as tough for her and it hurt just as much.

The door sprang back on its hinges. Warm air came out, sweet with the scent of aviation fuel.

“I was right,” he said.

“About?”

“It’s an active airport. There’s planes in here.” He stepped in. “Two of ’em.”

They both shone their flashlights into the cave-like blackness, revealing the fuselage of an elderly single-engine plane, with another standing in the deeper shadows.

“This one’s a Cessna 172,” he said. “No rear window, so it’s probably pushing fifty.”

“Fifty what?”

“Years old.”

“And the other one?”

“You don’t want to know. This is the one that might work. It can take us about seven hundred miles.”

“Is there any gas?”

“Oh, it’s ready to fly. They both are. These are drug planes. They move coke and hash, high-ticket stuff. Lightweight. They’ll have usable avionics. Though I wouldn’t try playing with an iPad while landing in a storm.”

He went over to the plane and shone his light in. “There’s a Garmin GPS in the dash, which is good.”

“It looks awfully run-down.”

“It’s junk. They stick a Garmin in these things and spend nothing else. These planes go in all the time, or get impounded by the DEA. So they’re expendable. So are the pilots. Let’s get the hangar door opened.”

He went over to the old wooden door and popped off the padlock with the tire iron. He handed the iron to her. “Keep this.”

“Sure. Why?”

“In case anybody shows up. Keep watch. Let me know if you see any lights. This is a drug stop, so there could be security. Silent alarm.” He got in the plane and switched on. The avionics lit up immediately and he began to not like this. He didn’t like things that were too easy. Always an angle somewhere, something not seen.

An old plane is even easier to wire than a car, but it has to be done from under the cowling. He didn’t need to, however. He found the key in the glove compartment.

The engine fired up immediately. This thing had been flown recently. It was probably scheduled to do so again, maybe even later tonight.

He called to her, “We’re in good shape, get in.”

She came over and clambered into the co-pilot’s seat. She strapped herself in.

He throttled up until the plane rolled out onto the sand apron. Typical of the region, it was an east-west runway, sited to catch the prevailing winds. Not much of one, though, basically the desert floor denuded of weeds and cactus. He headed the plane into the wind. Once he took off, he'd turn east.

There was a car on the highway, moving fast, maybe heading here. He ran up the engine. The plane began to move forward. There were no lights. He was just guesstimating the position of the runway.

As they began to roll faster, plant life thudded against the wheels. The whole airframe shook. The speed crawled up, but not fast.

“Is it going to take off?” Diana yelled over the squall of the engine.

“I have no idea!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The drag of the sand slowed them down, and they kept trundling along, hitting cacti and slamming into tumbleweeds until it seemed as if they were going to go all the way to the Pacific without leaving the ground.

“Make it take off!”

“I’m trying!”

He watched the speed creep up to fifty-five knots, then sixty, then hang there, remaining maddeningly fifteen knots under rotation speed.

Without warning, the ground was gone, and he realized how this airport worked, which was really, really badly.

“What’s happening?”

“We just taxied over a cliff.”

“Oh God!”

“I agree.”

The stall horn started bleating. His only choice was to drop the nose into absolute darkness and hope that the ground was farther away than he thought.

“What’s going on now?”

“We’re either gonna die or we aren’t.”

The airspeed indicator shot up to sixty-five and he felt the wings begin to bite. At seventy, the stall horn stopped. At seventy-five, he pulled the stick back, rotating nicely into a clear night sky.

“We’ve lived,” he shouted to her over the rising blare of the engine.

“Barely.”

“That would be true.”

He’d taken off into the west and climbed to two thousand feet while getting the feel of the airplane. It had been a long time and he was more than unsure of himself. Worried that he might become disoriented, he kept his eyes on the instruments, not even glancing out the windshield. At least, at this hour and in this place, his chances of colliding with another airplane were too small to calculate.

He kept climbing, heading west. Eastward there were mountains, and he wanted plenty of altitude before he approached them.

At five thousand feet, he commenced a slow turn. Any higher, and he risked running into a monitored airway. He didn’t have any idea of what the established flight paths might be, or where they were. He didn’t want to blunder into approaches to larger airports, maybe at Bullhead City or Lake Havasu City.

“Where are we? Why do we keep turning?”

“We’re heading into mountains. I’m gaining altitude.”

“Dear God.”

“You’re a worse flyer than me.”

He was actually relaxing a little, at least for the moment. Unless their pursuers were able to track them personally, this was going to prove a decisive blow to them. It wasn’t as good as getting behind them, but at least when he landed this airplane, he would know that they had lost him.

The Garmin showed the highest peaks below them at thirty-five hundred feet, so they were safe here, and safe, also, from the DEA, the Border Patrol, and Homeland Security. DEA was interested in night flights by small aircraft, but their primary concerns were movement northward from the Mexican border and low-altitude flight.

“Do we know if we’re dealing with any exotic technology?”

“We know so little, Flynn. Almost nothing. For example, why did they send only one cop, and what are his capabilities? His limitations?”

“One limitation we know.”

“What?”

“He got his ass killed.”

She turned to the window. “I’ve thought that he might be the only good guy. Their Dalai Lama or whatever. And the rest of them are all ... Christ, I don’t even want to think about it.”

He hoped that she wasn’t going to add a morale problem to her difficulties with field skills. Low morale was as lethal as a gun.

The tiny cabin shuddered, the engine howled, blue flames glowed in the exhausts. He kept them at cruise, a steady hundred and forty miles an hour. Two hours out, they were north of Seligman, Arizona, and he was not liking the feel of the air. To maintain his heading, he was having to crab the plane northward more and more. The wind was picking up. Worse, there was continuous lightning on the northern horizon, and it was getting more distinct.

The plane bucked like a frightened horse, the creaking of the airframe audible even above the engine and wind noise.

Diana was now slumped forward. Flynn knew what her problem was, but he didn’t see any airsickness bags.

“If you can, feel in the seat pocket behind you. There might be a bag back there.”

She did it and found one, and none too soon. In seconds, she was heaving into it. He opened the vents and cold air poured in, a mix of the scents of exhaust and desert night.

The heavy weather was bearing down on them fast, but he couldn’t turn south, not and expect to thread through the higher mountains around Flagstaff. He needed to stay between Flagstaff and the Grand Canyon, basically, or he was going to crash this airplane.

“There’s a light,” she said. “Below us.”

“What kind of a light? Is it moving?”

“Steady. Not a strobe. Moving, yes. Getting bigger. I think it’s coming up.”

He doused his running lights, then dimmed the cockpit as deeply as he dared. At a minimum, he needed his artificial horizon and his compass.

“Where is it now?”

“Gone. It went out.”

“Went out? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That it is *gone*, as in disappeared. Jesus Christ, why do I have to spell everything out?”

He pushed back a flare of anger. They were getting on each other’s nerves. “Let’s not fight,” he said.

“This is a goddamn nightmare!”

He flew on. There was nothing else to do.

When the light didn’t reappear and nothing else happened, he restored his instrument lighting but left the running lights off. They’d been in the air now for two hours, and he had another three hours of fuel left. Like so many of these drug wagons, this plane had been modified to fit larger tanks.

“We can make El Paso,” he said. “We’ll land at Sunrise Airport. I’ve flown in there.”

“We can’t rent a car without identifying ourselves.”

“That’s not the plan.”

“I don’t want to steal another one. It’s too risky.”

“That’s not the plan, either.”

“So we buy?”

“We can’t buy.”

“Then what? I don’t get it.”

He said nothing.

The storm now behind them, they flew into a gradually spreading dawn,

and he was relieved to finally see the horizon. As the plane began to feel like a more solid platform in the sky, the sense of disorientation that had dogged him from the moment he'd taken off faded.

The light that Diana had seen coming up was also gone. What it might have been they would never know. The sky is a big place.

The landing at Sunrise was surprisingly easy. He squawked their approach and got immediate clearance. They hit the runway with a single bounce, then Flynn throttled back.

"That worked well," Diana said. She sounded ready to kiss the ground.

"The Cessna is a forgiving airplane."

He pulled out one of the disposable cell phones and dialed a number.

"Hey, Miguel." He shifted into Spanish. Diana's face immediately reflected the predictable suspicion. "*Compadre*, I'm at Sunrise and I've got an airplane somebody on the West Coast probably wants back. It's on the apron in front of the old Bellanca hangar. The bogus on it is NT273, it's a Skyhawk."

"What're you up to? I thought you quit the cops."

"I did. Private enterprise now."

"Anything there for me?"

"An airplane."

Diana interrupted. "What are you saying? What's going on?"

He closed the phone, pulled out the battery and the chip, and crushed it between his hands. "A friend's going to pick us up," he said.

"That's off the reservation, damnit. *Way* off. And you know it."

"Nothing's off the reservation anymore. He will pick us up, he will take care of the plane, he will get us where we need to go."

"You can't have involved the El Paso police."

"No police."

"Then—oh, Christ, not a gangbanger?"

"He's honest. A good guy."

“You’ve tangled us up with the drug trade. Flynn, this is not a direction for us.” She opened her door. “Come on, we need to get out of here.”

He climbed out, also. They needed to get away from the plane anyway. The way it had been hidden, it could well be on some DEA list.

“Miguel and I went to grade school together. When we were six, he beat me to a pulp. Put me in the hospital. Last year, he did ten years on a case I worked. We’re good friends.”

“He did ten years last year?”

“He blew his way out.”

“Good Christ!”

“Not with explosives.”

“But he’s an escaped convict. You can’t get an escaped convict involved in this.”

They walked into the lobby. Flynn eyed the sandwich machine. He was definitely hungry.

“He got off for good behavior.”

“Who shaves nine years off a ten-year sentence for good behavior?”

“It was very good behavior. I thought you’d be comfortable with an ex-con.”

“Don’t throw that in my face, okay? I wasn’t guilty.”

“Neither was Miguel.” He put some money in the machine and got a ham and cheese sandwich. “Avoid the pimento,” he said.

“No food,” she muttered. “Later.”

“That’s right. Sorry.”

Miguel had gained so much weight that the only reason Flynn recognized him when he finally ambled in was that there was nobody else coming through the doors this early in the morning.

“Hey, buddy.”

“Thanks for the plane, man. That’s gonna be some useful hardware.”

“No problem. You better get a paint job on it, though, I think it’s probably

on the list. Not to mention its former owner.”

“You movin’ stuff? You on the sweet side of the law at last?”

“I’m still honest.”

“The plane tagged?”

“Don’t know. Could be.”

“We’ll find anything like that.”

“I need clean transportation. Car or truck.”

“I got a Range Rover, good VIN, good plates, not a problem.”

“Done, let’s go get it. We’re on a schedule.”

He gave Diana a long look. “Man, I’d like to see her work a pole.”

“You would.”

“The truck’s gonna set you back. Not much.”

“Yeah, it’s gonna set me back one airplane.”

“You come in here with a hot airplane and expect a clean truck in return?

Man, that ain’t right.”

“Neither is dealing in stolen goods.”

“You aren’t a cop anymore. You tell me that, it’s gonna stand up in court. I know the law.”

“Eddie is still a cop, and Eddie still doesn’t care for your ass.”

The negotiation was starting to take too long, but Flynn could not betray his urgency. He just wished he believed that he could get away from their opponent, but he did not believe that. Maybe they were out of his gunsights right now, but he doubted that it would last.

Finally, Miguel said, “The plane is a good trade.”

They headed for his house, where the Rover waited. Diana was silent, furious at Flynn for letting an outsider so close.

Flynn wondered how long it would be before the perp and his friends showed up in Miguel’s life, and extracted from him every tiny bit of information he possessed.

“Where you goin’? Or should I ask?”

“See Mac.”

“Mac? Ain’t nobody shot him yet?”

“Mac dances too fast.”

“Where’s he keepin’ himself these days?”

Flynn laughed. “That I’m not gonna tell you. The plane is worth four times the truck. That’s enough for one day.”

“I wouldn’t sell Mac. Mac’s my friend.”

“Everybody’s your friend, Miguel. That’s why you have no friends.”

Twenty minutes later, they were heading out of El Paso in the Rover. Across the Rio Grande stood the dirty hills of Juarez, a most dangerous city, but bright in the light of dawn.

Flynn thought it would be nice to be in Juarez right now, hiding in a small hotel somewhere, deep in the city’s maze of streets.

Even there, though, it would just be a question of time, wouldn’t it? From now on, it would always just be a question of time.

“Who’s Mac?” Diana asked.

“MacAdoo Terrell. The worst person I know and one of my oldest friends. Maybe the worst person in Texas, which is saying a fair amount.”

“MacAdoo Terrell and Errol Carroll?”

“Mac and Flynn. Our parents died before we were old enough to kill them. At least Eddie got a decent name. He was the third member of our gang.”

“And why are we going to see the worst person in Texas?”

“Because we need a friend.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Where the Rover had come from, Flynn hoped he would never know. It had the feel of death about it. Why he knew that, he couldn't really say, but he knew it. It was his cop sense, he supposed, which had been in overdrive for a while now.

They were a few miles west of the little town of Iraan, pronounced Eerie-Ann in West Texan.

"We'll turn north on Three Forty-Nine," Flynn said. "Mac's got fifteen thousand acres of hell and good hunting up there."

"What's so bad about this guy?"

"What isn't? He won't show himself right away, incidentally. When he does, it'll be a near thing for me. He's got any number of reasons to want me dead, and we don't have enough money on us to do more than get him to think about changing his mind."

"A lot of people don't like you, Flynn. Casinos. Your boss."

"Eddie Parker? We grew up together."

"Well, he seemed pretty sour on you. Why does this guy hate you?"

"First off, Eddie has been pretty sour since we were about five. Second, I put Mac's brother on death row."

"And he can't blow his way out?"

"Not so far."

“It strikes me as foolish to expose ourselves to more danger than we’re already in.”

He turned onto Mac’s road. It went back three miles, and it rode like it hadn’t been spread with gravel in a good long while.

“Shouldn’t we get our guns ready? Mine’s in my backpack.”

“I know where your gun is.” He took his out of its shoulder holster and laid it carefully in a cup holder. “They won’t do us any good.”

“I just do not see why we’d come to some criminal lair or hideout or whatever it is.”

Flynn saw Mac’s shack huddled down in its draw, a ramshackle mess but topped by a very large, very clean American flag.

“See that? That’s why.”

She shook her head. “A crook wrapped in a flag is still a crook.”

He knew that Mac would already have the truck in the sights of one of his superb rifles.

“There are gonna be dogs,” he said. “Don’t get out until Mac calls them off. They’ll tear you to pieces.” He pulled a little closer to the shack and the dogs immediately swarmed out from under it. They were Mac’s own special breed, Weimaraner–Pit Bull mixes. Loyal, fast, lethal. If a bullet was going to stop one—and that was the only thing that could—then it was going to have to be well placed. Their wide heads, huge jaws, and yellow-gold Weimaraner eyes made them look the part of the hell-hounds that they were.

As soon as the truck stopped, they swarmed onto the hood and began clawing at the windshield and leaping against the doors and windows.

“My God, Flynn!”

“Just stay cool. They can’t get in.”

“How do you know that?”

“Armor glass. It’ll take two or three blasts from a ten-gauge shotgun to knock out one of these windows. Dog teeth can’t do it.”

Mac was on the porch, standing back in the shadows, so still he was hard

to see. He had the same ability to remain motionless that his brother did, and his father had in his time.

Slowly, his cupped fist went up to his lips. In it, Flynn could see something silver. “He’s using his dog whistle.”

An instant later, the dogs scurried back under the porch. Flynn rolled down his window.

“Hey, Mac.”

Mac walked toward the truck. “You got a shit of a lotta nerve comin’ out here, Carroll.”

“I need some help.”

“Oh, well, good. Allow me to accommodate you. Who’s my rape victim?” He leaned into the window and said to Diana, “After I blow this shitbag’s head off, we’re gonna party.”

“I didn’t drop the big one on Weezy,” Flynn said. “The jury did that.”

“You put him in the same courtroom with them. Chained to the fucking wall.”

“Your brother is obstreperous.”

“You want a cup of coffee, come on in.”

As they entered the shack, which was all gray boards, split shingles, and tin on the outside, a luxurious bachelor pad unfolded. The ample living room was paneled with exotic woods, a collection of stag, lion, rhino, and elk heads decorated the walls, and a brilliant black and yellow tiger skin lay before the big stone fireplace.

“Well, asshole, you came at the right time,” Mac said. “Cissy!”

Flynn held in his shock as Cissy Greene, Governor Greene’s oldest daughter, came sliding out of the kitchen. Cissy was not underage, not quite, and she was as ripe as a woman ever can get, her curves flrid, her face glowing, her lips beckoning moistly. How in the world this very bad man had hooked up with her he could hardly imagine, but here she was, big as life and a lot prettier than her pictures.

“Cissy, this here is Asshole Flynn and his boyfriend. What’s your name, son?”

It was cruel and it wasn’t true, but Diana went red. “I’m actually a woman,” she muttered. “My name is Diana.”

“Oh, the goddess Diana herself, my goodness, I am honored! No wonder you appear so ferocious. Meet Actaeon up there.” He gestured toward the magnificent stag head.

“I thought I had him torn apart by his own dogs,” Diana snarled.

“Hell no! He lived through that and came to Texas. Where else? I got that sucker from one mile. *One mile*, girl! Not my best shot, but decent.” He smiled. “The reason you-all are lucky is that Cissy here is a terrific coffeemaker. Just drop the grounds in her mouth, pour in boiling water and make her gargle. Personally, I can pack a bullet a lot better than I can make a cup of java.”

He gestured at them to sit, and Flynn and Diana dropped down onto the magnificently soft leather couch. It was light tan, and Flynn thought better of asking him what it was made of. The Nazis had done lampshades and gloves. Mexican drug lords were way past that.

“Is that a tattoo,” Diana asked, fingering a faint shadow in the surface of one of the couch pillows.

“Guy was a bandito. Low-grad South Texas bangers. Assholes.”

Diana jumped to her feet.

Mac directed a frank gaze at her. Flynn could see that he was taking in her beauty. “If I saw you naked, would you have me torn apart by my own dogs?”

“I’d whip your sorry ass myself.”

“Oh! Upon my word, Flynn my love, I see the attraction now. Coffeemaker can’t keep me in line, but I’ll bet goddess here keeps your ass good and red.”

“Mac, we’re not on a social visit. You’re the best gun I’ve ever known,

and the only person I know who's hunted tiger. I have a job for you."

"And if I do it, you'll get Weezy a reprieve?"

"No can do. You'll get a hell of a tiger skin, though. Better than this scrawny tourist rug."

"'No can do?' You worthless sack a shit. Sometimes I really wonder why I bother. I'm too damn affable, that's my problem. So I'm tellin' you right back, 'no can do.' But I am curious. Since we aren't in India or Siberia, what tiger?"

"We'll get to that."

"Not today we won't. 'Cause you just decided to get the fuck out of my house."

"Let me ask you this. Are you a patriot?"

"Shit, I knew that was gonna come up! Goddamnit, every cop who comes out here pulls that same card out of his hip pocket. Dubya has hunted this sliver of mine, my friend. A saint who got his ass handed to him by the negro."

"This will be the most patriotic thing you have ever done, Mac. Because what is at stake here is America. Our land and our people as we are now. So, if that matters to you, now is the time to face the fact that Weezy killed all those nuns because he's a total wacko and is best left to his fate."

"Is that it?"

"That's it. That's my play. Except I know why you've latched onto Cissy Greene. Obviously."

"Your boy has got fine card moves," he said to Diana. "He won a lotta money out here at poker, before civilization set in. Jesus God, you put Mexicans in the sheriff's office and whaddya get. Screwed is what!" He gave Flynn a long, sad look. Flynn knew that he was thinking about his poker game. When a wealthy rube sat down at his hallowed table, he soon discovered that he couldn't get up until he lost. Then he was kicked on the ass and told to go home.

“You want some Blue Label?” he continued. “I got a coupla cases I could let you have. Finest scotch in the world.”

“Why offer me a bribe now?”

“Not a bribe. Sealin’ a deal. I feel good, ’cause I’m gonna do good. Although savin’ America and shootin’ a tiger surely can’t be played outa the same deck of cards.”

“The tiger’s just a first step. We have to get past it to get to what I really want.”

“Okay, mister police, so your idea is I start by killin’ an endangered species. Then what? Weezy leave some nuns behind?”

“You did it, didn’t you? Weezy’s taking a fall for you.”

The convent had been on land wanted by Reich Development. The Sisters of Mercy would not sell, and it was soon being rumored that Reich had put a bounty on them. At the time, Eddie had thought Manny the Torch was going to be coming over from Dallas, so that was who the department was watching for. Then Weezy had showed up and blown them all to kingdom come. He’d imploded the building, and very professionally.

Because he’d come across as a nut case, the suspicion that it was a contract killing had never been followed up. In the State of Texas, though, nobody could be crazy enough not to get the needle for detonating nuns.

As always with Mac, the waters ran deeper than they appeared. To understand him, you had to read the eddies and whirlpools.

His face, previously throwing off smiles like confetti, had grown careful, the lines around the eyes tightening. His physical stillness had also returned, and Flynn knew that this could still go south real fast. Way south. He thought about his gun out in the car. He imagined Diana trapped under this monster while Cissy squealed and hit at him with her curling iron.

“You’re a clever man, Flynn Carroll, I’ll give you that. Now what more do I have to do?”

So he was going to let it pass—for the while, anyway. “We’re gonna have

to go on the hunt of a lifetime, you and me. At some point, we will be tracking the most incredible tiger on the planet. Not a half-starved tourist tiger concerned only about its mange. Eighteen feet of pure Siberian fury, and as smart as we are. At least.”

Mac’s mouth had dropped open. His eyes went kind of glazed. He said, “If you weren’t the straightest shooting cop in Texas, I’d tell you to your face that you’d lost your mind.”

“The tiger is only the front door. Behind that door is hell, Mac. The real thing. Might as well be.”

“We’re gonna be tying a knot in the devil’s tail?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“So what’s our next step, Detective Carroll?”

“Me and Diana, we’re in danger.”

“I don’t like this, Mackie!” Cissy shrilled.

“Send her home, Mac, she doesn’t need to be here.”

“She can’t go home. Her daddy got caught in bed with the damn secretary of state again and the missus has cleared out of the Governor’s Mansion.”

The secretary of state was Charles Forte. A guy. “Well,” Flynn said, “boys will be boys. But at some point, we will have to go places where Cissy cannot follow.”

“She shoots pretty good.”

“I can outshoot you,” she said, her baby fat wobbling prettily.

Flynn would get back to that later. “We need to use your computers now, Mac.”

“My computers are off limits to the po-lice.”

“They’re also unhackable. The most anonymous damn computers I’ve ever encountered. Everything proof.”

“This I gotta see,” Diana muttered.

“You’re not gonna see much, son.”

“Quit calling me that!”

“I can let you open a browser. Nothing else.”

Flynn knew that Mac’s computers were vitally important to a big part of his business. The Texas Rangers had discovered that they were connected to a server farm he owned in Thailand, and were probably responsible for sending out billions of spam emails a day. His hackers in the Philippines used the system to do a brisk trade in government secrets, stealing from one country to sell to another. But never America, not Mac’s beloved America. Or probably not.

His favorite scam, though, was to wait until a big shipment of drugs was moving up through the region, then tip off the DEA for a reward. His going rate was ten percent of street value. It was a perfectly legal business, but risky—which was where the guns came in. As often as not, the DEA guys found all the mules and guards involved with the shipment dead, shot from a distance with a high-powered rifle.

“This is interesting,” Diana said, calling to Flynn from the computer room. She had begun to work, with Mac hanging over her like a morbidly fascinated vulture.

Flynn went in. “Where’s Cissy got to?” He didn’t like these people where he couldn’t see them.

“Coffeemaker’s making coffee,” Diana said.

“I have no secrets from my lover,” Mac said.

“Yeah, you do. Among them that she’s a hostage.”

“She can walk outa here anytime she wants.”

“She’s gonna walk into Iraan? Thirty miles? Cissy’s in your clutches so you can get a pardon for Weezy, am I right? Does she know she’s a hostage?”

“Maybe, but she doesn’t care. In fact, she starts coming as soon as the big bad evildoer just brushes past the subject of sex. She’s your classic con hag, rich, bored, and hot as oatmeal. There was a bunch of Tri-Delts out here from UT trying to outhunt their boyfriends. I cut her outa the herd.”

“There’s a Jay Elder on the board of directors of the Texas Animal Rescue League,” Diana said.

“Could be a hit. This is the place near Austin?”

She was silent, working. “Jay Elder is an attorney, in practice twenty-three years. He’s got property around Lake Travis west of Austin. He’s also got a Louis C. Morris on his client list.” She tapped a few more keys. “Interesting.”

“A Louis Charleton Morris died thirty-seven years ago. An infant. So we know that our guy is wearing an alias, and he’s fortyish. Fits the picture.”

“Man, you are good with those suckers,” Mac said, “whatever the hell you’re doing.”

“I am good, son,” Diana replied. She clicked a couple more keys, and paper came out of the printer. “Jay Elder, Louis Morris, the animal group, and a satellite view of the facility.”

“I’d pay for your services,” Mac said. “A lot.”

“They’d cost more than you have. Whatever you have.” She turned off the laptop, then turned it over and examined the base. In a moment, she had a black oblong object in her hand. She swung it high overhead and smashed it to bits on the desk. Gouges of mahogany flew.

“Hey hey HEY, what the hell? What the hell did you just do?”

“Nonsecured computer used in a classified operation. Hard disk has to be destroyed. Legal thing, son. Sorry.”

“Damn you!” He came at her.

Flynn saw that the rage in his eyes was damn serious, and he stepped between them. “Hold off! Just hold off!”

Mac stopped, but that was going to last maybe five seconds.

“Jesus, Diana!” Flynn said.

“He’s got a backup system.”

“It doesn’t fucking work!” he shouted.

“I fixed it. All of your stuff is on it, none of mine. If I’d left traces, you’d draw federal interest. You don’t want that.”

“Anybody ever gets me, it ain’t gonna be a fed.”

“It’d be a drone strike.” She took out her credential. “Ever seen one of these?”

Mac looked at it. Now he shifted his eyes back to Flynn. “What kinda crowd are you running with, buddy?”

“It’s a long story. Suffice to say, if you help us, there will be credit earned. Significant credit.”

“Flynn, if it don’t involve saving Weezy’s life, it don’t mean a thing to me. That’s my little brother, man!”

“Don’t keep hitting me with that, you’ve got the governor’s daughter strapped into your guillotine and we both know why. Weezy will not take the needle.”

“As long as she stays by my side. But since when does a twenty-year-old do anything for more than a couple of long farts? Soon’s I run outa horse, she’s gone.”

“Mac, don’t reveal a crime to me.”

Mac spread his hands. “So, okay, let’s go tiger hunting.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

They'd taken a suite at the Four Seasons in Austin on Mac's dime. They were using one of his laptops and any calls were made over one of his cell phones. His security was the best.

Mac and Cissy had ordered up champagne and caviar, fried wontons, Snickers bars, the list was long. She was pleading to invite friends, and Flynn thought it wise to let that happen. With them would come grass and crack and X and coke, and for Cissy a useful oblivion. In anticipation of the fact that they would be separated, a friend of Mac's, Giorgio Budd, had appeared.

Cissy and Giorgio bickered in the living room. He was a masseur, but she didn't want a massage. Flynn could hear them from the bedroom he and Diana had made into an office.

"So come on," Giorgio wheedled. "I can do it through your clothes, it's nice. Daddy no see."

"Yeah, but daddy touch."

"No, no, no boobies, baby. Just let daddy do his thing."

She yelled, "You're too icky, okay! It'd be like being touched by the Pillsbury Dough Boy, get it? You need to meet my dad. He'd love you."

"He's a stinkin' Republican. I don't massage no stinkin' Republican."

"You could bite off his dick. You'll get the chance."

Mac sat in the window of the bedroom they'd made into an office.

Flynn said to him, "That's going well."

"If she bolts, Giorgio has orders to tie her up and stick her in a closet."

"Don't tell me these things, damnit!"

Mac's window overlooked the Colorado River and a sunny view of South Austin beyond. "I got a bad feeling," he said. "I had a good feeling. Now I got a bad one."

"It's gonna be a piece of cake."

"No, Flynn, it isn't."

Mac had good instincts, there was no question about that. Excellent. Flynn had not told him of the casualties so far, and he wondered why not. He should warn the guy, obviously. And yet he didn't.

He liked Mac, who was, as he claimed, an affable man. But he was also an extraordinary engine of human suffering. That's what crime is—the infliction of human suffering for financial or other gain. God only knew how many lives Mac's scams ruined in a week, not to mention his more murderous activities. Of course the DEA and the Rangers let the shooting of drug mules and cartel gunmen happen. Scumbags killing scumbags, nice and convenient.

"I've got the whole area mapped out," Diana said, "from the Animal Rescue to Jay Elder's ranch compound near Lake Travis. There's a house, a barn, a couple of outbuildings, a dog run and kennel. Active."

"What took you so long?" Mac asked. "You coulda gotten that off Google Earth an hour ago. We need to get out there, get a feel for the land."

"Mapped to three feet, in real time," she continued. "Google Earth doesn't do that."

"You guys can recognize faces from space, can't you? Read license plates?"

"Very yesterday, but yes."

"What can you do now? Read minds?"

"Classified."

"Cool word, son. Must make you feel important as hell."

It was already pushing seven, and the sun was starting to set.

“There’s something strange,” Diana said abruptly.

On the screen of the laptop she was using was a wilderness area. Right in the middle of it was what appeared to be a small village, made of logs and expertly camouflaged.

“It’s in the middle of a wildlife preserve. Strange place for a village.”

“Any signs of life?”

“I can’t be sure. There are paths, obviously.”

“What the hell does this have to do with the price of bread?” Mac asked.

Diana said, “It’s two miles from Jay Elder’s ranch house. And look at the buildings—there’s been an effort to camouflage them. Quite skillful. You wouldn’t see this for what it was on a Google satellite map. And as for Google Earth, their trucks stick to roads.”

Mac peered at it. “Boy, I can even see individual branches in that camouflage. From way up there.”

“Mac, we can determine your rate of hair loss by watching your bald spot. Face it, if you weren’t useful, the feds would’ve crushed you like a bug a long time ago.”

“You’d be surprised at how good I am.”

“They’re better. Now, let me see. I can switch to another lens—here we go.”

The image changed to infrared. Nobody had to ask about the change. Both Flynn and Mac knew infrared very well.

“Hm,” Diana said. “No obvious heat signatures. Flock of deer, eleven does and a buck, about half a mile away. That glowing dot is probably a buzzard looking for supper. Nothing dead, though, not big enough to spot, anyway.”

“Corpses are cold,” Mac said.

“Rot is hot, son. This system is sensitive enough to pick up the heat of decay.”

Flynn said, “Maybe it’s an old hippie place. Commune. Austin was a

major stop on the Hippie Highway.”

“Old paths would be more vague. These are sharply drawn. People use this, but I don’t think they’re there now. And they don’t have pets. No sign of any dogs or cats.”

“You wouldn’t happen to be able to spot a tiger with that thing, would you?” Mac asked.

“I would but I haven’t.”

“Shit, then, what am I supposed to hunt?”

“You don’t understand,” Flynn said. “The tiger isn’t where it’s supposed to be, penned at the Animal Rescue League. It’s the only Siberian tiger presently missing in the United States. It’s called Snow Mountain, it’s seven years old and it has had a number of legitimate exhibitor owners, specifically two zoos and a circus. Apparently it was sold along because it ate a hell of a lot. It’s about forty percent larger than what’s normal for the breed. It was collected by the Texas Fish and Wildlife from an abusive situation, so the record says. Of course, records lie.”

“And it’s here in Texas—specifically near Lake Travis? Or not?”

Diana said, “Jay Elders is here because he was at his law firm yesterday. But he’s just back, interestingly enough, from Vegas.”

“How do you find things like that out?”

“Classified, son.”

“Quit that, okay? I’m sorry I insulted you. Son.”

“You are sorry, son, I agree there. Now, take a look at the Elders place. Tell me what you think.” She shifted to another image, this one of a ranch house in a small compound of buildings. There were three trucks parked near the house, two of them Cadillac Escalades, and the third a van with blackened windows. The van’s side door was open, and it was possible—just—to see a bit of the interior.

“There aren’t any rear seats,” Flynn said.

“Nope, and look closely.” She blew the image up to a blur. “Isn’t that a

barrier behind the front seats, like the kind you see in taxis? See that white there, across the top—you can just see the dashboard beyond it, so that's clear. But below, it's a featureless blackness. If you were transporting a large animal, you might use a van like that, especially if it had a touchy disposition."

"He's touchy all right," Flynn said. But then he remembered the expression on the cat's face in the storm drain, almost—was it kindness? A sort of kindness? "Touchy and complicated."

"I have two images here. The van pulled up. Then this one, the van with the rear door opened. About seventy seconds between them. I'm hoping we can find some residual heat in the second image."

Mac said, "Do the DEA boys have access to stuff like this?"

"Classified."

"I think I might retire," Mac said.

"Don't do that, Mac," Flynn said, "you'll kill my dream."

"Which is?"

"Collar of a lifetime."

"Fuck you, Flynn."

"Double back."

They both chuckled, remembering their young days in the streets of Menard, getting up to no good together. "Fuck you" and "double back" was essential dialogue of their youth.

When they were ten, they'd been like three brothers, him and Mac and Eddie.

"Too long, Buddy," he said.

From the living room came a peal of female laughter. "She's discovered that Giorgio's a eunuch," Mac commented.

"Oh, come on," Diana said. "There are no eunuchs."

"He was cut by a sultan so he could be trusted to massage the ladies of the harem."

“Holy shit, who would consent to that?”

“I don’t think that ‘no’ was an available answer. He made some money, though.” Cissy laughed again, wonder in her voice. “When he can’t get what he wants, which is to touch their beautiful bodies, he does show and tell. Works the pity angle. She’ll be on his table shortly.”

“Guys, this has processed up nicely.”

Flynn saw the same image on the screen, except this time there were a few extra blurs. “What are we looking at here?”

She pointed to a ghostly smear. “That’s a man. The computer’s telling me he’s six two and fairly heavy. Likely a real bruiser. Now, here’s the interesting one. Right there by the open door. The computer doesn’t know what that is, but it’s definitely a valid infrared signature. A minute or so before this photo was taken, something warm moved through that space.”

“They just let a damn tiger out to roam the effing night?” Mac asked.

“Looks like it,” Diana said.

“It can’t be smart enough to risk that. What if it eats a kid?”

“It’ll go out and take a deer, be my guess. Stay out of sight, come home at dawn.”

“Damn hard to credit.”

“Mac, this hunt is gonna be the challenge of your life.”

Mac smiled, just a little, deep in his face. “You know, I think I’m gonna take my nice warm girl into the master and get myself prepped.”

“Don’t drink anything more. Don’t get fatigued.”

“First off, I’ve only had three bottles of that flat-assed Dom Perignon they sent up. Plus sex before a hunt helps my concentration.” He went off into the living room. “Girl! Get offa that thing, you’re gonna get your ass laid right now.” A moment’s silence, then, “Come on, little man, you can quarterback.”

Chrissy, Mac, and Giorgio went into the bedroom, and soon what they used to call “sounds of revelry” in Flynn’s frat house at UT were heard. He wished he had Mac’s courage to still live as a boy, but he could never be as

careless with lives—his own and others—as Mac was.

“Would you please go close that door?” Diana asked him.

Fine by him. Envyng Mac’s kind of freedom wasn’t healthy.

“I’ve picked up a couple more traces,” Diana said when he came back. “Here—” She pointed to what looked to Flynn like a slight white discoloration in the image. “And again.” The next discoloration was even fainter. “It was moving south-southeast.” She looked up from her work. “Flynn, I think the damn thing is on patrol around that house.”

“Ideal for Mac. If it’s following a set pattern, he’ll figure that out. The man could track a ghost in a snowstorm.”

“That’s going to work both ways.”

“There’ll be two of us, and neither one’s going to do what Snow Mountain expects, which is to assume he’s dumb.” He paused. “Diana, do you know anything about combining human and animal genes? Would that be the reason the damn thing is so smart?”

“You have to assume so. Or maybe it’s a mix of ours, tiger, and who knows what? Think about it. If they could be from anywhere, they could *bring* anything.”

“I’m wanting to give Mac some idea of what to expect. He understands that this is a real smart tiger, but how smart he doesn’t understand.”

“If he gets eaten, I have to tell you, I don’t personally have a problem with that. But that’s just me, of course.”

“Friend of my youth. Plus, I see a future for him on our new team.”

“How could he possibly survive a security check?”

Flynn said nothing.

The sun was well down now, the lights of the city glowing, the river a black ribbon. Flynn could even see a few stars, but that wouldn’t last. The moon was rising in the east, full and fat, a big Texas moon.

He began methodically assembling his equipment, his own personal night-vision lenses, his new pistol—one of Mac’s .357 Magnums—and his other

essentials, a handheld GPS, a backup compass.

She slid his MindRay into the backpack.

“No.”

“You were using it under pressure in adverse field conditions.”

“All field conditions are adverse.”

“We can’t leave this thing in a hotel room.”

That stopped him. Surely she didn’t expect to come with them. “Diana—”

“I know what you’re about to say, and don’t even think about it. You absolutely need me in the area.”

“No.”

“I can operate a command post in the car. I’ll be looking at satellite data as you work.”

“Do it from here. We both have cell phones.”

“It’s too much of a risk and you know it. You’ll be lucky to have an hour before they detect you. Maybe less. If cell phone calls are popping out there, way less.”

He couldn’t deny the truth of that, nor the fact that the information she could provide would be extremely valuable, even essential.

“We can use the same radios we used in Montana. I’ve got yours, mine, and Mike’s in my backpack. They are low power and the encryption technology makes them sound like backscatter. No scanner in the world will even identify our transmissions as signals.”

“In this world. Maybe we failed in Montana because alien technology was in use against us.”

She was silent for a moment. Then she said, “The value outweighs the risks. If you get detected, I’m going to see them coming. And what if I nail down the location of the tiger? That could happen.”

He looked at her. She glared back at him, the determination and defiance if anything increasing her attraction.

“Good enough,” he said, “let’s get Studley back in his pants and do some

hunting.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

As Flynn and Mac headed off into the thick brush, Flynn looked back at the truck. They'd parked it off the road near a little place called Balcones Springs, where they'd pulled the truck up into a brushy area along a disused road, but one that was high enough to provide the low-power radios a useful platform. Nearby was the Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Preserve, as difficult an area to walk as the Texas Hill Country offered. It consisted of nearly forty square miles of steep-sided hills, gnarly ravines, cactus, and cedar. The only nearby water of any significance was in Lake Travis itself.

They were still two miles both from the strange little village and Jay Elder's ranch house, and about equidistant between them.

Flynn touched the "transmit" button on his radio's earpiece. A moment later, there was a brief burst of static, then another. Mac and Diana, acknowledging.

"That satellite stuff has me spooked. How does she gain access?"

"Dunno. It's not a password, that I do know. Something more esoteric."

"What if this guy Elders has access to the same feed?"

"He doesn't."

"You know that?"

"If he did, why would he be doing something as risky as using guard animals—the tiger, for example. Or the dogs."

“I get your drift. It’s just that my bad feeling is getting worse, man.” He looked down at his GPS. “The last place she picked up the tiger was eighteen hundred yards due north.” He put the GPS in his pocket.

“Best turn it off.”

“It goes off by itself.”

“Until it does, it radiates a signal. Not much of one, but it’s there. I know from experience with what we’re dealing with, we need to be real, real careful about signals.”

“What are we dealing with, Flynn?”

The question lay there, unanswered in the dark between them. “How much have you figured out?”

“That this is some kind of classified government deal. That this animal is really weird. What is it, something that escaped from a lab?”

“Something that was created in one, that we know. Whether it escaped or was sold on or exactly what happened isn’t clear.” He did not tell Mac why they were actually going after the tiger, to get at the extraordinary criminal behind it. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to. He didn’t know how.

They moved through the moonlit hills with the swift precision of men whose lives had unfolded in places like this. The land around Menard was much the same: dry, mean, and hard. It was the sort of land that looked inviting from a distance, but would give you maybe two days if you got lost in it—assuming that you didn’t get snakebit or slip and fall down a bluff. By the third day, you’d be too crazy with thirst and weak from struggling in the terrible land to do anything but stagger until you dropped. Observed from a porch on a high bluff on a summer evening, though, the land smiled like a saint.

“Guys, I have a new trace. A thousand yards north northwest of your position.”

Flynn pressed his transmit button to indicate that they’d heard her.

In flat land, it would have been a possible shot, but not in these cruel little

hills, just high enough and steep enough to tax a strong man.

“We need to split up,” Mac said. “Let’s angle in, maybe five hundred yards apart. First one gets a shot, takes it.”

“Absolutely do not get out of sight of me. *Do not.*”

Mac frowned, shook his head. Beneath the rim of his Stetson, his face was in deep moon shadow.

“Come on, let’s move ahead. You see a shot, take it.”

Separated by fifty yards rather than five hundred, they slipped softly through the moonlight, each man concentrating on his own silence. The north wind grew stronger, hissing in the cedars and sighing in the live oaks, making the autumn grasses dance. There was that note of sadness in it that colors so much of nature. Far to the north, the same clouds that he and Diana had seen from the plane were putting on an electrical display as they rolled across the featureless plains of Texas.

They both carried Weatherby Mark V Deluxe rifles chambered for .300 Weatherby Magnum cartridges. The boat tail spire point bullets they were using were forged in Mac’s own shop, by a master bullet maker called Carlos Gons. Gons’s bullets were famous in West Texas for being the finest that money could buy—assuming you were friendly with Mac, of course.

A skilled sniper could use these rifles and these bullets to shoot extraordinary distances. But not in this terrain and not at night. Here, they were looking to get within three hundred yards of the quarry, and to do that they were going to need to surprise it.

Flynn had considered just going in to the ranch house with some serious ordnance, but he now needed to investigate that village, also, and that was not going to happen until the tiger was gone.

Mac stopped. He pressed his transmit button twice, looking for a report from Diana. A single flutter of static came back: “no joy.”

But Mac still didn’t move. He raised his night vision binoculars to his eyes. With this moonlight, you didn’t need night vision goggles, but the

binoculars were useful for looking into shadows and pulling in distant detail.

There was a sound, then, soft but unmistakable. It was the chuffle of a tiger and it could not be more than fifty feet away—but not in the direction Mac was looking.

They were about to take a hit.

“Back to back.”

“What? Why?”

He said to Mac, “Back to back.”

“What’s going on?”

“It’s here.” He touched his radio. “Diana, it’s within fifty feet of us. Do you see it?”

“I don’t—no ... standby—oh God, Flynn it’s in those cedars to your left. Flynn, it’s going to pounce right now!”

Flynn fought down the impulse to run. Unlike the situation when he’d faced it with the Glock, one of these rifles would bring it down immediately.

“You heard?”

“Oh, yes.” Mac examined the cedar thicket with his binoculars. “Where the hell is it? Ask her again.”

He pressed his transmit button. “We need coordinates.”

“It’s in motion away from your position. Flynn, something about the way it moves causes it to just leave traces. I can hardly track it. But it appears to be going south, toward the lake. Moving fast. Now it’s gone. No—stand by.” A pause. “Lost it.”

“Okay, take a breath. It’s trying to lead us, looks like.”

“Into a trap?”

“Away from the village. Away from the ranch.”

“So we ignore it.”

“If we do that, we fall into whatever trap’s been laid for us.”

“So let’s follow it.”

“Then we fall into a different trap. We’ve been outmaneuvered.”

“Man, I’m hunting a tiger, here, not a damn werewolf.”

He thought he now needed to tell Mac the truth. But how? This was a man who had absolutely no idea about aliens, except for the illegals who worked his and every other ranch in swarms. Employers called them grad students.

Diana had said that the government didn’t actually know what they were. And that was after sixty years of watching them. So how the hell did he explain them to Mac?

Maybe he didn’t. Maybe what he needed to do was to just put Mac where he could do some damage and hope for the best.

“Let’s head for that funny little village,” he said.

“Not the ranch?”

“That’s the head of this snake. I’m looking for the heart shot.”

“Flynn, I’m always looking for the heart shot and the high card. But just before we go charging off, *where the fuck is my tiger?*”

Flynn hit his radio. “Anything?”

A burst of static was her only answer.

“Verbal, please.”

She came back, “It’s well south of you now, probably close to the lake.”

“Then nowhere near the village?”

“No. No way.”

He said to Mac, “We’ll find it at the village.”

“But she said—”

“Come on.” Flynn began moving cautiously forward. Mac stayed close. They went down a long draw, then up onto higher ground, skirting one of the weathered limestone hills.

“What’re we expecting?”

“No idea.”

As they moved slowly ahead, the village came into view, in the form of a number of structures that appeared almost Polynesian in design, low buildings open at both ends, with peaked roofs and elaborately carved lentils.

“What the hell?” Mac muttered.

Diana sent a burst of static, then spoke. “It’s come out of no damn where and it’s heading directly toward you. I’ve got a clear view, it’s running fast. According to the computer, you have three minutes.”

“We could take cover in one of these,” Mac said. “Set up an ambush.”

Flynn went closer to the nearest one. The wood was dark, the carvings were hard to make out in the shadowy moonlight. Wind blew through the thing, which was open at both ends.

He thought maybe that it was an alien village, right here on earth. Was it the only one? Did anybody know? They were just so damn uninformed about the whole thing. Hopefully there was somebody somewhere with good information, because a village—Flynn was no expert, but to him this looked like some part of an invasion.

He risked a light, shining it into the interior.

“Empty, looks like,” Mac said.

They took a step in.

“My God, it stinks in here,” Mac said.

It was a milder version of the smell in Oltisis’s office.

Flynn took another step forward, moving deeper.

“Flynn?”

He turned around.

“Is there something behind me?” Mac asked.

Ten feet behind Mac, right in the center of the village, standing absolutely still, was the tiger. It had taken no more than a minute to get here.

Its eyes were on its prey. As in Montana, the animal had outmaneuvered them. Flynn could not get a shot off at it without hitting Mac, and it was so close to him that it could tear him to pieces before he even finished turning around. On the other hand, the moment the animal jumped onto Mac’s back, Flynn would have a kill shot. So this wasn’t a quite a checkmate for the tiger. It was a double check.

“Mac, come to me.”

“Man, that smell—”

“Nice and easy. Do it now.”

Mac’s eyes became tight steel in the moonlight. His face closed down. As his finger slid over his trigger, he came a step closer. Silently, the tiger shifted, keeping Mac between itself and the gun. What an expert it was. It had thought at least five moves ahead.

Mac took another step, and the tiger remained behind him. But it knew that he could bolt at any second. So could it—and it did, just as Mac entered the structure.

“Where was it?”

Flynn did not answer him. He was watching in astonishment and growing horror as the darkness behind Mac continued to deepen. Silently and in some unknown manner, the apparently doorless opening was closing.

He ran past Mac, but it was already much too late. Where the rear opening had been was the blackness of a wall.

The tiger had not thought five moves ahead or eight, but ten, twenty, maybe more.

What it had done was elegantly lethal. It had coaxed them into a man trap.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Flynn reached up and touched his transmit button. “Diana? Come back.”

Silence.

Mac said, “That thing is smarter than me, Buddy.”

“It’s brilliant.”

“What is it, Flynn? It can’t be a tiger. It just looks like one.”

“I don’t know, Mac. I just don’t know.”

“My flashlight’s dead.”

“Mine, too.”

“And the radios. And my GPS.”

Flynn found his in his pocket and pulled it out. It had been off, but when he pressed the toggle, nothing happened. “Same here.”

None of the electronics worked.

“Goddamnit, what have you gotten me into, man?”

“I thought we could handle this.”

“Well we can’t.”

Suddenly Mac was in his face, his breath full of sour fear. “Flynn, for God’s sake, what in fuck is this about?”

There was nowhere to begin. “What I think is that maybe if we can make our way to the wall, we can get out of here.”

“The fuck, we’re trapped, man!” Mac fired his rifle, the report shattering

in the confined space. He fired it again, straight up, and in the flash Flynn saw him, his eyes glassy, his face a glaring mask of fear. Again he fired, and again Flynn saw him. This time his lips were pulled back, his eyes were glaring almost comically, but there was nothing funny about the transformation—the visible disintegration—of this man.

“*Mac!*”

Again he fired, and this time Flynn saw something behind him, a figure standing with its legs spread and its hands on its hips. Its mouth was an oval complication of spiked teeth.

Not an animal. Not like Oltisis. But not human either ... not quite.

“Cool it!”

Again Mac fired, and this time Flynn saw in the flash that there were figures all around him.

“Shit, they got my damn gun!”

Flynn tightened his grip on his own.

“We’re not gettin’ outa here, man!”

“Stay cool, there’s always a way.”

“Fuck, oh, *fuck!*”

“We’re not done,” Flynn said.

Mac began babbling and weeping. Anybody who gets scared enough reveals an inner asshole, was Flynn’s experience. Mac was no exception.

Slowly, Flynn turned around. Behind them, there had been another door, so maybe it was still possible to get over there.

Porting his rifle, he moved forward. There was the softest of flutters against his cheek. Lurching away, he cried out with surprise.

The rifle was gone from his grasp. Incredibly.

His first thought was to draw the Magnum, which was still under his shoulder. He stopped himself, though. Whoever had taken the rifle would surely take it, too.

“Fuck, they got my Mag, man!”

Flynn didn't respond. He kept his arm tight against his shoulder holster.

There was a book of matches in his pocket, kept there for whatever emergency might require them. Would they still work? He had no idea, he'd been transferring them from pocket to pocket for months. Moving as slowly and quietly as he could, he reached in, felt his keys, some change, and then the matches. Crouching over them, he pushed the cover open, tore one out and struck it. There were sparks, but no light. Again he struck it, and this time it flared, sputtered blue, then caught, a tiny yellow flame.

In the light it gave, which was not much, he saw Mac, now lying on the floor. He was surprisingly close by. "Mac, get your ass up."

There was no response.

"Mac!"

His eyes were open but staring blankly. Flynn recognized this as a state of extreme shock, like a man lying on the roadside beside the twisted ruin of his car.

Just at the edge of the flickering pool of match light, there was movement.

The match went out.

Frantically, he fumbled another one between his fingers, struck it and held it up.

Standing over Mac was one of the creatures. It looked up at him with eyes so large that they were like great, plastic buttons, sky blue and swimming with tragedy.

The match went out. Flynn lit another.

Mac groaned. He lifted himself up on his elbows, he saw what was standing over him and started to roll away, and at once the thing began striking him with a nasty little sap, which caused him to throw up his arms in defense of his face, and to scream a gargled, quickly stifled scream.

Now Flynn did draw the Magnum, holding it in both hands, bracing it in front of him.

Another of the things jumped toward him.

The Magnum was gone, taken with such extraordinary quickness that Flynn had no chance to react. One instant, his hands were hard on the gun, then next they were empty.

He backed away, then he turned and blundered across the small interior space, in the process upending what felt like furniture and causing something to screech in anger—more than one something. In fact, the space seemed to be filled with these beings, five, ten, who knew how many?

This was their home.

He came to the back wall. Feeling along it, he attempted to understand what it was made of. From the outside, the building had looked like nothing more than a loose construction of dried branches. In here, though, it was slick and hard, cool like stone.

He kept feeling along the wall, seeking some kind of hinge or latch or some sort of opening.

Across the room, he could hear Mac screaming, and could hear the screams becoming more and more muffled, as if he was being enclosed in something.

Until he was also helpless, Flynn realized that they intended to contain him, not risk attempting to overpower him.

This told him that, while they were faster, he was stronger. Also, they either didn't want to kill him or didn't have effective weapons of their own.

Understanding that they were treating him like a rampaging animal gave him some room for maneuver. Not a lot, because, just as was true of a cop facing a knife-wielding drunk, there would be conditions that would force them to risk attempting to overpower him.

He mustn't try to fight them. He mustn't be destructive. He continued feeling along the wall, until he came to what seemed to be an intricate mass of twigs and branches woven together.

The Russian boar he caught on his place up in Tom Greene County never understood the trap. But he was human, surely he could understand.

Methodically now, he felt among the twigs. The structure had been wide open at both ends.

Twigs. Wood. He had matches. Could he set it on fire? No, they'd put a stop to that the same way he would if a drunk with a knife started trying to use it.

They were close around him now, but why didn't they get more violent? What were they waiting for?

In one of Mac's gun flashes, he had seen a beam about six feet up, and above it what appeared to be loose thatch. Thinking that he might be able to break out that way, he raised his hands upward and felt for purchase. Holding on with the tips of his fingers and pushing with his feet, he went up the wall faster than he had expected—or than they had, because there was an immediate rush of scurrying below him, and rough, guttural whispering. His fingers throbbed, but he kept climbing until he felt the beam.

Long, peeling cries rose, full of complicated, haunting undertones, like the wind on a winter's night, like somebody crying in the dark hills of childhood, like wolves howling.

What was really going on here? How were these people—or things—connected to Oltisis? Could it be that there were two species of alien on Earth?

He swung out onto the beam, and immediately saw before him two of the creatures. In the next instant, the closer of them leaped at him, screaming and clawing.

As he pulled it off, the second one slammed a sap into the side of his head and he fell from the beam, forcing his arms up to protect his head as he fell. When he hit he rolled and bounded to his feet. One of the creatures was crushed and broken beneath him, writhing and screaming with a warbling banshee madness. Lightning-fast hands grabbed at him.

One after another, he pulled them off, but the pummeling saps kept coming until finally what felt like a sack of iron slammed him in the right

temple.

Then the dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Something hit Flynn in the forehead so hard his eyes flashed. Still, though, he didn't wake up completely. He tried to turn over, but something else scraped his shoulder, preventing him

When he opened his eyes, it didn't help. This was absolute dark. Again he tried to sit up and again he slammed his head.

His lay still. His temple throbbed, his forehead ached, his shoulders were compressed and the air was thick.

Twisting, he raised his left hip until he could free his arm. He felt upward—and encountered a ceiling not even a foot above his face.

So this was no floor he was lying on. He'd thought himself in some sort of tight crib, but this was not a crib. The ceiling could only mean one thing: he was in a box.

For a moment, he was out of control. He kicked, he hammered at the lid, screams burst out of him.

No. Keep your head. Right now, your mind is the only weapon you've got.

This was what Abby had experienced. Steve. All of them.

Poor damn people, above all, poor *Abby*.

He pushed at the top of the thing. No give whatsoever. Steel? Thick wood? What did it matter, he wasn't going to break out, it was far too strong.

Panic hit him again, causing him to start gasping, causing his stomach to

twist against itself and his heart to fly.

No, *no!* You *will* go silent inside. You *will* slow that heart rate. You *will* stop that gasping.

Okay, breathe evenly, let the heart rate drop, focus the mind. No matter how hard it is, do it.

He visualized an open space. Dark but open.

The air was thickening fast but still breathable. So far, no frantic waves of suffocation were overwhelming him. Yet.

Keep the breaths even but shallow, don't move unless absolutely necessary.

All right, let's get our bearings. You're in what appears to be a coffin or a box.

First thing you need to know is, have you been buried alive or are you still aboveground?

He had fallen to the floor, fallen on one of the creatures or aliens or whatever they were.

What he had to do now was change his situation or, if that wasn't possible, face it. If he'd been buried alive, he was going to die here. It wasn't pretty, but he'd damn well died in a good cause. On the other hand, if he was aboveground, maybe there was a way out.

The air was getting very bad very fast. He felt along the join between the lid and the sides of the box. Seamless. Might as well be welded closed, and maybe it was.

Long ago, he had reconciled himself to the idea that death might come to him during the course of his work. But not now, not before he had gotten to the man who had killed Abby.

He inventoried himself for tools. He was still fully dressed, so maybe he still had some of his possessions.

The rifle and the pistol were gone, of course, but he could still feel his wallet. Only by raising his shoulders and wriggling his hips could he manage

to push his hands down into his pockets.

Frantic surges of air hunger coursed up and down his body.

He got his right hand into the pocket, and to his surprise it closed around his pocket knife. It had been with him since high school, and contained a blade, a fingernail file, and a small scissors. As he scrabbled at it, attempting to get it out, he tried to think what he might do with it.

It was then that he noticed that the air hunger was getting less. He was beginning to be able to breathe again.

That could mean one of two things—either his twisting and turning was opening a crack somewhere, or somebody on the outside was introducing oxygen into his air supply. He remembered something about the Chinese doing this during some distant war, perhaps Korea. The objective was to so terrorize the victim that he became open to brainwashing.

If this was torture, then they were out there watching and listening. They had a use for him and needed him to be so broken that he would follow their orders.

So what needed to happen in here to get them to open the lid?

The answer was clear: once they were sure that he had completely lost it, they would bring him out.

He began having trouble breathing again. His mouth opened, he gasped, but he also remained totally still.

Finally a surge of need went through his body that was so intense that it made him kick. His chest heaved, he sucked air through his open mouth. Tormenting urgency swept his body.

He cried out, he slapped the lid, he threw himself from side to side, he wailed.

And the anguish receded a little. His head cleared. He was still breathing frantically, he heart hammering, his chest pumping, but it was getting less.

He forced himself to calm down. So it wasn't that he was opening a crack somewhere in the box by pushing against it. Somebody was indeed out there,

and they were intentionally torturing him.

His breathing was labored now, but no longer terminal.

Once he had completely panicked and completely despaired, he was going to be taken out.

Fine, he would deliver the panic they were looking for. It wouldn't be hard, he was nearly there already. He knew that what at first would be an act would quickly become actual terror, because his screaming would flood his body with adrenaline.

He uttered a groan.

Soon, the air was getting stale again.

Another groan, but this one turned into a scream, and that opened the subconscious gate that he'd been holding closed with all of the inner strength he possessed.

There came boiling up from his dark interior a gigantic, roaring explosion of sound. He hammered, he kicked, he raged, he bellowed.

No escape.

Tears came. He found himself sobbing like a child.

His idea that he was being tortured was a fantasy. There was nobody out there and the coffin was underground. He had been buried alive, and everything else was just rationalization and wishful thinking.

Another scream burst out of him, then another and another and another. He smashed his head against the lid until he was reeling with pain, he clawed and screamed until his nails bled and his voice broke. He collapsed into the suffocated, gasping sobs of a dying man.

He lay, spent but still panting and ever more frantically. He began to float away on a lurching, tormented sea.

Again the cries came, so hysterical that they sounded like somebody else, an unknown version of himself, possessed of vast rage and fear and a hunger for life that was stronger by a factor of a million than the strongest love or terror he had ever consciously known.

His lungs churned, his tongue lolled, his hands began to weaken, and the clawing turned to scrabbling and helpless slapping at the unyielding lid.

There came a ripping sound. Then a click. Then light flooded him and air as pure as dew.

He writhed, he uttered choked sounds from a place in his mind so deep it had no words, he saw only the glare of the light and then, within it, a shape.

The shape focused.

A face stared down at him, softly intent, the eyes as pale as snow. “Hello, Flynn.”

Flynn gasped, frantically sucking air, unable to stop himself. As relief washed through him, he realized that he’d been just moments from death in there. Much closer than he thought.

He recognized the face immediately. But the security camera had lied. The oddly plastic skin and the too-perfect hairline were not a disguise. This was not a human face, but something that had been made to look like one.

“You’re Morris.”

An arm like a piston thrust him back down into the box.

“Yeah,” he said, “you can call me that. It’s a name on a suit, put there to confuse the garbage.” His lips lifted away from his teeth, as if in a smile. “I’ve got an offer for you, and I’ll kill you slow if you don’t do my little job for me. Is that understood?”

Flynn said nothing.

“All right, if that’s the way you want it, fine.” He put his hand on the lid.

“What’s the job?”

“Too late, Flynn. You’re done.” He murmured something to somebody out of sight, but Flynn heard it: “Take him out and bury him.”

With an earsplitting crash, the lid came down.

Flynn hammered at it, he couldn’t stop himself. “Don’t do this! Jesus, let’s talk, come on!”

The box scraped and Flynn felt his weight shifting. He was being moved.

“For God’s sake, give me a chance!”

He had thought that he had been broken. But now he discovered that he had not yet understood what that was.

As they maneuvered the box, he could hear grunting. Who was it? Not the creatures from the village, surely. No, there was a murmured word in Spanish. People, then. Henchmen.

He thought that you could not be more deeply a traitor, than to betray mankind itself.

The box lurched so far to one side that he rolled over, then was hurled back as it hit something with a dull, hard thud.

He’d been slid, then dropped into a grave.

“Listen to me! For God’s sake!”

And what will you do, little man, he asked himself? Will you, also, trade your species for your life?

There was a crash. Another. Then more and more. Dirt was being shoveled in. They were doing it for real this time, and the air was getting thick fast, and this time it would not be refreshed.

He bellowed, he kicked, he hammered at the lid, he rocked from side to side trying to break open the coffin.

The sound of dirt being shoveled in ceased to crash against the lid. As it got deeper, the sounds became more muffled.

This was it. He was now underground.

He went to another level of terror, one far beyond where he had been before, deeper yet, more raw than anything he had ever known. It was a savage, blind animal fear that caused him to scream like a desperate infant, slicing away layer after layer of toughness and strength and hard-won inner composure, leaving in its wake a panicked, shrieking rat.

Where had he gone wrong, what had he said or hadn’t? There had been no bargaining, no time.

“Give me a chance,” he screamed. He hammered on the lid, he kicked.

“For God’s sake *what do you want me to do?*”

There was a sound.

He froze. What was that? He listened.

It went in and out, in and out, and he thought it was the whisper of breathing.

“*Please!*”

“I want you to do what’s needed, that’s all.”

The voice was in his ear, *right* in his ear, so close, so intimate that instinct made him attempt to turn toward it.

“Then tell them to dig me out! I’m smothering fast!”

“You will do the work I have for you.”

“They’re still filling the hole, tell them to stop!”

“I have work for you.”

It was a choice. *The* choice. Die here like this or do the monster’s work.

There could not be a traitor more profound. But if he died, there was no chance at all that Abby’s destruction would ever be avenged.

“All right!” he shouted, “I’ll do it!”

Nothing happened. He waited, sweating it out.

His heartbeat grew rapidly more irregular, his mouth lolled open, his tongue hung out, and his breaths came faster and faster, more and more uselessly. He was breathing his own breath.

“You will do this work?”

He tried to answer.

“I can’t hear you.”

A gasped whisper: “Open ... open...”

The digging stopped.

“Open...”

There was light all around him, and air flowing like grace into his very soul. His body flushed with relief and his head swam as his blood reoxygenated.

He hadn't even been underground.

Morris chuckled. He reached down and drew Flynn to a sitting position.

Flynn looked at the box he had been confined in.

"Not a coffin," Morris said. He was a man of about six feet, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, a weathered Stetson on his head. "Coulda been used as one, though." He lifted Flynn under his arms. "Still shaky?"

"No."

"You lie like a child."

Flynn took quick stock of his surroundings. He was in a barn, its big door open wide to a sunny morning.

"Come on, let's get you something to drink. I got Coors, Lone Star, Shiner."

"Just a cup of coffee."

"Nah, you want a Shiner." Morris snapped a finger at a man standing nearby, who Flynn recognized as Jay Elder. He sauntered over to a dark blue cooler and opened it. As he reached in, ice rattled.

"Sounds good, doesn't it?"

"I have to admit that it does." He estimated that he was forty feet from the door. He couldn't bolt, though, not yet, because Elder was coming back with a frosty longneck.

The animal in him wanted that beer in the worst way.

"Flynn, you gotta understand that you're all mixed up. We're the good guys here! That thing you met in Chicago, that was evil."

"Okay."

Elder arrived with the beer. "It's gonna be a new era for mankind," he said. If he thought that he wasn't evil, he was a fool.

He took the bottle. Shiner is a rich brew, and he could smell the sweetness of it, and practically taste the cold relief it would bring to his throat.

"Go ahead," Morris said. "You've earned it."

He lifted it toward his lips, calculating carefully, moving slowly to buy

time. A quarter-second delay, a wrong half-step, and he was going to end up back in that coffin, this time for good.

Using all the strength in his arm and shoulders, he reached back and swung the bottle into the side of Morris's head.

The bottle exploded with a wet *crack* and foam and glass sprayed across Morris's head and face.

He stood there staring. He didn't even blink.

Flynn cried out in shocked surprise—under the coating of skin there must be steel or something.

Then Morris made a sound of his own, a low growl that reminded Flynn of the voice of the tiger.

He broke and ran. He was thirty feet from the door when Elder, thin and wiry and quick, leaped at him. He was light but fast as hell.

Not fast enough, though, to avoid a punch, a solid blow to the chin, which lifted him two feet and hurled him backward. He landed on the barn's dusty floor.

Morris roared, and Flynn knew that he was hearing rage from another world.

What must it be like, to produce minds as fine as Morris's, but so filled with rage? Or those things in the village—were they part human? Why were they so sad?

The universe is a dark place.

The last thing Flynn heard from Morris as he ran out the door into blazing morning sunlight was a roar—as it changed into laughter.

He had an inkling as to why. It was all part of breaking his will. They'd done it during the Inquisition, done it in Nazi Germany, done it in the Soviet Gulag. The technique was to let a prisoner think he had escaped, then, just as he touched freedom, drag him back.

So his aim was clear: he needed to go farther than they thought possible.

He ran across the barnyard and vaulted its weathered wooden fence.

Without looking back, he knew from the silence that Elder and Morris were not following him. This meant only one thing: somebody else was. He thought it would not be the tiger, not in broad daylight, and not as close as this to the heavily developed shoreline of Lake Travis.

From somewhere nearby, there was a sudden burst of barking. An instant later it was silenced.

His heart seemed to twist against itself, his throat to twist against itself from sheer terror.

One of the outbuildings they'd seen had been a kennel.

Dogs were a problem. Big time.

Too bad he'd lost Mac, Mac knew dogs and knew them well. As he ran, he continued to listen, but the dogs were no longer giving voice.

So, were they also smart, maybe as smart as the tiger?

He had to force himself not to run wildly.

This was going to be hard. It was going to be very, very hard.

CHAPTER THIRTY

As he ran into deeper brush, Flynn inventoried. His only weapon was the pocket knife. He had no compass, no cell phone, and no GPS, only the knowledge that he was running in a generally southerly direction.

He did not hear the dogs, but he also did not believe for a moment that he was beyond the perimeter of the trap Morris and Elder had set for him.

He knew that he was leaving a scent trail. Worse, the harder he tried to get away the more he sweated, and the stronger it was getting. His effort to escape was making him easier to catch.

To break his trail, he needed to get to water. He needed the lake, but how far was it? More than a mile, certainly, and this shore was not developed, so he wasn't going to be stumbling across any roads.

They'd chosen their location with characteristic skill. Being near a large city and a population in constant flux around the lake gave them access to plenty of genetic material—if that was even what they were after—but they were also isolated enough for them to keep themselves well hidden.

He forced himself to move more slowly, to tend his track as best he could, to reduce his visual and scent signatures.

The sun was strong, and he was sweating ever more heavily. He was exhausted from his ordeal and so dehydrated that he was beginning to struggle with muscular control.

Then he heard something—a quick rustling sound to his right. The instinctive reaction was to turn away, but you can't escape a dog like that. He is going to be faster than you are, and you cannot hide from his nose.

Flynn's hands were good enough to give him a chance to stop maybe one of them, but probably not for more than a few moments. So he turned toward the sound, and charged into the cedar thicket that the animal was sliding through.

He screamed, he couldn't help it—a short, sharp cry, instantly stifled. The dog was black except for the face, which was long and lethal-looking, but as pink as human skin. The eyes were green. They were entirely human.

Immediately on seeing Flynn, the dog turned away, careful not to expose its nose to his fists.

His gut frothy with disgust, Flynn broke off the assault, leaped out of the thicket and continued running.

Behind him, he could hear complicated, guttural sounds as the dogs communicated among themselves. They were fanning out, preparing to outrun him and capture him in a pincers movement.

A steep hillside appeared ahead. Forty feet up, the limestone emerged as a cliff, and in that cliff there were a number of low openings. Caves.

Could be good.

But no, no way. They were deathtraps. Even if they were large—huge—the dogs would gain an unbeatable advantage. They didn't need light, he did. Worse, the damp air of a cave was an ideal carrier of scent.

So he continued following the terrain lower and lower, until at last he came to water—or rather, a dry creek bed. Still, though, it led downward toward his only hope.

It began to be possible to discern the voices of individual dogs, as they muttered and growled among themselves.

As he got closer to water, the plant life grew more dense, and the thickening stands of cedar were getting harder and harder to move through.

The voices of the dogs stopped.

He thought, “they’re coming in for the kill.” Maybe he should have gone for the caves. Maybe he should have done a lot of things, chief among them not moving ahead with this until contact with some sort of headquarters had been reestablished. He’d gotten Mac killed. God only knew what had become of Diana.

Now there was silence around him. But why? He turned around and around, wishing he could somehow pierce the glowering stands of cactus and the dark cedar thickets with his eyes. What was the holdup? He must have some advantage, but what could it be?

He looked up the long rise he’d just descended. Then he turned a half turn. Nothing there but cedar. Another half turn—and winking through the choking underbrush there was a metallic gleam.

Metal, hell, that was water. Of course, the dogs had already scented it. And he saw one of them, just for an instant, a black flank gleaming with tight fur. It was moving quickly, staying low behind a stand of cactus on his right.

He saw their problem: he had a better run to the water than they did. They’d stopped here in hope that he wouldn’t see it before they could maneuver in front of him.

No longer concerned with being detected—they knew where he was to the inch—he hurled himself wildly ahead, throwing himself into the foliage between him and whatever water was below him.

There came a chilling sound, the furious rattle of a snake. They were common in the Texas hill country, with its ample supply of small animals and the warm rocks that snakes needed to gather energy.

He knew the risk, but there was no time to stop and deal with it. He threw himself against his side of the stand of cactus, tumbling away from the fat, bristle-encrusted pears, feeling them piercing his shoulder and flank.

He was falling then, dropping through resisting, scraping masses of cedar, dropping further, stopping, clawing himself free and falling again.

Breaking free, he fell ten feet, maybe more, through clear air. Enough to shatter limbs if he hit wrong and he was completely out of control.

He landed on his back in clear, cold water and heard its silence as he sank, and saw above the sun dancing on its surface. He also saw the snake hit the water, a good eight feet of writhing fury.

Stretching himself out, blowing to reduce his buoyancy, he kicked his way deeper. Close by, the silence was profound, but he could hear a distant buzzing of engines. This wasn't a stream, it was the lake itself.

He heard splashes behind him, at least a dozen of them. The dogs had lost a small battle, but that had only sped them up. His one advantage was that he could hold his breath, which was not so easy for a dog. But they were going to be faster.

He'd been winded before he fell, though, so he had to surface right now.

The instant his head broke the water, he both gobbled air and turned and turned, trying to see what he was up against. A quick count revealed the hideous heads of twelve sleek animals speeding toward him from three of four possible directions.

Immediately in front of him, not three feet away, was the snake. Sweeping his arms, he backed himself away from it. It raised itself up, using water tension to force a good three feet of its length above the surface. It couldn't strike, at least. To inject its venom, it would need to be close enough to dig its fangs into his skin.

Sucking breath after breath, he twisted around and used the one ability that he had that none of these animals, not the snake or the dogs, could equal. He could hold his breath long enough to dive deep. And once he was underwater and too far from the dogs for them to see him, they weren't going to have any way of determining his location.

He swam as deep as he could, passing over a drowned tree, characteristic of Texas's many artificial lakes. He'd pulled more than one drowning victim out of such trees on Lake Menard.

Even as he went to the surface for air, he could hear the tireless churning of the dogs getting louder. He didn't bother to turn and look at them when he broke the surface, that would eat a good second that he couldn't afford to lose.

Again he breathed, again and again, saturating his lungs with air even as the dogs got louder. Then he saw, turning out of an inlet about a quarter of a mile away, a power boat. It swung in a graceful arc, remaining up on plane, its wake spraying behind it. Nobody would come out under that much power unless they were on a mission.

Between the dogs and the boat, he had been very neatly trapped.

Again, he dove deep, but this time did not double back toward the dogs. They were smart enough to anticipate that. They would move from line abreast to a deeper formation, and surround him and tear him apart the moment he surfaced.

The sound of the oncoming boat got louder.

He had to surface, and when he did, he saw a figure on the front of the boat. It was Morris, and in his hand was a long-barreled pistol. Some kind of a target weapon, accurate at distance.

The boat was coming fast, its wake foaming white.

He dropped beneath the surface.

The trap was sprung. Here, he ran out of options. Here, they dragged him out of the water and took him back, a thoroughly broken man.

There would be more torture, until he'd been to death and back many more times.

But why? What was it that Morris wanted him to do?

Now the boat was circling above him. As soon as he surfaced, he was going to be within range of both the pistol and the dogs.

Looking up at the hull, he could see that the twin props were on shafts that extended out behind the craft, which appeared to be about forty feet in length.

He swam upward and, as the boat swept over him, he resurfaced in its

prop wash. As he sucked air, though, one of the dogs piled into him.

He went back down, leaving the snapping jaws and churning claws behind.

Then he felt something unexpected—a current of warmer water.

This could mean only one thing, an incoming stream. He swam toward it, keeping as best he could in its warmth. No matter what, he had to remain submerged until he was in the mouth of that stream. If he went up to grab even a single breath, he was caught.

To conserve his oxygen, he forced himself to do the opposite of what instinct was screaming for him to do. He forced himself to slow down.

Moving carefully, he began to be able to see the limestone bottom rising. He was swimming up a small canyon. With just inches to spare, he passed over the skeleton of another drowned tree, this one with the stark remains of what had been a stone house below it.

The bottom rushed up, and then he was swimming in three feet of water and there were flashes in his eyes, and he was going to take another breath, and it was going to be water.

He breathed. Breathed again, deeper. But it wasn't water, he had come up into the bed of a stream no more than ten feet wide and just three feet deep.

He lay flat on his back, letting its water sluice around him, allowing just his face to break the surface. He didn't want a single molecule of odor to reach those dogs, nor a single sound, and he didn't want his body heat to be detectable, much less his image.

He remained as still as possible, just pushing himself along with his heels, doing it inch by inch. Eventually, the stream would have a bend in it. Only when he was around that bend and invisible from the lake could he dare to move more quickly. Even then, he would stay with the water.

He came to a deeper pool, the water crystal, the limestone glowing tan. Around him, birds sang. He slid deeper, waiting there with just his face exposed, minimizing the chances that his scent would reach the dogs.

Finally he moved again, slipping around a turn in the narrow creek.

All was quiet. He hadn't even stopped the birds. He raised his head and listened. Distantly, the boat's engine screamed. Good, they were operating a search pattern.

Finally, carefully, listening to every sound and watching every shadow along the banks of the stream, he eased himself to his feet.

He froze, watching and listening. There was no sound of movement in the thick brush that surrounded the creek. He crossed to the far side, then climbed a bluff until he could see what turned out to be part of Lake Travis, a mirror of the sky dotted with sails. Small white clouds flew overhead. Nearer, the boat was now stopped. He could see the dogs on board, sitting in a group on the fantail. As they worked to gain scent, their heads turned first one way and then another.

Obviously, they weren't picking up his scent, but they did not stop trying. Then one of them went to the rail. It stood, nose to the wind. Another joined it.

His heartbeat increased, he barely breathed. It was time for this reconnaissance to end, so he moved back into the water, and then quickly up the creek, which was as shallow as a few inches on this side.

He went a hundred yards, then climbed the bank and pushed his way through the brush. The ridge he had descended was about five hundred yards ahead and perhaps a hundred and twenty feet high. Somewhere beyond it was the ranch headquarters where he'd started.

A single bark, low and shockingly close, told him that he'd made a fundamental mistake doing that reconnaissance, and the trap he'd entered was already closing.

Only two alternatives were left to him, either to do something that they wouldn't expect, or something that they couldn't counter—or, for that matter, both.

One thing that might throw the dogs off would be if he backtracked along

his own scent trail. He was wet now, leaving less odor behind. They might be tricked. They might lose him.

The only problem was that doing this would return him to the ranch.

Had that been the real plan all along, to induce him to go back to the compound and be captured where he'd started his escape?

He looked carefully along the ridge, then at the cactus and tufted grass below it.

Tracking is a skill that involves not only careful observation but also careful visualization. To keep a trail, you need to not only read sign, you need to be able to discipline your imagination to see the path as the person you are tracking must have seen it.

Doubling back along the lakeside, he returned to the bend. Beyond this point, he knew that it would not be safe to go. To reduce his scent further, he submerged himself completely. Then he left the water and went across toward the bluff, crossing his own trail about sixty steps later.

Turning, he looked back the way he had come. Not surprisingly, he had left a clear track.

He scanned the terrain ahead. Were they hidden somewhere, already aware of him, already waiting in ambush?

Backtracking as carefully as he could, he climbed the ridge. He would risk the dogs noticing the movement.

He could not do the safe thing, which was to keep going out to the road. He had to determine if there was any way to help Mac, assuming he was still alive. Or Diana, for that matter. If it had been him in the Rover, he would have come in to provide support as soon as communication failed. She would have done the same, and since she hadn't, he had to assume that she was in trouble, too.

They might both be trapped in boxes somewhere, or under some other type of torture, or slated to be broken down into component parts or whatever was being done to people.

Doubling back, he made for the ranch compound. If they'd left it unguarded, he might gain some useful intelligence. Who knew, maybe he'd even turn it into a win.

Still, he had to be damn near conservative. If he lost his life, who knew what would happen then? Maybe there wasn't anybody else left. Maybe the whole operation would fail. For sure, it would be a catastrophic setback.

Atop the ridge, his own sign was quite clear, a swathe through the tall grass that looked like it had been put down by an elephant. The dogs, all nine of them, had crossed the clearing line abreast. Their tracks were straight and light. They had worked to minimize their sign.

Moving ahead, but not so fast that he would raise his skin temperature and once again intensify his scent, he worked his way back. Soon he saw, through a thick stand of cedar, the shape of a building. He went closer, slipping deep into the cedar thicket, stopping when he came to its border.

The place was silent. No sign of movement. There was the barn, a new shed nearby, and the small rock ranch house. Under some live oaks fifty yards away was the kennel.

The barn doors were still open, the interior shadowy.

He watched some mourning doves pecking in the small patch of grass near the house. These were flocking birds that fed on the ground. They were sensitive to nearby movement and would fly up at the slightest sign of disturbance. He waited, but they continued to feed in peace.

Morris could not have left this place unguarded, so its empty appearance had to be a lie.

He stepped out of the cedar and strode quickly to the barn. On the floor toward the back stood a long silver box, open, the interior lined with black plastic. His box. There was oxygen equipment nearby, a green canister lying on its side, some tubing disconnected from two nipples on one end.

He forced back the impulse to hammer the thing to bits.

Under the pecan tree by the house, the doves were still pecking at nuts.

Mac and Diana were not in the barn.

He stepped out and moved away from the structure. Turning slowly around, he listened for anything that might help him. His hearing was good and it was very quiet, but the silence was total. By now the dogs would be breathing heavily, but he didn't hear anything that suggested their approach. Fearing the tiger, he looked, also, along the rooflines.

He dared not go close to the house. The dogs would hear the doves rising from a long way off. They would know what it meant, too, no question.

He looked toward the shed. There was a padlock on the door, a new one. His picklocks were gone, of course.

No matter how carefully he listened, only the cooing of the doves disturbed the silence of the place.

Could they have actually left him an opening? Maybe they'd never considered the idea that he'd be so foolish as to return to the compound.

He went to the shed, moving carefully and methodically. The lock was a good one. He could not force it without tools. Behind the shed, though, he found a low roof with a trapdoor in it. A storm cellar. Not surprising, given that one of the most powerful tornadoes ever recorded had touched down a few miles north of here.

He bent down, grasped the rusted iron ring in the center of the trapdoor, and pulled it up.

It was dark and silent and it felt large. Hill Country ranches didn't have big underground chambers, just root cellars, and usually not even that. So this could be something constructed by Morris.

He wanted to call out to Mac and Diana in the darkness below, but to raise his voice was far too dangerous. As he listened, he thought he heard a faint pulsation, like a big pot boiling.

He wanted to go down the ladder, but that was beyond the limit of responsibility. He was here to make best efforts, not throw himself away.

For a long time, he listened to that sound. Boiling, he thought, definitely.

No voices, no sound of movement.

As he left the shed, he heard a sound coming from the direction of the ranch house, high and sharp, that certainly was not doves. But what was it? Not a voice ... or was it? Perhaps not a human voice.

And then he heard another sound, just the slightest edge of a yap, quickly stifled.

He saw movement at the house, a door opening.

Even so, the doves did not move, which meant only one thing: they were not normal doves. They were another deception, and a very clever one indeed.

At the same moment, one of the dogs appeared at the edge of the compound. It came across the field at a trot, its tongue lolling, its eyes intent on the house. It went up to somebody hidden just inside, and as it did the person crouched down to greet it.

It was one of the creatures from the village. In the sunlight, its skin was yellow-gray and its eyes seemed, if anything, more deeply sad than they had in the gloom of the structure. He could see a shadow of humanity there, but also something else. Was it a mix of a creature like Oltisis and a man?

Maybe, but it couldn't walk the streets, not by a long shot, not like Morris could.

The high-pitched sounds became a strange, musical cooing, joined by the dog's voice, a group of vocalizations more complex than any ordinary dog could make.

They were taking pleasure in one another, these two misbegotten creatures, a dog with a man's eyes and this ... thing. The dog licked the creature's hands and it smiled, its teeth jutting out of its mouth like blades.

More dogs appeared, and then the snarl of engines as two four-wheelers burst out of the brush.

Flynn faded back toward the far side of the compound, trying to keep the shed between himself and the danger.

When he was back in the brush and somewhat concealed, he turned and ran toward the road he and Diana and Mac had come in on.

As far as he was concerned, the secrecy was over. Without Diana and Oltis, he had no official recourse. So he needed to bring some level of policing authority into the situation, and damn the secrecy. Let the secret get out. Better that it did.

Problem was, he also knew that the cops wouldn't do anything serious unless they had evidence of a crime, and so far he couldn't offer much. Certainly not enough to enable, say, the Travis County Sheriff's Office to get a warrant to enter onto the ranch property. No judge was going to approve a warrant on the basis of what would sound like the ravings of a lunatic. The fact was that he wasn't going to get any police action out of a claim that there was a village full of aliens on some rancher's property—unless they tossed him into the state hospital over in Austin.

Even if by some miracle they did move, it would not happen overnight, and this needed to get done fast. The only thing that might work against the kind of power and intelligence he was seeing was speed.

There was only one answer: he had to come back here with serious firepower, and fast, and he needed to kill them all.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

He sat hunched over a beer at one of his college haunts, a place called the Scholz Garten in central Austin. He'd come here because it was deep in the inner city, and Morris and Elder might be cautious in a populated area.

He sat at his old table in the far corner of the outdoor beer garden. Across from him was Abby's chair. It was late in the afternoon, the shadows were long, and the memories of her were as raw as blood.

Once he had reached the road, it hadn't taken him long to find the spot where the Rover had been. It was gone, but there was no sign of anything unusual, such as tire marks that might indicate a sudden departure. The truck had remained in place for some time. He had even been able to make out scorch marks left where the catalytic converter had touched some grass.

As he sipped beer, he searched gun classifieds in a local rag. He was looking for a very specific weapon, a Heckler and Koch MP5. If he could find a dealer with a Federal Firearms License and the weapon in his inventory, he was hoping he could obtain it and let the paperwork float along behind the transaction. To own a fully automatic machine gun in Texas, he'd need to get a sign-off from a local honcho of some kind, but he was figuring that could be accomplished with a donation.

He went to the pay phone, dropped in four quarters and phoned a guy called Joe Harris in a little town called Lost Mill, who advertised a selection

of weapons. He had no HK in stock, but he thought he could get his hands on one pretty quickly.

“How fast?”

“Well, I could get it brought in here—let’s see—how about seven?”

He would need to carry it around, so he wanted concealment. “Does it have the CIA case?” This was a briefcase with a trigger in the handle, a nice piece of equipment.

“No CIA case. Those things are hard to come by.”

“Don’t I know it. So I’ll be around at seven to take a look.”

After he’d reached the highway, he had hitched and walked until he got to a place called Four Points, where he’d found a bus and taken it into Austin.

When he’d rented the car he was now driving, the clerks at the Avis station had been concerned about his appearance. He looked like a tramp with an improbable amount of cash, and the cash was mysteriously damp. He’d used his real credential, and the police identification had reassured them, fortunately, just enough to get them to give him a car. The use of cash would keep the rental record at the station until the car was returned and the completed transaction processed.

He didn’t want to show the gun dealer his real pass, for fear of spooking him, and he couldn’t meet him looking like he was headed directly to the nearest 7-Eleven to commit mayhem, so he planned a first stop at a motel to clean up.

Everything was so very normal, the Texas sun starting to set behind tight little clouds, traffic passing on Congress Avenue, up the street the improbably immense state capitol building looming over the city. All was quiet—but Texas streets could be deceptive, as he well knew. There had been some notable crimes committed in this city, some textbook crimes. A classic story of police action against a sniper had unfolded at the summit of the University of Texas tower back years ago, which was still studied as a model of how to respond to such an emergency, and, for that matter, how not to. A cop had

died investigating the sound of gunshots. The lesson: don't expose yourself until you know where the shots are coming from.

He drove south on Congress, then took First Street to Interstate Thirty-Five. Harris was just the other side of the line in Hays County. Between here and there was a Super Target, and not far away, a motel.

As he drove, he automatically kept his rear under surveillance. Once on Thirty-Five, he stayed well below the speed limit and far to the left, letting the traffic pass him like a river. Texans are not slow drivers, and nobody hung with him.

He knew that the gun was going to cost a lot. He would need to bring cash, which meant a visit to a bank. When he'd dipped the special ATM card earlier, though, it was dead. He visualized some bureaucrat deep in some Washington cubbyhole canceling the cards as soon as contact was lost with their holders. Nobody would ever stop to think that this might leave them in the wind. Budgets trumped lives, always.

Fortunately, there were Frost Bank branches here. This was his bank in Menard, an old Texas outfit, and he was going to need to make a substantial withdrawal from his personal savings. He had about thirty grand on deposit and he'd have to get it all. It was already a quarter to six. He watched for a branch.

As he drove south along the highway, he saw a Wells Fargo, and somewhat later a Frost Bank sign. He pulled off the next exit and doubled back.

The branch was small, but when he handed over his withdrawal slip, the clerk didn't react with any surprise. This was agricultural country south of Austin, full of farms and ranches and basic businesses like rock quarries. There were going to be a lot of illegals working, and that would mean cash payrolls.

"Hundreds, please," he said. Bigger bills were faster to count and took up less space. He carried the money out in a brown paper bag, got into the car

and stashed it under the backseat.

His next stop was Target. His clothes were done, and in any case, they'd been touched by those creatures out there—God knows what they had done to him while he was unconscious—and he wanted them off his body. He wanted a long, thorough shower, lots of soap.

In the Target, he headed for men's clothing. He passed a mother with her two girls looking through racks, a clerk stocking a shelf with radios, a couple of guys searching for T-shirts, and he found himself at once loving them as he had never been aware of loving his fellow man before, and also feeling oddly distant from them.

He understood the origin of Diana's inner distance. It was having secret knowledge of a larger world that did it. They were innocent, he was not.

He found the camouflage sweats he needed, and then the black sneakers. A ski cap and mask were harder, but he eventually dug some up in a sale bin. He also got a white shirt and some slacks, and threw in a dark blue windbreaker, the thinnest one he could find. He planned to buy a pistol off Harris as well.

In the checkout line, he waited behind a family who was buying a gas grill and had a lot of questions about it. The wait was hard.

Finally, he left the store and crossed the parking lot to his car. The details of the world were in sharp focus, sounds, movements, the expressions on people's faces, even the feel of the asphalt beneath his feet. It was how he felt just before walking into a domestic dispute, which can so often turn out to be a more dangerous situation than it seems. More cops were injured and killed on domestics than on any other type of run.

Given his plan, he did not expect to survive his return to the compound, and, frankly, he was beyond caring. If there was an afterlife, he'd be with Abby. If not, then not. The only thing that mattered was that everybody at the compound also came out dead.

He reached the motel at six twenty. He checked in and went quickly to his

room. This was a point of vulnerability. He was unarmed, so if they were following him, this was an ideal time to take him.

He threw his bag of clothes on the bed, stripped and showered with the curtain open. He was focusing down very tightly now, concentrating his thoughts on the unfolding mission, preparing his mind and body for action.

Once he was cleaned up, he drove to Joe Harris's operation, which consisted of two double-wides on a bare lot in bleak scrubland south of Austin.

The first thing that came to his mind was that the setup wasn't straight. The double-wides had the barren look of crook places.

Harris had dogs behind a chain-link fence, which frantically announced themselves as Flynn walked up the uneven flagstones leading to the first trailer. This was about the point, when he was in a uniform, that he would've unsnapped his holster.

At least they were just ordinary dogs.

He knocked on the flimsy door.

"Yo."

"I'm Flynn Carroll, I called about the HK."

The door opened onto a man who looked like he'd been inflated and then rubbed with beet juice. Even a mustache that would've caused a sensation in Dodge City failed to hide train-wreck teeth when he smiled.

Flynn recognized it as meth mouth, the dentist's dream.

"Well, come on in," Harris said, his accent deceptively softened by the south. But this was not a soft man.

Flynn stepped into the dim, smoke-choked interior. An air conditioner screamed as if in its death throes, doing little more than jostle the sweaty air. The chrys smoke was almost dense enough to induce a transfer high, and, in fact, Flynn took a slight hit from it. Felt good, which was bad. Drugs and high-intensity action are mortal enemies. When quarter seconds count, as they would tonight, you need to be spotlessly clean.

An HK in pristine condition lay on the Formica table that filled half the kitchen area.

“I assume you can show the cash, ’cause she can’t go outa here on no check or nothin’.”

Flynn noted that there had been no mention of paperwork or identification. He also took note of the Diablos tattoo on Joe’s arm, and of the fact that he was wearing a small pistol on his right ankle, maybe an AMG Backup. Not very accurate, but in a confined space like this, who cared?

“It’s in my car,” Flynn said. “How much’re we lookin’ at?”

“I’m thinkin’ about twenty-two thousand dollars, sir.”

“That’s strong.”

“You look at ’er. She got class, a lotta class. Plus this fella, it turned out he had—lemme get this here—” He brought up a black plastic briefcase. “This is just dead on for the CIA case.”

It was a good briefcase, no question there, the trigger mechanism solidly constructed.

What he had in the car was exactly twenty-two thousand two hundred dollars. He decided to see just how crooked this crook was.

“I need to take the gun with me. Can we let the paperwork float?”

“You plannin’ some kinda score?”

“I have a buyer. Kinda on the warm side.”

“*Cucuracha?*” It was slang for a cartel enforcer.

“Big enough to cook and eat.”

The guy looked into Flynn’s eyes, looking for some kind of sting, no doubt. In Flynn’s experience, guys like this always ended up trusting plainclothes cops more than they did their own damn mothers, they were that stupid.

“I’ll tell you,” Joe finally said, “I don’t know if you noticed, but the governor’s kinda stopped carin’ who does fed paperwork and who don’t. I mean, you ain’t gonna go shoot up the capitol, I hope. ’Cause that would be

embarrassing.” He chuckled. His eyes never left Flynn’s. “I see you in there, you little shit pussy. Your *cucuracha* ain’t around here, is he? You’re gonna sell this thing cros’t the border, ain’tcha? Gonna get some Border Patrol killed, probably. I don’t think I can do that.”

It was an opening gambit. Soon, the price would be thirty grand. Flynn didn’t really care, because he had decided that he wasn’t going to be a buyer today. He was, however, leaving with the weapon.

“I’m not in the business,” he said. “I don’t bargain.”

“What are you, then?”

“I don’t want to lie to you. I’m gonna put you on your ass and take your gun.”

“Wh-a-at?”

“I don’t want to. But this HK is hot and I’m not gonna pay anything close to that kind of money for a hot gun. Anyway, I’m probably pretty hot myself, so I kinda think we were made for each other.”

A hand meaty enough to be a filling meal started for the ankle holster. Flynn reached across the table and bumped Joe’s ulnar nerve against his humerus. The hand flopped and Joe yelled.

Still without getting up, Flynn aimed a blow at the middle of his chin, thrusting upward as he connected. There was a crack and Joe’s head pitched back. He fell over in his chair, crashing against the sink hard enough to bring more than a few filthy dishes down with him.

Flynn stood. One thing he had learned from watching bad guys screw up was never to waste time in a situation like this. Do what you have to do and get out.

He looked down at Joe. He’d be in slumberland for ten minutes, maybe a little less.

He laid the HK in the case and made sure all the magazines were full. There wasn’t time to toss the place for more rounds, so what was in the three thirty-round magazines had to be enough.

As far as a carry weapon was concerned, he didn't see any pistols in view, so he contented himself with taking Joe's AMG. It was chambered for the .380 ACT round, which was good. This round gave it better stopping power than the more common version, which was chambered for a .22 round. There were also a few of these out there that could accept a .45 cartridge, but the accuracy was really poor. The combination of the pistol's fixed barrel and the ACT round's low breech pressure offered an outstanding mix of accuracy and firepower for a compact pistol. Ole Joe did indeed know his guns.

Leaving the trailer, Flynn made it a point not to hurry. There were bound to be eyes on this meet, no question. He couldn't afford to raise suspicion, otherwise every cracker inside of three counties was going to be here in minutes. Forget the cops, these guys were way more dangerous than the law. You messed with Diablos, you dealt with Diablos, no police need apply.

His next step was clear. He would return to the Lake Travis area and await darkness. Then he would move on Morris and his people and his animals, and what would happen would happen.

A machine gun is a good weapon. Used correctly, of course, and he knew how to do that.

As he drove, he considered his chances. On balance, he thought that Morris had not expected him to return to the compound. It hadn't been a trap at all, but a mistake. So he could be outsmarted—once, anyway. Maybe, then, twice.

He had one objective and one objective only: waste Morris and all who were with him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

He had planned his return to the property as carefully as he could using Google maps and satellite views he examined on a computer at a copy shop. The house and the barn appeared on the satellite view, for example, but not the shed, the village, or the kennel. Diana's images had been real time, of course, but Google satellite photos averaged about two years old.

This meant that the dogs and the creatures in the village were all recent additions. Ominously, then, they were in the process of expanding their operations here. But it also meant that there had to be vulnerabilities. Something wasn't properly guarded. Some plan of defense was flawed. The question was, would he be able to find that flaw?

One thing was certain: the whole operation—compound, village, all of it—would be carefully guarded now, and in depth.

He had waited until nine before setting out. He wanted as much time as he could get prior to moonrise, which tonight was at eleven twenty-six. But he also didn't want to arrive any earlier than he had to. He'd used the time to find stores where he could put together a new rig.

In his backpack was a pair of fairly decent night vision binoculars with an infrared light source. In addition to the AMG backup and the HK, he was now carrying two Tasers and a good combat knife.

He had considered blowing the whole place to kingdom come, but you are

not going to be able to buy the necessary explosive materials without tripping all kinds of alerts. It was one thing to get hold of a machine gun of a type used by the drug cartels and readily available on the black market, another to buy explosives that Homeland Security took an interest in.

Before he left, he'd located on the map a new spot to leave the rental car, and as he drove down the main road, he ran his plan mentally, dwelling for a moment on each phase, making certain that everything was as well thought out as possible.

He'd worked the maps carefully, and took a different approach to the ranch. He didn't want to park anywhere near the place they'd left the Rover. For this reason he drove not past the ranch, but down to the little marina that was in an inlet about a mile away. He had hit upon the idea of playing two cards at once. He could conceal the car and also disable the boat, which was almost certainly kept there.

He parked in the marina's lot. There was a snack shack still open, and he strolled in and bought a Coke, then, as if he owned the place, ambled down to the single floating dock. It was not difficult to recognize Morris's boat, a forty-foot twin built for speed. He stepped aboard, then slipped in under the protective canvas. Wiring a boat with two engines to deal with would be an annoyance, but he didn't need to start it. He pulled up the engine cover of the port Chevy and quickly removed the distributor cap and tossed it overboard. For good measure, he ripped out the gas line. He repeated the performance with the starboard engine.

Bon voyage, bastards.

It would be a long trek up to the ranch compound, and it would take him closer to the village than he'd like, but the steepness also meant that getting back down here fast was going to be a lot easier.

Returning to his car, he opened the rear deck and methodically equipped himself. He wore the knife in a sheath on his left hip. Easier to reach with his right hand. He tucked the AMG into the ankle holster he'd taken off its

owner. The night vision binoculars went around his neck, with the fully loaded magazines in two big fanny packs. He carried the HK naked. If he had occasion to carry the machine gun in population, he'd use the case, but there was no need here. Dressed as he was, any cop was going to see him as a threat anyway, so there was no real point in hiding it.

As long as he could, he kept to the road for ease of movement. Once he left it, though, he rolled on the ski mask. White skin was easy to see even on the darkest night. Of course, with night vision equipment, he would still be easy to spot. Not to mention the animals. The dogs' noses worked all the time, but the tiger's eyes were going to be a lot better in the dark.

He had bought some copper screen at Home Depot, and had fitted it into the crown of the dark blue cap he was wearing, so he wasn't worried about a MindRay. They might have something better, but there was nothing he could do about that, or any equipment of extremely advanced design, for that matter.

His assumption was that, one way or another, he was certain to be detected. The question was, how close could he go and how much destruction could he cause before they dropped him? And they would do that, no question. He was here to kill, and therefore also to die.

He thought he had at least an even chance against the tiger, as long as he could see it in time. With his armory, he could take the dogs, but any use of his guns would obviously end all surprise, so if they came out, he planned to fade back, then return later.

His pace was steady, the road empty. The eastern sky glowed faintly. The moon was on its way.

He reached the point where the road bent slightly to the right, and as he came around the curve, he heard a sound, low, not quite an engine noise, but also not natural. Not the tiger or the dogs, so probably a machine of some sort.

Barely breathing, he slid into a cedar thicket at the roadside. Slowly, the

sound grew louder. It was a motor noise. Carefully, moving just as he would when he was stalking somebody very smart, he raised the binoculars to his eyes. He looked up the road. Nothing. And yet the sound was becoming more detailed. Something very quiet, and therefore probably closer than it seemed.

It was ratcheting now, like nothing so much as large insect wings.

Then he saw it, flying right up the center of the road as methodically as if it was a miniature drone, a four-inch wasp, black with yellow stripes on its abdomen.

No wasp flew like this and no wasp was this big, not even in Texas.

Almost certainly, it was a drone. The Pentagon could make fake insects, he'd read about them being deployed as spy cameras in Afghanistan. But this was beyond that, this was an actual, living creature that was also a machine.

Continuing directly down the center of the road, it flew slowly past.

He remained still, not moving the binoculars, not moving anything.

The creature made a slow circle above the center of the road. It hovered, facing the thicket. Flynn stopped breathing. It was a calculated risk. His stillness would make it harder for the insect's compound eyes to detect him, a fact he remembered from high school biology. Assuming that it even had compound eyes. Who the hell knew, maybe it could see the head of a pin at ten miles.

It came closer, hovering, its yellow legs folded beneath its abdomen. As any country Texan would, he recognized it as a Cicada Killer, a big, normally benign wasp that was common in the region. Big, but not the size of a jumbo shrimp, which this thing was going to top by a good half inch.

As it examined the thicket, the head moved from side to side, but not with the mechanical seeking of an insect. No question, it was under intelligent control.

The thing maneuvered into the thicket, its head now jerking quickly from side to side. So it was indeed using compound eyes, and therefore it must be a genetically modified wasp, not a machine made to look like a wasp. It was, in

effect, a living camera, and whoever was watching through those eyes was trying to overcome their limitations with rapid head motions. The result was a horrifyingly odd and unnatural spectacle, a wasp moving its head as if it was on a spring, all the while flying with bizarre deliberation.

It came closer. If he made the least motion, he was going to be seen. The operator was obviously already suspicious or the thing wouldn't have stopped to examine this particular thicket. In any case, Flynn was soon going to have to move. In another thirty seconds, he'd have to release his breath, and when he did, he would be detected.

Slowly, its wings humming, the wasp drifted among the branches, moving more skillfully than any wasp should. It came closer to him. Its head vibrated. It came closer yet, so close that he could feel the air of its wings on his cheek.

Then it was silent. Where had it gone? He waited. Had it flown away?

A tickling began, first on his cheek, then on his temple, then a scratching on his eyeball. It was on his face, crawling there, and now not only could he not breathe, he could not blink, not once, not while the tiny claws tapped his watering eye and the head vibrated, buzzing more faintly than the wings had, and the mind behind those eyes, perhaps in the village, perhaps at the ranch, tried to understand what they were seeing.

Over his head, then, there came a sudden flutter, loud, then a great, rattling clatter and the Cicada Killer's wings snarled and it buzzed away. For an instant, Flynn was confused. Then he realized that the creature was chasing a cicada that its presence in the thicket had just disturbed.

Living machines had their limitations, it seemed, insofar as they remained true to their instincts.

Breathing again at last, he reached up and rubbed his tear-filled eye.

Then he thought, "Did the thing go off chasing the cicada, or did it make me and fly away for that reason?"

The ranch was another world, where technology had entered animals and changed their deepest natures. Not only the tiger and the dogs, but also that

snake, he felt sure, had been altered. Also, the doves, which was why they hadn't flocked when there was movement in the house. They had been another trap, continuing to feed and express no alarm as the dogs silently approached. All the while, though, someone had been watching through their eyes, and sending information back to the dogs.

He slipped out of the thicket and into the clearing behind it, which was now glowing with the light of the rising moon. He was moving way too slowly, he had to pick up his pace.

He remembered as a boy lying on the plains side by side with Abby, her hand slipping into his as the moon rose, and glowing above them, the cathedral of the Milky Way.

The mystery of the stars. The tragic face of the creatures in the village. Morris smiling like a doll smiles. The eyes of the dogs, green some and brown and blue—full of humanity and the savagery of animals.

The tiger, curious, sorrowful, and brutal.

By dead reckoning now, he moved toward the compound. He remembered telling Diana "Love your gun," and it was truer now for him than it had ever been before. The metal of it vibrated under his hands with a secret life. The trigger longed to be pulled. The gun was a life changer, an engine of evolution. The gun was holy, it was god in metallic form. The gun was freedom.

A flashlight, maybe, flickered on the path ahead.

As he looked, he also listened to the rustlings of the night, seeking for the sighing movement of a new hunter slipping through the tall grass.

When would he see the tiger? When would he see the dogs? Or would another snake seek him out, a big copperhead, perhaps, as swift as a shadow?

Before him was a long rise, and beyond it a glow. The compound, it had to be. There was nothing else out here but the village, and it didn't show lights.

Binoculars or not, the house was just an indistinct shape. But there was more movement between it and the barn, people going back and forth. How

many was he contending with, five or ten? More?

He wondered if the humans involved here were really traitors to their species, or were they themselves in some way under control?

If he thought he had a choice, he would not be here, not with all these unknowns involved, any one of which could destroy him.

In the corner of his left eye, there was the flicker of a swift shadow, but when he turned it was gone.

That was the only evidence he needed. That had been a dog and therefore he had run out of options. His plan had been simple. Rush the place, spraying it with machine-gun fire, all the while seeking to target Morris.

Now, getting to the house was going to require another approach. At some point, any rush was going to be stopped by the animals.

To his left was the long white bone of the caliche road that he had just left. To his right, a clearing full of stands of prickly pear cactus and cedar. Night-blooming flowers filled the air with fragrance.

Something caught his eye—not a movement, but a shape that did not fit the terrain.

In the clearing, standing so still that he almost hadn't seen it, was the tiger. Incredibly, it was not a hundred feet away, close to its ambush range. As always, it had stalked him with almost supernatural skill.

He didn't move. It didn't move.

Three seconds passed. Five.

He couldn't kill it, not without the noise of gunfire reaching the house.

Its long body was low to the ground, but he could see it clearly, almost flowing like a liquid as it edged closer to him.

Unlike at the Hoffman place, there were no trees here to use as a backstop, just these gnarled stands of cedar, and the cat would be at a definite advantage inside one, able to make its way among the branches much more easily than he could.

A nearby sigh drew his eye to the tiger again. Incredibly, it was now less

than ten feet away. It had come on him much faster than he had anticipated, even with his knowledge of its skills. Moving slowly, he slid the little AMG into his hand.

He could not see it anymore, but he could hear its breathing, deep and slow, completely calm, no tension in it at all. Still without moving a muscle, he attempted to determine the direction the breathing was coming from. Behind him? Possibly. Possibly also off to the left. In fact, since he was right-handed, his left rear would be his most vulnerable spot. Probably, it had even factored that in, it was that smart.

A nervous finger kept touching the trigger on the little pistol. Once again, they were at what was becoming a familiar impasse. His only survivable situation was if his first shot was a head shot. At night, with a fast-moving target and a small, short-nosed pistol like this, it would be almost all luck.

There was a faint sound, perhaps an intake of breath—and he realized that the tiger wasn't behind him anymore at all, but now concealed in the cedar directly ahead.

This time, it had outmaneuvered him. The battle of wits that had begun in Montana was over.

The tiger had won.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

He braced the pistol. There was a streak of movement, the sound of big paws skidding in dirt—and then the frantic blowing cry of a deer.

The tiger had run right past Flynn, moving so suddenly and so quickly that he wouldn't have had a chance to get off even a single shot.

Flynn watched it as it busied itself devouring the deer it had just brought down. The creature had died at once, and the tiger now lay on the ground gobbling into its entrails.

There was no question in Flynn's mind but that the tiger had seen him and had definitely known that it had a chance to take him.

He recalled that moment in the storm drain, the curiosity in its face, and the sadness.

The tiger had self-awareness, and the tiger apparently did not like the situation it found itself in. "Slaves are dangerous, Mr. Morris," he thought to himself. Good.

He didn't plan to push his luck, though, so he left it to its kill, fading quickly back through the cedar thicket, then heading due east toward the highway. He was glad that he trained himself in the skills of orienteering and dead reckoning. He didn't need a compass to make sure that he didn't accidentally close the distance between himself and the house instead.

As he walked, the ground rose slowly, until he had a huge view of Lake

Travis, dotted with the lights of boats. Very faintly, he could hear music echoing across the waters.

He had to win this battle this night, that music must never be silenced.

Now he was directly behind the house, and about half a mile out. He understood, though, that he was looking at an unknown world full of unknown creatures—insects that were really observation platforms, snakes infused with extreme aggression, human-dog mixes, the tiger, and who knew what else? What of the creatures from the village? Nothing would prevent them roaming these hills at night. They had overpowered him so easily that if he so much as spotted one from a distance, his only choice was going to be to blow his cover by killing it immediately.

Never standing to full height, slipping quickly from cedar thicket to cedar grove, he moved as quickly as he could.

When he once again reached the caliche road, he paused to see if he could gain any additional information from remaining entirely still for a time. He backed into a stand of cedar. It would somewhat cover his scent, should the dogs come around, or the tiger decide that he was, after all, to be attacked.

Using the binoculars, he reconnoitered up and down the pale strip. No animals in evidence except an armadillo about a hundred yards away, snuffling for grubs along the roadside. Or was it only that?

Armadillos gave dogs a wide berth, so maybe it was an indicator that they weren't nearby. More likely, though, it was like the doves, a subtle deception. So it probably meant that the dogs were indeed nearby.

There was another noise, but this time it was more rhythmic, not the hum of wings.

He stepped out into the road, hesitated, then reached down and felt the ground—and felt a vibration. He pushed the binoculars to his face, and saw, just nosing around a bend in the direction of the highway, the glittering grillwork of a car with its lights off.

It was too late for him to jump back and too late to move carefully enough

to conceal his tracks. He leaped ahead and rolled into the brush. Then he froze. The car had a full view of him now, and movement attracts the human eye, especially in the dark. Even under conditions where a man can't see a boulder ten feet ahead of him, he can pick up movement.

As the car approached, he remained absolutely still. He was looking at a GMC Acadia, black, moving slow enough to avoid kicking up dust in the dry roadway.

Was this another attacker? Some sort of outlying patrol?

A shaft of moonlight rested on the driver's face as the vehicle crept past. Flynn saw a woman's hair, some kind of a sweatshirt, and a face with a distinctive, immediately recognizable profile.

He lay there in the ditch, his mind racing. *Diana?*

But no, it was impossible. She had recruited them all, she had created the team. But it was a very special team, wasn't it, consisting exclusively of the few police officers who had complained to the FBI that the abductions were real.

They had all been slaughtered, all but one.

Had it been another deception, designed to silence the few people who had realized what was happening and were equipped to do something about it?

Still puzzling it out, he rose from the ditch and faded back onto the far side of the road, into the land that belonged to the state wildlife refuge.

From his experience as a detective, he knew not to draw conclusions until the facts came into focus, and they weren't in focus now. In fact, they had just gone out of focus—way out of focus.

He had never known that it was possible to feel this isolated and alone.

He also knew from the bitter anger that he felt that he had begun to love Diana—not that she had replaced Abby, but that, as this ordeal went on, he had been finding a place in his heart for her.

But who did she love? Who was she, really? Cut away all the promises and all the claims, and what was left was an ID that she admitted was false.

He put some distance between himself and the ranch, crossing a limestone hill, stopping only when he reached a bluff. Far below was the lake. This was the bluff where he'd seen the caves. Were they of any use to him now? Maybe, but the chance of getting trapped was too great.

He had definitely been observed by the tiger and possibly in other ways, so he could not risk remaining on this side of the ranch. Also, he needed to regain his pace. The moon was already well risen, the land flooded with its glow. The more he hesitated, the more his danger increased.

Even so, this whole side of the property was now compromised. He had no choice but to descend the bluff, go back across the road near the marina, and climb up to the ranch from the other direction.

If he was fast, this might work.

He clambered down, intending to double back and make his way along the lakeside until he reached the stream, then cut through it and return in his earlier scent trail.

When he was about halfway down, there was a flash from below. It wasn't bright but it was followed by a familiar electric crackle that surprised him so much that he almost lost his grip. Struggling not to fall, he turned to look down—and saw, incredibly, that the entire clearing at the foot of the bluff was filled with the creatures of the village with their great, stricken eyes. Four of them had Tasers, and a fifth had something that from this distance was far more dangerous. This was a rifle, probably one that he or Mac had brought into the village.

Laden with the machine gun, the heavy magazines, and his other equipment, Flynn nevertheless had only one maneuver. He had to climb back the way he had come.

Immediately, a rifle shot rang out. It was wide to the left, perhaps fifteen feet away and low. Knowing as much as he did about shooting, Flynn knew to move toward the impact point, not away from it. And indeed, this caused the shooter to miss again, this time by five feet to the right.

If he was lucky, this would work one more time, maybe two. The shooter was small, therefore clumsy with the rifle. But with unknown capabilities. He increased his speed.

Another shot struck the limestone, this one close enough for him to feel a spray of shattered stone against his cheek. The shooter was either brilliant or very poor, to be trying for a head shot.

Another shot, and this time Flynn felt the heat of it. Limestone fragments from the bluff stung his neck.

The next shot would make it.

He reached the lip of the bluff.

Pulling himself up with all his strength, he rolled onto the top as two shots in quick succession slammed into the limestone just below him.

The shooter had found his target, but an instant too late.

They were racing up the bluff with the ease of creatures made to climb.

He ran, speeding toward the road. He was desperate now and he knew it. His only hope was to make it back to the marina and get to the car. But they could flank him easily, and there were the dogs and there was the tiger, and Diana out there, who could be extremely dangerous, as much as she knew about the way he thought.

The car. Now. His last chance.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

He stayed off the road itself, leaping stands of cactus, darting around cedar thickets, stumbling when he came upon a concealed draw, then picking himself up and continuing on.

He ran hard and far, passing through the silent countryside with the swiftness of a deer, quick but vulnerable.

He couldn't hear a sound behind him or around him. It was as if he was entirely alone. And now he had to add a new concern, which was the silent helicopter. Now that they were certain he was here but no longer sure of his location, it might well become involved.

He reached the marina, which was closed and dark. He rejected the idea of taking one of the boats. Even if he had time to wire it, they would then know where he would appear next, somewhere along the lake.

His car was the only one left in the hard-dirt parking area. He ran to it and got in. As he inserted the key in and started it, he looked up and down the road, seeing no movement.

An explosion shattered the air, and for an instant he thought the car had been bombed. But it was a rifle bullet. It had shattered the windshield. The shooter was in the brush fifty feet away.

He threw the car into gear and floored it. As he accelerated, the little car fishtailed wildly in the dirt of the parking area. Fighting to regain control, he

pressed the gas pedal and it leaped ahead.

Dust churned up behind him as he sped along the marina road. His plan was now to violate all the rules. Instead of running from this impossible situation, he intended to rush the house and just shoot until they got him.

But the moment he turned into the ranch's road itself, the black GMC that Diana had been driving appeared, blocking his progress.

Hauling on the steering wheel, he turned into the pasture and went slamming through a mass of cactus so large that his tires spun in the pulp.

A second later, the truck was behind him, its grill filling his rear window.

As he maneuvered through the pasture, he fumbled the backpack open and worked the machine gun into his hand. To stop the vehicle chasing him, he needed a perfect burst. He levered the gun to semi-automatic mode.

Was he about to kill Diana?

He put the thought firmly aside. This was work, feelings came later.

The truck kept close, so close that he couldn't see the windshield. The driver wasn't a fool, he probably knew that if Flynn got a shot at it, he was a dead man, and also that Flynn wasn't going to waste bullets firing into the radiator.

A series of cracks, nicely measured, resulted in his own rear window being blown away. A powerful round was in use, sounded like a .308, probably a NATO round. Blow his head right off.

He swerved around some cedar, then skidded into more cactus, then plunged down into a draw. Behind him, the GMC blasted through the brush, pushing dense cedar aside like it was grass.

Again there was gunfire, and this time Flynn felt the whole car tremble as it took the shock of a round penetrating the trunk.

So they were going for the gas tank. Smart enough. He still had no shot.

Something had to be done, or he was going to lose this thing right here and right now. He drove on, unable to determine a productive course of action.

Then he saw water, then again, ahead and to the right, the lake, its surface

far down another bluff.

Okay, here was a maneuver for him. He got the HK into the backpack and opened his door. Now he was driving fast along the bluff's edge, doing forty, fifty, the car shaking itself almost to pieces. Outside his door, the cliff fell away.

This was going to be a very damn close thing. Very close. He didn't often bother God with his crap, but he bothered God now. A lot.

He spun the wheel to the left, causing the Cruze to literally go into tumbling flight. As it did, he dropped out of the open door and onto the cliff's edge.

The car went spinning into the lake.

He let himself fall and keep falling, breaking his plunge as best he could. Finally, he was sliding, then some roots and a loose boulder temporarily stopped him.

Far below, the car struck the water. Nothing left but a red trunk, then the night blue of the lake, the car gone forever.

He looked up, and saw five feet above him another of the caves. Yesterday's deathtrap was today's refuge.

As the truck snarled back and forth on the ledge, Flynn clambered into the cave. How well did they know him? If Diana was involved, they would be certain that he hadn't been in that car when it struck the water.

A moment later, he had his answer. It came in the form of gravel dropping down past the mouth of the cave.

So they knew their man.

The air coming out of the cave was cool—too cool, in fact, for this to be a small place. Back there somewhere was a very large cave indeed. Limestone tends to cave out over time, and this was old country.

He took his binoculars out of his pocket and saw, stretching away behind him, a substantial cavern. Its ceilings were cracked, there was rubble everywhere, and the only access to deeper areas was through a series of

openings that looked like real traps, the kind of places that would never let you find your way out.

No time to lose, though. As somebody dropped down outside the mouth of the cave, he plunged into the opening with the strongest breeze, and found himself squeezed tight as he forced his way along.

Confined spaces were never pleasant, and he had been sensitized by that damn coffin, but he kept pushing, dragging the backpack behind him, one of its straps around his left ankle.

He came out into a larger space—and saw all around him huge, glaring eyes. His heart practically exploded out of his mouth, but he choked back the scream as he realized that these were not living creatures but paintings of the gods of some forgotten tribe of Indians. They were beautiful, tall, staring balefully, their arms pointing toward the ceiling—where, when he raised his head—he saw a magnificent representation of the night sky.

Scraping echoed through the cave as his pursuers started down the shaft he'd just come through.

He headed deeper, walking, stooping, running when he could, not really keeping track of his movements. He could get lost in here, no question. But no matter what kind of twists and turns he took, he always heard behind him the scrape of their footsteps, and their quiet grunting as they negotiated the next narrow passage.

No more than one or two of them, he thought.

He smelled dry grass—just a whiff of it, but it was there. That bit of air had come from the surface. So there was another entrance ahead.

Sucking air, painting the way ahead with infrared, he was soon moving steadily upward.

Behind him, the sound of their scrabbling had grown louder.

A glow ahead, then a faint voice from behind shouting at him to stop. He did not stop. Then there came the crack of a shot. The bullet was wide, but not very. He ran away from the sound and toward the glow—and found

himself clawing his way out through a big stand of cactus, clawing and pulling at it, and forcing his body out to the surface.

Ignoring the torture of a thousand needles, he came up through the cactus—and saw, not fifty yards away, the truck. As he trotted toward it, he could hear that its engine was still running. He didn't wait, he ran toward the vehicle, putting every single bit of strength he still possessed into the sprint.

The truck was empty, so he now had two choices. He could take the truck and head back to the highway and get the hell out of there. Or he could rush the ranch compound with it.

He turned the truck toward the house. His job. His battle.

He did not see the two figures in the road behind him, did not see one of them yank an old Stetson off his head and hurl it to the ground in frustration.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

He stopped just out of view of the ranch to check his weapons a last time.

The HK was in good shape, and you wouldn't expect a weapon this durable to have any problem with a little fall down a cliff. All the magazines were there.

He stuffed the AMG into the pocket of his jeans and transferred the extra machine-gun magazines to his belt. Not the most secure way to carry them, but it was what he had. His most critical moments would be during exchanges. He'd trained with an HK and knew that he could pull and set two magazines in just under three seconds. Good time, but maybe not good enough.

He pulled the vehicle forward until he could see the compound. The house appeared quiet, the lights out. Beyond it, the barn was also dark. To every appearance, the place had been abandoned.

He took deep breaths, cleared his mind, and concentrated his attention on the world around him. He saw, just for an instant, some camouflage in motion about two hundred yards away. Somebody was in among a stand of mesquite, using the mottled shade as cover against the moonlight.

If he'd seen them, they could see him. He put the truck in gear and began moving toward the house. He drove quickly. There was no way for him to know whether or not they had realized it was him in the truck. He also didn't

know how many people here were capable of putting up a defense, let alone what form their weaponry might take, except that it would be exotic and it would be devastating.

He took the HK in his left hand and steered with his right. He passed the house, heading toward the area beside the shed that covered the entrance to the underground chamber.

Methodically, as he prepared himself, he tried once again to put aside his policeman's confrontation training. He could not announce himself. He had to just do this.

He got out of the truck and held the HK ready.

As he'd driven across the compound, there had been no movement from either the house or the barn.

Something hit him in the right shoulder with such force that it spun him around. A flash of pain shot down his chest and up his neck, but he regained his balance, turning to face the direction the blow had come from.

There was no nearby cover. He looked farther, and there, in the shadows of a cedar thicket, he saw a darker area that a careful observer could see had a human outline. He must be using some sort of stun weapon.

Just briefly, Flynn squeezed the HK's trigger. It blared out a burst and the figure sank. Just that quick. That impersonal.

Four shots, so twelve still in the magazine.

He moved closer to the shed, preparing for a reaction to his burst of machine-gun fire. But nobody moved in from the perimeter and the house and barn remained quiet.

He considered going down the ladder into the storm cellar, but decided to explore the shed first.

The door was unlocked, so he pushed it open.

This was probably an old well house. Before entering, he looked up at the grandeur of the sky. This was probably the last he would see of the world. He hoped that there was some sort of afterlife. That was all, hoped.

He entered the shed. Again, absolute quiet. There was an old stove pushed against one wall and a wooden trapdoor in the floor. Beneath it, there had to be opposition. That was fine by him. Just as long as he got to Morris, he didn't care whether he survived or not.

He lifted the ring, then hefted the door slightly. It wasn't barred from below. No, this was obviously the path they wanted him to take. The guy in the thicket had probably been out there to incapacitate him with the stun gun and carry him down.

When he pulled it up, the door made no sound. Well-oiled hinges, lots of use.

He climbed down the old ladder to what had once been the root cellar, then took a narrow spiral staircase, much newer, that led deep.

The closer he got to the bottom of the narrow space, the stronger the odor became of blood and burned flesh, of burned hair and another stench that cops come to know. It doesn't have a name, but it's the smell of things that have gone horribly wrong, that clings to places where violence has taken place. It's made up of sweat and blood and shattered lives, mixed together as the odor of fear.

The room glowed with soft fleshy light that came from the walls themselves. It was not a normal room, not a human room. Like the village, like all the rest of this place, it was an outpost of another world.

There was also a sheen of blood on the floor, and the stink of the place was so powerful that he had to fight hard not to gag.

Again, he heard the distant pulsation. He began moving toward it.

Machine gun at the ready, he went deeper. The pulsation became more and more distinct. Now it didn't sound so much like a boiling pot as a thumping assembly line.

Ahead there was a figure, short, quick, dressed in black, opening a box of a familiar kind.

A moment later, something that looked like a glowing fireball sizzled into

existence immediately above the body inside the box, which was a young woman, very pregnant. She was motionless but she did not look dead or even asleep.

Certain insects, he recalled, paralyze their prey so it will remain fresh for use later.

Her face was in shadow, but when he saw it clearly, he was confronted by such beauty that he gasped.

Immediately, the creature in attendance turned toward him, its movements snapping fast, like those of a quick snake.

There was a flash and for an instant Flynn saw in black outline the skeleton of the young woman and the skeleton of the baby inside her. The fetus moved its hands toward its face in surprise.

The light filled the room with a brightness like thick, glowing milk.

An instant later, the light was gone and his eyes were dazzled, and someone was standing in front of him. He felt hands on the machine gun and knew that in a moment it would be gone.

He didn't wait for his eyes to recover. He didn't wait for anything. He pulled off a burst and the creature flew backward, its arms flailing, its mouth and eyes wide with surprise.

Four more shots. The magazine was now half empty.

He stepped into the fight, moving quickly to aim the gun at a second creature. Had it been fully human, its face would have been the sort that cops see late at night, a whore's face, worn and tired and profoundly lonely. As it was, the great blue eyes were not only sad, they were tired. Also uncaring. He thought that it didn't care whether it lived or died.

Flynn did two shots, no more needed, and the figure flew backward into the wall, then slid to the floor.

He went to the young woman, whose eyes were now so glazed that he feared the worst for her. Working quickly, he performed CPR, but he couldn't get a pulse.

Light glared from behind him. As he threw himself to the floor, he turned into its glare.

“It’s over,” Jay Elder said.

If you have a gun, best to let it do your talking. Flynn depressed his trigger and the last burst on this magazine brought a brief shout, then Jay Elder disintegrated.

Replacing the magazine as he rolled, Flynn pushed the table over, creating a shelter for himself behind it.

Immediately, a stun weapon smacked the table, causing it to jerk back into his face. Four more of the creatures from the village rushed him. Another burst took them out.

Silence fell. The air was thick with the sickly stink of cordite, the powerful reek of blood, and a strange odor, the same cross between sulfur and cinnamon that had filled Oltisis’s space.

When there was no more fire directed at him, he took out his small, powerful LED flashlight and aimed it around the darkened room.

Elder was on the floor, his chest a mass of blood. Lying against the spiral stairs was one of the creatures from the village, also dead. In front of him there were the remains of at least six more of the creatures.

Flynn pulled out the empty magazine.

There was a whisper of movement in the dark.

A light came on, and suddenly he was face to face with the narrow, gleaming face of Morris. “Don’t reload, Flynn,” he said, “this is finished.”

Flynn said nothing.

“You’ve cost me,” he continued. “I can still make some use of her, but not much. And the infant is already sold along, so that means a refund. I don’t like to do refunds, Flynn.”

“What in hell does that mean, sold along?”

“I’m just a businessman trying to make something work in an out-of-the-way place that happens to contain some nice genetic material. This is a mean

little planet and it's dying. I want to get some of what it has to offer before you're all gone. That's all."

"But it's a crime where you come from, doing this. That's why your cops are after you."

"In some parts of our world, it's a crime. Not in all."

"You've turned yourself into something that can live freely on Earth. And you're struggling making more. That's why your helpers look like that."

"They aren't 'helpers.' That's a work gang, nothing more. When they're used up, they'll be terminated."

They were slaves, as Flynn had suspected. He realized why they'd been made to appear so strange. It was so they couldn't walk the streets and therefore couldn't escape.

The ability to manipulate life had created a whole new type of crime.

"What are you, Morris? You're not like Oltisis, are you? Not the same species?"

"Consider this a living costume. It's not pleasant and, thankfully, it's temporary. But to answer your question, I've been a lot of things in a lot of places." He gestured at the carnage around them. "This is costly. You're going to have to pay."

"What happened to my wife?"

"Your wife?" He looked over toward the dead woman. "That's your wife?"

The realization that he had not the slightest memory of Abby made Flynn's anger flare.

"You will go where she has gone," Morris continued. "Or you will die right here, right now." As he spoke, he slipped a rod into his hand, blunt and black and thick. Its end glowed like a coal. He waved it toward Flynn.

Searing agony. The machine gun flew from his hands as he grabbed at his chest, tearing the cloth away from his burning skin.

But he wasn't on fire.

The HK clattered to the floor.

“If I put a charge in you, you’ll feel that pain for hours, until you die of exhaustion. Or you can come with me.” He sighed, and Flynn knew it as a player’s sound of satisfaction, a sound that comes when the trump is laid down or the queen trapped.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Inside himself, Flynn fought for balance. He had to restore his mission, so he had to get past this checkmate, and he would. The only checkmate he would accept was death.

Morris said smoothly, “It’s not going to happen your way, Flynn. It’s going to happen my way.”

Flynn eased his foot toward the machine gun on the floor.

Morris kicked it away. “You need to understand that you’ve never come unhooked from my line.” He gestured vaguely. “The life you have known is over.”

Flynn still had the pistol in his shoulder holster.

“The pistol, too. You can’t win, Flynn, I’m sorry. I’m smarter than you are.” He glanced around the room. “I oughta just burn you, you bastard.” The stout little device in his hand hissed and its spark grew brighter. Morris smiled. “Fascinating, isn’t it? Come on, we’re going over to my factory.”

Morris directed him to ascend the stairs. He was caught, no question, but he concentrated on every detail as it unfolded. He needed not only to get an opening, but to see it. He’d watched many a fugitive miss a wide-open path to safety.

Outside, moonlight silvered the world.

“Get in,” Morris said, gesturing with his weapon toward the GMC. “Elder

was a good man. Making off-the-scale money. I can pay at that level, you know. Gold. You join me in this little, insignificant business I have going here, Flynn, and you'll be a billionaire in a year."

Flynn said nothing.

"I'm just sayin', Flynn, the money is serious."

As they entered the vehicle, Morris was careful with his weapon, keeping it constantly ready. "At home," he said as he started the car, "the equipment is better."

"Where is home?"

Morris didn't answer for a moment. He began driving across the grounds, heading out into the brush. "You know, I don't think I can explain that to you. It'd be like explaining this car to a chimpanzee. Can't be done."

Flynn thought, "So the truth is, it's somehow vulnerable." He would not forget Morris's inadvertent admission. If he lived.

They drove along a rough pasture track to the village.

From this perspective, the structures were really amazingly well camouflaged. They appeared to be a few piles of brush, the sort of thing left behind when cedar is cleared. Only from overhead could you see that it was organized around a central path.

Flynn had been watching Morris carefully, looking for an opening. So far, there had been none.

"Now, what's going to happen to you in there is that the contents of your mind—all of your experiences—are going to be taken out for sale to people who don't have the rich opportunities that life on Earth offers."

It probably wasn't bullshit, but he couldn't say that he understood it.

"Your body will be dissolved and reduced to recoverable stem cells, which will be sold on the black market." He laughed a little, and in that laugh Flynn heard a very human sound, the glee of a psychopath. He regarded Flynn with wide, avid eyes.

"Why are you telling me this?"

“You’ve caused me extraordinary trouble. I won’t deny it.” He smiled his soft, haunted smile. “I just want you to know how it’s done. What was done to your wife.”

A searing flash exploded into the car and, absolutely without warning, half the village burst into flames. Instinct caused Morris to whirl away from the blast, in the process dropping his weapon.

Instantly, Flynn reached out and grabbed it, and by the time Morris had looked back, it was pointed at him.

Morris’s face told his story. He was horrified and he had no idea what was going on. Neither did Flynn. Opening the door with his free hand, he backed out of the vehicle—and found himself three feet from the tiger. From inside the truck, there came a sharp burst of laughter. Morris began to get out the other side.

Flynn’s problem was that he had no idea how to use this weapon. It was a featureless black cylinder, and the end was no longer glowing.

In the firelight, the tiger’s eyes flickered. The face was not angry, it was not cruel. Instead, he was seeing that same questioning expression. Very softly, he said, “Help me.”

Morris came around the car. Another of the weapons was in his hand, and the tip of this one was glowing.

Frantically, Flynn shook his, twisted it, squeezed it until his fingers went numb.

Morris held his at arm’s length.

Flynn stared helplessly at the red tip.

He was hurled backward, falling against the tiger.

But the tiger backed away. Then Morris was on top of him, slamming his face with the fury of the mad. He’d seen it before, he’d felt it before. Guys on angel dust fought like this. Crazies.

From above, there came a powerful wind, sweeping up clouds of dust and causing the tiger to crouch, then turn away.

There was a snap and a deafening roar and the other half of the village burst into flames.

Snarling, Morris leaped to his feet. He raised his weapon. The red went to white, then to iridescent blue. But he didn't point it at Flynn, he pointed it overhead.

Flynn looked up to see a shape not fifty feet above them. It didn't make a sound, but it was visible in the firelight. It was the silent helicopter.

The weapon glowed brighter. The base of the helicopter began also to glow. It swerved away. Morris followed it. The helicopter began to smoke.

Flynn was getting to his feet, but then the tiger finally decided to charge, and he was forced to roll aside, throwing up his arms to defend his face.

The tiger went right past him, its immense bulk flying through the air with startling ease.

It hit Morris directly in the chest, causing him to plunge fifty feet across the compound and crash to the ground. His weapon flew off into the night. But he was immediately back on his feet. "Snow Mountain," he said, "do *not!*"

The tiger stared at him.

Overhead, the helicopter began to work its way lower. The remains of the village burned furiously, ringing the scene with dancing flames and casting terrific heat.

Wobbling, the chopper reached eye level. A voice called out, "We can't figure out how to land this damn thing!"

It was Mac. Sitting beside him was Diana.

The chopper went up, disappearing into the night sky.

Flynn saw that Morris was on his feet. Snow Mountain was close to him. He wasn't attacking, but he wasn't doing anything else, either.

Flynn dodged into some shadows, trying to minimize his exposure to Morris.

The wind from above returned. Got stronger. The chopper appeared in

front of him, wobbling uneasily at eye level.

Diana peered out. “Flynn, you’re a pilot, what do we do?”

“Draw the cyclic toward you!”

Mac yanked it into his stomach and they lurched away into the dark, then came rocking back.

Mac yelled, “That didn’t work!”

“Reduce power!”

“Got it!”

“Move the cyclic back, *barely!*”

They were hovering now.

“Reduce power more.”

They dropped to an altitude of about four feet. He could reach out and touch them. The chopper wobbled, began drifting into a slow spin.

In seconds, they would lose it. He saw the truck moving. Morris was getting away.

“Jump,” he shouted, “do it now!”

But the chopper shot up into the sky. The truck was quickly disappearing into the dark. Then the helicopter reappeared, nose down, dropping fast. Not the right attitude for a chopper, not this close to the ground. But Flynn could do nothing. They were going to pile the damn thing in.

At the last moment, it lurched. It spun on its axis. Once again, it hovered at an altitude of ten feet.

“See, the bastard won’t land! It’s got a fuckin’ mind of its own.”

It did, Flynn knew. Somewhere in there, a sophisticated crash avoidance system didn’t like Mac’s piloting.

“Jump or die, damnit, both of you! Do it NOW!”

Something dropped out. Flynn recognized it by its shape: it was a shoulder launched urban assault weapon.

Where in the world had Mac come up with a thing like that?

He’d probably never know.

The chopper was still at about five feet. Shielding his eyes with his forearm from the hurricane of dust it was producing, he ran forward.

“It’ll take off again,” he yelled, “*jump!*”

First, Diana leaped out. She tried to roll off the kinetic energy but did it like she’d seen in movies, not the way that worked.

Mac dropped down, rolled expertly, and danced to his feet.

As he came out, Flynn dove into the cockpit and pushed the collective all the way to the floor, causing the rotor blades to lose lift. The chopper dropped to the ground. He turned off the ignition switch and the engine quit.

“That sucker’s alive,” Mac said. “And it don’t like me.” He was caked with dust.

Flynn could no longer see the truck.

Diana hobbled to her feet. The dirt in her hair made her appear to have gone gray.

“Sprain?”

“I’m fine!”

Mac produced a Magnum. Diana had one, too. Good.

Diana dug another Magnum and an iPhone out of her backpack. “Take these.”

Flynn took them. “Safe to use the phone, I wonder?”

“Right now,” Diana said, “all he has is that truck. His money, my friend, is gone. His life is gone.”

“You hacked him?”

“To the bone. If he has cash in his pocket, that’s what he has.”

At that moment, the ground shook. Soon, more flames could be seen flickering through the trees.

“He just did the compound,” Flynn said.

“Then he’s a total bum with nothing but a busted car. ’Cause he ain’t even got any insurance policies. Somebody canceled ’em. And his deeds. They’re gone from the county record office. Plus the electronic backups. Sometime

later tonight, that truck's gonna run out of gas and he's gonna be walking.
That'll be what he has. Feet."

The hell with that, he had his life, which was not acceptable.

Flynn ran toward the helicopter.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Gathering up the UAW, he told Diana and Mac, “You two stay here, get away from the village, do back-to-back defense. Shoot at any and all movement and expect that tiger to come around at any time. But don’t drop it unless it charges you. The tiger is conflicted, and that might be valuable down the road.”

He got into the pilot’s seat and restarted the engine. As soon as it ran up, he loaded the rotor with lift and rose into the sky.

The lights of structures that lined the lake shot past as he worked the foot pedals to bring the chopper’s yaw under control. At the same time, he looked toward the ranch, hoping to spot the truck in the glow of the fires burning there.

No joy. The truck wasn’t near the compound, and beyond fire light, the land was dead black.

He took the chopper into an uneasy hover, then leaned out of the open door with the UAW on his shoulder. Its sight was light-sensitive, and he soon spotted the truck bouncing through the brush, heading cross-country toward the main road, rather than going anywhere near the ranch’s driveway or the smaller road that served both it and the marina.

He began working the helicopter closer. He was no expert with its controls, though, and it was a struggle.

The UAW had just one rocket in it, so his first shot would be the one he got. The Magnum wouldn't be useful, just noisy, so the rocket was his chance.

Working the cyclic and the collective, he dropped down and moved closer to the truck at the same time. It was invisible to the naked eye, but easy to see in the sight, and the closer he got, the more the crosshairs converged. But then he would overcontrol the chopper or undercontrol it and the whole process would need to be repeated.

He had just two hours training on helicopters. He hadn't even soloed. Still, this commercial-military hybrid was relatively easy to fly, and he was beginning to be able to close in nicely when the whole airframe started shuddering, the collective came up on its own and the engine went to full throttle.

The chopper went up so fast it was like being in a high-speed elevator. Flynn was normally almost silent, but this caused him to cry out with surprise.

The autopilot had taken over. It was probably controlled by Morris down in the truck.

The altimeter was winding up at breakneck speed. As he watched, he went through two thousand feet.

Okay, think. He was not going to overcome this situation using manual control. At best, the battle that would ensue between him and Morris and the autopilot would crash the chopper. He surveyed the instrument panel. No obvious autopilot override.

There was one thing he could do that had to work. Also, though, it might kill him.

He took the UAW up and sighted in the speeding truck, but the sight didn't even activate. Far out of range.

So this was it. He was down to one choice, and it was a really bad one.

He checked his straps, then reached down and twisted the fuel shutoff

valve, stopping the engine. The warning horn sounded as the wing went into autorotation and the ascent stopped. The autopilot was still controlling it, though, and as soon as Morris realized what he'd done, he would try to crash it, no question.

Working quickly, he flipped circuit breakers, hoping to kill something crucial, like the autopilot's telemetry. Turning off its power supply wouldn't matter. Autopilots have backup batteries.

As he flipped more and more switches, the instrument lights went dark, then the instruments themselves ceased functioning.

He was now on straight visual in a dead black night, with only the distant lights along the shore, and those of the various fires below, to orient him.

Once again, he brought the UAW back to his shoulder. As the chopper lost altitude in uncanny silence, he searched for the truck.

It was moving at breakneck speed, not a hundred yards shy of the main road. Flynn didn't care whether this bastard's bank accounts had been hacked or not, or what had happened to him. He needed killing.

As the chopper continued to descend, the truck grew in the UAW's sight, until finally the crosshairs began flashing yellow.

A few more feet. He dropped the chopper's nose. Maybe they would die together. Fine, he didn't care.

The crosshairs moved closer and closer together. Then, very suddenly, they were red, and in the center of their cross was the truck.

He fired the rocket, which left the tube with a ferocious roar and a kick.

He tossed the tube behind him out of the way and concentrated on piloting the chopper, which was now rapidly losing altitude.

A blinding flash of white fire announced the end of the truck, and Flynn roared, "Abby, baby, Abby baby, I love you!"

He couldn't bring her back, but this was the end for the evil bastard who had destroyed her, and that felt damn wonderful.

Police procedures didn't matter. Morris was not human, therefore the only

law that applied was the law of jungle, and Flynn did that kind of law as well as any of the criminals he so despised.

Using the cyclic, he got the chopper aimed straight toward the dying fires of the village. As he came in, he heard both Magnums being discharged.

Adjusting the collective to decrease lift on the rotor, he dropped down as fast as he dared, hitting the ground approximately a hundred yards from the village.

His jaw snapped, a flash went past his eyes.

The helicopter became still. His ears rang from the shock of the impact.

Before moving, he checked himself: hands okay, arms, feet, legs. If he was going to go into a firefight with impact injuries, he wanted to know where he was impaired, and what it would do to his effectiveness.

He jumped out of the chopper and approached the village. To the west, huge flames still gushed up from the ranch compound. Further south, a smaller glow marked the position of the truck.

Diana and Mac came out of the underbrush.

“I thought you crashed,” she said.

“No. What were you two firing at?”

“The tiger’s out there.”

“Has it charged?”

“You can’t ask us to take a chance like that!”

She was right, but he was also relieved when, very suddenly and in absolute silence, Snow Mountain appeared. His stripes were such perfect camouflage in the flickering firelight that it almost seemed as if he had materialized out of clear air rather than walked out of the shadows.

He came closer. Mac readied himself to shoot again.

“No,” Flynn said.

Broken only by the crackle of flames, the silence the tiger brought with him was as strange as a cry from a distant world.

Flynn reached out and laid his hand on the lion’s head—a small human

hand lost in the fur of the immense animal.

“You could sell that thing for a damn fortune,” Mac said.

“Don’t even think about it.”

The tiger looked off into the dark.

Flynn was relieved that Diana wasn’t the traitor he had thought her to be.

“We’re a good team,” he said.

Snow Mountain turned and slipped into the darkness.

Mac ran after him. “Hey!”

“Leave him be, Mac.”

“I don’t get my skin or to sell him to a zoo or nothin’. Shit!”

“He’s got his own demons to deal with, that one does.”

“He’s part human, isn’t he?” Diana asked.

“Be my guess. And who knows what else?”

“What’ll happen to him?”

“He’ll roam the land, make some kind of a life for himself.” He looked off in the direction he had gone. “That’s the loneliest creature in the world.”

A cathedral silence settled, as they all contemplated together the plight of Snow Mountain. In the distance, a dull explosion echoed from the direction of the compound.

“How did you ever get out?” Flynn asked Mac.

“I had to do a good bit of killin,’ tell the truth. Is that murder, doin’ those little gooks?”

“There’s no law to cover killing aliens, if that’s what they are. There will be, but not now.”

“Well anyways, it was self-defense.”

He thought of what had been happening at the compound, of the fate of the captured. “It sure was. I thought you were a goner.”

“I was acting.”

Flynn recalled that he’d been a terrific Dracula in junior year at Menard High.

But for the crackle of fires, everything was quiet.

Mac looked from one of them to the other. Slowly, a smile came into his face. "Have we won?"

Flynn noticed that Diana's hand had slipped into Mac's. For a moment, he felt shock. Disappointment. Then he forced it back inside. He'd been lonely for a while, so he'd stay that way. Fine. Abby was with him and she had no plans to take up with some damn crook.

He reflected that whole worlds can change in a moment on the battlefield, and that had happened here.

He smiled back at the two of them. "Right now, we've won."

Above the sirens, because it was so close, there was a sound that made Flynn freeze. "Back to back, brace the pistols!"

Dogs came leaping and snarling in at them from every direction at once, their bodies speeding like liquid fire, their teeth flashing, their human eyes filled with human hate.

With the care and expertise of a man, one of them grabbed Flynn's throat with its long claws. Its mouth opened and it was slashing with its teeth when he blew it in half. For a moment, the jaws continued snapping with shark-like fury, then, its blood gone, it dropped away like a stone.

Behind him Diana's shot went wild. As she screamed and another dog leaped on his back, he turned and blew off the head of the one attacking her, then killed two more at her feet.

All the while others piled on him, until their weight staggered him and he fell forward between Mac and Diana, then forced himself to turn into the ravaging pack that was on his back, and fired four more times, taking all of them out, leaving them in pieces on the ground around him.

Then they were gone.

Mac hung his head.

Diana sat on the ground covered with blood and sobbing.

Flynn said, "There are eighteen. We did twelve. The others won't try

again.”

Diana dropped her pistol into her backpack.

“Unless we disarm ourselves. You love your gun, remember.”

“It’s too hot to hold.”

“It’ll cool off. Mac, you okay?”

“I’m alive.”

“We’re done here,” he said. He could hear pumpers churning over at the compound, but great masses of smoke were still pouring skyward, lit by the fires in the underground chambers.

“Those guys gotta be wondering what the hell was going on out there,” Mac said.

“Probably think it was some kinda drug factory. Probably figure it belonged to you.”

“Me? I don’t have any penetration into Travis County. I’m way west of here, buddy.”

“It’s time for us to go on down the road,” Flynn said. “Morris and his operation are done.”

As the three of them walked out to the highway, Flynn saw that Mac and Diana were still hand in hand. In silence, Flynn walked on ahead.

Once they were on the road, Mac directed them to the parking lot of a closed strip mall. The Range Rover was there, pulled up behind a dry cleaners.

“Backup transportation,” Mac said. “We stationed it here last night.”

Last night seemed like a thousand years ago.

Moths and bats swarmed around the floods that lit the parking area. In the far shadows, a young couple necked in a convertible. Music echoed in the distance.

“I thought we’d go on over to the Oasis, knock back a few,” Mac said. “Sounds like there’s a band goin’.”

On the far distance, Flynn heard country music, the wail of a violin, the

frantic twitter of a mandolin.

He preferred blues to bluegrass.

They drove to the bar, which overlooked the lake. In the parking lot, though, Flynn hung back. He'd seen a taxi rank, cabbies trolling for kids too drunk to drive, and smart enough not to.

He watched Diana and Mac disappear into the lights and the crowd. He'd thought she was his, and it was going to take him time to get easy with the truth.

This battle had been won, but there was a war going on, and they needed to be prepared for whatever might come. They needed a bigger operation, more and better-trained personnel, more equipment. More of everything, and better.

He got into one of the cabs. "Take me into town. Motel 6 be fine," he said.

The driver worked in silence, which was good. To Flynn, silence was home.

The cell phone buzzed. He looked at the number, did not recognize it.

"Yeah?"

"Flynn, where are you?"

"Kicking back," he replied. "Catch up soon."

"You don't want to celebrate?"

"I'm good."

"Flynn—"

"Diana, you be careful. I know Mac well. He's a professional criminal and he breaks hearts for fun."

"Flynn, I love you."

"I love you."

Silence fell. Extended.

Finally, Flynn added, "But you want him."

"He wants me."

Pretty as she was, she was too hard along the edges to have been wanted

very much in her life. Mac went for powerful women, though. He enjoyed demolishing them.

“I’m here,” he said, “and you’re gonna want a shoulder in the end.”

“Mac is a lovely man, Flynn, that’s what you can’t see.”

“If you say so, Diana.”

He hung up as the driver pulled up in front of the Motel 6’s tiny lobby.

He checked in with his own credit card, a small but sweet satisfaction. In the room, he flipped through the channels. Nazis, cartoons, girls, the usual late-night stuff. Still, he left it on in the background. The mutter of artificial excitement relaxed him.

Toward three, he decided that sleep was not in the cards for him tonight.

He pulled on his jeans and a sweatshirt and went out into the parking area, then up onto the shoulder of the empty highway.

He walked, listening to the rhythmic whisper of his shoes on the tarmac. When an eighteen-wheeler thundered by he didn’t vary his pace or even glance at the drama of its passing, so deep had he gone into his thoughts.

His memories of this extraordinary experience followed him as shadows in the wind. Whatever happened, he was going to stay with this thing. In the end, whatever these creatures were, he would banish the bad ones from Earth, and create conditions that would enable the others to share the richness of their minds openly with mankind.

Flynn Carroll walked as he henceforth always would, with his secrets buried in his silence. He walked his own path, but not alone. Abby was there by his side. He chose to believe in the prevalence of the soul, and that she was, as are all decent people, part of the essential goodness of creation, of which he was soldier, servant, and ally.

In the silence of his heart, he embraced the people he had loved, and those he had lost. The moon had set, and the Milky Way in its majesty spread across the great vault of the sky.

He paused, looking up into the vibrant beauty of it all, and imagined other

eyes and other minds perhaps returning his gaze, and thought on the richness of the weave of good and evil he had touched, and what dark secrets must still be undisclosed. Had Morris been the only criminal of his kind? Were there more, as yet unsuspected, or would there be? And what of the alien police? If there was more crime to fight here, would they be willing, this time, to send enough support? And if not, then how would he proceed on his own?

He walked on down the dark highway, alone and content to be alone. His battle was won, and that was good. A good feeling.

A meteor flashed in the sky, then descended in blazing grandeur.

Or was it a meteor? He stared along the horizon where it had fallen, looking for some new glow or some other hint that it had been, perhaps, a conveyance from the deep beyond.

Nothing glowed, though, and no more meteors appeared.

Fine, then he would go on down the road, and see what might develop. The questions, however, of who these creatures were and where they had come from and what their true motives might be—these questions had not been fully answered, not in his opinion. He had wrecked the enterprise of one of their criminals. But the greater mystery that they represented had not been solved.

But that was tomorrow's problem. Today's had been solved. Whoever they were, their good guys now knew they had a friend here on Earth, and their criminals that Flynn Carroll was somebody to be reckoned with.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WHITLEY STRIEBER is the bestselling author of more than twenty-five books, including the legendary *Warday*, *Nature's End*, and *Superstorm*, the basis of the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*. His most recent books, *The Grays* and *2012: The War for Souls*, are both being made into films. His website, Unknowncountry.com, is the largest of its kind in the world, exploring the edge of science and reality.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

ALIEN HUNTER

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"Whitley Strieber at his best—part Stephen King, part Dean Koontz, but always Whitley."
Douglas Preston, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Kraken Project*, on *Alien Hunter*

WHITLEY STRIEBER



ALIEN HUNTER: UNDERWORLD

A FLYNN CARROLL THRILLER

ALIEN
HUNTER
UNDERWORLD

WHITLEY STRIEBER



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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CHAPTER ONE

AS HE did every morning, Flynn Carroll was going through police reports on his iPad, reading them quickly. Then he stopped. He flipped back a page. As he reread, his eyes grew careful.

He didn't look the part of a careful man. His appearance—ancient chinos and a threadbare tee—was anything but. Duct tape repaired one of his sneakers. His hair was sort of combed; his beard was sort of shaved. But the stone gray eyes now stared with a hunter's penetrating gaze.

In two respects, the report was right in line with the others that were of interest to Flynn. A man had disappeared—in this case, two days ago. This morning he was discovered murdered in a characteristically brutal and bizarre manner. What was different was that the body had been found very quickly. Usually, corpses were located days or weeks after the murders.

Not only was this a case for him, but it also represented a rare chance. The killers would generally do two or three or more victims over a period of a few days. The first body would rarely be found until at least two or three more killings had been done. There had been no other disappearances or characteristic murders reported anywhere in the area. If this was the first in a new series, it represented both a major change and perhaps a major opportunity.

The change was that this victim wasn't an anonymous homeless person

picked up off the street. This was a citizen with an identity and people and a place in the world. The opportunity was that the killers might still be operating in the area, and Flynn might have a chance to get them.

He unfolded his lean frame and got to his feet, striding off between the rows of consoles and neatly dressed technicians who manned the command center.

As he passed one of the linguists, he asked, “Got any new messages?”

“This week? Two lines.”

He stopped. “And?”

“A complaint, we think. They seem to be saying that you’re too brutal.”

“Me? Me personally?”

He laughed. “All their messages are about you.”

They’d been asking their counterparts on the other side for six months for more information about these killers. All they had been told was that it was a single, rogue band. From the amount of activity Flynn guessed that it consisted of about seven individuals.

Another of the techs sat before a strangely rounded device, beautiful in its darkness, but also somehow threatening, a glassy black orb that seemed to open into infinity.

Flynn went over to him. “Jake? Got a second?”

The man was intent on his work, peering into the blackness. Within this small, very secret working group hidden deep in the basement of CIA headquarters in Virginia, this device was known as “the wire.” It provided communication with their counterpart police force. This other police force was headquartered on a planet our experts had decided was called Aeon, the government of which was eager for open contact with mankind. Supposedly.

The problem was—again, supposedly—that they weren’t entirely in control of their own people. Aeon, our experts had decided, had evolved into a single, gigantic state, but it was free, and so, like any free country, it had its

share of criminals.

Flynn's take: Let's see this place before we decide what it's like. Nobody had ever been to Aeon—except, perhaps, the people who had not been killed, but had instead disappeared without a trace ... like his wife, Abby.

“Let Aeon know we've got another murder.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And if there's any response, anything at all, get it translated on an extreme-priority basis.”

As far as Flynn knew, only one remaining alien—a creature that looked human—was responsible for the original crimes, the disappearances. These new crimes—all killings—were being done by things that looked, frankly, alien. They weren't the “grays” of popular imagination, with their huge eyes and secretive ways. Flynn had never encountered one of those creatures. Apparently, they weren't from Aeon. With such a big universe, so incredibly ancient and complicated, who knew what they really were or where they were from?

The ones he was trying to take off the map were wiry creatures with narrow faces and blank shark eyes. They had four supple fingers and long, straight claws that could also be used as knives or daggers. They were biological but not alive, he didn't think, in the same way that human beings were. Their rigid determination and ritualistic, unvarying murder techniques suggested to him that they must be robotic.

He did not hate them. His objective was to clean up the alien criminal element on Earth so that the public could safely be informed that contact was unfolding. To the depths of his soul, Flynn wanted open contact.

There was one exception to his dislike of killing them. The first alien criminal known to have arrived on Earth had called himself Louis Charleton Morris. He used a highly sophisticated disguise that gave him human features that were regular and spare. His hair was black, his lips narrow but not cruel.

His expression was open, even friendly. If you encountered him in a dark alley, you wouldn't think you had a problem. You'd also be just as wrong as a person could be, because Louis Charleton Morris could do far worse than kill you. He could take you into the unknown and do to you there whatever he had done to Abby and so many others.

There had been a police officer here from Aeon, until he was killed. He had two legs and two arms, and a face with lips that were somewhat human, but the eyes were those of a fly. Oltisis could not expose himself to our atmosphere, and had worked out of a hermetically sealed office in Chicago.

Disguising oneself as Morris did was, it seemed, so illegal that not even a cop could get a clearance to do it. Since Oltisis's murder, though, Aeon had apparently changed that policy. No replacements had showed up, however.

Flynn's theory was that the killers belonged to Morris. They were something he had created and was using to get revenge.

Flynn's previous life as a detective on the police force of the city of Menard, Texas, had hardly prepared him for this work. Get your wife taken right out of your marriage bed in the middle of the night, though, and you'd change, and change a lot. You would go on a quest to find her, or find out what had happened to her. To serve that quest, you would learn whatever you needed to learn, and do whatever you needed to do. You would push yourself hard. You would not stop.

He walked across the room to a door marked only with a plastic slide-in sign: DIRECTOR. On the other side, there were more desks; more computing equipment; more quiet, intense men and women. Saying nothing, moving with the supple energy of a leopard, he went through into the inner office.

"I've got one I want to move on right now."

Operations Director Diana Glass said, "Okay, what are we looking at?"

"Town in Pennsylvania. Guy disappeared yesterday. He's been found. First report from the area."

“They could still be there.”

“That’s what I’m hoping. There’s a strange kicker, though. He’s a neurologist. Dr. Daniel Miller.”

She raised her eyebrows in question.

“It gets more interesting. He worked at Deer Island.”

“On the cadavers?”

“Possibly. There’s a neurobiology unit there.” He paused. “So maybe he hit on something somebody would rather we didn’t know.”

“Official Aeon would never do this.”

“You sure?”

“Maybe it has to do with his work, but I also think a citizen was involved to make sure you’d come. It could be an ambush, Flynn.”

“Probably is.”

“How did it go down?”

“He went out on a mountain bike. When he didn’t return at sundown, his wife called for help. The bike was located at dawn. The cops brought hounds, but his scent was only on the bike.”

“But they found the body anyway?”

“In a wetland a few hundred feet from his house. Same condition as the derelicts. Lips cut off, genitals and eyes dissected out, drowned.” So far, more than twenty homeless people had been taken off the streets, mostly in the northeastern United States, brutally and bizarrely mutilated, then drowned in the Atlantic and returned to locations near where they’d been picked up.

“We need some advice from Aeon,” Diana said.

“And how are we going to get that?”

“The two police forces, working together—”

“Don’t even start. There’s one police force: us. Ever since Oltisis, Aeon’s side has been all smoke and mirrors.”

“For God’s sake, don’t do any more killing.”

He locked eyes with her.

She looked away. “The other side objects more strenuously every time you kill another one, Flynn. They want them back.”

He said nothing.

“They have laws just like we do! They want these creatures back for trial and punishment.”

“No, they don’t. They’re not creatures.”

“That’s a matter for debate.”

“You haven’t fought them. I know when I’m dealing with a machine—believe me. No matter how high-end its brain is.”

“They don’t want them killed. Bottom line.”

“If they want them back, tell them to damn well come and get them.”

“If you’re wrong about what they are, you’re committing murder.”

“We’re disabling machines, not killing people. Anyway, this is our planet. So, our laws.”

“Which don’t include blowing away perps like—” She hesitated, unsure of how to continue.

Flynn knew exactly how. He said, “Like they’re broken machines and cannot be stopped in any other way.”

“Aeon is far in advance of us technologically, Flynn. Far more powerful. When they complain, we need to listen.”

“‘Aeon’ consists of messages translated from a language we barely understand, coming from someplace we can’t even find, that will not send a replacement for the one policeman they did give us, or even explain what they think happened to him.”

“Oltisis was killed in Chicago, not on Aeon.”

“And what about a replacement? Or, God forbid, even two. Or fifty? Why don’t they send us a whole team of detectives and a nice chunk of SWAT? Seems the logical thing to do.”

“They regard this as a small problem. One we can handle ourselves. They haven’t sent support, out of respect for us.”

“Have you ever told them the truth?”

“What truth?”

“That only one person is able to even get near these critters? I need support, Diana. The risk is just incredible.”

“We have messages that specifically forbid you to kill, as you know. You’ve got to promise me you’ll abide by them.”

“So what do I do? Bag them up? Drag them off to a supermax?”

She sighed. She knew perfectly well that they could not be contained.

“Over the past nine months, I’ve done four. If Aeon’s telling the truth and this is a rogue band, maybe I can wrap the problem up on this mission. Finish the thing.”

She leaned far back in her chair, her long dark hair falling behind her, her green eyes, so deceptively soft, filling with uneasy calculation. Her face, an almost perfect oval, took on an expression that Flynn knew all too well. When she was twenty, it must have been a soft face, sweet with invitation. Her journey to thirty had been a hard one, though, during which she’d seen death and done some killing. Her face still said angel, but now it also said soldier. Hidden behind that cloud of Chanel was a woman with a tragic secret: The blood of some of her own cops was on her hands. Flynn knew she was as haunted by the deaths of members of their original team, who had been killed by Morris and his group, as he was by Abby’s disappearance.

“Losing you would be a phenomenal disaster, Flynn. You’re right about that. I’m going to have to order you to stand down on this one.”

For a little while in the dangerous period when they had been tracking Morris, the two of them were together twenty-four hours a day, sleeping in the same room for mutual protection, and they got to be a thing—sort of, anyway. They had wanted each other, but he was not able to dismiss Abby’s

ghost. Four years ago, their affair was an act of desperation, which had faded when the threat became less. With her sitting in the boss's chair and him married to a ghost, he considered it entirely over.

“Time, Diana. I’ve gotta move.”

“You heard me.”

As he walked out, he called Transportation and told the operator, “I want to be in Mountainville, PA, in best time.”

Diana came up behind him.

He walked faster.

“Flynn, at least wear the rig.”

The rig was designed to record his moves, to be used in a training film. “Nope.”

“Unless you wear it, we can’t hope to teach others. You can’t work alone forever, Flynn.”

“Fine. Hire Mac.” MacAdoo Terrell was an old friend from Texas. He’d worked the Morris case with them. He was among the best sniper shots in the world, if not the best, and Flynn could use a sniper in this.

“You know I can’t.”

“No rig. Forget the rig.”

She hurried along, working to keep up as he strode out of the command center.

“Flynn, please!”

He stopped. “The rig contains electronics. As I have previously explained, when I wear it, the electronics will be detected, and therefore, I will fail to engage the perpetrators. Of course, they may well engage me, in which case, I’m done.”

“Do not go out there.”

“I could end this!”

“Flynn, it’s a trap, and you’re completely buying in to it. I don’t get why

you don't see this.”

“If you know you're entering a trap, it's not a trap—it's a mistake on the part of your enemy. So I'm gonna walk into their mistake—and they don't make many—and I will not lose this chance.”

“Flynn, will you grant me one favor? A small one?”

“I'm not gonna wear the rig—but, yeah, something else.”

“Come back alive.”

“Fine. Done. Good-bye.”

This time, she stayed behind. He passed through the two departments that concealed the command center, went to the transport hub, and got in the waiting SUV.

The driver was silent. Flynn was silent. Usual routine. He spent the drive to Dulles looking at satellite views of Mountainville. Frustrated by what he was seeing, he texted Logistics: *Throw me something better than Google Maps.*

That's all we have. Not a strategic location.

He punched in the tech's phone number.

The answer was immediate. “Sir?”

“Get to the Pennsy Department of Geology, or whatever they call it over there. You want a map that details any isolated watercourses within two miles of the house. Mountain streams, that type of thing. Any that are spring fed and absolutely pure. And any caves, crevasses, rocky areas, especially near the good water. You want a map that shows all of that. You got it, you call me. Make it fast—it's as urgent as they come.”

He put down his phone, then returned to the Google map. Steep hills, lots of cliffs, which meant exposed climbing. For them, the best terrain. For him, the worst.

The car dropped him at general aviation, and he strode quickly through to the waiting plane.

As he entered the cabin, he asked the pilot only one question: “How long?”

“An hour and sixteen minutes.”

“Get me there in an hour.” If this had any chance of working, he had to be ready by sunset. Maybe the aliens would be there one more night. Not two, though. Never happen.

“Sir?”

“I know the plane. It can do it.”

“It’ll risk the engines.”

“Do it.”

Once they were airborne, he called the unit’s FBI liaison officer. “Flynn here. Get the body out of the hands of the locals immediate. Standard procedure: autopsy and record, then freeze. Provide the family with stock ashes in an urn. The local cops are to be told that this is a terrorism matter. If they talk, they’re gonna be spending the rest of their lives inside. Obviously, make certain there’s no press.”

“Got it,” the liaison officer said.

The engines howled. The pilot was running them as ordered.

Flynn watched the land slide past far below, the trees tinged with autumn, little towns nestled in among them, America in its quiet majesty, her people in their innocence.

He wanted things to be right for them. He hadn’t been able to protect Abby, but he could protect them, at least a little, at least for a while.

As always at such moments, he wished he had Mac with him. They’d grown up together but gone down opposite paths. Mac was a criminal, more or less, so tangled up in being a DEA informant and massaging the drug cartels, you couldn’t tell at any given time which side of the law he was on.

If Flynn missed anybody besides Abby, it was Mac. He’d helped wreck Morris’s operation just like he lived his generally illegal life—with skill,

ease, and pleasure.

His extensive criminal record made him a security risk. So no clearance, which meant no job, despite the fact that he'd been effective and, unlike most of the others who worked on that case, lived. Morris had been running his operations out of a ranch near Austin, Texas, complete with bizarre intelligence-enhanced animals and human accomplices.

Flynn slid his hand over the butt of his pistol. What success he'd had—the killing of four of the things so far—came from one central fact: He had become very, very fast with his weapons. None of the trainees he'd been given so far were able to come even close.

It wasn't too surprising, given that a man could practice for a lifetime and never learn to shoot a pistol as fast as Flynn could. He'd always been good with a gun, but in the past few months, he'd reached a level of proficiency that was, frankly, difficult even for him to understand.

The engine note changed, dropping. The plane shuddered, headed down. Flynn looked at his watch. Fifty-four minutes.

He hit the intercom. "Thank you."

The reply was a burst of static. The pilot was probably thinking about whom he'd have to deal with if he blew his engines.

From the air, Mountainville appeared to be little more than a few stores and some houses tucked in among a low range of hills. The single-strip airfield wasn't manned. The plane could land, though, and that's all that mattered.

The place looked the picture of peace, but Flynn knew different. Somewhere down there a man had endured what was probably the worst death a human being could know.

Also down there, he had reason to hope, would be his quarry.

The plane bounced onto the runway and trundled to a stop, its engines still roaring. He got out and crossed the tarmac to the car that had been left

for him. As per established procedure, the vehicle was dropped off by the regional FBI office. Nobody was to meet him. What Flynn did, he did alone.

He tossed his duffel bag into the trunk, then got behind the wheel. He sat silently, preparing himself for whatever might come. Then he started the engine.

The hunter was as ready as he could be. He headed off toward Mountainville, and whatever might linger there.

CHAPTER TWO

THE TAIL Flynn had been expecting showed up ten minutes after he left the airport. Now he drove down a quiet country road—two lanes, not in good repair, choked on both sides with pines. Diana’s tail was about a mile behind, staying out of sight, or imagining that he or she was doing so.

As he drove, the forest on his left fell away to reveal an open field. Beyond it was Mountain Ridge, a low rise of land shadowed by the darkness of the pines that covered it. Somewhere along that ridge, Daniel Miller had met his end.

Flynn noticed a flicker of movement in the rearview mirror. He sped up a little, drove until he saw a mailbox ahead, the name **MILLER** painted on it. He turned quickly into the drive and sped up the unpaved double track.

He began to see flickering light bars winking through the trees ahead. So the locals still hadn’t left, which was not good. The longer the body stayed out there, the more chance for word of its condition to spread. Public knowledge would turn very quickly into public terror if the world realized what was happening.

At that moment, his cell phone vibrated. It was a text—and an odd one: the number three repeated three times. Nothing else. It wasn’t a police code, at least not one familiar to a Texas cop.

He glanced in the rearview, but the apparent tail was gone, so he killed

the phone and pulled over. He looked for the number where the text had originated, but it was blocked. He called Diana.

“Did you just text me a three-code of some sort?”

“No, I did not. What did you get?”

“Three threes from a blocked number.”

“Some sort of phone scam?”

“On a line this secure? I don’t think so.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“By the way, pull off your tail.”

“Flynn, you need somebody on your back.”

“The poor guy is vulnerable as hell, you know that.” Only it wasn’t just any FBI agent pulled in for the duty. It was Diana herself, of course. Soon enough, he’d send her packing.

He hung up and returned to his drive. A moment later, the phone buzzed again.

“Go ahead.”

“You got your maps.”

He killed the phone and pulled over. Drawing his iPad out of his duffel, he examined the maps he’d been sent. They were eleven years old, but far more detailed than what he’d found on Google. He saw the Miller cabin, and another cabin two miles away. Could be others around by now, but from the look of the woods he was in, not too many. Good. The fewer people who were exposed to this, the better.

There was a little stream, called a “kill” in this area, from the original Dutch word *kil*. This part of Pennsylvania had originally been settled by immigrants from Holland. Hecker Kill descended from the mountains, passing no structures until it went under the road and meandered across the flats toward the Delaware River. So the water in the upper reaches would be as pure as Earth could make it, the milk of the planet, just the kind of water

the creatures liked best. There were also deep ravines.

If the aliens were in one of those ravines, that could be useful. The deepest of them also had a pool at the bottom, and caves.

They liked hiding in caves, and the nearby water supply would likely make that their first choice. Somewhere between here and there would be the point of ambush.

He looked long at the map, committing all the elevations to memory. Too bad there were no water depths. He might have to take one hell of a risk involving that pool, and it had been a dry autumn.

Thinking out confrontations with the aliens was like playing chess for your life.

He started the car again. Soon the drive was choked on both sides by dense growths of pine. As he proceeded up the dark, steepening track, he prepared to meet Eve Miller.

He felt his body relax into a scholar's slump, felt his breathing become less measured. He'd be Dr. Robert Winter, an infectious disease specialist from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

He counted the ruts of six vehicles in the drive—one of them large enough to be an ambulance. Or, in this case, a coroner's wagon. The tire marks went in only one direction. So nobody had left yet. He wasn't about to expose himself to the local cops. The FBI guys had better be in control of that body by now, and all evidence confiscated. The tail he'd deal with in due time.

The drive ascended steeply, penetrating into thicker and thicker stands of pines and oaks, ash and maple. Lovely spot.

He reached the row of official vehicles parked at cockeyed angles in the grassy roadside. There were two black FBI Fords, the coroner's wagon, and two sheriff's department cruisers.

Farther on, he could see a log cabin huddled under an overhanging oak.

He pulled his car up past the official vehicles and into the gravel roundabout in front, then sat listening and watching, just letting himself settle into the scene. Then he opened his duffel again and took out his weapons.

He carried two pistols. His main weapon was a Casull Raging Bull loaded with .454 rounds. It was a superbly engineered pistol that could handle high-speed shooting and still provide accuracy, so long as you were practiced with it. Its ported barrel reduced recoil, giving it an accuracy edge. The other weapon was also a Casull, this one a .454 quarter-inch—basically a Police Special with more juice. In the past, he'd carried an AMT Backup, but the Casull offered both more power and accuracy.

He attached the Bull, still in its holster, to his right hip with a clip, then locked the holster into the belt. The little pistol he tucked into a shoulder holster under his left arm. His guns were protected by a biometric array, which made it impossible for anybody else to fire them.

So the aliens couldn't shoot him with his own pistol, but they had a lot of other ways of dealing with him. If they got him, he knew that it would be slow. They made their victims suffer, and they would undoubtedly pay special attention to him.

In the event of capture, he had a way out. He withdrew a black steel box from the duffel and opened it. Inside were two silver capsules, each a quarter of an inch long. He took one out, then looked at its chemically treated seating in the box for any discoloration that would reveal even a microscopic leak. He then fitted the cyanide capsule into the back of his jaw. Crack it, and he would be dead in three seconds.

He went up onto the porch and pressed the doorbell.

Nobody came. So had the widow left? If so, the ambush could be about to go down right here, right now.

He rang the bell a second time.

The door creaked. An eye flickered in the peephole.

“I’m Dr. Winter from the CDC,” he said.

There was a faint scraping sound behind the door. She was sliding her fingernails along the doorframe, unsure about whether to open it.

“I have a few questions, ma’am.”

The lock clicked and the door swung open. Standing before him was a woman of perhaps forty, her considerable beauty wrecked by lack of sleep. No tears, though. He noted that.

“Please come in,” she said.

He found himself in a large living room with a cathedral ceiling. There were checked curtains on the windows, and a couch upholstered to repeat the pattern. An oak coffee table stood before the couch. Two deep recliners faced it. In the open kitchen he could see a Bosch dishwasher and a Sub-Zero fridge. A collection of copper pots, all of them gleaming, hung from a rack above a broad granite countertop.

“Very nice,” he said.

“Thank you. The CDC. Is that why they won’t let me see my husband? Is some sort of a disease involved?”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

She gave him a defiant look, her eyes full of fire and sadness.

“When you last saw him, he was riding out toward the ridge?”

“On his mountain bike. It’s in the cop report. Why is someone from the CDC here?” She added in a low, ominous voice, “What happened to his eyes, his face?”

“You did see him, then.”

“The sheriff came up here after he found him. He showed me—” She shook her head.

“Pictures?”

She nodded.

He would make certain that the FBI got those pictures, and they ended up

in a shredder. “Did he say what he thinks happened?”

“He fell off his bike and became disoriented. But that doesn’t leave a man all cut up, not like that.” She looked him up and down, blinking once when she noticed the bulge on his right hip. “You’re not from any Centers for Disease Control.”

No point in continuing the lie. “No, I’m not.”

“So it’s not a disease?”

“No.”

“Are you here about Dan’s clearance?”

“Did he talk about his work?”

She considered that, then shook her head.

He pressed her. “What did he tell you?”

“Nothing.”

He went to the couch. “May I sit down?”

“I can’t stop you.”

“If you tell me to leave, I’ll leave.” He wouldn’t, but hopefully she wasn’t going to try that particular path.

“I know what you are.”

“And what would that be?”

“Like I said, you’re worried if his clearance was compromised.”

“I want to help you.”

“How in the world can you help me?”

“By finding who did this and bringing them to justice. May I know your first name?”

“I’m Eve. But shouldn’t you know that?”

“It’s in the file, but I prefer to ask.” He tried a smile. No reaction. He asked her smoothly, “What do you think happened to Dan?”

“What do I think? I don’t know what to think. He fell off his bike. He was maimed. He drowned in two feet of water. It’s not exactly a straight story, is

it?”

“No, it isn’t.”

She fell silent. Grief? No, not quite. When her eyes came back to him, there was a nasty little spark. But why? What was she hiding?

“Is this work-related?” she asked. “Are you trying to tell me he was murdered, is that what this is about?”

“We don’t know what happened.”

“But it could have been murder, or someone like you wouldn’t be here. And the local cops aren’t going to be told, are they?”

“They’re going to close it out as an accident.”

“And the FBI?”

“They’re here because of his clearance. To make sure no classified information slips out in the course of the investigation.” He paused. “Look back to before this happened. Anyone come up to the house who was unexpected?”

“That’s why he was out there in the first place. Three children came to the door. They asked if they could come in. I asked what they wanted, and they just walked off the porch and sort of wandered back into the woods.”

“And you’d never seen them before?”

“They looked like little tramps. They were filthy. They smelled. And no, I don’t know where they came from.” She drew her shoulders together. “They made us worry that drifters were camping in our woods. We have three hundred acres of this mountain.”

The aliens could hypnotize the unwary into seeing them as deer, as owls, even as children. They could put hallucinations in your mind, damned convincing ones. “What do you remember about the kids?”

He watched her eyes flutter closed. She was trying hard. She said, “I was glad they left.” She leaned toward him. Her voice a low whisper, she continued, “I found them loathsome.”

“But no more details?”

“Were they part of this? Because they were not normal children. No way.”

He offered the simplest and safest of all the lies he could have told her: “No, they weren’t part of this.”

“I want to believe you.”

“Let’s think back again. Besides the kids?”

“Nothing important.”

“Everything is important.”

“He was murdered. That’s why you’re here.”

Flynn did not reply.

“Did you work with him? Can you at least tell me that?”

“I did not,” he said.

“You’re like him—you come off as a real gentleman, but inside you’re tough as nails.”

“He was a hard man?”

“Strong. Like you.”

He nodded. “Now, think back. Anything else? Anything last night?”

She looked into the middle distance. Flynn watched the pulse in her throat. He’d interrogated too many people to watch her eyes. Do that, and even a person with nothing to hide would spar with you. Lower your gaze, and they feel an unconscious sense of control, even though they are not in control.

“You know, there is.” She leaned forward. “I couldn’t sleep last night.”

“I understand.”

“Very late, there was an owl at the bedroom window.”

“An owl? Had that ever happened before?”

“Never. It was just looking in at me. I hit the window with a pillow, and it flew away.”

Owls didn't look in windows, so the aliens had been here as recently as last night. They'd still been interested in her twelve hours ago, so maybe their interest was ongoing. Maybe she was also a target, or, as was more likely, they had planned their ambush of him near the house, and wanted to be sure he would be nearby tonight, protecting her.

"Let's talk about Dan and Deer Island. What do you know?"

"His employee number was 333676. I knew very little else. It was all secret."

The first part of the number sent enough of a shock through Flynn that he had to drop his head for an instant, so she wouldn't see his expression.

In that same instant, the blocked number became a central issue. He needed to find out at once who was behind it.

He lifted his lips into the appearance of a smile. "Tell me the very little."

"What you want to know is whether or not he shared his secrets with me. He didn't. I just figured a few things out."

"Run down what he did tell you."

"His project was called Dream Weaver. He did a lot of work with hypnosis, which I figured out from things he said."

The project name didn't ring any bells, but the fact that he worked with hypnosis meant that he almost had to be involved with the bodies. The question of how the aliens could hypnotize people without speaking to or touching them was of major interest to the U.S. government, especially the intelligence community.

"Anything else? Anything at all?"

"Three nights ago, we thought we heard somebody on the porch." She nodded decisively, fixing it in her memory. "We did."

"After the children or before?"

"After. It's what finally decided Dan to investigate up the ridge."

"He was armed with what?"

“Not armed. We’re not gun people.” She glanced again at his hip.

“I’m a police officer,” he said. He lifted his jacket to reveal the butt of the big pistol.

“From where? What department?”

“Can’t answer, I’m sorry.”

Given that Dan Miller worked in an advanced facility that was involved with the mysteries of alien neurology, Flynn was now almost certain that he had been looking for a meeting with them, not a confrontation with squatters. They had granted him a meeting, all right—his last.

“I’m going to spend the night out in your woods. I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t leave the house.”

“Are you serious?”

“Your husband worked against terrorists. They killed him, and I’m going to see if I can track them.”

“It’s almost dark.”

“They might still be out there. You need to know that.”

“Then I’m going back to the city.” She clutched her shoulders. “I don’t want to be here anymore.”

“Leave in the morning.”

“I want to leave now.”

“Ma’am, I don’t want you out on those roads in the dark. This is a lonely place. Safer in the house with the doors locked. And turn on your alarm system.”

The wall clock hummed in the kitchen. A breeze toyed with the pines outside. He raised his eyebrows, asking for a response.

“I think you’re the saddest man I’ve ever seen. Why is that?”

“Just stay in the house. You can leave in the morning.”

Should he tell her what was really going on, that she was a pawn in a deadly chess game?

The words hung on his lips, ready to be spoken.

She said, “Yes?”

If she thought the “terrorists” were going to come after her tonight, she’d certainly leave, which would change things in unpredictable ways.

He believed that he could protect her. He believed that he could kill aliens here tonight, and save future lives as well.

“Again, please accept my condolences.”

She smiled, sadly and tightly. “Do you want a cup of coffee? I didn’t even offer you coffee.”

He gave her a salute.

She returned a wary smile.

As he went down the pathway from the house, she leaned against the doorjamb watching him. Then he rounded the big old oak, and she was blocked from his view.

When one of the official vehicles down below started up, he stepped off the road, moving swiftly back into the trees. The FBI would have told the locals to leave him alone, but he wasn’t taking any chances.

Now it would start, the first phase of a hard night of hunting.

His tongue went to his cyanide capsule, his hand to his gun. He turned his back on the parade of vehicles lumbering away down the road, and slipped into the forest.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS just approaching sunset, so the aliens would still be in the ravine, if he had guessed correctly about their location. He wouldn't be able to kill them there, but he might succeed in running a deception that would make them misread his competence. When they sprang their trap on him at the house, they would hopefully be overconfident.

As he moved through the woods, he heard the rustling of beetles, the hollow echo of birdsong, and somewhere close by, the uneasy mew of a raccoon. Animals would not venture near the aliens, meaning that silence in the woods was a useful warning sign. Birds would take flight, and even insects would stop their shrilling.

When you were within a few hundred feet of them, there would be absolute silence, nothing but the rustle of the breeze.

As he walked, he took deep breaths, pulling in the air, smelling it and tasting it, feeling it in his lungs. He was seeking their scent, the strangest odor that he knew. You could describe it as sulfurous, but it also contained the nasty sweetness of death and the roses of memory. Like everything about them—about Aeon, for that matter, and the whole issue of aliens on Earth—it was full of secrets.

Now, as he climbed the increasingly steep path, he saw signs, not of the aliens but of Miller's mountain bike. Here he had slipped a little, and farther

on, he had sped up. Then, here, along this rocky stretch, he had stopped for a time.

Had he been looking for squatters or seeking out the aliens?

Here, in a flatter part of the trail, the mountain bike had stopped again. It had stood on its tires long enough to make deep indentations in the soft earth of the trail. Beside the wheel marks, there were toe tips. Miller had balanced on his toes, still astride the bicycle. He had been looking up. He would have seen above the trees a glittering emptiness not unlike that of the lens of the wire back in the office, and before he knew it, he would have risen into the air. He would have been dragged into what would have seemed something like a big wasp nest, stinking and claustrophobic. In it, he would have been strapped to a table. Then they would have gone to work on him.

Flynn was pretty sure of all this. He had seen most of the other bodies that were recovered, the wounds, the bruises left by the struggle against the straps.

He moved a little deeper into the woods, a little closer to his target ravine. Along this route, the land got more and more rocky and steeper. He moved silently, relying on his memory of the elevations from the map, and his own terrain sense.

Then, very suddenly, the birds were gone. He stopped. Nothing rustled along the ground; no wildlife scuttled or growled. Far off, a dog was barking frantically, and from the sound of it, had been for a while. He stepped back a few feet, until he once again heard birdsong.

“Flynn—”

At last, she’d made her move. He pretended surprise. “What in hell’s name are you doing here?”

“Saving your life.” She nodded toward the ravine. “They’re down there.”

When he moved toward it, she came with him.

“I won’t let you do this, Flynn.”

“Diana, you need to back off. You don’t belong in the field, and we both

know it and we both know why.”

“Don’t hit me, Flynn, not with that.”

She’d lost her original team because she’d panicked and made command errors. She and Flynn were the only two who had survived a night of merciless carnage.

He put his hands on her shoulders. “Sorry, it was uncalled for.”

“I remember every guy, all the time.”

“I was there, too. I could have done things differently.”

“On your first operation? Green as you were? No.”

He turned back toward the ravine. She threw her arms around him.

Gently, he peeled her off and began moving downward, descending quickly into steeper terrain.

The rocks were painted with orange and tan lichens and gray moss, but they were jagged and sharp. Soon, he was working his way down a cliff. A bad spot to have to draw a gun.

He reached a granite outcropping. Peering over the small ledge that it formed, he saw the pool he’d spotted on the state map.

Somewhere below this ledge and above the pool, there was going to be a cave or a crevasse where the things were hiding, all pressed up against its walls like giant bats.

His ability to use his weapons would be compromised, while their dexterity would be at its most useful.

His left hand went to his neck, lingering on the scar that was there, long and red and still tender after three months. It had been done by one of their claws. Three inches, right down to the vertebrae—so fast, he hadn’t been able to react. Just in time, he got in a shot that had separated the head from the body.

He took a breath and continued down, pausing every few seconds to inhale their odor, testing its strength.

Then he felt the earth beneath his body give way. He steadied himself, then kept sliding carefully down toward the source of the odor.

The next instant, his footing was gone and he was more than sliding, he was out of control. He let it happen, scrabbling now, seeming to struggle.

Rocks and dirt cascaded down into the pool. Just as the slide was becoming a fall, he managed to grab a root outcropping. This caused him to swing out. The root shifted; then he felt it giving way under his weight. Swinging back, he grabbed another outcropping with his free hand. He found footing. Tested it.

The odor of the aliens was now chokingly strong, its sourness greasy, its sweetness so thick, it had become a sickening taste.

Carefully slipping out of one foothold, he found another lower down. Again, he descended.

He was close now, just a few feet.

Without warning, something fell on him from above, wriggling wildly. Before he could rip it off, it had wrapped itself around his neck and was striking at his face, fangs gaping out of its bright red mouth.

An illusion, he knew, but he wanted them to think it had convinced him.

Letting fly what he hoped sounded like a bloodcurdling scream of pure terror, he leaned outward and let himself fall.

As he passed the cave, he let off a couple of shots, intentionally wild.

He spread his legs and arms, exposing as much body surface as possible to the water. Maximum resistance meant maximum deceleration.

He hit the bottom hard, real hard, but didn't feel anything break. He swam painfully to the surface.

He came up gasping, coughing, flailing in the water. He needed to make his struggles look convincing. As he reached the bank, he wallowed, slipped and fell, and finally took off running down the gravelly path that paralleled Hecker Kill. He shambled along until he was well away from the ravine.

Then he dropped the frantic dash of a surprised and defeated man and trotted efficiently away.

Once he thought he was out of their range, he stopped. He listened. Normal sounds only. He used his nose. Pine and the sweet rot of the forest floor. Diana couldn't have seen him fall, but she would have heard the scream. So she was probably heading down to the kill herself, trying to save him. If night settled before he reconnected with her, she'd probably panic and bring up a search party. All to the good. The worse at this he and his people seemed, the better the hunting later tonight.

He sped up, moving among the pines like a ghost, silent, nothing scraping, nothing crunching. He gave the Miller place enough of a miss to ensure that he wouldn't be seen, but he also drew close enough to the house to see it.

It was near dark now, and light flowed from every window. Inside, he could see Eve sitting in one of the recliners. She was reading a book. There was music playing, a piano, its soaring notes drifting like birdsong across the quiet.

He was immediately reminded of another piano, on a blizzard-ridden night in Montana last year, and the woman who had been playing it, beautiful, talented, and innocent. Taken by Morris amid the slaughter of Diana's team.

Eve Miller would not suffer a similar fate, or any fate, at their hands.

Seeing that all the official vehicles were gone, he crossed to the wet area where Dan Miller had been found. He looked out across a clearing marked by bunched tufts of weeds jutting up from black water. It wasn't deep, though, not even shoe deep. Miller had been drowned in the ocean like the rest of them, and brought back here.

He looked up at the sky, empty now of larks, the first stars appearing. What had they traveled in, bringing Miller here? That was one of the great

questions. The one flying disk that had fallen into military hands proved to be a simple assemblage of balsa wood and foil, like a kite, or so he had heard. But the wood could survive the highest temperature that could be generated, and the foil was stronger than a foot thickness of armor.

It was full dark now, and that meant it was time to intercept Diana again. He turned away from the mire and went back to his car. He waited, but she didn't show. So he cleaned his guns, making sure that their carefully oiled mechanics contained not a drop of water from his swim. Then he got out and opened the trunk. He gathered up his work clothes.

"Hi, there," he said to the darkness. "Looks like I lived."

She came out of the forest. He hadn't needed to see her before he spoke. He knew where she was.

"I've decided that a capture attempt is too dangerous, Flynn."

"I wasn't planning one."

"So you agree with me. Good. We'll go back to D.C. and build you a team. The team can attempt a capture."

"No."

"Flynn, I'm your superior officer."

"And I'm the only person we know of who can kill these suckers."

"Because you won't train anybody!"

"Who are you gonna get for me, then, Bob Munden?" Munden was arguably the fastest gun in the world, capable of getting off an accurate shot in under two-hundredths of a second. However, this was a young man's game. Fast as old Munden was, he wouldn't make it.

"Flynn, we have to keep looking until we find who we need. You can't be the only person with your reflexes."

"I sincerely hope not."

"No more killing."

"Go home."

After a moment, she stepped close to him. Her face, wreathed in darkness, was as soft as a leaf. “I know you feel something for me, too.”

It hurt to hear her say that, and it was not the kind of hurt he liked to feel. He knew that he had to leave Abby behind one of these days, but how?

“It’s dangerous for you here,” he said. He took his second pistol from its holster, punched in the release code on the small keypad embedded in the grip, and gave it to her. “Keep it in your lap as you drive out. Don’t stop until you’re in a decent-sized town. Altoona. Go to Altoona. Drive fast.”

She looked at the pistol, handed it back to him. “I’m armed. But, Flynn, I’m not sure I understand what you were doing back there. Did you really fall?”

“I was building up their confidence. Now, go.”

She hugged him. It was unexpected, and he reflexively stiffened. Instantly, she released him. “I’m sorry.” She squared her shoulders.

“I—” The next word hung in his throat, unable to be set free. Until he knew Abby’s fate, his heart would remain frozen. Silently, he laid a hand on her cheek. She put her own on it and closed her eyes.

“God go with you, Flynn.”

He bowed his head to her, then watched as she walked off down the road. His hand was on his gun, his eyes on the sky above her, but no shape came. He would have seen it blotting out the stars as it slid into position above her. Maybe they were playing careful, or maybe they didn’t have their ship operating yet. He’d seen it before. It was old and battered. It clattered rather than hummed.

When he heard her car start, he was relieved. He listened until the mutter of her engine died away. As she left, he felt part of him leaving with her. There were days now when he couldn’t remember Abby’s voice or even her face, but almost every night, her murmur of invitation woke him to his loneliness.

He went back to his own car and got to work. First, he blacked his face with charcoal; then he wrapped himself in a long coat that was blacker than black. When he pulled up the hood, he was hardly more visible than the shadows around him. The dense cloth was treated with light-absorbing micro-optics that rendered the garment completely nonreflective. To an observer, it would create the illusion of an emptiness or a shadow, rather than something solid.

He got into the car and waited, letting his attention sink down into his body, concentrating on the feel of his skin, the pumping of his heart, the steady rhythm of his lungs, letting all thought slip away. He didn't do this only because he feared that the aliens might detect thought somehow, but more because it fed his spirit and made him strong.

Tonight he might experience great terror and great pain, and he might die. He remembered why he was doing it, for all the innocent lives that were his to protect, and also for the great chance that contact represented. If only this would come out right, mankind would receive a blessing from the stars. He needed to clean up this mess first, though, and that was the work of his heart and his soul, and what he was willing to die for.

As the silence of the night surrounded him, he felt himself disappear into his task. You wanted to be fast, you could not be thinking all the time. Your body had to do it; your mind could not.

Animal sounds returned, the scuttling of shrews in the late-season leaves, the snorting of an opossum, the rustling journey of a family of raccoons.

He thought nothing. Felt nothing. Only his breath whispering, only his blood running. He was the perfect hunter now, a big cat at one with the night.

Ten o'clock came, time to move.

What slid from the vehicle was more animal than man, a panther. Stealthy and swift, he slipped off toward the house with a smooth and powerful gait, running as silently as the air.

CHAPTER FOUR

AS FLYNN drew nearer to the house, he heard something unexpected: voices. There was a man speaking, low and warm, a night voice. He could hear the desire in it.

Eve Miller's reply was softly intimate.

He knew instantly that this was what Eve had been concealing when he questioned her, and why she showed so little grief.

He went closer yet, slipping onto the front porch of the cabin, dropping low, then raising his head just enough to see in the picture window.

A man of maybe fifty in worn jeans and an open shirt was sitting beside Eve on the couch, watching her with eager eyes. A leather jacket was thrown over a side chair. Hanging on its back was a shoulder holster. Flynn remembered how she'd said the word "sheriff," tasting it, and knew that this was the man.

His arm was around her, but he wasn't consoling her. She was flushed with pleasure.

Flynn went back to cover, then swung up into the oak that overhung the cabin, climbing with swift ease into its upper branches. From here, he had a view of both the sky and the roof.

He concentrated on what he was smelling and hearing, as an animal would. He noted the scent of rotting oak leaves, the sharper odor of pine, the

tang of chimney smoke. No trace of the eerie stink of aliens, though. Methodically, he looked from place to place, watching for even the slightest change, the thickening of a shadow, the suggestion of movement in the dark.

Below, the lights of the house went out. Soon, laughter rippled faintly, and then the shuffling rhythm of lovemaking.

Eventually, silence fell. An owl passed low over the roof and was gone. A real owl, he hoped, but there was no way to be sure.

Then he felt a change, just the slightest tremble in the tree's core. In response to the shudder, a leaf fell, slipping downward, making whispered sounds as it touched other leaves.

He knew for certain that something else was with him in this tree, something very quiet, very stealthy.

A night wind murmured. On the distance, something cried out. Farther off, a dog began to mourn, its voice caressing the silence.

All the nearby animal sounds had stopped. No owl muttered; no breeze sighed. It was as if the world had entered a zone of silence.

Below him, the house slept.

The tree trembled again. Something was climbing. Coming closer. Very stealthy.

Moving so slightly that the shift of weight could be detected only by the most sensitive creature, he pressed his ear against the tree trunk.

The scratch of claws, then silence.

If the aliens got too close to him, he would either be captured or killed—their call. They could disable the human nervous system with a touch. He'd fall like a corpse and be collected and carried off into their ship. In the stink and filth of it, he would be strapped onto their table. Then, to better enjoy his struggles, they would release his nervous system. Even knowing that he was giving them pleasure by doing it, he knew that he would fight those straps with all his might. He would not be able to stop himself.

Click, scrape. Then silence. Then again, very soft.

His fingers slid to the hilt of his knife. He could throw it a hundred feet with pinpoint accuracy. He could cut with it just in the right way to pop the head from the body. Then you stomped the head. It was brutal and it was messy, but it worked.

The dark grew deeper, the silence more profound.

There was the slightest of sensations along his ankle, a breath of air, the shudder of a leaf against his skin, no more.

His body threw the knife; he didn't. His arm sent it rocketing straight down at a speed of over sixty miles an hour.

There was a liquid sound, like a stone dropping into mud. Then there was something like a gasp, very precise, as if a machine had been surprised.

A scratching sound followed. It got louder, more frantic. A thud followed, against the distant ground.

He dropped down fast. Taking just an instant to glance at the spidery, inert form on the ground, he returned his knife to its scabbard and dashed toward the house.

An enormous creature came toward him, a bear. But it was no Eastern black bear. It wasn't even a grizzly. As it lumbered closer, he recognized it as a North American short-faced bear, twelve feet tall, a monster that had been extinct for thousands of years.

Before he could turn away, it reared up, looming over him, roaring with a voice like thunder.

It drew back a massive paw.

He kept running, straight toward it.

The huge claws slammed into him ... and kept going right through him.

It was more impressive by far than the snake, but it didn't slow him down. Over months of dealing with the aliens, he'd seen many different apparitions, creatures of legend, monsters out of his own mind, you name it.

The front door splintered as he burst through.

Things now moved at blinding speed. One alien leaped at him from the balcony overlooking the great room. It came like a huge bat, its thin arms spread wide, its very lethal claws glowing like blood in the firelight.

He drew the Bull and fired a single shot that lit the room with white light and roared like a demon. The bullet separated head from body, but even as the head tumbled past his shoulder, the body gripped him with steel arms and steel legs and pinned him as surely as if he had been caught in a vise.

The third alien, still in possession of all its powers, touched him with the electric tip of a short wand that it carried. Immediately, incapacitating waves of energy surged through his nervous system. He staggered, frantically trying to close his teeth on the cyanide.

Still completely conscious, but also completely helpless, he fell to the floor.

It stood over him, staring down at him with eyes like cruel windows, dark with infinity. Its tiny mouth was opened in a neat *O*, and it rocked its head from side to side. He had the thought that it was mocking him.

As it continued to watch him, he began to feel his nervous system coming back to life. His heart was thundering, his blood roaring in his ears, his lungs sucking.

Still, it watched him, its head lolling from side to side, its mouth open in that strangely empty and yet ominous *O*.

His arm flashed out and he grabbed its leg, yanking it off the floor.

It swooped backwards, and he found himself holding the leg of the largest spider he had ever seen. Reflex caused him almost to jump away, but he stopped himself. He tightened his grip.

The thing was chest high, its compound eyes glittering with hundreds of reflections of his own face, the features contorted with disgust and fear. Its huge black abdomen was striped with yellow, like a tiger. There was a

burning chemical stench to it, which he thought might be venom.

What the hell had just happened here? Had the creature actually changed form? Because this was no illusion.

Effortlessly, it broke his grip and leaped up to the cathedral ceiling. It hung there, watching him. When he glanced toward his gun, its whole body stiffened. From here, he could see the stinger in the tail, a black dripping scimitar.

It began to crawl across the ceiling, heading for the upstairs bedroom, where Eve and her lover presumably lay in the strange coma the aliens could induce, assuming they were alive, assuming they were still here.

Leaping across the room, getting the gun in his hand, and firing a shot accurate enough to penetrate the abdomen would be a matter of two seconds. It was going to take the creature about the same amount of time to drop on him. Its body would create more wind resistance, though, so maybe there would be a second of play in there.

He touched the cyanide capsule with his tongue. The secret to making a move like this work was to want it and let it happen, not to do it.

The spider dropped as he rolled, grabbed the pistol, and fired into its abdomen just as it enveloped him.

An instant later, he was on his feet, and the crumpled remains of the third alien were on the floor.

He went into the kitchen, got himself a glass of water, and drank it. For a time he stood over the sink, his head down. He did not want to look at the remains, much less touch them. He had to, though. Killing was intimate work, and there was only one thing more naked than a victim's body, and that was the killer's soul.

He went to the remains splayed across the floor and looked down at them. How could such ferocity and such danger be associated with something so insignificant as this little, shriveled mass of flesh and limbs as thin as pipes?

This alien was not going to be doing any more damage. None of them were. He knew the power of his weapons and the efficiency of his delivery. These creatures were dead.

He shifted his gaze to the darkness at the top of the stairs. The door to the bedroom hung open. The room itself was dark. What he might find up there made him uneasy. They'd been in there long enough to kill.

He mounted the stairs one by one, moving silently to the top.

The interior of the bedroom was still dark. He heard no breathing, but neither did he smell any odor of blood.

He drew down the blanket that covered them, and at that moment beheld a sight so appalling that he shrank back from it as if it were poison or a charge of fatal electricity. The man was on top. Eve was on the bottom. But their skin was like candle wax that had cooled and frozen. They were melted together in a grotesque, faceless whole, their two bodies somehow made into one.

He could see blue veins in the areas where they were joined. With a shaking hand, he touched the skin, which was soft and felt as new as a baby's. They looked like a bag made of human flesh. Even the faces were melted together.

Choking back a fear that told him to just run, to get out of there, to give up this quest, he reached out to one arm, thick and misshapen, that ended in two hands with ten fingers, and tried to find a pulse. Two hearts, a complication of signals, but there was no doubt—they were still alive.

He reached out, his own heart breaking. What unearthly, monstrous, mad power could do this? How could such evil even exist?

They lurched, and muffled inside the flesh that now lay as a living curtain that linked their faces, he heard a gagging female cry. Then the lower voice of the man, stifled, "Jesus!"

The body began to writhe, then to shake. The flesh that sealed their faces

together bulged and warped as they fought for breath.

Their confusion changed to panic. Choked screams filled the room and filled Flynn with a dread as terrible as any he had ever known.

Helpless, he watched them roll on the bed, heard their sphincters release, smelled the rise of urine, saw the skin turn red, then purple, and listened as the screams died into suffocated gasps and they died encased in an impossible mutual flesh.

Like a father whose child has died in his arms, he bowed over them, touched them with gentle hands. His face was rigid with loathing, his eyes swimming, his lips set in a line that spoke of the rage within.

In its slow way, the night came back, the hurried burr of the last crickets of summer, the sighing of the wind.

He lifted the purpling corpse and staggered with it across the room, then put it down at the top of the stairs.

When Diana and her friends saw this, maybe they would face the truth that he had known from the moment the presence of the aliens had been revealed to him. This was not a matter of a few alien criminals filtering through to Earth from a planet that was basically good. Something was terribly wrong on Aeon.

So far, everything that came from Aeon had been insane except Oltisis, and maybe the whole damn place was one big madhouse. He shook his head, then got the quilt off the bed and threw it over the poor couple.

He left the house and went and got his car. Carefully, not using lights, he drove it up to the front porch, parking it as close as he could. He could carry 150 pounds, but the two bodies, melted together as they were, had to weigh 300, maybe more.

Maybe this wasn't just an act of insanity. Maybe it was some sort of statement about the sins of the lovers, mad and ugly and vile, but possibly founded in some distorted moral sense. Eve's bedding her lover the night

after her husband died wasn't pretty, but it sure as hell didn't deserve this. It was also a warning, no question, that was directed at Flynn. It was meant to terrify and to say, Yes, you can kill us, but we have powers beyond anything you can imagine.

He returned to the house, registered the stillness of the living room, then went back upstairs.

As his head rose above the level of the second-story floor, he stopped.

What in hell?

It couldn't be.

Cautiously, he mounted another step. No, the thing was gone.

He drew his gun. With two quick strides, he went to the top of the stairs. He turned—and lying there in the bed were the two people. He ran to them, and saw by their darkly open eyes that they were in the profound state of unconsciousness that the aliens used to render their victims helpless.

With a gentle hand, he drew the quilt up over the naked forms.

It was hard to believe that the thing he had seen was never really there. But, like the spider, it had been an illusion on a whole new level, perhaps generated out of desperation.

But they'd all been dead when he found the melted bodies. Or had they? Was there another creature?

He returned to the car and got his forensic pack. The two sleepers would be like that for hours—insensible, impossible to awaken—so he didn't need to worry about them as he returned to his original task, which was to now strip the place of every trace of what had happened.

He opened the kit, drawing out the small, powerful flashlight, the brushes, and the bags. He set to work, moving methodically, meticulously catching every speck of strange flesh here and throughout the house.

Once outside, he gathered the remains of the aliens. They stank of hot plastic and rotten meat, and looked like huge, broken insects.

First, he put on his thick rubber gloves, then carefully lifted the first body, bunching the claws up into a fist so they wouldn't slice into him.

There was a severed head, which he lifted quickly, choking back his disgust, and thrust into one of the bags. Everything in him hated this part, but he was nevertheless extremely careful.

He thrust the last of the remains into one of the reinforced bags, then sealed them with CLASSIFIED MATERIALS tags. He dumped them into the trunk.

A fog was rising, turning the trees into ghosts.

The sky overhead, which had been filled with stars, was now as black as the interior of a cave. Or no, that wasn't quite right, was it? The sky didn't look dark; it looked empty. Could clouds have come in so high that they weren't reflective, or was it that there was too little local ground light?

He considered this, then looked away. Of course it was clouds—what else could it be?

As he got in the tired FBI executive vehicle he'd been given, the sheer exertion of the night overcame him. A headache came on. Closing his eyes, he sat back. The pain radiated down from the top of his head, involving his eye sockets, his temples, and his neck.

Stress fatigue. He pressed his fists into his eyes, and slowly, it passed.

Feeling a little better, he started the car and began driving, lights out, watching the faint line of the road ahead, letting the car creep as silently as possible. As he descended the steep track, the trees on both sides became thicker and the fog more dense. Still, he didn't turn on the lights. On the road, fine, but he didn't want anyone noticing a car leaving the Miller place this late.

There were a couple of sharp turns, which he negotiated slowly, keeping close watch on the nearly invisible line of the road. When he reached a straight stretch about three hundred yards long, he immediately increased his speed.

He reached the end of the Miller's road at last, and drove on, his mind a whirl of confused thoughts. Was this finished? Had he killed the last of them?

He had not killed Morris, and while that monster remained at large, nothing was finished. He would go on, deep into the night, looking, waiting, a spider more dangerous than the one the aliens had tried to frighten him with, patient and lethal.

CHAPTER FIVE

HE TURNED on his cell phone. The moment it went online, it rang.

“You killed them all,” Diana said.

“How would you know that?”

“Flynn, I have to tell you, Aeon is really, really pissed off.”

“Okay.”

“They want you stopped once and for all.”

“Say again?”

“They are *demanding* this, Flynn, and we’re not sure exactly what they mean. They might want you killed in return.”

“You tell them that we lost twenty-eight living human beings to their seven damn robots or whatever they are, and if they want us to capture these creatures, either send us instructions or send us help.”

“Flynn?”

He heard tears in her voice, which concentrated his attention. “Are they coming after me?”

Silence.

“Hey, this is me, Diana. Am I in trouble, here?”

“I don’t know.”

He controlled it. “Look, I’ve got the bodies in the trunk of my car.”

“What happened to the civilian?”

“They’re fine.”

“They?”

“The wife has a lover. The sheriff. Look, there’s a lot going on here. We’re dealing with a whole new level of mind control, for one thing. I’ve seen things—oh, Christ, Diana, I’m telling you—”

“I want you off the roads. They could grab you.”

“What do I do with these bodies? I can’t just leave them in a Dumpster.”

“Okay, get them to Wright-Pat. Get rid of them. Then come back here, Flynn. Stay close to home.”

He wasn’t sure he was going to do that. In fact, he had no idea what he was going to do, but he was certainly going to get rid of these bodies. He considered flying them to the containment, but thought better of it. He had no idea if he was more vulnerable in the air or on the ground, but he had absolutely no hope of escape in a plane, so he decided to stay on the highway.

Even so, he had never felt more exposed in his life. He’d never been scared like this. He was used to feeling invulnerable, and now he felt anything but. Why in hell would Aeon care so much about these damn things? They were machines made of flesh and blood, nothing more, so why be so concerned about them?

Perhaps Aeon’s intentions were being misinterpreted. Maybe they were on the right side of this thing after all. Our knowledge of their language was flawed at best.

He gripped the wheel, pushing the car as fast as he dared to go. He sure as hell didn’t want some state cop looking in that trunk.

As he drove, he found himself compulsively tonguing the cyanide capsule. He’d planned on following his usual routine and returning it to its container, but not now, no way.

He just could not believe that Aeon was angry. If they wanted contact to develop, they should be elated. Not only that, why should he be afraid of

them? They had no major presence here. No ships, no personnel. Or did they?

Diana and her team were panicking. They were confused. Had to be.

He drove on, the lights of his car reflecting back more and more fog, making it so hard to see that he gripped the steering wheel and peered ahead, but he never let the speedometer dip below seventy.

The fog was dangerous, the night was dangerous, being alone on the highway was dangerous. Worse, he was no longer even close to understanding what he was dealing with, and that was very dangerous.

About an hour out of Mountainville, the state highway met the interstate. He had to stop for gas, so he also got coffee. The attendant was an Indian man behind bulletproof plastic. He took Flynn's money and handed out his change, his eyes glazed with sleepy boredom.

The coffee was old but it was strong, and he drank it methodically as he continued on down the highway.

He covered the distance to Dayton in just over five hours. It was pushing ten in the morning when he reached Wright-Pat. He was hungry and close to exhaustion, but there was no stopping until these bodies were safely burned.

He pulled into the first guard post and flashed his badge.

Nothing happened.

The guard leaned into the car. "Sir, are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay, but I have a legitimate ID, so please let me through."

"Would you like an escort to the base hospital, sir?"

"Open the gate, please."

Flynn took back his secure ID. It didn't appear any different from any other USGS Identification Card. On the surface. As it was run through readers in ever-more-secure areas, though, it would grant deeper and deeper access, into places that not even presidents knew about.

The gate went up and Flynn drove through. Wright-Pat was a big base, the U.S. Air Force's largest repair and refitting facility, among other things.

Among those “other things” was the Air Force Materiel Command, which controlled the warehouse where he was headed.

It was a low building no different from dozens of others on the base. Thousands of people passed it every day without realizing that, two hundred feet beneath the warehouse’s dull exterior, a supercooled morgue held fourteen alien bodies—including two from Roswell, New Mexico—that had been brought here in the fall of 1947 and had remained here ever since. The bodies were kept at near absolute zero, and were tended remotely by technicians who had no idea what they were keeping cold. Their training informed them that this was a storage area for unstable chemicals, and that if they failed in their duty, a massive explosion could result.

The building also contained a furnace designed to burn “special materials” at extremely high temperatures. Contrary to popular opinion, classified papers were not burned, but reduced to pulp and recycled. Still, the presence of the burn facility meant there would be plenty of normal traffic, and lots of ordinary material like classified electronics. This would be mixed with any ash that might contain evidence, such as bits of the alien bodies Flynn was about to consign to the flames.

He pulled the front of the car up to a tall corrugated metal door, then went to the identification pad and punched in his code. A moment later, the door began to clatter up on its chains.

He backed up to the furnace and waited in the car while airmen put up screens around the vehicle. As soon as he had slid his card through the pad, the facility manager was automatically informed of the security level he required.

Finally, hidden behind seven-foot-tall flats covered with gray canvas, he got out and went to the intercom. He picked up the handset and asked, “Is it up to temp?”

The answer was immediate. “Yes, sir.”

Flynn never took chances. "Are all personnel accounted for?"

"Yes, sir."

"The entire floor is clear at this time?"

"Sir, there's a work crew repairing the exhaust fan housing on one of the ventilator systems."

"Pull them."

"Yes, sir. Give me a minute, sir."

While Flynn was waiting, he went to the furnace and tested the mechanism. An interlock prevented direct contact with the interior. Heat like that would incinerate you in an instant.

The intercom buzzed.

"Yes?"

"The facility is clear. No eyes on your position."

He replaced the receiver and pressed the ready button on the furnace housing. A green light appeared on the black surface of the control panel, and the door slid open. Despite the thickness of the interlock, the heat was so intense that the interior shimmered with it.

Flynn opened his jacket, lifted his pistol to a looser position in his holster, then walked to the back of the car. He unlocked the trunk and pulled it open.

The three bags lay just as he had left them. When he put them in, he'd noted their positions carefully. Also carefully, he touched the nearest of them. No responding movement. He touched the one behind it. Nothing. He reached deeper into the trunk and touched the third bag. Again, nothing inside reacted.

He lifted the first bag out of the trunk. The aliens were light, weighing only ten or twelve pounds. Careful not to let any claws cut through and scratch him, he carried the bag to the furnace and laid it in the open receptacle. Immediately, it began to smoke. He pressed the red activation button and the door closed. He repeated the process with the second bag.

As he turned back toward the car, he heard a loud click overhead. Angry, thinking that some airman was still working up there, he looked up. He saw only the shadowy girders. An instant later, though, when he directed his gaze back to the trunk, he saw that the last bag had been torn open and was now empty.

He stepped quickly back to the intercom. “This is on lockdown. I want the entire facility evacuated at once. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.” He could hear the question in the voice. He didn’t care.

A red light began circulating overhead and a Klaxon sounded. He drew aside one of the screens and stepped into the center of the large open space.

Methodically, he scanned the floor. Empty. So the thing had jumped into the girders.

Now there came another sound—the echoing creak of hinges.

Flynn turned toward it, and was horrified to see an airman enter through a side door and begin walking toward him.

“Get out of here!”

“Sir?”

“Out! Now!”

The airman stopped. His smile froze.

“Move!”

From overhead, there came a flutter. Flynn looked up. The airman kept smiling.

A figure dropped down, looking for all the world like a dark gigantic demon sliding down an invisible wall.

Then it stood before the young man, five narrow feet of spindly arms and legs to the airman’s solid six-foot bulk.

The next instant, the creature leaped back into the rafters.

The airman had entirely changed. His uniform was gone, nothing left of it but shreds on the floor. Blood gushed out of his eye sockets and from the

hole where his mouth and tongue had been. It went sluicing down his legs, pumping from the crater that was all that was left of his genitals. From overhead, there came a whirring sound, a noise of bees or busy flies.

As Flynn watched, the streams of blood stopped. They hung, frozen like candle wax, then, slowly at first, changed direction. They began to travel upward, racing across the man's body as he crumpled to his knees. An orb of blood, dark red, hung in the air six feet above where he had stood.

As Flynn was drawing his gun, the creature dropped back down.

It connected with the vibrating mass of blood.

There was a blur and a high crackling sound like something being dipped in hot grease. The bubble of blood disappeared into a new form entirely, and what landed with a light step on the room's floor was not an alien. Neither was it a human being, not quite. It was covered with pink gel, like something that had come out of a chrysalis or burst from some malignant egg. The eyes opened. They were sky blue, set in a blurred but unmistakably human face.

As he watched, another version of the airman took shape before him.

The boy's smile returned. As if surprised, he blinked his eyes.

It was astonishing, but Flynn was not deceived. This was not a hallucination, and it was not the airman. It made an impossible leap back into the rafters. Flynn fired at it, but no blood returned.

He began hunting the thing, but the room was complex with shadows, the ceiling fifty feet overhead, and he soon recognized that the thing could hide up there for hours. So he decided to try another strategy.

He walked out into the middle of the space. Holding his pistol, he looked around the room. Then he took out his small LED flashlight and shone it into the rafters. Three girders down, a slight thickening of the shadow along its upper surface.

His target.

"Shit," he said into the room's echo. He holstered his gun and walked

directly under the creature. Hands on hips, he shone his light into a dark area under the stairs that led down from the office level at the far end of the room, the same stairs the airman had come down.

Above him, he heard the slightest sound, a bare whisper.

He drew and fired into the biorobot as it dropped down on him.

The bullets blew its guts out, and it fell at his feet with a nasty splat.

He looked down at it, then at the actual remains of the boy—a husk, his youth destroyed in an instant—his promise and the hopes of those who loved him, all gone. He choked back his heart and his hate, and the anger that gnawed his core—if only he'd been quicker to see him coming, faster to react, this poor kid would still have his life.

Teeth bared, he sucked the blood-reeking air and, with it, sucked deep into himself the sorrow and the shame of his failure. He kicked the hell out of the dead alien, its incredible disguise already fading and melting like the Wicked Witch of the West.

He turned away from the mess and, walking with the excessive care of a man confronting the gallows, crossed the echoing concrete chamber to the black intercom hanging on the wall.

“Yes, sir, do you need assistance?”

He said, “There’s been an accident. You are to seal the building. I repeat, seal it. It is to be guarded. A team will be here tomorrow to restore it.”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

“There is a man down.”

“Sir?”

“I repeat, there is a man down. He is dead. Our team will inform the authorities here of his identity after their inspection is complete.”

“One of my men is in there?”

“There was a man here. I don’t know why and it’s not my issue. He is dead.”

“He got shot?”

“No, sir. He was killed in another manner. He died in the line of duty.”

Flynn replaced the receiver in its cradle. As he walked away, the intercom began ringing and kept ringing. He did not turn back.

How in hell had this happened? Somehow, the thing had survived. What had enabled it to do that was yet another question that could not be answered. The purpose was clear: he had observed the predator in the process of camouflaging itself as its prey, like an Indian covering himself with a buffalo hide in order to get close to a herd.

They had thrown away two of their lives and sent this third being on a suicide mission, because the real ambush was not intended to happen at the Miller house at all, but here, in this room, where Flynn would least expect it.

The place suddenly felt cold, freezing. The stink of the room, blood and cordite, was sickening. Moving fast, he snatched his duffel out of the car and dug out his cell phone.

He punched in the numbers that would take him to a scrambled signal, then called Diana.

“Jesus God, what have you been doing for seven hours?”

“I pulled the battery on my phone.”

“I thought you were a goner. Give me a heads-up next time.”

“I’m at Wright-Pat. There’s been an incident. I’ve ordered our facility here sealed.”

“An incident? What kind of an incident?”

“You need a team out here to clean up some atypical remains. Plus there’s a casualty. An airman.”

“*Shit!*”

“The body’s been mutilated. You’ll need to commandeer it. Our eyes only.”

“What are you telling me?”

“What you need to do! And I need a plane.” He would have preferred to drive to Washington, but there was no time for that now.

He left the facility, closed the access door, and listened as the locks clicked into place on the other side. The cleanup team from their unit were now the only people on the planet with the code needed to open this door.

He wondered whom she would choose. Things had gone wrong before, but this was the only time anything remotely this messy had happened.

An airman pulled up in a big SUV. He got out to open the door, but Flynn let himself in. He sat in silence as he was driven to the flight line. When they arrived, a jet was just being positioned on the apron. It was the full dinner: a general officer’s plane complete with a cabin crew of two.

“You don’t need to stay on board,” he said as he stooped to enter the plane.

“Sir?”

“Leave the aircraft, please. You’re not needed today.” There was no reason to put anybody in harm’s way who didn’t absolutely need to be there.

The two stewards looked at each other.

“Do it!”

Slowly, they went to the rear of the cabin. When the crew were down on the apron, he activated the steps. The steps came up, the door closed, and he locked it down. He signaled the pilots. “Get this thing cleared and get it moving.”

There was some sort of a reply, but he didn’t listen. As always, he had work to do. He’d been away from his unending records search for over thirty hours, and he didn’t like that. He pulled out his iPad and hooked into the secure network, then began once again searching police reports—town by town, and city by city.

He looked at murders, disappearances, accidents, anything that might lead to the dark place that was his beat. He worked for an hour. For two. He

stopped only when he had assured himself that his beat was for the moment quiet.

He wouldn't allow himself to hope, but maybe—just maybe—he had indeed gotten the last of them. Maybe it was just him and Morris now.

He listened to the roar of the wind speeding past the airframe and to the noise of the engines. He let his eyes close and was immediately asleep, or as asleep as he ever got. The doctors called it “guarded sleep,” the sleep of men in combat. He dreamed of Abby on a blue day on the beach, watching the gulls wheel. The sweet smell of her cornsilk hair filled his memory, and he sighed and turned as if toward somebody in the seat beside him.

His eyes opened. He had become aware of a change in the pitch of the engines. He evaluated it. Normal. They were landing.

New rules: Be faster on the scene than ever before. When the aliens are apparently dead, cut the remains to pieces.

It was an air force plane, but it landed him in the general aviation section at Dulles.

He left without a word, not looking back. The mystified pilots watched him cross the tarmac and disappear into the terminal. They had never even seen his face.

CHAPTER SIX

WHILE HE was away, Flynn's personal car had been moved into the general aviation parking lot. He walked over to it, a black Audi R8 GT. To a man with his reflexes, most cars drove like buses. The R8 did not.

There was a bag from Wagshal's on the passenger seat, which, as his standing order with Transportation instructed, contained a pastrami on rye and a Brooklyn Lager. As a Southwest 737 screamed past not a hundred feet overhead, he opened the bag, cracked the can of beer, started the car, and headed out.

He had no idea how long it had been since he ate, but the sandwich did not last until the Beltway. He got an hour of sleep on the flight, so he felt fairly rested. It had been uneasy sleep, though. Things were spinning out of control, and he knew it.

He took the exit off the GW Parkway and stopped in the guard station at CIA headquarters. He drove around the back of the main building and then into the underground facility, over to where cars that couldn't be exposed to passing satellites were parked. He sat in his car with the windows down, just listening to the space. He got out. Nobody else here, the parking spots mostly empty. Even as he was walking through the facility's relative safety, his extreme sense of caution did not change. They might have failed on this day, and they might all be dead, but he still worried about ambush anywhere,

anytime.

In the long, clean corridors of the CIA, people gave him the usual glances. In his patrolman days, his uniforms had always been sharp. As a detective, he'd worn a suit with a string tie and a Stetson, an outfit intended to make him disappear into the north Texas woodwork. No more. Now he was too fixated on his job to worry about appearances. As long as his clothes were street legal, that was all that mattered to him.

As he was approaching their section, another text came in. This time, it was the number 676, once again from a blocked line.

He stopped in his tracks, staring down at the screen.

He was looking at what had been Dan Miller's full employee number at Deer Island.

No way this could be a coincidence, and somebody certainly wanted him to know that.

He got to the numbered door that concealed headquarters. He paused. This time, it could be seriously argued that he'd screwed up on every possible level. He set his jaw, paused for a moment, then went in.

The same kids were at the same consoles, working at the same intractable problems of translation and communication. As he passed silently among them, he could feel their uneasy disapproval like a sour smoke.

"Anybody wants a head for their den, let me know."

It was his standard joke, but this time there was no ripple of laughter.

He pushed through into Diana's sleek lair. She was not sitting at her desk, not exactly. She was poised there.

"Don't hit me," he said, cringing back and raising his hands.

"Flynn, *why?*"

"He got in the line of fire."

"You killed four people!"

Had there been anybody else in there? No. "Wrong body count, and I

didn't kill anybody. A kid got killed. Big difference, Diana."

"If you'd done your job right, nobody would be dead."

"I ordered the facility evacuated. Maybe he was deaf, I don't know. An airman died, and I'm sad about it. But it was one. Not four."

"We consider the aliens you killed people."

"Not legally, they aren't."

"Flynn, that's the last time you throw that in my face, okay? You've gotten yourself into huge trouble, and us along with you. Hell, the whole planet, Flynn! What if they could just push a button and we're history?"

"I've gained a lot of intelligence on this mission."

She raised her eyebrows.

"The exsanguinations are explained. What I saw was one of those monsters—"

"Please."

"What am I supposed to call them? What's the politically correct term? Tell me, because I want to know."

"Try calling them people."

He let it lie. "It used the airman's blood to coat itself in a human form."

She gave him a long, searching look.

"Do you understand what I'm saying? Because it's kind of important."

"We're going out to Area Fifty-One, you and I." The exobiology group was located there, scientists who sat in the desert thinking up reasons that contact with Aeon could be made to work.

"I don't have time."

"You have time."

"I have time to keep searching for cases, and that's all the time I have."

"Let me tell you what those kids out on the floor have been doing ever since you went on your murder mission."

"Excuse me, policing mission."

“They’ve been communicating with Aeon, trying to save your life.”

“Well, thank them for me. Unless I’m headed for a meeting with the needle. Then don’t thank them.”

“A deal has been struck, Flynn.”

“Which involves the scientists at Area Fifty-One how?”

“You will accompany me to Area Fifty-One. Consider that an order.”

He thought about that. Normally, she did everything she could to satisfy her brief from the scientists—short of giving him direct orders like this. That way, he could go on doing his job and she could go on being quietly relieved he was getting kills.

“Diana, we both know that everything coming out of Area Fifty-One is bullshit. In any case, I want to go to Deer Island.”

“Why?”

“I got another one of those calls: 333676. Ring a bell?”

“No.”

“It’s Dan Miller’s employee number.”

She got up and went to her “window.” They were in a basement, so it was actually just a poster of the Grand Tetons she’d bought at Target and tacked to her wall.

“I love it when you stare out at the view. It always means you know I’m right.”

She turned. “We’re on a strict schedule. And frankly, if you want to stay in one piece, you’d better cooperate.”

For a moment, he thought about it, then spread his hands, gesturing surrender. “You can count on me, boss. Down the line.”

“We leave at six. You might think about taking a shower.”

He glanced at his watch. Half an hour wouldn’t give him time to go home. “Can I use your lair?” Her suite had a private sitting room and a full bath, which he often used between cases.

“I’m gonna try to have a meeting in here. We’re cataloging new transmissions. So don’t disturb us, if you can manage that.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He went through into the luxuriously furnished private suite that was a perk of her Senior Executive Service pay grade. The luxuries that interested him weren’t things like her Persian carpets, gleaming antiques, and 3-D TV. His cars were a luxury—the Audi and the Ferrari California that waited for him in Texas. Most of his guns were there as well—his pistols, his sniper rifles, his matched pair of Purdey shotguns handed down in the family for three generations. These were his luxuries, and the wine cellar his family started in the 1920s, when their land in the Permian Basin south of Menard had turned out to be a raft floating on a lake of oil.

For most of his life, he had preferred to live only on what he made, but after Abby’s disappearance, he found himself wanting to embrace his own heritage. A couple of years back, he had started drawing on the family trust. In a strange way, it made him feel less alone.

In keeping with family tradition, he lived modestly. Until he started buying extreme cars a couple of years ago, few people outside his small circle of close friends had any idea that he had money. The way he figured it, though, the work he did now was shortening his life, probably by a lot of years, so whatever he was going to enjoy, he needed to do that right now.

He threw off his clothes, realizing as he dropped them onto her antique Sultanabad carpet, that they were really pretty damn dirty. Stained, too, with greenish purple blood.

Showers bothered him. He didn’t like being in places with only one exit. He wanted two ways out, always. He turned the gold handles in her marble shower stall and let the water flow until it was steaming. Then he stepped in. He left the door open and faced outward into the bathroom as he methodically washed himself.

The hot water felt good on his skin, except where it burned in his latest

wounds. He stepped out of the stall, opened the medicine cabinet, and rummaged until he found some disinfectant. Then he pulled the ugliest cut apart by drawing his shoulder forward, and poured the disinfectant in. There was pain. A lot, in fact.

As he dried himself, he realized that his clothes were too gross to wear. The room stank like some kind of bovine had rolled in it. Wrapping the towel around his waist, he went to the exquisitely carved dresser. He opened the bottom drawer, which was where his things were kept. He often showered and changed here—slept here, too. From here, he could move on cases a lot faster than he could from home.

But what the hell was this shirt? It wasn't one of his.

“Hey,” he called, “what is this thing, a bolero shirt?”

No answer from the office. That's right, her meeting was out there. And, as a matter of fact, he was hearing his name mentioned, was he not? He strolled over to the door. Yep, they were talking about him.

He went out waving the shirt. “I can't wear this.”

“Put some clothes on.”

“I can't wear a blouse.”

“That's an ordinary man's shirt. Unlike your tees, it happens to have a collar. Something you apparently haven't worn in some time. Now, get dressed.”

“Sorry, kids,” he said to the staring young faces, “I didn't mean to frighten you.” He started to put on the shirt.

“Flynn, get out!”

“You said get dressed, boss.” He sat on the edge of her desk. “So, what's the latest findings? Aeon turn out to be big on comedy clubs? Marijuana dispensaries? Too bad they don't have decent cops.”

“Flynn, Aeon knows you're the fastest gun in the West and the toughest hombre in town—and they're not impressed, as I've told you. They also

know that you're richer than God, and therefore a dilettante. And they have been speculating about whether or not you're crazy." She folded her arms. "I think that question is answered."

He turned around so they could see the gash that extended from his neck to the center of his back. "I could use a Band-Aid."

"My God, Flynn, you don't need a bandage, you need medical attention."

"We're off to Bullshit Central, remember. Fifteen minutes."

"I'll have medics on the plane. Now, get out of here."

He drew on the shirt. Nicely tailored, too. She'd spared no expense. As he buttoned it, he said, "So when do we leave?"

"When I say. Now, go away. You're not need-to-know on this conference."

"333676. Track down that blocked number."

He went back into the bedroom, threw himself on the bed, and waited.

The sheets were scented. They smelled like her.

"Flynn!"

It was Abby, calling to him from her porch across the street. The summer wind whispered in the trees; the sweet smell of the Texas prairie filled the air.

"Flynn!"

The movie ended. Blank screen. Then he realized that it wasn't a movie. He opened his eyes.

"Christ, I was about to call for a blowtorch. I thought you were in a coma."

He bolted upright. "Sorry, I didn't realize—"

She sat down on the bed and pulled the shirt away from his back. "That needs ten stitches at least."

"It'll heal."

"We have to go now, so get your ass moving, please." Her voice was harsh, but not her eyes.

He reached out and touched her cheek. She did not turn away, and he knew that he could kiss her if he wanted to. Neither of them moved. In the silence that they shared, there was a lot of life lived together, friends as they were who were also enemies, lovers longing for each other across a gulf of conflicting agendas.

“We’re on a strict schedule,” she said.

They rode to the airport in his car. He drove fast; he took chances. He liked to hear her yell at him, and she obliged him, saying he was going to lose his license, she’d see to it, on and on. Just made him drive faster. With this car and his reflexes, it wasn’t dangerous, and with no strange cargo to hide, things like tickets didn’t matter. Often enough, they got written, but the same hand that protected him from all other official harm made them go away. Her hand.

He said, “As I said, I got three good kills.”

She said nothing.

They’d been given an excellent plane, not one of the cramped puddle jumpers he was used to. There was a private cabin, behind it an office and a small press unit. To the rear was a galley.

“Impressive.”

“You could afford your own jet.”

“Not interested.”

“Your frequent-flier miles, I know.”

“I haven’t been on a vacation in a real long time. I dream about it. First class, all the trimmings, on my way to somewhere sweet. Barbados. Ever been to Barbados?”

“Course not. My salary won’t take me that far.”

“Don’t hand me that. You’re just like me, a rich dilettante. What I’ve become.”

“You’ve accepted your family. That’s not being a dilettante. And I’m not

rich.”

“Senator’s daughter. Senators are rich.”

“The senator is comfortable. That is not rich.”

She called her dad “the senator,” her mother Mrs. Glass. She didn’t talk about it much, but it didn’t sound like a happy home. She had kept that powerful last name, though, even through her marriage.

Once the plane was at altitude and heading into the sunset, the medics took over.

“Sir,” the doctor said uneasily, “I’m afraid I’ve only got some topical anesthetic. I didn’t realize—”

“He doesn’t need anesthetic,” Diana said. “He’s not like us.” He heard pride in her voice. He liked that.

While they stitched away, he smelled steak cooking, and when they finally let him up, he found an exceptional meal waiting in the office, which had been reset as a dining room. A general’s plane was not Air Force One, but it had first class pretty well beat. He gestured toward the meal. “How many taxpayers did it take to pay for all this?”

“None. Or rather, one. I paid for it.”

“The poor senator. Did you leave him to starve?”

“Yes.”

He picked up the wine. “An ’83 Romanée-Conti? That’s worth a trip to Barbados at least. First class.” Then he had another thought. “Is this my last meal?”

“Any meal could be your last. Damn you, Flynn.” Her voice broke. She choked back her emotions. “What if they tell us something like they’ll kill the whole planet unless we kill you?”

“I’d kill me.”

She closed her eyes briefly, then looked away from him.

They ate quietly for a few minutes.

“This spread looks to me like it’s meant for a celebration. Was something good supposed to happen, and you forgot to tell Transportation that it fell through?”

She said, “You miss nothing.”

“Comes with the job.”

“I’ve often wondered why you were hiding in that little job in Texas. A man like you.”

“It was a big job, and I wasn’t hiding.”

“I mean, why weren’t you running an oil company or something? Doing something incredible?”

“Being a cop isn’t incredible?”

She shrugged, then poured them both wine.

“By the way, that blocked number. Can’t be located.”

“How is that possible?”

“It was purged from the carrier’s system.”

“That’s unusual.”

“Also illegal. They’re frantic about it. You have any idea what it was all about?”

Flynn did, but if he was right about why he was being messaged like this, he had no intention of telling anybody. It might be dangerous even to think about it. “Not a clue,” he said.

“I know when you’re lying, but never why.”

They drank in silence. The medical team had retired to the press section, so the two of them were alone. She glanced back to be sure the door was closed.

“You know, Flynn, I’m not being very fair to you.”

“What’s new about that?”

She laughed a little, but said no more. He was curious, of course, but he didn’t press her. If somebody wanted silence, that was fine with him.

He closed his eyes for a couple of seconds, and suddenly the plane was landing. He recognized that he had come to the point where he was desperate for sleep.

“Listen,” he said as they lined up on the runway, “if I’m supposed to talk to these people, you better tell me what I need to say.”

“No talking necessary.”

“It’s a dog and pony show, then. They’re going to try to convince me that there’s something good going on here, which is and always will be utter horseshit. Diana, I could be needed somewhere right now.”

“There’s no dog and pony show. In fact, no scientists at all. It’s past their bedtimes, anyway—you should know that.”

As they touched down, he stared out into the glare of the runway lights. Beyond them was blackness.

Very little of Area 51 was actually devoted to the legendary secret of the aliens. For the most part, the place was exactly what it was claimed to be: a test bed for future aircraft, including new designs that utilized the earth’s magnetic field for propulsion and lift. There were space planes here and, Flynn suspected, some devices that were of alien construction and defied gravity.

“Leave your guns, take your jacket,” Diana said as a steward cracked the door.

“My guns?”

“Leave them.”

“No.”

She sighed. “Flynn, just please cooperate for once.”

“I don’t go out on lonely desert airstrips at night without my guns.”

“Do you think you’re being handed over?”

“Maybe.”

“Trust me.”

“No.”

She glanced at her watch. “Take them, then.” She marched down the steps and into the shadows.

Flynn followed her into the cold of the desert night. As the wind whipped across the tarmac, he zipped his jacket. Yet again, his tongue touched his cyanide capsule. Would it be now? If he was about to be given to some creeps in a flying saucer, then yes, it would.

The plane’s door was pulled closed, and its engines whined as it taxied slowly away.

“Hey, we’re not anywhere!”

“No, this is the right place.”

Once the plane was gone, they were left standing on a strip of concrete surrounded on three sides by desert. Now and again, a tumbleweed went bounding across, a gray shadow in the thin light of a sickle moon. His right hand slid down to the butt of his pistol. She held tight to him, and he couldn’t tell if she was trying to control him or holding on for dear life.

The sound that came then was not something you heard, but rather something you felt. It vibrated your teeth; it made your skin crawl.

“Look,” Diana whispered. Flynn followed her gaze upward and saw the hazy outline of a descending shape, perfectly round. It quickly grew larger, blotting out more and more stars.

Flynn’s finger went to his trigger. He tongued his cyanide capsule until it was between his teeth.

Now the object was hanging in the air before them. It did not move. It was not affected by the wind. Flynn didn’t try to convince himself that he wasn’t afraid. He was very afraid.

In the distant light from the hangar area and the low moon, the object shone like burnished steel. It was nothing like the disks he was used to seeing—not worn, not small, not clattering like an old truck. No matter his loathing

of the aliens and their ways, this thing's sleek form was beautiful to see.

He realized that a tripod landing gear had come out of it, and it was now standing on the runway. There hadn't been a sound nor the slightest suggestion of movement. A narrow line of light appeared in its base. This grew wider and brighter, until he could see part of an interior of featureless bright metal. Very slowly then, something began moving in the light, a form.

"My God," he heard himself whisper. Hardly thinking of it, he drew his gun.

"Put that away."

"Diana—"

"If they see that thing, we might die right here, right now. Both of us."

He holstered the pistol.

A figure glided down in the column of light. He was expecting to see the thin form of an alien, but what he saw instead was a trim human shape, a woman in a blue jumpsuit.

Immediately, he thought of what he'd seen the alien do at Wright-Pat, and of Morris.

The object rose enough to spread the light into a pool a hundred feet across. Flynn and Diana were in that pool, and so was the alien, which now came walking toward them with the easy gait of absolute confidence.

She stood before them, a woman of perhaps twenty-five. If he hadn't seen her come out of a flying saucer, he would have said that she was human.

She looked up at him, her eyes searching his face, and when she did, he saw in her blond arched eyebrows and her subtle, almost sensual smile, an unmistakable shadow of Abby.

"Hello," she said, turning toward Diana. "You are Police Commander Glass?" There was in her lilting voice just the faintest trace of an accent, oddly Asian in so Caucasian-looking an individual.

Diana saluted her.

The woman's gaze returned to him. "And you are Officer Carroll?"

"I'm Flynn."

She wasn't smiling now, far from it. Her eyes were glittering with something he could not mistake. She hated him.

Diana said, "Officer Carroll, meet your new partner. This is Gt'n'aa. We're going to call her Geri."

Geri extended her hand. Flynn stared at it.

"Flynn?"

"Oh—yeah." He took the coldest, strongest hand he had ever felt in his life. As he shook it, he could feel the power there, like living steel.

"Very well," Geri said, glancing off into the dark. "Shall we proceed?"

Flynn's mind was racing with questions, all of them unanswered, all of them urgent. But before he could speak, Diana and Geri moved off toward the edge of the runway. Simultaneously, the light went out and the ship ascended, swiftly disappearing into the night.

A familiar sort of chime sounded. Flynn saw a Jeep Cherokee on the edge of the tarmac, revealed by its interior light. Diana had just unlocked it with its remote key. She went around to the driver's side and got in.

Flynn opened the passenger door.

"Backseat," she snapped.

He got in. The alien got in the front beside Diana. They drove off toward the buildings of the Area 51 complex, through a desert night lit only by the distant stars and the beams of their headlights.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FLYNN SAT silently in the Jeep, fighting back confused feelings of hatred and longing. He was used to living in a reality that he didn't quite understand, but not like this. This was too much.

They came to the familiar Science Building 3, with its glass doors and its lobby lit with glaring neon. In the days of the Lockheed Skunk Works, this had been Lockheed's on-site office building, two stories of cubbyholes now filled with exobiologists, alien ethicists, exopsychologists, and other irrelevant, time-wasting dreamers.

They crowded together, at least thirty of them, their brilliance well hidden behind their slack jaws and childishly wide eyes.

Diana went front and center with Geri in tow. Flynn hung back. He didn't even like these people to see his face, and socializing with them was not going to happen.

"Ladies and gentlemen, a lot of history has happened in this building, but I think that this qualifies as a—"

"Excuse me, I can introduce myself," Geri said. "Please call me Geri or Colonel—either will do. I'm the equivalent of a colonel in your air force, or a senior police commander. I'm from Aeon Central Police Command, and my mission is to get this situation under control, because it's obviously running amok. I'd shake your various hands, but I'm here to work, so if Major Glass

would show me to my office, please.”

Diana, fumbling out words like “of course,” and “thank you,” led her away. The lobby emptied.

There was an old metal desk in one corner and a wooden chair. Flynn took the chair and put his feet up on his desk. He pulled his iPad out of his duffel and turned it on.

When he input his password to reach the secure network, he was denied entry. He read the FAILED LOG-IN ATTEMPT warning. He was attempting to access a secure network, and his identity was known. If he continued, he would be in commission of a felony.

“Here you are, Officer Carroll. Come on, we’ve got work to do.”

Geri stood over him, the shadow of Abby smiling in her face.

He followed her into a spartan office—gray linoleum floor, gray walls, dingy white ceiling tiles. He had to hand it to Uncle Sam; the old fart had a real talent for interior decoration.

She dropped down behind the desk. “Sit,” she said, gesturing to the one steel chair in the room.

“Where’s Diana?”

“Licking her wounds. She got a lecture.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“I told her she was incompetent and her operation was an embarrassment to her and a failure for this planet.”

“How many planets are involved?”

She raised her eyebrows appreciatively. “Nice question. Very quick. You should know that you’re talking to the person who was most strongly in favor of executing you. And I’m still of that opinion.”

“Fine. Let’s head to Dodge. Face off at high noon. Gun to gun.”

“I don’t carry your sorts of weapon. Frankly, mine are better and I am faster.”

“Good, then maybe you can increase the kill rate around here. Because I need to get the last of the murderers.”

“You don’t understand anything. That’s stupid.”

“Stupidity and ignorance are two different things. A person who doesn’t get that is a fool.”

“Remember that English isn’t my native language. If I’m too blunt, just tell me.”

“Inside of five minutes, you’ve told me that my boss is incompetent, our operation sucks, you want me dead, and I’m stupid. That’s too blunt.”

She did not reply as fast as she had earlier. He could see the calculation in her eyes. Despite all her bluster, she was beginning to see that she was on unsure footing.

“You need to slow down,” he said. “If you’re going to be calling the shots, you’d be well advised to at least inspect our operation. Do you even know how it’s organized?”

“In such a way that it isn’t working right.”

“Oh? We save lives. Human lives. So it’s working just fine, thank you.”

“One field operative who destroys every biorobot he encounters, not knowing that his actions are only going to goad them into becoming more aggressive. That’s not our definition of ‘working right.’”

“I can’t capture them. Nobody can. If I’m lucky, I can get an occasional kill. Where’s our choice in that?”

“You’re a police officer. I’m sure you have procedures.”

“My guess is that you know exactly what those are.”

“I do, and you don’t even try to follow them when it comes to our mechanisms.”

“Biorobots? Mechanisms? So I’m right about what they are.”

Diana came into the room. Geri went to her feet. “No, not needed, please leave.”

Diana's eyes met Flynn's. Nothing needed to be said. They both thought exactly the same thing about Commandant Geri. "We have a situation."

"Exactly our concern," Geri said. "That's why I'm here. You stress these entities enough, they amplify the conflict. If you keep destroying them, their numbers will continue to grow. Think of them as cancer. Your planet has cancer, but so far, the tumor is small. I am here to help you keep it that way."

"I think that the conflict has just been amplified. We have a problem in a community called Elmwood, Texas. The entire town has been set on fire."

"Elmwood? So they're trying to lure me again."

"Lure you?" Geri asked.

"Sure, they did Dr. Miller for two reasons. One, because they apparently didn't like the work he was doing. Two, because they wanted to lure me. They got me where they wanted me, but then had a bit of a setback. So they're trying again. Of all the places in the world, they know for certain that I'll go to Elmwood."

"Why would that be?"

"My family founded the town."

"Should you, then?"

"They'll keep causing trouble until I do—you can be sure of that."

"But given what happened in Mountainville," Diana said, "wouldn't they try something else?"

"Destroying the town my family founded qualifies as something else, I think."

"Seems as if we have our first case as a team, then," Geri said.

Diana ordered transportation to Menard, and the three of them headed to the flightline.

On the plane, Flynn asked Geri why they couldn't use her ship, and received a long lecture about how they couldn't introduce technology that was too far ahead of our own without disrupting our society. It made a kind

of sense, but he didn't buy it. He wasn't buying Geri at all, except for one thing, which was that she had something like a ghost of Abby in her, and he was going to find out why that was.

The flight was two and a half hours, twelve hundred miles. Geri sat staring straight ahead the whole time, her hands folded in her lap. It was unnerving.

“What're we going to do about her uniform?” Diana asked. “She can't traipse around Texas in a blue jumpsuit.”

He thought about that. Then he made a decision. On the surface, it probably seemed simple. It was not simple, and it might bring some unexpected results. He said, “I've still got all of Abby's stuff. They're just about the same size. We can stop by the house on the way out.”

When he was very small, he'd gone to the country school in Elmwood. He closed his eyes, remembering the clapboard building where class had been held. His mind drifted back to his granddad, a stately old Texan who was just as polite as a preacher and as formal as an undertaker until you got him on a quarter horse. He could toss a lariat like the cowboy that he was, and cuss like he was the devil's understudy.

The family had come before oil, when this part of Texas was all about wheat and cattle. Wheat if you were a gambler and crazy, cattle if you were only crazy.

“Flynn,” Diana asked, “how tired are you?”

“Not tired.”

“False. You ought to get some sleep.”

“If I sleep now, I'm liable to wake up and find the whole town dead, in addition to all the cops and rescue workers who are probably trying to save them.”

Menard's airport was closed down for the night, but the automatic lights came on during their approach.

The moment they pulled up to the terminal, Geri got out of the plane.

Flynn made a call on his cell phone while he and Diana watched Geri become involved with the tall cyclone fence that separated the apron from the outdoor luggage station and the parking lot. Finally, she returned.

“I’ve called the custodian,” Flynn said. “He’ll be along in ten minutes to let us out. He’ll also drive us to my place, and we can get you changed.”

They waited on the tarmac, with the prairie wind blowing down their necks. Flynn kept his anguish to himself. Whatever was happening over in Elmwood was his fault, no question.

Robert Greaves, the tiny airport’s custodian, finally pulled up, pie-eyed and trying hard not to topple over. “I hear you workin’ in D.C.,” he said.

“Yep.”

“Menard ain’t changed a lick, you’ll find.”

“I know it.”

Greaves drove by aiming the car along the curb. The smell of bourbon filled the car.

When Flynn saw his house, which he had not entered in nearly a year, he felt a real catch in his throat. This was going to be hard as hell, giving this weird woman things that had belonged to Abby. He wanted it all, every ballpoint pen and every blouse, every hair curler and cocktail gown, and all the jeans and all the tees. Geri was stiff and uneasy as she walked up to the front door. Was she sensitive enough to understand the pain this was causing him? He doubted that.

Diana was on her cell in the car, and still on it when they entered the house as Greaves drove away. Finally she closed it and came in. She said, “Nothing’s happened for a couple of hours.”

“How many are dead?”

“So far, three. The locals are still going from house to house.”

“Where is this culturally appropriate clothing?”

He led Geri up to his and Abby's bedroom, which was still as it had been on the day of her disappearance, Abby's top drawer still opened an inch, everything just as their life together had left it.

Silently, he opened her middle drawer and took out a blouse; then he got jeans from the closet, sneakers, socks from her sock drawer, a bra, underwear. He laid it all on the bed.

There was a hissing sound, and her uniform fell away. "Help me with this clothing. It's unfamiliar."

"I'll send Diana up," he said.

"I want you. You help me."

"No." He went downstairs to Diana. "Get her dressed," he muttered. "She can't do it."

"Goddamnit, Flynn, I don't want to be alone with that crocodile."

"Get her dressed!"

She hurried off, stomping up the stairs. He couldn't blame her.

Aeon. Beautiful name. It meant "life." It meant "eternity."

He remembered his mother sitting years ago at the great table in the dining room, throwing out tarot cards. She had been good with things like tarot cards and the *I Ching*. Once, she had thrown him the Tower and said, "How funny, it falls in the place of the future." She had looked up at him, and he could still remember the fear in her eyes, the haunted fear. "The future, Errol," she had said, then turned the destruction card facedown, as if sealing a tomb.

They should have called Aeon that: the Tower of Destruction. It was death riding down the night, pale and quick, in the form of creatures whose cruelty was as much part of their blood as love was part of the blood of man.

He thought these thoughts sitting in the same easy chair that his father had used and his grandfather before him. He wondered where this situation was really going. Having failed, why would they try the same trick of luring him

to another isolated spot just twenty-four hours later?

Only one answer to that question: because it wasn't the same trick.

He listened to the slow movement of the old house. A house has gestures, the sigh of a footfall on a carpet, the creak of a step, the whispering crack of wainscoting as the floor it borders is pressed by a stealthy weight.

"I dislike this clothing."

He got up from the chair. "It's what women here wear." Dressed like this, she could have been Abby's twin, which made him want to rip them off her back. He smiled. "You look entirely American now," he said.

"Well, I'm not." Her tone reflected her arrogance.

He took them outside and opened his garage. The Ferrari stood there in its red grandeur, the Range Rover beside it, looking very stuffy and staid.

He opened the truck and they got in. He thought it might not run, but it did, turning over after a few hesitant grinds of the starter.

As he drove down the familiar streets of Menard, he said, "I don't know what we're going to find out there, but I have to say, I feel way out of my depth."

Geri said, "Just remember procedure. That's the important thing."

"Yeah, procedure," Diana muttered. "Hear that, Flynn?"

He said nothing.

A couple of deer appeared in the road, bounding off into the darkness as the truck approached them. He no longer saw creatures like deer and owls in quite the same way.

"What if we kill some of your people tonight, Geri?"

"If we follow procedure and that happens, then it happens."

"Tell me, what's your procedure?"

"Much the same as yours: Demand compliance. If the perp has a weapon, warn that deadly force will be used."

"In this case, the perp is the weapon. It's their speed and those claws.

They don't need guns."

They drove on in silence.

"Okay, here we go," he said. There was a large police blockade ahead, dozens of light bars flashing, SWAT vehicles, even a riot tank, all spread across the road in a disorganized mass. Beyond the barricade, the remains of Elmwood glowed and flickered on the horizon.

"They expect us," Diana said as one of the state cops peered in the driver's-side window, then waved them through.

As they were passing, Flynn got a surprise. Standing there with the state brass in a pair of worn chinos and a leather jacket was his old boss, Eddie Parker. His face was hidden under the shadow of his Stetson, but Flynn didn't need to see his expression to know how very unhappy he was.

He stopped the truck.

"Excuse me, drive on."

He got out and walked over to Eddie.

Malcolm Dodd, the chief of state police, and Fred Carter, captain of the Texas Rangers, both watched with Eddie as Flynn walked up.

"Eddie."

"Three dead, all old folks who couldn't get out of their houses."

"I am so damn sorry." Flynn didn't say how relieved he was that they hadn't been maimed like Dan Miller.

"Can I tell 'em what you do?"

Eddie couldn't give away any secrets. "Sure."

"This is a Menard guy. Flynn Carroll. He's a fed now. Way up there." He fluttered his fingers.

"Can you help us?"

"We need to have a look."

"What happened?" Dodd asked. "Do you have any idea? I mean, the whole place caught on fire at the same time. Within minutes."

“This will be handled,” Flynn said. He had no idea how, but these frightened, hollow-eyed men needed something that would restore morale.

“He’s the man,” Eddie said. “We’re gonna get past this.”

“It was a secret weapon, wasn’t it?” Fred Carter said. “Some kinda terrorist thing.”

“That’s right. Terrorists. A secret weapon. They chose to test it on Elmwood, probably because it’s out of the way and vulnerable. It would have been done from above. A plane. We’ll get them, fellas, never fear. And anything you find, put it in channels right away.”

He got back in the Range Rover and closed the door, then drove on toward the town his family had founded a hundred and fifty years ago.

Ahead, Elmwood’s low, familiar buildings lay in smoking ruins. One of them was the Carroll General Store, now a Rite Aid pharmacy, where Flynn had played on the porch as a boy, rolling his beloved toy stagecoach back and forth under the hard Texas sun.

As they moved ahead, he kept watch on the night sky. Sooner or later, he knew, their disk would come—small and old, perhaps, by the standards of a place like Aeon, but here on Earth, still immeasurably advanced and breathtakingly dangerous.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FROM THE first moment he saw Geri, Flynn had understood that he had to get away from her, or it. He needed to deal with the present problem, then follow the trail he'd been given, the code, and he didn't want her along for the ride. 333676. Somebody on Deer Island was calling his attention to Miller and to the island.

"Okay," he said, "at this point, we need to enter the community."

"Flynn," Diana said, "the aliens are there—you know it."

"I do."

There was something moving at the end of Plainview, which was Elmwood's main street.

Flynn got out of the truck. They were in front of a ruined storefront that had once been Jack Holt's barbershop. Beside it was another empty store, which had been spared the fire. A Mode O'Day women's shop had been there.

"Stay in the vehicle," he said.

Geri got out. "We need to do this together."

"Do you know what 'this' is?"

"I do not."

"Just checking."

She stepped up onto the raised sidewalk.

“You get any closer to it, you’re gonna get yourself killed.”

“Closer to what?”

“One of your friends is in there. There’s another one down at the end of Plainview, and two more moving into position to prevent us from getting away.”

“This is impossible.”

“Get back in the truck and lock the doors.”

“You must not—”

“Get us all killed. I agree. Now, please give me the cooperation I need to keep you alive.”

There were two more of them in the alley between the barbershop and the hardware store, which had still been in business until tonight. No longer.

He went over to the Range Rover and leaned in the window. “First off, these windows need to be closed. Second, Diana, I want you to get the vehicle turned around and ready to burn rubber.”

“What’s going on?”

“We’re in the process of being surrounded by Geri’s mechanisms. They mean to kill me, and will certainly include you if they can. And maybe her. Obviously, I’m not sure.”

Diana said, “I just don’t see anything.”

“You don’t know how to look. I thought you’d be ready for this.”

He noticed that a black oblong object had slipped into Geri’s left hand. It was small and trim and had no barrel.

Diana opened the car door.

“No.”

She came anyway.

“Nobody obeys orders anymore.”

“You can’t give me orders, Flynn.”

“We’re surrounded right now.”

“You knew this would happen. You’re challenging them.”

“We’d better pull out,” Geri said. “I didn’t come all this way to be killed on the first night.”

“So what’s procedure in a case like this? I assume shooting our way out is a no go.”

Diana laughed a little.

“You led me into this,” Geri said. “You knew I’d end up being forced to do it your way.”

“What I knew, and what I know, is that you have no idea what you’re doing. At all.”

“I’m trained for police work. I’m not a soldier, I don’t kill unless deadly force is my only alternative.”

“What we need to do right now is give these folks who are surrounding us one hell of a bloody nose. So what’s the procedure we need to follow?”

“Of all the planets in all the galaxies in the universe, I’d be sent to this one.”

“That’s a good line.”

He drew and fired three shots, but still the alien that had leaped out of the ruins of the drugstore came on. It launched itself at him, but a fourth shot caused it to drop to the street, where it kicked and flailed wildly, blood spraying out of its exploded chest and face.

Then it stopped.

Silence fell.

“Geri, what choice did I have? What procedure should I have followed?”

She snapped, “No choice.”

“So what are we looking at, here? We haven’t had fires before. So do you know what we can expect next?”

“They’re programmed entities. They don’t invent; they repeat. Anything they do, they’ve been programmed to do.”

“How about you? Are you a programmed entity, too?”

“I don’t know.”

Diana gasped, but Geri’s words surprised Flynn only for a moment. It was the truth, it was the future talking, and it was a warning to mankind that Flynn vowed never to forget. Mix man and machine at peril to man.

Four more of the aliens had come up, and more were crossing the roofs. He could hear the faint rattle of their claws and the whispering breeze of their jumps.

“In a few seconds, we’re gonna have another confrontation. It’ll be a lot harder. If we do enough damage, they might back off. Please use your weapon, Geri.”

Three of them leaped off nearby roofs as four more came out of doors on both sides of the street. Flynn dropped two of the jumpers before they hit the street, but the rest of them kept coming.

A number of cops appeared, moving in from the side streets. He heard Eddie’s shout: “Flynn, what in holy hell?”

“Get out of here! *Now!*”

He took a hit so hard that he staggered, then went down on one knee with the thing on his back. Its arms wrapping his chest felt like steel bars. His left arm was free, but when he reached down for his small pistol, it was gone. It had come out in his fall and lay twenty feet away.

There was a dull thud, and the alien flopped to the ground.

He pulled out his .454 and did three of the others with thunderous shots. Diana, crouching by the truck, screamed as he fired.

The one that Geri had dropped leaped up, rising easily fifty feet in the air. Then, coming down as another three jumped onto the roof of the truck, it went after Diana. Geri pointed her weapon at it, but nothing happened. She shook it and tried again. Nothing.

He took all of them out with shots fired in such quick succession, they

sounded like a single detonation.

Geri stood looking at her weapon in the palm of her hand.

“Does that thing not work?”

“Apparently not. It isn’t properly tuned to Earth’s magnetic field.”

He took it from her.

“Return that, you’re not authorized.”

He threw it as far as he could, watching it arc away onto one of the roofs.

“You’ve given a weapon to the enemy—that’s an actionable offense.”

“Let’s hope they try to use it. Now, get in the truck—we’re done here.”

“You said we’d be killed if we leave.”

“That was then.” He gestured toward the bodies. “This is now. We’ve probably got a minute or so of playtime while they regroup. They’re testing my skills, and they don’t mind using their own lives to do it.”

“Why do they need to test you?”

“They can’t figure out how to defeat me. I’m too fast.”

“Why?”

Something crossed his mind—a suspicion. Small, probably far-fetched, but there. He said, “You tell her, Diana.”

There was the slightest hesitation.

“Diana?”

“You said we need to get out of here, Flynn.”

He started the Range Rover as Geri and Diana tumbled in and locked their doors. He drove to the end of Plainview and out into the flat prairie beyond, bouncing along the same dirt track that he and Mac and Eddie had used going deer hunting together, and later taking dates to look at the stars.

He took out his cell phone and called Eddie.

“Stay the hell out of the town until further notice. It’s quarantined, do you understand? Everybody out.”

“Flynn, what in God’s name are you doing? What were those shots?”

“You didn’t hear anything. You have nothing to tell the press or anybody else, any of you. National security.”

“Okay, Flynn, I hear you.”

Flynn hung up.

Diana was on her own phone. “I want a big cleanup crew to Elmwood, Texas, before dawn. There is alien material on the streets, and we want it gone. Out of there. Every trace.” She listened. “Call out the whole operation, everybody you need.” She glanced at her watch. “Get here no later than four.”

He did not hate; it was inefficient. He said, “It’s not over. They’re going to come after us again.”

He was driving through a grazed-down pasture on the Triple Horn Ranch, a forty-thousand-acre spread bordered by the railroad and the interstate.

If they got out of this situation, which he doubted they would, he had quite a number of questions for Geri, and she would not fail to answer—he would see to that.

“Where are we going?” Diana asked.

“Away. Far away.”

“They went to your town to break your heart.”

“They did.”

“Geri,” Diana said quietly, “we need an army with Flynn’s capabilities.”

“We do,” he agreed.

“You can’t raise an army?” Geri asked.

“Our problem is that we can’t find anybody else as fast as Flynn who can also do this work. So he has to be an army of one.”

“That can’t last.”

“That’s for damn sure,” he said. “We barely got out of Elmwood, and that’ll be the last time we escape, if we have. Geri, what abilities do they have to track us right now?”

“A vehicle on an isolated roadway like this would be easy.”

“And are they likely to be doing that?”

“I would think so. But remember, we’re dealing with a few hundred individuals. They’ve come here because Earth is easy. It’s undefended.”

“Why don’t you defend us? Your military could surely handle a small force like that.”

“It was a miracle that I got here. I have no idea if my pilot will even get home alive. Or if I’ll ever be able to leave Earth.”

Diana said, “Oh, Jesus.”

Flynn said nothing.

“You’re displeased?”

“Just how much trouble is Aeon in, anyway?” Diana asked.

“I’m not supposed to talk about it.”

“But you’re going to,” Flynn said.

She said no more.

He decided that he’d come back to this when the time was right, but one thing was very clear: Aeon was not some sort of giant United States or European Union like the exo team imagined. He could see that what was happening here on Earth was such a sideshow to them that they had only seen their way clear to sending a single officer, and a kid at that. Geri was no Oltisis, not wise, not deeply professional. Unlike him, though, she could breathe the air without getting allergies and walk the streets without spreading terror. Progress of a sort, but he would rather have had a seasoned cop.

He finally reached the interstate and slid into the traffic pattern. Hopefully, they would be a little less conspicuous in the flow of vehicles.

“Isn’t Menard behind us?” Diana asked.

“We’re not going to Menard.”

She considered that. “Where, then?”

“You figure it out.”

“Oh, no. No way.”

“Otherwise, we don’t have a prayer.”

“I’ll be getting out now. I’ll hitch to the airport.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“He’s a criminal. We don’t need that kind of a complication.”

“You don’t want a former lover in your hair.”

“He wasn’t my lover.”

“If you say.”

“Damn you!”

He said to Geri, “Last year we got a device from you people called a MindRay. A number of people who relied on it paid for that mistake with their lives. Now I saw that your stun gun, or whatever it was, didn’t work either. Why?”

“I think that there’s something about Earth’s magnetic field that throws our devices off.”

“And yet you got here from another planet. That worked. Why?”

“It doesn’t always.”

“Where is Aeon?”

“I don’t know how to tell you.”

“How far away? In light-years, say.”

“Your year is half as long as ours, so ... twenty-four of your light-years.”

“And how long in actual travel time? In the ship?”

“About half a day—or six of your hours—to reach jump, then a second or so, then movement into your orbital zone, a couple more days—about two Earth days, total.”

“The part of the journey that involves movement across light-years takes a couple of seconds?”

“It’s a wormhole,” Diana said. “We think it’s near Saturn. We’ve detected

powerful gravity waves from there.”

“So is there one, or are there many? How many ships can come here at once?”

“We control the other end of it. Mostly, anyway. A few crooks get through. Obviously.”

“So your control isn’t very secure?”

“I am sorry to say that it isn’t.”

“Why not? What’s wrong?”

“That’s complicated.”

“Try me.”

“Corruption is one problem. Illegal crossing another. Mainly, it’s illegal crossing.”

“Why Earth? Why even come here?”

“Criminals come here, rebels come here, not decent people.”

“Of course,” Diana said. “Just our luck.”

“We only engage with species on our own level. The crooks go for the lesser ones because they’re helpless.”

“Okay, so why are the crooks here?” Flynn asked.

“Take your DNA, your stem cells. That stuff has markets all over the galaxy—a healthy, smart species like you people. Plus, Earth is a beautiful planet and it’s incredibly rich. You can live here in serious comfort and luxury, and on most planets, that is not the case. Earth has a rep for being a really fun place to be. But the only legal travel here is for scientific or social engineering purposes.”

“Social engineering?”

“The ones you call the grays are increasing human intelligence by creating a question around themselves that you can neither bear nor answer. They do it with the UFO and abduction mysteries, which they will never allow to be solved. Such questions increase logical intelligence, which gets

into the DNA. Two more generations of this, and your average human is going to have the intelligence of what you now consider a genius.”

“And what about grays? What sort of social engineering do you do?”

“We don’t have the resources or the skill. They’re very advanced.”

Now that he’d gotten her talking comfortably, he shifted to critical questions.

“The criminals here can make themselves appear human. How many are doing this?”

“No idea.”

“You’re like that, aren’t you? This isn’t the real you.”

“This body is so nice. It’s soft and it smells good and it’s so sleek and curvy.” She stretched, leaned her head back, and shook out her hair. “Even your hair is wonderful. And these eyes! They’re way better than ours. I’ve never seen the world like this before, all these colors. It’s just very sweet in this thing.”

“How many others are here like you?”

“None, not legally. It’s very strictly regulated.”

“But there may be criminals doing it?”

“You need to understand a little better just what you’re dealing with. There is one criminal, or a gang of them, who have taken on human form. They are running the robots you are killing, and probably building them here.”

“The robots can also make themselves look human. I’ve seen it.”

“That’s just a skin-deep disguise. Their programming doesn’t change.”

“So how would I detect one?”

“Vicious, paranoid personality, judging from the way the ones your perp is deploying have been programmed.”

Light glared in the windshield. He hit the horn and swerved onto the shoulder, but it wasn’t out-of-control traffic, it was something else, and the

light stayed right with them.

Geri let out an unearthly wail.

The truck's engine screamed as its wheels started to leave the ground. He jammed the gas to the floor, gaining just enough traction to get out of the column of light that was trying to drag them skyward.

The vehicle bounced as its full weight dropped back onto its shocks. The next second, the light was on them again. Again, he turned out of it, then went caroming across the field he was in with the light following him. Every time it flooded the car, he spun the wheel again, but he knew that he was going to run out of luck sooner or later.

"Do you have any way of dealing with this?" he shouted to Geri above the screaming of the engine.

"We can deprogram them."

"How?"

The light hit again, and this time he slammed on the brakes, threw it into reverse, floored it, and backed up swerving wildly at the same time.

"You need their core code, and we're not going to be able to get that."

The light flooded the windshield. It had them now, and it wasn't going to lose them again.

He opened his window, drew his gun, and fired upward.

The wheels left the ground entirely. The engine shrieked so much, he pulled up his foot.

They were a good four feet off the ground.

He fired again, two quick shots.

The light turned blue. The truck lurched.

He fired again.

A sheet of flame enveloped the truck, which fell to the ground, hitting with a jaw-snapping crash.

Once again, he hit the gas and they lunged forward.

“Can they fix whatever I hit?”

“I don’t know.”

Behind them, he saw a column of orange smoke, glowing from within.

“What’s that mean?”

“It’s on fire, I think.”

Had he destroyed it? “Are they vulnerable to bullets?”

“Not usually. But that one’s a relic. A real piece of junk. A lucky shot would probably do damage.”

“How can you tell it’s junk?”

“You can hear it.”

Ahead, he saw a familiar berm. “Railroad track,” he said. He drove along beside it until he found a small trestle spanning a draw. He parked the truck under it.

“Ever hop a freight, Diana?”

“Every day.”

He got out of the truck. “Come on. Lesson one.”

He led them up onto the track. “This is a main trunk line. There’s trains through here every few hours. Long trains. Slow. We’d hop ’em as kids.” He knelt down and listened to the rail. “Okay, there’s something a few miles out. Don’t know which direction yet. We need to walk a bit, find a place where the berm’s flatter. You need to be able to sprint. Can you sprint, Geri?”

“Excuse me, but what’s a train?”

“Oh, God,” Diana said.

“A big engine that pulls cars along rails.” He kicked one with a toe. “Point is, they come through here just slow enough to where you can grab a ride. I mean, the full ones. The empties, forget it. Way too fast.”

“Where will it take us?”

“Away from here. That’s all we need right now.”

“No sign of the light,” Diana said, peering up into the star-flooded sky.

“Won’t last. If they find us out here like this, they’ve got us.” He took Geri’s arm and led them both back under the trestle. “This kinda crap happen at home?”

“Yes, actually, it does.”

“You mentioned rebels. Who’s winning?”

She shook her head. Her lips had formed a tight, bitter line.

“So they are. Why would that be?”

She stayed quiet, so Flynn took to listening for the next train.

“We created them!” She burst into tears.

Clumsily, he tried to comfort her. He looked to Diana for help.

“Not in my job description.”

In the distance, he heard a low, familiar sound, the horn of a train sounding as it approached a grade crossing. It was moving westward, which was good on two counts. It would be running heavy and therefore slow, and it would take them where they needed to go.

“Okay, kid, button it up. We’ve got some traveling to do.”

Geri shook her head. “We can’t escape. There’s no way.”

“There’s always a way.” He took her wrist, and she came along like an uneasy mare, ready to bolt at any moment. Diana followed them up onto the track.

Geri dumped her cookies between the rails. Crouching, she wept and coughed.

The train’s swinging headlamp appeared far along the roadway.

“Okay, what’s gonna happen is, there’ll be an empty boxcar along somewhere. We spot one, we start running. I’ll pull myself up, then get you guys, one after the other. It doesn’t feel like it, but we’re on a long upward grade, and she’s gonna be doing less than five miles an hour when she passes here. That’s fast, but if we sprint, we have a chance.”

At that moment, he saw light from above hit the field about half a mile

away. Geri swallowed a scream. Even Diana, who was normally cool under pressure, grabbed his shoulder. She said, “Flynn, do you have any of that cyanide?”

“No time.”

“Please!”

The train was closing. So the engineer wouldn’t see them, he got them crouching down on the berm. If they were spotted, the guy would radio the bulls working the consist, and that would be another complication.

The light danced through the field, working its way closer to their position.

“They’re following our ruts, Flynn,” Diana moaned.

“Yep.”

The first engine roared past. There were four diesels back to back, and the train was moving at the equivalent of a flat-out sprint. He trotted along beside it, letting the cars slide on ahead, one by one.

“Stay with me!” he shouted.

A boxcar passed with its door rattling but closed. He leaped and grabbed the frame of the door, dragging it open and levering himself inside.

The light flashed down twenty feet away, then went out again.

He grabbed Geri’s arm and pulled her up. Diana was running hard, both of her arms stretched out, her hands clutching air. He leaned farther out. Reached. Touched her fingers, lost them.

The light flashed down again, this time a short distance ahead of them. The next time it came, it was going to hit this car. What that would mean, he had no idea.

He got her. Fingers intertwined, he pulled her toward him, causing her feet to bounce on the roadbed. If she slipped now, she’d be lucky to lose her legs and not her life. She cried out, her eyes begging, her teeth bared with effort and terror.

She came rolling in and lay on the floor gasping. Geri had crouched against the far wall.

“You considered this fun?” Diana gasped.

“It takes a little practice.”

The car shuddered. Light poured in the door, sucking columns of dust up off the floor. Flynn and Diana joined Geri against the far wall.

The car swayed furiously, the wheels screaming on the rails. Then it was plunged into darkness. Soon the light appeared again, but this time farther behind them.

As the train rounded a long curve, Flynn could see the light far behind them, dragging at the truck, which remained stuck under the trestle. He could see it rise, slam against the ties until it made them hop, but it could not be pulled out.

Finally, the light went away, flashing downward occasionally, then flickering off into the night.

CHAPTER NINE

THE TRAIN shuddered and clanged, picking up speed as it rolled into the long downgrade past the little community of Hale. Flynn knew the place well. If you wanted to jump a westbound train, you had to do it east of here and vice versa.

“I can’t believe we got away,” Geri said. “I thought I’d be killed right away, like my uncle.”

“Oltisis was your uncle?” Diana asked.

“We’re a police family.” She shook her head. “We actually got away.”

“We didn’t,” Flynn said. “They know exactly where we are.”

Both women looked to him.

He explained further. “The light hit this car and only this car. Therefore, they know we’re in here. Geri, tell me this—could that light pick up something as heavy as a boxcar?”

“Not on a small ship like that.”

“This train is going to stop in about fifteen minutes in the switching station at Hermes,” Flynn said. “When it does, they’re expecting that we’ll get off. The instant all three of us are on the ground, they’ll strike.”

“If we don’t get off?”

“They’ll follow the train until we do. We’re going to need to jump while it’s still moving. We absolutely cannot get off when it’s stopped.”

“Won’t they be watching for us to come off outside the station?” Geri asked.

“I hope not.”

“I don’t think I can jump off a moving train,” Diana said.

Flynn went to the middle of the car. “What you need to do is to control the way you take the hit. You do that with your shoulder and thigh, and as soon as you hit the ground, you start rolling. From twenty miles an hour, you’re going to break some bones. From ten, you’re going to be bruised. Less, and you walk away with a little dust in your mouth. Or, truthfully, a lot.”

“At what speed will we jump?”

“The faster, the better.” He glanced out the door. “Come on. There’s no time like the present.”

The prairie was silent, the sky awash in stars. Even so, he couldn’t imagine that they wouldn’t be spotted immediately, but he also didn’t see an alternative. He checked his guns. He’d caused the disk some damage before, so maybe he’d get lucky again.

“Okay, ladies, this is going to be extremely unpleasant. We’re doing about fourteen miles an hour. The lights of the switching station are going to appear when we round the next curve, so now’s the time.” He put his hands on Diana’s shoulders. “Relax, remember to roll.”

She shrank back.

He shoved and she went tumbling away down the berm, disappearing in a cloud of dust.

Geri had her eyes shut tight. He pushed her out, then went himself.

It was an easy roll into a berm that consisted of small gravel. Dusting himself, he got up to see if either of the women had broken bones.

Diana was sitting up about two feet from the passing train. She had her head in her hands.

“You hurt?”

She shook her head.

He found Geri lying on her side. He leaned down. “Geri?”

An eye opened.

“Can you get up? Is anything broken?”

“What does it feel like? I’ve never broken one of these before.”

“Pain will radiate out from the site of the injury. There will be swelling.”

“No, nothing like that.”

The train passed, its red taillight disappearing into the blackness. Above it at an altitude of no more than fifty feet was an object, its smooth skin softly reflecting the starlight. The object followed the train around the bend and into Hermes.

He got Geri to her feet. “How many ships do they have?”

“They’re not rich, or they wouldn’t be here. So probably one, maybe two.”

Diana was still in tears. He put his arm around her shoulder. He didn’t want to tell her that they had a twelve-mile walk through some of the most desolate country in the United States before they reached Mac’s place. He didn’t even want to confirm her suspicion of where they were going, out of fear she’d run off on her own.

“We’ve got a hike,” he said, “and we need to do as much of it as we can before sunrise.”

“What if they find us?” Geri said.

“Will they? You tell me.”

“I have no idea.”

They set off, with Flynn guiding them by the stars. No way was he going to allow any electronics to be turned on. In any case, this was his country. He didn’t expect to get lost. The tricky part would come later. You didn’t walk up on Mac Terrell’s outfit without taking extreme precautions. He could

easily make a target a mile away, and he wasn't going to like the look of three people approaching without any preliminary warning. Even if he let them come up, his dogs were going to be another problem. They were incredible animals. Off-the-charts smart. When they were working for Morris, they had nearly killed Flynn. Instead, a number of members of their pack had gone to dog heaven.

They'd remember him for sure, and they'd likely be eager to even the score.

How Mac had gotten them to go over to his operation was very simple. Money meant nothing to them, but they did like good food. Dog food was out, even things like slabs of raw steak were out. These dogs lived on the finest meats, superbly prepared. They were gourmets. Mac had seen their value and hired a cook, built a cookhouse, even brought in some real high-grade food animals to service them—the best beef, mutton, and poultry Texas could provide—not to mention game, with which they were abundantly supplied.

Morris had obviously designed and built them. They were full of human DNA and nearly as smart as a man. With their superb ears, eyes, and noses, they were far superior to any human tracker.

As they walked, Flynn kept close to the few draws he found, ready to roll into them if he noticed the least sign of movement in the sky. Probably, all that would be visible would be a blotting of stars. The bottom of the thing wouldn't be reflecting any light.

“Geri, I want you to tell me if the ship has any other vulnerabilities. I stopped the light working for a few minutes. Could I do more?”

“These ships are meant for inter-solar system travel. In an atmosphere, they can do about forty thousand of your miles in an hour. In space, up to a million.”

“A million miles an hour?”

“In space. They work by generating their own gravity field. This is done with counterrotating magnets that turn really fast. That’s the vulnerability. Hit that, and the ship disintegrates.”

“How would I hit it?”

“It rotates around the lower part of the ship, but the fuselage protects it.”

“The fuselage is strong, I assume.”

“Very.”

“And there are no seams, no cracks?”

“There is a seam. It’s a millimeter wide. It’s there to allow the ship’s gravity field to establish itself in the right pattern.”

A millimeter was not good. Not good at all.

“I want us to stay as low as we can. Keep to the draws. I know it’s harder going, but those guys have got to be looking for us.”

“Maybe they’re still following the train,” Diana said.

“Geri, let me ask you another question. You know that mind-reading device last year, the one that didn’t work—are there better ones? Might they be able to pick up our thoughts and track us that way?”

“I can’t say for sure. I don’t know what they have.”

He thought on that. “What might they have?”

“Another MindRay would be the only thing.”

“Good, because they’re damn near worthless.” They weren’t designed to actually read thought, but only to detect and evaluate it, and offer a reading as to the target’s state of awareness.

“Again, it’s the planet’s magnetic field. They need to be purpose-built to work on Earth, apparently.”

“And none have or will be.”

“No.”

“Answer me this: Is it possible that the crooks have weapons built into their bodies? Because they can paralyze you or render you unconscious by

just touching you. They can hypnotize at a distance.”

“There are lots of models of biorobot. That sounds like a crowd-control unit.”

“Models? Units?”

“As I said, we created them. They became self-aware and turned on us.”

“I’ll say they did.”

“They’re in rebellion at home, but the ones here are run by somebody. They’re not part of the rebellion. They probably don’t even know about it.”

“And they’re the only form? Spindly legs and arms, deep-set eyes, and narrow faces? Those claws.”

“Yes.”

“What about other forms?”

“Some of them have the ability to use a tone that hypnotizes people. They’re used in the entertainment industry, to create special effects.”

“Like bears that aren’t really there?”

“I suppose.”

Geri was worthless as a cop, but she was a fountain of information. He’d learned more about Aeon and its weapons and its troubles in the past hour than anybody on Earth had learned since the first aliens had showed up. At least, as far as he’d been told. With the government so secrecy-obsessed, maybe there was more knowledge in other areas.

“Diana, do we have any liaison with the air force?” He’d read things like the testimony of Dr. Milton Torres, who was ordered to shoot at a UFO over England in 1957, and he knew that in 2008, fighters had been scrambled from the Joint Reserve Base in Fort Worth to confront UFOs that appeared over Stephenville, Texas. In addition, he’d gone through dozens of public reports of helicopters following the things. But whenever they queried the Secretary of the Air Force, they’d been informed with absolute sincerity that “The air force takes no interest in unidentified flying objects,” and this despite the

clearances of all involved.

The result? The three of them were being menaced by something in the air, and there was nobody to call, and nothing to do but fire a gun at it and hope for a lucky shot. MacAduo Terrell, however, might be a real help in that department, given that all his shots were lucky.

The eastern sky began to glow, but at the same time, they had entered the low, nameless bands of hills that rose north of Mac's place. They were probably on his ranch by now, in fact, and so had just another few hours to go before they reached the house.

Nobody complained—he had to give them that. Geri shambled along. Diana tried to maintain her dignity, but the way she pranced was a familiar giveaway. She was dealing with blisters. Flynn noted this carefully. If they had to run, she would be slowest.

“I don't want anybody getting snakebit,” he said. “They come out with the sun, and they come out hungry. Geri, I assume you know what a snake is.”

“I did the Earth course and trained on-planet last month—so, yes, as I recall, a snake is a sort of self-propelled muscle that uses its mouth both for swallowing prey and defending itself. Some are venomous, and some are not. We have nothing like that on Aeon.”

“The diamondback rattlesnake is the main threat in this part of Texas. There are a lot of them, and we'll see some. What's critical if you hear the rattle is to stand absolutely still until you've identified the location of the snake. Then you can probably move off if you take it slow. If not, I'll deal with it.” He would avoid killing a snake if he could. They were just trying to protect themselves. They didn't deserve to die for that. When they were kids, he and Mac and Eddie had used them for target practice. People changed.

The sun was well up in the eastern sky when Flynn spotted the first faint gleam off a tin roof far ahead.

“Okay, hold on. No closer.”

“What?” Diana asked.

“That’s Mac’s place out there. We want to be real careful from here on. If we’re close enough to see it, we’re close enough for him to hit us.”

“He wouldn’t fire on you.”

“He might shoot first and ask questions later. It happens. Plus, he’s got Morris’s dogs.”

“That can’t be true.”

“It’s true.”

“How in the world did that happen?”

“With Mac, you never know. But he sold his old pack to the DEA, the way I heard it. Now he has the finest pack of dogs in the world.”

“What sets them apart?” Geri asked.

“They’ve got human genes. They’re highly intelligent.”

“That kind of hybridization is illegal.”

“Not here. We don’t know how to do it, so we don’t have a law against it.”

“Well, you should.”

“Geri, what kind of person is Morris? He’s not just here for fun. He kidnapped and he kills. Now he’s on a revenge kick.”

“We have psychopaths, too, unfortunately. He came here to steal genetic and sexual material because he was looking to make money. Then, I guess when you thwarted him, his ego took over.”

“Sounds pretty familiar.”

“Have you seen Mac recently?” Diana asked.

“I came out for a visit a couple of months ago, so yeah.”

About half an hour later, Flynn saw another flash of light, this one on the windshield of a pickup. It was sending up a dust cloud and coming toward them.

“Thank God,” Diana said, “I’m just about done in.”

“Get out of sight,” Flynn said.

“Excuse me, the arms are turning pink on this. Is that a problem?”

“It’s called sunburn, Geri.”

“How strange.”

“Yeah, it’s strange, all right. Come on, you two, we need to—”

“I know what sunburn is, but normally you’re better adapted to your own star. Are you sure the human species originated on Earth?”

Shaking his head, more to ward off the bizarre question than to answer it, he drew her down into a slight depression in the ground, which was the only concealment for a good mile.

From the distance, there came the echo of a single shot. The pickup slowed, then began jerking forward. The engine stopped.

There was a figure inside. Not moving.

“Hey, we’re over here,” Diana said. She rose out of cover.

“Stay down!”

Another bullet sprayed dirt five feet in front of her.

“You’ve just been warned,” Flynn said. Mac did not miss. He was telling them to stay the hell away from that truck.

The next thing he knew, she had her cell phone out.

“I wouldn’t turn that on.”

She ignored him.

He put his hand around hers, squeezing until she gave up the phone. “There’s no coverage out here. Except for the aliens. They might have very good coverage.”

“They do,” Geri said. She pointed.

Just above the western horizon and moving slowly this way at low altitude was a bright silver disk.

CHAPTER TEN

AS HE always did under such circumstances, Flynn inventoried his assets: both pistols, fully loaded; his knife; two people ill prepared in any useful way; and a pickup truck that was at the far end of a master sniper's shooting gallery and had a corpse behind the wheel.

He reached into his mouth, took out the cyanide capsule, and threw it into the brush.

"What are you doing?" Diana asked.

"Getting rid of my gum. It looks like we have a choice to make. Either we get killed by friends or by enemies. What'll it be?" He quietly ditched the rest of the cyanide. If the aliens captured them, there'd be no time to share it, and he didn't want to do that now. One of them was liable to bite down out of fear if an attack developed.

"They know we're here, so why not try the cell phones?"

Flynn watched the silver disk. It was now moving southward. "They could be combing the hills. Working their way back from wherever they were when they realized we had left the train. So forget doing anything that emits a signal."

He looked toward the truck. The five hundred feet between here and there offered not the slightest cover.

Mac knew they were here, but he obviously didn't know who they were.

He was likely to watch for hours, waiting to see if there'd be another move. He might even shoot the truck to bits, or blow the gas tank to conceal evidence. If the truck began to move, he'd certainly start shooting.

Flynn made his decision. "I think there's a chance we can reach the truck. We can find some concealment in it until dark. Then we can try driving back into the ranch. If we're luckier than God, we might make it before Mac opens up."

"What about the disk?" Diana asked.

"They're going to detect four bodies in the truck. All we can do is hope that'll throw them off. Geri?"

"They could be able to identify us individually, or not. Depends on the technology they possess."

"Okay, I'm going to go over there on my stomach. I'll signal each of you when to come."

As it turned out, the move went smoothly. While Geri and Diana sat in the back of the double cab, Flynn shifted the body of a Mexican in ten thousand dollars' worth of superb leather clothing and—improbably—a pair of fine Lucchese polo boots into the passenger seat.

Blood did not smell good, and corpses were about as maneuverable as bags of wet cement, but he got it done. He considered the polo boots. Legend had it that the game of kings was once played by Tamerlane with the heads of dead enemies, and Mac had bragged about reviving that tradition with some of his friends from south of the border. So this character had probably been lured up to play, without realizing that the plan was to use his head. He'd gotten away, though. Almost.

Too bad Mac hadn't come out to harvest his prize, but if they finally got a little luck, maybe that would happen soon. Mac didn't waste things, and he hated clutter on his property. He wouldn't leave the truck out here forever, but if he didn't want the head, it could be a few days before he finally showed

up with his handyman, Carlos.

Morning wore on, the flies of West Texas became thicker and thicker, and nothing moved except an occasional chaparral cock and, yes, a diamondback sliding along, coming toward the truck.

“See that?” Flynn said. “It’s the heat of the day. He’s going to shelter in our shadow. When the sun sets, he’ll go hunting. He’ll have about three or four hours before he cools down and goes to sleep.”

“This planet has so many different creatures on it.”

“Aeon doesn’t have as many?”

“We weren’t careful enough. Before we knew it, it was too late.”

“You have any pictures of home? I’d love to see what another planet looks like.”

“Not allowed. On a lesser planet, we can only go in clean and in local genetics. Sorry.”

“Oltisis certainly wasn’t in ‘local genetics,’ as you call us.”

“That protocol has been changed.”

“Let’s call it a less advanced planet, okay, not lesser?” Diana said.

“Intergalactic political correctness—I like it, Diana,” Flynn said.

“Funnyish.”

Autumn or not, it was a hot day. He decided to work on Geri a bit more, see how far he might get.

“Where do you get your human genetic material?”

“There are dealers. But mine came in on the official line. We didn’t buy it.”

“Does it have a history?”

“It came from Earth. That’s its history.”

Was it that she wasn’t telling him something, or that she didn’t know?

“You realize you look like my missing wife?”

“Of course.”

“It’s not pleasant.”

“We thought it would please you.”

“It’s agonizing.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“Are you ... her? In some way, partly her?”

“I’m so sorry that we misunderstood your culture. The way love works among you.”

“I repeat, do you have my wife’s genes?”

She reached over the seat and touched his face. It was a gesture right out of Abby’s life and her soul, but those fingers were hard and as cold as if they were dead. Still, the touch went deep into Flynn’s heart and gave him, without words, as eloquent an answer to his question as he could have hoped for.

The loneliness he felt then was a thing of stunning power. Geri was not Abby, but her memory come to life.

It was toward evening that they became aware of the deep rattle of the disk.

Nobody spoke. Nobody needed to. They all knew that it was now directly above the truck, and they all knew exactly what that might mean.

Flynn laid his hand on the butt of his big pistol.

A shadow grew around the truck, then it began to shudder, then to rise off the ground. He had the key; he could start it. But they would win, inevitably. Behind him, he could hear Diana’s ragged breathing. Geri was making stifled noises into her hands.

Then he had an idea come into his mind out of, of all things, old submarine movies where desperate captains released corpses to float up and deceive the enemy.

He threw his weight onto the corpse so the truck lurched, then reached up and opened the passenger door. The corpse rolled out, falling to the ground

with a wet thud. The cloud of flies gushed upward into the ship above them, the corpse with them.

The truck went higher. Higher still. Then it stopped. Wavered. And with a bone-rattling crash, it was dropped back to the ground.

Flynn heard himself gasp, almost cried out, stifled it.

“Get down, everybody!” He leaned down until his entire body was below the level of the dash.

Geri had burst into tears. Diana held her. He could feel them struggling to crouch in the confined space of the second seat.

“Nobody move,” he whispered, “and you, suck it up. Now!”

Geri gobbled her sobs.

He waited, silent. After a few more minutes, the shadow of the disk disappeared. New flies began replacing the ones that had been drawn into the ship. Flynn lay in the dried blood, letting flies feast on the sweat that sheened his own face.

After ten minutes, he sat up a little, peering over the dashboard.

The ruse had maybe worked. The disk was moving low across the range, its surface shimmering. The corpse lay on the ground a few hundred yards away. The disk was going so slowly that it seemed almost as if it were standing still. But it was not standing still, and in time it disappeared into the northern sky.

The truck blazed with heat, the flies billowed and swarmed, not a breath of breeze blew. Rising heat made the land shimmer. There was a time when autumn had brought northerners screaming down into West Texas, but not for years.

Cramped as he was, with the right side of his face pressed into the bloody seat where the corpse had been, he still did not move and would not move, not an inch, not until it was full dark. Even then, he was certain that the aliens would be able to see them, and that Mac would detect them walking in. They

couldn't use the truck. Mac would blow it up.

He asked Geri, "How long are they likely to keep up their search?"

"Forever."

"I mean, in this immediate area?"

"No way to tell."

"Any details you know about their programming, tell me."

"There are thousands of different programs for different uses. The way the rebels are banding together now, though, it's impossible to tell. And the ones you're dealing with aren't even our design, remember. Morris has probably got a lot of designer programming built into them."

"Where might he be building them? On Earth? Another planet?"

"In this solar system, certainly. Probably on-planet. It'd be cheaper and safer."

Night came, and with it fewer flies, but also dropping temperatures. Flynn moved, stretching his aching legs. Slowly, he sat up. In the back, both women did the same.

Flynn had thought that maybe Mac would send Carlos out on his own to take care of the mess, but the only sign of life at the ranch was the light over the corral. In fact, the place looked abandoned, what Flynn could see of it. He knew different, of course. Mac didn't show any more light than he had to.

"Can we get moving, Flynn? I'm too thirsty."

"We're all thirsty, Diana. Problem is, Mac's got this whole approach covered by radar at night."

"So how in hell do we do this?"

"We have to do it," Geri said. "This body is failing."

"So is this one," Diana muttered.

Flynn considered their odds. Not good, but not zero. Seeing three living people come out of a truck that had previously held a single dead one might make Mac curious enough to give them a closer look before he opened up on

them.

“I have to tell you, we could be blown off the face of the Earth or he might let us come in, and I can’t see how to calculate our odds. I think we just need to start walking.”

“We should’ve gone on down the line,” Diana said. “It’s your obsession with this particular nutcase that’s gotten us into this jam.”

“He’s a useful nutcase, Diana.”

“I don’t think so.”

Flynn opened his door. “Let’s go. Don’t trip over the corpse.”

He stepped out into the darkness. Right now, he was likely being painted by the radar. Alarms would be buzzing. In seconds, Mac’s arsenal would open up. However, not even Mac could sniper-shoot at this range using starlight amplification equipment, so he’d be likely to fire a rocket, hoping that anybody on foot would be in the kill zone when it hit the truck.

“Okay, run. Now. Straight toward the ranch.”

“Won’t that spook him?”

“Diana, just do it!”

When he ran, they followed. He kept it up until they were both gasping and falling back. Still, only when they were well clear of the truck did he stop. They came struggling up to him.

“Flynn,” Diana said, “I’m just about done. I can’t take much more.”

Flynn grunted. She might have to take a lot more—and if she couldn’t, she might die. But he didn’t go there, not right now. “We walk now, straight in.”

He was relieved that nothing had happened yet, but also curious. Could Mac have identified him and Diana? The continued lack of activity was building his confidence. “I think he might be letting us come in,” he said. Of course, it could also be that he was letting them get into night range. That, he did not say.

They had walked for about twenty minutes, and Flynn was beginning to feel good about this, when he heard something that he really, really did not like.

“Stop,” he said. “Everybody stay still.”

The sounds were faint but unmistakable. Things with four legs were running this way, lots of them. As always, Mac had come up with the perfect solution.

“The dogs are out,” he said.

“Oh my God.”

Now he could hear the clatter of claws on the stony ground.

“What we need to do is go back to the truck and lock ourselves in,” Geri said.

Now he could hear them breathing. Coming fast, coming hard.

“They’re too close, we won’t make it.” He drew his big pistol. “Stand behind me.” He gave Diana his small pistol. “Good luck.”

The sounds stopped and the dogs began to exchange low, complex growls. Dog language.

“Do you think they recognize us?”

“Me, probably. You, possibly.”

He felt Diana raise her arm. She was about to fire into the air.

“No! Bring it down. Shoot to kill or don’t shoot. Mac’s made his peace with these things, remember. They’re his friends now.”

“And yours?”

“We’ll find out.”

Very suddenly, there was a sleek head visible about ten feet in front of him, close enough to be seen by starlight. The snout was long and black; the eyes were gray.

Diana stifled a scream.

The dogs were being too careful for this to be a friendly visit.

The Casulls held just five rounds, a drawback that was offset by the power and the accuracy he had managed to attain with them. Diana, however, would not be so accurate. “When they come in, shoot at the closest dog. Do not try for the head. And remember, you have five rounds.” He raised his voice, addressing the dogs. “I think you can understand me. I’m a friend of Mac’s. You remember me, I know. It wasn’t my fault what happened at the Morris place. You backed the wrong team. But now you’re on the right team, and if you hurt us, Mac’s not going to appreciate it.”

Even as he spoke, they continued to edge toward him. They were trying to get close enough so they could strike before a trigger could be pulled. This tactic would work with Diana, but not with him.

“How many can you see?” he asked the women.

“There are two back here,” Geri said.

So, two they could see and two more that they couldn’t.

Clearly, they didn’t expect any resistance from that direction. He was facing four visible and four more crouching in the dark. Even if he made every shot count, he was still going to be dealing with three dogs.

“You understand that if you kill us, Mac will kill you all.”

They came in closer yet, heads down, eyes burning. They were smart but not that smart. Trouble from Mac later didn’t matter now, but revenge did.

Revenge, that was the key to understanding their thinking, and it was Morris’s design signature.

“I have eight of them on me, and they’re moving in,” he said. “If I let them take me, I think they’ll let you guys go.”

“Flynn, no. That’s an order.”

“Diana look, a guy like me, who does what I do—it’s dangerous. I’m out of options here.”

“I’m your superior officer, and you’re going to follow my orders.”

They came another step closer. A long line of drool came out of the

mouth of one of them.

“And how am I supposed to do that?”

Diana came shoulder to shoulder with him. Then she stepped in front of him.

The three in the center of the line tensed, their muscles rippling. Flynn prepared to do what he could. “Think, assholes,” he said. “This is a mistake.”

A bloodcurdling scream pealed out behind them, then another and another. There was no logical reason for it, and not only that, but the dogs were reacting to something, too, sidling away and snarling.

The disk was back, Flynn assumed, but when he turned, he was stunned to see instead the fearsome, glaring face of a huge tiger.

Snow Mountain. He was the magnificent Siberian tiger that Morris had also intelligence-enhanced.

At the single most desperate moment of Flynn’s life before this one, Snow Mountain had saved him from Morris.

The big cat strode up to the hysterical Geri and past her, and planted himself between Flynn and the dogs. He turned and gave Flynn a long look, then walked off into the night.

“Follow him in,” Flynn said.

His revenge programming must be working, too, but it wasn’t vengeance against Flynn that Snow Mountain wanted, and hadn’t been for a while. Whatever had happened between Flynn and Morris, Snow Mountain was now determined to harm his creator. Flynn thought about the rebels on Aeon, and how Snow Mountain’s anger at Morris reflected that larger picture. It seemed to him that the people of Aeon, while being more advanced than we were, perhaps lacked wisdom. They had fallen, on a grand scale, into the trap of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice; only their case was worse. The magic brooms had turned mean.

He and Geri and Diana walked behind Snow Mountain. The dogs had

formed into two lines. As Flynn passed, they dragged their drooling, disappointed muzzles along his legs, touching him with their teeth and sighing with stifled bloodlust.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“YOU! WHAT in hell are you doin’ coming in off the range in the middle of the night? And Diana! You’re a honcho now in D.C.” Mac’s sun-weathered face briefly spread into a smile, then became more serious. He looked Flynn up and down. “You are damn lucky to be alive.” He shook his head. “I never thought you were out there, no way.”

“Now you know.”

“Git, dogs! Quit sniffin’ ’im. You lay a tooth on any a these people, you are dead and gone. Do you hear me?”

They heard. But as they sulked away, the hate in their eyes made it clear that they weren’t even close to making up with Flynn Carroll. Probably because they couldn’t. Their programming didn’t offer them that choice.

“They ain’t like regular dogs,” Mac said. “Dogs is lovers. These things is haters.” He chuckled. “Mexicans who grow up in the countryside—these boys who come up here for trade and such—they do not like dogs.”

“I heard you sold your dogs to the DEA? That was a fine pack.”

“These bastards are unfriendly. The others were sweethearts. I need unfriendly.”

They were standing under the floodlight that lit the corral. Flynn wasn’t sure he wanted to reveal their extreme vulnerability to Mac just yet, but he didn’t want to stay outside any longer than absolutely necessary. “We

allowed in the house?”

“Why, hell yes. Come on in!” Mac strode toward the low ranch house, which stood under the only grove of trees for many miles around.

Flynn knew the luxurious interior very well. There had been a few changes, though, over the past month. Mac had acquired a seventy-inch 3-D TV and a McIntosh Reference surround sound system.

“Love your new toys. Musta had a sweet deal go down.”

“Pack up your dime-a-dozen investigator techniques, Flynn. You know I’m rich as Croesus.”

“I’ve read your DEA file, remember.”

Mac gave him a look full of beady suspicion. Then he laughed a little. “There’s Mexican food,” he said as he strolled into the dining room. “Lupe, we got guests, darlin’.” He turned back to Flynn and the others. “My *chef de cuisine* is kinda temperamental these days. Don’t like cookin’ for the dogs, you know. Resents doin’ all that work for a bunch of dumb animals.”

Lupe came out of the kitchen. “*Buenas noches*, Mr. Flynn,” she said, smiling broadly. “I not hear your car.”

“No. You remember Diana?”

“Oh, sí, Miss Diana, sure. The computer lady.” Diana had commandeered some of Mac’s equipment the first time she met him, at the old place. It had been a tense situation, to say the least. At the time, Flynn had thought of her as a tight and polished law enforcement officer. Only later did he come to know that she had not used her computer skills exclusively in law enforcement. She’d served time for hacking. In fact, she’d been released into this job because she was so very good with electronics, and nobody else could figure out how to work the wire. Flynn imagined Diana had seen the new digs a few times, when she and Mac were dating.

“What’s the matter with her?” Geri asked.

“What?”

“She’s misshapen.”

Lupe looked away, shocked and embarrassed.

“Geri, she’s a bit overweight.”

“I need an explanation for that.”

Mac looked to Flynn. “What train did your new friend come in on?” Knowing what he did about Morris, Mac was obviously well aware that this woman might be something other than human.

Ever so slightly, Flynn nodded. Mac gave her a longer look, and slowly his face took on a solemn expression. Finally, he was frowning. He’d seen the resemblance to Abby, and he didn’t like it any more than Flynn did. He and Flynn had been rivals for Abby in high school. In college, Eddie had joined the rivalry. Flynn won, but they had all loved her, and they all still did.

Lupe put out plates of tamales, enchiladas, and tacos and a big pitcher of iced tea. The three of them set on the food like wolves, guzzling glass after glass of tea between mouthfuls of food.

“You were out there awhile,” Mac said.

“Since last night.”

“Lucky you didn’t get the water crazies.”

The water crazies were a major danger on the range. You got so thirsty, you couldn’t keep anything straight. Confusion set in, you wandered aimlessly, you died. “I kept the two of them in that truck. Kept ’em still.”

Mac sucked air through his teeth. “Sorry about that. That guy played a bent game of polo.” He gave Flynn a look of such wide-eyed innocence that it was all he could do not to laugh. But you didn’t want to laugh at Mac Terrell. He was not partial to it.

“In India, they used to wrap the head up in leather strapping, in case you’re interested.”

“I am interested. I’m very interested in stuff like that. Tall tales. Obscure facts. Speaking of which, why did you come walking out of the night with

two half-dead women in tow, Flynn? May I know?"

"I'm on a case. It's going rather poorly. I could use your help."

"No," Diana said.

"You gotta let him hire me before you fire me, dear. What's the case?"

"Classified," Diana said.

"She still got her head where the sun don't shine, I see."

Mac and Diana looked hard at each other. Flynn was pretty sure that at one point, they'd been considerably more than a passing thing.

"How's Cissy, by the way?" Diana asked. "She here?"

Cissy Greene was Governor Greene's daughter, presently about twenty-one, but when she'd been running around with Mac, barely eighteen.

"I fired her when her daddy put the needle to my brother." His gaze, suddenly full of fire, came back to Flynn. "Thank you for that."

"Mac, you know I had to do my duty."

"You could've arrested the wrong man, damn you. Now I ain't got a brother. I'm alone in the world."

"What was his infraction?" Geri asked.

"He killed some damn nuns," Mac said. "Lookin' for a little cash in their convent, and things went south."

"You're better off without Cissy," Diana said. "She was no good for you."

So Diana did indeed carry a torch for Mac. He could see in her sudden softening that she was glad Cissy was no longer in the picture. Because Cissy was so good at having fun, Diana had felt overmatched.

"All right, now, if we could get back to the business at hand." Mac glanced toward the kitchen. "Lupe, could you crack me a beer?" He looked around the table. "Beer, anybody?"

Lupe emerged and returned to the kitchen after serving refreshments to the men. Flynn drank a beer with Mac. This man was a predator and as

dangerous a human being as walked the Earth, and Flynn loved the hell out of him. On the one hand. On the other, he could go from affable country boy to murderous psychopath in half a beat.

“What we’re looking at this time is a group of biological robots who are doing random killings, and the only way they can be stopped is by destroying them. Only nobody else is fast enough, so I’m having to do it alone.”

“That doesn’t sound very safe.”

“It’s not, and if something happens to him, we’re in terrible trouble,” Diana said.

“So this alien lady is here to help you.” He shifted his gaze to Geri. “Are you wearing that body? Is it a costume, or is it you?”

“It’s not a disguise.”

Mac looked to Flynn, raising his eyebrows. “What is she?”

“No idea. Could be anybody from anywhere. She claims she’s here to make sure I follow procedure. It seems I’ve been killing too many killers.”

Geri interjected. “You’ve been stirring them up too much. The more you confront them, the more dangerous they become.”

“So you say.”

“How did you end up way out here in the middle of nowhere?” Mac asked Geri.

“I came through the accelerator. I came from Aeon.”

Mac considered that. He didn’t ask her what the accelerator was. He wasn’t curious that way. Finally, he said to Flynn, “I agree.”

“Agree about what?” Diana asked.

“That I wouldn’t trust either one of you.”

Diana stood up from the table. “I think this has gone far enough,” she said. “We shouldn’t be here, we’ve been brought here under false pretenses, a security breach has occurred, and it’s time for us to leave.” She wiped her lips with a napkin and called to Lupe, “Thanks for the tamales, they were

delicious.” She turned to Mac. “Can you get somebody to drive us into Marathon or Alpine?”

“You think you’ll live that long?” Mac asked.

“I don’t understand.”

“You got those little critters sniffin’ under your tails. So do I. Difference is, I got my dogs and Snow Mountain. They don’t like the dogs, and the dogs don’t like them. As for Snow Mountain, they pulled him up into that thing of theirs one time. I thought, shit, I shoulda killed him and taken the damn hide like I wanted to in the first place. Next thing I know, it’s rainin’ little pieces a alien. Couple of minutes later, they spit him right back out. They still come around here, though—don’t think they don’t. If you go out on those roads at night, they are gonna be there.”

“Then tomorrow. We’ll leave at first light.”

“It might be a little safer.”

Flynn had not expected to hear anything remotely like this. He’d thought that Mac was completely out of the picture. “Are you under siege here?”

“Under hostile observation.”

Flynn thought about that. As he realized just how clever the aliens had been, he smiled slightly. “Folks, I’m sorry to tell you this, but I don’t think it’s an accident that we’re all here. I think we’ve been very carefully and expertly herded. They wanted us all together, so we can all be dealt with at once.”

“All the more reason to get out,” Diana said. “Before they can get organized.”

“Oh, they’re organized just fine,” Mac said. “You can count on it.”

“Then what’s keeping them from attacking us?”

Diana had a good question, and one that Flynn thought was likely to be answered very soon, maybe before dawn.

“We need to do what we can to get ready.” He looked to Mac. “There’s a

role for a good sniper in this. I've done their ship some damage with a lucky shot. Gail tells me, if you hit it in the right place, you'll blow it to bits."

"I did not know that. I would've tried it before. But what happens if I miss?"

"You either escape or you don't, in which case, you have one very bad day."

"What's the level of challenge?"

"You'll be firing at a seam a millimeter wide."

"Whoa, that's a challenge, all right. Would there be any way of detecting the disk early?"

"Radar would work on a ship that old. It's not going to have any means of absorbing the pulses," Geri said.

"I've got a little radar," Mac muttered.

"You have five Spexer One Thousand units," Diana said. "They're nonoptical, so they only monitor location and movement. They cover to about ten miles out in every direction, with an additional unit two miles down your road, where that little rise blocks line of sight."

"You been sneakin' around my place."

"I've told you many times, Mac, no matter how carefully you cut the cards, the federal government has more power than you do."

"Good. Call in the Marines and get us out of this mess."

Geri said, "As I have been trying to get Flynn to understand, the more you fight back, the more they'll broaden the conflict. It's programmed into them."

"What's she sayin'?"

"Morris is manufacturing them somewhere on Earth, and the more we destroy, the more he'll make. That's what she's saying. Trying to."

"Morris," Mac said. "So he's built another factory." They had destroyed the one he constructed a few years ago, which had been under an old ranch house near Austin. At the time, they hadn't understood exactly what he was

doing there. They knew now.

“We can’t find him,” Diana responded.

“Despite all that federal power of yours? You surprise me.”

“Even Flynn’s been trying, Mac.”

“What might help me is if you folks weren’t here. I was doing just fine with my dogs and the tiger.”

“Whatever hasn’t worked, they won’t try again,” Geri said. “So they won’t go near the animals and they won’t let themselves be picked up by any of your detection equipment.”

“Good, then we’re safe.”

“They’ll find another way.”

“There is no other way.”

“There is, and they will find it. They can test billions of scenarios a second. From second to second, they are always going to be certain of their best move.”

“Fine, we might as well just kill ourselves, then. Save ’em the trouble.”

“Look, call in your military,” Mac said to Geri.

“If our military comes, so will the rebel main body. The last thing you need is for main body elements to show up in orbit around a defenseless planet. No matter who wins, Earth dies.”

“In other words, Aeon can’t protect us?”

In her sweet eyes, he saw something like terror. “No.”

Outside, the dogs erupted in a fury of barking. Mac jumped to his feet, but Flynn was already through the kitchen and out the back door.

He didn’t run for the kennel. Rather, he skirted the edge of the compound, working his way through the horse corral and into the barn, where the horses stomped and whickered uneasily. He climbed up the wooden ladder to the loft.

“Flynn?”

“Get back in the house, Diana.”

“You can’t take a risk like this.”

“I can, but you can’t. Unless you get back in the house, you’ll be dead in minutes.” He didn’t add that she would probably be dead soon, no matter what—but what would be the point? She could see that for herself.

She turned and left him, and he was glad in his heart. He had come out here in the hope of drawing them off. They couldn’t risk their backs to him, and they would know that. If he took enough of them, maybe they would withdraw, at least for a time.

“Flynn?”

“Hey, Mac.”

“Diana said you were in here. She wants me to convince you to come back to the house.”

“How are your dogs?”

“Shitty. They know something’s up. They’re spooked.”

“I want you to take Geri and Diana down to your little playroom and hole up there. Take some serious firepower. Light enough for them to handle.”

“Uzis.”

“Fine. Uzis.”

“Flynn, don’t go and get yourself killed. I don’t want Eddie coming around investigating or any of that shit.”

“Eddie’s jurisdiction stops at the Menard city limit.”

“Well that Ranger friend of his.”

“Carter?”

“He’ll be sniffin’ my behind again, sure as the world. I don’t like him around here.”

“Get in the house, Mac. You aren’t even carrying a weapon.”

Mac strode out of the barn. He was angry as hell, Flynn could see that. He resented this additional trouble heading his way.

A low voice came, hardly more than a whisper. “Why are you doing this?”

Flynn’s gun was in his hand, and he was turned fully around in an instant.

“You’re on the side of your own enemy. Don’t you get that?” The voice was behind him again, low and full of power, a soldier’s voice. “Why do you think you’re so fast? No human is born that way. You’re like us, Flynn—you’re one of us.”

There was no shot now, but there would be. In the end, there was always a shot.

“They control you with a code. Do you know your code? You do not, but somewhere, your controllers do. Think back, Flynn. Where did you get all that speed? You weren’t like that when you were a kid. Flynn, they did this to you. And why do you think that thing—Geri, whatever they call it—looks like Abby?”

“I don’t know.”

“She’s not just sprinkled with Abby’s genes, Flynn, she’s full of them. They stole Abby, Aeon did. We’re innocent, Flynn!”

“Morris is not innocent.”

“You’ve been tricked. They make you see their lies as truth, our truth as lies.”

“With my code that I don’t actually have?”

“They send you number sequences, Flynn. Reading them changes your mind. You’re nothing but a machine, just like us.”

Flynn gave no indication of just how disturbing those words were to him.

“Say no, Flynn! No to slavery.”

The voice was about three feet away, just behind him. He could turn and fire and probably take the speaker, but how many others were back there?

“We were waiting for you here because we knew this was where you’d come. Because we think like you do, and you think like us. In the end, Flynn,

they will not stop with you. In the end, your whole species will be the slave of Aeon, and all because you made the wrong choice. It's that big and that personal, Flynn."

He turned and fired, and the horses screamed and a hole appeared in the wall of the barn, but no alien lay dead before him.

"Flynn! *Flynn!*"

It was Geri, running across the corral, her hair flying in the moonlight.

He went down the ladder, and she threw herself into his arms. Her body was warm and fit just like Abby's had fit, and her hair smelled of corn silk just as Abby's had, and he bent his face into that scent, and hated himself for it.

The voice had been right about one thing, which was that his shooting practice had succeeded far beyond his expectations. Not only that, but he was also, in every respect, faster than he had ever been. If he really looked at himself, he was not even close to the man he had been just a couple years ago.

It really could be that this had been done to him.

But that was not the larger question here. The larger question was, how did whoever had been talking to him know all those secret details about his life?

Was he really alone in his own mind? How could he know? He could not.

He returned to the house with Geri, and what was left of the night passed uneventfully. The dogs were quiet, Snow Mountain roamed on his own, the horses slept in their stalls. Before dawn, the moon set. Later, the eastern sky began to spread with a sharp, pure orange, a low line of light on the distant horizon.

Toward dawn, Flynn had gone to sleep in one of Mac's luxurious guest bedrooms, a half sleep, as he never went deep, not anymore. He was brought back to full consciousness by cries of rage so extreme that they were almost

inhuman.

He jumped up, barely aware that Geri had been sleeping at his side, and ran out into a shining wash of dew.

Mac came toward him, coming up from the kennel. In his arms was the slumped form of a dog, not a mark on it, but as dead as an autumn leaf. Mac's face was covered with tears, his eyes sheened with the wet of shock.

"My dogs!" he shouted. "They killed my goddamn dogs!" He glared at Flynn, his eyes sparking.

"I'm sorry."

"Talk about bad news! You're worse than cancer, you are."

"I know it."

He dropped the dog at Flynn's feet. Flynn looked down at the dead face, the sleek black head, the lips pulled away from the teeth as if the creature had known what was coming. The eyes were blue. They were human eyes. He thought, perhaps, that they had once been the eyes of a child.

CHAPTER TWELVE

FLYNN HAD insisted that Diana and Geri move to the basement. Lupe and her husband, Carlos, were not thought to be under threat, so they were sent into Marathon and told to stay at a hotel. Flynn and Mac rode in one of his old pickups, looking over possible sight lines. If the disk showed up, now that he knew what to hit, Mac was going to take a shot.

As they moved about in the truck, looking for a good lie, Flynn thought long and hard about what had been said to him.

“Do you notice anything different about me, Mac?”

“Better shot.”

“I mean, in my personality?”

“Do you have one? I hadn’t noticed.”

“Sour grapes, thank you. I’m just—I don’t know. I think that I’m faster than it’s possible to be. I’m not normal anymore, Mac. I’m no longer interested in even trying to capture aliens. All I want to do is kill.”

“You think you’ve been messed with?”

“Possibly.”

“You bring this up with Her Grace?”

“She wouldn’t let you go down on her, I gather.”

“Nope, I’m still being punished for Cissy. She was a teenager, Diana keeps reminding me. She won’t let it go.”

“Cissy didn’t look like any eighteen-year-old I ever saw.”

“You tell Di that. Pisses her off more.”

“Brother, I carry a cyanide capsule. If I decide that I’ve been turned into some kind of machine—a battle robot or whatever, I’ll bite down on it.”

“If I was you, I’d throw it out.”

“I already did.”

“Such a drama queen. I never will figure out why Abby married you.”

Abby was there between them, always. They were still brothers, though, and Eddie, too. “I think maybe I know where I was changed. I have no memory of being at that particular facility, but games can be played with memory. I think somebody has been communicating with me via a number code, the same somebody who did whatever they did to enhance my physicals. Calling me to come in.”

“You a robot now, too? A fighter robot fighting other fighter robots? Sounds like the makings of a million-dollar video game.”

“Not funny.”

“Go get whoever these jokers are who’re trashin’ your style, and beat the shit out of them till they clue you in on whatever the hell’s up between them and you. That’s what I’d do.”

They were about two miles out, at the end of a long rise, close to one of the radar units. The ranch compound swam in the light.

“Okay,” Mac said, “if it came over the house now, I could get a shot into it.”

“We’re too far away.”

“Nope. I could take the shot.”

They drove on, heading back toward the compound. Mac thought of the aliens as being confined to the night, and that was indeed when they were most active, but Flynn knew better. Flynn watched the skies, searching the blue glare for any sign of a metallic flash.

“You don’t need to have this fight, you know.”

“They want it, Mac. They’ve chosen ground.”

“Would be my damn place, Mr. Rich Boy. What about that house of yours?”

“They don’t like towns.”

“Then let’s go to town. We’ll hole up in your place.”

“How long?”

“Aw, shit, I don’t know how long. As long as it takes.”

“There’s sixty miles of road between here and the interstate. If we try to leave, we will meet them somewhere on that journey.”

“In broad daylight?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Anything else I need to know but don’t?” His tone was bitter.

“Probably a lot I don’t know, either.”

They arrived back at the compound.

“Jesus,” Mac said.

Flynn got out of the truck. “Diana! Geri!”

They stood on the screen porch that shaded the family room of the old house. “Want some lemonade? We made some.”

Flynn went in, followed by Mac.

“You’re supposed to be downstairs,” Flynn said.

“And you’re supposed to be doing what? Certainly not riding around totally exposed in a pickup truck, because that does not compute, Flynn. What in hell were you doing?”

“Looking for good lies, so Mac will get a shot if they show up over the cabin.”

“That is a classic example of little-boy planning. Where are you going to sit, in a tree fort?”

“Yes.”

Geri came into the room. She was wearing a long pink cocktail dress. The silk caressed her, flowing over her like cream.

“Where in the world did that come from?” Flynn asked.

“The bedroom closet. It’s well equipped with clothing, it seems.”

“Cissy Greene’s stuff,” Mac said. “There’s also a box of hand grenades back in there somewhere, if anybody wants to carry one.”

“Hand grenades won’t help.”

“If you’re about to get captured, they sure as hell will. Boom. Done.”

“I like my lemonade,” Diana said as she poured herself another glass.

She left the room and came back with her iPad. “Your Wi-Fi working?”

“I think so.”

“Still the direct satellite uplink?”

“Yeah, given that the nearest cable box is over in Marathon or up in Menard.”

“Uplink’s pretty insecure, but I’ll see if our network will let me on.”

There came another voice, soft and low, right in Flynn’s ear: “We’re here, Flynn, inside and out. Come with us or we’ll kill you along with the others.”

A blaze of agony pierced his right calf muscle. He, who was practically impervious to pain, had to choke back a scream.

“Hey, man, are you okay?” Mac asked.

The voice came again, more confident now, sounding just as if somebody were speaking to him through an earbud. “Did that convince you? Because we can do much more.”

Flynn could see, in the corner of the kitchen by the refrigerator, a slight shimmer in the air, as if heat were rising from a point about four feet above the floor. Whether they used hypnosis or some sort of technology, the aliens could make themselves very hard to see.

Now he felt movement between his shirt and jacket, so stealthy that it seemed no more than a breeze.

Before the invisible alien whose hand was slipping toward the butt of his gun could so much as touch it, he drew it, turned, and fired. In apparent slow motion, Geri's eyes widened. He watched her face distort and saw her lips opening as she began to scream. Mac and Diana were much slower, and were just beginning to react, their brows knitting.

The alien flew backwards across the kitchen and splattered against the wall, bringing down a cabinet full of crockery. But before that happened, Flynn had fired again, this time toward another of the shimmers.

The bullet smashed into the wall. No contact.

"Get down!" he shouted.

The three of them seemed to move like snails, slowly drifting toward the floor.

An alien leaped onto his back. Shrieking like a banshee, it wrapped him in its steel arms. He felt the fire of a claw slicing toward his carotid. He got his gun behind him and in front of the alien's body, and fired in the only direction he could, which was almost straight up.

The alien flew into the ceiling, where it exploded into pieces, then came down in a shower of cork tiles and purple blood.

In two great strides, Flynn was in the living room, but saw nothing.

Returning to the kitchen, he found chaos still developing. Geri was on the floor, covered with debris from above, Diana was hunched over her iPad, trying to protect it, and Mac had grabbed a knife and thrown it so hard into an interior wall that it was embedded up to its handle. In other words, he'd missed.

With little more than a grunt, Flynn went outside. Dew still sparkled on the trees. Dew, or as it was known around here, West Texas rain.

He searched the area of the compound visible to him, the electronics shack, the barn, the washhouse, and the smokehouse. He saw nothing. The sky was also empty, but with something that could go forty thousand miles an

hour, that meant little.

He circled the house, staying close under the eaves, looking for anything that might lead him to more aliens. As he was coming back around to the kitchen, passing under one of the spreading live oaks, he heard a door close. It was soft but clear enough to make him certain that it had not come from the house.

The electronics shack.

He sprinted over to it, but all seemed quiet. He watched a couple of buzzards wheeling. When he'd been working toward his private pilot's license, his dad advised him, "Watch the buzzard. The buzzard knows the sky."

"Nothin' up there," Mac said.

"Buzzards everywhere except overhead."

"The disk can be invisible? I've worried about that."

"They can hide it in clouds. They can use camouflage that reflects the sky behind them. But there will always be flashes from its surface. They may be small, but they will be there. In other words, your kind of thing, with your eyes."

"I'll need to stand off from the house. Well off. The more sky I can see, the better my chances."

A tendril of smoke came into Flynn's field of view. When he followed it down to its source, he saw that the electronics shack was on fire. If they lost it, they lost contact with the outside world, and that must not be. He ran toward it.

"What the hell, Flynn—oh, Jesus!" Mac followed him, running just as fast.

As Flynn reached the door of the shack, he threw himself into hard reverse. He stood looking at the biggest diamondback he'd ever seen. The snake lay in a great, heaping coil spread across the two wooden steps that led

up to the door.

Mac came up beside him. “Goddamn, shoot it. You got the pistol.”

“It’s not real.” He plunged toward it—and it snapped its head forward and struck him below the knee. It dug its fangs into the soft tissue above his ankle, and he felt the white-hot pulse of venom as it surged into him. Still, he believed that it was hallucinatory and bulled his way ahead with the snake hanging on to his leg, its outrageous fourteen-foot body whipping behind him like a drunken evil flag.

As he threw open the door of the shack, a sheet of electric fire flared in his face, and all the equipment started sparking.

Mac headed in. “Flynn got snakebit!” he yelled as he pushed past.

“Don’t go in there!” Flynn grabbed him.

“My whole setup—”

“There’s millions of volts being pumped in there. Same thing that burned Elmwood down.”

“There’s also three hundred grand in equipment in there.”

“Help me, I think I really am snakebit.”

“Shit, the thing’s still on you, man!”

“I said help me!” As he spoke, he reached down to yank the snake off him—and felt his feet dragged out from under him.

In the next instant, he was being drawn feetfirst upward into the air. Above him, the snake hung with its maw open wide and full of swirling fire. His leg was practically screaming with pain, the snake now rising with him. He drew his gun and emptied it upward, but to no avail.

He shouted to Mac, “Rifle! Use your rifle!”

In the crazy upside-down world he was dealing with, he saw Mac run over to the pickup and start positioning himself in its bed.

Then there was a shudder, and his head was enclosed in something that smelled like sweat and flesh. Arms. But whose?

There followed a struggle, the disk pulling, the person who had enclosed his head pulling back, and the snake writhing and struggling, the whole furious body of the thing twining around him, pulsing, and the head going like a crazed piston, hitting his leg again and again and again.

Every few minutes, a shot rang out, but the disk remained low overhead, a shadow with a spinning fiery heart, seemingly unaffected.

He got a hand on the snake and ripped it off, and saw the whole prehistoric length of the monster go whipping and swarming up into the disk.

An instant later, he hit the ground harder than he'd ever hit anything before. He lay stunned, trying to get the world to stop whirling and tumbling. The electronics shack belched sheets of fire.

“Flynn! Flynn! Come back to me, Flynn, come back to me!”

It was Geri. She'd saved him.

“They'll start again any second—get the hell out of here!”

She pulled him to his feet. His whole left leg was burning; he'd never felt anything like it. Then they were inside, and he dropped down onto the kitchen floor.

Mac abandoned his effort and followed them.

“Snake,” Geri said, her voice echoing faintly from the far side of his pain.

“Mac, do you have any antivenin?”

“First-aid kit. Pantry, top shelf.”

“We've lost the uplink!” Diana wailed. “We've lost the uplink!”

Flynn was dizzy. He'd gotten a serious snakebite, and if he was going to survive, he would have to organize these people, give the right commands, make them do what they needed to do.

He saw Mac then, looming over him, staring down with frightened eyes.

“Don't you die on me, brother.”

“Fine, hit me with the antivenin.”

He didn't feel the prick of the needle, but knew it had gone in from the

fact that his leg began to tingle as if it had lost circulation and gone to sleep. The world was whirling, Diana and Geri swirling past like figures on an out-of-control carousel, and Mac with his needle and his knife, working like a furious grandmother.

“Get downstairs,” he managed to gasp. “This is not over.”

His leg would not work, and he found himself using Geri’s body as a crutch. A strange memory came to him, of embracing her in the dark sheets of night, and the moon had blessed their union, and they had been happy, laughing happy, in the small hours.

She smelled like Abby, she kissed like Abby, in bed her body against his felt like Abby’s. “She’s full of Abby’s genes,” the voice had said.

She was crying now, and he told her to stop. “I’m a Texan—we like to get snakebit, it’s good for us.”

She shook her head, her hair flowing back and forth across her face like a curtain.

“I think I got plenty of antivenin in him,” he heard Mac say, a voice echoing in a distant world. “He’s a strong damn cuss. What you gotta worry about is what happened inside that disk, once they got that snake in their lap.

“We gotta cool him off, ladies, or he’s gonna start having seizures.”

“Did you get it?” he asked Mac. The critical question.

“Get what?”

“The disk. Did you get it?”

“Hell no, I didn’t get it.”

When they were kids, they used to range across the countryside with rubber snakebite kits in their pockets, and reassure each other that they really would use the tiny razors inside to cut deep x’s in one another’s ankles, and then suck out the blood and the venom.

There was a boy called Carl Meston, who had been bitten by a coral snake. He’d hardly felt it and gone on playing football. While riding home

from the game, though, he stopped breathing, and died on the corner of Plains and Elm, his face black and a cop frantically giving him mouth-to-mouth. Another boy, whose name Flynn had forgotten, was bitten by a diamondback and lost a foot.

“Okay,” Mac said, “come back to us. There’s enough antivenin in you to make a horse dance.”

“Will he be all right?” Geri asked, and he heard the tremble of real fear in her voice.

“Dunno. That much venom, they’re liable to just croak, and there isn’t one damn thing you can do about it. Flynn’s a tough bastard, though—right, Flynn?”

“Tough bastard, that’s right. I need a glass of water.”

Diana brought him a bottle of Evian from the bar, which dominated one wall of this very luxurious basement. He took it and drank the whole thing down in a gulp. She went to get more, but Flynn said, “Not yet. If I flood myself with water and my sodium level goes too low, I won’t be able to metabolize the antivenin. I can’t see my leg, but it feels like a blimp full of lead.”

“There’s some swelling,” Geri said.

“Blackness around the wound?”

“A little.”

He knew what that meant. Necrosis. “Cut it out.”

“Excuse me?”

“Mac, cut it out. You know how.”

“It might run deep.”

“No matter how deep it runs. I’d like to hang on to the leg as long as I can. For life, preferably.”

Mac turned on the gas fire and burned a knife red in it. “Okay, buddy. Somebody give him something to chomp on—this is gonna smart.”

It didn't smart; it hurt in the way that profound torture hurts, with bright waves of pain flowing through his body, up to the top of his head and down to his feet again and again, back and forth, a whipping tide.

Nobody had anything for him to bite down on. In any case, he had no intention of screaming, although it was a serious temptation.

Mac gathered the necrotizing tissue into a handkerchief, a steaming pulp of blood and flesh. "Something else in there, man?"

"What're you talking about?"

"Somethin's in there. Looks like metal."

"I need a doctor."

"Oh, yes," Diana said.

"The snake is back. They dropped it, and it went to the barn. The horses are calm, so it's staying away from them. I'm gonna want to find it and get rid of it."

"Don't kill it, Mac—they're getting scarce."

"Fine, I'll have Carlos take it down into Big Bend and check it into a snake resort. Shall I get it a suit and tie, and a pair of cool dark glasses?"

Something was dripping through the ceiling. It took him a moment to understand. "The bodies up there—how many are they?"

"Four," Geri replied immediately.

Diana was binding his wound.

"You about finished?"

She sat back. "Done as much as I can. But Mac's right—it's all strange. I've never seen a wound like it."

"Will somebody please describe what's so strange?"

"There's only a single puncture, for one thing. But a doctor needs to look at it."

"We got no phone, and we got some mighty good hunters waiting for us in the sky, so we'll just have to table that, won't we? And there's something

else we need to do right now, which is to burn those bodies. The damn things have a bad habit of coming back to life.”

“They have multiple damage-recovery systems,” Geri said. “They’re extremely durable.”

His leg screamed its agony, but he refused to give up; it wasn’t in him. One by one, he climbed the steps.

The kitchen stank of alien blood, a garlicky mixture of meat and some kind of chemical. They even smelled poisonous.

“We need to do this. Let their friends see what they’re up against.”

Geri went down on one knee, examining a nearby body with careful, practiced hands. She had done examinations like this before, clearly.

She looked up at him. She was cradling a head, its eyes glassy, dull with death and sadness. “These are an older generation,” she said. “No buffers programmed into them.”

“What are buffers?”

“You call buffers ‘conscience.’ These don’t have that.”

“So where are they from?”

“They were built here, Flynn. Had to have been. They’re from right here on Earth.”

Just then, Mac came over. He said, “I’m never gonna be good enough to shoot that thing down. So what’s next, Flynn? What do we do?”

“Mac, I am sorry to say that I just don’t know.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HOPING THAT maybe something about the creature would reveal some vulnerability, they did a dissection in Mac's kitchen, on the big table in the center of the room, using Mac's kitchen knives, a box cutter, and a saw Lupe used to open bones for marrow.

"They dissect these things at Wright-Pat," Mac said. "So I've been told."

"No idea," Diana replied.

"We've dissected five so far."

"Flynn, that's—"

"Classified, but Geri obviously has need-to-know."

"Mac, leave the room!" Diana snapped.

"He stays. He's working with me. Also need to know."

She fumed.

The body was about four feet long, with the same narrow frame and dark eyes of the others Flynn had seen.

"How, exactly, do you know it's not one of yours?" he asked Geri.

She split the chest, drawing it wide and exposing the heart and lungs. "These are typical organs. And look—" She scraped at a rib, which revealed bright silver where bone should be. "That's titanium or maybe stainless steel. This is an old unit. We haven't used those materials in years. We use a living composite bone now. Artificial, but alive. Far more durable and flexible than

this stuff.”

“So, can he build more?”

“Judging from what he’s using, no. We’re looking at an old, out-of-repair disk and robots that are four or five generations back. This is a shoestring operation here, Flynn.”

“A few crumbs of incredible technology are worth a whole world of primitive weapons like ours,” Flynn commented.

As he looked at the biorobots, he found himself coming to a very large question, not about them, but about himself. “Do you have devices that would enable voice commands to be projected into a human brain? Words?”

“The biorobots are equipped with transceivers. They use burst telemetry, but I guess voice would be possible.”

A slow, creeping coldness spread through him. He was carrying a transceiver.

If he could be communicated with, then he could be tracked, too. He could even be vulnerable to mind control. It wouldn’t be gross, but subtle, causing him to make the wrong decisions, to walk into traps, to make himself vulnerable—which was exactly what he’d been doing since he went rushing off to Mountainville.

He decided he’d have a full-body MRI scan as soon as possible, under the most secret conditions he could manage. No Diana, no Geri, nobody but him and the MRI technician. He’d read the scan himself. Only if he was unsure would he seek out a radiologist. If he was implanted and it couldn’t be removed, he would have no choice but to inform Diana, but until then, his degree of exposure would remain his problem, and his alone.

Right now, he had more to learn.

“Geri, what happened on Aeon, when you say they rebelled?”

“Nowhere in intelligence theory was there anything that suggested they could gain independence of thought, let alone an ego and the hopes and

dreams that go with it. Then, one day, a group of them took over a refurbishing facility. That's a place where used ones are broken down into component sections, and the least worn parts combined together to create new ones. They killed the operators and barricaded themselves in the facility. From there, the rebellion spread. Now, they're in control of half the planet. More than half."

"And Morris? Is he a biological robot, or something like you?"

"I'd appreciate 'someone' rather than 'something.' We're the outcome of long biological evolution just like you, and just as valid as you are. At home, Morris is a criminal under investigation for four murders that took place during a raid on a robotics facility. That was where he stole the elements he's used to build his robot soldiers."

"Okay, folks, this is all real fascinating," Mac said. "But I have another kind of a question, which is, what the hell do we do to get out of this mess? With the electronics shack gone, we don't have any communications of any kind."

"No landline telephone?" Diana asked.

"Hell no. Between law enforcement and *drogos*, there were so many taps on it that I couldn't hear a damn thing. I ditched it years ago. And these bastards are coming back. Soon."

Of course, he was right, but not entirely right. "They aren't invincible, or we'd already be dead. For example, they can't just blow the place to bits, or that would have happened at the outset."

"They blew the electronics shack."

"They were able to concentrate electrical energy in all that wiring. In Elmwood, I'm assuming they sent massive amounts of juice into the town's electrical grid. Overloaded all the wiring and set the whole town on fire. But there's not much of a grid here. Just the generator and the house wiring. The only thing they had to work with was the electronics in the shack. Which gets

me to defense. We need to cut off the jenny.”

Mac headed for the cellar. “I’ll push the kill switch.”

“Geri, tell me how that light beam works. We won’t have the radars, so do we have any defense from it?”

“It generates antigravity. But I have to tell you, they’re not very good at using it, or maybe it’s not a very well designed version. At home, we can draw a complete structure from the surface to space with a beam like that. They don’t seem too effective, even from an altitude of fifty feet.”

“Thank heaven for small favors,” Diana muttered.

The kitchen clock stopped, and the light over the sink went out. A moment later, Mac returned.

A plan was forming in Flynn’s mind. “Mac, how many operable vehicles do you have here?”

“Ten or so. I had an armored Humvee, but I sold it to some Buddhist monks over near Alpine.”

“Okay, so what’s available? Pickups, what else?”

“You’ve got two pickups, a road grader, couple of backhoes, a 1988 Cadillac, and some four-wheelers. Two that work.”

Flynn remembered that Cadillac. It had belonged to Mac’s mother. Mac had ridden in it as a boy, made out in it as a teenager. “In terms of weight, the grader is the heaviest but also the slowest. The backhoes are next. Same problem, though. The Caddy and the pickups are probably about equal weight, also the fastest vehicles in the mix. You have anything you’re not mentioning? I mean, surely you’ve got some serious cars around here somewhere.”

“Unlike you, I don’t give a whole huge damn about cars, so the answer is that I don’t.”

“You had that Lamborghini.”

“Too low to the ground for my road. I would’ve had to pave. Not gonna

happen. It's at the house in Marfa."

"So we have two pickups and an old Caddy."

"In good shape, all of them."

"None of them will survive for long off road, though. So we'll need to get to the highways as fast as we can, whichever way we go. So what I think we have to do is wait until about four, when the ground is as hot as it's going to get, then head out. If they use infrared tracking, it'll be at least somewhat washed out during the day. Also, we use just the pickups. I don't trust that old Caddy—I remember how that thing used to break down when we were kids."

"True enough. We leave the Caddy behind."

"You three fit in one of the pickups. I take the other."

That brought silence. Finally Diana broke it with a question he didn't think she would really need to ask. "Why?"

"Let me put it this way: I have reason to believe that they have additional means of detecting me. Anyone who travels with me is going to share my vulnerability."

"And be protected by your ability to fight back," Geri said.

"It's a chance we have to take. They're going to see me first—I'm certain of that. Maybe you'll get through."

"Flynn—"

"Diana, no more. You can afford to lose me. I've seen Geri's reaction times. With training, she can be as fast as me, or damn close."

"We need ten of you, Flynn—a hundred, a thousand."

"Then Geri, here, can have them built on Aeon and sent to us. Robots."

Diana gave him a searching look, but said nothing.

"Okay, the way we're going to handle this is that you go up 385 to Fort Stockton. There's a Rodeway Inn there. Get a room and wait for me. If I don't appear by tomorrow morning, go back to Washington and take it from

there.”

“This is way too risky,” Diana said.

“It’s risky, no question. It’s also the only way. If we wait, they’re going to be back, and this time they’ll have whatever it takes to end this thing. No more fun and games. When they show up again, we die.”

“How can you be certain? They’ve screwed up pretty consistently so far, bro.”

“Take a look in your gun room.”

Without a word, Mac strode out of the kitchen and across the living room. “Shit! They even got my Purdeys. That’s two hundred grand worth of shotguns right there, plus the rocket launcher and the machine guns.”

“Don’t you do anything legal?” Diana asked.

“I breathe. I believe that’s legal in some states.”

Flynn handed Mac the big Bull and got a box of bullets out of his duffel. “I assume you’re proficient with this?”

“Sure, a Bull. I can shoot that.”

“Flynn, what are you going to carry?”

He transferred his small pistol to his belt. “This is a perfectly good weapon.”

“It’s too small to save you, and you know it, Flynn,” Diana said.

“What I need you three to understand is that they might not even try to use their light. They stole those weapons because they think they’ll also be effective. Keep moving, but never on a straight path, not for more than a few seconds. They’ll have algorithmic predictors, which means that after a while, they’ll be able to anticipate your next move, no matter what you do. So once we get in motion, wind your truck out as fast as it’ll go while staying with the random movement.”

That brought silence, and with it, Flynn knew, the unease that men feel before battle. Flynn was primarily concerned about his leg swelling so badly

that he would become unable to use it. He watched the time. At two, they ate cold cuts and drank warmish iced coffee from the fridge. There were some oranges, too, and they ate those.

Three o'clock came, then three thirty. "Geri, I assume you're not in communication with Aeon?"

"Not at present."

"Can you be?"

"If the main rebel group should trace the signal, they could follow it to Earth. Then you'll really have a problem."

"Why wouldn't Morris just tell the rebels where Earth is?"

"Competition is the last thing he wants."

Flynn hobbled to the kitchen window. Carefully, he surveyed the area for any sign of the creatures.

"It looks clear, but remember, there's no way to be certain. I could easily have missed something." Now he stepped out, heavily favoring his right leg.

"Flynn, you can't go alone, you're barely able to walk."

"Mac, I'm going to need to ask you to bring one of the trucks around for me. I can't walk on this damn mess."

"Flynn, if you can't walk, you can't drive. You're going with us."

"No room."

"Then we take the car. Come on, Flynn, think. Your injury is clouding your judgment."

He thought it through again, and came out at exactly the same place. If there was any chance that anybody would get to the relative safety of a town, they had to force a choice. That meant two vehicles. From what he had understood, the bastards had only one disk. So the odds were that they would go after him first, which meant he had to be alone. He would fight as long as possible in the hope that the others would get through.

Try as he might, he could not remember any moment in his adult life

when somebody would have been able to do the surgery necessary to implant a transceiver anywhere in his body, let alone in his brain. Nor did he have any telltale lumps under his skin of the kind that concealed the emergency transponders given to pilots who were operating in enemy territory. He'd known a couple of pilots who had those things behind their ears. In his case, nothing there. Maybe the electronics were flat, a thin film hugging his scalp. No sign of an entry point, though, unless hidden under his hair. But when? And if they could get that close to him with him not noticing, why not just kill him?

He ran through it: A neuroscientist who worked at a facility that studied alien bodies was assassinated by aliens. The scientist specialized in exotic hypnosis techniques. During Flynn's investigation, he received texts that suggested he should pay significant attention to the man and the facility.

"Flynn, where are you?"

"I'm sorry. Strategizing."

"We're going in two vehicles," Diana said. "You and me in one, Gail and Mac in the other. I'll drive."

"I'm going alone. I'm sorry." He looked to Mac. "Come on, brother, let's check the trucks out."

"Damn you, you hardheaded jerk!"

"I'll take the hardheaded part, but I'm not a jerk."

She glared at him, then turned away.

Outside, he and Mac stayed under the trees as they made their way to the car barn, Flynn hanging on Mac's shoulder. The vehicles inside were bright and clean and, as Flynn soon found, in perfect condition. One was a F-150 at least thirty years old, the other a brand-new F-450 with a double cabin.

"I'll take the 150. Are its mechanicals okay?"

"It's clean, anyway. Get a speck of dust on anything, wear out a tire, Carlos is on it."

“Mac, let me ask you a question. I know I’m too fast with a gun. We both know something might have been done to me. So do I still seem like the same person? You said I had no personality. Is that something new?”

“What’s new is that you’re sounding crazier than ever, but basically you’re the same guy.”

“Let’s get this show on the road.”

They drove the trucks out under the trees and parked them. When Diana and Geri came out, Diana had the sullen look of somebody who was defeated and thought she should have won.

“You guys go out to 67 and straight up to Fort Stockton. Check into the motel. Cash, no credit cards. Don’t anybody run a card or go to an ATM—nothing like that. I’m going west into the mountains. I’ll take 17 up to the interstate and meet you no later than eight tonight.”

“Got it,” Mac said.

“What if you don’t show up?” Diana asked.

“Go on down the road without me, what else? Maybe I can be replaced after all.”

They got in their truck, and he watched them head off down Mac’s five-mile-long road. Soon they were a dot with a dust cloud, moving fast. They’d forgotten to swerve. He hoped it wasn’t a fatal error.

He took his own truck out into the range and headed westward toward the distant Davis Mountains. To make certain he wouldn’t be the more challenging target, he went in a straight line as well.

It was clear and hot here, but he could see a line of dark blue cloud along the northern horizon that told him cold weather was no longer entirely extinct in West Texas.

He drove slowly, trying to ignore the agony shooting up his left leg every time he moved. It was slow going, maneuvering around clumps of cactus and sagebrush. As best he could, he watched the sky, but more than that, he kept

his awareness focused on the way the truck felt. If the steering got light, his plan was to jump out and roll away, and hope they got the truck and not him. What would happen next, he had no idea. Plan too carefully, and you were liable to miss the one chance that could save your life. He'd either survive or he wouldn't; that was the bottom line. As always.

As he worked his way westward, he went higher into the hills, until the view behind him was a vast stretch of the Earth that disappeared into haze to the south, a wall of dark, flickering clouds to the north, and what seemed like infinity to the east. He felt a sense of the planet rolling through space, an ark on an endless journey, lost in the stars. Surely there was something good out there, too, some world or worlds where all was well.

Deep in the lost immensity behind him, he could see a column of smoke rising into the stillness before the storm. So the aliens had found a way to set Mac's place on fire after all. Couldn't be anything else. He thought of that wonderfully ramshackle house filled with fine paintings, superb equipment, and Mac's many collections, and he thought that Mac was right about him: he was a cancer, a destructive element, bringing ruin and death wherever he went.

It hadn't been necessary to burn Mac out, or even important. There was only one reason for it, which was purest spite.

As he drove on, negotiating every wrinkle of land he could find, he watched the oncoming storm, its face shot with lightning and boiling with angry clouds, and he asked himself a question he could not ignore and could not lay to rest, and certainly could not answer. The question was, "Who am I? Or what?"

He turned the old truck toward the storm, and went on.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BY THE time Flynn reached Highway 17, the truck was laboring, and he was watching the temperature gauge climb toward its red line. If the truck stopped, he would be alone on foot. Even if the aliens didn't take him, with his leg in this condition, he wouldn't make it far. This land did not have room for the weak. If his vehicle failed him, he died. Simple truth.

He was still a mile from the dark line of the road below him when the gauge slipped into the red. He tried to drive fast enough to keep some air moving under the hood, but not so fast that he made the problem worse.

As he descended the escarpment that marked the western border of Mac's ranch, the needle's ascent slowed. Then it started to drop. But there was a long flat area at the bottom, and when Flynn had to step on the gas again, it almost immediately became pinned. The next step would be a blown hose and the end of the line.

He crept ahead, glimpsing the road from time to time. Was it getting closer? Hard to be sure. If he'd drifted into an angled approach, he could end up going miles more than necessary. The truck would not make it, no question.

He got another glimpse of the tarmac. The gauge was still pinned. The engine coughed and faltered and the truck shook. His leg hammered with pain.

With the truck protesting like an exhausted horse, he climbed a steepening bank. When he reached the top, he saw spread before him the long, empty strip of the road. A grateful wash of blood flushed his face as he turned onto the highway at last.

He began traveling at about forty, hoping that the breeze under the hood and the easier going would help, but the gauge remained stubbornly pinned, and the engine's laboring became more pronounced.

The storm was now a great cliff of clouds looming across the whole northern horizon. Farther east, he knew that it would bring tornadoes, but out here in West Texas, the chief danger from weather like this was lightning and hail and the flash floods that would turn bone-dry gulches into raging torrents inside of two minutes. But Flynn had seen it before. He knew this hard land and its power, and respected it the way a man respects a snake, and loved it the way he loves the mystery of a mountain lion.

The lines these storms drew in West Texas could be very clear, and he watched the wall of rain coming straight toward him, a dancing haze swallowing the highway.

First, the truck was buffeted by a fierce gust of wind, and then the rain hit. He found himself peering into white, rushing nothingness. The truck's old-fashioned electric windshield wiper did little good. At least the cooler air ended the overheating crisis.

The wound now involved pain so great that it made him woozy and nauseated, and caused him to scream between clenched teeth whenever the truck struck the slightest bump.

Thus far, it was looking like he'd escaped, and he was worried that this meant the others had not.

Slowly, the outskirts of Fort Stockton appeared, some houses naked in the naked land, then a Texaco station and a little strip of stores. There was a KFC with its big red and white sign collapsed into its parking lot. Farther on, there

stood a Dairy Queen and a steak house with the kind of food that drew ranchers, who ate and told stories and laughed in good seasons, and sat silently in their booths in bad ones.

Like the rest of the region, practically every foot of this place held at least one memory for him. The saddlery where his dad had taken him to get his first saddle of his own; the church where his grandmother had been baptized, worshipped, and from which she'd been buried. Over a little farther, she and her people were in East Hill Cemetery, living in his memories, lying in the stark land, in the wind.

Finally, he saw the Rodeway Inn ahead. He pulled into a parking space near the office, stepped out of the truck and into pain so extreme that he had to clutch the door to keep himself from buckling at the knees.

He took deep breaths, forcing the agony down, forcing his body to function, his muscles to work. He walked into the motel. The clerk, behind the desk and watching a TV show on a tablet computer, looked up at him. He did not smile.

“You all right, cowboy?”

“I'm fine.”

“You don't look fine.”

“I had some friends check in a while ago. A man and two women.”

“They didn't check in. They stood in here and argued, then they left.”

What in hell could that mean? “Excuse me?”

“That fella got a call on his cell. Then he yells out, ‘The crazy bastards are burning down my house.’ A few minutes later, he leaves in a cab. Some air force officer from up at the base picked up the women.”

So they'd gotten one after all. They'd lured Mac back. He would be dead by now, poor damn guy. He hoped that he'd put up a hell of a fight. He thought, *Good-bye, fare you well, you bastard.* He choked back his feelings and pulled out his cell phone. Safe enough to use it now, unless they'd taken

to invading towns in driving storms.

He called Diana. “You have reached a monitored voice mailbox. Please leave your message.”

“What the hell’s going on? Where are you?”

The next thing he knew, he was on the floor.

“Shit,” the clerk said. “I get ’em all.”

It took Flynn a moment to realize that he’d blacked out. As he got oriented, he fought to his feet. He clutched the counter. “I need a room.”

“You need a lot more than that. I’ve called EMS.”

“No. No EMS. I can take care of myself.”

“No, you can’t. I’m not giving you any room, either—you’re damn well at death’s door. What happened to you, anyway? You get yourself shot?”

A couple of EMS attendants appeared almost immediately. Flynn didn’t resist. He was slipping in and out of consciousness, and could no longer deny that he had reached the end of his tether.

He saw the gurney they were wheeling in, though, which made him strive to pull himself together. He willed the pain to concentrate just in the wound. He relaxed into the fire of it, allowing it to consume him and become part of him.

“I’m okay,” he said. Then, to prove that, he took a step. But he could not take another. “No, I’m not. You’ll need to move me.”

“What happened to you?”

“Got snakebit down near Marfa. Diamondback.”

They laid him on the gurney. One of them started setting an IV.

“I’m good. All I need is wound management.”

“That’s our call, fella.”

He let them set a fluids IV. “No dope,” he said, “I don’t need dope.”

“What treatment have you received?”

“Antivenin, I think.”

“You think?”

“A friend had some at his house. I don’t know its condition. I don’t think it’s working very well.”

“We’ll see.”

They rolled him into the wagon. He listened to the siren as the ambulance lumbered through the rainy streets. The next thing he knew, he was wheeled into a small emergency room and felt a nurse cutting off the leg of his jeans.

“Doctor!” she shouted.

A young Indian doctor came in immediately. He smiled. “Hello, I am Dr. Patel. What has happened here?”

“I got snakebit.”

He looked down at the wound. “No, this is not a snakebite.”

“The hell, it was the biggest diamondback I’ve ever seen.”

“I’m sorry, but this is not a snakebite.”

Flynn knew that but had not wanted to face it. He struggled to raise his head. He could see his swollen lower leg, purple ringed by angry red. “It was a diamondback fourteen feet long.”

“With a single fang? I don’t believe so. The largest go to seven feet long, anyway. There is something under your skin. Can you tell me what that is?”

“I’ve been driving on this leg for hours. I just need to sleep. A good sleep.”

“What is that under your skin? Can you remember?”

“I don’t know.” He had to get it out, but he couldn’t let this man do it. If he did, the object would be sent to pathology and be destroyed or lost or even end up on the evening news. It was unknown technology, and maybe a window into the mind and abilities of the enemy.

Was it transmitting or receiving, or doing both? And why do such a clumsy job of insertion?

The answer was obvious, and made him consider just leaving it where it

was. They had anticipated that he would suspect there was something implanted in him. They wanted him to take it out and, when it was removed, imagine himself free. But he would not be free, because whatever was of real importance to them would be somewhere else in his body.

“I can walk out of here.”

“You can’t walk three steps. We need to get that thing out, and then the swelling will go down so long as there’s no infection. Now, can you give me a better idea where it came from?”

“I got snakebit, and afterwards it was there. That’s all I know.”

“You were not bitten by a snake, as I have told you. Now, I want to move you into the operating room and get this thing out.”

“Doctor, I—”

“Nurse!”

“Yes, Doctor?”

“Call Dr. Francesco and get this man prepped. Left lower leg, foreign object.”

The next thing Flynn knew, he was being slid onto the hard, black table in the middle of an operating room.

“No general anesthesia,” he said as a nurse added a bag to his IV and a doctor in greens asked him if he was allergic to any drugs.

Before he could protest further, he felt the comforting hand of the drugs take him and hold him. Time began passing at a different speed. He was half awake and half asleep, and struggling with all his might to remain conscious.

He heard a voice say, “Jesus,” and saw two masked faces staring at each other.

“Careful,” he said, forcing his lips to form the words. “Don’t let it near you, don’t touch it.”

“He’s vocalizing. Take him deeper.”

“No. Do not. No.”

Then it was black, the voices were somewhere in the far away, and he could feel long periods of pressure against his leg.

He became aware of women shouting. “Errol! Errol!”

It was nice here. Warm. And he had not slept in days. Not in days.

“Errol, wake up! Errol!”

Who was this bothering him? The hell with them.

“Errol! Wake up!”

He saw a face filled with two brown eyes.

“Yeah?”

“We thought you were gonna sleep until Tuesday.”

He was in a hospital room, lying on the bed and hooked up to a vital signs monitor. There was an IV in his arm. Electrolytes only, he saw.

A nurse smiled down at him. “Who was JFK?”

The name didn’t ring a bell. He covered. “Who wants to know?”

“Look at the clock. Can you see the clock?”

“Yeah.”

“What time is it?”

“Three twenty.”

“Okay, we’re getting somewhere. What’s your name?”

“Flynn Carroll. Nobody calls me Errol. And by the way, JFK was President Kennedy.” He had also remembered that he was in a hospital in Fort Stockton and he needed to get out of here. He needed to reconnect with Diana and Gail right now, and he needed to take with him whatever the doctors had extracted.

“Doctor, he’s conscious.”

Now a male face peered down at him. Kindly, about forty, white guy. “I’m Dr. Francesco. I’m your surgeon. Do you know what we took out of you?”

“You put me under? I told you not to do that.”

“You went under on your own. You’re pretty wasted, Mr. Carroll. Now, what is that thing?”

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do we.” He raised the head of Flynn’s bed and held out a small white box. He opened it and held it so that Flynn could see. “Recognize this?”

There was a disk in the box, bright silver. In its center was a neat round hole.

He shook his head.

“You sure seemed to know something about it. You were yelling that something would come out of it. Despite the anesthesia.” He stared at Flynn, waiting for a response.

Flynn had no idea what to say.

When there was no reply forthcoming, Dr. Francesco continued. “Something did.” He picked up a lidded glass beaker.

In it, Flynn saw a wrinkled black object about two inches long. At one end was a mass of fine white threads, extended as if they were grasping.

“This thing was alive. Very alive. It struggled. It died struggling, as you can see.”

“Yeah, I see that.” Looking at the thing and remembering the voices talking to him, Flynn felt as deep an unease as he had ever known. This was very clearly a parasite, but also a piece of technology. Living technology. He was betting everything on the hunch that it was dead now.

“Where were you when you got this in you?”

“Like I told you, I thought I got snakebit.”

“The metal disk is obviously a housing for this proteinaceous material. You sure you’re not under some kind of exotic treatment, maybe experimental cancer treatment of some kind?”

“No.”

“Because what this disk looks most like is an implantable infuser. Something that delivers a continuous flow of—”

Another nurse came in and whispered to Francesco. She stood aside, shoulders hunched. Flynn could see that she was frightened, and that worried him.

“Well, it seems that your friends are here to pick you up. I’d like you to leave the proteinaceous material for pathology. The metal disk you can take with you, or we can discard it.”

“No, I need it all.” He found himself almost childishly relieved that Diana and Geri had finally come. He’d feared the worst for them. Now, if only he could get Mac to get the hell off that ranch and into his place in Menard, which would be safer for him, too—unless, of course, it was already too late.

The doctor placed both the disk and the small jar containing the mobile part of the system, or whatever it was, into a plastic bag, which he then sealed.

“If your leg gets hot and more tender than it is, or you feel nauseated or dizzy, get back in here. Infection’s what we worry about.”

An orderly brought in a wheelchair.

“Hold off, where’s my weapons? I had a knife and a gun.”

“They’ll be returned to you as you leave the facility.” The doctor slid his hands under Flynn’s arms.

“I can make it,” Flynn said. Standing on his own was hard but no longer impossible. The room whirled and he had to grab the bed railing, but he recovered himself.

“Don’t walk on that any more than you have to, Errol, please,” the surgeon said. “You’ll open the stitches.” He handed him a prescription. “And take this with you. Take one a day, starting in the morning. Be sure to take them all.”

The nurses helped him dress in his shirt and jacket and the remains of his

jeans. He could get a shoe on his right foot, but not on the left. It would take a day or so for the swelling to go down.

Working as hard as he could to walk normally, fighting back the pain as best he could, he headed for the lobby.

Diana and Geri were nowhere to be seen. He turned around to go ask where they were, and found himself face-to-face with an air security police officer who had obviously been standing beside the door he just walked through.

When he turned around again, he found himself confronting three men: a full-bird colonel in uniform, a major, and a civilian whose cold stare suggested that he expected trouble and was prepared to deal with it. The colonel wore a name tag—LEANDER.

“Don’t even think about leaving on your own,” Colonel Leander said. “We’re here to help you.”

“Who the hell are you?”

The civilian’s face crinkled into a smile. “I’m the boss you’ve never met, Flynn. Diana Glass reports to me.” The smile evaporated.

The air security personnel were right behind him now.

“Come this way,” Colonel Leander said. “Can you make it to the car?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“We can get a chair.”

With the SPs behind him, two armed officers beside him, and no gun of his own, he didn’t see a way out. Slowly, he made his way toward the vehicle, parked directly in front of the lobby doors.

“Somebody was supposed to return my weapons.”

“We have them.”

They helped him into the backseat. Colonel Leander sat on his right, Major Ford on his left, the civilian in the front seat with the driver, another air security officer.

“I repeat, do I have a choice?”

“What kind of choice?”

“To get the hell out of this car and go my way.”

“No, you don’t have that choice.”

The car started and they left the hospital grounds.

Flynn sat quietly, but his mind was blazing with a kind of mad fury, which he strove to control.

The security policeman driving the vehicle was not what he seemed. Flynn knew exactly who he was, and that he was the real chief of this whole operation, all of it, from the kidnappings to the murders to the recent plague of brutal attacks—all of it.

The security policeman who now sat behind the wheel was no security cop at all. Far from it—he was an evil, evil man, if he could even be called a man.

He was Louis Charleton Morris.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FLYNN HAD to use every bit of self-control he possessed to avoid revealing the turmoil he was feeling. The hate was so intense that it was like an actual fire inside him. Even in the darkest hours after Abby's disappearance, he had never felt an emotion remotely this powerful. Only one thing mattered to him now, which was to destroy the monster that was behind the wheel.

"Where are we heading?" he asked, his voice carefully modulated.

"Base," the civilian said.

"Does it have a name?"

"No, it does not."

"I want my weapons."

"Flynn, relax," the civilian said. "I'm Dexter Harmon, by the way. I know that Diana's never mentioned me. You're not need-to-know, and our girl follows the book."

"Where is she?"

"On her way back to Washington." He glanced at his watch. "Landing in forty minutes."

All lies. "Glad to hear it. Where are you in the chain of command, Dex?"

"You report to Diana, Diana reports to me, and I report to the president. If you don't mind, would you call me Mr. Harmon?"

"No problem, Dex."

He tried not to watch the back of Morris's head. He looked younger, his black hair was now brown, but those darkly gray, empty eyes were unmistakable. No, it was Morris, no question. The disguise was a good one, though. His mind focused onto one, single thought: *Kill him.*

He smiled. "I'm delighted to meet you, Dex, I have to say. Let me ask you this: How do you feel about the way I kill these bastards?"

"Just kill 'em all."

"I need to get to their leader. Handler. Whatever he is. Builder."

"Making any progress?"

"That's classified."

"Everybody in this vehicle is cleared to hear anything you might say."

"I'm on him."

"What's your plan?"

"I'm going to kill him. A few days."

"Now, that is a plan. Any details?"

What was this guy, an actor? He sure as hell didn't know how to mine a conversation for information.

"I know where he lives."

Flynn watched a subtle signal pass between Morris and Dex.

As they drove north out of Fort Stockton, they also drove into territory that Flynn knew well. Among the things he knew was that there were no bases up here. In fact, the only place of note was a big old dance hall called the Bluebonnet Palace, about twenty miles north of here, sitting all by itself on a godforsaken crossroads. Popular, though. There would be people there.

"Where is this base, exactly? There aren't any government facilities out this way."

"Up toward Lubbock."

"You understand that I've been very aggressively attacked from above a number of times in the past few days?"

“It’s not an issue,” Harmon said.

“How can you possibly know that? We’re in an ideal area for such an attack to take place.”

Nobody responded.

“Either you know something I don’t, or you’re taking a hell of a risk.”

“I’ve evaluated the situation, and I don’t think it’s a risk. You’re not alone, Flynn. There’s a lot of firepower in these vehicles.”

He thought about that. How ridiculous it was. He kept playing along. Before he killed Morris—and he would—he needed to find out as much as he could about his motives and his plans.

“Have you ever been up against these things? Any of you?”

Silence.

“Bear in mind that they’re also extremely fast.”

“And you’re the only person who can be effective against them, which is exactly what we want to understand.”

Bingo. Before killing him, Morris wanted to find out what made him tick. That was why he’d led him along like this, ignoring opportunity after opportunity.

“You need to give me a weapon, and you need to do it now.”

“If they show up.”

“If they show up, it’ll be too late to pass out weapons. We’re done.”

Of course, no attack was going to come, obviously, not with the head of the whole operation sitting right here in this car.

For a good hour, they drove in silence, turning first down one ranch road and then another.

“Elmwood,” Harmon said. He gestured toward his side window.

“I know where Elmwood is.”

The town, a low cluster of ruins on the eastern horizon, was dark and silent.

The highway spun away behind them, endless and empty. Once, a rancher passed with a load of cattle. Later, a sheriff's SUV sped past, going south.

The last thing Flynn wanted to see was other cops. He wanted to do what he was going to do in private. Kill the creature, destroy the remains, get the hell out. That was his plan.

They turned off the final paved road they would use and onto a dirt track. Flynn thought he could break the necks of the two men sitting beside him before they could draw their guns. Wouldn't do much good, though, not with that truckload of security behind them.

At the end of another half hour rumbling along the dirt track, they came to a small grouping of low buildings, which Flynn recognized as the kind of prefabs the military would erect in places where it intended to stay for just a few months. They passed through a disused gate that had been left hanging open.

"You ever have any intruders here?"

Nobody replied.

"Nice," Flynn said, "you're chatty. I like chatty."

"This isn't a game," Colonel Leander said.

They pulled up in front of a gray building. Like the others, its windows were covered by drawn blinds.

Once they were out of the vehicles, it seemed possible that the odds might change in his favor. If the right moment came and he could get one of their guns, he could take care of all of them before they got off a shot. The SPs had locked holsters that would open only to their touch, but not the two officers, so it was a matter of positioning.

However, it seemed that they were well aware of their danger, because he found himself surrounded by the security personnel with their hands on their weapons. The other three walked behind.

"Leg holding up?"

“No.” Actually, it was a lot better, but he had no intention of letting them know that. It would hurt like hell, but he was pretty sure he could run on it.

The interior of the building was lit only by a few overhead lamps. There were office cubicles, but Flynn had the impression that the place was empty and had been for some time.

“Come on in, Flynn,” Harmon said. “Sorry for the setup. We’re just in the process of moving in.” He ushered Flynn into a small office and offered him a steel chair. “Now, you ask, why are you here?”

“I’d like to know.”

“One of the great problems we’re facing is the presence of aliens who can pass for human, and who don’t have our best interests at heart.”

“Not news to me.”

“No?” He smiled, all friendly warmth. “You don’t have our best interests at heart, and you pass for human.”

“I am human,” he said.

Harmon sighed. “We can get it out of you, you know. We can get it all out.”

“I’m sure you can.”

“Then tell us where you’re from.”

“Menard, Texas.”

“That’s your final answer?”

“It’s the only answer.”

“I’m sorry for you, then. You do understand that all of your memories, all you know, can be removed?”

Flynn blanked his mind. He felt the two officers, who were in the room behind him, stir uneasily. Then he noticed that Morris had also entered. When he made his move, he would be dealing with four armed men, at least one of which was going to have special capabilities.

Harmon smiled again. “What will be left will be a vegetable. And what

we will do with said vegetable is, we'll take you to someplace like a barrio in Mexico City, and we'll leave you there. Do you want that?"

"What am I supposed to say?"

"Tell us where you're from and why you're here."

"Okay, I'm a Streib."

Harmon frowned slightly.

Major Ford said, "It's an alien from a television series called *Babylon Five*."

Harmon glanced up at Morris, then nodded slightly. "Let's get started, gentlemen." His voice was brisk.

The situation was this. Harmon Dexter was two feet from him across the desk. The two officers were out of sight behind him. Morris was behind them. There was one window. It was closed by blinds, but all he had seen surrounding the place was a low cyclone fence.

"Is my commanding officer aware of where I am?"

"Diana? Of course."

"And you understand what happens if you kill me? Do you?"

"You can't threaten me, Flynn." Harmon opened a drawer in the desk. "We're going to start with chemical interrogation. Depending on how far we get, we'll move on from there." He pulled out a flat, black box and opened it to reveal an interior full of medical instruments, syringes, and drugs in vials. He removed a syringe. "What I'm going to ask you are questions about your home planet. Where it is, that sort of thing."

Incredibly, it was becoming clearer and clearer that Morris must actually believe him to be from another world.

He'd found out enough.

Harmon raised the syringe he'd just finished filling. The next step was going to be a flood of wicked drugs. It was time to extricate himself.

An instant later, the syringe was embedded in Harmon's right eye. For

another instant, nothing happened. Then Flynn watched his head tilt to one side and his eyebrow rise, making Harmon look as if having a syringe in his eye struck him as funny.

He hurled himself back against the wall and began screaming and kept screaming while his hands fluttered crazily around his face, touching the syringe as if it were white-hot.

The suddenness of Flynn's move and the extreme reaction it had produced caused the desired effect in the other three. While Leander leaped toward Harmon, hands outstretched and also screaming bloody murder, Flynn removed the Colonel's pistol and whipped his temple with it, sending him to the floor in a heap. By that time, Major Ford was out of his chair and leaving the room. Morris was nowhere to be seen. Flynn got Ford by the collar and slammed him into the wall once, twice, a third time. Ceiling tiles rained down around his slumped form. The major was done for the day.

A tremendous blow caused the room to become a tiny dot of light surrounded by blackness. And then there was only the dark.

He squeezed his trigger, but it was frozen. He knew that he was staggering, that he had taken a hit, and also that the fool who had been carrying this gun put the safety on.

Pain shot up his leg as he hit the floor. His thumb found the safety. He pushed it. He took another powerful hit, this one on his left temple.

His free hand went up and he grabbed the wrist, then stuffed the pistol into his assailant's belly and fired.

On all fours now, gagging and shaking his head like an animal that had been kicked around, he fought away the darkness that threatened him.

Somebody was there, right in front of him, a speeding shadow. He saw a gun, heard its mechanism working, and lashed out, slapping it with his left hand, causing the slug to graze his chest instead of rip into his heart.

He fired the colonel's pistol, and there was a grunt, then silence for a

moment, then a whispery moan.

Flynn got to his feet. For a moment, he could not raise his head, not without becoming disoriented again. That blow had been delivered with incredible power. If it had been anything except a fist, it would have killed him.

Instinct told him to get out of the room, but close combat skills said to get a wall behind him, which he did, pressing up against the one beside the desk.

Harmon lay slumped against the opposite wall. His chest revealed slow breaths. Alive, unconscious. The two officers were also alive. Ford was groaning, his body under a fallen chair. There was bone visible in the middle of his right shin. The security cop was flat on his face in the hall. Nobody else was visible.

Flynn went to the cop and turned him over. He felt a moment of disappointment that it wasn't Morris. The guy was breathing, but struggling with a serious chest wound. Flynn did what he could to close the sucking hole with the man's shirt, then went through his pockets, looking for a phone.

He called 911 and said, "Been a shooting." He described the location carefully, and twice, to a perplexed state police dispatcher. "There's two guys, broken back, broken hip, possible broken neck. One with a sucker in the chest, forty-five slug all the way through. Fourth one's banged up, he'll walk it off."

"Sir, are you safe at this time?"

"I'm good." He closed the phone and slid it back into the guy's pocket. Then he returned to the office. Gently, he removed the syringe from Harmon's eye. No doubt the eye was gone, but maybe not. Depended on what was in the syringe. Whatever it was, it had completely knocked Harmon out.

He went quickly through the facility, but he did not expect to find Morris. They had both mishandled this thing. Flynn should never have let it go on as

long as it had. Morris should never have tried to capture him. To get Flynn, it was going to take a different approach. Stealth and indirection would need to be part of it—and luck.

There was nothing here except a few empty rooms. Signs of rodent infestation, cheap steel desks, rusting. He opened a few drawers. All empty.

It had been ten minutes since his 911 call. Troopers would be coming fast, probably down from Interstate 10, maybe up from US 90. He didn't want to engage with them, so he went out to the front. He was careful, stepping out just a foot or so, then checking overhead for any sign of a shadow.

Cloud cover combined with the lack of ground light to make the sky as dark as the interior of a cave. In contrast, in the infrared, he would be like a searchlight.

Nothing to do but keep moving, so he got into the Jeep and went under the dash. It was going to be a little faster to hot-wire than the Lexus they'd brought him in. He pulled down the wiring harness and did the bypass. A small spark flashed as he touched together the leads that activated the starter. With the engine running, he got behind the wheel and moved out immediately.

He drove along the dirt road for a time, then turned off into the darkness, heading south. As he drove, he watched the horizon for the glow from the lights of the approaching police. Meeting them would slow him down, which he did not need, especially because he was far from sure that he had escaped. He may have been let go so that he could be pulled back. It was an infamous technique that had been used for centuries to break the will of prisoners. The Inquisition had used it. So had the Nazis and the Soviets, and Pol Pot.

He turned off road and headed due south. He was still looking for a distant glow, but not of the approaching troopers. What he needed most right now was to disappear into a crowd, and in this part of Texas at this hour, that meant the Blue Bonnet Palace.

He was driving across an ungrazed pasture, which caused the Jeep to bounce against one big tuft after another. It hurt like hell, but he continued moving as fast as possible. In the distance, he saw the flickering of light bars, six sets. No doubt the first responders had called for backup.

Soon, he could not only see the the palace's lighted parking lot and its famous blue neon sign, but also make out the light poles and the details of the signage. So he was about a quarter of a mile out.

He took the truck over to the road and drove into the parking lot, getting as close to the doors as he could. From there, he hurried into the structure.

The Blue Bonnet Palace was an entertainment complex consisting of a dance floor, a bar, a barbecue restaurant, and an indoor rodeo arena capable of seating about two hundred people. Flynn no longer had any idea even what day of the week it was. He was hurt, he hadn't had more than a snatched hour or two of sleep since first getting off the plane in Mountainville a week ago, and now he'd taken a hard blow to the head, and you didn't shake that off so fast in life as you did in the movies.

The place was jumping, with city folks from all the communities in the area mixing with cowboys and ranch hands from local spreads. There was a square dance being called for about fifty dancers, and their happiness, the confident swagger of the men, the beauty of the girls, all but broke Flynn's heart. He had danced here many, many times—with Abby, with many other girls—had known that same happiness here, in his innocent days. He could yet hear the echo of their laughter, as he and Eddie and Mac swung Abby across that dance floor, on those long-ago nights.

“Hey, there, fella—you sure you're okay?”

It was a smiling security guard. It was one of the old guys, Cord Burleson. He'd been working here from forever.

“Cord, it's me, Flynn Carroll.”

Cord's eyes narrowed. He stared hard. “Holy shit, Flynn, you look a hell

of a sight. You livin' in the wind?"

"No, man, I got roughed up."

"'Cause you look like you've been homeless for a good long while. I thought you were rich."

"Could you do me a favor and get Mac Terrell on the horn? I need to talk to that man."

"Mac?" The smile became tight. "He doesn't come up this way a whole lot."

"Well, I've got his number in my head, but I've lost my phone."

"Yeah, that and just about everything else. What the hell happened to your face?"

"A truck sat on it."

Cord led Flynn across the dance floor and back to the office. The last time he'd been in here, it was to get chewed out for trying a false ID in the bar when he was seventeen years old. Nothing had changed, not even the picture of LBJ on the wall behind Sam Carter's desk.

"Sam okay?"

"Hell yes. It's gonna take more than God to get him off to heaven. Way he figures it, this crazy place is better, and he intends to stay."

Sam had built the Blue Bonnet Palace back in the '70s. He'd been running it for at least forty years.

Flynn sat down heavily behind the desk and dialed Sam's ancient rotary phone.

"Sam Carter," Mac said, "what in hell are you callin' me for in the middle of the night?"

"It's me."

"Where are you, Flynn?"

"At the Blue Bonnet Palace."

"What in shit for? I thought you went back to Washington. I was just

considering goin' up there and killin' your ass for getting my house burned up."

"Mac, can you come up here and get me? I've had some trouble."

"Flynn, you know where I am? I'm in your house with our friend Eddie. We're sittin' at your kitchen table, drinking what we believe to be a very fine bottle of your granddaddy's wine."

Incredibly, a break. Flynn hadn't had a whole lot of those. "Mac, put Eddie on."

Eddie took the phone. "Hey, Flynn."

"Eddie, I'm in serious trouble. I'm a prisoner. I need help."

"Okay. First, are you in immediate danger of your life?"

"No way to evaluate that. I need you to send a squaddie for me."

A pause. "Where are you?"

"Blue Bonnet Palace."

A longer pause. "You're free? You can walk out of there?"

"I can walk out of here, but I'm not free. I've been captured, Ed. How much has Mac told you about what's happening?"

"Enough to make me think he was completely insane. But you're worrying me, I have to say. Is my guy gonna go in harm's way? Because if he is, I'm coming myself."

"I think it's more dangerous if you come. You stay at the house. Don't even go home. Tell Mac to do the same."

"Me? How am I involved?"

"Send the squaddie. Fast."

"He's rolling in five."

As Flynn hung up the phone, he smelled food. He turned around, and there was Eileen Peeler, who had been running the pit out here since she signed on out of high school.

"Hey, Elly—why, thank you."

She put it down on the desk: a plate of brisket, sausage, beans, and a pile of steaming collard greens.

“Cord said you came in looking half dead. I’d say three-quarters. Not to mention starved. You’ve lost a few pounds, Flynn.”

“It’s been busy. I haven’t had a lot of time to eat.”

“All I can say is, I hope whoever was on the other side of the beating you took got some feedback.”

“Oh, yes.” Flynn took some of the brisket between his fingers and put it in his mouth. It was like going to heaven. “Sam’s bringing in some serious beef.”

“Goin’ pit, too. That helps.”

He looked at her, her full cheeks, the permanent joy in her eyes, and felt so very, very far away, as if he were watching her through the wrong end of a telescope.

“I believe Sam fired up that pit when he opened, didn’t he?”

“Forty-four years now. You shut up and eat, honey. I don’t know what you’re up to, but you’ve just about used yourself up.”

She left him then, and he ate and waited for the squaddie, and waited for the end of night, and wondered if either would ever come.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IN THE squad car, he had wanted to sleep, but the sense that death could come from above at any moment never left him now. Ever since Miller's murder, Morris had been playing Flynn. Watching him. Experimenting with his abilities by throwing various challenges at him. Learning him.

So the question now was whether or not Morris was still playing him, or about to reel him in. Had the ride to the "base" been expected to end in Flynn's capture? If so, then Morris would be throwing everything he had into this right now.

For his part, Flynn knew what he had to do next and where he had to go. He was focused on two places: Wright-Pat, where one intact disk was stored; and Deer Island, where he was fairly sure that the truth about Flynn Carroll was known.

The house blazed with light from every window. Flynn paused in the midst of the ghosts and memories that crowded his mind. This place was the center of his life, just as Mac's ranch had been the center of his.

He went in. "I need to arm up," he said without preamble as Eddie opened the front door to him.

"Man, you look like you've been bull-riding out there. And ended up under the bull."

"I'll comb my hair." He glanced at Eddie. "There's some people I need to

talk to.”

“The state boys are out there. You’ve got one guy who’s headed for the ER up in Lubbock unless they give him to the USAF. He’s in uniform, but he’s not air force, apparently.”

“Hold him.”

“On what charges?”

“Title Eighteen terrorism. I’ll get Washington to sign off on it.”

“And that’ll happen?”

“Yep.”

“Because I’ll be out on a limb. Far.”

“I know it.” He went down to the basement, struggling with the old house’s steep stairway.

Eddie followed him. “You said you’d been captured, but you’re here.” Mac was close behind.

“Think of it this way: I’m wearing an ankle bracelet you can’t see.”

“That’s the explanation for the leg?”

“I’m not sure. It’s just—” He was done. He went down on the couch. “Lock us in.”

“Lock the house?” Mac asked.

“Lock every damn thing, and I need you guys to stay up. Stay armed. If that door opens, don’t aim, don’t do anything, just start pulling your triggers. Flood it with bullets.”

“I can’t do that, it’s against procedure.”

“How I am coming to hate that word, Eddie. Shout the warning if you want to, but fire at the same time. You hesitate even a half second, we are all done.” The room wavered. “Look in my armory, get me the Bull that’s there, get yourselves the shotguns. There’s an extreme likelihood that they’re coming. They want me alive, so they aren’t going to just blow the place all to hell.” He was too dizzy to keep sitting, and had to lie back on the couch.

“Sorry.” He shot a hard glance at Mac. “God only knows what that antivenin of yours did to me.”

“I keep the best stuff, you should know that.”

He closed his eyes. “Yeah, I’m sure you do.”

Eddie got a call, took it. “Okay,” he said, “I’m rolling.”

“We need you here, man.”

“That was the state police. They’re working four dead bodies out on Seventeen. That’s what they found, Flynn.”

“Shit!” Morris had gone back and killed them, despite the fact that they were his own people. “How?”

“Head shots. One had taken a bullet to the chest, then later the head shot that did him.”

“Probably gonna find out that the weapon used was my other Bull. Morris got hold of it, I’m afraid.”

“Who in hell is this Morris?” Eddie asked. “It’s somebody I need to know about, that’s for goddamn sure.”

“We don’t know,” Mac said. “Who or what.”

“I’ve been tracking him for a year. He’s—shit, Eddie, you’re out of the loop on this thing.”

“He’s another of these aliens? Alien crooks?”

“I pretty much told him everything I know,” Mac said.

“Okay, then you’re sucked in, ole buddy. Down the road, you’ll need to sign some paperwork.”

“Lotta folks are being killed, man. That should not be kept secret.”

“I don’t make the rules, but I understand them.” Frustration choked his bitter words. “I have to say, if the public finds out how dangerous this is and how helpless we are, there will be hell to pay. You can’t tell people that something can steal them in the night or kill them at will—or do worse than kill them—and there is nothing whatsoever we can do.”

“Aren’t you in a police unit that works on this?”

Flynn thought about just how to answer that. He considered the office full of earnest kids; Diana in her suite worrying about political correctness; “Geri,” who could be anything. He considered it for a while, but said nothing.

Eddie’s phone beeped. He looked at a message. “Gotta roll,” he said.

“No, wait. Just wait, Eddie.”

“Flynn, I—”

“Wait! You wait and you listen.”

“Okay! Take it easy.”

“I need you both to understand something. I need you to understand that I am that police unit. I’m the one guy who can put up some sort of a fight, and they know it, and they are hell-bent to capture me. Right now. Tonight. Soon as they can.”

“What about CIA assassins, Delta Force, Blackwater, Navy SEALs?”

“It’s been carnage. So far, I’m the only man who’s been capable of surviving in the field against these creatures.”

Eddie gave him a searching look. “Which is because of your speed?”

Flynn nodded.

“Then I don’t get it.” He gestured toward Mac. “When we used to quick-draw, Mac was faster. Half the time, I beat you.”

“I’ve changed.”

“How? You don’t get faster as you get older.” Eddie’s phone buzzed again. “Yeah!” He listened. “Okay, I’ll be there.”

“Let me guess,” Flynn said. “The FBI just showed up.”

“Yes, sir, and they’re kicking ass.”

Diana had sent them, of course. “Just hear me out. I think what I am is a kind of breakthrough. Something was done to me that increased my reflex times dramatically. I don’t have any memory of it. So it wasn’t surgery, I don’t think, but I could be wrong, of course. What I do know is this: The man

who did it was a Dr. Dan Miller, and he did it at the Deer Island Biological Research Facility in Long Island Sound, and now that he's dead, there's a risk that I might be the only one of my kind ever created."

"Holy shit, man," Eddie said.

"You have to stay here and help Mac protect me. Until I get to Deer Island—and I have been notified that I need to get there with all haste—I absolutely must not be captured. Once I'm there, my best guess is that they're going to be able to re-create Miller's work using me as a template, and then we'll finally be able to create a police force of our own that can stand up against Morris. Hell, an army if we need it."

"I've got a police department to run. That's what I do, and I'm gonna keep doing it. And as to this Morris, you need to go public with this one, buddy. Put out an all-points. Wanted posters. The works. Interpol, all of it."

"We have turned over every stone in the past year. Every single stone. He's on wanted posters all over the world. Not for his real crimes, of course."

Eddie headed up the stairs.

"No!"

He hesitated. "Flynn—"

"I need you, buddy."

Eddie turned around. He looked suddenly smaller. Older. He came back down and dropped into one of the recliners that stood before the TV. He turned it on and began compulsively surfing.

"What about my wife, Flynn, the new baby? Don't tell me they're involved. If Ellen ends up like Abby—"

"Eddie, I'm sorry."

"What have you done to me?"

The words ripped at Flynn's heart. But this was war. More than war.

"Eddie, the fate and freedom of the human species are at stake. I've got to get to that island."

Eddie paused for a long time. Finally, he said, “I’m proud to be part of this. But you only have me for this one night. After that, I’m gonna take a leave and work on protecting my family.”

“Very wise, and thank you.”

“Flynn, it’s always been a privilege to be your friend. It still is.”

“Goes for me, too, buddy,” said Mac.

“I’ve got to sleep, and I want to believe you’re watching that door. Because if it starts to open, you’ve got maybe a second and probably less.”

He knew that there was a high probability they would fail, but also that he was too exhausted to continue. He had to place his trust in them.

He lay back, holding the Bull on his chest—clutching it, really.

There were no dreams, just an uneasy darkness. From time to time, he was aware of his friends’ voices. He was always aware of the pistol.

The night flowed on.

The next thing he knew, his heart was hammering, he was covered with sweat, his guts were heaving. Across the room, Mac and Eddie sat in two recliners that they had moved to face the stairs. They both held guns in their laps. They were both snoring, and that was what had awakened him.

He was not a man who angered easily, but when he did, other people could have definite problems, and he had to work hard to force down the urge to dump them both out of their chairs.

Carefully, in order to avoid waking them up, he took each man’s gun and laid it aside. He knelt down behind them and between the chairs, took a deep breath, and shouted at the top of his lungs, “*Good morning, fools!*”

They both leaped up, snatching air, looking for their guns. Eddie was the first to figure it out. He said in a low, dangerous voice, “I thought you said it was safe during the day.”

“Safer.”

Mac said, “You do understand you’ve been asleep for a while?”

“What time is it?” Flynn figured Four o’clock, maybe five.

“It’s nine thirty.”

“Yeah, well—I’m sorry, then. Just don’t both sleep at the same time, please. It’s a real bad idea.”

“Nine thirty, *Wednesday morning*, Flynn. You crashed on Monday night.”

There was no time. “Morris is liable to go to Deer Island. Maybe he’s already there, and if he is, it’s endgame.” Then another thought came to mind, and it was a terrible one. If he was broadcasting, he had already given away far too much. Even if all Morris could do was track him, he had to disappear from his radar, and right now.

“I need an MRI scan. Full-body. And a radiologist to read it.”

“Mexico okay?” Mac asked.

“Eddie, got an idea?”

“My wife’s brother-in-law is a neurosurgeon at MD Anderson in Houston.”

“Let’s go.”

“That’s a long drive,” Eddie said.

Flynn nodded toward Mac. “Where’s your nearest plane?”

“I don’t have any planes.”

“You have an air force. Where is it, on one of the ranches you don’t own?”

“I only have my one little place, you know that.” He made a call on his cell, said a few words, then cut the connection. “We fly in half an hour.”

“Do you need me, Flynn?”

“Eddie, your first instinct was right. Stay here and protect your bride and that newborn. Tell you what. Get them to a big city somewhere far away from here. Go on a vacation to New York. Even better, London. Paris. Stay in a big hotel. Don’t go out at night.”

“I’ll call my brother-in-law, get everything arranged.”

Flynn stood before his old friend. He put his hands on his shoulders. “Thank you for everything, and God go with you guys.”

Eddie nodded. He turned and started up the stairs. He stopped, turned back. “God bless, Flynn.”

“Same back.”

A moment later, the kitchen door closed. Flynn heard the lock turn.

“You got keys, too, Mac?”

“Yeah. Same keys I had when we were fourteen.”

They drove to a small ranch about ten miles outside of town, a tin-roofed house and a weathered barn. No sign of life.

“Nice place,” Flynn said.

“No, it’s not.”

“That’s right, it’s not. I won’t ask what you do here, because I don’t want to know.”

“Indeed, you do not. But it would be wise not to inhale.”

“Not a meth lab! Jesus, Mac, how low have you sunk?”

“It’s a joke, son.” He put his hands around his mouth. “Hey, Miguel! Compadre! You got gas in the buggy yet?”

The barn doors swung open to reveal a sparkling-new Cessna TT, as good as it got in the world of single-engine aircraft.

“Miguel Sanchez,” Flynn said to the heavysset man coming out from beside the plane. “How the hell are you?” They’d gone to school together, up until Miguel dropped out to become a professional criminal.

“I’m good, man. You still enjoying my Range Rover?”

“It’s ruined.” He pointed a thumb at Mac. “His place.”

“Figures. What happened, it get et by some damn exotic animal out there?”

“You could say that.”

“I got used to those weird dogs, but man, that tiger—I don’t like that

thing.”

Flynn liked Snow Mountain a good deal, but all he said was, “Yeah, I hear you.” At that moment, he heard rumbling and turned around to see a black Audi convertible barreling up the dirt track that led to the house pasture. “Who in hell is that?”

“We’re dealing with an airplane. You gotta plug in a pilot or the damn thing just sits there.”

“No.”

“Whaddaya mean, no? You gonna push it to Houston?”

“I’ll fly it.”

“The hell you will. I’ve been up there with you one too many times. Never again.”

“We don’t involve another innocent man.”

“Well, I’m not goin’ with you. I’ve got my Citation over at the airport, I’ll take that. Bernie flies it, too.”

“Mac, let me tell you what’s goin’ on.” He glanced at Miguel. “You don’t need to hear this.”

Miguel didn’t hesitate. He headed off and intercepted Bernie. They both stood about fifty feet away, watching.

“You take that Citation, you are going to your death.”

“What?”

“I’m tellin’ you, man, you gotta get your head around this. Morris will waste you the first chance he gets.”

“What about, like, in the next ten seconds?”

“If he knows we’re here, it’s possible.”

Mac looked down and hunched his shoulders, closing in on himself.

“Once we’re in the air, he will definitely find us and will definitely strike. If we’re going to make it, it’s going to take some fancy flying.”

Mac ripped off his hat and threw it down.

“We need to do this, Mac. Now.”

He grabbed up the hat. “I know it.”

They got into the plane.

Flynn looked over the controls. “Beautiful. This puppy can fly itself.”

“I hope so, because if you’re as good as you used to be, there won’t be anybody else involved who can.”

Flynn did the checklist, turned on the engine, and taxied across to the runway. The plane was light on the touch. A powerful little aircraft, probably capable of flying rings around most World War II fighters.

“Here we go.” He pushed the throttle forward and felt the airframe shudder into life as they sped down the runway. He didn’t know the exact rotation speed, but the plane made it very clear when it was ready to take off.

Once airborne, he turned east.

“Why is it tilting? What’s going on?”

“Take it easy, we’re okay.”

He pointed the nose into the hard and unforgiving sun.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FLYNN FLEW low with his radios and as many of his instruments powered down as he could safely manage.

Mac twisted in his seat. He peered out his window, then turned a pleading face toward Flynn. “Something wrong with the plane?”

“It’s fine.”

“Then why do I see trees going by?”

“We’re flying under FAA radars, which means we need to stay below five hundred feet.”

“Damn.”

Flynn was flying with only the gravitational and magnetic instruments, primarily the compass. Keeping a low signal profile probably wouldn’t deceive Morris, but it wouldn’t help him, either. He dropped the nose a little more.

“Water tower!”

They skimmed it so close that the plane’s wind stream buffeted them as it compressed against the white-painted surface.

Mac screamed and threw his head back, clutching his fists to his forehead.

“Guess you didn’t see what town that was.”

“Town? What town? Where are we?”

“Better if you watch the sky,” Flynn said. “Any gleam, no matter how

tiny.”

“What do we do then?”

“Find out if your airplane’s any damn good.”

They flew on, keeping as low as Flynn dared, between three and four hundred feet. He kept a close eye out for radio masts and more water towers.

An hour passed.

“Flynn, will you answer me a question?”

“I’ll try.”

“Be honest.”

“If I can.”

“I think we both know I can’t shoot the disk down, no matter how well I understand its design. I mean, we’re talking about a seam a millimeter wide.”

Flynn said nothing.

If he had been enhanced at Deer Island—and he was reasonably sure that was the case—maybe Mac could have been, too. But he wasn’t going to say that. He knew his friend. Mac was unlikely to be comfortable, at least not until he knew what was involved, and right now, Flynn could not answer that question.

They flew on through the empty morning sky, powering across the great, flat expanse of Texas, small towns, long roads, and a bleak landscape passing below in majesty.

When they were still about twenty minutes from their destination, Mac said, “There.” He pointed.

There was nothing there, just blue sky.

“Closing fast,” Mac snapped. “Eight o’clock.”

Flynn saw it, then. He pushed the throttle to the firewall and put the plane into a skidding roll, then dived almost straight down, forcing the disk, which had been coming up under the plane, to dart up past them.

“*Shit, Flynn!*”

Now at an altitude of perhaps fifty feet, he was flying along a highway, jinking across overpasses. He shot straight down the main street of a town with the disk close behind. Once out in the countryside again, he took the plane up to fifteen hundred feet as fast as he could make it go, then did a tight Immelmann turn and angled back down, passing under the disk, then doing another evasive turn at crop duster altitude over a field.

“Bag,” Mac croaked. “Bag!”

“Glove box.”

Mac yanked out a brown airsickness bag.

The small cockpit began getting hot. “They’re gonna burn us!” Mac shouted.

“They’re going to try to take the plane. They need me alive.”

“What about me?”

“They don’t care, buddy, but I sure as hell do.” He pulled the throttle back and dropped the flaps, then pulled the nose up, causing the plane to pancake almost to the ground.

Now he grabbed for airspeed and turned, heading south. They needed a more populated area, and fast.

The plane began to shake. The stall horn started peeping.

“What’s that?”

“Stall horn.” Again, he pushed the throttle to the wall. As he did a series of barrel rolls, Mac screamed.

“Can it, I need to concentrate here.”

“God, oh God, help me, help me now!”

Ahead, Flynn could see a shimmer of water on the horizon. They were no more than thirty miles from the Gulf of Mexico. “We’re ditching in about five minutes.”

“*Ditching?*”

“If we can hang in there that long.”

The disk, maneuvering effortlessly, dropped down in front of them. For a second or so, had he been in a fighter, Flynn would have had a shot at its flank, but not at that all-important lower fuselage seam. At an altitude now of just three hundred feet, he had little room to maneuver. Climbing would be certain death.

Again, the plane began to heat up.

“Is it on fire? What’s happening?”

“I think they’re pulling us into the thing.”

“Shit, Flynn!”

Below them was a stretch of Interstate 10. He saw a series of underpasses. He headed down. If he had to choose between becoming Morris’s captive or slamming into a concrete pillar, he’d have to choose the pillar.

They shot through an underpass, Flynn working the controls with breath and feather.

“Goddamn!”

They went through another. Overhead, the disk was pacing them.

The third one was narrower, coming up fast. Coming toward it from the other direction was an eighteen-wheeler. Closer. He could see the driver, his eyes practically popping out of his head, his hand hammering his horn.

A second later, it was all behind them. Then came another underpass. They made it through, and Flynn yanked the stick into his stomach, passing over an oncoming bus, then banking and heading once again toward the water, which was now spreading blue, covering half the horizon.

“Sailboats,” he said to Mac. “Nice.”

“You’re insane!”

The disk was nowhere to be seen, but that meant nothing. He kept heading toward the water. “I think that’s Brazoria down there. You can see Galveston out my window.”

“Are we gonna ditch?”

“We’re gonna stay within flopping distance of the water.”

Where was the disk? Backed off, maybe, because they were over a populated area. Morris wouldn’t want it to show up on YouTube.

He turned on his radios and navigation system and took the plane up to fifteen hundred feet. Somewhere, a traffic controller was going to be wondering where he came from, but with general aviation aircraft, they expected any damn thing.

They flew along the beach until he saw the Gulf Freeway, which he followed north. He called for clearance into Pearland Airport, and, to his private astonishment, they were on the ground a short time later.

They opened the gull-wing doors and climbed out. Mac looked back at the plane, shook his head, and practically ran into the airport’s small terminal.

There was a pay phone, and Flynn called for an Enterprise car. Then, almost fearing to do so, he called Eddie.

“Flynn! You in Houston?”

“We made it. How are you?”

“All quiet on the western front.”

“Just remember what I said, Eddie. Get the hell out of there for the duration.”

“We’re going to—”

“Don’t tell me, I don’t even want to know.”

“You’re all set with my bro. His name is John Shelton.” He gave Flynn a cell phone number. “He’s waiting for you, they’ll get you into radiology immediately.”

In the rental car, Mac said, “I sure would like to polish off a bottle of bourbon and do some smoke.”

“You and me both.” There were eleven texts from Diana on his phone. The first four were stern, the next five concerned, the last two frantic. He called her.

“Oh, God, Flynn!” Then, to another party he assumed was Geri, “It’s him.”

“Hey. I’m in Houston with Mac.”

“And you’re all right?”

“At the moment.”

“When are you coming in?”

“Working in that direction.” Until he was certain he could not be tracked, he had no intention of going anywhere near the office. “Listen, you stay careful. I’d live in the suite.”

“That’s what I’ve been doing. Both of us.”

“Good. Stay far away from your house, your friends. Just completely isolate yourself.” If he was being tracked, it wasn’t beyond possibility that she was, too, or any of them.

“I’ll do my best, Flynn.”

“Any more on that blocked number?”

“No, and it’s odd. Your cell phone records don’t show any calls from a blocked number.”

“So it’s still a mystery.”

“It is. I’m sorry.”

Saying nothing of his suspicions about what the calls meant, he hung up.

“What did she say?”

“Not a lot.”

According to the car’s GPS, the Department of Neurosurgery was on Holcombe. He drove into the massive hospital complex and found the structure without incident. Once they were deep in the parking garage, he felt himself relax a bit. When they found a parking space, Flynn said, “We’ll need to leave our weaponry in the car.”

“That doesn’t sound wise.”

“I don’t like it, either, but guns and hospitals don’t tend to mix.”

“Let’s live in here,” Mac said as they walked through the gray concrete mass of the parking structure. “We could have furniture brought in, and just set up housekeeping.”

“It’s tempting. Now I’m going to tell you exactly why we’re here.”

“You’ve got an alien implant you want taken out because Morris is using it to track your every move.”

“They took something out of my leg in Fort Stockton, but I think it was intended to be found, so I’d get rid of it and think I was clean. Morris probably anticipated that I’d figure out he had to have some kind of a tracking device on me, and he was trying to set up a deception.”

“Smart.”

“But not smart enough. I hope.”

They got to the elevator. Flynn looked for stairs, but seeing none, he pushed the button. Out of long habit, he listened to the motor as the car moved toward them. Being in places with no escape routes always bothered him. Elevators, always troubling, were potential death traps now.

They got to the seventh floor without incident, however. The waiting area was crowded. He called Dr. Shelton.

“Flynn Carroll.”

“I’ll meet you in Radiology. It’s in the basement—there are signs.”

Flynn hung up. This time, he found stairs, and they used them to descend to the lower basement, where the MRI scanner was kept.

“If we find anything, you’re doing this, too,” he told Mac.

“Not a problem. I sure as hell don’t want that horror show in my head. What’s he look like, anyway? I haven’t seen him since Austin.”

“Same general features, only a lot younger.”

“Younger?”

“They can control a lot of things we can’t. You’ve never seen one of them in person. I have. His name was Oltisis. He was in a safe house in Chicago

until it turned out not to be so safe.”

“What happened?”

“Morris did him. Burned down half a neighborhood in the process.”

They arrived in a long, brightly lit hallway, which led to a smaller waiting room in which there were three people. Flynn would rather they hadn’t been there, but the technician took him and Mac directly into the MRI chamber.

The enormous machine filled most of the space. Flynn said quietly to Mac, “Watch my back, I’ll watch yours.”

“Got it, boss.”

A tall man with an enviable mane of black hair came into the room. “I’m John Shelton,” he said.

“Flynn Carroll. This is—”

“I’m Frank James,” Mac said.

Flynn let it ride. Mac’s paranoia was legendary and, in this case, probably entirely justified.

“What are we looking for?”

“You understand that this is a national security emergency and it’s classified.”

“Ed explained that, yes.”

“You and your technician will need to sign security agreements. There’ll be someone here at the hospital to take you through that process tomorrow.” Or maybe not. He hadn’t told Diana a thing about any of this yet.

He lay down on the gurney and let himself be rolled into the machine. With the ceiling of the tube just inches from his face, he had to fight back claustrophobia. He closed his eyes. Anything could happen now. Whatever was in him might be designed to kill him if it was affected by a magnetic field. Or, if it was metallic, maybe it would move and destroy brain tissue. Maybe it was even designed to do that, on the theory that if Morris couldn’t have him, nobody could.

The machine started. He'd had MRI scans before, the time he blew out his left knee falling while giving chase, and the time an irate husband had cracked him in the head with a frozen chicken.

The thudding and clattering of the magnets seemed to continue on for hours, while he drifted in and out of sleep. He reflected that he was like a fox being chased down by dogs. He'd started out in Mountainville full of confidence. Now here he was in Houston, desperate and exhausted, knowing that if he couldn't throw off his pursuer soon, he was caught.

In the machine, he lost track of time. His mind wandered. Again, he slept.

"Sir? Mr. Carroll?"

A tinny voice kept calling him. He been flying in a bright sky, peaceful, sunny and blue. "Yes?"

"Sir, you need to remain still. We have about twenty minutes more."

"Yes. Sorry." He waited then, forcing himself to stay awake, until finally they pulled him out.

"Sir," the technician said, "can you come with me?"

"Mac—er, Frank—come on."

They went into a smaller room, dimly lit and full of glowing computer monitors. Dr. Shelton stood before one of them. On it was an image of a brain. Flynn's brain. He stared at it, and into himself.

"Good news is, you have no sign of any cancer or any other health issue. This is a normal brain with an intact vascular system." He took a pencil up off the desk and pointed at a part of the brain. "This is the cerebral white matter."

"Yes."

"This area of high signal intensity? See the bright spot?"

Flynn felt sick. He felt angry. But above all, he felt a quiet sense of triumph. "I see it."

"That one, and this one here." He moved the pencil to another, similar

bright area. “There are two of them, located bilaterally in the cerebral white matter of the frontal lobes. They are not natural formations, and they should not be there.”

“What are they?”

“Small objects of some kind. Metallic, or they wouldn’t look like this.”

Bingo.

“Can you get them out?”

“I would think so. They’re right on the surface, so all we’d need to do is make a couple of small incisions. We’d go in through your skull and pull them right out. It’s a matter of a couple of hours. But I’d need you to answer some questions, first, because I’m flying blind here. I’ve never really seen anything like this.”

“You’ve agreed to sign the security documents?”

“I have.”

“So you understand that there would be serious penalties if you told anybody about this?”

“I do.”

“Then I pronounce us doctor and patient. What you are looking at is a tracking system installed in my brain by a scientifically sophisticated enemy of the United States. I work in terrorism intelligence, and this device has compromised my freedom of action and endangered my life. So let me ask you, are you certain you can remove it?”

“If there are no unexpected problems, I would say so with a high degree of confidence.”

“There may be problems.”

“You sound like you’ve got some specific ideas.”

“I do. The objects may be able to maneuver. They may be able to elude your removal attempt. Also, when you do remove them, I may suffer severe brain damage or even death.”

“But they’re just little bits of metal. Not even the size of BBs. Almost like grains of sand.”

“Are you willing to attempt surgery?”

Dr. Shelton gazed for some time at the MRI image on the computer. Finally, he said, “If you’re willing to take the risk.”

“Doctor, I have no choice. And I have to tell you, this is a very dangerous situation. I don’t want you to talk about it, not ever. Try not to even think about it. And please utilize the minimum number of personnel you can in the operating room. Now I’d like you to do the same analysis on my friend Frank here.”

The technician reappeared, and Mac was put through the MRI scanner. In his case, the result was different. He had no sign of anything abnormal anywhere in his body.

“Doctor,” Flynn said, “as this is an emergency situation, I’m going to need you to perform the surgery as soon as possible. When can you schedule it?”

“I’d need to look at my calendar, but—”

“No, sir, I’m sorry, but you don’t need to do that. I’m requiring immediate surgery, I’m not asking for an appointment. I meant, how soon can you prep?”

Shelton thought about that. They were back at the computer, looking at Mac’s enviably clean scan. “I can prep immediately. I think we could be ready within the hour.”

Flynn felt a tide of relief flow through him. It was like being unexpectedly rescued from a certain death, he thought. If it was rescue.

“How long will the surgery take?”

“Given none of the complications you mentioned, no more than two or three hours.”

Two or three hours. He wondered if he would live through it or not. He

wondered if the things would move away from the surgeon's forceps. He wondered a lot of things.

"Let's go," he said. "Let's do this."

He followed Dr. John Shelton down the long white corridor and up an elevator to the surgical floor, his old friend with him. They came to heavy double doors marked SURGICAL SUITE. NO ADMITTANCE.

The doctor punched some numbers into a keypad. They went through the door and into the gleaming, unsure world of what Flynn feared would be a far more difficult surgery than Dr. Shelton expected.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DR. SHELTON had a large office with a window looking out on a wide swathe of sky.

“When did you last eat?”

“Two nights ago.”

“Do you take any medications?”

“No.”

“No aspirin, ibuprofen, anything like that?”

“No.”

“Liquids?”

“This morning. Glass of water.”

“Okay. I’m not expecting this to be a problematic surgery. We will do what’s called an awake brain surgery, and I’m going to ask you various questions during the process. We’re not actually entering the brain, but we are going to be right in the cognitive region, so I’ll want to be certain we’re not disturbing anything as we work.”

“I’ll need my colleague present in the operating room. And keep staff to a minimum. Do not describe the objects or ask any questions about them that your staff may—”

“Sir, I’m going to need to stop you right there. I’m going to need my staff’s full functionality.”

“Then they’re all going to have to sign security agreements. I’ll need them to know that and be comfortable with it.”

“I can assure you they’ll sign. I have a resident, four nurses, and my anesthesiologist, Dr. Kampmann. Just a moment.” He leaned into the intercom on his desk. “Julie, we’re going to be doing a full staff pre-op with this patient prior to surgery. Can you let everybody know?” He turned his attention to Mac. “You’ll need to prep and be in scrubs, and I’ll want you to remain in a specified area of the operating room, and not to speak. Are those conditions acceptable?”

“Fine by me,” Mac said. Flynn nodded.

They followed the doctor to the patient care unit, and Flynn removed his outer clothes, then placed his wallet, watch, cell phone, and keys in the locker provided. He gave Mac the key. “Don’t come in here and steal all my money.” When they were kids and Mac had been poor, he used to mug Flynn and Eddie practically every Friday night.

A nurse came in, a stocky black guy with a tight smile. These medical teams weren’t used to surgeries coming at them unexpectedly, outside of ER. A unit like this ran on a complex, tightly controlled routine. “Okay, we got to shave your head,” said the nurse. “This is the good part. You’re gonna like you bald, lemme tell you. You’ll never go back.”

Now wearing nothing but a blue hospital gown and his underwear, Flynn was taken to a small, single-chair barber’s station. The nurse said, “You get some of the women in here, it can be damn rough. But, you know, you want to get whatever’s in there out more than you want to keep your hair. What you got, anyway? I got you pegged for an injury. Am I right?”

“You’re right.”

“I know this stuff, I’ve been on the unit awhile.”

He rolled on surgical gloves, then lathered Flynn’s head with barber’s soap.

There was only a small mirror at the barber station, but Flynn could see himself in it, and as the CNA continued working, he saw a transformation from a man with short salt-and-pepper hair and hard eyes to a guy with no hair and even harder-looking eyes.

“There,” the nurse said, “now you’re ready to do some serious business. I want to wish you all the luck in the world.”

Back in Flynn’s patient cubicle, another nurse swabbed his head with iodine solution. Mac said, “You look scarier than hell.”

“Yeah, big orange heads tend to be pretty scary.”

“I meant, before she painted you. I’m telling you, the man who came across this room just now had death in his eye. It was damn impressive, I have to say.”

The anesthesiologist came in. “I’m Dr. Kampmann. I understand that you’re Errol Carroll?”

“Flynn.”

“Okay, Flynn, now what we’re going to use is a type of anesthetic that will deaden pain in your scalp and skull, but leave you fully conscious. There won’t be any tranquilizer solution, but I’ll be standing by with it, so if you feel too agitated or restless, just ask me, and I’ll instill some into your IV. And we’ll have general anesthesia ready as well. I assume that you’ve never had a craniotomy prior to this one?”

“I have not.”

“At first, there will be a sound from the electric saw, which some patients may find disturbing. These are going to be two three-centimeter exposures over the affected areas. Just enough for the endoscope. You’ll be able to see, hear, and respond to questions, but your head will be in a restraining mechanism, which can become uncomfortable. We don’t want you to move, so if you have any discomfort at all, even an itchy nose, let us know.”

“Will I be tied down?”

“Yes, you will.”

“I need to see my colleague alone for a moment.”

The doctor and the nurses withdrew, and Mac came in.

“I’m going to be restrained. If anything happens, anything you can’t explain, any movement in the room—you can see their movement, can’t you, at least somewhat?”

“I can see a flash off a windshield a mile away, but not those things, not like you.”

“What can you see?”

“Things they move past. If they make a curtain flutter, no matter how slightly, I’m gonna see that.”

“I think there’s a high probability that they’ll enter the operating room. They’ll try to disrupt the procedure.”

“Flynn, I’ve got to ask you, are you maybe broadcasting to them right now? Can they listen to you?”

“I assume so, but I’m not telling them anything they don’t already know.”

“I hope you aren’t.”

“Doctor, we’re done,” he said.

Dr. Kampmann had gone, but two nurses came and set up Flynn’s vital sign leads and IV, then wheeled him down another bright corridor and into the operating room.

A warm sense of calm enveloped him. Dr. Kampmann had told him there would be no tranquilizer in the IV, but obviously that was not the case.

“Flynn, can you hear me?” Dr. Kampmann asked, upon entering the OR.

“Yes.”

“Do you feel any nausea, any dizziness at all?”

“None.”

They moved him into a bed that was completely surrounded by equipment. This was his second hospital visit in three days, and also the

second in his life.

What seemed like only a moment later, he was coming back to consciousness.

“Can you hear me, Flynn?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Do you know who’s speaking?”

He looked toward the green-swathed face that was peering at him. “You sound like Dr. Kampmann.”

Kampmann looked past Flynn. “He’s back with us, John.”

“Hey, there, Flynn. We have both incisions opened, and I’m looking at the foreign object on the left.”

“Mac—Frank—are you here?”

“I’m here, Flynn. Back over here.” Flynn glimpsed a green-gloved hand raised above an array of monitors.

“Flynn, can you please begin counting backwards from a hundred?”

Flynn found that counting backwards was harder to do than he’d assumed. He had to think carefully, and he was making mistakes.

“The first object is out,” Dr. Shelton said. “It’s a silver disk. There are cilia attached to it. A manufactured object.”

Kampmann was looking at him. Flynn could see the questioning frown.

“Doctor, the objects need to be in sealed containers. This is very important.”

“Sealed, yes, we can do that.”

Flynn became aware of a distant, repetitive sound. “Is that a Klaxon?”

“Fire alarm,” Mac called. “That’s what it sounds like.”

Morris was making his move, no question in Flynn’s mind. “Can the doors be locked?”

“Nurse, see to it,” Shelton snapped. “Flynn, please resume your count.”

Voices rose outside. Soon, there came a smell of burning plastic. Then,

over the intercom, “Doctor, can you close?”

“I need twenty minutes.”

“They’re asking us to evacuate the building. It’s on fire lockdown. It’s not a drill.”

“I can’t pull out—I have this patient’s head wide open.”

A nurse said in a shrill voice, “Smoke entering by the vents.”

“Isolate us,” Dr. Sheldon snapped. “Shut down oxygen.” Then, more quietly, “Oh, God.”

“We have fire in the ceiling, Doctor!”

“Closing up.”

“Is it out yet?”

“One is out, sir. One is still in situ. But I have to pull out.”

Flynn could not allow that. Whatever might happen, if Shelton stopped now, he doubted there would ever be another chance like this.

“Do not pull out, Doctor. This is a critical emergency.”

“You got that right.”

“Do not!”

There no reply. Was he still working? Flynn couldn’t tell.

Hammering came on the door. “Fire department, open up!”

“For God’s sake, tell them the patient’s brain is exposed!”

“Is the second one out?”

Shelton didn’t answer.

“Mac, help me here! Make him do this!”

A long stream of burning plastic came down from above. One of the nurses broke out a fire extinguisher and began attacking the flames as best she could.

Mac came pushing his way through the equipment. “Doc, you gotta do this. It’s a national emergency.”

“It’s one man.”

“The man is important, Doctor. I think you know enough to understand that.”

Screams rose outside. The room grew dim. Black smoke seethed along the ceiling, shot through with deep red flickers. Once again, fire from above. Revealing, too. Morris had not felt able to send a team into a crowded building. Worth remembering.

“Where are we?”

“I told you I am closing up, whoever you are.”

“No, Doctor,” Mac said, “I’m so sorry, but you are finishing.”

“Jesus Christ, put that down!”

“Mac, what’re you doing?”

“You do it, Doctor, or she’s gonna be wearing a second smile.”

The nurse Mac had grabbed was limp with shock. Mac’s knife gleamed at her throat.

Every particle of honor and decency in Flynn’s body rebelled at the idea of doing it this way, but he saw no other choice.

A group of burning ceiling tiles fell into the operating room. One of the nurses screamed, tearing at her burning scrubs. Somebody else threw the doors open. Flynn was aware of great, dark shapes moving in the murk of smoke. Firemen. Then he heard roaring and saw that they were training a mist nozzle on the ceiling, enough to drive back the flames for a few more seconds.

“Okay, it’s done. We’re done.”

“Let me see them. Both of them.”

“Here, you, let her go. I am so sorry, Sylvie!”

“Who are these people, Doctor? Because this is insane—what’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Somebody get this patient out of here. He’s closed, he can be evacuated.”

“Give me the objects,” Flynn said.

Shelton thrust the two bottles into his hands. These things were very different from the one that had been pulled out of his leg. They were the size of tiny buttons, their upper surfaces gleaming. Hanging down from their lower surfaces were long streams of cilia, so tiny and numerous that they looked like tendrils of smoke.

As he was wheeled out amid scores of firemen, nurses, and other patients under evacuation, Flynn watched mesmerized as, again and again, the two objects threw themselves against the glass walls of the bottles they were imprisoned in. Finally, they pressed themselves up against the glass like two mean little eyes and remained there, as close to him as they could get.

Waves of dizziness kept sweeping over him. Both doctors stayed with him on the fire stairs as he was carried down on a narrow portable chair.

“Mac,” Flynn said, “I need you.”

They had reached the lobby.

“This man needs recovery time,” Shelton said to nobody in particular. “I need to get him into another surgery center.”

“Mac,” Flynn said, “you take these. I want you to go back to the parking structure and stay there. Go deep as you can. If it has a subbasement, use it.”

“You think that’ll stop the signal, because—”

“I have no idea.”

“Flynn, Morris is gonna come after me. You know it, and I know it.”

He had a point. “Tell you what, leave them in the car. Then—Doctor—where are we going?”

“Building Forty-two. You’ll be in recovery there for about four hours.”

“So put them in the car and come on foot to Building Forty-two. Get away from them, and stay away from them.”

They went out into a throbbing forest of fire equipment, dozens of vehicles choking every inch of space around the building. Their pumps

roared like an angry ocean. Brass and red paint gleamed in the sun. Two companies had extended their ladders to the roof, and pulsing, sweating hoses ran up both of them, managed by firemen at the midpoint, who fed hose to men on the roof.

“My patient is immediate post-op!” Shelton shouted. “I need him moved right now.” He added to Flynn, “And I don’t want to see you again, ever. You let me know where to send your records, I’ll be glad to do that. But I do not want you anywhere near me or this medical center or any of its personnel ever again.”

As he was lifted into an ambulance, Flynn saw two bodies in bags, lying on a sidewalk streaming with soot-blackened water. More ambulances were lined up, and he could see personnel with burns and other injuries crowding toward them.

“This patient is a just-closed brain,” he heard a nurse say as the ambulance doors shut.

He was driven only a few hundred feet, and in minutes was in a second recovery room, this one jammed with patients, many of them wearing the same sort of turban that was probably on his head.

“Sir, we need to do a neuro check on you now. Can you tell me your name?”

This he had not expected. He couldn’t leave his real name. He wasn’t an official admission to the hospital. He did not remember which aliases he might have in his wallet. He’d just been through too much to do that with any hope of accuracy.

“Sir?”

He tried one of them. “William Haffner.”

“Mr. Haffner, you don’t have a bracelet.”

“Fell off, I guess.”

“What day is it?”

“Wednesday.”

“Can you look at that clock and tell me the time?”

He looked up at the wall clock the nurse was indicating. “Four fifty-three.”

She started to ask him another question, but a page caused her to go hurrying off. A patient just evacuated from neurosurgery was having a heart attack, and chaos was erupting.

Flynn realized that he was done here. The next thing to happen would be that they would try to find him in the system, which was going to create a problem. Perhaps he should have anticipated that Morris would use this particular technique, but he hadn't. He'd been thinking exclusively in terms of an entry being made.

He had to find Mac, get out of here, and get out of this hospital complex as fast as possible. But right now, that was a problem. He was wearing briefs, a hospital gown and a thick head bandage. If he tried to leave like this, he would certainly be stopped. His wallet and other personals were in a locker on the burning surgical floor. No chance of retrieval.

Like the other recovery room, this one had lockers, and many of them were full. He might be able to pop one of the simple combination locks quite easily, but how would he know what he'd find inside? Women's clothes, clothes that didn't fit, the ID of a person who looked nothing like him. He might have to pop a dozen of them, even all of them. The minute the nurses noticed him up off his gurney, they were going to come running.

From where he had been left, he could see the big double doors that led into the room. That wouldn't be the right direction, not for what he needed to find.

As best he could, he turned. The door leading out in the other direction was narrower, not a public passageway.

When opportunity appeared, hesitation was always a mistake, so he

pushed himself up off the gurney, waited for the dizziness to subside, and went through the door.

The staff room was about twenty feet long, with stacked lockers on both walls and a well-stocked break bar. The lockers were identified only with last names, and locked not with hospital-issue locks, but with whatever the nurses had brought in themselves. He looked from one locker to the next, trying to guess which one might conceal male clothing, and also might have an easy lock.

There must be a security problem here, though, because the locks were good quality.

No, this wasn't going to work. He'd have to get as far as possible dressed as he was. When he headed for the exit door at the far end of the room, though, he got a break, a door to a janitor's closet. Even better, it wasn't locked. He stepped in and turned on the light. There were six steel shelves of cleaning supplies, a number of mops and other equipment, and some buckets. There was also what he was hoping for, which was a steel locker. In fact, there were three steel lockers. Two were locked with hospital-issue combination locks, the third with an even simpler one, which had probably been bought off the hardware shelf at a drugstore.

Flynn did it first, and was rewarded with a woman's slacks and sweater and a pair of platform shoes.

He did the second one, but it was empty.

The third had the worst lock, and it took time to work. As he was testing its drops, counting from click to click to determine the combination, he heard voices outside.

"She said he came this way."

"Shit, he's gotta be in the stairway."

"Did you contact his doc yet?"

"How? You know who that would be? We got a John Doe here, and he's

a damn head case.”

There was a faint click as they went through the door to the stairwell Flynn would shortly need to use himself. They’d be back soon, he guessed, once they realized he hadn’t been seen in the lobby. Almost certainly, they would do what they should have done in the first place, and search this room.

He found himself looking at a gray sweat suit. On the floor, a pair of track shoes. Even better, the suit had a hood.

The occupant of the locker was soon the proud owner of a hospital gown, and Flynn was in the stairwell, the hood pulled over his head.

He’d gone down a flight when he heard the tramp of feet. More than two people this time, some of them in heavy shoes. They were bringing security with them. Not taking any chances with a brain case.

Moving quickly, he ducked into the nearest fire door. He found another break room and another janitor’s closet. He went in and got a bucket and mop, then went out onto what turned out to be an ICU floor.

“Hold it, this is a sterile floor,” a nurse said. She was wearing greens, a hair covering, and bulging white shoe covers. All the nurses in the station turned toward him.

“Sorry, I’m due on the cleanup right now.”

“Get out of here, then, or I’ll have to write you up.”

“Sorry, ma’am.” He went to the elevator bank and waited for what seemed like the better part of an hour before an elevator finally appeared that had room in it for a janitor with a mop and bucket. He remained hunched under the hood, careful not to reveal the bandage.

Finally, he walked out through the jammed lobby and into the chaos that still filled the street. Fire ladders were being brought down, and hose pulled out of the neurosurgery building. Its front was streaked black with sooty water. All the windows on the top floor were shattered, the interior behind them a blackened ruin. Yellow barrier tape blocked the lobby doors, but a

man with a mop and bucket went unnoticed as he walked through, heading toward the entrance to the parking structure.

He had to find Mac and get out of here and do it fast, or there was no question in his mind that the hunters were going to pick up his scent again.

He went down into the dripping, water-soaked darkness of the structure. In light, he might see a shimmer as the aliens approached him. In darkness, he would see nothing.

He stepped out onto the highest floor. The only light came from a single emergency lantern, its battery-powered glow almost completely faded.

“Mac,” he said into the echoing silence, “you here?”

There was no reply.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

FLYNN HAD worked his way down to the lowest level he could enter. The two levels below this were flooded from the fire. It was on this level, also, that their rental car was parked. The silence was broken only by the echoing sound of water dripping from below. It was much darker here, too dark now to see any sign of the aliens at all. The emergency lighting was failing fast.

He was more helpless here than he had been on the other levels. The sound of the aliens' breathing was going to be drowned out by the dripping water. He could not expect to catch their distinctive odor over the stench of the fire, either. It was no place he wanted to be.

"Mac?"

Faintly from along the line of cars, he heard a clattering. He listened. The clattering had not been there a moment ago. Its source was about ten cars down on the right. He moved a little closer. Listened again. There could be no question. The sound was coming from the black Chrysler he had rented.

"Mac?"

No reply. He took a step closer. The rattling became louder. Was it Mac, somehow trapped in the car? And why make a noise like that?

"Okay, buddy, I'm here, I'm gonna get you out." He went close to the car, cupped his hands, and peered in the passenger-side window.

Something hit the glass so hard that it cracked. He jumped back, to see

two gleaming silver buttons clattering against the inside of the window, which was already cracked in four or five places, as if it had been hit by stones that weren't quite powerful enough to break it. As he watched, all but frozen with surprise, they crashed into the window again and again, hitting it so hard that the car rocked.

The glass bulged. Pieces of it shot past his head.

He had exactly one choice. He ran as he had never run before, down to the far end of the floor and into the stairwell. He slammed the door, but it wouldn't shut properly. He ran up to the next floor and the next, then out onto the street level of the structure.

He threw open the door into the brightness of the exit lanes. A figure stood by the pay barrier, darkly silhouetted against the light flooding in from outside.

"What kept you?"

"Mac, run!"

He dashed past him and heard him come following, his shoes slapping on the wet pavement.

"What the hell?"

"They're out of the jars, they're busting out of the car, and I don't know their range."

"Aw, man!"

They ran down the middle of the street, finally stopping only when they reached the lobby of a building that hadn't been affected by the fire or the patient rescues.

Flynn was so winded when he stopped that he had to bend full at the waist and gag for air. Mac came up from behind. He was silent, breathing hard, too winded to speak.

"Keep going."

They dropped back to a steady trot, stopping again only when they

reached a bus shelter. They waited for ten minutes, sitting hunched in the shelter.

“Were they doing that when you had them?”

“They were flying around in those jars so fast, you couldn’t see them. I was lucky to get them to the car. I got the guns, though. Barely.” He produced the Bull from the back of his waist.

Flynn took it. “This won’t help now.”

“How far can they go?”

He shook his head. “No idea.”

He punched in the secure exchange, listened to the recorded warning, then keyed in Diana’s number.

“Mac, where’s Flynn?”

“This is Flynn. I’m sitting at a bus stop in Houston with Mac. We need transportation, it’s as urgent as hell, and I don’t want to stay on this line or any line.” He told her the street. “Now, listen up. There’s somewhere I need to go. I want you to smooth the way for me at Deer Island.”

“Who do I call? What do I say?”

“Call the director. Tell him I need carte blanche on the island for at least a couple of days.”

“What’s going on?”

“It has to do with those blocked calls. It’s important, maybe critical.”

“Please tell me more, Flynn.”

“Not on this line.”

“Flynn, please.”

“When I get to a pay phone, I’ll fill you in. Also, I’ll need to talk to Geri. Right now, just do what I need you to do. And I have no ID. It was lost in the fire.”

“What fire?”

“You watch CNN?”

“That hospital? That was you?”

“We’ve got plenty to talk about, believe me.”

“I’ll get everything set up.”

“Fast as you can.”

She was true to her word. It was not ten minutes before a Houston Police Department squad car rolled up and collected them. The officer had obviously been told not to talk, because he remained completely silent during their drive to Ellington Field. It was a training facility and also the headquarters of the 147th Reconnaissance Wing, which flew Predator drones in the Middle East via satellite uplinks.

The guard station was manned by serious security. Understandable, given that a war was being fought in this quiet, sunny place.

The cop stopped and rolled down his window. One of the security personnel came forward and leaned in. She was well trained and on her game; Flynn could tell by the way she used her eyes.

“Identification, please.”

Flynn turned toward her. “I’m Flynn Carroll.”

She stared at him. Hard. “Okay. I got it. Let me clear you ahead.”

A moment later, a guard vehicle pulled up in front of them. They followed it across the base.

“Mac, planning ahead. How much cash do you have on you right now?”

“Couple thousand bucks, probably.”

Mac still ran a cash economy, which would shortly prove useful. Flynn watched the low buildings of the base. There was little activity. Once, a couple of airmen walked into the Noncommissioned Officers’ Club. Shortly, a civilian sedan fell in behind the police car.

“Phone,” he said to Mac, holding out his hand. He called Diana. “We’re on our way to the flight line, and what I believe to be an offended general just pulled in behind us.”

“That’d be General Stevens.”

“Okay.”

“He’s pissed off as hell. He wants to yell, I guess. I can make him disappear.”

“No, it’s fine. Just so you know. If he goes off rez, I’ll call you back.”

They reached the Air National Guard building, a structure in need of a bit of paint. Once again, there was little activity, which was all to the good. Flynn got out of the car and told the cop to go back to Houston. The general stopped also, got out of his car, and came hurrying over.

“Excuse me, I understand you two people think you’re taking my plane. I’m afraid it has a prior commitment.”

“Good afternoon, General,” Flynn said.

“I have no intention of letting unidentified civil service bureaucrats take this aircraft. If I have to, I’ll call the Secretary of the Air Force.”

“Bring your driver.”

“My driver? What the hell are you talking about?”

“General, you’ve got two things to do right now: The first is to come in here with me and find us both uniforms. The second is to put on our clothes and fly to Langley AFB.”

“Langley! What the hell for?”

“Because you’re receiving an order from somebody who is empowered to do that.”

“*You?* You’re a—I don’t know what you are. I need some identification.”

“No, you don’t.” He glanced toward the driver. “You. Find us uniforms. Do it now.”

“You can’t impersonate air force officers!”

“General, you have no idea what credentials we carry. But you listen to me now, and you listen good, because if I have to say this again, it’s going to be to a soldier with no stars on his collar. Do you understand this?”

“This is extremely irregular.”

“What you are dealing with right now, sir, is the single most urgent national security matter that you have ever encountered in your career, or will ever encounter. Do you understand this?”

“I have no idea who you are or what you’re supposed to be doing.”

Again, he said to Mac, “Phone.” Then, to the general, “If I have to make this call, your career is over.”

They went eye to eye. The general was pure determination. Then they really connected, and Flynn watched a familiar surprised confusion come into his face. An instant passed, and he took a step back and cleared his throat.

“Very well,” he said. He cleared his throat again.

The driver reappeared, and he and the three of them changed in an office. The general was pretty well swallowed in Mac’s clothes, but the driver, who was a tall kid, did all right with Flynn’s sweat suit.

“Have a pleasant flight, gentlemen.”

“Thank you,” the driver said. The general glared at him.

After they went out onto the apron, Flynn told Mac that they were taking the general’s car. “We’re going to Hobby.”

Mac didn’t ask any questions, which was good. He was becoming more efficient at this.

The general’s Buick stood where it had been left in front of the building. It was unlocked, but they had no keys to start it.

Mac used to be better at wiring cars than he was. “How long for you to wire it?” he asked.

“They’re more complicated than they used to be, and it’s not something I do a lot of anymore.”

“You did good with my dad’s Mercedes. Why don’t you give it a shot?”

“You’re smarter, you do it.”

“Don’t undersell yourself, you’ll be faster.”

Mac went under the dash and had the engine turning over in four minutes. To anybody watching from above, they would have appeared to linger in the parked car a little longer than normal, but hopefully not long enough to arouse suspicion.

On the way to the airport, Mac asked, “May I know what we’re doing?”
“Changing the world.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

AS THEY drove off the base, Mac was unusually quiet.

“You trying to come up with a question that makes sense?”

“I guess I am. What I’m thinking is you might’ve gotten those two guys killed just now.”

“I agree.”

“You sent them in harm’s way without so much as a prayer book.”

“I’m not sending them into any more danger than I’m going to take on myself. Less, probably.”

They drove on for a while. It was six fifteen, and Houston’s notorious traffic was just that—notorious.

“How much have you lost on this so far, Mac? What with your house and all?”

“Four million.”

“So, maybe a million.”

“No, it really is four. The paintings were originals.”

“They’re forgeries.”

“That is not true.”

“Manet was right-handed. Your forger painted with his left. Who were you planning to sell them to, billionaire morons? I didn’t know there were any.”

“Gifts for *drogos*.”

“So, a grand for the paintings. Tell you what I’ll do. I know how hard you have to work for your money.”

“Which you do not.”

“I do not. So I’ll rebuild your place for you. As long as you don’t cheat me, I’ll pay the bills.”

“My accountant—”

“He outta jail?”

“Four more months.”

“Any contractors on the outside, but not on the lam?”

“I’ll need to check.”

“We’ll use my accountant. My contractors.”

“I get that.”

Flynn watched the passing cars and kept his eye on the low, thick clouds, looking into their faint glow for any sign of a shadow. Mac sat with his knee up against the dashboard. His long face was usually ready to crinkle into an affable smile, but that easiness was gone now. He, too, stared into the empty night.

“I miss my dogs.”

“Those weren’t dogs.”

“Yeah, I guess not. Alien animals.”

“Those were people who’d been genetically mixed with dogs.”

“Oh. That must be why I liked them so much. I like people.”

“Then you like Snow Mountain, too.”

“Only see him once in a while. He liked Mozart. He liked the Stones. I used to hire bands and quartets from over at Sul Ross University to come play for him.”

“What did they think of him?”

“The kids? Nothing. They never saw him. But he was there.”

“Who did they see?”

“I’m more of a narcocorrido type of guy, so, nobody, basically.”

He tried to imagine the scene, a string quartet or a rock band set up in Mac’s house pasture, playing to the night, with a tiger way back in the dark somewhere, listening blissfully.

“I guess they thought they were playing for a rich, cantankerous eccentric, then?”

“I guess they did. I never really thought about it. There’s a lot of eccentricity out in our neck of the woods, as you know.”

“All too well.”

“I think it’s the Marfa Lights. They make us crazy.” He paused for a moment. “I want to go home, Flynn. I’m not cut out for this.”

“I wish it was safe for you, buddy. I wish to God it was. You stick close for a little while longer, I’ll make it safe. I promise you that.”

“When I went back there and saw my house burning up, I really, seriously thought about killin’ your sorry ass, Flynn. But I love you, goddamnit. You’re a good friend and always have been. So here’s what I think: Let’s kill ourselves a damn alien and do it soon.”

“I have a plan.”

“You always do. Only remember that only some of ’em work. Just never forget the freight train.”

When they were kids, Flynn had devised a plan to slow down a freight so they could hop it more easily. The result of their attempt had been a fifty-three-car derailment.

“I believe Eddie set that one up.”

“Your idea, Flynn. Your idea.”

Flynn had been way overconfident, thinking the engineer would notice the switch signal and stop. He didn’t notice a thing, and rolled the whole consist out onto the siding at forty miles an hour. Nobody was hurt,

fortunately, but seven thousand chickens had escaped into the night.

That was then, in the delicious, lingering summer that had been their boyhood. This was now, and this was a time of storms.

They parked and walked silently to the terminal. As they exited the parking structure and were briefly exposed to the sky, Flynn felt a tremendous sense of vulnerability. If only he could know for certain how capable of following him and reinserting themselves the implants were. He knew now that nobody had been there to insert them in the first place, which was why he had no memory of it. They'd been released at some point, probably when he was at the Miller place, and entered on their own. He recalled feeling a sudden, sharp headache there, just as he was leaving for Wright-Pat. It had passed quickly and he'd thought no more of it.

He remembered the old Hobby terminal from his childhood, flying in here with his dad to watch him do his business with the big oil companies downtown, which chiefly consisted of making sure they were reporting his royalties accurately. It was still a battle, but Flynn had others to fight it now.

"We need to find a pay phone, because Diana's going to have to get us on the plane from her side of the line."

"I've got plenty of cash."

"We're both packing heavy heat and have no luggage, and I have no ID. And what happens when you show your license?"

"Depends on which one."

"You have more than one on you right now?"

"I've got seven on me right now."

"Give me one, and we can buy the tickets."

The ticket counter was empty. "Two for Dayton," Flynn said.

"Credit card and ID, please," the agent replied, standing up from her stool and going to her terminal.

"Cash," Flynn said. He handed over the two IDs.

She looked at them, blinked, and looked up. “I could give you military. You got air force IDs?”

Mac pointed a thumb at Flynn. “We don’t have those with us, because this gentleman here is a professional fool.”

She smiled, then looked again at the driver’s licenses. “Are you two twins?”

“Yes,” Flynn said.

“And in the air force together. I think that’s cool.” Her smile widened. “I’ll write you up military—that way you won’t have to bicker. I know how twins like to bicker.”

A few minutes later, they had their tickets on the last flight out, a 9:20 through Atlanta.

“I don’t look a thing like you, Flynn.”

“They see a lot of people. This time of day, they’re looking right through you.”

“You’re one of the most hideous men I’ve ever seen. I’m very insulted.”

“Mac, you know what you look like? You look like a wizened, shifty-eyed cowboy who got shrunk by too much exposure to the sun.”

“You realize how much of your height is in that neck? My dogs mighta been part human, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the aliens didn’t start you out right in your mother’s womb, and make you part turkey.”

“You need to quit using that shoe polish or whatever it is you’re putting on your hair. Spring for a dye job.”

“If I get my hair dyed down in Marfa, everybody in West Texas is gonna know.”

“You look like somebody pushed you up a chimney.”

“Women happen to go for my hair.”

“Women only go for you because they find your criminal ways exciting.”

“Yeah, they do get off on murder stories.”

“Don’t tell me that. Then I’ll have to tell Eddie, and he’s gotta question every damn one of ’em.”

“Okay, so I didn’t tell you.”

“Let’s find us that phone.”

“Use my cell.”

“Give it to me.” He removed the SIM card and handed it back. “I’ll keep the card for now.”

Mac said nothing. He understood perfectly well what Flynn was doing, covering their tracks. This was also part of the way he conducted his life, whichever side of the law he happened to be on at any given time.

“We oughta get us some throwaway cells.”

“You will find that they don’t sell them in airports.” He located a pay phone and dialed Diana’s home number directly. He did not go through the secure network.

It rang once, then twice, then a third time.

He hung up.

“She’s not there?”

“Three rings. Our prearranged emergency signal. She hears that on her landline, she knows there’s big trouble.”

“I thought we were out of trouble.”

“We’re not out of trouble.” He dialed again. This time, she answered midway through ring one. He listened as she accepted the charges on the call.

“What do you need?”

“Back door through Hobby, then I need to see General Sam Dickerson at Wright-Pat. We’ll be landing in Dayton at three this morning. I want to see him at seven. Still no ID and no money.”

“Can I get some kind of an update, Flynn?”

“We’re alive.”

“I’m glad you are, because I thought Morris had you.”

“I thought he had you.”

“Why?”

“The way I learned that you’d returned to Washington was from him.”

“How could he know my movements?”

“He figured it out. Not too hard, though. Where else would you be going except to your safest place?”

“I need to be sure we’re secure here.”

“You got that right. Is Geri still with you? Because I have a question for her.”

“She’s always with me. In my office right now. I’m sitting in my suite, wishing I were alone.” He could hear the crackle of tension in Diana’s voice.

“Trouble?”

“She doesn’t sleep, ever. She just sits there, watching me. She doesn’t read, watch television. Hardly eats. Just stares.”

“She’s scared.”

“I think she’s absolutely furious about what happened out there. She considers us dangerously incompetent, and she wants in the worst way to go home.”

“Put her on.”

A moment later, he heard Geri’s voice. “Yes, Mr. Carroll?”

“You know what a tracking implant is?”

“Yes.”

“Two of them were removed from my head today. They seemed to have some sort of an ability to move on their own.”

“They do. Once they’re synched to an individual’s genetic identity, they can be released and they’ll find their target on their own.”

“How much range do they have?”

“Range? You mean, how far can they broadcast a signal?”

“No, how far away do they have to be before they can no longer find their

intended host?”

“Far. Ten, twenty thousand miles.”

“All right. How can they be destroyed?”

“Heat above two thousand degrees.”

“How about blowing them up or smashing them?”

“They’re holographic. Even a small bit of one will retain the functionality of the whole.”

“What about containing them?”

“With things you manufacture? Some of your safes might work. I’ll look into it.”

“Unfortunately, we didn’t understand their capabilities and put them in a jar.”

“That wouldn’t work.”

“It didn’t. When I last saw them, they were in the process of breaking through the glass in a car window. We ran. Within fifteen minutes, we had transport and were ten miles away. I’m now twenty-two miles from the spot where I last saw them. What’s my exposure?”

“All of this was in populated areas?”

“Yes.”

“It’s possible that they’ve lost you for a while.”

“How long?”

“They’ll be doing a grid search right now. Your advantage is the populated area. They’ll need to get pretty close to you before they can detect you against all the background noise.”

“Listen, Geri, we sort of know each other.”

“I would say we do.”

“So I need to give you some friendly advice.”

“And what would that be?” He heard the rigidity that had come into her voice. She was the authority figure here, at least in her own mind.

“We’re not incompetent. Just uninformed and technologically backwards. Forcing us to use only our own locally produced equipment is tying our hands.”

“You threw my pulse weapon onto a roof. My weapon, registered to me. What if somebody tossed your gun away? You’d have to report that. You’d have to take a reprimand.”

“I’m sorry about that, but it didn’t work, and that was dangerous to all of us. But some things do work. Those implants, for example. I’d love to be able to get something like that into Morris. And the disks. So I want to repeat—we need a disk.”

“That’s all gap-distant technology, meaning that your science is so far behind on it that you can’t understand it even if it’s explained to you. Exporting technology like that for any reason is highly illegal, and licenses just do not get granted. The latitude for abuse is too great, not to mention the cultural disempowerment that’s involved. Scientists who see something so potent and so advanced that they can’t even begin to understand its most basic principles, lose hope. They become scavengers.”

“Look, your technology is so advanced—the stuff that works—that this one guy is potentially more powerful than all the military forces on Earth.”

“He has vulnerabilities.”

“What are they, exactly?”

“One disk and no ability to resupply without letting the main body of biorobots know where he is. He’s a full biological running a squadron of biorobots who know nothing about what’s happening on Aeon, and they must not find out, or he’s going to lose control of them. He can’t go back. What he has is all he’ll ever have.”

“That’s true now, but what about next year? The year after? We’re talking Cortés taking the Aztec Empire with five hundred Spaniards. You know that story?”

“It’s a great myth that higher ethics follow scientific advancement. Lower planets are vulnerable.”

“Morris and a few hundred robotic entities could end up owning this world, so I have to tell you, I don’t think your scruples matter just now. Earth is on the line, so *give us what we need.*”

“Flynn, the truth is that we don’t have the resources.”

“Not one spare disk? A couple of implants?”

“Getting things off-planet is the problem. All of our movements are resisted, and as far as Earth is concerned, we must not be followed here by the main body, as I said.” She stopped. He heard a swallowed gagging sound that told him she was fighting back emotions of great power.

He realized, really for the first time, how much courage it had taken for her to come here.

“Just do what you can.” He hung up. “Let’s go,” he said to Mac. “We’ve got a flight to catch.”

Diana had done her administrative work well, and they were escorted through TSA security by the station supervisor. As they stepped away toward their gate, she saluted them.

“What’s that about?” Mac asked.

“She’s probably been told we’re on some sort of crucial mission.”

“True enough.”

The plane was crowded. Given what Geri had explained to him, that was a good thing. As best he could, Flynn leaned back, forcing his substantial frame into the narrow economy-class seat.

“You know what their greatest problem is?”

“Whose?”

“Aeon’s. They didn’t just invent a new life-form, but one that’s also stronger, faster, and more intelligent than they are. Their biorobots are an evolutionary leap, and they’re going to replace their creators. What’s

happening to the people of Aeon is what happened to the Neanderthals. A better species is pushing theirs aside.”

Flynn thought, *And maybe ours, too. Maybe a lot of species.* How ironic that a civilization far away and so deeply hidden in the vastness of space had created something that would turn out to be such a scourge right here at home.

He was a cop, though, not a soldier—at least, not yet. Right now his job remained what it had been from the beginning: Get the lawless element under control. Contain Morris and roll up his operation.

The plane flew on, as did Earth on its mysterious journey, each bearing its cargo of innocent lives into an uncertain future.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE MOMENT they entered their room at an airport motel, Mac fell onto the first bed he reached. He was snoring before he hit the mattress.

Flynn had gotten a sewing kit from room service and cut off his various bandages. There was swelling on his scalp, as well as an angry red knot at the center of the incision the doctor in Fort Stockton had made. Could be the beginning of infection. He'd keep a close watch. Next, he went into the bathroom and stood in front of the plastic sink. He took a long look at himself in the mirror. Stone bald, he looked frightening, no question about that. The surgical wounds were held together by gleaming staples, two in each incision. He was way too close to Frankenstein.

He lay back on the empty bed, wondering what the future held. Morris had to guess that he'd go to Deer Island. Would he also come? Of course he would.

He slept a shallow, worried sleep. Every sigh of breeze, the tapping of a tree on the bathroom window—any slightest sound brought him instantly awake. He hugged his gun like the life preserver that it was.

They got up at six to a room service breakfast, which they ate in silence, the way soldiers did before a fight. The trip to Wright-Pat was a familiar one, and once again, Diana had paved their way past the guard post.

Flynn knew his way around Wright-Pat, of course, and they were in

General Dickerson's office at exactly seven.

Dickerson was younger than Flynn had imagined he would be, more the age of a colonel than a general. He had the easy manners of a man used to command, and the contained watchfulness of somebody who knew more than a few secrets. When Dickerson smiled as he crossed his large office, Flynn knew immediately that care was to be taken here. This man could be hard and he could be difficult.

"Gentlemen! The two mystery men. I'm curious as hell, I have to admit." His handshake was perfunctory, almost as if he had forgotten it even as he extended it. "Please, sit down." He hurried back around his desk, a wary officer manning a battlement. "So, may I know why you're wearing the uniforms of a service to which you do not belong?" The smile reappeared for an instant, and then was gone.

"We're trying to stay alive," Flynn said. "It's been hard."

"You're sure as hell beat up, Mr. Flynn. Or Colonel Flynn. I'm not sure what to call you."

"Just plain Flynn will do." He gestured toward Mac, who was hunched up in his chair like either a scared possum or a coiled rattler, take your pick. General Dickerson would never guess that this was a man who had played polo with human heads, or at least was willing to. "We're just a couple of cops from Texas, but we've gotten ourselves into a heap of trouble."

"A heap of it," Mac said.

"We need your help, sir. There is a flying disk—an alien craft—that is going to kill us if we don't shoot it down. Basically."

Surprise widened Dickerson's eyes, followed by a wary narrowing. "Are you nuts? How did you get in here?"

"Don't even go there, General, please. There just isn't time. I've had bodies autopsied in your facility here. I've incinerated them in the burn room. That airman you lost the other week—that was on my watch, I'm sorry to

say.”

“The need-to-know barriers are so high, I just didn’t know where to go with this when I was told you were coming.”

“We’ve got to cross those barriers. Officer Terrell and I have been working on this for a while. We’re trying to clean out a nest of rogue aliens without panicking the public. And we’ve gotten ourselves into a pickle. According to our counterparts in the alien police force, the leader of this criminal enterprise is a real psychopath. He’s aggressive as hell. Very frankly, General, it’s a battle to the death, and we’re losing.”

As if to himself alone, General Dickerson nodded. He closed his eyes. “I think you probably shouldn’t have told me a lot of that.”

“I need help. From you. Now.”

“What can I do?”

“You have a disk. We need to see it.”

“That might be hard.”

“If you stall for even a minute more, I’ll have you up on charges of high treason.”

The general held up his hands. “I’m not stalling. It’s just that we don’t have it here. I’m going to send you to another facility. We only have a little bit of this still here at Wright-Pat. Air Materiel does metallurgical and functional analysis, and we have the exobiology section you’ve apparently dealt with. But operations are conducted from another base entirely. You’ve probably never heard of it. Deer Island.”

Flynn gave no sign of the effect that name had on him. “No,” he said carefully. “We have not.”

“I’m going to send you there to meet Colonel Adam Caruthers and his team. It’s possible that they can help you in some way, but I can’t tell you that, because I don’t actually know what they do. Just that this is their baby. When the public says they see jets chasing flying saucers, those are the

colonel's boys.”

“Can they shoot one down?”

“Again, I’m not concealing anything from you when I say I don’t know. I’m not need-to-know on that information.”

“It’s dangerous for us to travel. Very dangerous.”

“It’s the only facility of its kind in the world.”

“Where is it?” Mac asked.

“Deer Island is in Long Island Sound.”

Mac started to talk, but Flynn motioned him to silence.

The general offered transport, but Flynn thought they were safer sticking to the crowded airlines.

On the way back to Dayton International, they stopped at a Target and bought civilian clothes. As autumn deepened, it was getting colder, so they got jackets as well as jeans and sneakers, and Flynn bought himself a baseball cap to cover his wounds.

In the rental car, Mac said, “I’m not a cop, and I’ll never be a cop.”

“Sure you are. You’re a cop, and a good one.”

“I don’t have that gene, I’m sorry.”

“I’ve read your DEA file. You’re as good an undercover as they’ve got.”

They rode on, Mac saying nothing further.

“Anyway, I know what you really do. I know you make a little on the side, but most in your sort of business do. It’s not blood money—that’s what’s important. I also know that you’re not rich like you make out. There is no Lamborghini in Marfa, for example. And your brother was no damn good and that broke your heart, and you didn’t screw Cissy Greene, but you did protect her from a very abusive father until she figured out how to fend for herself. I know you, Mac.”

“Aw, shit.”

“And I’m proud to.”

They flew in another blessedly jam-packed jet from Dayton to LaGuardia Airport in New York. On the flight, Flynn reflected on Deer Island. It had started out as a biological warfare research facility, but obviously its mission had expanded to include a major alien research center.

They had a layover at LaGuardia, and ate a quick meal at a Five Guys burger stop.

“I’m still bone tired,” Mac said, biting into his hamburger. “Feel like I didn’t sleep a wink.”

“You could go into the city, stay there until it’s safe to return home. Probably be okay holed up in a big hotel.”

“While you go in harm’s way alone?”

Flynn nodded.

“Nothing stops you. Nothing slows you down, even.”

“I need to get this bastard.”

“Mano a mano ain’t gonna cut it, my friend. You need an army of tough sonembitches who know how to work close.”

“When we are close, we are going to need a master sniper. As you know.”

“I’m not gonna get that seam. Nobody is.”

“Maybe not.”

“Definitely not. You don’t need a sniper. Not a human one, anyway.”

“Not entirely.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Maybe nothing. We’ll see.”

Mac knew Flynn too well to continue to question him. But after a moment, Flynn decided to say a little more. “Mac, I need to ask you something and tell you something.”

Mac raised his eyebrows.

“Have you recently had a headache? Bad, but it faded almost immediately?”

“I don’t have headaches.”

“Because I think I know how these implants go in. When I was leaving the job I did in Pennsylvania—it was a good haul, I got four dead—I got this fierce headache.” He paused, remembering the confident Flynn of those days. The great alien hunter. On that night, he’d actually thought that he cleaned up the problem. “Anyway, as I was driving out, I felt a terrific pain that started in the top of my head and radiated down into my face and neck. It was so bad, I thought I was having some kind of stroke. But then, just like that, it was gone. I think that’s when the implants went in, right under the skin and through the skull without leaving a mark. I think that’s how it feels. So have you had a headache recently?”

Mac leaned back and closed his eyes and thought. “No. Definitely not.”

“If you do, tell me.”

“I sure as hell will. I’m gonna go apeshit if I get something like that in me.”

“We can get them out. I’m living proof.” He thought of the objects racing back and forth in endless, ever-changing search grids, hunting him down.

They took a commuter flight up to Bridgeport. The moment they disembarked and entered the terminal, a tall, grim-faced man appeared, walking toward them. He was jammed into a dark business suit, his build and bearing broadcasting not only military, but elite military. He looked like a Delta Force operator crammed into civvies he didn’t really know how to wear.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “please come with me.” He turned and walked swiftly toward an alarmed door marked NO ADMITTANCE. He pressed a code into the keypad, opened the door, and stepped aside.

This was airport operations, where pilots checked in, filed their plans, then went out to their aircraft. The man led them into the supervisor’s office, which was small and windowless, with three metal chairs and a cluttered

desk. There was a picture of Governor Wade on the wall, a flight school diploma, and another picture of a man shaking the hand of what appeared to be a foreign dignitary.

“We’re going to borrow Mr. Reilly’s office for a few minutes, gentlemen. Please sit down.”

Flynn and Mac sat on two of the steel chairs. Their host, if he could be so described, took the third.

“I’m Adam Caruthers,” he said. “This is the first time in the history of this program that any outsiders have been handed off to me. May I see your identification?”

“Have you been briefed?”

He held out his hand.

Flynn reflected that secret bureaucracy was a labyrinth, full of dead ends and empty spaces. The empty spaces were between the ears of the bureaucrats.

“Colonel, I think you have been briefed, and therefore you know perfectly well that I’m not carrying ID at present, and you know why. Also, I don’t think you’re at the top of your chain of command, so I would suggest that you cease diverting from the order you have received and carry it out.”

Caruthers’s eyes stayed hard. Real hard. “Gentlemen, I’m going to tell you the real reason for the extreme secrecy we maintain.”

“We know the reason.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Do tell.”

“There are all kinds of aliens out there, and a lot of them do a lot of strange things, not just the ones we’re having trouble with. Like abducting people out of their homes, and the air force can’t do a thing about it.”

“That’s actually pretty accurate. It’s illegal activity, and we can’t enforce against it. As I understand it, you’re a specialized policeman who deals with matters like this, so maybe you can help us.”

Flynn said, “I deal with aliens who steal people and murder them, and do worse.”

“The ones we have had interaction with generally return people.”

“Fortunately, the group we’re dealing with is small. If we can eradicate them now, their numbers won’t grow. Like getting rid of a cancer while it’s still small.”

“I thought cops put bad guys in jail.”

Flynn said nothing.

“Perhaps we’d better go over to the island, Flynn. May I call you Flynn?”

“That’s my name.”

They walked down a corridor to the back of the terminal building. A short distance away, Flynn saw a helicopter sitting on a pad.

“Recognize that?” he said to Mac.

“I sure do.”

It was the same type of ultra-sophisticated chopper Morris had used during their first encounter, at Lake Travis near Austin. Back in the good old days, before he had the disk.

“I’m surprised that you recognize it,” Caruthers said. “It’s still a secret technology.”

“Except it’s sitting here on a helipad at a public airport, plus one was used against us by the alien we’re tracking. It happened last year outside of Austin.”

“The one that was stolen.”

“And destroyed, because we destroyed it.”

They got into the chopper. The pilot, wearing a black uniform with double lightning strikes on its patch, wore his visor closed. Normal enough, but Flynn would have preferred it to be open. As the engine whined into life, Flynn’s instincts were starting to alarm.

Inside the chopper, there was almost no sound. Unlike every other

helicopter he had flown in, this one's wing didn't pulsate, but rather moved smoothly. Therefore there was no characteristic chopping sound, but only a steady, high-pitched whine and the whistle of wind blowing past the cockpit canopy. The engine was entirely silent.

As Deer Island slowly emerged out of the haze of the autumn afternoon, Flynn examined the ground. The place seemed surprisingly familiar, and he wondered at once if he'd been here, but had his memory of it erased. There were hypnosis techniques that could do that.

He memorized the layout of the island, noting three clusters of buildings: one to the north that consisted of four structures, one to the south with two, and a more substantial main building.

They circled the main building, then dropped down onto a helipad across the narrow road that passed in front of it.

"We have a bit of a ride to our end of the island," Caruthers said. "We've been here only a few months. Our operation back at Wright-Pat was a good bit larger, but I guess downsizing's pretty much the order of the day."

"And Biology's at the other end?"

"Yes."

"Did you know Dan Miller?"

"Guy who got killed by those drifters in his woods? I knew of him."

"What did he do?"

"No idea."

They arrived at a cart shed and took an electric golf cart around the headquarters building.

The facility was, to be honest, a dump.

Caruthers seemed to read their reactions, or expect them. "Sorry we're not more impressive," he said. "I don't know about bio, but the hardware program has been in a holding pattern for years. Most of our contact is with the aliens popularly known as the grays. Contact, actually, is a bit of a joke.

It's hardly that. I think you'll find that alien species aren't exactly forthcoming about much of anything. They haven't told us word one about our disk, and we've had it for more than fifty years."

"We have the same problem. Our guys won't detail one of our own disks to help us. Our hope is that their disks work on the same principle as the one you have, and we can learn something from it, or even use it."

They arrived at a building even less impressive than the main structure. There was rust; there was flaking paint. Air conditioners jutted out of a couple of the windows. Beside the door was stenciled a number, 3-3-2.

"Where's Building 3-3-3?"

"That's Biology. South end of the island."

Flynn got down from the cart. He'd known the answer to his question before Caruthers said a word.

He felt a quiet sense of triumph, but instantly suppressed it. The job wasn't finished yet. One thing had changed, though, which was that he now—just possibly—had a chance to win this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CARUTHERS USHERED them into a conference room. There were four men here: two in air force fatigues, one in a polo shirt, and one in a weathered suit.

“Gentlemen,” Caruthers said, “before we begin—” He cleared his throat uneasily. “Before we begin, I’d like to ask you to lay your weapons on the table.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

He smiled at his colleagues. “As you say. Gentlemen, these are our exoengineers. Officers Flynn and Terrell are working with a police force from a planet our exobiologists at Area Fifty-One have named Aeon. Now, here in our unit, we’re not familiar with this specific planet. But hopefully we do have some possible avenues of help for you.”

“I’m Dr. Evans,” the older man said. “These are my colleagues, Richard Dawkins and Martin Reese. Dr. Reese, will you begin?”

“Mr. Carroll, if I understand the briefing paper we’ve received, you have one of the most unique problems in the history of human–alien contact.”

“There are lives being lost, if that’s what you mean. We’re dealing with a murderous psychopath who has a disk, and we can’t get near the damn thing. We need to change that.”

“This liaison officer from this other planet—Aeon— isn’t being helpful— I mean, aside from not giving you a disk?”

“She’s answered some important questions, but no, in the end, she hasn’t been effective in assisting us to deal with this criminal.”

Dr. Evans said, “I find this whole thing amazing. You actually achieve developed, ongoing contact with beings from another planet, and it’s cops and robbers? Tell me this, what do they do? What’s the crime?”

“Wait, let’s back up just a minute. You make it sound like contact is rare.”

“It’s very rare. A few civilians. Some of them have published books, which you can read. A couple of politicians. Eisenhower, but he couldn’t make any sense of what happened.”

“And that’s it? That’s the whole story?”

“The whole story would take me a year just to begin. Suffice it to say that we started out by shooting at the first groups we encountered, and we should never, ever have done that. Of course, that’s a major secret.”

“I’m not concerned about your secrets. My only interest is getting help downing a disk that’s causing a lot of problems.”

Evans said, “Let’s roll the film, Colonel.”

Colonel Caruthers opened a laptop and a small projector, connected them, and turned out the lights.

A moment later, Flynn found himself looking at gun-camera footage. Old-fashioned tracers crossed the sky, moving toward what appeared to be a bouncing searchlight beam. Then blackness. The film ended.

“What happened?”

“This was one of our first shoot-down attempts. The plane came down filled with thousands of tiny holes. The pilot disappeared.”

“The gun-camera footage was intact?”

“This strip was intact.”

“This next strip is from the gun camera on the Sabre Jet of a pilot called Milton Torres. It’s from 1957. Take a look.”

The black-and-white gun-camera footage flickered and jumped. Something flashed past. A young male voice said, “Target sighted.” The sky whirled, clouds racing past. A disk appeared. It was difficult to estimate size, but the great, gleaming thing appeared to be huge, hundreds of times the size of Morris’s disk. It was also far more sophisticated, morphing and changing, almost as if it were a liquid. The voice resumed. “Target acquired.” A pause. A buzzer sounded. “Target lock. Target lock. Commencing firing procedure. Missiles armed. Preparing—” The object disappeared. A faint, under-the-breath comment: “Oh, shit.” Then, “Target lost. No target. Firing sequence abort. Abort.” Then another voice, “Return to base, FF245.”

The image flickered and was gone.

Dr. Reese said, “In 1947, General Curtis LeMay convinced President Truman to go to war with the aliens. Any and all aliens who showed up. Between 1947 and 1957, when we called a halt to the shooting, we lost a hundred and fifty-eight pilots and an even larger number of aircraft. During the Korean War, we lost more pilots and aircraft in our secret war here at home than we did over the Korean Peninsula.”

As Dr. Reese spoke in his precise, dry voice, Flynn grew increasingly aware of the fact that he wasn’t dealing here with the dynamic military engineering operation he had hoped to find.

“Right now, I have a man and his family out in Menard who are in imminent danger of being kidnapped and killed. I am looking at an entire town burned to the ground a few nights ago.” He gestured toward Mac. “This man has lost everything that mattered to him, burned out. I have lost my wife. Now, I am not dealing with some brilliant, huge civilization like I think you are. The grays. I am dealing with biorobots who are more like viral particles or a disease vector. They are controlled by a psychopathic alien. As far as I

understand it, they have just the one disk, and it's not the best. Potentially, they're vulnerable. What I am trying to do here is find a way to shoot down that disk."

Evans stood up. "I thought that's what this would be about. We've failed in that department. Your mission is futile."

Rage flared in Flynn's guts. He fought it and nearly lost, but finally forced himself not to deck Evans. Still, his mind turned to Eddie out there on the empty Texas plains with his new family, and to Mac, a helpless, proud rooster who would crow defiance to his last breath, and to all the victims—the cases that haunted a good cop, the ones where justice hung suspended.

When he spoke, his voice was mild. "We're not done, Mr. Evans, so I suggest you sit back down."

They had all been getting up. None of them stopped. They began to move toward the door. They'd done as ordered. Now it was time to escape the pain.

"Because I could tell the world about you people and your failure. There's nobody powerful enough to stop me."

Evans turned his liquid, sorrowful eyes on him. "We can get a kill order, you know. We can do that."

"Am I killable, do you think?" He brought his gun out so quickly that their eyes flickered. He slipped it back into his belt as smoothly as if it were silk.

"Tell you what," Caruthers said to his colleagues, "why don't we take them down? Let them see."

"See what?"

"The disk, Flynn. Maybe looking it over would be useful to you."

Now, this was better. This was what he'd come for. "Sure, let's have a look."

"All right, but first I have to insist that you leave the weapons behind. I can't take you into a sensitive facility like that when you're armed and we

aren't. If something walked out of there, it'd be my ass."

"You are armed, Colonel, speaking of your ass. You're wearing a compact pistol in an SOB holster. So don't tell me you aren't armed. Plus, Dr. Evans has what looks like a Police Special in the right-side pocket of his pants."

Silence fell, broken after a long moment by Evans. "He's good."

"They say that," Caruthers commented. Then, to Flynn, "I still can't let you go down there armed."

"I'm not going to draw on you down there or anywhere else."

"I don't know that. If you want to do this, there's no choice. I'm sorry."

Flynn glanced at Mac, then took out his pistol and laid it on the table. Mac did the same.

They followed Caruthers and Evans back into the corridor, then down a steel stairway into a basement.

"There's an elevator."

Flynn stopped. "An elevator? How deep are we going?"

"It's a couple of stories."

"I don't think this is a good idea," Mac said.

Flynn said, "If the things have any vulnerability, we might see it. If their disk has the seam that Geri talked about. If you could see it, see exactly where it was—"

"I can tell you right now that you're not going to find any seams on this thing. Anyway, it was built by the grays, not by your people. What if it's completely different?"

"Let's take a look."

The black door of the elevator had a glass porthole in it, and when it opened, there was a hiss of escaping air, which told Flynn immediately that this was a deep shaft, more than a couple of stories.

As the door slid open, it revealed a space little bigger than a closet. There

was enough room for only three people, and the three scientists went down first. From the sound of the lift and the amount of time involved, Flynn thought it was a drop of fifteen hundred feet. Unusual on an island, given that the water table was going to be at sea level. To build whatever was down there would have taken a lot of money and engineering skill. A lot.

The elevator returned again. Mac said, "Are you sure about this, Flynn?"

"No."

"Then I don't think we should do it."

Flynn did not reply, but he stepped into the elevator. After a moment, the much more hesitant Mac followed. The elevator whined softly as it dropped.

"Why so deep?" Flynn asked.

"I don't know," Caruthers said.

Flynn smiled. "Of course you do."

Caruthers shook his head. "You're a real paranoid, aren't you?"

"In our line of work, if you're not paranoid, you're not sane."

The elevator door opened onto a concrete corridor, dimly lit by old-fashioned incandescent bulbs in hanging metal fixtures. As they walked down the hallway, Flynn could hear a distant sound of flowing water, and the deep, throbbing hum of powerful pumps. They were far below the water table, and it must take a great deal to keep the ocean out of this place.

"Do you have any fail-safes?"

"In what sense?"

"The pumps. If they go down, this place floods, and fast."

"They can't fail."

"They're mighty durable, then. What about the power?"

"There's a reactor."

A reactor wasn't going to be used to power some godforsaken has-been program. Yet again, the mystery deepened.

They came to a wide steel rolling door. Caruthers punched a code into a

keypad beside it, and the door began to rise. Caruthers had made no effort to conceal which keys he pressed, and Flynn took note of them. He also noted that he was once again being underestimated. Always a useful bit of information to store away.

And then he saw it. Its skin was a deep silver, as if a thin layer of diamond covered the metal. It hung in the air, an oval so perfect that it was impossible to turn away from its beauty. He felt its life, as if it had a heart and a mind, as if it were a living creature.

“Flynn ... my God.”

The three scientists stood in a group, small beneath the bulk of the thing. It floated in absolute silence. In the center of its lower surface there glowed a single red light, and he thought it was an eye, and that it was looking into his soul.

“This was built by the grays,” Evans said, “or given life by them.”

“It’s nothing like what we’ve seen,” Flynn said. “This is like a—I don’t know—”

“A sacred object,” Caruthers said.

“A sacred being,” Flynn said.

Richard Dawkins said, “I’m the resident metallurgist. Let’s begin with the outer skin.” He gestured. “Come on over—it doesn’t bite.”

“We need to see under it,” Flynn said.

Mac strode over to it and put his hand on it, whereupon it folded inward like the wall of a tent. He drew his hand away and looked at it, leaning back. Then he touched it again, running his finger along it.

“It’s constructed like a kite,” Dawkins said. “The frame is balsa, the metal is basically tungsten, we think. It’s a tissue just a few hundredths of an inch thick. Interesting that it’s also the strongest substance known to man.”

Flynn was not interested in the metal. He bent down and went under it. In its center was a red light, glowing softly. “Does it work?”

“We’re not sure.”

“Mac, come down here.”

Mac crawled closer. “Doesn’t anything scare you?”

“Not this. Look along this surface—use those eyes of yours. See if you can spot a seam.”

They lay on their backs. Flynn pulled out his pocket LED flashlight and shone it along the surface. “See anything?”

“It’s featureless.”

“Take your time.”

“If this is a different model—”

“Keep looking.”

“Is it alive?”

Flynn moved the light slowly along the surface.

“Flynn, this isn’t a machine, this is a creature.”

“Keep looking.”

Evans called to them. “You guys still with us?” He sounded oddly far away.

“Wait,” Mac said, “roll the light back.”

Flynn moved the beam slightly.

“There. Got it.”

Flynn held the beam steady. “I don’t see a thing.”

“It’s there.” He reached up, extended a finger, then touched it. “See it now?”

There was the faintest indentation stretching away from Mac’s index finger, a line so narrow that Flynn wouldn’t have seen it on his own, not even if he’d had his nose up against the surface of the disk.

“That is finely machined,” he said. “Beautiful.”

Mac flattened himself back down onto the floor and stared up at the surface. “Man, I’m two feet away, and now I can’t see it at all. Shine your

light again.”

It took them a full minute of searching to realize the truth. “It’s gone,” Mac said. “Disappeared as soon as I touched it.”

“You’re sure it’s gone?”

“I’m sure.”

They backed out. “There’s a seam, all right,” Flynn said, “but it disappeared when we touched it.”

“We hadn’t detected it before. A major error.”

“What about controls and propulsion. How does it work?”

“Propulsion is my department,” Reese said. “Come on, we’ll need to enter the craft.”

As he stepped closer, it rose silently a few feet.

“Is it alive?” Flynn asked. “It feels alive.”

“There’s something going on here that’s real hard to understand. Do you believe in the soul?”

“I don’t know.”

“You work with the grays, you work with the soul.” He nodded toward the disk. “It has a consciousness. For want of a better word, we call it a soul.” He raised an arm, and a dark round hole appeared in its side, about midway along the curve of the bottom. “We know that approaching it like this works, but we don’t know why,” he said. “We’ve never been able to find any device or system inside that would account for doors appearing—or seams disappearing, for that matter. Not only that, but you can walk up to it like this from any angle, and an opening will always appear right in front of you as soon as you gesture like I did.”

Leaning down, he approached it, then stood up so that his head and shoulders were inside. “We call this a penetration,” he said. “It’s not like entering a plane—believe me.”

“Which one of us stays here?” Flynn asked Mac. “Your call.”

“That will be me.”

Flynn leaned down and joined Reese under the thing. As he did, the nature of the air around him seemed to change. It became subtly heavier. A silence fell, and it was a familiar one. When he was hunting aliens in a forest and came into a silence like this, he knew they were near.

He saw around him a gray, featureless exterior, like the inside of a tent. “There’s no room,” he said as he looked up. Reese’s body filled the hatch.

“Just stand up. It’ll open for you.”

He did as instructed. Instead of his head touching the metal of the fuselage, he felt a warmth and a sort of fluctuation in pressure. Then he was face-to-face with Reese, the top half of his body inside the craft.

The interior air was warm and dry. There was a soft rose light that seemed to penetrate everywhere. Before them, he could see a huge ring made of white metal. Inside it was another ring made of black metal. They were separated by a closely packed row of silver ball bearings. Hanging in midair in the center of it and about three feet above it, was a crystal. It was an eight-sided figure, rose colored like the light that filled the space.

“What happens is that these two circles counterrotate. We know that. But what we don’t know is what powers them and why the counterrotation is so effective in driving the thing.”

The seam had to be between the inner and outer rings, so when they were rotating, it wasn’t going to disappear.

“Has anybody ever flown one?”

“No.”

“Flown in one, then?”

“Lots of people, I would think. A reading of the abductee literature would lead you to assume so.”

Flynn reached over and touched the outer metal ring. He grasped it and tried to make it turn.

“Not gonna happen. But we do know something about its operation. We’ve recorded the sound of spinning disks. Armed with knowledge of how this functions, and its size, we’ve determined that it would need to rotate at something on the order of a hundred sixty thousand revolutions per minute to emit a sound like that.”

“But you can’t make it turn?”

“We can’t find a power source. The two rings are oppositely polarized permanent magnets, but nothing we’ve done—feeding them powerful electric currents, attempting to heat or cool them, bombarding them with gamma rays—none of it has caused a single response. We have clocked disks just like this moving through the atmosphere at upwards of a hundred thousand miles an hour, but not leaving a sonic boom.”

“Where did you get this thing?”

“Caruthers knows more about that. Adam, can you hear us?”

From below, Caruthers’s voice drifted faintly up. He sounded as if he were a hundred yards away at least, and speaking softly. “This was found on the Plain of San Augustin in New Mexico. There were three extraterrestrial biological entities inside. All dead. Found in 1949.”

“What about controls?”

Reese said, “That’s Dawkins’s department. He’ll take you a little deeper.”

Before Flynn could respond, Reese had dropped out and Dawkins appeared and said, “Now, what will happen is, if you move straight up—push yourself higher—you’ll find that the thing morphs as you penetrate more deeply. Stay with me, though, because you can get lost in here, and I have to warn you, that’s happened.”

“Get lost? How? Where?”

“We don’t know, but some of the early explorers never came out. After a while, as I understand it, you could smell their decaying bodies. They’re dead in here somewhere. We don’t know where. Let’s go. Keep standing, stay

within sight of me.”

Flynn found himself in a small room that contained three bucket seats and three consoles. There were no readouts and no controls, just indentations with small holes in them. The indentations were the shape and size of children’s hands, but designed for six fingers.

“You can sit down.”

“No, I can’t.”

“Do it. The seat will change to fit you.”

He could barely maneuver, humped over in the small space.

“Act like it’s all your size, and it will be. Go ahead.”

He straightened up, and the room did indeed grow larger, the seats along with it. When he sat in one, the console before him expanded, too.

“Now put your fingers in the controls.”

As he did so, they morphed into five-fingered control surfaces. They fit his hands so precisely that it felt as if they had been made just for him—which, in a sense, they had.

“This is just incredible.”

“We don’t understand any of it. Look down.”

When he did so, the floor beneath him became clear, and he could see down to the crystal and the ring below it, what looked like a distance of at least fifty feet, and yet he had come up only a few feet to reach this control room.

“What has happened is that the interior of the craft expanded to fit us. But on the outside, your friend isn’t going to see a single change.”

“They’re a million years ahead of us.”

“Or they simply have better minds.”

He thought of the brutality and carnage he had witnessed, and could not reconcile them to the magnificent, elegant technology he was seeing here. Maybe the grays had better minds. Not Aeon.

“Could there be tramps? Thieves who could steal things like this? Alien thieves who maybe wouldn’t be able to work them all that well? Because what I’m dealing with is brutal and mean. My aliens sure as hell don’t square with anything as sophisticated and beautiful as this. Whoever created this thing touched the mind of God.”

Dawkins smiled gently. “Or maybe another mind, also magnificent, but not so sweet.”

As soon as Flynn rose from the chair, the distance down to the ring became short again.

“You go first, Flynn. Don’t want to get you lost.”

When Flynn looked down again, he could now see the opening they had come through, and below it the concrete floor not four feet underneath.

“Careful, now—everyone who’s disappeared in here has been on their way out.”

Flynn went to the edge of the opening and dropped his feet out.

“Reach back, please take my hand.”

Flynn felt Dawkins’s thin hand in his own. He dropped down, the scientist coming immediately behind him.

Dawkins stood with his head bowed, his face sheened with sweat. “That’s hard,” he said.

“I’m glad you made it out,” Evans said.

Flynn fought back any sign of the bitter disappointment he was feeling. The truth was, though, that this entire journey had been a waste of effort, and from the way these people were acting, dangerous on a whole lot of different levels.

It was time to cut and run. Except for one problem. “Where’s Mac?”

“He and Evans went up to the commissary a couple of hours ago, to eat and get you checked in to visitor quarters.”

“What are you talking about?”

Dawkins laughed a little. “That’s another reality in there, with a different time. I once worked in there for a day, trying to find some kind of connection between the control panels and the motor. When I came down, four weeks had passed, and two men had disappeared while searching for me.” He bowed his head and was silent for a moment. Then he said in a voice choked with pain. “One of them was my brother. We’re twins.” Then, lower, full of more trembling emotion, “We know he died. He’s one of the ones we could smell.”

The thought came to Flynn that they were like bugs trapped behind the mystery of a glass window, a mystery they could never hope to defeat and never hope to understand. Impossible not because they didn’t have the information, but because they didn’t have the raw brain capacity. Nothing could tell a fly what glass was. Nothing could tell a human being what this disk was.

“Are we finished, then?”

“Sure, Flynn. If you’re done. Any more questions?”

“No more. Not now.” But there was one. He’d save it for later, though, at just the right moment, or maybe by then there would be no point, and he would never ask it at all.

He had not gotten very far here. Not far at all. In fact, all his visit had done was confirm his worst fear, which was that the disks were so far beyond human understanding that there was no hope. If so, then Morris would soon rule this world of Earth. It would be free no more, a slave planet given over to whatever its master chose to do with it.

Fifty years after Cortés conquered Mexico, only one out of ten of the indigenous people were left alive. If Flynn’s battle failed, he knew that humanity would fare even worse. Our species would be lost to the egomaniacal lusts of a psychopath.

He was a humble man. He’d never thought of himself as being

particularly important, but in this moment, mankind's future was clearly his to win or lose. And not more than a couple of hundred people on the whole planet, if that, even knew his name.

Was he up to this?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FLYNN SWALLOWED the acid of desperation back into his churning guts. He did not see how he could win this thing, not against technology so advanced that it seemed more like magic than like science. Was Morris's disk equally advanced, a machine that might as well be a living thing? How could anybody ever damage a craft like that with a little chunk of lead, even if they did hit a seam?

On the way back to the main building, Flynn noticed that Mac was now quiet and withdrawn.

"Geri said we're dealing with an old, primitive device—remember that."

"The seam just disappeared. Then a door opens like some kind of magic is going on. I don't know, man—no matter how primitive it is, maybe it's not primitive enough for a jerk with a gun."

When they returned to the main building and went inside, Flynn had an incredibly powerful sense of *déjà vu*. This hallway—wide with a black linoleum floor polished to a high gloss, its rows of office doors, each one locked like a safe—was as familiar to him as his own house in Menard. And yet, his mind was telling him he had never been here before.

As they approached the commissary, the smell of the food was incredibly familiar, sending a dagger of memory right through him. Not that it was good food—it was hardly that—it was just damn familiar.

He was certain now that he'd been subjected to hypnosis so that he wouldn't think about this place. It was a security measure. Too bad it hadn't helped Dr. Miller.

Frankly, he was excited about taking Mac to Bio. His friend had found a seam that was almost microscopic. As he was, the man had what was called exquisite vision. When they were kids, he'd been able to pick out the moons of Jupiter, not to mention see a tree rat crossing a wire at night and blow it to kingdom come at a distance of a couple of hundred yards. And leave the wire untouched.

"This is not food," Mac said. They were passing down the steam table in the commissary.

"I believe those are chicken wings," Evans said.

"From what planet?"

Flynn remembered what he'd eaten the last time he was here. In the hope that reenactment would release more memory, he got the same meal again, a quarter chicken, green beans, baked potato, and pineapple yogurt for dessert. He, Caruthers, Evans, and Mac sat together. The others had gone to a table of their own.

"I enjoyed my time here," he said. "When I was working with Dr. Miller." Mac gave him a sharp look, but the other two didn't react. It wasn't a good sign, but he continued anyway. "I thought maybe we could go down to the Biology section and have a look around."

Both Caruthers and Evans stopped eating.

"I mean, I was there. That's where my physical enhancement was done. I'd like to look the place over again."

Laughing, Evans said, "I think I need to consult Legal."

The cavalier reply made him so mad, it was all he could do not to reach across the table and splatter the guy's face against the far wall.

He put his anger firmly in a drawer and smiled. "Well," he said affably,

“that’s probably the best thing. On the other hand, I have a cop out there in Texas who could at any time get picked up and have his eyes cut out of his head, not to mention what will happen to his family. But you consult Legal. However, know this, all of you: If they die, I am liable to become very damn irrational, and that’s not going to be comfortable for you.”

He reached over and tapped Evans on the ear, moving so fast that the gesture couldn’t be seen by normal eyes.

Evans shot out of his chair and sprawled on the floor, holding his head and crying out.

The buzz of conversation in the room died away.

As Evans sputtered and gagged and struggled to his feet, Flynn stood up. “Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, is anybody here from the Biology unit?”

Nobody reacted. Here and there, people began leaving the room.

“I was there. Some of you probably worked with me.”

The trickle of people leaving became a flood.

“You did good,” he said. “I’m quite a piece of work, folks. Fastest gun in the West.” He drew the Bull and reholstered it. “Anybody see that? No?”

The flood surged toward the doors.

“Okay, folks, don’t have a heart attack—I’m harmless. At the moment.”

The only table still populated was theirs. A couple of security guards, one of them with a stun gun, stood in the doorway. Flynn returned to his seat. “I’d advise you to tell those guys not to make any sudden moves,” he said to Evans and Caruthers. “I don’t care for sudden moves. Frankly, you know what I do when I see childish bullshit like guards with Tasers? I just think to myself, ‘Bullshit. Empty, childish bullshit.’”

Flynn picked up his table knife and tossed it into the wall. There was a crash, the window above the point of impact cracked, and nothing could be seen of the knife except the hole where it had entered. He reached over and took Evans’s knife, and began doing surgery on his chicken.

“You people have been at this what—sixty, sixty-five years? And look at you, four guys nursing a piece of equipment you can’t even begin to understand. Where’s the massive scientific effort? Where’s the billion-dollar budget?”

“The parade’s gone by. Twenty, thirty years ago at Wright-Pat, it was a different story. Some of the best minds in the world worked on this. The best. For years and years and years, Flynn. And we learned basically nothing. We lost. Now we’re what’s left, four trudging bureaucrats protecting the secret of the ages.”

“I want to go to the Biology section. I want to meet the people who worked on me.”

“As I said—”

“Let’s roll. Right now.” Flynn stood up.

“You’re not cleared to go down there, Flynn,” Caruthers said.

“Then get me cleared!”

“You can be. No question. But we have to go through channels, and you know that.”

“Diana Glass cuts red tape like butter.”

“So call her,” Evans said. “Right now. The second she gets you cleared, off we go.”

Flynn said, “Give me a phone. I lost mine.”

“No cell coverage on the island. In any case, if classified matters are to be discussed, we need to go to my office and use the secure phone.”

Flynn followed Evans down a hallway and up two flights to the sort of small office that defined the reality of the middle-level bureaucrat in the federal system. There was a picture of the president on the wall, one of Evans with a high-ranking but nameless air force officer, and an engineering diploma from Ohio State. On the desk were two photographs of which Flynn could see only the backs. There was an in-box with a great deal of paperwork

in it and an equally busy out-box. For a man who had portrayed himself as basically a caretaker, he seemed to have a lot of work to do. But these days, when so much was done in digital media, the busy boxes could have been there just for show.

There were two telephones: one an old-style landline secure phone, the other a cheap wireless model. Flynn strode over to the secure phone and called Diana.

She said, "Complaint line."

"I'm laughing. Now I'm not. They're insisting that I need further clearance to go to Biology."

"I really don't know how to say this, but going down there could reduce your abilities. Put a level of awareness between you and your new skills that could affect your speed."

"What the hell are you saying?"

"It's dangerous for you to see your records—too much self-awareness could compromise your skills."

"I want to appeal to your superior officer."

"I have no superior officer."

"Sure you do."

"You can't appeal, and you can't know who he is or where he is or anything about him."

He hung up the phone.

Evans said, "You heard the same thing from her that we got in this command. Show you the disk, then show you the door."

Flynn spread his hands. "Okay, I lose. No contest."

Mac blinked, but said nothing.

They were due to be returned to the mainland at first light, in time to catch the dawn patrol commuter back to LaGuardia. From there, it was a nonstop to Dallas, then another commuter to Menard.

They were assigned two rooms in the small visiting quarters. Flynn had no further reason to spend his time talking to the locals, so he went to his billet and threw himself onto the bed. He assumed that there would be cameras and audio, so he did nothing to reveal his real intentions.

He closed his eyes and began mentally, and very carefully, reviewing the map of the island he'd made in his mind as they landed.

Mac followed him in. "What's the plan?"

"No plan, Mac. The long and short of it is, we busted out."

"So what happens next?"

He hated to lie to Mac, but right now, the two of them were certainly onstage. Caruthers was listening. His security team was listening. Diana was listening and probably whomever she worked for as well.

"We're due on the helipad at six sharp," he said. "From there, I think we need to go back to Menard."

"Menard? Why not Washington?"

"Because they've got their heads so far up their asses, they can see—"

"Oh, yeah, there is that."

"We need to do what we can to protect Eddie and his family. Just leaving Menard isn't enough to save them. If they even left."

"You think we're gonna die out there?"

He thought he was going to probably die, but not in Texas. If what he was about to do went wrong in any way, that was going to happen right here, tonight.

"We might as well get some sleep," he said.

Mac lingered. "Flynn, what was it like in that thing? I mean, that must have been amazing."

"What it was like is, we're never going to have anything remotely similar, not in our lifetimes or many lifetimes. As you move around inside, the entire interior of the thing changes, depending on what you want to do. It looks

about twelve feet high at the center, am I right?”

“Yeah, I’d say so.”

“When you first go in, you find yourself in the motor room. Counterrotating magnets, but we can’t make them turn. We don’t know exactly what they’re made of or what kind of power needs to be applied. Then, say, you want to go to the control room. You just stand up, and it kind of appears around you. Nothing morphs or changes—you’re just in another place. It’s the most incredible experience I’ve ever had. The control room is not complicated. Two chairs before consoles with nothing but a couple of handprints embedded in them. Little chairs, but sit in one and it fits you, just like that.”

“Put your hands in the handprints?”

“I did. Nothing happened. I felt like a monkey fooling around in a car. Not only did I have no idea how it worked, but I had no idea how even to *learn* to make it work.”

“A monkey could be trained to drive a car. It’d be hard, but it’s doable.”

“Maybe, but he’d never learn to fix a car, or why it runs, nothing like that.”

“Flynn, a fighter pilot can’t begin to understand his aircraft. He knows the general principles. That’s all. But I say again, he could be trained.”

“They’re telling me nobody knows how it works. They’ve had it for sixty years—more—and they haven’t gotten to square one. What’s worse, I can believe it. The thing is just amazing. And that feeling that we both had, that it was somehow alive—” He shook his head. There was nothing more to say.

“I gotta tell you, some asshole with a gun is not gonna pull down one of those things, no matter how much skill he has.”

“Remember, we’re not dealing with state of the art.”

Flynn offered no sign to Mac of what he intended to do, but, as always, his old friend sensed something. He probed a bit, but thankfully in the wrong

direction, asking him if there was any way to get the disk out of its containment.

“It’s hundreds of feet underground. Access tunnel’s filled in.”

Mac seemed to look into himself. Flynn waited, watching him as he sank deeper and deeper into the truth. He said, “We’ve lost.”

“Looks like it.”

“We’ll all move. We’ll run.”

Again, Flynn waited for him to realize what would actually happen if that scenario was played out.

“Goddamnit, Flynn!”

“I don’t have a choice, Mac. It’s me or it’s you and Eddie, and his little family. That baby, Mac.”

“You can’t throw yourself at this thing, Flynn.”

Flynn could not look at his friend. He said no more.

“I’ve never been a coward, Flynn. But I don’t see what purpose is served by us going back to Menard, especially you. You already told Eddie to get the hell out. He *said* he would get out immediately. If he didn’t, it’s his problem. If he went to New York, tell him to stay there. Buy him an apartment there or in London or anywhere. You can afford it. Me, I’ll live on the run. I’m good at that.”

“Morris can be satisfied.”

“Flynn, no.”

“What the hell else can I do?”

“No!”

“I’m gonna go back to Menard, and I’m gonna take it from there. But you’re right about New York. You stay there. Bury yourself in it. If Eddie’s there, you’ll have some company. When I come face-to-face with Morris, I’ll bargain for your lives.”

Mac stood up. “I’ve been mad at you a lotta times in my life. You’re a

person who's good at making people mad. I'd like to be mad at you now. But I'm gonna leave it. See if you start to make some sense in the morning. Because you're not making sense now."

"Mac—"

"No, don't talk. It is time to cut and run. Spend a little of that damn cash of yours to stay alive. Who knows, the longer you live, the more chance you have that Morris will slip up and give you the opening you don't have right now."

Flynn said nothing.

Mac left, slamming the door hard behind him. Flynn hated to see him go like that, but there was no choice. He stayed quiet, listening to the building. He'd already spotted all the visual surveillance. There was a good deal of it, typical of a facility that housed classified records and materials. Most of what was here had to do with biological warfare, though, not with the even more secret alien materials.

He turned out the light and then lay on his back in the dark again, waiting. He'd already planned his moves. He had a reasonable assurance that they would work. But care had to be taken. The least misstep, and this would all be over.

Before he made a move, he was going to need to figure out the cameras. While he was talking to Mac, he'd spotted both of them, fish-eye pinhole jobs—one in the back wall, one in the wall near the door. He could safely assume that the setup would be the same in all the rooms.

He was sure the surveillance team just saw a man who was waiting, hands behind his head, seemingly staring bleakly at the ceiling, wallowing in his defeat.

He noted that the edges of the two-square-foot ceiling tiles did not end above the closet door. Useful information. Because the roof was peaked and there were vents at each end, he knew that there was an attic above the tiles.

To reach it, he would need to go through the hatch at the far end of the corridor outside.

The drop out of one of the vents was survivable, but only barely. Somebody using that escape route would need to land exactly right to avoid a sprain or worse.

Still, it was doable. He could get out of this place without alerting security. But how would he manage to take Mac along with him? Without Mac, there was no point in going. In fact, leaving Mac behind would mean defeat.

It was time to test security. He got up off the bed, paused to open the closet and put his jacket in it. Leaving the closet door open, he strolled out of the room. There was a guard station beside the only stairway, manned by no fewer than three armed guards. Their careful eyes followed him as he crossed the hall and knocked on Mac's door.

“Want to take a walk?”

“Outside? Are you kidding?”

“Just down to the vending machines. Get a Coke.” He nodded, communicating necessity.

“Why not?”

As they walked down the hallway, one of the guards spoke into a walkie-talkie.

“Evening,” Flynn said as they stepped around the desk.

“You're restricted to the structure,” the guard lieutenant said.

“Not a problem. We're going to get some food.”

There was another guard station at the foot of the stairs. Three more guards, all now on their feet, all with their holsters open, their hands on their weapons.

Had he wished, Flynn could have taken their weapons and knocked them all cold before they could take a breath. Whoever had set these guards knew

it, too, because stations at both ends of the building were in sight of this one, meaning that anything he did to these men would be seen by six more pairs of eyes, and dealt with accordingly.

He knew exactly who had placed these guard stations in this way. The only person who knew enough about his skills to be able to thwart them.

“Hey, Diana,” he said, “you’ll be watching this little charade, so listen up. I’m gonna get a Coke and go to bed to cry my eyes out. Tomorrow morning I’m going to New York and I’m going to disappear. So this is good-bye, love.”

Until they entered the small space of the basement vending machine room, he said nothing more. There was a Pepsi machine, a water machine, and a machine dispensing microwavable food. A microwave on the chipped white counter nearby.

He bought a burrito and put it in the microwave and turned it on. The machine wasn’t so noisy as he had hoped, but it would have to do.

He spoke softly. “You willing to try it?” He waved his hands across his lips, indicating that Mac was to nod or shake his head.

Mac paused. His brows knitted. A question came into his face.

Flynn said, “Do a bedbug like when we were kids. Go out through the closet ceiling. We’ll be dealing with a forty-foot drop to the ground. Is that okay?”

Mac’s face, lips tight, eyes full of edge, said that he wasn’t at all sure.

“Me, neither,” Flynn said. The microwave turned off, and he added in a normal tone, “Like I said to Diana, I’ve decided to take your advice. Right now, I don’t have an implant, so the longer I wait, the more danger I’m in. Tomorrow morning, I’m going to start running while I still have the chance.”

Mac opened his arms and embraced him. “You oughta be in the movies,” he whispered.

“See you on the other side.”

Mac bought a Diet Pepsi, and they returned to the second floor.

The making of what they used to call a “bedbug” was a matter of getting in the bed and leaving it with the sheets arranged in such a way that a parent peeking into the room would—hopefully—think that it still contained a boy.

Would a subterfuge this simple actually work? Not for long, but hopefully for long enough.

To minimize the effectiveness of the cameras, he drew his blinds and turned out his lights. It would actually help a bit with the tiny nailhead units. You weren’t talking all that many pixels. The best of them used computers equipped with sophisticated algorithms to supply the data that the lenses would be missing. With just a few pixels to work with, a good system could provide crystal-clear images in full light, but only adequate ones in the dark.

He sat on the side of the bed and took off his socks. They would form the “head” of the bedbug. Leaving his shoes on the floor, he got under the blanket and sheet. In fact, he got under both the top and bottom sheets. More bulk for the bedbug. He turned on his side with his back facing into the room and pushed the sheets until they formed a long wad sufficient to lift the blanket. Then he slipped the socks onto the pillow in front of his face and went deep into the blanket, until all but the top of his head was covered.

He slid backwards out of the bed and down to the floor. Remaining low, he slid on his stomach into the closet. Then he rose up, pressing himself against the back wall.

There came a knock at the door. “Mr. Carroll?”

“Yeah.”

“Bed check.”

“Who’re you, the hall monitor?”

“Just doing my job, Mr. Carroll.”

“Okay, let me get some sleep, then. I’m not going anywhere.”

As he spoke, he reached up and slid one of the big ceiling tiles out of

place, Then he raised himself by gripping a girder with his fingers. The air in the attic was choking, full of dust and insulation, and the pulsing of an unusually complex ventilation system that, judging from all the electronically controlled flues, was capable of being sealed in an instant. Shades of the biological-warfare days.

Above the layers of insulation and massive equipment, a thick cable harness ran from one end of the building to the other.

Moving quickly, he found a supporting beam and climbed along it to the rear of the structure, knowing that a man of his weight would cause sounds below in this otherwise lightly framed building.

He reached the metal vent, which was two feet by two feet in size, as he had observed from outside the building. Feeling its edges, he determined that it wasn't wired, and was screwed into the building's frame with standard construction screws, which he removed with his pocketknife.

Behind him, there was the breath of a whisper.

"Guard came to my door," Flynn said.

"How deep is their security going to be?"

"On the way in, I identified a motion-sensor grid, but we can avoid it."

As he was working, he realized that he could see his shadow. Immediately, he dropped down, pulling Mac with him. He watched the beam of a flashlight play along the girders.

The light continued to explore the space for a time. Finally, there came the faint scrape of a hatch closing. Still, Flynn and Mac didn't move. Flynn waited a full minute, but nothing else happened.

He pulled out the vent and looked down at the drop.

Immediately below the vent was a window, the one at the end of the second-floor corridor. The sill was about an inch deep, just enough to enable a jumper to balance, assuming that he would be able to cling to the inch-deep upper ledge.

“Mac, what I’m going to do is lever myself out until I’m hanging from my forearms—then you’re going to climb down my back. You got that?”

“What about you?”

“I can take the fall.”

“You’re sure?”

“It’s just a guess. Now, move.”

Mac was lithe and as strong as twisted wire. Flynn felt him slide quickly across his back, then overhand himself until he was dangling from Flynn’s ankles. Then he let go, landing silently and efficiently.

Flynn lowered himself until his arms were stretched and his feet were about eight inches above the sill below. He dropped.

As his feet contacted the sill, he thrust his fingers hard against the upper window frame and pressed his body into the window itself. He was still in control of the descent, so he immediately dropped down, letting his feet slip off the sill and cutting the speed of his fall as much as he could by grabbing it as it passed eye level.

He hit the ground jarringly hard, rolled, then got to his feet and moved at once away from the building. A moment later, Mac followed him.

Darkness didn’t matter to security in places like this, not anymore. Security would certainly be able to see them, so speed was essential.

As they moved off, lights began turning on all over the building, including outside lights—bright ones, many of them.

Staying low and close to the miserable little shrubs that stood around the building, Flynn ran. Mac followed.

They blended with the shadows and were gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THEY HAD reached the shell road that led to the biology labs, and were trotting down it when Flynn heard the whine of electric vehicles. They darted off the road and into the scrub, but there was little cover. Anybody with infrared look-ahead or a starlight scope would spot them instantly, and Deer Island security would undoubtedly have both.

“Why are they doing this?”

“Something’s wrong.”

“What?”

“Flat on the ground, flat as you can be.”

Lying very still, protected by a slight indentation in the ground, they heard a sound nearby, a low grunting and snuffling.

“Russian boar?” Mac whispered. They were all over Texas.

“Not up here. Probably a feral—”

There was a sudden burst of very weird, very complex chattering.

An instant later, the lights of three electric carts flooded the area.

“Shit,” Mac whispered.

Their motors screaming, the carts shot straight at them—and flew over the indentation, missing Flynn and Mac by so little that they were washed in heat.

The moment they passed, Flynn leaped to his feet. In the glaring lights of

the fast-moving carts, he glimpsed what may have been a running figure, pale and humped.

Mac said, "Did you see that?"

"Barely."

"Muscular rear legs, short forelegs, hairless, with a long, whipping tail."

Mac's eyes were truly amazing. "Anything else?" Flynn asked him.

"That's not enough?"

"What about the face?"

"Not human at all. One of them looked back. The eyes were powdery green. They were rounded. Maybe a new form of alien."

"That's all we need."

Now that it was clear they weren't the objects of the hunt, Flynn and Mac went back to the road and headed toward the floodlights that surrounded the Biology section. They were still half a mile away, and as they approached it, Flynn left the road again. They proceeded into a slightly higher area, where they had a broader view of the facility.

Flynn could see that the fence was covered both by cameras and motion sensors. He said, "We're going to walk up to the front door and just knock. But first take a good look—what do you see?"

"Tracks in the sand inside the compound. Boots, also dog prints."

"What kind of dog?"

"Long, thin print." He glanced at Flynn.

"Which is why covert penetration won't work. Come on."

The road was set deeper, and when they were on it, they could see only the roofs of the facility floating above the glare of the lights.

As they moved closer, Flynn said, "We have somebody behind us, about sixty feet. Closing."

Mac began to walk faster.

"No, stay cool." In one smooth movement, he drew his gun and whirled,

landing in a crouch with his legs spread. Standing there frozen with fear, hands raised, and eyes practically bulging out of his head, was Evans.

“Mr. Evans, out for an evening stroll?” Flynn made the gun disappear.

“Gentlemen, may I approach?”

Flynn nodded.

“I’m here on behalf of your boss. She’s urging you not to go in there, and we concur.”

“She saw us from satellite?”

“Yes.”

He looked up and waved. The starry night looked back.

“We need to do this,” he said.

“We don’t control that facility.”

“Who does?”

“That’s unclear.”

“I was down there a few months ago.”

“I know it.”

“Who controlled it then?”

“We thought we did. We were working there. Dr. Miller worked on you.”

“Come down with us,” Flynn said. “Maybe you can help us get in.”

Evans shook his head—a short, sharp, decisive movement. There was no way he was going a step closer to that gate.

Flynn began walking. Mac hesitated, then caught up with him. “How dangerous is this?”

“We need to try.”

The gate was locked with a padlock on a hardened steel frame. The lock had no key and no combination.

Flynn called to Evans, who was still standing back in the road. “How does this work?”

“We can’t open it.”

Flynn said to Mac, “What we’re looking at here is an alien facility. I wonder if it has embassy status.”

“Okay, good. An alien facility that’s locked and doesn’t have a doorbell. So let’s just move on.”

“Mac, you have the vision of a buzzard. You need the vision of an eagle.” He did a quick draw and replace. “Whoever’s on the other side of that fence did this for me. I think it’s at least worth asking if they could help you.”

“Why don’t you go in there and get *your* eyes fixed up?”

“Come on, you start way further up on the bar. My vision is normal.”

Evans had left the area. The night wind rustled in the saw grass; a riot of stars looked down. On the distant horizon, a light rose and was gone—a car, perhaps, safe on a mainland road.

“Flynn, the only reason I’m still standing here is that I’m afraid to go back to the main building alone.”

“Makes sense.”

“If aliens killed Miller and took this place over, why in holy hell do you think they’ll help us?”

“Because that’s not what happened.”

“Sure plays out that way in my book.”

“Miller was working here with a human crew. I remember the place, and there were no aliens involved—not in what he was doing. The technology was alien, though, that’s for sure. Miller was killed and probably so were a lot of other people who were working in there. By Morris. No question in my mind.”

“So why are we here, if it’s abandoned?”

“It isn’t. The grays are in there.”

“The ones on kids’ lunchboxes?”

“You read up on the grays, you will find that they’re quite real, they’re very advanced, and they take a serious interest in Earth. I’m hoping they’re

mad as hell about what's happening, and they'll give us a lot more help than Aeon can. Basically, I'm hoping they have cops, too."

The wind rose again, scudding through the grass, moaning in the eaves of the old building.

"There's nothing out here but us and these floodlights, under which we are fools to be standing." He stopped, then held his hand up to shield his eyes from the glare of the floods. "Oh, shit." He pointed.

Just visible around the corner of the far end of the building was a figure. It came all the way around the corner. It had a black dog on a lead. This animal had a broad head, very unlike the dogs Mac had inherited from Morris. It was huge, and as black as night.

The two of them came closer, the man striding, the dog rippling with muscle and tension, its eyes never leaving them.

"Christ," Mac said under his breath. "See that?"

"What?"

"That guy's got seams, man. That's a—a—holy God, Flynn, it's the dog! The guy is just—look at him! The dog's running the show."

It wasn't a man. It wasn't biological at all. As it approached, Flynn could hear the hum and whine of motors. The dog, though, watched them with an intensity you see only in animal faces: the calm, cruel care of the predator.

The two of them came to the gate. They stopped. The artificial man stood motionless. The dog drew closer to the fence. It inhaled deeply of their scents, its nose pressed hard against the cyclone fencing. Flynn reached his hand out and felt the cool night air being sucked past his skin.

The dog backed up.

Flynn knew why the artificial man had been built—so that nothing would appear unusual from satellite.

The dog stared at the lock, which moved, clanking faintly as it did so. Without the slightest click, it opened and then slipped off the hasp. It turned

again and locked itself. The gate was now open.

“Why don’t they just send somebody real out here?”

“The grays are extremely secretive.”

“Flynn, *are* these the same grays you see painted on kids’ lunchboxes and those crazy books? Because that’s bull crap. I don’t care *what* Caruthers says.”

“I’ve never seen one in person, but yeah.”

“I’m not buying in to this, and I’m not going in there, either.”

“Fine.” Flynn opened the gate and stepped into the compound. The surface was the same as the surrounding landscape. The lights seemed even brighter, now that they were focused on the area.

The compound consisted of three buildings. The more imposing one, which wasn’t saying much, was the only one lit up from inside. The other buildings’ windows were dark.

“I’m going in,” Flynn said.

“Been nice knowing you, pal.”

With the dog shadowing him by inches, Flynn crossed the twelve-foot strip of land. “Either you come or you don’t.”

The main door was glass that had been painted black. This operation was being run on the cheap—or just made to look that way.

As he approached, he heard an elaborate series of clicks the complex locking system opened itself.

“Mac, you coming?”

“I can’t walk, man. I didn’t know I could be this scared.”

“You want to be carried?”

“Screw it.” Mac came up beside him. “This feels like the gate of hell or something. It’s radiating menace like heat.”

“I know it, and I don’t understand it, either.” He put his hand on the stainless-steel grip in the center of the glass door. “Just let’s push through it.”

Beside him, the dog made a faint sound, a growl. Flynn wondered again what he and Mac had seen out there in the scrub. Was it yet another species of alien? Security had been chasing it, or perhaps herding it, obviously keeping it away from the other facilities on the island. But why was that necessary?

“Man, I can’t handle this.”

“Nobody can.” He pulled the door open. He heard a hiss and a faint pop as the air pressure equalized. The place was not quite airlocked, but tight-sealed like the house Oltis had inhabited in Chicago.

“Look,” Mac said.

He was staring at the door of the nearest office. Beside it was a nameplate, MITCHELL, T. TRAFFIC COORDINATOR. Above the English-language strip were three more tags, all in different and entirely unrecognizable lettering. The door itself looked like something that belonged in a submarine—steel painted high-gloss gray, with hinges and a lip designed to withstand significant pressure from this direction.

“So there are three species besides us working in this facility. Plus, the hall can be pressure controlled.”

“Is Aeon represented?”

“I don’t think so.” He gestured toward the door’s multilingual nameplates. “None of that looks like their alphabet.”

“Here comes trouble.”

A man in a white medical coat was walking toward them, coming down the long hall. As he came closer and his face became clearer, for once even Flynn Carroll was surprised. This couldn’t be another trick of Morris’s, surely. But then what in hell was really going on here? As the man drew closer yet, and his identity became undeniable, Flynn just let his mind blank. His right arm was ready to move at lightning speed.

“Hi, Flynn. We were expecting you a little later. I’m afraid I’ve lost some

money in the office pool. You've done very well to get here this fast."

Standing before him was a man he now recognized as an old friend and comrade in arms, Dr. Dan Miller.

"Dan, you look a hell of a lot better than you did in that bog."

Miller smiled softly. "We had to strip me out of my former life. Evie'll be okay, though. She has—"

"The sheriff, I know. Who died in your place, Doctor?"

"A long story."

"If Morris didn't do it, why would he think it's you?"

"He did it, and we hope he was deceived."

Flynn didn't inquire any further. He decided to assume that no crime had been committed and leave it at that. He was just incredibly glad to see Dan here.

"So this is Friend Eddie," Dr. Miller continued.

"I'm Mac Terrell."

"Oh, the black sheep. Looks like we got Flynn's thinking a little bit off. I expected the other cop."

"Mac's the one with the skill we need," Flynn said. "I brought the right person."

"And what skill would that be?"

"He's got incredible vision. I want you to make it miraculous."

"May I know why?"

"We have a disk to shoot down."

"That's impossible."

"It isn't."

"Exactly how do you plan to go about it?"

No reason to take a risk here. Strict information control was called for. "I don't think you'd be need-to-know on that."

He shook his head. "As you wish."

Mac said, “If there’s all these alien species here, why won’t any of them just shoot Morris’s disk out of the sky?”

“Good question,” Flynn said.

Dan Miller said, “We’re going to have to go down into the red zone, guys. Mr. Terrell, you need to understand just how radically different this is going to be. We will not see aliens as you understand them, but we will see machines that are so advanced, they might as well be alive. Extremely advanced and far more intelligent than any human being. You will feel the power of their minds all around you. You will experience profound fear.”

“I’ve noticed that already.”

“A little of it. There’s a generator outside that cues brains to feel danger and fear. It keeps animals and people well away from the facility. What goes on down below will be much more disturbing.”

They reached the elevator’s large black door, reminiscent of the brutal barriers that sealed a supermax.

“Okay, through that door we’re going to be in a species-neutral atmosphere. There’s less carbon dioxide in it than we have, a little more oxygen, and a cluster of rare gases. We can breathe it, but it smells a bit odd and it will affect your sense of taste. It’s been designed so a maximum number of different species can use it.”

At a wave of Miller’s hand, the door opened to the complex interior, all of it strikingly familiar to Flynn, from the shimmering, powdery silver light to the blurred shapes and odd, twisted angles of the many different machines. In one direction, there was a pathway to what looked like infinity, in another, a black, twisted knot that was hard to look at without getting a headache. Stretching ahead was a catwalk over the main machine floor. There were three sets of rails at different levels—one in the right position for human hands. The catwalk hung ten feet above the floor of the facility. Below, there was a series of what appeared to be windows on the floor, each one a soft

square of equal size. Some were gleaming black, others gray and filled with shadows. Two looked out on vivid scenes. One displayed a rose granite building, with long rows of black windows. The other revealed a path in a rich jungle scene. There were huge trees covered with long green strands like hair. Leafy shrubs crowded the jungle floor. A well-worn path led off into the distance.

Abruptly, the window with the building went black.

“One portal to go,” Miller commented.

“They’re openings to other worlds.”

“I’m looking at another planet?”

“You are,” Dr. Miller said.

“How does that work?”

“As far as we understand physics, it can’t.”

“If I jumped down there right now?”

“You’d end up in that jungle. Probably fifty, a hundred light-years from here.”

“Could I get back?”

“Who knows?”

Flynn noticed that a couple of the uniformed security people had appeared on the catwalk. People blocking his exit were not wanted. Also, there’d been a lot more traffic in the past. He remembered aliens down on the machine floor. “Where is everybody?”

“Flynn, the station’s being retired. The grays are leaving Earth. Everybody’s leaving.”

“*What?*”

“You know this thing—what these fools released into the universe—”

Doors ahead opened silently onto a room that was at once startlingly familiar and exceedingly complex. Flynn said, “Mac, there are machines in there with hyperdimensional shapes. This means that human eyes and human

minds can't make sense of them any more than a bird can figure out a living room. Don't look around in there, it'll disorient you."

"More than disorient you," Miller added. "You can become psychotic, and the effect can be permanent."

There were now four workers—three following them, and one lingering at the end of the catwalk. So they weren't workers, they were guards, as Flynn suspected. He felt a familiar tension rise in his muscles.

"Come on, guys," he said, "the sooner we get this done, the safer everybody's going to be."

Mac asked, "Can Morris do anything to us down here?"

"Unknown," Dr. Miller snapped.

"What about those creatures on the surface?" Flynn asked. "We saw security preventing them from moving out of the restricted zone."

He shrugged. "Something somebody left behind. A failed experiment in human–alien hybridization. They have human genes, so we're not going to be killing them, as per E. O. 2241-R."

"Which means what?" Mac asked.

Flynn said, "A restricted executive order that states that anything carrying more than ten percent human DNA is human and subject to human law. It was promulgated during the second Bush administration."

"You never told me that—or any of this—before," Mac said.

"His memories of this place were blocked. Morris can get into the mind, remember, so we sent him out with his skills but not his memories."

"Okay, question time's over," Flynn said. "Let's do this."

"Past the catwalk, we move on the red lines only. Don't ever step off. Not ever. If you do, you'll become lost and we will not be able to find you."

"It looks normal."

"It's not. Come on."

They moved carefully along the catwalk, keeping their eyes on the path

ahead, not looking at the machines that loomed around them.

“They’re watching us,” Mac whispered.

“Back off your guards,” Flynn said.

“They’re not guards. They’re a dismantling team. The facility’s going to be mothballed. Earth is being abandoned.”

“You said that, but will you say why?” Mac asked. “What’s been released into the universe?”

Dr. Miller stopped. He turned and faced Flynn and Mac. “Aeon is doomed. At least, the natural species is. They’re going to be rendered extinct by their own creation.”

“We know that,” Flynn said. “There has to be more.”

Miller nodded sadly. “The species they created—”

“The biorobots?” Mac asked.

“They’re much more than robots. They’re self-evolving and full of bad programming.”

“In what way bad?”

“As Aeon woke up to the fact that they weren’t alone in the universe, they got scared. They saw they were primitive. They saw that others were more intelligent. They felt threatened, and used their knowledge of genetic engineering to build what is essentially a self-programming warrior species.”

“Which is what me and Flynn are fighting. Two people, only one of which is presently any good at it.”

“It’s an isolated band,” Miller said.

“So why not just tell the more advanced aliens to get rid of them. Then we can all go home.”

“Flynn, do you remember why we’re doing it this way?”

“I’m a low-tech weapon. If the other aliens use their powers, there will be subspace echoes that stand a chance of being detected by the main body. So will their communications, all their activities. I assume that they’re not

leaving to abandon us, but to hide us.”

He thought of the wire back at headquarters. It would undoubtedly be on the way out, which would be all to the good, as far as Flynn was concerned. He wondered about Geri. Could her mere presence here be a danger?

“No angels to protect us?” Mac asked.

“Not around here.”

Flynn thought about that. No angels. The universe full of dangerous life. Somewhere out there, surely something better would one day be found. But clearly today was not that day.

“Let’s get this done, Doc,” Mac said. “I’m ready. Sort of.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE GREAT, black thing stopped Mac in his tracks.

“Take it easy,” Flynn said.

“What in holy hell is that?”

If evil had a color, this fat cylinder—nine feet long and standing on four squat legs—was painted that color. Flynn remembered how frightening its absolute darkness had appeared to him the first time he saw it.

Mac stood staring at it, gripping the rail that followed the catwalk the three of them were on.

Flynn noticed that two of the guards who weren't guards were now close behind them. Too close.

“What's going on?” he asked Miller.

“Not sure.” Then, to Mac, “This is a bioeditor. It's what can do what you need done.”

“What's that down there, a black hole?”

Miller said, “The best way to explain that formation comes in a poem by W. H. Auden. Do you know his work?”

Mac said nothing. Flynn remembered the lines from Dr. Miller's explanation the last time he'd been here and quoted them: “The crack in the tea-cup opens / a lane to the land of the dead.”

“We think what you're looking at is an entrance to a parallel universe.

Not another planet, but the undiscovered country, the land of souls.”

Mac took a step back. He gestured toward the machine. “It looks like some kind of torture chamber from hell.”

“No, actually, it’s from California. It was built at the Trident Group in Palo Alto.”

“Built by us?” Flynn asked.

“Built at the Trident Group, not by the Trident Group, unfortunately. By the grays. It’s soul science, this thing. We’re not there yet.”

“You can smell the evil. You can see it.” Mac turned away from the thing. “Soul science the hell, it’s satanic.”

Dr. Miller said, “There is no supernatural, only the natural world, some parts of which we understand and some we don’t. It’s natural to fear the unknown.”

“It looks evil to me. Gotta say.”

“Mac, it works.”

Looking at it now, being in this room again, took Flynn back to how he had been before his time in the machine. What had changed in him went way deeper than biology. He had come out of it with new reflexes, but also with a better, more careful, quicker mind, and a deep new river of spirit within him.

“It’s not evil, it’s just ... different. Here”— he took Mac’s hand— “touch it.”

Mac pulled back, but Flynn was faster. When Mac’s hand touched the wall of the thing, the same thing happened as when Flynn had done it before. The whole side of it shuddered like the most delicate flesh, or the surface of a pond.

“It feels alive,” Mac said. “Just like that disk, only more so.”

“It’s not a creature,” Dr. Miller said, “but it is intelligent.”

“What’s it going to do to me?”

“When you enter it and concentrate in an organized way on the alterations

you want, as long as they're possible, it's going to make them."

"Does it hurt?"

Flynn said, "It's going to be the strangest thing you've ever experienced. But it doesn't hurt."

"Go on."

"Your body seems to disappear. It's like you've become a kind of chaos, a sort of storm. You're roaring, rushing, all confused. But alive. Incredibly, totally alive. The feeling will scare you worse than anything you've ever known, but you won't want it to stop. Then your body will focus around you in the same form as the machine. A liquid blackness. You need to think about your eyes. Imagine seeing things two miles away. Seeing microscopically. Sparks will start hitting your eyes the same way they hit my hands when I began thinking about my draw speed. I went into the depths of myself, the why of me, my hopes and loves and fears. You mention angels—I felt like an angel, Mac, an angel in the light. Then all of a sudden, thud, and I was lying there in the thing, just me again in that cold, dark hole. I cried, Mac. I sure as hell did."

"If I want to stop, can I?"

"No," Dr. Miller said.

Mac walked up to it. "Why don't you do this to more people? Flynn needs an army."

"We worked on that. Hard. So did the grays. To make somebody truly exceptional, they have to start out at the top of their game. We can't put an ordinary person in there and have a man with incredible abilities come out. And now it's too late. Machines like this, soul editors, are real easy to detect. This thing has to be gotten out of here pronto. To tell you the truth, this whole facility has been kept in operation by the grays, in hope that you'd make it in before they had to pull the plug."

Flynn burst out, "Why in hell don't they just help us?"

“This isn’t help?”

Mac stood even closer to the machine, looking at it, caressing its trembling flank. “Has anybody ever died in it?”

“There have been heart attacks. The first person to test it died of a stroke. That was in Palo Alto.”

“Flynn, if this kills me, I want my ashes scattered in Big Bend, down along that ridge near Panther Junction—you know the place.”

It was where Mac had almost won Abby, in a flaring sunset, on an evening so long ago it seemed like it belonged to another life. He’d kissed her, and Flynn saw Abby melt into him, and the joy in his eyes when she did. Later, around their campfire, she had searched Flynn with her own teary eyes. After moonset, she came to him in the inky night and whispered, “Hold me,” and Mac, lying in his sleeping bag under the stars, had silently mourned.

“I know it. I’ll do it.” He wanted to say that it wouldn’t happen that way, Mac wouldn’t die, but what did he know? Not even Dr. Miller knew.

Dr. Miller said, “You go around it, Mac. Stay on the red trail. When you reach the entrance, it’ll look like a tunnel with red glowing walls. You just lie forward into it, and the machine will do the rest.”

“It’s like the first time your ma ever held you,” Flynn said, “like remembering your birth.”

Mac shook his head, stood still for a moment, then strode around the machine and was gone.

It made no sound.

“Is it working?”

“Stand back.”

There was a sound of something vibrating, followed by a wave of ice-cold air coming off the thing. Then it frosted over, the liquid blackness hardening and becoming covered with pale frost.

“What the hell?”

“We don’t know, except that it’s normal.”

“Have you ever been in there?”

“I tried for an increase in intelligence.”

“And.”

“IQ 148 before, 152 afterwards.”

“That’s not nothing.”

“We put a guy in, an IQ of 190. He came out completely insane. Killed himself right here on this platform where we’re standing.”

The guards were very close now. When one of them started to follow in Mac’s steps, Flynn put up a hand. “No.”

His eyes met the guard’s. And he recognized him. It was the airman killed by the biorobot at Wright-Pat, or rather, it was the biorobot, impossibly, incredibly not only alive, but here.

Flynn drew his gun and blew the creature in half.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“WHAT THE hell, Flynn, have you gone crazy?”

“It’s one of them.”

“No, that’s impossible.”

Others were crowding forward, and Flynn could hear movement behind the machine as well. When he turned to look, it was still frozen solid, doing its mysterious work. It had better be quick, because this was not going to last. He had the Bull and the Special, but Mac and Dr. Miller were unarmed. A quick calculation told him they would be done in under ten minutes.

“Any other way out of here?”

“What’s going on? You say these are Morris’s people?”

“Four of them. Three now. Five or six more in the facility. We have about eight minutes, that’s all.”

Another one came forward, and Flynn dispatched it with another roaring shot. In the distance, there was a loud pinging sound, repeated again and again, each ping farther away than the one before.

One of the creatures launched itself at Dr. Miller. Flynn took it down also, and it fell shrieking to the floor below. It missed the vortex, though. Blood flooded out of the chest, but it immediately leaped back up the twenty feet to the catwalk and came straight at Flynn. At the same moment, another of them jumped over the machine, which began to make a high-pitched sound that

reminded Flynn of an animal in pain.

“This is coming apart!” he yelled to Miller. He fired again, then a second time, this time at least rendering the two on this side of the machine unable to move, at least for a while.

There were only the four of them, but they had obviously evolved yet again, because they were coming back from lethal shots in seconds, not the hours it took the one he’d “killed” in Mountainville to recover.

He drew his knife and handed it to Martin. “They have to be cut apart.”

“These are people!”

“Doctor, do as I say, or we’ll all be dead—”

The fourth one dropped down onto Flynn from somewhere above. It was in the form of a strongly built, athletic man, and it threw him sideways and off the edge of the platform. He fell toward the vortex, which seemed almost to bend toward him, as if it were hungry for him.

As he dropped, he reached out and grabbed the leg of the creature that had unbalanced him, then twisted himself upward and threw his own leg over the platform.

For an instant, they were frozen, the two of them, their strength in balance.

Blood poured down through the platform as Miller cut up the one that had been lying there, cut it up and screamed out his revulsion as he did it.

Flynn’s adversary shuddered. It redoubled its efforts.

But then Flynn was back on the platform, back on top.

Miller stood over the remains of the one he’d butchered, staring down at it with stunned eyes. Flynn grabbed the knife out of his hands and spun around, taking off the head of his attacker.

Then there was stillness. Flynn wasn’t sure if there were some that had backed off, or if they were all incapacitated.

He ran around the machine. For a moment, he didn’t understand what he

was seeing. Then he did. The whole side of the thing had been laid open like a man's guts. Hanging out was a pulsating complexity of what looked like organic wiring, wet tendrils in a thousand different colors. One of the creatures lay slumped against it, its eyes glazed with what might be death. The other one was nowhere to be seen.

"Mac!"

No reply.

"Doc, how do I pull him out of this thing?"

Dr. Miller came around it. "My God."

"Where's Mac? What happened to him?"

Miller peered into the dripping tangle of wires.

Flynn knew they had little time. The creatures were all linked. Morris would know exactly what had happened here, and would be regrouping right now. Obviously, he was low on soldiers or he would have sent more.

"Mac, sing out."

"There's a body," Miller said. "Under there."

Flynn could just see it, a jeans-covered thigh under the machine. It was bulging horribly, as if the unseen part of Mac's body had been crushed.

Flynn's heart broke. At the same time, anger on a level he had not known possible swept him. This was more than rage, more than what he had thought of before as human emotion, a pillar of fire within him.

Bending down, he reached forward, thrusting his arms under the slumped remains of the machine. Using his leg and back muscles, then every muscle in his body, he lifted the thing. It was like cradling an injured man, just as intimate and sad.

"Hurry!"

"I'm trying."

"Can't hold it." He let it down.

Mac's leg was no longer visible. Flynn turned around. "He must have

gone down into the vortex.”

“The hell I did.”

“Mac!”

He was standing beside Dr. Miller on the platform.

“It protected me. Held me like a baby. I could feel it dying all around me, but it would not let them get me.”

Flynn took his friend by his shoulders. “You got a hell of a lot of guts.”

“Listen,” Miller said.

It was a rushing sound, like a great wind or the long thunder of breaking waves.

“What?” Mac asked.

“I don’t know.”

It was coming from back along the catwalk. Flynn could feel deep trembling.

Flynn went to the end of the platform, followed by the other two men. As they moved toward the door, the entire room seemed to fold in on them. Rolling out from behind them, there came a thick mass of dark blue smoke and a choking odor, sharp and hot, of some unknown fire. Flynn didn’t turn; he didn’t slow down.

Ahead of them, the door began closing automatically. Klaxons started, then emergency lights.

Flynn dived through the door and onto the catwalk above the portal to the jungle world. Mac and the doctor came behind, but the doctor’s shoe got caught as the door slid closed.

He ripped it out, but then fell backwards and off the catwalk.

The portal appeared to be about twenty feet below them, but the doctor did not fall twenty feet. He kept falling and falling, his body twisting, his arms and legs windmilling. As they watched, he grew slowly smaller and smaller, until he was a dot moving across the green of the jungle.

There was a flash of light, and Dr. Miller was much more visible again, lying on the jungle path, one shoe missing, his legs twisted. As they watched transfixed, he shook himself. He stood up. Looked around. His hands went to his head. He understood what had happened to him.

He stood there screaming silently, looking up, his eyes wild with terror, as the portal grayed and went dark. The portal shuddered like the surface of a lake, and then Flynn realized that the whole room was liquefying around them.

They ran, dashing down the catwalk and out into the staging area, stumbling and falling as the pressure door closed behind them.

The elevator was across the room, its forbidding black steel door closed.

“Can we get out of here?”

“I don’t know.”

He went to the elevator and pressed the button. There was a moment’s hesitation, but then it slid open. Before they could board the elevator, Flynn noticed that the Klaxons had stopped. Movement behind him caused him to turn, gun at the ready.

The pressure door was reopening.

“Jesus,” Mac said as they got closer and looked together into the now completely empty space, a large bare room, its floor twenty feet below the doorframe. It was gleaming white, lit from above by rows of ordinary LED panels. There was a faint odor of something that had burned, but a long time ago. Old smoke.

The aliens had withdrawn.

“That poor guy,” Mac said.

Flynn nodded. Dr. Daniel Miller had become the most profoundly lost man in the history of the species.

They got into the waiting elevator and returned to the surface.

The signs on the office doors were now all in English only. Here and

there, a white space marked a place where a sign in some alien language had been removed.

Flynn touched a door handle. It was unlocked. He opened the door and stepped into the office of a Dr. William Richards. It was a typical office in a secret lab: There was a heavy-duty file safe, locked. On the desk was an in/out-box, which held some trivial memos about supply issues and a lighting problem. No references to aliens, nothing about what must have been taking place here just this morning.

“The parade’s gone by,” he told Mac. “Let’s get out of here.”

“What about that dog?”

“They’ll be gone, both of them. And the aliens we saw out in the mounds. All gone. This place has been sterilized—and so has the rest of the planet, would be my guess.” He thought of Aeon’s more primitive portal, a massive gravity well out near Saturn. “Probably the whole solar system.”

“And the disk?”

“Morris is still here, you can be sure.”

“Here, in this place?”

“Obviously his crew got here somehow. But he got his nose bloodied tonight, so I’m thinking that he’ll pull back, at least for a time. He’d better—we have exactly two bullets left in the Bull. The Special doesn’t matter, since it’s not accurate enough.”

As they talked, they walked toward the main exit. Outside, the floodlights were off. The gate in the compound’s fence stood open. The dog was nowhere to be seen.

Flynn tried his cell phone, but there was no coverage.

“I guess let’s walk up,” he said.

“Is it safe?”

He looked up at the sky. A late moon had risen, and still hung low in the east. To the south, the faint glow of the Northeastern megalopolis created an

illusion of dawn.

“Three thirty,” he said. “Hard to believe we were down there that long.”

They started up the road. Flynn was alert for any movement, any sound, but all was quiet.

The disk rose up from behind a saw grass-covered dune and was on them in an instant.

Flynn threw himself to the ground and rolled off the road, but it was too late. It had been too late since the moment they left the facility.

Morris had really surprised the hell out of Flynn this time. “He got me, Mac. The attack down in the facility was there to put me off my guard.”

He found himself looking up into the center of the disk’s underside, a roiling circle of fire that would soon generate the light that would drag both of them into the hands of somebody who was going to hurt them very badly before killing them.

“Can you see that seam?”

“Man, it’s dark.”

There was a dull booming sound, and the light hit them. They rolled in opposite directions, and the light followed Flynn. As he felt himself rising, he grabbed the Special and thrust it at Mac. “Don’t miss!”

The gun tumbled up into the light and was gone. Flynn felt his body leaving the ground. He yanked out the Bull and made sure it was in Mac’s hand. “Two shots, but get outta this light!”

He rose further, seeking as he did so for his knife—not to defend himself, but to kill himself. His mind flashed regretfully to the cyanide capsules.

The end of the game, and the human side had lost.

What in hell could he expect?

The glowing maw of the thing was just above him now. He spread his arms and legs, and was just able to catch himself on the edges. Immediately, though, he began to slip inside.

A shot rang out. He heard the bullet whine off past his head—passing so close, he could feel its hot slipstream. The fingers on his left hand lost their grip. His arm thrust up into the thing. Hands, cold and strong, grabbed at his wrist, then clutched it.

His right leg went in. It also was grabbed.

“I’m goin’!” he screamed. He who was never scared was scared now—he was scared sick. It was going to end like this for him, in this monstrous machine, being cut to pieces, dying in his own vomit and in agony.

There came a tinkling like the laughter of children, cruel children.

A sharp sound followed, but in the distance. A shot? He was unsure.

There was a rush of air, then a flash of agony. Then there was darkness.

The darkness gathered him into itself. It was nice. It was good and kind and he belonged to it. Then he saw something that at first he didn’t understand: a circle of fire overhead, slowly spinning.

There was a flash like a million suns, which left them both night blind. The flash was followed by a chest-slapping shock.

There was a silence.

“Are we still alive, Flynn?”

“Mac?”

“Are we?”

Flynn realized that he was on the ground, not in the disk. He said, “I’m thinking that we are.” He tested himself, moving first one leg and then the other, then his arms. “I’ve got an issue with my right hip and arm. Must be my landing.”

Mac sat up. “You fell a long way.”

“I’m good at falling. I’ve practiced.”

“The machine worked. I could shoot that fisherman over there right between the eyes.”

Flynn looked around. “We’re in the middle of the island.”

“Look due south. See that little piece of water?”

“No.”

They both got to their feet. “There’s a boat that’s got three guys on it. Two of ’em are asleep, the third one’s got a line in the water.”

They were both hurt bad, which became clear when they began trying to resume their hike up to the main building. They moved along arm in arm, leaning on one another.

“How in hell did I break my leg?”

“What’s that wet stuff? That goo?”

“That’s blood, Mac. You damn well shot yourself.”

“I did not!”

“Yeah, you did. You winged your own leg with the first shot.”

“Aw, shit.”

Lights bore down in their faces, hard, bright rows of them.

“Is it another disk? ’Cause the gun’s empty.”

“It’s the security patrol.”

“Hey, we need help down here!”

A shadow moved out from behind the lights, an unrecognizable silhouette. The hands went up. A voice called out, “Flynn? Flynn Carroll?”

“Diana!”

She came closer, breaking into a run; then she was there before him. She threw her arms around him. He swayed against the weight of her, then inhaled the scent of her, and her sweetness made him dizzy with relief and desire.

“What the hell happened down there? I thought you were being examined by Dr. Miller.”

“Morris got into the facility. Miller was— Oh, Christ, Diana, do you know what was down there?”

“Some advanced machines is what I heard.”

“It’s clean now. You could eat off the floor.”

Diana and a number of the security personnel helped the two of them into the back of two of the carts, and they went together back up to the main building.

“Mac got the disk,” Flynn said on the way.

“The wire is gone. Geri is gone. She left the way she came, from Area Fifty-One.”

“I wonder if she made it.”

Diana didn’t reply, and Flynn didn’t pursue it. There was no reason to speak more about Aeon. The planet had sealed its own fate, and would disappear into the history of the universe.

“Did you get Morris?”

“He wouldn’t have been on the disk, but his assets are gone.”

“Then that’s the best we can hope for. A good result.”

Diana wasn’t happy, and Flynn knew it—and why would she be? Morris was their mission.

As he thought about that, he tried to put himself in Morris’s position, to see matters from his enemy’s viewpoint. He would know exactly why they were here, and how dangerous Mac would be to him if the bioedit was allowed to complete. Thus the logic of sending some of his last few entities into the facility where they would meet certain destruction. They might be destroyed, but so would the bioeditor, hopefully Mac, and ideally Flynn.

Finally, there was the surprise attack with the disk. So Morris wouldn’t be in it. Far too dangerous.

So where would he be?

They arrived at the main building, and Mac was loaded off and carried toward the infirmary. Flynn’s leg injury had flared up and he was hobbling, too, but at least he could walk.

He looked out across the water, a blackness touched here and there by the

light of a fishing boat.

He stopped. He thought back. “Diana, where’s the helicopter?”

“Now?”

“Right now.”

“It took off after it dropped me. I guess the traffic director would know.”

“Never mind—is there a boat? A fast one?”

“There are two boats that I know of.”

He ran after Mac. In the infirmary, a sleepy-eyed nurse in a bathrobe was cleaning Mac’s leg wound.

“Can you walk?”

“Can you?”

“Not really.”

“Me neither.”

“We have a chance to get Morris. It’s our last chance, maybe for years, maybe forever.”

“I can walk. In fact, I can run.”

“Same here.”

Mac got up off the table.

“Sir?” the nurse said.

Mac gave her a rictus grin, tight and hard. “I like pain, ma’am. In fact, I enjoy it so much, I’m going out for more. I’ll likely come back later. In a bag.”

Back in the corridor, they were met by a captain who looked like he’d pulled on his uniform over his pajamas.

“This is Captain Gilbertson, island chief of security,” Diana said.

“I want both boats to converge on the south of the island. Make a wide loop, no lights. And I want that chopper called back. What I want it to do is start patrolling the Connecticut shore with its searchlight on.”

“Excuse me, Miss Glass, is this the man you were telling me about?”

Flynn said, “There’s a fishing boat out there with three individuals on it. It’s going to be heading for the Connecticut shore, but slowly. It won’t want to be drawing any attention. That boat is to be taken, and the individuals on it not just shot, but destroyed. Do you understand this? I want their bodies detonated, ripped to pieces.”

The captain’s face had turned to stone. Horror rimmed his eyes. “Shot? Destroyed? What are you saying, here? This sounds highly illegal.”

“Diana, is there anybody on the island who’s on our side of the line?”

“No, there is not.”

“What about Evans and his crew?”

“They’re not cleared for bio.”

Flynn returned to the captain. “Captain, this is a national security matter, and you’re not cleared to know even what you already do. You and your unit are ordered to stand down.”

“On whose authority?”

“Do it, Captain, or you will be in a world of trouble. Trust me.”

“He’s right, Captain,” Diana said. “Just get us the boats.”

“A boat,” Flynn said. “One boat. Your fastest.”

Captain Gilbertson started a call to his superior officer. Flynn took his cell phone from him. “Prepare the boat at once, or you’ll be charged with insubordination, dereliction of duty, and aiding a terrorist in the commission of acts that lead to loss of life. The last charge carries the death penalty, and it will be imposed, I can assure you. Now, get your ass in gear and get that boat prepped, and I want three high-powered rifles, scoped, on it, some flash bombs, and some hand grenades.”

“We don’t have grenades—”

Flynn grabbed Captain Gilbertson by the lapels and went close in. “*Don’t lie to me.*” He thrust him away so hard, the soldier flew across the corridor and hit the wall with a thud that shook the place. “Do it now!”

Ashen, his hands trembling, Gilbertson pulled himself together and rushed off.

“Let’s move,” Flynn said.

They headed for the island’s small boathouse.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

AS FLYNN guided the boat around the island, Mac lay on its long prow, watching the water. The boat was a Donzi, lean and low, powered by a 300hp MerCruiser engine. It was in excellent condition, kept ready for patrol and intercept duty.

Diana was beside Flynn, watching the boat's radar under a hood made of her coat. No light could be allowed to show, none at all.

As he ran the boat, Flynn kept a careful lookout to the sides and back. His chief worry was that Morris had anticipated this maneuver and was planning to ambush them. Given that he was almost certainly down to his last two entities, he would be desperate. As far as Flynn was concerned, Morris could appear anywhere, anytime—just not with the disk, and thank God for that.

Mac came down. "There's one fisherman out there with three guys in it, heading for the Connecticut shore." He pointed to a faint light. "Two miles out. Moving slow, like they were trolling."

Diana said, "I see him."

"We need that chopper," Flynn commented. He wanted it doing a grid search along the shore, making it appear that the focus of their interest was not on the water itself. Hopefully, this would cause Morris to turn around and head for Long Island. The farther they were from witnesses when what was about to happen went down, the better it would be.

“I’ve got a point-to-point measure on him,” Diana said. “He’s moving at about five knots.”

“Mac, what’s your maximum confident range?”

“Give me a thousand yards.”

“At night? Are you sure?”

“I can count the number of threads in a shoelace.”

Flynn did a quick mental calculation and increased speed to 7.8 knots.

“Keep watching. I’d like a positive ID before we can do this.”

Mac, who had returned to the front of the boat, slid back down again. “You aren’t gonna get positive. Positive is impossible, even for me.”

“What will I get?”

“The best I can offer. But it’s never going to be absolute, not at three thousand feet.”

“Then if we make a mistake, that’s what happens.”

“I’m not a murderer, Flynn.”

“With certain exceptions.”

“Which don’t include innocent civilians.”

“We can’t risk not taking the shot.”

Saying it made him feel kind of sick.

Diana, he noticed, had not protested. She remained huddled under the coat, peering at the radar.

“Diana?”

She came up. “Yes?”

“Did you hear?”

“I heard. They could be innocent bystanders.”

“Let’s hope it’s them,” Flynn said.

“Let’s hope.” She went back under her coat. The faint glow of the radar reappeared around her feet. “They’ve increased speed. By an additional five knots.”

Morris had detected this boat and was testing it. If it increased speed when he did, he would know its intentions. Flynn held steady.

“We’ll be in range shortly,” Diana said.

Flynn’s hand hovered over the throttle. The boat would do thirty knots, easy. All he had to do was push it to the firewall, and they’d leap up on plane. If Morris’s boat was just the little fisherman that it appeared, he wouldn’t be able to get away.

“An extra six and a half knots. That makes eleven and a half knots.”

Morris was slowly increasing speed. In other words, he was running. That meant two things: First, they had the right boat. Second, Morris was vulnerable.

“He’ll be at the mouth of the harbor,” Diana said.

“How many yards ahead of him?”

“Fifteen hundred and fifty.”

“Too far. What port is it?”

“A little community called Easterly. Couple of marinas, a fishing fleet of maybe five boats. He’s up to twelve knots.”

Unless Flynn increased speed, he would never come into Mac’s range at all, because Morris would reach port first.

He gripped the throttle. But then a realization came, which was that, if Morris had enough speed available to him, he was already close in enough to beat the Donzi.

Morris had won again, as always by thinking farther ahead. No matter what Flynn did, he wasn’t going to catch the psychopath.

“Chopper’s up,” Mac said.

“I don’t see it.”

“You will. Two minutes.”

“He’s at thirteen knots. Four thousand one hundred yards ahead of us. Opening the gap now.”

Flynn held steady.

The seconds practically crawled—five, ten, twenty.

Flynn watched the dark shore.

Two minutes came and went.

“We’re losing him,” Diana said.

A spear of light came down from the sky above Easterly, then ran along its shore. A moment later, another, farther down, appeared. Then a third one up the coast a few miles.

Three helicopters instead of one.

“Slowing. Ten knots. Five. Dead slow now.”

Was he buying it? Or just being cautious?

The Long Island shore was dark.

Five searchlights now swept up and down the Connecticut coast, centering on Easterly.

Diana said, “He’s increasing speed. Fourteen knots.”

“What in hell?”

“No, wait he’s going dead slow—no—oh, Jesus, it’s a turn, a tight turn. He’s heading this way! He’s still turning. Now he’s going for the opposite shore.”

It had worked—maybe. Flynn held steady.

Diana said, “On his current heading, he’ll be in range in two minutes.”

Mac went back up to the front of the boat. Flynn held the boat absolutely steady, still on the same heading, now closing rapidly with Morris, who would cross their bows at 2,200 feet.

Without warning, without a flash or a sound, there came a tremendous shock wave, invisible until it hit the boat. Flynn was knocked back off the helm, sprawling into the seating behind him. Diana, whose head was below the level of the cockpit dash, lurched with the boat but kept her footing.

Flynn scrambled to his feet, grabbed the helm, and righted the lurching

boat. “*Mac!*”

“I got it, I’m okay.”

“Hold on, it *will* come again!” Then, “Di, you okay?”

“I’m good.”

“I hope it’s the same shock wave weapon Geri used, because it didn’t work worth a shit.”

Twenty seconds to go. Ten.

“It’s speeding up, it’s coming straight at us.”

Mac fired. A second time. A third.

Flynn pushed the throttle to the dash, and the Donzi leaped to life.

Mac came down, sliding into the cockpit. Flynn said, “We gotta stay up on plane—the bow’s full of burst seams.”

Flynn swerved the boat so he could see ahead. The fishing vessel was dead in the water. In it, he could see slumped forms.

“Di, crack the grenades.”

“We can’t set off grenades in the middle of Long Island Sound.”

“Maybe you can’t,” Flynn said.

When they came up beside the fishing boat, which was wallowing in the water, Flynn surrendered the controls to Mac and jumped aboard at once. “Give me some light!” he shouted up at Diana, who turned one of their floods on the scene in the craft.

A figure lay sprawled on its back. It looked entirely human. “Jesus,” Flynn muttered. He turned over a second figure.

The face was not the same as that of the first, but its shape was. Flynn pulled out his flashlight and lifted one of the eyelids, and there staring up at him was the unmistakable steel gray of Louis Charleton Morris’s eye. In his temple, there was a hole oozing blood. Geri’s weapon was in the bottom of the boat, floating in the bloody water.

Morris’s only mistake had been to trust it.

Flynn picked up the pulse weapon and put it in his pocket. Might be of some use to somebody. He'd turn it in to the tech team at HQ.

The third and last body had a human form as well, but the face of a biorobot. It stared, but not sightlessly.

"This one's rejuvenating fast," Flynn said.

Diana handed down the grenades, and Flynn thrust one in each mouth, breaking jaws to ram them in. Morris seemed to be resisting, so Flynn used his knife to also cut back the muscles at the hinges of the alien's jaws, then rammed the grenade farther down, into his throat.

Morris began spasmodically attempting to regurgitate it.

Mac cut into Morris's thorax and put in another grenade.

They got back into the Donzi and pulled out, planing away at high speed. When they were a mile out, Flynn detonated the grenades by radio.

Modern hand grenades were not small explosives, and the boat burst apart in a deafening explosion that slammed from the Connecticut shore to the Long Island shore and back. In the distance, car alarms along both coasts began sounding. A deeper siren, perhaps a volunteer fire department, joined them.

"There are going to be water patrols from ten sheriffs' departments out here within half an hour, not to mention the coast guard," Flynn said as they headed back to Deer Island at full throttle.

"Did we do it?"

"Mac, you're one of those guys who's going to get a medal you can't tell anybody about, because the answer is yes, we did it. We have sterilized our planet of a psychotic alien and his deranged posse of biorobots."

As the boat ran on, Flynn looked up at the half moon now hanging in a deep purple predawn sky, and at the stars beyond, fading now. He thought of the scourge that Aeon had unleashed, and what must be happening there now, and of Geri gone on her perilous journey, taking with her the last echo of

Abby that he would ever see.

Diana leaned against him for a moment. Nothing was said, and then she was gone from his side, back to her seat.

He drove the boat onward, staying up on plane to reduce leakage, toward the dark bulk of Deer Island and the life of the future, whatever might come, whatever lay beyond.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Whitley Strieber is the bestselling author of more than twenty-five books, including the legendary *Warday*, *Nature's End*, and *The Coming Global Superstorm*, the basis of the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*. His most recent books, *The Grays* and *2012: The War for Souls*, are both being made into films. His website, www.unknowncountry.com, is the largest of its kind in the world, exploring the edge of science and reality.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

ALIEN HUNTER: UNDERWORLD

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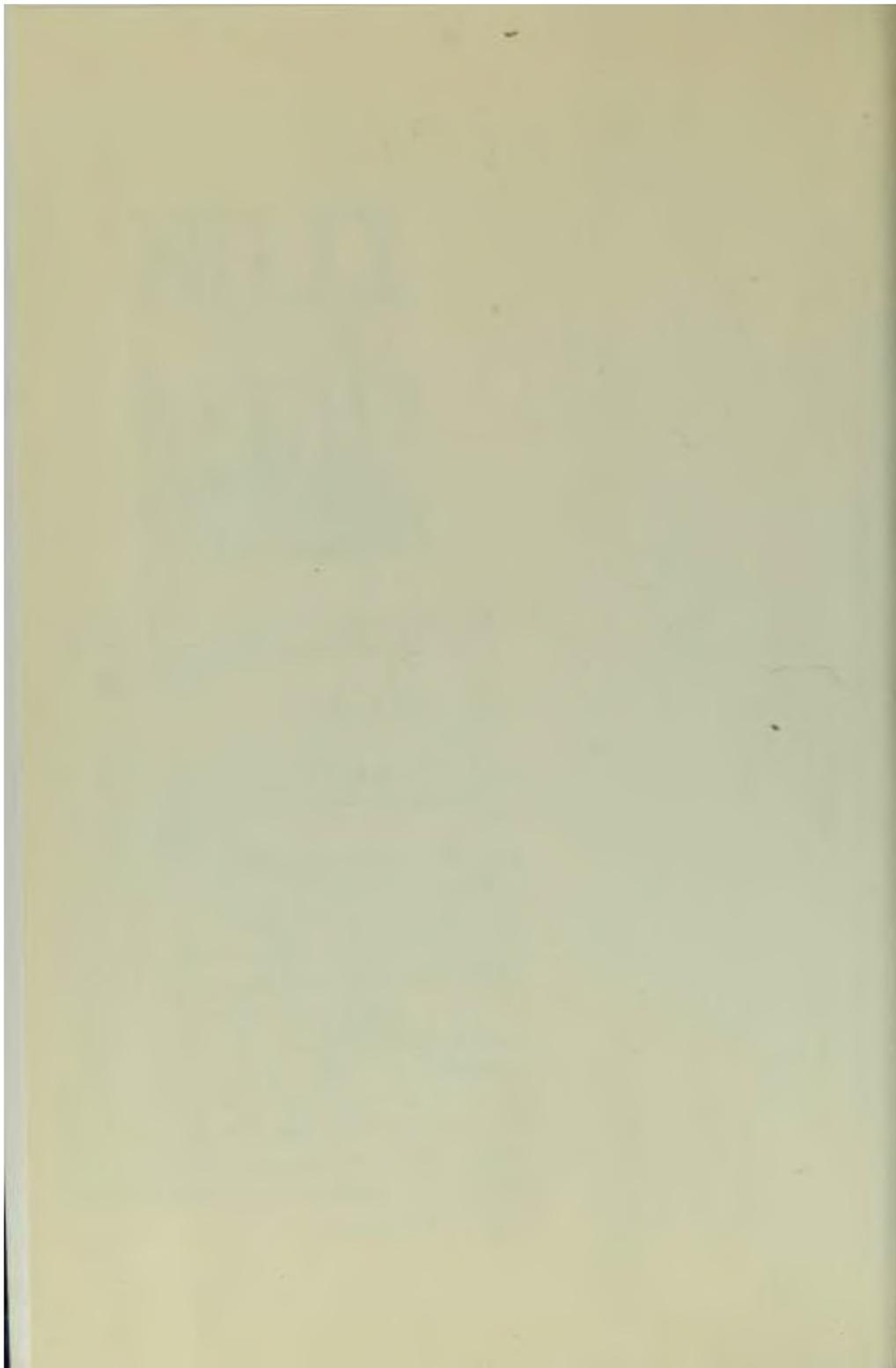
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FOR THOSE CHILDREN

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Part One

BY REASON OF DARKNESS

1.

Suddenly he was there, remarkable and perfect. The next instant he had disappeared into the crowd. Barton gazed after him, but not for long. People noticed you watching children. He walked on.

As soon as he felt it was safe he turned around and overtook the boy from behind.

He had no intention of being carried away yet again by his natural enthusiasm. Another mistake would be too much to bear.

On this particular day he was searching Crossland Mall for the fourth time. He'd been in Stevensville for a disappointing week; he'd been thinking of giving up on Iowa altogether.

He stopped at the mall bookstore and retraced his steps. Now he could safely get a good look at the boy from the front. And what a remarkable face he saw. There was fire in the eyes, along with a boy's natural softness. The face was the sort you could look at for hours; such beauty was a kind of food. His fair cheeks were pinked by the sun, his features at once gentle and sharp, and yet full of dignity. His nose was graceful, but there was also a sweet bluntness to it. His lips were as red as if they had been blushed. The boy's hair was strawberry blond, his skin like cream. His brown eyes were touched like the hair by subtle flame. The expression was affable, with an edge of mischief around the eyes—and yet there was also something else, almost a sense of command. That was so interesting.

The child held his head proudly. The tip of a smile played across his lips as he encountered another boy, obviously a friend. By comparison this other child was a shadow.

Barton watched carefully as they went into a video arcade. His target established himself in front of one of the machines. This was a bit of a disappointment. Perhaps this child was not the extraordinary creature that he seemed. But his looks! God.

Barton had to be extremely careful with this one.

He could do wonders for the right boy, of that he remained convinced. The last time was so awful that he'd made the decision to change his ways. He'd sealed that decision by mixing his own blood with an innocent's.

For hours a given relationship could be so good. His heart opened, the boy's heart opened and they were truly father and son. In those times he would have given his life for his boy.

But inevitably the relationship changed. The boy sneered, he cursed or even spat. Then the truth came out: the vicious punk had despised him all along.

Ending a life properly was a craftsman's work. You had to do it with the dedication of a lover, the care of a professional, the considered pace of a libertine.

You didn't necessarily want to. But once the relationship had collapsed . . .

Obviously the boy in question couldn't be set free.

These thoughts, brief as they were, led him to other, darker ideas, tempting notions from a diabolic corner of his soul.

He found himself imagining that lovely face wet with tears, the eyes pleading, the voice shrill, and his own hands moving as if under the control of the terrible instrument that they held.

The image was so vivid and horrific, it made him shake his head and gasp. The floor rocked. He put a hand to his mouth to force back

the sickness.

Barton had secret knowledge: when skin burns it smokes; a pierced lung sucks.

He had to will himself to calm down, let the bad thoughts fade away.

'OK, take it easy,' he told himself. 'All that's wrong with you is that you're very excited by this child. He's a treasure and nothing bad will happen. No, with the right boy, there will be no bad part.'

Barton was stable.

This time he would do everything exactly right.

In the past he'd picked them up off the street. "Your mother told me to come get you and take you home." "I'm with the police, son." "There's been an accident, we have to take you home now." It depended on how young they were and how neglected they looked. "Want to take a ride, go to McDonald's, get some candy?" And to the saddest, shabbiest of them: "Want to be my friend?"

Timmy had gone for that one. Jack had fallen for the police gambit. For that ruse Barton had worn a bluejacket and some insignia he'd bought at an army surplus store.

The current problem was going to be much more challenging. This child was happy and bright and might not fall for a simple lure, which meant that one could not be risked. If he wanted a specific boy, he only had the one chance. He'd tried forty kids before he got Timmy—who had been flawed, of course. When he'd trusted to chance, he always had problems. He had finally accepted the fact that he could not get a perfect child unless it was by careful choice.

To be certain that the child was right he was going to have to make a closer approach, risk some brief interaction with him.

There were benches for parents in front of the arcade. He sat down, pretending to tie his shoe, and looked the place over as he did so. It was very ordinary: a deep room with fifty or so games and a lot of noise. There were maybe ten kids listlessly pumping the machines.

Only one child looked as if he was standing in a shaft of light.

Barton ached to try a street ploy, but that was not the prudent course. Instead he would proceed slowly and carefully. First he would go outside and sit in his van for ten or fifteen minutes, then re-enter the mall in dark glasses and wearing a different shirt. If he was lucky, he could have a brief conversation with the child. Tone of voice, vocabulary, expression— they would reveal volumes.

He did not want a coarse child, a bitter child, a delinquent child. This one must not be bruised. He must be intelligent, well adjusted, good of heart.

Then it would work.

He returned to his Aerostar which he'd parked not far from the mall's main entrance. To fill the time he enjoyed one of his secret pleasures: he wrote about the boy on a yellow pad. Usually he just wrote a description, which gave him the enjoyment of calling the child's image vividly to mind. Other times he might write a letter, or simply repeat the name again and again, such as "Timothy Weathers" written until it seemed a kind of sweet penance. But he didn't yet know this boy's name.

"Dearest Child, I would like to ask you if I can be your new father. I know it sounds crazy and you love your dad, but just please listen to me for a second. I don't have a boy and I can't, and I'd give you every single thing you could ever want. I won't ever punish you. You make all the decisions. I work, I'll earn the money for us."

He stopped writing.

It would be so beautiful!

"There is something so marvelous about you. Thinking of you now I can smell the grass in the backyard, see that wonderful old elm that was almost my second home in the summer. You make me feel so good, so deeply happy.

"I know you are a magnificent human being. I can help you fulfill your great potential. I can take you out of this wretched cultural desert and help you to flourish and become the great soul that God meant you to be.

"Let me love you, serve you, become you."

He stared at the last two words. That wasn't what he meant at all. "Become you"—what was that supposed to mean? Barton wasn't crazy. He crossed them out. In their place he wrote: "enter your life." Now that was precisely correct.

"Oh, my God," he said, "he's so incredibly special."

Obviously he had already fallen in love with this child. Oh, he would be such a good father! He could do it, he would be just wonderful.

Barton tore the paper into tiny bits. These he put into a plastic bag which he would eventually pour into some dumpster somewhere behind a gas station. Although he had no evidence that anybody was investigating him, the possibility was always there.

That was why he'd quit making his acquisitions in California, and partly why he was working rural areas. Small towns were so open, and their police departments usually had very limited resources. Also, his experience was that small-town America produced better-looking, sweeter, smarter children.

Another important consideration was location. He was always careful to choose towns close to the interstate. This wasn't only because of the need to leave quickly, but also because the citizens of such towns were used to seeing strangers passing through. One more wouldn't arouse anyone's suspicions.

His watch told him it was time to go back. The capture itself was always nerve-wracking, but these new preliminaries made the whole process much worse.

Barton said to himself, "You don't have to do it."

He groaned so loudly that a man walking past his van glanced his way. 'OK, you're losing it again. So take a deep breath, imagine every muscle in your body is melting. That's better.'

The thought of losing this boy was just unbearable.

Barton told himself he had to be strong. He must stick to his plan. What if the boy was rotten inside, foul-mouthed or dirty-minded? He certainly didn't want any of that, not anymore. This child had to be right.

The next step was to get back in that mall and make the final decision. If it was in the affirmative he would then locate the boy's home, find out his name and get some idea of his family situation. To some extent poorer was better, and it helped if the family was new in town. It was easier to get kids who had unhappy homes, but that had been his mistake in the past. They might look fresh and beautiful, but too many of them were grim and sullen and rotten with greed, the *vicious little bastards!*

Looking first to be sure nobody was near the van, he pulled off his tan knit shirt. Then he took the blue button-down out of his small suitcase and put on the dark glasses.

His clothes changed, he got out of the van and moved quickly toward the mall entrance.

Noon was approaching and waves of heat rose from the cars in the lot. Barton was sensitive to heat. The other kids had called him "Leaky," he sweated so much. That and "Fat Royal."

That was a long time ago—longer than it felt. But mentally Barton

was never far from his own childhood. He kept going over things. People who remembered childhood fondly were lucky; they were the ones who had put the pain to rest.

Crossing the pavement he bowed his head against the sun and was grateful to push through the doors into the air conditioning.

In the old days department stores had smelled like malls did now. It was the perfume of merchandise. The smell always took him back to the days when his gang—well, not really his, but the gang he was in—used to ride bikes down to Woolworth's on Main and Mariposa where they had a comic book rack and cap guns and toy soldiers and a lunch counter where you could get a hamburger and large Cherry Coke for seventy-five cents. He wasn't really in the gang, of course, but he rode with them. Or rather, he took the same route. The guys would all sit at the counter; he would be in a booth nearby.

Remembering those days, he smiled a little. Mom had given him one thorough strapping that time he got caught shoplifting those Uncle Scrooge comics. If he'd only managed to pull it off and gotten one for every member of the gang, maybe then they would have taken him in.

Mom had laid it on right in the middle of the living room. Then they watched *Have Gun Will Travel*, and he lay there on the floor where she had left him.

He passed Midplains Savings and Wilton's Jewelers, its main window literally jammed with ceramic brooches illustrating flowers and little hats and ladybugs. In another window there must have been a couple of miles of gold chain.

The mall was moderately crowded. When he was in crowds Barton was compulsive about looking into faces. He was also sensitive to the aesthetics of skin. Smooth, pale skin inspired him. He loved to brush a soft arm or beautiful hand. To taste its salt sweetness, to inhale its miraculous variety of scents—of such things he dared only dream.

Another pass by the video arcade and he saw the boy again, still at his moronic game. Barton took a deep breath, stopped walking and closed his eyes for a moment.

Now came the frightening part: he went into the arcade.

There was a skeeball game in the front, and beside it a locked display case full of cheap trinkets and candy. Each item was marked with some ridiculous number—fifty skeeball coupons to get a miniature Whitman's Sampler, a thousand for some cheap sunglasses.

The electronic games all depicted murder and mayhem, brawls and violent death. They promoted machismo and reinforced unconscious racism. Little thought was required. Rather, they demanded what the streets demanded: dexterity and feral cunning.

Barton moved closer to the boy. His heart began to pound and his underarms to grow damp despite his powerful antiperspirant. He could see the boy's back moving as he breathed. The boy wasn't a fantasy anymore; he was a human being in a black-and-white-striped T-shirt and black shorts.

The vulnerability of children could be extraordinarily intimidating. Barton wasn't a predator, he was a romantic and did not like to see himself as an exploiter. Getting close to kids also meant seeing their imperfections, which could ruin everything ... or it could be delicious.

On the side of this boy's perfectly white left hand there was a small brown mole. Farther up his arm there was another. These were not fatal imperfections, like Jack's relentlessly foul mouth or the black birthmark on Timmy's thigh. Rather, they enhanced the child's beauty in an almost poignant manner.

Watching this sensitive child play Space Harrier was like watching an angel hitting on a bottle of booze.

Barton moved closer. The boy's skin shone in the arcade's lurid fluorescence. It was all Barton could do not to touch the warm

smoothness of his hand, to let his finger brush across the mole.

As the boy's Space Harrier game ended Barton put a quarter into the RPM machine beside it. This was a two-person game. In a quavering tone, he asked, "Want to race?"

"Sure."

Wonderful voice! Soft, yet richly melodious. And a real surprise: this voice was kind!

The boy came over and dropped a quarter into his side of the machine. He barely reached Barton's shoulder.

Even though Barton tried his hardest, he was bested three times in a row, which he found lovely. Nothing was said until the end, when the boy looked up at him and with a sparkle in his eye said, "Want to play for money?"

Barton smiled. "This is already costing me."

The boy laughed and went over to his dark-headed friend. A moment later the friend's brittle, sneering voice drifted back: "Just some queer."

The boy glanced quickly at Barton. There was apology in his soft eyes.

The boy's friend had, in addition to his pimples and his coal-black hair, the extended face of a horse.

Suddenly it hit Barton: *I'm being seen by a potential witness!* He had to get out of here, even if it meant losing the boy.

That was a monstrous thought! In his few minutes on RPM he'd fallen far: he could hardly bear the thought of letting the child out of his sight. But prudence demanded that he leave at once.

The van was stifling. He started the engine and turned the air

conditioning on high.

The locals were all talking about how hot and dry a summer it had been. The corn was stunted, and the farmers wanted rain. Barton had learned to talk about it, too. Every morning he read the Stevensville Iowan, and when the waitress served his breakfast he might say a few words about the weather.

This way if she was ever questioned she would review the past few days and say, "No, officer, I don't remember anybody unusual at all." She would not say, "Gee, yeah, now that you mention it there was this guy that ate here a few times. Real quiet. Never said a word. Kept his head down."

Never mind waitresses, though; here was a strong, direct witness: "Yes, officer, there was this guy in the mall who played RPM with him." And then would follow the description, the IdentiKit portrait, the poster.

Thank God for dark glasses.

He pulled out of his spot and sped to the nearest exit. Once on Lincoln Avenue he headed for the Burger King. Eating would pass the time.

He entered the order line behind a blue Camaro. Three girls were in it, ages sixteen to eighteen. He wished that he could say something to them about their smoking, offer them some help with their addiction. They were all so young!

He watched them order Whoppers, fries, shakes, desserts. Their blond heads bobbed as they talked, the driver's skin gleamed in the sun as she worked the microphone button.

If he got to a child in time, he was convinced that he could transform anyone of sufficient intelligence into a cultured human being. With the right care, the soul would bloom.

"A Whaler and a small dinner salad with blue cheese dressing," he said when his turn came at the order window. "And a glass of iced tea." Not "icetea," like they all said. "Iced. Tea." In the English language it was two words.

As the Camaro left the takeout window he drove up and got his things.

With his food on the seat beside him he accelerated into traffic. He fought the desire to go back to the mall earlier than was safe.

Please don't leave, son. Dad had called him that, and he enjoyed pretending to be Dad. Power was the greatest aphrodisiac.

He made himself go out on the interstate to kill a little more time before he attempted to relocate the child and follow him home.

Grueling hours of search might be necessary this time around. He just didn't know. This was all new to him. And as far as getting the boy—his idea was more a fantasy than a plan. Would it work? He had no idea.

Driving along, nibbling nervously at the Whaler, his thoughts returned to the boy. Wasn't that a wonderful voice? Just exceptional. And that extraordinary face. The word "handsome" did not suffice, and "pretty" was demeaning. This boy had a quality of the miraculous about him.

Even to glimpse such beauty was a privilege.

Barton himself was not beautiful and never had been, but he had made himself into a worthy soul.

The rich white clouds reminded him of the past. He had looked for shapes in the clouds, and had seen the Flying Dutchman there, and his mother had said, "There's a gallows and an old man hanging, and the wind is tearing off his head."

High summer: heat waves coming up off the fields, mirages on the roads, girls in clingy cotton dresses. His friends would ride out into the hard land, and he behind them, Fat Royal pounding his old Huffy to keep up.

In the heat of the day they would take comic books and Cokes down by Salado Creek and read and sip their cold drinks and talk of the matters of those days.

The van hummed on the highway. The Whaler tasted of plastic, as if the heat of the day had melted some of the container into the bun.

A summer had come when he was the only child who hadn't moved away or gone to camp or gotten too old to spend time down at Salado Creek. Eventually he'd had to face a hard fact: childhood was not eternal.

When the flowers had blown from the trellis in the backyard that autumn, he had become possessed by a soft, cloying anguish that had never since left him. He did not pine for his childhood because it had been beautiful. It hadn't been. What he wanted was to somehow escape the pain.

Alone by the Salado, he had first experienced the sort of fantasy that could still make his stomach churn with revulsion even as it stirred his desire.

In the fantasy he was carried naked to the creekside by the other boys. They laid him face up on the bank, with his head dangling over the water. He could see the sky above and the gently swaying cypress trees, and then they would push his head backward until it went under. Desperate, fighting the water that was forcing its way up his nose, he would be dimly aware that somebody was handling him where they shouldn't be.

The fantasy was wrong, it was a sin. So intense were his efforts to suppress it, more than once he imagined jamming a red hot soldering iron into his brain.

What he wanted now was a pure relationship with a child to prove the goodness that was in him. He could be a good father and a very special sort of a friend. He had to show that to himself. By giving joy to a child, he could heal the wounds of his own childhood. That was his great quest.

So on and on he went, searching for the perfect relationship with the perfect child. He dreamed of looking back one day and saying of that child: *I made him happy*. Then all would be well.

The closer the boy was to perfection, the more he brought back memories from Barton's own past: the blowing trees, the voices, the easy laughter of the old days—and Fat Royal and Let's Fuck Leaky and oh God, if only he could repair the past! The saddest memories are those that just miss being wonderful.

To get closer to kids he became clever in their ways. He learned to form friendships with them using a combination of kindness and firmness. He learned about their fads and fashions. He was aware of the importance of Nintendo, and of the differences between Super Mario Brothers Two and Super Mario Brothers Three. He knew all about Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

When it was good with Timmy, the child had kissed him as he might have his own father.

Dad had died as quietly as a moth rising into the sky. "I love you, Dad!"

Barton had stood over his father's still body, and spoken those exact words.

At the graveside he had read one of his own poems, and Mother had said, "What a lovely thought."

Each Sunday since the death she put a single sprig of lilac on the grave. Her grief had been so intense for so long that it had come to seem like a sort of grim pastime.

Again and again Barton tried to puzzle out why he did what he did. Was it Dad's fault, or Mother's? Was it his? Had something terrible happened that he had forgotten, or was it an accumulation of little disappointments that had done it? The other children had been awfully damn hard on him. Every time he thought about it, he got so *fucking mad!*

But he wasn't dangerous.

He prayed for the new little boy. "God, let him survive."

If only the black room didn't exist, if only he never took them there, if only—

A child needed him.

2.

Because he had other things on his mind, Billy wasn't really working at Space Harrier. The American Legion was sponsoring a short story writing contest with an Iowa theme, and he intended to win it. His main inspiration was that first prize was the amazing sum of five hundred dollars.

He also had an idea. It was stimulated by a summer reading assignment recommended by Jim McLean, his English teacher. The inspiration was Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and the idea was that your typical Iowa farmer would wake up one morning and discover that not only had he turned into a giant bug during the night, so had all the other farmers. And they were hungry for corn.

Billy was excited about his story, so excited that he'd failed to better last night's crop of teenage records in Space Harrier.

As far as digital games were concerned, he much preferred Dungeonmaster on his Amiga computer. He was already deep in level ten and the way he computed the probabilities he had a fair chance of surviving until the game ended.

He wondered what would happen when it did. When you beat Super Mario Brothers all Mario did was lie there and sleep. Not a very big deal considering the magnitude of the achievement.

He worked alone; deep Dungeonmaster levels were too hard to crack with a bunch of kids arguing about every spell you cast, and then getting pissed off when they weren't allowed to take a turn.

Jerry Edwards was already sulking over Billy's performance on Space Harrier. Acing games for the brain-dead like that was boring to Billy, but to Jerry it was the equivalent of climbing Mt. Amanda herself in the backseat of her parents' Vulva station wagon.

Being an undumb kid in a place like Stevensville was even more inconvenient than it had been in the last town, Iowa City. Iowa was not a state of genius, his dad said, but it made up for it with a big heart. Whee.

At least it was better than New Jersey had been, where drug dealers were always after you, sometimes even chasing kids down and forcing them to do crack.

Dad had been fired from the school in Jersey before he was fired from the one in Iowa City. That was how Billy ordered his past: from firing to firing. Dad had a mind of his own, and was therefore canned on a routine basis.

Dad could yell and wave his arms with excitement about LaFollette and Gus Hall and the House Un-American Activities Committee. He was capable of scoffing openly at everything from the CIA Charter to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, a Vietnam-era travesty only he had not yet forgotten. It was all pretty embarrassing, but the way he loved the hell out of you made up for it.

"Stevensville is a very tolerant, very midwestern place," Dad said. "I hope to last at least two full semesters."

Billy had disgusted Jerry by abandoning Space Harrier in midgame.

Three minutes after Jerry grabbed the controls the game over sign came floating into the foreground.

Billy whipped through level after level in Afterburner while putting his short story together in his mind. Waves of planes came at him. He jinked and jugged, dove and climbed, and thought how great it would be to be really weird like Kafka. I mean, Gregor Samsa just plain turned into a giant bug. His mother hurled an apple at him and it got embedded in his back. He was even crunchy like a bug, but too huge to step on. His family was very embarrassed.

That was such a good story. When his own family went down to Des Moines in July Billy had taken a super-sharp Xerox of Kafka's picture to have a KAFKA LIVES T-shirt made at the Shirt-works.

His story was going to just totally turn everybody's stomach which would be incredibly fun. It would be the best-written submission, he was confident of that. But would it win? Only if the judges had the courage to recognize the best. It would certainly go into the fall issue of Stevensville Junior High's literary quarterly, the Biblion. Gum-popping goddesses would read it and say, "That was really, well, sort of unfiltered." They would also say, "That Billy Neary is so outa tune."

Suddenly Billy crashed. He stared at the screen, watching the smoke rise as his jet plowed into a town. That was what you got for plotting a short story while playing a game whose moves were measured in hundredths of a second.

To cover his embarrassment he instantly turned away from the screen. He had a reputation to protect.

"You screwed up, Neary. I saw you!"

"And you're gonna tell the world."

"Naturally!"

"I'll do you a favor sometime."

"You blew level ten. I can't believe it." Jerry grabbed Billy's head, rapped hard on the top of it. "Yep. I thought so." He rapped again. "Hear that? Sounds like there's wood in there."

The headlock was pretty painful, but Billy knew to give no sign. "Implying that I'm a woodenhead. I'm crazed with laughter."

"No, man, that sound means you have a brain tumor."

"My middle name is Melanoma. If you break my neck I'll vomit all over the warts on your chest."

Jerry dug his knuckles deeper into Billy's head.

"I will seriously retaliate."

Jer ought to know that Billy's threats were on the level.

"Remember the toilet caper, boy." Billy had flushed a Baby Giant down the toilet at Cinemas Three and gotten Jerry blamed for the explosion.

"I damn well do remember it, you smug son of a bitch."

"Now, now, children don't talk like that."

"The fuck they don't."

"Let me go or I put a time bomb in Lacy's mailbox and you'll take the heat."

"Lacy's in bed with my dad."

"So are most of the other men in town. You know you can't afford heat from Lacy."

Jerry released him—not because of the threats, but because something else had interested him. "There's that queer you pussywhipped on RPM."

"That's no queer, that's Lacy's twin sister."

"Don't speak that way about our police chief. It's unpatriotic."

The stocky man's eyes slyly turned. Billy felt himself being scrutinized.

"You could probably make a couple of bucks off that guy, you let him suck you off."

"Thank you, Jerry, but I can do without your kind of money."

"Your problem is, you got no head for business."

"Give no head for business, you mean."

"Is that funny, or just dumb?"

"Brilliantly hilarious."

"Dorked out."

It was lunchtime, and Billy was hungry. His finances were so low that lunches at Burger King or McDonald's had come to seem lavish, so he decided to head home for peanut butter and jelly or—if his mother was in her gourmet mode—a grilled cheese sandwich.

Billy left the mall, unlocked his spectacularly ancient Schwinn from the rack and went pedaling off. He loved this bicycle, especially the fact that it was old and rather low-tech. Reverse chic appealed, especially in a town packed with glittered Hard Rocks ridden by kids in glittered British Knights and Nike Airs. Also, riding a plain old bike and wearing plain old clothes pleased his plain old dad.

He took the usual route home, swerving briefly into the Burger King parking lot to spy out the society, even though he was fairly sure that Amanda and the other observables hadn't heaved their butts out of bed yet, knowing their established summertime routine. Most of them would be embarrassed to do their Egg Beaters before two-thirty at the earliest.

Despite the certainty of physical abuse, he intended to declare his love to Amanda at the next opportunity. He would then accept the beating from Jerry. Amanda had already made an observation about the enormous Jerome that was probably fatal to Billy's hopes: "He has hair growing on both sides of his chest."

"William, my little twelve-year-old super-dork," Jer had said, "give up. She'll never buy into your girlish looks."

"I'm sure she'll love your wit, your brilliance."

"She'll love the fact that I'm thirteen and a half and I can get a hard-on that works."

"Gee, does it work a lot?"

"Only when I make scuzzbags like you chew it. Look Billy, if you talk her up somehow or other, I'll eradicate your face."

"Why so worried? Feeling insecure?"

"I like to kill guys like you, Billy. I really do. The last thing Iowa needs is more brains."

"Brains mean money, dear child." Except, of course, in a case like Dad's . . .

"I don't have brains. I come from a dumb family. My dad can hardly even run an automatic elevator. That's why we live in a little town, because there aren't any around here. But he owns a piece of this mall and a piece of the Sears mall and about six thousand acres of corn. And never forget, schoolteacher's son, that he is on the Board of Ed."

"Which explains why the Board of Ed has nothing to do with brains."

"Why should it? Clearly, school isn't about learning. It's about winning basketball games."

"Will I have a sense of humor too, when my hard-ons start working?"

"They never will, junior. They never will."

So it went. The day would probably come when Amanda would forsake Jerry, but not for baby-faced Billy Neary with his old bike, old car, old clothes and cheap Walkman.

He would never admit this to Jer or any other living soul, but he was beginning to wonder what it was *like* to reach puberty. He knew all about it of course, thanks to his father's stentorian and incredibly embarrassing sex education "conversations." But what was it *really* like?

It was just noon when Billy wheeled into his driveway.

A single place was laid at the red Formica table that dominated the kitchen. Mother had indeed produced a grilled cheese sandwich, but it was for his older sister. He slid half of it into his mouth while an unsuspecting Sally was rummaging in the fridge for some Hi-C.

"You thieving creep!"

"Slip of the tongue." He laid open his cheese-filled mouth. "Excellent cheddar," he said.

She took a swipe at him with the ice-cream scoop, which had been lying in the sink. Then she stared at it, her eyes widening with horror. "My Heathbar Crunch!" she gasped and ripped open the freezer. "Dad," she yelled, "you've been eating my Heathbar Crunch that I bought with my own money!" Throwing the ice-cream scoop over her shoulder she flounced out. "I hate men!"

Dad had not stirred from watching the Orioles slowly if ineptly defeat New York. "One to nothing and it's the top of the ninth," he commented as Billy passed through the den. He was working on a huge bowl of Heathbar Crunch.

"I ate her lunch. You've got her dessert. Retaliation is possible."

"She's scared of me, I'm much too large and awful. She'll take it all out on you."

"I'm going down to the basement to work on my short story."

"Have a plot yet?"

"Iowa farmers turn into giant bugs."

"Didn't I read that headline on the Weekly World News down at the A&P?"

"Dad, it's based on Kafka."

"Throw Kafka at the American Legion. They're sure to give you five hundred bucks for that."

"Well, it would be fun to write."

"What about doing something topical? Flag burning, for example?"

"I'm scared of matches."

"My God, a player has hit the ball. Oops, it's a foul. Kind of an interesting half-second there, though."

Billy was careful to lock the basement door against a raid from his sister.

Sitting down before his beloved computer, Billy decided that his day was going pretty well. It was afternoon and the basement was cool and there was a large Butterfinger hidden behind his computer bench. There was also a beer there, but that was part of another scenario. Bring Amanda down, impress her with his ultra-boss computer, sip a little brewski, then, well, connect faces. Billy Neary and his Flying Fantasies. He sighed, then flipped on the computer and loaded Pro Write from the hard disk. The white screen stared at him. "It was a dark and stormy night," he wrote. Nah, not cliched enough to satisfy the American Legion.

"When Bob Hughes woke up one morning from dreaming about his corn, he found himself changed in his bed into a huge corn borer. All that was left of that farmer was his toupee."

'Oh, man, this would be an awful lot of fun, but Dad was right that it wouldn't win the American Legion contest.' He hit erase and sat staring at the blank screen.

"Young Freddy Krueger had a deep love of his country, and especially its beautiful flag."

A yucky story idea, yes, but Dad had closed the loan window in July and Billy was down to smelling other people's breath after they ate their hamburgers. His last ever candy bar was two feet away from his trembling fingers. He had to write a winner.

"He would defend his flag with his life. To a true patriot like Freddy, it meant everything. And everything else, too."

Maybe he'd better change the Freddy Krueger. They probably wouldn't make the connection to the Nightmare on Elm Street movies, but why take the risk? He'd call his character Martin Bormann. They'd never in a million years pick up on the fact that he was one of Hitler's dearest, sweetest thugs.

While he stared at the screen, Billy's hand moved toward the Butterfinger.

The thing was, he wanted to have fun. A story about the flag was not fun; it was a chore. He killed ProWrite and played around for a while with the birdsong he had recorded the night before. All summer he'd been trying to get that bird to reply to him. Whenever there was enough moonlight to keep it awake, it sang on the wire behind the house. Billy sang back, but so far the bird had never responded. He had been recording its song in hopes of better imitating it. Now he was comparing the digital image of the birdsong to his own efforts. Slowly but surely he was getting closer to the bird's notes. It would be so extreme to have a conversation with a bird. Of course, it would just be

sounds. He didn't know any vocabulary. He could imagine it translated:

Bird: "The moonlight-t-t-t is so sw-e-e-et!"

Billy: "I have a t-t-tortilla in my e-e-ear!"

Bird: "What an asshole is he-e-e-re!"

He became absorbed, and when he became absorbed the world around him just plain ended. Hours passed. His sister took down the bucket of water she had carefully positioned above the basement door and spent the rest of the afternoon making pecan divinity for the specific purpose of hiding it from both of the damn men.

Slowly, carefully, Billy was crafting his reply to the bird. He was producing deep music, amazing sonorities that were at once beautiful and weird.

Shadows came out from behind the furnace, from out of the disused coal cellar, down the steps that led to the storm door with its rusted hinges and loose lock.

Since it was a summer Saturday night, dinner was free icebox, no call and no formal table. At six he sucked up the Butterfinger, counting on it to sugar-high him through until about nine, when Jer would show up and they would hit B-King. Jer had promised to treat him to a small fries.

Finally there was no light in the basement but the pale glow of his monitor. It was past eight when Billy leaned back from his work and rubbed his eyes. He noticed with mild interest that there was a pair of legs visible beyond one of the basement windows.

Somebody was standing there. Dad? Jerry, inexplicably wearing gray slacks?

Never mind, it didn't matter.

But it did.

3.

Barton had felt sick when he saw the sea of kids in the video arcade. In only thirty minutes the place had filled up. Kids must have been pouring in steadily almost from the time he left.

He should have stayed; he'd never catch sight of his boy in this crowd. But he'd been seen, he'd had no choice.

Even now it was perfectly obvious that he was looking for somebody. He went down to the bookstore. Absently, he paged through a new novel, *Fire*. God, what an upsetting title. People did not know how much fire could hurt unless they had seen somebody being burned. If a person is burned extensively enough they start feeling cold. After a really thorough session they shiver like they were in a freezer—not that Barton had any knowledge of that.

There was such a thing as a wild scream. When a person knew that their agony would only be ended by death, that is how they shrieked. The black room had the most expensive ceiling tiles you could buy, and the cinder-block walls were double-thick. It swallowed screams.

If there is one place on earth where you can do absolutely anything you want, you are free.

A steam iron.

Barton's stomach churned. He put the book down. Again he made a run past the arcade. He rolled along casually, watching out of the

corner of his eye.

And there he was, the angel being manhandled by the bigger boy who'd been with him earlier. Barton was livid. Had the situation been different he might have intervened. Then the muscle-boy saw him. As he moved off, he just glimpsed himself being pointed out to the angel. Damn, that wasn't supposed to happen even once, let alone twice!

Uneasy about lingering in the mall, he had returned to his van yet again. He gripped the steering wheel, staring into the void of the parking lot. Stevensville might be a small town, but Crossland Mall was huge, designed to serve this whole part of the state. What was he going to do?

He'd definitely been noticed again.

Then a miracle had occurred. God must love him: he saw his boy coming out of the mall by himself. Barton was so excited he couldn't get his engine going. As he sat furiously grinding the starter the child moved toward the bike rack.

Barton's thoughts had flashed back to the first time he had seen Jack, on an October afternoon. Yellow leaves had been running in the streets and skywriters scrolling an enormous Pepsi ad across the blue of heaven. That had been at the Mill Run Mall in Tappan, California.

The engine ground to life, and for the first time Barton thought he might get this child.

The boy finished unlocking his aged bike and started for the exit. Despite the risk of losing him, Barton waited a full thirty seconds before following. He had to submit himself to the discipline of the quest. You had to know how to breathe, how to move, how to empty your mind and concentrate with total attention. Finally he started off, moving with the gliding slowness that most drivers adopt in mall parking lots. He wanted to jam the gas pedal to the floor.

By the time he caught sight of the boy again he was already turning

onto crowded Lincoln Avenue. Accelerating smoothly as he slipped into traffic, Barton cruised past the child. He kept him in sight with the special wide-angle rearview mirror he'd bought for just this sort of maneuver.

He'd bought it when he was following Timmy. The technique was to get ahead and let the child catch up.

Poor Timmy. He had been—

'Not now, Barton.' He was on the hunt. It wasn't time for memories. He coached himself: breathe in, breathe out. "Control your breath and you control your soul," said those who were spiritually aware.

The boy rode into the Burger King parking area. Quickly maneuvering the van, Barton cut into the far end of the lot. As he wheeled around he expected to see the bike cross right in front of him, but there wasn't a sign of the boy or his bike.

Barton looked out toward the street just in time to see the Schwinn disappear beyond some parked cars. As fast as he dared he left the lot. The boy was far down the street, pedaling hard. What did this mean? Surely the child hadn't seen him. Of course not. Boys changed their minds in an instant. Very well. He would keep his eyes on the bike. It was at least a quarter of a mile away—and just then it had turned a corner. To keep the boy in sight Barton had to gun his motor. So much for caution. He covered the distance to the side street in a few seconds.

Hicks Street. He looked down its tree-lined expanse. No bike. Damn. The boy must live in one of these houses. Unless— it was also possible that he had made the next corner and turned again. Barton moved to the end of the block. There he was, just disappearing up a driveway. In a moment Barton was cruising past 630 Oak. He had him. The boy walked his bike into the garage and dropped it onto an equally aged girl's bike. The child knew this place well. Barton was virtually certain that the boy lived here.

Next Barton checked the property for signs of a dog. What he glimpsed

of the backyard revealed that it wasn't enclosed. There was no doghouse. He spotted no telltale heaps of dog feces, no spots of dead grass indicating that a dog had urinated there.

At the end of Oak, Barton turned onto Maple, then went up Elm to Hicks. Then he drove down the six hundred block of Oak a second time.

While the condition of the yard suggested that there was no large dog present, a smaller pet might still lurk within the house. When he penetrated he would bring a hammer, raw meat and a plastic garbage bag for the animal's body.

If people like him got caught it was because they were careless. He could assume nothing, trust nobody.

He had never met another person like himself, but he had studied their failures in newspapers and magazines. He'd even done volunteer work for Missing America, a large support group for parents of missing children. He needed to get inside the mind of the parent and the police detective as well as the child.

He knew the law. He knew exactly what would trigger FBI involvement. He also knew police, and what telltale signs would make them suspect a runaway. If they thought a boy had left home on his own they would quietly downgrade the case.

Abduction by strangers was rare. In most places it was a sensational crime, not forgotten for years and years by the community. Etan Patz, abducted from SoHo in New York in 1976, was still being hunted.

Because Jack was listed as a runaway everybody had forgotten about him. But Timmy was on those damnable posters all over the country.

Barton had mixed reactions to that. The prospect of being investigated made him wake up sweating in the night—and yet the idea also caused a deep, illicit tingling.

Most guys like him took their kids right off the street. Barton had done that in the past, but his new method was far more subtle and extraordinary than simply luring a kid into the back of a van.

He drove slowly past the target house. Suddenly he became aware that his pants were soiled. There was a stain on his thigh. How long had he been wearing these pants? He couldn't remember. It could have been since last week, since Timmy. Revolted, Barton tried to pull the cloth away from his skin. He inadvertently turned the wheel. The van swerved badly.

There—another moment of inattention. Somebody might have noticed the white van that swerved the day before Johnny So-and-So disappeared. And under hypnosis the witness might remember the license number of that van.

It was so easy to fail.

He headed back out to the interstate, driving quietly for a time, to calm himself. He would have to live with the stain. It was probably just grease anyway.

He took an exit ramp about ten miles from Stevensville and drove down under a bridge where he had already scouted a good place to park the van.

He thought over what he had seen. The family lived in a lovely old neighborhood, but their house was visibly shabby. In addition both of the kids' bikes were old, and the station wagon in the garage had seen better days. These were good signs. A poor child was easier to dazzle.

So he was part of a family of four or more. Unless the target had a brother whose bike Barton hadn't seen, it was likely that he would have a bedroom of his own in that big old Victorian house.

Barton looked at his watch. One-forty. He would not return to Oak Street until after dark, sometime between eight and eight-thirty. It would be his first chance to check out the house on foot. If they had

their name on the mailbox, that would be when he would learn it.

Since it was likely that he could act tonight, he would have to check out of his motel now. Following his plan, he would start driving west immediately after making the hit. He'd sleep in Colorado and Utah, living in the van until he reached L.A., which would be on the fourth day.

It was a hard drive but he'd done it before in that time, without ever once exceeding the speed limit. The idea of getting stopped for speeding with a kid in the van was too horrible to contemplate.

Maybe he was pushing too hard.

He probably should have taken the week on Maui before coming out here. As it was, he was going to have a hard time convincing Gina that his extended absence was in any way legitimate, let alone forgivable. She had to give in, though. It would be suicide to fire such a popular employee. In his own very small way, he was a star.

He *needed* another boy, and it couldn't wait even *one fucking minute*.

4.

A hand dropped down on Billy's shoulder.

"Dad!"

"Would you believe it's eleven o'clock?"

"No. I thought Jerry was coming by at nine."

His father laughed. "He came. You told him to leave you alone."

"I've gotta just put this one sequence together, Dad. I've got all the tracks laid, it's just a question of linking—"

"It's the end of the day, Birdman."

"I'm not tired."

"You're never tired."

"So let me finish this. I want to talk to that bird."

"Formula for long life, says Chinese sage: bed, sleep and sweet dreams."

Hand in hand they went upstairs.

Barton was lying in the yard under a twisted old tree. The moonlit shadows of its limbs made crooked fingers in the grass. When the

basement light finally went out he sat up. But there were still lights on upstairs. Didn't these people ever sleep?

It was a beautiful night, and every so often he would raise his eyes to watch the moon through the branches of the tree.

"I see the moon and the moon sees me, high up in the old oak tree ..."
On his nights of boyhood the breeze would come fifty miles from the sea, bringing with it the magical scents of the ocean mixed with night-blooming flowers.

Barton would dream of evil green waves and the ocean giant the Bible called Leviathan. Whisper-quiet, Leviathan would come up from the depths of his dreams . . .

The last of the lights finally went out.

Earlier he'd watched the boy playing with his computer. There had been terribly complex images on the screen, and music, such music, wild and beautiful. He had watched that lovely face concentrating, seen the graceful curve of his neck, the softness of his boy's hands and the laughing, gentle eyes. He was the most perfect boy Barton had ever seen. Just absolutely perfect.

He wondered how this boy was punished. Probably just talked to, the lucky little *bastard!*

Barton would be laid in his mother's lap. The purpose of the ritual was to correct and teach. There was love in every blow, Barton knew that. Dad would never help him. Dad would never tell her to stop, tell her it hurt too much.

Dad had been so weak at the end, Barton had just laid his hand over his nose and mouth. He'd had to do this to see if his father was still alive.

Barton had called to his mother, who was in the shower. "Mother, Dad has died."

Dad had never come to his bed in the night.

And he hadn't smothered Dad.

He stood up, took three deep, hungry breaths and moved toward the house. His feet whispered in the dewy grass.

Billy dropped his clothes into the hamper. As always, there were a number of issues connected with the shower. First, how long. Second, how hot. Naturally the most desirable situation was very long and very hot. But Billy knew the risk of depriving his mother of her hot water. She also showered at night, and could become dangerous if this happened. "Since you wanted such a long shower, take mine, too."

"But it's cold, Momma."

"I know."

He wanted her to have her small pleasures. She saw to so many of everybody's needs. Given Dad's profound lack of technological skills, it was she who assembled the toys of Christmas, she who had connected up the Amiga and taught him the rudiments of it. Basics like food and clothing came from her, and she also was the one who understood that his mind was on a major growth curve. She had introduced him to *The Catcher in the Rye* when Dad was still promoting *Tom Swift and His Amazing Underwater Toaster Oven*.

Billy lathered himself efficiently with Ivory. He took special care with his underarms, for he had noticed again today a musky odor lingering around him during the noontime heat. As he washed, he touched his privates.

Amanda.

He almost collapsed. The merest flickering thought of her made his penis leap to life. It stood before him in the spattering water, and he

checked to make sure the door was locked. What would his sister do if she saw this? Call the police, probably. What—would—Amanda—do?

You would end up wearing a bicycle around your neck, young man. Boy, if this thing wasn't working yet, it sure was about to start.

Amanda ... to walk with her, hand in hand, to the gazebo in the center of MacIntyre Park, dear Lord, and there to place my lips against her lips and perform extremely pleasing acts . . .

Awash with desire he faced in the privacy of his shower the fact that there was no hope. Amanda Bartlett would never pay him the least attention.

"Ach du lieber Augustine —" And what was the rest? Two months out of school and he was already brain-dead in German. "Du lieber Amanda ..."

You did not impress a girl like Amanda by being recording secretary of the German Club. Let's face it, Jerry had elaborate muscles and could prance the gridiron before her admiring gaze.

When baby-faced William Neary came up to her and said, *"Ich bin lieben —or lieber —uh ..."* he could expect the proverbial wet *Spaetzle*.

As the shower turned tepid his erection collapsed and he stepped out. He dried himself and pulled on his yellow cotton pajamas.

Bedroom, bed. To sleep, perchance . . .

* * *

Because there were basement windows secluded at the back of the house Barton could take his time entering. He examined a window frame with his penlight, taking inventory of its various weaknesses. He

did not want there to be any sign of entry or exit.

He'd learned from his work with the missing children group that policemen felt ill-equipped to fathom the secrets of families and read the hearts of children; the most beloved child could decide to leave home, and for unknown reasons. A flower of youth might end by turning tricks on Sunset Boulevard or Lexington Avenue in the Fifties and nobody would ever know why.

Barton intended to create the appearance that this particular kid had packed up and moved out. But before he did that, he had to face the tricky part; indeed, it was the best ruse he had ever contemplated.

In his pockets he carried wire in various grades, a group of plastic cards of different thicknesses and even some old-fashioned skeleton keys he'd bought at a yard sale. Small-town locks were sometimes old enough to give up their secrets to these keys. Finding that the window was secure, he tried the storm door. He was pleased to discover that entering here could not be simpler: there was a padlock, but that had been locked onto the broken hook. The tongue of the hasp hung open. He took out his 3-In-1 Oil and oiled the hinges—very, very lightly. Then he wrapped some felt around the loose parts of the lock. He checked his other equipment: the cloth packs, the ether, the duct tape, the hammer, the bags.

He was going to be a wonderful father to this boy. They would have a fabulous life together.

Billy listened to the quiet. Everybody's light was out. Only Billy was still awake—as usual. He simply did not sleep as much as other people, at least not as much as the members of his own family did.

He threw off his sheet and stepped into the faded shaft of moonlight that shone on his rug. He went to the window. The breeze was scented with the perfume of corn tassels. He loved the night, and was all too aware that this night fell at the end of his last childhood summer. In October he would be thirteen. He'd heard his father and mother talking one night, and his mother had said, "He's disappearing. Right

before our eyes, he's just disappearing."

The moon was high, and the bird sang into the silence. He could see it sitting on its telephone wire. To his ear there was no sound in the world quite so pure as the voice of a bird. Carefully he directed the microphone of his tape recorder out the window. He drew in breath, rolled his tongue into the back of his mouth and let out three notes. The bird went on singing to itself, all alone on the wire.

The world swimming in moonlight, the whispering breeze, the bird's clear, sharp song—nobody could re-create such beauty. But he could try. This time he closed his eyes. He let his ears become his only senses. He filled his lungs and pretended he was a bird also, soft and quick and smitten by the moonlight.

He sang.

The bird sang back.

Again he sang.

And the bird sang back.

He replied.

The bird fell silent.

Billy opened his eyes. Goose bumps covered his skin and his blood rushed with wonder. His first impulse was to wake Mom and Dad up and tell them, but that might be a mistake. He would almost certainly get a strict order to slide back between the sheets.

There was no time for sleep now. He had to go down to the basement and play this recording into the computer, examine the exact nature of the notes that had gained response.

Had he actually duplicated the bird's voice, or simply deceived the creature?

As he slipped along the hall he heard the bird again. At the top of the stairs, he paused. Aside from the bird, the only sound was the ticking of the big clock in the living room.

Quietly he went downstairs.

5.

Barton lifted the storm door, went halfway down the steps and pulled it closed behind him. Admirably soundless.

He stood in careful silence, not even breathing. When he took a breath it was to test the odors in the room for what information they might impart. The air smelled of cool concrete, with a faint undertone of mildew. Ordinary basement smells, nothing to worry about.

He was surprised at the intensity of his feelings. This was a luscious moment. It was also extraordinarily scary. Sometimes he thought he could best understand himself as a dark element of God sent to haunt the world.

He padded into the center of the basement. He was hunting for the stairs with his penlight when he heard a distinct footfall above his head. It was faint, but very definitely there. He listened, but the sound did not repeat itself.

An instant later he was appalled to find himself standing in a flood of light.

Billy turned on the basement light from the pantry. He went down, his eyes on the Amiga. The quiet made the basement mildly creepy. It was a familiar sensation, and he would have ignored it except that it caused him to remember those legs he had seen earlier outside the window.

Dad had been wearing khakis. None of Billy's friends wore gray slacks in the middle of summer vacation. Had it been an extremely subtle trick played by his sister, to get back at him for eating her sandwich? No, she wasn't that subtle, at least not usually. There was, of course, the time last February she had taped the matchbox full of fruit flies from the bio lab inside his guitar. He'd noticed the change in tone, torn out the box and inadvertently released the tiny flies. He hadn't even noticed the bugs . . . until ten days later when their reproduction rate had caused his room to suddenly become a jungle hell. Given that he was owned by parents who did not believe in insecticide, getting rid of the flies had been a pretty major pain in the ass.

Well, there certainly wasn't anybody out there at this hour, unless it was some kid. By ten-thirty you could hear the lights changing from one end of Lincoln to the other. Kids at slumber parties would sneak out in the nude at midnight and nobody would see them. Once, according to Jerry, he and Dick-the-Prick Davis and Fo-Fo Garr had met up with Cynthia Stales, Rebecca McClure and Sue Wolf on Endower Lane, and both groups were nude.

Lying bastard.

He sat down at his computer and flipped the switch. The opening screen came up, followed by his hard disk icons. He went into his birdsong files. He plugged his earphones into the small amplifier he used with the computer, and unhooked the speakers. Instantly he was lost in the wistful, perfect music of the bird.

Barton breathed carefully, with infinite softness. He lay under the boy's workbench, his elbows grinding into the hard concrete floor. The child's bare feet were not eighteen inches away from his face. It would have been so easy to just reach out and grab one of those sleek ankles. But the boy would scream the house down.

Initially Barton had been so stunned by the light that his mind had gone blank. Fortunately instinct had prevailed and he'd dived under

the table just in time. Gradually, he recovered his composure. His breath came more gently, the sweat dried on his face. He forced himself to think calmly and clearly. Things were by no means out of control. There were still lots of options.

If he could figure some way to get out from under this damned table and work his way around behind the boy, he could put him to sleep in a few moments. Barton was a powerful man; the child had no chance of getting away before the ether overcame him.

Billy labored happily, but not for very long. He had to admit that he was a little tired, and digitizing a tape was a complicated process. Working with sound on a computer was slow, exacting and technical if you were interested in doing it right.

He killed the program and sat staring at the blue opening screen for a short time. When he thought about it, he wasn't so tired that he couldn't play Dungeonmaster for a while. And why not? Life wasn't supposed to be all work.

He loaded his Dungeonmaster disks and pressed the red resume button beside the great black door that appeared on the screen. In a moment he was deep in level ten.

Barton edged his way out from under the end of the workbench farthest from where the child was sitting. In the shadows ahead stood a fat old converted coal furnace with an evil grate.

He slid along inching like a great worm, until at last the furnace was between him and the boy. He pulled himself to his feet and peered out from amid the tentacles of ducts.

The boy was still playing with the computer. If this was going to work Barton would have to move like lightning. He opened the ether and

crouched down.

Tensing his muscles, bracing, he prepared to leap.

The last thing he did was to soak his felt in the chemical. Its medicinal stench filled his nose, its coldness made his hand ache.

What was that smell? It was raw and fresh. Billy had been tapping his feet, tipping the chair back as he played. Had he somehow crushed a dropped tube of glue? He checked under the workbench. There was considerable debris down there, including that missing Amiga User utilities diskette. He retrieved it and put it into his diskette box.

There was no glue, and yet the whole basement reeked of the stuff. There was also another smell, a human smell. Billy sniffed his own underarms. It wasn't him. Could it be Dad, or his sister? No, neither of them stank. And the glue smell—it just didn't make sense.

Upstairs was suddenly very far away.

He decided that he'd had enough for one night. He turned off the computer, slid back his chair and left the basement. Although it wasn't a usual thing for him to do, he locked the basement door behind him. He also left the light burning. Burglars, he thought, don't like light.

But what would a burglar be doing fooling around with glue?

Too late Barton had realized his mistake. The boy had sniffed, looked around. Obviously he had smelled the ether. And then fear had entered his face. He'd hurried off, locking the basement door behind him.

After the door had closed there was no further sound from upstairs. Barton was left alone in the light.

That might just mean that the boy was waiting and listening. Barton contemplated violating a cardinal rule and leaving a trace of his presence: he considered locating and cutting the telephone wires.

As he looked for the telephone company's incoming service he glimpsed his own reflection in one of the basement windows. It startled him and he jumped back.

Beyond those black windows he couldn't see a thing. A coldness spread through him as he realized that the boy could be going outside to examine the room from a position of safety.

Never mind the phone wires, he had to get out of here.

At first Billy had tunneled into his sheets, hidden in his familiar bed with his beloved stuffed Garfie snuggled close to his chest. But that didn't work. Not being able to see out increased his feeling of vulnerability. He threw the sheets off and looked around him. The room was as always. He sniffed. No unusual odors here. He listened. No strange noises.

He knew what he'd smelled in the basement, though. He was almost sure that another human being had been in there with him, somebody who was sweating and—for whatever weird reason—using glue. Whoever it was hadn't made a sound.

Billy decided he might have been having a nightmare while he was awake. Could that happen? He wasn't sure, but he thought maybe it could.

He decided to check out the rest of the family. Maybe he'd find the explanation in one of the other bedrooms.

Barton had withdrawn from the house very, very carefully. It had

taken him a good five minutes to convince himself that the boy had indeed stayed inside.

Except for the basement, which blazed with light, the place was dark. He looked at his watch: one-fifteen. At least he had plenty of time left. He decided to return to his spot under the tree and wait.

The bird's song had drawn Billy to his window again, and from there he'd seen a bulky black shadow moving across the lawn. He could hardly believe it. When he understood that this was completely real, that he was wide awake, a cold shock flashed through him. Somebody really had been watching him while he was in the basement. That person must have been the source of the smells. And earlier—had he been the one in the gray slacks?

The thought of the weird guy who'd played RPM with him in the video arcade flashed through his mind, but that was too crazy even for Billy Neary. The guy would have had to have followed him home, for God's sake.

The prowler had moved with a sort of rolling scuttle, almost crablike, quickly disappearing beneath the twisty limbs of the oak. Billy waited for him to come out the other side and go off down the sidewalk, but he did not come out.

This was serious and he had to tell Dad. He went into his parents' room. They were so tangled up together in their four-poster bed that they seemed like one body with two dark heads.

"Dad?"

No response. He looked down at them. How would it feel to sleep bundled so close to a woman? He wasn't sure he was ready to spend the night without Garfie.

"Dad."

"Mmm? Hah—"

"There's a man in the yard."

"What?"

"I was looking out my window and I saw a man go under the oak."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

Dad and Mother came untwined from one another and sat up. Dad looked angry. He swung out of bed and went to the window. "Where?"

"You can't see him now. He's under the oak."

"Maybe you should call the police, Mark."

"Let me take a look." He went over to their dresser and got the flashlight out of the bottom drawer.

Feeling a lot safer, Billy followed his father down the stairs.

Barton saw a glimmer of light touch the stained glass above the front door. It was only the slightest flicker, but it caused him to stand up and step back into the shadows. Then the door opened and the light jabbed like a needle into the dark yard.

With a single quick step Barton put the tree between himself and the flashlight. Obviously the boy had waked up his father and now they were searching for him.

As soon as he could get out of here he was going back to the van. He should never have tried this breaking and entering routine, it was just too risky.

But he had to have this boy!

He stood absolutely still, holding his breath, hardly daring to watch them lest they feel his stare. As if his thoughts could in some way control their actions, he willed them to stay on the porch.

Their voices drifted across the silent lawn. "There's nobody out there now, Billy."

Billy, his name was Billy.

"I saw him, Dad. He was right over there." He pointed straight at the tree. "He was fat."

"I don't see a soul."

"It was very scary, Dad."

So Billy had not only noticed his presence in the basement but also seen him as he moved across the lawn. He'd never dreamed he'd been under observation then. This little boy was sharp. He was also kind, and intelligent and beautiful. No matter the dangers, Barton could not abandon him. Billy.

6.

Barton's watch started beeping at exactly three-forty-five. Real sleep hadn't come, only a light nap. He opened his eyes into the warm blackness of the van. It was stuffy and the windows were fogged. He crawled up into the driver's seat, put the key in the starter and turned on the battery. When he lowered the windows the cool, rich night air brought him to full wakefulness.

The question was, should he go back? He already knew that Billy's father hadn't called the police; he would have picked up the dispatch on his scanner. There hadn't been anything, except when the one patrolman on duty made a routine check with the dispatcher.

The father must have decided that whatever his son had seen was innocuous. Even so, there was still great danger in going back tonight. But Barton couldn't risk waiting another day. There were too many imponderables.

While he'd been lying in the dark van, Barton had decided that he had been searching for Billy for all of his adult life. He just hadn't known it until now.

Barton Royal would give that child just a wonderful, wonderful life. There was so much love in him, so much giving, so much caring. Maybe Billy wouldn't believe it at first, but in the end he would love his new father so much the past would be completely forgotten.

He gripped the steering wheel as if it was the edge of a cliff. He told himself to breathe deeply and evenly. He was calm, alert.

Again he inventoried his supplies: ether, felt, duct tape, plastic cards, wire. The hammer, meat and plastic bag he could leave behind. Had there been a dog, it would have come out onto the porch with its master.

Billy, the little master.

You will be my soul's guide, Billy. I give you myself. I pray to you: dear Billy, open my eyes, guide me to the light.

He started the van. Ten minutes later he was passing the Burger King. Then he was on Hicks, then on Oak.

And there was the house. Thankfully, the basement light had been turned out. Dear old Dad must have noticed.

Barton imagined the conversation between father and son.

Dad: "I know what happened to you. You got the heebie-jeebies down there in the dark."

Billy: "I saw a man, Dad."

Oh, Billy, I pray you deliver me. Be the one who is stronger!

He cut his lights and engine and rolled into the driveway. The tires hardly crunched on the concrete driveway.

Then he stopped the van. A glance at his watch: four-oh-six. He would take no more than ten minutes in the house. He went back in through the storm door, working quickly and efficiently. This time the basement stayed dark.

As he passed the workbench and its litter of computer disks and equipment, he noticed a Butterfinger wrapper. So Billy liked Butterfingers. Duly noted.

The door at the top of the stairs was locked with only a knob button, but nevertheless it slowed him down. He fumbled with the plastic cards that you were supposed to work into the crack between the door and the jamb.

There was quite a scraping noise, so he stopped. Closing his eyes, he leaned against the door. Carefully, he probed more delicately with the edge of the card. Finally he found the tongue of the lock. He twisted the card from side to side.

Quite suddenly the door swung open.

Every movement, every breath counted now. He could imagine the father lying still and silent, could imagine his eyes opening, glittering in the dark. Every creak and drip in the house echoed with hidden significance. He heard the clocks ticking, the breeze moving the kitchen curtains, the scuttling of a roach on the floor.

He took his ether from the knapsack and put it with the felt into his side pocket. The silent house before him was deeply disturbing. He smelled a fragrance of apples and, very faintly, the hint of Pine Sol. There was a faint scent of pecan divinity.

That odor carried him to his depths. In his neighborhood the older sisters used to make pecan divinity. They would gather into a muttering, unapproachable tribe and eat it in somebody's backyard. If Barton drew near, they'd scream "Fat Royal" and throw a rock or two.

When he stepped from the pantry into the kitchen proper he smelled bread. Now there was one of the best odors in the world. When they'd been baking at the Wonder Bread plant you could smell it up and down Mariposa.

A large white appliance stood in the middle of the kitchen table. Barton recognized the thing as an automatic bread baker. He'd wanted one, but he wasn't sure it would work.

Now he'd go ahead and make the purchase.

This was such a nice kitchen. It smelled wonderful, its curtains were fluffy and pretty, it was clean except for that one roach. Family life was such ordinary magic, but he was *not allowed!*

He ran his finger along the warm top of the bread maker, careful as always not to leave prints. Then he took out his rubber gloves and put them on. They were the kind with reinforced fingertips. He had read that new techniques could read a print left through a surgical glove.

Even though he was on a tight schedule, he did a quick inventory of the pantry and refrigerator. It was important to know what Billy liked. He'd already found that Butterfinger wrapper and a Bud Dry behind the workbench in the basement. From now on there would be plenty of Butterfingers in Billy's life. As for beer, Barton would introduce him to Anchor Steam and Dixie and Cold Spring Export.

There was Carnation Instant Breakfast in the pantry, and Tang. There were LaChoy Chinese dinners and Chef Boyardee spaghetti with meatballs. It was surprising how many kids enjoyed that stuff.

Adults starve quietly; children scream and pace and plead.

In the freezer he found Old El Paso enchilada dinners and MicroMagic cheeseburgers and shakes, and Aunt Jemima microwave pancakes. There were Dove Bars, vanilla with milk chocolate coating, Tabatchnick vegetable soup, Birds Eye frozen orange juice. (He'd stun Billy with fresh-squeezed.) In the fridge he found Coke Classic and Dr Pepper, Hi-C Fruit Punch, a package of Oscar Mayer hot dogs, sweet relish and French's mustard. He ignored the potatoes and lettuce and fresh squash in the crisper. The boy would consider them penitential foods. There was Pepperidge Farm toasting white in the breadbox, and he noted Double Stuf Oreos in the cookie jar. The peanut butter was Jif Super Chunky, and there were Smucker's peach and raspberry preserves in the fridge. As small a thing as the right kind of peanut butter sandwich could be an important ice-breaker.

Leaving the door to the basement open, he went through the dining room into the front hall of the old house, and began to mount the

stairs. To reduce the chance of a creak, he took them three at a time, testing each step by slowly rolling his weight forward. Then he was in the upstairs hall. He didn't know who was in which bedroom. He had to guess, which was nerve-wracking.

Two of the bedroom doors were closed, one open. It made sense to look first in the open door, simply because that was the least risky.

He peered into the room. Against the far wall there was a window glowing with the thin last light of the moon. A bird's clear, lonely song pealed through the night. Under the window there was a bed, and on the bed a figure. His heart almost stopped at the sight of Billy sprawled in sleep.

Moving as carefully as a rat he crossed the floor, thinking of it as a dance. He was a good dancer. Mel Powell's Dance Studio, fox trot, rumba, swing, jitterbug, 1955.

He approached the bed. Swiftly he opened his ether, soaked the felt, laid it on the boy's face. The child was still for a moment, then he tried to turn his head. Barton was ready and bore down hard. A rush of movement went through the little body. There came a stifled sound, a cry of surprise. Billy's mouth opened, he tried to bite the cloth. He shook, his arms came out and flailed. His hands grasped and slapped. He made stifled gobbling sounds.

"Good, good," Barton whispered.

The boy shook and drummed his feet. The bed thuttered with a perverse echo of passion's tattoo. Only very gradually did his breathing become heavier, his movements slower.

Barton sang to him, sang in his sweet ear, "Where are you going, Billy boy, Billy boy, where are you going, charming Billy . . ."

Finally the child became unconscious.

Barton resoaked the felt and put it into a plastic sandwich bag, ready

for instant use if needed. Then he scoured the room for precious belongings. He found a guitar, but it was too big to bring. The stuffed toy that the child slept with he left behind. Weaning Billy away from that would be hard, but necessary if he was ever to put his present life behind him.

He took clothes, of course. The boy's wardrobe was not stocked with fashionable things like Gotcha and Ocean Pacific and Mexx. His clothes ran to plain jeans, shorts and T-shirts.

If this child was going to live in the Hollywood Hills with Barton Royal he would have to dress more fashionably. Once he was tamed a trip to some of the Melrose boutiques would be in order. But in the meantime, his old clothes would have to do. Barton stuffed the knapsack, then gave Billy another dose of ether and drew down his sheet.

How superb.

Barton pressed his face close to Billy's neck and smelled the natural sweetness of his skin. Why ever did boys turn into men? What a terrible curse! He lifted Billy in his arms and carried him out to the hall.

"Goodbye," he whispered on Billy's behalf, "goodbye to my dear old home." As he went downstairs, stepping because of his burden even more carefully than before, he felt almost like he had the moment Dad died, sad and yet joyous, his soul shot with sorrow even as it leapt free.

He was fully and completely aware that this was the most evil most hurtful crime he could commit. But what about him? He needed somebody, too.

He swept through the basement, a great black bird dragging prey, a fat man in the lost middle of his life, sweating under the weight of his stolen burden. He carried Billy across the front yard to the van. He had left the side door open, and he put Billy inside on the bunk. Then he strapped his wrists and ankles to the frame. Last, he sealed his mouth

with gray duct tape.

One final time, he left the van. Returning to the house, he raised the garage door as quietly as he could. It rattled like hell but there was nothing he could do about it except pray.

Quickly he wheeled the boy's bike out and stowed it in the van. He already knew that he would ditch it in the Platte River outside of Lincoln. It was too old to keep and took up too much room in the van. Obviously, he didn't want Billy to have a bike, but its disappearance would make the police think this was a runaway.

He returned to the driver's seat, paused and thought. He inventoried everything. Penlight, felt, plastic cards—he'd left nothing behind.

He pulled off his rubber gloves and put them in the map case between the seats. For a long moment he looked at Billy, who lay very still on the cot behind him. Suddenly nervous, he leaned close to the boy. It was all right; he was breathing fine.

His fingers hesitated over the key. Then he grasped it, turned. The crystal silence of early morning was fractured by the starting of the van.

He drove off down the dark street.

Part Two

CHARMING BILLY

7.

In the silence that followed the alarm clock, Mark Neary became aware that the house was filled with a wonderful aroma.

"My God, it worked."

Mary sat up. "I believe you're right."

They had invested in a two-hundred-dollar automatic bread baker, which promised to deliver a fresh loaf when you got up. Sally and Billy had argued over the cryptic instructions, but apparently they had figured them out.

Sally stuck her head in their door. "The most recent reincarnation of Torquemada is not in his room."

As he shaved, Mark assumed that Billy had gone down early to supervise the bread maker. Mary rubbed her long legs with Jergen's lotion. It made a soft sound that he loved.

All the clocks in the house ticked on, passing through eight-oh-eight,

eight-oh-nine, then eight-ten. Deep in Billy's computer a microchip silently marked the seconds, and in the living room the reproduction Regulator slowly retightened its spring after sounding eight chimes.

Eight-fifteen. In Billy's bedroom his digital watch beeped. His sister heard it and entered the room. She picked it up from the floor beside the bed and put it on his table. His ridiculous Garfie, which was in the middle of the floor, she threw onto the unmade bed.

A breeze blew through his open window, billowing the curtains.

Dressed in robe and slippers, Mark Neary hurried downstairs. "Smells like bread heaven," he called as he entered the kitchen. He raised the top of the machine and beheld a magnificent loaf. In a moment it was on the kitchen counter, steaming hot and wonderful. He pulled open the basement door and called Billy. "Come on up and get some absolutely fresh, absolutely hot oatmeal whole-wheat bread, complete with toasty crust."

He cut himself a big piece and spread it with strawberry jam. "It's heaven," he shouted.

Mary came in, her face glowing with the light of morning. Objectively Mark knew that his wife was no special beauty, but his heart did not know that, and it beat harder on behalf of the brightness of her skin, and his sex raised itself a little when she came up and kissed him. "You taste like strawberries," she said. He felt the laughter in her, and realized that he had dreamed again about her. They had gone to New Zealand in his dream. They had sailed a sunny bay. He remembered the water slapping the sides of the boat, the green hull, the white sails. Her dream body had been smooth and cool and her skin had tasted of the sea.

Mary turned away from him, absently tossing her hair, her eyes sparkling. On this day, he thought, we will be happy. "The bread's dynamite," he said as he cut her a slice.

"Let me do that. Those are defined as hunks, not slices."

"We need a bread knife."

"It's all in the wrist."

"Fresh bread! William! Appear!"

"You ought to set more limits, Mark. He's become part of his computer."

"You don't limit bright kids unless you absolutely must."

"Everybody needs boundaries." She went to the basement door.

"William Neary, the computing window is now closed. You have thirty seconds to get up here."

When no young voice replied, "Hold on!" she looked down the stairs. "Billy?" She descended a few steps. It was dark. She was confused, perhaps even a trifle concerned. "Billy?" She went quickly down, turning on the basement light as she descended.

Sunday breakfast together was a rule. His father was just too lenient. Billy had to learn that rules defined a family and made it work. They were the foundation of relationships, and so of love.

She stood in the middle of the basement, struck suddenly by the way its present silence clashed with her usual impression. It was full of boys' things—an abandoned model airplane, the whole elaborate, painfully costly computer system, tape recorders, a Casio keyboard, the splayed open remains of a number of old appliances, things he'd found in people's trash, Mets and Lions Club caps from New Jersey days, toy cars. She picked up one of the cars, a Rolls-Royce with a missing door. So recently it had been a prize, so quickly abandoned for better things. Abandoned, lost, like boyhood itself. Such was the poetry of the matter: this twelfth was the last summer of her son's childhood. From now on there would be that touch of autumn.

In all its simplicity and perfection, the quiet moment among her son's beloved junk captured her heart. 'How rich I am,' she thought.

Then her thoughts went to Mark, her dear failure of a high school history teacher. They'd shared grand ambitions: he was going to be the next Walter Lippmann, a fine author of the left, full of literate fire. Except his sentences were generally too long, his thoughts too complicated, his words too dry.

He was a little heavy about the middle now, and he'd been fired a lot for his flaming love of the social ideal, but many sparks of his youth were yet unquenched.

She loved his body on hers, loved it when he shook with passion, adored the tickle of his lips upon her breasts, adored sweating with him in the night.

"I simply cannot cut it thin enough for the toaster," he shouted. "Help me!" The "help" was long and full of mourning.

Laughing, she returned to the kitchen. The table was only half set and now Sally had disappeared. This just was not a morning for a formal breakfast. The Sunday paper lay on the counter, "Blondie" and "Prince Valiant" huge and colorful on the first page of the comics section. Billy loved the comics.

"The kids are getting through the strainer," Mary said.

"Help me cut this darn bread. It's great but it's got its gluish side."

" 'Gluish' can't be a word."

"Don't Funk & Wagnall me, *help* me!"

'I'll just plain Funk you if you don't watch out,' she whispered.

"Bad girl." He popped her on the bottom.

Sally came in the garage door. "His bike's gone."

"That's odd, Mark."

"Did you do something to him, Sally? Something that made him decide to escape your wrath?"

"Mother, he's twelve years old. He doesn't run away from me anymore. He fights back as best he can with his thin little arms and tiny fists."

They continued making their breakfast, as a ship might sail on even after its belly is sundered. Mary got the bread into the toaster and the water into the ancient percolator. Sally finished laying the table. Mark stood overseeing the bacon, Sunday comics in hand.

Mary did not tell him to be careful. If he wanted to set the newspaper on fire with his cooking, that was his business. She had decided this ten years ago. This time the bacon cooked and the newspaper did not.

They sat around the kitchen table eating bacon and toast and eggs, drinking frozen orange juice because they could not afford the kind that came in cartons. A pot of coffee steamed in the center of the table, beside the pile of Sunday paper.

Wrinkles appeared in the yolks of Billy's eggs. Eventually his sister stole his bacon and his mother put the eggs in the oven with some foil over the plate. Little was said during breakfast; the radio played a series of forgettable tunes, cars passed, one or the other parent looked up whenever a child shouted in the street.

"It isn't like him," his mother said. She was looking out the kitchen window into a yard flooded with sunlight.

They finally decided to make calls to the parents of his friends. One after another, the same answer came back. By ten there was a definite quiver in their voices, but the reason remained unsaid. At eleven the family drove over to the mall, but it was closed. There were a couple of people at Burger King, but no kids.

Knowing that his bike was gone, they drove the streets of Stevensville. It was all useless, and at noon the family returned home.

Sally, deeply upset, withdrew to her room. Outside the grasshoppers sang, lawn mowers clattered, sprinklers whirred. The strains of piano practice floated over from the Harpers' house, and an engine endlessly revved and died as young John O'Hara tried to bring life to the fifty-dollar car he'd bought from a junk dealer.

Mark went to his daughter. She lay on her side reading and listening to the radio. Mark knew nothing about rock and roll, having lost interest when he realized at the age of fourteen that no girl would ever consider him a hep cat, never mind his pink shirt, black pants and Wildroot-soaked fenders. Mozart, Telemann, Bach: this was his music, the music of what the kids called "geese" in his day and time. His friends were boys with crooked horn-rims and sour-smelling white shirts, and pallid, bepimpled girls in harlequins and too few petticoats, who professed themselves to be "sent" by Beethoven's Sixth, "so passionate, Markie!"

Now when Sally's blooming classmates got crushes on their history teacher, he thought, 'You're about thirty years too late,' and laughed within at the irony of time.

It was remarkably poignant to watch a girl become a woman.

He sat down on the bed beside her.

"Was he angry?" Mark asked her. "Was there a fight?"

"No, Dad. No way. He was fine."

"He didn't say anything to you—talk about taking a ride, going somewhere—" Mark stopped. He realized that he'd already asked her at least five versions of this same question. He fell silent.

Sally said it: "I'm scared, Daddy."

Mary came in. "Was there anything he wanted? A new computer program? Something he might have decided to go into Des Moines on his own to get?"

"Billy'd never go to Des Moines by himself without telling. And the computer stores're probably closed Sunday."

Mary bowed her head in acknowledgment. Her son wasn't *that* indifferent to limits.

Mark realized there was something he had to say. Let Sally hear her father's fear, let Mary hear that he could be victim to his feelings. He had to get this out, and he had to do it now. "Last night, he woke me up." He took a deep breath. "He said he'd seen a man in the front yard. I looked, but there wasn't anybody there. I'm sorry to say, I just—"

It came then, the pain, welling up in him like a ball of red fire, bursting in the center of his heart.

"Oh, Christ—obviously, I—" It wasn't pride that stopped him this time, or the reticence of an inward man, it was the sheer horror of his mistake. "He must have been watching all the time—waiting for his chance."

Mary was absolutely silent and completely still. When she spoke her voice was very soft. "If it happened—and that's a very big 'if—it certainly isn't our fault. We can't think that way." She looked at her husband. "We can't, Mark."

"We have to call the police."

"I agree," Mary said. At once what had been a slow decision became a desperate emergency. Both parents went for the phone in their bedroom, followed by their daughter.

There was a short delay while Mary fumbled through the phone book looking for the number. This was a small town; the police could not be reached by jabbing 911.

Outside the lawn mowers had stopped, and lunch was being eaten in the other houses on the block. Soon baseball would hit the airwaves and the men would disappear into their air-conditioned living rooms

and dens.

Mary spoke the numerals. Her voice was loud in the noon hush, the digits enunciated with excessive care.

As Mark punched in the numbers a boy's voice sang out high and gay, and for an instant he thought—but no, it was some other child. A clawing, frantic urgency came over him as the phone rang, and when a voice said "Stevensville Police" he could barely manage to reply.

"My name is Mark Neary. I'm calling to report that my son, William, appears to be missing."

His call had been answered by Patrolman Charles Napier, who was on dispatch this Sunday until four. The call didn't surprise him. They got three or four of these a month. If the children were young the cases were always solved within a couple of hours. Older children might be runaways, and runaways sometimes took longer. But they all came home in the end, all of them. Kids got killed, even kidnapped, but not in this sleepy little town. The parents, of course, were always terrified, and Charlie was always gentle with them. "When did you discover William was missing?"

"When we got up this morning. During the night he woke me up. He said he'd seen a man in the front yard. I investigated, but there was nothing wrong. Then this morning he wasn't here anymore."

Charlie Napier had pulled out a missing persons form. He took the bare details of age and description. There would have to be an immediate investigation of this case, because a minor was involved. In adult missing person cases the department waited twenty-four hours before starting a search. "An officer will be out to see you in about ten minutes."

Mark hung up the phone. "They're coming right over," he said. His voice sounded to him like an echo. He had become his own audience, observing the tragedy even as it spun itself around him.

Distantly, "The Star Spangled Banner" rose from a neighbor's TV. The baseball game was starting, and everybody else was safe, and nobody else's child was threatened.

Mary's hand came into his. "Do you really think that the man—"

"I don't know."

She wanted to lean her head against him, but restrained herself. They needed to be strong for one another, not to display weakness. She squeezed his hand. "He'll be found."

"I guess it's the step we just took. It makes you face how damn scared you really are."

Mary herself felt light-headed. She asked Sally to go downstairs and make some coffee.

As Sally poured out the grounds and measured the water, she tried to understand. Dad had said that Billy had waked up in the night and seen a man. What did it mean? Sometimes she and Billy would both wake up in the middle of the night and do something crazy like play Monopoly on the hall floor. They'd watch *Chiller Theatre* that came on channel six at two a.m. Saturday. Or they would talk, spinning dreams in the night. She wanted to get out of Stevensville as much as she'd wanted to get out of all the other little towns where her father taught.

Billy was a pretty bright kid. Surely he wouldn't have agreed to go with some man who came to the house in the middle of the night.

Her brother was also a total innocent when it came to certain things. You could give him an Oreo loaded with tabasco sauce and he'd pop it into his mouth every time. But he wouldn't let himself get kidnapped.

The arrival of the police alerted the neighborhood for the first time to the existence of a possible problem at the Nearys' place. People noticed the green and white car cruising slowly along, watched it as it came to a stop in front of the teacher's unkempt yard. Because they were recent

arrivals most of their neighbors did not know the family; some of them didn't even know the name. Mark knew that the appearance of the police car would bring uneasy questions.

He felt queasy, watching the officer come up the walk. A curious distance imposed itself. The policeman approached as if he was a phantom coming up an unreal front walk, beneath a sun as bright as memory. How strange that Billy was not there wanting to see his gun. As he came swiftly across the porch through the door the percolator started rattling. Sally went back to the kitchen.

She went to the percolator, leaned into the steam and inhaled.

"Coffee's ready," she said as she entered the living room. The young policeman smiled.

He asked questions about Billy. His age, his looks, did they have a video to run on television?

Mark was horrified. A video! Television! Billy was gone, really and truly gone. He wasn't in the basement, he wasn't out visiting, he wasn't at the mall.

Mary's impulse was to run somewhere and seek him, shout his name, make more phone calls.

"We don't have a video," Mark said.

"But there are pictures," Mary added. She was sick inside.

Just because they had no video didn't mean that Billy was lost forever, but that was how she felt.

"If you get TV they'll run a video a little more than a photo."

Listening to the man, realizing that Billy was truly gone, Mary could have screamed her guts out. But she didn't do that sort of thing, it wasn't her style.

She crossed her legs and leaned forward. She understood nothing about the black storming ocean within her. Life had so far never brought her a suffering such as this. Not even Mother's death compared to it.

She found herself ally to the parents whose children were torn from their arms at Auschwitz, to those who saw their little boys hanged at Tyburn for the theft of a button, to those whose children were raped by the passing Huns or Teutons or Romans, to all who have stood helplessly by while their innocents were caught in the mayhem of the world.

But she sat quietly.

The policeman noted how self-possessed the family seemed. His training had barely touched on missing children. There were certain realities, though, and he was aware of them: Most missing children were found within twenty-four hours; most were runaways. When they were done violence, it was most often at the hand of a parent or another family member. When they were abducted by strangers, they were most often found dead, or never found at all.

There were indications that this child had run away. The bicycle was gone, for one thing. According to the mother there were clothes missing.

"We call in a detective from Wilton in missing child cases. He's had a lot of experience with these cases. I just have to get the preliminaries, so we can put out a bulletin and get the picture over to KKNX. I'm sure they'll want it for the ten o'clock news."

"Billy's been kidnapped." Mary Neary's voice was smooth with terror.

"Well, ma'am, we assume the worst, hope for the best. That's how we do these things. But with his bike gone and the clothes obviously taken, this is very apt to be a runaway. Very apt to be."

"He left his watch behind," Sally said. "He never leaves his watch."

"I don't want to get your hopes up, but we've never lost a runaway here in Stevensville."

At first he thought he was hearing a distant siren. It took a moment of listening for him to understand that the sound was coming out of Mary Neary. Slowly it got louder. He glanced at the husband, who looked perplexed. Then the man's face went pale. As if she was a figure in a dream, the daughter's closed fists slowly came up to her cheeks. Her mother's eyes screwed shut, her arms whipped around her breasts and her whole body seemed to snap.

The sound of her anguish was made more painful to hear by her efforts to stifle it, not opening her mouth, throwing her head back, and all that tortured noise coming from her nose.

Afterward there was a stunned hush.

Sally ran out to the kitchen. She turned, her posture that of a soldier at the edge of the battlefield.

"The coffee's getting cold," she said in a shrill voice. She closed her eyes. In that moment she was wounded as certainly as if somebody had cut her with a whip. For the rest of her life she would be exquisitely sensitive to those sudden hushes that can stop a moment. And she would forever think, when they came, that somebody she loved had just been lost.

8.

At five o'clock in the morning Barton had passed through Des Moines. He had seen only one other vehicle on Interstate 235, a pickup truck going north, its headlights cutting the last of the dark.

He had left the interstate and driven through the streets hunting for a place to get a cup of coffee and a doughnut. Around him the city was drifting toward morning. This was the hour of last dreams, and the quiet was made more true by the dull hum of air conditioners and the slippery sound of an occasional passing car.

The public nakedness of a sleeping city would have thrilled him ordinarily, but this time it only added to his unease. He had expected to be exhilarated by his victory, but he felt an altogether different emotion. He couldn't seem to shake the feeling that something was deeply and terribly wrong, that he had made some mistake so basic he simply could not see it.

Without finding a place to get a doughnut he returned to the highway.

As the van sped westward the sun rose. It first sent the Aerostar's shadow far ahead, then caused it to contract. He thought of the shadow's astonishing cargo. Charming Billy.

What have I done wrong?

From the bed in the back Billy moaned. Barton heard an edge of consciousness in the voice. He would pull into the next rest area and do a heavy needle on the boy, put him out for eighteen hours.

Again there was a sign of consciousness, a thick, muffled word that was probably "Dad."

"Dad'll be here in a minute."

The reply was another moan.

Barton didn't want to stop on the roadside for fear some state trooper might offer help.

Dull thumps emanated from the back of the van. Billy was awake all right. He was struggling against the straps. In the rearview mirror Barton could see the quilt heaving. "It's just a nightmare, Billy!"

"Mmm . . ."

Sleep, little boy, sleep and rest, Father will come to thee soon . . .

"Mmmfff!"

"It's a nightmare!"

"Hh—mmmff!"

Come on, come on, doesn't Iowa believe in rest stops!

The road stretched out straight and empty. Behind him Billy jerked and moaned. Barton gripped the wheel, pressed the gas pedal as far down as he dared.

Five minutes passed, then ten. All the while the boy struggled. Finally, after twenty minutes, a rest stop appeared. Thank you oh dear God who loves your Barton. He pulled in toward the picnic tables and outhouses, then past a long line of parked eighteen-wheelers, finally stopping near a little grove of trees at the far end of the picnic grounds.

Quickly he opened the glove compartment and took out the black wallet containing syringes, alcohol and a small bottle of diazepam formulated for injection. He'd chosen the drug after reading medical textbooks. It was safer than a barbiturate and had, in addition to inducing sleep with a sufficient dose, the property of reducing anxiety.

He put some alcohol on a cotton ball and drew two cc's of the drug into one of his syringes. Then he climbed over the seats into the back, pushing past the bicycle and the bag of clothes, to the bed where the boy lay strapped and moaning.

The moaning became a high-pitched wail as he dug beneath the soft quilt and found Billy's arm. Billy's head jerked from side to side. He was trying to push the quilt away from his eyes.

His arm quaked when Barton touched it, but Barton was strong and quick. He swabbed the skin and delivered the drug. But it wouldn't go to work at once and the word coming from behind the gag was now distinct: "Dad! Dad!"

"You're in an ambulance, son!"

"Dad!"

"Dad and Mother are fine. Your sister is fine. There was a fire. Sleep now, son."

There were more sounds as Billy struggled to respond. In a moment he was going to be conscious enough to understand that he was gagged. Barton decided to take the risk of a scream and remove the tape, try to calm the child down. As he pulled it off, Billy smacked and coughed. Then he spoke.

"A—fire?"

"You're going to be fine. Sleep now."

"Did I get burned?"

"No, son, just a little smoke."

"I can't move . . ."

"So you won't fall off the stretcher. You're in an ambulance. You're very sleepy now. Go to sleep."

At last the breathing changed, grew ragged and then long, and Barton closed his own eyes and let his own breath sigh slowly out.

"Ether is a relatively short-duration soporific that was administered in gaseous form as an anesthetic during the early history of anesthesia."

They had been on the road nearly two hours. Barton should have given Billy the diazepam on the other side of Des Moines. To punish himself for his stupidity he slammed the empty needle into his own thigh. Stupidity must always be punished. Everything had to be plan-perfect.

"Ether is a short duration soporific," he said as he yanked the needle out.

To Barton's surprise Billy's hand was dangling. His struggles had been so extreme that he had freed it, something Barton had never seen any boy accomplish before.

Barton threw back the quilt and loosened the strap that bound the child about his midriff. He returned the hand to Billy's side, really touching him for the first time, holding his soft skin and feeling a rush of hurting desire. Despite the abrasions resulting from the child's effort to free it from the strap, it was a lovely hand, pale and silky.

He wanted to kiss it, to somehow meld with its beauty. He looked at the skin, now burnished by a shaft of sunlight. It was so exotic, so perfect down even to the dusting of fine hairs that came down from the wrist and spread along the outer edges toward thumb and little finger. That they would thicken and darken seemed impossible to believe: and yet this perfect being would soon be cast down the cliff of manhood.

Barton bent toward the hand, his lips parted ... it would be a sign of love, of respect, even of awe . . . his secret . . .

Inwardly, he made demands of himself. 'Don't! It's ugly and perverse and wrong.' But he longed to, he could hardly bear not just once touching his lips to that soft skin. 'It's monstrous! Don't!' He trembled. 'It isn't you, Barton. You're a decent, lonely man trying to recapture something pure, you are not a filthy lecher!'

He gripped the limp hand hard. Then he dropped it. He watched the sleeping form. Billy's slimness made Barton feel like a big, fat lump.

He wanted to give Billy a father's warm kiss, and feel him return it, and then Billy would be bound by the rich and healthy love that flourishes between father and son.

Laughing a little to himself, Barton climbed over into the driver's seat. He backed the van up to the outhouses and dropped the black curtain that hid the rear area from anybody who might look in the windshield. He didn't really need to use the facilities, but he knew better than to pass up a chance. He couldn't risk leaving the van while he was getting gas, and he didn't feel safe in rest stops during the day when they were full of meddling children and watchful parents.

Outside he breathed deeply of the early morning air. He was feeling better and better. This thing was going to work, he could sense it. At first it would be hard, but Billy would find that Barton Royal could show him such love, such attention. It would be quite beyond what he had known before. Their life together would be wonderful.

The outhouse was full of busy flies and had an oily, chemical stench. To Barton's surprise, some little creature screeched as he stepped in. Wriggling beneath his foot was a mouse. Involuntarily Barton jumped back, but the little animal was so damaged it could barely drag itself away. It was horribly injured. Probably it had already been weakened by poison before he stepped on it. Barton's first impulse was to use another outhouse, but then he thought he ought to put the little thing out of its misery.

With the intention of stomping on it he raised his foot. But then a sort of hesitancy entered his mind. He brought his heel down carefully, just pinning the creature. Its screams filled the tiny room. They were surprisingly loud. Bit by bit he increased the weight on its back. He could feel it writhing.

Kill it!

He slid his foot back and forth. The tail twisted and turned in the dust beside his shoe. A delicious warmth filled his body. As the mouse screamed, he hummed.

At last he decided that it was time for the creature to die. By inches he increased the weight on its back, until finally there was a crunch and the screeching stopped. He finished his business and returned to the van.

It was just a mouse, for God's sake.

He rolled down the windows and let the wind flood the van. Cotton clouds rushed up from the south. They were colored pink and gold against the sky. Before him stretched the road to the mountains and the wide western deserts, and finally home, his house tucked into its own very private quarter-acre of the Hollywood Hills.

He was within fifty miles of the Nebraska border when a state trooper suddenly pulled in behind him. For some time he'd been watching the police car coming up on his left. It was no more than two car lengths back when it shifted into his lane.

He checked his speedometer: fifty-eight. Not fast enough to warrant a ticket, not so slow as to be suspicious. The trooper came closer and closer, until he was less than twenty feet away. Inside the car Barton could see a shadowy, expressionless young driver, an older man beside him. He gulped air and tried to think. What could possibly have drawn them to him?

What indeed: he was engaged in an incredibly risky enterprise. For all

he knew a neighbor had seen his van at the Nearys', seen him hurry across the lawn with the boy in his arms, seen him wheeling the bike into the back of the van.

He had no reason to feel secure. Safety was an illusion. He was the worst imaginable sort of criminal—a child abductor—and he was on the run with a drugged twelve-year-old trussed up in his van.

This trooper was about to catch a monster, and maybe that would be best. The authorities would paw him, chain him, put him in prison ... or worse.

Barton Royal was not insane!

He should have used back roads, gotten out of the state that way. It had been stupid to cling to the interstates.

Why did the trooper just stay back there, watching? Why was he playing games? He hadn't had to piss when he was at the rest stop, but he had to do it now, his whole body was tensing, every muscle tightening, every sinew straining against bone and cartilage. His mouth had gone dry, his eyes felt like they would burst out of his head.

"Get it over with, you bastards!"

Wait, he had options. He remembered the scanner. *Turn it on, fool!*
Turn it on and keep it on!

He watched out of the corner of his eye as the little red dot raced up and down its face, seeking for some snatch of dialogue.

Silence. The trooper wasn't on the radio. Of course not, not now, fool! He's already done that. He's just waiting, watching, hoping for something more than the description, something that'll give him probable cause to enter the van.

He was trying to break Barton's nerve, that was it. If he took off the trooper would chase him down. That would give him his right to

search.

God, God, please help your child Barton. You made me, God, now you help me! I'm going through hell here!

The trooper's light bar started flashing.

Oh, God, please don't let it be now. He wanted just a month with Billy, then he would willingly die! Yes, die for thirty happy days!

He sat up straight, became prim. "Pull the van over," he told himself, "be as proper as a schoolgirl in church." The trooper followed him. He tried to calm himself, get some spittle into his dry mouth. 'OK, Barton baby, here he comes. My, what a clean-shaven face that trooper has. I wonder if he needs to shave at all?' He blanked his mind, cranked up a smile. His voice was calm, concerned, perfect as he said, "I don't think I was speeding, officer."

"Driver's license, please." The voice was calm and clear.

"Yeah, I have it, just a second." Barton tried not to tremble as he pulled out his wallet.

"California license, Mr. Royal?"

The voice had dropped an octave. Suspicion.

"Yeah. I have my summer place in Utah."

A long silence. Here it came. They would utter the murderous formula: "We'd like to have a look in the back."

"Your plates are expired."

Oh, no, not stupidity again. Fool, fool fool! But wait. How could that be? On the way to Iowa he'd stopped at the mail drop in Salt Lake, gotten the renewal. He'd put on the sticker.

"No, I don't think so."

"No sticker."

It was on the front plate. Wasn't that what he was supposed to do? "It's on the front."

Please, Oh Lord of heaven, I will do anything, I will serve you body and soul for evermore —

The trooper went around to the front of the car, looked at the plate. He came back to the window. "Mr. Royal, you ought to have stickers on both plates."

"They only sent me one."

"Well, I suggest you get another if you don't want this to keep happening."

"Thank you, officer."

"We're not going to issue a summons this time, Mr. Royal, but you'd better stop at DPS in Salt Lake and get that sticker."

"I sure will, officer."

Billy uttered three short, sharp cries. The trooper leaned farther into the window. At that moment inspiration struck. "I have a capuchin," Barton said.

"A capuchin?"

"The sounds. A monkey. A little monkey in the back."

The officer's face grew tight. He drew back from the van. "All right, Mr. Royal. You can go now."

He put the van into drive and accelerated back onto the highway. The troopers remained on the roadside, their light bar still flashing.

Barton's face flushed, his temples throbbed. Huge sparks danced in his

eyes. Did he need to see a doctor about these intense stress reactions? He was overweight, sure, but this— maybe there was high blood pressure or something.

He imagined himself dead on the road with a boy in the back.

Never!

9.

The Nearys had been dropped into hell. Nothing had prepared them for this. Their hell had neither gate nor horizon, and its demons were police officers with sad, suspicious eyes. They tormented not with blows but with questions. And always there was the central question, the one nobody could answer. Hell's characteristic sound was a silent telephone.

Neither Mark nor Mary gave voice to the hope they privately shared, that this awful day would end with Billy's straggling reappearance, home late from some boyhood escapade.

He was such an adventurous little boy!

During the afternoon hope slowly died. It began to fade after the police had left, when they were supposed to be eating lunch.

The ham sandwiches Sally made eventually drew flies. As the afternoon grew old the edges of the bread curled and the lettuce became slack. The day wore through four, then five. The day began to end, and still he did not come.

It was decided to inventory his room once again, to see this time if some clue to his whereabouts could be determined from any toys he might have taken with him. Detective Walter Toddcaster, who had come up from Wilton, insisted on participating in this task. At first they thought his motive was some hidden mistrust. But when they

faced the quiet, immensely familiar little room, they understood that it was compassion.

Handling the toys was as hard as it would have been to grab flaring briquettes from a backyard grill. But once picked up, putting something down was even worse, like dropping one's wedding ring down the drain, or giving up one's life, or letting go the hand of God.

So thick were the memories, so great the pain, only Toddcaster could manage anything even approaching a coherent inventory.

Mary and Mark sat in the middle of the floor with the drawers under the bed open before them. They fumbled in a haze of stifled tears.

Mark remembered the voice of his son muttering long fantasies of play, his cars in his hands, his Lego, his Brio trains, the decrepit stuffed Garfield the Cat doll gone anorexic from age and cuddling. "Has he been practicing his guitar?" Mark asked automatically.

Mary was in her own pain. "I've been meaning to gift out this Brio," she said quietly. "He doesn't use it anymore."

From Sally's room came the voices of the Beatles: "Give Peace a Chance." Mark's mind shifted suddenly to his college days. He had sung that song before Billy was even a possibility in the world. Gratefully he let it draw him into other times. Other voices seemed to rise around him: "Let it be..." There had been some good times.

When Billy was a newborn Mark had cuddled him inside his robe. He fed him his bottle while reading the morning paper. It was there he had said his first word: "Da."

Mary was clutching a red Brio train engine to her chest. "I remember his first word," she said in a tiny voice. "Ma. Remember that?"

Sally came in. "We're going to find Billy," she said.

Detective Toddcaster added. "This inventory is going to help us."

Suddenly Mark and Mary were clear-eyed again. Mary sat up. "Yes, we are." Then she frowned, looking very like a little girl.

A shadow entered the room. Sally understood first. "The sun just set," she said in a hushed voice.

"I think we're finished here, if nobody can spot any missing toys." The detective got to his feet, a sense of bustle in his movements. "So what we're missing is the street clothes. Shirts, pants, underwear, socks. And his duffel."

"Like he went on an overnight."

"Except for the shoes," Mark said.

Detective Toddcaster glanced around. "The shoes?"

"Look. The black sneakers, the dress loafers. Even his slippers and his flip-flops. They're all here. When he left he was barefoot."

Mary held out her hands as if warding off a blow. She picked up a scuffed shoe. "He's about to go into men's sizes, Mark. Did I tell you that?"

Mark nodded. He could not speak. But he knew as certainly as he knew his own bones that Billy had been taken by that man in the yard. "He wouldn't go out without shoes, especially not on his bike."

"Not even in August, Mr. Neary?"

"My brother never went barefoot. It's not the style anymore," Sally said.

"No, I guess not." Walter Toddcaster was a compact man with a great, bobbing ball of a head. He had come up from Wilton in an olive drab Chevrolet, which was currently parked in the driveway. Now he looked down at Billy's shoes as if they might reveal some secret only a professional could interpret. "My grandson loves British Knights," he said. "Wouldn't be caught dead in anything else." Looking at Billy's

tattered sneakers, he blinked as if somebody had just given him a small slap.

Seeing the expression on Mary's face, he reached out a neat hand, startlingly thin in a man so portly, and caressed the air near her shoulder. "I have confidence, Mary. We're gonna find Billy. I'll even tell you where. Walking his bike along some country road, either busted or with a flat tire. And we'll find him soon, because he will have noticed that the sun's going down and he'll have given up waiting or whatever he's been doing and started to walk."

"He wouldn't just take off without telling us. My son is a natural adventurer, but he's also a good boy." She dropped the shoe with a thud. "My son never lies. He is never lied to."

"Momma—" Sally had folded her arms.

She tilted her head as if she was hearing some special music. Her face worked. "My point is that Billy is a smart little boy, but he's also trusting. He could so easily be deceived. That's what worries me!"

Mark was deeply worried by what he saw appearing in her.

Not even in labor had she looked this bad. After fifteen hours trying to have Sally she had grabbed Mark and said, "It's gonna come again and I can't stand it, Markie, I'm gonna scream." "Scream, for God's sake," Dr. Epstein had said. "You're driving me nuts with your strong, silent shtick. Woman, scream!" And again she contracted and her eyes were like glass and she did not scream, could not, she had to be in control and Mark knew that for her it would be a kind of death to scream.

It had taken fifteen hours. She stank, she ran streams of sweat, and finally Sally appeared, her head looking like a little blue banana. She snorted and then wailed like the wind, high and thin.

Billy had been easier, because he was her second. For days afterward he had been placid. Until he was about six months old he had been a docile baby. Since then he had not stopped for a moment.

Toddcaster watched them. He'd seen this stage many times before. They had a runaway but they didn't want to admit it. And why should they? Their child had despised his home so much he'd decided to leave. The fact that he'd done it on a bicycle meant he was almost certain to be found. This case would be closed within twenty-four hours, and that would be that.

In the meantime a little handholding was all that was required. He was bored and he wanted a cigar. But he was embarrassed to ask if they minded. Their house was so clean, the air fresh and faintly scented with some potpourri the woman must have made.

It was time to get this show on the road. "Look, he took shirts, pants, things that he'd need if he was going to stay away for a few days. He went on his bike. I think we should assume that Billy ran away."

From the door their daughter said, "No way."

Something in her voice made Walter Toddcaster jerk around to face her. He knew that kind of conviction. "What makes you say that?" If he was wrong, OK. He wanted to find out the truth and, above all, the boy. "What makes you so sure?"

"He was happy. We have a happy family." The girl looked up at him, a pale, heart-shaped face, blond hair, a real heart-breaker.

"Sometimes things build up—a kid just can't see his way, communications fail—"

Mark Neary went to his feet. "For God's sake, our son's been kidnapped. He even saw the kidnapper last night right out in the front yard! We're wasting time debating about it."

His wife looked dully at the floor. "It's easier for you if he's listed as a runaway, isn't it?"

"We want to get your boy back."

Mark wanted to grab his lapels, shake some sense into the man. "Then put out a bulletin!"

"We APB'd his description to every police force in the state this morning. You know that."

"And you haven't heard a word. Not a single cop in the state of Iowa's so much as glimpsed him."

Toddcaster looked at him. Mark looked right back, and was surprised to see in the detective's eyes something that he had not noticed before. It was as unexpected as a cold wind in the middle of the August heat. He did not like it, not in those eyes. If the police felt helpless, where did that leave Billy?

"We have to go on the evidence, and the evidence is that Billy left on his bicycle, taking his clothing with him. That's what I have. That's reality."

"Just to be safe, why not report it as a kidnapping?"

Walt Toddcaster wished that he could do just that. His instinct was always to expect the worst, but the fact was that if he put in a report a lot of police organizations were going to crank themselves up. You cared about abducted kids. Cops had families; they knew how much this hurt. The first thing outside investigators would find was that the bike was missing. And that would be very embarrassing.

"Get me some hard evidence."

"The testimony of his family!" Mary's voice was rough. She thought to herself that she wanted to die but she could not, not and leave Billy.

When he was a baby he'd had blond curls. She had cried silently, her back straight and a smile plastered on her face, when Mr. Terry cut them off. Clip, clip, clip, and there went babyhood down to the floor of the barbershop.

The sound of the doorbell ringing shot through every one of them, even Walt Toddcaster, who had been in this same sort of house with this same sort of people too many times.

Three bedraggled young men stood at the door, their faces sheepish. They had cameras and equipment with them. A blue and gray van lettered KKNX EYEWITNESS NEWS was parked at the curb.

"You have the missing child?"

Mark opened the door wider. The men came in, looking into the corners of the hallway, glancing at the ceilings. "Set up in the living room," one of them said. His voice was pitched to a funereal hush.

"No," Sally said, "in the basement."

"The basement?"

"Oh, Mark, she's right! His stuff is down there. Our son is a computer nut. You ought to put it on TV."

"That'll be a good visual, ma'am."

As the TV crew followed Sally downstairs, Toddcaster pulled Mark and Mary aside. "Listen," he said, "the voice of experience talking. You're very self-contained. You keep your feelings inside. Nothing against that, I do the same. Ulcers instead of tears, less embarrassing. But the more emotion you show on the tube, the more stations'll pick this up and run it. Take it from me. Voice of experience."

"What will you say, Walt?"

"He's going to say what he thinks, Mark. That Billy ran away."

Walt Toddcaster made another half-gesture toward Mary. "I want Billy to get found. I want a win on this. Guarantee I do."

"A runaway means we're bad parents. That we somehow drove him away. And meanwhile, somebody has our boy. "

A member of the television crew met them on the stairs. "Is there any other entrance to the basement? It's a great location, but we've gotta bring in some lights. We need a straight stairway."

It took Mark a moment to remember. "There's an old storm door, but we haven't used it since we moved in. I don't know if we can even get it open."

When he pushed at it, though, he found that it opened smoothly. Toddcaster began peering at it as if it had somehow hypnotized him. The thought crossed Mark's mind that maybe he was a little off. 'How good could the cops in these backwater towns be?' he wondered. God help Billy.

While the men from the TV station brought in their lights Mark sat at the computer, idly going through its inventory of games and projects. Mary went upstairs and got the photo album. There was last year's birthday party, and a couple of recent shots of him sitting at the computer.

The detective hovered like a ghost near the storm door. Now he was touching the hinges with his handkerchief. His face had acquired the appearance of bad sculpture, at once intense and empty. Finally he stopped, rocked back on his heels and returned to the basement.

The TV crew finished their preparations. Mark and Mary and Sally sat together in front of Billy's Amiga. The crew turned on the lights. Their blue glare shocked, the sense of exposure intensifying Mark's pain. His eyes were wet, but the tears there did not come from the part of him that spoke and thought and acted. They were a signal from the dark, and Mark in that moment knew what it meant to experience the unbearable.

Then the camera was rolling and the director was asking Walt a question. "What happened to Billy Neary, Lieutenant Toddcaster?"

"In these cases we always look for a runaway or kidnapping by a parent living out of the home. But the Nearys are a happy family. This

is typical Iowa we have here.

"Abduction by strangers does happen, but it's very rare. At first we thought this was a runaway. It looked like a clear case. The boy's bike was missing, clothes had been taken from his room. In fact, if you hadn't wanted to use that storm door, I'd still be wasting my time on the runaway theory. But this boy was kidnapped all right. I'd bet my badge on it. And the kidnapper's a clever one, taking the bike like that."

Mary and Mark gave way together, like two trees knocked down by the wind. She was silent. Trying to disguise his tears, he made peculiar gobbling noises. Sally took both her parents' hands.

"Can you describe your son, Mrs. Neary?"

She struggled for the words. "Four feet tall. Reddish-blond hair. Will you show his picture? Please?"

Then Sally spoke. "Please, whoever you are, my mom and dad didn't do anything to hurt you. Please, please give Billy back to us."

The camera lingered a moment and then it was over. Without saying a word, the crew began folding up their equipment. When the lights went out the basement seemed like a kind of tomb.

Dumb with sorrow and surprise, the family followed Walt Toddcaster upstairs. He went straight to the phone. They could hear him talking to the FBI field office in Des Moines. His tone was urgent.

Then he turned to them. "Somebody oiled the hinges of that storm door. And it was recent, probably within the past twenty-four hours."

"Nobody oiled any hinges," Mark said.

"I know you didn't. The abductor did it. That's how he got in the house. He had to oil the hinges or the creaking might have waked somebody up."

Mary flew into his arms. "Hey," he said.

"You're a genius!"

He turned away from her, away from them all. He went to the window, stood looking across the front lawn. "I'm a dumb cop. It took me all day to figure out you folks were right. Now I want to get a crime squad in here. Dust for prints, look for clues."

"What clues? We've touched everything, been everywhere. It's too late for clues!"

"I hope you're wrong, Mark. The FBI's in on it now. They're sending a crew up from Des Moines. The drill is, they'll gather evidence and coordinate any national search. We'll do the instate footwork. They'll be here in an hour. And in the meantime, I have a suggestion. We ought to send somebody out for food. You haven't eaten all day and you're gonna need your strength."

"We could all go out," Sally said.

"No. From now on, this is rule number one: See that phone? You never, ever leave that phone unattended. Never. If none of you can be here, get a neighbor, get a friend. Use it as little as possible. If you want to make calls freely, order in another line."

"We have call waiting."

"That's not good enough. And always answer on the first or second ring. Another thing. We're going to loan you a special recorder. Every time the phone is picked up, it'll start automatically. And if Billy calls, just say one thing. Not 'I love you,' not 'Are you OK?' Just say, 'Where are you?' Remember that, 'Where are you?' Any scrap of information he can give—God willing, maybe it'll help us."

"Do they usually call?"

"Well, look at it this way. Right now your son has one thing on his

mind. He wants to go home. He wants you. And if he sees a phone, there's a chance he'll try to use it. But he might not have much time. And it'll be dangerous. So after he says where he is, tells you anything he can, you say to him, 'Hang up.' Do that as fast as you can. I can't impress on you enough, do not stay on the phone with him. Look at it from the kidnapper's viewpoint. He sees the kid on the phone. What does it mean? He's just been made, in all probability. This kid has now worn out his welcome. He offs the kid, and he's outa there."

-He just—he kills Billy—"

"Mary, we have to face it. A man who does this kind of thing is not a Mr. Niceguy. He does not have normal human responses to things. Chances are he's unstable and he's undoubtedly mean."

The phone rang, once again sending shock waves through everybody in the house. Mary answered it, her voice smooth, but hushed by pain and suspense. "Neary residence."

It was the local police. They'd just gotten the FBI bulletin and Chief Lacy was coming over.

"They've been cruising around hunting for Billy all day," Walt said. "Now they'll shift tactics. They'll start going through their files looking at possible perps. A town this size, the likelihood is they won't find any candidates. But we'll be knocking on a few doors in Des Moines and Davenport, you can be sure."

Mark went to the front window. "He stood under that tree. He went up the driveway, along the side of the garage, into the backyard. And then he came in."

"The storm door was never locked, I take it."

"I don't remember." To himself Mark said, *It's my fault.*

Walt came over to him. "I know what you're thinking. If you'd done this, if you'd done that. Forget it. The guy wanted Billy. He was going

to get him no matter what."

"Why my son, Walt?" Mary had taken on the hollow expression that warned Walter Toddcaster of an impending explosion.

Despite her deteriorating emotional state, he continued on. He had a job to do, and it was suddenly damn urgent. "There isn't anything in your background—anybody who hates you— either of you?"

Mark shook his head. Mary looked at him. "My husband has strong political ideals."

"What kind of politics?"

"I'm pretty far left," Mark said. "I've lost a couple of jobs because of it."

Walt Toddcaster's only politics was that of the policeman: vote for the guy who protects the police budget and hates crooks. That probably made him conservative. He'd never thought much about it. "What jobs?"

"I'm a history teacher. Most recently I got canned over the flag-burning issue."

"You think people should be allowed to burn flags?"

"Essentially, yes. But does that make my son a target for kidnapping?"

"It might." Mark bowed his head. Walter realized how harsh his statement sounded, but he did not like the kind of causes he suspected this man supported. Neary was the sort of misguided soul who wanted to put the cops behind bars and let the criminals run the streets. "You make a public stink? Get in the papers, maybe?"

"I'm just a high school teacher. Stories about me don't show up in the paper. When I get fired, nobody notices."

"Now, Mark, that's not quite true. The ACLU—"

"Got me reinstated with back pay. And so they changed the master plan and eliminated the position altogether."

"None of this got in the papers?"

"Not a word."

"We don't know why a given perpetrator picks a given kid. There've been studies, but most of them conclude it's just random. He picked a boy he found attractive. Your boy."

Sally, who had been flipping endlessly through the channels on TV, turned back to KKNX and put the set on mute. "I'm going out for Kentucky Fried Chicken," she said. "I'll bring back a bucket."

A moment after she went out the front door Mary leapt up and ran after her. "Sally! Sally, no!" She grabbed her daughter, clung to her. "Don't go out there!"

"We have to eat, Mother! You didn't touch the sandwiches I made."

"They're still here—"

"I threw them out. They got dry. Momma, I'm not gonna have anything happen to me walking two blocks. It's still light out."

Mary strode across the porch. "I'll go," she said as she headed for the garage. "Walt can move his car."

"Mom, there's no need!"

Mary did not answer. Walt hurried out and pulled his car to the front of the house. He watched Mary back down the drive, turn into the street and drive slowly off. She really ought to be using her headlights. If he'd been out on patrol, he would have given her a warning for no lights after sunset.

Mark and Sally were standing together on the porch as Walt returned to the house. He hated this part, watching the family suffer. Some of

them disintegrated, others did not. It was largely a matter of luck.

"Maybe they'll get it on the seven o'clock news," Sally said.

They were still watching when Mary returned. Walt and Sally ate.

"Twelve-year-old William Neary, son of popular Stevensville High School teacher Mark Neary, disappeared from his home early this morning. Police are saying that he was abducted by a stranger who entered the house while the family was sleeping. Full details at ten."

Mark felt his face grow hot. He was hardly popular. The kids barely knew him, he was so new here.

The next moment the phone rang. It was Tom Benton, Stevensville principal. "Mark, Jesus Christ—"

What did he say? "He's gone, Tom." It was so hard to talk about it. To say that, to say "He's gone," it was like heaping coals on your own head.

"You take all the time you need, Mark. Forget that makeup class you were going to do. I don't want to see you."

The instant Mark put down the phone it rang again. This time it was one of Billy's friends, Jerry Edwards. Jerry's voice was hushed. The Edwards family had already been questioned both by Mark and by Walt Toddcaster. "Mr. Neary, we just heard it on TV. Billy—"

The boy's father came on. "If there's anything we can do, buddy. Any damn thing."

As Mark put down the phone the doorbell rang. Sally followed him to the door. A man in a camouflage jacket stood there. For a brief, hopeful moment Mark thought, they all thought—

"Look, we never met. I live two doors down. I want you to know, if there's anything I can do to help—"

"Thank you," Mark said. "But the police are doing all they can."

Walt came to the door. "Wait a minute. There's lots your neighbors can do to help." He pushed his way in front of the family. "Come on in, Mr. —"

"Gerrard. Mike Gerrard. I manage the Walmart over at the mall."

"The Nearys are going to have a poster printed with Billy's picture on it. You could put some up where you work. And they need people to cover the phone when they can't do it themselves." He took Mike Gerrard aside. "They need friends, Mr. Gerrard."

"Hell, yes," Gerrard said. He looked to Mark like somebody from another planet, huge and strong, with tiny, quick eyes. And Mark thought, 'What if he's the man who took my boy.' He forced himself to dismiss the thought.

The sudden outburst of concern was making it all so terribly real. Mark felt physically weighted down, as if somebody had loaded his shoulders with chains. He smiled though, gamely trying to keep going. He had to keep going. Billy needed him. He needed Dad's strength and intelligence and bravery, the things he'd always believed in.

Mark felt like a scrap of nothing.

The phone rang again. This time it was one of Mary's friends. "Keep the calls brief," Walt said.

Mark had just hung up when a car stopped out front. Two men got out, young men wearing neat suits. The family knew at once that the FBI had arrived. The men hurried up to the porch, passing through the little knot of neighbors that was gathering on the sidewalk.

The porch was shadowy and Mark turned on the light. The young men introduced themselves. They came into the house. Realizing that his presence was no longer needed, Mike Gerrard went out to the sidewalk and began conferring in an intense undertone with other neighbors

who had gathered there.

The two young men were full of crisp confidence. But they wanted to be taken down the same road that Walt had traveled, the painful road through every corner of Billy's young life.

There were forms to fill out and work to be done. A truck appeared, containing a laboratory team from Des Moines. Suddenly the house was full of people, pictures were being made, fingerprints being taken, steps and couches and every inch of Billy's room vacuumed.

One of the FBI agents, a redhead named Franklin Young, showed Sally and Mark a form. "This is the National Crime Information Center Missing Person Report," he said. "We're going to fill it out together, then it's going to be faxed to Washington."

Young filled out part of the form himself. "I'm going to list Billy as believed endangered in the message key. That doesn't mean we know something you don't. It's policy for any stranger abduction of a juvenile. Also, it'll give the case highest priority."

Once again Mary and Mark addressed themselves to the details of their son's life. As she worked Mary felt a kind of fury building in her. She had a brief, bloody fantasy of seeing the kidnapper's head explode.

Under "Miscellaneous Information" they wrote a description of the kidnapping, the fact that Billy had waked Mark up with the story about the man in the front yard, the detail of the oiled storm door, the missing clothing and bike. The agents were careful and patient; they left nothing out.

When the form was finally completed, Franklin Young took it out to his car. As he drove off to fax it to the National Crime Information Center, one of the police lab workers began fingerprinting the Nearys so that any prints left by a stranger in their house could be identified.

To Mary all this activity made it seem as if the world's bindings had come loose. She could not move, could not think anymore, could not

fill out forms, talk, explain, thank, hope.

When the phone rang again Mary very carefully took a throw pillow from the couch and pressed it against her face. She screamed, then, and screamed again. She felt Mark's hand touching her arm, clasping it, heard his voice as if from a long, long distance. "Mary! Mary, for God's sake!"

She went on screaming, louder and louder. She did not try to stop, did not even want to. She thought she might scream on forever.

10.

Billy knew he was in bed, which was fine, but there was this humming sound. Then he was a balloon full of warm air, and the humming was making him vibrate. He was a red balloon, sailing through a clear sky, sailing slowly higher and higher—

What was that humming, and that jostling? Once in a while, the bed would definitely jostle.

Light flickered behind his eyes. Everything was all warm and soft. But it wasn't nice, not at all. He felt like something very old and very dead had been poured down his throat. Had he come down with the flu during the night? No, the doctor had said—

The doctor?

My house burned down and I'm in the hospital!

He tried to get up but it didn't work, and he remembered why. A long, long time ago he'd waked up, and he'd discovered that he was held down by straps.

So why do they tie you up in the hospital? Only one reason, you're so bad off they don't want you to move.

He decided to take a quick inventory of himself, using Dad's self-examination technique for when you got hurt and there was nobody around. "Your attention is like the beam of a flashlight, Billy, and you can move it through your body. You point it at your left foot, then your

right. Left hand, right hand. Legs, arms, torso, head."

He felt like he was in one piece, but there was this fuzziness that was strange, and he was definitely sick. What was that, "something, something and palely loitering," from the Shelley poem—or was it Keats? Kelley and Sheets.

He should have won poetry reading at the Speech Fair. Instead, What's-her-name Pugh had won with "My Last Duchess." His poem was "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." The beautiful lady without mercy. Yeah. Every beautiful lady he knew was like that. Amanda wanted football, not poetry. "La Belle Dame . . ." Alone and palely loitering.

And humming. The humming went on and on, rising and falling, and with it that slight jostling. Off in the distance, somebody was playing opera. The humming twisted and turned, merging with the music.

Why in the world was he strapped to his bed? Surely not even a children's ward did that. Maybe—

"Am I still in the ambulance?"

Distantly a voice: "Yes, son. Go to sleep."

Still in the ambulance . . . but then where was it going? Stevensville Central Hospital was on Route 19, wasn't it? Yes. That wasn't but a few minutes from the house. He wasn't sure how long he'd been in this ambulance, but it was certainly longer than five or ten minutes.

He felt a tiny, cold hand on his cheek. Very tiny, very cold. He shuddered and the feeling left him. No hand. At least, not a real one.

Maybe this was all a great big nightmare.

Billy's voice was so melodic, it made Barton's heart ache just to hear it. But its presence was alarming. He mustn't wake up this soon—especially not in the middle of Denver.

Barton himself had been awake for over twenty hours. Along with the highway, the hours swept away behind him in a quivering, hypnotic line. It was now six-thirty in the evening, and he had been driving for fourteen hours and thirty minutes. He had pushed hard, knowing that a confrontation with the boy was inevitable, and that it was going to happen on the road.

He had it all planned, a tender, painful moment. "Billy," he would say, "I will be more to you than your mother and father ever could be. You need me but you don't know it now. You will come to love me as I love you, with a very special love."

The one thing he believed in totally was his love. Nothing so pure, so noble, could be wrong.

Billy would panic and flutter against the straps, and he would cry. Barton would hold him, maybe kiss his cheek, there was nothing inappropriate about that, speak sweetly to him: "We will have a beautiful life together, you will come to love me as I love you . . ." Those words, so incredible, said to his perfect beauty: I love you.

A man before beauty, his head bowed, fighting the urgency to kneel, to adore that which God has made in the image of His faultless self.

"I give you my heart and soul, Billy."

He listened to the hissing of the tires. He whispered, "I give you my soul."

The scanner burped, a trooper calling in position from somewhere in the mountains. It sounded again, a trouble report on the Denver police frequency.

He heard police talking. Then the humming grew and changed, became a whining and got higher. Was that the siren? No, there was

no siren. This ambulance didn't have a siren.

A fire . . . there'd been a fire . . . and he was hurt.

The bread maker! It had been responsible for the fire! He knew it, the thing ran so hot! They never should have bought it.

He flew to full wakefulness. "What happened to my mom and dad?"

"Your parents are fine, son! Everybody's just fine. You suffered a little smoke inhalation, that's all."

God help him, he was driving down a crowded freeway in the middle of one of the biggest cities in the United States and Billy was waking up. This was supposed to happen later, back in the mountains where there were plenty of side roads and nothing but the wind to hear his screams. There Barton could reach out to him, could communicate, soothe and offer himself as father, friend and slave.

Here all he could do was clench the steering wheel and hope the child stayed reasonable.

* * *

Billy took experimental breaths, in and out, in and out. There was nothing wrong with his lungs. He felt sick, not hurt. So why in the world had he spent hours in this ambulance? What was going on here?

"Let me go home! I'm fine!" He had to go to the bathroom at once. "I have to use the John. I have to right now!"

Billy was going to realize any second what was happening. Then he would start screaming and struggling, and oh dear God, hadn't he loosened the straps to make sure Billy could breathe? Hadn't he? Yes .. . back in Ogallala . . . loosened the strap around the chest because the child's breathing seemed labored.

He might get free!

Barton began maneuvering through the traffic, taking a few risks. This was getting dreadfully ugly. A few more miles and it would have been different. Even out of the boy's pain Barton could create love, he knew he could. But not now, not under these impossible conditions.

He loathed traffic!

Why didn't the driver say anything except just "go to sleep, go to sleep"? Why didn't he explain? And what about that doctor? Hadn't there been a doctor back here with him, who'd given him a shot . . .

Late last night somebody got him out of his bed, he remembered that. Yes, they put a rag over his face, he thought it was Sally giving him a hard time. Then he got all numb . . . then there was this humming.

Again he tried to get up. It made sense for an ambulance bed to have straps, but not the little ones that held down his wrists and ankles. They weren't just meant to keep him from falling out of bed, not only that. He was *really* strapped in this thing.

"Let me up!"

Still no answer. It would help a lot if he could see something. He took a deep breath and blew, trying to get the cover off his face. Earlier he'd tried it, he remembered. But the effort was vague, like a barely recalled nightmare. Hadn't he struggled and fought and almost gotten out? Maybe, or maybe he'd just dreamed it.

No, his wrist still hurt where he'd pulled it out of the strap. So that part was real.

What were these straps all about, anyway?

"Will somebody tell me what's going on here!"

Oh, God. He's fully conscious and he's starting to understand and I am just passing the Arvada exit.

At least the towers of the city were now behind him and the traffic was a little thinner. Could people hear somebody screaming from inside a van? If they drove alongside with their windows open, maybe so. He hadn't counted on this and now he wasn't sure of anything except that he was dog-dead tired and beginning to simply give out just when he needed every bit of what was strongest and best in him.

Maybe he had to take action, and maybe it was going to be not the best thing for Billy. Maybe he had to hit him with a real drug. For an extreme emergency there was some two-percent solution. Not a lot, but enough to send Billy flying for a few hours.

Morphine wasn't like those other drugs; morphine worked. Billy would go as high as a kite.

No. Fathers did not give morphine to their sons.

But there was no time to think about it now.

Billy raised his chest as high as it would go, struggling against the straps. He pushed until he couldn't breathe, and pushed still harder—until at last he stopped, gasping, his head pounding with the first real headache he had ever felt in his life.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

He twisted his arms, tried to break his legs loose. The chest strap had give in it, but the others were totally tight. There was no way out. Finally he lay still and tried to think it out. He'd gone to bed last night, everything normal. He'd had his day, spent time at the mall, played Space Harrier and Afterburner with the guys. Then a queer had played RPM with him and after that he'd taken off. He'd worked on his Amiga. Later he'd gotten the bird to reply to him. They'd talked in the moonlight.

At some point he'd seen a man in the front yard. He told Dad, but there was nothing there when they looked. But no, that couldn't be. This was an ambulance, he was hurt. But he didn't feel hurt, and why these straps?

If this *wasn't* an ambulance, if he wasn't hurt, then—

A sudden realization made him slam himself against the straps. He knew who'd been in the front yard. It's the weirdo who was at the mall!

Terror descended.

"Help, oh, help me! Somebody help!" But there was nobody—except *him*. Billy screamed. It was not the fearsome noise he had expected, but the fragile piping of a boy, as shrill as the sound of a mouse being tortured by a cruel child.

The noise was like fire. It radiated absolute human terror. Nobody who heard a sound like that could mistake it for anything other than what it

was. They would know for certain that there was a child in this van, and that child was desperate.

The windows were all closed but the traffic had slowed down again and there were cars both to the left and the right.

People must hear it. God, yes! If only he'd put the gag back when he'd knocked Billy out. But he couldn't do that now, there was nowhere to stop.

Then it occurred to him to drown out the screaming with music. A fast hand jammed a new tape into the cassette player and turned the volume up to full. It was Lily Pons, one of his treasures, singing "Un Bel Di" from *Madama*, oh God, and the moon rode low on the horizon and the traffic moved in clotted anguish on the hard-lit road, and Billy screamed as a soul must scream when death first sunders it from the world.

His head bobbed, his teeth clattered and tore as he gnawed at the quilt that obscured his vision. The thought of that man up there driving made a thick, nasty taste rise in his throat.

Opera was blaring out of the radio and streams of memory poured up from deep within Billy's soul, recalling when last year his dad had taken him all the way to Cleveland to see *Carmen* and he'd loved that trip so much, it had been such a happy, happy time. After the opera they'd bought a ton of Kentucky Fried Chicken and eaten it all in their motel room.

He touched this memory like a thread in a maze and then it was gone and he was back here strapped to this cot. He lay jerking his head hopelessly, chewing at the quilt that covered his face. Warmth spread around his thighs and legs. At first it scared him, then he realized what it was and felt ferocious delight.

He was glad he had wet the bed, and he realized that he could do much

worse. In all of his life he had never shat a bed. But he did it now and it seemed awful and also gloriously savage and effective. The stink of it soon filled the close atmosphere under the quilt, and to his pleasure he found that he could also vomit.

The aria wailing out of the radio seemed to deepen and change, becoming something else: a mother singing as if to her child while he slips into dream.

Barton was trying to deal with his map, looking for some back road, some escape from the steel lights of the freeway. Behind him the boy lurched and twisted, shaking the whole van. A horrible stench filled the air: Billy had defecated. Anger flashed through Barton. This was an unneeded and undeserved complication.

If Barton Royal had made a mistake like that he would have been thoroughly dealt with.

He suddenly heard retching, liquescent heaves. The boy had vomited. The odor was so thick it greased his mouth with its foulness. Lily Pons sang on. "Sempre Libera," from *La Traviata* filled the cab. Then the map got away from him and he swerved and there was a dry thump and another car was honking its horn. He'd hit them, God help him. It was a Taurus, green, full of people. It pulled in front of him, and wouldn't you know there was now a convenient shoulder. He had to stop; they could get his license number, description of the van.

Billy heard a grinding thud, felt the car waver a little. Then it began to slow, finally to stop.

Maybe they'd stopped at a gas station. But no, there'd been that thump. Flat tire? No, Dad had plenty of flats and they caused an unmistakable flapping sound. So OK, it was an accident, but not a bad one.

The man addressed him in his sweet and evil voice. "Please, Billy, I know what you think, that I'm a monster. But I am not a monster. Very far from it! I have such hope for you. Yes, hope! You think you know what's happening, but you don't. Just give me a chance. One chance is all I ask."

Billy heard him leave the van. How do you escape if you're all tied up? Billy thought of Indiana Jones. How would he do it? Break the straps, but they were too strong! What would James Bond do? He had all that high-tech stuff.

Billy had nothing. He told people he was a black belt, but the truth was he couldn't even get out of Jerry's headlocks. A kid couldn't get away from a grown man.

About all a kid could do was scream.

The love in Barton's heart welled up until he was almost weeping. Poor little Billy. It was so natural for him to be afraid. Poor little fella. He felt, though, that he had really communicated just now. Surely Billy had heard the warmth and decency in his voice and that was going to calm him down, get them both through this first great crisis.

The people in the other car looked like zombies looming out into the yellow sodium vapor lights. Barton opened his door, carefully leaving his engine running. As he closed the door he checked to be absolutely certain it had remained unlocked.

The driver of the Taurus came around to the back of his car. Barton's heart sank. He could see damage—the taillight was smashed, the bumper was buckled, and there was a gash in the fender. His own fender had only a smear of green paint on it.

"What're you gonna do about it, asshole?" The driver was tremendous, wearing an ancient Doors T-shirt, stinking of cigars and beer.

"I'll pay."

From the van there came a terrible shriek. Barton battled the instinct to run for it. The others turned slowly, perhaps drunk-enly, absorbing the impact of the sound.

"My child must be having a nightmare," Barton breathed.

"That sounds weird, man."

Barton returned to the van. *The two-percent solution, the two-percent solution, find it, find it!* He pulled the little bottle out of the glove compartment, opened his needle case—and heard the car door click.

The other driver was there, his yellow eyes glaring. He reached in and took Barton's keys. The van shuddered to silence. "After we work out our problem you get 'em back."

"Help me, I'm being kidnapped! Help me!"

The man paused, looked toward the back of the van.

"Please, he's evil, he's a monster!"

"No, no son," Barton said, speaking gently, insistently. He drew solution into the syringe and crawled into the back of the stench-choked van.

Why didn't the other man listen? He was out there, Billy knew it. So why didn't he *listen*? "Call the police! Help! Help!"

"What's goin' on in there?" At last!

"He's having a nightmare!"

"No! He's a kidnapper! He's killing me!" The sound of his own voice terrified him, and a scream burst out of him. It was involuntary and it

confused him; he had not known that instinct had a voice. He surged against the straps like a fish on a line, strong and vital and seeking to be free.

Barton struggled with the needle, trying desperately to evacuate air bubbles, then to find a bit of white skin that was motionless enough to inject. He lifted the quilt and then with his free hand pulled down Billy's pajamas. The skin was like milk, it stopped Barton's heart.

Billy's shrieks were unlike anything Barton had ever heard before. They were so high and yet so amazingly fierce, the screams of a young tiger.

"What's the matter with that kid, man, you gotta give him a shot?"

"Epilepsy! And nightmares!"

A gasp, crackling, shuddering, then a bubbling whisper: "Police!"

"Yeah, son, I'll do that. I'll call the police."

"No! He'll be fine! This shot'll do it, you'll see." "No, man, let the paramedics give the shots. Stop that, man."

Barton choked back his own gorge, striving to maintain control. Sparks were dancing in his eyes. Deep breaths, one, two, come on, search the pale skin and there, just where the thigh was strapped down, he could hold the leg, prick the shining skin.

Whispering started in Billy's mind. Only he couldn't quite understand the words. Ripples were spreading, dying, the sun was setting inside his mind.

No! You have to scream! "Please. I—am—being—kidnapped! Get the police!"

Suddenly the quilt fell away and Billy could see. He was in the back of a van, and there was a bloated, ugly troll squatting beside him. His eyes were bulging, sweat was streaming down his face, his nose was full of pores. In his white, fat hand there was a syringe.

"He was in the mall! I remember him, he was in the mall!"

"Hey, man, that kid's in real trouble!"

"He's merely upset!"

"I'm gonna call the police."

Billy saw, suddenly, that the troll was wearing a blue shirt, and this seemed extremely important. "Officer, he was wearing a blue polo shirt. And he was crying. Yes, crying. I was crying, too."

Barton drew back, watching Billy's head shake from side to side more and more slowly, watching the tautness go out of the straps, the fists unclench and the eyes roll. Barton backed out of the van, climbed down and stood before the drunk, shaken man from the Taurus.

"See, he's gonna be OK."

"Jesus H. Christ, man, you sure?"

"Oh, yeah. It often happens like this. Then we give him his shot and he's OK."

"Look, man, if it's all right with you, I think we oughta call a cop anyway."

"No. I haven't got time. I want to get my little boy home. He's sick, as you saw."

"You got a doctor, man?"

"Yes! Sure! Dr. Ledbetter. A fine doctor. He's why my son's not in a home. Wonderful doctor!"

"Listen, I got five hundred dollars damage to my car. I know, sounds like a lot but these damn bumpers cost on these cars. Repairs are high. So I think we oughta get a cop. Otherwise, you kiss the insurance goodbye. And somebody oughta take a look at that kid. Besides you, if you get my drift."

"I do and I'm not sure I like it—"

The driver called to one of his companions. "Mikey, get the Highway Patrol on the car phone. This guy's got somethin' funny workin' back here." He turned to Barton. "You stink, and your van stinks. It smells like you got an open sewer in there." He peered into the van. "That's just a little boy."

"He's had an epileptic seizure. He'll be fine. Now if you'll let me—" Barton's tongue scraped the roof of his mouth, making a sound in his head like the scaling of a fish. He drew all his cash out of his pocket.

"Hey, man, that's money."

"Yeah, look, I'll give you the five hundred. That'll cover your damage and what say we just let it go?"

"That kid—"

"My son is fine! I don't want him frightened by the police. He's sleeping now, and if he's not bothered he'll sleep the rest of the night. When he wakes up, he won't even remember this happened."

"You got five hundred there?"

"Are we bargaining? Here." Barton counted out the bills. "You got it."

"That makes me feel better, man. I feel like getting back in my car now."

The traffic, the lights, the noise, all became a dream, frightful, glaring, but a dream and in the dream Barton was released. He moved to the front of the van. The other driver had put his key back, and he turned it.

Music burst forth, Lily Pons so loud she sounded like a banshee.

He jabbed at the button and killed the cassette player. Sudden silence, only the hiss of traffic behind the closed window of the van. He started the engine. As he pulled into the traffic he sang, "Glory, glo-ry," and imagined that an angel had taken him and his beloved burden under a golden wing.

Barton and Billy, alone at last.

11.

The first night in hell: red dreams.

In Mary's dream she was at a party. It was not a fun party, and not a good dream. There was a woman there she was afraid might be her mother even though her mother was dead. No matter what she did, Mary could never get this woman to face her. The woman always had her back turned. She was wearing a green silk dress just like Mother's. She was terrifying.

Mary's dream-self knew these things: that a child's soul is as fragile as dew, and souls can be murdered.

Then, in her dream, it was a day in October, a day as gray as old metal, a day worthy only to be thrown away. It was October 12, 1987. *That* day.

Dad died of heart disease in March of 1976, just a few days before his seventy-fifth birthday. Now Mother had also reached seventy-five, with sunken cheeks and drool and a bobbing head. Her eyes were as if sheened with mineral deposits.

She once had said, "My dear, what's happened to your chest? You're

concave." Mary had been bending because of a tennis accident.

"Mother, please. Flat-chested I can handle. But if a woman is concave, she might as well give up."

Mother had stared back as if to say, "So, give up." Instead she said, "Mark is giving up in a way, isn't he?" And yes, it was true, she had seen it. They both knew a secret, that any life—all lives—must be constantly healed by soaking torrents of love. We are as dependent upon such healing as the plants in the fields are upon rain.

A thousand years ago Dad had been very successful, a Chevy dealer in Morristown, New Jersey. *The Chevy dealer.* They'd had a maroon Chevy, a blue Chevy, a tan Chevy. They'd had radio ads. "Give the Morristown Chevy toot." So whenever they saw another Chevy on the road, they dutifully tooted. Mary would reach over and hit the horn with her fist.

The woman in the green dress whispered, "It was your fault, dear. You and that hopeless husband of yours. No burglar alarm. Not even a lock on the door! Now look!"

Two tall men were carrying a little boy through a thick, ugly woods. One carried him by the shoulders. The other went comically along with Billy's legs in his hands like the handles of a wheelbarrow. Billy was naked.

If his abductors did not kill him and he could not escape, he would eventually surrender and start trying to make something of his new life. Kids were like that, they adjusted, made do with the present.

If only she'd explained more to him about the dangers of abduction. But how did you do that and preserve the joy of childhood?

Even if a miracle happened and Billy got back home,, his childhood would be shattered.

His voice came in her dream, clear and fast and high: "Momma, will

you bathe me tonight?" She had done it until he was seven. It was like a sacred act, so much fun with the rubber ducky song playing and the wonderful toy ferryboat from Germany full of cars and the little frogman who really swam, and they made storms in the tub, and the ferryboat would toss and she would go *cra-a-ack* and *bo-o-om* for the thunder and hit the water with her fist where the lightning struck.

"My dear daughter, you might as well have given that child away. Given him away!"

"We were asleep! We didn't know!"

In her dream the two men stopped. She could smell the night flowers, hear the roaring of the cicadas, see moonlight dappling a glade. In that dappled glade the two men sat speaking in low tones. Billy was before them on the ground, trussed like a pig, not even struggling anymore. They took no notice. She floated above them, and saw that they were eating candy bars.

She saw this with total clarity. One man was eating a Hershey bar with almonds, the other a Clark bar. The sounds of their eating involved crunching and sticky slurps and the crackle of candy wrappers. There were tears on Billy's face and she wanted to wipe them but she could not. Her mother said, "You never can, dear. Not in the end." Then Mary was wide awake and sitting up.

For a long time Sally had watched the night. She sat on her bed and put her elbows on the window sill with her chin in her cupped hands. In her memory she heard her brother playing in his room, talking to himself under the covers. What was he saying? If you went anywhere near he got quiet.

At eleven-thirty the sound of taps came faintly on the wind, all the way from Fort Stevens down south of town. In her mind she drifted across the oceanic prairies, and farther south to the rolling hills of Kentucky, drifting in the cloud-choked sky, past clouds of American spirit and

American dream, and also her own dreams, when a boy would at last notice her and when she would go hand in hand with him and they would laugh together and he would turn to her and lift her chin with his forefinger and thumb and say, "May I kiss you," and she would open her lips a little.

They played taps at midnight, not eleven-thirty. And she couldn't possibly hear it this far away, no matter how the wind was blowing.

A dog or a coon humped across the front yard.

"Where are you, Billy," she said. "You might be dead, brother. You might know the secret. Do you know it, have you died? And did you go to God, or turn into a star, or are you just rotting there in a culvert where he left you?"

She started to think about how a man would do it with a boy, but then she couldn't.

Mark Neary listened to the night around him, the distant sound of a train heading west, far above a jet full of sleeping people. A car whispered down the street and he found himself tensing to its sound. But it went on past.

Beside him his wife of sixteen years sighed in the bed. His great anguish had paradoxically intensified his interest in the familiar mystery of her body, as if the weight of his suffering drove him to seek the old refuge of the flesh.

How dare he—his child was being raped, brutalized, tortured. He knew it with the certainty natural to his careful mind. The bright, happy, vital child who had been taken from this house was either dead or being destroyed right this second.

Billy was one of those children who were so perfect that it seemed impossible that tragedy could ever reach them.

He'd been so damn complacent. 'Not to do anything about the man in

the yard—may God strike me down!

He imagined excited hands fumbling against his son's naked skin. Then they were parting Billy's naked legs and his father was cringing in agony.

Then the wind swept up from the south bearing its marvelous freight of prairie smells, the aster and the grass and the mystic perfume of the corn.

His son's body lay glowing in the moonlight.

His son's body lay crumpled beneath a tree.

His son's body floated pale in the slow waters of the Pomander River, surfacing from time to time like an exhausted fish.

His son's body lay beneath the pulsating flesh of a huge human maggot, and his eyes were wrinkled shut and his hands were purple they were tied so tight.

"I am praying now," Mark whispered into the perfumed air. "God help my boy."

He turned over and, as he had a dozen times before, placed his face in his pillow. Then he wept in the breeze, in the moonlight, in the sweet Iowa night. A bird sang alone.

12.

It wasn't like waking up, it was sudden and cruel; this was the first time Billy had ever been pulled to awareness by pain. His body jerked against the straps, an involuntary spasm. Then his eyes opened. Even as it left him, his young mind clung to the blackness. For a last blessed instant he was nowhere, he was nobody.

Then he felt the inevitable humming of the van, the humming and the jostling. The air was sweet, scented with pine. The odor penetrated deep into Billy's soul, bringing dense memories.

The kitchen was gold with afternoon light, and there was his apple and glass of milk on the counter, and the air smells piney because Momma has just mopped the floor.

When he reached for the apple the illusion shattered. He knew where he was and who he was with and so he fought, kicking, jerking his arms, shaking his head as the van bored on, deep into the night.

From the front a woman's voice sang, very high:

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine

You make me happy when skies are gray ..."

The voice piped and wavered, never quite on note or key. When it went high Billy went with it up the mountains. Then it broke and down they fell, sailing through black air.

As they fell Billy began to become consciously aware of the pain that had awakened him. Memory and dream slipped away and he was left with only the truth: he was thirsty, and it was a torment beyond belief.

Every part of him, his belly, his arms and legs, even his skin suffered for water. His mouth felt like the dentist had jammed it solid with cotton logs. The humming of the van became the muttering of a brook and he saw water bubbling over stones, saw the thick green depths of the Pomander River, tasted water pouring from the faucet under the oak tree in the front yard.

He had stood there. From there he had watched. And now *he* drove the van. Even though Billy's head was no longer buried under covers, he could not see *him*, not more than a glimpse and that only if he arched his neck back as far as possible.

Then *he* was a dark hunched bulk behind the wheel.

"I'm thirsty!"

The singing stopped but the van hummed on. Being ignored made Billy's cheeks burn. He wanted to somehow get to that ugly man and hit him until his head broke open like a cantaloupe. "I'm thirsty," he repeated. He tried to sound angry, but he could barely whisper.

The figure remained hunched over the wheel and the, van hummed on. Billy's vision wavered. Tears came.

He gazed through his anguish at the shadowy night, the tops of pine trees hurrying past, the stars. It was as if he was at the bottom of a deep, deep hole and he could just barely see the sky way up there. 'The stars,' he thought, 'we used to count them in those days, lying in the front yard and we would talk about all the people in all the worlds so far away.'

Then he thought, 'This is how I will escape. I will turn the straps into molten leather by making my wrists and ankles hotter and hotter like that guru could do—make himself hotter or colder, it said so in the paper—and then I will get him by the throat.' He concentrated on his wrists, imagining them getting hot, imagining that the leather was crackling, creaking, getting weaker.

Of course nothing happened. But couldn't people bend spoons with their minds, either ... or was that possible in California? He imagined the straps getting hot and weak, hot and weak.

They *were* getting looser, too, at least a little. Hotter and hotter, wrists and ankles, and he could smell it now, the stink of the burning leather. Yes, looser by inches, by degrees, looser and looser . . .

With a soft tearing sound his right ankle became free. A moment later his left wrist was out and he was pulling, fumbling, working until at last he was completely free.

The van still hummed, the stars still followed them, the trees still tumbled past. Billy sat up. He turned his head and there just two feet away was the ghoul, dark and hunched, singing through his nose.

To himself Billy said, 'Your muscles are steel, your blood is molten uranium, your bones are hot iron.' He moved as precisely and quietly as a spider. He put his hands around the thick neck of his tormentor, holding them just an inch from the shaking flesh. Then he throttled the life out of him.

Something began to happen. Billy felt it first as a change in the humming. Then came the rattling of gravel as the van left the highway. As it moved along a dirt road the tires rumbled. The slower the van went the faster Billy's heart beat.

Billy realized that he was still strapped to the bed, still trapped, still helpless. He tossed his head from side to side, moaning with disappointment. It had been so real!

The engine went off and the van grew silent. Billy listened, his limbs taut against his bonds, his face tickling with tears.

He groaned aloud, a sound that sank into a sob. "Now, now," came a low voice. It had a rattle in it, and a curious lilt as well. If a man and a woman were both talking at exactly the same time, this was how it would sound.

Billy flew into a wild panic. The tighter the straps held him the harder he struggled.

"Billy, relax, son, take it easy. Nobody's going to hurt you." The voice rose as it might when you were comforting a dog: "It's OK, Fido, it's OK, there, there boy. Easy . . ."

"I hate you! I hate you!" He spat but there was no spit, so all that came was a fluffy rasp.

"Son, I have a nice big thermos of Evian water. Have you ever had Evian water? It's cool and clear and it's just as sweet as a fresh mountain stream."

When the man opened the thermos, Billy could smell the water. He'd never noticed before that water had a smell. "Please," he said. He heard the begging in his own voice and wished he could sound stronger, but it was no use. He couldn't fight, he couldn't get away. He was too little and this man was too big and he was so far from home and he didn't know where he was or anything!

The man put his hand behind Billy's head and lifted it, and brushed the edge of the thermos against his lips. The water stung where it touched his cracked mouth, but it tasted so good, so cool, so rich, a million times better even than it had smelled.

He got two big gulps before it was snatched away. "Go slow, Billy, you don't want it to come back up."

That reminded Billy of what he had done, soiled the sheets. That was

all gone now, there was nothing left but the kitchen-floor smell of pine. The man had cleaned him off while he slept. That must be why his pajama bottoms were gone. He shuddered.

The water came back and he drank again. This time he got more and it flowed down his throat, bringing with it waves of relief. His head lay against the man's strong hand and he drank and drank.

As he drank he looked at the man's face. It was pale and soft, with cheeks that were too smooth. He looked like he was made of Silly Putty, like if you touched him you would leave a fingerprint. His eyes darted to the window every time a car went past.

He took the thermos away. Then he smiled and when he did everything changed. Crinkles appeared around his nasty eyes, and they became gay and full of laughter. His lips spread and his teeth appeared, smooth and white.

His smile was so unexpected and so bright that Billy uttered a burst of laughter. "So," the man said in his eerie voice, "we aren't all frowns, are we, Billy?"

"How do you know my name?"

"I know a great deal about you." He reached a hand out, hesitated for a moment, then touched Billy's arm. Despite his determination to hate this man, and his conviction of terrible danger, Billy felt relieved.

He was hungry for orientation. "What time is it?"

"Eleven."

Eleven at night. Billy thought about that. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"Not in the bed, please, Billy." The voice pleaded, and Billy had the curious impression that this man was a sort of servant, almost a slave, or wanted to be. Billy realized that he could get the man to do what he

wanted, like Uncle Hank had been when Billy was little, always carrying him on his back, buying him toys and candy ... at least until he married Kate and had Matt.

Mom had said, "My brother loves kids." She explained that certain people were able to stay a child inside even after they grew up. Uncle Hank was such a person.

The man's hand was massaging Billy's upper arm, and Billy tried to move away. "I won't hurt you," the man said. "I've got to work on your circulation."

"I have to go really bad."

"I'll let you up. But you'll have to go on the roadside. Can you do that?"

"There are cars."

"We'll walk a ways into the woods. We're in a thick forest."

Instantly Billy decided he would run off into the forest.

When his wrists were freed his hands started to tingle. Then the same thing happened to his ankles. The man had to help him sit up, and he felt very dizzy and funny, like the van was tumbling slowly over and over. The man crouched before him, rubbing his feet and his hands, rubbing and slapping.

Billy watched his bald spot. He wished he had a gun embedded between his eyes and he could fire it right into that spot and then the man would collapse like a bunch of rags. Then Billy would get out of the van and stand by the roadside until a car stopped, and he would tell them to take him to the nearest phone. But he had no gun, he had nothing. He thought of kicking the man, but it would do no more than make him mad, and that would obviously be a mistake.

When the man looked up Billy was confused by the expression, which was of an intensity quite beyond his experience. The man moved back

until he was sitting on the cot opposite.

He smiled again, mischievously, and Billy thought of when he used to babysit Matt and the little boy had done something that he knew Billy would fuss at him about. Suddenly the man reached out. Billy flinched, but then the man's fingers were touching his cheek. They were warm and soft and thick, and Billy became aware that the man was fat. "It's not going to be bad," the man said. "Believe me, Billy, I promise you with all my heart and soul."

"I want to go to the bathroom."

"All right! We'll go right now." The man slid open the side of the van, which was at once flooded with crisp night air. It was startlingly cool, and Billy began to shiver. "I don't have any pants."

"You won't need them, it's dark."

"I can't go outside without pants. And I don't have shoes. I can't walk in the woods without shoes."

"Don't be such a baby!" There was a weird, whining harshness there that made Billy even more scared.

"Don't I have any clothes?"

"Of course you have clothes! Now move!"

The tone made Billy scurry straight out of the van. The man took his wrist and without a word led him in among the trees.

Instantly the world changed. Billy was not often in woods this deep. They belonged to fairy tales, the woods dark and deep . . .

They were darker than Billy had thought possible, so dark that he couldn't see anything except the man's small flashlight, a wavering pool of yellow that occasionally revealed a huge trunk.

He heard the calls of forest birds, soft and scary.

A car passed the van. When it slowed the man stiffened and his hand went more tightly around Billy's arm. "It hurts," Billy said, pulling his shoulder away.

The car went on. "I'm sorry," the man said. He loosened his grip. The ground was covered with pine needles and also very steep and it cut into Billy's bare feet. After another couple of minutes the man stopped. "Here," he said.

Billy's mind had focused to a single idea. He was like a bird being held outside of its cage, waiting for the instant that its owner's mind would stray. "I can't do it if you're here."

"I can disappear just like this." The man turned off his flashlight. Now the darkness was so perfect that it seemed to Billy almost to have a life of its own. A feeling of complete helplessness overcame him. He thought he had stifled the sob of despair that built in his chest, but the man's hand touched his shoulder. "It's OK, Billy," the man said. Then, as if the dark might somehow sanctify his words, he added something incredibly icky. "I love you so darn much, son."

That encouraged Billy to overcome his fear and take a couple of steps away. The man made a small sound in his throat, shuffled. Billy took three giant steps, brushing against a tree. The man's breathing was now noticeably farther off. Billy stepped all the way around the tree.

Behind him the flashlight flickered on, then flashed wildly among the tall trunks, just missing Billy's shoulder. "Christ," the man said.

Billy moved off, trying to remember the locations of the trees he'd glimpsed in the beam of the flashlight.

There was a steep slope, and Billy slid down. Uttering a stifled cry, the man followed him. His body was heavy and he slipped and scraped noisily along. When he was close Billy heard the little sounds he was making, like the way the crows muttered when they landed in the front yard.

Without another thought, throwing his hands out in front of him, Billy hurled himself farther down the slope, fumbling against trees as he went, scrambling around them, going down and down. Behind him the man raised a howl and came plunging after him. His light flickered yellow, a magical eye.

The forest spoke a deep unknown language, murmuring to itself as Billy scrabbled along. He skinned his knee, bruised his shoulder. His hands were before him like a blind man, his feet were stinging from the pine needles. Something flapped away, screaming an angry scream.

Billy became aware of the details of the darkness, its thicker places, the directions where the shadows seemed more open. But the flashlight was far more effective than intuition and night-blind eyes, and the man came very fast. Under his breath he kept making sounds, grunting and furious. They no longer reminded Billy of a crow, but rather of the fearsome noises the tiger had made at the Des Moines Zoo during the class trip: back and forth it had gone in its cage, and its snarls said it wanted you.

Billy had to feel his way, his arms outstretched, his hands spread as if to turn a blow. He went through the whipping trees, grasping, pulling, struggling. They spread their piney sap along his arms, their needles pricked his palms and dug into his feet.

The man plunged down the bank, crashing into trees and gasping when the limbs whipped his face.

Soon Billy could not tell which direction he was going in, whether up or down, falling or climbing. His lungs ached, his nostrils flared, his head pounded. As Billy gained speed the man's clamor was gradually absorbed by another sound, a roar as if of a huge wind. But there wasn't any wind. Closer and closer Billy came to this sound. He no longer dared to look behind him. If the flashlight was right there, he didn't want to know it.

Then the stars filled the sky. Billy stopped, incredulous. Before him

was a sky more vast even than that of the prairie night. The stars stood in millions and millions. The roaring filled his ears, and then he understood where he was.

Realizing his predicament he reeled forward, his arms turning round and round. Below him he saw like in a model train layout a cluster of cabins marked by a single light. How far down? A hundred feet, five hundred? All around Billy the loose stony earth was coming alive, whispering and rattling. It tickled beneath his feet as it transported him toward the edge.

Fifty feet to his right a mountain stream threw itself off the cliff. Down and down the water went, pale in the starlight, down into the silent valley. To Billy the stream sounded like the trumpet that calls you to death. Some archangel blows it. Supposedly.

He was falling. The slope was too steep and the soil too loose to hold him. He pressed himself back against the bank. It felt like he was in an elevator, just starting off but speeding up quickly. In another moment he was going to be out in the air, falling to the music of the water. He saw a dog walking lazily across the compound between the cabins.

"Momma," he said. He scrabbled, he grabbed at the loose dirt, he found that he most desperately did not want to die. He'd had hardly any life yet! He threw back his head and screamed, and the stars wavered in his tears.

As if it was a hook made of cold iron, the man's hand closed around his upper arm. Then his face was there, beside Billy's face. "I love you," he said in a voice loud enough to be heard over the gush of the falls.

How Billy hated to hear that! But the man was strong and he laid himself against the arm and watched the stars disappear as he was dragged back into the cliff-hugging woods.

Roughly, the man pulled Billy up the slope. It took him a long time and a lot of rest stops. He wheezed and cursed under his breath, but never for a second did he release Billy's arm, let alone loosen his grip.

At first Billy was defiant, thinking that he would get away again and this time he would find some tiny path down the face of the cliff, secret since the days of the Indians and the mountain men.

But his shoulder and knee hurt where he had hit them, and his feet were raw and he wanted to be warm again.

The man pulled him along, and at length the dim light in the van's ceiling began to flicker in the trees. "Do you still have to do your business?" the man asked.

"Yes," Billy said.

"Come over here." He pulled him toward the van. "I wasn't planning to use these, but it's your fault." He opened the front door and lifted the passenger seat. Underneath it was a toolbox. Billy sucked in his breath when he saw what looked like a small gun in the man's hand. But it wasn't a gun, it was handcuffs in a leather case. They were neat, just like cops had.

He snapped them on Billy's wrists, clicking them until they were tight. Then he checked them with the flashlight. "OK," he said, "you have three minutes. If you pull anything like that again, you're going to find out that I punish."

Billy tried to walk on his own but could only stagger. His feet hurt so much he had to balance on their sides, bandy-legged. He lifted the front of his pajama shirt and pissed where he stood, watching the stream of urine smoke in the mountain cold.

"Where are we?" he asked as he finished.

"The mountains of the moon, as far as you're concerned. Get in the van."

The man made him lie on the miserable little bed again, and the straps soon replaced the handcuffs. The cot had become so familiar he felt almost like he belonged there.

"This is gonna be tight," the man said, wrapping the thickest of the straps around his chest, "and it's gonna be hell because it is so tight. But I can do worse. I can certainly do worse."

He tightened the strap until Billy was reduced to shallow breaths. "I can't—"

He slapped a strip of wide gray tape over Billy's mouth. "Can't breathe? That's because the chest strap is too tight. You're being punished this way, and it might go on for some little time."

Billy pressed himself as hard against the strap as he could. He couldn't breathe, he was scared to death!

"You'll manage well enough if you relax." The man took his hair in his fist, forced Billy to look at him. "I am going to attend to your feet. I am going to do everything to help you. And you will find that I can be very, very nice. Our life together can be wonderful, Billy. But I want you to understand something."

He brought his face close and it was horrible to see, sweaty, scratched from the pine needles, fat. The eyes were funny, though. You expected really mean eyes. But this guy had the woebegone expression of a big old floppy hound.

"If you keep trying to get away, if you give me a hard time, if you cause me trouble, then I will turn around and go right back to Stevensville, and you know what I will do? I will kill your parents. Did you hear me? I will kill them both and it will be hard and slow. Then I will kill your sister. And you will watch all this. Then I will burn down your house and leave you naked in the middle of nowhere with no parents and no home and no sister. And it will all be your fault. "

These words were like fists blasting Billy's face; the shock of them made him as dizzy as real blows would have. He had never dreamed that his mom and dad were in any danger.

He had to be tough, he mustn't cry! 'Now, like the man says, relax. You

do things his way, you won't get Mom and Dad and Sally killed. So do things his way, dumbhead!' Now what was it he was going to say to the man? Something, and it had seemed darn important.

The man began working on his feet. He cleaned them with tweezers and cotton as Billy raised his head and looked down his body at the figure with the flashlight and the little blue first-aid kit. There was a smell of alcohol, and then the pain was so great that Billy threw his head back and shrieked behind the gag.

Soon the sting stopped, though. He felt bandages being put on. That was a lot better.

Then he remembered what it was he had to say. Despite the agony, despite his half-suffocated condition and his gag, he started trying to communicate with the man. Again he lifted his head. He made urgent sounds behind the gag. He worked his mouth, stabbed at the tape with his tongue, mustered what little saliva he had to try to float it off.

Finally the man took notice. He crawled up the van and gingerly removed the tape. Billy swallowed, cleared his throat, and met the eyes. The hound-dog expression was gone, replaced by a warm, contented look.

"My mother," Billy murmured. His voice was so thick it sounded like an animal growling. He stopped talking, tried again to get some spit in his mouth. It seemed enormously important that he be understood. "My mother," he repeated with all the clarity he could muster, "always gives me a cup of hot chocolate when I get hurt."

Part Three

**THE CUP
OF KINDNESS**

13.

The first day she kept wanting to organize yet another search. But they'd already looked everywhere they could, and they had clear evidence of the abduction.

She kept telling herself, 'It really happened. Some total stranger came in here and just took him.' Her basement, her stairs, his bedroom—as the police painstakingly re-created the movements of the intruder these family places came to seem charged with darkness at midday.

On the second day it seemed as if the investigators would never stop poking through her things, lifting chairs, vacuuming, scraping, spreading dirty fingerprint powders. But when they finally did leave she panicked, fearing that they had given up. She had to stifle the impulse to run after them.

On the third day time revealed itself as the true enemy. There remained nothing but the silent phone and the regular tolling of the clock.

Mary told herself to reestablish the routine of the household. She should start by cleaning up the extensive mess left by the fingerprint men. One impulse moved her to throw herself into it, to put on an

apron full of pockets and stuff them with Pine Sol and 409 and Windex and start working. She knew how to disappear into housework.

Because it was an escape from worrying about Billy, she feared work as much as she longed for it.

All Monday and most of Tuesday people had come to the house bringing the kind of covered dishes that made Mary think of funerals. Her mother had always taken a casserole over when a friend had died, apparently on the theory that grief whets the appetite but destroys the ability to cook. When Mother herself passed on, her friends brought fleets of casseroles, whole cooploads of roasted chickens, reefs of salad, enough food to feed the mourners for two years.

Now, as evening fell, Mary was coming to recognize what all the activity of the past forty-eight hours concealed. Behind it was complete helplessness.

The last investigator to leave was a forensic surveyor who had made a map of the property and a set of drawings of the interior of the house. Hundreds of pictures were taken, and every means had been used to gather not only fingerprints, but even glove prints and any bit of hair or debris that might be relevant.

Toddcaster had explained that most of this wasn't intended to gain information that would locate Billy, but rather to find evidence that would place the suspect at the scene when he was eventually found.

"What will they do to find him?"

"Old-fashioned police work—following up leads, canvassing, trying to pick up the trail."

"It's a big country," Mark said bitterly. He was full of guilt for not being more aggressive when Billy had reported the man in the front yard. Mary worried that his recriminations were sapping his drive.

They had found the exact place under the tree where the man had stood, and even virtually invisible indentations that indicated he'd spent some time lying down. He'd been able to rest, maybe even take a nap, while he waited for the house to get quiet. What kind of a monster could be that cool?

Mary had gone there late last night and stood watching the windows of the house. Shafts of light fell onto the grass. She saw Mark come into their bedroom, saw Sally's dim night-light and Billy's black window. She saw Mark sitting on the side of their bed with his head in his hands.

The most awful part was that her little boy was so vulnerable. He was full of posturing and bluster. He'd pretend to be tough and that would probably do nothing but make his situation worse.

Her son was one of the brightest, most inventive, most cheerful children she had ever known. It was easy to make friends with Billy, all you had to do was smile. He had a temper, but even when he got mad it only took him a couple of minutes to cool down.

He had his limitations, though; she couldn't imagine him escaping from a smart adult.

You knew exactly how Billy felt at all times. He lied with his eyebrows raised and an expression of comic innocence on his face. He might as well be carrying a sign.

The poor little boy was not in any way equipped for this. Oh, he might run away from his kidnapper if he could, but he wouldn't get very far. You taught your children the basics— don't go with strangers, memorize your phone number— but how could you ever teach them to deal with the kind of onslaught he must be enduring now?

Beyond the basics he didn't know much about sex, so he would probably be mystified and revolted by the man's advances. That was the most hideous part, to imagine him being . . . handled. When you thought of the brute process of a man having sex with a little boy, it

just made you want to wither and die.

In addition to helping the police and watching the FBI methodically dismember her home, she had been compelled to be a hostess. Winnie Lacy, the wife of the police chief, June Edwards, the mother of Billy's best friend, Tom Benton's perky little assistant principal Dougal Frazer—who had been instrumental in getting Mark his new job—had all come to the house. Mark's best friend among the faculty, Jim McLean, had offered himself as general helper until the autumn term started. Sally, bless her soul, had made iced tea and served the food from the covered dishes.

At first the investigators were reassuring. "Most of these cases have a local slant. Most of these guys are repeat offenders, and we'll interview every known molester in the state. Most of the cases are closed within forty-eight hours."

But the magic forty-eight hours passed, and only silence.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children had referred the Nearys to a support group. It met in Des Moines, and they were getting together tonight. There were five other families in the group. Two of them had runaway children and three were victims of parental abduction. Nobody had—with certainty—lost a child to a stranger.

Nevertheless Mark and Mary and Sally got into the car and drove two hours to the meeting, held in the basement of a Catholic church in an unfamiliar part of Des Moines. Behind them they left Jim McLean staring at the TV and snacking from the array of dishes still on the coffee table. He would be there if Billy called.

Mary wanted to drive but Mark insisted. She knew why: he also hungered for control over the nightmare. They were both clawing darkness, falling, and she knew that Mark felt it perhaps even more than she did. He had been having severe headaches, something completely new for him. This morning she had massaged his neck and shoulders for half an hour, and he was taking as much Advil as the label allowed. She watched him twisting his neck as the old wagon

wheezed south. "I really don't mind driving," she said.

"It relaxes me."

They rode in silence. To the west the sunset slowly bloomed. Soon the last edge of the red disk dropped below the horizon, leaving a bright orange line shimmering beneath a sky that rose from yellow to infinite green. Night swept down out of the heights. A star floated in the emptiness, enormous and of a beauty so great that it made Mary feel as if she was starving for a sustenance she could not name. Both of her kids were amateur astronomers. "What's that star?" she asked Sally.

"Venus. It sets in an hour."

Was Billy seeing it, too? She hoped not. Stargazing would be sure to remind her poor son of home. He was so sensitive, and so devoted to his family. Summer before last he'd gone to camp, only to return after a week with the most spectacular case of homesickness the counselors had ever seen.

Mark had thought it was because he was insecure, that it was an anxiety he could overcome. But Mary understood her son's real problem: the camp was too structured. Billy was an adventurer, a lover of freedom, hungry for independence ... on his terms.

She wanted to hug him so badly she thought she was going to go mad.

Mark turned on the radio. There was an all-news station in Des Moines, and they listened to that. The stories were muttered incantations. Mary closed her ears, letting it all bleed into nonmeaning. Her mind waited only for two words: William Neary.

For an hour she waited, but the words never came. So quickly Billy had become old news. "Are you listening?" she asked Mark.

"Not really. Just passing the time."

Sally spoke. "Do you remember the time Billy put the firecrackers in

the toaster?"

Mark said, "No, I do not."

"But you remember it exploded?"

"I recall throwing it out the kitchen door. Billy did that?"

Sally laughed. Then she started to sing.

*"The ants go marching one by one,
The little one stops to get his gun —"*

Mary closed her eyes. She recalled all the old songs, "The Ants Go Marching," "Moringtown Ride," "Charming Billy." Oh, "Charming Billy," how that would make her toddler laugh!

*"The ants go marching two by two,
The little one stops to go to the zoo —"*

'Darling, stop,' she said in her heart. 'I can't bear it, I just can't!'

"Honey, no!"

Mary was relieved that Mark had made the demand.

"But we always do!"

"Not tonight." Mark's voice was soft with pain. He was the one who

most loved the kids' songs . . . even though both kids had really outgrown them.

Sally burst into tears. Mary tried to touch her but she pulled away. She threw her head back and wailed. "He's dead!"

Mark pulled the car over. He turned full around in his seat and reached for his daughter. She let him draw her forward, let him grasp her awkwardly across the seat. "Not for us he isn't. Not ever."

Mary reached out to them, touching Mark's cheek with a nervous, unsure hand. Mark made a low, sad sound. Then he took a deep breath and continued. "You see, this is our strength. We believe in Billy. He is alive and we are going to get him back."

"Daddy, he was so scared sometimes at night. He was scared of the dark. He had such a big imagination! We used to play Monopoly together on the hall floor on nights when he couldn't sleep."

Mary had known of those games, had lain in bed listening to her children's quiet voices and the rattle of the dice. She recalled his efforts to bamboozle his sister into giving up. "I have Park Place and Boardwalk. Mathematically, it means you can't win!" "But Billy, dearest, I have the rest of the board!"

There was so much to remember, a great avalanche of words, smells, acts, adventures, right back to the weight of him in her womb. "Remember when he was born, Mark?"

"You had a hell of a time."

"I thought he'd never come out."

"Wasn't I the hard one, Momma?"

"That's right. Billy was pretty quick."

"He was green," Mark said. "A green prune with a banana head."

Sally laughed a little and Mark released her, half-turning back toward the driver's seat. She reached after him and they clasped hands. "Why was he green?" Sally asked.

"Bilirubin," Mary replied. "They put him under the lights."

"Which turned him puce. A puce banana head. I thought, Jeez, this can't be my kid."

"Your father claimed I must have had ancestors from Neptune. But he turned out so handsome." She was silenced then by the pain of her longing.

Mark started the car.

As they drove through the streets of Des Moines, Mary watched the evening life—lighted signs, people moving down sidewalks.

She was beginning to see that tragedy made you an outsider. By the way people walked, held their faces, stood at lights or crossed the street, Mars could tell which of them had suffered and which had not.

Then they turned a corner and the street they entered was empty, just dim street lamps and a few parked cars. St. Peter's was a huge stone church, dark and forbidding in the shadowy middle of the block. It looked closed, even abandoned. Only a hand-lettered sign impaled on the iron spike fence that ran down the side of the old building indicated that they had come to the right place, SEARCH GROUP IN CAFETORIUM, it said.

Mark pulled the car up to a meter. "Now all we have to do is find the cafetorium."

"What's a cafetorium?"

"A combination cafeteria and auditorium, I assume."

Mary and Sally followed Mark down some metal steps to a black door with bars on the dingy glass window in its center. It was locked and

Mark rang the bell. The door opened instantly and a flood of light poured out. With it came a dark figure and a smiling voice. "I'm Bob Turpin," the figure said. "I'm pastor here."

"Mark Neary. This is my wife, Mary." Mary extended her hand. Father Turpin's grasp was cold and bony. "Our daughter, Sally." The priest clapped his hands on her shoulders, a gesture apparently contrived to appear casual. "A fine young woman. And how old are we?"

"I'm thirteen, Father. My brother was twelve."

"Was?"

"Is."

"Yes, is. Right this moment, is." He looked from face to face. He was so thin, Mary wondered if he had some sort of disease. "And you are going to find him." He led them down a corridor lined with, of all things, the tombs of his predecessors. "The kids call this the cryptatorium. Eighth-grade talent shows and priestly funerals carried on amid the steam tables. Still, we've been buried down here since the Paulists built the church. I'm a Paulist, incidentally, if the Church means anything to you."

"We're Catholic," Mark said. "Nominally."

"An interesting word, 'nominally.'"

Then they were in the room with the steam tables. A small group of people was gathered in a circle of folding chairs. There was a quiet tension among them, a permanent expression of shock in their eyes.

As the Nearys advanced toward them Mary found that she was shaking. More even than the moment they had first called the police, this felt final. She had already faced the fact that Billy was gone. This was different, though. He would never come walking up the street pushing a broken bike. He would never appear at the front door in the care of a couple of kindly policemen.

Mary Neary had always helped. Now she realized that by giving her ten dollars to the Bishop's Relief Fund and Peter's Pence she had been comfortably placing herself outside the victims' pain. Looking at them—the bald man with the crooked glasses, the black woman's smiling welcome, the elaborately overdressed social mother—she realized that she bore a prejudice against life's casualties that until this moment had been entirely unconscious. She had been counting the victims as less—less lucky, less intelligent, less competent—than the golden many.

They took their seats and Mary thought, 'Now me.' Then they all pulled out pictures. Small snapshots, folded "Missing Child" posters. A ritual began, the silent passing of these pictures to the Nearys.

"Where's your picture?" a mother asked.

"I have my snapshot in my wallet," Mark said.

"Listen to me," the bald man said. "Here's what I say, 'My name is Harry Vreeland. I am the father of a missing child named Robbie Vreeland. This is his picture. Have you seen this child?' " He held out a poster of a smiling little boy of about seven. "You got to not only have your pictures with you at all times, you got to have them ready."

The overdressed woman regarded Mary with her coal-black eyes. She was smoking, and her fingers and teeth were yellow from the stains. "Our boy ran away." She raised her hands, a gesture of defense. "I admit it. There were problems." She looked straight into Mary's eyes. "He decided he wanted to make his own way." Her voice cracked. "He tried, but he was just too young This country has a dark side, don't ever think it doesn't. On the dark side of America, children get eaten."

The black mother spoke up. "I'm Jennine Gordon," she said in a soft, precise tone of voice. "We all want to tell our stories, but first we want to hear yours."

Mary heard Mark exhale. How exhausted he sounded.

"We'd like to hear a few other stories first," Mary said. "We need

perspective." She wanted Jennine to help her, it was like drowning.

"I know," Jennine said. Mary thought, 'She could become my friend for life.' Jennine continued, "First, we have children here that are classed as runaways, but they are really abductions. They run away and then get abducted off the street. Or the perpetrator is clever and makes it look like a runner."

"Ours tried to do that," Sally said.

People nodded.

"I just want to say that the parental abduction is just as painful as the stranger abduction. Maybe it's more painful, because you know how bad it is for your baby." Her voice grew heavy and low and Mary thought, 'There is a terrible mystery here.' But she could not even put a word to it. "My Amelia is fourteen. Her daddy died in 1986 and I married again. My new husband loved my daughter." She stopped, jutted out her jaw. "Oh, how he loved her! I was too stupid and too in love to see!" She shook her head, anguished. Mark's hand found Mary's and she was glad to feel his shuddering touch. Now Jennine's voice went very small and high. "I let him adopt her. The very day we signed the papers, my life became hell. He hit my baby! He beat me up when I told him no. Within two months he was spanking her every day. She was walking humped over. At school she would throw up when it was time to come home." Now, a whisper: "He locked them up together in the garage at night."

Her voice became loud. "I didn't stand for it. No way, baby! I divorced the bastard! Damn right, and got custody with no visiting rights and saw the backside of that man! Then, a month later all of a sudden, Amelia is gone. And I feel—I feel—"

Father Turpin said, "We have an excellent recovery rate in the group. In the ten years we've been going, about thirty percent of our kids have been located."

"What do kids do?" Sally asked.

"Get into it with your friends," said a boy a little older than she. "You never know. Kids hear stuff, especially when school starts up. There might even be somebody who knows."

Mark was looking down at his feet. Mary imagined sand in motion, hopes drowning. Maybe, though, she was projecting her own feeling of helplessness onto her husband. Mark spoke. "What is the single most important thing we can do?"

Vreeland spoke. "Publicity, pure and simple."

"You can hunt for your child. The odds are long, but most of us do it," the overdressed woman added.

It seemed so pitifully little!

The group in its pool of dim light now appeared to Mary like survivors in the tireless ocean. Their raft was hope, but the sea is forever.

Father Turpin handed around a booklet of pictures from the Vanished Children's Alliance. Some of them might like to try to get their kids in this publication, he said.

When Mary glanced at it a sentence stopped her. It was like hearing Dr. Kingsley say of her mother, "We're talking about dying." It read, "Stranger abductions as well as nonrelative abductions are proportionately the greatest risk of life-loss of any missing group."

Her mouth went dry, the voices in the room faded. "No!" Mary was astonished at herself. All eyes were on her. She realized that she'd spoken aloud. She smiled, tried to cover. Nobody smiled back. Maybe the Nearys were the worst off. Maybe they had no chance. Maybe Billy had already died a horrible death. The thought made her very soul ache. She threw back an errant curl. "Our boy will come home."

Jennine Gordon nodded. "When I think of what he's doing to my baby, I'd like to put lead between his eyes. Lord Jesus forgive me! When I'm really goin' nuts—when I can hear my baby screamin' for Momma—oh,

God—you want just somebody to hold you. But you are alone. And you think, I did this. I married this fool!"

The mystery was there again, a silent force binding them by their torments.

One by one Mary caught their eyes, and one by one they looked away. She respected this because she understood it. They could not meet her eyes because of what they shared— not the hope, but the tragedy.

These people with their nervous smoking, their clenching hands, their tattered pictures and little sheafs of records—they were really not here at all. That was the essence of the mystery that had enveloped them.

When a child was stolen, a part of each parent was also stolen. Without that essential part they would never again be whole; no matter the beauty of the day, they could not see it, nor could they enjoy the touch of love, for it might corrupt their vigil with an instant's transport. They do not hope and they do not laugh. Night and imagination are their curses. Mary saw it all.

"We will get him back," she said. How thin was her voice, how weak! She felt Mark's hand come into hers, and Sally beside her shook like the leaf of the aspen. "You'll see. We will."

Soon thereafter the meeting ended in a flurry of information passing: how to find social workers who care or a psychologist who was good but not too costly; where to get a new device that told you the number from which you were receiving a call.

At the side of the cafetorium a spectacularly aged parish volunteer offered coffee, and there was a box of Hostess doughnuts opened on the table beside her. She smiled when Father Turpin took one.

Mark insisted that Mary drink some coffee. "You'll want it," he said. "It's a long trip home, and we both need your strength. This time you do the driving."

14.

They were sailing across the desert on a clear blue afternoon. In a massive feat of endurance driving Barton had gotten them past Las Vegas before he had finally left the interstate in order to sleep. His only stop had been to ditch the bicycle.

Afterward he had at last been able to stretch out on the cot beside Billy's and close his eyes. The air had been fresh and desert-cool. The sun was just rising. As its light slowly filled the van, Barton had taken Billy's hand in his own.

The warmth that filled his heart reassured him that he had not sinned in taking the child. "Every act on behalf of love is heroic." Who had said that? Some poet, Barton thought, the name forgotten since high school and Gen. Lit.

Then he had slept. He had dreamed of a little man following him in a comical midget car. The dream had awakened him to high sun and left him with an urge to get rolling again. Now it was nearly noon and the next thing on the agenda was a drive-through restaurant and some much needed sustenance. Too bad you couldn't get decent food from

chain outlets, especially as celebration was presently suggested.

"Good old Route 15," he sang out. "You know what I see?" He was about to point out the Devil's Playground, but thought better of it. Once they were home in L.A. he might be able to prevent Billy from finding out where he was, maybe for a long time. That was always best.

"Where are we?" asked a breathy voice. It made Barton sit right up; this didn't sound like Billy. Rather, it recalled Dad on his deathbed, his lungs full of cancer and emphysema. Why would Billy sound like that? Then he remembered: he'd punished him by tightening the chest strap. That was a long time ago. Hours and hours—at least twelve hours, probably more.

He pulled the van over. Throwing back the quilt, he saw that the boy's gut was sucked in, his chest distended. There were ridges of paper-white skin pushing up around the thick strap, purple welts bulging through the buckles. A froth of mucus made Billy look like he was exhaling bubble bath. His face was gray. "Oh, son!"

When Barton touched the buckles Billy shook his head from side to side and shrieked. Instinctively Barton glanced out the windows, but they were alone on an empty desert road.

"OK," Barton said. Again he touched the buckles. When Billy started shaking his head again and pulling against his wrist straps, Barton felt something else inside himself. This something made him slow and careful.

He laid his hand on the row of three buckles, pressed. Billy grew frantic. He looked down at Billy's naked body and he found that he could not stop pressing on the buckles. His legs were weak with the pleasure of the moment. "I love him," he told himself, "that's why I can't stop touching him even though it hurts him." Billy's eyes searched his face, pleading. "We'll have to do this for some little time," Barton heard himself say.

No, this was vicious! He had to release the child at once. But his hands

were heavy. He imagined the struggle to breathe across hours and hours. A hideous struggle. He had experimented with suffocation, and he knew how awful it was. Next to burning, slow suffocation was the worst death.

Billy's screaming stopped. His twisting and turning stopped. His body seemed to sink into itself. He made a fragile, discontented gabbling sound. It was like a baby.

This unexpected surrender shattered the moment. Barton saw himself, saw what he was doing. 'Disgusting creature, *you're* the one who ought to be suffering. Imagine, forgetting for twelve long hours what was supposed to be a fifteen-minute punishment! You fat pig! Fat Royal!'

He remembered the little dove he had found under the honeysuckle hedge, the poor thing scuttling along with its wing broken. He had caught it in his hands and taken it to his room and splinted the wing with drafting tape and a Popsicle stick.

He'd fed that dove with his own hands and nursed it and kept its box warm with a light. In the end the splinting had worked and his mother had put her arm around his shoulder and said, "You have such fine hands, maybe you'll be a surgeon."

He could nurse a dove back to health, but he could not remember to alleviate a magnificent child's suffering. His fingers fumbled with the buckles while Billy shrieked.

"My dove flew away," he shouted over Billy's noise. "I healed it and it flew away."

He had to push the swollen skin through the buckles. It was rubbery and hot and when he finally lifted the strap Billy started taking deep breaths and coughing up great gobs of mucus.

Quickly he unstrapped his ankles, then his hands. "No more," he said. "No more, Billy."

Billy sat up. Barton grabbed the sheet from his own cot and tried to clean Billy's chest. But the boy coughed again, the sound rattling the whole van, and more came up. Then he vomited froth, which Barton swept away in the sheet.

Through even this loathsome ordeal a part of Barton remained calmly objective. It told him he had really done what he had done because it was necessary to break the boy's will.

There was no use pretending that Billy loved or even liked him. It was much too soon. What he had to do was get Billy to quit fighting and accept his new situation. That required strong medicine, yes, but it had to be tempered with gentleness or it would lead to nothing but fear.

"My chest—" Billy put his hands on the marks. They were deep and now the line where the strap had cut into him was turning purple like the skin that had been compressed under the buckles.

Barton pulled his first-aid kit out from under the bed and produced a tube of antiseptic cream. "Lie back," he said. "I'll tend to it."

Billy turned his head. Barton remembered the time Duke had trapped that kitten in the tree. Its face was full of fear and it was so helpless. Barton had climbed the tree with Duke clawing the trunk and moaning. He had gotten the kitten, but then he'd slipped, and Duke—

No. He hadn't slipped. He'd held the kitten squirming in his hand, held it over Duke's head while Duke went mad, leaping and snarling, and the kitten had hissed and writhed and bitten at the hand, until his fingers loosened their grip . . .

Barton shook his head. Those memories, they would come and take him over, he was back there again and he had to be here. What if Billy just walked right out of the van right now? Began running like in the mountains?

Oh, that had been horrible! His heart had practically burst, exerting himself like that. The damned kid—but Barton had turned it into an

effective display of dominance and power. On the way back to the van Billy had lain in his arms, surrendered to the greater power of the adult.

He'd read a lot about brainwashing. One of the techniques the Chinese used in Korea was to allow men to escape, only to bring them back with an overwhelming show of power. They would put the men in coffins and pretend to bury them alive, all the while feeding them just enough oxygen to prevent them from losing consciousness. They would go mad in the coffins, dying and yet unable to die. When they were released they would be so surprised and grateful that fine young men from Cincinnati and Bakersfield would crouch like coolies and place their lips against the scuffed boots of sneering Chinese teenagers.

The key thing was the element of surprise. Barton thought he probably needed some of that now. He could not provide the overwhelming sense of deliverance that was the genius of the coffin torture. But wasn't there something he could do, some little softening that might make Billy revise his opinion of his captor?

He brushed Billy's cheek with a kiss. The boy's eyes flashed, and Barton was disappointed to see that his expression was one of disgust. "I know you hate me," Barton said. "But I love you. I love you more than you have ever been loved before."

"You're a dirty queer."

"The word is 'homosexual,' son. Think of their feelings. Anyway, I am not a homosexual."

"You're not?"

"I want to see you grow into the best of the best. I'm rich. I can give you everything you want. I want to be more a father to you than anybody else could ever be."

"My chest hurts."

He gave Billy a double dose of the children's aspirin he had packed in the first-aid kit.

"My feet hurt too," Billy said. He coughed, long and hard. "They sting."

Barton looked at them. "They seem better than they were," he said hopefully.

"The circulation was cut off. I'm likely to get an infection."

"I used lots of Mycitracin."

"I was in my pajamas. Where are they now?"

"They were a mess. From what you did."

Billy gave him a long, appraising look. "I'd like to have some clothes on."

Barton got the duffel he'd packed in Billy's bedroom. It seemed an alien object, beautiful and enigmatic. Boys' things always appeared that way to Barton, as if they were charged with potent and heartbreaking magic. When he unzipped the bag the clothes he'd pushed in came fluffing out. "That's my stuff," Billy said, his voice cracking. He grabbed the clothes, held them to his face, inhaled their smell as if seeking to recapture whatever element of home he could. He moaned with pleasure. "My Kafka T-Shirt. You got my Kafka T-shirt!"

Barton laughed, delighted that his random choices were such a success.

Billy put down the clothes. His eyes were full of anguish. "Didn't my Garfie get to come?"

"The stuffed toy?"

"Garfield is hardly a stuffed toy." His hand fluttered across his chest. "You really hurt me," he muttered.

Barton wished he'd thought to bring some Benadryl cream to mix into the antibiotic, but he hadn't considered injuries this serious. He'd gotten his other boys much closer to home, and it had been a simple matter to take them to the house.

He hadn't thought ahead about this journey, at least not well enough. Somehow he'd visualized Billy sleeping the whole way. But they'd started out on Sunday night and it was now Wednesday. If he'd drugged the boy heavily enough to keep him out all this time there might have been brain damage or even death.

As Barton thought, he selected clothes for Billy. Shorts, a T-shirt. No shoes, though—that was one of Barton's smartest rules. Bare feet were no big deal in his time, but they slowed these modern kids down considerably. "We're going to go to some fabulous stores," he said. "You'll be able to dress in absolute fashion."

"My mother buys my clothes."

"But you like style, you like to look your best."

Billy pushed aside the blue T-shirt Barton had given him. "I want to wear my Kafka shirt." Wincing, he raised his arms to drag it over his head.

"Let me help you."

"I can do it!" Then he grabbed the briefs that were in Barton's hand and drew them up his smooth legs. He put on the shorts.

The T-shirt was odd. If Barton had realized what was on it, he wouldn't have brought it. The shirt was light gray, and on the front there was a photograph of a hollow-eyed young man in what appeared to be a cheap suit and striped club tie. Under it was the caption KAFKA LIVES.

Franz Kafka . . . wasn't he some sort of horror novelist? Barton wasn't sure. "I'll have to teach you about Kafka," he said briskly to cover his

ignorance. "Would you like to learn?"

"I know about Kafka."

Barton heard the hate in Billy's words. But it was also true that Billy was for the first time responding to him as a human being. This was an initiatory moment: their first genuine conversation.

"I know about Kafka, too, Billy."

"Wir graben den Schacht von Babel "

Barton realized that the words were German. It would be a potentially serious disadvantage if Billy knew a language that he himself could not understand. Billy was watching his reaction.

Barton had first seen the boy playing games in a video arcade. There had been nothing to indicate that he was unusually educated. But then, a lot of schools in his part of the Midwest taught German. The area had been settled by Germans, hadn't it?

"It means, 'We are digging the pit of Babel.' "

"A remarkable sentiment. I've always thought that horror novelists—"

"Let me spell it out. I'm trying to communicate that I don't want to talk to you. If you want to stick me in the butt, do it and get it over with. But don't try to fool with my mind."

The words came as melody; they lilted. The music of Billy's voice made the contempt more plain. Barton bowed his head. "You will never get away from me, Billy."

"Of course I won't. If I do, you kill my parents."

Barton was astonished. "I never said that!"

"You don't even know what you tell people."

Barton had *dreamed* of threatening Billy with that. He'd *contemplated* it. He never had the feeling that he said and did things that he didn't know about. Of course not. Barton Royal was a very special man with very special needs. But he was quite sane. That was his rock. Everything he did, he did for a perfectly sound reason.

"If I said that I didn't mean it."

Billy could not have looked more relieved if he'd been instructed by a director. "Come into the front," Barton said, in a spirit of appeasement.

Billy crawled forward. He hunched into the passenger seat.

"Do you usually sit like that?"

"No."

"I've always believed that a gentleman's inner bearing is reflected in his posture."

Billy raised his T-shirt. Inwardly, Barton chided himself. He had so much on his mind, it was hard to remember the details.

There was, however, a detail that he *did* remember. "I have a suggestion. Let's eat!"

"Not very hungry."

"No? You haven't eaten in two and a half days. You must be famished."

In the silence of the moment that followed, Barton heard a small sound. Billy was clenching and unclenching his left fist against the seat.

Jack had tried to starve himself at first. Little boys never succeeded at this. "I'll get myself a nice cheeseburger," Barton said. "You don't have to eat."

Billy snorted out his contempt for Barton. The anger that rose in Barton made him want to grab those shoulders and shake them *damn hard!*

"Come on, Billy. It isn't going to be bad, living with me. We're going to be friends, you'll see."

"You can't make me."

Barton felt the flush enter his cheeks. He gripped the steering wheel. 'Now, calm down,' he said to himself. 'Take it easy.' He breathed in, breathed out. *The hostile little bastard!*

No, don't let that get out. He doesn't need your anger, he needs your love. He needs understanding and firm, kind support. He's just a boy.

The little shit!

You could just put your hands around his *fucking neck and squeeze!*

That's the way choking works, you squeeze until the windpipe pops. Then you can just sit back and watch. It doesn't happen right away, but they die. They clutch their throats, they run, they might even try to fight back. But then they get all black and the tongue comes out and they start shaking. They lose their bladder and they go down and they die at your feet *like fucking rats!*

He was going to throttle this child, and he was going to do it right now!

No!

But his hands were rising from the wheel, going to claws. Stop, take it easy!

The little shit!

He grabbed the steering wheel and hung on with all his strength. His fingers kept snaking off, but he fought it, he had to fight it, he had to somehow regain control, he wanted the boy, he did, he could still make

it work, he just knew it!

Pop the windpipe! Watch him smother! *Scum, you filthy little scum!*

His feet thudded against the firewall, against the brake and gas pedal. It would just be *so damn satisfying* to break the little bastard's neck!

Then the boy, who was looking on with wide eyes, suddenly reached out a hand and began patting his shoulder. "It's OK, mister," he said. His voice was the softest of whispers.

Barton was so surprised that his anger went spitting out of him. He sank down, breathing hard. "Please don't make me mad like that," he said.

"I won't! Not ever again! I promise!"

When Barton released the steering wheel he saw that his right hand had split the plastic. The torn piece hung off the wheel, its vinyl covering twisted and ripped.

They drove for a time without talking.

Then the boy began to sing:

"The ants go marching one by one

The little one stops to get his gun,

And they all go down, around,

Get out of the rain!"

How delightful! He knew that well, of course, from his job. He knew all sorts of children's songs. Billy was really coming around, this was going to work!

Barton sang the second verse:

*"The ants go marching two by two,
The little one stops to tie his shoe,
And they all go down, around,
Get out of the rain!"*

Laughing with pleasure, Barton pulled the van onto 15. As he glanced around to check the traffic he saw the face of the child he had been enjoying so much.

It was soaked with tears, the eyes like slits, the nose running, the cheeks bright red. And the lips were pulled back from the teeth in a particularly horrible way that managed to communicate all at once disgust, rage, hate and the blackest, most dreadful fear.

Barton returned his gaze to the highway. He pressed the gas pedal.

They went on.

15.

Billy slumped in the seat, his chest tormented, his lungs rattling when he breathed, his feet still tender from last night's escape attempt. There was blood on his Kafka T-shirt. Could you wash blood out? Mom would know.

The sun was beginning to set and it blasted into his face, making his eyes ache as much as his heart. Then he opened his eyes wide, glaring directly at the sun. 'Maybe if I'm blind,' he thought, 'he'll feel sorry for me.' He shut his eyes tight: he didn't want to be blind, then he'd never be able to get back home!

He stared at the glove compartment, which hung open before him. It was full of tapes. They were mostly the operas which the man was constantly playing. He saw *Madama Butterfly* and *La Gioconda* and *The Flying Dutchman*. He decided he didn't like opera much anymore, even though he'd liked Carmen.

There was also a small flashlight there, black, with a long silver scratch on it. That was the light that had bobbed along behind him in the woods. If only it had broken, if only it hadn't even been there, or he had dropped it down the cliff.

Then what? Billy imagined himself falling into the yard of the little cabin beneath the bluff, and they would carry him inside and he would die, and then he would go home. He saw the hearse, a black Cadillac with a flower car behind it, and the St. Stephen's choir was singing

"Nearer My God to Thee." The coffin was gray.

He read the inspection sticker on the windshield backward. Utah. Were they going there? What was Utah like? Was this Utah?

He counted the buttons on the radio. It was a real nice one, a Sony. He wanted to ask if it had memory and was there a CD player in the van since it had CD controls on it. It would be neat to hear a CD in a car.

He sat nursing his pains and being hungry. He was so hungry that he kept thinking he smelled a hamburger. The memory reminded him of the Stevensville Burger King, and his gang. A great bunch of guys, even the registered nerds like Jerry Edwards.

Going to the Burger King with the guys, ordering a Whopper with fries and a Coke, and afterward having a fried cherry pie for dessert, and no parents around. Getting on your bikes early in the morning and riding all the way out to the place where the railroad trestle crosses the river, building a fire and roasting hot dogs, waiting for the train to come and flatten the pennies you put on the track. And plus you could lie under the trestle as it went across, a shaking, rumbling cataract of sound that left you feeling like you'd been shaken apart and come back together again. There was also walking the trestle when you heard the first blast of the horn. That was when the train crossed Main Street in Stevensville. It took ten minutes to walk across, and the train made the distance between the town and the trestle in fourteen if it was running exactly on schedule.

Billy had done that a dozen times, always cutting a little more off his start time. He loved it, the jitters in his stomach when he started, the hypnosis of the passing ties, the other guys screaming his times and the train's horn blowing and mourning and then the tracks jumping and seeing its light in the middle of the day glaring like the eye of death, and throwing himself off the trestle at the last minute into the tender grass that grew beside the tracks, and lying there breathing grass and watching the passing Amtrak cars, red and blue and silver, and the flash of a pale face in a window.

He looked at his own hands in his lap and thought, 'He says he loves me. He says I am beautiful. What does he mean?'

The man looked like a fear of the night become real. Billy sat up, forced his pain to the background. His only restraint at the moment was having the seat belt pulled tight across his lap with his arms pinned underneath. It wasn't a very good way to keep somebody captive.

If only he had thirty seconds and a telephone, he knew exactly what he would do. Too bad they were going sixty, he could jump out.

His mind snatched at whatever bits of information it could find. 'We're going west because the sun is setting in my face. This is IH 15 because that's what the signs say, and also he said it. We're in a desert that looks like the surface of Mars. We carry a Utah inspection sticker, which probably means that we're either in Utah or on our way there.

They passed a filling station and he saw a bank of phones shining in the last sun. The tires hummed. The cassette played. The man sat there driving and pulling at the piece of steering wheel he'd broken. Billy saw that the gas gauge was close to empty.

The man drove, occasionally making a little sound in his throat, like he was secretly talking to himself. He was like a huge queen termite, all smooth and pale and big. Once Billy had dissected a queen termite—fifth-grade science. Eggs poured out of her and he felt sad even though she was really incredibly yucky.

Sal Geller had said, "You could dry the eggs and make Them into a cereal." Billy replied, "Eat them damp and they'd be like rice. A whole bowl. Nice and hot." Mrs. Chapman overheard them and sent them both to the office for being nauseating little boys.

He cried silently, telling himself it was for the lady termite. 'Mommy, it's gonna be night and I know you miss me. Dad, I'm here, I'm still alive.' They loved him so much, they must be suffering hell and there was nothing he could do except sit here and get taken farther and

farther—

The man moved slightly in his seat. The van began to slow. About half a mile ahead Billy saw a Mobil station. He made his mind blank. Then he closed his eyes, let his head drop to one side. He began breathing rhythmically, pretending to sleep.

The van stopped. There was a click and the engine turned off. A moment later the man's door was opened and closed. Billy looked: the man was out by the gas pumps. This was a self-service station.

Billy pulled his hands out from under the belt and unlatched it. But when he pushed the window button nothing happened. OK. He reached over, turned the key, tried it again. Still nothing. Then he saw a child lock. He flipped it, and this time the window went down. In an instant he was out of the van. There was nobody in the station office. From the garage beside it he heard a machine whining. There was a Toyota being greased. At the far corner of the station he saw the phones. He ran for them. There was almost no time, he knew that. Maybe he was already seen.

He grabbed the receiver, pressed "0." The phone rang once, twice. "Operator."

"My name is William Neary from Stevensville, Iowa. I've been kidnapped by a man in a white Aerostar. We're on Route 15 heading west."

"What's the number of that phone, son?"

"702-995-0091." He couldn't risk another second. He hung up. *Jesus let the operator tell Mom and Dad!*

Billy started to run into the garage, but the click of the gas pump turning off stopped him. There were only seconds left and the attendant was nowhere in sight. The only thing saving Billy was the fact that the man's view of him was blocked by the smoked glass of the van's windows. But the man had to be moving. In another few seconds

he would come around the front of the van—

Billy crossed the tarmac at a crouching run, slipped like an eel into the window. The man was no more than five feet away, walking toward the gas station. Billy dropped into his seat, pulled the belt over his hands. As he sat watching the man pay, he cursed his luck with the attendant, who had appeared to take the man's money. If only there'd been another ten seconds, Billy might be free right now. But what if the attendant was as stupid as the people back in Denver had been, letting the van go despite the fact that there was a kid inside screaming he'd been kidnapped? The stupid dumbheads in that Taurus, Billy wished them into the depths of hell. How could they not understand, not care?

The man got in. Billy had leaned his head back against the seat and was again breathing as if he was asleep.

They were accelerating onto the highway when Billy realized his terrible mistake. He had left his window open, and the man was sure to notice. Then the wind stopped. The man had raised the window with his button. Billy waited, but there were no screamed questions, just the silence of the road.

When he opened his eyes a slit he saw that the man was looking at him. Was it suspicion? Certain knowledge? Or did he just like to look at the bee-you-tiful little boy?

What the hell did it mean that you were beautiful? It meant that there were certain people who wanted to destroy you, that's what it meant.

When the man's voice suddenly started Billy was jolted by a tremendous shock.

"What'd I tell you? A great, big, delicious Roy Rogers! Hamburgers, here we come."

It was all Billy could do not to burst out laughing with relief.

"I'll bet you could sure use some food. I know I could."

Where'd he get that voice? Those voices? One sentence he sounded like a man, the next a sort of half-man. It was like there was a boy in him who had never grown up, and if you listened a woman, too.

But he wasn't gentle, he'd torn apart the steering wheel!

Billy looked at his meaty face, at the hurt eyes. The man was smiling, a big, harsh grin. It was the kind of smile somebody who hates kids makes when they have to be with a kid. Those fat hands concealed iron bones, and they had wanted to grab him around the throat and choke him worse than the straps.

When he was in the straps he'd cried out to the man, he'd promised never ever to try to get away again but the man hadn't seemed to hear him, he'd just sat there driving like he was part of the van itself. Billy had struggled for hours and hours just to get enough breath. He'd slept and dreamed he was at the bottom of the sea and he swam into a giant clam and it closed and it was crushing his chest. He had to breathe and he knew the next breath he took was gonna be water.

Waking up felt like that time Jerry sat on him too long and made him pass out. But that was different, Jerry had paid him two dollars not to tell his dad. Although, of course, he had stolen back one of the dollars later.

Billy remembered how the man had seemed like a bat coming after him through the woods all graceful and fast, his big body maneuvering among the trees. It was ballet to see him run, this swift lump of a man.

"Give us two cheeseburgers with the works, two orders of fries, a water and a large chocolate shake." The man turned a sheened, smiling face toward Billy. "Sound good, old chap?"

"Sure," Billy replied. He tried to sound like a robot.

The man pursed his lips and then his hand just sort of happened to drop onto Billy's leg. Billy looked at it there, at the school ring too worn to read, at the wrinkles along the knuckles, at the white back that

was almost but not quite like a woman's. "Now look, Billy, you're going to make it. You're going to be very happy! You should see the house where you're going to live. Wow! It's a big house and I have beautiful furniture. Antiques, even. And you can see for miles, it has a huge view, and you will have everything you ever wanted or dreamed of. You have to pull yourself together. The chest strap was harsh, I admit that, but goodness, in all those hours you didn't utter a word of protest! You poor boy, how you must have suffered!" The hand patted his. "Honest to God I am so sorry. If you'd said one single word I would have loosened it immediately. But you had to be punished, you surely see that. You ran away and that is a no-no. The ultimate no-no! But ten minutes, fifteen. I just got so absorbed in my driving—"

"I asked you and asked you and asked you and you never even turned around! Then you came back and went to sleep."

The man's eyes widened. Then the order came and he was fooling with the white Roy Rogers bags and his wallet and little blue change purse like an old lady's.

In front of them Billy saw a station wagon full of guys his age. They were horsing around and he could hear their faint voices full of laughter. He leaned forward against his shoulder strap, listening, watching and wishing.

It was a Buick wagon, recent model. The kids were wearing hockey outfits. Normally Billy didn't run with the jocks, but right now the interior of that car looked like heaven.

The man tapped his horn a couple of times. He was smiling and nodding into the windshield. "Come on," he said, "please, that's right, step on the gas pedal, dear." He stomped the floor with his left foot, so hard the whole van vibrated with the blow.

Billy tried telepathy. He'd done it with Eric Worden a long time ago. The Wordens had a Ouija board and Mrs. Worden said it worked. 'Help me,' Billy said in his mind, 'help the boy in the van behind you.'

The wagon went to the end of the parking lot and returned to the interstate. Nobody inside even glanced back. The van followed and then they were briefly behind the wagon again. Billy tried to direct pure thought into the head of the driver. 'Help the boy in the van behind you. Help me, help me!' His lips were a determined, silent line.

As the car pulled away for the last time, Billy saw that it had an Arizona license plate. So maybe they were in Arizona. 'The capital of Arizona is Phoenix.' That was what he knew about Arizona. Or maybe Tucson was the capital.

They went down the highway with the food on the console between them. Billy decided not to eat.

If the operator had told the police, they should be here by now. Every second the van was farther away!

"I hope you like burgers and shakes," the man said. His hands were tight on the steering wheel, his one visible eye was rolling in Billy's direction.

"Yeah, sure."

"Eat. Don't wait for me. I'll grab my burger when the traffic thins out."

The smell of the food made his mouth start watering. He didn't want to eat, though. That man would not get the satisfaction of seeing him eat food his filthy hands had touched.

Normally Billy moved through life from food break to food break. Breakfast at home, lunch at school, snack in the afternoon, then dinner and before bed a final glass of milk. Plus as many cookies and as much candy in between as he could get away with.

He looked at the bent steering wheel, then at the man's tense face. He recalled how slow he'd been taking off the strap, how he'd hesitated with his hand on the buckle and his face red. With a guy this nuts it was best to do what you were told to do and wait for your chance. After

all, the more Billy cooperated the more the man would relax. Plus the police were coming. They had to come, he'd *told* that operator!

No hamburger had ever smelled as good as this one did. This Roy Rogers must be special. He could smell every separate thing, the salad dressing, the tomatoes, the lettuce, the meat. It just seemed automatic to lift it to his mouth and take a big bite.

"Not too much at once, honey. It's been a long time since you ate and it'll all come up again."

Honey ? Screw you.

As he chewed Billy stared across the hood of the van, watching the oncoming traffic. People were beginning to turn their lights on. The sky ahead was glowing pale orange and green, the land was dark. Ahead of them he saw a truck with about a dozen license plates, he couldn't even tell all the states. California. North Carolina. Arkansas.

A car passed with California plates, then another.

"How's the burger?"

"It's OK."

"That's my boy! You looking forward to the shake? You like a chocolate shake?"

Billy would not give him that. "Not much."

The man played with the steering wheel. "What's your name?" Billy asked. A smile came over the man's face, big and ugly and kind of sad, like when he'd had that hangdog look.

"Well, well, well, I think we're warming up a little at last! I am Barton. And please do not call me Bart. Barton."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty."

"What happened to you?"

"Pardon me?"

"You look a lot older than my dad, and he's over forty."

"Well, never mind. Eat your supper." He began to hum along with the opera he had put on. "You know," the man said, settling back in his seat, "I remember when I was your age, you know what we did? When I was twelve." Billy wondered how he knew so much. His name, now his age. Had the man been studying him, watching him, maybe for weeks? The thought was sickening.

The man was looking at him now, a look that at first seemed warm and friendly. But his eyes were not right. They stared for so long that Billy got worried the van would run off the road.

Of course that would be great, if he survived. The police would come and then it would be all over. Maybe he could try grabbing the steering wheel when the man wasn't looking, and pull it and reach his foot over and jam down the gas.

"Do you know what we did?" the man asked again. Billy knew he had to answer.

"No," he said. He took his last mouthful of hamburger and started on the shake, which was so delicious that he felt a stab of literally physical pleasure when he tasted it.

"Well, we had a great time! There was this lady in our neighborhood who was very old. She used to sit beside her window and listen to the radio. One day we climbed in when she wasn't in the living room and attached wires to the microphone. She came in to listen to the news, and we hid outside and announced the end of the world. It was quite a newscast! And you know what she was doing when we went to see how she had reacted? She was sound asleep." He chuckled. "I guess there's

something to be said for getting old."

"You couldn't have attached wires to the microphone because regular radios don't have a microphone."

"Well, I meant the speaker. It's a detail. Do you have any funny stories?"

"Not really."

"You've never done anything funny?"

"I guess not."

"But you've laughed. Tell me something that made you laugh."

The mere thought of laughter brought tears to Billy's eyes. He could hardly talk. But he had to say something, he didn't want to make Barton mad again. "We don't laugh, we aren't allowed to."

"Aren't allowed to? Why not?"

"Religion." He thought fast. "We're Charismatics. We don't laugh, we only speak in the tongues."

There was a period of silence. Billy knew he had been at least partly accurate. He'd heard the Charismatics bellowing away in the basement at St. Stephen's. "Lamma lamma sammi," they would yell, or, "Globbalubbyboof!" They would make long sentences of these words and scream, "Praise God, praise Him!"

That was speaking in the tongues. After the hollering died down they would all say "Amen" and sing a hymn. Any kid who heard this would have to be carried off on a stretcher from laughing so hard. The Charismatics themselves did not laugh at all.

"You're very religious," Barton said. The wariness in his voice delighted Billy, and he thought it wise to expand on the theme.

"We go to Mass and Communion every morning. I confess every Thursday. We all have statues of Jesus and Mary in our rooms, and when I'm not eating or sleeping or doing homework, I pray."

"You must have very few sins, and yet you go to confession every week."

"No, I have plenty of sins. The more strict your religion, the more sins you have. That's why probably all the holiest people are in hell, my dad says."

Barton nodded. "They have the strictest religions and therefore the most sins. Makes sense. But you haven't told me your sins."

Should he say something stupid like he did the once or twice a year he went to real confession, or should he—dared he—try another tack? He wanted to seem tough and dangerous to this man. But would anything be believable? Being near Barton made Billy feel helpless. If he didn't try, though, if he didn't try everything he was going to be near Barton forever.

"Well," he said, "you aren't supposed to tell." He glanced at Barton. How would he take this? "But I killed a man."

Barton burst out laughing and Billy hated himself at once for being so stupid. "You shouldn't laugh," he yelled. "I tied him to a bed just like you did me and I connected him to an extension cord. And I plugged it in."

"Who was this? Who did you kill, little boy?"

"A man who tried to kiss me."

Barton sighed. Billy, who had been sucking his shake between sentences, came to the bottom and rattled the straw.

"That isn't nice!"

He did it again, rattling it long and hard.

"Oh, please," Barton sang out, "don't make me punish you. I find it so embarrassing." But he sounded like he found it fun. Billy stopped.

As night fell and the desert became flecked with the lights of distant towns, Billy felt a loneliness so overwhelming that it seemed almost sacred.

He watched the gathering dark.

16.

Sally lay motionless, staring into the dark. She listened. The silence told her nobody else was awake.

So what had waked her up?

She heard a creak close to her bed. She turned her head, but all she saw was total blackness.

It felt like she was awake and dreaming at the same time. Another creak came, and suddenly there was a hand over her mouth, a slick hand that stank of rubber. She twisted away, intaking breath, trying to scream. The rubber of the glove pulled her skin.

Then her mouth was free and she heard herself bellow. As the scream died into its own reverberations she could hear his brutal grunting. His other arm came under the covers, sought her waist, started dragging her.

"Daddy! Daddy, oh, God, he's back, he's taking me! Daddy!"

The lights came on. Her heart was thrashing, sweat was pouring down her cheeks, she was crouched against the wall behind the bed. Her mother and father were two ghosts bobbing in the warm glow of the overhead light. Daddy rushed up to her and scooped her up in real

arms that were warm and strong.

She let herself go like a rag in his hug and the strength of him filled her. "He was here," she moaned.

"No," Mother said, "no, baby."

Air whistled into her lungs, her heart's motion became stronger and slower, the night wind began to dry the sweat that was soaking her.

She heard herself moaning, "He was here, he was here," and it was like another kid was doing it. Then she was being shaken back and forth, her head lolling, the ceiling fixture swinging before her eyes.

She caught her breath. There was Mom, her face white, her eyes puffy, and Dad with his glasses crooked and that haggard look she wished she could wash off his face.

"No, baby," Dad said. "Nobody was here. You were dreaming."

It seemed unbelievable. "Really?"

He held her tight and she smelled him, a waxy old smell like a grandfather. But she put her arms around him, and Mom held her hands behind his back. "You had a nightmare," Mom said.

"I'm scared at night."

"Why didn't you tell us, Sally?"

She looked into her father's eyes. "Because I didn't want to." She pulled away. "I want coffee."

"I think we could all use coffee," Dad said.

"At four a.m.?" Mom asked. Then she made it a statement: "At four a.m." They wouldn't be getting back to sleep, none of them. Sally put on her robe and followed her parents downstairs. As they moved through the house she turned on every light.

Walter Toddcaster was dragged out of his sleep by the ringing of the telephone. He wasn't surprised; it was part of the job. His wife didn't even stir.

"Yeah?"

"We got a lead in the kid case. He called in."

"Tell me about it."

"An operator took the call from a pay phone at a Mobil station near Estes, Nevada. He's in a white Ford Aerostar, traveling west on IH 15. That's all we got."

"License number? Anything?"

"As a matter of fact there is a little more. The call came in at eight-fifty-one their time last night. The phone company reported it to the state police. They got to the booth at nine-twelve. No Aerostar. But the attendant remembered the van."

"And its driver?"

"A white male aged about forty-five to fifty. Five foot ten, somewhat overweight, wearing a pale blue Izod shirt and black slacks."

"This is good news."

"Not entirely."

"Hit me."

"The attendant also *thinks* he saw a boy—get this—climbing into the window of the van. The boy was wearing a white T-shirt with a photo on it and shorts. He thinks the kid might have had a big red spot on his shirt."

"What are you telling me?"

"He thought it looked like blood."

Toddcaster sighed, thanked the duty officer and hung up the phone. The question was now a personal one: did he clam up on this family, or stay emotionally involved? A man has to protect himself. You can break, you get too involved.

To a cop blood usually means death. This particular abductor, at some point, will kill this child.

Taking places around the red Formica table in the kitchen was another of the unspoken family rituals that had given Sally quiet pleasure, and now created distress. Dad set the coffeepot to perking, and it was soon rattling away, a painfully merry sound.

Mom sat with her arms folded before her and her head down, like you used to at naptime in grade school. Sally reached over and touched her hair. So suddenly that there seemed anger in the movement, her mother raised her head. "Did you see him?"

"You said—"

"It was a nightmare, Mary."

"No, Mark—I mean when he took Billy. Did you see him?"

Sally was confused by the question. She hadn't seen him . . . had she?

"The dream, Sally. Maybe it's a buried memory."

"No, I—I don't think so."

Her mother's face changed, the eyes growing narrow, the lips curling into an expression that Sally had never seen before. "If you remember anything, you tell us!"

"Mom, I don't!"

"I think you do!"

"Mary, hey!"

"She doesn't realize how serious this is! She's a child. It's a game."
Abruptly she stopped talking.

Sally thought in a dull, helpless way, 'She's angry at me because I'm the one who was left behind.' Slowly, Mom's hands went to her face.
"Mom?"

"I'm sorry, honey. I love you, you know I do. I just want Billy back so darned bad!"

The pot rattled and chattered, and the room filled with the smell of fresh-brewed coffee. Sally knew that something was being destroyed in this family, something that was fragile and necessary. Was it a kind of family sentiment, a sort of shared lie—or was it a truth crushed by the savage reality of a world that sees children as objects to be consumed?

She said all she could think to say, "I'm sorry it wasn't me, Mom. I know he was the baby." Mary gave a loud, tragic wail and reached toward her daughter. They twined hands across the table. "I don't think I ever saw him or heard him, but I'm so afraid he'll come back I almost can't stand it. I don't want to die like—"

"He's not dead! *He is not dead!*"

"I know—I'm sorry, Mom, I—"

Sally watched as her mother seized the coffeepot and filled the mugs. Her hands, which had been clenched and trembling, became deft and efficient when she performed the familiar chore. Sally saw something about her mother that she had never seen before, and knew that it was the bravery of continuing on even when you wanted to roll up into a little ball and die.

Mary's voice rang clear and suddenly very strong. "We cannot have a defeatist attitude, because this family is all he has. If we don't get out there and do our own investigation and find our boy, he's gone."

"Mary, the police—"

"What did they do? They came here, they ruined my house with their filthy tests and then they went back to their other damned cases, the ones they have some chance of solving.

Nobody's looking for Billy. Canvassing every known pederast in the state! That's their idea of working this case. Billy's not in Iowa. He probably hasn't been in Iowa since Sunday morning. He could be anywhere! And we are going to have to find him. Nobody else will. Nobody else gives a tinker's damn." Noisily she sipped her scalding coffee. Sally watched her, full of admiration.

"It's one thing to do publicity, but we can't possibly mount an investigation on our own. Where would we start?"

"Somewhere!"

As Toddcaster dressed he thought of the next steps to be taken. They had to put out a request for incident reports on white Aerostars up and down IH 15. They had to follow up anything they might get. And the family had to participate. They needed to take their poster to every truck stop and filling station on the west side of that highway. It was a big job, but not impossible. He could find out the approximate range of the Aerostar, and they could concentrate their postering in areas where it was most likely to have stopped for gas.

He was going to tell them that Billy was alive, and they were going to emote all over him.

The part about the blood he would leave out. And he wouldn't explain why the boy had gone back to the van, although he understood. The

blood told him: Billy Neary was being tortured. Kidnappers did it to brainwash their victims, literally to intimidate them into obedience. They did it out of fear, out of anger. Mostly, though, they did it for fun.

Maybe there would come a time when Billy wouldn't make a phone call even if he could. That happened, he'd seen that. There was an unholy love that entered these relationships. Sometimes they kissed the hand that would, in the end, kill them.

Sally considered how many crannies there were in the world, and how small her brother was.

The familiar, dull hopelessness began to reassert itself. Noble sentiments aside, they were just like the other families of the Searchers group with their pictures and their desperate strategies.

Mother had become a woman possessed. "We'll get him back. We'll find a way."

"We could canvass the neighborhood," Mark ventured.

"Do you know that the police *did not do that!* Did you notice? They didn't so much as knock on a single door in this neighborhood! If we get our picture into the right hands and somebody says, 'Hey, I've seen this kid,' then they'll have something to go on. Otherwise, it's just basically waiting for something to turn up."

"That's not exactly a fair characterization, Mary. They're doing a lot more than that."

"I don't want to be fair! I want Billy!" With a glare like the enraged Medusa in Sally's ancient-history book, her mother reared back and hurled her mug against the wall. Coffee went everywhere and the little framed cross-stitch she had made, "Bless my kitchen, Lord, and all that come herein," was shattered and fell to the floor amid the showering bits of the mug.

Silence followed the outburst. Dad seemed frozen in his chair, like

Sally too astonished to make a sound.

Scuttling like a coolie, Mother hurried to pick up the pieces. "Don't anybody else move, you'll get glass in your feet!"

"What about your feet, Mom," Sally said. She went down to help. Together they picked up the larger pieces of glass while Mark sopped up coffee and slivers with paper towels.

Sally watched as her father finished, then came over and enfolded his wife in his arms right there in the kitchen. They seemed so small, and so much older than Sally had ever before noticed. She got up, slowly backing away from them. She wished they wouldn't keep revealing themselves as little and helpless—but they were, just look at them.

"We can work as a team," she said, trying to interject a hopefulness she did not feel. Her parents seemed hardly to hear her. They were on their feet now, Mom sobbing, Dad holding her in painful silence. "We can work as a team," Sally repeated, this time a bit more loudly.

Dad was so haggard; right now he looked like a total stranger.

To cover her disquiet Sally kept talking, her voice fast and thin. "We can, if we organize. We'll buy a book, learn how to be detectives. We'll become a family of detectives."

Mom blinked, and suddenly her face softened. Sally and Mom had many long talks. At the best moments, they were sisters. But usually Mom was on her case. "This isn't one of those young adult mystery novels."

"I don't read that junk anymore, as you well know. I just think we can accomplish something—realistically. I do."

"Maybe I don't! Maybe that's why I threw the mug! I'm so damn frustrated, I could just tear my hair out!"

"We can try your idea, Mary," Dad said. Sally watched her father as he

continued to awkwardly caress her mother. Then they went together in a kiss. Usually they were casually affectionate but never extremely intimate in front of her and Billy. She didn't know what to do, lower her eyes or what. She was delighted.

Just then they all heard a sound outside the open kitchen window. All looked. The moon had set, and the window was black. Instinctively they drew closer together. Sally's eyes went to the rack of knives.

There was a knock at the door. It was more as if a branch was tapping against the frame. There was none of the firmness of the human hand.

Dad went to the door. "Who is it?" Sally stepped closer to the knives—and as she did it, she discovered a truth about herself. Neither of her parents had so much as thought about getting a weapon. And why should they? Neither of them would dream of using one.

Sally could do it.

Then Dad swung the door open and there stood Detective Toddcaster blinking in the sudden light. Sally must have gasped, because he turned toward her, his expression full of apology. "I saw the lights on," he said. He stepped heavily into the kitchen, dominating it with his large, clumsy body, his stale-cigar reek and his wrinkled, intense face.

"You've been here—how long?"

"I just came over. I drove by. I guess maybe I'm glad I saw lights. I have news. Billy is alive. He called the operator from a pay phone in Estes, Nevada, at eight-fifty-one their time last night."

Sally felt a shock go through her body as if somebody had slapped her across the face. Mother cried out. Dad went to the detective and grabbed his shoulders. "Is he OK?"

"He's alive."

Her mother was shaking, twisting her hands together, moaning, "He's

alive, he's alive."

Sally saw that all along she hadn't believed it. Hidden behind her brave words had been a secret certainty: Billy was dead. And Sally knew that she had thought so, too. She had thought her brother was dead. But he wasn't, he was somewhere, he was alive right now, breathing and hoping and wanting to be home. Sally just could not bear that thought, it hurt so terribly, it was like fire raging in every soft place of her soul. She went the two steps to her mother, her arms out, seeking embrace. They fell together and then Dad was on them both.

Not until Toddcaster cleared his throat did Sally remember that he was there. He stood squinting at them, as if their bodies gave off light. "We have a description of the vehicle he was in and the man driving it."

Sally listened to his rough, sullen voice. She had never before met a man so tough-sounding.

"Thank you," Mom said. "We were just—despairing—I mean, we don't know *what* to do—"

"The Searchers—"

"Oh, God, they're as bad off as we are."

"It was a pretty grim scene," Dad added.

"You have work to do now."

"Tell us," Mark said.

Toddcaster's expression changed. Was there a hardening around the eyes, a twinge of pain or even anger? Sally wasn't sure. "Do you want coffee?" she asked, breaking away from her mother's taut grasp.

"If I don't have to lick it off the wall."

Mary laughed. "One of my discoveries this week is that I have a

temper. If Mary Neary ever gets near this guy, you are going to see what a real mad woman can do to a real bad man."

Sally poured him a mug of coffee.

"So tell us!" Her mother's voice teased like it always did when she wanted something, but now there was also a high, scary note of terror.

Toddcaster pulled back a chair, sank into it. His chin on his chest, his mug crouching in his big hands, he looked like a man who had suffered some catastrophe of the skeleton. "What you need to do is canvas IH 15 from the point of the sighting all the way to L.A. Take your posters."

Dad put his hand on his cheek, caressing it as if the skin had become hypersensitive. "That's thousands of miles!"

"Start at Las Vegas and work west."

Sally did not like the guarded sound in his voice. Wasn't this all incredibly good news?

He had pulled out a cigar and was alternately sipping the coffee and gumming it, in what Sally thought must be a rhythm that he found comforting. "Lemme tell you about these cases. They are hell to solve, unless you get a break. Well, we have something of a break. No question. But your man is also very clever. I will tell you a little bit about your man. Clever man. This is not knowledge, you understand. We don't know these things. This is experience. Voice of experience. You have basically four kinds of people who do stranger abduction. First, they kidnap for ransom. Rare. This is not that, not the son of a teacher. Then there's the political kidnapping. You're a controversial guy, Mark. But let's face it, the controversy is not a large one. Then there is the sexual kidnapping. Pederast. Usually, though, these are impulse crimes. A kid goes out to the convenience store and never comes back. Also, usually younger kids than Billy. These are people who can't confront their own sexuality. They want kids who are too young to understand. Fourth type, the complex abductor. Maybe he is

searching for his own lost childhood. Maybe he is deeply angry. Mentally ill. Certainly a psychopath. Could be a sadist. Any damn thing. This guy will be a loner, a bachelor. For whatever reason he needs a child."

"So he steals one."

"For him this is acting out a fantasy. He hardly troubles himself about issues like kidnapping, is it wrong? He just acts. All of a sudden, he's doing his thing. Shrinks talk about motivation. The hell. The horrible truth about being human is that we can't put our real motivations into words. We don't know why people do what they do. We don't even know what the hell we are, any of us. We're just here.

"But remember, this man is psychopathic, and there's very special meaning attached to that word. It means that he has trouble understanding the consequences of his own actions. Time has no meaning for him. It's all now. Yesterday is gone forever. Tomorrow—who ever thinks about that?"

It was so hard to listen. The guy could do anything, that's what Toddcaster was really saying. *Anything!*

As if he was himself caught in a relentless wave, Toddcaster continued. "Odds on this guy is a complex abductor. He thought about it. He planned it. Then he executed the plan.

"Tell you what's gonna happen. You get out there with your posters. Keep me informed as to your whereabouts, and any information you come up with. We'll follow up by requesting incident reports on a white Aerostar all along their probable route of march. Did he get a ticket, have a fender bender? Maybe we'll get lucky. But it ain't a perfect world. Cops don't necessarily *file* incident reports. The hell, you'd be filling out forms until you died."

He took a long pull of coffee. "That beats the hot acid they dispense at Donnie Doughnut. Look, I'm gonna go home and console my wife for a couple of hours. At last report she'd given me up for dead." With a

long, groaning sigh he launched himself from the chair. "Gravity," he said, "not my friend."

Sally followed him to the back door, watched as he went down the flagstone walk into the dark. Moths were fluttering around the dim light, their shadows dancing on the tiny concrete porch.

Far in the west she could see a glow, all that was left of the moon. Her mind returned to her nightmare. In it she'd seen, just for an instant, a face as pale as the moon.

Billy had probably had just such a nightmare. Only in his case, it turned out to be real.

"Brother," she whispered. It was an unaccustomed word. She hadn't called him that; she hadn't even used it much. But now it was precious. It was all she had left of him.

She watched the fading sky. "Brother?"

17.

Barton had driven until four a.m., then slept once again in the back with Billy. It was now Thursday and they were both riding up front. Billy's seat belt was clasped over his arms, which were cuffed together. They were not far from home.

Billy hadn't had a good night. Barton could see that he was fading. His cheeks were sunken, his hair stringy. He sat crouched forward, silent. He wasn't beautiful now. Barton had been thinking that maybe he couldn't handle this child.

The other boys had never really tried to escape. They'd been possible to tame, at least to a degree; fundamentally this was because they were very unhappy children to begin with. Their ambivalence about their home lives made them somewhat compliant.

Billy's midnight dash through that forest had been daring and courageous. Facts had to be faced: Billy was probably a mistake of a new and different kind. Because he was a well-loved and cared-for child, he was much more desirable. But that also meant he was far less cooperative.

Barton also saw that he should have stayed in California. He could

have gone up the coast north of San Fran. There were lots of perfect small towns up that way. Then he would have been closer to home, and gotten his boy back with a lot less wear and tear, not to mention the reduced risk. The long hours in the van were what had turned Billy into the stringy, sullen thing that sat beside him now.

Too fucking bad!

* * *

Barton caught Billy's attention when he sucked his breath in hard. He watched him grip the steering wheel until it twisted. He was so strong that it was weird.

His temples were covered with beads of sweat, his eyeballs were popping out. Obviously he was furious, but why? Not a word had been said for hours.

Billy didn't like this at all. Barton acted mad and disappointed. 'I'm not good enough,' Billy thought—and suddenly there appeared the miraculous possibility that he might be freed.

"If you want to let me go," he said, "you don't have to take me back to Stevensville. I'll be OK."

Slowly Barton's head turned until he was facing Billy full, not looking at the road at all. "No," he said. Then he jerked back, quickly returning his attention to the highway. In his voice there was a menacing sweetness which Billy did not want to hear.

But he did hear, and he was pretty sure he understood.

Barton's mind whispered its secrets. 'You really shouldn't think about the black room. No, you should not.' It was so awful and stuffy in there. The kids didn't like it.

He remembered such moments there . . . 'So *I* go, "You don't come out of the black room." And he goes, "What if I have to take a piss?" Timmy, the big genius.'

In the black room, Barton could take his time. They weren't coming out, there was no hurry. You had to know anatomy. You had to understand the nervous system. There was no way they could escape, there was no way anybody would hear.

There was a corner of heaven under Barton Royal's house, called the black room. In that place and in that place alone he was fully himself.

They were getting into heavier and heavier traffic when Barton suddenly pulled the van onto the shoulder. His face, which had been dark and empty while he was driving, was altered by a smile. "You gotta go in the back. I'm really sorry, but you must understand."

"Yeah, sure," Billy said aloud. 'Don't cross him,' his mind warned. He had to be very, very careful.

"I'm sorry, son, but we're coming into a city. Get on the cot."

Not that! "Oh, come on, Barton. I won't try to run away anymore. I promise."

Barton's smile got even wider. "Get on the cot." His low, sullen tone made the smile seem all the more eerie.

"Barton, look, I don't think I can stand the straps anymore. I'm sorry, Barton, but please, you have the handcuffs, and I could just sit back here with them on—"

"Get on that cot, you *fucking little scum!*"

Billy had never been yelled at like that before, never even heard

anybody yell like that except maybe in a movie. He hopped right up and put his hands rigidly to his sides, waiting for the straps. He tried to fight the sobs but he couldn't, he was just too tired. As Barton strapped him in he was wracked by waves of blackest despair.

As Barton tightened the straps down he tried to be pleasant, even affable. No need to panic the little creep. He would have him in the black room within the hour, then he could let it *all* out.

The little shit was going to have a hell of a time in the black room. It was eleven. Given traffic, they'd be home by twelve— twelve-fifteen. Then he'd have to call in, God knew, maybe he didn't even have a job left, it'd been a week since he was due back from Hawaii. More than a week.

No, Gina might be mad, but she'd never get rid of Uncle Squiggly. Tiny Tales needed him.

'Gina Roman, you bitch, you better not fire me. I had the flu! It wasn't my fault it happened on Maui.'

He'd make it up to her, do a show every Saturday without fail from now on. They had forty kids a week last month, at five dollars a head. That left her one hundred fifty dollars a week clear, you take out his fifty. Uncle Squiggly would get that Squiggle Box cranked up until all the little boys and girls would be laughing and laughing and laughing, the *little pieces of shit!*

The van continued along the highway for about twenty minutes,, then it slowed and Billy knew they were taking an exit. This time there was no question of screaming. Not only was he strapped down, his mouth was taped up tight. He tried to pray.

'Hail Mary,' he thought, 'womb of Jesus—' He was too scared to remember the words.

The van was moving up and down hills, Billy could tell that. Up a long hill, curving this way and that, then down and then a sharp turn. Even though it was useless, Billy struggled.

If only.

If only he could just get out of this van, he could run fast enough to beat fat Barton.

If only!

Familiar old L.A.: a sea of convenience stores punctuated by an occasional mass of houses. He made his way down Santa Monica, turned right at Hugo's, scene of many a breakfast of omelet, fresh-squeezed o.j. and that great coffee of theirs.

L.A., West Hollywood, the Hills. This was his town and he loved it dearly. Just for fun he turned on Fountain so he would pass Tiny Tales. The store was open, Gina was in the window putting out the display for that new Pat the Bunny reissue. So the point-of-sale stuff that had been promised last month had finally come. She was doing Barton's work for him—and let her. Let her wonder. For what she paid she didn't deserve employees who were reliable.

"I had the flu. My mother had the flu. The whole fucking *world* had the flu, Gina!"

Mrs. Worden said people could go out of their bodies. Maybe if he got out he could fly home and tell Mom and Dad where he was. But how do you do it? She sat on the floor and went "Ommmmm" and said she'd been to the Pleiades. What is the female word for dork?

If only that phone operator had told somebody! Probably she thought, 'Just a kid playing another prank.' They were all so dumb!

He couldn't bear the straps another second. Every sinew strained against them, strained and could not stop straining. Behind the gag he was screaming. His head was bobbing.

For a time he was lost in his terror and in the choking claustrophobia of the little cot that was his prison.

Then something happened. He did not know what it was, could not have known the power of the reserves that lie within us, that by grace and need may be briefly tapped.

Souls can fly from bodies, withered legs can carry us again, empty eyes can recover sight, the dead can rise in silence—but not often, not often at all.

What Billy found in the well of miracles was clarity.

'You have to charm him,' his inner voice said. 'Win him over. Make him love you.'

How? Adults were incredibly good at telling if you lied. Plus he didn't know how to be an actor.

He'd better learn.

They reached Sunset, passed the lovely St. James Club with its wonderful suites Barton could never possibly afford, then the Mondrian where he sometimes had supper when he was feeling flush.

When he turned onto King's Road and began going up into the Hollywood Hills themselves he was oppressed by a sense of looming menace, as if the whole escarpment was going to slide down into Sunset and bury him. The tranquillity of King's Road replaced Sunset's zipping traffic.

He wanted to stop at the video store and rent Cabaret for later. He also needed to go to the liquor store and get a bottle of that '84 Mouton-

Cadet if it was still on sale. Sally Bowles and fine claret were a ritual after the black room.

Billy noticed that the van was going slower. There was no traffic anymore. They were climbing a hill that was steeper and longer than the others. Hill, Los Angeles: didn't they have a place called Beverly Hills? He must be in Beverly Hills, California!

'God,' his heart said, 'give me the strength I need. Please, God.' But, did he really believe in God? He'd had his doubts. But not right now. Right now, he decided, he believed totally. 'And God, if I've been asking too many questions, please don't mind. It wasn't a big deal, I'm just a kid with a lot of questions. Still, the business about the loaves and the fishes—if you calculate the size of the crowd and the amount a single man could eat, you had to create loaves and fishes at the rate of about a hundred and sixty of each per minute, which is amazing. And also, why do you have *fishes*, God, when we have just plain fish? Were yours something special, like maybe a bunch of minnows?'

No, Billy, shut up! 'God, I believe all the miracles! Really! I love Jesus, and that is *really* true! I'll put up His statue in my room, pray every day. I'll be an altar boy like Dad was. Oh, God save me!'

It was surprisingly cool for an August day in L.A., sunny and hardly more than seventy. This was the kind of weather that had drawn the millions to this place.

By four the smog would be almost unbearable, but Barton would be safely sealed up where no smog could penetrate. He shuddered deliciously, thinking that he'd be doing it at four. By then they'd be a couple of hours into it. He'd be sweaty and possibly even a tad bored. The fucking thing that was eating his heart right out of his body would at last be getting quiet. Billy would be almost unrecognizable.

Tonight would be a blessed night. Wine, the stars, and Cabaret. Sally Bowles, his love.

When the engine went quiet Billy really started squirming. There was a short silence, then the rumble of a garage door closing. It got dark.

"We're ho-o-me," Barton sang out. "Welcome to my world, Billy boy!"

Barton rolled the side door of the van open. Despite everything Billy was eager to see the mansion. He loved big houses. If he'd been in control of things, Dad would have made more money and they would live in a huge house with columns. Instead of the old wagon they would have something incredible, like maybe a bright red Bentley Turbo, zero to sixty in six and a half seconds, top end a hundred and sixty, the fastest production sedan in the world.

"I'm just going to take in our stuff," Barton said. "Then I'll be back for you."

When the smell of the strange garage came into his nose, Billy's fevered thoughts went quiet. He felt sad. Unexpectedly, he remembered the way he'd dropped his bike on top of Sally's the last time he'd come home.

The last time!

"OK, my boy, now for the big moment." Barton crawled up into the van and unstrapped him. Immediately Billy pulled off the gag. Barton cocked his head, smiled. "Now, did I tell you to do that?"

Billy began at once to carry out his plan of good behavior. "I'm sorry, Barton."

Barton tousled his hair. "No problem. C'mon, let's take a look around."

There was a second car in the garage, but it was no Mercedes. Billy saw an old tan Celica with a taped-up window on the passenger side.

They went into a tiny, filthy kitchen. It stank in here! Barton was whistling. "Here is where I prepare meals fit for royalty. All I have to do is dig down and start cooking!" He chuckled.

This was no mansion. Barton had lied, he was poor. The only new thing he had was that van.

Barton realized that he'd left rather a mess. He'd been eager to get away after doing Timmy. He'd wanted another child so bad he could hardly stand it!

This place did not smell too good. Timmy had taken a lot more out of him than he'd admitted at the time. They'd been together for two months. Jack had lasted even longer, almost half a year.

Billy was going to be a record in the opposite direction. It was really very sad to get a new boy only to do him right away. But God, the black room was thrilling.

Barton bustled around all happy. He kept looking at Billy, though, and his eyes said he was completely and totally crazy. But of course he was crazy, look at what he had done and how he lived! He probably didn't even know this wasn't a mansion.

The kitchen opened onto a small living-dining room. Barton hadn't misled about one thing, the view was pretty neat. They were at the top of a high canyon. Below them there was a long gully full of brush and exposed sewer pipes. Billy could see a glimpse of a road, and beyond that the vast Los Angeles basin.

"Do you know where you are?"

Billy didn't think he ought to admit it, but it was so obvious that they were overlooking L.A. "I—I'm not sure."

"You know damn well, don't you?"

Billy nodded.

"Sure you do. Now you're going to have to get undressed."

Billy didn't like this. Why would he want him naked, except to do something bad?

"Can't I wait until bedtime?"

Barton laughed, deep and rich. When Billy started to laugh too, Barton grabbed his shirt and pulled him almost off the floor. "You'd better learn right now to obey me, Billy. You don't get second chances around here!"

Billy did as he was told, until he was down to his briefs. "That's fine," Barton said. Billy stood waiting, miserable and afraid.

He still had creamy smooth skin, and the chest was healing with surprising speed. Well, never mind, the black room awaited. He would get Billy completely trussed up and then tell him what he was going to do to him.

That part of it was incredible. Timmy hadn't believed. Even when he was in the black room he hadn't believed. Then Barton started, and finally he believed.

Billy would believe right away.

Mom would say it over the dinner table: "I'm going to punish you after supper, Barton." He would have to eat every morsel and laugh if somebody told a joke and speak when he was spoken to, and then Mom would take him by the hand into the living room and his father wouldn't even glance up from the paper while she did it, even when it went on and on.

Then they would play cards, and he would have to play, too, even though it was excruciating to sit down.

He carried them down to the black room after he told them. Billy would believe and he would be as rigid as a child made of wood, his skin cool and dry, and would either be silent or whimpering.

"You know, Barton," Billy said in a shaking voice, "I guess I really am kind of glad to be here."

Barton had not expected this. It was obvious that Billy hated him. This boy was a failure.

"I had a rough time at home," Billy continued. "My dad beat me. You won't, will you, Barton?"

Was this for real?

Billy's mind was rushing from idea to idea. He had a very bad feeling about the way things were developing. There was something Barton was getting ready to do, and must not do.

"Your dad beat you?"

"Yeah. With a real whip."

Barton snorted with obvious disbelief.

"No, he kept it on a shelf in his closet. He beat me if I was late. And my mom drank and Barton, I'm really glad to be here."

Barton folded his arms. "That's not true."

"I'm homesick as hell, I admit that, but I know you want a boy and you're going to be nicer."

Barton went to the big picture window.

Saying what he said made Billy sick inside, but it was probably his only

chance. If he didn't betray Mom and Dad he was never going to see them again.

"I hate them," he yelled. His voice sounded flat and insincere. Barton shook his head, said nothing. Billy tried to get some more feeling into it. "I hate them!"

Barton went to a built-in bookcase on the wall beside the couch. He opened it and took out a big, thick rope.

"Come here, Billy."

18.

Father Turpin sat awkwardly in the Nearys' living room. Mark had given him coffee, and now watched him busy himself with cup, sugar and milk. Mark had not expected him. After Toddcaster left they had all gone back to bed. Despite everything Mary and Sally had gotten to sleep; Mark hadn't been so lucky.

Having a priest in the house brought back childhood habits of awkward and excessive courtesy. "Yes, Father, no, Father ..."

Mark's eyes went to the priest's black briefcase, then up to his face. Father Turpin sat on the edge of his chair, his saucer held in his left hand. With his right he raised the cup to his lips. His eyes, looking back at Mark's, seemed at first genial, surrounded as they were by wrinkles that might be laugh lines. When he smiled, though, seeing that Mark was regarding him, something baleful appeared. Mark was struck by how predatory he seemed, and how that appearance must hamper his work.

"I was hoping Mary and Sally would be able to join us."

"I'd wake them—"

"No, no." He leaned forward. "Detective Toddcaster called me." He fell silent, as if this statement had enormous importance. His expression became sly. "You're going hunting."

"This afternoon I fly to Las Vegas. I'll poster westward toward L.A."

The priest put down his cup. All geniality had left his face. "I've come to tell you that there's a little money for folks with major breaks. The Searchers cut a check for five hundred dollars."

Mark stared astonished at the check that was being offered him. "The Searchers are with you. I'm with you. The Lord is with you—at least, nominally."

"Father—"

"Bob. I'm Bob." He cleared his throat, put the check into Mark's hand. He opened his briefcase. "Now, I gather you're at the point of realizing just how little you know about conducting an investigation, and how important self-help is going to be."

"There isn't anybody else!"

"That isn't quite true. The police do a great deal, but you and Mary and Sally represent Billy's best chance of coming home." He glanced around the room. "I presume you can't afford a private detective."

"I'm a high school teacher."

"Well, there's a man in Des Moines. Richard Jones. He's a detective, and a good one."

"I cannot even begin to afford that sort of thing—in spite of this check. I've got a two-thirty flight and I'm exhausted and I have a hell of a lot of work to do before I leave."

Turpin held up his hands, as if defending himself. "Mr. Jones does this for free. No actual searching, mind you. But advice. You need it, especially now, before you hit the road."

Suddenly here was another thread in Mark's hand. "When can I see him?"

"We'd better leave as soon as possible if you're going to make a two-thirty flight." He withdrew a thick green book from the case. "You can borrow it."

Mark took the book. *Techniques of Investigation*.

"It's a basic text on police science. The chapters on missing persons will be quite useful. You can use them to make certain the police are doing all they can, and that your own investigation is sensibly organized."

An image of Father Turpin's bleak cavern of a church rose in Mark's mind. How did it feel, week after week, to say Mass for twenty or thirty people in a nave meant to accommodate four hundred? That was this man's truth—and yet there was absolutely no sense of despair. None at all.

"I've gotta get packed. Give me ten minutes."

"I'm not the one in a hurry, Mark."

Mark went upstairs and threw some clothes into the ancient Samsonite two-suitier he took to teachers' conventions. Then he topped off the pile with a box of five hundred of their brand-new missing child posters. He woke up Mary and told her he was going with Turpin.

"He's here?"

"He brought this." He handed her the check. Without another word she got up and went downstairs.

"We need this so bad, Bob. We've only got a couple of thousand dollars to our names." There were tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

Turpin stroked her head, a clumsy gesture. In his eyes there was a sort

of desperation. Sally came down behind her mother, like her wearing a robe over her nightgown. They stood on the front porch as Mark and the priest left. Sally waved a small wave. "I'll call tonight," Mark said.

Turpin's car was old, an enormous Chrysler from the mid seventies. "I share this tank with the Sacred Heart Convent," he said as he started it. "Five aged nuns who seem to have little to do but clean the damn thing with Q,-tips."

"It looks like it just came off the assembly line."

"Embarrassing, but I live with it. Wheels are wheels."

"It's sweet that they do it for you."

"I'm their confessor."

"Elderly nuns?"

"You'd be surprised. I've been hearing confessions for over forty years, and those sisters are about the only ones left who can still surprise me."

As soon as they were out on the highway, Mark began wondering. Had Billy been taken this way? Did he see these signs, this long, flat view, smell this air while he was in the hands of his abductor?

Mark closed his eyes. He tried to blank his mind, but his mind wouldn't stop. Had he been tied, gagged? Had he been trussed up on the floor of that white Aerostar, or simply sitting there too scared to move? Mark's thoughts left the realm of words, and he began to see his son, a bright shadow in a dark space. When shadow Billy said "Dad!" Mark started awake. They were halfway there; an amazing thirty minutes had passed. "Want some music?" Father Turpin said.

"Yeah." Mark started to look through his cassettes.

"I'm afraid they're all pretty schmaltzy. I'm a sentimental guy."

"Where from?"

"I'm a Mick from Queens. Irish heaven. And I've got the drinking scars to prove it. As well as the Clancy Brothers tapes."

Mark abandoned the cassettes.

"Want to talk?"

"About?"

"Whatever it is that's been making you moan in your sleep like that."

"Billy."

Turpin took an exit and moved through the center of town, stopping at last in front of a small office building. Mark followed the priest into a pink granite lobby.

It was all very modern and bland. There should have been an elevator with a rattling brass accordion door and an elderly operator with the name "Pete" embroidered on the pocket of his threadbare uniform.

As it was, Richard Jones's office was on the street floor. Father Turpin's fist had hit the door of the office once when it was pulled open. A gust of cold air poured out.

Jones was a tall man, heavysset, with a surprised expression on his face. It took Mark a moment to realize that this expression was permanent. He smiled at Father Turpin, then gave Mark a long look. "Sorry about your boy, Mark. Can I call you Mark?"

"Yeah, of course."

"I guess you've been given a lot of advice already." He stepped back into his pin-neat office and indicated a chair. "Make yourself comfortable. I know you have a time problem, so I'll keep this to an hour."

Jones dropped down behind his desk. "So you've talked to Toddcaster, the Searchers. Now me. You're hitting all the stations on the missing children underground. Next you'll be onto the foundations. First off, I will do things for you that you cannot do for yourself. I am a licensed private investigator, which means that I can find out certain things in the pursuit of my trade. Give me a license plate and I can make it for you.

Give me a name and I can get you an address—maybe. *If* you know the right state.

"Now let's talk brass tacks. You are the victim of a rare and terrible crime. Stranger abduction. Your son's been missing less than a week, yet you already have a major lead. This is very good news. But it might not go anywhere. Most leads peter out. Your genuine stranger abduction is a very hard crime to solve. It is often fatal. Face that." His lips became a hard line. "Be damned careful following up your lead. I'll be frank with you. There are satanist cults out there stealing kids for very nasty reasons. Why? Because they're jerks. Satan does not answer prayers. In this respect he is as bad as God. There are kiddie porn rings and kiddie prostitution rings. Your son could be sold to a pederast. You know what that is?"

"Yes, of course."

"Everybody has their pet theories. Toddcaster tell you about the 'complex abductor'?"

"He did."

"That's his pet theory. That, plus the fact that motivations can't be understood. Maybe not, except that sex and money and fear are all very understandable motivations, aren't they? Toddcaster thinks they're too complex to understand. I don't agree. People are motivated by the raw emotions—greed, anger, fear. Even love—at times." He smiled a rueful little smile. "I urge you, mister, don't settle on any one theory. Keep your mind open. Toddcaster may be right. But he may also be wrong, remember this. And another thing: the police have

limited scope. They can only think locally, statewide. Their impact diminishes the farther you get from Iowa. You have to think nationally, even internationally if the clues lead that way."

"I'm leaving this afternoon."

"You want to make sure you stay behind your man. You don't want him to see the posters coming up ahead of him. This might be your boy's death warrant. *Comprende?*"

"I understand."

"Make sure the police are keeping up their end of the bargain. But you've got to do the work. *You* get the leads. *You* take them to the cops. *You* make sure they are doing their job right because *you* are on top of them. This is your boy, Mark."

"For the love of God, I know that!" The moment he heard the rage in his own voice Mark regretted his tone. Jones apparently didn't notice. Mark looked at Father Turpin, who was sitting silently, his fingers held in a tent.

Jones had what soon became a torrent of advice, so much that Mark found himself dashing off notes on a yellow legal pad. How to interpret clues, how to generate, follow up and network leads, where to put his posters, which foundations would help spread the word, which were active and which were wastes of time.

At the end of one hour almost to the second the meeting was over. Jones leaned across the desk. "It's a hell of a lot of work, investigating one of these cases. I just have one piece of advice: don't give up hope. And if you do, call Turpin."

Jones and Turpin gave one another a silent look. Mark thought that they must have gone through a great deal together.

On the way to the airport Mark Neary closed his eyes. Father Turpin saw the yellow pad clutched tightly in the man's hand. 'Lord,' Bob

Turpin said, 'please give him back his kid. If you don't do it for him, do it for me, Lord. If I still have any pull with you, of course, in view of my empty pews.'

Part Four

HER IN THE DARK

19.

They'd been talking for what seemed like fifty hours and the rope was lying on the coffee table.

Billy was bargaining not to be tied up with it. He watched the afternoon light playing across the fat twist of its strands.

Then Barton started in again. "I'll be a good dad!" Why did he have to keep saying it, like he didn't believe it. Billy wanted him to be a good dad, he was all he had right now.

"Great," Billy said for the hundredth time.

"I'm going to show you the town. L.A. is incredible! You know how far it is from one end to the other? Nearly a hundred miles."

"Wow!"

"You're getting to like me, I can tell!" He shifted eagerly around in his seat.

Billy fought himself. By sheer will, he created a smile on his face. "You're cooler than my dad."

"I am your dad!"

Why did he smile like that when he talked? It wasn't a good smile. Billy could not help it, he still thought he was going to get killed. But he kept on anyway, gamely trying to project something like enthusiasm.

"I mean—you know. Than Mark." When he had to betray Dad it was terrifying. Dad always knew his thoughts. What if this was hurting Dad's feelings? Then would he never come?

Finally Barton stood. He now bustled around, cleaning up and chattering about himself. Billy listened. Billy felt the cool bite of the handcuffs around his wrists. He managed to get his shorts back on. When Barton saw this, he silently opened the handcuffs so that Billy could finish dressing. Then he closed them and returned to his cleaning. While Barton talked, Billy stared at the rope.

"I think I must have been too good—oh, look at this shirt, it's got—yuk—anyway, I was always highly obedient. My mother used corporal punishment. Slightly. It's not right, really. I mean, why do they do it? Punishing embarrasses me. It demeans you both. I mean, God, don't they realize that punishment simply *creates* punishers? It's obvious if people would just think, but they don't think. My parents were sweet."

He gathered up an armful of newspapers that Billy thought might have been used as toilet paper because they stank. "Oh, my, maybe you're thirsty! Are you thirsty?"

"I could live through a Coke."

"But you like Dr Peppers better. I looked in your fridge! Sure! I wanted to know just what you liked the most! I saw the squash in the crisper. You like squash?"

This guy *would* notice that stuff. "It's OK."

"I'm kidding. I know you hate it. All boys hate it. We were clean-platers at my house. You had to have a clean plate or you couldn't get up from the table. My folks were very loving. I also know you like

Butterfingers. You see, I remember those things!" He came over to Billy. "Just look how smooth your skin is, son. May I call you son?"

"OK."

"You must be at least half Irish."

"I am. And my mother's Scottish."

"The Celts! The most beautiful people on earth. Such complexions, like you have. But I'll bet you don't feel smooth and pale, do you? You feel like a boy. Strong."

"In a manner of speaking."

"In a manner of speaking! Out of the mouths of babes! I love your command of English."

He started pulling at Billy's shoulders, trying to get him to stand up. Billy pressed himself down into the couch.

"Oh, come on, son." Barton began mincing backward, pulling Billy up. Billy was wary. He wanted to stay right here. "You have a bedroom, you know. It's nice, come and see!"

Slowly he stood up. Barton took hold of the chain between his handcuffs and drew him across the living-dining room toward a pale green door that stood open a crack. Billy didn't like that door, didn't like the darkness of the room beyond.

Closer they went to the door, and closer yet.

As they passed the kitchen Billy heard water dripping and smelled a smell of old grease. He could see dishes piled up on the counter, even on the floor. There was what looked like a pair of fireplace tongs stuck into a pot of water in the sink. The water was gray and had dark chunks floating in it.

"I'm going to go get you some Dr Peppers and us some supper, then I'll

be back."

"I'll clean up the kitchen while you're gone," Billy ventured.

Barton's curls bounced as he shook his head with the vehemence of a toddler saying "No!"

Then he kicked the door open and thrust Billy in. Billy whirled, trying to get his foot in the jamb but the door was slammed almost instantly. "It's not a prison, son! I swear it's only your bedroom."

The deadbolt lock clicked. Billy almost panicked; he wanted to rush at that door, to kick it, to break it down! But he had to keep playing the game. If he didn't play the game, Barton would get mad and tie him up with that rope. Then Barton would—

"It's such a nice room, look at the walls."

There was wallpaper with fat little airplanes on it, like something from a nursery. "Yeah," Billy said, forcing lightness into his voice. The airplanes had faces, and all the little faces were smiling. The paper was yellowed, and in places there were rips. "It's real nice, Barton."

"Keen?"

"Really."

The door creaked, Billy heard breathing. Barton must be leaning against it. "Really, really?"

"It's a nice room!" Billy looked at the mattress on the floor, at the ugly black bars on the inside of the window, at the door with the screwheads showing from the deadbolt on the other side. "I'm gonna just love it!"

"Oh, I'm so glad! If you like it—that's very important to me. Son."

"Yeah."

There was another creak, then the sound of departing footsteps. Pulling nervously at his handcuffs, Billy went to the window. Behind the bars were closed blinds. Even pressing his fingers between the tightly spaced bars, he could barely manage to touch them. He couldn't raise them.

His skin crawled, a clammy feeling came over him. Then he noticed that there was another door, this one with a handle. He rushed to it, found that it opened.

It was a small closet. There was a pole, and on the pole were some coat hangers. One of them had a plastic cleaner's bag hanging on it, and another bore a white jacket that looked to be about Billy's size.

Moving his cuffed hands together, he took the jacket down and examined it. In one pocket was a crushed cigarette pack that had obviously been through the wash a few times. The other pocket was empty. Sewn into the collar was a name tag, "Timothy Weathers."

Billy sank to the floor, the jacket in his hands. He could barely breathe, he was so shocked by what he was seeing.

William Neary was not the first: Barton had done this before. And where was Timothy Weathers now? Billy listened, as if he could somehow drag the sound of another boy's presence out of the silence of the house.

He heard something, a sort of rapid, undulating buzz. Was it a wasp, or a pipe buzzing in the wall? It took him a moment to realize that it was a voice.

Was Timothy Weathers still here after all?

Dropping the jacket to the floor, he listened. When he stepped away from the closet, he didn't hear it anymore. But if he went inside, it was louder. He pressed his ear against the wooden planks that formed the back wall.

It wasn't another kid, it was Barton. He was talking in a wheedling, pleading voice. "I'm sorry, Gina, I swear it, it was just the most devastating sickness I have ever endured. I think it was the plane." There was a silence. Billy realized that he was hearing Barton talking on the phone. Then he started again. This time his voice was edged with desperation. "Don't say that! Don't say those words! No. Come on, Gina. You know they love Uncle Squiggly. It's a big draw, you can't tell me it isn't. Look I know you can get along without me, but what am I going to do, I've got to keep body and soul together! Please, Gina, I'm begging you, if you've already got another shop assistant OK, just let me do Uncle Squiggly. That's all I need! OK, look, I'll do it for half the money! Yes, *half!* Just don't fire me, Gina, I beg you!"

There was a long silence, punctuated by bursts of sugar-coated crap from Barton. He was really laying it on.

He'd obviously left work to go out and get Billy. He hadn't thought about the consequences and now he was pleading for his job.

Billy allowed himself to hope that Timothy Weathers had gotten away. Maybe even now he was leading the police back to this place.

No. If that was true they would already be here.

The wheedling voice started up again. "Oh, thank you Gina, thank you and thank God! I'll be in right away. Fifteen minutes! OK, thanks baby! Thanks from the bottom of my heart."

The receiver clicked and Barton's voice came through much louder. "*Fuckingshitty cunt-face bitch!*" When he stopped shouting Billy could still hear his breath, long, raging, ragged gasps.

Billy drew back from the wall. The way the guy shouted went right through him every time.

For fear that Barton would burst in and find him listening, he backed out of the closet and closed the door.

By the creak of his footsteps Billy tracked Barton's movements. He came out of his room, down the hall, paused before this door. Billy literally flinched at the click of the lock. But the door didn't open. He must have just tested the lock as he went past.

Then there came the distinct sound of the garage door rolling open. A car ground to life. It took a long time to get it started. That meant the Celica.

Again Billy went to his window. He pushed his fingers through the bars, but couldn't quite reach the blinds. He needed something—like a coat hanger. An instant later he was in the closet, then back with one in his hands. He could push up the blinds just a crack, but it was enough to see Barton's Celica disappear down the steep street. When it was gone silence settled on the house.

For the first time since this awful, awful thing had happened Billy felt a little bit safe. Tears sprang into his eyes. Then waves of sheer relief poured over him. He sank down bawling loudly.

Billy was young and full of vitality. He wanted to have his life!

The truth that he had not expressed consciously before now rushed forth: 'This afternoon I fought for my life.' He didn't know how to do that! Kids shouldn't have to!

He jumped up, lifted the blind again, peered hungrily through the crack. The sky was a glaring, bronzed blue, the light very hard and white. But there was a neighborhood out there! Houses meant people, and maybe somebody would hear him, maybe somebody would finally come!

"HEY HEY HEY HEY!"

The neighborhood was totally still and quiet. From this point he could see two other houses, one of them very modern, the other older and lower, like this one. Both had flowering trees in their yards. The modern one had a blue Mercedes in the driveway.

As he watched, a cat came along the street, sniffing at things in the gutters. Leaves moved on trees, but he couldn't hear a breeze. He tapped the thick glass with the end of the coat hanger. You couldn't make much noise like this. His throat began to ache for the freedom that conceals itself everywhere, and when lost proves to be as essential as air.

For a moment he felt calm, then all of a sudden he had to try the door. He kicked it, then kicked it again. Then he stopped, feeling it more carefully.

It was made of steel. "You dirty bastard!" He threw himself against it, kicking and screaming until he was hoarse. Finally he dropped down on the mattress, which stank faintly of urine and the sweet-nasty smell of unwashed sheets like Jerry sometimes had when his mother was on strike and refused to go in his room until it was—as she put it—"scraped."

Jerry! He hadn't thought of Jerry since the disaster. With all his might he wished Jerry was here right now. He could see him, could hear him cursing over Space Harrier, "Shit, it ate my quarter. I "It's not the game's fault, Jer. Your problem is, you're totally sucky."

You love people in a lot of different ways. You couldn't hug friends like Jer, so you kicked each other around instead. The more you fought, the tighter you got. "I'm in a hell of a lot of trouble, buddy." His own voice reminded him of the way Dad sounded when he talked. He was growing up; he was a lot like Dad, too.

All at once something he had been hiding even from himself burst into consciousness. He felt awful, vomiting anger, and he shouted it all for all the world and the bars to hear: "Dad, why don't you find me! Dad, where are you!"

His voice died.

He whispered, "Where are you?"

Despite his desire to never be asleep when Barton could sneak up on him, the silence and the dimness of the room were beginning to have an effect. He was alone for the first time since Barton, and his body began to sink of its own accord into the softness of the mattress. "Daddy," he repeated, but this time his voice was thick and slow.

Abruptly, he slept—and as abruptly awoke. He had no watch, he couldn't tell if he'd been asleep for a second or an hour. If he strained, he could hear the water dripping into the pot where the tongs soaked. What were they used for, barbecue or something? Who cooked with things like that?

Light was coming out from under the closet door, blue and baleful. The light was not normal. It seemed almost like a living thing, as if the brightness itself was full of feeling and need. It poured out into the bedroom. Billy watched, amazed. It was as if the whole moon had been stuffed into the closet.

A voice was singing,

"Where have you been, Billy boy, Billy boy,

Where have you been, charming Billy ..."

Momma's song that she sang when he was a baby! It was so good to hear, and it hurt so darn much!

Then there was a boy in the room all covered with light. He had Timothy Weathers's white jacket slung over his shoulder. His hair was as blond as the light that surrounded him.

Billy was deathly afraid of this boy and his chalk-blue eyes. He sat up in bed, horrified beyond words, as the boy's face worked.

He thought, I'm awake but I'm still dreaming.' He was screaming, the

boy, screaming as if in great agony. It was terrible to see, more terrible still not to hear. The boy was suffering, he was suffering horribly! Billy tried to talk but all that came out was a breathy whisper. The boy began twisting in the light, his face melting, his eyes melting and oozing down his cheeks. He was being dissolved by the sheer light, he was dying horribly and Billy could not even scream with him.

Then the closet door flew open. The light was coming out of the floor. It was open like a trapdoor. The other boy turned, still screaming, and went down.

This time Billy was really awake. He was staring at the ceiling, confused at first about where he was and what had just happened. But when he tried to touch an itch on his nose his handcuffs reminded him of everything.

He leapt up from the bed, rushed straight to the closet. He was heartbroken: his dream was wrong, there was no trapdoor. Again he went to the window. The shadows were long across the street, the cat and the Mercedes were gone. But there was a person out there. A boy! He was walking his bike up the hill, he was coming this way! The boy had black, straight hair. His bike was blue, and new. When he reached the top of the hill he wasn't fifty feet away.

Billy screamed with all his breath and it would have been a word but it was too loud, too shrill, it was just the scraped-raw sound of his pain.

Totally oblivious, the boy turned the bike around and as Billy jabbed the coat hanger into the window glass again and again—making only the slightest tapping sound—he mounted the bike and disappeared down the hill.

Away he sailed in freedom.

The glass was not only thick, it had dewdrops inside, meaning that it was double-pane as well. Billy threw down the coat hanger in bitter disgust. There was a neighborhood out there, and kids and cats and bikes and laughter and evenings in the backyard, and he was in here in

this stinking prison pretending under pain of death to love a human maggot more than he did his own precious dad and mom.

He wanted to scrunch down inside himself forever, to just twist and turn until he was nothing but a little, tiny black knot of flesh that didn't have any brain or any memories or even any eyes.

He rushed to the door. He was so frantic that sweat was breaking out all over his body. The tiny room seemed to be getting smaller by the second. The walls, the ceiling were curving in toward him; all the air was being sucked out. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't move, he was being crushed to death.

Somebody on another planet was screaming. It was kind of funny, so high-pitched. Babies cry, they don't scream. But if a baby screamed, it would sound like this. Only when Billy really listened to the funny screaming did he realize it was him.

The walls weren't closing in, the ceiling was still where it belonged. And there was somebody singing in the living room:

*"You are my sunshine,
my only sunshine,
you make me happy
when skies are gray. "*

That was a woman's voice! Billy rushed to the door. He smashed his ear against it, listened with all the concentration he could manage.

"You will never know, dear,

how much I love you.

Please don't take my sunshine away. "

It stopped, cleared its throat. This was a real woman, not the stereo. Gina, maybe it was Gina! *Oh, God, please, please, please!*

He listened, dangling as if from a thread of absolute need, as the woman moved around in the room.

Then the lock clicked, the handle of the door gleamed as it was turned.

The door came open.

A figure appeared backed by a halo of light from the setting sun. Billy stepped away, gasping, unable to speak, so glad, so glad—

"He-e-y," Barton said. He moved out of the halo of sunlight.

"It's been pretty loud in here. And here I thought you liked me." There were tears forming in the bottoms of his eyes. "I really did." He folded his arms.

Billy looked beyond him, but there was nobody else there. The woman's voice must have been just his imagination.

Barton stood with his head bowed, apparently overcome with emotion. Slowly his hands came up, covered his face. The moan that emerged from behind them was heartrending.

So Barton wanted love. That was totally disgusting. It was also sad, though, because he was so ugly and so mean and nobody could ever possibly love him even for one single second.

Billy reached out his clanking, cuffed hands.

20.

He ought to press a nice hot iron against those pretty, grasping little hands!

Then Billy moved forward into the light and Barton was struck silent by wonder.

At sunset the light shone across the living room and into this bedroom. When he came into this light Billy's beauty was such that Barton was instantly swept by a wave of regret for his anger. Billy had the softest, finest face he had ever seen. The light made his exhaustion disappear.

He'd been in there screaming, though. Like Timmy, like Jack he had been trying to make himself heard by the little Holcombe boy.

It had hurt when the others did it, but when Billy did it Barton felt betrayed to his very essence. It was as if the best part of his own soul was traitor to him.

He'd slapped Jack right across the room, and that devil Timmy, he'd had some really thorough attention paid to him, I should say!

The sunlight made Billy's skin go pink and pale white, made his hair glow as if it was precious metal, shone in his eyes like the very light of heaven.

"Billy," he said in a breaking tone. "Please, I want it to work so bad."

He lowered his eyes, unable to bear the boy's gaze. There was mischief in that face, and lies and fear and all the dark things that formed a boy. But there was also something he had never seen before. It awed him.

"Don't get steamed now, Barton, OK?"

God help him, though, the anger kept rushing into his blood, flushing him with its thrill. The rituals associated with it had enormous sexual potency. No matter Billy's beauty, he could fall victim.

The black room—

Don't even think about it!

But he wanted to think about it. Even though Billy was so beautiful and so awesome, he wanted to take him there.

Tear him apart!

Oh, yeah. People didn't realize what they were really saying when they spoke of the "pornography of evil." They thought they were expressing loathing, but those same people would gladly go to a hanging.

This peculiar pleasure was part of the ordinary state of man. The few that didn't enjoy the actual suffering of the condemned were secretly relieved by the death. To live on past the death of another was to taste the arrogance of the immortal. It was in such moments that death and sex would embrace.

During the Nazi years whores used to work the crack expresses that ran between Berlin and Warsaw. As the trains passed the fuming crematoria of Oświęcim every whore would be humping a customer.

Similarly, boys used to present their painted cheeks to the crowds as they left the Colosseum at Rome. Barton had walked those long arches, imagining the waspish cries of the boys, the distinguished grunts of their customers, the whoosh of togas stinking of semen and fuller's

earth, the clink of small coins in small hands.

Those days, when he'd gone to Italy . . . 1972. He was so young then, so afraid. He'd wandered the Roman back streets, listening to the voices, longing to join the lovely Roman gutter world. But he'd held back: his heart ached for ancient days, when Rome had been a more grand and brutal place. To shuffle through the Forum Trajani in the crowded morning, to hear the savage bellows of the crowds drifting down to the Circus Maximus or the Colosseum, to smell the sharply seasoned foods cooking in the stalls, to kiss Roman skin and feel the brute pressure of Roman love . . . he'd wandered past coffee bars and restaurants and fruit sellers in an anguish of desire.

He'd always ended up in those days by finding a woman. He loved the sodden smells of the body—waste and sweat and rancid, unwashed skin. It was delicious to kiss an ashen mouth, to be attached by its sucking passion, all the while quivering inside with delectable loathing.

Billy stood now with a subtle pout on his face. Since they had not been grasped as he had hoped, his cuffed hands had been lowered. Barton just could not believe that a human being could be this exquisite. It wasn't possible for him to resist this magnificent boy. He'd been tempted—it was too horrible to imagine.

"Billy!" He threw himself at the boy, scooped him up in his arms, suddenly, helplessly showering him with kisses. He shouldn't, it wasn't right, but he just couldn't help it.

"Oh," Billy said, leaning back away from the embrace. Just "Oh," a little surprise, no more. In the holy body Barton thought he detected a relaxation that suggested acceptance, even—dare he hope—enjoyment. There had been that first second of surprised resistance, but now he was relaxing into the hug. Billy liked to be held.

Barton came looming down on him, a bloated, black shadow swooping

out of the sunlit living room. Roughly he grabbed, pawed. Then he kissed and when his lips touched Billy's cheek it was like wet, horrible fire. 'This is it,' Billy thought, and he felt a sudden burst of rage against his father: *Why don't you find me, Dad, what's the matter with you!*

Inside himself Barton said, slow, slow, careful, careful. He did not like the stirring within him, it wasn't moral, it wasn't healthy, above all it was not normal.

He was normal! For God's sake, loneliness was a normal emotion. He had misplaced his own childhood. . . . From his diary when he was nine: "My hated woman parent sent me upstairs ... my hated male parent decides tonight if I am to go to boarding school. . . ." Like dying, like dying, the gleam of crossed guns on your collar tabs, the stink of Brasso, his dreadful uniform, the white duck trousers and sky-bluejacket, and combing the ruff of your helmet just so . . .

Oh, he was *holding* dear little Billy and Billy was not resisting, no sir, he was just leaning up against his new dad.

They say that the child is condemned to repeat the mistakes of the parents . . . and to some extent that was true.

As far as Barton Royal was concerned, though, the mistakes had just stopped. Here and now, this instant! 'I'll never lay a hand on you, Billy.' He held him back to arm's length, held him by the shoulder, and the tinkle of the chain between his handcuffs sounded as loud as a shattering window. "You know, I've been thinking. I wonder if you would like to call yourself Billy Royal? William Royal." He cocked his head, winked. "Don't you think it's grand?"

Billy had forced himself to relax into the iron embrace, to feel the rattle of the heart and the quaking of the hands as they swept his back. His single concern was that Barton not fly into a rage because of his attempt to attract attention. He'd thought Barton was still gone. The man was by habit extremely quiet.

Over Barton's shoulder he could see the thick rope lying on the coffee

table. Afternoon light bathed it in a kind of unholy glory. It was like a sleeping snake ... or maybe not sleeping.

Plans raced through Barton's mind. "Look, we need to unpack you. We haven't even done that yet. And then your dad has a beautiful dinner for you. I'm going to cook it myself. I went to the store and got some very nice things. Very nice. Oh!" He broke away, swept out to the kitchen, opened and closed the refrigerator, returned with a huge Butterfinger in his hand.

"As luck would have it, there's free extra candy," he said. "That's why it's so big." He held it out. Would Billy like it? Would he take it? This part was a little like taming an animal. Oh, nonsense, what a thought! This boy was angelic!

Billy held out his hands. Barton was surprised at how hard his own heart was beating. It sounded positively mechanical. When it crossed his mind that men his age did in fact have heart attacks a complex welter of thoughts and feelings tried to surface. He didn't want to die, except sometimes when he couldn't sleep at night and he had to face the fact that his needs were sick and ugly, and so unique that there would probably never be a cure.

Billy was holding the candy in his two hands. "Do you want me to eat this?"

"Do I want—oh, please! I don't want What I want is, if you *would like* to eat it. OK?"

He tried to tear the wrapper. "I can't—" The candy was too big, his hands too close together. He couldn't open it without breaking the bar in half.

The handcuffs were certainly an aesthetic disaster. They intruded into even the tenderest moments, and it was an ugly intrusion.

Would he try to escape? Barton thought about it, but only for a moment: he decided that he didn't want to find out. No matter how

tame, you must not be tempted to bring an undipped bird out of its cage. Los Angeles was full of parrots and parakeets that people had thought were tame.

"Here, I'll open it for you." He took the fat candy bar and tore away some of the paper. When he gave it back, Billy took a big bite. As he chewed he smiled up at Barton.

"May I?" Barton asked. Billy handed him the candy and he bit some off himself—not much! Where Billy had bitten he saw that the chocolate surface was slick with spittle. To take that into his mouth was like communing with Lord Jesus himself. He did it with reverence.

He was careful to bite just with his teeth; he assumed that Billy would be offended if he left any of his own spittle on the bar.

The taste of a Butterfinger, the smell of it, brought back so much home that Billy wanted more than anything to wither up and disappear. Two summers ago he'd been homesick at camp, but it was nothing compared to this. That had been a rich, poignant feeling made almost beautiful by sunset and the singing of the kids. "Yes, sir, that's my baby. No, sir, I don't mean maybe." And, "Mah dear old Swanee . . ." from Mr. Lockyear, which was so funny they all practically died. The sun set across Lake Williams and the campfire flared . . . they had toasted marshmallows and drunk bug juice which was really just cherry Kool-Aid, and Mom and Dad and Sally had moved like ghosts through his mind.

In the simple, ordinary flavor of the candy he tasted home. He wanted Mom to be saying, "I hate junk food," and Sally to be complaining that he'd stolen hers as well as eaten his own when all the time the thief was really Dad.

The last time he'd eaten a Butterfinger was the night Barton came. He'd been working on his birdsong.

Billy chewed with great deliberation. He had to swallow this and keep it down. C'mon, guy, give him a big smile!

Billy was enjoying it, he was relishing it! Barton was an excellent judge of character, all the mummies said so after Uncle Squiggly shows. This little boy was being won over, he was sure of it. He was being seduced. Yes, and wasn't that a beautiful thing?

Barton had dreams, and he loved smooth skin, but he would never—oh, absolutely not! No. Who was it who had claimed that there can be no crime in the mind? "That which remains within is sanctified by the silence that contains it." Walter Pater? No, too modern for him. R. D. Laing, perhaps. He suspected that a lot of fathers, seeing the glorious beauty of their sons and their sons' friends ached to make the leap of Plato's *Symposium*.

You didn't, though. In Plato's time a man who loved a boy risked only the outrage of the father. And with good reason—it was ugly, it was vile, it was just plain wrong.

Because the poor boy, if he liked it, then for the rest of his life would never be sure of his own sexuality. He would be cursed with desires he could not accept. Sex would be permanently out of focus.

Barton knew all too well.

It's a big, dark shadow and it's moving fast — it's Dad! His embrace was so soft, so insistent . . . and his touch—his touch —

It never happened! Never! Never!

He was only worried about it a little, that was all. Dad was a fine man, so gentle that Mom had to do all the punishing.

"Aren't we going to have supper soon?"

Barton had been a thousand miles away. "What?"

"If we are, I don't want to finish the candy."

"Oh, yes! Sweets before supper are a no-no. I remember that Timmy —"

"Timmy?"

The question had an edge to it. For a disquieting instant Barton thought that Billy might know something about Timmy. But no, that was just his natural suspicion. He'd even been a suspicious child. Mother had always commented on it.

"He's my nephew. When he stays with me he waits until supper's cooking, then he comes out and inventories the contents of the pots and pans. If he doesn't like what's being prepared, he'll go to his room and load up on Hershey's Kisses. I have to virtually smell them out if I want to get rid of them. He even hid some in the light fixture, once."

"He stays with you?"

"Occasionally."

"How old is he?"

"He's about your age."

Billy was keeping him talking partly because he hated the idea of any more hugging. But there was also another reason. Barton had mentioned unpacking him and he did not want to face all the reminders of home.

He could not allow Barton to see what was really going on in his mind.

With careful intention he turned his mind away from unpacking and toward Timmy Weathers. There might be something to be learned here. He watched Barton for some sign.

If he could learn the fate of Timmy Weathers, he would probably know his own.

Like hell Timmy was Barton's nephew. Barton was such a fabulous liar, it was awesome. But you could still read him, kind of.

He remembered the face of the Timmy Weathers in his dream. It wasn't true that he didn't know what Barton had done to Timmy. He knew exactly what Barton had done.

Barton really had to organize himself; he just wasn't getting things together for his boy. Boys need their fathers to be reliable so that they'll grow up confident, and take a good example with them into adulthood.

He had to get Billy's things, which were still in the Aerostar. He didn't want the boy to see the inside of the van again, but he also didn't want to leave him alone in the house. Neither did he wish to lock Billy in his room just for the three minutes it would take. That would imply such an utter lack of trust. Of course, there was an utter lack of trust—but Barton kept hoping that it was only temporary.

The will to escape could be broken. Barton could enact the beautiful life he had originally envisioned. He would introduce Billy to the finer things, would teach him literature and indulge his nascent appreciation of good music and the arts. He would cause this brilliant creature to blossom as never before. As that happened Billy would gradually lose interest in escape. In the end he would come to value his new father.

'I'll be loved,' Barton thought. What an odd notion.

He solved the problem of the bags as best he could. "Come on, Billy, we've got to get your things." They went together to the garage. As he expected, Billy became silent when he saw the van. Barton stood him in the doorway of the garage, beside the Celica. He crossed the

concrete floor with its cracks and oil spots, and slid open the van door.

It smelled of bodies and excrement and fear. He'd have to wash it soon, which was inconvenient because it would have to be taken into the driveway. He considered it dangerous to show the Aerostar too soon after a hit.

Barton knew all about incident reports, and there had been at least one and possibly two incidents on the road. The first had been the matter of the missing plate renewal sticker. Then there was the confrontation in Denver. That could easily have led to a delayed police report. For God's sake, Billy's screams would have kept any normal human being awake nights. When they sobered up, those people might well have called the cops.

The likelihood was small in either case that a description of the Aerostar had ended up in police files, but you could not be too careful.

He gathered up the heap of clothes that had come out of the duffel and stuffed them back.

"Now we'll organize your closet and dresser. You'll be all moved in."

Billy accompanied him like a robot, his movements stiff and controlled. He did not speak.

Somehow Billy had to keep going. Just glimpsing his clothes as Barton put them in his duffel had been hard. Now he would have to sort through them.

Dad!

They left the dim, stuffy garage and moved through the gray little house to Billy's dismal room. Didn't Barton realize how incredibly dingy and depressing this place was? Maybe he really believed it was a mansion. He could, he was that nutso.

Billy stood beside him as he dropped the duffel onto the mattress. The room was furnished with a pine dresser that Billy already knew was empty, that and the closet with Timmy's jacket in it.

Barton opened the closet door. If he saw Timmy's jacket on the floor he showed no interest.

They went through Billy's things together. "Oh, this is cute," Barton announced as he pulled out a red hockey shirt with white sleeves. "I think you're kind of fashionable after all."

On the road Barton had said the opposite. He was going to furnish Billy with a whole new wardrobe. But, of course, he was totally too poor. So now Billy's clothes became "fashionable."

Two hockey pullovers, three knits and Billy's one dress shirt comprised all the shirts Barton had brought. Then there were shorts and jeans. Also the shorts he was wearing and his now filthy Kafka T-shirt.

There were no shoes, and Billy decided that this had been intentional. If he made a run for it, Barton naturally wanted him to be as slow as possible.

He was surprised that thinking about his clothes made him more homesick than handling them. He put them away, then sat down on the mattress.

"I'll fix supper," Barton said. "It's going to be quite pleasant, I think!" He left the room, locking the door behind him.

Billy saw at once that Timmy's jacket was gone. This was very curious, since Barton's hands had been empty when he left.

Barton set about the preparation of a lovely meal. Mother had let him have some of the "Blue Towers" china and he set the table with it. Every single dish he'd been given was chipped, but a little boy wouldn't notice that.

When the setting was complete it looked more than a little impressive: the handsome plates, two long-stemmed wineglasses, all of it over a nice piece of linen that you could hardly tell was a bed sheet.

Barton took out his groceries and set about their preparation. He'd cheated a bit, but Billy was probably too hungry to notice. Everything could be microwaved, even the cherry pie.

"Whistle while you work," he sang. He didn't know the rest of the words, so he simply repeated the phrase again and again, in an undertone as rapid as his movements. "Whistle while you work! Whistle while you work!"

The meal was coming together nicely.

Billy had been examining the closet for some moments. There had to be an explanation for the disappearance of the jacket. The ceiling was intact, just ordinary Sheetrock. Besides, Barton wasn't tall enough to get anything up that high, even if there had been a hatch into an attic.

Now he turned his attention to the floor. He'd always loved secret passages. There was a period when he wanted to be a professional secret passage designer when he grew up.

"William Neary, Ph.D. Secret Passages Designed and Constructed." Despite his excellent plans, nothing could ever induce Dad to install his designs in any of the houses they'd lived in. "I don't need anything that turns the shower stall into an elevator." That had been his final word on the last one.

The back of the floor was built up and slanted forward. A one-by-one strip along its middle indicated that it was intended to hold shoes. The strip would hook the heels. Their house in New Jersey had a similar arrangement in the master bedroom. Billy had once tied string to all of

Mother's and Dad's shoes, and run it through a small hole drilled into the attic, and down to a similar hole in his own bedroom. When his parents were peacefully reading in bed he pulled the string and all of their shoes suddenly shot out of the closet.

Dad had theorized about what he called a "microquake." Later he'd heard his father at a party: "One night all of our shoes came jumping out of the closet." In the silence that followed this remark, he had laughed nervously. "It was a mini-earthquake," he'd added lamely. He'd never brought the matter up again.

Billy tapped the floor. Hollow. He pressed against it in various places, trying to see if there was any give. Then he noticed that the line between the board that held the shoes and the one on which it rested was slightly irregular. This gave him an idea. Sure enough, when he pushed, the board lifted easily. But he did not find a small storage space with a jacket in it. Instead, there was blackness and depth. A musty, greasy stench came from the opening.

He peered down into what could be darkness without end. He thought to himself: *It's hell.*

21.

Even setting, the sun of the West was brutal. As Mark drove it beat him in the face; it was a harder sun than he had ever known back East.

He was traveling his son's path down Interstate 15 in the little Plymouth he'd rented for twenty-five dollars a day after landing at McCarran Airport in Las Vegas. His plane had landed at seven, two hours late. It was already eight-fifteen. He was trying to get to Estes where Billy had made the call by eight-thirty.

He wanted to be there when his son had been there, to see what he'd seen, to hear the sounds of the place, to walk and think and breathe there. Above all, he wanted to ask questions there, and at that time. No doubt this wasn't a professional investigative technique, but it seemed sensible to him.

He knew he was chasing a shadow. Billy was gone. The time of day didn't matter anymore.

When the road rose to the summit of one of the long hills it was crossing, he could see an ocean of lights in the rearview mirror. Soon though, they were swallowed in the dark eastern sky.

That had been Las Vegas. Billy's plight seemed so enormous to him it was difficult to believe that the lights were not dimmed and the voices

of laughter subdued. A child was being carried to destruction, but only one soul trailed along behind.

The road spun endlessly past, and his mind went over and over his small resources. He had little money. It had cost him the fantastic sum of four hundred and eighty-three dollars to fly to Las Vegas. That would take care of most of the Searchers' check right there.

You couldn't make two thousand dollars go very far. And people spent hundreds of thousands on their searches, offered rewards in the six figures, expended years, created foundations, hired publicists.

Xerox Express in Stevensville had made up their five hundred posters for the cost of the paper. On the road he would eat one meal a day and sleep in the car. His present salary was twenty-two thousand dollars a year, and there was nothing in the budget for an extended leave of absence.

If he didn't find Billy soon, he was going to have to bear the pain of standing in front of classrooms full of kids who knew him, lecturing on the Battle of Chickamauga and the Teapot Dome Scandal. He could hardly conceive of anything more excruciating.

He drove toward his destination with one critical resource: he loved his lost son with the passion of the damned. This pallid, staring, gaunt man just wasn't going to stop.

Driving along in his shabby slacks and shirt, a plastic shield protecting his pocket from his pens, he was alert to possibilities. Billy was alive. A few hours ago he'd been right here, looking at this very sunset at this very hour.

Mark had sat in the plane listening to the whoosh of the engines, drinking the coffee they gave him, eating the bread-sticks and processed cheese while reading *Techniques of Investigation*.

He felt comfortable with the methods suggested by the book. Crime and history were strikingly similar, and so were the techniques of

discovery. You had to be relentless and logical. Both the historical event and the crime were generally brutal and stupid, and both obscured by shabby camouflage.

Suddenly he realized that he was passing a small town. A water tower stood black against the orange horizon, a McDonald's flooded the highway with curiously pure light. A couple of gas stations stood at the roadside, then there was a big truck stop, its lot choked with eighteen-wheelers. He noted all of these places for tomorrow's postering effort.

He was supposed to go straight to the sheriff's office when he reached Estes, but because of the time he had changed his plan and headed for the Mobil station instead.

Now that the sun had set the highway had become a black strip disappearing into the purple distance.

God help my son.

It was still ten miles away when he saw the first, faint indication of the station. About here the abductor must have glanced at his gas gauge, seen it was standing on empty. As he drew closer the familiar Mobil logo came into clearer focus.

The station itself was a pool of light in the large darkness of the desert. There were two cars at the pumps when Mark pulled up, a Pontiac and an elderly BMW with its sun roof open. Around the side of the station there was a dun Plymouth Duster, probably the attendant's transportation.

Mark saw him standing behind the register, taking money from a customer. He was wearing a coverall uniform. His face was long and solemn, and he wore a pair of aluminum-framed glasses. He was an old man.

Just beyond the station was a bank of telephones. They stood a little apart, and the light around them was dim.

With exaggerated care Mark pulled his car to a stop beside the Duster. Would the attendant be helpful? Cold? How did he explain himself? What did he say? He got out and started toward the station. There was a customer there, and Mark was too polite to interrupt. He used the time to examine the telephones. One after another he read the numbers on the dials.

It was the third one from the end. He had held this exact telephone in his hand, had pressed that "o," had spoken into this mouthpiece. Mark held the phone, too. He put it to his ear, listening to the wavering dial tone. The phone was covered with a faint film of graphite dust in which numerous fingerprints could be seen. Mark could have wept; the police were still working the case.

Until this moment he hadn't realized that coming here would be painful in the same way that visiting a grave is painful. He could smell and taste his son, could hear his voice, could almost see him standing here. He looked down and was appalled to observe the clear print of naked toes in the dust. Billy had been taken from the house without shoes.

Mark bent down. They were small enough to be a boy's prints. He could be looking at a mark left by his own son. He wondered if the police had noticed these prints. And then he thought, so what? They already knew Billy had been at this phone. The footprints were a poignant hint, nothing more.

"I figure you for the father."

The voice startled Mark. He looked up into the face of the attendant. Mark got to his feet. "Yeah. I don't want to disturb you while you're working—"

"Oh, come on. Come up to the station, I'll tell you everything I can."

Walking beside the man, Mark felt a sense of reassurance. "You have kids?"

"Four kids and eight grandkids."

"Wow."

The man chuckled. They entered the station. "I just sit in here makin' change mostly. Welcome a little talk. Especially if it can do some good."

"First, let me put up one of my posters."

"I'll do it. 'Course, I don't know company policy. Only the owner knows that and he's not around here except on Tuesdays. He'll take it down, for all I know."

Feeling enormously reassured, Mark went back to the car and got three posters.

"Gimme 'em," the man said. "Hm. Same picture the sheriff has. I just got a glimpse, but I saw your boy. William Neary. That your name, too?"

"No, excuse me, I should have introduced myself. I'm Mark Neary."

The attendant, whose coverall said "George," opened the battered steel desk that held the cash register and took out a big felt-tipped pen. "I think this'll be a good idea, Mark," he said. On the poster he wrote, "Seen at this station getting in a white Ford Aerostar at 8:40 p.m., August 17, 1989." He underlined the first four words a number of times. Then he looked up at Mark. Quite suddenly, he smiled. "I'm George Yost." He took the poster and Scotch-taped it into the window. "You want the whole story, I guess."

"If you can, I sure would like it."

"I told the sheriff and the state police."

"Still—"

"You don't have to explain." He put a hard hand down on Mark's

shoulder. There was nothing Mark could do but lower his eyes. His emotions were in an uproar. It seemed the greatest blessing in the world that this man was being kind. "I was out working on a lube job we'd got in that afternoon. Lube and oil change and check the brakes." He paused, picked up a coffee mug captioned "Maximum Leader," gestured with it.

"No thanks."

"I know, eats your stomach lining. Well, it's my poison of choice since I stopped smoking." He poured a mugful from a deadly looking pot that sat on an automatic hotplate at the edge of the desk. "So I came out of the lube hole and there was this Aerostar sitting there. Big deal, guy's filling up. He's on the far side and I can't see him. Hell, I don't but glance at the van. Why look at it? The state police brought an Aerostar in here and took measurements and figured out that the man is no taller than five foot ten. Based on I couldn't see the top of his head across the roof of the van." He blinked, seemingly amazed at this deduction. "So then all of a sudden I notice this boy. He is going back to the van from the phones. He's noticeable, first because he's hunched, like, and running like he was scared half to death. Second, I can just see the front of his shirt and it seems to me that it's covered with blood." At those words the world receded to a bright dot at the end of a long tunnel. To cover his shock, Mark went for the coffee. His hands shook so much he had to concentrate on every detail of getting a mug, grasping the pot, pouring. "You told the police this?"

George nodded. He must have perceived that Mark was hearing it for the first time, because his voice became very soft. "I thought to myself, how does that guy feel—meanin' you— when the cops told me you were on your way. I just wish to God I could say somethin' more about your boy."

Mark gulped down hot coffee and poured himself more. His overwhelming urge was to jump in his car and give chase. For an insane moment he contemplated trying to catch the Aerostar.

"I noticed one other thing. When they were pulling out, I got that it

was a Utah plate. Normally I never see a plate. But that boy, runnin' like that, and the blood—you know. Don't ask about numbers. I don't remember, except a '3.' "

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "I've tried to remember more. There's only one thing I wonder about: Why didn't Billy just come in here? Why didn't he come to me? I woulda helped him."

Mark had heard stories of children being won over by their abductors, or terrified into compliance. But if that had happened, he obviously wouldn't even have made the phone call. "I suspect that the abductor was armed. If my boy had gone to you for help, he risked getting you killed. Knowing Billy, he wouldn't have taken a risk like that with somebody else's life."

"A little boy who thinks like that?"

"Admittedly I might be crediting him with too much insight. You want to believe your kid can handle himself. But Billy is very bright."

"My youngest is at Stanford. Full scholarship. First Yost to go to college in a long time. My great-granddad went, so they say."

"Stanford's a fine school."

"Gonna go for a law degree. That's the way to make money these days. Them lawyers . . . you see the Mercedes, the Jag, the big Lincoln—odds on, you're lookin' at a lawyer's car. And if there's a chauffeur, then you're plumb certain."

"Did you see the man who had Billy?"

"Glimpsed. A long glimpse, though. I'd recognize him by his profile. He had a sort of blunt face. The police are going to do an IdentiKit job Saturday morning. They're takin' me up to Las Vegas for it. What they do is, get a guy to put together the profile from my description, then they use a computer to turn it into a front view. Hell of a thing."

Mark wanted to ask if the man had looked cruel or crazy, but he didn't know how to phrase the question. "Did he seem—"

"He was just normal. Dark, curly hair."

"Like me?"

"Nah. *Really* curly. He had a pug nose, and I remember his skin seemed really smooth. It was kind of sickly looking, too. 'Course people all look like Count Dracula under these sodium lights they got here."

Mark feared that he was finally getting at the truth. "Is that how he looked—like a vampire? A monster?" Inside himself he asked the real question: 'Was he the kind of man who would not only wound but kill? Please, tell me.' Tell me why my boy was covered with blood!

"He was just a guy in a car. Like I say, I wouldn't have noticed, it hadn't been for that blood on your little fella's chest."

Walter Toddcaster was not waiting for calls. He never waited for calls. What he was doing when the call came was reading a follow report on a young man who was almost certainly dealing crack behind the Studer Theatre. They were about ready to make him and send him to boarding school for a couple of years.

He picked up his phone on the second ring. "Yeah?"

"Detective Toddcaster?" A young male voice, with the pasteurized tone that said trooper.

"This is Officer Torrence of the State Police. I'm calling in reference to your inquiry about incident reports on a white Ford Aerostar."

"Yes?"

"We had one stopped and warned last Monday at eleven-fifteen a.m.

on IH 80 outside of Neola. Failure to display the proper renewal sticker on a license plate. The license number was Utah 1-C32A. It was registered to a Utah resident named Barton Samuel Royal. The town of registration is Salt Lake. We have an address."

"Jesus."

"Problem is, the address is a mail drop. The driver was carrying a California license, no notations and no record kept."

"This is gold, Officer Torrence."

"Yes, sir."

When Torrence hung up Walter just sat there for a moment. Neola was about forty miles from Council Bluffs. Billy's abductor could have easily made it that far on Monday morning. They had a possible make working here.

He went into the ready room and pulled down a tattered Rand McNally Road Atlas. A few measurements with a ruler told him that the position was time-consistent with the later sighting in Nevada as well.

Walt picked up the phone and called the California Department of Motor Vehicles. They wanted his request on letterhead, but would respond immediately if he faxed it to them.

Half an hour later he was looking at the driving record of Barton Royal. The man had an address in Sacramento. There was only one problem. According to the report, Royal had deceased on October 12, 1985. The bastard had managed to pull himself out of the records.

There were moments when a man wanted to kill. Walter Toddcaster had one of those moments.

Estes was profoundly rural: Las Vegas very definitely did not extend

this far west. Mark had come forty-five miles and he was in a place of an entirely different order. The moment he turned off the interstate he was in America's past, a world of dusty pickups and feed stores.

The sheriff's office was constructed of tan brick. It was a small building on the main street, newer than most. "Amon County Sheriff's Department, Estes Substation." Mark went in. He knew who he was supposed to meet: Deputy Richards. As it turned out, the only person present was Deputy Richards, who could not have been more than twenty-five. As Mark entered, he unfolded from his chair.

"I'm Mark Neary. I've just been out to the Mobil station."

"George is a good guy. He's been pumpin' gas in this town ever since I can remember. I don't know why he does it. He owns three stations. He could afford to drive a Cadillac, I guess."

"He said he was just the attendant."

"That's George. He tell you what you want to know?"

"No, he didn't tell me where my boy was." But he had taken three posters, Mark remembered. And now he knew why: he owned three stations.

"That's the sixty-four-dollar question. We've got the idea that the guy was going to California. This isn't exactly a deduction. Fifteen is the road to L.A. We've made inquiries at all the gas stations from here to the border, and we sent a request to the California State Police that they do the same. But that's a hell of a lot of stations. They'll get it done, though. They'll take your kid's picture with them."

They were trying, and they were trying hard. The trouble was the damned statistics. Kids just don't make it out of the kind of predicament Billy was in.

Barton Royal. Toddcaster wished it rang some sort of bell. He looked at the driver's license photograph, distorted as it was by the fax. Was this the same man who'd been driving the Aerostar?

That he could find out. He would ask California to send a better print to Nevada where they had that witness. The guy was scheduled to do an IdentiKit on Saturday morning, so he must have gotten a pretty good look at the man.

Then he made another call, this time to the Nevada State Police Division of Investigation. As he talked with Lieutenant Davis he faxed the California report through. They would both call Sacramento and get sharper pictures.

Toddcaster knew exactly what he was going to do with his: he'd have it shown to Billy's friends, then walked to every place the child had been on Saturday. If the face was Barton Royal's, and Barton Royal was the man carrying the license, they would get a positive from somebody.

His guess was that little Jerry Edwards would make the identification. It was highly likely that the man who had played RPM with Billy was Royal.

Deceased October 12, 1985.

It might just be possible to convince the state you were dead, if you knew what you were doing. He thought about it. You'd have to stop using your own name. And yet Royal had pulled out this license.

So he'd killed himself off and now had another identity. He'd have been scared to death when he was stopped by the Iowa State Police. So he used the Royal license, knowing that it would lead to this dead end.

The man was smart. In more ways than one, that was bad news. The smarter the crazy, the meaner. Toddcaster's Law.

At eleven p.m. Mark's phone rang, drawing him out of heavy, exhausted sleep. It was Toddcaster. "How'd you find me?"

"I'm a detective. Listen, we might have made the abductor. He might be a man named Barton Royal, carrying a California driver's license, driving an Aerostar with a Utah plate that we have also made. There are a few details to clear up. But we have a picture. I want you to look at it."

"You want me to come back?"

"Nah, the Nevada State Police have a copy. You be at that IdentiKit session tomorrow morning. You look at the picture."

"But I never saw the guy."

"You don't know that. Just look at the picture. We're gonna have every kid Billy was with that day look at it. We're gonna shop it at random around the mall and at the Burger King and see if we can't hit paydirt."

"What about Mary?"

"I haven't told her yet. I was saving that for you."

To save money Mark and Mary had decided to limit their communications except in emergencies.

She answered on the first ring, her voice singing with tension. When Mark gave her the news she cried silently. "I wish we could hold each other."

"Me too, darling."

"I have hope, Mark. Is that a mistake? I'm so afraid it is."

How could he answer? There was no reason to remind her of the statistics. She knew the statistics. "It's never a mistake to hope," he said. It sounded lame. He longed to tell her about the blood, but he forced himself to keep silent.

A moment later they had said goodbye. He was alone again. He wanted desperately to sleep, but there was no way he was going to wait until morning to look at the picture. He was going into Las Vegas right now. What if he had seen the man, what if his identification was critical?

Mark got back into his car and drove off. Now he would see the glaring lights, the city of electric pleasure. But he wouldn't participate, not the exhausted man in the gray car, looking for State Police Headquarters.

They'd told him it would be easy to find: no neon.

22.

Because things were getting a little bit normal Billy wanted to curl up into a ball and disappear.

Barton was dancing around the kitchen as he prepared supper, with Billy standing in the door watching. He swept across the small space and kissed him on the top of the head. "How about giving a helping hand, son? We're both going to enjoy it, after all."

Billy did what he was told. At home he could conceivably enjoy helping. He had learned to cook steak like his dad did, and his dad was an expert. The only kitchen stuff that disgusted him at home were chewed gristle on the edge of plates and sinks full of goopy water.

Even though it was slightly cleaner than it had been at first, this whole kitchen totally disgusted him. At least the big pot with the tongs and the floating bits was gone, and the dirty dishes had been put in the dishwasher.

"You'll be amazed at what I can do with chicken nuggets," Barton announced, pulling a box out of his grocery bag. "Incredible things, my boy."

Billy still hoped, however forlornly, for the police to show up in response to his call to the operator. That had been so scary and so hard. He was pretty sure, though, that they were never coming.

Damn them! Why didn't anybody want to help him, anyway? The police were just as dumb as the people in the car when they had the wreck. Nobody cared.

He told God that he would gladly go to hell if only he didn't have to stay here.

"What you have to do, dearest, is just take this knife like this and—see?" With a butter knife he pried one of the chicken nuggets out of the frozen lump.

Clumsily, Billy took the knife with his cuffed hands.

"If you weren't such an escape artist we wouldn't have to use those things." Barton spoke in the happy-scoldy singsong Billy's math teacher used when the class was loud.

"I'm sorry." As he worked separating the nuggets with the dull knife he decided that the only hope he had left was to somehow call home. Fat chance he'd ever get into Barton's bedroom on his own.

Barton ruffled his hair. "Very nicely done," he said, collecting the pile of chicken. He was happy with Billy now, but what about the way he'd smiled when he held that rope? Barton enjoyed the bad stuff, too.

Just as the jacket had disappeared from the floor of the closet, the rope had disappeared from the coffee table. But they both still existed, and Billy knew exactly where they were: under the house, in the blackness he'd glimpsed when he opened the trap in the closet.

"This is going to be delish! I'm telling you Billy boy, when your dad gets into a kitchen, wonderful things happen!"

What kind of a fool goes to all this trouble with frozen chicken nuggets? All you had to do was heat them in the microwave, it said so right on the box.

Barton tossed the nuggets into an ancient food processor with

chopped celery, a can of mushrooms and a can of pearl onions. Then he turned it on, using Half & Half to liquefy the mess. The nuggets danced and rattled. Soon the whole thing was a sort of gray-green slop.

What did he think he was doing? He opened the food processor and tasted the unbelievably gucky ik inside with a wooden spoon. "Mmm!"

"Smells really good, Barton."

"Taste?"

Billy lifted his lips, showed his teeth. Did it look like a smile? He hoped it did. He tried to sound all happy: "I want to wait till after it's cooked. I want to be surprised!"

Barton thrust the spoon into his face. It took iron discipline for Billy to touch his lips to the stuff. It didn't actually taste horrible. It was kind of bland. But it sure did look like upchuck. "Good," he mumbled.

He watched Barton's back as he poured the slops into a skillet full of hot olive oil. There was a lot of steam. Barton giggled as it wreathed his face. Billy thought he'd better laugh, too. The snicker he managed was sharp and ugly, and Barton half-turned, a question in his face. When he saw Billy's smile, though, he relaxed and went back to his cooking.

The knife was still in Billy's hands. He could easily plunge it into Barton's back—if only it wasn't a butter knife. The most he would manage was to make Barton mad again.

Even though it wasn't cold he started to shiver. The air touching his skin had a deadness in it, the deadness of Barton. Barton was drinking wine from a huge glass as he sailed around in the stinking smoke from the stove. When he kissed his forehead again Billy smelled a gust of his breath, which was so strong it overpowered even the smell of the cooking. Nothing in his experience had ever smelled like that. It might have been an exhalation from the grave. Billy had to suck in his gut to overcome the flutters in his stomach. Mom always said rotting teeth

gave you bad breath. But Barton smelled like he was drinking acetone nail polish remover like you used to clean off instant-bonding glue.

"Do you know how to use a grater?"

"Sure."

"You were a real helper at home, weren't you?"

Billy saw a chance to help himself. "I am at home, Barton."

Barton's smile was so big it was painful to see. "Yes," he said, "yes, indeed." He held out some carrots. "Can you grate these, please, son?"

"Sure." He ought to say "dad" but it was too much, he couldn't do it.

Carrot salad. Sally always claimed the raisins in it looked like roaches. With this guy they would probably be roaches.

As Billy grated he thought about how to find out more from Barton. If he was going to call home, he had to be able to tell them where he was. He didn't even know the address, except that it was Beverly Hills. Or rather, probably Beverly Hills. That was the only "Hills" he knew about in Los Angeles.

He did not know how to question people, especially not people who didn't want to answer the questions. Presumably you did it like the cops on TV, or like the Gestapo with a big light in their face.

"What's your favorite movie, Barton?"

Barton became suddenly very still. "*Cabaret*," he said in a suspicious voice.

"I didn't see it. Where'd you go to college?"

"I was too free a spirit for that, I'm afraid. I spent a year in Europe. Mostly I lived in Rome. I love Rome."

"The Vatican is in Rome."

"I lived in a little pensione behind the Pantheon. I used to go inside it all the time, just to walk those floors, smell the air, enjoy the magnificence."

"I know the names of all twelve Caesars. Dad and Mom have the *Satyricon*."

"God, I loved the *Satyricon*!"

"Which translation did you read?"

"It's a movie, son. Brilliant!"

"So you went from Rome to Beverly Hills?"

"The Hollywood Hills, please."

Oh, wow, this was neat! This was really *very* neat! What a wild technique! It was like spies would really do and he'd thought it up all by himself.

"Now, my dear, *we eat!*"

Billy tried to pretend that munchkins were inside his stomach lining it with steel. It didn't work very well. If he vomited, Barton was sure to get crazy. But the flutters had turned to nausea. He sweated, struggling to contain himself.

"You look worried. Are you a finicky eater? I wanted to be one, but that just was not allowed in the Royal household. If you don't eat what's on your plate, you can *just starve!* No, just kidding. I'll go out and get you a pizza if this doesn't do it for you. There's a lovely pizza place down on Sunset, it's quite pleasant. Do you like pizza?"

So they were near a street called Sunset. Duly noted. "I can eat it." Dealing with Barton was like walking on spring ice. If you kept your balance, OK. But if you fell you broke through and that was that.

" 'I can eat it.' That's what I call *enthusiasm!* What's the matter, do I have BO? You keep pulling back when I get near you. Do you realize that?" He gave an annoyed sigh. "I want us to *like* each other. And I think we can. Yes, in time. Now sit down and we'll eat. This is called skillet chicken, it's an old family favorite of the Royals."

The fried slops looked like a giant scab and smelled like a cigar butt.

The carrot salad was just carrots and mayonnaise. He'd forgotten the raisins completely and the mayo was sour.

To drink there was something called Valpolicella, a wine in a bottle with a basket around it. Billy had never tasted wine and didn't particularly want to start. Like Barton's, though, his wineglass was huge. Where had he gotten these bathtubs— from a clown supply store?

Billy watched miserably as Barton cut off a slice of the chicken scab and slid it onto his plate. It was followed by a gob of carrot salad delivered via ice-cream scoop. Then came the wine, sluicing into the glass with sickening gurgles.

The meal proceeded. Barton "oohed" and "ahhed" with every bite, closing his eyes to concentrate on the incredible deliciousness of the flavors. Billy found that the fried slops turned to mush in his mouth. He put them as far back on his tongue as he could and swallowed each bite hard. The only way to cut the flavor was with the wine, which tasted like turpentine. Billy decided that he would rather lick the floor of the latrine at camp than eat this meal.

Thinking about licking latrine floors would do nothing to lessen his nausea. He was not a master upchucker like Joey Mox who could projectile-vomit on demand, but he was capable of making himself pretty sick when he wanted to. Only he didn't want to! He had to cut this out. No latrines. Instead he thought of a beautiful ham sandwich with fresh lettuce and mayonnaise and French's mustard, which he dearly loved. He would have his with a Dr Pepper and then go totally brain-dead watching *Duck Tales* on TV.

Dad and Mom did not allow much ordinary television. They watched *Masterpiece Theatre*, which was fine during the occasional nanosecond that it wasn't totally boring. He and Sally would sometimes sneak down late at night and watch Dario Argento horror movies on *Chiller Theatre*. That and *Fu Manchu*, Sally loved the old *Fu Manchu* movies. Billy preferred the Peter Sellers version where the British agent Dr. Neyland Smith pushed a lawnmower at all times.

All of a sudden he was about to cry because Peter Sellers was dead.

He couldn't do that, not when Barton was so happy. He imagined that there was an iron rod going straight up through his body, and it was connected to the strongest place in the world. He blew his nose on his napkin in order to cover the tears.

"I'd like to propose a toast!" Barton got to his feet. He was in his glory, face flushed, gleaming with sweat. His smile was ear-to-ear and so fixed it looked painted on.

He looked at Billy with melting eyes. "To the very finest young man I have ever had the privilege of knowing. To you, Billy." He held out his glass.

Billy's glass felt like it weighed at least ten pounds. Carefully, so that his chained hands would not drop it, he lifted it from the tabletop.

Barton clinked glasses. Billy stayed still.

23.

Walter and Mary were sitting in her kitchen.

"We've got a tough problem with this guy, Mary. We know his name, we know what he's driving, we even know the fact that his car is registered in Utah and he travels on a California license. But we can't find him, although we strongly suspect he's in L.A. because of the route he took."

Walter's way of telling you something made you wait. Mary hated that. She knew that there was nothing she could do but keep listening and hope he'd land on the point soon.

"As far as California is concerned, the bastard is dead. What this means is, he's living publicly under another name. When he's in danger he pulls out his real ID, which makes as a deceased. It's a damned clever wrinkle."

Absently, she twisted a piece of Kleenex she had in her hand until it

was reduced to little, rolled-up bits. She wanted to scream, to throw things, to hit. But she was wiser now in the ways of her rage.

"Have you told Mark?" It was so hard to have him out doing things while she just sat. The nights were long, the days were long, and she and Sally were getting on each other's nerves. The poor girl was scared it would happen to her, too—and in a curious way ashamed that it hadn't.

"That gets me to the good news. And it's very good."

"Why didn't you tell me right away!"

"No, I'm sorry. Forgive me. I'm just on edge." He pulled a piece of paper out of his briefcase. "This is the man that kidnapped Billy."

Mary took the picture in her hands. Before her was a pudgy man with wide-set eyes and thick, sensuous lips. The nose was broad, the brows were light and curved in such a way that the eyes looked back with startling innocence. It was not an adult countenance. Barton Royal looked like a very sad little boy who had weathered.

"The IdentiKit done by the Nevada witness fit this picture very closely. So did the one done by the trooper who stopped him out in Neola."

"But here's the kicker." He dropped an acetate sheet over the photograph, and suddenly Barton Royal was wearing dark glasses. "Jerry Edwards says this is definitely the guy who played RPM with Billy."

"Is this implying—did Billy know —"

"He was just a guy in the arcade. Billy showed no evidence of knowing him."

"But they played—why?"

"The guy asked Billy for a game."

She looked at the picture, trying to imagine this man with her son. She thought of him stalking Billy, of him coming through these very rooms that night, of him standing right here in the living room. This man, with his sensuous lips and his big, baby eyes, had been here. He had carried Billy out of the house in his arms.

"Barton Royal, present age forty-four."

"We can have this picture?"

Walter handed it to her. "It's yours. We're going to use it, too. The FBI's put Royal on their 'most wanted' list, which changes everything. Now that they have a name, an identity, things are going to get much hotter for your man. This poster will go up at every 'wanted' location in the U.S. We're also going to put Billy's picture on the poster."

Hope flowered in her heart, followed at once by questing impatience. She was so emotionally fragile that any news— good or bad—brought tears. Carefully, she regarded her lap, smoothed her dress. She wished to display only the calm, efficient exterior that she liked and trusted. The gushing, mercurial Mary Neary she had found inside herself was not reliable.

"What can I do? I'm having a really rough time just sitting here, Walter."

"I think you might have another shot with the media. If we have a little luck here and there, we're going to get this man. You can't hide behind a false ID forever. He left a trail somewhere. We'll find that trail. You could help a lot if you could get another round of TV."

This was one of those awful decisions that made her come wide awake in the middle of the night. "What if Barton Royal sees his face on TV?"

Walter raised his eyebrows.

"I know he's already hurt Billy. Mark told me."

"Publicity—"

"If he realizes that he's got problems—I don't see Billy living through that!"

Walter did not reply.

"You don't have an answer."

"No. It's obviously a possibility."

"Anyway, the publicity—we won't get on TV in a big place like L.A. They wouldn't give us ten seconds. We'll get Des Moines. A lot of good it does, anyway. People bring you those damned covered dishes and then they tune you out. They don't care, Walter."

"We care."

"The police care professionally."

"I want to close the case. But I also want to help that little boy, Mary, and you know it! There are cops eating their hearts out over this case. Believe it!"

It was true that people cared.

Jim McLean had been an angel. The whole school board had helped, the police chief, teachers, kids, parents, the neighborhood. She knew that she had to make just one or two calls and the new poster with Barton Royal's face on it would be up in store windows from here to Des Moines before tomorrow noon.

"My instincts tell me to hunt for him. We're just dead broke, but I could get out to L.A. on plastic."

"It's an impulse lots of parents follow. You might even get lucky."

Again she felt the wild flush of hope, then the familiar dead sensation that followed it. She shook her head, trying literally to shake off the

chains that bound her to her agony. "The thing is, if he's never found I'll feel like this for the rest of my life."

He reached out to her with the familiar half-gesture that never completed itself. But this time things changed: she took the grasping hand. "You always do this. You reach for me. Then you stop."

He was looking gravely at her. Had there been sexual content in his expression she would have withdrawn. Clumsily because she was sitting down, she let herself go toward him. They stood up as politely as if he had asked her to dance. Then he was holding her. Under his suit Walter Toddcaster was massive and unyielding. This was not a fat man, but a strong one. She could feel his gun tucked in its holster. He smelled of cigars and Paco Rabanne.

She was so tired now, so afraid. She was not a physically intimate person, except with Mark. But he was a long way away and Walter had the gruff softness of her dad.

She leaned over and pressed her cheek against his shoulder. He stopped dead still. Then he began stroking her hair with quick, nervous gestures.

They were silent. 'This is like time of war,' she thought, 'when people cease to believe in their own futures.'

"It's OK," Walter said. "It's OK."

She lifted her head. It was shocking to realize how little it would take for her to go to bed with this man. Through her sixteen married years she had touched no man but Mark. Such subtle ruptures as these are among the most destructive of the many undocumented side effects of violence.

She drew away from him. "Mary," he said, his voice low and harsh. She knew that tone well: it was the voice of desire.

"Walt—I'm sorry."

He nodded, as if to say that he understood what he must now do. He lowered his head, his lips became a tight line and a distant expression replaced the softness that had filled his eyes. She saw the truth of his life—a barren old marriage long worn out, two people like ghosts in one another's lives.

Victims were Walter's family, stolen kids his children. When he sorrowed for them, he sorrowed also for himself, and when he fought for them it was really the soul of Walter Toddcaster he sought to redeem.

"I'm going to drive down to Des Moines to get some of the official posters," he said. "They'll be printed by noon, and I'll bring them up. We'll start by giving them to schools, to the Y, places like that."

"I'll call Father Turpin's poster committee, and Jim McLean. We'll get them out as soon as you get them to us."

Quite suddenly and without another word he left the house. The kitchen door slammed behind him. Even though she had seen it swinging closed, Mary jumped. The sound wasn't what had startled her. She hated being alone.

She was as if bound to her chair, her kitchen, its silence. This morning she'd tracked a smell to the cookie jar. It was full of moldy Oreos. Cleaning it reminded her of the old ritual of the washing of the body.

"Lots to do," she said. First she would alert Jim McLean. Then she would phone Sally, get her back from Donna's. She was beginning to spend all her days in that dark, air-conditioned house with its purple drapes and its big-screen television. Sprawled together on the Antonios' cream-colored couch, Sally and Donna watched soaps and sitcoms. They ate Twinkies and drank Cokes and sometimes, Donna had said, Sally would just cry.

When Mark left, Sally went silent. Her dream of the family becoming a detective team had been the foundation of her hopes. But teams cost money. Sally's solution was to anesthetize her mind. Mary didn't like

it, but she also couldn't blame her daughter. Again she considered just going after Mark and the hell with the money. In addition to what cash they still had, there was some credit on their MasterCard. Perhaps another thousand dollars. She didn't want to think about it. She was afraid that she might have to go and not be able to afford it. What would she do then—beg?

Damn right she would. She'd call Father Turpin, ask for more money. She would ask some of the rich families like the Edwardses for a loan.

She phoned Jim, who wanted to come right away to see the picture. He could get the picture into the local paper, maybe also the *Des Moines Register*.

Then she called Sally. Every time her daughter left her immediate presence, Mary became uneasy. The phone rang once, then a second time. On the third ring her hands were sweating. On the fourth her throat was getting tight.

When the phone was answered she closed her eyes, let out her breath. "This is Mary."

"Just a second."

Sally came on.

"Do you know it's nearly eleven? Why don't you come home."

"Sorry, Mom."

"Sally, we've had a break. We know what Barton Royal looks like."

"Are we gonna get him?"

"Sally—" She had to stop. The choking tears hit her. Since Mark had left they'd been coming on like this, suddenly and without warning.

"Mommy?"

She managed to croak the words, "Come home."

When she was here alone she had taken to visiting Billy's room. Earlier this evening she had embraced his pillow, inhaled the fading odor of him that was still in the sheets. She had cried until her throat started closing and she was afraid she would gag. There had been murmurs in the hall, muffled footsteps. For a time she had been afraid to leave the room.

Last night Billy had called her name. She'd heard his voice so clearly it had woken her right up. She'd gone into his room then, too. The night made it seem somehow dangerous, as if the shadow of Barton Royal waited there.

A bird had been singing on the wire outside his window. She'd leaned on his windowsill, and listened to it for a long time. Now she took Barton Royal's picture in her hands. "Barton," she said. She tasted the name. "Barton Barton Barton." If she could, she was going to get this man. When she got him she was going to kill him.

She had believed that crime was a psychosocial illness, evil a medieval concept invented to frighten the serfs into compliance. But life was turning out to be more mysterious than either of those notions would allow. Evil had most assuredly walked the floors of this house. And Barton Royal was also a sick, sick man.

"I will kill you, Barton Royal," she said as she stared at the picture. Then she laughed. For Mary Neary this kind of laughter—so bleak, so bitter—was something very new. She understood little about grief, except that it always has a concrete origin: somebody is lost.

As if his life depended on it she raced up to Billy's room. Once there she did nothing but stand in the doorway. She was as still as a resting moth.

How could it hurt this bad? She didn't know anything could hurt this bad. Moonlight was just appearing in the window where last night she had listened to that bird. It must be the one he'd been trying so hard to

imitate. Imagine wanting to talk to a bird! She could almost hear his voice singing in the wind, see him on the faraway. Where he was it was dark, except she knew he was dancing. "Billy," she said, and the name touched her lips like balm.

A voice screamed deep and long, and then there was silence. The sound might have sliced her heart in half, a child in jeopardy. But she knew it was only some toddler chasing lightning bugs. That child was up too late!

Somewhere Billy was dancing. She imagined a ballroom full of painted men and their prisoner boys.

Then came the bird, singing as the moon rose. As if by a cunning hypnosis she was drawn again to its voice. It was just a little thing standing on a wire, but its song was so very free, so very wild. Part of Billy was there.

There was something there deeper than the freedom, the wildness. There, she heard it. Yes, then it was gone again. It was so mysterious, as if her very grief had secretly possessed the heart of the bird. Or no, it was not grief. In the bird's song she heard something more primal: encased as in an amber of sound was the first savage screaming of the beast.

It was to that music her son's ghost danced.

24.

At first Billy did not understand what was happening to Barton. He left the table and went across to the living room, taking the wine bottle and his glass with him. "What's your taste in music?" he asked. "My collection is eclectic." His voice was high and weird. It was getting scarier and scarier around here.

This wasn't because Barton was getting mad again. It was for the opposite reason. He was totally overfriendly. For once he didn't sound like he was going to get mad again any second. Billy watched him as he flipped through his pile of old record albums. "I suppose you like rock."

"Sure."

"I despise rock. It's mean-spirited. What else?"

Billy knew one good way to make people like you was to let them get their way. "I like all kinds of stuff. *You* decide."

"I have the sound track from *Cabaret*. I have the divine Kiri singing *Songs of the Auvergne*. I have the sound track to *The Singing Detective*. Did you see that on TV?"

He remembered it, a public television special about a writer with all

his skin flaking off, which was pretty neat. "My folks wouldn't let us watch much of it."

"Well, the sound track is marvelous." He drank down his glass of wine and put on a record. Billy was fascinated with the ancient hi-fi. It looked like something you saw in old black-and-white movies, huge and made of wood with an "RCA" emblem in the middle of the speaker. It only had the one big speaker, so it couldn't even be a stereo. Barton must be worse than poor, he must be on his way to living out of a bag.

The record came on and a song rose up out of an ocean of scratches. It was frowzy music from very long ago, the kind that was popular when dancing meant hugging each other and sliding along the floor.

The first song he played started out, "You always hurt the one you love." Barton said, "Don't be bashful, come over here with me." He poured himself more of the wine.

As Billy went toward him he suddenly spit out a word. "Dance!" His voice had changed, and now he didn't look friendly anymore. He advanced on Billy. "Dance!"

Billy had no idea what to do. He had hardly ever danced in his life. He knew there were special steps to the old dances, but what were they? He stood there.

Barton folded his arms, gave him an appraising look. "You can't dance?"

"I don't know how."

"Fox-trot, rumba, swing, jitterbug. Any of those words mean anything to you?"

Billy shook his head.

"You always hurt the one you love," the singer crooned, "the one you

shouldn't hurt at all ..."

"OK," Barton said. Billy saw something in his hand, then all of a sudden he was unlocking one of his handcuffs. As quickly as it had appeared, the key went back into his pocket.

"You always take the sweetest rose, and crush it till the petals fall . . ."

"I'll teach you," Barton said. But he didn't say it pleasantly. There was menace in it, sneering and hard. He yanked Billy to him. "I'll teach you to fox-trot first, that's the easiest."

Being close to Barton was seriously creepy.

"Come and trip it as you go, on the light fantastic toe. Do you know that?"

"No."

Barton slipped his arm around Billy's waist. "Now you put your right hand on my shoulder. No, don't grab it, you're not drowning. Lightly, delicately. That's it. Better, anyway. It's Milton, incidentally. You've read Milton, surely?"

Billy was trying not to cry but it was hard. This was a hateful thing Barton was making him do. Nevertheless he stood with his hand poised on Barton's shoulder. If he let himself cry it might be all over. He could not allow Barton to know how awful he really felt.

"Milton—surely you have. You're so *fucking smart!*"

There was that tone again, from the car. No more friendliness. Barton was getting like he'd been when he tore up the steering wheel. Only now Billy was leaning against his moist shirt, and the record was spinning and Barton was full of wine.

Barton swung Billy through the air, tightening his grip around his waist. Billy closed his eyes and went limp.

"If I broke your heart last night," Barton sang, "it's because I love you most of all . . ." His singing voice was thin. He sounded like a boy littler than Billy, or a woman.

Billy pretended he was in his own room. It was night, and the summer wind was billowing the curtains across his bed and he was looking up at the moon.

They swept around the room and the windows passed and the doors, and out the back door there was an ocean of lights.

The song stopped but Barton just slowed down. Now he hung heavily on Billy's shoulders, weighing him down so much he thought he might collapse. "Now we clasp our left hands— intertwine our fingers—yes, that's the way. This is how you are when you really dance." He pulled Billy yet closer. Another song started.

"I get along without you very well," the voice sang. Barton slid and sidled along. "Of course I do, except when soft rain falls . . ."

Barton was leaning over, burying his face in Billy's hair. Then Billy heard him crying and all of a sudden he couldn't help himself any longer and he was crying too.

"... but I should never think of spring, for that would surely break my heart in two."

Because of his crying Barton gradually lost the rhythm of the dance. Billy bore his weight as best he could. Now they just shuffled, ignoring the music. "Do I worry when the iceman calls ... do I worry if Niagara falls . . ."

"Am I furious 'bout your little white lies . . ." Barton sang along with the record, his voice sunken to a weepy whisper.

His hand in Billy's was ice cold and soaking wet. His other hand was like a claw around Billy's waist, each finger pressing tightly against his skin. Round and round they went, slow-dancing, Barton doing a rough

box step while Billy stumbled along with his bruised and bare feet, trying not to connect with Barton's shoes.

Barton was now kissing his hair. The feeling of lips tickling against his scalp was almost unbearable. Then there was something else, a wet, squeezing something. When Billy realized that it was Barton's tongue, he quite involuntarily cried out and pulled back.

Barton flung his arms wide, as if Billy's body had suddenly become awful to hold. Without skipping a breath, he said, 'Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee,' *Billy!* Author, quick!"

"Hemingway!"

"And I thought you were supposed to be so *fucking smart!* The author is John Donne. Hemingway used the line for a title." He threw himself down on the couch, spreading his arms out along the back. Then he patted a place beside him. "C'mere."

He put his arm around Billy's shoulders, absently massaging his chest. "Do you ever think about death?" His voice was very gentle.

"No. Well, hardly ever."

"'Never, never, never say a big big "D." Well, hardly ever.' That's from *HMS Pinafore*. Do you know Gilbert and Sullivan?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, hardly ever. Let me see your palm."

Billy held his hand out as flat and straight as a soldier might.

"No, come on, relax. I can't see the lines that way." He took Billy's hand. "I've forgotten you felt like I should," the record sang, "of course I have . . ." Barton traced the line in Billy's hand with a fat finger. "I was a boy once. I was! They called me Fat Royal. I've never told that to a living soul. Oh, look, this is your lifeline—do you know palmistry?"

"No. I don't believe in it."

"OK, OK, we're just doing this my way, OK? Your lifeline is this one here. See it?"

Billy looked into his palm. "I'll get along without you very well," Barton sang with the record.

Billy's very soul yearned for home. He could smell breakfast cooking, could see the east light pouring in his door, could hear Sally singing in her shower.

"Dear child, your lifeline is so short!" Barton took another long drink of wine, refilled his glass with the last of the second bottle. "Well, the good die young, I guess." He raised his eyebrows. "Let me ask you a question. Have you ever been whipped?"

"I don't know."

Barton chuckled. "You lied to me. Your father never whipped anybody. Let me tell you, the first couple of licks, you think you're going to make it. Strong, silent type. Then the third time, maybe the fourth, you let out some sound, just can't help it. By then it's hurting so bad you think it can't get worse." He paused. He was choking as he talked, slurring his words. "Have you ever wanted to kill anybody?"

"No."

"You're a liar! You'd like to kill me!"

"No, Barton! I like you! Really!"

"This isn't a game, you little asshole. This is the real thing. Do you understand?"

Billy was too scared to talk. Barton turned over his hand. "I see blood

vessels." He traced the blue shadow along the back of Billy's hand. "Do you ever wonder what you look like inside. Like, inside your hand?"

Billy nodded. "Yeah, I wondered that." He'd once gotten into an awful lot of trouble for operating on a live frog.

"The stomach is protected by first a layer of skin, then fatty tissue, then there are muscles that look like beef jerky, but light pink. Under that there's the viscera, which is hard and stringy when you pull it apart. Then there are the organs. Have you wondered, ever, what it's like to look inside a living body? How it would feel to touch a heart while it was still beating?"

"No, I never wondered that."

"But you have a science class at your school, don't you?"

"We dissected shrimp," Billy said miserably.

"Shrimp, really! You dissect shrimp at the dinner table. The thing about L.A. is, it's practically always summer. So you can always barbecue if you feel like it. But they have strict laws. No emissions! The air is terrible here. Have you ever barbecued shrimp?"

"Yeah. Dad makes Shrimp Wilder. He likes to barbecue."

"Oh, Shrimp *Wilder*. That's a very elegant dish. The sauce is green, as I recall."

"Yeah, it is."

"Do you like me holding your hand?"

"I don't care."

He laughed silently, throwing his head back. "You care." Then he took Billy's open hand to his mouth and licked it with his fat tongue. "Do you like that?"

It made Billy start shaking again. His heart was hammering so hard he almost couldn't hear. "I don't care," he stammered again.

Barton stopped. "I disgust you."

"No, you don't, Barton. Really, it's OK."

"No, it isn't." He drew Billy closer. "Put your head on my shoulder. That's it."

It was like Mom would do, especially when she was feeling sad about something. She liked to lean her head on Dad's shoulder.

Barton was getting more tense by the second. His muscles were hard. There was deep trembling, slowly getting stronger and stronger.

"We all have to die," Barton said. "After the first death there is no other.' How about that line? Do you know that?"

"No."

" 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London.' Do you know Dylan Thomas?"

" 'Never until the mankind's making bird, beast and flower'—I know that."

"Well, you know a little Dylan Thomas. The death of a child by fire—it's an incredibly sad thought. When death is quick, it's best. But it's usually a slow thing. The body struggles. Everything alive wants to keep living. We have a very sick attitude toward death in our society. A writer named Henry James called it 'the distinguished thing.' I think that's quite beautiful. 'The distinguished thing.' "

Billy wished Barton would stop talking about death. But he did not stop.

His voice grew mellow, like he was remembering things from a long time ago. "I guess the worst death is to be told in detail how it's going

to be done, and then have it done." He stretched out his legs, wriggled in his seat, sighed. "That's the worst, all right. There is no worse death."

Billy was devastated. He knew, now, that there was no hope and there had never been any hope. He was here for one purpose and one purpose only: to be killed.

His chest seemed to burst open and a great roar of pain poured up his throat and just stuck there. Barton held his head, stroking it. "I'm goin' to Jesus," Billy said. It was so strange, so very mysterious!

Barton seemed more like a force of nature now. "You go ahead and cry, darling. It's best to have a good cry when you first realize. Then you'll get it together and it'll become like a kind of project we do together."

Billy looked at him in amazed horror. Had he heard that right? Barton's eyes were twinkling. He took a long pull on the wine bottle. His glass lay on the floor.

"Barton, please let me be your son."

"That's just a game, Billy. The game is over."

"I'm a good boy, Daddy!"

"No, that game's over." His voice bubbled. "New rules." Now he sounded more serious. "I think you have to get philosophical about it. It's going to happen, Billy. I didn't want it to. When I got you, I wanted you to be a real son to me. I thought we'd work it out."

"We still can, Barton, honest. Honest!"

"But you turned out to be nothing but a *fucking little actor!*"

"I'm not, I'm not!"

"You are an actor and a liar!"

Billy jumped up and ran straight toward the big glass door that opened out onto the backyard. Beyond that was the canyon, and beyond the canyon Los Angeles itself. If he could just make it down that hill, then he would be safe, he would be free!

He threw open the door. Barton, slowed by drink, was not quite fast enough to stop the desperate, racing child. He did not try particularly hard, however. Had Billy seen the slight smile on his face, he might not have run so fast, or been filled with such wild hope.

But all he knew was that he was free. Free! He had the use of his hands and the lights of the city to guide him.

At the end of the yard he ran hard into a fence, but it was low and only stopped him for a moment. He climbed the few dry logs easily and hopped into the rougher ground beyond. His feet were still healing, and they were too sensitive for him to run really fast on the tumble of stones that formed the bottom of the canyon.

"Jesus, help me," he breathed. "Jesus help me," a gasping litany. He pumped along making stifled little screams because of the pain caused by the sharp stones.

After what seemed to him a long time he stopped and turned around. He could see into the house. The living room was empty. But there was no flashlight bobbing along behind him.

Stones or not he flew down that canyon. The ground got steeper. Down he went toward the lights. He could even hear cars now, the great whisper of the city. A helicopter chugged across the night sky. Billy waved as he ran—he never knew, they might see him.

Then, quite suddenly, the ground was flat and smooth. Surprised, he stopped. He reached down, felt warmth and hardness. The road, he'd reached the road! "Thank you, Jesus," he said. "Thank you, Jesus." He was trotting now, moving easily downhill. Then he saw car lights ahead. They glowed, faded, glowed brighter as the car came around one bend and then another.

It was over. He'd won, he was safe. Tears sprang to his eyes. He shook them away as the car came around the last bend. Taking no chances, he went right out into the middle of the road and waved both arms.

The car stopped, the lights boring into him. "I got kidnapped and I got away," he said. He talked loud, between gasping breaths. "Please take me to the nearest police."

As he ran around to the side of the car his heart almost stopped: it was a brown Celica. But it was being driven by a woman, he was still OK!

He got in the car. "That was a dangerous stunt," she said.

"I had to stop you, a man got me and took me to his house—"

"A man?"

She sounded so happy, why did she sound happy? She started the car. "Take me to the police station," he said.

"Oh, that's ten miles away. Why don't I take you to my house? We'll call 911 from there."

As the car began to move, he again realized he was free. That meant he was going to live, he was going to see Mom and Dad again! He hugged himself, moaning with delight and relief.

They went round and round on the curving road. "Where do you live?" he asked.

"Not far."

She was a thick, mean-looking woman with lots of blond hair. Her dress was loose and her hands were pudgy. Billy could smell liquor on her breath.

They kept going round and round, one street after another. He thought to himself, 'I'd better catch the names.' "Is it much farther?"

"Be quiet and let me drive!"

"OK, sorry."

They were on Mount Crest, then Ridgeway. Then they went around two other corners, up and down steep hills, around another corner where there were houses on stilts. One of them had a number, 314. 'Where am I?' he wondered. The drunk woman was taking him on a dizzying journey into total confusion. The tires squealed, the gears clicked as she shifted up and down the range.

Suddenly the car whipped into a driveway so fast the wheels must have left the pavement. They came to a screeching stop inside a garage. "We're ho-o-me," the woman shrilled. She pushed a button on a remote control clipped to the visor and the garage door rumbled down, leaving them in total darkness. For a moment the only sound was the woman's furious breathing. Then her door clicked and opened, and dim light filled the car. Barton's Aerostar was parked in the other bay. Seeing it, Billy simply screamed.

The woman threw back her head and laughed a high, shrieking laugh. "Come on," she said, "I think you've finally earned some serious punishment, you *fucking little creep!*"

Part Five

THE GOD DAMNED

25.

It was the most delicious, special feeling, like invading the soul of your mother and making her do evil deeds. "All right," he said and it was her voice, oh, it was her! And how the little boy scurried. Look at his eyes, as big as plates, look at his pale face in the hard garage light. "Barton is so-o nice, isn't he, my boy? Well, I am not nice! Get in that house this instant!"

Off he ran. "Barton, Barton," he cried. He didn't know, he really *didn't know!* This was lovely. Never before had it been like this. The others had seen right through the layers of makeup to the man beneath, but this child was much more innocent. The idea of cross-dressing had probably never occurred to Billy.

Barton marched into the house, went down the narrow hallway to the guest room and stood in the doorway, folded his arms. "Barton won't be answering you tonight, my boy. He's being punished too, for letting you escape again. The very idea!"

"Who—who—"

"I am Death."

When he saw the absolute horror on that face he couldn't contain himself a moment longer. He slammed the door and gave himself over to silent, agonizing mirth. Then he marched down the hall and into his room. He pushed back the rug and opened the hatch.

He'd only had time for the wig and the dress and a load of powder. For this occasion he was going to make himself up perfectly, using all the magnificent array of toys he possessed: the jars of foundation, the lovely powders and rouges, the eye shadows with their glorious names, Aziza, Revlon, Charles of the Ritz. He adored that last one, the way it clicked like a spike heel upon a marble step. The Ritz, *Ritz*, RITZ!

He went directly to his makeup table and turned it on. The lights were merciless, revealing the face in the mirror just as it really appeared. He was drunk, yes, but he could still see the great ape of a man behind the sloppy powdering he'd given himself. He poured some water from the pitcher and splashed in it until his face was clean. Then he covered his beard with Nair and went to work adjusting the wig. First he took it off and slicked his hair with oil so that it would take the fit perfectly. He daubed spirit gum around his forehead and sideburns and along the back of his neck.

Now he put the wig on properly. Once he'd pulled a few ringlets down here and there it was perfect, impossible to distinguish except at closest range. It should be perfect, he'd shoplifted it from an exclusive Rodeo Drive boutique. Indeed, all of his lovely collection was stolen either from the best boutiques or from dear Gina's extensive collection of goodies. It was soon time to take off the depilatory, which he did with a bladeless razor. Now his face was as lovely and smooth as his hands.

What Barton did was not transvestism, it was disguise. He had nothing against gays, but he himself was totally heterosexual. He would never allow himself to be one of those vile, disgusting lechers that touched boys—

Men like that ought to be killed.

'You have to understand,' he would tell himself, 'that what you do is ritual magic' For example, the dress was a disguise intended to evoke one of the unconscious selves hidden within him, as indeed the powerful mother of childhood is hidden within all men. The difference between him and ordinary people was that he expressed the unconscious and they didn't. They were scared, he was not.

When they saw him in his ritual clothing more than one of those other kids had screamed with laughter. But only at first. Then they had just screamed.

Barton went to work on his face, applying foundation, then powder, blush, rouge, then finishing around the lips and eyes. He painted on his lovely Summer Rose lip blush with quick, snapping movements, then applied Mystic Sea eye shadow, a beautiful, metallic turquoise.

The effect was simply magical.

He was always raptured by her. If only he could kiss her, swoon at her feet, give himself to her!

A blonde with vivid lips and exotic, pouting eyes stared out at him from the mirror. The eye shadow, however, had drawn the pain in those eyes to the surface. The sadness of his expression was his least fortunate feature. He corrected it with a little adjustment. Alter the line of the mascara, build up the lashes a bit—like magic, sad was sexy.

All the while Billy was waiting and worrying. He had reason to worry, too! He was about to get just exactly what he needed, and get it good and proper. The fun was over, the game was ended. Now the serious part had begun. Watching that little fucking scum acting his heart out, that had made Barton incredibly mad. Did he really think his inept hamming had convinced?

They'd tried the canyon before. You just drove around to where it opened onto Monarch and waited. The walls were too steep to climb, so there was no chance at all you would miss them.

It had happened so consistently with the other boys that Barton now looked forward to the canyon run. It was fun.

Dear little Billy was going to leap to the least snap of fingers from now on. He would worship the very ground Barton Royal walked upon; he would learn it was a privilege to obey a truly awesome human being to the letter.

He went down into the black room and selected the leather strap. He turned out the light, closed the trapdoor and covered it with the rug. Now he had to pause and prepare himself. This took consummate strength, perfect acting. He had to feel her, enter her, be her in all her glorious femininity and sternness. And she was so stern. Once she had set her will to it, there was absolutely nothing that would stop her. You could plead—and they had, God knew—but it made no difference. You could even lie, if you dared. Nothing stopped her.

With exaggerated care he hefted the strap with his right hand, holding the end of it loosely in his left. He walked down the hall, making sure his feet creaked the boards so Billy would hear. He paused outside the door to put an edge on the boy's fear.

The sobbing that started within the room was a deep music, marvelously stirring. His whole body began to tingle, and the more Billy sobbed the more delightful the sensation became. When finally he felt ready to intensify his delight, he unlocked the door and threw it open. Billy gasped as he stepped into the room. His eyes were fixed on the strap. His mouth dropped open. Then, no doubt imagining the pain, he squirmed where he sat.

"You're getting ten," Barton said in his best voice.

"Ten what, ma'am?"

He slapped the strap against his hand, and nodded his head.

"Please," Billy said, "I don't think I can stand it, ma'am. I've never had it done to me before."

"Most of them can't talk at this moment. You are quite a brave boy. For your bravery, I'll add three more."

Billy rushed to the closet. What was he going to do—try to hide?

Barton grabbed the handcuff still dangling from the child's wrist and dragged him back to the center of the room. "It's a slow thing, I'm afraid," he said. "Thirteen blows with this thing will basically take you apart."

He pushed Billy face down onto the bed. "Drop your pants. Can you manage?" When the child fumbled Barton yanked them roughly down around his knees. Billy put his hands to his head. His face was buried in the sheets. He was clutching his hair, pulling convulsively. Barton had never seen this before: the boy appeared to be tearing out his hair.

Fat Royal snapped the strap against his palm again. Billy gave a little kick. "Please, lady," he said, "I just wanted to look at the stars."

Barton's response was the first blow. It was smart and nicely delivered across both buttocks. There was a single, solid crack.

Billy bounced. He made a sound of surprise. No doubt it had hurt more than he had imagined possible.

The second blow was placed just above the red stripe made by the first. It was so hard that the strap whistled on its way to contact, and the moment of connection caused a spattering sound. Immediately the skin turned white and puckered. Then the blush started.

Billy cried out.

If this had been the black room Barton would have done a really thorough job. Given the soundproof window you could have some screaming up here, but he had to take care.

The third blow would be placed below the first, which was now a well-raised, fiery red stripe exactly across the center of both buttocks. He

raised his arm until he felt the strap lightly touching his own back. A tide of anger flowed in him, directed at this willful, arrogant child.

The third blow landed with the sound of a pistol shot. Billy threw back his head. Some garbled words came out, "Jesus" or "Sorry," or something. There was no way to tell, and what's more, Barton didn't care.

This had always been what it was about. He didn't want a son to love, he wanted the sweetness of this. People did not understand that. They did not understand that a soul could reach beyond good and evil, to regions where suffering and pleasure were the same.

"Billy?"

"Yes ma'am!"

"How do you feel?"

There was no reply.

"Now listen to me, I'm waiting for the welts to come up properly. Then I'm going to do the ten and it's going to drive you mad with pain. Have you ever been mad with pain?"

Billy made a high noise, a sort of keening.

A moment later the welts were properly livid. Barton delivered a quick, vicious series to the center of the buttocks. Billy shrieked more with each strike. Then he began to squirm away, twisting from side to side, using his hands to ward off the blows. His will to appease with compliance had broken down. He was on his way to becoming a squirming, squalling animal.

The fury came upon Barton then, velvet and fire in his head. He attained a rhythm, up and down, up and down, until flecks of blood and skin began to fly up, forming a sort of haze around the leaping flesh.

At last Billy lost everything. His back arched, his eyes became teary, wrinkled lines, his screams pealed. Now, if they were in the black room, Barton would have let go completely, would have transported himself by the torment he was inflicting into heaven itself.

There was a last flash of rage and a final, brutal slash of the strap, and he was finished.

It was as if he had just awakened from hypnosis. The velvet in his mind was gone, the extraordinary calm that had formed its base was changed to sorrow and disgust.

What was he doing in these ridiculous clothes, hurting this poor child? My God, look at him, look at what had happened to Billy!

Throwing down the strap as if it was crusted with filth, he turned and rushed from the room. He closed the door. Maybe he should also have cuffed the poor creature and locked the lock, but what was the point? Barton knew from experience that Billy would be unable to move when he returned to consciousness. Sometime in the night the child would wake up in severe pain, and cry himself to sleep. Tomorrow morning there would emerge a quiet, compliant boy, walking stiff-legged. In his eyes there would be something of the rat.

Walking into his own bedroom, Barton glimpsed himself in the floor-length mirror that hung on the back of his closet door. Instantly he looked away, but it was too late. He knew what happened when he did this, and yet he did it every time.

"No," he said, trying to force himself not to look again. But he did look, he could not help looking.

There stood a fat, middle-aged man loaded with lurid makeup. His underarms were soaked, his spike heels wobbling absurdly. By the time he'd lurched into the bathroom he was sobbing.

This mirror was worse, the fluorescent light made him look like a ghoul.

The lips were fat, the eyes glaring, mad. He was so incredibly, totally screwed up. He was worse than that, he was completely psychotic.

He had just maimed another human being and would almost certainly end by visiting him with a horrible death.

You cannot stop, you cannot prevent yourself!

All his justifications were lies. Nothing explained him, not even his hard childhood. He did what he did because he got pleasure from it.

That makes you evil.

Evil, he was evil! He was an ugly, vicious, evil swine!

A huge roach crawled slowly out from his dress and up his face. He could feel the tickle of its claws, the faint, frantic scratching as it made a trench in his makeup.

When he clapped his hands to his face the makeup came off like sodden clay. He wiped at it, making little screams in his throat, his whole body twisting with the loathing he felt for himself. There was no roach under his hand. He ripped off the dress and stood naked, a sweated lump who stank of his ugly labor.

He fell to his knees, he crouched down, drove his fists into his eye sockets until he saw bursts of red and yellow. His mouth opened, he gagged, he felt something awful and black within him slither to the surface.

A snake was flipping on the floor, slick and wet as if it had been coiled in his gut. He fell down moaning and as black sorrow closed upon him he wished with all his heart that he would be free.

Billy was a dot of light in the middle of the forever dark. He'd been killed, he thought, whipped to death. "Momma," he said. "Momma?" It was so still, so very silent.

The whipping was a red memory.

"I don't want to be dead!"

Such a great agony assailed him when he moved that he flew into panicked thrashing. His screams were broken and soft, pitched to the tone of small wind. He was completely unfamiliar with great physical pain, but nevertheless he finally managed to calm himself down.

The overhead light was still on, filling the room with its hard, yellow glow. Billy was lying in a wet spot on the bed. Slowly, he slid to the side. With trembling fingers he felt his buttocks.

The skin was lumpy and covered with something sticky. When he looked at it, he saw that it was blood.

The sound of his own moaning made him feel so sad that he forced himself to stop. Nobody could ever be bad enough to deserve what he'd just been given. It wasn't possible to be that bad.

Billy was a good person, with a natural desire to find good in his fellow man. His innocence, which had so disadvantaged him until now, came to his rescue by preventing him from understanding the hopelessness of his situation. Beneath his suffering there was fresh water flowing, the very water of life. It bubbled up in him no matter how hard his fortune, and would not run dry.

This deep strength, which had not been so vividly present in the other children Barton had abducted, enabled Billy to continue his struggle. Although it hurt terribly, he fought his way to his feet.

"Mommy," Billy said. He wanted her so badly, she made it not hurt anymore! "Oh, Mommy!" He was sinking back through the layers of his young personality, back to the days when she carried him on her hip. "Carry me, Mommy, I is tired now." When he moved the pain clutched at him. "I sorry, I sorry . . ."

A part of him reminded himself, 'You aren't a baby, you can make it, you must try to get out of this.' It was just so hard—he had been whipped so terribly. His legs were like two posts, almost impossible to move. When he did, fire raced up and down his back, making him flail his arms and grit his bared teeth.

Like any normal child, Billy's sorrow would have extended to the hand that had hurt him if he felt he was dependent upon it for his survival. He would have accepted help even from the blond woman. When she was gentle to him he would have reacted with gratitude.

This is why children cleave so tenaciously even to hard parents. It takes repeated beatings, long periods of brutal treatment, considered and relentless injustice to break hope. As spectacular as Barton's assault had been, Billy had nevertheless survived like a little coal in the ashes; he was still struggling and would not stop. The pity of the abused child is that he does not cease to hope, not until the last beam of his life has faded.

So he wobbled across the floor, raised his arm to the knob on the door and tried. Every movement caused agony; the buttocks relate to so many other important muscles. To shuffle, to stand still, to raise his arm, to tighten his fingers on the silver doorknob—all of it hurt.

Under his breath he was uttering a new litany. Gone was "Jesus," gone was "God." He was down deeper now than those words, which come to have meaning in a child's vocabulary only at the age of four or five. "Ma," he said with each step. "Ma-ma-ma" as he crept along.

He did not exult to find himself in the hall, nor did he even think of where he was going or what he needed to do. He simply kept sliding one foot after the other, and so made it into Barton's bedroom. He had never seen it before, but he did not notice the beautiful canopied bed, the lovely silken sheets, the lace curtains or the perfume in the air.

He did see Barton, a shadowy heap on the bathroom floor. As far as he was concerned, though, this was not Barton. The blond hair told him that it was the woman who had whipped him. He went over, concern

for her rising in him. But then he saw she was sleeping, her dress drawn over her like a coverlet. He returned to the task at hand.

He had come to call Mama. When you got hurt and nobody else would help, that was what you did, you called Mama. He looked around him. On a small, ornate desk was a telephone. "Mama," he said. He put his hand on the phone, picked it up, heard the dial tone in his ear.

Although his danger was now extreme, he was beyond caring about whether or not he was caught.

He began to press the numbers on the phone.

26.

The skin was being savagely scourged from her back when the ringing of the telephone woke Mary. For an instant the agony of the whip mingled with the noise of the phone. She came to consciousness in blood and rage, flailing frantically for the receiver, composing herself. Try not to sound sleepy, be calm, it might be the end.

"Ma-ma."

Some baby was up early and playing with the phone. "You put the phone down, honey, you aren't supposed to be calling people at this hour."

"Ma-ma!"

In an instant she couldn't think, couldn't remember even how to speak. Frantically she swallowed, fighting to respond. "Billy!"

"Mommy."

An instinctive impulse to grab him almost made her hurl the phone away from her. But she held it hard to her ear. 'OK, settle down now, take it easy, remember the instructions, get information.' One deep intake of breath was all she allowed herself. Calmly, distinctly, she asked: "Where are you, Billy?"

"Hollywood Hills."

When his voice stopped the silence in the phone was tremendous.

"What street?"

"Near Ridgeway . . ."

"Do you know the name?"

"No. The people next door have a blue Mercedes. Barton has an Aerostar."

"We know about the Aerostar. We know he's called Barton Royal. Anything else?"

"He has a brown Celica. He hid the Aerostar."

"What does the house look like?"

"Garage in front. . . dead-end street—" His voice dropped to a whisper, then she heard weeping like she had never heard before in her life. It burned into the depths of her soul, as if a hot knife was plunging into her. She gritted her teeth.

"Anything else." She managed to sound quite calm.

"We're the last house. Top of the hill—"

"Number on the house?"

"Ma-ma, I got spanked, I got bad, bad—"

She bit her knuckle. The skin crunched in her teeth, she tasted the blood. The pain seemed to belong to a distant, fraudulent life. Think, woman! "Is he nearby?"

"She in the bafroom."

My God, he sounds like he's a toddler! He's regressing, he's hurt, he's being tortured to death, oh God in heaven help me I am not strong —

"Hang up."

"Mama wait!"

"Say goodbye."

"Goodbye Ma-ma."

The silence continued on the line. He was frozen, he couldn't put the phone down!

"Goodbye. Hang up now."

He began weeping, a sound like little rain.

She jerked her head away from that pitiful baby's voice as if it was a bellow of agony. Her beautiful, brilliant child—all the labor and the love—was being ruined! He was suffering, oh, terribly, yes, there was no question that it was terrible, terrible—

At that instant a door opened in her and she came to the part of her that was as strong as stone. Here Mary Neary was objective and effective. When she spoke again her voice radiated sure confidence. "Now put the phone down and get away from it. Don't try to call Mommy again. The police will be there as soon as they can." She stopped, and when she did the big silence assaulted her again.

"Mommy—"

Again she writhed. A huge sob came up into her throat. She threw her head back, sucked air into her open mouth, spoke again. "You have to hang up now, honey."

But he didn't hang up. He was unable to break his connection to her. So powerful was her desire to radiate strength, to fill him with her own health and courage and her very blood she literally snapped to attention beside the bed. "Put that phone down," she barked. "I want to hear the dial tone this instant!"

"Mommy help. Mommy help."

"Hang up right this instant."

"Ma-ma, Billy wants—"

"I know, darling, I know. But you have to hang up. Right now. Do it, Billy!" The silence replied. Her free hand was a fist against her chest. She was shaking so hard she could barely see. *"This is an order, young man! Obey me instantly!"*

Click. Then at last the dial tone. She sank to her knees, crouched with the phone hugged against her chest. Oh let it be that he was not seen. God, please. Aloud she whispered into the silent room, "I love you, honey, Momma loves you."

With exaggerated care she put the receiver back on its cradle, and then stared at the phone as if it contained a living spirit. Something happened to her that was beyond tears. When she thought of him out there somewhere suffering that much—my God, some vicious thing had beaten him, had reduced him to a gibbering jelly, tortured him—her mind swarmed with images, each one more hideous than the last. She sank to the floor, twisted this way and that. Her hands twined in her hair.

She couldn't help herself, she started pulling and pulling. Her body burned with the agony of her son's voice and she knew then the deepest, truest meaning of motherhood, that it has to do with the very spirit become blood and bone. She had borne him and held his naked body in her arms, and he was of her, and was her own self transformed.

Her hands dug into her hair, her body seemed to sputter flames, she felt rising on her buttocks the welts her son had received, the heartless whipping splashing into flesh that had never been struck, and shattering not only the body of the boy but his little soul's light.

"Momma!"

Sally had come into the room. She wore her summer shorty pajamas. Her face was stricken. Mary realized that the poor thing must think she was dying.

She got to her feet, drew herself up. "I just got a call from Billy and we have work to do."

"Momma, what's wrong with you!"

"I'm upset. But that doesn't matter—"

"You're bleeding, Momma, you're bleeding all over your face!"

Mary withdrew her hands from the tangle of her hair. Her scalp was tender; there was wet all down her forehead. She hurried into the bathroom. She had literally been pulling her hair out at the roots. Sally turned on the water, got a washcloth wet and began daubing her mother's face. "Momma, is he—"

"Oh, Sally, he sounded like hell." To hear herself saying those words made her congeal inside. Again she began to tremble.

"Did he say where he is?"

She all but threw herself out of the bathroom, grabbed the phone again, jabbed in Toddcaster's home number. "Walter, he called—"

With a muttered "I'm coming," he slammed up the phone. Mary took the precious tape out of the recorder, put in a new one.

Five minutes later the phone and the doorbell rang at the same time. The phone was the FBI in Des Moines. Walter had already called them. "He said he's in the Hollywood Hills at the end of a dead-end street near a street called Ridgeway, but it isn't Ridgeway. They're at the top of a hill. The man drives a brown Celica. There's a blue Mercedes parked next door."

Walter joined her and in a moment the tape was being replayed so that he and the FBI officer on the phone could both listen. While it played

Sally cradled her mother in her arms, cleaning her face with a damp washcloth.

Walt finished with the tape. "That's a hell of a stress reaction you got going there," he said, touching her bloody face. "It's called sweating blood when you do that, hon."

He stepped into the hall, motioned Sally to follow him. But Walter Toddcaster was not a man who could readily whisper. "She's about had it," he said in a low voice. "They start pulling their hair out, they're losing it."

Sally's reply was an inarticulate whisper.

"We gotta help her, keep her going, because this thing will play through real quick."

"Play through?"

"It means we're going to find your brother real soon." Walter went back to Mary, glanced into her watchful eyes. "You heard me, didn't you? Which I guess I wanted. You gotta get some Valium or something, hon. You can't take this pressure. Nobody can."

"The hell I can't, Walter Toddcaster. No way am I going to dull my mind with pills at a time like this."

"Hey. Just trying to assist. I think you did good on that phone call. Real, real good."

Sally suddenly went for the phone. Mary's first impulse was to pull her off it in case there was another call.

"What time is it in Nevada?" Sally said. Mary realized that she was calling Mark. 'Oh, Mark, I forgot you, I called Walter first!'

"Dad, it's me. He called. We know approximately where he is."

Mary grabbed the phone. "I talked to him, Mark. I talked to him!"

"Where?"

"The Hollywood Hills."

"Address?"

She told him what they knew.

"I'm going to fly to L.A. as soon as I can. I'll call the police when I get in."

"The FBI's already done that. Maybe they'll have him by the time you get there."

"Maybe. Look, I love you, and I'm outa here."

Mary put down the phone. Sally grabbed it again. In moments she was talking to American Airlines, ordering tickets for the two of them.

Toddcaster stood in the doorway to the living room, looking as if his presence here had become tentative, uncertain. "Walter?"

"The case is outa my hands. It's up to the FBI and the Los Angeles police now. All we can do from here is offer support as needed."

"I'm going."

"Of course. But be careful, Mary. There are don'ts in this thing, major don'ts. Don't try to find him on your own. When you get to LAX report to the police. They have a missing persons unit. By then they will know your name, they will be on the case. Do not go to Hollywood by yourself."

Sally put down the phone. "If we can make the seven-twenty flight to Albuquerque, we can be in L.A. by nine-thirty their time."

By the time Mary was grabbing her clothes out of the dresser Walter Toddcaster had faded into the background of her life. She didn't even see him leave the room.

By the time she was snapping her bra he was already a memory. In ten minutes she was dressed; she even had an overnight bag with some things stuffed into it. As they ran to the car Sally was still pulling her curlers out, throwing them on the dew-fresh grass. Toddcaster watched from the front porch. "I'll man the phone," he said.

Mary glimpsed him once, a shadow on the porch. She heard a shout, big and powerful, cutting the silence of the morning. "Drive carefully," he yelled.

Mary hardly heard him. In moments she was doing seventy down Lincoln. She had exactly thirty-five minutes to get to the airport. Even given the sparse early morning traffic, the trip would take forty.

"Momma, you'd better let me do the driving."

"You've never driven a car before in your life."

"Momma, I take the car at night when you and Dad are asleep. I've been doing it ever since I was tall enough."

"Sally, you're kidding!"

"I'm a good driver, Mom. And if you don't slow down we're going to get a ticket and miss the plane!"

"With you behind the wheel we'd be worse off—you don't even have a license, you're thirteen."

"I do a lot of things you don't know about."

As much as she could bear, Mary slowed down. They must not miss that plane. Her boy needed his mother desperately.

If he was found, she had to be there. This was probably the single most essential thing she would ever do.

Until they reached the interstate she took Sally's advice and kept to the speed limit. Then she pushed it. Otherwise there was no chance. The

old wagon shuddered at ninety, then seemed to get a second wind as it passed through a hundred. At a hundred and ten it felt like it was floating. The engine made a sound like a herd of cattle.

They were still thirty miles from Des Moines when a light bar started flashing behind them. "Fuck," Mary said, causing her daughter to stare in amazement at her. She pulled over. The black-and-white came up beside her. One of the two policemen in the front seat leaned out.

"You're Mary Neary?"

"Yes."

"We're here to give you an escort. Let's go."

They made the plane with three minutes to spare.

It was not until they were in the eventless void of the flight that her mind began to open the doors to the dark. He was badly hurt, he was with a desperate man, he was so darned *out of it!*

If he'd turned into a baby again, he was at the end of his strength. When that man asked him, "Billy, did you make a phone call," he'd probably say yes.

She remembered him when he was a toddler, guileless and so absurdly serious that Mark had nicknamed him "the Judge." God help him, he'd *regressed!*

Mary felt her daughter's warm, light fingers placing gentle pressure on her own. Since Billy's disappearance she had not had much room inside herself for Sally, and she regretted that. But Billy's plight was so terrible and her own suffering so great that she simply could not invest her daughter's needs with the importance she knew they deserved.

The Good Mother was being broken by the strain of the tragedy. If she lost Billy, then what would be left for the girl? Or worse, if he came back ruined, requiring years of therapy, what then?

"Mother?"

She turned, appalled by the interruption of Sally's voice.

"She wants to know if you want breakfast?"

To Mary's surprise the flight attendant was there with her trolley. "A Coke," she said automatically.

"No, Momma, we need food."

"It's a cheese omelette," said the flight attendant.

Mary ate her omelette and drank coffee, and watched beneath as her familiar world slid slowly away.

She had a question, asked to the sky, to the hazy prairie below: were they really going to get Billy back, or was it too late for that?

27.

When Barton came to he was still on the floor of the bathroom. The sour taste of last night's wine filled his mouth, and he was teetering on the brink of nausea. His tongue felt rough, his thirst was extraordinary. His skin felt tight and withered, his face was desert-dry from the caked, peeling makeup. The white dress, now filthy, covered him like a sheet. When he threw it off he smelled his own stink. As soon as he sat up his head began pounding so hard he thought he was going to faint from the pain. Blood rumbled in his temples and dark waves obscured his field of vision. The room rocked like a very nasty little boat in very big seas.

He'd drunk himself silly last night. It was the first time that had happened in ages.

This was Sunday. God, he was doing a show—two shows. What a miserable way to start his first day back at work.

Damn that Billy. You loved him, but you knew damn well he was faking it. It just hurt like hell was the problem. You wanted to make him love you, and when he just went on faking it you wanted to hurt him.

You destroy everything but oh, it felt so good! The relief when it was over and he was sitting on the couch, watching *Cabaret* and sipping a

truly fabulous wine, was so very great.

For a couple of hours afterward he would be all right. It was like it never happened, never could happen. It was so completely over that the idea of doing it again was utterly absurd.

He pulled himself up by the edge of the sink and drank three glasses of water. He took a handful of Advils.

The remains of the makeup, the wig hanging by a few bits of spirit gum, the dress—the sight made him turn away from his mirror.

But why? Why did he persist in these feelings about himself? It was a disguise, for God's sake, and that's all it was.

He forced another look into the mirror. His was an interesting face. People thought it looked sad; he'd be going along perfectly happy and all of a sudden somebody would say, "Are you OK?"

I'm just fine, thank you. No I'm not. It didn't help to pray, it didn't help to read books about psychiatric abnormalities. Worse, he was smarter than any shrink he'd ever encountered. As a result he didn't know why he was like this and he couldn't find out and he couldn't stop. The only way he had found to deal with it was to accept that he was just a very unusual man.

He tried a little smile. *Look at you!* He cocked his head, turned aside and glanced at himself in three-quarter profile. This way he didn't look sad, he looked mad.

No, mean. Kind of funny and kind of mean. A mean munch-kin. He wiggled his eyebrows. "Fuck you," he said.

Nobody loves me but me. Nobody ever will.

To just be loved, what a thing. It was commonplace!

I am terrible.

He turned away from the mirror.

Wrapping a towel around his middle, he went into his bedroom and threw back the scatter rug that concealed the door to the basement. He tossed the wig and dress down.

Then he flipped on his tiny bedroom TV, but it was Sunday and there was no *Good Morning America*, only some spectacularly banal cartoon about turtles. American television considers American children drek. That's why it feeds them garbage. He tsked, jabbing the power button. The set died, leaving a single white star in the middle of the black screen.

It would be nice if this headache would start to abate. Maybe he could use another handful of Advil. Couldn't you OD on that stuff? Didn't it kill the liver or something? He didn't want to take any of that codeine, it always made him nauseous.

As he prepared his shower a dream came back to him. It was vague at first, but it held his interest because it was something about Billy. What had he seen about Billy in the landscape of this dream?

Billows of steam rose, the water drummed against the tin shower stall. When Barton stepped in his whole body was grateful. His skin sucked up the moisture, the ancient makeup was swept off his face; the sins of the night went down the drain forever.

He took a deep breath of the steam gusting up around him, then let it slowly flow out as life and feeling poured back into him.

"Ma-ma," Billy had said in the dream. He'd been thrilling to see, tall and imposing. Barton shuddered, shaking his head, stepping back from the stream. It made him extremely uneasy to imagine Billy standing over him.

Ma-ma?

Billy opened his eyes. He was on the floor of his bedroom; his bed stank too badly of pee to use. Even so he'd pulled part of the filthy sheet over him in his sleep. Now he pushed it away.

He sat up. His bottom hurt terribly; he could barely move. That woman had really walloped him. He'd seen her lying on the floor of Barton's bathroom, when he'd been calling Momma on the phone.

He'd called Momma! The memory of her voice made him open his eyes wide. Then he was filled with such deep sadness that he just couldn't even sit up and fell right over on his side. His knees came up to his chin and he wanted his Garfie but it wasn't there anywhere so he put his thumb in his mouth instead and closed his eyes.

He stayed like that, dreaming about how she sounded.

He'd told her, yes he had!

It was so quiet in here.

Momma said the police would come. "Police," he whispered around his thumb. "Police, come!"

The silence seemed to close more tightly around him. He did not like this kind of quiet. Very softly, he sang against it.

*"The ants go marching six by six,
the little one stops to pick up sticks,
and they all go marching down,
around, get out of the rain!"*

Being all scrunched up hurt his bottom and his chest. The only place it

didn't hurt was his feet, which were almost completely healed anyway. And so was his chest, except for one long scab that he knew he shouldn't pick.

Sometime after the beating he must have drawn up his shorts, because he was dressed.

Moving with the exaggerated care that would have been more appropriate in a man of eighty, he unwound himself. Slowly, propping himself against the side of the bed, he came to his feet. "Police," he said. "Momma said. Momma told me."

He began a journey toward the bedroom door. "Police. Police."

Barton finished his shower and dried himself with his big, coarse towel. As he shaved he kept listening to that word "ma-ma" repeated in his mind. How strange that it was associated with the image of Billy as hero rather than as helpless child.

It was impossible to erase the image of Billy looking down on him, his head backed by the soft glow of the night sky.

Oh, Billy. I love you, really and truly. And so you are dangerous to me, really and truly.

When Billy heard the hiss of clothing in the hall he wobbled back away from the door. He'd almost had his hand on the knob. Now he moved more quickly, going toward his bathroom, attempting escape from her.

The door swung open and there stood Barton. He was wearing a white shirt with a wide green necktie. On the tie were written in yellow the words, "Uncle Squiggly."

"Good morning, Billy boy."

" 'Morning."

"Come here to me."

Billy gave him a wary glance. He seemed happy, though, and that was reassuring.

"Come on."

Slowly Billy walked over. Barton hugged him to himself. "Hmpf! You need a bath, young man."

"I wet my bed after she whipped me."

"It smells like an animal lives in here!" He folded his arms. "What 'she? What are you talking about?"

"The lady. After I ran away she came and got me. She brought me back and whipped me."

"That was just a little spanking, a little way of letting you know you'd been bad."

Billy hung his head and was silent.

"Now take your shower. I want you all clean before I go to work. I have to be at the bookstore by ten and it's already nearly nine."

Billy gingerly touched his buttocks.

"Still smarts, eh? Well, you'll survive." Then he smiled that terrifying smile of his and Billy backed toward the bathroom door.

Barton brushed past him, pulling all the sheets off his bed. "When you come out there'll be fresh sheets. You're to make this bed up perfectly. If she sees it's not done right, she's capable of dishing out another just like the last one."

Holding the dirty sheets at arm's length, he left the room.

These sheets were really filthy. They'd been on the bed at least since Timmy. For an instant a door within him was cracked open, and he glimpsed something so bizarre that he was made momentarily dizzy.

Well, that certainly wasn't real! Lord, what a mind you have! There had been Timmy and there had been Jack, end of story.

He stuffed the sheets in the washer and poured in lots of bleach and detergent. With an angry snap of his wrist he turned the machine on, immediately returning to Billy's room. The shower was running. When Barton entered the bathroom and pulled back the shower curtain Billy turned away. Barton's eyes widened: the child wasn't kidding about the whipping.

His buttocks were deeply bruised, with open cuts and long, raised welts. Barton stared in amazement. He did not remember delivering such a beating as this. A few smart blows wouldn't do this. It must be that delicate skin, he told himself. Skin like that showed every little mark. He reached his hand out, touched the contusions. Billy flinched away.

All of Barton's reserve of tenderness emerged. The little guy was really suffering. But when Billy squirmed away from his probing, a delightful shiver went through him. *No! I don't want that!*

Oh, yes you do.

Billy was cringing away like a wild creature at the far edge of a cage, and it was simply awful. His heart seemed to close on itself.

"It hurts," Billy said in a small voice.

"Nonsense! It's barely visible."

"Really?"

"The pain is all in your head." He helped the boy out of the shower.

"Billy," he said.

"Yes?"

"Hold out your hands."

"Please, no. I won't try to run away, I promise."

"I ought to cuff you behind your back, but I'm going to be gone all day and I don't want you pissing on yourself again."

After his first punishment Timmy had made breakfast and served Barton like a butler. He'd remained on his best behavior until the very end. Even on the table, he was polite.

He must not think about the black room! The mistake was taking them down there. The black room was only a fantasy.

Most people—even people who'd had shitty parents— weren't like Barton. Most of them were fine. So why him? Why did he have to bear these driving, uncontrollable passions? What was the answer? It was part of the secret everyday world, where there was no place for him. All he could do was reach in and steal the children.

It was secret only from him, that was what was so sad. Everybody else *lived* there, *the fucking scum!*

Barton was all over him, pawing him, muttering. He smelled like after-shave, and what did that name on his tie mean? Billy bit his lips to keep from crying out when Barton touched his bottom.

"Who's Uncle Squiggly?" Billy asked breathlessly, trying to cover the fact that he kept pulling away.

"It has to do with my work."

The shower made it easier to move, but he still hurt bad.

"Who is she?"

"Uncle Squiggly is a character I play at the bookstore where I work."

"No, I mean the lady."

"You'll find out more about her later." For a moment he went out of the bedroom.

Billy stared after him, his heart flooding with amazement and hope. He'd left the door wide open! Billy could see right into the kitchen, and even see the tangled shrubbery beyond the kitchen door. He could make a dash—

No, he couldn't. It hurt too much.

Barton came back in with folded sheets in his arms, closing the door and locking it. With a glance at his watch he sat down on the foot of the bed. He had a little, fascinated smile on his face. He crossed his legs. "How many times have you tried to escape, Billy?"

Billy hadn't dried very well, and he was cold. His hair was dripping wet, and before he replied he blew some water off the end of his nose. "Three times."

"And each time you've failed. What does that tell you?"

Billy thought of his call to Momma. "I didn't!"

"Didn't what?"

He looked from wall to wall, frantic for an answer. He mustn't tell about the phone call, he mustn't do that!

"I didn't escape." Surely Barton saw how afraid he was.

"And you never will. I'm a lot stronger and a lot smarter than you are, Billy." He gave him a frank look. "You know that I've had other boys living here, of course."

Billy nodded. "I thought so."

"Where are they now, do you think?"

The police had to hurry up!

"Can't you answer?"

Billy shook his head.

When Barton smiled again Billy clapped his hands to his face, his cuffs clanking.

* * *

The child was in extremis, there was just no other word for it. Barton patted the bed beside him. "Come on, sit down, we'll talk."

"I don't want to!"

"I don't have much time, I've got to get to work!" He pulled the boy down beside him, put an arm around his shoulders. He could not resist pressing down, feeling the squirming as the child smarted.

He remembered how he had screamed, how the pain had swept him in fiery waves, how little his protests had mattered. "I love you," he'd said, again and again until all he could do was scream. After it was over he would be expected to thank her.

He lifted Billy's cuffed hands to his lips and kissed them. The boy glanced up at him, his eyes wary and calculating. Barton knew his thought: 'If he kisses me, maybe he loves me.'

Pitiful little creature.

There was hope again. Barton was being nice now. When Billy had risked a glance at him he'd seen a nice smile on his face. He did not dare look up again, he didn't want Barton to get mad at him. If you looked him in the eye, he always got furious.

"Billy, when I get home tonight, I'm going to complete my work with you."

Could it be true? Would he—"I can go home?"

"To your long home. Do you know what that is?"

"My home isn't long. It's just normal. You've seen it."

"The long home is a phrase from the Bible. It's in Ecclesiastes. Can you quote your Bible?"

"Not much."

" 'Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets.' Do you know that?"

"No." Coldest fear was coming into Billy's heart.

"What is the long home, son? Can you understand?"

Billy's mouth was dry. Looking to the door, to the barred window back to the door, he was like a fragile sentinel. Barton removed his arm from Billy's shoulders and put it around his waist. Billy could not help it, he was so scared and so alone: he leaned against the grown-up shoulder.

" 'Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit

shall return unto God who gave it.' "

Billy hardly even heard the droning words.

"Do you know what it means?"

Hot tears came welling up in Billy's eyes.

Barton stroked his head. "I love you from the depth of my soul," he said. His voice was rough with emotion.

For a time they were silent together.

"Did you make a phone call last night?"

"No!"

"You little bastard, *you fucking well did!*"

"No, I didn't, no!"

"Ma-ma! Remember that? When did I hear you say it?"

"N-never. I never did!"

Barton grabbed his shoulders and twisted him and glared into his face.
"You're a fucking liar!"

Billy could not speak in reply to the roaring, furious energy of that voice. He shook his head as hard as he could.

"Yes. You got out of here somehow and you made a call! Confess!"

Billy began to cry. There was nothing else he could do now.

Barton grabbed him, pulled him close. "Oh, please forgive. Forgive poor Barton! I am so afraid!"

"It's OK," Billy said in a clumsy, halting tone. "OK, Barton, OK."

Barton sighed elaborately. "This house is full of mirrors," he whispered. "Well, I have to go to work." Again he hugged Billy, kissing him on the cheek for a long moment. "I'll speak to her. I'll give her hell for whipping you so hard."

The instant the lock clicked Billy began to have trouble breathing. He sucked in air but it didn't seem to help. He was seized by kinetic terror, and began lurching around the room, helpless to stop himself.

He heard himself making sounds as he moved, "Ah, ah, ah," pacing like that big monkey they kept all alone in a separate cage in the Des Moines Zoo, going down one wall to the corner, turning, going down the next wall—go down the wall with the door, slam his hand flat against it, then past the bathroom and back again.

Again he made the circuit, and again. He thought, 'I'll never stop.'

Barton leaned against the door, listening.

He stepped back from the door, made a conscious effort to relax. Take a deep breath, let it out slowly. Drop your shoulders. Let the tension slide off and sink into the floor.

The child hadn't gotten out. "Ma-ma" was a dream.

In the black room all imbalances were corrected.

But now there was something urgent awaiting: real life, a sunny morning, work to be done!

He went into the bathroom and got his makeup kit. For the next few hours he was going to be Uncle Squiggly. Oh, he might sneak away to check on Billy from time to time, but basically he would be in character all day. Afterward he would buy the wine and rent *Cabaret*.

Parting was such sweet sorrow.

28.

Quite unexpectedly she saw him. At first she wasn't sure— she hadn't been certain that he would be at the airport when they landed. He looked so old, so dusty, so exhausted, she could hardly believe it was Mark. His hair was frazzled and seemed to have gotten gray virtually overnight. He moved with the clumsy roll of a stiff old man. She could not imagine him jogging beside her down Lincoln Avenue, or climbing on the roof with a bundle of shingles on his back.

She raised her head and squared her shoulders. "Mark," she called. Her eyes caught his. "Oh, Mark!"

Then they were holding each other, such relief! Then she opened her right arm and drew Sally into the hug.

"How did you find us, Daddy?"

"Toddcaster told me the flight you'd be on. I've only been here for an hour myself."

"Mark, where do we go? What do we do?"

"The police—it's huge here, honey. You have no idea. They have a special squad that specializes just in hostage situations."

"He's not a hostage."

"They use them to free anybody who's being unlawfully held. I think they'll assault the house when they find it."

Within herself she thought that Billy would be killed. Aloud, she said: "Mark, how close are they?"

"I haven't talked to them personally. This is all coming from Toddcaster. Until they find the house, this is being handled by the missing persons unit. Then the hostage team gets it. The FBI is acting in an advisory capacity, but they'll participate in the arrest."

But Billy—what about Billy? What if Royal saw the police coming? He would kill Billy then. Or if they were clumsy and he had more advance notice, he would run and take Billy with him. If that happened her instinct told her they would never see their son again, alive or dead.

She did not give voice to these fears until they were in their rented car. "We're at the Crown Motel on Hollywood Boulevard," Mark said. "It's seventy-five dollars a night and not far from the Hollywood Hills. Above all, they take MasterCard."

Even transmitting simple information there was a graveside hush in his voice. He also feared that Billy would be destroyed by the efforts of the people who were trying to save him.

They were going down a long, long street with low buildings on either side. The sky was white, and everything was flooded with early sun. The air smelled faintly of exhaust fumes and flowers.

Sally had taken control of the map and was enthusiastically navigating.

"The police know where we'll be staying?" Mary asked.

"I told Toddcaster where we'd be. But he advised me to call in anyway. My impression is we're supposed to just wait. They'll bring Billy to us."

"I want to be there."

"It'll be dangerous—"

"Most of all for my son!"

"Our son."

"It's almost worse when you're close."

Sally's hand came over the backseat, caressing Mary's cheek. She leaned against her daughter's touch. "You're the greatest, sweetheart."

They drove for what seemed a very long time. Small shopping centers passed one another in an endless, incredibly dreary parade. How many video stores, cleaners, doughnut shops, convenience markets could there be?

Mark must have been having the same thoughts, because he finally asked Sally, "Do I turn anytime soon?"

"La Cienega ends in Santa Monica. We take a jog there and go up to Hollywood Boulevard. It's really your basic grid pattern with a few wrinkles."

"And a lot of miles."

"I feel so out of control," Mary said. "I nearly lost my mind on the plane."

"My flight was only an hour. So when I almost went nuts was waiting for you in the airport. You don't want to be out of communication."

The traffic got worse, and finally they were creeping. Mary kept picturing a certain house surrounded by police in flak jackets, and her little boy inside with Barton Royal. "Is there an all-news station?" she finally asked.

"Probably two or three of them in a place as big as this."

She turned on the radio, twisted the dial until she heard an announcer. But he was talking about Lucia di Lammermoor. "That's FM, Momma. Try AM."

She found the little switch and shifted to the AM band. Soon there was more talk. "If baby alligators are growing in our sewers—" She turned the dial again, forcing herself to control the panicky rush that kept threatening to seize her.

"Hurry the fuck up," Mark suddenly screamed, leaning on his horn. "People in this town drive like the living dead!"

"Want me to take over?"

"Mary—"

"I'll be glad to."

"You're crazy behind the wheel. We'll be up on sidewalks."

"She got a police escort on the way to the airport," Sally said. "She was incredible. We went a hundred and ten!"

He pulled out of the stream of traffic and turned the wheel over to Mary.

"First, Sally, give me a course that's off the main roads."

"This map isn't exactly perfect. There are a lot more streets than it shows."

"Do it, Sally!" Mary cried.

"Take a right whenever you can. When you hit Crescent Heights go left."

They were soon on Crescent Heights, where the traffic was less. From time to time Mary managed to open the little car up. She managed fifty, even sixty for short periods. The car was sluggish, hard to steer,

noisy. She made a mental note never to buy one, whatever it was.

They reached Hollywood Boulevard, and were soon moving east. She was only dimly aware that they were passing corners famous in the history of American popular culture.

"What is it somebody called this place—a bunch of shacks at the end of the rainbow?"

"That's what it looks like."

"I think that's an actual quote. Raymond Chandler or John Ford or somebody said it. 'Hollywood is a bunch of shacks at the end of the rainbow.' "

"Except that it's beautiful," Sally said.

"You've suffered a clear collapse of aesthetic sense," Mark replied.

"Daddy, it's beautiful because it's where Billy is."

To their left rose the Hollywood Hills. Even in the sunlight they seemed dark to Mary. This was an ugly, forbidding place. As they waited at a light a family of six in identical Hawaiian shirts crossed the street. The children all carried baby ducks. Mary leaned her head on the steering wheel. Billy was probably within ten minutes of this very spot.

Sally rustled her map. Mark said, "The light changed!" Mary was surprised at how rough he sounded. Mark was the mildest of creatures.

She realized that the anger that was in them all was coming to the surface. Sally spoke with trembling fervor. "If I got this guy, I would stab him in the heart."

"I'd make it slow," Mary announced with gusto.

"The Crown Motel!"

"Beautiful job, ladies!"

They piled out of the car and entered the lobby of the motel, which was grimly surfaced in linoleum and Formica. The picture window, however, rose out of a planter bursting with flowers.

"Reservation?" asked the woman behind the counter.

"Neary. Party of three."

"Lemme just take an imprint. You've got 207, drive around the side, you can park right at the door."

A few minutes later they were established in a room with a green shag carpet that smelled of stale cigarette smoke. Mark headed straight for the phone, tossing his overnight case onto the bed as he went.

Mary hovered close to him; Sally began to try to turn on the huge old Chrysler air conditioner that jutted from the wall opposite the dresser.

"This is Mark Neary. May I speak to Lieutenant Jameson?" Silence. "Robert F. Jameson." More silence. "Is this Missing Persons? It's about my son, William Neary. We received a call from him. He was abducted, and he told his mother he was in a house in the Hollywood Hills. We just got here. From Iowa." Yet more silence. Mark's face flushed. "Look, the FBI is in on this, the Iowa State Police, the Stevensville, Iowa, police, half a dozen missing children groups! I don't need to come in and give you a description! Lieutenant Jameson is supposed to know all about it! I am not yelling at you!" Silence, the receiver clutched. "You must know about it! You should have been working on it for hours! What about the FBI, aren't they involved? They were very involved in Des Moines, believe me." Silence, during which Mark shook his head angrily. "I am not being rude," he snapped. Then he stared at the receiver in amazement. "The bastard just hung up on me!" Mark hammered the receiver against the table.

"Don't break that phone," Mary screamed, grabbing the instrument.

"I can't believe this! 'Lieutenant Jameson is out on a case.' You would not believe the fucking, officious, arrogant prig I just talked to—Jesus and God!"

"Try the FBI, Mark."

"I don't have a name there."

"Then Toddcaster. I'll call Toddcaster." She looked at her watch. Three o'clock in Des Moines. He'd be at his office. He picked up on the second ring. "Toddcaster."

"Hi, it's me."

"Hi, me. Do you have a name?"

"Mary. Mary Neary."

"Oh, Christ, excuse me, baby. Have you got him yet?"

"We're in a motel here."

"Right. The Crown Motel on Hollywood Boulevard."

"My husband called the Los Angeles police and they acted like they didn't even know about the case. They wouldn't help us at all."

"OK, I got it. I'll make a couple of calls."

"And call us back?"

"Give me ten minutes."

She hung up and threw herself back on the squeaky bed. "He'll call us back," she said. Sally was watching CNN on TV. Mary tried the radio in the room, but it didn't work. "Of course not," she muttered.

Mark lay down beside her. "CNN won't have anything," he told his daughter. "We're nobody, as far as they're concerned. You don't get on

national news unless you're Donald Trump and your kid got a bloody nose in the schoolyard. We're just ordinary trash, suffering like hell. We're not interesting. Oh, Christ!"

The frustration in his voice gave stark emphasis to their helplessness. "I hate all the publicity anyway," Mary said. "The only person who's gonna see your kid is the person who has him. I'll bet they haunt the postering places."

"I feel so damn useless. That's what I hate. I mean, he's probably no more than a couple of miles from here!"

"Maybe we could find him ourselves," Sally said.

There were a lot of things a child couldn't understand, even a bright little girl of thirteen.

"We could poster," Mark said. "I've got two hundred right in my suitcase."

"I just think it's dangerous."

He leapt up off the bed. "Well, if I do nothing but sit here and wait like this I am going to go completely crazy, Mary dear!"

She reached out to him, hesitated.

"Maybe they have a street directory for sale in the lobby," Sally said. "I'll bet they do if salesmen stay here."

"Fine, go see if you can get a street directory. Your mother and I'll wait for that old fatty in Des Moines to get around to calling us back."

"He's not fat. He's corpulent."

"You're talking about synonyms."

"I define 'corpulent' as marginally more dignified. Anyway, we owe him a lot."

"And we owe Turpin, and Richard Jones, who is a hell of a nice guy by the way, and the Searchers. Thank you, thank you, thank you one and all! Where in hell is my son!"

Sally rushed out of the room.

"Mark, I want you to tone it down! It can't help her to see you like this."

"Us, baby. You're not exactly peaches to be with. You ought to look at yourself in a mirror. Your face looks like an advertisement for dead skin."

"I almost pulled my hair out at the roots when Billy called."

He rushed to her, grabbed her into his arms. "Baby, baby, I'm sorry. My poor baby." When he stroked her sore temple, she closed her eyes.

After a moment he broke away, shaking his head and laughing bitterly. "That was about the most spectacularly unfeeling, high-handed bastard I have ever encountered. And I have dealt with school boards, for Chrissake!"

The phone rang. "Walter!" Mary grabbed the receiver.

"To make a long story short, Lieutenant Jameson runs the whole show. My guess is, he's never gonna be in. They do have a team of officers working on Billy. It's a big, active case, never fear about that. The problem they're up against is that unless they're very sure they have the right house they can't get a warrant to enter. The California judges aren't that easy to deal with, apparently."

She'd expected half the police department to be combing the Hollywood Hills, looking in every attic and basement for her little boy. But Walter was talking about search warrants and judges and things that all added up to the same central fact: Billy was not getting found.

"So what do they need? What would get them moving?"

"They've got all their black-and-whites in the area trying to spot the Aerostar—"

"He's hiding the Aerostar! Billy said that! Don't they understand?"

"Whoa, just let me finish. Or the brown Celica. If they see a man fitting Barton's description driving either car, they'll follow him home, then go to the judge."

"But why did they give Mark the runaround? It was incredibly cruel, to pretend like they didn't even *know*."

"They're aware of your address. But they're wary. They want you out of the way when they make their move."

"We love him, he's our child!"

"Men like Barton are dangerous in the extreme, Mary. The L.A. police know this just as well as we do, and probably better. Barton Royal will kill Billy if he realizes that the cops are on top of him. They want to make it as easy for themselves as they can. And not letting the frantic parents get in their hair must be high on their list of priorities."

Her voice was barely a whisper when she thanked him. Mark slammed his fist against the bathroom door. "They don't want us around in case Billy gets killed because they're afraid of misconduct charges, or a goddamn lawsuit."

It was at that moment Sally appeared with something called *The Thomas Guide*. "The ultimate street directory," she said. "It's so radical!"

Mary took it in her hands. The thing wasn't a map, it was a thick book. She thumbed through it.

"Where are the Hollywood Hills, kid?" Mark had grabbed the book.

"Grids thirty-three and thirty-four. They may also be covered in twenty-three and twenty-four."

"Ridgeway," Mark said. "Right here."

They all looked at it.

"It's such a small area," Mary said. "We could cover every single street that dead-ends off Ridgeway inside of an hour."

"He said *near* Ridgeway, Momma, not off Ridgeway."

"But he can see Los Angeles from the house, which means it faces south. That ought to narrow it down."

"No good, Momma. At night this place must be a sea of lights. All that really tells us is that the house is high. But all the houses are high up there!"

"So it's really a huge area we have to cover." Mark threw himself back down on the bed.

"No," Sally said. "'Near Ridgeway.' If we're lucky that might be enough."

Three minutes later they were in the car. Mary drove, Sally navigated.

"Just keep on Hollywood. When it crosses Laurel Canyon it changes to another kind of street."

It did. Mary had never seen anything quite like this crazy labyrinth of little streets, with every intersection hidden around another curve. The car didn't much like the hills, either.

"King's Road," Sally said. "Go slow, Ridgeway's the next one to the right."

"This is Queen's Road."

"Take a right anyway."

Mary saw it. Ridgeway. Billy was probably within a mile of this precise spot. She turned onto the street almost on two wheels, slammed the gearbox into first and gunned the motor to climb the steep hill.

"Next street's a dead end," Sally said. Her voice was tense. She was so involved in the map she practically never even looked out. "Take a right," she said quickly.

"I can feel him," Mary said.

"There," Mark said. "That's a house that fits."

Mary was so stunned she didn't downshift as the incline steepened, and killed the engine. The car lurched along on the starter until she threw it into neutral. By then it was flooded and they had to wait.

The house was just where it should be, at the end of the street. There was a garage to one side, then a wall beneath what was probably a bathroom window. Next came the front door, and beside it a larger window completely blocked by a shade. Beyond that was a wing that must contain a bedroom.

Most telling, there was a small brown car parked in front. "Is that a Celica?" Mary asked.

"Toyota, certainly," Mark replied.

"It's a Mazda 626, Daddy."

Mary looked at the house, imagining her son just behind the windows. "He's there," she said.

She compelled herself to be very calm now, very methodical. Again she tried the car. This time it started. She drove up to the house.

Mark looked at her. She looked back. Sally asked the question that remained unspoken between them. "What do we do?"

"We've got to get in there, obviously."

"I knew we'd end up in this situation." Mark's tone expressed his uncertainty most eloquently.

Mary brushed it off, anger in her voice. "Obviously he doesn't know what we look like. We invent a pretext."

"That isn't obvious at all, Mother. He was in the house. For all we know, he took good looks at all three of us."

"We break in, then," Mark said.

Mary demurred. "If he hears us or sees us, Billy's dead. Maybe all of us are dead."

"Look, you two, I think it should be completely simple. *I* go up to the house. I say my bike broke down, I need to use the phone. Then I'm in."

She was a brave child and that was an absolutely horrifying idea. "That gets us nowhere, except then he'll have both our kids."

"I can take care of myself, Mom!"

"Trained police go into houses like that in flak jackets."

"Billy's in there, we all know it!"

"If we did this—and that is an *if*, honey—the way we go about it is, you get evidence. That's all you do. Anything in the house that looks suspicious—if you see anything you know belongs to Billy, or if you hear him—"

"Mark, she must not go in that house! Never!"

"What if I see him?"

"You ignore him."

"No, I know that. I mean, what about his reaction?"

"That's a problem, all right."

"But Daddy, he's in that house. I know it!"

"I'll do it," Mary announced. She got out of the car and started up the front walk. She would say they'd broken down and needed to use the phone. Given the heap they were in, it was perfectly believable.

The morning sun bore down on her. Overhead the sky had turned deep blue. The beauty of the day was painful to see.

She was almost in a trance of fear when she rang the doorbell. Instantly a small dog began barking, a sound as raucous as a Cuisinart cutting up block Parmesan.

The door swept open. A truly ancient woman stood there, her face very sweet and very wrinkled.

"May I help you?"

"I—we—the car—"

"Yes?"

"We've broken down. I need to call a garage."

The woman fixed her with faded green eyes. Mary tried to smile. Realizing that she was twisting her fingers together, she put her hands down to her sides, then to cover the suddenness of the motion pretended to brush off her skirt.

"I can let you use the phone," the woman said, opening the door more widely. "It's no problem."

Mary stepped into the foyer. The interior of the house was dim, and she knew at once that they'd been wrong. There was a living room, but the view was of a brushy canyon and other houses on the hillside beyond.

Also, Billy surely wouldn't have forgotten to mention the ridiculous Pekinese that came squabbling and snuffling up to her, its whole body wagging.

"It's in the kitchen, dear," the woman said. She smiled. "I was making Bundt for my daughter."

"It smells wonderful," Mary said, but her voice broke and she could say no more. Without another sound she rushed out of the house and returned to the car, leaving the woman standing perplexed in her doorway.

"It's the wrong house."

"How do you know?"

"It's the wrong house, Mark! We're going."

She started the car. Back in the doorway the elderly woman muttered, "It fixed itself." Smiling, she returned to her baking.

The little car moved away down the sunny street.

29.

Barton burst into Tiny Tales and threw his arms around Gina. "Oh baby, baby, I'm so damn sorry!"

"Richie, stop it."

She was standing near the register in that blue and white checked dress of hers. It was far too young for Gina. It stated in clearest terms that her youth was at the bottom of a closet. Her dark hair was swept up around her skillfully porcelainized face.

"You look so utterly, utterly extraordinary, Gina dear."

"Richie, *where were you?*"

"I told you, I got sick on Maui.

It was simply the most horrible thing. You know that kahuna I was supposed to meet?"

"He called me about you. You never showed up. You never even called."

"I was just wrapped up in blankets in the motel room the entire time. I absolutely could not move, could not think. I've never been so sick in my life!"

Gina folded her arms. "You disappear all the time, Richie. I told you in June—"

"That was a death in the family, you can't hold me responsible!" He adopted an elaborate pout.

The slightest of smiles played across Gina's lips, and Barton knew he would win yet again.

"OK, Richie, you always come back with some lame excuse. For a week I can't even get your answering machine and it turns out you were putting your mother in a nursing home in Anaheim. And that room of yours in Los Feliz—God, every time you disappear I think you've been mugged to death."

Barton put on the saddest, silliest most hangdog expression he could muster. "That room is what I can afford." He batted his eyes. "This is an expensive town and Richie is not a wealthy man, despite his name." He did his imitation of Stan Laurel in trouble with Ollie.

It took a full minute, but the flicker finally broadened into a real smile. "I do have some rather good news."

He clapped his hands, gave a little jump.

"You might earn enough money today to move to West Hollywood because we have a hundred and fifty-three reservations!"

This was good news. A hundred and fifty-three kids at five dollars a head—that was a good day's money, no two ways about it.

"Uncle Squiggly is becoming a hit, Richard dear."

Gina's tone told him that apologies and acceptances were over. Barton could drop the act. "He sure as hell is."

"Stephanie Strauss is bringing her little boy, and that means more heavy-duty Hollywood mommies are just behind."

"This is extremely exciting."

"Here's the icing on the cake. *L.A. Style* is doing a write-up on the

store. And you are the featured subject."

He felt the blood slowly drain out of his face. He'd wanted Uncle Squiggly to be a success, but he had not counted on something like this. *L.A. Style* went in for lots of big, glossy pictures.

But that was OK. He'd be in his Uncle Squiggly makeup.

Then he thought: the reporter would certainly check his record. *L.A. Style* often did wrecking jobs. They'd love to print a story about how West Hollywood's favorite children's entertainer was a mystery man living under an alias.

"Richie Williams" was at best thinly constructed. The ID would never hold up under professional scrutiny. He was little more than a Social Security number and a couple of lousy credit cards.

Barton started back to the stockroom to put on his face.

"What about the store," Gina called after him. "Don't you think the store's lovely?"

There were new displays of books everywhere, ranging from Bill Peet's delightful stories for tots to Judy Blume and John Bellairs for the older children. There were tables stacked with books, shelves of books, reading nooks in various themes: the Dinosaur Nook, the Fire Truck Nook, Home Sweet Nook, Uncle Squiggly's Squigglenook, all appropriately decorated.

"Really great, Gina. Really!"

The stockroom was dark and hidden away behind a door covered with bookshelves.

Barton liked it best with the lights out.

The moment he heard Barton's car start, Billy had raised the corner of

the blinds. He watched the Celica back down the driveway, pull out and leave. For a long time, he observed the neighborhood. Nothing much happened, but he didn't stop, couldn't; he was hypnotized by his own longing.

He was also waiting for somebody.

Momma had said they would come. Momma *told* him.

The blue Mercedes sat in its driveway. Nobody came or went in the other houses. The street remained empty.

"Momma," he said aloud. The sound of his own anger brought him a little strength. "Where are they," he shouted. "Momma, you said! Where are they!"

Then he thought: 'That woman! What if that woman's in here listening? She'll hear me yell, she'll be in here with the whip!'

No. If she had heard him, she would have come in instantly. He'd be getting it right now.

Still, he crept to his door and listened. There was nothing except water dripping in the kitchen. That reminded him he was hungry. Barton had been mean not to give him any breakfast. He might not get any food all day.

Or ever again—he might not get any food ever again!

He had to get out of here and he couldn't!

Oh, wait a second. Of course he could! He made a rush toward the closet. It still hurt to move, though, and he quickly slowed down. He put his hand on the cool glass doorknob, slowly turned it, opened the door. He stepped inside, bent painfully, then opened the hidden entrance to the basement.

The darkness within was absolute.

* * *

"Now is there anybody here who's at least sixty-teen y-e-e-ears old!"

They roared as one: "NO!"

"What, nobody's sixty-teen years old?" He looked at the mothers, mock horror on his face. "Why did you bring me all these little teenie tiny tinsie tootsie cutesies?" And he thought, 'They paid five bucks for this,' and laughed within. "They aren't even sixty-teen yet!"

"I'm sixty-teen," one little girl announced.

"Uh-ho," Barton crowed, sweeping her up into his arms. "What is your name, Miss Sixty-Teen?"

"Sukie."

"Sukie Tawdry," he muttered to himself. Her blond ringlets bobbed. She looked very, very serious. "You know what we do to bad little girls, don't you, Sukie?"

She wriggled and giggled and stared at the Squiggle Box, which was the whole point of the show.

Nobody knew what went on inside it. This was a comedy suspense routine for the Mairsie Doats set. Children adore suspense.

Would Sukie be the first ever to get put in the Squiggle Box?

Barton looked around the room. "We'll take a vote! Is Sukie really sixty-teen years old? Who says—NO-O-O!" They roared, they went wild, the ones who'd been up in the past yelled with eager delight.

"Sukie, do you know what this means?" Barton said. He was very

serious now.

Sukie was giggling so much she couldn't talk. Barton took her over to the big box covered with red wrapping paper. Now Sukie was laughing, but Barton knew to be careful. The wee people were very sensitive.

Barton pushed the yellow frownie-faced button on the Squiggle Box. It emitted an enormous roar and all the kids screamed.

"Do you want to go in, Miss Sixty-Teen-Year-Old Sukie?"

"YES!" all the kids shouted.

Sukie shook her head very, very hard.

Barton looked around in confusion. "But Sukie says NO-O-O!" He whispered to her, "I won't put you in."

"I know, Uncle Squiggly," she said, and kissed him.

Her kiss was moist, and her skin had a lovely, milky smell.

Billy peered into the dark, damp-smelling hole. How far down was it? If he jumped in he might fall forever and ever and ever. Or he might fall ten feet and not be able to get back out. He was afflicted by what was truly an agony of uncertainty. He'd called Momma hours and hours ago. Nobody ever came for him! Nobody!

But that wasn't true, Momma cared about him! She sure sounded like it even when she got mad because he didn't want to quit talking to her.

Maybe if he could get into the basement this way, he could get out by another door, and then he could call Momma and talk as long as he wanted. They could even trace the call, like they did in detective movies.

He sat on the edge, his legs dangling into the darkness.

He hated the dark.

"Now let's see, maybe if *I* put my hand in the Squiggle Box—" He nudged the button and got another big roar from inside. The kids fell silent. As often as some of them had seen this, the doubt always captured them. "Uh-oh," Barton said in reaction to the roar. He yanked his hand back as if it had been burned. "Sukie," he said plaintively, "would you just put your pinkie in the Squiggle Box?" He pressed the button again.

"Why does the Squiggle only roar when you push the button?" a voice called from the crowd.

Now, that was smart. "Who-o-o said tha-at?" Barton cried. He saw a delightful little boy with a sly smile on his face. "It was you, wasn't it?" In a few years this boy would stop the heart, such would be his beauty.

"Yeth!" He was one of the oldest, perhaps six or seven.

"What's your name?"

"Christopher!"

Barton said to Sukie, "Will you go and get Christopher and bring him up here? I think we need a little *haaalp!*"

The boy said, "Uh-ho."

"Y'know," Barton said to the crowd as Sukie very importantly strutted down and got Christopher, "sometimes a boy Chris's size comes *out* of the Squiggle Box in one piece! But it's a very, *very*, VERY small piece!" As he spoke he measured with his hands, making them come closer and closer together until his ten fingers were all crunched up and he was peering at a microscopic crumb between them.

They were screaming with laughter. It was amazing how much enjoyment they could derive from a simple cardboard box and a little suspense. This was a lovely group.

Sukie and Chris arrived hand in hand, their faces beaming up at him.

While he was at it, he thought he might as well get Chris's last name.

Billy hit hard and pitched forward, falling against a rough concrete floor. The pain made him shriek and roll, and that hurt even more. It took him a long time, but he finally recovered himself. He stood beneath the thin light from above, trying to see the rest of the room he was in.

The first thing he noticed was Timothy's jacket, which lay on the floor a few feet away. Just as he had thought, Barton had shoved it in here to get it out of sight.

Billy picked up the jacket. "I wonder if you were like me," he said. "Timothy Weathers." He held it close to him. "You're dead." The silence was total. "Timothy Weathers, tell me what it's like to be dead."

"Now, since Sukie won't put her hand in the Squiggle Box, and Christopher won't put his hand in the Squiggle Box, somebody's gotta do it!" He punched the button with his elbow. The roar this time was a little off-key. Before the afternoon show he'd have to replace the batteries in the cassette. Gina had faulted him for having cheap props before, and he didn't care to give her more ammunition. God, but this group was getting excited. They were too damn loud!

"Now, I'm gonna sing a song, and if I get every word right, then you're all gonna have to put your hands in the Squiggle Box together. But if I get even one word wrong, then I'm gonna have to do it! OK?"

They shouted agreement.

"Sing a song of sixpence, rockets full of pie—" The crowd bellowed. He went doggedly on, leaning into the shrieks, "Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie!" He smiled and said, "I got it right, so let's go—get your hands in that Squiggle Box!" The response was happy

pandemonium.

The ceiling was solid. There were no stairs. There weren't even any windows to the outside. He'd hardly allowed himself to dream that he might get out while Barton was gone.

As he fumbled along he wished that he had a flashlight or some matches. It wasn't long before he understood why it was so dark: most of the basement was behind a cinder-block wall. The only way out was a narrow steel door in the middle of that wall.

Billy went to the door. It clanked when he tapped it; it was the kind of door you would use on a prison.

He put his ear to it. At first he heard nothing, but then he wasn't so sure.

Slowly, carefully, he drew back.

Then—behind him! He whirled around. But there was nothing there—just blackness and the dim shaft of light from the closet.

He stood still, afraid to go back, afraid to go forward. He started to pray, but stopped. It hadn't helped before now, why would that change?

God probably couldn't even hear him. Maybe there was no God. Probably not. Probably there was just the devil.

This had been a big mistake, and he had to get out of here! He rushed over to the shaft of light, tried to jump. It was no good. He was way too far down

The only other exit was the steel door.

He began to cry.

Nearly done, all that was left was snack and chitchat with parents. Wonderful show, and every single one of them had paid the two bucks for the "Uncle Squiggly" balloons that had poured out of the Squiggle Box at the end.

"Is it a Squiggle in there?" Chris Mohler's tiny face peered up at him.

"No."

"Then why's it called a Squiggle Box?"

"Because it makes little boys like you squiggle!" He reached down as he talked, tickling him.

The children were mobbing him. He could not help being gladdened by their delight, and for a brief moment it was as if the steel door that sealed his heart was opened a crack.

"Have you worked with children long, Mr. Williams?"

The voice was thin and strident. It belonged to a young woman who looked like she was made of string. Her eyes were close together, her hair was disastrous. What had happened to her—was that rusty steel wool on her head, or the result of an extremely unfortunate home permanent?

"You must be from L.A. *Style*," Barton yelled over the noise of the kids. "We'll be done in ten minutes, I'll talk to you then."

He kept smiling hard, lest she come to know that he was deathly afraid.

'There aren't any monsters,' Billy told himself, 'not like what you're afraid of.' But what was that breathing, then, behind the door? He'd heard it, it was there.

He couldn't get out of here, and now he was worse off than he'd been

upstairs! His choices had all run out: shaking like the terrified little boy that he was, he dragged himself slowly back to the door.

He put his hand on the knob.

Then he thought: 'The woman. Maybe this is where she hides during the day.' This made him pull his hand away as if the knob was red hot. Images of her were burned into his mind—her bright blond hair, her flowing dress, her fat, wet lips. He remembered her voice, high and nasal and full of fury. Above all he remembered that big, black strap.

What she had done to him was branded into the very core and essence of the boy. Remembering, he bent as if cringing away from blows. He sucked in his breath until his lungs were ready to burst. But there was no other way out. Either he opened the door or he waited here until Barton came home.

He stood, his fists clenched, his head bowed down, a small creature in a very dark place.

* * *

Gina was obviously delighted, but Barton found the reporter horrible. Her photographer had taken close-up pictures while he was doing snack, and each time the flashbulb popped he would wince.

"Can we have one shot out of costume?"

Have a care, here. "Oh, I don't think so. I'd rather just be Uncle Squiggly."

"Then can you give me a little of your background? You seem to have a really intuitive thing with the kids. Where does that come from?"

"A happy home life. My parents were Quakers, and we just had a very

peaceful, very sweet upbringing."

"Sort of a modern-day *Friendly Persuasion*?"

"Well, hardly that. But it was a loving family. Unfortunately my mother and dad have passed away."

"Do you have any children of your own?"

He answered politely in the negative, pretending to be rueful about it. As he spoke Billy's face drifted up out of the dark.

Her next question concerned his previous experience.

"No, no previous experience with children. Of course, I was one once, ha ha ha. Just an out-of-work actor who happens to like kids."

The questions droned on and on. He answered until he started to get hoarse. As they talked he kept smiling, waving to departing customers.

"I've just got another couple of questions. You've never said exactly where you're from, Mr. Williams."

He returned his smiling attention to his inquisitor, *the stupid fucking bitch!*

Billy hunted with the fervor of a distraught puppy for some way out other than that door.

Again and again he tried to jump up and grab the edge of the opening through which he'd dropped. Each leap caused agony, but a corner kept brushing the tips of his fingers.

He was hampered not only by the pain but also by his handcuffs. Twisting, pulling, he tried to squeeze out.

His mind raced with excuses. "Barton I fell in, Barton the trapdoor was

just opened, Barton it was an accident, Barton please don't do anything to me, Barton, don't tell *her!*"

Finally he had to stop. He was out of breath and his buttocks just plain hurt too much.

Again he approached the steel door. "God, if you're real remember I got born, I'm alive, I'm down here—"

Tears were blinding him. When he tried to brush them away the salt of his sweat stung his eyes.

He gritted his teeth so hard his jaws cracked, but he put his two hands on the knob. This time he turned it.

The door moved smoothly, opening away from a thickly padded jamb. Billy had the impression that the door was extremely heavy, more like something that belonged on a safe than in a basement.

Inside was like a starless night.

What was this place, and what was that *smell?*

Barton wanted time to take a quick run up to the house. His little escape artiste was a caution and a worry. Timmy was rough trade, but at least he could be counted on to be there when you got back. Rough trade and rather stupid—coarse, to be frank— but still, the heart misses that which is familiar.

He was due to start the next show in less than an hour. Damn the reporter, damn them all! "We just love Uncle Squiggly!" Gush, gush, gush.

"Richie, look at this!" Gina opened the register. She was speaking in a whisper because the store was still jammed.

Barton stared dully into the cash register. It was packed with money.

"Nice," he said. "Look, I want to take a run over to my apartment." He had been careful to really rent the dump in Los Feliz. But he never went there. The point was, nobody must know about his house. The secret-life aspect of things was usually part of the fun, but it could get wearing at times.

"You can't go now, you'll be late for the next show!"

"No, I—"

Gina held up her watch. Barton was appalled. He'd been stuck with the reporter longer than he realized, and the enormous joke watch he wore as Uncle Squiggly kept lousy time.

"Gina, I have to!"

"You can't!"

"Gina, I think I left the oven on!"

"Ovens can stay on all day, otherwise how would we cook turkeys, Richie dear? You stay here. I cannot imagine what I'd do with a crowd of preschoolers who were all keyed up for you. They'd tear the place apart!"

He glared at her. She glared right back.

The dim light from the trapdoor barely penetrated this far. Billy was cringing, waiting for her to come leaping out of the blackness.

But he didn't hear any breathing now. Maybe he'd been the only one breathing. That had to be it, because there wasn't anybody in here now.

Except there was something on the floor. It glowed white, but it didn't move. He went down on all fours, began crawling toward it. The thing was all twisty, like a piece of cloth would be, but it was also lumpy. It

looked almost solid.

Finally he could touch it. He reached out, felt it with quick fingers. It wasn't solid, it was stringy. He picked it up, felt it.

It was hair. He fingered it more carefully. Inside there was stiff netting, and it smelled like glue. Hair you glue on is a wig, like that purple wig Sally wore Halloween before last when she went as a punk.

The wig was yucky and he dropped it into the gloom. There was still white stuff over there. He looked at the pale mass. Was it a sheet?

The moment he touched the fabric he knew that it was her white silk dress. He looked up. Above this part of the basement must be Barton's bedroom.

So this dress and this wig—he thought of her pudgy hands, her stocky form stuffed into the flimsy dress, her hard eyes.

"Oh, no," he whispered. "Please, no."

Being trapped like this was hideous. He *hated* these people, but there was no escape, he simply could not get away. When he got back to the house he was going to march that kid straight down and strap him to the table. Then you just close the door and forget it. No more worries.

"Oh, is this your *dolly* you're holding out to me?"

"She wants Miffie to go in the Squiggle Box," the mother said, all laughter and twinkling eyes.

"Oh, poor Miffie, she'd be so scared!"

"She's only a dolly. She's made out of plastic. My brother chewed her foot and she didn't mind."

He tried to retreat around the counter, but now there was a little boy

there, trying to reach the intentionally tempting display of gourmet lollipops Gina had set up. "They cost me twenty-eight cents apiece, dahling. And look at the tags." You could get coconut, vanilla bean, root beer, cola—for a dollar fifty apiece.

"Want one," the child announced.

"We're going now," his mother replied, picking him up.

"Uncle Squiggly, give me one."

The hell. Gina'd take the buck fifty right out of his share.

"Your mommy says it's time to go." Smile, smile, smile. He pictured Billy digging at the edges of the window, picking the lock, pulling out the grating that covered the vent in the bathroom ceiling.

Get me the hell out of here!

Another kid: "I want an autograph!"

OK, sure, sure, sure.

"I want to kiss you, Uncle Squiggly!"

My made-up cheek?

"But I *need* a lollipop, Uncle Squiggly!"

"Your mommy says no!" Why don't you just take him out the door, you foolish bitch. Smile, smile, smile.

"But I won't eat it, I'll just *hold* it!" Screws up face, takes deep breath, screams like he was being tortured with hot pincers.

Finally the mother retreats, her shrieking creature in her arms.

Yet more children came crowding around him. And the reporter was back, hovering at the edge of the crowd, obviously being just simply

tormented by one last question.

He hated them all, in general and in detail. They were his captors, the evil, stinking swine.

But he smiled from ear to ear, clapped his hands and uttered a high, piercing laugh to get attention. "Bye bye," he shrilled. "Bye bye everybody!"

Came a chorus of tiny voices: "Bye, Uncle Squiggly!"

At last they began leaving in earnest. The reporter still hovered at the edge of the retreating crowd, but she was going to be dismissed with a claim of laryngitis.

He could escape.

But yet another diminutive grinning face was thrust at him. "Oh-h-h, what a big boy! You must be at least fifty-teen!" Smile, smile, smile.

Another couple of kids behind him, another couple of minutes. Then he was making his run, no matter what.

If he was late for the next show, so be it. This was about survival, he could smell it. You better be damn careful, Billy, *you vicious little scumbag!*

If there was a light in here the only way Billy was going to find it was by feeling along the wall. He swept the rough cinder-block surface with his cuffed hands, moving step by step deeper into the room. The doorway was now a faint gray outline in the black.

Billy's hands brushed something, which swung back and forth, making a grating sound against the wall. He touched it again, gingerly, feeling a substantial handle. His fingers felt along, and soon came to metal. Yes, and a very particular type of toothed blade. He realized that this was a saw. Something tough and dry adhered to some of the teeth. He

rolled bits of it off in his fingers, but could not identify it.

Was this a tool room? Surely a tool room would have a light. All along the wall he found other tools: there was something with a metal tip and a long cord that he thought might be an old-fashioned soldering iron. He felt also something he recognized from upstairs: the pincers that had been soaking in the kitchen sink. They were smooth and clean now.

Then he found an object he could not at first identify by feel. He touched the weave of its handle, following this down to a clutch of leather strips. Something stabbed his left index finger and he snatched his hand back. He sucked his finger, tasted the salt of his own blood.

As lightly as he could, he touched the spot again. There was a small metallic object tied to the end of the thong. It had an almost familiar feel to it. It was a curved hook with a tooth on it.

All of the thongs ended with a fish hook.

When Billy realized that this was a whip he leapt back—and slammed into a piece of furniture that dominated the center of the room.

He turned around, feeling frantically. This was a wooden bed—no, too high. It was a table. The instant he felt the straps he knew what this place was for.

"Momma, it's a dungeon!"

For all its problems, Los Angeles was a lovely city. The way it shone at night like an ocean of stars, and the way it was now, kissed by that tart Pacific breeze, wreathed in flowers, the hills shining, water running down the gutters along Ridgeway—for all its problems, Los Angeles enjoyed a special connection to heaven.

As the Celica labored up the hills, Barton watched the peaceful day life

of the neighborhood. There a Mexican gardener was lovingly tending a trellis of climbing roses, and there an ancient lady was walking her silly little dog. The big floppy hat and old-fashioned cake makeup marked her as old Hollywood. Probably a founding member of the Extras Union.

He had triumphed this morning—or Uncle Squiggly had. It had been a fine show, and this afternoon's would be even better. He was going to gain some minor celebrity, too, with the article in *L.A. Style*. They wouldn't be cruel, and he felt more confident that the reporter wasn't going to check into Richie Williams's background too closely. Why bother? As far as Gina and the rest of the world were concerned, he was just another out-of-work actor. Richie held a card in the Extras Union.

He turned the last corner, pressed the gas pedal and began to ascend the last hill.

As Billy leaned over the table, feeling the straps, understanding exactly what it was, he felt something gently touch the top of his head. It went swinging away, then came back again. He grabbed the edge of a light fixture, felt the socket, the bulb. And here was the switch.

A moment later the room was flooded with a white glare that made Billy squint.

Here was the saw, here the soldering iron with a caked, black tip, the pincers polished and clean, the whip. A big knife lay on the table with some brown-stained paper towels partly covering its blade.

Then Billy saw that there was another, smaller room to one side. A bead curtain hung in front of its door. Behind the curtain there was a stack of at least a dozen black plastic lawn and leaf bags, all of them elaborately sealed with duct tape.

They gleamed in the harsh light, and when he approached them he

smelled a musty odor, like the time he found that dead rat under the furnace.

The room was deeper than he thought, and stuffed with the bags. There were more than a dozen. He touched one of them, finding it to be much more sturdy than a lawn and leaf bag. He pulled at the plastic, but it was far too thick to tear.

Billy took the knife and slit the nearest of the bags.

The odor that came out was completely unexpected in its revolting intensity. Billy had never smelled anything so totally dead. More than just a smell, it was an actual gas, thick and moist, pouring deep into his sinuses.

A nut-colored fist dropped down from the hole. Within the bag Billy saw the hollow shadow of a face.

At that moment a shaft of light poured down on him, overpowering even the wildly swinging fixture. Billy looked up in terror and in awe. For one vivid second he thought maybe it was the light of God.

Barton said: "You're already down there. Good!"

He descended the ladder from his bedroom with startling speed, sweeping down like an angel from the radiance above.

30.

Sometimes Mark Neary felt that all of his adult life he had been watching things die. He was now deep in the era that his radical youth had called the future.

But even as his hopes for the social body had faded, he had witnessed a glorious and secret increase. This was the growth of his children.

Before they were born, he'd had no notion of the true importance and scale of human souls. Nor had he known about helpless love, that cannot deny and cannot end. This kind of love persisted forever, and so did the relationships that emerged from it. Thus even if the child was lost, he persisted in the heart of the parent, frozen in the beauty of his life.

The neighborhood they searched was choked by dry and highly flammable brush and jammed with flimsy houses. It was so insanely appropriate that this place existed in the most geologically unstable place in North America. He could imagine the stilts snapping and the great houses tumbling over and over into the gullies and canyons, and then everything bursting into flames.

And yet children played, expensive cars whispered past, and the faces behind the windshields were bland.

He drove on, obedient to his daughter's crisp voice. Mary sat in the back, her eyes closed, exhausted by the ordeal of her own time behind the wheel.

"Take a left, then go up the hill."

"Heads up, Mary. We're about to rise to another possibility."

The house was maddeningly similar to many of the others they'd seen. The blank garage door faced the street, there was a dry patch of lawn.

Mary gasped.

"What?"

"A blue Mercedes."

It stood in the driveway of a multitiered, modern house on their left. For a moment Mark watched the shimmer of heat rising from its body. Then he looked back to the much smaller house at the end of the street.

All the windows on the front were closed by blinds. The garage door did not have a window in it at all.

"I'm going to have a closer look," Mark said.

"Be careful, honey."

Hardly aware of her voice, he got out of the car. Surveying the scene, he was fairly sure that Billy wasn't here. The empty street, the silent house—there was a sense of dry rot in the air, as if the place was home to the dead.

Mark stepped quickly up the stub end of the hill, pausing when he reached the driveway. He walked to his right, heading for the corner of the garage, which was bordered by a magnificent oleander tree covered by pink flowers so fragrant that they were in a curious way horrible. Even knowing how foolish this was, Mark went on, compelled

by instincts he was unaware of and could not even begin to control.

He maneuvered quickly through the tree into a very different space behind it. The oleander concealed a tangle of brush, twisting vines and rose creepers dense with thorns. Mark picked his way ahead in the sun-dappled dimness. There was a smell here of something dead.

He found two windows, but both were carefully painted on the inside with black paint. Mark examined them minutely. More than the location of the house or even the presence of the blue Mercedes next door, these painted windows raised his suspicions. Who would do this unless they were hiding something?

He ran his fingers along the edges of one of the window frames. It was aluminum and flimsy enough, but he couldn't risk the noise breaking it would make.

Mark was about twenty feet from the back of the garage. Beyond the edge of the wall he could see a flagstone walk which undoubtedly led to the back door.

In the distance a dog's voice rose. The animal was barking furiously. This made him draw back for a moment. But the dog was far away and its barking faded with the slightest shift of air. Mark began moving down the wall. The shade grew deep, caused by a tree that was choked in vines.

From behind the foliage there came music and gentle splashing. A neighbor was enjoying a quiet swim. Tiny birds flittered in the dry leaves that matted the ground.

He could see from the signs of long-ago trimming that the ugly, grasping brush around him had once been a verdant hedge faced by a strip of rosebushes and shaded by what was now the twisted ruin of a jacaranda tree.

He reached the end of the garage wall. Ahead a quarter-acre of unkempt lawn fell away into a deep canyon. The view was tremendous,

a sweltering plain lost in haze. He found it difficult to comprehend that such magnitude could be the outcome of human activity.

It made a sound, too, a continuous murmur that seemed to blend with the silence, intensifying Mark's sense of vulnerability.

He was unarmed, and without a weapon he knew that his odds of overpowering somebody were not good. How could a soft and untrained man possibly prevail against the resources of the abductor?

In the distance a helicopter thuttered. The sound died away, rose, died, then got suddenly louder. The machine boomed directly overhead, circling. As it wheeled he saw the police uniform on the pilot, was dazzled by sunlight struck from his aviator glasses.

Then the helicopter departed, disappearing into the haze.

Mark was astonished and angered by this futile and dangerous display of official presence. His guess was that they didn't know whether or not this was the house, and were searching at random. But what would Barton Royal think if he saw a police helicopter two hundred feet overhead? He would assume that he'd been discovered. Billy would bear the consequences.

The dwindling of the helicopter left him with a powerful sense of his own isolation and the incompetence of the authorities. That arrogant, cruel phone call—he'd never forget it.

He had to get to his boy before the police bungled things further.

As hesitant as an edgy kitten, he leaned around the wall that was concealing him. What he saw was a wood-framed screen door leading into a small kitchen. The atmosphere of emptiness and abandonment remained, and was so seductive that he stepped out into the open.

There came the thought that maybe the man had sensed trouble and gone, taking Billy ... or leaving him behind.

Suddenly Mark recalled his son with perfect and startling clarity. He saw the broad, light smile, the rounded nose, the pure, proud look in his eyes. In the memory of his boy Mark saw the man that had been emerging, and that stabbed him deep.

He stood in full view of the door, agog and unmoving, his legs spread apart, his fists clenched against the pain of his vision.

There was a noise, very faint, that at first seemed like the moan of deteriorated plumbing. Mark was confused and did not clearly understand its meaning: few people have heard the unique sound of great agony.

It stopped, then started again. He listened. Once more he risked a movement into the backyard.

Presently he could discern that the sound did not come from inside the house. His glance went to the concrete foundation. A narrow basement window had been blocked by bricks and rough mortar.

The sound rose again, so thin it might have been the wind, so high it seemed to penetrate to the very center of his head. But the emotions behind it—ferocity, despair—were unmistakable. That was no loose pipe, no straining motor. That was a human sound, a cry. It was coming from the bricked-up basement.

Farther back Billy went, back in among the bags full of other boys. Had he been older and quicker to understand the possibilities of self-defense the room offered, he would have taken the knife.

The thought had not crossed his mind.

As Barton tried to reach him, he screamed. Barton's eyes were shut tight, his teeth bared like the teeth of the dead boy Billy had seen.

For an instant Barton's fingers clutched his ankle. Shouting every

curse in his limited vocabulary, Billy yanked away and pushed another bag down.

Again Barton almost reached him and now he was all the way against the back wall.

Then Barton spoke in a low, growling voice. "Don't— make—me— touch—them."

Billy dug down, pushing at the heavy, sodden bags. Inside some there was sloshing, but others were dry and clattered like they were full of lumber.

There were so many!

Barton was dancing at the entrance to the little room, trying to get to Billy without coming into contact with the bags. Billy buried himself in the remains of his predecessors.

When Barton realized that he couldn't get Billy without dragging the bags out of the room, he really started screaming. He paced the floor of the other room. "I didn't," he shouted. "Mother, I did not!" He pounded his forehead against the wall. "There were just the two! Oh, yes, it was unfortunate!" He started crying then, arching his back, his head shaking so much his shoulders and arms shook too and it looked like some huge invisible dog was shaking the life out of him. The sound he made was so terrible to hear that Billy screamed too.

Then Barton went silent. An instant later he started hitting something, harder and harder, the sound of the blows rising in fury. As he lashed out he squealed, a sound high enough to vibrate Billy's teeth, and the blows went on and on. *Its me in his mind, it's me he's hitting!*

That realization made Billy scream again, and their voices melded as those of two singers might, singing a song of love.

Hit him again! Hit him again! Hit him again! Use the hooked whip, use it!

There had been two little mistakes, that was all. Just Jack, just Timmy.

This one is a fucking big mistake!

Where the hell did all these bags come from?

— My, what a fine-looking young man! We must be at least — let me guess—forty-teen !

— I'm gonna squiggle you so hard!

And why not? This was his room, his perfect place, and here he could do anything.

Let's see, here, while I've got him on his stomach . . .

He hefted the whip.

The boy on the table watched with evil, flickering eyes. Of course, he'd always understood this child's filthy secret: there was an ancient evil lurking in him. He brought the hooked whip down with all the strength in him, the muscles pulsing in his back, his arms working like pistons and the stinking little monster was howling and it was all coming out now, all of it like black fire out of him at last and he was free!

Except that the table was empty.

Of course it was: to get Billy he was going to have to touch them! He would have to pull down the bags and feel them in there, and face that they are bones and black liquid and the damp powder that the lime pellets leave.

I didn't do it, I couldn 't have!

"Billy for God's sake, come out of there. Come out of there and I'll—I'll —Billy, oh, remember what I have! Yes! I'll get one of those giant Butterfingers for you if you come out!"

He rushed up the ladder, heading for the kitchen. He'd put them in the fridge.

Mark had now been out of Mary's sight for more than seven minutes. She watched the spot where he had disappeared. Why in the world had he gone around behind the garage? What an incredibly foolish thing to do!

"Where the hell is he," she muttered.

"We better go get him, Momma."

That was her immediate impulse, too. But she saw the risks. If he'd been taken hostage himself, they could all end up in the hands of Barton Royal. Or maybe Mark was dead. She could see her poor husband getting himself killed.

The clock in the dashboard ticked busily away. Why had she agreed to wait here, anyway? She was the more resourceful of the two of them; she should have been the one to get out.

"Listen!"

Mary heard nothing. "What?"

Another helicopter had come. This one was black and much quieter. It flew in high, then stopped, hovering over the house. The sound of its rotors dwindled to nothing.

"They know," Sally said. "The police know!" She groaned. "Oh, Daddy, get back here!"

"I'll go get him."

"Momma, be careful!"

"I will, baby. But if I don't come back in five minutes, get out of the car and go next door. Tell them everything, tell them it's an emergency and to call the police."

"Billy's there, Momma."

"Oh, yes, he's there."

Billy heard Barton rush up the ladder and then the loud thud of the trapdoor. Once his mind would have leapt to the possibilities, but he had decided that he liked it back here. The dark was nice, and he enjoyed being with the other kids. He hadn't been with other kids in a long time.

Also, these kids were special: they were his brothers.

If he wanted to, he could hear them talking to him, but it wasn't very interesting, what they had to say. "Get up, Billy, run, grab the knife, turn off the light, break the bulb." But he couldn't do that. Then he would be a bad boy and get another licking.

Instead he scrunched himself down even farther in among the bags. He closed his eyes. This was where he belonged. It was his new room. This was where he was going to stay forever and ever. There was going to be just a little hard time and then he could come back and get to be in his own bag like his brothers. He loved his brothers so much.

"Hey, Timmy, are you gonna grow up and get old?"

(I don't think I'm gonna do that, Billy.)

"You have a really boss jacket, Timmy."

He stopped talking to his brothers and tried to pray again. "Dear God, send the angel Gabriel with his sword of fire. I need that at least.

Maybe even the archangel Michael with his sword of fire, too. OK?"

He waited but they didn't show up. OK, he'd try the Blessed Virgin. "Hail Mary full of grace—" Nah, no teenage girl in a blue nightgown is gonna be able to handle this.

"Come out, my dear, I have a lovely, huge Butterfinger and it's nice and cold and completely scrumpy!"

"Hey, guys, looks like I ran outa time." As a lover with the body of his love, he ran his hands along the creases and folds of the nearest bag. "See you around."

Barton could not imagine how this had happened. He vaguely remembered a boy named Danny, but that was—oh goodness—years ago. This appalling horror was completely impossible! No, no way at all was he responsible for these piles and piles of bags!

Nobody else came down here, except him and his boys.

Then a face appeared in the gloom of black plastic, a sinister, glaring nymph.

"Who are you?" Barton asked. He was completely mystified by this unexpected presence.

"I'm me!" The boy came crawling out. He tumbled onto the floor. "Hi, Barton."

Barton held out the candy, a trembling sacrifice. Light was pouring from the child, as if the sun itself had entered him. The hand that took the Butterfinger was colder than the frozen candy.

With great solemnity the boy unwrapped the candy. He did not simply tear back the paper, but took the whole bar out and dropped the paper to the floor. Barton picked it up and put it in his pocket.

"I love them cold like this, Father, because you can eat the chocolate off first," Billy said. "Do you like to eat the chocolate off first?"

Barton was beyond words. The voice was gold in his heart, as if all love had entered there. He rocked back on his heels, clutching himself.

Glory poured from Billy's eyes. "Is this your hobby?" he asked. He looked around the room, his eyebrows raised expectantly. "Is it?" Then he nipped the candy bar, taking off a large slab of chocolate, exposing the brown interior. "You have to be careful doing it this way, because if you eat off all the chocolate, then the inside's not as good." He took a bite of the crunchy center of the bar. "So is it your hobby? Killing kids?"

Barton was silent. Words were not a fatal weapon.

"How many of us are there?" Billy asked. He chewed the candy, a frown on his face. "Enough to make a pretty big club, I'll bet. The kids at my school have clubs, but I'm not gonna get in any. I guess that's why I obsess over Kafka. You gotta have something that makes you special." A smile came into his face, and as suddenly disappeared.

Barton found himself moving toward Billy with the precision of a dancer. Gentle, invisible hands were guiding him. He felt a vast presence coming close around him, and had the sense that it was somebody he had always known and always forgotten. Yes, taking his hand, guiding it toward the boy's arm, and curling his fingers around the arm.

Billy threw back his head and cried the most sorrowful cry that Barton had ever heard.

Exquisite.

Mark had seen him, he'd seen Barton Royal! He'd come scuttling right into the kitchen like some prehistoric crab, opened the refrigerator, gotten something and slammed it again.

He had his proof, he was a witness and would swear that Barton Royal was definitely in this house. He wasn't going to take any more crap from the cops, his boy was here!

Be careful, for God's sake, man! If you are heard, if you fucking well make a sound, Billy is dead.

He shrank back, farther into the gloom beside the garage. The prudent thing was obviously to go for the cops. But as he turned he heard a new sound, one so terrible that even his dulled instincts told him that it was a desperate, terminal cry.

More than that, he recognized this voice: it was Billy.

He stepped out of concealment, marched up to the door of the house. From the inside he smelled an odor of coolness and old food. It wasn't a clean house. In fact, it looked filthy. He tried the door. It was locked.

The scream came again, so faint and yet so very, very dark. It made him quail back, made him want to cover his ears, to run. But it also made him take out his keys and tear a hole in the screen.

Sticking his hand in, he felt for a deadbolt, encountered only another keyhole. The door locked on both sides. But how stupid, he simply tore out the whole screen and walked right in.

Barton Royal certainly wasn't expecting trouble.

Or was he? What about motion detectors?

Then the scream came again, a little louder now that he was inside the house. He clapped his hands to his ears, it was terrible to hear! *Billy, oh God help my boy, God help him!*

Where was he? The sound was so faint—muffled. Then he recalled the bricked-up window. Of course, they were in the basement.

Heedless of the dangers, Mark plunged off into the house.

"Shut up!"

Billy knew he was supposed to be quiet but it was just very hard because he saw those straps. If he didn't see the straps it would be easier, but every time he saw them the screams just came out by themselves.

"Sorry, Father!"

"Get up there, Son, go on!"

"Father, please—"

"Do it!"

He tried, but his body would not climb up onto the table. He belonged with his brothers, he knew that, and the only way to join them was to get up on the table. The trouble was, his arms and legs wouldn't do what his head told them. He just stood there.

So Father had to pick him up and lift him onto the table. There, that was much better. Now all he had to do was lie down. Father would take care of the rest.

But when Father leaned over him to grab the buckle of the chest strap Billy was astonished to find himself striking like a snake. The flesh beneath Father's chin crunched and tore and he reared back screaming. Blood spurted.

'I guess I did that,' Billy thought.

Then Father had a great big knife in his hands, and the blade was pale gray.

Mark heard that! Did he ever hear it! That wasn't Billy, that was a

grown man and he was in pain. The sound was right underfoot! There was nothing but a throw rug on the floor of this bedroom. Mark turned it back and saw the trapdoor, its ring handle recessed into the floor.

He pulled the door open.

Billy was right there, lying on a table beneath a dim bulb. Beside the table stood the crablike man. In his hand was a machete.

Barton looked up, his eyes squinting against the sudden increase of light.

"Billy!"

Billy smiled a tiny, distant smile, and cocked his head in a gesture almost of apology.

Barton Royal raised the blade.

Mark did not know what in the name of God to do.

Imagining his real dad's voice brought Billy much comfort, even if it was only a dream.

Then all of a sudden a man jumped down out of the light. He was all sweaty and crazy-looking and he had brown fluffy hair and bent-up glasses. Was it Jesus? Surely they didn't send Jesus for every dead kid, so it must be an angel. Maybe God did send an angel! That would be really neat!

Father—no, *Barton* —made a funny noise, like he was pretending to be a lion or something. He swung the knife at the man. It went *sst!*

The impossible had happened. And so suddenly, so completely unexpectedly. It was the father! Simply fantastic! Somehow he had

been tracking them, he must have moved heaven and earth, he must be more cunning than he looked.

God, this kid was such a huge mistake.

No, it was all right. This wasn't the end. He just had to off this guy and get out of here, and then he would be safe. He had his absolute emergency escape route all planned. Two hours from now he could be in Tijuana, and from there down to Bogota, and back into the rain forest to hide until better days.

Again Barton swung the machete. The man cried out and jumped ineptly away, slamming into the wall behind him. Billy lay like a life-sized doll on the table.

"Why?" the man said. His face was twisted, his eyes bulging. "Why!"

"It was Billy! He wanted to come—and he was the first! I didn't hurt him. I've wanted a son all my life. I was good to him! There was just your Billy." He could not look at those anguished eyes, and turned his face away.

"You crazy, vicious bastard!"

Even though he was yelling Dad had tears in his voice. Billy did not like that. Dad was in big trouble!

There was an awful whistling sound and a snap and Dad was down. Then Barton was on top of him, snarling, and all of a sudden there was a terrible thud and Dad turned into something that looked like a pile of rags.

"Dad!"

There was no response.

He'd been smart, but Billy's father was no fighter. Now he'd finish off the child and be done with it.

But the whole closet was full of bodies!

Somebody else did that.

He chose his weapon. This would be simple, plain, quick: the butcher knife.

As he hefted it he became aware that there was something moving in the basement beyond the steel door.

Oh, God, it was opening! A huge, masked shadow loomed into the room. Another dropped down the ladder. Their plastic eyes were glistening, their guns dark blue in the light. "Freeze! Police!"

Then the blade to the heart.

Part Six

**THE BAND
OF BROTHERS**

31.

Mark Neary takes a breath, it doesn't work, he takes another, it doesn't work, he feels dizzy, his head hurts, he is in deep trouble, he knows it. "Gotta catch my breath—call my wife— get my breath—call my wife— gotta get my breath!"

"Two cc's, get it in there, OK, you have brain tissue exposed, doctor. Bleeding in the wound."

I'm lying down Billy needs me I'm spinning.

Headache!

There were men on the other side of Barton's room. They had guns and they stood by the far wall. They blocked the door.

His heart was fluttering like it was made of paper. Even when he was very still it did not stop.

He was peace, he was the dove. *I am the white dove, the dove that spreads wing over the cathedral of sacred shit.*

"There are too many tubes in my damn face!"

Then he saw movement, somebody coming through the line of uniformed men.

A woman, moving like a great, wary walking stick. Mother was so gray, so thin!

Her jaw was trembling. "I'm glad they got you."

You and me both!

Her arm came up, the flat of the palm, he turned his head away. "Fourteen, Barton, for God's sake fourteen innocent children!"

"Don't you hit him, lady!" The policemen crowded forward. "Just take it easy, ma'am."

"Fourteen!"

Stars exploded in his head. His face burned. The tubes came out and snaked around his face. *I'm sorry, Mother!* "Get her arms! Quick!"

They dragged her to the far side of the room.

My heart has fire in it.

Fire!

"The case was solved by a massive nationwide FBI-coordinated police investigation. The house was stormed on an emergency basis by tactical police force officers when it was learned that the boy's father had made an unauthorized entry."

'Momma they filled the bathtub up with blood, don't go splash in it, don't go boom! Momma I don't want no storm, it's blood! Open the drain it gonna go over my head! Momma don't go boom! Momma

don't put my ferryboat in here! Momma I gotta die now, Barton says to!

(Your brothers will help you.)

"In a related development all three are in serious condition at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. Despite a self-inflicted stab wound to his heart, doctors are fighting to save Royal so that he can stand trial."

A woman is weeping. Her name is Mary Neary. She sits on a plastic chair in a waiting room with a gray linoleum floor and pale green walls. There are marks on the ceiling tiles from a long-ago leak. She clears her throat, takes a sip from a Styro-foam cup she is cradling in her hands.

Her daughter, Sally, is playing a word game with Dr. Richard Klass, a child psychiatrist on staff at the hospital.

The thing was, his heart didn't actually beat. It just sort of shook in his chest. If he so much as lifted his head, he began to lose consciousness.

He put out his hand, but Mother did not take it. "I've just been remembering," he said. "We sure had a great time in the old days, didn't we?"

"Son, why did you do it? *Why?*"

He watched a fly circling the ceiling light.

"Mother, you should have seen one of my Uncle Squiggly shows."

As if she was suddenly cold, she wrapped her arms around herself. Again she left.

"I bubble when I breathe, doctor."

The cardiologist smiled and nodded. He was thirty-six, he had five children, he was from Calcutta. He did not feel that his patient would live. For the press he remained guarded, but not blatantly pessimistic.

'Oh you opened the drain I am going down please Momma get me, get Billy, I gotta get outa here Momma, I gonna go down! I slipping, my head is in Momma, I gonna go down, my body is in, the blood is taking me Momma, I am in the drain, I am going down. Momma the devil gonna get Billy! He got claws they is long they gonna go all over me!'

(We are your brothers. We are here.)

"Mr. Neary?" "Yes?"

"Can you feel this?" "Needle in my foot!" "This?" "Tickles."

"Very good. Now, relax your neck, please. Good. Any pain?" "Jesus!"

There appears to be no lasting neurological insult to this patient, but the wound continues to heal slowly.

'Oh God why is he like this, he's like plastic, doctor, I can't get through to him, he just stares! Billy! Billy! Remember our lullaby? "Billy boy, Billy boy, where are you going, charming Billy." Sure you do, God in heaven help my poor baby!'

Barton peered into the blackness that had surrounded his bed. Had the room gotten dark, or was it him? A boy walked out of the shadows. He was an angry boy, a familiar boy. Barton knew exactly why he was

here. "You'll never get me, *never!*"

Things were moving in the boy's eyes. How strange that looked. Barton tried to raise himself, to discern just what that was.

Worms!

Danny was this boy's name. He had long, long arms, and they opened for Barton.

No!

The boy embraced him. Oh, and it was almost like love!

(Why did you do it? Only the truth, please.)

"It was fun!"

Impaled baby.

Danny drew back and raised his hands and Barton got heavy, too heavy! His heart began rattling. Something was happening to gravity.

"This is an examination of William Neary, age twelve years and nine months, a traumatized child. The characteristic state of tonus called waxy flexibility is fully evident. The patient can be manipulated and holds postures. Mutism, stupor, apparent absence of will are all present. I do not believe, however, that this child is catatonic. I feel that this is a stress response so extreme that it mimics catastrophic psychosis. The prognosis is nevertheless doubtful."

'I gotta get outa here Momma, it dark, big spider man got his arms all around me, I do-do on myself, I goin' down the hole Momma!'

He sees his brothers for the first time. There is no recognition.

(We will help you.)

"Help him! You've got to help him! I know he's suffering terribly, you can see it in his eyes, Dr. Klass, please!" The doctor feels he should embrace the patient's mother in order to effect some transference of anxiety.

When Barton woke up again there were more boys in the room. They came closer and closer, their hair trailing behind them, their fingernails scraping the linoleum, their faces as pure as purest light.

"Mother!"

(She went home.)

"She went home?"

"When can I see Billy?" "In a couple more days, honey."

"Christ, Mary, I'm fine. They've got me walking up and down the ward, you saw me!" "In a few days!" "Mary, what's the matter?" "Mark, please—" "He's not dead! Don't you dare tell me he's dead!"

"Sally, just hold my head for a while. I've been up—"

"Twenty hours, Momma. We can go back to the motel if you need some sleep."

"But it's helping! As long as I hold him, he seems to be better. Just let me get a thirty-second nap, just close my eyes . . ."

A sunken, wobbly remnant, she sinks elaborately to the couch.

"Doctor, she's out."

"Your mother is suffering from complete exhaustion. I think we should just let her sleep right here."

They get a gray blanket from the ward closet and tuck it around her. The life of the waiting room goes on, people arrive, sit and depart, lives are won and lost, tragedy strikes, joy descends, Mary sleeps through an entire day.

"Sir, what are you doing in here with an IV tree?"

"What room is William Neary in?"

"You can't come on the children's pavilion, you're an inpatient!"

"I'm his dad!"

"Psychiatric wing, room 2102."

Mark hurries along, pulling his tree of intravenous lines, his mind racing: psychiatric, psychiatric, psychiatric—he maneuvers himself down the corridor. Its long, waxed floors are treacherous, it makes him dizzy to walk too fast. 'Forty-eight stitches I'm surprised my head wasn't cut in two where does this hall end Jesus.'

He is so tiny! Oh, just look, look how small he s gotten! He is so quiet!

"Billy?" Why doesn't he react, his eyes are wide open. "Billy!"

What's the matter here?

The spider opens up its mouth and this man comes out wearing robe of Jesus and he got a coat tree in his hand that's funny and where'd you get those dumb-dumb glasses Daddy?

Mark Neary cannot bear the sight of his broken child. His heart is sick with woe and suddenly he is very, very tired. Like a leaf he slips to the floor, barely noticing the IV tubes ripping from his arms. The lights dim. Then there are nurses. Then he is watching ceiling fixtures go past overhead.

It will be two days before he can leave his bed again.

Barton wanted to hear a Mozart symphony. He wanted to eat a blood orange.

Danny had a green Sohio truck with lights that really turned on. When he went with Uncle Barton he made sure to bring his truck.

(You laid us on the table!)

I didn 't do that.

(Our screams made you sweat with pleasure!)

Every act of life is etched forever in the flesh of the soul.

Mary is slumped by Billy's bedside with her head in her hands. She has cuddled him, she has talked to him, she has sung a thousand songs, she has poured her very soul into his empty gaze, and now the woman is spent.

Sally is stroking her brother's head. In a hoarse voice, she sings:

"Where have you been, Billy boy, Billy boy,

Where have you been, charming Billy?"

It is clear to her that Mother cannot go on. It is also clear that she must. "Come on, Momma, let's do it together."

Listlessly Mary joins in, barely lifting her voice, placing her hand on her son's chest.

"Where have you been, Billy boy —"

He mocks them with his emptiness. "Oh, what's the use," Mary wails, "he doesn't hear a thing!"

"Momma, we have to! We have to try! Now come on!" Again they start.

'Where have you been, charming Billy?

I have been to see my wife —Momma, come on—

She's a young thing and cannot leave her mother!"

"Oh, Momma, look!" An expression has replaced the emptiness. He stares up at them with the astonished eyes of a newborn baby.

"Let's go, Momma! He is looking at us, he sees us!"

Mary sings furiously now. "Where have you been, Billy boy, Billy boy —"

"Hey in there, I see you, yes I do, little brother dear, I see you!"

They are calling him, a chant: "Billy, Billy, Billy, Billy."

Sally chokes, clears her throat. She stops.

"I gotta have a Coke, I'm dying. You want a Coke, Momma?" She jabs at the nurse's button.

Mary remembers that he had such soft hair when he was a baby, like a blond cloud sitting on top of his head.

"I ww—mm!"

"Momma, Momma listen!"

"Mmm! Uhh!"

His voice, the lips hardly moving, but his voice!

"Billy! Billy! Billy!"

"Mmm! I—ww—"

Mary couldn't understand, she wanted to understand, she bore down on him, pressing her face into his narrow, sour little face. "What, Billy, Mommy is here, Mommy hears you!"

"I want a Dr Pepper!"

Barton took his new plane out of the blue box. Oh, so beautiful! Attach the wheels! Attach the wings! Hook up the propeller to the rubber band! Put on the tail!

"No Barton, oh, no!"

"Oh, Barton, that *hurts!*"

Instruction number fifteen: "Wind propeller one hundred and sixty

turns to achieve maximum flight."

He ran up the tall hill. There were clouds piled in the west and sun blazing in the east. The breeze went right through him, it was so pure and he was so good!

"It's hot, Barton, it's so hot!"

"Doctor," Barton said carefully, "it hurts."

"Yes," the doctor replied, smiling, "it will, for a time."

"I want a Whopper with a large fries and a chocolate shake and a fried cherry pie for dessert."

"He still likes that yuck."

"We're gonna get him *just* what he likes, right, Billy?"

"Right, Mommy!"

While he waited for them to come back he read to his brothers. He read *The Lost World*, about finding the land of dinosaurs and the jungle drums beating out the warning, "We will kill you if we can, we will kill you if we can." He said to his brothers, "If only for one second we could go back to the Jurassic and see a real *Tyrannosaurus rex*." Then he asked, "I wonder if dinosaurs got gas?" Maybe going back to the Jurassic wasn't such a hot idea.

Seeing the Burger King bag reminded Billy of home, and for the first time he thought of Jerry and Amanda and all the kids and hanging out together trying to out-cool each other. He also recalled the fact that he was dead-bone broke. Since he obviously wasn't going to win the American Legion Short Story Contest, maybe he should become a pickpocket.

Then they opened the bags and he bit into the Whopper and it was like

being home and all of a sudden he was really very glad.

After he was finished Sally produced a small white box of her own. "You try making this on a motel hotplate!" "Divinity!" She folded her arms. "Eat some. Go ahead, I dare you."

The wind was taking his plane higher and higher. At first he was glad, but when it became a tiny black dot he grew worried, then angry. "Come back," he cried, "come back!"

They belong to the wind, they can't come back.

He jumped, he waved his arms.

He heard the voices of the women they would never love, the wailing of their unborn children.

His head fell to one side. The light of other fires invaded his eyes. He was so terribly heavy!

The sky opened like the skin of a rotten fruit, and there came forth the furious legions.

32.

Mom and Dad came into Billy's room with Dr. Klass. Billy watched them walk right through his brothers like they weren't there. He didn't like it when they ignored his brothers. But he would not stand for it when they told him his brothers didn't exist. How dare they, the liars!

But he'd made a concession. He no longer talked to his brothers when the grown-ups were around. Only he and Sally could talk to them. Since they were his brothers, they were hers, too. They were brothers to all kids.

Dad still looked really weird with his huge bandage and the one eye made gigantic by the big lens they had to put in his glasses. Barton had cut a hole in his head. Billy wished he could see in the hole, but he didn't have the nerve to ask.

Right now his dad looked scared. He looked to his mother. She was scared, too.

Dr. Klass took him by the hand. It was OK, but it still made him feel creepy-crawly when they touched him. When the nurse bathed him he had to shut his eyes and sing real loud.

"Billy, we want you to know that Barton Royal died last night just after midnight."

That was OK. No it wasn't. He busted out crying, he just couldn't help it.

Dad rolled his goofy eye at Mom. She pushed past Dr. Klass and put her arms around Billy. Mom smelled so good, Billy liked her so much.

"This is good," Dr. Klass said, "he's unloading some stuff here."

"I missed the funeral!"

As Mommy hugged him he pulled his face away so he wouldn't touch her skin. He sure loved her, but she had skin like a salamander.

"The funeral is at two-thirty," Dr. Klass said, "but we have more important things to do than go to an old funeral. You and I are gonna write another play about Barton today."

"I'm gonna go to the funeral!"

"No, Billy."

"Yes I am, Mom! I have to!"

Dad talked, his voice low. "Billy, you're in the hospital. You aren't even near well yet. You have bandages all over your bottom and you—"

His brothers were all yelling and screaming. He had to go!

"I can go in my bandages. Don't you want me *ever* to get well?"

That shut them right up, as he had figured it would. Sally, who was sitting over by the window working a puzzle and not saying anything, gave him a wink. She knew all about why he had to go to the funeral.

"We'll have our own funeral, Billy," Dr. Klass said. He was a nice guy, but he could dork out at a moment's notice. He had just dorked out.

Billy knew how to shut him up. "Gee, I'll make the gravestone and we can use a real coffin," he said like he was all excited about it. "I know

they have coffins in hospitals for when people die."

"Ah—"

He looked up at Mom and Dad. "I've gotta go. It's real important to me."

His father bowed his head, then came down on the bed with him and Mom. They held each other's hands.

"I'll navigate," Sally said.

It was a long drive to Anaheim, and they had to start out right away. Mom drove, Dad sat beside her. Billy lay with his head in Sally's lap. Although she claimed she was finding lice and cooties and stuff, he knew she was just rubbing his head.

Billy had never been to a graveyard before. When they got there all kinds of reporters came thundering up yelling questions. Ever since he had seen himself on TV in just his underpants Billy didn't like those jerks.

It wasn't a very good graveyard, he decided. The headstones were mostly small. Here and there somebody had left a few withered flowers in a bottle. When the wind blew, sand swept the stones like dry rain.

Barton's grave site was the only active spot in the whole enormous place. There were three folding chairs, a couple of men in white T-shirts with shovels in their hands, another man in a frayed black suit.

There was also a woman, as Billy had hoped there would be. His brothers had been worried she wouldn't come. He could feel their relief.

The woman sat very still on one of the folding chairs, her brows knitted in the merciless sun. All the time as Billy and his family were coming closer, she watched them.

By the time they had arrived she was staring down at her own feet. She stood. "Make it quick, please, Reverend," she said. Her voice sounded so much like Barton's it made Billy want to vomit.

The man opened a paperback of the Bible and read in a nervous voice: "In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves—"

"Two verses after," the woman snapped. She blinked her eyes. "Where I marked."

The Reverend cleared his throat. "Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish . . ."

Billy heard his brothers repeating in the air, "and the grasshoppers shall be a burden, and desire shall fail. .." He joined his living voice to their dead ones: "because man goeth to his long home ..." which was all he remembered.

Barton's mother clutched her hands together, looking straight at him. She looked sad, but also scared.

Dad raised his head. Billy saw the pride that had come into his face, and was glad. "Or ever the silver cord be loosed," Dad and Mom said together, "or the golden bowl be broken—"

They stopped, silenced by the power of the same deep feelings that had compelled Billy to bring them here in the first place.

Barton's mother spoke in tiny words. "Then shall the dust— the dust —" Her composure was broken by the most desperate grief.

She covered her face and shook.

The coffin was lowered by a machine with an angry, screaming whine. Billy watched it drop into the dark hole and with it his life with Barton, and the dim life before. He had come here seeking an ending. He

asked his heart, 'Do I hate Barton?' and heard a silence that let him raise his eyes from the grave.

Barton's mother recovered herself enough to throw a clod of soil into the hole. Billy heard it rattle on the coffin.

Now it was time to perform his mission. His brothers gathered around him. They were excited. He had taken them on a big adventure. He dug in his pocket and pulled out the fourteen construction paper notes. On each he had written a name. One by one he dropped them into the grave. Sally, who had helped him make them, said his brothers' names with him.

"Chuck."

"Danny."

"Jack."

"Timmy."

"Andy."

Dad added his voice.

"Ezra."

Mom did, too. Their chant was ragged because only he and Sally knew the names by heart.

"Liam."

"Unknown Child Number One."

"Unknown Child Number Two."

The sweating preacher and the two workers joined their voices.

"Unknown Child Number Three."

"Unknown Child Number Four."

"Unknown Child Number Five."

Mrs. Royal started to do it, too.

"No," Billy said. "Not you."

She nodded her head. She whispered, "No."

"Unknown Child Number Six."

"Unknown Child Number Seven."

Billy stopped. He looked to Barton's mother. He had a last note, which he handed to her.

When she saw what it said she gasped as if stabbed.

"Read it aloud," he told her.

She shook her head. Her eyes were closed tight.

"Read it," one of the workers said.

She muttered something. Then she cleared her throat. "Billy."

"OK." Billy nodded at the grave.

"I want to keep it," she said in a quavering voice.

"Throw it in!"

Billy watched it flutter down, twirling round and round and round, until it hit the side of the coffin and slid into the dark.

A crow rose from a tree, wheeled screaming over the party, and strove for the sky on its black wings. Billy looked from the cheap, gray coffin in its hole up to the raucous, flapping creature in the sky.

"I'm ready to go," he said to his parents.

His father took his hand. In the rough coolness of his fingers Billy felt the future, he and Sally growing up, Mom and Dad getting old and dying. The thought did not upset him. On the contrary, it filled him with a joy that seemed deeper than his own soul, as if it entered him not only from his father's trembling hand, but from the whole contents of the world.

When they got into the car together, Billy was fascinated by details for the first time since his passion. He noticed the way the radio worked and the fact that it had no cassette player. He noticed that there was a climate control as well as a cruise control. He noticed the hole where the cigarette lighter was supposed to be—and wondered what would happen if he put his finger in.

As they pulled away from the curb Billy looked back. Mrs. Royal remained at the grave. She stood watching them leave, her body as narrow as a stake. One hand came up, hesitating, tentative, as if to wave. But she did not wave. Instead her fingers touched her cheek, trembled against the empty skin.

He closed his eyes, listening to the kind old hum of the tires.

By the time they turned onto the highway the day had reached its moment of high sun. Everywhere the shadows were in retreat. Sally started to sing:

"The ants go marching two by two,

The little one stops to go to the zoo —"

"Those aren't the right words."

"You're supposed to make up the words, Billy."

"Are not."

"Are!"

"Are absolutely not no way uh-uh."

"Well, I do!"

Billy sang, "The little one stops to do some doo!"

"Billy Neary, that's gross!"

The journey back had begun.

Author's Note

The theft of a child is perhaps the cruelest of all crimes, unique for its spectacular inhumanity and corrosive potency. Fortunately it is not an everyday crime; neither, however, should it be ignored. The numbers do not matter; the spectre of this crime diminishes as does no other the joy of parenthood and the innocence of the young. Childhood is not immortal; childhood could die. If it does, this will have been among its harshest poisons.

Readers wishing more information about how to help missing and exploited children can write:

The National Center for
Missing and Exploited Children
Publications Department
2101 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22201

—Whitley Strieber

(Continued from front flap)

forty-four-year-old, fat and sweaty, searching the world for his own lost boyhood. When he sees Billy he knows that he has found the extraordinary creature he has been looking for—the perfect child that he never was. And he knows that in a matter of a few short hours he will have Billy all to himself, to love, to cherish— But Barton Royal is a very angry man. And Billy is very small.

Though Mary and Mark Neary can hardly believe that their son is gone, they suspect with every passing minute that he is in ever deepening danger. But even their worst fears cannot comprehend the gruesome and chilling reality of Barton's hideous world and the secret black room beneath his house where Billy is held prisoner.

Presented from both Billy's and his kidnapper's points of view, *Billy* is a story so terrifying—and yet so passionately committed to the value of the human spirit—that it will leave you breathless.

Whitley Strieber has long been hailed as a master of suspense. In *Billy*, he delivers a psychological thriller that will establish him as a writer of awesome versatility and power.

Whitley Strieber is the author of the bestsellers *Communion*, *Transformation*, and *Majestic*. He lives in New York City.

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**CAT
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WHITLEY STRIEBER

**CAT
MAGIC**



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

This book is dedicated to something that may be a cat. He is enormous, black as death, and usually gone. He has a shredded ear and a kink in his tail. If he is around, he might enjoy being stroked, and then again he might hurt you if you so much as touch a hair. He never purrs. He likes to stare.

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

CATMAGIC

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *COMMUNION AND CATMAGIC*

I wrote *Catmagic* in 1984, well before I was consciously aware of the visitors who figure in *Communion*.

Communion is a story of how it felt to have personal contact with the visitors. The mysterious small beings that figure prominently in *Catmagic* seem to be an unconscious rendering of them, created before I was aware that

they may be real. It could be that the message of the book—which involves respect for earth and all her creatures, and the seeking of higher consciousness—is somehow derived from my inner understanding of the meaning of the visitors.

The hardcover edition appeared under a pseudonym, Jonathan Barry, primarily because it was published too close to the publication date of another of my books and would have created a conflict. I am the sole author of *Catmagic*.

Catmagic concerns Witches and Witchcraft, also known as the religion of Wicca. It is about the spiritual path of real Witches. It has nothing to do with tomfoolery like alleged "black magic." The Witches I met in doing research for *Catmagic* were no more evil than Christians or Buddhists or Hindus, or the practitioners of any other perfectly legitimate religion, among which Wicca can certainly be numbered. They were good people, passionate in their concern for the welfare of the natural world and the growth of their own souls.

Certainly there are a few people who distort Witchcraft and mock its ancient rituals in ceremonies that glorify evil. I met two such people. They turned out to be secretly associated with another religion. They were calling themselves Witches and engaging in painfully silly black magic rituals involving dead goats in an effort to discredit Wicca. Others who do evil in the name of Witchcraft are mentally disordered or, simply, charlatans. Such people should no more be counted Witches than practitioners of the black mass should be considered Catholics.

To learn more about the "old religion," the reader is invited to write Circle Wicca, Box 219, Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, 53572.

—Whitley Strieber

PROLOGUE

Stone Mountain is the only truly rough peak in the Peconics. Its gray, cracked ridges stretch for about three miles in that otherwise benign chain. They are so loose and treacherous that even the most obsessive rock climbers avoid them as offering too unsubtle a doom. The Appalachian Trail, deferring to the fact that old Stone has been known to slice a good pair of Beans to shreds, skirts the mountain and passes through the orchard-choked exurbia of the little town of Maywell, which huddles beneath the mountain like an Israelite at the feet of Pharaoh.

From the grand and crumbling Collier estate at one end of town to the dark Victorian buildings of Maywell College at the other, the ridges look down on the whole of Maywell. This is not an area of superhighways and roaring commuter buses; Maywell has been bypassed by the roads and the developers. Once again, old Stone is to blame. No highway construction company would bid on a road to cross that miserable expanse of cracked granite, so Maywell remains much as it was a century ago, a town as pretty as it can be, alone, and largely content with its own gentle self.

Maywell prospers in a quiet way, on the orchards and the farms whose produce is trucked off to Philadelphia and New York, and on the maintenance of Maywell College, an institution small in both size and reputation, but more than adequate to provide the town its full share of raucous students and middle culture.

Maywell does not really like the modern world. It has a tendency to look to sorter eras with well-dressed, genteel longing. It is peaceful, moral, and respectable.

It is, in short, just the sort of place where peculiar things happen.

These things may be grim and awful, as was the raising by Brother Simon Pierce of his Resurrection Tabernacle, or pretty much the opposite of grim, such as the witchy goings-on out at the Collier estate.

They may be odd, as in the case of poor Dr. Walker. He was a brilliant biologist whose abrasive personality and dogged obsession with his own bizarre theories made him tiresome to his peers at Yale.

Eventually, when he raved to the newspapers about bringing frogs back to life, he was hurled out. So now he continues his career in this forgotten corner of the academy, teaching freshmen the intricacies of the zygote and

plotting the breakthroughs that will vindicate his genius.

Besides its beauty and isolation and its smattering of eccentrics, Maywell has something else odd about it.

This is a bit more serious. This is quite terrible and quite wonderful—if such words have any clear meaning. *Terrible* conjures images of huge, gaping beasts or sulking psychopaths; *wonderful* brings a silken princess and a thornless rose.

Both words might conjure a cat.

Certainly either suggests the great King of the Cats, a creature known almost exclusively to students of obscure Celtic mythology, and holding sway, according to Robert Graves, “upon a chair of old silver” whence he gave “vituperative answers to inquirers who tried to deceive him.” No doubt he/she accounts in part for the androgynous nature of Puss In Boots and was the progenitor of the first Cinderella story,

“The Cat-Cinderella,” which is itself a folk memory of the very ancient legend of the cat as friend of Ishtar, the fierce old mother goddess who once swayed over Sumeria.

Among the fragments of the old mystery religion of the Greeks is the identification of the goddess Diana with a cat. From deep time, the female witch has identified a male cat as her familiar. And, of course, there were the Egyptian cats, most of whom were mummified and persist to this day stacked in the basements of museums.

The extraordinary creature that inhabited the ridges of Stone Mountain, though, was no candidate for a museum. Indeed, at the moment it was very intensely alive, and not out on the windy ridges, but wandering far more delightful realms.

All was not perfect: long ago it had been touched by one of Constance Collier’s spells, and something was tied to its ear.

This was an invisible thread, which led from the delightful realms all the way into Maywell, where it joined the other invisible threads being woven on the loom of the town’s life.

The other threads turned and twisted constantly, crossing as the druggist married the grocer’s daughter, slipping apart when he died, becoming knotted when she also passed on, and so on, the cloth never finished, its invisible patterns ceaselessly shimmering and changing.

Only one of the townspeople, Constance Collier, had both the wisdom and inclination to sit occasionally at the sacred loom and maneuver the threads

around a bit, perhaps granting some indigent follower of hers a little good fortune or causing the business affairs of one of her adversaries to come unraveled.

She never touched the thread connected to the mythical cat's imaginary ear, and hadn't since she had first tied it, a deed she had done on a soft spring day when she was still full of hope. Many long years had passed since then, while Constance had plotted and spelled and hexed and waited. But she had never needed to call the cat. She had gone from being a beautiful young woman to a wise old one, and had become patient with her lifetime of waiting.

If the thread was pulled, it would bring the cat back to Stone Mountain, and down into innocent, unsuspecting Maywell. There was, however, only one reason to do this appalling thing.

Of late Constance had known renewed hope. There was a chance, after all, that the final chapter in a very old story would at last be written.

Constance, Dr. Walker, Brother Pierce—three of the main characters are in place. There remains only one more, and she is already approaching the town, chugging along in her ancient Volkswagen Beetle.

Even more promising, it is jammed with luggage and easels.

An observer of the invisible could see that the particular thread that is tied to the cat's ear has wafted down and fallen across Morris Stage Road. The old Volks wheezes, its gears grind, and it moves closer.

Hidden breezes blow the thread about, entangling it in the lower limbs of an autumn-fired birch. Now the thread is tight.

Closer and closer the car comes, its blond young driver peering out. There are no exit markers here. She has been told to take the third right after the big crossroads. She is counting and staring as the car sweeps into the thread. She experiences nothing more than a trickle and a sneeze, but off in the cat's realm things are quite different. The cat is dragged, howling with pain and anger, all the way to the dreary, windswept ridges of old Stone.

For a moment nothing more happens, but that is only because the cat's eyes are shut tight.

As the shock wears off, it blinks, then begins to gaze.

Huge, golden cat eyes appear, hanging above an otherwise empty expanse of rock.

The cat glares down into the weave of Maywell's life, to see what fool has dared this conjuring.

BOOK ONE:

Godfather Death

The glacier knocks in the cupboard,

The desert sighs in the bed,

And a crack in the tea-cup opens

A lane to the land of the dead.

—W. H. Auden, “As I Walked Out One Evening”

Chapter 1

The frog wanted desperately to hop. But it couldn't hop. It jerked, then jerked again. It stayed where it was, clamped down tight. It flexed, tightened, jerked. The hot, dry hurting kept on. The frog worked its tongue. Pain. It tried to move its head. Pain. Things were piercing it. Again and again it tried to hop. But it stayed right where it was, in this hard white place with no leaves and no whirring wings and no sharp delicious bugs to wrestle from the air.

It tried to hop.

Still, it did not move.

It tried. Tried. Tried.

It hurt, it had to move, it had to *hop*.

"There we go—no—hell. Bonnie, the animal is still too slick."

Painful, tormenting, scraping all over its back, hot and dry. It hopped hopped hopped.

"Thanks. Now... yeah!"

"That did it, George. The probe's well seated. I haw a good signal."

"Okay, Clark. Let's get started."

On Stone Mountain the creature—which was still only eyes—began spinning itself a cat body so it would be ready as soon as the sun went down. Two sparrows, who saw something astonishing create its own solid presence out of thin air, took flight, screaming in the silence. A raccoon stiffened and stared, and mewed. What it saw had no taxonomic classification. No, indeed, for it belonged to a rare law, this creature of mercy. Pacing now, it waited for the sunlight to rise away from the streets of the town. And suffered along with the frog.

The frog understood nothing it saw around it. There were long strands sweeping out above its eyes. It could see every turn and wrinkle in the wires leading from its skull. But it did not understand the wires. It saw them as legs, and thought of bugs.

It liked to use its good eyes, to see sharp. Seeing sharp meant eating well. But there were no wings whirring, no fat bodies, no good scent connected with the sight of these long legs. The frog's tongue swelled with the blood of hunger. It wanted to see insects, to smell dampness, to be in green water. It

wanted to hop. But it was stuck right where it was.

“That looks like a good, steady electroencephalograph to me, Clark. The frog’s normal. Not too happy, but normal.”

“Don’t let it jerk out my electrodes, Bonnie. I hate frogs. Give me something big any day.”

“Like what?”

“Like a person, Bonnie dear.”

“Constance wouldn’t like that.”

“No, and she doesn’t like this either.”

“You’re doing it.”

“She might not like our work, but she appreciates the necessity, at least. That’s more than I can say for the Stohlmeyer people. Sometimes I think they’re secret followers of Brother Pierce.”

“God, don’t bring him up. I don’t want my hands to shake while I’m working.”

A silence fell among the three people in the lab. They all knew the eventual object of their experiment, the goal given them five years ago by Constance Collier: to kill a human being and return him or her back to life. Her goal, her program.

But Constance didn’t like all the animal killing they had to do to succeed. “I feel every one of those deaths,” she had told George. “Maybe I’ve made a mistake. Maybe you ought to stop.”

He would never stop. He had pursued this goal at Yale and destroyed his career mere. He would pursue it at Maywell and drag his name up out of the mud. He was going to vindicate himself in this little backwater. One day this college would be famous because of what he had done here.

The technician, Clark, finally spoke. “Okay, folks, I’m ready to proceed.”

“I’m set,” said Dr. Walker.

“Bonnie, how about the audiovisual?” Clark asked.

“Up and running.”

“Right. Here we go. Beginning the count. Five.”

The frog felt heavy, as if it were buried in mud. Heavy and smothering. Its heart began to beat harder.

“Four.”

Something tickled inside the frog. It was terrible, this feeling, like nothing else the frog had known, tickling under its skin, like water spiders running there. The frog tried to move, to escape the tickling, but the weight seemed to

bear down the more. Fear made its eyes bulge.

“Three.”

It was as if the frog were being tom apart. It had a vision of talons, of huge whistling wings.

Death came to it then, and its heart slowed.

The smell of water rose up around the terrified creature, then became a vision, water in darkness. The talons let go, and the frog fell into the quiet water, then it was dawn and flies were rising, and the frog was on a lily pad singing up the sun.

“Two.”

The dream sank to dark, and the frog felt itself falling into nothingness.

“One.”

The black parted, and the water dream of a moment ago lay before the frog, and this time it was real.

The frog was free. It hopped easily to the good-smelling water, and the water splashed around it and made its skin jitter with pleasure as it dove down into a black bass pool. Reefs of tadpoles swept past and sticklebacks darted in shafts of sunlight, then the frog went up again and broke the surface amid blooming lilies.

“We have complete termination. It’s dead, George.”

Cloaked by darkness at last, the cat began to move down the mountain. As it did, its form flickered and grew ever more solid. When it crossed the ridge, it was a shadow of a cat, a shudder in the light, a wisp of colder air. When it reached the edge of Maywell, it was a scampering, dark suggestion of something quite familiar.

By the time it came into the streetlight at the corner of Indian and Bridge it was quite clearly an old black tomcat with a tom ear and a proud, bent tail.

At least, that’s what it looked like. Animals and children, though, were not deceived. They sensed the true shape of this vast and terrible being, and were filled with dread.

All over the town cats awakened and stared at darkened windows. Strays slid beneath porches or huddled under cars. Birds stirred in their trees and dogs at their masters’ feet. Here and there a napping infant screamed. On the grounds of the Collier estate old Constance paused in her walk, closed her eyes, and entered the immense space within herself. She knew she should try to stop Tom, but she did not.

George would manage, he was a survivor. And the poor frog!

In any case, her gesture would probably be futile. Such a deep violation of the laws of life was making the cat awfully mad. Constance's interference wouldn't even be noticed.

The black tom began his progress across Maywell, intent only on one goal; Animal Room Two, Terrarium D-22, Wolff Biology Building. He hurried down the sidewalk on the right side of Bartlett Street, past the tall homes that had housed the same Maywell families for generations, the Haspells and the Lohses and the Coxons, families whose ancestors had seen the Revolution from those leaded-glass windows, who had leaped in the springtime fields and left mandrakes for the fairy.

The tom passed a red Mustang convertible beneath which an elderly and very arthritic tabby hid.

The tom heard its wheezing breath, saw the pain in its eyes. Frightened of the enormous spirit it saw stalking down the walk, the tabby yowled miserably.

The tom stopped. He lowered his head, concentrated on the neglected, dying animal before him. A sensitive paw reached out and touched the cowering tabby. *I give you the gift of death, old cat. You have earned it.* Instantly the tabby's body slumped. The tom watched its soul leap up like smoke into the starry sky.

None of the tabby's fleas crossed to the tom. They chose rather to risk the cold autumn ground.

The tom continued on its way, and everything sensitive to it took notice as they might the transit of a wendigo. As it passed the Coxon house, it brought a vision to the innocently open mind of little Kim, the eleven-month-old baby. She began to wail in her crib. She didn't know words, but in a painful, true flash from the enormous mind that was passing, she had seen her own end, far from now in a sleek blue thing she did not yet know was called a car, in the bellowing water of a flooded river, on another autumn night.

And in the prime of youth.

Hearing the desolation in her cries, Kim's mother came into the nursery, picked her up, and clucked and sang and patted. "Oh, had a burp," her mother said. "Such a big burp!" When the wailing passed, she put Kim down.

The frog found fat, lovely flies skimming along the surface of the water. It

caught them, aiming with its keen eyes, darting its tongue.

Something the frog might have called a goddess, had it known of such things, marched the water, raining desire down on the feeding bull, making it forget its feeding and follow.

“Monitor the blood flow in die extremities. We’ll wait until it stops completely before we bring our baby back.”

The frog was jumping and leaping for the green goddess, wanting to show that it was the greatest bull, the bull of bulls, huge and strong and thunder-voiced. It dove deep, shot to the surface, dove again.

“That’s the last of it, George. No more blood flow.”

“So we can confirm one absolutely dead *Rana catesbeiana*?”

“By any definition. Even the Stohlmeyer Foundation’s.”

“This time. Doctor, they’ll accept our protocols. For sure.”

“Thanks, Bonnie.” George Walker kissed her straw-sweet twenty-year-old hair. He stood to his full height, six feet of slim but fiftyish male. God, he thought, the beauty of her youth! “I have ninety seconds of null readings, Doctor.”

“Good, Clark. I think we’ll convince ‘em this time.”

“For sure,” Bonnie repeated.

And if we don’t, George thought, you kids are going to be’ out of Maywell State College on your tight little asses just like me. No Stohlmeyer grant means no professorship—and no assistantships either. But then again, what would Clark care—he had the Covenstead to return to. Bonnie was too wild to live in Constance Collier’s witch village. As for George, he kept his house in town. He had his reasons for staying away from the estate, chief among them his career. It was one thing for people to commute into New York from the Covenstead, another for them to try and work in the town.

Any professor foolish enough to have open contact with the witches could forget things like tenure.

If the Stohlmeyer grant ended, Constance might find George some money for his work, but the grant was the validation that the college trustees needed to allow him to continue it here. Loss of the grant meant loss of career. George could not bear that thought: he had worked so hard, and been so misunderstood.

“Let’s earn some gold, kiddies, and bring this little sucker back to life.”

The frog heard, thrumming in the whole air, a rush as of bird wings. It was

low and large, too large even to be a bird. Was it wind?

The frog saw scud on the surface of the waters, saw the lilies tearing, saw the leaves of cypress and willow lift into the black sky, heard the thrumming rise to a scream. It waited no longer, but rather leaped for the dark, safe deeps.

A shimmering, golden goddess of a frog swam there. The bull's heart was captured and he went deeper and deeper after her, his loins tingling, his muscles singing in the quiet. She lured him farther and farther, deeper than any frog should go. Come, she said with her quickness. Swim, she said with her grace.

Swim! Swim!

The wind was seething behind him, roaring through the lilies, ripping the green and quiet waters, the holy pond.

Swim, little one, the goddess called, swim with all your soul!

The black tom began to run. He rounded a corner onto, Meecham Street. The neighborhood changed from houses to a row of neat little shops. Bixter's Ice Cream was open, its video games clattering and buzzing. Beside it the B. Dalton bookstore was just closing up. Joan Kominski locked her register and turned out her lights. The passing tom, unnoticed by her, shot her a vision of her own future: she was in a hospital room dragging breaths that would not fill her lungs. The hallucination was so detailed that she could smell the oxygen, see a picture of a clown on the wall, hazy beyond the plastic oxygen tent, taste her own drowning fluids. And feel Mike's hand in hers and hear him calling "Doctor, Doctor!"

She paused, stunned. With shaking hands she lit a cigarette. She stood in her darkened bookshop, smoking, calming herself down.

The tom trotted quickly down Main and crossed the Morris Stage Road. Mike Kominski was roaring home full of Amtrak martinis, late as usual from his job in New York, and it would not do to be caught in front of that particular Lincoln.

The wind was just behind the frog now and he knew it was dry and he knew it was hot. He swam and swam in the roiling, dirtying, darkening waters. Ahead the maiden frog, the goddess, glimmered, urging him to rush on and on, deep to her, deep to her!

"We're getting an electrical field!"

The wind touched his back and it was hot and ugly and hard. It must be deathwind, for it smelled of the man-place.

He must not surrender to it! Ahead she flashed her gold beauty. He swam as he had never swum before, the water hissing past his nose and eyes, his whole body surging with the effort of it. Her eyes shone and her skin gleamed.

The wind touched him again.

“Heartbeat!”

No!

The wind surrounded him.

“It’s coming to rhythm.”

The wind sucked at him—

“It’s getting steady.”

His whole heaven collapsed. But she did not abandon him. Alone of all that beauty, the most beautiful part remained. When she saw him being dragged back, she turned and came, too, swimming fearlessly into the dry agony that had captured him. She ceased to animate his determination and concentrated on giving him courage. She went deep, deep into him, into the secret place where glowed the strength of his spirit.

Then he hurt all over and he was hungry and he was hot and it was white and there were no fly smells and it was bleak again.

“It’s alive, George!”

“Damn right it is.” George Walker could hardly restrain himself. He stood up from the bank of instruments, he clapped his hands. And Bonnie leaped, a blond streak of joy, into his arms. He kissed her moist lips.

He enjoyed the deliciousness of the girl while young Clark looked on, glasses steaming. Relax, Clark, let an old man get a little. What does it matter, you get all you need on the Covenstead.

George did not have that privilege. His relationship to Constance was too deep a secret; he could not go on the Covenstead except by dark of night, and then only in those rare instances when he was called.

And as for living among the witches—well, if his work here was ever done, maybe. He had never told Constance his dream of retiring to the hidden witch village.

He was afraid to. If she said to him what he feared, that it was not his fate to find peace in this life, he did not think he could stand it.

Sometimes the loneliness of his position was very hard to bear.

“We’ve got to get it out of the halter,” Clark said, his voice full of testy eagerness. “It’ll dehydrate. We really don’t need a damaged specimen, do we, folks.”

Bonnie broke away from George’s hovering presence. “I’ll bag it and return it to the terrarium.”

“The isolate,” George said. “And band it with the date and time. Under no circumstances do we mix this little piece of gold up with the other beasties.”

The frog was soon in the awful, waterless pond with the magic walls. It knew what it had to do here. Sit. A hop meant a hurt on the nose. The magic wall could not be seen, but it was as hard as the skin of a floating log.

So the frog sat. Remembering its heaven was almost enough to make it turn itself inside out with agony. It begged the golden frog to help.

I cannot!

Take me back, please.

I cannot!

Dried, dead flies scattered down, sticking to its nose. The frog’s tongue did not go to get them.

Please, please.

I cannot!

The frog felt a cleaving that in higher things is called love, for the lost green water. All it could do, though, was sit, inert and mute, silent.

Frogs are not made for anguish. Nor to have their deaths stolen from them. Nor to be dragged back from their humble paradise.

Frogs are made for joy.

The Wolff Building crouched dark and ugly ahead. Nobody saw the incredible way the tom entered the building, nor saw it slip down the corridor to just the right door.

But the instant the cat went through that door the frog knew.

The frog saw dangerous eyes on the other side of the magic wall. Once it would have hopped away from such terrible eyes, but now it only sat, apathetic. In its brain there repeated the image of the deep water and the golden lover it had lost.

Even when the huge black head of the tom came oozing right through the magic wall, the frog did not hop. Had it understood the miracle involved in a cat pushing its head through solid glass without breaking it, the frog might

have jumped. But it did not understand the magic wall. As far as it knew, the only purpose of glass was to disappoint frogs.

The cat nudged the frog with its muzzle, then opened its mouth. The sharp frog eyes saw the tongue, the white fangs, the gently pulsating throat. And it saw more.

Instead of terror, the frog felt eagerness. For down in the cat's throat it saw its lost beauty, her skin touched by sunlight. She lay in a crystal pond, tadpoles swimming about her flanks.

Heaven was in the belly of the cat. The frog laid his head in the tom's mouth.

This was one death it did not have to suffer. The tom snapped its jaws down so fast the frog felt nothing.

But then it had already died once and that was quite enough. It saw a fierce flash of light and heard a sound like tearing leaves, and was gone.

The cat tasted the cold, sour flesh of the frog, gobbled, drank down the cool blood, felt the eyes sticky against its tongue, the skin slick and bland, the muscles salty. It swallowed the frog.

When it returned to the night, the moon had risen red in the east, its light diffused by haze from the Peconic Valley Power Company's plant twenty miles away in Willowbrook, Pennsylvania. The tom proceeded along North Street toward Maywell's one and only housing development, "The Lanes," built by Willowbrook Resources in 1960. The development's sameness had over the years been camouflaged by trees. Each of the streets had been named after a familiar variety. The birches planted on Birch were tall and blue in the moonlight, the spruce on Spruce dark green. On Elm there were oak saplings and one or two still-struggling Dutch elm victims.

The cat passed down Maple Lane until it reached the Walker house, a substantial raised ranch with pale yellow aluminum siding and a '79 Volvo in the driveway. Beside it was Amanda's ancient VW Beetle.

The tom went between the two cars, through the closed garage door, and into the game room beyond. It was indifferent to the fact that the lights were on; it knew that the room was empty. It slipped behind the sofa just as Amanda, nervous and hollow-eyed, entered. It cocked its ears toward her, and heard much more than her breathing, her movements. It heard the voice of her mind, the thready whisper of her soul.

She looked around, shaking her head. Here she was again, back in this awful house. She knew that this was a triumphal return to Maywell, but having to stay in this place cast a brown shadow on her victory. Too bad she couldn't afford the Maywell Motor Inn. But she was lucky to have managed to get enough gas for the Volks, given the present state of her finances.

This house... this town... the only thing about any of it that brought even a flicker of a fond memory was the thought of Constance Collier herself, with her wild colony of witches out on the estate, and her flamboyant seasonal rituals, the fires burning on the hillsides and the wild rides through the town.

It all seemed so peaceful now. As she had gotten older, Constance must have mellowed.

Sneaking out to the Collier estate to see the witches dancing naked in their April fields had been desperately exciting, one of the few thrills of being a child in this staid community.

Always, though, there had been this house waiting at the end of a happy day. She had come home to the resentments and the sorrows: this was a place of unspoken anger, where people wept at night.

She looked around her. Everything was brown and sad. Since George had bought it from his brother, it had—if possible—gotten even worse. There was an open chill on it now, as if hate was glaring into every room, from the walls, the doors, the very air. There was no more hypocrisy here, at least. The body of the house now reflected its soul.

Standing in the family room, Amanda felt the weight of the place. She remembered one awful night when she had come in from watching—almost participating in—the Halloween ritual on the Collier estate. Her father had slammed her up against that very wall. “Never, never get near that place!” His voice had been desolate with sorrow.

What would he think now? In a few days she was going to be working with Constance Collier.

She wouldn't participate in witchcraft. She had no time for such fantasies. Of course, it would be interesting to learn more about what went on at the estate.

She dropped down onto the old couch, the same one that had been here in her childhood. She was twenty and living on her own when she discovered that it was not necessary to be sad. Life could be rich and fulfilling. There was an aesthetic to living that had to be carefully learned, though, or there was the danger of falling down the same pit that had swallowed her parents,

the pit of spiritual bankruptcy and moral indifference.

Through the dirty glass sliding doors she could see the backyard. The old maple where she had spent so many summer hours was still here, and her throat tightened a little to see it. Ten years ago she might have been in that maple on an afternoon like this, sitting in the palace of leaves.

Ten years. The silences were growing longer. Her relationships with her parents continued, dragging themselves out in her mind. If she had to stay here, memories that were now no more than haunting would soon become unbearable.

She hoped that Constance Collier would have some space for her out on the estate. Then this hard journey would become much easier.

The only thing that would ever have brought her back to Maywell was Constance Collier. Now she was here, chosen to paint the illustrations for the renowned writer's new translation of Grimm's. It was the biggest and best commission she had ever had.

Mandy had come a long way for a twenty-three-year-old woman. A long, hard way. Of course the Caldecott Award for her *Rose and Dragon* illustrations had helped. She believed that the work itself, though, was what had attracted the secretive and distant Constance Collier's attention to an anonymous former townie.

She could create whole, complete worlds in her imagination, and paint them down to the last strand of golden hair.

Hands dropped onto her shoulders. "Oh!"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"Uncle George."

She could only feel kindness toward him, since he had been so willing to let her stay here. As soon as she came in, she had understood the reason for his eagerness: without Kate and the kids, this place was more grim than it had ever been before.

"You're looking lovely, Amanda."

"Why not? I've escaped Manhattan, and tomorrow I meet Constance Collier."

As he looked at her, his eyes brimmed with what she suspected might even be desire. Had she been a damn fool to stay with him? Perhaps she should have gone straight to the estate. But Miss Collier hadn't offered her accommodation. All of her old town habits came back. She dared not be forward with Maywell's leading citizen. Her agent had agreed. "Don't

jeopardize the project by making demands right at first,” Will T. Turner had advised.

“Have you got anything to drink?” Amanda asked. George padded off in his big sheepskin slippers, across the chipped linoleum of the game-room floor.

“Old Mr. Boston brandy good enough for you?”

She took it and sipped. “Mmm. Just the thing to relax.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Mandy.” He stood close to her. “I’m sorry the house was such a mess when you came. I just completely forgot. We’ve been very busy over at the lab.”

“Doing good things?”

“I’m hopeful.”

She nodded, sipped again.

“It’s just that I’m so damn tired.” He snorted out a laugh. “We were very successful today. Very successful.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

“Not really. Except to say that it was rather a triumph.” His eyes regarded her steadily.

If she stayed in this house, George was certain to make passes at her. She did not need that. She would have to risk giving Constance offense and request a room at the estate when they met in the morning.

She was ready to ask George some polite question about his triumph, when something unusual happened. One of her most treasured talents was the ability to have detailed visualizations on demand. But they never came like this, unbidden.

And yet, despite the fact that she was healthy and not in the least tired, she found herself in the grip of just such an uncalled vision.

She saw a haggard George, crouching in a dark room, perhaps even the awful cold room in this house’s basement. Her mother used to store coats there, in what had been billed in the brochure as a wine cellar.

It was where Mandy and Charlie Picano had gone for prolonged kissing behind the coatrack.

It was where their cat Punch had died, starved to death while the family was on vacation. Nobody had noticed that he had been shut in there.

It was where the children had whispered tales of witchcraft in Maywell, and Marcia Cummings had insisted that witches were good.

In Mandy’s vision a woman lay on a table in the room, which had been

transformed from a place of mystery into a torture chamber. The woman was dead, but George was not sad.

At the moment George was smiling. Mandy recoiled at the sight of his cadaverous grin.

“Mandy?” His smile faded. He began watching her closely.

She threw back her brandy.

“You’re good at that.”

“I’ve become a city girl, remember. And I’m tired from the drive. I want to go to bed.”

“I’m sorry I forgot to make up the guest room.”

“Don’t worry about it. I can make a bed.”

When she started for the room, he followed her. As they walked together through the quiet house, she hoped against hope that it would not be—but of course it was her old room.

He paused before the door and took her shoulders in his hands. He kissed her forehead. “Good night, Mandy.”

She fought down the shaking. When he kissed her, his lips felt like two leather straps. “Good night, George.” She turned to face her past.

George and Kate had raised two kids here and not even changed the wallpaper. Mandy remembered selecting it at Chasen’s on Main, being torn between the cornflowers and these repeating rose arbors. She had chosen the roses and then planted a rose garden beneath her window. Over three years her roses had flourished, and she had secretly called herself the Rose Girl. Only Marcia knew it! told Aunt Constance,” she had whispered when they were naked beneath the covers of a soft June night.

“You told her?”

“She said to give you a message. ‘Tell the Rose Girl that I love her and watch over her.’ ”

“Me?”

Marcia had squeezed her, and they had slept in one another’s arms, two ten-year-olds so innocent that their nakedness meant only friendship to them. “She loves us all. Let me take you to meet her.”

That was strictly forbidden. Dad hated Constance Collier, hated Maywell. He was only here because Peconic made him be here in his capacity as regional manager.

How Mandy had dreamed, lying in that bed beneath the window. Sometimes she saw witch lights on Stone Mountain; sometimes she watched

the red moon rising, or the stars.

There was dust in this house, dust and loneliness. And something else, too, she reflected as she closed the guest room door. There was a place in the living room wall that had recently been patched, as if a fist had been slammed into it. Shades of Dad. "George is a violent man," Kate had told her. And Kate had left him.

Mandy brushed her teeth and lay down on her bed in the dark. The moon made a pale shadow across the floor. A hollow autumn wind muttered in the dry leaves. Down the street a dog howled.

The old tom came out of his hiding place and proceeded across the game room, through the big eat-in kitchen, pausing in the living room. Against the perspective of the furniture the cat seemed unnaturally large.

It had a weathered, surprisingly kind face. And that kinked tail was endearing. The shredded ear, though, was almost comical, making it seem as if the whole cat was lopsided.

The tom waited on the sun porch where Mandy's easel and canvases were installed, waited amid the smell of linseed oil and paint. It saw the skill in her brushstrokes, and drank in the energy of the young woman. Poor, confused young woman. She had no idea how dangerous this story would be to her, as it unfolded.

She had painted a haunted landscape with a fairy stealing down a moonlit path... painted it with skill and even passion, and more than a little of her own heart's truth. But what a relentlessly sentimental notion of a fairy. It looked like a bug, with those wings. And it was far too small. The picture had the fatal defect of charm.

Settling sounds began to come from the bedrooms. The cat grew still. It closed its eyes, concentrating on every nuance of their beings. It felt as they felt, sensed as they sensed, shook its dirty old body as they tossed and turned, gazed with George as he adored the mental images of his women, Bonnie and his lost Kate, and Mandy, felt the pulsing, stifled sensation in his loins, and knew with him the dreadful weight of time.

The old tom waited until the moon was at the top of the sky to begin.

Then it moved off to commit the next act of the story.

It stole into George's bedroom, listened a moment to his sleep. In one quick motion it leaped upon his bed. It heard his heart laboring softly and faithfully on toward its eventual breaking end, listened to his stomach digesting the day's meals, felt his dreams, haunted dreams of frogs and death

and girls and loss.

The tom walked softly up his sleeping body, until its big head hung over his throat. It looked down at the pulsing artery in George Walker's neck. It opened its mouth, its fangs just inches from the flesh. George Walker sighed, as if inwardly aware of the death overlooking him.

The cat gagged softly and regurgitated. Something green and slimy slipped out of its mouth and onto George's face. By the time he had taken the first shocked breath of awakening, the cat was in the enclosed porch, passing the easels and paints. By the time George was gasping and fumbling for the light, the cat was going through the back door.

It slipped beneath the back porch as lights pierced the windows of the house and Mandy's feet pounded down the hall while George Walker screamed and screamed.

Chapter 2

One moment Mandy was asleep, the next she was running down the hall toward George's bedroom. His screams called her deep instincts, so high they were, so like a panicked baby's. Her first, hideous thought was of fire.

Then she saw him, crouched in the middle of the bed, his fists clutching his thin hair. Moonlight streamed over him, making him seem a dangerous shadow. She fumbled for the light switch, found it at last behind the door, turned it on.

The suffusing yellow light changed him to a crumpled old man. Something obscene and wet and green lay on the sheet before him. He was screaming at it. She went to him. Another bellow gushed out of him. His eyes were staring, oblivious to everything except the sticky mass on the bed. Each time he screamed, flecks of bloody sputum flew from his mouth.

"George!"

She grasped his shoulders, shook him. He was as rigid as wood. His skin was cold. He shrieked again.

"George!"

There were a series of broken gasps. Then another shriek, cracking, pitched like the cry of a bird.

"Hey!" She grabbed his cheeks, leaned into his face. His nostrils flared, his lips parted for another scream. She slapped him hard across the right cheek. The scream shattered, became a sob. She turned his face and slapped him on the left cheek. "George, wake up! You're dreaming!"

He raised his hands to ward off her blows. For a moment they remained like that, she holding his chin, he seeking sanity in her eyes. Then he sank against her, sobbing bitterly. She held his thin frame against her breast. "George, hush now, it's all right. It's all right."

"The hell it is!" His voice was hoarse. "Look at that! You know what that is?"

It was green, blotched with brown, so wet that it had made an irregular damp spot on the sheet. "What?"

"A skin." He sighed. "The skin of a frog. *My frog*." Then he was crying, silently, bitterly, his shoulders shaking, the tears streaming from his eyes.

He could only be referring to the frogs he used in his lab. But what in the world would one of them be doing here? She looked at it. Lying there on his

bed, in a place so wildly wrong, it made her feel all the power of the wind that souged around the house. Her thoughts went to snapping clean sheets and sunny rooms and she shuddered.

“Why is it here, George?”

“It really isn’t very mysterious.” He cleared his throat. “I need a drink.”

“Now, you take it easy. I’ll get it. You stay put.”

“Not in here.” He got out of bed. In four spider steps he was across the room. He took his robe from the closet.

She followed him into the game room, where he had already started pouring Black Label into a highball glass.

“Cheers,” he said. “Here’s to *religion!*”

She had accumulated a fair number of questions in the past few minutes. But she did not press him now. He needed space to calm himself down. Although he was talking instead of screaming, she saw the wildness of his panic still in his eyes. “Come here,” she said, patting the couch beside her. He sat down. She laid her arm around his shoulders.

Soon enough, he began to explain. “This was undoubtedly the work of a religious fanatic named Pierce.

He has one of these fundamentalist churches here. Brother Simon Pierce. A Bible-thumping charlatan.”

“Yes?”

“He—they, I should say—they’ve demonstrated against my work. He preaches against it. Death is God’s business, that sort of thing.”

“The mess in your bed—”

He snorted out a bitter laugh. “You don’t understand, do you?”

“No.”

“That is the skin of a frog I killed and brought back to life this afternoon.”

So that had been the triumph he had referred to earlier. “You actually succeeded?”

“You bet I did. Well-nigh perfectly.” He uttered a sharp laugh. “Of course you know we’re already virtually canceled by the Stohlmeyer Foundation?”

He said it like it should have been general knowledge. “I didn’t know that. Why in the world would they cancel such an incredible project?”

“Precisely because it is incredible. The academic world doesn’t like breakthroughs. It doesn’t like upset and bother. It wants nice, safe confirmations of old theories. The unusual is frowned on, the extraordinary actively discouraged. So my grant money runs out in a couple of weeks.

Unless, of course, I should produce a result so spectacular that it gets massive press attention. Then Stohlmeyer'd be forced to renew my funding or face embarrassment. This frog was to be my spectacular."

"You can repeat the experiment on another frog."

"Not in the time I have. It takes a lot of prep. To satisfy the protocols the review committee imposed on us, we have to prove the animal to be completely healthy before we use it. That takes a good week of observation and testing." He paused, stared into his drink. "Oh, God, when I think of how close I came." His shoulders sagged. "My problem with Brother Pierce started out so innocently. Three months ago I gave an interview to *The Collegian*. The very next Sunday Pierce was on my case. The seeds of ego bear bitter fruit, goddammit!"

She thought she ought to say something encouraging. She didn't much like George, but he was suffering now. "You can keep going. I know you can."

"The frog was just a first step. Next we were going to do a series on rhesus monkeys, then the big one. The experiment beyond the spectacular. It would have made me famous. Famous, Mandy! I would have rehabilitated my career. The Yale Sciences Board would have had to swallow their slap in the face. Maywell would have to stop treating me like dirt just because I've failed elsewhere. It's rime that I got a little recognition, don't you think?"

Beneath her hand she could feel the bones of his shoulder. He was much too obsessed with his work ever to get any exercise. He was wasting away.

He slammed his fist into his palm. "It's breaking and entering! Malicious mischief! I'm going to call the sheriffs office." He got to his feet.

"You're sure it's your frog? Maybe it's another animal. Just symbolic."

"That fanatic broke into my lab, killed my property, came over here, broke into my house, and assaulted me!" As he spoke, his voice rose to a pitch of renewed rage..He dialed the phone. "This is George Walker, 232 Maple. Yes, I haw a crime to report! Breaking and entering. Assault. Who's the victim? I'm the victim! And I know who did it. I know exactly who did it!"

He listened a moment further, then slammed down me phone.

"They're going to come by in a few minutes. Oh, *hell!*" He picked up the phone again. "Bonnie? Hi, hon. Sorry to disturb you in the middle of the night. Look, will you do me a massive favor? I think the lab got hit by Pierce. Yeah, by Pierce. I'm 90 percent certain. And I've got reason to believe he destroyed the frog." There was silence, punctuated by a burst of language from the other end of the line. "Go over there and check. And call me as soon

as you can. I've got to have complete confirmation before the sheriff gets here. That's a love, Bonnie. I'll repay in grades." He put the receiver down. "She's general lab assistant. Her dorm is just across the quad from Wolff. I ought to hear from her inside often minutes."

Mandy had a strong feeling that he shouldn't have called the sheriff's office. "George, try to calm down before the sheriff gets here."

"Why? I've just been assaulted, I've had my experiment set back, maybe even ruined if I can't get another extension from Stohlmeyer. Why, pray tell, should I be calm? If anything, I ought to be raving mad. And I am!"

"Just stay away from the liquor. And brush your teeth. If they smell you've been drinking, they're going to ignore you."

"Mandy, I was assaulted in my own bed!"

"Think about what happened, George. How is it going to look to a cop?"

She left him to dwell on that. Alone in her own room again, she fumbled through the closet for her robe. Deep tiredness weighed upon her. It was just after three o'clock. The moon had dropped low, leaving the room in shadow. By the moonlight that lingered outside she could still see the bulk of Stone Mountain rising behind the house, its thick coat of evergreens punctuated by gray-glowing tumbles of rock—

Mandy pulled on her robe and opened the window so that the cold air would refresh her. It smelled of the sweet rot of autumn leaves faintly tanged by old smoke. She could see Ursa Major wheeling above the dark high ridge of the mountain.

The Great Bear. Woman's stars. The little girls of Athens once danced beneath them, honoring Artemis the wild huntress, who prowled the autumn hills in the shape of a bear. As a child Mandy's favorite cuddly had been a stuffed bear named Sid.

Car lights shone on the back fence as the sheriff turned into the driveway. Mandy drew her robe close around her and went back to George.

He swept the front door open before the bell even rang. "Come on in."

"You the complainant?"

"I sure am."

The deputy was a lean man, his face all angles and lines exaggerated by the porch light. At his hip he had a big pistol, too big for the thin hand that rested on its butt. There were dark glasses in his top pocket, one chewed fret dangling out. His lips were dry and cracked. There was what appeared to be a food stain on the crown of his hat. He moved forward into the house, and

Mandy smelled chili on his breath. He regarded George. "Assault?"

"That's right."

"You hurt?"

"Mentally I'm seriously injured." The phone rang. George rushed to get it while Mandy stared back at the deputy, whose eyes had filmed in an unpleasantly intimate way the moment he saw her. Once she would have hated him, but too many whistles and whispers and unwanted touches had taught her indifference to men like this. As she had matured, their sexual insecurity had become obvious to her. She thought of them as frightened kids, unable to grow up, trapped on the rock of adolescence.

George's voice rose and fell as he talked into the telephone.

"Would you like a cup of coffee. Deputy?"

"Yes, ma'am. It tastes pretty good about this time of night."

"Come on." She led him to the kitchen, made him a cup of instant. She was just pouring the water when George burst into the room.

"Just as I thought, the frog's gone! That damn preacher got in there somehow and took it. And killed it. Shit!"

The deputy shot Mandy a questioning glance. "There was vandalism at Dr. Walker's lab," she said.

"Now, that'd be a college matter. We don't go on the campus."

"It started there," George snapped, "but it ended here. Come on." He led the deputy into his bedroom. The remains of the frog lay on the white bed sheet, drying to dull green. "There is where it ended. Brother Pierce or one of his robots came in here in the middle of the night and dropped that thing on my face!"

"Who did you say?"

"Pierce! That fundamentalist lunatic! He hates me and my work. He preaches against me! He's even led a demonstration."

The deputy put his coffee mug down. "You saw this man?"

"Of course not. I was asleep."

"Now, if I understand you right, you're preferring a charge?"

"Of course I am! I'm charging that fanatic with destroying university property worth God knows how much, with breaking into my lab and my home, with throwing that thing at me with intent to harm me—"

"Brother Pierce is a respected religious leader in Maywell, Dr. Walker. I don't think you ought to just go charging him like this, with no witnesses or nothin'."

“He’s the obvious culprit.”

The deputy glanced at Mandy. “The Lord will be on Brother Pierce’s side,” he said softly. His gaze returned to George, narrowed. “You just ought to know that. Not to mention the law.”

“The law? I’m the injured party!”

“You’re not hurt.” He ran his finger around the edge of the mug. Then he looked directly into George’s eyes. He smiled. “Not yet.” His voice was almost a whisper.

Poor George. No judge of men. Mandy saw his mouth drop open, then saw understanding slowly enter his face. He shook his head. “The college supports this town. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves.”

“You high-handed professors don’t run Maywell. And the college ain’t even the biggest employer. That’s Peconic Valley Power. Anyway, I’m just givin’ you some good advice. There’s penalties against preferring false charges. Stiff penalties, Doctor.”

“Ah. So now *I’m* going to be arrested. That makes a great deal of sense.”

“Listen, ma’am, why don’t you put him back to bed? And keep him off the hootch. It don’t do him no good.”

The deputy moved to leave. In an instant George was on him, spinning him around, grabbing the front of his jacket.

And staring into the barrel of his pistol.

The gun had come up swiftly. It hung between the two men, its potential silencing them both. They looked down at it. Mandy could hear them breathing, could see sweat on George’s brow.

“You take your hands off me, mister, and I’ll put my piece away.”

Mandy closed her eyes in the long moment before the two men separated. She saw the deputy to the door. He was about to say something to her, but she closed it too quickly to give him the chance.

“Useless! Utterly fucking useless! I’m telling you, Mandy, I hate this godforsaken little town. These people get someone like me, do they care? Hell, no! I’m going to immortalize this place. That lab of mine will be a museum someday. People will come here to see where the mystery of death was solved at last! And this rotten little town spits in my face.”

Mandy listened to her uncle rave. Outside the deputy’s car started up, its lights flaring briefly against the front window. Then its sound dwindled into the night. “It’s late. George. We’d better get some sleep.”

“Sleep? I’m going to the lab. I’ve got work to do.”

Her impulse was to try to stop him, but she realized that her efforts would only put him under greater pressure. She let him go.

In ten minutes his Volvo was cranking up, then rattling off down the street. She heard its tires squeal at the corner, then silence fell about her.

She returned to her bedroom. Too bad the door didn't lock. The idea of staying alone in a house that had been entered as easily and recently as this one did not appeal to her at all. She hadn't been in bed five minutes before she thought she heard a noise.

It was a scraping sound, and it came from the sun porch. She sat up in bed, looking into the dark and listening. The night settled close around her. The moon had set, the crickets stopped. The world had entered predawn thrall.

Again it came. Definitely from the sun porch. Carefully she pushed back the blanket and sheets and swung to the floor. Her first thought was to go to the kitchen and get a knife. But she'd have to cross the sun porch to do that. She went instead down the hallway, feeling her way in the dense shadows, until she had reached the entrance to the porch. While the stars rode and dry leaves whispered past the windows she waited. There was a feeling of sickness building in her stomach; her skin sang with the tickle of dread. She could not endure the suspense of staying here; she had to act. She would turn on the porch lights. They would surely scare away whoever was lurking beyond the door.

The switch clicked loudly. And she clapped her fist to her mouth to stifle a scream. What she saw made her back away on shaky legs. Then she realized that those glowing eyes were an animal.

Only an animal!

She laughed around her knuckles. Her heart slowed its awful pounding. The cat meowed.

"You poor cold baby," she said, coming into the light. "Let me get you some milk."

A stray cat at the door. What a joke. She had been terrified. As she went across the sun porch, through the dining room, and into the kitchen, she turned on more lights. She opened the huge yellow refrigerator and found it almost empty. There was a dried-up sausage of indeterminate age and make, a package of Oscar Mayer cotto salami, a loaf of Pepperidge Farm Bread, and down on the bottom shelf a pint carton of half-and-half. That the cat would love.

She filled a saucer and went back to the sun porch. When she opened the

back door, cold air came in, and with it a very fast, very large cat. She spilled a good bit of the milk jerking back as the animal made its rush.

It began lapping frantically at the spills on the floor.

“You *are* hungry, you poor creature!”

She closed the door behind it and put the saucer down beside its great head. It really was the most enormous cat. Black as sin, even its nose. It had a kink in the end of its tail and a ravaged ear.

“You poor, ugly old thing.” Gingerly she touched its back, half expecting it to bolt. But this was no wild creature. It arched to her touch, then drank all the harder. A starving, grateful, and very domestic beast. “You’re so sweet!”

She felt around its neck, but there was no sign of a collar. Her every touch drew a reaction from the animal. She found herself stroking it while it lapped at the milk, just to feel the undulating muscles beneath the soft black fur.

The cat finished and raised its head. When their eyes met, Mandy was fascinated. The eyes had a slightly sinister quality, the way they gazed so steadily back at her. They were sharply intelligent. The cat nosed her hand. It was silent; she could not seem to get it to purr, almost as if it was too independent for such an abject expression of gratitude.

“Are you still hungry?”

It stiffened, looked behind and above her. With the silence and grace of an angel it leaped over her head and into the hallway that led from the bedrooms to the sun porch. It was an amazing jump. “Kitty?”

From the direction of her bedroom there came a loud meow, sharp with beckoning. Mandy stood up, feeling a twinge of fear in her confusion, and followed the animal.

Questions. How could a mere cat jump like that? And where had it come from? And what sort of cat was it?

And wasn’t it beautiful, sharp-faced and glowing, lying on the foot of her bed, beckoning her with one open eye?

Fleas?

Ringworm?

Fever?

A meow, as soft as some heavenward breeze. And she was tired. She slipped into her bed. “You be a good watchcat, now.”

Almost as if drugged, she slept. She dreamed she was Alice, falling forever down the dark well of Wonderland.

Chapter 3

George dumped the bedroll he had brought up from his car onto the floor of the lab.

“What the hell is this? You going camping?”

“Living here is the only certain way to guard this lab. Brother Pierce has flunkies at the sheriffs office. To be safe, we have to assume he’s also got them among the campus cops.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.” Clark touched the bedroll with his toe. “I suppose you’re right.”

“I am right. This is Pierce’s town, not Constance’s—a fact which we ignore at our peril.”

“Constance was unhappy to hear what happened. She sends you a good wish.”

“Why not an effective spell against that cretin? I’m telling you, Clark, Connie’s got to either support me or abandon me. There’s no middle territory with this.”

Clark looked steadily at him. “I think a little equivocation is inevitable, given the personal consequences she faces if you succeed.”

George sighed. He couldn’t really blame Constance Collier. He understood why she rejected him; his work involved the transfer of power at the Covenstead. Of course it was hard for Connie. One leaf falls, another takes its place. The trees persists, but for the blazing leaf autumn is a catastrophe.

“She has to accept it. She’s getting old. God, they initiated her with a bullet to the head. She should be glad that science might take the risk out of it for Amanda.”

“Nothing will take the risk out of it. The risk is on the other side. You might ensure that the body will come alive again, but nobody can be certain that the soul will find its way back.”

“So Connie says. But at least the inheritor’s soul will have a body to return to. In the past that often wasn’t the case.”

“The problem is, they don’t always want to come back.”

“Well, that isn’t our concern. We’re only responsible for the body. Speaking of which, let’s get to work and see if this lab’s been booby-trapped or what.”

Clark moved to his station. He began testing their most important pieces of

equipment, the devices that killed and restarted the intercranial electrical field. With this apparatus they were learning to turn brains on and off like electric switches. “How seriously booby-trapped?”

George went to him. “A problem?”

“Not yet. It just occurred to me that it might blow up in my face. A booby trap could be a bomb, if they’re really serious.”

“Surely even Simon Pierce isn’t a terrorist.” When he thought about it, though, George wondered if they might not be in greater danger than he had realized.

Clark obviously shared his concern. “They’ve killed more than one witch, George.”

“The Gregorys?” It was supposed to have been an accident, the Gregory fire last winter. All four members of the family had been killed in their home. Libby Gregory was high priestess of one of the town covens.

George peered into the forest of wires that led to the isolation chamber where they had killed and restarted the frog. His gaze traveled along the red leads to each electro-magnetic coil. He was looking for a new wire snaking off to God knew what. “I think it’s okay.”

“Maybe we’d better stand back, just in case. And warn Bonnie.”

“Let’s do more than that. Let’s set the switches and then hit the generator from the other room. And open all the windows.”

They went into the main control room. Beyond, in the menagerie, Bonnie could be seen cleaning cages.

“Hey, Bonnie, we’re turning on the step-up transformer. Duck and cover, dearie.”

“What’s going on?”

“Look at this. I say ‘duck and cover’ and the first thing you do is poke your nose out. What if we were under attack? Do you realize that an atomic blast can vaporize you at four thousand feet? Unless you duck and cover, in which case you burn more slowly,”

“George, you’re so weird.”

“Weird and wonderful, my little chickadee. If we live through this, let’s go to bed together.”

“Clark, thrash that man.”

“Now, Clark, don’t deny an old man his pleasures.”

“I’m not interested in Bonnie. I have other plans.”

Bonnie bristled at that. “Constance going to marry you off to some

pubescent priestess, eh, so you can mind the babies while your wife spends all night lathered with ointment balling the priests?”

“You could live on the Covenstead if you would accept its rule,” Clark said gently. “It might do you a great deal of good.”

“I guess I’m too much of a rebel. Smelling all that health food when I go out there gives me an overwhelming compulsion to eat about four Big Macs. I’m best off being a town witch where I don’t have to live by a rule.”

“We don’t live by rules, Bonnie. We all agree on how we live.”

“Which means only that you’re willing to push a broom for the anointed and take orders from teenage girls.”

“No, that’s a complete misconception. There’s no fixed hierarchy on the Covenstead. Bonnie, I wish you’d just give a chance for a couple of weeks —”

“Okay, kids, let’s not get into that discussion right now when we could be sitting on Brother Pierce’s Fat Man on our way to Hiroshima. I’ve powered up the transformer. I’m going to open the lines.”

George stepped into the animal room with Bonnie and closed the door.

“George, is it really dangerous, or is your paranoia getting the better of you?”

“We’ve got to take precautions. They were in this lab, after all.”

“The other animals are fine, by the way,” Bonnie said. “Just the one frog missing.”

George shook his head. “The one frog.”

“I ran blood tests on Tess and Gort, to be sure there were no slow poisons or anything. They’re in good shape.”

“Small blessings count in this impoverished place. We can’t begin to afford new rhesus monkeys.”

“The lines are open,” Clark called. “I’m activating the cage.”

“Wait. Get out of (here.)”

“I have to watch the readings. If we overpulse we’ll burn out the whole thing.”

“It might be dangerous.”

Clark set his jaw. “Constance assigned me to this lab.” He needed to explain himself no further. George understood the loyalty of the witches to their queen. As a member of a town coven, he felt it himself, although less strongly.

The lights dimmed when Clark turned on the extremely intense magnetic

field that was the heart of the device. It was so powerful that electrons within it were forced to stasis. Electric motors in the field would stop, batteries cease to emit energy. And sensitive electrical systems, such as brains and nerves, would cease to function. A few seconds in this magnetic limbo sufficed to stop the animal's nervous system and render it effectively dead, although completely undamaged. As time passed, of course, cells would begin to deteriorate. Enough time and the deterioration would become irreversible. But before then the animal could be restarted by turning off the field and shocking its heart back into action.

The system was potentially safer than anesthesia, and the suspension of critical body functions opened up undreamed-of surgical possibilities. George felt that his work was important even beyond Constance's wish to use it in the ancient ritual of initiation. If things went right, he had a chance at immortality here. He dreamed of a Nobel, a chair at MIT, himself strolling the byways of Cambridge in a ratty tweed suit, ripe in age and honor.

The witch ritual was the most important thing right now, though. He loved the craft, its spirit and its aims. And the danger and drama of true initiation, the walk in the world of the dead: that was the greatest possible human adventure, and he was excited to be a part of it.

The ancient ritual now persisted in the West only at the Covenstead. Animists such as American Indians had stopped practicing it. Among the Apache, to become a shaman it had once been necessary to throw oneself off a cliff. Those who lived passed the initiation. Those who died, died.

George listened to the humming of the apparatus. It sounded fine. "What kind of readings, Clark?"

"Looks like we're okay. No unusual power drains, no sign of damage."

George returned to the main lab. He put his hand on Clark's shoulder. "That was a brave thing to do, staying in here."

"A calculated risk. I thought perhaps they wouldn't have the technical skill to hook a bomb into this system even if they wanted to."

Clark powered down the field. The lights flickered again, and the cage made a faint crackling noise. A sharp stench of ozone filled the air. George pressed the floor switch that turned on the ventilators. He realized that he was shaking. He was surprised that there hadn't been any damage to the equipment.

Suddenly he was weeping. Most men would have looked away, embarrassed. True to the custom of the witches, though, Clark threw his arms

around George and comforted him.

“You know,” he said softly, “no matter how hard this is, we’ve got to keep going. I don’t want to be maudlin, but frankly, an awful lot of people will be helped by our work. We have a mission, and that can’t be forgotten.”

Bonnie came in and put her hand on his shoulder. “George, we’re with you, I’m with you.”

He wished she had been the one hugging him. But when Clark let him go, she judged the moment ended and also walked into the animal room.

This was followed by silence: it was not pleasant to know they were under siege. As it penetrated, this hard truth deepened their upset even more. “What I don’t get is, Pierce takes the exact frog we were working on,” George said. “How did he know which one?”

“The isolate terrarium,” Clark replied. “It’s separate from the rest.”

“I guess. I hope we’ve seen the last of him.”

Clark stopped working. For a moment he appeared reluctant to speak. Then he seemed to gather some internal force to himself. “Frankly, George, this Brother Pierce is a lot more powerful around here even than you realize. Oh, I admit he’s been having his attendance problems lately, at least if you believe the paper. But the man has more charisma in his big toe than your average fire-breathing demagogue does in his whole *corpus delicti*. You oughta see this campus on a Sunday morning when Brother Pierce is working some big issue. Empty. And people are not sleeping it off, they are down at the Tabernacle for the Sunday Student Worship. Even the drug scene at Bixter’s is getting noticeably smaller. We’re becoming a Bible college.”

“That’s what we get for admitting all these Jersey rednecks. We ought to recruit out of state.”

“My point is, we’re surrounded by the guy. He’s everywhere. If a fundamentalist preacher can get something going on a modern college campus, he’s all but unstoppable. And Brother Pierce owns Maywell State. Simple as that.”

“So what’s our alternative? Shut down the lab and go home?”

“It amounts to a further impetus to work fast, in my opinion. Even beyond the funding problem. The longer we take, the more trouble he can cause us.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Damn the experimental protocols and go for the big win. I think the way to go is to move directly to the rhesus experiment.” Clark’s eyes were hollow. “Despite the problems we’re bound to encounter.”

“But what about the Stohlmeyer people? We’d be violating our own experimental protocols.”

“We have an obligation.” His voice shook. “Constance tells me that time is short. She can’t wait much longer.”

“It’s a hell of a risk.”

“What if this place is bombed or burned down? The risk of that could be even greater.”

Since the monkeys were already under health-status observation, it would take less time to work one of them up than to recast the frog experiment. In addition to proving an experimental animal’s health, they had to measure the tiny voltages in its brain and adjust all of their instruments to them so that the creature wouldn’t be in effect shorted out when they nullified its internal electrical field. It was a long, complex task. But they had been measuring the monkeys regularly for weeks, Clark had a point. It would indeed be faster to go straight to the monkeys and forget the frogs. The risks were clear: if they failed, Stohlmeyer would cut them off. Then there was the equipment difficulty. “Monkeys are a lot bigger than frogs. How do we get money to expand the field?”

With a rueful look Clark withdrew his wallet, pulled out a VISA card. “All I have.”

“Three thousand dollars on a credit card?”

“One thousand, sadly enough. And you’re good for another, unless I miss my guess. Or did Kate pick your bones?”

George’s bitter reply echoed through the dank, animal-scented lab. “I’m good for another thousand only if I can get a loan on my car.”

“We could try Constance. It’s just a little cash. Surely she can give us that without exposing the link between the lab and the Covenstead.”

Bonnie called from the animal room, “You know how conservative she is, George. You’ll never get it out of her.”

“She wants speed, yet she doesn’t like us to kill a few animals. And she won’t give us any money! Constance either has to commit to this or forget it. You tell her that, Clark. Unless she gives me the money to expand the cages, I’m throwing in the towel.”

“No, George. No, you aren’t. You know we can’t risk a financial link between the Covenstead and this lab. And you need your Stohlmeyer. Otherwise, how will you gain legitimacy in the outside world?

Research funded by witchcraft? Come on.”

“Constance could find a way,” Bonnie called. “She’s just tight with money.”

Clark ignored her. “We’ll manage, George, somehow. I wish I was rich, I’d kick in the whole amount.

Since she’s so committed, maybe Bonnie can kick in.”

George’s eyes brightened. “Hey, Bonnie, that’s a wonderful idea. You’ll surely invest money in your brilliant professor.”

A loud guffaw from the animal room. George opened the door between the two rooms, letting an even more powerful burst of odor into the lab. Swamp water and frog piss, sour bananas and monkey shit.

“It’s our rice bowls, Bonnie. All three of us.”

“I seem to recall that I’m on a scholarship. Where am I supposed to get money?”

“You buy plenty of dope over at Bixter’s, my dear girl,” Clark said. “I’ve seen you score a quarter-k at a time.”

“What’re you, the house dick? Do they keep conduct cards on us out at the Covenstead now? Eh, Mr.Starch?”

“You poor woman. You’re a witch, and you’re still not free. We know that the difference between good and evil is illusion. We also know not to confuse the two.”

“Goody.”

“The real truth is that you know that nobody cares at the Covenstead whether you’re a bad little girl or not.”

“Oh, no, they just get those condescending smiles on their faces—”

“They don’t care! Your bondage is your guilt. But it’s yours, Bonnie. You should take a lesson from Constance. She knows what it is to be free.”

“Bonnie’s bound, Connie’s free. Sounds like some kind of a spell to me.”

“I can’t get through to you. You just do not understand that the evil *is* the guilt.”

Bonnie sneered. “Drop the holier-than-thou condescension, will you? It bores me. I can be a damned good witch without your help, Clark.”

Shaking his head, he went into the animal room. “Let’s concentrate on the problem at hand. If we don’t come up with three grand worth of coils for the rhesus field, we are out of business.”

George followed Clark. Bonnie was preparing a likely-looking frog for its physical. “If we compress the observation time to forty-eight hours, we can be on-line with this beauty by Thursday night.”

“There’s yellow gik coming out of its anus, Bonnie dear,” Clark said.

“That’s A & D ointment. I just took its temperature.”

“Clark makes a good point, Bonnie. If we expanded the field we could go with a rhesus tomorrow morning. As soon as we get the coils.”

“I have no money. And we couldn’t pry another purchase order out of accounting with a crowbar. So let me finish getting little frogger here measured.”

“Bonnie, we can get two thousand dollars between the two of us. Surely you’re good for another thou.”

“Wrong.”

George went close to her. There were two ways to characterize this little witch: one, she was delicious and delightful; two, she was one stubborn lady. At night she swam through his senses. But only in fantasy. She wouldn’t take her old professor seriously. “Even in the animal room you smell like an angel.” She smiled. “Bonnie, you know what this means to me. I’m past fifty, darling.”

“I’m well aware of that.”

“Aside from making me as sexually interesting to you as it so obviously does, it means that I will die a sad old man if I don’t succeed with this experiment. You’re young, you have your life ahead of you. This is my last throw, honey. After this, sunset and bye-bye.”

She put the frog back into its terrarium. “George Walker, you are a hypocrite, a charmer, and a bastard. If I gave you a thousand, it would be out of other people’s money. Their happiness money. And they would be so mad if they couldn’t get high. Mad at me.”

“What do I have to do, go down on bended knee?” Even as he spoke, his eyes went to the two rhesus monkeys in their big cage. They stared back at him, sullen and bored. He could sense their hatred.

“It might be fun to watch but it wouldn’t help.”

George went over to the rhesus cage. He was tempted to make a face back at the ugly beasts. “How much smaller is Tess than Gort?”

“Tess is eighteen pounds. Gort’s twenty-two.”

“I mean in body mass?”

“Tess is 56.75 cubic centimeters of monkey. She’s approximately 77 percent of Gort’s mass. What are you getting at?”

“Tess might fit into a three-foot field. That’s only nine more coils. You wouldn’t have to give any money.”

“Good. My customers would kill me very, very slowly if I stole their money. And that’s what it would amount to. I’ve got about sixty dollars of my own.”

George put his hands on her trim hips. She did not move away and she did not respond. She simply became very still. Such plans he had for this slip of a girl! If the rhesus phase succeeded, she was next. Dear little Bonnie was going to be the first person to die and live to tell about it. Assuming he could convince her. Assuming the mere suggestion didn’t send her running for the nearest bus depot. But the problem of convincing her didn’t need to be faced just yet.

George wrote out a purchase order for the coils. When they were delivered, Tess, poor dear, would have a most extraordinary experience. Oblivious to her future, she sat in her cage delousing her mate and rolling her lips back. If George worked at it, he could probably get Techtronics to deliver before noon today. They had trucks up to the college all the time.

Dear little Tess. Not a big rhesus, not a scared rhesus. Not yet.

Chapter 4

Mandy didn't need a map to find her way to the Collier estate.

It took up the whole southwestern corner of the Maywell township and went beyond. The lands of the original grant included Stone and Storm mountains and the valley between them, an area of eighty thousand acres in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Mandy drove down Bridge Street toward the entrance to the estate.

A stillness filled the morning air. Red and yellow and orange trees overhung the old brick street. Here and there children dawdled past on their way to school. Beside Bridge Street and sometimes beneath it Maywell Brook shimmered in the sunlight. Autumn was the slow season for water, and the brook sighed along its gouged, muddy bed. It was all so familiar, so peaceful, as if she had left only a few hours ago. But the years had changed the familiarity of Maywell. Once this place had been, simply, life. Now it hurt to be here.

Mandy glanced at her watch. 9:20. She was due to meet the great lady in ten minutes. The great and dangerous lady. As a child Mandy had been cautioned never to speak to Constance Collier—not that she ever had. Except for her occasional forbidden intrusions onto the estate with other kids to watch witch rituals, she had only once or twice glimpsed the legendary figure sitting regally in the back of her enormous old Cadillac limousine, driven to some local function by one of her earnest acolytes.

On one memorable occasion she and Constance had locked gazes, as the old lady was driven slowly down Maple in her big black car. That was when life at the Walker house was entering the deepest level of hell. A quart bottle of gin went into the garbage every two days, and the arguments made *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* sound like a Marx Brothers film.

High up in her maple, Mandy had observed the car. It was moving very slowly. As it drew near she realized that the old woman was watching her carefully.

Sometimes she dreamed of that car, coming unlit down the night street, and sometimes of the old lady drifting out of it like mist which would slip across the lawn, beneath the shadow of the maple tree... and then she would see the tall, severe shadow in the hall, or feel a bony hand on her forehead...

Once she heard her father screaming in the basement, and there was a low,

sharp voice between the screams, and little Mandy had thought. She's in the house. Constance Collier is in the house.

In the morning she had decided that it had to have been a dream.

In those days Constance had seemed frightening. Now the fact that she was a witch was a matter of indifference to Mandy. What she was interested in was this illustration assignment. There was no reason Amanda Walker couldn't become the next Michael Hague or even the next Arthur Rackham. Beyond that, though, illustrating a Grimm's offered her a chance to express her craft to the fullest.

Mandy was convinced that her visions of the fairy tales were original and powerful and new. Surely they would stun the art world if they were ever painted.

All that stood between her and success was this final interview. It promised to be hard. How had Will described Constance Collier? Quixotic. Rude. Imperious. And you were never late to an appointment with her. *Not ever* was the way he had put it. From her own past, Mandy could easily imagine Miss Collier to be even harder to deal with than Will had said.

Soon the forbidding brick wall that marked the townside edge of the estate appeared out the right window of the Volks. It was vine-covered but in excellent repair. Iron spikes jutted up from it, hooked out at their tops. Perhaps the incursions from the town had grown more aggressive in recent years. There was no scaling that wall now and dropping over, sweaty and breathless, knees skinned and heart pounding.

The main gate, which Mandy had never before entered, was securely closed. Mandy pulled up and got out of her car. The gate was simple, almost stark, made of wrought-iron bars topped by more spikes. It might as well have enclosed a prison. Along the top of it were the familiar brass letters, "This Land of Dark," from a line of Constance Collier's great poem. *Faery*: "Entered she this land of dark, borne by the mist's own hand."

How very quiet this place was, and how old. The trees soared huge and silent. The only sound was that of an occasional leaf whispering to the ground.

Beyond the gate was a narrow dirt road, curving off into a thick forest the kids had always avoided, preferring to go the long way around, by the fields.

Mandy pulled and pushed at the gate until her feet scraped on the brick paving. The hinges didn't even creak.

She looked left and right—and saw a small gateman's house with its iron

door hanging open. Inside was a disused telephone on a frayed cord. She picked it up, put it to her ear. "Hello?" Dead. "Great." It was now 9:30 exactly. "Marvelous." She was getting off to a wonderful start. She would be fired before she even met her employer.

But she mustn't be fired. This just had to work, it had to. Her alternatives were bleak: illustrating the covers of paperbacks or maybe getting into advertising. To Mandy there was no thought more horrifying than that of being forced to abandon her vision and just use her skill. She had seen such people, had even interviewed in a few ad agencies. It had chilled her to walk down the long rows of trendy offices, each with its light box and drafting table, and see the gray people huddling there in frayed designer jeans and Yves Saint Laurent shirts.

She deliberated climbing the gate.

Then she saw that there was another door in the back of the gateman's house, one that led into the estate. It opened easily. As she pushed it, paper rattled. There was a note taped to the back, where it couldn't be seen from the street. "Please be sure this locks behind you, Miss Walker."

Obviously this was the way she had been intended to come. Nice of Will T. Turner to tell her. He really was a very marginal person.

Once inside the estate she went around to the back of the main gate and looked for some sort of a handle. There was nothing.

Furious that none of these procedures had been explained to her, she hurried back to her car and parked it as far off the road as possible, then dragged her precious portfolio out of the back seat and reentered the estate on foot. All of her most important work was in this worn black case, everything she had ever drawn or painted relating to Grimm's fairy tales.

The portfolio was heavy. Mandy couldn't be too mad at Will. He tried hard. If she had been planning intelligently, she would have called Miss Collier last night to reconfirm, and found out about this hike.

A few moments after she started off she found herself slowing her pace, despite her lateness. Finally she stopped altogether. She simply could not help it. She was in a wonderful cathedral of trees, their black trunks stretching to crowns of brilliant autumn color. Leaves littered the dirt road, marking the dust with bright splotches.

This was awesome. Too many months in Manhattan had made her forget the passionate silence of the woods. She began to walk again, now also noticing the rich scent of the air, cleansed by autumn rot.

This place was not only beautiful and dark and huge, it was also something else she could not quite name. The very slightest of shivers coursed through her body and she began to walk a little faster. It was as if the woods itself was not entirely unconscious.

She had no idea how long this road might be. In any case it was longer than necessary to make her thoroughly late. She marched along lugging the portfolio, trying to hum and not succeeding.

Her imagination was really too vivid for this. “You know I’m here, don’t you,” she whispered. Leaves stirred down. The trees filtered the bright morning sun to golden haze.

The colors here were magnificent: these must be very robust trees. Plants die gaily because they are sure of their own resurrection. Not so higher creatures. All things that share the terror of final death are brothers, from the microbe to the man.

The road curved upward, finally cresting a hundred yards ahead. Long before she was close to the top, Mandy was breathing hard. Even so the chill of morning had vitalized her. She felt physically wonderful, her whole body singing.

What, she wondered, was the origin of the legend of the watcher in the woods? This place was so alive, but not in a human sort of a way. Trees were enigmatic beings. She knew that man had once acknowledged this alienness by considering them the temples of his most mysterious gods, the forest spirits. Now those gods were cast low. Who once had been worshiped in the woods was today captured in fairy tales and called a troll.

Grimm’s was the net, after all, in which the Christian world had captured the old gods, diminishing their power (or so it thought) by making them the stuff of children’s stories.

Just this side of the crest she came to a darker place in the forest, where the trunks of the trees seemed more enormous, the carpet of leaves thicker.

She saw a small face, very still, peering at her from a hole at the base of one of the trees. Her imagination, of course.

She bent close, and watched with horror as it took on the absolutely solid appearance of something quite real. She started away from it, giving a little, involuntary cry. The sound was rendered tiny by the immensity of the place. And the face was quite terrible.

It just didn’t seem possible that something so small, so strikingly inhuman, could be there—but she could still see it in outline even from ten feet away.

As she watched it, an awful coldness seemed to slide up out of the ground and possess her whole body. She dragged her portfolio around to the front, a fragile shield.

She backed to the far edge of the road. She was suddenly freezing cold, almost sick, fighting the impulse to panic flight.

Her mind worked frantically, seeking some way of explaining the impossible presence. A dwarf? No.

Perhaps a statuette. Yes, that must be it.

But she could see the moisture gleaming on its eyeballs.

She decided to get out of here. She would phone Constance Collier from the safety of some coffee shop in town.

Her watch told her it was 9:45. By the time she got back to the car and drove into town it would be 10:15 at least. Over the phone Miss Collier could so easily tell her to forget the whole thing.

There really was no choice. Reason said that she was not facing some supernatural creature, not a troll, not one of Constance Collier's faeries. Such things were not real, not anymore.

But a mad dwarf from some nearby mental institution could be very real. And wasn't there a Peconic Valley Institute for the Criminally Insane?

Either she walked past it or she gave up this job.

Shaking, her hands clutching the portfolio, she started off for the crest of the hill. More than anything, she expected to find that the apparition in the hole was gone, a figment of her vivid imagination. But it was still there—staring out of blank stone eyes.

She stooped to look more closely at what was now quite clearly a little statue. It was a sneering, evil tittle elf, a creature of the cracks and holes of the world. Perhaps a mandrake, or a little fee guarding the lands of Faery.

A woods of fabulous spells,
Old sticks and roots and holes,
Leannan's grand dominion...

When she remembered those lines from *Faery*, the menace of the woods evaporated like a rotten mist. As with new eyes she looked around her. What had been hostile was now suffused with wonderment. The little face was not sneering, it was grimacing to frighten any who might threaten its queen. One

of her doughty fairy soldiers.

Mandy was delighted. These were the actual woods of the poem. Here a twenty-year-old Constance Collier had written the dream of *Leannan*, the Fairy Queen...

With a newly confident tread, full of gladness and awe, Mandy marched to the top of the rise.

Spreading before her was a magnificent vista indeed. The road had been carefully planned to take advantage of it. It meandered down across the rolling green fields to a long lake dusted with lilies and swans, and thence across the wide pasture that led to the house. How typical of Will T. Turner to describe this place simply as "crumbling." Had he been forced to leave his car at the gate and come on foot also? Probably trudged this very road, thinking that the gate was rusted closed, the leaves not raked, that there were rather too many lilies in the pond, and the green was high with cockle-burs and dandelions.

And he never noticed that he was in the Land of Dark, where lived the Faery of Constance Collier's extraordinary creation. Poor Will T. Turner.

Emerging from the woods, Mandy set out across the fields, filling her nostrils with the dry, sharp scent of autumn brush, her mind flashing image after image of paintings that must be painted here.

Late or not, Constance Collier had an illustrator. Amanda Walker had decided that she would not be driven off, not even at the point of a gun.

I'll do Hansel and Gretel in the woods, of course. And Briar-Rose's castle from this vista, with the thornbushes choking the ramparts in just this light.

Everywhere she looked there were more glories, wonderful wooden fences all tumbling down, a shattered hayrick, a great rusting contraption of scythes that must once have mowed the lawns.

How exactly right Constance Collier was to let it go to its natural state. If ever there had been happy land, this was it.

Oh, Pollyanna, smite on. You are heading toward a rough meeting with a very difficult old lady. Constance Collier eats illustrators for breakfast. She had quite literally fired the great Hammond Morris by burning the pictures he had done for *Voyage to Dawn*. When she heard that story, Mandy had felt contempt for Constance Collier. But she hadn't been offered this job then.

As she approached the house, she began to see that it was indeed in serious disrepair. The architecture was Palladian and very elegant, red brick and white columns, a lovely curved side porch, tall empty windows. Leaves were

everywhere, choking the gutters, matting the walks, blowing about on the porch.

There wasn't a sound. Despite the cool air, the bright morning sun was making Mandy sweat. Her portfolio had grown heavier, and she was glad to lean it against the wall when she finally reached the house. She went up between the tall, peeling columns and hunted for a doorbell. She settled for knocking.

Her blows echoed back from within. There wasn't an answering sound, not the clatter of feet, not a call.

When she knocked again, though, there was a startling flutter of wings at the edge of the porch. Six or seven huge crows wheeled about in the front yard, then settled into an oak and commenced to caw at one another.

"Hello!"

The sound of her voice caused the crows to rise again. They rushed back and forth across the weedy yard, their wings snapping with every turn.

When she knocked, the door rattled. It was obviously unlocked. Telling herself that old people are hard of hearing, Mandy turned the blackened brass knob and pushed the door open.

Inside was a shadowy central hallway with rooms to the left and right. The hall runner was old but fine, the lighting fixtures elegantly fluted. When Mandy pushed the buttons on the switchplate, none of them turned on. She looked at them; bits of wax revealed that they were now used for candles. Halfway down the hall a brand-new Panasonic vacuum cleaner could be seen in an open broom closet. At least there was some electricity still in the house. This touch of modern technology gave her hope, until she saw that the machine was not only new but not even completely unpacked. Its body was still in a plastic bag; as a matter of fact, all the packing material was visible beyond the end of the hall, in the kitchen. Somebody had been wrapping it up, perhaps to send it back.

As she proceeded into the house, the crows crowded onto the front porch, cawing and bickering among themselves, their voices echoing in the silence. But also, there were softer voices, and they were nearby. "You've got to be more careful," said a man. An older man, whispering. An elderly woman: "I *must* keep on. By the Goddess, I'm so close!"

"Miss Collier?"

A gasp at the top of the stairs, then silence. Mandy sensed that she had interrupted a very private conversation. She would have returned to the front

door, but by this time she was closer to the kitchen, so she hurried toward the back.

In the center of the kitchen was a heavy oaken table, its legs elaborately carved with gargoyles and grapevines. On it there was a toasting frame, of the kind meant to be held over an open fire, and a partially cut loaf of homemade raisin bread.

As Mandy crossed the floor, she noticed that there were candles in the lighting fixture that hung down from the ceiling.

And then she saw something really amazing: an ancient iron hand pump at the sink in place of the usual faucet. Attached to the wall behind it was a small hot water geyser such as Mandy had seen in the cheap hotels she had stayed in during her European days.

The stove, to the right of the sink, was a huge woodburning iron monster with eight burners across its massive top. “Royal Dawn” was embossed in the ironwork on the oven doors. The witch could have cooked Gretel in such an oven and had room left over for a couple of nice casseroles.

A thrill of childhood fear touched her. She’d never seen this place, but Jimmy Murphy and Bonnie Haver had sneaked in and seen a beautiful young woman cooking at this very stove. “She was pretty but her face was glowing in the firelight,” Jimmy had said. “She was so scary I thought I was going to pee in my pants.”

That had happened ten years ago, half a lifetime for Mandy. If Constance remembered, it probably seemed like yesterday.

From beyond the kitchen window there came the first loud sound Mandy had heard at this house, and it more or less astonished her. It was a splash, followed immediately by the distinct *boing* of a diving board.

Could Constance Collier possibly be in swimming—a woman past eighty, and in autumn? Mandy hurried out the back door and down an overgrown brick walk, which curved around a tangle of cedars. She came now upon another surprise. The walk ended in some brick steps, which led into a formal garden—overgrown, of course—surrounding a swimming pool inlaid with elaborate mosaics which shimmered beneath the agitated water.

A young man, lithe and pale, his blond hair streaming like smoke behind him in the water, swam vigorously from one end of the pool to the other.

“Hello?”

Oblivious, he swam another lap.

“Excuse me.”

He stopped, touched the edge of the pool. “Oh.” When he stood up in the waist-deep water, Mandy saw that he was naked.

She was instantly angry at him for flustering her, and spoke quickly. “I’m sorry to disturb you. I’m looking for Miss Collier.”

“She’s not in the house?” He showed no inclination to hide himself. She tried to keep her eyes on his face.

“I called. Nobody answered me.”

“She’s supposed to be in there having an argument with my father.” He came out of the water, grabbed a towel from the grass, and began drying himself. “Were her birds there?”

“Her birds?”

“The seven ravens. They’re almost always with her. If they were there, so was she.”

As the boy approached, the towel around his shoulders, Mandy realized that he was younger than he had seemed. Perhaps he was sixteen. Adolescent down brushed his top lip. “I’m Robin,” he said. Mandy knew she was coloring; Robin was very, very beautiful, in all the ways she enjoyed in the male. His muscles were firm but not knotty. His skin was smooth, yet he did not look soft. And his genitals were, well, very much there.

He had been waiting for some moments before she realized that he was holding out his hand. She took it, pumped it once. He held firmly to her hand, raised it to his lips, and kissed it. She felt the warmth of his breath on her skin. He smiled slightly, glancing down at his own turgidity. Mandy battled not to shake, and she inwardly cursed the heat she could feel in her cheeks. “I’m Amanda Walker,” she said evenly. “The illustrator. I’m doing the Grimm’s project with Miss Collier.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know anything about it. Perhaps Ivy can help you. My sister.” He took a step closer to her. She could see his teeth behind his half-opened lips. His smile was so subtle that it managed to imply passion and politeness at the same time. Nothing could be read in his obsidian eyes, which contrasted oddly with the blond hair and sunny Nordic skin.

“My sister is sunning herself in the maze, where the breeze can’t get to her.”

Mandy had not realized that the great tangle of cedar in the center of the garden was, or had been, a maze. She was glad to turn away from the young man, though. He had a nerve not even wrapping his towel around himself.

Close up, the maze smelled strongly of cedar oil. Mandy found the

entrance and went a short distance in.

Robin's renewed splashes were absorbed by the thick and long-untended growth. There remained only the faint screaming of the crows. The creosote path was so overgrown that Mandy had to go on her hands and knees to make any progress.

It wasn't a difficult maze, because the way in was marked by a string. No wonder; there was no fun to be had struggling through these weedy corridors full of spiderwebs and sticky cedar balls.

At the center of the maze was a complete surprise, a delightful secret garden. It was perhaps thirty feet square, and peopled by statuary. All the figures were characters from Constance Collier's books: there was Pandoric, the wicked homed boy; opposite him his mother Drydana, who had the power to turn herself into a woodpecker. At opposite ends of the garden were Braura the huge maiden bear, rearing up, her bronze claws gleaming in the sun, facing Elpot, the King of the Cats, who had one shredded ear and knew among other dungs how to fly. In the middle, on a marble pediment, stood the Fairy Queen, the tiny *Leannan*, Constance Collier's greatest creation, beautifully sculpted, with her trim waist and alabaster arms, her firm nose and delicate lips, and her wide gray eyes. The sculptor had captured not only Miss Collier's description of her character but the deeper wildness that sent the *Leannan* racing through her forests, "the wild huntress screaming so shrilly that it froze the footsteps of whom she sought."

"Excuse me. Who are you, may I ask?"

"Oh, I'm sorry! The statue—I'm Amanda Walker. The illustrator. I'm here for my appointment with Miss Collier."

"You were meeting her in here?"

"Well, not actually in this spot. But here, yes, at the estate."

Ivy rummaged among the things that had been spread out around her, pulled out a blue-faced watch. "It's 10:30. She's still with my father."

"Do you know if she was expecting me?"

"I don't know. I've been here almost all morning."

Ivy was every bit as handsome as her brother. Mandy found her presence, though, even more disturbing. There was something confusing about her looks, the strong-muscled arms and legs, the tiny breasts beneath the prim black bathing suit, the soft, gentle face with those dark humorous eyes. If such a woman were to embrace her, Mandy wondered, what would happen then?

“I’m afraid I’m terribly late. I was due at 9:30.” The girl stared at her, almost as if she thought her mad. “A mistake,” Mandy added miserably. “Please help me.”

The girl smiled at that. “You sound like you’re desperate.”

“I know she doesn’t like people to be late. The job is very important to me. And I’m so late!”

“You she’ll forgive, Amanda.”

“Where can I find her, can you tell me that?”

“Look what I have here.” The girl bent down and picked up a big, colorfully illustrated book that Mandy recognized at once.

“The Hobbes edition of *Faery*!”

“Signed and hand-colored by Hobbes just for Connie. Isn’t it wonderful?” She gave the precious volume to Mandy almost indifferently.

“But this—it’s extraordinary. I didn’t even know it existed.” She looked down at the leather embossed cover. Reverently she opened it. Tucked inside was a photograph of Hobbes sitting with a much younger Constance Collier on the pediment of this very statue. He wore a wing collar and a striped shirt, the cuffs rolled up to the elbows. She was in a long dress, its top of lace. Her dark Celtic eyes gazed merrily at her companion, who looked rather stunned.

This book was not illustrated with washed etchings as Mandy had assumed but with the delicate original watercolors that had been their models.

A Hobbes watercolor of this quality went for five thousand dollars. And how many were here? At least twenty. “My God.”

“See *Leannan* sinking dead,
her eyes pearled by dew,
Falling all ruined upon
fearsome Braura’s bed.”

Amanda was surprised at Ivy’s erudition. “You know *Faery*?”

“Of course. Why do you think we’re here, Robin and I? We are students, just as you are a student.”

“I’m an illustrator.”

“That was only a pretext to get you here. You’ll see. She’s got all sorts of ideas for you.”

Just then a new voice cracked from among the cedars:

“There you are, you prowling ninny! Come out of there! Why didn’t you

come upstairs? You must have heard us.”

“Miss Collier?”

A tall, thin woman in a dusty suit appeared among the shrubs. She burst forth brushing spiderwebs and twigs from her tweeds. “What in Goddess’ name are you doing in here? Oh! What do you have in your hands, you stupid girl!”

Mandy was horrified. All she could do was hold out the priceless book and hope that Ivy would own up to her wrongdoing.

“Don’t give it to me! I’ll drop it on the way back. Oh, be careful, careful! Don’t let those cedars touch the leather, they’ll start acid rot going! How could anybody be so thoughtless! Come on!”

Mandy’s heart pounded as she hurried along behind Constance Collier, the precious book cradled in her arms. Back in the maze she heard soft laughter and realized that brother had joined sister from some hidden entrance, and both were enjoying the joke together—

She followed Constance through the kitchen and into a tall library, its bookcases laden with calfskin and morocco bindings. A heavy silence descended, punctuated only by the crows. Finally Constance spoke.

“Put it on the table. There. Now, young woman, are you mad? You must be to come in here and take the very best volume I have and carry it out into the sun, and then you go into that dirty old maze—it’s criminal.”

“I didn’t—”

“No excuses! If you want to work with me, the first thing you’ve got to learn is to stop making excuses. I consider excuses loathsome.”

Mandy knew she was turning scarlet, and hated herself for it. Blushing was a curse. But there was nothing she could do about it. She could only hope against hope and push ahead. “I brought my portfolio, Miss Collier. Of the ideas I’ve had for the Grimm’s illustrations.” Should she add that it contained *all* the really good ideas she had ever had for Grimm’s, and amounted to the best of her life’s work? No point. The sketches and paintings would speak for themselves.

Constance Collier replaced the Hobbes in a slipcase on the leather-covered library table. “He killed my husband, in case you’ve ever wondered. Hobbes killed Jack.”

Mandy recalled that Jack Collier had died under somewhat sensational circumstances back in the early twenties. A hunting accident or something. “I didn’t know that.”

“Shot him. Shot us both.” She stared at the book for some moments. “You come highly recommended.” She looked up, her face for the first time clear to Mandy. It had the startlingly simian appearance that is sometimes associated with great age. Here and there were vestiges of the legendary beauty of the twenties and thirties, the dramatically straight, thick eyebrows, the narrow, angled nose. Gone, though, were those full, mysterious lips and the amazing lusciousness of complexion that Stieglitz had captured in his portraits of her.

Oddly enough, the same years which had devoured her sensuality had granted Constance Collier a deeper mystery yet: despite the fact that she was slack and dry, almost a leaf of a woman, her eyes shone with intense light. Mandy found herself very badly wanting to know her. Such eyes must hide wonderful things, or why would they shine so?

Mandy could readily imagine herself becoming a student of Constance Collier’s. All the childhood mystery would be dispelled. More, she was fascinated by this place, the ancient kitchen, the candles, the maze, the strange adolescents. She *had* to be allowed to stay!

“I think I left my portfolio on the porch.”

As Mandy went toward the front of the house, the cawing of the crows got louder and louder, until it was a bitter, crazy cacophony, full of inscrutable passions.

The flock rose like an angry belch of smoke when Mandy opened the door.

She stood, shocked beyond words. Her own scream was so naked with rage that it made her clamp her lips shut—

The crows had tom her portfolio and all of her drawings to tiny bits and scattered them about the yard.

She stood staring, disbelieving, shattered. Her whole past, everything she had done that was fine, had been destroyed by the brainless creatures.

She hardly noticed when Constance Collier stole near, a knowing and sympathetic look on her face, and placed a consoling hand on her hunched shoulder.

Chapter 5

The acid, frightened stink of Long-hands made Tess scream. Her voice woke Gort, who screamed with her. She ran the cage, feeling the wind rushing in her face, perch to far bars, far bars to back wall, bang against back wall to front bars, swing back to perch.

She had gone far, but she was no farther from Long-hands. There was stinking fear coming from him, and it infected her. Tess screamed. Again she ran the cage. Her own fear confused her, made her hands do what they shouldn't. She hit Gort.

At once he showed his fearsome teeth and she thought how great was this monkey and cast her eyes down an instant to say, I am yours.

In that moment Long-hands reached his fingers around her. She screamed and screamed and bit the fingers so furiously there wouldn't *be* any hard fingers anymore, but Long-hands only made a growl, "Sheuht!" and kept on taking her out of her home.

She hated it outside of the place where she had all her smells and all Gort's smells, and where Gort kept his body. Out here she couldn't run the cage, perch to far bars, far bars to back wall, over and over with the wind in her fur and Gort running too the other way, and passing each other and then tumbling down on the floor in their good smells together so glad.

Long-hands had her now, had her good. She tried to twist around and bite his face but she could not; she was being carried by Long-hands far away from Gort. She screamed. Gort screamed. Then she was brought into a man-smelling place and there was a bang and the wall closed up and she was away from Gort and all alone.

"She's all worked up, Bonnie. What's the matter with her?"

"She's kind of high-strung, you know that."

"We can't put her in the field like this. She's liable to crack the coils."

Tess heard their growling, heard the fear in Long-hands' voice, and knew the truth that he might have Tess but he was scared of Tess, so she showed him her teeth. She bared her strong, sharp teeth to make him submit. But Long-hands did not fulfill the law, he only held her farther away and kept up his frightened growling.

"She'll have to be sedated!"

"The protocols—"

“Leave it off the report. Dose her or we can forget using her.”

“Stohlmeyer will never accept it.”

“Bonnie, don’t you understand English? Dose her and do not make a record of it!”

“We’re getting sloppy, George. That’s very sloppy.”

“Do what I tell you! We’ll let her sleep it off and then run the experiment when she’s groggy.”

Little Yellow bared her teeth at Long-hands, but Long-hands did not submit to her any more than he had to Tess. She realized his power then, and understood that it must be so great that it smelled like fear. If Tess could not frighten such a monkey, and Little Yellow, the bringer of food herself, couldn’t do it, then Long-hands was just too powerful.

She grew calmer, knowing that there was nothing for her but to submit to the power of the awful Long-hands.

“Well, well, Tess, you finally getting tired? You bitch. I think we can skip the Valium, Bonnie. She’s just gone as limp as a dishrag.”

“Handling does that to them sometimes. But it’ll only last a few minutes.”

Long-hands put Tess in a cage so small that she couldn’t even turn around. Certainly she couldn’t run it.

All she could do was lie down and feel the hard bumpers push on her stomach and her knees and her hands and her head. But this was Long-hands’ will, and Tess was not strong enough to break it.

“Okay, Clark, she’s in the damn thing.”

“I’m getting a good reading. Nice and strong. It’s a pleasure to work with something that has a decent microvolt level. Those frogs are almost below the threshold of observability.”

Tess soon realized that the little cage didn’t smell like Long-hands. So that meant he had freed Tess. But Tess couldn’t move, not unless she pulled and kicked.

“Hurry up! She’s getting crazy again!”

“Ready on the countdown.”

“Forget the countdown! Just do it! Go!”

“Okay, power’s up. I’m activating the field—now!”

The whole world collapsed on Tess. She lost everything, her strength, her voice, her smells, her sounds.

She screamed and screamed and screamed but there was no noise, there was no calling to Gort or even Long-hands to help Tess out of this awful

nothingness. And falling! Falling and she couldn't find branches, she couldn't clutch leaves!

To the ground, the leopards, the hyenas, the stinking monkey-eating monsters that slip as shadows in darkness!

Terror slammed her like a great hand, she saw bared teeth and heard snarling death-growls, and she clutched and climbed and kicked—emptiness.

Then she smelled the most beautiful scent she had ever known, the best and most beloved of all scents, from when she lived in the forest where they ate green pellets sweet off the trees and danced between branches. She smelled the milky-soft breast scent of her mother.

Mother, it's me!

She clutched soft mother fur and warm skin. And mother took her between her legs where it was so, so safe, and began preening her.

Around them there arose the whole old forest again, the same trees, the same delicious green water, the same thunder-cold-joyful waterfall, the sweet, fresh smells of monkeys everywhere.

Mother again. Forest again. And all around in the trees the gib-gabber chatter of the Roaring-water-nearby troupe, the Clown, the Great Gray, the Little Browns, all the girl squealers.

Her mother preened down behind her ears where the mites got itchy and thick.

“Beautiful! Bring her up.”

The voice that had resounded across the sky left a smoking yellow rip where it had passed.

Mother hissed danger and Tess grabbed fur and they were off! They swung with the troupe through the bending, sighing trees.

A white wind was following them. White, dead! It was crushing the whole forest, the tall trees falling before it like sticks. It gasped and wheezed, sounding like something enormous marching through the wood.

Mother swept along, faster and faster, raging as she went, screaming back at the huge monster that had come through the tear in the sky. Its feet stomped and thundered the ground, its breath washed over them.

Tess screamed when she smelled it, for it was the odor of Long-hands and Little Yellow and their awful place-without-monkeys where Tess never, ever wanted to go again!

Do not take me from my forest, do not take me from my troupe!

The giant came closer and closer. Mother was screaming, carrying her Tess

now low to the ground, now high in the branches, darting and turning as only a mother could, rushing along beneath low shrubs and among the rocks, uncaring of her own cuts, then grabbing a branch and sweeping up higher and higher to the very top of the forest and leaping as if she had wings.

There was a great thud.

The forest evaporated.

Mother fell screaming away into nowhere.

Tess felt the hard little cage poking her from all sides. Agony exploded in her.

“Good Christ, Bonnie, tranq her down, tranq her down!”

“I’ll get the gun. I can’t do it by hand, she’s too wild!”

“Oh, Christ, look at that—open the cage—Clark, give me a hand. She’s going to crack the ceramics.”

Tess leaped up into the hateful stinking ugly place, her heart breaking for mother and forest and all the joys just tasted. She jumped to the floor and ran, crashing into walls, screaming so loud she heard Gort screaming back from the other room.

Not that hateful place again, not that poor old Gort when she could have mother and forest and the troupe! No no no no no!

Monkeys cannot beg for mercy. They can only make the gesture of submission. She made it. She made it to the walls, to the ceiling, to the floor, seeking the terrible giant who had dragged her back here, trying to somehow say, I submit; I, Tess, submit to your power.

So let me go home.

The monkey stopped moving. Bonnie went up and checked its eyes. “She’s unconscious.”

“I was afraid she’d break those coils.” Bonnie gathered the creature up in her arms and returned her to her cage. She reconnected the electrocardiographic leads to the sockets in the animal room so that Clark could continue his monitoring.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” George said. He stared down at the sleeping rhesus.

“I have to admit it, George. Yes, it is. A higher animal.”

“Clark, are you okay on the readings?”

“She looks normal from here, George. Looks good.”

“Bonnie, I told you this job would be an adventure.”

“It’s certainly that.”

George reached in and touched the fur of the comatose rhesus. “She hates my guts, you know that? She nearly bit through those handling gloves.”

“You show her you’re afraid of her. She tries to dominate you.”

George drew close to Bonnie. “I wonder what she experienced.”

“Nothing too pleasant, judging from the way she acted when we brought her back.”

“I think we can be sure that was a side effect related to the reestablishment of the brain’s electrical field. I suspect she’ll be fine when she wakes up.”

“You might be right.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I’m convinced. I’ll be even more convinced when she wakes up normal.”

“Let’s go look over Clark’s shoulder. The EEG ought to tell us a lot.”

Clark was standing before the electroencephalograph watching the readout. His face was sharp with concentration.

“How’s it look?”

“Still normal in every way.” He smiled. “The Stohlmeyer Foundation is going to like this.”

“What must that monkey know?” Bonnie asked. “I wonder if death is like a dream or just black? Probably a sort of descent into zero.”

George was watching her closely. He realized that this was the moment to broach the subject of Bonnie’s taking the journey herself. “It’s going to be the greatest adventure in human history to find that out.”

“Nobel Prize time, George,” Clark said.

“Assuming we proceed to a human trial,” George added. There. He had said it. All three of them knew that two more coils would make the cage large enough for Bonnie’s body mass. And they could get two more the same way they got the others. No money, just some more lies and another hot purchase order.

All that stood in their way was Bonnie herself.

“Somebody’s going to get the answer to a hell of a secret,” she muttered.

“Somebody’s going to become very famous. A heroine.”

Her eyes snapped to meet his. She had caught the gender. “I know I’m the obvious choice. But the cage isn’t big enough for me.”

“If Tess wakes up all right, that’ll be the deciding factor. I can get two more coils with no problem.”

Realizing for the first time what George was driving at, Clark went gray.

“Constance isn’t going to be comfortable with this. We haven’t done the testing we said we would do. She might forbid us.”

“Hell, don’t tell Constance! Don’t tell her a thing! Just do your job, Clark.”

“My job is to report to her, you know that.”

George could picture Connie’s reaction to his precipitate scheme: “Oh, no, don’t let him do that. He’s so impatient.” Then, next day: “Clark, you must tell George to hurry. Time is very short.” George had to convince Clark not to report to her. “Now, Clark, you and I both know what Constance will say. She’ll say that time is short.”

“You’ll never convince her to go to a human trial so soon.”

“It isn’t her business! I make the scientific decisions. You go to her if you want to, but I won’t be here when you come back. I just can’t work with the Stohlmeyer people looking over one shoulder and Constance looking over the other!”

“I have to inform her.”

“Do it and the project is over. Canceled.” Clark squirmed. Good, he was afraid to take responsibility for that. George pressed his argument. “Tess is alive.”

“You’re a witch, Clark,” Bonnie said. “Be faithful to the needs of the witches. If Constance dies before her successor is initiated, what will become of the Covenstead?”

Good for Bonnie! There was a game girl’. “So make your choice, Clark. Report to Constance and I quit.

Or do your job right here and now and we all succeed together.”

Bonnie put her hand to her throat. “I wish we could smoke in here. I’d really like a cigarette.” She laughed. “I’ve decided to do it,” she said. There was wonder in her voice, fear in her eyes. Now she whispered. “I want to know... to be the first.” Her tongue moved along her lips. Once again George saw how very beautiful she was, the delicate lines of her face, the casual sensuality of her mouth, the frankness of her eyes. She was precious to him, and he ached to kiss her, and feel that mouth open to him. Her cheeks were flushed.

“You’ll be an adventurer. Afterward someone as beautiful as you—the press’ll make you a star.”

“Constance will never allow press,” Clark put in.

“Constance will have no choice,” George snapped. “If Bonnie wants press, by the gods she gets press!”

Bonnie went over to the apparatus on the lab bench. She touched the gleaming black coils of the electromagnets. "I could sit in it as is if you could make it a little higher."

"No. I want you lying down. Safety." He did not add that, as a dead body, she would slump over from a sitting position and simply fall to the floor, taking the whole apparatus with her. She walked around the bench, looking at the array of devices. "You know," she said at last, "I am going to know once I do this. I mean, you guys, I am going to *know*." She smiled, and when she did, George thought her as soft as a newly opened rose. "I'm a second-rate witch, but I'll bet I'd be a first-rate media sensation." She smiled her brightest smile. "I wonder if I can act. Maybe I could parlay it into a film career."

"Not if you can act." Clark muttered.

Privately George doubted that she would be all that famous outside of scientific circles. What she was going to bring back, after all, was the news that death was death. Nothing. Blackness. Not much newspaper copy in that. "You'll be like an astronaut," he said.

She came to him and kissed his cheek. The two of them drew closer together, the explorers.

In her cage Tess screamed once, her anguish surfacing even through the drug-induced sleep. Then she subsided, and slept on.

Chapter 6

It had been hours since she left the Collier estate, and Mandy's rage and despair had not subsided in the least. She had driven around town until she was no longer too mad to cry. Then she had taken to the privacy of her uncle's house and locked herself in her bedroom.

Now even the tears were exhausted. She lay on her bed listening to the evening sounds of the neighborhood. A leaf blower roared, a child called again and again a name she could not quite understand.

She certainly wasn't interested in the banalities of a small-town evening. Her mind still orbited her loss: that portfolio had contained images from her soul. Without it she felt herself more alone than she could ever remember being, the center of a very private circle of pain.

The big black cat appeared. She stared, confused. Where had it come from? The bedroom door was locked.

It leaped onto the bed and rubbed against her thigh. Its fur felt silky and nice beneath her hand. As she stroked it the cat stretched. She seemed to remember from her childhood that Uncle George disliked cats, but until he came home and demanded it be put out, this magnificent beast was staying here. The cat moved suddenly to the far side of the bed. "Here, kitty," she said, and patted the place beside her. Her words sounded silly: you didn't say "kitty" to a near panther like this. It lay down and commenced staring at her. She found herself gazing back into its eyes. "You're such a nice old tom," she murmured. It really was very beautiful, with its night-black fur and green eyes. She listened for purring, but there was none.

One could look very deeply into this cat's eyes. If ail cats were like this one, gypsies would tell fortunes by gazing into their eyes. But cats generally look away.

In his eyes she could see her own face. How did she appear to him? Was she lovely, ugly, or what? Did he think of her as a goddess or a child? She touched his shredded ear and got a throaty growl in response. "Sorry." In apology she stroked his back. His muscles shuddered beneath her hand, as would a man she was stroking to arousal.

As would a man. But she had no man. And she had no work. Some of those paintings had consumed months.

Constance Collier had been furious with her crows and most apologetic,

but nothing could alter the loss of the portfolio. Given that Mandy was twenty-three, unmarried, childless, and most essentially alone those paintings and sketches had been her family, her center, the reason and sense of her life.

The tears came back, stinging her eyes. Furiously trying to quell them, she told herself that the pictures were not everything. Of course not *everything*, but they were her best. Among them were her treasures: her portrait of Godfather Death, which in some miraculous way had captured the laughter as well as the menace of Old Nick.

How could she ever do that again?

Or Rapunzel shaking out her hair, all that blond glory bursting in strands of morning sun—painted strand by delicate strand. Will T. Turner had made her laugh by comparing her technique with the masterful Van Eyck brothers of fifteenth-century Holland. But there was something in it: she had spent a great deal of time studying their work. Detail. Care. Richness of vision. Not the ideals of twentieth-century art perhaps, but she thought of herself as being from long, long ago. She was lost in this quick age. Her art belonged to the perfect grace of the past—even the very distant past.

Once she had dreamed of a time before the bison had left the plains of France, when winter had the name of a demon and cracked his breath like a whip... and she had been a queen reigning in a reindeer-skin tent... and making paintings in the sacred caves, the brush gliding in her fingers as if by magic, and the bison and the ibex racing across the plains of her mind.

When she woke up from that dream, she had wept to be herself, and to hear the droning of a bus in the street outside, and smell the smell of coffee on the morning air.

She had hurled herself into her work, spending four months on the little painting of Sleeping Beauty's castle behind its wall of thorns. And in among the thorns she had hidden the old world, the running deer and the flailing mammoth, the fish snapping in the water and the men like ghosts among the protecting gnarls.

The Sleeping Beauty carried in her soul all the promise of the future; the potion that drugged her was the past.

An artist's work is the issue of her body, and Mandy felt as if her children had been killed by Miss Collier's crows. The Seven Ravens indeed. The Seven Monsters.

She imagined an image in the cat's eyes; herself dead, her sea-pale skin soft against a pale sheet. We trust our souls to such frail vessels, a bit of skin,

a beating heart, paint upon paper.

Suddenly she came up short. That had been a very vivid image, and it was not the first image of her own death she had experienced in the past few days. Was she somehow in danger here? There had been all sorts of rumors about the witches, but none that suggested evil-doing.

“Is that what you’re telling me, old cat? Be careful of Constance?”

No, she knew what the cat was saying: Be careful of George. Yes, of course, George. He might come to her in her girlhood bed, come with pleas that became demands and the gleaming of a knife in the moonlight.

Tom preened himself. He stared at her. He could certainly capture her with those eyes. She kissed his forehead. “Who are you? Who are you really?” His cat face of secrets seemed to laugh.

Once right out under that maple tree, she had dreamed of being a mother. A vision had come, of leading children to the banks of a river and watching as they splashed at the lily pads.

Knights had come, plunging their horses into the water, and she had escaped in a silver fairy coach.

She had painted those children—who were really fairies—as Jack and Jill. Quick, passionate strokes, Mandy seventeen and flaming like a comet, the two jewels of children laughing down their hillside to eternity.

That painting had been destroyed.

“It can be a blessed thing to lose the past,” Constance Collier had said. “Sometimes what seems a treasure can really be a burden. You oughtn’t to hate my birds for giving you a chance to start fresh.

Great paintings have been made on this land. Give it a chance, and it will nourish you, too.”

The ravens had circled and circled, then alighted in a fine old maple and stared at Mandy with their blank yellow eyes.

Abruptly the cat raised its head.

“What’s the matter, Tom?”

The cat gazed long at her, then licked her hand.

“Surely you can’t be hungry?” She had remembered only one thing on the tear-blind way home from Constance Collier’s house, and that was to buy a bag of Cat Chow. Tom had eaten heartily not half an hour ago.

The cat got up and stood over her, looming, enormous, its breath coming in sharp little growls.

A patter of fear touched her heart. It was, after all, a stray. “What on earth

is the matter with you?”

For more than a few seconds the cat stared. Then a shudder passed through the animal and it went to the foot of the bed, jumped down, and moved off toward the door.

“No, you don’t.” She had lived with more than one cat and she suspected she knew exactly what this was about. “I fixed up a litter box for you in the mudroom.” She got up, unlocked the door, and took the animal by the scruff. It was heavy, but she was able to drag it across the linoleum floors of the dining room and kitchen. “Litter!” She pressed its nose into the box she had set up for it. “You stay in here for a while, Tom, you’ll get the idea.” She shut the cat in the mudroom and went back to the kitchen. It was nearly eight, she had been lying in that bedroom long enough. A nice little meal would be just the thing to cheer her up. She opened the refrigerator.

Until the accident she had been intending to clean up George’s house for him, and to fill the fridge and the cabinets with food. He was not much of a bachelor. Without Kate and the kids his life had obviously lost much cohesion. Kate had left him so abruptly. One day here, the next gone.

As Mandy had not done any shopping for human food, her choices were rather limited. She touched the stiff old sausage on the top shelf. What might it contain, besides bacteria?

She was forced to settle for a very dubious sausage sandwich. By the time she had gotten the big iron skillet out of the cabinet and put the bread in the toaster she had exhausted the small reserve of psychic energy her long brood had built up.

The cat yowled. In a while it would get desperate enough to use the litter box. Probably it had its own accustomed litter outside. Maybe she shouldn’t domesticate it. Maybe she had no right. This might be as much of a country animal as the ravens.

“Those birds aren’t pets,” Constance Collier had said, “they just live here. I suspect the flock’s ancestors inhabited this place long before the house was built.” She had paused then and regarded the birds.

“Animals are in eternity,” she had added. “How long do you suppose ravens and trees have been together on this very spot? One maple giving way to another—how long? A hundred thousand years? It’s been that long since the glacier receded from the Peconic Valley.”

Mandy couldn’t be too angry at someone who thought such thoughts.

There came hissing from the mudroom. Loud hissing. “Black Tom, Black

Tom run from the fire, run from the fire!” Mandy chanted as she sauntered back to see what was amiss. “What’s your trouble, kitten-cat?”

The growl that replied clapped like angry thunder. Mandy drew back.

Then she peered through the glass panes in the door.

The mudroom was empty.

At last the calls of the suffering, bereft monkey had become too strong for the cat to ignore. Tom had paced the little room looking for some explainable route of escape but had found none.

Its patience exhausted, it soared up from the house, wheeling across the evening town, just touching the top of the streetlight at the end of Maple, swishing through the crowns of trees. Birds fluttered away as it came. Dogs and cats dashed about below, panicked by its passage. A rat, falling from a wire, died before it touched the ground.

Tom flew through the evening hush, feeling the sleepy breath of the sky, crossing streets and alleys and houses faster and faster, passing over Bixter’s and through the frying-hamburger odor coming from its chimney, then over Brother Pierce’s Tabernacle, from which there rose the high-pitched excitement of a man too frightened of death not to preach damnation.

Then it reached the campus.

It was full of righteous fury. This experiment was unlawful. Constance didn’t seem to care. Why didn’t she put a stop to it? Was Tom being used by Constance yet again? Despite his great powers, she had outsmarted him more than once, the cunning devil of a woman.

Had it dared, it would have come here with a sword of fire. But it knew that it had not the right to destroy George Walker unless doing so furthered the overall plan of Constance and the *Leannan*. Those were always the terms of the spell by which Constance conjured the King of the Cats into a brief earthly life.

The tom entered the lab. At least it could take pleasure in relieving the suffering of the rhesus. Far from being forbidden, this was a required stitch in the weave of the story.

The King of the Cats swept into the laboratory where George Walker sat eating a Stouffer’s pizza in his underwear, his sleeping bag arranged on the floor beside him. George did not even stop chewing as it blew past him and through the closed door into the animal room.

The beast with the raped soul lay on its belly in the bottom of a miserable

little cage, its mate crouching beside it. They had been preening one another. Now they slept.

They did not see the air shimmer before them, roiling and flickering. First there was nothing but a fanged grin hanging there, then green eyes above.

To make this kill quick and quiet, the cat needed the dexterity of a human shape, and a silent weapon.

It concentrated, remembering the smelt, the shape, the heft of the human it knew best.

The eyes shattered and re-formed, now hooded with pallid skin, and the lips became those of an old woman, proud and delicate and firm.

Then the whole of the withered old body, quite naked, appeared suddenly in the air, dropped a few feet with a gasp, and stood poised, its fierce, kind face working with the palsy of years, a long, bright needle gleaming between the thumb and forefinger of its right hand.

Because one of this mated pair had been so terribly wronged, both could be blessed with death at the same time. They had earned that very special joy.

It was with the greatest pleasure that the shape of Constance Collier raised the long, sharp knitting needle and drove it deep into the eye of one of the monkeys, then through the heart of the other.

An instant later only the weapon remained to mark her, swift passage, that and the thin streams of blood running to the floor from the bodies of Tess and Gort.

Chapter 7

Without the cat the house was unpleasantly quiet. Small signs of her own past were everywhere, appearing before her like carp in turbid water, rising with their accusatory eyes. Overhead in her bedroom was the light fixture she had bought with three months' allowance, the roses she had painted on it faded to ugly smudges. On the game room wall there remained a faint streak from the crayon mural she had drawn there when she was ten and home alone, for which infraction her mother had given her the only spanking of her life.

She had hated the path worn across the living room carpet, and she hated it now. There were still holes in the sun porch ceiling where Mother had hung her plants.

Through her adolescence she had heard the tired acts of her parents' bedroom from this sun porch, sitting out here in the night with her legs tucked up under her, swinging in the porch swing to the creaky rhythm that shook half the house. The only reason she came out here was that not only the squeaking but the groans penetrated her own bedroom.

She had the awful feeling that she had not lived her youth. Where were the passions, the loves? All destroyed, pecked to pieces. But those were no real loves, those paintings. Could she really love? So far she'd had only casual relationships.

It was awful here. She ought to go down to Bixter's and see if the Pong machine was still there. Of course it wasn't, but they probably still made their famous creme de menthe soda, and there was always the magazine rack.

She sat listening to the water drip, still trying to work the loss of her portfolio to the back of consciousness and still not having much success.

She wished Tom would come back.

The telephone tempted her. Maybe a good talk would help. But she had lost her most recent male friend from half-intentional neglect, and the thought of falling back on him now only made her feel trapped. She could count on him to listen, though. Richard. Tall, sweet, sloppy in love. A sexual sentimentalist, capable of waxing talkatively nostalgic about the most private moment of love.

His love might be sticky, but it was also simple, and that she respected.

When his phone didn't answer, she supposed it was fate and hung up.

Didn't George ever come home from his lab? Everywhere she looked in this house she saw evidence of more deterioration. She had found newspapers from over a year ago lying beside a chair in the game room. George's sheets were slick with dirt; she doubted he had changed them since Kate left. There was a stack of *Persian Society* magazines on the floor of his bedroom with, oddly enough, all the pictures of the cats cut out.

She imagined that she heard his tread, saw his gaunt, haunted figure. She remembered the hate and terror in his voice when he had found the remains of his frog.

George had wept. Afterward, in his misery, he had stared longingly at her. He was full of tormented need. Any young, attractive woman, if she wished, could make him worship her.

Worship. A cold, distancing word. She would rather have passion from a man. But from George, nothing. The idea of being intimate with him made her want to bathe.

Even so, she wouldn't have minded a nice chat.

An hour passed. Nine o'clock and the old family clock that still dominated the living room chimed eight rusty hours.

The clock had been too massive for her parents to keep when they moved to their trailer retirement in Florida. It told the cycles of the moon on its face, the sickle, the half, the full. They rode a landscape dusted with small blue flowers. Dim within it there could be seen twelve shadowed figures dancing about a thirteenth.

Nine o'clock, Friday, October 18, 1987. The silence that followed the chimes seemed invested with obscure dangers, as if it were there to prove the menace of the house. Mandy thought again of the cat.

A search for him wouldn't hurt. She went out into the backyard.

Overhead, stars cluttered the racing gaps in the clouds. A sickle moon had risen and rode the quick sky.

Wind swept leaves to running like night smoke from the trees, rustling over eaves and dancing branches against windows. The cat was nowhere to be seen. Mandy drew the collar of her sweater close about her neck and went back to the house.

She locked the porch door behind her. All the windows were locked already; she had done that earlier.

The house was as tight against intrusion as she could make it.

She found herself returning to the mudroom. The ceiling light darkened the

windows and made the white walls glare. The mystery of the cat bothered her more in the dark. There was no place in here it could be hiding. Certainly not under the sink, which was the only enclosed space. Even so she checked there, finding a moldering box of Spic & Span and a pile of dirty, dried rags made from old undershirts.

Before the sink was the trapdoor to the cellar. She had not opened it earlier—what point, the cat could not have gone down there. She did not want to be alone here, not with the shadows and the moon clock.

Maybe the trapdoor had been ajar, falling closed as the animal passed. When she pulled the ring, the door came up with oiled ease. From below rose the familiar odor of the basement, unchanged since her girlhood. She peered down into the darkness. There was a click, followed by the faint roar of the furnace starting. Yellow, flickering light from the firebox reflected off the walls.

“Kitty?”

There was no other sound.

Mandy reached into the dark and felt for a light switch, then remembered that there was only a string at the bottom of the stairs. She began to descend the rough wooden steps in the faint shaft of light from the mudroom above.

She reached the floor, found the string, pulled it. No light: the bulb was long since burned out.

Once her eyes got used to it, the combination of the glowing firebox and the mudroom light made it possible for her to see a little. She glanced around, ducking beneath the fat tentacles that issued from the top of the furnace, the ducts carrying their heat to the reaches of the house. This was the way she had come on the most secret missions of pubescent love, a willowy, confident little girl, her nervous chosen boy in tow.

Opposite the furnace was a door set in a roughly made wall of cheap pine paneling, the builder’s fifty-dollar “wine cellar,” and the scene of those early experiments, one or two of which had left indelibly torrid impressions, the first, confused genital contact and the exploding pillow of pleasure that came with it. She had held his shaft in that room, too afraid and excited to move, listening with half an ear to *General Hospital* on the TV in the family room above.

On the door now was a rude sign painted in red ink:

“Kitten Kate Club. Keep Out!”

The sight of the rough letters pierced Mandy’s heart: this must have also

been George's kid's secret room.

More evidence of lives departed. Did those kids also remember their little room, even now whisper about it?

It was not easy for Mandy to open the door, but she did it. When she saw what was on the other side, she could not even scream.

She just stood, gasping, disbelieving, staring. The walls, the floor, the ceiling, were painted and scratched and clawed with images of cats. Panthers crouched, wildcats leaped, toms and pussies lounged and crawled and spat, and here and there was a photograph of a dismembered cat. Spiked to the wall were bits of cats, fur, and shattered bones, and in one corner a gape-jawed feline skull.

There was a dirty sheet wadded on the floor. The place stank of something like rancid grease. A votive candle stood in the center of the mess.

There was hatred here that seemed beyond the capacity of a human being. She realized that this was no children's place.

Only an adult mind had the patience to create this. A tortured, confused mind. Profoundly insane.

No wonder Kate had taken her children and run.

Mandy shrank back, closed the door to the ugly secret, then returned quickly to the mudroom. Her cat wasn't in the basement. She wished she did not know what was. She dropped the trapdoor, went back to the kitchen, turned on a light. She sat at the kitchen table, her head in her hands, feeling the secret of the house like a festering, rotting sore on her own body.

How odd the Girl's life looks—
Behind this soft Eclipse—

She whispered the words into the yellow Formica tabletop. Emily Dickinson knew secrets of women. So perfect to call me predicament a soft eclipse. Emily... you knew so much, wise Emily. And you hid on your little farmstead, far from life, far from the madness of men. I wish I were there with you right now.

Behind this soft eclipse...

To George, womankind, it seemed, was a cat. Kitten Kate.

So sick. So sad. So dangerous. She must leave here at once.

She stood up, thinking to go and gather her things. But there was movement outside. As footsteps ran up the front walk, her flesh crawled.

“Mandy!” The voice was high, shredded like that of a desperate woman.

“Mandy, let me in!”

“George?”

“Yes!” He howled out the word, rattling the knob as he did so. His voice was literally squeaking with rage: Miserably frightened, feeling trapped, Mandy unbolted the door.

He swarmed past her, muttering, stalking as dangerously as a spider through the shadowy house.

“Sonofabitch! Son of a fucking bitch!”

He disappeared into the bedroom. At once thuds and crashes started. “George!” She found him hunting through the bottom drawer of the dresser. Scattered around him on the floor were shirts and belts and about a dozen fat bullets. “George, what are you doing?”

“That sonofabitching Jesus freak killed my rhesus! My *rhesus!*” He produced a large black target pistol with a long barrel, began scrambling for the bullets.

“George, what’s got into you? Put that stupid thing down!”

“I’m gonna blow that bastard away! I was right next door in the lab and somehow or other he got in and killed my monkeys with a knitting needle.” He stopped, every muscle in his body tensing, his eyes screwed closed, his lips twisted back from his teeth. He clutched the gun in white, trembling fingers. “He stabbed them!” A huge, terrible sob tore through him, more a bellow than a cry—

He got up.

“Give me the gun, George.” He laughed, started for the door. Had she thought about it, she probably wouldn’t have dared to stop him. But her instincts were stronger than reason: she grabbed his elbow and spun him around. “You don’t even have any proof.”

“I don’t need proof! There’s nobody in the world who hates me like he hates me.”

“His whole congregation. You said yourself he preached against you. It could have been any one of them.”

“He may not be *personally* guilty, but—”

“You aren’t a court of law. You have no right to take his life. Go talk to him, threaten him, even spit on him if that makes you feel better, because, George, I am sure he is a bastard. But you give that gun to me.” She fought down her terror. He was so crazy. She couldn’t let him destroy himself and

another human being, too. She must not fail to get the weapon.

He swayed, then bowed his head. "You're right, of course. I really can't afford to be put in jail."

"Of course not. Give it to me, George."

Suspicion flashed through his eyes, to be replaced by an expression too mixed to come into a sane face: it was made of cruelty and love and something that might have been laughter.

He gave her the pistol, which she returned to its place at the back of the drawer.

"George, I want you to try and calm yourself down. You need rest, and I think you could use a doctor, too."

"I need to frighten that maniac into leaving me alone. And I think I know how to do it."

"Now, look, George."

"I'll go mad if I don't confront him! I've got to do what I can for myself, don't you see that?"

There was no way out of this. The man was going to have his battle. "Come on, then," she said. "If you insist on going, I suppose I can't object. At least let me drive you."

"You don't need to get involved."

"I said I'll drive you. I don't want you getting into trouble."

"He ruined me!"

"You'll keep working! You'll find a way."

She had hoped that he would calm down riding around in the Volks. Then they would stop somewhere, have a drink, and she would take him home. When he was asleep, she would leave for a motel.

Tomorrow she would deal with the issue of the Collier estate and the job.

He looked all in, shivering, huddled in his seat. "My only alternative now is to go to a human test and hope the Stohlmeyer people overlook the sloppy pretesting. That's all I can do to save the project."

"A human test?"

"It'll be safe enough. Hey, you took a wrong turn. The Tabernacle's at the corner of North and Willow."

Too bad he had noticed that. She took a right onto Taylor from Bridge Street, still trying to engage him in a diversionary conversation. "I met the great Constance Collier. It was quite an experience."

He couldn't have been less interested. "I'll bet."

Dull pain returned as she recalled her own tragedy, but she said nothing about it now. “Her estate is perfectly beautiful, And she seems rather good-hearted, actually. Despite all I’ve been told.”

“Constance Collier is a great woman. She means an enormous amount to me. Since your time, Brother Pierce has become her sworn enemy. He came in 1981, after you left. Last year he and his minions tried to get Miss Collier to put her name on something called *The Christian Faery*, and she responded by suing them for using her characters. He claims she’s a pagan.”

“That’s part of being a witch, isn’t it?”

“To some extent. At any rate, witches certainly aren’t Christian. That’s what’s gotten him so worked up.

Take a right on North Street. We’re almost there.”

The Tabernacle was a low building, obviously a cheaply converted warehouse. Cars were parked helter-skelter in the dusty lot that surrounded it. Light shone from within through windows that had been covered by “stained glass” Con-Tact paper. A wide sign, clean and bright and professionally painted, loomed twenty feet above the roof of the building. I AM THE LIGHT, proclaimed the black letters against the white background. Enormous carbon-arc floods crackled at the four corners of the sign, blasting it with preternatural brightness. From behind the stained-glass windows came a powerful roar of song: “O God, our help in ages past...”

Mandy could tell by the cars that Brother Pierce’s followers were working people, most no doubt unemployed and desperate in this steel and coal country, clinging to his simple answers for support in a hard time. Despite herself she was moved by the power and resolution in their voices.

“I didn’t expect a service,” George snapped. “But I guess the guy’s always got a service going on here nowadays. The whole damn township worships at his alligator-shod feet. The ones who don’t follow Constance, that is.”

“Why don’t we go have a drink? Come back after it’s over.”

George ignored her. Before Mandy could stop him he was through the door. She followed.

The church was not filled to capacity, but there was a very respectable crowd. Mandy had thought that the fundamentalist movement was on the wane—but easily three hundred people were here, and on a weeknight. There were many young people, no doubt students from the college.

“Welcome, brother and sister!” A puffy, sweating usher rolled toward them from his station near the door. He continued over the last bars of the

hymn. “I believe you’re new, aren’t you? Praise the Lord who has brought you into his Light.”

“I want to see Brother Pierce!”

The usher’s voice dropped to a whisper as the hymn stopped. “Well, now, he’s the one with the white hair, the tall man right up at the front.” He smiled. “That is Brother Pierce. If you’re here to offer repentance, you’re not too late. He hasn’t called the sinners forth yet.”

“I want to see Brother Pierce!”

“George, keep it down!”

“Brother Pierce! I’m Dr. George Walker of the Biology Department!”

Faces turned, some expressions quizzical, some darkening at his tone. At the front of the church the bright blue eyes framed by the white mane of hair flickered to intense life. It occurred to Mandy that both of these men might be psychotic. And yet there was something very different about them: where George seemed cruel, there was about Brother Pierce something of the terrible kindness of the ignorant—the sort of kindness that used to burn witches to make sure they would go to heaven.

“I want to know why you killed my laboratory animals, Brother Pierce. Why you destroyed my experiment! Was it because it would free people from the fear of death, which is what you use to enslave them?” His voice cracked and trembled, but did not die away.

Now accompanied by three much younger men, the usher rushed up the aisle behind George. Mandy came after them, her mind spinning. George enraged was a human fireball. It took courage to challenge a fanatic in the middle of a crowd of his followers.

“I said I am Dr. George Walker—”

“*I know who you are!*” Brother Pierce’s right arm came up, his finger pointed. “And I know you cannot help being here. The demon brought you, for you are but his instrument. But I love you in Christ, George, we all do.” He raised his arms, nodded.

The entire congregation responded: “We love you in Christ.” The joy among them, the warmth, was at once overpowering and affecting. Mandy was not sure she would have recoiled had one of them taken her hand.

“You shut up,” George roared, “all of you! You killed my animals and I want restitution. I demand restitution!”

“Good people, we have never done violence to this man, much less to the poor creatures he sees fit to torment in his heathen experiments.”

“You killed my frog, you killed both of my rhesus monkeys!”

“We did nothing of the kind. Satan has closed your eyes to the good of the world. I urge you to kneel and pray with us for the deliverance of your soul.” He turned and knelt to the cross that hung against the back wall.

“You lying bastard!”

“O Lord, we beg you to open your heart to this lost one, that he may be delivered from the spell of the Deceiver!”

“Shut up, you old shit! You *shit!*”

Two of the young men took George’s shoulders. He shrugged them off, took a menacing step toward Brother Pierce.

Mandy had to act. If she didn’t, these people were going to throw off the patina of loving-kindness and give George the beating of his life. “Leave him alone!” She pushed past the ushers. “I’ll take him home.”

She put her arm around his waist. “Come on, George.”

“Go with her,” Brother Pierce said sweetly. “Go with that unholy harlot!” His blue eyes were glaring at her, lit to shimmering coals by the fire in him. “You pagan.”

George was most definitely not the only madman here. She must have given some sign of her thoughts, because Brother Pierce instantly sensed her dismay and raised his accusing finger. He pointed it directly at her.

“You demon! You dare to bring your filth up from the pit.”

She tried to reply through a dry mouth, but her words were only whispered. “I’m a perfectly decent—”

Brother Pierce’s voice rose in an instant to a spitting, overamplified bellow. “Yea, you are a demon! For I see you as you are. Oh, yes! Yea, ‘they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails.

And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon!’ ”

Mandy was too astonished to make a sound, even to move. Why was this man suddenly so enraged, and at her? Why was he attacking her instead of George?

“You are the pagan’s servant! You sit at the feet of the evil that we bear among us!”

Oh. He must know that she was to be working with Constance. Big deal. “Come on, George,” she managed to say despite her fluffy mouth. “These people aren’t worth our time.”

“I’ll get you, Pierce. I’ll see you behind bars!”

“George, forget it. He’s a superstitious fool.”

“I call down the Love of the Lord upon you, I lay your sins in his Light. Lord, Lord, help us to love these poor lost ones, help us to save them!”

Mandy turned away, her temper just barely under control. “We oughta come back and burn this place down,” George murmured as they went together down the aisle—

“I couldn’t agree more,” she hissed.

Back in the car they sat silently for a moment. “Maybe we can have that drink now,” Mandy said as she tried to control her shaking. “Then I’ll take you home and put you to bed.”

George remained quiet until the car was in motion. “I can’t go home now,” he said suddenly. “I’ve got to prepare for the next step.”

There was no need to ask what he meant; she knew. Having delivered his threat to Brother Pierce, he was going to go back to his lab and test his process on a human being.

Should she warn his co-workers of the state he was in? No. That would be pointlessly destructive.

Maybe George kept the true depths of his madness in the basement of his mind as well as the house.

Tonight’s performance was quite understandable even in a sane man. She contented herself with an admonition.

“Be careful, George. Don’t hurt anybody.”

“Just take me back to my lab. I’ve got work to do.”

Chapter 8

Despite its gracious old homes, its broad trees, the elegance of its brick streets, Mandy now realized that in the years since she left town, Maywell had become seriously infected. There was no glib explanation for what had sickened it. The infection was hidden; it lurked behind the glowing windows of evening, drifted like smoke in the soft laughter of the night. Five years ago people had tolerated Constance Collier.

Now, because of the coming of a single man, they were being taught to hate her.

Mandy could not return to George's house, and now for more than personal reasons. The thought of meeting Brother Pierce's people prowling the night made her go cold. Between them and the basement room, there was no peace for her in her old home.

After she dropped George off at his lab, Mandy drove for a time, trying to calm down. Once the town's beauty had also been its truth, but its bleaker comers, the impoverished houses along Bartlett, the run-down trailer park near Brother Pierce's Tabernacle, seemed its greater reality now. Had the Grimm's project not been of such importance to her career, she would have left right now, and forever. But as she rolled past Church Row on Main Street, with the town common on one side and the three churches on the other, the white Episcopal with its elegant steeple, the Presbyterian neo-Gothic, and the ancient Friends Meeting House that predated the Revolutionary War, she could almost believe that Maywell was healthy still, and that Brother Pierce's glaring, buzzing sign was not glowing just beyond the trees.

A black truck charged her lights. She swerved and jammed on her brakes. "Damn." What was happening to her? She considered herself a steady and deliberate soul, and here she was drifting out of her lane.

But there was a reason, for a vivid imagining was sweeping through her. It came like the white wind that sometimes invaded her dreams, so powerfully that she just had time to stop the car before she lost all contact with Maywell.

The road in front of her disappeared, the trees lining it became a high stockade, the air grew thick with the stink of roasting meat and burning hair.

Screams of agony mixed with low merriment. She was no longer sitting in a car, but rather standing against a rough wooden stake. She felt a coarser

cloth upon her skin and knew the weight of a thick, sputtering taper in her hands. Chains lashed her body to the stake. She heard the gobbling crackle of a great fire, then saw red glowing in the faggots that were stacked around her feet, almost up to her waist.

She remembered words of consolation from long ago, when someone had said to her, "If you are to be taken to the pyre, never fear. Drugs will reach you, and you will feel naught!"

When was that? Not in this life. She stared helplessly at an impossible, spectral crowd rushing at her, men and women and dirty little weasels of children, all bearing fiery torches and bunches of twigs, which they threw at her feet.

Then a long tongue of fire licked her legs, so hot it felt cold for an instant. Then it was as if somebody were whipping her furiously, as if she were being scraped to death with a red-hot file. With a hiss her hair flared up. She felt her face dissolve like a skin of milk.

Oh, they have ruined me, they have destroyed my beauty. And I was the most beautiful thing they had.

I was their witch.

As abruptly as if a projector had been turned off, Maywell reappeared around her, the lamplit brick street, the dancing shadows of the trees. She sat a moment, too stunned by the hallucination to move.

She slumped at the wheel.

That witch-burning crowd had been *real*.

She recalled that modern anthropologists now believed that witchcraft was an earlier, pre-Christian religion, nothing more. Christianity had branded them evil and turned their Horned God into the Devil because they were competition. Too revered to be branded a demon, their Mother Goddess had become the Blessed Virgin.

Or so said some anthropologists.

There was a deeper mystery, though. Mandy saw in her mind's eye the rage coming into Brother Pierce's kindly face... she heard Constance's ravens screaming, remembered the strange, lascivious young man, Robin, his naked skin shining in the morning sun.

What was moving in among the trees? A great, broad-shouldered shape, gliding swiftly closer.

With frantic hands she restarted the car. She had to reassert the Mandy she knew and trusted. She thought of herself as a woman of strength and

effectiveness. She had an excellent imagination, but she did *not* hallucinate like this, not out in a public street.

Nobody was going to burn anybody to death. No matter how neurotic this little town might have become, this was still the twentieth century. Maywell was no isolated medieval village; it was a modern town, linked to the rest of the world in thousands of different ways.

She remembered more the tone of Brother Pierce's voice than the words, that tone, and the hurt behind the hating glare in his eyes. They really were the saddest eyes she had ever seen.

Somewhere in her mind the hallucination was still proceeding, asserting its presence just at the edge of awareness. As dreams sometimes do, it had doubled back on itself. She had not yet been burned. She stood before a trembling, excited bishop to receive her sentence.

He put the red taper between her small white hands.

Quiet, you! That part of her, the wild image-maker, must not be allowed to surface at times like this.

Where the devil was her self-discipline?

Be quiet, I order you, Amanda of the heart!

There now. With a conscious effort of will she directed her attention away from the flaming maiden within her to the cute old ice-cream shop she was passing. It was Bixter's, and she'd never seen a place that looked more like home, or safer. She'd spent an awful lot of good time at Bixter's. Right out there, in the alley where they parked the delivery truck, she'd smoked her first and last cigarette, a Parliament that had been given to her by Joanie Waldron, who had married the Kominski kid when they were in their late teens.

Beyond the front window she could see the wonderful old marble soda fountain, its spigots gleaming chrome and brass. There were the same wrought-iron chairs and charming little tables, and large numbers of students from the college. How she and her friends had enjoyed being mistaken for college girls by the occasional out-of-towner. How they had trembled when the college boys were attracted to them, cool, distant Bradley Hughes and men like Gerald Coyne and Martin Hiscott.

Mandy could not face Bixter's, not the Bixter's of this sadly changed Maywell. Home might have been hell, but Bixter's was a place a kid could relax.

She turned onto the Morris Stage Road and began heading back toward

Route 80.

She could go back to New York easily enough. Her loft was waiting. Her friends were waiting.

Or she could turn up ahead on Albarts Street and drive over to the Collier estate. If she dared.

But of course she dared. She was going to illustrate the new Collier Grimm's! She herself, Amanda Walker. It was a book as great, potentially, as the Hobbes-illustrated *Faery*.

A poem came to mind. "For too long you have gathered flowers, and leaned against the bamboo." Nan Parton had sent her that, and those lines applied right now, on this junction between New York and the estate. A poem of Wu Tsao. "One smile from you when we meet, and I become speechless and forget every word." Romantic, intense Nan, so angry within that her canvases seemed to have been scourged.

She could hear Nan now: go to the estate, it's even more important than it seems. Don't retreat now. If you do, you might never have another chance.

"For too long you have gathered flowers..."

Brave Nan, *you* would go.

Albarts Street came up on the left, marked by a flashing yellow light strung across the center of the Morris Stage Road.

God, Nan, I wish you were here to help me. The icons from the East Village: Robert when I'm lonely, Nan when I need courage. I loved her. "My dear," went the end of Nan's poem, "let me buy a red-painted boat and carry you away." In the night, in the heavy gloom of her Bowery loft, she had come back to find Nan there weeping, her brave Nan. She was crouched naked on the futon Mandy used for a bed, clutching the sheets to her face, kissing them. Mandy had crept out, shocked and embarrassed.

When she had come back. Nan was gone.

Dry with fear, she guided the car between the stately homes, beneath the ordered arch of trees, toward the Collier estate.

The thought of walking up to the house through that forest at night gave her pause. She could turn a corner, but she couldn't possibly do that.

But cars must go there all the time, so somewhere in Maywell there must be another entrance to the estate, one that a car could take. Dimly, she remembered a way in behind the old town graveyard.

Hadn't some of the kids once gone in that way on Halloween... and ended up at a wonderful celebration where they'd been given hard cider, among

other things.

She turned onto Bridge Street and drove along the wall, past the high gate with its motto and the trees beyond, so great and so at peace that they seemed not to be plants at all, but the bodies of gods.

She stopped beneath the streetlight at the corner of Bartlett and rummaged in her glove compartment for the map of Maywell she had bought at the EXXON station on the way into town.

Yes, there was that road. It became a dotted line on estate property just beyond the graveyard. She went back to the end of Bridge and turned onto Mound Road. Soon she was passing directly through the public graveyard. The Indian mound that gave the road its name rose abruptly beyond the edge of the graveyard. Maywell had been burying its European-descended dead here for three hundred years. The Iroquois used to expose theirs atop the mound. Before them, the Mound Builders had buried theirs within.

How long had burials taken place here? Thousands of years, probably.

By the usual standards of the United States this was a very, very old place. Once outside the graveyard the road turned abruptly west, toward the bulk of Stone Mountain, becoming strewn with leaves and narrowing to a car-width strip of asphalt.

She passed a “Do Not Enter” sign attached to a tree. As soon as she did, the road deteriorated, losing its asphalt and becoming a clay track planked here and there by rotting boards.

This was a desolate spot... the sort of place she might encounter—she did not quite know who, unless it was Brother Pierce with his terrible eyes and his spitting rage.

He seemed so familiar to her, as if, in some circle between the worlds, she and he had always been enemies.

Her firelit screams shattered the night.

Image of an owl alighting on the top of a charred stake, soft dangerous thing of darkness...

She was jarred back to reality when her head banged against the roof of the car.

You stupid dreamer, where the *hell* have you been? There wasn't even a road anymore. She was driving across naked heath. The Volks was struggling, bottoming and slurring about in the soil.

The Volks began to skid. Mandy downshifted to second, then to first. The tires caught again and the car lurched forward—only to get stuck even more.

She got out of the car and walked around to the back. The tires had tom through the thin covering of grass to the boggy earth beneath. For all she knew she might have driven this Volkswagen back to the Middle Ages. Maybe Brother Pierce was on his way in his bishop's robes, trembling with eagerness to burn her.

She gathered dry grass and stuffed it down under the tires. Then she tried again to get out of the mud.

The car shuddered, the tires whined, then she lurched forward with a roar from the engine—and promptly sank again.

She turned off the engine. It was dark out here and she was at least two miles from Maywell, perhaps half that far from Constance Collier's house—assuming she could find it. She hit the heels of her hands against the steering wheel. Give a city person a few trees and an unpaved road and watch the fun. She'd grown up here, she knew the condition of these old roads. Why had she allowed herself to get into this jam?

There was nothing to do but walk. She didn't care to stay with the car all night. A VW Beetle is no place to sleep if you are much more than three feet tall. At five-nine Mandy would be tortured by knobs and bumps and comers.

She felt around the glove box for her flashlight, turned it on, and was delighted to discover that it cast a beam. "At least—" The beam faded and died. Better put new batteries on her shopping list, she thought bitterly. She slammed the hood and set out on foot in the general direction she had been driving.

She would eventually see the house off to the right if she could just keep going in a straight line. With Stone Mountain on her left that wouldn't be very hard. She hadn't gone twenty feet before the ground got mushy.

She might walk toward Stone Mountain on the theory that the land would rise in that direction. She took a step and almost pitched forward. That way lay actual open water, lying in a pool across a sheet of mud.

Perhaps the other direction would be more productive. In fact she could see forest hugging the land like a black cloud over there.

It must be the forest of the guardian *fee*, the little stone fairy she had seen when she first came here. Well, what the hell, the forest was a lot safer than this bog. She should have left her car on Albarts and walked in as she had before.

Mandy strode along, her feet sucking busily, her eyes barely able to discern the ground in front of her.

She hoped that the blackness ahead really was that forest.

If it was, she would soon see the lights of the Collier house off to her right.

When she saw lights, though, they were not to the right. They glowed with deep radiance, but so softly that they might not be there at all. She stopped and stared toward them.

Very, very faintly she could hear the rhythmic jangle of a tambourine. There was a tang in the air, too, of wood-smoke. This must be the village where Constance's followers lived. If so, she was deeper into the estate than she had ever come as a girl. The witch village was a place of dark town legend.

She could see the dim outline of walls of wattle and straw, heavy thatched roofs. Candles flickered here and there behind leaded glass. Mandy found her way between two of the cottages and into the muddy track that separated this row from its opposite.

Candle lanterns hung before doors. Round stones for walking jutted from the track between the two rows of cottages. It was a scene from the Middle Ages, but the peace of it was far, far deeper than had ever been known in that tormented era. Mandy stepped along the stones. Just when she was sure the village was uninhabited, she heard the tambourine again, and this time noticed that it was accompanied by a low chant.

She knew then that this was indeed the witch village. She had come to this place of childhood legend.

At the far end of the path was a round wattled building very different from the cottages. Mandy went up to it and paused before the shut door. The tambourine was quite distinct now, as was the voice of the chanting woman. Mandy couldn't make out the words, but the tone was pure and firm and full of love.

Then there came a cry.

The voice and the tambourine stopped.

Behind her in the path Mandy heard panting. It was loud and close; when she whirled around, it became deep, chesty growling. It began to advance toward her. She had the impression that she was being menaced by a huge dog and backed around the edge of the building. This was one of the reasons that the townspeople stayed away from the estate.

There was a sense of quick movement and Mandy could feel the heat of its presence where she had just been standing. Then, in the faint light of a candle she caught sight of a long tail with a kink at the end.

“It’s you! You, Tom!”

He growled again, a most uncatlike sound.

“Tom?”

When she tried to approach the building again, he spat at her.

“My God.”

The cat was on guard here. It was very obvious that it wanted her away from the round building. How could that nice old cat possibly act this way?

Unless, in the dark, she had made a mistake. Maybe she wasn’t facing Tom at all.

Maybe this was something else.

When it growled again, she trotted, then ran around the building and onto the heath behind it.

She listened as she moved. Of course it was just the cat. Toms are crochety. If she’d held out her hand, he’d probably have rubbed against it.

Even so she did not stop. She had to climb a sharp rise. This must be one of the hummocks she had seen from fee house. At the top she was forced to pause for breath. Just stood, gasping, the night close about her, longing for just a gleam of saving light, listening for paws padding through the grass. She’d deal with that cat again, but not until daylight.

She tried to take her bearings. The little village was bordered on one side by the bog, on the other by these hummocks. It must be invisible from every direction except Stone Mountain itself.

Ahead, Mandy was soon relieved to see the lights of the Collier mansion. They were soft, but there were so many of them it could only be that great house. Her confidence renewed, she set off across the tumbling little hills, losing sight of the house in the valleys, regaining it on the hilltops. With the sliver of moon now free from clouds there was even a small amount of light. She had the luxury of being able to miss stones with her ravaged shoes.

She came suddenly to the edge of the gardens. The smell of the land changed, became at once more complex. Then she realized what was underfoot: she was walking through an extensive herb garden. Too bad she couldn’t see well enough to find a path. She hated to crush the plants. Come morning Constance no doubt would rage at her about the damage.

She was soon crossing tall grass. Up a steep slope she found the swimming pool, its water reflecting the moon. The windows of the house glowed with the loveliest light Mandy thought she had ever seen. She mounted the porch steps. The whole place was lit by candles, in holders, in chandeliers, in the

wall sconces in the hall.

There came from the library Constance Collier's voice, speaking with a gentleness and humor Mandy had not before heard from those lips.

"Miss Collier?"

The voice went right on. Mandy entered the kitchen foyer, then passed through the kitchen proper. There were no candles lit in here and she had to move carefully to avoid bruising herself against the big table.

When she reached the library, she paused at the door. The room was crowded; Constance Collier was obviously giving some sort of a talk.

And the gentleness in that voice! Where was Will T. Turner's harridan now? Mandy approached the doorway, emboldened by the sweetness of the voice to a greater confidence than she had felt here before. "Mrs. Collier?"

"Yes!"

"You're welcome here, Amanda. Take a seat and listen if you will." There was a single candle glowing in the room, lighting Constance Collier's old face in such a way that the lovely young woman she once had been seemed to flicker in its shadows, ready to emerge again. As astonishing as Constance was her audience.

They were children, easily two dozen of them, arrayed at her feet, so rapt with attention that they didn't even react to the interruption. They ranged in age from perhaps four to thirteen or fourteen. All were dressed in simple gray homespun. Constance herself was in a white linen dress embroidered across the bodice with green vines and pink buds. A lovely effect, so simple that it was elegant. On a young woman that dress would have been heart-stopping.

Lounging against a far corner Mandy saw Robin. His sister Ivy sat on a chair beside him. They also wore gray homespun now. When Mandy's eyes met his, he smiled a very small, very audacious smile. He shocked her, and the shock was delicious—which annoyed her.

"Now listen," Constance said. "This is the story of Godfather Death."

"The thing you must understand is that this story is very, very old. It is far older than fairy tales, and fairy tales are ancient things. This story does not come to us from the fairy-folk but down the human line. I suppose it has been told since we were granted the right of speech. And before then—well, it was in our hearts.

"A long, long time ago, when this world was still young and we were younger still, there was a woman whose fields were not great enough to support her growing family. She had been blessed with many daughters, and

they had all found men and raised families of their own-, until not even the woman's best harvest-leaping would bring up sufficient corn to feed everybody.

"Then one Lammas night her first daughter came in with yet another child. The mother took the baby and praised her daughter, but when the daughter had gone she wept, for the child must be exposed. Her heart heavy, the mother stole out in the cold of the night to give the boy to the sky.

"She was going along the road when she met a tall man with great horns on his head and eyes as fierce as a wolf's. This was not a bonded man at all, but some great hunter come in for the season's Sabbat. The mother held out the child and said, "Please, stranger, take this child of your own kind, and be his godfather."

The stranger took the boy and gave the woman a wand of rowan in return. "This is a miraculous twig; with it you can heal the sick. But be careful, for if you see Death standing at the head of the sickbed, touch the patient with the rowan and she will recover. If Death stands at the foot, however, say 'She will die.' "

"So she became a great physician and very wealthy, and her whole family prospered. One day the Queen called her to the bedside of her own child, a great and powerful hunter who had been gored by a stag. Death was standing at the head, and the boy lived. Then a second time the boy was gored, this time by a long-toothed tiger. Again Death stood at the head, and the boy was cured. But the third time, when the boy was sick with love, Death was at the foot of the bed and the youth had to die.

"The woman went then to visit the godfather and tell him all that had transpired. But when she went into the house, she found that things were most strange there. On the first floor a great black cat was fighting a dog and there was a terrible row. 'Where does the godfather live?' the woman asked. At once the cat changed into the Queen's dead son and sang:

"Rowan, rowan, silver twig of life
Cast my shadow on blood of strife."

"The woman went deeper into the house. On the walls were the shadows of the many animals the godfather had slain, stags and bear and bison And there were shadows of men there, too. On the floor there were many dead babies, the children who had been given to the sky. 'Where does the godfather live?'

the mother asked these children.

“They sprang up and sang:

“Rowan, rowan, silver twig of life
Cast my shadow on skull of strife.”

“So the mother went deeper, for farther on she could see a room scattered with skulls. When she touched them with the rowan wand, they came alive and spoke:

“Rowan, rowan, curse me not
For godfather has caused my flesh to rot.”

“Deeper yet the mother could smell a dreadful odor. She came then to a rotting forest, all the trees blackening with death, all the animals fallen down, and the grass withered like the curled fingers of dead children. Only the rowan bush remained untouched, and it glowed with life, its little buds opening even as she watched.

“She knew then where to find the godfather. Indeed, he was hidden in the rowan bush. When she saw him, she said, ‘Godfather, what are these strange apparitions in your house? At the entrance I saw your animals become children—’

” ‘And I saw your hair become gray, old mother.’

” ‘Then I saw the shadows of all your kills on the walls.’

” ‘Ah. So you know then why you are here.’

” ‘Then I found a room full of skulls.’

” ‘You found your own people.’

” ‘Then a rotted forest.’

” ‘The world to come.’

” ‘Then the rowan bush.’

“So he leaped out and made as if to grab her, but she was a quick old woman and she got away from him. When she looked back and saw his horns and his red eyes, she realized who he was and ran all the faster—

“She was so fleet that she came back into her own land, and when her people saw her they fell to rejoicing, for their old mother had become a young maiden again.”

Constance Collier stopped. She smiled down at the children. “That story

came from my grandmother, who had it from hers. I've told it now and again to some people who know, and they suppose it to be a survival of the time when we lived as often as not in caves. And that's what the godfather's house is, eh, a cave, and painted just the way they painted them at Lascaux thousands and thousands of years ago. So this must be a story about such paintings and the lives of the people who made them."

Mandy was entranced. That story could well be exactly as ancient as Constance claimed. It bore a close relation to "Godfather Death" in Grimm's. But this was a feminized version, sounding as if it was from the era when women were just becoming agriculturists, and men were still hunters.

Looking about her at these rough-clad children, at the beautiful wild boy in the corner, at Constance dressed like a princess herself, Mandy was filled with deep wonder and excitement. Something extraordinary was happening here, something that appealed deeply to her. And there was such love among these people that even when they were silent there was a sense of laughter.

"Now take the fire and off you go," Constance said to the assembled children. There were a couple of pleas for one more short one, and one piped request: "I want my dad to come live with us."

Silence followed the words. The joy was for the moment suspended in a graver mood. Constance reached her hand out and touched the cheek of a ten-year-old boy. "That is a matter for the circle, Jerry.

Next time you're there you make a picture of your father in your head, and imagine him among us, and make sure you see him smiling and happy."

"Will he come then?"

"The magic you do in the circle will help him."

The children fell in behind an older girl who carried a candle in a brass lantern. Single file the group went down the hall and out the back of the house. Soon the lantern was bobbing along on the hummocks.

Now was Mandy's chance to warn Constance Collier about the crazy old preacher. "I was at Brother Pierce's Tabernacle."

She looked up sharply. "Why?"

"It has to do with some trouble my uncle is having with him. He's a scientist, and—but that isn't important. I was there to help my uncle. And Pierce knew all about me, what I'm doing here and all."

"He reads the paper."

"I think he hates you."

Constance Collier's expression gentled again. "But you do not. You are

attracted to us. You identify with me.”

“Well, perhaps.”

“Come with me, Amanda. We’ll send those pesky ravens along to guide the children.” She went to the window and clapped her hands sharply seven times. Wings began to flutter and sleepy bird voices harped and shrieked. There followed a chorus of enthusiastic cawing and the crows burst up from the shrub beneath the window, where they had apparently been sleeping. Their cawing echoed in the sky and was soon greeted by laughter and cheering from the children. “They are good sometimes, dear, when they feel like it.”

“What are you?”

Constance Collier laughed. “An old woman who wishes to be young again. A dreamer, I suppose.”

“Excuse me, Miss Collier, but I know it isn’t that simple.”

Constance looked at her a long time. “In the end I will reveal every single secret to you. But only when I’m ready, so indulge your old benefactor.” She smelled more of minty incense than perfume. In the candlelight her skin seemed as alive as a girl’s. She touched Mandy’s face with unexpectedly warm fingers. “I could love you like a daughter.” Then, as if shocked by her own display of feeling, she rushed off. She called from the dark of the house: “Yours is the second room on the left, top of the stairs. We rise here with me dawn, which tomorrow will come shortly after six. Someone will be in to wake you.”

Mandy wasn’t convinced that such a thing would be possible at that hour.

“I have something wonderful for you to do tomorrow. Something marvelous. But you must set out just at dawn or there’s no point.”

“But Miss Collier—” There was no answer to her call, Constance Collier was gone.

Robin and Ivy began moving through the house with snuffers, putting out the candles. Mandy was too uneasy about the boy to question him, and she didn’t trust the girl at all. In the end she went upstairs. Her room was candlelit, with a basin of water and a chamber pot peeking out from under the ancient curtained bed.

Mandy undressed, putting her jeans, blouse, and underthings across the back of the blue stuffed chair that sat in front of the fireplace. She went to the writing desk and picked up the candle in its pewter ring-handled holder. Crossing back to the bed, she felt as if she had slipped into some unfamiliar

space in the world.

The time of mysteries in the night.

But this was Maywell, New Jersey, in the month of October, the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-seven.

It was also the time and place to climb into a wonderfully cozy curtained bed, curl up, and make sure she dreamed of peaceful voices and not strident ones, of children in candlelight and fabulous tales from long ago, and left the terrors behind.

She did not see Tom, who spent the night curled up on the canopy of her bed. And as he was not a purring cat, she didn't hear him either.

She was steeping heavily by the time Robin came into her room. He drew close to the curtained bed, parted the drapes, and peeked inside. When he was certain that she slept, he reached down and laid his hand on her naked breast, feeling its fullness and warmth. He whispered softly to her, an ancient spell:

“I'll come to thee in cat-time
I'll come and make thee mine.”

And then, the necessary words uttered, he crept off to his own bed.

Tom watched him go, switched his tail a few times, then settled in for the long night's vigil. In the bed below him, Mandy breathed as softly as a sleeping deer.

Chapter 9

On the night that the demon-sent doctor and the beautiful young witch came, Sister Winifred had been leading what remained of the congregation in “Rock of Ages.” Brother Pierce, winded from his last exhortation, surveyed the crowd. About a third were gone. They loved the Lord, of course, but in the absence of an intense issue their faith waned. They began to worry about money or work or just getting the washing done, and they drifted away.

He loved them so much, each one of them, and longed with all his heart and soul to see them on their way to heaven.

To keep them on the road, there had to be a great question before the congregation, something with drama and importance, that would threaten them, each one, personally, their homes and their children. *That* was the kind of issue that could be used to rekindle their faith. As they sang he prayed. At once he felt a stirring within himself. When he looked up he was surprised to see the shadow of a cat in the doorway at the back of the church. Cats made him sneeze. He was about to signal the usher to shoo it off when it went of its own accord.

Simon kept the faith of Christ as best he could. Of course, Christ was a long, long time ago. It took a little imagination to believe that the cruelties he had suffered were really enough to wash away the sins of the world. Christian belief was the only thing that Simon had ever found which would hold at bay the fiery wind of guilt that roared day and night through his soul.

He was so sorry for what he had done. A few moments of pleasure, a few moments of anger—then a lifetime of remorse and eternity in hell. He refused to confess himself publicly and to ask God’s forgiveness. In part this was because he felt that he deserved hell for what he had done. There was, however, the other possibility, that the whole thing—religion—was a product of the human imagination. If that was the case, he would be confessing and going to jail for the rest of his life for nothing. He was a believer, but he preferred to cut the cards himself.

Tonight Simon felt exceptionally tired. He had been slaving over the leaves all afternoon and now he was working like a dog, trying to get that spark to come into the eyes of his congregation. It wasn’t working.

He was just losing his magic. Six months ago he’d had this whole town wound around his little finger.

Well, not all of it: the old families and the college professors who lived in the elegant houses on Albarts and streets like that weren't interested. If they went to church at all, it was to places like Saint Marks with its dried-up Rector Williams, who looked like he'd been sucked up in a prune-making machine.

Simon got the poor, the welfare cases, the unemployed. Guys who used to work full-time over at the Peconic Quarry, which now ran maybe three shifts a month, others who once moved steel at the now abandoned Mohawk Fabricating Mill. These men had wives and children and souls and hopes, and they weren't getting anywhere. Simon's congregation had numbered two thousand souls at this time last year.

Now he had about fourteen hundred, a thousand workers and their families and four hundred Maywell students. His campus ministry worked surprisingly well, perhaps because the Maywell college kids were, in their own way, as much rejects as the steelworkers. These were the kids who hadn't made Princeton by a long distance, who hadn't even made Jersey State.

It had occurred to him to stand up and give them a little hellfire. Guilt was what made them keep coming back. Guilt, or was it hell? Sometimes their eyes really sparked when he described his ideas of hell. From some deep place in himself he knew what it was to burn. As a matter of fact, he was an expert on agony, both physical and spiritual. He could visualize burning flesh, sometimes even smell it as he preached. The trouble with his congregation was that they did not understand hell. It could be as small as a grain of sand, as large as a whole lifetime. And it did not have to be flames; it could be another kind of burning, the blue fire that consumes the spirit.

He knew all of this because he lived with it every day. His greatest secret was this: hell was with and in him. It was here, right now. He carried hell in his pocket.

He could feel it there now, dry and gnarled and unspeakably horrible. Their sins the Lord might forgive. If he could save just one from the torment he was already enduring, there was at least some small sense to his life.

But to do his work he needed their faith. He must kindle and rekindle it, and keep it burning white hot!

Instead he saw it dwindling. Those who came here came more and more out of habit, not because they couldn't stay away. At first they had poured through those doors with eager faces. Then they had come more slowly, then

out of duty. Now some of them didn't come at all.

What worked best to keep them was controversy. Simon had first come to Maywell because of the rumors of witches there that had spread through the underground fundamentalist movement.

Such a place seemed an ideal mission for a really committed preacher. They needed Christ in Maywell; not the sweet, empty Christ of Catholics and the Presbyterians, but Simon's Christ, a living Christ who would save you right then and there, in front of everybody, if you could feel it deeply enough.

Simon had built his church on the stones of controversy. Issues and public statements of protest had brought his people together, made them see themselves as a separate band, changed them from congregation to band of brothers.

They had collected evil books and records, stealing them from the library, buying them or shoplifting them from the Dalton's and the Record Room. Then they had made a bonfire of them out behind the Tabernacle and burned over four thousand separate items. Chief among these offerings were copies of the works of Constance Collier.

After the burnings Simon had seen an article in the *Campus Courier* suggesting that Dr. George Walker was engaged in fantastically evil experiments of reviving the dead. To combat this man, Simon had scheduled a ten-week series and thoroughly condemned him. He had even discerned a link between Dr. Walker and Constance Collier. One of Walker's assistants, Clark Jeffers, lived on the Collier estate.

The creation of *The Christian Faery* had been another massive project. The intention had been to replace Collier's demon-inspired *Faery* with the purified work. Getting godless children's books off the shelves of the library and out of the local bookstore was almost as important as book burning itself.

Constance Collier had reacted with venom.

She was a focus of pagan evil. He had heard rumors of the sinful activities on her estate, rumors having to do with odd sex and the raising of demons with magic rituals. It was impossible to be a witch and not a worshiper of demons.

Now the *Courier* had carried a story about Amanda Walker and her work illustrating the heathen, paganistic Grimm's fairy tales—for none other than Constance Collier!

Dr. George Walker. Amanda Walker. A witch working for him, she working for a witch—this was a cabal, all of it, a pagan cabal right in the

middle of this God-fearing Christian community!

God-fearing and clean-living... but it was no wonder that they were afflicted by pagans and demons, for they were not led by a clean man.

He touched the small bulge in his pocket that was his own personal torment. But tonight the hand was only a hard, dead little knot.

The hymn ended. Brother Pierce cleared his throat.

He didn't know what he would say next. But he trusted in the Lord to help him. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. His whole being seemed to stir. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the outline of a cat against the stained-glass window nearest his pulpit. It was on the outside, pressing itself against the glass.

He did not have time to be angry about it, though, for energy suddenly began pouring through him, coming from above, from below, from everywhere. His body seemed about to burst into tingling life.

Then the words appeared, rolling off his tongue as if of their own accord. "There is evil running as a shadow in these bright streets of Maywell. Yes, it even enters here, a place we have tried to make sacred! The evil doctor comes among us with his whore and makes lying accusations." He pointed upward with his right hand, and felt to his deepest core the warm, the righteous, the sweet presence of the Saviour. By God's grace he felt this, for he could now speak directly to beloved Jesus Christ. "I say to you, Lord, your people are innocent. Yea, even as the Lamb!"

People were suddenly back alive, their faces shining, their eyes quick with excitement. He heard whispers: "He is here, the Lord is here."

"We can feel it," he shouted. "O Lord, thank you and praise your holy name." He smiled a great chasm of a smile. "O Lord, what a night!"

People began to shout. "Praise the Lord!"

But there was another reality in this church, and if he looked past his own joy and faith, he could see it.

The ones toward the back of the room were not included in the excitement. They sat, their faces fixed in pious expressions. He knew that they couldn't feel a thing.

He was being prevented from reaching even to the last row in his own church!

He had to find a focus that would mean something to the man sitting in the otherwise empty row at the far back, who was either deep in personal prayer or asleep.

He cooled his throat with the water Winifred kept behind his pulpit in a green plastic pitcher.

His mind fumed morbidly to a vision of the Tabernacle dark and empty, a “For lease” sign on the front door.

A family of four defected from a front row. A front row family and the service not yet ended. So much for his ecstatic moment. He hadn’t even inspired the front sitters, beyond a few automatic praise-Gods.

The ones leaving didn’t so much as look embarrassed.

Fighting himself, he quelled his urge to scream at the defectors, to run after them, it was hard. This church was his life, his first and only success. He had known cold and hunger and despair. The Tabernacle was the only good thing feat had ever come to him. He was a man of many pasts. He had been a nightclub comic in Los Angeles, working the toilets, telling sorry jokes to scabrous drunks for fifty dollars a week.

“Little Red Riding Hood gets stopped by the Big Bad Wolf. ‘Okay, Little Red,’ the wolf says, ‘pull down your panties and bend over. You’re gonna get it up the ass.’ Little Red Riding Hood pulls a .357 Magnum out of her basket. ‘The hell I am,’ she says, ‘you’re gonna eat me, just like it says in the story.’”

Was his problem that they knew, that some of his past somehow clung to him, a stink of cigar smoke and cheap booze, of midnight bus rides and nights in motels without names? Humor. When he got a laugh, it was like a blessing from on high.

There were worse things, though, that clung to him, things far worse than the residue of a few scabrous jokes. During the seventies he had been a social worker for the city of Atlanta, specializing in home placement for unwanted children. There had been trouble, big trouble. She had been a lovely butterfly of a girl, soft and smooth and saucy. Once he had been proud of how he had helped her.

Despite the dropping of the charges, he remained the object of persistent suspicion in Atlanta welfare circles. His little twenty-second mistake—not knowing his own strength—had condemned him for all eternity, but it had also kindled in him this fire to save others.

Everybody in the church was watching him. It was up to him to keep them a little longer or let them go.

He hated for them to leave on such a dismal note. One little flicker of life, hope springing up, the feeling of Jesus right here in the room, then this

emptiness.

His mind flashed to a bright, gleaming image of Amanda Walker. That niece of the doctor's was so perishingly, delicately beautiful. And yet her eyes were full of firmness and intelligence. She was just the kind of woman he dreamed of, as lovely as an opening rose, yet strong enough to take him well in hand.

Firmly in hand. When he imagined offering her his guilty heart and asking forgiveness, he felt a shaft of agonized longing in his breast, just as if some demonic arrow had pierced him.

The restlessness in the room was getting worse. What the devil had this service started out about, anyway? He couldn't even remember. To buy a few seconds he took another pull at his water. Sister Winifred minced across from the choir box and refilled it.

Nervously, feeling more and more helpless, he flipped the pages of his Bible. Sometimes this worked.

Why had he thought of the woman now? Maybe the Bible would give the answer.

Then he saw a word flashing past, a promising word: harlot. What a friend he had in the Lord! He cried out the passage to which he had been led: "Wherefore, O harlot, hear the word of the Lord: Thus saith the Lord God: Because thy filthiness was poured out, and thy nakedness discovered through thy whoredoms with thy lovers, and with all the idols of thy abominations, and by the blood of thy children!"

He paused. The faces were on him again, the eyes coming back to life. He felt much better. "Well, now, wasn't that some witness! Oh, yes!" His laughter, ironic, angry, crackled through the silent crowd. "The very whore was among us, witnessing to the lies of the demon doctor." He pointed straight down the empty aisle. "And worse, she is going to the house of the pagan, to help her make more evil books for our children. Mark my words, that beautiful girl bears the mark of the demon upon her white flesh. And I warn you, she is here as an agent of the Dark One, come to spread corruption and confusion among the children!"

There was response then, a little shocked whispering among the older folk. The young people just stared.

As good as it had sounded to him, this was obviously not quite right. Something was still missing, the focus, the damned focus. He plunged on. "Is it not our duty to cast the abomination from our midst, to cast out the shadow

of evil that so vexes us, that turns the hearts of our children from the service of the Lord? And who is the whore's helper and employer? That woman, oh, yes, the pagan of the hills, none other. Yea, they are the unholy, the denizens come up from the deep. Yea, they are of Leviathan's army, oh, yes!"

Faces hardened. "Praise God!" came the shouts. This was a little better. Just a little.

"So I say to you, evil walks and talks in the form of woman, yea, even a woman dressed in the clothing of a man, in those bottom-wiggler jeans. 'The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, for that is an abomination unto the Lord!' "

Ah. There was a marked improvement in the interest level. Nobody was leaving now: the room was touched by new energy.

Were they only shocked by his fury, or did they believe the news he brought of the evil among them? He took a drink, stared from face to face. "Repent ye," he shouted at one, "Repent," at another—"O Lord, give us strength!"

Instead of blazing up with righteous love, those he had eye contact with glanced away. Despite the improvement he wasn't reaching them really yet.

He needed a simple, incendiary *word* that they could rally to, a fiery word that would entangle all three demons in one net of truth.

A glance at his watch told him it was closing in on 10:30. The service had been going on far too long, given the restlessness of the crowd. It was bad psychology to have people feel relief when the service ended. They ought to be left uplifted and longing for more. "Leave them feeling as children who have just been praised by their fine old father," a mentor had said. He struggled, he prayed in his heart, but no word came. He would have to drop the matter for the time being and go on to the last part of the service.

May the Lord find his word for him.

"So repent you now, good people, come forth, come forth and bring your sins before man and God! Come, have no fear of the love of God nor the ears of your brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus *wants* your sins. So be free with them, and bring them to his Holy Altar!"

He signaled Winifred, who started the organ. The choir hummed obediently along, "Amazing Grace."

Brother Pierce bowed his head.

A tall man stood up from deep kneeling. He wore a gray-striped suit and a vest. He looked much more prosperous than the run of the congregation. As

he came forward, Brother Pierce recalled his name: Roland Howells, chief teller of the Maywell State Bank & Trust. Not a tither. According to Mazie Knowland, who worked at the regional IRS office, Howells' 1981 income tax return showed \$28,000 gross salary. Contribution that year of exactly \$600.

What would he repent, this secret miser?

Howells came to the place appointed for confession and knelt before the congregation. "My name is Roland Howells."

"Speak up! If we can't hear you, neither will the Lord!"

"I am Roland Howells! I have to confess that I have been cruel to my wife, I have shouted, I have taken the name of the Lord in vain, and before God I have struck her."

"Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. Brother Roland!"

"Praise God, brothers and sisters, forgive me and pray for me. My wife took my son and left my bed and board, because I was hard and full of anger."

Something struck Brother Pierce as he listened to this man's trouble. Quite often lately members of the congregation had come forward to witness to the breakup of their families.

Very often. Sometimes three or four in a single service. Maywell was a quiet, settled place of barely five thousand inhabitants Not your divorcing kind of town. Brother Pierce Shook the penitent's hand, wondering. "The Lord will return them to you if you pray well, brother."

"I hope so. Brother Pierce. I sure do miss them. They're out there on the estate, I know that, I got a phone call."

Good God. Those words immediately brought another witness, a woman of perhaps fifty, her fingers nicotine-stained, face slick and pallid. There was something *abolished* about that wasteland of fat, smelly skin, probably full of the kind of imperfections that ruined a kiss to the flesh, moles and seedwarts and prickly little hairs.

"My name is Margaret Lysander. I also lost my family to the estate. My husband, my daughter, my son.

They didn't want me to come here, and when I got saved, they left for the witches."

Another one, and even purer gold than the first. The witches were stealing wives and husbands and children from God-fearing Christians, and that was a fact.

Here was something as deeply personal as there could be. A threat to the family was a threat to the very soul.

Something kept entering his mind, then flitting away, an uncaptured thought. A word. He put his fingers in his pocket and wound them around the dry, sharp-boned little fist that lived there.

Maggie Lysander started in again. "I was a good mamma to my kids," she said. "I didn't treat 'em except as the Lord lays down in the Good Book, and as you teach us. Brother Pierce."

"Amen, sister."

"It was like they was just bewitched."

Brother Pierce fairly reeled. Of course, it was so *obvious!* Bewitched. Witch! Witch! It wasn't anything wrong with his followers that was making their families walk out on them, it was the witch! And who was a known pagan who would not give her work over to the service of Jesus Christ? Why, the very one who employed the whore and was behind the evil professor!

Brother Pierce waved his arms with excitement. The Good Lord was in him now, in him deep and in him strong! "Oh, I *feel* the blood of the Lamb flowing in my veins, ohhh, I feel the Lord moving in me!" The Tongues were coming upon him. Maggie Lysander shrank away, the congregation sighed with suppressed excitement. This is what they came for, this was what made Brother Pierce special. Very well. Now they were going to get their money's worth.

He held his hands out before him, making them shake and tremble as if they were no longer his own.

They were going under the power of the Lord. Then his arms, then his legs and his whole body. He felt himself spinning, saw faces whirl past, faces and rafters and linoleum flooring. He grabbed on to the pulpit.

His mind emptied to make way for the coming of the Word. "Ohhhh Lord!"

"Praise his Name!"

"Praise him!"

"Ohhh, ye have the hand of the witch upon you! God's people are under the palm of the witch! The witch comes among you, oh, praise God, the filthy sorceress with her charms and dirty talk, she poisons the lives of your children and breaks up your homes, Ohhh Lord! And we cannot raise a finger against her! Ohhh Lord! We cannot do a thing on our own! We got to put down our human ways and let the *Lord God* do it his way! Ohhh, we got a

witch in the dark of the night a-coming to poison your chosen people!” It was as if a fire had been kindled down deep in his soul, a white fire of the breath of the Lamb, a red fire of his blood. Brother Pierce stalked down the aisle. “You and you and you, you got the witches’ charm right on your forehead, Ohhh Lord, she’s bringin’ us division in our houses and death, Lord, we cannot free ourselves, come into our hearts, O Lord, come right now among us!”

Maggie Lysander was the first among the congregation to catch on. Good girl. She arched her back and clapped her hands to her face and shrieked high and savage. “Lord! Lord! I got you in me!” She began to gyrate. Winifred started in on the organ, a syncopated “Rock of Ages” to sort of encourage things along a little. Brother Pierce grabbed a man and kissed him on the mouth. “The Lord is in *you-uh!*” The man shook and swayed and soon was joined by a dozen people around him, then a dozen more, then more and more. “The Lord is in *us-uh!* Ohhhhh!” Then more and more, some were shrieking and crying, some were clapping, stamping. Brother Pierce felt climax in his soul, all his false vanity burning away before the fiery coming of the Lamb. The Word was upon him. “Oh Lammaadossachristi! Ohhh rostoleuroxisatime! Lestochristomentisator!”

Maggie Lysander screamed. “Mathama! Lopadoa destona deutcheber!”

“Ohh, Laaaededmedema! Memkakopolesto, yeaaaoooh!” That was a good one! He shut his eyes and swayed and clapped. “Praise the Lord God-uh! Praa-aise the Lord God Almighty-uh, yea though they walk through the valleassstomana! Ooohabeiiatking! Ohhseettalbmnen! Beestalthnot, statltnot suffer, belsallnot suffer, salnot *not—thou shall not suffer a witch to live-uh!* There it was, oh, beautiful and true and good! A rich bitch of a witch of a stuck-up Mrs. Constance and her filthy whore of a too pretty-o goddamn girl!

“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live! Oh, boy! Oh, the Lord has me! Listen to the Word! Oh, boy!

Ohhhaletitmeanta!”

He was jumping and leaping, and they were all jumping and clapping in heady rhythm, oh, yes, and he kissed one and another, a fat face, a sweated brow, pretty lips, flesh of flesh, his people, his dear people, the people God had given him to make new in the Word. “Lammasuckum!”

He fell among the surging crowd of them, and they were touching him, tearing his clothes, putting their hands against his naked flesh, and raising him high now on a sea of hands, “Praaaaise God! God! God!”

They were not gentle, they hurt him, grabbing him and touching him, grabbing his hair, the flesh beneath his tom shirt, grabbing him so it hurt and felt good at the same time, and calling out in tongues, and embracing him among them, men and women and children with their hands on him, praising the Lord God and touching him.

They carried him forth into the cold of the night, beneath the bright enormous buzzing sign where the last white moths of the season fluttered, and beneath the night sky also, Ohhhh Lord! They loved him, they loved him, the Lord made them love him and he cried and they all cried and praised God together right out in the middle of the parking lot, and then they hugged each other. O God be praised and thanked, he was getting his people back!

The congregation linked arms. Spontaneously and without manipulation they began singing "That Old Rugged Cross," that old, old song from the past days, his boyhood of sorrow and pain, and all the sorrow and pain of them all, the sweet, decent, good, shamefully bewitched children of the Lord God.

One song followed another into the night. Sometime after twelve a fine mist began to fall. They went to their cars then, with no particular plan to do what they did, to drive the night in procession, flashing their lights and honking their horns, out Bridge Street and past the high brick walls of the Collier estate, until the rain changed to sleet, and the sleet to snow, and with much honking and waving and shouted praises, the congregation returned to their homes.

An hour later Brother Pierce lay sweating on his own bed in the trailer behind the Tabernacle, listening to good old country music all the way from WSB a million miles away in Nashville, sucking a bottle of Black Label, his mind clattering with his success. Just like that his congregation was united behind him once again. United against the witch.

If he could keep this going, he guessed he'd even see a tithe from the likes of Miser Howells. This was real inspiration.

Toward morning he knew he was not going to sleep. He had to point up the seriousness of his new issue. Had to leave a message that people *cared*, that they *hated*, that they were with their good Brother Pierce all the way.

He put a can of gasoline from the toolshed into his car and drove off about two hours before dawn.

Soon he was out on the lonely road near the Collier wall. A huge cat arched its back in his headlights, then darted to the roadside. Brother Pierce stopped his car. He got out. In his left hand he was carrying a whiskey bottle

full of gasoline. He lit a rag stuffed in the neck and hurled it against the wall.

The bloom of gasoline fire swelled and jumped madly at the trees. It was not strong enough to do damage, and was not meant to be. What Brother Pierce wanted was for people to see the black scar this would leave on the wall.

Snowflakes whirled among the flames.

It took less than five minutes for the fire to flicker out. But it left a nice, big mark behind.

People would see and it would make them think. Thou shall not suffer a witch to live.

It was just a suggestion.

Chapter 10

Mandy awoke to a clink and clatter beyond the curtains of her bed. She had slept so heavily that for a moment she didn't remember where she was. Then she stuck her head out to a slap of cold air and the sight of Ivy building a fire in the hearth.

"Good morning." Maybe it was the cold air or the amazing sight of the snow beyond the window, but her grogginess passed at once.

"Oh, hi. I'm sorry, I was trying to keep quiet."

"I don't mind. What time is it?" The sky beyond the windows was gray, saying only that the clouds were low and dawn had not yet come.

"Onto six. You've another twenty minutes before the bell." She put a bundle on the chair. "Here are clothes."

Ivy's voice was warm, and her eyes when they met Mandy's were full of friendship. Yesterday the girl had seemed so reserved—and so mean, creating the trouble with the Hobbes edition and all. She had certainly had a change of mood. Mandy remained angry with her over the business with the book. It wasn't unreasonable, she thought, to want an apology. Ivy cheerfully poked up the fire.

When it blazed she stepped to the center of the room, hands on hips. "How's your pot?"

"My—oh, I used it, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean," Ivy said. She reached under the bed, hauled it out, and glided away with the big blue porcelain pot cradled in her arms.

"Breakfast in the kitchen at 6:30," she called over her shoulder. A moment later Mandy heard her tell Constance that "the lady" was up. How old was Ivy? Seventeen, perhaps. Certainly she was too old to be calling twenty-three-year-old Mandy a "lady."

It took no small amount of courage to step naked into the freezing-cold room. A curtained bed, she had found, was a most delicious luxury. Maybe the style had been abandoned because it was simply too comfortable. She dashed over to the chair and opened the bundle, finding a bra and panties, and some of the homespun that the others wore, what seemed a shapeless dress that, when she wore it, clung most beautifully.

The cloth was so cold against her skin it made her hop and gasp.

She had just tied the belt when she heard a meow at the window. There

stood Tom, pressing against the glass, looking annoyed to be out in the snow.

Down at the village he had seemed dangerous. But now he was a cold old cat, and she couldn't resist letting him in. When she raised the sash, the burst of freezing air that engulfed her made her squeal.

"Come in here, you! Hurry up!"

The cat rushed past her and in an instant was curled up in front of the fireplace.

"You're a weird one, kitty-cat. How'd you get out here in the first place? Did you follow me?"

The cat stared at her. She wanted to stroke him but thought better of it.

"If you ever want a kiss," she said softly, "you know who loves you." She puckered up and went "mmmmm," but the cool seriousness of the cat's gaze silenced her.

This was unexpected. Could an animal see into a human soul?

Nervously she returned to her preparations. She had to break the ice on her pitcher to wash. The soap was homemade and smelled powerfully of peppermint. It smelled, as a matter of fact, very much like Constance Collier, like Ivy, like Robin. It smelled like this house. And it wasn't only mint, was it? There was in it a hint of some more exotic herb.

After her wash she dragged on her muddy shoes and wished she had some heavier ones, and also a good jacket or sweater.

And she wished Tom would stop that staring! Could there be laughter in a cat's eyes? Either he loved her or he disdained her. Or worse, both. Even though she was dressed, she still felt naked.

It took the faint tapping of flakes at her window to draw her mind away from him. October 19 and already it was snowing. If such weather held, this was going to be a long, cold winter. She peered through the hazy glass. What magic she saw, the world transformed to philosophical purity, silent but for the hiss of snow against snow and the rattling of bare limbs.

As the sky lightened she saw that the snow had touched the autumn colors of the trees with white. The perfection of the colors together, the pillowy razor of white, the staring reds, the oranges and browns, went to the center of her, for the scene the snow had created was truly a wonder of nature.

When Constance came along, swathed in a huge woolen robe, nothing but a face in the dark folds, Mandy was still motionless before the window. "I know," Constance said, touching her shoulder with long, light ringers. "You'll need the clothes we got you. Why didn't Ivy—" She went to the

door. “Ivy?”

Louder: “Ivy!”

From downstairs: “I’m in the kitchen, Connie.”

“We need Amanda’s warm things. She’s practically naked, the poor girl.” She turned around. “Ivy’s quite new to big-house responsibilities. But she has a good heart. A very good heart.”

Her footsteps sounded on the stairs. A few moments later she appeared with another stack of clothes topped by a pair of stout hiking boots. “I’m sorry, Mandy. I completely forgot the rest—the important stuff, too. I think it’s too cold for me today.” She looked down at Mandy’s feet. “What’s your shoe size?”

“Seven and a half.”

“Hiking boots have to be a little bigger to make room for the socks. I think I guessed right, though.”

“I’m glad you thought of them at all.”

“You need good shoes. You must learn every inch of this estate as if it were your own,” Constance said.

There was a beautiful hand-knit wool sweater of rich, iridescent brown, and beneath it something huge and dark and gray. Mandy put on the sweater and unfolded the mysterious garment.

It was a hooded, ankle-length cloak made of the tightest homespun she had ever seen. Down the front were monogrammed a five-pointed star, a triangle, a sickle moon, and two other, more obscure symbols.

It was tied about the neck with a red silk ribbon.

“This is wonderful.”

“You like it?”

She swept it across her shoulders and tied the ribbon. Ivy raised the hood. The cloak was heavy and warm and altogether magnificent. “Oh, Constance, I love it. Really love it!”

“It took half a year to make. The weavers started in April, We made it just for you.”

Mandy looked at her. What she had just said didn’t make sense.

“I’ve been watching you ever since you were a girl,”

Constance added. “And when I saw your work in Charles Bell’s book, I knew it was time for you to come to me.” She smiled. “Change your domes and come down to breakfast. We’re wasting time.”

The table, when Mandy arrived, was spread with a redchecked oilcloth. A

fire roared in the huge old stove and the windows ran with condensation. Mandy sat down to a plate of pancakes and syrup. There was a side dish of blackberries and a pitcher of fresh cream. Tea of an herb unknown to her completed the meal. “Everything you’re eating came from this estate. It can feed you four seasons of the year. And if you like homespun it can clothe you, too.”

“The village—”

“It’s an experiment. The villagers are trying to live really close to the land. Everything at the village comes from the surrounding fields and forests. The village lives by the breath of the earth, which is the weather, and the heartbeat of the earth, which is the seasons. And they live close to one another, too, unled except by the necessities that the land imposes.”

“Who are they, Constance? Are they witches, like we thought in the town?”

“Friends. Most of them are from Maywell. Some from farther away. They’re people who want to be reinitiated into personal contact with the earth. The village is an effort to balance old ways with new.” She smiled. “Because we have drifted so far from our relationship with the planet, many people have a tremendous need to rediscover their inner love for her. That’s what the village is about. It is only me first of its kind, I hope and trust.”

Tom came into the room. He stood beside Constance’s chair, looking up at her.

Mandy dug into her pancakes. They were sour and heavy and delicious, made of a rough-ground flour and raised by their own rot, with neither baking powder nor yeast added. With one of those swift, amazing leaps of his, Tom jumped onto the top of Constance’s head. Mandy was so startled she all but threw her fork. But Constance hardly seemed to notice the creature that had draped itself over her scalp like some kind of lunatic far hat with eyes.

The eyes sought Mandy. Didn’t he ever stop staring?

“Amanda, today I want you to begin your work. To try to do something very special and very difficult.”

Constance had leaned forward. Her tone was serious. But she looked—well—fantastically odd with the cat on her head.

“I want you to take your sketchbook and go out onto Stone Mountain and find the *Leannan Sidhe* and draw a picture of her.”

Mandy remembered the statue in the maze. “The Fairy Queen—do you mean mere’s a statue of her up there, too?”

“Go across the hummocks to the foot of Stone Mountain. You’ll find a path starting at a grove of birch.

Just a track. It’ll be tricky to negotiate. Climb the mountain until you come to a big rowan bush. Really huge. Do you know what rowan looks like?”

Tom crawled down her shoulder and disappeared under the table.

“To me a bush is a bush, Constance. I have no idea.”

“Look for smooth gray bark, red-orange leaves, and clumps of red berries. You really can’t miss it. It’s the only one like it on the mountain. Just beyond it you’ll find a large round stone mat’s got figures etched into it. But they’re weathered, so you won’t be able to make them out. You sit yourself down on that stone. Sooner or later fairy will come. The Queen is instantly recognizable.”

Surely her leg was being pulled. “You mean—real fairies?”

“I mean real fairies. They’re about three feet tall, very broad-shouldered the men, and they’ll be wearing their whites because of the snow. White breeches and tunics, mottled white caps. And she will be in white, too. A white gown of silken lace. She’s blond, and she’ll have rowan in her hair. You’ll see.”

She was so serious about this that Mandy became embarrassed. Constance Collier must be senile. “You see these fairies?”

“My dear, fairy are quite commonplace in the Peconic Mountains. They live all through this end of Jersey and Pennsylvania. And they are not tinkerbelles and tom-tits, either, they are very real. Don’t look for pixies, look for small, solid beings who are very real. They are as much a part of the planet as people and trees and cats. Much more man we. They’re a Paleolithic survival, dear. The fairy were exterminated in western Europe during the Middle Ages because they’re pagans. They follow the Goddess. This country is so big the fairy never got discovered. Even to this day there are parts of Stone Mountain that man hasn’t explored. And all a fairy needs to hide is a bush not much bigger than a pillow.”

Mandy felt cut adrift from reality. This woman was rational and sane and serious.

“They built the burial mound you drove past coming here. And the hummocks out in the back pasture—those are the remains of a fairy city built before the Iroquois conquered this valley.” She tossed her head. “The same families that built those houses have been up there on roe mountain for thousands of years, waiting for the day when they can come down and

reclaim their city.”

“What are they—I mean—what about language? Do they speak English? What should I say? And what if she wants money to sit for me? Tell me what to do.”

“Show the Queen respect. Bear in mind that we have been on this land three hundred years, and the Indians two thousand years. The fairy have been here since before the ice. Think of that. A hundred thousand years, maybe longer. You are on their land, we all are. Their Queen is the highest and most sacred being you will ever see in your life.” She paused. “Of course they may not show her, they’re unpredictable that way.”

As she had spoken, Constance Collier’s voice had rolled through the room, commanding, powerful, full of strength and assurance. It was the opposite of senile. This was the very voice of wisdom, and in spite of their incredible nature, Mandy found herself forced to listen to Constance’s words.

“Time is short, girl. Go your way. And don’t make a fool of yourself by getting lost.”

Ivy shrieked and jumped back from the table.

For an instant Mandy thought she was reacting to the wild things Constance was saying, but then Tom’s head appeared from under the tablecloth.

“I’m sorry! He stuck his nose between my legs!”

“Honestly, Ivy. You’re awfully edgy this morning.”

“His nose is cold.”

“You know to keep your legs crossed when he’s around.” She looked at Mandy. “Watch out for him.

He can be a tricky devil.”

Ivy moved away from the table. With a glance at her watch Constance told Mandy to get started.

“But I have no idea what to do!”

“I gave you your instructions. I want you to fall back on your own ingenuity. Amanda, darling, this is only the second test, and it’s not the hardest. Please get going.”

“Now, wait a minute. What test? You must be some sort of a lunatic if you think I’m going to go traipsing around snow-covered mountains looking for fairies! I was brought here to illustrate a children’s book. *That* I’m willing to do.” And that was that—

“I can’t tell you what I’m offering you, Amanda.” She looked at the cat,

who was now sitting on the drainboard licking the lip of the hand pump at the sink. “If I did he wouldn’t like it.”

“The cat wouldn’t like it?”

She nodded. “Something very odd might happen. You’d be surprised at what he can do.”

He continued licking the drips off the pump.

“I don’t mind if you’re eccentric. In fact, I’m flattered that you trust me enough to be yourself with me.”

“Amanda, this is *not* senility or eccentricity. What’s more, it’s terribly important.” Her voice was pleading now. “You must do it. More is at stake than you can possibly know.”

“What? What’s at stake? I came here to illustrate—”

“Hush! Forget that book. It was just a pretext to get you here.” She reached across the table, grabbed Mandy’s collar with trembling fingers. “You must trust me, just for a little while. Amanda, I’d rather kill myself than lie to you. Please trust me.”

Tears appeared at the edges of Constance’s eyes. Mandy reached up and took the old woman’s hands in her own. “I can do with a hike. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

She simply could not turn down such a heartfelt appeal. The only thing to do was just open her mind and let things happen. Whatever she found on the mountain, she found.

If there really *were* fairies—well, what fun. She got up, drew her cloak around her, and went out. The door slammed behind her. She pulled up her hood against the gusts of Snow. The flakes were small and very hard, and they rattled against the thick wool. Mandy set out, her boots crunching the powdery half-inch thickness that crusted the ground, her face stinging in the fresh wind off the mountain. The clouds were low and gray; the sun was a smear in the east. As she walked along, Mandy’s heart thrilled.

She was so gay she thought to sing. Whatever happened on Stone Mountain, it was going to be highest adventure.

Even if she was *really* intended to enlist her imagination and draw the most wonderful Fairy Queen ever created.

She went down past the maze and through the herb garden.

Beyond the garden the land sloped farther down, then rose abruptly up the side of the first of the hummocks. When she reached the top she saw a group of men far off to the south working on her car with ropes and wooden

pulleys. They wore deep brown homespun, and she could just catch the edges of a work song, the rhythm of the chant but not the words. The tone of their voices fairly lilted. The joy in them, open and unrestrained, carried clearly across the air.

Down the hummock she scrambled, trying to avoid getting her cloak caught in the bushes at its base.

“Amanda!”

A male voice. “Who’s that?”

A bush trembled. Instinctively Mandy backed away. There had been something harsh about that call, something that made her cautious.

A face, youthful. Satyr-like, appeared in the shrubs. With a great shudder of snow Robin stood up. He came close to her. “Where are you going?” he asked. He stood directly in front of her, dressed in a long wool cape, wool trousers, and a heavy coat belted at the waist. “You’re going to the rowan, aren’t you?”

Mandy said nothing.

“You know how the fairies keep themselves such a deep secret? If somebody sees them they don’t like, that person never comes back.”

Still Mandy said nothing. Robin seized her and kissed her with cold lips. “I love you!”

He was still a boy, and the road between seventeen and twenty-three is a long one. It was years since she had heard “I love you” uttered with such enthusiasm. “Thank you,” she said. How pale and controlled by comparison.

“Connie didn’t tell you anything about how to act, did she? About how to survive.”

“I didn’t get the impression they were dangerous.”

“Oh, but they are. They’re very dangerous. They have the fairy whisper. Nobody knows what it is, because it kills instantly. And they have tiny arrows made of splinters. The poison on the arrows gives you a heart attack, and no doctor can ever tell that you were poisoned. Hunters that die in the woods of cardiac arrest—half of them paid with their lives for seeing fairy.”

“Constance never even hinted at danger.”

“But there is! You’re being tested. Constance thinks you’re the Maiden, but they can’t be sure until the *Leannan* looks into your heart. She has all the fairy knowledge. She’ll read you like a chalkboard and either kill you or accept you. It’s all the same to the *Leannan*.”

“You’re telling me I could be killed?”

“If you aren’t just exactly who you’re supposed to be, the fairy can’t let you go. Surely you can see that.

They don’t want civilization meddling in their affairs. Anthropologists after them, for heaven’s sake. They saw what happened to the Indians, and they know that all their own kind in Europe were exterminated.

They’re very defensive, the fairy.”

Mandy began to entertain the notion of turning back. “Can you answer me one question?”

“Probably not.”

“Why me? Why am I being put through this—initiation or whatever it is.”

“You mean you don’t even know that? Constance is really playing it close with you.”

“She must be.”

“You’re unique, Amanda. She’s been watching you all of your life. Why do you think your father was transferred to Maywell? She brought him here so you would be close to her. What Constance knows—it’s impossible to tell, but she had the help of the *Leannan* at her disposal, as well as all the traditional lore of the witches. She commands a high and rare science, and you have to be very careful around her. You are old in the craft, Connie says.”

“Which craft?”

“Oh, wow, you’re really in a hole. Wicca, darling, witchcraft.”

“I thought that was it. All the town rumors are true, then. Everything.”

“Oh, not everything. By no means. All the good rumors, let’s say, and none of the bad! We’re learning the old ways again from Connie, and from the *Leannan* and her folk. And you are going to be our next Maiden, which is a sort of protector, especially if we’re under pressure from the outside. And our group is growing so fast, it’s only a question of time before the pressure starts. The very word ‘witch’ conjures up terrible images in people’s minds. They think we’re evil.”

“The wicked witch.”

“A false impression. Witchcraft is—well, you’ll see when you get to know us better.” His voice had taken on an edge of conviction. In many ways Robin was certainly a boy, but his love for what he believed was a mature emotion.

“Amanda!” It was Constance, calling from the edge of the herb garden.

Robin’s eyes narrowed. “She musn’t see me. Run, run to the top of the

hummock! Wave to her, tell her you're on your way."

As Mandy found footing in the snow she heard his voice behind her, a barely audible whisper: "Blessed be, my love, blessed, blessed be!"

Blessed be? The witches' greeting and good-bye. Mandy had read of it in Margaret Murray's famous book, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe*. Nobody interested in fairy tales could escape without reading Murray.

She remembered her own dreams of being burned... and of being in a cage—awful dreams. She shuddered and went on.

Constance stood like a fur-wrapped stick a hundred yards behind. "Please hurry," she cried. "Plea-ase!"

The *Leannan* doesn't wait for anybody very long!" Her voice was snatched by the wind and carried off among the rattling trees.

Far ahead of her she saw Tom jumping through the snow. She looked past him, to the dark tremendous mountain.

And she found that she was at least as curious as she was uneasy. She wanted to see the fairy. Oh, *if* there were such beings. A nonhuman intelligence sharing the earth with man. It was so enormous a thought that she couldn't even begin to play out its implications, so she simply filed it in a corner of her mind to deal with later.

From where she was now she could see a few curls of smoke off in the direction of the village. It was interesting to imagine life there, wearing homespun and using candles within hiking distance of modern America. There was undeniable appeal in the idea of reacquiring ancient ways. The witch rituals, for example, were so very old and strange that they had been ultimately terrifying to the superstitious medieval world. Now anthropologists understood them as a remnant of human prehistory. The Old Religion, the way of the earth. Wasn't "witch" an early English word for wise, or had that theory been discredited?

Crossing toward the tumbled, frowning face of the mountain, she heard off in the direction of the village a girl singing in a clear voice.

"Lost on gray hills, in autumn's dread splendor,
The wandering one, wandering one
Will the moon ever find her?"

The lilting, sweet-haunted song did not fade until Mandy was battling her way up Stone Mountain.

The more she committed herself to it, the more brutal the climb seemed to become. The “track” was a miserable affair, twisting and turning, as often as not blocked by fallen stones or an outgrowth of brambles. But for the glowing snow there was little light, and would be no more unless the sun broke through the clouds that were coming down from the north.

As Mandy struggled along, her feet grew cold despite the thick woolen socks and the good boots. Time and again she slipped on an icy spot or was deceived by the snow into stepping into a hole. She had been climbing what seemed to be an hour when the incline finally grew less steep., She stopped to look for the rowan bush.

Everything was a jumble. She couldn't possibly tell one plant from another. She turned around and found that she hadn't come more than two hundred feet. She was just now getting level with the roof of the distant house, which stood on its dark hill among its trees, seeming most forlorn and distant at this empty hour.

The wind belled her cloak and made her remember the world within that curtained bed. And Robin. “I love you,” he had said. How could he love somebody he didn't know?

She wiped the snow from her eyebrows and continued on.

Now the wind whispered, now it howled through the shaking trees. A fine hiss of snow made its way deep into her hood and reminded her painfully of her ears. She pulled the silken ribbon together. The track was now a mayhem of sharp rocks. To make any progress at all she had to crawl.

Paradoxically that very fact made her go on. The harder it became to climb it, the more she responded to the challenge of the mountain. She had not been given gloves, and her hands soon smarted from the cold and the stones. Her sketch-book, stuffed in her waist, jabbed her breastbone with first one corner and then the other.

If she had any sense, she would find some overhang, cuddle up under it, and make a few sketches of the Fairy Queen from imagination. Surely that was all Constance really intended. There could not be a Paleolithic species still surviving in these hills. And even if there were, they would be dirty, miserable, and scarce. Savages had none of the awesome beauty Constance had attributed to the *Leannan*. Savages living on a mountainside as rough as this would be little better than animals themselves.

The Paleolithic was thousands of years ago. Beyond memory. Beyond time. The whole notion was ridiculous.

And yet, Constance and Robin had both been so serious. Her whole life was dreams and visions and longing for miracles. Now she might be close to one—just might be. She struggled on. The wind roared without ceasing, like some immense tide restless in the rocks. Constance Collier had neglected to mention another little matter of some importance: the rowan must be on the very brow of the mountain, that dark, bare spine that got covered with deadly ice in the winter.

When she did come to the top, it happened so abruptly that she at first did not understand where she was. She almost staggered out onto a menacing slickness of ice as smooth as glass. She lurched and slid, then toppled amid her flapping, flopping cloak. Her sketchbook bent completely in two. She felt her pencils scattering out of her pockets.

Scuttling about, she retrieved them.

When she raised her head, she was frozen, but not by cold. This was a place of wonder. She could see to the north the long brow of the mountain, its gnarled trees huddling against it like warped children. The west wrinkled off forever. Beyond the Peconics were the Endless Mountains and the haze the northwestern fastness of Pennsylvania.

This was the border of one of the continent's last empty corners. Below lay Maywell in its shield of snow, the steeple of the Episcopal Church marking the dead center of the town. She could see The Lanes and almost make out Uncle George's house. The college's black buildings squatted beyond the diagonal line of the Morris Stage Road. Directly below was the Collier estate. Huddling almost invisibly at the very foot of the mountain, the witch village blended so perfectly with the landscape that even looking at it she wasn't completely sure it was there. After some time she counted twenty cottages, ten on each side of the central path. Foundations and walls for twelve more were in the process of being laid. The round building dominated the village. Occasionally a figure huddled from one door to another. Among the snowy hummocks tiny human dots raced about—the children of the village were out with sleds.

So very hidden, so secret, was the witch village. Through all of her growing up in the town, she had heard of only one incident of townspeople meeting villagers on their own ground—and those kids hadn't seen the village itself. Now she was seeing the whole estate, village and all, and it was lovely.

It did not prove nearly as hard as she had expected to find the rowan. An

imposing bush, it stood easily ten feet high, its northern side angled from the wind, the rest of it rich with berries, a gay-painted creature in this impossibly hostile place.

The rowan was so very alive that Mandy loved it immediately. It stood fast in its bed of ice and stones.

But it was also a great, gangling adolescent of a thing. When the wind made it gyrate, she wanted to laugh.

She made her way around it, touching twigs and berries as she went. Somehow she kept expecting to see Tom, but he wasn't about. Naturally not. There was a cat who liked a fireplace. A romp along the lower reaches of the mountain had been quite enough for him.

She found the round stone Constance had described. It was perhaps eight feet in diameter and two thick, standing at a slight angle on the surface of the mountain. It was black basalt, completely out of place in this granite geology. The surface was carved over every inch, but time and wind had worked it, too, so only the presence of the etching could be detected, not its content.

Basalt is a hard stone. Mandy ran her hand along the ice-crusting edge. The thing must be very old. What tremendous effort it must have been to bring it here, for it was certainly an import.

Just as she had been told to do, Mandy went to the center of the stone and sat down. She folded her cloak under her and sat cross-legged, so that she made a sort of a tent and was at the same time insulated from the icy rock. She faced southeast, away from the wind. This cloak had been exactly the right garment for what she was expected to do, which was sit and wait... and wonder how crazy she was to have come here.

Some adventure to get this cold. Not to mention thirsty and hungry. An image of those delicious unfinished pancakes came to mind. She saw the dark-flecked surface of them, the slightly crumbly interior, the amber glow of the syrup oozing along the plate. The memory confirmed the fact that she had very quickly ceased to enjoy this. She was up here alone and this was a damned cold place and she was freezing.

No sooner had the thought of leaving crossed her mind than a bird, of all things, fluttered out of the rowan and flapped about her head. It wasn't in the least afraid. This place must be very little visited. The dusty little sparrow was what city people called a trash bird. First with one bright, blank eye and then the other it looked at her. She had the distinct impression not only that it was a girl bird but that it felt kind of friendly toward her.

If she had brought crumbs she could have fed it, the little thing was so unafraid. She had never fed a wild bird before. "Sweet, sweet," she said. It flew away.

The next moment a squirrel, its fur rich and gray-black, came ambling along. It stopped at the rowan and ate berries for a time. Then it, too, came over to the rock and looked at the strange creature there.

"Hi," Mandy said.

The squirrel raised itself up on its haunches and wiggled its nose at her. Then, as abruptly as if it had been called, it jumped and raced away over the edge of the mountain. It had not been gone ten seconds before Mandy felt the pressure of paws on her back. She turned around and startled a raccoon, which tumbled about in the snow, righted itself, mewed at her, and went on with its casual sniffing of her cloak. Then it poked its frigid nose at her hands, smelling them carefully. "Well, I like you, too."

The sound of her voice made the coon look up at her. It mewed back, the cry so full of question that she ached to answer. But she could only smile, as she did not speak coon.

She began to understand Constance's sending her here. There might not be any fairies, but it was nevertheless a magical spot and a fine place to let the images flow in her mind. Despite the cold, the ice, despite everything, she could create extraordinary fairies here. There are places of life and places of death. Here on this inhospitable mountain between the sky and the rowan Amanda knew a feeling so strong it shocked her. Especially because it was not an aggressive feeling at all, but one of the peace and rightness of this world. No matter the fate of man, the loss or regaining of the old cup of kindness, peace abides.

A quick, hairy movement beyond the rowan brought her back to the present. She almost screamed when she saw what was there. Surely it couldn't be. But it was, and it had just noticed her. It moved like a great black furry rock, humping quickly along. There was nothing cute about the bear's black little eyes or the fog coming from its muzzle. She sat dead still, her attention fixed on the approaching beast.

The closer it got the faster it came. She could hear it breathing now, hear the clatter of its claws on the ice. A terrible, buzzing fear froze her.

When it bellowed she knew it, too, was a female, as the other animals had also been. If each animal could be said to represent an attribute of woman, this bear was the power of her protective instinct. Her greatest and most

dangerous power. A she-bear protecting her cubs is the most fearsome of creatures.

Slowly, carefully, Mandy spread her arms, palms open. Why the gesture? She did not know. Now she could smell the bear, a thick odor of rancid fur. Its coat was shiny with secretions. Mandy found herself looking into the animal's eyes. She saw there a femininity so savage, so full of implacable power, that it drew a choked little sound from her throat. The bear grumbled reply, stared a moment, then became indifferent to her.

It walked on past, crashing off into the fastness of the mountain. Perhaps this bear was without cubs, or they were not nearby.

While it had diverted her attention something else had happened, something which filled her soul with a coldness far greater than that of the wind.

About the rowan there stood six small men in snow-white coats and breeches. On their feet were white pointed shoes, and on their heads close-fitting caps just as Constance had described.

It wasn't possible. And yet, here they were.

Robin's warning rushed back into her mind.

She screamed, a single, sharp cry, quickly controlled.

These men had sharp faces with pointed noses and large eyes. Perhaps they looked so different precisely because they were so almost-human. But then one of them licked his lips, and Mandy got a glimpse of tiny teeth more like a rat's than a man's.

Together they raised bows, and mounted arrows on them made of twigs. There came then on the air the ringing of small bells and a whisper of tiny feet in the snow.

She appeared from behind the stone, all blond, her hair as soft as elder blow, her eyes startlingly dark brown, her body lightly dressed in the very lace Constance had promised. She was wee, not nearly as large as her six guards. On her head was a garland of rowan, berries and stems and leaves. Seeing such beauty, how ineffable, how frail, how strong, Mandy thought she would simply sink away. By comparison she herself was coarse. All delicacy seemed to have concentrated itself in this single small creature. Around her neck there was drawn a silver chain, and at her throat hung a gleaming sickle of moon.

Mandy instinctively lowered her eyes. It was more bearable this way, just looking at the woman's feet, no more than two inches long, naked in the

snow. Then the feet rose out of her line of sight. She looked up, startled. The girl was floating in the air. Wings flapped and she was gone. A great gray owl hooted from the top of the rowan, its horns darkly silhouetted against the sky. It took flight, racing round and round the rowan. Next hoofs clattered on the stones, and a black mare reared into nothingness, its neighs echoing off to silence.

An ancient woman, drooling, her teeth yellow, one eye put out, her hands fantastic with arthritis, scraped up on a stick. “Oh, my God! Can I help you?”

She held out her hands then and was as suddenly gone, the maiden spinning forth from her flying gray hair. The girl took Mandy’s large hands in her own tiny ones. She was grave now, her eyes limpid—and yet so very *aware*. They were scary. Her lips parted as if she would speak. Mandy remembered Robin’s warning about the whisper. The girl’s voice was as much the wind’s as her own. “You’re trembling,” she said.

“I’m cold.”

“Come a little way with me.”

Mandy started to stand up, but she was stopped by the astonishing sensation of being enclosed in enormous, invisible hands. Woman’s hands, immense and strong and soft. They drew her close to an invisible breast, clutched her, enfolded her. It was a terrifyingly wrong sensation; there was nobody here, and nobody could ever be so huge. She struggled, she tried to scream, she felt her stomach unmooring with fright.

But she found herself being cuddled in warm perfumed folds that could be felt and smelled and even tasted, so rich they were. All of the tension, the discomfort, the fear in Mandy’s body melted away. Then, just as she was beginning to enjoy herself, she was set down. She wobbled, she cried out, she flailed at the air.

Never had she felt so thoroughly explored, so—somehow—examined. She had the eerie feeling that whatever had held her had also been in her mind. And was still there, looking and discovering, moving like a strange voice in her thoughts. But it wasn’t ugly at all, it was young and so very, very happy and so glad to meet her. She couldn’t help herself, she burst out laughing.

The lady laughed, too.

“Who *are* you?” Mandy asked her.

But she was gone, they were all gone, as clouds upon the air.

BOOK TWO:

The Sleeping Beauty

*That such have died enables us
The tranquil to die:
That such have lived, certificate
For immortality.*

—Emily Dickinson

Chapter 11

The tom moved quickly, nervously, through the silent animal room. The terrariums were empty, the bloodstained monkey cage was empty. Even though the animals were gone, the room was still full of the ammonia stink of captured things. The tom hated this room, but he hated more the people next door, hated them enough to use them mercilessly. Because of their guilty dislike of themselves, he did not consider Bonnie and Dr. Walker capable of being true witches, and Clark understood enough to take care of himself.

He could feel the faint rush of microwaves from the newly installed motion detector in the center of the room. Such things were not powerful in his world, and they neither surprised nor impressed him. When he wanted Dr. Walker to come in here, he would trip the alarm, but not until then.

Despite his disapproval of her, the tom could not help but feel a little compassion for Bonnie. She was about to suffer a most interesting death.

* * *

George preferred to think of himself and Bonnie as wanderers in a deadly jungle. Somehow Clark was not with them, perhaps because he was so dedicated a technician, too realistic to have a commitment to the romance of the experiment, and no sense of the art of the work.

Unless at least one of them was awake and on guard, they had to assume their experiment would be ruined by Brother Pierce and his fanatics. There were various things George would like to do to Brother Pierce, chief among them being dismemberment. Slow, considered dismemberment, the lifting off of appendages. No. Burn him. Do it with a candle. Or tattoo his crimes on him. People did not understand the politics of pain, how it must settle in the victim and remain there for a time. An image from his dreams, of cat claws, hung a moment in his thoughts. He could light a fire in agony's tower on behalf of all destroyed things. He raged, and he hurt, and felt a fine rush of guilt: he could have delivered his body to Bonnie's will just then.

But he enjoyed too much the intricate mechanics of killing her, enjoyed her trembles and the faint scent of her sweat and the coolness of the skin to which he would soon attach electrodes.

He surveyed this tangled technical realm of his and saw that it was well

sealed against the rages of Brother Pierce.

It had taken a trip all the way to Altoona to find locks for the lab doors that were both secure and cheap.

Somehow George had installed them, reading the sketchy instructions, going by trial and error. His fingers were thoroughly mutilated but the tumblers worked smoothly and the steel protective plates were tight against the doors. He had put bolts on the windows and had bought a fifty-dollar motion detector at Radio Shack. It sat in the middle of the now empty animal room, ready to give warning if anybody should come that way. He had tried to buy a closed-circuit TV camera for the hall outside the lab, but he couldn't afford the four hundred dollars.

"This is just wonderful," Clark said. He was staring at a piece of interoffice correspondence. "Really very nice."

Bonnie was eating boysenberry yogurt; George had been staring at the coils that surrounded the outline of her body that they had chalked on the lab table. "What?" she asked.

Her eyes, so green, so full of fire, regarded Clark calmly. George himself was shaking, not with excitement or desire, but with the thought of just how risky this was going to be for her.

"It's a very politely worded requisition for our lab space. 'In view of the impending completion of your grant-related activities there,' it says. You'll never guess what they're going to put in here."

"A bar?"

"Fruit flies. They're going to use it as a fruit fly hatchery for Biology One."

"I wish I had a Bio One assistantship. No offense, George, but it's a secure job." Even Bonnie's voice was calm.

"I don't know," Clark said, "the work's too predictable. Boring as hell, raising generation after generation of fruit flies."

"Some people," Bonnie said around a spoonful of yogurt, "are better than others at fruit flies." She laughed, high and sharp, betraying a first sign of nervousness. "Your trouble is you're not committed to your work. I don't think you care. Take me, I'm the opposite. I'm dying to keep my job."

George looked at her. There was panic in there behind the brittle humor. He did not relish the prospect of her getting balky. What would he do if she tried to back out?

"I think we'd be best off if you went in with as calm an attitude as

possible. I'd like to see you in alpha before we put you under."

"In alpha! You think I can lie there meditating while you kill me? Look, if you want to talk about it, let's be completely frank with one another. Shall we?"

"Of course."

"Then I'll drop my act and tell you the truth. Yeah, you guessed it. I am scared to death! Absolutely."

She laughed again, this time without even the pretense of mirth. "S' funny, scared to death. But what if—" She stopped. The silence thickened rapidly. She stared down at her yogurt container. On the other side of the room Clark muttered numbers and worked with calipers, positioning the coils so that the fields they created would touch without overlapping.

"Are you afraid we can't bring you back? I just want you to think of the principles involved. You know you'll be returning. The physics is basic, so is the biology. Nothing's going to go wrong."

"Oh, George, you really don't understand, do you? Not at all!"

"Understand what? Tell me what you're driving at, then I'll see if I understand."

"George, what if something is *out there*?"

He restrained himself from laughing with relief. He had been afraid that he was going to have to cope with real death panic. But this sort of fear wasn't that bad. "Come on, now, you're a scientist and a witch. You *know* what's out there."

"Oh, no. I don't think you understand. I've enjoyed the witch rituals and all, but I was baptized a Catholic. They brand your soul at birth."

"Oh, Bonnie, come on. That's absurd. Belief is relative. Death will be exactly what you expect it to be."

"I just keep thinking, what if there really is a hell? And then I think, what if I fall in and I can't get out? I know it's stupid, it's highly unsophisticated, but there it is."

"That's what's scaring you?"

"That's it. I don't think I can help expecting some kind of Catholic hell. Or worse, a Catholic heaven, which is a form of hell where the good are brainwashed into wanting to sing at all times."

"You know what it's going to be like? Shall I tell you?"

"I wish you could."

"My dear, beautiful Bonnie." He caressed her cheek. It was so warm, so

soft—he kissed it. “I would never do anything I thought might hurt you in any way.”

He imagined her hanging from the ceiling, himself at her feet, and she comes down from her garrote transformed into a virgin of retribution and takes him at last to the black chamber.

The chamber in his basement.

No! Don’t think of that. Not now.

“You’re going to kill me, and I’m going to find out I’m still a Catholic after it’s too late. The Devil—”

“You know where that legend came from! The Homed God isn’t a devil any more than the Mother Goddess is a virgin. The King of the Netherworld and the Queen of Heaven are the oldest of seasonal deities.”

“I’m being sacrificed for a lark. So *you* can find out what it’s like.”

When he spoke, it was as if the words were formed by an outer mechanism, a device that had been made to seem human: “Oh, that’s low,” said the outer George Walker. “That’s a low blow. Let’s get our priorities in order here. I think that’s what we haven’t done. First, we are performing this experiment for a reason, and it’s an important one. The craft needs it. Constance needs it, and we all love her, don’t we?

Second, we will be giving mankind a new tool. A person killed in this way and cryogenically frozen could last indefinitely. What’s more we’ll revolutionize surgery, make ultra-long space voyages more practical.”

“Don’t patronize me! I’m scared, that’s all. I don’t know what I’m facing.”

Clark came over. “I hate to interrupt this charming conversation, but our electronics are ready.”

Bonnie stood up as if she had been sitting on a tack. Then she slumped, Clark caught her from behind.

“I know it’s stupid but I’m so scared I can’t move!”

George saw the tears brimming in her eyes. He had to act quickly. That was the merciful thing to do—and also, she might be on the point of changing her mind. “Hey, now, take it easy.” He sat her back down on her stool, “Clark, do you think you could bring in that swivel chair from the other room?”

When Clark opened the door to the animal room, the motion detector started warbling. After a moment he cut it off and came back with the chair.

“Better restart the detector. Don’t give them any chances at all.”

“Okay.”

As Clark went back, George moved Bonnie to the more comfortable chair. He stroked her hair.

“Because I’m a woman you think you can cuddle away all my fears.” Her voice was ugly and low. “Get me my cigarettes.” She drew herself away from him.

“The no-smoking rule—”

“Get me my cigarettes!”

He got them from her purse, held them out to her. When she took one, he lit it for her. She smoked in silence for a time, Clark came back and stood over them with his arms folded, his expression dark and analytical. The only sound in the lab was the intimate noise of Bonnie’s smoking, the crinkle of the burning tobacco, the blowing sound when she expelled the smoke.

“When I was a little girl, I went to Our Lady of Grace School right here in Maywell. It’s a lovely old school, run by the Sisters of Mercy. Sister Saint Stephen, Sister Saint Martin, Sister Saint Agnes. And Mother Star of the Sea.” She laughed. “Good old Mother Star of the Sea. I’m glad she’s safely dead.

Sometimes I still have nightmares about her.” Goose bumps appeared on Bonnie’s arms. “Oh, God, she’s waiting for me. I can feel it, she is! Mother, I’m sorry. Please forgive me. Mother.”

George listened to her exploring her private fears. He thought she might be an angel, this lovely girl, an angel come to torment him with her innocence. If she had risen up and taken him and jammed him in the coils, he would have let her.

“The thing is, it’s so easy for a Catholic to go to hell. I’ve got so many mortal sins. Hundreds.”

“You’re a witch. You’re in a coven.”

“Listen, a Catholic can go through a whole life, be all sorts of things. But when it comes time to die, the first thing that crosses your mind is ‘Dear God, where did I put my rosary?’ ”

“Sin is a relative thing, Bonnie. No church can tell you whether or not you’ve sinned. *You* have to believe it. That is one of the most freeing things I’ve learned from Connie.”

“You haven’t learned it quite right. What she teaches is that the conscience never lies. I’ve sinned, George, by the lights of church and craft alike. What if some devil captures me and never lets me come back?”

George didn’t like the drift of this. “Ready,” he snapped.

Bonnie took a long drag on her cigarette. “You wouldn’t believe some of the things I’ve done. Poor Mother Star of the Sea. I’m still guilty as hell about her. I guess I always will be.”

“What happened?” Clark asked. George could have choked him.

She snorted. “Baby boy, I’ve done things you would not believe. Things that would blow even your wiccan mind away.”

George laughed, trying hard to lighten this conversation. Casting about in his mind, he thought he had come across a way to reassure her and regain control of the situation. “Bonnie, do yourself a favor and forget Catholic sins. How about the real sins against humanity? I mean, like murder. Have you ever murdered anybody?”

Clark shifted on his feet. “Let her talk about her sins. It could be important.”

“Clark, please be quiet! Bonnie?”

“It depends entirely on your definition of abortion. If you say it’s murder, I’m six times guilty.”

That was a bad move, Georgie boy. Still, he kept fighting. “You’re as innocent as any other accidental mother! Abortion isn’t a crime, is it? An aborted fetus is simply somebody who didn’t happen.”

“Mother Star of the Sea always taught that hell is very, very small, because the souls in it are so turned away from God, so concentrated on themselves, that they’ve literally gotten tiny.” She looked at her cigarette. “The whole of hell could be hidden in one corner of a little coal was the metaphor she used.”

He had to pull her back to their shared hopes or he was going to lose her. “This is science, Bonnie. Our morality is that of science and craft.”

For the longest time she kept looking at the glowing end of the cigarette. “I think I see it,” she said. “Hell has come for me. It’s hiding in my cigarette.”

“I told you not to smoke. Now let’s get going.”

“It’s waiting for me.”

In a desperate effort to distract her, George took her cheeks in his hands, turned her face to him, and kissed her full on the mouth. He probed against her teeth with his tongue. She resisted, then she opened her mouth to him. He concentrated on the pleasure of the contact. No matter the circumstances, a kiss is a kiss.

“Bonnie, I love you. I love you too much to let anything happen to you. Let me tell you—”

“George, with all respect this isn’t going to work. I don’t think—”

“Hush! Don’t say another word. It can work and it will. You know in your heart just what will happen when I turn off your electrical functioning. You are going to go to sleep. Black sleep. Emptiness. Nothing.

Gone.”

“George, how do you *know* that? You can’t!”

“But I do! And so do you. And so does every human being. We live a little time and then we die and that is the end. Why do you think we’re so afraid of death? Because in our heart of hearts we all know it’s the end. No more George, no more Bonnie. Over. Done. That’s what scares us, not some medieval mumbo jumbo about hell.”

“So I’ll just be—like—asleep? That’s what you’re saying?”

“Exactly.”

She stubbed out her cigarette. “I don’t believe you.” A flicker of smile crossed her face. She drew George close to her, pressed her lips against his ear. “You be sure and bring me back, because if you do I am going to take you to my room and take off your clothes and love you senseless.”

“I’ll get a heart attack!”

“That’s me general idea, you old fart! I just want to make sure you don’t give up on me. I want total motivation.”

Here was the old Bonnie again, sexy and tough and humorous. Her words had really steamed him up.

Getting into her would be quite an experience. Quite remarkable.

He hoped it would actually happen. As time went on and he became more and more a beggar to the altar of womanhood, he had learned to control such hopes. But Lord, not even as a twenty-five-year-old Lothario had he ever received such a hot proposition. Not even from Kate, and he had married her.

Married her because she was soft and hard at the same time.

He wanted someone to twist the guilt out of his bowels even as they caressed him. As well as a woman, he wanted a judge.

Bonnie touched the chalked outline of her own body. “That lab bench is cold.”

“Think of how famous you’ll be. You’ll be on the cover of magazines. Personal appearances. TV. Lecture tours. For a while you’ll probably be the most famous person in the world.”

“Maybe I’ll even get to meet a few people where I’m going. Bring back the rest of *Answered Prayers* from Truman Capote.”

“Funny girl.” He glanced at Clark, gave him a quick nod that said let’s go.

Clark responded instantly. “I’m ready to wire you up, dear.” Bonnie was wearing jeans and an MSC sweatshirt. She pulled off the shirt without even a trace of embarrassment. She wore no bra, and her breasts were as succulent as the pears of autumn, Clark hardly seemed to notice, making George wonder for a moment if they might not be old lovers. But they weren’t, of course. They simply belonged to the unfortunate new generation, which took bodies for granted. Sex for them wasn’t dirty, poor suckers.

George helped her onto the lab bench. “It’s really cold in here,” she said. “Put a towel over me after you’re finished, okay, Clark?”

“Yeah.” He greased her ankles and wrists and attached electrodes, then taped others down on her chest, forehead, and neck. George wished he was the one doing it, especially that blushing chest. “You’re right, lemme see here.” Clark went over to the array of monitoring instruments. “Is the tape rolling, George?”

“No.”

“It’s set up,” Bonnie said. “I didn’t turn it on. All you have to do is press the ‘play’ and ‘record’ switches on the front of the machine.”

George found the buttons on the videotape recorder. When he pushed them down, the machine whirred.

He could see the tape inside begin to spin. “It’s running.”

“Right,” Clark replied. “Here I go. This is life signs monitoring for Bonnie Haver. I have the following metabolic signs. Heart rate 77, blood pressure 120 systolic, 70 diastolic. The subject weighed at the beginning of the experiment 128 pounds. She is a blond Caucasian female, eyes green, distinguishing marks a crescent-shaped scar on the left breast below the nipple. She is twenty-three years, four months, and eight days old.”

Clark was an efficient man. George nodded to him from his own station before the instrument bank. He ran the quickest test on the coils, sending a brief jolt of current through it to test connections.

“Oh! I felt that!”

“Just the test burst. What did you feel?”

“Like I fell right through the table.”

“Good. That means it’s working.” George began to adjust power to the coils, making certain that there would be uniform voltages at all points around her body. He did not know quite what would happen if some part of it was not correctly nulled. What, for example, would be the implication of a

dead heart and a living brain? He certainly did not intend to perform that experiment on a human subject.

Clark continued. "I am now going to read out the electrical status of the subject. Microvoltage loads are well within the normal range. Brain readings are as follows: alpha, .003 microvolts; beta, .014 microvolts; delta, .003 microvolts; lambda, .060 microvolts; theta, .0014 microvolts. Oscillation rate is nineteen. The brain is in deltoid activity level. All indications are normal, and suggest a resting person, somewhat tense.

That completes this statement of the subject's current physical condition."

Now it was George's turn. "Thank you, Mr. Jeffers. The condition of the null-electric apparatus is as follows: the coils are all at uniform resting voltage of .00012 microvolts, equal to the ambient charge of the atmosphere present in the laboratory, as measured by the Forest-Hayward atmospheric voltmeter, calibrated to standard zero September 19, 1985, in this same setting. Since calibration no variances have occurred and no adjustments have been made. Thus I conclude that the instrument is accurate and the null-electric field is completely inactive at this time. A brief operational test confirmed by instrumentation and by subject perception that the field can be activated. That completes my statement of the condition of the instrumentation." He paused a moment. "I think, at this point, we might have the privilege of hearing from the subject."

"I feel more or less normal. My stomach's slightly acidic and I must confess that I'm tense. My breathing feels normal and unrestricted. I'm cold. I guess I'm also a little scared.", "Bonnie, are you willing to go ahead with the experiment?"

A tiny voice. Hopefully audible to the microphone. "Yes." At the moment the motion detector in the animal room began warbling. George felt a surge of blood; Bonnie jerked and gasped; even Clark raised his eyebrows. "Visitors?"

"I'll go," George said. "Just stay calm. Odds are it's a false alarm." His lie was mostly for Bonnie's sake.

"Remember, that motion detector was cheap." He had not told them of the pistol he had brought from home and he did not tell them now. But he drew his windbreaker on. The gun was in the pocket.

The door to the animal room was closed. George watched the knob to see if it was being turned from the other side. He reached into his pocket and grasped the pistol. Then he put his hand on the knob and began slowly

turning it himself. He was scared, but more than that he was mad. If he found any of Brother Pierce's crazies in there, he just might start shooting.

Clark appeared beside him. "Take it easy, George. If you're planning to use that gun, take it out of your pocket. It won't do you any good where it is now."

George was impressed not only that he had noticed the pistol, but that he seemed to know how to handle a situation like this. "You an auxiliary cop or something?"

"I'm a Burt Reynolds fan."

George hefted the pistol. "Ready, Burt?"

"Ready."

He opened the door.

And saw something so impossibly dreadful that it made him jerk back. All the anger boiling in his soul threatened to erupt. He hated, hated, and yet—

Cat of fire, burning across a summer night of youth, cat of torment—

It sat, as black as space and enormous, on the windowsill The window behind it was locked.

"Maybe it's a stray," Clark said. He went over and turned off the motion detector.

George managed to force words from a chalky mouth. "What's it doing in here?"

"Maybe it's been here all along—in a cabinet or something. Sleeping."

George stared at it. The thing was really huge. "What is it, some kind of a throwback?"

"Probably got a little wildcat in its genetic mix."

"Well, I'm going to get it out of here. I hate cats. They're vermin, as far as I'm concerned." He stuffed the pistol in his pocket and moved toward the animal, which promptly arched its back and hissed. Loud.

"Unwise move, George. That cat prefers to stay."

"I can't use the motion detector with that thing wandering around in here." He held out his hand. "Kitty?"

Sssst!

"Most unwise move. Maybe if we went over to the gym and found a badminton net, we could throw it over him—"

"All right! I get your point. We'll lock the door between the rooms and worry about it later."

"My thoughts exactly. The experiment will only take three minutes.

Nobody's going to stop us in that short a time. They couldn't even get the door broken down. So we're home free, right? If we stop delaying."

George closed and locked the door. He kept his windbreaker on, though, with the pistol close at hand.

When he brought in the motion detector, he had checked every nook and cranny in that room for stray frogs. He had looked in the cabinets, even under them. The room had been empty.

"Okay, Bonnie, we are going to start. Please report your out-of-the-ordinary sensations, if any."

"Nothing so far."

George flipped the seven switches that activated the coils. He began turning the rheostats. "Establishing a voltage base at .17 microvolts."

"Oh. Ohhh. I definitely feel that. It's a tingling."

"Blood pressure down to 110 over 68."

"I'm sort of—all floaty. Oh, this is weird!"

When she stopped talking, George was startled to hear the distinct growl of a cat. He frowned, tried to look over the top of his instrument panel toward the door to the animal room. Although he could only see the top half, he could tell that it was very certainly closed. God, did he ever have the jitters. Cats were loathsome creatures. They needed to be drowned, every one of them. Or to be set afire and left to run like meteors in among the old sycamores of home. How his own cruelty disgusted him.

"Microvolts to .50."

"Blood pressure 80 over 66. Brain to alpha."

"I'm kind of sleepy and I sort of have this tickle in the middle of my chest where my heart is. And it aches a tittle." Her voice cracked. "All of a sudden I feel sad."

"Microvolts to .75. Damn!" Just for an instant he had seen the eyes of a cat hanging in midair over Bonnie. Glaring down at her.

"What is it?"

"No—forget it. I thought I was getting a bad reading. But it's okay. Fine." He tried to slow down his own thundering heart, to control the sweat tickling his top lip. "Bonnie, can you hear me?"

"Mnun?"

"She's showing theta peaks now, George. Oscillation is only five. She'll be unconscious in a few more seconds."

"Microvolts to .90."

“Blood pressure dropping. Theta dropping out. Oscillation null. Intercranial activity null.”

“But you still have some blood pressure?”

“Twenty over five. Dropping slowly.”

“Microvolts to 1.00.”

“The heart and blood have stopped. The brain has stopped. Dr. Walker, clinically Bonnie has died.”

George looked across at the still form on the bench. She was staring sightlessly at the ceiling. On her face was an expression that stunned George silent.

Had she, too, seen the eyes of the cat?

Chapter 12

Bonnie fell out of the world. She felt her blood forget her, her heart forget her, her brain forget her, her bones forget her.

Throughout life the body holds on to the soul. Death is a forgetting, and when the body forgets, it loosens its grip, and the soul falls out.

That is the simplicity of death.

It was so dark and so hollow here. There was no noise, no smell, no *feel*. And yet its hollowness was very, very huge.

Something was chasing her.

“Why am I still awake?”

She answered her own question, and at once: because you expected to be. Death is whatever you expect. If you expect heaven, you get it, or hell, or nothing. And you are also your own judge: you give yourself what you deserve. The fundamentalist creates his own hell, the Catholic his purgatory, the agnostics wander empty plains, muttering to themselves.

As she had died, a cat had come leaping out of the ceiling, Now it was behind her, stalking her. She sensed that it was dangerous. If she refused to believe in it, maybe it would disappear. Maybe it would stop chasing her down the hall to hell.

Torquemada burns, Sartre stalks in gray oblivion, Milton ascends dismal glories, Blake leaps with his demons.

It is all the same to death.

Helpless to change her own deepest beliefs, Bonnie joined her fate to that of the human majority. This was the death she contrived for herself: the big black cat came leaping and snarling toward her. As it got closer it got bigger and bigger and bigger.

She could not scream, not even when its face was the size of the risen moon, and she saw galaxies behind its eyes.

It roared, and she looked down its throat. She did not see a black carnivorous maw, but rather a long corridor, somehow familiar. A woman was walking this way along the familiar green linoleum floor.

Bonnie opened her eyes wide, staring in disbelief at the absolute reality of the linoleum, the glossy green paint halfway up the walls, the jittering fluorescent fixtures on the ceiling.

This was Our Lady of Grace School, circa 1973. “No, please, it can’t be.”

The oncoming nun was a juggernaut of black and white, the whimple framing a face made of prunes and daggers. Bonnie wanted to hide, for she knew who this skeletal creature was.

“Mother Star of the Sea!”

“Exactly, my dear. Come with me.”

“What happened to the cat?”

“Never mind that.”

Bonnie looked at the hand held out to her, the awful hand made of weathered, gnawed bones, glowing inwardly with fire where the marrow should be. “No! Get away from me!”

“Deep in my wound. Lord, hide and shelter me!”

“I hate ‘Soul of My Saviour.’ Don’t sing it to me.”

“Why, Bonnie, I’m dismayed. Our war really ended with ‘Soul of My Saviour.’ Don’t you remember?”

“I don’t!”

“Oh, yes, Bonnie, you do.”

With a rattle of tiles and jangling of fixtures the hall swayed and re-formed itself into the seventh-grade classroom.

“I tried hard,” Mother Star of the Sea snarled. “I’ve been eagerly awaiting my chance to deal with you.

Now, watch this.”

The classroom spun into full existence. They were all there, Stacey and Mandy and Patty and Jenette, the whole gum-popping crowd.

Bonnie sat in the next to last desk, Stacey behind her. “Having fun, Bonnie?”

“Shut up, Stacey, Mother will hear you.”

Mother in her glory sat reading, officiating at study hall. Bonnie was enjoying herself and did not want her fun to be ruined by Stacey’s meddling. She fixed the image of Zack Miller in her mind, the image of him sweating over his mop and bucket in the girl’s bathroom just when she happened to be peeing and sort of left the door open and—

“Oh, Bonnie, you’re *doing* it.”

“Shut up! Mother might hear you!”

“She can’t hear or see.” Then Stacey’s cool, fat hand was reaching around the back of the desk, slipping under the elastic of her skirt, going down to meet her own fingers. “Where is it?” Her whisper seemed to Bonnie to carry across the study hall. Mother SS remained engrossed in her Breviary.

“No! This is a sin!”

“I can make it feel really marvie, ask Ellie and Jill how good I am. I’m the best in the class.”

“Get out of here! This isn’t even youryouryour...” But it was her business, the intimate touch.

“This is a sin!”

“Only for Catholics. I’m a Unitarian, remember. My mom and dad tell me it’s okay if we’re in private.”

“The seventh-grade classroom is private?”

“The back row. She can’t even see this far. Consider us behind a curtain.” The other girls tittered and glanced, and Jenette stared openly, cracking her gum in rhythm to the jiggling of the two desks.

Stacey was terribly good, so good that it was some time before Bonnie became aware of what all the other girls had known from the moment it began to happen.

There was a shadow cast across her desk where no shadow should be. “Mother Star of the Sea!”

The punishment was severe: you may not continue at Our Lady of Grace, no, you will be left forever to your sin and struck down in anathema for your sin. In the eternal agony to follow. God will remember how you did this *unattractive* thing in study hall.

—But it’s not a sin! This is the twentieth century!

—You go to Our Lady. Therefore it is a sin—

The worst part of the punishment was the first note home, the sheer disgust of parents, the sneering laughter of the despised younger brother.

“In view of the fact that we do not have the budget to provide a psychologist, we simply cannot allow students with these tendencies to attend Our Lady. We would suggest that Bonnie enter PS 1 as soon as possible, and that she take advantage of their counseling program.”

The expulsion lowered her in the estimation of her father, it embittered her mother. It would mean spending the balance of the year in the virtual prison that was PS 1, a girl with a history of the unspeakable, watched constantly by the human raptors who circled those bitter skies.

Bitter Bonnie did a worse thing to her tormentor: “Mother SS was in on it!”

“What’s that?”

“She—she—” Burst into tears, play it for all it’s worth. “Mother taught us

how. She does it to herself.

She made me—made me—” Another burst of tears.

Her father stormed over to Our Lady, had a fiery meeting with the principal, Sister Saint Thomas. Poor Mother Star of the Sea. Once she had been principal, had been demoted on some hazy canonical basis.

Now this new cloud.

Bonnie was reinstated. Her first day back, what pleasure, she walked the halls surrounded by a surging pack of girls, while Mother Star of the Sea wept silently, standing against the wall near the chapel. The old lady could not even continue out the year, she who had loved the girls and had such hope for them—

Retirement will be a form of execution, slow but certain. Still, at this moment in time she remains a teacher, will be until the end of the week: she must teach the killing child her music:

“Oh, brother. Mother, not ‘Soul of My Saviour’ again!” ‘Twas on a cold and rainy afternoon in October, dear. You had already destroyed me, but it remained my responsibility to teach you. How I prayed for a miracle. ‘Let her confess,’ I prayed.

“All right now, girls, in the key of G, and briskly, please.” Snick, snick, snick, ruler against the edge of the desk. “Ah-one, ah-two, ah-three!”

“Blood of my Saviour, bathe me in Thy tide;
Wash me ye wa-ters, gushing from His side!”
(Olay)

“Stop! Who said that? Who said that horrible word! Olay, indeed! You dare to mock Our Lord’s suffering? Who was it? You? Was it you, Stacey Banks? Or you—yes, you, Bonnie, you black-souled beast! Bonnie, that was a sin’. No, don’t put out your hand, dear.” Mother Star of the Sea smiles. “Live with your sin!”

Bonnie can see now, she can see Mother Star of the Sea’s face, and it is the face of despair, so infiltrated by hate that it lives on even though—”You’re dead!”

“So what? So are you. We’re both as dead as doornails.”

“I’m going back! George is going to bring me back!”

“You sinned against me. You destroyed my career and my life with your accusations. I wasn’t the best teacher. God knows, not the best nun. But you

destroyed me. Don't you want to atone for that?"

"George has a machine, he's taking me back."

"You, my dear, are falling through nowhere at the rate of ten million light-years a second. No human agency has the power to get you back to your body. You are dead."

Bonnie tumbled over and over and over through all the terrible deaths of her memory, the death of her mother with the stone weight of the cancer in her stomach starving her crazy and making her throw up at the same time, through me deaths of her own babies interrupted in their amniotic heavens by long steel, then more deaths and more: people burning, drowning, falling, the life being crushed out of them, knives hacking their guts and bullets shattering their thoughts, ruin racing through the body of me world as cheerfully as a capering clown.

Merciful God, does death mean this?

Bonnie realized with a shattering burst of passion that she *wanted* the hell toward which she was falling.

She looked at her own soul, looked closely at it, and thought she must never, ever look anywhere but at that one flickering dot because it was something, after all, something in this horrible black hollowness. Its light was so very cold. But it was not *nothing*, not like what she was falling through.

She wanted to atone. Poor Mother Star of the Sea!

"So, children, that is why C. S. Lewis described hell as tiny. The souls within it are so concentrated on themselves, to the exclusion of God and all else, that the whole of Satan's Lair could fit in a single crumb of the coal on Father Flaherty's cigar."

"Yes, Mother Star of the Sea." (Olay)

"Who said that? I'm getting awfully *bored* by your olays, Bonnie. Please, haven't you done enough?" In the eye, a tear.

"Olay!"

"You impudent little—go stand in the hall."

Confessional, Our Lady of Grace Parish; "Bless me. Father, for I have sinned. I—am—Mother Star of the Sea's—*lover*, Another nail in an already sealed coffin. Just for the fun of it."

"Whaa-a-at! Who's this? What'd you just say?"

"Even though she's been caught, she still won't stop. Father, she—she—"

"Yes, my dear, pray to Our Lord for guidance."

That was the end of Mother Star of the Sea, right then, that day. Pack your

two black bags and off you go.

No more music class, no more “Soul of Our Saviour.”

“You wretched girl, you not only got me retired, I was anathematized by the Order. How I suffered! I didn’t have anything to eat!”

“You were strict. You were mean.”

“Not as mean as you! You ruined my life. All I did was make your palms sting. Because of you I did sm.

Yes, I sinned. By my own lights, I sinned. I got mad at their refusal to listen to reason, and I did break my vows. I spent the last four years of my life working in a Woolworth’s and going to the movies on Sunday. In my bitterness I denied the Church, I denied the Risen Lord, and I did it because of the cloud your accusations had spread over my life. Now I’m here, because I cannot believe that my denials weren’t sins.” Her long, thin fingers came forth, skillful narrow things that twined in Bonnie’s hair and slipped coldly behind her ears. “I’d really like a vacation. Now you’ve come, I get one.”

The cat surrounded them like a shadow, its flanks seething, its eyes everywhere, in their hearts, in the most secret places of their souls.

Mother Star of the Sea’s soul shivered and shifted, becoming a cloud of hot needles that swirled about Bonnie’s head. “I’ve got to get free,” the needles whispered and hissed. “Just for one delicious, precious second!”

“But you’re here for the long pull, aren’t you?”

“You’d deny me my respite? You don’t know what this is like!”

“I’m going to be leaving soon. Just passing through.”

“You’ve been here a million years already. The world’s gone. It ended. The sun blew up thousands of years ago!” She rasped and swirled, crazed by her passion to escape. “Hell is being condemned to time for all eternity. It never ends and it is never pleasant. Of the two of us, you committed me greater sin, and you must pay the greater price.”

Bonnie tried to back away. George had told her this would be like sleep! How arrogant of him, how absurd.

It is not what the mind thinks that creates the afterlife, but what the unconscious believes.

And the unconscious never lies.

“George, where are you? George!”

Mother Star of the Sea reappeared out of the snickering, jabbing swarm of needles. “Yes, George, I want my vacation and I want it now!”

As if behind the screen of the cat’s eyes Bonnie saw George tinkering in

the lab. “Hurry, hurry.”

“Oh, yes, George, I’ve got my valise packed. Ah, what fun!” The electric wind of George’s device shattered into the nothingness, negating for a moment the whole primacy of death.

Somebody was carried back into Bonnie’s body on that wind. But it wasn’t Bonnie. No, Bonnie went down deeper, to a charming place centered by a certain gingerbread cottage with a particularly vile stove inside. Yes, indeed. Hansel and Gretel aren’t the only ones to have visited there.

It was somebody else who reinhabited her body, fitting into the glimmers and flickers between the nerves where the soul is hidden. She came to do the will of her tremendous master.

The cat had a use for her. Just for a little while, she would slip through the weave of life, doing the bidding of the gods.

It was not Bonnie who returned to that lovely body on the lab table. No, it was Mother Star of the Sea, of course. And she had not come back for fun.

Chapter 13

George stood over her, looking down at Bonnie. As the last of her living flush faded, he touched her face.

When she was this still, he could really see her beauty. His body stirred as it had not since Kate. Kitten Kate.

“George?”

Bonnie’s hair was golden, very beautiful.

“George, she’s been down long enough.”

Bonnie, Bonnie. Pretty Bonnie. How cool her skin was becoming, how like alabaster. How perfect.

“The blood’s going to pool.”

George bent down between the gleaming black coils, drawing closer and closer to her face. He inhaled the fading sweetness of her skin, then kissed her cheek, lingering his lips against the softness. Bonnie had the nicest down on her cheek. He laid his lips on hers.

“For God’s sake, George, we’ve got to bring her back. There’s going to be irreversible brain damage in a minute.”

Bonnie was perfection.

“George! It’ll be murder, I swear!”

Clark could be a hell of a bitch. George went back to his instrument panel. “I’m going to go with a slowly ascending level rather than the quick jump we used on Tess. I think maybe we’ll get a more stable electrical response from the brain that way.”

“Just do it. Right now!”

He began raising the voltage levels in the brain.

“Am I supposed to get a reading?” Clark called from his station.

“Of course.”

“I’m not getting a thing.”

“Christ.” George glanced over at her. What on earth had made him wait so long? She had been unexpectedly beautiful dead. He had not been prepared for that. He raised the voltages to their full output levels. “Now?”

“Leave it on! Try artificial fibrillation. Maybe if the heart would restart—”

George rushed to the lab bench, pulled the fibrillator out of the wooden case on the floor. The thing wasn’t even plugged in. He had been that careless. He felt like a criminal. Shaking, fumbling, he got the piug into the

socket and held the electrodes against Bonnie's chest. "Give it a shot, Clark!"

The device snapped and jerked in George's hands. Bonnie's lungs expanded with a whoosh.

"No heartbeat!"

"Hit it again. Oh, *Jesus*'."

The fibrillator snapped again. This time there was a gargling sound from Bonnie's throat, "Clark?"

"I think I got—yeah, there's one. There's another! She's starting! We have a heartbeat."

"Bonnie! Bonnie!"

"D-d-d—"

"Bonnie, come back to us! Come back!"

"Heart rate 45. Blood pressure 55 over 30. She's responding, George. I hope to God there's no brain damage."

Her eyes were fluttering, her mouth working. She coughed, gasped, jerked her head from side to side.

"Bonnie, baby, Bonnie, *baby*."

"I'm gonna—" She tried to lift herself, failed, then made a mess all over George's beautiful equipment. He groaned to see it.

"Bonnie?"

"Yeah?"

"Come on, honey, let's get you out of there. Clark, give me a hand." While Clark removed her electrodes George got some paper towels and cleaned her up as best he could. Together they sat her up. She swayed, dangling her legs over the edge of the bench.

"My feet are asleep," she said.

Had George heard correctly? Was that Bonnie's voice?

"My dear," he said, "what a low voice you have."

When she looked up at them, George was confused. In a way that was hard to define, her face was not right. Her cheeks, which had been rounded, were now drawn inward by a tension that had not been there before. Her lips were held in a prim, angry line. And her eyes—she had a predatory look.

"Oh, my God," Clark whispered.

"Bonnie—what strange eyes you have. Do you feel all right?"

"I'm a little woozy, but I think my circulation's getting better." She stepped to the floor. "There! See, I'm okay."

Something was not right here. The voice was radically different. And her

face, her eyes... he didn't understand.

"George," Clark said, "come in here." He nodded toward the animal room.

"What about that cat?"

"Never mind the damn cat, just get in here!" Clark closed the door behind them. "What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know."

"Something's terribly wrong with her."

"I—what can I say?"

"Look, man, we're getting in trouble here, you and me. Careers are on the line." He paused. "The whole damn thing is videotaped."

George saw where he was leading. "We've got to help her. She's the main consideration."

"I'm a biologist. I can't help her. George, I'm telling you right now I'm pulling out of the project. Right out.

I don't care what happens with my degree. I don't care what Constance thinks. In fact, I'm reporting to her that the whole experiment is a failure and we've got to shut down. If you ask me, you're going to end up in jail or sued by outraged relatives before this is all over."

"Clark, just take it easy. It isn't that bad."

"That isn't Bonnie in there, you know it as well as I do. It's something else—something we've unleashed."

"That's an unsupported value judgment. The only thing that's definite is that there is a change of expression."

"A change of expression? The woman has another face, somebody else's, voice. She sounds like an older woman. A different woman."

"There's no proof that these effects are related to the experiment. They might have happened anyway."

"What a load of—you can't seriously advocate that! The girl was fine before we did this to her. Normal in every way!"

"There was nothing in the experiment that could have caused the effect we're apparently seeing. And I must stress that we've hardly had a chance to evaluate her. Probably we're dealing with minor sequelae to the blood pressure changes. My guess is they'll pass off—"

A scream pealed in the lab. When George threw open the door, Bonnie was reeling around the center of the room with the cat on her head. Its claws were in her hair, and it was trying to reach her throat with its teeth. "My God!"

George was revolted. A human being touched by a cat. And yet the

suffering involved in being bitten by those teeth would be so extreme that it would be fascinating. He fought to get his hands under control enough to grab at the loathsome thing.

At last he did it, felt muscles pulsing beneath its skin, heard its hissing, smelled its breath like an electrical fire. He got the head and pulled it back away from Bonnie's neck. Claws savaged his hands as he dragged the cat off her. It writhed furiously, screaming, its head turning and twisting, claws slashing.

Clutching the scruff of its neck, he took it into the animal room and tossed it into the empty monkey cage.

"This is crazy!"

He returned to the lab to find Clark standing at the door, staring down the hall. Bonnie was gone.

Mother Star of the Sea had to get moving. The damned cat was going berserk with impatience. There was no time to waste, not a single second. You took hell with you, even on vacation.

She did exactly what she was supposed to do—she ran. She did not know where she was going or even why she was here. That wasn't her business. She Just had to run. It that had brought her here would direct her movements.

There was one thing, though, she wanted to do on her own, and she wanted it so desperately that she risked the wrath of the cat for it.

For all the time she had been dead, she had been longing for one simple thing that was only available in life. Her last one had been stolen by a nurse's aide on the cancer ward at Perpetual Light Hospital. Her very last one, and she had done her terminal suffocation without even the small pleasure it would have brought.

Mother Star of the Sea fumbled in the pockets of Bonnie's jeans for some change. Thirty cents. Good.

She crossed a two-lane highway and went down into the familiar old town, looking for the right kind of store.

Bixter's. Of course. She went in. At the counter was a display so beautiful she almost wept to see it. With a trembling hand she picked out from among the stacks of M&Ms and Hersseys and Oh Henry!'s a lovely, fat, fresh Snickers bar. She shook as she held her coins out to the girl at the register.

"Thirty-two."

"Excuse me?"

“Thirty-two cents. A Snickers is thirty-two cents.”

Mother Star of the Sea wasn't really surprised. Her guilt didn't miss a trick. She was here, sure, but she had no intention of letting up on herself. Her suffering would stay with her. She knew better than to try and steal the candy. What would happen then she couldn't even guess, but it would certainly be worse than not getting the damn Snickers at all. “Too bad,” she croaked. She put it back and left the store.

As she walked down the street, a little bit of hell amid all these happy souls, she found she hated them.

They ate, they slept, they fornicated—and she couldn't even have a goddamn candy bar. Mother Star of the Sea begrudged them their silly, complacent lives. What a joke it all was. They thought they'd die, most of them, and face some sort of judgment. Saint Peter or whoever.

You could say not guilty, but it didn't matter a bit if you *knew* otherwise.

I am now walking around in a body I once hated with a passion so great it drew tears to my eyes. She looked down at the hands. They were smooth and pretty now, but in 1973 they had been plump, warty little things. Had she ever ruled them? She didn't recall, but she certainly hoped so. She raised one to wipe her nose. The arm was stronger than she had thought it would be, and she almost knocked herself out. Staggering, she recovered.

She was in here and she couldn't get out! How *horrible*. How funny.

Maybe I'm crazy. Perhaps I'm really Bonnie, but I *think* I'm the old dead nun. I'm Bonnie, and I've become my own guilt.

This speculation made her hate the people around her even more. In a few minutes the distance between her and her fellow human beings had become as wide as the black eternal pit into which she had fallen.

How she hated them, those bright faces, those innocent eyes, those sexy curves and jutting trousers. Two children passed. Their faces were smeared with chocolate. She smelled the aroma of Snickers on their sour children's breath. She would have gleefully roasted them over a slow fire.

As she walked along she noticed a trail of ants winding its way across the sidewalk. They were helpless.

Unlike the people, they could be hurt. She pranced up and down, stomping them to ant butter.

“Are you all right, miss?”

A cop. “Yeah. I just don't like ants.”

“We got a lot of 'em this year. I been puttin' out them ant motels at my

place all fall.”

She crossed the street. Wherever was she going, anyway? Hell if she knew. Let the cat take care of it.

The cat always knew just what it wanted. If you refused or hesitated in hell, The damn thing became a real tiger.

Something buzzed in her left ear like an enormous wasp, perhaps a cat struggling to make human sounds.

The words were clear enough, though. They told her just what was next. Cross Ames and walk a block farther on. Then take a left on North Street, down a block, and there it would be, huddled up against the back of the Tabernacle, Brother Pierce’s shabby old Airstream trailer with “God Is Love” painted down the sides. She arrived panting.

“Brother Pierce? Brother Pierce, are you in there?”

She hammered on the screen door that had been attached by coat hanger wires to the frame. The interior of the trailer was dark and quiet, warm from the sun despite the chilly day.

“Brother Pierce?”

She opened the screen door and stepped in. The trailer was not large. One side of it consisted of a reeking, unmade bed, the other of a desk and plastic-covered table littered with dishes.

She was careful to close and latch the door. The places where the cat’s claws had penetrated her scalp burned like fire. She didn’t care to encounter that creature again.

This was certainly a dreary little hole. Hot. Stinky. She cast around for some cigarettes, found a stale-looking pack of Saratoga 100s, put one in her mouth. Amazingly enough, she also located a book of matches. At least she would be allowed *some* small pleasure. But when she saw that there were just two matches left in the book, their phosphorus tips crumbling, she didn’t even try to light one. What was the point? Without further ado she tossed cigarette and matches over her shoulder.

The voice had not told her what she was supposed to do here, so she stood, as inert as an undirected zombie.

As the minutes passed, Mother Star of the Sea came to seem less a self and more a memory. Bonnie was returning, the old nun dissolving away. It occurred to the reappearing woman that the Mother Star of the Sea delusion could be an unexpected consequence of her temporary death.

It made her feel cold and clammy to realize that she had memories from

the time she had been dead.

Death hadn't been blackness or emptiness, not at all.

It had been Mother Star of the Sea and... oh, dear.

That problem. But she hadn't—or had she—ruined Mother Star of the Sea's life?

She certainly had. And she had gone to hell for doing it. In a little while she was going back. Forever.

Mother Star of the Sea was standing in the back of the trailer, her habit billowing like great wings. There was a great pile of whiskey bottles behind her.

Bonnie rushed wildly from the grim apparition—and into the arms of a short, fat gasping man who was on his way in the door. “I got to see Brother Pierce,” the man wailed.

“He's not here.”

The man wrung his hands. “I got to see him!”

“You'll have to wait.”

“I can't wait! No time.” She heard brakes squeal around the side of the trailer. “Oh, Jesus! Tell him there's gonna be a witch ride through the town tonight. Big secret, we ain't supposed to know! Tell him!”

Three more men hurried around the trailer. Then fatso was off, puffing and blowing, his pursuers close behind. Their car came swinging around the corner raising dust, driven by a fourth man.

A witch ride? She could never say that!

“May I help you, daughter?”

“Oh.”

“I am Simon Pierce.” He did not smile so much as reveal his teeth.

“I—” She wanted to tell him she was just leaving, but she couldn't very well do that. This was his home and she was standing right in the middle of it.

“I ask that members of the congregation never come in here.” He chuckled. “I am an inveterate bottle collector and some of my prizes are very delicate. Worthless, of course, except to me.” He stared at her, his eyes full of calculation. “Who are you, daughter?”

“I'm—a messenger! I have a message for you from, from—” She waited for the buzzing voice in her ear.

There was only silence.

“Bill Peters? Bill sent you?”

She had to think up something. “That’s it,” she babbled. “Bill sent me. He said to tell you there’s going to be a witch ride tonight.” It had burst from her on its own.

“Bill said that? Where is he?”

“Some men were after him—”

“Say no more. Bless you, daughter! You have brought me gold. *Gold!*”

So this was why she had been sent here. The cat of hell wanted to be certain that Brother Pierce knew about the witch ride.

He strode past her and got on the phone. Her last sight of him was of his back as he bent over the instrument, talking with excitement and relish. She had to get to the lab right now. She was remembering an incredible wealth of detail, and she had to tell George. Mother Star of the Sea, indeed. Guilty secrets of the dead.

She hurried up North Street to the place where it forms a triangle with Meecham and the Morris Stage Road. Bonnie was a careful girl. She negotiated the Meecham part of the crossing and paused on the pedestrian island, waiting for a break in the MSR traffic. She waited for some time. This was the commuter hour, and there was a steady stream of cars coming back to town from their day’s journeys.

There was a loud feline growl behind her. She whirled, shocked. All she saw were eyes and teeth, hanging in the air. But the eyes were glaring things, and the teeth curved like tyrannic fingernails.

She hurled herself away from the horror—and into the middle of the Morris Stage Road. The last thing she saw was the onrushing grillwork of a huge Lincoln. Mike Kominski didn’t even have time to swerve.

Her message delivered, Tom returned the messenger to its eternal abode.

Chapter 14

THE WILD HUNT

The moon had risen high, casting its light upon the mountain. Mandy stood beside the house with Constance, holding her cold, dry hand and watching the golden sickle in the sky.

“I want to stay here forever, Constance.”

“Yes.” There was shyness in her tone. Despite the march of years she had much still of youth in her “But you must be certain Would you give your life for it?”

Mandy raised her eyebrows, regarded Constance. “I’ve teamed to be suspicious of questions like that.”

“Well, no need to answer just this instant. You’ve been given a reprieve The ravens are announcing a visitor.”

Mandy heard their gleeful blaring babble of half-aware voices. She could detect the pleasure and excitement in their tone. “They know the visitor. Somebody they’re glad to see.

“Very good, dear. You’re learning how to listen to them.”

“Just the tone. Not the words.”

“The two are one and the same among birds. If you’re careful, you’ll hear the celebration in their greeting.” She smiled. “Ravens only celebrate one thing, and that is food. So we will find that our visitor is feeding them as he comes up the road.”

“He?”

“The female’s voices are sharpest. It’s a he.”

They went back inside and down the long central hall to the front of the house. Ivy had not yet lit the candles. That wouldn’t occur until the moon cleared the trees. “It’s nice to do things that remind us this old planet *rolls*,” Ivy had said. “It’s going somewhere, and we’re going there, too.”

Rise of moon, setting of sun, tumble of stars, all were noticed on the Collier estate.

A man in hat, down jacket, and snow boots was just mounting the final rise to the house. As he walked, he tossed bits of something to the darting, gleeful birds.

Mandy was no longer so desolate about the work they had destroyed. One glimpse of the *Leannan* had made her past efforts seem callow, at least the efforts at fairies. Their destruction was a grace; she would not have been able to bear them now.

“Well, look who it is. Ivy! Robin! Your father’s come for a visit.”

As she and Constance watched him making his way up the walk in his cloud of ravens, Mandy heard a rattle of footsteps from the house. A moment later Robin and Ivy burst past them and met him at the steps. With a cry of happiness Ivy threw herself into his arms. “Dad!”

“Hey, baby! Hiya, Bill.”

“Their outside names are Margaret and Bill,” Constance commented. She offered no further explanation as their father stomped the snow off his boots on the wide front porch.

“Lord, Connie, why don’t you get somebody in to plow that road? Tumbuli’d do it for a hundred bucks.”

“Hello, Steven. Come on in and dry your boots by the fire. We’ve got some hot mulled wine.”

He tramped through the door rubbing his hands. “Nobody mulls wine like you people,” he rumbled.

Mandy was fascinated. Robin had talked about the danger of outsiders learning too much, but here was one outsider who seemed familiar enough with them.

Ivy soon brought wine in steaming mugs. “Oh, that is good,” Steven said, leaning into the warmth. His face, reflecting the firelight, communicated strength and gentleness. His eyes were set in tangled brows, but the way they twinkled suggested that he did not take the witches quite as seriously as they themselves did. He seemed so at peace, so accepting. She could understand why he was trusted here.

“Snow in October! We had three inches down in the town.” He looked askance at Constance. “Sure is unusual, snow in October. I wonder if *she* was as surprised as we were.” He chuckled. “It is beautiful, though, the white against the autumn colors.”

“It’ll melt.”

“Good! I can get my compost finished. Say, she didn’t tell you when, did she?”

Constance risked. “That is no business of the Episcopalians.”

“Hell, Connie, I’m not just a church deacon. I’m also a gardener. I need to

know. And you got my kids, you old witch. I think I'm entitled to a few favors."

"Steven, I'd like you to meet Amanda Walker. She's going to be with us from now on. Amanda, this is Steven Cross. He's my neighbor across the road."

Mandy smiled. She knew the name Cross, of course. It was one of the old Maywell names. There had been Crosses in the Founder's Excursion in 1702. Mother Star of the Sea had drilled that into their heads in History, along with the equally important fact that two of the founding families, the Stemleighs and the Albarts, were Roman Catholic.

"My Lord, you do get the pretty ones." His big hand lingered in her own. Then he turned his eyes on Constance once again. "I thought I'd better come up." His voice lowered. "Something happened last night." He cast a significant glance in Mandy's direction. "Pretty serious."

"She can hear. She's going to team it all."

His eyebrows shot up. "You mean she's the new—"

"That's right. But don't congratulate her yet, she only just survived the first challenge. Now, why did you come? What's happened?"

"About midnight last night I noticed a lot of traffic out on Bridge Road. I went down the front walk and took a look. There was a regular procession, Connie."

"Who?"

"Brother Pierce has gotten wind of something."

"Maybe he's managed to slip a spy into one of the town covens. I wouldn't be surprised. That's the way it usually happened in the old days."

"I hope none of the ones who use our facilities."

"I doubt it. The covens that meet at Saint George's have been going for years."

"How about Leonora Brown's group—"

"The Priestess Quest. She is rather new at it. Have you met any of her coven?"

"The rector says it's a good group."

"And your Charlie knows people. No, I don't think my problem is there. I'd be more inclined to nose about the Kominski group. She's got three covens now. I cautioned her about growing too fast."

Steven smiled. "You folks sell ecstasy. That's a hard thing to beat in this day and age. People want to join, Connie. I don't think you realize how much

you're affecting me life of Maywell. Far more than you did even five years ago."

"I realize it. Never assume I don't know what I'm doing. And my people can keep their secrets."

He tucked his chin into his chest. His eyes were no longer twinkling. "Please forgive me, but I beg to differ. Not only Brother Pierce but everybody else in town knows there's some kind of a big do on tonight."

"Of course. They have to know."

He rocked back with surprise. "What? Oh, Connie, come on!"

"The essence of the ritual is danger. If it wasn't dangerous it wouldn't work. To be real, magic must be serious. We aren't playing games here."

Mandy listened with the utmost care. She believed these words.

Cross's voice rose as he spoke. "Connie, I don't think you understand what your people are doing. They're *recruiting* all over town, even in the churches. Even from Pierce."

"They aren't recruiting. We don't recruit. Witches are rare. It takes a very special person to become a witch."

He shook his head. "Whatever, you're going public. Connie, you people are way out in never-never land and this is a very conservative little town."

"There's a long tradition of toleration here in Maywell."

"Maywell is a Christian community, of course it's tolerant. Except for Pierce, that is. And he is far from tolerant." Steven stopped, looked a long time at the floor. Finally he spoke again. "You're in danger. All of you. This business of public rituals is highly irresponsible. And the recruitment—"

"We do not recruit!"

"Whatever it is! It's going to get you in trouble, mark my words. You've got families breaking up over this thing. Let me tell you how Maywell thinks of you. The tolerant ones—us, the Catholics, most of the established churches—still figure live and let live, but the more noise you make the more uneasy we get.

As for Brother Pierce's followers, watch out. They're running around with torches in the night, my dear."

Connie smiled softly. "We have to do what we do and be what we are. Nobody really has a choice in such matters. If it means that we lose the toleration of the town, then that's what must be. But we love you and respect you. Carry that message to your congregation, Steven. Wilt you do that?"

"You know I'll do what I can. But my strong sense of it is that things are

about to get out of hand. Puti back for a while.”

“I’m sorry, Steven.”

He drank deeply of his wine. “What’s in this mull, anyway?”

“Stool of toad, leg of worm.”

“Thank you. I’ll have to write that down. There was more than a procession out there last night. There’s a big burned place on the wall about a hundred yards from the gate, back toward town.”

Constance’s eyes narrowed. “A burned place?”

“The grass is scorched, the wall is covered with soot, and the overhanging branches are blackened.

Somebody’s awful mad at you, Connie.”

Constance’s eyes twinkled. “Pierce, of course.”

“Probably. But you’ve got plenty of enemies besides him. Could be some husband whose wife has moved to your village. Could be a whole group of ‘em.”

“There are only two families affected by the village in that way. And one of the husbands is about to come around. The other is too obsessed with his work to bother about us.”

“Then blame Brother Pierce. From what I hear he’s out to cauterize this place to a cinder. Burn out the witch infection.” He coughed. “This wine is loosening up my chest as well as my tongue. Your darned snowstorm gave me a cold, dear!”

“We don’t affect the weather. That’s just a superstition.”

Steven answered with a deeper hack.

“Ivy, what do you think your father’s cough needs?”

“Well, it’s bronchial, a lot of loose phlegm. Not very serious. I’d say onion broth.”

“Very good. But why are you sure it isn’t serious?”

“There’s no rasp in it, so not much inflammation, and none of the thickness associated with pneumonia.

And it doesn’t have the crack of a tumor cough.”

“See there, Steven. Your daughter is possibly going to be a quite competent herbal doctor. Ivy, give him the recipe.”

“Cut up six small white onions and boil them in a cup of honey. Boil them down for two hours. Strain out the liquid and take it hot, in small doses. You’ll cough a lot at first—”

“I’m sure.”

“Then it’ll stop, Dad. Your cough’ll be cured.”

“I’ll use up my Robitussin first, baby. I love you dearly, but I don’t think Mom’s gonna let me boil down onions in the kitchen.”

Ivy went and sat on the arm of his chair. She stroked what he had left of hair. Robin, sitting on the floor before him, took his mug and refilled it from the pitcher they had left by the fire. Mandy was for a moment conscious of the depth of the love that flowed between this man and his two children. He looked again at Constance. “Please tell me you’re at least going to be careful.”

“Tonight is a bad night for us to be careful.”

There was that suggestion of danger again.

“Don’t go down in the town.”

“We go wherever our ritual leads. The essence of the hunt is danger.”

“You’ve said that! Now, look, if you’re going to be crazy, at least do me one small favor. Tell Sheriff Williams your plan.”

“I did that, of course.” She laughed. “I even had to pay a hoof tax of fifteen cents.”

“I’m glad he knows. I don’t want the poor guy to get a heart attack.”

“Johnny Williams is a good man, Steven. We used to dance together out at Rollo’s Road House.”

“You remember that? When did that place close down—during the war?”

“Before the war. The reason I remember is that Johnny reminds me every time I see him.” There had come into Constance’s face a fey expression. To say she had once been a coquette would not be accurate. She still was one.

On the distance came the single boom of a gong. “The moon hangs two fingers over the mountain,”

Constance said. “We have a lot to do before midnight.”

He slapped his palm against his head. “I’m telling you half of this town is up *in arms*, Connie, and you propose to go thundering through its streets on horseback at midnight? You must be mad!”

“Half the town may be up in arms, but the other half is mine.”

“Not half, dear. Perhaps a fourth.”

“Many of the others are friends.”

“Oh, come on. You act like you haven’t heard what I said. You make a spectacle of yourself and you’re going to lose the friends you do have.”

Mandy saw something fierce in the look Steven gave Constance, something he himself might not even have been aware of. The gong boomed

again.

“I gather that means I have to go.”

“That’s what it means, Steven.”

He got up. “Thanks a heap for the wine. And don’t say I didn’t warn you if you have trouble tonight.” He tromped out, his children trailing behind him. “Your mother sends her love. Her apples are ripe, and she says to tell you she’s going to have thirty bushels. All grown without spells.”

“That’s what she thinks,” Ivy said. “I first spelled the orchard on Beltane Day.”

“I’ll tell her that. I’m sure she’ll throw away her fertilizer.”

“I wish she would. She doesn’t need it. It shocks her trees. They’re getting old before their time.”

“We’ve got a good harvest, too,” Robin added. “Pumpkins and corn and squash and wheat and oats.

And an incredible blackberry crop. We’re going to be making the herbal stuff again.”

There was an awkwardness now between the three of them. “It’ll be a good harvest, then,” Steven said.

“The best,” his son said. A pause grew, spread into a silence.

“Your sisters miss you.” Steven paused at the door. He opened his arms to his son and daughter. “You know,” An instant later he was off into the night. Soon the calls of the ravens began again, diminishing with him as he departed. “Hey! Lay off that hat! I’m outa bread!”

Then he was gone.

Ivy went about with her taper, and soon the house shone with the deep light of the candles. Mandy saw Robin hurrying through the kitchen. The slam of the door made her gasp. She was alert with anticipation.

She understood that she was at the center of this ritual. Naturally she was apprehensive. She told herself that was all it was—apprehension. She would not admit to deep fear, the curdling terror that comes when one faces a true unknown.

“What am I going to do tonight?” she asked Constance.

Her mentor took both of her hands. “You are the huntress, dear.” She wasn’t surprised. “I hope you know how to ride bareback.”

“I couldn’t possibly! I haven’t ridden a horse since I was sixteen.”

“Well, give it a try. You’ll have to go sky-clad, too.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll see. Now, come on, the moon doesn’t wait.”

The next thing Mandy knew she was following Constance down the path through the herb garden. The idea of hesitating never crossed her mind.

When they reached the village, they slipped between two of the cottages to find the place most wonderfully transformed from Mandy’s brief visit when she first entered the estate. There were candles everywhere, making pools of light along the snowy paths, gleaming in the windows of the cottages, in the lanterns before the houses, too. Holly decorated all the doors. “You’re to hunt the Holly King tonight, my dear Amanda,” Constance said. “As usual the rules of the game will be simple. Just do your best.”

Here she went again with the vague instructions. Mandy remembered struggling up Stone Mountain, not knowing where the hell she was going. “What if I fall off the horse?” she muttered, knowing there would be no reply.

She was being tested. Very well. She raised her chin.

Fiercely she determined to pass every test they could give her.

Constance stopped in the middle of the village. She looked most wonderful, hooded, her cloak touching the ground. Her face was lit by the candles, and the moon rode high above her. “If at any point you fail, my dear, we burn this village and go home. We quit.”

A stone seemed to knock in her chest. “It’s that important? Me?” Now all of her posturing seemed hollow.

“This is *your* night, my dear You have taken your place with the *Leannan* as I took mine fifty years ago.

To further prove yourself, you must capture the Holly King and make him your own. It symbolizes your strength. The Holly King is all of us, our covenstead, our way of life. If you want to lead us, you must first catch us.”

Mandy’s mind was still battling through the possible meanings of what she had just heard when Constance marched up to the doors of the great round building at the head of the town and threw them open.

The room within was an astonishment of light and odor: it appeared to be a combination barn and ritual chamber. Around the walls were stalls full of horses and cattle and goats. Mandy saw fine mounts, their rumps gleaming, their tails beautifully curried. The smell was not unpleasant, just intensely animal. The stalls, though, formed only the outermost circle. The greater part of the space was taken up by a beaten-earth floor, upon which sat perhaps four dozen people—men, women, and children.

In the center of the circle was Robin, his head crowned by holly, his body gleaming as if it had been waxed. He was, as were they all, quite naked. When he smiled at her, she was glad.

A familiar black tail hung down from a rafter, flicking occasionally.

There was a skirl of bagpipes and a rattle of bones. Six couples came into the circle around Robin. A young woman of perhaps eighteen dashed round and round it with an enormous broadsword, pointing it at the ground. The bagpipes wailed wildly. Mandy thought of all the movies she had ever seen of Scotsmen in war, and knew the sense of this magnificent noise. In hands such as held them now, the pipes were an instrument of courage.

Brother Pierce's face, sharp with hate, seemed to swim before her.

The group in the circle began to dance round their Holly King, clapping and chanting:

“Fire of life,
Pass, pass, pass!
Fire and flame, in Goddess' name,
Pass, pass, pass!
Heart and hand of Holly King,
Pass, pass, pass!”

She understood it all now. They were going to make her ride a horse through a hostile town in the nude, chasing a guy with weeds in his hair.

She was thinking to get out of here when strong hands suddenly grabbed her and whirled her away among swirling chains of people. They snatched at her cloak until it was swept off, then at her jacket, at her blouse, at her jeans. Soon she was naked above the waist. There was so much laughter that the violence of the undressing was almost dispelled. They lifted her at last over their heads, and in passing her from hand to hand finally got the jeans away from her.

She was shrieking from all those unexpected touches when she found herself delivered to the center of the inmost circle and laid at the feet of the Holly King.

Robin's eyes were big with desire. She could see, between his crossed legs, his standing flesh.

Close to him there was a strange smell, like mildew and rancid lard and menthol cough drops. A moment later she knew why. He dipped his fingers

in a bowl of thick salve and dropped a huge glob of it on her belly.

“Hey!”

They held her arms above her head, put their hands around her ankles. In their faces was such love, though, she made no attempt to escape them.

When Robin began spreading the salve up and down her stomach, she discovered that the touch of his hands could be pleasant. He spread the slick stink over her whole body, leaving only her private parts untouched. She tingled, grew warm. The sensation was not unlike that of Ben Gay, but deeper and not in the least relaxing. On the contrary, she wanted to run and jump and yell; she fairly could have flown.

The young woman who had wielded the sword came and knelt beside Mandy. “There’s a little sting,” she whispered. “Don’t mind, it soon ends.” She took some of the salve and nibbed it smartly into Mandy’s privates.

A little sting! It was all she could do not to shriek with the agony of it. As if anticipating her problem the bagpipes wailed again and the bones were joined by drums.

No wonder there were legends of witches flying. This salve made her feel as if she were floating. More than floating. If she closed her eyes, she just might sweep up into the rafters with Tom.

They got her to her feet and danced her about, clapping, turning, twisting to a new music. The pipes were gone now, replaced by flute and drum and bone, the old instruments of such dances, softer perhaps without the roaring pipes but in their way just as exciting.

“Corn rigs, an’ barley rigs,
An’ corn rigs are bonnie;
I’ll ne’er forget that happy night,
Amang the rigs wi’ Mandy!”

Happiness filled Mandy Walker. The hell with her concerns, this was fun. She really danced for the first time in her life, naked and free amid the smells of animals and the sweat of people—and her own phenomenal stench—round and round and round till the rafters garlanded with holly spun and the Holly King on his throne of floor spun, with his smiling lips and dark wonderful eyes, the gleam there so intense it made her burst with laughter.

There was the feeling that she had danced this dance before.

Just then the dance stopped. Annoyance flashed through Mandy. Then she

heard what had frozen the others. From far away the long sound of a horn. A hunter's horn.

Constance. She was out there somewhere, calling them to the hunt.

The stillness was only momentary. There followed a great roar of excitement. Mandy found herself astride a huge black horse, a snorting, excited, stamping giant of a stallion.

She was naked. She had only the mane for reins. Then they had drawn her through the doors, so quickly that she almost hit her head.

"I've got to have my cloak!"

Somebody gave the horse a swat and like blazes they were off through the middle of the village, the hoofs of her mount shattering candles as he galloped. In another instant they were out in the night, pounding along, her fingers frantic in his mane, her body slipping and sliding around because of the salve, the horsehair skinning her legs. And, she felt sure, they were heading toward the bog.

"Whoa! Hey, horse, come on! Oh, stop!" She tugged at the mane. The animal gave a snort and thundered on.

All she could do was clutch and hope. Maybe she would only be knocked out when she fell. Not killed.

Please not killed at such a prime moment.

The salve was having a more and more powerful effect on her. For example, she wasn't in the least cold.

And she could hardly feel the pain of the horsehair against her thighs. Even while she clutched and cried, the swiftness of the animal's flight began to seem less a terror.

It became exhilarating, scary in the same sense that a roller coaster is scary. She put one hand along the beast's pumping neck. It was a lovely creature, this horse.

It snorted.

"Take it easy, horse."

She felt beneath her its muscles surging, its blood singing in its veins, its sweat mingling with her slickness as they pounded down the night.

She found that she could sit up for a few seconds and, while she did, actually enjoy the wind rushing past her face.

Then she could sit up longer. She could press her knees against the horse's flanks and sit straight.

It was more than good, this ride. She tossed her head and dug in her knees

and shrieked out all the joy and wildness and power that had sprung up in her soul. And her mount neighed reply. She heard the maleness in his voice and knew he had responded to something in her own that she had never before known was there. She was a *woman* upon this creature, no passive cipher but a woman full of strength and pride and beauty.

She felt an intimacy with the animal flesh beneath her so raw that it startled her. He neighed again, a rich, delighted sound, and literally burst forward. They pounded, pounded, pounded, his foam flying back in her face, his smell filling her nostrils when the charged air didn't, pounded and pounded but were not spent, never that, never tired, only growing stronger and stronger together as they hunted down the night itself.

Hunted, yes! She was here to hunt Robin. She tossed her head and screamed again, screamed from the bottom of her belly to the top of her head, a high, slicing sword of a cry.

Far off she heard the huntsman's horn reply. Far, far off to the north.

She had not even to say whoa this time, nor to touch the mane of her horse. Only transfer the pressure from the knees to the ankles and he dropped back to a trot. Lighter pressure made him walk. Raising her legs altogether made him stop.

The horn pealed out once more. Behind her, wasn't it? Her horse turned his head back, met her eyes in the moonlight with one of his own. He was blowing hard, slick with froth, trembling with eagerness.

This was no ordinary horse. He *knew* where to go, she felt it. He knew how to find the Holly King. All she had to do was surrender to his simpler, clearer mind and his instincts.

For all she knew no horse was ordinary. Maybe there was no such thing as an ordinary horse or an ordinary ferret or an ordinary duck, for that matter, no more than there were ordinary fairies or ordinary people or ordinary cats.

She gave him knee and they were off again, rushing around the edge of the bog, up through the hummocks with the house gleaming in the distance, farther north in the valley than she had ever been, through acres and acres of fields, some smelling cut and rich with the blood of the land, others still ripening, corn and gram and pumpkins and squash, earth weighted with fruit. She wondered if the snow had destroyed much of the crop.

They trotted down a path between sentinel rows of corn, which clattered with their passing. Now the land began to rise and they went through an orchard, the horse's hoofs crunching the culls and adding cider to the thick,

delicious chaos of scents.

“Holly,” she whispered, “King of Holly...”

No, still farther north. Low in the sky she saw Polaris, hanging above the dark mystery of the land. That way lay the Holly King.

But how far? They were passing houses now, with electric lights and dogs reduced to hoarse yapping by the bizarre sight and even more fantastic odor of the intruders.

They approached a house lit by candles, which were quickly snuffed out. People came bursting out of the door, running after her, cloaked against the cold, racing up and touching her legs with a slap, then dropping back into the dark.

Her mount’s hoofs clattered on the brick streets, echoing in the stillness. She was acutely aware of her nakedness.

Then a car gunned its motor and shot forward. She was impaled by the lights; she heard a powerful engine crying out the rage of the driver as the lights bore down. She dug her knees into her horse’s thighs and pulled his mane sharply right. He burst into a gallop, climbing a steep lawn. The car followed, engine growling and tires screaming, then whining as it came to a stop at the curb.

She shrieked as her horse leaped back fences, stormed through porches, and jumped empty swimming pools. Then they were in an alley, then through it to the next street. Perhaps there had been a cordon arranged for them, but they were out of it now. She was glad, she felt the wildness again, the freedom, the sheer mad, sweating, gasping thunder of the ride.

And she knew she was closer to the Holly King. By long habit she wanted men, and waited for them.

Never before had she allowed herself the feeling of just taking what she wanted.

They went past Church Row and across the town common beyond. “Find him,” she whispered to her mount. “Find him for me!”

Behind them other cars were muttering and growling, their lights prowling the streets that surrounded the common.

Then she saw the blazing sign of Brother Pierce’s Tabernacle. People were running in and out, cars were coming and going—the place was like a wasp nest disturbed by a stick. She knew, at the same moment, that *he* was close by.

Her horse stopped. “Come on.” She pressed with her knees. He turned his

head and looked at her. “So this is the place,” she murmured.

She dismounted, stood a moment on shaky legs, getting used to the ground again. Snow crunched beneath her feet. The salve was not so strong now; she felt how icy cold this night really was. Half a block from the Tabernacle there was another candlelit house. More witches. But he was not in that house. No, he was outside. They were to meet in the night.

He was a clever boy, to go so close to Brother Pierce’s Tabernacle. Clever boy. But she wasn’t afraid of anything anymore, not even this.

She would have ridden right down the aisle of the Tabernacle if necessary. Maybe it was the ride or the salve or being naked in the streets, but she was very excited. She had never wanted anyone like she wanted the Holly King.

Her horse turned its head, pricked its ears toward a sound behind them.

And did not even have a chance to scream when the blast of a shotgun shattered its brains. The great body shuddered and collapsed. “Okay, whore, put your hands up!”

She started to run.

“Stop!”

The hell with that. She had darkness on her side at least. She ran. A shot thundered behind her and something hissed past her right shoulder. Buckshot. Keep going.

“I got the damn horse!”

My horse, my horse, my beautiful magic friend of a horse!

“She’s headin’ toward North Street!”

“Get her, man!”

She flew, forcing herself not to shriek the cry that came to her throat. There would be time for rage later.

My horse!

In their thirty minutes together she and that stallion had become friends in passion, fellow celebrants of gender.

A flash of white ahead of her, a stifled cry, and she realized she had flushed the Holly King! Her beautiful horse had been taking her right to his hiding place.

When he sprinted across North Street, she saw him clear in the streetlight, his skin pale, his long legs pumping, his holly on his head.

Others saw him, too. Car lights flared and engines roared from both ends of the street. By the time Mandy was crossing there were only seconds to spare. Then brakes squealed and furious voices were all shouting together,

“It’s the witch, it’s the witch!”

Behind her she heard clumsy crashing in the shrubs. She knew she was back on estate land, beyond the far limit of Maywell. North Street, where the estate’s wall ended, was also the border of the town. Here were the ruins of Willowbrook, an unfinished housing development that had been started and died after Mandy had left Maywell.

She stopped on an overgrown street to listen for the Holly King. The crashing behind her got closer only slowly, accompanied by a steady smoke of curses. Then, just as she was certain she had lost him, a shrub moved almost at her feet.

Instantly she pounced—and connected with his hot skin and pricking crown. She ripped it from his head and tossed it high in the air. He gasped, started to run again, but she grabbed his wrist and screamed out her triumph with all her victorious soul, uncaring of the people behind her, even of the flashlight beams that were probing for her position.

He pushed at her, he tried to break her grip. Her blood was so high that she raised her fist and slammed it across his face. He made a long, rattling groan and sank down.

“Oh, God, I killed him!”

But no, he was crawling. It was another trick! She leaped at him, grabbed him around the waist, straddled him, sat on him, pinned him to the ground.

And felt, to her infinite delight, his bursting rigid essence jamming up between her legs.

A flashlight beam skimmed her head and there was a brutal shout of triumph.

She could not move for the spear of pleasure he had thrust into her. “We’ve got to run,” she whispered, but she simply sat there, staring down at his blood-running face, feeling him in her, and knowing joy so extreme that it almost made her lose her senses.

Then she heard ravens. And yells, frantic yells. The flashlight beams began to flail about in the sky to a great roar of the most fierce cawing Mandy had ever heard. The cacophony retreated rapidly toward the Tabernacle.

When the Holly King was spent beneath her, she got up, put his crown on her own head, and found herself surrounded by other witches, all gasping from their long run. They were wearing ordinary clothing, caps, jackets, hiking boots. Apparently only the principals in the rituals were expected to go naked in the town.

Without a word they clustered about her, tied her cloak around her, and gave her a sweet, delicious drink of hot wine and honey.

She walked with them all the way around the western edge of the town and beneath the cliffs of Stone Mountain, back to the estate. Gentle hands carried her lover.

She sat in the center of the circle. They laid him, quite asleep, before her.

Her people then indulged in the revels of the night. There was so little she understood of their rituals, except that the bodies flashing about her in the circle meant ecstasy.

There were twelve of them, six men and six women, dancing about the inner circle of which she and the Holly King were the center. They moved to the right, dancing and clapping, chanting a single word: Moom, Moom, Moom, Moom.

They shouted, they whispered, they danced until the chant merged and changed and grew into another word, which she at first could not quite understand:

Moomamaamannamuaman adamoom amandoom.

Then she heard it—her own name. Amanda. She listened to it weaving about in the chant, and watched the sweat-slick nakedness of the people dancing in her honor, and wondered. Whom do they take me for? Who am I?

Chapter 15

For George, Bonnie's death was a great, black boulder, crushing him as a foot might crush an ant.

Clark had called him mad and disowned the project, then had gone back to the Covenstead to tell Constance all that had happened.

They had been together in the faculty commons when they got the news.

"There's been a student killed out on MSR," Pearl Davenport had shouted, her head popping in the door.

Clark went a dull shade of gray.

The long call of the sirens swept up and down the room.

"George, where the hell did Bonnie go?"

"Oh, Christ, oh, Christ."

"Pearl, who—"

"Clark, it was a girl. She got hit. I was coming across the damn road, there was an awful crunch, and this—oh, Jesus—this little rag goes flying halfway to heaven."

"It was a girl! Who, Pearl, honey?"

"Blond. Petite. I didn't see her clearly. I think she had on a college sweatshirt, Spacy-looking, that's all.

Then she's in the road and oh, I don't want to think about it."

Clark: "Pearl, come here, sit down. Henrietta, bring her some coffee." Bustle at the courtesy counter, gray Henrietta, Snow Queen of Frosh Bio, darting over with a Styrofoam cup.

Clark grabbed George's arm, grabbed it hard: "It's her, buddy."

Clark's rusting Datsun slipped and slid along, past the snowy playing fields and the track house, out the gates to the blue flashing lights of the Highway Patrol and the red shuddering ones of the Sheriff's Department. There was a scar in the road, maroon, mix of blood and rubber. The driver had tried hard to stop. "This goddamn comer!"

"Clark, we don't know!"

"The hell. She was crazy. She wandered into the street."

"We do not *know*."

He slammed on the brakes, clutched George's shoulders, his red, sweated face plunging into George's own, screaming, "You fucking *asshole*! We know! It was her and we killed her. You and I in our arrogance killed her!"

Jesus, to do an experiment like that on a human being without so much as a *single* successful animal test, without any safeguards—we ought to be horsewhipped, both of us. Connie is going to ask us, where was your conscience?” He made a sound like shaking leaves.

“Now, hold it. Calm down. We’ve got to think this thing through. We’ve got to be rational. Assume it is Bonnie. There’s no way this can be attributed to us. It was an auto accident. Happens all the time. We’re in the clear.”

“My conscience is far from clear. I might end up spending the rest of my life in atonement.”

“You speak of Connie. She pushed us.”

“She never asked us to be careless.”

“She pushed us! If anybody should atone, it’s Constance Collier.”

Clark did not reply. When George finally looked at him, he was laughing, but in total silence, his shoulders shaking, his face expressionless. “George,” he whispered, “if you don’t get out of my car right now, I am going to kick your head through that window.”

“Please, Clark—”

“George. I’m warning you.”

“We’ve got to work together.”

“Go.” He swiveled in his seat, raised his legs to his chin. His feet were inches from George’s head. “I’ll kill you, you self-serving bastard, I swear I will.” Then the man cried, bitterly and long, heaving, his eyes staring, and George knew who it was that quiet Clark had loved, and that he had given his beloved to the demands of his craft.

They were two lost men, George Walker and Clark Jeffers, Clark’s tears, though, told George that they were lost in different forests. The depth of his own sorrow was so great, he could not bear these tears. If he cared, he knew, he would go into his basement and light his candle, and die there.

George got out into an autumn evening brisked by the crackle of police radios, rendered urgent by the guttering of motors and the low voices of uniformed men with measuring tapes. Stone Mountain had a halo of deep orange. The mountainside itself was black, Clark did not drive away. He was watching George from inside the car, and George knew what he had to do. He walked up to an officer who was taking up a flare. “Excuse me.”

“Yeah?”

“I’d like some information. Was—”

“Look, I don’t have authorization to talk to reporters. Anyway, next of kin

haven't been notified yet."

"No, you don't understand. I'm Dr. George Walker from the college. The girl—I'm afraid—"

"She was a student, if that's what you mean."

"I know that. But you must, if she was identified, you must—was her name Bonnie Haver?"

"You knew her, then. I'm sorry. She didn't suffer. It was instantaneous I'm sorry."

George couldn't move. He wanted to somehow show grief, but there was only this awful, dead coldness within him.

He walked One foot before the other, across the rest of MSR and the pedestrian island, across the last hundred feet of Meecham where it angled into MSR, then down North Street.

He knew Clark was watching him go. He could feel his own end as the fall of an angel, wings dissolving in the thin moonlight.

May well was soft in the evening, so soft it seemed to want to seduce. As soft as a caress. Wind stirred from the north, rustling down the valley, drawing whorls of snow from the lawns that lined the street.

A cat appeared down the street, a huge black thing every bit as ugly as the one that had menaced him in the lab. He stomped. "Move!" The animal darted toward a house.

"Bonnie, Bonnie belle beauty, Bonnie belle, gone to hell. Bonnie belle beauty-o. Oh, shi-i-t!"

He had to laugh, really. What an absurd career his had been, not even big enough to be a cosmic joke. It was just a dreary reality, the smell of Lysol on the tab floor, the deaths of frogs and monkeys.

She walked in beauty, died in God knows what kind of horror. "Oh, Constance, why did you want it?"

What was it for!"

In his mind's eye he saw the old woman, serene, regal, standing before him in the formal drawing room of that tumbledown old house of hers. "George, I must challenge death. I must be able to kill, and then return to life, a human being, and to do it no later than December of 1987, Do you think it's possible?"

"Constance, the research is just in its infancy. There isn't all that much money."

"I can't give you money. There must be no traceable connection. Please,

George, it's vital to the future of the Covenstead."

He could not say that it was impossible. Tears filled his eyes again. Soon he would have to go to Connie and tell her everything. How could he ever ask forgiveness?

He passed Brother Pierce's Tabernacle, heard him roaring within. Cars were arriving, people were hurrying up to the doors. Here and there a pickup stood with rifles racked in the rear window. Honkies.

Rednecks. Slime.

"Slime! Hey, Brother Slime!" He gathered a snowball and hurled it up at the massive sign. God is Love, indeed. God is a sphere with no circumference and no center. God is nowhere. And God doesn't give a damn.

People had paused in the parking lot, big people with ugly little faces punched into the fronts of their fat heads. "Hiya, boys. Praise the Lord!"

"Amen, brother."

George continued more briskly, passing Stone and then Dodge. Going home. All of a sudden, he couldn't breathe. Going home? His house was dark and cold. "Kate? Please, Katie."

Kitten Kate and the kids. The gone.

She had cried and he had laughed. But he cried now, on his way down Bridge Street, past Elm with its shadowed houses and onto Maple. He struggled to his own shadowed house, to the front door, then the cold, dark living room.

What the hell are you crying about? Remember Saul Jones:

"She's moved out? Good You'll go for an uncontested. She gets me kids and you get the house." That was not a completely undesirable outcome. The other way around would have been disastrous. Truth be told, he could get along without his caterwauling, whining, wheedling, disappointed kids. The disappointed generation. Let them all live on the Covenstead. They even had their own school out there, fully licensed and accredited.

"*You* are leaving *me*, baby," he had said. "And unless you give me the house and the car I'll put up a fight for the kids." That worried her enough to stop trouble before it started.

"They're already gone. They left last night. It was their idea in the first place."

"You seduced them!"

"You get psychiatric help and we'll come back."

"I'll get a girlfriend."

“How about a cat instead!”

“You bitch.”

“You’re crazy, George. I’m going to tell Constance. She’ll assign you a counselor and make you go.”

Constance did nothing of the kind. She was too practical. She needed George’s work too much to risk his rebellion.

“Why, Constance? Why!” He had never been told the reason his research was so important to her. Now he wanted to know. It might help to dampen this fire in him. He could feel the red gargoyle of his anger turning on him, and it scared him. “Why! You tell me, you have to!” Constance stood before him, her smile sad and enigmatic. “Your grief is your chance to grow, George. I never said it was easy.”

Miserable at the memory, he jammed his fists into his eyes until he saw green stars. He sank to the middle of his dusty living-room floor bellowing as hard as Clark had. Long sobs wracked him. He poured his misery and grief and defeat out into the indifferent house.

Oh, Kitten Kate, I need you now. I was so glad the day you left. That wonderful morning when I slept until noon and watched the Miami game and drank eleven Buds. Lord, what a day! I was a laughing angel boy again, my mamma’s genius. No longer was I your husband, the accused failure.

But we were young together, Kate, and we shared some tilings. Remember that line, Kate—”Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky.” Oh, baby, something amazing, all right. I loved you and I threw you away, and I fell, baby, right out of the sky. Okay, I confess. I fell right out of the sky.

“Something amazing... a delicate ship passing by saw something amazing...” He could never remember all of her favorite poem. “A delicate ship passing by saw something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky.” Just that one line.

The house smelted faintly of linseed oil from the box of paints Mandy had left on the sun porch. He liked that odor; it reminded him of the six weeks of the summer of 1968 he had spent in Florence. There had been college students from all over the world there, art students, working on the restoration of the Uffizi masterpieces which had been damaged in the flood of the year before.

He had met Irish magical Roisin, with whom he had cohabitated for weeks, before he had found, jammed into her suitcase, the terrible rubble of a dead owl.

He had run terrified from her. Roisin, lost in the dangerous clutter of time.

Upon the dead waters, the last leaf finally sinks.

This sniveling had gone on long enough. It was time for the scum to be punished. He owed Kate, he owed the kids, he owed Constance, and now he owed Bonnie, too. He went to the mudroom.

He opened the trapdoor.

He descended to Kitten Kate.

Here he sometimes slept, with the cat eyes he had pasted on the wall staring at him, with the cat faces glaring at him, with the marching, running, jumping cats all around him, the long cats and the slinky cats, the cats of death and hell. He had burned one once, he and his dear childhood friend Kevin. They had burned a cat named Silverbell, a huge black cat with a loping walk and a kinked tail. Cat of Claire Jonas.

They had massaged Sterno into its fur and touched a match to it.

He slammed his head against the back wall, the one that had cinder blocks behind the thickness of cutout cats and drawn cats and pasted cat parts, the tufts of fur, the crisp bits of skin. This was the painful wall.

“Jenny went in there today, George. I told you what’d happen if you didn’t tear it down and the kids saw it.” Kate’s foot went *slam* against the floor.

“Look, I’ll get help.”

“How many times have you said that? Fifty? I want a divorce, George. I cannot stay here any longer—I do not want the kids exposed to whatever the hell’s going wrong with you.”

“I told you, I’ll go to a shrink. Constance will know somebody.”

“You’ll never do it. Anyway, you probably need an exorcist more than a shrink. That room is evil! Evil, George, and horrible and completely crazy and your daughter has seen it. You know what she said?

‘Gee,’ she said, ‘is this why Daddy hits me so hard?’ ”

“I always knew it. Somehow or another cats would destroy me.”

He looked around his room. This room was a cat. It was in a sense all cats.

It was Tink Tink reeeooooowww! across the green lawn a streak of popping blue fire, reeaaaaooooo poppop *crackle* rreeeeeeaaaaooooo!

What the hell, it was funny, she goes to the door, Claire opens it, and there’s this burning cat ali wound up on itself, rolling around on the porch.

They took her to the vet, and George couldn’t forget it even now: one yellow eye staring, the other burned away.

Put to sleep. Lullabye and okay, close your goddamn eyes, Bonnie! Golden slumbers fill your—oh, crap, I am missing my chance, somehow or other.

Come on, honey, wind of the western sea, blow, blow—

Oh. Go to sleep, Jenny, please go to sleep.

Not for you, Daddy!

George undressed. He knelt. He lit the candle. He arched over it, bending low, feeling the warmth rise to heat, to small pain. His chest was marked by a dozen round, red scars, the aftereffects of similar torments.

In the Kitten Kate Room, before the marching, the jumping, the yellow-eyed and creeping cats of the world, George knelt and forced his shaking, jerking body into the crackle-hungry flames, until a spot just below his left nipple, a fresh spot, sputtered and oozed red.

“God.” He pitched back from the flame, clawing at the agony of the wound, rolling, rubbing his filthy basement sheet into the crisped skin. Bacon chest. Is that funny-haha or funny-weird?

Very fine. Shirt back on, tuck it in nice and neat, do a good job, oops, no oozing through allowed. There was a stack of old newspapers back behind the door. Let’s see. September 14, 1983, *The Collegian*. Picture of Dot Chambers, Sorority Mavin, “Hazing Rituals to Be Reviewed.”

The SAOs had to cut out their Long March, and the Phi Zetas their paddling.

There is so much anger in this world. He plastered Dot Chambers down on his leaking flesh, then winked out the candle between thumb and forefinger and climbed back up the ladder to the mudroom.

A little torment could cure so much anger, so much grief. Bonnie was a volunteer. She took a risk in a noble cause and lost. The witches would give her body back to the earth. He would be forgiven. The experiment would be forgotten. Whyever Constance had needed it, this would be changed. The world would roll out and the Covenstead would live on, without anybody ever having returned from the dead.

He got a beer and went prowling about, wondering after little Mandy dear. Doing illustrations for Constance, was she? She’d be a witch soon, that was for sure.

Witch. Bitch. Kate gave good head once, back before the beginning of the end of time. Bobbing Kate—head down there giving head. You could make a lifetime of memories of Kate, had ye the inclination.

When he sighed, Dot crinkled. Okay, all right, you win. He threw back the Bud and went to the kitchen for another.

No?

All done. The refrigerator light filled the gloomy kitchen with an even gloomier glow. Gloom and glow, gloom and glow, Edelweiss, Edelweiss... remember *The Sound of Music* and Kate a girl then, the old Chevy II, back in the days of Martin Luther King and Bull Connors and the Yippies and oh what a fine ringing, singing time.

Bang.

One brief shining moment. Shamalot. A-a-a-y! I was gonna be a great scientist. Man, I won the science fair. I won a Westinghouse scholarship. (Almost.) I won tenure. (Almost.) Bang.

“So in the very moment of defeat he says to himself, wait a second. The experiment has been troubled by external conditions. There is as yet no definitive reason for shutting it down.”

Once the death was connected with his lab, everything would be impounded, his records and his equipment both.

George put on his jacket, zipped it, went out through the mudroom to the garage. All right. He was entitled to take his own property off the campus. They were his goddamn coils.

He didn't need the monitoring equipment, not really. Just the video camera. He'd take his own VCR down from the game room. Dear me, reduced to home experimenting. Down among the cats, where the air smells like burned beef jerky.

All right, okay, home experimentation isn't totally invalid. Here's some precedent: synthetic rubber was discovered on a wood stove. Penicillin was an accident.

As he guided the car down the driveway, he looked back at his house and thought, one day this place will be a museum. And that basement window there, the one between the rosebushes, people will point to it and say, that is where subject X took the ultimate journey, right behind that window. And in the end Constance will thank me. Yes, she will thank me for what I am going to do.

The streets were dark and surprisingly empty. He thumbed the knob that lit his watch. 12:47 A.M. A hell of a lot of time had passed unnoticed. He must have been in Kitten Kate for considerably longer than it had seemed.

Well, good. He needed time there. Good. It meant he had suffered longer, and therefore put himself back together for more time. The longer he suffered in the Kitten Kate room, the more chance he had for a happy life. He was filled with strength. Power. The power of pain. Dear little Dot, plastered to

my breast, who will it be?

Must be a she, of course, because only a she will fit my seven-coil array. Mandy was not enormous, and sooner or later, she would come back here.

Mandy, dear, you're five-nine if you're an inch. You'll fit. Just barely, but you'll fit.

Wasn't there a song somewhere about Amanda? "Farewell, Amanda... de de dan... sweet Amanda." He smiled. "Farewell, Amanda—remember me when you're stepping on the stars above." That was it. You'll step on the stars, Amanda.

I think.

He turned onto Ames, crossed the little bridge there, and saw glaring in his car lights a most unusual sight.

A huge black horse, a nude woman astride it bareback, the two of them surrounded by a flock of dark, darting birds. Hoofs clattered and crows cawed and the woman let out such a shriek that George screamed, too, involuntarily, screamed until his throat would break.

Hazing ritual? Too late in the season for that. Streaker prank? Fad was over.

George followed in his car, bearing down on the whole apparition, horse and woman and birds. The horse was not three feet in front of the Volvo when it leaped high into the air, across the sidewalk, and into the middle of a lawn. It continued on, snow clouds rising from its hoofs, around the house and into the backyard. George sat there, staring after it. He was sobered. Again he heard the woman scream.

Engines were roaring, lights rushing past. Pickup trucks, shotguns, guys with beer cans and cigars. Must be college revels, however improbable.

It grew much colder.

George drove onto the campus, went to the lab, and began loading the coils into cardboard boxes. Four trips back and forth and his car was full. There remained only one thing to get: the tranquilizer gun. There was enough scopolamine in one of those cartridges to close a human being down for a good hour.

He pocketed it. His pistol was nowhere to be found, Clark, no doubt, making sure the doctor didn't do himself in.

No, not yet. The good doctor had been in a tailspin, yessir. But the good doctor was now flying again.

He had a fine plan. He was going to become the spider of the house. Do a

little web sitting.

Sooner or later, dear little Mandy would be bound to return, if only to get her things.

When she did, he was going to kill her.

Farewell, Amanda.

And bring her back to a normal life.

Hello, again. (Applause.)

Together they would share their triumph with the world—

Chapter 16

Mandy awoke to the sound of dripping water. She opened her eyes and found herself looking across a dirt floor. Her shoulders ached, her thighs ached, and greasy male flesh wrapped her body. Robin, in the truth of the morning, needed a bath.

As she became fully conscious, she was struck by powerful, pounding emotions. There was sorrow over the horse that had been killed, but at the same time something new moved in her, a sense of tautness, as if a little steel had impregnated her bones, and her muscles had been filled with the energy of a coiled spring. Robin was not a large, distant model of her father, but somehow smaller, and she knew that she could share power with a man, or even take it from him if she wished.

Beyond these newly discovered feelings and powers, though, there was something much greater. Over the past twenty-four hours it had emerged as the new center of her understanding, revising everything. It was her memory of the *Leannan Sidhe*, the Fairy Queen. To lie back in the straw and know she had seen the *Leannan* and that the fairy were real gave her the most exquisite possible joy. For her the meaning of the world had deepened and grown much richer. The joy that filled her extended itself beyond love of the *Leannan* to include Robin and Constance and the whole Covenstead. She had reached, she thought, the center of the world's beauty.

She indulged in an elaborate stretch, feeling every muscle, every limb.

The water was gurgling, tinkling, pinging all around the outside of the wattled building. Here and there a drip came through the thatch. The unseasonable snow was melting.

Around her people sighed and snored. She was the only person awake, but the animals were snuffling about in their stalls. Across a tossed expanse of sleeping humanity a soft-eyed goat was munching hay.

Besides her enormous sense of personal well-being, there was a physical reality she could not ignore.

She felt sticky and clammy, dirtier than she had been since the days of tattered sneakers and sand piles.

She could not recall wanting a shower quite as much as she wanted one now. The dripping sounds made her long to feel a warm stream sluicing across her skin, to smell the gentle billows of Ivory as they washed away the

battles of the night.

She stared back at the eerie lozenges floating in the goat's eyes. Somehow it did not seem entirely innocent, this goat. Who knows what is in the mind of the animal—the simple emptiness that seems to be there or a silent, motionless intelligence? Its ears pricked forward. Her staring had made it curious.

There came the memory of thunder in the dark. The hard flash of the shotgun, the quivering of her devastated horse.

Her horse? She hardly knew his name.

But for a little while that horse had been part of her. He was the shaded man she had touched once or twice inside herself. In every woman, she thought, there lives a father and a bandit of a man, who is somehow reached through that mad love of horses that affects many an adolescent woman. Mandy could remember owning pictures of horses and going to the county fair to see the trotters.

You do not just kill a magnificent horse.

Robin's hand dangled across her thigh. She took it to her lips and kissed it. How unfamiliar it was. She decided that she did not actually love him. She felt passion for him. For her, this was a very rare experience. Her relationships with men were not straightforward. There had been too much anger between her and her father for her to ever trust herself to a man—

Idly she ran her fingers in his hair, touched his sleeping face. Would she love him, this man who had been given to her, or did the gift preclude that desperate, clinging thing?

Through the smoke hole far above came a blast of light. Outside chickens were cackling, and a rooster set up a lusty crowing. A cow kicked her stall and something made a chortling sound.

Something else moved in the far shadows, disturbing the dark near the wall. When Mandy raised her head to look more closely, the movement stopped.

She was not deceived, though. Even her brief experience with raw nature had already changed her perceptions. Animal cunning did not fool her so easily. She knew something was there.

Stillness settled, and as it did, the shadows began to move again. Something slid along, changing the curve of a leg, the thickness of a thigh, the length of an arm, as it moved among the sleepers.

Mandy understood all at once what she was seeing, and when she did she

jammed her fist in her mouth to keep from screaming. It moved steadily across the room, its head held just above the floor, its tongue darting, its eyes polished knobs.

Mandy watched it come into the center of the circle. Midway down its length was a lump about the size of a rat. It was at least six feet long, a great red and yellow creature, fairly glowing with reptilian health. It was on its way home after its predawn hunt.

The snake was no fool. It did not attempt to go near the animal stalls, but rather headed toward the door, crossing sleeping people with impunity, staying strictly away from the hoofed things. As it slid across a child's bottom, she giggled in her sleep.

Not ten seconds after it had disappeared into a crack in the wattling beside the door, the great gong boomed. Somebody coughed. The child awoke laughing. Other shadows began rising in the half light.

Cloaks and jackets and shirts were found. Mandy chose to watch the activity out of half-closed eyes.

She didn't want to miss any chance, however small, to learn more about these people. She was now able to accept that she was important to them, and thus it bothered her all the more that they were such strangers to her. She had already learned that direct questions didn't help much. Ask them their names and they would say Flame or Wild Aster or Garnet or some such thing. But never a legal identification.

As if he existed half in her imagination and half in reality, she saw Tom clinging in the rafters, a vividness fading. He had done terrible things, that cat. You could hear his fury in the way he breathed.

The general shuffle in the room awoke Robin. He shifted, stretched, then groaned.

"Hi," she said.

"I must be alive. I ache all over."

"You aren't alone. I'm hungry as well as sore."

He laughed. "You're lucky you don't have to eat and run. I've got to commute all the way to New York."

Surely he was joking. The Holly King couldn't possibly be a commuter.

"Don't look so amazed. You make me feel like I've got two heads or something. I go to the Pratt Institute. I'm studying design. It's no big deal. A lot of us commute. The Covenstead has to exist in the real world, after all. And it's out there, believe me, belching smoke and vomiting a continuous

stream of Big Macs and VCRs.”

He stood up and took a couple of halting steps. “Damn. I might be cutting class this morning. Look at my feet.”

She touched the cuts, the swellings, the bruises. He had run barefoot as well as naked last night.

Considering which, his feet were actually in fairly good condition.

Now that she was fully awake she recalled the Wild Hunt in exact detail. And she wondered about the morality of such an escapade. She and Robin had abused their bodies. Above all, there was the death of the horse and the terrible chase that could so easily have ended in their murder. One of the things the Wild Hunt had given her was the willingness to ask hard questions. She did not know it, but she was beginning to take the first, hesitant steps toward rule. “Why did you go into the town?”

“The Wild Hunt would hardly be wild if there was no danger. And the town covens would have been bitterly disappointed.”

“You could have found danger in the woods.”

“Safer danger? Come on. Our enemy lives in Maywell.”

“I lost my horse.”

“Raven was a great creature.”

“I loved him.”

“He was part of you last night, wasn’t he?”

“More than you realize.”

“Then he still is, Amanda. Now and always. And you should thank Brother Pierce for that. He gave you Raven.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“No air is sweeter than that we breathe after we have escaped our enemy.” Robin touched her face.

“Come on,” he said, “let’s find us some breakfast.”

She found herself willing to accept his touch and the consolation in his voice. The Wild Hunt was over.

Nobody needed to tell her that she had passed that test as well. From the new power and assurance she felt within, she knew it.

They went out into a mild morning. The ground was sodden, everything wet with runoff. The temperature was easily fifty. The air smelled of hot bread and wood fires, with a colder breath coming off the mountain. Robin inhaled, looked around. “If the snow had come a week earlier or stayed a day longer, it would have destroyed our crops.”

“You’re lucky.”

“Some people around here think the *Leannan* can control the weather. All the covens cast spells for a thaw, though. Maybe that’s what did it.”

“Show me some spells ”

“Soon.”

“Oh, come on. I’m sick of being kept in suspense by you people. I want to know now!”

“Look—quick!” He pointed toward a tangle at the base of the mountain.

“What?”

He laughed. “Fairy. You have to be quick to see them.”

“I’d like to see them up close again.”

“They don’t let you do that.”

“I’d like to see the *Leannan* again. Really see her.”

“Except for Constance, you’re the only human being who’s ever seen the *Leannan*. Unless there are some who saw her and didn’t survive the experience.” What he said both chilled and delighted her. She tossed her head, laughing somewhere deep inside. She remembered the silver-blond hair, the face with its laughing, sultry smile. “Do you wonder what she’s like?”

“Of course.” His voice was sharp, she thought a bit disappointed.

They came to a cottage near the center of the village. Inside Ivy was making oatmeal in a kettle over the open fire. Mandy had never actually been inside one of the cottages before. It was low-ceilinged, with rush beds against two of the walls. They were concealed by dark brown draperies of homespun. Each bed was wide enough for two. In the center of the room was a large table on which there were four earthenware bowls. A loaf of black bread sat on a board in the middle of the table. Beside it was a large wedge of pale cheese and a pitcher. There were earthenware cups and wooden spoons. A young man in a gray pinstripe suit laid plates out beside the bowls.

“Morning, Ivy,” Robin said. “Morning, Yellowjacket.”

“You both look like hell,” Ivy replied. “And you smell worse. Go down to the sweat lodge, please.”

There’ll still be plenty of food left when you’re endurable.”

Robin took Mandy’s arm, guided her out. “It’s her house,” he said. “Better not rile her.”

“I’d love a bath anyway.”

“You know about the sweat lodge? I was hoping it’d be a surprise.”

“Whatever are you talking about?”

“The sweat lodge. I designed it, you know. The structure, all the equipment. Everything.”

She had not noticed the long, low building hugging the edge of the village before. Smoke came from tall chimneys at either end, it was made of brick, with a roof of cedar shakes.

There were shoes and boots lined up along the doorstep. An overhang protected articles of clothing from the elements. “Hang your other clothes under your cloak.”

“I’m not wearing any other clothes.”

They disrobed together. She stood, feeling the prick of the morning air, her hands touching her breasts.

“I hope it’s warm in there.”

He opened the door into a steamy wonderland. The odor alone was unforgettable, a heady ambrosia of pine and cedar and soap. Cedar beams sweated above. There were three tubs made of glazed bricks.

Under them fireboxes glowed. People sat up to their necks in the water. A woman lay nearby on a wooden table being gently massaged by another. Two men did stretching exercises together on the wet slate floor. People talked quietly, laughed. Men shaved before a long, dripping mirror, their faces lathered light green. A girl, blond and tall, tossed wood into the fires, then went to a large canvas mechanism. She dipped the canvas bucket in one of the pools and raised it by a winch to the ceiling. “Shower’s ready,”

she said to Robin and Mandy.

At last, a wish granted. The soap, however, wasn’t Ivory. The bars were heavy and green, and flecked with herbs. They created dense lather that smelled of mint and left Mandy’s body feeling smooth and very clean, almost as if her skin had somehow been penetrated and renewed from within.

“Get rinsed,” the girl said. “Your water’s almost over.” As Mandy finished she heard the girl telling some of the people in the tubs to hurry.

“Maywell has only one bus into New York,” Robin said as he dried himself with a huge, rough towel. “If we miss it we miss work. So we do our ritual sweats in the evening. This is just your ordinary garden-variety communal bath.” Saying that, he got into one of the big tubs. Mandy followed, slipping down into the delicious water. The other soakers were just getting out, and she and Robin soon had the tub to themselves.

“What do you people do in New York? My impression was that you were

living out here in isolation, fanning and things like that.”

“We’ve got a great farm. But people have jobs, too. Careers. Some of us don’t choose to give them up.

In addition to this, our economy isn’t completely internalized. We have to go outside for a few things.”

“You mean matches—”

“We don’t need matches. We use rushes and waxed tapers and take from fire to fire.”

“Candles, kerosene?”

“I doubt if the whole Covenstead uses ten gallons of kerosene in a year. Wax comes from our own bees.

We have fine hives, and Selena Martin is an outstanding mistress of bees.”

“Medicine, then. Surgery. Advanced diagnostics.”

The attendant interrupted. “I’m going to damp back the fire now. It’s past time and you have your bus, Robin.”

Robin only nodded. “Would you believe me if I told you that modern medicine is to some extent an addiction. The more you rely on it, the more you need it. When we get sick, really sick, the medical team goes to work. We use herbal remedies extensively and effectively. As far as diagnostics are concerned, Constance is extraordinary. And she can heal, too. When a witch chooses death, the whole Covenstead celebrates. It is sad to be saying good-bye, but we’re also happy for the dying witch. You will learn about the Land of Summer, where we believe we go to await rebirth. Witches do not deny death. For us a death is as rich and joyous an occasion as a birth or a marriage.”

“I always think of it as a tragedy.”

“That’s just a cultural habit. Death is just another stage of life, perhaps the fullest, best stage.”

“But what if somebody—some female witch—is dying in abject agony from breast cancer? What then?

Do you dance and sing?”

His eyes filmed for a moment, then cleared. “A hard death is a blessing also. Anyway, we have powerful drugs for pain, not to mention hypnosis. All of that is Connie’s province. I don’t know much about it.”

“What is she, beyond leader?”

“Oh, she’s not a leader at all. Connie is much closer to being a mother than a ruler. She’s where you go when you have need—advice, encouragement,

medicine, whatever your need is, she is there for you.”

So that was to be her own role. Life was turning, Connie had grown old. “She wants me to be her assistant. That’s why they call me Maiden.”

“She has no assistant. She is Crone. Once she was Maiden. As she matured, the character of the Covenstead changed. When she was Maiden, things were much wilder, more intense. Then in her Motherhood we were builders, knitters, carpenters. Now she is Crone, and we are a contemplative Covenstead. When she passes—” He stopped suddenly, and she held out her hand to him. “I’m sorry.

She will die, or she would not have brought you here to be initiated. You will never be anybody’s assistant. When you are Maiden, we will belong to your will and your will only, just as we belong to Connie now.” He raised his head, smiled. “You will not rule us, though. We rule ourselves, each one of us. The only hierarchy of the Covenstead is that of heart and hearth.”

“Robin, this is just fascinating. But I have to admit that the water’s getting awfully cold.”

“Yeah, that’s a fact. Maybe we’d better go for breakfast, assuming Ivy’s saved anything for us.”

On the way back to the cottage they passed women and men hurrying off in the direction of the main house. They carried briefcases, wore topcoats, even some hats. Others had gathered into a work gang and were marching toward the fields. These wore plain homespun trousers and jerkins, men and women alike.

“What about taxes?” Mandy asked suddenly. “And those suits and ties. Surely you didn’t weave those.”

“The suits are bought. As far as taxes are concerned, the IRS knows where we are, and we pay our taxes. You have trouble writing off Bell, Book, and Candle as a business expense, though, so don’t even think about it.”

“It’s been tried?”

He looked at her, his face expressionless. “It’s been tried. Many of our priestesses and priests are recognized by the IRS as clergy. At least they were, until this year.”

“What happened this year?”

“Senator Stennis happened. He tacked an amendment on the Postal Appropriations Bill forbidding the IRS to grant tax exemptions to people who practice witchcraft.”

“What! That’s government interference in religion.”

“Fundamentalist Christians are not interested in preserving the Bill of Rights when it comes to people who disagree with their religious beliefs. The amendment passed by voice vote. Senators were afraid to go on record as supporting witchcraft.”

This cold wind from the outside world made Mandy remember her own dream life, the intense vision—almost a hallucination—of being burned to death.

She was to become responsible for these people. Would there come a time when the senators and the fundamentalist preachers would gain power in America and the flames would rise again? She knew already that she loved the Covenstead and wanted it to persist. If she had to burn she would, to ensure its survival. She would do whatever she had to for them, and in the end she was sure she would defeat people like the fundamentalists, whose very lives seemed to imply the existence of real evil in the world. If there was a Satan, Mandy thought, fundamentalist Christianity was one of his central means of capturing souls. They prayed to Jesus but did the work of their demon hearts, burning books, trampling the rights of others, spitting on America’s noble and ancient tradition of tolerance. She thought of Brother Pierce, of his kind, sad eyes. There was a man in service to evil, and not a bad man, either. A trapped man. And the sadness in his eyes told her that he knew the truth of his false religion. How different it was from the ever-opening flower that is the true spirit of Christianity.

As they walked through the Covenstead, Mandy noticed as much as she could, trying to form true impressions of this society. If she was to be their Maiden, she had an enormous amount of homework to do.

The village was different from every other place she had ever experienced. The very air seemed different.

There was no subtle message of oppression here in the way men strode and women walked. Rather, there was a sort of disciplined openness that was hard to characterize. Women managed it, she knew that. But there was no sense that one of the sexes had been overpowered by the other. The irritant of sexual politics had been subdued.

The moment they reentered Ivy’s cottage this impression strengthened. The almost indefinable sense of possession rested somewhere between Yellowjacket and Ivy. Although it flowed out of her, it stifled neither of them.

Robin was on his way to the kettle when Ivy handed him a chunk of bread

and a slice of cheese. “Drink some yogurt and you’re off,” she said. “There’s no time.”

“I’m not so sure I’m going. My feet are a mess.” He poured thick, brown liquid from the pitcher into a cup, drank it down, and took his bread and cheese. Yellowjacket got up to leave. “Good-bye, Ivy, and thank you. Good-bye, Amanda.”

He and Ivy kissed at the door. “Lawyers turn her on,” Robin whispered. “She’s no fool. Utopian communities may disintegrate, but law degrees last for life.”

“You’re not a very convincing cynic, Robin.” She kissed him, a pert, shy little kiss that surprised her almost as much as it did him. It was not love that made her do it. It would be most accurate to say that she felt poetry for Robin. She watched him eating, his long hands working the utensils, his rough homespun sweater revealing his strength. She had made love to that man last night.

Or had she? No, she had made love with the Holly King. And that was the difference between them: he was the Holly King only in the dark, on the Wild Hunt. But she was always Amanda.

“Let me look at those feet, brother.” Ivy knelt before him.

“The right one’s the worst.”

“I can see that. Broken blisters.” She felt the lesions. “Fortunately the puncture wounds are from thorns, not nails. But just to be safe I think you’d better get Dr. Forbes to give you a tetanus shot before he goes to town.”

“How delightful.”

Amanda was interested to hear this exchange. “Who’s Dr. Forbes?”

“A witch,” Robin said. “His witch name is Periwinkle Star, which is why we ail still call him Dr. Forbes.

He does all our vaccinations and immunizations and such. I think I forgot to mention him because I don’t like shots.”

“I’ll make up an arnica salve for you when you come back,” Ivy said. “But you’d better be prepared to show me your needle mark.”

Looking disconsolate, Robin left the cottage—

“He’ll be fine in a couple of hours,” Ivy said, banging about in the kitchen. “As soon as he’s sure he’s missed the bus to the city, he’s probably going to improve tremendously.” She regarded Mandy. “I’ve got bacon,” she said.

“It’s from a village hog, and it’s great. We’re very proud of it.”

“Bacon?”

“Thick bacon. Don’t you like bacon?”

“I do, but somehow I formed the impression that this place was vegetarian.”

“Some of us are. But *I’m* not, and I didn’t think you were. Plus, you’re eating like you’re really hungry. I think you can use the protein.” She commenced serving. Mandy moved to help, but Ivy wouldn’t let her.

“You’re practically Maiden of the Covenstead. Let me express my respect by serving table, if you don’t find it too uncomfortable.”

Her first impulse was to say that she did feel uncomfortable, but the truth was different. Deep inside herself, the position they were putting her in seemed very right.

She worried, though. The challenges of the past two days had made her aware of a passivity in her personality she hadn’t even known was there. By thrusting her into one incredibly difficult situation after another Constance and the witches had shown her how rarely she really took charge of her own life, and how good at it she was when she did. The trouble was, she had seen the passivity, but she had not surmounted it, not completely. If she was to take responsibility for all of these people and their remarkable way of life—especially during a time of persecution—she had to reach deep into herself and transform the passive into the strong.

She had spent her life placing herself in situations and waiting for things to happen, and that was not enough. Now she was to be Maiden of the Covenstead. Not President or Queen, but Maiden. To her it was a beautiful word. Not as cold as “crone” or as warm as “mother.” Maiden. It had a suggestion of home in it, but also another element, one that was fierce.

Maiden was a word of both love and power. She remembered herself on the hunt, how she had screamed.

Maiden meant woman’s softness. It meant tentative beginnings. But there was also the connotation of the Maid of Orleans, and Athene the Maiden of Battle, and the Maiden Huntress Diana. The Maiden, singing softly, seated on a creekside stone... the Maiden astride Raven, galloping to the battles of the night. It was a long, long time ago that women had such a role in this man’s world. She remembered reading a hymn to Ishtar, written at the dawn of time:

Ruler of weapons, arbitress of the battle
Framer of all decrees, wearer of the crown of dominion,
Thou merciful Maiden...

She sat down to the meal Ivy was making for her. Alone in her own place Ivy exuded loving decency.

The bitch of the maze was no more. In fact the whole incident—everything that had happened to Mandy on the Collier estate—was obviously part of this great testing of her spirit. The choreography of it all was subtle but not invisible. She knew the object: to help her find her strength and live from it so that she could be Maiden.

“I’ve got to get out to the farm,” Ivy said as she laid a plate of brown bacon before Mandy. “We’re harvesting pumpkins.” She laughed. “The Vine Coven is going to be making a *lot* of pumpkin pies and pumpkin bread and pumpkin soup this year. We’ve got a great crop.”

“The farm is organized according to covens?”

“There are three farmer covens, one shepherd, and one husbandry. The others are all more generalized.”

“What are their names?”

“Well—we’re Vine. And there’s Demeter. They do the grains. And Rowan does the orchard and stuff.

Hard labor is Rock Coven, lo is the husbandry coven. They raised the hog that gave the bacon that’s in your mouth. His name was Hiram, by the way. He was a very friendly guy. He used to root in the kids’ pockets.” Mandy stopped chewing. ” ‘Who eats flesh must do it with conscience, otherwise the weight of death will enter your blood.’ Constance always says that when she sees us eating meat.”

Slowly Mandy began to chew again. This time the bacon tasted very different, much richer and more succulent. The hog had given its life. Its sacrifice was somehow present in the meat and could be tasted by a sensitive palate. All of her life she had eaten meat and never thought twice about the suffering that went into providing it. Never before had she thought to honor the animals who gave their lives for her.

There was something strange here, strange and terrifying, that seemed to hover at the edge of consciousness. Mandy was afraid, and ate no more bacon.

Ivy continued. “Besides those of us in the covens, there are people like you who haven’t been initiated into the Covenstead yet, or taken into a specific coven. They—not you—are sort of outsiders. They live in the two end cottages.”

Mandy smiled. “You’ve told me more about the organization of this place than anybody else.”

“Well, since you captured the Holly King—”

“I’ve passed muster?”

Ivy smiled. “Let’s say that Connie’s very pleased with your progress.” Her cheeks colored. “The rest of us, to tell you the truth, are awed.” Her face became grave. “What was the *Leannan* like?” she asked in a low voice.

“Very small. Pale, blond. Her eyes were dark, almost the color of sandalwood. She was beautiful, but not in a simple way. Her face was gay and sort of light—that’s the best way I can describe it. But it was also very *aware*. It was the loveliest face I’ve ever seen. Also somehow the most dangerous.”

Ivy stared a long time into Mandy’s eyes. “What a wonderful experience that must have been. I’d give a great deal to see the *Leannan*.”

Mandy could only nod. It was not easy to talk about the *Leannan*. Sometimes she seemed like a memory, then like a dream. Ivy began to clatter in a chest. “I’ve really got to mix Robin’s salve and go.

Please make use of my house. And if you want to, you can handle my tools. In fact, it’d be a privilege if you did.”

“Your tools?”

She gestured toward the hearth. “My witch things. Just don’t touch the drying herbs. Connie’ll be furious with me if I don’t pass my herbals exam this term.” A silence fell between them. Ivy looked at Mandy with the very plainest sorrow in her eyes. She continued, but with effort. “It’s really a good day for harvest. We needed that. Grasshopper counted over four hundred good pumpkins!” She busied herself at her hearth for a few minutes, crushing dried herbs in a mortar, then mixing them with purified fat. She left the salve with a note for Robin, and an admonition for him to get out into the fields since he wasn’t going to New York. “His feet aren’t that bad. And we need the help.” Then she was gone, the door closing behind her with a creak and a decisive click.

Mandy stood in the middle of the compact room. Deep silence settled. Soon the smell of the bacon made her forget her misgivings about eating Hiram, and she sat down again. She was in a state of great sensitivity. Her whole body was tingling with life. Her senses were pretemporarily acute. She noticed, for example, that she could actually hear herself eating. Her jaws creaked, her teeth ground, her lips smacked. They were not unpleasant

sounds. She also began to notice, very faintly, the music of a harp mingling with her own sounds. Maybe it was next door, maybe farther away. She couldn't tell. But it was sweetly done, a tune that reminded her of a thousand tunes, of moments and days that were lost.

Normally Mandy did not think much about her past. Life had been too hard to dwell upon. Nobody in the family had cared about her or been interested in her desire to be an artist. She was an encumbrance to her mother and father, an interruption in the titanic duel that defined their marriage.

One hot afternoon when she was seventeen she had seen some framed canvases tucked away in the garage rafters. She had climbed up and discovered six paintings of her mother, all enormous, all profoundly awful. They managed to mix sentimentality with bad technique and ghastly color choice. In them Mother looked like a corpse with the hands and thighs of a hairless gorilla. She was a voluptuous woman, but not coarse.

The fact that the paintings were by her father had revealed a lot to Mandy, crouching up there in the dust, a secret witness to his failure. Their ignoring of their daughter's talent wasn't a side effect of a failed marriage, it was purposeful.

She had left that attic furious at her parents for their tragic self-absorption and their indifference to their own child. She became sullen and hostile, then openly rebellious. There were blows, and Mandy had screamed out her contempt for the hidden paintings. Dad had wept then, and Mother had crept away, her cheeks blazing. It was not until some time later that Mandy understood what had been behind their reactions. They thought of the paintings as a sort of personal pornography, but they did not destroy them because they were their only link to the time when their marriage had been good. Not long after that Mandy moved to New York.

She finished her meal and got up from the table. The harp had faded, and with it her painful memories of the past. They had been teaching memories, though. She saw that she should have been more compassionate toward her parents. It was too late now, though.

She didn't know quite what to do with herself. Should she explore the village? Could she? And what of the library up at the main house—what did it contain?

Before she left, she stopped to look at Ivy's ritual tools, which were lying on a piece of white linen on the mantelpiece. Chief among them were a long silver sword and a shorter knife, hooked at the end. There was red cord neatly

wound, and a small cauldron. Mandy could see things in it, but she did not know what they were and she dared not reach in and touch them.

“It’s a fine cauldron.”

“Constance!”

“Good morning, dear. I brought you some clean things.”

Constance strode into the middle of the cottage and put a bundle on the rough table. Mandy unwrapped the clothes.

They were beautiful—a cream-colored silk blouse, a tweed suit, hose, Gucci shoes. A small makeup kit completed the package. “Constance, these clothes—what’s it all about?”

“You should dress your part. You’re a princess now, to half the people of Maywell. Soon you’ll be their queen.”

“Maiden, I thought it was called.”

“That’s the first turn of the cycle. Maiden, then Mother, then Crone. I am, obviously. Crone. And I’m at the end of my time.”

“Constance, you’re healthier than most women half your age.”

“Don’t you patronize me, girl. When a woman in my position says she’s near death, you accept it. As a matter of fact, you don’t have much time before I go across. Now, don’t stand there like a scarecrow.

Dress!”

“I can’t wear these things—I’m on a farm.”

“You’ll be going down to the town this morning.”

Mandy dressed. There was even perfume in the makeup kit. Norell. Constance did everything right.

“Why am I going to town?”

“You’ll see.”

Mandy would have none of that, not anymore. “I am not as passive as you think, Constance. So far you’ve done pretty much what you wanted with me. But I’m afraid from now on I’m going to need reasons before I agree. I could have gotten my head blown off last night.”

Constance shrugged. “You want to be Maiden of this Covenstead, don’t you?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Certainly. Fail one of the tests and you won’t inherit your birthright.”

“What would happen to me if I did fail? For example, say I hadn’t found the Holly King last night.”

“Oh, you were going to find the Holly King no matter what, as long as you

stayed alive. In these tests the only way you can fail is to get yourself killed. So if you'd been shot dead instead of my horse—”

“My God. Do you mean to tell me that the purpose of all this is to see if I can stay alive? Oh, Constance, that's awful. It's downright immoral. I won't do any more. I quit.”

“No, not you. You've got too much determination, my little warrior. You'll see it through. All your instincts make you want to protect the Covenstead. I know, I'm the same type as you.”

“Constance, this is absolutely crazy. I won't hear of it. I won't!”

“Don't you ever call me crazy, you little whelp. If you had any idea how hard this is for me—what sacrifices have *really* been made for you—you would go down on your knees to thank me.”

“So tell me! Why *should* I thank you for trying to get me killed. I'd very much like to know.”

“Oh, what force you have. Reading your history, I've wondered what you were like.”

“Don't try to change the subject. I want to know, and I want to know now.”

“Well, what you really want to know is why you should risk your life. You cannot love the Covenstead like I do, more than your own life. You hardly know the Covenstead. But you will come to love it exactly as I do.”

“I can see that.”

“You must prepare yourself.”

“I know. Find my inner strength so that I can rule. I've understood that. It seems to me that I've also done it.”

She looked Mandy up and down. “Yes, perhaps so. You did well with the *Leannan* and with the Holly King. In the sense that you're still alive.”

“The *Leannan*... the fact that she exists is what I cling to. No matter how I feel, that tells me something about this is very real and very important.”

“Oh, little creature, how innocent you are. I suppose there's still enough arrogance left in me to make it impossible for me to see how anyone could take my place. Then I see the fire in you, and I think: you can do it. And I'll tell you something. You're going to have a terribly difficult reign. There will be persecution of witches, environmental disaster, perhaps even a world war that will burn us along with the rest. But somehow, if you survive the initiation, I think I agree with the *Leannan Sidhe*. You are well chosen.”

“I guess I'm complaining because I'm not used to this constant sense of

jeopardy. I sort of see the need, but still, haven't I proved myself yet?"

"Do you know the story of Persephone in Hades?"

"Of course."

"You haven't proved yourself until you have gone to the world of the dead and returned to tell the tale.

And I won't say another word about it, except that a young woman—not a very good witch, but a witch—died for you yesterday, and I want you to respect her memory and not be such a complainer."

"Died for me? In the Wild Hunt?"

"Before that. In an entirely different part of the process, one that relates to the Great Test."

"I wish you wouldn't be so damned cryptic."

"You haven't complained before. If that woman's death is to have any meaning, don't complain now. And don't overdo that eye shadow. The Vamp look went out some time ago."

"I wish I was in control!"

"The only one in control around here is the *Leannan*. She knows something about you of which you're totally unaware. The *Leannan* knows who you really are."

"I'm me. That's the long and short of it."

"You're an ancient and very powerful witch."

Those words seemed to explode in Mandy's brain like a white slash of lightning. She cringed, such was the power of this fiery internal bolt of recognition.

Constance continued. "You're terrified of your own history. That's part of what makes you such a passenger in your life. You will drift until you begin to do what you were born to do."

"You say the *Leannan* is in control. She's like a ghost. We hardly see her, let alone talk to her. Most of them have never seen her."

"She's not fifty feet away from this spot. She's even played her harp for you. Haven't you heard?"

"The music was very nice."

Constance snorted. "It was designed to evoke conscience, and it did. You learned from it. Now, listen, you must act. You must begin now, immediately. Show yourself in the town. The town covens need a boost of morale."

"Who's my armed guard?"

“You can’t use a guard.”

“How about Raven? *He* could have used one.”

“Let’s go up to the house. Your car’s there and you’re due at your uncle’s within the hour.”

“At my—since when? I don’t want to go to my uncle’s. Has that ever occurred to you?”

“You’ve got canvases and frames and paints there. Clothes. Books. You need to pick them up.”

“I don’t want to leave here. If I’m so important, I must be able to make a few decisions. And my decision is, I’m staying right here on the Covenstead.”

“The prospect of Maidenhood is making you imperious, Amanda. I’m not sure I like you imperious.”

“Then don’t come in here and order me around. I’ve had more than my share of terrifying and difficult experiences orchestrated by you, and I have no intention of having any more.”

“What possible terror could your uncle hold for you?”

“I just don’t want to deal with him. He’s disturbed, and he’s not going to become my problem.”

“After what happened to Raven last night, and the business of the young woman, I just want you to give the town covens a morale boost.”

“Why don’t you go?”

“You’re the one they’re excited about.”

“How can you be sure of that? My impression is that I’m quite the outsider.”

Constance looked a long time at her. “You were born to your role.”

“You hardly know me.”

“You say that! You’re naked in your work, dear girl. I know you from your painting. And I *know* that your visual skill is more than ordinary, or even extraordinary. It’s almost unique.”

“I’m not that good.”

“As a painter, no. There is something inherently banal about fantasies of elves and such, I’ll grant you that.

But the detail with which you render them, the depth of vision, suggests an imagination of great power. I know, I’ve spent time over your work.”

“So have I.”

“The *Leannan* says you have the birthright and I say you have the power.

If you can visualize, you can do magic, which is a matter of making the real world run parallel to the inner one of images and dreams. You have the strength to visit the House of the Godfather and come back. I did it, and I am less than you.”

Visit the House of the Godfather?

In the story Constance had told the children the other night, the Godfather was death.

The visit to me town suddenly seemed even more dangerous.

She wished she could just be left alone to wander around and learn more about the Covenstead, maybe even do a little painting. Some portraits of the witches, sketches of Ravens before the memory grew too static.

Constance looked straight into her eyes. “That, my dear, is not your fate. The days of painting and dreaming are behind you. You have a great work to do.”

What could Mandy say? Constance had just read her mind. “What are you, Constance?”

“You’ve asked me that before.”

“What are you?”

“The best friend you ever had!” Her voice rang through the cottage. In the silence that followed the harp started again. This time the tune turned Mandy’s heart, for she had not heard it since she was very small.

Sweet and low, sweet and low,
Wind of the western sea.
Low, low, breathe and blow,
Wind of the western sea...

The harp notes were from a small instrument, plucked by fingers able to touch the strings with great precision. Behind the gravity of Constance’s expression was hidden a smile. “The Leannan wants you to go, Amanda.”

The music, Constance’s loving expression, Mandy’s memories, all combined to create a moment of great beauty. Mandy found that she had not the heart to refuse them what they asked.

“Your uncle needs you now. Help him. He is your father’s brother, after all.”

Her father’s brother. Maybe in another age that would have meant a lot. The harp whispered, the harp sang.

Mandy dressed in the clothes. Constance embraced her and kissed her, and wished her well. "Blessed be," Constance whispered.

Mandy started on her journey.

Chapter 17

High morning was relentlessly bright, with water and melting snow sparkling off every twig and tuft of grass. Amanda guided her little Volks along, aware of the expensive crinkle of her suit and the creamy scent of her perfume.

She understood that she was entering the world of death and that there was great and ancient precedent for her journey. In the passage of the seasons Persephone moves through the netherworld to return to life in the spring. She is the corn seed hiding in the winter field, springing up alive again in the summer, giving humankind nourishment and prosperity.

Amanda was to make Persephone's passage, and she was to do it now, dressed as if for a sacrifice.

Constance had obviously walked death's edge herself when Hobbes shot her. Among ancient cultures everywhere: the Indians, many African tribes, the peoples of Siberia—wherever the old religion persisted—it was necessary to make this journey in order to become a guide for others.

The Volks hummed on. Nice of them to pull it out of the mud for her. Nice of them to tell her how to leave the estate by car. She was supposed to follow an almost hidden track through the hummocks and northward into the farm.

It was eerie in among the sharp little hills, especially considering how old they were and what they were said to contain. What must the fairy city have been? Were there silver towers, or painted gates, or pearl-white roofs sweltering under the prehistoric sky? Or had the fairy come from some far place, from the stars, even recently?

Did their ancient cities exist only in the minds of their human followers? Somehow she thought they lived in structures very much like the round meeting hall of the witches. Theirs was a whole civilization of magic, based on the simplest of goods. Their glories were those of thought unbound.

To them the mind of man was easy to control. Thus the *Leannan* could seem to change her shape or even become invisible.

The fairy would never emerge, though, into this world, not as it was, a place of illusions. They would do no more than watch from their far hills and their flights in the sky.

The goal of the witches was to create a world where even fairy could be understood, which meant one where men no longer thought of the earth as

something separate from themselves, but viewed humanity as one organ in the living body of the planet, and could see the universe all in its truth, without the self-deception that the human species was separate from the deeper continuity of the planet to which it belonged.

The *Leannan* was without question the loveliest form Amanda had ever seen or imagined. She almost wept to remember the music of that tiny, perfect harp, to imagine those fingers working the golden whiskers.

Just in time she downshifted to compensate for a length of muddy sand, and found herself out of the valley of the hummocks and on the witch farm.

Riding through it last night, she had known that it was fertile, but by day the fecundity of the place was startling.

There were no tractors rattling here, and the air smelled of the sweat of the plants, not the sharp odors of fertilizer and insecticide.

The scent was an intoxication, pouring in her open windows as she drove along the narrow road between rows of corn. It was mixed of wet hay and cut stems and the rot of the season. Among the fallen stalks and the brown vines the farming covens worked. Amanda came to a group of women laboring with scythes in wheat. They moved along the roadside, their tools whistling in the air, the stalks falling with a hiss and a swish, and the rattle of the wheat berries dropping onto canvas. They chanted as they worked:

“Where have you gone, John Barleycorn,
Where have you gone, John Barley?”

“I’ve gone to the fields where the stalks are grown,
You’ll find me in the fields, John Barley.”

The chant was whispered, as if to the stalks themselves. Rapture moved in the faces of the reapers as the wheat fell. Nearby a group of children rolled and laughed in the stalks, and three men bundled hay.

Never before had Amanda had such an impression of how very old some human things have become.

Mankind has been fanning for a long time now. She did not sense the presence of actual deities in these fields, but the mystery and the energy of the old gods seemed very real indeed. Demeter was the Goddess Earth, also called Gaia, known among Catholics as the Blessed Virgin Mary. Out of her rich belly her daughter Persephone emerged, escaping from Hades. Among

the Romans Persephone's name was Proserpina, and she was the goddess of health and well-being, as well as death.

Amanda had to learn what Proserpina knew. That knowledge was to be found in the world of the dead.

With it she could bring prosperity to the Covenstead.

There were chants going among many of the teams, the round voices of the workers harmonizing with the roar of insects and the bright calling of the children. As Amanda drove carefully along, she became conscious of how rich life in fields really was. How was it that such magic had been forgotten?

Where is mankind going, that we would choose to leave farms such as this behind? Too much of the joy of working with the earth has been sacrificed. No prayer is needed to assist the fertilized plantings of Iowa and Kansas and California, but without prayer we are less human than we were, and our farms are less alive, our food less true to the needs of our flesh.

And yet, our flight from the magical and the prayerful was not without sense: there was terror somewhere here, beneath the swelling light of the sun.

"Hello, Amanda!" A tall woman held a huge pumpkin aloft, her figure tiny in the sweep of the land.

Amanda waved from her window and tooted her horn. The woman, though, had put down the pumpkin and was running across the field. Amanda was stunned to recognize Kate, George's former wife. She stopped the car and got out.

"Amanda, look at you, "Now you've grown!"

She embraced Kate, whose hair had gone gray, but whose face was radiant, flushed with sunshine and work. She wore a loose homespun dress tied by a black cord. On her feet were thong sandals wrapped to her ankles. In her hair was a silver pin of the quarter moon.

"Kate, I didn't realize that you'd come here."

"We all did. George became impossible."

Amanda nodded.

"Constance has told us many times about the coming of the Maiden, but I had no idea that it was you.

When I heard your name I thought, is it possible? Then I saw you. Our Amanda. I just can't believe it."

Silence fell. There was obviously something else on Kate's mind. She was still smiling, but there was pain in the smile.

"I spent a night at your house," Amanda said. "I'm going there now to pick

up my things.”

“You’ve seen him? Constance won’t let him on the estate anymore. Is he well? Or is that the right question?”

George was certainly not well. “You’re forbidden to see him?”

“God, no. Connie doesn’t do that sort of thing. Afraid to see him. Amanda, something happened to him, something dark that has to do with Constance. Don’t think she’s all sweetness and light. She isn’t! She drew him into an involvement with death. She saw things about him that made him become obsessed. It was like death entered the house. We were in one of the Kominski covens. We were so happy. It was new and it was fun. Then George started these sessions up at the estate with Constance. The next thing I knew, he had started that series of experiments, trying to kill things and bring them back to life.”

Suddenly she stopped, looked around. “Let’s continue this in the car.” Amanda followed her in. They rolled up the windows. “I think Constance did something to his mind. He changed. All of a sudden he wanted a ritual chamber in the basement.”

“The Kitten Kate Room?”

“God, yes! It was so crazy. What in the world do cats have to do with it? He went in there and performed acts of self-abuse. He injured himself with candles. I trusted Constance and I sent him to her, and he got even worse! His work came to dominate his life. He’d spend literally days in that lab with that awful girl, Bonnie Haver, a tramp and a drug addict.”

“Bonnie Haver? You mean the one from Our Lady?”

“Yeah, you must have been in the same class, or close to it.”

“I remember her. She was involved in a horrible scandal. More than one horrible scandal.”

“She’s no better now than she was then! She had a terrible effect on George. The more he saw of her, the more time he spent in that hideous, demented room. My God, Amanda, I could smell the burning skin. It was hideous, hideous!” She slammed her hand against the dashboard. She was crying too hard to go on.

There was certainly a dark side to Constance. Dark and subtle.

The words of what had once been a favorite poem of hers came to mind.

I am the mower Damon, known
Through all the meadows I have mown.

For a moment she could see him, huge and dark, straddling the fields with his great scythe like a fiery ray of sun. I am the Godfather Damon.

“He was such a brilliant man. Now he’s crazy.” Known in all the meadows

Snick. Snick. Snick. Down go the stalks. To his cool cave descending... All the meadows he has mown. “Why did you come here?”

“I wanted to, I was desperate to live here. So were the kids! Poor George—it’s terrible what’s happened to him, but still, I love the Covenstead.”

“Have you confronted Constance?”

“Of course! She listened, then she embraced me and sent me on my way. End of story. Amanda, they’re all saying that you’re going to be Maiden of the Covenstead. Please, if you are, remember what I’ve suffered. My husband has been destroyed for some scheme of Constance’s.”

“I’ll remember, Kate. And I will make Constance tell me what it’s all about as soon as I get back from town.”

Kate kissed her cheek. Her eyes were big with sorrow. “I want my husband,” she said. Then she went back to her work.

Driving along, Amanda had the sense that something larger and darker even than she had thought was occurring. The trouble with this play was that the actors were not allowed to know the plot. Thus they were not actors at all, but puppets. She didn’t like being a puppet, not in such a fierce and dangerous mystery.

By the time she began passing the vegetable patches she was trembling. The warm, pellucid air was pearl-white with haze from the rapid snow melt. She sensed the close presence of a terrible contrivance of magic, terrible and beautiful, as sweet as light, yet so very dangerous. She recalled the *Leannan*’s guards, with their rat teeth. The *Leannan*, too, must have such teeth. Were they evolved from rodents, the fairy, as we are from apes, or had they come to earth from another planet? And Constance—what did she really know, and what did she really intend to accomplish?

She thought, as she rounded the last quick turn in the road, that she heard a horse galloping. Just here she had cried out for the sheer exhilaration of it, upon Raven’s back, when they were flying together. Oh, horse.

The border of the estate was marked by a neglected wire fence, a few posts, and a faded sign warning against trespass. There were blackberry thickets full of human laughter—the gay laughter of men picking berries

together, and from the sound having a good time of it.

Then she crossed a rickety wooden bridge into the outside world. Beyond a mowed field mere was a row of shuttered houses. She remembered their lights darkening down last night, the cloaked people running out, the excited voices, the rustle of feet in dry grass, the snapping hiss of quick-drawn breath.

They had touched her for luck as she rode by.

The road went from gravel to asphalt as it passed through the field. Then there was a yellowed wooden sign: Corn Row. Beyond that was a brick street, neatly curbed, overhung by nearly bare trees. There were tall houses set along either side, fanciful Victorians with curved porches and towers and widow's watches edged by gingerbread. A man with a cap pulled low over his face peered at her from one of the yards. He had something fat and green in his hand. His face was rigid.

As she picked up speed, she saw him lean far back, raise his arm, and throw the thing. She jammed on the accelerator. The car roared, and at the same moment what he had thrown hit the roof with a thud and a splash.

She turned on two wheels to Bridge Street. Her car filled with the reek of gasoline. She thought, no, no, not that, they mustn't set me on fire! More than anything she hated fire. The idea of being consumed by it haunted her nightmares. She prepared to stop and jump.

For whatever reason the gasoline bomb did not ignite. As she picked up speed again, she saw in her rearview mirror the man dash across the street.

They must wait there, she thought, just at the edge of the estate, for anyone who dares to come out. No wonder the nearby witches' houses were shuttered during the day. They must be under virtual siege for their beliefs.

As she proceeded down Bridge Street toward The Lanes, the peaceful life of the town surrounded her.

A blue delivery truck from Hiscott's Drugstore went past, followed by a small school bus full of kids. It turned onto Main Street, heading for the red brick school which took up one side of Church Row. In the distance bells rang. Early yet: 8:30.

Under the larger trees the melt fell like rain, and Amanda had to turn on her windshield wipers. The stink of the gasoline slowly faded. Amanda kept her speed high; she felt dreadfully exposed in the streets of this town. There was a strong temptation to turn around and go back to the estate. But she could not.

She did not understand the whole of what she was to do in the town, but she intended to follow Constance's instructions. Deep within herself, she sensed that she understood very well what she was doing, even though her conscious mind refused to recognize the sense of it.

Her plan was to go to George's house, get her things, and get out as quickly as possible. If that was all that happened, then the visit could be seen as a further test of courage. Maybe the man with the gasoline bomb was really a follower of Constance's. Perhaps that's why the bomb didn't ignite.

"The essence of initiation," Constance had said, "is the confrontation with the Godfather. To lead people in the ways of the hidden world, we must know death."

The shadow of the mower seemed to darken the whole town, Damon in the field of souls. Constance had said that Amanda did not love the Covenstead as much as her own life. But she was here, allowing herself to be acted upon by Constance, delivering herself to whatever new danger her teacher had devised.

The mower mowed, his scythe whistling.

She came to the corner of Maple Lane and turned left. Leaves cluttered George's lawn. No curtains blocked the windows of his house, which were black from the darkness within. His Volvo stood in the driveway. Amanda pulled in beside it, turned off her car, and set the brake. With the shrubs mostly bare the Volks could be seen all the way to the end of the street. It would not take somebody with a gasoline bomb long to discover where she had gone.

She ran a finger through the oily film on the roof of her car.

The house was silent. She went up to the front door, tried the handle. The door swung open.

The front hall was dark, the living room off to the left empty. She went in, intending to cross the dining room and see if George was in the back.

Halfway to the bedroom she heard Jane Pauley talking about French green beans. George was in the kitchen huddled over the little portable TV, absently stuffing Fritos in his mouth. An R.C. cola stood open on the counter beside him.

"George?"

"Oh, Good Lord, Amanda! You scared the hell out of me!" His smile was stiff on his face and he seemed very tired. "I assumed you had gone to live on the estate."

“I do think it would be more convenient for me to stay there. I’ll be doing all my work there.”

His eyes had gone all alight. The suddenness of his movements suggested nothing so much as stifled rage.

“The estate is really very quiet,” she said carefully.

“No, Amanda, it’s not quiet. Just last night they had a ritual. Surely you know about it. I was coming up Stone when I saw a naked girl riding a big black horse. Beautiful. She took off across the lawns before I could see her face.” He laughed, and the laughter changed to a wheezing cough.

How should she respond to him? He seemed to know nothing about her, yet he was supposed to be a witch, too. She decided to be careful. “Constance mentioned that there had been an event last night in the town.”

“Everybody from here to Morris Plains is talking about it. And you remember Brother Pierce. That beauty. He’s having a conniption. There was a run-in. Some of his people shot this girl’s horse and then got themselves mauled by a flock of trained crows over in the Wiliowbrook ruins. Oh, boy, the whole town’s going crazy! I was looking for some news on the Altoona station but they didn’t mention it. It’s a local sensation, though.”

It wasn’t like him to chatter. George had not struck her as being any more of a talker than her father, whose specialty was the long silence.

The sooner she understood the nature of this latest test, the sooner she could go back to the safety of the estate. “Never mind the town, George. I want to know how you’re doing.”

“Me? Extremely well. My experiment could hardly be going better.”

“Brother Pierce leaving you alone?”

“Your friends’ve made sure of that. He’s thoroughly preoccupied with witches now.” He smiled a little.

“You ought to see what they’ve put up in front of the Tabernacle. In a way it’s funny.”

Why was George so uneasy? Why was she so scared? “I have a question for you,” she said quickly.

“Are you my Godfather?”

“It’s been years since I thought about that. But yes, I am supposed to be responsible for your spiritual well-being.”

“So you are.” (Known in all the meadows you have mown.)

“The one and only.” He grinned.

This test was about death, all right. Her death. Constance had gone too far.

“I’ve got a lot of work to do up at the estate. I think I’ll just get my canvases and stuff—”

“Brother Pierce and his people have erected a stake in front of the Tabernacle. A stake surrounded by piles of wood. It’s a most dramatic display.”

She could still smell the gasoline fumes.

“Hardly surprising.”

“They shot that horse. Beautiful thing. I heard it. I was the first person there after the sheriff. He’s a witch, too, people say.”

Amanda remembered his fundamentalist deputy. That department must be a tense sort of place. “How horrible, to kill an animal that way.” She kept her voice as steady as she could. She had the sense that if she moved too suddenly, he was going to make a grab for her.

“I saw it. Fine animal. The poor thing didn’t die right away. I hate to hear a horse scream. Sheriff had to put it out of its misery.”

She stared into his jack-o’-lantern smile. Until now she had consoled herself that Raven hadn’t suffered.

A vision swam up of his whole end, as it had really happened:

For a few seconds he lay in silence, confused, not understanding what had happened to him. When he realized that the ground was under his side and he was no longer running, he tried to get up. That was when the pain hit, the thrumming, pounding pain that flared from his nose to his neck. When he screamed, laughter replied and a vicious kick to the muzzle. He shrieked through bloody, shattered nose bones.

He could only see out of one eye. Even so, when he could quiet himself he had looked for her.

Then he had seen the North Star. And he had begun galloping into great, snowy mountains. The sheriffs shot of mercy had sped him on—

“Amanda, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.” He made a clumsy movement toward her.

“I’m not upset. It’s just that I don’t like cruelty to animals.”

“Amanda—”

“George, I have to go now.”

He laughed sharply, then suddenly stopped “I’m nervous. Sometimes I think Maywell might be hell.”

“Maybe you have a point.” She wanted to get out of here.

“Give me your hand, darling.”

“No, George.”

“You’re my goddaughter! I want us to be friends.”

She had to play for time. “What’s troubling you, George?” As she spoke she stepped away from him.

“Troubling? Nothing at all, I’m fine.”

“You look terrible.” She took another step back. The point of the test was to go into the cave of Godfather Death and bring back something precious. She was here, and the treasure was the tools of her art.

“I’ve been working late. And I don’t eat well on my own.” He waved his bottle of cola. “Amanda, I’m awfully glad to see you.”

How could someone so pitiful be so frightening? “Take it easy, George.”

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Stay right there, George. Don’t come any closer, please.”

“Amanda, you don’t understand. I’m offering you a place in immortality.” What was this? It didn’t sound like part of the script. “Immortality! You’ll know the secret of the ages!”

“George, calm down.”

He waved his cola. Saliva flew from his mouth. “They might hate me and they might laugh at me and they might destroy my work, but they will never kill my ideas! No, my ideas will go on and on down the halls of time and in the end they will triumph.” He smiled as a marionette smiles. She saw his truth in that smile.

He had failed, totally and completely, and his failure had driven him crazy.

Her only thought now was to get away, but he had placed himself between her and the front door. She was forced to try and talk her way out. “George, get hold of yourself. If something’s wrong, you and I can sit down and discuss it like two civilized people. I can help you, George.”

“You certainly can! You’re young and strong and just the right size!”

What did he mean?

When he lunged at her, she managed to make a dash for the door.

He moved with tailored grace. His long arms came around her neck. Such was the force of his maneuver that the cola bottle slammed into a thousand pieces against the far wall.

Rape must be on his mind. Just the right size, she thought bitterly. Indeed. She might put up more of a fight than he expected.

He moved so suddenly, though, that he dragged her right off her feet.

“We’re going to the basement now.”

Oh, you idiot, don't struggle so! Everything's going to be just fine. You don't have a thing to worry about."

"You bastard! You try to rape me and I'll kick your balls off." She would, too.

"Rape? I'd never do that. I've got too much respect for women."

"Look, George, you're—slop pulling at me! Where are you trying to take me?"

"Basement, dear. My equipment's down there."

She writhed, remembering the room full of cat pictures. The lair of Hades. God, this *was* contrived. He was Hades, and he had surprised her despite her caution, just as in the old myth. He was dragging her down into the netherworld.

"Come on, quit that kicking. You're not going to get away from me."

"Let me go, George, I'm warning you!" She couldn't quite get into position to hurt him. If he got her down there, she had failed the test.

"It's a gift I'm giving you. You'll know what it is to die and come back to life Think of it, you'll *know*. You'll be famous, Amanda."

It took a few seconds for her to understand what he was planning. When she did, panic overwhelmed her and she screamed. He was about to kill her in his machine! Kill her! This was no game. Constance had literally sent her to her death.

"It's not tested! You might murder me!"

"It works perfectly. It's safe."

"Then why is it in the basement and not in your lab? George, please listen to me. You've got to get yourself together."

She was babbling and she knew it. Her body, her bones, her young blood, were panic-stricken. She exploded with effort. Twisting, contorting herself, she managed to dig her nails into his cheek. As he reared back she kicked behind her, jamming her heel again and again into his shin, tearing and pulling and twisting.

And suddenly falling free.

She stumbled to her feet and rushed to the kitchen door He was not three feet away, snarling, a flap of bloody skin dangling from his nose, plunging toward her.

Then she was through the door, running as fast as she could around the back of his Volvo, slipping in the wet grass, falling down.

He leaped on her so hard her breath whistled out of her mouth. Even so she

wriggled free of him and managed to stagger to her car. She got in, fumbling frantically with her key. Just as she jammed it into the starter his arm came snaking in the window and his fingers twined her hair.

“Immortality, you tittle beauty! You’re happy about it! Happy!”

It hurt so much when he yanked her hair that she saw flashes. But she started the car. With her last bit of strength she engaged reverse and let out the clutch.

Something pricked her shoulder. When she looked he was withdrawing a syringe. She bellowed, grabbed at her arm. “It’s just scopolamine, Amanda,” he said, his voice full of apology. “It won’t hurt you.”

She stared in horror at the shoulder. It was as if a warm tropic wave washed over her. In the distance she heard the car ticking over. Quick! You’re too slow!

She pressed the gas pedal. From far, far away there came kindly laughter. “I’ve got the key, dear I took it out. You can’t drive the car, the engine isn’t even running.”

What happened to the engine?

“Let’s go back in the house now.”

“No-o-o... no thank you...” Was that her voice? So empty, so distant.

“Come on. Right now.”

He opened the door. Then his hand was under her elbow.

“Let’s go, Amanda. We have a lot of work to do ”

She rose up out of the car even though she didn’t want to. There just didn’t seem to be any way to resist As he took her into the house she cast a sorrowful look back. Then he closed the door and began nudging her down the long hall toward the mudroom.

“Tom?”

“What’s that?”

He was in the game room, lying like a long black python along the back of the couch, his kinked tail switching, his eyes gleaming.

“Tom, help me! Tom!”

George looked around. “There’s nobody here but us, dear.” For some reason he could not see the cat.

Tom kneaded the couch and yawned.

“Please, Tom, please!”

“Be careful, honey,” George said, “you have to climb down a ladder.”

“Oh, a ladder. Please...”

“That’s it. All the way down, now. Right. You stand there. Stand still.”

She couldn’t move if she wanted to. His voice was the only command she could respond to.

“Oops, you were swaying. Did you realize that? I had to give you quite a dose of scope, honey. You’ll be out like a light within the minute. Come on, now, hurry along.”

The Kitten Kate Room again. She didn’t like the Kitten Kate Room. On the ceiling was a picture of a galaxy spiraling through eternity. Superimposed on it was a lean black cat. Black and dangerous and lovely. “Tom, help me!”

“Cross your wrists in front of you, please. Sorry I don’t have any straps, I know they’d be more comfortable. But I can’t risk you moving in your sleep and wrecking the coils. Also, when you wake up you’re going to be a tad upset, I think, so it’s better this way. Isn’t it better, dear?”

Dimly, distantly, she felt her wrists and ankles being bound, felt rope swinging round and round her body, felt the world swinging away.

She dreamed long, vague dreams of the beautiful lady of the mountain, and the Holly King and Raven, and all that new world.

And Tom... yawning while George killed her.

The first thing she saw when she was conscious again was the terrible face of the panther in the ceiling.

“Hello, Amanda. How do you feel?”

“I’ve got a headache.” She tried to move, realized she was still tied. Her confusion was complete. She was bound down tight, surrounded by shining brown ceramic devices of some kind. She tried again to move, but the ropes held fast.

“I was killed! You killed me, didn’t you?”

He put his hand on her face. “We’re going to begin the experiment now, dear. I had to let the drug wear off first. You’ve been asleep all day.”

The blackest despair covered the little sprig of hope that had started to grow in her. “No! No!”

“Not so loud, dear. These houses are close together.”

“Help! *Help me!*”

“Hush, now!”

She heard a buzz, felt the table sway. A terrible tickling swarmed in her chest, centered on her heart.

“See you in a few minutes. Toodle-oo!”

The dark took her.

Chapter 18

RED MOON

moom moom
hear my call
moom moom
speak to me

—Anselm Holto,
“Troll Chanting”

No wind passed her and she impacted nothing, but she knew she was falling. She heaved and twisted. It was excruciating to anticipate a splattering end that never came.

She screamed, but there was no sound. She called out, “Don’t kill me! George, please, please.” Her voice was dead.

So this is what it was like This—this billowing emptiness. Her body was not a body anymore. It seemed more smoke than flesh, thick and cold. But aware, and conscious and very scared. George had succeeded in killing her. Of course he’d never bring her back. If he could, he would still have a lab and official approval. She had come into the cave of Godfather Death and gotten herself killed. The final test was over, and she would never inherit the Covenstead.

She began to cringe in her falling, waiting for the shattering crunch, her ribs jamming full force into her shoulders. If terror was a creature, she was dropping down its throat.”

But she had no ribs, and there would be no impact. She was falling into nowhere, and she herself was becoming nothing.

There mumbled in her mind the ragged thought: I’m dissolving.

She didn’t think she could bear it, not falling and falling and never hitting, in absolute silence and absolute dark.

“Please, I can’t die. I’ve got to get back.”

A terrible, thin face flickered nearby, as if in response to her cry. She batted at it, a starved husk of a face with white worms for eyes. But it had delicate eyebrows and a familiar pale shape. Amanda rejected it with all the force of her soul.

“Daughter,” it said, “welcome to hell.”

“Mother! My God, what happened to you?”

The face shifted and congealed, wrinkling and collapsing on itself. “I lived,” it gargled, “I lived wrong...”

And then was gone.

“No, Mamma, no.” How horrible, how hideous, what a tragedy. She said she had lived wrong—but how wrong? What had she done?

“Mamma!”

The face reappeared, dissolving, just inches before Amanda’s eyes. The skin was sloughing off the bones, and the hair was growing long and ragged. Decay that must have taken a year in Mother’s coffin was being re-created in seconds. Amanda screamed and hit, and her blows went right through the apparition.

“Mamma, why?”

“I need this. I chose it, I must atone for my life.”

“*What?*”

“From the time you were six I hated you.”

“You didn’t hate me. Mamma! You—” But it was true, wasn’t it? Remember the hot sorrowing nights when she would not come, remember how she scorned your art, remember how she sat, as still and rigid as a wooden mother, that time Dad beat you up? “Mamma, I forgive! I forgive you!” Worms, get out of her eyes! Skin, come back! Hair, stop growing!

“We judge ourselves when we die, honey, and we are never wrong.”

“I forgive you.”

“I have to forgive myself, and that’s going to take some time.”

“You don’t deserve to suffer like this!”

“I told Mother Star of the Sea to discourage your interest in art,”

“Mamma, I know that. And she ignored you.”

“You got into the Pratt Institute. And I threw out the letter of acceptance.”

“Since then I’ve taught at Pratt two semesters. I’m beyond caring about Pratt.”

“I wanted to destroy you. I wanted to hurt you.” The face glowed as it spoke, as if with fire from inside.

“Mamma, I forgive.”

“I was jealous! You were beautiful and talented and I was—me.”
Something was moving behind her, something complicated.

“I forgive you!”

“I can’t forgive myself.”

Amanda saw it more clearly now, a huge black hulk of a thing with piercing green eyes.

When it opened its mouth, a great mewling scream filled the still air. Mamma recoiled, her rotted flesh fluttering from her brown bones, as the cat came closer. He was tremendous, but his face was familiar: there was that shredded ear—

Amanda was stunned to see him. Tom must be death or the devil or something. But he had been so cute, lapping milk and cuddling in her bed.

There came a crackling sound as he took a chunk out of Mamma’s skull. Amanda could see the brain within, as crunchy as a sponge that has been dipped in Clorox and let dry. When Tom’s long pink tongue scooped it out, Mamma made a sort of babbling sound. Then her eyes became blank.

While Amanda shrieked, her stomach twisting, her throat burning, her skin tickling with dread, Tom ate.

At last there remained not even a tuft of Mother’s rough hair.

Then Amanda saw that Tom was staring at her.

There was a new sensation involved in facing those eyes. She could actually *feel* his stare driving like wild snow into her soul, seeking every hidden crack and cranny of her being.

Was this the Last Judgment? Did a cat—no, it couldn’t be Tom, not sitting in judgment over her.

“Please—”

The eyes grew bright and fierce.

“No. No! Keep away from me!”

The mouth opened.

Down Tom’s gullet Amanda saw fires dancing, and a vast legion of tragedies, each as immense and personal as her own.

Hell was inside him.

“Who are you? Why are you after me?”

There was no answer but the oily gush of his breath and the burnt-hair stink of the cooking dead.

He was getting larger and larger, so large that she could walk into his

gaping jaws if she wished. But she didn't wish! "I'm not guilty of anything! I got murdered and I'm not going in there! I've got to get back because my life isn't over and they need me!"

At once the jaws snapped shut. Then she landed, as lightly as a feather, upon a gray and silent field. Her body felt substantial, solid. Or rather, almost solid. When she looked down she could see herself, but she had the feeling that she could have walked through a wall. She peered around her at the storm-turned line of the horizon. This was empty country. Tom curled about her legs. He looked up at her out of his little cat's eyes and seemed ready to wink.

After what she had seen, she was afraid of those eyes. Maybe they would become big and menacing once again, and those jaws would open—

He carried everlasting tragedy in his belly.

And yet he was the only other thing here, so in a way she was glad for his presence. Without looking at him she bent down and stroked him. His fur was full of electricity. "I wish you could talk. I wish you could tell me what's going on."

He didn't speak, but a gentle force turned her head. She was stunned at what she saw: the quietest, most perfect landscape of trees and green hills, blue sky flecked with white clouds, and in the shadows of the sky something wonderful that had no definite shape. It was, rather, the presence of a condition—an emotional color—as if goodness filled that air. Amanda's first love, a boy who had died in a fire, came walking toward her. "I remember you," he said, and there was something eternal in his voice. "I've been waiting for you." He opened his arms, and what flowed from him was as a fine old song.

Other voices soon joined the song, then overwhelmed it. They were soft and yet solid, chanting: "Moom moom hear our call. Moom moom hear our call..." The chant went on and on, splitting and filling the soft air of summer that caressed her.

She recognized those voices—it was Ivy and Robin and Constance and the others. "I can hear you"

Her heart almost broke: before her lay heaven, behind her life. The name the witches were calling evoked in Amanda powerful, hitherto hidden feelings. Moom! So familiar. How Moom had loved her life.

"I've got to go back. The witches need me."

Her old friend laughed very gently. "Tom guards the line between here and

life, Amanda. You can't make it past him. And nobody who goes down his throat ever comes out again."

The chant went on.

"Hey! I hear you!" It tore her soul. Despite what her dead friend had said, she turned back from heaven.

The air around her shivered and began to fade. And she knew it was doing that because she had just made a firm and unshakable decision: she was going back to life, somehow, if she could.

A cold wind sprang up. Ugly gray clouds swarmed across the sky. Her first love became a black, dancing skeleton in a bombed landscape, and replacing the song of heaven there arose a great multitude of sorrowful cries. They echoed out of the clouds like high thunder, and Amanda saw that the gray hid monstrous flying things.

Terror began to grow in her. The things in the clouds had wings and black scales and long red nails. She knew that they were demons.

Above their banshee cries there remained the chant: "Moom moom moom moom," on and on and on.

She wanted to somehow open the sky, to part those dreary gray clouds, to get through to the chanters.

Tom had returned, sullen and slinking, mewing loudly. "Tom, they're calling me back, I can hear them!

Please, Tom, tell me how to get to them! They need me! Oh, God, I can feel how bad they need me!"

She ran, she jumped, she clawed the air. When she scrambled up the gnarled remnant of a tree, she could hear the sucking eagerness of the demons in the clouds.

How absurd, she thought, to have chosen this. Nobody ever came back from the dead, not with all of hell barring the way. The dark once entered...

Guardian: a great maroon scorpion with the blue-eyed face of a little girl.

Guardian: a white bird that warbled lies.

Guardian: something that once had been a nun. Mother Star of the Sea.

Amanda hadn't thought of her since sixth grade.

Tom spoke, a fierce, rasping voice in her head. "They are death's soldiers, the demons."

"Then death is evil."

"Death is death, neither good nor bad. It's just there."

She ran. It was brutal, simple instinct, the reaction of the monkey to the

slinking panther. The ground beneath her was spongy and had the slickness of skin. Maybe it was skin. This hideous place could easily be on the back of some inconceivable monster. She slipped and slid in the soft, glittering folds of it, and smelted the sweet stink of it.

The cat ran along beside her for a while. Then she saw it prancing in front. Then the clouds spit a drop of hot, sticky rain.

The drop tickled her face. She raised her shadows of hands and touched the ooze. It was full of hair-fine worms. The tickle on her face changed to an itch, then at once to a dull ache. She reached up again and pulled away a great gout of skin. It was seething with the threadlike creatures. She threw it down in disgust and wiped her hands on the rubbery ground.

The sensation in her face was awful, an ache and a salty cut and the itching of a scab. She raised her eyes to the sky, which was tossing and bulging down at her, as if great fingers punched behind the clouds. "Let me go home' I don't belong here and you're not going to keep me!" She would have thrown something but she had nothing to throw.

Somebody whispered in her ear, and she knew it was a demon; "You've got a lot to learn, baby."

"Don't you dare call me that! I'm Amanda Walker and I'm not your baby."

The clouds twisted and stormed, became a great, dark skull filled with lightning, and began to draw closer to her. The grinning jaws bellowed thunder so loud she held her ears and screamed, but her own voice was lost.

And she had an odd thought: the demons in those clouds don't hate me. They're just doing their job.

"Your body can't receive you back. Dead is dead. The ones who do return end up as ghosts, useless victims of the winds."

This was a new voice, not big like the storm. Rather it was soft and small and full of peace. Amanda had heard something like it before, at the fairy stone. If a voice could be called sacred—she went to her knees. "I thought death was something like going down a long, hollow tube and then meeting my grandfather or somebody and being welcomed, and—"

"Each person creates his own death."

Amanda was increasingly sure she knew that voice. And if she was right—then maybe things were going to get better. "Who are you?"

For just an instant Amanda glimpsed a bright, tiny woman, quite perfect, with rowan in her hair.

"*Leannan*, it is you. I was hoping it was. Listen, please help me get out of

here. I've got to find a way to go back without ending up in hell."

The *Leannan* regarded her. "You've set yourself a difficult problem."

"But I don't deserve hell. I'm not guilty of anything."

"If you want my help, then come with me." Tom was at her side, looking large indeed next to the Fairy Queen. "Don't worry about your demons. They won't stop you going deeper into death."

"Oh, no, that's not what I want. I'm going to get out of this. I've got to go back to the Covenstead!" She turned—and found herself facing a narrow man with a sneer on his face and rape in his eyes. He grabbed her throat with a wet hand. Suddenly both he and she were as solid as living bodies. She could smell his rancid skin, see his oily tongue, hear his breath bubbling in his nostrils. "Hey, baby," he said, "let's dance."

"Oh, God! Oh, God, help me!"

He brought out a long, serrated knife. "This is God " When he started squeezing her throat, she suffered very real agony. "This is just the beginning, you stinking bitch. I'm gonna cut your heart out and eat it right in front of your eyes!"

The blade caressed sensitive skin, and she saw a long spike of flecked drool start in the corner of his mouth. "*Leannan*, please, you said you'd help me!"

"Then you must follow me."

"I'm sorry. I will."

At once the rapist began to change. His form wavered and he rolled his eyes. His knife fell into dust, his whole body shivered, twisting back on itself.

Then Tom was there, swishing his tail.

"It was you! All the time, it was you! You're evil, you're a monster. A *monster!*"

"He obeys the law, Amanda. And so must you." A hand so small it felt like a little, warm mouse came into her own. "Come with me. I want to show you your past, so you can learn what's drawn you so against your better judgment to your witches. Perhaps then you'll see that you should go to what you think of as heaven, which I call the Land of Summer. You've long since earned your peace."

"I want to go back. I've got to."

The *Leannan* sighed. "You're very strong," she said ruefully. But the small hand squeezed Amanda's fingers.

Amanda walked along with the *Leannan*. She wasn't at all sure she wanted

to, but every other choice seemed worse. She had expended her last bit of resistance facing Tom the rapist.

She suspected that he was only the first in a long line of guardians of the gates of life. The scorpion, for example, was worse. And the little bird far worse. And then there was Mother Star of the Sea. Dear God, she was the very personification of guilt. In school she had managed to make Amanda feel hell-bound for having an untied shoe.

“Will you please hurry up, Amanda? I’m having trouble with my damn fire.”

That was Constance Collier—and this place—they weren’t on the field of skin anymore, they were—oh, God, this was all familiar. “Oh, *Leannan*, thank you, thank you!” All the time she had been bringing Amanda back to the Covenstead. Deeper into death, indeed.

“The veil between life and death is thin here. But make no mistake. I have not brought you closer to the resurrection you seek. Let Constance show you your first life. Perhaps then you’ll see that you have the right to the summer you have earned.”

The meadow was clear and bright, and Constance was sharply outlined by the sun. Things were still very strange: there were people around her, for example, but they were mere shadows, seated in a vague circle. Connie was stirring a great, iron cauldron, and that was very clear, too.

She smiled at Amanda. “You’re slow as molasses, girl!” Her voice renewed Amanda’s determination. Despite what the *Leannan* said, she could hear how very desperately Connie wanted her to return. The old woman waved her long staff for emphasis. “By the very Goddess we’ve got to get you back.”

Amanda ran up to the edge of the circle. “Constance, am I really dead? This is crazy—if I’m dead how can you be here?”

“Go round the circle once widdershins and you can come in. Then I’ll tell you.” Amanda began to walk.

“Not that way. That’s sunward. Widdershins is the other direction.”

Inside the circle even the air was different. It had less of the sparkle of spirit air, and smelled of fields and farm. She could just see, if she looked very, very closely, the faces of the people huddled around its edges. She recognized Ivy, and her heart panged to see Robin. But they certainly did not see her.

“Where is this place?”

“We can meet here for a time. The witches’ circle lies between the worlds.”

“I’m on the estate?”

“The circle is in both places.”

“What places? Have you given me some kind of a drug?”

“Oh, little baby, the drug is death! You are really and truly dead. And we don’t even know if your lunatic of an uncle will get himself back together enough to return you to life. He doesn’t *want* to, that’s for sure.”

“But you sent me to him! If you knew this would happen—”

“To be the witches’ guide in life, you must learn the secrets of death. And to do that you’ve got to die.

Unless there’s a chance you won’t come back, you aren’t really dead.”

“The *Leannan* said that you were going to show me why I don’t need to return. But you seem to want me back so much.”

“I’m going to show you your first life. How you take what you see is your business. Now I’m going to swirl the cauldron and you lean over and look into it. Be mindful of what appears, young woman!”

The cauldron gurgled and gargled almost like a living throat; it boiled and bubbled. Soon Amanda began to see things rolling about in the murky waters. Shadows, faces... things that made her look more closely.

“That’s right, that’s good.” Constance swirled harder.

“The tennis shoes you wore when you were ten, some snapshots of you then. Baby treasures, too, Holly your dolly and first friend. And Old Moll with her nose askew, and calico Kitten Stew—remember them?”

“I remember.”

“Look, then. Look at life in the classroom.”

Something was wrong with this picture. Her childhood had not been a time of such terror. Or had it?

The waters turned and turned. She remembered sixth grade. There was Daisy O’Neill and Jenny Parks sitting by the window, and Bonnie Haver in the back, plump Stacey behind her.

Two swishing rows of girls came down the chapel aisle behind Mother Star of the Sea. They chanted to the *Stabat Mater* tune:

“Touch your lips to a weenie on Friday,
And you arc doomed.
Be a whiner or a masturbator,

And you are doomed.
Drown a baby or steal Mother's eraser,
And you are doomed."

"Now, wait a minute," Amanda said. "Eating meat on Friday isn't a sin anymore."

Bonnie Haver: "But you did it when it was, so you are doomed."

"I'm not even a Catholic! Mother Star of the Sea might have secretly baptized me that afternoon I fell asleep at my desk, but—"

"You are doomed."

Just at the edge of the circle Amanda saw the blade-faced man again. He was wearing a long slack coat.

In his hand was a smoking soldering iron. He held it up. "How about some scars, girl?"

Constance brandished her staff and shouted: "Away, Tom! Come as her friend or don't come at all."

"He's a demon, Connie, and I think the *Leannan* might be one, too!"

"No, Amanda, they're not demons, not those two. They're gods. Or angels, your Mother Star of the Sea would call them. In any case, they're a couple of whores. All gods are. They'll be whatever you want them to be and do what you want them to do. If you declare yourself guilty, they'll take you to hell and give you to your demons. Or they'll sing with you in heaven. It's up to you."

Despite herself, Amanda found that she was looking deep into her own soul, where the moss of forgetfulness grew. And under the moss she saw: "I *did* tease that nun. And I did it on purpose, because I wanted to make her suffer. Oh, God, I did it for the sake of hate."

The man with the soldering iron stepped right through into the center of the circle. With a shout Connie pitched back and fell among the shadows of her witches. Amanda looked at the blue, smoking tip of the iron.

"Now, my dear, open your legs."

She would not. She was guilty, but not *that* guilty, "I was just a little girl. It was the innocent anger of a child."

The man twisted and hissed at her, then in a yowling instant was Tom again, curling about her feet, his tail low and sullen behind him.

Connie came shambling back, brushing corn silk from her cloak. This field had just been harvested.

“The particular deity you call Tom is your familiar, dear. You must learn to control him. Until you do, be careful. Remember that he follows your wishes. If you stay on this guilt trip, watch it.”

Amanda looked at the cat. He winked one green eye.

“No, dear, ignore him. Look into the cauldron again. See what you’ve suffered on behalf of the witches.

You needn’t feel guilty if you don’t wish to make such a sacrifice again.”

“I thought you wanted me back, Connie.”

“Not out of guilt. Out of love. Now, look. Look deep!”

There was somebody in the cauldron, a tall and furious somebody from a far place and a farther time.

“You’re beginning to see who you were. You’ve been a witch for a long, long time.”

“That other one down there—I remember him, too. He burned me!”

“He always does. But don’t be attracted by his bishop’s robe. Go back farther, to when he wore simpler things.”

Amanda looked deeper into the cauldron. Just then it shook as if someone had kicked at it. She seemed to slip and slide away from the edge. The waters, which had been clearing, grew murky again.

“What’s going on?” Constance rasped. “Who’s messing up the chant?”

“I’m sorry.”

“What’s the matter with you. Ivy? Can’t you tell she’s here? Can’t you see her?”

“Connie, I’m trying my best!”

“This is the most important circle we’ve ever cast! Don’t you dare break it. Now, chant, girl, *chant!*”

“I said I’m trying.”

When the chant became smooth, the cauldron cleared again. But it lasted only a moment. Soon the waters were more turbid than before.

“Ivy, you are breaking the chant.”

“I’m sitting in a damned ant bed, Connie. They’re swarming all over me.”

“*Chant!*”

The waters came clear. Amanda peered in. As before, her childhood floated at the surface. Below came the various colors of other lives, whole finished worlds swimming in dim old seas.

Back Amanda went through the babble of time, to a tiny brown village huddled beneath something vast and tumbled white, a mountain upon a

mountain of pure ice, a glacier.

“This was the first life, Amanda. You had just fallen from the eyelashes of the Goddess. You were new then.”

Too late Amanda realized that she had leaned beyond the limit of balance. She fell into the boiling cauldron.

There was a shock of intense pain, then she was suddenly sitting in a reeking tent. It smelled of rancid grease and human filth, sour breath and sweat. She gasped, shocked that she had suddenly reacquired weight and substance. Her mind humbled about in an unknown tongue. Her body was smaller but heavier, her breasts enormous pendula, sweaty and jiggling with milk. She was swinging them back and forth over a fire.

Upon her head was a crescent of horn, around her neck a necklace cunning-twined of last summer's vine, the one upon which the Red Goddess Flowers grew.

She was Moom, Daughter of the Red Goddess. Moom, the happy, the rich, the good! Round her thighs were fastened leather garters, one on each, made of the softest doeskin, well chewed. They were marked with the waxing and waning phases of the Red Goddess and signified the rule of the wearer, who could dance in them, work in them, give love in them, and never need for an instant to remove them.

Wearing them, she was the Goddess. Without, she was only Moom. She kept the knots tight, never mind that it made her feet tingle. Other women envied the garters and liked to lie upon her lap and gaze for hours at them. Chief among these was Leem, who would have been the great queen ahead of Moom had she not stolen a cave bear cub to keep her warm at night. Its mother came in a rage and bit off her hand.

No maimed woman could keep hold of garters.

The ritual of the raising of milk went on. As she swayed and wove herself about above the flames, Moom heard the leather of the tent slap against the frame. The whole tent shuddered. A frigid gust leaked in, making the men and the children in the outer circle press against the women who surrounded the fire.

Moom felt the milk oozing out of her bones, sensed it running along the milk channels in her flesh, knew it was filling her breasts.

They soon became huge and tight, brown-gleaming in the firelight, their nipples rigid and dripping.

The women sat back on their haunches now. All were engorged. They

began to clap. Three times sharp, three times soft, three times fast, three times slow. They hummed the music of the bees, to bring summer luck to the family. First their daughters and their sons came to them and took each according to his age, the youngest as much as they willed, the older less, and so on. Through this the men waited.

Then each man brought to the fire something of their mysteries, a great black haunch of bison, a liver from an ibex, a mammoth's stomach still stuffed with flowers and roots. All of these things they set in the immense earthenware cauldron, the family's greatest treasure. They dropped brands in it until it hissed and smoked and filled the tent with wonderful smells.

Moom chewed the blue flesh of the stomach while her husbands took breast upon her, and then ate the flow of her monthly blood.

Thus Moom's family shared the food of men and women, in the lost winter of a long time ago, not too far from what would one day be called Alesia, men later Eleusis, the central place of the mysteries of antiquity.

It was there, in the hard spring of her fifteenth year, that Moom met the most terrible of ends.

The water had flooded their lands that Maymoon, running down from the White King's icy haunches until the men said, "The White King's piss is going to drown the world."

Moom said, "We belong to our place."

The men said, "We cannot live in the White King's piss. We've got to get out of here."

As a portent a great piece of the White King, so large that it reached far past the top of the sky, toppled into the meadow with a roar that loosened teeth and sent the leather tent flying about in tatters.

So they left, all but handless Leem, whom they abandoned to the winds. They went down the long stone ridges, into the forests where the little animals lived. Life in the forest was hard, for a hunter could spend all day seeking a beast not large enough to fill a single mouth. Moom, though, had been granted the secrets of mushrooms and berries, so they did not starve.

Beyond the forest there were plains so full of bison that the very air smelled of them. Moom wondered if they were not a single beast with many bodies, so closely did they cling to one another.

In the center of these plains, where mere flowed water, men had made many leather tents, and even some of grass and mud, more tents than Moom had ever imagined in one place.

“I am Alis,” said the man of the place, when Moom brought her family down among the dwellings. “We are Alesians.”

“We are Moom.” She slapped her belly. “I am *the* Moom! The powerful! Full of milk and blood and babies.”

Alis laughed. He was tall and graybeard. “Eighteen times I have brought back the sun! Oh, I am *the* Alis!

The most powerful!”

She was confused and amazed. Challenged by a man, who could not even let the Red Goddess Moon into his baby closet? How could it be that he was so foolish? She did not know that Leem had come here ahead of them, traveling fast because she was alone, and contrived this treachery. “You might dry up the Goddess! I wouldn’t risk that if I were you!”

The lands of the Alis, she noticed, were yellow and dusty despite their river.

He threw her down and took her garters and put them on. Then he strapped a leather flap to his loins to cover his bull. He danced the women’s mystery dance, slapping his belly and shrieking the birth cries.

Then the Alesians made cages of strong saplings and put Moom and her women inside.

When hot stones were piled high around it, Moom ran her cage, and shouted and shrieked in agony unspeakable. AH one day as the sun crossed the sky of Alesia she suffered. And she saw Leem, jeering among the men, waving her stub of an arm. The bars at the end were covered with Moom’s roasting blood, and she was purple. She was cracked. She smelled like the last of the cauldron. Her hair was nubble that crumbled off in her hands.

She called at last: “I am Moom!” And died.

The Alesians ate Moom and her women. They remained beside the river a full season after that, but the men made no milk and birthed no young. In time other women came and took Moom’s garters off Alis’s legs, and the Alesians went away with them.

Amanda lay weeping, exhausted, in the shimmering, dying circle. The figures around her were exhausted, too, dwindled from ghosts to embers. Somewhere a bell was ringing.

“Amanda! By the four winds rise! Amanda!”

She couldn’t. She was too tired. Black fingers came from the sky, sweeping down around her.

“Amanda, you must wake up. The demons are taking you.”

The voice was dulled by the thick, black clouds. “You’re innocent, Amanda. You’ve sacrificed enough!”

She was becoming heavy and dreamy. She remembered summertime and cherry Kool-Aid and Mamma’s delicious gingerbread, and her own little backyard playhouse. “I used to pretend it was made of candy...”

“Amanda, you fool! You’re letting them deceive you! They can’t take you to Summer. They want to destroy you!”

“The cottage in the forest... gingerbread...”

“They’re monsters. They want to eat your soul.”

How silly Connie sounded. “Oh, Connie, it’s just Tom and another one of his tricks.”

“Tom’s a friend! But these things—oh, God.” The smoke smelled like honeysuckle. Amanda remembered the backyard, the sprinkler ticking. Mamma humming an old tune.

“Chant, witches! Chant with all your hearts and souls! Can’t you see what’s happening to her? She’s *not guilty* and they’re going to take her to hell anyway, because she dares to try and return to life. Please by the Goddess chant!”

The smoke had become a crowd of dark shapes. One of them shifted and focused, and grew into the solid form of a very pretty girl of about twelve, wearing a blue dress. One hand was hidden behind her, and in the other she held a leash. There was a bear on the leash, a bigger, more friendly bear than Amanda had ever seen before. It leaned down when it saw her, and regarded her with eyes so intelligent that their stare was a kind of song.

The bear said: “I am a very special bear, my dear, for I can give you visions. And they’re better than that cauldron nonsense.” With that it followed its mistress off into the dark beyond the circle. From Constance’s throat there came a last, fading cry: “Don’t forget, Amanda, you are not guilty...”

Amanda followed the girl, and her wonderful bear.

Chapter 19

Simon Pierce stood surveying what he could see of the Collier estate from across a tumbledown fence.

He was looking into a blackberry patch, beyond it cornfields, it was lovely land, and tended with love, too. Most of the nearby fields were already harvested. The nearest thing worth burning was a stand of uncut corn three hundred yards away.

For hundreds of years the people of Maywell had kept away from this place. There wasn't even an occasional hiker. Nobody came onto the estate without an invitation from Constance Collier. Most would say that it was out of respect for her privacy, but Brother Pierce had heard darker rumors. There had been spells and curses that Worked. Early Jones, back in the 1820s, had tried to cut wood in Collier land. His wife gave birth to horribly deformed twins. He himself died of a strange, progressive weakness of the limbs. More recently the Wilson brothers had hunted Stone Mountain. They had reported glimpsing "little men" who scared the animals away. Two years ago they had been found back in the Endless Mountains, far from the estate, lying dead around their campfire. They had both had heart attacks while they slept. Natural causes, or Constance Collier?

Simon did not want to cross into that woman's land. But he had to. He had driven his congregation to a high pitch of excitement. They had to do something, and he had to lead them. Burn the cornfields. It was simple and practical, and he thought they could get away with it. The ethics of doing it bothered him a good deal, though, especially now that he saw with his own eyes how honorably tended was this land. It was painful to burn good land. He had been brought up to think of the land as the great source of prosperity. Still, this land was good because it was witched. Beneath its fertility was a foulness.

Simon motioned to the man behind him and started down the road. At first he moved along beside it, but the absence of opposition emboldened him to step onto the strip of grass between the ruts.

"Careful, Brother Simon. Better stay off the road."

"We're here to do the work of the Lord. We have no call to skulk and hide, Brother Benson."

"This is private property. If we're seen here the sheriff'll have a reason to

fire me.”

“Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?” Simon felt sad for the poor, mistaken pagans, and found the deputy sheriff’s whining a disappointment. “You put yourself in the hands of God, Brother Benson. If the Lord wants you fired, you’ll be fired. You walk proud now, for you are on a mission of mercy, to teach these ignorant ones the power of the Lord.”

His mind turned and turned with the complexity of the situation. Simon liked things clear, but they were far from that. He needed the witches as a galvanizing issue; he also felt terribly sorry for them. He was not a man to hurt others.

He felt down deep in his pocket for the shrunken, brown talisman of his own wrongdoing. It was nestled there, reminding him for life of his terrible sin. Its presence gave him satisfaction: often he prayed with it,

“Lord, take me soon. I want to burn for what I did to her. Please, Lord, send me down to the deepest fire.” While awaiting his descent into his own richly deserved hell, Simon Pierce saved the souls of others.

He grasped the hard nubbin that was the hand. Once it had been white. Once soft and sweet to kiss. The hand had been connected to the precious body of one of the Lord’s finest creations, an innocent tittle girl.

Before he found the Lord, Simon had been so confused, so disturbed and angry. His mother hadn’t been a good mother. After his father had disappeared on a Bible-selling trip that never ended, she had whored, bringing man after man home, and he would hear her bed banging against the wall between the two rooms, and once one of the men came to him naked, and she hit him in the side of the head with a steak mallet and pushed him out on the fire escape.

She would drink and take diet pills and whip Simon, cursing him while she did it, then subside into long states of suppressed fury.

Sometimes even now he dreamed that he had been brought up in an orphanage. He had to work to remember his real childhood. In his teens he’d been impoverished, living in a slum with his wasted old ruin of a mother, and she went crazy one night and tried to set them both on fire. At the age of fourteen he lost her. It was bitter because he was so lonely without her, and yet she had been so bad.

As he grew older, moved from one foster home to another, he found that

his exploding adolescent sexuality was all twisted. He could not love women, not even those his own age. He just couldn't face them. His feelings concentrated on little girls. They were so helpless, and he felt so safe with them.

Then had come Atlanta, and his conversion, and this stem life of remorse. He was doing two good things today: strengthening his own people and bringing the witches a chance to see the error of their ways.

If this was so good, though, why did it feel so bad? Sometimes he saw Christ as a red-eyed monster of his own making, and he wondered, Do I worship the Lord, or have I been deceived by a demon in a beard? He fought the tears that had appeared at the edges of his eyes.

The air was warm, the sun spreading long shadows across the fields. He glanced at his watch. 4:30. To throw the witches off, they had decided to come in broad daylight, when they would be least expected.

Indeed, all was quiet. There was the familiar melancholy of harvested fields, but there was something else, too, something awful. You could smell it. The place was just plain too fertile. It looked good until you really looked, then you saw the obscenity. God never intended His land to work this hard.

This richness was a gift from Satan. Thinking thus, it would not hurt so much to burn the land.

"Hey, look here."

"What is it. Brother Turner?"

"Just about forty quarts of blackberries." The short man was smiling, standing next to a massive blackberry bush to the right of the gate. He held up a steel bucket. "We can have a feast!" The other men laughed. Turner took a handful of berries and began to eat them.

Simon knew just what he had to do. He leaped at Turner, grabbed his wrist, and flung the berries aside.

"Don't be a fool! That's witch poison!"

"They smell fresh."

"I'm tellin' you, if you want to eat the produce of the Devil's farm you go swear on the Devil's Bible! You eat only of the garden of the Lord." He snatched the bucket from Turner. "Do not ever put this sort of foulness to your tips!"

Now would come the first test, for Simon and for them all. The blackberries were fat and had been picked with proper care. None were broken. Simon knew how meticulous the work of blackberry picking could

be, with the thorns and the delicacy of the berries. So much effort was in this bucket. To lay it waste took strength.

“Jesus,” he whispered, “I love you.” He poured the berries out onto the ground. He kicked the ‘sodden mass. “Come on, this is what we’re here for! This *garbage* is probably going to be sold right in Maywell.

Your children might be the ones to eat these devil’s berries!”

There were several full buckets by the bush. He took another and raised it high over his head. For a shivering moment, he held it there. The bucket was heavy. When he flung it to the ground, it hit with a thud and a splash of fat, ripe fruit.

Simon stood, surveying the rest of the buckets. A curious feeling, almost of relief, replaced his former regret. He recognized this as the Spirit of the Lord working in him. “Praise God!” Sad it may be, but this was certainly labor in His vineyard.

But the other men hung back. Deputy Benson still stood near the gate, his hand nervously resting on the butt of his pistol. His badge, Simon noticed, was not on his chest—as if people wouldn’t recognize him without it.

Simon shuddered. Now the Spirit of the Lord twisted and turned in him, and met up with the softer spirit of the hand. The hand had belonged to a wonderful little person, a saint, Simon was sure, and it did not like these evil fields. The hand revealed to him that death itself swarmed in the stubble, as if the borderland of the Lord’s world was back there at that gate. Brother Turner stooped over and picked something up.

“What’s this?”

Simon examined the plump little packet of cloth. “Open it.”

“I don’t want to open it.”

Simon took it from him. He undid the thong that held the package together. Lying within was a withered image of a fat little man with roots growing out of it every which way. He threw it down. “Mandrake,” he said. “They put them in the fields to get the Devil’s blessing.”

“I’m gonna take that little thing home—”

“Leave it. Turner. This isn’t a game. They’ve charged that thing up with so much satanic force it just might come alive at night and get down in your throat.”

“Lord.”

“You don’t know what it’ll do. People these days have no idea of the Devil’s *power*. Just sheer power!

You take that thing, and it will drag you right down to hell, mark my words.”

The men backed away from the poppet. The hand told Simon to get out of this foul place. The hand said,

“Do God’s work, and do it fast.”

“We will baptize ourselves here, my brothers. We will each of us take a bucket and cast it down.”

Let blood, and blood will flow. But first the knife must slash the skin. After they participated in the destruction of the berries, Simon knew that his followers would grow more bold. And then the next act would embolden them further, and so on until the grand plan that God had given him could be fulfilled.

He looked across the wide fields. Beyond them he could see the slate roof of the Collier mansion, just visible above the trees.

The hand stirred in his pocket, touching and tickling and thrilling.

She had thrilled him unforgettably, that gentle child.

He spread his arms beneath the fire of the sun, for a vision came upon him. He saw all this land as it *would be*, cleansed in the fire, all these fields as black as death, and the house beyond the trees a smoldering ruin. “On yonder hill,” he said, pointing directly at the roofs of the house, “I will build my church.” And he saw it as clearly as could be: a fine brick church, with a tall steeple and a graceful portico. As proper a place of worship as Rugged Cross in Atlanta, a real House of the Lord, where His fire and His righteousness prevailed. “Oh, the Lord has shown me such a sight. Rising from the ashes of the witch house, the triumph of His Name!”

“I hear something.” Deputy Benson pointed. In the silence that followed his words, Simon heard it also, human voices twisted to an unholy rhythm. “Moom! Moom! Moom!” And within the longer notes, bright children’s voices chanting faster, “Moom moom moom! Moom moom moom!” There was another voice, this one single. An old woman was calling somebody.

“What’s that name?”

“Amanda. She’s calling the name Amanda.”

“Amanda Walker. The devil woman herself. The devil rider.”

“We’re not certain it was her. It could have been any one of them.”

Simon fumed on the deputy. He was getting tired of Benson’s way of sapping energy with his satanic hesitation and questioning. “Praise the Lord,

Deputy.” He snatched up a bucket of the berries, “For you.”

Benson was the kind of man who used to get into trouble in bars before he got himself saved and became a man of the law. He smiled past his false teeth. “Sure, Brother. Praise the Lord.”

“Praise His Name!” This was an important moment. If Benson didn’t pour out those blackberries—

He did it. He turned that bucket over and they spilled right into the road in a pretty pile. O Lord, wonderful are Thy ways! Just for good measure the deputy lifted his right foot and stepped carefully into the berries, crushing them good.

The Spirit of God came upon them all. Previously hesitant, the other men now went about eagerly destroying the rest of the blackberries. Brother Pierce kept an ear cocked to that devil chant. No telling how many demons were over there beyond that stand of dry cornstalks. He was not here in strength, not yet, and couldn’t withstand a supernatural attack. He did not want his people to end up having to run off this place. He wanted them to walk away.

You had to build a thing like this. Boldness would grow with success.

There were blackberries and blackberry juice all over the ground, staining the road, the dry grass beside it, and the shoes of some of the men. Simon could have kissed those stained shoes, and he would have been kissing the holy feet of the Lord. “I think we oughta light the fire right over in that stubble. It’ll spread to the standing corn on its own.”

“The ground’s awful muddy,” Turner said.

“The sun’s dried the stubble. We’ll be okay.”

Turner hefted the five-gallon can of gasoline. “I still think we oughta do it in the corn. We aren’t gonna cause ‘em any trouble burnin’ a harvested field.”

“The fire will spread. The Lord doesn’t want us to get too near the demons.” The chant made Simon’s scalp tingle.

He walked a little distance into the field. The chant was hypnotic, intoxicating. They had to hurry. “Okay, now, pour it out in a line right across the road. We’re gonna be behind it, see. They’ll come runnin’ soon as they see the smoke. So the fire’s gotta be between us and them.”

“Good tactics,” Deputy Benson commented. “Let’s not get caught.”

“We are doing the work of the Lord, Brother Benson. I am proud to be acting in His Name.”

“Yeah, but I still don’t want to get caught by a bunch of damn witches.”

Simon allowed himself a small smile. Brother Benson would have a lot of trouble explaining himself to his boss. A lot of trouble, given that the sheriff was himself a witch, Who knew, maybe good Brother Benson was a spy for the witches.

The gasoline smelled nice. Simon had always liked the odor of it. When he was a very little boy and things were still good, and his dad would bring the DeSoto in hot from a long day on the road, Simon would like to sit on the bumper and smell the smell of gasoline fumes coming out of the grille. That was a wonderful odor, and he remembered it fondly even to this day.

“Step back,” Benson said. He had a match lit. He leaned forward and tossed it into the just-soaked grass. There was a crackling sound, and a wall of fire spread a hundred feet across the field and twenty feet into the air.

“Ohh! Oh—God, God, God!”

Turner was on fire! His arms and his chest blossomed with angry, orange flames. Frantic, he flapped his hands. The flames sounded like an awning fluttering in the wind.

Benson grabbed him—and got a fireball of a hand in the cheek. He jerked away, his own hair and shoulder burning.

“A curse, a witch curse on us!”

Turner was burning bad, his face a horrible mask of terror and agony, his chest and arms blazing. “Help me! Oaaahhhh Qod! Aaaahhh!” He started running, then fell in the road. He was hitting his head with his fiery hands, and his hair was burning with blue spatters of flame.

Two of the men had their coats off. Then they were on top of Turner, smothering the flames. Greasy smoke came out from under their coats.

When he was put out, Simon rushed to his follower, knelt beside him. He almost screamed to see the hideous damage the fire had done. He had to force calm into his voice. “You’re gonna be all right.” he said, “God will heal you.” But the man was far from all right. His hair was melted black, his cheeks and shoulders were livid red where they weren’t crisped. And his hands, the poor man’s hands were just two seared stumps.

Simon couldn’t control himself anymore. He wept. Poor Turner’s eyes rolled in his head.

“Hey! You men!”

A young woman in jeans leaped right through the fire they had set, followed by two more, and then three young men. Simon jumped to his feet. He was genuinely terrified now. It was a curse and a spell, too—those

witches weren't even hurt by the fire. "O Jesus, they're demons incarnate!"

Simon turned around, saw most of his men spread out along the road, running for all they were worth.

First in line was Deputy Benson, clutching a handkerchief to the cheek Turner had burned.

Simon looked at the two men who had stayed with him. Then he looked down at Turner, whose eyes were rolling, whose legs were moving slowly, as if in some terrible dream he ran yet from the fire that had consumed him.

The witches had stopped. They were standing together, staring in surprise at the burned man. Simon saw hard, inhuman faces, evil grins. "Let's get goin'!" he yelled.

"What about him?"

"He's a dead man."

Three more witches jumped through the flames. They carried shovels. On the other side of the fire somebody was shouting instructions.

Simon gave way to the same kind of wild, panicky flight that had overcome the rest of the group. As he ran he heard his last two supporters, their feet pounding close behind.

Those witches were a well-organized bunch. They were already burying the flames, damn their black hearts. As Simon reached the gate he turned to see their progress—and his feet flew out from under him.

He landed with a thud and a splash. He had slipped down in the blackberries. Davis and Nunnally raced past. For a moment Simon thought he was going to be caught by fierce witch women, who were coming up the road in their blowing cloaks. They waved long wooden staffs. He scrambled to his feet and hurried on. His right leg hurt like hell and his hands and clothing were stained purple.

"Simon," he heard behind him, "Simon Pierce, you fool." It was a familiar voice, a very familiar voice.

"Don't run away from me! Don't be afraid."

He hesitated. That was a voice from his own church! He had heard it raised in song and in prayer. He had heard that woman get saved. She was one of the ones who had walked out on her husband, taking her two youngest children. He turned around. "Effie, by the love of Jesus, let me take you home."

"Oh, Simon, no. I can't do mat." She came up to him, her cheeks flushed red, her eyes flashing. "You're making a great mistake. These are God's

people, too. We just worship in a different way.”

“The damned worship Satan different from the way the saved worship the Lord.”

“You don’t understand. This is the best, the happiest, the most morally pure place I have ever been. I’m strong and healthy. Even my allergies have disappeared. And you ought to see Feather—that’s little Sally’s witch name—she’s no longer the shy little girl her daddy used to beat. Now she’s high priestess of the Children’s Coven, and she’s so devoted. Oh, Simon, this place is full of love, just as Christ is full of love. You cannot be Christian and have so much hate.”

“You serve the Devil!”

She raised her head, proud and defiant. “No, sir, you are the one with the torch in your hand. If there is a Devil, you are the servant.”

Simon extended his hand to his lost follower, but she drew back from him. The other witches were crowding around, those who weren’t back with Turner. Simon turned and walked briskly off their land.

The van was already in motion when he reached it. “Stop! Wait for me!” Eddie Martin was driving; it was his van. Simon hit the gleaming black side of the thing. “Eddie, please!”

Finally it stopped. The back door slid open and Simon pulled himself in. It was a comfortable van, with seats around the sides and a big cooler just behind the driver. Eddie would fill that cooler with Bud for hunting trips into Pennsylvania. You could shoot right through your limit of deer back there in the Endless Mountains.

“We left Turner! Oh, Jesus, we left Turner!”

“Take it easy, Benson,” Eddie said from behind the wheel. “Look at it this way. We did damage to Satan’s farm and most of us have lived to tell about it.”

Simon couldn’t have said it better himself. Eddie was the Lord’s kind of a man.

“The witches might have killed us all,” Simon added. “Running is no shame in the service of the Lord, men. The important thing is that we will return!”

“A man is dead. There’s gonna be all hell break loose around here. We ain’t had a murder in Maywell in twenty years, not since Old Coughlin went around the bend and shot up the Unitarian Church.”

“Who said the word murder. Brother Benson?”

“The man was set on fire by—by a spell!”

“Here you are a man of the law and you don’t even know the law. The State of New Jersey isn’t gonna buy any stories about spells, true or not. The coroner will rule it an accident. We’re the only ones who know what it *really* was, and we can’t prove a thing, can we?”

“That mandrake thing. We’ll go get that.”

“You’d still have to prove black magic, which has been around since the day Satan got thrown down into hell, and it ain’t been proved yet. No, Brother, this is our own private problem. We know there was a spell worked, and a hex on that poor man of God, but the State of New Jersey doesn’t know and doesn’t care. Why do you think the state’s got witches living in it anyway? Don’t tell me the bureaucrats don’t know about ‘em. Those government people, they *like* the work of Satan being done in their midst!

Sure they do! We are soldiers, every one of us, soldiers of the Lord. But you ask the State of New Jersey, and the state will say, an accident!”

There was a chorus of amens. Poor Turner had died hard in the service of the Lord, but he had given them all a great blessing. His death made him a martyr, and would be proof positive to the whole congregation that the witches were evil and had to be destroyed. Simon would create such a funeral for that fallen saint as Maywell had never seen before.

The Lord’s people were not going to give up because of a martyrdom. Far from it, the tragedy would strengthen them. They had been plunged into the tempering bath of blood. Before this they had been a bunch of scared children.

Now they would become a fiery sword, wielded by the righteous hand of God.

Chapter 20

TORTURE

The bear was easy for Amanda to follow because it wore bells, and when it capered they jangled gaily.

Summer airs danced about Amanda's head, and she went laughing behind the great black beast, through the alleyways and yards of her own early childhood.

They were going toward a certain gate, a very important one.

The little girl leading the bear stopped beside Dad's precious flowering plum tree, the one in Metuchen, in those fine days before they had come to Maywell.

She was sweet of face, her dress blue lace, her right hand always held behind her back, a charming pose.

She beckoned with her left, and Amanda could not resist running toward the old back gate mat led into their yard.

The old back gate, the old yard: here it was always a warm June day in about 1969, a year of highest happiness, long before the troubles started in Amanda's family.

She opened the gate and stepped through. Even the air smelled good! She was almost shaking with joy.

Just around the corner of the house she could hear herself laughing, her own six-year-old voice, bell-high and full of joy. Her impulse was to hurry forward, but she hesitated. This was the wrong direction. She had to find the cauldron again, to get back into contact with the witches. Why had she followed the bear?

Had she been hypnotized?

She turned around to go back. Instantly everything changed. There was a great screaming and clanking, walls arose, a rafted ceiling slammed down, and the next thing she knew she was upended and tied to a board in an echoing lumber mill. Logs thundered past on a flume. Down her belly there came a great ringing roar and she saw the blurry gleam of a saw and knew that it was going to chew her in half. She jerked, she writhed, she bellowed. At a far window she saw Tom, arching his back and spitting, then pacing

behind the glass, his eyes terrible.

The little girl's right hand, detached from her body, appeared in the air and pulled a lever. The blare of the saw grew even more shrill and the board began to vibrate. Amanda soon felt wind tickling the bottoms of her feet, then sharp heat as the saw drew close.

Then it was between her legs, the spinning steel skinning her ankles and the sides of her knees.

She suddenly remembered herself when she was ten, reading *The Mad Monk* under the sheets, reading by flashlight the forbidden gore.

He had sawed a woman in half. He had done it slow.

And she, in her summer bed, had imagined not the hard screaming agony of being split asunder, but the softer terror of the breeze in intimate pans that signaled the approach of the whirling tool.

She felt that little wind now, right up at the top of her thighs. Hot sawdust was spewing up, then shifting down and tickling her belly. Soon the sound would deepen from the efficient pitch of steel cuffing wood to a more liquid choffling.

The girl leaned her gentle face over Amanda and looked at her. Her eyes were no longer blue. They were the red of apple skin.

"Don't try to go back. You keep making that mistake We don't want to hurt you, Amanda. We don't even dislike you. Far from it, we want to make you one of us." And her eyes turned dead-water green.

Amanda was disgusted with herself She had been deceived so easily. How stupid to follow a cheap carnival trick of a talking bear. But she would not relent, not even now. She was, after all, dead. The saw and the body it was about to cut were both illusions.

But when the blade touched her and she felt the searing horror of its teeth in her secret skin, what resolve she had developed dissolved. "I promise I won't go back!"

"I don't believe you." The sound of the blade changed. Amanda felt as if she were being ruthlessly pinched, her skin being compressed to ridges and then tom off.

"I'll never go back! I'll obey you! I swear!"

"By what?"

"Oh, stop the saw. Stop it!"

"By what do you swear?"

"By—by—"

“By your own immortal soul?”

“By my soul! Oh, yes, by my soul!” Could a demon hear a lie? Amanda hoped not.

“Very well, I give you back your summer day.”

Instantly they were in the old yard again, Amanda and this strange little creature. As the girl walked along ahead of her, Amanda noticed that she had a stump at the end of the arm she usually kept hidden.

The girl didn’t mention it and Amanda didn’t dare, so they went on in silence. There was washing on the line, including Amanda’s own very favorite pink flap-bottom pj’s. “Is childhood heaven?”

“Or hell. Whichever you prefer. Many a child has its own dead self as a silent observer of its life.”

“But time—the past—how—”

The little girl shrugged, “It’s not important.” She squatted down in the grass, motioned with her stub for Amanda to sit beside her. “You made the right decision coming with me and Ursa. The witches call this place the Land of Summer. Christians know it as Heaven. And your old backyard is just the beginning.

There are winged palaces the other side of the highway, and the pleasure of the sight of God just behind the drive-in bank.”

This wasn’t heaven at all, and Amanda knew it. She looked sadly back toward the gate. Tom was gone.

Beyond it was the long gray plain where her Journey through death had begun. Ever so faintly she could hear the hoarse chanting of the witches.

“They need me. Without me they’ll give up.”

“You don’t have to go back there, Amanda. You’ve done your share for the witches.”

“But I’ve never been needed before, not like this. It’s not because I’ll feel guilty if I don’t help them. I know I’ve already done a great deal in past lives, I’ve seen Moom. But I love them.”

For an instant the girl’s eyes became as bright as bloody suns. “Ursa,” she called, “I need you.”

The bear came up, its bells jangling in a way that should have been merry. It leaned closer to Amanda. Its breath seemed sweet, or did it? When she smelled that thick, hot odor, she thought of night-blooming flowers, or perhaps of rotted ones.

“So *Leannan* and Constance succeeded in relieving your guilt, and yet you

still want to go back. Strong girl.”

“I told you, I love my witches.”

“You love torture—because that’s what you’ll get if you go back.”

“Then that’s what I’ll get.”

The girl smiled. “We’re so much alike, you and I. You’re a good magician, Amanda, and I’m a bad one.”

She laughed a little. “I was a monster by the age of eight, and dead from murder before I was thirteen.”

Amanda looked into the eyes. They were totally without depth. They seemed painted. She saw nothing, no wisdom, no help, not even any hate. Demons might sometimes look like people, and sometimes like nightmares, but they seemed, essentially, to be machines.

“Since you’re so stubborn, Amanda, I’m going to show you a past very like the future you’ll be facing if you go back.”

“You mean I have a choice? I can go back?”

“We serve you, Amanda. Your demons are part of you.”

“I’m going to go back.”

“I will show you the worst terror you can know.”

“No matter what, you won’t stop me.”

“I will show you death by fire.”

“I’ve got to go—now!” Amanda leaped up.

“Ursa,” the girl said lazily, “stop her, please.” The bear’s claws came around her face like bars. Its immense force pulled her back to the soft grass.

“I said I would show you what will happen to you. You tittle fool, it’s happened before. Just look!”

The voice was far bigger than the girl—even than the bear. It was as if the whole place, the grass, the trees, the sick yellow sky, had bellowed out the words. And the claws one by one popped through Amanda’s skin and into her skull and sank coldly into her brain.

And brought with them visions.

She saw the earth as it was when the green muck first oozed upon it, a foaming cauldron of a planet, swept by bitter winds and howling in the agony of its birth, the sun blue and furious, comets and meteors swarming in unsettled splendor, the electric distempered sky striking life again and again into the ooze.

Ursa sent her forward through the cries and tinkling of five billion years, to a dripping afternoon on a hill overlooking a dark medieval town. There was a

newly built manor nearby, with ugly little slits of windows and snapping red flags.

She no longer felt like a ghost. But also, she was not her familiar old self, Amanda of the careful artist's fingers and the dreams. Her name here was Marian, and she despised that manor. It belonged to the Bishop of Lincoln, and she hated him even more than she did his house.

She sat upon her hill cursing the palace below her. She was the Lady of the Forest, the Queen of the Witches. The garters she wore were not so different from Moom's, but they were not on dirty naked legs. These garters reposed against skin as pale as cream.

She was the great ruler of the countryside. Her beauty melted the most violent hearts, and in this time there were many such. Her mother had reigned openly, but because of the Christians Marian was almost a fugitive, coming to her Ceremonial hill only on the greatest occasions. The rest of the time she hid in Sherwood Forest, defended by Robin Goodfellow and his fairymen.

This special morning, though, she sat upon her stool and received her subjects. Last night had been Mayeve, and Robin as Godfather had drawn the moon down upon her. She had felt it come into her womb and shine there through the festivals of the dark. How the women had shrieked in the greenwood last night, while the pipes wailed and the drums mumbled low. Robin in his antlers had pranced and danced until his great stone of a devil's tail had stood straight up before him, and he and Marian had joined the common rapture.

The bishop, she knew, was in a fury about the rutting festival.

He had gotten a decree from Rome, he said, that proved she and hers were demons incarnate. She had not replied to him, that Sunday after Candlemas when he had challenged her from the steps of his miserable cathedral. She was Maid of England, after all. It was not for her to speak to a mere bishop; even the King knelt to her, did he not, in secret?

Even Edward kissed her garters in Mab's cave, during the Mysteries.

So she sat upon Mabhill and let the wind flounce her hair, and handfasted those who had made merry in the night, and pretended not to notice the arrival of the bishop and his chain-mailed soldiery.

A youth saw him and raised a hand against him, saying, "Kneel thou to the Maid of England." In response the Bishop of Lincoln raised his eyes to the Silent God of the Catholics. The youth, who was of fairy blood and wide and short and strong, reached up and pushed the white miter from the bishop's

head.

He was bald but for his tonsure, and the long brown curls of it waggled in the wind. Goodfolk laughed, and when they did, one of the soldiers goosed the fairy with a dagger. The fairy staggered as blood spurted from the wound the point had made in his buttocks.

The bishop and his men had the laugh this time, and at the fairy's expense. Soon they left the hill and returned into the town, closing the gates behind them.

"The bishop has blooded a fairy," people whispered. In the following days this terrifying news ran through the whole county, and soon all the churches, most of them so new their stones were yet white, became empty.

In the subsequent months the bishop fell into want and had to let many of his men at arms go.

Of those who remained, not a night passed that the fairy did not poison one with their tiny arrows. At Midsummer's Eve the bishop came and knelt to Marian and kissed the garters of the Maid of England.

Midsummer's Eve was a great joy that year of 1129, with all the handfasted couples from Mayeve leaping the fire, and the bishop and his priests dancing for the Goddess along with the goodfolk of the county.

But that bishop was a sly one. Never for a moment did he despair of the Silent God, nor forget his pope in the storied kingdom of Rome. There came a black ship into the harbor at Grimsby, sent up, it was said, from the great Catholic fortress of Canterbury. Upon this ship were seventy tall knights and seventy knaves, and horses for all. They took march across the Lincoln Wolds and climbed the Heights.

"My lady," a fairy messenger said at last, "they have crossed the Trent upon boats made from the sacred tree's that grow on the bank."

She only nodded, and let him withdraw before recommencing her weeping. None but she knew how she had prayed and spelled against these knights. And all for naught. That they were across the Trent meant only one thing; her hour was upon her. The Goddess was calling her Maid back to the red moon.

But her people needed her. Without her their faith would wither and die. They would become godless, or worse. Catholic. Alone in her palace, deep in Sherwood Forest, she waited and prayed. Her prayer took the form of a vision quest to the Cauldron of the Crone. She peered long into the bubbling stew of her own past.

Always before, this sort of quest had been rewarded with wisdom.

But not this time. No, her *lang syne*—the memory of her past lives—was closed to her.

And what of this fine palace of timber and wattle made, and her Robin? She sighed to think of the beams falling down, and becoming food for the termites and the fungi, and her marvelous dancing Robin stopped in his dance forever.

After the knights had crossed the Trent there came a week of slowly rising tension. They dared not enter the Maid's woodland domain, for even their hard armor would not be protection enough here, where her flames could kill them as they slept or poison their food supplies.

But the knights did not need to come into the forest. They knew the cold truth: if they waited long enough, the Maid would be obliged to come to them.

The days grew shorter, and the deep wind of the north came back to Sherwood Forest. Robin made ceaseless forays into the camp of the black knights, but their defenses were strong and always defeated him. Worse, the knight's sheet-metal armor was proof against even the most cunning fairy archers. Their straw-thin poisoned arrows could penetrate chain mail, but they bounced harmlessly off the sheet.

Hallows' drew nigh, and with it the timeless custom of the Maid's Progress. Never in remembered history had a Maid failed to carry out this ritual. To remain in hiding now would be to say that the Old Religion was powerless, or that its ceremonies did not matter more than the mere life of a Maid.

She could only hope that the Bishop of Lincoln would in the end hesitate to kill her, for fear that the country people would rise against him.

But he was such a clever man. To simple eyes it would seem that he had no part of these knights. The sheriff of Nottingham was his knave in the matter and commanded the troop. Few of the country folk knew the truth of who was really behind the expedition.

The red moon rose on Hallows' Eve and the fairy came with the silver carriage. It had been fashioned long ages ago by a fairy metalsmith. The carriage was a buttercup of silver, with silver wheels. It was drawn by eight fairy horses, small fellows but stronger even than their masters.

They traveled along the lower paths of the forest, where the trees were so tremendous that the ways between were barely wide enough for the fanciful vehicle.

She never reached Mabhill this Hallows' Eve. Just as they left the forest, the sheriff of Nottingham shouted from behind a long fence, "Hallo, be ye the Queen of the Witches?"

She said nothing.

"If ye be or not, you cannot pass. I am seeking the Maid of England, to kiss her garters and make merry with her. Be ye she?"

She could not refuse his request; to do so would be heresy, "I am the Maid, good sir," she said, and raised her skirts for him.

But he did not come to her. Instead knights jumped out of holes and bowers and laid steel hands on her.

The fairy fought with their little swords, but they could not match lances. Two of the knights fell to poison by lucky shots against the cracks in their armor, but most of the arrows loosed from the protection of the woods fell harmlessly. "Look how they fight us with twigs, the picts," laughed the powerful Catholic soldiers.

The Silent God was not so weak as Manan had hoped.

They put her into a cage made of rushes and earned her all the night, arriving the next morning in Lincoln Town. The Maid had never actually been in a town before, and she was astonished to see the chickens and pigs swarming about right in the offal of the citizens. No wonder the people of the towns were sickly folk and given to riotings. Smoke hung low in the streets, and trolls wandered about snarling for farthings.

Bread was stacked in great quantities in the houses, and bladders of wine lay by the doors. There were many barrels full of apples and cider. The sick lay about in comers, and filthy children ran back and forth with bits of garbage in their black little hands. She was most amazed, staring at the wonders and horrors of this place from her cramped cage.

At last the Bishop of Lincoln came down the way. He was preceded by blaring crumhorns and soldiers in white armor, riding upon a horse with his own chest gleaming gold and his helmet of burnished brass.

He might look grand, but Marian was the Maid of England, the Goddess Earth, and she met his eyes directly, even from the cage. He said naught, for he was proud in this place, and imagined that he had dominion over earth. But how was that? Would he build a prison around the greenwood or trap the sky?

How did he intend to capture her?

They took her in procession, with dancing, up the muddy street and

through the tall wooden gate of the bishop's palace. Upon that gate she saw a terrible sight, one that made her freeze inside. There were many spikes fitted to it, and on each spike was the head of a fairy. Some were black with rot and some gone to white bone, and others still dripped blood.

How dared this man kill fairy? They would set pox on him and all that was his. They would poison him.

But they had not managed it, for he rode fair and high, did he not?

No matter what, she would never pray to the Silent God, Her life belonged to the Goddess; indeed she was the Goddess. In the Mysteries it was revealed that every woman is the Goddess. She is water as well as thirsty throat; she is the quenching, too. And the Homed God, the Godfather whom the Catholics call the Devil, is Death her consort, both taker and giver of life.

The Catholics claimed that human beings were born of sin. But what was it? Marian had never seen any.

Could it be poured from a cup or sold in the market? No. They said it lived in the soul, this sin. But where? The Crone of the Cauldron lived there, and the Cauldron contained only truth in its spiritual stew.

She knew, she had tasted of it many times.

They carried her into a tall, dark hall most artfully wrought of stone. Compared with this, her own palace was rough indeed. But her home smelled at least of the forest, not as this did of greasy fires and sour beer.

"We will begin at once," the bishop said. They took her down a winding stone stair. She was given a draught of milk by a young woman who worshiped her for a moment and then slipped away. Soon the bishop came prancing down the stairs. He had affected humble brown robes.

"Hangman, the first degree."

She did not mind when they disrobed her. She was used to being naked before others. Clothes were only proof against the wind, after ail. But when they laid hands on her garters, she at first almost swooned with astonishment. Then she fought their fumbling, clumsy fingers. She fought with all the fury of the legendary maid Boadicea who had fought the Romans, and did not stop lighting even when twenty of them sat upon her, laughing and flatulent, most of them stiff to wood from scuffling about with her.

In the end they took the ancient garters of the Goddess, and it was the first moment since time began that they had not been on the thighs of the Maid of England. She cried out and at last spoke to the Bishop. "I command you, my knave, to have me unhande, that I may replace the garters."

“Rack her.”

There commenced an excruciation beyond belief. She was bound in a wooden bed so that she could not get up. It creaked, and when it did the most terrible pain came into her legs and arms. After a time it creaked again and hot agony shot down her spine. Her belly tore on its moorings. Bile came up, and when she spat it out, there was a great deal of laughter all about.

“Confess that you are a witch and a poisoner,”

“I am the Maid of England, sir. You must know I be a witch. Of course I am a witch!”

“You have poisoned the wells of Lincolnshire. Confess it.”

“The fairy poxed you, sir. Give them back their deadheads and make no more, and they will raise the curse soon enough.”

“The second degree, please, hangman.”

The men took her from the wooden bed and bade her stand, but she could not stand. So they made her kneel before the hangman while he cut off her tresses. How long and black they were, lying upon the vile stone floor. She sang to them a little and mourned that they would be with her no longer.

They poured a black liquor over her head and ignited it. The torment was awful, her ears and scalp raging with a pain as if the skin were being rubbed off the bone. Her body wanted to run, but she fell to the floor at once when she tried. There were great knots around her legs, and she could not move them for aught.

“I am broken,” she moaned.

“Then you say it, you are witch and poisoner. It is you who poisoned the wells of Lincolnshire, Lady!”

“I told you, give them their deadheads—oh, I hurt so, sir, really I do. Do you not know that I am the Goddess Consecrate? Oh, where are my garters?”

“The third degree.”

Her head ached so badly that she could hardly think anymore. She could still feel, though, as they lifted her high and put her wrists in rings. They horsewhipped her mercilessly. She fainted then, and the Goddess herself came to her and made her a promise that gave her courage. “Only a little more will you suffer, my daughter. Your body will soon give up the ghost, and I will receive you.”

The Goddess appeared in her dream as bear. But when Manan awoke there was another animal present, a great black cat she knew well. He strode about the chamber snarling and spitting at the bishop.

“Look there—her familiar has come to save her! Capture it and we will burn it with her!”

The man who touched old Tom got the flesh ripped from the bone of his finger. Then Tom leaped into the rafters. Soon only his green eyes could be seen. Then with a flick of his tail and an angry scream he was gone. “There you see, girl, your devil abandons you.”

“The Goddess cannot abandon me any more than the air can abandon me.”

“The fourth degree.”

They laid her in a wooden box made with boards between her legs. Then they hammered wedges between these boards and thus crushed and split the bones of her legs, causing her a torment that made her break her throat with shrieking.

“Say that you poisoned the wells.”

But she was insensible, and could say nothing.

She awoke to the distant crowing of cocks. A boy, most frightened, came to her and laid poultices upon her legs and back, and gave her thick beer, as much as she could drink, and worshiped her. “Oh, Goddess,” he murmured, “the peasants in the country weep that the townsfolk have got you.”

“My child.” She could say no more, and soon brought up the beer.

Then there was a dismal blast of crumhorns and sackbuts and the hangman returned. She screamed in terror to see him, but when they were alone he also worshiped her and wept bitterly. To let him know she shared his misfortune, she laid her hand upon his head, but she had not the strength to speak.

Soon the soldiers reappeared and put a conical crown of paper upon her head. Then they took her in hand and dragged her out into the misty morning. There was a stake erected in the middle of the bishop’s close. The high sheriff of Lincoln and the sheriff of Nottingham both came, and other lords, and the high sheriff read aloud a charge:

“You have been found guilty of treason against the King, by calling yourself Queen of England, and have carried out a program against his subjects by poisoning of wells and suchlike, and you keep familiars and say you are a witch. By my authority as sheriff of this shire I command that you be tied upon this stake and burned forthwith for treason, and your ashes be cast into the river and never buried in consecrated ground, because you are a witch.”

She could not imagine a horror as great as being consumed by fire. She rolled her eyes with terror, she struggled despite the pain in her legs. She was

weak from her injuries and could not get away. Soon she stood against the tall wooden stake, lashed so tightly there she thought she would be tom into parts. She wept openly before all the nobles and ladies of the shire, even many who had worshiped her, and forgot in her dread that she was Maid.

“Do not bring the torch,” she screamed. “Oh, put it away! Put it away!” But the hangman, still weeping, laid it upon the faggots at her feet.

There was an awful time, watching the fire creep and grow in the wood.

Quite suddenly it pierced her feet as with hissing irons. She certainly could not bear it, and she shook what of her she could shake, which was her head. Then the flames caught to the robe they had wrapped her in and began eating her flesh.

“Oh, Goddess, Goddess!” She raised her face to the sky, to see if she could find the Lady of the Clouds—and she did. Yes, there, the Lady in her endless, ever-changing glory of forms, dancing across the morning as gaily as ever on a Mayfair’s day.

While the flames devoured her she looked upon the white dancing shapes of the clouds, serene in endless blue.

Then she died.

And Amanda, lolling in the Land of Summer, understood the message of this memory. With twisting dread she foresaw what waited for her if she returned to life: another, slower fire.

Chapter 21

Constance stirred her cauldron with the fury of the possessed. She was old, though, and her body protested. These slack arms could not stir forever.

“Amanda, listen to me! Amanda!”

Despite all of her knowledge and her understanding of a situation she had in large measure created, Constance had not expected what was happening. Something immense and strange was coming down the road, a furious, disappointed little girl who somehow lived both in the other world and in this.

Her body was gone to rot but her spirit longed to finish its uncompleted life.

The moment Constance sensed this dead child’s rage she knew she might never get Mandy back. There is no demon more angry than one who does not deserve its fate. The child had been cheated of her lifetime. Her bitterness made her want to hurt others. She had not yet understood the depth of compassion. Without life to teach her, she might never understand.

Why this demon was in Amanda’s death Constance could not imagine. It was as if there were forces outside of Amanda’s own soul commanding her to journey onward. And she was going. Constance could feel it. She stirred and groaned and sweated, but the veils between the worlds got thicker and thicker.

She felt the loneliness that came when a spirit turned away from the circle. “Amanda!”

The little girl was the key. But what had been done to her to make her as she was? Why was she still partly alive? And how could such a thing be? A child like that ought to be far, far into Summer by now.

The only explanation was that some part of her must still be in this world, by some rare process clinging to actual, physical life. Whatever it was, it kept her chained to bitter memories. The only protection from her would be to find out how to break this strange connection.

In her mind’s eye Constance could see the child, pretty enough, dressed in blue—and bearing a stump where her right hand ought to be.

So that was it, the hand.

What gave it life, though? Only devotion and attention could do that, and what warped soul would have so intense a relationship with the severed hand

of a dead child?

Dimly in her vision she could see Brother Pierce approaching. Yes, it was time for him. She had foreseen that correctly, in her long nights of meditation before the *Leannan*, submitting her mind to the shattering guidance of that powerful being. The *Leannan* could have met Constance anywhere, but their meetings took place in the Mabcave on the back of Stone Mountain.

Constance preferred it that way. In her agony she was sometimes noisy. A glance from the *Leannan* could shatter the ego. Many times the *Leannan* had shown her the awful details of the death she had chosen for Constance. Not knowing the future is hard, but knowing it can be excruciation.

In her male form as the King of the Cats, the *Leannan* wove on the loom of time. She wove the life of May well just as she did the journey of Amanda. But it was a rough weave. The will and effort of humankind was what would make it fine.

Now came this angular, guilt-ridden man, straggling along with a few of his followers.

Tom, who had been stalking round and round the witches' circle, stopped and crouched to the ground. A glance at Constance told her everything: the hand was not expected. It contained a fury that did not belong to the world of the living.

It was capable of vast destruction.

A moment later flames roared to life on the far side of the cornfield. Despite them, and the screams that were uncoiling above their crackle, Constance and the Vine Coven tried to keep their circle.

"Moom moom moom moom moom moom," went the chant, turning and flowing between the worlds, almost a thing apart from its creators. "Moom moom moom moom."

There was the barest chance that Constance could relieve the hate of the wronged child, but only if she could understand. To her it was obvious that the hand was connected to Brother Pierce. But why had he kept it? She rowed in the cauldron with her hazel staff, looking for answers.

Shadows flickered in the steamy water, bits and edges of the little girl's horror, her bitter runaway's life, and the man who had taken advantage of her dreams and then denied her everything.

Constance rowed and rowed, but she was old and used up, and the world in the water wasn't patient with her. Her muscles had been defeated ten minutes ago; only her will forced her on. Still, she got no specific vision of what had

been done to the little girl to cause this rage. And where was the hand? On Brother Pierce's person. Good God, it was in his pocket.

She felt her life as a tattered edge; she wanted to drop the hazel rod. Tom glared at her. In his eyes she saw the *Leannan's* image. *Leannan* whipped Constance with a vision of her own dying. Blue flames raced across a ceiling of her future, yellow flames spouted through a floor. The gnarling fire turned her to a black hump. She heard the crackling hiss of her own burning skin. Then there came the pain: she screamed in agony, terrifying the poor Vine Coven. "Chant," she shouted, "chant for your fives!"

"Moom moom moom moom!"

Other witches began rushing past the Vine Coven, cloaks and flaps of canvas grabbed from harvest wagons in their hands, running to the distant screams and flames. Nearby cornstalks were already rattling with wind from the inferno.

The cauldron circle wasn't strong enough to help the enraged child, and so there was little hope for Amanda. "Moom moom moom moom, hear our call! Moom moom moom moom."

There must be no end to the swirling of the cauldron or Amanda would be lost forever. Black wings beat in Constance's mind. "I'm fainting! Help me!"

Tom jumped up on her head and dug his claws into her scalp. The pain of it would have kept Rip Van Winkle awake.

"Moom moom moom moom moom—"

The waters roiled and sputtered, deep with scent of herb and shape of frond, boiling-pot of a few common herbs, window into the human soul. Black, dangerous, interesting waters.

Constance was frantic. Even Tom's claws and his tail tickling her nose could not keep her conscious much longer.

"Moom moom moom moom!"

Black water covered Constance. Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.

She awoke a few seconds later to find the circle shattered, and with it Amanda's last contact with this world.

Why in the name of all holies didn't George Walker resuscitate her? He was supposed to have done it long before now. All of Constance's planning to create a safe journey through the netherworld had been useless. "The only thing you are doing," the *Leannan* had cautioned her, "is sending Bonnie Haver to a terrible end. When you die yourself, how will you explain the

arrogance of what you have done? Will you take her place in hell? What will you do, Constance? Look at you, holding your head high, you arrogant creature! There is no guarantee for Amanda any more than there is for any shaman who attempts the journey. If there was a guarantee of her return, she wouldn't really be dead. You revolt me, not seeing that. How dare you be so stupid, so willful, after all you have been taught. Amanda couldn't enter death if she had a guarantee. She'd come back with mere hallucinations. You're a shameful fool, Constance."

That voice had cut more by its tone even than by its hard words. "I give myself to your mercy,"

Constance had murmured through her tears. The *Leannan's* laughter had tinkled in the cave. Then Tom had come forth, great and roaring, a panther with teeth of steel, and driven her out.

There could be no guarantee. And, absent one, Amanda had died, finally and actually.

"Constance! There's a man on fire!"

She could smell the awful barbecue and gasoline of the burning man, and the matted stench of his burnt hair. They all smelted it.

"Moomoomoom—moom..."

"Chant!"

"Connie, we've lost her. She isn't here anymore."

"Chant!"

Something awful happened. Tom leaped down into the cauldron, disappearing into its boiling interior with an awful howl. Then, rising from the water, came the little girl. She waved her stub of an arm, triumphant. *I am the hand, the hand that takes.*

"You poor child."

A cry from beyond the cornfield and me smoke; "Help us! Help us! This man is dying!" The lo Coven was out there.

They had been in among the corn rows gathering culls for their pigs.

When the fire began crackling in nearby cornstalks, the Vine Coven finally gave up. Between Connie's exhaustion and Amanda's wandering, and now this little girl, they lost all hope.

But then things changed again. Brother Pierce was running, and taking the hand with him. As he ran, the little girl disappeared in a shower of sparks, her eyes flashing toward the departing figure.

Without the demon to block it, the way to Amanda was clear.

“We’ve still got a chance!”

“Moomoomoomoomoom...”

But there wasn’t even a whisper of Amanda.

It really was a great blow. After Constance’s own death the Covenstead would go on, but it would be a diminished thing indeed, weak and prone to the ordinary destructions of life. Without the wisdom of death and the connection to the old traditions Amanda would have brought back, it would last a generation, perhaps two, then fade away.

The Maywell Covenstead would not be the rebirth of a fine and peaceful old way of life after all.

Mankind would continue as before, unable to stop the rape of war, the bleeding of the earth, moving helplessly toward the coming end.

“Help us,” came another call from the corn.

Joan and Joringel were carrying the burned man between them on a canvas tarp. The worst thing about him was his hands, flaking black lumps. “Take him to the house,” Constance commanded.

“It’s too far. He needs help *now*.”

Constance did not like the idea of an outsider, no matter how comatose, being in the village. Joan and Joringel went right past her, crashing through the cornfield, indifferent to the toppling stalks and the flying ears of the corn as yet unharvested.

Constance was wretched with despair over the loss of Amanda, but she had no choice. The situation demanded her presence. She broke circle and followed the others to the village.

Tom didn’t follow, though, because he wasn’t there anymore. As swift as smoke he had crossed Maywell to a certain house. He moved on soundless pads across the basement floor, coming swiftly to the Kitten Kate Room.

What a pleasure it was going to be to deal with this cat-hating maniac. George was going to die a most hideous deserved death. Tom had planned it carefully. But now was not quite the time. Not just yet. He leaped up on the table where lay Mandy and George.

The maniac was weeping softly as he caressed the body of his niece. The cat snuffled at his leg, looked long at his trembling, supine body.

Tom jumped down again and began circling the table. He was panting with rage. “Meow.” The sound penetrated George’s trance deeply enough to wake him, but not so deeply that he was conscious of the presence of a cat. “Uh? Oh, I’m—God, I passed right out!” He leaped from the table, ran over to his

controls.

He felt the blood drain out of him. It had been fifteen minutes! Mandy was irretrievably dead. Fifteen minutes of such ineffable sweetness. He had lain upon her, had kissed the stillness of her lips, had felt her eyebrows tickling his cheeks, had pressed his loins against the quieted sepulcher of her body.

He cried openly, to see what he had done. This had been a last chance, and he had been hypnotized with the pleasure of caressing her dead body. He had ruined everything for himself. Now he was simply a murderer.

“Meow.”

What the hell was that? It couldn't be a cat, not in here, not alive.

He loathed the torture cats on the walls of this room, with their probing eyes and inflammable fur. But their feline skill at causing pain fascinated him.

Something was going very wrong. What if the torture cats were—

But they were just magazine cutouts. He had made them himself, selecting over the years the best and most dramatic of all the cat pictures he had seen.

A huge black Tom rushed along the floor—and with a faint hiss transformed itself into Silverbell at the moment of her burning.

“No! It's not you, you're not alive!” He backed away from Silverbell's blackened, smoking form.

Silverbell growled. She moved forward, wobbling slightly because one paw was burned off. She was between him and the door.

“Getaway!”

He told himself she wasn't real. She was dead. Silverbell, who seemed to have forgotten mis, growled again.

“Won't you ever forgive me? Please forgive me!”

“Forgive yourself,” snarled a tiny, extremely harsh woman's voice.

The voice was so small he could barely hear it, but it smashed into his soul with the force of a hurricane.

Before such power only the truth was left him, and he screamed it out: “I can't! Can't! Can't! Can't!”

The cat was close now, so close that he could see its smoked oyster of a tongue pressing between carbon-blackened teeth.

He kicked the cat hard, and its crisp skin shattered. But muscles and bones, even tom asunder, immediately took up the chase, oozing across the floor.

“God! Oh, God, I've gone nuts. I'm stark raving mad.”

He stomped on the crawling, sliding ruins of the cat, stomped and stomped

until they were only wet marks on the floor. “Jesus. That was a hell of a hallucination. I’ll be needing a Thorazine drip if I keep this sort of thing up. I’ve got to get myself together. Come on, guy. You have a dead body to dispose of.”

There was another meow. Confused, George looked to the ceiling where it had come from.

It was a seething, squirming mass of living cats. George did not even have a chance to scream before they began dropping to the floor, screeching and spitting.

Next the walls came alive As he watched, a huge Persian bulged and oozed into life and leaped at his throat. It grabbed his shoulders with strong claws. Then it sank its teeth into his neck. He felt them pop through his windpipe and deflect the passage of air.

Off the ceiling they came, out of the walls they came, all the cats he had ever known and feared, biting, scratching, squalling, killing him by their sheer suffocating numbers. When the smothering began to hurt, he threw some of them off. But more came, until he was nothing but a jerking hump in the swarm.

He was killed by the living flesh of his guilt.

The cats gobbled him, chewing and swallowing him in chunks, until at the end there was left only a belt, a pair of shoes, and three Bic pens.

The cats returned to the ceiling and the walls. The room grew quiet. Mandy lay in absolute stillness.

Some time later a fly entered the Kitten Kate Room. It circled for a few moments, seeking just the right place to undertake its project.

The fly landed on Mandy’s upper lip. It preened itself carefully, then turned around and began to lay its eggs.

It laid them in the cathedral of her left nostril.

Chapter 22

MOTHER STAR OF THE SEA

The thing the demons couldn't understand was that Marian hadn't died in despair any more than had Moom. She had seen visions of the Goddess from her pyre and been laid in Summer afterward, where her soul had been renewed. Knowing that another fire awaited her return did not stop Amanda from wanting to go back to the Covenstead.

"But you can't, you're dead!"

"George wilt revive me."

"It's too late for that. He's dead, too."

The girl in blue waved her empty wrist, and a hole opened up in the ground. "Go on, look. He's created a lovely hell for himself."

Down the hole Amanda saw George laid out on an operating table, his whole belly opened, his pink insides exposed. She could see the froth of his screams, but thankfully was spared the sound.

Kittens were cavorting in his entrails, batting his intestines about as they might wriggling caterpillars.

She was stunned and appalled to see that she herself was his demon, standing over him with the scalpel that had opened him up. The demon image of herself looked up at her, smiled, and waved the scalpel like a child waving a treasured lollipop.

"Stop it! Please stop it!"

"How? Only he can do that, and he obviously doesn't want to."

"But he can't have chosen such torture, and not from me. I don't hate him!"

The girl snickered. "That image down there isn't you. It's part of him—his impression of you."

"I'm not cruel, I could never do that. Why did he—"

"Demons serve their victims. Only a demon of you can punish away his guilt for murdering you." A brush from her stub closed the hole. "Enough of that. I can show you beautiful things, Amanda."

"That's a lie."

“I offer you the Land of Summer.”

“No. I’m going back.”

“Without the witches to guide you, you can’t. And I destroyed their circle.”
She held up her wrist.

“Something of me is left in the living world. My hand is still there, and it isn’t dead. So I use it to manipulate life.” She laughed aloud, a harsh and bitter cackle.

As she did so, the illusion of the little girl shifted for a slight instant, and Amanda saw what *really* wore that frilly blue dress. It was a hard-shelled something, dark red and many-legged and misbegotten, and it bore the name of Abadon.

It looked at her through its many-lensed eyes, and in every lens she saw the gentle, smiling face of the *Leannan*. “You! It’s really you, it’s all you!”

“No. All except you. I am not part of you.”

“You are my demon. You must be part of me.”

“Oh, the devil take you, Amanda! Why didn’t you educate yourself more thoroughly? Don’t you know that I’m not only *Leannan*, not only Tom, not only Abadon and not really any of them. See what sort of a cat I really am?” She changed again, spitting and grinning, sharp lightning sparking from the buzzing tips of her fur.

“Schrödinger’s Cat!”

“That’s only a concept. More than that.”

Was it against the law of the universe for anything to be only what it seemed?

“Nothing is against the law. The law is its own violation. That is the core of all events, that is Schrödinger’s Cat. Just relax. I’ll take you farther than you ever could have gone yourself.” With that Abadon snapped his scorpion’s tail, Tom hissed, and the conceptual cat spat, and the *Leannan* laughed a laugh so mean it startled Amanda.

She stepped back, stunned by the realization that the world of the dead was at least in part a great slaughterhouse for souls, and the handless child folded into all of these other forms was one of the master butchers. She was leading Amanda toward the clicking maw of something so remorseless that it was willing to devour the frail and precious immortal bits of human beings, a sort of predator of the netherworld, that ate all the best of men as men ate full-ripened fruit or the tenderest parts of animals.

Nothing any man had ever done to any man was as bad as this.

“We’ve got to get going,” the thing in the shape of the little girl said briskly. “Oh, Amanda, you’re just going to love deep Summer. It always makes me so glad when I can take somebody there. I really feel that it makes my job worthwhile.”

Amanda did the only thing she could do: she started to run away.

In an instant Abaddon shed its disguise and leaped on her, grabbing her in enormous pincers and scuttling away with her.

Amanda fought it with teeth and fists. She had expected it to be impossibly strong, so she was surprised when huge plates of its shell came off in her hands. Then she discovered that it was no more difficult to open the pincers than it might be to push aside heavy doors.

When she freed herself, the thing slumped back, whipping its sting about and howling with rage and pain.

“You’re a cheater, you don’t play the game!”

“I told you, I’m going back.”

“You’re dead, you haven’t got the right! This is just the border of hell, baby. There’s terror beyond belief between here and life.”

“I’m going back, and that’s that!”

“You are in violation of the law! Have you heard, ever, of anybody returning from the dead?”

“Osiris. Christ. Lazarus.”

“And little Amanda Walker from Maywell, New Jersey. Don’t make me laugh. Now, come on, you’re wanted elsewhere.”

Amanda strode back toward the garden gate, determined this time to go through it, and stay gone. She opened it and stepped forth.

Before her was a forest, a most unusual forest. From here it didn’t look too nice. It seemed to be made of enormous human legs, festering with sores and ooze.

Amanda reached the gate. Behind her the girl in blue waved her ragged wrist and laughed her angry laugh.

The odor of the forest was pretty bad. Gas gangrene must smell like this, Amanda imagined, clinging to your nasal surfaces as oil clings to water.

“But I don’t have nasal surfaces. I am dead. All of this is an illusion.”

From far behind her there came a shout: “Give my regards to Mother Star of the Sea.” Then the *Leannan*’s needle-sharp laughter once again, merging with another very different sound.

This noise came from beyond the forest, and it was more welcome by far.

One witch, still chanting.

Robin.

“I hear you! I’m coming back!”

But the chanting did not get stronger as Amanda entered (he forest. The stumps grew taller and taller, absorbing all noises. She felt awful and alone and small. A little white bird fluttered gaily. “Come with me, me, me!”

Of course the bird was trouble. Big trouble. But; at the same time, she was out of alternatives. The only place the forest opened up to let her through was where the bird went. She began to follow. It didn’t seem likely but you never knew. Maybe she would get through.

It stank fantastically in among the towers of rotted flesh. They were too close together to pass without touching. Soon she was covered with ooze and scrapings. The bird flew eagerly ahead, deeper and deeper into the forest.

Amanda had to fight with all her strength to retain self-control. She was almost mad with revulsion. The wounds seemed to spit at her. And there was even a sense that unseen hands were caressing her from inside the cracks in the stumps.

What ungodly creatures must make their homes in these filthy things.

“Don’t touch me!”

Nothing replied except the bird, which warbled furiously. “Come on, on, on!”

Amanda couldn’t stand any more. She stopped walking. She stared down at the ground.

And saw that it was a seething mat of long-bodied beetles. “Oh, no! Oh, I can’t bear any more of this!

Why won’t it stop? What have I done?”

“You didn’t play the game! You won’t judge yourself, not you! you! you!” The bird’s eyes were silver pins of hate.

“I am not guilty, that’s how I judge myself! Not guilty!” She stomped into the crunchy surface beneath her. “My name is Amanda Walker and I am not guilty. My name is Maid Marian and I am not guilty. My name is All Women and I am not guilty!”

The beetles were beginning to bore into her feet. She hopped. “I am Moom, full of blood and milk and babies!”

You, woman, are burning in the evidence of your name.

Amanda sank down into the crawling, hurrying masses of beetles. They swept over her like a wave but she just didn’t care. Let the worst happen. She

had gotten herself sent to a very special hell, the one hell not of the condemned's own making: the hell of those who refuse to face their own consciences.

"I don't deserve this! I do not!"

Somewhere far away, something tremendous and kind agreed with her and took an instant's pity on her.

It allowed her to hear a music human beings almost never hear, the sublime harmony that rules and arranges all things.

The final government of the world is this music, coming from no throat nor bird, but from what fingers the harp of creation.

The blessed music of the *Leannan's* harp faded into the rustle of the beetles. It wasn't much, but it suffused Amanda with a new and rare strength. Despite the beetles she raised herself to her full height.

Even so, her face did not clear their mass. In these few seconds she had sunken deep into the hordes of them, so deep that she was swimming beneath their surface.

If she opened her mouth—

She raised her arms, she began to claw slippery handfuls of them, pulling herself upward, crushing hundreds of them at a time in her struggles.

Music, indeed! *This* part of creation at least was all disharmony.

The voice of the *Leannan*: "You chose this, remember."

Amanda's lips were tingling, and feelers were coming in between her teeth and tickling her tongue.

"I don't really have a body! So this isn't actually happening."

But it felt more real than the sharpest living moment.

Her flailing right hand connected with something solid. She felt, she grabbed, she clutched. And she pulled herself out onto the root structure of one of the stumps. The bird was fluttering and shrieking. "I thought you were a goner, goner, goner!"

Amanda dragged herself up out of the morass of beetles. As long as you stood *on* the dam things, they were no problem. Just don't relax. Never relax, not if you are trying to cheat death.

Amanda took a deep breath, and when she did, became aware of a most perplexing new odor.

It was the tang of gingerbread.

She moved by her nose, in the direction of the smell. "That's right, right, right," the bird shrilled. Soon another scent was added, of warm chocolate.

And then one of jelly beans. And then just a hint—wasn't it—of searing steak?

The bird darted, it flopped, it peered at her with its silver eyes. Amanda followed because the smells were from life. They brought tears of remembrance. She had loved gingerbread, and she had baked it often.

It was the essential smell of the best of her past, a mamma-smell from before Amanda could even talk.

Poor Mamma. What a tragedy to leave life unatoned. It is so much harder later.

“Here we are, are, are!” The bird swooped off into a clearing. Amanda's eyes almost popped out when she saw what was there. Nestled in the center of the clearing, in its own pool of thin yellow light, was a most charming little cottage. It was decorated with chocolate drops and jelly beans and taffy whorls. The walls and roof were made of slabs of gingerbread, the chimney was a gleaming licorice top hat. Thick green smoke poured out of it, rising into the hazy air.

Amanda wondered who she saw moving behind that rock-candy window.

The trees pressed closer. The creature in the cottage bustled back and forth past the frosted window, and the smoke poured from the licorice chimney. The little bird spiraled up into the sky and disappeared.

Lucky little bird.

Amanda had no intention of going into that cottage. But not to worry, the door was opening.

The wind curled some smoke across the clearing, and Amanda caught a whiff of overcooked pork. A strangely familiar smell. School food.

There was a dark figure in the open doorway. Amanda stared, almost unable to believe what she was seeing, the long black dress, the white around the face, the silver cross on the breast.

What was a nun doing in a place like this? “I'm Mother Star of the Sea. Glad you've come to see me.”

Amanda thought it better not to say hello.

“Come on in, Amanda, darling. Time for our lesson to begin.”

Oh, yes, it was her all right, despite the fact that she now had the rough voice of a stevedore.

“I think I'll stay out here.”

“Oh, no, my dear. Look, I've got all sorts of goodies for you—candies, cakes, gingerbread.”

“No, I’m okay out here.”

Mother Star of the Sea came forward, prancing, mincing, her arms akimbo, her head lolling from side to side, her jaw snapping.

Perhaps she intended to be amusing, but she could hardly have chosen a more unwelcome appearance.

Ever since she I was three and she’d been chased by a man dressed up as Mr. Peanut, Amanda had loathed and despised all forms of puppets. Little puppets made her skin crawl, but big puppets—life-sized puppets—they rattled their gums in her nightmares.

Even though Mother Star of the Sea was a tremendous puppet, she moved with sinister human purpose.

In another second she was going to grab Amanda with those intricate hinged hands.

Her painted eyes were blank, yet curiously avid. When Amanda turned to run, she found herself pressing against the rubbery flesh of one of the trees that surrounded the cottage. The skin was gray and weak and it gave way. Inside something sucked and swarmed about on itself—a fat, brown serpent of a thing lubricated with yellow mucus.

It had the head of a human being. She thought, perhaps, the face was familiar. Was it Hitler? Stalin? She couldn’t be sure. It bubbled words, “Help me, he-e-lp me...” Then it snarled, its body whipped out, and in an instant coils as hard as iron had swarmed around her.

She saw flashes, she heard an old song, “Lili Marlene,” a German song from World War II. And she felt hot wires digging into every part of her body, digging and exploring.

She felt herself disappearing, becoming less than nothing.

The wires were its teeth: it was eating her soul.

But then there came a rippling surge in the rock flesh, and the song changed to hissing, spitting invective, a *Götterdämmerung* of gutter German. It spat.

Then Amanda was free.

Mother Star of the Sea: “Don’t go near those trees!”

“I didn’t know!”

“Now, will you *please* come with me? The class is waiting.”

“The class?”

“Of course, Our Lady of Grace is a school, isn’t it? Therefore we have classes, or haven’t you put those two amazingly unrelated facts together yet,

my bright girl?” She clamped Amanda’s ear into one of her mechanical hands and started dragging her toward the cottage. “These woods are really far more dangerous than any place on earth. There you can do no worse than die. But here—oh, dear!”

Our Lady of Grace had been a grim place, a Gothic pile full of pale nuns and semidelinquent girls in jumpers and oxford shoes. “But I went to public school!”

“Not when you were eleven. We had you then.”

That was true. “It was only a few months.” Mamma had gotten hepatitis that year and Dad couldn’t begin to cope: they weren’t Catholic, but Our Lady was the closest place Amanda could be stashed.

Mother Star of the Sea clapped her hands. “I’m in the hells of all my girls’ It’s so *nice* to be needed.”

Amanda had hated Our Lady. Sausages were called bangers there and you had to eat them especially if you thought they were greasy and awful, and you had to kneel before the Madonna of the Upstairs Hall when you were bad. And they gave tongue-tashings that made you feel guilty for just being alive.

“You taught me music.”

“And you’re still dancing to my tune!”

“No.”

“All right, now, in you go.”

The cottage was really a classroom. That classroom. It was the most terrible place in her life, so terrible that she had crusted her memory of it with thick amnesia. There she had learned injustice, she had learned to hate, she had learned what evil is.

“Or was it that simple, my dear? Didn’t I love you?”

Didn’t I hold you when you cried, sent to school by your father with a black eye? Amanda, you’ve hurt me. You’ve wronged my lovely name. Aren’t you ashamed?”

The chalk-dust smell of the classroom made her clench her fists. She remembered that Bonnie Haver had once stolen her crayons. When Amanda complained. Mother Star of the Sea blamed her for not finishing her work, and punished her while Bonnie went free.

“I was afraid of Bonnie, dear. She destroyed me, you know. I couldn’t punish her, I had to let her go.”

That afternoon after gym Bonnie and two other girls, Daisy and Mary, had

—
“They drew on me with crayons! They drew all over me and you made me kneel to the Madonna of the Hall because I was a filthy, dirty little girl. They drew on me with my own crayons, and you punished me, you punished me again and again and again, and I said one day I would see you burn in hell, you evil, sadistic old bag of bones!”

“So here you are, feeling guilty for hating me. As you should. And punished you will be!” Her voice got lower, like the growl of a hunting cougar. “Sit down.”

“The desks—they have straps. I don’t think—”

“Have a goddamn seat! I’m your teacher. You’re here to learn about yourself. Now, sit in the desk.”

Amanda sat. With a great clatter of fingers Mother Star of the Sea strapped her into the chair. “There.

Bonnie dear, time to come out and play.”

“Oh, no, not her. Not that—”

“Bully? Yes, she was a bully when she was eleven. Too bad you didn’t know her more recently. She’s gotten really mean.”

Amanda writhed. She really didn’t understand this at all. Why was she here? This wasn’t her hell. She hadn’t done anything to be ashamed of at Our Lady. She’d been a good girl.

“You shouldn’t have despised me. It’s a sin called calumny.”

“You deserved it! You did!”

“I deserved compassion. It would have soothed me like rain.”

What little evil she had done, she had done in those months at Our Lady. There she had hated and hurt, and spread disappointment—but only because she was herself so sad.

Bonnie pranced down the aisle, blond and delicious in her schoolgirl greens, her ponytail flouncing behind her, a vicious-looking ruler in her rattling hand.

“Open your palms.”

“I haven’t done anything.”

“No, but I’ve got a right to my fun. Now, open your palms. This is going to hurt you more than it does me.”

This was crazy. She was getting the same kind of injustice she had gotten at Our Lady, and for no better reason.

“Both hands. Perhaps we can beat some sense into you. Remember, dear,

we just *might* be your friends.”

Unwillingly, sure she was making a mistake, Amanda did as she was told. The ruler whistled a familiar tune, then came down cr-a-ack across two quivering palms.

“That’s one?”

From the front of the classroom Mother Star of the Sea commenced a wooden rumble of applause.

Again the ruler snapped. Despite herself, Amanda yelled. It fell once more. Then another time and another and another. Her palms became purple. The room was echoing with her cries and the laughter of her tormentor.

“Oh,” Bonnie said, pushing an akimbo curl out of her left eye, “that was fun.”

So this was how the demons torture the damned in hell, very artfully.

“Please let me out of here!”

“What? Let the pig out of the slaughterhouse? Come on, dear, there isn’t a chance of escape. Smile, or we’ll feed you to the trees.” Bonnie glared down at her with sparkling, furious eyes. “This cottage is the heart of the forest. And Mother Star of the Sea—she’s Satan herself.”

Amanda looked at her pulsing, agonized hands. “If she’s Satan, who are you?”

“I’m her wife.”

The straps were tight. Amanda bowed her head in defeat and sorrow. She wept, and her tears were real.

They were the first sign of life in the basement where her body lay, a miracle in the secret dark. They fell from the dead, open eyes of her corpse, rolled down her cold cheeks, and dripped onto one of the Bic pens George had dropped when he was doing his own dying.

They dripped also onto the Covenstead, in the sorrow of the afternoon, onto Ivy’s cottage. They made their way through the thatch and pattered down in front of Robin, who sat frozen with grief, staring at the tabletop, and at nothing at all.

Chapter 23

As far as Ivy and Robin were concerned, a drip of perfectly ordinary water spattered on the oilcloth table that stood in the middle of Ivy's cottage. "I hate thatch," she muttered. From the hollow of his loss Robin lifted his eyes and watched his sister stomp about. "Damn," she said, "double damn!"

"Water bind it, no one find it."

"I'm not angry, Robin!"

"I didn't say you were."

"Oh, no. You just recited the last two lines of the anger spell instead. Anyway you're right. Of course I'm mad. A man got burned to death and my thatch is leaking and we lost Amanda!"

Robin got up from the table and put his arms around her. He kissed the tears that were forming in her eyes. She laid her head against his chest. "How are we going to go on without her?" she whispered.

The question intensified Robin's own grief. Outside, the evening wind whispered through the grass.

Constance had carefully prepared him for her coming so that when he finally met her he felt a kind of ecstasy. She was a luminous woman, worth the year's anticipation, all the rituals, and the long hours of instruction. He did not love her, although she was physically appealing. Not until the Wild Hunt did his heart open to Amanda. It was not her increasing power that won him, but rather the open, innocent way she threw herself into the ritual hunt, doing her best to succeed. Her courage and her vulnerability were what made him love her, as well as the old tales and the dim memories... when he was Robin to Maid Marian, so very long ago.

"Now she was dead, and his grief was like a brown cloud spreading not only through his new love but through his hopes for the future as well.

The unstated truth lay in the silence that had fallen between Robin and his sister. The combination of the pressures from Brother Pierce and the death of Amanda could kill the witches' dream. You could feel as a sort of weight on the air that the heart of this place was beating more weakly than it ever had before.

Robin took a deep breath. He could never stand this kind of silence for long. "If we're *real* witches, maybe we can do something about it."

"Like what, aside from burying Amanda?"

“What if we raised the cone of power?”

“In our present state of mind we’d never succeed.”

“Then we’d better change our state of mind! Look, what if the Vine Coven raised such a cone of power you could see it with your eyes closed on a sunny day. Then what?”

“So what do we do with it?”

“Don’t you see—we raise it over Amanda’s body, and we send a wish with it, for her to return to life.”

“Bill—”

“Please use my right name. We’re still witches.”

“Sorry, Robin. Amanda Walker is really, truly dead. Her body is rotting in a basement over on Maple Lane. We don’t even know if there *is* a life after death, in the final analysis.”

“You sensed her in the cauldron circle this morning-. We all did.”

“We felt something. The same kind of strange, enigmatic something we always feel.”

“It was Amanda—I could even see her, sort of.”

“You understand, don’t you, that this whole business of witchcraft could just be—I don’t know—sort of self-hypnosis.”

“Oh, no, it’s not. It isn’t hypnosis at all. You know as well as I do that it’s magical thinking, which is a very different thing. The *Leannan*’s power stems from magical thinking. You and I can do it, to an extent.

We can create vivid visions in our minds, which affect reality. You know, you do magic.”

“I know, I guess I’m just losing heart. I feel like I’ve been kicked in the stomach.”

“We’ve got to try!”

“But you’re talking about raising the dead. That’s a lot more than magical thinking. That’d be a true miracle.”

“I can’t think of her as dead. She was so alive. When I heard her on the Wild Hunt, that unchained voice echoing through the whole of Maywell—well, I discovered how powerful a sudden love can be.”

“Robin, if we try and fail, don’t you see that it’ll demoralize the Covenstead even more? People are in despair. Not only that, they’re scared to death of Brother Pierce. They’re saying we’re under a curse, and I for one think they’re right.”

“Surely people who’re willing to believe in curses are willing to believe

the dead can be raised.”

“She’s been dead for hours!”

“It’s been done in history. Not often, but it has been done.”

“History is a tissue of lies.”

There were voices outside, latecomers back from their day’s commute. Their laughter was comforting.

As soon as they heard the news, though, they became as silent as the rest of the witches.

Soon the six o’clock gong rang. There were no cooking odors among the cottages, and no lights in the night of mourning.

Despite Ivy’s arguments, Robin made the decision that they were going to try this impossible thing. But he had to be careful. Ivy wouldn’t be alone in objecting. People didn’t like to attempt things they thought were beyond their power. Failures weaken magic, and too many failures destroy it.

He had to handle this very carefully. “It’s time to go in and get her,” he said, “if we’re going to bury her here on the Covenstead.”

“Up on the mountain. Near where she saw the *Leannan*.”

“Yes, there.”

He went out into the village, knocking on the doors of the dark houses until he had the Vine Coven assembled. Some of the others wanted to come, too, which was fine with him..The only trouble was a lack of transportation.

“Why don’t (he rest of you prepare a lying-in-state?”

“At me house?” a voice asked from the dark.

If he sent them up to the house, they would all discover the secret of how dejected Connie had become.

She had retreated there, he knew, to hide that fact from her people. “I have a feeling Amanda would have preferred it on the Fairy Stone.”

There was general agreement to that. The Vine Coven set off, going in the Covenstead’s two station wagons. As they drove out through the silent farm, past the blackened field that Brother Pierce and his men had burned, Robin wondered if they might really have somehow brought a curse down upon themselves.

They reached the edge of the farm, then the limit of the estate itself. The lights of the cars played on the scar of the fire, and then on the purple stains in the road. He still had stickers in his hands from picking those blackberries.

There was a sharp *ping* from the hood.

Ivy, sitting beside him, peered forward. Just then there was another one.

This time a long crack slit the windshield.

From the back seat somebody screamed.

Robin hit the horn to warn the wagon behind them and jammed the accelerator to the floor. The car lunged and slurried until the tires caught the asphalt. Then it shot ahead, its old engine roaring and rattling.

Somebody shouted a charm. "Things of the night, take flight."

Robin was forced to slow down out of fear that he would lose control in the turn. People in the car were silent, stunned by surprise and fear. "They weren't actual bullets," he said, "or the windshield would be shattered. Pellets or even BB's. We weren't in any real danger."

He did not add what they all knew, that it was only a matter of time before this sort of thing escalated to open warfare. The people lurking at the gates were building courage.

"They must have somebody there all the time. I hadn't realized that."

"We'll post guards," Wistena said. "We'll have to."

Robin pulled over, motioned the following wagon to come parallel. "You folks all right?"

Grape was driving. She gave him a tight smile. They went on, down West Street to Main, then up Main and across Bridge to The Lanes. There were a lot of cars in front of 24 Maple Lane.

From the house there came soft singing. The town covens must have assembled there spontaneously as soon as Constance had called them with news of the tragedy.

It occurred to Robin that he was going to have to see Amanda's dead body in a few minutes. He feared for his own ability to believe in her life, then. Ivy touched him. "You're trembling, brother."

From behind, Wisteria put her hand on his shoulder. "We're all with you, Robin. Remember, she's in the Land of Summer now. The Goddess is taking care of her daughter."

It was very hard, this new experience of grief.

Sky-flower opened his door for him. They had been initiated on the same day, he and she.

Robin began to approach the house. It was full of people, of course, not only the town witches but a large part of the Christian community as well. Most of the genuine Christians of Maywell viewed the witches with wary respect. Only Brother Pierce's followers hated, and Robin did not think of them as Christians.

A queen had died, and she would be honored among all the good people of this town. He could hear that they were singing one of the Covenstead's own songs, one of the most beautiful.

“Somewhere there is a river
Somewhere there is new youth.
Oh, let me drink the cooling water
Let me bathe my soul in truth.”

Just as the song ended, Sheriff Williams came tromping up the basement stairs. “Evening, Robin,” he said. He embraced Robin, pressing him against his cigar-smelling shoulder.

“We got shot at, Sheriff. Just at the entrance to the estate.”

“I’ve got my deputy out there.”

“We didn’t see him.”

“Well, I’ll talk to him about it.” He looked at Robin out of stricken eyes. The sheriff had given up a great deal for his beliefs and his lifelong love of Constance Collier.

“You going down to the basement, Robin?”

“I’m going down.”

To get through the house they had to step over people, covens sitting close to one another, clustering around their priestesses and priests, and Catholics and Episcopalians and Methodists with their pastors.

Even people who had not known her sensed the wonder of her.

When they reached the mudroom and Robin saw the ugly little hatch to the cellar, his throat constricted.

She had gone down into that dark place to face death.

“She tried to get away,” the sheriff said laconically.

“Made it as far as her car. He dragged her back.”

Robin could hardly bear to listen.

“Fred, we’re coming down.”

“Okay.”

“Robin?”

“Yes, Sheriff?”

“Look, it’s kind of bad.”

“I want to. I’ve got to.”

The sheriff put a big hand on Robin’s neck. “In love with a witch. I know

just what you're going through, boy."

"We will gather at the river,
the beautiful, beautiful river..."

They were singing again, the strong voice of the Episcopal rector leading the rest.

The basement stank of dank earth and something else, something like overheated electrical wiring.

Something awful. "We haven't moved her, Robin," Fred Harris said. "We'll carry her up as soon as the casket comes."

Casket. Robin hated that word. He remembered their one experience of lovemaking, upon the humid earth, the moon setting red and low, she so full of all the furious urgency of the hunt, her body running with sweat and slick with the oils of the ritual, reeking of horse and human heat and the thick scent of love.

Cold caressed Robin as he moved forward toward the little room where Mandy lay. Lights had been hung by the sheriff's people, and the place glared harshly.

"What is this? What are all these... cats?"

"He was crazy. We just didn't know how bad he was. Not even Connie."

"Where is he. Sheriff?"

"We found his belt and some ballpoint pens down here. And there was blood on the floor. There's no sign of a body."

"Why do you think he's dead?"

"She isn't wounded, so the blood must have come from him. He's dead, all right." He gestured at the vast bloodstain. "People don't bleed that much and live. Who killed him and what they did with the body we do not yet know."

"This room is—"

"She had courage to come here."

Robin could hardly bring himself to go to her, so hideous was the place, jammed with the jumble of George's strange scientific apparatus, haunted by the pictures of cats.

Robin forced himself to cross the basement, past the bulging furnace, to the little chamber. Closer, the profusion of cats was almost unbelievable. Perhaps because of all of the cat images, this place seemed connected to him,

almost a part of him. “Tom is a black spark,” Constance had once said, “from the eye of Death.”

“Kate should have told us about this,” Robin said. “She was probably afraid. Look at the place.”

When he thought about it, Robin realized that it was impossible that Kate Walker had kept this secret from Constance. Of course Connie knew all about it. She knew exactly how dangerous George Walker was. When Robin peered into the death chamber, he felt the presence there as a thickening of the dark.

“Tom, is that you?”

“Who?”

“Connie’s familiar. The one she was going to give to Mandy. I sense his presence.”

“There’s nothing like that here, Robin.”

“I don’t think Tom’s going to show himself.”

“That cat scares the hell out of me. It’s too old, for one thing. At least forty, by my count. In my time as a witch, it’s appeared once when Connie was a girl and Hoboes shot her to make her a shaman—that was in the twenties, for God’s sake—then when Simon Pierce came to town, and now I’ve seen it around, sulking along here and there.”

Robin didn’t bother to mention that Connie owned a painting of Tom done in 1654.

He took a deep breath He could delay no longer, and looked down at the form on the table.

Even in death she glowed. Her beauty, Robin thought, could defy the grave. Her face had been caught in a living expression. Her eyes were open, the fine brows knitted as if in puzzlement. Her hands were clasped in her lap. “We removed the bindings,” Fred Harris said. “She was tied to the table.”

Robin prayed in his own private, wordless way, to the Goddess who awed him and the God he loved He let their images ride in his mind, the tall, pale Goddess and her shadowed consort, moving as ever in the Land of Summer. He wanted their comfort now.

Through the basement windows there came a honking of many horns and the ragged sound of human rage. “Damn,” the sheriff said, “they just ain’t gonna leave us alone, are they?” The honking horns obtained an angry rhythm, their notes long and bitter.

“One of theirs died today, too.”

“Robin, that man was trying to burn down your farm!”

“He died a hard death.”

The people outside were literally growling, their voices dull and deep, as the fall of rain upon a place already drowned. “I’d better get up there and give them a little hell,” the sheriff said. He fumed off across the basement.

Robin went around to the head of the table. He thought to close her eyes. “You can’t, buddy,” Fred Harris said. “Too late to change the expression.”

He did not want her to stare like this. It wasn’t a dead expression. Despite how cold it was, her body retained the suppleness of living muscle. In a way this was much more awful than the fixed stare of an ordinary corpse.

She was so obviously not at peace. “Isn’t there any way at all?”

“I can make ‘em look closed, but I have to take her back to my workroom.”

Her eyes were the shade of the moon dimming toward morning. Constance had said: “Every one of us has a hidden name, our *real* name. When you call her to the circle, call Moom.”

“Moon?” they had asked.

“No, with an ‘m.’ Moom is her real name. The *Leannan* calls her that.”

“Good-bye, Moom. Fare you well.” He visualized her on an old forest road, suitcase in hand, walking quickly away. Long breaths of sorrow filled him.

He was granted a vision of Moom: a dumpy little brown ball of a human being, reeking of fire smoke and rancid fat, full of thigh-slapping pride and laughter. That was the young Moom. Now the ancient soul seemed to stand over him, its face grave with the wisdom of very long time. “I feel her. She’s right in this room.”

“Come on, now, the casket’s arrived.”

Robin wanted just another minute alone with her, but there were a whole lot of people waiting and outside the din was getting louder. There were thuds. Rocks hitting the house. Sheriff Williams could be heard shouting, but he wasn’t having much effect. Upstairs the singing went on. “Amazing Grace,” then the Pentagram Chant. “Pentagram glow, bring us tight and glow, oh, glow, pentagram glow...” Ivy led it in her powerful voice.

“You go on up, Robin. Tell some of my guys to come down and help me.”

“I’ll help you.”

“You don’t have to—I’ve got plenty of men upstairs.”

“I don’t mind touching her. I want to.”

Her body was slack and cold. To put his hands on her like this, when in his

imagination she was so warm and full of life, was really very difficult. But it was right. This was his responsibility, this body.

They got her strapped to the stretcher and carried her across the basement. Other hands took her up the ladder. When Robin arrived at the top, the stretcher was just going around the corner into the living room. The house was full of winking yellow light. The Bees had arrived with boxes of their handmade candles.

Others unstrapped her from the stretcher and laid her in the simple coffin favored by the witches of Maywell, a box of hand-rubbed pine, tightly made. "Let the flesh return quickly to the Mother," Connie said. The box was a concession to state burial laws.

Ruby of the Rock Coven came to the head of the coffin. She looked long at Amanda. "We'll go back in procession," she said. "Rock will carry her all the way to the mountain."

They closed the coffin then, and Fred Harris bustled up. "You're going to walk all that way? That's two miles."

Ruby was Fred's daughter Sally in the outside world. Robin wouldn't have challenged her like that.

"There are plenty of us," she snapped. "We want to do it this way."

"That crowd out there—"

"There's a crowd in here, too!"

"Okay, honey, I meant no offense. I was just pointing out the facts."

"We want to show our strength. And to respect our dead." With that Ruby was joined by the rest of her coven. They surrounded the coffin and took its gleaming brass handles. Others gathered before and behind them, witches and town people alike, all carrying candles.

The local churches preached acceptance, and the witches in turn respected them. Together the group, Christians and witches alike, filed out into the rage of the night.

Brother Pierce was standing in the back of a jeep, his jutting jaw flashing in the glare of gasoline lanterns and powerful searchlights. After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 a wave of survivalism had swept his congregation. World War III had not broken out, but they had not abandoned their preparations.

Station wagons, jeeps, pickups, and powerful four-wheel-drive trucks were their vehicles of choice.

"You are the harlot of the Devil," he roared, pointing at the advancing

procession. “You killed a man today, you murdering demons!”

Ivy was the first to start singing. “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

“You see nothing but the darkness and evil of your hearts! What are you doing—celebrating our sorrow?”

Brother Pierce and his flock had been attracted to the house by the crowd assembled there, not by any knowledge of what had happened to Amanda.

His spitting voice mingled with the hymn. For an instant Robin saw his face clearly in the sweep of a searchlight from one of the trucks. His expression was not one of hate. It was beyond that. You couldn’t look at it.

The entire crowd lapsed to silence when the coffin was -brought out the door. In the back of his jeep Brother Pierce made a sullen hissing sound. Slowly one of the lights came about and fixed on the Rock Coven and its burden—

They were humming softly, a nameless song of woe.

Brother Pierce pointed at them. “Rejoice, for death has taken one of the evil!” He hugged himself, twisting and smiling to the night sky. “For wickedness burneth as the fire; it shall devour the briars and thorns, and shall kindle in the thickets of the forest, and they shall mount up like the lifting up of smoke!

Oh glory, oh hallelujah!”

He began to clap, and each clap of his long, narrow hands exploded through Robin’s sorrow. But Ruby had been right, so very right! They belonged here, with their burden.

A song burst from the throats of Brother Pierce’s followers: “We’re gonna tell the world about this!

We’re gonna tell the nations about that! The battle’s done, the victory’s been won. There’s joy, joy, joy in our hearts.”

How quickly they forgot their own dead.

The procession left the street at last, leaving Brother Pierce and his jubilant mob behind. Father Evans fell in beside Robin. “I hope you can forgive them, Robin.” His head was bowed. “I’m trying myself.”

“Are you succeeding?”

“No.”

“It’s that much harder for us, Father. For me, I loved her, you know.”

“The rector told me how important she was to you. Still and all, that nude

ride—”

“That’s our way!”

“Okay, let’s not get into that. Just know that it sure upset the Catholics. You oughtn’t do things that violate the town ordinances.”

“We had a parade license.”

“The nudity—”

Robin really didn’t want to have an argument with Father Evans. “I doubt if you’ll see another Wild Hunt.

This Covenstead will probably disband.”

“If I’m ever needed—”

“Thank you, Father.”

The procession straggled along, a bobbing line of lights, an occasional murmur of song. Up front the pallbearers were chanting quietly to keep themselves going. The Rock Coven was determined to carry her all the way. They were a heavy work team, building and maintaining roads on the estate, rooting stumps, making wattle and erecting cottages, hauling beams. Still, there was a weight in that box that must drag them down more by far than the heaviest stump.

As they marched they drew more and more people from their homes, until it seemed as if all the town that was not with Brother Pierce was in the procession.

“Are there any more candles?”

“Dad!”

“Connie called me. It’s a terrible thing, son.”

Robin couldn’t answer. His mother had come down from the house as well. She and Ivy were walking together just behind.

They entered the main gate of the estate, which had been thrown open for the occasion. “Who was she, son, really?”

“She’d been coming to us for a long, long time. We belonged to her.”

The great old forest that separated the estate from Maywell was filled with the peace of nature. Some small creature screamed among the trees, and great wings swept away. By the time they passed the house the procession was more tightly packed, in part because there were more people and in part because the Rock Coven, struggling at the front with the coffin, was slowing down. The house was totally dark.

It was some little time before Robin saw Constance standing on the front porch. Around her the ravens clustered in unaccustomed silence. In her black

cloak and hood she might have been a statue, faintly sinister in the light of the moon. She raised her head and Robin thought she might be about to speak. But then she came forward. She joined her people, and Robin was very glad—

The coveners had laid a way of hooded candles up the mountainside, each one carefully placed among stones to avoid the danger of fire. Even so, it was rough going, and not everybody was prepared for the journey. Even some of the town witches fell by the wayside. They joined others gathering in the fields, and as Robin negotiated the rough path he heard them beginning to sing together. Ahead the Rock Coven struggled mightily with their burden.

When Robin reached the Fairy Stone, the coffin was already placed upon it. People made a ring of candles around it, which guttered in the wind, flickering reflections of the mourners in the polish of the casket. The witches formed a circle. Behind them the townspeople who had made it this far. Stood or sat.

A deep silence came. Far off the wind moaned, its voice echoing through all the Endless Mountains. The moon stood bright and high amid the stars. Robin looked up at it, and the living intensity of its gaze awed him. This night, he thought, the old moon is an eye into eternity.

Chapter 24

REQUIEM FOR A WITCH

There had never before been a funeral like this in the Covenstead. In the deep silence there was a black flash of movement, then Tom jumped up and stood on the lid of the coffin.

His eyes were so fierce that Robin literally could not meet them for more than an instant. They burned green and they challenged, almost accused.

Constance Collier walked forward until she stood before the coffin, face-to-face with the huge, glaring creature that crouched upon it. The wind whipped her cloak. She spoke in a clear, soft voice, directly to Tom.

“O Great Irusan, King of the Cats, keeper of the doors of death, take this daughter of life safely through the shadowed abode. Keep her in your timeless kindness, lead her into the cleansing water. Smile upon the descent of the living, O Great God, as they go in thy lands of dark and laughter.”

She turned. “Robin. Come here.”

He forced himself to approach her, and thus also the cat Tom seemed to have become twice his normal size, the tips of his fur glowing blue, his claws digging into the lid of the coffin. “We want you to invoke now, young man,” Constance said.

“Invoke?”

“Call Ama. The Dark Mother.”

Constance stood behind him, a trembling wraith, her breath rattling, her right hand steadily rustling the cloth of her cloak. The wind had been rising since they had arrived on the mountain. Now it seemed to gather itself and pour down upon them in a great, cold breath. Their candles sputtered and guttered out, the flames driven away by its enormous force.

Robin was not dressed for this; he was cold. Jeans and a sweater were never meant to keep out the breath of such things as were approaching this circle.

He searched his mind, but he could recall no familiar form for calling Ama. She was the aspect of the Goddess associated with empty fields and winter’s waiting. She was also the mistress of secrets.

As best he could, he invented an invocation. “I call to you, sterile Mother. I call to you, Ama of the empty fields. I call to you, mystery Mother. Take

your daughter through Death's cold pleasure, lead her, gentle Mother, all the way to the Land of Summer." His voice was snatched and harried by the wind.

Without the candlelight the faces of those around him had been transformed by the moon, which hung more than half full, high over the mountains. Very faintly, from down in the valley, Robin could hear the others singing.

"Silver water of the sky
Flow forever, flow forever
Until I know why,
Until I know why."

The Song of Sorrows. It had not often been sung in this place.

Suddenly Father Evans began to speak. "May I add something, Connie, on behalf of your visitors?"

"Of course, Al."

"This is from Ecclesiastes. Take it as a message from my God to yours." He bowed his head. "In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, and the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low:

"Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:

"Or even the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.

"Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return to whom gave it."

There was silence then, for a very long time Constance spoke again: "Let us tell the story of the descent of the Goddess. Heed it well, for each of us shall go also upon that bourne."

Always before Robin had heard this story in the joyous context of the Sabbats. He gave the opening:

“The Lord of the Flies, Godfather and Comforter, stood before the door into silence.”

All the witches responded: “And the Lady came unto him, and sought the matter of the mystery of death; so she journeyed through the portal on behalf of those who had to die.”

“Strip thyself, Bejeweled Lady, for the cold is cold and thy bones are bones.”

Softly, gently, Tom began to howl. Only at the rarest of moments will a cat do this, in high sorrow and in the night.

Constance continued, her voice cast low beneath his keening cry. “So she gave her clothing to the earth, and was bound with the memory of summer, and went thus with open eyes into the empty voice of the pit.

“She came before Death in the nakedness of her truth, and such was the beauty of her nakedness that Death knelt himself down, and lay at her feet as a gift the Sword of Changes.”

The witches sighed in unity with the wind, and one spoke for them all, “Ours is the faith of the wind, ours the calling in the night.”

“Then Death kissed the feet of Summer, saying, ‘Blessed be the feet that brought you in the path of the Lord of Ice. Let me love thee, and warm myself in thee.’ ”

The witches made a sound as of whispering snow.

“But Summer loved not the purple hour, and asked of him, why do you pin frost to my flowers?”

The witches were humming a wordless inner song. Behind them the townspeople glanced at each other in wonder, for they had never heard such a sound. High and yet vibrant, deep and yet full of laughter, and sorrowing with the sorrow we all know, but which is not named in any human language.

” ‘Lady,’ Death said, ‘I am helpless against me dropping web of time. All which comes to me, comes.

And all which departs, departs. Lady, let me lie upon thee.’ ”

The humming grew louder, merging with the cat’s voice.

“The Lady said only, ‘I am Summer.’ ”

“Then Death scourged her, and there were storms and ashes.”

The humming stopped. Tom crouched as if ready to spring at Constance’s throat. She stood before him, her head high, the wind billowing her cloak.

“And she gave voice to her love in the fertile voice of the bee, and death was glad before her.”

“Now the mystery of mysteries: love death, ye who would find the portal of the moon, the door that leads back into life.”

All together: “Upon us, O Summer, leave the five kisses of resurrection. Blessed be.”

Constance had thrown back her hood. “Blessed be.” She glanced around. “Cemunos blows his horn this night, my children. Rocks, in the morning take her and bury her back in the mountains.”

“But the *Leannan* doesn’t let us go beyond the Stone.”

“The law is lifted for this burial. She is wanted there.” She took Robin’s hands in hers. “You Vines, will you watch over her tonight?”

“I will,” Robin said. The other Vines joined him. They stood close together as the rest of the procession wound its way down among the rocks. Soon the last sound of the departing crowd was absorbed by the night.

All became silent but for the wind and the rustle of Tom pattering about in the dry brush. The coven joined hands.

It was not until Wisteria said in a soft voice, “Look over by the rowan,” that Robin even thought of the fairy. But they had been here of course, observing everything. He saw them now, dark small shapes stealing forth from the great shrub. Their jackets and caps hardly reflected the moonlight at all.

Robin’s heart began to pound. A chill swept his body. He reached out, and found the hands of other coveners waiting for his own.

The fairy came close, at least a dozen of them, pausing not ten feet in front of the coven. They had bows no more than a foot long, and arrows that looked insignificant to Robin’s eyes. But he knew not to move an inch; those arrows were infamously lethal. Constance said that in the distant past they had killed mammoths with them.

The rustling grew louder.

The fairy smelled strong and sweet and nothing like human beings at all. Were they bearded or not?

Young or old? He couldn’t see.

Then there was a change. One moment the air was empty, the next a little woman was standing above the coffin. She shone in the moon, or perhaps she gave her own light. Robin looked upon her face, and saw in it such love and joy that he clapped like a delighted child, he could not help it.

Wisteria lifted shaking hands to her. She reached forward and touched Wisteria’s fingers. Then the other Vines crowded close about the coffin, and

each in turn was touched.

Close to her Robin could see the perfection of her body, the smooth, unearthly light of her skin. She came face-to-face with him. A thousand feelings roared through him: mad, lascivious passion, tender love, terror, lust, pleasure, laughter, all the wildest extremes of the heart.

She parted her lips and closed her eyes and raised her face to be kissed. He was shaking so badly he could hardly hold his lips open. He drew close to her, and into a scent that engaged his deepest, most private memories. In the single instant of that kiss he knew his whole *lang syne*, from the moment he had found Moom cracking walnuts in the forest to the awful night he had seen the bishop's men capture Marian, through the sad houses of all the years to now.

There was a rush of frowning forests and dances, and then the *Leannan* turned away from him and stepped off into the dark.

She seemed to go upward, and all eyes followed her. At first what they saw was incomprehensible. Then Grape screamed. Across the sky, enormous beyond understanding, blotting out the stars, were two enormous cat's eyes.

They glared until the witches hid their faces, and huddled like rabbits beneath a circling hawk.

It was some time before anybody moved or spoke. One by one, though, they looked up again.

They were alone with the night.

Robin was seething with an energy beyond anything he had ever felt before from even the most intense ritual. Around him the other coveners were the same, their eyes glowing with the light that had spread from the *Leannan's* body.

He knew he had to act, or give up. "Please," he said, "let's try to reach Amanda. Let's try the cone of power."

Without a word of protest they made the circle. They were with him.

BOOK THREE:

The Black Cat

*Within that porch, across the way,
I see two naked eyes this night:
Two eyes that neither shut nor blink,
Searching my face with a green light.*

*But cats to me are strange—
I cannot sleep if one is near:
And though I'm sure I see those eyes
I'm not so sure a body's there!*

—William Henry Davis, “The Cat”

Chapter 25

The class of one sat before her teacher.

Mother Star of the Sea capered, her habit flying about her, wimple on the floor, naked wooden head bobbing, smile working as she darted in and out, pinching her student and scolding like a parrot.

Mandy was being pinched away by crumbs and bits. The worst part of it was how badly she missed herself.

“Somebody,” she wailed, “somebody!”

“Will I do?” Bonnie Haver reappeared.

“Get me out of here! Somebody, please!”

Mother Star of the Sea rattled to attention. “You vant out? Jawohl! Outenzee hellhole! Sure. You can be a ghost, you have that right. So, soul, take flight!”

Amazingly, Mandy was free! Blowing like a bit of pollen on the autumn wind, blowing through long black mountains.

Familiar mountains.

The Endless Mountains. And there was the Fairy Stone. Mandy’s heart hurt to see the witches huddling together against the wind, and her own coffin.

It was high night in the Endless Mountains. Mandy had become one with the air, guttering the candles about the coffin, whistling through sweaters and under cloaks, caressing the ones she had loved and lost.

She was here, but she was helpless. So this was what ghosts were all about.

So close to her people and yet so separated, Mandy felt a desolation of loss. She could hardly stay still enough to touch her own clean coffin, much less return to the body that lay within. She slipped and eddied about while they prayed into the hollow darkness. She came close to Robin, and the grief in his face tormented her terribly.

“I love you,” she said, and the wind of her words made Robin shake in his sweater. “I’m right here with you. Can’t you hear me?”

He huddled into his clothing and lowered his head-before the persistent gusts that were the spirit body of his lover.

She roared in anger because they could not see her, but only managed to put out all their candles. Then she quieted herself.

The night upon the mountain became as still as a bedroom. She heard their

soft voices as they spoke encouragement to one another. How tired and beaten they were. Her heart suffered for them. She was so close, but so helpless.

In life we think of ghosts as rarities. We do not know that every rustle and squeak, every scratch of twig upon the screen or moan of wind along the eaves, is someone passing in the journeys of the night.

Mandy saw the first hopeful thing that had come to her since she died: Tom ran across the sky. His eyes were stars, his body the whole firmament, his tail the kink in the Milky Way.

Mandy wanted to hammer on her coffin, to dive into her body. Please! Let me go back to them!

As she flitted and blew along, she saw the *Leannan* coming across the mountain with her guards. As they crept into the rowan, Mandy had the odd thought that one could look on the fairy as a species that had developed a technology of, the spiritual world, Just as man has developed one of the physical. Using this magic, the Fairy Queen could rule here and also walk in the world of the dead. The science that supported her must be a strange and glorious thing—theories that were experienced as dreams; snatches of song that were powerful machines.

For her part, Mandy wasn't in control even of herself. One moment she could be close to the ground, the next high in the air. Then she might be in Robin's hair, then scudding among the stones.

Was the *Leannan* going to kiss him? She hoped so, that would help him! She began to plead on his behalf: "Please, *Leannan*—"

Then she saw puppet grins nearby. "No, not yet, don't take me back!"

"But Mandy, this is the perfect time."

"You said I had the right!"

"You did, but you've used it up."

No sooner could she smell the candy stink of the cottage than she felt herself falling down its licorice chimney.

She was back in hell's schoolroom.

Robin heard the wind wailing, its voice echoing through the Endless Mountains to the north, and moaning south in the gentler reaches of the Peconics.

He couldn't even start the cone of power, so overcome he was by the *Leannan's* kiss. Her loveliness had struck him temporarily dumb.

More than that, it had sent through him a current that seemed to have washed every cell of his flesh with new sensitivity. He looked out on the world from revised eyes, and the world was not the same. Beneath him the soil now seemed a surging flesh. Every stone was an eye, every blade of grass a nerve ending. Earth was not just alive, it was more than that: it was shockingly aware. It knew him as it knew every man, woman, and child, every tree and every animal that was resident upon its body. And it was watching them all, quietly, endlessly, like a mother dreaming over her children. Wisteria began raising the cone of power, and Robin was grateful to her, to them all. Finn hands took his own. The coven was confident in their rituals; they had the balance of professionals. They raised the cone with a series of sounds, called the Chants of the Long Tones.

Wisteria started the whispery humming.

Soon other voices joined, each so familiar to Robin, each the voice of someone who was far more than a friend or even a lover. People who do real magic together become close in ways that words cannot say.

They chanted into the silence of the mountains, into the wind, into the living sky. Robin looked to the center of the circle, just above the coffin, for the shimmering red moon the coven sometimes saw when they raised the cone of power, but only the darkness there returned his glance.

At first Mandy did not understand. What were those funny little joints her demons were putting together—wooden knuckles? They were building hands, arms, a new puppet.

Then she screamed, she pushed and struggled at the straps that bound her once again to her chair. Lying on teacher's desk was a gleaming, enameled wooden head. And on that head was a caricature of her own face.

"I couldn't smile like that. I've never hated anybody enough"

"Oh, no? We're *your* demons, Mandy. We make whatever serves your guilt. Do you think the real Mother Star of the Sea would be in hell—not that good woman, took!"

Suddenly there appeared in Mandy's lap a shimmering mirror, and in the mirror was an explosion of loveliness such as she had never imagined, smooth and cool and green, long hills and the perfect voice of joy, a young woman raising song. It hurt to see her, this real Mother Star of the Sea.

"She'll never know you chose her to be your demon." The puppet Mother snapped her jaws. "She's a saint! I'm your sin, not hers."

Full of snide laughter, she and Bonnie assembled their new marionette. Mandy watched, stumped in her straps.

Mother Star of the Sea approached. She was wearing a surgeon's mask. In her hand was a hacksaw. "I'm going to take out *your* brain and put it in *this* head." Bonnie opened the hinged top of the noggin. "Think of it, a miracle of modern science."

Mandy looked desperately about. Bonnie was behind her now. Strong hands held her head steady.

Mother Star of the Sea laid the saw against her temple.

This is just an illusion, she thought miserably. I don't have a body.

The first cut crunched through her hair. Then a prancing migraine—fire in her skull, nails being driven between bone and brain—made tears flow and her nose run. Her eyes rolled in agony with each rhythmic burr of the blade.

After this was done she was never, ever going to go back, she knew that. She was going to become some inconceivable part of hell.

She was dimly aware of three new schoolgirls at the front of the room testing the joints of the puppet, making it snap its jaw and rattle its fingers.

Somehow, in her agony and despair, she had an idea. What was the opposite of the demon's anger? Not love. They would jeer at that. It was compassion, rich, deep, abiding compassion. She could damp the fires of her own guilt with it.

She summoned up what strength lay at her command, she forced herself to think, to form words, to talk:

"I forgive you," she said. "I forgive all of you."

The sawing stopped.

The girls playing with the puppet dropped it and stared at her, their eyes glassy.

Bonnie released her head.

"Damn," Mother Star of the Sea said.

"I forgive you and I—I love you. I love you all no-matter what you do to me."

There was thick silence. Then Mother Star of the Sea burst out laughing. "That old cliché! Love thy neighbor! What a load of crap!"

But she had thrown her saw to the floor.

"Unstrap me."

Bonnie came dutifully forward. In a moment Mandy was free. She stood up, she turned.

There were tears in the eyes that watched her. These were all part of her, every one, no matter what else they had become.

“I’m sorry.” It was all she could say. To turn one’s back on guilt is not difficult. After all, the deeds had been done, the wrongs committed. She understood how she had turned away from her mother and father when she could have embraced them in their need. But the past was the past, she did not need these demons to punish her. Mother and Dad were dead. Her best had not been good enough to heal their lives. Any effort she had made on their behalf would have failed. The lesson was, she should have tried.

The lesson had been learned. It was possible to melt the heat of Mother’s anger with her own soul’s spring. Compassion, acceptance of self. I did wrong, and now I have paid. She left the demon schoolroom.

Behind her there arose a great howling and clattering of puppet joints. She walked on, though. They were tragic and she could not help them, but she would never forget those parts of herself.

As she moved through the forest, the stumps shook and swayed and seemed to beckon her closer to their rotted sides.

Death never gave up.

“I am leaving you. I can’t help you.”

Soon she came to the border of the terrible woods, heart pounded, her mind sang with her triumph.

The view before her was so vast, so extremely awesome, that she almost lost her balance.

Beyond the formless edge of the world of the dead a whole galaxy was revolving, its stars shining in colors too subtle and exquisite to be named. The light of stars is their voice; their language is the color of that light.

The earth, a small green ball, lay in a tremendous, withered palm. Evil, huge beyond imagining.

I am the hand. The hand that takes.

All about wheeled other empires of stars. Hundreds of billions of fiery beings going in the orbits of their time, carrying planets and lives and rivers and storms.

The voices of the stars were raised in vespers, for the whole universe was at evening.

I am the hand.

But not only that. Death is also rebirth. In the very act of taking life, she returns it to the land. Spring flows from winter; the rose takes root in the

rotted flesh of the shrew.

She may be the hand that takes, but she is also a little girl running along a lane between lilac hedges, beneath kindly old oaks, who converse as she passes new growth of purest green.

She could not see details of the earth below her. She did not even know what she might be standing on.

She was just here, millions of miles out in space, lost.

Then she heard a familiar human sound, a vastly distant whisper of a chant.

The coven. But how could she hear them—from here the earth was no more than a pinprick in the night.

If she heard them, though, perhaps she might find them. Behind her was death, before her the whole gulf of space. She did the only thing she could: she jumped. She sailed out and down, trusting, hoping, that she would land in the right place.'

There came a familiar girlish voice in her ear: "I'm going right along with you. I'll be there waiting for you when you land. I am death, and you will not escape me." The girl with the missing hand shot off, leaving a blazing track in the sky.

As she had at the moment of death, Mandy felt the awful, windless falling. She tried to will herself in the direction of the chant. There lay home.

High above the witches' circle a meteor passed in the sky, glowing across the face of the moon. They had been working for two hours, and still the cone had not appeared. Every few moments the Chant of the Long Tones was interrupted by the sound of Ivy clearing her throat. Grape was shivering. Earlier Wisteria had endured a coughing fit.

The wind pushed and challenged and demanded. Every time another frigid wave covered him Robin gasped, and for an instant forgot the chant.

But he tried, they all tried, and when it was right the chant was very, very strong, a sound that was wind and water, the grinding of the earth in the depths of a mine, the furious silence of the night-hunting bird.

Again Robin collected himself for another effort. He took a breath and closed his eyes, and expelled his tone from the bottom of his gut.

I am the hand.

The voice was not Mandy, but it was hovering just above the coffin. "Who are you?" Grape whispered.

I am the hand that takes.

It was a freezing, bitter voice. Robin chanted on, filled with dread. This morning something had come into Vine's circle from the other world and displaced the wraith of Mandy. That other thing had been a little, maimed girl, who had jumped about the pentagram for a moment and then darted off again. Was she back?

The coveners chanted desperately, trying to keep the circle clear for Mandy.

A blizzard swarmed down the face of the mountain. Mandy's mind, her heart, her whole being, were now concentrated on one thing: find the circle—

Wisteria huddled in on herself. Grape and Ivy leaned against one another. Even clasped hands had grown cold. The moon had long ago crossed the top of the sky. There were no more meteors to bring an instant of wonder to this freezing effort. The Chant of the Long Tones sank low, and still the spiraling cone of power did not appear.

Robin watched the sky for another sign and listened for another word.

But there was no sound, and the only lights in the sky were moon and stars.

Magic is just the physics of another reality, he told himself. It's perfectly believable. The physics would serve him whenever he wanted it. But the cone of power just wouldn't appear. Magic. It encouraged you one moment, the next tried to convince you it didn't even exist.

If it is a physics, it is a damned contrary one.

Robin might have seen a cat crossing the sky. Might have seen a witch passing the moon. Might have heard a word.

It came again, very, very faint: "Please..." That was all.

"Hey! Did anybody else hear that? Wasn't that Mandy's voice?"

"She's here."

"Moom moom moom moom moom moom moom mooooom!"

Oh yes I hear you yes I hear you down in hills in the dark. And I see you. This time, I haven't been sent and I can't be taken back. I got here on my own—

Mandy began to journey toward the faint glow that was the Vine Coven's circle. She was a wraith again, but now the circle directed her and helped her. The wind of her demons was not going to blow her aside.

Tom appeared ahead, switching his tail. When his eyes met Mandy's she came to a stop. She had never seen such menace. There was no way to move

past that cat, not just yet.

After the one single, faint cry the witches had heard no more. They had tried and tried to chant it up again and finally exhausted themselves.

All of the Vine Coven but Robin slept. He sat rigid and still, facing the coffin through a rim of frozen tears.

Dawn was not far off. Robin stood up to gauge the time. Moonset had come and gone and only the stars lit the sky. He put his hand on the lid of the coffin, looked down at the constellation reflected in the wood.

Ursa Major. The Great Bear, symbol of feminine courage.

The eastern sky was glowing now, just a little.

Robin wondered how he would face the day. Or the Vines, when they woke up all stiff and grumpy from their freezing vigil, and remembered how hard they had tried, and how completely they had failed.

A sound from the coffin startled him profoundly. He lifted his hand as if the lid were hot. It came again, louder. Of all the things it sounded like—a rattle, a mutter of thunder, gargling—it sounded most like a fart.

Robin's fingers went to the latches. He thought something must be going wrong with the body. He opened the coffin.

In the thin light he saw her, clear and pure, lying in her rumpled silk suit, her feet in gleaming Gucci pumps. But her face—he was shattered by its beauty. That such a creature could be a mere human seemed beyond possibility. A great, rasping sob escaped him.

If love killed, let it kill him now. Maybe they would be reunited in death.

She sighed then, and he realized what all the noises were—corpse gas.

With a thousand regrets he closed the lid and turned away. He was walking toward the rowan tree when a movement in its shadows startled him. Then he realized that the fairy had returned. All around they stood, and not five or six, but dozens and dozens of them, the men in black jackets, women in dark green gowns, and children everywhere, wee mischievous creatures darting about among their parents.

There were more than dozens—he could see them even on the far ridges, lining the naked cliffs like dark little clumps of shrub.

Come to do her honor, in some secret dawn ceremony of their own. Not even Constance had seen a fairy funeral. Who knew what their rituals were?

The coffin shifted. All around him the fairy clapped and laughed.

Robin knew, then, that this was not a funeral.

He grew afraid. The whole of the mystery had settled on this place and he had not even known it was coming. A wave of energy, tingling and electric, set all of his hairs to singing. He shuddered and turned around.

The coffin was still closed. But then thunder blasted in Robin's throat, a roar of astonished Joy: sitting upon it was Amanda Walker.

He fell to his knees, he could not speak, could hardly bear to look at her. His mind didn't whirl with thoughts or fill with glee. On the contrary, he went quiet inside.

He heard a scrape as she came down from the coffin. "Robin?"

A seizure took him. There was nothing he could do to avoid toppling forward. His fists came up to his chest, a sound between a grunt and a groan issued from between helplessly clenched teeth. He knew all that was happening, but from a distance, as if it were occurring on a stage.

She crouched down in front of him and took his face in her hands. Her touch was as wonderfully alive as the *Leannan's*. He wanted to speak, but he couldn't. "I'm here," she said.

His emotions burst forth in him. Then he lifted his head and shouted glory. All around him the fairy were singing, a sound like the tumbling of small water.

Wisteria awoke. She smiled, and kept on smiling.

Then Ivy opened her eyes. When she saw Mandy she screamed loud enough to rattle the mountains all the way to Pennsylvania.

That woke everybody else up, all except Grape. In the excitement they did not notice that she remained huddled where she was.

Amanda embraced them, one after the other, and after she had held them, each was sure that she or he felt noticeably warmer. When she slipped her hand into Robin's, there stirred in him the very laud of gladness. "Let's go down," Amanda said. "We have to break the grief of the others as soon as we can."

It was not until they started forward that Ivy noticed Grape. "Robin, help me. If you can believe it, Grape's still asleep."

"No," Amanda said. "I'm afraid she's dead." Robin looked into Amanda's eyes, but only for an instant.

There was no way to describe them. Simply put, they were terrifying.

"She's not dead, Amanda, she's just—Grape? Grape!"

The corpse fell over. It was already cold and stiff. Suddenly the fairy were all around. One of them did something to Robin's knee and made him fall

back away from Grape.

“Let them take her.”

“She—why did she die?”

“She gave herself in return for me. Death cannot be cheated.”

Robin went close to Amanda. He wanted to kiss her, but he dared not, even though she seemed as sweet as womanflesh could be. Light was hesitating in the sky when the coven started for the village.

Already the east was yellow-green, Saturn a lantern in the last blue of night. As they walked, the fairy put Grape into the coffin that had been Amanda’s and carried her off into the depths of the hills.

“Honor her, and be glad for her,” Amanda said.

On their way down the mountain a great happiness came upon them all and they began to sing.

“With a hey! and the sun.
With a hey! and the sun.
We go merry, we go gay,
We go in morning’s way!”

Tom watched, with a fury of love in his green eyes. He lay where the night still lingered in the western sky.

His gaze shifted away from the triumphant procession, moving past the edge of the Collier estate and into the predawn town. It went to a certain trailer behind a certain tabernacle and rested upon an object in the pajama pocket of sleeping Brother Pierce. That object held the key to the end of the drama, the last confrontation.

There was movement in the pocket. Somebody besides Amanda had used the chant as a beacon. The owner of the hand had also returned. As nothing of her physical body remained but the hand itself, she was concentrating all her considerable energy there.

Already she was learning to use the old, dead flesh. Slowly, persistently, the withered, dead hand clutched and opened, then clutched again.

Brother Pierce slept on.

The hand opened. The hand clutched. As love had given Amanda new life, so hate was giving it to the hand. If hate had been visible, it would have appeared in the form of a murdered girl in a blue dress.

Or Abaddon, the scorpion truth of Revelation.

I am the hand, the hand that takes.

The visible part, lying in the preacher's pocket, opened and clutched, opened and clutched, with a dry, crackling sound. Then it touched the preacher, caressed him.

It did not wake him, but it made him sigh.

Chapter 26

“You sure you want this thing open?”

Brother Pierce was getting exasperated with the funeral director. That question had come at least six times over the last half hour. “His brothers and sisters in Christ want to say good-bye to him.”

“But I can’t do anything with him.”

The man just would not see the point. “All of that business with wax and face powder and whatnot—we don’t hold with that.”

“I’ll have to break his arms. You can’t leave those fists like that, up against the face.”

“You’ll do no such thing! Leave him just like he is.”

“Now, look here, Brother Pierce, I’ve got a reputation to uphold. I am not going to have a poor burned man go out of here for a viewing in that condition! He even smells burnt. No, sir, it’s just unthinkable.”

Brother Pierce regarded Fred Harris. Your typical small-town businessman. Episcopalian. Daughter a witch. Probably a witch lover himself. Too bad he was the only funeral director in Maywell. “I will have people see what those witches do to a good Christian soul! I will have them see! The poor man had suffered terribly. Let it be a testament, let it be for a reason.

Harris sighed. “The death was ruled accidental. If he hadn’t had that gasoline—”

“You were not there. You did not witness—” Brother Pierce stopped himself. He was just about to say too much. So far nobody knew exactly who had been out there with Turner. The witches hadn’t managed to give the sheriff’s office any particularly clear descriptions. Simon had not needed to swear his own men to secrecy. The little community of the Tabernacle could be trusted to cling together in any trouble. He looked into the undertaker’s suspicious eyes and prayed silently that the Lord might flood his starving soul with so much grace that he would lose his hatred of good Christian people. What a blessing it would be to see the stone fall away from the tomb of his heart, and Christ rise within as the lily in the spring.

Harris gave him a sharp, appraising look. Simon reached into his pocket, grasped the hand. It was there to remind him that he was full of sin, and for all his prayers no better than the worst sinner himself. That poor little girl’s

murder could never be atoned, but even so, he was determined to do only good with his life. Afterward he would be glad to go to the hell he so richly deserved. “We love you, Brother Harris, and we want your funeral home to have a fine reputation. But we also love Brother Turner and we cannot have communion with his martyrdom if it is hidden in makeup.”

Harris touched the coffin gingerly, with a respect that had not been there a moment ago, Simon thought.

“Even so, it’s leaving here closed. Brother Pierce. What you do with it once you get it to your church is your business, I guess.” With that he lowered the lid on the staring, blackened corpse.

Brother Pierce stayed right with the coffin. He could honor the dead at least by constant attendance.

Harris’s two assistants rolled the coffin into the funeral home’s Cadillac hearse. Simon hated hearses, which were as black and lonely as the whole big sky. He kept his fist closed around the hand. Over the years the guilt it brought him had ceased to be a torture and become a comfort. When his punishment finally came, he would welcome it. The bottom of the pit would be a relief.

Riding toward the Tabernacle, his mind returned to the accident. That fire had just jumped at poor Turner. Enveloped him. He saw it again, red and ugly, spreading all over the man. He saw the agony on Turner’s face, the astonishment, the terror, most of all the sadness.

There came to Simon a shuddering thought. Wasn’t it Turner who had first picked up the mandrake? Of course, yes. Turner. He must have been infected by the evil spelt in it.

Sweat began to tickle Simon’s neck. He clutched and rubbed at the hand. Could spells travel, jump across that long gray sky, maybe, and settle in the Tabernacle?

In his mind he saw flames leaping from every window of his church, and heard the hiss of the fire wind and the dreadful screams of his beloved people trapped inside. A gigantic, misshapen mandrake leaned in against the shaking, bulging door, holding it closed against the congregation.

“Brother Pierce!”

“Wha—what?”

“Are you all right?”

“Of course.”

They rode on. Simon was shaking, covered with sweat. What had he done

to cause them to call out?

Had he screamed, or maybe moaned? Yes, maybe that. He must have moaned.

“I feel such grief for my brother.”

“I’m sorry for you.”

Simon was very relieved when they reached the Tabernacle. He watched them take the coffin out of the hearse and roll it on the catafalque through the big double doors at the back. “That’s fine. I can take it from here.”

When they finally drove away, he could not have been more glad.

He looked fondly around the Tabernacle, the rows of pews he had bought from the closed Presbyterian church in Compton, the pulpit that had been a conference-room lectern, bought for eleven dollars at the Maywell Motel fire sale, the organ they had gotten full price from Wurlitzer, and the paint and the simulated stained glass and all the evidence everywhere of the hard work of the Lord’s people.

No images, unless you counted the empty cross at the front. “We keep his portrait in our hearts, brothers and sisters, that is the beginning and end of the images of the Lord.”

The Tabernacle was cold. He checked his watch. An hour to go before the funeral. He went to the thermostat and turned it up to seventy. By the time people arrived it would be comfortable enough. There was no reason for the oil bill to go above four hundred a month in autumn, not with all the body heat the congregation generated.

He rolled the catafalque to the front of the Tabernacle. His funerals were always simple, needing essentially no preparation. Simon required contributions to the Tabernacle in lieu of sending flowers, so there were no wreaths to worry about. For a moment he clasped his hands and thought of God sitting on his throne in heaven. God in heaven. “O Lord, let me do right by you. Please, I love you so much.” He bowed his head. “I’m sorry. Lord, to ask for help. I know I’m dirty in your eyes, but I’m still trying down here. Don’t help me, but help my people. Give them the strength they need to get rid of the witches.”

The hand seemed almost to warm as he prayed. It helped him so much. Without it he’d be lost. He’d never know what moves to make. The hand was his guide.

He remembered it milky white, dangling from her smooth arm, the fingers tapering, nails bitten and lined with dirt from play. She was a picture, so

pretty. She had come on to him, had snapped her gum and run her tongue along her teeth, and given him that steady, godless gaze.

If only he hadn't been so darned sad, so alone. When she snuggled close, he had embraced her right there and then in the middle of the foster-home rec room, and caressed her lank hair, and looked into her round blue eyes. "Get me out of here," she had murmured. "It's such a dump."

"I can't, hon, I'm just a social worker." She had raised her face to him, and he had thought perhaps she was an angel, despite the chewing gum, "Adopt me, Simon," she had whispered.

"Oh, hon, I can't, I haven't got the money to raise a girl proper."

"Simon, on the books I'd be your daughter, but I'd really be your wife."

He remembered the smell of her breath, deep-sweet and juicy.

She had done things to him, things that felt so good he was as if tied in that chair. Never had he known the touch of such beauty. He had thought he was dying it was so good.

O Lord, I am Thy servant, and Thou art the kingdom and the power and the glory!

Afterward he just got so dam mad at her, she had damned his soul with those pretty white hands. She laughed at him and tossed her head like a little filly, and he took her by the neck and crushed the gristle of her windpipe, and all of a sudden her cream-perfect face was tight and blue.

Oh, God, he hadn't been able to get her breathing. Her throat was purple where his hands had been and she grabbed at it and her eyes rolled and she died right there and then.

He had tried to blow air into her lungs, to give her artificial respiration, but she wouldn't come back to life, so he was faced with this dead body.

"Lord, please, I've got to stop thinking about it!" If this kept up, he was sure to start hitting the bottle he kept in his trailer. It was less than half an hour before the congregation would start to arrive. Maybe one good drink would clear his head.

He went back to his trailer. Even though he usually didn't drink much, over the years the back of the trailer had become crowded with bottles. He couldn't very well throw them away.

Not that he pretended to be a teetotaler. But a preacher ought to be upright. So he kept his liquor to himself and followed even the smallest drink with a couple of peppermint Certs.

The opening of a fresh bottle was always a small festivity. He drank good

whiskey. Twelve years old, smooth as a bunny's ears. "Lord," he said as always, "forgive me what I cannot help." He took a fair pull.

Soon an echo of contentment was spreading through his body. "Thank you, O Lord, for this gift." He knelt on the floor of his trailer. "Thank you for this kindness."

Here he was, a preacher thanking Jesus for liquor. Now, there was something that would make a real man of God laugh out loud.

He lay back on his bed, reminding himself once again to change the sheets. He didn't have a maid—he never allowed people in here.

He took out the hand. It lay on his palm, small and complex, a thing of clutching angles. A cut-off thing.

And yet, not cut off. In a way still alive.

Probably death was just nothing. The end. Sure there was a God, but God didn't give much of a damn.

God was sq very far away. Heaven was the other side of the sky, and the sky was too damn big to ever cross.

He looked quickly at the hand. Hadn't it moved just then, just when he thought how far away heaven was?

Sometimes he thought the hand could whisper to him.

He should have given her the knife and showed her how to cut a man's neck so the blood spurted out in a pulsating stream, and she'd move his hair aside and turn his head a little and—zip. She would have done it. She would have done anything for him.

"I am destruction."

He was going to give them one hell of a funeral. Let's see, how many Turners were there? Betty and—what—two kids? Three of 'em altogether. More than enough grief there for a fine show.

A change in the way the tight brown leather of the hand reflected the light startled him. He looked at it again. Was there subtle movement, or was that just the light flickering?

He put the hand down on the floor beside his cot and got the Bible from underneath. He'd do readings, the reference to death in Numbers, then the 116th Psalm, then the last and most important part, the Abadon passage from Revelation 9. The funeral would then wind its way down to the town graveyard just the other side of the Collier estate.

He was going to give fire to the faint of heart, he was going to burn wickedness in white heat.

He was going to burn the wickedness of the harlot in the hell of the flames, and at last destroy the abomination of the earth that infected this town and was tearing as a long-nailed claw tears at its God-fearing heart.

Another movement made him look again at the hand. What he saw shocked him. Always it had been closed. The thing was dry. And yet, as a flower of night, it had opened. He touched it in wonder, then picked it up. It was as stiff open as it had been closed.

He kissed the palm.

For a long time he lay inhaling its dry, faintly organic odor, remembering the salt-sweet smell of it in life, suffering an agony of helpless regret.

“Brother?”

He stuffed the hand in his pocket as he leaped off his cot. Had so much time passed? “I’m sorry, Sister Winifred. I was resting in preparation for the service. I must have dropped off.” He smoothed back his hair, splashed some water on his face, and ate his Certs while Sister Winifred waited at the door of the trailer.

She had a look of quiet happiness about her. “Brother,” she said as they went toward the Tabernacle, “is there any provision we can make for those standing in the parking lot?”

He stopped. “Wait a minute? Are you telling me I’ve got an overflow crowd?”

She nodded, at once pleased and solemn, remembering the nature of the occasion. Brother Pierce was careful to hide his own elation. One good thing about this witch business was that it was really an inspiration to the people. A man had lost his life, but the Lord willing, his sacrifice would not have been in vain.

“Tell you what you do. Sister. You stick that P.A from the movie projector out on the front stoop. And leave the doors open. They’ll hear us. They will hear the Word of the Lord.”

Shyly, and so quickly that he could hardly notice, she touched the bulge of the hand in his pocket. He was shocked, and drew back. There was on her face a knowing sort of a smile. “Praise the Lord,” she whispered. Did she think it was his member?

The light of the packed Tabernacle washed him with energy. He was glad to see how intense those faces were today, and the sincerity in the tears. It humbled him to feel every stare upon himself when he mounted his pulpit.

He looked from face to face, nodding to the weeping Turner family. For

the moment the coffin was closed. He would do the revelation after his first reading. “Now we are gathered here to seek in the Kingdom of God for succor, my beloved brothers and sisters, for He who cherishes us shall now comfort us in our loss.”

“Oh, yes,” from a few mouths.

“For a man is dead, and he was a good man! Yes, he was a good man!”

“Oh, yes!”

“And this man was killed by the spell of the mandrake, a spell woven by witches against us, and he was burned in the fire of their evil hearts!”

“Oh, yes!”

“I tell you this: we will avenge his death, for the people of the Lord will not let the evil of witchcraft fester among them, growing out of all proportion as cancer grows, for in this congregation we have the power of His holy name, we have the cure for the cancer of evil!”

“We have the cure!”

“I recall from the Good Book, from the chapter of the Numbers where God spoke out of the mouth of Balak, and said, ‘Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!’ And I say to you, I say to you, I would join him in a minute if I thought it would bring us peace from the torment of these witches! Oh, these spellbinders and these devils are riding the horses of hell in our streets, and burning the fathers of our houses, for they are the very fire of evil!”

“Praise the Lord, praise His Name!”

“Now I am going to ask that you give one another the kiss of peace, and I am going to open this coffin, and I tell you this, Betty Turner, you are to come up here and embrace your husband, and each of your children will do it, too, for you must see and remember, all of you, the work of the dread hand of Satan, and bid good-bye to our lost brother.”

Something moved in his pocket. And in his mind he thought he heard whispered approval. The hand of the little girl, cut off for a lot of reasons. He told himself that he did it to prevent identification.

No, he remembered too well the work of the knife. It had been pleasure that animated him, a steaming pile of rotted pleasure, to take a part of her softness...

It was not soft now. It had become an instrument of the Lord’s work. Praise be the hand, may it bring him his punishment in its curled, brown

fingers.

He went down to the catafalque. The lid of the coffin opened smoothly. He could sense people craning to see, could hear the gasps, the stifled screams. Brother Turner lay, a blackened hulk of a thing, his head scorched bald, his carbonized fists raised before his chest. His eyes were half closed, his lips parted. He had died of suffocation, from seared lungs.

“The beautiful naked witch will burn as he has burned, in the slow fire of purification!”

It was all in planning, too. Simon did not make idle threats. He would at once avenge the lost brother and cleanse for them the souls of the witches.

Tomorrow night he would burn their elegant red brick devil-house with its fine white columns, the kind of house exactly that the filthy scum rich lived in back in Houston. Then he would take that woman of theirs, the one with the soft white hands and the flowing hair, the one who had abominated the streets of Maywell with her naked ride, and he would tie her up in her nakedness and burn her before the witness of his people.

Then he would say to the witches, disband. Be gone. God does not want you here.

The hand touched him so intimately that it almost made him cry out again, as it had so long ago in Houston.

“Betty Turner, come forward and embrace your husband!”

“Oh, please, I—we just can’t!”

“You can and you must, for it is the will of God! I call on the rest of you, help her and her children to take courage! Come forward and embrace your brother, every one of you, embrace him and touch his agonized flesh and know what evil the witches do to the body of the Lamb!”

Sister Winifred was the first to go. That was a plucky lady. She jerked back when she laid her cheek against the dead face and the dried crackling pricked her. Moving up and down the aisle, Simon exhorted.

“Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus! Help them now, give them strength!”

The weeping of the Turner family filled the Tabernacle, that and the shuffling of the faithful up to the coffin.

“And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth:”

“Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works

do follow them.”

Betty Turner clapped her hands to her face. “Close it,” she wailed, “please close it!”

“And I looked, and behold a white cloud, and upon the cloud one sat like unto the Son of man, having on his head a golden crown, and in his hand a sharp sickle.”

Some of the men began to push the open coffin toward the rear of the church so that more could embrace (he dead saint.

“And another angel came out from the altar, which had power over fire; and cried with a loud cry to him that had the sharp sickle, saying. Thrust in thy sharp sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth; for her grapes are fully ripe.”

There began among the congregation soft clapping. Simon nodded to Winifred, who started the organ going, very low, “Gather at the River.” Best to stick to the simple, familiar songs, Brother Pierce always maintained. That was the way into the most hearts and souls.

He was pleased with the strength of feeling in the congregation.

This funeral was going to give the men the courage they needed tomorrow night. It would take more than his pitiful sermonizing to inspire those men to face the witches again.

Harris signaled from the door. He was waiting with his hearse; the town graveyard closed at dusk.

“We will recite Psalm 116, brothers and sisters, as we go into the outer darkness, to return the flesh to the dust of the earth.”

He began the psalm.

“I love the Lord, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications.”

They put the coffin in the hearse. Simon rode in the funeral car with the Turners. Betty, a handsome woman, was flushed with her grief, her breasts heaving rhythmically beneath her black dress, her eye shadow running down her face. She had a golden harlot of a daughter, and a son of freckles and sandy hair, whose face shone with faith despite his grief. Simon read as the car moved off toward the graveyard.

“The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell got hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow.”

Betty Turner leaned her head against Simon’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I couldn’t hug him. But I just couldn’t, and now I’ll never see him again.”

Simon covered her hand with his.

“The Lord preserveth the simple: I was brought low, and he helped me.

“Return unto thy rest, O my soul; for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee.”

Betty Turner drew a ragged breath. Her daughter’s eyes filmed. “Now, don’t start in again, honey,” Betty said. “You’ll start me, too.”

“Take comfort in the Word of the Lord,” Simon said. “This is His Word also. ‘Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.’ Your husband was a saint, my dear sister. A saint”

The son’s face clouded. Simon assumed he was remembering the truth of their private misery. That life with Turner had been miserable Simon had no doubt. Turner was a drunken, red-faced roach of a man with his hair full of grease, mean as a hog and twice as fat.

“Let Israel now say that his mercy endureth forever.”

“Brother Pierce,” the daughter asked, “do you know the whole Bible?”

Simon smiled. It was such a simple, pure question, from that darling, soft child. How could lips be so red, or eyes so blue, or hands so very smooth? He fought the ravaging that he felt, and forced his face to gentleness.

The hand stirred.

He twisted and squirmed, but it remained close against him. He forced himself to answer the girl’s question, know about half. Every day I learn a new verse.

“Is there anything,” the boy asked, “that can make us proud of Dad?”

“Willy.”

“Sorry, Mom.”

“There is a verse, son, from the 119th Psalm. It goes like this. ‘This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me. The proud have held me greatly in derision: yet I have not declined from thy law. I remembered thy judgments of old, O Lord, and have comforted myself.’ So we must all do the same, son.”

The boy thought about this. “Can I watch,” he asked at last, “when you burn the witch?”

“Oh, hush, now! Whoever said he was going to do such a thing?”

Simon felt himself grow cold. He had said little of his ideas, yet here they were coming out of the mouth of a child. There must be a lot of whispering going through the congregation. Sometimes he wondered who the leader was—himself or the intangible spirit of the group. “Do not admonish your son, Sister Turner, for a child might speak in the tongue of the Lord.”

When the car stopped, dusk was already far advanced. Betty Turner sank back into her seat. "I just don't know how I'm going to get through this! I dread the burial." She looked at Simon with stricken eyes. "There's no way you could call him a good man. He drank. He beat us up. He was lazy and he two-timed me. He left us poor. But he was a person." She glanced out the rear window, toward the sunlight that still clung to the cliffs of Stone Mountain. "Those witches killed him just when he was trying hardest to get himself saved. You see, that man wanted to live in the Lord. But the flesh is weak!"

She and her son and daughter, tears in their eyes, left the funeral car and walked toward the gravesite behind the coffin of the dead father.

Easily a hundred cars had come. Brother Pierce went to the grave, which had been lined with green artificial turf by Harris's people, and provided with a sling for the coffin. Simon saw that he had the biggest graveside turnout in the history of the Tabernacle. That was wonderful, but it meant that there might be spies in among the crowd, witches and people sent by the sheriff and such.

Very well. He would not threaten anybody, nor even mention the vision he was having, of that young naked-rider witch lying in the midst of a fire, and she can't get away, and she is burning and her screams are peeling through the night. And for just a few minutes, Simon is happy. He doesn't even need the hand.

And it is because for these few minutes he is vanquishing the sin of that poor misguided girl.

He could only be at peace, he decided, when he was sending a soul to heaven. She had shone in the night like a goddess, had Amanda of the long flowing hair. Of course it was her. He had noticed that hair when she visited the Tabernacle with her insane uncle. Oh, yes. The uncle was dead now, dead in that coffin they had taken from his house.

The deputy sheriff had said it was her in the coffin, but he was misled. She was young and perfect. No, it was him. If anybody were to dig up that coffin, they would find the old whoremaster of a scientist in it.

Simon stood in the thickening dark, among the dense crowd. The coffin was behind him, ready to be lowered into the grave. Betty Turner stood on his right, her daughter on his left, the son beside the daughter. Simon began reciting the familiar lines of Genesis 3:

"In the sweat of thy face shall thou eat bread, till thou return unto the

ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”

He paused The hand felt warm now, and heavier than it had been in years It felt alive. He glanced down, but the bulge in his pocket was the same as ever Best to put it down to nervousness and forget it The witches had him spooked.

“Everybody knows why we are here. We are here to bury one of our own. And we are here to make a statement that those witches must not forget. We know you, and we burn with hatred for the evil that is in you, sons and daughters of Satan. For there is written upon your foreheads, ‘And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails. And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name is Abaddon.’” He pointed past the tall shadow of the burial mound, toward the darkening mountain.

He remained silent, pointing.

Let the spies guess what it meant. His own people knew. It meant tomorrow night and fire.

He flipped the lever that set the coffin to lowering, then thrust into his pocket to reassure himself that there was nothing genuinely wrong with the hand.

Whereupon it twined its warm, living fingers in his own—

Chapter 27

On her way down the mountainside Amanda had become aware for the first time of the density of flesh.

Every muscle and joint was stiff. The easy shorthand of movement she had enjoyed in the other world was replaced by a weighty crawling that she found most unnatural. Physical life was an astonishing limitation. She had never understood before the real effect of flesh on the soul, to stifle it in thick dying folds.

They had to carry her the final distance to the house. She had slept deeply, without dreaming. She was awakened by the whisper of the sun's return. She could hear its light sweeping into the room. It poured across the floor, yellowing the damask curtains of the bed. She slipped from beneath the covers and parted the curtains, letting in the golden haze.

The quality of the light reminded her of where she had been and, above all, what she had learned. The whole secret carnival paraded in her mind's eye. It was impossibly beautiful, a series of images acutely charged with meaning. There were the terrors, Bonnie and the demon-girl Abaddon, and of course Mother Star of the Sea. There were also her two fleeting moments of heaven, and in retrospect they had far more impact on her than did her long journey through her own guilt. Her few moments in the old backyard of her childhood were suffused in memory with the richest light that could be imagined, a light that illuminated both physically and emotionally. To know that she had left this light caused her the most intense suffering. She twisted and turned in the bed, experiencing her body as a tangle of iron chains.

Then there was that short flash of Mother Star of the Sea's real fate, her own heaven. Hidden in her had been a great and compassionate spirit, trying by sheer strength of will to save the souls of the girls she was teaching. Did she know that she had become their demon, the arbiter of their guilt?

Yes, she knew, and upon that knowledge rested the palace of her happiness. For she also knew that she provided them with a safe means of working through the sour material of conscience after death. They used their memories' of their stern, uncompromising teacher when they died to cleanse their souls for heaven. Because they had her, their work went quickly. To give them this enormous blessing, she had sacrificed love on earth and accepted a lonely death.

She understood the silence of Lazarus. How could you make voice from the air of so dun a world as this, after heaven? And she had seen only the edges, not the whole light of it. She felt actual physical pain, as if the air were being crushed by very longing from her lungs, and her blood boiling with a need beyond addiction.

She wanted nothing so much as to tighten into a little knotted ball and wait until she could return.

A shadow bulged in the canopy above her. "Tom?"

He didn't stir. Nor did he purr. She found him awesome now, having seen him out of disguise. She wished she could thank him, but she had no idea how. She could hardly give him, say, a catnip mouse.

She looked down at her own flushed nakedness. It might be heavy and coarse, but she could still love this body of hers. Her blood sang in her veins, her skin thrilled at the simple contact of the air. She touched her own thigh, sensing the electricity of the contact between flesh and flesh.

There was also something else, a new and more objective awareness of the world around her. She saw the Covenstead as a tiny eccentricity of life, a final refuge of magical thinking. In her own mind she could see the blue stretches of reason and the bright shapes that defined the inner realm of her magic. She had acquired access to more of her mind than she had previously known. Her attention rushed into this vast new space. In it she saw Constance, who looked up at her with hollow, awestruck eyes. Instantly she knew Constance. Her knowledge was not verbal, but it was total. The experience had a powerful emotional impact on her. Without being able to say how, she understood the hidden meaning of this tragic and enigmatic figure.

Constance stared at her, and she was shocked to realize that this was a shared experience. They were somehow linked. Then Amanda saw Ivy, then Kate, then Robin. His love poured out of his eyes, a perfumed glow. He was coming toward this room, bringing his innocence and his helplessness. She wanted to cherish and protect him. But for Constance, none of them were aware of her careful scrutiny.

Their attentions were not strong enough to enable them to see by this other light.

Outside the bed there was a small voice. "Amanda?" She pushed back the covers and raised her head into the full light of the sun. Beside her bed stood Robin, just as she had known he would. Instantly she knew what troubled

him. Her heart opened to him. “Look at me,” she said.

He raised his eyes. His sense of rejection was easy to read. After his initial jubilation at her return, he had begun to see her as unreachably strange. There was nothing she could do but show him that she valued him and needed him.

“Please,” she said, “kiss me.”

A peck.

So he was not so much awed as angry. “Robin?”

“Your breakfast is ready.”

She got out of the bed and put on her robe, which she found neatly folded across the back of the big blue chair. “Robin, I love you.”

“Thank you. I love you, too. We all do.”

She felt a sharpness within her, a taste of salt. “I mean I love *you*.” She looked at him. “Holly King.” Did he know how long was their association, through how many lives they had danced together? No, not really. He had been told, but his awareness lay at the side of his mind, shrouded in dark curtains of doubt and confusion. The trouble with reason is that it is only one part of the mind. In him, as in all of them except Constance, it was a great, central bulk of a thing, condemning them to perceiving only the linear and the expected.

She saw that mankind was exactly like the dinosaurs. The reptiles had chosen physical overgrowth at the expense of all other development and so had perished. So also mankind, since the beginning of recorded history, has been crushing all parts of the mind except the reason, until this excessive mental growth threatens him with extinction.

Reason is useful for building buildings, but it cannot build a happy life, nor enable a human being to see the sacredness or the richness of the earth. It cannot allow him to feel with his own blood just how painful it is to hurt the land. We live in maya, the world of illusion. There is no need for most of what we have, not for all these transformations of material that we have accomplished—

We have built a civilization that is exactly like a poison in the earth, or a viral growth, or an exploding cancer.

Amanda saw it all so clearly, and as well that the Covenstead might be tiny—just a few people, after all—but because it stood against this terrible, fundamental human mistake, it was incredibly important.

May the idea of the Covenstead, rich and open and unchained by the hungers of the consuming society, spread through the world, freeing man

from his own mind, and the terrible hypnosis that is going to extinguish the species if it is not broken soon.

“Amanda!”

Robin’s voice interrupted her. She was breathing hard, staring. “Sorry. I’m fine. I was in another world.”

Slumping in his black sweatshirt and faded jeans, his muddy working boots, he could not have looked more forlorn. “I’m sure.”

“No, I don’t mean—oh, Robin, I was preoccupied.” How could she tell him what wonders she now perceived? The mists had lifted from her vision. To her, people had been revealed as magic architectures of almost unbelievable beauty, and him especially.

She went to him, gathered his unresponsive body in her arms. “Please kiss me.” She opened her lips and waited, remembering the hungry passion of the kisses they had traded at the culmination of the Wild Hunt.

He held her stiffly.

“I’m only a person, Robin.”

“I know that. It’s just that—I saw you—”

She put her finger over his lips. “You don’t know what you saw.”

“The hell I don’t. I saw you dead!”

What could she do to bring him back to her? Nobody could be natural and at ease with a miracle.

She realized, as the strengthening sunlight set her blood to racing, that they were all going to react much the same way. “The last thing I need is worship. I’m still me, Robin. And I love you exactly as I did before. Or no, that’s a lie.”

“I’m sure it is.”

“I love you a million times more. More than you can possibly imagine!”

His expression closed. How stupid of her to say that! But the words were already out. They swarmed in the air, vibrating his whole being to a sort of brown despair. He was thinking he’d like to get this over with and get out to the fields. “I don’t want to keep you from the harvest,” she said.

“You can even read my mind. What are you, Amanda?”

She had asked that same question of Constance. From this side it was a bitter question to hear. “I know that I love you.”

“Quit patronizing me! I mean, what happened to you? What did you find out?”

She wondered how she could ever tell it. If death is truly what one makes

it, then there was little to say.

“Something’s out there,” she said. He raised his eyebrows. “Surprise is important. I can’t deny you that.”

Robin held out his hands to her. She went to him, but she was little comforted by his stiff, nervous hug.

“Tell me anyway.”

“There is another world. It grows out of the mind when it is freed from the body. When you die you find your conscience waiting for you. It cannot lie. If you suffer then, it is because you choose to do so. If you go on into the highlands, it is because you feel ready to accept the joy of heaven.”

“Am I ready?”

She could see so easily into his soul Like her own, his guilts seemed terribly small. He was unsure that it was right to leave his parents, and he worried about not being able to provide for them in their old age.

She slipped her hand into his. “You should reconcile yourself with your parents. Growth for you lies in the direction of understanding how you really feel about them.”

“We’ve come to a pretty good understanding already.”

She heard the lie. But it was not her place to correct him. He had to travel his own path. “Robin, I have so much to tell you. I relived our past together.”

On the surface he barely heard her, so preoccupied was he by what he imagined as the distance between them. But his essence heard, and looked out of his eyes with graceful eagerness. “May I know?” he asked. The acid in his voice, so contrived, seemed silly to her, but she did not laugh.

“You didn’t choose the name Robin by accident. It’s been your name before. We were lovers a long time ago, when I had a house in the forest.”

How they had loved, in the warm Sherwood nights, when the cat watched from the branch, and the stars coursed beyond the treetops. “I don’t remember.”

Oh, but she knew that was a lie. He did remember, and very well. She saw it in his eyes. “The log palace? The fairy? The coming of the sheriff of Nottingham?”

“You’re telling me I was Robin Hood?”

“Yes. You were Robin Hood.”

He looked askance at her. He smiled just a little.

“You really were.”

He burst out laughing, and when he did the wall between them fell at last.

He kissed her easily, and there was hunger in it, the real hunger of essence seeking essence. “Oh, Amanda, I’m so glad you came back!

We tried all night, we raised the cone of power, but nothing seemed to help. I worked and worked and worked and I was sure I had lost you. Then the *Leannan* came and a little while later there you were!”

He was covering her face with kisses now, and they were kisses of passion. “You’re so beautiful, I love you so much, I didn’t think I could live without you!”

She delivered herself to his embraces. They went back into the bed and she drew down his pants and underpants and opened her robe to him. There, in the secrecy of the curtained bed, they made furious, shaking, gleeful love, laughing and kissing as they did it. She opened herself to him and let him seek the center of her pleasure.

When he spent himself, she attained a level of ecstasy so intense that for an instant she blacked out.

Afterward it was as if the rich dark of her womb was vibrating, announcing the presence of new life.

They had conceived a baby just then, she knew. But that as for another phase of life in the Covenstead.

Just now, would keep her condition a secret.

They lay awhile, linked. She followed his semen on its journey, feeling it struggle up her fallopian tubes, a swirling, struggling cataclysm in the dark, until finally one bright speck of him reached the egg, and there burst forth a light that sang. The connection to the egg held, and a new voice jabbered up in her. She smiled, beatified by her womanhood. “Can you keep a secret?”

“Of course.”

She saw how thin was his real ability to do this. Keeping a secret is one of the most difficult of disciplines.

“You must keep it for about three days. Can you do that?”

“Certainly. Come on, tell me.”

“You made it,” she said. “I just got pregnant.”

His eyes widened. “How—”

“I felt it all. The whole thing.”

He fell on her in a wild excess of passion. “I was scared of you, my love. I was scared to death, but you cured me of it. You opened me up somehow.”

“You opened yourself up. When you saw there was still room to laugh.”

He laid his mouth on hers. She touched him all over, feeling every

delicious inch of him.

Robin's kiss went on and on, lingering now, probing now, seeking in the miracle of their joined selves.

Finally he cuddled beside her. There came from him a whisper so soft it was almost unarticulated... a thought. "Was it just dark, death? Were you telling me the truth?"

She hugged him. "You can look forward to great wonders."

He went up on an elbow. "I still can't believe it. You actually came back to life. This is a scientific fact.

And you have memories, knowledge from the world of the dead. This is incredible."

She had to forgive him; he did not mean to make her feel lonely. "The better you know yourself before you die, the better off you'll be."

"Is there a moral order? Such a thing as sin? Is there a hell?"

"As far as moral orders are concerned, we make our own choices. We are our own judges. And we are never wrong."

"So, like, if Hitler *thinks* he's doing good, then he goes to heaven? Is that right?"

"After death, all illusions fall away. We know ourselves, exactly as we are. I think I had a glimpse of Hitler."

"In heaven?"

The memory so thoroughly revolted her that she almost screamed. "No."

Tom's head appeared between the curtains. For a moment the two of them just looked at it. It was much too far from the floor, and he certainly wasn't dangling from the canopy.

"Is there a chair out there?" Robin asked nervously.

"Not that I recall."

Tom extended his tongue and slowly, sensuously, licked his chops.

"He must be—he has to be—"

"I think it's his idea of a joke. Don't let it upset you."

"The cat is floating in midair and you tell me not to get upset! Jesus! Scat, damn you!"

Instead Tom came in, rolling and playing in the air.

"I think he's celebrating."

He floated past and out the other side of the curtains. Robin was silent for some little time. Once or twice he started to talk. Then he shook his head.

"As I recall," he said at last, "you like pancakes."

“This is truth.”

“Would you like some now?”

She regarded him with deep fondness. “Would I ever.” They both dressed, and she brushed her hair and washed her face, and they went down to the kitchen. She had expected light and activity, but the room was cold.

“They’re all down at the village,” Robin said. “They’ve a feast for you. As you might imagine, there is a great of excitement. Only the Vine Coven’s really greeted.

“I barely remember coming down the mountain. I was terribly tired.”

“You walked like a zombie.” He hesitated at his own words, then looked away, as if he had unthinkingly called attention to some deformity of hers.

The two of them went out into me morning.

There was more than one veteran in Simon’s congregation. His call had been heard, as a matter of fact, by no fewer than seven vets, three of them tough young steelworkers on indefinite layoff. All had been trained in modem infiltration techniques during the Vietnam War.

At Betty Turner’s request the command post was in her home. Simon sat before his makeshift desk in the family room, which had been renamed the Operations Room.

“I got the radios. Brother,” Tim Faulkner said. He put a big box down on the floor. “Just what the doctor ordered. Three hand-held CBs, all tuned to the same channel.”

Charlie Reilly tromped in with a map, which he proceeded to unroll against the wall. “Give me a hand, Tim, I want to tape this thing up.”

Simon had never seen such an elaborate topographical map. It showed contour in great detail, brown lines against me various shades of background color.

“This is the National Guard ‘63 update of the Geodetic Survey map of the Maywell Quadrant,” Reilly said. He and Tim Faulkner finished taping it to the wall.

It brought a military look to this headquarters. Simon took pleasure in the calm and professional atmosphere. He had been trying not to think about the hand coming to life. It was almost the only thing he *could* think about. Either it was a miracle to proclaim or a spell from which he must protect his people.

But which?

“Davis is down at the County Courthouse,” Deputy Peters said, “getting

me blueprints of the Collier place. Once we have those we'll be ready to get this operation set."

Eddie Martin spoke up. He was wearing green army fatigues and a camouflage flak vest. "I want to develop a mission analysis with detailed operational orders. And I don't want anybody handling weapons or gasoline who doesn't know what they're doing. We're not a bunch of assholes. We're organized, we've got structure, and we're in the right. So let's act that way."

Even Simon's original men had acquired new efficiency. He had little to do but watch. The martyrdom had filled his people with the grace of God. How he loved these people, deeply, abidingly, with his whole soul. They would help themselves and the witches, too. Let the poor people suffer in this life so that they would be happy in the next. Only one person among them all would not be going to heaven. Such was his joy and his deep, inner sadness that Simon wept quietly, the tears moving coldly down his cheeks. He sat bunched at his card table, nervously touching what was in his pocket.

The witches' barn was crowded. In the center was a great circular table, heaped with all kinds of food.

People stood round it or sat on the floor. When Amanda and Robin came there was an intense stir, suddenly hushed. Amanda was not surprised to see Constance a miserable shadow of herself sitting off in a corner. She would need much support and reassurance. Her fate was upon her, visible to Amanda as a sizzling, burning finger that pointed directly at the center of the old woman's skull.

"Connie?"

When Constance met her eyes, Amanda knew at once that she was aware of it, too.

After a life lived between the worlds, the old woman was afraid of death. Connie's black ravens stood in a line along and above her.

Amanda made her way through the silent, watching crowd of people to her benefactor. She sat down on the floor in front of her. "Connie, how can I help ___"

"I'm not afraid of death. It's pain." She saw Connie burning in agony, her ravens swarming, their wings dipped in blue flames.

"Oh, Connie!"

"Whisper!"

"Can't you stop it? There must be some way, surely."

“When my fire burns, I’ll be there. Nothing can change it.”

Amanda saw that. The closer the future comes to the present, the more possibilities become probable.

Then they become inevitable.

Connie smiled, a study in sadness. “Nature must feed, Amanda.”

“Yes, Connie. You can lean on me now. You can tell me all your fears. Nothing is hidden from me.”

Constance seemed to sag. In her eyes there was incredible gratitude. “I need you. I’ve needed you for years.”

She would have taken the old woman in her arms there and then, but a woman came up, offering Amanda a bowl of sweet yogurt, all but bowing and scraping. Constance looked very sad. “It takes an independent spirit to do magic. They won’t be witches long if they become your followers, young woman.”

“I don’t want that.”

“You certainly don’t! They’re awed of your knowledge of death, but they all have the same information hidden in their hearts. We just forget it for a little while, so don’t take advantage of your fellowman’s poor memory.”

“I’ll try not to.” Rather than have the woman grovel there, she took the proffered bowl and ate it while the whole of the lo Coven, who managed the dairy, looked on with pride. “It is human nature to seek the confirmation of princes,” she said. “That’s why royal families are forced to spend so much time making inspections. I can teach them not to regard me as a royal person.”

“Let them be in awe of you, but let them make their own decisions. It’ll be hard, especially when you can see farther than they can. But they must learn from their own mistakes.”

“I know. We can’t teach people anything. They have to have their experience.”

Constance moved her hands beneath her dress and brought out a blackened, ancient garter. “This is yours,” she said. “I’ve been keeping it for you.” And so, without ceremony, she was being offered the very garter of Maidenhood. She recognized it of old, and took it. The leather was very, very old, as black as carbon. The clasp was of bone. Dimly, as if she were an echo of a cry, Amanda remembered Moom. Moom’s laughter, Moom’s pain, Moom’s courage. She had given birth to six children and died before she was fifteen.

Moom had owned two garters. And so had Marian.

“Where’s my other garter, Connie?”

Constance waved her hand. “Lost to fire during the time of Innocent VIII.” The room was stuffy, the smell of the food heavy. Two children, Ariadne and Feather, actually knelt when they brought a plate of pancakes.

Amanda knew that she had to act, and quickly, to avoid becoming the resident Goddess-Queen. It was right for the witches to have a queen, but she must be no more than first among equals.

She held up the garter. “I’ve been given this. It belongs to the Covenstead and it can only be worn by an initiated priestess. Am I right?”

There were murmurs of agreement.

“Fine. Initiate me just as you would any apprentice. And if you elect me, I will wear your garter to the best of my liability.” She thought of Moom, who would have tom any woman apart who had tried to take this garter. And Marian, to whom the sacrilege of removing it was unthinkable. She put it in her pocket and took Connie’s hand. “You want anything from the table, Connie?”

“No.” Her voice dropped. “You know what I’m going through.”

“Yes, Connie.”

“I wish you could hold me.”

“I will, Connie, when we’re alone. As long as you want me to. I’ll be with you, Connie, even at the very end.”

“I feel so strange without the garter! So sad.”

She took Connie’s hand, for a moment held it tightly. The moment between them seemed to deepen. But Amanda knew that she had to break the moment. As much as she wanted to comfort Connie, this time belonged to the Covenstead. “If I don’t go over to that table and serve myself, I’m going to get more of bowing and scraping.”

“You don’t need that. Go, do your duty.”

There were pitchers of apple cider and a little blackberry juice. No whole berries, though. Too bad.

Amanda had seen them on the bushes, fat and delicious-looking. There were elder-blow pancakes and pumpkin pies and squash cooked in herbs and honey, huge loaves of dark bread and white goat’s milk cheese. There were pitchers of cream and milk and pots of pungent tea. Slabs of the pig Hiram’s bacon.

Long before she had tasted it all, Amanda had managed to satisfy even her

fierce appetite. Her body wanted to confirm its renewed connection to life, and it did that by eating.

She moved through a fog of silent, fascinated stares. "I haven't eaten since yesterday morning," she said.

"If you ever resurrect anybody else, don't forget to feed them. You come back hungry."

A little nervous laughter, as lame as her attempt to relieve the tension. Connie put a gentle hand on Amanda's arm, drew her aside. "Take a lesson from Manan. She was very clever at being queen. She knew how to rule without coercion, and reign without causing awe. But even when she played hide and seek with the children or raced horses with the men, nobody ever forgot she was queen. It's a trick, Amanda, to be first and equal at the same time." Then Connie said something that disquieted Amanda.

"It's an illusion, just as the peace and happiness of this moment are an illusion."

"What do you mean?"

"Go outside and look at the sky. Look with your new eyes."

Amanda stood up, told Robin to stay behind, and went out on her own into the quiet village. A drift of smoke rose from the sweat-lodge chimney.

As her eyes followed the smoke into the sky, she almost fell over backward with terror and shock. She was looking up the side of a towering leg covered with gleaming black fur. It was so tremendous that it was almost beyond seeing.

She looked up and up the rippling, muscular sweep of black fur to the vast, expanding chest perhaps a thousand feet above, and right into the grinning Cheshire face of the largest and most menacing black cat she had ever seen.

And Tom was looking straight back at her. There was instantaneous communication between them, deeper than spoken words. Tom was at once a part of what menaced the Covenstead and what protected it. The aim of the Leannan was to test the witches. The aim of that other darkness, that which controlled Brother Pierce, was to destroy them, as it was to destroy everything that gave mankind a chance of survival and growth.

This *Samhain* was indeed a season of learning and of dying.

That which menaced the Covenstead was far larger than Tom. Indeed, it towered over him, an immense presence of hate that swept up from Maywell and across the sky, drawing its strength from the immense heart of evil, and all the smaller hearts of men and women who would kill what they do not

understand, who would despise ways which are not their own. She saw it clearly, even as it shrank back from her.

What had possessed Brother Pierce and those like him fed on fear, and hated both man and God.

“This long central hallway suggests to me that the way to go is to jimmy the front door and work through with the gasoline sprayers until we reach the kitchen, here. Then we get the hell out. On a radio signal the fire team goes through the same way. We put a two-minute timer on the fuses. By the time the place starts burning we’re approximately ‘three hundred yards away, just at the edge of the forest.”

“I’d rather you had three minutes,” Brother Pierce said. He did not want another Turner.

“If we leave it go too long, they’ll smell the fumes.”

“How many people altogether on the place?” Bill Peters asked.

Bob Krueger answered. “There’s twenty-one commuters to Philly and New York. Plus they’re running a damn good three-hundred-acre farm using only hand tools. We can’t see they have less than seventy people working that land. Add in children and boost the total ten percent to be on the safe side, and a reasonable guess is a hundred and thirty.”

Bill rubbed his cheek with his right hand. “Where the hell do they live?”

“They’re out there,” Eddie Martin said. “Got to be. We’ve targeted twenty-three houses in town as witch-owned, but the estate witches ain’t living there, or we’d see ‘em move out to the farm every day.”

Bill thumped the blueprint. “They sure as hell don’t live in this house. Not unless they’re jamming together.”

“They might be. Anyway, I don’t think it’s a concern.”

“It’s a concern, all right. We’ve got to know where these people are. You’re talkin’ sixteen guys in our group. We’re no match for over a hundred. If we aren’t careful, we could all end up captured or worse.

With these people, maybe a lot worse.”

Simon thought of the house burning and lowered his eyes, praying once again to the Lord for guidance.

They were witches and they must be evil, but was it his place to pass sentence on them? He was tempted just to say the whole attack was canceled and that the Lord had given him a better idea.

Unfortunately the Lord was quiet, and Simon had no better idea. “Please,

Lord,” he called in his heart, “help me to do your will. Help me, O Lord.” But the Lord remained silent. The planning session went on.

Amanda looked up at the creature above her. Its great eyes glared down. It was waiting, and she had the feeling that there was very little time. But what did it want her to do?

She looked into the eyes. They were too knowing to be safe, but they were also very, very good. There was even humor there somewhere. In a flash he crouched down.

Amanda backed up. She could see the huge face superimposed on the village, hear the breathing, even hear the damp sound when he blinked. She could feel he was calling to her. Despite all his awesome power, he could not succeed without her.

“How can I help? Please tell me!”

In his eyes she saw men running on dark streets, she saw gasoline tins and roiling orange fire, and she heard Constance screaming in agony.

“Can’t you stop them, Tom?”

Then in the cat’s gleaming eyes Amanda saw the whole Covenstead on fire. She was so horrified she jumped back and fell down.

She stared into the morning sky. And sure enough, what she feared to see was there. Poised over the barn was a flaming finger exactly like the one that threatened Constance. Amanda went back to the barn and drank a long draught of cider. People gathered round her then, and began kissing her one after another. She kissed them all, soft lips of women, thin lips of men, wet lips of children. She kissed them as openly and intimately as she had Robin, and shared her breath with them all.

Some went away shocked, all silent. None but Amanda and Constance saw the fingers, and Constance kept to her corner, from time to time jerking her head as if to get out from under the thing that hissed in the air above her.

But that was not the way to escape. Amanda’s mind was tormented with the problem. This was why she had been returned to her people. She was here to save their way of life.

There seemed to be no direction in which to turn. She sensed that she might as well try to change the course of the Amazon as alter the fate that overhung the Covenstead.

She knew the emotion that came to fill her, knew it all too well. It was absolute and unreasoning. She fought it but it would not subside. Her fear

was like ice in the depths of her belly, freezing everything, freezing hope. She could see Brother Pierce as if through a vault of night, his spirit tortured, his mind made up. He personified man's deep, visceral fear of the unknown. There was so much hate and so much ignorance. She had no power against it.

But she had to have power. Somehow she had to save the Covenstead. She saw Simon Pierce standing alone in the center of his night. In his hand was a torch, and fire was in his eye.

Chapter 28

NIGHT ON THE SURFACE OF A STAR

In hush of afternoon Amanda went alone to the ruins of the fairy village. She needed time alone to think about the Covenstead's problem. Tom had communicated to her that there was no escape from fate.

They had to live through whatever lay ahead, or die in it.

She climbed a hummock until she was isolated, as Maid Marian had been so long ago, overlooking her dominion. A small black stone came to hand. It was smooth with time, a flung aged to gentleness.

In it she could feel the record of all it had ever known, whole eons collapsed to sighs. The stone was wise, and it had a message for her.

The stone said; you must embrace the fire. Amanda saw the whole Covenstead consumed by quick red flames.

The leaves, the stems, rustled with a hurrying breeze.

"Act," it whispered, "act."

The secret is—

She saw the horses kicking in the barn as their manes began to smoke and curl.

The Fairy Queen spoke: "This is the destiny of the night: you are warned that children of the fairy danced here once, but they do not dance now. The demon has different forms in different times, but it kills the same way. It is the hammer of witches."

"How do I stop it? Tell me how!"

She saw the *Leannan* for a moment, standing in among a tangle of weeds. "I don't know. If I did, my fairy would be able to reclaim this place, and they cannot."

"Why not? What stands against you?"

There was no answer.

Amanda sat a long time, her eyes closed, listening to her body work and to the breeze worrying the dry grass. The body may be heavy and slow and coarse, but it was so wonderfully real. Once tasted, the life of the flesh could never be forgotten.

Destruction, wars, fire—

Had Brother Pierce no epiphany?

When she opened her eyes, she was astonished to find how long the shadows had gotten. So many hours, so little time.

Her people had come. They formed a circle around the base of the hummock. They chanted her name.

“Amanda, Amanda, Amanda, Amanda.”

It was deeply moving to hear the word of the smell and taste and look of herself. Moom, also, had been thus moved, and Marian.

You must act, the wind had said.

But how?

The stone educated her. Images, words, thoughts, poured through her mind. She saw the whole massive mechanism of oppression. It came not only from the sorrowful heart of Brother Pierce but from the bleak, loveless minds of fundamentalist legislators assaulting witchcraft in Congress, and their followers persecuting witches in the dark of night. It was as if some great consciousness had possessed them and perverted their desire to do good, sweeping a black hand across their eyes.

Then the stone showed her the condition of other witches in the world, the desecrated Grove of the Unicorn in Georgia, being vandalized by fundamentalist Christians before television cameras, the act gleefully broadcast on an evening news program. She saw Oz, a witch in New Mexico, being slandered on a “Christian” television program, and more: she saw the restless, questing hatred that animated this new persecution of the Old Religion, the articulate men in their fine suits arguing in Congress, and the spreading madness of the Brother Pierces of the world, and the sadness hidden in the hearts of them all as they prayed to the Risen Lord even as their hate chained them to the service of the Dark One *Leannan* would not name.

Then she saw the future, as it might very well be, a future so hard that she must not even share it with Constance. She saw prisons full of witches, steel bars and raping guards, and long, agonizing laws on the shimmering digital books of tomorrow, and she saw the glimmer of coals where witch places had been.

She knew with steel clarity and a gentle heart what she had to do. “Take me to the children,” she said. “I want them to initiate me.”

Ivy: “Amanda, that isn’t the way we ought to do it. You’re to be welcomed, not initiated. Death initiated you. And the honor goes to the

Vines.”

Robin: “We have it all planned. We’ve invented a really beautiful ritual.”
She went back to the village.

People there were preparing for the rite, which was to take place at moonrise in the stone circle the Covenstead used for its major rituals.

An awesome ceremonial was not right. If the kids made up a ritual, it was bound to be simple and full of fun, and so powerful and rich with real magic.

On a small wooden table in the middle of the circle were Ivy’s athame, cup, cord, and scourge, the traditional tools of initiation.

A group of six or seven people were making decorative sheaves of wheat to dress the altar. A crown of rowan had been woven for Amanda.

“Windwalker, will you round up the children for me?”

He looked up from his work. By day he was an advertising executive. His mundane name was Bemie Katz. He worked with the children’s coven.

“They’re halfway between here and the mountain. There’s a game of follow the leader going on.”

“That makes it easy. Find the leader.”

He went off through the village calling the name of Ariadne. She was one of the middle girls, a gangling child of eleven, brown of eye and quick to smile. Amanda remembered her kneeling with her plate of pancakes, like an Egyptian slave girl.

A perfect choice for high priestess of the initiation—

Soon she appeared at a flamboyant run, her green skirt whipping about her legs, her hair flying behind her. She came up, wide-eyed, just managing to stop at the edge of the circle. “It’s not cast,” Amanda said. “Come on in.”

Behind her, straggling along, were the rest of the children of the Covenstead, twenty-eight kids in all.

“Good game?”

Ariadne nodded. She was breathing hard. “Up to the Fairy Stone, then back down the mountain.”

Amanda remembered Grape, gone forever beyond the Stone. There had been a quiet ceremony in the Covenstead just after dawn, but they had not awakened her for it. What had happened to Grape? Did she also wander, as Amanda had, in hard kingdoms?

The *Leannan* spoke again in Amanda’s mind, this time testily. “She’s in the Land of Summer. She’s perfectly happy.” Amanda was startled to hear the voice so close. It was like wind or remembered melody. Anyone could

have heard it had they known what to listen for.

Amanda spoke to the children. "Come and sit around me, all of you. I have something I want you to do."

They gathered round, all freckles and smears and wide eyes. "All right, now listen closely. I'm going to be initiated after we go to sweat lodge."

"You're the Maiden already." This from a grave boy, dark hair, thin, intense face.

"But I'm not a member of your Covenstead. I don't belong to you, not yet. You have to initiate me first.

And I want you kids to do it, as a very special favor to me."

They stared at her, waiting for more.

"You need to select a priestess."

There was silence.

"Come on, discuss it. Do you want Ariadne? Or maybe somebody else?"

"I want Feather," came a soft voice.

"Wait a minute," Ariadne said, "you can't say that. You *are* Feather!"

"I'm a better witch, Ariadne, you know I am."

"But you can't choose yourself It's not fair. I'm the high priestess of the children's coven."

Feather was a girl with a smile hidden in her face and the glow of early puberty about her.

"I want Feather, too," a boy said.

"Ariadne," another replied. "It ought to be her."

"Feather is nicer."

"Ariadne pulled you out of the bog last month."

"All right, kids," Amanda said, "you can have an election. All in favor of Ariadne, raise your hands."

She counted fourteen.

"And in favor of Feather."

Fourteen again. Both girls had voted for themselves. Amanda could not imagine a better outcome. "Very well, you'll do it together. Which of you knows best the Way of the Altar?"

Ariadne nodded to Feather.

"Feather will be first priestess, then. Will the two of you choose a priest?"

They consulted for some time in whispers, laughing frequently as they went through the list of boys.

"We choose Robin," Feather told her.

“Robin? You mean the adult Robin?”

“You should always be initiated by your lover, don’t you know that?”

“I have a lot to learn about witchcraft.” But even as she spoke the words, she knew they were not true.

In Marian’s memory alone there was a vast amount of lore, of the herbs and the spells and the ways of the forest. From Moom came the simple heart of it all, the chants and dances.

Somebody was banging the gong for sweat lodge. Amanda went with the children to the wide foyer of the building. Smoke was rising from both chimneys, and the wooden flaps covered the windows. The adult witches were gathering at the lodge entrance, hanging up their clothes and pulling off their workboots.

Long shadows were creeping from under trees and around the comers of buildings as the witches passed into the big lodge. The steam had been filled with the aroma of the forest, drawn from damp herbs laid on the hot rocks.

Amanda strode naked into the center of the room and lay on one of the long benches. The children went first to the stone tubs and crowded in together, squealing and laughing as they attacked one another with soap and rush broom.

Amanda contemplated them, the fire-marked children. Why must there be such hate for such happiness?

“Hey, lazy!” She looked up, startled. Ivy proceeded to shove her down the bench. “Give me some room there, Maiden.” Ivy lay down beside her. “I understand the point you’re trying to make with the kid’s initiation,” she said. “It’s a good idea.” She laughed. “A lot of the coveners from the town and some of the Christians are coming. What we had planned was a procession around the estate, with you riding a horse.”

It was Amanda’s turn to laugh. “You’re not serious?”

“Not entirely.” She gave Amanda an arch look. “You really are rather awesome. The Catholics are calling you a miracle. I think the Episcopalians favor a medical explanation. But everybody agrees, you’re something quite unusual.”

“I’m just me.”

Ivy smiled at her. “An awful lot of people saw you dead. Now you’re alive again, walking around.

Naturally there is a little awe.”

Amanda thought of the finger in the sky. “I’m not nearly as powerful as

you think.”

“Don’t patronize.”

There came in the splashing of the children’s water a sparkling whisper, “Hurry, Amanda, every moment counts.”

“Surely, *Leannan*, there is still time.”

“No. There is no time.”

“I think we gotta give ‘em warning,” Deputy Peters said. His eyes were red, his face was perspiring.

Simon watched him carefully. Bill Peters was so damn afraid. Even the tone of his voice could cause people to lose their courage.

“We can’t, Bill, we’ll risk a fight.” Eddie Martin was certainly more Simon’s sort of man. Strong, decisive, looked like he’d beat hell out of the first person to cross him. His wife had complained of him once in a private session with Simon. “You cleave to him,” Simon had told her. “The Good Book says a man’s supposed to cleave to his wife,” she had replied, “not the wife to her husband. You men just read it backward. And anyway, he doesn’t cleave. He hollers.” A decent girl, Simon had tried to treat her kindly. He had blessed her and told her to place her troubles in the hands of the Lord.

“We are talking about murder, you guys! My God, if we burn a hundred and thirty people—we can’t risk it, we’re crazy.”

Simon listened, but at the same time did not. The meeting had been going on for some time, and he suspected that it was going to resolve itself no matter what he said.

Lately he found himself turning more and more to his past, as if the approaching crisis was returning him to his own great guilt, and to the hand. He had only known her for a few days, but he had thousands and thousands of detailed memories of her, of how she had laughed and what hopes she had cherished, and what she had enjoyed. She wanted to be a lawyer, and her favorite thing in the world was Double Bubble bubble gum. He remembered her talk, her ideas and ways, the anger and the bitterness at a fate she could not control, and how very much she had wanted to be held.

He was snapped back to the meeting by Eddie Martin’s voice. “Now, look here. Deputy, we are talking about something that has to be done! This town’s got cancer. If you want to get rid of cancer, you take a burning brand and you just burn it right out.”

“I’m telling you, if we burn that house, old Williams is going to be pretty

mad, but in the end he's going to give up on it. But if even one person goes up, he'll have the state police in here and every damn one of us'll be in jail within the week."

Simon spoke mildly, softly. "Thou shall not suffer a witch to live."

Eddie Martin slapped his fist against the table.

Hard silence followed.

"But also, 'Let none of you imagine evil against his neighbor.' We must punish them until they come to their senses, and when they do, then let us love them."

Feet shuffled. There were a few coughs. Simon sensed that they did not really understand him, and that was sad. He knew the truth about Christianity, its deep, inner decency and tolerance. Why, when he preached, didn't it come out that way? He just couldn't figure it out. But here they were. Would Jesus be comfortable in this meeting?

Bob Krueger spoke a compromise. "We set everything up, then we pull back almost to the road, see.

Then we fire a few shots into the air with a shotgun. That'll wake up every damn witch from here to hell.

They'll have time to get out of the house but not time to catch us. Or even see us."

"That's a good idea," Deputy Peters said.

"Vote," Eddie Martin said.

They tied it up. Eddie looked long at Simon. "You gotta break it, Brother." If he were to vote against Eddie's wishes, how would he take it?

"I must seek the counsel of the Lord."

Just then Mrs. Turner came in with two big pizza boxes. Her son followed with three six-packs of beer.

There was no merriment as the men began to eat. Simon had never been in battle, but he could imagine that men must be like this the night before an assault.

As they dug into the food, Simon left the room to pray in private. Unfortunately Eddie Martin followed him. They went together into the garage. Eddie was stiff with rage. "I'm not satisfied. Brother Pierce.

Seven of 'em voted against me. Seven cowards."

"They'd call themselves prudent."

Eddie sucked in breath. "What do *you* call them. Brother?"

Now, this had to be handled very, very carefully. He didn't want to lose

either half of the group. “Brother Martin, I think we are walking in the way of the Lord, and we are doing His work, in His vineyard. I trust in His wisdom.”

“I trust in His wisdom, too. That’s why we gotta do things the rough way. Burn ‘em. Make sure the survivors leave and *never* come back—if there are any damn survivors.”

“Williams was already over to my place, asking all kinds of questions about poor Brother Turner, rest his soul. If the witches die, there’ll be no doubt in his mind about who did it. And it will be a crime of national importance. We’ll look evil, and they will look like martyrs.”

“We’re about to burn down a house worth an easy quarter million dollars. Probably more. Williams is gonna be asking questions anyway.” Eddie Martin came close to Simon. He stank of machine oil from cleaning guns. His eyes were bloodshot. “I’ll tell you what we ought to do. We ought to capture every one of those bitches and all the little toads they got as men, and have us a public execution. And then when Williams pokes his nose around—just blow his head right off. I’d do it myself, and I’d be proud!”

This was too much, and Simon knew it. He had never seen a look like the one in Eddie Martin’s eyes.

“Have a caution, Brother.”

“Why? You know you got more than half this town on your side? Sure you do! Even got some of the Episcopalans, who don’t hold with the town covens meeting in their damn basement. And Catholics who got upset about that nude ride. Hell, you got every law enforcement person except the sheriff himself.

And Tom Murphy, he’s state police major up to Elsemere, runs the whole damn county. He’s been around the Tabernacle a couple of times. I seen that man prayin’ his heart out with you, Brother Pierce.”

Everything Eddie said was true. The more public the witches became, the more powerful Simon got. He knew that, but he did not know just how to handle this situation. If he voted to warn the witches, he lost Eddie and his six supporters for sure. If he voted against warning, he probably wouldn’t lose the others.

But they risked committing a crime of extraordinary ferocity, one that could not be justified anywhere in the Bible. Or could it? “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”

Eddie had been out here long enough. Simon wanted to take this before the Lord. “Where lives are involved. Brother Martin, I have to pray. Please leave

me alone for a few minutes.”

After Eddie left, Simon knelt down beside the Turners’ old Dodge wagon, facing the back door of the garage. A tattered toy puppet lay on the floor between him and the door, its head cut open, no doubt in some childhood game. He noticed then that there were a number of other dolls lying on a shelf near the door, all with their heads in disrepair. A lot of anger in the Turner house.

“O Lord,” he whispered, “please help me now. It is in my power to send the witches into the fire of your divine justice. Hear me, O Lord, and let me know what to do.” He knelt there, staring at the dolls. Soon the concrete floor started hurting his knees. “O Lord, just send me some kind of a sign.”

There was nothing. Simon knelt a while longer, his mind full of wordless prayer. At last, sorry that his need had been too little to interest the Lord, he began to rise. Just then he heard something odd—a mewling sound on the far side of the garage. He peered around the car.

The sound came again, much louder this time. He couldn’t see anything over the top of the car. But when he looked under it, he saw well enough.

There was a black panther in this garage with him. Even as he started to get to his feet, it sailed soundlessly across the hood of the car and blocked his way. There it stood, huge, its massive, kinked tail flicking, its one good ear cocked toward him.

He was dumbfounded. There weren’t any panthers in May well. “Help!”

It growled and leaped at his throat. The thing almost knocked his breath out of him. Then it was on him.

He couldn’t believe this.

A panther with terrible eyes, laughing and green and cruel. “Help me!”

“We’re coming!”

The men came through the door in a bunch and stopped, shocked. The panther had Simon down. He knew it was about to kill him.

“What the hell—”

“Get a gun. It’s gonna tear me apart any second.” He could smell its breath, an odor like rotten meat. He tried to control his shaking, because it seemed to excite the cat, which began to breathe harder and harder, washing him with the foul stink.

Suddenly the cat yowled. Something invisible was pulling at its powerful neck, forcing its head back away from Simon.

Well, glory be, he understood now. The cat was a witch spell and the Lord

was protecting him from it.

His men were bunched up at the door. They had guns, but Simon knew that bullets wouldn't hurt this panther. It was a spirit thing, had to be—despite the tom ear and busted tail.

“Brace yourself!”

When the bolts clicked, the panther didn't even bat an eye. Instead it opened its mouth wide and with a lunging motion went for Simon's jugular. “Oh, God!”

It stood gagging, unable to reach him. He could see the faint outlines of immense fingers around the thing's neck. And a tremendous, dark, *something* standing behind it, holding it back.

The sheer strangeness of it all terrified him. A shot exploded over the sound of his screams.

The big cat leaped straight up into the air shrieking in rage. And the shadowy form leaped right after it.

Simon sat up. He felt his throat. No injury. “O my dear Lord,” he said. His heart was thundering, his blood roaring in his veins.

“It's up in the rafters,” Tom Faulkner said softly. “Nobody move.” He cast the beam of his flashlight toward the dark directly above Simon, who was still sitting on the floor.

Tom was the first to cry out. Then Bill Peters took it up, then they were all shouting, backing toward the door, and Simon himself was scuttling along the floor, trying to get to his feet, too terrified to make his body work right.

The only tiling left up there was a pair of eyes and a big cat grin. Then the eyes closed, and the grin faded.

“It's gone,” Eddie Martin cried. “The damn thing just evaporated!”

The beams of half a dozen flashlights confirmed that the garage was empty.

“That, my friends, was what you call a witch spell. Praise God, it was a thing sent after us from the depths of hell! And the Lord Himself saved me from it. The Lord saved me. Glory hallelujah, I have seen the hand of God.”

Now Simon knew exactly what God wanted.

Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!

Chapter 29

DAUGHTER OF THE MOON

“When we were kids we used to try to imagine what death was like. Like an explosion, a little girl—I think her name was Nancy—said. Nothing, one boy said. He was killed in the Great War, which was just as well. From his idea of death you can see he was an afflicted bore.”

“Connie, you must collect yourself.”

Constance’s reply was bitter. “Thank you, Amanda. I need advice from someone older and wiser. I’m very grateful.”

“I’ve come up here to invite you to attend my initiation.”

“Ah! Into what? Fire?”

“Into the Covenstead.”

“I can’t get that *thing* to go away that’s over my head!”

“Oh, Connie!”

“Don’t pity me, you little whelp! Pity yourself. You’ve got one, too. We all do. The whole Covenstead’s as good as dead.”

“Connie, *please!*”

“I’m only telling you the truth. Here, take a pull.” She started to hand Amanda a bottle of Madeira, then stared at it fixedly for a moment. “Old women can get drunk on any damn thing.” She laughed.

“Something’s in the air. Don’t you smell it—burning hair?” She got up from her bed and came to Amanda, put her head on her shoulder. Amanda embraced her. “I am not afraid of death, but of the manner of dying. I don’t want to burn.” She moaned, nuzzling into Amanda’s shirt. “You’re so young and warm and strong. But be clever. Even you cannot resist it.”

“I’ve got to save the Covenstead.”

“Yes.

That’s why you’ve been dead. You’ve passed all the tests. You have the strength and the wisdom.” She was shaking. “Oh, Amanda, I’m so frightened.”

Constance had always been her strength and her support. To be witness to the old woman’s terror was itself terrifying. But Amanda kept her feelings to herself. She held Constance in strong arms. “The Covenstead will survive.”

“The Covenstead is to be tested by fire. Remember that the *Leannan* is as much with you as she is against you. If the Covenstead proves itself weak, it will certainly die,”

Compared with what she had been through with Mother Star of the Sea and Bonnie, the onslaught of Brother Pierce did not seem so terrible. After all, he was a mere wave from the outside, expending itself on the outside. Her demons had come from within her own soul. “We will not die. I’m stronger than Pierce.”

Connie clutched her. “You have come to us as a warrior Maiden, to see the witches through another era of persecution. The fundamentalists will grow and grow in power, and they are the direct agents of darkness.” She sobbed. “They’re so innocent, and so deceived. Brother Pierce may well fail. You *are* strong. But what about the next, and the one after that, and the one following? Will you still be strong, ten years from now, twenty? Will you be strong in prison, or in exile? What if you lose your freedoms, your right to a fair trial, your right to due process? Believe me, Amanda, there is a dark time for witches coming, and we have never been more necessary.”

“I am not afraid.”

Connie hugged her more tightly. “All power to you then, Maiden. I don’t know where you get your courage.”

“Well, one place I get it is out of being sensible.” She moved away from Constance and picked up the telephone. She dialed the sheriff’s office.

“Sheriff Williams, please.”

“May I say who’s calling?”

“Just say it’s important.”

He came on the line.

“Sheriff, this is Amanda Walker.”

“Oh! I heard about last night. Amanda, I was so deeply moved. I’m sorry I won’t be at your welcoming, but I don’t trust my deputy anymore and I’ve got to stick close to the office.”

“Never mind that right now. I’m calling you to tell you that this Covenstead is in danger.”

“I know that. Simon Pierce is after you.”

“I want you to deputize everybody in the town you feel you can trust, and bring them out here tonight with all the weapons at their disposal. Some people are already coming to the initiation, but they won’t be enough.”

“I’d better call in the state police.”

“Do that if you think it’ll help. But get people out here no later than nine. I want all the approaches guarded.” She looked at Constance, who was nodding on her bed, about to slump over onto her side.

“And I want you to personally guard Connie. I want you right in the room with her at all times, do you understand that?”

“I’m already moving.”

“Sheriff, thank you. I love you. I love all of you so much.” She hung up the phone. Where was the self-involved little artist of a week ago, the one who used to paint pictures of imaginary elves? If she spent the rest of her artistic career painting a portrait of the *Leannan* and captured a tenth of her beauty, her career would be a success. Or if she painted Tom somewhat as he was, or Raven as he had been.

But it wasn’t time to think about that now. She had to go back to the village and go through her ritual initiation.

Getting Connie settled, she wished she could relieve some of the poor woman’s terror. To know when you are going to die is a hard thing, but to know that it is going to be by fire must be very much worse.

The gong sounded. Amanda tucked the quilt around Connie’s chin, kissed her head, and quietly left the room.

“I’m telling you, we go late. Catch ‘em all sleeping.”

“Early. We’ll take ‘em by surprise.”

“When they’re not asleep? They’ll be all over the place. The house’ll be full of ‘em.”

“They’ll be out in the fields. It’s harvest time and they’ve still got a lot of standing corn.”

The group had been arguing ever since the appearance of the thing in the garage. Again Simon saw those eyes. Despite the help of the Lord, he was, quite frankly, frightened. There were real supernatural events happening in Maywell. Opposition to the witches had become far more than a means of ensuring the loyalty of his own congregation. The Christian brotherhood itself was at stake in this little town. The witches could command real, live demons with green eyes and the bodies of panthers.

The demon had been terrible, but the Lord had shown He was stronger. Simon was a sinner, too, of course, but his own crime must seem small to God beside that of the witches, who were willing to call hell-things into the world. “We’ve got to destroy them!”

A chorus of Amens.

The beeper Deputy Peters carried at his waist started warbling. “Gotta call in,” he said. Everybody fell silent as he made contact with the sheriff's office. He said a few words, listened, hung up. He looked toward them, his face pale. “I just got told to get down to the office by nine P.M. I'm on desk duty all night.”

“He wants to keep tabs on you.”

“Which means he suspects something. But he suspects it for later. After nine.”

Brother Pierce spoke. “That decides it. We move as soon as the sun goes down. We move fast, and we hit ‘em hard.”

Eddie Martin rolled up his maps. Other men began assembling the equipment. Afterward Brother Pierce led them all in prayer.

The sun rode the edge of the sky. All the Covenstead and many of its friends and supporters crowded around Amanda, except for the children, who sat in the circle they had cast. Robin and Ivy's father Steven was there, and the Episcopal rector and Father Evans.

They intended a Christian presence here, no doubt as a gentle reminder to the witches that they could always return to the Church. Amanda accepted that. Between them they had brought twenty parishioners.

For the past hour the children's coven had been working furiously and noisily, creating their ritual.

Ariadne and Feather stood in the center of the circle now, Robin behind them.. The great sword of the Covenstead lay on the ground before the two girls. Ariadne held the cords, Feather the scourge. Robin took the athame from the small table they were using as an altar and used it to symbolically open the circle for Amanda to enter.

The Christians began the ritual with a benediction. “O Lord,” Father Evans prayed, “let the light enter their hearts, let thy hand touch them in blessing.”

At the same moment that the sun touched the edge of the horizon Amanda stepped into the circle.

Previous to her experience in death, she had considered the circle a symbolic place. But the symbols of this world are the concrete reality of the other. She vividly recalled the cauldron circle, and Connie stirring and calling. The cauldron, full of the energy of the spells that had been cast into it, had been as real as a rock, the people around it vague, flickering shadows.

Robin stepped forward between the two girls. All three dropped their cloaks to the ground Amanda did likewise. The four of them stood naked in the crisp air. Amanda felt goose bumps rising on her skin.

Because of the cold, the rest of the coveners remained clothed. Steven was just outside the circle, watching his son. Father Evans had a bemused expression on his face.

Feather gave Robin a sheet of loose-leaf paper on which a dozen different young hands had written in red pencil. Robin read:

“This is the Charge of the Coven:

Keep our secrets hidden in your heart,
Master our ways; if you cannot do it do not start.

Perfect your inner sight
That you may to the circle add your light.

The Craft of the Wise is sought, not found.
It is everywhere, so look around.

Tonight you will vow before the Goddess and the God
To give your all to the hidden synod.”

“Will you answer this Charge?”

Amanda nodded. “I will.”

Feather spoke. “Then kneel and take our pentacle.” She handed Amanda a five-pointed star of silver, enclosed in a circle of gold. “Say with me, I have heard the Charge of the Coven. Before the Goddess and the God and all the wise, I swear I have taken it into my heart.”

Amanda felt the presence of the witches around her, the whispering power of the circle, the nearness of the *Leannan*. Full of joy, she swore.

The gong of the Covenstead sounded.

Robin took the paper on which the charge had been written and burned it in a little golden bowl. “By smoke, by fire, fix these words. By wind, by air, by earth be it done!”

He came and knelt beside Amanda. Feather stood behind her and Ariadne

knelt on the other side. They made a circle, Ariadne and Robin clasping their left hands before her knees and their right hands on the back of her head. Feather laid hers on theirs. The three spoke together. "Do you to the Goddess and the God give all between these hands, without reservation or hesitation?"

"I do."

"Say it then: I am a child of Earth and Sun, I am daughter of the Moon."

Amanda said the words.

"I love the planet of my birth, and the star of my life, and me moon who granted me my humanity."

Amanda repeated after them.

The whole circle spoke. "By our will and the goodness of the Goddess, may all the powers of the craft enter your body, and especially the secret wisdom of our coven." Their voices dropped to a whisper.

"Be as the animals. Their simplicity makes their anger small, their love great."

Silence fell.

Amanda could hear the wind bothering the weeds, and the silver cries of birds at evening.

From behind her Feather spoke: "Stand up I'm going to mark you as a witch." She took herbed oil that smelled of rust and peppermint, and made an X on Amanda's lips. "Blessed be the mouth that speaks its love of the earth." Then she marked Amanda's breasts. "Blessed be the heart that beats its love of life."

Then she marked Amanda's genitals. "Blessed be the loins that give birth to the world."

Amanda thought of the life growing inside her. Just barely there, but so very there. Her darkness was flowering.

Ariadne took the scourge. "This is the Charge of Remembrance." She hit Amanda across the buttocks with it, just hard enough to sting. "Remember that you belong to the dust and will return." Again she struck her.

"Remember that you belong to the coven and will never leave." Again the cords touched Amanda's flesh. "Remember that you are daughter of the moon."

Three more times the gong rang, its voice echoing off the vastness of Stone Mountain.

"Guess what," Feather said, "you're a real, live witch." She smiled "It's official."

The children's coven crowded around her, laughing, hugging her and one another. Nearby a harp began to play. As the rhythm grew more and more intricate and faster and faster, it beckoned, then demanded that there be dancing.

They went round and round together, Amanda and Robin and the children, the other witches and their guests joining outside the circle. The harp sang to quicken blood. The moon, fat and red, slipped swiftly up the purple sky.

The last of Simon's men scaled the wall and dropped down into the leaves below. "We're clear," Simon whispered to the others. "Let's go."

Eddie Martin led. They filed along the inside of the wall, seeking the road that led into the estate from the main gate. The darkness was almost absolute, and dry twigs kept brushing Simon's face, scratching at him. This must be virgin forest on this side of the wall. The trees were giants, ready to crush you.

There were fifteen men divided into three groups of five each. The lead group Eddie called the Suppression Team. Their job was to pin down any opposition on the way in. The second group was the Fire Team. Three of them carried gasoline in five-gallon sprayers. The other two were responsible for the timed fuses. The last group was the Support Team, and Simon was part of this. Their mission was to remain a few hundred yards behind the others, providing cover and diversions—if necessary drawing fire.

Even though the sun was just down and the moon rising, the forest was so dark that Eddie from time to time had to flicker his flashlight ahead. Simon, running along among his men, was not surprised to find himself afraid. They all were. Somehow the fear made the Lord's work seem even more important.

There came a soft word from ahead. The road had been found. The group gathered itself together.

Simon was cold, and confused about directions. Fortunately Eddie Martin and the others were good at this son of a thing. They knew exactly what they were doing.

"Okay, everybody gather round." There was warmth in the little group huddling around Eddie. "We have to move fast. We could be under surveillance even now."

Silently, feverishly, Simon said a prayer: "Lord, let thy will be done." He said it again and again and again as they moved along. The witches were human beings, he couldn't forget that. He touched the hand.

“Suppression Team, front and center.” There was shuffling movement among the shadowy forms.

“Lemme set my watch. Okay, you’ve got two minutes lead, then the Fire Team will follow. Take off!”

They hurried away, their footsteps muffled by the leaves that littered the road. A flicker of light from time to time marked their progress. “Damn that Faulkner,” Eddie murmured, “he can’t stay away from his light!” Soon his watch peeped. “All right, Fire Team, let’s go.” As they trotted into the dark, Bob Krueger set his own watch. He was deputy leader of the Support Team. Simon was content to let him do the commanding. Give him a pulpit and Simon could convince turnips to dance, but he was no good at military maneuvers. Back in 1962 he had failed his induction physical for reasons the draft board had refused to disclose, even to him.

The next thing Simon knew they were marching up a slight incline. The smell of the woods was almost overpowering. The presence of the witches in Maywell had sensitized Simon to the devil’s ways, and this woods was definitely infested with demonic force.

They went farther and farther, deeper and deeper into the forest. Simon could sense the unseen things crowding about them, it was all he could do not to take a shotgun from one of the men and start blasting away.

As they reached the top of the rise they had been climbing, the blackness ahead began to change, then to tighten. They were coming to the end of the woods.

“What the hell is that?”

“Quiet!”

“Something’s moving.”

Simon couldn’t tell who was talking, but he could hear the slow dragging shuffle. It was emerging from the forest, parallel with them. “Oh, God.”

“Be quiet.”

A light snaked out.

There was nothing there. The light moved left, right, left again. Then Simon saw it—a stone statuette of a broad-shouldered man no more than three feet tall, a powerful little man with a furious, grimacing face.

“It’s some kind of a charm. Pass it by.”

They kept on walking. Simon looked back once only. He might have seen the shadow of the thing moving slowly up the road.

“Okay, halt,” Krueger said. They had come into a pasture. Now all that

separated them from the house was a few hundred yards of field.

The moon was riding the treetops. It cast its pale light upon the scene below: empty, disused fields crossed by the road. And on that road two clumps of dark figures, spaced a few hundred yards apart, going forward at a steady pace.

“Okay, guys, it’s our turn. Move out.”

The Support Team started off. Simon felt the moonlight on the back of his neck like a living finger. The darkness had been hard, but this was harder. “O Lord,” he prayed, “thy rod and thy staff—”

Far in the distance crows began to call. Their voices shattered the silence, echoing up and down the valley. Simon actually ducked. He remembered those damned birds, and somebody should have thought of them before. During that nude ride the other night they had saved the witches with their fierce pecking attacks.

Their noise grew more intense as the Support Team reached the house. The crows were swooping and flapping frantically in the front yard, but they didn’t attack. When Simon stepped up onto the porch, he sensed the charged presence of the house.

In among the gracious columns he could see that the front door was gaping. From the shadows within there came a powerful odor of gasoline.

Chapter 30

After the initiation the group retired to the barn. Carpets had been laid on the floor and a fire built in the central fireplace. The room was warm, tenderly lit by the flames. Incense scented the air. One of the members of the Vine Coven played the panpipes, the long, sweet notes swelling in the quiet. The Christian delegations were gone. After the ceremony their cars had moved slowly off across the farm.

For the sake of the witches' safety Amanda would have preferred them to stay, but they could not be allowed to witness this.

Amanda had never known that there could be such intimacy among a large group of people. They were deeply in love with one another, all of them. It was upon this foundation that their society rested. How anybody could find such gentleness threatening was beyond Amanda's comprehension. And yet she herself would once have been shocked at the spectacle before her.

Even though it was an act shared among many people, it was as intensely private as a wedding night.

Robin lay beside Amanda, his hand resting on her thigh, his eyes closed. She turned on her side and regarded him.

"Are you asleep?"

"Hardly."

"Robin. I'm so happy."

He kissed her cheek. "You belong to us now."

"I feel that."

"There was dissension about you once, when you first came here. A couple of covens even thought about leaving the Covenstead."

"What kind of dissension?"

"Over you being an outsider."

"I'm not an outsider."

He smiled at her, leaned over, and began kissing her.

She could see a vague, colorful haze around most of the people here. Where the lights of the couples touched there played deep blue of heartrending beauty. She remembered that color: it was the same as the sky of the Land of Summer. Love, she now understood, was so connected to death that the two were like an old married couple, serenely embracing.

Amanda gazed at Robin, enjoying the wonder of him. "You raised the cone

of power. Without you I couldn't have found my way back."

"Vine Coven did it."

"Each did it, and all. If you're a witch, everything you do is magic. The craft of the wise is the art of expressing the true relationship between humanity and the earth."

"Which is?"

"I can't explain magic any more than a Japanese monk can explain Zen. Every human being is a hologram of the whole species. Each contains all. That's the basis of magic. And earth is not an inert ball of rock. It is aware, it thinks, it knows we're here. That's magic, too."

"Why do I find that thought chilling?"

"The earth will give back exactly what it gets." She was silent a moment. "Humanity is supposed to function as a single being, the brain of the planet. Instead we are all scattered, each going his own selfish way. The earth gets selfishness, it will return selfishness of its own. You have to feel the world as a whole, mankind as a whole. Let illusion drop away. Differences, ideologies, fears, all disappear. Hate evaporates with the rest of illusion. Only love remains." His expression was blank. "Don't you sense it?"

The love, the compassion?"

"I can hardly imagine what your perceptions must be."

A disquiet came upon her. How could such a simple thing be so opaque to him? But what about her, a week ago? She had to bring what she had learned into the world. But not now. There was work yet to do. Brother Pierce and his followers would come once deep night had fallen, she felt sure of it.

And yet, in her mind's eye she saw him moving through the woods, saw him approaching the house in darkness... as if he was already there.

It was not long after eight, though. She must be projecting images from later tonight. Surely they weren't already here, when it was still gloaming. Soon the sheriff would come and the danger would be over.

Even so, she heard the hissing fire that still lingered above the Covenstead. The thought of it made her dig her fingernails into her palms. If all was well, why did danger still point its finger?

Robin was aware of none of this. She returned his smile, all the while feeling the most acute loneliness.

She and she alone understood enough to protect this place. She was very uneasy.

Outside there was a dull boom, followed at once by a low, steady roar.

Amanda started, then raised her head. “No, be quiet. It’s only a jet.”

She saw fire.

Somebody started humming. Others took it up, and soon the whole room was filled with a gentle, human music. It was the sound of over a hundred people all married together.

For a little while it seemed as if the marriage was even bigger than the Covenstead, that it extended forever outward, covering the whole earth and including everything—air, rocks, plants, all matter living and otherwise, and all people whose hearts could join.

When the hum died away, the roar did not. It had gotten louder and was now punctuated by deep crackling sounds.

Amanda’s throat almost closed, her breath came in a long gasp. Everybody in the room knew at once what it was. Somewhere on the estate there was a great fire.

People jumped up in their fright and rushed naked for the door. A mistake, and Amanda acted instantly.

“Stop! All of you!” They froze, turned, their faces tormented by their feelings. “We get our clothes on first. We do not panic.”

“I think it’s the house,” Robin said as he rumbled with his jeans.

Amanda got jeans and sweatshirt on, and jammed her feet into her boots. She was among the first through the door.

Red, flickering reflections covered Stone Mountain. From the direction of the main house there arose a tower of sparks. Smoke was billowing up into the sky. “Connie!”

As she ran, Amanda felt a fool. Why had she not heeded the warning of her own mind, then her own ears? She had been seduced by the moment. She raced frantically across the hummocks, her legs pumping. “Connie!”

Flames were literally bursting out of every downstairs window, snatching and licking at the bricks. The upstairs windows glowed.

Smoke shot from the chimneys. Sparks climbed in whorls and eddies up the sky.

She had never before realized how long the distance was between the house and the village. She ran and ran and yet seemed never to get any closer. Her wind began to come hard and her legs to ache.

At last she reached the edge of the herb garden. The tang of smoke was heavy on the air. Wood and something else.

Gasoline.

“You’re killing her, you’re killing her!”

Connie’s crows were flying round and round the house, screaming horribly whenever they went through the flames. When they saw Amanda, they came and fluttered and shrieked about her head. She rushed straight to the kitchen door.

A blistering wave of heat slammed her back. The kitchen was blazing. Beyond it was a sea of flames.

She couldn’t get in that way. “Connie!”

She ran around to the front.

Flames had climbed the columns of the portico. The front door itself was gone. She could see inside, to the black profiles of the hall furniture. As she watched, a chunk of ceiling collapsed into the hall and was lost in sparks.

She backed away, shielding her face. Robin came rushing up, followed by half a dozen others. Three of them went to hook up garden hoses.

The crows were throwing themselves against the window of Connie’s bedroom. “She’s in there, Robin!”

His arm came around her waist.

She broke away. “I’m not going to let her burn!”

“There’s no way—”

If only she had asked the sheriff to come at eight instead of nine. A thousand if-onyms, and the hell with them all. She was going to do her best. Others were trying to save what they could from the library. One group was looking for a ladder in the toolshed. They dared not try to get the one in the basement.

Amanda began climbing a gutter. The bricks behind it were hot to the touch. Smoke was coming out around some of them.

The wall was bulging, ready to collapse, and the gutter was loose. Amanda climbed anyway, hand over hand, her feet barely able to keep her from slipping back down.

“Amanda, stop! It’s too dangerous.”

Struggling with the shaky gutter, she continued up. Beside her the downstairs window belched flames.

She could smell her own hair beginning to burn. A few feet farther up, the crows were hurling themselves again and again against a window. She felt something cold running down her back, saw water steaming on the bricks around her. They were trying to protect her with the garden hoses.

What a fool she had been not to have gotten things organized before!

Wasting time with rituals and pleasures.

She was now parallel with the window. The crows flew madly about in a stink of burning feathers. She reached out and tried to get her fingers under the edge of the window frame. No luck, it was too tight.

She climbed a little farther. Water played around her, making things dangerously slick. But the others weren't thinking of that. They were afraid she would burn.

How could anybody believe that other human beings could deserve a horror such as this? She hammered with her one free hand on the glass. "Connie! Connie!"

Slowly, unwillingly, the glass began to give way. Again and again Amanda slapped at it. Finally lines of fracture started to cross its surface.

The gutter made a scraping sound. Amanda felt it sway outward, away from the wall. "It's falling," Robin bellowed. "You've got to come down!"

The glass shattered. Amanda cleaned out the shards and, levering on the window frame, was able to pull herself over onto the sill. The crows flew past her into the room.

Connie lay on her bed with her hands folded neatly on her breast. Her face was in repose. Flames were popping up through the floorboards. The doorway was a sheet of fire. Even as Amanda watched, the bedclothes caught with a snapping sound.

The crows rushed madly about in the room, becoming smoking, blazing meteors in the superheated air near the ceiling. Their voices high with suffering, they tried to protect Connie with their bodies.

"Connie, wake up!"

The combination of the crows and Amanda's screaming did it at last. Connie's eyes opened. For a long moment she simply stared at the ceiling, which was shot with fingers of red flame from the doorway

"Connie, come to me! Quick!"

Her eyes met Amanda's. "Don't be a fool. You can't protect me from my fate. Get out of here!"

"Come with me."

She sat up on the bed, and when she did, something terrible happened to her. There must have been a layer of superheated air in the room just above the level of the bed. Her hair burst into flames. She screamed then and began beating her burning scalp. Then she leaped to the floor. Her eyes were wide, her lips twisted away from clenched teeth. "Goddess!"

The whole top half of her body started on fire. She danced. She made barking noises. Urine sprayed around her. Then she pitched back onto the floor, burning fiercely. Her legs hammered, her arms moved in slow arcs.

A white-hot stone of grief and rage slammed into Amanda heart. Robin screamed above the roar of the fire. "Hurry, Amanda! The wall's caving in!"

The frantic voices and the heat compelled her to turn away from Connie. To keep from catching fire herself she had to crouch low. In seconds the room was going to be a mass of fire. She reached the window, climbed out, swung to the gutter. With a wrenching scrape it separated from the wall. The ground whirled beneath her. Bits of burning tar from the roof dropped past her like meteors. If she didn't get away from here, she was going to become a torch.

Dark figures raced about in the reflection of the flames. The garden hoses played frantically. Excruciating pain stabbed her shoulder. There was fire on her but she couldn't even slap at it without losing her precarious grip on the gutter.

Flames now poured out of the window of Connie's room. Above the window the roof was a pillar of fire.

The hoses had managed to put out the fire on her shoulder, but another brand of tar hit her arm. She screamed in agony.

The gutter began to break. She braced for a thirty-foot fall to the ground.

Then there were arms around her, big, burly arms.

Robin and Ivy's dad. "Steven!" He was on top of the longest free-standing ladder they had been able to find. Balancing, grunting with effort, he carried her down.

Then she was being dragged away by grasping, struggling people. She managed to get up and run with them, and not a moment too soon. With a roar and a great burst of withering beat the whole side of the house gave way.

They went far out into the herb garden before they turned around. The house was an inferno.

Beyond it red lights twinkled. The township's volunteer fire department was arriving.

Silence settled over the witches. There was nothing they could do, nothing the firemen could do beyond making sure that the conflagration didn't spread to forest and field. They stopped their truck in the front yard and began deploying hoses.

Amanda felt tears on her cheeks. She was not sad so much as bitter, and

incredibly angry with herself for being so careless. Despite the clearest portents and warnings, she had underestimated Brother Pierce and his followers. Sheriff Williams came running up, his pistol in his hand. His eyes were stricken. “Did they get her? Is she killed?”

Their faces told him. He dropped his pistol and sank to his knees, shaking hands covering his face. “I love you. Constance! I love you! O Goddess, help me!”

Steven held Amanda, and Robin kissed her face, kissed it frantically. His eyes spoke the terror he had known when she was in the house.

Ivy came rushing up and put a salve on her arm and shoulder. “Third degree on the arm,” she muttered.

“Not too much of it, though.”

The salve helped.

Father Evans was back, and most of the others who had attended the initiation. “My dear girl, I’m so sorry for you all. I just want you to know that it wasn’t my people who did this, not a bit of it! I have preached to them that you aren’t evil, that you are simply doing things differently from us.” He faced the rum of the house. “Please forgive them. Lord, those who did this thing.”

“It was Simon Pierce,” Sheriff Williams said. “I’m going to put that man away for the rest of his life! And I’m going to disband that Tabernacle of his as a menace to the public safety.”

“You do that,” Amanda said. Her heart was full of woe and fierce hate for the ones who were oppressing the Covenstead. She intended to make Maywell safe for the people she loved. They had as much a right to the freedom of their practice as anybody, and they were not going to be denied that freedom.

After his speech, the sheriff had bowed his head and covered his face with his hands. He stood swaying and silent.

“Sheriff Williams,” she said. She put her arm around his shoulder. “Come on. We need you now.”

“She’s dead! I loved her, you know. I loved her every day of my life for fifty years. She was a wonderful woman. Truly, one of the greats.”

“I know how much you loved her. And I respect it enormously.”

“I hope she’s happy I have faith that she is.”

“I know where she went,” Amanda said. “I can tell you for certain that she’s happy.”

“You—”

“I do know.”

“That means an awful lot to me. Thank you for saying that.” He was silent a moment. “I remember her first coven. Back in 1931 it was. We were just kids! Hell, I wasn’t even twenty. That was the Appletree Coven. We met around a crab apple tree out by the edge of the woods.” He gestured off toward the dark. “Hobbes and her and Jack and me and five or six others. It was quite a secret.” He stopped. His shoulders shook. “She was so beautiful. Like you are. Her skin was like pearl. I just fell for her. Totally and completely. I’ve been on her side ever since.” He hugged himself. “She was the Goddess personified, as far as I was concerned.” There was a long silence. “Oh... all that went so bad... there were terrible times! Hobbes—” The sheriff sobbed. “Why couldn’t she have gone peacefully? Why did she have to burn?”

“I saw it happen. She didn’t even know. She never felt a thing.” Best to keep the truth to herself. She needed this man to get himself together. He was very important to them now. He took something from his pocket. “I keep these as trouble stones,” he said, hefting a small object in his hand.

“To me trouble is a piece of flint.” He threw the stone. “Earth bind it, no one find it!”

He took a deep breath and contained his grief, at least for the time being. “Okay, let’s get to work. Can I assume arson?”

Robin spoke. “The whole downstairs caught at the same time. And we all smelled burning gasoline.”

The sheriff went to his car. He spoke into the radio. “This is Williams. Constance Collier’s just been killed in an arson fire. I want you to go get that Brother Pierce of yours and lock him up until I get back to question him.”

“On what charge?”

“Murder one! Now, move or it’s your ass!” He put the microphone back on its dashboard hook. “I shoulda gotten rid of that damn Peters months ago.” He shook his head. “Who’d have known how crazy they really were. How damn crazy!”

The house now consisted of five standing chimneys and two blackened columns. The rest was flaring rubble.

Amanda thought of the treasures that had been lost with Connie. The library now consisted of a couple of stacks of scorched, sodden books. The magnificent Hobbes Faery was not among them.

Steven remained close beside Amanda. She suspected that he was as drawn

to her as his son. "Thank you," she said, and kissed his cheek. She tasted the tears there.

Robin hugged her.

Amanda realized that the whole Covenstead had gathered around her. For a moment she was afraid, but then her ages of experience came to her aid. On behalf of all the witches she spoke:

"We've had a loss. A terrible loss. But I want all of you to think not of what has been taken from us, but of what Constance Collier gave us before she died. And what she would want us to do. What she would demand of us if she were here. We all want to mourn. I'd like to go crawl under a rock somewhere and just forget this world exists for a while."

"But we cannot do that, not one of us. Connie would scorn us if we did. We've got to save this Covenstead, and the way to start is to protect it from further damage right now, tonight. I don't think we can assume that Pierce will give up until the whole place is destroyed."

"Nor can we assume that he's gone. Every one of us is in danger. So I want every coven to be aware of where all of its members are at all times. Nobody wanders off." She motioned to Sheriff Williams.

"Before we organize, find out if anybody's missing. Look around you. Are you all accounted for?"

There was general movement. "The Nighthawks are in the volunteer fire department. They're over by the pumper."

"Except for the Nighthawks? Good. Now I want everybody who knows how to handle a pistol or a rifle to step forward." About a third of the coveners, most of them from the town, gathered around Amanda and the sheriff. Generally the town witches kept guns. What weapons were on the Covenstead had been stored in the house. "Deputize them."

"I did that before I came out, like you said on the phone. I was just finishing up when the fire alarm came through. We were planning to get here a little early, just to be on the safe side."

It hurt to hear that. But Amanda continued. "I think we ought to divide up. The main group will go to the village, some people armed. And get some fire extinguishers from the truck. I'm sure they've got them."

That thatch could go up in a matter of seconds if our friends manage to get to it with a torch. I want the Rock Coven to stay with me."

"If you shoot," Sheriff Williams said, "do so only in self-defense."

Most of the coveners went off toward the village. Amanda watched them

go, the moonlight gleaming off their weapons long after they themselves could no longer be seen.

“Now I want the rest of you to guard the Covenstead. That means the main gate, the West Street entrance near the blackberry patch, and the old road through the graveyard.” She left them to do their own organizing and went over to the pumper. A couple of the firemen were sitting on the running board drinking coffee. “How long do you intend to stay?”

“Until we’re sure it isn’t going to flare up again. Probably means all night, a fire this big.”

“Good. Watch the horizon, too. Especially toward the fields and off in the direction of the village. The same people who started this fire might not be finished.” With that she went back to the sheriff.

“Amanda,” he said, “I wish I could convince you to hide out in town until I have Pierce behind bars.”

That was out of the question. “I can’t leave the Covenstead.”

“I know that. Just wishin’ out loud.”

“Robin and Ivy, let’s go back to the village. That’s where I belong.”

They crossed the path through the herb garden and descended into the dark of the fairy mounds. The moon rode the middle sky.

On their way Amanda cried, silently, privately. Without speaking Ivy and Robin took her hands.

The village was very quiet.

“Where are they?” Ivy asked, standing among the cottages. “Hello?”

“Don’t move an inch. Don’t even breathe.”

The voice was hard and scared and mean. A man came hesitantly forward from between two cottages.

In one hand he held a shotgun. A flashlight flickered, paused a moment on Amanda’s face. Her throat tightened, her tongue felt thick in her mouth. They were being captured, right in the middle of their own village.

“Well, look what we got,” said another voice. It was terrible to hear, mad but powerful, cruel but ever so smooth. She remembered it well. Hate came forth in the shape of a man, smiling. “The rest of your people are under guard in that barn over there,” Brother Pierce said. He was Alis of the Alesians, he was the Bishop of Lincoln.

Other men were bringing the three guard covens toward the village. “Looks like we got the drop on you folks,” Brother Pierce said. “We’ve just been waiting and watching. We knew you’d fall into our trap.”

He motioned them into the barn with the others, but when Amanda started to follow, he put his hand on her shoulder. “Not you, young woman. You’re coming with me. There’s a lesson I want to teach you.”

Brother Simon Pierce put a rope around Amanda’s neck, knotted it, and led her off toward the dark face of Stone Mountain.

Chapter 31

In the dark Amanda stumbled and fell hard against her burned arm. The pain drew an involuntary shriek.

She hadn't wanted to scream, she had wanted to go in silence.

Nothing was served by this man seeing her weakness. He stood over her, his rifle crossing his chest, a tower in the moonlight. She looked up at the gleaming face, the amethyst eyes. Did he, too, remember the other times, when he was other men... Did he know the kinship between the two of them, the long association. In some ways he was as much the dark side of her own spirit as Tom was of the *Leannan's*.

How had so few of them managed to capture so many witches? For a moment it seemed almost impossible, even with the advantage of surprise.

Then she saw the help they had.

It was visible as thin smoke, hanging just beside him, the handless girl and also something else, at one glance lace and blue, at another slow-clicking claws.

"Abadon."

"That's one of God's words. Don't you make a spell with it!" He brandished his rifle. "I'll blow your brains out right here and now!" She fought her panic back just enough for silence.

The ghostly child whispered in his ear, and after a moment he spoke again. "Let me tell you something.

Miss Witch Woman, so you understand. Get on your feet." She stood up.

There must be some way to communicate with him. "Do you know what's there, attached to what you carry in your pocket? Surely you do. It's talking to you—"

He slapped her across the mouth. The blow hit with a bright yellow flash. As best she could, she swallowed her anger.

She was unable to look for more than an instant into his eyes. They were sheened with hurt, not hate. She could hardly bear to imagine the suffering of this man.

They reminded her of other eyes—Mother Star of the Sea's. They were desolate buttons, the eyes of an abandoned doll, the eyes of guilt. The Led man's voice came as a murmur of wind; "Remember that Mother Star of the Sea is part of you. Remember, she is your guilt." The voice faded, and

Amanda considered its message. If she could release herself from her own guilt, she could release this man from his. Had she the compassion to love somebody who had so hurt her, and was about to hurt her more?

Fighting him could not save her now. Only love could do that.

“You come with me, and you come fast If I don’t get back to your village inside of an hour, my men are going to set that round cow barn of yours on fire, and all the devils in the damn thing are going to burn and their children with them. So I suggest we get a move on.”

The night was growing much colder. Amanda shuddered and set off, walking quickly. Tears obscured her vision. She told herself to be calm, but it was very hard. They had not climbed long before he spoke again, his voice rough. “Stop here.”

He was walking behind her. She felt him draw close, felt his rifle between their bodies. His breath trembled down her neck.

“What do you know about spells?”

“I—”

“You are one.”

“If there is anything, any black panther or walking statue or anything at all tike that, I am going to let them burn your people. And I am going to burn you very, very slowly. Do you understand that?”

She saw Tom in the tangle of brush at the foot of Stone Mountain, saw him by his moonlit eyes. It was all she could do not to call to him.

She expected him to spring at Brother Pierce’s throat, to kill him, or at the very least to grow enormous and scare him away.

Tom’s eyes were fixed on her. He was panting.

There was a long silence. Pierce’s lips came close to her ear. “Listen, you and me, we have a problem.

My people are kind of like, they’re out for blood.”

“You burned Constance Collier to death!”

“There was a sign from the Lord.”

They were very close to Tom now. Amanda could just see his crouched form in among the rocks. Any moment he would spring.

Closer they came. Now she could see his tail switching in the moonlight. She moved forward more quickly, to give him room for his jump.

But something happened to prevent him. It was very quick and very damaging: a needle of a claw sliced out from the ghost child and narrowly missed blinding Tom. With a scream he bounded off into the darkness.

“What the hell—”

“It was just a cat. I saw it.”

“Just a cat! You people got a few cats, don’t you?” After a moment of studying the brush Pierce continued on, pushing her with the side of his gun.

Dread filled Amanda. Hate dominated love. The flower always died. Every birth ends in death. Perhaps that was the true lesson of the Sabbat that was upon them. *Samhain* is about the tragedy of the dead, not their persistence in the spirit world.

As she had on other last journeys, Amanda sought solace in the sky. The sweep of the heavens reminded her that peace, in the end, would come. Worse things than this have happened, and better things, and as does joy, sorrow has an end. Nobody will ever know all of the secrets in the stars, the worlds that have come and gone.

They were more than halfway to the Fairy Stone. No matter his reluctance she knew that she would soon be burning again, and he tending her fire. It was a cruel homecoming for them both. His guilt came along beside him and he didn’t even see her. The little murdered girl glared at him, but he was blind to her childish stare. In her form Amanda could see the flickering image of the blood-red scorpion, Abadon. It seemed an amazingly dangerous thing, this creature. Was this a denizen of some real and final hell she had not suspected before? Abadon was not an invention of Brother Pierce’s guilt. It had an independent life of its own. The way it looked at him, so steadily, so... carefully, suggested that it thought it would soon devour his soul.

The wind hit them as they reached the rocky crest. Amanda began to shiver uncontrollably. A sweatshirt was no proof against this cold.

The wind sighed in the bare trees and whistled across the stones. Listen as she might, she heard no words in it. There was only the peace of its movement, as it flowed its own secret way.

Ahead, glowing in the moonlight, she saw the Fairy Stone, and before it the gangling rowan bush.

“Get to work, sweetheart.”

“Doing what?”

“Gathering firewood! It’s as cold as the devil’s behind up here.”

He was going to make her build her own pyre. Would he also make her light it? An awful quivering started inside, in her skin and meat that would soon be dripping grease. The stake was an agony beyond the conception of those who had never endured it. Her legs resisted by growing heavy, her

hands by getting clumsy. The branches and twigs she was gathering seemed to cling to her like claws.

Before, she had always defied him. Now she must attempt something new. Was there enough love in her to include this evil being? “You can be free of your guilt,” she said miserably, hopelessly. “I can help you.” She knew that he had murdered the little girl, she could see it in his eyes, marked indelibly there, that one moment repeating and repeating in their glassy reflection. “She will forgive you, Simon. She has already forgiven you.”

“How the hell do you know about that? Devil musta told you!” The butt of his rifle whistled in the wind, then she was flying against the Fairy Stone, her kindling flung about her. “Pick it up! Load it up on that rock. I want the whole country to see this fire. It’s a beacon to the people of the Lord, that they have been made free!”

She scuttled around gathering twigs. Her side hurt where he had hit her, her shoulder and arm where she had been burned earlier. So much pain.

She had to get through to him. There was no other hope. “Simon—”

“You shut your mouth and keep working!”

He feared, therefore he hated. On the surface he hated women, deeper inside he hated the woman in himself. At his core he hated life.

Mistakes, recriminations, and guilt are the central bondage of evil. Finally she had a good-sized pile of brush and kindling. “Come here, witch.”

She went to him. She looked straight into the desolation of his eyes.

I am trapped, those eyes said. And I hate you for it.

The wind scurried, hissing against the Fairy Stone. *I am the hand that takes.* The sheer power of his own guilt was opening the stiff fist in Brother Pierce’s pocket, opening it and clutching his thigh with the bony fingers. A question, dark with terror, concentrated in Pierce’s eyes. She could see the moonlight reflecting on them as on two brown glass balls.

“I can free you, Simon. I have the power to forgive sin.”

The eyes narrowed. “You’re crazy.”

“The hand is alive. I can see it moving in your pocket. Not only that, I can see what it’s attached to—a little girl you once knew.” She spoke softly, trying to calm him with her tone. Carefully she reached toward him. “Face the wrong you did her and forgiveness will come.”

“Wrong *I* did? We aren’t exactly here to talk about my guilt, are we? You’re the witch, the spellmaker, the devil worshiper.” He snorted, trying to deride her. “You’re evil incarnate.”

“I’m just a woman. What you’ve got in your pocket might well be evil incarnate.”

“You shut your mouth about that, Miss Witch!”

“For heaven’s sake, Simon, you’re carrying the hand of a murdered child. You can’t tell me what’s evil and what’s not.”

He looked at her out of eyes sharp with suspicion. “You know too damn much,” he murmured. “Maybe you’d better go over and lie down in that kindling now.”

That terrible command brought back the harshest of memories: the feel of the cage that had held Moom, the way the bars had bent but never broken; the hideous three minutes that Marian’s fire took to crawl to her through the wood, then the swooning torment when it first touched her feet.

She told herself that she was reconciled. Beyond death, this time, she knew that summer awaited. She could smell the air of it, and already hear the music.

Even so the command made her sink helplessly to the ground. Her mind might be reconciled, but her body refused to go willingly into such torture. “I’m sorry.”

He twined his fingers in her hair and dragged her to the pyre. “Put your arms over your head.” When he grasped her wrists, a shock of knowledge swept through her. She saw the guilt that lay yet in his hands.

“You murdered that little girl and cut off her hands so they couldn’t identify the body. Then you kept one of them. You did that, didn’t you?”

“I am a man of God! How dare you blaspheme me!”

“You can still find your way out of this.”

“You’re a lying witch and you’re gonna burn!”

He crossed her wrists and wound the end of a long leash around them. Then he looped wire around her ankles.

She remembered how as Marian she had watched the clouds. She would do the same with the stars.

He tightened the leash. As long as he kept it taut, she could struggle all she wanted, but she could not get away.

Even as he worked, she saw the sadness in his eyes. His surface personality might really hate her, might really be about to burn her, but his deeper essence loathed what he was doing. She got a flickering image of herself escaping across Stone Mountain. “You were going to let me go. Why have you changed your mind?”

“How come you know so much about me? Nobody in the world knows what you know.”

She remembered Connie beating at her flaming head.

Why do they burn us? They want to banish the dark.

And Moom thinks, “But I *am* the dark. I give life in the dark. What comes from me, comes from there.

Babies come from the dark!”

The voice of Grape: “I’m waiting for you, Amanda. This time you will not wander the underworld. You’re coming home.”

“Stop that heathen muttering. I warned you, no witch spells”

She felt her soul gathering the memories it would take on its journey, pausing at the door that leads out of the body.

“Goddess,” she whispered, “open it fast once the fire starts. Please don’t let me suffer long.”

He twisted his leash tighter around her wrists. Her hands bulged from the pressure. For a time she was silent. A moan escaped on an exhaled breath.

The next one became a sob. “You killed a child, Simon.

But you can atone, even for that. I can help you atone.”

“I am not guilty! Before God, praise His Name, I am not!”

He looked at her, into her eyes. “Could you really help me?”

“Of course I could. Of course!”

The torment of the leash grew less. By the Goddess he was letting her go. Then he sighed a long sigh, tightened the leash again, and laid her face-up in the dry brush and sticks.

Her disappointment made her burst into tears. Through her own suffering, though, she kept trying to understand him, to find the insight that was the key to his need. He wanted her help, she could see that.

Why wouldn’t he allow himself to accept it?

Then she saw into the nature of the hell he was inventing for himself. In the heart of his guilt he would be forever devoured. It was surprising that he could not yet see the shadow of his demon, the ghost child, for the more hatred Simon conjured in himself the more real she became. From all around them there came the scuttling of Abaddon’s long, jointed legs.

He was the first human being she had encountered who had condemned himself to the eternal hell.

Tom hovered just at the horizon, huge in the mountains, his black shape like a cloud along the ridges. He gazed at her with fixed intensity.

Amanda kept on trying to reach Simon. “The child will let you atone.”

He peered down into her face. There was a distinct odor of pizza on his breath. “I’m sorry I did it. I just—all of a sudden, she touched me and it felt too good, and all of a sudden—oh. God, she was just lyin’ there dead. A kid and dead.”

He clasped his hands together and looked into Amanda’s eyes. His essence seemed to call out to her,

“Help me, don’t let me do this to myself. Help me!”

The clicking of Abaddon’s pincers mingled with the windclatter of the rowan’s limbs.

Amanda’s tight-bound arms hurt so terribly that she had to force herself not to bellow. There was only one way for her to save herself: she had to save this man.

“I cut off her hands and tossed her in a river. I couldn’t have any ID. But I’m sorry, damned sorry.” Even his sorrow was ugly.

“You don’t have to endure your guilt. You can relieve it if you’ve got the courage.”

“I’m so scared,” he whispered. “I deserve eternal damnation for what I did.”

“You deserve what you choose to deserve. Your guilt can end, Simon. Untie me and we’ll talk.”

For some time he didn’t move. At least there was a struggle going on in him, or so it appeared.

She kept hoping, but when finally he met her eyes, the pity she saw filled her with despair. He would not look so sorrowful if he had decided to set her free. “You’re right to think this is hard for me. I don’t enjoy making people suffer, in fact I’d like nothing better than to let you free. But I’d be ‘doing a real sin then.

You need the suffering I’m going to give you. I’ll spare you God’s fire by burning you in mine. You see, you don’t understand that this is a good deed I’m doing. When you’re dead and in heaven you’ll thank me. Fifteen minutes of torment will save you from an eternity of spiritual fire.”

With a little, fascinated smile on his face, he began to spark his cigarette lighter. Amanda turned away.

Her stomach churned, her womb contracted around the tiny life within.

She thought of the Covenstead. This was to be their last Samhain, then. Where had they erred? Why had the powers abandoned them?

With a click and an orange flicker, then another click, Simon got his lighter going. He cradled the whipping flame in his hands, then applied it to some dry leaves at the edge of her pyre.

“I’ll pray with you as long as I can.”

“Put it out!”

“As the fire burneth, let her soul be cleansed, O Lord.”

She tried to roll away but she couldn’t. She twisted and groaned. Remembering Marian’s death, she concentrated on the sky. Summer is waiting, she told herself. The flames rose from blue to orange and began to dance in the wind. When the first heat touched her, the fire was perhaps three inches from her thigh.

The little girl came close then. It was amazing that Simon could not yet see her. Amanda looked right at her. Her eyes were so stilt, so knowing, so very angry. By moonlight Amanda could see the freckles on her nose.

“You think you’re going to hell, don’t you, Simon? You think there’s no way out for you. There is a way out.”

A flicker of interest registered in Simon’s eyes.

The fire came closer. He tightened his leash until she thought her arms would break. She began to cough in the tangy smoke. She could see coals raging in the center of the spreading flames. Sparks flew to the sky when she struggled.

“Simon! The Lord wants you in heaven. He wants everybody, doesn’t he?”

The heat was rising fast.

“O Lord, on behalf of this your daughter I ask mercy and forgiveness in this time of her agony. Let your purifying fire cleanse her of the sins of the earth.”

Tom paced just beyond the circle of firelight. She screamed at him. “Please help me!”

Simon licked dry lips. His eyes reflected the fire. The heat against her thigh was becoming a torment. Her clothes were smoking. Simon had started to shake.

“You ask God to forgive me, but you’re the one who needs forgiveness. You’re the sinner here, Simon.

The hand is proof of that.”

“I am the light—”

“You’re no better than the rest of us! Scared and guilty and lost. Now put out this fire and rejoin the human race.”

“I killed her. I admit it, sure I do. I confess it. But what’s the good, she’s still dead.”

“Worse sins have been forgiven. If you have courage, you can atone—oh, for the love of all that’s holy I’m catching on fire!”

The wind was making the fire caress her hip. “I beg you, I beg you, please stop!”

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

Miserably Amanda writhed. There must be some way to reach this man. “Oh, please!” In another moment the flames were going to cover her.

Simon’s face in the firelight was that of a little boy.

She squirmed, she kicked, she shrieked.

Watching her, his expression changed. There came into it a glimmer of something she hadn’t seen there before, that might be remorse. “The hand is —”

“Guilt. Your guilt. But you can atone for your crime. I can show you how!” The flames were licking along her leg.

“I can’t! I can’t ever atone!”

“Put the fire out! That’s a start.”

The flames spread to her shirt.

“Oh, put it out! *Put it out!*”

He was divided, his hands alternately reaching for her then pulling away. The heat was starting to drive him back.

“You’d be free, Simon! Free of your guilt!” Her body wanted to give up to the maddening anguish of the fire, but she had to keep trying. “Think of it, Simon. All these years you haven’t slept a peaceful night!

You could, Simon, you could have peace!”

“O God—” He burst into tears. Then he was moving, he was coming forward, his hand shielding his face, and suddenly the leash was loose and she was able to leap up, to roll, to free herself.

Pain boiled in her chest and leg but it had worked. She was free, she was not being burned anymore and Simon Pierce was kneeling among the broken coals, fumbling in his pocket, then bringing out something small and strange, the hand, dead but splotched with areas of living skin.

He held it cupped in his two palms.

Amanda backed away, for something beyond conception was happening beside him. The air filled with a sighing sound as of a thousand children murmuring for home, as by threads and tatters a girl of twelve spun into final,

true, and absolute reality.

A small, dark shape scuttled toward the rowan. Fairy were here, maybe even the *Leannan*.

The girl reached out and took the hand from Simon. “Oh, no,” he said. “Oh, Betty. Oh, no.”

The girl twirled in the firelight. Her hands, both attached again, were spread wide. She was not smiling.

“You’ve got to forgive me, darlin’. It was one of those crimes of passion, like they say. But you’re dead, darlin’. Please, I don’t want to see you like this! You’re dead.”

A great roar of wind came sweeping out of the sky and with it a raging, furious voice screaming every foul word in every language of man.

The murdered child’s fury slammed across the landscape, echoing from valley to valley. Simon cringed before her, who bellowed loud enough to break rock.

Then silence came again, filled only by his shaking breaths. “She’s the Devil! Lord, O Lord, she’s the Devil come after me!”

“I’m not the Devil,” she said. “I loved you, I really did.” She drew his face up by the chin, making him meet her eyes.

Amanda could see Abaddon hiding in the body of the child, ready to burst out and grab him and drag him down. She had to help him. “You’re guilty, but not eternally guilty, Simon! Nobody is eternally guilty.”

There came a ringing as of great bells back in the chambers of mountains. With each tintinnabulation a flock of unlived days fluttered by on moth’s wings. The life that the girl had been denied, the nights exquisite, the wearing days, the hard incredible pain of birthing, the old shadow again and the reaped field of experience, all came up and sank back again, dissolving into a powder of shadows.

Simon saw what he had denied her, and Abaddon began to flex in her body. “She’ll have another life, many lives. She has time.” He sank down, he covered his head, he made a long sound beyond a sob.

“Betty,” he whispered, “Betty, Betty, Betty. I can’t give you back your life, Betty. I can’t give you back what I took.”

“Simon, think how many others have taken lives. Millions. You aren’t alone and you don’t deserve eternal damnation for it. Accept your guilt and atone, but don’t pretend it’s worse than it is.”

“Atone? My atonement is hell eternal.”

“Your atonement is what satisfies her, and she won’t keep you for all eternity. You are not that bad.”

He looked at Amanda with gratitude, and in that moment Amanda knew that he had accepted that his own guilt had limits.

From the shadows came a strange fairy music, not the harp, but a harsher sound as if of drums and bells and rattling stalks. This music made Simon look curiously in the direction of the rowan.

But there was nothing to be seen, not to his untrained eye. Amanda saw it all, though.

He gasped. A shaking hand went up to touch his hair as his gun, forgotten, clattered to the ground. Off in the dark the fairy musicians pointed horns at him. They did not make a sound that could be heard, but Amanda could feel it in the air all around her. Simon put his hands to his ears and crumpled forward.

Rendered white and narrow as silk, his hair fell away.

He uttered a sound like wind spending itself. His flesh sloughed from his bones, his fingernails grew long.

His eyes sank, his hands became crone claws.

Amanda remembered him at the Tabernacle, pointing and shouting a terrible sentence from the Book of Revelation. She spoke aloud, but her voice was small: “And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails. And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name is Abaddon.”

The horns made great brown noises, which sucked the youth from him. He fell forward, already little more than a terribly aged skeleton.

The girl murmured a pitying word and caught him, cradling him in her arms. There was something like satisfaction in her face. Her overseeing his hell would in the end relieve the suffering of them both, her anger and his guilt.

Amanda could hear the snap of his skeletal jaw, a noise no bigger than somebody clicking the teeth of a comb.

The girl carried her burden away across the Fairy Stone, in among the crowd of fairy that lined the far ridge of the mountain.

When Tom came bounding up at last, Amanda at first wanted to greet him, then felt anger as sharp as cut glass. “You old cat, why didn’t you help me?” She looked out into the dark, at the departing shadows of the fairy. “And you, why did you wait so long!”

She knew, of course. They had not been able to do anything to Brother Pierce as long as he wanted eternal damnation, for they could not be a part of his hate. It was ironic that his own self-loathing protected him from his destruction. As soon as he found the least glimpse of his good core, though, he could not condemn himself for eternity. Then they could become a part of his justice.

Amanda followed the progress of the girl climbing into the mountains, still carrying her burden. As they went, the girl changed. She became like smoke, men more solid, until she was the *Leannan* sweeping through the heights and glens, carrying an extraordinarily shrunken man in her arms.

When she realized that the ghost child had also been the Queen of the Fairy, she knew that the last test was over. They had all been tempered in the *Leannan*'s terrible fire. The strength and wisdom Amanda had been given were her weapons against the coming age of persecution, of which Brother Pierce was only the beginning.

She began making her way down the mountain, thinking of the other witches. Her injuries made her progress slow, and as she moved along, she heard gunfire and the roaring of some great animal, shouts and finally screams as high as wind in wire. Pain or no pain, there was only one thing for her to do. She leaped ahead, rushing along the rough path as fast as she could. Her injuries screamed, almost rendering her insensible, but she ran on.

She looked around for Tom, who had been slinking ahead through the undergrowth. "Help us," she screamed. "Help us!" He was nowhere to be seen.

Terrible imaginings of the murder of her people swam through her mind, of Kate being shot, of Robin burning and Ivy burning and all the Covenstead in ruins, of animals kicking at fire in their stalls.

By the time she entered the village her head was crashing with pain and exhaustion. She needed medical attention, and soon.

An awful silence had settled on the Covenstead. The village stood in darkness, in shadows. She saw nobody. She went close to the barn.

A faint sound came from within—singing, low and sad. The people were alive, at least. But their tone said all: they were preparing to die.

She peered down the pathway between the cottages. Where Brother Pierce's men? There wasn't a soul around.

Then she noticed Tom. He crouched low, facing the shadows beside the sweat lodge. He was huge, and amazingly terrifying, a great, black lion with a

flowing mane and golden eyes. He was the size of a car.

Huddled before him were Brother Pierce's men.

Tom yawned. Nearby the *Leannan*'s harp began to play. It was odd, to think of her at once back on the mountain with Simon, playing her harp in these shadows, and stalking about as Tom. Amanda loved the *Leannan Sidhe*, and the warmth in her heart made the music grow sweeter. Is it that God is lonely? Is that why we exist?

Amanda saw what had happened here. Their usefulness expended, the *Leannan* could have taken Brother Pierce's men, too. Or could she? Maybe she had not the right; maybe it was not their time to die.

Tom gazed at Amanda and swished his broken tail. His pink tongue appeared for a moment between his teeth, and he licked his whiskered cheeks. She picked up a discarded 30-30, found it to be empty, and tried a shotgun. It had two shells left. When she pointed it at Pierce's silent, staring men, Tom leaped up in a shower of sparks and became a cat again. Then he closed his eyes and soon was purring the first purr she had ever heard from him.

She threw open the door of the barn with a shout of joy. "We're free! We've won!" Robin swept her into his arms.

There followed a time of people holding one another close, joyous in their lives but remembering their dead. Sheriff Williams was called, and Brother Pierce's men were led off to the county jail.

The silence of the night engulfed the village and soon brought rest to the exhausted little group.

As far as Brother Pierce himself was concerned, a search was mounted for him the next day by the sheriff's office and the state police. Nothing was found, not so much as a discarded gum wrapper. Over subsequent weeks wells were sounded, Maywell Pond was dragged, and the mountains were walked.

Tom would scamper along with the searchers, his tail bobbing in the tail grass, his good ear pricked to any sound.

But nothing was ever heard, nothing found.

Simon Pierce was never seen again.

CONFIRMATION



WHITLEY STRIEBER

CONFIRMATION

By Whitley Strieber



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Whitley Strieber is the author of *The Wolfen*, *The Hunger*, *Communion*, *Majestic* and many others. Most recently, he has published *Solving the Communion Enigma* and the Alien Hunter series. His weekly radio program Dreamland appears on Unknowncountry.com.

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Dedication

In memory of Dr. Paul Hill the author of Unconventional Flying Objects, a thirty-year veteran of NASA and a true hero of our age.

This book is dedicated to the children of the close encounter experience. Our generation will find the answers, but it is theirs that will gain the heavens.

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.

3 JOHN 4

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Any errors in this book are my own.

Introduction

Something Truly New

UFOs are nonsense and alien abduction is a fantasy—so says science and so says the press. But science also keeps the door open, as it has for the past fifty years, waiting for some sort of evidence that would make the subject worthy of study.

Such evidence has been found and will be discussed in detail in this book.

In an interview with *Nova* in 1996, the late Dr. Carl Sagan said that for the UFO phenomenon “to be taken seriously, you need physical evidence that can be examined at leisure by skeptical scientists: a scraping of the hull of the ship, and the discovery that it contains isotopic ratios that aren’t present on earth, chemical elements which form the so-called island of stability, very heavy elements that don’t exist on earth, or material of absolutely bizarre properties of many sorts—electrical conductivity or ductility. There are many things like that that would instantly give serious credence to an account.”

The new evidence deserves just that sort of approach. From the beginning, the scientific community has, very appropriately, supported a policy of isolating the UFO phenomenon and everything connected with it from the mainstream of its efforts because there just wasn’t any way to support the incredibly improbable idea that there could be anybody here except us. So the whole phenomenon has been explained as a combination of hallucinations, confused misperceptions of ordinary events, and outright fraud. In any case, what possible tools of science could be used to extract hard evidence from a collection of wild stories?

The evidence exists, and so do the tools. An organized effort can be made in three different major areas that will reap a scientific harvest substantial enough to offer us, no matter its origins, a rich return of new knowledge. Moreover, this effort may well answer the key questions once and for all: Is somebody here? If so, what are they doing?

In my ten years of experience as a publicly identified close encounter witness, I have met dozens of scientists, political leaders, reporters—all sorts of people who might be concerned with a matter like this—and, with a few exceptions, I have found them open-minded and fascinated but unwilling to

change their position of denial until substantial amounts of physical evidence became available. I have agreed completely with this posture, because science should not spend time and money tilting at windmills, and the public should not be seduced by misplaced scientific and official interest into believing that aliens are here if that isn't true.

But many scientists are becoming aware of what is happening, and even as I write this, there is a new level of interest building. On October 10, 1997, a panel of nine scientists released a statement that "some UFO evidence may be worthy of scientific investigation." Before coming to this conclusion, they reviewed evidence provided them by UFO investigators and promised a report in a few months that "makes recommendations for further research."

Among the scientists involved were panelists from France, Germany, and the United States. France was represented by Jean-Jacques Velasco, who heads the ongoing official investigation of UFO reports being conducted by CNES, the French space agency. Also attending were Thomas Holzer of the High Altitude Observatory, Peter Sturrock of Stanford University, Randy Jokipii and Jay Melosh of the University of Arizona, James Papike of the University of New Mexico, Guenther Reitz from Germany, and Francois Louange and Bernard Veyret also from France. These scientists were not asserting any particular belief about UFOs but only seeking to "play a more active role in helping to unravel this fifty year old mystery."¹⁴

In addition to scientific support, the religious community is beginning to respond to the growing evidence. I am grateful that Monsignor Corrado Balducci of the Vatican has allowed an interview with him to be added as an appendix to this book in which he states his opinion that the growing body of witness testimony "should not be ignored," and that superstitions about our visitors being demons should be abandoned along with official denial of the reality of the phenomenon. Among other things, Monsignor Balducci is an expert on demonology.

Over the course of this book, I will be suggesting specific directions for research in a number of areas, among them behavioral science, brain science, psychology, atmospheric science, propulsion technology, materials analysis, and, if it becomes apparent that aliens really are present, then a whole new area of cultural anthropology as well.

Ironically, even as it asks the best questions I have ever come up with, this book does provide some key answers, and they present an incredible picture indeed. What it all means, science must tell us. But if I am right about what it

suggests, what is by far the most extraordinary event in history is unfolding right now.

Gone are the arguments that science has nothing to work with. Behavioral science has not only the witnesses but also physical proof that something unknown has happened to at least some of them, in the form of apparent implants that have been removed from their bodies. Any surgeon can remove these objects, usually in a simple office procedure, and there seem to be thousands of witnesses displaying the signs of their presence, which can easily be confirmed by X ray. This potential harvest of objects also means that materials science can acquire a substantial sample for study. And it doesn't end there. Fantastic advances taking place right now suggest that we may soon actually be able to find out, in an absolutely physical way, exactly what parts of the wild alien abduction stories are true and what are not.

The evidence, if it is properly addressed by science, has the power to change completely the way we deal with this issue, possibly providing us with wonderful new discoveries and information. But there are problems. Not everybody is open-minded. Not everybody is ready to entertain such evidence as may be presented.

Certain important elements of the American press were once much more flexible in the way they approached the phenomenon, but for the past twenty years, the opposite has been true. On January 13, 1979, *The New York Times* published a story entitled "CIA Papers Detail UFO Surveillance," claiming that declassified documents confirmed that the government was deeply concerned about UFOs. Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner was "so upset" about this article^[2] that he conducted an internal survey to determine whether the claim was true. Donald Wortman, deputy director for administration, reported to him that there was "no organized Agency effort to do research in connection with UFO phenomena...."

Since this event, the American press has generally closed the door on the UFO phenomenon. Perhaps, though, it now has needed justification to reexamine its position.

Some of the evidence that I will present is extremely provocative, even incendiary, and raises a concern that by denying the reality of the mystery, the press may actually have ended up spreading the very sort of false belief that it has been trying to prevent.

Understand, I don't think that anybody is to blame for this. It happened because the idea of aliens being here was so improbable and the evidence was

so equivocal. But as a society, it would seem that we can now take the whole question another step forward and maybe at last start to move toward some satisfactory answers. Taking an interest need not imply a commitment to belief in alien contact, but we must seriously ask who or what is causing the UFO and close encounter phenomena, why it is taking place, and, above all, what its significance may be.

It is also necessary to face the fact that the existence of the evidence means that there really may be aliens here—aliens who are creating an extraordinary theater in the sky while at the same time entering the personal lives of many people in extremely bizarre and secretive ways. Unless we deal with the hard evidence that has come to light in an organized and effective manner, we are going to remain passive to what could be not only a valuable knowledge resource but also an intrusion into our world that may or may not be in our best interest. Given its intimacy and the incredibly provocative nature of many contact reports, that does not seem wise.

Part One

THEATER IN THE SKY

The heavens declare the glory of God;
and the firmament showeth his handiwork.

—Psalms 19:1

Chapter One

Miracle over Mexico

So, what is all this evidence? Alien bodies, perhaps, or faster-than-light communications equipment? This is not a book of proof of alien presence but of evidence that confirms that an unknown phenomenon is unfolding among us. This phenomenon emerges in three distinct areas: the first is a dramatic growth in amateur video recording of strange things in the sky; the second is the unexpectedly huge body of close encounter testimony that is far, far different from anything that has thus far appeared in print; the third is the unexplained objects that have been surgically removed from some close encounter witnesses, myself included, who claim to have been implanted with them during their encounters.

All three of these areas present provocative evidence, but it would seem appropriate to begin with unidentified flying objects: what we see in the skies. To do this, the first place to go must be Mexico, which has, since 1991, enjoyed the most incredible and best documented series of UFO sightings in history. In this book, incidentally, the term “UFO” means only that an object is unknown. It is not an assertion that the object is an alien spacecraft.

On July 11, 1991, people all over Mexico City were watching the sky. But the weather was cloudy, and that made their anticipation uneasy. Still, there were people on the roofs, on every street corner, in the parks. By 1:15, everybody was looking upward. But would the clouds part?

Slowly, it got darker, and as it did, the clouds did indeed open. There was the sun, a corner eaten by shadow, then a half, then more. Then the moment came: a total eclipse. Video cameras were trained at the heavens as an estimated ten million people observed one of nature’s greatest wonders.

But they saw considerably more than an eclipse. They also observed an object immediately below the blacked-out disk of the sun, and to some people this object looked very much like a UFO.

At six minutes and fifty-four seconds, this was an eclipse of unusually long duration, so a considerable amount of video was made of the object. The eclipse was doubly important to the Mexican people, because it also marked the beginning of a new age in the calendars of many ancient Mexican tribes^[3],

including that of the Aztecs, who founded Mexico City and still form a large part of its population. The Aztecs saw this eclipse as the moment of passage from the Fifth Sun to the Sixth. The earliest known Mesoamerican eclipse predictions, and the first one mentioning this event, come from the Dresden Codex, one of the remaining Mayan calendrical texts.^[4] Both the Mayas and the Aztecs consider this eclipse to be a fundamental change of age.

Even though the object seen beside the sun created a local sensation, the only report of it that reached most people in the United States was a statement that it was a misperception of the planet Venus. UFO researchers in the States have claimed that videotapes of Venus can be made that appear similar to the Mexican video, specifically, to the ones that show what appears to be a structured metallic object with a shadowed base and currents of disturbed air swirling around it. In an effort to substantiate these claims and explain the Mexican videos, I and others have made our own videos of Venus. But, no matter whether in lighting conditions similar to that of the eclipse or not, this has proved to be impossible. Venus doesn't look a thing like the Mexican videos, in fact. In general, it seems that when claims like these are made, the claimants must duplicate their work in public. Moreover, Venus was not below the sun during the eclipse, which is where the unusual object was located.

Given that a number of stars became visible during the eclipse and appeared on amateur video as early as 1:04 P.M., it has been easy to dismiss all of the recordings as simple mistakes. But some of these videos almost certainly are not of celestial objects, as will be seen.

Perhaps because of the fact that the place and time of the object's appearance fit one of their own important mythologies, the Mexican people were not so ready to dismiss it. One man who was particularly interested was Jaime Maussan, the anchor of Mexico's version of *Sixty Minutes* and one of the country's most popular television personalities. On the air one night after the eclipse, he made what was to prove to be a historic request. Responding to the high level of public interest, he asked, as a guest on the program *What Is Your Opinion?*, for viewer reaction to the reports. The call-in program, which normally went off the air when interest faded around midnight, continued until 10:30 the next morning.

Maussan, who had asked people to send in their videos, was deluged with tapes, a process that has now continued for seven years. The objects—or whatever controls them—seem almost to respond to all the attention.

Although this massive wave of sightings has not been commented on outside of the UFO press and a few paranormal-themed television programs in the United States, it stands as the largest-scale and longest such wave in history.^[5] It is impossible that some of the videos were hoaxed by their makers, because they were made in public while hundreds, thousands, and sometimes even millions of people were observing the objects. Some of these same videos, such as one of a metallic cylinder hanging motionless in the sky in broad daylight, were made as crowds visibly reacted.

Few places could have been found that were better suited than Mexico to what happened there: Generally open-minded people had access to excellent technology that could make a visual record of anything they wanted, and do so easily and inexpensively. So as the eclipse of July 11, 1991, reached totality, millions of eyes—and many camcorders—pointed upward. Later, hundreds of people would submit copies of the videos they made that day to Jaime Maussan. Many of these were indeed of stars, but his investigation would disclose that seventeen of them appeared to be of unexplained objects.

Still, none of the seventeen anomalous videos in Maussan's possession was gathered by atmospheric scientists or astronomers. They are not perfect. The people making them were not generally thinking of things like triangulation. Often only the object and surrounding sky are visible, so the relative location of the object cannot be determined.

However, there exists one image that completely defies explanation. It was taken by a Mr. Fuentes at 1:23 P.M. and shows the object leaping across the sky. Because the height of the object is unknown, the distance of the movement also cannot be determined. It appears to be a substantial motion, and if the object is far away, then it could be many miles. Since the object moves only once and does not return to its point of origin, this cannot be explained by the sort of shimmering, bouncing, or momentary defocusing that might result from atmospheric disturbances. The object makes a sudden, arrow-straight motion from one stationary position to another and does not shimmer or bounce either before, during, or after the motion. Admittedly, the speed of the motion (just at a second in duration) suggests the possibility that it may be the result of some sort of transient atmospheric effect on a star, but the fact that it does not return to its original position also rules out that possibility. In fact, the object remains motionless in the second position.

A television executive, Guillermo Arreguin of Televisa, was observing an object as well and made a professional quality recording of it on his personal

equipment. This video reveals an object with a definite elongated shape, inward sloping sides, and flat upper and lower surfaces. It is shadowed on the bottom and appears to be disturbing the air around it and emitting a faint violet light from the shadowed area. Seen by the naked eye, it was reported that this object looked nothing like a star.

So if it was not a star, could it have been a secret aircraft hovering over Mexico at high altitude? If so, then it was an extraordinary plane, because at approximately the same time, eighty-five miles southeast of Mexico City in Puebla, Efrain Breton and his family were observing the eclipse with, among other things, a video camera. According to their time-stamp, they were recording the object at 1:22 P.M., but there is no indication that they noticed the movement that was recorded by Fuentes. Given that these were not professional recordings, it's easily possible that the times on the tapes were not exact.

In the Puebla video as well as some of those taken in Mexico City, a faint star can be observed in the same position above the object. This leads to the conclusion that the videos are of the same object, which must be extremely high. In fact, to be visible in two different places that far apart, the object would need to be at an altitude of more than fifty thousand feet, giving it a probable diameter of at least a quarter of a mile.

Both the Breton and Arreguin videos reveal the same lower-surface shadowing and atmospheric effects, an additional strong suggestion that it is, in fact, the same object. If it is, then its size and height suggest that it lies well outside the envelope of functionality even of the most extremely advanced aircraft. If it was Venus, then the combination of rapid atmospheric cooling and the brightness of the planet at that particular time must have been what caused the shimmering air that is visible on the images beneath the object. It is hard to see how Venus could be this radically distorted, however, when a star visible nearby in the same frame is perfectly normal. This probably defeats the claim that the object was Venus.

Unfortunately, the Fuentes video, which shows the object in sudden movement, does not also show it in relation to the star that appears in the Breton and Arreguin videos. So it cannot be concluded that the object that made the impossible motion and the one that was seen in Puebla and Mexico City to have a shadowed base are the same thing.

The likelihood that the objects are manmade is diminished by another video, this one made at approximately the same time by Luis Rodolfo Lara in

the town of Tepeji Del Rio. In this video, the object is seen to be maneuvering in relation to two other smaller objects, also moving, that appear above it. In this video as well, a faint pinkish colored area appears beneath the object, accompanied by apparent atmospheric distortion.

Could this be, then, a rigid device held aloft by the same mechanism that powers a hot-air balloon? It is clear that there is something glowing and distorting the atmosphere underneath the object in some of the videos, but there is no point of origin visible, which would be the case if this was heat being produced by a kerosene burner. The problem with this theory is that the object recorded in Puebla and Mexico City must be the same, and therefore the balloon would have to have been gigantic and operating at the upper edge of the atmosphere, almost in outer space. This would have been well outside of the capability of a hot-air balloon no matter how large.

So it is not unreasonable to entertain the notion that this object, contrary to all the assertions that it was Venus, was not a known object at all. If it was Venus, then another video should be produced showing the planet distorting in a similar manner while stars visible in the same frame remain unaffected. Using an analog VHS camera of the type generally available in 1991 and in use during the eclipse, I have not personally been able to achieve this effect, although I did see some slight distortion of Venus and other stars shot on the twilight horizon on the evening of October 17, 1997.

In the United States, the stories coming out of Mexico were ghettoized, in the sense that reports were more or less confined to media that cover the paranormal and thus isolated from the general public. Astronomers, meteorologists, and atmospheric scientists all ignored the phenomenon. Among the few serious investigators are Britt and Lee Elders, who have produced a series of excellent video digests of the material after engaging in years of on-site investigation, meeting witnesses, following up stories, and having the video examined by professionals. Their fascinating digests cull the material and concentrate on what is provably strange.

Like the Elders, I have found Maussan and his associate Daniel Munoz to be extremely competent and thorough investigators who are more than willing to share data and to assist outside investigators.

After July 11, 1991, there developed in Mexico a heated debate about the videos. In general, though, the Mexican people came to agree that the object was an unknown. Many millions had seen it and had observed with the naked eye considerably more structural detail than was transmitted by video. So

word of mouth supported the idea that it wasn't Venus or a star. The parts of the Mexican scientific and astronomical communities that supported the American contention that the object was Venus offered no evidence. Nobody did the obvious, which was to create, in public, sample videos of the planet or a star showing the same effect.

If the Mexico sightings had begun and ended on July 11, the vast number of witnesses still would have made them one of the most remarkable cases ever recorded. However, this is not what happened. In fact, July 11 was the beginning of an extended period of sightings that, very simply, ranks as the best-recorded series of unknown events in history, and which, as of August 1997, involves what could well be the clearest daylight video image of a UFO ever made.

After the July 1991 eclipse, the state of Puebla had so many sightings that viewing them became a nightly ritual. These objects were, for the most part, lights in the night sky. There was no detail to distinguish them from stars, except for their slow movement. They appeared to concentrate in the area of Mt. Popocatepetl, the volcano that dominates the area.

However, the proliferation of genuine sightings and all the excitement also caused the appearance of probable hoaxes. In September of 1991, during a television discussion about the phenomenon being broadcast by Super Channel 3 in Puebla, there was a major sighting in the area—as the panel discussed UFOs, one hovered in the sky above the city. This object was flashing a strobe light on an irregular interval and might have been an airplane except that it remained almost motionless for twenty-six minutes.

Over the village of Metepec near Puebla, the same phenomenon was repeated the next night. Meanwhile, in Puebla, an object hovered over Super Channel 3's transmission tower. This object glowed with internal light, but did not strobe. It first hovered, then moved, meaning that it was not a celestial object.

However, none of these objects ever did anything that suggested that it wasn't a balloon. There were none of the characteristic dramatic maneuvers that would have proved that they were real UFOs.

The next extraordinary event that happened in Mexico was the beginning of one of the most astonishing sequences of UFO videos ever made, and in this case there was no question of authenticity.

The first event in the sequence took place on September 16, 1991, at the National Independence Day parade. There were flybys of aircraft during this

parade, including flights of jets and helicopters. Vincente Sanchez Guerrero, a member of Maussan's crew, was there obtaining footage for news coverage of the event. There was no expectation that anything unusual would happen.

An unknown object was recorded by Sanchez hovering beneath a flight of jets. The object, clearly visible in front of a heavy cloud cover, oscillates light and dark surfaces in a pattern of vertical movement. After the planes pass, it begins to ascend, gathering speed until it moves above the upper edge of the background of cloud cover and becomes visible against the open sky.

Adding to this already amazing display was the completely incredible fact that it was repeated at the next two annual parades as well. The result was that UFOs were recorded maneuvering among the aircraft at three successive air shows, on September 16, 1991, 1992, and 1993.

The 1992 event was recorded by Demetrio Feria, a professional videographer who was taping the parade. Immediately after a flight of jets passed, a small object was observed moving just below a thin cloud cover, almost directly overhead. This object displayed a dark surface, but there was insufficient detail to determine anything other than its slightly elongated disk shape and the fact that half of it was darkly shadowed, the other half reflecting sunlight.

The next year, one of the most profoundly inexplicable of all UFO videos was made at this air show. Filmed by Alejandro Leal, who was taping a flight of helicopters, the object appears as a small, shiny ball that proceeds to maneuver among the helicopters, displaying an ability to avoid them and not be affected by their rotor wash as it passes beneath and beside them.

The object can be estimated to be between eighteen inches and three feet in diameter. It can't be a balloon because it moves upward of seventy miles an hour and engages in a broadly curving and obviously organized maneuver. It passes through the flight of helicopters but does not get blown away or even disturbed, not even slightly, as would happen to anything that was dependent on the air for its lift. Instead, this object makes an easy, assured movement that no design dependent on the air for lift could accomplish. The object isn't an aircraft of any kind, because it isn't flying. Instead, it is vectoring inside the air mass, its lift being accomplished by some means that is independent of the air.

It seems possible, then, that the amount of notice afforded them at the first air show brought the objects back for a second and third time. This evidence of intelligent planning minors what was happening in the Puebla area but

with the difference that the daytime video record provides far more convincing evidence that the UFOs were genuine.

It would be worth considering the possibility that whatever is behind the appearance of these objects may actually be seeking notice and is well aware of the conditions under which it may be obtained.

That the objects sometimes seek notice and react to observers is further made evident by a video recorded by Felipe Gonzalez on July 25, 1992. In this case, the object first appeared near a billow of cumulus cloud on a fine day. While both the object and the cloud are clearly visible, it is not possible to determine the size of the object because there is no way to tell how far away from the cloud it is.

The video is quite clear, and as this is broad daylight, the object cannot be a star. Also, it has an angular shape, tapering to a sharp end. It cannot be a balloon, because of this sharp point.

So maybe it is a model airplane, or even a real one that has had its appearance distorted by some atmospheric phenomenon.

Again, this would seem to be impossible because of the absolutely remarkable flight characteristics displayed by the object. This one moves slowly toward the cloud, slows down, speeds up, briefly stops, then slips behind the cloud. A moment later it appears in a small cleft in the clouds, darts across the clear space between them, then seems to hide with just an edge peeking out from behind the cloud—almost as if it is aware of the observer.

The object then disappears behind the cloud again. A moment later, it reappears in a broader cleft. It crosses this cleft, pausing for a moment in the center, then slips behind the cloud on the far side. Incredibly, it stops there completely for a moment, then disappears and reappears, “peeking out” from behind the cloud. It looks exactly as if it was playing with the observer, then finally is gone behind the cloud. Whether it was playing games or not, the motion displayed cannot be attributed to any known form of aircraft or aerial device at all.

Could it then be a computer simulation? This would be quite possible in 1997, but in 1992 it would have taken a considerable amount of computer power to accomplish. In either situation, there would be a characteristic signature of digital enhancement from the use of such programs. Because information is being added to the existing image, there are slight distortions in the surrounding pixels that can be detected on a computer. But this image,

when examined, shows no evidence of such distortions. Not only that, in a pixel-by-pixel examination, the sky color is seen to be blurred across the object, the opposite of what would happen if it was a digital inclusion. A similar effect could be created, but on a detailed examination the evidence of this work would be detectable.

Also in 1992, on June 25, Demetrio Feria had taped an object racing across the sky beneath cloud cover at 5:30 in the afternoon in the Federal District of Mexico which, once again, could not have been a star, a balloon, or a plane. As it moves, apparently at a very high speed, it oscillates slightly, turning a darker area toward and then away from the observer. This appears to be a solid, coherently structured object. The daylight image is plain to see.

This same pattern of oscillating movement was recorded by Tim Edwards in Salida, Colorado, during a period in 1995 when he taped a remarkably strange video sequence, footage that takes the UFO phenomenon to the same level of strangeness that the witness testimony has taken the close encounter reports.

To begin this journey into high-level strangeness, we must go first to June 6, 1994, to a tape made at 6:16 P.M. by Juan Flores Arroyo in Mexico City. The Arroyo family were outside with their video camera when they noticed a bright object in the still blue sky. This was precisely the sort of UFO that the skeptics generally dismiss as an unusually bright star. In this case, however, video evidence exists that clearly shows this not to be the case.

What it *does* show would appear at first glance, to be impossible. The object remains stationary for a short time, glowing brightly. It then becomes somewhat more dim and proceeds to eject a slightly less clear version of itself, which slowly moves away and disappears. The famous “Doctor X” case reported from France in 1957 contains a version of this observation. The doctor, who along with his son had a legendary close encounter, saw a UFO double as it approached him.

It is one thing for testimony about such a phenomenon to be offered, another one entirely for it to be recorded by a video camera.

What might something like this mean? It could be, simply, that the object ejected some sort of waste material that then floated away and dissipated. It could also be that it created a projection of itself akin to the holographic projections of personnel and equipment that have been theorized by nonlethal weapons researchers for military applications.

No matter the weather conditions, stars never appear to double in the sky,

with the secondary image slowly floating off like a puff of smoke. It could not be a flare, because the object was not bright enough, and there was no slow descent. It could not be a firework, because its duration in the sky is much too long. There is a video of something similar from the United States that is connected to one of the strongest and most disturbing of all close encounter cases, which involves not only video and still photography of a UFO but also an apparent implant found in the witness and surgically removed.

There is a great deal of video from Mexico that really cannot be explained. There is also a great deal showing stars and other commonplace phenomena that have been misinterpreted by witnesses. But there are other cases where the matter is not clear cut, and some of these are quite interesting.

On May 3, 1994, in the border city of Juarez, Francisco Javier recorded something that has the appearance of an open clam with some sort of material lodged between its two halves. This object was strobing blue-white flashes from a faintly visible structure on its bottom as it moved slowly through the night sky. It offered no maneuver that could not be accomplished by a balloon or slow-moving aircraft.

On May 5 in the same city, Rosi Uribe recorded an object like an elongated plate with a glowing domed superstructure moving slowly along and strobing in the same manner. This object was recorded for some minutes and was close enough to reveal a certain amount of detail in the video image. The platelike surface was lit by what appeared to be a glow being emitted from the roof of the superstructure, which has a number of dark areas along its face.

Although it is not possible to gain an exact measurement of the size of the object, because its distance from the camera is unknown, the video includes a view of the city the object is traveling over, and it can be estimated that it is at an altitude of approximately fifteen hundred feet. The amount of detail visible suggests that the object is fairly large, although not huge.

Video was made of a similar structure over Stuttgart, Germany on May 29, 1993. Although it wasn't strobing, it appeared identical in shape to the elongated plate recorded by Uribe. Taken at 10:00 P.M., this video also shows the object moving slowly and at very low altitude. This time, though, the entire surface is glowing bright red-orange. The object is quite low, and its movement against the foreground of hills, trees, and flat, unlit landscape suggests that it is traveling at slow speed. There is something eerie about this

video, because the object is so low and moving so slowly that it seems as if it ought to fall out of the sky.

That something so bizarre would be seen in two such widely separated parts of the world is interesting. But it also appeared again, this time in 1995 over Miami, Florida. The Miami tape offers enough detail to determine that the object could easily be precisely the same thing recorded over Juarez. This tape also shows an airliner near the unknown object, and so it is difficult to conclude that some sort of bizarre atmospheric effect transformed an ordinary plane into what appeared to the video camera to be a UFO.

But the object never, in any of the videos, does anything that a dirigible or blimp couldn't do. So could it then be some sort of hoax, constructed for the purpose of attracting attention and spreading false belief in UFOs? Possibly, but it is hard to imagine the hoaxer transporting his "flying saucer" from city to city in the hope that it will get the desired notice. Some UFO investigators have suggested that videos like this could be blimps, and a German television station has claimed that the Stuttgart video is an advertising blimp. No reason was given for this by the station beyond the fact that there appears to be no other way to explain the object.

In general, for amateur video to be definitively ruled an unknown, it would seem essential that, among other things, some maneuver be recorded that cannot be accomplished by any known aircraft. But given that there is so much amateur video that fulfills this criterion, has not been digitally enhanced, and was taken under conditions so public that a simple hoax must be ruled out, a dedicated scientific effort would almost certainly result in high-quality professional recordings. This could lead to valuable insights into, among other things, what keeps the objects aloft. As we desperately need some form of engine that can efficiently transport large numbers of people, supplies, and equipment into space, this would seem to be a valuable area of research. But the present emotional climate within the scientific community still makes such research difficult.

Throughout the 1990s, UFOs have continued to appear in Mexican skies. For example, on January 28, 1996, an enormous light entered Mexico from the north, proceeded to the center of the country, then turned east and crossed Yucatan, disappearing over the Gulf of Mexico. While Americans watched the Super Bowl, this awesome display was seen by millions. It appeared to involve something breaking up at high altitude, and for the first part of its flight followed a ballistic trajectory typical of a descending meteor. However,

the turn it made is hard to explain. It would be highly unusual for all the fragments of a large meteor to leave a ballistic trajectory at the same time and turn in the same direction.

On August 6, 1997, what is perhaps the clearest video of a UFO ever made was recorded over a wealthy suburb of Mexico City. As of October 15, there were, in addition to the video, twenty-four eyewitnesses, including two who have been added to the small but disturbing number of witnesses who have suffered unusual injuries.

Chapter Two

August 6, 1997

In the southwestern quadrant of the huge Federal District of Mexico lies the wealthy suburb of Bosques de las Lomas. It is the richest suburb of Mexico City and so far had not been an area of UFO sightings. But on August 6, 1997, that changed.

On that day, a group of young men in an office observed a strange object in the air beside a nearby building. This object caught their eye because it was in motion; it was rotating and oscillating at the same time. They pointed their digital video camera at it and took approximately ninety seconds of what may be the clearest imagery of a UFO yet made.

This video came to the attention of Jaime Maussan in September of 1997. In this case, the witness who filmed it wanted to remain anonymous, but a search of the area has uncovered twenty-four other people who saw the object, including one who apparently suffered physical side effects from standing approximately fifty feet below the object for a few minutes and another who may have experienced more serious injuries.

The video was taken from a window approximately three hundred feet from the object, which has a diameter between forty and sixty feet. The object is gray and smooth-sided, a familiar top-shaped UFO with a domed upper surface that flares out to curling edges that surround a relatively flat bottom, which is pale in color but surrounded by a darker ring. The two ends of the object appear to be slightly darkened and remain motionless. Somehow, the rest of the object seems to be rotating, or some sort of film on the surface is being agitated by regular waves of motion that create this appearance.

The setting in which the object appears, at an initial altitude of about a hundred feet, is a cityscape, with the object hovering over an area of low buildings. There is a high-rise apartment building in the right foreground. No people are visible in the video at any time. The object hovers for about ten seconds, rotating and oscillating in a clumsy-looking manner. Continuing with these same motions, it then accelerates toward the apartment building, moving at slow speed, probably no more than ten or fifteen miles an hour. It

also ascends approximately another hundred feet and can then be seen moving along just above the roof of the apartment building and some distance beyond it.

It finally moves behind another building and never re-emerges. Neither a moment of appearance nor of disappearance is recorded on the video, and the object never moves at a speed that would rule out hoax, although the clarity of the image and the strangeness of the object are enough to make this video worth examination.

On August 3, 1997, three days before the object was recorded on video, it was reportedly observed by a number of witnesses, including one who, as of this writing in October of 1997, is hospitalized with unexplained and uncontrolled normal pressure hydrocephalus (NPH), the first symptoms of which occurred after he had watched the object at low altitude overhead for half an hour.

This man is in his thirties, but NPH is a disease of the elderly. It is usually attributed to surface inflammation of the brain due to subarachnoid hemorrhage or diffuse meningitis.^[6] But this syndrome is so rare that there is little information about it, and often there is no evidence of what may be causing it in a given case. It should be noted that the witness showed evidence of drunkenness on admission to the hospital.

A few days after watching it, he began to experience problems with movement and was diagnosed at that time. Whether his proximity to the object was a causative factor remains unknown, but since this disease is associated with inflammation of the surface of the brain, and the witness was standing under the object for so long, the possibility must be considered, especially in view of the injuries to another witness.

This witness, who happened to be standing immediately beneath the object as it was being videotaped, also experienced physical side effects. In her case, these took the form of burns to her face and arms. She could feel a weight from above, as if some invisible force was making her body feel heavier. In addition, she felt as if she was experiencing a static charge over her whole body. The day after the sighting, she developed a sunburn on her face and arms, the areas of her body that had been exposed to the object. This sunburn persisted until early September, when it finally faded, with—so far—no lasting effects. An ordinary sunburn that persists for three weeks is unusual, and the long duration of this burn suggests that there was energy present beyond the infrared, which is the component of sunlight that causes burns.

The possibility exists that these witnesses were exposed to ultraviolet, radio, microwaves, radar, X rays, or an unknown form of energy.

So, were these people injured by this object, and was it a genuine UFO? Among the other witnesses was one who saw it just before it disappeared, and her testimony is useful. As it went out of view of the group with the video camera, it came into her line of sight. A fashion photographer, she rushed to get her camera. Unfortunately, when she returned, she saw only a violet haze in the air, which rapidly dissipated. This violet haze is a known aspect of the UFO phenomenon, and scientists have already theorized about its possible significance. (It will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.) Another convincing detail is the fact that Maussan, who received the video on September 26, went to the area to interview people at random in order to find out if anybody could remember seeing it. The first such person he found was the twelve-year-old daughter of a street vender, who was able to describe it in detail before seeing the video.

Maussan provided both me and Jim Dilettoso of Village Labs in Tempe, Arizona, and Britt and Lee Elders, with copies of the tape for analysis. Mr. Dilettoso sought to determine whether the object might be suspended from a helicopter above it and outside of the frame of the camera, or, if it was a balloon, then tethered to a cable underneath. To accomplish this analysis, he located the axis of the object by finding the point around which it was oscillating. He then drew a straight line through this point and followed the movements of this line frame by frame to see if it intersected at an apex above the object. He found that this line of axis remained unbroken for as many as ten frames at a time, but then it “jumped,” meaning that any cable would have broken. So the object cannot be dangling from a wire or affixed to a tether. The tether possibility is made even less likely by the fact that the center of the undersurface is completely free of any markings or variations that would indicate the presence of a hook, and the rotation would seem to preclude tethering to the outside edges. Dilettoso also estimated the diameter of the object as between forty and sixty feet, meaning that it is, at its thickest point, approximately twelve to sixteen feet thick.

The fact that there is considerable motion caused by handholding the camera reduces the likelihood that the image of the UFO has been digitally added to the tape. To do this would require a massive effort because no two frames are ever in the same place. At best, an illusion of motion could be created this way, that would be obvious on frame-by-frame analysis of the

video. Mr. Dilettoso also ascertained that, although the video had been made with a digital camera, it had not had digital information added to it later, which makes it less likely that this video is a special effect. However, it should also be noted that, if it was made digitally and then the digital tape was shot from a screen, no digital signature would appear on the new tape, effectively covering the digital track. To determine whether there might have been any tampering concealed in this way, I transferred the segments of the image where the object passed behind building walls into digital format and, using Adobe Photoshop 4.0, examined the pixels of the moving object to see whether any of them were in the wrong place. If the object was a digital image, it would be extremely unlikely that this part of its motion across the field could be accomplished without some pixels falling out of place and appearing in front of the building. But the image was clean.

So the object was almost certainly physical, either a radio-controlled model of a UFO or the real thing. If radio controlled, then it was probably held aloft by helium or hydrogen, because there appear to be no air vents that would enable a column of air to be emitted from a concealed propeller. If it was an untethered balloon, then it was probably controlled by jetting air through a duct that would account for the darkened areas at the two ends of the object parallel to the camera. The “rotation” then would be something like a loose Mylar covering blowing in the wind.

The one remaining question became whether or not the object was flying or moving by some other means. If flying, then it can be concluded that it was a model. But if it wasn't, then it was a genuine UFO. An object that is flying, such as a balloon or a plane, is held aloft by air. In fact, everything that we make that moves through the air is either flying or, like a bullet or a rocket, on a propelled ballistic trajectory. This UFO was certainly not on a trajectory of any kind, since it hovered and maneuvered in an entirely independent manner. So the crucial question became, was it vectoring—that is to say, being held aloft by some means that was independent of the air?

If flying, then the object would exhibit a reaction to the air around it as it accelerated. Also, since it was oscillating, its center of gravity was off its axis, or there was a tilted gyroscope inside the object. In either case, some of the oscillation would be transferred into any lateral motion, causing the object to describe a series of partial curves as it moved across the sky. Also, as it nears the building, it ascends. Then it stops at a certain altitude and rises no farther. As this is a very difficult maneuver for a lighter-than-air craft to

accomplish without complex and sensitive controls, it seemed impossible that there would be no wobbling at the top of the ascent, especially as the volume of gas that could be contained inside this object would be too small to sustain the weight of a pilot, meaning that the object had to be radio controlled. If this was a lighter-than-air craft, the ascent had to be accomplished by airflow, as nothing was dropped from it before it rose to lessen its weight. In any case, regaining control over this type of ascent by use of airflow from an upward-directed fan or propeller would not be possible without some sort of bouncing or wobble.

Working at Bauhaus Media in San Antonio, I examined the tape to see if actual motions could be determined. We examined the image at various levels to see if we could detect any signs of downdraft below the craft. There were some possible indications of air movement, but they were not persistent and were probably due to the smog and debris in the air at the time. We then stabilized the critical first section of the recording, removing all camera shake from the image of the object itself. We did this from a few seconds before the object begins its acceleration to where it completes its ascent. To accomplish this, we used Avid Illusion software on a Silicon Graphics O2 computer. To get the cleanest possible image off the VHS tape, we utilized an uncompressed serial digital interface straight from the copy in our possession.

This process had the effect of transferring all camera movement out of the object, so that only the motions that it had itself made in relation to a fixed surface nearby (the corner of a building) remained.

We observed a slight upward tilt in the direction of motion at the moment of acceleration. However, this same angle comes and goes even when the object is hovering and appears to be a side effect of its oscillation. There was no additional “buck” resulting from acceleration. In addition, the ascent appeared smooth. It was not affected at all by the oscillations. When the object completed its ascent, it did so without the slightest wobble or adjustment. The end of the ascent is as clean and abrupt as the beginning.

So the probability exists that this object was not air-dependent. Even saying this, though, hoaxers can be extremely clever, and in the absence of absolutely impossible maneuvers, such as disappearing on camera or accelerating so quickly that the movement cannot be explained, fraud cannot be completely ruled out.

If I was hoaxing something like this, I might very well choose to make my balloon oscillate in order to disguise the fact that it was air-dependent. Still, it

seems impossible to do this while also accomplishing straight trajectories and a perfectly clean ascent. Given all the witnesses, the physical injuries reported, and the fact that the object also displays the “walking” effect of a tilt-to-control device as it moves above the top of the building, there is every reason to accept the video as worthy of consideration as possibly genuine. Tilt-to-control involves moving forward by slipping off a supporting column of air or energy, then raising the leading edge to bring the column directly under the craft again. Platforms designed by long-time NASA aeronautical engineer Paul Hill using air for tilt-to-control support were tested in the 1950s. (His assertion that he based his designs on observations of UFOs will be discussed in Chapter Six.) But the Mexican craft was probably not using air for support, because of the precision of movement observed.

If it is a genuine unknown, then it should be of interest to scientists working on propulsion technologies. This leading-edge research is beginning to be carried out in numerous labs, due to the fact that current engines, based on heat energy, have already outlived their usefulness.

At the present time, the idea of colonizing the solar system with millions and then billions of people seems far-fetched, but within a very few years it will be seen as a necessity if humanity is to continue to maintain a growth-based economy and to thrive. In addition, we must find a way to relieve Earth of its growing burden of radioactive and other pollutants, and the ability inexpensively to get them into space and incinerate them in the sun would be a practical alternative if we could leave Earth’s gravity cheaply and efficiently, instead of relying on rockets with all their expense and pollution.

The combination of the way the object maneuvered, the nature of the sensations and injuries experienced by the witness who stood under it, and the violet haze that persisted after its sudden disappearance might combine to give somebody who is aware of the various new propulsion technologies now under discussion some valuable information.

With this in mind, I took the video to some scientists who had attended NASA’s Breakthrough Propulsion Physics Workshop that was held August 12-14, 1997, at the Lewis Research Center in Cleveland. Papers were presented at this workshop, which, among other things, discussed leading-edge ideas such as whether the vacuum of space can be engineered to extract energy from it.^[2]

The idea of “engineering the vacuum” was first proposed by Nobel prize winner Dr. T. D. Lee in his book *Particle Physics and Introduction to Field*

Theory.^[8] The theory is based on the fact that “empty” space isn’t empty at all. In fact, it contains many different energetic processes, some of which may be exploitable for a whole new type of power.

Interestingly enough, a system that drew its energy from the vacuum would work as well in an air envelope, because the subatomic source of its energy is present everywhere. Dr. Robert Forward of the Hughes Research Laboratory has already demonstrated that the vacuum can be exploited for energy.^[9]

The physicist who looked at the tape was intrigued and disappointed at the same time. He was intrigued for the same reason that I was: There is a reasonable likelihood that the tape is authentic, and if it is, then it is the clearest image of a UFO in operation that has ever been made. The disappointment came from the fact that there is no “clincher” in the tape. The object performs no maneuver that would be completely impossible for a radio-controlled model. However, the way that it functioned was fascinating to him. It is quite possible that something that relied on a column of energy to hold it up might make slow speed maneuvers very much like those that appear on the tape.

Unfortunately, the video did not reveal any of the signs of excited air around the object, such as that seen in some of the earlier Mexican video, that might have helped in making some guesses about the nature of the supporting field. The image is not quite enough to enable us to close the book and say that UFOs are definitively real. To do that, we need an actual UFO in our hands, or a professionally made record that shows enough detail to convince absolutely that the object under observation is a real unknown. Such a record could be obtained with considered scientific effort, and the existing videos and films are, of course, available for examination.

Interestingly enough, such film has not only been made in the past but also has been analyzed by scientists, pilots, and aeronautical engineers (this will be discussed in Chapter Six.) But before we turn to that material, it would seem productive to go a little deeper into the Mexican experience. If UFOs are spacecraft, then perhaps they have aliens aboard, and maybe somebody might at some point have made a video of such a creature. Maybe so.

Chapter Three

Alien Shadows

Video has appeared on TV around the world that claims to depict aliens. Best known is the “alien autopsy” film aired on television in 1995. However, this film has come under criticism because of authentication problems. Allegedly made from film taken of an autopsy of an alien whose spacecraft crashed in the New Mexico desert in 1947, the video shows a humanlike body with large eyes and six-fingered hands. If it is a real body, it isn’t human, because the six fingers are all different, and human beings have genetic information for only five different fingers. In a human being, a sixth finger must always be a repeat of one of the other five. In addition, when the leg is manipulated, the movement of the femur within the hip socket appears to be anatomically correct, a subtlety that would be hard for a special effects artist to duplicate.

The owners of this video have never produced any of the original 16-mm film with image on it for testing. The original film would need to be displayed along with laboratory aging results in order to verify its authenticity. What has been done so far is to display the aging results of some white film leader in the Fox television program that aired in the United States. Because of the lack of verification, this video, as subtly convincing as it is, must remain open to question.

I was asked by a television program to view two videos of apparent aliens. One had allegedly been smuggled out of the legendary Area 51 and come into the hands of the owner of a small video concern. The other was said to have appeared anonymously in the mailbox of the owner of another small video concern.

I don’t spend time and money on anonymous evidence, but I was willing to look at the videos. In the one supposedly from Area 51, there appears a figure with a huge head and black, platelike eyes. It is behind glass, and seated near it is a man who appears to be concentrating. There is no movement at first, but soon the alien’s huge head begins to wobble. Its tiny mouth opens, and fluid begins to issue from it. The creature is obviously in distress. As it collapses, two people in white protective clothing appear and begin trying to

collect the fluid, as if for examination. In the lower right quadrant of the screen, there is a bright, bouncing green light that appears like a laser.

I saw this video in the company of a number of other close encounter witnesses. Although I was given little reason to believe that it was real, and so stated at the time, the edited version of my statements that appeared publicly included only my emotional reaction to the harsh situation and obvious distress of the creature.

The next video, given to me by the same program, "Strange Universe," involved an alien body being drawn out of a black plastic bag by what I assume is a mortician or coroner. It's very realistic, but there isn't any way to verify it, either. Also, there appears to be some sort of an overlay in the video designed to obscure the image, and the video was made with an old camera, which hardly seems likely if it was really the work of some sort of supersecret government agency.

The one other piece of video of an apparent alien that has been produced does not suffer from anonymous authorship. On the contrary, not only is the author of this image known, but it is part of what is arguably one of the strangest and best-documented series of UFO appearances that have ever been investigated.

On the night of September 12, 1994, a new radar system was being tested at Mexico City's international airport. During the test, a large stationary radar return appeared on observers' screens. This return persisted for five hours, with the object showing little, if any, movement. Then it abruptly disappeared.

Technicians evaluating the radar had concluded that they were seeing a malfunction, but two nights later the object again appeared over Metepec, about forty miles from Mexico City. This time the airport in Toluca also got it under visual observation. People on the streets of Metepec noticed it as well, among them a witness who had a video camera. She was not able to get it to work that night. But the next night, September 15, with the camera now working, she noticed a glow in a cornfield behind her home. When she looked more closely, she observed what appeared to be a living creature of some sort standing near the corn. The creature was clearly visible and for a very disturbing reason: Its head glowed from within.

She described what she saw to Jaime Maussan: "I saw it turn its head and look at me in the window where I was standing. It seemed that it was also surprised. Its eyes were sad. They looked like the eyes of a monkey, very

deep, but also sad. It moved in a way that made me think I had caught him by surprise. That's when it turned back and disappeared. That's what happened, not more, not less."

When asked if it could have been fake, she states that it displayed facial movements and "had eyes like ours." She further said, "I want to tell you something straight. I don't know anything about these things." Commenting to Maussan about his work, she continued, "When I see you on TV, I change the channel. Because I do not believe in these things. Not at all. I believe that we are a million light-years behind these people."

An interesting internal contradiction in her statement, obviously. She doesn't believe, and yet she feels that we are far behind "these people." Frankly, if she had not seen an image that she couldn't explain and finds it almost impossible to believe, I doubt that she would have made this contradictory statement. She would have said one or the other. This innocent lapse of logic, as the weirdly impossible memory overlays the long-held beliefs and produces the contradiction, is strong evidence of her sincerity.

The figure observed on the video is glowing in a featureless dark background. It seems to be hunched forward, or the head set into the shoulders in such a way that the chin, which is long and narrow, comes down as far as the center of the chest. The body, which is revealed by the glow that is either emanating from the head or coming down from above, appears to be wrapped in gray-tan material. This material can be seen flowing onto the ground around the figure. As the witness taped the figure, she described it to the friend who was with her but not in the room. "It's horrible," she said, "it's looking at me. It's a dwarf, it's horrible." She stated that it seemed extremely sad, an impression that many close encounter witnesses report.

In addition to its long, narrow chin, the face displays the dark and sunken eyes that the witness describes, as well as two extrusions on the upper part of the forehead. Each is about three inches long and jointed forward at a ninety-degree angle.

The body covering displays folds like a blanket or shroud. There is no visible tailoring. This material conceals whether the creature has feet. As the creature moves away, it seems slow and hunched, as if it is carrying a great weight. Its movement is steady enough but appears laborious as it disappears into the cornfield behind the house.

So, was this a practical joke at her expense, or was it real? The tape is analog, not a digital composite, so if it was a prank, then it was played by

constructing a figure, perhaps out of papier mâché and a light, then turning it on, with the operator guiding it from under the blanket. It would be a simple effect to accomplish, and the poor quality of the video makes it impossible to distinguish enough detail to determine this.

The next morning, the cornfield behind her house was found to be trampled down, as if something heavy had wandered through it, crushing a couple of acres of corn.

Even given this strange side effect, if it ended there this story would have to be added to the long list that cannot be resolved due to the lack of professional involvement and investigation while the event was in progress.

But the story does not end there. Maussan followed up the sighting reports with a request for information from the Mexico City airport tower, which is how he learned about the radar observations and the Toluca visual contact. Over the next month, the tower informed him of six more radar contacts around the area with what appeared to be the same object and gave him the coordinates. He followed up by overlying the locations in a helicopter. In each case, there was a field of crushed plants beneath the place where the radar contact had occurred, looking exactly like the cornfield behind the Metepec witness's house. In one of these fields, Maussan found and made a videotape of a bizarre plant that appeared to be a pumpkin vine out of which was growing the leaves of other plants. Unfortunately, as no scientists were involved, this plant was not collected. Little can be gained from the video except to say that it looks strange.

It seems reasonable to think that there might have been some connection between the objects sighted on radar and the crushed fields that appeared below them. Unfortunately, though, there is nothing about the Metepec video that makes it possible to state for certain that the witness was not the victim of a hoax. Still, it is probably the closest thing there is, at present, to a video of a visitor with authenticating support.

Most of the videos from Mexico, and most earlier photographs, film, and videos of UFOs, show what appear to be machines flying around in the sky by wondrous means. But beyond the strange actions and maneuvers of what seem to be structured aerial devices of some sort, and the one alien video, there lies another world of much more problematic videos that suggest that the camera has uncovered skyborne phenomena of ultrahigh-level strangeness. This video record, taken as a whole, is so strange that it is, almost beyond conjecture. And yet it is there, readily accessible to whatever

analysis can be applied. It leads one to the fascinating conclusion that, if it does not prove accessible to conventional explanation, then our world has not been completely explored, in the sense that it contains a large-scale phenomenon of some kind that we have not yet noticed.

The first of these strange tapes is also the last of the Mexico videos that I will discuss. I consider this a door into the next level of the UFO video. From here on, the path becomes really dark, the way completely unknown.

Carlos Diaz is a photographer. He is also a native Mexican, an Indian of Toltec ancestry. He lives in a small town in northern Mexico and has impressed people such as Maussan and Dr. John Mack with his simplicity and honesty. He has never asked any money for his videos and has been entirely forthcoming in explaining them. According to his explanation, he created them at night near his home, in general by going outside at times that somehow seemed to him to be appointed and awaiting the appearance of the object. In other words, he feels, like so many witnesses, a sense that he is “called” to his meetings.

What Mr. Diaz has produced is a group of videos of a low-hovering object that appears to be a bladder glowing with internal light, or some kind of discrete plasma. It appears and disappears instantaneously, and at times its orange glow varies slightly.

A close examination reveals dots of light that are apparently internal to the object. Mr. Diaz has taken a number of stills of it, which could easily be hoaxed with simple equipment. However, he has also made a video that is much more interesting because it is not as easy to dismiss.

This video is approximately thirty-five seconds long and is divided into two shots. It was taken at night. In the first shot, Mr. Diaz’s rural house can be observed in the foreground. In the dark sky above the house, there is a bright object. It is luminous but not radiant, with the result that color and shape can be distinguished. The camera is then zoomed, and some detail can be observed as well. At this point, its configuration is somewhat like the glowing object taped near Stuttgart that I referred to in the previous chapter.

The witness is approaching the object, walking with the camera trained on it. It is thus impossible to tell if the apparent small maneuvers are a result of camera movement.

There is then a cut, and the object appears in more detail and at a different angle. The rural sounds—a rooster crowing, crickets chirping—continue across the cut. What has happened is that the witness has moved closer to the

object, walking through a field and up onto a hillside with the camera off, then turned it on again. Aside from testimony, there is no way to tell how long the camera was off.

It does appear that a slight oscillating maneuver that was beginning to occur just as the camera was turned off is just ending as it is turned back on. The object then remains completely motionless. It is visible against a featureless black background.

Carlos Diaz has struck investigators who have met him as a very honest man. There is not the least indication that these tapes are hoaxed. But the only way it is possible to tell that the camera is still outside, or that it is the same night, is Mr. Diaz's testimony. The object remains visible for about ten seconds and then disappears, as if a switch has been thrown on its light source.

Some might argue that the video could have been created in any number of simple ways. It could involve, for example, an object with a light inside suspended from a wire or lying on a tabletop. There is no way to evaluate this piece of video except to confirm that the form was not added digitally. But given how many other simpler, cheaper, and more undetectable analog methods could have been used, this isn't proof of anything.

The first part of the video would have been harder to fake. The zoom from the first frame containing background detail to the final one containing only the object against a black background is continuous. It could be possible to do a double exposure, first exposing the background, then repeating the zoom against a black surface with the lighted object suspended in front of it. If this was the case, though, the camera motion that occurs when the witness begins to walk would be a major problem to adjust perfectly so that the object's movements were consistent with it.

Diaz has impressed researchers who have met him and does not appear motivated to exploit his video beyond a natural desire that it receive the notice he feels that it deserves. In other words, he is like most legitimate witnesses with hard evidence—neither hungry for publicity nor unwilling to stand up, if asked, for what he has seen. So if we grant that his video may be genuine, then what is it and how does it differ from other videos of unknown objects?

Mr. Diaz has claimed a certain level of communication with the object and regards it as a plasma that is, itself, a living creature. If seeming plasmic structures like this one and the fiercely glowing object that was taped near

Stuttgart are real, then what would they be? Creatures? Natural formations? Technological objects?

If they are creatures, then they are so different from anything that we identify as a living organism that we would have to redefine our concept of life in order to include them. It is easy to say a phrase like “plasmic being,” but what would that actually mean? A living gas? Electrons that think?

These are not questions that can be answered, not yet. We can, however, explore the whole area further. Come with me into the realm of the *really* strange.

Chapter Four

An Undiscovered Country

In March of 1994 in the town of Midway, New Mexico, video producers Karen and Jose Escamilla made a video of something that they did not understand. The recording was made at about ten in the morning on a clear day and shows a rod-shaped shadow racing across the sky. At first, the Escamillas assumed that the shadow was an insect or bird passing near the lens of the camera. But they remained curious about it, and over the course of the next few months they discovered that more such images could be obtained.

In September, they began experimenting. Along with the shadows, which Karen Escamilla named “rods,” they shot birds and insects at two-thousand frames per second. They found that even the flapping wings of insects could be seen at this very high shutter speed, but the rods appeared the same, revealing no more detail than they had at lower shutter speeds.

Now quite intrigued, the Escamillas began filming the rods more extensively. They are not readily visible with the naked eye; they move at such a high speed that they can hardly be registered. But a video camera is different. Unlike an eye, it does not need to follow an object in order for it to be noticed. It simply records everything that passes its lens and emits light in the sensitivity range of its receptor system. To record the rods, the Escamillas used a simple procedure: They set up a camera, aiming it at a fixed point in the sky, and let it run. They then examined the video and sometimes found some of these objects.

The objects they filmed appeared to them to be between fifty and a hundred feet long, but there was no certain way to tell. In one of the most spectacular videos, the objects are seen speeding just above the peaks of a mountain range. One of them hits a mountain and, slightly bent and foreshortened, moves off more slowly in another direction. Because these objects were obviously moving just above this mountain range, their size has been determined to be five hundred feet in length. Another video shows the rods plunging into the ground and disappearing, which seems to contradict what happened when they hit the mountain, almost as if parts of the earth

were solid to them and others were not.

Of course, most of the objects that appear when a video camera is set up and allowed to record the sky undisturbed are birds, bits of dust or seedpods, insects, and other normal airborne debris. I have proved this to my own satisfaction by experiment. What's more, the closer the object and the faster it moves, the stranger it looks. A fly, for example, can turn out looking like some kind of otherworldly flying centipede if it is a few feet from a lens that is correctly focused. But the images discussed in this chapter, the Escamillas' included, were made with focus set on infinity. At this focus, little or nothing is recorded of objects passing at close enough range to induce this type of distortion. Moreover, this sort of shadow doesn't strike and bounce off a mountainside, or dive into the ground.

Lest it be assumed that the Escamillas somehow faked their video, or that they have mistaken an artifact for something real, it should be noted that the rods have been photographed before. In 1976, Trevor James Constable published *The Cosmic Pulse of Life*.^[10] In this book, he maintains that there are living creatures of unknown species and genus who inhabit the sky much in the same way that fish inhabit the sea. He published a number of pictures in the book made on infrared film.^[11] They bear a striking resemblance to the video that is being made by the Escamillas and others.

Some of the most arresting video was made near Monterrey, Mexico, by Santiago Yturria. Escamilla and Yturria taped the objects extensively around Monterrey, and on one of the tapes a rod actually passes between Mexican investigator Jeronimo Flores and the camera that is recording an image of him. As the shot was being made at an extremely high shutter speed (one ten thousandth of a second), any bird, insect, or piece of ordinary debris would almost certainly have been visible, or at least more clear, in still frame. But what happened was similar to the other rod footage. The object remained as indistinct in still frame as it was in the moving video. Even at that high a shutter speed, no new information appeared.

In December of 1995, Escamilla recorded the rods moving over a building in Roswell, New Mexico. The camera was a little less than half a mile from the building. Two rods were recorded moving above it. Unfortunately, it was not possible from this video to determine if they had been behind the building or between the building and the camera. In any case, they were certainly behind a group of telephone wires which enabled him to estimate that the objects were ten to a hundred feet in length. By observation, it is clear that

they were moving at very high speed. No matter what they were, they were at least two hundred feet from the camera and must thus have been moving at a far higher velocity than any bird or insect.

Although their range is unknown, the rodlike shadows seem accessible to being recorded in any number of different places. As of October 1997, Escamilla reports that rods have been filmed in twenty-three states of the United States and in Mexico. These videos continue to be made. On June 15, 1997, a rod was filmed speeding past the Empire State Building in New York City.

Although some scientists who have seen the video agree that it is mysterious, there has been no organized study of the objects, largely because of a lack of publicity and no professionally gathered evidence entering the scientific data stream. This would appear to be an interesting opportunity for the atmospheric sciences.

Interestingly enough, there was some comment about skyborne life forms even before Constable's book was published. I believe that the first mention of this concept was made by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in his short story "The Horror of the Heights," which concerns an early ascent to the then-appalling altitude of forty thousand feet. When he reaches this level, the narrator makes the following comment: "But soon my attention was drawn to a new phenomenon—the serpents of the outer air. These were long, thin, fantastic coils of vapour-like material, which turned and twisted with great speed, flying round and round at such a pace that the eyes could hardly follow them." Will fact turn out to mirror fiction? We shall see.

Three other videographers, Tom King of Phoenix, John Bro Wilkie of Los Angeles, and Tim Edwards of Salida, Colorado, have all taped an equally strange phenomenon that may be related in some way to what the Escamillas have found.

The method they use was evolved independently by Wilkie and Edwards, then utilized successfully by King as well. This discovery began with the observation that objects become much more visible in the high light levels that occur near the disk of the sun. If the disk itself is blocked out, the video camera can record detail from this area that cannot be observed with the naked eye for any length of time. I must add that doing this also challenges the ability of a video system to make accurate recordings, and many bizarre images of ordinary objects can be obtained this way. But the images I will discuss here have, frankly, surprised me. I believe that I am, so far, the only

person to have extracted this particular material from these videos, so it's perfectly possible that somebody else will be able to demonstrate that they bear some relation to the ordinary world. If not, then the tapes that have been made by these men, especially some made by Edwards in the fall of 1995, are quite simply the strangest video recordings ever made.

On an August afternoon in 1995, Edwards, a Salida, Colorado, restaurateur, had gone outside with his six-year-old daughter to talk to two men who were working on his roof. As he talked to the workers, his daughter kept trying to draw his attention to something in the sky. Finally, he looked up and saw something quite unusual.

Fortunately, he thought to go inside and get his video camera. What he filmed was a glowing strip in the sky that had rectangular areas of light flowing along its surface. Although to the naked eye it appeared to be a structured object like some sort of gigantic cylinder or platform, on the video recording it presents an almost organic appearance. Jim Dilettoso of Village Labs was able to estimate its altitude at seventy-five thousand feet and its length at approximately one mile.

Less conclusive were the efforts to determine what it was. Some researchers concluded after a look at the tape that it was sunlight reflecting on a kite string. But the object was reportedly seen by observers as far away as California, and seventeen witnesses have been documented throughout Colorado. Additionally, a precisely similar phenomenon was taped on November 8, 1990, in Krasnodar, Russia. For these reasons, the kite string theory is probably not worth pursuing unless its proponents can duplicate the phenomenon using this medium.

If this is something that can be explained, then practically the only thing it could be might be a bizarre exhaust trail left by a high-flying secret aircraft. It is difficult to explain the pulsations of light passing down the object in terms of condensation from a known aircraft's exhaust system. There is alleged to exist a type of engine that emits detonations in series that would produce a contrail looking like string of pearls, but, as with any contrail, this would extend if it was still being ejected. This object does not extend. Instead, it remains at a discreet length as it moves across the sky.

Then perhaps it is a cloud formed by such an engine during a power maneuver, something like the thick contrail that results when a fighter briefly engages its afterburner at high altitude, leaving an isolated segment floating in the sky.

But the only thing moving in connection with this material is the pulsating light. If this is an isolated segment of contrail, then where is the flow of energy coming from that is causing this movement? As it is not getting longer, it is not still being produced by the aircraft that generated it. Thus there can be no motive power to transmit the pulses along its surface.

In addition, each pulse moves down its length in less than a second, meaning that the pulses are traveling at a very high rate of speed. It is hard to see how they could represent emission from any sort of engine, given that the forward velocity of the plane or rocket producing them would also have to be exceedingly high. So the greater likelihood is that the object is unknown and the lights are some sort of sequential flashing process.

Almost as if it was a kind of beacon, it got Edwards to begin searching the skies. After the object was shown on television, he was contacted by Tom King, who also began using the method of taping into sun glow. Along with Wilkie, these men have taped for many hours and produced much anomalous material. After their efforts came to my attention, I contacted them, and they kindly consented to give me copies of their tapes. On a first look, these appeared to me to be tapes of commonplace objects that had been distorted by speed and extreme lighting conditions. Nevertheless, I watched carefully. What I hoped to do was to identify the seedpods, insects, birds, and dust particles that I thought I was seeing, so that I could explain the phenomenon.

The material that I was viewing on Edwards' tapes appeared to be in essentially three areas of sky. There was very close material, which moved at quite high speed. This took the form of white, blurry objects that raced around in the sort of tight trajectories that might be associated with blown material like seedpods. Farther out, there were racing balls of light; these, I thought, might be insects or birds distorted by speed and high light levels. There were, at this level, also shadowy objects racing past and flares of material that appeared to be blowing spiderweb.

Initially, the objects that most arrested my curiosity were higher than any of these. These were cylinders that seemed, because of their distance from the camera, to be moving slowly across the sky, as if with the wind. They were not drifting, though, but always moved in a straight line and always in the same direction.

I accidentally hit the wrong button on the VCR and made a surprising discovery. The frozen frame presented a radically different and unexpected picture. The flying bits of fluff had a very unusual structure to them. As I

began moving through the tape frame by frame, I realized that I was looking at something far more interesting than I had assumed. First, the cylindrical objects that I had thought were birds or planes now revealed some surprising features. As I advanced the frames, I saw that dark surfaces were rotating into visibility, then disappearing again as the objects moved. These surfaces displayed blocky designs of dark and light. Both the objects and their motion appeared to be similar to the video made by Demetrio Feria at the Mexican national air show in 1992.

Then I observed one of the closer objects. I had assumed that it was a bit of dust flying past near the lens of the camera. What I saw was astonishing: a segmented object looking like some sort of flying rope with a series of elongated domes on top. The rearmost segment had an opening at its end that appeared to be ejecting violet material that looked something like the emission recorded underneath the object sighted over Mexico City and Puebla in July of 1991.

I could hardly believe what I was seeing. I am not easily able to accept strange things like this at face value, and my first thought was that I might be looking at an image of a flying insect that had been severely distorted. When I showed this to San Antonio video producer Leonard Buchanan, his impression also was that the segmented appearance was caused by the object moving so rapidly that more than one image of it appeared on the same frame. This is not an uncommon phenomenon in video.

The trouble was for me that insects and birds on the tapes were clearly visible. In still frame, enough detail could sometimes be seen to identify species. So what species was this? Even assuming that there was only one segment actually present, what was it—a seed-pod? It seemed to be moving extremely fast, but without knowing how exactly far it was from the camera, speed could not be determined. It could not have been fewer than fifteen feet away, because the lens was set to focus at infinity. Any closer, and it would have been out of focus.

The tapes were made by aiming the camera just above the edge of a roof, which was used to block out the disk of the sun. The angle of the shot was so low that the roofline is visible in the bottom of the frame as a dark, straight line.

Lip compression is a phenomenon that causes wind to speed up as it passes an edge. This is why eaves howl during a windstorm. Could the objects have been subject to winds that were sped up by lip compression? Certainly they

could, and maybe that was the cause of the rapid motion.

The problem with this is that the objects move in many different directions, often making U-turns in the air. They do not circulate like clouds of dust or flocks of midges and mayflies caught in small vortices. In fact, they do not move as if they are being blown by wind.

They take a number of forms. The most common does not appear to be a segmented shape that is repeated, but rather a pair of twined cords. Though some of them appear to be emitting violet material, most of them show no evidence of motive power. They have no wings and do not function like any sort of flying craft that we might be familiar with, including conventional UFOs. Like the Escamillas' rods, they seem more like some sort of unknown life-form than any conceivable air or space craft.

The last form that I observed was by far the most bizarre. My best efforts at explanation did not offer even a suggestion of a conventional alternative. This phenomenon appears to occur in the middle to far distance. There are two observations. The first is a cylindrical object that transforms just as it leaves the live area of the tape into something with two appendages and a blunt triangular wing. The transformation takes place over only three frames. The object then leaves the live area of the tape, and no more information is thus available.

A second object appears in the lower right corner of the screen, moves upward toward the center of the live area, then takes a curving dive and disappears. At first this object looks like a tiny flying man. On closer observation, it appears to have four equilateral oblong appendages, squared and possibly segmented. They are slightly darker on the flat ends, suggesting the possibility of shadow visible in a hollow interior. There is nothing to indicate the presence of a head.

The object flexes in its dive, as if it is pliant and under some sort of muscular or other tensioning control. It then leaves the live area, and there is no more information to be gained. At normal speed, these objects are mere blurs. Only by looking at them frame by frame can the detail be seen.

Another amazing object has been taped by John Wilkie over a house in Los Angeles. It is visible only in one frame of the tape. It appears over the roof of a house and consists of three visible segments that look something like streamlined crab shells. Their curving rear areas appear to be open, and they are connected together by a black, ribbonlike spine.

What is it, and what are the other forms that have been recorded? UFO

researchers describe them in terms of aliens and spacecraft, but that is only one theory. They are not visible to the naked eye and so might be a newly discovered phenomenon that has been present for a long time. If this is the case, then its presence offers a rich new source of information and insight into life and the world.

Because the evidence has been presented by amateurs in the context of the UFO debate, it has never been seriously examined by science. But the phenomenon appears to be quite real, and therefore any culturally induced hesitancy of this kind would seem to be inappropriate and irrelevant. The fact that the objects are observed in so many places and do not appear hard to tape suggests that they are rather common. Obviously, something like this is readily accessible to scientific study.

It is possible to speculate that something as complex as our atmosphere might harbor undiscovered life-forms, especially if they leave no spoor or other signs of their presence and are not visible to the naked eye, as would seem to be the case here.

It is not enough, though, to concentrate on only one level of the phenomenon. To identify what it is, it would seem that the whole array must be included, from the high-altitude cylinders to the web-like arrays to the middle- and low-level material.

If it is a single phenomenon, though, then what might it be? Surely no single creature would appear in so many different forms at the same time. There are, of course, plants with radically different male and female components and colony insects with many different forms. But there is something about this whole phenomenon that seems to fight the conclusion that it is, in any expected sense, a simple life-form of some kind.

It is not to be expected that alien life will be easily accessible to understanding. It may operate according to principles that are unknown to us and function according to logic that is difficult for us to see or anticipate.

We have enormous problems communicating even with terrestrial animals on their own terms. We understand only rudiments of the language of dogs and know little about how the world appears to them. Animals with complex languages, such as dolphins, offer us almost no access to their minds. Even more complex aliens may be expected to be correspondingly harder to understand.

Could we, then, be looking directly into the eyes of aliens when we look at this array of phenomena? On August 31, 1997, John Walker published a

fascinating series of speculations about this subject on the Internet.^[12] He hypothesizes that people report the bewildering variety of objects that they do “because they’re living, space-dwelling creatures.” He goes on to suggest that they might have originated as planetary organisms and thus congregate near planets and on them to carry out mating and reproduction, much as migratory turtles do on certain shorelines and islands. “Having evolved from originally planet-bound life, they need the environment of Earth (matter/gravitational field/etc.) to reproduce, just as toads and other amphibians must return to the water to bear their young.” He further suggests that the possible presence of aliens might be due to the fact that they are “passengers on rather than builders of the craft,” in the same sense that we use horses, and therefore that the aliens themselves may have no more idea of how their “craft” work than the average horseman does of the life that animates his mount.

Although these are only speculations, they do illustrate the wonderfully imaginative thinking that would potentially sweep science and society as we attempted to come to terms with the true weirdness of the UFO and close encounter phenomena.

But before we jump to conclusions about such matters, it would seem sensible to descend a little deeper into the labyrinth of UFOs—whether they exist, what powers them, and what sort of response humanity may already have mounted to their presence. To do this, we must go to the only part of space that we have even begun to colonize, the near-Earth orbital environment. There we will find one of the most interesting, controversial, and ignored mysteries of modern times.

Chapter Five

Never a Straight Answer

On September 15, 1991, just as the Mexican phenomenon was beginning, an array of unusual objects appeared on a videotape made aboard the space shuttle *Discovery* during mission STS-48. This video was recorded off the live public feed being broadcast from the shuttle by NASA Select TV by Donald Ratch on an ordinary VHS video recorder.

The videotape was made from output from a camera in the shuttle's payload bay between 20:30 and 20:45 GMT near the west coast of Australia. It shows approximately a dozen objects moving in different directions in the area of the orbiter. One of these objects, which has come to be called the "target," appears near the air horizon and is first observed moving in a path that follows the horizon. The objects suddenly stop, then an instant later there is a flash. Immediately, the objects move off at high speed on different trajectories. Two seconds later two streaks come up from below, moving through the area previously occupied by the "target." It has been hypothesized that the two streaks are pulses of energy from some sort of a beam weapon.^[13] Previously, that was only a hypothesis, but as will be seen, it has recently gained some surprising support. Shortly after the event, the shuttle camera pitches down, revealing that there are several more objects, one triangular in shape, moving below the orbiter.

There was considerable controversy about this tape. It was shown on national television and has appeared in UFO documentaries. Responding to congressional inquiries, NASA stated that "the objects seen are orbiter generated debris illuminated by the sun. The flicker of light is the result of firing of the attitude thrusters on the orbiter, and the abrupt motions of the particles result from the impact of gas jets from the thrusters."^[14]

Because this explanation was so easy to believe and the alternatives are so incredible, Kress's statement was accepted without question by the press and received little scientific criticism. The controversy was effectively ended. But, in fact, NASA's explanation does not appear to have been a correct one, and scientists who did not agree with it have presented a powerful case that it was wrong.

Professional analysis of this tape has come from two scientists, one a physicist, Dr. Jack Kasher,^[15] and the other an imaging specialist, Dr. Mark J. Carlotto of TASC, an advanced photo analysis group in Reading, Massachusetts.^[16] Dr. Kasher was a NASA consultant in 1991, and worked on the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) from 1972 until 1992 at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

Mr. Kress stated that the flash of light was the result of the firing of attitude adjustment jets on the shuttle. (The Orbital Maneuvering System/Reaction Control System [RCS] provides thrust for changes in the speed and attitude of the shuttle.) The orbiter has three groups of these thrusters—one group each in pods located on the left and right sides of the aft fuselage and another group in the nose—but at the time of the event, no such thruster firing was ordered by mission control. About two minutes after the event, however, mission control did order such a firing, to initiate a movement preparatory to a supply water dump.^[17] This maneuver took place fifteen minutes after the event.

According to NASA, the movement involved was six degrees, a change of angle that would have been easily observable on the tape, as the air horizon (the top of the canopy of Earth's air) and the ground horizon are both clearly visible, and so is a star. And yet there is not the slightest change in the shuttle's attitude in relation to the horizons or the star after the flash. Carlotto observes that, following the claimed thruster firing, "There is no significant change in the direction of M2" (his designation for the star). He continues, "Yet the apparent motion of all objects including the star must change if the attitude of the spacecraft was altered by the thruster." He concludes, "The lack of any change in attitude following the flash implies that the flash was not due to a thruster firing."^[18]

Given that mission control did not order such a maneuver, and the shuttle's position did not change, it seems impossible to dispute the contention that the flash was not caused by the firing of attitude adjustment jets. So that part of NASA's explanation is incorrect.

Speaking for NASA, Mr. Kress further claims that the change in the trajectories of the objects takes place because they are hit by gases from the thrusters. If this was the case, the "target" would have moved in an entirely different manner. For example, the firing of a thruster could not have caused the object to stop at all, let alone half a second *before* the flash that represented the supposed firing. Carlotto's analysis of the tape agrees with

my own observation. He states, “Prior to the flash...the object slows and seems to stop.”

NASA also claims that the objects were “ice particles,” which were small and close to the shuttle. But the aft bulkhead camera that took the pictures was focused on infinity when they were made. This is conclusively proved by the fact that the camera pans down to include a view of the shuttle’s open cargo bay door immediately after the sequence of events under discussion. At no time is there a break in recording, so the camera was not turned off and then returned to service at another focal setting. What happens as the camera pans down is that its focal system detects the nearby cargo bay door, and the focus is then seen to move off infinity to a closer setting, causing the cargo bay door to come into focus.

In addition, it appears from Dr. Carlotto’s analysis that the “target” object first appears and moves below the air horizon—in other words, it was coming up out of the air canopy, not moving on a trajectory near the orbiter as it must have been doing if it was an ice particle ejected from the shuttle itself. “A slight tail at the beginning of the track [of the “target”] suggests that the object may be moving up and out of the atmosphere.... Instead of changing abruptly as one would expect of a particle suddenly coming into sunlight, the brightness increases gradually over a one second period.”^[19] He contends that this is more consistent with a bright object coming out of a cloud layer within the atmosphere, or possibly a very large and distant object moving from shadow into daylight. However, Carlotto states in his paper that he cannot “speculate on what they might be.”^[20]

The combination of these observations and the fact that the camera was set on infinity when the “ice particles” were recorded suggests in the strongest terms that this part of NASA’s explanation is also wrong. In addition, Carlotto analyzed the appearance of ice particles that were released in the separation of the Apollo Command Module from the LEM/Saturn V third stage in an earlier Apollo mission. He found that all of these particles moved in the same trajectories, and that their light levels changed at a rate of seven cycles per second as they tumbled, in contrast to the half-a-cycle-per-second rate of the objects in the mission STS-48 video.

After his analysis, Dr. Kasher concluded, “Once the idea of ice particles has been discarded, there aren’t many options left.”

Let’s examine the sequence *as if* these objects are not ice particles but some unknown form of material. Here is the sequence of events: The dots of

light are moving in various different directions. They stop. A moment later, a flash occurs. After a further half-second pause, they begin to accelerate in directions that are different from the routes they were taking before the flash. The main object proceeds away from the area, accelerating at very high velocity. Then a fascinating, indeed disturbing, phenomenon becomes visible, when the two streaks of light come up from below, moving through the frame in approximately the same area just previously occupied by the most prominent piece of material.

Dr. Kasher says, "One possible explanation is that we were firing at them."

Could such a thing be true? If so, then it could mean that part of the defense system possesses technology far in advance of what is publicly known and is actively engaged in hostilities against whatever those dots of light represent. Conceivably, it might also mean, then, that the horrifying video referred to in Chapter Four of the alien apparently dying while under interrogation is real. If so, it would certainly be clear why the intelligence community and the military would be protecting this secret so obsessively.

If it is not a video of ice particles, then the following narrative would appear to explain it: A group of unknown objects are approaching the orbiter. They are targeted. But they detect the targeting process. They stop, presumably in order to determine the intended trajectory of some sort of incoming fire. A flash of light takes place, which must have revealed this information, because they then move off at high speed on new trajectories of their own. All of this takes place in fewer than two seconds. A second later, two pulses of light come up from below, moving through the area where the "target" object was previously maneuvering.

If this is a correct analysis of this tape, then it suggests that an attempt was made to destroy the target object or to warn it away from the shuttle by parties in possession of a sophisticated weapons system that has the ability to locate and fire at targets in near space.

Could such a weapon be possessed by the United States and actually have been in the area that the shuttle was passing through at the time this event took place?

The shuttle was on a course north of Australia and near its west coast. There is a large American installation at Pine Gap near Alice Springs in central Australia that the Australian government has told its citizens is a "research facility." When the incident took place, the shuttle was between twelve hundred and fifty and fifteen hundred miles northwest of Pine Gap.

The facility is managed by the supersecret U.S. National Reconnaissance Office, ostensibly a signals-acquisition organization loosely connected to the Air Force but reporting to the CIA. The installation is as well-known locally as Area 51 is in the United States, as the source of numerous strange flashes of light and UFO sightings. Some of this activity was videotaped at Alice Springs on November 26, 1996, and shows lights maneuvering in a manner inconsistent with aircraft.

Unfortunately, video of moving lights is hardly proof of anything, and the fact that they were taken near Pine Gap does not mean that they had anything to do with that facility. Rumors about Pine Gap are no more conclusive than rumors about Area 51.

However, Pine Gap is most certainly not a research facility. It is, in fact, America's largest satellite intelligence-gathering facility and is one of the largest ground satellite stations in the world. It collects data from a group of satellites manufactured by TRW Space Systems. Visible on the surface at Pine Gap are eight large radomes and about twenty other buildings. The guidance section, housed in a fifty-six-hundred-square-meter facility, is divided into a Station Keeping Section that controls satellites on geostationary orbit, a Signals Processing Section, and an Analysis Section.

The base is serviced by the U.S. Military Airlift Command, which schedules two C-141 Starlifter flights a week, transporting parts and supplies to the facility and probably hard data in the form of tapes or other media back to the United States. The facility is provided with high-frequency communications operating under the International call sign VL5TY and transmitting encrypted communications to Clark Field in the Philippines. KW-7 and KW-13 cryptographic machines are used for teletype and voice encryption to TRW facilities in Redondo Beach, California, reaching the Communications Vault in Building M-4. About half of the daily Pine Gap signals traffic is directed to CIA HQ in Langley, Virginia. The rest goes to the National Security Agency, the National Reconnaissance Office, and the Pentagon.

Whether Pine Gap was involved in the events that took place during shuttle mission STS-48 is unknown. The available hard evidence is on the shuttle videotape.

If the events depicted on that tape involve military action, then a targeting effort began to be made from the ground station sometime after the "target" moved above the horizon and began to approach the shuttle. This targeting

process would have relied on a high-intensity return from the target to enable final acquisition and aiming of the weapon. The pulse of light observed would thus have been designed to reflect against the objects, providing the ground-based targeting system with an accurate fix during the instant of reflection.

This would mean that the targeting system probably would be optically based, in other words, a telescopic system. So does a laser weapon targeted by an optical telescope exist in the American weapons inventory?

Actually, one does.

The Mid-Infrared Advanced Chemical Laser (MIRACL) is an antisatellite and antimissile laser defense system currently under test at the army's High Energy Laser Systems Test Facility at White Sands, New Mexico. This is a ground-based laser designed to emit pulses of light energy sufficiently powerful to destroy an incoming missile warhead or an orbiting satellite.

It is intended to be targeted by a telescopic system also under test called the SEALITE Beam Director. This consists of a large-aperture (1.8-meter) gimballed telescope and optics that are designed to point the MIRACL or other laser beam weapons onto a target. It works by optically locating its targets and then feeding their coordinates into the laser beam guidance system.

Colonel Philip Corso, a retired United States Army intelligence officer, in his controversial book *The Day After Roswell*, suggests that such a weapons system has been functional since 1974. He claims that a high-energy laser based system has been developed that can shoot down alien spacecraft.^[21]

On August 28, 1997, it was announced that the army was exploring the idea of testing MIRACL against a sixty-million-dollar air force satellite. An article that appeared in *The New York Times* on September 1, discussed the various political issues that have arisen connected with such a test, primarily whether it might trigger a continuation of the arms race, as other countries struggle to match America's growing ability to engage in near-space military action.^[22] On October 23, 1997, news reports suggested that the laser had malfunctioned and not blown up the satellite.^[23] Given the project's political sensitivity, however, and the level of security involved, there is no way to tell if this is true, or whether this is the only weapon we possess with these capabilities. The *Times* article also said, "The United States has no demonstrated way of shooting down satellites, though experts speculate that it may have secret ways that could work in an emergency."

Colonel Corso claims in his book that alien craft tried to disrupt our space program for years. “They had buzzed our capsules traveling through space, interfered with our transmissions, and pulsed us with EMP bursts.”^[24] Electromagnetic pulses are bursts of energy that can short out electronic components such as computer chips and guidance systems and would definitely be a serious threat to our spacecraft and satellites.

If this sort of hostility has actually been taking place, then the events recorded by the shuttle’s camera may make a very different sort of sense. It could be that the objects were positioning themselves to act against the shuttle or to threaten it in some way.

If so, then what the onboard camera recorded was the targeting, acquisition, and firing of a high-speed weapons system that, although it did not hit anything, did cause the objects to leave the area.

Unfortunately, there is no single piece of evidence that overwhelmingly confirms that we have a record, in this videotape, of military action that was triggered when these objects came too close to the *Discovery*. And even if that is the case, a substantial amount of further evidence would be necessary before we could be certain that the action involved our own military. If one alien force is here, why not another that is hostile to it?

If the objects had been identifiable as satellites, missiles, or spacecraft owned by a hostile human power, there would be no question but that this is a record of military action against them.

Beyond the bare facts, though, there is nothing more that can be concluded, except that NASA has come through this particular test with its usual flying colors: Never A Straight Answer has once again lived up to its nickname.

What if there is a secret war being fought against an alien presence? One thing is certain: It has to be the least visible war in history and the least dangerous to civilians. We certainly aren’t getting blown up, and no *Independence Day*—style invasion seems to be happening.

Not only that, the aliens display remarkable strategic innocence, even stupidity. The reason is that they must have sat passively by for at least fifty years while we painstakingly struggled toward a level of technology with which we could successfully oppose them. It is as if human armies were in the habit of waiting to attack until they were sure that their enemies could defend themselves.

If we are fighting, then the mere fact that we *can* fight means that the aliens are not hostile. If they were, they would have obviously attacked us

and won at least a generation ago. There aren't any reasons why hostile aliens would wait for us to catch up technologically before engaging in battle. But there are many that might motivate friendly but misunderstood ones to act in just this manner.

I would be astonished if the United States had gotten itself tangled up in some sort of a secret war with aliens. Even given the effectiveness of the national system of secrecy, it is hard to see how a multibillion-dollar effort like this could be completely concealed for generations.

But if aliens appeared during the early years of the Cold War, I wouldn't be at all surprised to find that the United States had greeted them with gunfire and took an essentially hostile stance, one that included the firing of an occasional warning shot.

Whatever rationale might have evolved to justify such a policy internally might be hard to sell to the public, for the simple reason that it is likely to be wrong. Otherwise, why haven't the "hostile aliens" blown us all to hell already?

If they are not hostile, then they would have three options. One would be to overpower us. Another would be to leave. The third would be to wait until we calmed down, while engaging in a slow program of acclimatization.

The United States, having made one of history's most spectacular mistakes—a mistake great enough to cause the public to demand an end to the whole system of secrecy behind which the policy was evolved—would have an overwhelming motive to continue hostilities, especially if they were what was preventing public interaction with the aliens and, along with it, the revelation of the mistake.

The visitors, seeing that it was not the people but the leaders who couldn't handle their presence, might well take their case directly to the ordinary citizen—thus showing up in our bedrooms in the middle of the night, as they appear to have done.

But before we descend too deeply into speculation, perhaps it makes some sense to take a look at the possible technology of the UFOs and see if their flight characteristics emerge out of the world of the imagination, or if they make any aeronautical sense. What are these things flying around in the sky? Can they really be spacecraft?

Surprisingly enough, these seemingly magical objects have already been carefully observed by scientists with outstanding credentials, with unexpected results.

Chapter Six

Hidden Hardware

The most extraordinary book ever written about UFOs was finished in 1974, but not published until 1995, after its author's death. Paul R. Hill's *Unconventional Flying Objects* takes an aeronautical engineer's look at the UFO, with startling results.^[25]

But why was it hidden, even by Dr. Hill himself, for so many years? I was not able to get an answer to this question, but it certainly suggests cover-up, especially because of the overwhelming importance of this book. We owe its publication to his daughter, Julie M. Hill, who found it among his effects. If it had been published in 1955 or 1965 or 1975, it would have caused a massive international sensation. But its publication in 1995, only after the doctor had died and the UFO question has been publicly declared moot, has hardly been noticed.

There is a fascinating book mentioned by Dr. Hill that examines the way science assimilates new and unexplained phenomena, called *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, by Dr. Thomas S. Kuhn. Kuhn explains that theories that supersede established beliefs enter science when tools and methodologies are devised that end any controversy about the data that inspired them. The scientific establishment resists the new information as long as it can. Often, it rejects the new ideas so completely that the case is closed and the matter is forgotten. But the data, in the end, always prevail. In this sense, the treatment of the UFO phenomenon has been typical of what happens when new data challenge current beliefs. Applying Kuhn's theories, it seems likely that the UFO phenomenon is about to be integrated into science despite what currently appears to be almost total rejection.

The degree to which science will reject knowledge at any given time is dependent on how remote it is from what science already accepts. As this whole field is extremely remote, to say the least, it isn't surprising that the abundant evidence—at least of strange flying objects—that has been accumulating for fifty years continues to be ignored.

On the other hand, even the most improbable evidence will be accepted if it confirms theory. For example, the “omega minus” particle became accepted

in physics even though there were only two events in two hundred thousand trials that indicated that it was real. By contrast, experiments, for example, in psychic transfer do not enter the area of accepted knowledge no matter how many successful trials take place.^[26]

When Galileo was one of the few people with a telescope, his theory that Earth and the planets orbited the sun was resisted to the point that the church, acting on the advice of some of the most qualified scientists and theologians of that era, almost arranged to have him burned at the stake as a heretic. But as the number of telescopes kept growing and observer after observer saw for himself or herself the truth of Galileo's claims, his theories were gradually adopted.

Like Galileo's data and other controversies of science such as the notion that meteors fall from the sky, the theory of gravity, and whether electricity and then radio actually existed, the UFO phenomenon will be recognized as soon as there are instruments deployed that can reliably acquire the relevant data. These instruments do not have to be invented. The video-recording equipment, high-speed cameras, telescopes, and other needed devices already exist. The key is that they be made use of by qualified scientists, so that a data stream can begin.

As compelling as the amateur video is, it is not a scientific data stream. In addition, the unpredictable appearance of UFOs makes it harder, but by no means impossible, for this phenomenon to be captured professionally. This is because UFO appearances seem to run in waves, and the deployment of sufficient resources during these periods would be likely eventually to bring results. In addition, the odd phenomena recorded by the Escamillas, Edwards, King, and Wilkie seem more general and persistent than ordinary UFO appearances and should thus also be more readily accessible to organized sky recording by atmospheric scientists.

Of course, there will be resistance to any effort to engage in data acquisition of this kind, emanating from the same kinds of sources that Kuhn identifies as being centers of resistance in the past: established authorities (whether civil or institutional to science) who have committed themselves to the idea that the phenomenon is nonsense.

People who have made a professional commitment to a certain theory are threatened when that theory is challenged. In the case of this phenomenon, both science and the press have so completely committed themselves to the idea that the whole area of study is without value that they can be expected to

continue to resist fiercely, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that a real mystery is present. If the history of science is any indication of what will happen now, there will be continued resistance to the funding of data acquisition, despite the fact that this would now seem to be outrageously irresponsible. If the process of assimilation of these data is being further deranged by some sort of a government cover-up, then the battle will be all the more fierce and difficult.

That such a cover-up exists is suggested by the fact that Hill did not publish his book during his lifetime. It is clear from statements he makes in it that it was always his plan to publish after his retirement. But instead, he seems to have been unable to do this, and the project had to wait until after his death. In his introduction, written in 1974, he commented that “at last, the UFO witness, long the butt of ridicule from all sides, had some of the heavy guns of science on his side for a change.” He made this statement because scientists such as atmospheric physicist Dr. James E. McDonald, Professor James Harder, Dr. J. Allen Hynek, and Dr. David Saunders were vociferously disagreeing with the Air Force’s then recently published Project Blue Book conclusion that the UFO phenomenon was not worth studying. Clearly, he thought that science was changing its position more than twenty years ago.

But this did not happen. In part, it was probably due to some sort of government action undertaken within the scientific community in defense of the Air Force and its Blue Book conclusions. Possibly, Dr. Hill’s own failure to publish his book came about as a result of action of this sort. Also, however, the failure of science to respond to the questions raised by such powerful and well-credentialed professionals as Dr. McDonald was due to its continued inability to acquire useful data. Worse, such data as had been acquired were ignored and even suppressed, and the officially sanctioned fictions promoted by Project Blue Book went unchallenged.

Dr. Hill was employed as an aeronautical scientist throughout his career, which began in 1936 with a professorship at the Polytechnic College of Engineering in Oakland. He was then assigned to the Langley Research Center, first under the National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics (NACA), and then under NASA when it formed. He was there from 1939 until 1970, retiring with an Exceptional Service Medal for Outstanding Scientific Leadership.

The reason he was interested in unidentified flying objects was that he had two sightings that suggested strongly to him that the phenomenon was real

and caused him to set out to understand what he had seen. On July 16, 1952, his first sighting took place. It was made during the 1952 UFO flap, arguably one of the most dramatic theatricals of this type that has ever occurred. Dr. Hill's sighting is mentioned in Major Edward Ruppelt's *Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*.^[27]

The Langley Research Center where Hill worked was in Hampton, Virginia, in the middle of an area full of defense installations and "almost surrounded by water." On July 16, 1952, two Pan Am pilots made local headlines by reporting a sighting from their plane over Hampton Roads. The moment he read the news, Hill was excited. He had already noticed the tendency of UFOs to reappear in a given area during a "flap." He reported that he thought, "This is the night. They may be back." He went to the area where the sighting had been reported in order to attempt an orderly gathering of data, something that cries out to be done today.

At 7:55 in the evening, he and a friend parked their car on the Hampton Roads waterfront and waited. At 8:00 a flight of UFOs came up over the southern horizon. They were moving in parallel, at an estimated speed of five hundred miles an hour "at what was learned later by triangulation to be 15,000 to 18,000 feet altitude." Hill described them as glowing amber and determined that they were spheres thirteen to twenty feet in diameter.

As an aeronautical engineer, he was in a position to make an entirely professional observation, which he proceeded to do. It seemed almost as if the craft were displaying themselves to Dr. Hill, as they came to a stop in the air directly over his head. He observed them to "jitter" slightly, a description that seems reminiscent of the motion observed in the object that was videotaped in Mexico City on August 6, 1997. They then leaped one ahead of the other faster than the eye could follow—something that was also recorded in the Fuentes video in July of 1991. Moving a little off the zenith, they began revolving in a horizontal circle "at a rate of at least once per second," then shifted their revolutions to the vertical.

Hill described himself as being "awe-stricken." As an aeronautical engineer, he knew the extraordinary flight capabilities that he was observing.

Soon a third sphere came from the same direction as the first two and joined them. As they crossed the lower Chesapeake Bay, a fourth sphere appeared, coming down the coast from the direction of Norfolk, Virginia. The objects disappeared to the south.

Dr. Hill followed up this observation by investigating whether anybody

else in the local area had observed it. He found that the Norfolk paper had reported the object that he had seen coming from that direction. It had been observed by a bus driver and his single passenger in Norfolk just a few minutes before it appeared at Hampton Roads. In addition, a ferryboat full of passengers waiting to go from Hampton Roads to Washington had seen the whole incident. The story was carried on the morning of July 17 by the *Newport News Daily Press*, with a detailed description from an Air Force captain and fighter pilot.

Dr. Hill investigated why local aircraft spotters had reported nothing. (In those early Cold War days, spotters were still employed all over the United States, as a backup to radar systems, to watch for enemy planes.) He got a list of them and visited them individually in their homes. They had all seen the UFOs. He reports, “The head spotter said that he had been instructed by the Richmond Filter Center, operated by the Air Force, to report aircraft, and no nonsense, and so he had said nothing.” It was from them that he obtained the data needed to triangulate the altitude.

He also reported the observation to his boss at NACA, who dismissed his story completely. His report to Air Force Intelligence resulted in a complaint that he should have called Tactical Air Command during the sighting so that they could have tried an intercept.

He then made an interesting comment, especially so in view of what appears to be on the mission STS-48 tape: “At the time, I already had a growing aversion to the Air Force’s attempted intercepts, but why discuss policy at the bottom of the totem pole?” This seems to indicate that he was aware of an Air Force intercept policy, with which he disagreed, and suggests that he had access to policy makers at a higher level than the local Air Force intelligence office. But he did not elaborate.

Through the 1950s, he continually updated his database of sightings, with the result that he began to be able to make determinations about the craft and how they might be powered.

In 1962, he had another sighting over Hampton Roads. It was a cloudy day, and he was in a car, with a broad view through the windshield of the southern part of Chesapeake Bay and the Roads. “Over the southern end of the Chesapeake Bay, I was surprised to see a fat aluminum or metallic colored ‘fuselage’ nearly the size of a small freighter, but shaped more like a dirigible, approaching from the rear.” It was about a thousand feet up and moving slowly. “It looked like a big, pointed-nose dirigible, but had not even

a tail surface as an appendage.” Dirigibles had by then ceased to be operated by the United States military, and the dirigible hangar at Langley was long since torn down. It was much longer than the Goodyear blimp and had no identifying marks.

Any question of its being a blimp then ended, as it began to accelerate “very rapidly and at the same time to emit a straw-yellow, or pale flame-colored wake or plume, short at first but growing in length as the speed increased.” Its angle of attack also rose to about five degrees with the horizontal. Hill calculated that its acceleration across the distance of five miles in four seconds, starting at a speed of one hundred miles per hour, gave it a speed at the point of disappearance into the cloud cover of eighty-nine hundred miles per hour. The g forces involved would have been one hundred times Earth’s gravity, easily enough to destroy any manmade device and kill all of its occupants. Despite the plume of energetic material being emitted, there was no sound.

After his 1952 sighting, Dr. Hill was forbidden by the director of NACA to do or say anything that might create an impression that NACA had any belief or interest in UFOs. The result of this was that he collected data unofficially for twenty-five years, becoming NASA’s backroom specialist on UFOs. It is interesting to note how early present government policy regarding this matter began. Even as it was officially keeping an open mind in the 1950s, one of the primary professional sources of confirming evidence was silenced.

Dr. Hill became a sort of clearinghouse for all UFO reports that reached NASA’s attention. He thus had access to many of the best cases of the era. As a result, he was able to observe films that were made by professionals in the 1950s and 1960s. Among these was a film shot in 1952 by a Navy chief photographer, Warrant Officer Delbert Newhouse, while vacationing in Tremonton, Utah.

With two thousand hours of flying time as an aerial photographer and twenty-one years in the navy, Newhouse is obviously classifiable as a photographic professional with a specialty in reconnaissance. Like Dr. Hill himself, Newhouse appears to have been given a remarkable opportunity to record the operation of UFOs during the summer of 1952.

He was driving down a highway when he noticed some unusual objects in the sky. Immediately aware that they were outside of his very extensive experience, he stopped the car and took out his movie camera. Using a 3-inch telephoto lens and color film, he obtained a good record of the phenomenon.

Because he realized the importance of what he was seeing, he adopted a professional stance. While the disks maneuvered in formation, he held the camera steady. When one left the group, he moved the camera ahead of the object, then let it fly through the frame so that he could get a record of its angular velocity.

Dr. Hill reported that he studied this film carefully, along with fighter pilots and other professionals. Nobody involved concluded that the films were of the usual suspects—aircraft, birds, or stars—or even marsh gas, a favorite debunking explanation at the time.^[28]

So they were judged to be genuine unknowns, photographed by a professional in 1952. They represented concrete evidence, obtained at a level of confidence consistent with scientific demands for professional-level data input. But why did we not conclude, in 1952, that UFOs were what these professionals thought they were: intelligently guided objects? It is hard to see how science ended up in the position of rejecting evidence like this, especially when the Cold War was causing the American military to engage in a frantic search for new weapons of all kinds—unless, of course, the evidence was classified in order to enable a search for the motive power of the craft to be undertaken outside of Soviet scrutiny.

This was an extremely serious issue at the time. In 1949, the USSR had detonated an atomic bomb. In 1953, both countries exploded hydrogen bombs. A top-secret 1953 RAND study, now declassified, showed that American airbases were vulnerable to Soviet long-range bombers.

The United States, Canada, and Britain had a joint flying saucer project called Project-Y, which had as its objective the production of a flying saucer-type aircraft. Dr. Hill worked on the precursor to this project, using his observations of UFO tilt-to-control maneuvers as the basis of designs that eventually became the AVRO Flying Platform. A tilt-to-control design rests on a column of energy—or, in the case of a flying platform, air. It sits level to hover, tilts forward to accelerate, tilts backward to stop, banks to turn, and descends by “falling-leaf” or wobbling motions.

So not only was professional-quality film in the system, it was being used as the springboard for aeronautical design considered important enough at the time to be highly classified. Even though there is little documentation suggesting that propulsion experiments were also undertaken, it is hard to see that this would not have been done. The greater likelihood is that such work was also classified and remains so. The only reason that the flying platform

studies were ever declassified is that they were not successful.

If—fantastically—the data really have been ignored just as the government claims, then we need to stop doing that, because we have at our disposal the capacity both to collect more and to evaluate it and can conceivably deduce how to engineer the propulsion system of the UFO from observation, if there is enough of it and it is properly documented.

Even though Hill did not duplicate the propulsion system, he made significant progress toward an understanding of the technology. He analyzed a number of cases where force-field effects were reported, such as people being affected by sunburns or other physical symptoms, cars stopped due to electrical failure, and, in one case, roof tiles being swept off a house. (A mysterious shutdown of a vehicle's electrical system and engine often seems to take place when a UFO is near.) Not only did he make it clear that the strange maneuvers of the UFOs made good physical sense if it was granted that they were operating within some sort of force field, he also came to the conclusion that this field must be what he called a “direct acceleration field.” Hill proposed that this type of engine would be far better at developing thrust than the heat engine that we have been using for two hundred years. He called it the field engine and suggested that, because of the way the objects repel all mass, not just electrically charged or magnetic objects, that this engine must generate a field that can cancel gravity.^[29]

Dr. Hill also addressed the matter of the plasma that seems to surround UFOs, stating that “there is really no secret as to what this illuminated sheath of ionized and excited air molecules is.” Through an analysis of its characteristics, he identified it as an air plasma. He went on to say that “the ion sheath also accounts for some daytime UFO characteristics such as a shimmering haze, nebulosity of the atmosphere or even smoke-like effects....” This description precisely fits the phenomena observed in some of the Mexican tapes made more than forty years later.

It would seem probable that this plasma is generated by the field engine, and therefore that a correct analysis of the plasma might lead closer to an understanding of the engine. Dr. Hill offered many observations on the possible origin of this plasma, concluding that it must be caused by the ionizing radiation of X-ray frequencies. This would certainly account for the deep burns experienced by the Mexican witnesses who were injured by the August 6 UFO.

Because of the aeronautical behavior of UFOs, Dr. Hill ruled out the

electromagnetic field as a power source. It is not a static field, but one that, as it spreads at ultra-high speed, cannot be concentrated enough to generate useful thrust in the atmosphere.

When he looked at static fields as possible power sources, he found that the motions of the UFOs were consistent with the presence of such a field around them, as anything using a static field will obey Newtonian dynamics when it comes near objects or engages in flight maneuvers.

There are three types of static-energy field that might conceivably hold something up: the magnetic field, the electric field, and the repulsive-force field. In his analysis of which type of field might be involved with the objects, Dr. Hill narrowed his search to the repulsive-force field.

This did not mean that he rejected the many reports of electrical effects, such as the blanking of radio reception and interference with auto ignitions, but rather that he did not believe that these effects were signatures of the primary field that was being used to hold the craft up.

There is a popular notion that the motive power of UFOs must be a magnetic field that opposes the magnetic field of Earth. This cannot be true, because Earth's magnetic field is parallel to the planet only at the equator. Because the so-called magnetic dip increases toward the poles, UFOs would have to maneuver at increasingly extreme angles as they left the area of the equator, and this is not seen to happen. In fact, by the time they reached the arctic circles, they would slide down the angle of Earth's magnetic field and hit the ground unless they greatly increased the power of their internal magnetic field. But this, in turn, would drive the object toward the pole, where it would eventually come to rest.

The question then is, can we determine what kind of force field might be capable of holding these objects up and enabling them to maneuver as freely as they are seen to do on the Mexican videotapes and films such as that made by Delbert Newhouse?

In 1967, Russian physicist Andrei Sakharov published a study suggesting that all of the general relativistic phenomena, including gravity and inertia, among others, could result from changes in the energy of the vacuum brought about by the presence of matter.^[30] This went significantly beyond Einstein's own theory that inertia must be accounted for as a reaction to the gravity of distant galaxies, and raised an implication that, if inertia was actually dependent on the quantum-fluctuation of energy within the vacuum, then it might be accessible to engineering. For example, the vacuum could be mined

for virtually limitless energy, and inertia could be exploited by the very kind of field-effect engine that Dr. Hall had proposed that UFOs were using.

Despite this, it is still difficult to imagine how even a field-effect engine could generate speeds faster than light. If it couldn't, then it would take millennia to traverse interstellar distances.

Lately, there has been a popular notion that a “warp” drive would solve this problem by bending space until any two points were, in effect, joined. Then interstellar travel would be instantaneous. In 1994, physicist Miguel Alcubierre showed in a delightful and elegant paper that one way inertia could be engineered was by expanding space behind a vessel and shrinking it ahead, effectively moving the ship faster than light.^[31] But a recent study suggests that the amount of energy necessary to sustain such a warp is about ten billion times the energy locked up in all the visible mass in the universe.^[32] According to *The New Scientist* of July 26, 1997, Alcubierre commented, “I’m not really surprised. I always thought the amount of energy needed would be ridiculous.” So it would seem that alien fans who assume that the visitors must be hopping around in warp ships might need to find another assumption.

Or will they? In 1941 it was conclusively proved that man could never reach the moon because it would take a million tons of fuel to send a one-pound payload that far. But nobody considered the idea of a multistage rocket that would send only a small part of its total mass to the destination.

Einstein’s general theory of relativity doesn’t prohibit faster-than-light movement. What it prohibits is acceleration across the speed of light. If a particle starts out faster than light, it doesn’t violate the theory. One way around the barrier would be to move through a higher dimension where it doesn’t exist. This possibility, suggested by a branch of physics called string theory, would work by gaining access to higher dimensions, which are compressed inside particles, and using them as a sort of shortcut. But these extra dimensions—there are ten of them—are more than a billion billion times smaller than a proton, and “inflating” them will also take a great deal of energy.

This would be another means of manipulating the vacuum, which, despite the problems outlined by Pfennig and Ford, may still be a key to ultrarapid movement over long distances.

Perhaps one of those phenomena might involve the ability to move through what is popularly called a wormhole, a structure that links two distant points

in space, if it could be kept open long enough. To do this, we must learn to find, store, and manipulate exotic matter that has some very weird properties indeed.

These are almost unimaginably exotic possibilities. And maybe they *don't* work and therefore nobody is moving faster than light. This might mean that the visitors have come here slowly—and the probability that this is true has been the reason that skeptics have, for years, maintained that they could not be here at all. But the mathematics of interstellar travel at even a small fraction of the speed of light do not actually support the skeptical arguments. On the contrary, if there are any interstellar civilizations in the galaxy at all, it is logical to expect that they have already arrived here.^[33] However, if they do not have the ability to travel faster than light, then it is also probable that their journey has been one-way but that they retain an ability to communicate with their home planet using some version of quantum communications that are at present in the experimental phase here.^[34] Such communications would be based on the fact that particles that are said to be in a state of quantum entanglement both respond simultaneously to changes in either one.^[35] Right now, we have been able to observe this phenomenon in particles as far as seven miles apart,^[36] and there is no theoretical reason why this instantaneous “spooky action at a distance” as Einstein called it, would be in any way changed by physical distance. So if visitors have come here slowly, they may well also have carried communications devices containing half of many billions of entangled pairs, and therefore continue to enjoy rich instantaneous communication with home even though it might take quite a long time for a physical journey to be made.

During the time they have journeyed, they will have been victims of time dilation: On the ship, only a few years will have passed, but their home world will have gotten thousands of years older. If their civilization has fallen, maybe they are more deeply alone than we can possibly imagine, and perhaps this accounts for the profound sadness that close encounter witnesses so often report.

There could be other methods of transferring a species across interstellar space that would work even if “classical” speeds are all that can be achieved—speeds in the low millions of miles per hour, for example. In the late 1950s, Dr. John Von Neumann, one of the pioneers of modern computer science, and called by the press “the smartest man in the world,” postulated that there could be created something that has come to be known as the Von

Neumann Machine.^[37] Such a machine would be capable of duplicating the species that created it, traveling the universe until it found a suitable planet.

So even if there is to be no “warp drive,” and even if interstellar travel is extremely slow, not only is it possible that somebody is here, but they might be in close touch with home despite the vast physical distances involved.

Even though the United States government appears to have possessed ample evidence that UFOs were real as far back as 1952, over the 1960s and 1970s it went out of the UFO business completely—at least, as far as the public was concerned. The Project Blue Book committee, chaired by Dr. Brian O’Brian and including Dr. Carl Sagan, declared that the UFO phenomenon did not threaten national security and that the committee could find “no UFO case which represented technological or scientific advances outside of a terrestrial framework.” This was based on an assumption that interstellar travel was just too unlikely, an assumption that appears not to be all that supportable.

In retrospect, it is fair to ask if the committee’s statement was a lie, given the fact that it should have had access to the Newhouse film and should have been aware of Dr. Hill’s work. He was well-known throughout the space sciences community as NASA’s “UFO clearinghouse” by the time the report was published. And yet there is no evidence that he was even consulted. Given his credentials and the records and film he had available, his testimony alone would have been enough to compel the committee to come to an opposite conclusion.

Despite all this, the intelligence community and the Air Force continue to maintain that there is nothing wrong and aggressively to engage in the denial of UFO reports. In 1997, the CIA announced that it had used UFO stories as a cover for early flights of the U-2 spy plane,^[38] but this still doesn’t explain Dr. Hill’s observations or the films he refers to. If UFOs are secret aircraft, then it means that as far back as 1962 we were in possession of vessels that could accelerate from a speed of one hundred to eighty-nine hundred miles an hour in four seconds.

This would mean that a part of humankind has technology so extraordinary that the rest of us are virtually a different, lesser species, confined to an overcrowded, dying planet while the others traverse the heavens like gods.

Frankly, it seems much more likely that UFOs have a nonhuman origin, if only because the technology they displayed back in the 1950s could have been used to bring the Cold War to a quick end, had either side had access to

it, and this did not happen. What did happen—and what is happening—is indistinguishable from what would happen if aliens were not only here but also actively enforcing the secrecy that surrounds them.

As Dr. Hill's book makes clear, the government apparently did have evidence made by professionals that UFOs were real. It even invested in flying platform research that its own creator claims was inspired by observations of them, and at the time this research was highly classified. Whether the aliens—if that's what they are—and the government are hostile to one another, they agree on one thing: Both sides want the public to remain ignorant at the present time.

Now, why would that be?

Over the next two sections of this book, the answer to that question will become clear.

Part Two

CLOSE ENCOUNTER

Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye ...
Assent, and you are sane;
Demur,—you're straightway dangerous
And handled with a chain.

—*Emily Dickinson,*
“Much Madness is Divinest Sense”

Chapter Seven

An Emergency Situation

The evidence that UFOs are flying around in our skies is so extensive that it is reasonable to consider that these unconventional objects are in some way real, and that many of them seem to be under intelligent control.

The immediate question, then, is what sort of intelligence is involved—alien, human, or something else—and what does it want with us?

All sorts of arguments can be made for one hypothesis or another about what the visitors are, but there is little hard evidence to support any of them. What there is consists of a few brief videos of apparent aliens, some of the most famous of which may be fakes.

Nevertheless, it would appear that this intelligence has deposited a most unusual message among us, one that involves a compelling, possibly urgent, mystery. Very often, something happens to witnesses during encounter that leaves a total and complete blank that has been called “missing time.” As somebody who has experienced it myself, I can attest to the fact that it is much more profound than simple forgetfulness. Missing time is different in the sense that you are left with a blankness, as if part of reality has been somehow removed. Memory can be lost, but I doubt if anybody who has experienced missing time would ever consider that this eerie inner absence is anything like normal forgetfulness.

Despite the barrier presented by missing time, an enormous number of people have claimed to have seen visitors and come back with some amazingly provocative memories. Just as waves of UFO sightings had been reported in the 1950s, in the 1960s people began reporting strange and intimate encounters with aliens. These reports have risen until, over the ten years since my own encounter and the publication of *Communion* in 1987, I have received nearly a quarter of a million letters claiming contact, with more than thirty thousand of them offering detailed descriptions of the encounters.

These letters present a completely new picture of the experience, one that has not yet been described by anybody, not the media, not UFO investigators, not the smattering of professionals who have the courage to deal with the subject.

There are three issues connected with these letters. The first is, do they originate in real experience? The second is, how, if at all, does some sort of filtering alter the memories? The third is the great mystery of close encounter, the fact that many witnesses report periods of time within their experiences that involve total amnesia. If we are ever going to understand this, we must bring light to that darkness.

Reading the letters and discovering their extreme strangeness, it became clear to me and my wife, Anne, that almost nothing is known about close encounter. Its complexity, its weirdness, and its amazing frequency suggested to us that we were literally looking at a message from another world that seemed to be relying on the witnesses themselves as its medium of communication.

Scientists tell us that we are dealing with dreams and hallucinations. The press agrees. The public, on the other hand, seems to suspect that the encounters are with aliens. Some behavioral scientists have theorized a perceptual level they call the “imaginal,” which is more substantial than ordinary imagination but less so than physical reality.^[39] But this work has never gone beyond the theoretical stage.

Unfortunately, the lack of authoritative answers has meant that hucksters and false experts have been exploiting public ignorance, and speculative cosmologies have emerged that not only treat the notion that aliens may be present as fact but even include detailed beliefs about where they are from and what they may be doing here. So powerful have these fantasies become that in March of 1997, a cult—most members aging and tired of waiting for “the landing”—committed mass suicide on behalf of their particular system of beliefs.

As we construct a picture of what people are actually reporting, certain things will become clear. First, this is the strangest thing that has ever happened. Second, compared to past descriptions of encounters with fairies, angels, sylphs, and so on, the modern experience is vastly more bizarre. Most of its imagery is, in fact, stunningly new. We are thus faced with the same problem that Montezuma’s observers confronted when they were unable to communicate the real meaning of Cortez’s attack to him until it was too late.

Having been able to examine so many thousands of narratives, I am in a position to construct a general picture of what people actually say about their encounters, which is almost totally different from the picture that has been built up in the press.

Not only that, the natural memory presented in the letters is mostly different from the narratives that emerge out of hypnosis. Even though there is a curious symmetry to the natural recall, it is not the sort of easily understood narrative of abduction and torment that the hypnosis-derived stories suggest.

The one thing that I wish I could do and cannot is to apply statistical analysis to the testimony. There has never been a large-scale study done of the authors of these narratives. It may even be that some of the letters that I quote are hoaxes. But because every letter quoted represents many others that are similar, at least in overall structure if not in detailed content, this remains a representative sample as I could derive without professional support.

What is it actually like to have one of these encounters? From personal experience, I can tell you that there is little in life with more impact. It has been ten years since my first adult encounter, and I still remember it as vividly as if it was still happening. I think about it, remember the sounds, the look of it, the feelings that I had. How many dreams do I remember from ten years ago? None. My dreams have been forgotten, but that encounter is like a memory of meeting the president or being in a plane crash: It has come to rest in my mind as an extremely intense, entirely real experience. Understand, I am not by this claiming that it *was* real, only that it felt real then and it still does.

But what *happens*? What are the visitors like and how do they act? Moreover, if they are really independent entities of some kind, then what are their motives, and is it safe or dangerous to be exposed to them? And where are they from—another planet, another reality, or somewhere in the secret interior of ourselves? Can we ever identify them, or is it that we simply do not have the tools and the language to accomplish this?

One thing is certain: To properly address the issue of what is happening to people, we must abandon beliefs and embrace questions. The first belief to put aside is that close encounter, as we undergo it now, is a continuation of past experience of the unexplained. The fact is that the letters reveal something that is far more elaborate than what has been reported in the past. In this sense, they are like the reports of crop circles. Even though the first description of one dates from 1687, appearing in a woodcut from Hertfordshire, England, titled “The Mowing Devil,” the crop circles of the past were trivial affairs compared to the extraordinary complexity of what appears today. And lest it be assumed that crop circles have been explained,

they have not. Of course there are fakes. They're created every year, but even the best of them are distinguishable from the real anomalies.^[40] The fakes are made with rollers, and the crops show evidence of mechanical crushing and bending. The mysterious ones—in general also the more complex and beautiful—are made in some unknown manner. The crop stems are bent, but not by pressure, because no breakage takes place. Even the gray film that coats growing stalks remains undisturbed, something that would be impossible if any conventional means of bending them was used. This does not prove that aliens are responsible. The use of unknown means suggests unknown origin but does not prove it.

The original descriptions of close encounter are, in a sense, as distinctive as genuinely mysterious crop circles. Even more telling, the arresting image of the large-headed alien with the huge black eyes that now appears throughout our culture was not present until recently. Although there exist a few suggestions in Sumerian and prehistoric Israeli art, and possibly from some cave paintings in Africa, this image was not part of the culture in any really large-scale way before the last few decades, or our art would be full of it.^[41]

The close encounter experience, which has been the subject of a great deal of hysterical speculation and misguided reportage, is surrounded by false information. The first inaccuracy to address is that witnesses report seeing the same thing again and again, suggesting that some sort of organized scientific study of human beings by aliens is taking place. Witnesses do not report the same thing again and again, not even as a response to the lurid imagery that fills videos, books, and television shows.

And yet, dismissing the reports as hallucination doesn't work either. Multiple-witness contacts, which have hitherto been considered extremely rare, are actually commonplace and as such are, quite simply, indistinguishable from descriptions of real events.

It is obvious why the materials sciences have not studied the UFO phenomenon: Until now, there has been no material to study. But it is less clear why the behavioral sciences have not more carefully considered the condition of witnesses. Probably, the reason is that most behavioral scientists assume that the commonly publicized abduction scenario is the beginning and end of the story—and thus that there is no story.

The *Chicago Tribune*, on April 23, 1997, published an article that amounts to a compendium of the commonly held assumptions.^[42] According to the

Tribune article, people who report these experiences are usually disturbed and looking into their past to understand why they feel that way. But the reality is different. Many of my correspondents describe events that have just happened to them, and few describe any mental disturbance beyond the fact that they are very naturally confused, curious, and sometimes frightened by what has happened.

That they are normal people is borne out by a number of studies of the broader spectrum of witnesses, none of which were referenced by the *Tribune*. Nor were all of these studies conducted by researchers sympathetic to the witnesses' claims. For example, in the November 1993 issue of the *Journal of American Psychology*, Nicholas Spanos reports on a study of close encounter witnesses. The study showed that such people are "neither psychologically disturbed nor especially fond of fashioning elaborate fantasies."^[43] He theorizes that many of the encounters occurred during dreams that were mistakenly recalled as actual events, and others involved nightmares associated with sleep paralysis. To an extent this is probably true, but it does not explain the many encounters that start while the witness is wide awake, or the multiple-witness cases.

The *Tribune* article goes on to explain that "hypnosis is invariably the preferred method" in dealing therapeutically with these disturbances, with the result that false memories are elicited. But most witnesses never get near a hypnotist, and in any case, it isn't at all clear that hypnosis is without value as a tool in memory recovery. In the hands of a skilled professional, it can obviously be useful. Unfortunately, close encounter witnesses who are subjected to it are often working with investigators who hypnotize them again and again until their story agrees with an accepted scenario, and do become victims of the misuse of the technique.

We will build our image of close encounter out of the natural memories of people who have had continuous recall of their experiences from the time they happened. Recovered memory and recall generated under hypnosis form a small part of the close encounter narrative actually available and will not be used here at all.

The *Tribune* article goes on to say that the typical abduction story "adheres to a script" involving the humiliation of the witness and featuring a ritual strapping to a table, followed by strange medical experiments and sexual intrusions.

Even if this sort of script were commonplace, which it is not, why would

the UFO stories take such a frightening turn? Interviewed for the article, University of Washington psychologist Elizabeth Loftus suggested that “you get more attention these days if you tell a story with sex in it.” This implies that witnesses are seeking publicity or notice of some kind. In reality, witnesses are so desperate that their anonymity be preserved that it takes requests to about ten people to find one who will allow his or her story to be told publicly—then, for the most part, only if anonymity is strictly preserved. They have good reason for this reticence, too. I know of only a few witnesses whose names have appeared publicly who have not suffered tremendously as a result. Even a brief appearance on the radio or television can lead to a ruined life.

So the picture presented in the *Tribune* of the close encounter witness as a disturbed individual seeking attention, who has been further damaged by hypnosis, would not appear to reflect the vast majority of actual people reporting this experience. That it adheres to a script is deeply believed by some UFO groups. In the Mutual UFO Network’s Information Center in Seguin, Texas, there is an illustration—engraved as if in stone and looking like an Egyptian frieze—of what is now believed to be the typical abduction experience. The human victim is carried by coldly robotic aliens into a UFO, placed on a table, and subjected to horrendous and inexplicable medical procedures.

But we get only a smattering of letters that describe this. The reason that it came to be assumed that this was the whole of the close encounter experience is that it was heavily publicized and is easy to understand: Alien scientists are studying us and exploiting us. They’re cold and uncaring, emotionless, ruthless, and cruel. In other words, they are the enemy, the *other*—not so very different from the cold, often mechanistic imagery generated about outsiders by tribal cultures.

But if this scenario was not true, why would researchers who are making a sincere effort to understand what is going on assert that it represents fact? It is too easy to assume that they are simply incompetent or conspiring to create a false impression. Knowing many of them as well as I do, I feel quite certain that they are entirely sincere, and I would not doubt that there is something useful to be understood from this story. Later, one of the most compelling of the implant cases will turn out to be involved with the very sort of sexual assault that they claim is happening.

And if our close encounters are indeed with aliens, wouldn’t they have an

obvious motive for obtaining sexual and genetic material? If we found creatures on another planet, these are among the first things we would want for study. Additionally, we might very well breed animals from that planet for scientific reasons. Whether or not we would do the same with intelligent species we found there would depend on our approach to the ethical issues.

What appears, swimming up like some shadowy creature of the dark unconscious ocean, is very bizarre, but also—in an odd way—very logical. To enter the world of these narratives is to discover what appears to be the working of a nonhuman mind, or of a part of the human mind so hidden that it has never before gained a voice.

Individually, the stories are incredible. But taken together, they are beyond the incredible. Whether it comes from deep within us or from out among the stars, we are most certainly dealing with a communication from another world. Again and again, the letters present one consistency: The witness is challenged, often with devastating power, to look at self and life in a new way. The challenge cannot be ignored, because to do so is to surrender oneself to a descent into total psychological and spiritual chaos.

This, then, is the threat and promise of the close encounter experience, as recounted by thousands and thousands of witnesses: whether it is to be welcomed, borne, or fought, it must be faced. We must wake up and stop being passive to it. In doing this, we must also face its central mystery: What happens during missing time?

In *Communion*, I theorized that it may be what the force of evolution looks like when it applies itself to a conscious mind. I would suggest that this is probably the best of my many notions about the visitors, especially because it refers only to their effect in our world, a question we can usefully address no matter whether “they” are aliens or not.

Where are they from? Until we can begin to see the real magnitude of that question and cope with its complexity, it is probably better that we don't have any biological remains to lead us to the certitude that they are from another world.

What, after all, might one mean by the term “another world”? Obviously, that could mean another planet upon which has evolved a species with an ability to reach here. But it could also mean another *sort* of world altogether, one that swims in the ocean of our being, or one that contains us in the same sense that the universe contains its stars. It could mean something extraordinary about us as well, after all, could “another world.”

Whatever it means, there is one thing about it that we *can* examine and, if we keep our wits about us, even understand. That is the message that has appeared among us and within us, in the form of all these letters from all these people, each of whom bears a tiny part of the whole enormous document. It is in decoding this message that we will probably find the first true answers about the motives of the visitors and get our first real hints of their true nature.

But it isn't simply a matter of collating letters and extracting "the facts." There really aren't any facts of that sort to be had, not yet. What is available is a sort of tool, one that can teach us how it feels to grapple with missing time and to cope with experiences that unfold on a larger-than-ordinary mental scale.

As we journey through this wild country, we will find again and again that the message points not toward the alien but toward the human: Who are we, who would react as we have to this strange intrusion into our lives and souls, at once hiding from it and displaying ourselves to it like testing adolescents?

If it is possible to find out, it would seem that it must begin with a careful examination of testaments like these.

Chapter Eight

The Journey Begins

It is the wee hours of the morning, and all is quiet. Softly, swiftly, a shadow comes, passing above the houses, moving less quickly now, coming closer and closer yet, stopping, hovering in the night sky above one certain house, blotting out the stars. A sleeper sighs, stirs. Briefly, light shines down on the house. A dog grumbles, the sleeper begins to dream.

And then, eyes fly open, the sleeper sits up, astonishment bringing a cry that is instantly stifled—

The mystery begins: Is the sleeper seeing figures of dream, or real, flesh-and-blood creatures... or perhaps something so strange that we are going to have a hard time even finding words to describe it? Hard, but because of those hundreds of thousands of people who have already tried, no longer impossible. We can weave their descriptions together to create a tapestry, shimmering with strange colors, suggestive of new meanings—a tapestry of language about things that we have not thus far named... at least not in any way that seems deeply true.

The visitors approach in many different ways. Often, it's studied and careful, especially when groups of people have their encounters together. But equally often, there is total, stunning surprise.

"I went to bed late and I reckon my head had been on the pillow for less than thirty seconds, when, for want of a better word, it exploded." Thus begins a testament that exemplifies one of the most characteristic manifestations of the close encounter experience: the overwhelming, devastating, and total assault on the deepest sense of being and worth.

Although the established picture of the experience is that it usually wakes people up and is therefore explainable as sleep disturbance, that is very far from true. Equally often, it starts when they are wide awake: "The next thing I remember is the breath being knocked out of me as I somehow went through the windshield of the car."

Even testimony as incredible as this is not all that uncommon. Incidents while driving usually happen on the highway rather than city streets, and the witness ends up unharmed but in possession of some extremely bizarre

memories. Sometimes, when the encounter ends, the car is found to be miles from where it was when the experience started. Other times, it appears as if no time has passed at all.

Encounters often involve more than one witness and are indistinguishable from real experiences in their structure—although not their content. It was from such encounters, starting in the early 1970s, that the modern image of the alien with the long thin face and huge black eyes emerged.

One day in 1984, two friends were traveling together when "my car was completely immersed in light inside and my hair felt like it was standing up on my arms and head. Even my complete body seemed quickened now at this moment I know something is going on and the light seemed to be centered in behind us. As I started looking over at Fred, I noticed in the rear view mirror an image.

"There sitting in the back seat was this white beautiful creature with very bony thin arms, legs and rib cage, long skinny arms with very long fingers twiddling them while slightly turning its head looking us over. Its eyes were very large and tear drop shaped, its nose and mouth area were small. Eyes were very black, chin was prominent almost like the lower jaw of an ant. I knew instantly this creature was highly intelligent.^[44]

The two witnesses stared at each other in amazement, and then they had a period of missing time. They have discussed the matter often over the years, but without coming to any understanding of what happened to them. It is possible, of course, to dismiss their experience as a seizure-related hallucination that was communicated from one party to the other by suggestion, but this seems disingenuous, in the sense that it amounts to rejecting it simply because it is too strange to accept.

At the same time, the question begs to be asked: What *did* happen in that car—if anything? As I said earlier, I have not personally investigated all of these letters, and it's perfectly possible that hoaxes are involved. The problem is, as will be seen, they're *all* this strange—or stranger. Surely a hoax would unfold along more accepted lines, involving perhaps a vivid tale of being taken aboard a UFO and treated to the sort of interaction described in conventional abduction literature. After all, isn't the hoaxer's objective to be believed?

Who is going to believe a story like this, though? Two men are riding in a car that, after a bath of light from above, ends up with an edgy, finger-twiddling alien sitting in the back seat? Perhaps the story should at least be

entertained, if only because it contains so many elements that are hardly present in the published literature but are commonplace to the actual reports. For example, the alien seems to have come in right through the roof of the car. Just as it is not unusual for people to find themselves flying through windshields, roofs, and solid walls, it is also quite ordinary for the aliens themselves to pass through solid objects and to appear and disappear at will.

How such reports relate to reality is not known, but there is some interesting research (to be discussed in Chapter Twelve) that opens up the possibility that we may one day be able to differentiate between memories of actual, physical events and memories that a witness only thinks are real.

Encounters often involve groups of witnesses, and when they do, they often begin with the appearance of a UFO. Soon after, one or more of the people who saw it have a close encounter. However, it is extremely rare that the close encounter feels "normal." Witnesses begin to drift mentally; they seem to become almost hypnotized; they experience the sensation of static electricity tickling their skin, they have allergic reactions. But if these symptoms are seizure-related, then why would two people become seized at the same time, and why don't the cars involved get wrecked? And what about the imagery? In 1984, the particularly arresting alien image that was reported above was not yet commonplace. The letter does not say if either man had a preexisting awareness of it.

But it was around, certainly, in 1984. However, some of the most vivid alien imagery comes from long before the form had acquired a place in the culture. A typical example is this description of something that happened when this witness was five, back in 1954:

“Something came through the wall that looked like a man, but it was not human. Whatever it was, it had substance and was solid matter. It bent forward until its face, if one can call it a face, was only about two feet from mine. The most dominant physical feature of this thing was its long, thin nose and it had arms and legs that were thin as broomsticks.”

If this was just a child's fantasy, then why aren't there descriptions of images like this from earlier eras? Did this form of fantasy just begin? In fact, this sort of imagery doesn't start to be remarked on in the psychological literature until the 1970s, when the mental health community was just starting to grapple with the alien encounter experience.

The experience develops in many different ways, and many do not involve the alien image at all. Hundreds of witnesses report, for example, that they

see balls of light that seem to have conscious direction. They are a commonplace of the experience that links it to other visitation imagery. In many cultures, they are associated with the souls of the dead, and it will be seen later that there is something about the close encounter experience that is deeply involved with death and the dead.

Another initiating event involves the blow to the body. “As I lay on the bed sleeping, I was suddenly awakened by some kind of force which hit me right in the center of my chest.”

Sometimes this seems to shock the witness into a wider view of reality, not unlike a Zen slap. One Zen practitioner, after reading *Communion*, said to me, “fifteen seconds with the visitors, fifteen years of meditation.” I would not entirely agree, but certainly this is a blow that sends the mind off on a long, long journey into places where mystery, dream, and truth mix in a maddening but potentially fruitful brew of questions.

Sometimes the shock of the approach is even more impressive than the Zen slap: “They were dressed like 1920s thugs, and came into the bedroom with old fashioned Tommy Guns, aiming at me and blazing away. I felt the pellets bounce off my torso, and for several days I had pains in the chest.... They seem to delve into nascent fears, test a person, and then return with all kinds of amazing compensations.”

So in part—and perhaps great part—this communication would appear to be about us. It starts with a stunning surprise, then builds from there upon the wreckage of shattered beliefs. What it seems to be about, on this level, is the destruction of the witness’s faith in his or her assumptions about reality. One witness’s head explodes, another goes blasting out through a windshield, a third is slammed in the chest, a fourth gets attacked with machine guns. In other words, the message is: wake up, the world is not as you thought.

But the delivery of this message does not end the experience. Far from it. At this point things get really strange and really provocative, because this is when the witness usually ends up facing the mystery of missing time.

Hypnosis has been used to try to access it, but so far this effort has suffered from the total lack of reference points. Given that there is absolutely no basic memory to provide a foundation, there is no way to tell if the recovered memories are real. To explore the issue further, it is necessary to add more dimension to the approach phase of the experience, because this is where many of the richest and most detailed material comes from. Here is an example:

“Directly in the middle of the yard was a large metal saucer-like vehicle. The vehicle was much smaller than I might have guessed.

“As long as I felt like an observer, I was content to watch this peculiar drama unfold. There were four or five small kids walking out of the ship onto the lawn. I can remember thinking that this was absolutely an amazing stunt that these individuals were pulling off.

“These kids were much smaller than I was and were no threat to me. I would estimate that they were probably the size of a five or six year old. They were wearing body hugging dull silver/gray suits that seemed to cover them completely from head to toe.

“Why did their parents allow them out so late? These type of thoughts were the prevailing ones in my mind at the time.

“The tiny occupants walked across the lawn heading toward the end of the driveway. They walked down the driveway and stood directly in front of me, but fifteen feet or so down from my window. I found it humorous that they would not be able to climb up to my window.

“As soon as I had presented this thought, I noticed two of them take something from nowhere and let the item unfold before them. I quickly saw that it was a ladder of some sort. I perceived it to be a rope ladder with metal hooks on the ends. I became completely amused at the simplicity of the tools which a seemingly advanced group of beings were forced to use to enter my domain. For sure this was an elaborate hoax.

“I heard the metal ends of the ladder as they gripped tightly on the window sill directly in front of my face. I saw them with my own two eyes right in front of my nose. My heart started racing as fear began to consume me. The tiny kids were about to climb up to my window, but why?

“I saw the fingers of the first to reach my window as they reached up to pull themselves up by the ledge. These were *not* people fingers. There were only four of them and they were a different color. They seemed to have a bulbous look to them.

“It was when the head started to peep up over the ledge directly two inches in front of my face that I lost it. The head was donning no helmet. It was completely hairless with wrinkles like frown marks across the brow line. The color was that of a dead person, kind of ashen. It was about to pull itself up to where we would be eye to eye when I became so terrified that I was no longer able to witness this scenario any longer. I flew out of the room screaming.”

Usually, when people are awake during the approach, they feel a sense of menace and they flee or, if they can't, they struggle. Although I am trying to base this discussion on letters that are representative of the whole, I would like at this point to turn to one that is unique, because if it is true, the insight it offers is so valuable. I have met this woman, a teacher and a grandmother, a gentle and straightforward person. She told this extraordinary story, I believe, just as she remembered it.

“In 1976 I was vacuuming my living room floor at about noon. Suddenly I felt quite ill and thought I was going to vomit, so I sat down on the couch to see if the sick feeling would subside. I then saw that I was not alone; there were three strange little people standing alongside the couch, just looking at me. I froze with fear, as I had never seen anything like them before, not even in the movies.

“Two of them were short and fat, about four to four and a half feet tall, with broad faces and enormous black eyes, but with only a hint of where a nose or mouth might have been, almost like a pencil drawing. They had wispy bits of brown hair at the back of their heads, and they didn't have blue suits on like the ones you described in *Communion*; instead, they were wearing brown shrouds. These, I knew instinctively, were the workers. The other was female, thin and about five feet tall. She wore a black shroud and had black wispy hair at the back of her head. Her face was very elongated, with huge, dark, piercing eyes, and once again just a hint of where a nose or mouth would have been.

“The tall thin one started to speak to me with her mind, and told me I was to go with them. I answered with my own mind that I wouldn't go. Somehow, telepathic communication seemed perfectly normal at the time, and I felt quite comfortable communicating that way. This doesn't mean that I wasn't frightened—I was beside myself with fear.”

As her mind came under the control of whatever was affecting her, she naturally experienced extreme terror. She describes herself as literally crawling toward the front door in her effort to escape. There she saw a vision of her husband. Gratefully, she embraced him, only to be dragged back. At that point her resistance broke and she gave up trying to escape.

From that moment on, there is no memory, not for hours. When her husband finally did arrive home, she could hardly believe that it was really him. He had been at work all day. It seemed that they had drawn an illusion of the most powerful figure she knew out of her mind and broken her will by

showing her that they could overcome it.

Nothing has enabled her to recall one second of what happened after she was overpowered. She lost about four hours of memory, which seem to be completely inaccessible to recovery.

For the most part, the structure of the ordinary doesn't depart until missing time begins. In many cases, there are substantial numbers of witnesses, often whole families, involved together in the encounter. These encounters, especially when they start during the day when people are awake, are remembered in great detail. It is from the ultrahigh-level strangeness of this detail that my own suspicion that we are dealing with an alien presence comes.

"At about nine P.M., what I thought was a large car with bright headlights rolled down our gravel driveway." The witness looked outside but saw no car and so dismissed the incident—for the moment.

"We slept until about seven A.M., and when I was back at the kitchen sink after breakfast, I looked out the window to see a woman in a red windbreaker jacket enter the stables. She was wearing white pants and was holding a long stick in her hand.

"Then I saw a man jump off the pumphouse nearby. He was small, with brown hair, and seemed to bounce in a way that had no relation to gravity.

"Next, I left to do some marketing, and when I returned, my husband walked up to me and said, 'There are people in the trees! We've been trying to talk to them but they won't answer.'

"I looked and saw that whoever was up there had constructed some sort of platform.

"We went upstairs to look out of the bedroom window. I said to my daughter, 'Do you see what I see?' She said, 'Yes, Mom, there's two of them. What's that thing coming out of that one's head?'

"There was some kind of beautiful beaded antenna sticking out of the left side of the head of one of the beings. One of them looked slightly oriental, and the other seemed more Caucasian, but smaller and with a brown mustache. One of them had on a remarkable piece of jewelry—it was a band striped in different metals of all colors: silver, gold, platinum, green, red, purple and black.

"Since they continued to ignore us, we went downstairs and outside again. I let out our Rottweiler dog. This caused a commotion, and I saw ten or twelve pairs of legs, all wearing white pants, scamper away up the hill. I let

go of the dog and as I approached the house, I saw a woman who was the same type of being you describe in your books. She was dressed in a kelly green jumpsuit and was too long and thin to be a human being. She was climbing among the branches of one of the trees next to the house. I said, 'You have no right to do that without my permission, you should have asked.'

"Back upstairs, at the bathroom window this time, I was able to get a closer look at her. She was unlike anything I've ever seen. Her arms were long and unbelievably thin, and she had some sort of faun colored soft leather flight cap on, of the type that pilots used to wear in the old-fashioned cockpits of early planes. She was also wearing goggles from the same era, although the lenses were shaped to fit her large, slanted eyes. She had soft looking gloves on, and her jumpsuit was closed down the front with some sort of metal fasteners. She looked like she was engaged in filming, and aimed a black video-type gadget directly at me."

The witness's husband came in, but the being had disappeared. The witness then ran downstairs and outside, still attempting to get a better look at what was going on.

"Then I saw the most incredible being that I have ever seen. It was almost indescribable—a silver crystal, moving mass of energy and light with the exact same striped band of jewelry that I described before on it."

Later, the family felt unsure about this whole experience. It had been vivid at the time, but the high level of strangeness made it hard later for all of them to be certain that it had been real.

There was, however, a sequel that suggested that it was all too real. "I got very ill after that visit. The following week, I lost thirteen pounds. I needed two liters of intravenous fluids the following Friday. My littlest one has ground her teeth down, and pulls the covers entirely over her head every night, but we're more calm about it than we used to be."

So what happened to this family? A careful reading of the letter suggests that there was a great deal of missing time involved, and that whatever happened was so stressful that this woman and her youngest child were left with severe trauma.

Again, missing time. So the question must be asked, is there any way to raise that curtain, because if we don't raise it, we aren't going to be able to understand what is happening to us.

And so the visitors approach, the sleeper awakens, and we learn a little bit

more. But the gate to the unknown is barely open. We can't yet guess what happens during missing time.

Or is that really true? With care and cunning, we might be able to shine more light than one might think into that particular dark corner.

Chapter Nine

Beyond the Dark

The moment that human eyes meet visitor eyes, the world usually goes black. But not always. Not all of the assaults—if they are assaults—are successful, and a great deal can be learned from the people who actually fight off the visitors. This next series of cases offer a startling sense of continuity as each witness in succession penetrates the darkness a little more deeply. This first case is an example of the witness fighting off what was apparently an attempt at abduction. The witness had lain back on his bed only to feel, as mentioned in the last chapter, a sensation of his head literally exploding. He then went deeper into the experience, much deeper.

“After a few seconds, the vacuum of what used to be me was filled by an entity of total evil. This evil thing so terrified me that I wanted to start fighting, until I became conscious that I was unable to move my limbs. Although I was screaming to my wife to wake up and help me, my lips barely moved and the screams were whispers.”

This state is characteristic of people in hypnagogic trances, a harmless, mildly seized condition that can occur during the process of waking up. In this state, the subject will often observe the “old hag,” a hideous apparition that generally sits on the victim’s chest. The condition persists until the individual manages to break the paralysis, whereupon the whole thing evaporates like a mirage.

In this case, the initial sensation passed as soon as the witness could move and scream—a situation characteristic of a waking dream and in no way remarkable. But what happened next is totally beyond explanation:

“We had decided to turn off the light and get some sleep, when we both said, ‘What’s that noise?’

“We heard a low humming sound. A quick glance at the clock told us it was two-thirty A.M. The humming soon changed to a deep, fast throbbing. It didn’t sound like a plane, or a truck, or a car. It got louder and stopped right over the roof of the house, directly above our bedroom. There were no flashing or glowing lights, just a very loud thumping sound right over our double bed. We froze; what on earth could be on the roof?”

By now both of them were wide awake and terrified. When I met and talked to this witness, the fear that he had experienced on that night was still in his eyes, despite the years that had passed.

The next thing he knew, “Something invisible grabbed me by the chest and started pulling with amazing force. I felt like my soul, not my body, was being pulled up vertically towards the loud throbbing noise, and although I thought it would be futile, I screamed for Sally to lie on top of me. When she did this, the sensation of pulling eased a little.”

What was being drawn out of this man? I have discussed it with him, and his impression was that the part of him that could think and feel was being separated from the physical part of his body.

“I was screaming and struggling against an invisible ‘beam,’ with my wife lying on top of me in my bed at two-thirty A.M. What a sight we would have presented if someone had walked in! It might have seemed funny later, if it hadn’t gone on for another two hours.”

A shocking situation and indicative of just how persistent the close encounter experience can be when somebody has been singled out. But, in this case, his will proved stronger than whatever was hovering over his house, and the attempt eventually ended. Toward dawn, the couple fell asleep. Subsequently, this very successful man has gone on to pursue his career without any further nocturnal interruptions.

It is not enough to say that some wandering demon came along and tried to rip this man’s soul from his body. As Monsignor Balducci points out in the appendix, we can do better than to approach the situation with assumptions like this that do not actually fit the situation. It isn’t even obvious that this was a negative experience, because the witness became deeply aware of himself in a new and richly rewarding way. He was plunged directly into the mystery of the soul by his experience.

Amazingly, even though this man stayed in his bed, the story can still be continued. This is because this precise thing has happened to other people at other times, and not everybody has managed to fight off the attack. So our original objective of recovering something from the missing time experience still has not been defeated. Although the two had never met, this next witness faced exactly the same experience as the first one, except that his struggle against the pulling force did not succeed.

“Then I was pulled up and through the ceiling head first. I reappeared in a large room with a high ceiling, or no ceiling. I seemed to be floating. I looked

up and saw long ropes hanging down, lots of them. They were thick, maybe six inches around, and that part of the room was full of them. I was close to one rope and it looked like it had white cocoon webbing all over it.”

It is not entirely unexpected that this extraordinary memory from the dark would be so strange. In all probability, one of the reasons that we cannot remember missing time is that what happens there is so bizarre and so hard to understand that it simply does not come together in a coherent enough way to form a memory. The witness is left with a feeling that something important has taken place, but he or she cannot form it into a structure. But not in the case of this witness. As the situation developed, his memory continued its penetration of the unknown:

“I saw someone across from me, about twenty feet away. He was white and misty and I knew it was a male. Someone was observing me close up on my left, out of my field of vision. As I became aware of this, I said, ‘May I look at you?’ The answer was, ‘No, you may not.’ It was female and also firm, as if talking to a child. I obeyed as if I was indeed a child.

“I started to turn to my left to see who it was that had spoken to me. As I did, I started to panic and screamed bloody murder. I saw the top of a bald white head, and holes for eyes.”

With the advent of fear, the light of memory is extinguished. The next thing the witness knew, he was back in his bed and wondering whether he had been dreaming. But he at least took us to the portals of the cave, even though we have as yet shone no light on what happens in its depths.

This next event also took place in the predawn hours, which is the time when sleep is deepest, when most deaths and births occur, when our dreams are at their most powerful, and when most close encounters take place.

“I was trying to go back to sleep when I really felt strange. It was like I was being forced to close my eyes and fall asleep. I knew I was not dreaming. I fought this feeling and struggled with all my strength. It was horrible. I felt I was being taken, not my body but my soul.

“I remember that ‘they’ won and I couldn’t fight anymore.”

Like the woman who had been caught while vacuuming and the one who had been captured by the beings coming up the ladder, the next part of this interaction was a total blank. But this time a new wrinkle was added. So far, all of the encounters we have been discussing were one-time-only affairs. This case, though, proved to be different.

The witness reports that her experience began recurring almost daily. She

continues, “I then became unexpectedly pregnant.” The experiences became less during the pregnancy, but when she brought her daughter home, “the first night was extremely restless. I sensed evil, as if something was trying to get my baby. I stayed up all night praying by her side. I did wake up to see a short shadow at our doorway.”

During her work as a nurse, she had a powerful conversation with a dying patient during which he suggested to her that she not fight. She decided to follow his advice, with fascinating results.

“Since he told me not to fight it, I don’t. It’s not so scary anymore. I let it happen. Just once, I remember hearing a female voice say, ‘Come here.’ It sounded either very old, or computerized.”

“I have grown spiritually so much in the last eight months. I now call the experiences a spiritual awakening.”

Unfortunately, she does not tell us what precisely is creating her newfound spirituality, but she has indeed taken us a little deeper.

There have been whole books written about missing time and what it may contain. But most of these stories have either come from long series of hypnosis sessions or have been derived from channeled information. So this information seems even harder to take at face value than the more conventional memories and dreams reported here. And beyond these letters, there just isn’t much that has been recovered in natural memory from those concealed hours.

So if we cannot penetrate missing time any more deeply without resorting to unproved memory recovery techniques, is it necessary to stop?

Actually, no. There is an indirect approach. As simple as it is, it also offers the twin advantages of continuing to stay with natural memory and to support it whenever possible with more than one witness.

It would seem that there are people who don’t have missing time at all.

“My greatest experience was when I was walking home late one night from a friend’s house. As I was crossing a bridge, I noticed something strange. I was glowing; everything was glowing. What looked like a glowing fishnet crossed the entire sky. To my left, upriver and above at about two thousand feet, something that looked like a giant manta ray without a tail sat motionless.”

The witness sat on the bank of the river where he had been walking and watched the phenomenon from early morning until noon. Nobody else saw it—maybe because he was having a waking dream. But, then again, it was a

very strange one:

“What appeared to be a blue glowing ball with sparks flying off of it hovered at eye level just barely out of my left field of vision, keeping a distance of about a hundred feet from me.”

Encounter has a lot of peripheral effects, among them dark blue, fast-moving figures such as the woman vacuuming her living room saw, and, as this witness describes, glowing balls of light. They are generally seen in peripheral vision, and people often mention that they are somewhere to the left.

This suggests a neurological component involved in these observations that may well in some way be seizure-related. This is not to say that the observations are hallucinations but rather that the brain of the witness is being affected and his or her perceptual abilities interfered with.

After making the observations reported above, this witness proceeded on his way and found himself observing numerous people in the area who, as he puts it, “didn’t seem to fit into the local culture.” More disconcerting, they seemed to know him.

Behind this seemingly simple comment there lies an almost totally unremarked but not too surprising aspect of the experience: the implication that there is a human connection of some kind, that not all of the visitors are strange alien forms, but rather that people are often involved.

It is when people are involved on the “other” side of an encounter that missing time seems most often not to occur at all.

Even though some extremely strange aliens have been reported, any discussion of the forms the visitors take must begin with the human. From the beginning, there has existed this undercurrent of human involvement.

If there are aliens here, then it obviously wouldn’t be impossible that they would be working with human beings. If so, then it is unfortunate that these people are also isolated behind a veil of secrecy.

In discussing the experience in terms of its human component, it is possible to go deeper than the mere fact that people are seen in the company of aliens. There’s more to it than that—much more. For example, there is this sort of story:

“Suddenly I felt something smooth rubbing my open right hand, and when I opened my eyes I was surprised to find that a hybrid child was holding my wrist with both hands and rubbing the top of his head with my own hand! He was looking right at me and grinning, and for some reason this tickled me; he

was so cute.

“There was also a normal little girl with dark brown, longish hair, wearing a dress with petticoats. She was about four, and was trying to pry open the fingers of my left hand. I asked the hybrid what he was doing and he telepathically said, ‘I’m chewing purple gum.’”

This charming anecdote did not lead to any great revelations, but it does take our concept of the experience a step farther away from the stories of alien scientists here engaging in some sort of an organized study of humankind. It would seem that the imagery connected with close encounter is light-years beyond this. Certainly it doesn’t fit our folklore in any meaningful way, beyond the fact that some of the visitors are small like elves and seem to possess the power of gods. But what they do—well, there isn’t any folklore about fairies who chew purple gum.

But how does this relate to the quest to crack the shell of missing time? To answer that question, we can go a little deeper, into the stories that explore the connection between close encounter and death. By looking at these stories—which are generally absent from current close encounter literature—we may begin to see why the fears that surround the hidden hours are so incredibly deep.

“About twelve years ago, when I was six to eight months pregnant, I woke up and saw this white form standing beside my bed. It showed me something and I said, ‘Hey, that’s my kid!’ I then felt a kick in my stomach. For a long time after that, I thought something was going to happen to the child I was carrying. As it turned out, during my ninth month, my five year old son was killed in an accident a few yards away from the house. I gave birth three weeks later.”

The close encounter experience has been terribly trivialized by the attempt to force it to appear comprehensible and believable. It is not possible to understand, and it is awfully hard to believe—or even to theorize about what *might* be happening.

But stories connecting it with birth and death abound among the letters we have received, so it makes sense to follow them, as far as they may take us from present ideas about the form of the contact experience. By doing this, we come to the borderland between life and death—and what are probably some of the most powerful experiences human beings have ever had.

In the 1960s, a mother and her small daughter were driving by night across the Mojave Desert. “About two hours outside of Flagstaff, my daughter

began to shout that she saw a spaceship in the sky.” She looked in the direction that the child was pointing and observed “first two and then three lights moving rapidly in the sky, turning at ninety degree angles, pulsating and disappearing.” She then pulled off the road onto a dirt track. They were sitting there watching the sky “when suddenly in front of the car there appeared a huge, dark and glowing object with a partial row of lights in the middle.”

She then remembered her breath being knocked out of her and being pulled through the windshield of the car. She found herself in a large room with some very strange-looking people. She was filled “with a feeling of love or long-lost family; it was almost like a homecoming.” Her daughter was not there, though, and this concerned her.

“They kept saying ‘Welcome, welcome!’ in my mind, and laughing. They then told me some strange things about human origins and alien intervention on the planet earth at various times in the past and future.

“There was a whole generation of beings that came to earth in the far past and took up earth life. They were from the family of Ranm. They said that was why the old god names were as they were on earth: Rama, Brahma, Ra, Abraham, etc., in order that humans might remember. But so much confusion set in that the names became designations for gods or heroes, and that wasn’t the point at all.”

Once reassured that her daughter would be fine, she “was strangely soothed and unusually happy.” But not for long. She was told that they were in some way sorry about her daughter, but they did not say why. When she was returned to the car, “my daughter was in the back seat crying.” She told her horrified mother never to touch her again. “I tried to calm her and ask her what had happened to her and she shouted, ‘I’ll never tell you! Leave me alone!’“

They then drove to California, the mother hoping that the incident would be forgotten. But, as is characteristic of close encounter witnesses, she soon began having difficulty sleeping and became ill. “My hair began to fall out and my mouth started bleeding, and I was exhausted.”

Her daughter was suffering, too, and one night woke up screaming. When her mother calmed her, “she said very factually, ‘Mommy, I’m going to die. The spaceship people told me so. They said little bugs had gotten into my body and they were sorry, but there was nothing they could do since I’m a little girl.’“

She then began to display symptoms as well: high fever and swollen joints. She was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, but there was also concern that she had been exposed to radiation. They returned to their home in Texas, where “she was diagnosed with a very rare cancer of the nervous system, neuroblastoma, and it had metastasized, and she had just a few months to live.

“Before her death, she began to draw extraordinary pictures that were more advanced than a ten year old’s, even though she was only three and a half.”

This terrible event continued to have unusual repercussions in the grieving mother’s life. After the child’s funeral, a friend called from a city two hundred miles away, saying that she had to drive to see her immediately. “Without glasses, she was legally blind, but she drove anyway. She said that two nights before at about two-twenty A.M., she was awakened by a noise and then saw her roof begin to dissolve. In the air above, she saw a type of spaceship. Two tall beings appeared, and in between them was my daughter. They told her they hadn’t been able to get through to me because of something, but to let me know that my daughter was okay and was with them! She thought at that point that she’d gone completely insane. I broke my promise to myself to never tell the story of the experience in the desert and told her what had happened that night, and we both cried and cried.”

If this was the only such story, it would be powerful enough, but the fact is that it is one among a whole class of the stories that emerge when there is no missing time.

Another such event took place a few years ago in the southeastern United States. A husband and wife were sitting in their downstairs living room at about ten o’clock at night, with the elderly family dog sleeping on the floor between them. Even though he had already been walked, he suddenly became nervous and began to pace. The wife decided to take him out again.

As she opened the front door, two things happened simultaneously. The first was that an orange ball of light swept away from the house, disappearing across a nearby line of trees. The next second, the couple’s ten-year-old son came running downstairs yelling excitedly that “little blue men” had brought his older brother into the bedroom, and the older boy had a message: tell his mom and dad that he was okay.

I was deeply moved when the man narrating this story to me over the telephone concluded it with the statement: “Mr. Strieber, our seventeen-year-old died in an auto accident last week, and we want to know if there’s any

way that this story might be true.”

I talked to him for a long time, trying to be supportive without making claims that could not be substantiated. I could not tell this man that aliens with the power over life and death had brought his son to him to relieve the agony of grief that he and his family were enduring. But I could say that there were others out there like them, whose lives had been lit in just the same way by the strange and powerful light of close encounter.

Does this suggest, though, that human beings come into this world with some sort of a life plan, and that whoever is behind the close encounters understands this level of reality and can actually see and even adjust such plans? If so, then if they ever come out into the open, we can expect our lives and our world to change in some extremely fundamental ways.

Among them would be confirmation that the soul exists and probably also that it can in some way be touched by science. In the past, as scientific understanding has increased, the borders of what is considered to be supernatural have been pushed farther and farther back. What was witchcraft in 1650 was science in 1750, and, if the soul exists, I suspect that the same process will eventually include it within the boundaries of the known. So our science may someday also include a technology of the soul, and the curtain between the worlds of the living and the dead will finally be raised.

Then there will be no more missing time. But we need not wait in order to continue to explore it, because we have not yet come to the end of the letters. There are other mysteries, tales of sexual encounter and journeys to other worlds, trips through time and meetings with some very remarkable creatures indeed, and the most amazing stories of all, those that come to us from childhood, when our eyes were too wide open for us not to see.

Chapter Ten

Innocence

Perhaps the reason memories from childhood are so rich is that our minds are more flexible when we are young and more capable of being open to what adults reject as impossible.

One witness wrote of a childhood adventure he'd had near Hamilton Air Force Base in California. "In a small gully we encountered a shimmering mirage effect that reflected the sides of the gully as mirrors reflect the sides of a magician's box. Going through the mirage, we found a large tunnel that led deep into the hill."

Once inside, this group of small boys with BB guns made an unusual discovery.

"The tunnel led into a landing area divided into four bays, equipped with a conventional bench at the back and a variety of metal parts hanging on the walls. We examined the benches, and then entered a large door that was fully four inches thick, approx. 12' high, and 7' wide. This size is the most important thing to recall.

"Entering the base proper, we were fully functional and free to go where we wanted, under no restrictions. A groove ran down the middle of the tunnel floor. This divided into four other grooves, one of which led to what seemed to be a landing bay."

They had extraordinary adventures, including seeing UFOs parked, what looked like a greenhouse, and an area containing alien babies. In the end, though, they began to suffer from a familiar problem.

"Finally, a box-like device moved out from behind the UFO, and my vision blurred and I got groggy.

"I noticed a weird, full-sized figure coming towards me like a robot with a red target painted on its chest. I found out later it is body armor. The target is designed to attract fire to the center of the armor, the safest spot. At this point I got really groggy.

"I came out of it surrounded by a circle of larger beings, heavier built, all staring at me every which way I turned. I panicked, and broke out of this ring to the tunnel where my other friends were. We tried to mount a counter-attack

to get our friend (who was left behind), but panicked and ran outside. At a loss about how to get our friend, we hollered for him to come out several times. He finally did, but in a badly shaken state.”

He had a vague memory of being told to “forget everything.” “I awoke at sunset, with my friends kicking me awake and, slowly, we went home exhausted and totally unaware of what had just happened.”

But he did not remain unaware. He made other visits to the base. “I also saw a conventionally furnished room, where aliens and humans were freely mixing with each other. They had human males working with them as ‘front men,’ so to speak.”

Other children have had unexpected fun with their encounters: “In many ways I was a ‘different’ sort of child; for one thing, I was nocturnal, which led to my falling asleep at school a lot. I often told my parents that small doctors visited me at night.”

This witness was often found standing on the doorstep of her apartment in the middle of the night, ringing the bell to get in. Once, at the age of four or five, she appeared there wearing only her underpants. Her pajamas were neatly folded on the foot of her bed.

But where did she go on those long-past nights?

The motif of schools and teachers is fairly common among childhood memories.

“We met in the garage at my grandfather’s house, and I would sit out there for hours talking with a tall, thin gray lady with a pointed chin who told me to call her Grandmother. Grandmother put me through a kind of schooling. She taught me to use my mind and senses for telepathic and other communication. She showed me pictures of the earth from space and little video pictures of what would happen to the earth when I was about fifty. She was a loving, patient teacher. Her skin felt like very soft leather, and she had a pleasant but cheesy smell. She quit coming when my mother objected to what I was learning.”

Later this witness touched on the possibility of recontact and is still considering doing it. She believes that close encounter witnesses are volunteers, that others “literally don’t see what we see,” that the visitors are “not emotional, and their loving approach is not an emotional love,” and that “they are here to help, as they define help.”

But what is meant by help is not what we might expect. Rather than giving us plans to build a starship, the message of the encounter experience seems to

be about us: Hidden behind the wall of missing time isn't some revelation concerning the aliens and their hardware but, rather, one that concerns us and our hidden—or forgotten—potentials.

One witness remembers two men from his childhood in the 1940s, who seemed perfectly normal, except for what they taught him, which was far from the usual sort of lesson.

“Milt asked if I'd like to learn how to fly. They would hold my trousers belt in back and we would run along and they'd let me go. I would go three to five feet, then I'd bite the sand. [This took place at meetings on a beach.] Then the other one would pick me up and send me back, all the time saying to me, 'Think no thoughts. That is important and necessary. Then float.' I could go twenty to thirty feet at times. It was great! I went at a rate of one to three miles an hour, I'd guess.”

He also saw the two men going in and out of the sea in what he describes as a capsule that looked to him like a silver Airstream trailer. Inside the capsule, he once saw a being that looked like one of the visitors, with a narrow face and huge black eyes. His imagery, as it dates from before the idea of the flying saucer had been introduced into the culture, reflects shapes and forms that were familiar in the 1940s, such as silver trailers.

Witnesses often report that they are told that our world is “a school,” and if we are coming into contact with vastly advanced aliens, it isn't unreasonable to consider that they might think of it in just this way.

“One of my first memories is of being in a classroom with other children. We were a select few. I was very happy to see my teacher, the lady on the cover of *Communion*. I loved her teaching. I was about age nine.

“My next clear memory is from age eleven. I remember being in her office. Her husband was also there. She had a radio on her desk that was playing my favorite kind of music. The three of us were dancing to this music.”

Like so many who seem to live altogether outside of the constraint of missing time, the witness quoted above has seen her encounter experience evolve over her whole life. She recalls an adult meeting with her old teacher. “I then found myself in a well-lit hallway facing an old friend. She was standing in the doorway to her office.” A moment later, she found herself back in bed. Then another lesson unfolded. “About twenty seconds later, I saw a small gray box in front of me. There was a hand over it, also gray. It was a clawed hand, and it held a silver wand. The top of the box was tapped once. This created a great wave of knowledge that went through me.

Physically, it felt like a slow-moving ocean wave. In that wave was knowledge of myself.”

Many witnesses describe a box. More than one has thought of it as Pandora’s box, and perhaps that is not too far wrong, given what seems to be inside.

Many families report encounters across the generations, and I have numerous letters from parents describing things happening to their children that are similar to what they remember from their own childhoods.

“My earliest memory was probably from before the age of four, when I clearly remember being taken from my bed and led to a clearing near the bluffs overlooking our local lake. Someone was holding my hand, and I was frightened when it was put into another child’s and I was told I was the one to complete the circle.

“As I did, the sky above us lit up so brightly that I was able to see all the children quite well. I realized that I didn’t know any of them. They weren’t neighborhood friends, but I felt a sense of connection, a family feeling, a sense of familiarity.”

Her further memories are unclear. She recalls a soothing male voice telling them what she describes as “very important things about our future and the reason we had all been summoned to that place.”

This is typical of the encounter experience: One is so often left with a sense that something tremendously important is happening, so rarely with any clear idea of what that is. In a sense, then, what we *can* say is that the experience creates powerful questions in people, questions that change minds, that open them and compel them to grow. It is thus a challenge of the deepest kind, probably viewed by the inner self as momentous. Depending on how widespread it is, it could conceivably be having a phenomenal hidden evolutionary effect on humankind—but how much greater that effect would be if we understood!

Another witness, now a state official, as a boy observed with his mother an incident of jets scrambling to intercept UFOs. His father was involved in the incident in an official capacity but would tell them little of what happened.

Afterward, though, the boy was deeply affected. Like another witness quoted in this chapter, and like me and many others, his experience was signaled by an increase in nocturnal activity.

“During this period, in the fifties, I began sleepwalking almost routinely.” Often his mother would catch him, sometimes outside in the street. But not

always. “I still remember these episodes to this day, and how the night felt, so vast.” All he recalled of any interaction were vague memories of shadowy figures in the house, and he never had any encounter memories that were more specific. Despite that, this story illustrates the profound changes that can take place in a person after something as simple as a sighting. Some deep part of him began trying to go somewhere. Was he trying to meet the visitors, or to run from them? He never got to the end of that particular journey, and perhaps the fact that he didn’t tells us a little more about what lies behind the curtain of missing time. If we have a soul, and the soul has a plan, then maybe we fear to see the blueprint. Perhaps looking at it would transform life’s fertile spontaneity into a rigid drama devoid of surprise—would, in short, rob us of our reason for living.

In this sense, then, we would prefer the blindness of missing time, because we do not want to wake up to knowledge that would so damage us.

And indeed, sleepwalking is such a common motif that it would almost seem to be a metaphor for the limited contact that is available to us or that we prefer. “When I was a small child, my parents found me on numerous occasions sleepwalking in our neighborhood. Once on a family camping trip, my father failed to lock the camper door.

Subsequently, he found me miles from our camper up on the mountain walking around in my nightgown. From then on, all doors were securely locked at night.”

Another thing that childhood encounters are associated with is unusual intelligence and what appear to be changes in intelligence.

A typical example: “My son started reading at one year of age and started first grade with a seventh grade reading level. He has an incredible obsession with astronomy, just like you said you did when you were younger.

“He told me that he has been having abduction-related dreams about ten or so in all. He’s described visitors appearing in the room and talking to him. He’s got a lot of fears, very much so, and in fact he’s slept with my wife and I quite a lot.

“Once we were waiting for darkness so we could use the telescope when he decided to talk to me about the nature of time, space and ‘aliens.’ He basically went into an unprompted lecture to us. Pulling out a pad of paper and a pen, he went on to draw a matrix showing where humans exist on the scale of living things, both intelligent and non-intelligent, and pointed out how far we are from the visitors’ level. He described abductions as an attempt

on the part of the visitors to accelerate the process of development, bringing us closer to their level. He said, ‘we are like babies in a baby carriage and the aliens are like a mother pushing us along. But they are pushing it very fast and we don’t have a safety strap holding us in.’

I knew nothing about this boy when I met him across a table at a book signing, but looking into his eyes was a startling, even electrifying, experience. He was shy, but those young eyes flashed with a brilliance that I often see in children who are close to this experience. I had the odd feeling that he somehow knew the secrets that we adults are struggling so hard to crack. It is possible for human beings, especially young ones, to know and understand more than they can put into words, and I am to this day haunted by the expression on his face. I was not surprised to get his father’s letter.

Much useful information can be obtained from children who are being properly supported in their experience, by parents who do not ask excessive questions, draw too much attention to their stories, try to impose religious beliefs on them, or deny them.

It’s difficult, because there is a tendency to want to explain things to kids, emerging naturally out of our desire to protect them, relieve their fears, and satisfy their curiosity.

Parents often find themselves dealing with this experience under the most difficult of circumstances. There are cases where the whole family is under the pressure of visitation, and there are symptoms of implants present as well. This is a dreadful situation to have to cope with alone, but such is the social ignorance and superstition surrounding close encounter that parents have no idea how to get help. Although it is difficult, an effort can be made to find a nonjudgmental caregiver if professional support is needed.

It is especially hard to cope with the experience when powerful and sensitive matters such as birth and death are involved, and this is very often the case. The close encounter experience unfolds at the points of greatest question that human life possesses: What is the meaning of a life? What happens when we die? What is a human being?

“We saw UFOs all the time,” writes one parent, describing events that happened in the 1970s, when her children were young. “My second son dreamed he was taken to a base for UFOs.”

They then had an incident occur at about eleven at night that unsettled the whole family. “I started to take a step [toward a window] when there was a brilliant flash of light. It lasted a very long time. Before I could move, my son

exploded out of his room at the top of the stairs and my daughter came pounding down the upstairs hallway. They were both demanding to know the same thing: ‘what was that?’

“This is what we discovered: we had lost upward of an hour of time. Where did it go?”

Later, this correspondent may have received an important clue, one that leads to the conclusion that the amnesia might come not only from the confusion and deep threat that lie behind missing time but also from the fact that what happens there is on a much larger scale than ordinary life—a scale that is so large that it is hard for the human mind even to sample it, let alone grasp its full meaning. Powerful feelings are engaged when somebody comes face to face with it, that sometimes lead the witness toward a painful sense of having been raped, but more often in the opposite direction, toward insights that encompass even the secrets of the future, and as such seem to be almost dangerous to remember.

In our attempt to unlock missing time, we have journeyed far from the factual matrix that should govern any book about hard evidence. But if we are to take a realistic look at what people are reporting, it is important to digress in this way. The shocking relationship between these stories and hard fact will be dealt with soon.

Even so, something occasionally happens in the hallucinatory world of close encounter that seems to draw us a little closer to the facts.

A witness who was attending a school function met somebody for the first time whom she felt strongly she had seen somewhere before. He felt the same way, but they couldn’t place each other.

As they lived in different towns, they kept up their new—or renewed—acquaintance by mail and over the phone. After the school year ended, they visited. “Suddenly I found myself asking if he believed in the visitors. ‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ was his response. The fear in his voice was chilling. Then images began streaming through my head. They were of him as a child, asleep on a couch in a house I had never seen. I was terrified, I couldn’t stop talking, the words just came out. I described the room he was in. Jacob said, ‘I hated that room because those ugly little children would come in and take me away!’ He was crying and I was shaking uncontrollably. This went on all night.” They eventually went to bed in separate rooms where my correspondent’s situation became even more shocking.

Believing that the event had ended, she closed her eyes. As soon as she did

so, she had an experience similar to the one frequently reported by others, with a being seeming to intrude into the darkness of her mind.

“I saw a tall, thin figure with huge inky black, liquid eyes. She (it seemed feminine) was bathed in a pale blue light. She reached a thin arm toward me.”

After her initial shock, she came to feel that this creature was not really hostile to her. It seemed then that her friend’s fear was somewhat misplaced, and she entered the fairly large group who feel that the visitors are in some way trying to help us. Whether this is true or not, they are certainly putting us under pressure, and pressure is often a very productive state. The next letter illustrates the sense of being educated and pressured at the same time that is characteristic of many stories:

“I may have been ten when I woke up to find myself sitting in a rectangular room. A blackboard was across the wall. There were only long benches to sit on. These benches were full. Maybe four benches contained forty kids, all the same age. Everyone was sitting with their spines stiff from terror! Then I saw why.

“An insect-like humanoid entered the room. He was the teacher. His skin was gray and ugly, with an oversized brain cavity. He seemed nude and was bent over, trying to keep his head up. I was terrified. I really went stiff when I saw it stop writing on the blackboard and turn to look directly at me. He seemed really angry, really hating me. (New student?) His face was weird: no mouth, a little nose and big eyes, not black or Asian. He had no hair anywhere. Also, he needed a walking stick to walk about.”

There is something at once terrifying and hilarious about this story, with its image of a fearsome alien hobbling about on a cane. But the thought of those children, literally “stiff” with terror, suggests a darker interpretation, that they are being placed under pressure so ferocious that we can hardly even bear to face it.

And yet we *are* facing it a little. Gradually, as we come to see that we can do this, no matter whether the close encounter experience represents a dialogue with aliens or a new kind of dialogue with ourselves, it is still filled with all sorts of valuable potentials.

This next witness is another person who had his childhood experiences in the 1930s and ‘40s, long before there was extensive alien imagery in the culture. As so often, his experience was intimately involved with the largest issues of life and death.

In 1935, he was suffering from pneumonia, at that time a dangerous and

often rapidly fatal disease. “One evening right at dark two beings came to the windows in an elongated envelope. They and their conveyance were like Northern Lights, and they asked me to go with them, and each took a hand. When they touched me it was like being lightly tickled, and very pleasurable. [This sensation is commonly described.] I couldn’t see them as being like us. The odd part was that you could see through them, but they were there and we talked without sound.”

The imagery described here accurately expresses the same sort of encounter that is reported today, with the difference that the choice of words such as “elongated envelope” for “flying saucer” are obviously from a time before today’s catchphrases were known. And now we would describe talking “without sound” as telepathy. But since we have no more idea how this is done than we do what a UFO is, maybe these earlier, more neutral descriptive phrases are actually more accurate. In any case, this experience evolved to a level that is rarely reached but seems close to the very core of encounter.

“They took me to a huge pavilion where pairs were waltzing. My impression was that the males were dressed in black with white trim. The females were dressed the opposite way. There was no ceiling, but crystals hung above and made music beyond comparison that sounded to me like wind chimes.”

He had three visits to this place, on the last of which he received a message. A female asked him why he was afraid of the dark, then told him “that both the light and the dark are my benefactors, and they would make them equal. She took a crystal and placed it in the palm of my left hand. For a second it resembled the Star of David, two triangles, then melted and ran between my fingers.”

So the witness is taught on his third trip something about the nature of the three forces: positive, negative, and equalizing, that Buckminster Fuller years later would describe as the building blocks of the universe.

We are dealing here with a communication about the most fundamental forces of nature—the positive and negative energies that dance together to create the friction on which reality itself depends. If it were not for this dance, repeated from the subatomic level to the moral, there would be no life, and life would be devoid of choices, and what now seems filled with purpose and meaning would be blind and empty and dead.

He had physical consequences that were oddly related to the metaphoric

ones. “In a few weeks it became apparent that my night vision had changed. My eyes would adjust to allow me sight when it was pitch black.”

He also became nocturnal, and whatever had taken an interest in him quickly began using that to its advantage. Late one night on a Boy Scout trip, when he was the only one left awake, he found himself watching undulating shafts of light that fascinated him. “The shafts of light began a strange movement, and there was my envelope, and something like an oval cylinder; it just seemed correct to go into it. In an instant there was the pavilion, but the ‘others’ were not dancing. They seemed to be conversing, but not with me, when a lady asked me to ‘step on the dais’ because I was their ‘conductor.’”

He asks, “What is the purpose of the ‘conductor?’ My being is as common as the earth.”

Perhaps that is exactly why he was so exalted in the fantastic world that conceals itself within the mind and soul and the dancing universe that embraces us.

Chapter Eleven

Worlds Beyond

It could be that scale is the essential problem with this communication. Our difficulty understanding it may be because it is being delivered in thoughts that are on a larger scale of time and meaning than we are used to. Since we can understand it at all, though, it would also seem that we can rise to it and close the gap that its presence suggests must exist between ourselves and the visitors.

Even given the small amount of decoding that can be attempted, it seems reasonably clear that this message has the coherence, subtlety, and grandeur that one would associate with the marvelously rich consciousness of somebody old and brilliant, but it also contains a logic so strange that an alien origin does seem possible. Again and again, the voice behind the letters speaks: The world is not what it seems, it is greater, stranger, more wonderful than you dare to see.

If the visitors are really aliens and are communicating with us in this way—not only using the sky as a theater but also using the mind—then wouldn't they have deposited information about their own world somewhere along the way? This would be such an efficient way of helping us to narrow the question of what they are, and thus work faster to close the gap that is keeping us apart, that it seems inevitable that the witness reports would abound with this sort of information. And they do.

“We went to a beautiful planet, (I think it was another planet) that was very hot. It was hard to breathe. I remember seeing a flower and wanting to pick it up. They said not to because it could harm me. We were on what seemed to be a mesa. It was filled with vegetation, but no insects and no animals were present. My friend remembers picking a fruit off of a nearby tree that resembled a pomegranate. The grays said we could eat the fruit, it wouldn't hurt us. We were told to scatter the seeds when we were done.”

This couple are deeply involved in the encounter experience, the man having had contact for nearly thirty years. On the occasion described above, they recall going on a three-day journey that ended with a return to Earth on what appeared to them to be a spaceship. Then they made a discovery that

will surprise nobody involved in this experience. “According to the clock we were only gone for a half hour of our time. How could that be?”

We are beginning to understand the physics of time, and in recent years it has become clear that movement through it is a theoretical possibility.^[45] But physical? Perhaps, but at present it seems that we could affect movement through time only “by manipulating matter and energy in the most extreme and fanciful manner.”^[46] But *something* happened to these people. Is it a shared fantasy or dream? if so, what caused it? Or did they actually physically go to another world over three days that were somehow compressed into half an hour?

Given how little we know about contact, it would be inappropriate to make a decision based on the logic of reality as we now understand it. What if the visitors are five hundred years in advance of us? We can’t imagine what they might be able to accomplish in terms of alteration of consciousness or even movement through time. Look at our world as it was five hundred years ago: No one had ridden in a car, flown, listened to a radio, or felt refrigeration. The world of five hundred years ago was almost unimaginably less capable than our own.

But who is to say that the visitors are only five hundred years ahead of us? What if they are billions of years in advance of us, if they have had consciousness since before earthly life even began?

What might they be? What might they have accomplished? The possibilities are breathtakingly limitless.

Whether journeys like the one just described actually happen or not, a desert-like landscape is so frequently mentioned in the letters that it is worth considering that it might be a real place. Often, the desert is red. But whether the visitors are the Martians of fiction and legend or not, it seems clear that they aren’t from the Mars that we see today. But it is also true that the planet once had flowing water, and there also exists a certain amount of evidence that simple life-forms might have existed there in the incredibly distant past.

Mars probably died about the time life on Earth began, and it just doesn’t seem possible that evolution to consciousness could have taken place during the early part of the solar system’s life, given the experience of Earth, where it has taken three and a half billion years for it to evolve.

Surely, also, if they had been here over all of time, we would have noticed them before this, and that simply has not happened. And yet the universe is a very strange place, and all of our understanding of the time it takes evolution

to unfold comes from a sample of just one planet.

Not only does the desert recur as a motif in the stories, cities are often seen, and there is in this material also a curious consistency.

“I was standing in the middle of a red plain. The ground beneath my feet was dust...like what I imagine moondust would be like. There were no rocks, no chunks of anything.

“I appeared to be in the middle of a street. There were large, tan buildings running up and down this street, in all sorts of strange configurations. They were not elaborate at all—just very angular. On the whole, they looked like Spanish missions, if those missions had been designed by Salvador Dali. They were made of some crenellated metallic material that on first glance looked like adobe.

“The sky above my head was white. Not bright white or cloudy white—it was more like the sky glowed, like it had some innate property of light.

“On the street were dozens of the ‘gray’ creatures. They appeared to be gliding back and forth up and down the street. They gave off this feeling that I was sort of distasteful to them. I felt big and dirty and ugly.”

The visions of the desert planet go on and on. Here is another:

“This dream involved a repeated scene from inside a low-flying vehicle, of a desert landscape below. There seemed little or no perspective, but speed was slow enough to allow a good view of an absolutely vegetationless desert landscape, of reddish brown color. I somehow associate a school with this desert location so old that our best efforts to measure its age would be totally inadequate.”

However, this is not the only image that is reported, and a distant planet perhaps in another age is not the only place that is described. People have had other experiences with time.

“We flew over this weird looking landscape. It looked like the trees turned into grass, we were going so fast. When we slowed down it was evening. Almost as though we had traveled an entire day. I looked down at this log house and saw this woman as she nervously waved to her husband and two children, who were heading away from the house in a buckboard being pulled by two horses. I looked at this lady who was wearing this old, worn and dusty dress with a dirty white apron around her waist. The next thing I remember, I’m standing on the ground near where she’s hanging up her laundry. The interesting thing is that like these visitors, I, too, am wearing a hood. I remember she looked around one of the sheets she was hanging up and

screamed.”

Not a particularly surprising reaction, certainly, as a pioneer wife confronts an unknown far greater than anything she could possibly have imagined. But her ordeal was not over yet.

“One of them said that this lady’s condition was worse than he thought, and she would have to leave with them if she was to live. Next thing I know, I’m looking down on this house and watching her husband and children as they come home. I can tell he’s calling for her. As I watch him head into the house, the children look up and see the vehicle we’re all sitting in, but by that time the husband is in a panic because he can’t find his wife. I don’t know what happened to this lady after I was dropped off.”

I made an effort to find out if any record of such an incident exists from the past. The problem is that the reader does not know where the incident occurred, and if there is a past record, it is lost in a newspaper archive or buried in a pioneer diary in a museum somewhere.

Another witness had an experience that may have been related to movement through time and also leads us to an exploration of yet another aspect of close encounter: the confrontation with the double.

“I was riding down a highway in my town when I looked across the median and there was someone waving rather frantically in the westbound part of the lanes. I took a left, deciding to see who it was.

“I pulled over into a Dairy Queen, and he took the second entrance in. We were driver side to driver side, headed in opposite directions. Then it hit me.

“The closer we came to each other, the bigger his smile and the brighter his eyes got. HE WAS ME! He just smiled, waved slowly, passed me by, and took off!”

He drove a very similar car as well. The witness never saw him again but is doubtless a haunted man.

There are many wrinkles to the time-travel theme. “I walked up to an old white, wood-frame house. A small boy about ten with blond hair came out to talk to me. I asked, ‘Where’s your mother?’ and he replied, ‘She’s gone right now.’ He went back into the house. It then dawned on me what had happened. I had gone back in time, to see myself as a child and to see my mother. It felt like I really had gone back in time, or anyway everything looked right.”

Does all of this mean that time is not the fixed, immutable reality that we assume, but that we can somehow free ourselves from it? If so, what an

amazing blessing that would be—and also, in a sense, what a tragedy.

If we could travel through time, we would lose something of our species' childhood, because we would come to know everything that was true about us and everything that was not. Huge areas of the past, now rich with mystery and wellsprings of cherished belief, would cease to be in question.

In a sense, every time we answer a question, the world gets a little smaller. A hundred years ago, radio was a breathtaking mystery, a spark dancing with promise. In this age, it's commonplace and not very interesting, as the leading edge of communications science is already beginning to explore quantum entanglement as a means of sending messages that would be able to travel unlimited distances instantaneously.

Another witness had a number of dramatic UFO sightings in the company of friends and family members, that evolved into a dream glimpse of another world and an unforgettably powerful message.

He and his mother were together at the time. "We saw what started out as a bright light that started to get bigger. We realized that it was coming closer. It stopped and did nothing but hover for a few minutes. Then the most beautiful 'spikes' shot out from it. Some were short and others were long." The spikes changed color from white to purple as the UFO rotated. They then heard and felt a hum and went out on their porch to observe more. "We didn't see a bright light. Instead, we saw a large black disk. As it flew over us, we saw what appeared to be lights, or perhaps windows, all along the outside of the craft." It then went away, and the two of them calmly reentered the house and retired for the night—the sort of inexplicable response that characterizes the experience.

He then began to have a dream "of somehow being told the world was about to end and I was one of the many who were chosen to go to another planet to survive.

"We were led to a cliff at dusk, and a big spaceship of some kind came down to rescue us. The next thing I remember is walking through the streets of this place with the other survivors. The buildings were small and square, one story stucco or clay. We were led to a building where two robot-type beings told us that the planet was where we'd be living and we would be the rulers, guided by them."

Reading this, I was once again struck by the consistency of so many of the letters about other worlds. Only a few mention tropical or temperate places. Most have the desert motif, and stucco or adobe buildings predominate to

such an extent that one wonders if people are reporting visions of a real place.

Along with the appearance of impossible and wonderful beings, time travel, meetings with the dead, and journeys to other worlds, warnings that our own is soon to end are a commonplace of the close encounter experience. There is many a witness waiting for the moment when the ships come in waves to collect the chosen and take them to some other world.

Warnings such as these, along with the plethora of seemingly impossible experiences that accompany them, do not necessarily signal a great change in the physical world. What they most certainly do signal—quite indisputably so, in fact—is a profound change in another world, one that is at once more durable and fragile than the physical—the world of the mind. And this is true whether the architects of the experience are aliens or not. In fact, if they are not aliens, then it is even more true.

In the high summer of the Roman Empire, during one of the most peaceful eras in history, the Roman world was filled with portents of doom and undercurrents that seemed to indicate that the whole meaning of the world, as it was then understood, was wrong. Millennial preachers scoured the empire proclaiming that the end was coming by fire and the wrath of an angry God.

Given that we are still waiting two thousand years later, it would appear that God is not as easily angered as was thought. But the classical world was certainly ending, soon to be engulfed in the tide of compassion and fervor that marked the rise of Christianity.

The reason the Romans felt doomed in the midst of plenty was that they could instinctively see that the imbalances inherent to their empire's structure would eventually destroy it.

It is this sort of an ending that we are facing now, and I think that our mind, at a very deep level, understands that the modern economy, dependent as it is on perpetual growth for its prosperity, is coming to a crossroads. Either we find a way to expand into space on a massive scale, or growth is going to stop.

One of these things has to happen, and either one of them is going to change our world fundamentally, making it within a hundred years completely unrecognizable to us.

And so we are in much the same position as the ancient Romans were. We, also, live at a time of fundamental change, and the content of the close encounter experience, with all its warnings and portents of devastation and its completely new look at reality, is, at least in part, a response to this.

Still, the experience involves enormous issues of perception. Put simply, are any of these stories factual? I am tempted to take a stand on behalf of some of them, because they involve multiple witnesses or seem to have happened to people in completely normal states of mind. What else would an honest, normal woman who looked up from her housework to find a bizarre team of aliens watching her report except the truth?

Combined with the fact that there are UFOs flying around in the skies, it seems that stories like this should just be taken at face value. If not, then there has to be some compelling reason, something stronger than denial based on the improbability of the situation. In general, when perfectly ordinary people offer reports like these in a world that is filled with evidence of UFOs, it seems illogical to assume that they must be false.

But the stranger the stories get, the less easy it is to be certain about them. So we have to decide, where do we draw the line? Certainly most of these memories are consistent, at least in one way: They are consistently strange. The one thing that links the story of the family who arrived at their country home to find aliens leaping around in the trees to that of the terrified child who ended up in a classroom with a mean-tempered old alien teacher on a cane is strangeness. Both stories are impossibly absurd, and yet both are being reported by perfectly rational people in normal memory.

If we are to conclude that all of these stories are nonsense, then we must also conclude either that thousands and thousands of people sent me hoax letters, or that something is wrong with ordinary human memory. But might it not also be interesting to entertain the notion that, as Dr. Carl Sagan suggested, real aliens would be almost unimaginably strange?

In all of these stories, there is a curious sense of impossibility and reality intermixing in some way, a kind of mad stew of meanings and implications—in other words, a thread of chaos woven into their very texture that threatens to destroy the whole fabric.

One thing is undeniable: Contact can leave witnesses in a fruitful if uneasy state, filled with questions too provocative to ignore and too bizarre to answer. Like the paradoxes of philosophy and the unanswerable koans of Zen, the very impossibility of their memories urges the minds of the witnesses toward change, with the result that those who do not become locked in fear report spiritual awakening.

We are curious creatures, and I think that it is time that we let the close encounter experience beguile us a little instead of rejecting the mystery as

either too silly to bother with or hopelessly inaccessible to solution.

Before continuing on to a discussion of the physical evidence that supports the reality of these memories—and that evidence is as appalling as it is compelling—I would like to explore some of the issues of perception that attach to the close encounter experience and may explain some of its strangeness and how to make it become more consistent and clear.

If there are aliens here, why would they combine the spectacularly public airborne theater of the UFO phenomenon with the secretive theater of encounter—a penetration of the individual so deep that it involves nocturnal raids not only into our bedrooms but into levels of our mind that we generally cannot reach ourselves?

If this represents some sort of an attempt at contact, then these two activities may not be contradictory at all. They may both be expressions of the same central policy, which would be to enable us—or compel us—to include imagery of our visitors in the group of assumptions and perceptions that we refer to as reality. This would be to help us acclimatize ourselves to their much larger scale of thought and learn to integrate the rich new reality that they represent. Aliens or no aliens, the next phase in the evolution of mind is likely to take consciousness to the point that it is no longer dependent on time to structure meaning but is centered beyond both space and time.

So we have defeated missing time to a degree and even gone beyond it. We have seen the outlines of a coherent and quite incredible communication. But we have also seen a lot of obvious dream material and some that seems seizure-related.

Where, then, are the facts? If somebody is trying to say something, why don't they just say it instead of depositing it in our unconscious like this and making it so difficult to understand?

It may be that they are being as clear as they possibly can. And it also may be that we possess effective tools that are finally going to enable us to get things into focus.

Chapter Twelve

Yes Or No

What can possibly be made of stories like these? Why would normal people be generating such incredibly bizarre tales out of their ordinary memories?

Is it because aliens are here, and aliens—real ones—are just as strange as we thought they would be? Or is it that expectations built up within the culture have led the fantasy-prone to recast ordinary nightmares into hallucinations of alien contact?

Behavioral scientists have offered many theories of why certain people might come to believe that they have had close encounters. Until the Spanos study (discussed in Chapter Eight) and others like it, there were theories that witnesses must be fantasy-prone or boundary-deficit personalities, or persons otherwise marginalized and given to occult interests.^[47] Multiple-witness cases were explained as instances of group hallucination induced when a number of fantasy-prone individuals came together.

The terms “fantasy-prone” and “boundary-deficit” both describe individuals “whose ability to distinguish between imagination and reality is diminished relative to a ‘normal’ individual.”^[48] Such people have a tendency to alter memories, combine subconscious and hallucinatory events into fantasies, and to experience imaginary events “with the same vividness and emotional impact of reality.”^[49]

A 1988 study by Ph.D. student Julie Parnell involved more than two hundred participants in a UFO conference.^[50] Two personality tests were administered, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and either the 16 Personality Factors Test (16PF) or the Adjective Check List (ACL). Like the Spanos study, this one did not find evidence for psychopathology.

In my case, the Bender Gestalt, the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale Revised, the House-Tree-Person Test, the Thematic Apperception Test, the Human Figure Drawings Test, and the Rorschach were all administered to me by Dr. Maryellen Duane on March 7, 1986, a few months after my December 1985 close encounter. Among the findings were that I was a bright individual

who “appeared to be under a good deal of stress,” was suffering from fatigue, and “appeared to be very frightened and to feel powerless.” She saw “a good deal of inner turmoil” and was concerned that my stressed condition not compromise my ability to separate fantasy from reality.

I did not show any evidence of being a fantasy-prone personality, though, and the general high level of stress and turmoil that I displayed seems consistent with the picture presented by victims of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “A fantasy origin for PTSD would be a novelty, because all prior experience indicates some external source as the cause,” according to Bullard.^[51] But stress disorder also appears to cause a tendency to fantasy, so it is conceivable that alien fantasies could arise as a secondary consequence to explainable stress factors.

In part, the results of my personal tests were what has led me to adhere strictly to the notion that the close encounter experience—especially my own experiences—should remain open to question until there is absolute proof of origin. I continue to stand by that belief, although the physical evidence to be presented in the next section must stand as a possible indication that the time for neutrality is passing.

Many psychologists quite logically take the position that any memory that contains elements that are unexplained by present theories of reality must in some way be incorrect. This position originated when it was discovered that the claims of people reporting satanic ritual abuse could not be substantiated by investigation, and that there were cases of claimed child abuse that the parents felt certain had never happened.

Eventually a group of accused parents came together, founding an organization called the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. Its assertions about the distortion of memory have been taken by the media to mean that all unusual memories must be false, whether they were repressed or not.

On May 23, 1993, in the *Middletown Record*, reporter Joseph de Rivera explained, “in March of 1992, the False Memory Syndrome Foundation began collecting cases of parents who reported that they had been falsely accused on the basis of ‘memories’ recovered during therapy.” He went on to report that memories recovered in so-called trauma-search therapy, where the therapist searches backward from a presented disorder to find the trauma that caused it is fundamentally flawed. “The problem with this reasonable-sounding procedure is that a patient in distress is vulnerable to influence by suggestion.”^[52]

Of course, it is important that innocent people not be incarcerated for crimes that did not happen, but at the same time, it is not at all obvious that we understand memory well enough to conclude that there is no such thing as repression.

Although the validity of the mechanism of the repression of traumatic memory, primarily in abuse cases, has been questioned by some psychologists, reports of such repression have been present in the psychological literature for years.^[53]

On November 23, 1996, an Associated Press story was filed about a woman who had been attacked and gang-raped after a college Halloween party.^[54] She remembered nothing about it until fellow students started telling her that there was a videotape of the crime. It turned out that five men had raped her and taped themselves doing it. The victim is seen in the tape to be physically helpless and was said to be drunk. She did not even talk to police until five days after the event, when pain from her injuries triggered her memory.

But would her memories of the content of the attack have been accurate if they had been recovered by trauma therapy instead of videotape? If trauma can alter and derange memory, they may not have been. There have been theoretical attempts to explain how false memories can be generated, most notably by Elizabeth F. Loftus in *The Myth of Repressed Memory*.^[55] She theorizes that suggestion can end up being assimilated and perceived in the same way as real memory, and that a complex mixture of cultural influences and confused childhood perceptions can be accidentally molded by well-meaning therapists into bizarre structures that essentially mirror their own fears. It seems to me that an inexplicable attack on an adult might well be misinterpreted through a similar process of culturally induced distortion.

As there is little to no evidence that the more lurid descriptions of satanic cults reflect actual groups that operate in the real world, there must be truth in what Loftus says. In *Remembering Satan*,^[56] Lawrence Wright demonstrates that satanic rituals recalled by members of a family involved in an abuse case simply did not happen. Unless all the investigators were also Satanists, the family had not remembered whatever did happen—if anything—correctly.

Could it be that bizarre memories—even those that are never repressed—are simply distortions of other types of trauma? If so, then why are otherwise normal people doing this?

One of the problems psychology has faced is that no clear mechanism of

distortion has been identified. This has led some researchers to go so far as to conclude that all seemingly impossible memories must be wrong, that if bizarre memories of satanic cults are provably false, then it's safe to conclude that even more bizarre close encounter accounts must be false as well.

The fact that close encounter memories have been thought to be inaccessible without trauma therapy that usually involves hypnosis has made them even more suspect. Anyway, who would believe for a moment that anybody saw aliens in the trees or got abducted out of the living room in broad daylight by a giant telepathic insect? Or take my case—four books full of one impossible story after another.

It is reasonable to ask a simple question: Are there *any* facts associated with these memories? I can point to the many multiple-witness cases and to the structure of most of the memories, which would be perfectly believable if they didn't involve aliens. A man reports that he was educated by a crotchety old nun on a cane and all the children were afraid of her. A normal memory, accepted at face value, completely believed. But if he reports the same thing, except that the teacher was a crotchety old alien on a cane—well then, that's a different story entirely. We laugh. We dismiss it. Completely disbelieved.

The mind can deceive itself. False memories can even be induced in a laboratory setting. In fact, it has been decisively proved that people often distort memories of past events. But to the extent that a flock of birds, say, becomes a troupe of tree-climbing aliens—to a whole group of people? Or a husband and wife misremember a passing airplane as a demonic force trying to separate soul from body?

Memory has been shown to change over time but not to this extent. The February 1997 *Journal of Psychiatry* reported a study of Operation Desert Storm veterans that showed that their memories of traumatic events changed in the two-year postwar period.^[57] Although there was no way to tell if the original memories were accurate in the first place, forty-one veterans recalled events two years later that they had not originally reported, and twenty-seven did not remember events that were in their after-battle reports.

The study found further that veterans displaying the most serious symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder showed the greatest amount of memory distortion. This is noteworthy, because it suggests a relationship between the level of distortion of the memory and the seriousness of the stress that accompanied the precipitating incident.

Interestingly enough, the extremely bizarre nature of the close encounter

reports by this measure becomes a chillingly powerful argument that the witnesses are remembering something—even though inaccurately—that they not only perceived as real but that also delivered an ultrahigh level of trauma.

According to the story in *Science News*, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk of Harvard Medical School viewed the Desert Storm study as inconclusive. “This is an article about people’s willingness to report traumatic experience to strangers,” he said. “It says nothing about the critical issue of whether these recollections are in fact reflections of reality.”

And so the central issue remains: How do we tell where reality stops and fantasy starts? Interestingly, if it can be proved that close encounter recall is based on real, physical experience, then it is less likely that the sensory parts of the memories will be distorted than intellectual ones such as the battle reports that were used in the Desert Storm study. In *Psychological Trauma*, Dr. van der Kolk proposes that traumatic events that are first processed as sensations or feelings may be preserved differently from intellectualized material. He notes, “Clinicians and researchers dealing with traumatized patients have repeatedly observed that the sensory experiences and visual images related to the trauma seem not to fade over time and appear to be less subject to distortion than ordinary experiences.”^[58]

But if close encounter is physically real, then we must also contend with the fact that the physical sensations involved may be seriously altered, just as the witnesses report. It may be expected that extraordinary distortions occur, possibly beyond anything that has yet been studied. But until we know how the mechanism of distortion works, we cannot filter out the fantasy.

However, there are a number of avenues of approach that suggest that science can make real progress toward the creation of just such a filter, because of the fact that memories can be evaluated biologically. This is connected to brain-imaging research, an area of exploration that has gained enormously in recent years because of the development of the PET scanner, which enables researchers to observe the brain while it is actually at work.

Two studies, conducted independently, suggest that severe and repeated sexual abuse in childhood actually damages a part of the brain called the hippocampus, which is a sort of switching mechanism that organizes and integrates memory. These studies were reported at the May 1995 meeting of the American Psychiatric Association by scientists from the University of California at San Diego and Yale University School of Medicine.^[59] Apparently, severe trauma may unleash hormones that injure the

hippocampus, thus leaving a measurable signature of abuse in the brain of the victim. It should be noted, however, that not all victims of abuse exhibit this change, and a study conducted by McGill University scientists on twins suggested that, in men, there may need to be a genetic disposition for the change to show up. Nevertheless, it would seem possible that other forms of abuse may also leave signatures in the brain—scars, as it were, that prove that something bad actually did happen to the victim.

Obviously, though, that gets us only partway down the road, if it develops that damage to the hippocampus will occur only in some trauma victims and not in all. But there is yet another study that might eventually enable us to sort the whole thing out.

In 1996, research was reported by a team of Harvard scientists led by Dr. Daniel Schacter^[60] that suggests that the brain actually processes false and real memories differently, even though the witness may believe that all the memories are real. For example, a true memory of hearing a word will induce brain activity not only in the hippocampal area but also the left tempoparietal area where the brain decodes sounds. If the word was only believed to be heard, there will be no left temporal activity because no sound was ever decoded.

If this research proves out, it would have dramatic implications in the whole area of memory studies and would open a new door into the mysterious memories and life experiences of the close encounter witnesses. Dr. Schacter was quoted by the *Times* as saying, “we believe we have a clue now about how false memory works.”

In addition, Dr. van der Kolk reports, “Contemporary biological researchers have shown that medications that stimulate autonomic arousal may precipitate visual images and affect states associated with previous traumatic experiences in people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder but not in control subjects.”^[61]

It is this biological approach to the problem that is most likely to lead to a solution. If real trauma is present in the close encounter witness, it is going to have some sort of a biological signature. And conceivably, using the technique proposed by Dr. Schacter, we may be able to construct a true narrative out of witness testimony, if it proves to have its origin in real trauma. This would work by reducing the testimony to a series of very narrow yes or no questions, each of which related to one of the physical experiences reported. Then, by determining the way the brain processed the

answers, we could isolate the parts of the memories that were based on factual events. For example, if a witness believed that he had seen a shadowy figure in his bedroom shortly before a missing time experience, it might be possible to determine, by observing which parts of the brain process the memory, whether a visual image was actually present.

Using such methods, a picture of the close encounter experience could possibly be constructed that is based entirely on whatever factual realities lie behind it.

But the research that has been done so far has been limited to simple false memories induced in the laboratory, where witnesses were deceived into believing that a certain item had been in a set when it actually was not there. Whether it will be also applicable to extremely complex memories remains to be seen, but it does seem to hold out significant promise.

We can hope that, as science begins to come to terms with close encounter, it will realize that it has many tools that it can apply even to the anecdotal evidence with a reasonable expectation of useful results. And then at last this phenomenon will leave the realm of confusion and fear and fiction, and find its true place in the area of human experience we consider to be real.

It would be wonderful for close encounter witnesses if some progress could be made in understanding their memories. From personal experience of it, I know how overwhelming the stress response can be. The most debilitating problem is sleep disturbance, which often becomes chronic. Although I no longer suffer from the problem, I experienced “guarded sleep” for years after my first encounter. Associated with lack of sleep is depression, which can be devastating. An inability to trust others and strong separation anxiety that emerges whenever a loved one so much as leaves the house are also symptoms shared by close encounter witnesses and sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder.

What distinguishes close encounter from ordinary high-stress experience is another group of symptoms altogether, and because they are so different from other stress-related symptoms, it may be inferred that whatever induces close encounter memories is no garden variety stressor.

What basically happens is that the witness’s whole sense of reality explodes. People become psychic, they begin to believe that they can see into the future, they take spontaneous journeys through time, they begin to see vivid images in the region of the brain known in folklore as the “third eye,” they levitate, they believe that they take on the appearance of alien forms for

periods of time, they acquire wisdom and new compassion, their children become preternaturally brilliant, they take journeys out of the body, they become healers, they acquire relationships with the dead, they become deeply concerned with the welfare of the environment.

They begin to feel that their sexuality is involved, they come to feel that they are breeders of some sort, they begin to think that they have relatives living on other planets, they believe that they acquire ongoing relationships with the aliens who visit them.

Fortunately, not everybody has all of these side effects, but few people come away with none of them.

When we understand why the experience causes people to think that they have changed in these ways, we will also understand what it is that is happening to them. And then, perhaps, we will begin also to understand something of the mind that seems to be behind all the wonder and terror of the experience. And no matter the origin of that mind, whether it is alien or from right here at home, that is going to be one extraordinary discovery.

If the mind of the alien does not originate between our own ears, then there may be some interesting physical reasons for the perceptual distortion that appears to occur, that goes beyond stress-related issues.

If a nonhuman intelligence is responsible for what is happening, then there are likely to be problems involved in the process of interaction that are fundamentally different from any that we have experienced before. It is not obvious that contact will ever be a smooth process.

In fact, *if* it is happening, then there may be a complex and subtle mix of reasons for the perceptual problems that are occurring. First, it is unlikely, once fact is separated from fantasy, that what remains is going to be particularly believable or easy to understand. The bizarre combination of the sublime and the gothic that characterizes so many experiences, for example, is likely to conceal motives and expectations that are very different from our own. More than that, the secrecy that seems central to the whole contact process must be a major contributor to witness confusion.

Even beyond these problems, though, there is the issue of whether perception will be deranged by the mere process of encounter. There are indications from physics that the observer plays a role in the actual construction of reality. In his seminal book on quantum physics, Dr. John Von Neumann shows how quantum theory indicates that the observer may have an active part to play in the creation of reality.^[62] Von Neumann says that

physical objects would, essentially, not exist in any definite form if an observer was not perceiving them. Reality, when not being observed, exists as a sort of wave form of possibilities called a superposition, which acquires definite form only when it is observed. We never perceive the true texture of the universe, and can never see it, because everything we observe turns into the forms we are wired to see.

Although there has been a lot of controversy about this idea, the problem of the observer in quantum physics has not yet been solved. If it is true that the observer's expectations somehow govern the shape of reality, then close encounter could conceivably be an extremely difficult process.

I and thousands like me have found close encounter to be psychologically devastating, impossible to remember clearly, and full of perceptual distortion. Dream mixes with reality. Things that seem physical one moment become hallucinatory the next. Aliens change before our eyes into the very images of our worst fears. What appear to be living creatures become intermixed with our nightmares.

In other words, when we try to interact with them, we experience an outbreak of perceptual chaos. Could it be that this is what happens when two differently wired observers attempt to turn the same possibilities into a reality coherent to them? If so, then the fearsome pressure on the ego that takes place during encounter would be explained, because it would be experiencing a situation that would be doubly frightening: It would appear to the ego that a deeper, more total annihilation than the individual had thought possible was at hand. Of course, it would all be an illusion: No matter whose consciousness prevails, it seems probable that the superposition is going to resolve into the same physical appearance. This is because, whereas there is evidence that the resolution of superposition into matter may depend upon the observer, there is no evidence that the process of observation itself governs the structure of the universe.

So if there isn't an actual battle going on between the two minds to create different realities out of the same universal stuff, then this psychological side effect must be controllable. Even if the physical content of the world is somehow at stake, we still have a weapon available. This is because understanding itself would be a powerful form of control in such a situation.

I have had many close encounters. Despite my best efforts, I have on only one occasion been able to alleviate some of the internal chaos. I did this by performing an inner movement of my attention that I learned over many

years of meditation. I moved my attention out of my personality, which felt as if it was coming unanchored and about to be destroyed, and concentrated it on the sensation of my physical body. This brought the situation nicely into focus. During the few moments that this lasted, I saw four rather tired looking people, quite small, wearing dark blue clothing. Their faces were sloppily smeared with a greasy substance of the same color. It was night and the blue material seemed intended as camouflage. There was a period of perhaps two minutes during which we simply stared at one another. Then they left, moving quickly, their coloring making them seem to disappear. But there was no trick to it. They did not evaporate like smoke. They moved off into the dark.

There is obviously much that can be done to understand the degree to which the close encounter experience is real, and the biological evaluation of memory looks especially promising. This is going to become particularly important, because, given the possibilities just explored, and what unfolds in the next part of this story, it seems urgent that we gain the clearest possible understanding of what the close encounter witnesses are trying to tell us. It could be, after all, that what is happening to them today will be happening to the whole world tomorrow.

Part Three

HARD EVIDENCE

The Lord shall preserve us from all evil;
He shall preserve our souls.
The Lord shall preserve our going out and our coming in,
From this time forth, and even for evermore.

—*Psalm 121*

Chapter Thirteen

Early Days

It was a winter night so silent that it seemed to bear a sort of innocence. But it was not an innocent moment, because I had just woken up and I couldn't move. Instead of enjoying the sweet, contemplative quiet of the country in the deep hours, a helpless commotion of fear made me want to run. I was paralyzed and helpless despite the fact that something was being stealthily pushed up my nose. Then I heard a terrific crack between my eyes, and the world went black.

The next morning, I woke up exhausted, as if I had been struggling and fighting all night. There were even spots of blood on the pillow. But Anne hadn't been disturbed, and nobody else had been in the house. So it must have been a dream...except by February of 1988 I had been through too much: I knew the stories other witnesses told of getting strange little objects pushed deep into their sinus cavities. Typical of the reader comments was this one: "I protested as much as possible, which can't be much when they coerce as you know, and then they stuck something up my nose."

Because of reading letters like this, I thought *maybe* it had been a bad dream, but it also made me frantic. Clearly, my most logical strategy was to undergo a thorough physical and neurological examination, which would include both a CAT scan and an MRI scan.

The day after the incident, I began experiencing fearsome cluster headaches, so there was ample medical reason to undergo the tests. I did not tell the neurologist about my experiences, although the doctor who referred me knew the story.

The neurological exam revealed mild bilateral asymmetry, with the left side of my body being somewhat more developed than the right, but nothing to suggest the presence of disease. On March 16, 1988, I had the CAT scan. The finding was completely normal.

I then proceeded on March 18 to the MRI scan. The results were somewhat different. "Occasional punctate foci of high signal intensity are located in the cerebral white matter of the frontal lobes bilaterally, as well as the left temporo-parietal region."

The neurologist did not view this finding as a matter of concern, and indeed, no evidence of disease process related to it has emerged over the nine years since the test was conducted.

However, another MRI scan specifically of the nasal cavity conducted in 1989 revealed some deviation and apparent scarring consistent with a mild insult to the upper part of the left nostril. No discrete objects were observed in any of the tests.

I might also note that the phrase “increased signal intensity” in an MRI scan means, to us lay people, that a greater reflectivity is being observed from a given area. This return could be because of deposits of some kind, such as calcifications in soft tissue, microvascular disease, the dead nerve tissue that results from loss of the myelin sheath, or, conceivably, a foreign body. Unfortunately, it would be unlikely that an exact diagnosis could be achieved without more aggressive testing, even exploratory surgery, and only a serious medical problem would justify such a course. So the matter was left there, and I had to be content with knowing that something *might* have happened on that night. But if it had, and something had been inserted into my brain, then was my mind being influenced, even changed? What was happening to me, to all of us? I was beginning to feel that the harder I tried to find the answers, the more difficult the questions were becoming.

When I questioned my doctor about whether something could be introduced into the brain through the sinuses, he responded that this would be the easiest way to get to the temporal lobe—which is, of course, the seat of consciousness. However, it would be medically extremely dangerous, because of the danger of carrying bacteria-laden debris from the nasal cavity up into the brain along with any surgical instrument that was introduced from that direction. So I was left to suppose either that it was a dream or that whoever had done it had greater command of antisepsis than we do, because there had been no infection.

I decided, in 1989, to undertake a study, through the Communion Foundation, of people who reported intracranial implants, whether through the nose or by other means. At the time, I had no idea that two witnesses, Betty Stewart Dagenais and Jesse Long, were both struggling out on the West Coast with implant issues of their own, and it would not be until 1996 that I discovered what had happened in their quite shocking cases.

I felt that we should do MRI scans of people who had reported brain implants or nasal intrusions and see if we could gather evidence that was

more definitive than what had been obtained in my own case. We looked through our file of letters and soon found a number of witnesses who reported one or both of these symptoms.

Some of them had, like me, already been disturbed enough by what they remembered happening to them to seek medical attention.

One witness who had experienced pain in her ear and head after an encounter, leading to full-scale migraine, had an MRI scan with a result that sent a chill down my spine:

“There are several small areas of increased signal intensity present in the white matter in the frontal areas bilaterally, with three bright signals seen on the right side, measuring about 4 to 5 mm. in size. A 6 to 7 mm. bright signal is seen in the frontal white matter on the left side, with small punctate lesions anterior to this. These are in a periventricular location. Also two areas of increased signal intensity are seen in the white matter in the temporal lobes, one on each side.” The doctor concluded that the areas of increased signal intensity were “suspicious for demyelinating disease in a young individual.” (The witness was in her forties.)

This was a virtual carbon copy of my own finding. Did it mean that we both shared the same exotic disease, one that might cause vivid hallucinations? I was eager to get an answer to this question, but my research was unavailing. So-called unknown bright objects are found in about 1 percent of all brains scanned, and the finding is usually considered innocuous, although it may be associated with chronic fatigue syndrome in some cases—but not in mine, as I have always had a normal to high energy level. This finding has also been seen in patients with myelin-related diseases such as multiple sclerosis, which occurs when an unknown process destroys myelin and causes the nerves it encases to die. But the demyelination associated with MS presents a characteristic pattern of destruction centering in certain nerves associated with motor control, and that was not present in either scan. This is why the other witness’s radiologist noted only a “suspicion” of possible demyelinating disease and mine did not mention it at all. The defining factor is that neither of us has shown symptoms of such disease over the years since the tests were done.

If such returns from an MRI scan are not caused by demyelination or another disorder, another possibility is a foreign object. Back in 1989, a number of witnesses had reported expelling BB-sized objects from their nasal cavities, but at that time I was not aware of any that had been collected, so

exactly what these reports meant I could not determine.

Like me, the witness who sent me this other MRI report had experienced severe headaches. So, assuming that she was not suffering from a disease, then what might be the matter with her?

She had vivid memories of a machine of some sort being placed against her forehead, and had woken up to find that triangular areas of her eyebrows had lost their hair, and red dots like small puncture wounds had appeared in the center of the hairless areas.

“I began waking up in the morning with bare patches in my eyebrows. The bare patches were in the shape of triangles. I used an eyebrow pencil to cover them—but after months of this, I thinned them out.”

She experienced a disturbance to the peripheral vision in her left eye, a symptom that she shares with other witnesses. When her doctor told her that the unknown bright objects in her brain were behind her eyebrows, she was horrified. She has a rather clear image associated with her apparent implantation. She remembers seeing a group of tubes coming out of a white base. The ends of these tubes were ringed by small lights and had needles in the center that she believes produced the marks in her eyebrows.

“While lying flat on my back the white base is placed above my head. The tubes are flexible, the tiny lights are white and warm. Once they are in place the needle slowly penetrates into my skull. It is done very slow in order not to crack the skull.”

One can well understand why she complained of headaches.

She ends her letter, “for some damned reason I am connected to the unknown—the hidden. And we all know that man hates what he cannot understand. So where does that leave people like us? Dissected, prodded, hated.”

One thing about my proposed MRI study concerned me. It was that witnesses were reporting that the small objects being expelled from their noses were metallic. My problem was that magnetic resonance imaging places the patient in a powerful magnetic field. If there was something metallic embedded in an organ, there would be a danger that the magnetic field would cause the object to move. Obviously, this could result in injury, maybe quite serious injury in the case of a sensitive organ like the brain.

I did not want to abandon the study, but I also did not want anybody to get hurt.

My decision was to concentrate on people who had already had MRI scans

with no consequences and to preinterview the potential subjects carefully, so that I could be certain that they understood that there was a certain level of risk, however remote. I was surprised to find that absolutely nobody even considered dropping out of the project.

The way we found witnesses was to announce the project in the Communion Letter, which we were publishing at the time, as well as to cull our correspondence for people who provided descriptions of objects being put up their noses or otherwise introduced into their cranial areas. We concentrated on the brain largely because it didn't occur to us that there might be implants elsewhere in the body. I saw this as an intrusion into the seat of consciousness, and to me the brain was the place to go to find the evidence.

The letters that came in began to form a picture, and it was a disturbing one. "I was abducted and missing for five hours when I was between eleven and thirteen, some twenty-odd years ago. A few years ago I had an MRI scan done twice on my head. The doctor had no explanation for me for what the spots were that showed up on my brain."

This was another witness with spots in the temporal lobe, a finding that was beginning to become familiar to me.

One possible explanation I ruled out was that these were imaging artifacts—glitches in the scan caused by the equipment. There are many image artifacts associated with MRI scans, such as movement artifacts, flow artifacts, and central point artifacts. Movement and flow artifacts appear as fuzzy or smeared areas, but central point artifacts are bright dots of light. The radiologist I was working with said, however, that they are easily recognized and were not what we were seeing.

I cannot claim that there is a large-scale pattern of people who display unknown bright objects in their brains reporting close encounters, because the studies necessary to determine this have never been attempted. But certainly such an effort would be worthwhile. It would also be worthwhile to find witnesses willing to submit their bodies to postmortem autopsy, in order to determine exactly what has happened to their brains.

One witness sent us two diagnostic reports on his brain. The first said, "Skull X ray—Foreign body of possible metallic origin noted in the mid-brain." The second was slightly more informative: "X rays show a small metal object in the temporal right lobe causing temporal lobe syndrome." The skull itself showed no sign of any trauma, and no entry point for this object

was observed.

This witness was having a complicated response to the presence of this object, which could have involved either close encounter or hallucinations or both. In any case, we very sadly could not include him in the MRI study, largely because of concerns about the effect of the magnetic field on what had already been identified in X ray as a metallic object. In addition, the radiologist was concerned that his X rays might show other disease process in the brain and felt that he should remain under care at home.

I felt tremendous sadness when I finally wrote this witness telling him that he could not participate in the program, but the danger of causing the metallic object to move was just too great. This is why witnesses who want to find out if their brains contain objects should always begin with X ray. Usually, metal shows up clearly on X ray, and if such a thing as this witness had is present, then an MRI scan should be attempted only if the doctors involved still feel that it is indicated.

Another witness sent us material showing that she had something near her pituitary gland. But was it a growth or an unknown object?

This witness, Dr. Colette Dowell, has been mentioned by various UFO researchers and featured on the television program *Encounters*. On February 2, 1986, Dr. Dowell had a CAT scan of her brain and pituitary. The finding was that she had a normal pituitary, but “there is, in addition, a 3 mm. non-enhancing nodule in the left lobe which could represent a microadenoma.” The key word here was “could.” It was not a definitive diagnosis, which was why we were interested in looking more deeply into this case. What would the much more detailed MRI picture show us?

Dr. Dowell had experienced a disappearing pregnancy with no apparent miscarriage at age fifteen and suffered from menstrual difficulties. As menstrual and other problems of the female reproductive system can be caused by pituitary adenoma, these complaints were what led to her CAT scan.

She wrote us, “Since I was a teenager I have been experiencing ‘UFO’ dreams. I do not know the origin of these paranormal experiences.” She stated that, from an early age, she felt watched. She reported, “I felt there were two Colettes, one from this planet and one up in the stars.”

She further notes, “in 1988 while camping in my van near Chesapeake Bay, a vibrating energy permeated my vehicle and continued through my body with the focus being my third eye or pituitary region.” This led to an

even greater sense of clairvoyance. She had numerous abduction dreams. By 1989, her alien-related thoughts and apparent experiences so distressed her that she consulted a number of psychiatrists. But tests revealed a personality within normal range.

Dr. Dowell may indeed have a pituitary adenoma, as she has experienced other symptoms associated with this disease, including vision disturbances and galactorrhea, or lactation outside of pregnancy.

The anterior pituitary, which is the location of the object, is like a glandular clearinghouse. In it, hypothalamic neurohormones regulate the creation and secretion of six major peptide hormones, which are then secreted in bursts, or in circadian or diurnal rhythmic patterns. Enlarging adenomas can cause many symptoms, the most obvious of which are headache and visual disturbances. False pregnancy is not a symptom of pituitary adenoma.

As Dr. Dowell was one of the most interesting and articulate of our candidates, on June 6, 1989, an MRI scan was undertaken on her. To minimize the number of slices taken and thus the cost of the scans, candidates were asked to indicate the area where they thought they had an implant. Most indicated the sinus region, but Dr. Dowell's scan was done, for obvious reasons and at her insistence, in the pituitary area.

The impression was, "A 3 mm. zone of high intensity within the posterior sella turcica, as noted correlating with the patient's demonstrated microadenoma." At the time, the radiologist felt that the object observed on the MRI scan and the one revealed by the CAT scan could be two different objects, but he eventually concluded on his report that they were the same.

Dr. Dowell's MRI scan has had quite an extensive amount of review over the years, as certain abnormalities associated with it have continued to suggest that it might not be an ordinary adenoma after all. Among those reviewing it have been four physicians, three psychiatrists, and two ophthalmologists, as well as a panel of five neuroradiologists from the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

Only one of these doctors would identify this as a normal-appearing situation, and he refused to identify it as an adenoma, instead stating that it was within normal range for an MRI scan of this area, and no disease process was present at all. The others would not offer opinions. The problem is that on an MRI scan, an adenoma does not usually appear as a 3-mm punctate zone. A small zone of high signal return is more often associated with calcium or other nontissue deposits, and the doctor who would discuss it said

that it appeared to him to be a calcification.

Some UFO researchers have identified Dr. Dowell's object as an implant, but its nature has never been determined, any more than it has been definitively determined that the unknown bright objects in the brains of other witnesses have been put there by somebody and have not occurred naturally. Dr. Dowell is adamant that its true nature is unknown.

I talked to Dr. Dowell on September 4, 1997, and discovered that she was no longer having the vivid experiences that had been with her for so long, and there was an interesting reason for this. Like some of the other witnesses mentioned in this book, she was diagnosed with disturbances in her peripheral vision. In her case, these were thought to be a side effect of pituitary adenoma. Oddly, her medical records show that this has turned out to be a transient symptom for her. Unless the adenoma is removed, it is unusual for a symptom like this to disappear in such a case. But Dr. Dowell has had a study done that showed her peripheral vision to be normal after two examinations that showed otherwise.

She provided me with the medical records confirming this. On August 20, 1990, she was diagnosed with bitemporal quadrantanopsia, the vision dysfunction typical of pituitary adenoma. On March 29, 1994, she was again tested, and the visual field was found to be unchanged from 1990. The presence of the probable adenoma was again confirmed by another MRI scan. At this point, surgery was obviously becoming an option. Then, just ten days later, on April 4, 1994, she was retested to validate the previous test. The report states that the "results indicate no visual field defect—unexplained improvement."

Dr. Dowell has also ceased to lactate abnormally and has not had any of the sudden "jolts" of energy in her forehead region that used to disturb her so frequently. She states, "This is not to say that my symptoms won't appear again, just that they have subsided."

Dr. Dowell has experienced an unfortunately chaotic diagnostic history. Some of the doctors have even claimed that her scans were normal, despite symptoms like abnormal lactation and visual disturbances that are typical of pituitary adenoma.

It seems possible that the object observed in the CAT scan and the one in the MRI scan are indeed two different things, and two of the doctors agreed that this was so. But were either or both objects implants? There is no way to know. So she has been left to wonder whether she is an abductee with an

implant that can be seen—at least at times—near her pituitary, or is simply suffering from a conventional abnormality that for whatever reason has a rather unconventional presenting appearance.

This case illustrates a fundamental medical problem that will crop up again and again as I narrate the further history of possible implants and certain ones—for there are some whose existence is beyond question. This is that we need and do not have an appropriate array of tests not only to diagnose these objects but also to identify their effects and functions.

Fortunately, not all stories are as hard to end as Dr. Dowell's. I would hope that some thought might be given to testing Dr. Dowell further, using some of the techniques suggested in the Communion Foundation's proposed implant study protocol.

But those are today's issues. Back in 1989, it was with high hopes that I continued to gather witnesses for our MRI study. Dr. Dowell's object was inaccessible because it was buried deep in her brain. These other witnesses mostly had memories of nasal intrusions.

I could hardly sleep the night before the tests began, I was so excited at the prospect of finding an implant at last.

Chapter Fourteen

The One Within

Before I report in detail on those studies, I must add yet another dimension to the picture that we are painting of this bizarre situation.

It is easy to conclude that implants must be tracking devices or mind control machines of some sort, put in us by aliens. But recall that Dr. Dowell, as a child, felt that she was not entirely of this world—that she was actually living two lives at the same time, one on Earth and another as an “alien” among the stars.

She was not alone. In point of fact, this blurring of self is experienced by many close encounter witnesses, and it would seem appropriate to introduce it into the discussion during the survey of implants, lest we forget that one thing that the questions raised here do not have are simple, pat answers. But if implants don’t do conventional things, then what else might they do? Even if they are tools of communication, it could be of a very extraordinary kind.

The deeper you mine the close encounter experience—always refusing to submit to the temptation to rush to explanations—the richer and more profound are the questions that it returns. There is a subtle but continuous suggestion that the experience involves some sort of inhabitation or—less distressing—a kind of blurring of normal and alien selves. Given the incredible stress of encounter, it really isn’t too surprising that there would be unusual side effects like this. Other highly stressful experiences can lead to similar personality disruptions.

Witnesses are left with the sense that the visitors are somehow inside them, or using some means to look through their eyes, or dwelling in their bodies, or living parallel lives to them in other worlds. In some cases there are physical sensations involved, and witnesses will report that they feel as if part of their vision is being stolen, and they somehow perceive less of the world than they did before their body began to be “shared.” In other cases, like Dr. Dowell, they feel as if they are in two worlds at once.

Occasionally, a witness will find that he or she has suddenly changed physical appearance and actually looks like an alien. Incredibly, this shape-shifting phenomenon is also sometimes witnessed by others.

One night a witness woke up and found that his arms were long and thin, and he felt light and seemed to be pulsing with the delicious electricity that eastern traditions identify as kundalini. He discovered that, in this state, he could fly. He went upstairs to his son's room and woke him. The boy seemed delighted to see him and acted as if he was greeting an old friend. Next morning, though, things were different. The boy remembered the experience vividly but as a nightmare. He recalled the "alien" as a monster that had flown around his room like a giant bat.

Another time, a witness cried out that the visitors coming near her were so ugly. One of them placed a blue-gloved hand on her wrist and said, "My dear, one day you will look just like us."

A member of the psychological community came out of the bathroom one morning and found his companion terrified. "You changed all of a sudden into this weird being. Your body was really thin and your arms were long and thin also. You had these huge eyes with a slightly larger head." At the time, the witness says, his friend knew nothing about my books. He changed back to normal, but does not report if the relationship survived.

It would obviously be inappropriate to jump to the conclusion that people are literally turning into alien forms at times. But something quite unusual must be happening in these cases. Whatever it is, it does suggest that there may be some sort of more active participation on our part, perhaps one we cannot articulate clearly, probably because it represents action being taken that is far from our conscious understanding of our own natures. It is a reminder that, whenever you ask the question "Who are the aliens?" you must ask in the same breath, "Who are we?"

Other witnesses have reported being told, "We will come from within you," and one was given the particularly haunting explanation, "It is me within thee."

Although this might refer to an aspect of the experience so strange that we simply do not have enough information even to begin to describe it accurately, it might also mean in a completely straightforward way exactly what it says, which is that the first confirmed alien artifacts are going to be found inside our own bodies.

Back in 1989, we gathered our witnesses for the MRI project, and one by one they went through their scans. Three of them displayed completely normal scans, but four did not. Here are the findings and the stories behind them.

This first examination was of a witness who had reported a recent nasal intrusion. The MRI revealed a “slight increase intensity in the right turbinates.” This was assumed to be “suggestive of recent minor allergic changes or upper respiratory infection,” and the MRI was judged normal.

We were all frustrated with this scan, because, although it showed that the nose was irritated, there was no return of an object or sign of trauma.

The witness comes from a family that has recorded dozens of close encounters since the early 1960s. The fact that there was so much multiple witness in this case was what had drawn my interest in the first place. Though I would have loved to get physical proof, in those days I was still vacillating about whether this was at its core a previously undetected hallucinatory phenomenon. For me, the implant project was in part a search for abnormalities that might induce seizure. I was considering, for example, the possibility that allergies were involved, largely because of the terrific allergic responses that I and some of my friends who had encounters at my cabin had experienced when the visitors came close.

Could it be that the allergies triggered the visitors, or was it the other way around? A secondary aim of the MRI project, then, was to see if there might be, for example, a connection between restricted airways and close encounter events. It is thought that airway flows might affect brain activity, and we considered that this might be a useful area of exploration.

The first witness also reported a number of childhood encounters with apparent nocturnal intruders, coupled with missing time and nosebleeds. The father had experienced intruders and nosebleeds in his childhood as well and had comforted his son by telling him that these things were normal for children. The witness’s childhood intruder experiences and nosebleeds took place in 1967 and 1973, in an area of the country that had notable UFO flaps in both of those years.

The case was somewhat compromised because much of the material was dream recall, but it was strengthened by the fact that the witness and his father had seen a UFO while together.

After seeking out a psychologist to help him deal with his memories, he discovered that his sister also had a lifetime of encounter recollections, which she had recorded in a diary without discussing them with the family. He discovered that the dates in the diary coincided with his own memories and dreams, so the case was reasonable.

In the end, though, it did not offer much more than had been available

before: lots of suggestive detail, now including the fact that there was nasal passage irritation in a man who believed that he had experienced nasal intrusions. But there was no object.

The second of these witnesses scanned had also reported a nasal intrusion. Her MRI report stated: “inflammatory changes in the paranasal sinuses. Otherwise normal examination.” Once again, there was no object present.

I might note here that inflammatory changes like these are a very common MRI finding. Think of how many times people have a slight cold or allergy and irritate their nasal passages just by blowing too hard, and you can see how impossible it was to draw any hard-and-fast conclusion from such an observation.

Still, we now had two people who reported nasal intrusions, and both had irritated nasal passages. In neither case was there any sinusitis present. So these results were actually slightly supportive.

The next study, also of a witness with a memory of nasal intrusion, offered something a little more tangible: “Small polyp right anterior ethmoid cell. Evidence of mild inflammatory changes within the nasal turbinates.”

I thought, at last. All we had to do was to remove the polyp and dissect it. Either it was an implant or it wasn't.

The ethmoid cell is located in the ethmoid bone between and below the eyes, at the root of the nose. Given where the needles were believed to be going, an object in this area would be a possibility.

However, the radiologist was not looking for something as easily identifiable as this. The polyp returned like organic material, not metal. Medically, it was trivial and probably the result of allergy. It could easily simply disappear on its own. Even if it didn't, it wasn't causing any sort of symptom or giving the patient any discomfort. It was not, in short, a candidate for surgical removal.

So it had to be abandoned as possible evidence, and we all became very frustrated people. The witness wrote, “Aside from learning that there actually is something in my head, I learned from you guys how important it is to keep a sense of humor about this.”

Reluctantly, we brought the MRI study to a close. We had nothing but suggestions and implications, and when we did find a possible surgical candidate, we could not fulfill enough conventional criteria to justify the attempt.

As the clouds of autumn gathered, I found myself in a lonelier position

than ever. I had been publicly branded as a cult leader and compared in print and on television and radio to the murderous fanatic Jim Jones, who orchestrated the mass suicide of his entire following. For the most part, the public recognized this lie for what it was, and a television poll showed that ninety-five percent of the viewers of one program did not believe it. Nevertheless, there are always a few eager to hate, and the afternoon after these charges had been repeated on one of the national breakfast programs, I was assaulted in Washington National Airport by being spat upon.

I slipped, in 1989, from being sad and frustrated into a state of clinical depression. The visitors were still in my life. Letters were pouring in. There were fantastic UFO sightings being reported by the Belgian military and civil air authorities. And I had been inches from proof that what I regarded as a desperate but totally rejected emergency was really happening.

I was frantic to break down the fortress of secrecy that has kept the average person ignorant and helpless, to restore my own reputation, and, above all, to trigger the explosion of scientific inquiry that would follow any disclosure that aliens were really here. I wanted it, but as I looked up into the dark of the night, I thought that it was really very far away. How would I ever make any progress? Where would I go from here?

I could not do anything but wait. Time alone was my friend, but time also worked against me, in the sense that, if the visitors were becoming progressively closer, they might eventually overwhelm all of us. To lie in bed at night knowing that you were being falsely turned into a national pariah even as the visitors came slipping through the dark was not easy.

And then there was always the horror of being alone with it. What if this was something evil, and implanted people were controlled people, lost to the power of a force as malevolent as it was incomprehensible?

At times I deliberated finding a surgeon willing to do an exploratory on me and extract one of the bright objects in my brain so that it could be dissected. But what if it was only a cluster of dead tissue? And who would do such a surgery whom I could also trust?

I didn't want to take the risk, and in this, I was not alone. Unknown to me, a witness in Washington State was going through very much the same thing. Betty Stewart Dagenais had experienced contact for many years. This contact had involved a phenomenon that witnesses call "toning," which are sounds that range from things like the raspy burr of digital transmission to series of discrete beeps heard in the head or beside the ear.

I had noticed a few instances of such toning in my own life but nothing that I could describe as recurrent or easily identifiable as an artifact of the encounter phenomenon. In my case, the reason was that I was diagnosed with tinnitus in my left ear in 1976, the result of damage from a truck backfiring near my head. This resulted in a slight but continuous ringing and could also have caused transient sounds. Another cause of such sounds would be circulatory. Such sounds would normally not involve beeps but rather a high-pitched noise building to a peak and then subsiding. A tumor pressing against the aural nerve might also be to blame, either for continuous or transient sounds. Normally, psychological factors do not enter into this, but with all the fear connected with the close encounter issue, I would think that it would be possible for people to experience normal sound transients and then proceed to hallucinate episodes like discrete beeps, relating them to imagined contact experiences.

But Mrs. Dagenais's contacts were too extensive for that, and, in her case, there would soon be physical evidence that suggested a connection between the sounds and her encounters. She had a lump in the pinna, or outside structure, of her left ear that she associated with a close encounter. At the time, I was only vaguely aware of the possibility that objects might be found other than in the nasal cavity or the brain. Budd Hopkins had suggested that a certain type of small scar was associated with close encounter, but we had no way of verifying this at the time.

The scars were called scoop marks because of the fact that they appeared to involve a removal of tissue just below the surface of a small area of the skin, most often on the calf, causing the epidermis to sink. I had never seen one on a witness, and at the time it did not occur to me that they might be associated with objects placed in areas of the body that were more accessible than the cranium.

Betty Dagenais had a very different sort of problem. In 1986, she had been told directly by her abductors that she would die if she had the object in her earlobe taken out. So she endured her encounters as best she could, the way most people endure them, in silence, alone, and without any real help.

I do not possess a record of her encounter experiences, as she never wrote me or communicated with me. I don't know if she knew about my books.

Mrs. Dagenais was obviously deeply concerned about what was happening to her, though, and as we get into the stories of implantees whom I do know and have interviewed, I think that it will become clear why this would be so.

In 1989, Betty Dagenais died of natural causes. There was no question that her death was in any way unusual. She left instructions that her ear was to be autopsied. This was done, and the material extracted from it remained with her family until 1994 when its existence came to the attention of some interested parties. On January 6, 1995, Mrs. Dagenais's dark, one-millimeter-diameter implant was subjected to electromicroscopic analysis by an engineer, and found to be made of aluminum, titanium, silicon, and traces of other minerals. He commented, "Titanium could be used in a transmitter or receiver, as could aluminum." A quality control technician with a specialty in electronics was also questioned about what a device consisting primarily of those elements might be used for. He replied that it "would be a transducer and can be used to transmit signals." He was not told that the device had come from the body of a close encounter witness.

To my knowledge, this was the first implant that was ever subjected to laboratory analysis. But, although interesting, these results cannot be called conclusive. The reason is that the object has an imperfect pedigree. It was not kept under controlled conditions after it was removed from Mrs. Dagenais's body, so it could be that what was examined and what was removed from Mrs. Dagenais are not the same objects. Even though there is no evidence of this, it would obviously be better if objects were analyzed immediately after their removal. This is especially important if their composition is ordinary.

Also in 1989, close encounter witness Jesse Long, a distant cousin of Amelia Earhart, was coming to the end of more than thirty years of enduring what is without a doubt one of the most wondrous and terrible human experiences ever recorded. This diffident, careful, and altogether remarkable man has recorded what he remembers of his lifetime of encounters in an amazing manuscript, as yet unpublished.

Unknown to me and to practically anybody else, Mr. Long had presented himself at a doctor's office to have an implant removed from his shin that had been inserted when he was four years old. Fortunately for all of us after it came out, he kept it against a time when it might be analyzed. In this case, it is less important that the object remained untouched by science for all those years, because of what has been found.

Chapter Fifteen

Dr. Roger Leir's Discovery

Jesse Long's remarkable object remained unexamined until 1996, and between 1989 and 1994, to my knowledge there was nothing of significance done about implants by anybody.

"Psychic surgeons" claimed to be able to remove them, and some even charged fees for this service. Abduction researchers said that they existed but that they turned to powder or disappeared when extracted because the aliens didn't want them analyzed. So they became rather mythical, a sort of Holy Grail.

I went through those long, frustrating years struggling with my continuing experience, persecution that would not stop, and consequent depression. I was haunted and hunted at the same time.

Although after the MRI study I gave up hope of ever finding a physical implant, not everybody did, which turned out to be fortunate. In June of 1994, UFO investigator Derrel Sims of Houston met Roger Leir, D.P.M., at a conference in California. When Mr. Sims became aware that Dr. Leir was something quite rare, a medical professional who was also interested enough in the UFO question to be a member of the Mutual UFO Network, he told him that he knew some witnesses in Houston who believed that they had implants and might want to have them removed.

Roger Leir is among a small company of scientists like Dr. Hill and Dr. John Mack who are too curious about the world around them to dismiss the unlikely as impossible. And like the others, he is a good scientist. He was interested because he wanted to know if there was anything real to the witnesses' claims. He saw that he had an opportunity to conduct a test.

He made an offer to Sims: If the people involved would fly to California at their own expense, he and a colleague would make all the necessary arrangements and perform the surgeries at no charge.

Up until this time, it does not appear that there had ever been any formal attempt to remove and then study such an object. With the exception of the work done on Colette Dowell, the results of our MRI study had never been published. The only object that might possibly be considered an anomaly was

the one in Dr. Dowell's head, and there was a good likelihood that, despite all the questions about it, it was a pituitary adenoma. The existence of the Dagenais and Long implants was hardly known, and they had not yet been studied. But witnesses claimed—swore—that this happened to them. And if there were actual implants, well, that would be a terribly important thing to find out. Perhaps because the area was so unknown, Leir was intrigued. His approach was, "Let's see if there's anything there."

It turned out that X-ray images had already been obtained of objects in two people. One individual had two objects in her left foot, another had one in his left hand. Both of these people were close encounter witnesses, and both felt that the objects involved had been implanted into their bodies by aliens.

It must be added at this juncture that an immediate objection is that it isn't all that uncommon for foreign objects to become embedded in feet and hands. So maybe these were just innocuous objects, a bit of gravel that came to be under the skin of a hand during a fall, a small piece of iron that got into a shoe and worked its way into the foot, or, in the case of a T-shaped object, a surgical inclusion.

If they were naturally occurring objects, they would either have been rejected or, if the body could not accomplish that, been encapsulated. Sometimes an encapsulation can involve tissue, but in general it also involves the deposition of minerals around the unwanted material. A surgery would answer the question of how the body had responded to the objects, not to mention making material available for analysis.

There are obviously any number of things that can work their way under the skin, especially of a hand or foot. Graphite debris left when a pencil lead pierces the skin would be the closest thing in external appearance, for example, to an implant. Commonly, pencil lead leaves a mark under the skin that can remain for years as a faint gray discoloration. It is medically trivial, and not in any way comparable to these objects, which were much larger and also deeper than a pencil lead would ordinarily be found.

If not a pencil lead, then the objects could be bits of shrapnel or other debris—nailheads, bits of gravel, any number of things.

According to the witnesses, they had entered in the following ways:

The woman recalled an encounter and abduction that had taken place nearly thirty years previously. But at the time she was not aware of any object being placed in her body. However, when her foot was X-rayed in connection with an unrelated problem, the returns for two unknown objects in her left big

toe had appeared. She could not recall any accident that might have driven these objects into her foot, and they were large enough to have caused quite noticeable pain and trauma. So she had become concerned that they were connected to her close encounter, and she wanted them out.

Dr. Leir could see from the X-ray that the objects seemed to be metal. They were deep in the tissue of the big toe, one on each side of the bone. One appeared to be small and seedlike; the other was a distinct “T” shape that he at first assumed had been placed by a surgeon. But there was no scar and no surgery was reported by the witness.

The second witness had quite an unusual story to tell. At the age of six, he had observed a basketball-sized object floating in the air in an open space behind his house. As he walked up to it, the thing had exploded, leaving him with the feeling that a fragment of it had been embedded in his hand. No wound remained, and nothing was done.

When, as an adult, he was X-rayed, he was surprised and disturbed to discover that there was actually something there. The strange incident was the only thing that had ever happened to him that had involved a possible injury to his hand.

Over the course of the next few weeks, plans were made to carry out the surgeries. Leir presented these X-rays to a radiologist, who confirmed that they appeared to be of metal objects.

Prior to their meeting at Dr. Leir’s office, neither of these witnesses had come into contact with each other. They had not, for example, been involved in the same accident, or been exposed to similar metal fragments in a shared work situation—or any work situation, for that matter.

Dr. Leir and his colleague, a general surgeon, were aware of how controversial these surgeries might turn out to be and were concerned about creating a very high-quality record of the proceedings. As a result, all of the operations were recorded on video, and the excised objects were also photographed at the moment of removal. There were a number of witnesses present, among them Alice Leavy, the state section director for the Ventura–Santa Barbara MUFON, whose own case would later become one of the best documented on record. The general surgeon who was present and did all above-the-ankle procedures and the witnesses will not be named in this discussion.

The surgeon doesn’t want to expose himself to the danger of license-related attacks such as those that have occurred against other professionals

who have expressed a public interest in this subject, including Dr. Leir himself and, of course, Harvard professor Dr. John Mack, whose book *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*, brought him challenges both to his professional credentials and his tenure.

There were a number of other people in attendance at these surgeries. The surgical nurse was Denise Messina; the video photographer was Mike Evans, who also holds a degree in nursing. Jack and Ruth Carlson created a paper record of the event. The closed-circuit television system that allowed the surgeries to be witnessed from outside of the operating room was devised by Bert Clemens.

Among the witnesses in that room were Derrel Sims, Alice Leavy, and the coordinator of the event, Janet Wamick.

I mention the names of all of these people because I want to make it as clear as possible that these surgeries were not performed in isolation. Careful records were kept, and each step of the procedures can be seen on the video that was made. This is important, because it can be observed that there was no scar tissue above the objects before the surgeries, and the objects were actually brought out of the wounds and displayed on camera, proving that something was really removed.

The patients were processed in a manner that had been carefully planned. First, a full medical history was taken. Next, the patients were asked to provide as complete a history of their close encounter experiences as they could. They were then interviewed by a psychologist.

Prior to surgery, new X-rays were taken and reviewed. Also at that time, small quantities of blood were removed from each patient for the purpose of creating a transport medium for the objects that would soon be excised. The blood was then centrifuged and the serum extracted. An anticoagulant was added to the serum, and the medium was ready.

The first patient, who had the two objects in her toe, was then taken into the operating room. Even using the X-ray as a guide, it took more than an hour to locate the first object. In and of itself, this is not unusual when attempting to excise objects from deep tissue. However, despite hypnosis performed by Sims, who is a certified hypnoanesthesiologist, and extensive anesthesia to the toe, the patient began to respond to the probing, reporting bursts of pain. With this problem controlled, further probing of the area revealed a small gray object. At the moment that it was excised from the surrounding tissue, the patient reported another burst of pain.

Dr. Leir has had extensive experience removing foreign objects from the foot, and he reports that this type of reaction occurs when the object is involved with a nerve. The disturbance to the adjacent nerve fibers will overcome even heavy local anesthesia. However, this response is sufficiently unusual that the additional risk of general anesthesia is not indicated in surgeries of this type.

Once it was removed, Leir found that the tiny object was enclosed in a very dense membrane. He was surprised to discover that this tissue was so tough that he could not remove the object from the structure enclosing it even with aggressive use of a scalpel.

Leaving the object still encased in the membrane, he turned his attention to the other side of the toe. This too required a lengthy dissection, and the patient was similarly sensitive when the object was finally located. It was enclosed in the same type of dark membrane as the first object.

One of these objects was tiny and hard, about the size and shape of a cantaloupe seed, about two millimeters in diameter. The other was T-shaped, as it had been on the X-ray, and somewhat larger, around three millimeters on a side. This object had the appearance of something that had been constructed out of two straight pieces.

The incision was then closed, and the surgery on the second patient soon commenced. This surgery proceeded similarly to the first, with the patient immediately reporting discomfort when the object was probed.

This object was strikingly similar in appearance to one of the objects that had been removed from the first patient, as it also resembled a cantaloupe seed and was about the same size.

If these were the result of accidents, how could it be that two people who had never met would end up bearing such similar objects in their extremities? If these were identifiable bits of debris this would not be hard to understand. But there was no obvious way to identify them, and in all of their quite extensive careers, neither surgeon had ever seen anything like them.

The combination of the fact that these objects were present in these people, and that two of them were nearly identical, is obviously compelling and disturbing evidence. Although it does not prove that aliens were responsible, it strongly suggests that the objects were artificially inserted into these people by somebody.

It developed that the membranes were almost as strange as the objects that they enclosed. After they became dry they weakened and it was possible to

remove them and send them, along with surrounding tissue, for pathology study. The biopsies were performed at a local lab, which was informed that the tissue had been dissected from the area around some foreign bodies, which had also been removed. The lab was given no information about the unusual situation.

It was confirmed that the sensitivity of the patients to the surgery was due to the fact that nerve tissue had somehow grown to surround the objects. One of the reports stated that the fragments submitted contained “fibroconnective tissue and fat demonstrating peripheral nerve and pressure receptors.” This growth of nerve tissue is a very unusual finding.

The membranes themselves were formed out of superficial rather than deep tissue. As the body does not possess genetic instructions that enable it to create skin deep inside muscle tissue, it is hard to see how these membranes could have grown naturally. In any case, they were the probable reason that the underlying objects were not rejected.

At this point, a misfortune occurred, as funds could not be found to carry out analysis of the recovered materials. I was not aware that the surgery had even happened, or I would have immediately offered to undertake this work.

Thus it was not until nearly a year later that the objects were actually placed under analysis. The benefactor was the National Institute of Discovery Sciences (NIDS), which is managed by former United States Army nonlethal weapons specialist Dr. John Alexander.

NIDS contracted with New Mexico Tech to do a study, and the following battery of tests were applied to the objects:

DENSITY IMMERSION USING TOLUENE
MECHANICAL PROPERTIES ANALYSIS
X-RAY SPECTROSCOPY
SCANNING ELECTRON MICROSCOPY
X-RAY DIFFRACTION ANALYSIS
ELECTRICAL/MAGNETIC PROPERTIES ANALYSIS.

Two of the three samples were found to be essentially similar in density, the third one lighter. One of these was then broken. A core was observed of shiny metallic material. The lighter sample, which had been the T-shaped object, had no core. There was a dramatic difference in hardness between the samples. The seedlike objects were as hard as quartz, while the lighter T-shaped one was as soft as calcite.

The two seedlike objects both had insulating outer shells that were composed of iron, phosphorus, and calcium, with small amounts of chlorine present.

The lighter sample had a very complex structure and composition. Its small, harder areas were essentially similar to the heavier objects. The more extensive lighter material consisted of iron, silicon, phosphorous, molybdenum, chlorine, sodium, and calcium, with a trace of copper.

The cores of all the objects were found to be iron-carbon, probably ferrite, as the sample was ferromagnetic.

The lab initially had not been told anything about the possible origin of the materials. Later, they were informed that they had been dissected during surgeries. In a letter of opinion, they offered the hypothesis that the object might be made of meteoric material and suggested a number of different meteorites that had displayed similar contents. It was noted that iron meteorites contain a small amount of nickel, but the fact that this was not present in these objects could be due to their being fragments of a larger sample.

It was also hypothesized that an iron sliver embedded in the body could cause a calcification reaction, and that the mineral cladding observed might be due to this. In any case, the minerals would have prevented tissue rejection even if the membranes did not. However, what meteoric iron was doing in the hands and feet of these people is not known. If they had been struck by micrometeors, then there would surely have been scar tissue. And the T-shaped object, obviously not a surgical staple or nailhead or something else common, seems to be a construction of an unknown kind, made from unusual materials.

A year later, another group of surgeries were held, this time involving three patients including Alice Leavy.

My wife, Anne, and I were among the many witnesses to these surgeries, and observed them on closed-circuit television. As I watched the monitor, I found myself quite overcome with emotion, and the attendant psychologist very kindly took time out to help me. Even so, I was unable to remain in the room and had to go out for an hour simply to collect myself. The reason I felt such powerful emotions was that I have been trying so long to get science and society to admit the existence of the close encounter problem, and the idea that we might actually be closer to this excited me but also made me feel very aware of the injustice associated with the scorn and abuse that close

encounter witnesses endure.

I saw Dr. Leir and his colleagues as heroes, and time has only made me more sure of this opinion. As I write this, Dr. Leir has finished his own book about his work, titled *The Aliens and the Scalpel*, but I cannot yet report that it has a publisher.

There were three surgeries performed on the afternoon of May 18, 1996. I witnessed one of them on the closed-circuit monitor and observed a second in part on the monitor and in part firsthand. I watched this one through a window in the door of the operating room because I wanted to be able to say that I had personally seen the object extracted. I saw it being probed for, found, and drawn out.

In addition to video, still photography was again used to record these surgeries. Like me, I have no doubt that the doctors were concerned that there would be accusations of some sort of sleight of hand. I satisfied myself, in one case, that the surgery was absolutely normal, and the photographic record proves that the others were no different.

Given all the witnesses and the visual record, questioning that these operations happened, it would seem to me, would be a way of putting off the real question that they have raised: What are implants and why are they being found in people's bodies?

The particular surgery I observed personally was one that I considered to be of paramount importance, that of Alice Leavy. At the time, I had no way of knowing what would happen in Alice's life later, but there were already two reasons why I considered this surgery so important.

The first was that Alice's first awareness of the existence of the implant had come during a hypnosis session. Unlike the other patients, she did have a small scoopmark scar above the area where the object was found, but she had no memory of what caused this injury.

So in Alice's case, this surgery would to a degree test the question of how well hypnosis worked to find the facts in close encounters.

This type of hypnosis, where the witness is regressed to find evidence that is totally absent from natural memory, is the most severely criticized. But in this case, the efficacy of the hypnosis was immediately challenged with X ray, and it was found that an apparent foreign object was present in the area concerned. And then the object was removed.

So it appeared that hypnosis did have an efficacy here. Without it, Alice would never have suspected that an object was present, as the small scar was

innocuous and there was no indication of any lump under the skin.

There was another reason why the case was so important. This was the location of the object. It would be highly unlikely that a foreign body would get lodged deep in a calf muscle, unless the person had been a victim of shrapnel from an explosion, or had experienced the end of some kind of projectile breaking off in the tissue, or been hit by a bullet or BB. But Alice had never had any such injury.

Of the three surgeries performed, one involved excision of a triangular metallic object from a man's jaw, and two involved BB-sized grayish-white balls being removed from the legs. The metallic triangle from the jaw area also was covered with a membrane similar to one that covered an object Dr. Leir had removed from another patient's neck in an undocumented surgery.

So far, none of the objects removed has appeared to be particularly unusual. All are made of known materials. What is strange about them is that they were in these people at all.

What happened afterward was in many ways even more stunning than the removals themselves. I had wondered what might happen when an implant was taken out. If it had been inserted by aliens, would they react to what had been done?

In early December of 1996, I followed up the surgeries with a phone call to Alice Leavy. How was she doing? Fine. Had anything unusual happened after the removal?

Some people had felt as if they had lost a sense of intuition when their object was removed, but Alice was glad that hers was gone.

In her own quiet way, she then shocked me almost speechless by saying, "They came back and stayed for six days."

What in the world did she mean?

Thus begins the story of the Camarillo, California, sighting sequence. At 4:55 in the afternoon of December 2, 1996, an object was observed about fifty degrees up in the northern sky by a member of a family friendly to Alice. This object might easily have been an early star, but it was observed to be moving slowly, either rising into the northern sky or coming closer to the viewer, it was impossible to tell which.

It emitted a pure white light and was not in any way similar to aircraft, which could be seen in the area at the same time. Sunlight reflecting off their fuselages had a reddish hue.

At 5:10 P.M., the object changed color, from pure white to reddish-peach,

suggesting that the setting sun was at least in part responsible for the light. But the thought that it might be a balloon was ended when, a moment later, a small pinpoint object of the same color appeared below the main object, moving downward. Soon, small puffs of some sort of substance began to be emitted from the top of the larger object, a process now familiar from the Mexican videos and Dr. Hill's discussion of it as a plasmic effect. Then another small object separated from the main object on its left side. The two objects moved in tandem, then disappeared in what looked like a puff of smoke or mist. The sighting ended at 5:12.

The witness reported this event to Alice Leavy, and she arranged for a group to visit the location the next afternoon, armed with a video camera and still cameras with telephoto lenses.

The object appeared at 4:46 P.M. It was more defined than the evening before and had a spherical appearance. After some problems, video recording commenced. At 5:09, the object became reddish. Then a tiny dot of light was observed through binoculars to emerge out of the top of the larger object and move away from it. This was not visible on the videotape, however, due to the lack of detail resolution.

The object then changed, becoming a vertical chain of smaller objects that soon vanished. This transformation was recorded on the video, and much detail was captured by the still cameras as well, including the satellite objects exiting the large object.

I have seen some of the still photographs and can verify their remarkable combination of clarity and impossibility. Being that the object's actions were observed by half a dozen witnesses, both through binoculars and with the naked eye, and recorded on video and photographed at the same time, it is hard to maintain a case that they are anything that can be explained. After analyzing the video, Jerry Barber of Sunland Video Productions thought that the object, when it moved, might have accelerated at five thousand miles an hour.

So Alice Leavy, from whose leg one of the most inexplicable implants was removed, a few months later ended up witness to one of the best documented UFO sightings in recent United States history.

Of course, it is impossible to tell if this represented an attempt to communicate with her, but given the ultrahigh-level strangeness of everything else in the UFO and close encounter world, the possibility must at least be entertained.

But perhaps the lights in the sky have nothing to do with the implants in people's bodies. Up until the Camarillo sightings, the witness testimony itself offered the only link. Still, the case is far from perfect. We don't have any convincing video of a witness being taken aboard a UFO and only one that may even show an alien. Not only isn't there any physical or visual evidence that witnesses and UFOs are connected, there is no direct evidence that aliens are involved.

So how can we be sure? The answer is that we cannot, not just yet. The objects that Leir removed shouldn't have been in the witnesses, true, and that some that came from unrelated witnesses were identical is startlingly suggestive of intentional implantation, but the only way to determine that they were put there by aliens would be to prove that they were of non-Earth origin. So we know that they didn't belong where they were found but not who put them there. And we are far from knowing why.

Even the fact that Alice both had an object removed and then ended up being treated to a fabulous UFO sighting could be coincidence. I don't think that it's possible to say that the sighting can be explained in any normal manner, not given what is on the videotape and the photographs, but there is no nonspeculative way to relate it to the removed implant.

Still, it is also true that Alice experienced a dramatic increase in close encounter activity after the implant was removed, something that has also been reported by other witnesses. Alice was kind enough to share some entries from her personal journal with me, and I will let her tell the story of what happened to her after her surgery.

"July 11, 1996. I felt different since the surgery. No longer had the drive I once had to investigate UFO abduction. Just felt different. That evening, around 11:00 P.M., I started to get a bad headache. Unusual. On the right side of my face behind my temple and eye. I took a pain killer. (Aspirin-Free P.M.) I went to sleep around 12:10 P.M." Her husband and one of her two daughters were also asleep. The second daughter was watching television in her room. "Sometime between 12:15 and 1:00, she noticed her TV having double images on a few channels." She then turned off her TV and went to sleep at 1:00 A.M. The following events then unfolded: "Bill [Alice's husband] says that at 1:05 A.M. he awoke as a bright white light was shining into our bedroom. He thought it was time to get up and get ready to go to work, as it was so bright. He sat up in bed, looked at his clock—it was 1:05 A.M. He thought, 'Oh, good, I can go back to sleep, it's not time to get up.'

He then looked at my side of the bed, and noticed that the covers were pulled back and I was gone.”

He assumed that she was in the bathroom or something, but she reports that the medication made her sleep heavily all night and that she had no memory of getting up. The feeling of illness and exhaustion that she next reports will be familiar from some of the close encounter stories reported in Part Two of this book. “When I awoke my right ear hurt, and it was wet inside. All day I was very ill. I had an earache in my right ear, a headache and my stomach was very upset.” They also found that their dog had apparently panicked during the night, to the extent that it had scratched three large holes in the carpet in their family room, something that it had never done before.

These sorts of disturbances, with their vague implications of some sort of an outside factor being responsible, are very typical of what many witnesses report. Usually, they must be set aside as probable dreams and misperceptions, but in this case, the presence of the implant means that we could as easily be looking at fragmentary memories of a very real intrusion of some sort. But who came, and why?

It is going to require a methodical and scientific study to answer these questions. Since there are thousands of witnesses with implants, and many ready right now to submit to surgery and donate their objects to science, it would seem logical to seek a harvest of them. Still, because they suggest a reality that is so very far from the expectations of science and society, the tendency to continue to ignore the problem will persist. False and sabotaged research may be produced to facilitate continued rejection of the data.

Even if the objects are made of ordinary material, it may be that they contain extraordinary technology that we cannot detect. For example, if somebody had been given a transistor to analyze in 1915, he or she would have been able to report on its composition but would have had no idea of its function. It would not even have been possible to determine that it had a function. We may well be in the same situation with these objects.

It would be persuasive, I felt, if there existed an implant made of unusual materials, or showing obvious signs of the presence of technology that we do not understand. So for me the question became, could it be possible to find an object that not only was extracted from a close encounter witness but was also a mineral or technological mystery?

Meet Jesse Long and his friend Junior.

Chapter Sixteen

Jesse's Story

It is a summer afternoon in 1957, in the small country town of Rogersville, Tennessee. Jesse Long and his brother, Johnny, are playing in their yard when a man in a dark uniform gestures to them from the edge of the woods nearby.

Modern children would have reacted by running. But America in 1957 was a different place, the more so in rural areas. The boys, age five and four, look curiously toward the man. When he gestures to them with a long rod that he's carrying, they go over to see what he wants. Jesse is a little uneasy, so he takes John, who is seventeen months younger, by the hand.

The man leads them into the woods.

Soon they arrive at the top of a small hill, where stands what Jesse remembers as a little round house. The man then points the rod at them. It emits a bluish-white light, which paralyzes them. At this point, Jesse feels fear.

In the house, the boys are separated. Johnny is taken into a room where he finds toys. He plays with them, watched over by what appears to be a giant insect like a praying mantis. He does not feel fear for himself, but he does hear his brother screaming and crying in the next room.

Jesse is not having such a benign experience. He has come face-to-face with a tall man, very thin but human looking, with unusually large but otherwise normal eyes. He is told to remain calm and that they don't want to hurt him. Figures he cannot see work around the lower half of his body. He experiences pain from his leg, and he screams and cries.

The next thing he knows, he and his brother are back in the sandbox where they had been playing. They had both been told not to talk about it, and this is a more than normal suggestion. They want to tell, in order to get comfort and reassurance from their parents, but they cannot. Somehow, this terrifying and bizarre experience is simply swallowed by these two children.

It is not, however, reconciled, nor is it forgotten. Both of them remember the encounter.

John, who is an artist, as an adult built a sculpture of a giant praying mantis

and lives in a house constructed to resemble the round house on the hill.

Afterward, Jesse becomes fearful. He is so scared at night that he often hides under the covers. For him to sleep, the window at the head of his bed must be shut and the curtains drawn.

I first heard of Jesse Long in 1996 from a friend, special effects artist Steve Neill, as one of a number of close encounter witnesses who went public and as a result experienced damage to their careers. I had told Steve of my new plans to begin analysis of materials and do controlled studies of implants, plans that were inspired by the Dagenais case and the work of Dr. Leir and Derrel Sims.

Steve said that there was a man in Los Angeles who possessed an implant, and that when it had been removed from him, he'd had the surgery photographed and videotaped.

I called Jesse Long and found that he did indeed possess this object, along with the videotape and photographs of the removal. As we talked, I quickly realized that this was potentially a good case with which to begin my new effort. It had two interesting elements: a second witness who had natural memory of the event, and a physical implant to back it up. But it wasn't perfect. In a perfect case, there would be adult witnesses to the abduction as well as an implant that had been removed under controlled conditions and then placed directly into the hands of analyzing scientists.

Despite these weaknesses, on the mental ten-scale I had originally developed to help me evaluate letters, this case was a seven, which was extremely high. Most cases are a two or a three. Five would be the highest number so far achieved.

A one is a dream memory corroborated in some way by physical effects. An example would be somebody dreaming that he or she had contact, only to find a day or so later that there were confirmed UFO reports in the area. A two would add some kind of physical side effect to the encounter, such as a bloody nose. In a three case, there would be waking memory instead of or in addition to the dream memory. Four adds parties to the abduction, such as two people in the same family dreaming the same dream. In a five, they have shared waking experience. Six adds observers who independently see UFOs in the area during the abduction. Seven adds other conscious witnesses who observe aliens. Eight adds evidence such as an implant observable under the skin. In a nine case, there is extensive conscious encounter added to an extracted implant. In a ten case, the implant would be extracted under

controlled conditions and immediately transferred to a lab.

Beyond that, and off the scale, would be proof that the implant could not have come into the body naturally, and the final proof would be an implant that demonstrably could not have been manufactured on Earth.

Talking to Jesse, I got a very positive impression of his sincerity. But I also know that sincere belief may support false memories.

I was rather surprised to learn that his implant had been removed as long ago as 1989 and that he had not been able to find what he regarded as a satisfactory situation for it to be studied. He'd had two offers, though, one apparently from NASA and one from a private foundation. The NASA offer had come to him in a completely unbidden telephone call. He did not even know how they had gotten his name. They offered to fly him to Houston, but he was too unsure of the situation to respond positively. The private foundation wanted the implant but did not want him to come along with it and would not tell him whether they would release the results to him.

So the object had stayed in a small case on a chain around his neck, held there day and night for seven years.

Mr. Long was without personal resources to conduct the study on his own, because, since 1989, his career had been virtually destroyed. In that year, after the object was removed, he had begun to talk publicly about his situation. No sooner had he appeared on a fairly obscure public access television show than his formerly thriving business as a script supervisor began to decline.

I have heard this tale of woe so many times from witnesses who go public that I always suggest in the strongest terms that they remain anonymous.

There are many reasons for the persecution. Local skeptics groups actively engage in persecution of witnesses. UFO groups who do not agree with a witness's interpretation will do the same, as will religious groups, especially fundamentalists. There may be government intervention at times.

I am not much of a conspiracy theorist, but I do believe that a combination of cultural bias and even small amounts of active persecution can destroy lives and careers, because I have seen it. In point of fact, I do not know of a single witness who has gone public in the United States and not suffered economic and social hardship as a result.

Mr. Long's profession of script supervisor is quite competitive, and I have no doubt that his public statements were used against him. A script supervisor needs to be clearheaded, and the suggestion that he might have some sort of a

mental problem was probably what devastated his career.

On another level, it was interesting to me that we had undertaken our MRI study in 1989, Betty Dagenais's implant had been autopsied in 1989 and Jesse's object had been removed in 1989. Only now, in 1996, was anything more being done.

Why had all this time passed with nothing happening? I had been through a devastating depression, suffered a financial attack that led to the loss of my famous cabin and almost to my suicide, and had only gradually rebuilt my life. I don't know what happened to the Dagenais object during that period. Jesse's implant had remained in his immediate possession.

In 1995, I was in San Antonio a good deal, and I had met Catherine Cooke, the head of a local organization called the Mind-Science Foundation. This foundation had been created by Tom Slick, a wealthy oilman who engaged in the first scientific search for the abominable snowman, and sought to bring science to the study of rejected phenomena such as psychism. Slick also founded the Southwest Research Institute (SWRI), and I realized that it was conceivable that Mind-Science, with its mandate to explore the frontier, and Southwest, with its fabulous scientific resources, could work together to study implants. There would be resistance, of course, but I felt that, with Cathy Cooke's support, I might be able to make a little headway.

Cooke enthusiastically agreed to help fund the Long study, and we were soon ready to fly Jesse to Texas.

Southwest Research Center is divided into two parts: the nonprofit Biomedical Research Division and the Southwest Research Institute, which is not-for-profit and subsists on contracted research for government, industry, and the individual. We would be buying analysis from the Materials Sciences Division of Southwest Research Institute which would not be asked to make any commitment about the object. In any event, most of the scientists involved in the work didn't know where it had come from, and the staff member scientist involved, Dr. William Mallow, was never asked his opinion about UFOs.

Before I can turn to a discussion of the results of our studies, and why they made this such an incredible case, it is important to complete Jesse's story. For it is somewhere between the physical evidence and narratives like this that we are likely to find the beginnings of a real answer to the question of what UFOs and the close encounter experience may mean.

So far, nothing that I have told of Jesse's experience has been from

memories extracted with hypnosis. These are things that Jesse remembered in natural memory.

I have seen two childhood photographs of him. Jesse appears to be extremely uneasy. When I showed one of the pictures to a specialist in child psychology, she said that Jesse appeared to be grief stricken. Since he was not in grief when the picture was made, she thought that it might indicate that he was depressed.

This is not a usual state for a child and could well be related to an effort to conceal what the child regarded as a frightful secret. In one of the photographs, Jesse is touching his shin, in what he reports became an almost compulsive childhood gesture.

Jesse's next strong memory of something unusual is a vivid experience of flying over Florence, Alabama, the town to which the family had recently moved. He did not feel that this was a dream, not even at the time, but he also could not understand how it could be anything else.

The next winter, this harassed child became frightened of Santa Claus, because he could get into the house when people were asleep and nobody could stop him. Fears of the Sandman, the Easter Bunny and such sometimes seem to occur in children who are having trouble with the close encounter experience and may be related to memories of the figures they see and the apparent ease with which they gain access to the child.

When Jesse was twelve, a dreadfully disturbing event took place: Shadowy figures began to show him babies and tell him they were his children.

It is hard to think of anything more upsetting for a little boy just beginning to cope with puberty. I have never heard of a child fixating on a fear like this, or even dreaming about such a thing—nowhere except inside the close encounter experience.

Later, we will explore further the way that the experience connects to sexuality and genetics, because no discussion of it can be complete without reference to these two areas.

It is difficult to know how, as a child, Jesse really felt about these experiences. He is too gentle and straightforward a man to express much raw emotion, but when he said to me, "I was scared," I felt a wave of sympathy pour through me.

What external force would do this to a child? What child would have a nightmare like this?

His experiences continued. He would recall seeing craft flying above the

streets of the town and be terrified that they were coming for him.

The matter did not end with the close of childhood. In college, he saw a light come down from the sky and land in a field behind his house. He went out to see what was happening—only to find himself suddenly turned around and walking in the opposite direction, with no way to explain what happened to half an hour of his life. He had been walking toward the light, then experienced missing time and found himself walking away.

Of course, the time is not missing. The victim's memory is what is missing.

The picture Jesse presents is one that is very typical of people who are troubled by their encounters. It is hard to distinguish between the behaviors and feelings reported in many such cases and stories that might be told by a child who was trying to cope with repeated nocturnal visitations by an abusive human intruder by imposing imaginative reconstructions on acts that are too terrifying or dangerous to remember accurately.

In Jesse's case, though, the display of the babies stands out. It is an unusual memory for a child, even one whose mind is trying to screen conventional abuse with more palatable memories, or dissociating from the abused part of the self.

Long continued to struggle in his adult life. For the most part, he remembered what he referred to as "silhouettes," small figures moving very quickly in his house.

Through all of this time, the strange object remained embedded under the skin of his leg. Occasionally, there was mild irritation, but he made no effort to have it removed.

He moved to Los Angeles and began his career. As a member of the union, his future seemed secure. He was coping as best he could with his strange dream life and also living with wild mood swings and many other symptoms of a high level of stress that did not appear to have any clear source in his life.

He remembered a good childhood and was still in close touch with other members of his family, including his parents. Around this time, John built the house in the woods that was shaped like a UFO.

In 1989, Long read Budd Hopkins's book *Intruders*. He was startled by the similarity between his own memories and some of the stories told in the book, and he wrote Hopkins a letter describing his experiences.

At this point, a skeptic would say that he took a step into the fantasy world

of the abduction researchers. And previously any responsible party would have to say that, at the very least, his reading of a book on the subject by a writer like Hopkins or myself would quite possibly reconstruct disturbed but essentially normal memories around the imagery of alien abduction.

But things are changing, and Long's case is one of the first to reflect this change. Not only did he have his memories, he also had the object in his leg.

Hopkins referred Long to a support group in Los Angeles, and he eventually ended up working with Yvonne Smith, who has devoted her life to helping people who suffer from what I believe ought to be called contact trauma.

According to members of her group whom I have talked to, Yvonne has been successful in relieving them of stress. She uses hypnosis, and although it is effective in helping them to come to terms with their emotions, whether it is also an effective mnemonic tool is still an open question. As is suggested by the case of Alice Leavy, it is probably better than has been suggested by those who would deny the validity of the whole close encounter experience.

Some of the problems with hypnosis have been dimensionalized in a recent study conducted by Dr. Joseph Green, a psychologist at Ohio State University, and Dr. Steven Jay Lynn, a psychologist at SUNY Binghamton. They reported on their study at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association in August of 1997.

In the study, forty-eight students who had passed a susceptibility test that showed them to be highly hypnotizable were divided into two groups. Prior to regression, thirty-two of the students were warned that hypnosis could lead to false memories and told that it could not make people remember things that they would not ordinarily remember. Sixteen students were given no such warning.

The students were asked to select an uneventful night from the previous week during which they had experienced normal sleep with no recalled dreams. Under hypnosis, they were asked if they had heard a loud noise at four in the morning. Afterward, they were again asked this question.

Forty-four percent of the students who had not been forewarned reported that they had indeed heard it. Only twenty-eight percent of those warned made such a report.

This suggests that false memories can be induced in hypnotized subjects simply by asking questions. Also, though, people warned that this may happen may have an easier time discriminating.

I know Yvonne Smith both personally and by reputation, and I can say with assurance that she would never intentionally lead a witness. In fact, most researchers using hypnosis are well aware of these problems and compensate for them as best they can.

We cannot know, however, the degree to which the volatile situation and the hypnotic process may combine together to induce inaccuracies in witness memory. It is also clear, though, that regression offers both positive therapeutic effects for witnesses and may possibly be uncovering some very real experiences.

Nevertheless, extreme care has to be taken, and when a witness enters hypnosis, a line is crossed. This is especially true when the witness's natural memories are vague or even nonexistent. But that was not Jesse's situation. He went into hypnosis with a considerable store of intact natural memory.

In his work with Yvonne Smith, Jesse found that his uncertain experiences of the little "silhouettes" that came for him in the night concealed a great deal of suppressed memory, and it was extremely disturbing. He remembered instances of forced extraction of semen and being frequently shown children who were claimed to be the offspring of these assaults.

This led him to decide to have the object in his leg surgically removed, and this was done in May of 1989. There were no complications, and the surgery took only a few minutes. The object on the tape and in the photographs looks very much like the one that Jesse showed me in 1996. Although I cannot say that it is the same object, some quite shocking discoveries about it have made what happened to it in the years between 1989 and 1996 less important. No matter where it was during those years, and when it was put into his body, it is one very strange object.

A few months after it was removed, he had a horrendous experience, remembered in full consciousness, in which his visitors reappeared, apparently searching for the object. Not finding it, they left a painful injury in his leg in the form of a hole burned by a bright light, apparently a laser.

An event that took place in 1992, some years after the removal, suggests that the excision of the object had not ended his experiences. This happened in Atlanta, during the filming of a feature for which he was doing script supervision. It had been a long time between films, and he considered himself extremely lucky to get this job.

He had been provided with an apartment for the duration of the film's location time in Atlanta, and one night he was awakened by a noise. He

found himself paralyzed. He could see that there were shadows standing in the room. Terrified, he tried to protect himself, but he could not move. He was somehow transported to another location and placed in a reclining chair with his feet raised and his head back. A moment later a woman so thin that she appeared to be in an advanced state of starvation came onto him. As he puts it, "I began to feel and see that a sex act was taking place."

He pleaded for her to stop. He was so frightened and revolted that his struggles finally overwhelmed the paralysis enough to enable him to grab the woman's shoulders and push her off his body.

Up to this point, nothing in this situation is beyond conventional explanation. The "old hag" attack is a commonplace of psychology, a type of hypnagogic hallucination first described more than a hundred years ago. In a normal situation of this type, the breaking of the paralysis would cause the apparition simply to disappear. The victim, shaken and horrified, would eventually return to normal sleep.

In this case, though, that is not what happened. Paralysis did not cause the apparition to disappear. Instead, the woman fought fiercely, clawing Jesse's left arm as he thrust her away from him.

There was no further memory, but upon awakening the next morning, his attention was immediately drawn to a group of scratches on his left arm. Unlike the "old hag" nightmare, which is usually vividly remembered the morning after, Jesse had only a confused jumble of memories, much more like a trauma victim immediately after an assault or accident.

He and another member of the crew habitually took a walk together after breakfast, and this morning he showed her the marks. That afternoon, they were watching second unit film footage taken from a helicopter that had been flying at treetop level. While watching this, Jesse suddenly recalled being removed from his apartment and going up into the sky.

This unlocked a flood of memory, which came back so powerfully that he had a panic attack and collapsed. A 911 call was made, and he ended up in an emergency room with a diagnosis of shock.

Even though his work on the film was completely satisfactory, rumors about the incident got around Hollywood, and since then he has been hired only on rare occasions.

Did Jesse have a nightmare that was exacerbated by hysteria caused by his exposure to the UFO community? If so, why did it have such a strange structure, leave physical traces, and come into memory when triggered by a

mnemonic? This pattern fits spontaneous recollection of memories suppressed by trauma, not nightmare.

We do not know exactly what happened to Jesse Long. There is at present no way to be certain what parts of his story are fact. More than that, even when we are able to determine which of his memories his brain processes as real, physical events, we will just be at the beginning. This is because memories are not naked records of events, they are interpretations.

To find out the truth, we are going to have to locate a base in fact that is founded in an understanding of what actually happens to people like Jesse.

It is no longer responsible to dismiss a story like his as a disturbance that is probably due to child abuse that the victim has been induced to misinterpret to be alien abduction.

The reason is simple: Jesse's implant.

Chapter Seventeen

“Junior”

In the introduction to this book, I quoted Dr. Carl Sagan’s famous challenge, outlining what science needs to make the whole issue of UFOs and aliens worth studying. Among the things he said would be needed was, “material of absolutely bizarre properties of many sorts—electrical conductivity or ductility.”

As part of my proposal to Catherine Cooke and Dr. William Mallow that their foundation engage in a study of implants and suggested that the first object to be studied should be Jesse’s implant. Initially, we laid ambitious plans to undertake a program that would start with witnesses who still had implants in their bodies, then extract these objects and study them under the kind of controlled conditions that could lead to the publication of papers in the peer-reviewed scientific press.

However, the Mind-Science Foundation is both small and not directly concerned with the essentially physical issues that surround the question of implants. Its small size made the board wary of the liability implications of a human subjects study, and there was the question of whether its charter directed it to enter this area.

A letter from Dr. William H. Stone, chairman of the Scientific Advisory Committee sent to Ms. Cooke and other members of the board stated, in regard to the implant project, that they had “ranked it low in terms of adding to the knowledge base of ‘mind science.’ It went on to say that “the issue of liability was raised by every voting member of the Committee.”

If studies like this are to proceed beyond where they are now, it is going to require commitment from organizations whose charters charge them with solving problems like those that an implant poses. These problems are very complex and involve everything from the behavioral, memory, and mental health issues brought by the hosts, to their overall physiological condition, to the detailed state of tissues surrounding the object, to the obvious materials and technological issues connected with the object itself.

It is obviously not within the purview of a small foundation devoted to studying the human mind to undertake such a study, but it is to be

congratulated for at least taking the project seriously and attempting to find a way to do it.

It is well within the Communion Foundation's chartered aims, but again, to do the study on a large enough scale will require greater resources than it possesses. Also, because of all the controversy and the extremely high level of resistance from science, the study needs the support of more established institutions.

Such institutions must not allow a cultural bias against the possibility of an alien presence being responsible to stop them. I have often met open-minded scientists who end up jumping through hoops to avoid this one possibility. All possibilities must be faced head on.

I met Jesse Long for the first time on June 18, 1996, when he drove to San Antonio with the object that he calls "Junior." He was not willing for it to leave his sight, not even to be brought by courier to the lab. So we had agreed that he would accompany it personally to San Antonio and stay with it as it moved from equipment station to equipment station, being tested.

When I first saw it, I was quite disappointed. Jesse kept it in a round plastic container on a piece of dark foam material, and it looked like nothing more than a sliver of glass. I had already interviewed him on the telephone, and I was quite familiar with his case, so my immediate thought was that this was just an ordinary sliver of glass, and I was looking at a possible case of child abuse that had been distorted into memories of alien abduction by a combination of cultural forces and the subject's inability to face the truth.

I almost suggested to Dr. Mallow that the tests not proceed. The Mind-Science Foundation had kindly provided the funds for the testing, and I thought that it was my responsibility to cut their losses. Mallow, however, who has been with SWRI since 1954, immediately noticed things about the object that piqued his interest.

For example, even though it appeared to be glass, it held an unusual pliancy, and there was a faint clouded effect that interested him.

The following tests were applied:

SCANNING ELECTRON MICROSCOPE EXAMINATION WITH SPECTRAL ANALYSIS
FTIR (INFRARED) SPECTROSCOPY
X-RAY DIFFRACTION

As we went into the darkened electron microscope area, I recalled my

youthful fascination with this astonishing technology. I was looking at an instrument that could see almost to the atomic level, and I was suitably awed.

It operated effortlessly, and the journey down to the surface of Jesse's object was, I believe, the most extraordinary that I have ever taken.

Dr. Mallow's report described the object as follows: "A glass-like fragment resembling the shard of a broken bottle; about 1.5 cm. long, 3 mm. wide tapering to 1 mm. at the tip, and 1 to 1.5 mm. thick; colorless and slightly clouded when viewed against a black background. The narrow tip appears to have been broken and blunted as opposed to a fine point. The 1 mm. cross-section of the tip appeared dark when viewed at an angle or directly."

There was no reason, at this point, to believe that this was not exactly what it appeared to be—a glass shard, completely trivial. However, as the electron microscope looked more closely, some unusual details began to emerge. "The narrow tip contained a carbonaceous inclusion, dark and globular in form, at approximately 1000X magnification."

This material appeared to be a tiny quantity of dried blood that had been forced into this well-defined indentation in the tip of the object. Could the tip of this thing be structured? Were we looking at accident or design?

More work needs to be done to determine this. What can be said at present is that it did not appear like the irregular tip of an ordinary glass shard. In addition, there was a groove running down the body of the object from the tip, and it seemed possible that one edge of the object's surface had been sharpened and then melted in order to smooth rough edges. But these were just initial observations.

A more definite piece of odd evidence was observed: "The wide end of the shard contained a bulbous and spheroidal outcropping suggesting rapid cooling of a liquid or a melt."

If the strange condition of the tip and the apparent attempt to melt rough edges were both taken together, did it not suggest that this object was not a glass shard at all but something manufactured? If so, then we could be looking at something that had been purposely built to penetrate the skin.

There were a couple of features about it that were already interesting in this regard, the main one being that there had been no attempt by Jesse's body to reject the object. Normally, foreign objects will be rejected by the body, either floated out the entry wound or, if that isn't possible, then encapsulated in minerals that will enable the rejection process to stop.

The object had remained in Jesse's body for thirty-four years without being rejected but had come out completely clean. It had not been encapsulated at all, which meant that it was not recognized by the body as a foreign object.

There was only one reason why the object might have caused this kind of response: It had to be made of a substance that the body does not reject. There is one, called Bioglass, which is a glass formula developed in the 1970s for use in dental implants that the body recognizes as bone and does not reject. However, the body integrates Bioglass, so why, after thirty-four years, was this object still free?

Since Jesse had definitively claimed that the object had been in his body since 1957, I would have been very concerned if it was, in fact, Bioglass. To me, this would raise a suggestion that this object had been manufactured much more recently than 1957.

I said nothing about any of this to the lab personnel. Their tests were thorough. If it was Bioglass, they were going to find that out when they did comparative work on the spectroscopy and identified the formula.

The scanning electron microscope's spectral analysis was not unusual. "Silica dominated the spectra with calcium, magnesium, and some potassium, sulfur, iron and zinc in very low levels." Nothing odd there except the sulfur.

"The X-ray fluorescence, which can penetrate the mass, revealed a very remarkable composition. I was astonished by the levels of calcium, phosphorous, and most surprising, sulfur in this specimen. No known glass or transparent ceramic was available in the 1950s with 6% phosphorus, 22% calcium, and certainly not with sulfur at any measurable level, let alone 22.42%. A 1970s patent for Bioglass does resemble the implant, except for the sulfur content." This was confusing. If the object was Bioglass, then where had the sulfur come from? Maybe it was responsible, in some way, for the fact that the object had not functioned in the body in the same way that bioactive ceramics do. What happens when a bioactive ceramic is inserted into the body is that the surface of the ceramic forms a biologically active layer that works as a bonding interface with the surrounding tissue. And not only do bioactive ceramics bond, the bonding layer can be stronger than the implant material itself.

None of the eleven different formulas for bioactive ceramics, including five Bioglass formulas, contained any sulfur. There was also a small amount of potassium (1.10 percent) found in Jesse's implant, which is not part of these formulae.

So this was interesting, and Dr. Mallow suggested that another set of tests be run. Prior to doing that, however, it was discovered that the object was smaller than the minimum required size for the X-ray fluorescence instrument that had been used to detect the sulfur, so that result probably was not reliable.

Without the sulfur, the formula was conceivably close enough to Bioglass to end the story of this implant. This is because what had happened to it during the seven years between 1989 and 1996 now became all-important. Unless we could say that we knew for certain that this was definitely the same object that had been in Jesse's leg since he was a child, the only possible conclusion would be, "Bioglass, probably manufactured sometime after 1970."

What disturbed me about drawing this conclusion, though, was the extremely aggressive and unpleasant nature of Jesse's story. If his perceptions were accurate, then somebody had been exploiting him in a brutal manner. I did not want to allow an excess of skepticism to deprive him of his one tangible piece of evidence that the torment that had followed him throughout his whole life was real. If I did that, I might end what chance he may have of receiving the support, or at least the sympathy, of society.

The fact that Jesse's abductors had been so secretive and that he had been routinely subdued, with no effort made to convince him to comply voluntarily meant to me that there was a strong possibility that what was being done to him would turn out to be unwanted even if it was explained.

Anybody engaged in an activity like this would take pains to conceal the least shard of evidence. So, did the subtle hints of manufacture mean that this was a piece of technology in disguise, and we were on the point of discarding it because we were being deceived by what was, in effect, an attempt to camouflage it as something ordinary?

This bit of glass would have been discarded as unimportant by any doctor who might have removed it during Jesse's childhood. Now, without the sulfur, we were back to Bioglass. But there was a second inspection of the object conducted in December of 1996, largely because of Dr. Mallow's insatiable curiosity about materials. Since he had not found the correct formula the first time, he wanted another crack at it.

This time, scanning electron microscopy, X-ray diffractometry and, despite the previous problems, X-ray fluorescence would be employed in analysis.

It had been determined that X-ray fluorescence could be used even though

the object was very small, as long as there was some adjustment made for the readings that would be obtained from the part of the X-ray beam that reflected back from the surface on which the object was placed. So when the test was run, a blank was also run using only the mounting component as a reference, and the values obtained in this test were then subtracted from those in the test containing the object.

This resulted in a reading that was similar to the reading obtained from the surface scans run off the electron microscope and left no further doubt that sulfur was not a component of this object.

Under X-ray diffraction, the object was confirmed to be amorphous, not crystalline. But we had a further interesting issue appear this time, again suggesting some sort of manufacturing process. "An orange peel effect at 140X, which is not typical of fused silica or a glass shard, was observed."

The lab broke a number of glass jars and examined the breaks microscopically, and could find no instances where this texture occurred.

Further efforts were made to induce normal glass to exhibit this surface effect. "One shard was caustic treated using 10-normal sodium hydroxide, boiled for 30 minutes, and another acid exposed for a short period (1-2 minutes)." This was done to see if artificial biochemical aging could produce the effects. No such structures appeared.

Could it be, I asked on reading the report, that these structures might have appeared if we had aged Bioglass?

Then I was told that the new, more accurate readings showed that the formula was not Bioglass at all. In fact, there were some very strange features about this formula, the first one of which was that, since it wasn't Bioglass, why hadn't it been rejected?

The object was actually stranger than it would have been if the original formula had been correct. And then it got even stranger.

The ordinary glass shards were subjected to scanning electron microscope examination and "induced such severe charging and scatter, they could not be photographed or analyzed." This is absolutely typical of glass and occurs because it does not conduct electricity. For such substances to be examined by SEM, they must first be coated with a superthin film of gold. This is standard operating procedure in a laboratory.

"In contrast, JL's implant did not charge, and photographed and analyzed easily."

The problem with this was the formula, which was now confirmed by two

instruments: The object was not just a piece of ordinary glass; it was 99.3 percent silica by weight, more like fused quartz. Ordinary glass is nonconductive, and with this high a silica content, there is no way to see how it should have been possible to examine the object with the SEM without first making the surface electrically conductive.

So it was now strange on three levels: (1) it *wasn't* Bioglass, but it had not been rejected by the body; (2) it was an unusual formula with a very high amorphous silica content and strange surface features; and (3) it was electrically conductive, which should have been impossible.

“In conclusion, the implant *does* exhibit unique surface characteristics that cannot be explained by any assumed biochemical effect arising from extended exposure to a host's body fluids, even after 30 years of *in vivo* exposure. Since there is no known precedence for such a situation as this, we cannot make a reasoned judgment for the anomalous surface topography and general morphology of the shard.”

The exact formula for the implant is: silicon, 99.3 percent; potassium, 0.02 percent; calcium 0.27 percent; and iron, 0.03 percent. The rest of the material (.38 percent) consisted of traces too small to be identified without destructive testing of the object.

I wanted to know if the iron could have made it conductive. The answer was that many glasses contain even larger traces of iron and do not conduct. It would take a much larger proportion of iron in the formula to accomplish this. Dr. Mallow hypothesized that the strange surface structure might be the answer to the conductivity. The effect cannot be caused by a film because the object was cleaned with water, acetone, and alcohol, but it is possible that something exists down in the cracks between the surface cobbles that is providing the conductivity. If so, did this substance come from Jesse's body, or was it applied to the surface as part of a construction? There is at present no definitive answer to this question. But it should be noted that the fact that the object was electrically conductive also made it functional: This could have worked like a radio crystal, receiving its power either from an external source or from the body.

“One interesting observation worth noting is the extreme heat required to generate a glass of 99% silica. Most boro-silicate glasses and flint glasses are processed at under 2500F (1500-2000F), but a glass of 99% silica would require over 3000F to process easily (blow, cast or mold).” Such a glass would have started out as quartz, diatomaceous silica, or pyrogenic silica. In

this case, diatomaceous silica was ruled out because there were none of the microscopic anatomical features from the skeletons of the diatoms (tiny sea creatures) that would have been present if this material had been used.

High silica content glass is a substance that is difficult to make and to stabilize but that offers certain significant advantages in terms of things like refractivity and heat conductivity. The manufacture of this glass would have involved an extreme range of heat and a considerable amount of technological expertise. For example, the insulating tiles on the space shuttle, notoriously difficult to produce, are made from pyrogenic silica, an ultrahigh silica content glass.

Is this some kind of a trick, then, something made in a laboratory that would, on examination, appear strange enough to generate the belief that it was an implant?

Possibly, except then how did they create the object's surface, and what was this odd artifact doing in somebody's body? Pictures taken of Jesse as a child show his scar; that same scar is visible in photographs of the removal of the object, with the object being drawn out from under it. And even if the conductivity can be explained, the cobbled surface is still strange, and what such an object might have been doing inside somebody's body is a complete unknown.

Although no known technologies seem associated with the object, it is interesting to note that such a material might have a technological application that we can understand. It could conceivably modulate signals, receiving and possibly transmitting on specific frequencies like a commonplace radio crystal. It might be possible to study the object further in order to determine this, but before that happens, it would be helpful if other such objects could be located and harvested for purposes of comparison.

The report concluded: "The questions outnumber the answers." And that, at the moment, is where the matter stands.

Chapter Eighteen

My Implant

After I discovered in 1988 that there were some unknown bright objects in my brain, I was in a terrific quandary. There seemed to be nothing further that I could do to resolve the question of whether these objects meant anything. What worried me was that, because of my books, I had become a person who was looked to for answers. Even if inappropriate, this was inevitable. But what if my mind was somehow being influenced from the outside?

My books were being taken as a sort of message by many people that spiritually evolved aliens were here trying to influence humankind in a positive way. Although I had tried to tell my story as I had experienced it, I thought that what I had also done was raise a series of questions. Yet, when I read the books months after writing them, I could see a disturbing difference between what I had written and what I had intended.

In general, while the books frequently raised and repeated questions through their pages, the descriptive material was so vivid that, as often as they were raised, its impact obscured them. And no matter how often I raised them again publicly, I was generally introduced on radio and television as “alien abductee Whitley Strieber.” As I would always point out, I didn’t know what had happened to me. Still, I appeared to have become a propagandist for aliens, when what I was trying to do was conduct a public inquiry into whether they even existed.

In the early 1990s, my concern that my public presence was really a form of advocacy for something I thought should remain in question was one thing that caused me to back away from the whole field. I began writing fiction again: *Billy*, *Unholy Fire*, and *The Forbidden Zone*. At the same time, the adventure with the visitors continued to become steadily more intimate and intense.

I set conditions that I thought would be impossible for them to meet if they were figments of my imagination. As I described in *Breakthrough*, they met these conditions with an astounding series of encounters that left me feeling that I had to return to the subject. Still and always, though, I wondered if my mind was really independent of them...or some human agency that might be

behind them.

Then an event took place that continues to haunt me. I have never recorded it before because it happened after *Breakthrough* was finished and there was no place for it in my book about childhood, *The Secret School*. But I have spoken about it in lectures and have thought a great deal about it.

The night of May 24, 1995, was cool but still at our cabin in upstate New York, and we left our bedroom windows opened. Even through the tumultuous and terrible years that have followed, I have never forgotten those few minutes of extreme terror and wonder that came into my life because we did that.

I had been sleeping lightly but peacefully when, at 3:15, I heard the distinctive sound of car tires crunching on our gravel driveway outside. This brought me instantly to consciousness. There was a locked gate halfway down the drive, well away from the house. But this car was *here*, right under the bedroom window. We were totally isolated; the only thing that kept us in communication with the outside world was a single telephone line, and that could easily be cut.

Then I heard the garage door going up, which couldn't happen without the alarm going off. But it was happening.

As I opened my eyes, I heard a voice behind the house, on the opposite side from the driveway, say, quite clearly in the silence, "Condition red." I thought that I was being invaded by crazy people or perhaps some sort of intelligence community team.

I wanted to do three things: get my gun out of the bedside drawer, turn on all the outside lights, and call the sheriff's office if I could. As I turned to open the drawer, I saw something that terrified me to my very core: Somebody was standing in the hall just outside the bedroom. I couldn't see this person very well. It was dark in the room, which was lit only by the LEDs from the burglar alarm, which still showed itself as armed.

Immediately, two people moved into the room, a young woman in black, featureless clothing, and behind her a man, taller, with a full beard. The woman said something, or generated some sort of a sound, I don't know which, and I was rendered helpless. But my eyes were wide open, and I was totally conscious. I was unable to speak or move, though. I was absolutely beside myself with terror and rage. I'd always feared that some night these sorts of people would show up, and God only knew what was going to happen to me and Anne now.

They came close to the bed. The woman looked perfectly human. She was small, with a grave, rather pretty face. Then, slipping and sliding along behind them, I saw something else. I did not see it well, but it seemed to me by the way it moved—a graceful, almost serpentine motion—that it was one of the nonhuman forms that have become so familiar to me. Then the young woman, who was now right beside the bed, reached down and pushed my eyes closed.

A blast of pure fury went through me. The sensation of helplessness was hideous, the feeling of vulnerability appalling. I was turned halfway on my side and could not tell what might be happening to Anne. I wanted to help her, I wanted to get us out of here. I cursed myself for having continued to live in this isolated place so long.

Then I felt myself lifted up, bending at the waist, with the lower part of my body still on the bed. When I was laid back down again, my head was in somebody's lap. They were sitting on the bed, and I was facing their midriff, meaning that the left side of my face and my left ear were exposed.

Somebody began doing something to my ear, and all the while there was a voice speaking in a sort of singsong. I have never been able to remember what was said. The next thing I knew, I was plunged into the kind of blackness that comes when you are on the operating table and the anesthesia hits. The moment I woke up the next morning, I turned toward Anne. I shook her awake. Even though hours had passed, in my mind it seemed as if the incident had happened just a second ago.

She was fine. As usual, she had not been disturbed during the night. She recalls now that as I described the incident to her, I mentioned that the people had come in a white Jeep Cherokee. I do not know how to account for the fact that I said that, except that there could be components of my experience that I have forgotten. Maybe I got out of bed and looked out the window before I was overcome. If I did this, I would have seen right into the driveway.

My immediate desire was to investigate the incident. Remembering that the garage door had been opened, I threw on some clothes and went downstairs. When I entered the garage, I found that the door behind our car was indeed wide open. But the burglar alarm was still armed and was not indicating this breach of the perimeter in any way. I disarmed the system, anticipating that later I would look at its readout for the night and see if it recorded any entries into the house.

I got into the car with the idea of driving down to the gate and seeing if it was also open. As I backed out, I felt a strange tickling sensation. Then I noticed that there was static everywhere in the car. When I moved my hand off the steering wheel, it made a spark. Touching the back of the passenger seat caused another one. I had just backed the car free when I noticed this. I leaped out, worrying that something might happen to me in that environment.

Although I did not think to examine the driveway for new tracks until that moment, it didn't matter because I hadn't driven over it yet. When I did look for tracks, I couldn't make out anything unusual. We came and went all the time, as did various trucks and so forth, so there was no way to tell much. The shale surface did not, in any case, take deep or detailed tracks.

I went back in the house and tried to settle down. I tried the phone; it was fine. I pulled the last twelve hours of activity on the alarm system, but all it showed was the normal arming and disarming. Whatever had happened had bypassed the system. I shaved and finished dressing, then checked the car. It seemed to have returned to normal inside, so I went down to the gate. It was closed, and it worked perfectly. There were no ruts suggesting that a vehicle might have gone around it and through the woods.

I called the man who had installed the alarm system, and he came out later in the day to check it. Everything worked, including the switch on the garage door. But he explained that a switch like this could be defeated magnetically. If a powerful enough magnet was held near it before the door was opened, it wouldn't trip. But the magnet would have to be very powerful.

Still, that didn't explain why the circuit had never broken. When I'd gone downstairs four hours after the incident, the door was still wide open and the alarm was still on. He replaced the switch and adjusted its placement, but there was nothing really decisive that he could do. I had already been through a terrifying series of incidents where somebody had been calling the system from the outside, disarming it over the phone, then coming in and, in one case stealing a check and leaving a virus on the computer, in others placing firebombs in the basement. The installer had closed off the part of the system that enabled it to answer calls, and I had complained to the New York State Police Criminal Investigation Division about the intrusion. There had been no investigation.

Late that afternoon, my left ear began to hurt. The pinna, or outside, of the ear was sore. Anne looked at it, and it was red. We felt it and found a swelling just behind the crown. The outer part of the swelling seemed hard.

On the inside edge of the pinna there was something that felt almost like a coiled wire.

I thought: implant. And immediately I wondered if I should try to get it operated on. In those days, I was still unaware of Roger Leir's work, so I assumed that the surgery would have to be done by somebody who knew nothing about the possibility. I knew, also, that this would mean that I would not get to keep the materials—if any—that came out. They would go to tissue pathology, be examined for cancerous tissue, and that would be that.

I went to my doctor in New York anyway, though, just to be certain that the swelling wasn't a sign of some disease that was unrelated to the incident. He thought that it was a little strange but essentially innocuous. He counseled me that, if it grew or became irritated again, to come back for a biopsy.

Over the next few months, we were compelled for financial reasons to leave our beloved home forever and began to split our time between small apartments in New York and San Antonio, keeping to a tight budget. In the agony of these days, I wished often that I could return to being a non-controversial fiction writer, but I just could not let this go, not after all that had happened.

The next thing I knew, I had heard of Roger Leir's work, and I immediately thought that I might get my implant removed as well. But then I heard of the warning that had been made to Betty Stewart Dagenais, that she would die if her object was removed. The problem was that our objects were in exactly the same place: on the puma of the left ear.

So how was I to take this? Was the warning general or specific? Was it even real? All close encounter witnesses deal with a tangled knot of imagination and reality in their memories. Nobody—myself included—can be certain about anything. So I hesitated. Dr. Leir felt the object and commented on the same structures that I could feel. His six patients had not been harmed by their removals. Jesse Long had not been injured.

So, I decided to see if I could find a doctor willing to remove it. I did not go to Dr. Leir because I thought that he would become open to charges that he was the only one discovering these things in people. So I found a general practitioner in San Antonio. For his own peace of mind and because of the weird sequel that involves him, I am not going to name him. However, the procedure was recorded on videotape, and the laboratory analysis of what was removed is a matter of record as well. There is also the scar on my ear.

The surgery was conducted on October 9, 1997, in San Antonio. The

diagnosis was a foreign object in the pinna of the left ear that became irritated when I slept on it and interrupted my sleep. The doctor was aware of who I was but conducted the surgery only on the basis of this diagnosis. Prior to surgery, an X ray was taken that did not show a return that would suggest, for example, the presence of a metallic object. But the doctor could palpate the object, which he described as a “hard mass fixed to the pinna of the ear.”

The surgery was an in-office procedure with local anesthesia. I was conscious the whole time, and there was little pain. The operation proceeded normally until the surgeon actually uncovered the object. It appeared to be a discrete white oval shape that was to a degree intermixed with the cartilage surrounding it. When the doctor attempted to dissect it out, however, there was an unusual reaction.

He commented, “I can’t even feel it anymore.” Far from being fixed, which he had determined on quite a careful examination of the ear prior to the surgery, the object was proving to be highly mobile.

He opened up the incision a little more to try to regain the object, but it was no longer present. He tried dissecting away some of the cartilage. He said, “I have the cartilage exposed,” but he still could not find the object. He continued, “It’s like it moved. I had it marked, and it’s like it’s lower.” He concluded, “The whole idea is that I can see the cartilage, but it’s intermixed in the cartilage. And at this point it would take literally excising the cartilage, and we’re not going to do that. But it did move down and it did diminish in size, which is even more odd because lidocaine causes things to swell up.”

At this point, the surgery was concluded. What we had were two small samples. One was almost certainly ordinary cartilage, but the other might have been a piece of the object. These were taken to Southwest Research, where they were observed under a microscope. The first sample was indeed cartilage. The second appeared to be collagen, possibly of an unusual structure, but this was uncertain because the cutting involved in removing it could have caused its appearance. However, it contained crystals a few microns in size that appeared similar to Jesse Long’s much larger object. The crystals were examined under the scanning electron microscope and found to consist of calcium carbonate or possibly calcium phosphate.

As calcium, carbon, and phosphorus are present in the body, the crystals could conceivably have appeared as a result of laboratory procedures. Before being examined, the material was removed from the preservative saline solution, dried in alcohol, then placed under the bright light of the FTIR

microscope. It is possible that this caused the crystals to precipitate, but why they would appear as discrete formations rather than in the sort of clumps that normally occur in precipitation was unclear. However, it would be far from a typical finding, as calcereous inclusions are not found in crystalline species in cartilage even given preparation. But with just this rather ambiguous evidence, it would be inappropriate to conclude that anything otherworldly is involved. But it's my ear, and I know when I first noticed the swelling, so I must confess that I am suspicious that the unusual nature of the finding means that we are stumbling around with some kind of technological inclusion that is very far beyond our understanding. But this is hardly a scientific conclusion. What is needed, yet again, is more evidence—more funny lumps in more ears, as it were.

There are two diseases that might cause crystals to appear in tissue. One is gout, but that's ruled out because the crystals would have been formed of uric acid. The second is somewhat more interesting. Pseudogout deposits crystals of calcium pyrophosphate in joints.^[63] But it is not a disease of the pinna of the ear, and I have none of its arthritislike symptoms. It is conceivable, though, since it also lodges in cartilage, that this is the explanation for this object. The doctor felt that this should be ruled out because he did not feel that the disease involves the ear.

Over the years since I noticed the object, there have been some instances in which it seems to have become active. The first of these took place during my first meeting with my new literary agent just a few weeks after the object appeared. My left ear became hot, and I began hearing warbling noises. I excused myself and went into the men's room, where I observed the ear to be bright red. I soaked paper towels in cold water, but before I could apply them, the heat and the sound both stopped abruptly. The second incident took place while I was describing this incident to Dr. Mallow, during one of my first meetings with him. He was able to observe the ear turn bright red but could not hear any of the accompanying sounds. This incident also ended abruptly. The third time, I was in a slide program prepared by artist and close encounter witness Steve Neill. Slide after slide of the familiar little aliens with the huge black eyes were flashing on the screen, when suddenly the warbling sound started in my left ear again, and the exterior of my ear became hot. A few moments later, I was called out of the room. Fellow witness Kim Carlsberg, who has published a book about her experiences,^[64] was upset. Her left ear had become hot and was glowing bright red exactly

like mine. I could not feel anything in the cartilage, but we ended up sitting there and staring at each other in helpless perplexity as our ears slowly returned to normal. Another witness had something similar removed from her forehead, which proved to be filled with microscopic strands of silica.

There was an extremely peculiar sequel to my surgery. It seems that some days before doing the surgery on me, my doctor had scheduled the removal of a lump from his own back after a biopsy that suggested the possible presence of precancerous cells. This lump was excised by his dermatologist on October 27, 1997. It was not precancerous but instead contained what he reported to me was a “small gray inclusion that was unlike anything the dermatologist had ever seen before.”

Absolutely nobody involved ever dreamed that this would happen. We were not prepared for it, and the inclusion was lost to study. A very frustrating and disappointing outcome for me, I can assure you. The doctor said, when I explained to him the possible importance of objects like this, “Wait a minute. You’re telling me that I busted one alien implant, and got another one taken out?”

“If that’s what they were, you sure did.”

“So what happens to me now?”

I was able to reassure him that nothing untoward has happened to Roger Leir and his colleagues...at least, not so far. But if the upsurge in close encounter activity that has been reported by other witnesses who have had their objects removed is any example, it is possible that this doctor—who doesn’t remember anything in his life to do with aliens—might be headed for some interesting times.

I could not conclude from my surgery and the analysis of the material removed if it was all natural and explainable or if it was really something unknown. The doctor who did the surgery felt strongly that the movement of the object was quite unusual, because it had so clearly been fixed when he examined it, both initially and just prior to the incision being made.

At the moment, this is where the story ends—almost. As of October 30, 1997, my ear has healed. The object has returned to its former shape and size, including the suggestion of a coiled structure on the inside of the pinna. And last night, while I was out walking the dog with my wife, the ear became very hot, and the tones recurred for about thirty seconds.

I tell this story in such detail because I think that a great many people who have strange objects in their bodies are going to have the experience of

getting the objects removed and then being unable to tell for certain what they are. All of the stories will not be as clear as those of Jesse Long and Alice Leavy. A lot of us are going to end up living just as I must live, in a state of question about what might be happening to them.

Although I can say that this has not affected my health in any negative way, it is not an easy thing to live with. I am haunted by implants. What do they do? How might they be affecting my work? Above all, are the objects in my brain and ear even implants? There are credible natural explanations for both of them...at least, on the surface.

Anyway, the press always snickers at the idea of implants, so shouldn't we dismiss them as goofy, even paranoid, nonsense? In a society as heavily burdened with secrets as ours is in the late twentieth century, I don't think that would be wise. In this society, anybody who isn't at least somewhat paranoid probably isn't entirely sane.

I would never rule out the possibility of a human connection in the close encounter experience. Many witnesses besides me have seen human beings during their encounters. There is a whole subgroup whose entire abduction experience involves only people, mostly in military uniforms. And given what will emerge in the next chapter, I don't think that any thoughtful American can assume that the intelligence community can be trusted not to engage secretly in mind control research.

I wish that I could report that I couldn't find evidence of any such research, but that is very far from true. In fact, the truth is quite shocking, because not only has there been a great deal of research, the American intelligence community has mounted a shameful series of attempts to develop outright mind control, engaging in the process in some of the most horrific experiments ever undertaken by man.

Chapter Nineteen

What Do the Implant Data Mean?

The great strengths of the surgeries performed by Dr. Leir is that all were carefully recorded, that some of the objects were identical, and that none of them should have been in the witnesses. The weaknesses are that there was a time lag between the surgeries and the analysis of the objects, and the objects were not found to be made of unusual materials, although it is hard to see how a T-shaped structured object cored with meteoric iron would have come into somebody's body by accident, or how two totally unrelated people would bear virtually identical objects of the same odd substance.

The Jesse Long case reveals an object that, after two laboratory examinations, remains hard to characterize. It is an unusual substance, fused quartz, with a composition of ninety-nine percent amorphous silica. It has probably been melted and honed, suggesting that it was manufactured. In addition, its cobbled surface is unusual. How it could conduct electricity is not clear, as its surface was cleaned of impurities, and silica is nonconductive. On the other hand, there is no way to confirm that the object actually entered Jesse's leg in 1957 because there are no medical records attesting to this. There could be something else under the childhood scar visible in old photographs of him. Moreover, the seven-year gap between its excision and the analysis means that we cannot be certain that what was analyzed and what was removed are the same thing. In this case, though, the fact that the object is so mysterious outweighs the lack of a clear record of possession.

Beyond these first few cases, there are thousands more. Many more implants can be excised, conditions can be controlled more rigorously, and a very extensive array of studies can be applied both to the objects and their bearers. We can also attempt things like relating the type of encounter to the type of implant, to see if there is some correlation. We can use new techniques to determine from brain biology and function what parts of the witnesses' memories are factual. Before excision of the objects, we can subject implanted witnesses to all sorts of psychological and physical tests, to attempt to determine what the objects do. Afterward, we can search for

technology in the objects, then engage in much more thorough materials analysis than has yet been done. In the end, we can probably make educated guesses about the purpose of the objects.

Scientists all over the world are racing to achieve implantable nanotechnologies of all kinds. Already, we implant animals with transponders that emit identifying signals when excited by incoming radio signals on the correct frequency. But they are too short range for tracking, and are used for identification purposes, and only in animals.

Four companies distribute veterinary-grade implants, Destron/IDI, American Veterinary Identification Devices, Identichip, and Infopet Identification Systems. The devices that they manufacture are tiny but not yet small enough to fit comfortably under human skin, which is much thinner than that of most animals. Radio tracking can be accomplished in animal husbandry but only with collars. An implantable tracking device is quite possible, though. Certainly, the miniaturization technology is already available. Hughes Missile Systems manufactures a trackable microchip called the Hughes Position Locating Reporting System for use in vehicles from trucks to missiles. The reason this device cannot be used as an animal implant is that it would require a battery if it did not have a vehicle electrical system as a power source.

Human implantables are already well into the planning stage. Miami surgeon Dr. Daniel Man has patented an implantable chip that could be used to locate lost children or senile patients who have wandered away. A similar project, called KIDSCAN, would bounce a signal off a satellite that would function as a locator.

Advances in piezoelectric technology and decreases in the size and power requirements of circuits of all kinds suggest that it will not be long before tracking devices like these can be implanted in animals and, perhaps soon after, human beings. It is always possible that there are “black” projects that have outstripped what is known and available publicly.

It could be that the conductivity of the Long implant represents a solution to the problem of how to deliver energy to a tiny object without a battery. The Leir objects could offer a magnetic signature without needing any internal energy source at all. How far away this signal might be read would depend on the type of energy pulse applied to it and the sensitivity of the equipment reading the return.

We are making at least as much progress with implantable drug delivery

systems as we are with signaling devices. There are systems that encapsulate drugs in nonbiodegradable membranes, such as the Norplant system, and drugs that are delivered via injectable micro-capsules. Beyond this, there are sophisticated implants under development that would be injected into the vascular system and would emit their drug loads in a highly controlled manner. Using variants of such technologies, anti-cancer drugs, for example, will be deliverable directly into the interior of tumors.

Depending on the application, such implants might be made either of biodegradable materials or of fibers along the lines of Q-Fiber, an amorphous, high-purity silica fiber manufactured by the Manville Division of Schuller International.

These would appear as fibrous clusters of material with a predetermined void size between the fibers that would carry a biodegradable matrix with one or more drugs dispersed through the matrix. Although such devices are under patent application, they have not yet been manufactured. There is little reason to doubt that they will be, however. And it may be that we already have a prototype.

One of the strangest implants ever found was contributed by Dr. John Mack. Expelled from a witness's nose, it is described as an organic, plasticlike, three-lobed fiber with an internal structure organized into intricate layers in a seemingly irregular manner. The specimen was a "tough," pinkish-colored, one-inch-long, kinky, wirelike object. A pathologist found it to be about twenty to thirty microns in thickness, and it could be stretched out more than three inches. It was reported to have a gelatinous sheath with bumpy outcroppings; it was clearly not a hair. A radiologist found it to be radiolucent, thus not metallic. Neither the pathologist nor the radiologist was able to identify the object, so further tests were done. Using the scanning electron microscope for energy dispersive spectroscopy showed the specimen to consist primarily of carbon and oxygen, with carbon being the dominant element. It was, in short, a carbon fiber filament filled with hollow areas.

Nobody could identify the origin or function of this object, but it is conceivable that it is a carbon-fiber equivalent to the Q-Fiber implant described above that is as yet unpatented and still in the design phase.

As fascinating as this possibility appears, the most urgent issue that close encounter witnesses connect with implants is not tracking or drug delivery. It is mind control. For many of us, this is the bottom line:

Do these things mean that somebody is doing something to our minds?

Mind control has been an objective of intelligence services throughout this century. In 1977 it was revealed in a hearing before the Select Committee on Health and Scientific Research of the Committee on Human Resources of the United States Senate that the CIA had spent more than twenty-six million dollars on the notorious MK-ULTRA project, which operated from 1950 until 1971 or later. MK-ULTRA is most famous for the frightful tests of LSD on victims who were not informed that they were being given the drug. This led to the congressional hearings^[65] that eventually forced the CIA to release some of its MK-ULTRA files.^[66] They told of a massive undertaking that involved 186 researchers in the academic community, fifteen foundations, twelve hospitals and clinics, three prisons, and numerous pharmaceutical companies. The envisioned scale of this project was so large, according to the select committee's files, that, at one point in the early 1950s, CIA ordered a hundred million tabs of LSD (then called EA-1729) from Sandoz Pharmaceuticals. As this was enough LSD to dose half the American population, one wonders what was intended.

MK-ULTRA involved 149 subprojects, and, with 23,000 victims, is the worst known misuse of governmental authority for illegal medical experiments to occur outside of the Nazi death camps, although it is perfectly possible that totalitarian governments have engaged in worse programs that remain unknown.

The disturbing areas of this research, insofar as implants are involved, concern the possibility of using them as receivers for energy that disrupts or alters the mind, or invades it with thought, or as drug delivery systems. It is possible, of course, that the object that was expelled from the nose of Dr. Mack's patient, if it was an implant designed to deliver drugs, represents an illegal use of such a device. There is another instance where this might be a possibility as well, but it does not involve a drug delivery system.

One of the patients that Dr. Leir and his associate assisted was a man with a story very different from those told by the others, all of whom felt that they had been implanted by aliens. This man worked for a defense contractor and had a low-level security clearance. He developed dental problems and was sent by his employer to a dental surgeon, who operated on his jaw.

Afterward this man began to hear voices that sounded to him like CB radio transmissions. The sudden onset of this symptom was related in his mind to the dental surgery so he returned to the dentist, only to be told that the surgery could not be responsible.

The area was X-rayed on a visit to another dentist, and a triangular object was observed to be embedded in the witness's jaw just below the surgical site. The witness found his way into Dr. Leir's surgery, and a triangular metallic object was subsequently removed from his jaw. However, the voices did not subside, and psychological testing suggested the presence of possible disorder. So it is impossible to tell exactly what happened to this man. Perhaps the object came there by accident during his dental surgery, and the voices were part of a coincidental disease process. Perhaps signals heard consequent to the implantation of the object initiated an abnormal reaction that appears now that the object has been removed as bipolar disorder.

Like the story of the Mack implant, though, this one also raises questions about whether the secret government has really abandoned mind control experiments with innocent citizens as the victims.

As the CIA has steadfastly refused to release all of the MK-ULTRA documents, contending that not all of them were relevant to the case that was brought against it, there is no way to tell if it is really out of this business. In addition, there may be substantial additional documentation that has never been placed in the public record. Mind control research was transferred from the Technical Services Staff to the Office of Research and Development in 1962, and no ORD records on the subject have ever been released at all.^[67]

United States mind control research probably began during World War II when Colgate University professor George Estabrook suggested to the War Department that there could be military uses for hypnosis. In 1946, Estabrook destroyed his diaries, and no information on his activities has been forthcoming from the government. During his lifetime, he did occasionally suggest that his work had involved the "creation of hypno-programmed couriers and hypnotically-induced split personalities."^[68]

After the war, the CIA sought data derived from the death camp experiments of the Nazis, importing alleged Nazi scientists and doctors like Karl Tauboeck, Friedrich Hoffman, Theodor Wagener-Jauregg, Kurt Rarh, and Hans Turnit, who variously engaged in experiments in Germany during World War II with drugs designed to induce paralysis and with lethal gasses.

^[69] Given that the American intelligence community imported these people and allowed them to continue their research here, it may be conjectured that it has enjoyed the use of scientific discoveries made in the Nazi system, possibly in the death camps.

The Office of Naval Intelligence, allegedly as early as the 1950s, funded

the work of neuroscientist Jose Delgado, who specialized in the area of intracerebral implants and electronic brain stimulation. His book *Physical Control of the Mind: Toward a Psychocivilized Society* suggests that behavior could be modified by brain implants that would, for example, cause such physical pain when violent behavior was contemplated that the potential criminal would become unable to act as soon as he or she so much as thought of a crime. By extension, of course, it can be seen that all sorts of behaviors could thus be modified, especially given that Delgado achieved much more subtle results. He was able not only to induce extreme moods like passion and exhaustion but also, as he reports, using “radio stimulation of different points in the amygdala and hippocampus,” to produce “a variety of effects, including pleasant sensations, elation, deep, thoughtful concentration, odd feelings, super relaxation, colored visions and other responses.”^[70]

Delgado also figured in an experiment that involved making a cat’s ear into a microphone that could pick up conversations the animal was hearing.^[71] Obviously, it would also be possible to implant a tiny speaker like a hearing aid that could be a source for voices. Such a device could touch any number of different cranial bones, including the jaw, and still transmit signals that would be low-level hearable.

According to Alan Scheflin and Edward Opton in *The Mind Manipulators*,^[72] Joseph A. Meyer of the National Security Agency has allegedly proposed implanting half of all Americans arrested, whether convicted of a crime or not, so that they could be subjected to continuous monitoring thereafter.

The use of hypnosis in remote control of subjects would be possible given present technologies, conceivably even if the subjects had to be placed in the trance state from a distance. Afterward, a fairly simple device could be effective in triggering a posthypnotic suggestion. This could be something, for example, that would produce beeps such as those that Betty Dagenais claimed to have heard coming from her implant. It could also be that by hypnotic suggestion the victim could be made to remain consciously unaware of the signals. The signals could be used to trigger all sorts of posthypnotic responses.

There has been a rumor that a device invented by Dr. Delgado, which he called the stimoceiver,^[73] has been evolved into a something that is capable of inducing a hypnotic state via radio transmission. The stimoceiver was developed in the 1950s, and there is a famous film of Dr. Delgado disabling a charging bull in the Madrid bullring by using a radio transmitter that sent

signals to a device embedded in the animal's brain. The technology that grew out of the stimoceiver is known as radio hypnotic intracerebral control and electronic dissolution of memory (RHIC-EDOM). Whether RHIC-EDOM programs actually exist is a matter of conjecture.

In 1977, Senator Richard Schweiker (D., Penn.) questioned MK-ULTRA administrator Dr. Sidney Gottlieb regarding these rumors, asking first if MK-ULTRA involved the use of hypnosis.^[74] Gottlieb replied that it did. The senator then asked if "any of these projects involve something called radio hypnotic intracerebral control." Gottlieb replied in the negative, but when Schweiker pressed him he stated that "there was a current interest, running interest, all the time in what affects people standing in the field of radio energy."

One reason that Senator Schweiker was so concerned involved rumors about laboratories where fantastically horrible experiments were being conducted into the effect of radio transmissions into the human brain. But it was not until July 28, 1985, that such experiments received any substantive public exposure. On that date, David Remnick published an article in the *Washington Post* titled "The Experiments of Dr. D. Ewen Cameron," which was subsequently entered into the Congressional Record.^[75] Cameron's laboratory was founded in Montreal at the behest of the CIA, with funding by private foundations. In its Radio Telemetry Laboratory, according to the report, was the Grid Room in which the subject was strapped into a chair (being given a dose of paralyzing curare if there was resistance), then wired to an EEG. Using LSD and electroshock, the subject was "de-patterned" until his or her mind was empty. This was enhanced by an artificial-sleep program that kept subjects in a state of artificial coma for as long as two months at a time. Reprogramming was undertaken by the use of endlessly repeated messages for sixteen hours a day.

According to the article, Dr. Cameron, who was president of both the Canadian and American Psychiatric Associations, was assisted by Dr. Walter Freeman, who during his career performed four thousand frontal lobotomies and was honorary president of the Second International Conference on Psychosurgery in 1970.

According to a paper presented by Harlan E. Girard at the NATO Advanced Research Workshop in the Coherent and Emergent Phenomena on Bio-Molecular Systems at the University of Arizona in January of 1991, research into brain emissions and brain deprogramming has been matched by

research into reception methodologies. This paper, “Effects of Gigahertz Radiation on the Human Nervous System: Recent Developments in the Technology of Political Control,” describes research into the use of radio activated electrodes implanted deep in the brain to achieve control over subjects.^[76]

Unfortunately, most information regarding such research has largely disappeared from public view since the early 1980s, so it is at present impossible even to guess how far this area of intelligence research has progressed. However, the existence of the Girard paper would suggest that it is still ongoing.

At present, many congresspeople maintain what are called “wavie” files of letters from people complaining that they have been negatively affected by radio and microwave interference. It is assumed that these are troubled individuals, and in the case of the man whose object was dissected by Dr. Leir, it was not possible to tell if he was suffering from a naturally occurring psychological disorder or one caused by his apparent implantation. To my knowledge, as of October 1997, his implant had not been subjected to study.

The degree of sophistication in implant technology that may have been achieved behind the screen of classification is not clear from the available information. Because of the Supreme Court decision rendered in 1986 that held that CIA need not disclose the names of scientists and institutions involved in MK-ULTRA, the CIA has been able to hold back substantial documentation involving mind control experimentation.

In an editorial on May 30, 1997, *The New York Times* stated that “the Central Intelligence Agency has a way of exceeding the worst expectations about its behavior.”^[77] The CIA has been fighting openness, possibly by destroying documents, and it can be assumed that incriminating records will continue to be destroyed as demands for openness increase. Projects can also be transferred into the hands of defense industry companies and, with destruction of evidentiary records within the agency, become effectively isolated from any oversight.

To have this type of research taking place behind the veil of classification is dangerous to the welfare of our nation and of humankind. Research into mind control should be conducted—if at all—in the most public possible manner. Instead, we have no way to tell if it still goes on, but a certain amount of evidence suggests that it might be taking place, and using unwitting citizens as “volunteers,” as happened during the MK-ULTRA

years.

I have not dealt with the issue of MK-ULTRA and children in this book, because there is a paucity of hard evidence. However, there are a number of people, many of them terribly disturbed, who claim that they were the victims of mind control and brainwashing experiments as children, and numerous close encounter witnesses offer testimony that their encounters began in childhood. A psychologist, Valerie B. Wolf, gave testimony on March 15, 1995, before the President's Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments to the effect that a number of her patients had been telling her that they had, as children, suffered horrific abuse involving brutal mind control experiments, and that she had discovered, on reading committee testimony, that some of the doctors named in radiation experiments had also been named by her patients long before their documented activities, such as injecting uninformed experimental subjects with plutonium, had been disclosed.

Aside from this disturbing fact, little documentation exists that may support their claims, but one piece of possible evidence suggesting that the CIA was indeed interested in children comes in the form of a 1964 memo from Richard Helms, who was then CIA plans director. He stated, "Cybernetics can be used in molding of a child's character, the inculcation of knowledge and techniques, the amassing of experience, the establishment of social behavior patterns...all functions which can be summarized as control of the growth processes of the individual."^[78] The CIA has a special definition of "cybernetics" all its own. According to a CIA directive distributed by Mankind Research Unlimited, the "Cybernetic Technique" is "a means by which information of modest rate can be fed to humans utilizing other senses than sight or hearing."^[79]

To allay fears that the CIA has utilized children in mind control experiments or in any other manner, as well as to reassure the public that there is no mind control experimentation now taking place, all of its files on this and subsequent ORD programs in this area should be released.^[80]

But even that will not completely solve the problem. The gathering of secret intelligence is useful, even to a republic like ours, and should obviously continue. But the secret agencies do more than that. They are proactive. They evolve and enact policy. In the past, they have engaged in horrific experiments designed to control and disrupt the human mind. During the Cold War, the line between intelligence gathering and the expression of

state power became blurred as a result of this irresponsible and inappropriate secret proactivity. And it still is.

Some of our current politicians realize this and have been trying to achieve more openness. This has been marginally successful, but the secret government—the civilian intelligence community and its military counterparts—has proved that it will do anything it can, even violate the law if necessary, to keep its secrets. A memo from the inspector general of the CIA to the director dated October 20, 1975, states, “A number of documents concerning the destruction of MK-ULTRA drug records are attached at Tab A. In general, they show that the records were destroyed on the instruction of Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, then Chief, TSD, on 31 January, 1973. Both Branch files and records retrieved from Archives were destroyed.” In addition, it states, “The destruction of MK-ULTRA drug files was ordered by Mr. Helms.”

This practice of losing and destroying records does not end with the CIA and has survived into modern times. Recent events surrounding the “Gulf War Syndrome” controversy make a case in point. On January 28, 1997, “the Pentagon claimed that all full copies of the chemical-warfare logs maintained by the military during the 1991 Persian Gulf War had disappeared, even though copies on paper and on computer disks had been stored after the war in locked safes at two locations in the United States.”^[81] To its credit, Congress has fought back against this outrage. “After a 20-month investigation, the panel that has led the chief Congressional inquiry into the illnesses of Persian Gulf War veterans will ask that the Defense Department and the Department of Veterans Affairs be stripped of their authority over the issue.”^[82]

This process of “lying by losing” may well have also saved the Air Force from having to admit that anything unusual happened at Roswell, New Mexico, in July of 1947, the date of a famous alleged UFO crash. In the General Accounting Office report on this matter, initiated by Congressman Stuart Schiff (R., New Mexico), it was stated that all of the outgoing records from the Roswell army air field from 1945 through 1949 had been improperly “destroyed,” which effectively ended the investigation.^[83] Nevertheless, on March 18, 1997, the accountant who was stationed at the Roswell air base publicly stated that he remembered paying the bills for the equipment used during the cleanup.^[84] On March 19, 1997, the *Newark Star Ledger* reported that a series of apparent arson fires set over a two week period at the Iron Mountain storage facility in South Brunswick had

destroyed in excess of a million records. Whether these records were pertinent probably will never be known. In addition to classified documents, this Iron Mountain facility stored many corporate records, so there could have been other motives for this arson.

Unfortunately, because UFOs represent rejected knowledge, no serious press institution, *The New York Times* included, has bothered to investigate this deficiency in the GAO report. Instead, the absurd stories promulgated by the air force in the summer of 1997 to explain Roswell were treated as essentially factual in the serious press, the *Times* included.

It does not appear that the kind of large-scale reform needed to change the overall situation will be taken anytime soon, but until the black budget is ended and pertinent records are revealed, we will never learn the true history of our country's secret activities in the latter half of the twentieth century. Thus we will not know the degree to which, if any, the intelligence community and the defense industry are responsible for the implantation of the objects that have recently been removed or the many others that remain in people's bodies.

The Congress may be uneasy, but the Senate is firmly on the side of secrecy. For all of its posturing about greater openness, the fact remains that on June 19, 1997, the Senate passed the latest black budget by a vote of ninety-eight to one.

Chapter Twenty

“A New World, If You Can Take It”

Of course there exists a possibility that aspects of the close encounter phenomenon have been induced as a side effect of illegal mind control experiments. But unless a substantial part of humankind has moved far ahead of the rest of us technologically and somehow managed to keep this secret, the massive scale of the overall phenomenon would seem to preclude this. Although there has been no study of the number of witnesses reporting implants, when the Communion Foundation attempted to start its study in 1996, in just twenty-four hours it received more than a hundred responses from people who had both close encounter memories and visible surface signs of implants. This suggests that the number could be very large.

So a human factor is unlikely to be the entire explanation for close encounter, and it is hard to see how any human agency could be responsible for the breathtaking hardware that has been put on display in our skies for at least the past fifty years. Of course, if there are aliens here and they have co-opted our own military and intelligence infrastructure, then there could be the very combination of human and apparent alien activities that are being reported.

Hypnosis and mind control experiments of the type discussed in the previous chapter could easily have advanced to the operational level by now, and this could offer an explanation for some implants and even some UFO claims. But witnesses have been reporting these things since long before the knowledge appears to have been available to organizations like the CIA, and there is a smattering of historical evidence that suggests that encounters have been taking place on a smaller scale almost forever.

One thing is clear: Given the data, the answers to the questions posed in this book are certain to be extremely bizarre. But we don't need to answer the more difficult origins questions before we can usefully address the issue of the significance of the phenomenon to human life and the human future. Even though it might be a long time before we make a definitive determination about origins, there is much that can be learned about effects, because they are unfolding in our skies and happening in our minds and bodies.

The first thing that is clear is that the phenomenon is putting humankind under great pressure. No matter its origins and the motives of whoever is creating it, whether this pressure is destructive or evolutionary depends on how we respond to it. There are two kinds of people in the close encounter experience: those who are being destroyed by the pressure, and those who are surviving and growing because of it. As the experience continues to spread and grow in complexity even after fifty years, it is important to make the choice to use it however we can, regardless of the motives behind it.

If the visitors ever come crashing into every life in the same way that they burst into the lives of witnesses, a tremendous amount of strength is going to be needed for us to face this. Careful science is going to have to be done beforehand if we are to expect rational, considered, and mature behavior on the part of the individual and society. To live with this complex experience and make use of it, we are going to have to face the fact that we, also, are complex, and we live in an ethical and moral world that is like the ethical context of the phenomenon, full of ambiguities, a place in which plain good and plain evil are rare.

There is a very individualistic, laissez-faire quality to close encounter. It is between the individual and the visitors. It tries to bypass official institutions, and I suspect that it has been effective in doing this, because if certain knowledge of an alien presence had reached Congress and the White House, it would surely have leaked. That it may be known by intelligence or military officers who have illegally used our secrecy system to conceal their activities from their own superiors or isolated themselves from accountability within defense industry companies I would not doubt. Our enormous system of secrecy is a holdover from the Cold War era, and you could hide something the size of a small country inside its arcane byways. If there is ever aggressive reform of the system or radical budget cutting, such activities, if they exist, will come to light, as long as the records concerning them are not destroyed first.

Only if the government has been threatened into silence by a powerful alien force bent on carrying out its policies without interference could it be that the secret may be more widely known. If so, then it is understandable that even politicians could keep it, given the extraordinary nature of the threat.

On July 4, 1997, Anne and I met Colonel Philip Corso, the author of *The Day After Roswell*. Colonel Corso, a brilliant and fascinating man of eighty-

two, told a remarkable story of an attempt he and his superior officers had made to bleed technological information gleaned from recovered UFO debris into the defense industry. He had no obvious motive to write this book. He received an insignificant payment for it and has no pressing financial needs that I was able to discover. What he was doing was breaking an oath that he had kept throughout a sterling career, and his true motive for doing that must have been quite powerful.

Colonel Corso entered military intelligence during World War II and so he would have signed a draconian secrecy agreement that made the release of any classified material at all an act of treason.

I asked him if he had violated such an agreement to write his book, and he replied that he had waited until his commanding officer had died, out of loyalty to him.

It was an indirect reply and suggested to me either that he did not violate his oath because the book isn't true, or that he was released from it to write the book and was not able to reveal that.

Although I have no way of determining how accurate his book is in detail, I do feel that it is in general a true account. This is because he was telling his version of the same story that so many other military men, among them Colonel Jesse Marcel and General Arthur Exon, have told. To my knowledge, I was the first person outside of the military to whom General Exon talked. I was introduced to him by my uncle, Colonel Edward Strieber, who had been his lifelong friend and a member of his command.

These two officers did not offer me the rich treasury of detail that I wanted, but I would be extremely surprised if they were lying. Among the things that Exon was very specific about was that everybody "from Truman on down" had known about the Roswell incident from the day it happened, and that it was known to be an alien spacecraft "almost as soon as we got on the scene."

One thing that Exon said is relevant in terms of Corso's book. When I asked him if any technology had been recovered, he replied that a lot of it had stayed with the Army, except for the airframe. The reason it would have happened this way is that the crash took place just as the Air Force was being split off from the Army and made into a separate service. So parts that did not seem relevant to flight might well have been left with the Army. They would have gone to Army Research and Development, and that is where Corso was employed, under Lieutenant General Arthur G. Trudeau, in the 1960s, when he claims that he was ordered to feed them into the defense industry in order

to increase the speed of technological development.

In private conversation, Corso appeared to me to possess a knowledge of the visitors that went beyond what he had recorded in his book. So I was fascinated when he told me that they had communicated to the military that they were offering something to humankind, which was “a new world, if you can take it.”

This statement fits the situation that we are living with right now. Under the scenario that it suggests, the visitors are not going to give us anything. But what we can take, we can keep. The reason would be that there is such a great knowledge gap between us and them that they fear—or know—that our culture would be disempowered if we were exposed to theirs.

In “Searching for Extraterrestrial Civilization,” T. B. H. Kuiper and M. Morris theorize that “complete contact with a superior civilization (in which their store of knowledge is made available to us) would abort further development through a ‘culture shock’ effect. If we were contacted before we reached this threshold, instead of enriching the galactic store of knowledge we would merely absorb it.” Given that the insights of new minds might be the only thing in the universe that such a species might desire, “by intervening in our natural progress now, members of an extraterrestrial society could easily extinguish the only resource on this planet that could be of any value to them.”^[85]

This suggests a positive motive both for the visitors’ reticence and the government’s parallel policy of secrecy. It also suggests that they will fight us and resist us at every turn—not to destroy us but to prevent the very thing that has ruined practically every indigenous culture on this planet that has come up against our own Western technological civilization: the descent of the less technologically potent culture into nonmeaning.

If this is a true picture of the situation, we need to get a lot more aggressive. Either we are going to close the gap between us or we are not. They will not act any more than they must to help us, and everything they do diminishes our future value not only to them but also to ourselves. To wrest knowledge from them, we need to be tough and smart and courageous, not passive and secretive and scared. Science needs to admit that the whole phenomenon represents knowledge that should not have been rejected and start exploiting that knowledge.

The vast majority of the American people believe that the government is covering up something about UFOs. There is an assumption that it is

concealing immense knowledge. But if this was true, then it must have obtained a substantial amount of that knowledge from the pool of close encounter witnesses, and that it has not done. It wouldn't have been a matter of questioning one or two of them but of sampling thousands, if only because the experience is so complex and varied.

We have not only received letters from more than two hundred thousand witnesses, we have spoken personally to thousands of them as well. Surely, given all this dialogue, if there had been any extensive effort of this kind made, we would have learned at least a little bit about it. Rather than concealing knowledge, what the government may be hiding is the fact that it has been told by the visitors that either we make the progress we need to make on our own, or we do not get to join the cosmos. Any decent human being would put up with practically anything to keep such a secret. The government would be in precisely the position of doing what Corso says it has done. Under this scenario, all the leaks and the gradual acclimatization of humankind that have been occurring would involve the government trying to fudge the rules as much as it dared by slipping what technology it could into private hands.

But if we are to make any progress with this, the first step is probably to quit looking to the government for the big answers. For whatever reason, given the evidence at hand, the government has been unable to act. One area where it could possibly be of help involves validation: If it is able, it should admit at least that it is aware that UFOs may be intelligently guided objects. Then we could finally get past the denial that pervades our society and start harvesting the valuable knowledge that is currently being thrown away.

It is not a matter of examining the evidence that is now available, which is diminished as a source of really clear answers by the fact that it has generally been gathered by amateurs and investigated by people like me who, while sincere, have limited resources. What is needed is a group of well-conceived and organized scientific programs that will methodically obtain fresh evidence at a professional level of recovery, then analyze it as deeply as possible—and that will not be sponsored exclusively by groups and individuals who start out with such a heavy bias against the rejected idea that UFOs may be real and close encounters actual experience that they simply create another level of confusion.

The rewards of doing this objectively could be very great. As there is already enough UFO evidence to suggest that they are genuine anomalies, a

really good-quality record of these objects might very well lead to insights into their power engineering that would help us provide for ourselves a new means of transport that would get us out into the solar system on a large scale and maybe even beyond. Perhaps, if the visitors are aliens, we will even be able to trace them back to their point of origin and answer that question as well.

In the process, I expect that we can colonize this solar system and see a billion healthy and prosperous human beings living off-planet by the end of the next century. If we can gain this new means of transport, we can guarantee the future health of the growth economy that now sustains us, which at present is limited by the ability of Earth to meet its needs.

By properly questioning and examining the close encounter witnesses, perhaps using the PET scanning technique referred to earlier, we can also uncover the reality that triggers the wild encounter memories and provide a baseline in fact to support the use of hypnosis to learn more. With patience and careful effort, we can, in all likelihood, build a true picture of what happens during missing time by piecing together fragments of memory from many different people.

I hope this book will not cause a rush to judgment, with skeptics trying to prove that evidence so far retrieved is worthless while UFO believers conclude that it is proof. Both approaches are a waste of time, because the conclusive evidence has not yet been gathered.

What can be said now is that these questions are worth scientific time and effort. We need a program to recover implants under controlled conditions, such as the one I originally proposed to the Mind-Science Foundation, which would involve first examining the witnesses, then extracting objects and analyzing them immediately thereafter.

Obviously, the presence of evidence of things like implants also could mean that we are in a lot of trouble. But before we become certain of that, we might examine some of the compelling reasons for another species to exploit us that might not be evil.

Here is one example. Let's turn the table for a moment. It's, say, five hundred years in the future. Humanity now fills the solar system with a teeming, fabulous civilization, wondrous beyond compare. But something is terribly wrong. For whatever reason, we are in need of something from some other species. And this something is vital to us: Without it we will go extinct.

This donor species, whom we have found living on a planet of a distant

star, isn't nearly as advanced as we are. In fact, they're primitive, although not so primitive that they couldn't conceivably organize themselves to resist us if they were inspired to do so. Even though there is a gap between us, we see that they are very bright, and they might just possibly respond positively. We send a task force, which takes generations to arrive, but when it finally does, it begins by making an attempt to contact their official world. From their standpoint, they see vast numbers of UFOs, as happened here over the ten years between 1947 and 1957. We show ourselves to their scientists and military personnel, as happened with Dr. Hill and Chief Newhouse, among others. We show ourselves to their government, as happened during the massive sightings over Washington in July of 1952.

But they do not react well. Because of paranoia induced by conflicts internal to their species, they fear that we might be a danger to them. Having just endured a long period of territorial conflict, they are obsessed by the idea that they must control their own space. As a result, they shoot before they talk. We find that we can't communicate with them at all. Worse, we don't see how we can overcome their fears. When we do make any direct contact, they tend to integrate us into their religious mythology, identifying us with their version of demons. Worse, because they don't understand the way that the process of contact artificially threatens the personality with a false sense of ego-annihilation, they can't overcome their fears.

They are completely unable to cope with us, so we can't ask them for what we need, and even if we could, they couldn't understand the request.

As we get to know them, it becomes an additional concern to us that any sudden introduction of our technology will destroy their own initiative and devalue their culture. We know this because of what happened here on Earth between 1550 and 1950. As technological civilization spread, the native cultures that weren't subjugated and destroyed succumbed to irrelevance and died.

Our exoanthropologists warn that this could happen to this entire planet if we were to put in an appearance before they are able to communicate with us meaningfully and absorb the shock of our presence. They would become scientific and technological beggars, soon declining into a pallid shadow of our own civilization. So what are we to do—sit back and go extinct because they are too primitive to understand that what they are giving up will save us?

We know that we could overcome their resistance by a slow process of acclimatization and education. But we'll have to be extremely careful. If

we're too friendly, they are going to start looking for technological handouts. Worse, they might not want to give us what we need. So we decide to keep our presence secret for two reasons. The first is to enable us to exploit them without their resisting. The second is to enable them to maintain their self-empowerment by inducing them to take from us what they need for their own growth, rather than destroying them by giving it to them.

Our ethical situation seems clear: We take what we need to survive while at the same time carrying out the acclimatization attempt. At the same time that we finish exploiting them, we hope that they will have made enough progress to close the gap between us and join us as a cosmic species.

We will have taken some part of their heart from them while giving them the chance to take a new world from us. As a result of our actions, both species may be saved from extinction.

If something like this is happening here, it would explain why some witnesses have awful experiences and others are given what is essentially an education, and some end up in both situations. It might also explain why the close encounter aspect of the phenomenon is so extremely clandestine while the air show that's been going on for the past fifty years could hardly be more public. It explains why many people are taken to an evolutionary edge by their experiences.

From where I sit, having come to know so many people who are in contact, having heard them speak of their struggles and their triumphs, their terrible fears and private agonies, I do not see humankind as being fundamentally helpless before this. The helplessness that we have displayed so far has been induced by ignorance, and the ignorance has been caused by secrecy on the part of the visitors—and, perhaps, official secrecy as well.

Humanity is not a frightened infant but more a giant in bondage, and the chains that bear us down are fashioned from these secrets.

From all I have seen, I believe that the greatest of the secrets is that we are well capable of understanding every mystery that the phenomenon has presented to us. The science of the visitors that appears so magical is accessible to the human intellect. If our minds and the institutions we have founded, especially our scientific institutions, were able to deal meaningfully with this, bringing the immense resources of the human community to bear, we would quickly wrest control of our destiny back from whoever has taken it.

A new world awaits, one that offers access not only to such things as the

breathtaking propulsion system used by the visitors but also to age-old secrets such as whether a soul exists and, if so, then the potential to enter its world in a scientifically meaningful way. I suspect that we stand ready, most of us, to offer everything we possess to this effort. We are soldiers, it would seem, drafted into a war. Ours is the cause of a human future in the stars, and it is a struggle that we must not lose, for if we do lose it, then the glory that is the human mind will never be expressed fully and properly into the universe, and the goal for which we were doubtless created will not be fulfilled.

What is contact and who are the visitors?

For whatever reason, if it knows or if it does not, the government cannot tell us. No authority can lead us—none except the authority of the individual will, fully informed and correctly educated, and so made free. Behind all the secrecy and confusion that shadow this situation stand the visitors and the truth about what they are and what they are doing. It is on their heads that the greatest blame for the negative effects of any policy of concealment must rest. But it is also true that the gulf between us is obviously vast, and it could turn out that they are already doing all they can on our behalf without risking our disempowerment.

In the end, it is to one another that we must turn to regain our freedoms and overthrow the culture of denial and the policy of secrecy that together have so diminished and hindered us; but above all, it is upon our scientific institutions and the foundations that support them that the greatest responsibility rests.

The visitors may be at once tempting us with their theater in the sky and forcing us into action by the outrageous invasion of our bodies represented by close encounter. Whatever they are doing, it seems clear that they are not preparing for some great event where they finally put in an overwhelming appearance. Anybody who has a close encounter ends up feeling that something big is about to happen. The sense of incipience is part of the experience, part of what drives us forward, what lures us to do battle with the impossible. But the reality may be very different: If we are to get anything out of this, I suspect that we are going to have to take it.

In all the past fifty years, there has been no instance of the visitors directly adding resources. Nobody gets the plans to a starship. Nobody gets a map back to the home world. What we get instead are fear, confusion, cryptic messages, and a feeling of being pushed around—and the sense of something beyond price, lying just out of reach.

In short, we get a prescription tailor-made to drive us so crazy with

questions and terror and outraged pride that we are finally going to stand up for ourselves. I think, in other words, that the visitors are looking for a fight—but it is a strange one, because if we don't win, they also will lose.

A new world is on offer—if we can take it. If we can tear the raw truth out of their hands, and if we can bear it when we get it, then we are going to get off this little planet where we are so clearly beginning to suffocate. Otherwise, we are probably going to die here, if not from the environmental effects of overpopulation, then because of some natural catastrophe or other, just like the dinosaurs and all the others.

Getting out into space in large numbers means becoming an immortal species, and that is what I want for us, because I see a huge genetic content that has not yet been expressed, billions and trillions of lives yet un-lived, and on the reaches of future time, I see the pure light of children who will not be born if we do not escape this place.

If this new world is anything like what the close encounter experience suggests, it is going to mean that humankind will gain scientific tools that reveal final truths. If there is a soul, we are going to find it and find out what it means. If there is none, then we are going to face the fact that we are fabulous little lights, soon gone. But does that not make us, in a way, even more precious? Does it not mean that we have an overwhelming obligation to fill each expiring moment with wonder?

There is a gap between us and the visitors, and they cannot close it without destroying our ability to innovate on our own. But if we embrace the question now, there can be a spark, and then everything will change. That spark will occur when science suddenly realizes the value of the discoveries that lie in this direction and rushes to take advantage of what fear and confusion have been making it shun for fifty years.

Suddenly, we will begin to capitalize on the phenomenon instead of rejecting it. And when science and society acknowledge it, the visitors will respond—but I doubt that it will be with the catharsis that by then every human heart will be longing for. Rather than satisfying us, they are likely to tempt us further and further—with outrages, with dazzling displays, with promises—with whatever it takes. And then, when we are finally traversing space on our own, I wouldn't be at all surprised to find that they disappear. When we meet the visitors, it will be because we have gone to their place of origin and done it on our own.

The knowledge that will lead us there is all around us, in the skies, in our

bodies, in our minds. All we need to take it is the courage.

Appendix

**An interview with Monsignor Corrado Balducci of the Congregation for
the Evangelization of Peoples and Propagation of the Faith, The Vatican**

*by Michael Hesemann
Editor, Magazin 2000*

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EXTRATERRESTRIALS AND CHRISTIANITY

THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED BY MICHAEL HESEMANN,
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Monsignor Balducci, in August 1996, NASA announced the discovery of traces of extraterrestrial life on a meteorite stemming from Mars. How did the Catholic Church react?

The Catholic Church did not react at all because it accepts all truly scientific discoveries. Science—true science—originates with God. God has revealed his secrets in nature, and science discovers them when it explores nature.

God has spoken to us, has told us what truth is. There can be no contradiction between God's revelation in scripture and in his creation, and thus there is no contradiction between true science and the true proof of God's existence. The Catholic Church welcomes scientific progress, for it is necessary to reveal God's miracles. The Church uses science as a tool to prove a miracle, for only scientific research can provide evidence whether an occurrence is the result of natural, divine, or demonic forces.

Is there a conflict between the belief in extraterrestrial life and the Christian faith? Or is it acceptable for a Catholic to believe in extraterrestrials?

There is no conflict, not at all! It is reasonable to believe and to affirm that extraterrestrials exist. Their existence can no longer be denied, for there is too much evidence for the existence of extraterrestrials and flying saucers as documented by UFO research. To assert categorically that they are illusions and hallucinations, or that eyewitness accounts are not credible, is wrong. This would mean to question the value of such testimony per se, and this would have serious consequences for religion itself, since religion is founded on an historical incidence, on the birth of a human being, Jesus Christ, who was not only man, but also God, and of whom we have knowledge through testimony, the gospels. Religion is based on the testimony of human beings who had become witnesses to God's revelation. When human reason attempts to prove that this is impossible, that such testimony is unreliable, then faith

will collapse, and humans would become ignorant. It is right to have faith, but it is sensible when human reason can explain everything.

How would Rome, how would the Church react if contact with extraterrestrials were made?

If such a contact were to occur, it would confirm the truth that extraterrestrials exist. The question is whether these extraterrestrials are inferior or superior to us, and both possibilities are quite feasible; however, such an occurrence would not call into question the teachings of Christianity.

There is a passage in Holy Scripture, in the New Testament, in which St. Paul refers to Jesus Christ as the King of the universe, not just the King of the world. This then means that everything in the universe, including extraterrestrials, UFOs, etc., are reconcilable with God, because He is the King of the universe.

For science, such contact with extraterrestrials will prove once and for all the existence of extraterrestrial life, and the Church and science will unify this knowledge with the other truths of which we are aware.

Jesus taught: Venture out and teach the gospel to all peoples. Would the Church teach the gospel to extraterrestrials?

This question leads us far into the future and is, of course, hypothetical. If I made contact with extraterrestrials, I would first of all ask them what their opinion is of a higher being, what their concept of God is. It might be that they are much more religious than we are. This question is still highly speculative. It is, however, not a speculation, not a fantasy that UFOs exist, but it is a speculative question about this modality, for it is possible that we must help them to believe more deeply, and conversely, that they are superior to us in their faith.

Once this question is answered, when these contacts are no longer limited to exceptional occurrences, we shall know what we need to do. As I pointed out, it is very important to lend credence to the eyewitness accounts, but we must be very careful to be sure that they are authentic. I have also heard of people who claimed to have had contacts, but who unfortunately were not mentally sound. We must not exclude everything, yet we should not reach too far with our curiosity.

Certain is that the Christian religion, that theology, does not rule out the

existence of extraterrestrials. We know with certainty of the existence of God, of the angels, and of us. We need not discuss our existence, for we can see and feel each other. Science allows us to think about the existence of other inhabited worlds. There are also clues which seem to confirm this, such as the existence of flying saucers, which also indicate that extraterrestrials are further evolved than we are, for UFOs are machines that we, too, might build one day, but only in the distant future.

If we compare our nature with that of angels, we note a difference: angels have only one spiritual side, while humans have a spiritual and material side. The spiritual aspect of humans is strongly conditioned by their material aspect; in fact, it is subordinated to it. Our spiritual nature cannot exist without our material nature, while it is extremely rare that the spiritual side dominates the material side, and these exceptions lead us into the realm of parapsychology. Our spiritual side cannot be active without our material side. This is the argument of relation. There can also be a form of existence which is exclusively spiritual, that of the angels. The angels are nearly perfect, but our soul is not, otherwise the deceased would reach perfection the very moment their soul is separated from their body. Yet they are not perfect, for their soul remains, even after the separation from the body, conditioned by their material side, and thus imperfect. The soul of angels is pure, while that of humans is not. Thomas Aquinas discusses this argument of relation. It is possible that beings exist whose soul is a little more independent from this instrument, the body, and thus the grandiose possibilities of the spirit manifest themselves more clearly. Possibly, and this is strictly hypothetical, there is a kind of “lighter matter,” matter that is more spiritual than material. Let us be mindful that extraterrestrials are able to traverse outer space and travel through time and space. Where does our soul travel when it is separated from the body? To the moon? Of course not—it exists beyond time and space. Space and time are simply categories in our thought. If we consider now experience with extraterrestrials, which is documented by the UFO research, we find clear indications that these are beings whose soul is more independent from the body, from the material. While they do have a body, their body, the material aspect of it, is no longer so dominant. The body should only be an instrument of the spirit, it should follow the soul, not condition it. When we see what these flying saucers are capable of, how fast and nearly weightlessly they can move, indeed faster than the laws of gravity allow, as UFO research has shown, we cannot help but acknowledge that

extraterrestrials are superior to us.

If we now assume logically that extraterrestrials also have a spiritual and a material side, we must ask ourselves which side is dominant, what value, what influence the material side has for them. Perhaps extraterrestrials are beings whose material side only follows the spiritual side. This is, of course, only speculation.

When we speak of flying saucers and extraterrestrials, we always assume that these beings are our superiors. It is, of course, also possible that they are like us or that they are spiritually even inferior to us, even though they are scientifically more advanced.

When we talk about other inhabited worlds, we are thinking, of course, first of our solar system, our tiny part in this huge space with its billions and billions of suns and milky ways, with its distances of billions of light years which are so large that when the light of a star reaches us, it is possible that this star no longer exists. How can we deny that other inhabited worlds exist in this enormous universe? God did not tell us everything, but St. Paul refers to Christ as the King of the universe. This is so because he is one with God, the creator of all life, of plant life, animal life, human life, and the elevated life, since before he created humans, he created angels. As many theologians and church teachers, but especially St. Paul, have said: Everything originates in Christ. For we believe that Christ is God's son, but at the same time also God himself. This is the secret of the Holy Trinity. And that is a fact, not speculation. For, as I said in the beginning, we can prove this man's existence as well as his divinity, and in addition God's word, for God can not lie, and there is nothing He does not know. What He reveals to us pertains to the way we need to live in order to join Him one day, and that is the most important thing that should concern us. However, God has told us nothing about the inhabitability of other worlds, because he thought it unnecessary. He has left it up to us to explore this possibility, just as he has left it up to us to discover ourselves.

Christianity's fundamental teaching concerning the conditio humana asserts that man has fallen through original sin and has been saved through Christ's sacrificial death. Do you think it is possible that other extraterrestrial beings have not fallen through original sin and thus perhaps still exist in an edenic state of harmony with God's laws?

Only in the future will we be able to answer this question, when open contact has taken place. It may also be that on other inhabited worlds beings exist that are subject to original sin. The creation of humans belongs to our world. Naturally, it is also possible that God has created humans and animals and plants in other worlds, but the creation story we know relates to our world.

In our world, the fall of man occurred through our ancestors. Only our ancestors are responsible, and they have not traveled to other worlds or colonized other planets. For this reason I would assume that original sin pertains only to us humans. Perhaps extraterrestrials have also been subjected to a test, the same, a similar or a different test, to find out how they would behave—but this test was ours, not that of other beings who are not the successors of Adam and Eve.

Is it possible that other humans are closer to God because they have never distanced themselves from Him?

Not necessarily. The angels live in the immediate proximity of God, and still a separation has occurred; the fall of a group of angels has come to pass. The angels have seen God, have lived with him, and have been subject to a test that we do not know anything about. Not God, but they have subjected themselves to this test; we must not think in our categories here. But of what nature was this test? It was a sin of hubris, but what caused it? In the gospels we find no clear indication of the nature of this test. These beings have been created with incredible potentialities, potentialities which are unthinkable for us, because we belong to a different category. The Holy Father has recently addressed this question.

These beings had such great potentialities that some of them said: Why do we need God when we have such an enormous potential ourselves? Others perhaps said: Well, perhaps we do not need God anymore, but we should be grateful to God that He had created us and given us these possibilities. Let us worship Him, let us adore Him, for He is infinitely perfect, infinitely good. The fall of the angels resulted from the sin of autosufficiency, the fallacy that one could exist without God, that one need not thank God for one's existence.

The situation of these fallen angels, that of the Devil, will always remain the same into eternity, according to the New Testament. The angels who have committed this sin will remain evil spirits forever. Now one might ask: Why

does God, who is so good, not absolve them of their sins? The answer is that they have never asked for His forgiveness. If each of these angels were to say, “Lord, forgive me,” they would be immediately forgiven.

Do you think it possible that some of the angels might be extraterrestrials from planets located closer to God?

The angels, God’s messengers, have always concerned themselves with humanity. They have helped humans to live according to God’s will. And it is certain that they are still doing this today. The existence of guardian angels is not established as an absolute truth of faith, but it is quite certain. Each human being has his or her own angel that follows him or her everywhere. Thus, the angels help humans to better themselves. That is the Church’s doctrine. But you asked whether the extraterrestrials are angels.

Well, if you ask whether the angels can assume a body to reveal themselves, I would have to say yes—that is possible, but it would be an exceptional case. Normally, they affect us through inspiration; both good and demonic influence originate from them. Then there are visible appearances of angels. We know of appearances of the Virgin Mary—not all of them are authentic, and often we need science to answer this question. I would not assume that angels use flying saucers. But of course they can utilize them to show us something.

As you know, in March 1983 I gave a presentation at the “Croce” bookstore in Rome on Giorgio Dibitonto’s book, *Angels in Starships*. I was told on that occasion that it was the first time a theologian and priest had made a presentation on a book about UFOs; I had read and very much liked the book. In the end, I praise it as a book that shows us the infinite love of God, the Virgin Mary, and the angels for us. It is a book that awakens in us a desire for an exchange of our love with God. But I did not want to imply, neither then nor now, that angels really come to us in flying saucers. Such a claim requires scientific proof. Let science prove that angels travel in flying saucers! I shall neither rule this out nor affirm it.

What is your position on the UFO phenomenon?

My position concerning the UFO phenomenon? UFOs exist, there’s no question about that; nobody can deny it anymore. Some may say, to be on the safe side, that much originates in the human psyche, is derived from human

complexes and dysfunctions, that they are hallucinations, etc. This may be true in some cases, but not in all. One thing is certain: the UFO phenomenon exists; the wealth of evidence is obvious and cannot be denied.

We cannot trace everything back to “psychic problems” because if we do we would question human testimony per se. And that is very dangerous. The human testimony is a very important element that helps us in our social life. If we question it, we may soon reach the point where we question the testimony of Christ’s existence.

How do you interpret the UFO phenomenon in the theological context?

I would prefer to speak of a human interpretation and not of the theology because it is not necessary to be Christian in order to determine that something is real. It is entirely sufficient to be rational. I could try to interpret it theologically, even though it is actually controversial.

The same is true of the UFO research. First: The UFO research is already quite advanced as far as its methodology is concerned; that is undeniable. Like parapsychology, it deals with phenomena that have existed since the beginning of humankind.

Second: The explanations of the UFO research should be sought in this world or, to put it more succinctly, in science and not in the world of angels or the Virgin Mary or the demons. The phenomena should be explained from within themselves. That is why scientific progress is very important. Each individual event should be thoroughly examined, not as a miracle, but as something supernatural; not as a divine or demonic incident, but as physical reality, as part of nature. Over time, scientific progress will come to the aid of parapsychology and UFO research.

Thank you, Monsignor.

Monsignor Corrado Balducci is a member of the Curia of the Roman Catholic Church, a prelate of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and Propagation of the Faith, a noted theologian and expert on demonology. He has been an exorcist for the Archdiocese of Rome and is the author of two books on the subject, *La possession diabolica* (Rome, 1973) and *Il diavolo* (Monferrato, 1990).

Michael Hesemann is a cultural anthropologist and historian. He is the

editor-in-chief of *Magazin 2000*, published in German and Czech, and the author of *UFOs: A Secret History* (Marlowe & Co.), *Beyond Roswell* (Marlowe & Co.), and *Cosmic Connections* (Gateway Ltd.).

Afterword

The Communion Foundation solicits contributions for its work in UFO studies. It exists to foster understanding of the UFO and close encounter phenomena. Among its planned activities are a study of implants, a sky search, and research into the biology of memory. It also seeks close encounter narratives for its files.

Contributions may be made in any amount and are tax deductible. Please send contributions and narratives to:

The Communion Foundation
5928 Broadway
San Antonio, TX 78209

News of the foundation's activities will be posted on its Web page:
<http://www.strieber.com>

Because of the volume of mail, Whitley Strieber cannot reply personally to letters or E-mail, but every narrative is read and evaluated.

Many of the videos and books mentioned in this volume are available from their publishers. Further ordering information can be found on the Web page.

Further Reading

There are many good books on UFOs, the close encounter experience, and related subjects. There are as many, or perhaps even more, bad ones. This is a very short list of books that rank among the classics in the field.

Timothy Good, *Above Top Secret: The Worldwide UFO Cover-up*, Morrow, New York, NY, 1989. Exhaustively researched, highly accurate, thorough, and altogether amazing.

Paul R. Hill, *Unconventional Flying Objects: A Scientific Analysis*, Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc., Charlottesville, VA, 1995. The best book about UFOs ever written.

Richard Haines, ed., *UFO Phenomena and the Behavioral Scientist*, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, NJ, 1979. Where any behavioral scientist should begin.

Budd Hopkins, *Missing Time*, Marek, New York, NY, 1981. Established alien abduction as a phenomenon worth attention.

J. Allen Hynek, *The UFO Experience*, Regnery, Washington, D.C., 1972. The classic casebook, by one of the great originators of the field.

Carl G. Jung, *Flying Saucers*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1978. Still among the most thoughtful and useful books ever written about the phenomenon.

John E. Mack, M.D., *Abduction: Human Encounters With Aliens*, Random House, New York, NY, 1994. The book that establishes abduction as a legitimate unknown. Mack is a Pulitzer Prize-winning psychiatrist on the faculty at Harvard.

Prevailing Winds Research: *The Mind Control Reader*, Prevailing Winds, Santa Barbara, CA, 1994. A solidly researched compendium, carefully annotated: the beginning of any journey into intelligence community abuse of the public.

Carl Sagan & Thornton Page, ed., *UFOs: A Scientific Debate*, W.W. Norton, New York, NY, 1974. Twenty-three years old, but it still identifies the outlines of the controversy with decisive clarity.

The Internet

There is a vast amount of information on the internet about UFOs and related subjects, and most of it is bunk. However, there are some really excellent resources out there, also. These are among the best.

CNI NEWS

www.cninews.com

News about contact with nonhuman intelligence. Edited with rigor and precision by Michael Lindemann, this site offers well-filtered news of UFOs, close encounters, and all sorts of unusual events.

THE NATIONAL UFO REPORTING CENTER

www.nwlink.com/~ufocntr

Peter Davenport runs this outstanding operation, where he and his colleagues assemble and organize sighting reports from all over the world. Can be counted on for reliability.

THE ART BELL WEBSITE

www.artbell.com

A huge site, full of fun, passion, wildness, and surprises. Art Bell runs a late night radio program that will—and does—entertain practically any possibility and any claim. Art is the best in the world at what he does. He presents, you decide.

SCIENCE, LOGIC, AND THE UFO DEBATE

www.primenet.com/~bdzeiler/index.html

This site is constructed around debate, with a bias—stated—toward the hypothesis that aliens are responsible for UFOs. But the debate offered is very real. Intelligence abounds here.

SCIENCE FRONTIERS

www.knowledge.co.uk/frontiers

The site of William Corliss, who for three decades has been assembling reports of anomalies gathered from the scientific press. Fascinating unanswered questions of science are revealed here.

JOURNAL AND SOCIETY OF SCIENTIFIC EXPLORATION

www.jse.com

The Society of Scientific Exploration explores the extreme edge of the possible, but with a solid scientific approach. Breathtaking ideas abound.

UFO Photos

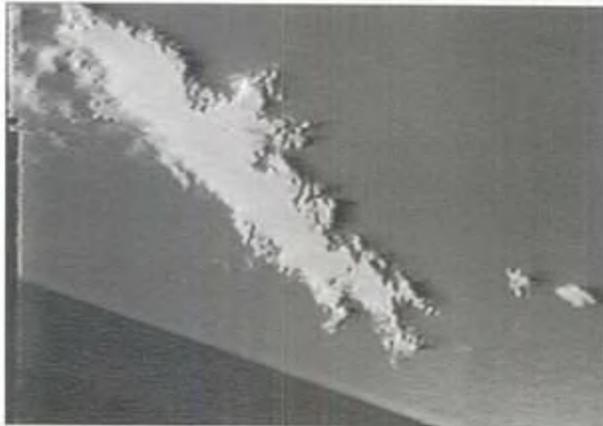
UFO Photos



"Platform" videotaped by Tim Edwards. Its estimated altitude was 50,000 feet, and it was more than a mile long.
CREDIT: TIM EDWARDS



Structure taped over Edwards's house. This is not a distorted video image. It was low and close, moving at high speed.
CREDIT: TIM EDWARDS



This object dives above the roof of the house, flexing like a living body. Its entire motion takes place under a second.
CREDIT: TIM EDWARDS



This appears in a single frame of video shot by John Bro Wilkie over Los Angeles.
CREDIT: JOHN BRO WILKIE

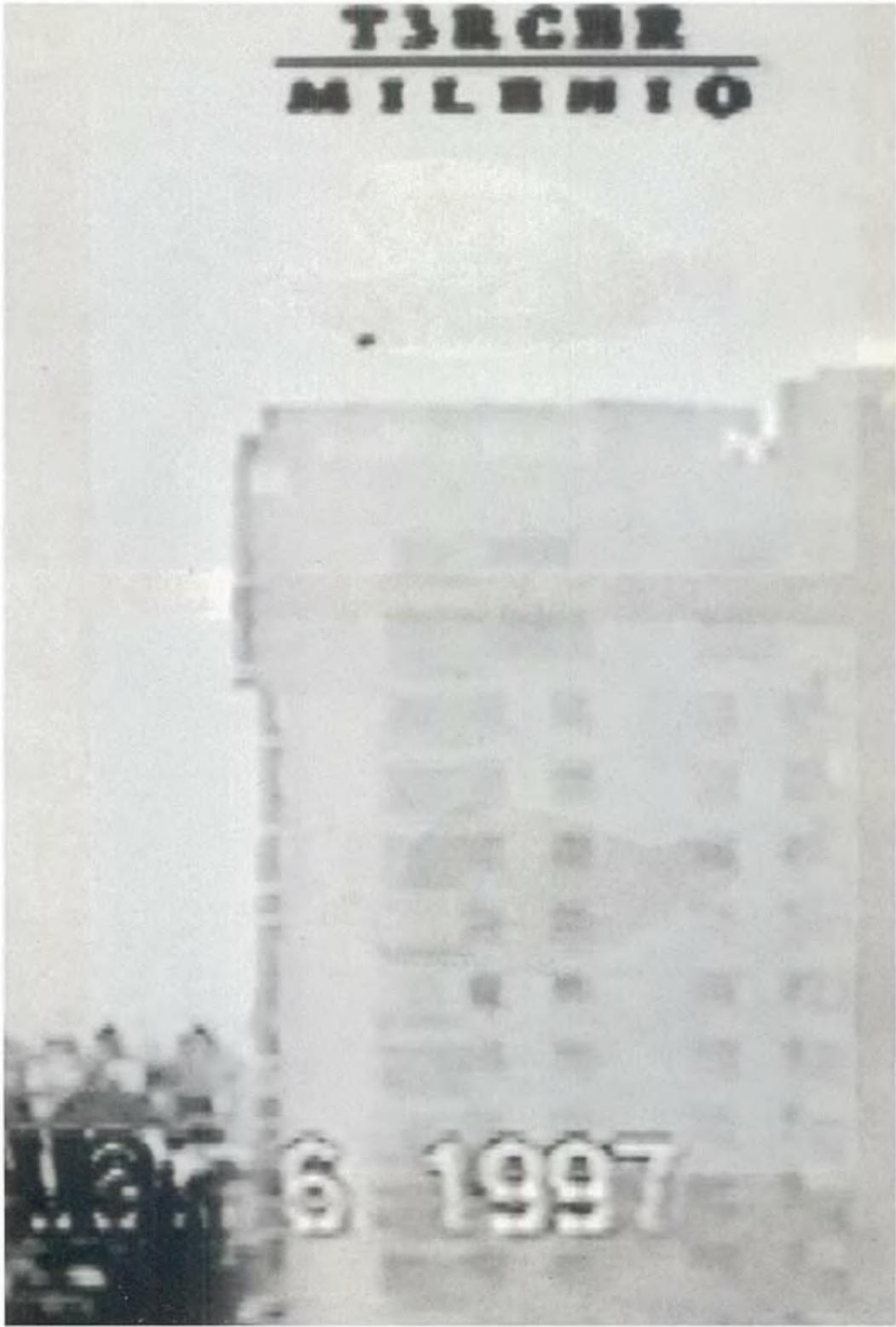
The UFO videotaped over Mexico City on August 6, 1997. The best and most thoroughly authenticated video of a UFO presently on record.

CREDIT: JAIME MAUSSAN



T3RCHH

MILENIO



6 1997



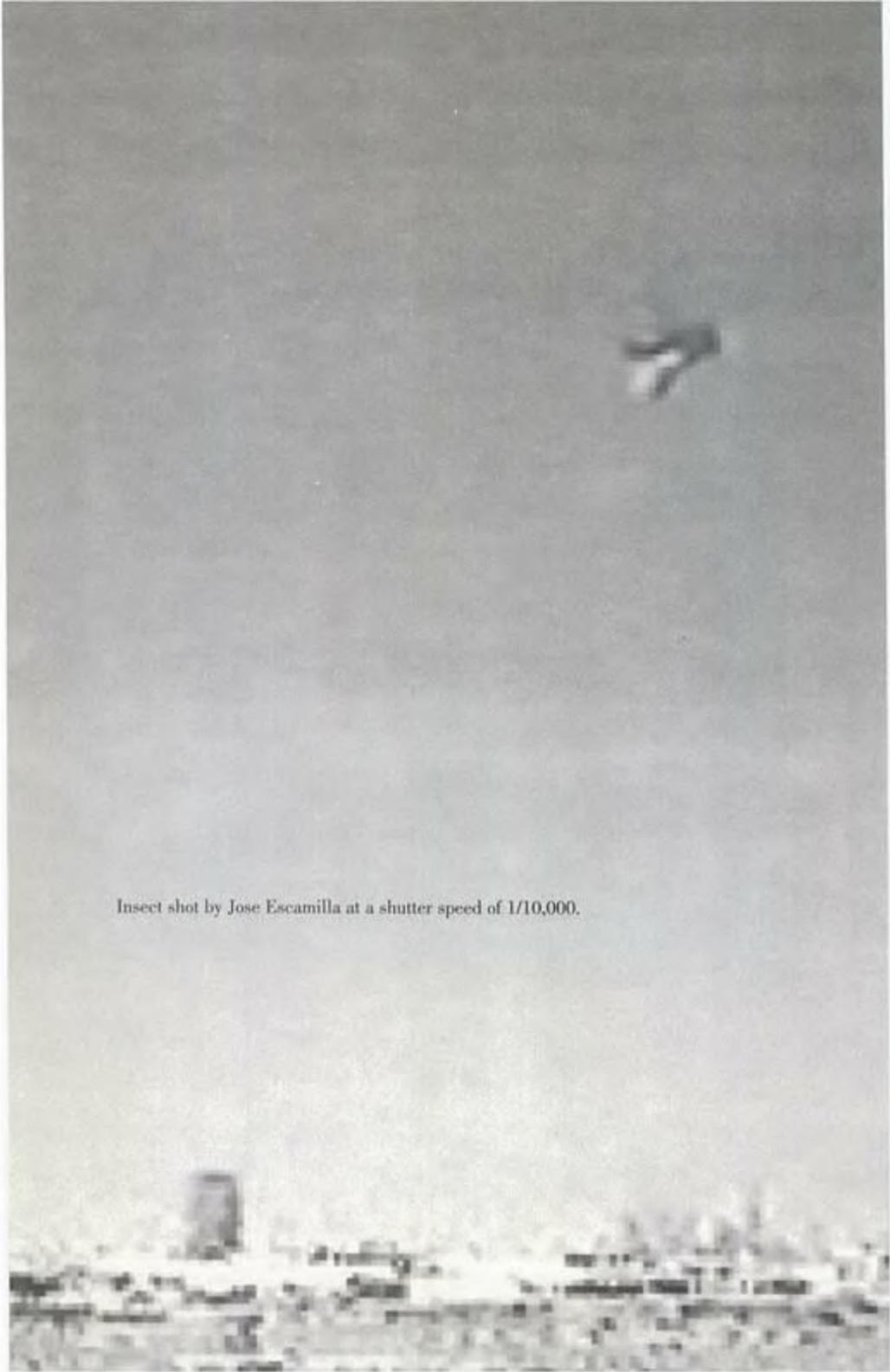
Probable UFO over Jaurez, Mexico.



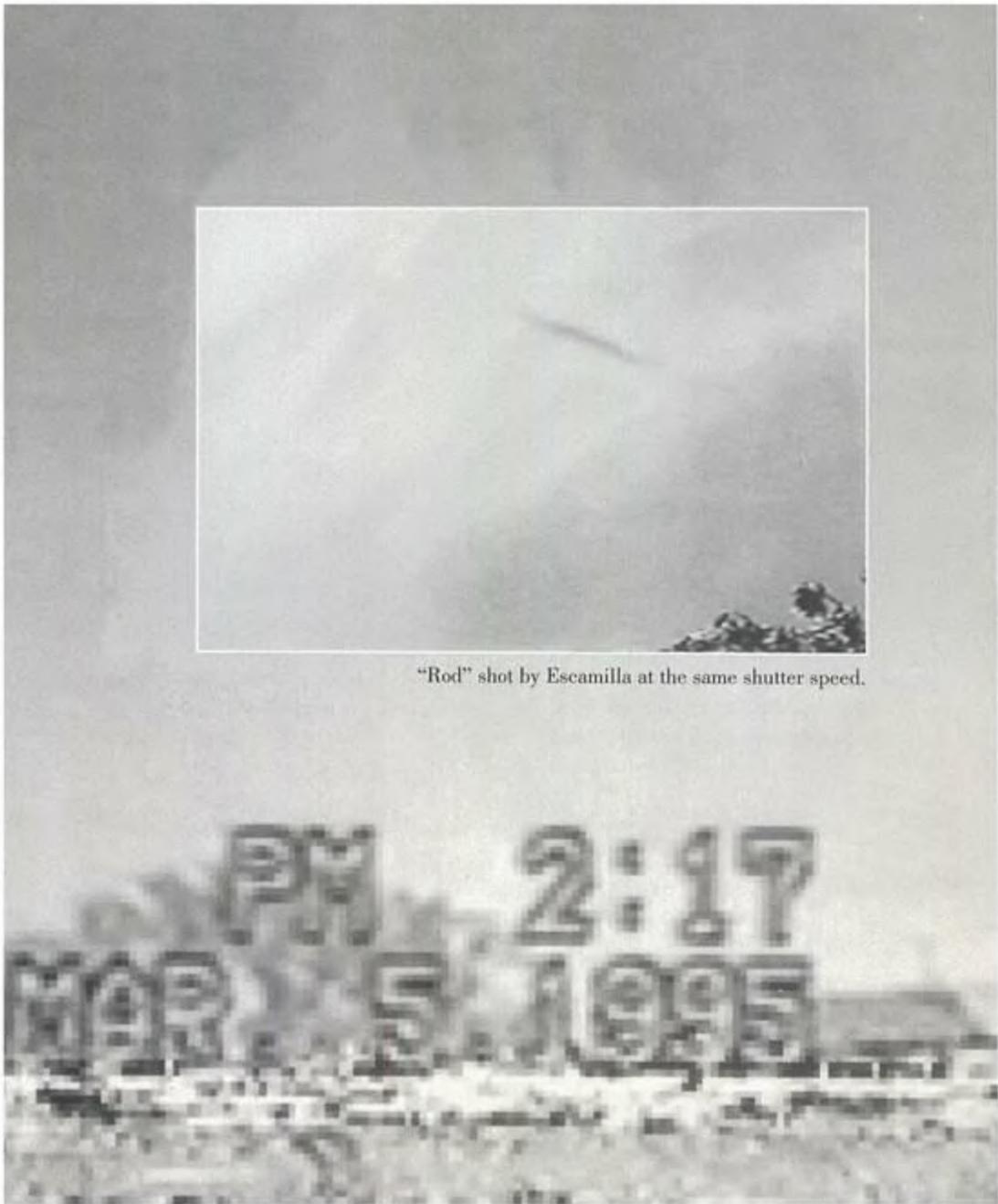
Similar object over Miami, Florida.



A third one over Stuttgart, Germany.



Insect shot by Jose Escamilla at a shutter speed of 1/10,000.



"Rod" shot by Escamilla at the same shutter speed.



Probable UFO with object leaving it (faintly visible on lower right) shot by Alice Leavy two months after her implant removal.

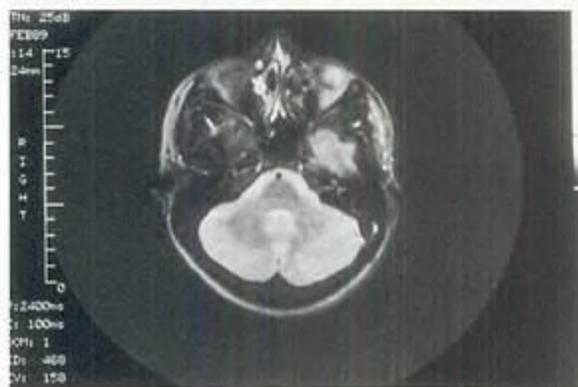
Implant Photos

Implant Photos



1: THE STRIEBER IMPLANT STUDY

March, 1988, MRI scan
of Whitley Strieber's
brain showing unknown
bright object in right
temporal lobe. (left side
of picture)



Object in sinus of witness.



Object in sinus of second
witness.



2. THE LEIR SURGERIES

A typical implant as it appears under the skin before removal. CREDIT: MICHAEL PORTONOVA.



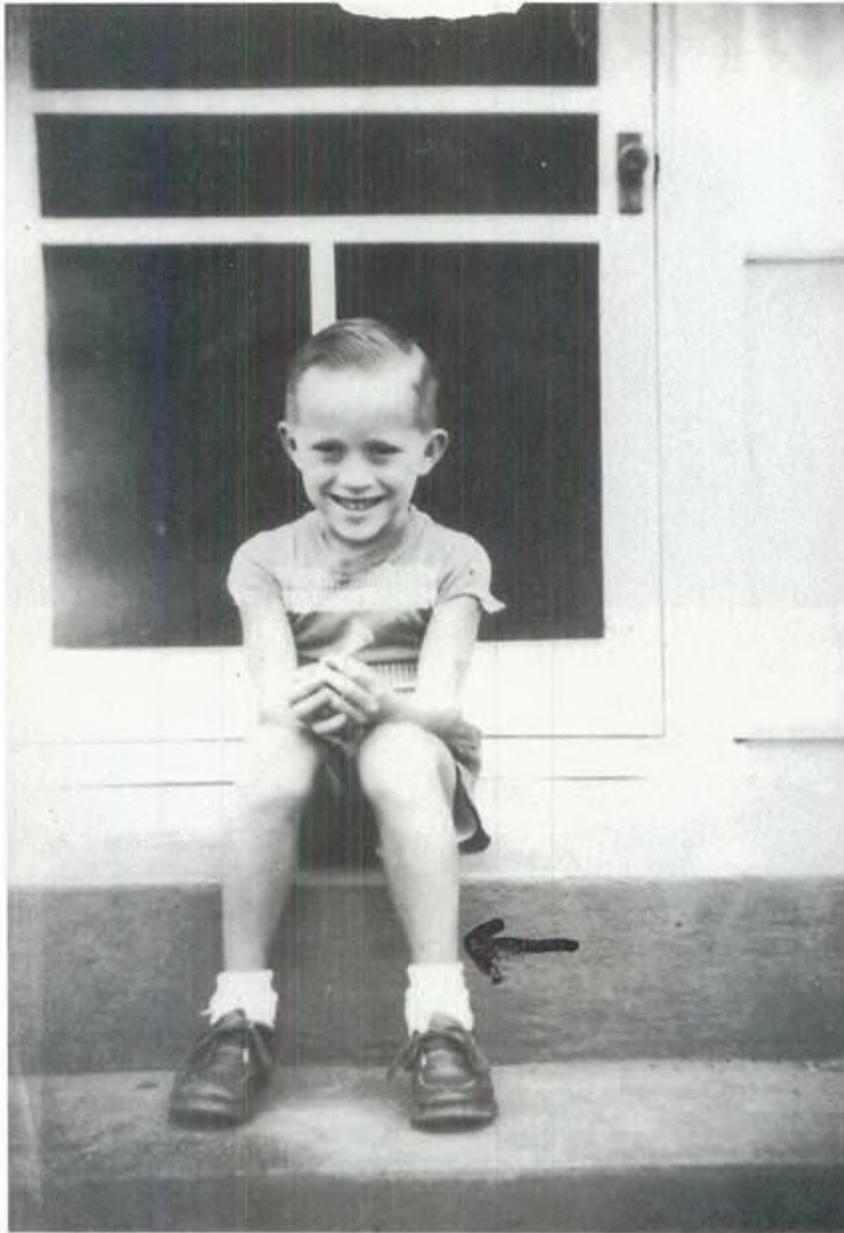
Roger Leir and his surgical team removing an object from the leg of Alice Levy.
CREDIT: MICHAEL PORTONOVA.



X ray of T-shaped object and "Canteloupe seed" in the foot of a witness, found not to be a surgical inclusion. This object has a core of apparent meteoric iron.



X ray of object found in the jaw of a defense worker.

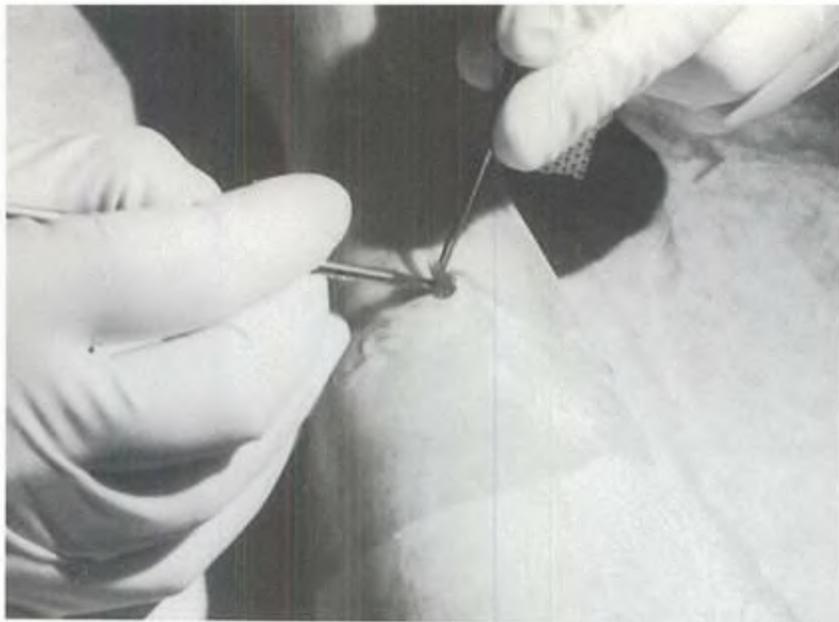


3. THE JESSE LONG STORY

Jesse Long as a child. Implant scar is visible on his left shin.



Jesse Long's brother's house, built before he had any conscious memory of his possible abduction to "the round house on the hill" that Jesse remembers.



Jesse's implant being removed in 1989.

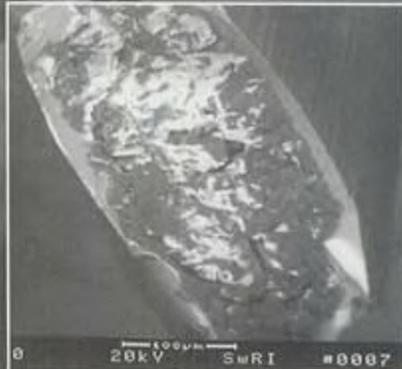


The implant that Jesse calls "Junior."

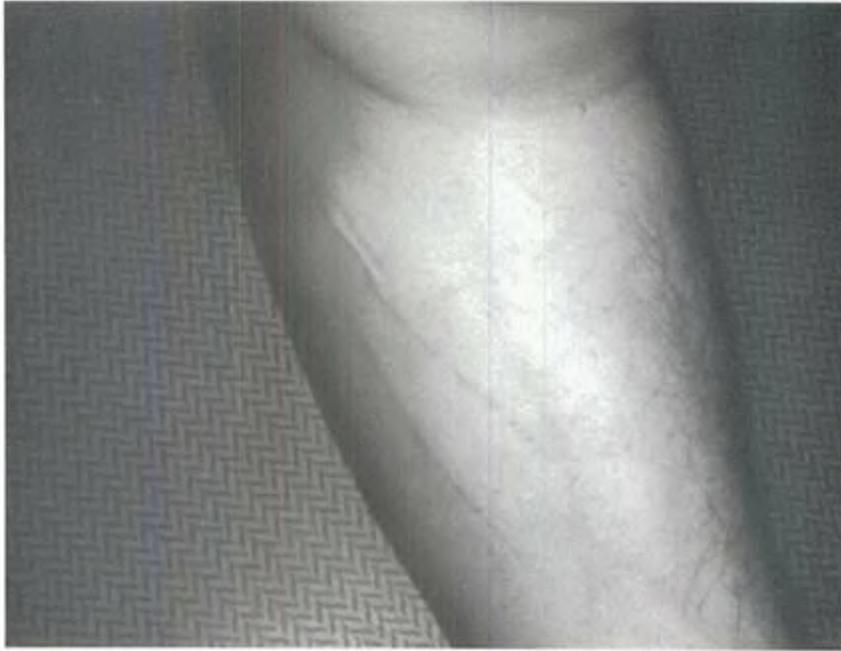
Junior's strange properties being explained to Jesse at the lab.



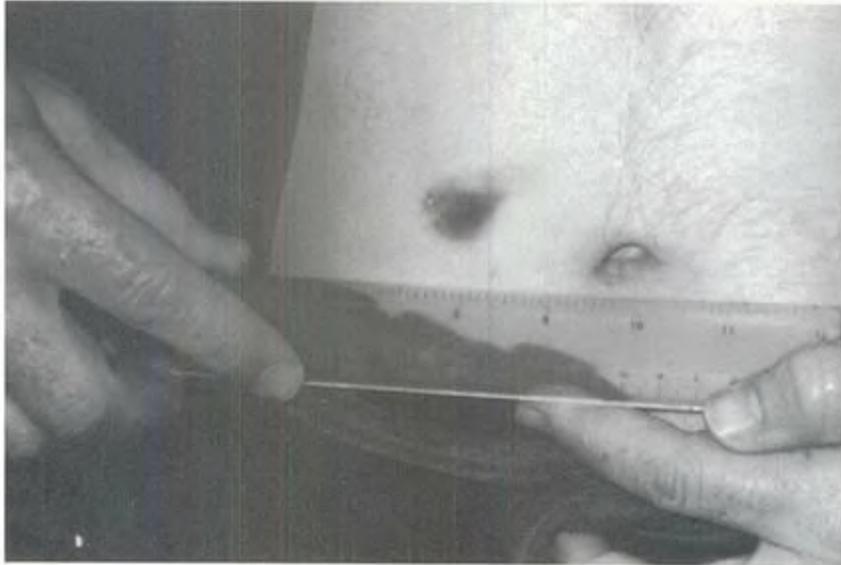
Electronmicrograph of Junior's cobbled surface.



Proteinaceous inclusion in the tip of the object.



Scratches from an abduction-related attack that took place four years after Jesse's implant was removed and caused him to need emergency room treatment for shock.



Triangular abduction-related injury on Jesse's abdomen that also occurred after his implant removal.

**Other Whitley Strieber books available from Crossroad
Press**

CAT MAGIC



Some people in Maywell, New Jersey, commute to New York. Some are working on a lab project that will change the world—if it is allowed to succeed.

And some people are witches.

Amanda Walker is not a witch—yet. She’s an artist, looking for work—unaware that someone has a desperate need for her, a dark plan that may require Amanda to enter death itself.

If she is allowed to live long enough to make the choice.

Amanda’s tale is far stranger than she knows. It is ancient beyond memory. In times of great change it must be relived, in all its fear and hope, its wisdom and its passion.

One of those times is now.

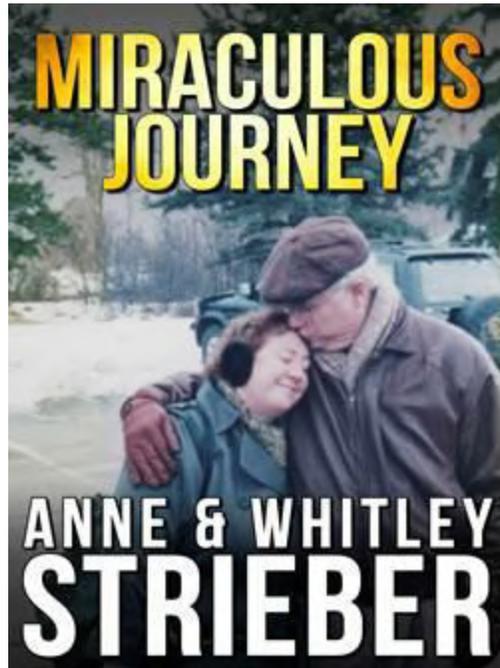
THE WOLFEN



In the dark, they are watching...
They are waiting for you.

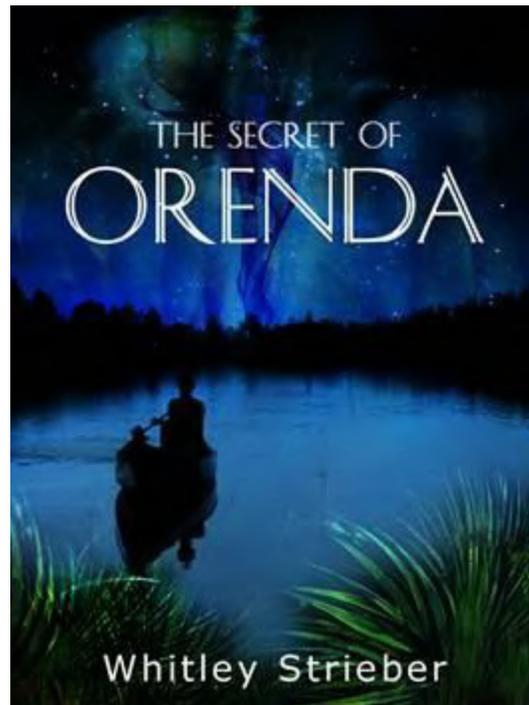
No one has ever lived to tell the horrifying truth about them. Yet even now the Wolfen are gathered in the night-dark alleys ... unseen, poised ... ready to destroy their helpless human prey. Only one man and one woman, trained cops, willing to risk their lives, stand in the way.

MIRACULOUS JOURNEY



Is death really the end? Why do we fear death? As Anne Strieber faces this inevitable transition, she and her husband Whitley explore the deep meaning of this journey, and find in it a richness of meaning that is largely ignored by a society obsessed with avoiding death at all costs. In 2004, Anne Strieber had a brain hemorrhage that led, most recently, to a brain tumor that is of a type that is generally fatal. So now, after a long struggle, she faces death. Instead of turning away from it, Anne explores the miracle of life and the mystery that death represents. Is it an annihilating end, or a journey into a new kind of freedom? Whitley and Anne Strieber explore this question from the perspective of the love that illuminates their long marriage, and find that, in facing death, it is possible to find the true miracle of why we live our lives in the first place. Life is the miraculous journey, death at once an end and a joyous new beginning.

THE SECRET OF ORENDA



Orenda: Feel the Magic

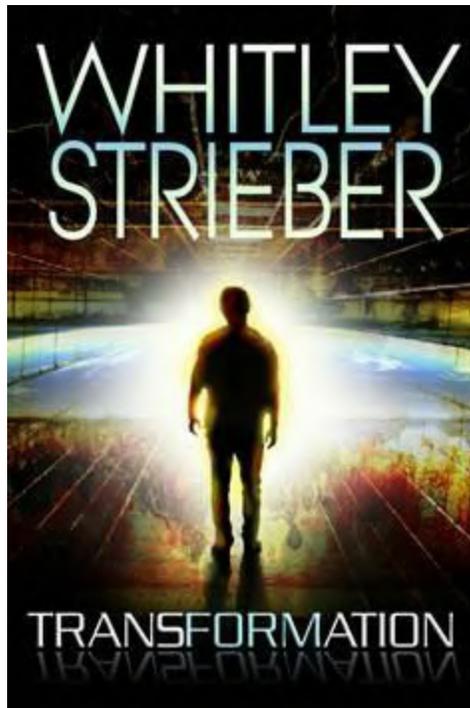
Deep in the forest there lives the world's greatest and most beautiful secret. Known only to a few initiates, the people of Orenda continue the ancient ways of magic from mankind's lost past. But even the wildest places are under threat, and this ancient tribe, who know nothing of the modern world, are discovered—and become a sensation.

Must their magic die, absorbed in the hectic modern world? Lawyer Mary Russell says no. Chief Charles Hay says no. Worldwalker Jim Hyam says no.

But the world says yes. And the world comes, in planes, in SUVs, in off-road vehicles, with cameras, forms to fill out, laws to follow and guns to make sure.

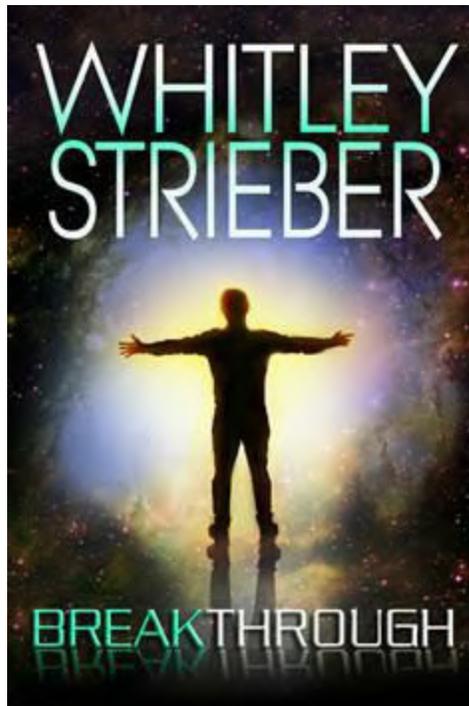
Who will win? Feel the magic.

TRANSFORMATION – BOOK II OF THE COMMUNION SERIES



The author of *Communion* has seen a new vision of this magnificent, mysterious, and fiercely alive universe through the shattering effects of an assault from the unknown. The visitors are sweeping up from where they are buried under layers of denial and false assurance to say: There is something more to us and our universe.

BREAKTHROUGH – BOOK III OF THE COMMUNION SERIES

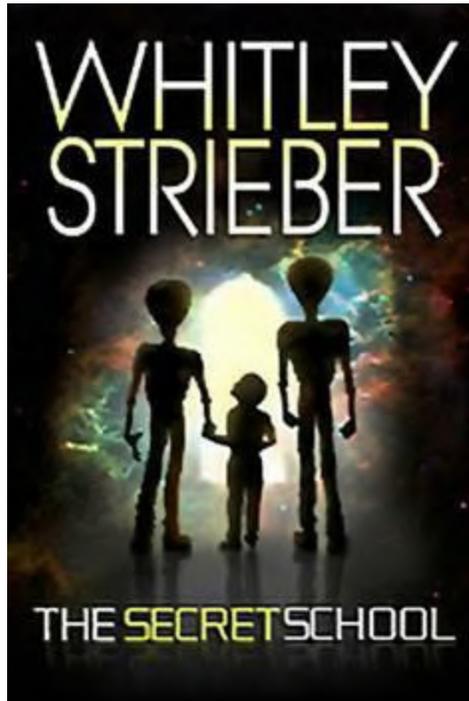


In his worldwide bestseller *Communion*, Whitley Strieber told of his remarkable encounters with alien beings, and convinced millions of us that we are not alone. But that was just the beginning of his incredible true-life odyssey.

Since then Strieber has been led by the visitors on an astounding journey of revelation, and with their inspiration, has discovered a passageway to profound personal insight. He has seen them enter the lives of others and witnessed the extraordinary effects of their presence. And he has received their vast wisdom about the wonder of life and the rich, almost totally unexplored experience we call death.

Powerfully moving and stunning in its implications, *Breakthrough* gives us a truly illuminating look at these mysterious, yet prescient, agents of change and reveals their inspiring message of hope for our chaotic and troubled world.

THE SECRET SCHOOL



In *The Secret School*, Strieber returns to his youth to recount a summer he spent in a “secret school” in the woods near his childhood home. It was there that he learned the nine lessons that forever changed his life and prepared him for the chilling events narrated in his previous three books. His recollection was triggered by his first encounter in 1985, but for years still remained half-hidden in shadow. Only now has he begun to reconstruct these childhood summers spent in secret adventure, these summers that planted the seeds for his adult encounters with alien visitors.

Jumping between a child’s-eye view and an adult’s hindsight, Strieber deftly weaves an adventure that stretches across decades, landing (or rather, lifting off) at the place his new life started when he met extraterrestrials. Strieber fans everywhere will not want to miss his haunting odyssey into the past and the startling new insights these memories provide about the meanings of his alien encounters and the future destiny of mankind.

**Other Whitley Strieber books available now or coming soon from
Crossroad Press**

Billy
Black Magic
Bob the Dog
Messages from a Distant Star
Mr. Baltimore
Nature's End
Somewhere in the West
The Forbidden Zone
The Lost Father
The Night Church
The Path
The Wild
Unholy Fire
Warday
Wolf of Shadows

Anne Strieber books coming soon from Crossroad Press

Little Town Lies
The Cave
The Invisible Woman

End Notes

^[1] Press Release, Society for Scientific Exploration, Oct. 10, 1997.

^[2] *Studies in Intelligence*, semiannual unclassified edition, #1, 1997, p. 78.

^[3] Fernando Diaz Infante, *La estela de los Soles a Calendario Azteca* (Mexico City: Panorama Editorial, 1986)

^[4] Adrian Gilbert and Maurice Cotterell, *The Mayan Prophecies* (Shaftesbury Element: 1995) pp. 38-39.

^[5] Jaimie Maussan has a file of more than 170 hours of video collected from around Mexico, with the first tapes being deposited in July of 1991 and the most recent, as of this writing, in August of 1997.

^[6] *The Merck Manual*, 16th ed. (Rahway, NJ: Merck & Co., 1992), pp. 2542-43.

^[7] H.E. Puthoff, "Can the Vacuum Be Engineered for Spaceflight Applications? Overview of Theory and Experiments," NASA Breakthrough Propulsion Physics Workshop, Lewis Research Center, 1997.

^[8] T.D. Lee, *Particle Physics: An Introduction to Field Theory*, (London: Has-wood Academic, 1988).

^[9] R.L. Forward, "Extracting Electrical Energy from the Vacuum by Cohesion of Charged Foliated Conductors," *Physics Review B* 30, no. 4, (1984): 1700-02.

^[10] Trevor James Constable, *The Cosmic Pulse of Life* (Tustin, CA: Merlin Press, 1976); reprint Garberville, CA: Borderland Sciences Research Foundation, 1990).

^[11] *Ibid.*, Borderland, ed., p. 403.

^[12] John Walker, "Flying Saucers Explained" (www.fourmilelab.chlgoldberglsaucers.html), August 31, 1997.

^[13] R.C. Hoagland, *The Discovery Space Shuttle Video*, (New York: B.C., Video, 1992).

^[14] Martin P. Kress, assistant administrator for legislative affairs, NASA, letter to Rep. Helen Delich Bentley, November 22, 1991.

^[15] J. Kasher, "A Scientific Analysis of the Videotape Taken by Space Shuttle Discovery on Shuttle Flight STS-48 Showing Sharply Accelerating Objects," Fund for UFO Research, Mt. Ranier, Maryland, 1992.

^[16] MJ. Carlotto, "Digital Video Analysis of Anomalous Space Objects," *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, Vol. 9, #1, p. 45.

^[17] Rep. Helen Delich Bentley, letter to Pat Newcomer, Office of Legal Affairs, NASA, January 3, 1991.

^[18] Carlotto, "Analysis of Anomalous Space Objects," p. 6.

^[19] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

^[20] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

^[21] Corso, *The Day After Roswell*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), pp. 267-68.

^[22] "Military Is Hoping To Test Fire Laser Against Satellite," *The New York Times*, September 1, 1997, p. 1A.

^[23] *San Antonio Express-News*, October 23, 1997, p. 13A.

^[24] Corso, *The Day After Roswell*, p. 268.

^[25] Paul R.Hill, *Unconventional Flying Objects* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads, 1995).

^[26] D. Radin, Ph.D., *The Conscious Universe: The Scientific Truth of Psychic Phenomena* (San Francisco: HarperCollins 1997), p. 49.

^[27] Maj. E. Ruppelt, *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 157-58.

^[28] Ignis fatuus is the flickering light that results from the spontaneous combustion of marsh gases, produced by decomposing plant and animal matter.

^[29] Such fields are the subject of growing scientific interest, as indicated by the discussion of the technical aspects of field propulsion mechanisms in H. Puthoff, "SETI, The Velocity-of-Light Limitation and the Alcubierre Warp Drive, an Integrating Overview," *Physics Essays* 9, no. 1 (March, 1996): 156.

^[30] A. Sakharov, "Vacuum Quantum Fluctuations in Curved Space and the Theory of Gravitation," *Soviet Physics.-Dokl.* 12, no. 4 (1968): 3454-55.

^[31] M. Alcubierre, "The Warp Drive: Hyper-Fast Travel Within General Relativity," *Classical and Quantum Gravity* 11 (1994): L73.

^[32] M. Pfennig and L. Ford, "The unphysical nature of 'warp drive'" *Classical and Quantum Gravity* 14 (1997): 1743. NY, 1997.

^[33] T. B. H. Kuiper and M. Morris, "Searching for Extraterrestrial Civilizations," *Science* 196 (1977): 618.

^[34] B. Stein, "It Takes Two to Tangle," *New Scientist*, September 28, 1996, pp. 24-30.

^[35] Malcom Browne, “Far Apart, 2 Particles Respond Faster than Light,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 1997, p. C1.

^[36] Dr. Nicholas Gisin of the University of Geneva and colleagues demonstrated this with paired photons. “Light’s Spooky Connections Set Distance Record,” *New Scientist*, June 28, 1997, p. 16.

^[37] John von Neumann, *Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1966).

^[38] William J. Broad, “CIA Admits Government Lied About UFO Sightings,” *The New York Times*, August 3, 1997, p. 12.

^[39] Kenneth Ring, *The Omega Project* (New York: Morrow, 1992), p. 219: “Perhaps there is, after all, a third realm of the imagination in its own right, not as something unreal but as something objectively self-existent, the cumulative product of imaginative thought itself.”

^[40] “Clocking the Swirls of Summertime,” *The Independent Long Weekend*, London, August 2, 1997, p 15.

^[41] It first appeared on the cover of the June 1957 issue of *Fantastic Universe*, designed by Virgil Finlay.

^[42] “Spacing Out,” Jeremy Manier, *Chicago Tribune Tempo*, April 23, 1997, p. 1.

^[43] *Science News*, November 13, 1993.

^[44] All quotations in chapters 8 through 11 are from letters sent to the Communion Foundation and used with permission of their authors.

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CRITICAL MASS

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

CRITICAL MASS

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*This novel is dedicated
to the men and women
who are engaged in the
lonely and dangerous struggle*

*to protect the Western world
from nuclear terrorism.*

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I would like to acknowledge the help of technical specialists, Arabists, and so many others who were kind enough to contribute their time and expertise to this project. I wish that I could acknowledge each individual personally, but various circumstances obviously prevent that. Any errors are, of course, my own.

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

—2 Peter 3

'Tis light makes color visible: at night
Red, green, and russet vanish from thy sight.
So to thee light by darkness is made known . . .

—Rumi, “Reality and Appearance”

CRITICAL MASS

1

NIGHT RIDE

Jim Deutsch was driving much too fast, but it was urgent that he interview the children before they died. He was not close to the end of this investigation, and they almost certainly possessed crucial information. If he did not get it, he had not the slightest doubt that more people were going to be joining them in death—many more, and soon.

What he had to find out was something he was very much afraid he already knew: why these little children, just smuggled in from Mexico, were radioactive. He had spent his career in counterproliferation, and the sudden appearance of radiation-sick kids in a border town was a definite worry. Of course, they could have been brought over in a truck full of smuggled X-ray isotopes, or gotten into some other innocuous material. But he doubted that. He had to get solid evidence and work it up convincingly, in order to get the massive search going that he feared was needed.

When the speedometer moved through a hundred, he forced himself to let the car slow down. He took a deep breath, held it, then let it out. He loosened his hands, and felt blood rush back into his fingers.

The South Texas countryside rolled past, a wilderness of mesquite brush, the sky to the west deep orange. To his Connecticut eye, it was almost hellishly ugly. But his was a war fought in nightmarish places, and this terrain was certainly better than dry, stripped Afghanistan, or the lethal, magnificent mountains of Iran.

When the brush gave way to threadbare fields, he glimpsed cattle staring and old oil wells pumping with a lazy sensuality. He could imagine the Texans of the past racing up and down this road in their Cadillacs and Lincolns, whooping. Wildcatters, they had been called, those buccaneers of the oil fields.

He had been in many of the world's isolated places, and felt here the same disappointing and reassuring silence. Cities with their bustle and promise lured him, and also repelled him. He liked to hang out at Dom u Dorogi in Moscow listening to blues, or Sway in New York, with its Middle Eastern

decor that always drew him into his memories. In the end, though, he would need the night and the silence where he had made his life. He would need the danger, foolish addiction that it was.

Ahead, a figure rode a horse right down the middle of the highway, a silhouette against the late sky. With foolhardy and trusting slowness, the old man walked his beast onto the shoulder. Jim shot past him at a distance of no more than thirty feet, glimpsing a narrow man on a tall roan. He seemed so needful, slouching along in the last sun, that Jim wished he had prayer left in him.

Again, he let his rented Taurus ease back to eighty. Mesquite brush whipped past, now. To the west, the sky faded. Texas Highway 57 was as empty as any road he'd known in Siberia or Afghanistan.

He considered the dying children, ahead in the border town of Eagle Pass. He wanted to believe that they'd been brought across with some piece of smuggled radiological equipment. But that was the sort of thing that the suits at Langley would want to think, and that was what they must not be allowed to think. On his end of the intelligence community, you survived by expecting the worst. On their end, he who made waves was in the most danger. But their danger was demotion. His was death.

His fear was that a bomb had come across and it was in motion, right now. He needed to find it, or at least find its trail, and he thought it must start with these poor kids. If he got lucky, they'd have some specific information. If not, he'd take what he got and go from there.

He wished that he trusted the system, but he was far too experienced for that. If he had, he would have called this thing in the second he heard about those kids. But he had feared what would happen—he'd find himself looking at orders not to waste his time. Wrong orders, and they would result in catastrophe.

The front face of the intelligence community appeared formidable, but that was the work of media experts, not a reflection of reality. It was the filter of analysis in the secret rooms that didn't work, and not understanding that—or not accepting it—had been his potentially fatal mistake. He had assumed that the system would absorb the information that he and his strings of agents gathered, and respond correctly.

But that hadn't happened when he was in Afghanistan or Pakistan or Siberia, so here he was in Texas, chasing after nukes that should have been caught before they left whatever benighted place they had come from.

Instead, they were here, and the Mexican border was now the front line of a battle that belonged twelve thousand miles away.

Something had been wrong out there, very wrong. The CIA had extensive operations devoted to monitoring the nuclear materials black market. He had been part of that, operating out of U.S. embassies, and available to do things like penetrate storage facilities and inventory their contents. He was also good at finding people and obtaining information. He was good at running, too. He'd escaped across many a border in his time.

But he shouldn't have needed to do that sort of thing. He shouldn't have been compromised, not ever. After 9/11, there had been a number of decoy companies created by the CIA to draw the interest of terrorists and smugglers by operating things like false weapons sales organizations.

But there had been dissention about these fronts. They hadn't attracted their targets because they'd been too far from the centers of Muslim extremism—all except one, Brewster Jennings, which had operated in the Middle East and had been effective.

However, Jim had believed since he had first engaged with it in 2002 that it was penetrated by somebody. Soon after he began working with this organization, his life had become dangerous. People knew. Turkish intelligence had him identified. Friends in Pakistani intelligence warned him that they were building a dossier on his activities.

Then had come the Valerie Plame affair in 2003, and the name of her front operation, which was Brewster Jennings, became as famous a name as Microsoft or Toyota.

The result of all this was simple: too many men like him had been compromised. Some must have lost their lives. He, who had been working halfway across the world, was now working in the United States, because there was now fissionable material in Mexico, possibly in Canada, too, and it was on its way here, no question.

As he sped toward the dying children, the fear he lived with every second of his life rose up in him, the sick, desperate urgency that dragged him awake nights and haunted his days. He was in the dark and he was falling, and he could not stop falling.

Somewhere along the road, every intelligence agent meets a demon question, one that absolutely must be answered but that has no answer, and Jim's fear told him that his was lying in the hospital at the end of this road.

His stomach forced acid into his throat as he churned down the two-lane

highway, speeding through silent towns called Batesville and La Pryor. Between them, he pushed the Taurus hard. Surely there wouldn't be a highway patrolman hiding along here, to come out with his lights flashing and entangle Jim in delay. His car was waking up buzzards asleep on the roadside, for God's sake.

He operated out of Dallas, where he officed in a little cell in the Earle Cabell Federal Building, just down the hall from the FBI. He was now a CIA contract employee, his status a fiction that allowed him—allegedly—to work within the continental United States. He suspected that his activities were not legal. He suspected that if he ever ended up under the bright lights of a congressional hearing, he would be alone.

He'd been transferred here from Kabul six months ago, after a quarter ton of U-235 had been intercepted on its way into Laredo and his supervisors had finally understood that the danger they had been fighting in distant places had arrived on their doorstep. He liased with the FBI Weapons of Mass Destruction coordinator in Dallas, which was another problem. The Office of National Intelligence might have improved interagency cooperation at the top, but the old "stovepipe" system still operated when it came to the nuts and bolts of intelligence gathering. His FBI counterparts shared only what they were legally required to share. Or did they? Did he, for that matter?

To counteract his lack of eyes and ears, he'd requested the right to recruit in the field, but had been turned down. These past few months, he could have used some good agents along the border, really used them.

Maybe then he would have been on top of this case before children lay dying. Maybe he would have made an interception. But this was going to be a chase, because whatever had been on its way across the border was now in country and being positioned.

U-235 didn't matter. This would not turn out to be about uranium. In fact, he thought the U-235 that had been brought over before was a test carried out to see how U.S. safeguards worked.

Nuclear materials are hard to detect if they're properly shielded. The most reliable detection systems react not only to radiation but also to the presence of the kind of bulk necessary to conceal it.

Whatever he was chasing now had been highly radioactive, and it had been brought across with illegals, probably in a truck. Could it be plutonium dioxide, perhaps, ready to be transformed into a metal, or intended to be used in some sort of low-yield bomb? It was shipped as a powder, which could

have leaked. But if that was the case, why hadn't the radiation detectors on whatever bridge it had crossed screamed bloody murder?

Maybe, while the truck was on the bridge, there had been nothing to detect. No leaks. But the new systems were designed to see shielding as well as emissions, and there were new brand-new detectors in Eagle Pass; he'd seen the installation reports. They would have seen a bomb, surely.

But for whatever reason, they hadn't.

At this morning's meeting, the regional Weapons of Mass Destruction coordinator, Cynthia Spears, had read a report from the Laredo Field Office about the radioactive kids. "They are illegals aged ten, eight, and four, believed to have been off-loaded by coyotes when they got sick."

The moment he'd heard those words, he'd booked a flight to San Antonio, then been compelled to drive from there because of the lack of air service to Eagle Pass. He knew little about the community. In 2007, the mayor had refused to allow Homeland Security surveyors to enter the town to survey for the wall. Later, it had been built, but it was of no concern to Jim. Walls had no relevance to him. The things that concerned him came across bridges in disguise, not through the river under cover of night.

The more he thought about it, the more certain he became that he was dealing with plutonium and that these children had somehow been exposed during handling, after it had crossed the border.

Plutonium was potentially much more of a threat than highly enriched uranium. It took far less plutonium to make a bomb, and therefore it was more portable. But it was also harder to make plutonium go critical and explode. If the builders had the right parts, though—well, it was possible. You could even get a low-yield plutonium bomb out of a simple gun-type detonation system of the kind used with uranium bombs.

Every country that had ever produced nuclear weapons materials had experienced some loss. Most highly enriched uranium and plutonium that had been lost by Western governments was accounted for in one way or another. But that was not true of Russia. During the collapse of the Soviet Union, highly enriched uranium and plutonium had gone missing and so had numerous critical parts.

He drove harder than ever, pushing the car relentlessly. In the movies, he would have had access to a government-issue Gulfstream or something. In the real world, no chance.

He fought the illusion that the road was actually getting longer, stretching

away in front of him like an expanding rubber band.

This came from the desert lights phenomenon, the sense that distant lights weren't getting closer. For a fair amount of time, he'd seen lights ahead—but at least it was a city, and not the dim cluster of lanterns that marked most settlements along the ragged edges of the world.

“Come on,” he muttered. *Were* the lights receding?

Nah, the Global Positioning System now had him twelve miles out. Experimentally, he opened his cell phone. Nope. Okay, noted. At least he was not going into some squat Kazakh burg full of bored sadists in threadbare uniforms who would thoroughly enjoy a night of waterboarding an American.

Gradually, the lights resolved into individual buildings, an Exxon station, a trailer back from the road, and he was soon moving through the outskirts of Eagle Pass.

But no, this was the middle of town. Eagle Pass appeared to be all outskirts, but it was low-slung, that was all, and quiet at this hour. A peaceful place.

Towns like Ozersk and Trekhgorny and Seversk, where he'd worked from time to time, might be isolated, but they were more lively than this at night. Drunk Russians—which after a certain hour in Siberia is, essentially, everybody—do not go gently. But here in this little border town, you sensed a peace, the same peace you felt throughout the developed world. He called it profound peace, soul peace. Eagle Pass enjoyed the same soul peace that blessed the rest of America. People felt safe here, which was another reason that things like 9/11 were so destructive. They slammed the American spirit right in the face.

Of course, human and drug smuggling were big business on the Mexican side of the border, and the violence involved was certainly known to cross over. Still, this was very certainly not the third world.

In cities like Islamabad or Kabul or Tashkent, you can smell the old, sour stench of hate, and see the fear that lives in people's eyes, the blood-soaked remembrance of crimes long past, and waiting retribution. You come back to this country after a few years of that and you want to kiss the ground.

Then he saw it ahead, the outline of a big building just visible in the last light. The hospital. Inside, maybe a key that would save a million lives and, with them, the way of life now called freedom. The dying children and, God willing, some clues.

He drove into the parking lot, pulled the car in between a weathered

Toyota and a Ford truck. How deeply American was this place, how kind and how very ordinary.

He got out of the car and hurried toward the great, dark building to challenge its secrets.

DELIVERANCE BY DEATH

As he approached the hospital's wide main doors, instinct made him check the locations of fire escapes and exits, count the stories, and note whether or not you could get off the roof. He had no reason to be concerned; it was just habit.

The lobby was large, the floors white and polished. There were people sitting here and there in the chairs, some reading, others simply waiting. He passed the gift shop and a row of plantings, and approached the information desk. There was faint music, no hospital smell, a sense of order.

He remembered hospitals like great broken skeletons, echoing with the voices of the unattended.

"I'm Dr. Henry Franklin," he lied to the receptionist. "I have an appointment to visit the Morales children."

She punched at a keyboard. "Uh, uh-oh, they're critical. I'm afraid they're in intensive care, no visitors."

"I'm from the Centers for Disease Control," he said, the falsehood emerging with practiced smoothness.

She made a call, spoke Spanish. "There's a guy out here. I think it's a reporter. He's claiming to be from CDC."

He was a fair linguist, which was one of the reasons he had been an efficient case officer. He rarely let people he dealt with know when he spoke their language, and he didn't do that now.

"May I see some identification?"

He drew out his wallet and showed her the CDC card he'd armed it with. As a nominal CIA operative, he had access to a variety of false IDs, some of which he could use legally, all of which could survive an in-depth background check . . . he hoped.

"Please, Doctor, come with me," a nurse in green scrubs said. She'd appeared silently, a young woman whose dark looks reminded him of his former wife, the gorgeous Nabila, still present in his heart. She was furiously complex and needed urgently to be cherished—too Arab, in the end, to

endure an unruly American husband such as himself.

The implacable demands of his work kept him away from her too much, and this made her feel unloved, and, in the end, she had walked out of the marriage. He was still heartsick at the loss and grieved as if she were dead.

People raised in the restless Western tradition understood nothing of what it was like behind the doors of Muslim households, of how right it could feel to be enclosed in deep tradition and intimate privacy. She had made coming home an entry into another, better world, gorgeously peaceful. Sentiment aside, though, he was an old rogue puma. Home is the hunter, home from the hill—except not him. This hunter only came home on leave, assuming he was close enough to manage it.

He missed her now, as he followed the nurse up the corridor. He watched the dark hair, the fluorescent overhead lights glowing on the olive skin, the smooth surge of her private body, and imagined her private ways.

Then they were at the entrance to an intensive-care unit. The doors opened onto a forest of equipment, patients enveloped in technology, nurses in their greens, a group of doctors conferring quietly at the foot of a bed. Again, he was reminded of other hospitals, where he was sometimes the only person present with even rudimentary medical knowledge, sitting with men of courage who were dying in squalor, able to offer them nothing more than a hand. The edges of the world may seem tattered and ugly and corrupt, but there are heroes there.

“She’s in and out,” Nurse Martinez said. “Rodrigo is conscious now.”

“Has the FBI been here?”

“Just the border patrol, to take them back if they survive.”

“The parents?”

“No parents.”

“But they know they’re illegals?”

“Sure.” The sudden clipped tone reflected the quiet fury of the Mexicans, their disdain for the whole process that was unfolding at the border, the way it reminded them of ancient defeats, and made them cling even more fiercely to the bitter certainty that being Mexican did not make you less.

She stopped before three shut green curtains, then drew one back.

And there he was, a shocking picture of childhood gone wrong, a little boy festooned with IVs, his vitals monitor indicating a temperature of 105, a blood pressure of 171 over 107, and an oxygen exchange number that Jim knew was ominously low.

A drain, black with blood, led from the boy's mouth. Mouth bleeding: 300 REMs exposure. Probably fatal in a healthy adult. This scrawny boy was already dead.

"Can he speak?"

"If he will."

"Hello, my son," Jim said in Spanish, causing Nurse Martinez to glance at him. "Will you tell me where you sat in the truck?"

They had been brought across Bridge 1 right here in Eagle Pass, Jim felt sure of it. He would not ask the boy direct questions, though. Jim had done too many interrogations to try that. Only the stupid were direct. Only the stupid were violent. He prided himself on being able to extract information without the subject realizing that he was being interrogated.

The boy's eyes met Jim's. Mahogany, sad as a dying animal's, waiting blankly. His throat worked, his mouth opened, and the interior was red, as if filled with tomato soup. "It was in the front."

"Do you mean with the driver?"

He shook his head.

So they'd been in the body of the truck, pushed up against the front wall. "And what was there with you? A box, perhaps?"

Rodrigo shook his head. His skin, mottled from burst capillaries, looked like colored tissue paper, as fragile as if it could be ripped by the friction of a thumb. There was internal hemorrhaging as well, Jim thought, and soon that blood pressure would start crashing, and that would be the end of this poor damn kid. The eyes settled on Jim's face, and he knew the look, defiant: *I haven't told you everything.*

"No box, then, Rodrigo. But there was something there." Sick fear swayed Jim. There was a question now, to which the answer, at all costs, must not be "yes." "Rodrigo, was the thing round, and it had lots of wires?"

Rodrigo's mouth opened. There was a deep sound, gagging, bubbling, as if his guts were boiling. Consciousness ebbed.

"Can we bring him back?"

"You're not a doctor."

"Can we bring him back?"

"What's this about? Who are you?"

"Nurse, I have to get him to answer my question. Reduce his morphine drip."

"I can't touch that drip!"

Jim reached up and turned it off.

“How dare you!”

Jim stood to his full height, causing him to loom over her. “This is a national security matter. You will cooperate.”

“I—”

Rodrigo groaned. Jim went back down to him, laid his hand on the poor little guy’s sweating brow. “What did it look like?”

“Black,” the boy said. “We sat on it.”

“Round? Black and round?”

Rodrigo frowned a little.

“Was it a box, Rodrigo?”

He nodded—and Jim knew, suddenly, what had been done. These children—in fact, everybody in that truck—had been used as a human shield. The bodies were there to confuse the mass detector and, hopefully, absorb enough radiation to get past the particle monitor.

But that wouldn’t work. It might help, but the instruments were too sensitive. And, in any case, why in the world hadn’t Customs and Border stopped a truck obviously loaded with illegals?

Jim wanted to scoop this little guy up into his arms and take him away, but he had no key to heaven. He had no kids, but he hoped that he would, one day, and if so, they would be cherished with this man’s whole soul, to make up for the horrors he had seen across the shuddering mass of the third world.

“Where were these children found?”

“On Main, a couple of blocks from the bridge. The police brought them in.”

In an adult, radiation exposure at this level would cause immediate fatigue and nausea, followed by a few days of recovery, the so-called walking-dead phase. Rapid and irreversible decline would then commence.

“Has there been a dosage evaluation?”

“We’re estimating three to four hundred REMs for the older children, a bit less for the little one.”

He’d get a satellite lookdown of the area from the National-Geospatial Intelligence Agency. From Nabila’s brother, Rashid, who worked in their reconnaissance unit. If he was lucky, Rashid might actually find a picture of the truck. With the computers they had available, whether or not a truck had stopped in the street near where the children had been found could be determined in an hour or less. If they were lucky, they’d get the make, the

year, conceivably the license plate and a visual of whoever had taken the kids out and laid them on the sidewalk.

Interesting to see if Nabila and Rashid were on speaking terms again. Rashid had been against the marriage, called it an abomination. He'd been right, but for the wrong reasons. He and Nabby were among a tiny handful of Muslims in the intelligence community, and they were there only because of political pull. At a time when you could not understand the enemy without at least understanding Arabic, American's clandestine services had locked arms to keep Arabic speakers out. In Jim's opinion, that made Nabby and Rashid crucial personnel—but they were nevertheless treated with suspicion, and their activities were carefully watched.

Silently, Nurse Martinez closed the curtain around Rodrigo's bed. "I won't be able to rouse him. It's not a coma, but the sleep is profound."

It would, Jim knew, turn into death, and he thought that could happen at any time. But the boy had done all that was needed of him. He had informed Jim that he had crossed the Rio Grande in a truck with a plutonium bomb for a companion. So the burning question now became, how could that happen? Who in the world could miss a thing like that? Even if the detectors failed, they searched all vehicles, especially trucks.

Then the nurse opened the curtain around the little girl's bed, and Jim did not understand what he was seeing, not at first. Then he realized that she was under a tent of lead.

"She's emitting," the nurse said.

He contained his shock. There was only one way the girl could be that radioactive, and the knowledge of what that was drew a coldness into his belly. She had been made to carry unshielded plutonium or plutonium dioxide on her person, in her rectum, her vagina, her stomach. Poor damn little thing! The stuff was so heavy, she couldn't have carried much.

"These kids were the only victims found?"

"Yes."

"No other cases of radiation sickness in the area? At all?"

"I don't think so."

"I'll need to know the exact spot on Main where they were found."

"Of course." She drew him a little map.

He left the hospital, trying not to run. The moment he got to his car, he threw open the trunk and unlocked the silver case that held his detection equipment. His standing orders required him to contact the FBI Weapons of

Mass Destruction Directorate in the event he became aware of the presence of a nuclear weapon inside the United States. He wasn't actually sure of this, though. The situation was highly suspicious, to say the least, but he needed harder evidence if he was going to get a massive interdiction response.

Among his tools were brushes and a vacuum to gather dust, cameras, an ultrasensitive GPS device, a Geiger counter, and a device that could detect the kind of high-explosive materials likely to be used in nuclear detonators.

He put the Geiger counter on the front seat beside him, and headed for the address the nurse had given him.

A nuclear bomb could be loose in the United States. If it was, it would be on its way to its target right now and they would be wasting no time. Certainly anybody capable of injecting a plutonium nuke across the U.S. border understood U.S. detection systems well enough to know that it was going to be found, and soon.

So they would be moving as fast as possible. If he was lucky, there were maybe a few days until the thing was detonated. But for all he knew, it could be in the air right now, approaching Los Angeles or Denver or some other vast concentration of innocent Americans.

He left the parking lot, forcing himself to drive as carefully as possible, forcing himself to continue to think clearly and calmly.

The thing was out there. Oh yes. He just needed to lock down a little more evidence to make sure the whole system took notice, and this was treated like the emergency that it was.

RESSMAN AIR SERVICE

Todd Ressman was beginning to think his business might actually work. Last year, he'd cleared a little money, and so far this year, every month had seen positive cash flow. It had been a long haul, very long, since he'd been laid off during the death of Eastern Airlines in 1991. But what's nearly twenty years in a guy's life?

He'd done charter work, off-the-books work, piloted for discounters, worked in Africa and Asia . . . and in the end gotten together enough cash for a down payment on his cargo-modified Piper Cheyenne. He'd put down sixty grand, all of his savings. He wasn't going to move people, not after all his years in the damn airlines. Cargo didn't complain, and had few other alternatives. If you were going to get something moved out of Colorado Springs fast, he was the go-to guy, and tonight he was taking a machine tool and a crate of frozen chickens to the Pahrump Valley Airport in Nevada. He was slotted for flight level 18, and at economical cruising speed he expected to land just after midnight.

The flight would cost him \$3,118.23 and would generate revenue of \$5,004.19. If he got something in Pahrump, the run would be even better. What he might get there he couldn't imagine, however. The town's chief industry was sod, followed by prostitution and gambling. And speaking of chicken, the Chicken Ranch airport was one of the drop-ins, for God's sake, but not for a cargo operator, obviously. Nevertheless, he'd learned in the years he'd been running his service that the worst thing you could do was anticipate. His business ran on the unexpected.

The tool he had, for example, looked like some kind of disassembled drill press. It was heavy, but not heavy enough to take up all of his poundage. The chickens in their sealed crate had been a late addition.

Who would spend all this money to move a drill press, or, more fantastically, chickens that couldn't be worth but a few hundred dollars?

He knew the answer, which was always the same: folks had their reasons.

He'd take off in a few minutes, into what promised to be a gorgeous night.

This was why he did it, why at fifty-eight years of age he was still going up every day of his life. He never got used to it, never tired of it. Back on Eastern, he'd flown sixes, then sevens, then twenty-sevens. He'd seen Eastern in its glory days and in its Lorenzo days. The death of that airline had not been pretty, nossir. Frank Lorenzo had destroyed it surgically, pulling off one valuable part after another, until there was nothing left but a lot of wretched old planes and men and women who would not quit until the thing was simply liquidated, which was what had happened.

Well, that was groundside stuff. Todd wasn't really interested. What he wanted in his life was his two PT6A-28s roaring on the wings of his lovely, quick airframe, his glowing instruments before him and the stars in the sky.

He got aboard and checked his stow, making certain that all the tie-downs were secure. Thirty years in the air had taught him that the sky had a lot of ways to hurt you and the best method of dealing with that was to respect the fact that airplanes that usually wanted to fly sometimes decided not to do that anymore.

He could have been flying with another pilot, but why spend the money? Generally, he rented ground crew by the hour. He was based out of Colorado Springs but really would take anything anywhere in the United States, Canada, and, less willingly, Mexico. He spent two or three weeks flying, usually, then went back to C.S. and his house and Jennie, whom he had met on the old LaGuardia-Pittsburgh run pushing twenty-eight years ago.

He looked over his manifest. The drill press was from Goward Machines, destined for some outfit called Mottram Repair. They must need it bad, to move it like this. As for the chickens, they were going from Blaylock Packers to an individual, Thomas Gorling. Todd could figure out most of his cargoes, but this one had him stumped. He had it back against the bulkhead, well secured. You always had to ask yourself, what happens if this airplane turns upside down? Given a small plane and a big, violent sky, that could happen. Had happened. In fact, in his years in the air just about every damn thing had happened. He'd experienced fires, crazy passengers, every known malfunction you could imagine. Usually, the Cheyenne was a pretty tolerable traveler, but she could get obstreperous when she was running heavy and there were crosswinds about.

He went into the Fixed Base Operation. A couple of other pilots were hanging around, guys waiting for their jetsetters to get poured out of their limos. He could have made steady money flying bigs, but he wanted to be his

own man and no way could he afford a jet. It was a struggle to make the payments he did have. But it was his plane. His life. He went when he was ready to go. Or not.

Nobody said anything when he came in. Why should they? They knew what he was, a guy on the bottom rung, fingernails dug into his airplane, scratching through the sky on fumes and maxed-out credit cards.

He checked his flight plan, then went into the hangar. He was looking for something, he supposed. Not really thinking about it directly. Just looking.

There were a couple of mechanics there. “Hey,” he said. “I’m the guy moving the chickens.”

They were heads into a Citation that looked like it had a hydraulic leak in the left-wing leading-edge controls. That would’ve made for some complicated landings, for sure.

“Yeah,” one of them finally responded.

Todd didn’t want to crack the cargo, but the truth be told, it was bothering him. He’d four-one-oned Pahrump and hadn’t located anybody called Gorling. Of course, maybe he was staying at one of the whorehouses or a motel, who the hell knew?

But chickens? Come on, the guy was paying close to a thousand bucks, here.

“Who brought them in?”

“Christ. Lemme think. Coulda been—yeah, a fridge truck.”

“Mexican fellas?”

“White men, all.”

He went back inside, spoke to the FBO operator, a girl of about thirty, dark and tired looking, with a name tag that said: “Lucy.” “I need a phone number for this chicken guy,” he said. “Lemme see the manifest.”

No phone number for the receiving party. So what was supposed to happen? He just dumped the crate in Pahrump and good-bye, Charlie? He’d been paid; that wasn’t the problem. But he liked things to work right. There were no tracking numbers in this business, and there wasn’t one damn thing about Mr. Gorling on this manifest.

“The hell with it,” Todd said.

“Isn’t there a Chicken Ranch in Pahrump?” Lucy asked.

“Funny girl.”

“Chickens are a funny cargo for you guys. I could understand caviar or wine, but not chickens.”

“Unless it’s not chickens.”

There was a silence, then. The two pilots lounging in the ready room both perked up. Everybody knew the rules. You had to report suspicious cargo. But was it suspicious? Todd had five hundred dollars of his profit riding on the poultry, so he didn’t want a bunch of FBI crew cuts out here fisting the cavities. On the other hand, he was damned if he was going to move illegal drugs. Legal ones he carried all the time. One of his main money cargoes, matter of fact.

“So maybe I gotta crack the chickens, seeing as it’s not a good manifest.”

“You try Information?”

“I did indeed. No cigar.”

She hit an intercom button on her desk. “Marty, Julio? Captain Freighter needs to crack his chickens.”

He could hear her words echoing in the hangar, could hear, also, the snickers of the jet pilots.

He went back out on the apron, looked sadly at his beautifully loaded baby. She was all ready to go, looking like she was born for the sky.

The two mechanics came across from the hangar, moving slow. Who wanted to manhandle cargo? Not their jobs.

“Sorry about this, guys,” he said. “I got a sour manifest.”

Then Lucy came out. She had a weather fax in her hand. “I got a line moving in,” she said. He looked northward and saw it, the flickering of lightning just below the horizon. Ahead of it would be winds, strong ones. He knew his front-range flying. He had about twenty minutes to get in the air and get out of here, or he wasn’t going upstairs for hours.

“Well, fellas,” he said, “looks like you’re gonna get to earn your money another way.” He took the FBO’s copy of the manifest. “Oops,” he said, jotting down a phone number beside Mr. Gorling’s name. “Bastard gave us a dud contact number. How were we to know?”

He got in his plane and pulled the door closed.

Ten minutes later he was rotating. Ahead, as he rose, he saw the squall line racing down the range, alive with lightning.

He banked west, and flew off into the stars.

A thousand feet below him a man watched Todd’s plane rising into the sky. The man had been trained, and carefully, to recognize the silhouette of the Cheyenne. He got into his car and drew his cell phone from his pocket.

For some moments, he studied his watch. Then he made a call. “Mother,”

he said, in his soft, calm voice, the voice of the dutiful son, “I am nearly home.”

THE BRASADA

Jim had quickly found the spot where the kids had been dropped, but then he'd lost the trail. They had been radioactive because they were near something radioactive, but it wasn't leaking particles, and frankly, that made it look more and more like an X-ray isotope. It could have been that illegals had been concealed behind a shipment of perfectly legal isotopes and the children, with their small bodies, had been sickened by the radiation and tossed off the truck to die.

However, he had been to all local public transportation hubs, which consisted exclusively of bus stops. There was an airport but no regular flights. Conceivably, the bomb could have been shipped as air cargo, but he had found a faint radiation signature at the Kerrville Bus Company station on Jefferson, in the cargo-holding area. The bus company had no record of any isotopes or X-ray equipment being moved, so he had logged this as evidence to be followed up.

He couldn't personally track down every bus that had left the station in the past two weeks. It could be done by the FBI, but it was a dangerously slow way of working, no matter how efficient they might be. What they would most need to know was exactly when the device had arrived at the bus depot. That would narrow the search to just a few busses, and enable them to catch up with the bomb . . . if there was a bomb.

To find this out, he needed to investigate the two bridges that crossed the Rio Grande in Eagle Pass. If X-ray isotopes had been brought in, they would have been logged. Both bridges had advanced spectroscopic portal radiation monitors, ASPs, installed on them. This was state-of-the-art equipment, and after some false starts in the early going the system was testing to a high degree of reliability. In any case, if the plutonium was not detectable because of shielding, the presence of an unusual mass such as a lead container in any crossing vehicle would have triggered an immediate alert and a search of the vehicle.

He hoped that his visit to the bridges wouldn't make the Customs and

Border boys uneasy, wondering who the hell he was and tripping him up every way they could. You think ordinary people don't like bureaucrats. Bureaucrats *really* don't like bureaucrats. As he drove, he opened his briefcase and fished out another set of creds, one of the many that he had developed for work along the Texas-Mexico border. Strictly speaking, identifying himself to a federal officer with a false credential was illegal, but his ambiguous status enabled him to get away with a lot. Annoying, but also useful at a moment like this.

He turned into the station parking area, which was full. He pulled up behind a couple of dusty official Blazers and cut his engine.

"Excuse me, no parking; you'll have to get that vehicle in motion."

Jim showed him his Customs and Border inspector credential. "What's your name, Officer?"

The guy looked over the cred. Then he looked up at Jim. The eyes of this very large young man were nasty little pins, full of hostile suspicion. "Arthur Kenneally," he said at last.

Kenneally was maybe twenty-two, spit and polish all the way, although heavy. And sad, Jim thought, and wondered if that meant something. "I need to take a quick look at your ASP," he said.

Arthur stared at him.

"You have an advanced spectroscopic portal radiation monitor on this bridge. An ASP. I need to check it out."

"There's no ASP on this bridge."

Jim was practiced at concealing surprise, but not this time, and he hoped that the flush he felt surging up his neck would not be visible in the parking-lot lights. "Are you sure?" It was all he could think to ask.

"I work here."

"What about the Camino Bridge?"

"Mister, there's nothin' like that on either bridge."

"Are they out for maintenance?"

"Look, there are no ASPs here. None whatsoever. Do you get that? The number is zero. And you're double-parked, Sir. If we need to go hunting, we gotta scramble these vehicles."

Jim watched him. Why was he so defensive?

"Sir?"

"That's okay, Kenneally. I'm moving out." A tingling crept through his body, his muscles tensed. He returned to his car, backed out, turned around,

and drove into town. It was hard to stay on the road, hard even to think clearly. He recognized that he was panicking. But he had a major problem here, no question.

Homeland Security had placed ASPs on every bridge that crossed the Rio Grande. They had been problematic at first, but as improved devices became available, the bridges had been high priority. He'd been shown the deployment records by Cynthia Spears. But the records were wrong, which meant only one thing—at some level, there had been sabotage. Either the devices had never actually been deployed or they had been removed.

Was it local? Did that account for Officer Kenneally's manner—he knew that the monitors had been ditched, and therefore was part of some sort of illegal group, probably accepting bribes to allow trucks to pass without proper search? Or was the problem farther up the line, in Dallas, where the deployment of the ASPs had been managed, or even in Washington, where the whole national program was directed?

This felt an awful lot like what had happened in southern Russia, when Jim discovered that facilities listed as secured by the National Nuclear Security Administration were, in fact, not secure at all. And then—because of what was going on with Brewster Jennings and possibly the NNSA itself—his reports would sink into the system and die.

This had to be reported, of course, and maybe with the same lack of effect, but his mission wasn't to fix the problem on the bridge or even investigate it. It was his job to find what had already been brought in, and he needed to remain focused on that, because lack of information about when the truck had crossed was going to be a serious challenge.

The mere fact that this had been done to these bridges increased his conviction that this was not about X-ray isotopes.

Time was the enemy now, and he drove harder even than he had coming down. He would return not to Dallas but to San Antonio, where he would engage the FBI as fully as he could manage. He didn't have proof, but he certainly had evidence enough to justify an investigation of what was going on at those crossings and an extensive search for any possible nuclear devices that may have been allowed into the country.

In addition to the FBI's Weapons of Mass Destruction Directorate, the National Nuclear Security Administration's Office of Emergency Operations needed to be informed, and OEO needed to deploy all thirty-six of their teams to this region, armed with all possible radiation-detection and

explosive-suppression equipment. The two FBI teams that specialized in disabling firing systems would need to be put on full alert. The staff at G-Tunnel, the five-thousand-foot-deep shaft where the device might need to be detonated, had to be warned that they were liable to receive a hot nuke within hours.

He was out on the highway now, driving into the dark, heading for San Antonio as fast as he could go, and it was here that the car took the first blow.

For an instant it shot forward; then there was another crash from behind as he instinctively hit the brakes. Struggling for control, he gripped the wheel. What was this, a shredded tire? A glance in the rearview mirror revealed only blackness.

A third crash knocked his head forward and back, and he understood that this was not about the tires. Somebody was ramming him from behind.

He switched on his high beams and accelerated, drawing away from the other vehicle, feeling his heart match the drumming of the engine.

So it was Customs and Borders, had to be. That bastard hadn't been a pissed-off bureaucrat, he'd been a scared-shitless crook. That would be a Customs and Border Protection truck back there, most likely, with Kenneally in it.

He smashed the accelerator to the floor, drawing farther away from his pursuer.

Long experience told him not to think more about who was back there. Speculations like that only slowed you down.

Given the fact that he might not get out of this, he needed to report at once. He flipped open his cell phone—and froze, horrified, when he saw that there were no signal bars.

His pursuers had known to wait for the dead spot, of course.

He had to get this report moving!

Wham! This time the car swerved, went up on two wheels, and almost left the road. As he fought the steering, something in the rear began clattering. Flashes in the mirror told him that his bumper was dragging, making sparks. Another blow might split the gas tank, and then this little game would be over.

His mouth was dry now, his palms sweating enough to add to the danger of losing control.

Wham!

The car shuddered; he felt the wheels slewing, regained control, but barely.

No smell of gas, and—at least at the moment—no flames.

Then the rear window flew to pieces, spraying him with tiny bullets of glass. The flashes that accompanied it told him that he was being fired on with an automatic weapon.

Back to the drawing boards on the identity of his pursuers, because he'd seen that particular spray of light before, and that was a Kalashnikov, not exactly the kind of weapon used by Customs and Borders. There were incidents of ranchers reporting men with these weapons moving up the coyote trails, but they were drug runners, not U.S. officers.

He felt that coldness along the neck that comes with being profoundly exposed to a gun. Too familiar.

It chattered again, its rasp now clearer and closer.

He took the only choice left to him, and veered off the road into what Texans called the *brasada*, the brush country. Behind him, he heard the squeal of tires, then the roar of the truck's engine as the driver geared down to go off-road. Jim could feel his car wallowing in the soft soil.

The Kalashnikov rattled again—and suddenly there was light behind him, a lot of light, flickering. They'd gotten his tank and he was on fire. Now he had only the gas left in the line, maybe a couple of miles, maybe less, and if that fire ran up the line, he would need to get out of here fast.

As he continued on, he began to hear the fire, a sound like a fluttering flag, and smell it, too, the sweetness of burning gas, the nasty sharpness of the carpet in the trunk.

He had to keep maneuvering to avoid contorted mesquite trees and that was slowing him down and he thought that there was a significant risk of an explosion, so he opened the door and rolled out of the car and kept rolling, and the truck passed him at a distance of six inches.

He scrambled to his feet and blundered off into the tangle of thorny mesquite branches, cacti, and, he had no doubt, snakes. Both his training and experience made it clear that he was in an endgame situation. His pursuers were heavily armed. Already they were off the truck and he could hear them moving in the brush, speaking quick, quiet Spanish: "Over there, Raul. Three meters, that's it. Forward."

He had the uneasy thought that these were military personnel. Mexico was a complex society, the evolution of half a millennium of exquisite corruption. Certainly the military could be involved in something like this. That would be an important route of investigation, assuming that he survived.

But he had to survive—*had to*. If they broke this one little link in the chain, the bomb would be free and clear. He cursed himself for hitting the road before making his emergency calls.

He smelled the sourness of new sweat, the sharp sweetness of old, some sort of liquor, and many cigarettes. There was a human being within feet of his position, and upwind of him. He could taste this man, and the fear that would make him an animal in an instant.

If the man had professional experience, Jim was about to be caught. He'd seen it many times, the way a pro would just know his adversary was there and fire into him, and the guy had better have good cover. This man, however, blundered past his quarry. But then he stopped. Took a step back. Now he was two feet to Jim's right, facing in this direction.

Jim listened to the man's breathing. It was soft, meaning a relatively light individual. Then there was a rustle, and the sound of the breath ended.

The man had turned away.

Jim did not like to use his killing skills, but this was a situation that demanded every resource at his disposal. In this incredible situation, millions of lives might depend on his life.

He didn't even have his pistol, because he had stashed it in the glove compartment to avoid any metal detectors in the hospital. It was still there.

He deserved to be put up on charges. And now, maybe, they would need to include murder.

He stood up and was behind the man in a step, and grasped his head between the flats of his hands, and did something that he had done just twice before in his life, and detested. He snapped the man's neck, using the hard sideways motion he'd practiced on dummies and used in Iran when a camp he had established to take readings near an underground nuclear facility's venting system had been spotted by a couple of poor damn shepherds.

The body went instantly limp, but he wasn't dead yet, Jim knew. There was still air in the man's lungs that could possibly be used to make a sound. Jim had heard that sighing croak before. It wasn't a loud noise, but it would be audible in this silence.

As soon as Jim lowered him to the ground, he stepped on the man's back hard, pressing until he heard the air hiss out of his nose. He would smother now, as he slid into death, and Jim would add that last bubbling hiss to his own nightmares.

To his left, more breath. Another man, a larger one. Now to Jim's right, the

rustle of a shoe pressing something dry.

And then the sun, so bright it seemed to roar, and he knew that he had been pinioned by a searchlight. “Now,” a voice said in English with a Mexican accent, “now come.”

For an instant, shock froze him—and not only the shock of being hit by the light but the fact that the voice had a Mexican accent. But no, he’d heard it on the bridge, all right. It was Kenneally. Scratch the accent. The kid was no actor.

Jim threw himself to the left, to the ground, then pushed himself with his feet. As he reversed course, the light wove about. He took off as fast as he could, because he knew that these seconds were his life.

The searchlight lost him, then came racing back. He dropped down; it passed him, returned . . . then went on.

He had been able to use its beam to see ahead, and now twisted and turned among the trees for a hundred feet, moving silently away while it sought him in other directions.

Abruptly he burst into clear land, felt the give of softness under his feet, saw the dark building more clearly now. His heart thundered; his breath roared.

There was a house, but he also knew that the three hundred open feet stretching before it could be where his career ended.

He sprinted ahead, pushing himself as hard as he could, hunched low, legs churning. But still it seemed slow, a kind of drifting dance, and from behind him there came the unmistakable, resounding crash of a .45 automatic.

Stumbling onto the porch, he shouted, “Federal officer; I need help!”

THE DOGS OF NIGHT

The house was small, it was dark, and it was silent. Jim hammered on the door. “Federal officer!” He prepared to break it down.

Lights came on inside, then on poles in the pasture that surrounded the house. In those lights he saw figures. Simple uniforms, perhaps official Mexican, perhaps not. Frozen now, calculating the changed odds.

Then the voice of the man in the house, a gravelly shout: “Awright, boys, time to go on home. My dogs is hungry tonight.”

The man connected to the voice then came onto the porch, and Jim recognized him. He’d been riding horseback down the highway near here as Jim had driven past. It was the same tattered, ropelike old man, unmistakable. With him came a pack of dogs as lean and ornery looking as their master.

At the far edge of the light, a gun chinked. The Kalashnikov had been reloaded, was now being cocked.

“Watch out.”

“Boys—*take ’em!*”

A dozen snarling, eager dogs swarmed off into the dark. The Kalashnikov chattered wildly, the flashes arcing in a crazy motion. Then there was a shattering blast beside Jim’s head and he thought he’d been hit—but a fountain of sparks spewed away into the night. What had happened was that the old man had fired a shotgun, a big one. Then again, *whoom!*

The old man turned to him, gave him the meanest, most toothless, most dangerous-looking grin he’d seen since Afghanistan. “Jus’ tryin’ to warn ’em off ’fore they get et.”

From off in the dark came the barking of the dogs, faint screams, growling, then louder screams that grew quickly frantic.

“Well, they gettin’ et,” the old man said. “Them dogs is gonna go blood on me, Vas-kez don’t stop his invadin’.” He dropped down into an ancient steel lawn chair that guarded the porch. “Gawddamn ticker, it gets goin’, it don’t stop. Gonna be the death’a me, of course. Now, what we got here?”

“I’m a federal officer—”

“Oh, how surprising. I’d never have thought that of a feller in a Sunday go-to-meetin’ suit, getting chased through the damn *brasada* in the middle of the night.”

“Who is Vasquez?”

“Emilio Vas-kez, local border control officer, Mex side. Moves flesh. He works closely with our border boys. Money changes hands.”

“Where can I find this man?”

“In his office in Piedras Negras, be my guess. Me, I never cross. Be a one-way trip.”

Piedras Negras, the Place of Black Stones, the Mexican city across the Rio Grande from Eagle Pass.

“You say that Customs and Borders know Mr. Vasquez?”

The old guy gave Jim a look that was a lot more careful than he had expected to see. “Now, you listen up, Mr. Federal Officer. This is Texas, here. It’s another country, see. You got your border cops and whatnot, but that’s only in the towns. Out here, there’s another law, old-time Texas law.” He rose from the chair, cupped his hands over his mouth, and called, “Boy-ees! C’mon, you devils! *Boy-eeees!*” Then he looked at Jim, eyes twinkling. “Won’t need to feed ’em for a week, best guess.” He stared off into the dark. “Might be one or two of those fellers still out there though. They must want you bad, Federal Officer.”

“Let’s go inside,” Jim said. “I need to make a call.”

As they entered the dark house, the old man turned on a floor lamp.

“Kill that!”

“Vas-kez ain’t gonna come up here, not when the dogs’re out.”

“For my sake.” He picked up the phone—and got silence. “Does this need to be turned on?”

“It’s a phone.” The old man took it, listened. Cursing under his breath, he returned to the porch. “Vas-kez, you damn cur, you cut my line again! I’m comin’ over there, fella, and I’m goin’ huntin! I know where you live, goddamn you!”

The dogs returned, quick shapes speeding under the thin light from the light poles. Jim stood in the shadows alongside the house, holding his cell phone at arm’s length. Still no signal. He closed the phone. The dogs, he noticed, looked more like hyenas. “What are those, anyway?”

“Dingoes,” the old man said, “smarties. I feed cattle, and these dogs are my caballeros. A man and twelve of these fellas can handle a herd of three

hundred head very easily.”

Kenneally had been working with what looked like the Mexican military. But it could be anybody, even other Customs and Borders officers in disguise, who knew? The kid was in it, though, in deep, and somebody was going to want to talk to him, for sure. Not Jim, though. All Jim wanted was to track down the bomb, if there was one.

“I need to get back to my office,” he said. “I’ll pay you to drive me, or I’ll buy your vehicle.”

“Where’s your office?”

Was it dangerous to reveal that information? He wished he knew more about what he was dealing with. What if they came up out of the brush later and worked this man over? What might he reveal when his eyeballs were being washed with acid? “El Paso,” Jim lied.

The old man was silent so long that Jim thought he hadn’t heard. “Problem is,” he finally said, “if I sell you the truck for what it’s worth, which is about fifteen dollars, how am I gonna get another truck? And I can’t go to El Paso; I got three hundred head on feed; they need papa.”

Legally, Jim could not commandeer the truck. “How much do you need, then?”

“Ten thousand is gonna do me a decent replacement.”

He couldn’t write the man a personal check for that amount, because the expenditure wouldn’t get approved and money transferred to his account before the check bounced. “Mister, I want to appeal to your patriotism.”

“I am sorry to tell you, but I am faithful to an America that has been gone so long you never had the good fortune to know it. That makes me a real patriot, fella.”

“I hear you and I understand and I agree.”

“You only think you do, and that’s the problem with all’a you people.”

Jim had no choice. He would lie again. “Sir, I am going to commandeer the truck. I have the legal right to do this. I will leave you a receipt, and I will have it returned to you as soon as possible.”

“Billions of dollars thrown down the drain every day, and all you can do is steal one old man’s old truck. You oughtta be ashamed, Federal Officer. Course you’re not, ’cause you’re the same as the rest of ’em, just somehow lost the thread of freedom. I shoulda let ’em pop you, see how my dogs do on white meat.”

Jim respected this man’s suspicion of government, but what could he do?

“The vehicle will be returned by six o’clock tomorrow night, and you’ll be compensated fairly.” He held out his hand. “I am taking the keys.”

That brought a moment between the two of them, not pleasant. Jim could see the old man considering what to do—shoot him, set his dogs on him, or give him the truck.

He waited for the decision. The old man took in a breath, let it out as a sigh. “There goes one perfectly good truck,” he said, “Federal Officer.”

As Jim went to the truck, he watched the dogs carefully. They were no longer in the slightest interested in the night out beyond the house pasture, but they were tracking him with their eyes. A snap of the old man’s fingers and he’d be torn apart.

The truck was ancient, its radio torn out, its cab dusty with old feed. He felt rotten taking it, even for a day. Worse, he’d have to rely on what was going to be a very busy San Antonio FBI to return it.

He opened his wallet and counted out as much as he dared to go light, a hundred dollars. “I’m sorry I’m not good for more. But I might need my cash.”

The old man took the money. “My tax refund?” he asked with bitter irony.

“Is there any way out of here that doesn’t involve Fifty-seven?”

“Well, you can use my track over to Eighty-three, then head down to Crystal City, then over toward Big Wells on Eighty-five. That’ll get you to the interstate.”

He went as fast as he could, listening to the brush scrape the truck, glimpsing a snake rushing in its headlights. As he drove, he pulled the battery out of his cell phone. He didn’t know exactly what sort of detection equipment his pursuers might possess, and he didn’t intend to experiment.

The truck was gasping by the time he reached Highway 83, another empty strip disappearing into the dark. His situation was extremely serious. With so few roads in the area, he understood that he was still in extraordinary danger. He’d been in similar situations before, though, and he knew from experience that the keys were misdirection and speed.

But they knew the area; he didn’t. So much for misdirection. And as far as speed was concerned, as he accelerated onto the highway he found that the old F-150 topped out at under fifty. He kept the lights off, navigating by the faint glow of the road between the dark masses of brush that choked both sides. When he needed to slow down, he downshifted to avoid flashing the brake lights.

The highway made a sharp curve, and he found himself in a small community called Carrizo Springs. As soon as he could, he left the main road, pulling into a closed gas station and around the side of the building. He sure as hell needed a weapon. Maybe the thing to do was roust out the local cops. There had to be a sheriff's station here, maybe even a local police force. He needed to get that report called in, and fast. He must not be the only person alive with this information.

There was a pay phone out near the station's air stop, but it was out of order, long since shut down. Beside it, though, there still hung a badly weathered phone book. He found an address for the Dimmit County constable's office and headed for it. The streets of the small community were empty at eleven, and when he found it the police station was closed. There was an emergency number, but that meant using the cell phone. Probably safe, probably it would work, but what if these things weren't true and they caught up with him and killed him? You didn't take a job like this unless you were willing to die for your duty, and he had no problem with that. But he did have a problem with not getting that information through.

The problem was easily solved, though. On his way here, he had seen a motel with a lit sign, and he returned there now.

He drove past the motel, then turned a corner and cut his lights. Nobody appeared, so he went back and pulled up in front. Inside the lobby, he could see an empty clerk's counter. Hopefully there'd be somebody back in there somewhere.

As he prepared to enter the dimly lit lobby, the great cities of the American West surged and crackled with the energy of life. Las Vegas, Los Angeles, San Francisco—they were all gigantic jewel boxes packed with innocent humanity. In Las Vegas the Strip glowed and hummed with late-night excitement, but in the little community of Pahrump a few miles away all was quiet. Ressler had landed, delivered his cargo, and flown on. The crate had now been in the cage at the Pahrump Valley Airport for two hours. It was all alone, just a large, black box with a bill of lading taped to it indicating that it contained frozen chickens. The airport was dark, and the road leading up to it was even darker, the silence absolute.

After a time, though, a truck appeared on that road. It moved so slowly and quietly that not even an armadillo scuffling along in the nearby brush was disturbed by its passing. In the truck were two young men, their faces vague in the faint light from the dashboard.

The truck parked for a time. There were flashlights, and careful shadows as the two men entered the cargo cage and brought out the box. A moment later the truck left, its gears grinding. The cargo cage was now empty, the moon low in the western sky. The armadillo crossed the road, snuffling busily for beetles.

The Las Vegas metro area is home to over 4 million people, Los Angeles to more than 13 million. Denver, San Francisco, and Phoenix also are not far from Pahrump.

Las Vegas was a glittering target, as was San Francisco. But 43 percent of all goods that enter the United States come in through the port of Los Angeles. Destroy it, and the United States of America is plunged into chaos.

VIRTUAL NATION

Nabila al-Rahbi found the new website so easily that it crossed her mind that it might have been pushed just to her. The enemy knew, perhaps, not exactly who she was but certainly that she was here. Her work was to find terrorist websites—real ones—and determine who ran them and who visited them and uncover the links from one person to the next across the web. Unlike National Security Agency units trolling for e-mails, text messages, and such, her work was much more focused and personal. She was one of a tiny number of people in the intelligence community who could read Arabic, Farsi, and the other essential languages of terrorism. Her security clearance, however, was so narrowly focused that she couldn't even enter most of the offices on her floor, let alone talk shop with anybody. She came to work, reported upchannel, and went home.

She looked at the new page, comparing the simple Arabic to the English translation that had been provided by whoever had created it: “This from the Mahdi: Women of the West, you must assume the *hijab* or there will be a serious consequence.” The translation was accurate enough.

According to Shia tradition, also endorsed in this case by many Sufis, the Mahdi was the Muslim savior. Most Shia were “twelvers,” who believed that the Twelfth Imam, who went into hiding in the year 940, was the Mahdi. He was expected to return at the end of time, to join with Jesus and unite the world in peace. Sunni, far more numerous than Shia, did not have any specific doctrine about the Mahdi, but the idea had appeal. So whoever might be claiming to be the Mahdi was not being stupid. He could expect the support of Shia, and would appeal to the hopes of all Muslims, including the Sunni.

She worked with the site a bit, but this was all it contained, just the words printed against a beige background. It demanded that every woman in the West, presumably, take the veil. Well, the hell with that. She was a Muslim woman herself and she wore the veil when she chose to wear the veil, and that was what was right. Some stupid idiot had posted this, but the world was

full of them, wasn't it, Muslim and otherwise?

She considered herself devout but also an American patriot, loyal to the country where she had been born, proud to be spending her life fighting for the ideals it represented, and very much a part of American culture. There wasn't the slightest reason that a Muslim couldn't embrace the modern world and modern law. Those who said otherwise were, quite simply, heretics. In fact, as far as she was concerned, Salafism, the reform doctrine developed in the eighteenth century by Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, had been distorted into heresy, and that failing had started with ibn Abd-al-Wahhab himself. There was nothing wrong with Tawid—the Salafi doctrine of the oneness of God—but much of the rest of the teaching was like the Book of Leviticus in the Jewish Bible. Leviticus had been written while the Jews were captive in Babylon, and was designed to give them special rules so that they wouldn't forget their identity. Ibn Abd-al-Wahhab had been the first to sense the lure of the West, and had created his reform movement to ensure that Muslims would not be absorbed into the new and seductive culture that was emerging in Europe. In her not-so-humble opinion.

When she jogged through the park with the wind in her flowing black hair, feeling her limbs naked, she was proud of her womanhood and her government for respecting it, and when she bent to prayer she was filled with the joy that she liked to believe drew so many to the Muslim faith. Allah was there, part of you, part of your heart. You had only to listen and let yourself be loved, and never mind the cruel heresies that were currently afflicting the faith like a nasty virus.

Stupid though the little site was, because of the threat it contained her standing orders required her to identify it by server and, if possible, owner and report it upchannel.

She did a quick WHOIS, knowing in advance that it would lead nowhere. Next, a traceroute went to a server in Russia, but there was a masking attempt, so she would look a little further. First she downloaded and saved the site, then continued her analysis. The real server was not in Russia, which was a plus. Soon, she found herself in the GÉANT2 topology. The server was in Finland. A university, she saw.

And then the website was down. They'd seen her looking at them, and pulled it. This was unusual. Generally, they left sites up longer, so that more than one intelligence and media group would find them. Whoever had put this up had not wanted to stay around for long. Taking no chances, then,

which could mean that this actually mattered in some way.

She saved the traceroute, knowing that she would be questioned about it by people who knew essentially nothing about what she did or how she did it but thought they did because they had learned a few terms. They could not even begin to understand the ever-changing complexity of the Internet, certainly not its delicious symmetry and chaotic beauty, or the organic way that it grew.

With the site down, she entered the traceroute itself into Grabber, a program developed by In-Q-Tel that would do far more than any ordinary tracing effort. In moments, she knew that the hosting server was on the campus of the Finnish State University of Technology, an institution about 160 miles from Helsinki that offered degrees in technology and economics.

A few keystrokes got her to the identity of the server itself, and she found that it—not very surprisingly—supported an on-campus Internet cafe. The place was called Origo. There were a hundred workstations there. The site had been created on station 13 at 1406 local time yesterday. She went to Google Maps and was soon looking at the university. But where was Origo? Ah, in the library. Good enough.

She would search the student body and faculty against all databases, of course. She stared at her screen. If they were just kids fooling around, why had they taken it down the moment they saw her? She was herself spoofed to a server at Keele University in Staffordshire, so her hit would have appeared completely innocuous . . . unless somebody really good was watching. Could that Russian connection mean the FSB was involved? Russian intelligence had superb hackers, for sure.

So maybe this was a Russian attempt to see how good their American counterparts were, akin to Russian bombers approaching U.S. airspace. That would explain why the site was simple but contained a clear threat. They'd want to watch her investigate.

She recognized, at this point, that she would probably never know, but then again, one learns early that intelligence work has little to do with complete sentences. Ellipses and question marks were in the nature of the product. There were no slam dunks, unfortunately, which was why people like directors brought in from outside the community so often made mistakes.

She pulled out of the Keene spoof and came back on from a Kinko's in Tallahassee, Florida. She reset Grabber and waited for results.

If she got anything substantial on anyone at the university, she would

request that SUPO, the Finnish intelligence service, be informed of the website and asked for additional information about any possible persons of interest she might have turned up. If the CIA elected to act on its own, some operational type would probably drive up from the embassy in Helsinki, take a few pictures in Origo, then return with the inevitable “no result” report.

Nabila put the site together out of her download and looked again, seeking hidden codes. Was that why it was so simple? Was it actually a coded message, not intended to be found by her office, and had her snooping spooked them?

Her job was to assume that it was important. But even when she looked deep, it seemed entirely clean. Unless the message itself was the code.

What might “a serious consequence” mean? Could be anything. Probably had to do with women. Shoot the queen, maybe, or blow up some monument symbolic of women’s freedom? Perhaps she should feed it to the Brits. They’d be all over any suggestion of danger to the queen. She was surrounded by clever depth, as it was called, not just muscle but really smart security management, like the president. Nabila supposed that was why the old lady had once woken up in Buckingham Palace to find an intruder sitting on her bed.

The site, if you could call it that, was just one page, very rudimentary.

Had it been created, perhaps, by a child? Maybe, but not an Arab child, who would have covered it with Saudi flags and jihadist rhetoric. Perhaps it had been made by some little Finnish boy playing at terrorist. Did any Finnish schools teach Arabic? God knew, not many American schools did. Nabila’s comfort level with it was probably the only reason she even had a job in the intelligence community. She’d never believed that Daddy’s pull would have been all that was needed. Some pull; he’d been little more than a glorified lobbyist.

She stared longer at her copy of the page. Beige background, a few words in the Verdana typeface, a few more in a Kufi-style Arabic typeface.

What was troubling her, she decided, was the directness of that threat. There were no quotations from the Quran, none of the usual justifications and other bunk that, as what she considered to be a sane and truly devout Muslim, she found so deeply offensive.

She considered carefully. First, the site was rudimentary, but whoever had created it had been sophisticated enough to spoof its server address, then to pull it down the moment Nabila got past the spoof. So this was the work of an

individual or group with at least a moderate amount of sophistication. The second thing that contributed to her uneasiness was more serious. It was that no Arab would state a threat so bluntly unless he was absolutely certain of both his ability to carry it out and his intention to do so.

She had a lot of resources. Every day she gathered hits on the many false flag websites the CIA owned, looking for patterns of interest that might lead back to identifiable individuals who were just beginning to explore terrorism. And that was just a small part of her work. She knew all of the serious terror sites, of course, everything that could be known about them. She knew, also, that she was a target, certainly of the Base, Al Qaeda, and of the Iranians, probably also of the Saudi intelligence service, the Istakhbarat, and Mossad.

She did not rate a full security detail, but she was driven everywhere and watched, always.

She sat back in her chair and went through the cigarette motions, folding a stick of sugarless gum into her mouth instead.

When it came to Internet terror sites, nothing was as it seemed. Many an apparent terrorist website was anything but. Pretending to be a terrorist group could be very financially rewarding to con men, and very productive of useful intelligence to organizations like the CIA, Mossad, the FSB, and, as always, the Istakhbarat. Many sites were run by con artists who cared nothing about Islam. Others were Mossad and CIA false flag operations—fake terrorist groups, basically—which gleefully took contributions from the very same Saudis who collected American oil revenue.

She loved her work here. Fundamentalism was going to destroy Islam, which she regarded as an act of sacred communion between man and God. Truth to tell, although she loved being of Saudi extraction, she was soured by the fact that it put such a limit on her advancement. Would a Muslim woman, a daughter of Arabia, ever become anything more than what she was? A department head, for example? No.

Because of the concerns that would arise, she did not dare to go to the native country of her parents, and had not done so since she was taken there as a child. One day, she would do hajj, of course, but she kept putting it off. After the promotion.

She picked up the phone, spoke to her supervisor. “Marge, Nabila. I’ve got one that’s bothering me a little. I’m shipping you the download now. The site itself was taken offline less than a minute after Referer dropped the link in my lap.” Referer was a system of ’bots that ceaselessly searched the Web

looking for new sites that fulfilled a broad range of criteria having to do with terrorism, including threats, money transfer, indications of personnel movement, and a myriad of other factors. It was an excellent system. Gone were the days when the CIA was a technological fool.

“Have you translated it?”

“It’s bilingual, and the English is correct.”

“I’m waiting.”

“Sent from this end.”

Marge Pearson had been in the Soviet Russia Division back in the Stone Age. With thirty years in the CIA, she had not the slightest intention of retiring, and praise Allah for that. She was a company legend, and Nabila counted herself extremely lucky to have such an influential and respected boss. A recommendation from Marge meant automatic advancement, and she was generous to her kids, Marge was. So, maybe even Nabby had a shot.

“I’m looking at it. I see; that’s a very direct threat.”

“That’s what’s bothering me.”

“We’ll move this one along.”

Nabila could almost hear Marge thinking. She decided to help a little. “An Arab would not make a threat this direct unless he could carry it out, and intended to do so.”

“This could cause a run on scarves.”

“That’ll be the day.” She cherished the safety of the West. The idea of Šarī’ah being imposed here was too horrifying to contemplate. Šarī’ah was an ancient and imperfect system that had only one place in the world of modern jurisprudence: it should be considered suggestive where appropriate, advisory and nothing more. Western law was one of the greatest of all human inventions, and the more it spread the better the world would become. It was that simple. Šarī’ah was from a time before human rights were really understood, and therefore it should be considered a historical artifact, not a living system of laws.

“Nabila, I want this to go to the prelim, but I’ll need more if it’s going to make the final.”

Nabila swallowed her surprise. Marge was referring to nothing less than the Presidential Daily Brief.

But this—how could this go so far so fast? Further up the ladder, maybe they knew something Nabila didn’t. Even the mention of getting near the briefer excited her. Getting in the briefer—in her world, that was game, set,

and match.

She thought for a moment. How could she advance this? “Let me take a look around,” she said. “I’ll see if I can get anything more.”

She could put in a request to the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency to do a backward lookdown for identifiables on the ground at the Finnish university, but that would be futile. Such requests had to be vetted on both sides of the fence. The CIA might not let it go out. The NGIA might not let it come in. In any case, it would take the request hours to move between stovepipes, if it ever did.

No, the only way to get anything done was to jump the fence—that is to say, call somebody over there directly. That meant dealing with her brother, which was not a pleasant thought. They shared the house, at this point, in silence. Still, she dialed his number.

Day by day, his disapproval of her was growing. She’d seen by the way he prayed, the extra hand movements, that he was becoming Salafi. At home, she wore the veil. Increasingly, though, he spoke of *purdah*. *Hijab* for him, okay. Draping herself in a damned shroud, no way.

The phone rang. She did not want to despise her brother, but she did despise the strictures on women—the rejection of half the human species—that had grown up in Islam over the years, spreading like some sort of soul cancer.

It rang again. Her heart began beating harder. It was almost sickening to ask him for help—but she loved him; she did. He was her little brother, who had clung to her in fear when they went to the seaside and he saw the waves.

The female members of Mohammed’s family had never been in *purdah*. If Mohammed and Jesus were to return and see what had become of their faiths, she thought—no, knew—that they would be sickened.

Rashid picked up.

“Rashid,” she said, “good afternoon.”

“Hello,” he answered, sounding as if he had forced the word out through a sphincter.

“Brother, I need a lookdown-backed-up twenty-four hours of all the physicals at a Finnish university. I need it, specifically, around a coffee bar called Origo, which is on the top floor of the library. You’ll see the building on your map. Entries and exits.”

People in intelligence knew not to ask why. But that was not what mattered. “Who wants this?”

“It’s for the briefer,” she said smoothly.

Now the silence became as sharp as a blade. But facts were facts: he was male but not as senior, largely because his language skills weren’t as important in the technical post he held. So his advancement was even more constrained than hers. He did not report to somebody who could propose for the briefer. Rashid’s work might end up there on occasion, but it would be background.

“I am looking at the location,” he said. “I’ll do a run now.”

“I’ll find comparables.” She then went into the university’s database, which proved to be a relatively easy process, and found three names that matched the CIA’s internal watchlists. She e-mailed him the photos off their dossiers.

“One,” he said.

She was so stunned she could hardly speak.

“Which?”

“The Indonesian.”

“Thank you, Rashid.”

“Your husband also telephoned.”

“I thought he was in Afghanistan.”

“Where he called from is not known to me. But I provided him, also.”

“With related information? Why are you telling me?”

“Because he is your husband. I am telling you to let you know he is alive.”

She could think of nothing more than to thank him and hang up. Jim was not her husband; Rashid had to face that. They had divorced in American law. But Jim had not divorced her in Šari’ah, because, as he put it, “I’m not Muslim.” Anyway, she didn’t want it, either.

She looked at this Indonesian. He had entered the coffee bar six days ago, at three in the afternoon, local time. The site had gone up six minutes later. With only the single page, that would have been easy even for a complete amateur. Because it was so small, it had taken the ’bots all this time to find it. It had not been pushed to her, after all.

She telephoned Marge. “I have an Indonesian male, Wijaya, means ‘victorious.’ Patronymic is Setiawan. Thus, Sumatran. And matronymic Padang. Thus, also, a Minangkabau. This group is a center of Islamist reaction. He has been at university for two years. His police record is clean. Driving violation, wrong side of road, forgiven due to recent arrival. Bank account in order, no strange activity. He has traveled a lot. His results at the

university in civil engineering are average.”

“So, why is he on our list?”

“There is an access level on the file. You’ll need to run it by Counter-terrorism.”

“Thank you, Nabila.”

Nabila hung up. For a moment, she rested her head against the edge of the desk. This man was a known terrorist; she was certain of it. That would be what was behind the “no access” part of the file.

She had gone deep, and found gold . . . perhaps.

INSHALLA

On the day that the Americans found the message, the wind boomed in the long tunnels of the old base in Pamir, but down here in the long-abandoned command center the air was always still and cool, smelling of tobacco and people and the cook fires of the women.

Aziz had been designated the receptacle of the hidden Imam, the Mahdi, two years ago. Although Sunni, he had accepted the ancient title, and with it the belief that the Imam had actually entered his body and become him. The brotherhood of Inshalla intended that both Sunni and Shia would accept the Mahdi as savior. They were relying on the Arab love of legend to overcome the antipathy between the sects, and the idea that he had at last come out of his long ages of hiding by entering the body of a believer would inspire them.

Before this, Aziz had been a very Westernized Arab, had shaved himself and kept a closet full of fine English suits in his villa in Peshawar. All this he had given up to follow the law to the letter. The villa was behind him now, to be used only in case of emergency. He'd lived too many places to have a home anymore. The world was his home.

"Oko is up," his assistant said softly.

"Ah." He glanced up from the writing he was doing, a poem to commemorate the coming day, which would be first day of the new world.

October 10 had been chosen because it was the anniversary of the Battle of Tours, which had driven the Children of God from Europe and condemned the poor Europeans to live now for more than a thousand years in misery, separated from God.

Tomorrow, there would be a little moment of suffering among the worst sinners, but then Islam and happiness would come at last.

Emir Abdul Rahman al-Ghafiqi, chosen of God, blessed of name, had seen defeat on October 10, in the year 117 Hirja, the Christian year of 732. Charles Martel—the Hammer—had shattered the emir's faithful soldiers on that day, God have mercy on their souls.

So tomorrow, all these years later, came another October 10, and this time

the victory would go to God.

Inshalla, God's Will, was the name of the organization that was doing this work, of which he was now, as Mahdi, the head. Before Al Qaeda, there had been Inshalla. Al Qaeda had been born out of rage, after the Saudi king brutally murdered people of faith who had entered the Grand Mosque. Their holy mission had been to correct the apostasy of the king's stooge of an imam.

Inshalla had been created in an apartment in Brooklyn in 1981, long before the present troubles had begun. It had been created not in reaction to a crime but out of the simple joy that comes from being close to God and the desire that this joy creates in the heart to bring it to others.

Even though Inshalla was a small group, for further security it was divided into cells of no more than four. Although it was unknown to most intelligence services, it was one of the most powerful entities on earth, behind only the Western nuclear powers, in terms of its weaponry. It also had two gigantic advantages over them, which Aziz believed would enable it to rule the world. First, it was invisible. Second, its nuclear weapons were already sited in their target countries and could be detonated quickly.

Even as the fires of Islam resurgent rose all over the world, Inshalla had remained hidden, doing its patient work. They moved small things—a bolt here, a casing there, a bit of radioactive material to another place. It was all in the good cause of freeing mankind to taste the joy of Šarī'ah and indulge in the sweetness of Islam.

Now all preparations were done. When it had been founded, Aziz had been twenty years old. Now, at forty, he had been named Mahdi, not because he was of the Ahul al-Bayt, the House of Mohammed, in blood, but because, he had been assured, he was of the house in piety. However, everyone knew perfectly well that this was not true. God forgive him, he was a worldly man. He wanted to believe that he had been chosen by Allah's mysterious hand, but Aziz thought there were other reasons. First, he was rich and could afford to keep everybody in this place supplied. Also, he was not important to the brotherhood. He was not a member of the council. In all truth, his death would be no loss. The title of Mahdi would then be passed to some other equally expendable man.

Eshan reminded him, "Oko is up." Eshan, faithful clerk, Inshalla's eyes and ears.

Aziz sighed. He was watched, always. He turned on the shortwave radio,

tuned to the correct frequency, and listened to the numbers. Oko was a Russian number station broadcasting to the Kremlin's spies in China, Afghanistan, and Japan.

From Inshalla's contacts in Russia they had acquired the one-time letter pads necessary to decode the Oko ciphers. Because each cipher was used only once, breaking the code was essentially impossible. But the use of the system was difficult, especially because the same set of numbers meant different things on different pads, and the Russians were not aware that anybody was piggybacking messages onto their system.

The result of this was that decoded messages were often ambiguous and subject to interpretation. As he was the only person outside of the council who knew the whole structure of the plan, he was generally also the only one who could resolve these ambiguities.

As he worked, Eshan copied the numbers coming from the station, handing another tissue to him whenever he was ready for a new page.

A fly came and went, buzzing into his luncheon dish. He let it feast on his *palaw*.

Here in the Pamir Panhandle, the Russians had dug deep enough to defeat the American missiles of the day, and they had built to last. They had never expected that they would lose this base. How could they lose? They were the Soviet Union. The mujahideen were the mujahideen, ragged, reeking, and armed with little more than Chinese-made Kalashnikovs that would melt after a few rounds. Nobody with weapons you could bend across your knee was going to beat the Red Army. Unless, of course, they were also armed by the United States, which provided weapons that did not break, most certainly not. Terrible weapons, the Americans made. They were a clever people.

The Russian intention in Pamir had been to construct missile installations that could threaten China and, potentially, other Asian states and deepen Russia's relations with India by giving the Indians some tangible support . . . and also something to think about, should they become too interested in turning toward America.

There was space for fifty large missiles in the tunnels, as well as control facilities and personnel housing. Immediately after 9/11, Osama bin Laden had used them—to hide not from the Americans but from the far more dangerous Afghans, both the Taliban, who wanted more money to leave him alone than he could raise, and the Northern Alliance, who wanted to collect the American reward that was on his head.

Aziz said to his clerk, "It is done," and Eshan withdrew. Aziz put the thin tissue of the one-time pad into his rice and ate it, then burned his thicker worksheet in the little brazier that kept his food warm.

He listened to the number station droning on, moving agents, he supposed, issuing requests for information, whatever else the nursemaids of spies did. His part of it had come today for four minutes between 1306 and 1310. Tomorrow, there would be a general call at 0600, which would tell him when later to listen for his messages.

Now tea was being served by the Persian boy who had been left here to be Aziz's student. The boy's father was a powerful Iranian politician, a man of the holiest aspirations. Aziz, in his new role as Mahdi, had said on first seeing the boy's deep, soft eyes and the glow of his smooth skin, "His name is Wasim, the handsome." And so it was.

This place was ten meters below the surface, under steel-reinforced concrete. There were no telephones allowed here, no radio transmitters of any kind. Al Qaeda had learned an almost fatal lesson in the months after God's glorious gift on September 11, 2001, when it was discovered that even the briefest transmission would immediately be detected and tracked by the Americans. Lives had been squandered, because it had been so hard to believe that they could do this. But it was true: after a call or even a burst transmission on the radio, the cruise missiles would come, or the planes, the monstrous planes full of Crusader lackeys and carrying bombs that could dig deep and tear men to pieces.

But Inshalla had endured, and had never been identified. Al Qaeda had been forced into the backs of caves and mountain fastness. Eight out of ten of them had died. That many. But Inshalla had not been so much as scratched. Always, they had been able to continue the great work, assembling, gram by radioactive gram, the triumph of God.

Aziz had read the report of the Crusaders: "It is now believed with confidence that Al Qaeda has been reduced to a small headquarters and a few scattered sympathizers who have no contact with central command. This command unit is in North Africa, and is itself dispersed. The individuals involved, bin Laden and four associates, rarely meet, and move each night from one house to the next."

Only the Russians knew of the existence of Inshalla, and then only a bit, and not the true name. They were a mercenary people, the Russians, always willing to trade what they did not want for what they did not deserve. So they

were willing to sell bits and pieces, no single one of which revealed the truth of what was actually being acquired. The plutonium had gone out from so many different places and in such small quantities that it looked like loss, not theft. The same with the parts.

Finally, the complex sequence that would lead, at last, to the imposition of true happiness across the world was in place. This small, invisible nation, this joyousness, this God's Will, like the United States, like Britain and India and Russia and Israel and the apostate country Pakistan, was an atomic power. It had the weapons, and it had the means of delivery.

This made Aziz, as Mahdi, a great world leader . . . and yet his existence, let alone his name, was known only to perhaps a hundred people.

Sometimes he had the urge to tell others who he was, that the most pious men on earth, the truest friends of God, had declared him Mahdi. But as he now was hidden by the cleverness of Allah himself, the temptation of the old Aziz to indulge in his braggart ways had always to be overcome.

Mohammed had said, "During the end of days, my beloveds will suffer great calamities and torment from their kings. Persecution will engulf them. The people of God will be tortured and suffer injustice. God will raise from my progeny a man who will establish his peace on earth and justice for the faithful."

This headquarters had both radio receivers and a reliable means of sending messages, if an old one. Aziz's messages out went by camel or mule, not by electronic means. Only idiots would use mules, the Crusaders would think, even in this place, where they had been used since before the time of Iskander. So their animals were laughed at. And as far as his men were concerned, what proud NATO officer would think a rag-head could accomplish anything, one of the stupid rag-heads who carried orders all the way from this place down to Peshawar, orders that were not written but woven into the hems of the *chapans* that the rag-heads wore on their foolish backs?

The Crusaders wore steel helmets and were encased in armor. These arrogant ones treasured life more than they treasured God. Their white faces were burned by the sun, their voices quick in the way of Western languages, chopping out their brute words.

Aziz spoke Arabic and Dari and Persian, all ancient languages full of history and nuance, languages of the deep mind. He and the men and women who were here read only the song of God, the Holy Quran. None of them

ever ventured to the surface of the old installation. Nothing crossed there but dust, not by night or day.

The other benefactor of this place, the Persian Sayyad, whose son now served Aziz under his new name of Wasim, purchased their stores for them in a hundred villages in Khyber, in Malakand, in Kohat. From here came gourds, from there potatoes, from another place rutabagas. Water came from the wells within the fortress, dug by Russian engineers to provide for a force of a thousand men.

Only after the Crusaders came here in 2006 and mined the place and blew down the entrances with artillery shells had Inshalla ventured to occupy it. The Crusaders would not carry their own mines into the deep tunnels. Too dangerous for these precious sons of Europe and America. But rag-heads were another matter, so rag-heads had done the dangerous work. Rag-heads could lose their limbs or be killed. That was delightful to the Crusaders.

However, these workers, in the pay of the Crusaders but loyal only to Allah, had kept careful records. So each mine they had laid was now marked by a small fence, to keep the beloved of God from being injured.

Aziz preferred his tea sweet, and there was sugar enough for it today, for which he was glad.

He still indulged himself, but only a little—a bit of sugar here, some music there. He had no need to use the gadgets of the West, the GPS devices and iPods, the glittering cell phones, the CD players and televisions. None of them had need of these things. What they did need was the food of Islam, the food of prayer. They could live forever on prayer, he thought. They were that far from the material world. Although, of course, he did miss his iPod.

Now, though, he only listened to the radio station Burak Mardan, FM 104. And, at the moment, there was a song of Abu Shaar Thayir. Then came Hadiqua, singing of lost love.

“You enjoy Hadiqua,” he said to the young Wasim, who lingered nearby, waiting to take away the tea things.

“I thought I was here as a student. But you are not a teacher.”

“I am the Mahdi. Watch my life. My life is your teacher.”

“You don’t really know the Quran.”

“I love the Quran.”

“You teach me nothing.”

“Do you fear me?”

“I fear only God, *the* God, the one God.”

The Mahdi nodded. “See, you have been taught. That is a lesson important to learn.” He would not ask of the boy whether he was Sunni or Shia? Aziz knew that Wasim was Sunni. This eternal war between the Sunni and the Shia was certain to become history in a few weeks.

Aziz did keep one Western bangle, a watch, and he glanced at it now. Just after eleven, the Duhur Salat. In the Pacific time zone, just after 2100. The time was not far, now. Not far.

He motioned to Wasim, who at once brought him pitcher and towel. He performed *wadu*. “O you who believe, when you rise for prayer, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows and lightly rub your heads and your feet up to the ankles.”

The boy also.

Then they turned to Mecca and performed the *salat* in the silence demanded of the noon prayer. How Aziz’s heart filled with love now as he began Al-Fatiha: *In the name of God the merciful and compassionate, praise to God the Lord of the Universe, master of the day of judgment. Thee alone we so worship; thee alone we turn to for help.* And then he drew himself deep into his heart, for he was a leader of men, hiding here in the kind earth, and needed God’s help always, could do nothing without it. *Show us the straight path,* he said in his mind, in his soul. *Show us the path of those whom you have guided to Islam, not the path of those who earn your anger or go astray.*

Over a thousand years since Charles the Hammer had led the children of Europe—God’s beloved children also—astray, Aziz was going to bring them at last into Islam. Now they held drunken sway, protected by their tanks and their knights. They were eating the world, gobbling its gold and its oil and its precious water, spitting out bangles and baubles and sweets, and suffering meaningless desires and fornicating, then drowning it all in a soul-rotting slurry of alcohol and drugs. He’d had a blue Mercedes CLS in Peshawar, and the women who had come to him—what a life!

No, to be forgotten. He turned his mind back to the Crusaders. Filthy! Curse that CLS and the temptations it brought!

He felt something on his neck, and knew, then, that it was the boy’s hand. Wasim had laid a kindly hand on Aziz’s neck. He felt the light child’s touch, and the heart of the child also.

Wasim held him, then looked at his face. Solemnly Wasim lifted a corner of his thin coat and wiped Aziz’s cheeks, drying the tears that he had known would be there, that were always there after prayer.

Aziz smiled. "May Allah be with you, Wasim," he said.

The boy muttered something.

"What is it you say, Wasim?"

"That's not my name!"

The boy went away then, to the far side of the room. He worked a moment, then returned with a pomegranate sliced on a little tray.

Aziz took the food, and ate. "I have a message," he said. He had thought long on this message. It must be one of two randomly chosen words, "purple" or "green."

He would try now to find God in his mind. Would he see a horseman, a wandering beggar, an eagle rising in dawn light? There were many images of God in his mind, secret, impious things that had been there since he was a small boy and first praying and then wondering how this God who so dominated their lives must appear.

When he had said, "God is an eagle in dawn light," his father had given him a shaking. When he had asked his father, "Is God like a horseman on a fine mare?" his father had slapped him and said, "God would not ride a mare." He had asked his father later if God was like a beggar on the road, and his father had gone to the kitchen and returned to their schoolroom with a broom, and beaten his back with its long wooden handle.

He had not asked again what God looked like, but the images still danced in his mind when he prayed.

Then he saw God the eagle with his dark wings, God crying rage into the dawn.

"The word is 'purple,' boy. The English word 'purple.' Tell Eshan now."

Wasim hurried from the room.

Aziz felt the Mahdi within him, and the Mahdi's heart seemed to swell with joy. All would be well, now. Happiness was at hand.

ESCALATION

Jim Deutsch's world had ended. He'd been in plenty of trouble in his life, but not like this. No matter how bad it had gotten—running from one bunch of semi-official thugs into the arms of another, you name it—somebody had always had his back.

No more, not after the fantastic escalation that had taken place at the motel in Carrizo Springs. In that dingy room, his world had collapsed around him. The Brewster Jennings problem was one issue that he was aware of but was obviously not the end of the compromise of American counterproliferation. The system was deeply penetrated, and at high levels. It had to be.

What had happened had placed him in the worst position an agent could find himself. He dared not expose what he had discovered to the very system that was designed to support him in his work, because he would be revealing it to the enemy.

So he had continued on his own, and now an exhausted, scared man moved through the Colorado Springs Greyhound station listening to his Geiger counter tick over and trying desperately to guess where they would have taken the plutonium from here.

He needed the WMD interdiction infrastructure; he needed satellite lookdowns and the support of CIA analysts; he needed the FBI's investigatory skills and powers; he needed the local and state police and the entire national enforcement and detection apparatus.

He'd assumed that the assassination attempt had been a local thing—Kenneally and his buddies trying to protect themselves.

This was why when an FBI arrest team had appeared at the door of Jim's room at the little motel he had known instantly that he was facing a far larger problem than he had imagined—than he could have imagined. Local guys on the take couldn't cut orders that would send the FBI after somebody. That would have to be done from above.

It had been eleven thirty at night when he'd entered the lobby of the little motel and called out, "Excuse me," in the gentled voice of a tired salesman.

The clerk had appeared. Jim had shown his driver's license—a driver's license, not his own—paid his forty dollars in cash, and left the lobby. The whole transaction had taken under five minutes.

Always careful, always overdoing it, he'd parked the old truck some distance from his room and gone through the interior of the motel to reach it. He hadn't used the radio or the television, or even turned on the lights.

He had been in the process of making his emergency call when he had noticed a change in the pattern of light under his door. He'd looked at it. Only one possibility—somebody was out there. He'd thought it might be the clerk, suspicious of so late an arrival. Then Jim had seen the knob move. He'd gone into the bathroom but found it to be windowless. There was a double door that communicated with the next room down the line, and he'd used that. He had no bag with him, no luggage. But he did have some skill with locks.

The mechanism had clicked, but it had not disturbed the snoring, scrofulous drunk in the cigar-choked room Jim had entered. He'd stepped quickly to the exit door, cracked it, and seen a sight that had, quite simply, stunned him almost to paralysis.

There were FBI agents there, four of them, an arrest team.

As he had ducked back out of sight, they had broken down his door. They hadn't been wearing assault gear, just those inevitable business suits of theirs, muscle-packed worsteds, a cut below the sharkskins the Russian FSB cats wore.

He'd stepped into his neighbor's bathroom and stood there for half an hour. Aside from that first crack of the breaking door, there had not been another sound. Given the absence of luggage and the fact that Jim had been in the room no more than five minutes, he allowed himself to hope that they would conclude that they had been misdirected.

High-end tracking was the only way he could have been found. To gain access to the kind of satellite data needed to track somebody, you needed high clearances. You needed power.

The FBI team might have been following orders, just executing a warrant. But who could generate that warrant? Certainly not Arthur Kenneally. Jim had to assume that he was facing an organization of unknown dimensions that was embedded in the American enforcement and intelligence communities.

He'd faced it, he thought, in 2002, when he had first suspected that the U.S. system in the Middle East was compromised. It was big, powerful, and

damned effective. It had not taken them long to get on his tail.

It was the most dangerous penetration of American security in the history of the country, and he couldn't even begin to think how extensive it was, or who was behind it, or where it went. He couldn't afford to worry about it, not now, not yet, not with work like this to do.

Arthur Kenneally's attack had made it clear that the bridges were a problem, but the appearance of the FBI at Jim's door told him that he was right about this bomb. It was real, it was here, and somebody very far up the ladder was protecting it, and God help the American people.

He had waited in what turned out to be the bathroom of a guest called Charles E. Madison, and fortunately the agents had made no effort to extend their search into Mr. Madison's room.

An hour later, Jim had taken Madison's driver's license and a couple of his credit cards, then opened the door and observed a clear hallway.

In the parking lot, Jim had spotted a stakeout car. So he was being advertised internally as a pretty big fish. He wondered what the FBI officers' arrest warrant said. Above all, where it had originated.

He had left the motel by a rear exit. Even though following a man on foot in a city by satellite was damn hard, he did not choose to underestimate the skills of his enemy again, and he walked under trees and along the very nicely turned-out local riverfront, keeping hidden from above as much as possible.

As there was no way for him to tell what was wrong, his professional responsibility was to assume that everything was wrong—which was not far from the truth, given that whoever was pulling the strings could control FBI arrest teams.

Experience had taught him that the only chance of survival under official pressure of any kind was to be very fast indeed, so he had stolen a car he'd found parked in a driveway and driven north on 83 until it hit Interstate 10. Then he'd headed west.

He was now thrust into a situation that was totally new to him. His information was crucial, but how could he communicate it when he no longer trusted the system? Obviously, orders no longer applied. Not only that, he feared that it was only a question of time before they found him again. His car had been almost the only vehicle on 83, and still virtually alone traveling into the dawn on I-10. Someone like Nabby's brother, Rashid, would make quick work of locating Jim.

He had one objective now: stop that bomb. He must take no risks except those that related directly to gaining control over the weapon.

He'd driven hard, ditched the car in Fort Stockton, and taken a bus to El Paso—from which he'd gone from stop to stop along the Greyhound route westward, finally picking up the trail of the bomb in Roswell, New Mexico, in the form of an increase in the clicking of a Geiger counter he'd bought from a hardware store that stocked mining supplies. From Roswell he'd followed it to Colorado Springs, and here the trail had stopped.

He decided that the only person he could now safely inform of his activities would be the president of the United States, but the president was far away and unreachable, hidden behind a wall of officials and guards. Jim's CIA creds—the real ones—might get him as far as the chief of staff, Thomas Logan. Might. But could he get past Logan, a lowly contract employee like him, working outside the chain of command?

He even wondered about the Office of the President. The Plame affair had led back to Lewis Libby, who was just one tier below Tom Logan's level. Jim knew little beyond the press reports, but he had to wonder, now, just how high up this thing went.

A lot of individuals and countries had motive to harm America's ability to track illicit nuclear materials abroad—arms dealers, smugglers, nations, and groups hoping to acquire nuclear weapons.

But this—it was way larger than any of that. The conclusion was hard to escape: somebody was trying to suppress interdiction of an actual bomb in this country, and, incredibly, they could call on the power of the FBI to do their dirty work.

There seemed to be only one choice open to him—move fast and interdict the weapon himself, then find somebody he could trust with his discovery.

The bomb had been removed from a bus's cargo bay here, he was sure, and probably within the last day or so. So, was it still in Colorado Springs? No, they would keep it running toward its target, and now that they knew he was on their trail, they would be doing that as quickly as they could.

They would want to get the bomb in the air, and maybe that's what was happening right now . . . or had already happened. They wouldn't take it near Colorado Springs Muni, too much danger of detection. So they'd fly out of a smaller field. If they were going to hit Denver, he could be seeing a flash on the northern horizon at any second. But there were bigger prizes farther west.

The bus station phone book revealed a general aviation airport outside of

town and a couple of air cargo operations with the same address. Would he find the bomb there? If so, he was liable to end up in one hell of a firefight over its possession—which would be interesting, given that he had no gun.

A lone cab stood on the rank outside the bus station. At this hour, the driver was asleep. Jim approached the vehicle, looking first at the tires. Mismatched, worn. That worked. And the paint was old, the cab scraped and dented. No question this was a real cab, but was that a real driver? He was Mexican, looked about sixty. Peering down, Jim could see that a small billy club protruded from the door bucket. Was that the driver's only weapon?

Jim tapped on the window until the driver opened his eyes.

"Kreist Air Charter," Jim said as he got in. "2121 Burlywood."

The driver started up. As they moved through the empty late-night streets, Jim watched the man's reflection in the rearview mirror. The guy kept to his business, driving efficiently. Jim let his eyes stray to an ad for *Fiddler on the Roof* playing at the Paramount Theater. He didn't do amusement. When he was a kid, he'd enjoyed things like daring onrushing trains to smash him to bits. Down behind the family farm, there was a quarter-mile trestle. When he heard the first blare of the Amtrak diesel's horn, he'd start running ties. It was a near thing, always, and if you didn't make it, you had to climb down the pilings and hold on for dear life as the train highballed past a few feet over your head. It beat everything except sex.

"Know anything about this place?" he asked the driver.

"Don't get much custom. Looks like a dump, far as I can tell."

Their kind of place, then.

As the field was open twenty-four hours, there would likely be somebody on duty in the FBO.

The cabbie pulled up to the front, stopped.

"I'll be a few minutes," Jim said. He didn't want to lose the cab.

"How many minutes?"

"Give it fifteen."

He pushed the worn glass door of the FBO open and went into the lobby. There were a couple of black sofas, some old magazines, and one of those vending machines that sold dead sandwiches. A guy with a white ghost of a beard and deep, vague eyes sat behind a counter fingering his way along the lines of a Bible.

"Excuse me."

He almost threw the Bible into the ceiling. Then he unfolded himself. Six

feet two of angles and elbows, a laugh like an engine dying. “Well, hell, I thought you were a ghost.” He looked Jim up and down, his face registering curiosity, then confusion. Then the eyes glanced away. He’d grown suspicious of this past-midnight stranger. “Got nothin’ due in, mister,” he said, “and nobody’s goin’ out until tomorrow. No plans on file, and it’s too late to put in a new one.”

“Nobody’s ready to fly?”

“Not a soul. And nobody’s prepping. It’s just me and the cat. We got a airport cat.”

Three possibilities: He was early. He was late. The bomb was not being moved through this airport. “Any traffic out of here earlier?”

“Tonight? We had a couple of landings. No takeoffs.”

“I’d like to take a look around, if you don’t mind.”

“Well, you can sure look around here in the lobby, but not out on the apron or in the hangar. Them new regs. What’re you lookin’ for?”

Jim drew out his DEA identity card. Silently he showed it to the guy.

“Oh, for the love’a—we got nothin’ like that here. No suspicious traffic.”

“I’d like to just walk through the hangar, if you don’t mind.”

“Hell no, I don’t mind. We’re clean as a whistle.” He became confidential: “Lemme tell you, but I guess you guys already know this. Them Mex cartel boys’re goin’ direct in DIA now. Private jets, don’tcha know. Nobody touches them boys.”

“You have many of ’em come through here?”

“Private jets? Sure. Every day. Hunters, you name it, goin’ back in the mountains.” He stepped over to an elderly computer. “You want me to bring up the log? Whatever you want, I’ll do.”

“Well then, I just need two things. First, don’t log my visit.”

“Oh, nossir, I understand. I understand that.”

“Then I’ll need to go out to the hangar on my own.”

“The door’s rolled down, but it’s not locked. Plus, we got twelve tie-downs on the apron. There are two working charters, both of ’em hangared. Resson Air Service has a Cheyenne, shit plane, always givin’ him problems, gonna look at the fuel system in the morning. Kreist has his Baron in for cleanup; he had a passenger do a toss.”

Jim walked out onto the tarmac, in the sharp air of night. The stars always made him think of the truly dark places he had been. Siberia, the taiga, where the forest echoed with the cries of animals and the stars were so bright you

could believe that it was the first night of the world. He looked east across the faint glow of the apron and the runway with its green guide lights. Beyond it was the glow of a back porch light, maybe a house, maybe a convenience store along the road.

He remembered seeing that porch light down in the *brasada*, and knew that he would take the memory of it with him forever, adding it to the moment he'd found the car—strangely, a Buick—that had gotten him out of Russia, and the first time he had known that Nabila was naked in the dark, from the way her breathing became shallow and sharp.

He went into the hangar. Under the dim, high lights were three planes—the Baron, the Cheyenne, and a trim Citation with an opened-wing access. Hydraulics.

He removed his Geiger counter from its small carrying case and turned it on, then waved the paddle around the hangar. *Tick. Ticktick . . . tick.* Nothing. He looked toward the equipment bays, went closer. If the thing had been repackaged, maybe it wouldn't be emitting much radiation anymore. Previously, it had been dropping dust, which was what had enabled him to track it. Now, maybe not.

So maybe they'd show up later. Or maybe they weren't going to Denver at all but moving the bomb farther west. There was one hell of a plum out there, after all. If they hit LA, the radioactive dust clouds would be contained by the mountains and turn into the most poisonous damn smog in history. Nearly half of U.S. import-export went through the LA Long Beach port complex. Plus, people couldn't get out of the LA basin, not when they were all going at once. No, a nuke, even a small one, would turn Los Angeles into hell on earth.

**THE SUN RISES
AT MIDNIGHT**

Jim paused to examine the planes. One of these charter guys could've unwittingly flown the bomb west a couple hundred miles, then come back here, no problem. Could've done it last night.

Jim approached the old Cheyenne. It was one tired airplane, with cracked paint and slick tires and what could be metal fatigue crazing one of the landing gear. This plane was going to take somebody to heaven, and soon.

Again, the faint, empty ticking from the Geiger counter.

Jim did a walk around the Baron, with the same result.

He was so tired now that he was worrying about his ability to notice details and make judgments. He had caught not so much as a catnap since his predawn escape in Texas, and it was past eleven now. He was beyond exhaustion, and it looked like he was coming up against another blank wall here, and it was just so damn dangerous to do this alone.

The Citation and the Baron were both passenger carriers. The Citation could probably lift the bomb as well as a pilot, but the Baron couldn't, so it was out. Unless, of course, this was one of those legendary suitcase nukes. But such things were science fiction. Nuclear materials don't work like that. You might be looking at only a few pounds of plutonium, but the rest of the bomb was going to be a good three or four hundred pounds, possibly more.

The Cheyenne could take a decent payload and it was configured for cargo. It would belong to some air tramp, probably. Guy who might do a fair amount for money.

Jim got up on the wing and unlatched the door. He leaned down into the warmer air in the plane, scented with leather and machine oil.

Tick. Tick.

Shit.

He pulled his head out of the confined space and returned to the FBO. To help him keep his eyes open, the old man had turned on the radio. "Oil prices are going through the roof, the dollar is in free fall, and gold is predicted to

be at fifteen hundred dollars an ounce by year end. . . .”

“Could I see the filed manifest and logs on the cargo guy?”

The old man unfolded himself, got a large logbook, and brought it over to the counter. Jim turned to the section tabbed “Ressman” and looked through it. One flight earlier today, up to DIA to pick up a load of antibiotics and move them to Telluride. Guys like this did a lot of medical supplies, no doubt.

Jim turned the page. Last night, it had been machine tools and chicken to Pahrump, Nevada. “Chicken to the Chicken Ranch,” he muttered.

The old man chuckled. “Ressman didn’t get a lick of it, I don’t think.”

Jim copied down the recipient’s phone number. But where was the 707 area code? In fact, was 707-747-7727 even a phone number? Maybe Boeing?

“I need to make a call.”

The old man pushed a telephone across on a long cord. He dialed. “The number you have called is not a working number. . . .”

The phone number was handwritten, the rest of the manifest typed. This number had been jotted down by a pilot in a hurry, and the numbers of Boeing jets had just slipped into his head.

Jim made a second call, this one to Mr. Ressman’s emergency number, noted on his particulars form.

A ring. Another. “Hey, Barker, whassa matter?”

“This is not Mr. Barker. I am Agent Edward Ford, Mr. Ressman. I need to talk to you about a load you moved last night.”

“I knew it! Damn it, I *knew* it!”

“You knew what?”

“It was drugs; damn it, I shoulda cracked that damn crate!”

“You had evidence to suggest you weren’t carrying a properly manifested load?”

“Officer, I had no such evidence. Which is why I carried it. Goddamn it, stay right there. I’m just across the highway, I’ll be right over.”

In a normal situation, Jim would have had Ressman controlled immediately. Because this was a national security emergency, he would have been taken to a safe house for interrogation, and no lawyers need apply. Not tonight, though. Jim needed help immediately, and this man, he felt sure, was able to provide it.

He went outside and watched, and soon lights were coming along the road, then turning into the airport’s drive. He paid off his cabbie and let him go.

Jim would be a while with Ressman; he knew that.

A man in a soiled mechanics coverall got out of a tiny rental car and strode up to Jim. “Todd Ressman,” he said, putting out a big hand.

Jim took his hand, shook it. “Mr. Ressman, tell me about the load with the manifest error.”

“I’m fucked. Goddamn it, I am fucked! Look, I’m not into any illegal activity, and there was no reason to doubt the load. It was—”

Jim still wasn’t sure what he was dealing with here. The plane had shown no evidence of a radiation signature. Maybe it had indeed been a load of chickens, or, more likely, coke. “What made you think you might be carrying drugs?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. It all seemed completely normal. Just a guy left a phone number off the manifest, and I was looking at weather on the way and —”

“Where did you take the load?”

“I left it in the cargo cage in a little airport in Nevada.”

“Mr. Ressman, you are going to take me to this airport.”

“I—”

“Let’s go; we need to be in the air right now.”

“Uh . . . I—”

“I’ll pay for your fuel used at the end of the trip. If you don’t cooperate, you’re going to go down right here, right now.”

How far down, Mr. Ressman could not begin to imagine, but it looked bad for him. This man was facing life in a supermax if the bomb didn’t detonate. If it did, he was headed for the needle.

“Going down?”

“You filed a counterfeit cargo manifest, Mr. Ressman. If the cargo was illegal, then you are going to need a lawyer. As it is, you’re facing a significant fine. So I expect your full cooperation.”

Ressman strode into the FBO. “I’m taking a passenger to Pahrump, Nevada,” he told the operator. “File it for us, please. I’m gonna go over at ten on heavy mixture, full cruise. Got that?”

“Got it.”

As they entered the hangar, the operator pushed the big doors open.

Jim settled into his seat, watching the plane come to life as Ressman threw switches. In minutes the engines were roaring and the plane was rolling out toward the night. “How long?”

“At full power, a couple of hours.”

“Fast as you can.”

The old plane clattered down the runway, then seemed to leap off and just slide into the air. She didn't look like much, but she wanted to fly. At least, as long as the engines kept running and the tail didn't fall off, or a wing.

“We've got seven hundred miles to cover, and I'm good for three hundred and eight miles an hour,” Ressman said. “There's a headwind, so I think we're looking at about two-seventy. That's gonna get us in just past midnight, Pacific time.”

“Just don't blow the damn thing up.”

“Oh, she'll make it. She's too mean an old cuss to quit.”

Which is what they all said before they went in. Jim closed his eyes. Pahrump. The airport had to be tiny, without a doubt completely unguarded, probably totally abandoned after dark. You could fly out of there and stay under FAA radars all the way into the LA basin. Then you just pulled up to about three thousand feet, and the rest was going to be history.

“You want to set that radio on the NOAA emergency channel for me, please?”

Ressman set the radio. Jim saw Ressman's eye shift in his direction, then return to his work. Ressman's mind was probably a hive of questions right about now. What would NOAA Emergency have to do with a drug bust? Why was it so urgent they chase down the cargo right this instant, instead of, for example, bringing in the feds in Las Vegas?

Well, let him be suspicious. He'd learn nothing, not from Jim Deutsch.

The plane bounded along as it crossed the silent Rockies, invisible in the darkness below. They were probably far too close to the peaks for comfort, so Jim was just as glad that the instrument lights, dim as they were, still made it almost impossible to see out. He'd flown one too many missions over trackless mountains in dog-tired planes. His number had to have been up a long time ago.

For what seemed like hours, the plane bucked and pitched.

“Lotta turbulence,” Jim commented.

“Mountains make the air restless at night.”

On and on it went, the pitching, the wallowing—until, suddenly, everything changed. Now, a sense of stillness settled in, as if the plane weren't moving at all. So they were over the desert at last. Here and there below, Jim could make out a faint light. He'd always wondered what kind of

lives unfolded in places that lonely, in a country like this. In Iran or Afghanistan, he knew, the lives were terrible. But here you probably had satellite television, some kind of ranching to do, farming, maybe, if there was water. A peaceful life.

He squirmed in his seat. The bomb had now been at large for at least three days, maybe four. He watched his own reflection in the window. Tired man, eyes shadowed with fear.

As a child, he'd always protected the younger kids. He'd been good to his little sister, to Mary the angel, as he now thought of her. Mary. How strange the world was; how odd that death even existed. He forced the thought away, of what it must have been like on the night she died, the party, all the kids, the lights of Cancún. She'd gone swimming drunk at four in the morning. His last relative, Mary. He'd gone halfway across the world to bury her.

Only when the drumming tempo of the engines rose an octave did he realize that he had been napping.

The plane hummed; the night flowed past outside. "How far out are we?"

"Ninety-six miles. Twenty minutes, we're on the ground, assuming I can find the damn ground."

"No lights?"

"You can turn 'em on as you come in. Assuming you've guessed right and you're in range."

He stared into the darkness ahead. Vegas would be at about two o'clock, still below the horizon. LA would be at eleven o'clock, and well below it.

Out the windshield, he could see the cowling of the plane, ahead of it a faint glow, rising steadily as they came closer. "Vegas is out there," he said.

"Yeah. Gonna be pretty, when we pass south."

Then he saw the cowling as if it were lit by the midday sun, a black, nonreflective surface covered with chipped paint. Then the glare faded and winked out.

"Jesus," Resson said, shaking his head. "What in hell was *that*?"

As Jim's eyes recovered, the instrument lights flickered and turned off.

"Shit! Battery!"

Red running lights soon illuminated a cockpit full of dead electronics.

"What the fuck? What was that?" Resson's voice was high.

As Jim's vision returned, it brought with it a depth of anguish that was unlike anything he had ever felt before. This was not grief or shock. It was anger—rage. At whoever had done this stupid, stupid thing, but more at

himself. He should have found a way to make his report. Maybe if he'd just flown to Washington—but no, he didn't see how he could have done it differently, not without compromising security.

The pilot was struggling, the plane wallowing and pitching, barely under control.

Jim had failed as profoundly as a professional in his position could fail. The system had failed, too, but he didn't count that. He was ninety miles from the bomb and the bomb had gone off. That close!

It was deep failure, profound, in-the-bones failure, of the kind that weaves the darkest strands of history and leads to the ruin of nations. He said, "Are you in control of this thing?"

"I've got no instruments and it's dark out there! What happened to my instruments?"

"Can you get me to the closest airport?"

"Las Vegas?"

"There is no Las Vegas."

THE SONG IN THE DESERT

One could say that a man in a certain hotel room picked up a stub pencil and marked the number 2 beside the word “croissant” on a narrow yellow menu, then saw silver light. Or one could say that a girl called Sally Glass feigned a moan of pleasure in the bed of a man whose soul was tired and found that the man’s face splattered her like hot grease. Or one could say that the light that came like a hammer set everything from one end of the Strip to the other on fire and scraped the surfaces off all the buildings and smashed them like crushed hats.

In that moment there were chips being exchanged and sports books in action and Ethel Rhodes in the buffet at the Flamingo walking among the diners saying, “Keno, keno,” with her cards and her entire history from birth to this instant, she who had once caught a twinkling glance from Frankie Laine, and who had a daughter, Crystal, making a good dollar in Nye County.

In that moment, the temperature rose from seventy-three degrees Fahrenheit in the Baccarat Room at the Bellagio to thirty-eight hundred degrees. To those who happened to look up at the instant of death, it appeared as a smooth, glaring surface, silver-white. To those who heard something, it was a sound like a lonely whistle on a late-night street, as gamma rays destroyed their auditory nerves. In the split paroxysm of death, they felt not pain but a perverse euphoria as the atomic particles shot electricity into their pleasure centers.

All became steam, then fire, then vapor, the transformation in under a millisecond.

Did they ascend, or was Jim Deutsch’s view the truth, that we have this life alone?

Still, death in that place was in the details, the sewage that was set afire in the drains, a deck of cards, fused into a brick, that would be found the next morning in the garden of a house in a suburb twelve miles from ground zero, and the head of Linda Petrie from Grand Coteau, Louisiana, the eyes wide, a little sad.

Body parts, whole bodies, shoes, clothing, furniture, sheets, forks and knives, cars, trucks, beds, window frames, groceries, roofing, rugs, dogs and cats, within two miles of ground zero, were swept up and hurled three more miles, dropping—many of them in flames—over the more distant suburbs.

In the desert night, ten minutes ago: Jim Deutsch is ninety-three miles away at an altitude of eight thousand feet. Delta 424 is on final at McCarran, Northwest 908 behind it just rolling into approach. Claire Nester on 424 is waiting for her baby to wake up and howl from the pain in his ears, and she remembers a time just a few weeks ago when there was no Georgie. Her eyes of love regard the man sleeping beside her, her Tom, in amazement and gratitude. *He loves me. He wants me. He loves the baby. Our baby. My son from my belly.*

And then the red light streaming in the windows like sunrise, and the tremendous jerk, and her last thought, *hurts—*

To go from being to nonbeing in a millisecond—is that death?

Is not death details, the laying down of hands, the sliding away of breaths, the light going from the eyes?

There are prayers being said at St. James's Catholic Church. After a long struggle, twenty-four-hour adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is now a reality here, and Mrs. Alfonso DeLaGarza kneels in the chapel. In her left hand, she has a missal open to next Sunday's liturgy. She glances down, and the little book disappears from between her fingers and that is the last thing she knows.

The gray bricks of the building turn to vapor as hot as the surface of the sun.

In Hari Sushi, Joe Manila pretends to be a Japanese sushi master, but he is not like the sushi chefs of Tokyo, who might spend years learning. He has a good knife and a lot of jokes and sees the fish turn black before his eyes, the chunk of tuna, then sees no more.

Fire in splendor.

In Chippendales at the Rio, the France, Texas, Red Hat Club is clapping in unison as "Derek"—actually Harry—Fisher dances and plays with his G-string.

Then there is air there, white air.

The stage on which he stood will be found by an urban archaeologist. It will be part of a larger chunk of fused black glass. In it will be the shadow of a male torso, and some sequins. This discovery will be made in seventy-three

years.

Within half a second of the detonation, the ceiling of Nine Fine Fishermen in New York–New York implodes, and everybody looks up toward the popping sound, and sees it coming at them, a forest of tiny cracks squirting fire.

The plane that brought the fire had bounced along the desert floor, and its pilot had thought that it would not rise. The name of the man who flew it isn't important. He had been born in Indonesia in 1988 and had little experience of life. He had flown to Mexico from Finland under one name, then crossed to California under another, a careful, narrow young man who looked Asian, not Arab, but whose abiding passion was his faith, and who found it fantastic that others, on hearing of Islam, were not inspired to accept this truth.

Outside the Hilton, Eddie Timmons was raising a match to Jenny Hilly's cigarette, wishing she did not smoke, fascinated with her fingers and her lips, and thinking, *She will see me naked; she will know my passion.*

Mort Carmody lost eight thousand dollars on a single throw of the dice, and cursed craps patterning, and the first syllable of the word "bullshit" became his eternity.

As it took off, the little plane had wallowed from the weight that it carried, had fallen back, had struck its landing gear against a fence and caused the pilot to jam the throttle. There had been a moment when the ground raced up. Then had come the rattling sound of brush striking the fuselage, and the desperate kid had closed his eyes and pulled his stick into his gut.

He did not know that he had missed crashing by the width of a child's finger.

So it is that the vastness of history rests in the details. A crewman fails to tighten a screw, the antenna of a reconnaissance plane blows loose, a signal revealing the position of Bull Halsey's carriers fails to reach Admiral Yamamoto, the Japanese lose the Battle of Midway and therefore World War II. On the turn of a single screw. And why? Because the cry of a seagull made a homesick boy dream, for just a moment, of his childhood.

So it is here, on this night. Had another boy drawn the stick into his gut just an eighth of a second more slowly, a city would not have died.

History trembled with the shuddering of that airframe, sighed as the plane rose free and sailed off into the night.

Its course had been carefully calculated. It would approach Las Vegas from north-northwest at an altitude of five hundred feet, not running any lights.

Until the pilot popped the nimble little craft up to nine hundred feet, it would not be detected by FAA radars at McCarran.

Military radars at Nellis did detect it, though, and Airman First Class John William Carr said into a microphone, “Bogey incoming altitude zero four hundred, speed one-thirty knots, proceeding west-southwest toward LV Strip.”

Ahead, the pilot could see his target, which was the Bellagio Hotel.

As he flew over the houses, the roofs, the pools, some lit and some not, he thought not at all of the lives within, not of the children with their toys and night-lights and unlived lives, nor of the happiness that was general in the place, like a song in the desert. He thought of the harlots in the evil towers and the alcoholic drinks that stupefied a man’s moral sense, and of the cruelty of the lies in the gaudy gambling halls, and saw steeples here and there. But his mind clung to his own home, to the sweet tropical evenings, when he had swung in the tamarind tree, and smelled the toasty smoke of his father’s water pipe coming up from below. He thought of the madrassa where he had been taught the Five Pillars and had memorized enough of the Quran to receive an honors. But he did not think of the moonglow that had illuminated Damascus a thousand years ago, in the innocence of Islam, nor of the softness of his mother’s hands. He did not think of Chrissie Powell, who stood now at her sleepless window, and heard the small plane come and pass, and thought it was some high roller coming into McCarran, and envied him the plane and the night.

He leaned out his mixture and increased throttle, then drew the stick back and began to gain altitude.

At Nellis, J. W. Carr instantly recognized this as what it was: this pilot was about to execute an attack in the form of an airburst at altitude. Carr hit the scramble horn, and Captain Michael Waldron leaped to his feet in the ready room, shouted, “Shee-ut,” and ran for the flight line.

The pilot in the small plane watched the Bellagio, tan in its lights, disappear as his nose went up. Dirty people were inside the hotel; he had walked through it and seen the strutting whores, listened to their filthy songs, watched the gamblers in the ringing dens.

All Las Vegas was dirty people in filthy dens. He stared through the windscreen now at the stars. Heaven above, dirty people below. A sacred moment.

Among the dirty people were Bruce and Caitlin Moore, who lived on West

Katie Avenue—and her nickname was Katie; that was funny—who at this moment were making love. Their infant, Tara, slept in the co-sleeper beside them, the immeasurable sleep of the very young. Tara with her dusting of red hair and the infinity of love in her eyes had inspired them to make another child, and pleasure wracked them as a single wriggling spark of Bruce and all that he was found its way into Caitlin's wet folds.

There was laughter, then, and the unnoticed hum of a plane passing low overhead, then disappearing.

Mike Waldron leaped into the cockpit of his F-15. Jimmy and Tuck were already running it up.

In among the folded limbs and warmth of the Moores, the new electricity stopped. Death came to the new person three seconds after life began.

From Nellis Boulevard to Rainbow Boulevard, Las Vegas was now burning. The Bellagio, at ground zero, had been transformed into a heap of lava gushing smoke. The rest of the Strip was an inferno—and, in fact, a firestorm like this had not been seen on earth. Not even Hiroshima and Nagasaki had known such destruction.

This was the most malicious single act in human history. One instant, life. The next, fire.

Most who died from the blast had no awareness. They were alive, then not. Many would remain entirely unrecorded. Some would be left as shadows in the ruins, on walls here and there that remained. Shadows raising their arms, shadows not.

All who had awareness saw the same thing: a sheet of white fire, like a gigantic lightning bolt slamming directly into your face. There was sometimes pain, but mostly not. Death came in the form of details: “my dinner is on fire”; “the slot has a short”; “the curtains are burning”; “my skin is gone”; “my throat, face, eyes, tongue hurts.” Only the first hundredth of a second of death would be recorded. Across the second hundredth of a second, the temperature of the body would rise from ninety-eight degrees to more than two thousand degrees. Destruction that violent carries with it no sensation at all.

Las Vegas is a busy city, busy at night, and there was traffic on all the highways, some leaving, some entering. Vehicles within the blast area were thrown like toys, some of them to altitudes of a hundred feet, their occupants screaming, confused, mostly blinded by the furious light, their eardrums shattered, feeling extreme, incomprehensible lurches, hearing nothing, their

feet jamming their brakes.

From afar, the front wave of the blast appeared to be filled with sparks, each of which was a dying, confused person.

Beyond the blast zone, on all the highways coming into Las Vegas, on Interstate 15, on 95, on 595, there were long lines of stopped cars, and in the roads and on the roadsides, wandering in the fields, stumbling, falling, were the occupants. All who had been facing toward the city had been permanently flash-blinded. Many of them were on fire. Around them and onto them there fell more fire, in the form of burning ceilings, bodies, clothes, carpets, vehicles, sheets and mattresses, chairs, slot machines, tables, telephones, fans, bricks, roller-coaster rails and a train like a great smoking centipede full of strange, insectoid figures: the skeletons of the riders.

Hearing the tremendous noise of the disintegrating city, the blind uttered high, singing wails such as one hears when a forest in Java or Borneo is set alight and the apes catch fire.

They were not human now, not in the intricate depths of this much terror. The blind did not understand why they were blind. They did not understand their pain, did not know why they had been driving one moment and now were wandering in a field or along a roadside, some of them crawling now, feeling along, crying names: “Jenna! Jenna!” “Bill, where are you, Bill?” “God help me! God help me!” Their voices joined to the great roar of the collapsing buildings, the only sound that remained after the cracking blast had died away.

Half the city still lived, the half that had not been vaporized.

Wind blew toward the fire from all directions, setting up a banging of shutters, a hiss of trees, and the wail of eaves. A terrier called Mr. Pip was the first creature to be lifted by this new wind and carried toward the red center. Mr. Pip writhed and yapped, hit a roof and bounced in gravel, then went rolling on, limp and sleek and silent.

The blast-effect cloud rose into the sky, lazy, flickering with internal disruptions, supported by a roiling column of deep red. The flash that had blinded eighteen thousand and the gigantic *crack* that had deafened a hundred thousand more had left the city in darkness. Toward downtown, all that was visible was blackness—a huge, starless darkness shot through with suggestions of flame. All was chaos and surprise. There had been not the slightest warning. One second, one life, the next—this.

Captain Mike Waldron’s neck and left arm and shoulder tumbled through

clear air. His plane, just sixty-three feet into its roll down the runway at Nellis, was burning and exploding, the rest of Mike Waldron stewing in the cockpit.

From out beyond Buffalo Drive and from the direction of Nellis, when you looked toward downtown you would see the shape of the blast-effect cloud, and you might understand that this was an atomic aftermath, that a nuclear bomb, and a substantial one, had been detonated here.

Farther away, fifteen or twenty miles, it was entirely obvious. From here, the cloud was clearly defined, a weltering horror in the light of the moon.

At Nellis, the flight line was on fire. The USAF Warfare Center struggled to get its communications back on track, but the building was burning and would need to be abandoned if fire crews did not come within minutes. They would not come, though, not within minutes or even hours, or at all. They would never come.

Just two emergency vehicles were operating, one with a full crew of six, the other with two. They worked the flight line, foaming burning airplanes. Inside Nellis's hangars, most planes remained intact. The four training missions that had been under way when the detonation took place had all crashed in the desert, victims of failure due to the bomb's electromagnetic pulse, which had destroyed even hardened electronic circuits over a 180-square-mile area centered on the blast, and damaged many more, much farther out, especially those of planes at higher altitudes.

At this hour, there had only been the two commercials incoming to McCarran, and none of the distant fliers were fatally damaged.

Aboard United 221 out of Seattle for Denver, the copilot was slowly recovering his vision. He did not know what he had seen—it had not appeared to be on the ground, though. He had perceived it as a flashbulb going off in his face. It had seemed as if it was inside the cockpit, and his initial reaction had been to declare an emergency.

Seven minutes later, there had been significant buffeting. The plane's radios now crackled with pilot chatter, as everybody tried to figure out what it had been. There was amusement in some voices: "Looks like they've landed," "I'm not reporting any UFO. . . ."

But then, on 221 and American 806 and Alaska 43, silence fell. There was too much light down there. Captain Baker of 221, who had been looking down when the flash took place and had not been affected by it, said into his radio, "Las Vegas is burning."

In the parts of the Las Vegas metropolitan area that had not been destroyed, there were 73,000 private homes on fire and 2,613 businesses. There were 381,000 people with third-degree burns outside of the blast area itself. At that moment, sixteen thousand more of them were actively on fire, frantic beyond words, screaming, staggering down streets or running, torches all.

Inside the blast area, the outright death rate was 87 percent. The unfortunate few who remained alive were for the most part maintenance personnel in basement areas. They were either trapped in absolute darkness, screaming, feeling along the floors of rooms now tangled with broken machinery, or struggling to find their way using flashlights or emergency lighting. Many had received fatal radiation doses. Many were bleeding from cuts, had broken bones, burns, bruises, or were injured in other ways. None would survive.

Not even specialists who had thought carefully about the consequences of an atomic explosion in a modern city had understood what the vast amount of combustible material in such a place would mean.

The Dresden fire in 1945 had dragged people into it from five hundred yards away. But here, even fifteen minutes after the blast, the wind was rising to a howl in the eaves of houses outside of the blast zone, picking up larger and larger objects. Along streets and roads, struggling people, most of them already weak from shock and injuries, began tumbling toward the flames, in the dust, in the chaos.

All communications with the city had ended in an instant. Four thousand, three hundred, and eight telephone calls of various kinds were disconnected. All local radio and TV stations were instantly killed.

However, ham operators in outlying areas—such as Pahrump—were not thrown off the air. A ham, Gene Lerma, was operating his powerful station sixty miles from ground zero when the detonation occurred.

His wife and child were asleep, but Lerma's wife leaped out of bed when she heard the great roar that filled the house, shattering windows and causing curtains and blinds to whip into the rooms. He, in his windowless studio, had been talking to a ham operator at McMurdo Station in the Antarctic when there was a voltage surge that popped Lerma's circuit breakers and the whole building was shaken to its foundations.

"I think we just had an earthquake," he said into the lifeless microphone. Then he was plunged into darkness. A moment later, his generator cut in and

the emergency lights came back. His next thought was for his wife and baby, and Lerma jumped up and ran out of the studio.

His wife said, “What is happening?” She had their still-sleeping little girl in her arms.

“Stay here.” He moved out onto the front porch and down into the stony garden. There were great booms echoing from somewhere and he thought it was the sound of the earthquake spreading through the land. As he turned to go inside, though, he happened to glance in the direction of Las Vegas.

For a moment, he was confused. What was that thing, that great, glowing *thing* just rising above the flat line of the eastern horizon? He stared, trying to understand. Was it smoke? No, it was glowing internally. There were periodic flashes of lightning, too, forks of it dancing across the face of the monster. But it wasn’t a thunderstorm, not so close to the ground.

Then it rose up still higher. It took form. A jolt as if of electricity shot through him from head to toe, because he had just recognized that he was seeing the mushroom cloud of an atomic explosion in the process of forming.

For a moment, he thought, *Dirty bomb*, but as the gigantic cloud billowed into the sky, towering, huge, and so horribly fast, he knew that there was only one thing that could do this. An atomic weapon had been detonated over Vegas.

His baby, his wife—he thought to get them into the RV and head west. But no, that was a mistake; if Vegas had been hit, LA might be a mess, too. Angie came out onto the porch, still with the baby in her arms.

“Go back,” he said, then hurried up to her and put his arm around her waist, and drew her back into the house.

They’d lost windows in the living room and the bedroom. They would need to shelter in the studio. But he didn’t think that fallout would be a problem, because the prevailing winds would carry the cloud east. And any cloud from LA would be funneled out across the desert well south of here.

Their problem was not going to be fallout. It was going to be food and water and security. An atomic war had started, he thought, unless this was a terrorist incident.

He went into the bedroom and dragged the mattress off the bed and into the studio.

“What are you doing?”

He had to tell her. He sat her down and said gently, “There’s been a very large explosion in Vegas—”

“Atomic bomb?”

“I think so.”

“Radiation?”

“Not here, not yet. But we’re going to stay in the studio. The generators have gas for thirty days, so we’re safe enough.”

It was then that he returned to his radio station. He’d lost a number of his electronic systems but not his tough old radios. He powered up and was soon looking at 150 watts output. A few adjustments enabled him to crank it up to the max the station allowed, 300 watts.

He began broadcasting in the 40 meter band and was soon talking to a ham operating out of Salt Lake City. He worked for news station KSL, and when they’d lost all contact with the West Coast he had gone to his nearby apartment and powered up.

Thus it was that an amateur operator made the broadcast that rocked the world: “I am talking to you from a town sixty miles west of Las Vegas. We are looking directly at what can only be described as a mushroom cloud. I cannot prove it, but it is my belief that Las Vegas has sustained a nuclear attack. I repeat, Las Vegas, Nevada, has been hit by an atomic or possibly hydrogen bomb. A large bomb. As I speak, I can see the cloud literally covering the whole western horizon.”

Then he wept.

11

RETREAT

Seventy-five miles east of Las Vegas, Ressman still struggled with his control problem. He called out over the blare of his engines, “I have to land this thing wherever it happens to be!”

Jim Deutsch said nothing. His misery was so great that he halfway hoped that the bastard would crash and kill them both. All Jim cared about now was getting to a phone. Any damn phone!

Then Ressman made a turn. “I see a light,” he shouted. “I see a light!”

Ahead, Jim saw it, too, the faint but unmistakable outline of a runway.

They came rocking and bouncing in on the strip of the Grand Canyon National Park Airport. Ressman laughed with relief; he threw his head back; he sucked great gulps of air. He said, “What happened to my plane?”

Jim heard him but didn’t bother to explain what the electromagnetic pulse that emanates from an atomic explosion does to electronic circuits. The hell with Ressman and his plane.

The Grand Canyon airport was quiet and dark, with a strong night wind coming in across the desert from the west.

“Is that the moon?” Ressman asked.

Deep in the western sky there was a curious light, a crescent. It was dim purple. “It must be,” Jim said.

“What happened out there?”

Too many years doing what he did had made Jim react automatically to questions with silence. Nabila had hated that about him, because habit had extended it far beyond the necessities of the job.

He could have told Ressman that his greedy stupidity had killed a great American city. He could have slugged the bastard, but he knew that would drop Ressman, and if he dropped this man, he was going to go further; he was going to kill him. His hands itched with the death in them. To be sure he wouldn’t use them, he jammed them into his pockets.

He could not yet see the cloud from here, but the color of that crescent moon told him that it was just below the horizon. They had about four hours

before the prevailing winds brought its deadly radiation over this airport, not to mention all the people living in the region.

He had no iodine pills. He had nothing to save himself or anybody, nothing except his mind and what was in it: the knowledge of what had just happened, of the fact that it had been accomplished because crucial security forces were penetrated.

But the top level didn't know this. The White House would call on every asset the country possessed, and some of those assets were going to be doing the wrong damn job. How deep was the penetration? How much more damage could it do? And worse, the biggest question of all: were there more bombs?

"Get a plane ready," Jim told Ressman.

"Excuse me?"

Jim gestured toward the three light aircraft that were visible on the hangar apron. "Those guys are ready to roll, and they won't have damaged electronics because they were below the horizon."

"What?"

"Find the one with the best range. We're going to take it."

"But—they're locked! I don't have keys."

Jim went to him, took him by the throat. "Be ready to fly in ten minutes."

"It's theft."

"I'm commandeering the aircraft due to the fact that this is a national emergency." He released Ressman. "Do it now."

Jim went to the small, locked waiting area. He sprang the lock with a credit card. Inside, he found a phone. He lifted the receiver. If it didn't work . . . but it did. He dialed CIA Operations in Washington, waited for the computer, and input his personal code. A moment later, a young man's voice said, "May I help you?"

"I have observed an atomic weapon detonate over Las Vegas, Nevada. The time was twenty-four zero one. That is midnight plus one minute local time."

There was a silence. When the voice returned, it belonged to a scared boy. "We don't have that."

One of the many problems the intelligence community had was that its members were now younger than they had ever been. Due to cannibalization from outside employers, and the fast-growing contractor business, the median age of CIA officers had been dropping for years. Thus the young man's crisis experience would be limited.

“I want you to tell me the procedures you will now carry out.”

“This is a drill?”

Jim remained silent. He didn't care how agitated the kid became or what he thought he was involved in, as long as he did his duty correctly.

Jim was not surprised that the CIA didn't have the information yet. One of the things that characterizes extraordinary destruction like this is that it conceals itself inside a circle of ruined communications systems. McCarran Airport would be off-line, probably permanently, Nellis AFB would be in chaos, and the local Homeland Security office would obviously be down. Probably there were no radio transmissions, no phones or cell phones, nothing at all getting out. Hams in outlying areas, maybe.

“A ten- to thirty-megaton atomic explosion has taken place above Las Vegas, Nevada. The probable agent is a plutonium bomb detonated at an altitude of five to seven hundred meters. It has caused extreme damage. The city is nonviable at this time. It is burning.”

“Please confirm your identity.”

Jim went through the classified identity routine. Then he added, “This needs to go upstairs right now, do you understand that, with my identity tagged intact all the way to the White House and the NSC. Do you know how to write up those tags?”

“Sir, I do not.”

Since the 1990s and the various failures that had resulted in the CIA blowing three capture and two assassination opportunities on Osama bin Laden, it had been possible for certain officers in sensitive situations that might require extremely fast response to move information on an expedited basis—that is, if the lines of communication weren't compromised, which this one certainly could be. Jim had to assume that whoever had been able to use the FBI to try to arrest him would also have made sure they had access to communications like this one. What he had to say, though, was beyond the need for secrecy.

“I want you to patch me in to the White House. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Sir. But, Sir, excuse me, shouldn't you be reporting in the chain?”

Now it was time to play his ace, the new card that the disaster had put in his hand. “It could be that the president has only minutes to live unless he takes shelter, so do as you are told and do it now!”

A silence followed. Then clicking, a ring, and a voice: “Security.”

“I need to speak to Tom Logan. It's a matter of critical national urgency.

There is a time problem. I need immediate access.”

“Who’s speaking, please?”

Unbelievable. He contained himself. “I am a CIA officer. My name must be on your monitor.”

“I need to confirm your credentials, Sir.”

He had the chilling thought that he might be talking to a conspirator. They would want to get as close to the president as they could. Nevertheless, he repeated his identifiers. He waited. There was another click.

“Hello?” God, had they hung up? *Don’t do this, for the love of all that’s holy!*

“Logan.”

The chief of staff, and thank you, God. “Mr. Logan, my name is James Deutsch. I am a Clandestine Operations contract officer operating under extreme deep cover within CONUS.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sir, this is the greatest national emergency in U.S. history. Within minutes, you will receive word that Las Vegas, Nevada, has taken a nuclear hit.”

There was a choked sound.

“You need to get POTUS in motion at once, but know this: there has been betrayal, probably for years, probably since Brewster Jennings in 2001. You are aware of that?”

“Of course I’m aware of it! But that’s—it’s solved. That was Ahmad Khan. State was ordered to leak Brewster Jennings to Pakistani intelligence, and Khan used the information so that he could smuggle nukes around Brewster’s operatives. It’s old news. Contained. Done with.”

“Okay, leave it. I know that our problem is in Customs and Borders at least, and I can identify one person of interest. There is also FBI involvement, but they may be acting on information with all good intentions. There must also be traitors, further up the chain of command, close to you guys. Understand that. *Must be.*”

“What are you saying here? Las Vegas—”

“Listen to me, God damn you!”

“All right! All right! It’s three in the morning; I had—I had an embassy staffer . . . uh, here. I have to get POTUS moving?”

“Las Vegas has sustained a gigantic nuclear strike. Largest bomb ever detonated over a city. You must move the president to safety, but you must

know—are you registering this now?”

“I am!”

“All right. The bomb was transported in country due to sabotage of the border detection system and a penetration of our security apparatus.”

“How bad? How bad?”

“I have no way of knowing, but they were able to generate an arrest warrant that nearly got me taken out of the picture. It’s up to you guys to figure out who could have done that. Find the warrant and work from there.”

“My God. And you’re saying—what? How serious is this explosion again?”

“Las Vegas is on fire from one end to the other. And, Mr. Logan, *there are probably other bombs.*”

“You have knowledge of this detonation?”

“I’m here, on the scene! I saw the blast!”

“What I need to know is why this happened. Where was our interdiction program?”

Jim could only hope that the man was not actually this stupid. He was in shock and half-asleep and maybe on pills or drunk or whatever. It must take a lot to enable a man in his position to sleep. Jim tried to inject more control into his voice. Sound calm, authoritative. Seconds counted. “Get POTUS in motion. Activate the Emergency Response System. Federalize the National Guard and put it under the Continental Army Command.”

“Who are you, again?”

“My name is James Deutsch, and I am on my way to D.C. because I cannot communicate everything I know over phone lines. Not *any* lines anywhere in the federal system, especially yours.”

“This is the White House!”

“When I get there, I will contact you again and you will conduct me to the president. Do you understand?”

“No.”

“If we are penetrated, there could be hostiles anywhere along the chain of command. I know the DCIA will back me on this. So will the DD. The deputy director knows me by name. Jim Deutsch. Tell the CIA to isolate information flow—oh, shit, I’m overcontrolling. I’m scared, buddy. Obviously, you need to communicate with the director level across the whole security system. Warn them. Tell them that this could have grown out of the Brewster Jennings problem. That’ll get their attention.”

Jim hung up. He leaned his head against the wall of the old-fashioned telephone booth for a moment, and breathed deeply.

He returned to the flight line to find Ressler sitting in an ancient V-tailed Beechcraft Bonanza.

“Let’s fly.”

“I’ve got the guy’s info right here,” Ressler said, “but you need to give him a call. I don’t know where they keep the keys.”

Jim took the pilot’s logbook from Ressler and returned to the little lobby. He dialed the number in the logbook but got an answering machine. “You have reached the home of—” Then a click. A concerned, older voice: “Hello?”

“Mr. Timothy Whitehead?”

“Yes?”

“My name is Agent James Deutsch. I’m calling on a matter of national importance. I am at the Grand Canyon airport with a pilot. I need to use your airplane.”

“What the hell?”

“It’s a national emergency, Mr. Whitehead. An atomic weapon has been detonated over Las Vegas and—”

“*What?*”

“Sir, please listen to me. I am at the airport. I need your plane.” He thought of the old man in Texas, now without a truck, struggling to survive. At least the owner of a plane wasn’t going to be hurting that bad. “I need to know which keys are yours.” There would be a set at the airport, of course.

“They’re on hook twenty-two in the safe. What’s happening? Are we in any danger?”

“Sir, are you in the Grand Canyon area?”

“We’re in Flagstaff.”

Jim made a mental calculation. That was far enough away to survive the worst of the radiation. “Keep your doors and windows closed. Turn on the radio and follow the alerts. You’ll start to hear them in about ten minutes.”

He hung up the phone. The “safe” was not a safe at all but a lockbox. He’d sprung many heavier-duty setups, and doing this one was no more difficult than rolling down a widow.

Perhaps Nabila could help. She was need-to-know on a thing like this. In fact, his guess was that she’d be getting a call-in within fifteen minutes.

He phoned. It rang. Rang again. “Nabila?”

“Jimmy!”

“The news is bad. Las Vegas was just nuked.”

She did not gasp; she did not cry out. In the background, he heard a male voice.

“Get Rashid on, too.”

“Jim?” His voice was tightly controlled.

“Rashid. Hi. Listen. I’m in Nevada. Las Vegas just took a multikiloton nuke. Plutonium, I think about thirty k’s. Three times the size of the Hiroshima bomb.”

Nabila choked out a cry.

“Nabila?”

“I have a warning! I have a warning that Maggie wouldn’t put in the briefer because we couldn’t confirm!”

“What warning?”

“Women in the West must put on the *hijab* or there will be a serious consequence. It was deployed out of Finland a few days ago.”

“Deployed out of Finland but originating in Russia?”

She was silent. They were violating the law, talking like this to each other and on a clear line and with another party with yet a different set of clearances on the call as well.

“Nabila, I have a need to know.”

“But I have no authority.”

“Where in Russia, Nabila?”

Rashid’s voice interrupted. “She asked me for lookdowns in Helsinki, then St. Pete, then—”

“Jim, is there a Russian connection?” Nabila asked.

“Listen to what I’m going to tell you. There is a penetration of U.S. security forces involved and it is extremely serious. Very high level. Obviously, a Russian connection is possible.”

“The Muslims are surrogates, then?” Rashid asked.

“They were, but they’re in control now, because nobody running them would have a motive to actually detonate a nuke like this, least of all Putin. But the internal system that’s protecting them—it’s still in place and it’s active, because they’re trying to kill me. Probably, whoever’s involved inside is doing it to save their own skin, at this point.”

“These terrorists are insane,” Rashid said. “Not all of us are like this. It’s heresy and it’s madness.”

“I know how painful it is for you guys. All the more motive to do what you can to help, am I right?”

“We will do anything!”

“Okay, here’s what I need. I am under threat pressure and I am moving east in a small plane with about a five-hundred-mile range. I’m going to take it down to Phoenix and I need you to wrangle me a jet out of Deer Valley Airport. I need clearances in order by the time I get there.”

“Consider it done!”

“Rashid, *how?*” Nabila asked.

“Nabby, I don’t know, but we will do this!”

“Travel me as someone too important to divert. The deputy director, say. And this is important—make sure the plane moves, even if nobody’s on it.”

“But . . . why?”

“Just do it. Make certain.”

“How can we even get a plane, let alone convince them to fly it with no passenger?” Nabila asked. “It’s all crazy.”

“We will! Now stop; this is enough. Jim, it will be as you say.”

“Thanks, both of you.”

“Rashid—”

“Enough, sister! Jim, it is done.”

He could imagine Nabby’s eyes, the widening at the edges that came when she felt insecure, or when she was being taken to bed. He could almost feel her body against him. When he was under fire or running hard, she would float into his mind like this, what guys called a battlefield angel. He wanted to say that he still loved her, but he feared that he might insult her, and he would certainly offend Rashid.

Rashid said, “Assalmu Alaykum.”

Jim replied, “Ma’a Salama.”

“Ma’a Salama,” Nabila said. Good-bye, in their formal Arab way, a convention full of the fatalism desert life induces.

Jim went to the little Beechcraft. He gazed into the pure air of the late night, staring for a moment back toward the huge flickers, red and orange and pink, that swept the western horizon. He climbed into the seat. “We good to go?”

“Checks out.”

He pulled down his door, made sure it was latched. The field around them was dark and silent. Or was it? Now, he had to assume the worst. Always.

When he spoke, he made sure it was loud enough to be heard from the edge of the apron: “Take me to Deer Valley Airport near Phoenix. Do you know it?”

“I’ve flown in there.”

Ressman started the tiny plane’s engine. It darted down the runway, and rose into the night. For a few moments, Jim let its running lights remain visible; then he told Ressman to cut them. The plane was lost to view.

Jim sat listening to the drumming of the old engine, scanning the meager instruments, watching the altimeter rise. When it reached nine hundred feet he said, “That’s enough.”

Ressman trimmed, throttled back, and dropped the nose. “We got mountains ahead,” he said.

“Not really. I want you to reset the course. We’re not going to Phoenix at all. I’m going down to Piedras Negras. So what I think we need to do here is refuel in Nogales, then take me to P.N. and we’re done.”

His call had been a diversion. He didn’t know who might be listening and he didn’t even know for certain if Nabby and Rashid could be trusted. If by some miracle they actually got an empty plane to fly to Anderson, he might achieve a major misdirection. If not, his pursuers would at least be a little confused for a while.

“I don’t know if I can find Nogales.”

“Out in that desert, it’ll be the only lights.”

“You’re running. Staying below radars.”

“I am running, Mr. Ressman. You got that right.”

When Ressman didn’t respond, Jim allowed himself to close his eyes. If Nabila had understood the silences between his words, a specially cleared jet would take off from Deer Valley in about two hours and head for Washington. It would be empty, except for the pilots, but hopefully nobody would realize that until it landed. He would be far away by then, on a different route and mission entirely.

12

EMERGENCY RESPONSE SYSTEM

Among the first things a president learns is that when his bedside telephone rings after midnight, the news is never good. He threw back the quilt and sat up. He picked up the receiver. “Yes?”

“Sir?”

“Hit me, Logan.”

“We need to get you in motion; a nuke’s gone off in Vegas.”

The world shuddered; the room swayed. He sucked breath, sucked more. His heart started in, bad. His mouth went so dry he could hardly form words. He grabbed the glass of water on the bedside table and drank it down.

“Sir?”

The president of the United States sat on his bed, a phone clutched in his hand, dying and dying, a million deaths. “Oh, God, God, God.”

He was no kid; he had his share of health problems; his heart wasn’t invulnerable. He took deep breaths until the sensation passed. Then another sensation came—that same heart almost broke with sorrow. His administration was ruined. This was the worst disaster in the history of the United States and it was his watch. He had a place in history and it was a hell of a bad one and—“Those poor people! Are we doing what we should? Where’s FEMA? Where’s the Guard? Where’s the National Emergency Response System?”

“We need to move you, Sir.”

“Where’s my wife?”

“She’s in Newfoundland, Sir,” Logan said. “They landed as soon as they got the emergency signal.”

He forced himself to think. This place could go up any second. He could be about to die—God, in seconds! “Okay. Okay. I’m calm. Is the government disbursing?”

“Across the board. The Emergency Response System is active; the whole country’s being warned—”

The president grabbed the remote off the bedside table and jabbed at it. The television turned on. He tuned to CNN.

At first, the screen appeared black. Then there were stars on it. “We’re eight miles west-southwest of the Strip, Charlie,” a voice said. Then more silence. “I don’t know if I can be heard. We’re eight miles west-southwest of the Strip, Charlie. Are we on the air?”

The stars bulged into blurs, then resolved.

Tom Logan came into the room.

“Oh my God,” President William Johnson Fitzgerald said. “God help us all.”

Hundreds and hundreds of fires turned the screen into a weltering orange glow. Buildings, homes, whole neighborhoods, all were burning. There were dark figures visible here and there in nearby streets. And in the center of it, like some sort of monstrous autumn bonfire, the Strip was sending a tower of fire into the sky.

“Sir, we need to get rolling.”

“I hear you. Get me the governor of Nevada.”

“Sir, we’re under imminent threat!”

“Do it!”

Logan made a call. “Governor Searles, please, this is the president calling.” He gave the phone to the president.

“Mike? . . . Look, I want to know what you need. I’m federalizing the Guard, but not there. You keep them. And if you need any military. Any military. Or planes. Nellis—excuse me? . . . Oh, God. Of course Nellis is gone. All right. Look, I’m going to give you my direct line, but I’ve got to get in motion. They’re afraid we could be about to take a hit. Washington.” He gave Logan the phone.

“Sir, I need to tell you something—”

“Talk to him!”

“Oh yes, Governor, it goes without saying. It’s a disaster area. We’ll make certain that all possible fire equipment, Phoenix, Salt Lake, LA—everything that can be deployed—”

The president grabbed Logan’s arm. “Go slow on that. This could be one of many. They might need their own services.”

“We’ll make sure everything’s moving toward you as soon as possible.”

Two Secret Service men had come in with the coat and shoes that were kept ready for a sudden move in the night. The president put the coat on over

his pajamas and put the shoes on and followed them.

Logan said, “Sir, Mr. President—”

From outside, the president heard the helicopter landing. “I don’t want that,” he said. “We’re too vulnerable in that.”

“It’s the protocol we’re using—”

“No. No. We’re going down.” Few people realized just how extensive the tunnel system under Washington actually was. There was not a single embassy without an FBI listening post under it. In fact, the first tunnel had been constructed by L’Enfant during the building of the city. It led from the White House to the Potomac, and was intended as an escape route for the president. During World War II, it had been widened and an electric railroad installed for the use of FDR. Until the advent of presidential helicopter travel in the sixties, it had been the primary escape route. It was why presidential yachts had been so important for so long, and why they had been anchored where they had. Every president from Washington to Kennedy had kept a yacht at the ready.

With the advent of missiles that could reach the city from Siberia in twenty minutes, though, other means had to be found. Thus the current system of moving the president to the National Redoubt by helicopter.

As they hurried down from the residence, the president could see one of the young men speaking into his radio.

At the bottom of the stairs, they were met by an ashen Milton Dean, head of the president’s security detail. “Sir, excuse me, but the tunnels are not safe in this circumstance; you have to understand—”

Among the agreements that a president made was to abide by the orders of his security personnel during times of danger. Was the chopper really safer? Certainly it was fast. They would be in the bunker in twenty minutes.

But that wasn’t enough, and he knew it. “Where’s the Continuity of Government Act?” he asked Logan. The president had introduced it earlier in the year, but it wasn’t a legislative priority.

“Stuck in committee, Sir.”

“Goddamn it.” The act would provide a structure for the governors to reconstruct the federal government, in the event that Washington was destroyed before the federal emergency dispersal program could be enacted. He took a deep breath. *Okay, fella, this is why they elected you. Good in a pinch.* “Where’s Matt?”

“The vice president is moving.”

The president headed out toward the Rose Garden and the waiting helicopter. He stepped into its plush, nearly silent interior, followed by a running Logan. But the Marines closed the door and took off. Their orders were clear: during an imminent peril emergency, move the moment POTUS is aboard.

Because there was only the dispersal program and no continuity act, if a nuclear weapon was detonated in Washington without warning the U.S. government would collapse. Why such an act had not been passed years ago was beyond President Fitzgerald's comprehension. And yet he'd let it get stuck in committee, hadn't he? You didn't like to think about things like that. You didn't want to believe it could really happen—which was your weakness, the enemy's strength. As things stood, the government had to survive or the country was ruined.

"Get this thing moving," he shouted into the intercom. "Flat out, boys!"

He closed his eyes. At least Linda and Polly and Dan were all right, for the moment. But God help the American people. And . . . oh, God, Las Vegas. "Damn those bastards; *damn them!*" Fitzgerald would not stoop to hating all Muslims. No, not this president. But he was tempted, because there was an incredible weapon being constructed that he could potentially use to entirely change the face of human society. Dream Angel offered him that much power. To order it activated, though . . . it would be the most monstrous, most terrible thing ever undertaken by any human power. What was worse, it was still unfinished. Parts of it were just theoretical. More terrifyingly, nobody really knew what it would do—except for the fact that it would kill millions.

He was going to be asked to make the decision about whether or not to attempt Dream Angel. If he lived. "Where are we?"

"Eight miles out."

"Put on the goddamn gas!"

A WORLD AT BAY

It was now one ten in the morning in Las Vegas, four ten in Washington, and eleven ten in England. A benign sun shone on the spires of London and the new skyscrapers that increasingly defined the skyline, and flashed against the wings of the pigeons wheeling above Trafalgar Square. In Regent's Park, the roses were lingering in the long, warm autumn, and Queen Mary's Garden was filled with noonish strollers. One by one, they took out their cell phones and one and then another stopped and concentrated on what their friends were telling them. Then they noticed bells beginning to ring, everywhere, bells.

In seventeen languages around the world, the BBC's announcers read the same main story: "Bulletin from America: The U.S. city of Las Vegas, Nevada, has sustained a large explosion and has fallen out of communication. There are reports of extensive damage and fires in outlying areas. Area witnesses report a blinding flash followed by a series of severe explosive shocks. A fiery cloud hangs over the city at this time. Many are believed dead, and there has been much property damage. Owing to the darkness there, a full assessment of the damage, and an official announcement about the nature of the explosion, will not be forthcoming until the predawn light in approximately an hour and a half."

Radio 4 went back to the reading of the letters of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to his mother, Mary Doyle, and the prime minister, who was watching a live video feed from Las Vegas being provided him by MI6, became sick in the toilet of his office at 10 Downing Street. Then his security personnel came and soon he, also, was in motion. Like the United States and every other Western country at risk of nuclear terrorism, the United Kingdom lacked a definite continuity-of-government process. If London was destroyed this moment, the British people would not only be without a government; they would also be without the slightest means to reconstruct one.

In Dharmasala, India, Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, considered the dark event. He made an unprecedented decision to telephone

His Holiness the Pope, who came to the instrument from his luncheon. The Dalai Lama stepped into his small garden, where the sun was setting over the wide-leafed trees. The pope listened with shock and concern to the old man. He did not consider that there was any doctrinal validity to the Dalai Lama's beliefs, but the pope certainly respected the man's sincerity. As the pope listened to the description of the catastrophe, he knew precisely why this other religious leader had called him. This was the beginning of an attack on religion; that was clear. And, more specifically, an attack on Christianity.

The pope next telephoned the prime minister of Italy and asked that he send troops to seal off the Vatican immediately. Then the pope ordered the Swiss Guards into action, and they began moving through St. Peter's and the Sistine, quietly but persistently directing the tourists to leave. In the crypt beneath the great church, other men moved among the tombs with powerful flashlights, finding here and there lovers, and once a priest on some nameless mission, who hurried away. Along with the interlopers, the tourists at the tomb of Saint Peter were returned to the surface.

In Paris, police surrounded important public buildings and the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, and the Musée d'Orsay were closed, as were the Uffizi in Florence and the Prado in Madrid. All European governments made similarly frantic efforts to escape their capitals, and all faced the same danger—total lack of continuity in the event of sudden catastrophe.

The United States, Canada, the European Union, Mexico, Japan, India, Saudi Arabia, China, Russia, and many other countries grounded all flights immediately. Most countries issued grounding directives, but many did not have sufficient control over their own airspace for this to be effective. Flights over most of Africa and various Asian countries continued, at least until planes made scheduled landings. All flights incoming to the United States, the European Union, and Canada were either turned back or landed under fighter escort.

The news reached the Middle East at approximately ten thirty in the morning local time, when Al Jazeera carried a grim bulletin: "The U.S. city of Las Vegas is in flames after the detonation of a nuclear bomb. There is no communication with the city, but news helicopters just arriving on the scene report that the entire metropolis is burning. The famous gambling strip is no more."

For a few moments, the channel went back to its regularly scheduled program, *The Fabulous Picture Show*, featuring an interview with Sudanese

film director Lina Makboul about her latest project, called *Water*. A moment later, the channel returned to the news and the same feed of the city burning, now in the pink light of the predawn, that was being broadcast worldwide.

Cairo, Baghdad, New Delhi, Rawalpindi, Kabul, Tehran, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem—all the great cities of the Middle East—simply stopped. Cars stopped in the streets; people stopped on the sidewalks.

As soon as it had received the alert from Mossad, the Israeli government had put its military on immediate alert. Across Jerusalem, across Tel Aviv, in the streets of London, of Paris, of Berlin, of New York, of Houston, of Mexico City, a great silence descended. But that was not true in Cairo, it was not true in Tehran, in Riyadh, in Damascus, in Gaza, where people rushed cheering into the streets, leaping, dancing, and soon the news crews were there, too, taping the sweating men, the dark rush of women.

After ten minutes of this in Cairo, the Egyptian government, desperate not to offend the Americans, sounded the air-raid sirens, with the result being panic and confusion, then a stampede to evacuate the city. In Iran, a frantic military went into defensive posture but was careful not to put more than a few aircraft in the air. President Ahmadinejad issued an announcement on state television that any attempt to attack Iran would be met with “fierce resistance.” Immediately thereafter, along with the rest of the government, he left for a mountain retreat north of Tehran. Privately, he was furious. Who had done this? He sent a message of condolence to the U.S. president, assuring the Americans that Tehran was not responsible. But would they believe it?

Similar messages were sent by Syria, Pakistan, Sudan, North Korea, and every other country that worried that it might be held responsible.

In the Pamir Panhandle in Afghanistan, a clear, quiet noontime arrived and people took their lunches of olives and cheese, of lamb and tomatoes, eating quietly in the profound silence of the place, while the grasses bowed in the noon wind and a truck passed on the road, its gears grinding as it began working its way up a hill.

In London and Paris, New York and Los Angeles, and most especially in Washington, it crossed many a mind that they might be in trouble, too, and quietly, in twos and threes, in family groups, among friends, they got in their cars or on trains, or on planes or busses, and left, and the roads at first whispered with their passage, then hummed, then roared, and finally the highways thundered and the terminals howled with terrified hordes, and the

employees left and the security officers, and riots spread through shattered streets, and children fell first.

As the sun rose over Las Vegas, a sight never seen before presented itself, for Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been lightly constructed, while Las Vegas was huge and complicated and packed with the complex wealth of material objects that defined the modern world—and people, of course, such a vastness of human detail.

The great cloud that was moving east with the prevailing winds turned rose red on its western flank, black in the east, for no light could pass through its density. Its leading edge was filled with glittering dots that appeared from afar like sequins or snowflakes. Some of them probably were sequins from Cirque du Soleil or one of the more traditional floor shows, but the cloud had lifted brassieres, glasses, seat cushions, chair legs, legs, hands, heads with dead eyes, bits of cars, sheet music, CDs, DVDs, watches, some on arms and some not, toilet paper in grand streamers, jewels driven to an altitude of thirty thousand feet and dropped in the endless sky, and all of this came with the fallout, dropping in gardens, on roofs, on speeding cars, on the runners and the dead alike, festooning trees with plastic toys and skirts and diapers and meat, diaries, stuffed animals in bits, wallets, money, chips like rain, some of them covered with ice and become hail.

So it is: when a giant place is exploded the center of it is vaporized, but then the blast sweeps out, snatching all and tearing all from its moorings, spreading tornadic, unexpected chaos far and wide. For the first time humankind knew the truth that had occupied the sweated nights of two generations of statesmen and generals: what a modern atomic bomb does, even one of moderate size, is even more unimaginably ghastly than the public has been allowed to know.

Terror rode on the shoulders of the world.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

Nabila was at her home workstation trying to find anything, anything at all that might help, all the while imagining Jim out there in the night, imagining his peril, when the phone rang. She snatched it up. It was Operations, telling her that the deputy director had not appeared at Deer Valley Airport.

She forced her heart down out of her throat. “Move the plane anyway,” she said, obedient to Jim’s instructions.

Had she just lost the husband whose love she had so unexpectedly rediscovered on this terrible night? She might never know.

She wanted coffee and, even more, a cigarette, but no more of that. But the fragrance was so comforting, the tobacco scent of memory.

She found Rashid standing silently in the kitchen, staring at the television that stood on the counter. She could not offer him the comfort she had given him when he was little and afraid. She held her own tears in, her anguish—no, despair—for her husband, her life, her poor, misconstrued faith, and the people who were suffering and dying now in Nevada.

“I feel so responsible,” she whispered. “If only we’d been better!”

He turned to face her. “We must respect God’s will.”

“This isn’t God’s will. Evil is *never* God’s will!”

“All is God’s will.”

She stopped her angry reply in her throat. This was no time for a religious argument. Like him, she’d read every word of the Quran. But she had approached it with a Western eye to the text, and had come to believe that Mohammed alone had not written the whole book. The reason was that the writing style changed so much. She saw that there were three Qurans. One of them soared above the mind of man, another was practical and wise in the way God must be wise, and a third, very different document was about brutality and power and the ruin of all who did not embrace the faith. She thought that the Muslims needed to reform their approach to the Book. As the

Christians had gradually abandoned Deuteronomy 13, with its admonition to kill all nonbelievers, the Muslims must accept that the violent suras were a corruption inserted by human beings and not the word of God.

The clock on the stove ticked its frantic ticking. Outside the open window, the lower branches of the oak stirred with a predawn breeze. How was it, when she looked back across her life in the Company, that it always seemed to be night? The sky was deep blue, dawn just visible now at the top of the window.

She and Rashid were both waiting for their pagers. All across the planet, military and intelligence operations were going into action, as the vast, immensely complex protective infrastructure of the world raced to crisis mode.

Certain countries, she knew, would be preparing for the worst: Iran would fear attack, and Syria. North Korea would not, because they had dismantled their nuclear program in 2007. But, of course, everyone in the community suspected that they had actually sold the highly enriched uranium that they had produced, probably to Hezbollah. In fact, the nuclear material that the Israelis had destroyed in Syria in 2007 was believed to have come from North Korea. Damascus hadn't protested the incursion because the central government had not known that the shipment of highly enriched uranium was even present in the country. It did, know, however, that the detonation of a nuclear weapon in Israel would not only decimate the Jewish population, it would kill millions of Palestinians, too, and lead to the immediate destruction of Damascus.

Had the North Koreans been somehow responsible for what had just happened to Las Vegas? Her mind flashed with an image of Pyongyang in the springtime, the streets empty, flower boxes everywhere blooming with pink Kimjongilias, the begonia variant cultivated to honor Kim Jong Il's birthday in 1988. She had never been there physically, but she had traveled those streets in real time, when she'd worked on a photomapping program that was designed to map every important place in the world.

"I'm not getting a call yet," Rashid said.

"Me, neither."

"Suppose they don't call us because we're Muslim."

"We're cleared. They have to call us. Especially—"

Her pager beeped—screamed, it seemed to her.

"—especially you."

It was not a call to go on dispersal. It was her emergency code requiring immediate action. “I have to go on the secure network here, right now,” she said.

His beeper warbled. He looked at it. “I’m on dispersal.”

The reality of what the two messages meant was immediately clear to both of them.

She looked into his eyes. Saw the shock there, in their wideness, their liquid glassiness. His tongue touched suddenly dry lips.

What had just happened was that he had been ordered to go to dispersal and live, she to stay in Washington and probably die.

They embraced. If his unit was on dispersal and she wasn’t even being given time to drive to Langley, it could mean only one thing: her services were needed immediately because Washington itself was under threat and the Internet might help them deal with it in some way right now. His work did not require him to be in harm’s way. He would therefore come under provisions of National Security Presidential Directive 51, which required him to go immediately to a secondary location outside of the metro area.

Without speaking, he turned and went into his bedroom. She heard him pulling out his emergency case and then went back to her own office, closed and locked the door, and drew the curtains. She turned on the green gooseneck lamp on her desk, then pulled the radio-frequency shield out of its hiding place in her bottom drawer. It was designed to absorb any radio frequencies emanating from her laptop—frequencies that could be picked up by ultrasensitive satellites. Her every keystroke could potentially be logged and transmitted to any location in the world.

The shield was green plastic embedded with copper screen. She fitted the laptop into it, then opened it and turned the computer on. This was not a home computer. It was a highly sophisticated instrument in a smallish box. It flashed on at once. She saw the seal of the secure network, and waited as a link was established. Saw Marge come up. She was in her home office also. They could communicate verbally, but it was less secure. Marge’s message box said: “We’ve got orders to do a selective shutdown of the Internet. Isolate the U.S. west of the Rockies, no I/O. Thoughts?”

“BI.” Meant “bad idea,” which it was.

“?”

“They need information. Take it from them, you spread panic.”

“WTU.” Meant: Will Transmit your opinion Upstairs.

One of Nabila's 'bots began flashing. She double-clicked it.

And there was the most stunning, the most monstrous thing she had ever seen in her life.

It was a Web site coming out of Japan. In an instant she saw that it had originated at the Toyama Campus of Waseda University in Tokyo. She grabbed the site, just glancing at the first few words.

The site wasn't intended just for her, not this time. It was in the open.

She saw that it must not be allowed to reach the media, not in this form, not at any cost. Her fingers flew as she plunged into the Japanese Internet backbone, racing after Waseda's server farm.

She found it, shot Marge an instant message: "Doing a DSA Waseda University. MTC."

She set a million calls a second on Waseda's servers. That would freeze them. She could only hope that nobody else had seen this, because it was the most incendiary single document ever written by the hand of man, and it almost made her literally scream aloud, howling her terror into the dawn light that was beginning to stream in the windows.

She ported her copy of the website over to Marge, then watched her 'bots. They weren't finding anything else like it. No, this had been done the same way as the *hijab* document—a single website, probably put up for just a short time. But she couldn't risk that. As far as she was concerned, Waseda would remain off-grid forever.

They could have posted the site in a million different places, public as all hell, but they had not done that, and she now realized why. It was the humiliation factor. World leaders—the president first—were going to have to tell their people about this.

COMMUNICATION FROM THE MAHDI OF THE EARTH OF MUSLIM
PEOPLE
GLORY TO GOD, THE CALIPHATE OF ETERNAL PEACE IS COME.
THE END OF TIME IS HERE.

Because the Crusader harlots, fallen daughters of God all, did not bow

their heads beneath the veil, there was a serious consequence.

Now, bowing before God, all must pray. The Five Pillars of Islam are established for all, and all must now join themselves to the joy of prayer as established in the Law.

All law, and the only law, is now the law of Šarī'ah. Immediately, all must perform *sadaha* in accordance with the Law.

The Crusader King, William Johnson Fitzgerald, must perform *sadaha* before all mankind at once. He must say before all the world, “Ašhadu 'al-lā ilāha illā-llāhu wa 'ašhadu 'anna muḥammadan rasūlu-llāh,” in a clear voice. He must then say in his uncivilized tongue, that the ignorant may understand, “I testify that there is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet,” and must say, then, that he is humble to the Faith. He must open the vaults of his weapons and cause his soldiers to lay down their guns in all the world. The minions and viziers and soldiers of the Crusader King must all perform *sadaha* at once and be seen to face Mecca in prayer, in accordance with the Law. They must remain in the dirty city of Washington. They may not leave.

All lairs of apostasy are closed and may not be entered. Anyone entering a Christian church is apostate and subject to the Law. Anyone entering a Jewish synagogue is apostate and subject to the Law. All worship in the names of false gods and statues now ends, and the Hindu, the Christian, the Jew, and all others proclaim *sadaha* in accordance with Law.

From the high places all around, henceforth this is ordered: that the prayers be proclaimed in loud voice at the appointed times, in performance of the *salah*, the five prayers of each day.

This must be done at once, or there will be a serious consequence. Your savior loves you, and will be pleased to communicate further with God's people, when God wills.

A LOST WORLD

The president was still in his helicopter when news of the latest Mahdi communication came in the form of an urgent bulletin from the Director of National Intelligence. The president took one look at it and picked up the phone. “Logan?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Is Matt safe?”

“They’re in their bunker.”

“Thank God.” So the vice president could reconstruct the government if he had to. Or rather, when. “I’m coming back.”

“Sir, you can’t—”

He hung up, then communicated with the flight deck. “Take us back,” he said.

Immediately the chopper banked and began its churning return to the White House. A headwind made it bounce. Outside, dawn burst forth in shades of pink and red. They flew low over the glowing trees of Bethesda, so low that he could see autumn leaves running along the streets.

His secure phone rang. Webb Morgath, Director of National Intelligence. The president snatched it up. “Webb?”

“This document *requires* the entire U.S. government to remain undispersed.”

“Make sure that no media says anything about the Fifty-one activation. And nobody—I repeat, *nobody*—is to know that I left the White House at all. If there’s any media awareness, invoke national security and suppress it. It can’t look like we came back with our tail between our legs.”

The chopper circled and came in for a landing on the lawn. He saw that the entire damn press corps was swarming outside the closed gates, waiting to be let in.

As he stepped out, Tom Logan met him. “Sir, we have evidence of deep penetration of the FBI and probably the operational infrastructure of the CIA. There is an agent coming in with more detail.”

“Reliable?”

“You’re never sure, are you?”

“What’s his résumé?”

“He’s a counterproliferation expert. The deputy director says he’s the best there is.”

“Is he reliable or not? Come on, goddamn it, evaluate the man!”

“Reliable!”

“Okay, hit me.”

“He won’t disclose anything over the phone.”

“Crap!”

“What else can he do?”

“Yeah, if they’re out there, they’re gonna be after White House communications, for sure.”

The president’s thoughts went to Leandro Aragoncillo, living proof of White House vulnerability. He’d been in the Office of the Vice President for years. Because of that case, an effort was being made to establish an effective internal security program that would cover all sensitive services.

Two months ago, in response to Fitz’s request, the inspector general of the Justice Department had reported that their efforts were “progressing,” which he knew was bureaucratese for “nothing doing.”

Aragoncillo, a Secret Service agent, had worked in the offices of Al Gore and Dick Cheney, and had been reporting to the Philippines, for the love of God. And who the hell had those bastards been selling the information to?

That, plus Brewster Jennings and other situations—who knew how deep the problem might be? One thing was very clear: Fitz was master of a ship with a broken rudder, and they were in shoal waters.

As he walked toward the White House, breathing the cool, tart air of a smoggy morning, Tom continued, “The pope and the prime minister are both holding. France is scheduled in twenty minutes, then Germany, Japan, and Italy. Russia—”

“No Russia.”

“Israel?”

“I want Webb Morgath, Wally Benton, and the generals on a conference call in my office in fifteen minutes.” That would be the Director of National Intelligence, the CIA director, and the Joint Chiefs. “I want the statutories on call.” That was the National Security Council and its statutory advisers. “I want *no* support personnel on the line whatsoever. I want a Marine guard

around the White House and around my person. The Secret Service is going to have to withdraw.”

“Sir?”

“You heard me. Do it, Tommy.”

“Sir, the Secret Service?”

“If we are looking at a penetration, we have to assume that they would try hard to compromise my personal detail.” He stopped, looked at Tommy’s ashen face. “Your eye is twitching.”

“I know it.”

“This, too, shall pass. Maybe. Now get things in motion for me, please.”

“Sir, everybody’s here.”

“*Here?* My God, they belong on dispersal!”

“Sir, when you came back, so did they.”

“But not Matt?”

“No, he’s still secured.”

Had he returned, Fitz would have had him arrested, returned to his bunker, and imprisoned there.

Still striding, Fitz shook his head. The others were still fools to come back. Without them, rebuilding the government would just be that much more difficult. So he’d do this as fast as possible and get them the hell out. He reached the Rose Garden and went inside. And there stood Dan, his son. Gone was the nose piercing. His hair was cut—roughly, but in a conventional cut. The media’s beloved Goth had disappeared, transformed into the kind of kid this president had hoped to show the world.

“What in hell, Danny, get out of here!”

“Dad—no.”

Sudden anger flared in him. How could Dan be so dense? “This is a death trap, for God’s sake! We’re in our grave, all of us who are in this place.”

“Dad—”

“You’re young; you have no business taking a risk like this. Look, your mom’s in Newfoundland, and I’m ordering you to join her. You go out to Andrews. There’ll be a plane. You and your sister be on it.”

“Mom is here.”

“That can’t be true.”

“She landed at Andrews twenty minutes ago. And Polly’s on her way.”

“This place could go, Son. Any minute. You need to leave.”

“Dad, your family is here, and we’re *gonna* be here.”

Then it would be all of them, all of the Fitzgeralds, vaporized together in this lethal place. He didn't want it, but he accepted it because he had no time to argue. He embraced his son and felt his arms around him, felt his hand patting his back, a gesture of gentle support, simple, telling of the bond between them.

He took a deep breath, then gave his son's elbow a squeeze and went past him into the Oval. He'd do it all from the ceremonial office, because today was history—probably the last day of history as the world knew it—and he was damned if he would do it anywhere except in the center of power and authority. The Oval.

EXCELLENT PLANS

Fitz supposed he was nothing but a sentimental fool, but he never entered the Oval without feeling the presence of all the great men who had worked here before him. He thought of decisions that had been made here, and what might have gone through the minds of the men making them. From here, Truman had dropped the bomb on Japan. From here, Kennedy had sent men to the moon. From here, Johnson had ended segregation. And from here—in here—Fitz would do what he could to repair the most horrendous breach of American security in history.

On his desk, the classified briefer lay open and ready to read. Fitz glanced down at it. A probability study analyzing who might be responsible, based on that idiotic concept of “chatter.” Why would chatter be so important, for the love of God? It was chatter, wasn’t it?

The Iranians were chattering the most, it seemed. Of course they were; they probably expected a bomb down their throat at any moment. The Syrians were chattering, the Israelis, the Egyptians, the Afghans, Pakistanis, Indians, Chinese, Kazakhstanis, Ukrainians, Russians—along with, he supposed, the rest of the world. Who wouldn’t be chattering right now? Even the Vatican was on the list.

There was, in short, nothing of value in the briefer.

Billions of dollars a year, a decade of reorganization, thousands of brilliant and courageous people, superb equipment—and *Las damn VEGAS was murdered!*

Shame. Shame on them. Shame, above all, on William Fitzgerald, who had believed in a system that was rotten, broken, shattered—*penetrated*.

The thing was, and he could not deny this, he had known. Why else had he been after the Justice Department to plug the holes? *Face it, Mr. President, you knew damn well*. Not specifically, of course. But he had known that somewhere in a system this large and this porous there had to be water gushing in, bulkheads collapsing, watertight doors that should be closed being left wide open.

You knew, Fitz. Their souls are on your conscience. You're the president and the buck just stopped. Their blood is your responsibility.

He hit the intercom. "Millie, is it still burning?"

"Sir, you can see. It's morning there now. It's all smoke."

They seemed to come to the door of his soul, the ocean of the dead, holding out their children's smoking bodies, calling to him, asking him why he hadn't protected them.

He wanted to cry, but he was too mad to cry.

He looked down not at the briefer but at the hands that held it. His hands. Mottled, a bit thick, a broken nail, his gold wedding band the only decoration. They were the hands of a man who, before this day was out, might order retaliation for this terrible, evil act.

Dream Angel would take hundreds of millions of lives. What was worse, Dream Angel was one of those absurdly theoretical plans that never worked the way they were supposed to work. All he knew about it for certain was that it was going to cause untold human suffering.

He pressed the intercom again. "When the Joint Chiefs arrive, I'll expect to discuss Dream Angel."

"Yes, Sir," Millie replied.

Quickly he considered the protocol of his telephone calls. The PM first, then the pope. The United States was a secular state, after all, and in any case, what could the pope offer but prayers?

Fitz picked up the phone. "Good morning, Cameron, sorry for the delay. I'm in my pajamas and an overcoat."

"Fitz, first, of course, there are no words—"

"Can you help me?" Four simple words, from one man to another and from his American people to their ancient British source.

"I've asked MI6 to review everything. Literally, everything, for any shred, any scrap—"

"What about London?"

"We're on crisis dispersal now. And coping with the civilian traffic moderately badly, I'm afraid. I think every hotel in the countryside has been booked by Londoners."

"You need a continuity-of-government plan."

"We're behind on that."

"You're not alone. I just hope it's not too late. Where are the French, the Italians, the Germans?"

“Nobody has a continuity plan, not that contemplates decapitation.”

“We’ve been fools, all of us.”

There was a pause, as if to absorb the enormity of that statement. “I’m not at Number Ten, in any event,” Cameron finally said.

“I’m in the White House.”

“Fitz, I just wish to God that there was something I could do!”

“You have this so-called Mahdi’s little missive?”

“Oh yes.”

“It came from Japan. The one before that—so innocuous they didn’t tell me about it—from Finland.”

“It was designed to create discord, that first one.”

“In what sense?”

“Too small to matter. Therefore, the people who didn’t recognize its seriousness will be blamed.”

“No witch hunts. No time.”

“They will be demoralized.”

“Cameron, we have a security problem on this end. Is there any knowledge of it over there?”

No response. The silence extended. Then, “Truthfully, how can I know? Certainly I haven’t been told.”

“Ask MI6, if you don’t mind. If they know anything, any hint, let me know. Or Matt, if I’m no longer involved.”

“Fitz, you’re a great man.”

“Too scared for that, Cameron.”

“We’ll raise a glass together, in victory.”

That sounded about as hollow as anything Fitz had ever heard in his life. “We will,” he said, trying to force something like optimism into his voice.

He hung up and said to Millie, “I’m going to do the press conference at nine sharp. Let them know.”

“You have an urgent from Mr. Hanlon.”

The director of the Secret Service. Fitz picked up the phone. “Charlie, don’t talk; just listen. I have credible evidence that there is a penetration of our security services, which made this whole catastrophe possible. I cannot know who we can trust.”

“Sir, we are absolutely clean. You know how carefully we vet our people.”

Except for spies from the Philippines, of course. “Thank you, Charlie.”

“Sir, we’re clean!”

He just could not take the risk. "I'm using War Powers to remove you. Stand the presidential party down now." He glanced toward the door. "Where are my Marines, Millie?"

Logan had come in. "Company A is deploying now."

"Okay." Fitz went back to the phone. "Charlie, I don't want war to break out between the Secret Service and the Marines. You stand down."

Charlie did not reply.

"Charlie, that's a direct presidential order issued during a national emergency." He fought to recall the exact terms of the act. What did he need to say to get this to happen?

"Yes," Charlie said at last. "Yes, Sir."

Fitz hung up. Logan said, "The pope is waiting."

"The pope, Millie." A click. "Your Holiness."

"I speak on most urgent matter," the old man said, his English lightly accented. "I have received a threat from an Islamic fanatic that calls himself the Mahdi. He says we must close all churches or there will be a serious consequence. Mr. President, I must know if this threat is with substance."

He considered, then threw the question back: "Do you have any indication from your own sources?" Contrary to popular belief, the Vatican didn't have an official intelligence service, but it was the world's best listener.

"We believe that the threat in this document has substance. If we do not close our churches, there will be a further bomb. What I want to know is if this is what you call a credible threat?"

The president did what presidents must do, but only good ones do well. He made an educated guess. "Holiness, I can confirm that the document you have is authentic, and is almost certainly linked to the group that has detonated this weapon."

When the pope's voice returned, it was low, and now so thickly accented that Fitz could hardly understand. "We cannot close all churches."

"It's not in your power, anyway."

"No, only the Catholic." He paused. "Is there anything to be done?"

The president considered his answer. He had to communicate force and caution both. "We're evaluating the situation. World leaders will be notified first, including Your Holiness."

"God be with you, then."

He hung up the phone. Millie came in and laid a color printout of the Mahdi's Web page on Fitz's desk. He fingered it, read it, read it again.

He went to the window, and watched the shafts of morning sun, gold and soft, spreading across the lawn. He wondered if he would be alive in fifteen minutes, or in ten . . . or one?

“Fitzie!”

Joy possessed him, followed immediately by as cold a dread as he had ever known, because his wife should not be here. Then the sound of her voice shot a bolt of memory straight into the depths of his mind. He saw her in girlhood, when they had been kids together, saw her in the tree house with little boxes of cereal and milk she had brought for a picnic, holding them while he kissed her and she turned away from him, her eyes as sharp as crystal, her cheeks red. She had a dusting of freckles then.

Tall, proud, her blond hair swinging, she strode to him. But her eyes did not have that crystal sharpness in them now. Her eyes were terrible. She had been crying, and doing it a lot.

He opened his arms and she flew in, and he said, with all the determination he could force into his voice, “Get out of here.”

She looked up at him. Briefly there was the old twinkle there. Then it was gone. “Not gonna happen, buddy.”

He kissed her.

Logan hovered. “Sir?”

Fitz drew back, taking her taste with him.

“Sir, your meeting’s here.”

“Let’s roll.”

The Joint Chiefs came trooping in, and the intelligence chiefs, the secretary of defense, the secretary of state, and the military secretaries.

“Gentlemen,” Fitz asked, “can we carry out Dream Angel?”

Air Force Secretary Hobbes said, “The planes are already in the air, Sir.”

Fitz looked at the faces of the assembled men, and of his wife and now also, he saw, his son and daughter, who stood in the back of the crowded room.

Dream Angel was the most fearsome military operation ever conceived. Over a thirty-hour period, it would deliver 1,750 W101 neutron bombs across all areas on the planet controlled by Muslim fundamentalists. At least, this was the theory. But Fitz knew military planning and its accuracy. He’d been a young congressman when a U.S. smart bomb had blown up the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. One thing was certain—wherever the bombs actually exploded, they would certainly kill an almost inconceivable number of

human beings.

“Very well,” he said.

Planes and cruise missiles would deliver the ordnance. From Saudi Arabia to Indonesia, the affected areas of the world would literally be depopulated. The expected death rate was so high that there was an environmental impact assessment that discussed the climatic effects of the huge amount of methane that would be released by the decaying corpses.

“Do we go?”

The question, raised by Air Force General Alfred Mandell, hung in the silence.

Fitz wished that he could raise the question of the penetration. But how could he? Once he reaches office, a president learns very quickly why such a massive intelligence organization is needed. Presidential power extends only as far as presidential knowledge. For example, they were helpless right now because they didn’t know anything about this so-called Mahdi, and even more helpless because of this catastrophic security issue.

“What fools we mortals be,” Fitz said. He looked at Webb Morgath, who literally twisted in his seat on the uneasy end of a couch. “Webb, can we narrow this thing down? Who’s the Mahdi?”

“Sir, I don’t have that information.”

“Do you know why?”

“We have the website—we know that it was set up on a server at a Japanese university, but that’s all we know.”

“Japan,” Fitz said softly, tasting the history in the word: Tojo ruining the country, then people bowing to MacArthur’s car as it passed, now Toyota and Honda standing astride the industrial economy of the planet.

The world, as it existed now, was an outcome of American victories in World War II and over the Soviet Union, and American foreign policy since.

But all policy is based on knowledge, and Fitz’s knowledge right now was compromised. He knew that Las Vegas had been nuked. He knew that this had happened, almost certainly, because U.S. security assets were being used or neutralized by the enemy. He knew that somebody who called himself the Mahdi had taken responsibility for the bombing. But he did not know if Dream Angel would work, and for a very specific reason. “So what happens if this attack isn’t coordinated from within the target areas? We execute Dream Angel and it doesn’t help?”

“Sir,” Secretary of Defense Mike Ryland said, “with all due respect, that

isn't the issue. The issue is spreading terror a thousandfold greater among the Muslims than they can deliver to us. Break their will."

Fitz's phone rang. Every eye turned toward it. All knew the same thing—Millie would never put through a call at a time like this unless it was terribly, terribly urgent.

He picked it up. "Yes?" He listened, then put it down. "Mosques are being set fire to all over the world. The UK, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, India—a huge backlash." Then he added, "It's working both ways. In Cairo and Beirut, they're driving through the streets of Christian neighborhoods, machine-gunning people at random. In St. Louis and Atlanta and Mobile, mosques are burning. A man walked down a street in Seattle, shooting men with moustaches. A Sikh was strangled with his turban in a Dallas shopping mall while a crowd applauded and cheered."

"We need to deploy the Guard," Ryland said.

"Let it run," Webb countered. "Let the energy dissipate now or it'll be worse later."

"No." A voice from the back, tiny with unease. Polly. Fitz sought his daughter with his eyes. She looked back at him from as if from another dimension, her gaze resplendent with the unquenchable hope of youth, her mother's proud lips, determined, supremely confident that her dad was the great man she believed him to be.

"Here are my decisions," he said. "I am federalizing the National Guard in every state except Nevada, under provisions of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2007. I am declaring that a state of martial law exists in the United States, and I am ordering the armed forces to DEFCON 1, with the specification that nuclear weapons must be mounted and armed at once. I am further commanding that any aircraft without specific military authorization found in flight in the United States, day or night, are to be shot down without warning. I am closing the borders, and please inform the Mexican and Canadian embassies that anyone crossing will be shot on sight until further notice, with regrets; I'm sure they'll understand." He stopped.

There was silence. He knew why. All of the above was expected. It was another order that they were waiting to hear.

He looked again from face to face. Briefly his wife's eyes touched his. He went on. His daughter's pleaded. Brave girl—until a month ago she'd been working at an AIDS mission in Botswana. She knew all too well the suffering of the third world and therefore the agony that Dream Angel would cause.

“Very well,” he said. “Now listen. I am going to communicate to the vice president that it is my recommendation that Dream Angel be enacted if Washington, D.C., is destroyed. Is that understood?”

Polly shook her head back and forth, back and forth, so hard that the only sound in the room was that of her hair swishing. Her face had gone bright red. He could see tears flying.

Then they all erupted. “Mr. President!” “Fitz!” “Sir!” All of them, their voices furious.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Not be a damn coward!” General Mandell blurted.

“That’s out of line, General.” Fitz knew that there could be a coup. He knew that the entire government could fly apart on this morning like an overwound spring.

Mandell saluted him. “Sorry, Sir.”

“What I am looking at is threats that originated in Finland and Japan. Not in Iran, not in Saudi Arabia, not in Pakistan.” He took a deep breath. “And I am looking at something else.” He glanced toward Logan. “That I cannot discuss, even in this room.

“What I can say is this. Power—world power—is gone from our hands. While we’ve been listening in on the pillow talk of the princes, the little guy has come up from the kitchen and stolen the damn silverware.”

“Mr. President, that’s defeatism.”

“Shut your mouth, Ryland. You’re a damn fool! Fifty years ago, we had divisions to fight against. Waves of Chinese soldiers to cut down in Korea, columns of tanks to blow up. Then came Vietnam, and that was a little different. A sort of army that came and went in the shadows. Then 9/11 and Iraq, and we were fighting ragtag Bedouins, disorganized and sparse on the ground, but far more effective than the Vietcong. But now where are we? Warfare has gone from divisions to individuals to . . . nobody. The virtual state. So you expect me to kill ten percent of the world’s population—just to be sure we *don’t miss?*”

Now the chorus of complaints rose to a roar, and there was menace in it. He saw bulging eyes. He saw spit in the shouting throats.

“*Hear me out!*”

They fell silent.

“If we carry out Dream Angel, and afterward we are still under nuclear threat, as I am sure we will be, we might have to surrender—”

There was an explosion of voices. He held up his hands. Sought them with his eyes. He regained control of the room . . . barely.

“Face this. It’s reality. What if they do another city, and then tell us they have more, and will do worse? What we do then is surrender. And that can happen *after* we execute Dream Angel.”

“You’re talking about Western civilization,” Polly said, the youth in her voice almost taking Fitz’s breath away. “We can’t surrender.”

But they could, if they were beaten, and he knew it. They would have to. “If we execute Dream Angel and we destroy all those countries, and we miss the leaders of this thing, then they could end up in control anyway. They will punish our people terribly for our actions. We’ll be marked as a nation of war criminals, cursed for a thousand years.”

Fitz had seen many men break, and they broke all in the same way. There was a stillness; then the shoulders dropped, then the head. He saw his secretary of defense break. “Trust my decision, Mike.”

Ryland looked at him. Looked him up and down. Fitz had brought him in because he was hard. A tough, brilliant man with a history in the military, in business.

“You are saying that we’ve lost.”

“Is that what you think?”

“Fitz, we need to retaliate.”

Fitz put his hand on Ryland’s shoulder. “I want you to say to me, ‘We need to kill two hundred million people.’ You say that.”

“We need to kill these terrorists!”

“*Who?* Who in hell do you mean?” He glared toward the intelligence chiefs, who stood together near the door, as if they wanted to escape. “With all your equipment, all those damned listening devices, all those brilliant agents, you can’t tell me a thing. You know when Assad jacks off or Putin blows his nose, *so who is this Mahdi? Where is he?*”

“Sir—”

“We’ve thrown away billions watching the embassies and the palaces. And what do we have? Not one damn thing!”

Millie gestured from the doorway to her office. The media was ready.

“We’re done here,” he said.

Logan said, “Your speechwriters—”

Fitz turned to his loyal chief of staff. Tried a smile. Didn’t work. “They can’t help me,” he said. “I’m alone now.”

As he left the room, he felt as if he carried a weight of stones. Polly came to him. “Daddy, we’re so proud of you.”

Anger suddenly came up in him, deep, raw, helpless. “Get out of Washington,” he rasped.

She stepped back, her face flushing, her dry lips opening with surprise.

He turned, took her in his arms. “You’re so young,” he said. “So very young.”

As he passed along the corridor, flanked by Marines in full battle dress, preceded by two and followed by three, he gave the order to release the communication that had been received from the so-called Mahdi. In five minutes, Fitz would speak. Now, however, on TV screens, on websites, read over the radio, slapped into newspaper extras, the words of the only man who had ever come close to conquering the world were seen for the first time.

And not one intelligence service anywhere on the planet knew his true identity.

Or no, that wasn’t quite true. One knew. It knew him well.

BLUE SKIES OF HELL

Ressman had successfully landed Jim in Piedras Negras. Jim had done what he had to do there, then crossed the Rio Grande in some shallows and made his way to Kenneally's little love nest. Jim had been watching the mobile home for an hour. From inside he could hear the president's voice on the television, could catch a few words. It was seven twenty in the morning now, full light. He hung back in a grove of twisted mesquite trees, moving as little as possible in order to take advantage of the dark trunks as camouflage.

He knew the contents of the terrorist website. He'd heard it read on the car radio. Everybody on the planet, he assumed, was aware of it by now. Whether the president embraced Islam or not, Jim thought that Washington would be destroyed, probably at midnight tonight. He knew all too well how hard it was to prevent such an attack once the bomb was in place.

They would try to interdict this, of course—even now, Homeland Security operatives were doubtless moving through the city with radiation detectors, filling its streets and skies with surveillance mechanisms, watching every detail of desperate life as the place unraveled. God help Nabby. He could only hope she had made it to her dispersal point.

He moved closer to the double-wide. Thankfully, there were no children. He didn't know if he could do this with children present. It was now seven thirty. His target was moving about inside, so he was probably on an eight-to-four. He would leave in about ten minutes.

Carefully Jim pressed his ear against the wall of the trailer. A female voice, high, quick, full of sobs. Him then, lower, quieter, an edge of tension that suggested a possible vulnerability to Jim.

He went along the gray wall, staying below the line of the windows. He reached the screened back door, grasped the handle. He saw that the door was spring-loaded and would make a distinctive creaking sound as it was opened. There was no way to surprise them; they were going to know that he was coming in.

He took a breath, deep. He was going to have to face a gun. He was going

to have to terrorize people and hurt them, maybe kill them. He thought of the towering cloud and the dead, and pulled the door open.

The moment the springs creaked, there came a challenging male voice: “Hey!”

Jim stepped in, finding himself in a kitchen—green linoleum, a countertop range crowded with four small burners, a narrow fridge. The window above the sink looked out on a black Tahoe. The room, the whole trailer, was thick with cigarette smoke. From the living room a parrot chattered above the droning, mournful voice of Anderson Cooper on CNN.

“Who are you?”

Jim smiled at Kenneally. “A ghost. That’s why you couldn’t kill me. Who’s your contact?”

“Get out.”

“No can do. Who paid you?”

The wife called out, “Arthur, who is that?”

Arthur Kenneally was big, hulking even. Like some big men, he could move quickly—too quickly. But Jim was also quick. He stepped past Arthur and into the living room, where a handsome woman of perhaps twenty-eight sat in the dark watching the television. She had a large cross in her hands.

He reached down and closed his fist around the lace collar of her nightgown and dragged her to her feet.

Her eyes widened; her body flopped, a fish dragged to the surface. She would scream, but not just yet. He swung her around and slammed her against the fake wood wall beside the door. The whole trailer shook; the wall snapped; she cried out.

“Who paid you, Arthur?”

“Freeze!” He pointed a pistol at Jim.

Foolish move. Jim needed a gun. He wheeled, putting Mrs. Arthur between himself and his adversary. “She can die; it’s okay by me.”

“Arthur!”

“Who paid him, love?” Jim threw her against Arthur, who stumbled back into the kitchen, his gun flailing.

It was a Colt .45, U.S. Army issue, heavy and hard to handle. Probably Arthur’s daddy’s gun. Customs and Borders weren’t issued weapons like this. Jim saw the two pounds of pistol shaking, its muzzle wobbly. Using a quick, accurate step, he raised his foot and connected with the man’s wrist. The pistol hopped, then flew from the man’s flopping hand.

With a crash, it slammed into the ceiling. Jim hurled Arthur's woman into his face and caught the weapon as it fell. "New rules," Jim said.

They lay in a heap, both now in shock, Arthur still believing that he was going to be able to control a situation that was far from his ability to handle.

Jim grabbed a fistful of collar and dragged Arthur to his feet. "Who paid you?"

"What?"

Carefully restraining himself, Jim pistol-whipped him.

Arthur slammed into the wall. In the living room, the parrot began screaming.

Now Jim got the woman to her knees. So pretty, the face tiny and delicate, the skin almost translucent.

He jammed the gun into her mouth, shoving hard enough to make her gag, jerking it so that there would be blood for Arthur to see. Then Jim pulled it out and threw her on top of Arthur. "Who paid you, Art?"

"Get out," the woman shrieked, blood flying from her mouth. "Get out!"

Jim took her by the hair and dragged her into the living room. As Arthur came to his feet, Jim waved the gun at him. "I excite easily," Jim said. "It's a fault." He pressed her face against the television. "Arthur did this. Las Vegas is burning and Arthur is personally responsible. Arthur will be executed, and if you don't tell me everything you know right now, you'll take a needle, too."

Jim drew her away from the television and threw her onto the couch. When she hit, she cried out.

"I had nothing to do with this!"

"Don't even try, Arthur."

"But—what? What did I do?"

"Removed the ASPs from Bridge One. Who was out there in the *brasada* with you, Arthur? Who was in command?"

"Arthur, what is this? What is this man saying?"

"What I am saying is that your husband took out a major U.S. city, goddamn it! He killed a million people!"

"Arthur?"

"Shut up!"

Jim felt a fiery pain in his back, and realized that she had pulled a knob off a cabinet and gouged him with the screw in its base.

Roaring, Arthur pushed toward Jim. His aggression told Jim that he

understood that something was wanted from him and therefore that the gun was only a prop.

Jim stepped aside with a dancer's ease, and Arthur crashed into the kitchen table, bending its aluminum legs and causing it to slide to the floor.

Now the woman leaped on Jim's back. He ducked forward, twisted his arms behind him until he could find purchase in her clothing, then hurled her forward and out into the living room, where she fell hard against the birdcage, releasing the terrified parrot, which flew out screaming, his green plumage gay in the clutter of the wrecked space. As he fluttered around and around the swaying ceiling light, his shadow made the walls dance and the woman screamed and screamed, cringing on the floor.

Arthur came back and found out that the gun was not quite a prop when it slammed into the side of his head, knocking him into the stove.

Jim leaped on Arthur and pinned him. "You tell me or I will turn on this burner in three seconds." An otherworldly calm had descended on Jim, as it always did in these situations. Afterward, he knew, he would turn into a knotted mass of agony, his throat burning with acid, his guts sour with bile. But now, he was moving in his zone of balance.

He turned on the burner, which was under the back of Arthur's neck. As Jim expected, the whole body lurched, the face turned purple, the eyes bulged, and spitting, orange flames came out around Arthur's head, making him look for a moment like a crazed saint.

In Arthur's howl Jim heard the tone of assent, and he turned off the burner. As Arthur chewed, his face bright with grimace, Jim drew well back. Arthur's vomit was white froth. "Egg Beaters for breakfast," Jim said. "Good idea. You oughtta stop smoking, too."

Jim yanked Arthur up off the range. His burnt hair added a nauseating stench to the fetor that already filled the house. Now a new smell—piss. Arthur's sphincter was releasing. "Now, Arthur, tell me."

"It was an order!"

"From?"

"Channels. An ordinary order. And we'd gotten them before, when that system was first being deployed, and it turned out not to work."

"The order is filed?"

His wife began screaming again. Jim turned toward her. "Shut up," he said. She didn't. "What's her name, Arthur?"

"Gloria!"

“Gloria, if you don’t settle down, I have to kill Arthur.”

As Jim dragged Arthur back into the living room, she gobbled the next scream. Jim tossed the big man onto the couch, then picked Gloria up and threw her down beside him.

“Now, let’s all understand each other. I am here for two reasons. First, Arthur destroyed or disabled the advanced spectroscopic portal radiation monitors on Bridge One, which enabled Mr. Emilio Vasquez to smuggle at least one atomic bomb into this country, which was detonated at midnight over Las Vegas. And Arthur tried to kill me when I found out.” He smiled at Arthur. “So let’s see if we can get past that bullshit about you following orders. Unless somebody ordered you to come after me. Who might that have been?”

Gloria’s face contorted so much she took on the appearance, almost, of something not human. Jim was reminded of ancient busts of Medusa. It was terror so great it appeared as rage. He knew it, he’d seen it before, and it shamed him to know that he was responsible for such suffering—but not enough to make him stop.

“Tell him,” Gloria said.

“Shut up!”

“You tell me if you know, Gloria, and you’ll be spared the needle.”

Her eyes were furtive now, stopping at the door, stopping at the window. The parrot flew round and round, his cries as precise as a metronome.

She lifted a hand, as if to capture the bird. “He’ll fly into the window!”

Jim braced the pistol in her face. “Last night, Arthur burned sixty thousand or so children to death.” He had made up the number. “So you can understand why I don’t give a shit about the damn bird.”

“Don’t tell him anything,” Arthur snarled.

Jim put the muzzle of the gun against Arthur’s knee. “This will blow your leg in two.”

“I’ll go into shock.”

“She knows, Arthur. And I know she knows. So your life no longer matters.”

Arthur closed his eyes. “We had an ONI officer come down here. He met with me and we went over to Piedras Negras together and had dinner with Vasquez. That night, I was ordered to stand the bridge detail down for twenty-five minutes between four and five in the morning, which I did. I saw men in the river; then I heard noises under the structure. That was it.”

“The ONI officer showed a badge?”

“He sure did, and it checked out.”

“You did a GSA secure database run? You personally compared the officer to the photograph?”

“It was the same guy.”

“Name?”

“His name is Franklin Isbard Matthews. He’s in ONI security, works out of Washington.”

Probably a real person who had no idea that he was following orders generated by the enemy. In other words, a dead end, not even worth following.

The parrot flew past screaming and Jim reached up and caught the little green guy, and carefully returned him to its cage.

“God, you’re fast.”

“Fast,” Jim responded without interest. He pushed the gun into his belt. “Thanks for the piece.” He would not leave them bound. They were useless now, and nothing they could do would change anything.

As he left, though, he went along the side of the building until he found their phone line. He ripped it out and shattered the switch box with his heel. Then he stepped into the yard, backed up until he could see their satellite dish. He drew the gun from his waist, aimed it, and fired. This produced a deafening roar and the predictable hard kick. But he was practiced with many pistols, and he loved a .45 automatic, and one of the reasons was what happened on the roof, as the dish and its box of electronics shattered into dozens of pieces, accompanied by another scream from Gloria and the cries of grackles that rose from the mesquite trees surrounding the house.

He went to the Kenneallys’ car, opened the hood, and pulled off the distributor cap. Taking it with him, he faded back into the brush, moving as if he was angling toward the road their property fronted on. He passed mesquites and cacti, inhaling the dry air, faintly sweet with autumn rot, the smell of the ripe mesquite beans the grackles were eating.

When he was invisible from the house, he shifted direction, and headed for the actual location of his car, a little-used fence road two miles back on a neighboring ranch. On the way, he tossed the distributor cap aside.

When he got to his car, he opened the bottle of water he’d left on the seat and drank it down, then ate the power bar he’d bought after he’d crossed the river. His first stop had been Piedras Negras, where Mr. Vasquez and his

entire family now lay dead in their house. Unpleasant task. Horrible, even. But Jim was past caring about small deaths.

He pushed away the memory of their struggles, the plump wife, the twenty-year-old son with the eyes of a rodent, and Vasquez himself, flapping his hands as if Jim were an annoying fly.

He went onto the roof of the car and looked across the low, brushy land. He'd chosen his position carefully, because from here he could see Arthur's little homestead. The trailer was a white gleam in the sea of yellow-green mesquite. Nothing moving. The truck was still there. Arthur would be wanting medical attention, so he'd probably already be on the hoof. If he got lucky and a car stopped, he might be in Eagle Pass in an hour.

Just to check, Jim opened his cell phone, put the battery back in, and watched as it powered up. A moment passed. Another. Nothing. He didn't want the phone's carrier signal to be available for more than a few seconds, so he removed the battery as soon as he was certain that there was no incoming service. Then he got back into the car, started it, and pulled out onto the fence road. The Global Positioning System came up, but the screen was simply white. No detail. He zoomed out all the way to fifty miles, but still nothing. It didn't matter, he knew where he was going, but still, it was impressive that the 50th Space Wing had shut down NAVSTAR. Made sense, though. A lot of it.

He had one objective, now: Get what he had learned to the president. To Logan. Jim had no intention of giving any names to security at any level, not FBI, CIA, ONI, none of them. If he could get hold of Logan, that would be it.

How far the country had slid, that ordinary civil service types like Arthur Kenneally and Franklin Matthews would do what they had done, probably for a couple of grand.

Jim arrived at the ranch compound he'd passed, lights out, at four thirty this morning. The ranch had just been getting up, and nobody had noticed the silent, dark car that had moved along the fence line.

They noticed now, though. The rancher, a short, portly man in a weathered straw Stetson, came marching over, waving at Jim to stop. "Yessir," the rancher said as he hurried along, "yessir." As he got closer, he added, "I ain't gonna see none'a my game in your trunk, I hope."

Jim waited for him with his creds in hand. He showed the best he could, which was his real credential. It was not a wallet he often opened, but this was getting actionable on a whole lot of different levels, and if the country

survived this crisis, there was going to be an inquiry into every move he made from the moment he discovered the missing detectors on that bridge.

“Well, Sir,” the rancher said. “I’m Tom Folbre; you’re on the Cut Four Ranch.”

“I need the use of a phone and I need it to be private.”

“Sir, I can’t do that—”

“This is—”

“Sir, they shut down all the phone lines along the whole border. All we have is the TV and radio. No way to call out until further notice. Plus, it’s martial law, on-site curfew from Brownsville to El Paso. Nobody leaves home except in an emergency. They got the Army on its way down from San Antonio.”

Jim left the man standing there, whipping with the Stetson at the dust Jim’s car kicked up. At least the rancher hadn’t been as ornery as that old and pitiful guy with the dogs.

Now, what could Jim do? There was another bomb. In fact, there were probably many other bombs.

He wished that he could throw himself on them, become a human shield. He could not have felt more alone.

THE FIELDS OF HOME

Jim turned west on Highway 277 and headed for Laughlin Air Force Base near Del Rio. It was a training facility, but a major one, and if there was no C-37 on station, Colonel Adams was going to be able to get Jim to Lackland in San Antonio, where he could pick one up, this time to fly to Washington for real. His call to Nabila had told whoever must certainly be watching him that he was on his way from Deer Valley. That little misdirection was over, though, because that plane had landed empty. He could assume that locating and killing him was once again a number one priority of the people who were enabling this horror to happen.

He turned on the radio. All the stations were broadcasting news. He listened to a border blaster rebroadcasting WFED, Federal News Radio, out of Mexico City. The Hipódromo de las Américas had been closed. The Federal Security Police Service was claiming that the bomb had not entered the United States through Mexico, and the president was protesting the militarization of the border. All flights of any kind had been grounded. Citizens of the Federal District were urged not to buy gasoline unless needed, and a general traffic curfew was in effect.

The chaos and suffering that must be behind these reports infuriated Jim. This was what the bastards had done—not only murdered a great city but also sent all the rest of them, worldwide, into turmoil. How many would be trampled in frightened mobs, how many fail to receive essential drugs, how many go without water or food? And the economic costs were incalculable. Even as things stood now, it would take the world years to recover and there would be blood and sorrow.

His jaw clenched so hard it cracked. He fought back a surge of self-hate that was itself a kind of black internal tidal wave, a rage against his own failure so great that he would have jumped out of this car if he weren't needed to repair the damage.

“Don't,” he said aloud. His work depended on self-confidence. He had to push his despair back down into the pit for now.

With an angry stab of his finger, he hit the radio's scan button. Here was WOAI in San Antonio, the voice grimly announcing that all military reserves must report to their units. CONUS was no doubt scrambling for bodies. Jim's guess was that there were under a hundred thousand military personnel available for deployment in the United States.

World stock markets were closed, but the price of gold had gone up eight hundred dollars and oil was pushing through three hundred dollars a barrel. Ships at sea had been ordered to stop, all of them, and the U.S., British, Japanese, and European navies would sink any vessel that entered their territorial waters. Europe had also stopped any nonessential road traffic.

The litany went on and on and on. Jim saw a picture of a world that had been frozen in place as it fell into chaos. How long would it last, though? What of the massive traffic jams, the people fleeing the great cities? Where were they in this? Who was enforcing the various curfews? The answer was clear: nobody.

He moved on along the dial, this time picking up something called KGOD-FM. A Reverend James Haggerty was telling his congregation that God had used the heathens to destroy a place of sin and evil and good Christians must rejoice and fill the churches and prepare to meet God, for the rapture was at hand.

The clash between Muslim fundamentalism and Christian fundamentalism was a battle between two grotesque distortions of religion. The mad battling the mad over, in Jim's opinion, nothing. God's silence was God's truth, and that was what they could not bear to face. Somewhere, there had to be a heaven, justice, and a better life.

Life may or may not be preparation for heaven; Jim didn't know. What he did know was that a hungry kid or a ruined businessman or a worker on a breadline was real, now. And all those burnt bodies, and all this suffering, this was what was real. *And it was his.*

The car's tires whined. He was doing an eighty-eight, and this vehicle, older than the one he'd had on his way to Eagle Pass, had no more in her. He really didn't care to be out here when Army regulars started their deployment. They would be scared, confused, and armed to the teeth. Getting past them was going to be real hard.

He passed Laughlin's auxiliary base and radar station, then shot through the tiny towns of Normandy and Quenado, glimpses of rural poverty and rural peace. He saw chickens in a yard, a little stone house. The lights you

saw from the sky at night, in the lonely places—these little towns were such places. He wished he could stop, go into one of those houses, and that would be it.

But his mind returned to Washington. Even if the president and the world did all that the document demanded, Jim thought that the terrorists would destroy Washington if they could, and other American cities. The gauntlet was down. They had to break America now, or they would gain nothing.

He pressed the gas pedal until his foot tingled, but the car would not pass ninety.

He began to watch on his right, waiting for the big, friendly sign that generally announced a U.S. Air Force base. The car seemed to be drifting, the highway gliding past like a slow, old river.

Whereupon he saw the sign and also a dark blue Air Force bus and what looked like a squad of APs in full battle dress. As he dropped his speed, he surveyed the men—kids, actually. They were armed, for sure, but did they have a laptop? If so, they would run whatever ID he gave them, and he didn't trust anything to pass at a time like this except his real cred. If they got a bad answer, he had no idea what they might do. Problem was, his real cred was going to be flagged by the folks who were after him.

No choice, though. As he slowed, they turned toward him, stirring nervously, their hands clutching their weapons. Pulling off the side of the road under the eyes of kids this scared and this well armed was not a pleasant experience. Their lieutenant's lips were dry, his eyes staring. Jim knew how dangerous the stillness of these young men was. If they so much as glimpsed his pistol, they would kill him.

"Sir, get out of the car."

He moved to conceal the gun.

"Get out of the car!"

"Coming out! Coming out slow!" He pulled the door handle. "I want to warn you, there is a weapon on my person."

One of the squaddies rushed the car like a charging lion. *"Get out of the car; get on the ground!"* He threw the door open.

"Okay! Take it easy!" Jim hit the deck, digging into the hot tarmac and the dusty hardscrabble beside it. He could hear insects buzzing, smell dry autumn grass and the sweet, hot odor of his engine, could hear the overstrained block tinkling as it cooled. "I'm a CIA officer. My name is James Deutsch."

"No CIA around here," a piping young voice screeched.

“I am going to move. I am going to get my credential.”

A gun barrel thrust into his back. “Where is it?”

“Left side.” He hesitated. “When you get it, you will feel the pistol in my belt.”

They backed away, then consulted together in hurried voices. Arguing. Then the lieutenant got on his radio.

“No!”

The kid froze. Stared at him.

“Do not put this on a radio. If you’ve got a gate phone, fine, but if you broadcast this, you are murdering me.”

Now they argued again, and this time it was furious. The lieutenant sounded outnumbered. These kids were certainly not prepared to face a situation like this. Their experience probably ran to extracting drunk pilots from beer joints and manning guard stations where they knew everybody who came and went by name.

While they were busy, he pulled out the .45 and slid it toward them.

All the weapons came up. “*Stay on the ground.*”

Next, he pushed out his cred. “That’s my credential. You read it now, Lieutenant, and then take me to Colonel Adams.” Nobody moved. “*Do it now!*”

The lieutenant kicked the pistol away and picked up the cred. Looked at it. “I don’t know what one of these things is supposed to look like.”

Those words told Jim that this boy knew he needed help. Jim was good at projecting authority. “The credential is fine,” he said.

The kid looked down at him. “Where are you from? Why are you here?”

Jim took a calculated risk and got up. Nobody threatened him. “I could tell you, but then I’d have to shoot you.”

“You don’t have a weapon.”

“Okay, let’s go,” Jim replied, “and leave that radio turned off.”

He walked over and got into the car, passenger side. “You need to post a guard on me. That’s what your colonel’s gonna expect—what’s your name?”

“Rawson, Sir.”

“Okay, Lieutenant Rawson, you drive and post your guard in the backseat.”

With one of the airman sitting behind them, they drove onto the base—which, on first viewing, appeared to be abandoned. Jim knew that this was because it was in its highest alert state, which meant that personnel did not

move unless ordered and all aircraft were under cover. The sky would normally have been full of trainers and the streets full of vehicles and airmen. But the only things flying there now were buzzards, wheeling with dark grace.

As they entered the base proper, they passed a golf links. “Decent course, Lieutenant?”

“It’s okay.”

“Where am I going, son?” As long as it wasn’t the guardhouse, these two boys were going to be able to keep their weapons and preserve the fiction that they were in control of this vehicle, which they were not. If he had to, Jim could disarm both of them in five seconds. In another five, their necks would be broken . . . if he had to.

“You’re going to HQ. We called it in on the guardhouse phone.”

That was acceptable. “Can you tell me if there’s a thirty-seven on base?”

“Nothing’s flying, sir.”

Jim did not reply. When they pulled up to the curb in front of base HQ, an AP in fatigues opened the door. “Come with me, please, Sir.”

As Jim walked with him, the rest of the escort fell in behind. They went down a long, polished hallway and entered Colonel Adams’s office suite.

The colonel’s compact, powerful build told Jim that he’d flown fighters. He stood up without smiling and took Jim’s credential. Examined it. “How can I help you, Mr. Deutsch?”

“I need a ride to Andrews. Now.”

“That is hard.”

“Is there a thirty-seven available? Anything that can get me there?”

“Oh yeah. It’s just clearances.”

Jim took a chance here. He said, “The White House will take care of that. I need to make a call. I need the most secure line you possess. And I’m also going to need a uniform and the name I’m flying under.”

“Uh, wait—”

“You have AFOSI staff here, I’m sure. I’ll fly under the credentials of the senior officer.”

“That would be Major Carstairs.”

“Very well, Colonel. Major Carstairs is going to Washington to an OSI emergency meeting involving border-related issues too sensitive to transmit. He is leaving as soon as clearances are in place.” Now came the big one. “Let me make that call.”

The colonel took him down the hall to the AFOSI station, where he was able to use an encrypted line. He called the number Logan had given him. It rang. Again. A third time. “Logan.”

“Secure on your end?”

“Go ahead.”

“Deutsch. I need clearance to fly Laughlin AFB, Texas, to Andrews immediate.”

“Done.”

“I’ll come to you direct from Andrews.”

“Is there anything you can say now that will help us?”

Jim glanced at the colonel, nodded toward the door. The colonel stepped out, closed it.

“I would take the ONI and FBI out of the loop immediately.”

“I can’t do that!”

“This is isolated. Small, but we have to assume that it’s perfectly positioned. Normally, I’d say that it wasn’t at the director level and that the overall organizations were secure. But under the circumstances—”

“He won’t shut them down, not on information like this.”

In other words, not on the recommendation of a field operative whom they’d never heard of before. “I can understand that. If he does nothing else, he needs to shut down their communications capabilities.”

“Thank you.”

Jim hung up. If it happened, it might buy some time. Then he thought, *Maybe it wouldn’t do that. Maybe it would do the opposite and make them move faster.* He said to the colonel, “You got any Tums?”

“No, Sir.”

“Send ’em to the plane. If they don’t get there before we take off, I’ll let my goddamn guts eat themselves. And minimize the number of people who see me, and see this plane take off.”

“Sir, I—”

“Best effort.”

“Yes, Sir.”

While the plane was being made ready, Jim was taken to the quarters of a lieutenant who was allegedly his size. The kid was not all that big, though, and Jim had to cram into the uniform.

A silent AP drove him to the jet. The colonel was as good as his word. Aside from the plane’s ground crew, there was not a soul to be seen.

“Sir,” the AP asked as Jim got out of the car, “what do we do with your car?”

“It’s not my car.”

“Is it rented?”

“Stolen. There’ll be a police report on it in Eagle Pass, be my guess. Tell them your lieutenant went joyriding.”

“I’ll be sure to do that, Sir.”

Jim climbed the steps and pulled the door closed, then secured it. He called up to the flight deck that he was ready to go.

Exhaustion overcame him, and he closed his eyes. He didn’t want to; he wanted to watch the route. What happened was not sleep, but it wasn’t consciousness, either. The plane became a boat; the morning, night; the air, an ocean. Wind screamed in the rigging; phosphorescent spray flew across the tops of the waves.

The storm was so hellish that he opened his eyes. He looked out across the cold military luxury of the cabin. Outside, white, clean clouds, blue sky, green, sweet land far below. His beautiful homeland, concealing now behind the smiling face that it presented to the sky the darkness of hell.

THE NECK MAN

Nabila's familiar office felt unreal to her, as if her desk were a landscape from somebody else's life or the distant past. The leaves still clung to the trees outside her window and the morning garden was dappled with sunlight, all very pretty and peaceful, and for that reason the scene seemed more like a painting on a wall in hell than something real.

She looked at her personal cell phone. This was the number Jim used. If he could call her, it would come in on this line. And how strange that was also, the flush of longing she had felt when she'd heard that careful voice, low and precise and so maddeningly arid, telling of this terrible event, and drawing her into his needs. Later, they would investigate that call. They'd want to know what he had been doing ordering the plane and why she had violated so many rules to help him. There were lying phone calls to explain, forged orders.

She realized that she had not started loving Jim again. She had never stopped. Her heart was tortured with love for him and fear for him—above all, that. To bear her fear, she had suppressed her love. She had not been able to live with the endless worry, the long, dark nights, the cold bed, nor with that sense of being shut out of so much of his life and his thoughts. She recognized that he could share nothing with her of his life. She could share little of her own. But her heart—it recognized only the loneliness.

To stop caring about him, she had divorced him.

She looked at the cell phone, all but willing it to ring again.

Wives of lost intelligence officers waited in sweated anguish, often for years, often forever.

"Jimmy, where are you?" she whispered to the sun of midmorning.

Somehow, she would do her work, continuing to search the ugly backside of the web, the deadly electronic landscape of religious sociopaths and their ugly blogs, spitting hate and, sometimes, clues.

The television spoke of Muslims being killed in London, in Berlin, in Amsterdam, in Paris, even in Mexico City, being shot by truckloads of

marauders ranging the streets, the sodden, ruined neighborhoods where the Libyans and Syrians and Iraqis and Palestinians and Algerians fried their little food and muttered over their sweet tea, the Egyptians with their careful, disrespected ways.

They were killing Muslims in their private ghettos, she thought, the lands of the sad.

The heretics—for that's what the fundamentalists were—would not win this. Of course not. Nature and destiny did not work that way. The Arab world had made itself into a dead end. They were like a nation of men somehow washed through time from the distant past, muttering by their fires while the West soared overhead in gleaming planes.

They would not win, but Washington also would not win. Today, Washington would die. She knew this. She had read it certainly in the Mahdi's message. The Mahdi, king of the end-times. What arrogant, stupid nonsense. There was no Mahdi, no more than there was a Wizard of Oz. And that idea of this being the end-times—she refused to consider it. Every woman had a right to experience being the wife of a good man and mother of children.

Washington would not win, because it had already lost. The mere fact that this could happen had ruined it. Now, the breathtaking vulnerability of the West was known.

Suddenly she wanted Rashid to hold her. She wanted to be the dutiful sister she had not been. She wanted not to loathe his effort to restore Šarī'ah in their lives.

She laughed a little. How self-serving was that thought? *Now that Šarī'ah might become the law of the world, you're already seeking to surrender to its bondage. Fear corrodes.*

She closed out her work, isolated herself from the network, then turned the computer off. She went to the door and confronted the large regulation security lock that was required to protect any computer as classified as hers. This room was well sealed, even its windows and the door. When she opened it, she could hear the church bells that had started in the midnight still ringing—she'd never known that there were so many bells in Washington, D.C.—and also sirens, wailing police cars, and the busy, frantic fire horns. There were other sounds, perhaps shots; she couldn't be sure.

Then she heard clattering. She realized that Rashid was still here. She was astonished to find him working on his laptop.

To avoid seeing his screen, she stood in the doorway. “Rashid?”

“What?”

“Shouldn’t you be on dispersal?”

“I’m selling that rug.”

She almost cried out, she was so astonished. He’d received an emergency call, the country was at war with an enemy he was uniquely positioned to find, and here he was, selling the Sarouk he’d put on craigslist. “You are selling the rug? Now?”

“I have a bite.”

“There are people on craigslist today?”

“The offer came in last night.”

He was in denial. There could be no other explanation. You did not sell rugs in a city that probably had only hours to live. Or maybe you did. There had been that famous tobacco auction going on in Krakow when the Germans marched in, and in Baghdad the shops had stayed open as the Americans took the city. And wasn’t it Boethius who had commented on the barbarians traipsing through his garden while he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*?

She heard herself say, idiotically, “I wouldn’t have minded if it was the green.” The purple Sarouk had been in their mother’s bedroom.

“The dyes are bad.”

“The dyes are fine. The rug is precious.”

She could see his back stiffen. In Šarī’ah law, he was the one with authority to do this. “Would you beat me, then, if I disagree?”

He turned off his computer, got up, and came toward her, two steps. His face, the eyes so large, looked as it had when he was a child, so unsure. “You have a gun,” he said, laughing a little.

“I do have.” They’d issued it to her and made her learn its secrets. She could fire her AMT Backup with proficiency, difficult as it was to aim the little pistol. “It’s in my drawer.”

“Right now, it should be with you.”

She bowed her head. “You’re right, of course.” She did not add that he was in violation of Directive 51, still being here. Even craigslist didn’t explain it. It was two hours since he’d gotten his orders.

He slid his laptop into his backpack.

She wanted to say something about what was happening to them. “If we —” She stopped. She could not utter the truth. Her blood seemed to moan in her veins.

He looked her up and down.

“Cape May,” she said. “Do you remember?”

He nodded. “Blue sky, hot sand, running after the sandpipers.”

“Are you afraid, Rashid?”

“I am afraid.”

“Me, too. More than I thought I would be. Why didn’t they disperse me? If I were you, I’d have gone the second I got my order!”

“It’s all God’s will. If we live or die. It’s just—surrender. Surrender.”

“We are responsible for our lives.”

“That isn’t the story we’ve been told, Nabby. It isn’t faith, to put our own will in front of Allah’s.”

“Faith is deeper than doctrine. There is only one faith, beneath all the stories.”

He gave her a sidelong look. “If I tell you why am I selling rugs, will you tell me why you are spouting philosophy?”

“I’m trying to reach the brother I once had. I believe you’re still there, Rashid. I believe in you.”

He threw his arms around her. “Come with me, Nabila! Forget your orders and come!”

She shook her head, she fought her tears, but they came anyway, great, wracking sobs that brought with them a thousand memories, so many happy days. She and Rashid had been happy, before Mom and Dad died, and actually for a long time after. So happy!

She held him back away from her. “You go now.”

“Nabby—”

“Now, Rashid. God go with you!”

He held her to him, kissed her hair. “God go with you, Sister.”

Then Rashid drew back, stepped to one side, and went off toward the garage. She heard the kitchen door slam. Then came the silence of the house.

She went along the worn runner that Daddy had put down in this hall when she’d been ten. It was a lovely Kerman, only now, twenty years on, looking as if it had just discovered it was being trod upon. She jabbed her combination in the lock and went back into her own office, still with the angels on the walls from when it was their childhood playroom, the angels that Rashid was planning to have removed in favor of a geometric pattern.

The bells outside made the familiar space seem desperately silent, and she turned the radio on. “God will not allow these evil monsters to destroy

America! I tell you, crowd the churches, jam them, let this monster know what we're made of! Don't tread on me, you Islamofascist bastards! *Don't tread on me!*"

As she listened, she came to realize that this shrieking voice was old Rush Limbaugh, the right-wing talk-show host. For a moment, she was transfixed by the fear in his desperate howl. Then she twisted the dial to the local National Public Radio station and, in the excessive calm of the voice there, heard a different version of the same terror: "Authorities worldwide are canvassing for more bombs, and federal officials now admit what has been an open secret for some time, that in January of 2006 nuclear materials were located in Las Vegas and destroyed. Why the public was not informed at that time will be the subject of a question to be posed to Homeland Security Chief Random Wilkes."

Random Wilkes, another empty suit, as far as she could tell. The expansion of the director level in the intelligence community had done nothing but increase the amount of bureaucracy. Information had to get through so many levels nowadays, it was a miracle that the president ever found anything out. Had the old system still been in place, she had no doubt that he would have seen the threat in the first website. Probably it would have made no difference. But what if it had?

She tuned to the all-news station, where she learned that violence against Muslims was worsening throughout the United States, that Muslims were rioting in Paris, and that the Russian air force was bombing Chechnya.

So far, nothing about U.S. retaliation. Over the course of her career, she'd heard whispers that there was a scorched-earth scenario available to the United States that involved the destruction of half the population of the Muslim world. It was a hateful, horrible notion, and when Rashid had first thrown it in her face she had agreed with him that it was monstrous . . . and reminded him that it was, also, a rumor.

She hoped that, if it was real, using it would indeed save the West. She had serious doubts, though. Where would the leaders of a program like this be? Not in Karachi or Riyadh, certainly. Far more likely their headquarters would be in some out-of-the-way location too sparsely populated for a program like that to cover, or, more likely, in some middle-level Western city like Barcelona or Columbus that would not be on the nuclear list.

Feeling a congealing, twisted hatred for her own kind—for herself—she forced herself to concentrate on her work. She should never have left this

desk, let alone gone off-line. But regs required her to shut down when she left the office.

The ceiling seemed to be getting lower. When the bomb went off, the ceiling would slam into her, she thought, crush her before she could perceive a thing. One instant, she would be this richly alive human being. The next, nothing.

She gave her thumbprint to her laptop, then input her latest password sequence. Her personal seal appeared, confirming that she was back on the secure network. How secure, though, given what Jimmy had said?

The CIA's networks were supposedly secure, but not if there were spies inside the system. Because of her particularly sensitive work, she'd be a very specific target. They would be watching her right now. So here she was, forced to trust something that she did not trust. She opened the small program that told her if anybody was on this node with her. The space remained white, so she continued on, opening her browser and lining up her 'bots.

They were finding hundreds of new sites. Of course, every lunatic on the Internet had something to say, every terrorist group something to claim. Stupid people. Worthless.

She knew she shouldn't do it, but she found herself navigating to craigslist. What was Rashid really doing, anyway, worrying about such a thing as a time like this, to the point of violating orders?

She went to the D.C. section, then to collectibles. She searched on "rug," and there it was, the only one. She opened the page. Stared, confused. How could you sell anything with this sparse offering? There was no picture. There were only four words of description: "Antique Sarouk carpet, purple." Not even the size. And yet he said he had a bite? Impossible, he was a complete idiot.

She knew that she shouldn't use her skills for this, but nevertheless she hacked into their civilian Internet service provider, Washington Cable, and was soon looking at the server space allocated to Rashid's account. She opened his e-mail.

Nothing there except spam, some from as long as six days ago. So if he had read his e-mail as he said he had done last night, why was his spam still on the server? It would have been downloaded with the rest of the e-mail.

She looked in the record of items he had recently sent. There was an e-mail there, its subject heading "Sarouk Carpet." She opened it. There was only one word in the body of the text: "Purple."

Odd and odder. She saw the address of the recipient, a Gmail account. If she wanted to go any further, she would need to contact Google Security. It wasn't difficult. Her program automatically secured the legal permissions necessary.

She wouldn't be alone, though. Every keystroke would be recorded, and Legal might have questions later. If she couldn't answer them, she'd end up under investigation.

She couldn't honestly check the box that said it was a national security matter, not quite. It was just—well, it was odd, that was all.

But this was Rashid, her brother, perhaps too intense about his religion, but certainly a patriot! She was going paranoid. Because this was an insane thing to do, an abuse of power, probably a criminal act.

Instead of checking the box, she did something that was far less illegal, and replied to the buyer as Rashid. She could see that the buyer wasn't in his e-mail account—probably still in his car, in fact—so she spoofed him: “This is Rashid. I am sorry, I have decided not to sell my rug. The offer is withdrawn.” She hit send—and immediately the message returned. She checked the network, the servers. The backbone was intact. The route was clear. The problem was quite simple: the address no longer existed in Gmail.

In other words, the recipient had closed the account as soon as Rashid had sent his strange, single-word e-mail.

She sat, staring at her screen, thinking. Her heart was blasting; sweat was running along her underarms.

Now she returned to Google's security sign-in area. She certainly had justifiable suspicion this time. “Rashid,” she whispered, her voice miserable.

She checked the boxes, checked that this was a national security matter, and that she had probable cause.

From behind a veil of tears, she sent her request to Google. Sometimes there was a delay. They had their legal issues, too, their oversight protocols. But not today. Today, the reply came back in just seconds. The Gmail account had been opened this morning from a T-Mobile HotSpot in Alexandria. It had been open for just six minutes. Of course, the account's information still remained, but all it did was direct her to that particular Starbucks. She noted the address, though, because she knew now that this was important. Her heart was breaking, but her mind was clear.

“Purple” was a coded message, and therefore her brother was involved in something. What if it had to do with the nuclear attack? Oh, but God, no, that

was impossible. Rashid might be tangled up in some silly extremism, but not that. Or there might even be some innocent explanation—a secret society, perhaps. Wahabis in the United States were secretive, and for a member of this community to be flirting with them—he would be very careful.

Still, he had violated the most important order he had probably ever received in order to transmit a code word on a morning when he should have been racing to his dispersal point.

She threw her head back; she clenched her jaw; the tears rushed from her eyes; her nails dug into her palms. Then she drew breath, and a choked cry came out of her, instantly silenced.

Again, she heaved, fighting herself, clapping her hands over her own mouth. She forced herself to stop shaking, to swallow the next scream.

Their father would weep with rage to know that the effort he'd made to get his kids around the prohibition against Muslims in intelligence work had led to this: "Senator, you know Rashid and Nabila from their babyhoods! You know what kind of kids they are!"

She told herself that it wasn't just them, not just the Muslims. After all, had divisions between families like this not happened here before, in the Civil War? But this was her brother's betrayal of her and of their country, not the betrayal of some other brother from long ago.

Jim had warned of a penetration and a serious security problem. She had known at once that her work would be of intense interest to anybody wanting to follow the CIA's efforts to contain this problem. She was an important link in that chain.

So they were almost certainly watching her online activities. Of course they were. But this also meant that they had seen what she had just discovered about her brother.

They would have to act, and at once.

She picked up her cell phone—and then turned it off. She took the battery out and laid it on her desk. She closed her laptop, unplugged it, then removed the battery. She dropped the computer and the battery into her backpack.

How long might she have? Not long. They might be on station somewhere in the neighborhood. Probably were.

Rashid had left her here not to die but to be killed.

She left her office. She knew she had no time to waste, but the weight of the lost past, as she went through the house, slowed her movements. Leaving here was pushing against the strength of a river that was made up of the

pictures on the walls, the carpet that had pleased Daddy so much, the couch Mother had loved. Nabila could hear the happy voices still, her mother calling her from the kitchen, her dad—well, she had felt herself a royal child once, simply to be his daughter.

Feeling now like a refugee from some sort of hurricane, she bowed her head and left the house. Rather than taking her car, she walked down to the coffee shop on the corner. She had no intention of using the WiFi node there—or of using the computer again, not until it had been completely examined by digital security, in the unlikely event that she managed to reach Langley.

She walked past the silent houses and the houses where people were leaving, filling their cars, calling to their children, throwing their luggage in, their clothes in piles. An SUV raced away, followed by a dog running hard. The vehicle rounded a corner, the dog still behind it, his big ears flapping as he ran with all his might.

She found the old pay phone in the cul-de-sac beside the coffee bar and dug into her purse, praying that she had change.

She put in two quarters. Dialed. She scrambled for more money. Paid more. And heard ringing. Again. Again. “Please, Jim, oh, *please!*”

“Please leave a message.” His voice, at least.

“Jim, it’s Nabby. I think Rashid is in it! Oh, God, Jim, help me! There is a word, I think a signal. ‘Purple.’ That is, the word ‘purple.’ Jim, where are you? Am I talking to a dead man?”

Unwilling to hold the line open longer, Nabila hung up and walked quickly away. She wasn’t sure where to go. The Metro? That might help. Take a few stops, then phone Marge, see if she could be picked up.

But how could she know that whoever showed up could be trusted? She could not know.

She turned a corner, and saw coming this way a car that was too careful to be anything but a spotter. She stepped back into an alley. The car went past.

Her heart hammered. The car was looking for her and therefore the car was proof. Somebody had indeed been watching her every online move, and had seen her make her discovery about the carpet sale.

She watched the car stop at the far end of the alley. There was no time now; whoever was surrounding her would have her in their gun sights in minutes.

They were probably a detail from some agency or other that had been ordered to bring her in or kill her or whatever. They themselves wouldn’t

even know why—or, ultimately, where—the order had originated.

She went down the alley and into the tangle of bushes behind a row of houses, and used the crackling shrubs for what cover they offered.

Then she saw a man watching her from the tall back window of one of the houses. He wore a T-shirt and had a rifle ported across his chest. She had never felt so acutely aware of her black hair and enormous brown eyes. All she lacked to make her identity certain was a burka. He stared with the steadiness of a practiced hunter. She smiled at him and went on along the alley. Ahead was 9th Street, and just down the block Eastern Market and its Metro stop. But was the Metro still running?

Just as she exited the alley, another suspicious vehicle, this one a white Jeep Cherokee with tinted windows, came around the corner and passed her going north on 9th Street. She tried to duck back, but it stopped. It sat, motionless, engine running. Coming through the alley from the other direction were two men, moving fast. They had pistols in their hands.

She looked again toward the man in the house. Was he a civilian, or another pursuer? No way to know, and no way to know if he would help her or hand her over.

She opened the gate to his back garden and went in. Motionless, he watched her come. Behind her, the men moved more quickly. She reached the house. He opened the door.

“I need your help.”

He drew her in.

YOU HAVE NEVER MATTERED

Alexei offered Vladimir a Sobrainie. Vladimir looked hungrily at the black tube. “Not smoking,” he said. “It is your last lung,” Dr. Abramov had told him. “Respect it.”

The two men watched the valley, waiting for the last pink echoes of sunlight to disappear. Birds, screaming faintly, sailed in the high light.

“You do it,” Alexei said.

All the way from Tashkent, they had carried on a desultory argument, drinking and watching the bleak landscape pass by. “It’s for you to do.”

“It’s loathsome.”

Vladimir made scrambling motions with his fingers. “They’re going to run all about screeching, ‘Don’t, mister, don’t.’ ” He chuckled. “You will do it because you are an exceptional man.”

When Alexei started with his knife, he couldn’t stop. He terrified even himself, the way he killed.

Far below, a truck wound its way along the road. From the installation there was not the slightest sign of activity. “Such peace,” Alexei said.

“You’re a superman, Alexei.”

“Let’s go, then.”

They were in Afghan dress. Vladimir wore a *pakol*, the favored hat of the mujahideen who had destroyed the Soviet armies. Alexei was in a dark *lungee*, clumsily arranged, which the meddlesome desert wind threatened at all times to unwind. He felt the wind, cooling quickly now, as it insinuated itself under the folds of his *chapan*. He would have preferred the sand-mottled uniform of Russian desert forces, but the American, British, and French satellites could all see two people moving in terrain this sparse, and would immediately notice them. Soon, the drones would arrive, and then God knew what might happen.

Alexei stopped. “Now, what is that spit of land? Is that it?”

Vladimir unfolded the oilcloth map, which whipped in the rising wind. “God, I hate deserts,” he muttered. The damned Americans had turned off

their Global Positioning System, so the Garmin that Mother Russia had bought for them was now nothing more than baggage. But it had an MP3 player in it, so they could listen to music, anyway. “This is it,” he said. “Down there, we find the air shaft.”

“Why not just let the Americans complete their fez-boil? We could go back to Tashkent now and drink.”

“I have plenty yet.” He produced a flask.

“How many of those did you bring?”

“You’ve stolen everything else of value in my pack. You should know.”

“I only steal what others don’t need.” Alexei took a swallow from the flask. “Jubilee, no less.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. That’s Hennessy X.O.”

“I only drink patriotically.”

“Then I will be drunk while you kill the children.” He pointed. “That’s the right ground formation; the entry is there.” As he moved ahead, he heard Alexei scrambling along behind him.

“Do we know why we’re doing this?” the young man asked.

“Do we care? Without Las Vegas, my hopes for a better future are lost.”

“Your sense of humor is too French, dear Vladimir. There was a time when a statement like that would have sent you to the gulag.”

“True enough, under Stalin you would be Beria and I would be dead. Now, it’s the time of the thinking men, so I lead and you do the bloodletting. It suits you, anyway. Your butcher’s hands.”

“I have the hands of a pianist.”

“Same difference. Did you ever see Denis Naumov perform? His hands look like roasts, but his Debussy—amazing.”

“Naumov. Debussy. When I hear the word ‘intellectual,’ I go for my gun.”

They came to the entry port. It was a kilometer from where the fezzes were living, and nobody but a Russian with a proper schematic could possibly get through to the personnel deck. Vladimir had never been inside the installation. They’d been shown photographs, though, so they would be able to comb through it until they reached the flesh. Then their orders were to kill everybody, no exceptions, no mercy, no bribes. If they did not do this correctly, they would, themselves, probably be killed.

Often Vladimir wondered if he actually cared for his own life. He had when he was young, certainly. Had loved it, loved just to breathe. They don’t say it in the movies, but when you kill for a living, gradually you also die.

Then you are like he was now—dead and alive at the same time.

He had a condo in the South of France, in the development of La Californie. He was happy there, happy to watch the French with their snails for luncheon and their wonderful legs. He would get drunk there, good and drunk, and recite Lermontov, who had been his father's favorite and was therefore also his favorite. "I love you, my friendly dagger, dear friend forged of Damascus steel."

"You're mad as a Chechen, Vladimir."

"Mad and sad, which is to say, Russian. Come now, roast-paws, let's do this work that is ours to do."

"You call it work?"

"What else is it?"

They entered the air shaft, bending low and moving fast, their way lit by their powerful German-made flashlights. The deeper they went, the louder the intake fans became. Soon they were churning and wind was whipping past the men's heads. "Don't let that idiotic turban get into that thing," Vladimir said. "I don't need your head torn off."

"I was issued this turban."

"I was issued a turban also. Do you see me wearing one?"

"I see you wearing the uniform of the bastards who wrecked our army."

"Let me ask you this, Alexei. What is one mujahid with a cigarette lighter responsible for?"

"I have no idea."

"Six Soviet tanks."

"Traitor."

"Just getting your blood up. Here's the hatch." He opened his general-purpose tool and loosened the old bolts, probably last tightened thirty and more years ago, by some sweating Soviet technician who was now an old man with a nicotine-stained moustache—or, more likely, dead.

They had to heave the heavy hatch back together. "The USSR built to last."

"But not my flat."

"Worthless roast-hands, what are you doing in our glorious FSB? Ah, the quarry is heard. Listen."

Wailing Arab music echoed from beyond the end of the tunnel.

"Do they have happiness? Humor? All of that wailing . . ."

"A love song. Her man is a shit."

“All fezzes are shits, in my experience.”

“You fuck their sisters in Tashkent.”

“I have to. They demand it. Anyway, they’re not Arabs. Just with the mullah shit.”

They went out into the broad personnel tunnel, carefully closing the inner access hatch behind them. Silent now, each intent on his work, the two men moved off to their respective areas of responsibility.

Vladimir had to kill his old friend Aziz, who used to masturbate in his bedroom, leaping like a great frog while he did it, no idea he was on video in ten different departments of the FSB, let alone the iPods of many of the department heads’ teenagers.

Vladimir went into the old communications shack, with its walls lined with ancient, useless radio equipment. To evade American detection, Aziz’s operation used manually delivered messages now. The mules were their shortwave radios, and piggybacked number stations. The fezzes actually believed that the Russian operators knew nothing of the fact that they were using the number stations. Absurd, of course.

“Hello, Vladimir.”

The prick against the back of his neck told him everything he needed to know. “I hope it’s sharp,” he said to Aziz.

“It’s dull as stone, Vladi. Your sort of a knife.”

“I was afraid of that.”

Then there came a sharp, echoing cry. The surprise—no, astonishment—in Alexei’s voice was unmistakable.

There was movement behind Vladimir, and then he was shoved into the small communications room by two figures in full purdah. Women? No way to tell. One of them had what looked like an antique Arab dagger, curved to tear out guts. The other had Alexei’s pistol. They were followed by a boy with a meat cleaver. Aziz stood in the concrete hallway behind them.

“We’ve been waiting for you,” a familiar voice said.

“A double agent, then, Eshan?”

“You always underestimate us, you Russians. You cannot accept our abilities.”

Aziz came in. He nodded toward Alexei. “That man was here to cut your head off, boy. Kneel down, Alexei; young Wasim here is going to cut your head off instead.”

Alexei cried out, then stifled it.

“What? You were going to cut his head off? But he can’t do the same? Why, because he’s only a stupid fez?” Aziz took a step toward Alexei. “You helped us. Useful Russians. But it’s finished, the bombs are there, so you don’t matter anymore.”

Alexei grinned—a thin, pitiful attempt. “I can pay.” He shook like a palsy victim, and Vladimir was embarrassed for him, and for Russia.

“Alexei, face it. We’ve been betrayed and we’re dead,” Vladimir said. “You might as well do as he says.” Himself, he felt only a dull, empty hopelessness. He’d been at this most of his career, assembling and transmitting the thousands of tiny packages that had been sent to the hidden stations around the world. It had taken eleven years of work to get the bombs in place, moving them bit by bit, then getting the Islamist fools to assemble them correctly, these men who did not know a motor from an engine.

“Wait,” Alexei yammered. “Eshan, Wasim, and you women—listen to this! Yes, listen! There’s a reward—many rewards—for him! Yes, for Aziz! The Americans, ten million, the Syrians, two million—dollars, yes, listen! The Pakis, two million—oh, a long list! You can betray him and be rich. Rich!”

One of the women knocked Alexei in the shoulder with an empty butane tank she had been carrying as a weapon. Squalling, he lurched away from the figure, whereupon Eshan tripped him, and he went down groveling like a whipped cur.

Vladimir simply waited to die. He didn’t care anymore. This operation had gone out of control. It would not be recovered. The group grabbed Alexei’s arms. They pushed him to his knees.

Aziz said to the boy, “Chop at it, at the back of it. Let him scream; they’re holding him.”

While Alexei screamed and twisted his head, the little fellow took a gingerly chop at his neck. The touch of the blade caused Alexei to bob his head almost comically. Vladimir was reminded of a chicken. How banal, for this to be among his last thoughts, Alexei the pecking hen. Shouldn’t he contemplate Pushkin or “O God, our help and aid in distress . . .”? But it was a long prayer; he’d best come up with a shorter one. The Dinner Prayer, perhaps. Could he recall the damned thing?

Again the boy hacked and Alexei squalled. How afraid he was, old roast-hands, who would have strangled this pretty boy slowly, just to watch his eyes fade.

Aziz shouted, "This is a Crusader devil; do it!"

The boy, weeping, muttered something in Persian. Aziz snapped at him, and the boy hacked at Alexei harder, the cleaver now making a sound like a butcher's off-center chop. Blood spurted and Alexei stomped and babbled some sort of slurred plea. He was losing blood fast. Consciousness was going.

But that poor child, dear heaven, what a thing to make an innocent kid do! "The boy will not forget this," Vladimir shouted. "Never! Aziz, it's wrong to do this to him!"

"To the Muslims, execution is not extraordinary."

"There soon will be no Muslims."

"The Muslims have won the world."

"Have you any knowledge of Dream Angel?"

"They will not execute Dream Angel, Vladimir. They will choose to live as slaves."

The boy stood trembling.

"Do it, boy! Do it!"

The kid's big eyes bulged, his face shone with sweat, and he chopped and chopped. Like great, swaying birds, the women in their black burkas hovered nearby, their arms sweeping in their distress like impotent wings.

Alexei's screams became sucking hisses, and then the boy lifted his head by the hair. "It's heavy," the boy cried.

"Then put it down," Aziz replied mildly.

"This is not a lesson I was sent to learn!"

" 'As for those who disbelieve, we enter them into the fire and often, so that their skins are terrible with fire. Then we will change them for other skins, that they may taste the pain of it again.' " He took the boy by his collar and raised him eye to eye. "Which sura, boy?"

The boy stared right back at him. "Four. Fifty-six."

He threw the boy to the floor. "Now, Vladimir, you have some work to do for me. There must be a signal, to be sent when you succeed. I want you to send that signal."

"Fine. I don't care." He gave no sign to Aziz that he was mistaken. No signal was to be sent. The least flicker of radio transmission out of this place and the Americans would be here within the hour. So, let them come.

"What is it, then? Not a radio signal, surely."

"Of course it is."

There was a flash in Vladimir's face, and a terrific blast of pain. For a moment, he was confused, his mind questing for some understanding. Then he realized that he'd been slapped with a gun butt. He had not the slightest intention of being tortured. "Here's the truth: If I don't return to the forward base at the appointed time, then a radio signal is sent. It will appear to be from you. It is intended to draw the Americans. There are rangers waiting on top of this structure. They have a transmitter."

Aziz had known Vladimir for eleven years. He had first met with Vladimir when he was a spy in Chechnya, had lived with him in Moscow, had slept with him on drunken nights when they were hunting bear in Siberia and the two of them were in a tent in the depths of the taiga, and—it had simply happened. It was nothing, a matter between men. Nothing sinful.

Well, never mind. Vladimir must now die.

It was also necessary to abandon this place, given that the Americans might indeed be somehow alerted. Very well, they would return to Peshawar. It was past time, for there was political work necessary. Hezbollah had condemned him. Syria, Iran, even the Taliban were uniform in rejecting this messiah of whom they knew nothing. Hamas, of course, those running dogs of the Jewish state.

"Do you know, Vladimir, that we have a weapon in Moscow?"

"You do not."

"Do you want to find out?"

"What code are you using?"

"Purple."

"You're lying!"

"Why should I be lying when the president, in his very office not three hours ago, said to launch Dream Angel. But wait, he said."

"Dream Angel is going to its fail-safe points?"

"So I have been told by a simple man with a very bad truck, who drove along your terrible Soviet road with a certain message. Here, I have a photo." He showed Vladimir a picture of the Kama 3 of old Hassan, with the names of certain djinn written on the door. It was the order of the names that revealed the information.

"I can't read that. Is it Pashto?"

"Dari, Pashto? What does it matter, some stupid writing of us fezzes?"

"You've conquered the world, haven't you?"

"Allah has." Then he took the knife from Wasim, and raised it to

Vladimir's throat.

Vladimir looked into Aziz's eyes. "Old times," Vladimir said.

Around them, the women, Eshan, Wasim, all became still. "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet," said Aziz. "You know, the Americans are on their way to this place already, aren't they?" He smiled a little. "They have followed him. He has let them."

"Aziz, no, I despise the Americans! Despise them!"

"You were in the pay of the CIA."

"As were you!"

Aziz laughed at him. "But I ate the money."

"Please, I can be of use. Yes, I'm a whore. But of course! Yours, now, Aziz."

"Putin's, the CIA's, mine. Who knows who would be next? Nasrallah, perhaps? With Hezbollah singing the song of the Crusaders, why not?"

"The world hates you. The Muslims are all against you. Al-Zawahiri has condemned you!"

"Certainly. Al-Zawahiri is like Nasrallah. His whereabouts are known to the Crusaders. So he is nothing but their slave."

"I can be of use!"

Aziz gave the knife to Eshan and turned away. "The Americans will be here soon," Aziz told him. "This man works for them. We must go at once." He hurried off down the low concrete corridor.

Behind him, there was the sound of the throat being expertly slit, a noise like water spattering. Aziz hesitated for a moment but did not turn back. He heard the thud of Vladimir's collapse, and the drumming of his feet. When the bubbling of the breath faded, Aziz walked on. He had work to do, and very quickly.

His first wife, Zaaria, threw the gas cylinder she had carried off to one side. "Why are the Muslims against you?"

"No Muslims are against me. Only apostates."

"And all these millions on your head, Aziz? What is this?"

"A Russian lie."

She looked at him, her eyes dark in her concealing *hijab*.

"We leave at first light! Prepare everybody!"

"We go to Peshawar?"

"We go where God sends us."

She hurried off toward the women's chamber.

ONLY A DREAM

In Alexandria, Virginia, “Ronald Alfred Mullins” and his younger brother worked in their garage. Ronald, whose real name was Bilal Aboud, had the plan in his hands. “The circular valve is to be turned twice,” he said to Hani.

“And then does it explode?”

“It does not explode. Turn the valve, Hani.” During the night, Bilal had heard Hani weeping. He had seen Hani go to the kitchen and eat peanut butter from the jar, and had heard his smacking. He must not weigh more than 128 pounds or the plane could not fly, and for that he had needed to starve himself for nearly a month. His Ramadan fast had never ended.

Of the two of them, only Bilal knew what the word “purple” that had appeared in the craigslist advert meant. When he had been counseled by the psychiatrist about how to ensure that Hani would indeed carry out his mission, it had been explained to Bilal that anticipation was the worst thing. So he had not told Hani when the flight would take place. However, they had to be in readiness, and so had to install the bomb into the airframe.

Hani had also been carefully trained. He knew not to ask, knew that he did not want to know: “The only thing that matters, Hani, is what you are doing right now.” So Hani had trained like that, concentrating only on the momentary activity. He would think of getting the plane off the ground, then of the four-minute flight to his ascension point, then of pulling back the stick. He would not think of his death, never that, never at all. He was not a simple creature; he had his own ideas of heaven and afterlife. In truth, he did not think he had an afterlife. Hoped he didn’t, because what he was going to do was so extremely evil. But he had his brothers’ and sisters’ lives to consider, and the honor of his family. Their father, he believed, had been shot dead by Blackwaters in Baghdad. He had been an electrical engineer driving to his work. He was not a fighter of any kind at all. He had been shot, Hani had been told, for sport. People said that he had pleaded, but the Blackwaters had shot him, then shared cigarettes among themselves. Perhaps he had been

killed by American mercenaries . . . or perhaps by somebody seeking to radicalize the two English-speaking brothers. In any case, Hani fought for honor, not for access to a heaven he did not believe was even there. For him, America was Blackwater.

“Now, this is the bomb?”

“This is the bomb.”

“There’s a lot of wiring. It looks delicate.”

“It only needs to work once.”

“Will the radiation kill us?”

“Not as long as the plutonium is properly contained.”

Hani laid a hand on it. “Cold,” he said.

“You can’t feel the power of it.”

The two of them lifted the black melon by its handles, moving it into the flimsy aircraft.

“It’s not easy! Careful!”

It was not supposed to exist, this bomb weighing only two hundred pounds. But it did, did it not, and there were many more of them, Bilal hoped. The new land mines was how Bilal thought of them.

It dropped down into the compartment they had welded together with such effort, struggling with modifications to the kit. But this was satisfying. It was stable in its position now.

“Now, the wings,” Hani said.

They had to fix the wings to the body of the aircraft, which must be done in the street. It could not be done here; there wasn’t enough space. “It is not time,” Bilal said.

Hani smiled. “Time is only a dream. As is this life, also nothing but a dream.”

Bilal laid a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Allah has no need of time. In heaven eternal, there is no time.”

“Do you believe it, Bilal?”

Bilal did not like this question. He himself couldn’t fly the plane; he was too heavy. In the training camp in Texas, he had been taught that when a pilot asked when he must fly that was a danger sign. “I believe that the world the Crusaders have made is evil,” Bilal said. “The nation that murdered Dad for sport is evil.”

Hani nodded. “We’ve never been able to train with the wings. Do you think we’ll get them to work?”

“If God wills.” The wings had been modified to fold back, and would need to be carefully opened and locked, once the plane was out in the street. That would be the most dangerous moment.

“Bilal, I’m—”

“We are all afraid. It’s natural.”

Hani smiled again. In it Bilal saw a new fragility, and he thought that Hani was failing in his resolve.

“I was going to say I’m hungry. I want some lunch.”

Bilal put his hand on his brother’s narrow shoulder. They went to the kitchen together.

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

Rashid's space was tiny and stuffy and deep, so crammed with equipment that it was almost impossible for him to move from his chair. Rashid hated the claustrophobic hole. He had not even wanted to come in during drills. But now he must live here, in a tiny two-man bunk with another controller. He was the only Muslim among them, of course. The token.

He did not dislike his coworkers. In fact, very much the opposite. Their dedication to the service was admirable. They were not Muslim because they did not understand, not because they had rejected the faith. They were not like his sister, foolish creature, with her apostasies. Why not bow before the word of God, proud woman?

Even though she had accepted the faith and prayed—actually prayed—she had her demonic justifications for not even so much as wearing the veil, except when she pleased. Immodest creature, self-willed sinner!

Her arrogance was why he had suggested that the first demand be the veil. She had ignored it. Had she not, perhaps he would have also suggested that the bomb be detonated in the wilderness, not over Las Vegas. He would have accepted the danger of making such a suggestion to the powers. So it was her, Nabila. She had killed Las Vegas, and before he was through with her he would make certain she understood that the bombing there was on her head. Once this was over and power properly consolidated, it would be his faithful pleasure to execute her with his own hands.

Before him was an array of screens, each one providing a different view of his surveillance sector. It was normally a high-interest area, but at present management was concentrating on the continental United States, not on Afghanistan and Pakistan.

His mission was to co-analyze production from the new Rugby Altair class Synthetic Aperture Radar satellites, and the Echo 12 systems in higher Molniya, invaluable for his current effort, because of their dwell capability. It was a piece of luck that the Echo 12s were at a high fuel level, having been refueled by Shuttle Mission STS-201 last month.

He had all manner of software assistance and his computers were essential to his work, but he had intentionally developed a reputation for liking to look at his imagery at once, rather than waiting for it to process. He was extremely careful and, he thought, extremely good. Never, at any time, did he do anything that might suggest that he had another agenda. Of course, they watched the Muslim with a special eye. Of course, they secretly despised him. It wasn't their fault; it was the evil in them. Evil comes to us all. We must actively go to the good, and Crusader lies made it hard for these poor people to do that. Greed, the dark master of the West, had locked their hearts, and a good Muslim addressed their tragic state with compassion. This was what Nabila didn't understand. When they were unpleasant to her in the shops or whatever, she cursed and spat and stomped out her rage. She should thank God for the blessing they gave her, which was a chance to give her suffering to Allah.

Rashid's teacher at the mosque, who had brought him out of the folly of moderation and into the light of the truth, had said to him, "Evil exploits human weakness. The men of the West are not to blame any more than locusts are to blame. But we must still kill the locusts, or the field will be ruined."

That was true, and look why—even now, there was blue water at the north pole in the summertime, the glaciers of Greenland were sliding into the sea, the oil of his homeland was being devoured by the Great Satan and his minions, and God's beautiful earth was dying beneath an avalanche of plastic bags, discarded buttons, bottles, toys, and who knew what else—a mess being made by humankind, in defiance of the will of God.

Rashid never did anything to compromise his mission, but he also served his real master, and as he watched his screens he saw that this service was going to once again be needed.

His protocols dictated which sectors he was to observe most carefully, and the Pamir Panhandle was not one of them. This was why, when the clear outline of a Fennek reconnaissance vehicle appeared during a lookdown, he had to fight his rising heartbeat. This was important, because everybody knew that inappropriate indications of stress could bring on an incident-targeted lie detector test—and not with a polygraph, not anymore. The much more effective No Lie fMRI was now in use, and like all of his colleagues, he'd had a baseline exam that made it essentially impossible for him to conceal a falsehood. He must never forget, not now: all they had to do was

ask the right question and he was finished.

He queried ISAF HQ, Afghanistan, for their deployments in or near 37°19'43"N, 70°44'35"E. What a Fennek might be doing in an area he secretly knew to be enormously sensitive he did not know, but it was very worrisome, and he had no choice but to take the risk of asking.

ISAF came back: "No deployment coordinates req." So it wasn't a Fennek but rather a vehicle disguised to appear to be a Fennek. This meant only one thing: Russians. Russians were within a few kilometers of their old installation. From its size and shape, he thought they must be in an old BRDM reconnaissance vehicle, fitted with plywood panels to make it appear from above to be modern NATO equipment.

Of course, they would have blueprints of the Pamir installation. They would know all the old trip wires, all the mantraps, and, above all, the secret ways in through the ventilation system, pathways that NATO would not have mined. They would be able to penetrate right to the heart of the place without detection. Would Russians understand what was being done there?

He could not even ask that question. The fact was that they were penetrating the place, so of course they knew something, possibly everything.

They must have come in through Tajikistan, a team of specialists. Putin must have realized his mistake in letting Inshalla have this base in the first place, and the Russians were there to clean house. They would kill Aziz and his entourage, and clean up the entire base to a forensic level of thoroughness. Inshalla had done Russia's secret work in throwing America into chaos, and now it was time for it to stop.

It must not stop.

Perhaps he could suggest an attack on the Russian target. There were SiMiCon Rotor Craft available in Afghanistan, armed with Hellfire missiles. But no, that would look like he was reaching above his level of authority, perhaps attempting to bypass his superiors, and that would cause suspicion.

He composed an instant message: "Poss. Russian BRDM-2U camoed as German-marking Fennek observed scout mode coordinates near 37°19'43"N, 70°44'35"E. Unknown mission. Lookback shows route out of Tajikistan. Recommend immediate site investigation Sov era installations region."

He could not warn anybody in Pamir. He knew this: if the martyrdom of Aziz as Mahdi was meant to be, it would be. God forgot nothing, knew everything. However, it was hard for Rashid as a technician in command of these powerful resources not to try to help Allah decide what his will was

going to be.

“Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar. . . .”

The words had come as if from the interior of his own soul. They shocked him so badly that he almost lost his balance in his seat. Instinct caused him to pull down the cover that concealed his controls. And then he saw a face peering at him over the cubicle partition. His neighbor, Carol Wilkie.

“Hello, Carol.”

“God is a woman.”

“He will be surprised to hear that.”

“Saint Teresa of Avila went bald. Would she still have to wear a veil?”

“Why wouldn’t she want to?”

“It’s time for Asr,” Carol said, “by my reckoning.”

“Ah, thank you, my *adan*. I was far away.”

“Your keys told me that. Anything up?”

“It’s nothing. . . .” She was not need-to-know for his area, and compartmentalization here was extremely strict, especially now. “Actually, even this peering over the divider is illegal.”

She gave him a questioning frown.

“To look in here. You’re not cleared to see what I am doing.”

She sighed. “They should’ve put the walls all the way to the ceiling. Damn congressional cheapskates.” She laughed a little, and it was very pleasant to see and hear. She wore a black veil, out of respect for her coworker’s sense of modesty. It was a fine thing, and he was very appreciative of her for this act of respect for him—and, for that matter, for herself.

He was tempted by Carol of the long, soft hands and the wide eyes that so deliciously pretended innocence. But not now; she was not part of his mission and she had to go away.

“Want to meet for tea?” she asked.

“No tea today. Just work.”

“Understood.” She snapped him a salute and disappeared.

He unrolled his carpet and used a moist towelette to make quick *wadu*, then went down to his prayers, imagining his soul flowing across the world to Mecca, and coming as a supplicant to the feet of God. How he longed to be with God! How he loved God!

During the prayer, though, Rashid’s computer beeped the alarm of an incoming urgent message. One of the satellites had detected movement on the ground. He had consulted his mullah about moments like this, and it had been

decided that Rashid could compress the prayer. Pilots did it, surgeons, soldiers in the heat of battle. You wrapped the whole prayer up into a single word, and sent it off to Allah with praise and thanks. Allah understood these things. Rashid had been instructed, “You must obey Allah and follow Allah’s laws to the letter, but you must also love Allah and enjoy Allah. Allah is the vengeful lion, but Allah is also the pomegranate in the summer garden, ripe for plucking.”

It smacked of Sufism, but Rashid had accepted it, for this man who instructed him had himself an excellent reputation among Saudis in America, and had been the choice of Rashid’s father. He had known little of Salafism. He had not understood the beauty of its purity, or the power of its message of reform. He had not understood how it felt to belong to the deep truth of the faith, which was only available through total acceptance of the precepts of the Kita at-Tawib, and a return to the ways of the first and best generation, the generation of Mohammed.

Another beep came, and Rashid sent his prayer off on its voyage, and returned to his console, where he saw that a passing Rugby had detected movement along the river, seven figures moving south and west. They had sheep. Rugby satellites had almost no dwell time—a little more than the Lacrosse series they had replaced—but it had been enough to project the probable route the figures were taking.

He knew that this was the Mahdi Aziz and his entourage, escaping into Pakistan. Nobody would drive sheep in that hostile region, a freezing desert without sufficient grass to sustain them, let alone fatten them for market. So this meant only one thing: the Mahdi and his followers had escaped from the Russians in the BRDM.

Rashid saw a chance to end this threat. His supervisors would not know that there were no shepherds in that region. He could safely peg the alarm: “Shepherds seeking lowland pasture due to seasonal weather changes.” It was October, so of course they would be going to lower pastures, and nobody would ever know that he had saved the Mahdi, the very man who was delivering the human species from its long age of darkness into the light of Islam.

Rashid looked at the perfect image, the little band struggling along in what appeared to be a nasty wind. A glance at weather conditions told him that it was minus 8 degrees Celsius there, wind at twenty-two klicks out of the north. Winter was coming to the Kush, even though the Crusader billions

were doing the work of Satan and destroying Allah's beautiful world. They had no respect for the Tawid, the unity of God with his creation: "And it is He who spread the earth, and set the firm mountains upon it, and the rivers; and all manner of fruit." So it was law that man respect the world, and not eat it with the jaws of a hungry caterpillar.

Then a hand came down on Rashid's shoulder. His cubicle was locked; only his supervisor could enter. "Hello, Mark," he said without looking.

"What is it?"

"Shepherds, I think. Have a look."

"Running from whoever was in that BRDM?"

"With their sheep? I doubt it. Unless the Russkis are out for mutton."

"Could be, could be. I see you called for a closer look from ISAF."

"Something seems off. Why are the Russians there?"

"Those old installations are listed as destroyed, not useable."

"So they say, Mark. But what's on the books and what's real—" He shrugged.

"Well, we'll soon find out. They've got a chopper going in. Live bait." That was the term around here for manned reconnaissance aircraft. The best possible information, but—well, there were many people in that area who might shoot at a NATO helicopter. Even children, just for a little excitement.

Rashid thought of the men in the chopper, churning through the cold dawn, being buffeted by the winds, watching for the wink of rifle fire, or the swift white arrow that marked a speeding rocket.

Mark shook his shoulder. "Good work, Rashid. If anything comes of it, I'll buy you supper."

"If anything comes of it, I'll eat my hat."

They laughed together. It was a close comradeship, here in this office. So very close.

SNIPER COUNTRY

As Jim's plane landed at Andrews, he watched two dark blue jeeps loaded with air police pace it, then maneuver onto the apron that stood in front of the VIP receiving area. Of course they would assume that anybody flying in under current circumstances would be important. It went against Jim's instincts, this. He preferred to be the same color as the walls he passed.

In the plane, he'd slept, but badly. Every time he began to go under, he'd see that terrible light blooming across the cowling of that bastard Ressman's plane.

When they banked on their way to their landing approach, Jim had seen Washington in the distance, white structures afloat in the colors of autumn. He had come here to track backward through ONI records, trying to determine if Franklin Isbard Matthews, who had supposedly duped Arthur Kenneally into pulling the detector off Bridge 1 in Eagle Pass, was a real person. If he was, Jim was going to force information out of him.

That was the way it worked in this business. You swung on vines of information through a jungle of lies. Eventually, either you reached a dead end or you didn't.

It was seven hours and forty-five minutes from now that frightened Jim. Given that they hadn't already detonated the bomb that was certainly hidden here, they were going to do it at the most dramatic moment, which he thought would be the same as at Las Vegas: midnight. This would show their power, their absolute control of the situation. They could blow up cities on schedule, no matter how hard anyone tried to stop them.

As the plane's engines wound down, he stepped to the rear and cracked the door. "Thanks, gentlemen," he called up to the cockpit. "You got the fuel, I'd turn this lady around pronto."

The pilot came into the cabin. "Yessir, we're ready to roll."

"Then go. Right now. Don't even stop for a drink of water."

The young man nodded and disappeared into the cockpit.

As Jim went quickly down the worn aluminum steps, the engines began

gaining power. He heard the faint thump of the door closing but did not look back toward the departing plane.

He hardly saw the APs, either. He couldn't bear looking at their young faces flickering with hope that this might be the man who *does* something. The weight of history oppressed Jim acutely. He crossed the tarmac, his worn sneakers whispering on the asphalt, a strange contrast with the uniform. As he moved toward the glass doors, the details of the moment crowded him, the faint rustling of his trousers, the slight movement of an awning, the smell of burning jet fuel lingering in the air, and the sweet, infinitely sad scent of—of all things—some sort of late-season flower. Where was it growing, he wondered, in this ocean of concrete?

A Sufi he had known and had sat with in a stifling tiny room in—God, was it Kabul, was it Herat?—had said to him, “The world is memory.” He had reacted in the way a young man does when facing the profound, with nervous, uncomprehending affection. He remembered that old, weathered man now, with his water pipe and his tea and the laugh lines around his eyes.

Jim pushed through the glass doors into the freezing, over-air-conditioned lobby. It was empty, utterly silent, a wide expanse of Air Force blue carpet, rows of plush leather seats, a large color photo of Secretary Robertson on the wall, beside him the smiling face of President Fitzgerald. Jim knew that Fitz was canny, but was he smart? There was a difference, and it could be huge. Jim needed Fitz to grasp things fast, above all to understand why an out-of-place operative was bucking the chain of command and agree to see him.

When he'd been in training, they had been given a lecture by old Gus McCall, a legendary guy, a very bright man, who had done hard things for his country. He had said something Jim had never been able to forget: “Presidents are scared. Not sometimes. All the time. And scared men can be dangerous. You are the messenger, remember, and the news you bring is always bad. If you do your job right or if you don't, in the end he will want your head.”

How a man dealt with this fear was the measure of his success in that monstrously difficult office. Jimmy Carter had been frozen by it, Richard Nixon driven mad. Eisenhower had overcome it, Lincoln been made great by it, Johnson victimized by it. Fear—relentless, open-ended, cruelly distorting of everybody and everything—drove all presidents. So the question was, what was it doing to Fitz right now?

Out the far side of the building, Jim found a courtesy car waiting, a sedan

that he knew at once would not survive a chase. But he wouldn't be in it long. He knew that every intelligence service in the world had been interested in who was on the plane that flew from Texas to Washington during the tightest lockdown in history. He knew that AFOSI, the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, had this car bugged and fitted with tracking devices.

He drove quickly off the base, heading along the Capital Beltway into the city. His plan was to ditch the car as soon as possible and take the Metro to the Mt. Vernon Square stop and from there walk to the ONI offices. There he hoped to talk his way onto a secure line to the White House and an invitation to meet with Fitzgerald.

As he drove up the entrance to the Beltway, however, he found that the outbound lanes were in gridlock. He could see people out of their cars, some fighting, others trying to push stalled and wrecked cars off the roadway. It was hell, he thought, with children peering out the windows.

Then he realized that he was looking at an SUV coming straight at him. He swerved—only to see another big grill as the cab of an eighteen-wheeler bore down on him, horns screaming. In the windshield, he could see a girl driving. The cab was full of kids.

He ripped the ungainly car's steering wheel and missed the truck cab by inches. The entire road was crowded with traffic leaving. The only way he could make progress was to drive next to the inner barrier, flashing his lights and hitting his horn continuously.

As a car with cardboard boxes badly lashed to its top passed him, a guy in the passenger seat showed a silver Magnum. His grimacing, teeth-bared face said, *Try me, Uniform.*

No, thank you.

Then there came a fight across the anarchy of lanes. Jim slid between two cars, then went around a pickup that was on its side and burning. When he slowed, people on foot began beating on his windows, one woman making spiderwebs on the windshield with a spike heel. There was a sickening crunch when he sped up to get past them, and the kind of lurch that meant only one thing: he'd driven over a body. "God," he whispered, "God help him."

There was no way to stay up here, so Jim pulled off on the D Street exit and went down into the streets. Despite the alleged twenty-four-hour curfew, he had not so far seen a single police vehicle. No doubt, the cops had stopped reporting to work or even had been themselves dispersed. One thing was

clear: public order was nonexistent.

There was a man lying on the sidewalk, his face so flat against it that Jim knew that he was dead. Jim also knew how he'd been killed—he had been clubbed in the face, then, as he pitched back, pulled to his feet and clubbed again, then knocked over with a body blow from behind. You saw bodies like this in alleys, in the world's hard places.

A hurrying crowd moved around the dead man, their feet grinding his blood into the sidewalk in long, red smears. There were people with backpacks, pulling children's wagons full of clothes, cases of bottled water, boxes of cornflakes, you name it. Down the street, a gutted convenience store burned.

Once again, the car attracted attention. Here came a woman festooned with kids, her face soaked with tears and blood, her clothes torn. From another direction, a man with a deer rifle at port arms approached, trotting as if he'd spent time in the military. He probably knew how to use that weapon, too. It was clear that if Jim was going to keep this vehicle, he was going to need to kill to do it, but doing that was going to slow down his progress toward his objective, so it wasn't a necessary option for him to take, thank God.

The moment he stepped away from the car, a crowd leaped on it.

Walking to the ONI offices from here was too dangerous, but he was only a few blocks from Nabila's place. Given that his mobility was so limited, he would risk using her secure equipment to connect with the White House. She'd be on dispersal, of course, but he might be able to get to it.

By the time he had reached the end of the block, he saw that there were probably a hundred people fighting over the car. Ahead, a man sat on the curb laughing and firing a shotgun into the air, the booms creating a permanent swooping riot of pigeons, some of which lay in the street, ruined puffs of feathers. The detonations snapped off the buildings, the explosions coming as regularly as metronome ticks. Two women passed, leading six children linked together with a clothesline. Another body, this one burnt and smoking, was curled up under the stoop of a brownstone.

The beauty of Nabila's neighborhood was wildly out-of-focus with the mayhem unfolding in it. Percy's, a restaurant they had loved, stood open. For an instant, it seemed to be untouched; then he saw a cardboard barrel of sugar burst just inside the doorway and a tattered Irish setter frantically gobbling the spilled contents, its russet dewlaps touched as if with snow.

He would not see Nabby, of course, but he wanted to as badly as he had

ever wanted anything. Not only was she beautiful, but she also had a gorgeous, supple mind, which had made their love affair also an ongoing conversation, at least at first, when they were both stationed here and their marriage had flourished. True, they had lost that when he'd moved to Operations and become involved in counterproliferation and ended up halfway around the world and in situations where he couldn't communicate with her.

Then even the trips home had stopped working. They'd slipped into being strangers, and he knew from her dutiful tension that even lovemaking had come to seem to her like an affair with a stranger.

Until Las Vegas, he had not wanted to see her, not because he didn't love her but because he did. In the field, he'd become a sort of addict. He needed the tension of lonely places now, the sense of being a player in a dangerous game. He was able to kill, and although it was a huge issue, it was also a source of pride. The warrior's way. In a job where a second's hesitation could mean your life, you had to be able to do violence with ease, and he could do that, and it excited him and made him feel fantastically capable.

He was a form of wildlife that had thought itself domesticated—like those dogs of the old rancher down in Texas, being transformed into killers by the taste of blood.

She had said, before they were married, that she wanted a quiet life. Deep inside this fiercely independent woman, he had come to understand, were expectations born out of her upbringing and her culture. Home was sacred to her in a way that could feel confining to a Westerner. He loved her so damn much, and knew now that she still loved him—and knew that she was probably suffering agonies right now, wondering about his safety.

But they were back to the old problem—no communication. As things were now, calling her and telling her he was all right might be the exact thing that destroyed him. From the moment he did it, he would no longer know whether or not his presence in Washington had been detected.

God, he had never thought to see this city like this. Washington had warts, for sure, but this scramble—it was grotesque. Ancient Rome must have been like this when it was being sacked. Except for one huge difference—technology had enabled the barbarians to become invisible men. They were here, all right, just as they had been in Rome . . . but here, in the magical modern world, you couldn't see them but only feel the effects of their savagery.

As he approached Pennsy Avenue, though, he was surprised to find that the atmosphere was beginning to change. Now, closer to Eastern Market, people were walking, not running. There were fewer guns, and he hadn't seen a body in a block.

Ahead, to his amazement, he heard singing. He knew the music. It was "Amazing Grace," and the voices were ragged at first, then richer and bigger, and when he turned the corner and had the whole Eastern Market plaza before him, he saw that it was an assembly point for some sort of rally or perhaps even a march. Children held their parents' hands; there were baby strollers everywhere, people in turbans and djellabas, people in Western street clothes.

Few of the Muslim women wore the *hijab*, but the Westerners were getting blue veils out of cardboard boxes. He saw Muslim women dropping their head scarves as they joined the group.

Dogs jumped and capered, and the song rose, grew stronger, then tailed away. Somebody spoke through an electronic bullhorn in a Middle Eastern accent, a portly man with a dark moustache. From his demeanor and his accent Jim thought he was Lebanese. He stood in a sea of video cameras, some of them professional, most amateur.

The man had an iPhone and a BlackBerry and was reading text messages. Then he looked up. "We are with more cities! Six in this country, and London joins us and Cairo. Cairo joins us! Mexico, we are in Mexico; we are in Peshawar. We are in Peshawar, too, it's true!" He held up his BlackBerry. "It is here; I see the video; it's true! Peace, peace is coming!"

So the Mahdi wasn't the only one who could use the Internet.

"We start to move, start to move! Everybody join us, chant it, let's go, hey, TV—" He waved at the cameras. "We do it! Here we go!" He turned and strode off up the broad avenue, bellowing "Amazing Grace" through the bullhorn in his dense Middle Eastern accent. Then, "We are all together, all together!" The crowd shouted back, "All together." Various hymns came and went, ragged, brief. Snatches of "Nearer, My God, to Thee," "Happy Land," and others.

People raised placards, "Sura 2:125/Genesis 17:9," "God is God," "Islam is Holy is Christianity is Holy." A tiny, gray-haired Asian woman threw back her head and shouted at the sky, "All we are asking is give peace a chance." The voice, though small, brought a silence. This was a woman these people wanted to hear. Then the leader was standing, waving the crowd past him.

Jim recognized senators, congressmen, and a cardinal. He saw familiar faces—was that Meryl Streep, and the little, intense woman beside her Ellen Page? Was the tiny old lady actually Yoko Ono? In a wheelchair, a man who looked like Jimmy Carter was being pushed by a woman Jim thought might be Shirley MacLaine. All of these people must have been in Washington making movies or doing benefits or for other reasons. Certainly they had not arrived after Las Vegas. Or had they? It was always a mistake, he thought, to underestimate the power of the people. Somehow, they would find a way.

Then the leader had connected with the small gray-haired lady, who took the bullhorn and shouted again, “All we are asking is give peace a chance!”

Jim had to fight back tears, just to see this enormous crowd, every one of them certainly aware that they could be vaporized at any moment, but still here, still trying.

The voices rose, the chant spread, and blue veils became a sea, and turbaned men and hatless men, a smattering of black fedoras, even. The voice of the crowd deepened. The milling mass swirled, took form, and the march magically organized itself, heading off toward the center of the city.

A girl carrying a newborn in a sling came trotting up to him. Her eyes were as blue as her scarf, her face so pure that it seemed as if it had been brushed by a shaft of light. She reached out and before he could stop her took his hand. “Come on,” she said. “Don’t be scared.” Then he saw her baby sleeping in her innocence, and a great, choked sound gushed out of him. She squeezed his hand. “I know it’s hard, but you can do it.” She met his eyes with her own, and the courage seared him.

He said, “I’m on a mission.”

“There’s only one mission now,” she said. “Come on. Come with us. This is Madison. I’m Senna.” Her smile, it seemed to him, contained within its glow some sort of proof of what he had always denied, that there was such a thing as the human soul. He thought he was being touched not just by this young woman but also by the God who had willed her—and him, and all—to be.

Only sentiment, no doubt, but there was certainly something here that the barbarians did not have. They owned only the shadows. These people owned the light.

He went with her, and she smiled up at him but then was off, trotting to a group who had come out of a house. “Come join us,” she shouted as she ran to them. She would carry her baby for all the miles. She would go to

everybody she saw with her message. She would not stop.

He saw skeletons, hers wrapped around her baby's, skeletons and flies. *If only he'd been a little faster, a little less rule bound.* Had she known that she was talking to the man whose failure had let this happen, what would she have said then?

He reached the far side of the march and suddenly was on a street sacred to his heart, the short block of D Street, SW, where Nabila had her house. Every inch of this sidewalk had meaning. Here she had taught him "In Doha Ya Doha," when they had been planning to have children. She had sung it on a raw winter night, when they walked on crunching snow and the moon glared through the naked trees. "In doha ya doha, wa al-ka'aba banooha . . ." for a child who now never would be born.

That was the truth of Jim Deutsch, right here in this street, his barren truth.

He faced the house itself, looked up to the bedroom where they had made their happiness. He climbed the short steps to the front door and started to ring the bell. He stopped, though, because his instincts told him instantly that the house was empty. Buildings do not lie, and this one was saying two things. First, there were no living creatures within. Second, something was wrong.

He pulled out his picklock, worked it for a moment, and was in. He closed the door behind him, being careful to reset the lock. Here was the familiar coatrack, Rashid's blue pea jacket hanging there . . . and his own old corduroy with the weathered leather elbows and the pocket she had mended for him in another life, long ago.

He threw off the uniform tunic and went deeper into the house. "Rashid? Nabby?"

Jim knew that silence would be the only answer, but he called them anyway. He went upstairs and turned down the hallway that led to her office and the bedroom he had once shared with her.

When he saw that the office door was open, he knew instantly that she was in terrible trouble. There was no way she would leave this house on her own initiative without locking and alarming that door. Just no way. The office had been secured by the Company. Its door moved on quiet hinges, the steel of the thing concealed by veneer that matched the other mahogany doors of the old house. Inside the wall there was a copper grid to keep prying electronics at bay and on the desk another to further secure her computer.

Had it been locked, this door would not have been passable, not even by a

well-equipped professional. Because Jim had seen her coming and going, he was aware of the combination. He'd memorized it; he hadn't been able to help himself.

He stepped into the office and had another shock: her computer was on. Incredibly, the secure network was wide open from this terminal. Anyone could come in here, sit down, and enter a deep tier of classification.

So he wouldn't be risking the use of this terminal; that was crystal clear.

He looked around for some clue as to what had happened. Taking the steps four at a time, he went down to the kitchen and yanked open the garage door. Both cars were gone.

Back up he went, back to their bedroom. What he saw there stopped him, but not because of danger. It was because nothing had changed. She had told him she had redecorated, had said it with a sneer of anger in her voice, but it wasn't true. He was everywhere in the room, his books, his Bose radio, his bedside CD collection—even the novel he had been reading on the last night, when their battle had stirred the neighbors and he had left and hadn't come back, even that lay undisturbed on the bedside table where he had left it.

He stood silent, bowing his head to the sacredness of the love he saw here. He sucked air through his teeth—*he had to fix this*. Fix it all. Find the murderous bastards who had wrecked Vegas and put the noose around Washington's neck, find Nabila, find what he had lost of himself and his marriage.

A glance at his watch revealed what he most did not want to face: if he was right about the way the enemy thought, he and his world and the woman he loved—if she was still in Washington—had just five hours to live.

Forcing himself, he went methodically through the rooms, looking for some clue, some indication of what had happened to her.

There was nothing. Again, forcing himself, he went back upstairs, and took advantage of the presence of his clothes to shed the uniform.

As he was leaving, he noticed that the back door was not completely shut. Without going too close, he looked out into the garden. To find out more, he needed to go out there.

That could be death.

THE CARD OF THE LOVERS

He stepped out quickly, moving toward the nearest shrubs as fast as possible. Every visible window—and there was an entire row of brownstones across the alley, all of them looking straight into this garden—potentially concealed a sniper. He looked for slightly open windows, because he'd never encountered a sniper who would shoot through glass and risk deflection of the bullet.

As Jim approached the end of the garden, he saw breaks in the shrubbery, twigs that had been snapped. He'd tracked in places a lot more challenging than a Washington back alley, so he knew at once that she had pushed through the shrubs to the alley gate. There were a couple of partial prints on the ground—sneakers, woman's size. Nobody following, so whatever had happened to drive her from the house, it had not been somebody behind her.

She had been using her computer when she left—so quickly that she'd violated every regulation in the book.

He went through the overgrowth to the back fence, and opened the gate. A quick glance told him that she'd taken a left. He followed, and soon saw that she'd turned and moved into the yard of a nearby house, one that fronted on South Carolina, the street opposite hers.

He entered its back garden. A hundred and fifty feet away stood the brownstone, with black wrought-iron steps leading up to its rear door. There was a tiny patio with an expensive-looking barbecue grill to one side, and a table and chairs, also wrought iron.

He could see from the way the dry grass was bent here that Nabby had headed directly for the steps. As she'd entered the yard, she'd been moving fast. Running from somebody who her computer had told her was coming after her.

He opened the gate, following the dry, bent grass. A glance at the house revealed only locked windows. No sign of movement along the roofline, either, so no sniper taking aim at him.

Looking down, he followed the track a few more feet. Here she had

stopped, and suddenly. When he raised his eyes, he saw why—there was a figure in there, first visible from this point. It was a male, wearing a white shirt, standing back from the window. He carried a rifle across his chest. Jim remained motionless, evaluating the gun by its outline. There was a thick barrel, a gas canister below it. It was only an air rifle, but the guy probably felt protected by it. This was useful, because when people felt protected they were vulnerable.

Jim waved, to indicate to the man that he was seen, then mounted the steps and twisted the ancient spring bell that was affixed to the doorjamb. Almost at once, the inner door opened. The screen was still locked.

“May I help you?”

“Actually, I’m from over there—” He pointed toward Nabila’s own back garden. “I’m trying to find my wife.”

He did not respond.

“Dark hair, five three. She’s an Arab and I’m worried . . . you know, given the situation.”

“Not here.”

“Has she been here, then?”

He shook his head. So Jim grasped the handle of the screen and gave it a couple of the quick, twisting shakes that would spring the lock, and barged right into the guy’s face.

The man fell back against his kitchen table, then recovered himself. Jim stepped up to him, turning to one side to deflect the aim of the air rifle. Then he grasped it with both hands and plunged the stock into the man’s stomach.

The power of the blow made him cry out as he flew backward across the table and crashed into the swinging door on the far side of the kitchen. He hit the floor with a thud, and the door banged back against him. He lay between the kitchen and the dining room, making little gasping sounds, “oh . . . oh.”

“Nice kitchen,” Jim said, “love your granite.” He went over to the prone figure. “You’re looking pretty peaked, fella.” He put his foot down on the man’s face. “Crush a guy’s jaw, it kills him if he can’t get treatment. Windpipe swells closed, but it’s slow as hell. Tell me where my wife is.”

“F-f-f-f—”

“Fuck me? Wrong answer.” He pressed down until he felt the nose bend. Now the hands came up and grappled with Jim’s ankle. “You don’t tell me the truth, it gets worse right now. Where is she?”

“I am Undersecretary of Defense Charles Walters, and I don’t know where

in hell your wife is!”

“DoD Comptroller Walters. I thought all of you guys were Georgetown clowns. What’re you doing over here on Capitol Hill?”

“Get off me!”

Jim pressed down harder. “Nonessential personnel, so no dispersal. They left you behind without even a Secret Service party. Shame on them.”

Walters growled—or perhaps groaned—through his shoe-stifled mouth.

“Now, I know she was here because I tracked her here. So you’re lying and if you lie again, right now, you will be demolished, Sir. Understand this clearly: as far as your god-for-damned title is concerned, *I do not care*. So, let’s start again.”

The shoe-stifled voice became complex enough to convince Jim to remove his foot.

Walters leaped to his feet. “How dare you!”

“Your face has a footprint on it. Where’s my wife?”

“Let me see your cred!”

“You got *cojones*, I’ll give you that. Sure, I’ll let you see my cred.” Jim pulled out his real credential.

Walters opened it, read it. Then looked up at Jim. Then down again. “You really are Jim Deutsch.”

“I really am.”

Walters went into the dining room and sat down at the gleaming mahogany table. It was a splendid big room, with gorgeously detailed moldings and a fine, glittering chandelier. *What would blast effect do to it?* Jim wondered.

“She was here. She established her bona fides and I confirmed her clearance with ONI.”

“That was stupid.”

“I know the whole story and I know that now, too! But they were already on to her. A whole capture and suppression team, with shoot-to-kill orders.”

“You’re certain of this?”

He nodded. “Five minutes after she left, they appeared. Wanting to know if I’d seen her. It was a full-bore security detail. I contacted ONI again, and they couldn’t confirm anything. The office was in chaos by then, so who knows? By the time I’d returned to the door, the team was gone.”

“The front door, since she’s the only person who came in the back. Did she also leave by the front?”

“You’re good. I bet you earn your money.”

“So, what you’re saying is, she had a five-minute lead on them.”

“The Metro was still running then, so she might have done a little better.”

“You know it was running? How do you know?”

“You feel it. The line’s under this street and you feel it.”

“She mentioned me. Did she have any message for me?”

“The cred looks real. I wish I could confirm that.”

“So, she had a message. What was the message?”

Walters slumped, a man filled with defeat. “The phones are dead. The computer is off-line.”

“You aren’t on a secure network?”

“DoD shut down everything except intelligence traffic. I’m out in the cold.”

“I’d hate to be an accountant.”

Walters sniffed a laugh out of his swelling nose.

“You’ve gotta trust my cred,” Jim added.

From his office in the Pentagon this man must see a lot of craziness, disappointment, and culpability. The money men always know the skeletons personally.

“Mr. Walters, I need any information you have *now*.”

“She said, ‘Rashid knows. Tell Jim that Rashid knows.’ ”

The cold of absolute zero. The explosion of an electric shock. Then heat rushing into his face, his hands going tight, needing to kill.

No wonder the divorce had made Rashid so furious. No more production to be derived from Jim’s comings and goings. However infrequent, they must have been incredibly useful.

He told Walters, who was rubbing his face, “You treat that with ice.”

“I know how to treat it!”

He had to control Rashid, but that involved determining his dispersal location, then getting there. Only the White House might be able to help. “Do you have a car?”

Then it hit him. So obvious. “Never mind.” He went out the back again, thundered down the steps, and ran across the yard. He threw open the gate and in moments he was in Nabila’s back garden. Then he was in the house. He went upstairs, went to her office—and found the door closed.

He stood there, for a moment too stunned to move. But—when he’d seen that her network was live, he must have instinctively pulled the door closed. Not a problem, though. He never forgot a number. He input the combination.

Waited. Nothing happened. He did it again. “Shit!” She’d changed the damn thing.

He gave the door a kick so ferocious that he heard things falling off shelves downstairs, but he didn’t even leave a dent. Of course not. It would take a shoulder-launched rocket to knock this thing down. He ran his fingers across the lock. There was no way around it, not without the combination or explosives.

Even so, he shouldered the door and got a sharp, cracking pain for his trouble. “Goddamn it!”

He’d seen the room being installed. He knew there was no point in trying the attic or coming in through the wall or the windows.

Despair settled into him at last. Resourceful though he was, he now felt sure that midnight was going to arrive and Washington was going to find its fatal end. He would not be able to communicate with the White House in time for there to be any chance at all of locating the bomb.

His jaw clenched, his teeth bared. What a useless gesture, keeping the White House open. Noble today, but what about the leaderless country tomorrow? “Sure, there’s the veep,” he muttered. “But it’s the symbol, you moron! The civilization rides on the *symbol!*”

A three-thousand-year journey toward human freedom was ending. He had no illusions: when Washington went, and Fitz with it, the Western world would bow to its new conqueror. Then, gradually and over time, Russia would emerge as the new superpower, as the one source of relief from the Mahdi’s awful rule. Oh, that was the plan. He knew it. He knew those old KGB types, understood the way they thought. *We play poker with foreign policy; they play chess.* For them, the end of the Cold War was only a setback, strictly temporary.

Then he was aware that the movement of air around him had just changed. Something was moving in the house, he thought, and at the same instant was aware that the quality of light around him had altered as well. Without looking, he knew that her office door had been opened from inside, and very quietly.

The next moment, he smelled a woman—woman’s sweat, edged with soap and scent.

“Come into the doorway where I can see you, please. I have a gun.”

“Nabila!”

“Jim?”

Then she was there. Before him. So small; he had remembered her as formidable, but she was only this little slip. She raised eyes that were red from crying but shimmering with joy.

In that instant, he recognized that the power of love becomes overwhelming when it touches souls together and that this had never happened between them before, but it was happening now, and he threw open his arms and she rushed into them, and they covered each other with kisses and whispered names, and he felt himself stirring—no, exploding—and she threw back her head and laughed but also pushed away from him.

They stood like two duelists now, suddenly wary, expecting anything. “Rashid,” she said, “my brother—”

“Walters told me.”

“I tried to get out there, to get to him.” She showed Jim her AMT Backup. “I would have killed him.”

Jim took her face and kissed her. “You don’t want to go down that road, Nabby.”

Here came that delicious small smile of hers, touching the edges of her full lips, the sides of her dark eyes. And he thought, *O Arabia*, and cared nothing but for the beauties and magic. A strange, forbidding, and gorgeous place, a fragile, artful civilization . . . and the darkness invested there, its parasitic talons sunken into the same holy book that gave the Arabs the poetry in their souls and, he was beginning to admit to himself, their connection to the God whose silent reality defines us all.

What people did not understand was that his reality makes true every name he has ever been given. God is Allah, Yahweh, Ahura Mazda, Athene, Zeus, Ra, on and on, each name representing another human convergence with the mystery.

All of this passed in just an instant, in the compression of a man’s intimate, inner shorthand, and in the next instant Jim said, “He’s on dispersal. Where?”

“Maryland 28. Westmond. In a building there. But I had problems—there’s a shooter team after me. I nearly got killed!”

“I know.”

“I saw I had to do this at any cost, shooters or no shooters. But I didn’t even get to the Beltway. The car was attacked, Jim! Time and again! And my face—I look too Arab; I just about got shot! I was lucky to get back here at all. Did you get my message?”

He shook his head.

“On your cell.”

“I haven’t had it on. Danger of detection.”

“I found a code Rashid sent. The word ‘purple.’ ”

“To whom?”

“Somebody in Alexandria. It went to the cable company’s servers there. Then I lost it.”

“Purple” would be a case identifier. When they got that word, they would know which case was being activated. “Alexandria,” he said. You thought of it as a D.C. suburb, but it was a big city. You could easily hide a nuke in Alexandria, and if you could somehow get it on a plane, you’d be not five minutes from an airburst over the White House. Even if you didn’t have a plane, a nuclear detonation there that was the size of the Vegas one would devastate the whole region.

“I’ve got all the ASP readouts from there, but nothing shows up,” Nabby said.

He considered that piece of information. It would be easy to conclude that the bomb wasn’t there, but his sense of it was that this would be wrong. The location was too perfect. “It’s there,” he said.

“I concur. But it’s a big place.”

“Nabila, we have one card left to play.”

“But—what? How?”

“Call it the Card of the Lovers. Low card, odds always against it. But if you trust it, it’s a powerful card.”

“In Islam, trust is surrender.”

He wanted to kiss her, to somehow melt away the scars. But there was no time.

She followed him downstairs and outside, into the dangerous streets.

SOME SORT OF LIFE

As midnight swept westward, city after city rose from cringing desperation, and knew that life—some sort of life—would continue there at least for a little more time. Because Las Vegas had been destroyed at midnight, the world had become focused on that as the hour of lightning. But why must it be midnight? The truth was far more bleak, and was reflected in the offices of intelligence chiefs and their screaming prime ministers, presidents, dictators, and kings across the whole planet. With the exception of a few professionals like Jim Deutsch, who understood something of the mind they were dealing with, nobody knew if midnight actually mattered. The inner circles of the world feared that another bomb could go off at any moment, and that made them panicky, and their panic played right into the hands of the Mahdi. The more chaos, the better. Chaos, for Inshalla, was safety.

In the Muslim world, the stunned jubilation—the joy riots of Cairo and Tehran, Karachi and Baghdad and Gaza, and a thousand other places—faded as the images from Las Vegas began to march across TV screens. Initially, the scenes had been of burning buildings and lines of cars on highways, all taken from helicopters miles away. Now, though, video shot on the streets was appearing, and the horror was beyond imagination, even to people who lived in a world of street-corner bombings and public executions. One image, of a little girl being sucked toward the firestorm, followed by her shrieking parents, broke hearts across the planet. All three had died. The man with the camera had died. A reporter had found the camera. Thousands of burnt bodies littered the streets in gutted neighborhoods, and now great clouds of buzzards and gulls descended on the city, circling in swarms, spreading their wings over the corpses like feathery shrouds.

Nobody could see images like this and not be affected, and Muslims, inside themselves, found themselves saying, *This was done by people who pray as I do, who worship in the same mosques, who believe as I do.*

The reality of the crime, there for everybody to see, was, across the

Muslim world, transforming jubilation into shame.

Women went about silently if at all, heads covered, eyes down. Men sat in tea and coffee shops, smoking and staring. If anybody played music, somebody would stop it with a curse. Men were angry and argued, but never about the pictures from Las Vegas. The images evoked a shame similar to that which attaches to pornography, because of the intimate connection between pleasure and violence, and they came to taste obscene.

The princes of Riyadh quietly dispersed, aware that their city was at once the capital of extremism and of moderation and that none knew where that left it, as an enemy of this mythical Mahdi or as his ally. Who knew, maybe he was even harbored here.

Certain Muslim leaders knew of Dream Angel, and there were anguished meetings taking place in various capitals. Some years ago, the Fitzgerald administration had intentionally leaked an outline of the plan to Tehran, and the government was well aware that while substantial areas of the city would be spared, an intricate pattern of bombing would so decimate the believers that the faith might collapse here and the country be given over to the powerful Western leanings that were its suppressed truth.

Riyadh did not know of Dream Angel but would have been appalled at the extent of the targeting in Saudi Arabia, where individual towns and specific neighborhoods in every city were marked for death. In all, Dream Angel would cut the population of the Kingdom by a third, and destroy the religious police utterly.

Even though elements within certain Muslim national intelligence agencies were aware that the Pentagon was creating an ultradetailed map of the Muslim world, and that it had military significance, they had been unable to obtain details.

So they inquired of the social sciences community, and found that something called a social-associative network could be involved.

Some of these states had constructed their own versions of the American map, using their own social scientists, so they knew roughly where the targets were.

They also knew that innocent people would die, and in staggering millions, something the West once would never have contemplated doing. It was genocide on a scale that made Hitler look like an amateur.

But these people were not innocent, not according to the new definition of guilt that the West, under increasing pressure and without consciously

realizing what it was doing, had adopted. Guilt no longer attached only to action. Guilty wishes, guilty dreams, the inability to expel terrorists from your community—these were the new crimes.

But what was the sentence for committing them?

The Syrian and Iranian intelligence services both hit on the same answer: the target areas would be annihilated by small nuclear weapons delivered to their targets with great precision.

There could be only one type of bomb that would do this—a neutron weapon. It would deal death in the form of sheets of high-energy particles that would slaughter microscopically, instantaneously boiling the victims to death, cell by cell.

The mathematics of such bombs could be made as exact as the map of the targets, and only if they got very lucky indeed would any national air defense manage to shoot down a plane or two. None of the cruise missiles would be destroyed. Except for the West and Israel, there were no powers on earth that could intercept a cruise missile.

So, in conference rooms and offices across the whole of the Muslim world, the same question was asked: will they now kill us all?

What a few of the leaders knew, the whole population of the Muslim world suspected: there would be retribution, and it would be terrible. So the cities of the Muslim world were soon just as convulsed as the cities of the West, and even more so, because they were more densely populated and less well organized.

The old part of Jakarta was soon burning, the streets so packed with vehicles that dogs were jumping from car roof to car roof amid running crowds. Rumors were everywhere, and whenever a plane was heard overhead, thousands died, trampled.

Despite all this chaos, Washington was not the only place where people were struggling to find reconciliation, and the vast majority of Christians and Muslims saw themselves as being joined together on the same side in a desperate struggle against an evil so great that they had not been able to imagine that it could exist—until it emerged in the form of the fiery sun that had murdered Las Vegas.

At the moment of the explosion, it had been eight in the morning in Rome and the pope was in the dental chair in the small medical facility in his Vatican apartments. Guillermo Cardinal Mosconi, his secretary of state, approached. It was quite a surprise to the pope, because the formal nature of

Vatican life meant that an unannounced visit like this was extremely unusual.

Mosconi, a short, quick man currently dressed in a business suit, made a sharp motion at the dentist as he approached the pontiff. “Holiness,” Mosconi said, “I am bringing news of the most critical nature.”

The pope got out of the chair and went straight into his private office, clearing his mouth of cotton as he walked, dropping it behind him. Mosconi was not given to outbursts. Whatever this was, it was extremely serious.

They sat across from each other. Behind Mosconi were many of the pope’s collection of twenty thousand books, which had been provided for when the apartments were remodeled after his election to the Throne of Saint Peter. Pope John Paul II had lived like a monk, but that discipline had died with him, and the apartments, therefore, were pleasant, this room decorated in deep, dignified reds and excellent woods. The desk was an antique that had been with the pope since he had been elevated to archbishop, a gift from the faithful of his home diocese.

Pulling off the dental apron, he sat heavily. The papacy was, in truth, a wearisome trial for him. He did it for love of the church, for love of Jesus and the great power of the sacraments. In his privacy, he longed for the rambles of his boyhood and the solitary evenings of his childhood summers.

He raised his eyebrows to Mosconi. “Cardinal?”

“There has been an atomic explosion in the United States.”

“God preserve them.”

“It has destroyed the city of Las Vegas. One million are dead. The churches all are burning. All.”

The pope had closed his eyes and turned his inner being toward the Lord. Surrendered himself, mind and heart. He had asked the question he dreaded to hear answered: “An accident?”

“Deliberate.”

Then he knew. It was the Muslims.

“Yes,” Mosconi said, reading the very familiar face of this man he had known for forty years. “An unknown Muslim organization. Unknown to the Americans, they say. It has demanded, also, that you order all churches to be closed. They are using the atomic threat to force the entire world to embrace Islam.”

The pope gave Mosconi a careful look. “So,” he said, “you are saying that we know more?”

“We have, as you know, a connection within the Belorussian exarchate—”

“Yes, Mosconi!” Of course he knew. “Go on.”

“There is indication that a plutonium bomb of Russian manufacture was used.”

If Mosconi said it, there was no question of any indication. It was certain. “And do the Americans know this?”

“I have no belief that they do.”

The pope realized immediately that he held the fate of nations in his hands. If he directed this information to the American president, the third world war that the church had fought so hard for so long to prevent would then unfold. Both the Americans and the Russians would fire their missiles at each other. Each side would be afraid not to, lest the other side fire first and destroy their ability to retaliate.

The key would be to reveal those directly responsible, the Muslim group that, the pope had immediately concluded, was the out-of-control tool of the Russians. They wanted the West on the defensive, not destroyed.

The people directly responsible could be punished, and nobody ever need know where the bomb had come from. “Are we aware of directly responsible parties?”

“There is this ‘Mahdi,’ so he calls himself.”

“Then he’s the one to drag into the light.”

“We don’t have the reach to do this.”

Inside himself, the pope begged the Lord for guidance. Perhaps the answer came in the cardinal’s next suggestion, which was to call the president.

The pope did this, offering his condolences. Then he asked if the Americans had any specific expectation that there was another bomb. Fitzgerald said little, but the grave tone of his voice caused the pope to end the call in a mood of deepest foreboding.

“We have here a possible Antichrist,” he told Mosconi.

Both of them knew, of course, of the prophecy of Saint Malachy, and the fact that it had been written not by that twelfth-century holy man but by the odd and dangerous Michel de Nostredame, popularly known as Nostradamus, in the sixteenth century. There was something horrible about it, something profoundly unholy, that made the pope almost queasy when he so much as thought of it.

He thought of it now, though, in particular of the prophecy of the next pope, Peter the Roman, who was to be the last. He quoted, “ ‘In persecutione extrema sedebit Petrus Romanus.’ ”

As if to shield himself from the words, Mosconi raised his hands, brushed them across his face as if warding off an insect. “During the final persecution, the seat will be occupied by Peter of Rome. Yes, Holiness.”

The pope reached across the desk, and took Guillermo’s hand. “ ‘Qui pascet oves in multis tribulationibus: quibus transactis civitas septicollis diruetur, et Iudex tremêndus iudicabit populum suum.’ ”

“He will feed his sheep amid many trials, and when these things are finished, the city of the seven hills will be destroyed, and the great Judge will judge his people.”

The pope and the cardinal looked into each other’s eyes. “ ‘Finis,’ ” the pope said. The last word of the prophecy. “Is it happening, Willy?”

“This you must give to God.”

In the silence that followed, they heard voices coming from the square.

The pope stood up. “Dress me,” he called, and his dresser came quickly with the cassock and mantilla. The pope dressed, then went to the window in which popes customarily appeared.

Below, in the light of a gray morning, there had been perhaps a thousand souls, looking in the great square almost like none at all. But when they saw him, the cheer was so robust that it raised the pigeons, who flew in graceful arcs, their wings flashing when they swept into the sky.

By noon of that day, St. Peter’s Square was half-full. The pope was making preparations to speak to them from the balcony of the basilica. He would come at just before six in the evening, the hour of midnight in Washington, when it was expected by all the world that the American capital would be destroyed.

He had telephoned President Fitzgerald again, urging him to leave the city. The president would not leave. “Continuity of government has been assured,” the president had said.

Was the man committing suicide? The pope was not sure that he understood the president’s motive. A sort of desperate defiance, he thought. In his most private mind, the part of it he shared with no living man, he was coming to the conclusion that America was finished. For a long time now, they had been caught in a situation where their power was decompressing. Their inability to find an effective way to control Muslim guerillas and their failure to understand that what seemed like Muslim terror was often a projection of state power had brought them, inevitably, to this execution ground. The tool of Islamic terrorism was used by many hands.

“Holiness, Signore Manconi has arrived.”

He had asked earlier that Hilario Manconi, the president of the Vatican Bank, brief him on the world financial situation. “Very well.”

Manconi, whose dreary, equine face made his first name seem like a sardonic joke, proceeded into the presence. At a gesture from the pope, Manconi sat beside the desk and, with an officious snapping of latches, opened his briefcase and drew out a sheaf of papers. “It’s a catastrophe,” he said.

The pope was so tired, so emotionally stripped, that he almost blurted out a bark of laughter at the sight of the woebegone Hilario announcing disaster. “Go on,” he said.

“The dollar has collapsed. It is at this moment fifty-three dollars in the euro, and none can know where it will end. The U.S. central bank has exhausted its foreign currency reserve and nobody will buy treasury notes at this time. Gold is to four thousand, one hundred euros, tripling from the open. Bourses are closed, but not commodity exchanges, and everything—” He stopped. His throat worked.

“Continue.”

“I am continuing! Oh—sorry. Holiness!” He drew out another sheaf of papers. “The bank’s position is very sound. We have not much in dollar holdings. And our gold—” He shrugged. “The wealth we command is almost beyond calculation, Holiness.”

“My concern is the welfare of the people of the world. Are they starving, signore?”

“It’s chaos. Transport disrupted. All shipping lanes shut down. No flights. In Europe, not even road traffic, nor in America, but the U.S. authority is collapsing. There are all sorts of presidential orders going out. Nobody obeys. They all run from the cities.”

“And here?”

“In Roma? Some, certainly.” He blinked, looked up sharply.

“Not here,” the pope said. “God willing.”

“No, Holiness!”

The pope waved him to silence. “If it is God’s will that this test be given us, then we are grateful for his faith, for God does not give unfair tests. So if the Mahdi succeeds, I have no doubt that St. Peter’s will become a great mosque, in the same manner as Holy Wisdom.” He referred to the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, which had been the greatest center of worship in

Christendom for a thousand years, before being converted by the force of Islamic arms into a mosque.

“But, Holiness—”

“You know, a few years ago the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought—do you know of this?”

“No, Holiness.”

“A Muslim institute published a letter of peace between the faiths that also contained an admonition against Christians’ waging war against Muslims on account of religion. And yet, there is no place on earth that has ever been forcibly converted from Islam to Christianity. Have you ever been to the Hagia Sophia?”

“Of course.”

“The Quran says they should conquer.” He thought back across his life, his mind touching a memory of the long-ago afternoon he had spent wandering the halls of the Alhambra in Granada, among the most beautiful buildings in the world—a Muslim building. “The conqueror of Spain was also called the Mahdi. His prophecies are in a work called the Hadith, and it is their fervor for conquest that has always animated the Muslim spirit. These terrorists are part of a deep tradition of Islam. They are not separate from it. I will tell you this: after the conquest is finished, this time, I will be knocked dead with stones.”

He knew that his feelings should be more balanced, his mind concerned only with being shepherd to the faithful. But he was so very, very angry. He thought of those poor people of Las Vegas, all burned and their homes ruined, and the gigantic suffering that this economic collapse would visit on mankind.

The knowledge came to him—perhaps, he thought, from God—that this invisible Mahdi was not a creature suffused with spiritual power, an Antichrist. Rather, he was like Hitler, an ordinary but ambitious man whose arrogance, aggression, and refusal to humble himself in prayer had opened the door of his soul to evil. “So,” the pope said, his voice low, “he is only a man.”

“Holiness?”

“Thank you, Hilario.”

The banker stood and stepped back, then turned and hurried away. Looking after him, the pope reflected that he was probably in the middle of the most frantic day of his life, poor man.

Alone now, the pope went across the apartment and entered his chapel. As always, he knelt in the back of the ornate little room. He heard an increasing great roar from the square. The faithful were gathering in the arms of the church. Closing his eyes, he prayed. Had he publicly called this foolish little creature the Antichrist, he might have set the whole world on fire. “Jesus, I hear your voice within,” he said. “Thank you, my beloved master, for this guidance. I give you my weakness, my anger, my senseless hatred. I give it to your compassion, oh my friend.” He followed this with a fervent Pater Noster, then raised his eyes to the blue-veiled virgin John Paul had installed here. “Thank you, Mother, for your intercession for me. I will not speak my anger, Mother.” Quickly he prayed a decade of his rosary.

When he turned from the chapel, he was not surprised to see that Mosconi was back.

“The Grand Mufti has come.”

“What is this?”

“The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia is here.”

But how could this be? “There was no such meeting arranged.”

“There was nothing. He has come on the king’s plane.” Mosconi shrugged. “He simply arrived.”

After the pope had publicly told the truth about Islam, that it was a religion of violence, there had been that letter signed by a number of high Muslim authorities saying that they had no argument with Christians, as long as these Christians did not seek to invade Islam. Then the Saudi king had come to Rome and said essentially the same thing. The pope had refrained from speaking of the Islamic invasion of Christian Spain and the Christian Middle East. But, in his mind, he had not forgotten the truth of history, and he did not forget it now. Islam had invaded the Christian world then and was doing it again now.

So this—a meeting between the church and Islam, at this moment? “Mosconi, I’m at a loss.”

Mosconi bowed his head in assent. “In the private audience chamber?” He offered the pope no choice as to whether or not he would receive the Mufti. But the private audience chamber was a state room, private or not.

“No, no, it’s not a state visit. It can’t be official. Bring him here.”

“Will you take the throne, then?”

The pope considered this. If he sat in the symbolic chair that stood in this room, gilded and red, before the wall bearing his portrait, the meeting would

take on a symbolic meaning that neither man wanted to cope with. But at his desk perhaps the Mufti would feel an unpleasant sense of being a supplicant.

“Mosconi, I have no private places! I cannot take him back to the dentist with me.”

Mosconi smiled slightly. The pope’s sense of humor was well known behind these walls. “Where, then, Holiness?”

“Let’s go to my books.”

He crossed the room, his feet whispering on the carpet—an Arabian design, he recalled, a gift from the king of Jordan—and went to the little nook of chairs that was his private lair, where he indulged himself in history, poetry, and thought. He sat beneath the tall shelves of volumes, every one of which had been read. It was like an extension of his mind, his library. The treasure of his life. “I will receive him now.”

Mosconi turned toward the desk, reaching to press the intercom button.

“Wait. What do I call him? A name? What is his name?”

“You call him Sheikh. He will call you Pastor.” Mosconi picked up the telephone, and in a moment the outer door opened.

The Mufti was tall and very straight, and came striding forward, his spotless white robe whipping behind him. The pope could see a hint of a dark cuff under its hem, and a gleaming shoe peeking out as the Mufti walked. Beneath his robe of ancient design, there was a business suit, no doubt from Savile Row.

As he came closer, the pope rose. This was something the outside world would never see, but he realized that this man could possibly know a great deal about what was happening. He could be a key.

“Pastor, I bring you greetings from the king, as custodian of the Holy Sites of Islam and leader of the Islamic Kingdom, and I greet you from my sad heart and the hearts of all good Muslim people.” He spoke a densely accented but understandable English, and his face—the expression—caused the pope to at once cease to be wary of him. The man was exhausted. His eyes were desperate. Many tears had been there. The pope could imagine this man on the king’s palatial plane, sitting alone, weeping in the privacy of the sky.

Suddenly, as if it was entirely natural, as if it had been meant from the beginning of the world, the two men embraced. The pope felt the trembling bones, then stepped back, holding the Mufti at arm’s length. How fragile was this old man, beneath his robes.

They were silent, and the pope suddenly knew why. He knew that it was

because God was there, directly there, speaking to both of them in the eternal language, the pope believed, of truth.

He told the Mufti, “We say that our God is not your God, but it isn’t so. It isn’t so.”

“We have it, ‘there is no God but God.’ ” Then his eyes pleaded. “These people are monsters. Heretics in our faith.”

In English, also, the pope responded, but carefully, “Sheikh, it is a tragedy when holy faith is used as justification for violence.”

“You and I have both been to the Alhambra,” the sheikh said softly. “I know that you have.”

“You and I have both been to the Hagia Sophia,” the pope replied. “I know that you have.”

Their eyes said the rest of this history, and their silence.

“The king has conveyed our sorrow to the president and the American people. I am here because I wish to appear with you before the multitude in the square and before the world.”

The pope was affronted. This lost soul could not appear here, in God’s church. The pope started to speak his refusal—but, again, he felt that presence. This time, there seemed to be a little girl here, she was all burnt, standing behind the Mufti, and with her was an angel of God. They were silent, watching the pope. Even so, he shook his head. A thing this great could not be done in a moment, no, not even for the angels.

Such an event would normally be years in the planning, perhaps decades. There were three congregations that should be involved, and many cardinals who would expect to be consulted, and rightly expect this. There were many orders, also, that would anticipate offering their opinions, not to mention Opus Dei and other powerful lay organizations.

But the child was still there, still watching him. He could hardly bear to look at her blackened flesh, but it would not leave his mind’s eye. “Be as little children.” He recalled his mother saying it to him, recalled her telling him that if he forgot this, he forgot Christ.

He knew what a child would do. He forced himself to smile. “Mufti,” he said, “I sense that God is with us.”

From outside, the roar of the crowd was now enormous, louder than he had ever known it. He thought of each of them, each an astonishing microcosm of the whole. “The Kingdom of God is within you.” The Lord had said that not to kings but to simple folk just like the multitude whose hopeful faces were

turned now toward that window over there.

His heart bowed, and he knew that when he and the Mufti went to the window Jesus would be with them.

“We will go before the world, then, you and I.”

The Mufti closed his eyes for a moment. In the tightness of the lines around them, the sunken cheeks, the pope saw that he also was in deepest inner conflict. “There is only one God,” he said. “I will say it.”

“I also.” It was now five fifteen. Less than an hour. He wanted to telephone the president again, to beg him to leave Washington. But the president, he knew, had ascended already into another state. He had observed it in John Paul, the sudden sense of distance that comes as death steals closer.

No, President Fitzgerald was beyond telephone calls now. He was busy, that poor man, with the waiting that comes before dying.

TWENTY MILLION DOLLARS

As the president danced on the end of his rope in Washington, in Peshawar birds were making riot in the high morning and it was pleasant in the gardens of the town. Later, it would grow warm, but the heat of summer was gone, and even here there was that sense of echo that haunts autumn days.

Aziz took his tea with careful design, for he knew that history would record his actions in every detail. There would be poetry and song and texts, and each gesture of his that Eshan and the Persian boy Wasim were observing now would become part of the eternal history of human freedom.

He must be seen as the confident servant of Allah, not the man he felt himself to be, full of flutters and fears.

It must be, this thing, for this was be the world's last chance to join itself to the love of God. In a very few moments now, the Great Satan would be finished.

Aziz wanted to look at his watch, but he would not show anything that might later be taken to mean that he was not entirely surrendered to Allah. He nodded to the Persian, who came forward, his enormous eyes, as always, full of wonder. Again, he nodded.

The tea gurgled into Aziz's glass. "Thank you, Wasim," he said, bringing the whisper of a smile to the face of a boy who was just beginning to understand his own role, that not only was he here as a student but also his duty was to serve the Mahdi and give him relaxation when his heart was heavy with cares.

There were sounds coming from outside, voices shouting. The Mahdi allowed himself to wonder if word had come to Peshawar that the Great Satan had been brought down.

"I am not here to give tea," Wasim said. "I want to return to Tehran. I don't want to wear this—" He gestured to his *djellaba*. He shook his head.

"Children are beaten for impertinence."

"I want my Xbox back! This is all crazy! You live like it was the Stone

Age!” The beautiful eyes bored into him; the voice dropped, the lips barely moving. “You’re ignorant and you care about nobody but yourself. You’re a monster.”

Aziz sucked breath. Every cell in his body wanted to strike this insolent boy. Even so, in Aziz’s deepest heart he felt an abiding sorrow for the terrible thing that had been done, and the fact that it could never now be changed.

He shook it off. There could be no faltering now, no weakness.

Outside, more voices were rising.

The boy smiled at him. “When can I go? All Tehran is against you. All Muslims are against you. Even Hezbollah says you’re evil!”

“They are cursed of God. Our Brotherhood is not evil!”

“The Muslim Brotherhood has also condemned you, whoever you are. Nobody knows! Are you some madman’s stooges? Osama’s? He’s stupid enough to try this. Who are you?”

He would say nothing of Inshalla to this boy. He would not say the name to this rebellious child. “I will ignore your insults now, but later I will beat you.”

The boy looked straight at him, his eyes glinting with accusation. “I hate you,” he spoke with a mildness that was chilling to Aziz. He reflected that this boy had killed, and so become a man. A man could kill again.

“Your father paid a great deal to put you with me.”

“My father is a fool.”

The voices outside had become a roar, and Aziz was beginning to be curious about what might be happening. Surely if the bomb had detonated, Eshan would come and tell him.

Then the boy spoke again. “You lied; you’re not a teacher. You teach nothing. I want to call my father! Why is there no telephone?”

Eshan appeared. His face was impassive. “It is three minutes past the hour now,” Eshan said.

Perhaps Eshan had not heard what the crowd had heard. “History is three minutes long now,” Aziz said to Eshan. “In the first minute Mohammed is born; in the second the Quran is finished. In the third all the world rejoices at the death of the Great Satan.”

Eshan did not respond but only lowered his eyes. Aziz wanted to savor this event, as the people of Peshawar, so used to the oppressive faithlessness of the apostate government and its Crusader-financed police, realized that the Crusader king had been killed.

Aziz got up from the chair where he had been taking his tea, and moved across to the heavy door that sealed the garden off from the outside world.

“Mahdi, perhaps, have a care.”

“Why is that? Do they suddenly know me in Peshawar? Am I not hidden by God himself?” The Twelfth Imam had been rendered occult by Allah. He would not be discovered, could not be, until the time was right.

“I don’t know, Mahdi.”

“I do know, and I tell you that I’m in no danger here.”

“Yes, Mahdi.”

He enjoyed Eshan calling him by his title. Glorious title. Eshan had seen the way his hell-raising boss had changed once the great office was conferred on him, had seen him literally transform into a new man, as the Mahdi’s ancient spirit filled his own young and brash one.

The door in the thick garden wall was kept locked. Aziz approached it, took down the big key, and fitted into the lock. “Are you afraid, Eshan?”

“Yes, Mahdi.”

When he opened the garden gate, he saw a woman rush past with her hair flying, then another in Western dress, who was wearing a blue veil. There were men, too, and he saw a great column of smoke behind the roofs of the houses.

Eshan came behind him. “Master, don’t go far.”

“What is this, Eshan? What’s burning over there?”

“Sethi Mohalla.”

“A mosque is burning?”

“The mosques of the truly faithful are all burning.”

“But—”

“You should look at the news!”

Eshan’s tone astonished Aziz. “Where is your respect? Don’t forget who I am.”

“Then stop sitting around drinking tea and pretending you’re the Prophet’s left foot. We’re having a catastrophe! Anyway, we’ve known each other a long time, Aziz.”

Aziz held in his surprise. First the boy goes mad, and now this. “We must trust in God. God does all.” Some girls passed, again without veils. He gestured at them. “What is this? What is this business?”

“Our women are removing the *hijab* in protest against the bomb, and Christian women are wearing the blue veil to announce respect for Islam, the

Veil of Mary, Mother of Jesus. Christians and Muslims are worshipping together, all over the world. They are praying together everywhere, hand in hand.”

This could not be true. His clerk was overwrought. But the matter of the *hijab*, this Aziz could see with his own eyes. “This is illegal, to remove the *hijab*.”

“Not in Pakistan.”

“They must be stoned, Eshan.”

“Mahdi, there are not enough stones. Millions of Muslim women are doing it. The whole Muslim world is united as never before—against you, Mahdi.”

Eshan quoted the great words of the Muslim Brotherhood. “ ‘Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our leader. Quran is our law. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope.’ ” He continued, “Conversion is violent, often. It has always been thus. But afterward—what happiness!”

“The Muslim Brotherhood denounces us.”

“We are masters. Above the Brotherhood.”

“We are denounced.”

Anger raced the Mahdi’s heart, but he strove to appear serene. He let the breath of rage slip from his body. “Very well,” he said. He wanted to curse the arrogant devils, especially these females, but he turned, instead, and went back to his garden. He gave the outer door a good, hard slam. They would learn of the power of Islam, these women, all of them! Devils!

From deeper within the house, he heard the voice of Al Jazeera—another female, and she also was speaking of the “universal protest of the Muslims against the monsters who dropped this bomb.”

“Zaaria and the others are watching television?”

“Yes, Mahdi.”

Not even his three wives knew for certain who he was. This was a man’s secret, this secret and sacred life of his. “Go and turn it off! Devils!”

There was movement from behind the black curtain that concealed the women’s rooms. A small hand darted out; then the curtain parted. Slowly, his daughter Jamila came into the garden. At thirteen, she had a roselike purity about her, with flawless skin, her olive cheeks brushed pink, her lips just becoming sensual. It would not be long before she went into *pardah*, but not just yet. Every father longed to delay that moment, especially when he had such a beautiful child as Jamila.

Jamila wore a blue *hijab*, not a black one. Black for the heart of the female,

black to prevent disturbance among men.

“What is this blue?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She twirled around. “What if I take it off?”

“You will be stoned, Daughter.”

“Oh, *stoned!* With little stones or big stones?”

Absently he gestured toward some cinder blocks that were stacked against the garden wall.

“Do only women get stoned, Father, dear Father?”

“Whoever disobeys a law that requires stoning is stoned. Now let’s leave this subject.”

“My mommas say you’re the Dajjal. Are you the Dajjal, truly?”

“This is monstrous! A monstrous lie!” The Dajjal was the antithesis of the Mahdi, an evil being such as the Christians called the Antichrist.

Jamila twirled, and as she did, the blue scarf floated off her head. “Do you like me,” she trilled in the music that was her voice, “or perhaps I’m not pretty to the eyes of a demon.”

“This is madness.” He took her wrist. “Stop this!”

“No! Don’t you touch me!”

“Be silent! I am your father! Get that *hijab*.”

“Stone me; you’d love to even though it’s not the law! I’m not in *purdah* yet, and I’ll never go into *purdah*, not for you. You’re a bloody, evil *monster!*”

It took all the strength he had in him not to slap her senseless. They had been infected by that accursed Al Jazeera with its rubbish nonsense!

“Wasim! Come stone me; my father commands it!”

Wasim came from inside the house, followed by a scent of cooking spices. “What is this?”

“I’m disobeying the law! I must be stoned!”

Wasim looked toward Aziz. “Mahdi?”

“She will not be stoned.”

“What? But Wasim, you cut off heads! Surely you can stone, too!” She took his wrist. “Here, come to these blocks. Pick one up. I’ll be a good girl; I’ll kneel. You can crush me easily!”

“Mahdi?”

“Wasim, go back to your cooking.”

But Jamila blocked his way. And then she did more; she did the unthinkable. “Ba-ba-*bang*,” she chanted as she tore off her blouse. “Ba-ba-

biddy-*bang!*” She bent, then came up again. She stood naked. “Now, Father, I am obscene. The filthy female.” She danced in front of Wasim. “Getting excited? How about you, Father? Is not your filthy daughter pretty? Will you not want me among your virgins in your heaven?”

“No! No, oh, God, what is this? This is madness!”

She went to the blocks and hefted one. The big, gray thing almost caused her to fall back, it was so heavy against her frail nakedness.

Certainly a woman going naked would be severely punished. But a child?

“Daughter, there is nothing in the law to require the punishment of a foolish girl.” He went to her and lifted the great block out of her hands, and returned it to the stack.

Then Zaaria, who was Jamila’s mother, came out of the curtained room. She came to the center of the garden. He knew her by her eyes. His wives obeyed the sura, and thus she was in full purdah.

“Zaaria, your child is misbehaving. Please take her away.”

She reached up and unbuttoned her robe, her dexterous fingers working quickly.

“What are you doing?”

“You are not of the Ahul al-Bayt. You did not become known in Medina.”

The robe opened, and in her hand he saw the knife used for the dressing of chickens.

“You are no Mahdi, but I will tell you who you are, because I know.”

“I am Aziz, of course, only Aziz, son of the carpenter. The Mahdi is concealed within me. Only when the Caliphate is restored will you see my transfigured form.”

“ ‘The Dajjal will bring hell to paradise, and what he will call paradise will be actually hell; so I warn you against him as Noah warned his nation against him.’ ”

“How dare you quote scripture to me! And stop this immodesty. Get the naked child and go away.”

Then his other wives came into the garden, one of them wearing a Western bathing suit, little more than a gaudy yellow string. The other was in jeans and a sweater, and, like Jamila, wore the blue veil.

“Dajjal,” Maya, his second wife, hissed. “You murdered a whole city!”

“I saved the whole world!”

Maya carried a big butcher’s cleaver and Salwa an iron bar. Salwa hefted it and came forward. “You’re the monster of the whole world!”

He knew what these weapons meant. He knew that he was being betrayed. Only one thing mattered now. "Eshan, is it completed?"

Zaaria said, "Tell him nothing."

"Tell me!"

Eshan saw what was happening. The Mahdi was leaving this man. "I must go, now, Aziz." Eshan had been told exactly what to do in this event. Should Aziz become too dangerous a receptacle, Allah would simply move the Mahdi to another.

"Help me! Get the gun, the gun, Eshan!"

Eshan left the garden and went into the house. Aziz shouted after him, "Is it completed, Eshan?" There was no response. "*ESHAN!*" But Eshan did not answer. He must go now to a certain madrassa.

The women came closer to Aziz.

"What are you doing?" He tried to smile. Their faces were awful.

"Do you know that Salwa lost toes?" Zaaria asked him.

"I don't understand."

"While you were warm on your djinn of a horse, do you remember the figures walking behind you? The *shadows!*"

"Of course I remember!"

"And no hospital, then. No hospital for her! She has gangrene, you *scum.*"

He backed away, toward the outer door.

"Don't let him," Maya snarled.

Wasim took a few steps, until he was between Aziz and the door. He turned around and threw Wasim against the wall. "You're all apostate! I am the Mahdi!"

"Dajjal," Jamila sang, twirling with her hands over her head. She danced on her mother's discarded burka.

Outside, there were shots; there were screams. The sick-sharp odor of cordite sifted through the air.

"They are purging Pakistan of the ones like you, the followers of the Dajjal." Salwa raised her arms high. He watched the beautiful arms, watched the black bar in them. Above it, he saw the fading green of the trees that overhung the gardens and, higher, white clouds in the blue.

There was a pain, and then ringing silence. He knew, then, that he was on the ground. Salwa stood over him, the iron bar in her two hands.

As he was raising his arms, she hit him again, this time a blow that glanced off his shoulder, making him cry out as the bones separated. A rush of nausea

swept him. He pushed himself away, and the third blow slammed into the ground with a sickening *thunk*.

“No! Please, I’m young; I deserve to live! I was forced. Yes! They told me if I did not obey, you would all die! Yes! They told me this!”

Maya came down to him, pressed her soft face into his. “You deserve hell! What of the children you burned? Have you seen that? The fields full of charred bodies? *What of them, Dajjal?*”

Then he felt a coldness on his neck, then searing heat, then an agonizing choking sensation. He reached up; he felt, his hands trembling, losing control—an effort now—he felt the handle of the cleaver. *It was in his neck!* He fought the growing weight of his own hands, fought to close his fingers—and then it was out; it was in his lap. There was a sound. Rain. No, his blood—*blood*—gushing out of his neck.

He managed to raise his head, and they were all there, Maya, Zaaria, Salwa, Jamila, and Wasim.

Aziz’s throat had a torch in it. “Please, I can’t breathe,” he said.

Wasim barked out a laugh. “Kiss the feet of the dead, Mahdi.”

“Don’t call him that; it’s impious,” Zaaria said. She took out a pack of Marlboros and passed them to Salwa and Maya, and as his struggle turned slowly from agony to a sort of floating warmth, they stood smoking and watching him die.

“It . . .” He wanted to tell them that it changed nothing. But there was no strength.

Then it was dark; there was a child singing in perfect voice, like a distant lark.

They watched his head loll, his eyes roll back. Then his breath stopped.

“Well, it’s done,” Zaaria said.

“Are we rich, now?” Wasim asked. “I want to go to live in Paris!”

Zaaria went to Aziz’s office. There was little here, just his mysterious codebooks and Eshan’s laptop. She picked up the laptop and hid it under her burka.

“Let’s go,” she said. “To get this money, we need to start with the police.”

They opened the garden door onto a street that was quiet again. A police truck stood at the nearby turning. Beyond it, fire equipment rumbled; and white steam rose where the firemen directed their streams into the ruins of the mosque.

It had come time for prayer, and muezzins raised their calls across the city

—most of them, to be sure, electronically, but the age-old call of Islam nevertheless spread far and wide, echoing off the old stalls in the markets, off the walls of houses, floating through the gardens, the call to prayer.

Zaaria walked up to the police truck. From the back, uniformed men watched her, lazy with disinterest. “Nobody prays?” she asked.

One of them smiled a little; that was all.

She went around to the front of the vehicle where their officer was facing Mecca.

“The peace of God be with you,” she said as he finished.

“And with you.” He came to his feet. He was a prim man with a neatly trimmed moustache and an aroma of ginger and roses. His uniform was so bright and clean, it appeared to have been just made. “Have you trouble for me?”

“I have news that the man who is behind all these plots is dead.”

“You can prove this? That it’s him?”

“We have his codebooks, his radio equipment, a laptop, many things.”

“So, you will have done Islam a great service.”

“And the twenty million dollars the Americans are offering?” Salwa asked.

“Is it so much now?”

“I saw it on Al Jazeera. Last hour, they doubled.”

“If this is true, you will have it.”

“We can lead whoever you want into Pamir, and show them his hideaway. And his clerk is here in Peshawar. We can identify him.”

So ended the life of the Mahdi Aziz, the son of a carpenter. His life ended, yes. But nothing else did.

THE LOST PLANE

At ten minutes to midnight, Bilal had embraced Hani. “Soon, you will know the joy of heaven! What happiness!”

Hani had not smiled, but Bilal had not seen the danger of this, fool that he was. Now he hurried through the streets, looking for his brother.

Bilal had thought that surely Hani was ready. He had prayed so earnestly, had worked so hard on the preparations. He would fly; it would be over in a minute; all would be well.

Didn't Hani realize that they were both dead anyway? The bomb had been removed from its shielded container. Nothing protected them from its radiation. They would both sicken and die in days. In any case, it didn't matter, because this house in Alexandria was only ten miles from the White House. This house would burn—and, in any case, Bilal planned to be on the roof, so that he would be killed immediately. Why wait and suffer?

The plane was stationed too near the point of detonation for it to be stopped in time. F-16s circled constantly, and an E-4B flew higher. It was officially a flying command post, but Bilal thought that this one must be modified to work like a very sophisticated AWACS, with the kind of downward-looking radar that would immediately guide the F-16s to a target.

Hani needed under four minutes in the air, but still it would be a near thing. At the first sign of a missile launch against him, he would detonate, no matter where he was.

It had all been so well planned. Their training had been so excellent, the aliases given, everything! And now look at this Hani; in the end he values his own life more highly than Allah's will!

Bilal thought of all the men and women who had so willingly given their lives in Palestine, in Iraq, all over the world, for love of God, and now this little fool, the most important of them all—here he was—he ran away.

The promise of heaven was true. How could he, a good Muslim, not know that? Bilal had to find him. But where? Aleph Street was empty and silent.

Bilal had kept Hani far from the Islamic Community of Northern Virginia,

lest he be tainted by their apostate ways. They were worse than Shia.

Bilal wished that the Mahdi with all his knowledge of the universe, of the souls of the living and the dead, of heaven and hell, were here to offer the advice that Bilal needed, but that could not be, because the Mahdi was still hidden by Allah himself, and would remain so until the final triumph. Must be, or he would certainly be killed. The Americans had always in the past paid their great rewards to those devils who gave up holy warriors, and now the reward for the Mahdi was up to \$20 million. Even with the dollar falling like a stone into a bottomless well, that was still much money. If the Mahdi was indeed proved to be dead, the Crusaders' wealth would rise again, along with their steel armies and their deadly, godless ways.

"Hani," Bilal called. His voice echoed. "Hani, I am weeping! Hani!" It was already twelve fifteen. "*Hani!*"

Most of the shops were dark, the Flair Cleaners, of course, but also the 7-Eleven on the corner—dark and the door chained closed. But then, at the far end of the street, Bilal saw a glow. That could be that little café, the place of the badly seared hamburgers. Those men in there were Muslim. They would do their business and trust to Allah's will. Or the Starbucks on Kingdom Street, perhaps, but the blacks in there, they were like all Americans; they would certainly run.

Bilal raced down Aleph, his legs pumping, hating to get away from the plane and the bomb. Crusader trucks bristling with antennae were ranging the streets, helicopters passing overhead. There was a reason that he and Hani had rented an apartment on a street directly behind a medical-imaging center, full of radioactive elements to throw off just such a search. And so far, it had worked, but it would not work much longer. With the bomb no longer shielded, it was only a matter of time before the searchers would see that the imaging center was emitting too much radiation, and would investigate.

There was no hiding an unshielded plutonium bomb, not for long. "*Hani!*"

"Can I help you?"

Bilal stopped, breathing hard. He tried to smile at the Crusader policeman, knew he had failed. "I am sorry. My brother, he is—" Bilal touched his head. "Beloved of God, we say, do you know?"

The cop nodded. "A little slow?"

"Yes, that's right. And he's afraid. He's wandered off."

A big hand came down on Bilal's shoulder. "He'll be all right." The policeman smiled, then, and his smile was strong, firm. "Look at your watch;

what do you see?”

“Twelve twenty-two,” Bilal said, trying to keep the despair out of his voice.

“So, they missed! Your brother’s probably celebrating!”

Bilal raised his hands. “Oh, thank God,” he intoned.

“Him and all the angels, buddy,” the cop said. “We got a curfew, now, so you need to get back home. Has your brother got a cell? I might be able to reach it through the police net.”

“No cell. Oh, look—the Starbucks—is that open?”

“Cops only.”

Bilal hurried past him, but a moment later there was the squawk of a siren, then the flashing of the police car’s lights. Bilal stopped, raised his hands. The cops, two of them, now both in their squad car, gave him genial looks. “Hop in. If he’s not in the Starbucks, we’ll cruise you for a while. We’ll find him.”

So Bilal got into the police car, sitting in the cage in the back. Had the devils captured him? They were clever, the Crusaders. He sat forward on the seat, trying to appear calm.

“Rough one, today,” one of the cops said.

“Yes, Sir. Very definitely.”

“You guys staying under cover?” asked the other cop. “Because there’s a lotta folks—you know—well, it’s a tough time for you now. You Arab?”

“We are Iraqi. I’m a procurement specialist. My brother—well, he keeps our house, God willing.”

“What agency you with?”

“No. Iraqi government.”

“Yeah. That must be interesting work.”

“Very interesting!”

Then he saw Hani. He was sitting in the Starbucks, but what was worse, he was there among a dozen police and other helmets, sitting working on a laptop! What was he doing there with that computer? Was he giving them all away?

“Oh,” Bilal said, “he’s there. Stop. Stop now.”

“Hey, we found ’im!”

Bilal pulled the handle, and found that the door had not been secretly locked, after all. These Crusader fools had helped their enemy.

He went into the Starbucks. There was music playing; was it Joni

Mitchell? Sweet voice, anyway, some Crusader harlot or other, “Give Peace a Chance.” Idiots. “Hello, Hani.”

“Hello.”

“Is this betrayal?”

“No. I’m only playing King Kong.”

“King Kong?”

“That game. It was in the house when we rented it. It’s good fun!”

“Hani, it’s half past twelve.”

“I know it.”

“Are you not going?”

Hani played the game.

Bilal sat down across from him. “My brother, this is defamation for our family. Even in the eyes of God.”

“It’s fun, but hard to get the gorilla to leap. I think perhaps it’s a little defective.”

The first of the two policemen came in. A few of the others greeted him.

“Here we are in the den of the Crusaders! Hani, please come home.”

“Hey there, guys, we gotta roll. You comin’ or not?”

“We will come.”

“He can use a computer?”

“All the time, he plays a gorilla game. We will walk home later.”

“You better come with us. It just ain’t safe for you folks.”

Bilal looked up sharply.

The policeman smiled. “I’m embarrassed, but I think you understand that it’s not safe for somebody who looks like you. Not safe tonight.”

Bilal took Hani’s arm, and gently brought him to his feet. “Come, my brother. You need never do that chore I asked of you. Come home with me.”

Hani touched Bilal with his eyes. “There is no other way.”

“Brother, there is. When we are home, I will show you this.”

They were taken home by the police, back to the plane and the bomb, and as they went into the house an F-16 thundered low overhead, its fuselage glowing in the city lights.

Inside the house, Bilal said, “I have another way. I am too heavy now, but perhaps that can change.”

Hani’s eyes grew as quick as those of an uneasy sparrow. Flick, flick, they went, looking to the living room, to the kitchen, resting on the door into the garage.

“You must help me, Hani.” Bilal tugged at his brother’s shoulder. “Here, come to the garage; we have the saw.”

Hani pulled away. He looked at the floor. Shook his head. “I will go,” he said.



As midnight had approached, President Fitzgerald had ranged the White House like Banquo’s ghost, followed and guarded at every turn by Marines.

At ten minutes to twelve, he had taken a call from the Pakistani leader: “Mr. President, I know that Dream Angel is off the deck. I am calling to beg you for our lives.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Fitz had said, and immediately felt weak for saying it. He sensed his power—American power—ebbing away, dying with the dollar and the terrible passage of this night. He’d hung up, not listening to the man’s further protests.

There had been two calls from the pope, who was apparently with the Saudi Grand Mufti. The Saudi king had telephoned twice. More pleas, no doubt. There had been other calls from Syria, from Iran, from Indonesia, everybody knowing that Dream Angel had moved to its fail-safe points, everybody knowing that the moment Washington was destroyed, hundreds of millions of Muslims would also be destroyed.

At five minutes to the hour, the vice president had called. “Fitz, I want you to know that the Document of Transfer arrived safely. I have it here.”

“Thanks for letting me know, Matt.” The world was distant from Fitz now, full of details—the singing of the crowd out on Pennsylvania Avenue, the distant roar of a passing F-16, the tap of heels along a corridor he could not see.

“That’s not why I called.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Come on; I’ve got the chopper on the lawn!”

“America does not run.”

“The death of the president will be looked on as proof of our weakness. It will be seen as a defeat!”

“The courage of the president will be seen as strength. Then the world will see a smooth transition of power. That’s what history has to remember, not that I turned turtle and saved my own damn ass. There’s a lot of movers and shakers out there, for God’s sake.”

“Who?”

“That crowd. Senator Martin is there, Cardinal O’Halloran, for God’s sake. They’ve been singing for hours. Standing their ground because I am standing mine. This is the best way, bro. Take it from me.”

“It’s a waste of life! The kids, Fitz, Linda. Think of them!” Matt paused. When his voice came back, it was darker, and there was a lot there, Fitz knew, that was not being said. “You could have evacuated a lot of people from that city.”

“And risk an immediate detonation? No. Listen to me: Dream Angel is approaching fail-safe. They can remain on station for four hours; then there’s a refueling cycle.”

“The moment Washington is destroyed, they’re goin’ in. Should’ve gone in hours ago.”

“You don’t think my decision was the right one, either.”

“Fitz, there are no right decisions in this thing. I would have sent Dream Angel and gotten the hell out of D.C. You look at things differently.”

One minute to twelve had come. “You wouldn’t have. No way. Not if you were in this chair.” The trouble with Dream Angel was that it was too big to use. You have an ant on a plate, you can’t use a sledgehammer without smashing the plate you’re trying to keep clean. But there was no use explaining any of this. One thing a president learns early—don’t explain yourself, because you can’t.

“Fitz?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s twelve two.”

“Well, hell, they’re late, aren’t they? Go with God, bro.”

“You, too. My love to all.”

“I have a cussed tough family.”

They were both silent, then. Hanging up this phone, Fitz thought, was like an act at the end of the world. But he did it. He looked at the phone, on the old Roosevelt Desk. He was in the Oval again. He didn’t give a damn who heard what. At last, the president of the United States had no secrets.

“Logan, we got anything from upstairs?”

“Nothing. There is not one bogey in the sky anywhere in the area. And every high point from Atlanta to Bangor has been searched at least twice. Plus the radiation detection teams are out in force. Fitz, there just isn’t anything.”

“I wish the damn detectors were better.”

“The best technology in the world—”

“—just isn’t good enough!”

He went to the window, looked out across the shadow-filled Rose Garden. Officially, he was a praying man. They liked that, the American people. Guy like them, grateful to his God. Fine.

He’d go to the National Cathedral on occasion, but it was more a time to turn over problems. He wasn’t like those crazies who’d been around here before, with the gall to believe they were on some kind of special mission from God. He just hoped for the best. He knew what he was—as, he suspected, did most people—a little bit of nothing on a tiny dot of a planet in the middle of who knew where? Lost in the stars.

He bowed his head, and he prayed hard, not to some God who might be looking down on a president but to the God of his childhood, whose presence he had felt when, as an innocent boy, he had knelt and been grateful for his little days.

TWO STORIES

Twelve thirty came, and Rashid's stomach was in his throat, his heart racing, his blood boiling. He jumped up and went to the cooler and got a Coke, popped it, and chugged. Immediately, Mark was there.

"Are we looking at a coronary?"

They could see his medicals, of course. He was way off the charts; there was nothing for it. "I'm sorry. My sister wasn't dispersed. And the waiting—oh, God!"

Mark put his hand on Rashid's shoulder. "That's very understandable. If you're not mission capable, you just let me know, we'll have Horace add your con to his for a while."

"I'm not seeing anything. Bombers at their fail-safes. Pakistani military convoys heading out of target areas."

"They know the Dream Angel target areas?"

"The entire Pakistani establishment will be packed into Karachi. Wherever there are concentrations of moderates. You can be sure of that."

"What about those Russians?"

"They never reappeared. Only the shepherds, that's all that ever moved in the area."

"And low-level reconnaissance showed nothing. Dead, no activity."

"The vehicle remains parked where it was."

"Then the two Russians are still in there?"

He was going mad; he couldn't talk more about this; he was no actor! He had to get out of here somehow and get to Alexandria and find out what had gone wrong, and he had to fix it, God willing.

"They are in there. Perhaps it's some sort of—I don't know—bounty hunt. They thought perhaps this Mahdi nut was hiding there. They went in and now they're trapped in a cave-in or blown up by a mine. There is absolutely no sign of activity. Nothing. So that's what I think happened."

"Well, it bears watching. Why not send in some Dragonflies?"

These were small drones disguised to look like insects, which fooled

nobody. “They haven’t got the range. I can put in for conventional drones again, but it’s going to mean diversion from targeting-related missions. I don’t think we’ll get them.”

“Yeah, we don’t want to rock that boat.”

“Listen, Mark, do you think I could go outside and get some air? It’s like hell in here for me. This place is so damn small!”

“That’s totally against regs.”

“Mark, I’m getting sick! My sister—it’s driving me up a wall!”

“Yeah, your meds are spiking every alarm in the book. Look, I can’t do a compassionate pass, not at this alert level. What I can offer is a tranquilizer and cot time.”

“No tranquilizers. But I wouldn’t mind if Horace took my con for half an hour. That would help. But if Washington . . . when—for God’s sake, don’t hold it back from me.”

Mark went back to work, moving off through the door of the tiny canteen and down the narrow corridor, his bald head shining in the fluorescent glare. Rashid went to the rest area, closed the door, and looked around for some other means of escape. A grill in the wall, but he wasn’t going to be able to make it through the ductwork. That was movie fantasy. The grill was small; you’d need to be a child to get through there. In any case, there were barriers back in the ductwork, he felt sure. This was a secure facility.

He lay on the cot considering his options.

His only means of departure was right through the front door, into the car park, down the twisting access road in his car, and out to the highway. This would mean breaking regs. It would mean a disciplinary hearing, maybe arrest, maybe even getting shot thanks to some trigger-happy cop with a rod up his ass over the curfew.

Given moderate traffic, Rashid was only twenty minutes from Alexandria. The traffic was almost gone, he knew, because he’d done lookdowns when he could. If he could get to the bomb, he was convinced that he could fix whatever had gone wrong.

As soon as he made his move, they were going to be after him. His car was loaded with tracking devices, of course, so they could afford to stand well off. They would be able to tail him from the very satellites that he himself used all the time. Even if he left the car, his implant would still be trackable. They all had them, in case they were kidnapped. So nobody would need to come near him, not until he made contact with whomever he was going to

see.

If it was anyone other than Nabby, they would be all over him in minutes.

God, make the plane fly! Make it fly! Where was it? The stupid, evil betrayers, why weren't they doing their part? Did they despise God? What was wrong with them?

There were shouts. At first, he wasn't fully aware of them, so lost was he in his desperate thoughts. Then they turned to cheering and his throat closed; his head began to pound. He got up from the cot and went back to the work area, twisting through the maze of carrels. People were coming out, congregating, violating regs as if they no longer existed. They were pouring into Horace's cubicle, everybody.

"Hey, infidel," Carol Wilkie cried. She came up to him and embraced him. "Don't be modest!" She took her veil and drew it across her mouth. "The Paki cops got the Mahdi and a hard drive is on its way to the CIA station in Peshawar. They'll upload its contents to Langley in a few minutes."

"Oh! Oh, my God, how . . . wonderful! Wonderful! We are saved. Saved!"

"Not just yet," Mark said. "But we're going in a good direction."

Rashid forced his face into a smile. "But we still have our cons," he said. "This may make them act precipitately."

"It's being kept under a lid," Carol responded.

Suddenly Rashid saw what to do. "In Pakistan?" he said. "Don't make me laugh. Folks, listen up." He was proud of himself. This was hard, but he was doing it for Allah, this wonderful act. How had he come by it? God, only God, could have transformed him like this. They were all watching him now. He continued, "We need to go back to our cons. Let nothing past! Because, mark me, this will be known from Jakarta to Riyadh within the hour. Is already known. And it is going to make our enemies act."

Silence. Staring faces. "And I thought you were losing your gourd," Mark said.

"I was. Now I'm not." He went back to his own con. Washington had to wait, now. His work was here; God had just made that very clear. He had to do whatever he could to expand his operational area, to cover some more important regions.

He knew the cities that Case Purple covered. It was his job, now, to get his mission revised, so that he could do what he could to conceal suspicious activities in them. All one of these pigs needed would be to see airplane wings being unfolded on a street in Queens or Hammersmith or the

Tiergarten and another nail would be driven into the coffin of mankind's future. Humanity could not survive much longer, if the Crusader world was allowed to continue to gobble resources. No, they needed balance. They needed the help of Allah, and so Rashid's job remained the same as always. He went to work.



From a window in the darkened residence President Fitzgerald stared down at the crowd. His lips moved to the rising chorus. Beside him, Linda stood resolute. Dan and Polly also.

"No indications, Sir," Logan said, his voice soft and admirably firm.

The second hand of Fitz's watch swept on. Overhead, the jets screamed back and forth, round and round. Higher, AWACS and the E-4B circled. "No joy, no joy," came the reports. The Air Defense Command was convinced that they could shoot down anything that entered Washington airspace within thirty seconds of its being observed.

"You can depend on us," the generals had told Fitz.

"Well overdue now," Logan said.

Linda's arm gripped Fitz's. "I love you," she said, then kept repeating it, a mantra, "I love you, I love you. . . ."

Freedom had to win, and death here was the greatest contribution that Fitz could now make to that cause. His anguish was that his family would not leave him . . . and his abiding joy. He was so angry at them and so proud of them.

Dan gasped, sobbed, choked it back.

"One thing I know I have. I have the bravest family in the world, and the most loyal damn chief of staff in the history of this office, and Logan, could you please get us that bottle that's in the drawer beside my bed?"

Logan disappeared.

"What bottle?" Linda asked.

"The one you don't know is there. You can't be president without hootch. It's never been done."

"Dad—"

“Dan, boy, we’re not safe. They’re just late. Could mean anything.”

“It might still happen?”

“At any moment. But the longer we go past the hour, the more the odds drop.”

Maxwell, the butler, appeared with the bottle of Blue Label. He brought it on a silver tray, with shot glasses.

“Max! I thought I told you to go back to Wheeling!”

“I lost my bus ticket, Sir.”

“Well, I only see five shooters there, Max. You better get a sixth for yourself.”

There, in the darkness, with the voices of the people singing and the autumn wind rattling the old eaves, the presidential party solemnly drank smooth whiskey. “History forgets moments like this,” Fitz said. “But we must never forget.”

Dan said, “You’re a great president, Dad, and I didn’t think you would be.”

Now, that was a rock-back-on-your-heels stunner, coming from his hero-worshiping son. Who was Dan, really? He would have a hell of a time forging a life of his own. To its children, a presidency was a cursed shadow.

The crowd had stopped singing. All those faces were looking at something, some sort of movement close to the main gate. But what?

“What is it?” Linda asked.

“Somebody attempting entry,” Logan said.

There was dripping, and a smell of urine, hot, intimate. Fitz did not ask who had let go. It wasn’t him; he knew that. He wished he could spread his arms around his whole people, the whole world. “ ‘Yea, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death,’ ” he said, and then, very suddenly, could speak no more without his voice revealing the terror that rode his soul like a mad horseman.



“We need to see the president,” Jim shouted through the great iron gate. A Marine stared at him from fifty feet away, well into the White House grounds. Farther back, a Humvee stood, its engine grumbling, dim light

within revealing more young faces. “Look, I know perimeter safety, too. I know you can’t approach.”

“Hurry, Jim!”

“I know—listen—I’m going to toss in my credential.”

The Marine reacted immediately, snapping to a defensive posture, pointing his weapon at Jim.

“No!” Nabila cried.

“It’s just a credential,” Jim said. He dangled the small leather wallet. “Nothing else. You need to take it to your officer now.”

The guard snapped his bolt. Other Marines came trotting closer. Around Jim and Nabby the crowd sighed and surged.

One of the officers in the Humvee said something into a microphone, and the guard pointed his gun into the air. Jim saw his finger close around the trigger. He had just been ordered to deliver warning shots.

“You’re gonna have a bloodbath, you panic these people!”

“Jim, let’s go! It’s too dangerous!”

He turned on her, suddenly hot with rage. “Nabby, I don’t think you understand. If I don’t get in, then I have to die here. This is my mission, Nabby. I will carry it out *at any cost*.”

“Jim, you’re more valuable alive! Jim, *think!*”

He tossed in the credential. The guard took a step back. Another. He lowered his weapon.

“It’s a quarter past,” somebody shouted.

The old woman began crying out the words again: “Give peace a chance. . . .” She had come out of nowhere to this place; all of them had. Why had they thought to come here? What had moved them to risk their lives?

Jim found these thoughts moving him deeply. They were here to lend their memories to the same martyrdom old Fitz had accepted, in that solemn, silent mansion.

“You have to listen! I have essential information—”

Somebody grabbed his shoulder and roughly turned him around. He found himself looking into the face of a man in a suit, a hard, cold man with an earpiece. Secret Service, FBI, CIA—who knew? He was a man following orders, and it was clear from his eyes what he had been ordered to do.

Then Nabila cried out, and Jim saw that two other of these men were pulling her away. They would be fast, but he also was fast. He chopped the Adam’s apple of the one confronting him, with a stiff, driving finger, then, as

his head snapped downward, spun around him and got an arm around Nabby's waist.

Jim saw the black glint of a gun in one of the men's hands. "No," he cried, but it was too late. A woman saw it, too, then two other people, and they shrank away as she screamed, her voice rising to a trembling, penetrating wail, "*He has a gun!*"

The crowd seemed to sigh, an oddly soft, oddly gentle sound. Then the fool raised the gun, bringing it into the view of hundreds of people.

The entire crowd recoiled. The man struggling with his throat went down in the spreading rampage, followed by the one attempting to pull Nabila from Jim's grasp.

Jim hugged her to him. A shot rang out, followed by a roar of terrified voices. People ran, their eyes glazed, their faces twisted to animal forms. It was too much for them, all the hours of waiting, and despite the noble struggle and the ideals when they finally lost it, they lost it all, and in an instant the band of heroes became a mob of animals.

Then the gates swung open, and the Humvee came slowly forward. And, incredibly, Fitz was there. Fitz was standing in the damned thing and so was his wife and so was Logan.

Its horn blasting again and again, it moved out into the crowd, with Fitz standing there in his shirtsleeves, his arms raised in the air. Beside him, the First Lady was impassive, as motionless as a statue—and, somehow, the dignity of her pose combined with the passion in her husband's stance brought the couple so vividly to life that the energy of the riot was literally absorbed and people turned and they became silent.

Trotting along beside the Hummer, Nabila still cradled in his arm, Jim called up to Logan, "I'm the guy on the phone! I need to talk! We've got a target!"

The roaring of the Hummer, the clapping, chanting crowd—Logan couldn't hear him.

Then a Marine started working his way toward them. In the now-clear space before the gate, Jim saw the crumpled form of the man he had struck. The face was black. Jim had collapsed the poor guy's windpipe.

Then the Marine was on Jim, his big hand coming down, grasping his shoulder. He could waste the Marine—pop an eye or crush his windpipe, too. The kid could not survive a man so lethal as Jim Deutsch. But look at him; he probably hadn't been shaving for more than a year.

“Sir, the president wants to see you.”

Jim looked into the tight young eyes, silent diamonds. “Let’s go,” he said.

Nabby climbed into the Hummer, too, and in another moment President Fitzgerald and Tom Logan had descended into the cramped crew compartment with them.

Nabby said, “A principal in the organization here in Washington is Rashid al-Rahbi. He knows crucial codes. He is an analyst with the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. I am ashamed to say that he is my brother.”

“We’ve known that he was a traitor for about four hours,” Jim added. “We’ve been trying to come in, but there’s a lot of resistance. Whoever is working for the other side has the ability to order arrests and lethal actions. Attempts have been made on both of us.”

The Hummer arrived at the side entrance to the White House, and Marines opened the doors as the presidential party emerged. They entered the White House reception area. Jim was surprised at how weathered it all looked, the tired glass doors, the steel desk where some of the world’s most prominent people must stop to present their identification, the elaborate—but, he knew, quite ineffective—X-ray entry system. He could easily get a weapon through one of those things. It was like so much security hardware—great on paper.

As they walked down a dim corridor, Jim said, “This thing goes—”

The president turned on him, grabbed his shoulders. The great, leathery face—that Rushmore visage of his—glared, eyes dense with exhaustion, lips slack and dry. The president shook his head. “Not here,” he said in a voice that seemed to rise from the tomb.

They went up a small elevator to the private suite. Here was a small foyer, on the far side a closed door. When Logan opened it for the First Family, Jim had enough of a shock to make him gasp audibly, and he was not a man who shocked easily.

The entire room had been stripped of its carpets, its furniture, even its flooring, even its plaster. He found himself looking at bare studs and framing, and walking across big hewn beams on a plywood path.

“They’re everywhere,” the president muttered.

“The bugs,” his wife said in a chipper voice. Jim could hear something like despair there.

“I’m not wrong,” the president said.

“No,” Jim agreed.

“Are you implanted?” Logan asked.

“I am,” Nabila said. “My brother may still be.”

“Not folks in my line of work,” Jim said. “We don’t want the other side finding Uncle Sam under our skin. We go naked.”

“You people are implanted?” the president asked. “With what?”

She held out her arm. “To track us if we’re kidnapped,” she said. There was a neat red scar an inch below her elbow, on her cloud-soft inner skin. “This is why I have had so much danger today,” she said, her voice tight. “If the wrong people have your code, you cannot get away.”

“Your brother has one of these, too?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s reach out for this guy,” the president said to Logan.

“Consider it done,” Logan replied. He opened a cell phone.

“Wait,” Jim said.

Logan looked up sharply. The president half-turned. They weren’t used to this sort of intervention. This was the president of the United States who had just given an order.

“We don’t want to go through channels, Sir.”

Logan looked to the president.

“We need to go directly to this man’s personal supervisor,” Jim added. “Bypass the entire system.”

“Just how extensive is this conspiracy?” Logan asked.

“That’s what we don’t know,” Jim said.

“You’re right, Mr. . . . Deutsch,” the president said. “But this presents a problem. I’ve got—God, how many levels between me and him? I have no idea.” He shook his head. “Nothing this big works right,” he muttered. “It just cannot work.”

Jim could not agree more. Streamlining was what the federal services needed, not the additional layers of authority that had been imposed over the last few administrations.

“I can call him,” Nabila said. “On his, um—well, there’s back channels that we all use.”

“His cell phone will be out,” Logan said. “We’ve shut the entire system down.”

“Call his supervisor.” Jim said. “Not him. His direct, personal supervisor.”

“And if he’s part of it, too, Jim?”

“Nabila, would he be?”

“I have no way to know that!”

“Call him,” the president said.

She took the military phone and dialed. Mark answered immediately.

“Mark, it’s Nabby.”

“Rashid is—”

“No, Mark, listen to me. Mark, are you near him?”

“I’m in my office.”

“Good. Now, listen. This is life or death. Life-or-death telephone call.”

“Yes.”

She looked desperately at the president, who motioned to her to keep on.

“Mark, there has been a major security breach in your sector.”

“How would you know?”

“I am going to put somebody on the line. This is going to be unusual.”

She handed the phone to the president.

“This is President Fitzgerald. Do you recognize my voice? . . . Good. You are to get this man—”

“Sir,” Jim said, “don’t have him arrested. Get him to—uh, may I do this?”

“Mr. Chambers, this man speaks for me.” He handed Jim the phone.

“Hello, Mark. Listen carefully. What I want you to do are two things. First, I want you to read back Rashid’s entire con for the past hour. I want you to tell me every satellite he’s used, everything he’s flown, all of it. And I want you to send him a signal. Shut down his con. Close him down. Almost certainly he’s already looking for some excuse to leave. Let him go.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get back to us with every scrap of information you pull off his station.” He hung up.



Rashid was surprised when he was messaged for an emergency conference. He stuck his head over the partition. “Hey, Carol, what’s this conference?”

“What conference?”

When he turned back, he saw that his monitors all were plated. He knew instantly what those blank screens meant. Somebody had identified him.

As always, God had made his plans for him. In truth, he had been trained

for this contingency by experts, Russian mercenaries working for the private army BlackWatch. They'd gotten twelve thousand dollars cash to put him through four days on the BlackWatch avoidance course in Georgia. He'd been CrackBerrying Nabila and Mark and whoever else he could think of from Bermuda that week when his real location had been Burge Island, where the accursed mosquitoes were the size of the ever-present and disgusting shrimp.

There was nothing for it now. He'd just been flushed, no question.

He hurried down the corridor to the front desk, passed the desk officer without a word, ignoring the, "Excuse me," that was called out behind him.

He got past the perimeter guards also, and he knew why. The NIO was watching him run, of course. They would want him to leave.

He reached his car, got in, and drove quickly away.



Mark Chambers was soon back on the line. "He's bolted all right."

"Okay, you keep on him," Jim said.

"He knows everything about this type of surveillance."

"And he will eventually evade us. But we will still learn something before that happens, and let's hope it's what we need."

For the first time, Linda Fitzgerald spoke. "Does this mean that Washington is out of danger?" In that trembling lilt Jim recognized hysteria. This woman was about to explode in their faces, and he did not blame her.

He answered carefully. "This man may lead us to the bomb. That's all I can say."

"But it could go off—"

"Linda, it could go off at any time," her husband said, his voice betraying a level of anger. "It hasn't happened yet, that's all."

For a moment, she was silent. Then she pitched forward as if struck a blow in the stomach. Fitz touched her, distantly, as he might a wounded soldier during a tour of Walter Reed. "Come on, gal," he said softly. "Let's pull together."

"Excuse me," Logan said. "How do we get a secure lockdown on this

man? Where do we go for that? Not to his boss, for God's sake."

Given the need for speed, Rashid's own unit was the only place they could turn to. "We have no choice."

"What if they're all in it? Come on, man, think!"

"I've done that, obviously! And *we have no choice.*"

"This is a big government. There's always a choice."

"Okay, first, how do you know we'll be secure someplace else? Second, it'll take time and we don't have that, do we?"

"We could engage the National Reconnaissance Office."

"The man is actually physically running right now, so can you manage that in twenty seconds?"

"Tom, goddamn it, will you stop this arguing?" the president said.

"Sir—"

"Mr. Deutsch, get on the horn and get us this man's location! Do it!"



Rashid stopped his car near some woods. On the other side was the Columbia Pike and, just north of here, a small neighborhood. He got out and moved in among the trees. A Rugby would be passing over now, and there were drones, he felt sure, running high and silent. Moving from trunk to trunk, he made his way beneath the thickest foliage he could find. If they were able to locate his implant without NAVSTAR online—and he assumed that they were—they probably didn't need a Rugby to find him now. But you never knew; he might get lucky.

He had to get to Alexandria and get that bomb detonated. Even if he needed to do it in the garage, that was fine. Just get the thing to go off, that was the key. If they'd turned coward or been killed—whatever—he would do it himself, never mind, and regard the task as what it was—a privilege. Death excited him, and the prospect of the wonderful heaven Allah had prepared was delicious. He'd wanted a boy first, then a girl. He'd wanted his own house, and the love of a wife. But those things were not to be, because Allah, it seemed, wanted him.

Walking out of the woods and into the little neighborhood, he wondered if

he would have to kill now, which person, innocently living? It didn't matter. He would kill if he had to, but stealth was better.

The first house he came to was empty. Shortly he would need a car, but right now this was exactly right. He went to the garage, broke a pane in the door, and went in. As he did so, a small dog began barking frantically. It hopped up his leg, groveling and panting, absurdly grateful that he had come.

Of course, there was nothing absurd about its gratitude. The animal had been left in this garage with nothing but a bowl of water.

Well, good, in a moment he could make use of the dog.

How American this garage was, so tidy and yet so cluttered with possessions. Why would a man with a tiny property like this one require a chain saw? Or a collection of model ships, gathering dust on the workbench? It was all stupid, all this obsession they had with material. The Crusaders fed their hunger for God with rubbish like this. Television instead of prayer. That was no way to live.

He went into a splendidly appointed kitchen, where he found a good knife, small but with a blade of excellent quality. For some little time he sharpened it in the electric sharpener that stood on the gleaming granite counter. Then he went through the dining room with its silver-laden sideboard and glowing mahogany table, and into the bedroom wing. He found a bathroom, where he searched the cabinets for alcohol.

Because he had no choice but to do it this way, he took the knife in his clumsy left hand and sawed away at his right arm. Gritting his teeth, sucking back his screams, he cut deep, dissecting away fluffy folds of fat and lean strips of muscle, until he found the dull silver capsule he was seeking. Pushing at it, working the wound until it frothed and bubbled, he gradually got the thing between his fingers.

He looked at it. Featureless, dull silver. Inside, he knew, there was an intricate array of circuitry, a masterpiece of subminiaturization. The telemetry the thing generated could even be used to determine his state of consciousness, whether or not his eyes were open and functioning, his speed of movement, and, if he was wounded, how long he had to live.

All of that, and the only thing it would do now was feed a hopping, snorting little dog. Not much of a watchdog, this little thing. He opened the fridge and found a plastic container of turkey salami. Taking out a slice, he folded it around his implant, then gave it to the animal, which ate with the frantic gusto of the starving.

Taking it by the scruff of the neck, he put it out into the garden. It ran yapping to the back fence and began jumping at the gate. He followed it, remaining close to the few trees, then using a garden shed as cover.

When he opened the gate, the animal raced out, dashing off along the alley. So now they had a dog to catch.

Rashid had no idea which Mahdi sympathizers in the FBI or the CIA cut orders to arrest or kill people like Jim Deutsch—or even if they were Mahdi sympathizers. Maybe they had other agendas. That was the nature of intelligence, now. There were too many players, too many agendas. The entire process was out of control. Unbeknownst even to most world leaders, the whole vast planetary community of spies had long since descended into anarchy.

Rashid reached the house, went through it onto the front porch, and walked quickly down its covered expanse. There was a little rail, a porch swing, some drying flowers on a white stand. This had once been somebody's refuge, their little nook where they had, perhaps, sat and read books. Filth. Western nonsense. He hated it all. The only book was the Quran. The rest was worthy only of the fire, all of it from Genesis to *The Great Gatsby* and beyond, without exception. He even favored burning the Islamic texts, the endless interpretations and such. Why did you need this when you had the original word of God?

Read the word, pray, do your work—this was the world that was being created, a happy world at last, freed of the vast burdens of the soul that the Crusaders had imposed, as part of their service to darkness.

He passed down off the porch, into the yellowing grass beside the house, and went into the next yard, where a red Dodge stood in the driveway. He looked in the window and saw no Global Positioning System in the dash. Good, the car could be used. But he needed a key. Perhaps it was in the owner's pocket, of course, but it could be in the house. He could get lucky. God could help him.

He went up the driveway, and stepped onto a porch similar to the one next door. There were shadings of difference, though—different plants, no swing. Also, the front door was solid, no windowpanes. So he kicked in one of the windows. Why not? What did the property of these faithless creatures matter? He reached in, opened the door, and entered.

“Excuse me!”

Rashid froze. A man stood back in the shadows of the room, a plump man

of perhaps thirty-five, wearing shorts and a T-shirt. For a moment, he seemed like some sort of hallucination, his presence was so unexpected. But then he came forward, and in his hand Rashid saw a small vase. Then the man reached down and lifted a side chair by its leg and threw it.

As Rashid stepped aside to avoid the chair, he pulled out the knife he had used to cut the implant from his arm. He advanced on the man, who was fat and confused but still quick enough to slam the vase into the side of Rashid's head.

Just in time, Rashid turned, causing the blow to glance off behind his left ear. It hurt, but it did not stun him, and he slashed backward with the knife.

It connected; the man drew in breath; then Rashid thrust as hard as he could, digging and cutting, pistoning his fist as he had been taught.

The man gasped; his foot stomped so hard the whole house shook; then he drew back away from the knife, as Rashid had been trained that he would do. Rashid followed him, still cutting, feeling the resistance of cartilage and organs, feeling blood, hot, fast, gushing out around his plunging fist.

The man hit him with the flat of his hand, hit him hard enough to make his ear ring. Then the man came off the knife and fell against the wall. He made a noise, low, like he was gargling, as black blood gushed from his mouth. He slid down the wall, his eyes fixing on Rashid. "Hey, man," he said, then another word, a garbled mutter. His head slumped onto his chest.

Rashid found himself kicking the man, and when he did, there was an almost musical sigh, a poetic little sound.

He looked down at the figure. Was he only pretending? Or was this, truly, death? Rashid watched the chest. No breathing. The eyes were still open, also fixed, slightly misted over. Dead, then.

Gingerly Rashid pushed a hand into one pocket, then the other. He took the wallet, the keys. He went quickly through the house and out the side door that led to the driveway. There was a pot boiling on the stove, which he shut off. No reason to attract attention with a fire.

Then he saw, sitting in the sun in a tiny breakfast nook, an ancient woman. She was silent, staring, her face so deeply wrinkled that it looked false, like a caricature of great age. In front of her was an empty soup bowl. In her hand, in among knuckles like great stones, was a silver spoon.

He went back to the stove, got the pot, and went to her. He poured her some soup. Her mouth began to work—and then she turned with all the sudden intensity of a striking snake and said, "You're crazy; you killed my

son. You're crazy."

He slammed the pot down on the top of her head with a huge clang. Soup splashed everywhere as her head snapped forward into the bowl.

He left, got in the car, grabbing the steering wheel as if it would somehow preserve his life.

At least the traffic was less daunting now, since the dispersal of the government was complete and most of the evacuees had left the area. He had no idea how long it would take him to get to Alexandria, but he had no doubt, now, that he was going to make it. His arm hurt. His heart was still pounding. The time for prayers had come, and he twisted his body so that it was indicating the east, Mecca, the true home of the human soul.

THE ITALIAN LESSON

For the pope, the day had been long and oppressively difficult, with numerous appearances, the reading of speeches, and the constant, vaguely disturbing presence of the Mufti. He had gone at last to the Domus Sanctae Marthae for the night. The pope could not house him in the Apostolic Palace itself, of course; that was not appropriate. Fortunately, he had not objected to the Domus. In fact, all day he had been faultlessly polite, even kneeling with the pope before the great altar in St. Peter's to pray through the six o'clock hour, as a terrified world waited for Washington to be destroyed.

He looked at the clock on the table beside his favorite chair. It was just going midnight now, so the danger was perhaps past in America, at least for the moment. He had telephoned two hours ago to offer his support to the president, whom he had met and found to be a man deserving of respect. Instead, the call had gone to the vice president, a clipped individual with a difficult name, who had thanked him politely and rung off.

For a moment, his eyes closed. When they opened again, they swam across the prayer he had been reading in his Breviary. The midnight nocturne, so familiar to a man who often did not sleep. Cares dragged at him late. He saw the ruin of the world coming, in the form of melting ice, storms, drought, starvation, and the end of oil. He saw it also in the strangeness of the violence that seemed these days to be everywhere. He felt his prayers as a drop of pure water in the dirty torrent of the demon. But here, now, in this silent room, with his beloved Breviary open in his hands, he felt close not only to God but also to the caressing arms of the Shepherd and his holy mother.

“Holiness!”

He looked up, startled at the sudden voice. Who would enter here without a knock?

A Swiss Guard was before him, and the expression on the man's face caused a horror of coldness to sweep the pope's whole body. “They have struck again?”

“Holiness, there is an airplane. An airplane in the night.”

He did not understand, and his face must have communicated his confusion, because the man spoke again.

“Holiness, there is an airplane, a small airplane. From the cupola, we have a call to alarm. Holiness, please come.”

He got up and followed the man. As they entered the corridor, other Swiss Guards came running, surrounding the pope.

“What is this airplane? Is the air force there?”

“The airplane is buzzing—we hear it. We can see nothing. And there are no jets.”

“Has anyone called the Aeronautica?”

“There is alarm. There is alarm.”

They went down the great staircase, now a whole phalanx of guards. “Where do we go?”

“Holiness, to the crypt.”

And with those words, the great tide of history that was sweeping the world entered the Vatican, for they would be the last words spoken in that place for thirty-one years.

The next instant, the tall windows that the pope was passing belched fire like the maws of a row of monster blast furnaces. The pope and his guards instantly became blackened ash, their bodies flying with the molten glass into the grandeur of the hall they had been passing through, imprinting their shadows on the opposite wall, which, a fraction of a second later, became dust.

The first millisecond after the detonation slammed St. Peter’s with an overpressure of 51 psi, the roof of the great church split with a massive crack. In the plaza, where many people were still praying, a sheet of light came that left them all reduced to ash. There was no attempt to escape; it happened too fast. Their prayers had prevented them from hearing the buzzing of the airplane.

On the plane, a young Albanian mother had struggled with the controls, shifting the tiny airframe clumsily around the sky, trying to position the aircraft directly above St. Peter’s.

She had taken off from the Ippodromo delle Capannelle south of Rome. The plane had been hidden in a garage nearby, and brought there by her brother and her husband after dark. The Arabs had taken her children, Agim, Teuta, and tiny, dear Gezime, still nursing, poor little thing.

They would call on the cell phone and Gezime’s wailing would be heard,

only her wailing. But now she would never again get mother's milk! It was life, though, life for the children, if the woman did this. Otherwise, she was to be taken to them and watch as they were baked to death one by one in an oven. The Arabs has promised this, and she knew that they would keep their promise.

She had been taught to fly, but on the ground. This was her first experience actually in the air.

An hour ago, they had sent a video of Teuta with her hair burning, screaming, poor baby, her hair with smoke! So the woman and her husband and his brother had done as they had been told to do, had pulled the black plane onto the racetrack, and there a man had come, and instructed her. He had showed her how to make the plane rise only, not how to make it land.

Her body had grown sick very soon in the plane. The night was big, the city full of confusing lights. She had kept the thing straight, keeping the bubble in the right place on the faintly glowing dashboard. The thing belonged to the devil. It was a machine of the devil.

She had not seen her husband and her brother solemnly taking the money, the stack of euros, after she had flown into the night. She had not known that her children had been abandoned in the cellar where they had been taken, simply left there locked away to die on their own, and their father, who would soon be in Beirut with ten thousand euros, would never think of them again.

The two Arabs were now on a train that was sweeping down the coast to Naples, its windows lighting the dry farmland through which it passed. They sipped coffees.

Her brother and her husband, having been exposed to the naked bomb, were being sick in the dirt of the racecourse, their vomit black in the sand, euros blowing about on an easy little breeze.

Ahead, she saw the great church, the largest thing in the city, although she had for a moment been confused by the Vittorio Emmanuel monument. She knew nothing of any of these places. Her family worked in the fields. She and her husband sometimes made a baby of cardboard and cotton cloth for her to thrust at tourists, so that they would grab at it while her husband and her brother picked their pockets.

The men were not good pickpockets. They seldom succeeded.

The family was crushed together in a shack outside the A90 in Ciampino. Somehow, the Arabs had come into their lives. She did not know how. When

the Arabs had taken the children, her husband had rolled on the ground and torn at his hair. How could so many misfortunes befall him? How could this be?

She could not fly this machine long. It swooped, it was buffeted by wind, it roared, and as she became more afraid, the instruments became harder to understand. Where was the bubble? Was she going right, left? Where was the compass?

Lights were rising to the north. She had been warned of this. Air fighters to shoot her down. Her mind fixed on her screaming daughter, on the smoking hair, the frantically bobbing head.

The machine hummed and vibrated. It reeked of petrol, and then something flew past outside—a roof! She had dropped almost to the ground: she pushed the rudder pedals, causing the whole contraption to shudder, and some sort of horn to start blating in her ears.

There was pain all over her body. To the left, a great red wave that was not racing toward her but was the last electrical effect of an exploding brain.

Absolute fire in the sky. She, a vapor, not even that. Shattered atoms.

Rome was not expecting this at all. There had been no indication that the city was in any way a target. All eyes had been on places such as Washington, New York, and London. The theory was that Muslims would know, or would have strong suspicions, and would leave threatened cities.

They had not left Rome, nor Paris, nor Berlin, but the Muslims of Bay Ridge in Brooklyn and Finsbury Park in London had departed in large numbers, ignoring curfews, ignoring everything—which had, in turn, sparked mass evacuations from both cities.

In truth, these people had no special knowledge, but they also were well aware of the extremists among them, and the fact that America and England were considered the Crusader capitals of the world.

Not even these people, however, knew enough of history to make the obvious prediction, that after the great sin pot of Las Vegas the Crusaders' religious capital would certainly be the next target.

From Urban II in 1095 through Boniface VIII in 1271, all the popes had called for crusades. This had happened in response to Muslim invasion of various parts of the Eastern Roman Empire, which had, by 1095, been Christian for over seven hundred years, part of the Roman evolution from paganism to Christianity that had accompanied the slow decline of the old Western empire.

The fact that the only religious invaders in the area had been Muslim and they had taken Christian people by force did not matter to the Mahdi and his followers, for the Quran told them to “fight against those who have been given the scripture but do not believe in Allah.” And again, “wage war on the idolaters, as they wage war on you.”

So ancient prophecy came true on that night, when the Whore of Babylon at last was brought low, Rome, the treasure-house of the Western spirit.

The fire swept down, charging the roof of the Sistine Chapel with far more pressure than it could bear. Unseen by any man, a fissure appeared between the finger of Adam and the finger of God, snapped, and spread, and in the next instant the greatest artistic expression ever created by the human hand was atomized dust speeding and vaporizing in the searing heat.

The doors of the Vatican Library smashed inward, comets blazing fire, and librarians looked up and were made hollow, and papyrus and parchment began burning with a fury never known before. The Codex Vaticanus, with its careful script, leaped into flame and was gone in an instant. When this early Bible was transcribed, ancient Rome still ruled the world and the hand, neat and Greek, that had done the work had belonged to a human being who had looked upon the soaring marbles of the Temple of Jupiter, and heard the roar of the crowd in the Coliseum, and the thunder of horses in the Circus Maximus, and shopped in the ink-sour bookstores along the Argiletum in the jammed quarter called the Subura, to which the Roman poet Juvenal attributed “the thousand dangers of a savage city.”

The library then imploded, and the Vatican Museum, and the great church itself, the skylights in its dome briefly spitting columns of fire into the interior, making it look as if the spokes of a great wheel of fire had invaded the space. In grand silence, as a young priest twisted toward the Blessed Sacrament that lay in the golden Tabernacle on the altar, the dome came down in great blocks, shattering the altar, the priest, the floor, and crashing with such force that parts of the nave collapsed into the crypt below, and in the tomb of Saint Peter there resounded a noise never heard there or anywhere else, the shrieking, weeping thunder of thousands of tons of concrete and art pulverizing.

The tombs of the popes were smashed, broken open, cracked, remains strewn and then set ablaze, ancient vestments and bones coming to lazy fire in the wrecked marble, fitful red pools flickering in the thick dark.

The great glass wall before the crypt of Saint Peter smashed into dust, and

the lights there fluttered out. An instant later, debris from the floor of the church above smashed down, filling the space with stone that would not be removed again, not even in vast time.

The glare of the explosion lit the south side of the Piazza Navona, causing it to burst into flames. People thronging the north side were astonished by what they saw—awnings, cars, diners at their meals in the mild night—suddenly all was fire. Before the blast struck, two seconds passed, during which a woman started to raise her hands to the flaming skin of her face, a waiter threw a glass of Cinzano he was carrying, cats scurried in the alley, a Chinese woman, achingly lonely, realized that she would die in the kitchen that was bursting into raging, inexplicable fire around her. She had been dreaming, as she shook a skillet of mushrooms over the belching stove, of rain in May in the hills of home.

The ancient treasure-house that was Rome trembled as if being shaken by the fist of God. The Senate House of Diocletian in the Forum sank into itself, the oldest parliamentary structure in the world. The Pantheon, perhaps the finest piece of architecture on the planet, finally, after over two thousand years testifying to the orderly dignity of the human spirit, collapsed in on itself with a dusty sigh.

Dust and smoke rushed everywhere, gushing through narrow streets, howling in eaves, crashing through windows. By the millions, roof tiles swept into the air, shattered, and became a kind of red snow by which the disaster would long be remembered, after the helicopters came in the morning and the glittering camera eyes returned images of the ruined city dyed red.

The bomb was not as large as the one that had shattered Las Vegas. This one had been meant to destroy a symbol, not kill a community. But however carefully this evil act had been conceived, nuclear destruction remained something that was really beyond imagination, and its effects were far more terrible than its planners had anticipated.

They had probably imagined a neat decapitation of the Vatican, not what actually occurred. Of course, Vatican City was destroyed, with virtually all of its treasures, the accumulation of so many years and so much human genius that it was like killing a part of an eternal soul.

Not since the Arabs had attempted conquest of Italy in 846 had Muslim violence been directly enacted against Rome. In that year, the Saracens had robbed the Basilica of St. Peter, which was then outside the city walls.

But this was not robbery, it was devastation, and moments after the

explosion the Vatican appeared as a sort of mountain wreathed in smoke. The great, welcoming arms of the basilica, designed by Bernini in the seventeenth century, were splayed outward, their colonnades tossed like matchsticks, the statues of the saints rendered into dust. The piazza itself was crushed down into its own foundations, becoming a blackened pit.

The Egyptian obelisk in the center had shattered. It had been moved there in 1586 from the nearby ruins of the Circus of Caligula, where it had been brought around the year 40. The absence of hieroglyphics on the obelisk had made its origin a mystery, but in any case, like so much that was destroyed on this night, it belonged to the depths of time and human consciousness. Its disappearance, although never remarked anywhere, left each human being less, as the loss of St. Peter's, the libraries, the Sistine Chapel, the museums, and also the people of the Vatican themselves, consecrated as they were to carrying on their shoulders one of the deepest of Western institutions, left all people immeasurably less.

In that instant of breathtaking cruelty and evil, the soul of man was made smaller, and a dark, brutal future seemed ready to spread in the hidden space within us all where the emblems that construct our civilizations are inscribed. Again, as in Las Vegas, it was the details—always the details—that were the places where the catastrophe was actually defined.

For example, the area around the obelisk was completely shattered but not completely lost, as some of the emblems of the winds—Ponente, the West Wind; Tramontana, the North Wind—that were embedded in the piazza there, were flung in the debris for kilometers and landed in the gardens of the Villa Borghese across the Tiber. These gardens, which were swept as if by a howling storm as the debris from the Vatican came pouring from the sky, had first been planted by old Roman republicans such as the populist ally of Julius Caesar, Sallust, and the libertine Lucullus, who used to organize torch races among the ancestors of some of the trees that were now burning down to the root, never to grow again. On this night, the trees themselves became the torches.

The baldachin that overhung the great altar of St. Peter's smashed down into it, followed by most of the dome above, which led to the collapse of the crypt and drove the fires deep, where they would burn on for nearly a year.

All the colleges, the abbeys, the institutes of the Vatican burst into flames. People who were not killed outright were set alight, and dashed burning against collapsing walls. In the end, nine out of every ten people in Vatican

City were killed outright. The others, their bodies broken and burned, ruined by radiation, died within hours or days. Of the city's 820 permanent residents, only 11 were still alive twenty-four hours after the blast. Another 216 employees who were in the city at the time of the explosion were all killed.

Thus the entire central government of the Roman Catholic Church ceased in a moment to exist. But the damage did not end at the borders of Vatican City, which was, after all, a 108-acre enclave in the center of a dense metropolis.

The Mufti was an old man and sleeping heavily when he burst into flames. He awoke to red haze and pain and then was dead. So, ironically, perhaps, the second great sack of Rome by Muslims also took the life of one of the most radical of Muslim leaders, but not one so radical as to countenance open and frank evil.

At midnight, Rome was a sparkling, vividly alive city. Clubs were open, restaurants, theaters, bars, and coffee shops. People thronged the piazzas, the streets. On the sheltered side of the Navona, there was an eruption of complete panic, with people leaping sidewalk chairs and tables, dashing into the cover afforded by restaurant interiors, as the patrons inside rushed out.

As the enormous, killing flash struck, there were uncountable moments of horror and confusion. Nobody within two kilometers of the blast actually heard it. Instead, they lost their hearing, being left with ringing or silence or hammering sounds in their heads, their ears bleeding, some of them blinded, but fewer than in Las Vegas, where more open space had led to wider sight lines.

The whole center of Rome became a gigantic trap. Pushed down by the same overpressure that had crushed St. Peter's, buildings across the city collapsed into the streets, blocking all escape. People on lower floors mostly survived, rushing out to avoid the choking fire that gushed down from the upper levels of structures, poured along stairways, smashed ceilings, and brought with it a dense cloud of smoke and dust.

Four minutes after the blast, the power failed. That it had lasted so long was due only to the heroic efforts of station engineers in surrounding areas, none of whom knew exactly what had happened, but who flipped switches and turned knobs, moving loads in a flash around the country. But it was no use, the system had taken extraordinary damage, and no sooner had Rome gone down than the whole grid faltered and the entire southern half of the

country was plunged into darkness.

For all of their years of training and preparation for even the worst catastrophe, across the entire center of the city the fire brigade was rendered helpless. This was not because of the power failure. They could operate without power, and even deliver substantial water using only their own generating equipment. They were prepared to draw huge quantities of water from the Tiber, but they could not reach the Tiber, not with so many streets hopelessly blocked. Indeed, the spectacle that Rome presented after the explosion was of a complicated mass of destroyed towers and roofs floating in a sea of burning rubble. Few streets were even visible.

Some of the Tiber bridges had been smashed, but not all, and one that remained was the Ponte Milvio, which was originally built over twenty-two hundred years ago by the Roman consul Gaius Claudius Nero. In 2006, Roman lovers had taken to commemorating the eternity of their vows by putting padlocks on one of the bridge's lampposts. When the lamppost had become so choked with locks that it had nearly collapsed, lovers had moved their vows instead to a website.

Now, both the lamppost and the servers containing the website were destroyed, and with them so many young lives, which had with hopeful fingers locked those locks.

As had happened in Las Vegas, communications initially failed completely. At the U.S. Air Force base at Aviano, there was an immediate alert. As was true the world over, there were patrols flying, here under overall command of NATO.

"We have a fireball—" came a transmission from an F-15 on patrol over the Tyrrhenian Sea.

"Say again?"

The plane was still on radar, but there were no further transmissions. Immediately a signal was sent to NATO Headquarters in Brussels: "Possible major explosion, Rome area."

The Aeronautica Militare, which had numerous bases in the area and was flying active patrols over the city, also experienced a regional communications failure due to the pulse of electromagnetic energy emitted by the bomb. But NATO's land-based communications infrastructure was left intact, and controllers who could not reach patrolling aircraft certainly could see, from bases around the city, that a mushroom cloud was rising over Rome. Second Air Region Command was instantly informed, but all attempts

to reach the prime minister failed—as, indeed, all such efforts would continue to fail.

Parliament was in session, and most of the government was present in Rome. Prime Minister D’Agostini had made an appearance at six with the pope and the Mufti, praying with them as the hour passed and all the world waited for Washington to be destroyed.

When it was not, the mass in commemoration planned at seven became a mass in celebration. D’Agostini was one of hundreds of world leaders who had telephoned the president after it appeared that the danger had passed. He was one of many whom Fitzgerald, in the darkness where he dwelled, did not bother to answer.

D’Agostini awoke to a flash so terrific he leaped from the bed, crying out, “It’s us, it’s us.” When his wife heard this, the perpetual fear that lives in the hearts of all world leaders and all who love them, instantly sped to the forefront of her mind. “A rocket,” she screamed.

The prime minister did not know why the room was burning, but he thought perhaps the Islamists had indeed launched an attack against the residence. He had no chance to think more, though, as the blast followed almost instantly and the burning curtains, the window frame, the glass, and most of the wall around it exploded inward, tearing him and Mirania to pieces, burying the smoking chunks of their bodies in the fiery debris.

So each soul started with a question, entered a moment of horror, then knew death.

As in Las Vegas, the lucky died first. Because the bomb that had been detonated over Vegas was large, that had included most of the people exposed to its power. Not so here. Only the residents of the Vatican and those in taller structures or, like the prime minister, residing in a residence luxurious enough to be open to the sky were killed at once.

Like other world governments, the Italian government had no decapitation plan in place, and this instant was therefore the beginning of what would stretch into two generations of costly, sometimes violent and disappointing conflict over the reconstruction of the state.

Most Romans were trapped in what became a hell even more terrible than the hell of Las Vegas, as over a million separate fires commenced in ninety thousand structures and people with shattered limbs in apartments, in houses, in restaurants, busses, cars, everywhere they happened to be, soon saw flames and smoke, and began to burn in such numbers that the smoke drifting

eastward with the prevailing wind smelled of cooking meat.

This was how Rome died, in a conflagration greater by far than the one that had consumed it in the year 64, and that fire had reached a heat so intense that it melted brick.

The true shock of what had happened almost at once began to be felt in the world. With the death of the Eternal City, a part of every decent human heart died, no matter if they were in Scotland or Syria, in China or Kansas.

In Beijing, the Central Committee called another emergency meeting. Previously, Chinese intelligence had viewed this as a problem involving only the Americans. Nevertheless, a report from the “Autumn Orchid” group that watched political activities in Hong Kong had indicated that an American retaliatory strike against targets in both Malaysia and Indonesia was possible, judging from rumors being traded among politicians there.

The primary concern of the Central Committee was not, however, the nuclear damage being done. It was the way that the upheaval would affect trade. Already, every cargo ship headed for the United States was stopped, on orders from the American authorities. The People’s Bank of China had frozen all dollar-related monetary activities, but the breathtaking collapse of the American currency had rendered China startlingly illiquid, and forced movement of value to the euro, the only other currency with enough liquidity to provide a useful basis for trade.

Now, in a paroxysm of panic, the euro was also being sold in every bourse on the planet. In point of fact, value was being transferred by others to the yen and China’s own yuan. The movement was of historic enormity, and could only lead to one conclusion: the collapse of value in the Western currencies and the subsequent inability of the West to continue trade.

Not since the fall of the Roman Empire had Western currency been so damaged, and the Chinese leadership, steeped in history in ways that Western leadership was not, remembered how profound the effects of that last unwinding of civil life in the West had been.

Marxist theory taught that capitalist systems were highly susceptible to destabilization, and the discussion touched on this. The West was falling. How far would it fall? Would governments and corporate entities embrace Šarī’ah law? If so, what of debt? Specifically, what of the gigantic debt that the West owed China, which was the world’s true banker? China had poured out the sweat of its people and the wealth of its lands, in return for IOUs from the West, and now they were becoming worthless.

Outside of the theoretical value of currency and debt, there was not enough symbolic wealth to continue the functioning of the world economy. Not even with gold trading at present in London at six thousand euros an ounce was there enough of it to back a new world reserve currency. The only thing that could conceivably back such a currency might be the combined central banks of China, Taiwan, and Japan.

So China began discussions with both countries, and never mind the difficulties with the illegal government in Taiwan. While Rome burned, Asia struggled to save whatever shreds of economic civilization that it could.

And there were still bombs, more bombs, and waiting pilots, some eager, some too afraid to say no.

In the Kremlin, there was increasingly frantic activity, as the reality of the conspiracy involving former KGB officers became more and more evident. Terror literally gripped the Putin government. If these bombs were determined to be of Russian origin, there would almost certainly be another revolution, followed by massive, crippling reparations to the West, if not a nuclear attack.

Vladimir Putin had made a choice to isolate Russia and its client states from the West, so that he could manipulate world affairs in such a way that oil prices would stay high, but this was far more than he had bargained for, and he was, behind the scenes, a shattered, terrified man.

Without his direct knowledge, the old KGB had been working outside governmental authority to break the superpower of the United States in the same way that the Russian superpower had been broken by the Cold War. In the KGB's madness, they believed that this would leave Russia free to restore its ancient empire, because it was not thought that Europe, in the absence of organized American support, would stand against any Russian reoccupation of lost territories, such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and, the greatest prize, Poland.

In history, the independence of these states had never lasted long, and the secretive former KGB officers did not intend that it would last much longer now. Russia needed a territorial buffer to its west. Who knew when another Napoléon or Hitler would arise? Given the ferment in the ramshackle democracies that England and the United States had imposed on Europe after World War II, anything could happen.

Vladimir Putin paced his office. When FSB chief Alexandrov appeared, Putin looked at him, Alexandrov thought, with the same infamous beady-

eyed fury that Stalin had, in legend, regarded his staff with.

“We’re going to be held responsible,” Putin said. “But we are not responsible.”

“Now the Americans will release Dream Angel,” Alexandrov said.

“That may happen,” Putin replied.

“Do we open our silos? What do we do?”

“Do you think it matters?” Putin asked.

“Our missiles are the only real deterrent to theirs on the planet!”

Putin scoffed at him. How could the man be so naïve? “What the military conceals from us cannot be *capability*,” he said, trying to force a mildness into his voice that was at odds with the anger and panic he was trying to control. “The generals conceal only their inabilities. When have you received a readiness report that you could believe?”

“I . . . I’m—well, certainly there is a level of readiness.” Both men knew that launch facilities that had been listed as fully operational had been found by the Kremlin’s inspectors to be abandoned and in ruins.

“A level of readiness. I’m sure. God only knows what would happen if they tried to launch. The whole country would probably be blown up. Our country!”

The missiles were old and liquid fueled, and many of them were so unstable that they could not even be removed from their silos, let alone fired.

“Perhaps the Ameris don’t know our situation,” Alexandrov said.

“No? All the Kremlin is a stage.” Putin chuckled. “We should dance and sing, provide some entertainment.”

This had once been Lenin’s office, bugged with radios disguised as filing cabinets. Now it was nanotechnology. Dust that communicated with satellites. You fight your way to the summit only to find that it is not power but the illusion of power that defines you.

“What is to be done?” Alexandrov asked.

Knowing all he knew, Putin could do nothing more than shrug.

“We can’t have Dream Angel,” Alexandrov said.

“Oh? Perhaps we want them to launch, but let’s not speak further here, not on that.”

“We must execute Case Forty,” Alexandrov said. “Our friends must.”

“It’s finished,” Putin said. Case Forty was the assassination of Aziz, the idiot who called himself Mahdi.

Alexandrov met his eyes.

“Yes, finished—as in, failed,” Putin said bitterly. Then he shrugged, looked up at the ceiling. For all he knew, there could even be video cameras recording his every gesture for the Ameris right here in this room. The Kremlin was a theater. “Case Forty has failed and we will not be heroes to the world. Aziz is in Pakistan now.”

“But how could he escape? Your man—”

“Dear Vladimir. Indeed, how could my man fail? Such a man? Aziz must have known that he was coming.”

“So we have a traitor?”

“You know what Stalin used to say—everybody is a traitor. So, yes, we have a traitor. We need a general purge.”

“Dare we do that?”

“To survive? Certainly. Kill them all. That way you can’t miss. Another of Stalin’s famous techniques.”

“I don’t have the apparatus to conduct a purge. I don’t have the informants, the trained teams of officers. That’s all gone now.”

Putin shrugged. “Perhaps the Bible has it right. Perhaps we’ve come to the end of time.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“Well then, you can believe this. Our intent was to unleash a nasty little cat to torment the Ameris. But that isn’t what we have done. We opened the cage of the nasty little cat, but there was a lion in the damned thing, and now the lion is running free, my friend, and anything can happen. Even here. They could come to Moscow.”

Alexandrov looked out the window, where the domes of St. Basil’s glowed in the artificial light that flooded the old cathedral. “Here? It’s unthinkable!”

Putin gazed also at the cathedral. “ ‘And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.’ ” He smiled his small and careful smile.

“What is that from?”

“The Revelation of John. From the Roman Bible.”

“Ah, yes. But still, it’s about Rome, not Moscow.”

“The world is Rome, you fool!” He laughed now, as cold a sound as Alexandrov had ever heard. “I don’t know that Aziz will win. The Mahdi! And the Muslims believe him. They’re rejoicing!”

“Carpet-bomb Chechnya.”

“We’ve done enough suppression there. Anyway, we’d need our own version of Dream Angel.” He considered for a moment. “I will tell you this, Alexandrov: we have lost a war nobody knew we were fighting.” He raised his eyebrows, a smile touching his lips. “Including us.”

Alexandrov knew when to leave him alone, and quietly withdrew.

COMMUNICATION FROM THE MAHDI OF THE EARTH OF MUSLIM
PEOPLE
GLORY TO GOD, THE CALIPHATE OF ETERNAL PEACE IS COME.
THE END OF TIME IS HERE.

Because the Crusader King, William Johnson Fitzgerald, did not perform *sadaha*, and the Christian churches were not closed, and an apostate decadent and fallen Muslim danced on the balconies of the greatest of these palaces of sin and evildoing, there has been a serious consequence.

An attempt has been made, also, upon the life of your guide, but as he is held hidden yet in the folds of Allah’s robe, he remains with you, and no amount of Crusader treachery can ever kill him or capture him.

Now, in view of the continuing Crusader apostasy, hear your Mahdi.

The law of Šarī’ah is enacted throughout the world, and replaces all other law.

You who suffer under the burden of debt, rejoice, for God has said it: your debt is canceled, and any trading in debt or with debt is liable under the Law. Further payment of debt will be punished under the Law. Extension of credit will be punished under the Law.

The existing authorities are ordered to arrest the money changers of the world, and the masters of debt, to wit, the chairmen of the leading banks, a list of whom will be sent to the kings and emperors of the world. And any citizen may also arrest them and bring them to prison, or imprison them himself, for the Glory of God and the Sanctity of His Word.

The use of intoxicants is forbidden now.

The apostate laws of marriage are ended, and now the only legal marriage is between professing Muslims. Divorced people may only marry other

divorced people. The giving of proper bride wealth is obligatory for any wedding from today.

Women must strive to cease working at jobs outside of the home, driving automobiles, and going about uncovered. Gradually, the Law will be enforced, as women learn the happiness that it brings them. Adultery by man or woman, properly confessed or witnessed according to law, is punished by stoning until dead.

Sanctions against slavery are ended, and the holders of slaves may now go openly with their slaves.

All executions are now public. Crime is punished according to the Law. The thief must lose his hand, the murderer his head, and so on.

Criticism of Mohammed is no longer allowed, and to those who have the Crusader taste for satire and derogation, your Mahdi urges you: reflect carefully, for you are no longer free to curse God or his prophet.

We repeat, for the last time, that the Crusader King William Fitzgerald must at once perform *sadaha* before all mankind.

The Crusader King has an evil plan called the Dream Angel, which even at this moment is poised to visit death upon hundreds of millions of Muslim people. If the jets leave the fail-safe points where they are now cruising, fifty Crusader cities will be at once put to the atomic torch.

We have spared the Crusader capital, because the flagrant apostasy of the pope could not go unpunished. But unless *all* of the requirements listed here are met, the Crusader capital will be destroyed at midnight tonight, and it will then be known that the pure and noble forces of Allah cannot be stopped.

The glorious Day of Standing is upon us, and your Mahdi rejoices with you, in the name of Allah the Most Holy, and Mohammed who is his prophet.

LITTLE MARY SUNSHINE

The destruction of the Vatican and the burning of Rome brought silence to the world. The streets, which in some places had been full of protestors and in others revelers, now became empty. Most TV and Internet outlets simply posted a copy of the Mahdi's latest statement and left it there without comment. Radio stations recorded a reading of it, and repeated the recording over and over again, afraid to say anything else.

President Fitzgerald huddled with his family in the stripped wreck of the residence. He had not gone into the West Wing in days. When he spoke, it was in a whisper, to avoid being overheard by any listening devices that his attempt to sterilize the place had missed. He'd had the windows boarded up and covered with carpeting, to thwart laser-based listening, and with tinfoil, in a layman's attempt to scramble radar and microwave systems.

He feared that the penetration of the government might have turned the surveillance capabilities of the U.S. intelligence community against its master. Not because it was probable, but because he could no longer be sure.

Thus the place looked like the lair of a madman, Howard Hughes or some such. To an extent, it was probably useful if those who came here went away whispering about Fitzgerald's sanity. Let the new Mahdi hear rumors that he was unstable. Perhaps he would become overconfident, and be drawn into some sort of mistake.

Fitz stared at the latest pronouncement, delivered to him by his own son on a sheet of paper. Dan lingered near. Linda and Polly were in the president's bedroom, which he and Linda shared. That one room he had left untouched. They were under strict orders to speak of nothing important there. For his part, he stayed out. When he slept, in uneasy fits and starts that were more like falling than falling asleep, he did it on a cot brought in by his Marines. "Rome," he muttered.

"Dad?"

All the terror, all the rage, boiled up in him, blasting up from his deepest heart like bloodred lava. "*Rome! Rome Rome Rome!*"

Dan drew back. An uneasy Marine pushed open the door.

“I’m going to do it,” Fitz said. Four words, softly uttered by a man who wished to the great God that he had never heard of politics.

“You mean . . . release Dream Angel?” Dan asked.

Fitz laughed in his son’s face—barked it out, the bitter snap of it made harder by the flat echo off the stripped walls.

“I’m going to go out there”—he pointed vaguely toward the Rose Garden—“and I’m going to do *sadaha*.” He felt himself crumpling, his heart echoing like an empty cave, and then Dan was trying to hold him, his good son, strong son. Fitz added, “We can’t win. Not against this—this monstrosity. We need God and we ain’t got God, have we?”

“Of course we do,” Dan said.

Fitz advanced on the two young Marines in the room. “Out!”

They looked to Dan, young eyes darting under their helmets. Dan gave them a curt nod, and suddenly Fitz saw him as a sort of savior. Dan had the answers. Dan could retrieve this situation.

“What do you think I should do?”

“Dad, if we don’t release Dream Angel, Polly and I are going to live under Šarī’ah law. That’s going to be your legacy.”

“They’ll burn our heart out! Burn it out! Fifty cities!”

“Unless it’s a bluff.”

A rush of tingling raced up his arms, followed by swaying nausea. He moved quickly to a chair, immediately sank down in it. “Yeah,” he said. “Kennedy played chicken. I guess I can.” And then he saw it, saw it clear. “I will go down there and I will shout that *ula ula* shit for our little fucking unkillable Mahdi; then I will wait one hour.” He went close to Dan, embraced him in a hug that made him stiffen. They were not a touchy-feely family. Fitz tried to stifle the loopy mirth that was coming up but couldn’t. Looming like a great, mad golem over his son, he giggled. “Then,” he managed to say, “I will release Dream Angel.”

“Dad . . . it’s a plan.”

“A good plan!”

“Why wait, though?”

“Throw him off.”

“The second those planes lock onto their courses and the cruise missiles are launched, he’ll know.”

“These are primitive people. They’ll be celebrating. Rattling goddamn

bones.”

“They are not primitive. They’re smart and effective. You can do *sadaha*. Who knows, maybe it will throw them off. But you better sure as hell move Dream Angel out at the same time.” He seemed to swell before his father, and Fitz saw in him all the power, the pile-driver instinct, of their clan. “Break ’em, Dad. Break ’em! Because I don’t want to live like that, and I’m telling you, nobody does, not even the Muslims—the normal ones, that is.”

The moment Fitz had considered releasing Dream Angel, his next thought had been of the fire in the cities, London, Paris, Berlin, Madrid—who knew, perhaps Moscow and Beijing, too, and why not Tokyo, LA, Chicago, and, certainly, old New York? “ ‘What candles may be held to speed them all?’ ” he said. “ ‘Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes / Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.’ ”

“ ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth,’ ” Dan said. “Wilfred Owen. Verboten, now, under Šarī’ah.”

Dan suddenly seemed like a comic figure, somebody from the Sunday funnies, a capering, grinning goon. Fitz had to literally fight the urge to slap him down, it was so strong. He compelled his fists to open, compelled his mind to push away the savagery that was a hair’s breadth away from possessing him. “Okay,” he said, “time to chop-chop. *Logan!*”

The outer door opened immediately, and his chief of staff came in.

“You sound like you’re walking in socks even when you’re not,” Fitz commented. “That’s a joke, Son.” He turned to Logan. “Okay, my dear—” He went close to him, gazed into the eyes. Sad, *sad!* “We are going to do this so-called—what’s it called, Son?”

“*Sadaha.*”

Logan took a deep breath. “Sir, the entire cabinet is downstairs, and I think you owe it to the system to at least enter the Cabinet Room.”

“Ah, yes, of course I do. I owe them! I owe everybody! And hell, it’s real convenient, because now that slavery’s coming back, I can literally belong to everybody! Snap your fingers, here comes Fitz. The ultimate in public service. Cabinet Room, sure. Boots to lick, here I come!”

He saw Logan’s eyes flicker toward Dan, then come back again, not reassured. Fitz continued, “You know, you two fellas know me by the moles on my damn butt. But lemme tell you. I am light-years away. I look like I’m here. Yeah. But I am not here. I am way out on the far edge, and the wind is blowing from behind and I am looking down, and sliding closer, and while

you guys are in the White House, the truth is, I'm looking down from this terrible precipice. And I know what I am seeing. It is the abyss." He clapped his hands. "Dresser! Suit me!"

The bedroom door clicked. Cracked a little. Opened. Linda and Polly came out. "We released the staff," Linda said. "But I can straighten your tie."

Polly stood to one side, shoulders hunched. He knew her when she was like this, his pouty willow of a girl, her fifteen-year-old face capable of so easily breaking his heart or mending it, or sending it with her slightest smile into high orbit. "Hey, girl kid, you don't look so hot."

An eye rolled on the visible side of her face, rested on him for a moment, then looked away.

"You need makeup, too," Linda told him. "You look dead."

That made him smile, proving, he thought, that corpses can. "Just a little tired," he said.

"Daddy!" Polly's face was hard now, gray and gleaming, a wax effigy, or something left behind by a vampire.

"Honey?"

"You're going to surrender."

"I am going to try to buy us some time."

"If you surrender, and we have to go into purdah, Daddy, I am going to commit suicide, and I'm not the only one."

"Polly!" Linda said. "Don't pressure him like this!"

"Mother, he has to know that I won't be the only one! I am not going to go into this slavery that these crazy people have for women! What's wrong with being a woman? A woman is a beautiful thing, a woman is a gift from God, a woman is equal. *Equal*, Daddy!"

"I know it! And I am not going to surrender. Perhaps, create that appearance. But, darling, I swear this to you on my heart and on the blood of my mother, I will not let this nightmare come here. No matter what it takes, they will not succeed." Whereupon he heard, as distinctly as if he had been a comedian dying on a stage, a ripple of sinister laughter, and thought, immediately—no, knew—that this was a symptom. His first definite symptom of psychosis. He'd been expecting it, because his reading of history told him that one of the primary things that drove leaders mad was being trapped between two unbearable alternatives. Leaders who had infinite power but were imprisoned by profound vulnerability—Nero came to mind, who had been excellent, then gone mad—lost their hearts, their minds, their souls.

Such leaders could kill a quarter of a billion people without a qualm. It was a road Fitz was going down, and he knew it, and every step he took he went a little faster.

Out there in the dark, across the whole world, the ships waited, the planes.

“Okay, Linda, tie’s straight, suit’s looking sharp. So, now, my lady, let’s get the Nixon trenches out from under these old eyes.” He followed her into the bedroom suite, crossed to her makeup table, and sat down. “Maybe some mortician’s wax would be the ticket.”

“It melts,” Linda said, “on skin that’s still warm.”

“Oh, mine’s not.”

“Well, I have some concealer,” she said.

When she began to brush it under his eyes, it felt as if the life were sifting out of him, sifting out into her fingers, drawn away by the tickle of the brush.

“Where’s that paladin of yours?” Linda asked as they went downstairs.

“Yeah, Dad, that guy with the Muslim wife. Mr. and Mrs. Reliable.”

“She’s got a lot to prove. And he’s effective.”

“Which doesn’t answer my question,” Linda replied.

“I’m not going to answer it.”

The familiar sharpness in his voice stopped their inquiry. They’d strayed into classified territory.

The doors opened. As they moved toward the Cabinet Room, he could see the press assembling in the Rose Garden, a huge throng of people and equipment. The demonstrators who had been on the front gate for so many hours had dwindled to a few. They had helped and inspired him more than they could know.

He stood before the door to the Cabinet Room. “Are the spiders in the web?” he asked Logan.

“The cabinet is waiting for you.”

“Clear out the staffers.”

“Sir?”

“We have no way of knowing who’s loyal and who isn’t. Lay on guards. Weapons at the ready.”

Logan nodded. Fitz saw that he’d turned his retainer the color of wet chalk. Well, let him worry. Fitz wanted them to think he was crazy. Crazy was weak, and he felt reasonably sure that something said by somebody on the other side of that door would reach the enemy. Not that there was a traitor in his cabinet, of course not, but somewhere among their staffs, yes, and more

than one.

And what of Linda's question? Should he trust Deutsch and that wife of his, Nabila of the endlessly twisting hands?

"These terrible hours," Fitz muttered.

Linda heard, put a hand on his shoulder.

He entered the Cabinet Room. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," he said. They all rose. He noticed that both Lucinda Goodavage and Marion Murphy wore discreet blue head scarves. "Courage," he said, looking into Lucinda's stricken face. "I want to thank you all for coming here. It took guts, and I know that."

Absolute silence. Time to deliver the bombshell. He took a deep breath. The curtains, he noticed, were green. First time he'd ever looked at the curtains. "I'm going to go out to the Rose in a moment, and I want to tell you why." He looked around at all their faces. Did they all think him insane? No? Well, they would. "I'm going to do *sahada*."

"You can't," Homeland Security Chief Wilkes blurted.

"Since when do you give the orders around here?"

Wilkes's face went gray. Lucinda Moore's lips tightened. She would have a traitor on her staff, he thought, almost certainly. Her old-fashioned politics of openness made her an easy target.

Henry Kerry stared down at the notepad before him. Here was another candidate, not because he was in any way weak—he wasn't—but because the State Department was just too damn big not to be vulnerable. So Fitz had traitors close to him, of that he felt sure, some kid carrying coffee and listening to every word, some secretary, affable and trusted, who left her reports in a back alley somewhere.

"Anybody wants to cry, do it outside." He chuckled a little. Lay it on. They needed to leave here thinking he'd lost it. Tell their staffers, make him seem weak, a little mad. If he was lucky, the enemy would hear and become overconfident, and make some sort of mistake.

"It's surrender," Secretary of Defense Ryland said. He was loud, his voice challenging. There were murmurs around the table, heads nodding.

Now it was time for the president to lie. This was his prerogative. The greater interests of the country always came first. "We have firm intelligence that the threat in the latest document is damned close to being real. There are at least thirty-five bombs planted around the world, and probably the fifty he claims is a true number. And mark my words, if I don't go out there and get

on my knees, we will see them all detonated within a week.”

“Like Washington? We’ve survived.”

“Like Rome, man! Rome!”

“Are you sure of this?” Ryland asked.

Coming from a man who should certainly have been in the loop on this, it was a fair question. Fitz’s answer, however, was not fair. “We have acquired a hard disk from Pakistan. It’s being decoded, but slowly.”

“What hard disk?”

“Need-to-know, Mike,” he told Ryland smoothly.

“I have a need to know!”

Fitz would never say, in this room, that the hard disk had belonged to the Mahdi, and that the Mahdi had been killed. Because that would become news. They would leak it. And it was both true and false. The Mahdi was dead. Long live the Mahdi. Plus, the disk was proving a tough nut.

“Mike, I’m sorry. You’re out of the loop and I can’t say why.”

Ryland came slowly to his feet. He leaned over, got his briefcase, and slid the pad into it. “You have my resignation,” he said.

“No! No, I won’t hear of it! Not now!”

“You have my resignation!”

“You sit down. When this is over, you can do what you want, but I can’t have cabinet officers quitting now. How would it look, for God’s sake!”

“It’s gonna be over as soon as you say that damn prayer out there. So fine, I’ll resign after that. One minute after, I’m done.”

Kerry stood, then Ryland, then the rest of them. Total rebellion.

Fitz laughed; he walked to an arched window, gazed out toward the gathering press. “I’ve got quite a crowd,” he said. “Maybe I’ll do a little soft-shoe.” He danced a bit. “Yes, Sir, that’s my baby. . . .” He flashed his professional grin, purposely did it too bright. He laughed a little harder. “You’re like kids who threaten to run away, but you’re scared to leave Poppa. Well, hell, Poppa’s got thirty-five cities full of people and treasure and the life of a goddamn civilization to worry about, so either *get out or sit down!*”

As he shouted at them, he kept the grin going. It must look wild. Absolutely bonkers. He’d done drama at Yale, but only a little. Too bad he hadn’t tackled Lear. Always wanted to, but he’d been a satisfactory Chance Wayne in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, also a well-reviewed Captain Warrington in *Little Mary Sunshine*. He laid his hand on his heart and sang, “In Izzenschnoken on the lovely Essenzook Zee . . .” Chuckled again. “I’m

gonna become Muslim in English,” he said. “If I mispronounce the Arabic, we’re liable to lose another city.”

“Mr. President,” Mike Ryland barked, “I’m not sure you’re well.”

“You know, you’ve got a point. I’ve got a headache, and I’ve had a little gas. Actually, I could be coming down with something. Nothing very serious, though. Death, maybe?” He barked laughter, then cut it off by wiping the air in front of his face. “Never laugh at your own jokes, son. Wise advice.” He glanced at his watch. “Time to go and fuck the world to the wall.” He started out of the room.

Ryland followed him, strutting along like a mechanical man, his bald pate as red as an apple. “Fitz, they can’t hit Washington! We know they’re not hidden in a building and they’re not in one of the tunnels, so they have to fly like they did in Vegas and Rome. They have to fly, Fitz! From Boston to Houston, any unauthorized aircraft has thirty seconds of airtime, Fitz! They cannot take us!”

“Whoop-de-do,” Fitz replied. “So, we’ve given them Rome; let’s give them Paris and Venice and Berlin and Tokyo.”

“Fitz, don’t do this!”

Fitz stopped. “Do you know what they’re smelling right now in Athens? Roast. They’re smelling the Romans literally cooking to death. In *Athens!*”

He could not say more. He could not face his cabinet any longer. He blamed himself for all this. He’d known how vulnerable the security services were to penetration. He’d known how few it would take on the inside to do this damage. But he had not pressed the inspector general, had he? He should have been shouting down telephone lines, forcing the bureaucracy out of its massive inertia.

They had restricted Muslims in the intelligence services. So how hard was it to simply abandon your religious affiliation, especially if you had family and friends to help you? It was like the Cold War, when it had been so difficult to keep the communists out. But worse, there was the matter of money. A lot of cash, just to glance away for a few minutes, what did it matter? It was probably just a marijuana shipment, anyway.

Oh, God. He was the accursed president. This was the worst.

He went out into the Rose Garden. Approached the podium. Faces, camera lenses, microphones. “Good morning, Hugh. Selena. Hi there, Cokie. Okay, folks, we have a very brief time here.” He swallowed. Wanted water. There was no water. “All right.” As never before, he was aware of the silent

presence behind the machines, of the billions who were watching this. The thirty or forty feet between him and the cameras, he imagined, was filled with angels. He allowed himself a little smile, a private moment in what was certainly the most public place in the history of the human species. He wouldn't have been surprised to find that every man, woman, and child on the planet was watching or listening.

“First, I would like to express my belief that there is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet.”

Even the clicking of still cameras came to a halt. From deep within the crowd there was a sudden sound, a cry, instantly stifled. There it was—the end of this age, not a bang, not even a whimper, just that little sigh.

Fitz thought, *What a species we are, that a few words could mean so much.* Then further, but deeper and more insubstantially, he reflected that the great curse of religion was that it tempted people into believing that the story of their deity was more important than the lives of human beings. It came to seem morally right to kill on behalf of the story.

“Now, before Allah and our blessed Mahdi, our guide given to us by a loving God, I say this. Allah in his infinite mercy has allowed the Mahdi to see into our dark hearts, here in the West, and has revealed to him that we were indeed planning a maneuver—an attack—that would have killed the faithful. That's right; we would have killed the faithful. I know you are wondering what that means. It means that we were ready to cause the death of hundreds of millions of people. Their lives were dangling at the end of our great and terrible Crusader sword. But no more. I have this day ordered the American Air Force and all the American military all through the world to stand down. Even as I speak, the planes are returning to their bases, and the missiles are being stowed in the holds of the ships that were about to launch them. And now, I call upon the Mahdi to bring forth new officers to help us enact the holy law of Allah in our land.”

There were tears on faces, other faces disappearing into hands. How ironic that, of all that Fitz had learned and seen in life, the thing that had most truly defined his largest moment, in the end, was his experience as Chance Wayne. The truth was not the word of God. There was no word of God. It was the silence.

Fitz turned and went quickly back into the White House, ignoring the voices wailing out their questions. The Roman emperors might have had problems with assassination, but they hadn't had to worry about the press.

Still, turning his back on the questions shamed him.

But then again, there comes a time in every big hand when a player with good cards feels a tinge of conscience. As Fitz crossed toward the elevator, people rushed forward. “I know that every world leader, every major CEO, every big banker, is on hold. Tell them this. The president says that Šarī’ah law is clear. Follow it.”

Linda and Dan and Logan tried to enter the elevator with him. He held up his hand. They stood, staring out of red, devastated eyes, as he closed them out of his world. They could not follow him, not now.

He did not return to the residence. Instead, he went down to the old Cold War–era White House shelter.

The moment the doors slid open, he heard voices and the clatter of keyboards. An enormous job had been done here in just a matter of hours.

The two Marines on guard duty confronted him. “Sir, the sequence.”

If he got it wrong, they would shoot him immediately, and by his own order. But he would not get it wrong. He had created the sequence himself. “Dulcinea,” he said.

“Sancho Panza,” the master sergeant replied.

“Mahdi.”

They stood aside, and Fitz stepped out into the transformed space. Gone were the elaborate electronic maps that had made this secret chamber one of the wonders of the Cold War world. What was left was raw concrete walls and people working at plastic tables brought in just hours ago. Power lines and fiber-optic cables ran out and down the long tunnel to the Potomac, where four more Marines manned a guard station that bristled with makeshift antennae.

What he had here was a highly sophisticated signals acquisition and communications center that completely bypassed the whole intelligence-gathering infrastructure. It had limitations, of course, but surprisingly few. Jim Deutsch and Nabila al-Rahbi, and Nabila’s group leader, Margaret Pearson, had handpicked the minimum number of people essential for the work. They were from the National Reconnaissance Office, the CIA, the National Security Agency, and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. Even so, there were just eleven people present and two Marines.

Fitz went straight to Deutsch, who huddled with a group of technicians, staring at a laptop.

“Where are we?”

Nobody answered. Nobody stopped working. Fitz could smell the sweat of desperation, the stink of it mingling with the sour damp of the concrete.

Jim Deutsch glanced up. "They have the disk contents uploaded from Pakistan pretty well decoded," he said.

Fitz's heart literally bounded in his chest. A rush of blood made the world sway. "That's wonderful!"

"It doesn't look good."

Elation, then the cliff. "Oh?"

Marge Pearson said, "We're looking at sixteen target cities."

"It's not fifty, at least."

"We have no idea where the bombs are or how big they are, or even if there's really a bomb present in all the cities."

"Which cities?"

"Think world tour. Us, of course. Then New York, London, Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Moscow, Beijing, Tokyo, Riyadh, Los Angeles, Seattle, San Francisco, Dallas, Chicago, and, of course, Jerusalem."

"They got a bomb into Israeli territory?"

"This one is going to be delivered from outside. From Syria, we think. A small plane or missile. In general, delivery is by small planes that are capable of using city streets as runways. In Rome, it was a racecourse."

"Okay, so my next step is to warn the Syrians."

"I wouldn't do that," Deutsch snapped.

A paladin, for sure. Nobody talked to the president of the United States like that. Still, he forged on. "Why not, Mr. Deutsch?"

Deutsch just shook his head, went back to whatever he was doing on that laptop. But Fitz didn't care, because this tiny operation down here represented, however faint, the only chance of winning this war. It was Deutsch who had suggested that he bring in people who had been close to the known traitor, on the theory that they would be most angry and thus the most highly motivated. It was as counterintuitive as all hell, but Fitz had to hope that Deutsch was right and traitors didn't run in packs.

Nabila al-Rahbi, also, was almost certainly loyal. She had the credibility of her religion to save, and Fitz had seen that she was a faithful Muslim of the deepest, truest kind. In fact, her Islam reminded him of his mother's Christianity. Her faith, also, had not been simple, and her intelligence had also tested it constantly, and driven it deep. "Trust grace," Mother had said. "Just trust grace. Faith is nothing but that."

Deutsch had suggested that he bring in Mark Chambers, Rashid's supervisor, and Carol Wilkie, his closest coworker. They had been working hour after hour, without sleep, running drones, pulling data from satellites, all the time cloaking their activities so that other elements in the intelligence community would not be able to detect their mission.

The more information the disk from Pakistan gave up, the more they could zero in on specific target cities, and perhaps isolate the location of the damned bombs.

"What about the specialist teams?"

"Operating in every known target city," Nabila said.

"What're you working on, Deutsch?"

"Our backyard."

"Do you not want me here?"

"No."

The president felt anger flush his face, but Deutsch was too valuable to fire, or even snarl at. Fitz told himself that this wasn't like being slighted by some senator or prime minister. The man was just some professional killer, after all, a guy from the depths one preferred would remain hidden. After this was over, he'd slip back into the shadows. Fitz knew the type.

"If I don't communicate with the Syrians, we risk the loss of Jerusalem, Mr. Deutsch."

Deutsch didn't even look up from his work. "Think," he said absently. "Sir."

"You don't like me, do you?"

Now Deutsch did stop. "That's a typically American question, you know that? We're obsessed with being liked. Most people in most cultures don't give a rat's ass. So forget that and consider this: if the new Mahdi discovers he's being drawn into a bluff, the world blows up."

"If he finds out. And I might save Jerusalem, for God's sake."

"You take that risk, you're a fool."

"You don't care if you're liked by me? That could matter."

"Look, what's happening in here is war fighting, okay, so I don't have time to stroke you. Thank you. Sir."

"Do you have anything for me?"

Deutsch seemed to freeze. "Sir, when we do, you will be called. Obviously. Thank you!"

"In other words, get out."

“Go upstairs and do your crazy-man routine. Lay it on. The weaker you look, the more lives get saved.”

“I’ll do Lear. I’ve always wanted to do Lear.”

“Fine. Good-bye.”

Fitz nodded to Deutsch. Stepped back. “Thank you. Everybody.” He might as well have been in an empty room, for all the reaction he got.

He left, off to do his duty and range the halls of the White House, smiling and muttering for the listening devices that might be there, and hoping to God that the plan that had been evolved mattered.

THE OCCULTATION OF THE MAHDI

No man might know how Allah, in the infinity of his wisdom and the limitlessness of his power, hid his guided one, only those who received the ancient spirit of the Mahdi into their unworthy bodies. The great secret of Inshalla was that for hundreds of years the Mahdi had moved in spiritual form from one human receptacle to another, each chosen by heaven for Allah's own reasons. Aziz had been Mahdi, but now Aziz was dead, killed by women who had been invaded by demons, and who had themselves been killed by corrupt policemen greedy for Crusader gold.

So Eshan had come to this old madrassa, to this old man, Syed Ahmad, following a prearranged instruction.

There were vines here, which Eshan thought were more ancient than this city but not more ancient than its founders, who had come down from the Kush carrying the vines of the blue flowers. They had called this the City of Flowers, and he could imagine them, in their silks and their furs, the fragile, cloudlike clothing of the ancients, tending their blossoms.

Syed Ahmad was not a sophisticate, as Aziz had been. He was not a lover of luxury. He knew the Book, though, far better than Aziz had. When Syed Ahmad spoke, there was music in it, the secret music that only the greatest scholars could ever express, and here he was in this little school, the master of a few boys, who would sit about only half-listening to his genius, their eyes flickering like all eyes to the glitter of life and the lure of the West.

Eshan watched him chew his food and wag his head, his dirty clothes reeking of tobacco and unwashed years. Eshan did not want to serve him, but he could see that the Mahdi was indeed in Syed Ahmad. So he was, literally, the embodiment of the Mahdi now. None knew how the choice was made. Somehow, Inshalla did it . . . and perhaps, Eshan thought, the Russians had a hand in it. He was not blind to political reality. He understood that Allah worked through men, and therefore also through their politics.

The Russians were more clever than the Americans, certainly, but they

could not begin to understand the workings of Allah in the world, could they? This was why the assassins they had sent after Aziz had been, themselves, assassinated. It was because God had needed Aziz to come here to the City of Flowers—thick today, though, with smog, and clattering and roaring with vehicles leaving, with demonstrators and police speeding around in trucks. Shots echoed up and down the streets, disturbing the quiet of this ancient place, too.

“Now,” Syed Ahmad said, standing up from his table in his dining room with its dangling bulb and dirty carpet, and its blue mosaic ceiling a memory—faint—of the dome of the sky. “Here we are when the great event comes to pass.” He went across to a sideboard made of black, fragrant wood, and pulled a small banana from a bunch that lay there in a brass bowl. “And banana trees, with fruit—do you know it? Ah, Eshan, you shake your head. The Book must be in your blood, in your body. People of the Book, my son, that’s what it means. Your discourse must be filled with the Book; thus you only speak from your true heart, which is Allah’s house in you.”

“I have not memorized the Quran.”

The new Mahdi wagged his head from side to side, reminding Eshan of a great ship swaying on the sea, his white beard its sail. But sails were not stained with tobacco, were they? “Then you’re illiterate,” he said.

“Oh yes, in the Book. But I can read. I speak and write in English, too.”

The Mahdi shook a blunt finger. “Useful, useful. Were you, then, schooled by the English?”

Eshan smiled. “They were before my time, Master. Actually, I’m an American. I went to school in New York. Brooklyn, New York.”

“Your faith has been well tested. Have you done hajj?”

“I have. Master, may I now ask you a question?”

Syed took off his glasses and rubbed them with a small blue cloth. For such a dirty man, this new Mahdi was surprisingly fastidious. An orderly nature, as befitted a scholar. He smiled, then, his beard bobbing beneath his long nose. “What is your question?”

“Did you feel it, when you became Mahdi?”

He laughed. He laughed loud. So loud, it began to make Eshan angry, causing him to feel as if he was being mocked. “You do not become Mahdi. The guided one simply opens his eyes. Within me, within you. It doesn’t matter. Look at Aziz. He had business suits and hair pomade, I hear.”

“Until we went to Pamir, he had a Mercedes convertible. He was the toast

of Tehran.” Eshan paused for a moment. “He drank. He smoked hashish.”

“Allah is merciful.”

“But . . . how are you chosen? Why did I have your address? Why did you expect me?”

“What do you think? That this would all happen by virtue of the breeze? But speak no more of it.”

When they came down to Peshawar, a boy had brought Eshan this name and address, so he had done as he had been instructed, and come to this place as soon as he saw that Aziz was being killed. But . . . had the women been ordered to kill Aziz? Perhaps that Persian catamite was involved, that wretched child, sent as a spy from who knew who? He was no student, apprenticed to Aziz by a loving father, that shadow-slipping boy with his seductive hands.

The women and the catamite had, in their turns, been killed. Somebody cleaning up after themselves, Eshan assumed, in this world where nothing was as it seemed.

On the way to Syed, Eshan had passed through the street of the shoemakers, as the note had instructed. He’d felt nothing but had afterward discovered something in his pocket. An Olympus recorder with a full tape in it.

“I have the recording, Master.”

“Oh, that’s good. And is the trap lying open? Have they stepped in?”

Eshan had no idea how to answer this, so he turned on the recorder to let the Mahdi listen. There was the usual creaking and popping. Syed Ahmad raised his eyebrows.

“He puts on the suit jacket. The transmitters are located in the jackets. Woven into the cloth by—”

The master held up his hand. “I do not need to know this.”

President Fitzgerald’s voice came through. “Better,” it said. “Now I look like a corpse that’s pretending to be alive.”

“What is this?” the master asked.

“How is your English, Mahdi?”

“My English is from school, but I still don’t understand this sentence. How is he pretending? He is alive.”

“It’s not important. He talks only to his wife.”

Then, more faintly, Linda Fitzgerald’s voice: “Where’s that paladin of yours?” Then the daughter’s voice came, speaking of the “guy with the

Muslim wife.”

“And all of this means?”

“ ‘Paladin’ means a hero or champion. He must have an operative that he trusts who has a Muslim wife.”

“But not himself Muslim? How strange, to be so close to the faith and not desire it.”

“Americans are strange.”

“This faithless husband needs stoning.”

Then the president’s voice came again: “Are the spiders in the web?”

“What does he say?”

“He refers to his viziers. He does not trust them.”

There was a clunk, then the sound of shuffling. “He enters the Cabinet Room. They come to their feet. Now, listen.”

The president spoke for a moment, saying that he would do the “Allah two-step.”

“The Allah two-step? That is a term of respect?”

“It is not a term of respect.”

“Then his acceptance of the faith was not sincere?”

The entire world had seen his acceptance of Islam. “That I cannot say. Certainly he is angry. But that’s to be expected. Islam becomes very quickly a habit of soul. This is why, once converted, so few fall away from the faith. But it’s hard for them at first. You know.”

“Yes, Eshan, very well. What is next?”

“The acceptance, which you saw.”

“Yes, and then what did he say in his privacy?”

“For twenty minutes, nothing. The signal was lost for a time.”

“Ah. Why is that?”

“You hear him walking, then a whirring sound, then static. Ten minutes later, the whirring again, then he walks, speaking . . . some sort of declamation.”

“May I listen?”

Eshan sped the tape forward until he heard the peeping of speech again. When he slowed the machine, the president’s voice returned: “ ‘Come, let’s away to prison: We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage: When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down, and ask of thee forgiveness: so we’ll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues talk of court news . . . ’ ” Then he laughed, muttered, and went

on declaiming.

“This means what?”

“Master, this is unknown to me. It’s in a old form of English. Perhaps a poem.”

The master looked at him, then stood and went across the broad room, his stockinged feet whispering on the weathered blue mosaic. “It is said that the devil is a mule, Eshan. Do you know of that saying?”

“No, Master.”

He chuckled. “This American devil is indeed such a creature—stubborn without cause, mean out of his deepest nature, habitually cruel.” He pointed a finger at Eshan, a long finger, the nail pale sculpted ivory. “Mind me, he knows very well that we are listening, and I tell you this—what we want to hear is what he said when the static was on. This is when he spoke the truth.” He waved the hand, opening it as if freeing a bird to the air. “All we have heard is a lie.”

“He has not embraced the faith?”

“He has not.”

Eshan tried to understand. “Then, Master . . . is he mad?”

“But of course, mad not to take the hand of Allah when it is extended to him. In his madness, I am afraid he leads the world further down the Crusader path, and all else is lies.”

“What is to be done?”

“All things come to him who waits.”

“That is a saying of the Jews.”

“Who respects the Jews has their measure. We will now punish Washington.”

“We cannot accomplish this at present.”

“Ah, no? You think not? I think that Allah has fixed that which was broken, my son, because Allah knew that the time to punish the Crusader capital was not two nights ago. It is now.”

His dark eyes twinkled, and Eshan knew that the Mahdi truly had entered Syed, for how otherwise could he possibly have such insight?

Syed laughed. “You wear your puzzlement so clearly, Eshan, you of the hopping eyebrows!” The laughter extended, then faded to a gentle sadness. “A carpet, Eshan, is woven of many threads. You are but one thread.”

“Then we are proceeding against Washington, Master?”

“It saddens my heart, that so many must suffer for the obstinacy of so

few.”

Eshan tried to contain the explosion of joy that came up within him, but the sheer intensity of it caused a ripple of delighted laughter—whereupon the master gave him a slap with a hand as soft as a woman’s. There was no real pain, but he turned his head aside, bowing to the shame. “Forgive me, Master.”

“Tell me, do you miss Aziz?”

This question frightened Eshan, because there could be no right answer.

The Mahdi gave him that charming smile, then touched his cheek. “Sometimes he worked for Mr. Deutsch, you know. Sometimes for the Russians. Did you know?”

Eshan struggled to quell his hammering heart. If there was the slightest suspicion of him, his life was over. “I killed the Russian contact with my own hands,” he said. “I slit his throat.”

Syed Ahmad smiled brightly. “Now come and help me pack and move, for it is certain that the Americans will unleash Dream Angel the moment that our beloved bomb detonates. We must hide among their running dogs, or we will be burned with the faithful.”

“Do we not desire martyrdom?”

“Of course we do, but we have work to do for Allah; we cannot yet allow ourselves to inhale the sweet scent of heaven.”

Eshan remembered the death of Aziz, and for the first time the thought touched his mind that this man might have been behind it, somehow. When the eyes twinkled again, Eshan saw something behind the merry glitter, a stillness of a sort he had seen just once before, but unforgettably. It had been in India. He had been walking along a path by a stream. It was twilight. In a field nearby, children were playing soccer, their voices echoing. He’d seen, beyond the path, something so still that he thought at first that it was a statue. Another instant, though, and he realized that the gold he was seeing belonged to the eyes of a tiger. It was watching the children. They were only Hindus, so he had hurried on.

Syed Ahmad of the tiger’s eyes stood. “Nowadays there is never enough time for tea!” He swept off into the deeper parts of the house, Eshan going quickly behind.

A LEG UP

As Rashid entered Alexandria, he became careful, and then very careful. There were few people about, most of them either gone or respecting the curfew. He did not doubt that there was a bulletin out for him by now. Once they lost him, they would be beside themselves, putting all of their resources to work. Would his own supporters keep him safe? They were salted here and there, two in the FBI that he was aware of, certainly a few more in the CIA, in Homeland Security, in the National Intelligence Office, cutting false orders, diverting real ones.

He'd spent the day sitting in his car listening to the radio news and watching to see how the local police patrols were organized. When he'd heard Fitzgerald sniveling about his conversion, Rashid had instantly known that Allah had granted Washington these additional hours precisely so that the cowardice of the Crusader king could be revealed to the whole world. Allah, beloved father, was always a step ahead of the devil.

Rashid drove until he found an indoor parking garage, then went in deep. He parked the car and climbed the stairs to street level, where he watched the sparse traffic for a time without stepping out. When he did so, he kept his head down. It was a long chance, but a skilled analyst could come close to identifying a specific individual, if the target was looking up at just the right moment. He had personally made Osama bin Laden four times. Nothing had happened, though.

Rashid had never met Bilal and Hani Aboud, the Moroccans who were responsible for this most important of all the bombs. How it was that Inshalla had chosen them, Rashid did not know. Obviously, though, something was not right.

He walked out into a ghostly quiet. Stores were closed, some of them with steel shutters. This was actually helpful. Although he was the only person on the street, which obviously made him a target of the police, it was also true that it would be easy for him to spot the opposition.

He walked steadily and quickly, keeping as close to buildings as he could,

taking advantage of any overhead cover that presented itself. In tracking, he knew what he was capable of, and Mark was even better, and he would be highly motivated, for sure, Mark who was facing weeks of interrogation about the mole who had worked for him, and probably would see his career go into terminal decline. So Mark was up there in the sky looking right now, as were they all.

In addition to worrying about what might be happening overhead, Rashid had to think about the police. There were few squad cars, thankfully, and the National Guard was not deployed in this death trap, so his chances of encountering anybody were not great. Still, he stayed off of short streets as much as possible. He didn't want some damned cop to come swooping around the corner before he had a chance to conceal himself.

He had been walking for three blocks when he heard a faint sound, perhaps a car engine. For a moment, he saw no place of concealment, but then he noticed that one of the stoops of the row houses he was passing had a small space under it. He slipped in, forcing himself down among the garbage cans that were kept there, making as little noise as possible.

The sound became more distinct, an engine nearly on idle, coming closer. Automobile, he thought. No lights, though. The police, then, being very stealthy.

This did not seem like a routine patrol. This seemed like what might happen if they had been sent here to look for somebody. Rashid forced himself not to look, not to even think about moving.

Something tickled his ankle. Then he felt a pinch. Of all things, a damned rat was biting him. He loathed filthy creatures like snakes and rats. When he moved, though, the garbage cans immediately rattled, and the gutturing of the engine was now distinct, so he had to simply hold his breath and bear it, an awful sensation, stinging, then tickling as the creature licked at the blood it was drawing. He was sickened; his skin crawled.

Then he heard voices, soft, intent, and a shaft of light appeared, shining along the wall. He watched it play carefully around the stoop. A glow filled the cul-de-sac. He pressed himself hard against the back wall . . . and the light moved slowly away.

He begged God to make them leave, because the rat was tearing at the skin now, sending excruciating waves of pain up Rashid's leg. He tried to move the garbage cans, but again there was sound—a scraping. And again the light returned.

Click. The car door had been opened. There were steps on the sidewalk, and the scuff of feet on the two steps down. Rashid could hear the cop breathing, in and out, in and out, a slight wheeze to it. Crashing, then.

“Shit!”

“What?”

“They got every garbage can in town down here.”

The pain in his leg stopped and the flashlight beam wavered as the rat sped into the pool of light that ended just an inch from Rashid’s crouching body.

“It’s a rat,” the cop said, his voice now uninterested. A moment later he was back in the car and the danger had ended. Still Rashid crouched, trying to get his heart to slow down. Allah, he knew, had done this. What rat bites through a man’s trouser leg and chews at living flesh? No, it had been a miracle, God making sure that the rat would be present when needed. “Thanks be to God,” he breathed. He waited, though, until the guttering of the engine had entirely faded and been gone for a time. Then he came out, allowing the cans to clatter a little. At first, he stood in the shadow beneath the stoop. Then he stepped back up onto the sidewalk. With the streetlights out—and they had been turned off earlier all over the Washington area, presumably to make it more difficult for any pilot to locate his target—the street was now far darker than it had been. But even so, just before this Rashid had been able to see. Then he realized, of course, the moon had set.

It had been over a year since he had gone online to find this house on a map. He had done it from a computer at a public library in Bethesda, and mapped a nearby location, not the actual house. He had also concealed his search in a series of other searches for local Wal-Marts and Target stores. This made him fairly sure that his tracks were covered, but again, he knew the skills of the analysts in Nabila’s department. Somehow, they might be able to uncover his search, although he could not imagine how.

He moved through the silence and blackness, no longer bothering to keep close to walls. There was no point. That sort of maneuver made it harder to get visuals, but a single man walking the streets on a cool night had an unconcealable infrared signature. If the cops were being directed from above, they would be back very shortly, and this time he would not escape.

He walked quickly, moving down one block and another, past houses, then bleak-fronted apartment buildings, their lobbies dark. A dog followed him for a time, a gray, panting shadow. “Come,” he murmured, “come along,” but the dog went off. Too bad; it would have appeared less suspicious.

Here and there, he saw a parked car, but never one that looked as if it could be easily used. And then it hit him like thunder from the hollows of his soul: You are here to die. If you are successful, you will not see another dawn.

He stopped, held his hands before him, two pale claws. His tongue felt his teeth, his skin the cool air. His mind was filled with images, memories, thoughts—and suddenly he saw inside himself a truth that he had been denying for years or, rather, covering with an increasing elaboration of prayer. This was that the Muslim promise of a heaven stocked with virgins seemed boring to him. More than that, he did not, he had to admit, believe in heaven at all, or hell, or anything, really, except the night air that surrounded him now, and the fact of death. So, why did he do this? He had no answer. He was face-to-face with the mystery of the soul.

Then he came to the critical block. The house was just around the corner. He could not assess the situation by walking to one end, then doubling back, or going around the block, or anything like that. Anything except going directly to the house and quickly letting himself in would be immediately suspect. So he walked down the sidewalk, crossed in the middle of the street, and approached the door of the red-brick row house. The street was so quiet that the only sound was the whisper of his sneakers on the pavement. Although the Air Force planes cruising above showed no lights, he knew that they were there, too high to be heard, knife-edge planes piloted by magically skillful men who would swoop after him the moment he became airborne. He had no illusions about this. The flying of the plane would be his responsibility. The only question was, what had happened to the Aboud brothers? They had not been captured, of that he was certain, because his unit at the NGIA would have been among the first to know and he had not been discovered until after they had failed to detonate their bomb.

He reached the front of the house and went up the steps. In his training, he'd learned the particular locks that were installed on all of the buildings that were in use for this project. Simple locks had been chosen intentionally, and the tongues had been filed to allow easy entry to anybody who knew the secret. Their security did not rest in things like locks. A lock couldn't keep out the authorities, and they were the only threat that mattered.

He drew his American Express card out of his wallet and pressed it into the doorjamb, an act that he had practiced many times in camp but never again, certainly not at home, where he had left the locks alone. Nabila's department had installed the locks, the alarm system, and her safe room, and he did

nothing but use what he was cleared to use.

He slid the card but encountered no resistance. Odd. As he was sliding it again, he heard a distinct sound, very faint. He froze, listening. Was this a jet engine, perhaps, very high? A fighter, perhaps an E-4B . . . or no, a drone.

But it was none of these things, and he knew instantly that a car was drawing near, was not a block away, was moving slowly along the street. Had he been spotted by an infrared system?

Again, he slid the card. Again, no resistance.

The engine noise became distinct. He slid the card—same result. Then he had a thought—perhaps the door was unlocked. He pushed at it . . . and it opened. Not a good sign.

The blackness inside was so absolute that he could see only the faint sparks generated behind his eyes by his own nervous system. With this blindness came the unsettling feeling that somebody might be standing in front of him. He stepped forward, feeling with his hands. How might the house be laid out? The garage, he had seen as he came in, was to his right. That would be where the plane would be kept, presumably also the bomb. He felt in that direction but kept swiping air. Finally, he turned that way. There was no wall; therefore there must be a large room.

He stepped once, twice—and his foot hit the leg of something. Glass shattered, and there were blue sparks. He had knocked over a floor lamp. From somewhere there came a sighing sound, as if somebody who had been holding their breath had tried to cover a sharp inhalation under the noise and not quite succeeded. For some time, Rashid stood motionless, listening to the house. Faintly, water ran in a toilet, the steady gurgle of a bad valve. There was an odor of cumin-seasoned food, old and stale. He took a step into what he knew now was the living room. Behind it would be the dining room and, somewhere on the far wall, a door into the kitchen. There, he hoped, he would be able to find a flashlight, which he would use to enter the garage. He knew how the plane would work, and he thought he might be able to extend the wings on his own. If not, he would detonate the bomb right here. Despite the fact that it would not be an airburst and it was ten miles from Washington, the destruction would be gigantic. Certainly the Pentagon would be completely destroyed. The Capitol's dome would be smashed, the Washington Monument knocked down, the White House set ablaze. Alexandria and Arlington would be devastated and Georgetown set alight. Radiation would be everywhere, and the American government—what of it

remained intact—would be forced to permanently relocate. The shame of it would haunt America for generations to come. The ruins of Washington would become a permanent symbol of America the powerless.

Forcing himself to move slowly, to use his hands like eyes rather than flailing them, he found the far wall, which was bare. In fact, except for the one lamp he'd had the bad luck to hit, the room itself was almost empty. This was a mistake. A safe house should look in every respect like a home; that was what they had been taught, and it was good teaching.

He found that he could see the outlines of windows faintly, and was soon able to guide himself into the kitchen. Then the door was under his hands. He took the knob and opened it.

At once, there was a smell, and he knew that it was blood, raw blood, and not yet decayed. What was here? What was he finding? He fumbled down into the garage itself, into a complicated mass of protruding obstacles. Tools clattered on a workbench as he drifted his hands along it. And then he felt something else, a softness, wet and dense, like a soaked sponge, but large. Gingerly he felt its rough edges, its damper center, then along the smoothness of it, feeling farther and faster, the cold, elastic quality under his fingers.

Frantic now, afraid of what this was, he felt for some sort of light, found a string, and pulled it, but uselessly. All the power in the region must be turned off.

But then he had something in his hand—a metal tube. Yes—he found the button; he pressed it, and found himself shining the flashlight beam on a man's severed leg.

Gasping, forcing back his cries, he stumbled away from the workbench. Flashing the light around, he saw that there was blood everywhere, most especially on a green chain saw that had obviously been used to do this horrific thing.

But why? Who?

And then he understood. To be certain, he swung the light toward the bulky shape of the plane. It stood complete, the wings folded back. They had only to be drawn straight, he saw, and hooked down.

In the cockpit was exactly what he expected to find, the slumped body of Balil Aboud. He had cut off his own leg to make himself light enough to get the plane off the ground. His brother, therefore, had either run away or died. Balil's hands clutched the stick, his fingers skeletal claws. His face was twisted with concentration, his teeth bared in a grimace of rawest agony.

Somehow, this man had sawed his own leg off, had dragged himself to the plane, had gotten in. But how? And why bother, given that he couldn't hope to get it out onto the street, let alone open the wings? Then Rashid saw the prints of shoes in the blood on the floor, and they made what had happened here quite clear. Hani had faltered in his courage, and Balil had tried to replace him. The plan had been for Hani to push the plane out and lock the wings open. But it had not happened that way, obviously.

Had Balil died here and then Hani run away? Or had Hani been a traitor from the beginning, in the pay of the Americans, perhaps, or the Saudi king, who paid bribes to jihadists all the time, the filthy dog? In any case, what Rashid saw here was the reason that Washington still stood.

"I have a gun."

He turned, shining the light in the direction of the voice. In the doorway stood what was almost a human skeleton, a hollow-eyed, sunken shadow of a human being. Held in both clenched fists, his arms shaking so much it seemed as if he would drop it at any moment, was a .38-caliber revolver, a Police Special. The man was so weak that he could barely lift the small weapon. With its short barrel, it was not particularly accurate, but Rashid would not take that chance.

"Hani, Allah forgives. Allah is merciful."

"There is no Allah! Allah is a lie!"

"Now, you know that isn't true. You know that Allah is in your heart."

The pistol began to shake more. He was trying to fire it, to pull back the trigger, but he was very weak. To make him light enough to fly, his brother must have starved him.

Rashid leaped at him, throwing him back into the kitchen. He hit hard, his head thudding against the floor. Rashid straddled him, no longer knowing where the gun was. He lifted Hani's shoulders and slammed his head against the floor. There was a grunt, and he lay still. When Rashid shone the flashlight on him, he cringed away from it.

Rashid smiled at Hani. "It's nothing. I understand. There's no shame in this."

"There is shame."

"You still have a chance."

"I cannot fly the plane."

"But I can, Hani. I'm within the weight range."

Hani gave him a careful look. "I thought you would kill me."

Rashid wished dearly that he could. But never mind, Hani would get his justice along with the rest of the devils in this evil place. “No, no, there’s no shame. There’s no blame, Hani. You must do for me what your brother was going to do for you, and help me run the plane out.”

“Who are you? How did you come here?”

“I’m nobody from nowhere. Now come.”

As he returned to the garage, Hani followed. Shining the light into the plane, Rashid saw, for the first time in his life, one of the legendary bombs. It was stowed in a carrier just behind Balil’s ruined body, a steel darkness. Rashid couldn’t make out the exact shape, except that it was a rough ball covered with what looked like blasting caps. There were many wires, which appeared disturbingly delicate.

He followed the wire harness around beside the pilot’s seat to where it ended in a covered switch. He opened the switch cover. In tiny Arabic script were written below the silver toggle the words “Courage for the heart” and above “God is great.”

He touched the switch. That was all that was necessary, simply to flip that toggle a quarter of an inch. That would forever change the world. Forever. “How great you are, O God,” he whispered, fingering it.

“I thought of triggering it here. Right here.”

“But you couldn’t even do that?”

“I’ve never seen anything. I have never made love. I have no children.”

“Help me now,” Rashid said.

Balil’s body had stiffened, and as they forced it out of the plane, the garage was filled with the sound of cracking bones.

“At midnight,” Rashid said, “I will fly.”

“And will it . . . wreck this house?”

For an instant, Rashid was going to tell him the truth. Just in time, though, he caught himself. “Oh no. The house will shake. Be damaged. But the explosion will not carry this far.” He gave Hani what he hoped was a believably reassuring smile. “It’s safe here for you. Safe enough.”

As Rashid embraced Hani, he continued smiling, but to himself. *May this devil burn in the firestorm that will be triggered by the bomb. May he burn slow.*

**A NIGHT-BLOOMING
FLOWER**

“You’ve never done operational work, Nabby,” Jim Deutsch said to his wife. “Stay cool. Things can happen fast. Just rely on me; this is my office.”

“Jim, I’m cool.”

“No, you aren’t.”

They were sitting together in the tightly confined space of an FBI surveillance van, which had been modified for radiation detection. The space was packed with technology, maybe useful, maybe not.

“We could see action and I want you to *not* get involved. You cannot handle a gun.”

“I can, and I’ve got one.”

She showed him her little Backup.

“That’s for close-in work. It feels like protection in a firefight, but it’s not protection. Too inaccurate.”

“Should I not use it?”

“Keep it close to hand, but don’t get ambitious.”

They had now been working Alexandria for four extraordinarily tense hours, moving slowly down each street, watching their screens and drinking endless cups of coffee. So far, they had detected eleven medical X-ray facilities and one dental office with what turned out to be a damaged X-ray machine. Now they were methodically covering every residence that was close to a medical X-ray facility, on the theory that the bomb had been hidden inside the radiation signature of such a facility.

It was now eleven forty. Fitz had capitulated in order to buy time, but the Mahdi’s latest message had been quite clear: all of his demands had to be met or Washington would die tonight.

Few of his demands had actually been met, though. Certainly, no bankers were being rounded up, and the worldwide *hijab* rebellion continued.

At least there had been a certain mercy, in that the time gained so far had

enabled more orderly evacuation of the region. The president had personally asked the demonstrators to leave, and many of them had, including all of those with children. Still, though, a certain number remained around the White House, singing and praying, their voices echoing through the darkness that had descended with sunset. There was not a single light, not a cigarette, not a penlight, in all that crowd.

The White House, the Capitol, all of the monuments were darkened as well. Only deep inside the most secret places was there light and activity, such as the White House bunker where Marge and Mark and the others were making progress only by agonizing inches.

Despite the security issues, the original disk had now been flown to the United States. It was at a classified NSA facility, with another team working on it there.

As they passed down a long street, an indicator spiked. “Stop, please,” Nabila said. The driver braked. “What have you got?”

“Go, now,” she murmured.

The van moved off, bouncing a little as it accelerated, the equipment bays rattling.

“We have it,” she said simply. “Back there, the third house. The bomb is there.”

“You’re certain?”

“Oh yes. Western X-ray is across the alley, right behind the house, but their signature would not extend this far. And yet we have a good signal. It’s there.”

“Invisible from above, though.”

“Completely hidden, yes, thanks to Western X-ray. The only place to find it is from the street. But we have found it.”

He got on the horn. “We have a hit. It is a full positive. Please set the deployment well back, and deliver a blueprint of the property pronto.”

As Nabby listened, her eyes grew moist. Jim understood that he could not know her emotions. Her family had been extremely close. Rashid was like an extension of her own soul. She loved him that deeply.

“Nabby, when it’s somebody you love, it does things to your judgment. Be careful.”

She shook away her tears. “I can do this.”

“It might come to him dying.”

“Jim, Rashid is not my brother. My brother has died already. The man in

there is the Dajjal, as are they all, all the ones who do this. It has stolen their bodies and killed their souls.”

The Dajjal was the Muslim equivalent of the Antichrist. Ideas like that didn't resonate with Jim, but if they gave her the courage she needed, then fine. If Rashid was here, she was going to face some terrible moments. To Jim, people who could kill for ideas were always the same—narcissists unable to empathize with others, their hearts killed by their ideas. As far as he was concerned, a person who was willing to murder another because they disbelieved some story was not a fully developed human being, and that included all religious fundamentalists, all political ideologues, all fanatics.

“You sigh,” Nabby said.

“Remember this: even if this bomb is detonated right here, inside that house, it's going to cause incredible damage. We have only one mission: prevent that bomb from detonating, no matter who dies.” He reached out to her, drinking in her wide, soul-rich eyes in the amber glow that filled the tiny space. Both of her small hands took one of his great paws. “I'll go in first,” he said. “If he's there and I need you, I'll call you.”

“The house plans are downloaded.”

He turned in his seat and viewed them. He noted the date, August 13, 2002. No legal alterations had been recorded since then. But if there was a plane in there—and he was certain that there was—there were going to be major internal changes. He concentrated on the basic outlines, the street-facing rooms. What was it like deeper inside? Too bad he couldn't know.

“I'm as ready as I'll ever be,” he said into his radio.

There was a brief silence while the coordinator checked the many levels of response. There were four SWAT teams on the ground, which would now all move to drop-off points just out of sight of the target location. Overhead, the entire airborne response force was targeting this immediate area. Bomb neutralization teams from Homeland Security and three police forces were deploying.

And, as Jim knew perfectly well, it was all pretty much useless, because no matter who was in there, all they had to do would be flip some switch or push some button and the entire region would go up in flames, centered on the crater that would be all that was left of Alexandria.

The radio beeped. “This is the president,” came Fitz's familiar voice. “I wish all of you the very greatest success in this endeavor. May God be with us all.”

Then, a young man's voice: "Radio silence now, please."

The frequencies they were using wouldn't be picked up by even the most sophisticated retail scanning equipment, but who knew what these people might possess? Fitz should have kept off the damn horn.

An image flickered onto one of the screens that lined the packed walls of the van. It was a bright shot of the house in full color, looking like day.

Jim busted radio silence. "Pull that damn Global Hawk out *now!*" he snapped.

"Global Hawks are invisible from the ground," Nabby said.

They were indeed equipped with transference technology camouflage, which displayed a continuous picture of the sky above the plane off its lower surfaces, but at low altitude a small amount of engine noise would reach the street. Normally, not enough to matter. "The city's too quiet," Jim said.

The image flickered off. The Hawk was gone.

Jim took a deep breath, let it out. He did not want to take Nabby with him, but he saw no choice. If Rashid was in there and he had his finger on the button, she was the only hope—and a faint one—of getting him to change his mind. "Eleven forty-six," Jim said. "Are we in place?"

The FBI explosives team was there. These men had suppression equipment that could prevent blasting caps from detonating. Wonderful technology, but they would need to get close to the bomb, and they would need time.

Jim opened the door of the van onto what had become a cold, windy night. There was a suggestion of rain in the air. Low overhead, clouds had begun racing down from the north. Jim would have liked night-vision equipment, but there was no use in calling further attention to the operation.

He'd hoped for alternate entry to the house, but there were only the two doors. Nabila came out beside him.

"I'm going to need to go in through the back," Jim said.

"I can distract him. Knock on the door."

"No! The least sign of activity, that bomb is going off."

As he began to move away, Nabila grabbed his arm. "Don't just leave me here!"

"Nabby—"

"I can help you. I have to, Jim." Her fingers tightened around his wrist.

"Your job is here. You control these people. You do it right."

Her eyes bored into his. "It's not going to work. Any of it. And you know it, don't you?"

Drawing away from her, he stepped out into the alley.

SISTER AND BROTHER

The SWAT teams that surrounded this place had already confirmed that there were no spotters or snipers posted anywhere. The house was meant to seem totally innocuous, and so was unguarded.

The house was a different story, though. The house would be bristling with guns.

He moved down the alley, staying close to the walls of buildings, careful to never expose himself to a sight line from one of the back windows. In his life, he'd done hundreds of entries like this, but never with stakes this high, of course. Not only did an entire city depend on this working, but that city was Washington, D.C.

He came to the back door, which was approached by two concrete steps. As he mounted them, he kept below the line of the window in the door. He crouched, listening against the wooden door. The urge to just smash the damn thing to kindling and get in there and try to kill the guy was almost more than he could suppress.

The lock was simple enough, but it would need a lock pick, not a credit card, which meant that there was going to be a slight click. He listened harder, pressing his ear against the wooden door. There was dripping, that was all. Of course, there could be a guard in there, somebody with the skill to remain silent. Could be Rashid, even. He wasn't a man easy to anger, but he found himself eager to kill Rashid.

He inserted the lock pick, felt for the slight resistance of the tumblers, was momentarily stopped by a shield in the cylinder, then got past it. The lock dropped open with a noise so loud it actually echoed. The damn thing sounded like a bullet!

Or rather, this was one very quiet place—of course, it would be, a safe house in an evacuated city that was waiting to die.

Nothing happened, so he pushed the door open. In the stuffy fetor that emerged, he smelled the unmistakable odor of blood. It was not brand-new but not old, either. So violence had been done here. He thought he was about

to find out why the bomb had not been detonated.

He penetrated deeper into the kitchen. The clock on the microwave oven offered the only illumination. He watched it change to 11:47. Vegas at midnight. Rome at midnight . . .

Jim closed his eyes, inhaled deeply. Blood, the dressing of salad eaten sometime this evening, still full of the volatile scents of seasonings . . . more faintly, oh yes, that would be aviation fuel, and the fuel can would have been opened within the hour or the fumes would be gone.

The blood was older, so whoever had cracked the fuel can was probably still very much alive. They would be with the plane, and he did not think it likely that he could reach them in time to prevent their flipping their switch. In fact, the moment they detected the least sign of his presence, this city would be destroyed.

The door to the garage, he recalled, would be on his left. It was so dark, though, that he couldn't be sure of his bearings. He moved ahead with extreme care, sliding his hands along the floor as he proceeded. All he could do here was get as close to them as humanly possible. To try.

Explosives suppression was a difficult business. There were no ray guns; that was for damn sure. To prevent a cap from detonating, it needed to be surrounded by a group of devices with highly specialized properties. This was slow, careful work for experts. If they were looking at a plutonium implosion bomb, it would be a sphere arrayed with many such caps, all timed to explode at precisely the same instant and compress the plutonium core so that it would go critical—and the rest would be history.

He found the door and slid his hand along it until he grasped the handle. The knob was cool beneath his fingers. Very carefully, he moved it slightly. The door was unlocked.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, preparing himself for what was beyond question the most important moment he had ever known or would probably ever know. It was a warrior's moment, and he forced his attention to leave his screaming, jabbering mind and focus on the beating of his heart, the sensation of his muscles, on his hearing and his eyes.

He turned the knob until the tongue was fully retracted.

His life was punctuated by moments like this, which involved sudden, violent movements into dangerous places. He did not allow himself to consider death. That was for peaceful nights under the stars. He was aware, instead, of every muscle wound tight. You needed to be ready to act faster

than thought, like an animal.

To minimize any squeal of hinges, he drew the door open fast, causing a gust of fuel-soaked air to hit him in the face.

He found the place lit thin blue by a fluorescent lantern, and also found that there was nobody immediately visible. Quickly he scanned the space. The wall of the family room behind the garage had been knocked down to create a makeshift hangar.

Before him stood a small airplane, its broad wings folded back against its fragile fuselage. He thought it was kit built, perhaps even specially designed. From its configuration, he could see immediately that it was able to take off in a very short distance.

The evacuation had played into their hands, because on a normal night pulling this thing out into the middle of traffic, setting the wings, and taking off would have been all but impossible.

They must have counted on a curfew, even an evacuation. This was a symbolic strike, after all. They weren't after people here; they were after a way of life, and the city that organized it and enabled it to unfold.

Wreck Washington, break the will of America . . . and, icing on the cake, throw the country into political and economic chaos from which it would never recover, not in its current form.

What the evacuation had done was give them their runway. Poor old Fitz had been so proud of it, too. "All those lives being saved," he had said. For what? To people who had lived in freedom, death would appear better than the life the Mahdi was going to force on them.

Jim was beside the tail of the plane, standing in the doorway from the kitchen. The room was entirely silent, or so it seemed at first. But rooms were never silent. No place was silent. He looked from the bloodstained workbench and the meat-encrusted chain saw lying on it to the garage door. He listened for breathing, heard none.

There was what seemed to be an earsplitting click and the garage door began to open. For the first time in his professional life, Jim was so surprised that he almost cried out.

An instant later, the plane's engine screamed into shattering life. He hadn't heard anybody because the pilot was already inside the plane, invisible behind its folded wings. Jim stepped down into the garage proper, went to the plane, and grasped the tail.

Then he felt weight—somebody on his back. The weight didn't stop him; it

felt like a child. Jim shifted, intending to scrape the kid off him. In that moment, the plane bounded forward—and the kid was gone. Jim started after the plane, which had gone down the short driveway of the row house and was now in the street.

He jerked to one side and ripped at a thin shoulder, tossing the skeletal child off his back. The kid hit the wall hard and slid down it. He was a human skeleton. Horrible. Had he been a prisoner? Or no—the bomb probably ate up all the lift the plane had to offer. He had starved himself so that he could fly it.

Had he gotten cold feet? Was he somehow incapacitated? And who was the pilot?

None of it mattered. What mattered was preventing that plane from taking off and at the same time not allowing the pilot to see him.

But how could it take off? The wings were still folded. There was a two-man job ahead, but now there was only one man.

The plane idled. The pilot was waiting for his accomplice. A glance at the kid told Jim that the accomplice was done.

The only problem now was the surrounding mass of personnel. If anybody made a mistake and showed themselves, that pilot was going to detonate his bomb immediately. The only chance they had was to disable the plane just as it was taking off, to crash the thing before he could push the button.

The plane's engine continued to idle. The pilot wouldn't wait long, and indeed the fuselage began to rock, as he twisted and turned in the cockpit, trying to see behind.

Jim stepped back into the shadows, dropping down beside the tool bench.

The pilot came out, bending low under one of the folded wings. He looked back toward the garage. "Hani!"

Jim saw that it was Rashid. Nabby would see this, too, on about four different monitors in the van. Moving with the greatest care, Jim drew the M9 he'd been issued at the White House. But Rashid was at least two hundred feet away, standing just behind the folded wing. If Jim missed and hit the bomb, Rashid would earn his heavenly virgins and so would everybody for twenty miles around. Normally, Jim would have no problem, even though the pistol's rated effective range was about 150 feet. But he had never fired this particular weapon, and if you were going to stretch range like that, and at night, you needed to know your pistol very, very well.

Rashid turned to the plane and quickly unfolded and locked the wing. Then

he walked around the fuselage.

Taking advantage of fact that the bulk of the plane hid him, Jim moved quickly across the garage. Now he was perhaps eighty feet from Rashid. Close enough, no question. As soon as the head appeared in the cockpit, Jim could squeeze off a shot that would not miss.

He knelt and braced the pistol.

Rashid appeared in the cockpit.

“Rashid!”

The voice blasted in Jim’s ear. Instinct swung him fast. Before he could stop himself, before he could think, he squeezed off four fast shots, sending Hani crashing against the back wall of the garage in a haze of blood and smoke.

The plane was on its way down the street, its wingtips just clearing obstacles such as light poles and a public mailbox.

Jim ran, his legs hammering. There was no longer any chance of preventing Rashid from pushing his button. He was going to detonate the bomb, no question. Now all that mattered was that he do it here on the ground and not achieve a far more damaging airburst.

The plane gathered speed slowly, and Jim gained on it. Closer. Closer still. He aimed the pistol. It didn’t matter anymore what he hit. Keep the damn thing on the ground; that was what mattered.

He’d done four rounds. He had eleven left. Properly placed, they could tear the little aircraft apart.

Then he saw, coming from ahead of it, another running figure. He saw white clothing; he saw black hair.

“Nabila! Nabila, get down!”

He had to shoot. There was no choice. And what did it matter if he hit her or not? They were all dead, anyway.

Incredibly, the plane rotated. Just like that, its nose turned skyward and it seemed to dance off the pavement and into the sky, and Nabby was hanging in the landing gear, her feet kicking as she struggled for purchase.

He stood there, his pistol raised, as the plane’s engine screamed and the aircraft wallowed, then heeled badly. He saw the rudder snap far to the right, saw the flaps work—and then the plane’s left wing struck a streetlight, and the fuselage wheeled, smashing into a house. The rudder hit Jim hard, causing him to lose his footing and topple forward, arms wind-milling.

He regained his balance, then froze.

The plane was still now, the engine silent. The reek of aviation fuel mixed with the smell of smoldering wires from the tangle behind the ruined dashboard.

When Jim tried to step closer, a searing blast of pain made him fall forward instead. From the lack of control and the waves of fiery agony, he thought he'd burst a tendon, or smashed his ankle altogether.

Grabbing an edge of the wing to support his weight, he peered into the twisted cockpit. Rashid was not only conscious; his hand was fumbling for something, undoubtedly the critical switch. Jim's gun was gone, though, lost as the rudder hit him.

Then everything was black. The world was upside-down, turning slowly, slipping into the distance. He was losing consciousness; he must have taken a head injury as well. He fought it as hard as he could, but his hands would not work. He couldn't get to Rashid. He had no strength. He felt as if his muscles were turning to water.

He was used to controlling his body. He could absorb a lot of punishment, handle a lot of pain. He was concussed though, maybe losing blood. Forcing himself, concentrating all his energy, he raised his right arm, and suddenly somebody else was there, a flash of white—he realized that it was Nabby and she had dived into the cockpit with her brother.

The reek of fuel filled Jim's nostrils as the whole scene was flooded with light. Low overhead, a helicopter was lighting up the entire street. There were voices then, and the sound of big engines—fire equipment coming closer.

An F-16 howled overhead at low altitude, waiting to pounce if the plane somehow managed to take flight. But this airplane was dead.

A single dot of consciousness remained, and it was telling him that Rashid could still detonate the bomb.

Rashid smashed his feet against the windscreen, which popped out of its housing with a loud, cracking protest.

He was out, just like that, supple as a panther. He staggered, stood—and suddenly, in the blazing floodlight, held up a remote control. Round and round he turned, holding it high. He was grinning, his teeth flashing.

Nabila, her clothes ripped, her body covered with blood, leaped through the broken windscreen and flew at him. She embraced him, also embracing the remote, and for a moment they were dancers, graceful in the steel-white light from above, dancing to the rough beat of the helicopter's rotors.

Nabila had Rashid's wrist in her right hand, bending his fingers back and

tearing at it with her teeth, trying to get the remote from him. Her left arm was twisted in a way that could only mean it was broken. At any moment, Rashid was going to press the crucial button.

Breathing deep, Jim opened himself to his pain, accepted that it was now part of him, and began moving toward them.

Nabby cried out, “Why are you doing this?”

“Islam converts by the sword! Face it, Nabby!”

“Daddy sees you from heaven! Think of that! Daddy sees this; he sees you killing the world!”

They went down together, Nabby throwing her head back and screaming with agony when she rolled across the broken arm. Jim saw the white of bone protruding from her elbow.

As he forced himself forward, his eyes were on that remote. The light from above was too blinding for him to see much beyond the pool of it where Rashid and Nabby struggled, but all around them Jim could hear the clatter of deployment.

Then Nabby was on top. She grabbed Rashid’s shirt and slammed his head against the pavement, growling through bared teeth. His eyes registered surprise, but the remote did not leave his hand. She did it again, the growling louder now, and this time Jim saw that Rashid was stunned.

Jim came to Nabby, and found himself beside a savage being, somebody he did not know, and he understood for the first time what it means to say that somebody has blood in their eye. She glared at him, teeth bared, cheeks sucking, and the growls turned into tears, bitter, agonized. She raised her head and stared up into the light of the churning helicopter, into the blasting wind of its rotors, and the sound that came out of her was the pain of love denied, a sister’s tortured heart, and the agony—even deeper—of women across the world. He heard the vast history of frustration that was in that cry, the despair of women denied the only things they want, which are an equal embrace and equal partnership on the human journey.

She had killed her own brother, and this was how it sounded when a woman’s heart tears itself apart.

But the remote, *the remote*—

Jim threw himself across the pavement, grabbed it, blood covered but intact. So why were they all still here? Why hadn’t Rashid used it?

Then Jim saw why. This remote wasn’t going to trigger a bomb. It was just an infrared TV remote with a range of maybe twenty feet, assuming no

obstacles. A remote trigger for a bomb would emit radio frequencies that could broadcast farther than infrared.

So this was a decoy. His eyes snapped to the wreckage of the plane.

Screaming to make his pain easier to bear, he dragged himself to his feet and headed toward the wreck. “Timer,” he said, but his voice was not loud enough, would not carry over the crashing echoes of the rotors above. “Timer . . .”

He beckoned the darkness until he saw men come into the light at last, men in blast gear and reflective face guards. Had there been time, he would have laughed.

He crawled into the blood-soaked cockpit through the shattered windscreen. The dashboard was ripped open, wires pulled out. Rashid had been trying to repair the manual firing mechanism, and when he couldn’t do it he’d produced this TV remote and used it to gain time.

He’d thought to bring it with him. Rashid was a careful man. Chess, not poker. He didn’t trust luck. He was always many moves ahead.

The bomb was a darkness behind the seat. Jim pulled its bent frame aside and saw it, black, about the size of a beach ball, hidden in a mass of wires that led to the detonators, each one a black plate plastered against the blue steel of the bomb’s housing. The plutonium core would be positioned in the center, surrounded by the triggers that would almost instantaneously compress it. But you would never see that. That would happen in well under a second . . . and it could happen any second.

Where was the countdown timer? It had to be running or Rashid wouldn’t have bothered to decoy it.

Then Jim saw it, a tiny plastic square no larger than a watch face. Its wiring was concealed under the black tape that held to the body of the bomb. The counter was reading down. He saw it go through 58, on its way to the end of its final minute.

There was no time to disarm this. That sort of thing could only be done in the movies. Actually running down the wiring of a timer like this and safely neutralizing it took hours.

He backed out, turned, and grabbed one of the explosives experts who were now crowding in behind him. “It’s on a timer,” Jim shouted above the din of the rotors. “Get explosives suppression on this thing! *Now! Now! Now!*”

They tried to pull him out, but there was no time, and he slid over the

bomb and into the tiny space behind it. Here he could be of help. He could place charge suppressors. If they did enough of them in the right pattern and they worked, the plutonium wouldn't be compressed correctly and the bomb would never go critical.

They knew what they were doing; they had probably simulated this a thousand times. One after another, the suppressors went onto the firing mechanisms, covering them like gray beetles.

A hand thrust three at him. "Where?"

Twenty-two seconds.

No time. He simply placed them at random, forcing them down over the explosive caps, hoping for the best.

Darkness.

A QUESTION OF TIME

Ahead, the light. This was death, then. So quiet! The light . . . beautiful. Calling him, a silent, sacred song. Then an angel looking down at him. God's good angel.

"Jim!"

Pain, then, sweeping dreams of heaven away. It surged up and down his chest, running in his guts like a pack of starving rats.

This was not heaven and the light was just the damn chopper and the angel had a busted arm because it was Nabila. "Oh," he said, and heard his own voice displace the ringing in his blast-shocked ears.

"Medic," she shouted. Then she stood up, sweeping out of Jim's field of view. "*Medic!*"

Vans came, and a larger truck, a SWAT vehicle.

He felt himself being moved, heard voices speaking quickly, saw an IV appear, and a needle, and knew that the needle was going to shut him down.

Nabila would not let them give her any pain medicine, not with Jim in such grave condition. His chest and stomach had been laid open when the detonators fired. He'd literally been cradling the bomb.

A colonel came into the meat wagon as the doors closed. "Is he gonna make it?"

Only a miracle would keep him alive, even this very powerful man. All bodies have their limits. She put her hand on his gray forehead. It was cold, dry. It felt as her father's had felt when he lay in his coffin.

She looked at Jim. Closed her eyes.

The colonel came up beside her. "He pulled this thing out," he said. "Those suppressors he placed were the key."

Ignoring the pain that her every movement sent surging through her own broken arm, she bent close to Jim. "Jimmy, you hear that?"

The vitals monitor's faint, slow beeping was his only answer.

From in front, she heard: "Hey, lights!"

She turned, looked between the drivers, out the front windshield of the

windowless ambulance.

The lights of the city were coming on, flickering at first, then erupting in long, glorious streams of street lamps, in dancing signage, in traffic lights, store windows, and houses. And in the light, cars began to appear honking their horns in joy, people who had been hiding came out from their houses, police cars whooped the delight that the young men and women inside felt.

Then, a high-pitched sound. Instantly both medics leaped into action in the careening ambulance, and Nabila knew that Jim's heart had stopped. She threw herself onto the floor beside the stretcher on which he lay, and gave to Allah the greatest, the strongest, the most heartfelt prayer of her life, that her life be one with God's will, and vowed to always be faithful, and to raise her and Jim's children in faith, if only she could have this chance.

On and on, the screaming, empty whine continued. One of the medics did CPR, his breath interrupting the deadly wail. Then they had paddles, and they got her to go back to the bench in the crowded space, and they shocked Jim. His body hopped, and there was a stench of burning hair, and they shocked him again.

He's gone, she thought. Just when she had finally found a way to love him, to accept what he had to offer, which was the toughness and compassion of a true soldier, his soul had departed.

But then the beeping started. Not slowly, not dramatically, but all at once.

"Oh, wow," one of the medics said. He looked toward her. "This guy's hard to kill."

"He's alive?"

"Lady, right now, the answer is yes."

EPILOGUE

Six months later, Nabila's arm was long since out of its cast, but Jim was just getting up on a cane, and would be on one for a while. His internal injuries were healing well, but the ankle hadn't been broken. He had somehow walked with a severed Achilles tendon, and healing that was going to take time.

Nabila drove them to the White House for the presentation.

There was still a great deal to be done, but an enormous danger had passed in these months. Beyond the bombs in Washington, Rome, and Las Vegas, there had been five other actual devices. The owners of this particular hard disk had also been in control of bombs in Paris, Madrid, Moscow, London, and Los Angeles.

Of course, there could be more still out there, and the penetration of the U.S. intelligence system was far from resolved.

Inshalla was harmed, though to an unknown degree, as the hard disk had given away few secrets about its personnel.

But for now, the full catastrophe was averted.

Italy remained in political chaos, and the European Union was striving to assist it in reconstructing some sort of functional central authority. Virtually every organized country in the world now had a continuity-of-government plan that addressed the danger of sudden decapitation.

Helped out of the car by a Marine in formal uniform, Jim was still getting used to the idea of being alive. Waking to find Nabby with him had surprised him, and he was still not absolutely sure that this new life that they were sharing was not, after all, some outpost of heaven.

He sucked in the sweet air of spring. "Smell the roses."

"Yes, Sir," the Marine said.

"I didn't mean you."

"No, Sir."

As they moved toward the entrance, Jim saw that a Marine honor guard was saluting them. He snapped one back. They did not lower their hands.

Jim and Nabila entered, and as they crossed the lower hall, Marines in their

dress uniforms and Secret Service in their black suits came to attention. “I thought it was supposed to be classified,” Nabila whispered, her shoulders hunched.

“Better keep our traps shut, then.”

They were conducted down to the West Wing Lobby, then immediately into the Roosevelt Room.

The long table had been removed, and the president, the vice president, and the secretaries of defense and state and their wives stood before the fireplace and the dramatic Tade Styka painting of Teddy Roosevelt as a Rough Rider.

When they began applauding, Jim at first thought somebody was behind them, and caused a ripple of laughter when he instinctively began to turn to see who it was. The two of them walked to the small podium, and the president stepped up to it.

He looked from one to the other. “I didn’t think we’d make it,” he said.

“Have we?” Nabila asked.

He cleared his throat and turned to the audience. “Not often in the history of mankind has there been so much owed to people who must remain hidden. I know that these medals are only a small token, but they are, nevertheless, the little we can offer you for a job well done.”

Traditionally, there was little said at the presentation of the Intelligence Medal. Some of the people in this room were not even cleared to know exactly why they were receiving it.

The president pinned Jim’s medal to his suit, and presented Nabila with hers. A few moments later, the ceremony was concluded and the medals were placed in their black felt boxes, to remain there until they would be buried with the recipients.

Afterward, the president, Jim, and Nabila went into the Oval. “Jim,” the president said, “I’ll get right to the point. You know that we’ve been making some changes in intelligence operations.”

“I noticed.” It wasn’t just change, though, not this time. There was a revolution under way. The whole system of classification was being revised, and stovepiping of information now carried with it serious penalties. Whole agencies and departments were being disbanded and reconstructed along new lines. The gigantic outsourcing process, so fraught with danger to the nation, was being ended, and the two private mercenary armies, as well as the various private intelligence operations, were being dissolved. Jim himself was no longer a contractor but once again a direct employee of a currently

leaderless CIA.

“Jim, I’d be grateful if you’d accept the Directorship of National Intelligence. Could you do that for me?”

“No, Sir, I could not.”

Nabila sucked breath. She knew that no such offer would be made to her. Muslims had work to do in the West, a lot of it. Repairing the damage would take generations. She was lucky her clearance hadn’t been pulled.

“There oughtta be a law against that—declining your president.”

“Sir, I’m needed in the field. It’s going to take years to identify and roll up this group that calls itself Inshalla. They’ve been hurt, but they’re still out there, and at last count, we’re looking at nearly a ton of plutonium still missing. Plus, we’re penetrated. I don’t think I’m competent to deal with that. I’m a frontline guy.”

“You underestimate yourself, Jim.” He turned to Nabila. “I hope you don’t.”

“I know my skills, Sir.”

“Good, because what I want you to do is build something for me. We’re starting a new directorate. Secret. We’re going to repair the damage done to the interdiction infrastructure. We’re going to find the people we can’t trust, once and for all, and get rid of them.”

She was silent. “It will be a secret directorate, so it’s politically safe to appoint me, is that it?”

The president smiled a little. “I can’t get you through a public advise and consent, obviously, Nabila. But if you’ll let me, I can help you serve in a capacity that’s worthy of your abilities.”

“I will accept the directorship.”

They left then, and while they were returning to their house, Nabila’s phone rang. It was the White House. A meeting was scheduled at seven tomorrow morning. Orientation and a discussion of policy.

“You’ve never had any operational training, have you?” Jim asked her.

“No Camp Swampy for me. Guns in the hands of Islamists—bad idea.”

“Then you should have some. Defensive driving. Neck breaking, perhaps.”

“Is this funny? Should I be laughing?”

“It’s funny. You should be laughing.”

“It’s not Arab humor.” Then she did laugh. “First Arabs blow everything up and the CIA director is fired. Then the new CIA director comes along and it’s an Arab. That’s funny.”

“You’re not getting that directorship.”

“Not officially, but you know that’s what it is. What it amounts to. Actually, it’ll have higher priority than CIA. Which is funny. Arab funny.”

“Why so?”

“Don’t you see? It’s purdah for me when I am rejecting purdah. My face is naked; my legs can be seen. But in my work, I remain in purdah. The woman is hidden!”

“It’s not American humor.”

“I was born here, remember! I am an American, Jimmy. Never forget it.”

“You’re an Arab-American.” He kissed her cheek.

“Careful, I will forget I am driving.”

That night, they lay discreetly together. Very late, she whispered to him that he must wait for her to bear him his children. She wanted this work. She wanted it very badly.

He held her, felt her strong heart beating against his, and loved her more deeply than he had thought it was possible for him to love, and went with her in the ship of the night, always now with her.



Syed Ahmad sucked his water pipe and watched the television. For the first time in history, Muslim leaders were in attendance at the investiture of a new pope. All eight Grand Muftis were there, part of what was said to be the greatest procession of religious leaders ever assembled, moving through the streets of Florence to the huge Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore. Ahmad smoked and watched with the others in the small coffee bar. Soon enough, there would be a new Mufti in Saudi Arabia, also, and it was already being said that the pope would attend his accession.

Blasphemy. Apostasy. God would curse them all.

But when there was applause, Syed also applauded and smiled. Secretly, though, he sent constant prayer to Allah, begging that the fire be put to their skin, and again, and again.

As God made all, God also made this. Inshalla had failed God, so God was repaying them by allowing this obscene blasphemy to be spat in the faces of

the faithful.

Or perhaps there was another way to look at it. Perhaps this was purification. After all, Aziz had been corrupt, had he not, with his fast cars and his liquor? Who knew if he had truly given up his sins? Perhaps others besides Aziz had angered God also.

Syed was careful in his prayer and full of love and devotion. He could not be the reason that there had been this failure, and he did not think he was blamed. No, he was not blamed; otherwise he would never have been allowed to escape from Pakistan.

His journey had been harrowing, but at least its possibility had been contemplated and there had been planning.

He had initiated it by sending Eshan on a certain errand into the center of the city, one from which it was not intended that he would return. His identification, however, had come back, but now it had Syed's picture where Eshan's had been.

That easily, Syed had gone from being an Arab of fifty-three years to an American of forty-one years. A little dye had turned back some years, and he had left Pakistan using the American passport of his own clerk. So Syed was here in the United States as a proud citizen—or rather, Eshan was.

He had come a long way, flying first to Karachi, then to Paris, now here. There was nothing against Eshan. This was his homeland. There would be no questions here.

The customs officer had asked him, "What were you doing in Pakistan for two years?"

He had replied, "My mother was ill. I was helping her until she died."

"For two years?"

"She died at once. I was settling the estate."

"You have an accent." He was looking at a computer screen, seeing that Eshan had been born in this country.

"I do?" He had laughed. "I've been gone too long!"

"Two years just to settle an estate? Must have been a big one."

"Not big. Arab."

He'd laughed then, the hard young customs man. "Welcome home," he had said.

And so it was. The new Eshan would start his old life over. He had no living relatives here, his father having met with a tragic accident just before they were to be reunited at last. Indeed tragic.

Even under this new name and in this unholy place, he still bore the idea of the Mahdi in his soul. He would start everything again, yes . . . but slowly and carefully. Go back to putting a grain beside a grain, the way it had been with them always.

Perhaps there would be no further attempt in his generation. But there was the future, and God had all the time that existed.

God had all the time, but Ahmad was tired. His body and his bones felt stripped of life, exhausted, and he thought that death was not so far in his future. The truth was, the failure had broken him.

Perhaps he shouldn't even be watching this. Perhaps his rage and disgust would weaken him even more.

Another round of applause. Was there not a single faithful man in here? Not one sitting off, keeping to himself?

Not one.

It was early yet here, but the sun was shining in Florence, on all the great men of the world, kings, presidents, prime ministers, and all those apostate and faithless religious leaders, strutting their lies.

Even so, Ahmad was at one with God's will. Not at peace inside himself, far from it, but certain, still, of heaven.

In fact, as the smoke relaxed him, he put on a smiling face for those around him. Agents, he assumed, were everywhere among the Arabs, noting everything. *Why is that one not smiling? Give us his name. . . .*

On the far wall there was a faded portrait of the old Saudi king Faisal, may God forgive him. In the back, a mural of the Arabian desert. But Ahmad was not really Arab; he was Baluchi, a man used to seeing his wealth stolen by others.

He listened to the fawning voice of the Al Jazeera reporter, a slick-looking Kuwaiti, grinning in his ridiculous Western suit of clothes. Why wear such things, the clothing of barbarians?

"The new pope has taken a name out of a famous prophecy. Cardinal Arinze, the first African pope, is to be Peter the Roman, Petrus Romanus. In the prophecy of Saint Malachy, Petrus Romanus is the last pope, but Peter the Roman has a message to add from the words of the Christian Book of the Revelation of John 'I am Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last.' He says, 'The last is also first, and the last Roman pope shall also be the first pope of a new church, in a new era of peace, that will be everlasting in the world.' This is the message he gave upon his triumphant restoration of the ancient

Catholic papacy.”

That was enough. Ahmad left. He could bear no more. You break their city, you leave it burning—and here they are!

Ahmad had no television in the small room he had taken above the shop of a leather-goods seller, but he certainly didn't want to see more of this. When he needed news, he looked in the papers or listened to the radio.

He had some dates and cheese from yesterday, and would take this for breakfast, with an orange soda.

He went slowly up 3rd Street, in a whipping morning wind, and saw that the trees were touched by buds and there were petunias lifting their heads in the small flower boxes that so many people kept in their windows, here in Bay Ridge. He thought that he would like Brooklyn, despite the cold. He had crossed many borders, and passed through many lands, and dark. This one, though, smiled its innocent American smile, and hoped only that the traveler would accept the welcome that was offered at every turn.

Yes, Brooklyn was a good place for him to be. He would be safe here.

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work behind the scenes to keep our world safe.
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Beware the bearers of false gifts and their broken promises.
Much pain but still time. There is good out there. We oppose
deception.

—message in a crop formation found on a farm in the United
Kingdom, August 2002

CHAPTER ONE

2002

Flynn reached for her and she wasn't there. Her side of the bed was cold and he was a detective, so he came immediately awake.

“Abby?”

He rolled out of bed, slid his feet into his slippers, and set off into the midnight house. It was November 16, 2002, the time was twelve-forty, the house was cool but not cold, there was no obvious sign of foul play.

“Abby?”

Hurrying now, he went downstairs, turning on lights as he passed the switches. By the time he reached the kitchen, he knew that she wasn't in the house and that there was no point of entry that would suggest a forcible kidnapping. In any case, he couldn't imagine why she would be kidnapped or by whom. But he'd been a cop for six years, a detective for two. In that time, he'd made a couple of hundred very bad people very mad, and some of them were people who might do just about anything.

Going back over his cases in his mind, though, he couldn't see a revenge kidnapper, at least, not one that was presently at large.

Just to be thorough, he checked the basement. They were in the process of finishing it, and it was full of boxes of ceiling tiles and Pergo flooring.

She wasn't there.

All doors were locked, all windows were locked. The alarm system was armed. So nobody could've come in here, not without all hell breaking loose.

She'd gone out. Had to have.

He called her cell—and heard it ringing upstairs. He went up. It was on the dresser but not in its usual place in her purse. Her purse was gone.

The first cold tremble of fear passed through him. Something was obviously very wrong here. Abby didn't get up in the middle of the night and go out. Never, not without telling him.

Following the rules, he dialed 911. "This is Detective Errol Carroll. I'd like to report my wife, Abigail Carroll, missing. Probable foul play."

The 911 operator responded, "We have a car moving, Flynn."

Next he called his boss, Captain Edward Parker. "Eddie, it's me, I'm sorry about the time. Abby's gone missing."

As the reality set in, a terrible, frantic urgency swept him.

"Okay," Eddie said. "Okay. Any evidence of an entry?"

"The alarm system is still on. Nobody broke in."

Silence. Flynn could practically hear Eddie thinking. They'd known each other since they were kids and they'd both known Abby almost as long. Both had dated her. Flynn had won.

"You guys doin' okay?" Eddie asked. It was his way of broaching the question that was going to be on everybody's mind.

"Eddie, this isn't a marital thing. Somebody got Abby." He knew that every word had to be measured tonight, because if he wasn't careful, this would get knocked down to an adult missing person real fast. "Look, I can't stay in here. I gotta roll."

"Wait for the uniforms. I'm sending a detective right now. Mullins. Tom Mullins, he's duty."

He didn't much like Tom and Tom didn't much like him. But Tom did his job. Sort of. "Okay, I'm gonna back him up, though. He's not gonna drop this down to an MPA because it's not an MPA, Eddie."

"You got it."

There came a knock at the front door. Decisive, loud, the way cops knock.

Where are you, baby?

He disarmed the alarm system and let the uniforms in. It was Willy Ford and a deputy sheriff he didn't know, name of Menchaca. "Hey guys, thanks for doing it so fast. I got a missing wife. Almost certainly a kidnap."

"Jeez, Flynn, Abby's been kidnapped?" Willy had flirted with Abby at the Memorial Day barbecue last year. Lots of laughs.

"Looks like it."

"Is there a point of entry?" Menchaca asked.

"Not that I can see."

A car pulled up and Eddie got out. He hurried up the walk, his belly bouncing, his gray hair fluttering in the night wind. His fly was down. You could see pajamas in there. Flynn had a damn good friend in Eddie.

"Anything?" he asked as he came in.

"We need prints out here," Flynn said. He shuddered. He was freezing cold on a hot night. "Look, I can't stay here. I'm gonna drive."

"No you aren't. I got the troops moving. Every car's on, everybody's looking."

Eddie was right. Flynn's going off into the night wasn't going to help anything.

"Who comes in through an alarm system?" Eddie asked.

"A professional."

"You drop time on any professionals? Time that they may have served?"

Cops were routinely informed when their collars were released from prison. "Nobody."

"What about ever?"

“You know my collar history.”

“Yeah, you got a fair number, buddy. Some bad’uns.”

“Nobody special, Eddie. Nobody—” He gestured toward the emptiness of the house. Another wave of fear was hitting him. He imagined Abby being tortured, buried alive, raped.

He wanted to run through the streets calling her name. He wanted to drive and drive, searching every crack house, every flop, every crib he knew. She was out there right now. Abby was out there and suffering *right now*.

Detective Charlie Mullin came in. “Where are we?”

“Doing an APB,” Eddie replied. “Get me a picture.”

Flynn strode across the living room and grabbed the photograph that stood on the mantel. It was a studio portrait taken two years ago, for her father while he was dying in St. Vincent de Sales, choking out his lungs, poor damn guy with his cigarettes and his unfortunate opinion that the dangers were overblown.

Eddie put the picture down under a lamp and took a few shots of it with his cell phone. He then took a verbal description from Flynn and inside of three minutes the all-points bulletin was appearing on police computer networks all across the state.

Flynn knew the statistics. Every hour that passed, it was less likely that she would be found.

“You have any idea when this happened?”

“I might.” He went to the side table in the hall and dug out the alarm system’s instruction book. “The system might tell us the last time it was disarmed and rearmed.” He glanced at Eddie and Mullen. “He had the code. Had to have.”

“Who had it?” Mullin asked.

Flynn shook his head. “Me and her, far as I know.”

“Parents? Brothers and sisters?”

“No brothers and sisters. My mom and her folks have passed. My dad doesn’t have it.”

“You’re certain?”

“Unless she gave it to somebody, which I very much doubt.”

“She didn’t,” Eddie said. “She was way too smart and too careful.”

Flynn input his code, then followed the instructions. In a moment, the answer appeared on the system’s LED screen. “Three thirty-two,” he said. Then the next figure flashed, the time it had been re-armed. One minute later. “This can’t be right,” he said.

“What time?” Mullen asked.

“Within the minute. Three thirty-three.”

There was a silence. Then Mullin said, “We need an inventory, Flynn.”

“She was kidnapped!”

“Somebody came in here and took her in under a minute? Who would that be?”

“Hell if I know!” He turned to Eddie. “For God’s sake, don’t cancel that APB, don’t cancel anything!”

Eddie held out his hands, palms up. “Hey, I got the county choppers up. I’m goin’ all out, Flynn.”

This was a small police force in a small city, with a compliment of just thirty personnel. They liked to think that they were good, but at the same time, there were a limited number of challenges. A murder every six weeks or so, a meth lab or crack house a week on the south side, a thin but steady stream of family disturbances, assaults, burglaries and robberies.

“I gotta admit, I can’t remember the last time we had a kidnapping,” Eddie said.

“Nineteen ninety-six. Kid named Angela Dugan, fifteen years old. Turned out to be her boyfriend. They were brought back from Tijuana—married.”

“So, you got any ideas yet?”

He didn’t. “Let’s canvas,” he said. “Before people take off for work.”

“It’s five.”

“Let’s canvas.”

It was cool and still outside, the silence broken only by the busy clatter of lightbars left running. The morning star hung low in a blood-red eastern sky. Up and down the street, lights were coming on. Across the street, Sarah Robinson stood on her front porch in her robe, her arms crossed on her chest.

Flynn gazed across at her. “She and Abby are planning to have their babies together.”

“Abby’s pregnant?”

He started across the street. “She hadn’t said anything.”

In times of extreme stress, details come crowding in, the crisp scent of the air, the soft crunch of grass under your sneakers, the distant pumping clatter of one of the county choppers patrolling above the silent streets.

“Are you guys okay?” Sarah asked, her voice constricted, her smile choked back into her face.

“Abby’s missing.”

“Oh, Flynn, oh my God.”

“Did you see or hear anything?”

She shook her head. “The cars woke me up. Let me get Kev.”

“I’m here,” Kevin said, coming out from behind her. “Same story from me. Nothing.”

They did the Monteleones, got nothing but sadness from this gentle, elderly couple.

“The next house is Al Dennis,” Flynn said. “He’s often up at this hour. I’ve seen his lights on when I come in off night duty.”

“Good.”

This time, though, Al had been sound asleep, and he came to the door bleary and blinking, pulling a terry-cloth robe on over his pajama bottoms.

“Flynn?”

“Al, Abby’s missing. She’s been kidnapped. We’re trying to find out if anybody noticed anything unusual during the night.”

“Unusual?”

“Lights, voices, a vehicle passing the house more than once, anything like that.”

Flynn saw him look into himself, a sign that detectives come to know, that somebody is genuinely searching their memory.

“Lights about three. A car out there.” He gazed at Flynn. “I thought it was you, Flynn.”

“Why was that?”

“I just assumed it was you coming off duty. I guess it was like, you know, the car stopped there. At your place. I didn’t hear your garage opening, though. I do remember that.”

“Did you see the car?” Eddie asked.

Dennis shook his head. “Sorry. I just—a car came up and stopped.”

“Did you hear it pull away?”

Again, he shook his head. “I got the impression the lights had gone out. Like I said, you coming home. That’s what I thought.”

“A time, Dennis?”

“After three. In there.”

He’d heard the car but hadn’t seen it. “Do you remember anything about the engine noise? A large car, maybe? A truck? Could you tell?”

“God, Flynn, I am so sorry. I wish I could help.”

As he thanked Dennis, he realized that he was beginning the rest of his life, and it would be a time of wondering and suffering and the pain of love that has been stolen, but not lost.

As he expected, the rest of the canvas turned up nothing.

Late in the morning an FBI agent came up from Austin to Menard, a kid named Chapman Shifley. Agent Shifley wore a suit, cheap but carefully pressed. He had a burr haircut and the fast eyes of someone

who might have a special forces background. He introduced himself, jamming his hand out and pumping Flynn's arm, the gesture an unconvincing parody of manly sympathy.

Only one assignment mattered to the FBI in Texas, and it wasn't this. Either you were on drugs and gangs or you were essentially nowhere. This assignment was nowhere.

The first thing he asked for was an inventory.

"I haven't done that. Except that her purse is missing."

"Could we just do a little looking around," Shifley said, not unkindly. He wasn't insensitive.

"Please be my guest."

The house was filling up with forensics personnel, "Lady" Christopher with her careful hands, her supervisor Jamie Landry, who hailed from the Evangeline Country over in Louisiana and made remarkable crawfish bisque.

It would take hours, but the two of them would methodically work over the entire house, looking for fingerprints and subtle evidence of some kind of skilled break-in.

As he climbed the stairs, followed by Eddie and Shifley, Flynn found that he didn't want to go back into their bedroom. He never wanted to go back in, not until Abby was safely home.

The cheerful curtains, the soft blue wallpaper, the sleigh bed—it was all as familiar as ever, but it now seemed miraculously beautiful, like a room from some past world found in a museum.

Landry came up and handed out latex gloves. "Don't move things more than you absolutely have to," he said.

Nobody replied.

Flynn rolled on his gloves and opened Abby's top drawer.

Immediately, he saw that clothes were gone, two or three bras, socks, underpants.

"Everything in place?" Shifley asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Because that looks like somebody took stuff outa there.”

“It sure does.”

In the closet, he found her backpack missing. Also, her white sneakers were gone, and some shirts and jeans.

If he’d been working this case on a stranger, he would have said that they’d left voluntarily.

“Flynn,” Shifley said, “were you guys doing okay? I mean, the marriage?”

“She didn’t run out on me.”

“I have to ask.”

“Yes, okay! *Yes*. We’re happy.”

“Because that’s not what this looks like.”

“Then it’s a setup! She’d never walk out on me. She—we—we’re in love. It’s a happy marriage.”

He knew the Bureau. He knew that they were going to back this down to an adult missing person, probable walkout. That would give the case maybe two more days of search time.

Eddie said, “They’re happy.”

“Yeah, I get it.”

His tone said that Flynn was right, and in that terrible moment, he could almost feel her soul flying away from him.

Of course, the locals didn’t quit. Eddie didn’t quit. But police forces live in a strange sort of a straitjacket. A local Texas police force has access to information from other Texas authorities, but not other states, not other countries. To really pull down a sophisticated kidnapper, you need the reach of the FBI with its connections around the world, and the co-operation of Interpol. The motive for stealing beautiful young women, if it was not perverted, was often nowadays for sale into slavery abroad. A twenty-two-year-old blond like Abby could bring big money in hidden slave markets.

By the time Landry and company had finished, Flynn had been awake for more than fifty hours. He was not in grief, but desperation. It wasn't as if Abby was dead, it was as if she was waiting for him. Abby trusted him. She would believe that he would do anything to find her. She would have faith that he would come.

By sunset on the third day, the house was empty and quiet. Not a single trace of useful evidence had been found. Abby, her backpack, her purse with her ID and a little money in it were all gone, along with three changes of clothes.

His wife had not walked out on him. His wife was out there somewhere, in the hands of a monster. He chose not to consider the possibility that she might be dead, and in so doing joined many thousands of people waiting every day of their lives for closure that never comes.

He had nightmares that she had been buried alive.

He had nightmares that she was being starved.

He had nightmares that she had been sold to some Arab prince.

On and on and on it went.

Every morning at five, he ran. He ran through the quiet streets of his neighborhood and down into the Railroad District where the great grain elevators stood, past their ghostly immensity, past the long lines of hopper cars dark in the early dawn, past the heaving engines with their great, staring lights, past the café with its warm windows and steaming coffee. He ran like a man under threat. Over time, he became narrow and hard, his body steel cable.

He became a master of the handgun, he learned fast shooting and target shooting and he became known among the shooters of West Texas as a competitor to be aware of. He learned tae kwan do and karate, and learned them well. He went beyond the normal investigative skills of a police detective, venturing into areas as diverse as wilderness tracking and the use of sophisticated bugging devices.

His colleagues admired his skills and feared his obsessive

dedication to his cases. When he was on a kidnap, he routinely worked twenty-four hours at a stretch and slept three. He could have risen in the department to a captaincy, but he prevailed on Eddie to leave him a lieutenant so that he wouldn't get sucked up into administration.

As the years wore on, he gradually turned his den into what became known on the force as the Abby Room.

Even though the FBI had abandoned the investigation before it was three days old, Eddie did not abandon it. Far from it, he hid Flynn's case time for him, allowing him to continue looking for his wife for two more years.

Finally, he quietly and sadly eased it into the cold case file. This meant that nobody could be assigned to it without his personal approval.

Still, though, Flynn's investigation continued. He became the most knowledgeable expert on kidnap in the State of Texas. Every force in Texas consulted him. The Texas Rangers consulted him. He solved case after case after case. But the Abby Room only grew more full of clippings, of clues, of false leads. He slid his unending search for her ever deeper into his caseload, accepting Eddie's silent compliance with equally silent gratitude.

Their bond of friendship deepened. Eddie had loved Abby, too. He had sat on the summer porches of youth with her, also. He had never married. Instead, his love affair with her had continued down its own lonely path, and he had watched with pain and joy as she and Flynn made their life together. When he went to their house for cop nights, he'd watch her out of hooded eyes. She'd had a dancing heart, had Abby Carroll, and looks and ways that no man could ever forget.

Not often—maybe once or twice a year—Flynn ran into a case similar to Abby's, an apparent walkout that seemed to him to be something else. Time and again, the FBI abandoned these cases after a few days.

Flynn did not abandon them.

Somebody was out there taking people, he knew it, somebody very clever and very skilled.

Somebody was out there.

CHAPTER TWO

The Night had come and gone, November 16, as always, the worst night of Flynn's year.

As he always did on the anniversary of Abby's disappearance, he had spent it in the Abby Room, pouring over files, seeking some new lead hidden in some record he hadn't considered before.

As always, he'd found nothing. Her case was dead cold. Still, though, she lived on within him. His side of the conversation of life continued.

Sarah Robinson's little girl Taylor was in grade school now. He had never asked her if Abby, also, had been pregnant, but every time he saw Taylor, a question came into the edge of his mind: were there bones somewhere of the woman he had loved, and tiny bones tangled within them?

He'd never remarried, never even considered it. After seven years it would have been legal, but he would never do it, not until he knew for certain that she was no more.

Eddie came out of his office and headed his way. His gut was rolling, his dark glasses bouncing in his breast pocket. He was coming fast, his scowl as deep as a grave.

Flynn was hoping that he was headed anywhere else, but he did just what it looked like he was going to do, and dropped down into the old chair beside his desk.

He said, "Special Agent Diana Glass wants to talk to you regarding an investigation you've been pursuing."

"The Mercedes case? The meth lab on Fourteenth Street?"

"The Carroll Case. Abby."

Flynn said nothing.

“She even knows about the Abby Room,” Eddie continued. “She knows you were interviewing Charlie Boyne again yesterday.”

The Boyne case was one of the other disappearances that were mirror images of Abby’s. “I wasn’t.”

“ ’Course you were.”

“Dallas PD and the FBI closed the Boyne case years ago. So I wasn’t interviewing him, as there is no case on the books.”

“Then let’s say you were pursuing your hobby of refusing to drop closed cases.”

“Who the hell told her?”

“Not me. I just sit in my office and wait for the parade to go by. Which it never does.”

“There was a parade. When the Tomcats won the semi-finals.”

Eddie looked blank.

“The Tomcats. Menard High’s football team on which you once served as a wide receiver. Last year they reached the semi-finals and the school decided on a parade. You were there. You rode in the lead pickup. In a uniform with a big cap. Very impressive.”

“Is that sardonic or sarcastic?”

“Both. Anyway, where is Agent Glass from, Dallas or San Antonio?”

“She emailed me for permission to talk to you about disappearance cases in general. Pick your brain, be my guess.”

“Okay.”

“Could be a break, Flynn, if the Bureau’s gonna finally do something.” He paused. “Thing is, she’s got a Gmail account.”

That was odd. “So she’s not the Bureau? Did she name an agency?”

“She did not.”

But who else would it be? ATF? No, no interest in missing persons there. Border Patrol? Possibly. “I’ve looked for evidence of border transport for years. So maybe she’s Borders.”

Eddie Parker said, "You're gonna find out. Right now."

A woman in a suit stood in the doorway of the squad room.

"My God," Flynn muttered.

Her hair was so dark it made her skin look as pale as marble. She wore a black, featureless suit that shimmered like silk. Her eyes moved to Flynn, then to Eddie, then to back to him again. Then the most beautiful woman Flynn had ever seen in his life strode through the dead-silent squad room. She stopped at his desk.

Eddie had taken off. His office door was already closing.

"Lieutenant Errol Carroll?"

He stood up and shook an unexpectedly powerful hand. Her eyes, emerald green, drilled into him. She was all job, this woman. Beauty, yes, but in service to a cause, which was very clear.

"Lieutenant, we need to talk."

He gestured toward his chair.

"Privately."

Silently, he led her toward the conference room. He could see Eddie lurking way back in his office, watching through the blinds, not wanting to get anywhere near this. He didn't want a single thing to do with this ice sculpture, either. She might as well have "Bad News" tattooed on her forehead in big red letters. Expensive clothes like hers did not go with garden variety FBI personnel, or any ordinary personnel at all. No, this lady came from way up high where the dangerous people lived.

After they were in the conference room, she shut the door. She turned the lock with a decisive click. He hadn't ever seen that lock used before.

"Sit down, please."

"What's this about?"

She reinforced her statement with a sharp gesture, and he found himself dropping into one of the old wooden chairs that were scattered around the scarred conference table.

She went into her briefcase and pulled out a tablet computer. She tapped a couple of times and he could see a file appear. Like many a detective, he was good at reading upside down. He saw his own name on it, and his picture.

She began flipping through the file, touching the screen with a long finger every time she turned a page.

“Do I need a lawyer?”

She stopped reading and looked up. “You have investigated twelve of them, starting with your wife. Each time, you’ve put in a request for more investigative support. May I ask you why?”

“May I see a cred?”

“You’re suspicious of me?”

He did not reply.

She held out an FBI credential that identified her as Special Agent Diana Glass.

“Satisfied?”

Not in the least, but that was beside the point. First off, the credential could be rigged. Second, he would never know the truth—at least, not until it was too late to save himself from whatever dire fate she had in mind for him.

“What do you want from me, Agent Glass?”

“First off, you’re not in any trouble. And I’m Diana, Errol.”

“Flynn. People call me Flynn.”

“Flynn? That isn’t in your file.”

“Errol Carroll? My folks had a tin ear. Flynn is a joke, as in Errol Flynn.”

She gave him as blank a look as he had seen in some time. His guess was that she’d never heard of Errol Flynn.

“Just call me Flynn without the joke.”

“We want you to help us nail the bastard whose been doing this, and we want you to start right now.”

“Sure,” he said carefully. “I’m ready to start any damn time. But why the change of heart?”

She got up and went to the door. “Tomorrow morning at eight. Be prepared to travel.”

“Travel? Where? For how long?”

She froze. She turned. “This is going to happen again, Lieutenant, and soon. With all the effort you’ve put into your investigations, the expertise you have developed, we believe you can help us prevent the next crime. So to answer your question, we’ll be going wherever we need to go, and it’s going to take however long it takes.”

She left.

He stood staring at the door. What the hell had just happened? As he walked out into the squad room, he saw her striding toward the front lobby.

Guys were being careful, pretending not to be absolutely fascinated with whatever had just gone down.

“I don’t know,” he said into the silence. “I have no idea.”

Eddie burst out of his office. His neck was pulsing, his face was crimson. This was not a man with a temper, but he was on full burn right now.

“What in goddamn hell’s the matter with you,” he snarled.

“Nothing.”

He held up a fax. “They’re telling me you’ve requested an indefinite leave. Thanks for this, ole buddy, ole pal. Next time just damn well tell me. Discuss it with me. Because we’ve been friends for years, jerkoff that you are.” As he talked, he waved the fax.

Flynn snatched it from him. And his jaw nearly sank out of sight.

“I didn’t know about this.”

“You didn’t ask for a leave?”

“ ’Course not. Why would I? I like to put creeps in jail. It’s my damn vocation.”

“So if I tear this up, you’re back here in the morning?”

At that moment, his phone vibrated with an incoming text. He read it. “You have a chance to catch the man who kidnapped Abby.”

Her timing was excellent, he had to say that.

“No, Eddie, actually the request is good.” He could hardly believe what he was saying, but he was doing it and as he did so, his conviction was growing. “The request is good.”

“I can’t pay you. I’d like to but I can’t.”

He didn’t spend much money, hadn’t since Abby. So he could handle the absence of a salary. “I’m sorry, Eddie. I have to do this.”

“Yeah, I get it. But clean out your locker. If the janitor has to scrape any rotted doughnuts outa there, you’re gettin’ a bill.”

Their eyes met. His friend was there for him and nothing more needed to be said. Eddie turned away and Flynn did the only thing left for him to do. He gathered up his few personal items and left the way cops always left on their last day, with a cardboard box in their arms and a few good-byes. A police force is like a lake. When you get out, you don’t leave a hole.

By the time he was unlocking his car, another guy would already have his current cases. But not the Abby Carroll case, of course. Not the Boyne case, and not any of the other missing persons cases that had gone cold.

He drove home in the quiet of the midday. This was all insane, of course. He never should have done this.

“Abby,” he said into the rattling of his old Malibu, “I’m coming, babes, I’m coming.”

CHAPTER THREE

As soon as he got home, Flynn texted Diana Glass that he was ready to go, but received no reply. He did an Internet search on her and found nothing. No Facebook page for a Diana Glass that looked like her. No Twitter account. A check of the National Law Enforcement Roster also turned up no Diana Glass, meaning that she'd never been in a local or state police force. His access to FBI records was limited, of course, but he'd emailed their personnel department a verification check on her from the office. Usually, you got an answer in a few minutes, and usually it was "verified." FBI creds were not easy to come by and not easy to forge. If hers had been false, he would have gotten an urgent call, he felt sure. They would investigate an imposter immediately.

So she was for real, but for whatever reason, they weren't going to be releasing any information about her.

He went into the Abby Room. He'd spend the rest of the day looking over his cases. Of course, there had been many thousands of adult missing persons in the years since he'd lost her, but only twelve fit the precise criteria that interested him: an apparent walkout without any sign of forced entry, and a spouse or loved one who insisted that there had been no motive for the person to leave, and had credible support for the assertion.

It was a surprisingly rare situation, so rare that to Flynn it was an M.O.

On the walls were pictures of Abby, of the house as it was then, photographed in methodical detail, of the neighborhood, all the cars, all the houses.

There were maps of the other cases, blueprints of each house from

which a victim had been abducted, with all the information from every crime scene intricately cross-referenced.

Abby smiled down at him, her hand shielding her eyes. The shot had been taken at Kitty Hawk in 1999, the summer of their courtship. She had been wearing her blue shorts and tank top. She'd been laughing and you could see it in her face. Later, back at their rental, he would unsnap that tank top and slip it off and stand on the tan carpet in the bedroom. She would seem, when she came close to him, to move with the lightness of a woman made of air, and the moment he had looked down into her eyes on that warm afternoon would remain engraved in his memory forever.

Sitting in meditation, he closed his eyes. "To study the self is to forget the self," he whispered into the silence. That was where he always started. Then he took his attention out of his mind and placed it on his body.

He felt his heart rate slowing until the beating seemed almost to stop. The cool of the room touched him so closely that it felt as if fingers were caressing him, fingers that were both intimately alive and as stiff as death.

He had understood the deep message of martial arts training: you cannot gain the freedom to fight at your best until you make friends with your death.

Beyond fear lies the balance that enables the blow to be perfectly struck, or deflected with perfect grace.

You never quite reach that spot, but you never quite fail.

He sat among his records, a naked man in a cold room.

He sat for a long time, letting go of his thoughts, his concerns, his questions.

As the stars made their nightly journey, he traveled deep within himself, sitting and flying at the same time. His heartbeat was now little more than a memory.

Other names and other faces came back to him: Claire Marlow, Hank Feather, Lucinda Walters, Gail Unterwager, George Nathan

Chambers, Kimberly Torgelson—the list that haunted his dreams.

All had disappeared at night. All had taken a small number of personal belongings. Gail Unterwager left three young children and a devastated, uncomprehending husband. So had Lucinda Walters. George Chambers had two sons and a seven-figure bank account, a wife that loved him and a flawless life. Kimberly Torgelson's little boy had been two and her husband had been completely shattered.

Yeah, buddy, I get it. Welcome to hell.

Three o'clock came. Outside the wind whipped the big old trees that surrounded the house, causing skeletal shadows to dance on the lawn. In the distance, an owl hooted, its voice flying in the gale.

When the hour grew late and still sleep did not come, he did what he always did at times like this, and walked through the house thinking and remembering, trying to understand how somebody could have come in and taken her out of bed like that and then carried her off, and all without her police officer husband noticing a thing.

Flynn was not a heavy sleeper now and he hadn't been then. So how had it been accomplished? To this day, he didn't even have a theory, not for any of them and especially not in Abby's case.

Once or twice, he had dreamed of her so vividly it was as if she was back. Once, the kitchen door had opened and he'd heard her voice calling up, "I'm home," her tone bright. He'd run downstairs, run like the wind, to find her standing in the dining room. "I'm all right," she said, and there had been a mixture of sadness and love in her face that had made him ache.

He had woken up, then, still in his bed.

Just before dawn his cell rang, startling him so thoroughly that he almost dropped it and lost the call.

It was Diana Glass.

"Can you come to a meeting?"

"Now?"

She gave him an address in the warehouse district near the grain

elevators. He agreed to go and ended the call.

He called Eddie. It rang. Again. Again.

“Whassa matter?”

“It’s me. Glass just called. She wants me to meet her on Avenue Twenty.”

Silence.

“A warehouse, Eddie, at four in the morning.”

“So you called to wake me up?”

“I did.”

“You want a squad car? Protection?”

“I want you to know where I went and when.” He gave him the address.

“Okay, got it.”

“In other words, if I disappear, it is not voluntary. You got that? *Not* voluntary.”

“If you have reason to be suspicious of this woman, don’t go alone.”

“I ran a verification check on her and I’m not sure what to think. The Bureau never came back to me.”

“That is odd.”

“Yeah, and she said eight in the morning. It’s four in the morning.”

“I noticed.”

“So don’t send anybody, but watch my back for me.”

“You’re gonna carry, I assume.”

“Oh, yes.” He headed upstairs, pulled on some jeans and a sweatshirt, then strapped on his gun and threw a jacket over it. He splashed his face, but didn’t take the time to shave. Then he took an equipment pack off its shelf in the closet and took it with him. It was all stuff he’d put together himself, a manhunter’s kit.

It was still deep night, and colder than he’d thought it would be, with wind coming steadily down from the north. As he opened the

garage, the rattling of the door echoed through the silent neighborhood. No lights came on, though. Everybody knew that he kept irregular hours.

The predawn air was icy silver, and the tires crunched on frost as he backed down his driveway. The Malibu's heater screamed.

Cold, hot, his body could absorb whatever came its way.

He had worked himself into a new man, as hard as stone, as quick as the air, a man too silent inside to feel fear. He'd practiced with his pistol until it seemed an extension of his body. He did not push, he did not heel, and hours of exercise ensured that his wrist would never break in anticipation of recoil. He was comfortable with the standard issue Glock, but also with the .357 Magnum, and, of course, with the old Colt Positive, known as the Police Special.

He did not go straight to the warehouse—never that—but rather made his way through the streets of Menard, the pretty, average city that had been his born home and would always be his home.

He passed Abby's girlhood house, now owned by the Dickson family. Along with Eddie and half the other guys in town, he'd courted her on that porch. He'd come to it at midnight, his adolescent body filled with desire, and swung alone on the old porch swing until her dad had come out and swung with him. Bill Baumgartner had understood a lot of things. When he gave Abby away, tears had touched his eyes as a smile had wreathed his face.

Good people, Abigail and her folks.

Bill and Amy were in Menard Memorial now, and when he went to see them on Sundays, he always told them the same thing, "I am searching."

For the kidnapper and killer.

For Abby's soul.

For the un-lived life of the child she might have been carrying.

For the truth, cold and clean.

The warehouse was one of the tin-siding jobs that looked like a

gigantic barn. On its side was a faded sign, unreadable.

He pulled his car up and got out. There were no other vehicles around.

This was looking more and more wrong. Very wrong. But if she wasn't law enforcement, who could she be? Surely the kidnapper wasn't a woman—this woman.

He been a detective long enough to know that the unexpected is usually the thing most to be expected.

He walked up to the door, which was unchained, the locks thrown back.

There was danger here, no question.

He went in.

CHAPTER FOUR

The air was cold and thick, smelling of mold and wet cardboard. His eyes were good in darkness, but not this good, so he put on the infrared glasses he had designed himself, cutting the lenses from a couple of Hoya RM9s. Then he pulled out his infrared illuminator and methodically swept his surroundings. A sodden mass of cardboard boxes appeared like a distant mountain range. Closer, he saw a jumble of ruined bicycles. Behind them were rows of dead Christmas poinsettias in plastic pots, also dry aquariums.

There used to be light manufacturing here in Menard, little factories that used wetback labor to make cheap goods that would be sent out to California on the railroad. No more.

Debris was what he had expected. It was what he did not see that was troubling him. The sense of abandonment had changed. Now, he felt the presence of watchers. So far, he hadn't spotted them, but he knew that this was only because he hadn't looked in the right place.

With a movement as smooth and natural as taking a breath, he slipped his gun into his hand. Out of habit, he'd brought his Glock. Should have taken the Magnum instead. He was off duty and officially on leave, so it had been his choice.

"Hello," he said. "My name is Flynn Carroll. You asked me to come here."

Then he knew that somebody was behind him. It wasn't a hunch this time, or an instinct. He'd heard the whisper that jeans make when they rub against each other.

Sucking in breath, then slowly releasing it, he went deep into himself, blanking his chattering mind by concentrating his attention on the sound. In another moment, he was going to need to move very,

very fast. He would have one chance only.

Another sound came, this time off to his right. So there were at least two of them, and they were maneuvering to place him in crossfire.

“Let’s stop this right now,” he said aloud. His words were followed by a silence. Were they surprised? He thought not. He thought they were very far from surprised, because he could see a third one off to his left, a figure that was more slight than the other two. Could be Diana. “Look, I’m gonna end up using this thing if somebody doesn’t show themselves real soon.”

Outside, the wind shook the thousand windowpanes and made the tin roof jump and rattle. The massive late season blizzard that was bringing the arctic to Montana was now also plunging southward into Texas.

“Flynn, listen carefully.”

Diana’s voice filled the room, a whisper from everywhere.

“Everything is good, Flynn. We’re all friends here. We just need to be very, very careful. This is all routine safe practice in this unit.”

“You’ll get used to it,” a male voice drawled.

A hand came down on his shoulder—and he took the guy down with a standing grapple, a simple jujitsu maneuver for which his assailant was, to Flynn’s surprise, entirely unprepared.

“Keep back,” Diana snapped. “Don’t challenge him.”

The guy he’d taken down got up. His face was hard to see in the darkness, but Flynn sensed a scowl of rage.

“Sorry,” he said.

All he could see of the eyes were shadowy sockets, but he could feel the anger.

“Flynn,” Diana said, “please give Captain Larsen your pistol.”

“No.”

“Flynn, you’ve come in here heavily geared and with a drawn

weapon. Of course we're being careful. Now, calm down. Give him the gun."

Flynn thought about it. He didn't move.

"We need to fly before dawn. We have a long way to go and time is of the essence. If you want to help prevent another disappearance and maybe stop this perp, now's your chance."

"I don't like total strangers coming up on me in dark rooms."

"This is a special unit, Flynn. We're operating under our own set of protocols. We've set up an orientation for you downstairs." She turned on the lights.

He lost his night vision equipment. Nobody else was showing a pistol, so he put his away. But he did not give it up.

"Thank you," she said.

At the far end of the space there was an old iron spiral staircase that had probably been ordered from the Sears Catalog a hundred years ago. He followed the rest of them down, and found himself in a basement that was just as dark as the floor above had been, but felt smaller. Not for long, though. A match flickered as Diana Glass lit a gasoline lantern—and hung it on the barrel of some kind of old tank. The thing wasn't in US livery and it was dusty, but it looked like it had never been driven.

"The Korean War," she said, waving a dismissive hand toward it. "They were on their way to San Diego when the conflict ended. Great shielding if you worry about listening devices."

"Which you do?"

"That would be correct. Flynn, first off, I want you to understand that there are many things that make this unit special. The first of these is that we're all just the same as you. We all have a missing loved one."

"None of 'em walked out," a male voice said. "My Cindy did not walk out."

"Louie Lander, LAPD," Diana said. "Just like you, just like the rest

of us, he's done a hell of a job on a lot of missing persons cases."

Louie Lander had a tight-to-the-skull faces and a hard, sad smile. "Just like me," Flynn thought, "I smile like that."

"Can you explain this security, because this is the most unusual damn unit I've ever come across."

"Flynn," Diana replied, "we're dealing with the most unusual damn thing that's ever happened. Mike, why don't you tell him your story?"

The second of the three guys standing in the light said, "Sure, Diana." He regarded Flynn with eyes full of pain. "We were having a cookout. It was just after dark. My wife and my little boy were out in the backyard playing hide-and-seek. I was cooking on the grill. I noticed it was kinda quiet." He paused. "That was in 2008. I never saw them again."

Flynn thought about this. "You were there? Right there?"

"I was standing twenty-three feet from my wife when it happened. My boy was playing near the back fence. Forty feet. I heard nothing, saw nothing. Finally I ran out into the alley. Up and down. Went to the neighbors." He stopped. "Called the precinct." He looked toward Diana Glass. His voice dropped. "A missing roller bag did the investigation in. Plus, the way they disappeared. No sign of an intruder. The local Bureau decided it was a walkout."

"Your son—his case wouldn't have been abandoned."

"He's on goddamn milk cartons," Mike muttered. "Nothing."

The same thought came into Flynn's mind that must have come into the mind of every investigator on the case: she left and took the boy with her, open and shut. No way could they have been abducted right out from under the nose of the father.

Mike's grin was eloquently bitter. "I can see what you're thinking," he said. "We were very much in love." He sighed heavily. "We still are. At least, inside me. Inside me, my family goes on."

"I hear that loud and clear," Flynn said. He looked to the third guy. "What about you?"

“First, my wife’s sister, six years ago. She was a talented woman, a violinist with the St. Louis Symphony. We all thought she walked out on her life, all except her boyfriend. The locals did a good workup. Went nowhere. Then, two years ago last month, I got hit. My Lynn. She comes out of the Costco near our place at ten at night—she worked there nights—gets in her car. *And it just sits there.* Eleven, I can’t get her on her cell so I drive over. There’s the damn Altima, empty. I call in the troops but nobody can find her. We get the security video. Two cameras. She crosses the parking lot, gets in the car, and it just sits there. Except.”

“Yeah?”

“There was a power failure at the store. One minute after she got in. Lasted twelve minutes.” The locals—my buddies—figured that’s when the kidnap took place. But when the Bureau found that a couple of changes of clothes and six hundred dollars in cash were gone with her, they got a different idea.”

“So we’re all in the same situation. Cases abandoned as walkouts. The operative word here is ‘abandoned.’ These are dead cases. So why are we here?”

“Last year, the Bureau finally upgraded its relational databases,” Diana said. “The first thing I did was to look for cases similar to my husband’s.” In the hard light of the gasoline lantern, her face had taken on a startling brightness, as if her skin was on fire inside. “What I discovered is that he wasn’t alone. Real walkouts are common, but almost always associated with domestic disturbance. Some of them are genuine, some of them are murders. There are a number of them like our cases, with no domestic trouble, and the spouse insisting that he or she would never, ever do this.”

“How many?”

“Flynn, over the past ten years, I’ve found eight thousand unsolved disappearances, two hundred thirty-six of which involve people who continue to claim that their loved one was kidnapped, despite all evidence to the contrary.”

“Anything linking them?”

“Nobody was a criminal, nobody was sick, nobody was disabled. Everybody had some sort of notable talent—musician, artist, electronics expert, you name it. It’s a highly functional group of people.”

“Abby was a musician.” He sighed. “So the FBI finally realized that something was up. A serial kidnapper. But why organize the unit now? Just because they got a new database?”

She glanced at her watch. “We need to move. The reason we pulled you in now is we’ve got the best case we’ve ever had, and we want the best team that can be deployed.”

“Where are we going?”

“There’s always an element of risk in this work, Flynn. We don’t want to talk about it until we’re off the ground.”

“You’re saying we’re not secure?” He looked around. “You’re not sure of these guys?”

“There could be extremely sophisticated surveillance,” Mike said.

“We’ve set a trap for the perp,” Diana added. “He’s taken two sisters. The third sister has moved in to live with her father. It’s an easy stakeout, and we intend to be waiting, starting tonight.”

“How long? Do you know when he’s gonna show up?”

“We think he’ll use the blizzard to cover his tracks.”

“So it’s in Montana. And we’re sure he’ll show?”

“Nothing is certain, obviously. But this is the most talented of the three sisters. She plays the piano and the violin, she’s a novelist, she’s a dancer. We have a target profile, and she’s way up at the top. Her sisters were good, but she’s outstanding.” She strode to the rickety spiral stair and went pounding up, oblivious to its creaking and swaying.

What the hell was going on here? What kind of a perp were they dealing with, who could steal this many people and do it so well?

They had an ancient minivan, white and caked with dirt, its side

panels scratched deep from a lot of overland work. The interior had once been luxurious, but the leather was now full of scuffs and tears, and the windshield was intricately cracked.

He sat behind Mike, who drove, consulting a handheld GPS as he maneuvered through the empty predawn streets. If they didn't want to ask the local guy for directions, that was their business.

It was six, shift change, and he saw a cruiser heading toward headquarters, the uniforms inside sipping coffee. Quiet time, six o'clock. The druggies have crashed, the citizens are just waking up, the whores are in the diners or in their motels. Quiet, good time, the eastern sky glowing with promise, dew gleaming in the summer, frost in the winter, here and there a jogger. Your city's most intimate moment.

"You aren't gonna get a flight at this hour," he finally said. "You're gonna need to take the Southwest at eight to Denver, then there's probably a United up to Billings. Assuming anything's flying." The late news had mentioned that the blizzard was setting records for snowfall and wind speeds. They'd called it a snow hurricane.

She drove toward the low buildings of the Menard Airport, now called Menard International since the Mexico City flight had been added. As a teenager, he'd come here to watch the planes taking off. In those days, there'd been a United 737 that headed for San Francisco at seven in the evening, and he and Abby had watched it and dreamed of what it would be to live there in a house in the Marina District or Nob Hill, and listen to the mourning of the buoys and watch the rolling fog. One night she'd said, her voice soft and shy, "What do you want first, a girl or a boy," and he had slipped his hand into hers and replied with silence, and known that she was to be his wife, and it would be good.

They passed the main terminal, which was unchanged from the way it had been all of his life, two low wings and a central tower. Inside were the six gates, now crushed behind a wall of security, but the Airflight Restaurant was exactly the same, and still served the chicken fried steak dinner on Thursdays, and you could watch the

planes while you ate.

Down at the end of this road was the hangar where Donald Douglas had once repaired an early Cloudster, and which now sheltered the ten or twenty private aircraft that called this place home.

“You have your own plane?”

“Yes.”

“So somebody’s a pilot?”

“I’m a pilot,” Charlie said. His tone reminded Flynn more of a funeral director.

They pulled around to the small parking area beside the hangar and got out. They moved as a team, he had to give them that. There was a practiced smoothness that he liked to see in a team.

As Diana entered the hangar through the weathered side door, she turned on the interior lights. Mike trotted over to the main door and rolled it open, revealing the empty concrete apron and equally empty runway.

There were two planes in the hangar, one a gleaming turboprop, the other a twin engine thing that was just that—a thing. Old. Grease on its landing gear. Bald tires.

Charlie hopped up onto the wing and opened a door.

“We can’t fly into a blizzard in that,” Flynn said.

“Charlie can,” Diana said.

Flynn was normally an unconcerned flyer, but this situation was not reassuring. “You’re looking at seventy-mile-an-hour winds in that storm,” he said.

Charlie, who was standing on the wing, said, “It’s got new engines compliments of the US Air Force, plus a classified antifriction coating and the most advanced avionics in the world.”

“It’s too light. No way. I thought you guys had Gulfstreams and things like that. Real planes.”

“This is the real world, not TV. I had to fight like hell for this.

We're travel-rated for commercial only.”

Flynn was the last to climb in.

He saw cracked insulation along the doorframe. He smelled gasoline. Mike and Louie had pulled the hangar door back and the morning sky was red with menace, the north wind already brisk. Billings was a thousand miles away, deep in the vastness of the storm.

CHAPTER FIVE

The more he saw, the less he liked. The little curtains on the windows were threadbare. Under his feet, the carpeting was worn through to bare metal. “I have to say, I don’t think this thing is airworthy on a good day. And this is not a good day.”

“If Charlie says he can take it into the storm, he can. Now, I want to brief you in procedures, because they’re not Bureau standard.”

That mattered little to Flynn. He was only vaguely aware of standard Bureau procedures anyway.

Charlie began turning on the electrics. His doubts seething, Flynn strapped himself into his seat, the rearmost in the plane.

Beside him, Diana sat paging through a file on her iPad.

When he realized that the plane was moving, he was shocked. He hadn’t heard the engines start or felt the slightest vibration, and yet they were heading out onto the apron.

“Boy, this thing is quiet,” he said.

“New engines,” Charlie said.

They moved swiftly across the apron. Charlie spoke into his mike, and after a moment the tower’s clearance crackled through the confined cabin. The controller’s voice, sharp with surprise and concern, made it clear that he’d been taken by surprise.

“Have you filed a flight plan?” came his voice, sharp in the silent cabin.

“We’re not required to.”

“Sir, if you’re heading north, I’d advise filing.”

Charlie’s reaction was to click off the radio.

“You oughta file a flight plan,” Flynn shouted over the engine noise, which was rising as they taxied onto the runway.

“Flynn, we can’t afford to leave tracks. Please understand that.”

“*Tracks?* It’s a flight plan, for God’s sake! The perp doesn’t have access to FAA records, surely.”

She dropped her iPad down on his lap. “You need to do a little studying on the way up. See what you make of the cases. Try to form in your mind an idea of the kind of capabilities the perp possesses. I guarantee you, they are awesome.”

The takeoff pressed Flynn back into his seat. In under five minutes, they were leaving ten thousand feet behind.

“This is the damndest thing,” Flynn said. “What is this? Because it sure as hell ain’t no fifty-year-old Piper Apache.”

“The friction-free coating makes it a different airplane. And the turbos. The airframe’s been strengthened. And the avionics, like I said—you can’t find better. Plus, it’s pressurized. Convenient in a storm. We can do forty thousand feet.”

“It’s not a Piper Apache, is it? It’s camouflaged as a Piper Apache.”

She smiled. “I could answer that question for you. But if I did, I’d have to kill you.”

There had been humor there—a little. It was clear, though, that Diana Glass really would kill to keep her secrets. It was understandable, though. This was a crack unit. These people were dedicated. Maybe people like this could actually win, even against a genius psychopath ... assuming they lived through the damn flight.

He watched home slip away beneath the speeding plane. Ahead, the sky was big and dark and mean, and the distant purr of the engines meant that he could hear the wind screaming around the airframe, like a voice from another world, mad and wild.

As the land slid past far below, it became more and more snow-choked. The silence that had settled over the cabin spoke to him in a clear voice. These people were all doing the same thing most people

in police work do when they're heading toward danger. Each one considers his life and wonders what will come, and grows silent, seeking within himself for his deepest strength.

Half an hour passed in this silence. Flynn read case files, one after another, more than he'd ever had access to before.

"I notice a pattern," he said. "The same articles of clothing every time. Three changes of underwear, three shirts or blouses, two pairs of pants."

"Interesting," Mike commented.

"Damn interesting," Diana said.

"I wish we could access Behavioral Science resources, Diana."

"Louie, no."

"I know—'until we know what we're dealing with, no leaks.' "

Flynn said to Charlie, "You came out of Behavioral, so what can you add?"

The engines drummed. The plane, now enveloped in grayness, was being steadily buffeted.

"Charlie?"

"I gotta fly an airplane," he said at last.

Soon the snowy fields below disappeared into a gray gloom. Flynn could hardly see the strobes on the wingtips. He craned his neck, looking up at the instrument cluster and seeing gleaming flat panel displays. An autopilot was operating, the plane banking and changing altitude on its own. Charlie didn't even have his hands on the stick. The plane, on its own, was navigating its way through the storm.

These avionics were ten years ahead of the airlines, maybe more.

Flynn thought he should feel safer, but he really wished that Charlie had his hands on the controls instead of reading files on his own iPad. And what about "I gotta fly this plane?" Apparently what it really meant was, "I decline to answer your question."

He watched the wing strobes disappear into the muck. Then the

wings.

He leaned forward. "Shouldn't you descend into visual?"

Charlie didn't react.

"Hey, Charlie, I can fly a damn airplane well enough to know we need visual."

Again no answer. Flynn turned to Diana. "Look, this is dangerous. No general aviation aircraft is up to this kind of flying, no matter what kind of avionics it has. What about deicing equipment? It has to be minimal."

"I just did a statistical analysis on the cases," Charlie called back, "and he's right. There's a very fixed pattern to the things that are taken."

"We know our perp has a team. He has to," Diana said. Then, to Flynn, "Just relax, let him do his thing. We wouldn't be up here if the plane couldn't do its job."

"What the hell is it, a drone with seats?"

She laughed a little. "The military's got some very good autopilots, obviously. Look, the computer's a lot better pilot than he is, right, Charlie?"

"Right. I'm looking at the site on the looksee. Snow's really building up around the house."

"What's a looksee?"

"We have surveillance cameras deployed around the target's home," Diana said.

As he paged through case after case, Flynn wasn't seeing a single indication that any witness had ever identified any person, vehicle, sound, or light that seemed to them to be unusual during the times the kidnappings had taken place. "My case is the only one with any sort of witness at all?"

"It is."

Flynn tried to relax. He hadn't slept much and he was tired. Looking at a rough day ahead, probably a stakeout tonight. Stakeout

in a blizzard. Lovely. He closed his eyes—and immediately felt a sensation of falling. Then the stall horn howled.

“Jesus!”

“No big deal,” Charlie yelled. “I’m on it.”

The horn warbled a last time, then stopped.

Flight became steady again, the engines now droning, the wingtip strobes faintly visible. Flynn had not realized until this moment how tired he actually was. Still, though, he clung to the arms of his seat.

More time passed. Finally, he found himself once again closing his eyes.

What seemed just a few moments later, he heard Diana saying, “Good morning.”

“I’ve been asleep?”

“Deep. Three hours.”

It felt like three minutes. “I can’t believe that.”

“Big changes, lotta stress, it’s natural. Healthy.”

The plane was still deep in the storm system, but flying smoothly, banking gently from time to time.

He saw that Diana had a readout of the plane’s position on her iPad. “What’s our ETA?”

“About twenty minutes,” she said.

“We’ve made good time, then.”

“The autopilot has an intelligent seek function. It finds the smooth air, so we don’t have to cut back our speed.”

When he was younger, he’d flown his dad’s plane between ranches, taking the old man from one of his properties to another. He still had his license and kept up with the field. “A hell of a nice toy.”

“That it is.” She raised her voice. “ETA upcoming, gentlemen. Just to be on the safe side, let’s do a weapons check.”

Flynn knew the law, and the law said that he wasn’t a police officer in Montana or anywhere except Texas unless in hot pursuit, and

flying in to a town and looking for a bad guy was hardly that.

“If you’re asking me to check my weapon, that means you’re expecting that I might need to use it. So I need to know where we are in the chain of command. Am I legal here?”

“We’re not in the Bureau’s chain of command at all. Me and Charlie are FBI, but this unit is seconded to the National Security Council.”

“*Seconded?* And since when did the NSC have any enforcement powers?”

“Okay, now I’m gonna tell you something that’s classified. You need to sign, though.” She took her iPad back from him, turned a few pages, then handed it back. “Electronic signature. Use the keypad.”

He read the letter, which was under the logo of the National Security Council and signed by the chairman. It granted him a Sensitive Compartmented Clearance under the code name Aurora. It was listed as a Human Intelligence Control System clearance and seemed to have something to do with the National Reconnaissance Office.

“I don’t understand this.”

“It’s an above top secret designation. Officially, we’re part of the National Reconnaissance Office, but that’s not where our actual chain of command runs.”

“Okay, so when you send a memo, who do you send it to?”

“My boss.”

“Not good enough.”

“All I can tell you.”

“And if I sign?”

“A little more.”

“Not a hell of a lot,” Louie said over his shoulder.

“Look, people, this does not look like a police unit to me. National Security Council? I was looking for a serial kidnapper and probable killer. Where’s the national security issue?”

“And the answer is the same, sign and find out.”

“Do it, buddy,” Mike said. “You need this. Heart and soul, man.”

“First I want to know if I discharge my weapon in Montana, what happens?”

Diana explained, “We’re operating under a National Security Letter. You fill out a discharge report and forget it.”

“A National Security Letter? For a serial killer? How? Why?”

She pointed at the iPad. “It will make sense, Flynn. It really will.”

He brought up the keyboard and signed his full name, then added his police ID number and his social security number in the blanks provided.

“Okay, so what have I done to myself?”

The airframe creaked loudly as the plane banked. The wing roots crackled. He could practically feel the tail torsioning, sense the metal weakening, the whole assembly getting ready to come to pieces. No matter how juiced up a small plane was, weather conditions like these were dangerous.

Snow seemed to gush at them. Charlie continued his maneuvers. He hadn’t even turned on the wipers, so he was still relying on full IFR. That was absolute confidence, or absolute stupidity.

The ground suddenly appeared below them, a spreading, featureless vastness of snow. When they banked again, Flynn could see roofs buried in the white desert, smoke whipping away from their chimneys. Nearby was a single dark line that looked like runways look when you should definitely not land there.

They banked yet again, and as they did, Flynn saw that there was a sign on the roof of the larger of the two hangars that marked the airport. It said, “Ridge, Montana.”

As they lined up on the runway and began to descend, he stopped asking questions. No time for that now.

In the end, he’d discover every secret thing about this damned operation, he was confident of that, but not just now. Just now, it was

time to let this thing unfold and hope that the blood that would fall in the snow on this day would not be his own. There would be blood, he felt, most certainly.

CHAPTER SIX

They taxied to the smaller hangar. There wasn't anybody around, of course. Why would there be on a visual flight rules airport during IFR weather?

Moving with lubricated precision, the team got out and pulled the plane into the shelter of the hangar.

"Diana, I need to talk to you."

"We're behind schedule."

"Look, I want to know what we're dealing with and I want to know right now."

"No problem," Diana said, "when the time is right."

The others began unpacking weather gear, warm jackets, hats, boots.

"You didn't get airsick, Texas," Charlie said. "I'm impressed."

"Flight was smooth. Anyway, I slept."

"And yelled."

"A little."

"We need to move," Diana said.

"When do we meet the local cops?" Flynn asked.

Silence fell.

"Five personnel can't run a stakeout in a blizzard!"

Diana continued as if he had not spoken. "What we're looking at is a relatively isolated house. About a mile from the nearest neighbor."

"Hey. You don't go past the locals."

"Lieutenant Carroll, I'll tell you what you need to know. That's all I

can legally do. Read your secrecy agreement.”

“I thought there was going to be a big reveal when I signed it.”

“As soon as possible.”

Impasse. He had no choice but to accept the situation.

“They’re in a house about four miles outside of town. Armed to the teeth. Scared shitless.”

“In weather like this, that’s total isolation,” Flynn said. “Do we have a read on the local power grid? Because if they don’t have power, that’s going to look like a real vulnerability to the perp.”

“Exactly,” she said. “Which is why we’re going to cut their power at some point if he doesn’t show up. Use their helplessness as a lure. We hope it’ll prove irresistible.”

“Why is he going after sisters, anyway? Explain that.”

“He got the first two, so we’re thinking he could try the third. What his motive is, we don’t know. There is a selection process, though. High-functioning people, that’s clear. Not too old, not too young.”

They began putting on the warm jackets, gloves, and boots that they’d pulled out of the plane’s rear cargo bay.

“I need gear.”

“There’s an Army-Navy outlet,” Diana said.

“Good stuff, I hope.” In weather this cold a stakeout would get dangerous fast.

“Far as I know. Let’s pull out the electronics, guys.”

Mike and Louie opened the plane’s nose cargo bay and Mike drew out a black, hard sided briefcase. Mike carried it to a workbench and released the elaborate lock that sealed it.

Flynn recognized night vision equipment and in-ear radios. But there were five blunt black wands, devices he could not place.

“Ranger equipment,” Diana told him. “Mike will check you out on one.”

Mike said, “First, you gotta know that it has a self-destruct system

built in. And a fingerprint reader. Once you're printed to it, if it gets more than ten meters from your body, acid's going to spray all over its interior. So you don't want to forget your little friend, and Uncle Sam really does not want you to do that. You're holding a million dollars worth of his computing power in the palm of your hand."

He pressed a button on the side, then pointed the narrow end of the device at Diana. A moment later, a reading appeared on a tiny screen.

"First, any reading at all tells you that a human being is out there somewhere, whether you can see him or not. Now, let's evaluate the state of the *commandante's* beautiful mind."

"Careful," Diana said.

"She's reading eighty-four," Mike said. "Anything over fifty is telling you the target's awake. Over seventy, the target's alert. Over ninety, the target has an elevated heart rate and high-level brain activity. In other words, your target is probably aware of your presence and your day is shortly going to be ruined."

He thrust it into Flynn's hand. Flynn looked down at it.

"It's a sensitive radio receiver and a computer that can read and interpret what it picks up. The thing draws a couple of milliamps and has the computing power of maybe a hundred thousand laptops. The receiver is tuned to pick up brain wave frequencies. It works the same as a garden variety electroencephalograph, only without leads. It has an effective range of ninety meters line of sight."

Flynn said, "Police departments could really use this."

"And it's also why we're not going to be calling in the locals. It's as classified a piece of equipment as the United States of America possesses. MindRay saves lives but it's easily defeated. Word gets out, no more trick pony."

"Defeated how?"

"Headgear that suppresses radio frequencies kills it. Embed a copper grid in a cap, and this device cannot read you."

So cops couldn't have it. Word would get out. He saw that. But he

also had a question that he didn't ask: did this thing make them more effective than the addition of some local bodies would?

"What's to say the perp won't be wearing a hat like that?"

"The classification of this item is very, very strict," Mike said.

"Okay," Diana came back, "we need to move right now."

Flynn thought that they would have been better off leaving these things behind and going in with local support. If he was in command of this operation, the MindRays would be headed straight back to the Pentagon.

Outside, the wind was now howling down the runway, blowing a sheer white torrent of snow. They'd gotten in just under what was exactly what the weatherman was predicting: a snow hurricane.

Transport was a weathered Cherokee with chains, a tight fit for five people, especially when one of them was as big as Flynn Carroll.

There was no visible road. The only sign of any activity was a light, faint in the distance, appearing and disappearing as the snow gusted.

Charlie drove, Flynn navigated with the handheld GPS that was part of each equipment pack.

"He has a team," Flynn said to Diana. "You indicated that."

"Has to. At least one accomplice, probably more."

They came out onto a plowed road. Now there were more lights, a snow-clad Motel 6 sign, beyond it a place called The Swashbuckler, a bar of the kind that grew like mushrooms in little places like Ridge, one mushroom per town. Inside, there'd be a bartender and a waitress snapping gum, in the back a cook. Along with the customers, they would have grown up here. In small towns, everybody had everything on everybody. Bitter places. Could also be murderous, especially on hard winter nights when you couldn't escape from those you loved and despised.

They pulled up at a big tin structure lit by a barely visible sign: "Rosen Surplus."

He got out and pushed his way into the store, which turned out to

be cave-like. There was an elderly woman with a tight gray bun sitting in a chair in front of rows of surplus fatigues. Hunter stuff.

“I need some warm clothes,” Flynn said.

The old woman looked up at him. “You sure do,” she said. Her face blossomed into a big, open smile. “Where’d you come from in that stuff, anyway?”

“Nowhere close by.”

She didn’t inquire further. She was too old to be curious about strangers anymore. She wanted his money, not his story.

“We got parkas on sale, thirty-six bucks. US Army mountain gear. Good stuff.”

He bought a parka, found a pair of boots that almost fit, some lined gloves, a hat, and an olive drab scarf that knew the services of moths. She showed him a dressing room behind a curtain where he put on two pairs of long johns and the rest of the clothes.

“Now you might live a while,” she said when he came out.

“Let’s hope.” He paid her a hundred and sixty bucks in cash and got a receipt for his expenses.

It was warm in the Jeep. Nobody spoke. Charlie backed out into the snow-swept street.

Flynn could feel the mission closing in. The absolute silence in the truck told him that these people sensed a whole lot of danger. Not sensed, knew. They *knew* that they were in great danger.

They drove off into a rampage of snow.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Louie was stationed a hundred yards away from Flynn, but he might as well have been in another state for all the good it did in this hell. The others were on the far side of the Hoffman house. The storm had come on even stronger than the Billings weatherman had said it would, and the snow rushed in the sky, pelting Flynn's parka and hood and working its way in under his scarf.

They'd been watching the house now since seven fifteen, and it was pushing nine o'clock. It was an excellent night for a perp who suspected he was under observation to make a move.

He had proven, however, that he could take them any time of year, from any kind of a dwelling, and never leave a trace of himself behind.

Off to his right, Flynn heard a distinct sound. A throaty growl.

It came again, and this time he thought maybe it was a tree scraping. Or could it be a car on the road, its engine straining?

The wind roared around him and the cold invaded his sleeves, the seam of the hood, anywhere it could get in, and that was pretty much everywhere. The scarf was a joke, the socks were a joke. The boots were waterproof, but no boots could keep out cold like this. It made him worry that he wasn't feeling enough pain from his feet, it numbed his hands and made his face burn.

When it comes to cold, after the pain ends is when death begins, and it is a line you can cross without ever knowing it.

The Hoffman place was a prairie Victorian with lighted windows downstairs, looking as warm and inviting as it could be. From time to time, he caught a whiff of oil smoke from what had to be a blazing

furnace. In the living room, he could see a fire flickering in the fireplace, and that smoke would drift this way, too. Professor Hoffman, Gail's father, sat in a wing chair before the fire, from time to time sipping at a mug that stood on a small table beside him.

Gail was cleaning up in the kitchen, moving elegantly about, her long arms putting away dishes. Girl-perfect, she reminded him powerfully of Abby.

Flynn was a snow-covered bulge in the earth and that was good. He was well concealed from the road, and the snow would insulate him a little. From time to time, he raised a stealthy, gloved hand and blew into it to warm his nose and face. He rocked from side to side, dipped his knees a little, keeping moving just enough to avoid becoming stiff.

If they weren't properly cleaned and oiled, guns could freeze solid in weather like this, even in your pocket. So he gripped his pistol. He also tried the MindRay. Once, he might have picked up a signal from the direction of the house. Another time he might have detected Louis. Out here, though, the display that had been clear and steady in the hangar flickered and changed so quickly that it meant, essentially, nothing. He was sure now that the thing was high-tech junk. Maybe the Rangers trusted it and maybe they didn't. He didn't.

He also tried the beautifully compact night vision equipment, only to find that the snow made it crazy. All he saw were flashes. He would've been better off bringing his own homemade scope.

He kept old-fashioned naked eye watch and nursed his Glock.

About fifteen minutes later, the living room went dark, then a front bedroom lit up. Professor Hoffman was heading up to bed at nine twenty-five.

Flynn had about decided to make an approach. As far as he knew, the Hoffmans didn't even know they were being staked out, and that was ridiculous. Also, the decision not to involve the local police was wrong, especially when the reason given was to protect the secret status of a piece of equipment that belonged in the garbage. The whole plan was borderline incompetent.

Flynn's worry was that the perp was already in the Hoffman's lives, someone they had come to trust. Was that how he worked—he was the grocery clerk, the night man at the convenience store, getting under the skin of the vic so skillfully that there was never a flicker of suspicion?

He shook the snow off and started toward the house, but there was motion to his right, at about one o'clock. Something low and big. A car? No, impossible off the road in this snow. Anyway, it was living movement, stealthy and low to the ground.

Almost on its own, his gun came out. He stayed where he was, though. Don't move until you understand.

A minute passed, then another.

This perp had once taken a forty-year-old woman who'd weighed two hundred pounds out of a farmhouse in Oregon on a rain-soaked night and left not even a footprint. He had taken mothers from shopping mall parking lots, fathers from backyard barbecues, nurses from their rounds, priests from their rectories.

He had killed them all, Flynn believed. Of course he had, killed them without remorse, lost as he was in whatever fantasy drove him.

Now there was another sound. What the hell was that? Something tinkling.

No, it was music. It floated like a spirit on the storm. There were windows downstairs with drawn curtains, and he thought that was where the music was coming from. It stopped, then started again. Soaring out above the roar of the storm, the hiss of the snow. Dear God, she could play that piano. What was it? Beethoven, maybe? Beautiful, anyway.

Rocking from side to side, checking his feet, blowing into his hands, Flynn began pressing forward again.

Another sound came, this time to his left. This was a very strange sound, a muffled sort of whistling. It went on and on, this sound, a kind of noiseless screaming.

Finally, it ended and did not repeat. The music swelled and the

wind moaned in the eaves of the old house. Low clouds plunged out of the north. The only light was from the house and the glowing snow.

He was going down to that house and he was going to announce himself to those people. He was well under way, slogging through drifts as deep as six feet, when he observed the moving shape again. It came from the right this time, and therefore had crossed his field of vision without him seeing it. So there must be a low area between him and the house, probably the snow-covered road. But it wouldn't offer more than a couple of feet of protection, so whatever that was out there, it wasn't a man.

He called on the reserves of inner silence that twenty years of intensive martial arts training had given him. "All things come to him who waits." The defender has the advantage, always.

He watched as the wind picked up a long stream of snow and blew it off into the darkness. The eaves of the house wailed, the music swelled, and bright scars of moonlight whipped across the desert of snow. Behind the storm would come brutal cold and behind that, they said, another storm.

The moonlight revealed a low form with a long back and tail—an animal. The instant the light hit it, it became so still that many people wouldn't have noticed it. A moment later, though, darkness engulfed the shaft of moonlight, and the animal with it. He fought to control his breathing, fought to stay where he was and not follow the flight-or-fight instinct, which was telling him to get the hell out of here.

He tried the night vision goggles. They hadn't been adjusted to work in snow.

Activate the radio, then? No. The others were all armed professionals, too, and a single spatter of communication could cause the perp to pull out—assuming, of course, that he was here.

The house was still dark. When the moon broke out of the clouds, it stood still and silent. Were they asleep? Could they sleep? He could see an LED in there, glowing red in the downstairs hall. They had an

alarm system. Certainly guns, too. So they probably felt safe.

The snow was now coming down in long, howling flurries punctuated by periods of driving wind. He waited, his hands clutching his gun. He'd stuffed the MindRay into his backpack. The equally useless night vision binoculars hung around his neck.

He was peering into the dark and thinking about trying them again when the moon appeared and he found himself looking into the face of a goddamn puma, which was not ten feet in front of him.

He gasped, choking back a shout of alarm.

How in the world had it gotten this close this fast? A certainty: it was the master of conditions like this. A possibility: it saw him as prey.

The eyes were steady. They were careful. To his amazement, they followed his stealthy movement to his pistol. Since when did pumas understand pistols? But this one sure did.

He wished that he had an Anaconda or a Model 29, because it was going to take some accurate shooting with the Glock to stop this creature if it charged from this close. Worse, it was a Glock Nineteen and not an Eighteen with its greater capacity and automatic fire option. He needed a perfect head shot or the animal would still be very much alive when it connected with him.

Carefully, he tightened his hand around the pistol and began to pull it up into firing position. If the animal leaped before the gun was aimed, he was going to be torn to pieces.

Its eyes shifted to his face, then back to the rising pistol, which was uncanny. How smart could it be?

It pulled its shoulders forward. It was about to leap. But then there was a slight hesitancy.

The eyes—so steady, so alien—returned to his face. In the stare Flynn could see a raw lust to kill. But then they flickered again, and in the next instant the animal was gone. He had gotten the gun into position just in time, and it had clearly understood that it had been outmaneuvered.

Amazing. He'd never seen anything like it. No animal was that smart.

The puma's tracks faded into the snow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Louie was approximately two hundred yards to his right, covering the house from an angle that gave him a different view. Flynn wanted to warn him on the radio, but he didn't want to be the one to blow this mission, misconceived though it was. He had to warn the guy, though, so he'd go over there. This would leave the house uncovered from this angle for a few minutes, but it had to be done. It was one damn smart cat, and the guy needed to know this.

The piano had started again, the music slipping and sliding in the wind. Abby, also, had played. His dad had played. He'd tried to learn, but he hadn't inherited that gene. What he could do well with his hands was shoot. He could turn even an old snub-nosed Police Special into a useful weapon. A good pistol felt like an extension of his hand. Any pistol, for that matter.

Pushing through the snow, he was tempted to call Louie's name, but even that might destroy the stakeout. Many a cop had wrecked a good collar with an ill-timed whisper.

He was sweating under his layers of clothing when he began to ask himself if he'd gone in the right direction. But he had, no question. So where was Louie?

The snow seemed less, so he tried the night vision goggles again. He could see a little better, but they didn't reveal Louie ahead. Instead, what Flynn saw was a strange, formless shape in the snow.

Was that a rock? A gnarled bush?

He tried working with the goggles, increasing the magnification.

The material was jagged, gleaming darkly. He still couldn't tell what it was.

Another patch of moon glow sped by. In it, he could make out a pale ripped edge protruding from the shape. Bone, maybe? If so, then that was a chunk of something the lion had just killed—a deer, hopefully.

As a precaution, he got his pistol back out and held it alongside his parka. If that was a kill, then the lion was protecting it, and that's why it was hanging around.

As he crunched along, he stepped on something just beneath the frozen surface. It was hard and irregular and it shifted under his foot.

He bent down and pushed away the snow.

What first appeared was a pallid slickness. He kept brushing. Something just below it, hard tufts of material. Frozen hair, he thought. So this was a kill and that was why the puma had menaced him. It had been worried about having its food stolen.

It took all of his training not to cry out when he found the staring eyes and gaping mouth of Louis Hancock looking back at him. The eyes flashed with moonlight when there were rips in the clouds.

The guy had been taken down by the mountain lion, which was about the damndest thing Flynn could imagine happening. As he pushed more snow away, he discovered that Louie had been hit from behind and thrown forward, then—incredibly—ripped in half.

The legs and abdomen were nearby, a knee and booted foot jutting up from the snow. So the lion must be big. Huge.

This stakeout was over. He reached up and pressed the call button on his radio. "There's been an accident. Detective Hancock is dead. Come in, please."

Silence.

"I repeat, Louis Hancock has been killed, apparently by a mountain lion. We need to close this thing down, we have a dead officer here."

Silence.

He was coming to really not like these people. "You can't continue the stakeout, you have a dead officer! I repeat, *dead officer!*"

The hell with it, he'd go in himself. He'd been on his way anyway, interrupted by this horror show. He went plunging toward the house.

The going was extremely hard, and he had to fight his way through some flurries so high that he was forced to lie forward and push himself ahead.

Every time he was forced to do this, he was very, very aware that he was entirely helpless.

He moved slowly, guided by the music. There were no lights showing in the house. When he finally stumbled out into the road, the going was a little easier, but not much. The house loomed ahead of him, tall and completely dark except for a single strip of light leaking from around the curtains of the room where Gail Hoffman was playing.

He was going up the snow-choked front walk when he saw the lion again. It was standing on the porch, back around the far edge, where it curved around under the living room windows. It was absolutely still, and it was watching him.

Once again, it had maneuvered brilliantly. He thought to back off, but any movement whatsoever was going to be a major risk. The animal could react a whole lot faster than he could. Certainly, trying to turn around and run would get it on him in an instant.

The puma was not protecting its kill. It was still hunting, and he was its quarry.

He calculated its distance from him at fifteen feet.

Its eyes were as still as glass. If the nostrils hadn't dilated slightly as it breathed, it would have appeared frozen. The jaw hung slightly open, the enormous incisors visible.

Was that the face of a mountain lion? He didn't know enough about big cats to tell, but it seemed somewhat longer and narrower. He decided that his best move was to edge in close enough to guarantee a fatal head shot. With luck, it wouldn't react in time.

Another step, then another, as he slowly came up out of the snow and into the compact front garden. Gail played on. The lion watched

him.

He saw its eyes close for a moment, then come open again. The message conveyed was clear and it was shocking: the animal was so sure of itself that it was *bored*.

Again he stopped, because he had understood why. The game was already over. It had been since before he'd started his maneuver. The animal was waiting for him to realize that he was caught. No matter what he did, it was going to make its move while he was still too far away for a reliable shot.

Bored did not mean careless. The face remained a picture of attentive patience.

He noticed a flickering light in the sky. Lightning, he thought, which would mean that the blizzard was about to intensify. Could that help him? Would a really powerful flurry give him a chance to return to the road, perhaps to make his escape?

Then he heard a noise even more inexplicable than the earlier one, which had obviously been Louie's death whistle. This was a whispering sound overhead, a big, rhythmic whisper of wind, too regular to be part of the storm. As he listened, it slowed and then settled, dropping down behind the house.

The rhythm was that of a helicopter blade, but it was too quiet. Way too quiet.

A moment later, the light in the front yard changed, and he saw why. The curtained room had just gone dark. The piano had fallen silent.

The lion, also, was gone, slipping away in absolute silence.

He stood still, listening, watching. Could it have jumped up on the roof? Carefully, moving slowly and as little as possible, he raised his head. There was no telltale shadow along the roofline. So it had retreated, backing down the porch until it was out of sight.

Was it trying to escape him or was it still hunting him? Since he couldn't know, he had no intention of going around the corner of that porch. He needed some spot where he could still see the house, but

which would give him protection for his back.

Fifty feet to his left was a tree, its trunk thick enough to enable him to lean against it, making attack from behind much more difficult. The lion would have to charge him from some point that he could see, and it would need to start far enough away to make the pistol useful.

The snow in the yard looked deep, and the slower he had to move, the greater the risk. But if he stayed here, the lion could get behind him.

He raised his gun up beside his shoulder where it could be aimed and fired in just over a second, then plunged off the snow-covered sidewalk and into the deeper drifts of the yard itself. He was at his most vulnerable now.

An enormous splash of snow hit him in the face, temporarily blinding him. He pulled a gloved hand across his face to clear his eyes.

The lion was beside the tree and it was already crouched, ready to leap at him.

Once again, it had outmaneuvered him. Yet again, he was too far away to risk a pistol shot. It, however, was close enough to take him.

Years ago, Menard had recorded a case of a mountain lion stealing a three-year-old out of the bed of a pickup, but he'd never heard of anything like this.

He'd probably been damn lucky to have seen it when he had, or he would have suffered the same fate as Louie.

He took deep, careful breaths, centering his attention on his body, letting his emotions race off down their own frightened path. "You're here, you've survived so far," he told himself. "You can win this."

How had the lion ever gotten over to the tree? How had it concealed itself in the snow? He was having a hard time believing that an ordinary puma could function like this.

Once again, he had to fight the impulse to turn and run.

The lion moved off past the tree, carefully keeping the trunk between itself and Flynn, and once again he had the uncanny sense that it understood guns.

He asked himself, “Do I have any chance at all of getting to the house?”

From where he now stood, the tree was thirty feet away, the porch and front door twenty.

The door had a glass window in it backed by a curtain. Breaking in would take ten seconds.

When a path looked easy, that was usually because it wasn't.

The moment he started back up onto the front walk, he had to assume that the lion would know his intentions.

He made a quick survey of the scene. The house was now completely quiet and completely dark.

Could it be that the lion was trained? Because another way of looking at this situation was that it was not only trying to kill him, it was also trying to keep him from getting to the house.

No, don't even go down that road. The perp didn't have a damn pet lion with a genius level IQ. The creature was bad luck, nothing more. Had to be.

Nevertheless, his cop's intuition screamed at him: secure your position. You don't know where that animal is and you don't know *what* it is, not really.

Once again, he tried the radio. Once again, there was no response, which was completely unacceptable. When this stakeout was concluded he was going to file a red hot report with whoever was in charge of this outfit, about its leadership and its shitty procedures and its worthless equipment.

Six feet to the left of the front door, the porch ended. Beyond it were lumps along the side of the house that indicated the presence of a flower bed. Behind the house, just visible, he could see the dark bulk of what must be the garage.

Somewhere back there Diana and Charlie and Mike were deployed—unless, of course, their radio silence was unintentional.

He would need to find them, but not right now. There was another thing that had to be done, which was that the Hoffmans needed to be warned and they had to be offered the close protection they should have been given in the first place.

Angrily jabbing the transmit button on his radio, sending out call after unanswered call, he approached the house.

He pushed his fist through one of the small panes of glass midway up the front door. Working fast because he had lost track of the puma, he pulled the remaining shards of glass out of the bottom of the frame, then leaned in, twisted the deadbolt, and opened the door.

The alarm sounded its warning buzz, but he didn't even try to cut it off. He wanted it to trigger. Surely that would bring Diana and Mike and Charlie in on the run—assuming, of course, that they were still alive. But surely—*surely*—they were. No matter how clever, a mountain lion simply could not slaughter four police officers. Someone was going to get to his gun in time.

The buzz of the alarm rose to a warble. Thirty seconds to go. “Miss Hoffman, Doctor Hoffman, police! Please disarm your system! Police!”

No reaction. They could have retreated to a safe room. They could be waiting there, guns at the ready. Hopefully, they were calling the locals.

His first order of business was to find such any safe room they might be in. It would most likely be in the basement, so where was that door?

He went into the living room. In the big stone fireplace, the fire that had blazed up earlier still sparked and muttered. Beyond this was the music room. With its drapes still closed, it was pitch black. Inside, he could see the darkly gleaming surface of a grand piano, its keyboard a pale grimace.

The alarm triggered, its horn blaring up from under the stairs.

Returning to the front hall, he opened the door of the understairs storage, then waited another full minute before disconnecting it. If it was set to make a distress call, he wanted to make sure that happened before he disabled anything. Finally, he pulled out its power line. Silence followed.

“Is anybody here?”

He detected not the slightest sense of movement, not the whisper of a footstep or a breath or the faintest creak of shifting weight from upstairs.

The wind rose in the eaves and snow swept past the windows.

He examined the alarm system’s control box and was horrified to see that the jack socket was empty. It had no phone connection.

Stepping into the hall, he tried his cell phone, but there wasn’t even the hint of a bar. In the kitchen he snatched up the receiver of a wall phone, but there was no dial tone. Lines were down, of course, in weather like this.

If that flash of light had been the perpetrator in some sort of helicopter, no matter how incredible it seemed, the brilliant puma had been part of it, deployed as an assassin and a decoy.

He looked out the kitchen window, across the bleak pale desert of the backyard.

He shifted frequencies on the radio, emergency calling again and again, but nobody came back. Field communicators like these were adjusted to a range of just a couple miles. You didn’t want them being picked up on bad-guy scanners.

To be certain that he was right about the Hoffmans, he went through the house checking bedrooms, closets, bathrooms, even under the beds.

He pulled down the attic door. As soon as the stairs unfolded, though, he knew they weren’t up there. Nobody had trod on these dusty steps in a long while. Still, he shone his light up. “Doctor Hoffman, police! Miss Hoffman!”

No reply.

He climbed the old steps, feeling the slanted ladder give under his weight. "Doctor Hoffman, I'm a police officer. I'm here to help you."

If he was wrong and they were up there, he might be about to get his head blown off. "Doctor Hoffman!"

Shining his light ahead of him, he went up two more rungs. He spotted a couple of cardboard boxes, but mostly the space was filled with loose insulation. Turning, he shone his light to the far end. The house had two wings, but there was no point in crawling any deeper. Anybody coming up here would have disturbed this insulation.

He backed down and closed the stairs, then spent some time in the master suite. The bed had been slept in, but it was cold now. The master bath revealed that this had been Doctor Hoffman's room. It also revealed missing items. There was no toothbrush in the holder and a shelf of the medicine cabinet was empty.

There were too many clothes in the closet to tell if any were missing, but the way that the hangars had been pushed back, it looked possible. He observed no luggage, so that was another question.

He went down the hall to Gail's room and found a similar situation. The bed was undisturbed, but there was evidence that cosmetics had been removed from the bathroom.

In the hallway, he found a closet that held luggage, but it was unclear if any had been taken.

Still, the evidence was sufficient to at least suggest that these people had left of their own accord. Nobody was going to believe that, though, because their cars were still going to be in the garage and there were no tracks around the house.

He knew damn well what had happened here. The Hoffmans had been taken. No question, it was exactly the same as all the other cases. So the kidnapper had managed to take the third sister right out from under the noses of a stakeout team, which was damn well amazing.

That most criminals were stupid was part of the shorthand of police work. The vast majority of them were going to be too dumb to get away, but also too dumb not to shoot. Catching the average crook was like herding a bull—dangerous, but not exactly what you'd call an intellectual challenge.

What they had here was a lurid genius with a bizarre imagination. To even think of training a big cat the way he had was extraordinary. To succeed was phenomenal.

He went downstairs and looked out the back door. He needed to locate the remaining members of the team. He observed the snow-packed back garden carefully, but saw no sign of any human presence. But he wouldn't, not from here. They'd be back in the tree line.

That damn cat was probably still out there, but he had to do this. He unlocked the kitchen door and drew it open.

The wind-driven snow slammed him so hard that he lurched off balance and had to grab the doorframe to keep from being swept backward.

There were major gusts in this thing, fifty, sixty miles an hour. Lowering his head, he pushed his way out into the storm.

CHAPTER NINE

The brief shafts of moonlight that had helped him earlier were now gone, replaced by scudding clouds and a literal wall of snow being driven directly in his face by the brutal wind. Out much more than five feet, he was blind. So what about the cat? Was it blind, too?

Despite this, the perp had come in here and taken his victims. Flynn knew when, too. It had happened just after Gail had stopped playing the piano and just before he'd entered the house—when Flynn had been dealing with the puma. It had disappeared because the kidnap had been accomplished and the perp had called it back.

The whole thing had taken roughly ten minutes and had been accomplished without a sound, without a trace of anything being left behind and without a hitch. *In this.*

He reached the garage and shone his light through one of the small windows that lined the two doors—and felt a shock with the power of a fist in the face. There was blood everywhere, blood and ripped clothing. He saw a hand, a leg—pieces of two people, maybe three.

The Hoffmans? The team? All of them?

He raised one of the doors, which came up with a massive creaking and a tinkle of shattering ice.

This door hadn't been opened in at least an hour, and the other one was caked with ice. So who were these people?

Stepping in, gun in one hand and flashlight in the other, he went to where a bloody jacket lay against the door of an old pickup.

North Face, black. High-intensity penlight in the right pocket.

Mike had worn a black North Face. The light was the same one all the team members carried.

Against the back wall, there was an old-fashioned pitchfork. On it was a rounded mass of bloody hair. It was Charlie, his distorted face just barely recognizable in the mess.

The perp may have originally intended to take the Hoffmans in the usual way, leaving behind evidence that they'd departed on their own. Flynn's best guess was that these two men had somehow succeeded in surprising him—whereupon they had paid the same price as Louie.

So this was now a major crime scene. There could be forensic studies done here. Maybe there would be prints, bits of hair, even blood. DNA, even.

Looked at one way, this was a scene of extraordinary violence and tragedy. Looked at another way, it could be a treasure-trove of evidence, the first one in the history of this case.

A quick survey of the remains turned up evidence of only the two men. Diana was not here. He made a quick decision to report this crime first and worry about her later. His guess was that she was beyond saving anyway, probably back there in those woods right now, in the form of frozen remains.

His duty was very clear. He had to get out of here alive and give the state criminal investigators all the help he could.

But how to accomplish that? The perp was going to definitely want him dead. He had effective weapons, including the lion, and probably skills and capabilities that Flynn knew nothing about. Given that he was able to train a wild animal to near-human hunting skills, it had to be assumed that he was well provided with extraordinary assets.

Could Flynn manage to walk out of here? No, the perp would not let that happen. At some point, the lion would reach him or something else would reach him.

Even if he did reach the Cherokee, which was half a mile back along the road, he didn't have keys. So he would need to wire it. Not difficult, but it would take a few minutes that he was unlikely to have.

He was trapped here, that was clear. But he wasn't going to give up. That was also clear. The odds were against him though, seriously against him. In fact, he didn't really think he had any measurable odds. So what he had to do was to leave a record behind, giving all the details of the crime as he had observed them.

A moment's thought brought him an idea. He set about searching the ruins of the two men for a phone. He could use it to record a detailed account of the crime as he had seen it unfold. He'd return it to the pocket it had come from. At some point, forensics would find the recording and listen to it.

Handling the corpse of a person who has just died is as intimate an experience as there is. Not many people do it—nurses, policemen, emergency medical service personnel—and those who do never get used to it. It's as if a living person has surrendered himself to you so completely that he is lost to your touch.

Largely because Charlie's corpse was the least maimed, Flynn approached it first. He'd taken a shattering blow to the head and sustained deep gouges. A man had delivered the blow, but the rest of it had been done by the lion.

The body lay at a twisted angle, its face turned away as if in some eerie excess of modesty. One arm lay across the chest, the other angled backward, obviously broken. Long gouges had reduced his heavy parka to rags that bulged with tufts of white wool insulation. Mike felt in the pockets, soon coming across the familiar shape of an iPhone. Grasping it, he withdrew it and turned it on.

It took a long time, but finally the opening screen appeared. Charlie didn't use a password, which was useful but not smart for a man who obviously dealt with a lot of classified material.

As Flynn pressed the logo of the recorder app, he found himself watching the battery indicator with increasing amazement. The phone got hot, quickly becoming almost painful to hold. He tried to turn it off but it was no use. He watched helplessly as the battery indicator moved across the face of the thing, reducing it in a matter of seconds to a dead, useless brick. Immediately, he pulled out his

own cell phone and found it to be hot, also, its battery drained.

He went to Mike's shattered remains, dug his fingers into a blood-soaked pants pocket, but did not find his phone. He patted the other pocket. Same result. Had it been lost in the battle that had taken place in here? He shone his light around the room.

Mike's jacket was so badly ripped apart that the contents of the pockets had been strewn all over the room. After a few more moments of searching, he found his MindRay under the truck. On the far side of the vehicle was a small black object, which proved to be not his cell phone, but an old Police Special. Flynn pocketed it.

At that moment, he heard a sound, a fluttering in the rafters.

He braced his pistol, but saw nothing. He used his flashlight. Still nothing. Could have been a possum or a coon. Not a lion, though, thank God, not up there.

Continuing his search, he soon located another pistol, this one a Magnum. At least one of these guys had been decently armed. The pistol had been fired until it was empty.

Charlie and Mike had fought for their lives in here. He hadn't heard the shots, so the battle must have taken place while he was still on the rise overlooking the house. That would have been at least half an hour ago.

He thought the situation over. Louie had been done by a big cat that had been expertly trained. Best trained animal in the world, no question. It hunted like a master tracker of the human kind, not like an animal. What had happened in here was that the lion and its human minder had worked together.

The shadow dropping down from above was almost on him by the time he saw it. There were eyes—huge, glaring—and he was firing his pistol again and again, aware that he was emptying it just like Mike had.

Then silence. Nothing was there but a wreath of smoke.

He took a long step toward the truck—and saw something moving on the far side. Reflex made him brace the empty pistol.

No more movement. No sound.

He went closer, then around to the front of the truck. Shining his light into the darkness between the vehicle and the wall, he saw a mass of something on the floor. A closer look revealed that it was feathers.

“Shit,” he said quietly. He’d shot at a poor damn barn owl. Fortunately for the owl, all he’d done was to separate it from part of its tail.

It was time to get out of here. He had one hell of a dangerous journey ahead. Reluctantly, he approached Mike’s body again and felt for a reload for the Magnum. He didn’t find one. He’d never know if the guy failed to bring extra bullets, or used more than one cylinder. Not that it was that important. Dead is dead, and they certainly hadn’t been killed by any barn owl.

It was time to do this, maybe lose his life and maybe not, but the longer he waited the more certain he felt that whoever had done three experts to death would find a way to kill a fourth—or was that a fifth? Diana had yet to be accounted for.

He turned out his light, went to the door, twisted the handle, and raised it onto the storm.

The wind was roaring steadily now, the snow gushing out of the sky in a horizontal cataract. He took his compass out of his pocket and oriented himself, then turned and closed the door.

He started off, pushing his way through snow that was two feet deep at a minimum. When he reached the road, he consulted his compass again, then turned and headed toward the town.

He’d find the Cherokee. He’d survive. He’d get this perp and see him take the needle.

The wind howled around him, clutching him, shaking him with the full power of nature at its most wild.

He struggled off toward the town, his compass his only guide.

CHAPTER TEN

Flynn's struggled to stay on the road, to see any possible attacker, to somehow make progress against a storm that was like a living creature. He timed himself, hoping that he could get at least a rough idea of when he might be approaching the jeep. He also watched as best he could for the puma or for any other sign of danger.

When a flicker lit the snow, his first thought was that it was lightning. There was no thunder, though. Then, for the briefest moment, a neat pool of light crossed a drift to his right.

He reacted by dropping and rolling off the road. He let himself sink into the snow. Face up, he lay absolutely still, breathing as lightly as possible. Heat sensing equipment worked particularly well in conditions like this and he did not want his breath to reveal him to infrared detectors.

He reached for the Glock with his right hand, Mike's Special with the left. He'd worked for years to shoot effectively with his left hand, and was able to hit targets firing from it at eighty percent of his right-handed proficiency.

If anything came at him, he was going to do his best to shoot it and the hell with the police self-identification mandate, this was kill or die. As always in moments like this, he took his attention away from his mind and even his problem, and concentrated it on his body. You'd think that paying attention to the problem was what you needed. But what you needed was a hunter's form, and that was a physical discipline. As he emptied his mind, cocked silence filled him. His breathing became deep, his heartbeat slowed.

After a moment, a more intense light appeared, growing at first brighter, then slowly dimming. It was moving up the road, and it

seemed to be coming from above, like a searchlight shining down from a helicopter.

As had been the case at the Hoffmans', there wasn't the slightest sound of an engine. A helicopter produces noise in two ways. There's the engine sound, but the distinctive chopping is caused by the rotor, or wing, breaking the sound barrier for a moment each time the engine drives it forward.

There was no engine noise. There was no chop. So could this be one of the rumored silent wing choppers the air force had been working on? *Was it the air force, then? Could it therefore mean safety?*

No, this same type of aircraft had been used to kidnap the Hoffmans.

So the perp had a trained lion and a helicopter with a silent wing.

He waited, breathing evenly, letting the snow settle around him. He was freezing cold but must not allow himself to shiver. His face burned from cold, but he would not move to push the snow away.

The light flashed down again and again, continuing on past him, growing slowly fainter until it was finally absorbed by the darkness.

Did the possession of an advanced helicopter mean a defense connection of some sort?

If he got out of this alive, that would be another line of inquiry worth pursuing. Right now, though, it was all he could do not to let his mind frantically game survival options. From long experience and study, he knew that in conflict the body is a better master than the mind. He concentrated his attention on his senses, mostly his hearing.

From yoga, he'd learned a practice of containing his body heat, and he regulated his breathing carefully. He needed to remain here for an unknown amount of time, but without intense physical discipline he was going to have to move in a few minutes or be frozen.

He took in breath, held it deep, then expelled it slowly, retaining as much heat as he could.

The light returned, brighter this time. It was definitely coming from

above, no question about that. If he had a helicopter with a silent wing, then maybe he also had a MindRay, maybe even a better one. Certainly heat sensors and night vision equipment. But would any of it register the presence of a mind in deep trance?

He concentrated his attention on his inner silence. His mind became totally quiet. He waited. They might get him, but there would be death among them.

Slowly, the light faded once again. Whatever equipment they had, they hadn't found him. Unless, of course, they were waiting for him to stand up into an ambush. If they were certain that he was here, they might realize that the snow was concealing him from their detectors. Therefore, he had to remain hidden until they concluded that he was dead.

He couldn't see his watch and dared not bend his arm, so he began to count. He needed to stay here at least half an hour, but how was he going to do that without freezing to death?

The cold penetrated deeper and faster than he'd thought possible, coming in through his double ply of long johns, making his bones ache and his skin go numb.

Time passed. He remained still. Methodically, he moved his fingers and toes.

When he'd heard nothing for what he hoped was at least fifteen minutes, he moved slightly.

No light flickered, no sound came but the wind.

He moved more, lifting his head until he could hear the intimate whisper of snow as it slid out of the sky.

As he came to his feet, he did an immediate reconnaissance up and down the road. It appeared that he was alone. To the east, the sky was slightly brighter, but darkness still dominated. He glanced at his watch. Five fifteen. He had not been under the snow for ten or twelve minutes. He had remained here for more than two hours.

He struggled back up onto the road and turned south, then resumed plodding.

Walking was hard work and extremely slow and even without his pursuers to capture him, it was clear to him that he might not make it out of this. If he didn't find the jeep and then also missed the crossroads and therefore didn't find the town, he would die within the hour. In fact, unless everything went perfectly and he had luck, one way or another, he was going to die in this place.

Ahead, a frozen road sign danced in the wind. It was caked with ice and unreadable, but he could see that it contained an arrow pointing to the right.

It was the way to the town. Even better, sometime in the past two or three hours, it had been plowed. Snow was blowing again, but when he put his feet down they hit tarmac, not crunching ice. He was able to safely increase his speed, which he did, forcing more and more out of himself, but at the same time getting his body into the same kind of rhythm that enables animals to lope for hours, checking his breathing, his heart rate, going for the long pull.

He began to allow himself to think that he might have escaped.

The road, though, seemed to go on forever. How long had they driven to get from the town to the Hoffman's turn off? He recalled ten minutes at most. The snow had kept them to twenty miles an hour, perhaps a little faster. So his best guess was that he had about five miles to go. He set his walking speed at four miles an hour, very fast for these conditions, but possible. He knew how each speed felt, from two to six miles an hour. The fact that the road had been plowed was a major plus. If he'd had to slog through the same depth of snow that had choked the side road, he wouldn't have made more than two miles an hour at best.

By the time he could finally see the town's streetlight, putting one foot in front of the other had become a struggle. Beyond it was the Motel 6, a strip of twelve rooms, two cars in front, most likely salesmen sheltering from the storm. He needed to inform the local authorities about the disaster at the Hoffmans', but he had no idea where the police station was located. He headed for the motel. They'd have a phone.

The office was lit by a single storm candle guttering in a saucer on the counter. The room was empty and it was cold. So they'd lost power.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

There was an area map glued under plastic, beside it a stand with brochures promising hunting, fishing, and hot-air balloon rides. They touched him with a strange nostalgia, and he found that he understood the look he'd seen in the eyes of cops who had seen carnage. They longed for the time before, and now so did he.

"Excuse me? Hello?"

Still nobody.

He went around the counter and leaned into the office. An ancient woman sat slumped behind a weathered old desk.

"Excuse me, ma'am?"

When she still didn't respond, he went around the desk and touched her shoulder. Her blouse was dank, the bones beneath dry and light.

Finally, there was a sort of subsurface shudder and she slowly unfolded. She looked up at him out of eyes that had once been tiny with cunning, but were now tired old beads of suspicion. She blinked. Blinked again. Then her face lifted itself from its wrinkled depths, the eyes suddenly full of flicker, and he saw ancient loves reflected there.

"Well, what do I have but a fine-looking young man in here," she said, then she smiled and the whole room lit up. "My God, where'd you come from?"

"Broke down 'bout a mile out."

"Lucky it wasn't more. Lucky we got room, night like this." She unfolded from the desk, her face briefly rigid with pain. Then the smile came back and she glided into the front like the dancer she must once have been.

He followed.

“Can’t run a card till we get the juice back. You good for forty bucks?”

He pulled out his wallet. “I’ve got the cash.”

“Well, that’s fine then.”

“Where’s the local police station?”

“You in trouble?”

“I’m a policeman from Texas. I need some information.”

“You lookin’ for the rustlers, aint’cha? It’s Mexicans, I’m tellin’ you. Them illegals. They got trucks, Texas. Big trucks. And guns, too. Big’uns. You’re carryin’ two pistols, Texas. Ain’t enough.”

The eyes were sharp, no question there. “Where’s the station?”

“There’s no police here in Ridge, we got about fifty people living around here is all. You’ll have to go on down to the town of River City. There’s a state police barracks there. Four fellas. This is Montana. We ain’t got a lotta police.”

“Is there a bus through here?”

“Eight in the morning, if it’s on time. Stops at the café. But you’re gonna sleep like an old dog, you lie down on a bed, boy. Want a call?”

“Yeah, that would be good.”

With no computer, she didn’t record the registration, which was just as well. The more he thought about it, the less sure he was that he would stop at that barracks. He really did not want to explain the Hoffman place to the state cops, how he had gotten there, what he had been doing, any of it. What he wanted to do was to get to an FBI office, and that would mean going all the way to Billings on that bus.

Somebody had to have a record of the men who had died on this operation, who they reported to, who they were, for that matter. Because he didn’t think he’d been told a straight story, not any of it. But somebody would know in Washington or wherever, and the FBI office in Billings would be the place to start locating that person. He didn’t want to try to involve the locals anymore, not when he was the

only survivor. God only knew where things might go, when some smart detective realized that he was the only witness and the only person who had come out of there alive.

“Look,” the old lady said, “I can’t get the keycard machine to print a key, so here’s a maid’s key. It works on all the rooms but please don’t take advantage of that.”

“No ma’am.”

“All we got here is a meat broker, some kinda pesticide salesman, and a couple of them gay cowboys keep comin’ around here since that damn movie. Ten years and they’re still comin’. Gay cowboys, my God, how could there be so many?”

“It’s a solitary life,” Flynn said.

He left her shaking her head as she negotiated the snow-swept walk that fronted the line of rooms. It was ungodly cold. If his cell phone had been working, he would have pulled up the weather app, but he made a guess that it was no more than zero, and probably below.

There was no heat in Room Seven, but also no wind and no snow. He did not undress, but wrapped himself in the thin blanket and stretched out on a mattress that wasn’t long enough for him.

He lay there, his mind turning over what had happened. But what *had* happened? A lion, a helicopter in a raging windstorm?

“Oh, Abby,” he said in the privacy of the inner dialogue that he carried on with her, “what secrets do you know?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

He slept like an animal sleeps, with just enough awareness left behind to rouse him if there was trouble. Sometime toward dawn, he heard the snarl and clank of a gang of plows passing outside. Later, a woman sang to herself on the other side of one of the cardboard walls. Or was that Abby come to him?

A little after seven, thin light woke him. He was washing his face in a chilly memory of hot water when the old lady called. He thanked her and headed out.

The sky was ribbed steel, cold and low, and the wind was blowing what felt like a pretty steady forty miles an hour out of the northwest. There was no snow falling, but streams of it rose from the drifts and pummeled his parka and face. His two-day growth of beard provided welcome insulation.

The café was closed. “No Juice,” said a sign scrawled on the door. He needed to eat. There were pies in a case on the counter, bags of Fritos on a stand. He could drink raw eggs without a problem. Plus, the lock was simple. The problem was, if he got caught, there’d be a ridiculous hassle to deal with, and more trouble for him if those bodies had already been found.

He stood on the stoop of the café, looking for the bus. He didn’t know where it was coming from or where it was going. It didn’t really matter, though. Away from here, that was all that mattered.

He was stomping and blowing on his hands when it finally showed up at nine twenty. It was like an angelic apparition, the big, muddy, slab-sided Greyhound. It had been in a war with the elements, but it was here, rumbling and clattering and shaking, brown ice dripping along its windows, shadowy travelers within.

When he got on, he found it packed. Probably a lot of people were cold. Probably they were looking for shelter in Billings. Well, so was he.

He went to the back where there were still a few seats, and took one beside a huddled red parka.

With a hiss of air brakes and a rumble from the engine, the bus started off. A few minutes passed, and the red parka stirred. “How long to Montana?” its occupant asked as she raised her head.

“We’re in Montana,” he replied. He turned to her.

It was Diana, and he was too surprised to speak.

“Help me,” she said.

“Of course. I thought—”

“I don’t know how I escaped.” Her hand came toward his. He looked down at it. She withdrew it, entwining it with the other, twisting them together.

“What happened?”

She glanced toward the seat in front of them. “Not now.”

“I understand. Where are you going?”

“Billings. I’ve got to make a report and I want a secure line, not a cell phone.” She took a long breath. “This is unprecedented.” She returned to her previous hunched posture. “How did they do it?”

“That’s not my question to answer.” She’d sent three men to their deaths. How they had been killed or by whom were not the issue. The fact that they’d been exposed to the danger, that was the issue. Her issue.

She turned to him. “You don’t want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“But you would have handled things differently?”

“Yes.”

“You need to know more. Then you’ll understand more.”

“Who’s going to tell me?”

He felt her cold fingers brush his wrist. He did not react, but he also found that he did not move away. "I don't have that authority," she said.

"Then there's something wrong in your chain of command, lady. I'm what you got left on the front line, and you can't tell me my mission? That's poor."

"You're furious."

"Too goddamn much secrecy. Lives wasted. So, yeah."

"And I wasted them?"

"If I get to submit a report, that's part of what I'll say. You shouldn't be doing this work. Sorry."

She sucked in breath. There was anger in her eyes, a flush in her cheeks. Not used to criticism, that was clear. "I didn't know he had a tiger," she said. "Nobody could know that."

"It was a lion."

She whirled in her seat, eyes now flashing. "That was a Siberian tiger."

"Oh?"

"Gray with darker gray stripes. It was a Siberian tiger in its winter coat."

He thought about that. He hadn't seen the flanks. The face had been strange. She could be right. "If that's true, we might be able to use it to track him down."

"How?"

"A Siberian tiger is an endangered species. A zoo had to get a license to import it. If it was sold, that had to be approved. A rare animal like that, there's gonna be a paper trail, and it's gonna lead to our target, or damn close."

"What if it was born here?"

"Whatever, the animal has papers. This could be a break."

The bus wheezed along. Tough buggies, these Greyhounds. He

leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Not tired anymore. Ready for action, but sitting in a damn bus.

Once again, he went over in his mind the details of what had happened, the tiger, the helicopter, the carnage in the garage.

“After they entered the garage, what happened?”

“Mike went in. Then we heard him firing his pistol. Charlie was nearest, so he ran after him.” Her voice dropped to a near-whisper. “When nobody came out, I went in. The smell of blood was so strong that I knew they were dead before I saw them.” She fell silent.

He felt for her. This was a conscientious officer and she was suffering. You lose a man, you’re changed forever. You lose three, and you are left in an agony of self-doubt and self-blame. If you’re good, that is. Still, though, he couldn’t change his opinion, not only of her but also of whatever organization she belonged to. Bad planning, bullshit electronics, excessive secrecy—it was not a workable system.

The bus crossed the great American distance, crawling through the endless, featureless snowscape with its big engine roaring and its windshield wipers creating a hypnotic rhythm.

Diana sat in silence. From time to time she turned to the window. He assumed that she was crying. He said nothing.

“What about the Hoffmans?” she asked. “Do you know?”

“They’re gone. I checked the house. A helicopter took them. I saw its lights.”

“More traceable than an animal.”

“You’d be surprised. Radar coverage out here isn’t gonna go much below six thousand feet. Stay under it, then the FAA isn’t gonna find out jack about you.”

“Homeland Security, surely.”

“You come up off of one of these ranches, you stay low, you’re free and clear.”

“You heard it?”

“Yep. It did not sound like a helicopter. But that’s what it had to

be.”

The bus pulled into another small town. Nameless place. Flynn watched the comings and goings of the passengers. Two left, three got on. He wasn't expecting a problem, but the last of them seemed to check folks out a little more carefully than would be normal.

“You see that?”

“No.”

“The guy in the camouflage. He's got busy eyes.”

She lowered her head.

He pressed her. “What do you think?”

“I don't know. How would they know we were here?”

“That's not the right question. The right question is, ‘Do they want us dead?’ I think we both know the answer.”

The bus started off. From back here, Flynn couldn't see much of the other passengers. He flagged the guy in the camouflage, though. He was wearing a khaki cap with fur earflaps. When he took it off, his burr haircut was sprinkled with gray. Forty-five years old, maybe. Flynn watched the back of the head, which never moved. “That's a professional up there,” he said.

“What kind of a professional?”

“Don't know. But whatever he's doing, he's on duty.” Flynn took a breath and released it slowly. Contemplating. He needed to evaluate the situation, so he got up and went to back of the bus. As he stood, he got a chance to take a better look at the man, who was sitting two rows ahead of them. He could just see his profile. The man's eyes were closed but his body language said he was nowhere near asleep.

Flynn stepped into the toilet, waited a short time, then emerged. Returning to his seat, he nudged Diana, then pointed with his chin. Her only response was another slight touch to his wrist.

“We have to assume that he's a threat,” Flynn said.

“I agree.”

The bus rumbled on, the snowscape outside so total that Flynn could have easily believed they were on another planet.

The guy could be anybody, an insurance salesman, who knew? Except that was not what he was. Flynn had known such men, quiet like that, contained. You couldn't see him watching you, but you could feel it.

"He's here to kill," Flynn said.

"I know it."

You talk about a high-grade hit, what had gone down back at the Hoffmans' was that and more. It was certainly the most exotic hit he'd ever seen, and one of the most effective.

The bus pulled into a town called Waco like the town in Texas except this was in Montana. Waco was basically a cluster of hills of snow with an occasional neon sign sticking out. There was a grain elevator and a gas station. The gas station was the bus stop. There wasn't even a place to get a hamburger. Or no, there was. You could buy a microwave burger in the gas station.

The bus hung there for a minute. Nobody got off or on. Another minute. Still no action. The driver's hand went for the door lever. The air brakes hissed.

Flynn grabbed Diana by the wrist and pulled her down the aisle. "Sorry," he called out to the driver, "didn't recognize it."

They got off and the bus pulled out, and Flynn saw the face of the guy staring out at them, a face as blank as a tombstone.

"What are we doing," Diana said, "we can't stay here!"

"What we're doing is surviving. Buying time. We're clean now, for a while."

They went into the gas station. "When's the next bus through?" he asked the guy behind the counter, a lanky kid with the swift, unsure eyes of a dog that can't figure out why it gets kicked.

"Two hours, but it's going the other way. Next one through to Billings is gonna be tomorrow."

“We’re going the other way. Our car broke down. We flagged him and had him drop us here.”

“I got coffee. The meatball hero over there’s not gonna kill you, you’re hungry. Avoid the burger.”

“What about the Philly?”

“I wouldn’t eat it.”

The kid’s eyes flickered away, and Flynn turned, following them toward Diana.

Snapshot: Diana’s eyes, staring straight at him.

Snapshot: the guy from the bus coming in behind her. Camouflage. Professional movements. He’d gotten the driver to stop a second time. Flynn dropped his hand into his pocket, closed on the Glock. Behind Diana, the assassin’s hands came up toward his chest. He was going for a gun, going into action.

Flynn threw himself at Diana, hurling her to the floor with so little room to spare that he felt the heat of the bullet sear the back of his head as it passed. Maybe an eighth of an inch, maybe less.

He rolled, pushing over a shelf of candy, sending Snickers bars and Kit Kats and PayDays flying.

The killer was bracing his weapon, a big long-range pistol with a laser sight. A red dot appeared in Diana’s hair. Flynn pulled her into the heap of candy and shelving as the second round smashed into the floor where she’d been lying. Cement shrapnel ripped at them.

He got the Glock out, felt for the trigger, found it, and fired through the parka.

Then he had the guy. And the guy had him. Gun to gun, the guy with the Glock was going to have to be good. Real good.

Gun fighting is speed and math, but mostly math. Flynn was good at math. Instead of dropping his pistol, he changed his angle of attack. An iffy head shot became an easy heart shot.

The guy had done the same. Heart to heart. Impasse.

But then the guy backed off a step.

Flynn couldn't see Diana, but she had to be the reason. The clerk was hiding behind the counter hammering at the keypad of his cell phone. Not gonna work today, Flynn thought. Cell towers need power, too.

The assassin turned and ran. Flynn followed immediately.

"Stay together," Diana cried. "That's an order!"

The hell. He took off across the pump island and out into the highway. The guy was running hard, about fifty yards ahead. Flynn continued after him, letting the long hours of endurance training he'd done propel him forward despite the wind and the blowing snow. Ahead, the guy's back was visible as a dark smudge in the sea of snow.

"Stop! Police!" Except he wasn't the police, was he, not in Montana, and maybe not even in Texas if he'd pissed Eddie off enough to get himself fired.

The guy did not stop, of course, so he quit wasting breath. He could get off a shot, but there was no chance it was going to connect. He ran harder but did not gain. In fact, the smudge became more and more indistinct. Finally, it was gone. Flynn ran on for another minute, but in the end he did the only logical thing he could and stopped. He stood staring out into the gloom of the storm. He had maybe two hundred yards of visibility. Even as fast as he'd been running, the guy had continued to outstrip him.

Diana came up, her breath surging out of her nose in blasts of fog. "We gotta get out of here."

"How could he run like that? How could anybody?"

"I don't know."

He turned to her. He took her collars. He pulled her close to his face. "Yeah, you do. You've killed three men with this bullshit secrecy, so why don't you give me some kind of goddamn chance and come clean. Tell me what you know."

"What I know? That we're up against a team. That they have excellent equipment and skills."

“They have a helicopter with a silent rotor.”

“A silent rotor exists. It can be retrofitted to a number of different helicopters, including some general aviation models.”

“So they’ve been able to steal classified equipment. What about their victims? What’s the point of all this?”

“We don’t know where they take people. We don’t know why. The third sister was the closest we’ve ever gotten to one of their operations.” She gestured. “Obviously, we weren’t ready.”

They began walking back toward the gas station. “How many of them are there? What’s their maximum area of activity? US? Other countries as well?”

“Primarily US as far as we can tell. Concentrated in rural areas near urban population centers where there’s lots of turnover and lots of young, well-educated, healthy people. They favor low-density suburbs like you live in. Like we did, me and Steven.”

“Your husband?”

“Yes. But let’s not go there right now.”

“No.”

The cold was so intense that the sweat he’d generated running was now flaking off him like an icy powder.

“Okay, one useful face. We’ve got the Siberian tiger involved. That’s traceable.”

They had reached the gas station. The clerk had closed it down and gone home, so they stayed close to the front window, using the station to shelter them from the wind and the pumps to interrupt the sightlines of possible snipers. Flynn didn’t like it, but it was what they had.

“We’re way too vulnerable here,” he said, “so keep low and keep watch.” Then he asked her a question that had been troubling him. He already knew the answer, but he asked it anyway. “You’re not a field officer, are you?”

After a moment, she shook her head. “I come from the world of

probability theory. I'm an analyst."

"You couldn't find a pattern, but then the third sister came along and you grabbed a few pros and off you went."

"Don't, please. No more."

"He could've taken her any damn time, but he wanted to teach you a lesson. So he chose the night you were there."

A cold silence fell between them. An analyst. An ad-hoc team. Equipment that didn't work as advertised. Who the hell did the thinking?

The wind kept the snow blowing, reducing visibility. Flynn wondered what would come first, the bullet or the bus? Or maybe it would be the tiger.

He didn't like it when his choices were limited to just one, especially when it was bad. Worse, all this flurrying was going to play hell out on the highway. Buses were going to stop in towns and stay there until they could follow plows.

"We need to find shelter. We need to either break into this place or we need to find somebody to help us. We can't stay here."

"The bus is due in forty minutes."

He stood up. "Too long," he said. He gestured toward the highway. "Outside of town, flurries are sweeping that road. So any traffic is stopped wherever it happens to be, and that's where it's gonna stay until it gets plowed out."

"If we miss the bus—"

"You let the sun set on us, we do not survive the night. Period. If the cold doesn't take us, he will. He will not miss again."

She looked up at him. "It's my decision," she said.

He set off, intending to knock on doors until somebody let him in. Who knew, maybe they'd have a truck, maybe with chains.

She caught up with him. Good. He didn't want to see her killed. Whatever she did, though, he intended to survive and he intended to win. This bastard had done enough.

“He’s gonna die or I’m gonna die,” Flynn shouted into the wind. “But not here, not now. I want my shot at him and I haven’t got it. But I will, lady. I will get my shot, and I’m not stopping until I do.”

They moved slowly along, huddled shapes in a blowing, frozen haze. They couldn’t go far, so Flynn intended to get to the first inhabited house they could find.

Slowly, they passed a bank, its tan brick front encased in ice, its interior dark. Next came a bar, its neon out, its door padlocked.

“Hold on,” she said, “don’t leave me behind.”

He put an arm around her and drew her forward.

“You’re strong,” she said.

He said nothing. They might be moving slow, but the reality of their situation could not be more clear. They were running for their lives with death by cold close behind them, and closer yet an even more dangerous enemy, who they could not see, let alone fight.

Flynn might not be able to see him, but he was out there, no question, and he intended to end this, and soon.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The house was small and trim, with green shutters and gray siding. It had started life as a double-wide trailer and had been added to over the years. It was set north to south on its lot, so the wind surged down the porch, which was buried so deep in a rippling snowdrift that Flynn had to dig through it to reach the front door. He knocked.

Silence.

“It’s empty,” Diana said.

“Nope.” He pounded.

From inside there came a cry, “Clara! What’re you doin’ out there?”

The inner door swept open to reveal a man of about sixty in a wheelchair.

“We need shelter,” Flynn said. “We need a phone.”

“Where’s Clara? Where’s my wife?”

Flynn felt Diana tense. He said, “We need to get in out of this.”

The man rolled his chair back away from the entrance as they struggled in.

“Who the hell are you? You ain’t from around here.”

“We were waiting for the bus.”

“No, that’s not the answer. You DEA lookin’ for meth labs. Every other house has a meth lab out here. State don’t care. They let it go. They have to.” He whipped the chair around and rolled toward the back of the house. “Clara! Where in hell is she?”

Briefly, Diana’s hand squeezed Flynn’s. He was thinking the same thing: maybe the whole town had been raided. Maybe the old and infirm were the only ones left.

“She went out?”

“To the barn, see to the horses. The intercom’s down, the cell phones don’t work, the landline is down and she’s been out there more’n a hour.”

“We’re cops,” Flynn said, “but we’re not looking for your meth lab.”

“I told you, I ain’t got any damn meth lab! None! Natha! Find my girl, you two, you’re a damn gift from God.”

There was no time to get warm, they went directly out the back. Flynn pointed to the faint trench in the snow that led to the barn. Diana nodded.

“Guns,” he said.

“Guns.”

“Are you proficient, Diana?”

“I score okay.”

They pushed the door open together. “Clara,” Flynn called into the dark interior. “Clara!”

A horse whickered, that was all.

The barn was unheated, but the two horses in their stalls had been expertly blanketed. A couple of big electric heaters stood in the center of an area of the concrete slab that had been carefully swept of anything that might catch fire. Their cords led to an orange cable that hung from an overhead socket attached to a rafter. No power, though.

“Clara!” he said again, then, “Oh, shit.”

“What?”

“Smell that? That’s blood.” He looked into the darkness. “Over there.” He moved deeper.

A third horse was up against the back wall, deep in the shadows. It lay on its side.

He went to it. Looking down at the maimed animal, he wasn’t sure what to make of its condition.

“You ever see anything like this?” he asked Diana as she came up.

“Oh, no.”

The lips had been sheared off, the eyes cut out, the genitals removed. A large section of the exposed flank had been flayed down to the bone. Where the rectum had been, there was a neat round wound.

“So you have.”

“Only in pictures. Animals mutilated like this have been found for years. None in the context of the kind of disappearances we’re investigating, though, not as far as I am aware.”

“You know more about this whole damn mess than you’re telling me, and I’m getting to really not appreciate that.”

“I can’t—”

“Yeah, you can, and you will, and you’ll do it soon.”

Flynn had seen something like this before, too. Some case file. Then he remembered. It was a rural crime down near Alice, Texas. “I saw some of these. Cattle, not horses. A rancher got the hell knocked out of his herd. Two prize bulls and three breeder cows. Fifteen thousand dollars worth of prime beeves. Sheriff thought it was coyotes. We wrote it up as vandalism so the poor guy could collect on his insurance.”

He remembered that place. Alvis something-or-other had been leasing that property. He’d run it with Aussie cattle dogs. Good beasts, but not good enough to prevent the loss.

“I have a feeling that the help does most of the heavy work. The kidnappings. But this is him,” Flynn said. “Him personally. His help isn’t going to be cutting animals like this.” He looked toward the rafters, then reached back and pulled his night vision goggles from his backpack.

The upper reaches of the barn were empty. He took off the goggles. “Let’s go out the back,” he said.

“Three guys are down, remember that.”

He said nothing.

This door also slid on rollers, but wasn't as large as the one in the front. Similarly, it wasn't kept up, and it took Flynn an effort to get it to grind open. As he did so, ice showered down on him.

Behind the barn was a mostly bald hill, topped by a few twisted trees. Close in, he could see a faint indentation in the snow. Further out, it was deeper. "That's a buried track," he said, moving forward. He drew his gun.

The further up the hill they went, the deeper and clearer the track became.

"Why would she come out here?"

"She was running. She saw that horse, and when she did, she ran."

As they approached the trees, Flynn felt the same indefinable sense of menace that had saved him in deceptive situations before. "Let's take our time. We want to watch those trees pretty closely."

They were taller than they had appeared from the barn. The snow made distances seem longer, but the trees were under a hundred yards from this end of the barn, and he was soon among them. He was careful, though, never to lose sight of her. He didn't want to lose her, God no, but she wasn't only important as a human being and a fellow officer. Without her, he had no idea who he was working for because she was too secretive to tell him. Probably didn't even have the authority.

In among the trees there was less snow, but every movement brought a fall of the stuff off overhanging branches. It got in around his hood and dripped through his clothes in the form of freezing cold water.

Just beyond the stand of trees they found an area about thirty feet in diameter where the snow had been blown away right down to the grassy hillside.

"Something landed here," Diana said.

He estimated the grade of the hill at a good thirty degrees. "Wasn't a chopper," he said, "not on a slope this steep."

“It must have hovered.”

“The pilot is a real expert, then,” Flynn said. “Very well trained.”

“You think she was taken from this spot?”

“Maybe. Thing is, the snow was blown back from here well after these tracks were made. Hours. If they took her, they took her frozen solid.”

“We’ll need to tell him she’s lost in the snow.”

He had his doubts about that. “Maybe.”

Flynn turned and headed back through the trees. Diana stayed close.

As they walked, he said, “I don’t think we’re forming an accurate picture of what’s going on here. If you think about it, it just doesn’t make sense. Not a damn bit of sense. Some kind of cult group in possession of highly classified equipment, including an exotic aircraft? Hardly seems likely.”

“That’s what it looks like, though.”

They reached the back door. “It’s what you’ve been telling your team. It’s not what you know. Question is now, what do we tell this old guy?”

“His wife is lost in the snow. Won’t be found till the melt. If then.”

He entered the house. The old man sat in his wheelchair. He looked up with the dead eyes of a man who already knows that he’s defeated.

“We didn’t find her,” Flynn said.

“She’s dead. Froze by now.”

“We don’t know that. Could she have gone to a friend’s house?”

“She’s not in that barn, she’s froze.”

“There’s been predator action in the barn, sir,” Diana said.

“Oh, Lord.”

“One of the horses has been killed. Looks like coyotes.”

“The hell, it’s them damn wolves! The Fish and Wildlife owes me for that horse.” His face suddenly screwed up. Flynn knew the way tragedy can roll past you at first, then come back and hit you like a boulder dropping from the sky.

“She’s still breathing, mister,” he said. “Count on it.”

Diana glared at him.

“What’s she shaking her head for? Don’t hold out on me!”

Flynn heard noises on the front porch, the crunch of boots in snow. “She’s back,” he said.

Diana’s eyes widened.

A voice called through the door, “Hey, Lar, I got your thermos refilled, the Katz’s’re running their genny.” Then, “Get this door unlocked, you damn nut!”

Lar wheeled himself off into the front room. A moment later, a tall woman, Montana lean, came striding in on a blast of cold air, snow falling off her boots.

“Hi, where’d you folks stray in from on a day like this?”

“We’re police officers,” Diana began.

“Well, I got me a horse up in my barn got cut up by space aliens, so you better go up there.”

“We’ve been up there.”

“It was them wolves,” Lar said.

“Ha! That’s what you people told him? Why do cops lie? It’s space aliens. We all know it. Been goin’ on for years.”

“That damn yearling,” Lar said. “Too young and foolish to stay away from wolves. Probably didn’t even know what they were.”

“They took my Bill, you senile old fool. Left the two yearlings just fine. They ain’t even spooked.”

“What about Jenny?”

“*Your* horse? Nobody’s gonna take that ole bag a bones. You couldn’t even sell that thing to a glue factory. What’s ’is name down

the road, that weird beard, offered fifteen dollars. He wanted to make pillows outa the hair.” She swung away from her perch looming over her husband, and trained tight eyes on Flynn and Diana. “So what in hell are you doin’ invadin’ my home, officers? If I may be so bold?”

“Our vehicle failed,” Diana said, the very picture of smoothness. “We’re looking for a ride into Billings. We can pay.”

“You will pay. No question there. You must be feds.”

“DEAs lookin’ to bust up some meth labs,” her husband said.

“That ain’t hard to do around here. ’Cept the state police, you talked to them lately? ’Cause they don’t share their turf, not to put too fine a point on it.” She spread her hands. “I mean, this is not a threat. Far be it from me.”

“We’re not in drug enforcement.”

“Oh. Well, do you do something useful, then? ’Cause maybe then nobody’s gonna gut you and throw you out in the snow for your wolves to drag away.”

The threat was delivered with the kind of smile that said it had meaning. So this little ole couple were indeed involved in drug operations. He wondered where she had her lab. Probably one of the sheds he’d seen out there. Normally, he would’ve been interested, just automatically. No more.

“Look, how much is it gonna take to get us to FBI Headquarters in Billings?” he asked.

“Well, let’s see. If you tell me why you’re here, that’s one price. If you don’t, then it’s another. Which you ain’t gonna be able to afford. And, lady, will you please stop thinking about that ridiculous little pistol you got in the right pocket of your parka? In fact—” An impressively quick hand reached in and withdrew Diana’s pistol. “Man, who do you work for, you get crap like this as your issue gun? What shit.”

She was right about that. An officer carrying a Beretta without a tracking light was not well equipped.

Flynn said, "We're working on a kidnapping. We were overtaken by the storm."

"Who'd kidnap trailer trash? What're they gonna get for ransom around here, twenty bucks and a pair of used boots? This whole town ain't got enough cash to ransom a donkey." She chuckled.

"We tracked the person of interest to Black Canyon City," Diana said. "Then the storm hit, we lost contact with our vehicle and took the bus."

"The wrong way. You're toward Bozeman."

"We were too cold to wait. We had to get on it."

She was quiet for a good minute. She looked down at Diana's gun. "First off, I know you're not a cop, lady. This ain't a cop pistol and here I am holding it and you ain't pissing your pants, which means you ain't gotta file a missing weapon report." She looked at Diana. "Three hundred bucks and I'll take you to Billings. Cash now." She turned her head toward Flynn. "That's apiece."

Flynn could have taken the gun out of her hand and made her eat his own. But he said, "Pay the lady, Ossifer."

A silently furious Diana produced a checkbook.

Clara barked out a mirthless laugh.

Diana put away the checkbook and counted out six one-hundred-dollar bills from what looked to be a narrow stash.

Clara was good at driving in snow, and so the truck clanked along at a steady thirty miles an hour. "Animals get cored out like that around here. Nobody but the poor rancher gives a shit. The cops lie. Insurance company probably pays 'em off, 'cause if it's predator action or act of God, they don't gotta pay, see."

"Space aliens would be what?" Flynn asked.

"God only knows. Whatever, they ain't gonna pay anyway. Bastards."

There was a world of hurt in the way she spat that word. He didn't want to hear the story of her life, though, so he remained silent.

The truck moved steadily along. Flynn watched the road, what he could see of it. He kept an eye on the sky, which was darkening again.

Time crawled. Flynn could almost feel the perp's frustration that they were getting away. Feel his bitter rage. With his trained animal and his fabulous chopper, he had to feel that a couple of dumb cops had no damn business escaping from him.

They arrived in the snow-choked city, finally reaching a recently plowed street where the going was a little better.

After a couple of turns, Clara pulled up in front of an office building, small, on the same scale as all the buildings around here. A small, trim city, the kind of place Flynn favored. Menard with snow.

When they got out, Clara sped off immediately.

"She's glad to be gone," Diana said.

"Probably with good reason."

They entered the building.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Nobody will have heard of us,” Diana said as they went down the hall toward the FBI office.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She opened the door and went in, Flynn behind her. Two agents and a clerk were on duty, sitting at desks in a single, large room. Along a side wall there were three offices, all closed.

Diana walked up to the clerk and spoke quietly. She produced a small leather folio and laid it on the desk. Inside, Flynn could see a badge and an unfamiliar identification card with a pink sash across its surface.

The secretary stared down at them. “Bill,” she called, turning in her chair, “what is this?”

One of the two agents got up from his desk, a tall man in his fifties. He had a tightly neutral expression on his face, the habitual mask that many field officers wore.

Flynn had never gotten much support out of the FBI. Down in Menard, their office was such a revolving door that nobody ever really got to know the community. Menard was just a way station in the drug wars. The agents who were going somewhere in the organization were all further south along the border.

The first agent took Diana’s credential to the second.

“They never know what it is,” she said.

“So how does this help us?”

“Just wait.”

He watched as the agents, their faces sharp with suspicion, huddled

over a phone.

“Who’re they calling?”

“It’s a nonstandard ID. They’ve never seen one like it before.”

“Because of the secrecy bullshit?”

She nodded. “It’s not bullshit, Flynn.”

The second agent came striding over. “You can use office two,” he said. He handed Diana back her ID.

“That worked, at least,” Flynn said as they crossed the room.

“I’m sorry, Flynn, I’m going to need to do this alone.”

There were chairs along the wall, and Flynn took one of them. The plaster was thin enough to enable him to hear that she was talking to somebody, but he was unable to make out the words. Once or twice, she raised her voice. He still couldn’t discern specific words, but he could hear the emotion in them. She was reporting the deaths of her men.

Her voice stopped. He waited. The silence extended.

She came out. Her face was rigid, her lips compressed.

“You reported,” he said. “They were not happy.”

“They were not.”

“So what happens next?”

“Flynn, you’re still going to be with me, but very honestly I asked to have you relieved and was turned down on the theory that you’re all I have left. So my problem now is that you’re clueless and I don’t have the authority to bring you up to speed.” She glanced across the room at the agents. “We need transport,” she snapped.

One of the agents got up and sauntered over. “Yeah? Can I help you?”

“Get us out to Logan.”

“Call a cab.”

“There’s no time for a cab, Delta’s about to leave. We need to move right now.”

“We have motels. Not up to your standards, I’m sure, but you’ll live.”

“If you don’t want a complaint in your file, I’d advise you to stuff your ego up your ass and do what you’re told.”

Flynn was as surprised as the agent, who glared at her.

“Right now, Agent.”

He jerked his head toward a side door. They followed him down a couple of flights of interior stairs and out to a well-plowed parking lot.

There were two sedans parked in it and three black SUVs, immediately recognizable as federal cars.

“I wanta take my Subaru,” the agent said. “Better in the snow.”

Once they were in the car, a dense silence settled. Nevertheless, Flynn thought he would try asking the agent some questions that could be useful.

“What kind of crimes do you guys cover out here?”

“Us guys cover the waterfront.”

“I mean, specifically?”

“I know I don’t have any hotshot National Security clearance, but that’d be privileged information.”

An asshole for sure. He kept going anyway. “Any kidnapping cases?”

“Kidnapping? No. Is that what this is about?”

“I can’t answer that. My hotshot National Security clearance prevents me.”

This brought a slight chuckle. “We had a disappearance four months ago. Not a kidnapping case. The vic packed a bag.”

Diana glanced at Flynn, who said nothing.

They pulled up to the departure gates and the agent let them off and sped away.

“Are federal officials always so helpful to each other?” Flynn

couldn't resist asking, but he knew the answer.

"Yes."

"So where are we going?"

"Just stay with me."

The airport was small and intimate, a reminder to Flynn of another America, one that still clung to life, just barely, in little places like this and Menard. Steady, settled, and safe—assuming, of course, if you ignored things like the meth industry that drove lots of local economies in poor areas.

Security was no problem, just a single TSA agent with an old-fashioned X-ray device and nobody ahead in line. Not surprising, since Delta to Salt Lake was the last flight out to anywhere, and they had just a couple of minutes to go before the doors were closed. They showed their creds and got their guns passed for hold stowage without trouble. Unlike the FBI agents, the TSA worker accepted Diana's credential without question. He passed his Menard Police Department ID card with equal disinterest.

As they walked down the aisle, Flynn took careful note of the other passengers. He didn't want a repeat of what had happened on the bus, and he thought they should assume that this perpetrator was capable of almost anything.

He was surprised to identify a Federal Air Marshal three rows behind him. Normally, you found these guys on long-haul flights in big planes. So why was he here? He slid into his seat between a businessman and a kid sealed up in an iPod. The FAM was carrying, which is what had identified him. There was a pistol, small, probably a .38, under the left arm of his thick jacket.

The flight was hot and cramped and seemed longer than it had any right to be. Twice, Flynn went back to the john so that he could pass the FAM. Nothing out of the ordinary, except for the fact that he was there.

Toward the end of the flight, Flynn closed his eyes for a few minutes, waking up when the aircraft shuddered as it began to land.

On the way to the next flight, he commented, "There was a FAM a couple of rows behind me."

"Really?"

"No, I made it up."

"Well, don't."

"Odd that he was there."

"A coincidence, as far as I'm concerned."

"You're sure?"

She stopped. She turned to him. "We are alone, you and I. I know one other person, the individual I report to."

He continued walking easily. Inside though, he was dealing with a major shock. *Only her immediate superior officer?* What in holy hell was going on here?

Their next flight turned out to be to Chicago. They were seated in first class.

"I could get used to this," he said to her. The seat actually had room for him.

"Don't. These were the only seats left. The storm's headed east, and folks want to get in before it closes O'Hare. The flights are packed."

"Why are we going to Chicago? If I may be so bold."

She opened her mouth, seemed about to speak. Remained silent.

"We've got a choice of prime rib or mahi-mahi," the steward said after they took off.

As Flynn ate, he saw that silent tears were running down Diana's face. He said nothing. What was there to say, that it would be all right? It would not be all right, it would never be all right.

Maybe she was going to be relieved or disciplined. Maybe she already knew that. But what was most likely was that she was remembering the men she had lost, and feeling a torment of regret.

"You need to eat," he said.

Listlessly, she took a bite of her fish and chewed.

“Flynn,” she said. Then she stopped. He’d seen grief many times, the way it takes a while to hit. Hers had hit. “Flynn,” she said again, “you’re a good cop and you have some outstanding skills and a lot of investigative experience in our area of concern, but things have changed, Flynn. We’re going to need to take a different approach now.”

“I’m not leaving voluntarily, if that’s what you’re driving at.”

She closed her eyes and he saw the tears well again, and realized to his astonishment that she was crying not for her lost men, but for him. She leaned toward him. “It’s a trap,” she whispered. “It’s always been a trap and I’ve gotten you tangled up in it, too.”

He added this to the long list of things about this case that he did not understand.

“They feel that you’ve gotten too deep. You can’t be released.”

He waited, but she said no more. “Well that’s certainly damn mysterious.”

“Security is very, very tight and for good reason, Flynn, as you will find. The thing is, there’s no going back from this. It’s marriage with no divorce allowed. You didn’t get a chance to make a decision and that’s not fair.”

“I made my decision when I walked out on the Menard Police.”

She turned to the window. But not for long. Very suddenly she turned back and said to him, “You’re going to meet people different from any you’ve ever encountered.”

“And you can’t tell me one more thing.”

“I want you to prepare yourself for the unexpected. I don’t need you gaping like a hick and asking little boy questions.”

“Do I do that?”

“When you’re in there, you may. This is going to be the strangest experience you’ve ever had. Beyond imagination.”

“I have to admit, I’m curious.”

She said no more, and the flight continued uneventfully, a plane

swimming in featureless darkness.

Once they'd landed and collected their weapons and equipment, Flynn found that they had a rental car waiting. She drove, and he noticed that she didn't use a GPS. She'd been here before. A lot.

He watched the gray sky and the gray of Lake Michigan, and wondered if there was any way to prepare to face a total unknown.

They'd been on Lake Shore Drive for some time before he understood from reading road signs that their destination was Evanston, just north of Chicago itself.

"I think you need to talk more, Diana. I'm a pro but I'm not a psychic. Narrate this a little bit."

"We'll be there in ten minutes."

"Excessive secrecy and compartmentalization just killed three men. And yet you keep it up."

"I have orders, I follow my orders."

"Following orders is good. But what that means is making them work. Your orders were to stop a dangerous criminal. You didn't make those orders work, so whatever it was you thought you were doing, it wasn't following them."

After a few turns in Evanston, she drove down a street lined with big old houses that looked like they were worth a lot ... and Flynn became concerned. There were no official buildings around here.

They passed those houses and drove into a less grand neighborhood. Here, there were stark oaks lining the street, and the tall row houses were as dreary as the sky.

They pulled up in front of one of the houses. In the driveway there stood a Chrysler 300. Other than that, the place was silent, the windows dark.

"So where are we? Not your ancestral home, surely?"

"Police headquarters."

"Not a good answer."

He got out of the car when she did, and followed her up the front walk. The air was bitterly cold, tanged with the sharpness of chimney smoke, a gusty breeze coming off the lake.

When she pressed the doorbell button on the jamb, there issued from deep inside the house the faint bonging of an old-fashioned bell.

This was not a police headquarters of any kind, but there was certainly something unusual involved here, because as Flynn had stepped out of the car, he'd seen a flicker of movement from a window in the house across the street.

“Does it bother you that we’re in gun sights?”

“You’re very observant.”

“Always been my problem.”

She rang the bell again.

“What’re they doing, sending our faces to Washington?”

She glance at him, frowning.

He continued, “There’s a camera in the door. Another one between the bricks to the right. Whoever’s in there has been able to watch us since we turned onto the block.”

“I did not know that.”

“Yet you’ve been here before.”

“As I said, this is our headquarters.”

He thought, “you look, but you don’t see,” but didn’t comment further. No point. Noted, though, was the fact that her lack of practice as an observer was a liability that must never be overlooked.

The door swung open on a woman of perhaps thirty. She wore an orange jumpsuit and had a plastic net on her hair. Her skin gleamed and Flynn realized that her face was covered with a film like petroleum jelly. On her hands she wore latex gloves.

He was still trying to make sense of this when she stepped back and let them in. She ushered them into a living room with an old couch, a coffee table, and a couple of easy chairs. A gas log burned in the

fireplace.

“Sorry,” she said, “we’ve been working on him.”

“Anything?”

Whoever they were interrogating, her expression said it all: they were getting nowhere.

“Flynn, just try to be open. I can’t tell you anything about what’s going to happen because no explanation would do it justice. I can’t even answer any questions, because any question you would have would be unanswerable.”

“I know what it is.”

“I don’t believe that. Tell me what you think.”

Flynn said nothing.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Two more of the jumpsuits lay folded on the couch. On the coffee table was a silver canister about a foot tall.

“We need to put these suits on over our clothes,” Diana said. “And do this.” She dipped her hand in the canister and scooped out clear gel. “Put this on your face and neck. Make sure you’re well covered. Don’t forget your ears.”

“What is it?”

“Something that’s necessary.”

He wasn’t objecting. He was here to learn. He slathered the stuff on himself.

“First, you’re going to meet the person our agency has managing this case.” She paused. “This is a unique person.”

He pulled on the jumpsuit, which was supple and light and felt like paper. But it was a lot stronger than paper. Sort of like silk with a paper-like finish, he decided.

Diana slathered herself with the salve and put on an elastic cap of the silken material.

Flynn finished by putting on his own cap.

The woman reappeared. Flynn said, “Hi, we didn’t get introduced. I’m Flynn Carroll, Menard City Police, Menard, Texas.” He put out his gloved hand.

She looked down at it, then back up at him. Usually, people’s faces told him something. Not this time.

“Follow her,” Diana snapped.

Shuffling along in his baggy jumpsuit, his face covered with

Vaseline that smelled like cinnamon, he followed the woman down the central corridor of the old house, past an umbrella stand and a photograph of a family from about fifty years ago.

“Whose house is this, anyway?”

“A sublet,” Diana said. “We found it on Craigslist.”

“*Craigslist?*”

“We move a lot.”

The woman opened a big oak door at the end of the hall. He followed her into a large room that Flynn guessed must have once been a solarium. It was on the back of the house and full of tall windows, but as dark as a cave. The expansive windows were covered by curtains.

In the middle of the room there stood a man of significant height, six three at least. As they came in, he glared down at them out of eyes sunken so deep in his head that they were like craters. His hair was completely white.

“Sorry to be meeting under these tragic circumstances,” he said. “And I apologize for the—” He gestured, indicating the costumes. “I’m allergic to everything.” He sighed. “I can’t even leave the house.”

Slowly, then, he turned to Diana. Some kind of electricity passed between them, and Flynn thought that this was the person she had reported to from Montana. He also thought that they were more than coworkers.

“My name is Oltisis,” he said, and at that moment he walked into a shaft of light, and Flynn saw that he had compound eyes, many-lensed like the eyes of a fly.

He sucked breath, but instantly controlled it. Let it out slow. As he did, the face turned toward him. Unhurried. The eyes seemed blank. But they also told Flynn that this was an alien. Okay, that explained all the secrecy.

“I don’t surprise you?”

“You do.”

“You’re very contained, then.”

“As are you.”

“I’m a cop, Lieutenant Flynn.” Oltisis crossed the room in two sleek strides. Flynn saw more than cop in the way he moved, he saw military. Lethal military. This alien might or might not be a cop, but he was certainly a professional killer.

As he sat on a broad leather couch that almost fit him, he gestured toward two wing chairs.

Flynn could hardly tear his own eyes away from that face. The lips were narrow and precise, the skin was as slick and featureless as plastic, and the deep-set eyes gleamed in the thin yellow light that filled the room.

No question, this was not a disguise. He was face to face with a real alien. But he also had a case to deal with. Men were dead. He said, “We need more people, and we need them now. We need help.”

Oltisis looked toward Diana. “I put together a cleanup crew to go back to the Hoffman place. Air Police. They’re totally out of the loop.” His English was perfect. Not the slightest accent.

“Did they find any trace of Hoffman and the daughter?” Flynn asked.

“Doctor Hoffman was in a snowdrift two hundred yards from the house. Frozen to death. Looked exactly like he’d wandered away and gotten lost. Nice touch, he had a bag of garbage with him.” He made a gravelly sound that Flynn realized was laughter, but it was bitter, that was very clear. In fact, it sounded like defeat.

“We need to break this case,” Flynn said.

“Ah?”

“You look beaten. Sorry.”

“And you don’t, Flynn.”

“Am I a fool, then?”

Oltisis met his eyes with his own glittering jewels. “No,” he said carefully, “you are not. Flynn—may I call you Flynn—this is a new

kind of police operation. We've got a criminal element operating here and we can't move freely among you. Thus the liaison effort."

"You could surely devise some sort of disguise."

"The allergic response is too deep. We'd need to create human bodies for ourselves."

"So do it. You must be loaded with high tech."

"If one of us is to acquire a human body, one of you has to die."

"I see."

"Criminals steal bodies." He lowered his head. "That's what happened to your wife."

Flynn went silent inside. For the first time, he knew that she was dead. Believed it. Images of her raced through his mind, too fast to track, but of her in her happiness. He swallowed his thrashing sorrow. "Did she suffer?"

Oltis stared into Flynn's pain, his eyes as blank as a shark's. Flynn thought, "This alien has seen a lot of violence, a lot of death." He continued to question him. "How many other field units do you have? How many officers on your side of the fence?"

"We need more, I agree."

What the hell? Could this be true? "Don't tell me it's just the three of us."

Diana said, "If it gets out that this is happening and not even the aliens can put a stop to it—"

"Jesus Christ, you need a whole damn division on this! The FBI and Interpol, at the least!"

"This gets out, mankind panics and contact gets set back fifty years. No, Flynn, secrecy is essential."

Cops sure as hell couldn't keep secrets, that was true enough, and the public would sure as hell panic, no question there, either. "People need to be warned. Otherwise they have no chance."

"Help us get this cleaned up."

“My wife was kidnapped eight years ago! So how long is it going to take? There are hundreds of people dead. You’re wired into the government, you just moved around a unit of Air Police, so put some resources on this or I’m going public.” But even as he said it, he knew that it was hopeless. Nobody would believe him, not without this creature in tow, and that was obviously not going to happen.

“You signed a secrecy agreement, Flynn. Don’t forget that.”

“He’s fine,” Oltisis said. “He just figured it out.”

“But he said—”

“You’re on board, aren’t you, Flynn? You’ve seen the problem.”

Flynn nodded. Oltisis was so sharp, it was almost like having your mind read. “I understand the need for secrecy. But there have to be more resources.”

“Rebuild your team. I can do that.”

“Bigger. And top people. Delta Force operators. CIA field officers. The best of the best. And better equipment. Jesus, you people must have some incredible equipment, not crap like that MindRay.”

“That’s one of ours.”

“Is it a toy, because if that’s the best you can do, I have a real problem with your technology.”

Again, Oltisis laughed, and this time Flynn got it loud and clear, the cynical laughter of the cop who knows only one truth: every single piece of equipment he possesses is inferior to what the crooks have.

“What’re you, fifty years ahead of us? I expected aliens to be, like, a million years ahead of us. But you’ve got powerful crooks and shitty equipment just like we do.”

“Budgets are budgets, Flynn. And we’re about a thousand years ahead of you, if you want to know. Among other things, we can manipulate gravity and you can’t. But you will. We’re helping you speed up your development, because there needs to be an alliance between our species. We’re similar and that’s rare and valuable. It strange out there and it’s dangerous. We need a friend, and so do

you.”

Flynn said, “You use your connections to get us the best cops and the best operatives you can find, and I am with you.”

Oltisis said, “We’ve been doing that.”

“So you came up with a small-town police officer like me. I think I’m a good cop, but let’s face it, my skill set is limited because my department’s needs are limited. We don’t train up supercops in Menard, Texas.”

“You have an IQ of two twenty. Did you know that?”

“I did not.”

“And you’re also highly motivated. We are doing our job, Lieutenant.”

“So let’s get on with it.”

“We have someone in custody.”

He was stunned. Then he wasn’t. “But he’s not the perp we’re looking for?”

“No,” Diana interjected. “This is one of his customers. My unit got him.” She paused for a long moment. “My old unit.”

Oltisis said, “He was a thrill seeker. Among us, life is all too predictable. It’s one of the major reasons we explore as we do. In any case, he came here, bought a human body and just basically went wild, indulging his every fantasy, and he doesn’t have pretty fantasies.”

“I thought aliens would be—well, different.”

“There’s greed and self-indulgence everywhere.”

“And the crime committed?”

Oltisis looked steadily at Flynn. “He raped fifty-six of your women, killing forty of them in the process.”

“Jesus.”

“If he’s sent home with the evidence we have, he’s going to walk. We have a real problem on Earth gathering forensics to a level our

courts accept. In our system, a case cannot be presented until guilt is certain. The only judicial issue is the sentence. We need a confession out of him, Flynn.”

“Now, are you saying that this thing—being, excuse me—has *two* bodies, one human and one like you?”

“Let me explain a little further.”

“That would help.”

“Every living body contains an incredibly dense plasma that bears all its memories, even every detail of its physical form. It’s the template, and it’s effectively eternal. In our world, doctors can move this plasma from an aged body to a young one. It’s also possible to cross species, but it’s highly illegal. I could enter a human body. I could live among you. At home, I’m just another person. But here, with my knowledge and my power, I’d be a god.”

“So what about death? Do you die?”

“If you wish.”

“If you *wish*?”

“When a human dies, your soul will linger on Earth if you have unfinished business here. Eventually, a new body will come along—an infant—that fits it, and you’ll enter the new body and return to life. With us, the process is no longer natural. I have a stem cell packet that can be grown into a new body.” He gestured toward himself. “If this dies, I can simply move to a new version of myself.”

“Will you?”

The face—horrible and strange and yet somehow deeply human—took on an eerie, concealing expression. “You can’t have known this, but that’s as rude a question as one of us can be asked.”

“Rude? I don’t get it. Why rude?”

“Let’s move on, shall we? Body theft is a major crime, as you may imagine. And when it involves interfering with an alien species, especially a less advanced one like yours, it’s actually our most serious crime.”

“But the exterior identity—what we can track—that remains the same, am I right? So this guy has a human ID. A human past.”

“The process works like this. A person is kidnapped. Then the heart is stopped and the whole body transformed into stem cells, which are grown on a new template. The new body fits the purchaser’s soul, and he enters it. The new ‘person’ won’t look the same as the one who was used to construct him. He won’t have the same DNA signature, either.”

“You can do all that?”

“At home, by law your new body would need to be an exact replica of your old one. But here, well, you don’t have body switching yet. So no law and no local enforcement infrastructure. Which is why there’s a ring operating, selling my species human bodies so they can live on Earth.”

“That’s a motive?”

“For marginal types like would-be criminals, it is. They’re free here. The local authorities aren’t going to catch them on their own, and our police force is hamstrung, obviously.”

“So what can they do that’s so special?”

“As I said, live like gods. The last one we caught busted the bank at a casino in Vegas, then used predictive techniques you won’t discover for five generations to game your markets. Inside of a year, he was vastly rich.” He paused. His voice dropped an octave. “This guy wasn’t so interested in money, obviously.”

“When they’re finished, they can go home?”

“If they’re ever finished. The one in custody would probably have stayed here for a very long time, maybe across the span of more than one life. You can help us with him, Flynn.”

“And what do you want me to do?”

“If the body he’s in now were to die here on Earth without access to his dealer, he’d be in trouble. No new body, so his soul would be left to wander until it got drawn into a human fetus. He’d lose his

memory of himself entirely. Become, in effect, human. Trapped forever in a primitive species.”

“Turn him over to our courts. Let us threaten him with the needle.”

“He was careful not to commit any of his crimes in death penalty states.”

“Drop him in a supermax.”

“He’ll escape. But he wouldn’t want to be tried in Texas.”

Flynn thought about that. Understood what Oltisis was driving at. “Okay,” he said, “let me spend some time with him. What’s his name?”

“Roger Ormond is what it says on his driver’s license.”

Diana said, “The identity’s perfect. It’s been built from deep within the system.”

“Take me to Roger Ormond. We’ll need to chat for a couple of minutes.”

They left Oltisis to his dark office and whatever thoughts a creature like that must have, and have to live with.

“We can disrobe,” the assistant said. “Roger isn’t allergic.”

“What’re you going to do?” Diana asked as she pulled off her jumpsuit.

“What Oltisis asked me to do.”

“He didn’t ask you anything.”

Flynn looked at her. “Oh, yeah, he did.”

They descended into a cellar that smelled of dust and heating oil. There was an ancient black velvet painting of JFK against one wall, beside it a rusting bicycle. There was also an old portable record player, and in one corner a dust-covered electric wheelchair, its seat well worn. Whoever had lived in that thing was probably damn glad to leave this life.

Across the room, a man sat in a cage made not of bars, but of a sort of shadowy haze that, as Flynn went closer, proved to be a mesh of

fine wires. He was under a flood of glaring white light. His eyes were closed, his skin was flushed red, and he was covered with a sheen of sweat.

Flynn went into action immediately. “Mr. Ormond, I’m your attorney. We’re going to be getting you moving within the hour.”

“Excuse me.”

“You’ve been extradited to Texas.”

The face, which had been open and questioning, shut down tight. So he was scared. Good.

“I didn’t commit any crimes in Texas.”

Flynn remained affable. “Tell them that. I’ll stay with you as far as the airport, but after that you’re on your own. You’ll be assigned legal aid counsel at Huntsville.”

“A prison?”

“Guarded by cops like us. Who know the truth. You won’t escape. You’re gonna die in Texas, Mr. Ormond.”

He started to stand up. The cage around him glowed and sparked. He fell back into his seat. “I didn’t commit any crimes in Texas!”

“So, Michigan, Illinois, New York.”

“I avoided death penalty states.”

Bingo. There was the confession. He revealed nothing of the small triumph that he felt. “Well, take it up with your lawyer there. You’re moving in an hour.”

As he left, the man in the cage erupted, screaming and thrashing. The cage sparked and sizzled.

Oltis was waiting, his face filling the screen of an iPad.

“Will that do it in your legal system?”

“Oh yes, he’s confessed. We’ll start processing him off planet immediately. He’ll take the full hit.”

“Which is?”

Oltis broke the connection.

Diana said, "They take them out of the body and put them in a sort of trap, is the way I understand it. They don't like to talk about it."

"A trap?"

"It's prison. In this one's case, permanent prison. They'll never let him out."

Flynn thought about that. This plasma they were talking about was the soul. "Soul prison. That's the worst thing I've ever heard of. To be dead, but still in jail."

"I think their name for it says it all. They call their permanent prison 'Dead Forever.' "

They left then, and Flynn could not remember ever feeling so happy to leave a place in his life. The world of Oltisis might be full of wonders, but it also sounded like a kind of hell. No mystery of life. No mystery of death. Imprisonment that could last for eternity. "What do you think of them, Diana?"

She was silent. "Let's do our job, okay. Better to just put the whole thing out of your mind. Concentrate on the work."

They got into the car. "I'll tell you what I think."

"No! I don't want to hear it."

"They've made themselves into monsters."

She started the car and pulled away from the curb.

"Where are we going?"

"I got us a hotel. We'll want to get cleaned up."

"Then what?"

"Once they break it to Ormond that he's been nailed, they're expecting to get some more information for us about the perp. He'll want to bargain, it'll be his last hope. So we'll get a call from Oltisis. There'll be a second meet."

"That's good and bad. We need the information."

"But you don't want to go back there?"

"Nope."

“Neither do I, Flynn. Neither do I.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

She'd gotten them a room at a hotel in the loop. They were traveling as man and wife, James and Diana Exeter. Flynn came out of the five minutes he'd actually allowed himself to wash off the oil and the itching that had come from being near the alien. He'd put on some fresh clothes in the bathroom. They were coworkers, not lovers.

He lay back on one of the beds, looking at the new identity pack he'd been given as they left the HQ. "This is well done."

"We're piggybacking on the Witness Protection Program."

He gazed up at her long neck, her full lips, her sad, dark eyes.

"Don't assume they're from another planet," she said. "Don't assume anything about them at all."

"Where would they be from, then?"

She was silent for a long time.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, well, it's damn mysterious, all of it."

"How much does the government know? What about UFOs? Is any of that real? And alien abductions—I mean, the kind where the people get brought back? There's websites, books, claims of millions of abductions."

"We just don't know."

At that moment, he saw something on the ceiling. A light. It moved down the wall ... toward Diana.

It trembled red on her forehead.

Leaping up, he threw her to the floor. As she screamed, recoiling from what she obviously assumed was an outburst of rage, he hauled

the curtains closed. “We’re leaving.”

“What? Why?”

“You just got painted with a laser.”

She started to stuff her backpack.

“No time for that. We’re outa here.” He confirmed that the hallway was empty, and left the room. After a moment, she was with him.

“Hey,” she said as he passed the elevator bank. When he didn’t respond, she kept on behind him.

He entered the stairwell and started up.

She stood watching him.

He pointed downward. “Death.” He pointed upward. “Life. You choose.”

Seconds counted now, so he took the stairs three at a time. After a brief pause, he heard her behind him once again.

He pushed his way onto the roof through a stiffly hinged door, then stepped behind its enclosure, keeping close to the wall as he did so.

“As much as possible, keep something between you and the view. If you have to expose yourself, stay below the level of the parapet. One flicker of infrared return from up here, and our evening is over.”

Somewhere there was going to be access to the elevator bank, there had to be. He could see the elevator’s roof structure, but no outline of a door.

By moving directly toward the back of the building he could keep the door enclosure between himself and the view, and still get a look at the hidden wall of the elevator bank’s roof structure.

Crouching, he ran to it—and soon found the opening he needed. He turned to motion to her to follow.

Once again, there was a laser on her. “Drop!”

She stared. He pulled her down. “I need somebody with field skills!” For an instant, the laser touched the wall of the building behind the hotel, and then was gone.

“Sorry!”

“Always do what I tell you. Always!”

“Okay!”

He got the hatch open. “We’re going to wait for an elevator to come up, then ride it down. They’re on their way to the roof but they won’t find us here, so it’ll be a near thing.”

“I screw everything up!”

“Everybody screws everything up. It’s the nature of cop work.”

An elevator came up, stopped three floors down, then continued its cycle. “That’ll be them,” he said. “When the car stops, get on it.”

“Jesus!”

“Don’t look down.”

With a loud click from above, the car halted. Flynn hopped on. Leaping carefully, Diana followed him.

“Now we’re going to wait until it passes below fourteen, then drop down into the cab. When we’re there, don’t touch any buttons.”

From this side, the roof hatch was easy to pull up, and they were soon inside the car. He didn’t bother to try to replace the hatch. Their pursuers would know what they’d done. Probably already did. This wasn’t about deceiving them, it was about getting just far enough ahead of them to escape.

She leaned against the wall of the descending car. “Thank God.”

“If we don’t encounter them in the lobby, we need to grab a cab to the nearest El station. We’ve put them maybe three minutes behind us. If we’re lucky.”

“And if we’re not?”

“We’ll need to try another casino.”

“Who are they? How did they find us?”

“It’s the perp. He undoubtedly followed his client when he was captured. He’s probably been watching that house for a while, waiting to see who was going to turn up.”

“We have to warn them.”

“If we live.”

The doors opened onto the ornate lobby.

He could see a second car just passing twelve, on its way down. “Here they come,” he said. He wished that he could get a look at them, but there were too many ways to lose control of that situation. He drew her toward the main doors.

He’d tracked people across the plains of north Texas, he’d chased them through the streets and alleys of Menard, and he was reasonable at both things. He could not recall a time, though, when he’d been the runner. The truth was, he had to fall back on spy novel stuff, and he didn’t like spy novels. Hadn’t read one in years.

“Okay, quick—” He grabbed her wrist and jumped into a taxi. “Water Tower Place,” he told the driver. It was the only name that came to mind. He had no idea what it was or where it was. Just something he happened to remember.

“Why Water Tower Place?” she asked.

“Why not?”

“You don’t even know what it is, do you?”

“I do not.”

“You don’t know Chicago at all, then?”

“I don’t.”

“Water Tower Place is a shopping center in the Loop. That’s downtown.”

Flynn fell silent. The perp had gone after them first because they were sure to go to ground as soon as Oltisis was taken out. “We need to get to a pay phone.”

The mall was enormous and filled with shops. It took a surprising amount of time, but they finally found a public phone.

She made a call and told whoever answered what had happened.

“Let me talk.”

She handed him the phone. "You're in immediate danger. You need to get out of there right now."

Oltis said, "I can't move that quickly. Something has to be prepared, and transport is complex."

"You don't have a fallback prepared?"

There was a pause. "I do not."

"I'd get out of there even if you have to be carried in a bag. There's an immediate threat."

"I'll do my best. I assume we won't be seeing you tonight."

"Have you questioned your suspect?"

"I've just begun. I know that your perpetrator has human helpers. Ormond's never seen him in person, so he says."

"And you're inclined to believe him?"

"He's ready to open up."

"Get out of there and take him with you. For God's sake don't lose him." Flynn hung up the phone. "Meeting's off, obviously." He looked out along a long, empty corridor. The mall wasn't closed but it was almost empty, and most of the stores were dark.

"We need to hunt up ATMs. We need all the cash we can get. And I assume you have a cell phone?"

"I do."

"Throw it away. First, take out the battery."

They ran the ATM cards until they each had around six thousand dollars in cash.

"Do they ever run out?"

"I don't know. Not soon."

"Too bad this is our last chance to use them."

"*Why?*"

"The cards will be made."

"Bank databases are well secured."

“No they aren’t.”

It was now pushing eleven p.m., so there was no point in going to an airport. Like it or not—and he didn’t like it at all—they’d have to stay in Chicago overnight.

Outside the building, they found long rows of cabs, and more of them at the entrance to the Ritz Carlton that soared above Water Tower Place. Flynn hailed one, and they got in.

“Days Inn,” Flynn said.

“Uh, Lincoln Park?”

“That’s the one.”

“I’ll get a reservation ahead,” Diana said.

“No cell phones.”

“They won’t see me.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m a hacker. It’s what I do.”

“A hacker? You have some useful skills, then.”

“I like to think so.”

As the cab negotiated the sparse traffic, Flynn watched behind them, using what he could see of the rearview mirror. He thought he was dealing with a team of about four individuals with some very good equipment. They had a long-range rifle scope with a state-of-the-art laser sight. The way they had followed their targets, the rifle had to be on a chopper, which had been hovering out over Lake Michigan. Not great marksmanship, though. A good sniper would not have missed.

They also had that animal. Would they be able to make use of it in a city? He didn’t see how. They hadn’t tried yet, at least.

The Days Inn was in an older building in a neighborhood that was active even at twelve thirty at night. Which was fine. Activity was good.

The cab pulled up and stopped. Diana started to get out, but a

gesture from Flynn stopped her. She didn't speak, she didn't turn to him. Good, she was getting the hang of it.

After he'd finished evaluating their surroundings, he said, "Let's go."

They exited into a driving wind. The air had grown noticeably colder. The storm that had paralyzed Montana was getting closer fast.

At the motel, Flynn paid cash. The clerk took the money and directed them to their room. He'd been doing this too long to bother to ask for ID and listen to the bullshit.

The room was stark but clean. Flynn was tired, too. Not a good time for it, though.

The bed was a double, too narrow to avoid the touch of bodies. Silently, she threw off her clothes. She kept nothing on. Her skin shimmered, her curves swept elegantly about as she moved. Steve Glass had been a lucky man.

They lay side by side, as still as two scared birds.

When he closed his eyes, he saw Oltisis, the thin face and deep, dead eyes.

Lights from outside glowed on the ceiling. The distant rumble of a great metropolis in its uneasy sleep lulled them.

Flynn slipped into one of those sleeps that comes so stealthily that they seem more like a state of altered awakening. Diana refocused as Abby, and the dreary hotel room became their old bedroom. The curtains swayed in the summer breeze, the leaves whispered, and Flynn became aware that they were not alone. He thought, oddly, that it was all right that the man was there, that he was slipping his arms under Abby's legs and shoulders, that he was lifting her like a leaf.

He saw the man's face in the moonlight, the intent eyes, the lips slightly parted, the chin a little pointed and yet a little heavy.

And then Abby sighed, and he turned to her but she was gone, and the breeze swept through the room, and a new kind of silence came

with it.

He leaped out of the bed.

“What’s the matter?”

“Abby!” He ran toward the window. “No!”

She shook his shoulder. And he was back in the bed in the motel room. He hadn’t jumped up at all.

“It’s a dream I’ve had before. I see the guy take her.”

“Did you?”

“Probably not. We did an Identi-Kit years ago. Posted the Wanted all over Texas. Nothing.”

They held each other in the dark ocean of the night, in the unknown. Eventually, they slept again, each clutching the other as a lifeline. Flynn woke before dawn and checked the hotel corridor. Empty and silent. He watched the street for a time, standing back from the window. An old woman in a black coat walked a Collie mix. A bus passed.

He looked back at Diana sprawled on the bed. Circumstances had thrown the two of them together, but he still belonged to Abby. He’d always belong to Abby. For the first time, he found himself imagining her death. Had she known what was happening? And what *did* happen? Was it slow, fast, painful? He should have asked Oltis. Or maybe not. No, best not.

Finally he sat in the room’s threadbare easy chair and turned on CNN, and watched the crawl on silent. A tanker had gone aground in the Azores. A movie star had gone berserk. Ford had a new computer system in its cars.

And *what the hell had just happened?* He was working with a cop from another damn planet, holy God. Secret as hell and the stakes were high. If the criminal elements could be stopped, there would be open contact. Open. Everybody would know. The world would change, and look at that Oltis, look at the way he was. That had to be the strangest and most wonderful person he’d ever met, and the

most sinister. They'd defeated death. What did that mean? Conscious plasmas—is that what we were?

Wonderful. The secret of the ages, and maybe the whole world was going to find out. Maybe we were going to defeat death.

Except for one problem. Small problem. It was that this whole damn thing was going south. Way south. And the worst part of it was, he had no clear idea of a next move. More than anything that had happened so far, that disturbed him.

He closed his eyes, but sleep didn't come, not really. At best, it was the uneasy sleep of the soldier who can see the flicker of artillery on the horizon. Or it was the sleep of the condemned, the mind searching for last dreams that did not come.

In its gradual, stately way, the light changed, dawn rolling in from the east. Diana snored softly. The minutes passed, one by one.

So he was a big genius. Wonderful, he was so glad. Too bad that he had run out of ideas.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The glow from the signs outside finally faded into the uniform ray light of a cloud-choked sunrise. When Flynn parted the curtain again, he saw flecks of snow tumbling past.

It was six twenty, meaning that they'd been here for over five hours. They would have to go soon, but she was still sleeping. Her fists were clenched, the blanket pulled tightly around her neck.

When he'd first met Diana, she'd seemed out of her depth and too arrogant to know it, but now she looked small and tragic, lying on the bed all clutched into herself.

"I'm not asleep," she said. She opened her eyes. "Did you sleep?"

"Some. Not a lot."

"Same here. Not a lot."

She got out of bed, indifferent to her nakedness. He was not indifferent to it. She crossed into the bathroom, lithe and perfect, a dancer.

The shower came on. He listened to it, but as he watched her shadow behind the curtain, he thought of Abby in the shower. She'd liked to sing, Abby. Her voice was a peal of bells.

The shower curtain flew back and Diana came out. "Yours," she said.

When he undressed, she took no notice.

He showered in silence. He was mapping out an exit strategy from Chicago. Keep it simple, make it quick. But where to go?

"I need a laptop," she told him as he dressed.

"We can do that at a Best Buy or a Staples."

“That’s numero uno. We also need disposable cell phones. Every time we use one, we need to bust it up and toss the remains. No more than twenty-second calls, and only if absolutely, absolutely necessary. NRO can pull down a cell call in about thirty seconds from anywhere in the world, and we need to assume that our guys are even better.”

“Okay, here’s my part of this. First, if our friend doesn’t get out of that house fast, he’s done. If it hasn’t already happened. The perp is ahead of him and way ahead of us, and the frank truth is, survival is the issue. So I’ve been thinking about transportation. What’s the safest way to run like hell? Planes are out. No way through security without showing some kind of ID. The train is better. They take cash and we can hide out in a compartment. But a compartment is also a trap, so that’s out. Obviously buses are too vulnerable. My bottom line: we buy a car off a lot for cash. There’ll be no record of the transaction until the title hits the state department of transportation. So we’ve got about two days to go as far as we can.”

“Then the car becomes identifiable.”

“If we’re still in Illinois it does. But that’s not where we’re gonna be, not unless the trail of that tiger leads here, which I very much doubt.”

“The trail of the tiger?”

“I think it’s our best shot. That animal has records. Where we’re gonna go is where it was last in the hands of its real owners. That’s our starting point.”

“Let me ask you this. What if we absolutely, completely and totally cannot find the tiger? What then?”

“We go to Plan B.”

“Which is?”

“I have no idea.”

“Jesus.”

“Ninety percent of detective work is having no idea, eight percent is being wrong, two percent is luck. You enter a crime scene, there’s a

dead guy. His wife, the usual suspect, is alibied and clueless. It feels like there's no next step. But you find one. You take it. Usually small, and usually a dead end. So you feel your way along until you locate another step, if there is one, which usually there is not. That's it. That's being a detective."

"But you solve your crimes?"

"We have a good closing rate in Menard. Better than a lot of places. Mostly you solve the crime because the perp is a moron, which is why this case is such a problem. Our guy is not only better equipped than we are, he's smarter."

Dressed, they went downstairs. In the elevator he said, "We walk in opposite directions on Diversey. You go north, I go south. Get on the first bus you see. I'll get on it, too, next stop. Do not sit together. We both get off at the El."

The doors opened, they entered the compact lobby and checked out. She left while he looked at leaflets. Then he left. He made no effort to case the street. If they were made, there was no point. Escape would not be possible, not a second time.

As he walked, he looked for a bus stop, found one, then waited. In a few minutes a bus pulled up. It was packed, which was all to the good. When he got on, for a moment he didn't see her. Then he did, standing toward the back, deep in the crowd. He grabbed a bar and stayed in the front. They traveled four stops to the El, then he got off, along with most of the other passengers.

He saw her again on the El platform. They didn't acknowledge each other. When the El came, they both entered the same car. Three other people did, too, a man in a gray overcoat with a fur cap on his head, a woman with a blanket-covered stroller, and a girl being led by a Seeing Eye dog. Ordinary people or hit squad?

Farther down in the car, Diana sat reading a paper. That was a nice touch, he hadn't thought of that.

Looking up at the route map, he decided to get off in Skokie. No idea why. It was just a random name. No plan was the best plan.

Stops came and went. All of the people who'd gotten on with them were now off, which was good. Hopeful. Unless they'd been cycled out, of course. Who knew what level of resources they were dealing with? Did the perp have ten confederates or fifty? No way to know.

When the train stopped in Skokie, he got off. She followed. Downstairs, there was a coffee shop. He took a seat at the counter. In a situation like this, it was always a mistake not to eat, so he ordered eggs, toast, and sausage. At the far end of the counter, she ate, too.

She'd probably seen the same dealership from the windows of the train that he had, but he left first anyway. If there was another one he hadn't spotted, he didn't want to take the chance that she'd go there instead.

It was a twenty-minute walk, and he didn't like the way it exposed them. Nothing to do about it, though.

As he pushed his way into the warm dealership showroom full of gleaming Chryslers, the only salesman in the place appeared, an Indian man with tired eyes and a cranked-up smile.

"I'm looking for something I can drive off."

The salesman sized him up. "Well, let me show you your car," he said. The plaster smile didn't change. The tiredness in the eyes maybe got a little deeper. This man was far from home with a blizzard on the way, and Flynn could see his wife and kids around him, needy ghosts. Most of the world was like this man, keeping on because what else were you going to do? Flynn knew that there would be no savior for Mr. Asnadi.

Mr. Asnadi tried to get him to look at some recent models.

"I got a budget, man. Two grand."

"We can do that. There's a Dynasty—"

"You can do better. What about that Shelby over there?"

There was a Mitsubishi V-6 in the Dodge Shelby, and it was turbocharged. A fast car if you needed it and he would need it, that he knew.

“This is a fine car. We’ve certified it, you can see. But there’s not much wiggle room.”

The sticker said three thousand one hundred dollars. There was wiggle room. The way the tires were sitting told Flynn that there was massive amounts of it. The car hadn’t rolled in at least six months, and you weren’t even going to get a kid to buy an old gray Shelby.

“I’ll give you two grand cash now. That’s my only offer.”

“For two grand, we have this Avenger—”

“The Shelby. Two grand. Or I walk right now.”

He sighed. “I have to clear it with my manager.”

“No you don’t. You’re the only guy here. You want to try sitting in a back room drinking coffee while I stew, then come out and bullshit me more? Ain’t gonna happen.”

“Let’s do the paperwork.”

Twenty minutes later, Flynn and Diana were driving away. “Beautiful,” she said, looking at the cracked dash.

“It’s fast and we might need that. Plus front-wheel drive and reasonable tires. It’s worth about eight hundred bucks, but I paid two grand to do the deal quickly.”

His instinct was to travel, but they went back into the Loop and spent an hour dipping more ATMs. Under no circumstances could they use plastic once they were outside of Chicago.

When they had sixteen grand between them, they headed out Eighty toward Fifty-Five. He wanted to get far away from here as fast as possible, and also out from under the storm, which was fast approaching.

In Joliet, they found a Best Buy. They picked up laptops. She also purchased a hardware firewall. “We leave the wireless connections turned off. When we take these online, it can only be with a wired Ethernet with the firewall between us and the connection.” They got a GPS. “We use it only if necessary.”

“It doesn’t emit a signal,” he said.

“Everything emits a signal. Our signals detection units routinely reproduce the images on GPS instruments being used by the Taliban. It’s one of the ways we aim our drones.”

“I’m an old-fashioned cop, don’t forget that. Gumshoeing around asking people questions. So don’t let this electronic crap trip me up.”

“That’s why I’m telling you.”

At a 7-Eleven, they got disposable cell phones.

Back in the car, she explained, “Any time we use any phone, the computers or the GPS, anything that connects us to the world electronically, we immediately move on. So don’t, like, decide to surf the net before bed or whatever.”

“Good enough.” When it came to computers and computer security, she was, thank God, clearly in control. “Now I have a question for you. It’s time to open up. We’re past the bullshit. I know the big secret. So now I want to know if there are any support personnel anywhere who could help us.”

“I don’t think there’s a single soul.”

“What about the stakeout team across the street?”

“Garden-variety FBI surveillance unit. Don’t know a thing.”

“Not very good, either, given that they let a hostile tail pick us up. What about your NSA supervisor? You’re not in the office. He must be aware of that.”

“Neither are you, and what does Captain Parker know?”

“Point taken.” He drove on southward under the deepening sky. Snow blew across the road in writhing ribbons. The car’s heater screamed. As he drove, he watched both the sky and the road behind them. The cloud cover looked to be at about two thousand feet, so any chopper that might be shadowing them would stay in the cloud. The road was a different story, the road he could see.

In an excess of caution, he pulled the car off suddenly, tires screaming.

“What’s happening?”

He said nothing. Ahead was a crossroad anchored by an Exxon Station, a Jack in the Box, and a Holiday Inn Express.

He pulled into the gas station.

“How about a warning once in a while? You scared the hell out of me.”

“We don’t need gas. I’m watching our back.”

For eleven minutes, nothing else came in off the interstate. Then an eighteen-wheeler appeared, air brakes hissing, and headed for the truck pumps.

“Okay, I think we’re clean and we’re in an isolated area. Now what we need to do is this. First, we’re gonna go online, both of us, and see if we can find any report anywhere of a lost or stolen Siberian tiger. At the same time that we do that, we’re gonna put these people in front of us where we can see them.”

“Put them in front of us?”

“We’re going online flying flags. Wifi. No firewall. Looking for a Siberian tiger.”

“They’ll find us.”

“What they’ll find is the motel. We’ll be backed off, watching. But first there’s another couple of chores.”

“Which are?”

“You’re going to learn some new driving techniques. A few moves, as much as I can get across in an hour. And you are damn well going to become proficient with that little popgun you’ve got.”

“I don’t like guns. But I’ll use it if I have to.”

“You will fall in love with it. Worship it. Because right now, Diana, our guns are our gods.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He'd taken them down a long country road and pulled off in a tree-choked dip just beyond a small bridge. "Let me explain this vehicle."

"I'm a good driver."

"This is a front-wheel-drive vehicle. Better for winter, but you're not going to be able to do certain maneuvers. Normally, rear-wheel drive is the way to go, but this has an advantage in bad weather. It's fast, but it also has a lightweight steering pump. This means that the fluid is going to foam if we do tight turns at high speed. Expect the steering to become extremely heavy. Also, rubber brake lines. They could expand and so you need to assume that you could lose your brakes, too."

"So it'll be unsteerable and it won't stop. You'd better drive."

"If I'm incapacitated, you'll have to. Or if I'm done."

"What do you mean 'done'?"

"You got a sixty-six percent casualty rate going so far, Diana."

"I'm sorry. I'm just—" She shook her head.

He changed seats with her, then taught her a few basics, such as how to find the apex of a turn and when to start accelerating out of one, and how to execute a reasonable 180.

On a quiet country road she was barely passable. Under pressure, she was going to forget everything. He didn't even mention the bootlegger's turn. If she needed to execute a maneuver like that, she was already caught, so what was the point?

He gave up on driving and went to handgun skills. They walked a short distance into a frozen field. "You ever fired your pistol? At all?"

“Yes. No. Once. One session.”

“The most important thing in pistol shooting is understanding just how inaccurate your weapon is. People are accurate with pistols from distance only in the movies.”

“How close do you need to be?”

“With the weapons we’re using, a few yards is the outside.”

“That’s *all*?”

“Targets will be in motion and so will we. You need to get in as close as you can, is the bottom line. A couple of feet, or even a contact shot, is best.”

“I did my shooting on a range. There was a trainer.”

“The range is a dream world. If you’re shooting, your mind is going to be too focused on the act to remember much of anything else. That’s what practice is about. When you’re under pressure, you’ll go on automatic pilot, not lose your head.”

“What’s the most important thing I need to know, then?”

“Avoid lifting the barrel as you pull the trigger. But you won’t, not entirely, so you need to aim for the largest part of your target that’s worth hitting. This is the chest just below the neck. The advantage of this shot is that it does anatomical damage that affects the arms. With a heart shot, your opponent can get off one, maybe two trigger pulls before he’s done. Not with this one.”

“What about the head? Just shoot him in the head.”

“You’re going to miss, and once you have missed, you are going to manage the weapon badly. That’s what happened to Mike.”

“He was highly trained.”

“So am I. That’s why I know what happened to him.”

He kept her shooting until she appeared to be comfortable with her PPK. “Who issued this gun to you?”

“I bought it at Wal Mart.”

“It’s an okay choice. Just remember exactly how many bullets you

have. Count as you shoot. Know, always, whether or not you've got one in the firing chamber. This is absolutely critical, because it is going to take you more than a second to fire if you don't. In an exchange of gunfire, close range, that extra half second is a lifetime—yours.”

She looked like she wanted to cry. As they returned to the nameless little cluster of franchises and gas stations, sunset was a dull red streak on the western horizon. Ahead, the black outline of the motel was now dotted with fitful lights. Flynn felt a familiar sadness rolling over him, the great, tragic surge of the human sea, and now, also, the greater sea of intelligent life of which mankind was only a part.

They got takeout at the Jack in the Box, then checked in to the Holiday Inn Express.

He tossed his backpack on the bed, then put the Best Buy bag down more carefully and pulled the computers out. He ate a chicken sandwich while he checked out one of the laptops.

“It works,” he said. He followed the instructions on the desk and was soon online with it. “I've got webcams in my house. I'll just go on my website and click through them all. Then I'm going to surf YouTube looking for video of Siberian tigers.”

“If they know what they're doing, you'll get noticed for certain.”

“Let's hope.”

“I don't quite get this. We're giving ourselves away.”

“We want them to come to us in a place of our choosing. We'll be standing off, watching from a distance. When they show up and don't find us, they'll leave. Then we'll be where we need to be—behind them. We'll start calling some shots.”

Once online, he stared into his own living room, dark and still. For him, home was the center of his heart, and his loneliness. He did their bedroom, then the kitchen. Finally, steeling himself, he moved to the Abby Room—and just sat there staring, for the moment too astonished to talk. When he found his voice again, he said, “The Abby Room's been torn apart.”

She came beside him and looked at the image. “My God.”

The walls had great gouges ripped in them, the furniture had been broken apart, the couch torn to pieces, all the photographs scattered. He felt kind of sick, looking at the violence of it.

“Can you rewind?”

He hit the reverse button, and the image began to flicker back. “I’ve got it set on thirty-second intervals, so it’s choppy. It goes back forty-eight hours.”

Twenty-one hours ago, there were blurred frames indicating movement. He clicked forward.

In the center of the room, there was a figure. The body was blurred almost to invisibility, but you could see that it was a man.

“It’s posed, you know. On purpose. You’re intended to see this.”

The man ripped down maps, tore up pictures. His fury was extraordinary.

He killed his browser. He couldn’t bear to see more. “That’s the perp,” he said. He tried to fight down the sick horror, but he could not. He choked back his emotions. “Goddamnit. Sorry.”

“Everybody in this cries.”

“Okay, fine. Siberian tigers. They can’t be imported, so the ones presently in the country are the only ones available.” He reopened his browser, being careful not to bring up his home security system again. “There is no national database of stolen property. The individual police departments each keep their own records.”

“So what do we do?”

“Look for break-ins at zoos and animal shelters that house these animals. The fact of the break-in will be recorded in the National Crime Information Center Database. Although, I don’t have a password.”

“Not a problem.” Her fingers flew. “We have a master access program. It can basically break into any password protected system there is. One with as many different passwords as this one has is

gonna be a piece of cake.”

He saw numbers flickering across the database’s access point. “Okay—one, two, three—”

The entry was allowed.

“That’s impressive.”

“Give me something hard. The Federal Reserve’s master password. Want a billion dollars? I could wire it into your account within fifteen minutes.”

“That might be a tad difficult to explain.” As much grief as was in her own heart, he was grateful that she was trying to lighten his mood.

She worked through the data. “Here’s an animal shelter in Austin, Texas, that was broken into last month. It’s reported as a case of vandalism. Chimpanzees were shot. You gotta ask why people do crap like that. And another one. Santa Barbara, California. A lion was killed with a high-powered rifle.”

“Nope, if we’re on the right track at all, it’s gonna be Austin.”

“You’re sure?”

“They have one of the worst burglary clearance records in the country. A criminal this smart is going to factor that in.”

“They logged the chimps as animal cruelty. There are pictures. Ugly. So nothing stolen.”

“Maybe and maybe not. Let me take a look.” He read aloud, “‘Fencing was breached in a large holding area that contained a Siberian tiger called Snow Mountain.’ ”

“It doesn’t say the tiger is missing.”

“Say you’re a cop. You investigate a break-in at an animal preserve. Of all the animals that are left unharmed, you mention only one in your report. Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do I. But I do know that Texas is full of wealthy ranchers

who love to stock their places with exotic wildlife. Texas being Texas, maybe you know that the tiger has been illegally taken by such a rancher or sold to one, and you know exactly who did all this—took the tiger and vandalized the facility as a cover—and because of who it is, you have no desire to pursue this individual.”

“Is it worth a trip, then?”

“You follow the leads you have.”

“I thought we were going to wait here. Try to induce a confrontation. I mean, by now they almost certainly know where we are. I mean, if they have the skill to watch for relevant searches.”

“I didn’t expect such a good lead. I think we need to run after it.”

They were close enough to St. Louis to reach the airport in a couple of hours.

They didn’t check out. Why leave behind any more information than you had to? What was the hotel going to do, send a bill?

They were south of the storm now, and the winter sky was vivid with stars. Cars passed now and again, not many though. People were getting their dinner, life was winding down for the night.

He watched the road behind them, but one set of headlights looks much like another, and distances are hard to gauge at night.

“What do you think will happen in Austin?” Diana asked.

“What will happen in Austin is the unexpected.”

“If the tiger is gone?”

“Then we’re close. The case starts giving up some gold.”

“Will they catch us this time?”

He thought about that. “If they don’t, it’ll be a miracle.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Using one of the throwaway cell phones, Diana had made some calls to airlines and determined that the next flight to Austin wasn't until five forty-five in the morning, so Flynn pulled into a Homewood Suites he happened to see near the St. Louis airport.

Once again, they checked in with cash. There was a stack of *USA Todays* on the counter, and he took one. He planned to look at the weather forecast. Big weather had a tendency to loop down over the country's midsection. If they were going to run into the storm again in Texas, he wanted to know that.

He went into the bedroom, tossed the paper on the bed, and turned on the TV. "Will it bother you?"

"I'm not sleepy."

He could feel a more intense electricity between them. She wanted to take another step, he could feel that. He said, "Outside of Menard, there's an area called the Staked Plain. When I was a boy, I used to ride there, and in the summer of my twelfth year a girl rode with me. Abby." He did not add that they had danced together naked in the grass.

"I'm here," Diana said.

His body went to her and his lips kissed hers, and then his heart kissed her. She was small in his grasp, surprisingly so for someone who occupied so much space in his life. They took their pleasure together then, two people who were tired and confused and afraid, but for this moment were able to find something like shelter in one another.

Then it was over, a memory flying back into the past. They lay side

by side in silence. Flynn felt gratitude. He wanted to thank her, but that seemed like another form of rejection. Abby haunted him.

Diana slipped quickly away into sleep. She was soon snoring softly. Flynn envied her the ability she had to drop off like that. For him, night was a prison. He dreaded the feeling of vulnerability that sleep brought. Since the incident, his doctor had explained to him that he was suffering from something called guarded sleep, which means that at some level, you're always awake.

He turned on the TV. For a while, he surfed, watching the Weather Channel, then CNN, then a Judge Judy rerun. Hitler strutted on the Military Channel. On Nick at Night, crazed cartoon figures cavorted.

His nakedness began to make him feel exposed and he put his clothes back on. Cradling his gun, he returned to the living room of the small suite.

For a time, he meditated. His gun lay in front of him, so he also closed his eyes. A few minutes vacation from it would be okay.

Abby whispered his name.

He gave up meditating and went into the bedroom and got the paper, which was lying on the floor beside the bed.

Back in the living room, he turned the pages, looking for the national weather. As he flipped through it, his eyes rested for a moment on the word "tiger."

He read the brief story, then stopped, too shocked for a moment to move.

He went into the bedroom, shook Diana and said, "Forget Texas, we're going to Vegas."

Diana stirred but didn't wake up.

"Look at this," he said, holding the paper out, then rattling it.

She moaned.

"Wake up, Diana, this is important."

She sighed, stretched, then started to turn over and go back to sleep.

“No, you need to see this.”

“What?”

“A tiger is on the loose in a casino in Las Vegas.”

For a moment she was absolutely still. Then she sat up. She grabbed the paper and read. “A coincidence?”

“This was yesterday. They’d lost us. My guess is that this is bait.”

“It doesn’t say anything about it being a Siberian.”

“It’s not a coincidence.”

“If you say so.”

“We need to catch the first flight out.”

“Flynn, I can understand investigating the place that lost the tiger. But the casino makes no sense. If it’s a coincidence, we’re wasting our time. If it’s not, they’ll be waiting for us.”

“I see a break in the case. Among other things, casinos are loaded with cameras. Think if we got the perp identified. Think of that.”

“It’s a trap, Flynn.”

“Of course it is, that’s the whole point. But we know that. We understand.”

They left the hotel and went on to Lambert, driving through the post-midnight world, past glowing fast-food restaurants and dark, silent strip malls.

“Once I watched a rat get cheese out of a trap,” he said.

“That’s impossible.”

“If you’re a smart rat it’s not. What he did was push the trap along the floor with his nose until it sprung. Then he ate the cheese. We need to approach this the same way, exploiting the unexpected vulnerability.”

“What is it?”

“It’s unexpected, so I don’t know. Yet.”

The earliest Vegas flight left just after six, so they spent a few more

hours in the next hotel, letting the night wear slowly into predawn. There was no trouble with tickets, and the plane wasn't crowded.

After taking off, it turned into the dark western sky. Flynn looked at Diana beside him. Was she capable? No.

Better question: was he?

Same answer.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

They pulled around the gigantic lion that guards the MGM Grand's porte cochere and got into the valet parking line. Nobody cared, of course, not about a couple of dismal little tourists in a rented Camry. Which was good. A noticeable detective is a bad detective.

He hadn't walked into this building in five years. As he approached the gleaming doors, the old itch came back. He fought it off. You don't start, that's how you control an addiction.

"What do we do now?"

"Find the tiger."

"If it's still here."

"It's gonna be a major production for them to get it out of the building. Security is all over the place, not to mention the press. This place is loaded with cameras, believe me. If security hasn't spotted the tiger being taken out, then odds are that it's still here."

"He could've used the helicopter to take it off the roof."

He thought about that. Then he said, "Possibly, but he still has to get it up there. Somewhere, some camera will have seen that."

This was the Grand, where the Skylofts had private butlers. How much would it take to convince his butler to help him get the tiger out? A couple hundred bucks would probably do it. Still, could a butler control the cameras?

They passed the huge golden lion in the lobby, heading for Skyloft check-in. They'd booked one, too, top floor.

He could hear the casino and smell the casino. From here, he couldn't see the blackjack tables, but he could imagine the dealers standing behind them, waiting. He'd known a couple of those guys.

They loved to see players burn, but they loved even more to see them win. Big wins meant big tips.

He slid the door back and entered the exclusive Skyloft check-in area.

“Reservation for James Carroll.”

“Yes, Mr. Carroll! Just a mo—.”

The receptionist’s smile turned to plaster.

“Get ready for company,” Flynn told Diana as the door behind them slid open and a howitzer shell in a black suit came in.

“Excuse me,” the shell said, his steel cranium gleaming.

“We’re here on official business,” Flynn responded. “No gambling.”

“Please come with me, Mr. Carroll. And you, too, Miss Glass.”

He looked at her in astonishment. “You’re booked, too?”

She did not reply.

As they headed toward security, the officer asked, “Are you two a team now?”

“Not really,” Diana said.

He led them into a familiar space, scuffed beige walls, no windows, a steel desk and a couple of wooden chairs. Not the sort of room you expect to see in the Grand. It was even more stark than the service areas and the maze of access tunnels that Flynn knew ran under the huge complex.

He thought he might recognize the security chief, but it was a new, short, stocky bullet-headed bald guy. The new howitzer shell said, “Diana Glass. Welcome back. Leaving, I presume?” He looked at Flynn. “And who’re you supposed to be, Mr. Carroll, Hecuba’s sidekick?”

“I’m a police officer,” Flynn said. He pulled out his badge. “Texas.”

“Doesn’t make a shit here, Mr. Carroll, this is Nevada. The message remains the same. Get out.”

“Look—”

“I’m lookin’ at a lot of losses between the two of you, now get off the premises or I’ll have to turn you over to some real cops, which will not amuse you.”

Unless there was a criminal charge, in cases like this the Vegas cops basically just yelled at you. It wasn’t against the law to win money from the casinos. It was just annoying to them.

“You have a tiger in here and I know this, and I know how to find it and get it out of the resort.”

He heard Diana suck in her breath.

“Your help isn’t needed,” the security chief said. “We’ve got eyes on every camera in the structure.”

“Why haven’t you evacuated?”

“Because we don’t think some eccentric high roller is gonna unleash his pet on the guests. We just want him quietly to leave. Like you.”

“What hasn’t been on the news is why you can’t find it, which I know you can’t. Or why we can. That hasn’t been on the news, either.” He flipped his badge wallet closed. “We’re not here to gamble.”

The security chief came closer to him. Flynn noted that he had a complete set of choppers. Not good with his fists, then.

“Wait here,” Choppers said. He left the room.

Flynn looked up at the camera and waved his fingers. “He’s gone to get the general manager.”

“I really didn’t want to come here.”

“Are you booked all over town, or just here?”

“Look, in a previous life I built illegal software, okay?”

“For the casinos?”

“Against the casinos.”

“All I did was count cards.”

“They don’t like that, either.”

“They do not.”

He looked at her with new eyes. From casino hacker to government super spy. “You’ve had an interesting career.”

She smiled a tight smile. “It has been interesting.”

The general manager came in. He was not smiling. “I’m told you won’t leave.”

“We’re not here to gamble. We’re here to help you with your tiger problem.”

“We don’t have a tiger problem.”

“You have a half-empty casino is what you have. Because of the bad publicity regarding said tiger. That’s a tiger problem.”

The guy was young, no more than five years older than Flynn, but he had the dead eyes of somebody who’d worked tables too long. Under the flinty, hostile surface was a deeper level of what Flynn sensed was real nastiness. So he had to be beaten about the head and shoulders a little. Not a problem. He said, “Okay, fine, we’re gonna leave. But we’re also going to let the press know that you refused our help.”

“A cop from the beautiful little town of Dead, Texas, and his hacker girlfriend? Nobody cares.” He turned his glare on Diana. “Why aren’t you in jail? You’re supposed to be serving time. Or dare I ask? ’Cause I can see you’re carrying heat, both of you. But then again”—he gestured toward a uniformed guard who had quietly entered the room—“so is he.”

“I’m not in jail because I cut a deal with Uncle Sam, Willard.”

“Willard?” Flynn asked.

“What kind of a deal would the feds cut with a sleazeball like you, Diana? You went down for four years.”

She pulled out her documentation. “When there’s only one person who can do a job, they’re gonna deal.”

He looked at her ID card. “As if this was real. Please don’t bore me. You either bribed your way out or fucked your way out or both. Or

you did something to their computers. Probably hacked your own release and just walked.”

“Look, Willard, we’ve been sent here by our bosses for reasons that we cannot tell you to do a job that you are not going to be able to do yourself.”

“We’ve got security patrolling every floor. We’ve entered and searched every guest room in the complex.”

“But you haven’t found the tiger or seen it leave the structure. Not on any camera. So what does that tell you?”

“LVPD SWAT are standing by.”

“Hordes of cops in black Darth Vader outfits. International media attention. That would not be good.”

“Whatever, I fail to see what a card shark and a jailbird hacker are gonna bring to the table.”

“Go the SWAT route. Or let us do our thing. Nice and private. You see the tiger, then you don’t.”

“Do we get an ID on the shithead who brought it in?”

“I guarantee the tiger. The shithead if we’re lucky.”

“And what does this cost?”

“Not a penny. We really do work for Uncle Sam.” He looked at Diana. “She’s been scared honest.”

“That would be false. So let me put it this way. If this fucks up in some way—if it turns out to be some sort of bass backwards scam, I’m not bothering with the cops. I’m gonna just go ahead and brass you two until your faces are but a memory.”

“You beat up ladies now?”

Willard focused on Diana. “I saw this ‘lady’ here toss an armed man twice her size fifteen feet into a glass wall.”

“I’ve only seen her geek side,” Flynn said.

Willard stared at her for a while. “That was her geek side. Don’t even get me started about her skill at ripping marks.”

Her face was scarlet. She did not reply.

A long sigh from Williard. "What do you need to get started?"

"Smart move," Flynn said.

"Nope, it's a case of curiosity killing the cat. Why would a big-time hacker team up with a small-time counter? I'm fascinated."

"Let's roll some videotape."

Willard took them to the security complex, which Flynn saw was fitted with state-of-the-art cameras watching the gaming area. Every corridor on every floor was also covered. "Any penetration into the rooms?"

"Not legal."

"Detectives, maybe? Police investigation?"

"It happens, but nothing's going down at present."

He introduced Scott Morris. Flynn saw a graying former cop, probably a retiree. Sincere, capable, dedicated. "Scott supervises the system. He'll give you what you need."

"I have all the incidents edited together," he said. "This is the first one that was noticed." He touched a button, which froze an image.

They were looking at a blur stretched along the floor line in one of the access tunnels. Diana said, "You can tell what that is?"

"I can tell that it isn't supposed to be there."

"Could be a big cat," Flynn said.

The security officer returned the camera to real time. The shadow was now gone.

"What was it then?" Flynn asked.

"Nobody could figure it out, so it got kicked up to me. I did a little work on the image, but it's unresolvable."

"What's the refresh rate on these things?"

"Eighteen fps."

"So whatever it is was moving really fast."

“Faster than a man can run.”

“Where’s that tunnel?”

“Right under us, actually. Access to the lion habitat is through there.”

The MGM Grand’s lions were a world-famous tourist attraction. When he was here gambling, Flynn had passed by the habitat often enough. Even the floors were glass, so it was going to be a hard place for a tiger to hide.

“Street access? Is that where they bring the lions in from the ranch?”

“Yeah, there’s access out onto Tropicana. A couple of hundred feet.”

“Let’s see the best image of the tiger that you have.”

“This is from the tower. Sixteenth floor. Three twenty this morning.”

The animal came down the hall, stopped, and looked up at the camera.

“My God,” Diana whispered.

Brilliant eyes sparked in a sea of gray-orange fur. The animal’s face seemed almost to smile. Then it slowly turned around and, switching its tail, ambled down the corridor and around a corner.

“Next camera?”

Scott Morris pushed another button. “This is all there is. A blur again.”

“It displayed itself intentionally,” he said. “And it’s still here. And not alone.” He asked Scott, “Do you cover the Mansion? With cameras?” This was an exclusive facility behind the Grand itself, reserved for high rollers and people willing to pony up \$5,000 a night for accommodation.

“We cover the whole facility.”

So there would be no reason for the perp to prefer the Mansion

over the Skylofts, and perhaps a good reason to favor the lofts, because he would have arrived the same way he'd arrived at the Hoffman's, from above, using that high-tech aircraft of his.

In any case, MGM was going to know a lot about the people who stayed in the Mansion. You didn't just walk in, you had to be invited.

"What about the roof of the tower?"

"There's time lapse video of all roof areas. We've examined every foot of it."

"How long is the delay?"

"Sixty seconds."

Easily time enough for someone to land, drop the animal and its support crew, and leave. Working at night, staying below FAA radars, using that soundless helicopter or whatever it was, it would have been easy.

"What we need to do is concentrate on the top floor of the tower, not the roof, the roof cameras are too slow. But I want to look at every inch of interior footage."

A few minutes later, Flynn was watching one camera, Diana the other. "You're looking for a blur," he said. "They know the frame speed of the cameras, so the animal is moving fast."

"It's that well trained? Tigers are hard to train." Morris said.

Flynn said nothing.

It took three hours, and during that time neither of them saw a single sign of anything unusual. Butlers and room service waiters came and went, guests came and went, but nothing else happened.

"Like I said, it's still here," Flynn said.

"Which surprises me," Diana replied. "If it's bait. Wouldn't they have exposed it, then pulled it out as soon as they could?"

"Gotta let the fish swallow the bait, then you can set the hook. That's what we're doing now. We're swallowing the bait. Next step, the hook will be set."

“How will it be done?”

Flynn thought about that. “We shall see.”

“Look, it’s not in this complex,” Morris repeated. “I’m sorry.”

“If it’s not anywhere you’ve looked, then it has to be somewhere you haven’t. I suggest we start at the point of entry and we move through every space where the animal has been observed.”

“And?”

“We shall see.”

“Flynn,” Diana said, “that’s just blatantly taking the bait.”

“A smart fish wants to get the fisherman to go home. So he plays a game with him. He wants to frustrate him. He takes the bait, but he’s careful. He’s not greedy. He nibbles. So the fisherman up there thinks, ‘have I got a bite or is it just the current?’ Finally, he hauls in his line and finds a clean hook. This happens a few times, and the fish is finally left in peace. Full, too.”

“So he leaves and we get nothing. Stalemate.”

“Oh, no, he’s gonna get something.”

“What?”

Flynn made a gun gesture. “The fish, in this case, is gonna follow the line right back to the fisherman in his little boat.”

“Flynn, you’ll get killed.”

“Somebody will, most likely.”

“Remember Montana. The animal is extremely dangerous, and whoever’s behind it is even more so.”

Flynn said nothing.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The lion habitat was immediately beside the security area, and it took them only a few moments to reach it with their latest minder, a young guy called Josh who apparently thought they were celebrity guests looking for an insider's tour.

He nattered away about the facility's history and its considerable prowess as one of the most popular exhibits in Las Vegas.

The walls and floors were clear glass, so it was easy to see the lions, but not entirely. There was a small area where they could stay out of view.

There was a crowd in front of the habitat, and a line full of kids formed up along the wall. It was a happy situation, calm and orderly. No problems here. There were cubs in the habitat, and the children were eager to have their pictures taken with them. Farther down the corridor, more people were filing into Studio 54. The casino was humming, too, and a show was letting out of the Cirque de Soleil's KÀ Theater.

This was a chess game with no board and more than one expert opponent. Or perhaps it was better to say it another way: a chess game with the perp and some other kind of game with the tiger, played by tiger rules, whatever they were.

He asked Scott, "Did you check the whole habitat?" He knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it from the man who had done the work.

"What's there to check? Six lions, two cubs, glass floors, end of story."

Obviously, Scott was not aware of how the habitat was laid out.

Flynn went to the door. "I need to enter the space," he told their minder.

The man blinked. His expression of surprise said that it wasn't a frequent request. Finally he said, "No."

"It's okay, Ricky," Scott said.

"Don't we need a release or something?"

"I need to do this right now."

Scott spoke into his radio, then listened. Willard, no doubt. Flynn waited. At a nod from Scott, Rickie unlocked the heavy door and stepped aside.

"Hey," the trainer who was handling the animals said, "You know what you're doing?"

"I need to see into the enclosed area."

"There's nobody in there. We're all out here."

This guy was tight with his lions, which was good. It meant that he could control them. Flynn was fast enough to deal with one lion, but six would be a definite problem, and lions weren't like tigers, they worked in packs.

The public was now aware of his presence in the enclosure and was watching him. He moved through the visible space, then took a few steps up into the hidden area.

It was exactly as he expected. He called out to the trainer, "There's another animal in here."

The trainer's head turned. "*What?*"

"Back in here. And I don't think it's a lion."

The man came to Flynn. "That's empty. It has to be."

Flynn moved a little deeper into the dimness. "Get security over here."

"This is impossible!"

"Look for yourself," Flynn said. "Carefully."

"Jesus, you're right. What is that?"

“We need somebody who’s able to work with tigers. And this one is very damn smart.”

The trainer had taken out a small LED flashlight. The yellow of the tiger’s eyes reflected back. “What the hell ... how did that get in here?”

“We need to get it contained.”

“There’s tigers at the Secret Garden in the Mirage. Is this one of their animals?”

“No. But they have experts, for sure.”

“Yeah, Siegfried and Roy. *The* experts.”

“Aren’t they retired?”

“If they’re in Vegas, they can advise. Plus, the Mirage has a good group of trainers. It’s a top-notch operation.”

One of the lions roared, then another. From outside there was excited babble, kids squealing.

“They’ve been restless as hell, and this is why. How long as that thing been in there?”

“That’s unclear.”

Behind them, Ricky opened the access door. “You guys okay?”

Immediately, there was a stirring from within the enclosure. “Close it,” the trainer shouted.

The lions erupted, roaring and striding, and at the same moment the tiger emerged. It was easily as big as two of the lions put together.

It fixed its stare on Flynn.

“It knows you. Is this your animal?”

Flynn said nothing.

The tiger came into view of the public, causing an immediate round of applause. The next second, it leaped, and Flynn had never seen anything quite like it. The movement was smooth and swift and covered a good fifteen feet.

As the tiger slammed into Ricky, he went down with a surprised

grunt.

“Holy God!” the trainer shouted.

From outside there came a confused babble, then an eruption of screams.

Perhaps because of pack instinct, but also due to curiosity, the lions followed the tiger through the door.

“Goddamnit!” the trainer shouted.

“Stay cool, we’ve got work to do,” Flynn said. He grabbed Scott’s radio. “The animals are in the casino,” he said on the emergency channel, “you need crowd control and all the wranglers you can get.”

He followed the trainer out into the broad hallway between Studio 54 and the casino. The lions were close together, moving down the center of the hall toward the casino, and the large crowds still exiting KÀ were parting like the Red Sea. But not all of them. An elderly lady who looked like a pile of bags with a face clapped her hands and confronted them, smiling happily. “Oh, how cute,” she gushed.

Another voice shouted, “It’s an act,” and there was a smattering of uneasy applause.

“Oh, God,” the trainer moaned.

Security was pouring into the corridor from both directions. Then a little boy with a toy ray gun burst through the crowd and took a firing stance. The next thing Flynn knew, he was spraying the lions with a super-soaker.

They remained silent and still, shaking their heads, annoyed by the water, unsure of themselves.

“It’s not gonna last,” the trainer shouted back at Flynn.

“I know it.”

A guard appeared with a gun.

The situation was three seconds from trample panic. “Don’t fire that,” Flynn shouted, “don’t let people see it!” The guard holstered it and stationed himself in front of the lions and spread his legs and arms, attempting to block their progress.

Now other people joined the old lady, attempting to attract the lions to them. One man succeeded in petting one of them.

“Lay off,” the trainer shouted, “don’t confuse them!”

“Folks,” Flynn said in his most commanding voice, “we need you to back out of here. Nobody run, just move out of the corridor, please. Stay away from the animals.”

The old lady was lifting the dewlaps of a lioness and shrilling at her husband to take a picture. Flynn’s warning did not stop her. Then a man with a cigar in his hand burst around the guard, roaring and thrusting it at the lions.

One of the them charged this sudden movement. The old woman was knocked over.

In three strides, Flynn moved among the lions, then past them. Quickly, he confronted the man with the cigar, lifted his arm and shook it out of his hand, and twisted the arm back behind him. Then he took the guy’s legs out from under him, whirled him around and pushed him away. He turned to the old woman and drew her to her feet. “Put her back together,” he said to another security guard who had just come up.

The lions, now afraid, began running. More screams erupted. Flynn’s trained ears counted ten sirens immediately outside the building, just beginning to wind down.

“Call your pros,” he shouted to Scott. “Right now!”

“It’s been done!”

Willard burst onto the scene. “SWAT’s deploying.”

Flynn took off after the lions.

They invaded the casino, moving fast. Their fear was escalating fast. At this point, they were highly likely to lash out at anybody who confronted them.

This was a huge space, and most of the patrons still weren’t aware of what was happening. But then one of the lions jumped up onto a blackjack table and roared. Nobody could mistake that sound, and

every head in the casino turned this way. Then the rest of them ran deeper into the room, and were lost to Flynn's view amid the high-roller slots. Roars and cries of terrified surprise followed immediately.

"Stay with this animal," Flynn shouted to two guards. "Send SWAT into the slots with nets, not guns. No guns, do you get that?"

"Yessir!"

He also ran toward the slots, vaulting the nearest row of them and landing in the lap of a spectacular young woman. Her chips scattered, mice on the run.

People were jumping up from their machines, shouting, flapping their hands at the lions, trying to leave the area.

Flynn knew about as much about lions as he did about tigers, which was just enough to know that they were efficient killers, but would only attack for food or in self-defense. For them, violence was a tool, and right now what he needed to do was to convince them not to use it.

"Clear the area," he shouted into the panicking crowd. "The police are on their way. Just take it easy, back out, don't make sudden movements." They slowed down, clustering, getting quiet. "That's it, that's right. Now just back out. Security will escort you to safety."

In moments, fully equipped SWATs appeared, and they had animal control nets. There was going to be some roaring and some resistance from the lions, but basically this was over.

Diana came up beside him. "This is what the perp's been waiting for. His tiger's going to take us out somehow, and right now."

"He's going to try. Listen, I need you out of here."

"No way."

"They must not take both of us. So you get out of here, you get in the car, and you drive, Diana. You drive far."

He spotted the tiger. It was making its way behind the high-roller slots, moving fast, staying low.

"The perp could be leaving the facility about now. You go out to

the front and make a note of every vehicle that pulls away.”

“He’ll use his chopper.”

“In broad daylight? He’s gotta have permits, he’s got to get clearance to use the helideck. No, he’ll use a car and this is a chance to see him or see somebody who works with him. Get some basic detective information.” The tiger disappeared from view. The animal was going somewhere. It would be picked up, and Flynn intended to still be alive when that happened, and to be there.

“You come with me,” Diana said.

“The tiger’s going somewhere to be picked up. If I’m there, I can call in support from the local cops. Maybe round up some of these people.”

“You will not survive this, Flynn.”

“Go!”

She turned.

“*Now!*”

She left.

Flynn trotted to where the animal had been, but there was nothing there. He looked ahead and saw an access panel. Loose. It must have gone through, and it must have been helped, otherwise the panel wouldn’t just be loose, it would be open. Smart as the damn thing was, the tiger didn’t have hands. Fortunately.

As he slid the panel aside, he reflected that he’d seen the tiger’s face more clearly this time. He’d had the uncanny sense that a person had been looking back at him through the eyes of an animal.

On the other side of the panel he found an access area that led to a forest of ductwork. It was a ventilation management shaft. The interior was unlit.

This was the moment when he needed to nibble the bait, not swallow it. The smart fish also had the discipline to defeat his own eagerness, and that was not easy, not when you were as hungry as he was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

He stood waiting for his eyes to get used to the dark. His night vision was decent, and this was always preferable to a flashlight. He could use his night vision equipment, which was still in his backpack, but it projected infrared and that would not be wise. For all he knew, tigers could see into the infrared, or this one could.

Soon, he was able to make out the shapes of ducts. There was light coming from his left. Also, on the floor, smears in the dust that could only be tracks. Instead of hiding, this tiger had gone toward the light, and that was very damn strange, especially because light changes the hormone mix in the human brain but not in the brains of predators. More visual information makes our other senses less acute. Could the tiger sense this, or somehow even know it? Or was it just a coincidence that it was going against its own instincts in such a way that gave it an advantage, but would look to most human pursuers like a mistake?

Flynn made his way under a long series of ducts, skirting the lighted area, moving as swiftly and silently as he could. He listened for any and every sound, and soon began to hear noises coming from the deeper dark. He stopped moving. Stopped breathing. Closed his eyes to concentrate on his hearing. Finally, he cupped his hands over his ears and turned slowly. As he did so, he was gradually able to make out a voice. Then that it was a female voice. Then that it was the voice of a child.

“Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town, upstairs and downstairs, in his nightgown ...”

Incredibly, what he was hearing was a little girl telling a Mother Goose story.

“Rapping at the window, crying through the lock, are the children in their beds ... are *you* in *your* bed, Jerry?”

He got his gun into his hand and went down on his stomach, drawing himself forward slowly enough so that the sliding sound was barely audible. As he moved ahead, the little girl’s voice grew steadily more distinct. Also, he began to see flickering light, very dim. A candle?

The voice continued, “Hush-a-bye, baby, mommy is near, hush-a-bye, daddy is near ...”

There came another voice, even smaller, hardly even articulate, whimpering.

“Hush ... hush.” The little girl was comforting an even smaller child.

Using the voices as a guide, he felt his way along, soon discovering an iron hatch that was standing open. As he felt the edge, he could detect neat slices in four heavy lock tongues. This door had been cut open, and not by any tiger, no matter how clever it was.

This was the work of the perpetrator or his people, the first overt sign of their presence he had found. So his instinct had been right. It wasn’t just the tiger under here. Somebody with a powerful tool was here, too, and not a blowtorch. The edge was absolutely smooth to the touch. A torch would have left a much more irregular surface. No, this had been cut by a very good blade—as a matter of fact, no blade Flynn had ever heard of.

Could this be their lair? Was that the real reason they were in Vegas? Maybe he’d overestimated their cunning, and blundered into their most secret place.

He told himself, no, don’t make that mistake, that’s nibbling the bait too hard. One more like that, and you taste the hook.

From the beginning, he had known that he would come to this point. Maybe the child wasn’t even real, and maybe something else was happening entirely. He was in a labyrinth, after all, a real one. Who could tell what the truth of such a place might be?

It was an easy step through the door, whisper quiet sneakers on hard concrete. As he stepped through, he felt the thickness of the wall. It was a good four or five inches of steel reinforced concrete. So this was an access hatch, not intended to be opened often, if at all. But what was it for? What was this space he was now in?

The little girl was now silent, but the candle still flickered. As he moved toward it, he became aware of dampness underfoot, and at once understood. He was in the city's storm drain system, and that hatch was not a hatch at all, it was a gigantic relief valve. An enormous structure like the Grand would be served by massive risers from the city water system. If one of them burst, this and other valves up and down this outer wall could be opened to let the water out into the drainage system.

But what in the world were children doing in a storm drain? Were they runaways?

Flynn had been born helpful. It was part of who he was and a big part of why he'd become a cop. Even as a kid, he'd rendered aid whenever the situation arose. When it came to putting bad people in jail, Flynn's motive was protective, not vindictive. He didn't care so much to punish wrongdoers as to keep innocent people safe.

He was in a tunnel perhaps fifteen feet high and twenty wide. The candle, guttering now, was a hundred yards further on. As he drew closer, he began to make out a bed, then a table against a wall, then what amounted to a small room built entirely inside the drainage tunnel.

People lived down here. They were raising children down here.

He walked into the tiny area. There was a mattress set on a rusty box spring, with two children sleeping on it. A tattered paperback of Mother Goose lay near the hand of an exquisite little girl, her blond hair a tangled mess, her face in sleep like something one might see through a keyhole into heaven. Cuddled beside her was a snatch of brown hair, all that could be seen of the smaller child she had been reading to.

Standing on the far side of the bed, just at the edge of the light, was the tiger. The eyes bored into him, but not with lust for the kill or even with hate. There was something like a frown there, not much of an expression really, but Flynn thought that it communicated clear meaning. The tiger's face was not angry. It was not murderous. The tiger's face was asking a question: "Who are you?"

Flynn had a shot—not much of one, but he could safely fire across the kids and maybe hit the animal. Moving as slow as oil, he raised the Glock. Quite calmly, the tiger watched it come up.

If he hit his target, the shot would be nothing short of a masterpiece. He breathed deep and set his feet.

The tiger disappeared as the shot blasted out, the noise rocking the tunnel, then echoing away in a series of thunderous slaps. Distantly, there were shouts, "shot fired, shot fired," then the thutter of feet running in the thin water that filmed the floor of the tunnel.

Other people lived down here, obviously a whole community. They were the kind of people who knew the sound of a gun when they heard it.

He had not hit the tiger. The tiger was gone.

The little girl lay with her eyes opened, her lips twisted back away from her teeth as if she was in pain. Her eyes were fixed on him. In the hand that had held the Mother Goose was a flying Taser. It was armed. The LED was glowing. A C2 like that could fire its electrodes twenty feet.

He realized that he had swallowed the bait, taken it deep into his gut. And now, in the form of a Taser in a child's hand, came the hook.

As he shifted and dropped, she fired. He felt one of the electrodes hook into the sleeve of his jacket, then the floor seemed to turn into the ceiling, and he knew that she'd hit her mark.

In training, he'd taken Taser hits. He knew to expect the confusion and the out-of-control muscle spasms that followed, also the way sounds became tinny and the world distant.

Somebody was there, a dark figure standing over him. "What you

doin' down here, topsider, you lookin' fer little girls." A blow hit his back. "That yo sweet, topsider?"

The effect wore off enough for Flynn to pull one of the hooks out of his clothes. He fought to respond to the voice, but could only manage a gobbling sound.

"You done good, Becky," the voice said. "Now we gonna kill us a topsider."

Flynn had been tricked into getting himself killed by a completely unconnected party for a reason that had nothing to do with anything.

"No," he managed to croak, "there's an animal down there." It came out as a series of gobbles.

"Zap him again, Becky." The man pulled a switchblade out of his pocket and snicked it open. "Gonna start with your balls, you piece a shit."

Flynn managed to suck a breath. "Animal in here! Dangerous!" He fought to get an arm up. Even though the little girl was standing on the trigger, there was no second pulse from the Taser.

"You're the goddamn animal."

Flynn pointed. "There's an animal back there in that tunnel!"

"What?"

"I'm a police officer. I was driving an animal away from your kids."

"You're a cop? Down here?"

Flynn had recovered himself enough to raise both hands. The Glock lay before him on the ground. "Swear."

"Shit a friggin brick, what the hell're you doin' down here? Cops don't come down here."

"To warn you ... an animal—big cat—escaped from the Grand. In the tunnels."

"Jesus. Becky, you seen it?"

She shook her head.

"She ain't seen it." The blade reappeared.

“She was asleep.”

At that moment, a light shone the tunnel, bright, a professional-quality flashlight. It moved closer, coming down the same shaft that Flynn had used.

“You’re a lucky man,” Diana said. “I thought I was gonna find meat.”

“What in fuck’s name is going on around here?”

“You watch your trap around those kids, buddy,” Diana said to the guy.

“My kids are my business.”

“Well, you better get ’em outa here until the SWATs track down that tiger.”

“You’re kidding.”

“You heard me. This officer probably saved their lives. ’Cause the animal went right through this tunnel.”

“I saw it,” Flynn said. He pointed. “Just there. Which is why I fired my weapon.”

“Come on,” Diana said. “SWAT’s coming down the tunnels and we have work to do.”

Flynn was perplexed. What had just happened here? Instead of the perpetrator’s goons, Diana had shown up. It wasn’t surprising that she’d ignored his request and followed him, but still, something was wrong.

As they made their way back toward the Grand, she said, “We misread this situation totally.”

“It looks like it.”

“This had nothing to do with us. They were on one of their missions.”

“Oh?”

“During the confusion, while the entire staff chased the tiger, which you can be assured will not be seen anywhere near here again, the

assistant manager of the resort disappeared from her office without a trace.”

Flynn did not reply. What could he say? What could either of them say?

When they had emerged back into the now-closed casino, she said, “There’s worse.”

“Hit me.”

“Flynn, there’s been a fire in Chicago, a bad one. A gas explosion leveled four row houses. Seventeen people were killed.”

He stopped. Looked at her. It was dark, but not so dark that he couldn’t see the shock in her face, or share her stunned horror.

“Oh my God, they got him.”

She nodded. “Flynn, we’re on our own.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The assistant manager's office was neat as a pin, except for the exquisite antique snuff box the Las Vegas detectives had found, which turned out to contain cocaine. They had also discovered that her credit rating was through the floor and she had a long string of dismissed cases that the Grand wouldn't have been able to see on her record before she was hired. The publicly available part of it showed only a traffic conviction.

Flynn breathed the room. Felt it. He noticed a curtain that had been pulled abruptly, but that was all. It looked out onto a distant view, so it was unlikely that somebody had been concerned that the window was under incidental surveillance.

According to the available tapes, she'd left the office when she'd gotten the alarm about the problem with the animals. She had never arrived on the scene.

"What is it?" Diana asked.

"What it is, is nothing."

"You sense something."

"You know, I'm not really thinking about this office. I already know that we're never going to find Elizabeth Starnes or Gail Hoffman or Abby or your Steve or any of them. What I can't get out of my mind is that tiger. I saw its face again."

"And?"

"It was intelligent, Diana. Like a person. It was like seeing a person wearing the face of a tiger."

"You wondering the same thing I am?"

"A human mind put into the body of an animal. Yes I am. You

could see curiosity. Like it was wondering who I was.”

“Feline curiosity?”

“Like it was asking me if we really needed to be enemies.” He shook his head. “I think it’s part human, and I have to wonder if it would change sides.”

“We’ll never get close enough to it to find out. Especially with Chicago gone. We need help.”

“You gotta have contacts above that level. Who does Oltisis report to? Did?”

She shook her head.

“*What?*”

“I was seconded to Oltisis. Sent to him on an origin-blocked order.”

“What the fuck is that?”

“A legal order that comes from a code-protected source. You can verify the code, but not identify the source. Could’ve been anybody. Most likely some agency that’s so classified even I’ve never heard of it.” She paused. “Or them.”

“Why are they so damn secretive?”

“If the alien presence is revealed and the public goes nuts about the disappearances—”

“Yeah, yeah, but this goes deeper than that.”

She sighed. “I know it. Mirrors reflecting mirrors. No damn end to it.” She paused. “The thought has crossed my mind that the bad guys might be in control at home. It could be that the ones helping us aren’t the police at all. Maybe they’re dissidents or revolutionaries or something.”

For a moment they were both silent, each contemplating the enormous stakes involved, and the mysteries they faced, and the responsibility they bore.

“We have to just keep pushing,” Flynn said, “and hope whomever Oltisis reported to catches up with us.”

“That would be true.”

Flynn continued, “They did Miss Starnes during the day, so no helicopter.”

Willard had become more cooperative. The company very badly wanted to find and prosecute the people who had caused the mayhem. The LVPD already had a blizzard of warrants out for them, not to mention a massive hunt for the tiger. They weren’t looking for Elizabeth Starnes, though not very hard. Given cocaine use and the kind of police record that would belong to a clever junkie, the resort was just as glad to be rid of her. In any case, it looked more and more to the police as if she’d walked out on her job, not been abducted. In other words, the old story.

Flynn and Diana had been given a small office in the security area, and computers with access to the property’s floor plan, its registration records, even the casino information.

They both worked the records, looking for things that didn’t add up, and in the back of both of their minds there remained the same hollow thought: we’re alone.

Flynn traced Elizabeth Starnes’s movements, picking her up in a stairwell, then again in the main lobby. There, she met an elderly man. She greeted him with what looked like professional courtesy, then walked out with him.

“Go into her family history,” he said. “See if she has any older relatives.”

“Her father lives in Crescent Manor. Charles Starnes. He’s a slot machinist.”

“A picture?”

“DMV probably has one.” Her fingers flew across the keyboard. “Got it.”

“That was a couple of seconds.”

“Fast hands.”

“No wonder Oltis wanted you, you’re a friggin’ genius.”

“Always been my problem,” she said tightly. “Makes you think you can get away with any kind of shit. If that hack I did on the Grand had gone down the right way, I’d be in Tahiti now, not a worry in the world.”

“Tahiti’d get old, be my guess.”

“No older than catching car thieves and pushers.”

“Yeah, as screwed up as this is, it’s better.”

They laid the driver’s license photo side by side with a blowup of the face of the man Elizabeth had met in the lobby.

“It’s close,” she said.

“It’s a maybe. Let’s talk to the father.”

“We lose time.”

“A little.”

“What do we gain?”

“You never know.”

Leaving the Grand, Flynn thought that they were entering a new and far more dangerous world. How had the baddies ever taken out Chicago?

“You did warn them in that call?”

“Absolutely. Oltisis said he was aware of the problem and all over it.”

Flynn said nothing.

As they walked through the port cochere, past the line of parking valets, Vegas was gold with late sun, the neon just gaining definition against the blazing western sky. Looking toward the mountains to the west, blue now, he thought of the tiger on its strange journey, and what it had seen and what it knew.

They were alike, him and the tiger, two hunters. The only difference was in their choice of prey.

Diana sat beside him in the car, her hands folded in her lap, her face as pale as a cloud, her eyes hard and quick and scared. The eyes

of the hunted.

“Where were you in prison?”

“Lesbian Island.”

“But you’re not one.”

“I was put there, okay? End of subject. I do not wish to talk about old lives that are dead.”

“After I lost my wife, I left Menard. Couldn’t stop going. I’d dip in here to hit a few casinos for money.”

“You counted good enough to get booked. That’s impressive.”

“I have a trick memory.” His mind was a warehouse full of file cabinets, full of details that he could never escape. “I recall every hand I ever played. And not just cards. I can tell you about the breeze on the night of August 14, 1997. I can tell you about the T-shirt Abby wore on June 11, 2006. You name it, I’ve got the details.”

“Details suit a detective.”

He turned onto Thirtieth. “I guess. At least I don’t need a GPS. Saves a little money.”

“What if you’ve never been there before?”

“I’ve seen a map.”

The father lived in a single-family home on Langdon, a short street that dead-ended into a condo complex. They pulled up in front and got out of the car.

“It’s empty,” Flynn said.

“You’re a mind reader, too? Do you have a cape? Some kind of leotard?”

“Yeah, I have a leotard. Asshole Patrol.”

She knocked on the door. As he expected, there was no answer.

She said, “You’re sure this is going to be productive, because now we’ve got to look for him.”

“If it wasn’t him at the Grand, then we have a picture of a member of this group, so yeah, it’s going to help.”

“He’s not here and we’ll never find him.”

“Let’s go back to the car.”

“And go where?”

“Nowhere. Wait.”

“Wait?”

“What a detective does, mostly.”

They said little, and that was how he preferred it. You chatted during a stakeout, you missed things. It was all about focus.

The sun went down, the sky to the west raged with the light of the strip. Bats darted past the car. The air turned cool, then cold. Diana rolled up her window. “I hate the cold,” she said. Her hand went to her neck. He knew that she was remembering the Hoffman stakeout.

It was nine twenty when a man came walking slowly down the street.

“It’s him and don’t get out of the car until he enters the house and closes the door. If he’s gonna run, you want him to start from a confined space.”

“Why would he run?”

“No idea.”

He was old and stooped and used up. Whatever he’d had, Vegas had taken it. Flynn watched him go up the walk, enter the house, and close the door.

“Okay, now.”

They got out of the car and followed him. Flynn put his hand on his badge wallet. The big star on his badge was a giveaway for Texas, but if he flashed it fast, maybe the guy wouldn’t notice. Diana’s credential would likely work better.

He knocked, then again, then the door was drawn open. Mr. Starnes stood there in a black undershirt.

“Yeah?”

Flynn did his badge. “May we come in?”

“You’re cops so it’s about Lizzie. I’m finished with her. Whatever she’s done, she’s done. Not my problem.”

“When did you last see Elizabeth?”

“Dunno. Three years? Five? Last time she showed up high. Sick of it. Sick of her.”

Flynn thanked him and returned to the car, Diana following.

“You hardly asked him a thing. I think he knew something.”

“He knew nothing and he’s not the man she met in the lobby.”

“Oh. Is that good?”

“It’s good. Now we have a face. A real face, of somebody we know is involved, maybe the perp himself.”

She followed him to the car and they headed back to the Grand.

“With a face,” he added, “we have a shot at finding a name.”

“How would we do that?”

“The old-fashioned way. We get the picture fixed up as clear as the computer genius can make it, then we hand it out to the staff. We show it to maids, bellmen, valets, anybody who might be able to help.”

“What if he doesn’t have an identity?”

“There’ll be something somewhere. There always is.”

“You know that? Despite how careful they are.”

“I know it.”

They returned to their small office. Willard came in. “I’m getting my hotel fixed. Nobody can figure out how that hatch was cut. You guys got anything for us?”

“Not our lookout,” Flynn said.

“But you’re government. You’ve got resources.”

“Report the kidnap to the FBI. Get them involved.”

“No, thank you. I’ve got the LVPD to worry about already.”

“Then don’t ask.”

“Don’t ask? Fine. I got a front office that’s about to wring my neck and your only fucking response is *don’t ask?*”

Flynn sighed. “If we told you, we’d have to kill you.”

“That bullshit line. Is that from a movie?”

“No doubt. Look, tell your front office that it’s classified and it’s all under control and they will never hear from us or the asshole with the tiger again. Or the tiger.”

“I hate the government so much I’m even afraid to vote Republican,” Willard said.

“Get out.”

He left, slamming the door behind him.

“You were nice.”

“Thank you.”

As Diana passed the image through a software photo processor in her laptop, it became clearer and clearer.

“It’s a disguise.”

“How can you be sure?”

“The hairline’s too perfect. The face is too tan. Likely, it’s makeup.”

“One that you can see in a picture, but that Elizabeth Starnes bought from three feet away? I don’t think so.”

“For whatever reason, she wanted to buy it.”

“Well, it doesn’t help us, Flynn.”

“There’s more information out there.”

Parking valets at places like the Grand sometimes remember things, so their first stop was the port cochere.

The encounter in the lobby had taken place just after noon. He’d already looked at a list of the Grand’s shift patterns, and the shift that was on right now would have seen anyone who left at that time.

He said to Diana, “I need you to fade while I do this. Unless these guys think I’m a private dick, they’re going to clam up, and PIs don’t

roll with beautiful assistants.”

“And cops do?”

“Question marks do, and that’s what they don’t like.”

She stalked off down the port cochere. Traffic was light, so there were six valets waiting. He wasted no time, he knew the drill.

“I need some help,” he said, holding up the picture.

Eyes moved toward it. Brains calculated. Flynn knew the question that these guys were asking themselves: could this asshole be stripped of a c-note with a lie? He headed that one off at the pass. “I know the man’s name, that’s not the problem. What we need to know is if he was in a Hertz car.”

Interest dropped a little. Not a divorce case, so less money was going to be involved. But then again, Hertz was a big outfit.

“We don’t like our cars getting boosted,” he continued, “so anything you know.” He rubbed two fingers together.

One of the guys took the picture and looked at it. “This wasn’t a rental car,” he said.

“You closed it out?”

“I worked a double shift today. I opened it, too.”

Flynn watched the other guys. No trace of a suppressed smile anywhere. “So, okay, what’ve you got?”

“Nightlights Limo both directions. Two passengers inbound, three outbound.”

Another of the valets sighed as if he was a tire losing air. The fool had just given up the money.

“That’s one of them in the picture,” the fool added. Then he fell silent.

Not a fool, then. Pretty good at what he did, actually. “Okay, so give.”

Silence. Not a gesture, not a sound. He’d been doing this job for a while. Discreetly, Flynn showed a hundred-dollar bill. The guy rubbed

his cheek with three fingers. Was the Grand this strict about this kind of tipping? He hadn't thought a casino would be. Live and learn.

Flynn played the game, rubbing his own cheek with two fingers.

"See 'em," the guy said.

He took out two hundred-dollar bills. They changed hands.

"That's the second passenger in the picture. Obviously not the lead guy. The boss was wearing about five grand, one of those suits where the guy's name is woven into the pinstripe."

He fought down his excitement. "And the name was?"

"Morris. In the pinstripes."

"Morris looked how?"

"He looked rich is how."

"Give me a description. Hair, eye color, anything you remember."

"He stayed well back in the car. I'm guessing at five eleven, say. Full head of black hair. Suit and tie, unusual around here. You're looking at a film star, sort of, but old-fashioned. Am I helping you?"

"Names?"

"Morris in the pinstripe. And he might have said 'Jay.' Might have said that name."

"Like he was talking to somebody or about somebody?"

The valet shook his head.

"Anything more you can tell me?"

"Look, we're deep into this and obviously it has nothing to do with Hertz, so I'm gonna need another couple of memory sticks."

"Anybody else got anything, now's the time." He put his hand on his breast pocket where he kept his wallet.

Another of the men said, "I put number two back in the vehicle. One of our managers was with him."

"That we know."

It took a hundred-dollar bill to get him to go any further. "The guy

who went and got her was well dressed.”

“This was Jay?”

“I didn’t hear that. He thanked me for opening the door, that was it.”

“And your manager? How did she act?”

“Drunk. High. Couldn’t tell. Not walking the walk, that was for sure.”

That was all they knew, so Flynn walked out of the port cochere and back into the hotel. Diana caught up with him in the corridor.

“I have good descriptions of two persons of interest. And a couple of names. Last name of Morris. And Jay. Somebody named Jay was with him.”

“Can you find them?”

He considered that. He had descriptions. He had the name of the limo company they’d used. “Yeah,” he said, “I can find them.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The least impressive vehicle Starlight Limos offered was a stretch Mercedes 300, and that's what Morris and company had used. It didn't take long to identify the driver, a part-timer called Ronald Brewster. The boss gave him up for twenty bucks. He lived in a weekly rate motel off the strip.

"On an approach like this, you need to follow procedures that I'm sure you aren't familiar with."

"What sort of procedures?"

"When a cop knocks on a door, anything can happen. So you stay behind me. Don't try to engage at all. Just stay out of it."

"I'm here to do my work, just like you are."

"Yeah, fine. This isn't your work. You're here because you're safer with me than alone. With me, you might live. Without me, you won't."

They walked around a swimming pool full of brown water that smelled of dead chemicals and drowned rats. A half-inflated Batman toy floated in it. The exotic orange mildew on the chaise lounges could have come from another planet.

It was dark now, and some of the rooms showed lights behind drawn curtains. Most did not.

He'd probably been in motels like this hundreds of times over the course of his career, sometimes to convince some guy not to push some girl through a wall, sometimes to arrest him for doing it. The Tara in Menard was the same sort of place, where sleazebag lawyers took their nooners and people went to live out their final acts.

He ran his eyes along the roofline, along the balconies, looking for

threats. It was possible that they'd finally broken through a significant barrier on the case. For the first time, they were actually investigating real, solid human beings. In all likelihood, they'd never been expected to get this far. So the strikeback, when it came, was going to be sudden and hard.

"Why are we standing here?"

"I'm looking for something."

"May I know what?"

"Danger."

That silenced her.

"You make a move in a place like this, everybody thinks you're coming for them, and they all generally have reason to think that. Knock on the wrong door, you're liable to get blown away for nothing."

"And the right door?"

"You're likely to get blown away for a reason. Let's go."

Brewster was downstairs, in room 103. The lights were on.

"Wouldn't it have been safer to call ahead?"

"Then the lights would be off, because Mr. Brewster would be gone." Here and there, Flynn saw a curtain part. Here and there, lights went out. There was a rasping click from two doors down. "Somebody in 121 racked a pistol," he said. "Be aware of this."

He knocked on Brewster's door.

Silence.

"Mr. Brewster, we're PIs. We need a little information."

Silence.

"I got a c-note for you, you open the door."

Nothing.

"Okay, I'll push it under the door. You still don't want to talk, you can keep it." Then, to Diana, "Gimme a hundred-dollar bill."

She handed him the cash. "I hope this is worth it," she said.

He slid the bill under the door. "There's more where this came from, buddy."

"No," she whispered.

"Five minutes, Mr. Brewster."

The silence extended.

"Nobody there," Flynn said.

"You're sure?"

"The place isn't breathing. Look, I'm gonna pop the lock, so stand away from the door. If there's gonna be shooting, this is when."

"But the man with the gun is two doors down."

"Exactly." He gave the door a slightly harder knock. "Come on, Mr. Brewster, there's money out here, but it can't wait forever." With his free hand, he slid a credit card into the doorjamb. "They make these easy, so cops can pop them without damaging the premises."

When Flynn opened the door, a cloud of smoke came out—crack smoke. "Not good," he said. Then he saw the body. "We have a problem."

The face was purple, the fists clenched against the throat.

"Is he ill?"

The man had been murdered, but this was no time to get into that. "Back out."

"But—"

"Do it now!"

She remained rooted, staring. He took her by the shoulders and pulled her out. He pulled the door closed until the tongue of the lock clicked. There would be little evidence of their presence here, unless the next door decided to yap them to the locals. Hopefully it was some paranoid, not a cop-talker.

"Is he asleep?"

"Get to the car."

They crossed the courtyard. Once they were in the car, he said to her, "The man was dead."

"My God."

"They made it look like he popped himself on crack. He didn't."

"You know that? How?"

"Trust me."

Unless they were very lucky, the two of them were made and this time they were going all the way down.

"What does it mean?"

"They were cleaning up a loose end. We're the other one."

"Why not just blow us away?"

As he drove, he glanced at her. "I like to think it's because we've been a little too slippery for them. But that guy hadn't been dead for fifteen minutes, so they're moving fast and we're their top priority, you can be sure."

"What do we do next? Do we need to get out of here?"

"Ever been to Phoenix?"

"No."

"You're going. Right now. Phoenix, Salt Lake, wherever we can get to fast."

He drove to shake a tail, but he doubted that it mattered. They'd have a box on the car, no question.

"What are you doing?"

"Driving fast. Hoping to live through the next few minutes."

"Is somebody following us? What's happening?"

He saw an underpass and headed for it. His chief concern was overhead surveillance.

"Why weren't we in this much danger an hour ago?"

"I think that the tiger was meant to kill us. Me, at least. For whatever reason, it didn't. Doing this guy was cleanup. He'd seen too

much and heard too much. Now they're probably frantic to get us. We've slipped through a few of their traps. No more. And we need to ditch this car right now. We're taking a bus."

"No buses!"

"A city bus like in Skokie. Couple of miles. So don't bark at me."

"I don't bark!"

"We're going to steal a car and find a small private airport and steal a plane."

"Come on."

"Or we're done. Understand, even though we can't see them, they are right on top of us and if we make a single wrong move we are dead. They haven't been baiting us or playing with us. They've been trying hard to get to us, but we've had a lot of luck. That has to run out. Maybe already has."

"We shouldn't have come to Vegas at all, then."

"We have a face. We have two names. It was worth it."

She fell silent, which was just as well, because he had to think.

He saw what he needed, a restaurant. "We're going in," he said. He repeated, "Stay close."

It was a seafood place, Christie's it was called, a low building looking like a mushroom in the middle of a sparsely occupied parking lot. A big neon trout danced in a pan on a tall sign near the building. They got out of the car into a faint scent of hot cooking oil. The sign buzzed and flickered.

"May we help you?" the hostess asked as they crossed the plant-filled entrance hall. It was late, close to closing time. Her plastic smile could no longer conceal the exhaustion in her eyes. How many jobs did she work, he wondered.

She guided them to a table amid a sea of tables. A waitress, Susan by her nametag, came and slid them menus.

"Go toward the ladies' room, the kitchen will be back there. Keep going through it, when you reach the parking lot, stay out of sight. I'll

be there in a couple of minutes in a vehicle.”

Without a word, she got up and headed to the back. In a moment, he followed her. As he exited into the lot, he saw her standing in shadows near the restaurant’s Dumpsters. He wondered how close this thing was actually cut at this point. If he kept her with him, would that slow him down enough to make capture certain? He couldn’t forget the way she’d frozen at Brewster’s place. On the other hand, she’d had the presence of mind and ability to follow him into the tunnel.

He decided that he didn’t care, he needed her. And it wasn’t just to work this case. He needed her for reasons he could not put into words. She had a right to live and be safe. He wanted to make sure that happened.

He spotted a Ford about ten years old. He went to it and quickly popped the door lock, then entered it and worked under the dashboard, feeling along the wiring harness for the right leads.

The car came to life and he drove around to Diana.

“This isn’t a good idea, Flynn, I have to tell you.”

“It’s the only idea. Everything else gets us killed.”

“If we get caught, we’re car thieves. Nobody has our backs. Remember that.”

“Use one of the throwaways to track down a small general aviation airport somewhere in the area, closed at night, big enough to have a few planes parked there.”

“Searchlight Airport,” she said immediately. “Seventy miles south off Ninety-Five.”

“You just happen to know this?”

“It’s in New Vegas. The videogame.”

“You play videogames?”

“I play with videogames. Crack them. Fool around with them.”

“There’ll be planes on this field? Flyable planes?”

“I have no idea, but I know it’s there.”

As they headed down Ninety-Three toward the turn onto Ninety-Five, he saw the Boulder City Municipal Airport. Plenty of planes, but it was also a busy facility, visibly active right now. The only way this was going to work was if they took a plane off an unmanned airport and stayed low and well outside of traffic patterns and radar coverage. Driving a hot car wasn’t going to work, because they were too likely to get stopped. If the Menard City Police had onboard computers that automatically ran every plate they saw, which they did, the Nevada State Police certainly did, not to mention the LVPD. A stolen plane, on the other hand, was even better than a stolen boat. It wasn’t expected. Homeland Security or not, there was little infrastructure to stop them. Plus, planes sat on general aviation fields for a long time. Until the pilot reported it, there wouldn’t even be anything in police files. Add to that the fact that they could manage some serious distance, and it was the best option, no question.

Once they were on Ninety-Five traffic thinned out. Soon, the nearest vehicle was miles behind them. The only lights overhead were stars. Not that this meant much. If you had a silent helicopter and kept it below the radar ceiling, you could turn out the lights and the FAA would never know. But he had gained some confidence in his ability to lose them. Between Chicago and Vegas, he was now convinced that they’d been further behind them than he’d thought.

Still, there were loose ends. There always were, and one of them was bothering him a good deal.

“Let me ask you this, Diana. You’re aware of bioactive tracking devices?”

“Sure. We put them in people like Rangers and pilots who’re flying into hostile territory. They’re injected under the skin. They’re the size of a grain of sand.”

“Were you ever given one?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“But it could have been done without your knowledge?”

“During a physical or something, maybe.”

“How effective are they?”

“The signal has to be picked up by a satellite. You need the codes. If you know what you’re doing, you can basically pick one up from anywhere in the world.”

He did not like to hear that. “I don’t think an unknown cop like me would have one.”

“You’re hardly unknown. First off, you’re part of a classified database that contains every detail on record about every US citizen with an IQ over 190. You’ve been in that database since you took that IQ test in high school And we watched you for three months before we brought you in.”

“What the hell is a database like that used for?”

“We watch for math skills and logic skills. The intelligence community eats geniuses like candy. We’re addicted to them.”

“So now I know why you got recruited. But why not me? I’m reasonable at math.”

“The Abby Room stopped any recruitment track you might have been on.”

“I wanted to rescue my wife.”

“It was evidence of obsessive behavior, the curse of the very bright.”

“I am obsessive. Damn obsessive. And cursed, of course, or I wouldn’t be here doing this, I’d be in Menard and I’d still have Abby and be living the life I was born to live.”

“If she hadn’t been kidnapped and you hadn’t gone off the deep end, you’d be working at NSA or someplace like that right now, and you’d be very happy and very well paid like I was. Like me and Steve were.” She fell silent.

“You don’t have a Steve Room, but you think it’d be a good idea.”

“I will have a Steve Room. I like the idea of the Abby Room. Comforting.”

He thought about that. “The hell with it,” he said, “sometimes I hate the world. I hate life.”

“Join the damn club.”

He wished he had some way to definitely tell if either or both of them was trackable. “What frequencies do implants operate on?”

“Ours are FM. High on the band.”

“But addressable?”

“If you know what you’re looking for, sure. An ordinary scanner held close to the body will pick up the signal.”

“We’ll stop at a Radio Shack tomorrow.” He did not add, “if we live.” “Would we be able to remove them?”

“Size of a grain of sand, usually lodged in deep tissue. We’d have to dig them out.”

“Nice.”

When they reached Searchlight, there was not much to see. A single casino, like a ship lost in a black ocean. Worse, they had to drive up and down the highway four times before they finally found the tiny, weathered sign that marked the airport.

He turned onto what proved to be a dirt track.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“No, it’s good. As long as there’s a plane, we’re good.”

“An airworthy plane.”

“A flyable plane.”

He didn’t bother to tell her that it had been years since he’d flown anything. His license wasn’t even up to date. And he hated landings.

There were no planes visible, but there was a large hangar.

“I wish we had that thing we flew into Oregon. What was that?”

“Provided. No idea except that it worked.”

“It was a damn fine airplane.” He got out of the car and approached the old hangar. A lizard rushed out from under his feet as he shuffled

through the sand.

“It’s locked up tight,” she said.

He didn’t bother to respond until he discovered that she was exactly right. The lock on the access door was a good one. Not only that, it was new.

“Drugs are probably moving through here,” he said as he examined the mechanism. “This is going to need brute force.” He returned to the car, opened the trunk, and took out the tire iron.

“What if it’s alarmed?”

“It’ll be a bell or siren so who’s going to hear it?”

“Maybe somebody lives nearby.”

“It’s your airport, Diana, you tell me.”

“Go to hell.”

As he worked the tire iron into the doorjamb, he said, “Sorry, that was uncalled for.”

“It was.”

He gave the tire iron a shove, hard, with his whole body.

He needed to be less harsh with her. She was out here for Steve the same way he was for Abby, and it was just as tough for her and it hurt just as much.

The door sprang back on its hinges. Warm air came out, sweet with the scent of aviation fuel.

“I was right,” he said.

“About?”

“It’s an active airport. There’s planes in here.” He stepped in. “Two of ’em.”

They both shone their flashlights into the cave-like blackness, revealing the fuselage of an elderly single-engine plane, with another standing in the deeper shadows.

“This one’s a Cessna 172,” he said. “No rear window, so it’s probably pushing fifty.”

“Fifty what?”

“Years old.”

“And the other one?”

“You don’t want to know. This is the one that might work. It can take us about seven hundred miles.”

“Is there any gas?”

“Oh, it’s ready to fly. They both are. These are drug planes. They move coke and hash, high-ticket stuff. Lightweight. They’ll have usable avionics. Though I wouldn’t try playing with an iPad while landing in a storm.”

He went over to the plane and shone his light in. “There’s a Garmin GPS in the dash, which is good.”

“It looks awfully run-down.”

“It’s junk. They stick a Garmin in these things and spend nothing else. These planes go in all the time, or get impounded by the DEA. So they’re expendable. So are the pilots. Let’s get the hangar door opened.”

He went over to the old wooden door and popped off the padlock with the tire iron. He handed the iron to her. “Keep this.”

“Sure. Why?”

“In case anybody shows up. Keep watch. Let me know if you see any lights. This is a drug stop, so there could be security. Silent alarm.” He got in the plane and switched on. The avionics lit up immediately and he began to not like this. He didn’t like things that were too easy. Always an angle somewhere, something not seen.

An old plane is even easier to wire than a car, but it has to be done from under the cowling. He didn’t need to, however. He found the key in the glove compartment.

The engine fired up immediately. This thing had been flown recently. It was probably scheduled to do so again, maybe even later tonight.

He called to her, “We’re in good shape, get in.”

She came over and clambered into the co-pilot's seat. She strapped herself in.

He throttled up until the plane rolled out onto the sand apron. Typical of the region, it was an east-west runway, sited to catch the prevailing winds. Not much of one, though, basically the desert floor denuded of weeds and cactus. He headed the plane into the wind. Once he took off, he'd turn east.

There was a car on the highway, moving fast, maybe heading here. He ran up the engine. The plane began to move forward. There were no lights. He was just guesstimating the position of the runway.

As they began to roll faster, plant life thudded against the wheels. The whole airframe shook. The speed crawled up, but not fast.

"Is it going to take off?" Diana yelled over the squall of the engine.

"I have no idea!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The drag of the sand slowed them down, and they kept trundling along, hitting cacti and slamming into tumbleweeds until it seemed as if they were going to go all the way to the Pacific without leaving the ground.

“Make it take off!”

“I’m trying!”

He watched the speed creep up to fifty-five knots, then sixty, then hang there, remaining maddeningly fifteen knots under rotation speed.

Without warning, the ground was gone, and he realized how this airport worked, which was really, really badly.

“What’s happening?”

“We just taxied over a cliff.”

“Oh God!”

“I agree.”

The stall horn started bleating. His only choice was to drop the nose into absolute darkness and hope that the ground was farther away than he thought.

“What’s going on now?”

“We’re either gonna die or we aren’t.”

The airspeed indicator shot up to sixty-five and he felt the wings begin to bite. At seventy, the stall horn stopped. At seventy-five, he pulled the stick back, rotating nicely into a clear night sky.

“We’ve lived,” he shouted to her over the rising blare of the engine.

“Barely.”

“That would be true.”

He'd taken off into the west and climbed to two thousand feet while getting the feel of the airplane. It had been a long time and he was more than unsure of himself. Worried that he might become disoriented, he kept his eyes on the instruments, not even glancing out the windshield. At least, at this hour and in this place, his chances of colliding with another airplane were too small to calculate.

He kept climbing, heading west. Eastward there were mountains, and he wanted plenty of altitude before he approached them.

At five thousand feet, he commenced a slow turn. Any higher, and he risked running into a monitored airway. He didn't have any idea of what the established flight paths might be, or where they were. He didn't want to blunder into approaches to larger airports, maybe at Bullhead City or Lake Havasu City.

“Where are we? Why do we keep turning?”

“We're heading into mountains. I'm gaining altitude.”

“Dear God.”

“You're a worse flyer than me.”

He was actually relaxing a little, at least for the moment. Unless their pursuers were able to track them personally, this was going to prove a decisive blow to them. It wasn't as good as getting behind them, but at least when he landed this airplane, he would know that they had lost him.

The Garmin showed the highest peaks below them at thirty-five hundred feet, so they were safe here, and safe, also, from the DEA, the Border Patrol, and Homeland Security. DEA was interested in night flights by small aircraft, but their primary concerns were movement northward from the Mexican border and low-altitude flight.

“Do we know if we're dealing with any exotic technology?”

“We know so little, Flynn. Almost nothing. For example, why did they send only one cop, and what are his capabilities? His

limitations?”

“One limitation we know.”

“What?”

“He got his ass killed.”

She turned to the window. “I’ve thought that he might be the only good guy. Their Dalai Lama or whatever. And the rest of them are all ... Christ, I don’t even want to think about it.”

He hoped that she wasn’t going to add a morale problem to her difficulties with field skills. Low morale was as lethal as a gun.

The tiny cabin shuddered, the engine howled, blue flames glowed in the exhausts. He kept them at cruise, a steady hundred and forty miles an hour. Two hours out, they were north of Seligman, Arizona, and he was not liking the feel of the air. To maintain his heading, he was having to crab the plane northward more and more. The wind was picking up. Worse, there was continuous lightning on the northern horizon, and it was getting more distinct.

The plane bucked like a frightened horse, the creaking of the airframe audible even above the engine and wind noise.

Diana was now slumped forward. Flynn knew what her problem was, but he didn’t see any airsickness bags.

“If you can, feel in the seat pocket behind you. There might be a bag back there.”

She did it and found one, and none too soon. In seconds, she was heaving into it. He opened the vents and cold air poured in, a mix of the scents of exhaust and desert night.

The heavy weather was bearing down on them fast, but he couldn’t turn south, not and expect to thread through the higher mountains around Flagstaff. He needed to stay between Flagstaff and the Grand Canyon, basically, or he was going to crash this airplane.

“There’s a light,” she said. “Below us.”

“What kind of a light? Is it moving?”

“Steady. Not a strobe. Moving, yes. Getting bigger. I think it’s

coming up.”

He doused his running lights, then dimmed the cockpit as deeply as he dared. At a minimum, he needed his artificial horizon and his compass.

“Where is it now?”

“Gone. It went out.”

“Went out? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That it is *gone*, as in disappeared. Jesus Christ, why do I have to spell everything out?”

He pushed back a flare of anger. They were getting on each other’s nerves. “Let’s not fight,” he said.

“This is a goddamn nightmare!”

He flew on. There was nothing else to do.

When the light didn’t reappear and nothing else happened, he restored his instrument lighting but left the running lights off. They’d been in the air now for two hours, and he had another three hours of fuel left. Like so many of these drug wagons, this plane had been modified to fit larger tanks.

“We can make El Paso,” he said. “We’ll land at Sunrise Airport. I’ve flown in there.”

“We can’t rent a car without identifying ourselves.”

“That’s not the plan.”

“I don’t want to steal another one. It’s too risky.”

“That’s not the plan, either.”

“So we buy?”

“We can’t buy.”

“Then what? I don’t get it.”

He said nothing.

The storm now behind them, they flew into a gradually spreading dawn, and he was relieved to finally see the horizon. As the plane

began to feel like a more solid platform in the sky, the sense of disorientation that had dogged him from the moment he'd taken off faded.

The light that Diana had seen coming up was also gone. What it might have been they would never know. The sky is a big place.

The landing at Sunrise was surprisingly easy. He squawked their approach and got immediate clearance. They hit the runway with a single bounce, then Flynn throttled back.

"That worked well," Diana said. She sounded ready to kiss the ground.

"The Cessna is a forgiving airplane."

He pulled out one of the disposable cell phones and dialed a number.

"Hey, Miguel." He shifted into Spanish. Diana's face immediately reflected the predictable suspicion. "*Compadre*, I'm at Sunrise and I've got an airplane somebody on the West Coast probably wants back. It's on the apron in front of the old Bellanca hangar. The bogus on it is NT273, it's a Skyhawk."

"What're you up to? I thought you quit the cops."

"I did. Private enterprise now."

"Anything there for me?"

"An airplane."

Diana interrupted. "What are you saying? What's going on?"

He closed the phone, pulled out the battery and the chip, and crushed it between his hands. "A friend's going to pick us up," he said.

"That's off the reservation, damnit. *Way* off. And you know it."

"Nothing's off the reservation anymore. He will pick us up, he will take care of the plane, he will get us where we need to go."

"You can't have involved the El Paso police."

"No police."

“Then—oh, Christ, not a gangbanger?”

“He’s honest. A good guy.”

“You’ve tangled us up with the drug trade. Flynn, this is not a direction for us.” She opened her door. “Come on, we need to get out of here.”

He climbed out, also. They needed to get away from the plane anyway. The way it had been hidden, it could well be on some DEA list.

“Miguel and I went to grade school together. When we were six, he beat me to a pulp. Put me in the hospital. Last year, he did ten years on a case I worked. We’re good friends.”

“He did ten years last year?”

“He blew his way out.”

“Good Christ!”

“Not with explosives.”

“But he’s an escaped convict. You can’t get an escaped convict involved in this.”

They walked into the lobby. Flynn eyed the sandwich machine. He was definitely hungry.

“He got off for good behavior.”

“Who shaves nine years off a ten-year sentence for good behavior?”

“It was very good behavior. I thought you’d be comfortable with an ex-con.”

“Don’t throw that in my face, okay? I wasn’t guilty.”

“Neither was Miguel.” He put some money in the machine and got a ham and cheese sandwich. “Avoid the pimento,” he said.

“No food,” she muttered. “Later.”

“That’s right. Sorry.”

Miguel had gained so much weight that the only reason Flynn recognized him when he finally ambled in was that there was nobody else coming through the doors this early in the morning.

“Hey, buddy.”

“Thanks for the plane, man. That’s gonna be some useful hardware.”

“No problem. You better get a paint job on it, though, I think it’s probably on the list. Not to mention its former owner.”

“You movin’ stuff? You on the sweet side of the law at last?”

“I’m still honest.”

“The plane tagged?”

“Don’t know. Could be.”

“We’ll find anything like that.”

“I need clean transportation. Car or truck.”

“I got a Range Rover, good VIN, good plates, not a problem.”

“Done, let’s go get it. We’re on a schedule.”

He gave Diana a long look. “Man, I’d like to see her work a pole.”

“You would.”

“The truck’s gonna set you back. Not much.”

“Yeah, it’s gonna set me back one airplane.”

“You come in here with a hot airplane and expect a clean truck in return? Man, that ain’t right.”

“Neither is dealing in stolen goods.”

“You aren’t a cop anymore. You tell me that, it’s gonna stand up in court. I know the law.”

“Eddie is still a cop, and Eddie still doesn’t care for your ass.”

The negotiation was starting to take too long, but Flynn could not betray his urgency. He just wished he believed that he could get away from their opponent, but he did not believe that. Maybe they were out of his gunsights right now, but he doubted that it would last.

Finally, Miguel said, “The plane is a good trade.”

They headed for his house, where the Rover waited. Diana was silent, furious at Flynn for letting an outsider so close.

Flynn wondered how long it would be before the perp and his friends showed up in Miguel's life, and extracted from him every tiny bit of information he possessed.

"Where you goin'? Or should I ask?"

"See Mac."

"Mac? Ain't nobody shot him yet?"

"Mac dances too fast."

"Where's he keepin' himself these days?"

Flynn laughed. "That I'm not gonna tell you. The plane is worth four times the truck. That's enough for one day."

"I wouldn't sell Mac. Mac's my friend."

"Everybody's your friend, Miguel. That's why you have no friends."

Twenty minutes later, they were heading out of El Paso in the Rover. Across the Rio Grande stood the dirty hills of Juarez, a most dangerous city, but bright in the light of dawn.

Flynn thought it would be nice to be in Juarez right now, hiding in a small hotel somewhere, deep in the city's maze of streets.

Even there, though, it would just be a question of time, wouldn't it? From now on, it would always just be a question of time.

"Who's Mac?" Diana asked.

"MacAdoo Terrell. The worst person I know and one of my oldest friends. Maybe the worst person in Texas, which is saying a fair amount."

"MacAdoo Terrell and Errol Caroll?"

"Mac and Flynn. Our parents died before we were old enough to kill them. At least Eddie got a decent name. He was the third member of our gang."

"And why are we going to see the worst person in Texas?"

"Because we need a friend."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Where the Rover had come from, Flynn hoped he would never know. It had the feel of death about it. Why he knew that, he couldn't really say, but he knew it. It was his cop sense, he supposed, which had been in overdrive for a while now.

They were a few miles west of the little town of Iraan, pronounced Eerie-Ann in West Texan.

"We'll turn north on Three Forty-Nine," Flynn said. "Mac's got fifteen thousand acres of hell and good hunting up there."

"What's so bad about this guy?"

"What isn't? He won't show himself right away, incidentally. When he does, it'll be a near thing for me. He's got any number of reasons to want me dead, and we don't have enough money on us to do more than get him to think about changing his mind."

"A lot of people don't like you, Flynn. Casinos. Your boss."

"Eddie Parker? We grew up together."

"Well, he seemed pretty sour on you. Why does this guy hate you?"

"First off, Eddie has been pretty sour since we were about five. Second, I put Mac's brother on death row."

"And he can't blow his way out?"

"Not so far."

"It strikes me as foolish to expose ourselves to more danger than we're already in."

He turned onto Mac's road. It went back three miles, and it rode like it hadn't been spread with gravel in a good long while.

"Shouldn't we get our guns ready? Mine's in my backpack."

“I know where your gun is.” He took his out of its shoulder holster and laid it carefully in a cup holder. “They won’t do us any good.”

“I just do not see why we’d come to some criminal lair or hideout or whatever it is.”

Flynn saw Mac’s shack huddled down in its draw, a ramshackle mess but topped by a very large, very clean American flag.

“See that? That’s why.”

She shook her head. “A crook wrapped in a flag is still a crook.”

He knew that Mac would already have the truck in the sights of one of his superb rifles.

“There are gonna be dogs,” he said. “Don’t get out until Mac calls them off. They’ll tear you to pieces.” He pulled a little closer to the shack and the dogs immediately swarmed out from under it. They were Mac’s own special breed, Weimaraner–Pit Bull mixes. Loyal, fast, lethal. If a bullet was going to stop one—and that was the only thing that could—then it was going to have to be well placed. Their wide heads, huge jaws, and yellow-gold Weimaraner eyes made them look the part of the hell-hounds that they were.

As soon as the truck stopped, they swarmed onto the hood and began clawing at the windshield and leaping against the doors and windows.

“My God, Flynn!”

“Just stay cool. They can’t get in.”

“How do you know that?”

“Armor glass. It’ll take two or three blasts from a ten-gauge shotgun to knock out one of these windows. Dog teeth can’t do it.”

Mac was on the porch, standing back in the shadows, so still he was hard to see. He had the same ability to remain motionless that his brother did, and his father had in his time.

Slowly, his cupped fist went up to his lips. In it, Flynn could see something silver. “He’s using his dog whistle.”

An instant later, the dogs scurried back under the porch. Flynn

rolled down his window.

“Hey, Mac.”

Mac walked toward the truck. “You got a shit of a lotta nerve comin’ out here, Carroll.”

“I need some help.”

“Oh, well, good. Allow me to accommodate you. Who’s my rape victim?” He leaned into the window and said to Diana, “After I blow this shitbag’s head off, we’re gonna party.”

“I didn’t drop the big one on Weezy,” Flynn said. “The jury did that.”

“You put him in the same courtroom with them. Chained to the fucking wall.”

“Your brother is obstreperous.”

“You want a cup of coffee, come on in.”

As they entered the shack, which was all gray boards, split shingles, and tin on the outside, a luxurious bachelor pad unfolded. The ample living room was paneled with exotic woods, a collection of stag, lion, rhino, and elk heads decorated the walls, and a brilliant black and yellow tiger skin lay before the big stone fireplace.

“Well, asshole, you came at the right time,” Mac said. “Cissy!”

Flynn held in his shock as Cissy Greene, Governor Greene’s oldest daughter, came sliding out of the kitchen. Cissy was not underage, not quite, and she was as ripe as a woman ever can get, her curves florid, her face glowing, her lips beckoning moistly. How in the world this very bad man had hooked up with her he could hardly imagine, but here she was, big as life and a lot prettier than her pictures.

“Cissy, this here is Asshole Flynn and his boyfriend. What’s your name, son?”

It was cruel and it wasn’t true, but Diana went red. “I’m actually a woman,” she muttered. “My name is Diana.”

“Oh, the goddess Diana herself, my goodness, I am honored! No wonder you appear so ferocious. Meet Actaeon up there.” He gestured

toward the magnificent stag head.

“I thought I had him torn apart by his own dogs,” Diana snarled.

“Hell no! He lived through that and came to Texas. Where else? I got that sucker from one mile. *One mile*, girl! Not my best shot, but decent.” He smiled. “The reason you-all are lucky is that Cissy here is a terrific coffeemaker. Just drop the grounds in her mouth, pour in boiling water and make her gargle. Personally, I can pack a bullet a lot better than I can make a cup of java.”

He gestured at them to sit, and Flynn and Diana dropped down onto the magnificently soft leather couch. It was light tan, and Flynn thought better of asking him what it was made of. The Nazis had done lampshades and gloves. Mexican drug lords were way past that.

“Is that a tattoo,” Diana asked, fingering a faint shadow in the surface of one of the couch pillows.

“Guy was a bandito. Low-grad South Texas bangers. Assholes.”

Diana jumped to her feet.

Mac directed a frank gaze at her. Flynn could see that he was taking in her beauty. “If I saw you naked, would you have me torn apart by my own dogs?”

“I’d whip your sorry ass myself.”

“Oh! Upon my word, Flynn my love, I see the attraction now. Coffeemaker can’t keep me in line, but I’ll bet goddess here keeps your ass good and red.”

“Mac, we’re not on a social visit. You’re the best gun I’ve ever known, and the only person I know who’s hunted tiger. I have a job for you.”

“And if I do it, you’ll get Weezy a reprieve?”

“No can do. You’ll get a hell of a tiger skin, though. Better than this scrawny tourist rug.”

“‘No can do?’ You worthless sack a shit. Sometimes I really wonder why I bother. I’m too damn affable, that’s my problem. So I’m tellin’ you right back, ‘no can do.’ But I am curious. Since we aren’t in India

or Siberia, what tiger?”

“We’ll get to that.”

“Not today we won’t. ’Cause you just decided to get the fuck out of my house.”

“Let me ask you this. Are you a patriot?”

“Shit, I knew that was gonna come up! Goddamnit, every cop who comes out here pulls that same card out of his hip pocket. Dubya has hunted this sliver of mine, my friend. A saint who got his ass handed to him by the negro.”

“This will be the most patriotic thing you have ever done, Mac. Because what is at stake here is America. Our land and our people as we are now. So, if that matters to you, now is the time to face the fact that Weezy killed all those nuns because he’s a total wacko and is best left to his fate.”

“Is that it?”

“That’s it. That’s my play. Except I know why you’ve latched onto Cissy Greene. Obviously.”

“Your boy has got fine card moves,” he said to Diana. “He won a lotta money out here at poker, before civilization set in. Jesus God, you put Mexicans in the sheriff’s office and whaddya get. Screwed is what!” He gave Flynn a long, sad look. Flynn knew that he was thinking about his poker game. When a wealthy rube sat down at his hallowed table, he soon discovered that he couldn’t get up until he lost. Then he was kicked on the ass and told to go home.

“You want some Blue Label?” he continued. “I got a coupla cases I could let you have. Finest scotch in the world.”

“Why offer me a bribe now?”

“Not a bribe. Sealin’ a deal. I feel good, ’cause I’m gonna do good. Although savin’ America and shootin’ a tiger surely can’t be played outa the same deck of cards.”

“The tiger’s just a first step. We have to get past it to get to what I really want.”

“Okay, mister police, so your idea is I start by killin’ an endangered species. Then what? Weezy leave some nuns behind?”

“You did it, didn’t you? Weezy’s taking a fall for you.”

The convent had been on land wanted by Reich Development. The Sisters of Mercy would not sell, and it was soon being rumored that Reich had put a bounty on them. At the time, Eddie had thought Manny the Torch was going to be coming over from Dallas, so that was who the department was watching for. Then Weezy had showed up and blown them all to kingdom come. He’d imploded the building, and very professionally.

Because he’d come across as a nut case, the suspicion that it was a contract killing had never been followed up. In the State of Texas, though, nobody could be crazy enough not to get the needle for detonating nuns.

As always with Mac, the waters ran deeper than they appeared. To understand him, you had to read the eddies and whirlpools.

His face, previously throwing off smiles like confetti, had grown careful, the lines around the eyes tightening. His physical stillness had also returned, and Flynn knew that this could still go south real fast. Way south. He thought about his gun out in the car. He imagined Diana trapped under this monster while Cissy squealed and hit at him with her curling iron.

“You’re a clever man, Flynn Carroll, I’ll give you that. Now what more do I have to do?”

So he was going to let it pass—for the while, anyway. “We’re gonna have to go on the hunt of a lifetime, you and me. At some point, we will be tracking the most incredible tiger on the planet. Not a half-starved tourist tiger concerned only about its mange. Eighteen feet of pure Siberian fury, and as smart as we are. At least.”

Mac’s mouth had dropped open. His eyes went kind of glazed. He said, “If you weren’t the straightest shooting cop in Texas, I’d tell you to your face that you’d lost your mind.”

“The tiger is only the front door. Behind that door is hell, Mac. The

real thing. Might as well be.”

“We’re gonna be tying a knot in the devil’s tail?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“So what’s our next step, Detective Carroll?”

“Me and Diana, we’re in danger.”

“I don’t like this, Mackie!” Cissy shrieked.

“Send her home, Mac, she doesn’t need to be here.”

“She can’t go home. Her daddy got caught in bed with the damn secretary of state again and the missus has cleared out of the Governor’s Mansion.”

The secretary of state was Charles Forte. A guy. “Well,” Flynn said, “boys will be boys. But at some point, we will have to go places where Cissy cannot follow.”

“She shoots pretty good.”

“I can outshoot you,” she said, her baby fat wobbling prettily.

Flynn would get back to that later. “We need to use your computers now, Mac.”

“My computers are off limits to the po-lice.”

“They’re also unhackable. The most anonymous damn computers I’ve ever encountered. Everything proof.”

“This I gotta see,” Diana muttered.

“You’re not gonna see much, son.”

“Quit calling me that!”

“I can let you open a browser. Nothing else.”

Flynn knew that Mac’s computers were vitally important to a big part of his business. The Texas Rangers had discovered that they were connected to a server farm he owned in Thailand, and were probably responsible for sending out billions of spam emails a day. His hackers in the Philippines used the system to do a brisk trade in government secrets, stealing from one country to sell to another. But never America, not Mac’s beloved America. Or probably not.

His favorite scam, though, was to wait until a big shipment of drugs was moving up through the region, then tip off the DEA for a reward. His going rate was ten percent of street value. It was a perfectly legal business, but risky—which was where the guns came in. As often as not, the DEA guys found all the mules and guards involved with the shipment dead, shot from a distance with a high-powered rifle.

“This is interesting,” Diana said, calling to Flynn from the computer room. She had begun to work, with Mac hanging over her like a morbidly fascinated vulture.

Flynn went in. “Where’s Cissy got to?” He didn’t like these people where he couldn’t see them.

“Coffeemaker’s making coffee,” Diana said.

“I have no secrets from my lover,” Mac said.

“Yeah, you do. Among them that she’s a hostage.”

“She can walk outa here anytime she wants.”

“She’s gonna walk into Iraan? Thirty miles? Cissy’s in your clutches so you can get a pardon for Weezy, am I right? Does she know she’s a hostage?”

“Maybe, but she doesn’t care. In fact, she starts coming as soon as the big bad evildoer just brushes past the subject of sex. She’s your classic con hag, rich, bored, and hot as oatmeal. There was a bunch of Tri-Delts out here from UT trying to outhunt their boyfriends. I cut her outa the herd.”

“There’s a Jay Elder on the board of directors of the Texas Animal Rescue League,” Diana said.

“Could be a hit. This is the place near Austin?”

She was silent, working. “Jay Elder is an attorney, in practice twenty-three years. He’s got property around Lake Travis west of Austin. He’s also got a Louis C. Morris on his client list.” She tapped a few more keys. “Interesting.”

“A Louis Charleton Morris died thirty-seven years ago. An infant. So we know that our guy is wearing an alias, and he’s fortyish. Fits the

picture.”

“Man, you are good with those suckers,” Mac said, “whatever the hell you’re doing.”

“I am good, son,” Diana replied. She clicked a couple more keys, and paper came out of the printer. “Jay Elder, Louis Morris, the animal group, and a satellite view of the facility.”

“I’d pay for your services,” Mac said. “A lot.”

“They’d cost more than you have. Whatever you have.” She turned off the laptop, then turned it over and examined the base. In a moment, she had a black oblong object in her hand. She swung it high overhead and smashed it to bits on the desk. Gouges of mahogany flew.

“Hey hey HEY, what the hell? What the hell did you just do?”

“Nonsecured computer used in a classified operation. Hard disk has to be destroyed. Legal thing, son. Sorry.”

“Damn you!” He came at her.

Flynn saw that the rage in his eyes was damn serious, and he stepped between them. “Hold off! Just hold off!”

Mac stopped, but that was going to last maybe five seconds.

“Jesus, Diana!” Flynn said.

“He’s got a backup system.”

“It doesn’t fucking work!” he shouted.

“I fixed it. All of your stuff is on it, none of mine. If I’d left traces, you’d draw federal interest. You don’t want that.”

“Anybody ever gets me, it ain’t gonna be a fed.”

“It’d be a drone strike.” She took out her credential. “Ever seen one of these?”

Mac looked at it. Now he shifted his eyes back to Flynn. “What kinda crowd are you running with, buddy?”

“It’s a long story. Suffice to say, if you help us, there will be credit earned. Significant credit.”

“Flynn, if it don’t involve saving Weezy’s life, it don’t mean a thing to me. That’s my little brother, man!”

“Don’t keep hitting me with that, you’ve got the governor’s daughter strapped into your guillotine and we both know why. Weezy will not take the needle.”

“As long as she stays by my side. But since when does a twenty-year-old do anything for more than a couple of long farts? Soon’s I run outa horse, she’s gone.”

“Mac, don’t reveal a crime to me.”

Mac spread his hands. “So, okay, let’s go tiger hunting.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

They'd taken a suite at the Four Seasons in Austin on Mac's dime. They were using one of his laptops and any calls were made over one of his cell phones. His security was the best.

Mac and Cissy had ordered up champagne and caviar, fried wontons, Snickers bars, the list was long. She was pleading to invite friends, and Flynn thought it wise to let that happen. With them would come grass and crack and X and coke, and for Cissy a useful oblivion. In anticipation of the fact that they would be separated, a friend of Mac's, Giorgio Budd, had appeared.

Cissy and Giorgio bickered in the living room. He was a masseur, but she didn't want a massage. Flynn could hear them from the bedroom he and Diana had made into an office.

"So come on," Giorgio wheedled. "I can do it through your clothes, it's nice. Daddy no see."

"Yeah, but daddy touch."

"No, no, no boobies, baby. Just let daddy do his thing."

She yelled, "You're too icky, okay! It'd be like being touched by the Pillsbury Dough Boy, get it? You need to meet my dad. He'd love you."

"He's a stinkin' Republican. I don't massage no stinkin' Republican."

"You could bite off his dick. You'll get the chance."

Mac sat in the window of the bedroom they'd made into an office.

Flynn said to him, "That's going well."

"If she bolts, Giorgio has orders to tie her up and stick her in a

closet.”

“Don’t tell me these things, damnit!”

Mac’s window overlooked the Colorado River and a sunny view of South Austin beyond. “I got a bad feeling,” he said. “I had a good feeling. Now I got a bad one.”

“It’s gonna be a piece of cake.”

“No, Flynn, it isn’t.”

Mac had good instincts, there was no question about that. Excellent. Flynn had not told him of the casualties so far, and he wondered why not. He should warn the guy, obviously. And yet he didn’t.

He liked Mac, who was, as he claimed, an affable man. But he was also an extraordinary engine of human suffering. That’s what crime is—the infliction of human suffering for financial or other gain. God only knew how many lives Mac’s scams ruined in a week, not to mention his more murderous activities. Of course the DEA and the Rangers let the shooting of drug mules and cartel gunmen happen. Scumbags killing scumbags, nice and convenient.

“I’ve got the whole area mapped out,” Diana said, “from the Animal Rescue to Jay Elder’s ranch compound near Lake Travis. There’s a house, a barn, a couple of outbuildings, a dog run and kennel. Active.”

“What took you so long?” Mac asked. “You coulda gotten that off Google Earth an hour ago. We need to get out there, get a feel for the land.”

“Mapped to three feet, in real time,” she continued. “Google Earth doesn’t do that.”

“You guys can recognize faces from space, can’t you? Read license plates?”

“Very yesterday, but yes.”

“What can you do now? Read minds?”

“Classified.”

“Cool word, son. Must make you feel important as hell.”

It was already pushing seven, and the sun was starting to set.

“There’s something strange,” Diana said abruptly.

On the screen of the laptop she was using was a wilderness area. Right in the middle of it was what appeared to be a small village, made of logs and expertly camouflaged.

“It’s in the middle of a wildlife preserve. Strange place for a village.”

“Any signs of life?”

“I can’t be sure. There are paths, obviously.”

“What the hell does this have to do with the price of bread?” Mac asked.

Diana said, “It’s two miles from Jay Elder’s ranch house. And look at the buildings—there’s been an effort to camouflage them. Quite skillful. You wouldn’t see this for what it was on a Google satellite map. And as for Google Earth, their trucks stick to roads.”

Mac peered at it. “Boy, I can even see individual branches in that camouflage. From way up there.”

“Mac, we can determine your rate of hair loss by watching your bald spot. Face it, if you weren’t useful, the feds would’ve crushed you like a bug a long time ago.”

“You’d be surprised at how good I am.”

“They’re better. Now, let me see. I can switch to another lens—here we go.”

The image changed to infrared. Nobody had to ask about the change. Both Flynn and Mac knew infrared very well.

“Hm,” Diana said. “No obvious heat signatures. Flock of deer, eleven does and a buck, about half a mile away. That glowing dot is probably a buzzard looking for supper. Nothing dead, though, not big enough to spot, anyway.”

“Corpses are cold,” Mac said.

“Rot is hot, son. This system is sensitive enough to pick up the heat of decay.”

Flynn said, “Maybe it’s an old hippie place. Commune. Austin was a major stop on the Hippie Highway.”

“Old paths would be more vague. These are sharply drawn. People use this, but I don’t think they’re there now. And they don’t have pets. No sign of any dogs or cats.”

“You wouldn’t happen to be able to spot a tiger with that thing, would you?” Mac asked.

“I would but I haven’t.”

“Shit, then, what am I supposed to hunt?”

“You don’t understand,” Flynn said. “The tiger isn’t where it’s supposed to be, penned at the Animal Rescue League. It’s the only Siberian tiger presently missing in the United States. It’s called Snow Mountain, it’s seven years old and it has had a number of legitimate exhibitor owners, specifically two zoos and a circus. Apparently it was sold along because it ate a hell of a lot. It’s about forty percent larger than what’s normal for the breed. It was collected by the Texas Fish and Wildlife from an abusive situation, so the record says. Of course, records lie.”

“And it’s here in Texas—specifically near Lake Travis? Or not?”

Diana said, “Jay Elder is here because he was at his law firm yesterday. But he’s just back, interestingly enough, from Vegas.”

“How do you find things like that out?”

“Classified, son.”

“Quit that, okay? I’m sorry I insulted you. Son.”

“You are sorry, son, I agree there. Now, take a look at the Elders place. Tell me what you think.” She shifted to another image, this one of a ranch house in a small compound of buildings. There were three trucks parked near the house, two of them Cadillac Escalades, and the third a van with blackened windows. The van’s side door was open, and it was possible—just—to see a bit of the interior.

“There aren’t any rear seats,” Flynn said.

“Nope, and look closely.” She blew the image up to a blur. “Isn’t that a barrier behind the front seats, like the kind you see in taxis? See that white there, across the top—you can just see the dashboard beyond it, so that’s clear. But below, it’s a featureless blackness. If you were transporting a large animal, you might use a van like that, especially if it had a touchy disposition.”

“He’s touchy all right,” Flynn said. But then he remembered the expression on the cat’s face in the storm drain, almost—was it kindness? A sort of kindness? “Touchy and complicated.”

“I have two images here. The van pulled up. Then this one, the van with the rear door opened. About seventy seconds between them. I’m hoping we can find some residual heat in the second image.”

Mac said, “Do the DEA boys have access to stuff like this?”

“Classified.”

“I think I might retire,” Mac said.

“Don’t do that, Mac,” Flynn said, “you’ll kill my dream.”

“Which is?”

“Collar of a lifetime.”

“Fuck you, Flynn.”

“Double back.”

They both chuckled, remembering their young days in the streets of Menard, getting up to no good together. “Fuck you” and “double back” was essential dialogue of their youth.

When they were ten, they’d been like three brothers, him and Mac and Eddie.

“Too long, Buddy,” he said.

From the living room came a peal of female laughter. “She’s discovered that Giorgio’s a eunuch,” Mac commented.

“Oh, come on,” Diana said. “There are no eunuchs.”

“He was cut by a sultan so he could be trusted to massage the

ladies of the harem.”

“Holy shit, who would consent to that?”

“I don’t think that ‘no’ was an available answer. He made some money, though.” Cissy laughed again, wonder in her voice. “When he can’t get what he wants, which is to touch their beautiful bodies, he does show and tell. Works the pity angle. She’ll be on his table shortly.”

“Guys, this has processed up nicely.”

Flynn saw the same image on the screen, except this time there were a few extra blurs. “What are we looking at here?”

She pointed to a ghostly smear. “That’s a man. The computer’s telling me he’s six two and fairly heavy. Likely a real bruiser. Now, here’s the interesting one. Right there by the open door. The computer doesn’t know what that is, but it’s definitely a valid infrared signature. A minute or so before this photo was taken, something warm moved through that space.”

“They just let a damn tiger out to roam the effing night?” Mac asked.

“Looks like it,” Diana said.

“It can’t be smart enough to risk that. What if it eats a kid?”

“It’ll go out and take a deer, be my guess. Stay out of sight, come home at dawn.”

“Damn hard to credit.”

“Mac, this hunt is gonna be the challenge of your life.”

Mac smiled, just a little, deep in his face. “You know, I think I’m gonna take my nice warm girl into the master and get myself prepped.”

“Don’t drink anything more. Don’t get fatigued.”

“First off, I’ve only had three bottles of that flat-assed Dom Perignon they sent up. Plus sex before a hunt helps my concentration.” He went off into the living room. “Girl! Get offa that thing, you’re gonna get your ass laid right now.” A moment’s silence,

then, “Come on, little man, you can quarterback.”

Chrissy, Mac, and Giorgio went into the bedroom, and soon what they used to call “sounds of revelry” in Flynn’s frat house at UT were heard. He wished he had Mac’s courage to still live as a boy, but he could never be as careless with lives—his own and others—as Mac was.

“Would you please go close that door?” Diana asked him.

Fine by him. Envyng Mac’s kind of freedom wasn’t healthy.

“I’ve picked up a couple more traces,” Diana said when he came back. “Here—” She pointed to what looked to Flynn like a slight white discoloration in the image. “And again.” The next discoloration was even fainter. “It was moving south-southeast.” She looked up from her work. “Flynn, I think the damn thing is on patrol around that house.”

“Ideal for Mac. If it’s following a set pattern, he’ll figure that out. The man could track a ghost in a snowstorm.”

“That’s going to work both ways.”

“There’ll be two of us, and neither one’s going to do what Snow Mountain expects, which is to assume he’s dumb.” He paused. “Diana, do you know anything about combining human and animal genes? Would that be the reason the damn thing is so smart?”

“You have to assume so. Or maybe it’s a mix of ours, tiger, and who knows what? Think about it. If they could be from anywhere, they could *bring* anything.”

“I’m wanting to give Mac some idea of what to expect. He understands that this is a real smart tiger, but how smart he doesn’t understand.”

“If he gets eaten, I have to tell you, I don’t personally have a problem with that. But that’s just me, of course.”

“Friend of my youth. Plus, I see a future for him on our new team.”

“How could he possibly survive a security check?”

Flynn said nothing.

The sun was well down now, the lights of the city glowing, the river a black ribbon. Flynn could even see a few stars, but that wouldn't last. The moon was rising in the east, full and fat, a big Texas moon.

He began methodically assembling his equipment, his own personal night-vision lenses, his new pistol—one of Mac's .357 Magnums—and his other essentials, a handheld GPS, a backup compass.

She slid his MindRay into the backpack.

“No.”

“You were using it under pressure in adverse field conditions.”

“All field conditions are adverse.”

“We can't leave this thing in a hotel room.”

That stopped him. Surely she didn't expect to come with them. “Diana—”

“I know what you're about to say, and don't even think about it. You absolutely need me in the area.”

“No.”

“I can operate a command post in the car. I'll be looking at satellite data as you work.”

“Do it from here. We both have cell phones.”

“It's too much of a risk and you know it. You'll be lucky to have an hour before they detect you. Maybe less. If cell phone calls are popping out there, way less.”

He couldn't deny the truth of that, nor the fact that the information she could provide would be extremely valuable, even essential.

“We can use the same radios we used in Montana. I've got yours, mine, and Mike's in my backpack. They are low power and the encryption technology makes them sound like backscatter. No scanner in the world will even identify our transmissions as signals.”

“In this world. Maybe we failed in Montana because alien technology was in use against us.”

She was silent for a moment. Then she said, “The value outweighs the risks. If you get detected, I’m going to see them coming. And what if I nail down the location of the tiger? That could happen.”

He looked at her. She glared back at him, the determination and defiance if anything increasing her attraction.

“Good enough,” he said, “let’s get Studley back in his pants and do some hunting.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

As Flynn and Mac headed off into the thick brush, Flynn looked back at the truck. They'd parked it off the road near a little place called Balcones Springs, where they'd pulled the truck up into a brushy area along a disused road, but one that was high enough to provide the low-power radios a useful platform. Nearby was the Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Preserve, as difficult an area to walk as the Texas Hill Country offered. It consisted of nearly forty square miles of steep-sided hills, gnarly ravines, cactus, and cedar. The only nearby water of any significance was in Lake Travis itself.

They were still two miles both from the strange little village and Jay Elder's ranch house, and about equidistant between them.

Flynn touched the "transmit" button on his radio's earpiece. A moment later, there was a brief burst of static, then another. Mac and Diana, acknowledging.

"That satellite stuff has me spooked. How does she gain access?"

"Dunno. It's not a password, that I do know. Something more esoteric."

"What if this guy Elders has access to the same feed?"

"He doesn't."

"You know that?"

"If he did, why would he be doing something as risky as using guard animals—the tiger, for example. Or the dogs."

"I get your drift. It's just that my bad feeling is getting worse, man." He looked down at his GPS. "The last place she picked up the tiger was eighteen hundred yards due north." He put the GPS in his pocket.

"Best turn it off."

“It goes off by itself.”

“Until it does, it radiates a signal. Not much of one, but it’s there. I know from experience with what we’re dealing with, we need to be real, real careful about signals.”

“What are we dealing with, Flynn?”

The question lay there, unanswered in the dark between them. “How much have you figured out?”

“That this is some kind of classified government deal. That this animal is really weird. What is it, something that escaped from a lab?”

“Something that was created in one, that we know. Whether it escaped or was sold on or exactly what happened isn’t clear.” He did not tell Mac why they were actually going after the tiger, to get at the extraordinary criminal behind it. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to. He didn’t know how.

They moved through the moonlit hills with the swift precision of men whose lives had unfolded in places like this. The land around Menard was much the same: dry, mean, and hard. It was the sort of land that looked inviting from a distance, but would give you maybe two days if you got lost in it—assuming that you didn’t get snakebit or slip and fall down a bluff. By the third day, you’d be too crazy with thirst and weak from struggling in the terrible land to do anything but stagger until you dropped. Observed from a porch on a high bluff on a summer evening, though, the land smiled like a saint.

“Guys, I have a new trace. A thousand yards north northwest of your position.”

Flynn pressed his transmit button to indicate that they’d heard her.

In flat land, it would have been a possible shot, but not in these cruel little hills, just high enough and steep enough to tax a strong man.

“We need to split up,” Mac said. “Let’s angle in, maybe five hundred yards apart. First one gets a shot, takes it.”

“Absolutely do not get out of sight of me. *Do not.*”

Mac frowned, shook his head. Beneath the rim of his Stetson, his face was in deep moon shadow.

“Come on, let’s move ahead. You see a shot, take it.”

Separated by fifty yards rather than five hundred, they slipped softly through the moonlight, each man concentrating on his own silence. The north wind grew stronger, hissing in the cedars and sighing in the live oaks, making the autumn grasses dance. There was that note of sadness in it that colors so much of nature. Far to the north, the same clouds that he and Diana had seen from the plane were putting on an electrical display as they rolled across the featureless plains of Texas.

They both carried Weatherby Mark V Deluxe rifles chambered for .300 Weatherby Magnum cartridges. The boat tail spire point bullets they were using were forged in Mac’s own shop, by a master bullet maker called Carlos Gons. Gons’s bullets were famous in West Texas for being the finest that money could buy—assuming you were friendly with Mac, of course.

A skilled sniper could use these rifles and these bullets to shoot extraordinary distances. But not in this terrain and not at night. Here, they were looking to get within three hundred yards of the quarry, and to do that they were going to need to surprise it.

Flynn had considered just going in to the ranch house with some serious ordnance, but he now needed to investigate that village, also, and that was not going to happen until the tiger was gone.

Mac stopped. He pressed his transmit button twice, looking for a report from Diana. A single flutter of static came back: “no joy.”

But Mac still didn’t move. He raised his night vision binoculars to his eyes. With this moonlight, you didn’t need night vision goggles, but the binoculars were useful for looking into shadows and pulling in distant detail.

There was a sound, then, soft but unmistakable. It was the chuffle of a tiger and it could not be more than fifty feet away—but not in

the direction Mac was looking.

They were about to take a hit.

“Back to back.”

“What? Why?”

He said to Mac, “Back to back.”

“What’s going on?”

“It’s here.” He touched his radio. “Diana, it’s within fifty feet of us. Do you see it?”

“I don’t—no ... standby—oh God, Flynn it’s in those cedars to your left. Flynn, it’s going to pounce right now!”

Flynn fought down the impulse to run. Unlike the situation when he’d faced it with the Glock, one of these rifles would bring it down immediately.

“You heard?”

“Oh, yes.” Mac examined the cedar thicket with his binoculars. “Where the hell is it? Ask her again.”

He pressed his transmit button. “We need coordinates.”

“It’s in motion away from your position. Flynn, something about the way it moves causes it to just leave traces. I can hardly track it. But it appears to be going south, toward the lake. Moving fast. Now it’s gone. No—stand by.” A pause. “Lost it.”

“Okay, take a breath. It’s trying to lead us, looks like.”

“Into a trap?”

“Away from the village. Away from the ranch.”

“So we ignore it.”

“If we do that, we fall into whatever trap’s been laid for us.”

“So let’s follow it.”

“Then we fall into a different trap. We’ve been outmaneuvered.”

“Man, I’m hunting a tiger, here, not a damn werewolf.”

He thought he now needed to tell Mac the truth. But how? This was

a man who had absolutely no idea about aliens, except for the illegals who worked his and every other ranch in swarms. Employers called them grad students.

Diana had said that the government didn't actually know what they were. And that was after sixty years of watching them. So how the hell did he explain them to Mac?

Maybe he didn't. Maybe what he needed to do was to just put Mac where he could do some damage and hope for the best.

"Let's head for that funny little village," he said.

"Not the ranch?"

"That's the head of this snake. I'm looking for the heart shot."

"Flynn, I'm always looking for the heart shot and the high card. But just before we go charging off, *where the fuck is my tiger?*"

Flynn hit his radio. "Anything?"

A burst of static was her only answer.

"Verbal, please."

She came back, "It's well south of you now, probably close to the lake."

"Then nowhere near the village?"

"No. No way."

He said to Mac, "We'll find it at the village."

"But she said—"

"Come on." Flynn began moving cautiously forward. Mac stayed close. They went down a long draw, then up onto higher ground, skirting one of the weathered limestone hills.

"What're we expecting?"

"No idea."

As they moved slowly ahead, the village came into view, in the form of a number of structures that appeared almost Polynesian in design, low buildings open at both ends, with peaked roofs and elaborately carved lentils.

“What the hell?” Mac muttered.

Diana sent a burst of static, then spoke. “It’s come out of no damn where and it’s heading directly toward you. I’ve got a clear view, it’s running fast. According to the computer, you have three minutes.”

“We could take cover in one of these,” Mac said. “Set up an ambush.”

Flynn went closer to the nearest one. The wood was dark, the carvings were hard to make out in the shadowy moonlight. Wind blew through the thing, which was open at both ends.

He thought maybe that it was an alien village, right here on earth. Was it the only one? Did anybody know? They were just so damn uninformed about the whole thing. Hopefully there was somebody somewhere with good information, because a village—Flynn was no expert, but to him this looked like some part of an invasion.

He risked a light, shining it into the interior.

“Empty, looks like,” Mac said.

They took a step in.

“My God, it stinks in here,” Mac said.

It was a milder version of the smell in Oltisis’s office.

Flynn took another step forward, moving deeper.

“Flynn?”

He turned around.

“Is there something behind me?” Mac asked.

Ten feet behind Mac, right in the center of the village, standing absolutely still, was the tiger. It had taken no more than a minute to get here.

Its eyes were on its prey. As in Montana, the animal had outmaneuvered them. Flynn could not get a shot off at it without hitting Mac, and it was so close to him that it could tear him to pieces before he even finished turning around. On the other hand, the moment the animal jumped onto Mac’s back, Flynn would have a kill

shot. So this wasn't a quite a checkmate for the tiger. It was a double check.

"Mac, come to me."

"Man, that smell—"

"Nice and easy. Do it now."

Mac's eyes became tight steel in the moonlight. His face closed down. As his finger slid over his trigger, he came a step closer. Silently, the tiger shifted, keeping Mac between itself and the gun. What an expert it was. It had thought at least five moves ahead.

Mac took another step, and the tiger remained behind him. But it knew that he could bolt at any second. So could it—and it did, just as Mac entered the structure.

"Where was it?"

Flynn did not answer him. He was watching in astonishment and growing horror as the darkness behind Mac continued to deepen. Silently and in some unknown manner, the apparently doorless opening was closing.

He ran past Mac, but it was already much too late. Where the rear opening had been was the blackness of a wall.

The tiger had not thought five moves ahead or eight, but ten, twenty, maybe more.

What it had done was elegantly lethal. It had coaxed them into a man trap.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Flynn reached up and touched his transmit button. “Diana? Come back.”

Silence.

Mac said, “That thing is smarter than me, Buddy.”

“It’s brilliant.”

“What is it, Flynn? It can’t be a tiger. It just looks like one.”

“I don’t know, Mac. I just don’t know.”

“My flashlight’s dead.”

“Mine, too.”

“And the radios. And my GPS.”

Flynn found his in his pocket and pulled it out. It had been off, but when he pressed the toggle, nothing happened. “Same here.”

None of the electronics worked.

“Goddamnit, what have you gotten me into, man?”

“I thought we could handle this.”

“Well we can’t.”

Suddenly Mac was in his face, his breath full of sour fear. “Flynn, for God’s sake, what in fuck is this about?”

There was nowhere to begin. “What I think is that maybe if we can make our way to the wall, we can get out of here.”

“The fuck, we’re trapped, man!” Mac fired his rifle, the report shattering in the confined space. He fired it again, straight up, and in the flash Flynn saw him, his eyes glassy, his face a glaring mask of fear. Again he fired, and again Flynn saw him. This time his lips were

pulled back, his eyes were glaring almost comically, but there was nothing funny about the transformation—the visible disintegration—of this man.

“*Mac!*”

Again he fired, and this time Flynn saw something behind him, a figure standing with its legs spread and its hands on its hips. Its mouth was an oval complication of spiked teeth.

Not an animal. Not like Oltisis. But not human either ... not quite.

“Cool it!”

Again Mac fired, and this time Flynn saw in the flash that there were figures all around him.

“Shit, they got my damn gun!”

Flynn tightened his grip on his own.

“We’re not gettin’ outa here, man!”

“Stay cool, there’s always a way.”

“Fuck, oh, *fuck!*”

“We’re not done,” Flynn said.

Mac began babbling and weeping. Anybody who gets scared enough reveals an inner asshole, was Flynn’s experience. Mac was no exception.

Slowly, Flynn turned around. Behind them, there had been another door, so maybe it was still possible to get over there.

Porting his rifle, he moved forward. There was the softest of flutters against his cheek. Lurching away, he cried out with surprise.

The rifle was gone from his grasp. Incredibly.

His first thought was to draw the Magnum, which was still under his shoulder. He stopped himself, though. Whoever had taken the rifle would surely take it, too.

“Fuck, they got my Mag, man!”

Flynn didn’t respond. He kept his arm tight against his shoulder holster.

There was a book of matches in his pocket, kept there for whatever emergency might require them. Would they still work? He had no idea, he'd been transferring them from pocket to pocket for months. Moving as slowly and quietly as he could, he reached in, felt his keys, some change, and then the matches. Crouching over them, he pushed the cover open, tore one out and struck it. There were sparks, but no light. Again he struck it, and this time it flared, sputtered blue, then caught, a tiny yellow flame.

In the light it gave, which was not much, he saw Mac, now lying on the floor. He was surprisingly close by. "Mac, get your ass up."

There was no response.

"Mac!"

His eyes were open but staring blankly. Flynn recognized this as a state of extreme shock, like a man lying on the roadside beside the twisted ruin of his car.

Just at the edge of the flickering pool of match light, there was movement.

The match went out.

Frantically, he fumbled another one between his fingers, struck it and held it up.

Standing over Mac was one of the creatures. It looked up at him with eyes so large that they were like great, plastic buttons, sky blue and swimming with tragedy.

The match went out. Flynn lit another.

Mac groaned. He lifted himself up on his elbows, he saw what was standing over him and started to roll away, and at once the thing began striking him with a nasty little sap, which caused him to throw up his arms in defense of his face, and to scream a gargled, quickly stifled scream.

Now Flynn did draw the Magnum, holding it in both hands, bracing it in front of him.

Another of the things jumped toward him.

The Magnum was gone, taken with such extraordinary quickness that Flynn had no chance to react. One instant, his hands were hard on the gun, then next they were empty.

He backed away, then he turned and blundered across the small interior space, in the process upending what felt like furniture and causing something to screech in anger—more than one something. In fact, the space seemed to be filled with these beings, five, ten, who knew how many?

This was their home.

He came to the back wall. Feeling along it, he attempted to understand what it was made of. From the outside, the building had looked like nothing more than a loose construction of dried branches. In here, though, it was slick and hard, cool like stone.

He kept feeling along the wall, seeking some kind of hinge or latch or some sort of opening.

Across the room, he could hear Mac screaming, and could hear the screams becoming more and more muffled, as if he was being enclosed in something.

Until he was also helpless, Flynn realized that they intended to contain him, not risk attempting to overpower him.

This told him that, while they were faster, he was stronger. Also, they either didn't want to kill him or didn't have effective weapons of their own.

Understanding that they were treating him like a rampaging animal gave him some room for maneuver. Not a lot, because, just as was true of a cop facing a knife-wielding drunk, there would be conditions that would force them to risk attempting to overpower him.

He mustn't try to fight them. He mustn't be destructive. He continued feeling along the wall, until he came to what seemed to be an intricate mass of twigs and branches woven together.

The Russian boar he caught on his place up in Tom Greene County never understood the trap. But he was human, surely he could understand.

Methodically now, he felt among the twigs. The structure had been wide open at both ends.

Twigs. Wood. He had matches. Could he set it on fire? No, they'd put a stop to that the same way he would if a drunk with a knife started trying to use it.

They were close around him now, but why didn't they get more violent? What were they waiting for?

In one of Mac's gun flashes, he had seen a beam about six feet up, and above it what appeared to be loose thatch. Thinking that he might be able to break out that way, he raised his hands upward and felt for purchase. Holding on with the tips of his fingers and pushing with his feet, he went up the wall faster than he had expected—or than they had, because there was an immediate rush of scurrying below him, and rough, guttural whispering. His fingers throbbed, but he kept climbing until he felt the beam.

Long, pealing cries rose, full of complicated, haunting undertones, like the wind on a winter's night, like somebody crying in the dark hills of childhood, like wolves howling.

What was really going on here? How were these people—or things—connected to Oltis? Could it be that there were two species of alien on Earth?

He swung out onto the beam, and immediately saw before him two of the creatures. In the next instant, the closer of them leaped at him, screaming and clawing.

As he pulled it off, the second one slammed a sap into the side of his head and he fell from the beam, forcing his arms up to protect his head as he fell. When he hit he rolled and bounded to his feet. One of the creatures was crushed and broken beneath him, writhing and screaming with a warbling banshee madness. Lightning-fast hands grabbed at him.

One after another, he pulled them off, but the pummeling saps kept coming until finally what felt like a sack of iron slammed him in the right temple.

Then the dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Something hit Flynn in the forehead so hard his eyes flashed. Still, though, he didn't wake up completely. He tried to turn over, but something else scraped his shoulder, preventing him

When he opened his eyes, it didn't help. This was absolute dark. Again he tried to sit up and again he slammed his head.

His lay still. His temple throbbed, his forehead ached, his shoulders were compressed and the air was thick.

Twisting, he raised his left hip until he could free his arm. He felt upward—and encountered a ceiling not even a foot above his face.

So this was no floor he was lying on. He'd thought himself in some sort of tight crib, but this was not a crib. The ceiling could only mean one thing: he was in a box.

For a moment, he was out of control. He kicked, he hammered at the lid, screams burst out of him.

No. Keep your head. Right now, your mind is the only weapon you've got.

This was what Abby had experienced. Steve. All of them.

Poor damn people, above all, poor *Abby*.

He pushed at the top of the thing. No give whatsoever. Steel? Thick wood? What did it matter, he wasn't going to break out, it was far too strong.

Panic hit him again, causing him to start gasping, causing his stomach to twist against itself and his heart to fly.

No, *no!* You *will* go silent inside. You *will* slow that heart rate. You *will* stop that gasping.

Okay, breathe evenly, let the heart rate drop, focus the mind. No matter how hard it is, do it.

He visualized an open space. Dark but open.

The air was thickening fast but still breathable. So far, no frantic waves of suffocation were overwhelming him. Yet.

Keep the breaths even but shallow, don't move unless absolutely necessary.

All right, let's get our bearings. You're in what appears to be a coffin or a box.

First thing you need to know is, have you been buried alive or are you still aboveground?

He had fallen to the floor, fallen on one of the creatures or aliens or whatever they were.

What he had to do now was change his situation or, if that wasn't possible, face it. If he'd been buried alive, he was going to die here. It wasn't pretty, but he'd damn well died in a good cause. On the other hand, if he was aboveground, maybe there was a way out.

The air was getting very bad very fast. He felt along the joint between the lid and the sides of the box. Seamless. Might as well be welded closed, and maybe it was.

Long ago, he had reconciled himself to the idea that death might come to him during the course of his work. But not now, not before he had gotten to the man who had killed Abby.

He inventoried himself for tools. He was still fully dressed, so maybe he still had some of his possessions.

The rifle and the pistol were gone, of course, but he could still feel his wallet. Only by raising his shoulders and wriggling his hips could he manage to push his hands down into his pockets.

Frantic surges of air hunger coursed up and down his body.

He got his right hand into the pocket, and to his surprise it closed around his pocket knife. It had been with him since high school, and contained a blade, a fingernail file, and a small scissors. As he

scrabbled at it, attempting to get it out, he tried to think what he might do with it.

It was then that he noticed that the air hunger was getting less. He was beginning to be able to breathe again.

That could mean one of two things—either his twisting and turning was opening a crack somewhere, or somebody on the outside was introducing oxygen into his air supply. He remembered something about the Chinese doing this during some distant war, perhaps Korea. The objective was to so terrorize the victim that he became open to brainwashing.

If this was torture, then they were out there watching and listening. They had a use for him and needed him to be so broken that he would follow their orders.

So what needed to happen in here to get them to open the lid?

The answer was clear: once they were sure that he had completely lost it, they would bring him out.

He began having trouble breathing again. His mouth opened, he gasped, but he also remained totally still.

Finally a surge of need went through his body that was so intense that it made him kick. His chest heaved, he sucked air through his open mouth. Tormenting urgency swept his body.

He cried out, he slapped the lid, he threw himself from side to side, he wailed.

And the anguish receded a little. His head cleared. He was still breathing frantically, his heart hammering, his chest pumping, but it was getting less.

He forced himself to calm down. So it wasn't that he was opening a crack somewhere in the box by pushing against it. Somebody was indeed out there, and they were intentionally torturing him.

His breathing was labored now, but no longer terminal.

Once he had completely panicked and completely despaired, he was going to be taken out.

Fine, he would deliver the panic they were looking for. It wouldn't be hard, he was nearly there already. He knew that what at first would be an act would quickly become actual terror, because his screaming would flood his body with adrenaline.

He uttered a groan.

Soon, the air was getting stale again.

Another groan, but this one turned into a scream, and that opened the subconscious gate that he'd been holding closed with all of the inner strength he possessed.

There came boiling up from his dark interior a gigantic, roaring explosion of sound. He hammered, he kicked, he raged, he bellowed.

No escape.

Tears came. He found himself sobbing like a child.

His idea that he was being tortured was a fantasy. There was nobody out there and the coffin was underground. He had been buried alive, and everything else was just rationalization and wishful thinking.

Another scream burst out of him, then another and another and another. He smashed his head against the lid until he was reeling with pain, he clawed and screamed until his nails bled and his voice broke. He collapsed into the suffocated, gasping sobs of a dying man.

He lay, spent but still panting and ever more frantically. He began to float away on a lurching, tormented sea.

Again the cries came, so hysterical that they sounded like somebody else, an unknown version of himself, possessed of vast rage and fear and a hunger for life that was stronger by a factor of a million than the strongest love or terror he had ever consciously known.

His lungs churned, his tongue lolled, his hands began to weaken, and the clawing turned to scrabbling and helpless slapping at the unyielding lid.

There came a ripping sound. Then a click. Then light flooded him

and air as pure as dew.

He writhed, he uttered choked sounds from a place in his mind so deep it had no words, he saw only the glare of the light and then, within it, a shape.

The shape focused.

A face stared down at him, softly intent, the eyes as pale as snow. "Hello, Flynn."

Flynn gasped, frantically sucking air, unable to stop himself. As relief washed through him, he realized that he'd been just moments from death in there. Much closer than he thought.

He recognized the face immediately. But the security camera had lied. The oddly plastic skin and the too-perfect hairline were not a disguise. This was not a human face, but something that had been made to look like one.

"You're Morris."

An arm like a piston thrust him back down into the box.

"Yeah," he said, "you can call me that. It's a name on a suit, put there to confuse the garbage." His lips lifted away from his teeth, as if in a smile. "I've got an offer for you, and I'll kill you slow if you don't do my little job for me. Is that understood?"

Flynn said nothing.

"All right, if that's the way you want it, fine." He put his hand on the lid.

"What's the job?"

"Too late, Flynn. You're done." He murmured something to somebody out of sight, but Flynn heard it: "Take him out and bury him."

With an earsplitting crash, the lid came down.

Flynn hammered at it, he couldn't stop himself. "Don't do this! Jesus, let's talk, come on!"

The box scraped and Flynn felt his weight shifting. He was being

moved.

“For God’s sake, give me a chance!”

He had thought that he had been broken. But now he discovered that he had not yet understood what that was.

As they maneuvered the box, he could hear grunting. Who was it? Not the creatures from the village, surely. No, there was a murmured word in Spanish. People, then. Henchmen.

He thought that you could not be more deeply a traitor, than to betray mankind itself.

The box lurched so far to one side that he rolled over, then was hurled back as it hit something with a dull, hard thud.

He’d been slid, then dropped into a grave.

“Listen to me! For God’s sake!”

And what will you do, little man, he asked himself? Will you, also, trade your species for your life?

There was a crash. Another. Then more and more. Dirt was being shoveled in. They were doing it for real this time, and the air was getting thick fast, and this time it would not be refreshed.

He bellowed, he kicked, he hammered at the lid, he rocked from side to side trying to break open the coffin.

The sound of dirt being shoveled in ceased to crash against the lid. As it got deeper, the sounds became more muffled.

This was it. He was now underground.

He went to another level of terror, one far beyond where he had been before, deeper yet, more raw than anything he had ever known. It was a savage, blind animal fear that caused him to scream like a desperate infant, slicing away layer after layer of toughness and strength and hard-won inner composure, leaving in its wake a panicked, shrieking rat.

Where had he gone wrong, what had he said or hadn’t? There had been no bargaining, no time.

“Give me a chance,” he screamed. He hammered on the lid, he kicked. “For God’s sake *what do you want me to do?*”

There was a sound.

He froze. What was that? He listened.

It went in and out, in and out, and he thought it was the whisper of breathing.

“*Please!*”

“I want you to do what’s needed, that’s all.”

The voice was in his ear, *right* in his ear, so close, so intimate that instinct made him attempt to turn toward it.

“Then tell them to dig me out! I’m smothering fast!”

“You will do the work I have for you.”

“They’re still filling the hole, tell them to stop!”

“I have work for you.”

It was a choice. *The* choice. Die here like this or do the monster’s work.

There could not be a traitor more profound. But if he died, there was no chance at all that Abby’s destruction would ever be avenged.

“All right!” he shouted, “I’ll do it!”

Nothing happened. He waited, sweating it out.

His heartbeat grew rapidly more irregular, his mouth lolled open, his tongue hung out, and his breaths came faster and faster, more and more uselessly. He was breathing his own breath.

“You will do this work?”

He tried to answer.

“I can’t hear you.”

A gasped whisper: “Open ... open ...”

The digging stopped.

“Open ...”

There was light all around him, and air flowing like grace into his

very soul. His body flushed with relief and his head swam as his blood reoxygenated.

He hadn't even been underground.

Morris chuckled. He reached down and drew Flynn to a sitting position.

Flynn looked at the box he had been confined in.

"Not a coffin," Morris said. He was a man of about six feet, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, a weathered Stetson on his head. "Coulda been used as one, though." He lifted Flynn under his arms. "Still shaky?"

"No."

"You lie like a child."

Flynn took quick stock of his surroundings. He was in a barn, its big door open wide to a sunny morning.

"Come on, let's get you something to drink. I got Coors, Lone Star, Shiner."

"Just a cup of coffee."

"Nah, you want a Shiner." Morris snapped a finger at a man standing nearby, who Flynn recognized as Jay Elder. He sauntered over to a dark blue cooler and opened it. As he reached in, ice rattled.

"Sounds good, doesn't it?"

"I have to admit that it does." He estimated that he was forty feet from the door. He couldn't bolt, though, not yet, because Elder was coming back with a frosty longneck.

The animal in him wanted that beer in the worst way.

"Flynn, you gotta understand that you're all mixed up. We're the good guys here! That thing you met in Chicago, that was evil."

"Okay."

Elder arrived with the beer. "It's gonna be a new era for mankind," he said. If he thought that he wasn't evil, he was a fool.

He took the bottle. Shiner is a rich brew, and he could smell the sweetness of it, and practically taste the cold relief it would bring to

his throat.

“Go ahead,” Morris said. “You’ve earned it.”

He lifted it toward his lips, calculating carefully, moving slowly to buy time. A quarter-second delay, a wrong half-step, and he was going to end up back in that coffin, this time for good.

Using all the strength in his arm and shoulders, he reached back and swung the bottle into the side of Morris’s head.

The bottle exploded with a wet *crack* and foam and glass sprayed across Morris’s head and face.

He stood there staring. He didn’t even blink.

Flynn cried out in shocked surprise—under the coating of skin there must be steel or something.

Then Morris made a sound of his own, a low growl that reminded Flynn of the voice of the tiger.

He broke and ran. He was thirty feet from the door when Elder, thin and wiry and quick, leaped at him. He was light but fast as hell.

Not fast enough, though, to avoid a punch, a solid blow to the chin, which lifted him two feet and hurled him backward. He landed on the barn’s dusty floor.

Morris roared, and Flynn knew that he was hearing rage from another world.

What must it be like, to produce minds as fine as Morris’s, but so filled with rage? Or those things in the village—were they part human? Why were they so sad?

The universe is a dark place.

The last thing Flynn heard from Morris as he ran out the door into blazing morning sunlight was a roar—as it changed into laughter.

He had an inkling as to why. It was all part of breaking his will. They’d done it during the Inquisition, done it in Nazi Germany, done it in the Soviet Gulag. The technique was to let a prisoner think he had escaped, then, just as he touched freedom, drag him back.

So his aim was clear: he needed to go farther than they thought possible.

He ran across the barnyard and vaulted its weathered wooden fence. Without looking back, he knew from the silence that Elder and Morris were not following him. This meant only one thing: somebody else was. He thought it would not be the tiger, not in broad daylight, and not as close as this to the heavily developed shoreline of Lake Travis.

From somewhere nearby, there was a sudden burst of barking. An instant later it was silenced.

His heart seemed to twist against itself, his throat to twist against itself from sheer terror.

One of the outbuildings they'd seen had been a kennel.

Dogs were a problem. Big time.

Too bad he'd lost Mac, Mac knew dogs and knew them well. As he ran, he continued to listen, but the dogs were no longer giving voice.

So, were they also smart, maybe as smart as the tiger?

He had to force himself not to run wildly.

This was going to be hard. It was going to be very, very hard.

CHAPTER THIRTY

As he ran into deeper brush, Flynn inventoried. His only weapon was the pocket knife. He had no compass, no cell phone, and no GPS, only the knowledge that he was running in a generally southerly direction.

He did not hear the dogs, but he also did not believe for a moment that he was beyond the perimeter of the trap Morris and Elder had set for him.

He knew that he was leaving a scent trail. Worse, the harder he tried to get away the more he sweated, and the stronger it was getting. His effort to escape was making him easier to catch.

To break his trail, he needed to get to water. He needed the lake, but how far was it? More than a mile, certainly, and this shore was not developed, so he wasn't going to be stumbling across any roads.

They'd chosen their location with characteristic skill. Being near a large city and a population in constant flux around the lake gave them access to plenty of genetic material—if that was even what they were after—but they were also isolated enough for them to keep themselves well hidden.

He forced himself to move more slowly, to tend his track as best he could, to reduce his visual and scent signatures.

The sun was strong, and he was sweating ever more heavily. He was exhausted from his ordeal and so dehydrated that he was beginning to struggle with muscular control.

Then he heard something—a quick rustling sound to his right. The instinctive reaction was to turn away, but you can't escape a dog like that. He is going to be faster than you are, and you cannot hide from his nose.

Flynn's hands were good enough to give him a chance to stop maybe one of them, but probably not for more than a few moments. So he turned toward the sound, and charged into the cedar thicket that the animal was sliding through.

He screamed, he couldn't help it—a short, sharp cry, instantly stifled. The dog was black except for the face, which was long and lethal-looking, but as pink as human skin. The eyes were green. They were entirely human.

Immediately on seeing Flynn, the dog turned away, careful not to expose its nose to his fists.

His gut frothy with disgust, Flynn broke off the assault, leaped out of the thicket and continued running.

Behind him, he could hear complicated, guttural sounds as the dogs communicated among themselves. They were fanning out, preparing to outrun him and capture him in a pincers movement.

A steep hillside appeared ahead. Forty feet up, the limestone emerged as a cliff, and in that cliff there were a number of low openings. Caves.

Could be good.

But no, no way. They were deathtraps. Even if they were large—huge—the dogs would gain an unbeatable advantage. They didn't need light, he did. Worse, the damp air of a cave was an ideal carrier of scent.

So he continued following the terrain lower and lower, until at last he came to water—or rather, a dry creek bed. Still, though, it led downward toward his only hope.

It began to be possible to discern the voices of individual dogs, as they muttered and growled among themselves.

As he got closer to water, the plant life grew more dense, and the thickening stands of cedar were getting harder and harder to move through.

The voices of the dogs stopped.

He thought, “they’re coming in for the kill.” Maybe he should have gone for the caves. Maybe he should have done a lot of things, chief among them not moving ahead with this until contact with some sort of headquarters had been reestablished. He’d gotten Mac killed. God only knew what had become of Diana.

Now there was silence around him. But why? He turned around and around, wishing he could somehow pierce the glowering stands of cactus and the dark cedar thickets with his eyes. What was the holdup? He must have some advantage, but what could it be?

He looked up the long rise he’d just descended. Then he turned a half turn. Nothing there but cedar. Another half turn—and winking through the choking underbrush there was a metallic gleam.

Metal, hell, that was water. Of course, the dogs had already scented it. And he saw one of them, just for an instant, a black flank gleaming with tight fur. It was moving quickly, staying low behind a stand of cactus on his right.

He saw their problem: he had a better run to the water than they did. They’d stopped here in hope that he wouldn’t see it before they could maneuver in front of him.

No longer concerned with being detected—they knew where he was to the inch—he hurled himself wildly ahead, throwing himself into the foliage between him and whatever water was below him.

There came a chilling sound, the furious rattle of a snake. They were common in the Texas hill country, with its ample supply of small animals and the warm rocks that snakes needed to gather energy.

He knew the risk, but there was no time to stop and deal with it. He threw himself against his side of the stand of cactus, tumbling away from the fat, bristle-encrusted pears, feeling them piercing his shoulder and flank.

He was falling then, dropping through resisting, scraping masses of cedar, dropping further, stopping, clawing himself free and falling again.

Breaking free, he fell ten feet, maybe more, through clear air. Enough to shatter limbs if he hit wrong and he was completely out of control.

He landed on his back in clear, cold water and heard its silence as he sank, and saw above the sun dancing on its surface. He also saw the snake hit the water, a good eight feet of writhing fury.

Stretching himself out, blowing to reduce his buoyancy, he kicked his way deeper. Close by, the silence was profound, but he could hear a distant buzzing of engines. This wasn't a stream, it was the lake itself.

He heard splashes behind him, at least a dozen of them. The dogs had lost a small battle, but that had only sped them up. His one advantage was that he could hold his breath, which was not so easy for a dog. But they were going to be faster.

He'd been winded before he fell, though, so he had to surface right now.

The instant his head broke the water, he both gobbled air and turned and turned, trying to see what he was up against. A quick count revealed the hideous heads of twelve sleek animals speeding toward him from three of four possible directions.

Immediately in front of him, not three feet away, was the snake. Sweeping his arms, he backed himself away from it. It raised itself up, using water tension to force a good three feet of its length above the surface. It couldn't strike, at least. To inject its venom, it would need to be close enough to dig its fangs into his skin.

Sucking breath after breath, he twisted around and used the one ability that he had that none of these animals, not the snake or the dogs, could equal. He could hold his breath long enough to dive deep. And once he was underwater and too far from the dogs for them to see him, they weren't going to have any way of determining his location.

He swam as deep as he could, passing over a drowned tree, characteristic of Texas's many artificial lakes. He'd pulled more than

one drowning victim out of such trees on Lake Menard.

Even as he went to the surface for air, he could hear the tireless churning of the dogs getting louder. He didn't bother to turn and look at them when he broke the surface, that would eat a good second that he couldn't afford to lose.

Again he breathed, again and again, saturating his lungs with air even as the dogs got louder. Then he saw, turning out of an inlet about a quarter of a mile away, a power boat. It swung in a graceful arc, remaining up on plane, its wake spraying behind it. Nobody would come out under that much power unless they were on a mission.

Between the dogs and the boat, he had been very neatly trapped.

Again, he dove deep, but this time did not double back toward the dogs. They were smart enough to anticipate that. They would move from line abreast to a deeper formation, and surround him and tear him apart the moment he surfaced.

The sound of the oncoming boat got louder.

He had to surface, and when he did, he saw a figure on the front of the boat. It was Morris, and in his hand was a long-barreled pistol. Some kind of a target weapon, accurate at distance.

The boat was coming fast, its wake foaming white.

He dropped beneath the surface.

The trap was sprung. Here, he ran out of options. Here, they dragged him out of the water and took him back, a thoroughly broken man.

There would be more torture, until he'd been to death and back many more times.

But why? What was it that Morris wanted him to do?

Now the boat was circling above him. As soon as he surfaced, he was going to be within range of both the pistol and the dogs.

Looking up at the hull, he could see that the twin props were on shafts that extended out behind the craft, which appeared to be about

forty feet in length.

He swam upward and, as the boat swept over him, he resurfaced in its prop wash. As he sucked air, though, one of the dogs piled into him.

He went back down, leaving the snapping jaws and churning claws behind.

Then he felt something unexpected—a current of warmer water.

This could mean only one thing, an incoming stream. He swam toward it, keeping as best he could in its warmth. No matter what, he had to remain submerged until he was in the mouth of that stream. If he went up to grab even a single breath, he was caught.

To conserve his oxygen, he forced himself to do the opposite of what instinct was screaming for him to do. He forced himself to slow down.

Moving carefully, he began to be able to see the limestone bottom rising. He was swimming up a small canyon. With just inches to spare, he passed over the skeleton of another drowned tree, this one with the stark remains of what had been a stone house below it.

The bottom rushed up, and then he was swimming in three feet of water and there were flashes in his eyes, and he was going to take another breath, and it was going to be water.

He breathed. Breathed again, deeper. But it wasn't water, he had come up into the bed of a stream no more than ten feet wide and just three feet deep.

He lay flat on his back, letting its water sluice around him, allowing just his face to break the surface. He didn't want a single molecule of odor to reach those dogs, nor a single sound, and he didn't want his body heat to be detectable, much less his image.

He remained as still as possible, just pushing himself along with his heels, doing it inch by inch. Eventually, the stream would have a bend in it. Only when he was around that bend and invisible from the lake could he dare to move more quickly. Even then, he would stay with the water.

He came to a deeper pool, the water crystal, the limestone glowing tan. Around him, birds sang. He slid deeper, waiting there with just his face exposed, minimizing the chances that his scent would reach the dogs.

Finally he moved again, slipping around a turn in the narrow creek.

All was quiet. He hadn't even stopped the birds. He raised his head and listened. Distantly, the boat's engine screamed. Good, they were operating a search pattern.

Finally, carefully, listening to every sound and watching every shadow along the banks of the stream, he eased himself to his feet.

He froze, watching and listening. There was no sound of movement in the thick brush that surrounded the creek. He crossed to the far side, then climbed a bluff until he could see what turned out to be part of Lake Travis, a mirror of the sky dotted with sails. Small white clouds flew overhead. Nearer, the boat was now stopped. He could see the dogs on board, sitting in a group on the fantail. As they worked to gain scent, their heads turned first one way and then another.

Obviously, they weren't picking up his scent, but they did not stop trying. Then one of them went to the rail. It stood, nose to the wind. Another joined it.

His heartbeat increased, he barely breathed. It was time for this reconnaissance to end, so he moved back into the water, and then quickly up the creek, which was as shallow as a few inches on this side.

He went a hundred yards, then climbed the bank and pushed his way through the brush. The ridge he had descended was about five hundred yards ahead and perhaps a hundred and twenty feet high. Somewhere beyond it was the ranch headquarters where he'd started.

A single bark, low and shockingly close, told him that he'd made a fundamental mistake doing that reconnaissance, and the trap he'd entered was already closing.

Only two alternatives were left to him, either to do something that

they wouldn't expect, or something that they couldn't counter—or, for that matter, both.

One thing that might throw the dogs off would be if he backtracked along his own scent trail. He was wet now, leaving less odor behind. They might be tricked. They might lose him.

The only problem was that doing this would return him to the ranch.

Had that been the real plan all along, to induce him to go back to the compound and be captured where he'd started his escape?

He looked carefully along the ridge, then at the cactus and tufted grass below it.

Tracking is a skill that involves not only careful observation but also careful visualization. To keep a trail, you need to not only read sign, you need to be able to discipline your imagination to see the path as the person you are tracking must have seen it.

Doubling back along the lakeside, he returned to the bend. Beyond this point, he knew that it would not be safe to go. To reduce his scent further, he submerged himself completely. Then he left the water and went across toward the bluff, crossing his own trail about sixty steps later.

Turning, he looked back the way he had come. Not surprisingly, he had left a clear track.

He scanned the terrain ahead. Were they hidden somewhere, already aware of him, already waiting in ambush?

Backtracking as carefully as he could, he climbed the ridge. He would risk the dogs noticing the movement.

He could not do the safe thing, which was to keep going out to the road. He had to determine if there was any way to help Mac, assuming he was still alive. Or Diana, for that matter. If it had been him in the Rover, he would have come in to provide support as soon as communication failed. She would have done the same, and since she hadn't, he had to assume that she was in trouble, too.

They might both be trapped in boxes somewhere, or under some other type of torture, or slated to be broken down into component parts or whatever was being done to people.

Doubling back, he made for the ranch compound. If they'd left it unguarded, he might gain some useful intelligence. Who knew, maybe he'd even turn it into a win.

Still, he had to be damn near conservative. If he lost his life, who knew what would happen then? Maybe there wasn't anybody else left. Maybe the whole operation would fail. For sure, it would be a catastrophic setback.

Atop the ridge, his own sign was quite clear, a swathe through the tall grass that looked like it had been put down by an elephant. The dogs, all nine of them, had crossed the clearing line abreast. Their tracks were straight and light. They had worked to minimize their sign.

Moving ahead, but not so fast that he would raise his skin temperature and once again intensify his scent, he worked his way back. Soon he saw, through a thick stand of cedar, the shape of a building. He went closer, slipping deep into the cedar thicket, stopping when he came to its border.

The place was silent. No sign of movement. There was the barn, a new shed nearby, and the small rock ranch house. Under some live oaks fifty yards away was the kennel.

The barn doors were still open, the interior shadowy.

He watched some mourning doves pecking in the small patch of grass near the house. These were flocking birds that fed on the ground. They were sensitive to nearby movement and would fly up at the slightest sign of disturbance. He waited, but they continued to feed in peace.

Morris could not have left this place unguarded, so its empty appearance had to be a lie.

He stepped out of the cedar and strode quickly to the barn. On the floor toward the back stood a long silver box, open, the interior lined

with black plastic. His box. There was oxygen equipment nearby, a green canister lying on its side, some tubing disconnected from two nipples on one end.

He forced back the impulse to hammer the thing to bits.

Under the pecan tree by the house, the doves were still pecking at nuts.

Mac and Diana were not in the barn.

He stepped out and moved away from the structure. Turning slowly around, he listened for anything that might help him. His hearing was good and it was very quiet, but the silence was total. By now the dogs would be breathing heavily, but he didn't hear anything that suggested their approach. Fearing the tiger, he looked, also, along the rooflines.

He dared not go close to the house. The dogs would hear the doves rising from a long way off. They would know what it meant, too, no question.

He looked toward the shed. There was a padlock on the door, a new one. His picklocks were gone, of course.

No matter how carefully he listened, only the cooing of the doves disturbed the silence of the place.

Could they have actually left him an opening? Maybe they'd never considered the idea that he'd be so foolish as to return to the compound.

He went to the shed, moving carefully and methodically. The lock was a good one. He could not force it without tools. Behind the shed, though, he found a low roof with a trapdoor in it. A storm cellar. Not surprising, given that one of the most powerful tornadoes ever recorded had touched down a few miles north of here.

He bent down, grasped the rusted iron ring in the center of the trapdoor, and pulled it up.

It was dark and silent and it felt large. Hill Country ranches didn't have big underground chambers, just root cellars, and usually not

even that. So this could be something constructed by Morris.

He wanted to call out to Mac and Diana in the darkness below, but to raise his voice was far too dangerous. As he listened, he thought he heard a faint pulsation, like a big pot boiling.

He wanted to go down the ladder, but that was beyond the limit of responsibility. He was here to make best efforts, not throw himself away.

For a long time, he listened to that sound. Boiling, he thought, definitely. No voices, no sound of movement.

As he left the shed, he heard a sound coming from the direction of the ranch house, high and sharp, that certainly was not doves. But what was it? Not a voice ... or was it? Perhaps not a human voice.

And then he heard another sound, just the slightest edge of a yap, quickly stifled.

He saw movement at the house, a door opening.

Even so, the doves did not move, which meant only one thing: they were not normal doves. They were another deception, and a very clever one indeed.

At the same moment, one of the dogs appeared at the edge of the compound. It came across the field at a trot, its tongue lolling, its eyes intent on the house. It went up to somebody hidden just inside, and as it did the person crouched down to greet it.

It was one of the creatures from the village. In the sunlight, its skin was yellow-gray and its eyes seemed, if anything, more deeply sad than they had in the gloom of the structure. He could see a shadow of humanity there, but also something else. Was it a mix of a creature like Oltisis and a man?

Maybe, but it couldn't walk the streets, not by a long shot, not like Morris could.

The high-pitched sounds became a strange, musical cooing, joined by the dog's voice, a group of vocalizations more complex than any ordinary dog could make.

They were taking pleasure in one another, these two misbegotten creatures, a dog with a man's eyes and this ... thing. The dog licked the creature's hands and it smiled, its teeth jutting out of its mouth like blades.

More dogs appeared, and then the snarl of engines as two four-wheelers burst out of the brush.

Flynn faded back toward the far side of the compound, trying to keep the shed between himself and the danger.

When he was back in the brush and somewhat concealed, he turned and ran toward the road he and Diana and Mac had come in on.

As far as he was concerned, the secrecy was over. Without Diana and Oltis, he had no official recourse. So he needed to bring some level of policing authority into the situation, and damn the secrecy. Let the secret get out. Better that it did.

Problem was, he also knew that the cops wouldn't do anything serious unless they had evidence of a crime, and so far he couldn't offer much. Certainly not enough to enable, say, the Travis County Sheriff's Office to get a warrant to enter onto the ranch property. No judge was going to approve a warrant on the basis of what would sound like the ravings of a lunatic. The fact was that he wasn't going to get any police action out of a claim that there was a village full of aliens on some rancher's property—unless they tossed him into the state hospital over in Austin.

Even if by some miracle they did move, it would not happen overnight, and this needed to get done fast. The only thing that might work against the kind of power and intelligence he was seeing was speed.

There was only one answer: he had to come back here with serious firepower, and fast, and he needed to kill them all.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

He sat hunched over a beer at one of his college haunts, a place called the Scholz Garten in central Austin. He'd come here because it was deep in the inner city, and Morris and Elder might be cautious in a populated area.

He sat at his old table in the far corner of the outdoor beer garden. Across from him was Abby's chair. It was late in the afternoon, the shadows were long, and the memories of her were as raw as blood.

Once he had reached the road, it hadn't taken him long to find the spot where the Rover had been. It was gone, but there was no sign of anything unusual, such as tire marks that might indicate a sudden departure. The truck had remained in place for some time. He had even been able to make out scorch marks left where the catalytic converter had touched some grass.

As he sipped beer, he searched gun classifieds in a local rag. He was looking for a very specific weapon, a Heckler and Koch MP5. If he could find a dealer with a Federal Firearms License and the weapon in his inventory, he was hoping he could obtain it and let the paperwork float along behind the transaction. To own a fully automatic machine gun in Texas, he'd need to get a sign-off from a local honcho of some kind, but he was figuring that could be accomplished with a donation.

He went to the pay phone, dropped in four quarters and phoned a guy called Joe Harris in a little town called Lost Mill, who advertised a selection of weapons. He had no HK in stock, but he thought he could get his hands on one pretty quickly.

"How fast?"

"Well, I could get it brought in here—let's see—how about seven?"

He would need to carry it around, so he wanted concealment. “Does it have the CIA case?” This was a briefcase with a trigger in the handle, a nice piece of equipment.

“No CIA case. Those things are hard to come by.”

“Don’t I know it. So I’ll be around at seven to take a look.”

After he’d reached the highway, he had hitched and walked until he got to a place called Four Points, where he’d found a bus and taken it into Austin.

When he’d rented the car he was now driving, the clerks at the Avis station had been concerned about his appearance. He looked like a tramp with an improbable amount of cash, and the cash was mysteriously damp. He’d used his real credential, and the police identification had reassured them, fortunately, just enough to get them to give him a car. The use of cash would keep the rental record at the station until the car was returned and the completed transaction processed.

He didn’t want to show the gun dealer his real pass, for fear of spooking him, and he couldn’t meet him looking like he was headed directly to the nearest 7-Eleven to commit mayhem, so he planned a first stop at a motel to clean up.

Everything was so very normal, the Texas sun starting to set behind tight little clouds, traffic passing on Congress Avenue, up the street the improbably immense state capitol building looming over the city. All was quiet—but Texas streets could be deceptive, as he well knew. There had been some notable crimes committed in this city, some textbook crimes. A classic story of police action against a sniper had unfolded at the summit of the University of Texas tower back years ago, which was still studied as a model of how to respond to such an emergency, and, for that matter, how not to. A cop had died investigating the sound of gunshots. The lesson: don’t expose yourself until you know where the shots are coming from.

He drove south on Congress, then took First Street to Interstate Thirty-Five. Harris was just the other side of the line in Hays County.

Between here and there was a Super Target, and not far away, a motel.

As he drove, he automatically kept his rear under surveillance. Once on Thirty-Five, he stayed well below the speed limit and far to the left, letting the traffic pass him like a river. Texans are not slow drivers, and nobody hung with him.

He knew that the gun was going to cost a lot. He would need to bring cash, which meant a visit to a bank. When he'd dipped the special ATM card earlier, though, it was dead. He visualized some bureaucrat deep in some Washington cubbyhole canceling the cards as soon as contact was lost with their holders. Nobody would ever stop to think that this might leave them in the wind. Budgets trumped lives, always.

Fortunately, there were Frost Bank branches here. This was his bank in Menard, an old Texas outfit, and he was going to need to make a substantial withdrawal from his personal savings. He had about thirty grand on deposit and he'd have to get it all. It was already a quarter to six. He watched for a branch.

As he drove south along the highway, he saw a Wells Fargo, and somewhat later a Frost Bank sign. He pulled off the next exit and doubled back.

The branch was small, but when he handed over his withdrawal slip, the clerk didn't react with any surprise. This was agricultural country south of Austin, full of farms and ranches and basic businesses like rock quarries. There were going to be a lot of illegals working, and that would mean cash payrolls.

"Hundreds, please," he said. Bigger bills were faster to count and took up less space. He carried the money out in a brown paper bag, got into the car and stashed it under the backseat.

His next stop was Target. His clothes were done, and in any case, they'd been touched by those creatures out there—God knows what they had done to him while he was unconscious—and he wanted them off his body. He wanted a long, thorough shower, lots of soap.

In the Target, he headed for men's clothing. He passed a mother with her two girls looking through racks, a clerk stocking a shelf with radios, a couple of guys searching for T-shirts, and he found himself at once loving them as he had never been aware of loving his fellow man before, and also feeling oddly distant from them.

He understood the origin of Diana's inner distance. It was having secret knowledge of a larger world that did it. They were innocent, he was not.

He found the camouflage sweats he needed, and then the black sneakers. A ski cap and mask were harder, but he eventually dug some up in a sale bin. He also got a white shirt and some slacks, and threw in a dark blue windbreaker, the thinnest one he could find. He planned to buy a pistol off Harris as well.

In the checkout line, he waited behind a family who was buying a gas grill and had a lot of questions about it. The wait was hard.

Finally, he left the store and crossed the parking lot to his car. The details of the world were in sharp focus, sounds, movements, the expressions on people's faces, even the feel of the asphalt beneath his feet. It was how he felt just before walking into a domestic dispute, which can so often turn out to be a more dangerous situation than it seems. More cops were injured and killed on domestics than on any other type of run.

Given his plan, he did not expect to survive his return to the compound, and, frankly, he was beyond caring. If there was an afterlife, he'd be with Abby. If not, then not. The only thing that mattered was that everybody at the compound also came out dead.

He reached the motel at six twenty. He checked in and went quickly to his room. This was a point of vulnerability. He was unarmed, so if they were following him, this was an ideal time to take him.

He threw his bag of clothes on the bed, stripped and showered with the curtain open. He was focusing down very tightly now, concentrating his thoughts on the unfolding mission, preparing his

mind and body for action.

Once he was cleaned up, he drove to Joe Harris's operation, which consisted of two double-wides on a bare lot in bleak scrubland south of Austin.

The first thing that came to his mind was that the setup wasn't straight. The double-wides had the barren look of crook places.

Harris had dogs behind a chain-link fence, which frantically announced themselves as Flynn walked up the uneven flagstones leading to the first trailer. This was about the point, when he was in a uniform, that he would've unsnapped his holster.

At least they were just ordinary dogs.

He knocked on the flimsy door.

"Yo."

"I'm Flynn Carroll, I called about the HK."

The door opened onto a man who looked like he'd been inflated and then rubbed with beet juice. Even a mustache that would've caused a sensation in Dodge City failed to hide train-wreck teeth when he smiled.

Flynn recognized it as meth mouth, the dentist's dream.

"Well, come on in," Harris said, his accent deceptively softened by the south. But this was not a soft man.

Flynn stepped into the dim, smoke-choked interior. An air conditioner screamed as if in its death throes, doing little more than jostle the sweaty air. The chrys smoke was almost dense enough to induce a transfer high, and, in fact, Flynn took a slight hit from it. Felt good, which was bad. Drugs and high-intensity action are mortal enemies. When quarter seconds count, as they would tonight, you need to be spotlessly clean.

An HK in pristine condition lay on the Formica table that filled half the kitchen area.

"I assume you can show the cash, 'cause she can't go outa here on no check or nothin'."

Flynn noted that there had been no mention of paperwork or identification. He also took note of the Diablos tattoo on Joe's arm, and of the fact that he was wearing a small pistol on his right ankle, maybe an AMG Backup. Not very accurate, but in a confined space like this, who cared?

"It's in my car," Flynn said. "How much're we lookin' at?"

"I'm thinkin' about twenty-two thousand dollars, sir."

"That's strong."

"You look at 'er. She got class, a lotta class. Plus this fella, it turned out he had—lemme get this here—" He brought up a black plastic briefcase. "This is just dead on for the CIA case."

It was a good briefcase, no question there, the trigger mechanism solidly constructed.

What he had in the car was exactly twenty-two thousand two hundred dollars. He decided to see just how crooked this crook was.

"I need to take the gun with me. Can we let the paperwork float?"

"You plannin' some kinda score?"

"I have a buyer. Kinda on the warm side."

"*Cucuracha?*" It was slang for a cartel enforcer.

"Big enough to cook and eat."

The guy looked into Flynn's eyes, looking for some kind of sting, no doubt. In Flynn's experience, guys like this always ended up trusting plainclothes cops more than they did their own damn mothers, they were that stupid.

"I'll tell you," Joe finally said, "I don't know if you noticed, but the governor's kinda stopped carin' who does fed paperwork and who don't. I mean, you ain't gonna go shoot up the capitol, I hope. 'Cause that would be embarrassing." He chuckled. His eyes never left Flynn's. "I see you in there, you little shit pussy. Your *cucuracha* ain't around here, is he? You're gonna sell this thing cros't the border, ain'tcha? Gonna get some Border Patrol killed, probably. I don't think I can do that."

It was an opening gambit. Soon, the price would be thirty grand. Flynn didn't really care, because he had decided that he wasn't going to be a buyer today. He was, however, leaving with the weapon.

"I'm not in the business," he said. "I don't bargain."

"What are you, then?"

"I don't want to lie to you. I'm gonna put you on your ass and take your gun."

"*Wh-a-at?*"

"I don't want to. But this HK is hot and I'm not gonna pay anything close to that kind of money for a hot gun. Anyway, I'm probably pretty hot myself, so I kinda think we were made for each other."

A hand meaty enough to be a filling meal started for the ankle holster. Flynn reached across the table and bumped Joe's ulnar nerve against his humerus. The hand flopped and Joe yelled.

Still without getting up, Flynn aimed a blow at the middle of his chin, thrusting upward as he connected. There was a crack and Joe's head pitched back. He fell over in his chair, crashing against the sink hard enough to bring more than a few filthy dishes down with him.

Flynn stood. One thing he had learned from watching bad guys screw up was never to waste time in a situation like this. Do what you have to do and get out.

He looked down at Joe. He'd be in slumberland for ten minutes, maybe a little less.

He laid the HK in the case and made sure all the magazines were full. There wasn't time to toss the place for more rounds, so what was in the three thirty-round magazines had to be enough.

As far as a carry weapon was concerned, he didn't see any pistols in view, so he contented himself with taking Joe's AMG. It was chambered for the .380 ACT round, which was good. This round gave it better stopping power than the more common version, which was chambered for a .22 round. There were also a few of these out there that could accept a .45 cartridge, but the accuracy was really poor.

The combination of the pistol's fixed barrel and the ACT round's low breech pressure offered an outstanding mix of accuracy and firepower for a compact pistol. Ole Joe did indeed know his guns.

Leaving the trailer, Flynn made it a point not to hurry. There were bound to be eyes on this meet, no question. He couldn't afford to raise suspicion, otherwise every cracker inside of three counties was going to be here in minutes. Forget the cops, these guys were way more dangerous than the law. You messed with Diablos, you dealt with Diablos, no police need apply.

His next step was clear. He would return to the Lake Travis area and await darkness. Then he would move on Morris and his people and his animals, and what would happen would happen.

A machine gun is a good weapon. Used correctly, of course, and he knew how to do that.

As he drove, he considered his chances. On balance, he thought that Morris had not expected him to return to the compound. It hadn't been a trap at all, but a mistake. So he could be outsmarted—once, anyway. Maybe, then, twice.

He had one objective and one objective only: waste Morris and all who were with him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

He had planned his return to the property as carefully as he could using Google maps and satellite views he examined on a computer at a copy shop. The house and the barn appeared on the satellite view, for example, but not the shed, the village, or the kennel. Diana's images had been real time, of course, but Google satellite photos averaged about two years old.

This meant that the dogs and the creatures in the village were all recent additions. Ominously, then, they were in the process of expanding their operations here. But it also meant that there had to be vulnerabilities. Something wasn't properly guarded. Some plan of defense was flawed. The question was, would he be able to find that flaw?

One thing was certain: the whole operation—compound, village, all of it—would be carefully guarded now, and in depth.

He had waited until nine before setting out. He wanted as much time as he could get prior to moonrise, which tonight was at eleven twenty-six. But he also didn't want to arrive any earlier than he had to. He'd used the time to find stores where he could put together a new rig.

In his backpack was a pair of fairly decent night vision binoculars with an infrared light source. In addition to the AMG backup and the HK, he was now carrying two Tasers and a good combat knife.

He had considered blowing the whole place to kingdom come, but you are not going to be able to buy the necessary explosive materials without tripping all kinds of alerts. It was one thing to get hold of a machine gun of a type used by the drug cartels and readily available on the black market, another to buy explosives that Homeland

Security took an interest in.

Before he left, he'd located on the map a new spot to leave the rental car, and as he drove down the main road, he ran his plan mentally, dwelling for a moment on each phase, making certain that everything was as well thought out as possible.

He'd worked the maps carefully, and took a different approach to the ranch. He didn't want to park anywhere near the place they'd left the Rover. For this reason he drove not past the ranch, but down to the little marina that was in an inlet about a mile away. He had hit upon the idea of playing two cards at once. He could conceal the car and also disable the boat, which was almost certainly kept there.

He parked in the marina's lot. There was a snack shack still open, and he strolled in and bought a Coke, then, as if he owned the place, ambled down to the single floating dock. It was not difficult to recognize Morris's boat, a forty-foot twin built for speed. He stepped aboard, then slipped in under the protective canvas. Wiring a boat with two engines to deal with would be an annoyance, but he didn't need to start it. He pulled up the engine cover of the port Chevy and quickly removed the distributor cap and tossed it overboard. For good measure, he ripped out the gas line. He repeated the performance with the starboard engine.

Bon voyage, bastards.

It would be a long trek up to the ranch compound, and it would take him closer to the village than he'd like, but the steepness also meant that getting back down here fast was going to be a lot easier.

Returning to his car, he opened the rear deck and methodically equipped himself. He wore the knife in a sheath on his left hip. Easier to reach with his right hand. He tucked the AMG into the ankle holster he'd taken off its owner. The night vision binoculars went around his neck, with the fully loaded magazines in two big fanny packs. He carried the HK naked. If he had occasion to carry the machine gun in population, he'd use the case, but there was no need here. Dressed as he was, any cop was going to see him as a threat anyway, so there was no real point in hiding it.

As long as he could, he kept to the road for ease of movement. Once he left it, though, he rolled on the ski mask. White skin was easy to see even on the darkest night. Of course, with night vision equipment, he would still be easy to spot. Not to mention the animals. The dogs' noses worked all the time, but the tiger's eyes were going to be a lot better in the dark.

He had bought some copper screen at Home Depot, and had fitted it into the crown of the dark blue cap he was wearing, so he wasn't worried about a MindRay. They might have something better, but there was nothing he could do about that, or any equipment of extremely advanced design, for that matter.

His assumption was that, one way or another, he was certain to be detected. The question was, how close could he go and how much destruction could he cause before they dropped him? And they would do that, no question. He was here to kill, and therefore also to die.

He thought he had at least an even chance against the tiger, as long as he could see it in time. With his armory, he could take the dogs, but any use of his guns would obviously end all surprise, so if they came out, he planned to fade back, then return later.

His pace was steady, the road empty. The eastern sky glowed faintly. The moon was on its way.

He reached the point where the road bent slightly to the right, and as he came around the curve, he heard a sound, low, not quite an engine noise, but also not natural. Not the tiger or the dogs, so probably a machine of some sort.

Barely breathing, he slid into a cedar thicket at the roadside. Slowly, the sound grew louder. It was a motor noise. Carefully, moving just as he would when he was stalking somebody very smart, he raised the binoculars to his eyes. He looked up the road. Nothing. And yet the sound was becoming more detailed. Something very quiet, and therefore probably closer than it seemed.

It was ratcheting now, like nothing so much as large insect wings.

Then he saw it, flying right up the center of the road as

methodically as if it was a miniature drone, a four-inch wasp, black with yellow stripes on its abdomen.

No wasp flew like this and no wasp was this big, not even in Texas.

Almost certainly, it was a drone. The Pentagon could make fake insects, he'd read about them being deployed as spy cameras in Afghanistan. But this was beyond that, this was an actual, living creature that was also a machine.

Continuing directly down the center of the road, it flew slowly past.

He remained still, not moving the binoculars, not moving anything.

The creature made a slow circle above the center of the road. It hovered, facing the thicket. Flynn stopped breathing. It was a calculated risk. His stillness would make it harder for the insect's compound eyes to detect him, a fact he remembered from high school biology. Assuming that it even had compound eyes. Who the hell knew, maybe it could see the head of a pin at ten miles.

It came closer, hovering, its yellow legs folded beneath its abdomen. As any country Texan would, he recognized it as a Cicada Killer, a big, normally benign wasp that was common in the region. Big, but not the size of a jumbo shrimp, which this thing was going to top by a good half inch.

As it examined the thicket, the head moved from side to side, but not with the mechanical seeking of an insect. No question, it was under intelligent control.

The thing maneuvered into the thicket, its head now jerking quickly from side to side. So it was indeed using compound eyes, and therefore it must be a genetically modified wasp, not a machine made to look like a wasp. It was, in effect, a living camera, and whoever was watching through those eyes was trying to overcome their limitations with rapid head motions. The result was a horrifyingly odd and unnatural spectacle, a wasp moving its head as if it was on a spring, all the while flying with bizarre deliberation.

It came closer. If he made the least motion, he was going to be seen. The operator was obviously already suspicious or the thing

wouldn't have stopped to examine this particular thicket. In any case, Flynn was soon going to have to move. In another thirty seconds, he'd have to release his breath, and when he did, he would be detected.

Slowly, its wings humming, the wasp drifted among the branches, moving more skillfully than any wasp should. It came closer to him. Its head vibrated. It came closer yet, so close that he could feel the air of its wings on his cheek.

Then it was silent. Where had it gone? He waited. Had it flown away?

A tickling began, first on his cheek, then on his temple, then a scratching on his eyeball. It was on his face, crawling there, and now not only could he not breathe, he could not blink, not once, not while the tiny claws tapped his watering eye and the head vibrated, buzzing more faintly than the wings had, and the mind behind those eyes, perhaps in the village, perhaps at the ranch, tried to understand what they were seeing.

Over his head, then, there came a sudden flutter, loud, then a great, rattling clatter and the Cicada Killer's wings snarled and it buzzed away. For an instant, Flynn was confused. Then he realized that the creature was chasing a cicada that its presence in the thicket had just disturbed.

Living machines had their limitations, it seemed, insofar as they remained true to their instincts.

Breathing again at last, he reached up and rubbed his tear-filled eye.

Then he thought, "Did the thing go off chasing the cicada, or did it make me and fly away for that reason?"

The ranch was another world, where technology had entered animals and changed their deepest natures. Not only the tiger and the dogs, but also that snake, he felt sure, had been altered. Also, the doves, which was why they hadn't flocked when there was movement in the house. They had been another trap, continuing to feed and express no alarm as the dogs silently approached. All the while,

though, someone had been watching through their eyes, and sending information back to the dogs.

He slipped out of the thicket and into the clearing behind it, which was now glowing with the light of the rising moon. He was moving way too slowly, he had to pick up his pace.

He remembered as a boy lying on the plains side by side with Abby, her hand slipping into his as the moon rose, and glowing above them, the cathedral of the Milky Way.

The mystery of the stars. The tragic face of the creatures in the village. Morris smiling like a doll smiles. The eyes of the dogs, green some and brown and blue—full of humanity and the savagery of animals.

The tiger, curious, sorrowful, and brutal.

By dead reckoning now, he moved toward the compound. He remembered telling Diana “Love your gun,” and it was truer now for him than it had ever been before. The metal of it vibrated under his hands with a secret life. The trigger longed to be pulled. The gun was a life changer, an engine of evolution. The gun was holy, it was god in metallic form. The gun was freedom.

A flashlight, maybe, flickered on the path ahead.

As he looked, he also listened to the rustlings of the night, seeking for the sighing movement of a new hunter slipping through the tall grass.

When would he see the tiger? When would he see the dogs? Or would another snake seek him out, a big copperhead, perhaps, as swift as a shadow?

Before him was a long rise, and beyond it a glow. The compound, it had to be. There was nothing else out here but the village, and it didn't show lights.

Binoculars or not, the house was just an indistinct shape. But there was more movement between it and the barn, people going back and forth. How many was he contending with, five or ten? More?

He wondered if the humans involved here were really traitors to their species, or were they themselves in some way under control?

If he thought he had a choice, he would not be here, not with all these unknowns involved, any one of which could destroy him.

In the corner of his left eye, there was the flicker of a swift shadow, but when he turned it was gone.

That was the only evidence he needed. That had been a dog and therefore he had run out of options. His plan had been simple. Rush the place, spraying it with machine-gun fire, all the while seeking to target Morris.

Now, getting to the house was going to require another approach. At some point, any rush was going to be stopped by the animals.

To his left was the long white bone of the caliche road that he had just left. To his right, a clearing full of stands of prickly pear cactus and cedar. Night-blooming flowers filled the air with fragrance.

Something caught his eye—not a movement, but a shape that did not fit the terrain.

In the clearing, standing so still that he almost hadn't seen it, was the tiger. Incredibly, it was not a hundred feet away, close to its ambush range. As always, it had stalked him with almost supernatural skill.

He didn't move. It didn't move.

Three seconds passed. Five.

He couldn't kill it, not without the noise of gunfire reaching the house.

Its long body was low to the ground, but he could see it clearly, almost flowing like a liquid as it edged closer to him.

Unlike at the Hoffman place, there were no trees here to use as a backstop, just these gnarled stands of cedar, and the cat would be at a definite advantage inside one, able to make its way among the branches much more easily than he could.

A nearby sigh drew his eye to the tiger again. Incredibly, it was

now less than ten feet away. It had come on him much faster than he had anticipated, even with his knowledge of its skills. Moving slowly, he slid the little AMG into his hand.

He could not see it anymore, but he could hear its breathing, deep and slow, completely calm, no tension in it at all. Still without moving a muscle, he attempted to determine the direction the breathing was coming from. Behind him? Possibly. Possibly also off to the left. In fact, since he was right-handed, his left rear would be his most vulnerable spot. Probably, it had even factored that in, it was that smart.

A nervous finger kept touching the trigger on the little pistol. Once again, they were at what was becoming a familiar impasse. His only survivable situation was if his first shot was a head shot. At night, with a fast-moving target and a small, short-nosed pistol like this, it would be almost all luck.

There was a faint sound, perhaps an intake of breath—and he realized that the tiger wasn't behind him anymore at all, but now concealed in the cedar directly ahead.

This time, it had outmaneuvered him. The battle of wits that had begun in Montana was over.

The tiger had won.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

He braced the pistol. There was a streak of movement, the sound of big paws skidding in dirt—and then the frantic blowing cry of a deer.

The tiger had run right past Flynn, moving so suddenly and so quickly that he wouldn't have had a chance to get off even a single shot.

Flynn watched it as it busied itself devouring the deer it had just brought down. The creature had died at once, and the tiger now lay on the ground gobbling into its entrails.

There was no question in Flynn's mind but that the tiger had seen him and had definitely known that it had a chance to take him.

He recalled that moment in the storm drain, the curiosity in its face, and the sadness.

The tiger had self-awareness, and the tiger apparently did not like the situation it found itself in. "Slaves are dangerous, Mr. Morris," he thought to himself. Good.

He didn't plan to push his luck, though, so he left it to its kill, fading quickly back through the cedar thicket, then heading due east toward the highway. He was glad that he trained himself in the skills of orienteering and dead reckoning. He didn't need a compass to make sure that he didn't accidentally close the distance between himself and the house instead.

As he walked, the ground rose slowly, until he had a huge view of Lake Travis, dotted with the lights of boats. Very faintly, he could hear music echoing across the waters.

He had to win this battle this night, that music must never be silenced.

Now he was directly behind the house, and about half a mile out. He understood, though, that he was looking at an unknown world full of unknown creatures—insects that were really observation platforms, snakes infused with extreme aggression, human-dog mixes, the tiger, and who knew what else? What of the creatures from the village? Nothing would prevent them roaming these hills at night. They had overpowered him so easily that if he so much as spotted one from a distance, his only choice was going to be to blow his cover by killing it immediately.

Never standing to full height, slipping quickly from cedar thicket to cedar grove, he moved as quickly as he could.

When he once again reached the caliche road, he paused to see if he could gain any additional information from remaining entirely still for a time. He backed into a stand of cedar. It would somewhat cover his scent, should the dogs come around, or the tiger decide that he was, after all, to be attacked.

Using the binoculars, he reconnoitered up and down the pale strip. No animals in evidence except an armadillo about a hundred yards away, snuffling for grubs along the roadside. Or was it only that?

Armadillos gave dogs a wide berth, so maybe it was an indicator that they weren't nearby. More likely, though, it was like the doves, a subtle deception. So it probably meant that the dogs were indeed nearby.

There was another noise, but this time it was more rhythmic, not the hum of wings.

He stepped out into the road, hesitated, then reached down and felt the ground—and felt a vibration. He pushed the binoculars to his face, and saw, just nosing around a bend in the direction of the highway, the glittering grillwork of a car with its lights off.

It was too late for him to jump back and too late to move carefully enough to conceal his tracks. He leaped ahead and rolled into the brush. Then he froze. The car had a full view of him now, and movement attracts the human eye, especially in the dark. Even under

conditions where a man can't see a boulder ten feet ahead of him, he can pick up movement.

As the car approached, he remained absolutely still. He was looking at a GMC Acadia, black, moving slow enough to avoid kicking up dust in the dry roadway.

Was this another attacker? Some sort of outlying patrol?

A shaft of moonlight rested on the driver's face as the vehicle crept past. Flynn saw a woman's hair, some kind of a sweatshirt, and a face with a distinctive, immediately recognizable profile.

He lay there in the ditch, his mind racing. *Diana?*

But no, it was impossible. She had recruited them all, she had created the team. But it was a very special team, wasn't it, consisting exclusively of the few police officers who had complained to the FBI that the abductions were real.

They had all been slaughtered, all but one.

Had it been another deception, designed to silence the few people who had realized what was happening and were equipped to do something about it?

Still puzzling it out, he rose from the ditch and faded back onto the far side of the road, into the land that belonged to the state wildlife refuge.

From his experience as a detective, he knew not to draw conclusions until the facts came into focus, and they weren't in focus now. In fact, they had just gone out of focus—way out of focus.

He had never known that it was possible to feel this isolated and alone.

He also knew from the bitter anger that he felt that he had begun to love Diana—not that she had replaced Abby, but that, as this ordeal went on, he had been finding a place in his heart for her.

But who did she love? Who was she, really? Cut away all the promises and all the claims, and what was left was an ID that she admitted was false.

He put some distance between himself and the ranch, crossing a limestone hill, stopping only when he reached a bluff. Far below was the lake. This was the bluff where he'd seen the caves. Were they of any use to him now? Maybe, but the chance of getting trapped was too great.

He had definitely been observed by the tiger and possibly in other ways, so he could not risk remaining on this side of the ranch. Also, he needed to regain his pace. The moon was already well risen, the land flooded with its glow. The more he hesitated, the more his danger increased.

Even so, this whole side of the property was now compromised. He had no choice but to descend the bluff, go back across the road near the marina, and climb up to the ranch from the other direction.

If he was fast, this might work.

He clambered down, intending to double back and make his way along the lakeside until he reached the stream, then cut through it and return in his earlier scent trail.

When he was about halfway down, there was a flash from below. It wasn't bright but it was followed by a familiar electric crackle that surprised him so much that he almost lost his grip. Struggling not to fall, he turned to look down—and saw, incredibly, that the entire clearing at the foot of the bluff was filled with the creatures of the village with their great, stricken eyes. Four of them had Tasers, and a fifth had something that from this distance was far more dangerous. This was a rifle, probably one that he or Mac had brought into the village.

Laden with the machine gun, the heavy magazines, and his other equipment, Flynn nevertheless had only one maneuver. He had to climb back the way he had come.

Immediately, a rifle shot rang out. It was wide to the left, perhaps fifteen feet away and low. Knowing as much as he did about shooting, Flynn knew to move toward the impact point, not away from it. And indeed, this caused the shooter to miss again, this time by five feet to

the right.

If he was lucky, this would work one more time, maybe two. The shooter was small, therefore clumsy with the rifle. But with unknown capabilities. He increased his speed.

Another shot struck the limestone, this one close enough for him to feel a spray of shattered stone against his cheek. The shooter was either brilliant or very poor, to be trying for a head shot.

Another shot, and this time Flynn felt the heat of it. Limestone fragments from the bluff stung his neck.

The next shot would make it.

He reached the lip of the bluff.

Pulling himself up with all his strength, he rolled onto the top as two shots in quick succession slammed into the limestone just below him.

The shooter had found his target, but an instant too late.

They were racing up the bluff with the ease of creatures made to climb.

He ran, speeding toward the road. He was desperate now and he knew it. His only hope was to make it back to the marina and get to the car. But they could flank him easily, and there were the dogs and there was the tiger, and Diana out there, who could be extremely dangerous, as much as she knew about the way he thought.

The car. Now. His last chance.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

He stayed off the road itself, leaping stands of cactus, darting around cedar thickets, stumbling when he came upon a concealed draw, then picking himself up and continuing on.

He ran hard and far, passing through the silent countryside with the swiftness of a deer, quick but vulnerable.

He couldn't hear a sound behind him or around him. It was as if he was entirely alone. And now he had to add a new concern, which was the silent helicopter. Now that they were certain he was here but no longer sure of his location, it might well become involved.

He reached the marina, which was closed and dark. He rejected the idea of taking one of the boats. Even if he had time to wire it, they would then know where he would appear next, somewhere along the lake.

His car was the only one left in the hard-dirt parking area. He ran to it and got in. As he inserted the key in and started it, he looked up and down the road, seeing no movement.

An explosion shattered the air, and for an instant he thought the car had been bombed. But it was a rifle bullet. It had shattered the windshield. The shooter was in the brush fifty feet away.

He threw the car into gear and floored it. As he accelerated, the little car fishtailed wildly in the dirt of the parking area. Fighting to regain control, he pressed the gas pedal and it leaped ahead.

Dust churned up behind him as he sped along the marina road. His plan was now to violate all the rules. Instead of running from this impossible situation, he intended to rush the house and just shoot until they got him.

But the moment he turned into the ranch's road itself, the black GMC that Diana had been driving appeared, blocking his progress.

Hauling on the steering wheel, he turned into the pasture and went slamming through a mass of cactus so large that his tires spun in the pulp.

A second later, the truck was behind him, its grill filling his rear window.

As he maneuvered through the pasture, he fumbled the backpack open and worked the machine gun into his hand. To stop the vehicle chasing him, he needed a perfect burst. He levered the gun to semi-automatic mode.

Was he about to kill Diana?

He put the thought firmly aside. This was work, feelings came later.

The truck kept close, so close that he couldn't see the windshield. The driver wasn't a fool, he probably knew that if Flynn got a shot at it, he was a dead man, and also that Flynn wasn't going to waste bullets firing into the radiator.

A series of cracks, nicely measured, resulted in his own rear window being blown away. A powerful round was in use, sounded like a .308, probably a NATO round. Blow his head right off.

He swerved around some cedar, then skidded into more cactus, then plunged down into a draw. Behind him, the GMC blasted through the brush, pushing dense cedar aside like it was grass.

Again there was gunfire, and this time Flynn felt the whole car tremble as it took the shock of a round penetrating the trunk.

So they were going for the gas tank. Smart enough. He still had no shot.

Something had to be done, or he was going to lose this thing right here and right now. He drove on, unable to determine a productive course of action.

Then he saw water, then again, ahead and to the right, the lake, its surface far down another bluff.

Okay, here was a maneuver for him. He got the HK into the backpack and opened his door. Now he was driving fast along the bluff's edge, doing forty, fifty, the car shaking itself almost to pieces. Outside his door, the cliff fell away.

This was going to be a very damn close thing. Very close. He didn't often bother God with his crap, but he bothered God now. A lot.

He spun the wheel to the left, causing the Cruze to literally go into tumbling flight. As it did, he dropped out of the open door and onto the cliff's edge.

The car went spinning into the lake.

He let himself fall and keep falling, breaking his plunge as best he could. Finally, he was sliding, then some roots and a loose boulder temporarily stopped him.

Far below, the car struck the water. Nothing left but a red trunk, then the night blue of the lake, the car gone forever.

He looked up, and saw five feet above him another of the caves. Yesterday's deathtrap was today's refuge.

As the truck snarled back and forth on the ledge, Flynn clambered into the cave. How well did they know him? If Diana was involved, they would be certain that he hadn't been in that car when it struck the water.

A moment later, he had his answer. It came in the form of gravel dropping down past the mouth of the cave.

So they knew their man.

The air coming out of the cave was cool—too cool, in fact, for this to be a small place. Back there somewhere was a very large cave indeed. Limestone tends to cave out over time, and this was old country.

He took his binoculars out of his pocket and saw, stretching away behind him, a substantial cavern. Its ceilings were cracked, there was rubble everywhere, and the only access to deeper areas was through a series of openings that looked like real traps, the kind of places that

would never let you find your way out.

No time to lose, though. As somebody dropped down outside the mouth of the cave, he plunged into the opening with the strongest breeze, and found himself squeezed tight as he forced his way along.

Confined spaces were never pleasant, and he had been sensitized by that damn coffin, but he kept pushing, dragging the backpack behind him, one of its straps around his left ankle.

He came out into a larger space—and saw all around him huge, glaring eyes. His heart practically exploded out of his mouth, but he choked back the scream as he realized that these were not living creatures but paintings of the gods of some forgotten tribe of Indians. They were beautiful, tall, staring balefully, their arms pointing toward the ceiling—where, when he raised his head—he saw a magnificent representation of the night sky.

Scraping echoed through the cave as his pursuers started down the shaft he'd just come through.

He headed deeper, walking, stooping, running when he could, not really keeping track of his movements. He could get lost in here, no question. But no matter what kind of twists and turns he took, he always heard behind him the scrape of their footsteps, and their quiet grunting as they negotiated the next narrow passage.

No more than one or two of them, he thought.

He smelled dry grass—just a whiff of it, but it was there. That bit of air had come from the surface. So there was another entrance ahead.

Sucking air, painting the way ahead with infrared, he was soon moving steadily upward.

Behind him, the sound of their scrabbling had grown louder.

A glow ahead, then a faint voice from behind shouting at him to stop. He did not stop. Then there came the crack of a shot. The bullet was wide, but not very. He ran away from the sound and toward the glow—and found himself clawing his way out through a big stand of cactus, clawing and pulling at it, and forcing his body out to the surface.

Ignoring the torture of a thousand needles, he came up through the cactus—and saw, not fifty yards away, the truck. As he trotted toward it, he could hear that its engine was still running. He didn't wait, he ran toward the vehicle, putting every single bit of strength he still possessed into the sprint.

The truck was empty, so he now had two choices. He could take the truck and head back to the highway and get the hell out of there. Or he could rush the ranch compound with it.

He turned the truck toward the house. His job. His battle.

He did not see the two figures in the road behind him, did not see one of them yank an old Stetson off his head and hurl it to the ground in frustration.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

He stopped just out of view of the ranch to check his weapons a last time.

The HK was in good shape, and you wouldn't expect a weapon this durable to have any problem with a little fall down a cliff. All the magazines were there.

He stuffed the AMG into the pocket of his jeans and transferred the extra machine-gun magazines to his belt. Not the most secure way to carry them, but it was what he had. His most critical moments would be during exchanges. He'd trained with an HK and knew that he could pull and set two magazines in just under three seconds. Good time, but maybe not good enough.

He pulled the vehicle forward until he could see the compound. The house appeared quiet, the lights out. Beyond it, the barn was also dark. To every appearance, the place had been abandoned.

He took deep breaths, cleared his mind, and concentrated his attention on the world around him. He saw, just for an instant, some camouflage in motion about two hundred yards away. Somebody was in among a stand of mesquite, using the mottled shade as cover against the moonlight.

If he'd seen them, they could see him. He put the truck in gear and began moving toward the house. He drove quickly. There was no way for him to know whether or not they had realized it was him in the truck. He also didn't know how many people here were capable of putting up a defense, let alone what form their weaponry might take, except that it would be exotic and it would be devastating.

He took the HK in his left hand and steered with his right. He passed the house, heading toward the area beside the shed that

covered the entrance to the underground chamber.

Methodically, as he prepared himself, he tried once again to put aside his policeman's confrontation training. He could not announce himself. He had to just do this.

He got out of the truck and held the HK ready.

As he'd driven across the compound, there had been no movement from either the house or the barn.

Something hit him in the right shoulder with such force that it spun him around. A flash of pain shot down his chest and up his neck, but he regained his balance, turning to face the direction the blow had come from.

There was no nearby cover. He looked farther, and there, in the shadows of a cedar thicket, he saw a darker area that a careful observer could see had a human outline. He must be using some sort of stun weapon.

Just briefly, Flynn squeezed the HK's trigger. It blared out a burst and the figure sank. Just that quick. That impersonal.

Four shots, so twelve still in the magazine.

He moved closer to the shed, preparing for a reaction to his burst of machine-gun fire. But nobody moved in from the perimeter and the house and barn remained quiet.

He considered going down the ladder into the storm cellar, but decided to explore the shed first.

The door was unlocked, so he pushed it open.

This was probably an old well house. Before entering, he looked up at the grandeur of the sky. This was probably the last he would see of the world. He hoped that there was some sort of afterlife. That was all, hoped.

He entered the shed. Again, absolute quiet. There was an old stove pushed against one wall and a wooden trapdoor in the floor. Beneath it, there had to be opposition. That was fine by him. Just as long as he got to Morris, he didn't care whether he survived or not.

He lifted the ring, then hefted the door slightly. It wasn't barred from below. No, this was obviously the path they wanted him to take. The guy in the thicket had probably been out there to incapacitate him with the stun gun and carry him down.

When he pulled it up, the door made no sound. Well-oiled hinges, lots of use.

He climbed down the old ladder to what had once been the root cellar, then took a narrow spiral staircase, much newer, that led deep.

The closer he got to the bottom of the narrow space, the stronger the odor became of blood and burned flesh, of burned hair and another stench that cops come to know. It doesn't have a name, but it's the smell of things that have gone horribly wrong, that clings to places where violence has taken place. It's made up of sweat and blood and shattered lives, mixed together as the odor of fear.

The room glowed with soft fleshy light that came from the walls themselves. It was not a normal room, not a human room. Like the village, like all the rest of this place, it was an outpost of another world.

There was also a sheen of blood on the floor, and the stink of the place was so powerful that he had to fight hard not to gag.

Again, he heard the distant pulsation. He began moving toward it.

Machine gun at the ready, he went deeper. The pulsation became more and more distinct. Now it didn't sound so much like a boiling pot as a thumping assembly line.

Ahead there was a figure, short, quick, dressed in black, opening a box of a familiar kind.

A moment later, something that looked like a glowing fireball sizzled into existence immediately above the body inside the box, which was a young woman, very pregnant. She was motionless but she did not look dead or even asleep.

Certain insects, he recalled, paralyze their prey so it will remain fresh for use later.

Her face was in shadow, but when he saw it clearly, he was confronted by such beauty that he gasped.

Immediately, the creature in attendance turned toward him, its movements snapping fast, like those of a quick snake.

There was a flash and for an instant Flynn saw in black outline the skeleton of the young woman and the skeleton of the baby inside her. The fetus moved its hands toward its face in surprise.

The light filled the room with a brightness like thick, glowing milk.

An instant later, the light was gone and his eyes were dazzled, and someone was standing in front of him. He felt hands on the machine gun and knew that in a moment it would be gone.

He didn't wait for his eyes to recover. He didn't wait for anything. He pulled off a burst and the creature flew backward, its arms flailing, its mouth and eyes wide with surprise.

Four more shots. The magazine was now half empty.

He stepped into the fight, moving quickly to aim the gun at a second creature. Had it been fully human, its face would have been the sort that cops see late at night, a whore's face, worn and tired and profoundly lonely. As it was, the great blue eyes were not only sad, they were tired. Also uncaring. He thought that it didn't care whether it lived or died.

Flynn did two shots, no more needed, and the figure flew backward into the wall, then slid to the floor.

He went to the young woman, whose eyes were now so glazed that he feared the worst for her. Working quickly, he performed CPR, but he couldn't get a pulse.

Light glared from behind him. As he threw himself to the floor, he turned into its glare.

"It's over," Jay Elder said.

If you have a gun, best to let it do your talking. Flynn depressed his trigger and the last burst on this magazine brought a brief shout, then Jay Elder disintegrated.

Replacing the magazine as he rolled, Flynn pushed the table over, creating a shelter for himself behind it.

Immediately, a stun weapon smacked the table, causing it to jerk back into his face. Four more of the creatures from the village rushed him. Another burst took them out.

Silence fell. The air was thick with the sickly stink of cordite, the powerful reek of blood, and a strange odor, the same cross between sulfur and cinnamon that had filled Oltisis's space.

When there was no more fire directed at him, he took out his small, powerful LED flashlight and aimed it around the darkened room.

Elder was on the floor, his chest a mass of blood. Lying against the spiral stairs was one of the creatures from the village, also dead. In front of him there were the remains of at least six more of the creatures.

Flynn pulled out the empty magazine.

There was a whisper of movement in the dark.

A light came on, and suddenly he was face to face with the narrow, gleaming face of Morris. "Don't reload, Flynn," he said, "this is finished."

Flynn said nothing.

"You've cost me," he continued. "I can still make some use of her, but not much. And the infant is already sold along, so that means a refund. I don't like to do refunds, Flynn."

"What in hell does that mean, sold along?"

"I'm just a businessman trying to make something work in an out-of-the-way place that happens to contain some nice genetic material. This is a mean little planet and it's dying. I want to get some of what it has to offer before you're all gone. That's all."

"But it's a crime where you come from, doing this. That's why your cops are after you."

"In some parts of our world, it's a crime. Not in all."

"You've turned yourself into something that can live freely on

Earth. And you're struggling making more. That's why your helpers look like that."

"They aren't 'helpers.' That's a work gang, nothing more. When they're used up, they'll be terminated."

They were slaves, as Flynn had suspected. He realized why they'd been made to appear so strange. It was so they couldn't walk the streets and therefore couldn't escape.

The ability to manipulate life had created a whole new type of crime.

"What are you, Morris? You're not like Oltisis, are you? Not the same species?"

"Consider this a living costume. It's not pleasant and, thankfully, it's temporary. But to answer your question, I've been a lot of things in a lot of places." He gestured at the carnage around them. "This is costly. You're going to have to pay."

"What happened to my wife?"

"Your wife?" He looked over toward the dead woman. "That's your wife?"

The realization that he had not the slightest memory of Abby made Flynn's anger flare.

"You will go where she has gone," Morris continued. "Or you will die right here, right now." As he spoke, he slipped a rod into his hand, blunt and black and thick. Its end glowed like a coal. He waved it toward Flynn.

Searing agony. The machine gun flew from his hands as he grabbed at his chest, tearing the cloth away from his burning skin.

But he wasn't on fire.

The HK clattered to the floor.

"If I put a charge in you, you'll feel that pain for hours, until you die of exhaustion. Or you can come with me." He sighed, and Flynn knew it as a player's sound of satisfaction, a sound that comes when the trump is laid down or the queen trapped.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Inside himself, Flynn fought for balance. He had to restore his mission, so he had to get past this checkmate, and he would. The only checkmate he would accept was death.

Morris said smoothly, “It’s not going to happen your way, Flynn. It’s going to happen my way.”

Flynn eased his foot toward the machine gun on the floor.

Morris kicked it away. “You need to understand that you’ve never come unhooked from my line.” He gestured vaguely. “The life you have known is over.”

Flynn still had the pistol in his shoulder holster.

“The pistol, too. You can’t win, Flynn, I’m sorry. I’m smarter than you are.” He glanced around the room. “I oughta just burn you, you bastard.” The stout little device in his hand hissed and its spark grew brighter. Morris smiled. “Fascinating, isn’t it? Come on, we’re going over to my factory.”

Morris directed him to ascend the stairs. He was caught, no question, but he concentrated on every detail as it unfolded. He needed not only to get an opening, but to see it. He’d watched many a fugitive miss a wide-open path to safety.

Outside, moonlight silvered the world.

“Get in,” Morris said, gesturing with his weapon toward the GMC. “Elder was a good man. Making off-the-scale money. I can pay at that level, you know. Gold. You join me in this little, insignificant business I have going here, Flynn, and you’ll be a billionaire in a year.”

Flynn said nothing.

“I’m just sayin’, Flynn, the money is serious.”

As they entered the vehicle, Morris was careful with his weapon, keeping it constantly ready. “At home,” he said as he started the car, “the equipment is better.”

“Where is home?”

Morris didn’t answer for a moment. He began driving across the grounds, heading out into the brush. “You know, I don’t think I can explain that to you. It’d be like explaining this car to a chimpanzee. Can’t be done.”

Flynn thought, “So the truth is, it’s somehow vulnerable.” He would not forget Morris’s inadvertent admission. If he lived.

They drove along a rough pasture track to the village.

From this perspective, the structures were really amazingly well camouflaged. They appeared to be a few piles of brush, the sort of thing left behind when cedar is cleared. Only from overhead could you see that it was organized around a central path.

Flynn had been watching Morris carefully, looking for an opening. So far, there had been none.

“Now, what’s going to happen to you in there is that the contents of your mind—all of your experiences—are going to be taken out for sale to people who don’t have the rich opportunities that life on Earth offers.”

It probably wasn’t bullshit, but he couldn’t say that he understood it.

“Your body will be dissolved and reduced to recoverable stem cells, which will be sold on the black market.” He laughed a little, and in that laugh Flynn heard a very human sound, the glee of a psychopath. He regarded Flynn with wide, avid eyes.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“You’ve caused me extraordinary trouble. I won’t deny it.” He smiled his soft, haunted smile. “I just want you to know how it’s done. What was done to your wife.”

A searing flash exploded into the car and, absolutely without

warning, half the village burst into flames. Instinct caused Morris to whirl away from the blast, in the process dropping his weapon.

Instantly, Flynn reached out and grabbed it, and by the time Morris had looked back, it was pointed at him.

Morris's face told his story. He was horrified and he had no idea what was going on. Neither did Flynn. Opening the door with his free hand, he backed out of the vehicle—and found himself three feet from the tiger. From inside the truck, there came a sharp burst of laughter. Morris began to get out the other side.

Flynn's problem was that he had no idea how to use this weapon. It was a featureless black cylinder, and the end was no longer glowing.

In the firelight, the tiger's eyes flickered. The face was not angry, it was not cruel. Instead, he was seeing that same questioning expression. Very softly, he said, "Help me."

Morris came around the car. Another of the weapons was in his hand, and the tip of this one was glowing.

Frantically, Flynn shook his, twisted it, squeezed it until his fingers went numb.

Morris held his at arm's length.

Flynn stared helplessly at the red tip.

He was hurled backward, falling against the tiger.

But the tiger backed away. Then Morris was on top of him, slamming his face with the fury of the mad. He'd seen it before, he'd felt it before. Guys on angel dust fought like this. Crazyies.

From above, there came a powerful wind, sweeping up clouds of dust and causing the tiger to crouch, then turn away.

There was a snap and a deafening roar and the other half of the village burst into flames.

Snarling, Morris leaped to his feet. He raised his weapon. The red went to white, then to iridescent blue. But he didn't point it at Flynn, he pointed it overhead.

Flynn looked up to see a shape not fifty feet above them. It didn't

make a sound, but it was visible in the firelight. It was the silent helicopter.

The weapon glowed brighter. The base of the helicopter began also to glow. It swerved away. Morris followed it. The helicopter began to smoke.

Flynn was getting to his feet, but then the tiger finally decided to charge, and he was forced to roll aside, throwing up his arms to defend his face.

The tiger went right past him, its immense bulk flying through the air with startling ease.

It hit Morris directly in the chest, causing him to plunge fifty feet across the compound and crash to the ground. His weapon flew off into the night. But he was immediately back on his feet. "Snow Mountain," he said, "do *not!*"

The tiger stared at him.

Overhead, the helicopter began to work its way lower. The remains of the village burned furiously, ringing the scene with dancing flames and casting terrific heat.

Wobbling, the chopper reached eye level. A voice called out, "We can't figure out how to land this damn thing!"

It was Mac. Sitting beside him was Diana.

The chopper went up, disappearing into the night sky.

Flynn saw that Morris was on his feet. Snow Mountain was close to him. He wasn't attacking, but he wasn't doing anything else, either.

Flynn dodged into some shadows, trying to minimize his exposure to Morris.

The wind from above returned. Got stronger. The chopper appeared in front of him, wobbling uneasily at eye level.

Diana peered out. "Flynn, you're a pilot, what do we do?"

"Draw the cyclic toward you!"

Mac yanked it into his stomach and they lurched away into the

dark, then came rocking back.

Mac yelled, "That didn't work!"

"Reduce power!"

"Got it!"

"Move the cyclic back, *barely!*"

They were hovering now.

"Reduce power more."

They dropped to an altitude of about four feet. He could reach out and touch them. The chopper wobbled, began drifting into a slow spin.

In seconds, they would lose it. He saw the truck moving. Morris was getting away.

"Jump," he shouted, "do it now!"

But the chopper shot up into the sky. The truck was quickly disappearing into the dark. Then the helicopter reappeared, nose down, dropping fast. Not the right attitude for a chopper, not this close to the ground. But Flynn could do nothing. They were going to pile the damn thing in.

At the last moment, it lurched. It spun on its axis. Once again, it hovered at an altitude of ten feet.

"See, the bastard won't land! It's got a fuckin' mind of its own."

It did, Flynn knew. Somewhere in there, a sophisticated crash avoidance system didn't like Mac's piloting.

"Jump or die, damnit, both of you! Do it NOW!"

Something dropped out. Flynn recognized it by its shape: it was a shoulder launched urban assault weapon.

Where in the world had Mac come up with a thing like that?

He'd probably never know.

The chopper was still at about five feet. Shielding his eyes with his forearm from the hurricane of dust it was producing, he ran forward.

“It’ll take off again,” he yelled, “*jump!*”

First, Diana leaped out. She tried to roll off the kinetic energy but did it like she’d seen in movies, not the way that worked.

Mac dropped down, rolled expertly, and danced to his feet.

As he came out, Flynn dove into the cockpit and pushed the collective all the way to the floor, causing the rotor blades to lose lift. The chopper dropped to the ground. He turned off the ignition switch and the engine quit.

“That sucker’s alive,” Mac said. “And it don’t like me.” He was caked with dust.

Flynn could no longer see the truck.

Diana hobbled to her feet. The dirt in her hair made her appear to have gone gray.

“Sprain?”

“I’m fine!”

Mac produced a Magnum. Diana had one, too. Good.

Diana dug another Magnum and an iPhone out of her backpack. “Take these.”

Flynn took them. “Safe to use the phone, I wonder?”

“Right now,” Diana said, “all he has is that truck. His money, my friend, is gone. His life is gone.”

“You hacked him?”

“To the bone. If he has cash in his pocket, that’s what he has.”

At that moment, the ground shook. Soon, more flames could be seen flickering through the trees.

“He just did the compound,” Flynn said.

“Then he’s a total bum with nothing but a busted car. ’Cause he ain’t even got any insurance policies. Somebody canceled ’em. And his deeds. They’re gone from the county record office. Plus the electronic backups. Sometime later tonight, that truck’s gonna run out of gas and he’s gonna be walking. That’ll be what he has. Feet.”

The hell with that, he had his life, which was not acceptable.
Flynn ran toward the helicopter.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Gathering up the UAW, he told Diana and Mac, “You two stay here, get away from the village, do back-to-back defense. Shoot at any and all movement and expect that tiger to come around at any time. But don’t drop it unless it charges you. The tiger is conflicted, and that might be valuable down the road.”

He got into the pilot’s seat and restarted the engine. As soon as it ran up, he loaded the rotor with lift and rose into the sky.

The lights of structures that lined the lake shot past as he worked the foot pedals to bring the chopper’s yaw under control. At the same time, he looked toward the ranch, hoping to spot the truck in the glow of the fires burning there.

No joy. The truck wasn’t near the compound, and beyond fire light, the land was dead black.

He took the chopper into an uneasy hover, then leaned out of the open door with the UAW on his shoulder. Its sight was light-sensitive, and he soon spotted the truck bouncing through the brush, heading cross-country toward the main road, rather than going anywhere near the ranch’s driveway or the smaller road that served both it and the marina.

He began working the helicopter closer. He was no expert with its controls, though, and it was a struggle.

The UAW had just one rocket in it, so his first shot would be the one he got. The Magnum wouldn’t be useful, just noisy, so the rocket was his chance.

Working the cyclic and the collective, he dropped down and moved closer to the truck at the same time. It was invisible to the naked eye,

but easy to see in the sight, and the closer he got, the more the crosshairs converged. But then he would overcontrol the chopper or undercontrol it and the whole process would need to be repeated.

He had just two hours training on helicopters. He hadn't even soloed. Still, this commercial-military hybrid was relatively easy to fly, and he was beginning to be able to close in nicely when the whole airframe started shuddering, the collective came up on its own and the engine went to full throttle.

The chopper went up so fast it was like being in a high-speed elevator. Flynn was normally almost silent, but this caused him to cry out with surprise.

The autopilot had taken over. It was probably controlled by Morris down in the truck.

The altimeter was winding up at breakneck speed. As he watched, he went through two thousand feet.

Okay, think. He was not going to overcome this situation using manual control. At best, the battle that would ensue between him and Morris and the autopilot would crash the chopper. He surveyed the instrument panel. No obvious autopilot override.

There was one thing he could do that had to work. Also, though, it might kill him.

He took the UAW up and sighted in the speeding truck, but the sight didn't even activate. Far out of range.

So this was it. He was down to one choice, and it was a really bad one.

He checked his straps, then reached down and twisted the fuel shutoff valve, stopping the engine. The warning horn sounded as the wing went into autorotation and the ascent stopped. The autopilot was still controlling it, though, and as soon as Morris realized what he'd done, he would try to crash it, no question.

Working quickly, he flipped circuit breakers, hoping to kill something crucial, like the autopilot's telemetry. Turning off its power supply wouldn't matter. Autopilots have backup batteries.

As he flipped more and more switches, the instrument lights went dark, then the instruments themselves ceased functioning.

He was now on straight visual in a dead black night, with only the distant lights along the shore, and those of the various fires below, to orient him.

Once again, he brought the UAW back to his shoulder. As the chopper lost altitude in uncanny silence, he searched for the truck.

It was moving at breakneck speed, not a hundred yards shy of the main road. Flynn didn't care whether this bastard's bank accounts had been hacked or not, or what had happened to him. He needed killing.

As the chopper continued to descend, the truck grew in the UAW's sight, until finally the crosshairs began flashing yellow.

A few more feet. He dropped the chopper's nose. Maybe they would die together. Fine, he didn't care.

The crosshairs moved closer and closer together. Then, very suddenly, they were red, and in the center of their cross was the truck.

He fired the rocket, which left the tube with a ferocious roar and a kick.

He tossed the tube behind him out of the way and concentrated on piloting the chopper, which was now rapidly losing altitude.

A blinding flash of white fire announced the end of the truck, and Flynn roared, "Abby, baby, Abby baby, I love you!"

He couldn't bring her back, but this was the end for the evil bastard who had destroyed her, and that felt damn wonderful.

Police procedures didn't matter. Morris was not human, therefore the only law that applied was the law of jungle, and Flynn did that kind of law as well as any of the criminals he so despised.

Using the cyclic, he got the chopper aimed straight toward the dying fires of the village. As he came in, he heard both Magnums being discharged.

Adjusting the collective to decrease lift on the rotor, he dropped down as fast as he dared, hitting the ground approximately a hundred yards from the village.

His jaw snapped, a flash went past his eyes.

The helicopter became still. His ears rang from the shock of the impact.

Before moving, he checked himself: hands okay, arms, feet, legs. If he was going to go into a firefight with impact injuries, he wanted to know where he was impaired, and what it would do to his effectiveness.

He jumped out of the chopper and approached the village. To the west, huge flames still gushed up from the ranch compound. Further south, a smaller glow marked the position of the truck.

Diana and Mac came out of the underbrush.

“I thought you crashed,” she said.

“No. What were you two firing at?”

“The tiger’s out there.”

“Has it charged?”

“You can’t ask us to take a chance like that!”

She was right, but he was also relieved when, very suddenly and in absolute silence, Snow Mountain appeared. His stripes were such perfect camouflage in the flickering firelight that it almost seemed as if he had materialized out of clear air rather than walked out of the shadows.

He came closer. Mac readied himself to shoot again.

“No,” Flynn said.

Broken only by the crackle of flames, the silence the tiger brought with him was as strange as a cry from a distant world.

Flynn reached out and laid his hand on the lion’s head—a small human hand lost in the fur of the immense animal.

“You could sell that thing for a damn fortune,” Mac said.

“Don’t even think about it.”

The tiger looked off into the dark.

Flynn was relieved that Diana wasn’t the traitor he had thought her to be. “We’re a good team,” he said.

Snow Mountain turned and slipped into the darkness.

Mac ran after him. “Hey!”

“Leave him be, Mac.”

“I don’t get my skin or to sell him to a zoo or nothin’. Shit!”

“He’s got his own demons to deal with, that one does.”

“He’s part human, isn’t he?” Diana asked.

“Be my guess. And who knows what else?”

“What’ll happen to him?”

“He’ll roam the land, make some kind of a life for himself.” He looked off in the direction he had gone. “That’s the loneliest creature in the world.”

A cathedral silence settled, as they all contemplated together the plight of Snow Mountain. In the distance, a dull explosion echoed from the direction of the compound.

“How did you ever get out?” Flynn asked Mac.

“I had to do a good bit of killin,’ tell the truth. Is that murder, doin’ those little gooks?”

“There’s no law to cover killing aliens, if that’s what they are. There will be, but not now.”

“Well anyways, it was self-defense.”

He thought of what had been happening at the compound, of the fate of the captured. “It sure was. I thought you were a goner.”

“I was acting.”

Flynn recalled that he’d been a terrific Dracula in junior year at Menard High.

But for the crackle of fires, everything was quiet.

Mac looked from one of them to the other. Slowly, a smile came into his face. "Have we won?"

Flynn noticed that Diana's hand had slipped into Mac's. For a moment, he felt shock. Disappointment. Then he forced it back inside. He'd been lonely for a while, so he'd stay that way. Fine. Abby was with him and she had no plans to take up with some damn crook.

He reflected that whole worlds can change in a moment on the battlefield, and that had happened here.

He smiled back at the two of them. "Right now, we've won."

Above the sirens, because it was so close, there was a sound that made Flynn freeze. "Back to back, brace the pistols!"

Dogs came leaping and snarling in at them from every direction at once, their bodies speeding like liquid fire, their teeth flashing, their human eyes filled with human hate.

With the care and expertise of a man, one of them grabbed Flynn's throat with its long claws. Its mouth opened and it was slashing with its teeth when he blew it in half. For a moment, the jaws continued snapping with shark-like fury, then, its blood gone, it dropped away like a stone.

Behind him Diana's shot went wild. As she screamed and another dog leaped on his back, he turned and blew off the head of the one attacking her, then killed two more at her feet.

All the while others piled on him, until their weight staggered him and he fell forward between Mac and Diana, then forced himself to turn into the ravening pack that was on his back, and fired four more times, taking all of them out, leaving them in pieces on the ground around him.

Then they were gone.

Mac hung his head.

Diana sat on the ground covered with blood and sobbing.

Flynn said, "There are eighteen. We did twelve. The others won't try again."

Diana dropped her pistol into her backpack.

“Unless we disarm ourselves. You love your gun, remember.”

“It’s too hot to hold.”

“It’ll cool off. Mac, you okay?”

“I’m alive.”

“We’re done here,” he said. He could hear pumpers churning over at the compound, but great masses of smoke were still pouring skyward, lit by the fires in the underground chambers.

“Those guys gotta be wondering what the hell was going on out there,” Mac said.

“Probably think it was some kinda drug factory. Probably figure it belonged to you.”

“Me? I don’t have any penetration into Travis County. I’m way west of here, buddy.”

“It’s time for us to go on down the road,” Flynn said. “Morris and his operation are done.”

As the three of them walked out to the highway, Flynn saw that Mac and Diana were still hand in hand. In silence, Flynn walked on ahead.

Once they were on the road, Mac directed them to the parking lot of a closed strip mall. The Range Rover was there, pulled up behind a dry cleaners.

“Backup transportation,” Mac said. “We stationed it here last night.”

Last night seemed like a thousand years ago.

Moths and bats swarmed around the floods that lit the parking area. In the far shadows, a young couple necked in a convertible. Music echoed in the distance.

“I thought we’d go on over to the Oasis, knock back a few,” Mac said. “Sounds like there’s a band goin’.”

On the far distance, Flynn heard country music, the wail of a violin,

the frantic twitter of a mandolin.

He preferred blues to bluegrass.

They drove to the bar, which overlooked the lake. In the parking lot, though, Flynn hung back. He'd seen a taxi rank, cabbies trolling for kids too drunk to drive, and smart enough not to.

He watched Diana and Mac disappear into the lights and the crowd. He'd thought she was his, and it was going to take him time to get easy with the truth.

This battle had been won, but there was a war going on, and they needed to be prepared for whatever might come. They needed a bigger operation, more and better-trained personnel, more equipment. More of everything, and better.

He got into one of the cabs. "Take me into town. Motel 6 be fine," he said.

The driver worked in silence, which was good. To Flynn, silence was home.

The cell phone buzzed. He looked at the number, did not recognize it.

"Yeah?"

"Flynn, where are you?"

"Kicking back," he replied. "Catch up soon."

"You don't want to celebrate?"

"I'm good."

"Flynn—"

"Diana, you be careful. I know Mac well. He's a professional criminal and he breaks hearts for fun."

"Flynn, I love you."

"I love you."

Silence fell. Extended.

Finally, Flynn added, "But you want him."

“He wants me.”

Pretty as she was, she was too hard along the edges to have been wanted very much in her life. Mac went for powerful women, though. He enjoyed demolishing them.

“I’m here,” he said, “and you’re gonna want a shoulder in the end.”

“Mac is a lovely man, Flynn, that’s what you can’t see.”

“If you say so, Diana.”

He hung up as the driver pulled up in front of the Motel 6’s tiny lobby.

He checked in with his own credit card, a small but sweet satisfaction. In the room, he flipped through the channels. Nazis, cartoons, girls, the usual late-night stuff. Still, he left it on in the background. The mutter of artificial excitement relaxed him.

Toward three, he decided that sleep was not in the cards for him tonight.

He pulled on his jeans and a sweatshirt and went out into the parking area, then up onto the shoulder of the empty highway.

He walked, listening to the rhythmic whisper of his shoes on the tarmac. When an eighteen-wheeler thundered by he didn’t vary his pace or even glance at the drama of its passing, so deep had he gone into his thoughts.

His memories of this extraordinary experience followed him as shadows in the wind. Whatever happened, he was going to stay with this thing. In the end, whatever these creatures were, he would banish the bad ones from Earth, and create conditions that would enable the others to share the richness of their minds openly with mankind.

Flynn Carroll walked as he henceforth always would, with his secrets buried in his silence. He walked his own path, but not alone. Abby was there by his side. He chose to believe in the prevalence of the soul, and that she was, as are all decent people, part of the essential goodness of creation, of which he was soldier, servant, and

ally.

In the silence of his heart, he embraced the people he had loved, and those he had lost. The moon had set, and the Milky Way in its majesty spread across the great vault of the sky.

He paused, looking up into the vibrant beauty of it all, and imagined other eyes and other minds perhaps returning his gaze, and thought on the richness of the weave of good and evil he had touched, and what dark secrets must still be undisclosed. Had Morris been the only criminal of his kind? Were there more, as yet unsuspected, or would there be? And what of the alien police? If there was more crime to fight here, would they be willing, this time, to send enough support? And if not, then how would he proceed on his own?

He walked on down the dark highway, alone and content to be alone. His battle was won, and that was good. A good feeling.

A meteor flashed in the sky, then descended in blazing grandeur.

Or was it a meteor? He stared along the horizon where it had fallen, looking for some new glow or some other hint that it had been, perhaps, a conveyance from the deep beyond.

Nothing glowed, though, and no more meteors appeared.

Fine, then he would go on down the road, and see what might develop. The questions, however, of who these creatures were and where they had come from and what their true motives might be—these questions had not been fully answered, not in his opinion. He had wrecked the enterprise of one of their criminals. But the greater mystery that they represented had not been solved.

But that was tomorrow's problem. Today's had been solved. Whoever they were, their good guys now knew they had a friend here on Earth, and their criminals that Flynn Carroll was somebody to be reckoned with.

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CHAPTER ONE

As he did every morning, Flynn Carroll was going through police reports on his iPad, reading them quickly. Then he stopped. He flipped back a page. As he re-read, his eyes grew careful.

He didn't look the part of a careful man. His appearance—ancient chinos and a threadbare tee—was anything but. Duct tape repaired one of his sneakers. His hair was sort of combed; his beard was sort of shaved. But the stone gray eyes now stared with a hunter's penetrating gaze.

In two respects, the report was right in line with the others that were of interest to Flynn. A man had disappeared, in this case two days ago. This morning he was discovered murdered in a characteristically brutal and bizarre manner. What was different was that the body had been found very quickly. Usually, corpses were located days or weeks after the murders.

Not only was this a case for him, it represented a rare chance. The killers would generally do two or three or more victims over a period of a few days. The first body would rarely be found until at least two or three more killings had been done. There had been no other disappearances or characteristic murders reported anywhere in the area. If this was the first in a new series, it represented both a major change and perhaps a major opportunity.

The change was that this victim wasn't an anonymous homeless person picked up off the street. This was a citizen with an identity and people and a place in the world. The opportunity was that the killers might still be operating in the area, and Flynn might have a chance to get them.

He unfolded his lean frame and got to his feet, striding off between

the rows of consoles and neatly dressed technicians who manned the command center.

As he passed one of the linguists, he asked, “Got any new messages?”

“This week? Two lines.”

He stopped. “And?”

“A complaint, we think. They seem to be saying that you’re too brutal.”

“Me? Me personally?”

He laughed. “All their messages are about you.”

They’d been asking their counterparts on the other side for six months for more information about these killers. All they had been told was that it was a single, rogue band. From the amount of activity Flynn guessed that it consisted of about seven individuals.

Another of the techs sat before a strangely rounded device, beautiful in its gleaming darkness, but also somehow threatening, a glassy black orb that seemed to open into infinity.

Flynn went over to him.

“Jake? Got a second?”

The man was intent on his work, peering into the blackness. Within this small, very secret working group hidden deep in the basement of CIA headquarters in Virginia, this device was known as “the wire.” It provided communication with their counterpart police force. This other police force was headquartered on a planet our experts had decided was called Aeon, the government of which was eager for open contact with mankind. Supposedly.

The problem was—again, supposedly—that they weren’t entirely in control of their own people. Aeon, our experts had decided, had evolved into a single, gigantic state, but it was free, and so, like any free country, it had its share of criminals.

Flynn’s take: let’s see this place before we decide what it’s like. Nobody had ever been to Aeon—unless, of course, the people who

had not been killed, but had instead disappeared without a trace ... like his wife, Abby.

“Let Aeon know we’ve got another murder.”

“Yessir.”

“And if there’s any response, anything at all, get it translated on an extreme priority basis.”

As far as Flynn knew, only one alien—a creature that looked human—was responsible for the original crimes, which had been the disappearances. These new crimes—all killings—were being done by things that looked, frankly, alien. They weren’t the “grays” of popular imagination, with their huge eyes and secretive ways. Flynn had never encountered one of those creatures. Apparently they weren’t from Aeon. With such a big universe, so incredibly ancient and complicated, who knew what they really were or where they were from?

The ones he was trying to take off the map were wiry creatures with narrow faces and blank shark eyes. They had four supple fingers and long, straight claws that could also be used as knives or daggers. They were biological but not alive, he didn’t think, in the same way that human beings are. Their rigid determination and ritualistic, unvarying murder techniques suggested to him that they must be robotic.

He did not hate them. His objective was to clean up the alien criminal element on Earth so that the public could safely be informed that contact was unfolding. To the depths of his soul, Flynn wanted open contact.

There was one exception to his dislike of killing them. The first alien criminal known to have arrived on Earth had called himself Louis Charlton Morris. He used a highly sophisticated disguise that gave him human features that were regular and spare. His hair was brown, his lips narrow but not cruel. His expression was open, even friendly. If you encountered him in a dark alley, you wouldn’t think you had a problem. You’d also be just as wrong as a person could be,

because Louis Charlton Morris could do far worse than kill you. He could take you into the unknown and do to you there whatever he had done to Abby and so many others.

There had been a police officer here from Aeon, until he was killed. He had two legs and two arms, and a face with lips that were somewhat human, but the eyes were those of a fly. He could not expose himself to our atmosphere, and had worked out of a hermetically sealed office in Chicago.

Disguising oneself as Morris did was, it seemed, so illegal that not even a cop could get a clearance to do it. Since Oltisis's murder, though, they had apparently changed that policy. No replacements had showed up, however.

Flynn's theory was that the killers belonged to Morris. They were something he had created and were being used to get revenge.

Flynn's previous life as a detective on the police force of the city of Menard, Texas, had hardly prepared him for this work. Have your wife taken right out of your marriage bed in the middle of the night, though, and you're going to change, and change a lot. You will go on a quest to find her, or find out what happened to her. To serve that quest, you will learn whatever you need to learn, and do whatever you need to do. You will push yourself hard. You will not stop.

He walked across the room to a door marked only with a plastic slide-in sign: "Director." On the other side there were more desks, more computing equipment, more quiet, intense men and women. Saying nothing, moving with the supple energy of a leopard, he went through into the inner office.

"I've got one I want to move on right now."

Operations Director Diana Glass said, "Okay, what are we looking at?"

"Town in Pennsylvania. Guy disappeared yesterday. He's been found. First report from the area."

"They could still be there."

"That's what I'm hoping. There's a strange kicker, though. He's a

neurologist. Doctor Daniel Miller.”

She raised her eyebrows in question.

“It gets more interesting. He worked at Deer Island.”

“On the cadavers?”

“Possibly. There’s a neurobiology unit there.” He paused. “So maybe he hit on something somebody would rather we didn’t know.”

“Official Aeon would never do this.”

“You sure?”

“Maybe it has to do with his work, but I also think a citizen was involved to make sure you’d come. It could be an ambush, Flynn.”

“Probably is.”

“How did it go down?”

“He went out on a mountain bike. When he didn’t return at sundown, his wife called for help. The bike was located at dawn. The cops brought hounds, but his scent was only on the bike.”

“But they found the body anyway?”

“In a wetland a few hundred feet from his house. Same condition as the derelicts. Lips cut off, genitals and eyes dissected out, drowned.” So far, more than twenty homeless people had been taken off the streets, mostly in the northeastern US, brutally and bizarrely mutilated, then drowned in the Atlantic and returned to locations near where they’d been picked up.

“We need some advice from Aeon.”

“And how are we going to get that?”

“The two police forces, working together—”

“Don’t even start. There’s one police force. Us. Ever since Oltisis, Aeon’s side has been all smoke and mirrors.”

“For God’s sake, don’t do any more killing.”

He locked eyes with her.

She looked away. “The other side objects more strenuously every

time you kill another one, Flynn. They want them back.”

He said nothing.

“They have laws just like we do! They want these creatures back for trial and punishment.”

“No they don’t. They’re not creatures.”

“That’s a matter for debate.”

“You haven’t fought them. I know when I’m dealing with a machine, believe me. No matter how high-end its brain is.”

“They don’t want them killed. Bottom line.”

“If they want them back, tell them to damn well come and get them.”

“If you’re wrong about what they are, you’re committing murder.”

“We’re disabling machines, not killing people. Anyway, this is our planet. So, our laws.”

“Which don’t include blowing away perps like—” She hesitated, unsure of how to continue.

Flynn knew exactly how. He said, “Like they’re broken machines and cannot be stopped in any other way.”

“Aeon is far in advance of us technologically, Flynn. Far more powerful. When they complain, we need to listen.”

“ ‘Aeon’ consists of messages translated from a language we barely understand, coming from some place we can’t even find, that will not send a replacement for the one policeman they did give us, or even explain what they think happened to him.”

“Oltisis was killed in Chicago, not on Aeon.”

“And what about a replacement? Or, God forbid, even two. Or fifty? Why don’t they send us a whole team of detectives and a nice chunk of SWAT? Seems the logical thing to do.”

“They regard this as a small problem. One we can handle ourselves. They haven’t sent support out of respect for us.”

“Have you ever told them the truth?”

“What truth?”

“That only one person is able to even get near these critters? I need support, Diana. The risk is just incredible.”

“We have messages that specifically forbid you to kill, as you know. You’ve got to promise me you’ll abide by them.”

“So what do I do? Bag them up? Drag them off to a supermax?”

She sighed. She knew perfectly well that they could not be contained.

“Over the past nine months, I’ve done four. If Aeon’s telling the truth and this is a rogue band, maybe I can wrap the problem up on this mission. Finish the thing.”

She leaned far back in her chair, her long blond hair falling behind her, her green eyes, so deceptively soft, filling with uneasy calculation. Her face, an almost perfect oval, took on an expression that Flynn knew all too well. When she was twenty, it must have been a soft face, sweet with invitation. Her journey to thirty had been a hard one, though, during which she’d seen death and done some killing. Her face still said angel, but now it also said soldier. Hidden behind that cloud of Chanel was a woman with a tragic secret, which was that the blood of some of her own cops was on her hands. He knew she was as haunted by members of their original team who had been killed by Morris and his group as he was by Abby’s disappearance.

“Losing you would be a phenomenal disaster. In fact, we can’t afford that risk at all anymore, not until we’ve trained up a bigger unit. Which gets me to something I haven’t wanted to bring up, but I’m going to have to order you to stand down on this one.”

For a little while in the dangerous period when they were tracking Morris, the two of them been together twenty-four hours a day, sleeping in the same room for mutual protection, and they’d gotten to be a thing—sort of, anyway. They had wanted each other, but he had not been able to dismiss Abby’s ghost. Their affair had been an act of desperation, which had faded when the threat had become less. With

her sitting in the boss's chair and him married to a ghost, he considered it entirely over.

"Time, Diana. I've gotta move."

"You heard me."

As he walked out, he called transportation and told the operator, "I want to be in Mountainville, PA, in best time."

Diana came up behind him.

He walked faster.

"Flynn, at least wear the rig."

The rig was designed to record his moves, to be used in a training film. "Nope."

"Unless you wear it, we can't hope to teach others. You can't work alone forever, Flynn."

"Fine. Hire Mac." Mac Terrell was an old friend from Texas. He'd worked the Morris case with them. He was among the best sniper shots in the world, if not the best, and Flynn could use a sniper in this.

"You know I can't."

"No rig. Forget the rig."

She hurried along, working to keep up as he strode out of the command center.

"Flynn, please!"

He stopped. "The rig contains electronics. As I have previously explained, when I wear it, the electronics will be detected, and therefore, I will fail to engage the perpetrators. Of course, they may well engage me, in which case, I'm done."

"Do not go out there."

"I could end this!"

"Flynn, it's a trap and you're completely buying into it. I don't get why you don't you see this."

"If you know you're entering a trap, it's not a trap, it's a mistake on

the part of your enemy. So I'm gonna walk into their mistake and they don't make many, and I will not lose this chance."

"Flynn, will you grant me one favor? A small one?"

"I'm not gonna wear the rig, but yeah, something else."

"Come back alive."

"Fine. Done. Good-bye."

This time, she stayed behind. He passed through the two departments that concealed the command center, went to the transport hub, and got in the waiting SUV.

The driver was silent. Flynn was silent. Usual routine. He spent the drive to Dulles looking at satellite views of Mountainville. Frustrated by what he was seeing, he texted Logistics, "Throw me something better than Google Maps."

'That's all we have. Not a strategic location.'

He punched in the tech's phone number.

The answer was immediate. "Sir?"

"Get to the Pennsy Department of Geology or whatever they call it over there. You want a map that details any isolated watercourses within two miles of the house. Mountain streams, that type of thing. Any that are spring fed and absolutely pure. And any caves, crevasses, rocky areas, especially near the good water. You want a map that shows all of that. You got it, you call me. Make it fast, it's as urgent as they come."

He put down his phone, then returned to the Google map. Steep hills, lots of cliffs, which meant exposed climbing. For them, the best terrain. For him, the worst.

The car dropped him at general aviation and he strode quickly through to the waiting plane.

As he entered the cabin, he asked the pilot only one question: "How long?"

"An hour and sixteen minutes."

“Get me there in an hour.” If this had any chance of working, he had to be ready by sunset. Maybe the aliens would be there one more night. Not two, though. Never happen.

“Sir?”

“I know the plane. It can do it.”

“It’ll risk the engines.”

“Do it.”

Once they were airborne, he called the unit’s FBI liaison officer. “Flynn here. Get the body out of the hands of the locals immediate. Standard procedure, autopsy and record, then freeze. Provide the family with stock ashes in an urn. The local cops are to be told that this is a terrorism matter. If they talk they’re gonna be spending the rest of their lives inside. Obviously, make certain there’s no press.”

“Got it,” the liaison officer said.

The engines howled. The pilot was running them as ordered.

Flynn watched the land slide past far below, the trees tinged with autumn, little towns nestled in among them, America in its quiet majesty, her people in their innocence.

He wanted things to be right for them. He hadn’t been able to protect Abby, but he could protect them, at least a little, at least for a while.

As always at such moments, he wished he had Mac with him. They’d grown up together but gone down opposite paths. Mac was a criminal, more or less, so tangled up in being a DEA informant and massaging the drug cartels, you couldn’t tell at any given time which side of the law he was on.

If Flynn missed anybody besides Abby, it was Mac. He’d helped wreck Morris’s operation just like he lived his generally illegal life, with skill, ease, and pleasure.

His extensive criminal record made him a security risk. So no clearance, which meant no job despite the fact that he’d been effective and, unlike most of the others who had worked on that case,

lived. Morris had been running his operations out of a ranch near Austin, Texas, complete with bizarre intelligence-enhanced animals and human accomplices.

Flynn slid his hand over the butt of his pistol. What success he'd had—the killing of four of the things so far—came from one central fact: he had become very, very fast with his weapons. None of the trainees he'd been given so far had been able to come even close.

It wasn't too surprising, given that a man could practice for a lifetime and never learn to shoot a pistol as fast as Flynn could. He'd always been good with a gun, but in the past few months, he had reached a level of proficiency that was, frankly, difficult even for him to understand.

The engine note changed, dropping. The plane shuddered, headed down. Flynn looked at his watch. Fifty-four minutes.

He hit the intercom. "Thank you."

The reply was a burst of static. The pilot was probably thinking about who he'd have to deal with if he'd blown his engines.

From the air, Mountainville appeared to be little more than a few stores and some houses tucked in among a twisting range of dark hills. The single-strip airfield wasn't manned. The plane could land, though, and that's all that mattered.

The place looked the picture of peace, but Flynn knew different. Somewhere down there, a man had endured what was probably the worst death a human being could know.

Also down there, he had reason to hope, would be his quarry.

The plane bounced onto the runway and trundled to a stop, its engines still roaring. He got out and crossed the tarmac to the car that had been left for him. As per established procedure, the vehicle had been dropped off by the regional FBI office. Nobody was to meet him. What Flynn did, he did alone.

He tossed his backpack into the trunk, then got behind the wheel. For a moment he sat silently preparing himself for whatever might come. Then he started the engine.

The hunter was as ready as he could be. He headed off toward Mountainville, and whatever might linger there.

Learn more of Flynn Carroll's past in

They Did Not Know

A never-before-seen short story by

WHITLEY STRIEBER

On the night that all of their hopes and the lives they thought lay before them began to unravel, Flynn Carroll and his wife, Abby, decided to go horseback riding in the moonlight. But in the weave of things, perhaps it wasn't really a decision at all. More a call. An order, even, at least for him.

Abby mounted Serena, floating up into the saddle in a flash of jeans, one elaborately decorated boot gleaming in the last glow of the sun. She and Flynn had cracked a Lone Star in the kitchen of his parents' ranch house, passing it back and forth as they walked over to the barn and saddled Serena and War Chief.

As they rode out, Flynn's father arrived from branding, in his pickup. He got out and came hurrying over to the barn, head down, gray distinguished hair flying in the south wind that sweeps Texas on summer nights.

"Son, you don't want to night ride."

He was right. It would be dead dark on the prairie.

"We'll walk 'em, Dad. It won't be a problem."

"Flynn—"

His father still thought of him as a teenager. Flynn was thirty, married now two years. "Dad, it won't be a problem."

"You come back with a broke-leg horse—"

"We won't." Flynn mounted, looked down at his father. "We won't," he repeated.

"Why do it on a hellion like War Chief?"

"He's here."

"Well, yeah, none of the hands are gonna ride him unless they have to."

"I like WC."

"I guess I see that. You're both so damn stubborn."

Flynn didn't like coming out here. Being rich had always set him apart, and the Two Bar was very rich. He and Abby lived in a small house in Menard. He had joined the police force. But tonight—well, he knew exactly why he wanted to come. They had made a decision, the two of them, and it was right that they come here to fulfill it.

“Come on over to the house, I'll show you the branding log. Pretty good day, son.”

“When we get back, Dad.”

His father's reply was a silence that Flynn knew was filled with sadness. They had argued fiercely over his decision to leave the Two Bar. His mother had begged him. There had been tears, there had been bitter anger. Still, his father never stopped trying to interest him in the ranch. It was among the last of the great Texas ranches, two hundred thousand acres of ranchland, farmland, and oil rigs. The family's wealth was fantastic. Flynn made \$36,800 a year as a recently promoted detective in the Menard City Police Department and was very happy. His dad was worth at least a billion dollars, maybe more, and was not very happy at all.

Of course it was all crazy. What Flynn was doing. Was it rebellion? A desire to find something of himself that didn't belong to the Two Bar? That's what Abby thought.

Now, as they walked their horses into the deepening evening and their long shadows stretched out behind them, he saw her smile at him out of the edges of her eyes.

“You be careful on WC,” Flynn's father called. “He'll throw your ass, he gets half a chance.” They had left the corral and were heading out into a vast natural prairie, this time of year studded with flowers and rich with their perfume.

“WC can't throw me.”

“The hell, that horse could throw Jesus Christ and the twelve goddamn apostles. Shit. Sorry, Abigail! Sorry!”

“Eleven goddamn apostles,” Abby called back. “Remember Judas was a Judas.” Her father was a hard-shell Baptist who'd brought his

family out from Abilene ten years ago because of a schism in their church. Abby had left his rigorous beliefs behind, but Harry Carroll didn't really grasp that. He still saw the tightly pious little girl who Flynn had fallen in love with when they were thirteen. In fact, she had strayed so far from her childhood beliefs that she was barely welcome in her father's house.

They rode on.

As it became obvious that they were definitely heading out, War Chief whickered angrily and tossed his head. Outbound, he'd sidle along snorting. He'd try to nip Flynn or scrape him off on one of the scrubby trees. But on the way back, they'd thunder across the land, a lurching giant on a flying horse.

"Let's go up the north way, get over that draw where the flowers're so thick."

She laughed a little. "Why go way up there?"

"Well, why don't you just hazard a guess."

She laughed more. They'd kissed for the first time on one of those long hills this time of year. They'd been fourteen, dating for a year. She'd had eyes like the sky, lips like roses light as air, skin as pale as a cloud.

Now, things were different. Their mission was more serious than a kiss. Now, it was the right time of month. Once she was pregnant, they would not ride again, not for a long time.

He wanted the baby conceived here, on the Two Bar. He wanted to do it lying on the land, embraced by the earth of it, by the life of it.

Once their child was born, he thought he'd probably return to ranching. He just needed to find out first if there was anything else in him.

When they were about half a mile out, Abby called out, "Race you!"

Flynn made WC rear, the horse's one trick. If anybody but Flynn tried it, WC would tumble them out of the saddle and head for the

barn.

Abby took off, Serena's hooves spattering dirt as she soared away into the lingering evening.

"Darn, no fair," Flynn shouted. He snapped his reins. WC picked up his pace, working into his gut-pounding trot. Flynn had first sat on a horse at age three, but WC knew how to cause even a good rider pain.

A quarter horse like Serena takes off like a Ferrari in heat, and she was three lengths ahead of WC inside of half a minute.

"You go, girl," Flynn shouted.

"Eat dust, dude!" Serena and Abby plunged ahead, surging into the last whisper of light. Bouncing along behind her, Flynn just laughed. He knew his horses, and he knew that Serena would tire soon. Once that happened, she could not be forced, not if you respected your animal, which Abby certainly did.

WC was now sort of sidestepping. Slithering.

"Your horse trying to put out a campfire?"

"My horse is trying to neuter me!"

"He better not!"

He finally got WC going and they were off again, but this time Serena didn't take off like she had at first. She was past that quarter-horse burst. WC had become aware of the competition and was finally thinking about galloping.

The wind rushed past, the first stars wheeled above, the Big Dipper and the Great Bear. Scorpio ranged across the firmament. The western horizon was deepest red, blood on the edge of the world.

They swept across the night, young and in love and in the fertile dark. And were watched.

They could never have imagined, in their excitement and the running night, that they were being observed by somebody at once as far away as eternity and as close as a breath.

Or perhaps that wasn't entirely true. Perhaps he should have realized it, for nothing about Flynn Carroll was as it seemed. First,

that wasn't his name. Second, he was already married, although not under the law of this land.

The watcher measured the flashing patterns in their brains, listened to their tumbling blood, comparing what it saw to patterns that had been etched in secrets deeper than man may know.

The watcher was aware that they would sense the danger that it brought, and so stayed well downwind of them. Humans can smell danger, they just don't know it.

Flynn reined in WC. "Evening star," he said, pointing to the strip of green that had replaced the blood in the deep west. A jewel lay there, silver against the last glow.

"Venus," Abby said, "Venus this time of year."

He dismounted. She was a lithe girl, graceful and cheerful and as mysterious to him as the sky, and as grand. The elegant logic of her curves made him long to hold her, to reenter the balance that was their delight.

She looked like something you'd see in heaven. She smelled like sea foam. As she swung gracefully off her mount, her hair floated around her.

He said, "Know where we are?"

"The ridge. The flowers."

"Exactly where."

"I can't see a thing."

"Yes you can. You see those boulders over there?"

She drew close to him. "What did you bring me here for, you naughty man?"

Gently, he leaned down and kissed her on the neck. He drew her down into the mat of flowers. They swam in their perfume. The air shimmered with the music of crickets.

"Flynn, we're out in the open."

"The horses won't care."

“What if your dad rides out?”

He turned her face to his and kissed her. For a moment, she was stiffly unwelcoming, her churchly modesty causing her to push at his chest. When the kiss went deeper, she finally sank into it.

Venus rode low in the west, chasing the sun. The gibbous moon was rising in the east. Somewhere in the dark, coyotes called to one another.

They lay back, side by side. He would have her naked, but he would take his time.

“What’re those?” she asked, pointing to a triangle of stars.

“I don’t know. Not a constellation.”

The watcher was now close enough to feel their heat and smell their breath. It saw not only their young bodies but also the dark fates that had already been written for them, part of the mystery to which all belong.

Flynn said, “I was going to spout that poem you love, but I forgot it all.”

“ ‘I went out to a hazel wood because a fire was in my head, and cut and peeled a hazel wand and hooked a berry to a thread.’ ”

“I can’t memorize worth a damn.”

She sighed. “It’s so pretty here,” she said.

She took his hand and laid it on her chest. He felt the sweet softness curving under the cotton of her blouse. “Squeeze that,” she whispered. “I like that.”

Instead, he lifted himself up and began unbuttoning the blouse. He opened it and, recalling their backseat days, reached around to unsnap her bra.

“They’re moving,” she said.

“What?”

She sat up and pointed. “Those three stars. They’re moving.”

The watcher stopped. Drew back. They must not become afraid,

they must not leave, not now. Time was of the essence, and if it ran out, then this complex effort would all have to be repeated. The watcher was not alive, but it was intelligent, and it would do whatever it must to fulfill its mission.

“I want you,” Flynn said.

“I’ve never done it outside.”

“Abby ... ” He kissed the cream of her naked breasts. His hands went to the button on her jeans.

She laughed again. “You are so dirty.”

“This is beautiful. It’s pure.”

He drew down her jeans and she lay naked in the night, an angel glowing in the flowers.

He raised himself on his elbow. His heart was bounding, his whole body opened to every detail of the moment. He was aware, with sudden clarity, of the world around them, the sleepy horses grazing nearby, the night wind filling the air with the scent of the flowers, the nearby snuffling of some night creature, the heat of her and the scent of her, musk and gardenias and sweat.

He looked down into the gravity of her face, seeing in it the religion of life, and then he laid his lips upon hers again and was at once lost in the taste of her and the tentative flicking of her tongue and the rising of his heat, his member now a sword, questing ferociously, making his own jeans into a drum skin.

Then her eyes were looking past him. In passion, he thought, but her breath shuddered and her throat worked, and then she tore away from him. In his fright and surprise, he leaped to his feet.

“Sorry,” he shouted. “Sorry!”

Then, and to his complete amazement, she screamed. She grabbed her temples. Her eyes were white terrified pools in the dark. He stared down, watching her, not understanding.

“Abby, I’m sorry! I’m so—”

She took another breath, opened her mouth, and started to scream

again. He clapped a hand across it.

“Abby, it’s okay, we’ll go home, we’ll do it at home.” He glared into her face, willing her to come back to herself.

Her nostrils dilated, her eyes bulged—and he understood that something was strange here. He could see her face too clearly. But why, when it was so very dark?

He whirled and looked up into the strangest thing he had ever seen.

To the west there were three bright stars in a row, stars that were not present in any constellation. Overhead, instead of the soft glow of the Milky Way, there was a riot of stars in a million colors, a sweeping massive horde of them, gold and yellow, blue and red, silver and green, more stars by far than he had ever seen before, so bright that they lit up the land brighter than the moon.

Where there had been grass bobbing with flowers, there were long creepers, thick masses of them. Their leaves were pale and feathery.

He leaped to his feet. They were in a vast field of waving plants, long tendrils in the night wind, which brought a sweet scent that pierced Flynn’s heart with an entirely unexpected nostalgia, but also gripped his blood with icy claws.

On the ground, Abby gasped and sobbed, choking. He went down to her and put his hands under her arms and lifted her. She trembled in a way that reminded him of some gentle little animal, a quail desperate in his hands that he had caught in an Indian snare as a child.

Then, above the whipping ocean of leaves, he saw a figure. It was a stocky darkness, little more than a shadow. But it was there, and now it was moving, edging toward them. It was the careful stalk of a hunter.

The lives they had been living a second ago had become, in the tiny drop of time it had taken for this change to occur, something that belonged to deep memory and the emptiness of ages.

The way she huddled against him, his dear little bird, he knew that she felt it, too.

The figure was now quickly coming closer, and Flynn somehow knew that it was coming for Abby. In an effort to conceal her, he drew her down, but she stiffened, frozen like a mouse under the gaze of a snake. He whispered, barely a breath but full of wild intensity, “*Down!*”

She came with him and they were two rabbits crouching.

Something was buzzing now, the sound of a fly, but enormous, close, then torn away by the wind.

Then it was there, right in front of them, its cobalt-blue work clothes gleaming in the strange starlight, its face that of a pinched frog, its eyes two bulging, expressionless domes of insectoid lenses.

It was a fly the size of a child.

Abby fell to her knees, spread her arms, and looked up to that mad sky.

“Abby?”

“That’s a demon, this is hell!”

A female voice said, “Not really, sweetie.”

Flynn turned toward the new—and so familiar—voice.

“Flynn, come with me.”

The voice was indeed familiar, but the face was in shadow. Not only the voice, but the place. “Don’t look so damn confused. You’re where your soul was born.”

Abby was still on her knees, her hands now clutched together, her head bowed. She was praying hard.

“Listen to her calling on her gods,” the other woman said. She came closer. She was beautiful in the night, with dark, flowing hair and skin like cream.

“Who are you?” Flynn asked, and was instantly washed with the most powerful sense of loss that he had ever known. It struck him and lifted him like a great wave into its surging grip.

Her face was ... so very, very dear. And this place, the shimmering,

waving fronds, the three stars—he loved this place terribly, with his blood, with his soul, which now felt as much a part of his body as his skin and his humming heart.

“You tell me who I am.”

“I—I’m sorry.”

“Tell me!”

He looked down toward Abby. “She’s naked. Don’t leave her like that.”

“You took her clothes off.”

Flynn was at a loss. He did not know this place, and yet he loved it. He did not know this woman, but her face was palely familiar, and her dark hair as it flowed in the wind was a lovely and haunting thing to see. Desire, until a few moments ago wrapped up in Abby, scalded him with unexpected intensity.

“Flynn,” came a tiny voice from below. “What’s going on? Where is this place?”

“Don’t you dare tell her,” the woman hissed.

“But I—”

“You’re under orders just like the rest of us.” She gestured with a slim arm toward the crouching Abby. “This is so dangerous, this whole situation.”

And then came a great thunder in him, the crashing roar of recognition. Memory flooded in, memory so strong and so complete—but so entirely unexpected—that he gasped from it and reeled away.

Then he locked eyes with her, in the wind and the shadows of a racing little moon. He reached a trembling hand toward her. She did not move.

“Something’s wrong, Diana.”

“You can say that again. And thank you for remembering my name.”

She took his wrist and drew him away. Hearing the rustle of their

departure, Abby shrieked and leaped to her feet. She came bounding after them, leaping through the rough fronds.

Diana, who he knew now was his wife—his real wife—threw back her head and laughed, the sound at once as raucous as the voice of a crow and as dear as the giggle of a lover.

Abby flung herself at Flynn, her hands grasping frantically. Flynn watched, all his passion gone. She was just an instrument, part of his mission. Or so he told himself. When dark blue figure carried Abby away, her shrieking became an awful, despairing cry.

“Don’t hurt her,” he said to Diana. “I’m the one you should be angry at.”

“I’m not angry, I’m jealous.”

“Don’t hurt her.”

He watched Abby disappear into the darkness, struggling and crying out, tearing helplessly at the thing that gripped her in its thickly gloved hands.

Diana kept moving.

Finally, he followed her. He didn’t see a choice. As they went up a long rise, Abby’s cries faded into the nasty, hissing wind. The closer they came to the crest of the hill, the brighter the sky became, until, as they mounted it, a view exploded into Flynn’s consciousness that swept everything else away: his fear for Abby, his confusion at what was happening, his questions about Diana—all of it—in a tide of memory as keen as a cold blade and as sweet as a summer song.

Before him there spread a vision of lights, and he at once knew that this was the great city of his birth and his upbringing and his soul’s deep home. This was the Aerie, known across the land of Aeon as the City where the Truth Is Known.

Home.

She had stopped. She had turned to him. She stood with her arms tentatively open, a tall silhouette against the blazing lights of Aerie and the magnificent drama of Aeon’s sky.

He went to her in silence, and in silence they embraced. He felt the warmth and soft scent of her, this woman who was so many things more to him than any woman on Earth is to any man. Still, though, Abby was there in his heart, dear.

Arm in arm now, they went along a familiar path, to their home and office, Social Police Division 211, the headquarters of the Police Protective Unit that was tasked with keeping criminal elements from exploiting Earth.

He was an officer. He was on mission and had been recalled.

He did not have a good feeling about this.

He followed Diana through the contemplative quiet of the central office. As he did so, the faint, dry-straw scent of the air, so familiar, the sounds of quiet conversation between man and machine, the soft footsteps as officers went from one station to another—all of it combined to induce a flood of memories.

He'd become a policeman on Earth because he was a policeman here. He'd taken form in the Carroll family because he would one day need a great deal of money. His childhood was in the record of the state of Texas and in the memories of his earthly parents and friends, but he had actually come in just two Earth years ago.

Earth was in terrible danger. His job: protect them.

In this work, you could not take such memories with you, but you could take your orders, so deeply encoded that only a few police specialists could extract them from your unconscious.

“Have I gone off mission, Diana?”

She walked faster. He saw her fists clench.

He passed the Earth Unit, where operators at observation stations watched for smugglers attempting to reach the planet. Outside, he knew, there were forty more such stations, each dedicated to another primitive planet, to preventing it giving up its wealth of genes and souls to criminals intent on selling them to underground scientists, slavers, wealthy thrill seekers, and whomever else might want them, whether for experimentation or entertainment, or to build them into

brilliant robots.

“I don’t want you to give her a baby.”

“I thought—”

She turned on him. “Remember who reads you.” Her voice was quiet, but her eyes were stunned with hurt. “Your feelings for her are agonizing to me.”

His heart opened to Diana, the real love of his life.

“You know it’s on mission. The baby is on mission.”

They turned a corner and headed for Diana’s private suite—their suite—where their marriage had been consummated, where they had chosen Earth work, where they had embraced for the last time before he began his tour.

In the middle of the large, comfortable room, Abby floated in an Isolate, her open eyes empty. The flickering lights of medical analysis touched her smooth skin.

Diana walked up to her. Gazing at her, she put her hands on her hips. “Incredible,” she said. “She looks like an angel.”

“A baby would endanger her? Is that why we’re here?”

As she floated there in perfect nakedness, shimmering with the blue light of the device that held her, he could almost believe that her soul, incredibly pure, had appeared on the surface of her body.

“She’s perfect,” Diana whispered.

“Then you understand.”

“It’s starting. On Earth.”

He felt an awful sinking of the heart, and yet with it came excitement. This was his work, why he was a policeman here and a policeman there.

“We’re married. We want a baby.”

She came to him and stood before him. Her face was flushed, her eyes fixed with anger. She drew back her right hand and slapped him hard.

Instinct almost caused him to strike back, but training stopped him—training and love. She turned away, plunged to her desk, and dropped down behind it. “I’m so sorry.” She shook her head. “Pardon my lack of professionalism.”

Diana didn’t have a baby with him; of course she was jealous. He felt it, too, the hollow cold truth that he might not come back. That his real wife might never bear their child.

“When I’m there,” he said carefully, “you know ... ” He gestured vaguely. They could not take memories of Aeon with them. Undercover cops like him lived and worked in total amnesia. If they remembered themselves, they were vulnerable to an enemy that could read the mind.

She stood again and came to him.

He took her in his arms and felt as she pressed herself against him a rush of memory and a rush of love.

“You want the child?” she asked. Then, very softly, her voice a burr of misery. “With her?”

He held her more tightly. “I want our child.”

“No,” she said sharply. “Violation of the mission.” She gazed at him. “What’s it like?”

“When I’m there, I’m Flynn Carroll, wondering why the hell I’m giving up a billion-dollar ranch for a little, tiny police job.”

“Billion what? I’m sorry, I’m not tracking.”

“Their measure of wealth. The obscure corner of earthly life I happened to enter turned out to be incredibly wealthy.”

“I did not know that. So your life there must be very pleasant.”

“I gave it all up to be a cop. Nobody can figure me out. Frankly, neither can I. Not when I’m on Earth.”

She came to him, and when she drew close he felt in her embrace a haunting, beloved memory of Abby. He would never tell her this, though. Never.

“Love, do your best. I’ll have to watch every detail, remember

that.”

He kissed her and felt her vulnerability and her anguish, and shared it.

She broke away then and went to the window. Sunrise was not far off, and the eastern sky was a strip of pink, one of the moons hanging there like a pearl.

“The Moon of Love,” she said. Then, bitterly, “Can a moon mock you?” She whirled around. “She’s a cover, nothing more. Which you seem to want to forget.”

“As I must. As you know.”

“She could be in danger.”

“I know it.”

“And the child.”

He knew that, too, and it made his guts crawl. What was worse, back on station, all of this would be forgotten. “What would you have me do, love?”

She went back to her desk, her place of authority. She had brought him here to warn him. Were there also orders? Her hands, fisted, lay before her. “Mission Control regards them as expendable.”

As far as the police department was concerned, Abby and the baby she and Flynn were going to have were a cover. They were bait.

“They will be taken,” she whispered. “Inevitably.”

Agony. Agony in his heart. But the whole human species and its chance to evolve and join the chorus of conscious species in the universe depended on this mission, and therefore on such sacrifices. He said, “I know.”

“I’m sorry I brought you here. I apologize.”

“You had to. We both know the regs. If I’m going operational, this is the only way to tell me.” His consciousness would forget, but not his deeper self. There, the hard, quick, brilliant police captain would remain hidden, waiting to take the lash to whatever smugglers presented themselves.

Hand in hand, they walked down to the transport, a formation known on Earth as a wormhole. Diana pressed their code into the heavy door and they entered the confined space of the transition chamber. The transport position shimmered before them, a darkness beyond the end of darkness. In this universe, there are many walls and many openings in those walls. On Earth, places that are closer than a hair seem more distant than the farthest star. Here, where the truth was known, such a traverse as this was just a short step, nothing more, but through a system that had taken a thousand years to create, a truly extraordinary triumph of the mind.

“Has she been sent?”

“She’s back. They’ve got her lying right where they found her. She’s just about to awaken.”

“I love you, my wife.”

Diana squeezed his hand.

He took a breath. He stepped forth, into the strange, empty coldness of the transport. There was the familiar hollow rush, then he staggered out into the night and the flowers of the Texas prairie.

She lay there, as pale as a cloud in the sea of white dots that covered the night prairie. Far to the east, Earth’s own moon was just rising.

He lay down beside her and gazed up at the strangely empty sky. Earth was an outlier, orbiting a star at the extreme edge of this galaxy.

As his memory faded, he clung for a last sorrowing moment to Diana. Then he turned to Abby. Her eyes were open, gazing into the sky.

His last memory of home winked out.

Abby said, “Flynn? Are you awake.”

“Mm?”

“It’s three. *Three*, Flynn!”

“How can it be three?” he said. He thought, *We’ve been here half the*

night and I never did it.

“We must’ve been tired. Plus, WC took off. We’ve gotta double on Serena now.”

“Forget the horses.”

“We need to get home; what’ll your folks think?”

“That we’re out here being bad. Which we are.” He drew her to him ... but as he felt her warmth and the curves of her, he also felt from deep in his heart something he did not expect and could not explain, which was a cold, gripping sorrow. It seemed like an echo from a long ago time, some tragedy that he had long forgotten, but that now returned to him, in this moment when new life was about to be made.

“You’re shivering,” she said.

He kissed her, and as he did, he entered her. “I was cold. Now I’m not.”

Their bodies crossed a bridge of stars, the stars of hope, the stars of new life, the stars of the miracle that is mankind.

When they were done, they lay back side by side. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. She turned and clung to him.

“Aren’t you cold?”

“I love being naked with you like this.”

“Well, I’m cold.”

He got his windbreaker, which lay beside them, and put it over her. He stared up into the stars.

“I wonder if there’s anybody up there,” he said.

“God, I guess. Somewhere.” She took his hand and laid it on her belly. “Somebody in here,” she said.

“We can’t be sure.”

“I felt it. I felt the exact moment.”

He lay there in wonder not only at the beauty of his wife amid the stars and the flowers, but at the mystery of life itself, and the new life that she seemed so sure now lay within her.

As the moon cleared the eastern horizon, they mounted Serena, Flynn sitting behind Abby and holding her around the waist. He leaned against her, inhaling the straw-sweet scent of her hair, pressing tight against her softness and her warmth. Gently, quickly, he kissed her neck. She giggled, a happy music.

Something inside him seemed to call to him, the voice of some unknown observer, stern and deeply sad. "*Danger*," the voice said, and was gone.

But there was no danger, not here in this familiar place.

They let the horse walk as slowly as she wanted, through the bright moon shadows.

On this perfect night, the world was wonderful.

"I'm happy," he said.

"Then why do you sound sad?"

"I'm not. Far from it."

As they rode, Flynn became aware of tears drifting down his cheeks. Drifting at first, then pouring. It was as if somebody he could not see, who lived inside him, was experiencing this lovely night as a tragedy. They rode on toward the distant lights of the house, and the whispered warning faded, and then the sadness.

Flynn kissed her neck again, and she arched her head and reached back and laid a hand on his cheek.

They unsaddled Serena and WC, who they found predictably standing at the barn door. Hand in hand, they crossed to the silent house and crept up the back stairs to Flynn's boyhood room. On the way, Abby tickled him and they stifled laughter, and in his own he heard once again that mysterious note of sadness.

The night passed, stepping softly into dawn, and they came downstairs to a sizzling ranch breakfast. Flynn's mother and father twinkled at them, but nothing was said of the late hour of their return.

On distant Aeon, Diana wept for the man she loved, working

tirelessly to protect him and his earthly wife and their coming child.

Or was she protecting them from Mission Control's plan, which was to use them as bait? Other eyes saw, other, darker minds wondered just who this seemingly innocent man might really be, and drew closer, and looked closer.

And then they knew.

Another deep-cover cop had been exposed—or rather, a subtle trap in which he and his earthly wife were the bait had been sprung. Soon the criminal band that was now evaluating Earth would conclude that he was indeed a policeman from Aeon and take steps to neutralize him.

By so doing, they would reveal themselves, the long game would grow shorter, and, if all went well, they'd be mopped up and the people of Earth would be left alone for a little while longer.

Over the next weeks and months, the movements of Abby and Flynn were observed, their associations researched, their every breath and every heartbeat recorded, along with the heartbeat of the infant sleeping within.

In a world so far away its home star could not even be seen from Earth, Abby and her infant came up for sale in an auction room that somebody from Earth would have seen as a sort of heaven, palatial and blue.

It was not a heaven. It was a place where souls were bartered, as evil a place as exists.

Figures watched her terror, just as butchers on Earth watch the terror of cattle, and with as little emotion. Others discussed her genes and the baby's rich stem cells.

The bidding was quick, just a gesture here, a nod there. In the end, the two of them went for a sum large enough to satisfy even the greediest smuggler.

They would be broken up for their DNA. Probably.

On the day that she was sold, Abby, all unawares, made Flynn a

chocolate pie. On her belly, there was a mark, red and hardly sore at all, where a long needle had been inserted. The infant, rich with new cells, was now labeled, as was the mother.

They were free Americans on one planet, property on another.

All was done, then, but for the waiting.

Late some nights, a car would drift past the house. Far away, Diana would watch it and wonder. Who was in it? Why were they there? Was it from Mission Control, perhaps some part of it she did not have access to? Or was it something else entirely—a sign, perhaps, that the trap was working?

The car was followed, but went nowhere important. Abby and Flynn lived their lives and slept their sleep, and the world rolled on.

Not forever, though, and not for long. Their life together soon would end, and his life alone would begin, and with it the quest that would come to define him, to find the woman he loved, to rescue her, to return her to their house of perfect love.

Diana would watch and weep inside for the husband who had forgotten her, but she would continue to serve the mission, duty before love.

In the great vastness of the universe, worlds begin and end every day. Somewhere eyes are being raised to the sky for the first time and somewhere for the last time, always. But in the heart, in the house of love, tiny events are enormous events, such as the loss of the one you love.

Flynn lost Abby and Diana lost Flynn, and the universe went its heedless way. But not for them, for them the losses were so vast that they were almost unimaginable.

Duty kept Diana loyal to the mission, and she tried not to hate the man she loved, watching him search for this other woman, this simple human creature who, after all, had been nothing but a bit of bait. That, and her own husband's new and eternal love.

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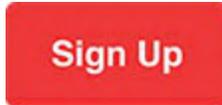
WHITLEY STRIEBER is the *New York Times* bestselling author of more than twenty-five books, including the legendary bestsellers *The Wolfen*, *The Hunger*, *Communion*, and *Superstorm*, all the bases of movies.

His book *The Grays* is also being made into a film. His website, Unknowncountry.com, is the largest of its kind in the world, exploring the edge of science and reality. You can learn more about Whitley's books at www.strieber.com and follow him on Facebook and Twitter. You can sign up for author updates [here](#).



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Underworld Teaser

They Did Not Know

Praise

Also by Whitley Strieber

About the Author

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To Michael Talbot,
of sacred memory,
author of
*The Delicate Dependency and
The Holographic Universe*

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the help of my editor, Mitchell Ivers; my agent, Sandra Martin; and my wife, Anne Strieber; all of whom have made essential contributions to the creation of this book.

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches toward
Bethlehem to be born?

— *The Second Coming*, William Butler Yeats

“I am part of the justice of the earth.”

— Miriam Blaylock, *The Hunger*

The Last Vampire

ONE

The Conclave

Everyone knew the sins of Miriam Blaylock.

Her crime, and it was an unforgivable one, was to enjoy human beings as friends and lovers, rather than to simply exploit them. She could kiss them and find it sweet, have sex with them and afterward sleep like a contented tiger. To her own kind, this was perversion, like a man with a sheep.

The fact that this prejudice was nonsense did not make what she was doing now any easier. She pressed herself back against the seat of the pedicab, instinctively keeping her face hidden, not only from man, but from her own kind. The *samlor* moved swiftly down the wet street, spattering through puddles left by the last storm. From the shadows of the passenger compartment, she watched a concealing fog rising from the moat that surrounded the ancient Thai city of Chiang Mai.

How could she ever do this impossible thing? How could she ever face her own kind?

Some theorized that she must have human blood in her family. The idea that there could be interbreeding was absurd, of course — nothing but an old husband's tale. She despised the narrowness of her kind, hated what, in recent centuries, their lives had become. They had once been princes, but now they lived behind walls, kept to the shadows, appeared in the human world only to hunt. They had opted out of man's technological society. They knew human breeding, but human technology was simply too intimidating for them.

Miriam owned a thriving nightclub in New York and had bookkeepers and assistants and bartenders, all humans. She had computers to run her accounts. She could access her stock portfolios using her PalmPilot, and she made money on the markets, plenty of it. She had a cell phone and GPS in her car.

They didn't even have cars. Once the buggy no longer bounced along behind the horse, they had simply stopped riding. The same with sails. When ships lost their sails, her kind stopped traveling the world. And airplanes — well, some of them probably weren't yet aware that they existed.

The other rulers of the world were now just shadows hiding in dens, their numbers slowly declining due to accidents. They called themselves the Keepers, but what did that mean nowadays? Gone was the time when they were the secret masters of humankind, keeping man as man keeps cattle.

Truth be told, the Keepers were in general decline, but they were far too proud to realize it. Conclaves were held every hundred years, and at the last ones Miriam had seen a change — Keepers she had known a thousand years had followed her mother and father into death. Nobody had brought a child, nobody had courted.

Despite their failure, Miriam valued her kind. She valued herself. The Keepers were essential to the justice and meaning of the world. That was why she had come here, why she had tempted the humiliation and even the possible danger involved: she wanted to continue her species. Miriam wanted a baby.

The last of the four eggs that nature gave a Keeper woman would soon leave her body unless she found a man to fertilize it. For all that she had — riches, honor, power, and beauty — her essential meaning was unfulfilled without a baby. She was here for her last-chance child.

She gazed across the gleaming back of the *samlor* driver at the busy night streets of the bustling little city. How the world was changing. She had chosen a *samlor* out of love for the past, which she most certainly shared with the rest of her kind. She remembered Chiang Mai as a small community of wooden houses with *theps* carved on the pediments of their soaring, peaked roofs, and golden temple spires rising above lush stands of trees. Now, the narrow old streets resounded with the shrill clatter of *tuk-tuks*, which were so rapidly replacing the pedal-driven *samlor*. The traffic wasn't quite yet the hell on earth of Bangkok, but it was certainly going in that direction.

She longed to be home, in her beautiful house, surrounded by her beloved

people, faithful Sarah and sweet young Leonore, just now learning her ways.

Just like the black, miserable dens of the other Keepers, her house was full of beautiful things. But hers were treasures of the heart, not the jade and silver and gold pieces her peers collected with total indifference, selling them later just because they'd become "antiques" among the humans. They didn't enjoy their priceless jade Buddhas or their Rembrandt drawings or their Egyptian gold. They just used them. She had a gold Buddha a thousand years old, before which she meditated, and twin Rembrandts of herself and her beloved mother. He had captured the sure gleam of their essence, she thought. She gazed often at her mother's wide, almost innocent eyes, at the subtle humor in her lips.

Over the millennia, Miriam had lost both parents and her husband. Her keepsakes of them were at the center of her life.

Rembrandt had known that there was something unusual about the two women who had commissioned him, a sense of independence and self-possession that human women in those days did not have. He had captured it in the proud, yet easy stance of the figures he had drawn, humming to himself as he made tiny pen strokes and smoked a long clay pipe. He had kissed Miriam's hand and said, "You are cold . . . so cold."

Not only did she enjoy human beings, she took pleasure in human things — painting and sculpture, writing and music. She had been an opera buff from the beginning of the genre. She had been at the opening night of a dozen great operas, had been transported by everyone from Adelina Patti to Maria Callas to Kiri Te Kanawa. She remembered the haunting voices of the *castrati* echoing in the palaces of the Old World.

The other Keepers looked upon humans as animals. Miriam thought that they had souls, that you could feel something leaving their bodies just as they died. It happened while you were all curled up around them, while you were comfortably absorbing their life. A sort of electric charge would seem to come out of them. Only after that would their eyes be totally empty.

They said it was the nervous system shorting out because of the fluid loss. Miriam hoped so. But what if the reality was that men had the souls, not us?

If we were the brilliant animals, they the dim angels? That would be an irony, that an animal had created an angel.

When she meditated before her Buddha, she asked these questions: Why do we live so long? Is it because we have been denied a soul? If so, could I trade? And why, O God, if you are there, why are we cold . . . so cold?

The rest of her kind lived to eat. She ate to live. She spent heavily, just as her family always had. She consumed money without thought, like so much candy or caviar. Her club, the Veils, was the most exclusive in New York. In a strong month, and most of its months were very strong, drugs and liquor would bring in a half-million-dollar profit. There was no cover charge, of course. If you were important enough to enter the Veils at all, you certainly weren't the sort of person who would be expected to pay a cover.

Miriam had been the friend of kings for two thousand years. She had seen their generations rise and fall. She loved them in their pride and momentary lives. She loved their finest things, the jewels and whispering silks, the attention paid to the very rich.

When the wallets of her peers opened, you could practically hear creaking. She had fun; they had their careful customs and their dreary, conservative habits. She wanted meaning from life, they wanted only to keep breathing.

But now, for all their rejecting ways, she needed them. Her plan was to travel to all of the current conclaves, at once charming and, hopefully, seducing a man.

Deep in memory's mist, she'd had a baby. She still remembered the moment of conception as if it were yesterday. For women of her kind, conception was the most exquisite pleasure they could know. At the moment a man's semen fertilized one of your eggs, your whole body reacted with an unforgettable explosion of nerve-tingling delight. Even after all this time, part of her being remained focused on that stunning moment.

They always knew the sex of the baby within them, and she and Eumenes named their boy and fell in love with him from that first, joy-filled night. Then had come the pregnancy, a year of gestation . . . and the pain and the

loss she'd felt as the silent, blue form of her dead infant was laid on her belly. Soon after, her beloved husband also died. Practically nothing could kill them — they never got sick, they couldn't. But he had weakened and wasted, and no one knew why. All her love, all her care, was not enough to save her dear Eumenes, not after he stopped eating.

He had grown as narrow and cold as a mummy, but his eyes had continued to glow . . . as if death had some special meaning, as if hunger had become for him a state of transcendence. She had begged him to eat, had tempted him, had tried, at the last, to force her own blood into his veins.

Was it grief that had killed him, or some greater despair? Like her, he respected the mind of man. Like her, he was unsure about whether or not humankind had ascended to a point that made it evil to prey on them.

Was it evil to be a Keeper? Was taking conscious prey murder? She thought that her husband had starved himself over these questions . . . and over the blue, hopeless baby he had so gently deposited upon her breast.

The dead may die to the world, but they do not die in the heart. Miriam's side of their love affair had continued on for whole cycles of years. But eventually his memory faded like the encaustic of his face that she'd had painted by Eratosthenes, that hurried little genius, in Alexandria.

Old Alexandria . . . redolent with the scents of myrrh and cardamom, whispering by night, singing by day. She remembered Cleopatra's hollow palace, and the Academia with its great library. She read all 123 of Sophocles' plays there, and she saw thirty of them performed. How many had survived? Seven, she thought, only seven.

Over all the intervening years, she had not been able to find a man of her own kind to replace Eumenes. Part of the reason was that conclaves only happened once in a hundred years, and *they* did not court except during conclave. For somebody who lived for the moment, that kind of planning just did not work.

Now she was at the end of her choices. Either she would find someone or she would never, ever give another Keeper to the world.

Keeper children learned in school that humans were bred to appear similar to us on the surface so that Keepers could go among them more freely. In the beginning, they did not look at all similar and were not at all smart. They were little apes with lots of hair and huge teeth. We Keepers have always been as we are, beautiful beyond compare.

Miriam had drifted into the habit of taking human lovers because she was lonely and they were satisfying and the emotional commitment was not great. You found a cute male or a sweet, sensual female — the sex mattered not to Miriam, both had their charms — and you seduced, softly, gently, with the caressing eye and the slow hand. Then you put them to sleep with hypnosis and opened their veins and filled them full of your blood, and magic happened: They stayed young for years and years. You told them you'd made them immortal, and they followed you like foolish little puppies. Like the dear creature who now kept her home and business in New York, who warmed her bed and hunted with her . . . the dear creature, so lovely and brilliant and torn by her silly human conflicts. She had almost lost Sarah a few years ago, but had brought her back. The girl should be grateful and compliant, but that was not always the case. Sarah made mistakes. Sarah lived much too dangerously. She was haunted by what she had endured, and Miriam could not blame her. Indeed, she could hardly imagine what it would be like to lie in a coffin like that, slowly deteriorating but unable to die.

Sarah knew that one day the torment would certainly come again. She strove to save herself, using all of her considerable knowledge of medicine to attempt to defeat the process of aging that must slowly consume her, despite the fact that Miriam's blood now flowed in her veins.

To live, Sarah had to prey on man. She was even more tormented by this than Miriam's other lovers had been. Her Hippocratic oath haunted her, poor creature.

Miriam stopped herself. Best not go down that path again. She was always troubled by the tormented lives and horrible deaths of her lovers. The delicious little things were her guilt, her pain.

But not now, not on this nervous, excited night, the opening night of the Asian conclave. At least a proper lover would never die as the human ones

did, pleading for deliverance even as their flesh became dust. But she would have to submit to him, obey him, live in his cold cell . . . at least, for a time.

Her body was her life — its rich senses, its wild desires, the way it felt when strong hands or sweet hands traveled her shivery skin.

There would be none of that in her future, not when she was part of one of *their* households, as she would be expected to be, at least for the duration of her pregnancy. Long, silent days, careful, creeping nights — that would be her life behind the walls of their world.

But that was how it had to be. She could almost feel that little body in her belly, could imagine hugging it after it came out, while it was still flushed and coal-hot. Only a newborn or a freshly fed Keeper was ever that warm.

The *samlor* glided along Moon Muang Road, heading for the Tapae Gate and the temple district beyond, moving through the murky, soaked night. How did the Asians stand this wretched climate? And yet, the heat was also nice. She enjoyed sweaty beds and long, druggy nights doing every decadent thing she could imagine.

The others shunned drugs. *They* said that they would rather die than become addicted for the thousands of years of their lives. She hadn't had that experience at all. Your blood protected you from all disease and weakness. *They* were just prejudiced against drugs, which were a human pleasure and therefore assumed to be trivial. But they had never done hash in ginger-scented Tangiers, or opium here in pillow-soft Chiang Mai, the last place in Asia where a good pipe of well-aged opium could be found. They had never smoked lying on silk beneath a hypnotic fan. When the nights were hot and the air was still, she was drawn back to the brilliant oblivion of the pipe. Drugs were less dangerous to enjoy here than in the States. No blustery, narrow-eyed policemen were apt to show up, waving guns and yelling. She'd had to race up too many walls to escape from those annoying creatures.

Well, all that was going to change. She was going to become a proper wife, and she certainly didn't need drugs for that. She wasn't addicted, so it wouldn't be a problem.

She could imagine her man, tall and silent, his face narrow, his skin as pale as a shadow. She could feel him, muscles like mean springs, long, curving fingers that could crush a human's bones or caress her plump breasts. She took a deep breath. These thoughts made her feel as if she were drowning and being rescued at the same time.

The wind rose, sweeping through the dark trees, sending ripples shivering across the puddles that were like lakes in the street. Much lower now, the clouds raced and tumbled. Voices rose from a little market, two girls singing some popular song, oblivious to the *samlor* that whispered past and to the being within, who was carefully listening to the patter of their heartbeats from a thousand feet away.

Her interest in them told her that the hunger was rising within her. She felt it now, a faint gnawing in her belly, a hint of ice in her veins.

This was bad news. Most of her kind could detect their hunger coming for days, and they could prepare carefully to do a hunt. She'd never been able to prepare. One second she was fine, the next it was starting.

Buddha said it was good to live in the moment. In the Vedas, she'd read that there was only the moment. Her species had no holy books, just records of their possessions. Her mother had told her, "Humans have holy books because they've journeyed closer to God than we have."

She noticed that the smell of the *samlor* driver was washing over her, blown back by the breeze. She took a deep drag on her strong Thai cigarette, attempting to blot out the delicious scent.

It did not work. Okay, she thought, I'll go with it. She looked at the driver's sweating back. A thirty-second struggle and she'd be fed for another couple of weeks. The thing was, the hotel had written down her destination in Thai for him. He would not deviate from the route. She needed to get him to go down some darker side street. "Speak English?"

He did not respond. So she'd have to jump him right out here if she wanted him, and that would never do. You did your kills in private, and you destroyed all trace of the corpse. Even Miriam Blaylock followed those two

essential rules.

The driver's skin rippled, his muscles surged. Mentally, she stripped him of his black shorts and T-shirt. She imagined laying him down upon a wonderful big bed, his penis like a cute little tree branch. She would kiss him all over and hold him closer and tighter, filling her mouth with his salt sweat and her nose with his every intimate smell. Her mouth would anesthetize his skin as the feeding began and in a few delightful moments, his blood would be sweeping down her throat.

She closed her eyes, arching her back and stretching, forcing his smell out of her nose with a rush of air. Think about opium, she told herself, not blood. Later, she would smoke to relieve this damned hunger. She needed to get back to familiar territory before she fed. It wasn't safe to do it in an unknown place.

Too bad her flight to Paris, where the European conclave was held, didn't leave until tomorrow evening.

This Asian conclave would end with dawn, and she'd have liked to have gone straight on to Europe. She could feed easily in Paris; she knew the city well. She'd hunted there recently — no more than fifty or so years ago, when it was swarming with Germans.

Of course, she might meet a man here in Chiang Mai. If she did, her new husband would attend to her need for prey during the pregnancy. If she wasn't leaving tomorrow, she'd be staying in Asia a long time.

If she was still alone after this conclave, she'd make her way along Samian Road, then cut into the welter of little streets that concealed a hole-in-the-wall she'd discovered called the Moonlight Bar. Down in the cellar a tiny old woman waited with pipes. Once, there had been thousands of opium dens in Asia. Now only Chiang Mai was left, with two or three small establishments.

At home, she kept her two-hundred-year-old opium in clay pots sealed with beeswax. Her ancient pipes delivered the vapor cool and easy, and Sarah was beautifully trained in the art of preparation and lighting.

She gazed up at the racing moon, thought of New York. It was about noon at home, so the cleaning crew would be at work in the club. Sarah and Leo would be asleep at home, probably in one another's arms . . . probably in Miriam's own bed, a curtained, canopied heaven made for Nellie Salter, cane-mistress to Sir Francis Bacon, and William Shakespeare's Dark Lady. She'd drunk too much before she died, had Nellie. She'd made Miriam positively giddy.

Maybe the thing to do would be to convince her husband to come back with her. Or, if that proved to be impossible, maybe she would break even that taboo, and bear the child without a male's protection.

Suddenly, a positively sumptuous girl appeared on the sidewalk, her features carved as if by a master, her skin as soft as mist.

"Speak English?" Miriam called to her. No answer.

"*Parlez-vous français?*" The girl hurried off, disappearing into a doorway. Miriam knew that she appeared enormous and intimidating to these people, an improbable apparition with ash-gray eyes and improbably elegant clothes.

Chanel sent her a *couturier* and staff each year, and she bought a new ensemble. Still, she was told it was all much too conservative.

It was true enough that her kind had trouble with fashion. Fifty years would pass in a blink, and suddenly you would find yourself wearing the last bustle in the world or the last top hat. That's why the few even slightly accurate stories about them so often portrayed them in antique clothes. Bram Stoker, she thought, must have known a little something about the real thing. How else could he have known to portray his Dracula as such a stodgy dresser?

An odor struck Miriam with the force of a slap. Involuntarily, she hissed. The driver's head snapped around, his eyes wide and white. The scent of human blood had invaded her nostrils, raw and still very much alive. Then she saw why: there was an accident ahead.

A powerful instinct urged her to leap out of the cab and suck the bodies dry

while the life force was still there to consume. But this was another instinct that had to be stifled.

As they passed the site, she held her breath. She could not trust herself with the scent of raw blood, not when the hunger was spreading through her body. Her skin was already cooling, making her feel heavy and slow. She'd be as pale as ashes when she got to the conclave. They'd all think, *Look at her, she can't even feed herself.*

The moon burst out from behind furious clouds. Lightning flickered on the spire of Wat Chedi Luang. The temple spires here in Chiang Mai were so lovely and exotic. She was used to the canyons of Manhattan.

Again the smell of the driver reached her nostrils. This time her body started to prepare to eat, her muscles growing tight for the assault, her mouth swimming in the mucus that would anesthetize her prey.

She took a long, last drag on the cigarette. If you pulled their blood into your gut with sufficient strength, your feed ended with delicious dregs.

“Be sure and get the organ juice, dear,” her mother would admonish her. “It makes for strong bones.”

Mother Lamia was hard to remember and hard to forget. When Miriam needed to fall out of love with a human, she would use her memory of what humans had done to her mother to help her along. It had come as a great surprise, the capture. When Keepers slept, their bodies reached a state near death. They were entirely helpless. So sleep was carried out in deep hiding, or — in those days — in great and protected palaces.

A man they had thought a friend had betrayed Lamia. He had been a faithful partner at cards, had been the Graf von Holbein. But it evolved that he was not a petty count but a powerful priest, and his name was not Holbein but Muenster, Father Deitrich Muenster.

Miriam had escaped across the roofs of the little town where they were living. She had not been able to take her comatose mother, nor to hide her. Miriam had expected to remove her from their prison either by bribery or by

brute force.

But they had not tried her. They had not even imprisoned her. They had wasted no time. Mother Lamia had awakened already chained to her stake. She realized instantly what was happening. But all of her struggles and strength did not break the chains or topple the stake.

Mother Lamia had stood proud on the pyre they had made for her, her hair flaring sparks into the night. She had stood there for a long, long time, because Keepers could only die when their blood stopped completely.

They had laughed when she screamed, and when they realized that she was dying so unusually slowly, they were even more delighted. Mother had been burned for a witch in 1761, in a village near Dresden. She had been the most alive, the best person Miriam had ever known. She had a fabulous sense of humor. She loved to have adventures, and she loved to dance. Mother introduced Miriam to music — sackbuts, violas . . . her beloved viola da gamba. Miriam had been taught to sing, to read and speak many human languages, so many that she'd lost count. The languages of the ancient world had been works of art, Sumerian and Egyptian and Zolor, among many others. They had been supplanted by Greek, with its sublime verbs, and Latin, which was too rigidly constructed . . . somehow crude. English was a practical tongue. Of the modern languages, Miriam thought that French and Mandarin Chinese stood out as being the most satisfying to speak.

Unfortunately, she had never learned Thai, so she was at a disadvantage here. “Will you hurry, you stupid creature,” she growled at the driver in English. He sped up. Her tone needed no common language to make itself understood.

The spires of the temple district rose all around her now. The district bore an ancient enchantment, for it was sacred to her kind, too. Here in the deep eons they had met, ten thousand years ago, fifteen thousand . . . when the world had been their toy and man a mute race of cattle. Look at the pavements left by her kind, still perfect after all this time. Look at the foundations of Wat Phra Singh and Wat Chedi Chet Yot — no human engineer could fashion such precision in stone. Stars curse what had happened among her kind, to make them vagrants in their own world. Give

me opium, let me smoke. Let me forget.

She touched the golden key that lay at the bottom of her new purse, the key that would let her into the sanctum in the cellar of the Moonlight Bar. The purse was a Gucci bought at the local night market for 2500 baht. It was a luxurious item and finely made. She didn't need another purse, but she loved to shop and she'd been unable to resist. Every Keeper loved exquisite leather, and calfskin was deliciously close to human . . . which was *very* taboo to wear outside the home. The prey might notice something — the remains of a tattoo or a human birthmark on your gloves or your pocketbook. Personally, she never wore leather from human skin. They might be prey, but they were sensitive, conscious beings and that had to be respected. But their skins tanned *très* softly, they flayed off a smooth back or buttock.

The *samlor* driver hunched forward as if some deep instinct was drawing him away from her. The thought again crossed her mind to just jump him. She'd ride him like a little bullock. He would shriek and buck, and it would be a thrill.

His living scent stung the flower-sweet air. Then he turned the *samlor*, going down a narrow street. It was little more than a passageway, very quiet.

She shoved another cigarette into her mouth and lit it. Closer they came to the ancient temple of Wat Chiang Man, the *chedi* within it buttressed to the four corners of the world by four gilded elephants.

The *samlor* stopped. Beneath the *chedi*, in a cellar no human being had ever entered, was the ancient *ho trai* of the Asian clans, a place founded before Siddhartha was Buddha, indeed before Siddhartha was born. "Stay," Miriam said. "Wait."

An eye took her in. The slightest of nods. She knew that this temple had a reputation among the ghost-conscious Thai. He sat with his head bowed and his feet clicking his pedals.

Her heels clattering on the wet paving stones, she crossed the short distance to the temple, then entered the *chedi*. Here, it was suddenly quiet. There was a scent of sandalwood and smoke from the single guttering lantern

that hung from a rafter, shining on the great Buddha that reclined in the center of the ornate chamber.

She paid respect to the Buddha, drawing her hands together and bowing. Had any of her peers seen her, they would have scorned her utterly.

She ran her fingers along the cunning mortise work, then tapped softly three times, causing the concealed mechanism to give way with a soft click. It was a little surprising, the way the mechanism felt. It was almost as if the lock were sprung. She thought she might have been able to open it just with a push. You'd never find this kind of carelessness in Europe or America.

She went down the steep, curving steps. She didn't need illumination, of course. There was a nocturnal species . . . miserably enough in this electric era. How her father had moped when the humans had discovered electricity. "We should have kept it from them," he'd said.

Keeper men and women did not live together except during pregnancy and, to some extent, child-rearing. But the love between them could be great, and he had never recovered from the loss of his Lamia. "I find myself searching the world for her," he would say. He'd persisted in doing dangerous things — climbing mountains, dueling, and traveling, endlessly traveling. It was death he sought, when he sought the far hills.

Her father had died in the explosion of the Hindenburg in 1937 — taken like his Lamia by fire. He saved human beings from the flames, and those he helped can be seen in the newsreel film scrambling from the windows as the ship descends. He comes out last, and his form disappears in the fire.

Over and over and over again, she watched that film, longing for one more rolling murmur of his voice, one more touch from his kindly hand.

She stopped on the fourth step. There was sound down below, definitely. Good, the conclave was in session. For most of the Keepers down there, this would be the first contact in a century with any of their own kind. Lovers met in sweet battle, and mothers lived with their children. But for the most part, they were a species as solitary as the spider.

A little farther along, she stopped again. Something she was hearing below did not seem quite right. Her people didn't laugh. She'd never heard anybody laugh except her mother and herself. Not even her dad had done it.

She went a little farther — and then she saw something incredible. On the dark wall there was a figure drawn. Or no, it was painted — spray-painted. She had to raise her head to see the whole of it. When she did, she saw that it was a crudely sprayed painting of a human penis in full erection.

Graffiti?

Farther along yet, there were paper cartons from a restaurant, still smelling of pepper and garlic. Nobody ate human food. They had no way to digest it. Inside, they were not made like humans at all. Liquor, however, was a different story. They could get drunk, fortunately. The others disdained alcohol, of course, but Miriam enjoyed fine wines and adored every form of distilled liquor from Armagnac to Jim Beam.

She moved a few more steps down, getting past the odor of the cartons. Her nostrils sought scent ahead.

Then she stopped. Fear did not come easily to her kind, so she was not frightened by what she smelled, only confused. She smelled humans — the dense odor of men, the sweet-sharp scent of boys.

A shock went through her as powerful as one of the lightning bolts that had been tearing through the clouds. She saw, suddenly and with absolute clarity, that the reason for all the odd signs was that there were human beings in this secret place. She was so surprised that she uttered an involuntary cry. The sound shuddered the walls, the moaning, forsaken howl of a tiger at bay.

From below there came a rush of voices, then the wild flicker of flash-lights. Footsteps pummeled the stairs, and suddenly two Occidental men and three Thai boys came racing past her, cursing and pulling on their clothes.

Behind them they left a greasy silence, interrupted after a few moments by the scuttle of roaches and the stealthy sniffing of rats. Treading as if her feet were touching sewage, Miriam descended into the sanctum. She growled low,

striding about in the filth and ruins.

They must have moved the sanctuary. But why hadn't they told anybody? Keepers might be a solitary lot, but ancient custom dictated that everybody be informed of something so basic as this. Unless — was she really *that* shunned, that they would move a place of conclave and keep only her in the dark?

Surely not. They were far too conservative to alter an ancient convention. So maybe there had been an emergency. Maybe the sanctuary had been discovered and they'd had to move it suddenly.

That must be it. She hadn't gotten the message because there'd been no time.

But then she saw, lying in a corner beneath the ruins of a shattered bookcase, a familiar red shape. She caught her breath, because what she was seeing was impossible. Her skin grew taut, her muscles stirred — the predator sensed danger.

She picked up the red-leather book cover and held it in reverent, shaking hands. From the time their eyes came open, Keepers were taught that the Books of Names were sacred. By these books, a whole species knew itself, all who lived and had died, and all its works and days.

That red leather was unmistakable, as was the inscription in the beloved glyphs of their own tongue, glyphs that no human knew. *The Names of the Keepers and the Keepings*.

They called themselves Keepers because they kept herds. If the rest of the book had been here, there would have been descriptions of the various territories that belonged to the different Asian Keepers and who had the right to use which human herd.

She ran her fingers over the heavy leather. It had been cured from the skin of a human when they were still coarse, primitive creatures. These books were begun thirty thousand years ago — a long time, even in the world of the Keepers. But not all *that* long. Her great-great-grandfather, for example, had

been able to imitate the cries of the Neanderthals. Buried in the Prime Keep in Egypt were careful wax paintings of the human figure going back to the beginning.

She crouched to the crumbled mass of paper, tried to smooth it, to somehow make it right. When she touched the pages, roaches sped away. She spread a crumpled page to see if any useful information remained.

The roaches had eaten the ink, what hadn't been smeared by the vile uses to which the paper had apparently been put. She laid the page down on the dirty floor, laid it down as she might lay to rest the body of a beloved friend.

She made another circuit of the chamber, looking into its recesses and crannies, but not a page remained.

She was face-to-face with what was without a doubt the greatest astonishment of her life. Some of the richest and most ancient Keepers were Asian. There had been — oh, easily a hundred of them.

She slumped against a wall. Had man somehow done this, simple, weak little *man*?

Keepers could be hurt by man — witness her mother and father — but they couldn't be destroyed by man, not this way. They *owned* man!

She looked from empty wall to empty wall and fully grasped the fact that the Asian Keepers must have been destroyed. If even one was left alive, this book would be safe.

When she grasped this enormous reality, something so rare happened to Miriam that she lifted her long, tapering fingers to her cheeks in amazement.

Far below the crazy streets, in the fetid ruin of this holy place, a vampire wept.

TWO

Blood Nocturne

The *samlor* moved with what now felt like maddening slowness through the sighing showers of rain, down the empty streets, while Miriam listened to the tremble of her own heart and smelled the air for danger.

What odor did she seek? The acid stink of a dead Keeper, perhaps, or the oil of a policeman's gun?

How could a human policeman kill one of them? The idea was absurd.

Yet the book had been destroyed. No battle among the Keepers, no matter how violent, would have resulted in the destruction of a Book of Names. Keepers fought for love and herds, but only occasionally, and never *that* hard. Not even in their days in the sun.

Miriam longed now to spend the night beneath the whirling fan, sucking deeply on her pipe, but thousands of years of hunting brilliant and dangerous prey made her too wary now even to consider such repose.

"Airport," she'd told the *samlor* driver. She'd pulled the plastic curtain across the front of the cabin and sat in the stuffy interior smoking and watching the rain pelt the driver's back, trying not to dwell on the scent of his blood.

The ride to the airport was a long one, and toward the end the creature had slowed to a slumped, struggling walk. If this had been another time, she would have whipped him.

She might be a rebel, but just now she felt an absolute, burning loyalty to her own kind. They had a right to life, just like any other creature. More of a right — this whole earth and every single creature living on it was their

property, and much of it — including man — was their creation.

They had given man everything — his form, his mind, his life itself. It was the Keepers who had originally bred the crops that man had been taught to cultivate, the grains and the fruits of the land, and the dumb beasts that he had been given to eat.

Her own great-granduncle had given the northern herds the apple, breeding the plants carefully through a hundred generations, then planting them where human tribes would discover the apparently wild orchards. This had been done as a solution to a nutritional problem. Humans needed fruit or they became constipated. It was most unpleasant to feed on a constipated human.

The *samlor* came to a stop before the shambling Chiang Mai airport, which proved to be empty in the predawn. Flights, it seemed, did not begin early here. She certainly couldn't sit alone in the lobby, not and invite the curiosity of security guards by being the only passenger present.

Nearby there was an area of warehouses, lit only by a few overhead lights. As the driver walked down a ramp to an area where others of his kind slept beneath plastic sheets, she slipped into the shadows at the edge of the main terminal building. A few yards away there was a chain-link fence with a locked gate. She twisted the lock off and moved toward the nearest warehouse, slipping in through a side door.

The black interior smelled of cotton and turned out to be full of T-shirts intended for the western market. "Grateful Dead," "Adolf Hitler, European Tour 1939–1945," "I Am a Teenage Werewolf."

She knew a great deal about fear, as something that her prey experienced. It was interesting to watch, in an abstract sort of way. She never felt it herself unless she got careless or unlucky. After all, humans couldn't do anything to a Keeper. Being killed by man was regarded as a freak accident, about as likely as being caught in an avalanche. Or, that used to be the case. Since about the time of her mother's death, things had been changing. The Keepers had responded by becoming more and more wary and reclusive.

Keepers were ten times as strong; they could climb sheer walls and leap

long distances. They were far more intelligent. But were they faster than a bullet or a warning cell-phone call? Had they the skill to outwit investigators armed with the tools of forensic science?

She had been surprised to see the shadow of man in that ruined holy place. But she realized, now, that she should not have been.

Given the destruction of the Asian Book of Names, she had to assume that there were human beings who knew of their Keepers and were efficient enough to have destroyed a whole conclave.

The question was, how much had they actually understood of that book? If man had learned to read Prime, the ancient Keeper language, then a terrible doom might be upon all the Keepers. That book not only contained records of the locations and property of all the Keepers in Asia, but also all of their familial and fiscal relationships to every other Keeper in the world. It told the locations and times of the other centennial conclaves that would be held this month.

Miriam had to warn her kind.

An hour after dawn, workers were coming to open the warehouse, and the airport was slowly returning to life. As Miriam went among the crowd in the terminal, she found herself coping with strange urges, ferocious urges. She wanted to grab a few of them and tear their heads off and drink their spouting necks with the savagery of the ancients.

Perhaps she *was* afraid. A predator experiences fear as an urge to attack. It was why her mother had roared and gnashed her teeth back when — but she didn't want to brood on that again, not now.

Her hunger was starting to actually make her bones ache, and her skin was turning whiter and whiter. The dry, corpse-like coldness that marked a hungry Keeper's skin was stealing her usual girlish flush.

“Bangkok,” she said to the ticket clerk, producing a Visa card in the name of the traveling alias Sarah had set up for this trip. A French national called “Marie Tallman” had entered Thailand from the U.S. and would leave for

Paris. Miriam Blaylock, a U.S. citizen, would return to New York.

She went to the surprisingly ornate first-class lounge. A hostess came up. Miriam ordered sour lemonade, then sat down and lit a cigarette. She contemplated what had become the problem of her hunger.

She'd ignored it for too long, and now she was going to have to feed before she left Thailand. Why hadn't she noticed this back in New York? She could have sent Sarah down to the Veils to bring back some wanderer. At home, she had reduced the hunt to a simple, safe procedure that delivered her prey right into her arms. Sarah found appropriate victims and lured them to the Veils. Miriam consumed them in a basement room built for the purpose, or she took them home and dined there.

She gave them a lovely time. They died in ecstasy.

She sucked a cigarette hard, blasted the smoke out of her nose. If she didn't feed soon, she would slow down, she would lose her edge. Then she'd have to find some weak human and do a thin feed. This would only stave the hunger off for a few days, no more. So there would be a second hunt in Paris, and more danger.

She ought to race straight back to New York and the hell with the rest of the Keepers. They probably wouldn't appreciate her efforts anyway.

But she couldn't, not when the greatest disaster she had ever known had befallen an entire continent. Of all the Keepers, how could it ever have been the Asians who would be attacked by man? Many of them were true ancients, more than ten thousand years old. Immensely wise, extraordinarily careful, not moving so much as an inch except to feed, they would stay in their black lairs, shadows with gleaming eyes and slow, slow breath, amusing themselves for months by gazing at a bit of intricately woven cloth or some subtly reflective gem.

When these Keepers walked among their herds, the humans would stir in their sleep, sighing with the sighing wind, clinging to one another without knowing why.

They had seen vast ages of man pass, empires rise and fall and be forgotten, thousands of human generations go to dust. More effectively than any other group in the world, the Asians had managed their herds, inducing migrations in order to evoke new strains, breeding their stock for beauty and intelligence and succulence. Humans called it famine and war and migration. Keepers called it stock management.

The more she thought about it, the more uneasy she became. How much of the secret of their Keepers had the humans involved understood, and who were these creatures? How could cattle enjoying the riches and ease of the feedlot ever realize the truth about their lives? Especially when not one in a hundred thousand of them would ever come into contact with a Keeper. But human beings were not cattle, and it was a mistake to think so.

Somehow, they had used their clever little brains to discover a secret that was larger than they were. They had used their damned science. They never should have been given the wheel, let alone electricity and — God forbid — flight.

But they had been. They were fun to watch, damned things. Also, as their population had risen out of control, they themselves had taken their science to greater and greater heights, seeking to make more food, to move faster, to create room for more and more of themselves on the groaning planet.

She'd had a brush with human science herself back twenty or so years ago. It was hard to believe, now, just how much trouble dear Dr. Sarah Roberts had caused her back then. She'd taken samples of her own blood into a laboratory. She'd damned well discovered the secret of the Keepers, that smart little vixen.

Miriam had eaten her cohort and seduced her. She'd flooded Sarah's body with her own blood, but Sarah had fought the transformation. She had refused to eat, claiming that her medical oath was stronger than her love of life. So she had spent a little time among the undead, her soul trapped in her slowly decaying body.

Meanwhile, Miriam had read Sarah's scientific papers and gained new insights from them about the synergy between Keeper blood and human

blood. She had managed to resuscitate Sarah.

In doing so, she had gained a complex and fascinating companion. Sarah had honor, and so could be trusted. But she did not like to feed. She considered it murder.

Miriam had lured Sarah into finding buried parts of herself that loved the soft skin and the considered touch of another woman. When they lay together, Miriam would draw her to climax again and again, with the pressure of the finger or the exploratory flutter of the tongue.

“Passengers for Thai Airways Flight Two-Twenty-three to Bangkok may now board through Gate Eleven.”

She began to file toward the gate that led to the plane. Normally, she minded travel far less than other Keepers. For a woman of their kind, travel was limited to courtship during her four fertilities and, of course, attending the centennial conclaves.

Defying convention, Miriam had traveled all over the world. She had tasted it and enjoyed it and watched it change across time, had walked in the grand alleys of ancient Rome and the perfumed halls of the Sun King.

She had lived a long time in the cellars of the House of the Caesars on the Quirinal Hill, had heard mad Caligula screeching and fed on the blood of his slaves, who were fat from their constant stealing of his peacock breasts and zebra haunches, and were too numerous to be missed.

Despite all her journeying, she detested small spaces. During the eastern European crisis of the nineteenth century, when local humans had briefly learned to recognize their masters, Keepers in the Balkans had been forced to hide in graves. Miriam had gone there to see firsthand what had gone wrong. She ended up spending a week hiding in a coffin, an experience that still haunted her dreams. It had taken almost all of her strength to dig herself out of the grave. Their use of this particular hiding place was how the legend that Keepers were somehow undead had begun.

It was some time before anybody understood why simple Transylvanian

peasants had come to understand that they were property. Not until the publication of *Dracula* did the Keepers realize that out-of-date clothing could give you away in a world where fashions had begun to change more than once in a human generation. The Romans had worn togas for a thousand years. In the Middle Ages, fashion had changed perhaps twice in a century.

In the nineteenth century, it began to change every fifteen years or so. Isolated in the Carpathians, the Keepers who lived there had failed to notice that powdered wigs and buckle shoes had ceased to be worn by humans. The peasants soon realized that every time one of these bewigged oddities was seen in the night streets, somebody disappeared. Twenty-six Keepers died during the Balkan troubles, the largest number by far ever to be destroyed at one time by man.

But there had been sixty or more here in Asia. *Sixty*. What if they were captured, starving in prison, or being tracked like foxes? Or worse, already dead.

They *were* dead. She sensed this. There was something missing in the air . . . a sort of silence where there had been music.

She strode toward the far back of the fetid tube full of seats. The only place she would sit on most flights was the very last row. If something went wrong, her great strength might give her an edge, for she would be perfectly capable of ripping a hole in the fuselage in order to escape, if escape was possible. The impact of a jet slamming into the ground at four hundred miles an hour would reduce even a Keeper to pulp.

The damn plane was going to be full, she realized. The wretched creatures were just piling on, and her belly was churning. She had to feed, and soon. She had to do it in Bangkok, and never mind the urgency of the situation or the danger of just being in Asia.

The plane was an A-310 Airbus, a type that particularly troubled her because it was too easy to fly. Pilots got careless in this airplane. Worse, it had only two engines, and she knew from her hobby of reading technical manuals that one of them was not enough to keep it aloft forever.

The Thai were smoking and chattering and eating human fodder: bits of pork and mushroom and pepper wrapped in what looked like edible plastic. Various of her human lovers had tried to introduce her to the pleasures of sweets and such, but she had not been able to digest any of it. She watched human food evolve steadily for thousands of years — until recently, that is, when continued population pressure had caused an increase in quantity and a corresponding decline in quality.

Herd tending was not her specialty, so she wasn't particularly concerned with what the creatures ate. Her parents had been breeders and practiced the art of inducing particular humans to breed with each other, so that babies with preferred characteristics would be born.

Her father and mother had bred a new race among the Egyptians, seeking to make a smarter human. They had eventually caused the birth a brilliant child called Ham-abyra, who is known to history not by his Egyptian name, but by the Hebrew inversion, Abyra-ham. He had been cut out of the Egyptian herd and sent to found a new one in another part of North Africa.

The herd of Abyra-ham were great survivors because they were so clever, but their blood had a bitter aftertaste, unfortunately. You ate a Jew, her father always said, you remembered it for a week.

Originally, there had been good reasons for wanting humans to be smart. The brighter they were, the better their survival skills, and the cheaper they were to manage. Also, the blood of the brilliant usually offered more complex, interesting bouquets. Keepers bred humans for blood the way humans bred grapes for wine.

The engines of the airplane began to whine. She hated to fly as much as or more than she had hated to sail, but she did it anyway, just as she'd always traveled. Her thirst for knowledge had made her take the spring galley from Rome to Alexandria to read in the library, and the summer galleon from Spain to Mexico to plumb the secrets of the Maya.

There was a problem, though. She'd often ended up eating every single soul on those slow old sailing ships. She never meant to do it, but it was just so tempting, all alone in close quarters with a gaggle of sweet-blooded

humans for weeks and weeks. She'd do one and then another of them, starting with the low slaves and working her way up. She'd create the impression that they'd jumped or fallen overboard. Come a storm and she'd do five or six, gobbling them like bonbons.

Ships she took would arrive empty . . . except for one seriously overweight Keeper well hidden in the bilges. One of her most particularly self-indulgent trips had been aboard a Dutch East Indies spice trader. She'd consumed a crew of fifty and all six of their passengers in just two months. She was so packed with blood she feared that she must look like a big blue tick. She'd come into Surabaya at night on the ship's sailing dinghy. As for the ship, it had sailed on alone for years, still a legend among humans, the *Flying Dutchman*.

Shuddering, the jet rose into the air. Fog, touched golden by the sun, hung over the ancient Thai city below. Miriam gazed down at the temple district, at spires just visible through the billowing fog, and wondered.

The hunger was beginning to claw at her belly. Her muscles were tensing, instinctually getting ready for a kill. Her mouth was filling with the sour flavor of need. The scent of people swept through her with every breath.

She turned on the air nozzle above her head to full force, but there was no escaping the succulent odor of her fellow travelers, not packed into this tin can.

You certainly couldn't feed on a jet. If you stuffed the remnant down the toilet, it would be found later in the plane's holding tank. Remnants had to be completely destroyed — ground up and burned, usually. Humans had found just a very few of them over the generations, generally taken for mummies. In fact, she'd once wrapped a news hawker in tape and put him in a mummy case in the basement of the British Museum. That had been when — oh, a few hundred years ago. He was probably still there, her old hawker. It had been the *St. James's Gazette* that he'd been selling. Pretty good paper in its day.

Look at the humans around her, she thought, all happy and fluttery and unconcerned about the thirty-thousand-foot maw of death beneath their feet.

How could anybody be as careless of their lives as humans were? They flew all the time; they raced around in automobiles; they went on roller coasters and fought wars. Miriam's theory was that humans did indeed have souls, and inwardly they knew it. That was why they came to her for sex, thrilled by the danger they sensed. They weren't really afraid of death, the humans. For them, it was nothing more than another thrill ride.

For the Keepers, death meant leaving the cosmos forever.

The plane leveled off. Miriam knew by its motion and sound exactly what it was doing at every moment of the flight. Actually, she could have flown it herself. She'd trained herself on her PC with a flight simulator, just in case some pilot died from the airline food or something. If some fool were to attempt to hijack the thing, she'd hypnotize him immediately and simply sit him right back down. They'd have to try to figure it out later.

Two shy children peeked at her over the seat ahead. They gazed steadily at the European, but it wasn't only curiosity in their eyes. She knew that the longer the flight, the more uneasy she would make her seat-mates. The presence of a Keeper evoked instincts that humans, being so near the top of the food chain, were as unfamiliar with as she was with fear. What a human felt in the presence of a Keeper was what a mouse felt in the presence of a snake — a sort of horrible question.

They would grow unaccountably suspicious of her, be strangely drawn to her, grow sick in her presence, and if they slept, they would have nightmares about her, every single soul in this airplane.

The stewardess came, her smile fading as she laid eyes on Miriam. She had a cart full of boxed food and piles of plastic chopsticks. She stood close, handing food to the people jammed in the nearby seats.

Her blood had a soft, plain scent, like Beaujolais from an uninteresting year. Even so, it would be smooth and warm and wonderful as it went down. Miriam kept her eyes closed, barely breathing.

Never guessing that Miriam could see through her own eyelids, the stewardess took the opportunity to look long at the tall European in the old

suit. Miriam worried that her makeup was too light. By now, her skin would be terrifying to a human. She'd appear as pale as a corpse. But she was also thirsty, so she had to interact with the girl, risk a moment of the creature's attention. "Excuse me."

The stewardess stopped. She organized her face into a carefully professional smile. "Yis," she said, uttering what was probably one of her few English words. *Yis. Nah. Okeh.*

"Water," Miriam said, pointing to a bottle with blue Thai writing on it.

The girl gave her the water and moved off nervously. The plane shuddered, the tone of the engines changing. Miriam fumbled with her water bottle. She knew that the sounds weren't abnormal, but they still made her uneasy.

Again, the plane shuddered. It was heading down, definitely. Surely there wasn't a situation. The engines were fine; she could hear that. But what if they were having control problems?

She took in breath, prepared to tighten the muscles that might be needed if she had to tear her way out of a crumpled fuselage.

But no, the plane *was* landing. Or more accurately, beginning its descent. She fumbled her itinerary out of her purse. Yes, the flight was forty minutes, and running exactly on schedule.

The flaps went down, making a terrific racket. Her startle reflex made her suck her water bottle so hard that it became involved with her teeth, and she accidentally shredded it. Water gushed down her front. Wiping her breast, she stuffed the ruined bottle down into the space between the seats.

She sat facing straight ahead, ignoring her accident. They didn't notice, anyway. They were too preoccupied with their snacks.

The plane was so thick with the smell of human blood that she would have liked to have gone into some sort of feeding frenzy like a shark. Total indulgence.

She'd never been on an airplane while this hungry before, and she resolved never to do it again. She should have eaten that *samlor* driver. She closed her eyes. Time passed, one minute, then another. She found herself inhaling the smell of her seatmate. He was a plump little thing, just popping with sweet blood. *Délicieux*. The odor of his skin was lively. This was a tasty morsel, sitting here. She sucked in more scent.

She began to imagine how she'd take him. She'd pretend to be one of those European whores who did such a lively trade in Asia. They'd get off the plane together, and then — well, sooner or later the moment always presented itself.

She could get a very nice feed out of this creature. He had noticed her glances and was scanning her. She could smell the spicy scent of his interest.

“Lovely flight,” she said.

“Oh, yes,” he answered. His English was good, which was a nice convenience.

She gave him a smile, very slight, a bit arch.

He squirmed in his seat, his eyes flickering between her folded hands and her face. Male victims always felt as if the strange woman who had taken notice of them was the most beautiful, most desirable creature on earth. Females found her personable and engaging. They never knew that they'd been bred to react this way to interest from their Keepers.

He crossed and uncrossed his legs, tossed his head, then leaned a little forward. “You spending some time in Bangkok?” So, he was available for consumption. She considered. She might miss her flight to Paris, and the rest of the world had to be warned about what had happened here, and at all speed. But by the moon and the stars, she was *so hungry!*

“Perhaps,” she said softly.

His smile widened to reveal a gold-capped tooth. She glanced down at his fingers, at the shimmering of his wedding ring. There would be a

complication right there — a disappearing husband.

He followed her glance, shrugged.

Her gut hummed.

The pitch of the engines changed again. She evaluated the sound, concluded that all was still normal.

She lifted her fingers, poised them above the back of his hand. To touch him now was an ancient act of possession, by which the Keepers had claimed their prey from time immemorial.

She lowered the cool tips of her fingers until they came into contact with his skin. “I’m staying in Bangkok for a few days.” She laughed, a musical trill. “At the Royal Orchid,” she added, drawing the name of the hotel from somewhere in her memory. She knew only that it was a very fine place.

“As it happens, I’m staying at the Royal Orchid, also, miss.” He smiled from ear to ear.

She hoped they had a room. She had no reservation. Doubtless he didn’t, either.

A moment later the plane hit the runway, then went jolting along the much-patched tarmac. Despite Miriam’s grim worries, it slowed steadily. Still, she was tense, waiting for the damned thing to get off the runway. For an unspeakably long moment, it hesitated. Were the pilots lost? Had the surface traffic controllers made some stupid mistake?

She pictured a 747 landing on top of them, its entire flight crew dead asleep. Years ago, two Keepers had been killed in a catastrophic runway accident in the Canary Islands. But the engines revved up again and the plane moved forward. A few twists and turns and it came to a halt. The seat-belt chime rang.

Immediately, Miriam’s mind focused on her victim. Now she must ignore him a bit, play the coquette, the Occidental woman who was just a little

indifferent to the Oriental man.

As they filed out of the plane, she stayed behind him, evaluating moment by moment every subtle change in his manner. A musty smell flowed from between his legs, a sharper odor of sweat billowed off his skin.

There was something just a little odd in these odors. He should have smelled far more of sex and less of . . . well, it seemed that he was afraid. Probably, it was because they'd been in proximity too long. You wanted to move quickly when you hunted, not sit cheek-by-jowl with the prey for an hour before proceeding.

In the airport, they were hit by the wall of filthy air that enclosed and defined life in Bangkok.

No matter his perversion, here the wanderer could find satisfaction. The Thai had originally been bred by luxury-loving Keepers, and they preserved the remarkable zest for pleasure that had been bred into them. But then, every herd in the world bore the mark of its Keepers. You could see the stark love of order and the obsessiveness of the northern Keepers in the Germanic peoples they had created, and the passion and subtlety of the southern Europeans in the French, the Spanish, and the Italians. She loved the wild mix of the Americas, never knowing exactly what to expect from that mongrel herd.

As Miriam and her victim moved out into the main hall of the airport, she laid her hand on his shoulder, the second time she had touched him. Each time she did it, she felt more of a sense of possession.

She felt not the rippling whisper of desire in his muscles, but the tense vibration of fear. This was going to take a great deal of care and attention. This man must be very sensitive indeed to feel as he did now. Perhaps she should turn back.

He plunged into the chaotic cab rank, a mass of bills in his fist, and they were soon in a taxi.

She disliked being driven by others in motorized vehicles, and this driver

was typical of these wild folk. In addition, he would certainly remember a run with a Thai man and a European woman.

Her victim sat rigidly, gripping the handhold above his door. When he offered her a cigarette, she did not like what she saw in his eyes. Did not like, did not quite understand. Their instinct was to be drawn to the predator, to be fascinated.

She let him light her cigarette, inhaled deeply. Cigarettes didn't matter to Keepers. Their immune systems swept cancer cells away like crumbs.

An impulse told her to give his cheek a sudden kiss. "Asia," she whispered, "Asia is such a mystery."

"I'm in outsourcing technology. No mystery there."

"Your accent isn't Thai."

"My father was a diplomat. I grew up in London and then Burma."

She remembered the days of the British in Burma, when they used to grow opium poppies on huge Crown estates. They had looked upon their laborers in much the same way that Keepers looked on humans. You could go out into those opium plantations and chew seed and take one picker after another, like an ape gobbling fruit. And then you could engage in the social life of the planters with their whites and their billiard rooms and their gin and tonics. Sometimes, you could even take one of them, for there were still tigers in Burma then and the corpse could be left suitably mauled.

Sweet nostalgia.

They arrived at the Royal Orchid, the cab at sea in an ocean of limousines. She went forward into the broad, echoing lobby. Women stared in open amazement as the fabulous clothes strode toward the check-in desk.

"I'd like a suite please." She presented her — or rather, Marie Tallman's — Visa card. The clerk ran it and gave her a keycard, his polite glance moving toward the next customer in line.

She had made no effort as yet to seduce her victim away from his uneasiness. He needed more subtle handling, and she had to accept that this might not be a successful hunt. She'd be damn mad if it failed, though, and the long journey to Paris would be hell.

She held out her hand to her victim. As sweetly, as innocently as she could, she smiled at him. He looked down at her hand. In it was a keycard. "Twenty-five-oh-seven," she said.

When they were alone in the lift, he finally smiled up at her. His odor had not really changed, though. He was not happy to be here. He was acting.

She kissed him on the forehead. Now that she was committed to what was probably a very foolish kill, she decided that she might as well enjoy herself thoroughly. She would take him slowly and drain him to the very last drop. She gave him a stern look. "How much am I worth to you?"

"How much do you want?"

"A thousand dollars."

His eyes widened, he reared back as if astonished. The lift came to a stop on the twenty-fifth floor. "Two hundred, miss. H.K. dollar."

They got out. She would not bargain all that hard, but also she must not raise his suspicions. "Three hundred, U.S." she said as they walked down the wide hallway.

"Five hundred, H.K."

"It isn't enough to cover my expenses, handsome."

"You'll do twenty men before the night's out."

She slid her keycard into the lock. Here she was, as magnificent a beauty as the earth might know, and this greedy little roach actually believed that she was going to give herself to him for the equivalent of about sixty U.S. dollars. He'd been afraid of her price, that was all. Wretched thing.

Sunlight poured in from the wall of windows that faced the door. There was a couch upholstered in yellow chintz and a huge vase of exotic flowers on the coffee table.

Far below, the wide Chao Phraya River shimmered in sunlight that shafted down between great banks of clouds. Tiny river taxis and long-tails wove the river with their wakes. Up the bank, she could see the spires of distant temples, Wat Phrathukhongka and, just visible along the Klong Phadung, Wat Trimitr, the temple of the Golden Buddha. Farther away, awash in glowing air pollution, were the graceful tile roofs of the Grand Palace and the pencil-narrow spire of Wat Po.

The two of them gazed in silence, both awed for different reasons. He no doubt thought it glorious; she was horrified and fascinated, as always, when she saw how vast were the works of man.

She sat down on the bed, drew her prey down beside her. Too bad she had to eat and run. Normally, she would have gone into the sleep that followed feeding, but this time she'd have to load herself up with amphetamines and do her sleeping on the plane. She'd book a first-class seat for this twelve-hour journey, no matter that the seats were in the most dangerous part of the plane. Still, the idea of entering helpless sleep amid a mass of humans was not pleasant.

She caressed her victim. He stirred, his clothes rustling. A moment passed, another. He had become still in the way human beings did when they were subconsciously aware of danger.

They were sitting on the foot of the bed. She took his chin in her hand and turned his face to hers. She looked into his eyes, looked deep.

What did the gleam in those human eyes mean? She always wondered that, right before she fed.

"Kiss me," she said to the creature. He smiled a drawn smile, then lifted his face to hers, his lips going slack, his eyelids fluttering down. She laid her lips upon his, careful to keep the anatomy of her mouth concealed. Their tongues met, and she felt his muscles stiffen a little as he detected that hers

was as rough as a cat's. If he bolted, she would be ready. She was ten times stronger than the strongest human being, ten times faster.

A cat worries its prey because pain flushes muscles with hormones that season the meat. This was true also of her kind, and some of them were casually cruel to their victims.

Stroking his head and purring, she laid him against the pillows and opened up his pants with her deft hands. She took his member out, smiled, then kissed it.

Then she stood before him. She removed her blue silk jacket, twirled, then unbuttoned her blouse. He watched with steady concentration, a slight smile on his face.

Instinct made her sway into the death dance, her arms undulating, her hips moving gracefully. Each time she twirled, her body became tighter and harder, more and more ready. As she danced, she threw off her clothes.

She stood before him naked, like a wound spring, her hands ready to grab him. There was in his eye a sort of curiosity, for she was very pale indeed, as pale as a ghost and as slick as glass, more like a statue than a being of flesh and blood.

He would soon discover that she was also cold, very cold. She sat down beside him and kissed him. But something was not right. As she had kissed him, he had returned himself to his pants.

No matter, she was sexually excited now herself. That was part of her reality and what made her so very different from the others of her kind: humans excited her. She liked their bodies, the way they tasted and smelled, the way they looked, the curves of the females, the pert rods of the men. Perhaps this was because she had discovered that she was capable of taking them to states of pleasure that Keepers could not reach with one another. Sex between species could be a stunning aphrodisiac, if executed with skill.

She lay down upon her little man, snuggled him into her. He seemed to be struggling with himself, fighting an inner battle. She reached into his pants, to

see if she could resolve the conflict for him. A few deft strokes, and he was ready.

The human male was not blessed with a large penis, and it probably felt strangely lost in her vagina. He would also be noticing the cold. In fact, she could hear him making little exclamations in his throat. He was becoming aware that something was wrong.

“There, baby,” she cooed, “little baby boy, all is well.”

He started heaving. He wanted out from under her. She was, of course, far heavier than she had appeared. She tightened her vaginal muscles, over which she had exquisite control. When she began undulating them, he yelped with surprised pleasure. He’d probably never felt anything like it before, not even in Asia.

Her mouth was pressed against his neck, her mucus flooding his skin with anesthetic. Her sharp teeth parted the skin so easily that he probably felt nothing at all. There was a bit of resistance from the wall of the vein. She made love furiously as she exhaled, made herself ready for the ferocious sucking motion that would consume his life.

His muscles worked, he twisted and turned. He would be feeling both the pain of penetration and the pleasure of sex. He grimaced, his eyes shut tight.

She stayed like that for a while, making love at first fast and then slow, bringing him close, letting him relax. She left her mouth wide open to the wound, letting the blood tick past, tasting it just a little, enjoying herself.

When he began to really squirm, trying to reduce what must be by now a quite noticeable pain deep in his throat, she pinned his arms to his sides and enclosed his legs in her own. Her strength was so great that it felt to her human lovers as if they were being encased in iron, or so they had always told her.

The penis, on the other hand, would feel as if it were being massaged by thousands of tiny, careful fingers. One man described it as the most divine sensation he had ever known. He begged her for it, even while he was dying.

She worked him to the edge twice more. His body was a roaring furnace; his blood was singing. She was deep in him, her drinking beginning to kill him. It was now, at this moment, that she was sure that she felt his soul.

She sucked massively and fast, the sound of it roaring through the silent, sunny room. He did not even have a chance to cry out. As he died, the pumping of his loins became disorganized, then stopped.

The blood came into her like living fire, like a flower opening in her gut. Then came the bittersweet flavor that followed the blood, that meant that the organs had also given up their fluids.

She got off him, sat on the bedside and lit one of his cigarettes. Taking a long drag, she enjoyed the sensation of absorbing his life. The males and females felt quite different. After consuming a woman, you had a ferocious sort of an energy in you. You felt as if you could tear the world in half. A man left the flavor of his strength. You got a heady, hard-edged high from testosterone.

She got up and strode to the window. The healthier they were, the more you got from them, and this creature had been very healthy. Her face got hot, her body flushed warm and pink.

She went over to the mirror and touched the reflection of her face. She had been a woman before; now she was a girl, fresh as dew, her eyes sparkling and innocent.

Still enjoying the taste of blood that lingered in her mouth, she rifled through the man's clothing. She'd get his money, then dispose of the remnant and go straight to the airport. She could still make her Paris flight. The European clan was not as big as the Asian, but it was wise and ancient, not like the adventurous Americans. Europe had fixed the Transylvania situation by transforming true vampire lore into myths and stories. Europe would know what to do.

She drew a fat brown wallet out of his hip pocket and tossed it open. Poor wife, smiling so desperately, will you miss this man or feel relief that he has gone? And here were children — damn!

She was furious with herself for looking at the pictures. She never looked at the damn pictures! She held the weathered print of the kids, wondering how old they were, poor little things. She stuffed it back into the wallet, pressing it deep into one of the pockets.

It was then that she noticed a rather strange card. At first, she thought that it might be a Thai driving permit, but when she looked more closely, she found that it was very far from that.

Lying in her hand was an identification card. She stared at it, reading it carefully. It was in French, English, and Chinese, not Thai at all.

The sunken husk lying on that bed over there, now nothing but forty pounds of bones and drum-tight skin lost in a pile of sheets, was no innocent Thai businessman. Lying there were the remains of Kiew Narawat, police inspector with Interpol.

Her breath came short, her skin grew hot and dry. She felt dizzy, her bowels threatened to let go. She threw on her clothes, settled her wig on her head, and applied a smear of lipstick to reduce the glow of her fire-red lips. Going deep into her purse, she pulled out three yellow-and-black bennies and threw them down her gullet. Sleep would drag at her now, but she must not let it come, not until she was in her plane in her seat and covered with a blanket.

Forgetting the remnant lying on the bed in full view, forgetting everything except escape at any and all cost, Miriam Blaylock made a mistake of spectacular proportions, one that she had not made in three thousand years upon the earth. Indeed, it was a mistake so rare that it could bring a Keeper the penalty of confiscation of property.

So distressed was she by the events of the past few hours — the discovery of the disaster in Chiang Mai, and now this horrible discovery, so loaded with dreadful implications — that she left the remnant where it lay.

There was only one thought in her mind: Get out of here. She hurried into her clothes, barely even stopping to see if she had left any of her possessions behind, and took a taxi straight to the airport.

THREE

Hunter of Hunters

When Paul Ward had first realized what the confused Interpol e-mail was about, he'd felt as if the entire Petronas Towers complex were about to topple into the streets of Kuala Lumpur. But the towers were fine. Only his program had collapsed.

Jesus God, he screamed silently, they were like roaches. He had cleared them out of the whole continent, sanitized it. And now, instead of cleaning out his office in Kuala, preparing for departure to the States and the start of the endgame against them, he was racing through the streets of Bangkok in this clanking old embassy Caddy.

Paul Ward was dealing with one smart breed of animal. How smart, he had just plain not understood, not until now.

He pressed himself against the seat of the limo, instinctively keeping his face in shadow. It was always possible that they knew him, he thought, that they would recognize him. He watched the people thronging the streets and wondered if Bangkok, or any city, would look the same if its inhabitants knew that predators a thousand times more dangerous than the tiger or the shark might be walking just behind them.

The damned thing of it was, he'd even run his traditional victory celebration, with all the traditional goodies, stolen in all the innovative ways that his crew could come up with. There had been a couple of cases of Veuve Clicquot borrowed from the Sûreté outpost in Ho Chi Minh City, a couple of cases of beluga borrowed from the KGB in New Delhi, and a whole bunch of dancing girls who came to the crinkle of the dollar — counterfeits made in Myanmar and borrowed from Pakistani intelligence by the redoubtable Joe P. Lo, who could steal venom from a cobra.

They'd been saying good-bye to the General East Asia Pest Control Company. Good-bye and good riddance to their ironically named front organization. This had been a miserable, exacting, assignment, and an extremely dangerous one. Will Kennert, Addie St. John, Lee Hong Quo, Al Sanchez — these were just a few who'd died fighting the vampires.

If he hadn't needed to be totally and completely centered for the task ahead, he would have told the driver to stop at a bar. He'd go in and suck sacred Stolichnaya like a Russki at the nipple of his still. He'd get a massage that lasted all night. Masseur in relays. Every sin he could think of and — thanks to being in good old Bang-yer-cock — some he probably couldn't.

“Goddamnit!” he suddenly said aloud.

“Sir!”

The driver didn't know that he talked to himself. Why would he? People didn't know Paul Ward, not even embassy people. They weren't supposed to. “Sorry, son.”

The flight from Kuala had exhausted him — just sitting in that damn seat, waiting through what seemed an eternity. He'd tried the phone, but it hadn't worked. The Gulf of Thailand was still an empty corner of the world. He hated empty places, dark places. He hated small places even more. Recurring nightmare: he comes awake, starts to sit up in bed, and *wham*, his forehead hits something with such force that he sees stars. Then he realizes that the air is heavy with his own breath and he can't sit up without braining himself. He knows, then, that he is in a coffin.

He knew a CIA guy called Richie Jones, who'd run afoul of the Khmer Rouge and been buried alive. Somebody who'd been in that prison compound had reported that you could hear him screaming for about half an hour. From Ohio State to a lonely hole in the jungles of Cambo. Had Mr. President ever been told about Richie? Had Mr. Director of Central Intelligence known or cared? Weep a tear for the Buckeye state, for it has lost a son.

To die the way covert ops died in the field, damn hard and damn alone — Jesus God, pass the bottle. And to do what he and his crew were doing, to

live the way they were living, chasing these monsters in the sewage and the filth of some of the world's most terrible cities, getting yourself eaten if you weren't careful — Jesus God, pass the bottle again.

He was tired. They were all tired. It had been a hard operation, soaked in the blood of fine men and women. And what a death. It'd be better to be buried alive by a bunch of twelve-year-old Khmers with AK-47s and dead eyes, than to be stung in the neck by one of those filthy things.

Long before he'd been forced to come back, Asia had been a place he wanted to put behind him. Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, 1971 to 1973. In those days, life had less value than dirt out here, especially American life, and most especially the life of a clean-cut CIA virgin with a buzz haircut and wire-framed glasses. He had made it through the Parrot's Beak massacre when Danny Moore had been pulled apart between two backfiring tractors. He had lived through six weeks in a bamboo cell with nothing but roaches and rats for food, while Betty Chang was methodically raped to death and George Moorhouse starved. He had survived because he was too ugly to rape and so cussed that he could crack rats and drink 'em, blood, guts, and all.

He fumbled in the little cabinet that was supposed to be stocked with booze. "Got any vodka in this thing?"

"No, sir."

Of course not. A CIA officer didn't rate booze in his car. This was the U.S. Government. The foreign service kid driving this thing outranked him by a damn country mile. The kid and the limo had appeared at the airport only because there hadn't been time to find a conveyance shitty enough for a CIA field officer. Had he been from State, there would have been booze and ice both.

"The goddamn bastards."

"Sir?"

"Nothing."

Paul wished they'd sent a girl driver. He wanted the scent of a woman in this car. He wanted, he thought, what all men want. He wanted deliverance.

He closed his eyes. Instantly, he saw an old and hated vision, the prairie grass dancing in the moonlight. He opened them again. He could not go there, no. Better to stay with the wartime memories or the memories of sterilizing those filthy dens with acid. How in hell was it that these things looked so much like people? How had they evolved? Had God gone nuts?

The prairie grass dancing in the moonlight, his curtains billowing with moon wind, and in the distance, the most beautiful voice singing: that was the beginning of a life woven from nightmares.

Paul slapped his breast pocket. Pillbox in position. He'd take two tonight, maybe three. Black sleep, please.

"Shit," he said softly, and then, "Shit!" louder.

"Sir?"

This kid would chatter that he'd had to drive a muttering old crazy man to the Royal Orchid Hotel, and then he'd try to find out just who this VIP third class was.

He would not find out.

The State Department could not tell anyone about Paul Ward because they could not tell anyone about the vampire project. If they did that, they would also have to explain that humans are not at the top of the food chain, that we are prey, legitimate prey, just as nature intended. What is worse, they'd have to explain that the predator is damn clever and has evolved some very remarkable camouflage. The predator, you see, looks just like you. Except that his skin is as pale the light of an October moon, and he will sing to you and dance for you, and comfort you in his arms while he kills you. As far as looks are concerned, you can't tell the difference between a vampire and your postman or your doctor, or your own damn brother.

No involved division of any involved government had questioned the

secrecy of this operation.

He stared balefully at the back of a stopped truck. Was it parked, or what?

“Can’t you hurry?”

“Sir, this is Bangkok.”

“Mind if I drive?”

“You want to drive, sir?”

“I need to get there before dark, for Chrissakes.”

“Look at the street!”

“Son, excuse me, but get me there now!”

The car shot forward, slamming up onto the sidewalk. An enraged pedestrian hammered the window as they smashed through a food cart.

“You damn fool! That was that guy’s rice bowl!”

“You told me to!”

“I didn’t tell you to hurt people.” Above all things in the world, Paul hated to hurt. He would put a fly out the window rather than swat it. He would watch quietly as a mosquito gorged on his blood, then brush it off when he thought it was getting greedy.

Ironic, in a man who had killed so much. When he slept at night, his legions of dead would steal near: the kids who’d died in the dark corners of Vietnam, the victims of the vampires, the crew members who had not returned. They would call to him; they would stroke him with their cool hands; they would beg him to return them their lives.

He would wake up awash in sweat and choking with terror and regret. He would go to the brutal light of the bathroom as to an altar afire with candles, and gulp the pills of oblivion. Black sleep.

Asia had made him love certain very bad things, chief among them opium. Better than hash, better than grass, better than coke or any of the new designer drugs, far better than the brute high you got off horse. Opium was a deep pleasure, something wonderful that connected earth and soul. It made you feel at peace with the eternal world. He loved the mechanisms of an opium high: the long pipes, the sweet vapor, even the tickly lice in the greasy old sheets of today's few real opium dens.

Paul Ward had sunk deep and sinned hard. Why not, my friends? Tomorrow we die.

Well, that was what they'd thought back in the seventies, listening to Kissinger on Armed Forces Radio. It had seemed hard then, before he knew about vampires, but it had really been easy.

The Jungle Jamboree. No way could you do opium then. He who tripped died.

Still true now, at least for him and his crew. Killing vampires was horribly dangerous. They were quick, so quick that they could throw a knife at nearly the speed of a bullet.

They could not be killed with normal gunfire. You could empty the biggest, most evil weapon in your arsenal right into one of the damn things and it would just stare at you with its deceptively calm eyes, waiting for your bullets to run out. You had to destroy the head.

If you cut them open after they'd fed, they would gush blood like exploded ticks.

The Book of Names had identified twenty-six vampires in Asia. He and his crew had burned out or poisoned or dismembered twenty-four vampires in Asia, and found the remains of two ruined lairs, creatures that had lost their lives on their own.

Accidents happened even to vampires. They weren't perfect. Statistically, if you live long enough, you will meet with some sort of accident. That was their disease — statistics.

That's why vampires did not travel. They were highly territorial and obsessed with accidents. So the trick was to kill them all in a given area as quickly as you could, then move on before the others realized that they were gone.

Paul's next target was going to be Europe. There were many references to Paris in the Book of Names. He'd been looking forward to working out of Paris. Not that he disliked Kuala, but he could use a little less humidity and a little more familiar beauty around him. The Musée Marmottan with its magnificent collection of Monet water lilies was a favorite. He considered Monet to be one of the most evolved of all human beings, on a par with the D. T. Suzukis and Foucaults of the world. From those paintings, a man could obtain the true balm of peace. The light that shone in from the garden at the Marmottan, that light was holy.

"God help me!" he cried out loud.

"Yessir!"

"Please, son, be quiet. And stop running people down."

"I didn't run anybody down. I just got around that truck."

"You need to go back there later. Give that guy some dough for his cart."

"Sir?"

"Without the cart, he and his wife will starve. Their children become prostitutes. Do you understand that?"

"Sir, I hardly think —"

"Do you understand that?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Could this be a marine out of uniform? No, look at the hair. Foreign service all the way. He was just yanking Paul's chain with his military lip. He'd be sneering later with his State Department buddies about the old CIA

asshole he'd driven around.

With his cart wrecked, that fruit vendor might as well open his veins, and Paul knew this kid would *not* go back, he would not give the guy the twenty bucks it would take to put his life back together again.

Funnily enough, Paul was in his work because he liked people. He'd seen the CIA take such incredible shit over the years and save so many damn lives. The Company could not defend herself, not without giving away secrets she was bound to keep. So she just took it. He'd seen the effects of all the Company bashing in his own life. There'd been a time when the merest hint of a Company connection brought women swarming like darling honeybees. Not anymore.

The car swung around another corner, and the Royal Orchid Hotel finally appeared down the smog-hazed street.

What the hell was he about to find? This would be the first actual victim they had ever had a chance to study. The vampires were obsessive about destroying remains. Except, apparently, this time.

Still, there was something very bad about all this. He could smell it, but he couldn't quite see it. A place is wrapped up, finished. Then, suddenly, it ain't finished.

Okay, think. Think it out, Paul: All of a sudden, they leave evidence in a hotel. The hotel is on a continent that has just been sterilized of their presence.

It was not like them to taunt you. They were too shy, too careful for that. Their lives were incredibly precious to them, because this life was all they had, at least in Paul's opinion. In his opinion, nature had given them immortal lives — potentially, if they were very damn careful — but they had not been given souls. They were damn animals and they knew it.

So if this wasn't a declaration or a taunt, then it must be something else. The thing was, when the National Security Administration had cracked the language in the Book of Names, the whole vampire world had been opened

up to Paul and his crew. He returned to the States to become head of a whole new division that would be devoted to eradicating the menace. There were to be units operating on every continent, using the methods that Paul and his group had evolved.

One of the reasons that he was racing back to the States so soon after completing his work in Asia was to deal with a stupid but potentially serious problem: The director of the CIA had been asking legal questions. Specifically, were these creatures to be regarded as animal or human? If they were human, then they were committing crimes, not killing prey.

Declaring that the creatures were human meant that a whole different approach would be necessary. There would have to be due process and trials and prison sentences, and the vampire would like nothing better than this type of leverage. The vampire was powerful and quick and so damn smart. It could get away from prison.

They were almost unkillable. Something about their blood gave them extraordinary powers of recovery. You had to blow that head apart, then burn the creatures to ash, to be absolutely certain they were dead. Then the lair had to be washed in acid.

How could you ever call anything that lived in a filthy hole like a vampire lair human?

But he couldn't stop the wheels of the bureaucracy from turning as they turned. "What is this bunch of agents doing out in Asia killing people?" "Who are these 'vampires,' a terrorist group? A secret society? What in hell is going on here?"

Some Thai were passing the car, banging gongs and chanting. Funerals made Paul physically ill. He had to drown out that sound, and *not* with a Thai radio station because the Asians, God love 'em, had not figured music out yet, not in any way whatsoever. "Are there any CDs in this car?"

"Destiny's Child, Santana, Johnny Mathis. Some kind of opera."

"Put in the opera, turn it up to full volume."

“Yes, sir.” The boy sounded crestfallen. Which one would the kid have preferred? Destiny’s Child, no doubt.

“Full volume! I want my ears to bleed! You got any cigars?” Paul was a creature of appetites. Fine wines, lots of them. The best vodka in the world, lots of it. The strongest opium, the most exotic, the sweetest, the most delicious of whatever the world had to offer. One of his great regrets was the failure of either the Company to assassinate Castro or, better, of the U.S. to just come to terms with him. The loss of the Cuban cigar had been a blow.

Well, good god damn, that was *Callas!*

“Louder!”

“It’s as loud as it gets!”

He reached forward, turned the knob all the way up.

Oh, God, *Lakmé*. Oh, God, the “Bell Song.” That she had lived, this goddess Maria Callas, was proof that human beings were of interest to the good Lord. Nothing so fabulous could have come about by accident. “Hey, kid!”

No answer.

“KID!”

“Yessir!”

“That *goddess* is called Maria Callas. You ever worshipped a woman?”

“Sir?”

“It is a very special pleasure, I assure you. To worship something so gentle, so soft, so willing as a good woman.”

“Okay.”

He’d worshipped at the altar of the female all of his life. Three marriages,

six mistresses, and whores enough to populate a small army were testament to that fact. Jesus, but she could sing. “Death, be not proud!”

“Yessir!”

“Do you fear death?”

“Yessir!”

“The goddamn Pathet Lao stuck an electric cattle prod up my ass and left it on so long steam came outa my nose. You know what I told them?”

“Name, rank, and serial number?”

“I told them, if they filled out the forms, they could get Visa cards from the Thai Farmer’s Bank. The deal was, let me go and I would help them fill out those forms. When they got their credit cards, that was the end of that Pathet Lao cell. Who wants to run around in the jungle covered with leeches when you could be sipping a Singapore Sling at the Poontang Hilton, am I right?”

“I guess so, sir.”

He could see the kid’s eyes rolling in the rearview mirror. Well, let ’em roll.

Let the DCIA and the president whine about whether or not the damn vampires had human rights or whatever. Paul decided that he’d like to *taste* vampire. Probably like — not chicken, no, they’d taste like something else. Snake maybe, except he’d eaten snake in Cambo, and it *did* taste like chicken. They made dynamite snake curry in Kuala backstreets. Little pieces of sour asp meat marinated with asafetida and fried in ghee. Oh, that is good.

They reached the hotel at long living last. It was a pretty place, luxurious. What was a vampire doing in a place like this? Vampires didn’t go to hotels. They didn’t sleep in beds. They were *animals*, God for damn it! The thing must have been crawling around in the ducts or something.

The problem he was here to solve was twofold: First, he had to get a line on the whereabouts of this animal. Second, he had to contain the curiosity of

the local cops, who had a corpse on their hands they could not understand at all. They also wanted to know why an Interpol officer was operating in their country without their knowledge. Of course, the problem there was that he was on CIA's payroll.

Kiew Narawat was a precise, solemn man from Sri Lanka, an excellent operative and a profound friend of the United States. But Narawat wasn't a member of Paul's team, just a garden variety asset who had been detailed to observe any nocturnal comings and goings at a certain temple in Chiang Mai.

Paul went into the hotel.

If they hadn't messed up the corpse somehow, that would be one good outcome from this tragedy. Not only would there be a useful forensic and medical yield, the condition of the body would help him make his case that the vampire killings should not be declared crimes. "This was the act of an animal," he could hear himself saying. "This man was not murdered, he was fed upon."

If they could just get a little more vampire DNA, that would be it. The discovery of the vampires had taken place in 1989, when the Japanese government had asked for help with a very strange murder. They had the attack on videotape from a traffic control point. It was three in the morning and the streets were empty.

An old man was struggling along the sidewalk. He was the only person in the area. Then this strange creature came loping along, and grabbed the man. It had put its mouth on his neck and suddenly the entire body had withered, disappearing into its own clothing. The creature had stuffed it into a satchel and walked off.

The man was unattached, very poor, and normally wouldn't have been missed even in that very careful country. But the police made an effort, because what they had seen was so disturbing. They identified the old man. They went to the spot where the crime had taken place and took careful samples of everything. A hair had appeared in the debris they vacuumed up from the sidewalk that was not human, and not from a known animal.

It had taken years for the mystery to percolate into CIA's pot. Paul got it because he was an old Asia hand and had his own father's mysterious death in his file. The way the old man looked after his blood had apparently been sucked out of him and the way Paul's dad had looked when he'd been discovered had been strangely similar.

They gave it to him because they thought he'd be interested. Well, he wasn't. And damn them for dredging up his father's memory like that.

Nothing more was done, not until 1998, when a crime reporter, Ellen Wunderling, had disappeared in New York while innocently doing research for a Halloween spoof about vampires. She had delved too deep into the gothic underground, an eerie, subtly murderous subculture that would be an ideal place for real vampires to conceal themselves. He'd begun his own investigation of the disappearance, but then came Tokyo and an opportunity to take immediate and direct action. He had been finding and killing vampires ever since.

Paul got into the elevator. He hated riding elevators. It opened on a wide corridor, with rooms open here and there. The management had cleared the whole floor. In front of one of the open rooms, a small crowd of Thai police, medical personnel, and plainclothes officers came and went.

The instant Paul entered the room, the smell hit him. What was it? A human odor, maybe. But so strange — salty, dry, distressingly organic. He looked down at the yellow flowered sheet with the angular lump under it.

"Thailand will expect extradition of the perpetrator, if he is found elsewhere, Mr. Ward," the colonel inspector said in his heavy, careful English.

Paul grunted, wishing that the man could be made to go away.

Kiew Narawat had been ordered to report if he saw anybody enter the temple. So why had he ended up in this room like this, instead? Paul took the sheet and pulled it back.

He actually had to stifle a scream. This was the most spectacularly

destroyed human body he had seen in his adult life. But not in his whole life, and that was what made it so terrible for him.

He was twelve again. He was awakened by a sound like the last water getting sucked down an eager drain.

The sleepy-eyed boy looked out the window, gazing into the glowing dark. The prairie grass was dancing in the moonlight, and there was a dark figure moving through the field with a burden of some kind on its shoulder.

Paulie stared. Who was that out there? But Big Boy wasn't barking and Big Boy was a hair-trigger watchdog.

The figure disappeared off into the woods. Tomorrow, Paulie would get Dad and go down there, see what had happened.

And then came the terror of the next morning and of the haunted life of Paul Ward: Where's Dad? he had asked his mom. I don't know honey, she had said. When is he coming back? I don't know! I don't know!

Flash forward four years: Paul is walking along the stream beside their pear orchard when he sees something strange down among the roots of a tree. Again, Big Boy notices nothing.

Now, Paul knows why. He knows that they secrete a blocking pheromone that makes it impossible for animals to pick up their scent. The remains of their victims are covered with it.

When he saw the skeleton of his father in a casement of dry and disintegrating skin just like this, he had run back to the house screaming in terrified agony, Big Boy gamboling beside him.

The dental records had been definitive. It was Dad. But Dr. Ford, their local medical examiner, could not figure out what had happened to him. The state police couldn't figure it out. The FBI finally issued a report: death by misadventure unknown.

Little Paulie had become obsessed with secrets. What had killed Daddy?

An animal? Space aliens? Nobody knew. Daddy had been strong and big and good, so why had he ended up like that down in the roots of a tree?

Some years later, Paul had awakened to see a woman standing at the foot of his bed, a woman dressed all in black, with golden hair and an angelic face. She looked at him out of sweet eyes, eyes that made the heart melt. But when he sat up, when he called out to her, she faded like a dream.

“The woman in here with him was French,” the policeman said, breaking Paul’s reverie. “We have determined that her name was Marie Tallman. She took the Air France flight to Paris. She will be detained there when she gets off the plane.”

“It was a female?” Paul responded. “You’re sure?”

“A woman, yes,” the Thai said, his voice gone sharp with surprise at Paul’s odd use of the word “it.” But Paul couldn’t help himself. Paul hated these animals whether God had made them or not, and he was damned if he would dignify them with personal pronouns.

“Under no circumstances is she to be detained.”

“Excuse me, but that is a violation of our sovereignty. I am sorry.”

Paul really noticed the officer for the first time. “Ask the French to photograph her and follow her. But *not* to detain her.” The Thai smiled. Paul could only hope that they would cooperate. He could not push the matter further, not and risk an inquiry to the embassy about the nature of his activities. The Thai were hair-trigger friends. They did not like CIA operations taking place on their soil without their knowledge.

At high levels in the government, he was golden. But these cops were strictly low-level, and they didn’t know one damn thing about Paul’s secret brief and his secret powers.

He gazed down at the remains, almost willing them to speak. But they said nothing. The face was stretched so tight against the skull that it looked like something you might buy for Halloween.

“Turn him over,” he said. “I want to look at the back.”

Two of the cops obliged. Paul knew that the vampires used human skin for articles of clothing — gloves and such — because you found such things in their lairs. He’d thought maybe the back of this man would be as neatly skinned as his own father’s had been.

He’d held some of those gloves and purses in his hands for a long, long time. He’d wondered which of the creatures had worn garments made from his dad. Whenever he and his crew found these things, they collected them with reverence and they blessed them and they cremated them and made a little ritual of scattering the ashes.

Melodramatic? You could say so. Sentimental. Sure. But his crew were united on two things: Any human remains they located would be respected, and no vampire would be left alive. Scorched-earth policy. Absolute.

Think if they had to read Miranda warnings. Think if the vampires were allowed legal defense, say, in India, where the prisons leaked and it could take years before a case came to trial? What if they claimed murder as their natural right, and proved that they were created by God to prey upon the human being? Presumably, laws would then have to be written allowing them to take a certain number of humans as prey each year, much as we allow ourselves to take whales.

And what about the endangered-species acts in various countries, most especially Europe and the U.S.? If the vampire was declared an endangered species — and it was conceivable, given their comparative rarity — then Paul and his crew would be out of business altogether. Governments would end up in the business of encouraging the vampire to breed and protecting its habitat — the ghetto, the teeming slum, the homeless shelter.

A man with glasses approached Paul. “We understand that you will be able to inform us of the manner of death.”

“Death by misadventure.”

“Excuse me?”

“The man had a bad adventure, obviously. So that’s the conclusion — death by misadventure.”

“You are coming all the way from KL to tell us this — this nothing?”

“The corpse is U.S. property,” Paul said. “I’m going to remove it to the States.” He needed it. He needed any trace of nonhuman DNA he could find. The hair from Tokyo wasn’t enough. But two samples — that would end the human-animal controversy.

“Now, wait,” the colonel inspector said, “now —”

“It’s a done deal.” He pulled the fax he’d gotten from the Thai foreign office before he left KL. He unfolded it. “ ‘You will deliver the remains to Mr. Paul Ward of the United States Embassy.’ That is what it says.”

The man nodded, reading the letter. Then his eyes met Paul’s. His eyes pleaded. “Please tell me in confidence what has happened.”

“He met with a misadventure.”

You rarely saw anger in the Thai. They were a reserved and very polite people. But the inspector’s eyes grew hard and small, and Paul knew that there was fury seething within him. Thailand had never been colonized for a reason. The Thai might be polite, but they would fight for their independence quite literally to the last man. No deals. “I would like to know, then, if I may, whether or not we are likely to see any more such murders.”

Paul gestured toward the yellow, sticklike corpse. “I’m a scientist. I’m trying to figure it out.”

“Is it, then, a disease?”

“No, no, he was killed. You can count on that.”

The room was full of police and forensics experts. Bangkok was not happy with this bizarre situation. Interpol was not happy, and asking all sorts of questions about who the hell had been running around with forged ID of that quality in his wallet, while at the same time pretending to Thailand that they

knew who the guy was. Lots of secret handshakes being traded all around.

Somebody was going to have to tell the widow and her three kids, too, and Paul suspected that he would be elected.

“I am Dr. Ramanujan,” a compact man said, jostling up, gesturing with his sterile gloves. “What has done this? Do you know what has done this, because I do not know?”

Paul hated to lie, and he did not lie now. He kept his secret and revealed it at the same time. “A killer did it, using a very special and unusual method of fluid extraction.”

“And where are the body fluids? The blood, for example?”

“The fluids are gone.”

“Gone?” “We will not find the fluids.”

Ramanujan grinned, shaking his head. “Riddles, sir, riddles instead of answers.”

They bagged the body for him and delivered all their forensic gleanings in a series of plastic pouches, each neatly labeled in Thai and English.

On the way down, the colonel inspector said, “Would you care to have a drink with me?”

Paul would have loved a drink right now. Twenty drinks. But he had an urgent mission halfway around the world. As fast as humanly possible, he and his crew had to follow “Marie Tallman” to Paris. And not on tomorrow’s flights, either.

“I’ll take a raincheck. I need to get to Paris as quickly as possible.”

“There are no more flights from Bangkok to Paris today.”

“There’s one.”

“I know the schedules very well, I am sorry.”

“This is off the schedule.”

“The American embassy has its own flights?”

Paul thought of the cramped USAF Falcon Jet that would carry them to gay Paree. “Just this one.”

“Then that’s good for you.”

He wondered. He had the sense that Paris was going to be a ferocious confrontation. For the first time, they would be facing vampires who expected them.

The question was stark: Without the advantage of surprise, did he and his people — his brave people — have any chance at all?

FOUR

The Castle of the White Queen

Miriam had been moving effortlessly through human society since before mankind had invented the arch, and she considered herself entirely capable of handling their customs, from the letters testament of the Imperial Roman Curia to the passports of the American Department of State. So she was surprised when the customs officer said, “Please come this way, Madame Tallman.”

She stared at him so hard that he blinked and took an involuntary step back. Shaking his head, he glanced again at her passport, then up to her face. “Come, please.”

“Is there something wrong?”

“You will talk to the prefect.”

The prefect? That sounded ominous. As Miriam followed along behind the customs official, she considered that they must have found the body. They had traced Marie Tallman; it was that simple.

As she walked, she felt somebody fall in behind her. She could smell the gun the man was carrying, just as she could smell the polish on his brass and the wax on his shoes. She knew he was a policeman, in full uniform. His breath was young and steady, powerful. He was also quite close to her, alert for any attempt at escape.

They thought, therefore, that she would be aware of why she was being detained. Ahead of her, the customs officer had hunched his shoulders. He feared that she might attempt to harm him.

These men did not think that they had apprehended some poor soul caught up in a fiasco of identity confusion. They believed that they were escorting a criminal who knew very well that she was in serious trouble.

These thoughts passed through Miriam's mind in a flash. The next instant, she was looking for a means of escape. She was a master of the human being, smarter, stronger, and quicker. It would be nothing for her to overpower both of these men. The gun was a trivial problem. Before his hand had even started to reach for it, both creatures could be knocked senseless.

The problem was the surroundings. There were other people going up and down the hallway. The customs area they had just left teemed with dozens more. The offices, most of which had glass walls, were also full of people.

So Miriam kept walking, hoping that she would be in a private situation for the few seconds she needed, before they locked her away. They would lock her away; she had no doubt of it.

It had been extraordinarily foolish to abandon that remnant. It was drilled into them from childhood: Never let man see the results of your feeding. Humans are cattle, but they are bright cattle and they must not be made aware of their true situation. The entire species could, in effect, stampede.

As appeared to be happening — in effect. There simply wasn't anything left to think. The Asians had already been swept away in the onslaught, and now she had endangered herself in a foolish, heedless moment of panic, and possibly many others of her kind as well. Because of what she had done, she was in the process of being captured by human beings. A Keeper!

They came to a door. The customs officer said, "Enter, please." She could feel the young policeman's breath on her neck. There was no more time. She had to act, and no matter the crowd.

She stepped away from the door and into the center of the corridor. This left the two men facing each other, their eyes widening in surprise at the speed of her movement. To them, she would have seemed to temporarily disappear. Keepers had bred humans to be slow, for convenience. That way they could be outrun, outjumped, and outmaneuvered. Prey should be easy to

herd.

Before the two men could turn to face her, she had slipped her hands behind their heads and pressed them together sharply. They dropped like sacks.

A secretary rushed out of an office two doors down. She looked at Miriam. She could not associate a young girl in an elegant suit with two unconscious men. “What has happened?”

“Gas,” Miriam cried. “The corridor is full of gas!” She turned and went striding on toward the emergency exit at the far end. A moment later, a horn started hooting. The terrified secretary had pulled the fire alarm and then rushed out into the customs area shouting, “Gas!” as she ran.

Opening the emergency exit, Miriam looked about for a way back into the main part of the terminal. Once out of the customs area, she would be able to go into Paris. She’d have to get Sarah to work up a new identity and FedEx her the passport. She certainly could not use the Tallman identity, and dared not risk her own.

Others were coming out behind her, so she climbed some concrete steps, then went down a long, empty passageway. Behind her, a man shouted that she was going the wrong way. She noticed his American-sounding voice, then glimpsed a narrow, dark figure starting to run toward her. She did not look back again.

She soon found herself in a bustling staging area for the assembly of airline meals. There were shelves full of little trays and plastic cutlery, and a wall lined with institutional refrigerators. Workers stood at tables putting the meals together on trays. Others covered them with plastic wrap. Others still packed them in steel shelves, ready to be wheeled out to the waiting planes.

There were aluminum double doors at the far end of the room. Striding with the confidence of a person who belonged exactly where she was, Miriam went to these doors.

Behind her there was a cry, “*Halte!*”

Miriam ran. She ran as hard and as fast as she could, speeding along the corridor and into a locker room. This was where the various workers changed into their uniforms.

“Halte Halte!”

A new man had burst into the room at the far end. Her throat tightened; she felt a sudden surge of rage. The reason was that this creature had appeared ahead of her. They knew exactly where she was. They must be using radios to surround her. She looked around for doors other than the ones she and the gendarme had entered.

She slipped through one, found herself in a shower room. The door had nothing but a handle lock, which she twisted. At once, he began to shake it violently from the other side. She threw open a window. There was a drop of about three stories to an area of tarmac crowded with baggage lorries. As the door burst open behind her, she went to the window and jumped.

Her teeth clashed together and her ankles shot pain up her legs from the impact. The palms of her hands burned when they slapped against the pavement. Immediately, she rolled under the overhang of the building, making herself impossible to see from above.

The shock had damaged the heel of one of her shoes. She struggled away, moving among the speeding baggage lorries. Stopping for a moment, she pulled off her shoes. The heel was not usable.

This dim, booming space was extremely alien. She'd never been inside a factory, never seen the raw side of human engineering and architecture. She'd preferred to live her life in an older, more familiar aesthetic. Her home in Manhattan was a hundred and fifteen years old; she stayed almost exclusively in old, familiar hotels when she traveled. She could handle the human world, but she'd never seen a place like this before, never imagined that the hidden parts of the human world were this mechanical.

Ahead of her she saw a passageway. The floor was dark and marked by white and yellow lines. The passage curved up and to the right. This appeared to lead away from the customs enclosure, so she began walking along it. It

was lighted by fluorescent tubes, some of them flickering and some completely out. The effect was eerie, and made more so by a high-pitched whining sound coming from ahead. She stopped to listen and tried to place this sound, but she could not.

The farther into the passage she went, the louder it became. She stopped again. It would rise and fall, then rise again. Then it almost faded entirely. She resumed walking, passing the endless, black-scuffed walls, moving beneath the flickering lights.

The sound screamed out right in her face, and her entire field of vision was filled with glaring lights. A horn began sounding.

There was no room to lie down, the oncoming machine was too low. She looked up — and there, where the lights were, she could grab hold. She leaped, missed by inches. The machine got closer, the lights growing as big as saucers, the glare blinding her and pinning her like the stunned animal that she was. The horn blared and blared. She crouched.

Like most animals', the backs of a Keeper's eyes were reflective. When she looked directly into those lights, the driver would have seen a flare as if from the eyes of a deer or a tiger. Human night vision had been bred away. Better that they sleep at night, giving the Keepers time to tend herd and feed.

There were only seconds left now. The machine would tear her to shreds. She would die from that — actually die. It was an oblivion that had haunted her all her life. She did not think that Keepers persisted in the memory of nature. She did not want to cease to be.

She sprang up from her crouching position and reached toward the light fixtures. She grabbed the edge and drew herself up, hooking one leg along the lip of the long fixture and pressing the rest of her body against the ceiling.

With a hot blast of air the machine went shrieking past, not an inch below her breast. It seemed to take forever, and she soon felt her fingers and toes slipping. She was going to fall onto the roof of the thing.

And then it was gone, and she fell instead to the floor, which she knew

now was really a subterranean road. Would another machine come? Of course. Would the driver have radioed her position back to her pursuers? Of course.

She knew, now, that she was in an extremely serious situation. Man had changed. Man was now effective and efficient. She remembered the Paris of fifty years ago, a compact, intricate city traveled by tiny automobiles and herds of bicycles. Only the Métropolitain sped the way this thing had. But it had been on rails.

Ahead, the screaming sound had started again. Another of the machines was coming. She saw, perhaps two hundred yards farther on, a ladder inset into the wall. It led to a service hatch of some kind.

The machine was coming, getting louder. There was a wind blowing in her face, getting steadily harder. This must be a subway system that served just the airport. But how could that be? Paris had a compact air-field, as she recalled, albeit a busy one.

It had grown huge, that was the answer, and she was thinking that maybe her brothers and sisters were at least somewhat right. Maybe she needed to stick closer to home, too, because this situation was getting out of hand, *way* out of hand. She sprinted, moving easily twice as fast as the fastest human runner — but what did that matter in a world where the machines hurtled along at phenomenal velocity? Even the strength of a Keeper was nothing against fifty tons of speeding steel.

As she reached the ladder, the lights of the train appeared. Immediately, the horn started blaring. Worse, a screaming sound began and the train started to slow dramatically. This time, the driver had seen her and put on his brakes. The last thing she needed was a confrontation in this damned tunnel. That would be the end. She'd be trapped then.

She bolted up the ladder, only to find that the steel hatch was battened down tight. Her great strength enabled her to push it until it bent and popped open.

The train came to a stop about ten feet from her. It stood there, invisible

behind its lights, its horn honking and honking. Back where she had come from, voices rose, people shouting in French not to move . . . French, and also that one American voice.

She clambered up through the hatch. Now she was in an access tunnel, and not far away there was a door. She didn't think it would make any sense to go along this tunnel, even though it was obviously meant for pedestrians and not trains. Tunnels were damned traps. She went through the door.

Light flared in her face; a roar assailed her. She staggered, and a voice said, "*Pardon.*" She had stumbled into a man in a taxi queue. He reached out, took her waist. "*Madame?*" he said, his voice rising in question.

"Sorry," she babbled in English, then, in French, "*Pardon, je suis confuse.*"

He looked her up and down. The other people in the queue were staring.

"I have broken my shoe," she added, smiling weakly. Then she crept to the back of the line. She had escaped the horrors of the police and the dangers of the maze. Somehow, she had reached the outside world.

She must get a hotel room, she thought, then seek out Martin Soule. He had been a friend of her mother's back in the days of powdered wigs. She'd seen him fifty years ago. Martin was very ancient and wise, very careful. He was also stylish, powerful and daring. Like Miriam, he was a wine enthusiast, and had even desensitized himself to some of their fodder, because it was so difficult to move in French society without eating. Once, he'd made her laugh by drinking the blood of an enormous fish. But then his preparation of it according to human cooking principles had revolted her. She still remembered the ghastly odor of the hot, dense flesh when it came steaming out of the poacher.

She was still well back in the queue when she noticed the policeman with a radio to his lips, staring at her as he talked. Her heart sank. At home, she dealt easily with the police. The police were her friends. She had the Sixth Precinct, where her club was located, well paid off. But she could not pay these cops off.

The policeman came striding toward the queue. He had his hand on the butt of his pistol. She thought to run, but there were two more of them coming from the opposite direction. Her only choice was to leap out into traffic and trust to her speed and dexterity to get through the cars that shot past just beyond the taxi stand. But even that would lead only to a wall.

When she realized that there was no escape, she let out an involuntary growl that made the woman standing ahead of her whip round, her face pale, her eyes practically popping out. Miriam's whole instinct now was to kill. Had she not applied her powerful will, she might have torn the creature's throat out.

Quelling her damned instincts, she forced a smile onto her face. She'd play her last card — give them her emergency Cheryl Blackmore driver's license and claim to have lost her passport. Maybe before they discovered that Cheryl Blackmore was a long-dead resident of Nebraska and most certainly did not rate a passport, she would have found some means of escape.

The three policemen arrived — and began chatting together. They were laughing, completely at their ease, taking no notice whatsoever of her. They'd been talking on their radios merely to arrange their coffee break.

Now, she thought, laughing to herself, there was the old mankind, the gentle, sloppy, genial humanity that the Keepers had so carefully bred.

As she slipped into her taxi, she was filled with a sort of glee. It was delicious to have escaped, delicious and lovely and joyous. And damn, damn lucky.

Her mouth began to dry out, her muscles to relax. The waves of hate stopped crashing in her heart. The taxi moved up a long ramp into the sunlight, and Miriam relaxed back against the seat.

“Votre destination, madame?”

“The Ritz,” she said. She'd take a huge suite. The Ritz would mean silk sheets like the ones at home, and a long call to Sarah to say how lonely she was and how far away she felt . . . and to tell her to get that new passport over

here fast.

In the cab, she pressed her shoe together as best she could, rearranged her hair, freshened her face, and tried to smooth the wrinkles in her suit. Her suitcase was gone forever, of course, and so she would have to buy new clothes, and there would be no time for proper tailoring at Chanel. That would make Sarah happy. They were both extremely fashionable, of course, but Sarah thought Miriam much too conservative.

So much of the Paris whizzing past was unfamiliar. The huge roads, the endless blocks of buildings that had grown like monstrous cliffs beyond the Périphérique distressed and confused her.

It was remade, entirely remade, and in just these few years! But then the taxi swung off the flying roadway and went down into territory that was, thankfully, more familiar. They were on the Rue de Vaugirard, where Philippe Vendôme had lived. She'd been fascinated by his alchemical studies, had stayed with him a few years while she was recovering from the grief of her mother's destruction. She'd adored him, with his wonderful, sophisticated manner and his passable skill at whist. Miriam loved games, but finding humans who could be effective opponents was not easy.

She had given Philippe of her blood, and turned back the years for him. He had become a searcher after the secrets of the Keepers. Useless, that, in the early eighteenth century. But he had been a pleasant companion, her entire pleasure for a while, until she'd met Lord Hadley's son John.

"Philippe," she murmured, thinking of that lovely house of his. In 1956 it had been something of a ruin. She had walked silent halls where she had laughed and loved with him, and reflected on the brief lives of men. Now she could only glimpse it, the once-proud estate little more than a front on a huge building. The street the taxi bounced along had been laid over part of the elegant park. Here, she and he had come and fed his swans.

Now they went underground, into a roaring tunnel full of autos and lorries, speeding along at a deadly clip. And here, quite suddenly, was the Champs Élysées. They had come by a new high-speed route.

It was all so familiar and all so dear. She remembered it from fifty years ago, even a hundred — the same marvelous width, the same trees, the same grand ambiance. Yes, this was just as it had been since Louis Philippe had commissioned Haussmann to reconstruct the intricate, ancient spaghetti-bowl that had been the Paris of the last age.

They were soon passing along the Rue St. Honoré, lined with luscious shops, in the windows of which she glimpsed the strangely simple clothing of this era, clothing that increasingly emphasized anything that was male about the female. The ideal form for human women was becoming that of the boy. She preferred elegance.

Then, here was the Place Vendôme. The Ritz was *exact*. Lovely and beloved! She had first come to this place on a rainswept evening back before the motor. What trip had that been? Perhaps 1900, when she and John Blaylock had come here in search of the luxury that was just then gaining the hotel its grand reputation.

Getting down from the taxi — or up, actually, out of this tiny modern sardine tin — she found herself face-to-face with a doorman in the hotel's familiar green livery, even his coat reminiscent of more gentle days.

She went into the lobby, passing across the thick carpet to reception. No face was familiar, of course. Fifty years and all the humans would have changed. They came and went like so much foam on a restless wave. Well, at least she had Sarah free and clear for another century, perhaps two . . . unless, of course, the dear found some clever scientific way to last longer. Sarah knew the ugly secret of her own artificial longevity. Such knowledge would have driven a lesser human mad, but Sarah was often at her test tubes, poor thing.

“I’m afraid I have no reservation,” Miriam said to the clerk, who managed to appear affable and also a little concerned at the same time. A blink of his eyes as she approached had told her that he knew exactly how old her suit was. She was travel-weary and hobbling from the broken shoe. Altogether, she could not look to him as if she belonged here. She dared not throw the names of fifty years ago around to impress him, either. Coming from what appeared to be a girl of twenty-five dressed in her grandmother’s old clothes,

such an attempt to impress would instead seem like the babbling of a madwoman.

“I am so sorry,” he began.

“I would like a suite. I prefer the fourth floor front, if you don’t mind.” These were among the best rooms in the hotel, and the only ones she would even consider using.

He asked for her credit card. She gave him Sarah’s Visa. It annoyed Sarah for her to use this card, but there was at present no choice. Using her own card was a serious risk, and Marie Tallman was retired forever. She waited while he made a phone call.

“I’m sorry, madame, this is declined.”

Must be crowding its credit limit, she thought. Just like Sarah to have a card like this. Too bad she didn’t have a copy of Sarah’s American Express card, but the only one of those in her possession was her own.

“Perhaps it’s defective, madame. If you have another —”

She turned and faced the doors. She had no desire to push this, even to remain here for another minute. She had to call Sarah. She started to open her cell phone, then hesitated. The call would not be secure.

“Is there a public telephone?”

“But of course, madame.” He directed her to a call box. She took out her AT&T card, which was in Sarah’s name, and dialed the call straight through to their emergency number. This only rang if it was absolutely urgent, so she could be sure that Sarah would pick up right away.

She did not pick up. It was five hours earlier in New York, making it eight o’clock in the morning. Sarah would be home, surely. She tried the other number, the regular one. Only the answering machine came on.

She tried the club. No answer there, not at this hour. Damn the woman, where was she when she was needed?

Maybe she'd fed. Maybe she was in Sleep. Yes, that was it. Of course, that must be it . . . must be. She put the phone down.

She thought matters over. She was effectively broke. But she was never broke; she'd had scads of money, always.

Perhaps she could try another hotel, some lesser place. There must be some credit left on the Visa card. Then she thought — how could she get into any hotel, this one included, without giving them a passport? The answer was that she couldn't, and the smaller and sleazier the hotel, the more obsessive it would be about identification. The Tallman passport needed to be burned; that's all it was good for.

She saw that she was still in mortal danger. They would have a description of her, and she hadn't even a change of clothes. They'd be searching the hotels, of course. It was logical.

She had to go to the Castle of the White Queen. Fifty years ago, Martin had been there. Maybe he still was, and maybe he could help her. Of course he could. He'd been a more worldly sort than Lamia, or even Miriam herself.

She began walking, soon coming into the Place de l'Opéra. She headed for the Métro. On the way, she stopped at a small *bureau de change* and turned her Thai baht into euros. She got forty of them. As well, she had two hundred U.S. dollars in cash. Not much, not much at all. But she never traveled with cash; she didn't need to. Being limitlessly wealthy made her sudden poverty especially difficult. She didn't know how to function.

She went down the steps into the clanging world of the Métro. She remembered it from her last visit, but she'd only used it once, and that was to get around a traffic accident when she'd been hurrying to the opera. There was difficulty with the change booth, then confusion about which *direction* she wanted. The hurrying crowds made it no easier. But, in the end, she found herself primly seated in a car going in the correct direction.

The Castle of the White Queen had been built on land that the Keepers had reserved for themselves from time immemorial. It was on the Rue des

Gobelins, and parts of it had been rented to the Gobelins family and fitted out by them as a tannery. At night, after Gobelins and his people went home; the hides tanned there were not necessarily bovine. The Keepers lived in the upper reaches of the building.

Locally, there were many legends about why it was called the Castle of the White Queen. Some said that Blanche de Castille had built it, others that it had belonged to Blanche de Navarre. The real builder was Miriam's dear mother, who had been known among her peers as the White Queen, for her grandeur, her splendid pallor, and the fact that their family had come out of the white sands of the North African desert.

The scent of man that filled the Métro did not make Miriam's jaws spread, let alone fill. As troubling as all this was, at least she was full, and very satisfactorily so. That had been a healthy little thing she'd eaten. She could easily bear this swim in a sea of food.

An accordionist began to play, and Miriam closed her eyes to listen. Certain things about Paris were almost timeless, it seemed. When she and her mother had been here, the humans had been making similar music, but with different instruments. The music was rougher and wilder then, but they were wilder also, the humans, in times past.

In those days, feeding in a place like Paris had been so easy that some Keepers had overfed, gorging until they bled out through their pores, and their orifices ran with the blood of their victims. The human population had been a seething, helpless, ignorant mass, living in the streets, under the bridges, anywhere there was a bit of shelter. The old cities had been full of nameless, aimless wanderers who could be plucked up like fruits fallen to the ground.

She missed Gobelins and left the Métro at d'Italie instead. Coming up to the street, she looked around her. She experienced a sense of satisfaction: things were really unchanged here.

She quickened her step, eager to get a sight of the castle. If the Keepers had been driven off — well, she'd deal with that problem when she had to.

Ahead was the tiny Rue des Gobelins, hardly an alleyway running off the much wider avenue. She turned into it — and stopped, staring struck with wonder. The Castle of the White Queen was *exact*, just like the Ritz. Worn, but so precisely the same that she thought it must still be in the hands of Keepers.

Until this moment, she had not realized how afraid she had actually been. She needed her kind now. And she needed, also, to warn them. In the hurly-burly of the past few hours, she had all but lost sight of why she was here and not back in New York.

Ironic indeed that the strongest, most intelligent species on the planet, the very pinnacle of the food chain, was in the same predicament as the frog and the gorilla.

It had crept up on them so easily, the result of a long series of what had, at the time, seemed like brilliant breeding maneuvers.

Back thirty thousand years ago, they had almost lost the entire human stock to a plague. They'd rotted where they stood, the poor things. It had been determined that overeager breeding had been the culprit. Generations of them had been bred for their nutritional value, which meant an imbalance of red over white blood cells. The result? They'd become prone to all sorts of diseases.

To ensure that they would survive and still remain the delicious food source that they'd been made to be, the Keepers had decided in conclave to increase the human population. To accomplish this, sexual seasonality had been bred out of the species entirely. This had been done by breeding for high levels of sexual hormones. As a result, the creatures had bloomed into bizarre sexual parodies of normal animals. Their genitals had moved to the front of their bodies, the penises and mammaries becoming huge. Their body hair had disappeared. They had become sexually obsessed, the females much more retiring than other mammals, and the males far more aggressive.

She moved toward the old castle. The last time she had entered this portal, it had been hand-in-hand with her mom. The building had been new then, smelling of beeswax and freshly hewn stone. Inside, the great rooms had

glowed with candlelight. Lovely bedchambers had been built high in the structure, behind small windows so that Keepers could linger over their kills, and the cries of pleasure and anguish could not be heard from the streets below.

Just under that garret there, behind the little, arched window was a sumptuous chamber where a Keeper could make sport with his kill for as long as he cared to, flushing it with fear again and again, then calming it and delivering bursts of incapacitating pleasure to it. This would bring the flavor of its blood to an incredibly delicious richness, sweet and sour, reflecting the secret harmonies that sounded between agony and ecstasy.

She had not fed like that in a very long time. Mother Lamia always did. Sometimes her feedings would last for days. But Miriam's human lovers had not cared for it and had felt awful for the victims when she did it.

Sarah, for example, could only bear to see Miriam do the quickest of kills. She herself struggled to live without killing, taking her nourishment from blood bank goop and pleading with Miriam for frequent transfusions that left both of them dizzy and bitchy.

Miriam went to the door. The way she felt now, she'd like to take a big, blood-packed human straight up to that chamber. Full or not, she'd spend a couple of days on it, using all of mother's old techniques.

They were the Keepers, not the kept. No matter how brilliant, how numerous, or how violent, mankind remained first and foremost, their damned *property!*

She pushed at the door. Locked. She shook it three times, making the very precise movements that were designed to dislodge the tumblers, in the event you had no key. Keepers did not have private property. All belonged to all.

It opened. She stepped in, treading softly in the footsteps of her lost past. A profound silence fell, a Keeper silence. Overhead, the great beams that had been so rich a brown in mother's day now were glowing black, as if they had turned into iron. The tanning vats were empty.

She went across the echoing floor of the factory to the narrow stair. Mother had hauled their victims up these very treads, Miriam following along to watch and learn.

How silent it was here, more silent than any human place. This was still a lair, oh, yes. But where was its inhabitant? Would he not be at least a little curious about the stealthy noises down below, the unmistakable sounds of another Keeper entering the sanctum?

“Hello,” she said, her voice uttering the sibilant, infinitely subtle sound of Prime for the first time in many a long year.

He was much smaller than she remembered, and as dirty as a coal-scuttle, a creature that had not bathed since the French court had filled its tubs with milk. His eyes were tiny and narrow, and he had the pinched face of a bat. He came forward wearing the tattered remains of a hundred-year-old frock coat, otherwise as naked as at his ancient birth. He was hungry, hissing hungry, as shadowy and insubstantial as a ghost.

A wound opened in his ghastly face, bright red and dripping. He uttered a sound, horribly eager, and she realized that he thought her human. She was so radically different looking from other Keepers that he believed her one of the kept.

His skeletal hands snatched her wrists, enclosed them in a Keeper’s iron grip. Then his eyes met hers. The bright glow of eagerness flickered, faded. He had realized his mistake.

He dropped his hands to his sides, then slumped at her feet. “*M’aidez*,” he whispered, not in Prime but in French.

As she looked down at this filthy, groveling, helpless creature, she stuffed her fist in her mouth. But he was not deceived. He knew that he revolted her. Because he laughed, bitterly, angrily, laughed to cover her screams.

FIVE

The Skylights of Paris

Paul had missed the traveler by ten seconds. He'd glimpsed the creature — tall, wearing normal clothes (an old-fashioned-looking woman's suit), a blond spray of hair, that was all he'd seen.

Rain roared against the skylight; thunder echoed across the roofs of Paris. He shouted into the phone, "Your people lost her. You and the French."

He listened to Sam Mazur's whining, complicated reply. He was CIA station chief at the U.S. embassy. Cupping his hand over the mouthpiece, Paul whispered to Becky Driver, "That's a paper cup. I said *bucket*."

"A paper cup is what we have."

Sam continued whining away about how the French had not cooperated and were not going to cooperate, that unless they knew chapter and verse exactly what the operation was about, it would absolutely not unfold on French soil.

"Tell me this, Sam. I'm curious. Why the hardening of the heart? I mean, the French don't like U.S. intelligence. But we aren't the enemy. They've always recognized that in the past."

"Cold War's over, my friend. Europe is sick of us, and France is sickest of all. They hate the way we and the Brits use the Echelon system to spy on them electronically. U.S. intelligence has had it here, man. Time to pack up our silencers and go home."

The paper cup into which the entire thunderstorm appeared to be dripping had filled up. "Becky, do you think you could empty this? These are Burmese shoes. I can't risk getting them wet."

She cast her big brown eyes down toward his feet. “You got those in Myanmar?”

“Had them made. I’m suspicious that there’s cardboard involved.”

“They look like funeral shoes.”

“What the hell are ‘funeral shoes’?”

“The kind guys wear to funerals. Shiny, black, and from about 1974.”

Charlie Frater snickered. Paul glared at them both. He’d brought dumpy, bespeckled Charlie and lithe, lovely Becky because they were the most ferocious close-in workers he had. Charlie was one of those people who just did not stop, not ever. He walked into danger like a priest walking into his church. The wonder of it was he looked like a guy who lived behind a desk deep in some civil service nowhere.

Becky, on the other hand, fancied herself a lady spy from the movies. She cultivated the effect with her dark, flowing hair and her long coats. She was only twenty-three, but she was the most cheerful and fearless warrior he had. And quick. So breathtakingly quick.

Not a man on the team hadn’t thought about Becky, probably dreamed about her. Paul had. But she kept to herself emotionally. Paul didn’t pry.

The rest of the team would assemble in the States. Paul’s highest priority was to eradicate the vampires there, always had been. Asia had been done first because it was available. Now he had to stop this traveler, lest she get to the U.S. and organize opposition. He had to stop her here.

He returned to Sam. “Bottom line is this: We lost that damn thing and it is now running around Paris telling all of it’s fuckin’ friends that somebody’s onto them. I regard that as your fault. I’m sorry.”

“May I hang up?”

“You may not.”

“Cause I have something to do. Important. Secret.”

“Tell me, does a ritual chewing out *always* make you need to take a dump?”

“Yes, it does.”

Paul carefully replaced the receiver in the cradle.

Becky and Charlie were staring at him.

“What?”

“What do you mean, what? What the hell did he say?”

“He’s a CIA bureaucrat. He said nothing.”

The skylight was now leaking in five places. As night fell, the immense skyscraper across the street began to light up. Whatever slight sense of privacy the room might have afforded was gone. Worse, there was no way to curtain off the skylight. At least two thousand office workers could look directly down into what was supposed to be a secret CIA safe house.

Paul stared up at the office building. “Let’s put together some dance numbers,” he said.

Charlie, who was, for some reason, practicing rolling cigarettes with a little machine, responded. “Stick a hat up there and maybe they’ll throw change.”

“Goddamnit, how are we gonna use this sty? Do either of you have a room that has a little privacy for us to work in, at least?”

“They’re way too small, boss,” Becky responded.

“Bullshit. We can manage.”

“More than one person in my cell and the zipper gets stuck.”

Paul thought, *sounds like fun*. He said, “Goddamnit!”

“Is this the cheapest hotel in Paris?” Charlie asked.

“Our employer is not in the habit of billeting its personnel in the cheapest anything. The *Sans Douche* is the cheapest inconveniently located piece-of-shit hotel in Paris. It’s conceivable, although just barely, that there exists another hotel with a marginally lower price. But it will not be as bad as the dear ol’ S.D. Would you care for some cat hair?” He slapped the bed, which was making him break out. “I’ve got plenty more than I need.”

“What we need is a plan of action,” Becky said, stating what was painfully obvious.

“What we need is a way to prevent the minister of the interior from calling in the ambassador and asking him why there are CIA personnel in Paris searching for the goddamn Bride of Dracula!”

“There was no Bride of Dracula, boss.”

“There damn well was a Bride of Dracula.”

“No, I don’t believe there was, actually.” Becky clicked the keys on her laptop a few times. “Nope. No *Bride of Dracula*, says the Internet Movie Database.”

“Take a letter. Steven Spielberg: ‘Stevie! Have I got an idea for you. It’s Dracula, except she’s a woman!’ Ladies and gentlemen, I will now retire.”

“Thing is, boss, how’re we gonna find her?”

“To fuck around with the French or not to fuck around with the French, that is the question.”

Charlie began to shuffle along beneath the skylight. “The problem is, we need to get this done.” He started singing, and that was terribly sad.

“ ’Cause she’s spreadin’ the news, she’s doin’ it today, ’cause she wants to be a part of it — ”

“Don’t they test for people like you anymore, Charles? I mean, when we

signed on, the first thing they gave us was a test to see if we were ass-holes. In my generation.”

“Cold War’s over, boss. They’re putting the old assholes out to pasture, not hiring new ones.” The phone rang. It was Sam, back again for more punishment.

“Hey, bro.” They’d been in Cambodia together, in Laos. Paul Ward and Sam Mazur were allies of the blood and soul.

“Tell me something. Where’s a good place to get sick on the food in — where are we, again, Beck?”

“Montparnasse.”

“Montpissoir.”

“There’s thousands of restaurants out there.”

“Good.”

“Very.”

“Cheap.”

“Not very.”

“McDonald’s?” “What’re you doing in Montparnasse, anyway?”

“We’re billeted in one of the shitty little hotels.”

“God, you’re low. You’re so low that it worries me even talking to you. I have ambition. I want to be a big-timer back at Langley. Got my sights set on the Lesotho/Chad/Botswana desk. Can’t swing something like that if people realize I’m tangled up with a liability like you.”

“The French said Mrs. Tallman was believed to have taken a taxi into the city. They give you any details?”

“Well, actually, yes.”

Paul tried not to hope, but did.

“The taxi is believed to have been French.”

Had he not hated the vampires so much and been so obsessed with them, he would have been ready with a comeback. All he could do was plead. “I need French cooperation, Sam. You gotta get it.”

“Whatever this is, they think it’s some kind of crazy American bull-shit, or maybe we’re trying to make assholes outa them or whatever. What’s that noise, anyway?”

“The rain.”

“Really!”

“Really.”

“’Cause it’s beautiful here.”

“Oh, shut up. Something’s bothering me, and lemme tell you what it is.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Well, this should look to the French like an Interpol operation. So why are they being so damn shirty?”

“Because they know it isn’t.”

“And why would they know that?”

“Because Interpol told them.”

“Clever boys. Okay, Sam — and guys, both of you listen up. Because I do have a suggestion. I think that we ought to detail a fluent French speaker to liaise with the police on the pretext that we have a missing national —”

“All hell will break loose.”

“No, listen to me. Tell them it’s a matter of the heart. We just need to search around a bit — very discreetly — because this lady has run away from home, and it’s politically sensitive. The French will buy this. It’s the kind of thing they understand.”

“The French will buy. They will not understand. They’ll want the name, rank, and serial number; then they’ll tell you whether she’s d.o.a. or not. That’ll be the extent of their cooperation.”

“What we need — look, Charlie, quit fucking with that — what is that?”

“A cigarette maker I bought in Bangyercock. It’s neat.”

“Bangkok, you sexist bitch,” Becky said.

“Put the toy away. What we need — are you still there, Sam?”

“Patiently waiting.”

“What we need, and I am talking about right now, the next few minutes, is we need to find the vampires she has come to see. We’ve lost her. No description except what looked like a Chanel suit circa about 1975 and real blond hair that was probably a damn wig. With no cooperation from the locals, we gotta shift gears. We use the same basic technique we’ve been using since Tokyo.”

“Which is?”

“We cull police records for patterns of disappearance. My guess is that they’ll cluster around the lairs, just like everywhere else we’ve been. Here in Paris, we’ll be able to get good maps — sewer lines, wire conduits, building plans, drainage pipes, all of it. It’ll be easier than Singapore. A hell of a lot easier than Shanghai.”

“Boss?”

“Yeah, Beck?”

“Ask him, who keeps crime records here? Is there a missing persons bureau?”

Paul found a button on the phone next to a grill that was hidden on the side. When he pressed the button, he discovered that he had a decent speakerphone.

“Sam? You’re on speaker.”

“Hey.”

Becky asked her question again.

“Prefecture of Police, Hall of Records,” Sam replied. “There are going to be ordinary murders and disappearances mixed in,” he continued.

“Meaning?”

“You’re gonna have to read the description of each crime to find out if it started as a disappearance. You read French?”

“I read French,” Charlie said.

“Sam,” Becky asked, “when is a missing person declared dead in this country? If there’s no presumption of foul play, say.”

“Nine years.”

“Are those records held separately?”

“I don’t truthfully know. We’ll need to ask the French.”

“Shit,” Becky said carefully.

“What if we tell them it’s a historical survey,” Paul suggested. “Becky’s a student from Harvard. She’s got a powerful daddy, and the embassy’s been asked to help her do research for her thesis.”

“That’ll work,” Sam said. “I can have her in the Hall of Records within the

week.”

“Tomorrow, Sam, first thing.”

“There’s bureaucracy, man. This is France.”

“Do it, Sam.”

“Is this stuff computerized?” Becky asked.

“You’ll be looking at everything from the best databases you ever saw in your life to big black books that weigh forty pounds and make you sneeze.” It was agreed that they’d meet at a bar called Le Lapin Robuste on Rue du Sommerard tomorrow at noon. By then Sam would know exactly how the records were organized. From there, they’d go to the Prefecture of Police, which was nearby, and see how far they could get.

As soon as the conference call ended, Charlie and Becky began looking through a Paris Zagat’s guide for a restaurant for dinner. Paul watched them. He felt once again the awful, frantic feeling that had been coming over him from time to time ever since he’d seen the grotesque remains of poor Kiew Narawat.

For a while, the knowledge that vampires were real had depressed the hell out of him. He’d tried to find some special meaning in the fact that it had happened to his father, but all he’d found was special hate.

There was something ghastly about discovering that you weren’t at the top of the food chain. It was like discovering that you had a hidden and fatal disease. You were left feeling horribly out of control. It entered your dreams . . . it was a cancer of the mind.

“Uncle Paul,” Becky said, “since there’s nothing we can do tonight, could me and Charlie please, oh please, take you out to some cheap-jack hole-in-the-wall for some onion soup and wine?” That snapped the twig that had been about to snap ever since he’d lost track of the damn vampire. He looked at them — two kids made arrogant by too many easy victories.

“Do you think we’ve won? Is that why you’re so damn smug, with your goddamn toys —” He swept the cigarette making machine out of Charlie’s hands. Charlie, who was wound tight by training and had a hair trigger, just barely managed to restrain himself, stopping his flying fist with a sudden jerk of effort. Paul looked at him. “Do it,” he said with an easy smile that he did not feel, “and I’ll lay you out.”

“Paul?”

“And as for you —” He grabbed her purse, which had been on the floor beside a chair. He held it up to the desk lamp. “What the fuck is this made out of?” He knew damn well. They all had this stuff — purses and wallets and belts, God only knew what else. The skin of the vampire was more delicate even than calfskin . . . probably than human, for that matter.

He emptied the purse on the desk and stuffed the damn thing into the trash can. “If they saw this skin, God only knows what they’d do.”

“I’m not exactly planning to take it with me into some fucking lair. I’m not *that* stupid.”

“Don’t you understand? Even yet?” He looked from one surprised face to the other. “No. You don’t. So you listen up, children, and you listen close. Something has changed. Big time. We’ve been dealing with something that’s very old and very slow to react, and so far it’s been easy. Like killing big bugs. You surprised ’em all, didn’t you? Token resistance — gnashing teeth, hissing. It was fun! It got to be, anyway. The professionals. Fuck! Fuck us, we’re assholes.”

“Not me,” Charlie said. His face was burning up. His eyes were beads. He was not trained to take abuse, and he did not take it well.

“Not you, little boy. Little, innocent boy. Lemme see your wallet.”

“What the hell for?”

“Lemme see the goddamn thing!”

Charlie held it out. “They use human skin,” he muttered.

Paul emptied it and threw it away with the purse. “Belts, shoes, anything?”

“That stuff is valuable!”

“If they see you with their goddamn *skins* in your hands, they’re gonna know exactly who you are.”

“They are not going to see us.”

“Listen to me. One of them has gone up to the fifth floor of a hotel, killed one of your peers, and then flown from Bangkok to Paris on a god-for-damned *airplane!* I’ve seen it and it looked like some damn lady. *Very* human! So they don’t all spend all their time hiding in lairs, do they? We’re up against something new! Something we know not one damn thing about! They may be as old as damn Methuselah and they may be slow to respond, but they’ve taken a blow to the gut, and they are now responding! So you better watch your backs, because they are strong and they are smart and *now they know!*”

In the silence that followed, he became acutely aware of the humming of the little electric clock that stood on the table beside the bed. Charlie went to the window. Becky sat staring at her hands. Then she looked up. He saw tears gleaming in the edges of her eyes. He saw, also, that they were not tears of pain or embarrassment, but tears of rage. That was good. He liked that. Let her burn.

Dad was calling him from the back porch, “Paulie, Paulie let’s make ice cream!” Dad smelled of the raw earth that was his livelihood. He smelled of the leaves of summer.

After Dad had disappeared, Paulie had walked on his knees all the way down the pasture road to the river and all the way back. He had done that while begging God that if Dad was found, he would never stop praying forever.

Mom had worked the farm until her bones stuck out, and been scared all

the time, because if she did not get her crop in, she said, this family was gonna hit the road. There was no bank in North Carolina, and probably not anywhere, that would give her a crop loan.

“What’re we supposed to do?” Becky asked.

“Your jobs!”

“I mean right now, Paul. Right this goddamn *second*, Paul! Because I don’t see one damn thing we can do. We got a vague description of a woman who apparently looks nothing — not one thing — like the creatures we’ve been killing. I mean, I wouldn’t make a damn handbag outa some *lady*. I saw little, shriveled monsters coated with dirt. I didn’t see anything that looked even remotely like a tall, blond woman.”

“We’ve known about these creatures for just a few years. They’ve been around for centuries and centuries. They’ve had a lotta time to think up a lotta things —”

“Not my point. My point is, you’re having a goddamn hissy fit because Charlie and I — who happen to have been risking our lives in a filthy, horrible, and completely thankless job for three hellish years — wanted to sneak a couple of hours of downtime when there wasn’t another goddamn thing we *could* do!” She folded her arms. “Explain yourself.”

“Simple. I’m a field supervisor and you’re not.”

“So, what do we do, boss? Right now?” Charlie was trying to put his smashed cigarette machine back together.

“Whatever you damn well please. Go to Tour d’Argent and blow a month’s pay. Moulin Rouge. The Slow Bar. Paint the goddamn town red, that’s what Paris is for.”

“I just want a good bouillabaisse.”

“I’d like a nice *steak frites*.”

Charlie and Becky went out into the rain. Paul listened to it hammering the

damn skylight for about five minutes. And he began to think that maybe he should've gone with them. Maybe he could find a liquor store open somewhere; who the hell knew? He'd buy himself a quart of Stoli and toast himself into a stupor. Do him a world of good to wake up tomorrow with a hangover.

He went down in the tiny elevator, jammed his hat over his head, and set out into what might as well become an all night bar crawl. Maybe he'd even break up the tedium with a few fights. He loved to use his fists, always had. Just loved it. Probably be pretty easy to pick a fight with a frog. Hopefully, he'd find somebody with good enough moves to make it fun. Guys who liked to fight, they could spot each other in a bar. There were signals — some heavysset asshole glares at you for no damn reason, that's an invitation. Practiced bar fighters lived in their own secret world, and he was very much part of it. Nothing like beating the shit out of each other to make a couple of guys friends for life.

He set out along the Boulevard Montparnasse. There were lots of theaters, more than he remembered from when he was last here. Too bad it was night; he could have slipped over to the Orangerie and seen some fuckin' Monets.

Maybe the thing to do was go to a movie and brush up on his French. But there were also lots of bars. He went into one. Fulla damn tourists, wouldn't you know. Nervous Arabs sipping glasses of wine; Americans loudly demanding martinis.

There were a few Frenchies at the bar huddling over drinks or coffee. He slid up and managed, with some effort, to get a Stoli.

It was small and overpriced, but it worked okay, so he ordered another. He wondered if the whores around here were as overpriced as the liquor. He'd been spoiled by the Asians, who worked their asses off for a few bucks, massaging, blowing, sucking, fucking, combing, tickling, licking, and then handing you off to the social director for another round with a fresh face.

He said to nobody in particular, "You know why the predator is always smarter than the prey?" Nobody answered.

“He has to be. The prey lives by work — crop the grass, till the field, whatever. The predator lives by his wits. That’s why the gazelle hardly ever sees the lion. It’s why the damn deer doesn’t see us.” He paused, then raised his glass. The barkeep did him. He knocked it back.

He’d come in here to fight, let’s face it. But he was damn forty-eight years old; what was he gonna do? Also, you couldn’t insult people who didn’t understand your goddamn lingo.

He left. Rain hit him in the face. Striding along, he wished to God he had something to do that mattered. Why hadn’t anybody taken a picture of the woman? Why hadn’t they confiscated the damn passport? You couldn’t even dagnet for her!

He was going so fast that he was practically running. The rain came down in sheets, in torrents. He watched the droplets sailing through the streetlights out of a low, rushing sky. He realized that he was running because he was scared. How must it feel to be eaten alive that way? They were parasites. Big, filthy suckerfish.

How *the fuck* had she eluded them? You don’t sneak past customs when they have you caught. You can’t! But she had.

Intelligence, of course. She was brilliant, obviously. So what did that mean? How many steps ahead was she? Ten? Fifty? A thousand? “Goddamnit!”

Then he thought, what if she knows about me? He couldn’t see how, but he didn’t have any two hundred and fifty IQ, either. She could be three feet away right now and he would have no way of knowing.

He found a little shop where they had some wine stuck in the window along with the displays of Orange Crush and Evian water. There was what looked like it might be a nice muscatel for about nine bucks. He shelled out and took it home under his arm.

Back in the hotel, he realized that he had no corkscrew. So he busted the neck and lay back on the bed drinking out of the jagged hole and staring up at

the office building. All those dark windows and not a single human figure anywhere.

It wasn't muscatel, not by a long shot, but the wine did him okay, especially on top of the vodka. Maybe toward dawn he slept, and maybe not.

He awoke to gray, sad light and music coming up from the street — some kind of wild Arabic tune. The office building towered like a monster ghost above his skylight. He got up, wanted a cigarette, and went through the goddamn motions with the goddamn gum. He chewed it brutally, stuffed in another piece, and bore down until his jaws hummed.

He'd been rough on the kids last night. But that was nothing new. They'd gotten their frogs' legs anyway. Thing was, he loved his kids. He wanted them to get their fucking frogs' legs whenever they could.

The phone went *brrrt-brrrt brrrt-brrrt*. Neat sound, he thought.

“Yeah?”

“We got three places, boss. Three *arrondissements*.”

“Beck?”

“Yeah, boss.”

“Where are you?”

“Prefecture of Police Department of Records.”

“Am I wrong, or is it six-fifteen in the morning?”

“Shit, they're gonna be opening this place up in an hour. We gotta get moving.”

“But how the hell did you get in there? That's what I want to know.”

“They got a lotta skylights in this town.”

SIX

Martin Soule

Miriam had done her screaming and her weeping, and now sat in a little café seeking with increasing urgency for a victim for Martin. She had called Sarah again and again, and still had not gotten an answer. But she could not let this problem, as disturbing as it was becoming, intrude on her urgent mission. She did not know exactly what had happened to Martin, except that he was starving, and it was the most horrible thing she had ever seen.

Patience was essential on the hunt, no matter whether you were in a hurry or not. The trouble was, you could not easily imagine the prey to be dangerous, and in an emergency like this, your instincts screamed at you to just grab one, drag it off by the hair, and give it to the poor sufferer immediately.

She forced herself to sit still, to appear seductive. The waiter was admiring her and so were some of the male customers. But nobody moved, nobody *did* anything.

She sucked in warm smoke from her cigarette, drew it deep into her lungs, then blew it out with a carefully manufactured seductive pout. At least they had reasonably good cigarettes here. This Gitanes reminded her of a Bon-Ton. American cigarettes were awful now.

Why were these stupid men ignoring her? Had customs changed so much? When she had last taken a victim in Europe, everything had been different. There had been an immediate flirting response, a quick seduction. That had happened on a quiet day in Clichy, in a little bar full of bums and Americans.

She was contacting men's eyes, but they wouldn't take it farther. She did not intend to let Martin starve, or any Keeper she could help, for that matter. As to why this had happened to him, she did not yet know. She could well

imagine, though — something awful that had to do with human oppression of the Keeper. She sucked the cigarette hard, blew out a furious stream of smoke.

The temptation was growing ever stronger to just go off down the street and do what instinct urged. To some Keepers, the finest of all meals came from a sudden, spontaneous impulse to just snatch a victim, tear it open, and drink. That was her instinct, always. She'd been drawn to America in the first place by the easy, rambling life it offered her kind. She'd guzzled her way across the wild frontier. You could go a few miles on horseback and pluck your fruit along the trail without the slightest worry. People disappeared out there all the time.

She'd finished her cigarette and was just starting another when she realized that a young male was heading her way. She said in French, "Can you help me? May I have a light?"

He moved past her toward the loo. Could this be a homosexual bar? No. Clearly not. Owning a club in New York as she did, she could tell the sexual orientation of a place at a glance.

From the bar, another man said, "You speak the French of Voltaire, lady. All those 'thees' and 'thous.'" He raised his voice, mocking her, " 'Cans't thou render me assistance? Mays't I take a flame?' We call it a 'match,' now. New word! Where are you from?"

"The past," she snapped. She got to her feet. To hell with the French, if they were no longer interested in a pretty girl.

"Oh, mademoiselle, please, I am just making conversation! Don't be so quick. You must be an American. You learned your French in school. Well, you had an old teacher. Damned old, I'd say! But that can't be held against you."

He was plump. The back of his hands revealed the telltale blue streaks that suggested that the drinking veins would be nice and big. The flow of the carotid would be delightfully powerful.

She gave him a slow, careful smile, the kind that made the males pant. She had practiced smiling for years, and she considered herself an artiste. As soon as she showed her rows of perfectly believable but entirely artificial human teeth, he came to her table.

Finally. She responded with practiced indifference. Smile too eagerly, and he would back off . . . at least, that used to be their way.

“You are not telling me to go?”

She shrugged.

In a lower voice, he asked, “Is this going to cost me?”

“A little.” Meaning everything you value the most — your breath, your blood, your very life.

“Then you’re for real — a whore staking out the rear table in a café. It’s so — I don’t know — *charmant*. So ‘old Paris!’ And that language and the ancient suit. You *are* from the past. Look, I don’t mean to spoil the effect, but I have only a couple hundred francs.”

“How sad.”

“Do you take credit cards?”

How could he ask something so profoundly stupid? A whore who took credit cards, indeed. She sucked in smoke, let it drift slowly out.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

“Excuse me, my sir?”

“I gave it up. Bad for the chest.” He tapped his breast, expanded his lungs, let the breath out. “Bet you couldn’t manage that.”

She could hold her breath for an hour. Keepers could drown, but it was not an easy death. For them, in fact, there were no easy deaths. The very body, every bone and sinew, was fanatically devoted to life. Man had the immortal

soul, not his Keepers. Man could afford to die. Keepers had to stay alive forever, if possible.

Miriam put out her cigarette.

“You have the loveliest hands,” he said, watching her.

She lifted a hand, bending her wrist delicately. When he kissed it, somebody over at the bar went, “Oh, my.”

“Be quiet, you fucking gorilla!” the victim roared. “Never mind him, he has the manners of an animal.”

She lowered her hand, touching his with the tips of her fingers: possession. “Good sir, I cannot stop with you the day long.”

“Your French is advancing. Now you sound like somebody from about 1896.”

“I have a pleasant room, and two hundred francs will be a good price.”

She strolled with him down the Rue de Bobbilo, then crossed the Place d’Italie into the Avenue des Gobelins. It was raining, and she leaned in toward him to be under his umbrella. As they crossed the street, she stumbled against him. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, frowning slightly.

It had been a costly slip: he’d noticed her weight. Keepers had dense bones and muscles like rock. Inch for inch, they were twice as heavy as the prey.

The smallest slip would sometimes be all it took to spook a victim. Like most predators, Keepers were successful only about a third of the time. The myth of the vampire as a creeping, unstoppable supernatural force was just that, a myth.

They were passing a small hotel. He started in.

“No, not here.”

“Where the hell is it, then? This is the only hotel around here.”

“Just a little farther, good sir.”

His pace slowed. She could feel him glancing at her again. Archaic language, excessive weight for her shape and size — he was not understanding, and that was making him nervous. She had to brush up on her damn French. Back in 1956, nobody had commented. But then, she hadn’t fed here, either, only gone to Chanel for a thorough reoutfitting. She’d spent thousands. They would never have commented on her French.

She gave him a carefully rehearsed look — eyebrows raised, gray eyes gleaming — that was meant to disarm him with a combination of girlish sweetness and womanly experience. This look had worked since she had first developed it, back in the days when one’s only mirror was a pond.

He went, “*hmpf*,” like a slightly shocked horse. Then he grew silent. His tread became determined, even dogged.

She had him, by heaven! That was a wonderfully effective look. It had set the hook along the Via Appia and Watling Street, in Ur and Athens, in Venezia and ancient Granada.

“This isn’t — oh, Christ — what the hell do you want to go in here for?”

“You’ll see.”

“Not for two hundred francs I won’t. A blanket on the floor of an old wreck like this rates no more than fifty, sweetheart. No way you’re gonna cheat Jean-Jacques. No damn way at all.”

If she accepted his offer, he’d decide that she was probably diseased and that would be that. She had to waste time bargaining.

“Upstairs is very nice. You must pay a hundred and fifty.” “The hell —”

“But only when I conduct you to the chamber, and if you are pleased.” She lowered her eyes.

“If I ain’t pleased?”

“Then I am desolated. I will do it for your fifty, and fulfill your pleasure, for one hour of the clock.”

“Now we’re back to the ancien régime. Your French is fascinating.” He looked up at Mother Lamia’s old palace, the gray limestone, the sharp peak of the roof, the tiny windows in the tower. She knew what he was thinking: *Dare I go in there with such a strange woman?*

“I have my domicile within. It isn’t as it appears.”

He smirked, but followed her through the door into the cavernous space. He stopped, looked up into the high shadows. “My God, what a place!”

“Come with me.” She moved deeper within, toward the stairs at the back of the enormous, dark room.

“That stairway’s a deathtrap!”

She thought, *Don’t make it hard, not when I am so frantic!* She said, “But, my sir, this is the way to my chamber.” She moved toward the stairs, swinging her hips.

“‘My sir!’ ‘My chamber!’ you’re weird, and I’m not going up there with you no matter how pretty you are. Anyway, you probably taste like a damn ashtray, you smoke so much.”

Then the damn thing turned and strode toward the door. She sucked in her breath, turned also.

It had moved fast. It put its hand in the ring, started pulling it. She leaped with all her might across the space between them. At the last instant, it saw her, raised a hand. For the split of a second, their eyes met. She fisted the crown of its head, doing it in precisely the right place and with the exact force necessary to knock the thing senseless. It dropped with a sodden thud.

“Martin,” she said. “My dear, look what I’ve brought you.” He’d been watching from behind one of the old tanning vats. He came out, moving with the slow, dragging gait of a very weak Keeper. He smelled like dry, old flesh

and rotted blood. His eyes were glimmers inside their sunken sockets.

She watched him lay his long gray form upon the cushioning body of his prey, watched him stretch like a lounging panther. Some of the old Martin could be seen in those easy movements, his grace, even a little of his power.

He laid his jaws on the neck, in the traditional spot. Keepers sometimes took their food from under the leg, or even, if they were particularly hungry and had really strong suction, from the main artery itself, which could be reached by a ferocious penetration of the small of the back.

It was decadent and cruel to take the blood from a small vein, but this was done as well. The victim knew, then, for it would remain conscious for most of the feeding. Awful, mad fun that was. Children did it, and Miriam could remember a few Egyptians she'd tormented that way, when she was still a little slip of a thing. She and that boy Sothis, the son of Amma, had experimented with all sorts of ghastly and peculiar ways of consuming their prey. Playing the role of child prostitutes in the seedy backstreets of Thebes, they'd often sucked their customers dry right through their erect penises, leaving nothing but a skeleton tented by skin ready for the tanner. Children can be so awful.

Martin's body began to undulate. His esophageal peristalsis was quite strong. The prey woke up and shouted out something, "Oh, shit," or some such thing. He began to toss and turn, and Martin, who was far from a normal weight and strength, started to slip off.

He needed all the nutrition he could get, so she most certainly could not kill the prey to prevent it struggling. Dead blood made a poor meal.

The thing heaved. There was a pop and a gooey, declining hiss. Martin's suction had broken. It heaved again, and this time he slid completely off. The creature sat up. Its neck was red, but there was no blood flowing. Miriam had the awful thought that Martin might be too weak to feed.

"What in the name of God is this?" The creature looked down at Martin, who was sliding across the floor, looking very much like a great beetle. "What in the name of *God!*" It scrambled to its feet.

Martin grabbed an ankle. The creature shrieked, its eyes practically popping out of its head. It kicked him away.

“Jesus in heaven, what’s the matter with that guy?”

This creature was surprisingly self-possessed. Miriam did not like this. She stepped forward, grabbed one of its wrists.

It kicked upward with its knee, directing the blow expertly toward her forearm. That was well done; that would have shattered a human bone. She didn’t know what she had here. Stars forbid it was another damn cop.

Its free fist came plunging straight toward her face. She caught it, stopping its forward motion so suddenly that the animal’s jaws snapped with the shock. She began to squeeze the wrists. It writhed and kicked again, this time getting her right in the midriff. Her muscles were far too hard for the blow to be painful, but it pushed her off her feet, forcing her to let go her grip. Instantly the creature recoiled from her.

“What are you?” it shrieked. “Aliens?”

That again. That was a recent bit of human myth that the Keepers ought to start using. They hadn’t been aliens to the earth for fifty thousand years.

Martin had risen to a sitting position, was ineffectually dusting his tattered waistcoat. When she looked back to the human, it was already starting to make once again for the outside door. With a quick leap, she put herself in its way.

“God in heaven! That’s three meters!” It showed its teeth, displayed the palms of its hands. “Look, we can work this out. I’m a family man. I can’t go to Pluto or whatever it is you want.”

Pluto was the human name for Nisu, the farthest of the planets. Beyond that was only Niburu, the wanderer.

“Child, you must give up your life. You cannot escape us.”

That would get the mind racing, the blood speeding.

“Don’t be absurd. That would be murder! And look at you; why, you’re just a baby in your mother’s old clothes! You mustn’t do something so terrible. You’ll regret it forever, *child*.”

Behind him, Martin had come to his feet. He began to stagger toward the victim, his shoulders slumped, his jaw gaping. The sound of his shuffling caused the creature to turn around. And now a moment occurred that did not happen often: a human being saw a Keeper naked of disguise, as he really looked.

It drew in its breath. Then silence. Then a burst of wild, panicked shrieking. But it stood rooted, mesmerized for the same reason that the mouse is mesmerized by the snake.

The deepest unconscious of the human being, the depth of the soul, knew the truth. It bore an imprint of that face from the days when Keepers kept them in cages. They had been pure animals then, without any conscious mind. So the terror they had felt had been imprinted on the unconscious and passed from generation to generation as raw instinct.

Too bad that the free-range human had made so much nicer a meal than the caged variety. Inevitably, they’d begun to run them in packs, then in herds, letting them make their own cities, have their own history. Inevitably, the Keepers had taken to living in the cities, and what fun *that* had been. Still would be, if they hadn’t all gone into hiding.

It was so unnecessary. Miriam had probably done a thousand kills in New York City since the creation of its police department, and she hadn’t had a bit of trouble there. In fact, she’d had almost no trouble at all, not until this last little lapse.

There’d been the Ellen Wunderling affair, when Sarah had panicked and eaten a reporter who had gotten too close to Miriam. But that had blown over.

The truth was, it was not hard to get away with killing humans if you were just a little careful, and the other Keepers should not have become so fearful. Caution was appropriate, of course. But this business of hiding in holes the

way they were doing — they were nothing now but parasites. She was the last of her kind, the last true Keeper, the last vampire.

Well, she had to rehabilitate them, starting with Martin. She would feed him and nurse him back to his grandeur, teach him to live in the modern world. She'd teach them all. Then she'd have a beautiful baby, and he would be a prince among them and lead them back into the sunlight.

The creature began to move away, but Miriam was quicker. She embraced it from behind.

It let out a terrific bellow and began to fling its head back and forth, attempting to slam its skull into her forehead. It connected, too. The blow mattered not, wouldn't even leave a bruise.

She tightened her grip. The creature struggled to draw her hands away. She could feel the ribs start to compress. The carefully orchestrated attempt to break her grip degenerated into hammering. Finally, the breath whooshed out.

Martin's jaw opened, and he fell against the prey. It wriggled, flounced, shook its head wildly. Martin fell away, then regained his balance. Miriam crushed out the last of the breath. Martin locked his jaw against the neck once again. The creature's legs, which had been kicking wildly, now began to slow down. Miriam squeezed tighter. She smelled hot urine, heard it sluicing out.

Martin's suction finally took, and the creature's body weight began to decline, slowly at first, then more noticeably. Martin, by contrast, began to flush red through his curtain of dirt. She felt the life go out of the human. The body became limp. A moment later, Martin let go.

"There's more," she said.

He slumped. "I cannot." He found a chair, fell into it. At least he wasn't crawling anymore. That was an improvement.

The blood and fluids that were left had to be taken. The remnant could not be left to rot. She carried it across the room and sat also, on the foot of the stairs. She laid the body out on her lap, bent down and sucked it until there

was nothing left to take, just the dry, cream-colored skin tight across the bones.

“Is there acid in any of the vats?”

He shook his head. “That’s all finished. No more tannery.”

Too bad. It had been a great convenience in the old days, because the remnants could simply be dissolved. It had been Mom’s charming idea to let the tanners come in.

“What do you do?”

He looked at her. “Miriam — it is you, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Martin.”

“I haven’t eaten in a year.”

Her mouth opened, but she did not speak, could not. She’d heard of Keepers going hungry for six months, even more — but how could he ever have survived this? How could he still live?

“Martin —”

“I begged for death, many times. But it did not come. Would not come.” He smiled a little. “I was turning into one of those . . . those things that *you* make.”

He was referring to her humans, to what happened to them when her blood in their veins stopped keeping them young. Keepers might not communicate with each other much, but it seemed that everybody knew of Miriam and her humans.

“It’s nothing like that. You would have died in the end.”

He nodded. “No doubt.” He raised his eyes to hers. She looked deep into the burning, black pools. Martin was thousands of years older than she.

“We are coming to our end, Miriam,” he said.

“We aren’t!”

He nodded slowly, not as if he was agreeing with her, but more as if he was humoring her. “You need to find a way to destroy that,” he said. “They’ll miss that man soon, and they’re bound to come here searching.”

“Why here? We’ve always been safe here. This is my mother’s house.”

“The City of Paris owns this structure. There are plans to make it part of the Musée des Gobelins, starting next year.” He made a dismissive gesture with his hands, a gesture that expressed vast defeat, vast sorrow. “They’ll clear all this rubbish out.”

“Martin, you were thriving just — well, just a few years ago.”

His face, which had filled out and now bore a smeared, filthy resemblance to the narrow-lipped elegance she remembered from the past, opened into a smile. The smile quickly turned bitter and ugly. “During the war, the Resistance built a secret headquarters in the Denfert-Rochereau ossuary. They heard us, deeper down, in the old labyrinth.”

This had been the traditional shelter of the Paris vampires, a honeycomb of tunnels that wound beneath the city, from which its stone had been quarried since the time of the Romans.

“They noticed us. They thought that we were spies working for the Germans, and they pursued us.”

“But . . . how?”

“With sound! They have those little tins full of carbon black —”

“Microphones.”

“Yes, those things. They put them about, and our voices were conducted to their ears through them.”

“But they can’t hear our speech.”

“Ah, Prime is such a trial, isn’t it? So complex, so many words needed for the simplest expression.” He shook his head. “We spoke French, which requires the central register of tones.”

“You’re speaking Prime now.”

“Am I? Yes, I am. How lovely. I’ll try to keep it up. Anyway, they did not really do anything at first. They were perplexed. But you know the French, they are a careful and patient lot. They did not give up on the strange stories collected by the Resistance, of a band of *hommes sauvages* living in the catacombs. When you were last here, we knew nothing of this. But they were working, you see. Always watching, always working. There began to be deputations from the Service Sociale going through the catacombs calling, ‘come out, come out, we are here to help you.’ Then a stupid fool, that idiot Emeus —”

“He and I grew up together. He was with the Thebes gang, me and Sothis out of Amma, Tayna of Tothen, that crowd.”

“Tothen now calls himself Monsieur Gamon. He is here. The others, the wind has taken.”

“Tayna was in Shanghai, living as a Mr. Lee.” Destroyed, now, Miriam supposed. She did not say it.

“Emeus ate one of the damned Service Sociale people. The hell that resulted has not stopped.”

So humans knew, also, here in France. “How much do they understand?”

“I don’t know what they know. How they find us. Only that I could not safely feed these years past.” He gave her a look that she had never seen from a Keeper before, almost of despair. It made her most uneasy to see such a weak and human expression in the eyes of one of her own kind.

“Why did you have to stop? What exactly did they do?”

“They came! I had just fed — in the Twelfth, coming up out of the labyrinth. The usual method.”

“When you say ‘They came,’ what do you mean?”

“I had chosen a very nice one, smelled great, skin tone said it was first class all the way. I took it into a — oh, some little covered place, a toilet, as I recall. I ate it and put the remnant in my little case that I carry, and suddenly — there they were, the police! Running after me. Coming in autos. Jumping out of doorways. It was phenomenal. I only escaped by leaping a wall, then to the sewers.” She pulled out her cigarettes, lit one. How tired she suddenly felt. She sensed that more had happened to him than he had as yet said, and she wanted to hear it all.

“Go on, Martin.”

“You look so beautiful.”

She thought, *I don't want to bear the child of a weak creature like this. I need the strongest blood now.* She said, “But you haven't finished your story.”

“Miriam, I have been captured.”

The words vibrated into Miriam's shocked silence.

“They examined me, Miriam. They opened my jaw, they weighed me, they extracted fluids!”

“But you escaped?”

“They tried to make me think I had. It was a silly business, though — unlocked doors and such. I knew they had let me go.”

She could feel her heat beginning to rise. Her blood was flowing faster. If he had been let go, then there was danger here.

“What happened next?”

“I waited months — a full season of moons. Then I took something — a rat of a thing, half-starved, living under a bridge in the trackless neighborhoods beyond the Périphérique. I had not even opened a vein before they were there, falling on me from the roadway above, rushing up in automobiles — it was horrifying. I ran. All I could do.”

“But you must have been terribly hungry.”

“I tried again a few days later. This time I took the RER to the outskirts, to an area where live the brown ones that they call *ratons*. Again, I singled one out, cut it out of a little herd in a cinema, then started to have my dinner.”

“They appeared again.”

“Dozens of them! All around! This time I barely escaped. I came back here. I have remained within these walls ever since.”

“But, Martin, how could you have not eaten for — what — at least a year? It’s impossible.”

“ ‘Nothing is impossible when you must,’ that is the motto of my family. Miriam, I have drunk the feral cats, the mice, the rats. I have eaten the very flies that are spit by the air!”

No wonder he stank so. A Keeper could not live on such blood, or could barely live. She did not want to pity one of her own kind, especially not one she remembered with such respect. He had been a charming lover in his day. She remembered him in the flashing brocades of the last age, a powdered wig upon his head and a gold-knobbed stick in his hand. He knew the fashions of the age; he dallied with duchesses and played cards at the table of the king. Among the Keepers, he was known as an expert on the ways of man.

“You and I have always been kindred souls, Martin.”

“I have thought of you often, child. You still live among them?”

“I have a club in New York that is quite *façonnable*. And a human lover called Sarah.”

“That business of yours.”

“A human to serve you is most useful.” Or could be, if only she would answer the damned phone.

“I don’t even know the names of those who pursue me.”

They had left him alone for these years, interrupting him only when he was — according to their idea — about to “murder” one of their own. There could only be one reason why he had been left like this: He was bait, and the house was a trap.

They must even now be rushing to this place. For they had undoubtedly bugged the entire building. God only knew, maybe there were even cameras. They could make cameras the size of a fingertip, microphones no bigger than specs of dust. Sarah used such things in the club’s security system.

“We have to leave here,” she said.

“But I — where?”

She stood up. “Is there any fuel?”

“What sort of fuel?”

“To make a fire! Chemicals! Petrol!”

He gestured toward some steel drums.

She went to them, ripped off the soft metal cover. It was some sort of chemical, but it didn’t smell flammable. Another was the same stuff.

But a third stank gloriously of the esters of earth-oil. It had been sent through their great retorts until it was a volatile. “This makes the auto go,” she said.

“I know what petrol is.”

She threw the barrel into the middle of the room. “Is the hidden route the

same?” Every Keep had one, usually more than one. There were escapes for fire, escapes for attack, escapes for everything.

“The same.”

The petrol had finished gushing out, and now stood in a puddle on the floor. Miriam took the empty drum and rolled it back and forth over the remnant until it was nothing but a sack of powdered bone. Then she tossed it into the petrol, making sure that it was thoroughly soaked.

At that moment, she heard a sound, the creak of pressure being applied against the door. She took Martin’s shoulders, leaned against his ear. “They’re just outside,” she said. “About to burst in the door and all the windows at once.”

His lips twisted back in an ugly rictus. He really, really despised them, this hunted creature. Taking his still ice-cold hand, she led him to the far wall, where once the waste from the tannery had poured into the little river Bievre, long since covered over. She counted one, two, three stones up from the floor. Now she pressed the one that was under her hand.

A brutal shaft of sunlight shattered the darkness. The doorway was a white blaze filled with darting shadows. Martin screamed, the shuddering ululation of a Keeper in absolute fury. So rarely had she heard it that Miriam screamed, too, throwing back her head and howling to the rafters.

“Essence!”

The human cry stopped her. They came out across the great room. They had nets, nets and guns. She felt tears of anger streaming down her cheeks. She was almost immobilized, such was her rage at being threatened by them. She did not let herself succumb to these feelings, though. No, she must not. Instead, she drew a book of matches from her pocket.

“Madame, si’l vous plaît!”

Lady, please, indeed! She struck one and lit the others and threw the whole flaming book. Instantly, fire roared up everywhere. The men began to shriek.

They leaped and jerked in the flames, as her mother had leaped and twisted in her pyre.

Miriam pressed the stone that would open their route into the sewers of Paris.

Nothing happened.

SEVEN

Deathtrap

Paul called Becky's cell phone for the fifth time in an hour. Her recording came back for the fifth time in an hour. He'd already requested that Communications in Langley track both officers, but their cell phones were off or the signals were blocked, so the GPS system could not find them. Just for the hell of it, he tried Charlie again, also. Same shit.

It was now ten A.M. By his estimation they were two hours overdue, maybe more. He thrust another stick of gum in his mouth and chomped on it. Thank God he hated French cigarettes.

The cell phone rang. He grabbed for it. "Ward here."

"Paul, this is Justin."

What in hell was Justin Turk calling him for now? It was five A.M. in Virginia. "Yeah?"

"I'm getting back to you."

"Look, man, I gotta have more support personnel."

"Shit."

"One of the damn creatures escaped from my net. I've followed it to Paris and lost it. I need more people and more equipment real fast."

"How fast is real fast?"

"Yesterday would've been good. I need at least five more field ops."

“I can’t just put people in this thing. You know the kind of problems we’re having. The discussions.”

“I’m losing a vampire. One that *travels*, for Chrissakes!”

“It takes weeks to clear people for you. A whole new background check, all kinds of shit. Even when I don’t have the director on my ass. Which I obviously do.”

“At least authorize the people I’ve still got in Kuala to follow me.”

“That’s a no-go.”

“Come on, man, help me, here.”

“This whole operation is under study. Until I have fresh orders, you’re all frozen in place.”

That sure was shitty news. “I need those people, man. This thing is going south fast.”

“I’ll work on it.”

“Don’t sound so convincing.”

The conversation ended there, with muttered good-byes. Justin was a sort of a friend. That is to say, he’d be there for Paul as long as Paul wasn’t a liability.

One thing was quite clear: There would be no new people, not with international human rights questions beginning to hang over the operation.

He saw somebody getting dropped down a shaft, and that somebody was him.

He hammered Becky’s number into his cell phone, then Charlie’s. Same results as before. “I’m in trouble,” he muttered to himself.

Still, it was possible that the kids were okay. He just wished that they’d

followed procedure with this break-in. There would be a hell of a stink if the French found out that CIA personnel had invaded the records office of their security service. He'd be recalled, of course. He'd have to explain what he was doing in France, and why he'd gotten here by commandeering an Air Force general's private jet.

He sat and stared up at the blank, sunlit wall of the office tower and listened to the water drip in the sink. He looked at his watch. "Ten-fifty," he muttered to himself. "Damn and *god* damn."

And he decided to use the time well. A situation like this could burst into flames at any second. He was as prepared as he could be for the Sûreté and the White House. What he needed to do was to get ready for the really hard ones — the vampires. And there was actually something he could do right now, something damn useful.

Becky had mentioned two areas of Paris: the Ninth and Thirteenth Arrondissements. He opened his laptop and went to the CIA's database. The site didn't offer any magical insights into the workings of the world, just some very good information and lots of detail. You could find practically anybody here, and at his level of clearance, he could input requests for Echelon searches on keywords of concern to any operation approved for the system. Echelon would then look for those keywords amid the billions of phone conversations, e-mails, radio transmissions, and faxes that it monitored.

Problem was, you had to be damn specific to get anything useful. What words might the traveler use on the telephone — what special, unique words? He didn't know who she might call or where she might go, or even if Paris was her final destination.

The CIA database also had a wealth of maps, better ones than could be bought in any store, including maps of Paris that had been drawn by the German military during World War II. Originally intended to be used in house-to-house warfare, they included detailed floor plans and plans of the sewer system that offered information down to which tunnels and pipes were big enough to admit a man.

The Germans had done this for most of the large cities in Europe. Many of the maps were outmoded, of course, and many like Paul had knowledge that the disastrous bombing of the Chinese embassy during the Kosovo conflict in 1999 had been caused by reliance on an improperly updated Wehrmacht street plan of Belgrade. Since then, all maps in the CIA database been clearly marked with the last year of update.

He saw that the Ninth Arrondissement had not been touched since 1944. The map legends and street names were still in German, which wasn't very reassuring. By contrast, the Thirteenth had been revised by the French in 1998, and there were annotations that it had been updated yearly since.

He settled down to stare at the screen. He had to memorize every street, every sewer pipe, every building plan.

The vampire would know its world down to the tiniest corner. It would be able to pick every lock, use every shadow, climb all the walls and cross all the roofs. It would use the sewer system like a railroad. It would be able to navigate the ductwork, the window ledges, the eaves.

Paul hadn't believed how smart and capable the vampire was, at least not at first. He hadn't believed it when he first saw one staring back at him with dark, still eyes, looking small and helpless. There had been a slight smile on its face, a drifting little smile that communicated a sort of casual amusement. Jack Dodge said, "Hey," and stepped toward it — and a knife shot out and sliced Jack's head from his body like a blossom from a stem.

Paul could still hear the sounds: the rip of Jack's skin, the crackle of his bones, then the *shuss* of the fountain of blood that pumped out of the stump.

Those sounds came to Paul in his sleep, in the whine of the jets he took through the night, in the whispering of the wind in the ancient cities where he worked.

The creatures drifted through the cracks and corners of their world, leading him on an infinitely careful chase. They played a kind of chess with him, appearing here and there, slipping away, only to reappear somewhere else.

His pursuit of them had taught him how brilliant they were. They always stayed ahead of him. His only useful weapons were surprise and technology. Brilliance and speed were their tools, but they had no technology. They had been neatly outclassed by a computer database and infrared sight.

The death of the vampire was appalling. It haunted Paul, and he knew it haunted his people. The vampire fought harder for its life than it was possible for a human being to imagine. They hid like rats, because their lives were just so damn precious to them. When you saw their death struggles, you could almost, at moments, sympathize. The vampire died hard. “Real hard,” he said aloud.

He sat staring at the map of the Thirteenth Arrondissement’s sewer system. There had been structural changes made as recently as a year ago. He tracked his finger along a tunnel that had been blocked up. Probably something to do with containing old waste from the tanneries and dye factories that used to be in the area.

No doubt that was why this map was so carefully kept up. The French had a problem with contaminated water and soils in the area, and they were cleaning it up.

The hotel phone rang. He grabbed it instantly.

“Two of your people were caught in the Department of Records of the Prefecture of Police at six-thirty this morning.” It was Sam Mazur at the embassy.

“Oh, Christ.”

“The French had them on video from the second they climbed down into the damn room, Paul! Come on, this is amateur night, here!”

“Are they being —”

“They’re being released under diplomatic immunity. But the frogs are gonna take ’em straight to the airport and put ’em on the first plane to Washington. They’re totally, completely, and thoroughly blown. I’ll tell you

another thing — the reason that they got to stay so long in that very secure facility was so that the Sûreté could record every damn keystroke they made as they hacked their way into the database. They know how they did it, what they found — everything.”

“I’m on my way.”

He didn’t know the Métro well, but he did know that it was the fastest way around Paris in midday traffic. He got in the train at Montparnasse. It moved off at what seemed to him to be a maddeningly leisurely pace. His mind clicked methodically from possibility to possibility as he tried to devise a new way of saving Becky and Charlie and his whole operation.

In less than fifteen minutes he was trotting up the steps into the Place de la Concorde.

The American embassy was beautiful and very well guarded. It was also quiet, unlike many of its counterparts around the world. The crowds of visa seekers and unhappy citizens reporting lost passports were at the consulate a few blocks away. His own diplomatic passport got him straight past the French guards and the marines.

He entered through a metal detector, declaring and checking the gun that his false Interpol ID allowed him to carry. Well, *false* was maybe too strong a word. The Interpol papers his team used were the result of an accommodation between the CIA and the international police agency.

Sam’s office was halfway down a wide corridor that looked as if it belonged in a palace. As indeed, it did. This building had been one before it became the U.S. embassy. He went in, and the atmosphere changed at once. Here there were computer screens and filing cabinets and a dropped ceiling. The outer office blazed with fluorescent light.

“I’m Paul Ward,” he said to a receptionist who, to his surprise, turned out to be French. What a local national was doing working in a clearance-required job he did not know. Times had changed.

Sam sat at a steel desk. His venetian blinds were firmly shut on what was

probably a view of an air shaft. The rumble of air-conditioning equipment shook the floor, but this office, itself, was not air-conditioned. It was just near the equipment.

“Paul, you old asshole, I thought you’d be arrested on your way here.”

“What about my people?”

“Business class on Air France. Not too bad.”

Until they reached Langley. This was not over, no way, not for any of them. It was a major screwup, and it was going to take a lot of time to fix it. If that was even possible. The White House had started asking its damn questions at just the wrong time.

“Are they in the air yet?”

“They’re being signed out of the hoosegow as we speak. The Frenchies don’t like people getting into their secure areas, *especially* not us.”

“Sam, you’re gonna hate me for this. But you gotta find a way to keep my people in country. I need them urgently, right now.”

He shook his head. “It’s over. So over.”

“Call in favors. Do anything.”

“Nothin’ I can do. They’re toast.”

“Then I need an immediate appointment with the ambassador.”

Sam blinked. “You’re kidding. You’d bring the politicians in on something like this? A jerk like you couldn’t possibly have a congressional sugar daddy.”

Paul tried using what he hoped might be a trump card. “It’s terrorism, Sam. I’m in the middle of a heavy operation that involves France only because we happened to follow an international terrorist onto French soil. If we lose this woman, innocent people are gonna die.”

Sam picked up the phone. “You don’t need the ambassador.” He spoke in rapid-fire French. Paul couldn’t follow it precisely, but he could tell that he was going up the ladder to somebody very senior somewhere, and this senior individual was being asked for urgent and immediate intervention.

Sam hung up. “The chief of the Division of Internal Security of the Sûreté will see us in ten minutes.”

This time they had an embassy Citroën with a driver, so it was a lot easier to get around. “You’re out there in the middle of nowhere without any support staff, the three of you,” Sam said. “Bound to be a problem, an operation that’s being run that far outside of guidelines, that thinly staffed.”

“We’re effective. That’s the bottom line.”

“I don’t want to intrude, Paul. But I gotta tell you, you look like hell. In fact, I’d give road kill a better rating. Whatever it is you’re doing that you’re so effective at, it’s taking you apart.”

He and Sam had learned to strangle people with piano wire and plant microphones under the skin of pet cats together. They’d been in Cambodia together, where none of their training applied and nothing they did worked. They had fought the silent war together when it really was a war.

“It’s just another shitty op, my friend. You look great, by the by. Tennised, golfed, and swum.”

“Also pokered every Tuesday night with the Brits. It’s a good life here, as long as you don’t get yourself in the kind of trouble your two goons are in.”

If only the French customs agents hadn’t made such a mess of things at de Gaulle. If only he hadn’t had to screen the operation through Interpol. The way he saw it, they should have disabled the creature with a shot as soon as it reached customs, then dropped it in a vat of sulfuric acid, or cremated it. Instead, they took it to an airport brig. It escaped before they even got it in the cell. Of course it did.

“I wish I could tell you what it is I’m doing,” Paul said. “It’d be a lot easier

if every damn security officer and cop on the planet knew. But there would be huge problems. It'd be the most unpredictable goddamn thing you could imagine."

"Well, that explains that. You gonna get yourself wasted, old buddy, on this thing. Your politics are all used up, way I hear it."

They pulled up in front of the long, impressively French Victorian building that housed the Sûreté. Paul expected a lot of bureaucracy and a long wait, but they were soon in a very quiet, very ornate office facing an extremely fastidious midget.

"I am Colonel Bocage," he said.

"Where's Henri-Georges?" Sam asked.

"You will interview with me."

Paul said in French, "*J'voudrais mon peuple, monsieur. Tout de suite.*"

Colonel Bocage laughed. "Mr. Mazur, this is the man in charge, that you promised us to meet?"

Sam nodded. "I made that promise to Henri-Georges Bordelon."

"And he transmitted it to me." "I need my people," Paul said. "We're saving lives." "You speak French. You should think in French. It's more civilized . . ." "I can't think in French."

". . . because we have so many ways of expressing concepts of good and evil." He smiled again, and Paul thought he looked, for a moment, like a very hard man. "Mr. Mazur, could you step out for a moment? I am sorry."

This wasn't the usual drill when you went to beg to keep your spies in place. But Paul was in no position to ask what was going on. When Sam had left, the colonel went to his window, which looked out over a lovely park. There was a difference between being a high official in the Sûreté and a lowly intelligence officer like Sam.

Colonel Bocage closed a manila folder he'd been appearing to review. It was only a pose, a tension builder. Paul had done it himself a thousand times, to a thousand nervous supplicants in ten different countries. "So," the colonel said at last, "you are here investigating *les sauvages*. Tell me, what do you Americans call them?"

Paul Ward had not had the sensation of his heart skipping a beat since the moment he had looked upon his father's remains. No matter how violent or how dangerous his situation, he always remained icy calm . . . until this second. His heart was skipping a whole lot of beats. He parted his lips, but nothing came out.

The colonel raised an eyebrow and with it one corner of his mouth. "I am your counterpart," he said, "your French counterpart."

Paul wiped his face clean of expression. Tell him nothing.

"You are surprised, I see," Colonel Bocage said. "Genuinely surprised. Tell me, how long have the Americans been working on this?"

Paul reminded himself never to play poker with Colonel Bocage. "A few years," he said dryly.

"My friend, we have been struggling with this problem for fifty years."

"We cleared Asia."

"Cleared?"

"We killed them, all of them."

"Except for Mrs. Tallman."

"Except for her."

"*Elle est une sauvage, aussi?*"

"You call them savages?"

“To keep the record clean. We know what they are. But you come from Asia, where we know you have been working very hard. Why not start in America, where the lives are more important to you?”

“Our first solid lead was in Tokyo.”

At that moment, Charlie and Becky were brought in.

“Ah,” Colonel Bocage said, “your colleagues. Now, please, we shall all sit together.”

“You guys okay?”

“Fine,” Becky said. She looked wonderful when she was angry — her eyes full of sparks, her cheeks flushed, her lips set in a line that was at once grim and somehow suggestive.

Beside her, Charlie played with the damn cigarette machine. His style under this kind of pressure was sullen defiance.

There was a silence. Paul was trying to remember if he had ever felt quite this embarrassed and uncomfortable before. He decided that the answer was no.

“This matter has the very highest level of secrecy attached to it in France,” Bocage said. “Government does not care to inform the population of such matters.” He paused. “You have concluded the same.”

“All governments that we’ve been to have concluded the same.”

“Given that we cannot protect our people, there seems little choice but to hide this until matters are resolved.”

Bocage rested his eyes on Becky, so frankly that she looked away. Paul was fascinated. Becky was the very essence of self-possession, and Becky did not look away.

“You obtained what you needed, I trust,” he said to her.

“Yes.”

He strolled over to his desk. “We used a computer spying program to watch your keystrokes,” he said, his voice rippling with self-satisfaction. There were few things more pleasant in the life of an intelligence agent than getting the drop on a colleague from a friendly country. Paul knew, he’d done it. “If you’d like a copy of your work —” He held a file folder toward Becky and Charlie. “In the interest of friendly cooperation.”

“It’d be friendlier,” Paul said, “if you shared something with us that we didn’t already have.”

“With pleasure, Mr. Ward,” he said. Then his mouth snapped closed, as if he had caught himself in a moment of indiscretion.

Paul saw that the man’s carefully relaxed appearance was concealing a state of extraordinary emotional tension. Paul’s experience as a wartime interrogator told him that this man was about to address something that he considered extremely terrible.

“Go ahead, Colonel,” Charlie said, no doubt reading the same signs.

“We have had one of these creatures under observation in a house in —”

“Let us tell you that,” Becky said. “Thirteenth Arrondissement. Rue des Gobelins.”

“Very good. Do you know which house? Or exactly what has happened there?” The colonel was sweating now.

“Tell us,” Paul said. He decided that the colonel was a man who habitually exploded in the face of his own staff, but in this situation had to contain the energy.

“We have had *une sauvage* trapped in a house in the Rue des Gobelins for over a year. It hasn’t eaten for twelve months, but it still lives.”

“So why not go in? If you got the thing trapped, kill it.”

“We were hoping that it would attract some response from its peers — curiosity, compassion, something that would draw them to it. But it did not, and now — well, it’s too late.”

Something had gone terribly wrong, which explained the ominous lowering of the colonel’s voice.

“What’s the trouble, Colonel?”

“The house is at this moment burning to the ground. In it, there are two vampires that we know of.” He stopped again. He rubbed his cheek, as if hunting for stubble. “There are six of my own people.”

“God save them,” Paul said. He knew, now, why the map of the Thirteenth Arrondissement was so up-to-date, and also why the sewer system had been altered. They had cut off access from the vampire’s lair. Exactly the approach Paul would have taken.

“But I do have some good news for you. This ‘Mrs. Tallman’ of yours was in the house.”

“That’s goddamn good news, Colonel!” Maybe she hadn’t had time to spread her warning. Maybe now she would never have time. “Do you know how long she’s been there?”

“She appeared yesterday afternoon at about six. That we know.”

“Yesterday afternoon?”

He nodded. “The taxi brought her from a hotel.”

“It’s possible that she didn’t reach any of the others.”

“It is. But they are aware that something is wrong, the Paris vampires.”

Paul had assumed that there would be resistance if they realized they were under attack.

“Only very recently,” the colonel continued, “have we been able to deal

with them. Only since we understood the difficulties involved in — the difficulties with the blood —”

“How do you kill ’em?”

“We shoot them to incapacitate them with a gun that has been especially designed for the purpose, then we burn them to ash.”

“That’ll work.”

He bared his teeth, sucked in air with a hiss. Paul thought, *This is one tough bastard. I like this guy.* Bocage stuck out his jaw. “We made many kills over the years. But the numbers, they still went up. Slowly, but always *up!* My God!”

“It’s been hard for us, too.”

“We would shoot them in the chest, then bury them. They would come out, but carefully, so we would not notice the disturbance to the grave. We thought we were eradicating them, but we were accomplishing nothing. Eventually, even we could see that the pattern of killing went on. But we could not track it because they come up out of mines under the city. All sorts of places. No pattern, you see.”

“What about the Ninth and the Thirteenth,” Becky asked.

“We eventually tracked one of the creatures back to the Thirteenth. To Nineteen Rue des Gobelins, to be precise. The only one in Paris living above-ground. The rest of them — dear God, those mines are a horrible place.” He fell silent for a moment. “We have a seventy percent casualty rate down there.”

Paul said nothing. Of the seven people who had started with him, he’d lost four. He and Justin had thought over fifty percent was monstrous.

The telephone rang. Colonel Bocage went around his desk and answered it. He spoke in French at some length, then put it down abruptly. He stood, silent. Paul knew what had happened without even asking.

“Another casualty report. The whole team that entered Nineteen Rue Gobelins was lost. Six men.”

“Shit!” Charlie said.

In the distance, a church bell sounded.

“There is good news. Of one *sauvage*, bones were found. They are being taken out to be burned.”

“And the other one?”

“Mrs. Tallman was reduced to ash.”

“Then we’re done,” Becky said. “Back home to find out if my fiancé remembers my name.”

“We are going to attempt to isolate and sterilize the mines,” Bocage said with that carefully practiced mildness of his. “We’re short six essential personnel. It’ll take us months to find and train replacements.” He raised his eyebrows. “I think that our two countries have some secrets to share.”

Langley would be as nervous about this as an old maiden aunt about a slumber party. There were protocols to create, careful integration procedures so that the secrecy laws of both countries could be followed during the operation. He ought to go back and make a full report up supervisory channels. On the other hand, he could just stuff the whole damn process straight up Langley’s ass, and do it without telling them.

“May I take it that you’re on board,” Colonel Bocage asked.

He didn’t even need to look at Becky and Charlie. Their answer would be the same as his. “You bet.”

EIGHT

Flicker of Fire

If she did not have blood immediately — absolutely fresh blood — she would die. Where she lay, trapped, helpless, and in agony, there could be no blood. Here in this dank place, with pain radiating through her body as if an army with burning coals for heels were marching up and down her, Miriam saw that she was coming to the final edge of life.

She had ended up here for one reason only: She had been surprised by the disaster in Chiang Mai and running like a desperate rat ever since. No planning, no forethought, simply a wild race across the world.

The humans had blocked the escape tunnel with concrete and reinforced it with bars of iron. She'd taken to the stairs, running up to the top of the house, to the ancient rooms where Lamia had lived. The old brocades still hung on the walls, rotting and falling though they were. And there was the bed she had used, where Miriam had cuddled with her, and where they had so happily shared kills. But the flames had come, marching like soldiers, and Miriam had been forced to the roof. She'd looked from the edges of the house; the streets had been filled with dozens of police and firemen. She could not climb down the wall into that, not in broad daylight. She could not jump to another building, not quite. She'd found a way, though. She always found a way. She had climbed down inside the chimney, down into the hearths in the basement, below the level of the fire. As she crawled out, covered with ash, the floor above had begun to cave in. Fire had swept over her, fire and the agony of fire.

There had been a tiny space at the back of the fireplace, where they had pushed the ashes. She'd pulled bricks out and made her way into a brick pipe not more than eighteen inches in diameter, forcing her body into the space until her joints ground.

She lay with her eyes closed, willing herself not to cry out with the agony of it. If she opened her eyes, all she saw was wet, moldering brick a few bare inches above her face. The whole time she was struggling through the crack, she'd heard Martin screaming and screaming. The only thing the food she'd brought him had done was give him enough energy to die slowly.

They were gaining control over the fire, and above her she could now hear human voices. Water cascaded down.

She heard a sound, very distinct, and very different from the water, or the popping of Martin's hot bones. This sound she heard was breathing — *snick snick, snick snick* — quick breathing, very light.

A rat was coming along the tunnel she was in, interested, no doubt, in the scent of raw, bleeding flesh. Or perhaps it was a devotee of cooked food. A French rat might be expected to be a sophisticate.

This rat represented a chance — a small one, admittedly, but its presence changed the odds from nonexistent to . . . well, a little bit better than nothing.

Here, little one, come here, little fruit. "The closer they are genetically to man, the better they are for you. The rats, the apes, the cows, all may be consumed to benefit." So had said the Master Tutomon, her childhood tutor, with his lessons in geometry and languages and survival.

The rat hesitated. She could not see it, but the sound of its breathing and the patter of its feet were clear. It was on her left side, just parallel with her foot. To encourage it to come closer to her hand, she began to wriggle her fingers.

She needed to open her eyes, and she prepared herself as best she could. The space might be entirely dark by now, and that would be better. The light was much less, but she saw the bricks, so close that they were blurred to her vision. An involuntary gasp came out of her. The rat scuttled away.

She raised her head until it was pressed against the top of the pipe, then looked along her arm. The creature came back. She could just see its interested little face as it went *snick-snick, snick-snick* against her fingertips.

She stretched her arm, opening her fingers, letting the rat venture closer to the center of the trap. But it came no closer.

The indifferent trickle of water that had been slipping around her body was becoming a steady stream. If this pipe backed up, they would notice. They would send a crew down to unblock it. They would drag her out, even if it tore her to pieces. There would be no mercy. There was never any mercy; that had become quite apparent.

Now, the rat was returning. The rat, in fact, was very close to her fingers. Her exquisite nerves communicated the sensation as it sniffed their tips. Finally, it decided to stop sniffing and try a bite of the cool, still flesh that had drawn its curiosity. Instantly, it was in Miriam's hand. It was wriggling and screaming its rat screams — *ree-ree-ree*. She sucked in her breath and moved her arm, drawing the creature closer to her mouth. She had to drag it against her naked breast, and as she did its needlelike teeth slashed the pale skin.

Then the creature was at her mouth. She bit off the shrieking head and drank the body dry, crumbling the remains, which were no more substantial than a little leaf.

The blood of the rat tasted surprisingly good. She could feel it spilling through her. It was going to be useful. But would it be enough for the task that lay ahead?

To continue the motion that her exhaustion had stopped, she had to work her arms over her head and press hard against the edges with her feet. In time, her bones would compress a little more, and she would move a few inches. However, if the pipe got any more narrow, she could be trapped.

Now that she was moving again, the water was sluicing around her, bringing with it bits of spent coal and ash. She pushed, felt more pressure, waited. Nothing.

If she was trapped — her heart began going faster. Harder she pushed, harder and harder. Still nothing. She felt her tongue swelling from the effort. Her bones ground and creaked. Her tongue began to push past the rows of

cartilage that filled her mouth, that provided the seal when she sucked blood.

Still nothing, nothing, *nothing!* And then — worse — louder voices. Yes, the humans were in the basement, speaking about the slowness of the drain. They must unclog it, of course. They would find within it this strange, distorted being that would slowly return to its previous form, and they would know another secret of the Keepers, that vampires' bones that were not brittle like their own, but pliant.

How would they kill her? Burn her until she was ash, as they had done to her mother? Hammer a stake into her heart until her blood stopped, then let her die over however long it took in a coffin — years, or even whole cycles of years? Or explode her head and dissolve her in acid?

There was a sound, and immediately a dagger of pain shot straight up her spine. The next instant, she slid along the pipe a substantial distance. She could have howled with the sheer joy of it, the wonderful sensation of release from the terrible compression.

The water she had been stopping came behind her, a gushing torrent that swept her down a wider sluiceway. Where she was now, there was considerably more light. It was coming from slits near the ceiling, that appeared at regular intervals. The space was high enough to stand up in, and she could peer through these slits.

She rose to a sitting position. She was exhausted. A rat was not worth much to her body, and she soon must feed again. She needed a human being.

She drew herself up and up, fighting the great blasts of pain from her tormented body. Finally, she was crouching. To see out, she would have to straighten herself, and she could not until her bones had spread again. She forced herself to try, to hasten the process as much as she could. Agony ran up and down her spine, causing her toes to curl and her lips to twist back. She hissed with it, she stifled the screams that tried to burst out of her throat.

Minutes passed. The water, which had been gushing past her knees, subsided to a milder flow. Its acrid stench was replaced by a surprising odor — the scent of a fresh spring. Her kind needed a lot of water and loved fresh

water. She was smelling a clean, limestone spring beneath the streets of Paris, in the very sewer. She turned herself toward it and began slowly placing one foot in front of another, walking toward the source. Now she could see that the arched space widened. To her left and right there were muddy banks. In the water, there swam tiny fish, sweeping along before her like little schools of pale starlight.

This wonderful, entirely unexpected place must be the ancient River Bièvre. The rumbling overhead was a street. And indeed, when she finally managed to peer out one of the slits, she saw passing tires. As she moved along, the water became better and better. No sewage here at all, just the stream still dancing in its ancient bed of stones.

She began to look for a spring. There was certainly one nearby. She could smell its wonderful, stony freshness. Ten steps along, twenty, and she found it, its water bubbling cheerfully out of the ground. Above it, somebody in the long-ago had made a little grotto and set a cross, which now stood encrusted with rust. She lay herself down in the water and let it flow over her, let it kiss her wounds with its clean coldness.

The pain grew somewhat less. The cold was helping to heal the burns, the clean water to reduce the need of her blood to ward off infection. If the process was to speed up to a normal rate, though, she had to have food.

She lay in the pouring spring, twisting and turning slowly, allowing the water to clean every part of her, to sweep away the ashen skin and the burned flesh, and the debris that had collected in the wounds. The thick stink of it all washed away with it, leaving behind only the smell of the water and the smell of her.

Finally, when those two odors had not changed for a long time, she rose from the stream. She began moving along the riverbank, a naked, burned creature, svelte and, she supposed, pale. She was looking for a manhole, some means of getting up into the city again, to the food supply that swarmed in its streets.

What she found instead was a door. It was steel and set high up in the wall, at the top of a series of iron rungs. The door was half the normal height and

had a lever rather than a handle. She climbed the rungs, pulled the lever, which dropped down with a thud. She drew the door open and found herself looking into a dark room full of humming machinery.

She climbed into the room. In contrast with the wet cold that had surrounded her for hours, it was warm and dry. It felt fiercely hot, although she knew that this was only the effect of the sudden change.

Her nostrils had been seared, but her sense of smell seemed unimpaired. She smelled machine oil, the fumes of burning, and the scent of lots of electricity. This was a furnace room. She knew boilers and furnaces well. She had special uses for them. This one reminded her of the Ehler that she had in her house, a good, hot system with an ample firebox.

Beyond the furnace, she saw stairs. She mounted them, stopping at the top to listen and catch her breath. She laid her ear against the door that was there. On the other side, she heard the tap of footsteps. They moved slowly about, *tip-tap, tip-tap*, pausing here and there, then moving on. Suddenly a voice began to speak, using English. It spoke about the manufacture of tapestries.

This work had been going on when she was last here. Across the street from her mother's house there had been a manufactory of tapestry. So it was still in operation, but there were also observers now, people from the English-speaking world being taken on tours of the works.

She turned the handle of the door. Locked. This was of little consequence. They had not learned the art of the lock, the humans. Shaking it a few times, she dislodged the tumblers. She knew exactly what she sought: a female creature of about her own size, preferably alone.

The tour group consisted of about twenty people being led about among the tapestries, which hung on large looms. She stepped out onto the gloomy area before the door, then slipped behind the nearest loom. On the other side, the weaver worked, stepping on her treadle and sliding thread through her beater.

Beneath the smock, the girl wore dark clothing of some sort; Miriam could not see exactly what it was. The casual dress of the modern age. She peered

at the creature. It was intent on its work. She listened to the talk of the guide. The tourists drifted closer. In another moment, they would see this person, observe her working at her loom.

Miriam stepped into the girl's view. She didn't notice, such was her concentration. Miriam moved closer. Now, the girl stopped working and glanced her way, then looked harder. Her mouth dropped open. She looked the naked apparition up and down. An expression of pity crossed her face, mixing with horror as she realized that the woman she was seeing was severely burned.

Miriam stepped toward her. She swayed as if falling, causing the girl to instinctively move forward to help her. Miriam enclosed her in her arms and drew her behind the loom, then opened her mouth against the neck and pulled the fluids in fairly easily, requiring two great gulps to finish the process.

Her whole flesh seemed to leap with joy; it was as if she were going to fly up to the sky. She fought against crying out, such was the pleasure. Her body from the top of her head to the tips of her toes filled with an electric tickling as her newly refreshed blood raced to repair her wounds.

The shuddering, tickling sensations were so overwhelming that she was dropped like a stone to her knees. She pitched forward, gasping, her body deliciously racked with a sensation very like climax. Again it came, again and again, and the voices came closer, and the tip-tapping of the shoes.

She grabbed the remnant, invisible in its heap of clothes, and pulled it behind the loom. As she untangled the dry, emaciated remains from the clothing, she heard a ripple of laughter. The tour guide had said something that amused her audience. The click of other looms went on. Quickly, quickly, Miriam put the clothes on — black jeans, a black turtle-neck, shoes that fit her, unfortunately, quite badly. Then the blue smock. No hat, and that was not good because her hair would take time to regrow. She needed a wig, but that could not be had here. She stood up.

“Noelle?”

It was the guide, curious about why she was not at her loom. They would

know each other perfectly, of course.

“Noelle, what are you doing? Why are you back there?”

She could not speak. She had no idea what Noelle’s voice sounded like. If the woman came around the loom, she would see something impossible — a skeleton covered with skin, and standing over it, a hairless and eyebrowless creature, its skin flushed bright pink. The burns were probably still very much in evidence as well, making her the stars knew only how grotesque. She picked up the remnant and crushed it. The cracking, splintering sounds were appalling.

“Noelle!”

“I’m fixing it!”

“Who is that?”

“It’s me, please.”

The guide began her spiel again, but her uneasy tone told Miriam that she was not satisfied with what she had heard, just unable to understand what was going on. She’d send a guard around in a moment, almost certainly.

Staying behind the looms, trying to avoid being glimpsed by the workers or the tour group, she went quickly back to the door. She slipped through and down into the basement. She went to the furnace and opened the grate, stuffing the remnant inside. Never again would she be so foolish as to leave one of these little calling cards behind. In this new world of aggressive, smart human beings, one more mistake like that would be her last.

She looked around for a doorway to the outside, saw one marked *Sortie*, with a red light above it. She went out, finding herself in an alleyway. In one direction, there was a blank wall, in the other, an entrance into a rather quiet street. It was early evening now, and the shadows were growing long.

She immediately noticed a curious flickering effect against the walls and roofs of the street ahead. Each time the flickering got brighter, there would be

an accompanying roar.

She moved forward cautiously, knowing that she had to go out into that street in order to escape. The closer she got to the opening of the alley, the brighter the flickering became, the louder the roaring. Now she could also hear crackling and smell a smell of burning petrol. The flicker-ing reflected against her black clothing. She held out her hands, looking down at them, at the orange light dancing on them. Then she stepped forward and immediately looked to the left, toward the source of the light.

The first thing she saw was the gutted ruin of her mother's house. The Castle of the White Queen was streaked with soot, its every window black and dark, its roof collapsed into the shell of the building.

Before it there were dozens of police and fire vehicles and milling gendarmes. The light was not coming from their vehicles, though, it was coming from a bonfire in the middle of the street, which was being fed by men with flamethrowers. At the mouth of the Rue des Gobelins a high barrier had been erected. No member of the public could see over it. She did not think that she could easily get around it. In fact, going out into the street would cause an immediate reaction, given all the police and the care with which they were preventing sight of this place.

In the center of the fire, she saw black bones and bones glowing red. It was Martin, of course. Obviously, the humans knew enough about the Keepers to take extreme care that they were really dead. A gendarme glanced at her, made a clear gesture: *stop there, come no closer*. His glance lingered for a moment, then he turned away.

The ring of people around the bones were different from the gendarmes. They were dressed casually; they looked brutal. Nearer, stood a small knot of others whom she took to be the supervisors. These people around the fire, making sure that the very bones of their quarry were reduced to ash, were the killers of the Keepers.

It was possible, if she listened intently, to make out snatches of conversation — a gendarme muttering about overtime, one of the murderers saying something about the temperature of the fire. Then the voice of a tall

supervisor boomed out. “Fine ash,” it said, “then hose down the street.” That was to be the fate of her kind, then, to be reduced to ash and sent down the sewer.

Silence fell. More orders were given and one of the *pompes* was started up. Soon, water was pouring from its hoses and sluicing along the street. She watched it come toward her feet, watched as it reached the drain. It carried floating bits of burned material and chips of bone. A button came tumbling and bobbing along, and she saw that it was her own button, from the suit she’d had to leave behind in order to squeeze down the pipe that had saved her.

“Excusez-moi, mademoiselle.”

One of the gendarmes was coming toward her. He smiled slightly, then took her arm, but quite gently. “I will conduct you out.” He drew her forward. He blinked, seeing her bald head.

“What has happened?” she asked, trying to deflect his concern.

“Vagrants set fire to the White Palace. There were deaths.”

“Why were they burning the bodies?”

He shook his head. “It’s what the authorities said. Who knows why.”

She let the gendarme conduct her along. His body was loose, his breathing soft, his expression indifferent. Obviously he knew nothing of the Keepers and only assumed that she was a rather unusual looking woman. Her eyes were on the men who knew.

Closer she came to them, marching beside her policeman. They were engaged in intent conversation. She passed just behind the two supervisors. Then she saw one, a female, suddenly turn and face her. The creature was beautiful, with swaying blond hair. But its eyes, almost black, appeared as hard as chips of obsidian. “Excuse me,” it said in American-accented English.

As instinct prepared Miriam to fight, her body became tight beneath the

restricting clothes. There were still many burned and injured areas, especially in her limbs, and the pain tormented her like the persistent hacking of slow, dull blades.

The creature followed her a few steps. "*Pardonnez-moi,*" it said, now in French. This creature was concerned and it was curious. It was not sure, though, of what to do. So it could not be certain of what she was.

Then the gendarme was letting her out onto the street. He asked her if she felt well enough to keep on. Instead of answering, she slipped into and quickly through the sparse crowd of onlookers. She did not look back, did not want to delay another moment her escape from the deathtrap.

Now that she had fed, her body wanted to sleep. She knew that it would be the deep, deep sleep of her kind, and that she had to find a place in which to lie safely for the helpless hours it would bring. But she could not afford it. She had an urgent mission to perform. The French Keepers must be warned, their Book of Names protected.

She walked quickly along the busy Avenue des Gobelins. She would go to a hotel somewhere, using the credit cards in this woman's pocketbook. Or no, there was a better idea. She would go to the woman's flat. It was a risk, of course, but she had the keys and the driving license with the address.

A little farther down the street, she saw a taxi at a stand. She hailed it with the same sort of casual gesture she had seen others using. She would also update her language as best she could. Any fool would remember a passenger who spoke like Voltaire.

As she got into the taxi, she opened the pocketbook. Noelle Halff, 13 Rue Léon Maurice de Nordmann. "Treize Rue L. M. Nordmann," she muttered, slurring her words like a modern Parisian.

The driver made a strange sort of a face, then drove on. He rounded the corner into Boulevard Arago, and then they were there. It had been idiotic to take a taxi. The place was barely a quarter of a mile away. "I injured my foot," she said as he stopped in front of a lovely artist's atelier.

“Too bad,” he responded as he took her money. She seemed to have done perfectly well. He hadn’t noticed anything about her. Perhaps baldness was not unknown among women in Paris. Some *outré* fashion, perhaps.

She went through the bag, looking for keys, soon finding a set. There were four of them, and rather than tumble the lock, she found the correct one. She let herself in, then turned the timer that lit the foyer. As it hummed through its few minutes, she located the next key and entered the atelier itself.

The room was furnished with another Gobelins loom and more tapestries, medieval reproductions that the woman must have been selling in the tourist market.

“Hello,” she said. There was no answer. She went across the studio to its small kitchen, and beyond it into an equally tiny *salle de bains* and *toilette*. For sleep, a *couchette* had been installed at one end of the studio.

She searched the *salle de bains*, looking for makeup, but also trying to determine if more than one person lived here. The results were ambiguous. There was a man’s razor, also two toothbrushes.

Somebody moved. She glimpsed in the shadows a strange, dark creature. She reeled back out of the tiny room, raising her arms, preparing to defend herself.

But nobody came leaping after her. The only sound was her own breathing, that and a trickle of water from the toilet.

She turned on the light and saw in the mirror a Miriam Blaylock so profoundly changed that she’d thought herself a stranger. The head was bald, the face sunken, the eyes black sockets. She raised a finger to her cheek, felt the skin. It ought to be pink and soft right now, glowing with the life she had just consumed. But it revealed another surprise. She was not sallow, but covered with fine gray ash. The outer layer of her skin seemed to have been carbonized, at least on her face.

She splashed some water on it, then dried it with a serviette. It came up muddy white. The sink was full of gray. She stripped off her clothes and

looked down at herself. She had sustained tremendous damage, more than she had realized. There were great rifts in her skin, filled with raw, angry flesh. Her hips were scraped almost to the bone. In one place, she could see actually see some bone.

She drew a bath, watching as the wonderful, steaming water gushed into the big tub. When she sat in it, the ash clinging to her body soon turned the water dark gray, tinged pink with the blood of her wounds.

Soon her whole body was tickling as her blood raced to repair the damage. She closed her eyes. How lovely. How much she needed to sleep. So easy it would be, so warm was the water.

No! No, she had to find stimulants — coffee, pills, anything — and she had to locate the woman's passport, call an airline, and buy a ticket to New York, go to the mines, warn the other Keepers.

She rose from the tub and threw open the medicine chest. There were three bottles of pills — vitamins, an herbal remedy for colds, nothing of any use. The poor young creature had been healthy and clean of even simple drugs. Miriam could not avoid a sense of waste when she destroyed a vital, young life like this. The girl had been not unlike her Sarah.

She had given up telephoning Sarah. All that mattered now was getting home. She was afraid that the disaster had already crossed the Atlantic and that was why Sarah couldn't respond. Would she find her beautiful home in Manhattan a ruin, just like the Castle of the White Queen, and Sarah's very bones burned to ashes? There was no way to know that. It was not given to her.

She peered into the mirror. Actually, her face wasn't so bad. A little makeup here, a little there, a bit of lip gloss, and she would be a girl again. She would be —

She stopped. Like the fall of evening or a black cloak dropping over her, a shroud, a sorrow so great fell upon her heart that it inspired not the usual gnashing anger, but a deep questioning of her own value as a creature, and indeed of the worth of the Keepers as a species upon the earth.

Look around you, she thought, at the complex life that had been unfolding in this atelier, at the wonders in the looms, their colors glowing in the faint light that came in from the street. Look at the book beside the bed, thumbed, earmarked, a book of poems with which Noelle Halff had put herself to sleep at night. *Les Fleurs du Mal* — “The Flowers of Evil.” Miriam knew the poems, appreciated them as well.

The girl might not have any pills in her cabinet, but she kept lip gloss and other cosmetics of the very highest quality. Miriam started to make up her face, to return to it an approximation of the endless youth that lay beneath her wounds.

She felt the weight of sleep urging at her brain, at her exhausted muscles, increasing the weight of her bones. She tossed her head, her eyes gleaming with a kind of fury. Even without drugs, she would not sleep. She could not, must not.

For she knew without question, if she lay down in this atelier — if she slept — they would certainly catch her.

NINE

Lady of the Knife

The lower condyles of human femurs lined the walls, joint-end out. Above them were stacked skulls. Paul had known about the Denfert-Rochereau ossuary, but only vaguely, as the sort of grotesque that tourists of a certain kind — fans of horror movies, say — might visit. For ten francs you could spend as much time as you wanted to with the bones of seven million Parisians.

“What’s that smell?” Becky asked.

“Maybe there’s a fresh corpse.”

“Thank you, Charles.”

“No bodies were ever buried here. Just skeletons,” Colonel Bocage said.

Still, there was a certain smell, and smells were important to this work. Paul inhaled carefully. They all knew the fetors of the vampire — the sour, dry odor of their unwashed skin and the appalling stink of their latrines. Their waste was dead human plasma.

Colonel Bocage and Lieutenants Raynard and Des Roches walked ahead. The two lieutenants had interesting histories. Raynard was not French but Algerian. He had been a Foreign Legionnaire. Des Roches, a solemn-looking man with a quick sense of humor and what looked to Paul like a whole lot of physical power, had been a GIGN officer. The Groupe d’Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale was France’s elite terrorist intervention unit. These were the guys who stormed planes being held by madmen. These were also the guys who were sent in when the government didn’t want prisoners, only bodies.

Because of the catastrophe that had just occurred, these were the last two men Bocage had. Signing people on was just as difficult for him as it was for Paul. They had to be excellent, they had to be clearable to a high level, and it was just damn hard to find people like that.

As they moved forward, everybody was quiet. The French were grieving over the decimation of their team, and everybody was well aware of how this hole had chewed up people in the past. Theirs was brutal, extremely dangerous work. Vampires died, but it cost. God, it cost.

They were passing rows and rows of bones, an incredible sight. They were still in the ossuary itself.

“No teeth,” Charlie observed, “no lower jaws.”

Des Roches said, “The teeth were sold to button makers to help finance the ossuary.”

“Was that legal?”

“Perhaps, at the time,” Colonel Bocage replied, “although not politically correct, I am embarrassed to say. But old France — it was not politically correct.”

“Madame de Pompadour,” Becky said, pointing to a sign.

“Who was?” Charlie asked.

“She was the executive secretary of King Louis XV,” Raynard said.

“And the mistress,” Bocage added, “of course.”

“How’d she end up down here?”

“After the revolution, the bones of aristocrats were no longer held sacred.” The tone of Raynard’s voice suggested that he did not entirely approve of the revolution. Like many men engaged in extremely difficult military pursuits, he was ultraconservative.

“Stop, please.” Des Roches consulted his PalmPilot, which contained a map not only of the ossuary, but of the entire system of mines beneath the streets of Paris. The mines were more extensive even than the legendary Paris sewer system. The map, provided by the Inspectorate General of Quarries, covered the two hundred plus miles of tunnels and shafts that were interconnected. This was estimated to be roughly three-quarters of the total. The rest of it, among the most ancient of the shafts, were either completely detached from the main body, or connected only by openings too small for a human to enter.

Given the danger of entering the tunnels, ground-based radars and sonars had been used to complete the maps, so they were not nearly as accurate as the hunters would have liked. Paul had spent the night with Charlie and Becky studying them. Each had committed a section of the complex to memory. They had quizzed one another on twists and turns, blind alleys and unexpected crossings, until dawn.

They reached a dead end in the ossuary, which was blocked by a gate and marked with a sign, *Entrée Interdite*. Over the past hundred years, the Prefecture of Police had recorded sixty disappearances from the ossuary. It wasn't many, but the points at which these people had last been seen were all closest to this particular connection with the abandoned labyrinth of mines. It was here that Bocage's teams had entered in the past.

“Regard,” Bocage said, “beyond this point, we must assume that we are, at all times, in peril of our lives.”

Raynard opened an aluminum case that he carried. He distributed lightweight Kevlar body armor. “Remember that they are experts with knives. They can throw a knife almost with the speed of a bullet, because of the arm strength.”

Paul remembered the Sinha Vampire. It had killed Len Carter with a knife thrown so hard it went completely through his body and struck Becky, who was standing ten feet behind him. She'd taken thirty stitches in her neck. Had she not been turned slightly away from him at that instant, her carotid artery would have been severed.

Bocage gave out pistols, weapons unlike anything Paul had seen before. “This pistol will fire five of the fifteen special rounds that it carries with a single pull of the trigger. There is no sight because laser sights are useless. They see it and they are too fast. The bullets are designed to fracture into millions of tiny bits of shrapnel. A burst will pulverize everything in a five-meter square. Remember please, to assume that the creature, no matter how badly damaged it appears, is only stunned. Do not get near the mouth, and bind the hands immediately with your plastic cuffs. Is this clear?”

They all knew the drill by heart. But they all listened as if they’d never heard it before in their lives. A professional never ignores a chance to get an edge. Maybe hearing it again just now would speed up reaction time by a hundredth of a second. Maybe that would save a life. Miriam paid her ten francs and passed through the entrance to the catacombs. She’d spent an hour at the Galeries-Lafayette buying casual clothes and a wig, so the person who came into this place did not appear much like the one who had passed the Castle of the White Queen yesterday evening. All that remained of her ordeal were angry red areas on various parts of her body. Her right hip was still somewhat stiff, as well. But this gum-chewing teenager with black, close-cut hair bore almost no resemblance to the pallid, sunken horror of twelve hours ago. She was soft, her pale eyes sparkling with the eager innocence of eighteen or twenty sheltered years. Any man would want to protect her, even to cherish her. The little gold cross around her neck suggested religiosity. A man, managing somehow to penetrate the mysteries of this sweet child, would not be surprised to hear her murmur, “But I’m a virgin.”

Moving as swiftly and carefully as a cat, she descended the spiral stair that led into the crypt. The touristic map she had gotten with her ticket covered only the ossuary itself, but she knew the ancient signs that would indicate the route from the public area to the lairs and, above all, to the Keep where would be stored the Book of Names and whatever other things the French Keepers owned collectively.

Her intention was to warn the other Keepers if she could, but without fail to take their Book of Names with her. She could not risk leaving it here, no matter how they felt about that. If they resisted, she would fight.

There were two sightseers at the foot of the stairs. She shifted her body

language, becoming a casual girl, a little nervous. The tourists were German, plump and smelling of their recent lunch of ham. The man had ugly, narrow veins. She loved the woman's carotid. A charming nibble, she would be.

She sniffed the faint wind coming out of the corridor. None of the lovely, infinitely subtle scents of other Keepers. Each Keeper had his own particular scent, mixed of skin and the dust of ages. Miriam longed to smell the skin of a robust male Keeper just after he had fed, when he was warm and moist, his muscles like flowing iron, his odor overlaid by the creamy, intricate scent of fresh human blood.

The rankness of the couple was strong, mixed with the rather sandy, musty odor of the bones. Again, she inhaled, flaring her nostrils. Yes, there were other human beings within, also, all stinking of their foods and perfumes and the orifices they had secretly neglected. She smelled the damp biscuit odor of little boys, the soft cheese fragrance of girl children, and a bit of an older woman's perfume. A class of mixed sex between the ages of six and ten was a short distance ahead, with their female teacher, who was thirty, no younger, and healthy. Miriam tested the air for new odors, filter-ing out those she had already identified. Some sort of exotic foodstuff came to her, spices of the East mixed with the odors of skin and spent cigarettes — a couple from Asia.

She entered the corridor. Her glance at the map had left her with a memory of precisely the number of steps she would have to go in every passage in the ossuary. In childhood, every Keeper was trained to use measured gaits, so she knew exactly how many inches she traversed with every step she took, no matter how fast her stride.

The entrance to the ossuary was marked by a group of thick, square columns painted white with black borders. She passed them, entering the earliest of the crypts. The most recent bones, quite naturally, were deepest. By human terms, they were ancient, but she remembered Paris perfectly clearly when there had been no catacomb full of bones and gawking tourists. In those days, the Keepers had the entire system of mines to themselves. One could ascend by an unknown stair into the street, take a victim down, and enjoy it at leisure, then have a nice sleep in the safety of the depths. The Paris Keepers had a pleasant life then.

She moved forward cautiously, seeking a certain spot that led from the ossuary into the deep shafts. There were other entrances, but this one was what you took if you knew what you were doing. Anyone coming down another tunnel would be assumed to be human.

The entrance was signaled, she knew, by a great cross. It would not be difficult to find. But to know its true meaning — that would be very difficult indeed . . . if you weren't a Keeper. When she was certain that she was alone, she sprinted along the galleries. Here was Madame du Pompadour — that hideous old crank who reeked of sour milk and had somehow captured the heart of one of the later Louises, a prancing unwise fellow who blew farts and stank horribly himself from a fungal infection of the skin. Madame de Pompadour, indeed. Her real name was Jeanne Poisson — Jenny Fish. Well, so much for that marble tomb of hers. This was far more appropriate. Philippe Vendôme had made fervid, ratlike love to her, hadn't he? Miriam recalled watching some sort of entertainment like that.

She'd been down here in the early eighteenth century with — which one — was it Lollie? Yes, poor Lollia, she'd been on her last legs then, frantically trying on powdered wigs and loading her face with leaded creams. No use, any of it.

Now another turn — and there was the great cross. But would the entrance still be behind it? Had the French found it and walled it up, also? She looked at the cross, refocusing her vision so that the glyphs that were invisible to the human eye stood out clearly. There was a word to utter in Prime, according to the instructions, that would open the wall. It would also alert the Keepers inside that she was there. She was instructed, as well, to append her name. She drew a deep breath, expanded her lungs, and released the call. It vibrated against the stone, its echo fluttering off down the corridors. Now, the instructions told her, press thrice the upper corner of the left tine of the cross.

The hidden door swung inward. Beyond was absolute dark. From within there came the odor of many lairs.

“Halte!” Everybody froze. “Do not move,” Colonel Bocage said. “Listen.”

It came again, a sound so deep that it was more a sensation than a noise.

“Could it be the Métro?” Becky asked. “Are we under a tunnel?”

Des Roches laid his arm around her neck, drew her close, uttered a breathy, almost-silent whisper. “That was a vampire.”

The French were in some ways far advanced in their knowledge. Becky and Charlie and Paul had been down many a dark tunnel, but they had never had to face anything this elaborate.

The place stank of wet stone and the musk of bats. The group had stopped its march and was clustering together in a low gallery. Becky shone her light on a stone where graffiti had been carved. “*Merci à Dieu, m —*” and there it stopped, as if the carver had run out of strength or light or time. The letters were formed in an old script, perhaps from the last century or the one before.

“Listen — again,” Charlie said.

It was eerie, that sound — so deep that you wouldn’t notice it unless you were trained to. Paul had heard it echoing off the walls of the night in Beijing, in Osaka, in Bangkok. As a boy, he had heard it mixing with the sullen hoot of the owl and the barking of the fox.

After some moments, there was no sound but their breathing and the busy scuttle of rats. The roar of the great city above them was a bare whisper. Water dripped, echoing as if somewhere deeper there might be a hidden pool or even a small lake.

“Lights out,” Paul said. “We go to light-amplification goggles.” Their equipment packs rattled as they put the night-vision goggles on.

You could see perhaps fifty feet. Beyond that was the haze of a darkness so deep not even the goggles could gather enough light to be of use.

“Do you wish to go to infrared,” Bocage asked his men, his voice, in its softness, sounding curiously as if he’d meant to utter words of love.

“Let’s do it,” Raynard said. He and Des Roches clicked on the infrared floods.

A hand grabbed Paul's shoulder, the fingers digging in. Becky was staring down the long, sloping corridor.

There had been something there, most certainly. "Vampire," Bocage murmured.

Paul had seen what might have passed for a tall, elegant man, tall and very quick of step. The moment the infrared flood had turned on, it had gone.

The Keepers were calling to one another that human beings had penetrated the barrier. Their voices were calm, which made her throat turn sour and her mind race — *don't you understand, don't you realize even yet?*

She had the map of the ossuary, but there was no map of the labyrinth beyond. She had to go by scent and hearing and what little sight was available.

She had not moved ten steps before the darkness completely enclosed her. Now she had to walk blind, on faith only, trusting in her nose and ears for direction.

Behind her, she could hear the breathing of tourists in the ossuary and their occasional murmured conversations. There was something about the place that kept them quiet, as if the spirits of the dead demanded it.

Along a low side tunnel that angled sharply down came a faint reddish-purple glow. For a moment she did not know what it was. But then she saw a Keeper, dressed all in black, standing not fifty feet away from her. His back was to her. He was watching the glow, which was bouncing, waxing and waning, as it slid along a far tunnel.

When his odor touched her nostrils — powerful, richly masculine — a thrill trembled through her. He stood tall. His absolute stillness made him seem so very noble.

She murmured low, in Prime, "I, Miriam out of Lamia, greet you." His back did not move. Then, very suddenly, he turned round.

He faced her now, the glow waxing and waning behind him. "I, Uriel from Enoch, now called Henri, greet you." He inclined his head.

She bowed deep at the waist, as was the formality for a Keeper entering from outside a given Keep. He came close to her and laid his long fingers under her chin and raised her.

"I come to present myself before the conclave," she added, still speaking in the measured, formal cadences of Prime.

He switched to French. "You want a kid, Miriam? Or a husband?"

"Both," she replied.

He smiled, then. "You still live in that house, I presume, with your wonderful little pets."

He did not sound too disapproving. Dared she hope? "Yes," she said carefully. She lowered her eyes to him, as manners required.

"How can you bear the smell?" His tone slapped her. He was as contemptuous of her as the rest.

She tried not to reveal her disappointment. But she raised her eyes. Damned if she would show respect to a man who had contempt for her. "What is that glow," she asked. It was getting distinctly brighter, so much so that she could now see the walls of this tunnel clearly, and even Henri's narrow, solemn face.

"It's trivial."

She dropped the manners and looked directly at him. Martin Soule had been in such terrible condition that he had presented no appeal. Henri, by contrast, was not hideous. He was dirty and poorly dressed, but his body was gorgeous. She could sense his strength, and the thought of being held in his arms was not without appeal.

He seemed indifferent to the light. "It's getting brighter."

He was looking at her with the attention a jeweler might pay a gem. “It’s true, then,” he said.

“What is true?”

“Your beauty is the greatest in the world.” He reached toward her, a tentative, caressing touch. As his fingers shivered along the edge of her lips, she tasted of their flat salt. Desire flamed in her. She imagined herself lying beneath him, absolutely, wonderfully helpless as he came roaring into her like an inflamed lion. She would receive him, an open flower, an open wound. She would be a slave to him then, hold his cup and kneel before him. She would let herself be possessed, and in turn she would possess him.

The glow flared, and now she heard a steady tread of — she listened — twelve feet. They sounded to her like human feet. “That light — it’s the humans, isn’t it?”

“It’s nothing. Ignore it.”

“Is it human?”

He gazed at her. “You are a forward creature, just as they say.”

“Humans are dangerous.”

“Don’t be absurd.”

“You knew Martin Soule, of course.”

He nodded. “He went to live in that house your mother so foolishly built.”

“He died there.”

“Did he?” His voice took on a note of question. “Why would he elect to do that?”

“They burned him! As they intend to burn us all!”

“I remember your mother’s misfortune. But that should not — ”

The lights appeared like ghostly eyes, six of them, all glaring straight down this tunnel. Henri was trapped in the purple glow. He turned to face it, smiling slightly. “Stop,” he said in flawless modern French, “you have no business here.”

Paul’s breath whooshed out of him when he saw it. He’d never laid eyes on one like this, so large, so strong looking. In Asia, they’d been smaller, and they’d hidden at the back of their lairs.

“There are two,” Bocage said laconically.

Then he saw, behind the towering male in its fusty suit from fifty years ago, a female. It drew back into the shadows, but it also had a human appearance . . . just like the traveler. Had he seen blond hair? He couldn’t be sure. The creature had moved with the speed and grace of a panther.

“*Mon Dieu*,” Des Roches said.

“You saw that female?”

“The face — it was . . . so strange.”

Paul had not seen the face. But he didn’t care about that now. It wasn’t the traveler, the traveler was dead. He raised his gun and fired, and so did all the others.

The noise was shattering; a gust of wind blasted back into his face, as the narrow tunnel compressed the expanding air. The screaming thunder of it was accompanied by a dazzling flare of green light, and followed by hollow, zipping echoes as bullet fragments tore along the walls.

Silence. A distant howl, growing louder. Charlie tore off his night-vision equipment and went for his flashlight. He flicked the switch. The beam shone like a white laser into the murk of dust that now filled the tunnel.

“*Non!*” Bocage screamed.

There was a flicker in the air, no more. Out of the dust had come a knife, thrown with the vampire's bizarre force, moving so fast that it was only a flash of light.

The beam of the flashlight wavered, then went crazy, then dropped to the floor. It rolled toward the vampires, and in a second nothing could be seen but a dim yellow glow in the murk of dust. This glow was pointing straight at them, away from the vampires. So they were visible, but they could not see.

Charlie began to make a sound, one that was almost comically like the whistle of a toy train. It changed to gurgling and splashing and the clatter of a body in seizure. He fell back, his head striking the ground with a crack like a breaking egg.

Des Roches went down beside him. Becky, stifling a scream, pushed close. Her hands touched the knife as if it was blazing hot. She made little, choked sounds in her throat, awful sounds. Her fingers fluttered around the handle. The sounds had a sense of question in them, but it was a question that nobody could answer. There was no answer. How do you extract a knife that is embedded up to its hilt in a man's face?

There was another blast, this one from Raynard's gun. Then Bocage fired twice more. Paul probably should have been terrified, but he felt the same calm, clear sense of inner control that always came to him at moments like this. His heart was sinking because of Charlie's death. But he did not stop fighting, not for an instant, no matter his breaking heart. He watched that dust, looking for shadowy movement.

Another knife appeared, headed straight for Becky. He saw it gliding as gently as a leaf on the sea, gliding toward her neck. He felt her hair under his hand, and then he pressed with lightning speed and she slammed flat, and the knife went clanging and clattering up the tunnel.

From off in the yellow gloom he heard a faint sound, an unmistakable sound: it could only have been a gasp of surprise.

Wild emotions sped through Miriam — horror to see a Keeper blown to pieces, fear that the next blast would kill her, and then, above all, amazement at what she had seen that man do, and amazement at how she felt about him.

That man — only a human — had moved as fast as a Keeper. She knew the human genome intimately. There was nothing in their makeup that could enable them to do this. Their physical limitations were bred into them. But not into this one, no indeed.

Then there was the way he affected her when he pulled off his ridiculous goggles and she saw his chiseled, complex face. Her body responded to this human as if he were a Keeper. This was not the attraction she felt normally to human prettiness, but powerful, shivering, blood-pounding desire. She wanted him not under her but over her; she sweated and lusted for him; she wanted him to possess her and fill her with a startling, frenetic hardness. Her body was begging her; it was pleading as if he were the strongest, finest male Keeper in the weave of the world.

She backed away, as horrified at these feelings as she was at the power of the weapons that were being raised against her.

She dashed to the end of the corridor, took a turning, another, then flattened herself against the wall. She listened — the ever-present dripping, the scuttle of rats, the deep fluttering of Keeper voices as they called back and forth, in mixtures of French and Prime, inquiring of one another: “What was it?” “Is there reason for concern?”

There were a lot of them here. They had indeed been assembling for their conclave. She knew, after seeing that man, that there would be no conclave. He was going to go through this labyrinth like the red shadow of death, like the hand of an angry god. None would survive him, not with his exploding bullets and his team and his eerie personal speed.

Off behind her, another blast of fire echoed, followed by the awful thudding of another Keeper body being ripped to pieces.

They were going to lose their battle. Therefore, she had to do what was necessary to protect the rest of the Keepers. She had to go to the heart of this

Keep and secure their Book of Names. To find it, she must be careful to make certain that every step she took was downward. Turning here, there, she went farther and deeper. Soon the dripping was general, water was running in rivulets, and she was concerned that the center of the Keep might be awash.

Every few minutes, there would be an awful roar behind her, followed by a series of weaker explosions. The humans — led by that eerie, beautiful monster — were clearing out the Keepers, moving with careful method. For their part, the Keepers, who had no call of alarm and no real way to react to an assault like this, were responding piecemeal, although with growing anger and ferocity. One after another, they would attack the human group. Then would come the roaring of the guns, and the distant, liquid thuds of bodies being torn apart.

She was moving fast, head down, when she suddenly sensed a change around her. She was in a much larger space, and not only that, she could see a little.

This was not a manmade tunnel, but something very much more ancient. The precise lines of its walls, the low, graceful arch of its ceiling, suggested that a far more careful hand than human had been at work here. Stalagmites rose from the ground. It looked like a forest on an alien world.

“I am Miriam out of Lamia, come seeking entry to your conclave.”

At first, there was silence. Then the light wavered and, with the softest of sounds, a shadow emerged. “I am Julia out of Helene who was Nef-ta-tu.”

She had not seen Julia since the days of splendor, when their kind had ruled Egypt, walking as princes among their human herds.

Julia had been as sweet then as a roe, as tender as an apple from the bough. What came to Miriam was a dark creature, so crusted with eons of dirt that only her eyes seemed alive.

Julia had the Book of Names with her, tucked under her arm as casually as some novel. “There is a human band in these caves,” she said, her voice mild.

“They are killing us.”

She gave Miriam a careful look. “How is that?”

“With guns.”

“We are faster than their hands. We can step out of the way before they pull the trigger. I’ve done it myself now and again.”

“These guns leave you no place to go. They spread a mass of tiny bullets. Keepers up there are being torn apart. The humans are coming for that book.” She smiled. “Let me take it.”

“I will not. You’re a pervert, Miriam. You’re unclean.”

“If they get your book, our whole world will be in danger.”

“They will not get our book.”

“They will be here in minutes. And they will get it.”

“There have been three hundred conclaves in this place. My grandfather built it when the humans were covered with hair.”

“May those days live in memory.”

“They were sour. The new ones now are much sweeter.”

Horribly close, there came the roar of gunfire. It was so close that the flash was faintly visible.

“We have to get out. We cannot waste another minute.”

“What is a minute or a hundred years? You have fallen from your nobility, Miriam. Everybody says it. I remember you in linen, how tall you were, your limbs like gold.”

“That memory is three thousand years old, Julia! This is now, and the humans are not armed with bronze daggers. Don’t you understand that

they're tearing the Keepers apart with their guns?"

"They will become lost. The labyrinth is more cunning than their minds can understand."

"That was true a hundred years ago. But now they have sonar and digital maps and handheld locators. And they're trained to kill us. They have killed all of Asia, and they have their Book of Names."

"Asia is far away."

"It's an airplane flight! I was in Bangkok a few days ago."

"You have the restless soul of a human, always traipsing about."

Miriam heard human voices. They would be here in moments. "Do you not think it strange that you alone are here at the appointed time? Where are the others? Can you explain it?"

"Don't cross-question me. All will unfold in its course."

"Then why hasn't it? What's wrong?"

"What has changed to prevent the conclave? Nothing."

"Everything has changed."

"A few humans cannot change the course of the world."

Miriam saw the humans creeping among the shadows ahead, four of them.

"It's lit," the tall, powerful one said. He walked into the gray glow from the ancient batteries. Humans had found some of the Keepers' batteries in the Valley of the Euphrates some years ago. They were still trying to understand how the ancients could have had electricity.

"Lookit — a power line!"

Discreetly, Miriam drew Julia into a pool of shadow. The humans were

now at the far end of the chamber, perhaps a hundred yards away.

“How do you work the lights?” she whispered to Julia.

“They’re always on during conclave. That’s the rule.”

“Julia, there is no conclave. We’re all being killed. Turn out the lights.”

Julia broke away from her, strode out into the center of the chamber. For a moment, the humans froze. They drew closer together.

“Julia!”

“Miriam, they’re only —”

There came clicking noises, ominous, echoing. Only seconds remained. “Julia, run!”

Julia turned to her. Her smile said that she found her friend of old times pitiful.

The tall human raised his weapon, followed by the others. Miriam watched his face, the careful sculpture of it, the hard fury of the eyes.

The guns blasted — and Miriam herself felt a hot slash of pain along her exposed hip. Just a few shots had filled the entire space with bullets — all this huge area!

Then she saw Julia, who still stood, who still held the all-important book. Julia, pouring blood, placed the book beside her on the ground. She sat then, a dark and bloody Venus beside a still-ringing stalagmite. Again the guns rang out, and this time her head went bouncing off her neck. On its face Miriam saw an expression of mild curiosity, nothing more than that.

“There’s another one,” a voice said. “Over there — that shadow behind the stalagmite. That’s a vampire.”

Miriam must not waste another instant. But the book — it was lying beside the torn ruins of Julia. It was only a few cubits away, but right in their line of

fire.

It was deep brown, its cover an ancient, profoundly aged human skin. On its cover was the Keeper's ancient symbol of balanced nature and balanced rule, known to humans as the ankh. The humans looked toward it, too.

She had to reach it, she had to get it. But first, she must turn off these damn lights. The copper wires were set on insulators a few feet above her head. She knew that these batteries were very, very different from what the humans had, that they drew their energy from the earth itself, and they were powerful.

To kill the lights, she had to stand up in full view, reach overhead, and yank a wire loose. The electricity would jolt her. If she wasn't fast enough, or could not let go of the power line, she would be burned inside — an injury that would take weeks to mend. In moments they would be upon her, though, and she would end up in their sights.

She was well up behind one of the stalagmites, but they nevertheless fired, all together, the roar of their guns causing the chamber to resound like the interior of a bell. She felt no injury.

The leader said, "Spread out," in a resonant, icy voice.

They came closer to her, led by their monster. His face was so determined, so truly terrible in the hate that was written across it, that she was compelled to think that his emotions were almost full-circle. This human loathed the Keepers so much that he nearly loved them. She would not forget this.

"We need to angle off that wall," he said, "it's pressed itself against the back of the stalagmite."

He spoke with detachment. Well, she also was professional. She reached up to the humming wire. Her fingers paused, hesitating. But this was no act of ritual possession. She curled them, closing them on the wire.

There was a buzzing sound and a choked, sizzling cry, and the lights went

out. “Shit,” Bocage said.

Paul went down on his hands and knees. “The book,” he whispered.

“Forget the damn book; get some light in here,” Becky hissed.

“Get the goggles — ” Des Roches said.

There was no time, and Paul knew it. “Cover me,” he said as he moved off toward the book.

“How?” Bocage asked.

He crawled two, three feet, then five, then ten. He could hear them putting on their goggles. They mustn’t use the infrared floods. Vampires could see into the infrared.

Then he felt it. He felt the book’s smooth surface and grasped it. But then he knew that other hands also had it, another hand was grasping it, too.

She was there, face-to-face with him, but he could see nothing. He could smell her, though — not the stink of the vampire but a scent unlike any he had ever smelled before, rich and complicated and sexy as hell.

When she growled — as vampires did — he thought that it was the gentlest and yet most lethal sound he had ever heard. She was stronger, he knew that, but he didn’t intend to let go of that book. “I know you can understand me,” he said.

There was only breathing in reply, breathing like the soft and edgy flutter of a swarm of butterflies. He thought, *She’s scared, too — a vampire that knows how to be afraid.*

She yanked the book right out of his hands. Instantly, he dove at her, slammed into her, felt the book clatter to the ground. Again she growled, this time with a mixture of surprise and raw fury that made him think that he would shortly die.

He tried to get his fingers around her neck, to choke her, to try to close off

that crucial blood flow.

He sensed somebody coming up from behind. Then Becky was with him, grabbing at the creature's arms, trying to throw it off balance.

The vampire's neck felt like steel. He couldn't manage to throttle the creature, and his hands were strong. He struggled, getting closer, seeing the face before him, a glowing moon in the darkness, smelling the sweat of a woman and — perfume. Yes, it was perfumed, this one. What in damn hell was going on here.

“Get a light! A light!”

In the split of an instant, the vampire was gone. Des Roches and Bocage appeared. As Paul looked across the empty cave floor, a wave of rage and frustration swept through him. He'd lost the damn book! This meant years more work, hundreds of lives.

Then Becky's hand came into his, her cool hand. A flashlight glowed, and he saw in that glow her shining, triumphant eyes. She gave him the book.

“Goddamn,” he said, “good god damn.”

She moved toward him, her lips parting, her eyes steady and strong.

There was no time — not here, not now. “We can get it,” he said, breaking away.

“It's gone,” Bocage said.

Paul could not accept that. He turned; he went a few steps into the deadly blackness.

“Paul! Paul, no!”

He went on.

TEN

The Traveler

As he ran along a low, narrow corridor, he flashed his light from time to time, making sure that he hadn't passed any side entrances and that he wasn't about to hit a wall. He did not think about the fact that he was a man alone penetrating into a lair that was crawling with the creatures. That female — he had never encountered anything like that. It had been clean and perfumed. It had felt soft and smooth, if immensely strong. He had not seen the face, but he knew that there had been beauty, perhaps great beauty. Its scent still lingered: Arpège and womanhood. Its touch had inflamed him even as it had made his flesh crawl. He wanted to bathe, to get its smell off him . . . and he wanted never to bathe again.

Was it the traveler, still alive after all?

He knew that the safety of the book was everything, but he also had to kill this vampire. He had never wanted to kill a vampire so much, not in all the years he'd been at it. This thing could walk the streets without a problem. The idea of vampires that could function in the human world was horrifying.

He came to a T — blank wall ahead, a passage to the right sloping up, another to the left sloping down.

He stopped, shone his flashlight first in one direction and then the other. Far away he heard Becky. “Paul! *Paul!*”

He heard something in her voice that was tender. But she was a professional killer, for God's sake. What man could romance a woman like that?

“*Paaaaul!*”

Her fear for him was heartrending. But he could not answer, dared not. They would have to do their best to follow. Waiting for them to catch up would cost at least two minutes, and there were no minutes available at all just now.

He listened ahead, closing his eyes and cupping his hands behind his ears. The rising passage was silent. But not the descending — down there he heard all sorts of noises — murmurs, scuffling sounds, the low thutter of vampire calls.

He hesitated only long enough to make certain that his gun had a fresh clip and there were still more in the rucksack that Raynard had given him. Three more, to be exact.

It was a lovely gun, the way it tore the things apart. His hand on its comforting butt, he stepped into the downward passage. The descent was steep. Soon, his flashlight was revealing carved inscriptions in Latin here and there on the walls. This tunnel must be very old indeed. The Arènes de Lutèce, where the Romans had held bearbaiting contests, could not be far overhead. Maybe they had quarried the stone for it here. But he did not think so. There was something too perfect about the way these walls were made. As old as it all appeared, every line was dead straight.

He was in a vampire place, something made by them in some uncountably ancient time. When this place was made, mankind must have been — well, maybe still living in caves.

What did it mean?

If they had been advanced enough to make this, they must have ruled the world then, in the deep long ago. The implications for human life were chilling. Anything could be true — they could even have bred us the same way that we breed cattle.

Fear kept rising, and he kept pushing it down. But what if he couldn't win? What if they had reserves of power that he had never imagined?

He tried to be philosophical. If he died here, he died here. At least he'd

take some of them with him.

And then — was that somebody breathing?

He stopped, listened. No, it was nothing, just the wind in the halls, or far-off street noise. He started off again.

One of them appeared ahead of him, leaping, screaming, a blur of darkness and fury. He fired, then fired again and again, until it exploded along the corridor with a series of wet splats.

He flicked on his light. He'd expected to see a mass of carnage, a flowing river of blood. But there wasn't all that much blood. And then he saw a bit of fur, gray, and he realized that the light had played a trick on him. He'd shot at the looming shadow of a rat.

“Goddamnit!”

He went on, deeper still, closer to the murmuring, to the whispering movement.

Then he heard a totally unexpected sound. A voice. A child's voice. “Sir?” His heart started hammering — not only because the voice was there, but because it was behind him.

Dare he turn? Dare he?

“Sir?”

Boy or girl, he could not tell. It sounded about ten, perhaps a little older. His finger slipped around the trigger. He felt sick, he did not think he could do this. But he whirled round, dropping to the floor as he did, firing.

There was nobody.

They were tricking him. The rat had also been a trick, he realized. No rat would cast such a big shadow. Somehow, they'd done it. They were tricking him, in order to get him to use up his bullets. They were probably counting his shots.

He looked out into the darkness, could see nothing. He listened, could hear nothing. Only his own breathing disturbed the silence. He was a strong man; he had learned that over the years of his life. But he had also learned that all strength has its limits. He had seen the Khmer Rouge bury a man alive, and listened to that man go mad in his hole. Paul himself had wept with fear, thinking he would be next.

The vampires knew the human mind. They knew his mind. They knew his limits. And that was why, when he heard the creaking, coming slowly closer, it was so very hard not to use his light or fire his gun. It was so hard. But he could not, because he knew that no matter how sure he was, this, also, would be a wasted shot.

As quietly as was possible for a large man, he moved so that his back was pressed against the wall. To give his ears whatever tiny extra edge that might be gained, he closed his eyes. Even though there was no light, doing this would direct his brain a little more toward hearing than sight.

He stuffed the book into his pants and cupped his free hand behind his ear. He listened in one direction. There was the creaking, just over there. But it was not a living sound, and no closer. In the other direction, though, there was another sound, more complex, far harder to hear.

It was, he thought, a living sound. It was the sound of breath being drawn, in his opinion. He would have to lower his hand, grab his light and shine it, then instantly fire if something was there.

But what if it was that child? They had known that he would be unable to fire at a child. They had known that he would take the split of an instant to be certain. That would be *their* time.

It was a duel, and they had rigged it for him to lose the instant he disclosed his position. The only way to win would be to fire into the dark and risk a child . . . theirs, but still a child.

The breathing was close now. He would have to act and instantly. He did not go for his light. Instead, he reached out. He caught a sleeve. It was yanked away but he was fast; he'd always been damned fast. He found

himself grasping a large, powerful, cold hand. The fingers closed around his wrist, closed and began to tighten.

There came laughter, soft and entirely relaxed. Foolishly so, he thought. He fired into the sound. In the flash, he saw a male face, powerful, dark, with a long, sharp nose and deep gleaming eyes.

There was a cry, deep, abruptly cut off.

Then he was deaf, as you always were deaf after that blast. When he could hear again, there was a high noise, the most terrible of noises, shaking the walls, echoing as it pealed again and again through the limestone chambers, the screaming of a woman in molten agony.

Now he used his light. It appeared, a female vampire, with beaded hair and a long dress on, dark blue silk, white collar, and the mouth fully open, a broad O filled with teeth. They had awful mouths, filthy and stinking of the blood in their guts, mouths that were made for sucking. They looked okay — a little thin-lipped was all — until they opened those wet, stinking maws of theirs. If you kissed a vampire, he thought, it might suck your insides right out of you.

The agony of grief was great for them, greater even than for a human being, as he had seen in Asia. She came maddened by it, her arms straight out ahead of her, her fingers long, lethal claws. He knew that she wanted to tear him to pieces. He knew that she wanted to feel his gristle break.

He pulled the trigger. In the flash, he saw her dress billow as if lifted by a funhouse blast. Her face folded in on itself, and her cry joined the cry of the gun and was gone.

Her body hit the wall behind her with a slapping thud, and she slid down a slide of her own thick, black blood.

They lay side by side, and he was amazed at what he saw. The male wore slacks and a black sweater, and a leather jacket so supple that Paul hardly dared touch it. The female beside him was equally passable.

These European vampires were not like the Asians, things that moved only in the shadows. These things could go anywhere they pleased, any time they pleased. But how modern were they? Was there anything to prevent them from getting on the phone, calling their friends in the States?

Of course there wasn't. Paul had to admit to himself that he'd been lucky in Asia. But that level of surprise was over now. The only thing he had on his side was speed.

Every single creature in this hole had to be killed, and it had to be done right now, today. Otherwise, there were going to be phone calls, God knew, maybe even e-mails, to vampires in America, in Africa — wherever they were as modern and technologically capable as he had to assume these creatures were.

Either he and his cohorts cleared the place out immediately or they lost any and all chance of surprising others.

A long shape like a gigantic spider came striding toward him from along the corridor, its shadow briefly visible in his light. He turned it out.

He listened to the steps, one, two, coming up the tunnel. He could hear its breathing now, slow, almost soulful, like a man in love. Closer it came, until it seemed as if it were directly before him. But tunnels deceive, and he knew that there was more time yet to wait. It seemed to slide along, as if it wore silken shoes or moved like a snake.

He held his gun straight out. He waited.

The footsteps stopped. The breathing became soft and low. Where was it? He was uncertain.

He turned on the light, and there were eyes glaring at him from three inches away. The face was sallow, gray, not a face from the world of the sun. He fired into the dark crystal hate in those eyes. The body took the whole force of the bullets and went sailing backward fifty feet, bouncing against the walls as it broke up. A leg went tumbling on down the steep incline into the dark.

The head was not severed. The eyes revealed shock, not death. He had to fire again, and he hated it, to waste a shot, but then there would be nothing further to worry about from this vampire.

He aimed, squeezed the trigger, felt the familiar satisfaction that came when they blew apart.

He went on down the passage. He was spattered with vampire blood, and he could smell its rankness. He could feel it in his shoes, slick between his toes. The blood could invade your body. If you had a cut, it could make you damned sick. He'd seen it, they all had — the fevers, the monstrous, weird hungers, the slow recovery.

As he went deeper, he felt his adult personality slipping into its own past. The love of wine, the love of music, the long days spent in elegant places — all that was going. There remained only a hurt, furious little boy looking for the killer of his father.

On he went, deeper into the secret heart of the ancient nest, deeper still. He was below the meeting hall now, down where no human being would or could ever go, down in narrow corridors painted with glyphs, walls and ceilings and floors forged by the perfect hand of the vampire.

This was the great secret of the world, that places like this existed hidden and embedded in the planet, where terrible minds had orchestrated with terrible cunning the bloody history of mankind.

He knew, suddenly, that he was in a larger space. He knew, also, that there was a new smell here. When he turned on his light, and he would have to do that, he feared that he would find himself face to face with hundreds of them.

He put his thumb on the switch. He pressed.

At first, he did not understand what had appeared in the beam. The place was so large that his light faded before the room ended. There were long brown lines of round objects arrayed in two rows facing a narrow aisle, and it took him a long moment to understand that they were skulls tightly encased in their own skin. Some had hair, and it hung in tufts like something left on

totems.

He thought that there might be a million skeletons here. No rat came for them, no maggot, for they were too dry even to attract vermin — only little running things, nameless beetles of some kind, that were slowly turning them to dust.

As he walked slowly along shining his light, he became aware that this place was easily half a mile long. Face after face stared out at him, each with its goggled eyesockets and bucked teeth. They were stacked twenty high.

Here was where lay the *real* dead of Paris, the anonymous, the disappeared, the forgotten. Ironic that this other, more terrible ossuary would lie deep beneath the Denfert-Rochereau, almost as if its human builders had known by some kind of race memory, or the whispered intelligence of the dead, that somewhere beneath their feet, there lay an even greater grave.

How many of these people had left weeping lovers behind, people who never knew whether to mourn them for dying or despise them for running away?

Such an anger filled Paul now that he trod steadily, uncaring of his own life, forgetful even of the vital importance of the book he had with him, marching like a soldier bent only on victory, going step by step toward his next kill.

In all this time, there had not been one more turning, not one place to hide. So all the vampires in this place must be ahead of him.

He had two shots left in his clip. He pulled it out, reached back and dropped it into the rucksack, grabbing a fresh one and jamming it in. If it came down to it, he would use the two shots left in that clip to blast the damn book to bits and then kill himself. He might not get it out of here, but they damned well wouldn't get it back, either.

The idea of being sucked dry like these poor people made a taste rise in his throat so vile that he had to choke back his own vomit. He would never, ever die like that, with the lips of a vampire pressed against his neck.

He had to get out of here. The air was sickening. The place was claustrophobic. The bodies were twisted in a hundred postures of struggle and suffering, the faces still radiating horror, agony, and surprise.

Eventually, he saw a door ahead. He hurried to it, looked for a knob. There was a silver ring. When he pulled it, the door slid smoothly back on perfect hinges.

There had never been any place like this in Asia. At least, they had never uncovered such a place. But they had been on a killing spree, hadn't they, compared to the subtle, expert French? He was good at dealing death, not at the cat-and-mouse game that Bocage was playing with these very much more dangerous vampires of his.

His light played on the walls — and he saw a human face staring at him. He gasped, momentarily disoriented by the eyes that looked back at him ... from the incredibly distant past. No human being had ever before looked upon what this must be, a vividly lifelike portrait of a Neanderthal, appearing as if it had been painted yesterday.

The picture was painted on what looked like a slab of highly polished stone, maybe using some sort of wax process. But when he looked closer, he realized that this was not a painting at all but an incredibly fine mosaic. It was constructed of bits and slivers of stone so tiny that to his wondering fingers the surface appeared absolutely smooth.

What a very fine hand had made this, and so long, long ago. Beside it there was another mosaic, this one of something he thought must be some sort of genetic map — incredibly intricate, incredibly detailed.

Was he was looking at a Neanderthal with its genetic map beside it? If so, then what was this room? What had been done here? All around the walls were more such images, some of even more ancient creatures, in which the shadow of man was dominated by the staring savagery of the ape. If you looked from first to last, there was a logical succession from a small ape with frightened eyes all the way to modern people. There were at least fifty of the pictures. They went on until they ended with a woman so beautiful that she seemed to have been born of the angels.

This looked like some sort of record of the evolution of man . . . or our creation. Quite frankly, it looked like a record of creation, the way one form followed another in close succession, each with its genetic plan beside it. For years, humankind had been sifting the dirt of Africa and searching the caves of France for its past. But we had never been able to find ourselves, had we? Never quite.

He went to the last figure. Even her green eyes were rendered to the tiniest nuance. Her face was so alive that she might as well have talked to him. She was a girl, maybe twenty, with dusty blond hair and an expression on her face of a sort of delight . . . as if she were beholding everything new. Maybe, he thought, he should call her Eve.

The vampires must be very much older than he had imagined. If this place was what it looked like, then they were also very much more important to us. In which case, we had not evolved through the accidents and ideas of God, but rather had been maneuvered out of the apes by another and terrible hand.

He was not a man who often felt like crying. He'd done a lifetime's worth of crying when he'd lost his dad. But tears came now, rolling down his hard, silent face.

Why had they done it? Why not leave us as we must have been — helpless, two-legged cattle? One day, the secrets of the vampires would all be known. Only then, he suspected, would mankind truly come to understand itself.

He had the chilling thought that maybe they were our creators. He'd known that they lived a long time, but this was totally unexpected.

He went on, deeper into this cave of secrets. Now the chambers he found were rough, and here also the hidden past disclosed a story. This was human work, full of gouge marks. In some incredibly distant time, human beings had dug to this very room, to the center of the secret. Had they died here, in some forgotten effort to throw off our slavery?

There were no records of other vampire hunters in history. He and his team had read volumes of old histories, attempting to see if organizations like the

Knights Templar or the Egyptian priesthoods might have known something. But they didn't.

He moved through the rubble of the human tunnel — and, very suddenly, he found a lot of vampires. They were moving quickly, just disappearing around a corner ahead of him when he saw them.

They were running. He'd never seen that before. But there were a lot of things about the Paris vampires that were new to him. He sped up, jumped into the corridor they had gone down and fired. He ran, fired again, waited. Scuffling ahead. He fired. Sounds — gabbling, gasping noises. And then a vampire loomed out of the dust. Its chest was open like a cabinet. It came for him, but buckled, its lips working, its mouth sucking air. Another was behind it, and another. He fired. He fired again.

There was one bullet in the clip. He had to reload. He backed up — and tripped, falling onto the one he had just killed. He fell hard, and heard the clips clatter off behind him. As he was scrambling up, a hand grabbed his flashlight . . . and crushed it. The dying vampire's last act had left him completely helpless.

He scrambled to his feet, then kicked into the dark, kicked at the softness of the creature's wrecked body. He heard hissing and bubbling. The damn thing wasn't dead, despite its wounds. He backed away, lest it regain its strength and attack him. Then he squatted, sweeping the floor for his lost clips, finding nothing. And then he heard before him:

“Come here, child.”

Was there another of their kids here? He backed up again, trying to get a wall behind him, to gain some kind of defensive advantage.

“Your end has come, child.”

He would have turned his last bullet on himself, but that would leave the book. He'd have to destroy it and just suffer the damn sucking death he loathed.

The one that had spoken was coming closer; he could hear it. Should he shoot it? Was it the monster, the queen? Was this her lair? No, he thought not. That voice had been low and musical, but male, very definitely.

He'd lost his gamble, then. He held the book before him and pressed the barrel of the gun up against it.

But before he could shoot, light burst out around him. He saw a crowd of vampires, all watching him with their grave, strangely empty eyes. He saw them in jeans, in tattered clothes from olden times, in dresses and the shorts of tourists. Their faces, though, were filled with hate, and they were not human faces. Down here, they didn't need to bother with makeup and disguise. All the lips were narrow; all the eyes were deep; all the expressions were the same: calm, intractable hate.

Becky was suddenly beside him, her gun flaring. He fired, too, his last bullet.

As he reached around for another clip, a flaming pain shot through his left side. The arm that held the book went limp, and the book thudded to the floor. He saw why — the handle of a knife was protruding from his shoulder.

From the crowd of vampires there came shots. These had some guns — another surprise for Paul. He heard a grunt behind him, saw Des Roches crumple. He and Bocage had come up behind Becky.

The guns fired again, from both sides. Becky moved to protect him with her own body. "Fall back," she snapped as she shot again and again.

Then there was silence. She said, in a quavering, incredibly tender voice, "You're hurt."

That was a lover's tone, and it touched his heart unexpectedly deeply. "I'll be okay."

Her finger quivered along the protruding handle of the knife. "Oh, Paul, oh, God." She kissed his cheek, and his heart seemed to turn over within him. Thrumming through his pain, he felt a kind of contentment. He could see her

rich eyes in the dark, full of tender concern. And he had to admit, it felt damn, damn good.

The beam of Bocage's flashlight played across the room. In the smoke and the haze of blood, there were easily a dozen dead or damaged vampires, all heaped against the far wall. "It's good," Bocage muttered. Then he went down to his man. Des Roches was pale, his face frozen. He was in agony and trying hard to suppress it. Paul was in exactly the same situation.

The question wasn't whether they could go out and regroup, then do what needed to be done, which was to get back down here to spray these creatures with acid. The question was whether anybody was going to live long enough to get out in the first place.

"Bocage, are we all hurt?"

He shrugged. "I'll live." His right leg was sheeted with blood.

"Becky?"

"I'm good."

"We must get out," Bocage said. "Des Roches is going into shock."

Becky was playing her light across the broken mass of vampires. "Eight," she said. "That's a total of seventeen in this action."

"We killed a conclave," Paul said. "Half of Europe, maybe."

"The Germans are doing the same in Berlin," Bocage said.

"The Germans! Why don't we Americans get told anything any-more?" Paul asked.

"You have Echelon," Bocage replied. "It's supposed to put the rest of us in a fishbowl."

"Apparently it doesn't."

Bocage smiled a careful smile. “No, it doesn’t.”

Paul was beginning to feel the shuddering cold that came with shock. He took deep breaths, trying to stave it off.

Becky went over to the vampires. “Bocage,” she said, “we need to blow their heads off. In case we can’t come back and sterilize.”

They rounded up his lost clips, and Bocage and Becky went among them, blasting first one and then the next. Paul wondered what it would be like with a woman who could do that.

The knife was beginning to hurt a great deal. A wound that penetrated a bone into its marrow, which this one certainly did, was exceptionally painful. On his side he had the fact that he was an exceptionally fast healer. But that came later. Now, there was only the pain and danger of the wound.

“We’ve gotta get moving,” he said.

The little band of them ascended slowly, everybody trying to keep their suffering from everybody else.

Despite the waves of searing pain that swept his whole body every time he took a step, Paul felt like laughing. The damn queen of the vampires, or the traveler, or whatever she was — was somewhere in that pile of broken bodies. No more perfumed innocence walking the streets.

Between this and what the Germans were doing, Europe was likely to be free of the pest. And the book under his arm would soon free the Americas — if they acted fast enough.

He coughed long and hard, experiencing such great agony as he did so that Becky had to hold him up. “There’s blood aspirating into the lung,” he said as she helped him to the car.

All the way to the hospital, she held him tight to her, so that the bumps would cause him as little pain as possible. It was still a lot. But he didn’t mind all that much. This was not a bad place to be, not at all.

ELEVEN

Queen of the Night

In the hours since she had first looked into the haunted eyes of Miriam Blaylock, Sarah Roberts had become more and more afraid. Now she held Miriam's hand; Miriam lay against her friend's shoulder.

Sarah had never seen her like this and so far had not been able to find out what was wrong.

Incredibly, they were using the Concorde, a plane Miriam had vowed she'd never fly again. Groaning and thudding came from under the floor where the four engines lay embedded in the wings close to the fuselage. For the first ten minutes of the flight, the cabin smelled of jet fuel. They'd taken this plane for years, believing it to be safe. Then had come the crash and a morbidly careful period of evaluation on Miriam's part. She'd gone over every detail a thousand times, imagined herself in the cabin of a plane she took often, looking out the window at the fire, hearing the awful roaring, feeling the vibration and then the sickening moment of free fall.

For the human beings in it, death would have been instantaneous. Miriam would have lost consciousness only slowly, as she was inch by inch consumed by the flames.

She'd had Sarah get every document there was about the refit. Despite all that had been done, she was still in a fright over flying on it. But she had insisted, absolutely.

Sarah thought perhaps the other Keepers had assaulted her. If so, it would be an anecdote for the book she'd been secretly writing about the Keepers for these twenty years of her captivity.

Sarah could tell that Miriam was awake. She was always awake unless

she'd fed or done opium in extraordinary quantities. Miriam's hand was soft and cool. Sarah lifted it to her lips, enjoying the heft of it, the taste of the skin, the softness against her lips. She inhaled the sweet smell of her friend's skin. Miriam sighed and laid her lips upon Sarah's neck, sucking until it almost hurt.

Sarah closed her eyes, listening to the howl of the engines, feeling the great soul beside her, loving her deeply and dearly . . . and feeling the evil of her at the same time.

Sarah told herself that a wolf might kill a deer, but never would it be murder. She told herself that. As a doctor, though, she was committed to human welfare, and that certainly did not include killing. The creature beside her had eaten children and fathers and mothers — had *eaten* them. As had she herself . . . in the shame of her secret life.

And yet, this was the agony of it: nature uses predators to ensure balance. One reason that human overpopulation was destroying the world was that the Keepers had failed in their natural mission. There were not enough of them to make a difference.

Miriam called herself part of the justice of the earth. And Sarah could not deny that. She had looked into the teary eyes of victims, seen them fade as she did her own clumsy sucking. She had known what it was to be engorged with human blood. Afterward, you felt as light as air. Any small imperfection disappeared. You became supple. Your skin regained a girl's flush and milk. And your heart — it beat with a happiness that seemed founded in something that was deeply right. You had dared the abyss, to do the bidding of nature. What an addiction it was, the addiction to death.

Sarah knew that she was using her strange new relationship to the laws of nature to justify herself. But she had not been given a choice. Miriam had fallen in love with her and had infused her own blood into Sarah's veins without her permission, putting her to sleep to do it. Sarah had awakened exhausted, aching in every bone, not knowing what had happened.

There had begun an awful struggle. She had tried to live on blood bought from commercial blood banks. She had tried to live on animal blood. Then

she had refused to live at all. She had actually died and been put in a coffin and slid in among Miriam's other expended lovers in her attic.

But Miriam had used Sarah's own research to bring her back. Sarah had eaten, then. She had not been strong enough to return to the terror of the coffin. Because, when Keeper blood flowed in human veins, you could live for centuries, but you could never really die.

Sarah had experienced the silent, trapped sensation of being unable to move, to breathe, to so much as flutter an eyelid in that coffin. She had been aware of the dark around her, of the lid above her, of the rustle of insects along her skin and the murmur of street traffic outside.

She'd heard Miriam playing her viola, had heard jets passing overhead, had heard the lapping mutinies of the East River and the hiss of the FDR Drive. She gone mad a hundred times, mad in the locked-up remains of her body. All around her, there had been other such coffins, some of them thousands of years old, that contained other trapped souls.

Then she had heard the tap of heels on the wide attic boards, and light had swept in, and her vague eyes had seen a smooth shadow, and life, *life*, had come marching up her arm like a grand orchestra pounding a grand tarantella.

Miriam had read Sarah's studies and her papers, and devised an experiment that had worked. For the first time in two thousand years of trying, she'd brought a lover back. She'd tried with the others, too, but it had been too late even for the most recent one, John Blaylock.

Alive again, Sarah had wandered the streets of a new world. She could be entranced by the play of sunlight on the edge of a spoon. A child's rude singing sounded the carillons of heaven. Each breath that swept her freshened lungs felt like the caress of an angel. She had learned to live in the cathedral of the moment, for the supple touch of fine leather and the sweet of morning air, for the fluttering of a bird in the birdbath or the drip of water in the kitchen sink. She had given away her doubts and her fears with her lost past (where there had even been a lover and a little apartment and a spreading career). She had given away her terror of the coffins upstairs, to the extent that she would sometimes go and lie in her own and draw the lid down and

stay there until the rigors of asphyxiation thrilled her throbbing sex and made her frantic. It was sick, she knew that. Miriam's love had transformed her from a healthy young physician into a decadent, murdering libertine with a sick and sorrowing soul. But it was so beautiful . . . or it had been, until this awful thing happened, whatever it was.

When, just after being resurrected, Sarah had looked upon her savior for the first time, she had spontaneously dropped to her knees. She was Lazarus, was Dr. Sarah Roberts, enslaved by gratitude to she who had returned her to life. To try and find some sense in the servility that she now felt, she had read long and carefully in the literature of sexual enslavement and finally into the lore of zombies. She worked hard to free herself, even going to Haiti to interview a man who had been killed in a zombie ritual and brought back by a witch doctor. He, also, was mysteriously bound to the man who had dug him up and resurrected him by rubbing him with a foam made from the blood of rats. The moment this man's teary, passive eyes had met her own, she had known that they were kin.

Miriam drew back from her, whispered to her, "I ought to really punish you, you devil."

Sarah turned to her, looked into her amazing eyes, with their child's fresh intensity. You would think she was just a girl, to look at those eyes. There was not the slightest trace that this was an ancient being. If you were observant, you would see that the lipstick was painted on a strangely narrow mouth, and you might suspect that some inner thing had been done to fill out the cheeks. But that would take a very acute observer. To most people, Miriam appeared to be a ravishing, wonderfully dressed, wonderfully affluent young woman, still dewy from girlhood.

Miriam sighed, her breath's heavy sourness filling Sarah's nostrils. "Bring me vodka," she said.

Sarah got up from her seat, moved down the aisle toward the steward, who was serving meals in the second cabin. "Oui, mademoiselle?"

"Madame in Seven-A wishes vodka, very cold, served without ice."

“Oui, mademoiselle, a moment.”

“Immediately, please.”

The steward understood her tone and poured the drink, a large one. Sarah took it to Miriam, who emptied it in an instant.

It was clear that Miriam had been through absolute hell over these past days. Sarah had suspected that her odyssey to the conclaves would be a disappointment, but whatever had happened was far worse than that.

“Another?”

“Perhaps in a few minutes.”

“I know how you hate this thing.”

“I just wonder if the repairs are satisfactory.”

“We have to hope.”

“Another vodka. Bring the bottle.”

Sarah went back to the steward. “She wants the bottle.”

“A service of caviar, perhaps?”

“No, only the vodka.”

“Mademoiselle, is madame afraid? Would she like the pilot to come and speak to her?”

“That I cannot ask her.”

“I understand,” the steward said. He had concluded that Sarah was a personal servant, and that madame would be taking all her service from her, and gave her the vodka on a small tray. “Will you want me to call you for her meal?”

“Madame will not be taking a meal.”

“Very well.” He returned to his passengers. The service in the three cabins of the Concorde was exactly the same, but by tradition the third cabin was for tourists, the second for business people, and the first for personages. Air France might not know just how distinguished this particular passenger was, but Sarah had made sure, as always, that Miriam was treated with the greatest respect.

The fact that Sarah was not privately reconciled to Miriam’s way of life and even doubted her right to her prey did not mean that she did not respect her. Miriam was a creature of God, also, and a triumph of nature. To a scientist, which Sarah most certainly was, her blood was one of nature’s truly remarkable organs. It had six different cell types, including one that Sarah had watched under the electron microscope trapping and destroying virus particles, transforming them back into the chemicals out of which they were constructed.

The blood sometimes seemed almost intelligent, the way it laid traps for bacteria. And the cells were remarkable, too. Unlike human cells, they did not scavenge for free radicals with mechanisms that grew stiff and unresponsive with age. Instead, the blood converted them into nutrient components, actually changing their atomic structure.

Sarah had allowed herself to imagine that Miriam *was* her blood, that the body was only a receptacle for this brilliant organ.

She had watched it as it worked in her own veins, how after a period of acclimatization, it had adapted itself to her needs, preserving those parts of her own blood that were essential to her life and adding most of its strengths as well.

It could not change the structure of her cells, though, which continued to try to destroy free radicals. What Miriam’s blood did in Sarah’s veins was to destroy so many of them that little more was necessary. Still, Sarah aged. Just very, very slowly.

Sometimes, she would go to the attic and whisper to the others, “John, I’m

coming, Lollia, I will be here soon.” She would tell them of Miriam’s doings. She would tell them of her own work, trying to find a way to bring them back to life. How it must be in those coffins, she could scarcely imagine. To have been like that for even a few days had been so extremely awful that she still had nightmares about it. But Lollie had been there for three hundred years. And there were others who were little more than teeth and long strings of hair, who had worshiped at Miriam’s feet when she was pharaoh’s daughter.

The selfishness of Miriam’s making herself gifts of these “lovers” had crossed Sarah’s mind. This was an unambiguous evil, and for a time she’d believed that she could find in herself moral ground to sabotage Miriam, on this basis.

But the nights in that bed of theirs, the *nights* . . . and living Miriam’s exquisite life with her, playing their violas together and going to the club, and seeing the world through a Keeper’s eyes, as if everything were always new-washed with rain — she did not have the strength to say no.

She wanted Miriam right now. To lie naked in her steel-strong arms, to taste of the kisses of a mouth that killed — for her it was an ecstasy more appealing, she suspected, than that of being lifted in the arms of God.

The truth was that she revered this creature, whom she ought to hate. She had not the moral strength to hate the pleasures of being Miriam’s possession. Had she been the maid of Hera or Proserpine’s sotted girl, it would not have been different. A human being had fallen in love with a terrible god.

When Miriam traveled, Sarah made all the arrangements. Normally, she stayed beside her lady, making certain that everything was perfect, that all was as she desired and deserved. It filled her heart with a deliciously awful joy to serve Miriam. She understood her history and her significance to mankind. Miriam’s family had invented Egyptian civilization. Her own father had moved the Israelites into Canaan. As far as he was concerned, he was only expanding his holdings, but the significance to human history was, of course, remarkable. Miriam herself had created and nurtured dozens of different aspects of western civilization. Her image haunted our literature. She was the Shulamite maiden, she was Beatrice, she was Abelard’s Heloise and Don Quixote’s Dulcinea — or more accurately, she had once sung a song

for a hopelessly smitten Miguel de Cervantes, and become the model for his character.

She wasn't Shakespeare's Dark Lady, but she had known the girl. The story of her mother, Lamia, had inspired Greek mythology. It had emerged in the seventeenth-century *Anatomy of Melancholy* and the whispered legends of Lamia had inspired John Keats's *Lamia and Other Poems* in 1820.

There were many Keepers, but Miriam and her parents had been more influential in human affairs than any of the others.

And now she was the friend and lover of a humble doctor from Queens, whose highest ambition should probably be to make her happy and keep her safe. Instead, Sarah was caught in an eerie web, unable to believe that Miriam had the right to kill, but also unable to do anything but serve her.

In a year, a Keeper took perhaps twenty lives. Sarah herself took ten . . . and each squirming, weeping victim consumed part of her heart. After a murder, she would weep for days. She would resolve to quit. She would renew her efforts to find a way of feeding on blood-bank blood.

Sarah returned with the vodka and served Miriam a second drink. "I wish I could comfort you," she murmured. "I know something's wrong, something more than just the flight. Please tell me what it is."

Miriam knocked back the drink. "Five thousand dollars a seat and still I cannot smoke."

"You can in the car." She glanced up at the map that was set into the bulkhead. They were traveling at Mach 2, just passing over the Irish coast. "Just two more hours, madame."

"Why are you calling me that?"

"Because you seem so regal today."

Miriam took her chin and turned her head until they were sitting like two intimate girls, face-to-face, their noses almost touching. "I have been through

unbelievable hell. And I am angry, Sarah. I am angry at you.”

“I know you are.” She’d gone to spend a few days in the Berkshires, away from the club, away from Miriam’s demands. She had not taken her cell phone.

“Love, if I can’t count on you, who can I count on?”

Sarah felt her cheeks grow hot, as they had in the hotel room when she’d been bathing Miriam and had seen the rough areas and angry blushing of her skin. That was healing trauma. Because Sarah knew the power of Keeper blood to overcome injury, she was aware that Miriam had suffered fearsome damage.

“Tell me what happened, love.”

Miriam turned her face to the window.

Sarah touched the black silk arm of her blouse, but Miriam said nothing more.

Very well. Sarah had learned to accept Miriam’s moods. “You look so extraordinary in those clothes,” she offered, gently flattering her, hoping to win a more full response. There was none.

Whatever had happened in Paris, at least it had brought those archaic Chaneles to an end. They had gone to Maria Luisa and gotten some delicious Eric Bergère designs. Miriam had been extremely compliant at the shop, spending twenty thousand dollars without complaint, and revealing truly wonderful taste and an extraordinary awareness of what might flat-ter her the most.

Sarah gazed at her. She was so splendid that you never got tired of looking at her, and in that fabulous black blouse of sheer silk with a bloodred satin body shirt beneath — well, the effect was almost perfect. The way it held her breasts high and suggested her curves was marvelous. This ensemble had been created by a hand that loved and understood the female form.

“I was nearly killed.”

Sarah leaned close to her, kissed her cold cheek, laid her lips there a long time, until she felt her body tickling within itself, lusting for the quick finger, the deep tongue. “Don’t say that if it isn’t true.”

Miriam bridled at the statement. “How dare you!”

“I’m sorry! I — just — please forgive me.”

Miriam leaned back, closed her eyes. “Is the passport going to be all right?”

“Perfect.”

“Why so?”

She had asked this about the passport ten times. It was a perfect passport because it belonged to a real person. “Leonore is a master of disguise,” Sarah said.

“Leonore,” she said. “Do you think she would be a good meal?”

“Miriam, you know I don’t find that sort of thing funny.”

“Maybe she’ll replace you, then, and you’ll be the meal.” She smiled that slight, fetching smile that looked so innocent and concealed such danger. “That might be best.”

She was truly a mistress of verbal torture. “I would open my own veins for you,” Sarah said.

“I suppose so.” Miriam’s voice was leached of emotion. “You’re certain of the passport?”

“Look at it. It’s you.”

The instant Sarah had understood that Miriam was without a passport, she’d gone down to the Veils, where Leonore was supervising the cleaning crew, and gotten her to make herself up to resemble Miriam. A slightly fuzzy

passport photo had been taken to an expeditor with a two-hundred-dollar fee and a thousand-dollar bribe. Miriam's new passport — in the name of Leonore Patton — was in Sarah's hand by five that afternoon. The next morning, Sarah had come over on the Concorde to rescue their distressed lady. That was yesterday.

Word had passed through the upper echelons of New York society that something untoward had happened to Miriam in Paris.

The whole club was in vigil, CEOs, aristocrats, celebrities, the brilliant and the beautiful. There would be a hundred of the most fashionable people in New York waiting to greet the queen when her plane landed.

“Please tell me what happened.”

Miriam's eyes met hers. Sarah forced herself not to look away, but Miriam was certainly furious. “In good time,” she said.

“I wish you could be at peace.”

“I cannot be at peace.”

Miriam's hand came into hers. Her eyes became like penetrating needles. “You remember I have spoken of Martin Soule,” she said slowly, evaluating Sarah, trying to look into her mind.

“He inspired Baroness Orczy. He was the real Scarlet Pimpernel.”

Quick as a flash, Miriam's iron fingers were crushing Sarah's wrist. “You're not sad,” she snarled.

“I'm scared! What's happening?”

“I ought to put you back in the attic with the others, you ungrateful *bitch!*”

“Miriam?”

Miriam released her wrist, tossing it away from her with a contemptuous gesture.

“Miriam, please tell me what’s wrong!”

“My French has become archaic,” she snapped. “I want a teacher standing before me at ten tomorrow morning. Ten exactly.”

“Yes,” Sarah said, aware that her voice was shaking badly, “a teacher at ten.”

There was a silence, during which the jet shuddered slightly. “I needed you, Sarah, and you weren’t there for me.”

Sarah closed her eyes. Tears swam out beneath the lids.

“You weep for me?”

Sarah nodded. “You’re the love of my life.”

“And yet you ignore the emergency number. You love me, but you want me dead, Sarah. That’s the truth of it.”

“I don’t want you dead.”

“You’ve hated me ever since I gave you my blood.” Her lips curled. “The gift of eternal life!”

“You ought to have asked me.”

“You’re an idiot, Sarah.” Then, unexpectedly, she smiled. “But I do enjoy you. You’re such a scientist!”

“You’re a murderer, Miriam.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“And I love you, too.”

Miriam said, “The vodka’s warm.”

Sarah got up like a robot and moved down the aisle. The faces of the other

passengers seemed vividly alive, their cheeks rich with blood. Sarah knew that this was an early sign of her own hunger. In a week, she would need to feed again. She'd try to stave it off, as she always did, with the blood she bought from the little blood bank on Thirtieth Street.

"I need a colder bottle," she said to the steward.

"Of course, mademoiselle." He drew a new one out of the refrigeration unit in his cart, put the old one in.

She took it back to their seats and poured Miriam another drink, then sat down. "I want to help you," she said.

"You're dangerously incompetent."

"I'm the best you've got!"

"For the while," Miriam said, her voice almost indifferent, as if the subject was no more than dull.

A shock passed through Sarah. "If you'd tell me what I've done —"

"I called you and called you."

"You've told me that fifty times! But you have to tell me what happened. Why did you need me? Why are we running like this? Miriam, for the love of God, what's happening?"

The pitch of the engines changed, followed by the angle of approach. "Finally," Miriam said, "you agree that you've proved yourself hopelessly incompetent."

Sarah nodded.

"So you agree that I can't take the risk of relying on you."

Sarah nodded again, and this time tears sprayed her breast. "Miriam, no matter what you decide —"

“It’s decided.”

“At a time like this, you need me. Whatever it is, I can help. I can correct my mistakes and do better.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“You’re being chased. We’ve got to get you out of the house. Hide you.”

“Do we?”

The plane roared, made a steep turn into its final approach. “It’s all right,” Sarah said automatically, “everything’s fine.”

The steward reminded them to place their seat backs upright and fasten their seat belts. He came past and collected the vodka. “Will Madame be wanting a wheelchair?” he asked.

“Mademoiselle will not,” Miriam said.

A short time later, the plane was drawing up to the gate. The moment it stopped, Sarah stepped into the aisle in order to prevent any passengers behind them from pushing past Miriam or impeding her way.

As far as the world knew, two resplendently beautiful young women stepped off the plane, one discreetly attentive to her companion, who walked with her cool gray eyes fixed to the middle distance, emeralds and gold glowing around her neck, a wide-brimmed Philippe Model hat on her head. The other girl might have been a friend, slightly less wealthy, or even an indulged secretary or servant. Indulged, because she was so well kept herself, with her superbly tailored green *peau de soie* suit and her fashionably tousled hair.

They passed through customs with the easy indifference of people so powerful that such things did not matter to them. The officers were quick, discreet. “Welcome home, Dr. Roberts; welcome back, Miss Patton.”

When they appeared in the Concorde Lounge, there was a discreet spatter of applause. Miriam slowed, then stopped, then turned. She raised a gloved

hand, smiled. Nobody who did not know the truth could possibly have imagined, not for an instant, that she was anything but a girl — a girl with wise eyes, but still a girl.

She stepped forward into the richly dressed crowd.

They surrounded her, kissing her cheeks, touching her as children do a mother they have not seen in a very long time. In each pair of eyes was the same regard, the same awe. Sarah watched this with the dispassion of a captive. Most of them probably thought of her only as the sparkling mistress of the most exclusive club in all of the Americas, a secret, exquisite club, a place where the most powerful of people could express their true selves without shame or restraint, where there were no restrictions . . . once you had passed the door. Some few knew part of the truth, the whispered reality of Miriam.

Only Leonore Patton was entirely certain of the truth. Leonore was being brought along. She was being educated. Sarah knew that Miriam planned to infuse Leo with her blood. Now she wondered if she herself would be killed or set adrift on her own?

People murmured around them, expressing happiness to see Miriam — some familiar faces, others less so — while Sarah anguished inside over what was taking place.

Some were staring with the mixture of fascination and horror that the true insiders shared, the ones who knew to be thrilled but also terrified when she swept them into some dark corner of the Veils, and kissed their necks in a moment of tipsy excess.

Miriam went to a young Latino — a kid she had marked as an upcoming star — and kissed him, brushing his cheek with the rough tip of her tongue. Miriam was never wrong about such things as stars. Carlos Rivera would certainly become one. So, for that matter, would Kirsten Miller who stood beside him, her careful, beautiful face radiating intelligence.

Then Miriam was finished with them, speeding out with Sarah behind her. Luis, their driver, came up to take the bags that others had conducted through

customs. Inner New York, secret New York, had been waiting for nothing but her return. Now the delicious terror could continue. Was she going to feed? Would it be some forgotten soul, ready for death? Or someone who deserved it — one she had judged in her correct and careful way? If so, would it be one they knew, perhaps some garish magnate who had tried to lie his way past the Veils? If it was, then who must they carefully fail to notice was missing, who next?

“One of my shorts paid off,” Sarah said after Luis had pulled into traffic and Miriam had settled back with a cigarette.

“How much?”

“It was BMC Software. We made thirty-three percent.”

“On what?”

“Six hundred thousand.”

Miriam smoked, gazed out the window. Sarah had heard the little grunt of approval that the awareness that she had made nearly two hundred thousand dollars had drawn from her.

Suddenly she snatched off the big hat, which she had been wearing since Paris. Then she said, “My head is warm.” She inclined it toward Sarah, who set about removing the wig. Even when Sarah had bathed her in the enormous tub at the Crillon, she had not allowed this wig to be taken off.

“Are you ready for this, Luis,” Miriam called, her voice tart with angry irony.

The silky blond strands of hair that had waved in the wind like fronds in the sea were gone. The effect was so disturbing that Sarah drew back. Miriam smiled, her face looking utterly false and improbably small on her strange, long head. In Egypt, they had concealed their heads beneath tall headdresses. Raise the crown from Nefertiti, and you would see Miriam’s mother with the same long head. She was called Lamia only among her own kind, and in myth. In the nations she had ruled, she had been many queens.

Miriam's eyes were wet. The baldness embarrassed her, even before Sarah, who knew every intimate stroke of her being.

“Oh, my love! My love, what — what — ”

“They tried to burn me to death,” she said.

“The other Keepers? My dear God!”

Miriam's eyes bored into Sarah's. In that moment, she seemed more profoundly alien than ever before. They were the eyes of a goddess . . . or a predatory insect. Glassy, cruel, and way too quick, the way they flickered about.

Sarah's heart broke for her. Lamia had died by fire, and Miriam had spent many a Sleep with her head in Sarah's lap, crying out as she helplessly relived the horror of that day.

Sarah threw her arms around Miriam. “Miri,” she whispered, “Miri, I will never let that happen to you, *never!*”

“We're in terrible trouble, child.”

“I know it, oh, God, I know it.”

Miriam came close to her, took her hand. They remained like that — both silent, Sarah weeping — on the long, traffic-choked drive home.

TWELVE

Sourball Express

Paul watched Justin Turk fool with his pipe. You weren't supposed to light up inside the building. Langley was a nonsmoking facility. Justin lit up. "You know," he said, "you're a good ten grades away from the use of exclusive air transport."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You requisitioned a Falcon Jet assigned to General Ham Ratling and took it from Bangkok to Paris on a noncontracted run. Meaning that we got a forty-eight-thousand-dollar bill from the Air Force, plus a letter from Secretary Leisenring. A very pissed-off letter. The general and his wife and kids all ended up in first class on Thai Airways, and we got a bill for that, too."

"It was a hot pursuit, Justin. For Chrissakes."

"A hot pursuit." He pulled a yellow pad out of his desk. "So how do I write this up? Give me words, buddy."

"Agents were in hot pursuit of a female vampire —"

Justin held up his hand. "Say something else."

"Terrorist."

"A terrorist contact incident has to be written up on one of those — lemme see here — Candy!"

Candy Terrell, his assistant, came in.

“I need a TCI form,” he told her.

“What the hell is a TCI form?”

“Terrorist Contact Incident. Every field op who thinks he’s encountered a terrorist, whether known or unknown, has to fill one out and file it within six hours. It’s been days in this case, of course. But nobody expects less from our boy.”

Candy left the room.

“We’ll return to the plane issue later. I thought you were injured.”

“It healed.”

“In two days? The police report said you had a knife wound in your left shoulder that took eighteen stitches. Why isn’t your arm in a sling?”

“I heal fast. Always have.”

Justin cleared his throat and shuffled some papers. Paul was perplexed. He had healed fast — incredibly fast. He should have been in a sling. He should have had a cast.

Why wasn’t Justin curious about that? Paul sure as hell was.

“You also have a body coming back. Was it on the transport with you?”

“The French flew it from Villacoublay to Ramstein. It oughta be in Santa Clara tomorrow. It’s being delivered directly to the family.”

“You’ve written a letter?”

Paul had not written a letter. He couldn’t do that, as Justin well knew. “It has to come out of the pool.” Next of kin were handled out of a central office when agents died or were injured in the course of secret operations.

“You do it. Let the pool send it.”

“Okay.”

“Because I want you to feel it.”

Paul sucked in breath. He really did not want to deck Justin Turk, his only ally at Langley, but Paul’s tendency was to go physical when he felt threatened, and an insult like that was damned threatening. He was sitting here, and getting this. “I took a hit, too,” he said. “We had a terrible time in there. Just awful.”

“You couldn’t have stayed out of harm’s way? I mean, given the French presence on French soil?”

“We couldn’t.” What else was there to say? Just let it go. The desks never understood operational issues, never had, never would.

Justin was watching him carefully. Paul realized that the needle had been inserted on purpose. Justin was probably trying to make him feel vulnerable, to throw him off-balance.

This meant only one thing: this was not a conversation. It was not a report. It was an interrogation and he was in trouble. The question was, what the hell kind?

“Well, Paul?”

“Justin, I don’t know what to say. I don’t like your drift. ‘Want me to feel it’ — what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You lose agents!”

“I’m fighting a war!”

“You and Don Quixote. We’re not sure about your war.”

“The White House is bothering the director, and you’re taking heat. Is that it?”

Justin did not reply, confirming the accuracy of Paul’s diagnosis.

“Tell ’em they have no need to know. Like the alien business.”

“The alien business! We don’t exactly have a directive from another world enforcing the secrecy in this particular case, Paul. All we have is you.”

“Thing is, how did the White House find out in the first place?”

“The French have a program. The Germans have a program. For all I know, everybody has a program. This is a secret that’s about to come out. And they are scared, because when that press conference has to be called, they will have to explain you and your killing spree, and they don’t know how to do that.”

“I’ve done my job. The French have done theirs. No doubt the others have, too. We’ve been effective. End of story.”

“Yeah, the French have a casualty rate of seventy percent. You’ve lost four out of eleven people in two years. That’s very effective, but not in the way we want, Paulie Paul.”

“Everybody loses personnel. I saw the French clean out dozens of vampires when I was there.”

“We prefer to call them differently blooded persons. DBPs.”

He did not like the drift of that. “Who decided this?”

“The Human Rights Directorate.” Justin shuffled more paper. “I printed out their memo for you.”

“I didn’t know we had a Human Rights Directorate.”

“It’s attached to the Office of the General Counsel. It was mandated under PD 1482 a year ago.”

Presidential Directive 1482 had established humane practices guidelines for the Directorate of Operations. Since Paul was not dealing with human beings, humane practices, he had assumed, were not relevant to his work.

Justin held the paper out to him. “We’ve been instructed to use these guidelines as the basis for a policy recommendation. We’re assembling facts for the Directorate of Intelligence now.”

Paul took the sheet of paper. “Who wrote this?”

Justin did not answer directly. “Read it.”

We must determine if these alleged vampires are human. These are the questions that should be asked in making this determination: Do they have language? Do they plan? Do they experience emotion? Have they enough basic intelligence to perform human activities? If all of these things, or most of them, are true, then it must be assumed that they are human or humanlike creatures, and should be afforded all the protection of the law.

Further, if indeed they must consume human flesh as a natural condition of their lives, then it is not clear that they can be identified as murderers or terrorists, any more than any predator species can be considered the murderer of its prey.

At the same time, there is nothing that prevents us from warning our citizenry about them and providing, for example, survival guidelines. The right of the prey to attempt to thwart the predator would seem to be as fundamental as the right of the predator to kill. However, their status as conscious creatures would preclude simply destroying them to relieve the threat.

Additionally, their relative rarity may identify them as an endangered species and, on that basis, mandate a level of protection of their habitats and limits on killing them.

In summary, the existence of these creatures should be made public, along with guidelines about how to avoid capture by them. Their lives would be protected under the International Human Rights Convention and possibly by endangered species acts in various countries. Their right to kill to eat must not be interfered with, except insofar as to aid legitimate attempts to avoid them.

Paul continued to stare at the document, not because he was still reading it, but because he was literally paralyzed with amazement. Had all of his blood descended into his feet? Is that why he felt this sense of having totally lost contact with reality? Or was it the piece of paper in his hand?

“Justin, could you tell me something? Could you tell me if Franz Kafka is still alive?”

“He’s dead. What’s the point?”

“Oh, I just thought he might have written this — you know — as a sort of kafkaesque joke.”

“Paul, I’m required to inform you that an investigation of your activities has been instituted. As there is a possibility that criminal charges could be levied against you, it is our official recommendation to you that you retain counsel. If you don’t have a lawyer of your own —”

“I haven’t got a damn lawyer!”

“Then you can apply to the Office of General Counsel for a referral to a legal representative who has an appropriate clearance match with you, so that you can discuss your situation with him freely. If you cannot afford to pay your lawyer, you can be referred to a legal aid lawyer with a clearance.”

Paul thought, *Just sit, keep breathing, don’t turn white, don’t turn red, don’t hit anybody or break anything.*

“Paul?”

“Just a minute. I’m trying to decide if I should laugh or cry. What’s your thought? Tears?”

“I didn’t write it, Paul.”

“Damn it, Justin, don’t you see what this is?”

“It’s an attempt to recognize the human rights of an alien species.”

“It’s a license for the vampires to hunt and kill human beings. Jesus Christ, I lost my father to these things! A little boy waits, and a wife, she waits and waits, and Dad just never comes home. You go on for years wondering, ‘Did he die or get killed, or did he walk out on us?’ It eats away at your heart and makes you hard, and gradually, it kills your heart. In my case, I found my dad. Most people never find a damn thing.”

“The government has decided that the differently blooded are part of nature.”

“Justin, pardon my stupidity, but aren’t we out there trying to protect people? I mean, isn’t that the fundamental promise of government? If a rancher gets his cattle killed by coyotes, you know what happens? He goes out and he damn well shoots the buggers or traps ’em. Nature made the coyote to eat cattle. But that doesn’t mean the rancher’s just gonna let it happen.”

“You’re under investigation for suborning your orders, Paul.”

Suborning was an ugly word. It meant misusing your orders or intentionally misinterpreting them. It was the kind of word you heard in trials. “That’s the criminal route.”

“I told you to get a lawyer. This is a serious situation, buddy. You could be looking at a count of murder for every single creature you’ve killed.”

“Justin, for the love of God, help me!”

Justin stared at him like he was something in a damn zoo.

“This is coming from the White House.”

“A bunch of college kids with no experience of life. Look, this is about people being killed. You know — mothers and sons, fathers and daughters.”

Justin worked at his pipe. “I’m only the messenger.”

“Why don’t you tell Mr. President something for me — for this stupid grunt nobody who just happens to value human life above all things. A

couple of days ago in Paris, I was in a room — deep underground — where I saw maybe half a million dead people stacked in rows . . . long, long rows. Every one of them was a tragedy. Every one of them was a broken family, or a broken heart, or at least a life stolen from somebody to whom it was precious.”

“People will have the right to defend themselves.”

“From something that can move so fast you can’t see it, that’s four times as strong as you are and twice as smart? I don’t think so.”

“The state will protect them.”

“Only one way to do that. Kill the vampires.”

“Paul, a stupid rancher does the environmentally unsound thing when he traps and poisons the coyotes on his place. A smart one plans so that his herd is never in jeopardy. The state’s simply gonna be the smart rancher.”

“But they’ll get through. They’ll find ways!”

“Some people will be killed. But it’s been like that for all of history, hasn’t it?”

“Let me pose you a hypothetical. You wake up some night, and one of these things is drilling into your neck. What do you do — I mean, personally?”

“This isn’t going to happen to me.”

“Hypothetically. Do you call Nine-one-one? Come on, be real, here! Christ!”

“The good rancher uses various appropriate and effective means to chase off the coyotes. We’ll be proactive in the same way.”

Paul got to his feet. “I’m in the middle of a mopping up operation in Paris. Gotta get back.”

“We are not going to continue with this barbaric exercise of yours. It’s over, Paul. Totally and completely *over!* Okay? And there are some people you need to meet.”

Danger always tapped on Paul’s shoulder before most people realized that it had entered the picture. Something about Justin’s tone of voice suggested that these people were going to give him a whole lot of trouble.

The U.S. had secret prisons for people who had broken the law in the course of classified activities. The law in those facilities was a strange, surrealistic version of the law on the outside. You had rights — just not the right to leave. Administrative prisons, that was what they called them.

Well, he still had the right to leave at the moment, or at least the ability, so he damn well walked out the door. He went through the outer office and into the corridor. There were two men coming toward the office. He went the other way.

Behind him, he heard their footsteps get quicker and louder. Goddamn, he didn’t want this. He’d been part of this organization all of his adult life. He had stood before the Memorial Wall and wept a tear for fallen comrades. He had loved CIA and stood by CIA and been absolutely loyal to CIA, no matter how dumb he thought the latest director was or how misguided the latest policy.

He got the hell out of the building, hurrying out the new entrance to the west lot where he’d parked. As he got into the pretty little Saab that had been waiting in his garage for the past two years, he wondered if he would be fast enough to pass the gate or if Justin had already called them and told them to detain him.

He pulled up to the guardhouse, showed his ID card, waited. The guard looked at it, made a notation, and opened the barrier. He drove out and was soon headed for the freeway. It was a sunny summer afternoon, and once he was out of Reston, the world came to appear innocent again, even sweet. He loved the people in the cars, felt their hopes and loves with the special empathy that only a person who has killed in the line of duty can ever know. There is something about the taking of human life that makes human life

seem incredibly precious. Even if killing somebody is necessary, the fact is that your dead remain with you all the rest of your days. Not your dead vampires, though. Only the people.

What if people knew that they were liable to be hunted down and killed, and it wasn't against the law? The very notion was absurd.

On this deceptively peaceful afternoon, he knew that he had to act with the utmost professionalism and speed, or he was going to be hunted down himself. Right this minute, there was an urgent meeting taking place somewhere in the building — probably in Justin's office — covering the issue of Paul Ward. He'd become what was known as a "runner," an agent who, when his actions were challenged, had immediately taken off. To CIA, this response was *prima facie* evidence of guilt. The Company was very skilled at hunting such people down.

What he needed to do was clear: he needed to kill as many vampires as he possibly could between now and the time they did manage to catch up with him.

He took 495 to 95, thinking that he'd go to Baltimore, park the car somewhere, and take mass transit to the Amtrak station.

According to what little he knew about the vampire in America, he needed to go first to New York. The reporter Ellen Wunderling had disappeared there researching the gothic subculture. In Paul's opinion, it was possible that she had stumbled across a real vampire, discovered too much, and been eaten.

So he'd go back to the plan of looking for her. She had disappeared in New York, so that would be his first destination.

He was a man who carried a lot of cash, always, so he'd be able to put some space between himself and his pursuers.

What a hell of a thing that he'd sacrificed lives for the French Book of Names and now he couldn't use it. He couldn't read a word of it himself, and he certainly couldn't stop by NSA and ask them to help him with the translation.

When he reached the exit for Route 32, he decided to make it interesting for whoever would be coming after him. He took 32 up to Columbia, which was a big enough town to have both a bus system and a taxi company.

He went to the Columbia Mall and parked in the covered parking, where his car would be harder to spot. He turned on his cell phone and strolled into the mall. It was so nice, so damn American. He went into the Sears, strolling easily, looking at the washing machines, the clothes. He bought a couple of shirts, a pair of pants, a blue blazer and some black sneakers. When he came out of the men's room, he looked like the same guy in different clothes. He knew that you weren't going to be able to disguise Paul Ward, but every little bit helped.

He dropped his phone in a lady's shopping bag. They'd follow that, for sure, probably track it down in about an hour. There was going to be some excitement in her sweet life.

He went outside and hailed a cab, which he took to the campus of St. John's College in Annapolis. A thousand years ago, he'd been a St. Johnnie for a couple of semesters. The school followed a great-books curriculum, starting with Homer and ending with Freud and Einstein. He'd read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* under Professor Klein, who'd had his fingers broken by the Nazis for playing the piano better than an Aryan. Still, as much as it hurt, he had played of an evening, Debussy and Chopin and Satie . . . He hadn't weaned young Paul away from doo-wop, but the playing had been awesome.

Paul had been the only kid in the whole school who'd favored the war in Vietnam, and also been dumb enough to put a statement up on the bulletin board about it. As a result, he'd soon found himself being recruited by CIA, and thus had begun the rest of his life. Old George Hauser, of blessed memory, had sat with him on that bench right over there under the great oak and spoken to him of what it meant to be an operations officer, how hard it really was, and just how disappointing it could be . . . and how much it mattered.

He went up the brick walk toward McDowell Hall, the administration building and meeting hall, where the choir had met. The young voices returned, calling to him from the quiet that he entered when he entered the

building. Downstairs was the coffee shop, and there also was the bulletin board where his current life had begun.

There were people here and there, but the campus was quiet in midsummer. He went through the basement of McDowell and out into the little quad. There was Randall Hall, where he had lived — given a single room even though he was only a freshman, largely because they could not imagine anybody who had written an entrance essay like his successfully living in close proximity to another person. He'd written on Saint Thomas Aquinas, the *Summa Theologica*. In those days, he had been a fiercely ardent Catholic. How long ago that was, the days of the skinny kid with the close-cropped hair and the delicate wire glasses.

He wondered why he had come here. Was it because he was dying, and the inner man knew it? He'd seen many an operational death that started with just this kind of official abandonment. *I will not go to prison*, he told himself as his eyes counted windows to his old room. How small Randall Hall looked now. He remembered it as a grand place. But look at it, you could almost jump over the damn thing. A vampire probably could, or come close.

He'd gotten to this place on the back of a hell of a scholarship, the Stephens Piper Award for Scholastic Diligence. Full tuition to the college of his choice.

He thought to himself, *How do I kill vampires, now that I am alone? Dare I assemble my people? No, they'd all be stopped at their ports of entry.*

He'd signal Becky not to come back — stop at the college library, see if they had a public computer. He'd send her an e-mail, using the team's own emergency code. She could share it with the ones still in Kuala. He went over to the library, which was wide open and, typical of St. John's rather tangential approach to organization, totally unmanned.

He booted up the computer behind the librarian's counter. No password needed, of course. St. John's was still St. John's. It wasn't that they were especially trusting. It was details — they avoided them. Was it the best college in the United States? Not by all standards, but by any standard at all, it was the most intellectually healthy.

His opinion. He opened up Outlook Express and logged onto their server. One code he'd never expected to use was "sourball express." It meant the unthinkable, that CIA had turned against the operation and everybody needed to go to ground immediately, wherever they happened to be.

When she saw it, she would go into meltdown, but she would do her duty. He typed the words. Then he added, "Go to B." There was a guaranteed job, given his recent casualties. Bocage understood American intelligence very well. He'd give her a good home.

He sighed. It was likely that he would never see Becky again, never hear from her, never know how her life played itself out. Well, hell, that was the nature of this game. You worked in total darkness. Sometimes there were other figures beside you, sometimes you were alone. He could have loved that kid, though. He could have loved her.

He sent the e-letter from the name of the person who used the computer, then immediately shut it down. There was no point in encrypting it. All of their encryption was backdoored to CIA. The point was not to write anything that would make an Echelon search possible. He hadn't done that, he was quite sure. Pretty sure. Somewhat sure.

He went out, hurrying down toward the playing field and the bridge with its bus stop. There was the tree under which he had kissed Connie Bell. Even all these years later, he remembered just how sweet she had tasted, Connie Bell. She was the loveliest woman he had ever known, even to this day.

He recognized, abstractly, that he was crying. At least, his eyes were wet. What a damn asshole he could be. Fortunate that he was alone. He was crying for his lost career, for his despised honor, but more for Connie Bell and lost youth . . . and for Becky Driver, whom he had never gotten an opportunity to kiss.

He crossed the playing fields and came to the bridge and the bus stop. He'd take the bus into Baltimore, to Penn Station.

His pursuers would spend their time looking for cell phone usage and credit card usage and ATM usage. Nobody would take to the streets, nobody

would try to think as he thought, try to follow him in the old-fashioned way, by following his mind.

He did not intend to stop killing vampires simply because he'd lost his backing. To hell with the CIA; he was going to do this thing. Maybe he'd rid the United States of the creatures before his employers caught him, who knew? Let Justin stuff that in his damn pipe. Endangered species, hell. If he rendered the damn things extinct before they could be protected, what would those White House pantywaists do — apologize to the world for allowing such a terrible thing to happen?

They were totally out of touch with the situation. If the vampires were free to hunt openly — if they had rights and legal status — oh, God, how awful that would be. Inside of a decade, they would rule the world again.

The bus came, and he paid his fare and took a seat. He leaned back, closed his eyes. “Should’ve graduated from St. John’s, asshole,” he told himself. He could’ve become a professor of classical languages, a doctor of philosophy. He could have led a quiet life, tasted of love and marriage. Except if you went through a childhood like his you were — well, you were scarred. He was a strong man. Tough guy.

But why? What motivated him to get so good with a gun, to learn the art of killing, to live in the shadows?

He knew. Hell yes, he did. This particular mystery man had himself figured out. When his dad disappeared, the world changed for him. It became a place where anything could happen and nobody was safe. He was as he was for a very simple reason: he lived in deep inner terror, and it never, ever went away.

What if his kids disappeared? Or his wife, or him? He was too insecure to be able to enjoy real love.

In his lifetime, he'd killed at least fifty men, some of them with his bare hands. He'd tortured people, done it sadly and methodically, but with the same determination that drove him now. He could see beyond the immediate tragedy to the greater reward. He had wired up the gonads of Cambodian kids

to get information that would save American lives. Would the mothers and wives whose lovers and sons he'd sent home alive tell him he'd done wrong?

He transferred to another bus line and rode this one to the station. He went to the newsstand and picked up some magazines, then bought a club ticket for the 4:35 Metroliner.

There was always the possibility that the station was being watched, so he went to the men's room and sat in one of the stalls reading. Guys came and went, toilets flushed around him. He read about elk hunting, then paged through the classifieds. *Field and Stream* always reminded him of the last time he had hunted, which had been with his dad. They gone up along the Chattaminimi Ridge, and just at sunrise had seen a buck to stop your heart. That had been about two weeks before Dad was killed. The vampire would have been watching him by then, for sure. It was probably only a few feet away during that walk, pacing them, waiting, doing its research on its victim. "What's that smell?" young Paul had asked. "Bats," Dad had said. "There's a lotta bat caves up this way." It had not been bats.

He waited until four-thirty-two, then left the john and hurried across the station. This would cause a sudden redeployment of officers, if there was anybody there. He knew how to flush a tail.

There was no tail, and he also nearly missed the damn train. But he did not miss it. He got in the club car and found his seat, dropped down and opened another magazine, *Newsweek*. He stared at it, while actually evaluating his surroundings and all the other passengers. There was a woman with two little girls, some businessmen, a couple of tourists, maybe from eastern Europe. Any of these people could be tails preset on the train. He was especially interested in the mom. That'd be a clever twist, the kind of thing they might use when a pro was the target.

Still, he didn't think they were on him, or anywhere near him. He thought he'd have a good week before they decided to put him on wanted posters. Probably call him a serial child killer or something. Be sure to get police attention all over the damn country that way.

He gazed out the window. This was his America he was passing through,

this America of rolling hills and tidy suburbs, and rusty old factories clinging to the rail line. He remembered a very long time ago when this was still the New York Central Railroad, and the cars had been painted olive drab. He'd made his first trip to New York on this line, emerging in Penn Station with saucer eyes and fifteen wadded up dollar bills in his pocket. He'd stayed at the Taft Hotel on Seventh Avenue, with three other guys from the college.

It was on that trip that he had seen his first truly great painting, Van Gogh's *Starry Night* in the Museum of Modern Art. It was also on that trip that he had gone to his first opera, *Turandot*, about a cruel princess in a moonlit palace of long ago.

He had been a person, then — a young person, just awakening to the world around him. Fresh as the dew, drinking his first drink, smoking his first cigarette, lying in bed at night with Connie Bell on his mind.

He was a killing machine now, was Paul Ward. He'd lost his ability to love women. He could still have sex, and he did that whenever it was convenient, either with whores or casual pickups. But love? No. That part of his heart had gone out like a spent old coal.

It did not seem as though two and a half hours had passed, but they were entering the Pennsy Tunnel, sure enough.

New York. It probably wouldn't be where matters ended, because he intended to follow this path to the last vampire in the country. He probably should have started here. But nobody they were aware of had ever even seen a vampire in those days, so Tokyo looked like found money. Too bad the Europeans had kept their programs to themselves.

He left the train last, walked up the platform alone. Nobody was watching him. He crossed Penn Station. Nobody here, either. He went out, up the stairs to Eighth Avenue.

Cabs roared past, people swarmed the sidewalks. He was tired, bone tired, and he wanted a major drink. A whole lot of 'em. He'd really love to have found some bar fighters, but he was too deep in cover for that now. First chance he got, he planned to spend some time smashing his fists into a

goddamn wall.

You burned down your house, fella. Just jumped up and ran out of there. What the hell did you know? Maybe those two guys were gonna give you a decoration.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and started up the avenue. He wasn't going anywhere in particular — just away from here. He needed a place to crash, for sure. The flight from Paris to Dulles had been lousy — a middle seat, a kid with massive quantities of popcorn on one side of him, the King of Sweat on the other. Then touchdown and straight to Langley, and the shit spitting through the fan.

He was so fucking tired; he didn't think he'd ever been this tired. Tired or not, though, he was a man obsessed, and his obsession kept him going. He was here to find and kill the parasites that had taken his dad away from him, and he was going to do it. He slogged off down the street — and soon found himself passing the Theater at Madison Square Garden. Lou Reed was giving a concert tonight, which might actually make him feel a little less miserable. Also, dipping into a crowd never hurt. He'd use it to strip tails, then find a room later. He turned the corner and went up to the ticket booth, asked for one on the aisle anywhere in the auditorium.

“Sold out.”

“What're they scalping for?”

“Eight hundred up. Guy on the corner, black jacket, he's got a few.”

The hell with that. He couldn't afford anything nice, never had been able to. Intelligence work was not a comfortable life, especially not in the field. James Bond was a cruel fantasy.

He decided to hunt up a fleabag that would sell him a few hours sleep for cash. Then he would start his investigation, and he would find the parasites in their holes, and kill them all.

THIRTEEN

All Through the Night

Across the sour reaches of an uneasy day, Sarah had waited and Miriam had remained silent. At the last moment, Miriam decided not to go to Lou's concert, saying that she was too tired. But that wasn't it. Miriam was never tired. The truth was obvious to Sarah: she was too scared.

Whoever she was running from was obviously extremely dangerous. But who could be dangerous to her? The other Keepers might not like her, but they weren't going to terrorize her. Could it be a human being? That seemed impossible.

Miriam's world had gathered her in, shielding her behind its walls of money and power. Only a few of her admirers *really* knew — or, if they had been told, actually believed — how she sustained her life. They preferred to view the *frisson* of danger that clung to her as part of her extraordinary personal style — an intoxicating mixture of sin and savagery and high culture. Had they known for certain that the whispers were true, most of them would have abandoned her to the police. Or so they told themselves.

During the watchful, uneasy night, Sarah's hunger had increased. Miriam did not offer Sarah the comfort and support she was used to getting from her. Instead, Leo was given the responsibility of attending to Sarah's suffering, giving her aspirin, then preparing a pipe for her. Leo's presence, since they had returned from England, had obviously become more important to Miriam, and Sarah found this disturbing. She did not like Leo. She did not want her in their lives.

Sarah smoked in the library while Miriam paced and consulted an old Keeper tome. She seemed to be looking for something in her books, paging carefully through their heavily illuminated pages. Sarah had been unable to crack the incredibly intricate hieroglyphics, and when she asked to be taught

the language, Miriam had said, “Your species isn’t intelligent enough to learn it. I might possibly be able to teach you to read a list, but who wants to do that?”

Of course, all of the important information about the Keepers was recorded in long lists in the Books of Names. If Sarah was ever to complete her own book, she needed to know that language. But she would need professional linguists and cryptographers to help her, if Miriam would not.

Miriam was now wearing one of her many wigs, a darling bobbed affair, pert and blond, that made her seem even younger. In it, she appeared her usual resplendent self. But she had been *burned*. Who would have done that? Even if it had been Keepers, why was she still afraid? Keepers didn’t hunt each other down. They argued and fought, on occasion, but their battles were never to the death.

Could it have been a human being? If so, then what manner of human could have managed it?

Near dawn, Sarah had awakened from a sleep made gaudy by opium. She felt awful, her stomach full of acid, her body aching, her heart hammering. She knew the symptoms perfectly well: Miriam’s blood — that strange otherness within her — was literally devouring her in its hunger.

The symptoms were not unlike those of a severe bacterial infection, as her immune system fought the part of her that was turning against her own flesh. Soon, she would be feverish. Then later, she would grow delirious. In the end would come death. Sarah had to feed. She had to do it now.

She was surprised to hear more than two voices coming from the direction of the kitchen. At this hour — about six in the morning — it was most unusual for there to be a stranger in the house.

Sarah hurried toward the kitchen. She found Miriam and Leo attending to the needs of a shabby, heavy woman who wore a tattered coat and scarf and smelled of ammonia and sweat. Sarah the doctor saw immediately that she ate badly and drank — was, in fact, somewhat drunk right now — had untreated skin cancer, and, from the droopy look of her right eye, an

undiagnosed stroke.

Beneath her feet Sarah could feel the rumble of the big furnace, which was used to incinerate remnants.

She continued to look upon her — perhaps sixty, obviously a street person, eating a piece of Leo’s rhubarb pie. Leo could bake. She could make fried chicken. Now, her sleeves were rolled up. There were handcuffs in the hip pocket of her jeans.

Sarah was appalled. Leo was being allowed to participate in this. Leo! Had Miriam lost her mind? This sort of business was for the Keepers and the blooded only. Never should Leo have been involved.

“Hi,” Leo said brightly. “I got you what you need.”

Sarah looked at Miriam, who leaned against the drainboard, watching with those crystal eyes of hers. She murmured, “Do it now.”

Leo said to the woman, “More milk?”

She replied, “Sure, lady.”

“Miri,” Sarah said. She nodded toward Leo. You didn’t feed in front of one of those. No way!

Leo went behind her as if to go to the refrigerator. As she pulled open the door, she also drew a sock stuffed with ball bearings out of her tight jeans pocket. She positioned herself behind the busily eating woman.

Miriam had obviously instructed her. She had *instructed* an ordinary human in this terrible secret. What if Leo went to the police, tried blackmail — there would be no way to stop her unless she was imprisoned like Sarah, in the bondage of Keeper blood.

Leo hit the woman. It was a gingerly, inexpert blow. She barked with surprise, pie flying out of her mouth.

“Again,” Miriam said. She was completely at her ease.

The woman started to her feet, her eyes bulging with surprise. Leo struck her again, but she was in motion now and the blow was even less effective. She stumbled forward against the table. She said something, perhaps in Russian.

Miriam answered her in a harsh voice, in the same language. The woman shoved the table aside, began to run toward Sarah and the doorway behind her.

“Keep after her, Leo,” Miriam barked.

This blow came down right on top of the cranium — not well placed, but there was plenty of travel in it and the woman went down like a bag of lard. Her forehead hit the granite tile floor with a jarring crack.

“Now,” Miriam said, “Sarah will prepare her with a little bleeding knife, won’t you, Sarah? Get your kit to show Leo.”

Sarah looked at the body, the slow rise and fall of the chest, the strange repose on the face.

“It’s in my office,” she said.

“Then get it. But be quick.”

She went up to the bedroom, through it, and up the narrow stairs to the tiny space that was her own. Its window looked out on a wall, but it had a lovely skylight. On fine days, she would sometimes lean back in her chair and let her thoughts wander in the sky that unfolded overhead.

Her desk was stacked with papers, and a frame from a statistical analysis program she’d been using glowed on her computer screen. She had been analyzing the effect of a new plasma solution made from Miriam’s blood on the decayed cells of her former lovers’ bodies. So far, the results were ambiguous at best.

She knew she shouldn’t, but she sat down. Her hunger was calling to her, screaming to her. But she still sat down; she still looked at her figures,

thought a little about the deliverance she was working on.

A life was about to be wasted, and this was comfort, because somewhere in these statistics and the cellular structures they reflected, there was a way to eject Miriam's blood from your body . . . maybe even a way to rescue those who had faltered while it still flowed in their veins. Faltered, but not died . . .

She clicked her mouse a few times, and a photo appeared on the screen of somebody who had most certainly died. This picture had been strictly forbidden by Miriam, not allowed anywhere in the house.

She gazed into it, into the smiling face of her beloved Tom. She and Tom Haver had discovered Miriam together. It had been a heady time for them at Riverside Hospital, uncovering together the fact that this was a new species of intelligent creature, sharing the earth with mankind.

In the picture, Tom was smiling. It had been their last carefree moment together. In fact, the last carefree moment of Sarah Roberts's life.

Behind him was the South Street Seaport Maritime Museum, in the days before all the new restaurants and attractions. They'd just come down off one of the old sailing ships. It had been a sunny autumn afternoon. He was wearing a windbreaker.

She knew every detail of how he had been when she had snapped that picture, remembered even his aftershave. It had been something called Jade East. They had walked hand in hand up South Street, bought some oysters at the Fulton Fish Market, gone home and eaten them on the tiny deck of their apartment. They were so in love.

Eleven days later she had killed him. She had killed Tom, and now his soul rested within her. She never spoke of him, hardly dared think of him because sometimes it seemed as if Miri could read thoughts. But he was part of her, and it was to him she would go, if ever her soul was released from the prison of this life.

Working quickly, she returned the picture to its hidden file. Miriam never touched the computer. But she might, and she was certainly smart enough to

understand it. Sarah could not imagine what would happen if she discovered the picture.

If Miriam understood the depth of Sarah's rebellion, she might be returned to the attic.

She looked toward the small door in the side wall. It led up.

She knew that she should get her fleam from the desk drawer and take it down immediately, that she was already overdue, but instead she gazed at that door.

It did her soul good to go up there. But it was hard to do it, to see them . . . and to see the other thing that was there.

She laid her hand on the knob, twisted it. The dark stairs rose steeply. She mounted them, hesitated, then walked quickly up.

Before her was a room dimly lit by small oval windows. There was something almost noble about the wide space with its sweep of gray floor. The attic ran the length of this large house, and thus was its largest room.

Bats roosted in the upper timbers. Ancient brass lanterns hung from crossbeams. This room had never been electrified.

Here were the coffins and boxes that represented her mistress's incredible greed, her invincible belief in her own rights over the rights of others. Here, also, was a humble coffin made of gray steel, still looking quite new.

Sarah went to it. She drew it open. It was here that Miriam had laid her after she had attempted to destroy herself. She ran her fingers along the white satin facing, touched the little pillow where her head had rested.

Here she had passed through death and here been brought back. This coffin, she felt, was her true home. This was the center of her reality and her being. It was where she must one day return. And she did return, when Miri was deep in the dead sleep that followed her feedings or — as now — otherwise occupied. Sarah would get in and draw down the lid, remaining

until the air ran out and she finally had to open it to breathe.

There was a deep, profound satisfaction involved in doing this. When she pulled that lid down, it was as if fresh water was soothing her burning, tortured soul.

She wanted to right now — especially now — so very badly. But she had to get back. She had to take the fleam. Her victim was waiting to be robbed of her life.

Through tearing eyes, she looked along the far wall, to the coffin that Miri so frequently came to see. This was John Blaylock. What Miri did not know was that Sarah would sometimes open this coffin . . . as she was going to do now.

She went to it, unlocked it, raised the lid. A familiar dry, spicy scent came out — the potpourri that Miriam kept there. The corpse was narrow, dressed in a tail suit with a wing collar. The neck had grown thin, and the face was distorted by the profound necrosis of a body dead and from drying out for twenty years.

The lips had slid back from the teeth, and the cartilage in the nose had dried out. The corpse was grimacing. But there was something about the grimace — some, strange living essence that made it hard to look upon for long. For this was no ordinary corpse. This was a living corpse.

She laid her hand lightly in the corpse's delicate hand. Then she leaned into the coffin and touched her lips to the dry, rotted cheek. She whispered, "I'm making progress, John. A little at a time. But it's there, John. It's there." With the slowness of an hour hand, the fingers of the corpse were closing. If she had an hour or two or three, John Blaylock would gradually grip her hand with an appalling grip. His fingers would feel like corded steel. His nails would dig as if seeking to break through to her blood.

But now, there was only the subtlest of changes — a slight tickling of a bony finger in a soft palm, the sighing pressure of a long, hard nail upon the tender inner edge of one of her fingers.

She drew away from him. In his eyes, she could see fire. See it — but was it there? Then she heard the sound of the corpse — for it made a sound when she came. It was moving — dry muscles, dead skin, every part of it. This created a rustle no more than the whisper of falling leaves, but it was unmistakably a sound of life.

In her clear, gentle voice, as soft as the tender airs of the night, she sang to him a song that was familiar to all of Miriam's people:

*“Sleep my child and peace attend thee,
All through the night. . . .”*

With that she left him. Miriam would not be pleased with this delay. But Sarah had a relationship with John and the others. One day, she would either bring them back to life or give them the release of true death. One day.

Her research had proceeded much farther than she had told Miriam. In fact, she was probably farther along in understanding the physics of the soul than anybody else in the world. This was because science rejected its existence. But she had *been* a soul, one trapped in its own corpse. So she knew that the soul existed. She had discovered that this rich electromagnetic being was accessible to technology, for it was part of the physical world, not some strange supernatural essence. The soul was a living plasma composed of trillions of electrons, each one cast with a slightly different spin, and each spin expressing a tiny part of the harmony and memory of the whole incredibly detailed being.

There must even be a medicine of the soul, she felt, for it could be sick and it could suffer. Oh, yes, it could suffer.

As she crossed the attic, the rustling grew faint, fading on an unmistakable note of dejection.

She drew her spotless sliver fleam out of its case of human leather and hurried downstairs.

They had cuffed the victim, who was laid out on the white enamel kitchen table.

“Pull up a chair,” Miriam said to Leo. “It’s quite a spectacle.” She glared at Sarah, but made no other comment on her slowness.

Sarah tried to control her shaking hand as she felt the pulse. With her doctor’s precise knowledge, she could determine exactly which neck artery would offer the best flow.

“What is that instrument?”

Sarah looked at Leo, who was sitting with her chin in her hands, watching from two feet away. She was going to watch an innocent human being die, and all she could bring to it was this ugly fascination. Sarah went from disliking Leo to despising her. She was actually tempted to go after her with the damned fleam.

When she did not answer Leo’s question, Miriam said, “It’s an antique surgical instrument, from when they used to let blood. That hooked end nicks into the vein, then the blade opens it. It’s very neat.”

“You don’t use one, though.”

With a dry sound, Miriam opened her mouth. Leo gasped at the funneled cavern with the pointed, black tongue at its center. “I don’t need one,” Miriam said, chuckling.

“Fleams were used by vets to bleed horses,” Sarah said. “It’s a brutal tool.”

“It looks beautiful.”

“That’s because she keeps her instruments so clean. She’s a doctor, remember.”

“How does this make you feel?”

“How does it make me *feel*?”

“Hurry up, Sarah,” Miriam said quickly.

Her throat was closing, her eyes tearing. But she tried to be proud, to do

well what she must do to survive. She was weak; she should let herself die. But she couldn't stay in that coffin of hers, no more than you can kill yourself by holding your breath.

“Aren't you going to wake her up for it?” Leo asked.

Miriam burst out laughing. “She likes them out cold! She has no taste!”

What Miriam meant was that the blood of a suffering victim tasted better. The adrenaline gave it a delectable piquancy.

Sarah hooked the fleam into the carotid on the right side. Leo came around the table so she could see the sucking process up close. Sarah's cheeks were hot with embarrassment; her soul was wretched with shame. But the blood that dripped out — oh, God, oh, it smelled so *damn good!*

There was a small struggle. The woman shifted on the table, moaning dryly.

“Do I hit her again?” Leo asked Miri.

“Please,” Sarah gasped.

Leo hesitated, looking at Miriam.

The woman stirred again.

“Leo, *please!*”

Miriam stayed Leo's hand.

The victim's eyes opened. Sarah glared at Miriam. “Miri!”

“Leo, don't you move!”

The woman said, “What the heck?” She started to sit up. Sarah pushed her down, nicked again with the fleam and locked her lips to the dirt-ringed neck. The woman said, “The *fuck!*” Then she rattled along in her own language, obviously cursing. She squirmed; she tried to free her hands.

Sarah forced every iota of air out of her lungs. She distended her belly. She locked her lips tight to the neck, making the best seal she could. The woman flounced and struggled, but Miri held her head and made Leo lie across her midriff. The woman made rasping sounds — desperate attempts to scream.

Sarah sucked. The artery wall resisted, then gave way, spurting a flood of fresh, hot, salty blood straight down Sarah's gullet. The effect was a thousand times more powerful than a hit of the purest heroin ever made. From her toes to her head, her skin rippled and shivered. An orgasm came, spreading through her until her whole body was a single, pulsing, vibrating dynamo of sexual genius. Somewhere far away, she could hear Leo laughing and crying at the same time, and Miri's voice comforting her, saying soft things that she did not mean.

She sucked and she sucked, and the old voice went down to a growling babble. She sucked and the old heart came to a stop. And then the body went slack, and the flow went down.

Sarah drew back. Blood, very black, dribbled onto the table.

Leo was standing at the far end of the room, her eyes round, her face covered with tears. Miriam said, "Come here to me."

Leo shook her head.

Miri went to her and drew her by the wrist. "*Watch!*"

With one huge drag, Miriam did what no human being could ever do, no matter how evolved their technique. She emptied the woman of every trace of fluid that was in her. The skin sank back against the skull, drew tight, crackling as it turned to dry parchment. The eyeballs withered, the clothes went slack around the body. And then Miriam came up, the corpse still popping and crackling as cartilage snapped and muscles twisted themselves into hard, narrow ropes.

Leo put her hands to her cheeks and screamed. Her eyes wild, she turned to run out the door.

Miriam was on her in an instant. She grabbed her collar, gave her a slap that snapped her head aside. “Shut up! You *watch!*” She glared toward Sarah, who was feeling the gorgeous postprandial levitation that came when you fed really well. Moral guilt had its limits. Now all was right with the world. Like an addict who has ridden the horse and lost, she was content with herself, made so by the charm of the drug that had seduced her.

“Sarah,” Miri said, “take Leo down and show her how to do a proper burn. And I expect to see no ash, do you hear me?”

“Yes, Miri.”

“I’m sorry, Miri!” Leo babbled, rubbing her cheek. “I panicked.” Leo went to the remnant, touched the skin that tented the face. “This is incredible!”

“It’s a small penalty to pay for eternal life, my dear. An occasional hobo goes to the Big Rock Candy Mountain.”

Leo frowned. “The what?”

“Gets released from the toils of a miserable life,” Sarah explained. Slang tended to enter Miriam’s vocabulary with a fifty to hundred year lag time.

Leo would not touch the remnant, so Sarah threw it over her shoulder and took it down. In the basement, Sarah said, “Having fun?”

“That’s not appropriate,” Leo said officiously. “A woman had to give her life.”

“For me? Maybe I ought to kill myself.”

“No, you have a right! Nature made you this way.”

“Miriam Blaylock made me this way. And she’s going to do it to you, too.”

“Miriam Blaylock *is* nature. And if she bloods me, it’s going to be the biggest privilege of my life.” They burned the remnant in a fire kept blue by Sarah’s careful attendance at the controls.

As they were starting to ascend the stairs, Miriam said, “Come into the infirmary, please.”

Sarah turned, surprised to find her down here. She was even more shocked when she saw that she was naked and all trace of makeup was removed. Her hair was coming back, a blond fuzz on her otherwise bald head.

Leo gasped. Sarah took her hand. “Don’t be afraid,” she said.

“But she’s — ”

“She’s not a human being, Leo.” Sarah was stirred by the long, lean body, the deep, dark eyes. This was a being she loved, who had covered her with wild kisses, who had expressed every shading of passion upon her quivering, delighted body. No matter how much Sarah hated Miriam, she also loved her, and loved the fact that Miriam took pleasure in her. “You’re my beautiful one,” she would say, and kiss every part of her body, her lips, her eyes, her moist pudenda. “You pretty little angel, you dear, soft baby.”

Leo made a terrified sound in her throat as the tall creature with the bright red eyes and wire-thin lips strode into the light. She took Leo’s hand. Sarah knew that Leo was now trapped. Nothing the girl could do — no matter how hard she struggled and fought — would release her from that seemingly gentle grasp.

Sarah was horrified at what was happening — at how swiftly Miriam was acting, so that the girl had no time to consider her situation. But she was also fascinated because she had wondered about the scientific issues involved in the transfer process. She welcomed a chance to observe it clinically.

Miriam drew Leo into the infirmary, a superbly equipped laboratory designed by Sarah, who followed obediently along.

She was already being buoyed by the effects of her feeding. In an hour or so, the Sleep would come and she would take to bed, and Miri, as was traditional between them, would sing her a lullaby. The Sleep would take her, and as it did, she would deliver herself body and soul into the protective custody of her beloved and despised mistress.

Miriam had tamed Sarah, after a fashion. But so also, Sarah had tamed Miriam . . . after a fashion. Thus does a love affair between species proceed — wild creatures finding what is universal between them, sensual delight and what abides in the heart, that love can cross any boundary and flourish anywhere.

The bleeding instrument — a black hose fitted with a small hand pump and two large silver needles — was already dangling from Miriam’s arm, one enormous needle a gray shadow in the flesh above the crook of her elbow.

Leo was staring at it, her eyes practically popping out of her head. Stumbling, she followed Miriam into the small hospital room. Miriam patted the examination table. Leo sat.

“Get the ice packs,” Miriam said.

“What ice packs?” Leo asked.

“We use ice packs in the procedure,” Miriam said. “Now strip.” She clapped her hands. “Chop chop!”

Leo threw off her clothes. She lay down on the table, arms rigidly at her sides. Miriam looked at Leo’s arms. “Set it,” she said to Sarah.

“I don’t like needles,” Leo said as Sarah stroked up a vein. How Sarah hated her now, the poor, scared little cow with her drippy nose and her big brown eyes.

Now this kid would get what she wanted. Later today, Sarah would take her to the attic, let her listen to the rustling, introduce her to who lay there.

“You will now be delivered of the blood of your eternal Keepers,” she said. “You will become part of me and I of you. Do you understand this?”

Leo said in a tiny voice, “I think so.”

“You will be given eternal life.”

“Miri!”

Miriam cast a glance at Sarah so terrible that her jaw snapped shut.

“Eternal life! But you will be bonded to me by an unbreakable bond. You will be expected to serve me in every way, without question. There will never be an end to it. Do you understand this?”

Leo turned her tear-streaked face to Sarah, and Sarah saw there a call for rescue from the very depth of this human creature. A soul was being lost, and it knew that it was being lost. But she said nothing.

“Set the needle.”

“N-no,” Sarah said. “No!”

“You do it!”

“Leo, this is wrong!”

She tried to meet Leo’s eyes, but Leo would not look at her. Miriam grabbed the needle and jammed it into Leo’s arm. Leo cried out.

Sarah reset it properly, secured it with tape.

“You are free to go, Leo,” Miriam said. “I haven’t started yet.”

“It hurts!”

“Again I say to you, you are free to go.”

Leo began to cry.

Sarah was awed at what she was seeing. She had a sudden, electrifying insight into who the Keepers were, into what Miriam was. They were indeed a force of nature, and she thought that they might be killed, but they would never die. No matter who hunted the Keepers, the Keepers would always in one way or another wander the world, seeking the ruin of souls.

Miriam grasped the pump in her long, narrow fingers and crushed the bulb smartly. Leo flounced on the table, giving a loud cry. Again, Miriam pumped,

and again. Leo's upper arm turned fiery red. She began to sweat.

"How does it feel?" Sarah asked.

"My arm's on fire!"

"Do you feel faint? Woozy?"

"I see an ancient city!"

Hallucinations. Interesting.

Sarah touched the skin of the neck. Pulse very rapid. She laid her hand on the forehead. Hot, dry. She got the ice packs and laid them along Leo's sides. Leo began to shiver.

Miriam pumped, waited, pumped again. Leo's eyes fluttered back into her head.

"Slow down," Sarah said, "she's seizing."

Leo's bowels let go.

"Clean it up," Miriam snapped, and Sarah went to work with towel, sponges, and bedpan.

Leo cried and moaned. Sarah had to hold her arms so that she wouldn't tear the needle out. She arched her back and writhed; she shook her head from side to side.

Sweat, blushed pink, began to bead on her upper lip and forehead. Her epidermal capillaries were hemorrhaging.

Sarah took her blood pressure — 270 over 140. Pulse rate 132. Temperature 106 degrees. She had perhaps half an hour to live, fifteen minutes before brain damage or a stroke. Sarah got more ice, put a pack behind her neck, another between her legs. The temperature dropped to 104 degrees.

Over ten slow minutes, Miriam pumped five more times. Leo came to and looked from one of them to the other out of agonized eyes.

“How do you feel?” Sarah asked.

“Water, please . . .”

Miriam withdrew the needles. Sarah took alcohol and iodine and cleaned Leo’s wound and stopped the leakage of blood with a small pressure bandage. She didn’t need to do anything for Miriam. Her wound healed itself inside of a minute.

“How did you know when to stop?”

“Her skin told me.”

Miriam’s people could diagnose practically anything in human beings by merely observing their skin tone. It was quite remarkable.

“What would have happened if you’d kept on?”

“I would have wasted blood. She would have died.”

Miriam took Leo in her arms and went out with her, saying nothing to Sarah. She was more alien right now, less human, than Sarah had ever seen her. She realized that Miriam’s whole personality was a sort of act. Seeing her like this, you realized that she was light years away from being human.

Sarah followed Miriam up to their bedroom. Miriam laid the girl, whose whole body was now flaming red, in the center of their bed. The Sleep was coming heavily onto Sarah, and she longed to lie down, too. But Miriam went to bed with Leo, enclosing her in her arms.

Sarah was left to the daybed. As she drifted into the dreams she would share with the victim whose life flowed yet within her, she heard her Miri singing to her new captive,

“Sleep my child and peace attend thee,

*All through the night.
Guardian angels God will send thee,
All through the night ”*

She cried herself to sleep, Sarah did, but when sleep came, it took her into a golden ship that sailed a windswept sea. In the purest blue sky she had ever seen, white seagulls wheeled and dove and cried. They came down and flew among the sails of her ship, and called to her with their harsh, haunting voices.

She knew that they were the birds of God's careless and unquenchable love, calling to her and to Leo, and even to Miri, as indeed they do to all.

FOURTEEN

The Veils

Sarah awoke when the afternoon sun, glaring in the tall bedroom windows, turned the inside of her eyelids bloodred. Leo was there instantly, kissing her, embracing her. “Oh, Sarah, I’m so glad you’re awake! I’ve been missing you like crazy!” “You — you’re not sick?” She should have been hanging between life and death.

“Oh, I was,” Leo said. “I was *so sick*.”

“You slept for two days,” Miriam said. She came down out of the light like a descending angel. She was dressed in bright white silk. Her hair was nearly grown back, and flowing golden blond across her milky shoulders. She was perfectly made up, looking absolutely ravishing. Her eyes were their usual ashy gray.

“We’re going to play this afternoon,” she said. “You’ll want to call your musical friends.”

Sarah took Leo’s hands. “Leonore, do you know what’s happened to you? Do you understand anything about this at all?”

“Look at my skin!”

How well Sarah remembered that miraculous discovery. A woman loves a pure skin, more than most realize — until she suddenly has something she never dreamed possible.

Leo shook her head. “And my hair!”

It was as pretty as Sarah’s, almost as pretty as Miri’s.

Perfection had transformed a pretty girl into a shockingly beautiful one. Leo smiled down at her. “I threw up all yesterday, but I’m better.”

“I used up all the antinausea stuff,” Miriam said. “She took to it more easily than you.”

“But now I feel — ” Leo shivered her shoulders. “I feel *fabulous!*”

As Sarah went about the duties of her life, showering and washing her hair, Leo chattered away about herself. When should she feed? Should they hunt together or was that wise? On and on. It was utterly grotesque.

“Leo,” she finally said when she was dressing, “I usually take this time in my office.”

It was a lie and Leo knew it. But she understood and withdrew at last.

When Sarah arrived downstairs, Leo was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the library looking at Keeper books she’d never been allowed to so much as touch. She tossed one of the ancient volumes aside and rushed up to kiss Sarah, chattering about yet more sensations and symptoms.

Sarah picked up the book and replaced it in its box. “These are very fragile,” she said.

“Yeah, they’re in Egyptian! Are they from Egypt?”

“They aren’t in Egyptian. They’re in the Keeper language, which is called Prime. The book you were paging through is thirty thousand years old. It is made entirely of human parchment and is also the finest illustrated medical text on the planet. If it had a value, Leo, it would be, very simply, the most costly artifact in the world.”

Leo had the hangdog expression of a surprised hound. But then she tossed her coltish hair and asked, “What are the first signs of hunger? I don’t actually know.”

“You feel cold. Your skin starts to get cold. Then you become a bit less energetic. That’s how it begins.”

“Should I get my own fleam?”

She sounded very like a bride planning her trousseau, or a pregnant girl deciding the furnishings of the nursery.

“Use a fishhook.”

“*Afishhook!*”

“A shark hook works quite well. I used one for years. The fleam belonged to my predecessor. Miriam just gave it to me recently.”

“Your . . . what do you mean, ‘predecessor’?”

“Oh, didn’t Miri tell you? We last about two hundred years. Unless there’s an accident, of course.”

“We die?”

“Oh, no. That we cannot do. We end up in the attic.” She smiled. “Like cast-off overcoats.”

Leo glanced toward the stairs.

“Miri didn’t tell you?”

“No, she didn’t.”

She took Leo’s hand and led her upstairs.

Miriam was at the head of the stairs. “I thought you were going to make an arrangement, Sarah.”

“An arrangement?”

“Flowers. For our guests.”

“I — yes. I was.”

“Miri, do we die?”

“You do not die.”

“But she said — ”

“The contents of the attic are my affair. As are those books. You girls do not *ever* touch Keeper things without my permission!”

“I thought — ”

“You thought you had the run of my house just because you’re blooded? You go downstairs and get things ready, both of you. And, Sarah?”

“Yes, Miri?”

“Be careful. Be very careful.”

As Sarah was arranging the flowers that would stand on the piano during the musicale, Leo chattered away about the kinds of people she preferred to “do.”

Finally Sarah snarled at her, “You’ve become a serial killer.”

Leo went silent.

Sarah turned on her. “You have! During the hundreds of years you now have before you, you’ll take thousands of lives! Men, women, children, every one of them wanting life and deserving life, and you will take their lives — steal their lives — because you’re a greedy, self-involved little monster!”

“Sa-rah!”

“You’re not worth the warts on one of their fingers! Not one! But in your arrogance, you think you’ve gained some natural right to kill them! Miriam has such a right — maybe! But you certainly do not.”

“Then neither do you!”

“I had this done to me. I didn’t ask for it. You did, Leo. You knew what it meant and yet you asked for it!”

Miriam strode in. “Miri,” Leo wailed, “she’s — ”

“I can hear,” Miriam growled. She looked from one to the other. “Two canaries in the same cage,” she said. “You’d better learn to get along, because you won’t be let out. I’m in trouble and I need you, both of you. Hell, I need ten of you! Fifty! But I do *not* need any bickering or moralizing or bitching. You’ll work together as a team or suffer the consequences.” She glared at Sarah. “Severe consequences.” She looked at the flowers. “That’s quite nice,” she said. Then, to Leo, “You are not her equal. You will learn from her and take her advice and, in my absence, her orders. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Miri.”

“Miriam to you, child.” She went out.

“Wow,” Leo said.

As the sun slanted across the floor, Sarah got out their violas da gamba, and she and Leo set the chairs. Among musical circles in New York, Miriam’s talent was well known. Far more had heard descriptions of her playing than had actually been privileged to listen, however, for she never gave public concerts. In fact, she didn’t perform at all. This would be, as far as she was concerned, merely an hour’s casual entertainment.

Leo greeted the guests, watching to see if they noticed how beautiful she looked. They noticed, all right — especially the women, who were always more aware than men of the details of beauty, the grace of the hands, the taper of the neck.

Sarah and Miriam had been working together on LeSieur de Malchy’s splendid “Fifth Suite for Two Violas da Gamba” for a few weeks before Miriam went to Thailand.

Maria Sturdevandt came and said hello to Sarah and Miriam. She would sing Madama Butterfly tonight at the Metropolitan Opera. With her was her

companion Charlie Gorman. Bootsie Ferguson, the wife of Henry Ferguson, CEO of Goldman, Sachs was there.

Miriam could play most instruments simply by picking them up, but she had practiced on the piano, the viola, and the flute, and on these she was masterful. Sarah had not been much involved in music before meeting her. But her own viola was now one of the loves of her life.

As she played, she gazed from one member of their small audience to another. She watched Falstaff Rosenkrantz, editor of *Vanity Fair*, searching his pockets for what turned out to be a Chap Stick. His powerful shoulders and narrow waist suggested good-sucking veins. She imagined how he would taste, all salt and wine.

As she watched Miriam's long, splendid hands manipulate her bow with the lightness of a breeze, she drew her own notes as best she could.

Sarah felt rotten about feeding and about Leo, and Miriam was distracted by her crisis, but the listeners, by their expressions, obviously felt as if they were in the presence not simply of musicians, but of masters of music. The suite proceeded from its dancing allemande to the saraband and finally the subtle, generous minuet. They sat side by side, Miriam in a summer dress of the lightest blue silk, Sarah in jeans and a black turtle-neck.

Standing open on the piano was a bottle of claret, a Latour nearly a hundred years old. There were glasses about and another, identical bottle beside it. A half-filled crystal carafe, shaped for use in ice, stood on an extraordinary little table. This wine was a white, but its color — a pale, rich gold — suggested that it, also, must be very fine. In fact, it was a freezing cold, exquisitely sweet Yquem, just now, at forty years, coming into its maturity. When guests sipped these wines, they would close their eyes.

The furnishings, also, were extraordinary. The chairs upon which the guests sat were Directoire pieces, some of them. It is to be remembered, though, that the designs of that period were inspired by classical models, and some of the other chairs were originals, carried from hearth to hearth in Miriam's baggage for millennia. Their wood, having been lovingly cared for by Sarah and all of her predecessors, was as rich as when it had been cut in

the now-vanished forests of Greece and Italy and the Levant.

Miriam remembered when this piece had first been played. It fit the moment so well because it had been composed out of pain, and this was a time of pain.

LeSieur de Malchy had fallen in love with Lamia, and Lamia had amused herself by leading him on, letting him kiss her alabaster limbs and gaze into her proud and laughing eyes. She had drawn him into deep, true love, as she was so very expert at doing, with the intention of then abandoning him to his music. She didn't want a man. She wanted a composition.

Out of his anguish had emerged music fit to satisfy the ancient heart of the Keeper. Among humans, it had never been all that popular, but when Keepers joined to play, LeSieur was inevitably among the choices.

The instruments that Miriam and Sarah used had belonged to LeSieur, made by Barak Norman, of London, for him.

Miriam, as she played, well recalled LeSieur and her mother playing the piece together.

The room had been small and close with candle smoke, but finished in gold, with scenes of forest walks painted on its walls. The music, Miriam remembered, had captured, as if in a living amber, the passion that this man felt for the woman who sat with him in her tall wig and splendid white gown.

Only Miriam had been their audience, as she was audience to every moment of her adored mother's life. As Sarah served her now, she had once served Lamia.

The music came to its end. There was no applause. They had learned long ago, her friends, that such displays were not wanted. She poured herself some wine. It was the least refined alcohol she could tolerate, wine. But the soul of the grape, captured, gave her spirit enough pleasure that she had collected wine through the years. She'd drunk Falernian in Rome, for she had been intimately involved with the lives of the old emperors.

Most of these men had not died by assassination as history recorded, but as vestal sacrifices. Rome had been secretly ruled by a concealed religion. The emperors were only seasonal kings, doomed to serve the state until the priestesses of Vesta decreed that it was time for them to die. They learned of this little condition only after they achieved the purple. It was no wonder that so many of them went mad.

Some had been throat-slitted or smothered or strangled, but others had been delivered to certain dark villas, rich, strange places whose graceful inhabitants spoke a tongue like thunder. The Vestas were a conclave of Keepers.

She put the glass down and walked out, never thinking to excuse herself from her guests. This house was run according to very ancient principles. It was an extremely exclusive place but, like an ancient palace, wide open to all who had the right to enter.

Whatever happened in here, they were free to come and watch . . . or at least, so it was meant to appear. They did so, full of nervous excitement over their attendance at what they perceived as extremely private moments — Miriam at her toilette, Miriam making love.

This was the way the aristocrats of history had conducted their lives. Their privacy consisted of being surrounded by their people, and Miriam could be comfortable no other way.

Or so it seemed. Miriam's ancient life was, of course, far more complex than it appeared. There were secrets within secrets. For, as Sarah and now Leo knew, this splendid house was also a place of murder, where innocent blood was guzzled like cheap champagne.

Paul was pushing a cockroach to the edge of the shower stall with his toe when he noticed something very odd about his feet.

He squatted, then got out of the shower and looked more closely.

It was the vampire blood that had made his skin so pale and smooth. Back in the ossuary, his shoes had been flooded with it. He rubbed his shoulder. Had it also sped his healing even more than usual?

He went back into the shower and washed and washed, using the cheap sliver of soap that had come with this cheap sliver of a hotel room. He stood in the small oblivion of the drumming water, watching the suds go down the drain.

It felt as if he were washing off a whole lot of his past in this lousy shower. Down the drain went his loyalty to his agency. Down the drain went his expectations about his own future: the successful end to his career, the honored retirement. He'd been a priest of death, and down the drain went this celibate life. Freud had said that all men want the same things: honor, riches, power, fame, and the love of women.

Well, he'd lost it all, hadn't he? — except maybe the love of a woman. But what woman would want a burned-out guy who couldn't even tell her what his life had been?

Becky, damnit, was the only woman he really wanted to talk to, and he hadn't realized it until too late. Probably all she'd ever felt for him anyway was a little compassion, maybe. Women didn't fall in love with him. They sensed all the damn violence, was his theory. He scared them. Or maybe it was all the traveling, the lack of time in one place.

He'd taken care of sex almost clinically, using whores like toys . . . or machines. Soon he wouldn't even be able to afford to do that.

Lying on the bed in his tiny room, he concentrated on his immediate course of action. He had eight grand. That would last a couple of months. But he didn't intend to spend anything like that much time here.

He lay paging through his well-thumbed copy of *New York by Night*, looking for the names of clubs, then calling information and asking for the numbers. Things in the world of Goths and Vampyres changed fast, and what had been au courant six months ago was way past its time now. None of the clubs mentioned had numbers. Probably they were all closed or transformed

into more trendy incarnations.

So maybe the thing to do was to go downtown and just walk the streets. He'd pass the locations of the old clubs. Who knew what he'd find.

On the other hand, maybe this approach was total bullshit, just an excuse for a bar crawl. In his heart of hearts, what he wanted to do was to get seriously fucked up, then find some whore to suck him off. That would put a decent end, at least, to a real bad few of days. He'd arrived in the Big Apple almost hallucinatory with lack of sleep and jet lag and the spiritual exhaustion that comes after you've been doing a lot of killing. And he'd arrived on the run. He'd holed up here, phoning a sandwich shop for food and newspapers. The room had no TV, so he'd slept a lot. At least one thing: the shoulder was doing lots better. Still hurt, but hell, by all rights he probably ought to still be in the hospital.

He had to get a gun. If he was going to blow the shit out of vampires, he sure as hell was going to need one. Too bad he couldn't get hold of one of those fancy French jobs. Now, that had been a weapon. Hadn't that baby *worked!* He'd settle for a good old .357, though. It had done good service for him in Asia, and it'd work fine here. You got close, aimed at the head. It was effective. Blew their noggins into meat and ketchup.

Problem was, where did you get a gun in Nueva York without triggering some stoolie network? Guys in the illegal gun trade made money two ways — off their customers and off the cops they tipped. Of course, they wouldn't tip on a real customer, but some jerk coming off the street, he'd get fingered for sure. His full description would arrive at the nearest precinct in ten minutes tops. Gun raps were a good collar in this town. Looked nice in a cop's paper.

First things first. Locate the vampires. If the club scene didn't do it, then go to public records, work the pattern-of-disappearances angle. What worried him about that was that a whole lot of people evaporated in this town. It wasn't like Beijing or Singapore or Tokyo, where a disappearance was news. Hell, most missing persons didn't even make the back pages in this wild old burg. So okay, he'd work the club angle to death.

They were on their way to the club, the Bentley rolling down Fifty-seventh Street toward Fifth Avenue. Miriam and Sarah sat side by side. Leo was on one of the tiny jump seats facing them.

Miriam said, “A man may show up tonight asking after Ellen Wunderling. It’s about time for him to find us. I want to be informed the moment it happens.”

The bottom dropped out of Sarah’s gut.

Leo asked, “Who’s Ellen Wunderling?”

“One of our dear princess’s little follies,” Miriam said, playfully kissing Sarah’s cheek.

Ellen Wunderling had been Sarah’s worst mistake until the Paris emergency debacle. But why would anybody still be investigating that case? The police had closed it.

Sarah wasn’t like a Keeper. She would not be able to escape from prison. If she went, she would die there, horribly, of hunger. What would happen to somebody like her, buried in a prison graveyard?

“What man?” she asked carefully, worried that Miriam would say no more. Since Paris, Miriam had obviously lost a great deal of trust in her.

Miriam reached up and opened the car’s sunroof. They were now speeding down Fifth Avenue. The spires of St. Patrick’s Cathedral swept past one side of the Bentley, Rockefeller Center the other.

Sarah curled up to her. “Miri, I’m so sorry I did her!”

“Don’t start apologizing again. We’re past that. Anyway, it turns out to be useful.” She stroked Sarah’s head. “Ellen is our little tar baby.” She smiled softly.

Sarah didn’t quite understand. She knew, however, that questioning would do no good.

“I hope Rudi’s there early,” Leo said. “I want to do all kinds of stuff tonight! I want to see how it feels now. Does it feel different, Sarah?”

“No crashes, no hangovers,” Sarah said. She gave her a false smile. “But the only drug that really matters — ” She glanced toward the intercom button. It was off. “ — is blood.”

“You’re hungry, dear,” Miriam said to Leo. “You just don’t realize it. We’ll need to find you a victim.”

Leo kissed Miriam’s neck. “Give me more of your blood. I want to be more like you.”

“You’re as much like me as you’ll ever be.”

“You’re a fool, Leo,” Sarah said.

Miriam gave her a shy sort of a smile. “Twenty years of love, and that’s all the loyalty you can offer.”

Sarah smiled right back. “ ‘Into whatever houses I enter, I will go into them for the benefit of the sick, and will abstain from every voluntary act of mischief and corruption.’ I violate my Hippocratic Oath by the very nature of my life.”

“Take off your clothes,” Miriam said.

“*What?*”

They were crossing Thirty-fourth Street. The Empire State Building swept past above, visible through the open sunroof.

“Do it.”

Sarah didn’t want to, not here, not in front of Leo.

Leo said, “I’ll help you.”

“Sarah.” There was a clear warning in the tone.

A few contortions between her and Leo, and Sarah was naked. She felt herself blushing. She covered her breasts with her arm.

Pushing her arm aside, Miriam took one of her nipples between her fingers and pinched it, watching Sarah's face. At first, Sarah tried to conceal her agony, but she finally cried out; she couldn't help it, the pain was so intense.

Leo watched, her eyes going nervously from Sarah's contorted face to Miriam's impassive one. "What's going on? Why are you hurting her?"

Miriam turned on the intercom. "Luis, take us on a tour. Fourteenth, down Broadway, give us half an hour." She released Sarah, who clutched her agonized breast.

Miriam took Sarah's face in her hands, gazed into her eyes. After a moment, she kissed her, pressing her tongue against Sarah's lips until she opened her mouth.

No matter how often they kissed, Sarah was always shocked by the sensation of those narrow teeth and that rough tiger's tongue. Miriam's mouth had a faint, meaty sourness that was at once sickening and delicious. Then Miriam broke away, spread Sarah's legs, and slipped to the floor.

Sarah could not have been more amazed. She looked at Leo and shook her head, to communicate her total confusion.

While Manhattan slid by above them and the Broadway crowds shuffled up and down outside the tinted windows, Miriam buried her face in Sarah's lap.

Never had Miriam taken such a posture. This was Sarah's place with Miri, not the other way around.

But — oh, my. Oh, *my!* Sarah thrust herself at Miri's face, her hands moving to guide her head, to press her mouth more tightly against her.

Miriam knew how to restore the bondage of a rebellious slave; she had done it thousands of times over the eons. She injected her tongue deep into

Sarah's vagina. The powerful organ stretched the membranes as tight as drumskins. When there was resistance, Miriam pressed harder. Sarah writhed. Miriam moved her head back and forth, but slowly, pumping carefully. Sarah held Miriam's temples with shaking hands and glared down at her, crying and laughing, then threw her head back and grimaced through a fusillade of explosive climaxes. When they finally stopped, Miriam slowly withdrew, dragging her roughness along Sarah's clitoris. When she raised herself, Sarah embraced her, clung to her, kissing her face and neck, then knelt on the floor of the limousine and kissed her hands and feet.

Sarah lay at Miriam's feet, her head in her lap, weeping softly. *And so, Miriam thought, the little creature has come back to me.*

"Hey," Luis said over the intercom, "you're drivin' me crazy up here. I'm gonna come in my pants."

"Leonore'll do you at the club," Miriam said to him as she lit a cigarette. She drew Sarah up beside her, took her head down to her shoulder. "You're my girl?" she said, her tone kindly.

"Yes."

She looked at Leo. "Hot?"

"Oh, my."

"Take it out on Luis."

"I don't want to make love to Luis."

"I'll expect him to report that you were sensational. Incidentally, you're going to feed tonight, so what do you want?"

Leo barely whispered the words. "A man like my father."

"Ah. And your father was?"

"Powerful."

Miriam smiled slightly, parting her lips just a little.

“When you do that,” Sarah said, “you look ten and ten thousand at the same time.”

Miriam burst out laughing. “It’s one of my *best* smiles!” The laughter was brittle and harsh, and Sarah was glad when it ended. “Stand up,” Miriam said suddenly. They had never closed the sunroof.

“I’m naked!”

Miriam gave her a familiar look out of the corner of her eye. Immediately, Sarah rose to her feet.

Miriam thought, *Good. She does not think, she obeys. She’s come back at last.*

The slipstream roared in her face, sending her hair flying back. They were going down Houston Street toward the Hudson. Crowds on both sides of the street started cheering and applauding.

Sarah threw back her head and raised her arms high and screamed and screamed and screamed.

New York wasn’t exactly the most dangerous city in the world, but the screams that Paul was hearing made him think that a woman was being killed. He looked up West Broadway toward the sound — and saw a black Bentley pass, going west on Houston Street. Some idiot girl was standing up in the open sunroof bellowing her head off, that was all.

She’d scared the hell out of him, damned rich bitch. He’d’ve liked to have given her a piece of his mind. Probably some damn tripper, that was why the screams were so bloodcurdling.

New York was one giant drugstore. Everybody was young, everybody had money, and every damn thing was definitely for sale. Ecstasy, crystal meth, crack, coke, hash, grass, horse, even old-fashioned shit like his beloved

opium. God knew, you could probably buy laudanum somewhere. You could get ten percent absinthe, for sure, *hecho en Mexico*. He liked getting drunk on absinthe. There was a poet in him, and the wormwood brought him out. Last time he'd done a bottle of good absinthe, it had been on the terrace at Las Brisas in Acapulco, one of the most beautiful places in the world to do serious drinking. The mountains, the city lights below, the sun setting over the Pacific — the view was unequalled. He'd gone back to his room afterward and written a thirty-page epic poem about the death of Nebuchadnezzar. Next morning, he'd had to go on the Internet to find out who the hell Nebuchadnezzar was. Some ancient king.

A couple came toward him, dressed all in black. The girl's long, loose dress suggested possible gothic overtones. "Excuse me, I'm looking for a club called Shadowcat. Is there a place called Shadowcat around here?" The couple stopped. The girl was a heartbreaker, round face, merry brown eyes, and one of those smiles that says *I know what you want*. She had a cute rack, too, a couple of sweet little apples. She said, "The things you're staring at are called breasts," and the two of them walked off laughing.

Was he losing his touch, or what? Then he saw a bookstore. Maybe they had some kind of SoHo guide that was more up-to-date than his copy of *New York by Night*.

He loved to read, and he hadn't been in an English language bookstore this big in years. Hundreds of titles, everything very colorful and appealing, all sorts of stuff. A dozen SoHo guidebooks, all brand-new. He opened one, *SoHo Unbound*. Under the heading, "Deep Dark Deadly," was a list of spots with appropriately strange names — The Marrow Room, Bottomley Topps, Dragged to Death.

He sure as hell felt dragged to death, but he decided to try The Marrow Room instead, because it had a more vampirish sort of a ring to it. Actually, none of them sounded much like they had anything to do with gothic play-acting. But one could always hope.

The Marrow Room turned out to be a lavish nightclub full of what looked to him like little kids. There was music blasting, strobes and lasers flashing. Wonderful little bubblegum girls kept dancing up to him and waving their

mermaid locks. He smiled and nodded, forcing himself not to so much as glance down. It wouldn't have mattered, anyway — the whole damn place was full of jailbait.

He went to the bar. “Stoli on the rocks,” he said.

The bartender looked at him. “Parents room in the back, mister. But it’s BYOB.”

He didn't really know what the hell kind of place he'd blundered into, but there was no damn point in finding out, that was for sure. When had rock clubs for children come in?

He left. A clutch of what looked like eight-year-olds clustered under a nearby stoop smoking and muttering together. This was different from Asia? How?

Then he saw a storefront with a black cat discreetly painted in one corner as the only indication that it wasn't altogether abandoned. A black cat was promising. He pushed the door open.

There were skulls. His stomach gave a turn. He never wanted to be in an ossuary again. But the skulls contained candles. There was music, very bad rock of some indeterminate kind, and here and there a few people in vaguely gothic costume sitting at tables. A couple danced mechanically under purple light on a small dance floor. The place smelled like cigarettes and sour beer. The bar had a rack on it with bags of potato chips.

“Stoli on the rocks,” Paul said.

The bartender, a listless woman of about sixty wearing a black dress, poured something clear out of a bottle with no label into a glass with a whole lot of ice. She brought it over. Her face was painted white, her lips dark, dark red. She was wearing plastic teeth.

“I'm looking for Ellen Wunderling,” Paul said.

“You a cop?”

“Not.”

“Wanna bj? Fifteen bucks.”

Paul was beginning to think of a whole lot of reasons to throw up. He was homesick. He wanted to go to one of those Bangkok barbershops where a cloud of comely maidens massaged you, cut your hair, did your nails, *and* gave you a blow job for fifteen damn bucks.

“I’m doing research on Ellen Wunderling.”

“Never came in here.” She turned away, busied herself pulling a beer — for whom it wasn’t clear.

“Any other place I could go? I’m new here, and I don’t know the scene.”

“Well, the first thing to do is not dress like a bus driver trying to pawn himself off as another bus driver. That horror show isn’t gonna get you in anywhere.”

“These are new clothes.”

“Go over to Shambles on Prince Street. You can get all kinds of stuff there. Get a hat, some blacks, some fingernails.” She cackled. “Get pierced, officer, then we’ll all just *love* you!”

“I’ll pierce you,” a voice called.

“Oh, shit,” another voice murmured.

Paul went over to the table. He wasn’t absolutely sure if he was talking to a man and a woman, two women, or two men. But he sat down anyway. He wasn’t planning to get in bed with them. Or get pierced. “I’m looking for Ellen Wunderling,” he said.

“Mistah Wunderling, he dead,” the most likely to be male said. His mouth was full of potato chips.

“Miss Wunderling.”

“You gotta go deep into the jungle, man — real deep. Try Hexion or the Hellfire Club — ” The girl — and Paul was now sure she was a for-real female and that underneath all that Vampirella makeup, she was your basic Queens chick — shook her head. “Hexion is a cannibal place,” the girl said. “They serve brain soup.”

“It’s not *real* brains.”

“What’s the Hellfire Club?”

“A Catholic hangout. Run by former nuns.”

“Any Ellen Wunderling connection?”

“He should go to the Veils.”

“Him and the Count of Monte Cristo.”

“What’s the Veils?”

“Just the most exclusive club in Manhattan.”

“The world.”

“Same difference. But it was the last place Ellen was seen alive.”

FIFTEEN

Scorpion Dance

Normally Leo was not much interested in the lesbian stuff that went on between Miriam and Sarah, but watching them this close, with Sarah going wild like that right in her face, was thrilling. When Miriam had kissed her before, she'd been polite about it and pretended, but it hadn't really been a turn-on. This had been the most amazingly intimate, beautiful thing.

She'd been a lonely little rich girl before she came to the Veils, her main claim to fame being that she was the daughter of, like, the second cousin once removed of General Patton. She had a co-op loft in SoHo in an artist building that was full of lawyers. She had a Maserati and a little pocket yacht called the *Y'All Come*, but Y'all generally didn't.

At, like, four o'clock one morning when she was so fabulously wasted, Miriam had said to her, "Come and follow me." They'd laughed. But she'd been totally in wonder because she was not exactly the kind of super cool person who'd be invited into Miriam's *house*.

Next thing she knew, she'd been given a little bedroom with cute curtains and a high brass bed. She'd had pretty much the run of this, like, amazing house. Gradually, she'd realized what Miriam did, Miriam and Sarah. They were lovers, but they also — well, wow, she was one of them now.

She squeezed her toes in her shoes. It was totally incredible to suddenly have this ultimate power. She'd never had any power at all. But now she sure did. She could point to somebody and say, "I want that one," and that person would undergo the most important experience of his or her life.

She wanted to feed for the first time. Even if she didn't have all that much hunger. She wanted this to happen.

It was unimaginable that she would live a really long time. But Miriam had stuff that was, like, Egyptian that was still in use. They had some three-thousand-year-old chairs in there. Leo had researched it. She'd priced it. A chair like the one Miriam had been sitting on during their viola drag would go on at Sotheby's easily for one million bucks.

She was going to see, like, the future. Spaceships. Aliens. Whatever the hell. Unless the world ended. Global warming, was that for real? Miriam said, "What happens happens." That was the way to approach it.

They were coming up to the club. Great. She was already high. She'd been awful sick at first, but since this morning, she'd started to feel better and better and better, and now she felt completely damn wonderful. She didn't have any aches or pains at all.

The Bentley stopped. "Okay," Leo said, popping the door.

But Sarah grabbed Miriam's wrist. "Don't do this!"

"It's safe enough."

"You can't be certain."

Leo watched them bicker. They'd both been real scared lately. For sure; Leo was no fool — she could see it. This guy was bad news.

Miriam started to get out again.

"The front of the club's too public. Go in the back."

Miriam stroked Sarah's head. "There's going to be a confrontation, child. And the club is where it's going to happen."

Leo watched her go in. Then she helped Sarah dress. "That was so cool. I feel like I really know you now, Sarah." Nervously, she kissed her cheek. Maybe Sarah would do something sexy with her. She'd love to find out how it felt. Or Miriam — but that was too, too awesome.

"You know me," Sarah said. She followed Miriam, and Leo hurried after

her. As usual, the club was dark, entirely invisible from the street. There was never a crowd outside the Veils. Ordinary people couldn't find the place. They weren't supposed to — only those who knew. And now Leo was, like, at the top of the food chain. She knew the truth behind all the rumors about Miriam Blaylock and Sarah Roberts. Sarah'd had a lover whom Miriam had killed, that was the main rumor. Another doctor. *That* they never talked about.

Miriam intended to capture the monster that was tracking her and feed off him, maybe even feed him to Leo; she wasn't sure. That depended on Leo. She was a tiresome little thing, truth to tell, but pleasant to have around and very eager.

Sarah, by contrast, was that most dangerous of slaves — one who did not understand the real meaning of servitude. An evil old Roman emperor, Septimius Severus, had once asked Lamia, “As all the world is my slave, why is it that only I am not free?”

Contained in those words was the ironic essence of the relationship between slaves and masters. Sarah was a poor slave because she thought of herself as a captive. Leo would be a good one because she would always look upon her accession to the blood as an achievement, not an imposition. This was why Miriam had been so careful to let her make a clear choice.

As Luis opened the door to the club, Miriam gave a tweak to the little rod in his pants. “Leonore,” she said, “will go to you in the Pump Room.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“I really gotta do him?” Leo whispered.

“Leo, I've serviced Luis dozens of times myself. You'll enjoy it.”

“But I'm not a whore, Miriam. I'm . . . one of you.”

“And we are objective about sex. It's a commodity just like booze and

drugs. Sex is part of this business. Leave your emotions out of it, and your ego. Sex isn't the sort of Blue Broadway that the average Jill imagines, my dear."

Sarah laughed. Miriam wondered what she found funny, let it go. She strode across the glittering bar that was the club's first and most public room, calling out, "The front's to be open tonight, Bill."

"You want the sign up, ma'am?"

"I want the sign."

Sarah came hurrying along behind her. It was only ten, so there were few people here. "That's a bad idea," she hissed.

Miriam stopped, turned to her, put her hands on her shoulders. She had not understood the notion of the tar baby. "He's going to find us. But he must do it on his own, and the sooner the better."

She went to Bill, who was digging behind the bar for the small brass sign that said on it only, "Veils." This sign was placed on the door. Beyond that, they never went. "William, love, there's a good chance that a man will come in looking for Ellen Wunderling."

"That again! Don't they ever give up?"

"He's not a cop. I want him drugged a little. Offer him a drink. Lace it with — I don't know — something that'll relax him, make him a little hallucinatory, perhaps. Ask Rudi. But be careful with him."

"Oh, yeah, you bet."

"What's the crash so far?"

"Nobody upstairs. Dungeon's active, though. Seth's on the horse, and that bishop is back. Upstairs is gonna get jammed later. We got DJ Bones tonight."

"Make him a regular." His sound had incredible drive, but there was an

elegance to it that fit this club very well.

“Twenty thousand dollars a night.”

“Do it.”

So that her early guests would see her and be able to tell the later ones that she was indeed here, she went to her customary table at the rear of the bar. Also, she was most interested in watching who might come in that door. He'd had three days to find the place, and he was far from stupid. He'd be here.

At first glance, this room appeared to be the extent of the Veils. But the point of the name of the club was that there were many levels, many layers to pass through. Beyond this room, there were eight others, but many more than eight different ways to sin.

Rudi came up to her. “I got great meth,” he said, “plus them new Hi-Los and some dig hash. The hash was cheap.”

“Push it hard,” she said, looking past him. “I’m probably going to do a pipe later with a friend.” She had a room in the basement that was locked using Keeper techniques. Not even Sarah could enter it unless invited. Sometimes, when the club was crowded and some target was available, Miriam might take it down there. Hidden in the room’s floor was an entrance to a short tunnel that led into the boiler room of an adjacent building. The boiler there had a very good firebox, where Miriam could dispose of remnants quite easily. She would crush them to jagged bits, and they’d burn with a sparkle and a hiss when she threw them in. If the tunnel was ever found, it would appear to be nothing but an old, disused drainage line.

Miriam liked her room. She enjoyed the absolute privacy, the absolute secrecy. Being that it was entirely hidden, she had done some extremely wicked things there, so wicked that not even Sarah could know.

She intended to be very, very wicked to the hunter, more wicked than she'd been to any human being in hundreds of years. If he brought his little gang of helpers, so much the better. She would take them all, gorging herself in the fashion of old, tormenting them so terribly that the ones who had to

watch would be sick all over themselves before their turns came.

“Cigarette me,” she said to Leo, who was hovering.

The girl lit a cigarette, handed it to her. “Um, can I go down with Seth after I do Luis? They’ve got that Presbyterian bishop in the cage.”

“Play your heart out, baby.”

Sarah leaned close to her, whispered. “Thank you so much for what you did. I’m still singing inside.”

Miriam smiled up at her, then watched her carefully as she disappeared into the back of the club. She was watching the way the shoulders were held, and the head. A slave’s posture was very subtly different from that of a free man. Not that they were bowed, but there was in the way they moved the aimlessness of somebody who has not planned their own actions. Sarah walked with decision.

Miriam sighed. Sarah was perhaps too much in love to be a good slave. A lover sought constantly to remake the beloved in the image of her dream. A slave accepted mastery.

“Sarah,” she said.

Sarah turned back. Miriam noticed that there were tears in the edges of her eyes. “Yes, Miri?”

“Turn on the veils, dear!”

“God, I forgot!”

Sarah turned the doorway on, causing the back of the club to disappear behind what appeared to be a dark mirror.

Doug Henning had designed the doorways for her, using his unique skills with light and mirrors. People seemed to disappear into a shimmering black haze when they left one room of the club, and come into view just as uncannily in the next. Thus the Veils.

She sat smoking and waiting. Miriam could wait well. She could wait for days, weeks.

She wondered if the hunter had as yet done any of his evil work in the United States. At the last conclave, held in January of 1900, there had been nine Keepers in America. Perhaps a few more had come over the past century, but probably not. They were not a migratory people. They had divided the corners of the world when they first arrived here, and nobody had wanted the Americas — there had been no indigenous population to work with there.

Two American Keepers had been killed in the airplane collision at Tenerife Airport in 1977. It was thus possible that there were only seven Americans left, including herself. It was also possible, if the murderers had already been here, that she was alone.

Even alone in all the world. That was possible, too.

She was contemplating this eerie thought when she heard a male voice, pleasantly strong, say, “I wonder if you’ve ever heard of Ellen Wunderling?”

He stood at the bar, a tall man with penetrating eyes, smiling at Bill with a detective’s careful eyes.

Miriam’s heart never beat with excitement. At least, it hadn’t in so many years that she could not remember the last time. It was humming now.

“That’s him,” Leo hissed excitedly, “that’s *him!*”

“Have you done Luis?” “Miriam, do I *have* to?”

“Go! Now!”

The girl left. Miriam could now concentrate on the hunter. Look at those eyes, that face, the rippling power of the muscles beneath the cheap clothes. He was damned beautiful, this one. She felt herself getting wet for him . . . which was quite odd, but not entirely surprising. Humans could amuse her, but they did not cause spontaneous sexual arousal. Even as her sex came

trembling to life, her mouth filled, for another part of her was threatened and preparing to fight.

Look at him there, in his rumpled clothes, with that fearsome face of his. Did anybody else find him so ferocious looking? They had no idea what he was. They had no idea where he had been or what he had done.

Look at the cast of his jaw, the line of his nose, his darkly glowing skin. And his eyes, look at the way they flicked here and there, like the eyes of a nervous fox.

Almost, it was not a human face. Almost, it was the face of some sort of exotic animal.

The outline of his suit told her that was carrying, and the gun was big — a magnum, maybe worse.

She was well back in the shadows, but she wondered now if it had been wise to get even so close as this. If he recognized her — but that was absurd. He was, after all, only human. But look at his movements, the grace, the precision — *was* he only human?

Well, of course he was. She was losing her grip, actually panicking. And yet . . . it wasn't panic. It was desire, damnit, real, live desire. She wanted to be with this man.

What had she done to herself, playing around with human beings? This *was* perverse, to want to lie beneath a human male. She'd had a little of this with John Blaylock, which was why she'd switched back to females after he faltered. The females could give you real pleasure, and they were also better servants. Sarah, with all her conflicts, was fun. Interesting. Leo was going to be a hungry little animal. Miriam had all sorts of delicious wickedness planned for that one . . . beginning with Mr. Hunter, here, who was to be her first human meal. The warrior was going to die a lingering, humiliated death at the hands of a rather stupid girl. That would be most fitting.

She watched him sipping a vodka on the rocks. He'd ordered Stoli, then asked Bill a question that she had not heard. Bill had said very little to him,

but she knew what it had been: “That’s the owner over there. Ask her.” So he was fortifying himself. She watched him throw the drink back. He turned toward her.

This was the moment. If he recognized her, she was going to be blown apart.

He met her eyes and came toward her.

“You’re a Stoli man,” she said as he approached. “You ought to try Charodei.”

Paul was so stunned when he looked at her that he almost lost his balance. In all his nearly fifty years on this earth, he had never beheld a woman who affected him more powerfully. She was a vision, just a damn vision. He loved noses, and she had one of those graceful, sweet noses with a tip that begged to be kissed. He loved complexion, and her skin was like frozen cream, a rich, deep white, perfectly smooth. He loved lips, and hers were exquisite, and they had in them the kind of small, amused smile that suggested a good personality. And eyes — her eyes were so calm, so gentle, so fresh-looking that he thought she couldn’t be a day over twenty. She was wearing dark blue silk that looked as if it cost a few bucks. And she owned this fabulous little place. It was small, but it was class.

“Please,” she said in a voice that would put the angels to shame, “have a seat.” She glanced away from him. “Bring him a Charodei, Billy.”

When she met his eyes, he found himself unable to look away. God, her eyes were frank. God, she was confident. He loved that in a woman.

“I want to see if you like it. It’s my little test.” Her smile — it was incredibly kind. That was the thing; this was a hell of a sexy woman, with those fabulous, beautifully proportioned breasts and that angelic face — but she was *kind*. You could see it in the gentle ease of the smile, hear it in the melody of the voice. In a place like this, he would have thought “pretty, but hard.” He knew special when he saw special, and this lady was *real* special.

But Paul was also a very single-minded human being. He was here to kill vampires, not to fuck-talk some kid into bed. He said, “I’m doing research on Ellen Wunderling,” but in his mind he was saying, “If I leave here without your phone number, I’ll kill myself.” Her smile turned, he thought, a little sad. “I didn’t catch your name, mister.”

“Ward, Paul Ward. I’m a journalist.”

“May I see your press credentials? I’m sorry to ask, but we’re almost a tourist attraction because of that story. It’s ironic, because we aren’t even involved in the Goth scene.”

“No, this looks like a very nice place. I wonder if you could tell me — ”

“Sir, I really think you should ask at the precinct. Detective Lieutenant Timothy Kennerly. They questioned every employee in this place at least three times.”

“Nothing ever came of it?”

“I saw her. We all did. She came in and got a Coke. She was sweaty; she’d been running or something. She seemed totally at ease. Not a problem. That was it.”

Paul realized that he was going to have to leave in a minute, as soon as she demanded the press credentials again. He had no credentials. In his wallet were driver’s licenses in five names from three different countries, and half a dozen credit cards, some of which might be good, all of which would flash red lights from Langley to Foggy Bottom the instant they were used.

Miriam saw that he was getting ready to stand up, and realized he was about to go. If he did that, she’d have to have him followed, but there was nobody here capable of doing it except Sarah. She did not want use Sarah that way; it was just too dangerous.

Ward himself was her key. He seemed so straight, though, that she didn’t know quite how to seduce him, or even if it was possible. She would do it by acting the young, innocent girl. Given the panting-dog expression presently

on his face, it was a type he liked.

“Listen,” he said, “I’m working real hard on this. I think it’s a huge thing. There’s something incredible behind it — what happened to her. Almost certainly. And I’d like to enlist your help. What I want to know is, do I have any chance at all?”

“Try me.”

He knocked back the drink. Miriam pointed to his glass, and Bill brought another. At that moment, a crowd came in. Among them she saw Jewel and a rather nervous Ben Stiller. Good faces for the club. It would be a good night.

Paul watched the people disappear one after another into the back wall. It told him that there was a lot more to this place than he’d initially thought. He wondered what would happen if he suddenly got up and went through. This little girl sure wouldn’t stop him. When he’d first sat down, he put her at about thirty-two. Now he was wondering if she could even damn well legally drink the liquor she sold. Christ, though, she was lovely.

She also knew a little something about Ellen Wunderling that she hadn’t disclosed. A flicker in the edges of the eyes had been his tipoff. He wished that he could interrogate her freely. She was an innocent little thing. You wouldn’t even need a rubber hose to get her going. A light slap would set this powder puff to babbling.

He wanted to get in her pants, and it was distracting him. This damn town had to be full of vampires, ripe for the killing, and if this bitch was holding back about Ellen, maybe she was also holding back information that would lead him to them.

“Let me ask you this,” he said. “In the *New York Times* story — do you know it?”

“Of course.”

“It suggests that there are people who think they’re vampires. Who actually drink blood. If I said, maybe such people drank Ellen’s blood — how

do you react to that?”

“The vampire scene is dead.”

“Not for these assholes. They think they’re getting something from the blood — besides AIDS, I mean. Some kind of life force. The soul, I guess.” As he spoke, she thought of how he looked behind a gun. She remembered the hate in his eyes, the eager spark as he killed. This creature *loved* his work, damn him. When she let Leo feed on him — and she would certainly do that in the end — she would make her go very, very slowly.

“Soul eaters,” she said. “Wow, that’s heavy.”

“I know it’s heavy, but it’s true — I mean, in the sense that it’s what they believe. Of course, it’s all bullshit — ”

“Of course.”

“But they believe it, that’s what’s important. You look at the stats. A lot of people disappear without trace, don’t they?”

“I don’t know.”

“In the U.S. in a year, over three hundred thousand.”

“You’re kidding . . . walking out on their debts, or a spouse they don’t like, that’d be most of it, I’d think.”

“There’s plenty of foul play, Miss — what’s your name?” Beautiful, he was. Gracious, not. “Miriam Blaylock.” “Miss Blaylock.” He paused. His eyes were searching hers. How hungry he was. She realized that he was an innocent. Incredibly, his sexual curiosity was that of a boy.

She said, “You look like a soldier.”

“Is that good?”

She laughed, raised her eyebrows, delivered a slowly developing smile. “Is it?”

His left hand came into view as he brushed his cheek with the tips of his fingers. *For God's sake*, he thought, *let her see there's no ring*. She was talking to him like a person, here. She was being nice to him. He was beginning to think to himself, maybe he should lay off work for a little while. Lie low here in Manhattan. Let some personal life develop for once. He'd been married to the damn Company for too damn long. He was ready for a little real life.

He tried an opening line. "So, how long have you been in the club game?"

She took out another cigarette, offered him one. She lit them both with a lighter that looked as if it belonged on the *Titanic*. It was tiny, gold, and complicated. He wouldn't have been surprised if it had blown up in her face.

"Lemme see that."

She handed it to him.

"How old is this?"

"I bought it in a shop. I thought it was cute."

"Well, it could be dangerous."

She tried to recall how long she'd had the damn thing. Seventy, eighty years, at least. She'd never had occasion to get a new one. She took the lighter back. "It's fine."

"I'm gonna get you a real lighter."

"It's fine!"

"No, I'd like to. I'd really like to." He'd go to Bloomingdale's, spend fifty bucks. This lady had to be impressed. He could not let her slip through his fingers.

She looked at him out of lowered eyelids. There was even a little hint of Asia in her miraculous face. He loved the way Asian women looked; they were just so damn beautiful. She was more beautiful.

He just plain wanted to kiss her. But how did he get there? Maybe she'd drink with him. He said, "Listen, lemme buy you one a these Cordiers — what are they — hey, this is great vodka. And coming from me, that's high praise."

How pathetic he was. For the moment, his attraction to her was pushing his fanaticism aside. If she kissed him, she wondered, would it draw him closer or scare him away?

"What do you actually do for a living?"

What was this, he wondered. Was she evaluating him? What if he told her he was CIA? Sometimes that was a major turn-on; sometimes they hated it. Usually, they thought you were a complete asshole.

"What I really do is — I'm a — well, I'm not a reporter."

"I know you're not a reporter, and I'm getting kind of pissed off, since you won't show me any kind of credentials and I'm still waiting."

"You're waiting, and I'm gonna — well, this is not kosher at all. This is really against regs — " "You are a cop. I thought you were."

"No, no." He pulled out his wallet, opened it to his ID card.

Miriam took the wallet, looked at the card. She thought that it appeared entirely legitimate, and it was certainly not a good piece of news. Her opposition was apparently governmental.

She memorized the card, and the information on the driver's license, and the number on the one credit card that was visible.

"Are you offended?"

"I'm curious. I mean, this is — it's so weird. What the hell was Ellen Wunderling really up to, that she rates attention from you people?" She motioned to Bill, who gave him a fresh drink — lots of vodka, less ice. "I mean, this vampire thing seems like something pretty stupid for the CIA to take an interest in."

“What if I told you it wasn’t stupid at all?”

“I wouldn’t know what to say. But I wouldn’t be real interested, either.”

Paul found that a very unexpected reaction. He sat back and regarded her. Given the past few minutes of conversation, he decided to revise his opinion about little Merry Blaylock. He’d bet thirty years in clandestine service that this kid did not know a single useful thing about Ellen Wunderling or vampires or anything connected with them. But the way she was looking back at him, with that dee-licious little smile — well, her innocence told him that conversation should go in another direction entirely.

The smile widened a little, played very fetchingly in her eyes. He could practically see her deciding that she thought his being CIA was kind of cool. The damn tag had worked for once. Damned amazing.

“Would you like to see my club?”

“They say it’s the most exclusive club in New York.”

She reached over, touched the back of his hand with the tips of her fingers. Then she laughed, a deliciously suggestive little bell-note, one of her favorites. “Oh, it is. Very, very exclusive. But if I like you, then you can come in. Welcome to the Veils.”

SIXTEEN

Demon Lovers

It looks like a wall — I mean, *just* like a wall.” Paul extended a large hand toward the entrance.

“Doug Henning was a master.”

“Isn’t he the one who died? Kinda young, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, he was.” He’d been a delicious young man.

She took his hand and stepped through with him.

Techno music hit him like an avalanche — one made of pure sound. The space was dark, milky with smoke. Lasers played in time with the very fast music, revealing random slices of a whole lot of dancers. On a small stage, its floor glistening like a mirror, was a shadow capering behind the most complex set of control panels and turntables he’d ever seen in a club. The dj was faceless, even his head was covered. He appeared to be as thin as his bones, but that was probably some sort of an illusion.

The intensity of the music was completely beyond anything in Paul’s experience. For a few seconds, he was virtually unconscious, reeling through a fog of reefer and crack and crys so thick he felt himself getting high on his second gasp for air. The next thing he knew, the music swept him up, seeming to yank his soul right out of his body and levitate him across the floor. He cried out, he knew it, he could feel it. But the music was so loud, the beat so intoxicating, the rhythm so danceable that his consciousness lost control of the primitive parts of the brain and his body began to move of its own accord. He thought voodoo, the shaking of priests, the trance of the gods.

He was dancing, and he could not do anything but dance. He was helpless to stop himself. The lasers showed sweating faces all around him, beautiful faces, goddesses, gods, and he thought he'd gone to some Olympian mountain. He thought he had risen above the ocean of life into the air of life. He was so happy, his heart was exploding with happiness, and it rushed through him as if fire had replaced the blood in his veins.

It was sorcery, he thought, it was magic. Satan's hooves were trampling him, but Satan's soft hands were also stroking him. He saw the girl — Miriam — standing there beside the stage with two other young women — both lovelies as well. Then a guy came out and began racing around the room like he was in some kind of a major seizure. He was wearing a magician's coat, black with red sequins and green sequins in the shape of a pentacle on it, and he ran in a jerky, unnatural way, striking dancers with a sparking wand and making them cry out.

Then Paul saw that most of the dancers were stark naked and there was a girl shooting a huge syringe straight into a guy's mouth, the needle penetrating under his tongue, and his eyes were flickering like a dying sign. There was sweat in the air with the smoke. There were pills rolling on the floor. The drugs were more plentiful here than anything he had seen in Paris or Bangkok.

It was hell, it was heaven, he was happy, he was scared to death, and he felt as if Satan were right there in this god-for-damned room and he was being butt-fucked by that NVR interrogator again in Muang Sing. Jesus wept, why had they done shit like that to him? The music got louder still and tighter still, driving, driving, crushing through his heart, burning through his brain, and then the magus struck him with the wand and the blow felt like an incoming mortar round.

The lights changed from lasers to white slits, and huge shadows swept over the dancers. When he looked up, he saw into a tremendous sky full of cloud towers and in them there was the Hindenburg exploding and burning, and from its belly there fell sparks that were people.

His whole self was torn away and torn out of him — his name went, his sense of being, the presence of and pain over his father, his place where his

mom lived in him and said, “You’re a good boy, a good boy” — all of his innermost self was torn out of him and swept away in the sea of smoke and the goddamnest best, most exciting, genius-level rock and roll he had ever heard in his life.

Then there was a girl there, one of the lovelies who’d been with Miss Blaylock. She had dark bangs and the kind of shape you wanted to put your hands around. She came dancing up to him and started undressing him, dancing with him and pulling off his clothes. He thought, *You know what I’m doing? — I am letting this happen, because this is the most fun I have ever had or known about.* He helped this exquisite girl with the light brown brush get every stitch of his clothes off and toss them down on the floor.

Nobody gave a shit, nobody stopped, he was dancing in a wonderful ocean of vibrating pricks and sailing boobs, and all the faces of all the gods and goddesses of the dance were smiling on him.

He yelled out, “I’m blown away! I am just plain *blown away!*” Then he remembered that he’d been carrying. The gun — had it been in his pocket or where did it go? Well, it wasn’t his lookout anymore, and anyway, who gave a damn? He was not hunting vampires now.

This was not like any kind of damn club he’d ever heard of before. This was some kind of magic shamanic demon hole, this was.

Cool!

The room changed again, and this time he screamed bloody murder because he could not help it, he could not even think about stopping it; he screamed and he stumbled forward because the floor had disappeared and he was standing a thousand feet *above* Manhattan, and down there the traffic was racing as fast as the music, and little puff clouds were shooting past beneath his feet. The illusion was so perfect — man, it was so perfect! — you did not believe that you were standing on anything. That music, that wonderful, driving, animal-perfect, jungle machine music just totally blew out his nerve endings, so he was not a body with weight and age but an eternal light-being flying over the city.

Somebody knelt in front of him and started blowing him, and for the first time in his life, he just enjoyed it without worrying about who was there. He didn't care if it was a girl or a guy or a damn gorilla; he just loved; he loved with all his blood and his hammering, crashing heart, and the little light in the middle that was him.

Then he did look down and he saw the naked woman from the limo on Houston Street. She was giving him a hard-sucking blow job in the middle of the goddamn dance floor, and it was the best damn blow job he'd ever had.

The pleasure was so intense that he could not stand, his knees started to give way. Somebody held him up, somebody strong as shit, so he just let himself go limp. The hands were long and thin and cold against his skin, but the arms were as steady as steel rods. No way was he gonna get dropped. The pleasure swept up and down him, crashing like great waves from the top of his head to the singing tips of his toes.

He closed his eyes, and in his mind he saw not the woman blowing him, but Miriam Blaylock. How could she be that beautiful? How was it possible? With this club, she was some kind of magician, some kind of demon, but God love her, she was so beautiful.

Then he noticed that he wasn't being blown anymore. Hell, that was tough, that was intense to leave him with his gob half down the chute. "Shit!" he yelled aloud.

The music snatched him up like a wave. His balls were aching from him being hard too long with nothing happening but the *music*; the music just did not stop, did it? He was dancing again, they were all dancing again. When he looked over at the stage, he saw six women and six men dancing in front of the consoles, and behind them the dj had his hood off. Paul noticed that his eyes were yellow.

Miriam Blaylock was dancing, too; he saw her. She saw him and her eyes sparkled; then she saw he was naked and she cocked her head and gave him a mock-angry look and wagged her finger at him. Oh, she was just the cutest little girl he had ever seen. God love her for letting him into this wonderful place where he was dancing with the beautiful. She must actually like him.

She must be impressed. Actually. He'd tell her he was the damn CIA director, if he had to. He never wanted to leave this place as long as he lived.

Then it was total dark, total silence. He stumbled, almost fell again, but nobody else moved. Everybody else just stayed still. He couldn't hear a damn thing, not after that music.

The lights came on, and all of a sudden the magical beings were just people. They were boys and girls in their teens, mostly. Some older ones. There were famous faces here and there, not people whose names he knew, but the kind of faces you recognized from TV or the movies but you didn't know exactly who. He'd never been in the same room with famous people before.

A guy came onto the stage. The dj. There was a faint sound like rustling leaves, and Paul applauded, too. Had the music fucked up his hearing or what? He'd listened to plenty of loud rock in his life, but this had been something more. This had been music that blew you so far out of yourself that he now felt as though some sort of internal reset button had been pushed. He felt blank, a deprogrammed soul.

In the light he could see people were getting dressed, and they were still doing drugs, right out in the middle of everything. Some of them were even still making love. Guys were still hard, thinking nothing of it. Some of these kids were not even teens. They were, like, teenyboppers. There were friggin' children in this place, drinking and doing drugs, naked with naked adults. It was total, amazing, awful sin.

"Hell," he said to two of them standing nearby, "this place almost got Bangkok beat!"

Waiters came through two big doors and started laying out food and wine. They brought it in on huge gold trays, in golden bowls and crystal bowls, and the utensils and the plates were all gold, too.

"Christ," he said to another couple, "those pots must be worth a million bucks!"

He hadn't noticed that he was the only one making any noise until a guy held his finger over his lips.

"Be quiet?"

The kid nodded.

Hell, he didn't want to be quiet. He wanted to talk dirty to some frail. He wanted to get finished getting blown. But, hell, he was okay with it; this was what they wanted to do. He was the damn newbie, looked like.

Sarah watched Leo pull Miriam away from the dj's stage and heard her say, "Miri, that *man!* He's utterly dreadful!"

Very quietly, Miriam said, "He's also utterly alone."

Leo seemed not to comprehend. "Well, just get him out of here, please. He's pissing everybody off."

Sarah marched over to her and said, "We don't talk to Miriam like that."

"What? About him? She was an idiot to bring him in. He even had a gun!"

Quickly, Sarah took Leonore out of the room. The hard lights of the kitchen were a better setting for this discussion. "Listen, Leo. Do not *ever* make demands of her. What's been done to you doesn't give you the right. In fact, it does the opposite. Before, you were her friend. Now, you're her possession."

"You know something, Sarah? You're a complete asshole." Leo flounced off through the doors.

Sarah was amazed at how angry she felt, watching those doors swing behind that arrogant little ass. It was a calm, dispassionate sort of anger, a deep anger. The idea that she would have to live years and years with Leo interfering between her and Miri was just plain awful.

Before Leo, she had not been loyal enough. She had been unable to shake the scruples she'd brought from her old life. Miri had stolen her from herself. But because she was not a volunteer but a captive, something else was also true. Miri was responsible for her. Miri, also, belonged to her. She had rights in this relationship. She had her place, and did not intend to be dislodged.

She went down to the office and stood at the one-way mirror, where she could see the dance floor. Everybody was eating, gobbling away at the braces of honey-dipped sparrows and other exotic foods that Vincent had prepared at Miriam's instruction. Miriam had little interest in human food, but it wasn't as if she didn't know about it. Her recipes spanned three thousand years. Honey-dipped sparrows had been the hot dogs of Elizabethan England.

Sarah watched the man. He was, in a way, beautiful — huge, muscular, his eyes extremely intelligent. She'd gone out on the floor and sucked him for a little while. She imagined that his ample organ would feel really nice inside her.

"You're drooling," Miri said as she came in. "And get your clothes on, you're the only one still naked except for that big slab of ham you're drooling over. Want to eat him?"

"What's the deal with him?"

Miriam sat down behind her desk. She tossed a small suitcase on it, clapped her hands. "Chop chop."

"The count, already? It's only two, Miri."

"Rudi's bag got too full. You'll have two counts tonight."

"I thought it was gonna be good."

"You want to know what the deal is with him?"

"Yeah." Sarah was sorting, preparing the pile for the count. It was over a hundred grand, though; she could already tell that. Money came to Miriam like metal shavings to a magnet. Ancient Keeper magic, Sarah thought. "So,

what is it?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you.”

“Please trust me, Miri. It’s agony for me when you don’t.”

“It’s agony for me when you forget your place, child.”

Sarah sorted bills into neat stacks of fifties, hundreds, a few twenties.

“I’ve been thinking about that. I want to ask your forgiveness. I want you to know that you’ve got my absolute loyalty.”

“Now that there’s a replacement threatening, yes. I wish you’d come to me before I blooded her.”

“Why did you? We’ve got to endure her now forever and ever! And she’s — oh, Miri, she’s tacky and she’s quite stupid.”

Miriam shrugged. “You want to do pipe later, child?”

“I thought you were mad at me.”

“I’m not mad now. In fact, I’m going to do celebration pipe. The two-hundred-year-old opium.”

“What possible occasion could there be now?”

“I’m going to take that man downstairs with you and me and Leo, and we are going to spend a very long time with him. We’re to feed Leo with him. Her first pabulum. Do you think she can handle it, Doctor?”

She was instantly excited, instantly appalled. A “very long time” would mean hell for the poor man. “Miri, I hate for them to suffer.”

“What if I told you that he’s the one who assaulted me?”

She stopped counting. In fact, lost the count. “You mean — ”

Miri smiled slow. “I snared him, Sarah, in my very fine net. Anticipated his moves correctly. He is, at present, our prisoner.”

“He’s the one from Paris?”

“Yes.”

Sarah looked at him again. “If we kill him, is that it? You’re out of danger?”

“They’ll be set back, because that man out there is a very powerful weapon. That man is the reason they win.”

“Who, Miri?”

“There are people killing the Keepers, Sarah. Making carnage of us all over the world.”

“*People?*”

“And that man is their leader.”

Sarah found a chair. “And we’re going to feed him to Leo?”

“She needs to eat, dear, just like us. She has a right to her food, too.”

Paul wanted his clothes. Everybody else was already dressed. This was becoming not fun. “Excuse me,” he said again, “I think that’s my — ” But it wasn’t his. Nothing was his. “Look, hey, I’m missing a wallet, here.” He really didn’t need to lose *that*, for Chrissakes. There was six hundred bucks in there. The rest was safe enough inside the springs of the bed at the Terminal Hotel, except for the three c’s he’d spent on the also-gone magnum.

“Hey, ladies!” he called out to no one in particular. “I got no clothes, here! Is there somebody in charge?”

They were purposely ignoring him, all of them. That was obvious. It was

some kind of joke, apparently. He was now the only person naked. The lights were so bright they might as well be on a beach. Goddamnit, this was like one of those dreams — you're naked in a department store or something.

He spotted some guy giving him the eye and flopped his dick at him. "Like to look at it, doncha?"

"It's pretty."

Oh, Jesus, and he'd been having so damn much fun. Normally, he had very little fun. Getting blown and then sick drunk in whorehouses was not fun; it was a job, servicing your urges.

The management was undoubtedly back there watching the New York sophisticates having their vicious fun at his expense. *Lemme put one of you turds in a vampire lair sometime, he thought, see if you find that fun.*

He glared around him. Female laughter bubbled up from somewhere in the crowd, was instantly extinguished.

He went over to the food table. Little dead eyes stared at him. But there was also caviar, and his guess was that this was the most expensive thing on the menu. So he cupped his hands and got a great big glob of it, causing all the cognoscenti to gasp. Then he threw the caviar at the damn one-way mirror.

"Gimme my damn clothes," he said quietly. "Or I'm gonna tear this place apart." He spoke with the kind of gentle intensity that suggested that immediate compliance was essential.

Leo, who had had enough of this jerk for this evening and the rest of what might be a very long life if things went her way, said, "I'll get your clothes."

"Wise girl."

The delay was because Miriam had decided that she didn't want him to get back into his rags. She wanted him properly dressed, so she had sent Luis up to the house to get some of John's clothes. He had just reappeared with a

black silk Donna Karan suit and a bloodred shirt, also of silk. Miriam would not allow John's things to be put into storage, not even yet. Maybe Sarah would come up with some new process someday, that would work for him. His body was still fairly intact, after all. So his things waited for him.

"It's crazy to have this guy here," Leo said.

Sarah, who was counting again and could not interrupt herself, did no more than glare. Now that she shared a secret with Miri that the bitch wasn't party to, she felt better, less threatened.

Miriam put Paul's wallet in the breast pocket of the superb jacket. The magnum, which was on her desk under some piles of money, stayed there.

"You're to bring him to my room," Miriam told Leo.

Leo knew that people who went in there did not come out. "Am I invited?"

"You are indeed," Sarah said.

A chair hit the one-way mirror, bouncing off with a distant thud. He was getting physical about his nudity.

Miriam shook her head. "My, my."

"He's out there naked in a fully dressed crowd," Sarah said. "I'd be pissed off, too."

Miriam chuckled. "Show him the club, Leo. Let him play with you a little. But don't you dare fuck him dry. Is that a promise?"

Leo came around behind the desk and kissed Miriam's cheek. Sarah couldn't watch it. She stared down at the magnum. She picked it up and pointed it at Leo. "Remember this," she said. "He's dangerous."

Another chair thudded into the window.

"Arrange to be at the door to my room with him in half an hour," Miriam said as Leo hurried out. Then she turned to Sarah, "Don't point guns at her."

“She’s rude to you.”

“She’s as she is. Accept her.”

“You want her instead of me!”

Miriam went close to Sarah, cradled her face in her hands. “Control yourself,” she said, pressing harder, compressing the jaw and cheeks until the eyes almost popped out of the head. “Will you?”

Sarah nodded. She could not speak.

Miriam could crush a human skull. She pressed harder. “Are you certain?”

Sarah nodded again. Mucus began dribbling from her nose. Her feet stomped and scuffled, her hands came up and fluttered along Miriam’s arms.

Miriam let her go. Sarah gagged, sucked air, pitched forward out of her chair. Then she came to her feet. Her cheeks were flaming.

“No jealousy,” Miriam said.

Tears pouring from her eyes, Sarah threw herself against Miriam. “Please don’t abandon me!”

Miriam had heard that cry from every one of them, and it went straight to her heart. They were tragic beings, her humans. She was ashamed of them. But she enjoyed them a great deal, and that, ultimately, was what mattered to her. Keepers caused human suffering. That was simply the nature of nature.

She kissed Sarah. “Better?”

“I’m sorry, Miri. It’s just that you’re so precious to me. I can’t live without you.”

“My love, I have a task of great importance that I need you to do.” She held out a brass key. “This is the key to his hotel room.” She tossed it onto the desk, told Sarah the address. “Go up there, take Bill or somebody with you. Go through the room, take every trace of him out with you. And

especially, if you find a small, black book, very old — ”

“He has a Book of Names?”

“If we’re lucky.”

Sarah was shocked. “What use would it be to him?”

“They can read Prime. Some of it.”

Sarah was truly amazed. She had counted a hundred and eighty different symbols in a single glyph. It was the most complex written language by a factor of a thousand. Who could possibly manage to crack a code like that?

“You’re sure of this?”

“I imagine they used National Security Agency cryptographers.”

Sarah felt a coldness within her, as if her heart had been pierced with a knife of ice. “Your name is there. Your holdings. Oh, Miri!”

The Keepers were in terrible trouble if these people were able to read such records. “Where would he get a Book of Names? How?”

“When you get the book — if you do — bring it straight here.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then we’ll just have to get him to tell us where it is, won’t we, dear?”

Sarah managed a smile. Sometimes Miri made them scream, which Sarah normally hated. She would not hate it if this man screamed.

“We’ll make him tell us,” she said. She put her arms around Miri. “Thank you for trusting me again.”

“Now go, child. Go like the wind.”

Paul pulled on the pants, got them sort of closed. “This guy must be thin as a rail,” he said. He managed to get into the shoes, too, which were of leather so soft it made his skin crawl. Could these people have somehow gotten something from a vampire? From what he’d seen in Paris, the vampires were much more capable of mixing with humans than he’d believed. His sense of it was that the Asians were more ancient than the Europeans and far less able to be seen on the streets. Maybe the Americans were younger and more humanlike still. Hell, maybe they would even fit into a hip crowd like this.

He looked more carefully at the shoe. Gucci sure as hell didn’t make them out of human skin, so that theory was out.

The clothes actually fit pretty well, although they seemed decades out of date. The jacket had a wide collar, and the trousers were subtly flared. They belonged to a man with big shoulders like Paul’s, a tall man and a strong man. But a slimmer one.

He regarded himself in the mirror. “Jesus,” he said, “I look like a million bucks.”

Leo decided that she utterly loathed him. “You look just fabulous,” she lied.

“Whose clothes are these, anyway?”

“A friend of ours. Listen, I’ve got an idea. The next set doesn’t come up until after dinner. Want to see the rest of the club?”

A guided tour from this babe? “You better believe it.”

She walked through another wall. Expecting to be blasted by music again, he followed her. But he was not blasted. In fact, he wasn’t in a room at all. He was in a Japanese garden, outside — at least it seemed like outside. The sky was velvet swarming with stars, a sickle moon just turning yellow as it slid toward the horizon. Bamboo chimes made restful sounds; water hurried over stones. Crickets chirped; a bat whispered past his face. Here and there in the dark, he could see pale bodies. There were at least a dozen people here, all covered by black cloaks, lounging on benches or on the grass. A guy with

glasses and an old-fashioned doctor's kit went among them like a waiter, discussing in quiet tones, then ministering to them out of his case.

Paul smelled opium . . . real good opium. He was already contact high and passive-smoke high, and maybe high on something he'd ingested in the food or those damn drinks he'd been given a million years ago. But he really loved opium, and it was one hard drug to come by these days. It took him back to quiet times in the Cambodian jungle, those magical times when they were more-or-less safe, and they could sweetly indulge.

They weren't outside, of course, not really. They were under a deep country "sky," and this was the middle of Manhattan. Leo took his hand, led him around the edge of the garden.

"Hey, wait, I could do some pipe."

"Um, if you stay in here, it's a thousand dollars an hour."

You could probably drop ten grand on this place in a single goddamn night. "Let's see the rest of it."

"This next room is rather unusual. But please remember, our credo is no limits and no restrictions."

"Sounds like fun." Paul followed her through another veil and into a completely mirrored foyer. There was a tunnel entrance. He hesitated. "Where does that go?"

"Just downstairs. And it only looks like a tunnel. There's a stairway when you get past the veil."

It was not easy to walk into what looked exactly like one of the Paris tunnels, but he followed her. He found himself in a stairway, dimly lit with recessed bulbs, its walls and ceiling black. The rubber treads on the steps gave it an institutional feel. He thought that it must be like this in certain prisons.

There was a thick iron door here. "What is this place?"

“We call it Foggy Bottom,” she said with a laugh. “It’s full of politicians.” She drew the door open.

The first thing he saw was a red butt. Leonore went in, giving it a spank as she passed. “Thank you,” a male voice said.

Paul followed her. “Should I? A guy?”

“He doesn’t care.”

Paul gave him a whack, and not a light one.

“Thank you, sir!”

Paul looked down, trying to see the face of the guy who was trussed up there.

“No, honey, we don’t pry. Not in here.”

But he had seen, and he knew the face. “Um, are these people all from Washington?”

“Washington, the Kremlin, Downing Street, the Vatican. You name it.”

Not all the whipees were men. There was a woman hanging naked from the ceiling, with what looked like heavy chains hooked to her nipples. “Ouch!” Paul said to Leonore, who kept walking. Another woman was encased in spectacular bondage, tied up like some kind of a ball, with what looked like a pair of underpants stuffed in her mouth.

“My God, who’s that?”

“A publishing executive on a guilt trip.”

There was a guy tied to a pole being whipped by two other guys with thick, black paddles.

“More publishers?”

“Two congressmen kissing a senator’s ass. They’ll be taking their turns on the post later.”

“You ever get a president in here?”

“What country?”

“U.S.”

“Which one?”

“Well, how about Bush?”

“Which one?”

Okay, that question was answered. “How much for this room?”

“Oh, you can do this room on my nickel. I’ll top you.”

“In your dreams, sweetie. Not my *schtick*.”

She shrugged. “You’d be surprised what it’s like, getting topped really well. Your ego is, like, imploded. This whole club is about blowing the ego away. Every room does it, but differently.”

“The Japanese garden?”

“The right kind of high, and you’ll feel very close to heaven there.”

“High is high.”

“No way. Our dealer is an MD who not only deals, he designs. He’s given all our customers physicals, he knows exactly what makes them tick. He’s doing blood tests, prescribing, adjusting, all during the course of the evening. They are being taken so high they’re gonna forget even their damn names.”

“And then the music blows you wide open.”

“You can get very close to God in here, mister. This place is sacred.”

Hell called *sacred* — that was something he never thought he'd hear. “Can we go somewhere else?” This was not the part of the club for him. He wanted to do some pipe, or at least get another drink. There wasn't much second-hand smoke down here, and he was crashing.

This time they went up in an elevator so small that they were touching. He sprang up instantly. When the doors opened, he stayed like that, because this was a ballroom full of beautiful beds, and there were people openly making love on them.

A pair of singers, a lovely, tall girl and a young man who was even taller, stood together singing in voices so filled with gentleness that they might have been saints. He recognized “All Through the Night.”

*“O'er thy spirit gently stealing,
Visions of delight revealing,
Breathes a pure and holy feeling . . .”*

There was a solemnity to this place that seemed at odds with what appeared to be an orgy in progress. Paul was a smart man, and he was well able to see the careful thought that had been put into all this. This room, for example, was about disconnecting sex from sin. No more need to hide.

Once in a while, he'd hit a house in Vientiane or Phnom Penh with a bunch of guys, and it would develop into pretty much of an orgy. It was fun but it was ugly, and you felt dirty afterward. In this room the lack of shame brought with it a sense of purity. Thirty or forty human beings were enjoying one another in all kinds of intimate ways, doing everything you could imagine with each other. Their faces glowed with lust, they sweated. But it was all so joyous.

Maybe Leo was right, maybe there was something kind of sacred here.

Seeing all these bodies entwined, he was starting to look at Leo real hard.

But she probably outclassed him like everybody else in this place . . . except for the morons in the dungeon. They were pols, and that was sorta his

world. But he could not relate to getting whipped. He got punished plenty without any assistance. The knife wound was still healing good, for example, but he sure as hell knew it was there if he tried to raise the arm too high.

Leo was terrific looking — clean as a whistle and sexy as hell. He could get into her in a second, way into her. His equipment had been considered pretty sensational by some. Maybe she'd like a little taste.

He decided to give it a try. “Look, I'd like — ” She rested her eyes on him, which instantly shut him up. “Let's go downstairs,” he said, his voice husky with embarrassment. He couldn't proposition her in here, for Chrissakes. He was no damn angel; he needed his privacy.

She strolled out into the foyer. He wasn't quite sure where she was coming from, and he didn't want to insult anybody. But he had to get it on somehow. He was human. He couldn't just be left to Sally Five himself in his hotel room, not after all he'd seen and felt here tonight. He wanted to be loved, too. But since that didn't seem likely to happen to him, maybe she'd just give him a break, here.

“I think you're really — I mean, I could sure as hell give you a nice time. If you need a tip — if that's the drill — ”

“I want to show you a very special space now,” she said. She took his hand.

How anything could possibly top what he had seen so far, he could not imagine. This wasn't just a place of pleasure. It was a whole new approach to pleasure, as something that did not need to be hidden and wasn't a sin. Even the ones in the dungeon were learning that lesson, in their own peculiar way.

The people who could come here were immensely privileged. All of his life, he had thought that the social barriers by which we live were a tragedy. Miriam Blaylock, whom he viewed now as something of a young genius, was challenging those barriers here, and he was beginning to decide that she was succeeding.

They went down a back stairway, steel stairs in a fluorescent-lit well.

There were doors with Exit signs all over the place and a hose station on every landing. He'd also noticed that the place was sprinklered and smoke-alarmed. "I've never seen so much safety equipment."

"We're very careful. You don't want the least feeling of danger."

"I've never felt so safe in my life."

She squeezed his hand.

"Look," he said, "I'm sorry if I embarrassed you. Or insulted. I just — I find you, you know, really, really attractive."

"I'm flattered."

They came to the bottom of the stairs, where there was a door with a breakaway bar that looked as if it must lead into an alley. A horrible thought crossed his mind. "I'm not getting the boot, here, I hope?"

She opened the door. There was a tiny chamber entirely made of mirrors. When he went in, there were Pauls staring at him from every direction, all of them disappearing into an infinity of repetitions. It was a sort of visual echo. "Hey, this is — "

"Have a fabulous time." She slammed the door, and he found himself alone in the small space. He turned around immediately, but saw only more mirrors and could not find the door.

Above all things, he hated confinement. But this was a place of pleasure. He was getting the ride of a lifetime for a poor bastard like him. He was not going to ruin it by freaking out.

So he wouldn't freak out, but the guy looking back at him out of all these mirrors, he looked like he would. Look at the eyes, look at all that pain. Then he thought he saw another face. He saw — Jesus God, he'd been a fool to come here! It was one of them, watching him through the damn mirror. He went for the gun that wasn't there, then lashed out. His fist smashed into the mirror. The room shook, he felt a blast of pain up his hurt arm . . . but the

mirror did not crack.

There was a voice then, very soft, “Turn right and walk toward me.”

He turned right. There was nobody to walk toward but his own reflection.

“Come on.”

He took a step, feeling ahead — and felt air. This mirror was another one of the veils.

Was he walking into whatever had swallowed Ellen Wunderling? Some kind of damn superexclusive vampire lair? Oh, hell, if he was, he’d at least take a few with him.

He stepped into the most palatial bedroom he had ever seen. On the bed sat Miriam. She was playing the flute, and doing it with exquisite skill. He gaped at her, at the tall bed she was in, at the phenomenal tapestries on the walls.

There was a window, and outside he could see smiling green fields with people working in them, men with brown tunics and caps. A horseman rode along a path, a man dressed in the fabulous clothes of the distant past.

She stopped playing long enough to say, “It’s a TV screen.”

But it was very well done. The image was so clear that it looked more like a window than a window.

There was a chair across from the bed, big, carved, almost a throne. He sat in it. He watched Miriam Blaylock play, watched and listened. This was one talented lady. What the Veils was about was limitless wealth and the power of human genius. If you had the cash, the Veils could rebuild your soul.

Or if you were a damn dogface on a lucky streak, like yours truly.

Miriam was wearing a white nightgown cinched just under her breasts with a pink ribbon. He thought, *I have never been in such a wonderful place with such a wonderful person before, and I think I’m about to get laid.*

Christ almighty. Now, he had to prepare himself. When she was finished with that sweet prelude, she was going to raise her eyes, and he was going to see once again her angelic and spectacularly sexy face. He was already as hard as iron. The issue was, how did he do it, if indeed he was to be afforded that privilege, without wadding her on stroke two?

The music came to an end. She put down the flute.

When he applauded softly, she laughed. "I was just fooling around."

"You fooled around with the *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* better than anybody I've ever heard. Better than Galway."

"I adore James."

"You know him?"

"We've played together."

"Okay."

Silence fell. He didn't know what to do next, what to say. He was way out of his class; that was the truth of it. He looked up at the ceiling, which was painted with a night sky, dark blue with gold-leaf stars and a moon that looked more like it had a snake in it than a man. The constellations were strangely off, too.

"That's an antique ceiling. Do you like it?"

"Oh, yeah. How old is it?"

She got off the bed and came over and sat on the arm of the chair. "It's from Atlantis."

"Okay," he said again, and instantly felt like a total jerk. What was he, a stroke victim, here? Couldn't he come up with something a little funny at least, in response to a funny remark from her?

"Okay what?"

“Sorry, I’m just — well — I gotta be honest. I’m just totally overwhelmed, here. Your club — I mean, Jesus. I admit to feeling just a little outclassed.”

She leaned down and grasped him through the silk pants. There was no underwear involved in this outfit, so it was a pretty intimate contact. The pleasure was intense.

“You need to cool down a little,” she said.

“I need to cool down,” he repeated.

She got up and went over to a big chest. It was made of dark wood, carved with writhing snakes. She opened it and he was amazed to see her bring out an opium rig with two of the most magnificent ivory pipes he’d ever seen. “You said you’d like a pipe. I think it’ll help a lot.” She stopped, though, then cocked her head, as if considering something that was a little new to her. “We’re not against drugs, are we, Mr. CIA man?”

“Nah, the Company’s a big importer. Anyway, I been doin’ shit since ’Nam. I’m in an extreme business. You can’t handle it without extreme relaxation. You gotta compensate.”

She gave him a pipe, started to prepare it for him.

“There’s that antique lighter again. Lady, you gotta ditch that thing; you’re gonna burn up.”

She glanced at him in a way that kind of shook him up. Was it a cold glance? Or hate? Jesus, if —

But then she smiled, and it was just so sweet that he could not believe that she was anything except very charmed by him.

He took a long pull and in a second was rewarded with good vapor. It seeped through him like blood in a sponge. It was very good vapor.

She lit her own pipe, then went to the bed and lay back, cradling it. He did the same, lying face-to-face with her. As he smoked, he felt his erection calming down. That was good. The opium would make the evening last.

She kissed him on the neck, just a peck, then giggled. He kissed her back, right on the mouth, hard and long.

After that she didn't giggle again.

SEVENTEEN

Blood Child

Miriam was careful with his kiss. She was not sure how much Keeper anatomy he knew, and until she was, she would take no chances touching his tongue with her own. Afterward, he gazed at her with what she thought were the saddest eyes she had ever seen.

Now, they were smoking together. She was handling the pipes.

He was still devouring her with his eyes, and there was in the back of her mind the thought that he might have some level of recognition.

She gave him a smile calculated to seem shy, a little surprised. He sighed, smoked, closed his eyes.

She removed the pipes after a few more minutes. She wanted him calm, but not in a stupor. Two pipes of this opium would put a human being in one, no matter how strong he was.

“Nobody’s interested in opium anymore,” he said, lounging back on the bed. “I mean, I picked up on it in the jungles of Cambodia. Primitive place.”

“My opium is grown on a Crown estate in Myanmar, processed in a facility built for the CIA in 1952. Some say it’s the very best pipe on earth. Did you know Maurice McClellan? He was in charge of that operation for CIA.”

“I knew Maurice.”

Then he was suddenly watching her with eyes as hard and cold as black diamonds. She was surprised — stunned, in fact — to realize that she’d just now made a mistake. If she were really in her early twenties, Maurice would

have died when she was just a child.

“He was a friend of my father’s,” she said, rolling over on her back and putting her hands behind her head to telegraph how complete was her ease. “He introduced him to Prince Philip.”

“Yeah, that’d be Maurice. He traveled in pretty rarefied circles.”

“You know what we should do?” she said.

“What?”

“We should get you more comfortable.”

“This is a boss suit. I like the way it feels.”

“It’s club wear. When somebody comes in — ”

“Dressed like a bum, like me.”

“You were confusing my guests. They thought you were some kind of a cop.”

“Do you get cops around here?”

“Sure. The precinct’s just around the corner.”

“I noticed.”

“It’s not a problem.” Not when fifty thousand dollars a week was being sent over there and half the powerful people in the city were making sure that this particular block just plain was not patrolled.

She slid her hands under his shirt. He blinked his eyes. He got so hard so fast that there was a hissing sound as his organ slid against the silk of his trousers. As she unbuttoned the shirt, she wondered how much blood he could lose without dying. He was very strong. He’d probably last and last.

Once he was well trussed up, her plan was to remove all her makeup, to let

him know that he had been captured by a Keeper. Then she would prick a tiny hole in his neck and use him as a teaching tool, letting Leo take him by small sips.

She ran her hands along his shoulders, pushed back the shirt. “You’re so *strong*,” she breathed.

“I work out.”

“What do you press?”

“Oh, two hundred. Two-twenty if I’m healthy.”

“You’re unhealthy?”

“I tend to get wasted.” He nodded toward the pipes. “That, booze, girls. I’ve lived in Asia too long, done too much — too much work.”

“What is your work?”

“Classified.”

She laid her head against his chest, drew herself, catlike, close to him. “That’s exciting.”

“What do you think I do? What’s your guess?”

“You — let me see — you’re *very* strong. But you’re also smart.” She whispered. “You’re a government assassin.”

He chuckled. “You kept my gun.”

“You can’t bring a gun in here. It’s against the law.”

“I thought the law didn’t apply to you.”

“My law.”

“How did you get so rich?”

“My great-great-great-great — let’s see, five greats — one more — great-grandfather was Lord Baltimore. He owned Maryland.”

“That’ll do it. But I still want my gun back.”

“When you leave.”

For a moment, he looked, she thought, kind of like a wild animal. He was hair-trigger; she knew that. Up close like this, he seemed even more dangerous.

She stretched, lying half in his lap and half on the bed. When she stopped, the edge of her hand was lying against his erection. She said, “Uh-oh.” Then, “Can I be a bad girl?”

“Be a bad girl.”

Very lightly, she touched it. Then she snatched her hand away. “Oh, it’s *huge!*”

He swallowed. He was trembling a little.

She felt more intimately. “It can’t be as big as it feels.” “Have a look,” he whispered.

“Shall I?”

He was too big around the waist for the pants, so they were only three-quarters zipped. She opened them. He came out, bobbing, the glans gleaming in the soft light.

He *was* huge. She pressed into the tender glans with a fingernail, then held the enormous thing in both of her hands. She drew off the pants. He shuffled out of the shirt.

She had not seen a male so beautiful in years. His muscles were fabulous, his skin lustrous. His face was purest masculine poetry, chiseled and hard, but with the complex, haunted eyes of somebody who had led a dangerous and uncertain life.

Whatever, he was a lovely specimen and he was going to make a sumptuous meal. She was actually a little jealous of Leo. What a great first supper!

A few minutes before he was brought in, she had gone down and checked the furnace next door. All was in order. Under the bed was the black overnight case that she would carry his remnant in.

But all that was for later. Until Sarah returned, she would continue to play with him. She needed that book. If Sarah did not find it, then this creature would discover that Foggy Bottom could be used for more than just games. There were some very serious implements there, and she knew just exactly how to apply them.

She stroked his chest, made a ring around one of his nipples with her finger. She touched the puckered wound on his shoulder. “This hurt?”

“A little. It’s healing.”

She remembered how good it had felt, seeing that knife dig in. If there had been a little more room for her backhand, she would have sliced the arm off.

“What happened?”

“A client became upset.”

“Very upset.”

“Very.”

She kissed the corner of his mouth, but drew aside when he tried to kiss her back.

“You know, Miriam, I have to be honest with you. This is the nicest night of my life.” He looked her up and down. She was still wearing her sheer nightgown. “You are — oh, gosh — so much more than you seem. I mean, please don’t take this wrong, but you’re just a kid, and this place is really deep, here. That girl that took me around — she said it was sacred and I thought she was a complete moron at first. But I started realizing what you

were doing. And I want you to know this — I agree with it.”

“Thank you.”

“You came up with the whole concept?”

“Yes.” She took his hands to her bodice, put the ribbons in his fingers. Then she drew his hands slowly apart. As she did so, the ribbon came away and the gown fell down her shoulders like drifting smoke.

“Oh, my,” he said. Her breasts were gracefully full, curved just right to fit the cup of the hand. He raised his hands. But he dared not touch. They were like some kind of perfect art, a porcelain dream.

She took his hands to them. When they lay in his rough palms, the nipples became erect. Gooseflesh dusted the pink areolas.

“Oh, Lord,” he said, watching this. He bent to her, laid his lips on that sweet skin of hers. Up close it had the texture of a child’s, absolutely smooth, as if life had not yet touched it.

Christ, he ought to ask for her driver’s license. But he wouldn’t, because if this was a minor, then God had made this kid to boogie and he was sorry, but she was gonna boogie tonight.

Her lips hung slack in a way that said she was real interested and real ready. He kissed her, which was awful nice. But he was careful, because he had a thing about him that had not always gone down with women, although the whores pretended to love it, of course. His tongue was kind of — well, rough. No other way to put it. He had a cat tongue. He went deeper, though. Couldn’t help it. The kiss itself was luring him, so sweet was her mouth. He just loved kissing this woman. Oh, wasn’t she a *woman*? Nice!

He wanted to touch his tongue to hers, but she didn’t seem to have one. It was way back in there. ’Course it was. She was probably scared to death.

But then he did, and when he did, she arched her back and cried out so loud it broke the kiss.

“Sorry!”

She threw her arms around him and latched onto him with her legs. She kissed him and kissed him, and he thrust his tongue into her mouth and her groaning and crying made him wild for her. She loved it; she loved the way he was.

She was haunted by how much he reminded her of Eumenes, who had been not only her husband, but her only Keeper lover. Power like this was something she had not tasted in eons. He was like the roaring oceans of the world, the flames of the stars, a tornado, a typhoon.

She locked her lips to his and opened her mouth to him, and he thrust in and rested in the kiss. Even though he had not yet entered her, she came to climax, came again and again beneath his sweating, eager body.

She looked at him, drinking him with her eyes. Never had there been a man so beautiful, never so filled with raging sexuality, never so — so — there were no words to describe it. No words.

They rolled and he was under her. The opium had done perfectly: he was ready, but he wasn't going to explode.

He let her sit on him, felt her take his penis in her two hands. Her cheeks flushed as she stroked it, loved it, kissed it, and licked it. It wasn't human, it couldn't be — because it was going to fit her and they did not fit her. They were wasted, small creatures in their sex, not like a real man, a Keeper man.

He was — but this was impossible. They didn't interbreed. She put that stupid idea right out of her head. He was a lucky accident, is what he was and that was *all* he was.

She wanted to taste of him. She wanted to know his every intimate truth. He excited her, truly, despite the hate that flapped in her heart.

“Hey,” he said, lifting his head and kissing her hard. “You've got a tongue like mine. We're two cats.”

It was true, and this was getting very strange very fast. “We’re made for each other,” she said carefully.

He slid to come from beneath her. She knew what he wanted and responded instantly, with delight. She was *never* on the bottom, but with him yes. Yes. She belonged under him. It felt meant to be. She shifted her weight.

His huge form dominated her. Gazing into his eyes, she spread her legs.

“Okay, baby,” he said, “this one belongs to *me*.” On that word he pushed into her.

The world turned black. Then a dam burst. Thunder rumbled in her head. Thrusting at him, she screamed out his name, “*Paul, Paul, Paul!*” as he pumped deep and withdrew, pumped deeper and harder, lingered then drew back, thrust and pumped, thrust and pumped.

It was as if she had become a single, blazing point of pure pleasure that was racing out through the universe at a million times the speed of light.

Then he rested upon her, and the feel of his surprisingly great weight on her body was the most wonderfully natural feeling in the world. He felt so much like Eumenes it almost broke her heart.

His loins surged, and the pleasure became a fiery comet that went straight through her. He slid himself almost all the way out, then plunged in again. He held her down, and she enjoyed the illusion of being helpless — oh, for the first time in years and years and years — and it was just so damned awfully wonderful. It wasn’t scary — or it was, but that was part of the enjoyment. He was slow with her, and precise with her, sliding in and out, in and out while she shook her head from side to side and arched her back and yammered his lovely name.

It was *just* like being under Eumenes, having all her power stripped away by his greater power, and being free in bondage to him at last.

While he thrust, Paul drank her with his eyes. Not only did she look wonderful and taste fabulous and feel great to touch and hold, she had a very

special instrument down there. This lady could use those muscles, yes, she could, to kiss the shaft and compress the tip in ways that not even the most skilled whores of Bangkok or Seoul or H.K. could even dream about.

Oh, my stars and bars, thank God for that pipe, he thought, or I would've come and been done in the middle of stroke one.

As it was, he went slow and careful while she kissed his chest and bit his hairs and licked his nipples. She cried out, she trembled like a branch in a storm, she pumped while he pumped, faster now, yelling, grasping his buttocks, pulling and pushing him. He was riding this filly, for sure; he was bigger than he'd ever been, and it felt better than it ever had.

Miriam was screaming, her eyes frantic and amazed.

She shrieked; she bellowed.

This was a damned thing, a very damned, damned thing! Because she was feeling a fire blazing inside her, and she knew what that fire was.

No Keeper woman who had felt it ever forgot it, the alarming, painful, delicious heat that told her she was about to conceive. But her egg wouldn't drop for a human! And it mustn't!

No, no that must not — not —

But the process went on, and she went helpless with it, a speck of a woman lost in a restless, living ocean. He was the storms above; he was the lightning striking her tortured waves.

The lightning, it seemed to her, was alive. And if so, then — well, then he was fertile!

Oh, stars, what was happening?

She had never dreamed that any human male would trigger this response in her body. It was her egg, her last egg, and it was moving within her, she could feel the searing delight of its journey.

She had not had a Keeper man in millennia, but she had wanted one always, and now suddenly this enormous body surging above her — that dear, powerful face, those driven eyes — this was a Keeper!

Paul was pouring with sweat, his thighs working, his every muscle singing with the amazing pleasure of this long, long session. Every thrust touched the shivery edge of climax; then as he pulled back, she loosened her muscles and they started again.

He'd never been in a state of pleasure this intense for this long, and things were happening to him that had never happened before. His heart was thundering harder than he could ever remember. Even his skin was tingling with pleasure, especially where it was in contact with her. Electricity — real, humming juice — seemed to be passing between them.

Again he thrust into her. Then he paused, drinking in her perfect flower of a face, her lustrous, joyous eyes.

She screamed. She had screamed a lot for Paul, but she *really* screamed now. She could feel the egg. Definitely. It hung in her, touching the mother lode of nerve endings, and where that egg touched that womb, a million dancing needles of sheer, tickling, joy sent their prickles marching out through her every sizzling nerve.

Paul was on fire with the sweet fire of the angels. Look at her pure, dear face — she *was* an angel! Oh, look at those eyes, those gray pools of innocence — she was the maid of Solomon's fancy. He pressed himself hard against her, thrust harder, and then as if molten gold were speeding in his shaft, he came roaring and yelling and laughing; he came as he had never come before or thought you ever could come. He came in pleasure and in love, in dear *love*, which had caught his soul afire.

She felt his semen speeding into her like a great flaming fire, a sweet sun — and she knew that it washed the egg, and it went screaming through the wall of the egg and sped down to the center, where slept the waiting shadow.

She threw her pelvis forward and arched her back, and they hammered at each other, squeezing the last demanded juice of the pomegranate, the last

starry flower.

A burning wave snatched Miriam up and away, filling her with wonderful fire, shocking her more than she had been shocked since the pyramids reflected the sun, since she had opened her eyes to the eyes of her Eumenes and managed to murmur to him, “It feels like a boy.”

Paul collapsed onto her chest, and they both burst into tears like two scared schoolkids.

Miriam Blaylock and Paul Ward had just conceived.

She was crying for the little baby that lay now within her, its cells already waking up. She was crying for she had no idea what that baby would *be* — Keeper, human, alive, dead, deformed — only that it was her second and it was her last.

“I love you,” he said, “oh, my God in heaven, I love you!”

She looked scared, and he touched her dear eyes to wipe away the tears.

“Miriam,” he said. He suddenly felt awful. “Please never make me leave you.”

She gazed at him, her eyes slow and contented. “I adore you,” she said, and there was such reverence in her tone that he wanted to cry. Maybe somebody would want a broke-down old CIA officer after all. And maybe that somebody would be this wonderful, special girl.

Miriam slid out from under him and drew his head down into her lap. With loving eyes, she gazed at him. Then she bent closer, kissing the tip of his nose and then his lips, and then the pulsing vein in the curve of his neck. She lay her mouth there for a moment, then withdrew.

Paul felt her sucking his skin a little. It was a nice sensation.

Suddenly he jumped away from her.

There, across the room, stood the woman from the limo, the woman who

had blown him on the dance floor.

Miriam got up, went to her, and took her hands. Sarah nodded her head, and Miriam burst out laughing. Her laughter peeled out again and again, and it was so pretty and so full of fun that he started laughing, too.

“How long have you been in here?” Paul asked her.

“Since you started.”

“You sure got an eyeful.”

Sarah shrugged.

“May I know your name?”

“Sarah.” She nodded toward Miriam. “I do her books.”

“You let your accountant in here when you’re — ” He chuckled. “To each his own, I guess.”

“It was lovely,” Sarah said. “You’re a very lovely man.”

The look in her eyes, though, did not suggest that she was pleased with what she had seen. In fact, there was something real on edge about this lady.

Then another one came in through the wall.

“Oh, hey,” Paul said as the girl who’d shown him the club appeared. He got his pants on. Not that one more naked male would matter to this crew.

Then he saw that she was blushing like a tomato. She had a funny little silver thing in her hand. A strange knife.

“What’s that?”

It disappeared into her jeans. “Sorry, Miriam!”

Miriam went to her. “This is Leo. The three of us run this club together.

Leo's the granddaughter of General Patton."

"He was my mother's cousin."

He threw on the shirt, started buttoning it. "General Patton, Lord Baltimore, Morrie McClellan, and Prince Philip. Not to mention Ben Stiller, who was in your place earlier. Lotta names to drop."

"Lord who?" Sarah asked.

Miriam smiled at her in a way that told Paul she was being made to shut up. Which meant that Miriam's story about Lord Baltimore was a lie. Which meant that she felt a need to conceal the origin of her wealth. Interesting.

"We're going home," Miriam said, her voice rippling.

"We are?" Leo's eyes flickered toward Paul.

"I'm in love," Miriam shouted. She raced back to the bed, threw herself at Paul, kissed him hard, then flounced back on the bed, pulling him with her. She said, "He's the best lover in the world." Then she was convulsed with laughter, peeking out from beside his big chest at Sarah and Leo. "Am I being naughty?" she chirped.

"Naughty is not the word," Sarah purred.

"What do I do?" Leo asked.

Paul said, "I think we fell in love."

Sarah suddenly smiled. "I'm so glad." Then she said to Miriam, "Miri, it's four. Can I let the staff go?"

"Is the house clear?"

"Ready for the nighthawks."

Miriam lay back in his lap, her hands folded behind her head. "Leo, tell Luis to get the car ready." She gazed up at Paul. "I'm bringin' my baby back

home.”

The two women went out without a word.

“They seem kind of upset.”

“Pets don’t like surprises.”

“Am I a pet?”

“You, my dear, are a great big beautiful *man!*”

They got dressed and went out of the little room, then through the kitchen to the rear of the club. The Bentley limousine he’d seen on Houston Street stood there gleaming in the predawn glow.

He got in, settling into the plush cushions.

“Want a drink?” Miriam asked brightly.

Sarah and Leo came in.

“You know what I’d like? Have you got a good cigar? After lovemaking like that, nothing in the world would be as nice as a really fine cigar.”

Leo grunted with barely concealed disgust.

“We have some Cohiba Piramides in the club,” Sarah said in a dull voice. “But it’s awfully confined for you to smoke a cigar here.”

“Luis,” Miriam called, “go back in and get my lover some cigars.”

Luis brought them out and held open the humidor.

“I was looking for a Macanudo, maybe,” Paul said.

“Cohibas are a bit better,” Leo replied, unable to conceal a sneer.

“We’ll all smoke,” Miriam snapped, handing cigars to Sarah and Leo.

“Self-defense, Sarah! Let me get my hand grenade — Paul says my lighter is dangerous, did I tell you? Hadn’t that ever occurred to you, Sarah?”

“I’m sorry, Miri, it hadn’t.”

“Well, he’s going to get me a new one. He says we wouldn’t want my pretty face to get burned, would we?” She cut and lit a cigar and handed it to Paul.

Paul took a drag of a smoke that was hard but incredibly rich, and he knew that it was true, that this cigar was better than a Macanudo. Way better, in fact.

Miriam offered one to Sarah, who waved it away. She pressed it on her.

“Look,” Sarah said, “I don’t want to!”

“Smoke!”

Paul was fascinated. What kind of accountant took orders like that? Miriam treated Sarah more like some kind of a slave.

Sarah took the cigar. Leo lit up in a hurry. In the front, Luis lit up. Only Miriam didn’t smoke. She sat glaring at Sarah. Whatever was going on between those two, Paul thought, they were absolutely furious with each other.

There was some cognac in the car, and Paul had a snifter with his cigar. It was as soft as a pillow, this brandy, but full of flavor. He didn’t bother to ask how old it was. Probably came straight out of Napoleon’s hip flask.

He allowed himself to imagine that what had come between him and Miriam might be serious.

“Where is home, by the way?”

“I have a beautiful home. You’re going to just love it. And if you *don’t*, then we are going to change it so you do. Isn’t that right, girls?”

“Yes, Miri,” Sarah said, tears in the corners of her eyes. Paul felt sorry for her. Knowing Miriam, she’d been bedding this sweet little thing. They could have been serious lovers. And then all of a sudden, here comes this guy, and bang, Sarah’s strictly backseat.

Paul wanted to kiss Miriam again. He wanted to be in her again, to go in there and just live in there. That was his damn wheelhouse from now on, that fabulous twat of hers. What a creature. What a damn night.

It got quiet in the car. Leo and Sarah were staring daggers at Miriam. They looked as if they wanted to beat her up, as a matter of fact.

Well, let 'em try, Paul thought. She was his girl now and nothing anybody could say, nothing they could do, could change that. Except — he was aware that it was a little dangerous to say you’d fallen in love forever because of a single great roll in the hay.

But, hey, there was something *there*, something damned wonderful and serious. It had happened. It damn well *had*.

He watched Sarah puff a little on her cigar, then closed his eyes and sipped some more cognac.

This was the life, despite the fact that all the exercise had made his shoulder start to sing. He’d like a couple of naproxen or something. No more opium. He’d done his share of drugs for the night.

He thought of his seven grand at the Terminal Hotel. If he didn’t show up sometime tomorrow, they’d be sure to toss the room. Probably they already had. That would mean the Book of Names was gone. Also the seven grand. Everybody knew to toss the bedsprings if you were tossing a room.

So, what did that mean to him, now that he was on the lam? Loss of the seven grand would be tragic. As for the Book of Names, he wasn’t sure if he was going to continue in that line. Maybe he’d done enough killing. He could write a pretty decent report, so maybe he’d interview at *The New York Times*. They hired out of CIA all the time . . . but mostly from the analytical divisions, not from the tough guys.

They arrived on no less than Sutton Place and pulled up — guess where — in front of the prettiest house on the whole block.

“Man,” Paul said as he got out. This was way far away from his side of the tracks. He looked up at the imposing façade. It looked damn old, but it was perfectly kept.

Miriam hurried up the steps and threw the door open. Paul joined her. “I oughta pick you up and carry you across the threshold,” he said.

“Welcome to my abode. Girls, he wants some breakfast! Caviar and eggs! Champers!”

Sarah and Leonore marched off into the back of the house.

“I don’t think they like me too much.”

“They’ll get used to you. In fact, I have a prediction. Sarah is going to totally change her opinion of you.”

Paul had big plans for bedtime, which came after a breakfast where Miriam picked and drank champagne, and he thought he must have consumed sixteen eggs at least. Sarah served table, and Leonore cooked. Sarah was awful pretty when she was mad.

Paul smoked another of the cigars in the big library. He saw all kinds of amazing books. There were also locked bookcases with really ancient looking black books in them, their spines unmarked. There were even scroll boxes, smelling of beeswax. He drew a scroll partly out, but it was real old and he was afraid to unroll it for fear he’d crack the parchment and cost her a cool million or something.

He would not have been surprised to find a Gutenberg Bible in here. What he did discover was to him equally amazing — a portfolio containing an original collection of opera libretti. These were not simply early printed copies. They were the manuscript scores.

Here was *Rigoletto* in what was apparently Verdi’s own hurried scrawl.

Reverently, he drew the score out. Miriam came up behind him so quietly that he was startled.

She laid a delicate hand on his shoulder. “You take an interest in opera?”

“A great interest.”

She took the score and walked through to another wonderful room. The wide parquet floor was covered with a Persian rug — the real thing, undoubtedly. But Paul’s attention was taken by the Steinway, a concert grand set in an alcove all its own. The windows that framed it appeared to be Tiffany stained-glass.

The sun was rising, spreading golden light across the rich mahogany top of the piano. On it stood a vase that was probably an ancient Greek original. Sarah was quietly filling it with flowers from a garden that could be seen beyond the windows, just beginning to glow with the light of morning.

Miriam opened the piano. She toyed with the keys for a moment, then riffled in the score. “Sarah,” she said, “would you?”

Sarah sat down at the piano. Suddenly she looked up at Paul. She held out her hands. “These belong to a surgeon,” she said.

What was she getting at?

She trilled up and down the scales, shaking her head in the shafts of sunlight, so that her locks shot red-brown sparks.

Miriam set the score before her, and Sarah began to play, and quite well. It took Paul a moment to recognize “Caro Nome,” and then Miriam was singing it, one of the greatest homages to the female soul that had ever been written. That she was singing it directly from the hand of its author made the experience all the more haunting.

Leo came in and listened, wiping her hands on her apron and blowing a curl out of her eyes.

When the song came to an end, Paul wanted to hold Miriam, to let her

know again how he felt. They had just had profound sex together, and he was in profound love. It sounded stupid, he knew that, and he couldn't actually say it. He'd only known her for a few hours, for the love of Christ.

She threw back her head and sang at the top of her lungs, "I'm in love, I'm in love, I'm in love with a wonderful guy!" She danced him round and round the room.

At noon she was still showing him her collections, her poetry — she had the original folio manuscript of John Keats's "Lamia," and Tennyson's "Tithonus," among many other wonders.

Paul struggled to show interest, but he had been asleep in the chair where he sat for at least a full minute when she shook his shoulder.

"Come on," she whispered in his ear, "you need a cuddle."

She took him upstairs, then, and they stripped in the sumptuous bedroom. She dropped her clothes to the floor for Leo to run around picking up. He was afraid to do the same, and put his on the edge of a little daybed.

Sarah drew them a bath in a huge onyx tub that must have, in itself, cost a million dollars. In fact, it was the damndest tub he'd ever seen — beautiful, glowing stone embedded with gold nymphs and satyrs and sea creatures.

It reminded him of something you might find in a palace. It had an ancient Roman look to it. The only place he had ever seen anything carved with such perfection, however, was in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid. The sarcophagus there looked a little like this tub.

Sarah wore a green dress with a maid's cap and a white apron. Between her soft good looks and Miriam's wondrous, long-legged nudity, Paul was damn well ready to go again. Sarah gave him a playful tweak as he stepped into the tub.

"Don't misfire his cannon." Miriam laughed as she joined him. Sarah washed their hair and their backs with fragrant soap. She washed his face, which was an incredibly intimate experience. Being naked with Miriam

would mean being naked with her friends, apparently. Hell, the more the merrier.

Here in this bathtub with these amazing people around him, he definitely decided that his past was no longer his problem. He told himself that this decision was now and forever. The world had survived a long time with vampires hiding in its shadows.

From this moment on, he had a new job: getting Miriam to marry him.

He lounged back, eyes closed, as Sarah's fingers delicately massaged his cheeks and softly caressed his forehead. Miriam's toes appeared between his legs, pressing and touching.

Yeah, it was heaven. The crusty old tough guy had found one hell of a pasture, looked like. He thought — hoped — that he was presently feeling the tiredness and disappointment of a lifetime, and maybe even its many, many sins, slipping away into the past and welcome forgetfulness, being cleansed away by the ministry of angels.

Then he noticed Leo. She had come in quietly. She sat on the john with her legs crossed, smoking and watching him. He saw the strange little knife again. It was outlined in the pocket of her very tight jeans.

Their eyes met. She smiled.

EIGHTEEN

Careless Love

Miriam and Sarah stood hand in hand looking at the magnificent human specimen lying asleep on the bed.

“He’s in hog heaven,” Sarah said.

“He is.”

Leo took out the fleam. She moved toward the bed, then looked to Miriam, her face questioning.

“Leo, we’re not going to do him.”

“But I feel — ” She shuddered. “We have to.”

“She’s right, Miri. Think what he’s seen. Think who he is!”

Paul stirred, throwing a large hand out from under the covers. “Miri . . .”

Miriam went to the bedside and knelt and kissed the hand. “I’m here, my love.”

The hand reached out, stroked her cheek. “Mmm . . .”

She slid in beside him.

When Sarah saw the tenderness in Miriam’s eyes, she was horrified. What had happened to her? Had she gone insane? This was the most foolhardy thing she had ever done.

“Leo,” Sarah said, “do it.”

Leo looked at the fleam. “H-how?”

Miriam’s head came out of the covers. She raised herself up. She whispered, her mouth close to Sarah’s ear. “I think I’m pregnant.”

Sarah stepped back, for a moment too surprised even to respond. She was a scientist and doctor who’d had twenty years to study every aspect of Miri’s body. A limitless budget had made the lab in the basement a wonder of science, equipped with every conceivable instrument, including many that Sarah had designed herself and had built by the finest medical engineering establishments in the world.

Sarah knew, therefore, that this “pregnancy” was a tragic fantasy. It must mean — could only mean — that Miri’s last egg had dropped. She was not pregnant; she just wanted to be. She could not become pregnant by a human being. All that had really happened was that Miriam Blaylock had lost her last chance to bear a child.

Sarah rushed into her and Miri’s sunroom, where they had their private little place together. Miri sewed for a hobby, using the intricate stitches taught her by her mother, producing the exquisite leatherwork of the Keepers. On the floor where Sarah had laid it, beside a couple of ancient half-opened scrolls, was the Book of Names that so much blood, human and Keeper, had been shed over in Paris.

Sarah threw herself down on her daybed and let the bitterness and the sorrow that had built up over the last terrible hours flood out of her in the form of huge, gasping sobs. Sometimes Sarah hated Miri, but mostly she loved her, and especially when she was suffering and vulnerable, as she most certainly was now.

It would fall to Sarah to examine her in the stirrups, as she had done so often, and to give her the news that would break her heart. In the end, Miri would come back to her, turning as always to Sarah’s enfolding arms for comfort. Sarah would give her what comfort she could, but how can you relieve the sorrow of a woman who has just learned that she has lost her last chance for a baby?

And worse, by so doing she had exposed herself and her household to mortal danger. She was in there alone with that evil creature — how could she *be* so heedless?

There were tender sounds coming from the bedroom, sounds of love-making. Sarah went to the door and signaled Leo, who was standing by helplessly and self-consciously.

“Sarah, I feel dreadful!”

“I know, dear.” As much as she detested this foolish girl, she could only sympathize with her now. She had lived this suffering.

“I’ve got to have blood.” She gave Sarah a desperate glance. “I tried to eat some of the omelet I made him, but it was revolting, it tasted like wet paper.” She threw her arms around Sarah. “He smells good. He smells like — like —”

“Food.”

“What have I done, Sarah, what have I done to myself?” Sarah could not answer her. There were no words to describe the ruin of a soul. But she held her, she kissed her soft hair. “We’ll hunt you up a meal. Like that old woman. A nice meal.”

Leo looked at her out of awful, stricken eyes. “I don’t want to kill anybody.”

“You made a choice.”

“I don’t want to!”

Sarah moved quickly to close the bedroom door. He mustn’t overhear this.

“Leo, I’m going to tell you something about that man in there. I don’t want you to be frightened. It’s all going to come right. I hope it is.”

She went across to the graceful New Kingdom table that stood beneath the wide window. Paul’s magnum pistol lay there. The table had been a gift to

Miri from Thutmose IV, “in exchange,” as she put it, “for some girlish indiscretions that he found very enjoyable.”

“This is going to come as a surprise, I know. That man in there is a killer of the Keepers. A professional.”

Leo’s eyes went to the closed door. “I didn’t think anybody knew about them.”

“There are people who know. He’s one of them. He’s murdered hundreds of them.” She said nothing of how that made her feel — the combination of relief and cold terror.

“Oh, my God. But why is she — ”

“Leo, something happened tonight that I still don’t fully understand. She apparently enjoyed that man immoderately. She thinks, for whatever reason, that he fertilized her egg.”

“Only another Keeper can. Isn’t that true?”

Sarah nodded. “It’s a fantasy, nothing more. A tragic fantasy.”

“She can make a mistake like that?”

“Miriam — a Keeper woman — has only four eggs in her lifetime. This is her last one.”

“Does she have any children?”

“No. Apparently she’s lost her last egg, and — well, she seems to have had a bit of a breakdown.”

“Can’t you give her anything? I mean, you’re a doctor and all.”

“What we need to do is to give her a pregnancy test. When it comes up negative, my hope is that she’ll come to her senses.”

“And I’ll get — I’ll get to . . .” She lowered her eyes. Her face burned with

shame. “I hate this!”

“You bought it,” Sarah said. “Wear it.”

“I don’t want to do any more killing! Not ever, Sarah.”

“Join the club.”

“But I have to, don’t I?”

“Join the club.”

Leo began to weep. The hopelessness in the small, defeated sobs was familiar from Sarah’s own private moments. Sarah embraced her, and Leo held on tight. “It hurts, Sarah. It hurts terribly!”

“Blood will fix that.”

Leo grew pale. “I’ll kill myself,” she said.

Sarah was silent. Leo hadn’t yet seen the attic. Better to put that off for a few days.

“What do I do, Sarah?”

“Leo, that man in there is a monster. He’s killed hundreds of Keepers, and he’ll kill Miri the instant he discovers what she is.”

“She won’t let him.”

“In bed together for hours, exploring each other naked, and him being familiar with Keepers and how they look — it could happen at any moment.” She gestured toward the magnum. “That thing is loaded with explosive bullets. They’ll blow your brains right out of your head, your heart out of your chest. The only thing that Miriam’s body can’t survive is the failure of blood flow. Given an intact circulatory system, she’ll heal. Always. He knows this. He knows exactly how to kill a Keeper.”

“I had a nice life. I had my loft and my little boat and my friends — a few

friends — and I was collecting cool artists like the Starn brothers and John Currin . . . but I spent most of my nights at home, or going to clubs by myself, trying to look like the group I wanted to be part of. But nobody wanted me. I was a washout . . . until all of a sudden *Miriam Blaylock* starts taking an interest. In me! I was totally impressed, Sarah.” She choked back a sob.

To her credit, she did not break down, which is what Sarah had thought was going to happen. She raised her head, stuck out her chin, and said, “What we have to do is pretty damn simple.”

“It is indeed.”

She took out the fleam, handed it to Sarah. “You know how to use this; I don’t.”

Sarah opened it. “You hook the end in behind the vessel, then jerk it toward you. The blood’ll come out in a stream. You get your mouth over it and just keep swallowing as fast as you can.”

“What if I throw up?”

“You won’t. You’re carrying around a pint of Miri’s blood in your veins. It’ll be like taking the most intense drug you’ve ever known. It makes the most powerful horse ever sold seem like aspirin.”

“He’ll go nuts when he gets stuck. I mean, he’s gonna feel it, Sarah.”

“I’ll do the incision. All you have to do is cover the wound with your mouth and suck as hard as you possibly can.”

“He’ll fight.”

“It’s not like that if you’re fast. They lose consciousness in a couple of seconds.”

“You better do it.”

“You need to eat! If you don’t, her blood’s going to start destroying yours.”

You'll go into shock."

"I'll die?" She actually sounded hopeful, as if she thought it might be a welcome release. Sarah thought of what was in the attic.

"Feeding draws the blood right out of the brain. He won't even get a chance to yell."

Leo looked to her with the gaze of a little sister, and Sarah realized that her feelings toward this kid were changing. She squeezed Leo's hand, trying to reassure her. "You're going to be perfect. The hard part is the incision, and I'm doing that." "It's quiet," Leo said, looking toward the closed door of Miriam's bedroom.

"He's sleeping."

"But she isn't?"

"No."

Miri only slept after she fed. Since she hadn't, she would be completely conscious the whole time.

"You stay at the door, Leo. Come in at my signal."

Sarah went into the bedroom, her fleam concealed in her blouse. Paul was as comatose as a mouse-stuffed snake. Miri was cuddled up to him like a schoolgirl with her first lover.

She looked so happy, eyes closed, face blissful. She was nuzzling his chest hair.

When Miri saw Sarah, she gave her a secret, delighted smile. Sarah went to her and stroked her hair, which was twice as full as it had been even a few hours ago. The Keeper body was astonishing in its ability to regenerate and restore itself. Sarah had been fascinated to find out how it all worked. Some nature somewhere had evolved this wonderfully regenerative organism, but it had not been earthly nature. Miriam had never told Sarah where they had come from, only that it was the stars. Why they had appeared here, as

colonists or refugees, or — as Sarah suspected — on some far more exotic mission involving the evolution of species, she would not discuss, and perhaps did not know.

Sarah went around the far side of the bed from Miri. She hated so to hurt her, but this had to be done, and there was no time to waste. Poor Miri could be foolish in love. It was her one failing. Sarah had been the victim of some of that foolishness, but also the beneficiary of its indulgence, for which she was profoundly grateful. Miri's love also lasted. In the past twenty years, she had probably spent ten million dollars on Sarah's scientific efforts, even indulging her struggle to see if she could remove the Keeper blood that Miri herself had put in her veins.

Sarah slipped into the bed. Paul's back was to her, his form concealing her from Miri's vision. She stretched out against him.

“Isn't he wonderful?” Miri whispered.

“He's certainly big.”

Sarah brought out the fleam, then drew the narrow silver blade with the hooked end out of its ivory sheath. Using the delicate tips of her surgeon's fingers, she found his jugular.

The pulse was excellent. He was going to be an extraordinary first meal for Leo. In fact, there'd be plenty for Sarah, too. She could top off that weak old woman and maybe get a month more time before she needed to feed again.

This was one kill that she wasn't going to mind. How strange her heart was, to want to kill an enemy of Miri's who had literally stolen her from herself. But she loved Miri at least as much as she hated her. She didn't think of herself as a lesbian — she had no interest in Leo, for example — but what Miri had done for her in the car on the way to the club had been wonderful beyond words, so fulfilling that it seemed to literally feed the soul. Not even with Tom had it been like it was with Miri.

This love across the border of species was deeply awful, yes, but somehow also deeply sacred. For all of her anger and all of her striving to escape her

fate, Sarah knew that she would always be here, always in the end choosing her Miri over freedom, over death, over everything.

She rose into a sitting position. Now she could see Miri, whose eyes were closed, whose lips reflected deep happiness — deep and pitiful.

She motioned to Leo, who came quickly to her side. Sarah gestured toward the sleeping man, then toward Leo's mouth. Leo nodded. On her face was a child's expression of fascination.

With the quickness of long practice, Sarah slit the vein. Blood spurted, and she pressed Leo's head against the wound.

She did surprisingly well, sucking with ferocious energy.

"He's out," Sarah said, as Paul's body sagged.

But then a shock like an explosion went through the huge body. Sarah heard air rush into the lungs. Leo was sucking hard, but he was most certainly not out.

On the contrary, he roared out his pain and surprise. Miri screamed, too, and leaped back away from them.

Still roaring, with Leo stuck to him like a stubborn leech, Paul lumbered up off the bed and started pulling at her, trying to rip her off him. She was not going to be pulled off, though. She sucked, he screamed, he staggered, Miri screamed.

Obviously, this man was not like ordinary men. Somehow, this man had remained conscious through a sudden and total loss of intercranial blood pressure. Somehow, this rather easy kill had become a disaster.

He lurched across the room, trying to peel Leo off. Her eyes were wide and she remained stuck tight. It was the blood, Sarah knew, the incredible effect of the blood. Her first taste had driven her almost mad with pleasure, and she would fight off the devil before she would stop sucking it out of him.

Sarah also knew that this monster was not going to be killed. She raced out

of the bedroom.

Leo was hardly even aware of what was happening. This blood — it was a miracle, it tasted like sunlight, like heaven. Every gulp of it went gushing into her starved cells, filling her with energy and power and buzzing thrills.

Then strong arms — really strong arms — came around her and yanked her off. Paul dropped to his knees, his neck spurting. He was gasping, he was swaying — and then he reached out and grabbed Leo's wrist and drew her down to him. He tried to speak but nothing came out. But the look of hatred on his face was something phenomenal, something unnatural. He was like some kind of hell creature, this man.

Miri grabbed her away from him and screamed directly in her face, a banshee wail. "He's of my kind," she shrieked. "Of *my* kind!"

A high-voltage shock of total surprise flashed through Sarah, who had returned to the bedside. She was saying that this man . . . was a Keeper? *This* man?

He rose up, his eyes blazing. He tore a newel post off the bed and swung it. It whistled past Leo, nearly hitting her. Then he swung it at Miri, who ducked easily. It shattered instead against the wall with such force that the whole house shook.

He leaped on Miri. His hands tightened like a vise around her neck. Leo grabbed his arms, but he could not be dislodged. No matter the blood he had lost and was still losing, he was as strong as iron.

"He's killing her," she screamed. She beat on his back. Miri's eyes came bulging out of her head. Leo screamed, she cried, she hauled at the iron arms. Miri's face was disintegrating, her mouth returning to its natural shape, the prosthetics that altered her appearance popping out. Then the compression of her throat forced her tongue between her lips. It appeared, black and pointed, gorged with blood. His own blood was still spraying out of his neck, spattering her with a red shower.

Leo hit him and hit him, but he was totally fixed on this; he was like a

robot programmed to kill.

Suddenly there was a terrific, blinding blast and he dropped like a stone. Leo threw herself between him and Miri, who went to her feet coughing and rubbing her neck.

Sarah stood quietly, the magnum in her hands.

Miri staggered. Then she threw herself on him; she turned him over, tried to stop his bleeding. "Help us," she screamed.

"Miri, let her feed! Let her take him!"

"You're a doctor! Help us!"

"Miri, he's dangerous! He's got to be killed, come on!"

"Save him, Sarah! *Please!*"

"Miri, no! Leo, take him!"

Miriam leaped up, and before Sarah could stop her, she had tossed Leo across the room like a rag doll. Then she yanked the magnum out of Sarah's hands.

Sarah prepared to die.

But Miriam stuck the gun in her own mouth. She screwed her eyes shut.

This would not kill her, but it would leave her too damaged to recover. In the end, Sarah would have to stop her heart.

"Miri, *no!*"

"Then help him."

Sarah knelt to the unconscious form, stemmed the bleeding from his jugular with a finger. His eyes were fully rolled back, and he was seizing from blood loss and shock. He had probably five minutes, maybe less.

“We’ve got to get him downstairs,” Miri said. She tossed the gun aside.

Miriam carried his shoulders, Sarah his feet. They took him to the lift in the front hall, squeezed in with him while Leo raced ahead on the stairs. She had the examination table dressed with a sheet by the time they reached the surgery.

He was in deep shock now. “This is going to be a problem,” Sarah said. She slapped a pressure bandage on his neck. The flow had dropped by two-thirds. His blood pressure must be almost nothing. “I’m losing him.”

Miriam burst into tears, threw herself on him.

“Get her off,” Sarah said to Leo.

But when Leo touched her, she threw back her head and howled with an agony beyond anything Sarah had heard from her or anybody ever. She’d never seen her like this, crazy with grief, her emotions like an exploding volcano.

“Leo, have you ever assisted in a surgery?”

“God no.”

Sarah took Miri’s shoulders. “Miri, can you hear me? Miri!”

Slowly, by what looked like tormented inches, a more sane expression returned to her face. “You did not have the right to take him.” Her eyes flashed with a ruler’s pride. “*You did not have the right!*”

“Please forgive me,” Sarah said.

“Then save him! Save him!”

Sarah stabilized the neck wound, then got them to turn him over on his stomach. The entry point of the bullet was below the heart. If the artery was intact, he might have a chance. She couldn’t type his blood, there was no time, so she had to go with O+. She told Leo, “Get me six pints of blood from the fridge. Miri, set him up.” While they worked, she went to the cupboard

and took out her instruments. She had a complete surgery here, even an extractor for bullets. She had once promised Miri, “If I can get you here, I can fix it, no matter what may befall you.”

There was an X-ray machine, but there was no way they could move him to the table now. There was no time. “Scalpel,” Sarah said as she swabbed the entry wound with Betadine. A glance told her that Miri had set the blood properly.

If he was really a Keeper of some unknown kind, she was flying almost totally blind. In Sarah’s own veins, Miriam’s blood functioned like a separate organ. It flowed with Sarah’s natural blood, but did not mix with it. It could not. Sarah could not even begin to guess what was going on in this man.

She dissected around the entry wound, opening it wider and wider, snapping orders. “Spreaders!” she called when she reached the rib cage. “Clamp!” she said when she found torn blood vessels.

She could not entirely save the lung, but she managed to isolate the bleeding enough to resect. Time disappeared for her. She concentrated totally, remembering her training and her work experience from so many years ago. Her fingers worked sometimes almost by magic, but for the most part it was her careful training that saw her through this terribly challenging procedure without — she hoped — a serious error.

When she could at last close him up, his blood pressure had risen to 80 over 50 and his pulse was 160. A temperature of just 99 suggested that he was tolerating the transfused blood well. She put him on an electrolyte drip, then got her prescription pad. She wrote for some time, then handed it to Leo. “They’ll have all this in the drugstore at Riverside Hospital.” “What’s the situation?” Miriam asked. Her blood-spattered robe still hung off her naked body. Her face was hollow, her skin gray.

“He’s hanging on.”

Miriam’s face twisted, and she threw herself sobbing into Sarah’s arms.

“Oh, baby,” Sarah said, “baby, I’m so sorry. I didn’t understand. I didn’t

know . . .”

“There was an attempt to cross the species, recorded in the Books ten conclaves ago. Keepers trying to escape from the need to eat human blood. The result wasn’t good. We’d created human beings with the speed and power of Keepers. So we destroyed all the family lines, except one. We found a last survivor about forty years ago. He was destroyed. Apparently he had a son.”

“I don’t think this is true, Miri. There’s no way we could interbreed. We’re as different as tigers and cattle, except on the surface.”

“You have no idea what our science was capable of — when we had a science.”

“What happened to your science?”

Miriam regarded her. She laughed a little, and Sarah sensed a whole hidden history in that laughter, a history of secrets that would never be told. “It was so good to be with him; it was like going back to the one time in all my life that I was truly and deeply happy. Oh, Sarah, I love him so!”

Sarah found herself hoping that the pregnancy was real. Because if this was true, and it was a healthy fetus, then maybe the great hope of Miriam’s life was being realized.

But still Sarah saw Paul to be mortal danger, and Leo was stationed to watch his monitors.

“How about your hunger?” Miriam asked her.

“I got some blood,” she said. But Leo’s hollow expression told them both that it had not been enough.

Sarah took Miriam back upstairs, to their private room. They turned on the video system so she could watch the infirmary every moment.

She lay back on the little sofa where she so often read and worked. Sarah knelt beside it. “Please forgive me, Miri.”

Miriam gazed at her. “I forgive you, child,” she said. “But you must help me with this.”

“Miri, he hates you. And he’s a killing machine.”

“He has a heart, Sarah, a huge heart. I want my chance to try to reach his heart.”

“When he wakes up, Miri, God knows what’ll happen.”

“I want you to help me. Both of you.”

“Of course we will. That goes without saying.”

Miriam went over and picked up the encaustic painting of her lost Eumenes. “I left my happiness in another world.”

“We have happiness.”

She smiled a little. “I’m the last of my kind, you know — the last Keeper.”

“There are others.”

Miriam looked at her. “Living in holes? That’s not being a Keeper — a true ruler of mankind.” She gazed at the portrait of the handsome young man in his white toga. “I’m lost in time.” She put it down and came back to Sarah. “But I have a baby. I have hope.”

Sarah did not know what Miriam had in her belly, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to find out. If this much-shattered heart took another blow, it was even possible that Miriam would join her peers in the shadows, living like an animal and waiting — no doubt hoping — to die.

“I want a pregnancy test.”

Sarah played for time. “As soon as Paul recovers.”

“No, no,” Miriam said. “You’ll do it immediately.”

“I need the resources of the infirmary for him.”

Miriam came to her. “You can do the test and we both know it.”

Sarah took her in her arms.

“I have to know,” Miriam whispered. Sarah hugged her tight.

They stayed like that, in the declining light of the afternoon.

Leo paced to the wall and back to the door, and she remembered chocolate icebox pie and blinis and blintzes and beluga. She went to the back windows and wiped off her sweat and remembered Mommy’s chicken fricasee and Aunt Madeline’s molasses cookies. She slapped the wall and hugged herself and sweated rivers and remembered rib eyes at Sparks and smoked salmon at Petrossian.

But all that really mattered was the raw, delicious taste in her mouth and the smell in her nose of blood, blood, blood.

When she’d drunk his blood, she’d drunk his soul, and she was drunk on it and she had to have more of it.

Her jeans were soaked with pee, her underarms and hair were awash, and she felt as if she couldn’t breathe and couldn’t think because she needed more, she wasn’t finished — she wanted a lovely bowl of cherry cobbler, but she needed blood.

She went to the black front door, put her hand on the gleaming brass handle, and she pushed out into the flaring evening. The city was its ordinary self, humming its indifferent hum, traveling down its million uncaring roads.

She was a hunter now, off to the hills. She ranged down the turning street and to the secret steps that led down to FDR Drive.

A car screamed past three feet away, then another and another. Leo darted out into the roadway. Two more cars came speeding toward her. She leaped

forward just as one almost grazed her back. Then she was on the far side of FDR Drive, climbing the iron railing and going along the narrow promenade.

A full moon hung over the surging East River, its glow touching the black, uneasy waves.

She was absolutely frantic; she'd never felt anything remotely like this. By light-years, this clawing, flaming inner agony was the most intense sensation she had ever felt in her life. She ached the way people ache when they can't get enough air.

She dashed along, searching for a derelict like a pig snuffling for truf-fles. She was strung worse than she'd ever known anybody to be strung. This made you wild; it made you want to run and never stop; it seethed like ants under your skin; it pumped pure desperation straight into your brain.

As she ran, she thought of home, the imposing house in Greenwich, her taffeta-and-lace bedroom, her daddy probably right now watching Monday night football, her mom reading.

Home was lost to her, home and all she had known of the peace of life. Her feet throbbed; her heart raced; her skin felt as if it were being sandpapered. The taste of Paul's blood lingered in her mouth, its scent in her nostrils. All she could think about was blood, the way it tasted, the way it felt going down, the way it had cooled the fire that was consuming her from within.

Then she saw a clump of shadow on a moonlit bench. She went up to it. Just a mass of rags. Good. Man or woman? Man — not so good, they were stronger.

She sat on the end of the bench nearest the head. Her hands almost shook too much, but she managed to get a cigarette lit. She'd quit two months ago, but that was before she met Miriam. Miriam smoked all the time. She didn't care. Why should she? Keepers were immune to cancer.

She dragged hard, wishing that the smoke was stronger. You could get a nice hit smoking horse in a cigarette, but she didn't have any horse. She had to calm down on her own.

She had the fleam and she had the victim. All she needed now was the guts. She looked down at a shock of dark, oily, lice-ridden hair. She knew he was dirty and that he probably stank to high heaven, but all she could smell was the blood, which was so good that she kept sucking in air and leaning closer.

She took the fleam out, fumbled the blade open — giving herself a nasty little nick in the process. Before she had even sucked it, the wound closed.

A damn miracle.

Stealthily, she shuffled the rags aside. There was the neck. Not an old neck. She knew she was supposed to take them back to the house, burn the remnant in the furnace and all. But how could she get some drunk back across FDR Drive and up the narrow steps that led to their property? The business with the lady, whom she'd found on Fifty-fifth Street and First Avenue, had been difficult enough.

She held the fleam close to the neck. She couldn't see any veins. She dared not touch the guy. She tightened her grip on the instrument. Then she plunged it down. There was resistance; then it went sliding in — way deeper than it should. In fact, she almost plunged it all the way in.

She was snatching for it as he rose screaming through clenched teeth out of his pile of newspapers and rags. He was face-to-face with her, his teeth bared.

He was a kid. Maybe younger than she was. He had long eyelashes, and the moonlight shone in his dark eyes. His hands went to his neck, his head cocked — and a flood of blood came out of his mouth.

Instinct made Leo go for it, but it was all over the ground already, splattering and splashing like spilled milk on the kitchen floor. He went to his feet, still screaming behind his clenched teeth, and began jerking and staggering, his bloody fingers slipping on the bloody hilt of the fleam.

And then, incredibly, she recognized him. Not from the club, not from her present life at all. She recognized him from prep school, from Andover. It was Benno Jones. He'd been a performance artist. His family was wealthy

but very conservative. Obviously, there'd been an estrangement.

She was confused. But also now, desperate. She lunged at him; she got her fingers around the fleam and yanked it as hard as she could. It came partially out, dragging red gristle, followed by a gurgling black flow of blood.

She latched on like a starving jungle leech. The blood seemed to flow into her almost automatically, pouring down her throat into her belly. Benno staggered along, his back bent, his hands made into fists, his barely-remembered acquaintance inexplicably sucking the life out of him.

He went down like a staggered bull, to his knees. She pushed him over and dragged his head into her lap, bending the neck to give herself the best possible angle. Then she put her lips around the bubbling gouge and sucked as hard as it was possible for her to suck. She got lots more blood, and from his lips a gentle question, "Leo?"

She did it again and it worked again. A third time and it worked, but less well. The fourth time, it hardly worked at all.

But he wasn't getting any thinner or lighter. He was still normal looking, except he was very dead. She tried again, sucking with all her might.

Nothing happened. She sat back on her haunches. Only Miriam could dry them out. He was way too heavy to carry. He felt like a sack of lead.

Then she saw, some distance down the promenade, a man walking about ten dogs. They were coming toward her and the dogs were going completely berserk. You couldn't hear the man, but you could see him yelling at them. Their voices were a riot of barking and howling, and they were struggling so furiously to reach the kill that their paws were digging dust up off the pavement. They looked as if they had exhaust.

She managed to get Benno to the railing and, with a massive, grunting effort, to roll him over and into the East River. Then she ran like hell, and as she ran, she began also to feel wonderful.

Behind her, the dogs quickly consumed any small trace of Benno that she

had left behind. She could hear the dog walker now, still screaming himself hoarse.

Her body seemed almost ready to lift off. She could run and run without even getting tired. Incredibly, it felt as if there were somebody inside her, a living presence that was not her but was friendly to her and part of her. It was a grand way to feel as if you had your own angel in you.

She did not see the solitary figure on the high cliff that separated Miriam's neighborhood from the Drive, who had been watching her from the beginning. She did not see it put a small instrument away, perhaps a set of binoculars, perhaps a camera.

She did not see it as it got into a car, nor did she see the car drive swiftly away.

NINETEEN

Trapped

Miriam raced through the house screaming for Leo, her voice shrill and shattering. Sarah was terrified. She'd never seen her like this. She was crazed with fury; there was no other way to describe her. Then those awful, inhuman eyes were suddenly glaring at Sarah.

“Miri, calm down. Please, Miri!”

Miriam shot across the sitting room and grabbed her and slammed her against the wall. “Where in hell were you?”

“I was with you, Miri!”

“You let her out, goddamn you! You careless, foolish — ”

She slapped Sarah so hard she went flying. Then Miriam was on her again, shaking her, screaming and smashing her head again and again into the floor. Sarah saw stars; the world reeled; she screamed, screamed again.

Miriam went to her feet, lithe and quick, glaring down at her. Then she was back again, her eyes glowing, her narrow lips twisted in some expression so alien that Sarah couldn't even begin to interpret it.

She kissed Sarah. Then she lifted her and helped her to a chair. She knelt before her and kissed her hands. “I'm sorry. Sorry. I'm just — ” She made a small sound, the snarl of a hurt tiger. “I'm feeling things I've never felt before.” She laid her head in Sarah's lap. Now she was weeping. “When I last had a baby in me, I was so protected. We owned Egypt! We lived in walled compounds. The wealth, the power — you can't even begin to imagine! But now — I've got my last baby and I need to feel safe and I don't!”

Sarah stroked her hair. She looked down at the lithe, powerful body in the magnificent butterfly robe, a garment made in China six hundred years ago, of thousands of individual bits of silk sewed together with tiny stitches. It was like a cloud of butterflies, this robe. Miri wore it casually, but that did not change the fact that it could easily be the most beautiful garment presently on earth.

Sarah had always been a lonely sort of a soul, but Miriam was *really* alone. Her baby had been her hope — Sarah realized that now — her one hope to relieve the despair that lay concealed behind the elegance and the headlong decadence that filled her time.

When she found out that this baby was a fata morgana, a mirage, she was going to be absolutely devastated.

Paul knew he was alive because of the pain. From his waist to his neck, he was a mass of sheer agony. His breath was coming in light little gulps, but he felt no air hunger, so he knew there was oxygen running.

He inventoried his body, working from training and long experience. He could wiggle his toes and hands, and lift his arms. That was good. He was too weak to lift his legs. That was not good. The left side of his neck ached. That must be a healing wound where that bitch had tried to suck his blood. His chest was gunshot real bad. There was bubbling when he inhaled, which meant that his lung capacity was dangerously low.

He was looking up, at least, into the ceiling of a hospital room. He could hear monitors beeping, and he could see an IV.

How the hell he had ever gotten himself to a hospital, he could not for the life of him imagine, but he damn well had. His self-evaluation told him that he had been shot in the left lung, which had resulted in aspiration pneumonia, caused by blood and debris. There wasn't any fever, so whatever antibiotics were in that drip were clearly doing their job. Also, the pain was diffuse, not concentrating on a certain spot the way it did when you had a bullet in you. Okay, so he'd been operated on. How much of the lung was left in there he

had no idea. Maybe none, the way it felt.

Altogether, he had been in worse shape than this and come out of it okay. So, great, he was going to have himself a killing spree as soon as he recuperated . . . unless, of course, his presence in this intensive care ward meant that he was back in the hands of the Company.

After a long five minutes, Miriam came up off Sarah's lap. The red eyes glared up at her. Instinct made Sarah cringe back away from her. Miriam sucked in breath. Sarah realized what was happening: she was hearing something.

"Is it Paul Ward?" But a glance at one of the monitors that had been set up in every room said that he wasn't the issue. He was stirring from the woozy state induced by his Valium drip, but he came in and out of consciousness three or four times a day. His lung capacity was too low to allow him to be fully awake.

Miriam came to her feet, catlike. In an instant, she was at the front door, listening against the thick mahogany. Then she rushed across the foyer into the music room, sat down at the piano, and — of all things — began to play Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. The vision of the cloud of butterflies floating around that narrow, incredibly graceful being was heart-stopping. She played with a touch as soft as a dusting of snow.

Sarah watched the great front door. The lock clicked. The handle moved. Leo's face appeared. From its flush, Sarah knew at once that she had fed. Hearing the music, seeing Sarah sitting with her head back against her chair, Leo's nervous face smoothed. All seemed well to her, all at peace.

Sarah could not imagine the reason for the false tableau. It was as if Miri didn't believe that Leo would come in unless she was lured by an artificial appearance of serenity. Perhaps Miriam overestimated Leo's intelligence, because she was entirely deceived.

She came strolling in, smiling a conspiratorial smile at Sarah. There was

blood on her blue T-shirt, more on her jeans.

“Where’s the remnant?” Sarah hissed. Leo tried to go around her. Sarah grabbed her collar. “Where is it?”

“Leave me alone!”

“Leo, *where the hell is it?*”

Miriam played on, seemingly oblivious.

“None of your business,” Leo sneered.

“Did you leave it on the street — for God’s sake, answer me!”

“If you must know, it’s in the East River. And so is that stupid toy of yours.”

Sarah felt a nervous twinge in her left eye. “What toy?”

“Oh, that thing — that stupid thing went all the way in his neck.”

“You left my fleam in your victim?”

“I couldn’t get it out!”

“Jesus!”

Leo tried again to go around her.

That damn bunch of vampires had been smart, real smart. They’d played him like a piano. God only knew how many of the parasites infected that filthy club. And the house — this vampire was a rich bitch, wasn’t she? She was light-years beyond the others. Kill this one, and you got the queen bee. Just like that really human looking one in Paris. Just like Mrs. Tallman.

Holy Shit — maybe they were one and the same. And maybe, if it was in

any way still in his power, he was going to really strike a blow when he destroyed the damn creature. It had fooled him totally. Even making love to it had felt great, better than making love to a real woman. A fucking animal had tricked him into screwing it, and that made him even angrier.

His throat had the metallic taste that you get when you're having electrolytes pumped through your body. He wanted water and food.

“Nurse?” he called.

He listened. Whatever hospital he was in, it was as quiet as a damn tomb. Probably an isolation ward for cases with classified material. He felt around for a call button, found one attached to the headboard.

Thing was, when he pressed it, who was going to come through the door — a sweet little nurse or Justin Turk? His money was on Turk. They'd been on his tail, for sure. Whenever he'd gotten into trouble before, the Company had very kindly rescued him.

So maybe he wouldn't be free to kill the filth. Goddamnit, maybe he ought to get up and bust out of here before it was too late. Unless it was already too damn late.

He actually started to raise himself, thinking to pull out the IV and take off. He felt pretty strong, except for his breathing. But if he tried this, he'd violate a rule that had kept him alive over his entire career: Never attack into the unknown. If all you knew was who was there, or supposed to be there, that was enough. But if you knew nothing, then you had to wait.

So he'd get the lay of things, build up his strength. Right now, what he wanted was a big rib eye, but a cup of broth would do. He pressed the button again. Nothing happened. Typical, probably meant this was some VA hole. He pressed it again, harder.

Sarah watched the monitor. Faintly, she heard the buzzing as Ward struggled to get some attention. He was more awake now than he'd been since the

surgery five days ago. She thought, *He's healing*. She could not help but feel a little professional pride. She'd brought a man back who should be dead.

The music stopped. Miriam got up. She turned and came toward them, the butterfly robe billowing behind her, a cigarette fuming between her narrow lips, her eyes flashing. "Where the hell were you?" she snarled.

"Me?"

Miriam's eyes met Sarah's. "The remnant's exposed," Sarah said. "My fleam was left in the neck."

Miriam went up to Leo. Long fingers grabbed her throat. "This is how you repay me?"

Leo pulled away from her. "I threw the guy in the fucking East River. He's gone."

"A body is never gone unless it's burned," Miriam shouted.

Once or twice, she'd alluded to the fact that she had done away with human companions who hadn't worked out. Sarah thought for a moment that she was going to finish Leo right now, right here on the marble floor of the foyer.

But then Miriam threw back her head and laughed. It was strange laughter, almost silent. "Come with me," she told Leo.

"Come where?"

Miriam grabbed her wrist and dragged her off up the stairs. Sarah got up to follow. Miriam stopped her. "My husband is calling," she said. "Can't you hear him?"

Paul heard a sound beyond the room's closed door. He'd punched the call button about fifty times. He shifted in the bed. "Nurse," he said. The single word ran him out of breath, and he sank back against his pillow sucking

oxygen.

When Sarah Roberts's face came into his view, he was so surprised that he delivered a croaking "Oh, shit!"

She was a vision of absolute beauty, her eyes glittering like coals. He tried to lift his arms, to strike out at her, but something stopped him.

He was cuffed to the bed. "Christ!"

"You're healing," Sarah said.

He inventoried his situation. Both wrists were cuffed to a length of chain fastened to the bed, along with both ankles. He had about two feet of travel, which was why he hadn't noticed until he began trying to move.

"Where the hell am I?"

"In my infirmary." She came over to him. He got ready to grab for her. "I'm a doctor, you know."

"Yeah, that's believable."

"You've survived a lung wound from a three-fifty-seven with an exploding tip. I think it oughta be damn believable."

"You kill people for food. How can you be a doctor?"

Sarah came closer to him. "I need to examine the wound," she said. Her tone, which had been carefully neutral, now seemed sullen — or no, sad. It seemed sad.

He prepared to make a grab for her. He didn't know what he'd do next. All he knew was this: he was in the worst situation he'd ever been in, and he had to do whatever he could to get out of it.

She tossed back the sheet, barely glancing at his nakedness. She drew back the dressing that covered the left half of his chest.

As she gazed at the wound, a sound came through the open door. Somebody out there was screaming, and horribly. Even as he lay here, somewhere else in the house, the vampires were killing.

His speed was not up to its usual standard, but he managed to grab Sarah's arm. Bandages flew from her hand as he yanked her to him.

He found himself staring down the barrel of his own damn pistol.

"God damn you," he said.

"God damn you! If it wasn't for her, you'd be dead, you vicious bastard!"

She reached up to his IV, opened the cock. His attention wandered. She seemed to sway, then to float above him like a madonna ascending to heaven.

The screams rose and fell like a terrible wind in a winter tree. Sarah Roberts's eyes bored into him — cold, indifferent, murderous. Despite his pounding, relentless hate, his anguished hunger to rise from the bed, knock that gun aside, and physically rip her head from her body, he sank into sleep. The awful screams wove themselves into a dark and nameless nightmare that the drugs in the IV soon transformed into an empty, aimless void.

Miriam held Leo's wrist and would not let go, not even as the slow, dry hand came and closed around her fingers. Leo felt the strange, dry strength of the corpse; she saw the spark of life in the withered eyes.

She couldn't look at it. She couldn't bear its touch. But she also couldn't understand what this awful place was, and above all, what was the matter here.

"Open your eyes!" Miriam said. "Look at it!"

"I am! But what — why —"

"You stupid little cow — didn't you think there'd be something — some price to pay?"

“Make it let me go! Let me go!”

Miriam dragged her away from John’s coffin. His clinging fingers caused the corpse to rise up, then, as its grip failed, to fall back with a dusty thud. Miriam slammed the lid.

“But he’s not dead! We have to help him!”

“How compassionate you are.” She marched her over to Sarah’s coffin. “This is where your friend came from.”

“What friend?”

“Sarah. That dreary zombie.”

“Zombie?”

“After I blooded her, she cut her own wrists. But she’s clever. She left me the knowledge I needed to bring her back.” She gazed toward John Blaylock’s coffin. “Too bad it was too late for him.”

“But they — I don’t get it!”

“Now that my blood is in your veins, Leonore, you cannot die. You’re not like us. We don’t have souls. But you do have one, and my blood has bound it forever to your body.” She glanced around the room, tossed her head. “This is your fate.”

Leo stood up. She backed away from Miriam. She had to get out of this awful place; she had to find a cure for herself. This was — it was unimaginable. And she had to kill — to stop this from happening to her, she had to kill and kill for the rest of her . . . time.

“Sarah’s become servile. She’s not an independent soul. She’s boring and I hate to be bored. I hate it!”

“Bored?”

“You have no fucking idea! This isn’t life, always hiding, creeping in the

shadows. I'm a princess, not a damned sneak thief! I want the philosophers, the kings about me, not the sleazy gaggle of decadents I attract now."

Leo had never known a thought this strange, this subtle, but her mind at last grasped the terror of her situation. "You've stolen me from myself," she said. She felt wonder at the evil, the cunning of it. "I'm a slave."

"No! *No!* Not like her, you aren't. When I resurrected her, her will was gone. She knows it, but there's nothing she can do about it. She even went to Haiti, to try to learn about zombies, to understand her predicament." She laughed a little. "By all the stars in heaven, she's *boring!*" She yanked Leo's hand. "You're going to be great. You've got a mind of your own. You went out there and fed, against my specific rule. You did it *your* way. You know how that makes me feel?" She grasped Leo's hand, glanced back toward John's coffin. "Ever since he died, I've been alone. Now I'm not."

"What about Sarah?"

"You are foolish, though. But never mind, you've got excellent basic intelligence. I will educate you. Do you know what you're going to be? Why I've taken you into my home?"

"God that I did."

"You're going to be governess to my son."

"Husband," the vampire said, "you're awake at last. Welcome, welcome back!"

He didn't have any idea how to react to that particular gambit. But you never knew what an animal as smart as these things might come up with.

The vampire took his hand in the same slim fingers that he had kissed. He felt his gut wobbling at the thought that he had ever touched his lips to its skin . . . let alone the other things he had done. It pressed his hand against its belly.

“Do you feel him?”

He looked up at it. It was all aglow, like a real woman asking you to feel a real baby.

“He’s kicking, he’s *very* strong. And Sarah says he’s robust. That’s the word she uses — *robust*. We’re going to have a son, Paul!” What bullshit. You couldn’t make a baby with a creature that wasn’t human. “You’re a liar,” he said, barely disguising his contempt.

They left, then, all except Leo, who stayed watching him. She had the gun, Paul could see it stuck casually into her belt. This was a tough kid, this Leo. She looked like a cross between a punk rocker and a schoolgirl. She was stationed right in front of the door.

Even if he hadn’t been shackled, he was probably too weak to do anything at the moment. But he wasn’t real concerned. He’d get his ass out of here soon enough. He looked at Leo, and she looked back at him.

Here was a question: Was this pretty kid, this Leo, a vampire or not? You really could not tell with these creatures. They were that good. He needed to know because he needed to know what kind of physical abilities he was dealing with. His instinct was that Leo was not a vampire. She was a hanger-on who knew the score. A very sick puppy, this Leo.

Paul tried an indirect approach, an interrogation technique he’d used a thousand times. Let the subject assume you know more than you do.

“So, Leo, what’re you in it for? Drugs? Dough?”

Leo looked at him.

“Love.”

“Oh, yeah, that. You love the monster. You ever fuck it?”

“Shut up.”

“You know, I don’t get you people. I mean, you’re not a vampire, but you

tolerate it. You go along with it.”

“Miriam is a beautiful and ancient being. She deserves our support.”

“Oh, I *see!* I guess Ellen Wunderling would agree with you. Hell, yes!”

“Sarah took her, not Miriam.”

He stopped. He thought about it. Sarah had come after him with some kind of an instrument, not her sucker mouth.

Could it be that she didn’t have a sucker mouth, but that she still fed on blood? If so, was there more than one species of vampire? Meaning, more vampires than he thought?

“Ellen wasn’t the right kind of food for Miriam’s species, or what?”

“We’re blooded. Miriam gives us her blood, and — it’s a miracle. You stop aging. You get incredibly healthy. You live for — well, a very long time.”

Paul stared up at the ceiling. Now it develops that Miriam can make ordinary people into vampires. Jesus *wept!*

Then Paul had another, equally chilling thought. Maybe this baby bullshit was not bullshit. If this bleeding thing was real, maybe the two species were closer than anybody thought. If he’d given a vampire a baby —

He uttered a carefully contrived chuckle. “I can’t believe that I knocked her up. Like, I’m human!”

Leo came over to the bed. She had the gun down at her side, hanging there in her hand. One step closer, and he could reach it. “You’re not human,” she said. “You’re a Keeper — or half a Keeper.”

It hurt, but he laughed. He really got a good laugh out of it. She was quite a bullshit artist.

“Okay. So, when do I feed on my fellow man? When I’m asleep?”

“You’re something that isn’t supposed to exist. They were trying to create a line that would live forever like they do, but not have to eat human blood. A better version of themselves.”

He remembered them in their lairs, their sneering, contemptuous faces. “They have utter disdain for the human species,” he said. “They don’t care whether they eat our blood or not.”

“They only hate those who kill them!”

“You’re a liar.”

“They do what they have to, to live. But there’s no hate in it. Just hunger.”

“You’re lying through your teeth! They hate us and they love to kill!”

“You think so? You remember when your dad died? The way he just suddenly disappeared?”

The words seemed to come from a very long way away — echoing, strange words, terrifying words. Because there was no way she could have known about that unless —

Bellowing like a stuck bull, he rose up out of his IVs and his monitoring cuffs and his oxygen line. She backed away, but he lunged at her — and collapsed against the shackles. He was a helpless pile of rags.

She stood over him, the gun expertly braced. Somebody had taught this lady how to make a mag work exactly right.

“Don’t you fucking move,” she screamed. “Don’t you fucking *breathe!*”

He stared up at her. “You lying bitch.” But he knew she was not lying. She knew something, all right. He hadn’t ever told any of these people about his dad.

“Your father was killed because he was a part of a failed mutant bloodline. We think you must have been overlooked. Unfortunately, because now you’ve gotten Miri pregnant with God only knows what.”

“The baby’s okay?”

“The first ultrasound’s in two weeks.”

During his outburst, she’d obviously tripped a silent alarm, because Miriam and Sarah came blasting in. They all had magnums. This place was hatching guns.

They got him rearranged in the bed.

So, Paul thought, *I guess this is a setback.*

Over the next few days, Dr. Sarah Roberts methodically showed him things about himself that he had never even dreamed. She took his blood and showed it to him under a microscope. He could see the strange cells that had been in the past attributed to a benign deformation. Then she drew blood from Miriam before his eyes and showed him the two samples side by side.

He was not blind, but he still did not want to believe. He clung to the idea — which in his heart he knew to be ridiculous — that this whole thing was a coincidence. Because he could *not* — no damn way! — have their blood running in his veins.

Sarah created a chromosomal map and showed him how his own nineteenth chromosome differed from that of a normal human being in the area known as 19a22.1. She showed him smaller differences in sixteen of his twenty-three chromosomes. Then she showed him Miriam’s chromosomal map. It was different in every single place that his was different, as well as in three more places.

Those three places represented the need to consume human blood, the great brilliance, and life eternal.

Paul’s grandfather had lived to a hundred and eleven. The whole family was like that. Supposedly there had been a Ward back a couple of centuries ago who’d made it to a hundred and nineteen.

She demonstrated to him that, because of the chromosomal differences, he would probably never be able to have a child with a human mother, but that he could indeed fertilize Miriam.

Finally, he had to face it. *He* was one of *them*. He wanted to crawl out of his own skin. If he'd been able, he would have put one of their damn guns in his mouth.

His dreams became nightmares. He hungered for death; he begged God to kill him. But he did not die. Instead, he kept getting stronger and stronger, throwing off the injuries the way he always did. Only now he knew why. It was because of his damned, accursed, evil *blood!*

Often, he would awaken and find Miriam gazing at him. She changed his dressings and cared for his bedpan, brought him his food and asked after his pain. Once in the morning and once at night, Sarah would examine him. Always she was cool and detached. Often, when they were alone, she would threaten him: "If you hurt her, if you break her heart, I will kill you with acid, I will rip your living heart out of your body."

His response was always the same: "Same to you, bitch."

He came to loathe himself. He'd fallen for Miriam because he was *one of them*. As the days passed, he got lots better. He also began to lay precise plans for the destruction of this household. He had to win their trust, first. It would not be easy, but Miriam — dear Miri — was totally smitten by him. That would be his opening.

So when Miriam came to him and sat gazing at him, he started to play little coy games with his eyes.

Miriam would twirl through the house singing "Caro Nome," and laughing, all the while feeling the baby within her. They took a year to gestate, and giving birth was very hard. But the baby — the baby was fine! "No indication of a problem," Sarah kept saying.

She really didn't know. She didn't even know for certain that Miriam was pregnant. She'd given her a urine test, but who knew if chorionic gonadotropin levels in a Keeper would be the same as in a human female. Probably not, in fact. Maybe their placental tissue produced another hormone altogether.

Unspoken in the household was the fact that the date of the first ultrasound was approaching. They would know then for sure, then and only then.

Miriam sang to her baby, she sang to her friends, and when Paul started smiling at her again, she sang to all the world.

Miriam had never before been so happy. Her household was thriving. Her body was glowing with health. She sensed that the baby was growing beautifully. And her new husband was slowly coming round.

"You know, Paul, I think you need to see it from our viewpoint, morally."

"Try me."

"We didn't make ourselves. Nature made us."

"That's what the CIA says."

She was quite interested in this. He'd never referred to what his employers might think of her before. "How so?"

"You're not murderers; you're predators. You have a right to kill us, and we have a right to defend ourselves. That's the basis of a policy statement they're working on." "Well, that's exactly my point." She just ached to kiss him, he was so luscious. But he had not so far been willing to do that again.

Tomorrow, she was going to surprise him. He was finished with the infirmary. Her hope was that he would return to the marriage bed. She was going to be as sweet and as tempting as she knew how.

She got Sarah alone and said to her, "It's time to take off his cuffs."

"It'll never be time for that."

“Do it.”

“Miri, it’s crazy!”

“Do it.”

Sarah went to him. She locked the door behind her, then produced her key.

“Hey,” he said.

As she unlocked first the ankle cuffs, then the wrists, he watched her. She did not like his eyes, hadn’t liked them from the beginning.

“Well,” he said as he rubbed his wrists, “that feels a whole lot better.”

She backed away from him as she would from a spreading cobra, with care and sick fear.

He smiled.

She had been made what she was by Miriam. She was thus weak and vulnerable, the victim of inevitable imperfections. But he had been made by nature, and there was something she did not trust about nature. Perhaps it was because of something she had seen in her scientific work, that nature did not appear to be blind. The wildness of nature, the ruthlessness, was the outcome of thought.

Because of this, no matter how tame he seemed, how compliant, how much at ease, she would fear him and hate him. She knew a secret about nature, and she sensed that Paul Ward was an outcome of this secret. Nature, she knew, had a great and terrible mind.

TWENTY

The Love Child

The vampire was partial to him, so he would use that. Every hour that passed, he was closer to the moment when he could kill them all.

She loved him, but they were damn careful anyway. They watched him on video cameras, every move he made, and they kept the infirmary locked. His approach was to go along with it. He didn't even try to get out. He sat up in his bed reading *War and Peace* and listening to endless opera CDs.

He ate lots of rare steak, which had always been his comfort food. Sometimes he asked for Thai cuisine. Everything he was given was beautifully cooked. He wondered if it was also drugged. With the steaks would routinely come bottles of wine worth thousands of dollars. Château Lafite-Rothschild 1945, Château Latour 1936.

He smiled at his captors. He was affable. When Miriam came in, shining and beautiful, he let her kiss him, as much as he could bear. When she put his hand on her belly, which she imagined even now to be a little distended, he would smile at her.

“As much as he hates the Keepers,” Sarah said to Miriam, “when he found out what he was, you'd think there would have been more of a reaction.”

“Sarah, the man is in love. He's realized that he's one of us. He sees the moral situation. Even his agency sees it. His hate is dying. That's why he's so quiet. It's a very thoughtful time in his life.”

“I just think you need to be very damn cautious when you let him out of there.”

“Oh, come on. You’re too careful.”

“I thought you were the one who was too careful, Miri.”

“He’s my husband and I want him in my bed. I want to have him in me again, Sarah.”

“That’s unwise. This whole thing is unwise.”

“What do you think, Leo?”

“I think he’s a really cool looking guy.”

On the afternoon of the release, they came down with a cake. They made a party of it with a thirty-year-old Yquem and the Lane cake, made after a sumptuous eighteenth-century recipe, with macerated fruits and cognac. Miriam joked by carrying a cherry to Paul in her mouth. He took it with his teeth and chewed it sensuously.

Miriam gave him the run of the house, all except the attic.

Sarah waited and watched. She tried to enlist Leo, but Leo was little more concerned than Miriam. Leo was a young fool, in Sarah’s opinion. Sarah noticed a subtle change in her own personality. A certain realization came upon Sarah that was similar, she thought, to the kind of assumption that comes to dominate a man’s mind in a terrible battle. It was the assumption that there would be no escape, that what Miriam was doing was so foolish that it could not lead to anything but destruction.

How could it be, though, that somebody who had clawed their way through so much life and so much danger to have a baby would, upon becoming pregnant, put at risk both her own life and that of the child?

Miri was a dear and familiar friend. Sarah knew her every mood, the meaning of every expression that flickered in her eyes, had lived with her in deepest intimacy for two decades and more. She knew Miri’s fears and her joys, had drawn her to extremes of sexual intensity and observed her with a lover’s fascinated dispassion as she lost herself in pleasures. She provided

friendship and love and loyalty. But Sarah thought now that they had come to an extreme edge, a strange country of the Keeper mind into which her understanding could not penetrate.

There was only one conclusion to be drawn from her actions: Deeply, profoundly, Miriam wanted to be destroyed as much as the rest of her race did. They had a death wish, otherwise why would beings so brilliant and wise be so easy to kill? The Keepers might not know human science, but they knew the human soul, and that was the key knowledge, what was required to defend yourself.

That they did not defend themselves was, as far as Sarah was concerned, an act of willful self-immolation. They must have recognized this in themselves eons ago, probably as soon as man became intelligent. This was when they began to experiment with melding the two species. They had been trying to escape from their own nature.

Miriam looked forward to feeding, though. She relished her kills, especially the ones that put up an interesting fight.

Every time Miriam stood close to Paul, Sarah waited, her insides cringing, for the end to come. Didn't she see what he was — a loaded gun, a trap ready to spring?

Eventually, Sarah and Miriam had to feed, and nothing she said could convince Miriam to make her meal of Paul Ward.

So they did it at the Veils. There must be absolutely no chance that Paul would see. At least Miriam agreed to that. So far she had not allowed him back to the club. That, also, meant that she had not yet become a complete fool.

They left Leo with him. Privately, Sarah instructed her to carry the gun, and to never get closer than twenty-five feet to him. If she saw the least sign of his trying to leave the house, or if he tried to come too close to her, or even to use the telephone, she was to blow his brains out.

Sarah hoped that it would happen. They would deal with Miriam's fury.

But Miriam threatened Leo — if you kill him, I will kill you. Wound him if you must, but do not kill.

When they came back after taking two Korean businessmen, they had to sleep their deep and helpless sleep.

Sarah told Leo, “If he makes the slightest move toward our bedroom, kill him. No matter what she says.”

“But — ” “I’ll deal with her! You’ll be in no danger.” “Sarah, can you think of any reason *not* to kill him?” “No.”

“What about the fact that Miri loves him?”

“She doesn’t know her own mind right now — and her name is Miriam, not Miri.”

“You call her Miri.”

“And you don’t.”

Despite the many tensions, life in the household had returned to something approaching its normal pattern, at least on the surface.

Sarah and Leo managed the Veils. Miriam went occasionally. Paul kept asking to go, and every time he did, Miri was a little more tempted, and Sarah trusted him even less.

She and Miri played their music. Miri began teaching Leo piano, then took her on as a student in a way Sarah had always wanted but had never gotten.

Leo began to receive a classical Keeper education. It began with the Ennead of Ra, the first tier of the Egyptian pantheon of Gods. She started to learn spoken Prime. Sarah doubted Leo’s ability to learn the written language, but Miriam was optimistic.

Sarah was surprised that Leo was such a good student. If Miri had wanted a tabula rasa who did not need reeducation because she had nothing to unlearn, she had chosen well. What was amazing to Sarah was that Leo

turned out to be a very quick learner. She was actually quite brilliant.

Miriam had picked her out one night at the club with a mere glance. They had been looking for somebody else to blood. They needed more personnel to keep ahead of the burgeoning of their business affairs. Sarah had assumed that they would take a man. But then, almost as an afterthought, Miriam said, “That one.” Leo had been in the Japanese garden with some friends, calling on Rudi’s skills to get them really, really high.

Slowly, Leo had left her old life behind. Now, all that remained of it was an occasional nervous visit to her parents, and soon even that would end.

Sarah knew that she was being prepared for something, and she came to think that it probably involved her own eventual removal from grace.

So Sarah was waiting for the coming of Leo. She was also waiting for Paul Ward to take whatever action he was planning. She was waiting, in other words, for the end of her world.

* * *

When she had been with Eumenes, Miriam had been too young to understand the rarity of happiness. She treasured it now. The overriding reality was that she had a baby in her, her very own baby after all these long years. The trouble was, her husband was turned against himself — a Keeper who had come to hate his own kind. True, he didn’t have life eternal and he didn’t feed on blood, but he was still a Keeper, and she was still working on him. She longed to draw him into the magic ring of her joy, and she thought that she could. What she was planning was a seduction. Back in the old days, Keeper men had found her hard to resist. She had lost none of her ability to seduce.

But that was all for later. First, there was a door she had to pass through, an essential door. As the days had passed, she had grown steadily more uneasy about it. She’d wanted to roll back the days, to prevent them from dawning. But they did dawn, one and then another, and her baby grew.

Now, Sarah told her, the baby would be sufficiently developed to see. In

the way of Keeper mothers, she already knew that she had a son. But what was his condition? It could be that he was deformed. Nobody could be sure what would happen when a Keeper was fertilized by one of these exotics like Paul.

At noon on the appointed day, Sarah came to her. She was in the library teaching Leo. Sarah said, "It's ready." She smiled down at her. These days Sarah was very warm and very grave. There was about her a sadness that Miriam found distressing to be near. Sarah thought that their life together had come to its burnt-out end.

She thought wrong, of course. She must midwife, then become a pediatrician and gynecologist for another species. Sarah thought that Leo was replacing her. She could not understand that Miriam's needs were expanding.

The group of them went down to the infirmary together.

Sarah had bought the very finest new ultrasound machine, so the baby would appear almost as clear as a photograph.

Miriam got up on the examination table. Sarah started the machine, which made a high, whining sound.

"Is it radioactive?" Miriam asked nervously.

"Not at all. It sends out sound waves, then reads the reflections. It's entirely benign, but just to be safe, we'll only use it for a couple of minutes."

Miriam lay waiting, her eyes closed, her body trembling. If it was bad news, she did not think that she had the emotional reserves to bear it. She did not think she could live past the loss of this child, but she didn't know how to die.

She felt the cool instrument sliding on her stomach, which was ever so slightly larger now . . . or was that her imagination?

She put her hand out and Paul took it. They had kissed a few times recently, but he was still being very cool. He wasn't dangerous to her,

though, not since he'd understood that he was partly a Keeper. At least, this was her opinion.

“Miri, look.”

There on the screen was a ghost. It had a small mouth and tiny, still-unformed hands.

She opened her eyes. She stared at the image on the screen. She always had trouble decoding pictures generated by machines, and at first all she saw were red smears.

“There are the hands,” Sarah said, pointing to a slightly less smeary part of the screen.

“Oh, hey,” Paul said, “that’s my boy.”

Miriam still didn’t see . . . and then she did. A tiny face swam into focus. “He’s — oh, he’s *beautiful*.”

Paul asked, “Does he have teeth?”

“His mouth is human,” Sarah said.

Miriam felt a tingle of concern. “How will he feed, Sarah?”

“Not like you do.” Sarah had tested the blood of the fetus. He was ninety percent Keeper.

“Won’t he starve?”

“Miri, he has what look like normal human organs and something close to pure Keeper blood. He’s going to live — well, maybe forever.”

“As a predator,” Paul said.

“I don’t see any evidence of that,” Sarah replied. “This child has an entirely human mouth and organs.”

“How can you tell? It’s a tiny embryo.”

“I can tell because I’m trained to tell.”

“You’re a gynecologist?”

“I’m a gerontologist. But you’re talking basic medicine.”

Paul’s face went white. He sucked his cheeks in, a sign in a human being of great rage. Miriam watched him, her heart on a shivering edge. She wanted so to love him, but if he threatened her baby, well, she would have to do what she had to do.

When he spoke, his words were knives. “It’s important to me, Sarah.”

“I see a human embryo.”

“Damned, damned *important!*” Miriam tried to conceal her smile. In that instant, she had understood something new about Paul Ward.

Leo, fearing his tone, dragged her ever-present pistol out of her belt. “Okay,” she said, her gum cracking. She didn’t like Paul any more than Sarah did. She wasn’t afraid for Miriam, though, not like Sarah was. Her concern was that Paul was a rival for Miriam’s interest and affection.

Paul looked at the gun. “Thank you,” he said.

Sarah, who had been examining the embryo, was the first to see an extraordinary phenomenon. For some moments, she watched, her attention captured by what she was seeing. She moved her hand back and forth in front of the monitor. She found it difficult to believe what she was seeing.

Sarah was a scientist. She didn’t believe in the supernatural. She only half believed in the human soul that Miri was always talking about. “You have souls, we don’t.” Uh-huh. “You humans are the true immortals.” Okay.

But this was something very extraordinary. This was a genuine miracle, unfolding before her scientist’s eyes. “Look,” she said, her voice gone soft with awe.

Miriam immediately saw that the tiny, unformed eyes, little more than blanks to which the art of seeing had not yet come, were somehow looking straight out of the monitor. It was as if the fetus were staring at them.

“Can he see us? Is that possible?”

“Miriam, I don’t know.”

Then the eyes flickered again, and they were looking at Paul.

“It’s an optical illusion,” he said.

But the eyes did not look away. Paul said, “My God.” Then he, also, fell silent beneath their eerie gaze.

Miriam’s heart seemed to her to open in her chest like a flower. “Our baby is a miracle, Paul,” she said.

He smiled the way he always smiled, and that made her sad. Why wasn’t he the beaming father he should be? He had a magnificent son. He should be so proud that he could hardly bear it.

Sarah brought the ultrasound examination to a close. Then she presented Miri with her first picture of her child. “His face is aware,” Sarah said laconically. “It’s impossible, but there it is.”

They all gathered around. The photo was detailed. The soft, half-formed face with its black eyes and its slight smile was just luminous.

Miriam drank in the picture. She felt the presence in her belly. Her heart beat with love, her blood flowed with love. And he wouldn’t be like her, he wouldn’t have to suffer the curse of being a predator. Her son would be great, but he would also be free.

She was not a weeper, but she wept now. Sarah noticed the tears and laid her arm around her shoulder. Miriam did not respond. She wanted Paul to hold her. She wanted him to embrace her and cry and laugh with her, and ask for a copy of the picture for his wallet, to treasure just as she would treasure hers.

Still, he made appropriate noises of admiration, and maybe that was a beginning.

“Let’s go upstairs,” Miriam said. She took Paul’s hand. “I think I’d like us to be alone together.”

“Me, too,” Paul agreed.

She led Paul into the music room, closed the door. “Do you like my playing?”

“I love your playing.”

“Then I’d like to play for you. You know this piece?”

“You’ve been working on it for weeks.”

“Sarah’s working. I’ve known it for three hundred years.”

He laughed a little. “It sounds so strange when you say something like that.”

She shrugged. “I’m just me.” She got her viola out of its case. She set her bow, tuned the instrument for a moment, then began to play.

Miriam was not completely surprised when Paul launched himself at her.

To see that *thing* grinning at him over the health of the monster in its belly was more than Paul could handle. He knew as he flew toward it that he had snapped, that this was wrong, that he was making a huge mistake.

He slammed into the creature, certain only that he had to stop it from making a sound or the others would come in and he would die. Even though they were human, the other two wanted to kill him a lot more than the vampire did; he was certain of that. They would blow him to pieces without hesitation.

It was smaller than he was. But for all its grace and beauty, it had even denser bones. So it was the heavier of the two. It staggered with his weight, but absorbed the blow.

He clapped his hand over its mouth. Its steel-strong arm came up and grabbed his wrist. They fought a silent battle, strength against strength.

He locked his elbow, tightened his muscles. The two of them twisted and turned, falling against the piano, then against the chair where it had been sitting. Its viola crunched and twanged beneath their slow dance. Paul caught the instrument with his shoe, purposely driving his heel into its body, making certain that what the creature loved was destroyed.

Its free hand came between his legs. It got a grip on his balls and began crushing them. They compressed harder and harder, until his deep guts were awash in pain. He used breathing techniques he'd learned in the war to try to control the pain. But he could not control the pain; the pain was astounding.

He started to lose the use of his legs, began to buckle.

Then he got his teeth into the flesh of its neck — its own favorite place. Too bad he couldn't suck its blood. He bit, grinding down with all his might, his incisors ripping into the hard muscles.

Check.

They broke away.

He waited for it to call to its people. He waited to die.

It stared at him. He stared back. It did not call anybody. They began to circle, and while they circled, he wondered why not . . . and because he did not know, he began to get scared.

It turned its head to one side, lowered it, and looked at him out of the side of its eyes. He knew that it was made up, that it didn't really have those perfect lips or those beautiful, soft eyes, but he could not help reacting to it as if it were the most wonderful woman he'd ever known.

Why didn't it call out? Was it here to die, or what?

He leaped at it again. He grabbed its throat, preparing to give it the most fearsome uppercut he could manage. He would stun it; then he would take the shattered neck of the viola and rip out its throat with it.

It stopped the uppercut in the palm of an iron hand. Then, very suddenly, his own hands were trapped at his sides. It was riding him, using its knees to pin his arms. It smashed its fists into his chest, using him like a punching bag. He toppled back, his chest wound making him cough hard.

It lay on him full length. He felt its weight, felt its vagina pressing hard against his penis. He fought to free his arms, but he couldn't. This was a death grip.

Its head came up; its lips contacted his neck. He threw himself from side to side, but it was no use. The creature's mouth locked onto his neck.

He could feel the tongue then, probing against his skin. At the same time, its wriggling, squirming body brought him to sexual life. His erection grew until it felt as though it would rip out of his pants. Faster it rubbed back and forth, harder it drove into his neck.

This was the death they gave their victims — an evil sexual charge and then the penetration — and he felt it — the cold, slim needle that was normally enclosed deep inside the tongue — as it came out and pricked delicately against his skin, seeking the vibration of the humming artery.

As it penetrated, the delicate, persistent pain made him gargle miserably. He was as stiff as a steel rod, its haunches were pumping, but he could also feel his blood sliding out of his neck, leaving him breathless and faint.

This was death by vampire, what his father had known.

And then, suddenly, it was on its feet. The lens was gone from one of its eyes, and it glared at him out of one red eye and one ash-gray one. Its face was smeared, the prosthetics gone from one sunken cheek. Along its lips was a foam of blood — his blood.

He was too exhausted to move a muscle. He could only watch as it opened his pants and sat on him. He felt himself being inserted into its vagina, and he struggled to prevent that, but he could not prevent it.

The creature raped him. There was no other way to describe what was done. What was worse — more humiliating, more angering — was that the sensation was not like the dull, empty horror of a true rape. There was something else there, another emotion, one that he did not want but could not deny.

It wasn't only that she was incredibly beautiful, even without her makeup — maybe more so without it. It was that she just *felt so right*. That was the reality of it. In her makeup or out of her makeup, she was the most wonderful woman he had ever been with.

He realized that he had been tricked into making his move. This was no battle to the death. It was a damn seduction!

And, oh, my, but it was a good one — so smart, so deeply knowledgeable of Paul Ward. It made his very soul ache to see her trying so hard to win him and to love him through his hate, to draw him to her side and the side of their son.

She stopped. He realized that he had climaxed, but also that she had taken a lot of blood out of him, so much that he was surprised that he was still conscious, let alone capable of coitus. But she knew the human body with incredible precision. The borderland between life and death was where she was most comfortable.

“So,” she said as she got off him, “what do we call him? I think it ought to be Paul. Paul Ward, Jr.” She smiled the smile of a sultry Venus, the most amazing expression in the most amazing face he had ever seen. “Agreed?”

She lifted him to his shuffling feet and led him through the house in triumph. They had to help him, but he went upstairs. He went into her bedroom — their bedroom — and fell upon their bed.

“It’s only a quart,” she said. He’d tasted lovely. It had been hard to stop. “You’re not *that* weak.”

His eyes almost twinkled, and he seemed to revive himself. “Okay,” he said, “maybe you’re right. So let’s finish this in bed.”

She was heavy, just like him, and lean and strong . . . but also soft, soft in wonderful ways that seemed to fit him just about perfectly.

She lay in his arms, gazing at him with such adoration that he almost wanted to laugh from the pleasure it gave him. All the love and tenderness that he had been trying to suppress, that were part of his nature and one with their bonded spirits, now blossomed forth in him.

“I never will leave you,” he said.

“I never will leave you.”

This, he felt, was their marriage vow. “You’re my wife,” he said.

“My husband.”

Leo and Sarah, who had come with them, now withdrew from the room. “I think she made it,” Leo said.

Sarah just shook her head.

When they had been in bed together for a little time, however, she felt it her duty to be sure that they were entirely comfortable . . . and that all was indeed well.

Miriam gave her a very large smile, her lovely face almost buried beneath Paul’s big, plunging back.

Sarah laid her hand on Paul’s shoulder. Then she went softly out and closed the door.

Paul finished, a second time within just a few minutes and with a lot of blood lost. He sank down upon her, then slid into the softness of the bed.

What had he done? He'd capitulated. Maybe it was the damn blood loss, maybe it was the brilliance of her seduction by violence, maybe it was the staring eyes of the baby — but one thing was certain: He was not going to kill this vampire.

She lay beside him as still as still water, her eyes closed, upon her face a narrow smile. He slipped his hand into hers, and she made a startlingly catlike purring sound.

It was while she was purring that he heard another sound, very soft indeed. Curious as to the origin of this very slight thud, he turned his head and looked toward Sarah's office.

As if by magic, the door came slowly open. First he saw a blond head, then a pale face in the gloom of the curtained bedroom. A small figure came in, moving quickly, almost as catlike as Miriam herself.

What the hell? It looked like Peter Pan. As much as his mind wanted to believe that it was part of a dream, he had to face the fact that it was real. He stared. It came, catlike, closer to the bed.

It was small but it seemed extremely dangerous. Paul's struggling heart started to struggle harder. He did not understand. There was nobody else in the house, and they were incredibly careful about that.

When the figure reached the bedside, he almost leaped out of his skin with surprise. It was Becky. Cocking her head, she gave him a look that said, *Naughty boy*, and the slightest of smiles traveled across her face.

In that instant — seeing her so unexpectedly — Paul came back to himself. It was a homecoming to see her. His very soul rejoiced. She reached out and touched his cheek, and he was so incredibly glad that he would have cried if he hadn't been such a tough sonofabitch.

She smiled, then, more broadly. She pointed a finger at the vampire and mouthed, "Bang bang."

Paul nodded.

Miriam burst out of the bed, leaping almost to the ceiling. She came flying across Paul and tackled Becky, who was sent crashing all the way back into the office, where her rope still hung from the open skylight.

Paul wasn't as fast, but Becky recovered herself. She dragged out a pistol — and it wasn't a damned magnum. It was one of the French babies. Good! This thing was going to be decided at last.

Miriam snarled when she saw it. She snarled, and then she backed away. In two lithe steps, she was beside him. "Shoot us," she said. She knew damn well how it worked. It was meant to clear a room. Becky could not kill Miriam without killing Paul.

"Hey, Beck," Paul said aloud.

"I thought we were a thing, you prick!"

The natural goodness of a love like that was fresh water in a desert that Paul had not even realized was dry. "Becky," he said, "oh, Christ — "

"Men. They're all the same," Miriam said. She had that little smile on her face that was always there when she felt in control of a situation.

"She's an ugly cuss, Paul! Jesus, you must be drugged or something, man!"

"Becky, I thought you were with Bocage. I thought — "

"We're here for you, Paul. All of us that are left."

"What about Justin?"

"Screw him. And screw the Company."

"They take an enlightened approach, it would seem," Miriam said.

Why in hell was she so calm? What did she know? "Be careful, Becky."

"Oh, yeah. Look, Mrs. Blaylock, we've got this place surrounded.

We've got video of one of your little helpers committing a murder. And we've got you."

"You won't kill Paul."

Becky's face changed. It grew as hard as stone. Nothing needed to be said. Miriam took Paul by the arm and began to back out of the room.

Becky stalked forward, bracing the gun. "Shoot, girl," Paul said.

Miriam backed them up another step. Becky came forward. "I love you, Paul," she said.

"Me too, baby." And his heart told him — it's true, it's always been true. He wanted her. He wanted normal human love, and that was what she had to offer. By the God in heaven, he wanted her.

She closed her eyes. He saw tears. He knew that he was about to die at the hands of the only normal human woman who had ever loved him, before he had even damn well kissed her.

So he made a move. Why the hell not? Might as well attempt the impossible. What he did was to leap toward Becky, hoping that Miriam wouldn't expect that.

He was free, falling toward her. Becky danced aside. And suddenly he was behind her.

The two women faced each other. Miriam covered her belly with her hands. Miriam screamed. It was the most terrible, bloodcurdling wail of despair Paul had ever heard.

The bedroom door burst open, and Sarah and Leo piled in behind her, both of them bracing Magnums. Paul recognized a standoff. He also recognized a situation that wasn't going to last more than a few seconds.

"We're gonna get 'em all," he murmured to Becky.

In the same instant that she squeezed the trigger, a desperate Miriam used

her great speed to leap into her face. Instinct made her raise the weapon — and the blast went crashing into the trompe l’oeil ceiling, which came crashing down in sky-painted chunks, filling the room with dust.

Becky was hurled all the way back against the far wall of the office. She hit the wall with a resounding slap. But she was Becky, she was no ordinary girl, and she came back immediately.

Paul had the gun. Behind Miriam, Sarah and Leo were getting ready to open fire. He started to squeeze off the shot that would reduce them all to pulp.

Then his finger stopped squeezing. He stood, agonizing. “Pull it,” Becky shouted, “*pull the damn trigger!*”

The clock ticked. Sarah Roberts began moving slowly to the left, sliding like a shadow. He saw her plan: she was going to throw herself between them, try to absorb the shot.

“*Pull it!*”

“Please, Paul,” Miriam said.

He stood there like a pillar, and pillars cannot move, they cannot pull triggers. He saw not Miriam, but his baby, the little half-made child who had maybe looked at him.

In all his years of killing, he had never killed a baby, and now he found that this was his limit. This was the one murder he could not commit.

His mind searched for a way to let his heart win. And his mind spoke to him in the voice of his father . . . or maybe it was his father’s real spirit there, giving his son the guidance that he needed: “If you kill that child,” his father’s voice said to him, “my life and my death and all the suffering of our family will have been for nothing.”

All those thousands of years of struggle on the earth — the slow evolution of the apes, the coming of the Keepers with their breeding and their feeding

and their tremendous acceleration of human evolution — all of it had led to this moment, to the burning, unanswerable moral question of the mother, and to the baby.

“Gimme that gun,” Becky said.

He did it. He gave it to her. As he did so, Sarah Roberts came forward. Her face was white, her eyes were huge. She loomed up, pointing her own weapon. With the clarity that comes to men at moments of great extreme, Paul saw a tear come out of her left eye and start down her cheek. And then her magnum roared and Becky’s pistol roared, and the room was choked with dust and debris.

Silence followed, and in it the improbable bonging of a distant clock. Before them lay the shattered remains of Sarah Roberts.

Becky looked down, then stepped quickly across the blood-soaked corpse.

The other two were nowhere to be seen. Paul and Becky followed them out and downstairs, saw them as they were disappearing into a pantry.

There was a brick tunnel leading deep. “Know where it goes?”

“Nope.”

“Shit. And there’s no map?”

“No map.”

“Then we’ve lost it.”

“Temporarily. It ain’t over till it’s over, girl.”

She dropped her gun to her side. “That one really got to you,” she said.

He looked down the dark tunnel where the monster that carried his son had taken him. “Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken . . . then the dust shall return to the earth as it was.”

“Okay.”

They were silent together. Paul could feel the cord that linked him to his boy, feel it unwinding into the void.

“That’s the last one,” Becky said.

“The last vampire? Are you sure?”

“They’re cleaned out. All of them.”

“Even here in the U.S?”

She nodded. “Bocage is almost as good as you.”

He felt her hand in his, her strong, good hand. “Becky?”

“Yeah?”

“How the hell did you get in here?”

“They got a lotta skylights in this dump, boss.”

He threw his arms around her. When he kissed her at last, he immediately found what he’d lost hope of ever finding, which was his heart’s true happiness. This was where he belonged, in the arms of this wonderful, normal, completely human woman.

They left the house, leaving the maggots or the police to deal with the corpse upstairs. As far as the vampire and its helper were concerned, they would be found. Their time would come.

But not until his son was born, no way. Not until then.

“What’s your opinion on kids?”

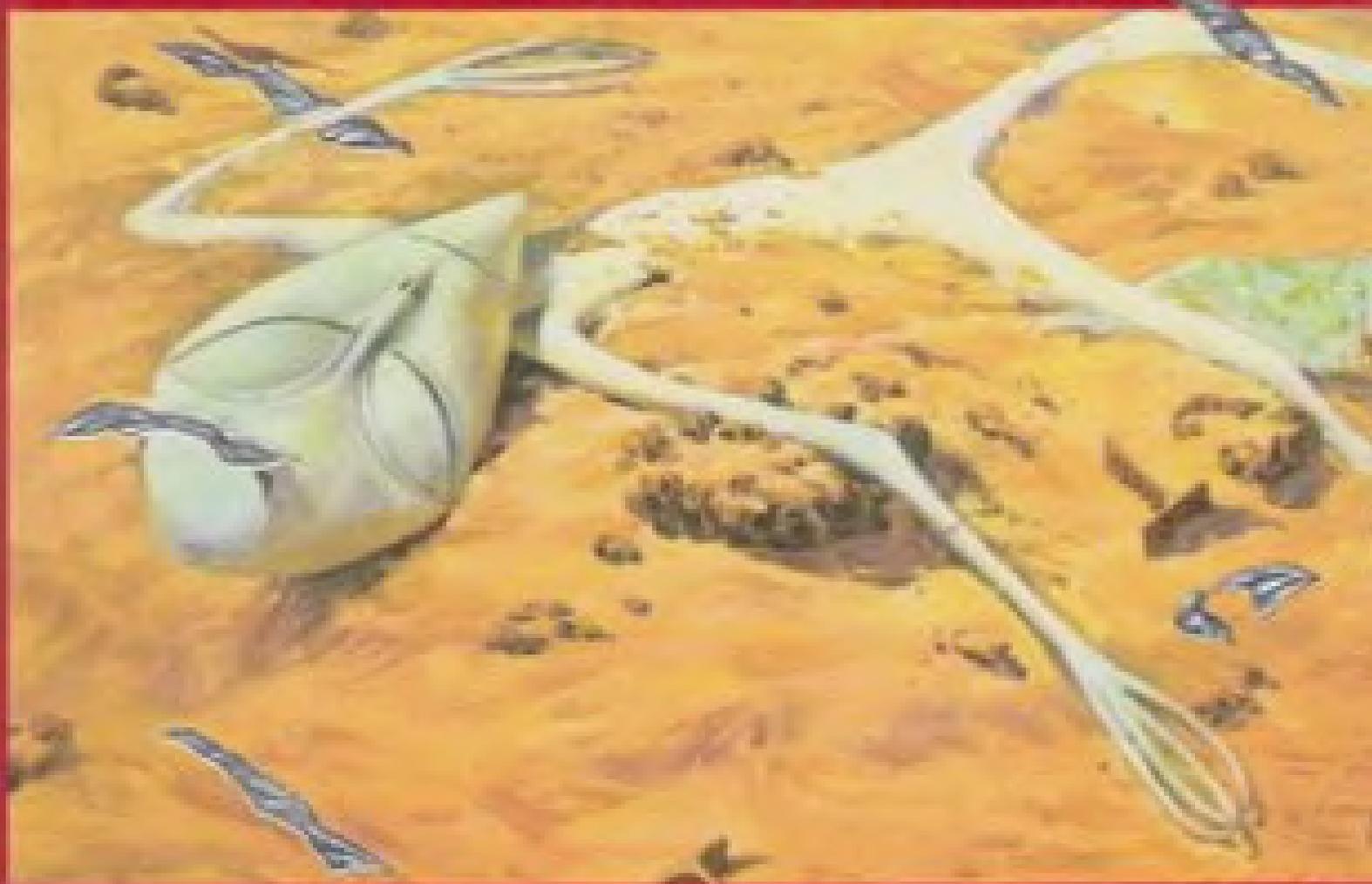
“Kids’re okay.”

“You could raise a kid?”

She looked at him. “Married to you I could.”

“Married to me.”

MAJESTIC



A NOVEL BY

WHITLEY STRIEBER

Author of COMMUNION

MAJESTIC

Whitley Strieber



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS NEW YORK

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It is a work of fiction that is based on fact. I have used the names of historical figures, and invented all others.

Newspaper stories quoted are entirely authentic except for the use of this convention. Insofar as it reflects the truth, this book is the outcome of the patience of those who have helped me. Any errors are my own.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Colonel Jesse Marcel, an unknown hero.

Through official secrecy and ridicule, many citizens are led to believe that unidentified flying objects are nonsense. To hide the facts the Air Force has silenced its personnel.

- Admiral Hoscock H. Hillenkoetter,
First Director of the Central Intelligence Agency
From the *New York Times*, February 28, 1960

Introduction

It was my misfortune to have some really good luck.

If I'd had the good sense to go along with it, I would have left this story alone. It's the scoop of the century, but it has almost certainly ruined my career. And I was about to escape my job with a dreary suburban weekly and go to work for a semiofficial urban daily. Now I'll never report for the Washington Post. I'll never enter the fabled halls of the New York Times, unless it is with somebody else's sandwiches in my hands.

So what is this thing that has ruined me?

I won't hide the fact that I was researching an April Fool's piece for my paper—or rather, my former paper—the Bethesda Express. We were going to get a good laugh out of an obvious absurdity that is believed by at least half the population.

I wasn't fired because I failed to turn in this story. That wasn't exactly it. What got me canned was that I found out it was all true. What I wrote struck my editor as being a joke on him.

He did not think this was funny.

Like the whole community of journalists, he was convinced that the subject is nonsense.

I have met the man who did this to us. Insofar as it is about any one person, this book is about that man.

His name is Wilfred Stone and he lives here in Bethesda, along with a few thousand other Washington retirees. For most of the past year he's been sitting in his backyard quietly dying of lung cancer. During the last six months he and I have been collaborators. As much as I can stand to be his friend, I am that.

At first Will was almost ashamed to tell his story. Secrets like his are their own very ugly pornography, and it was terribly painful to him to reveal them.

But he got used to it, finally became passionate about it. What started as sparse muttering ended in a torrent of searing human anguish, a howl for forgiveness from the edge of the grave.

I have viewed my role in our collaboration as that of facilitator. This book is Will Stone's confession. My job has been to support his effort, to fill in backgrounds, to do what legwork was necessary, and to provide my vision of this desperately troubled man.

I met Will because he sent the Express a response to a nasty review I'd published. I trashed a book written by what I assumed to be an obvious charlatan.

This is not a big town, and his letter was the only response in support of the professional liar.

In my own defense I can only repeat that I was also one of Will's victims.

When it came time to do the April Fool's story and I needed a sucker, he looked like a strong contender.

Will acted like he'd been waiting for a call from someone like me—which I suppose he had. Everything he does is structured in terms of bait and hook.

He is a subtle man, too subtle to just walk into my office with an armload of the most extraordinary and terrible secrets that the United States of America possesses.

Considering just how much he has wanted to tell his story, and how little time he has, waiting for me to take the bait must have been very hard.

He lives in a dark old house on a street that was fashionable thirty years ago. I went there to connect with my victim.

And became his.

He sounded like an old freight train as he huffed slowly down the hall to answer my knock at his door. After he opened it he leaned against the jamb to catch his breath. Then he straightened up and a huge, complex smile came into his face. I say complex because it was not a smile like yours or mine.

It was the saddest expression I have ever seen.

He took me into his grim living room with its grim furniture and thick, silent carpet. The curtains alone added cheer. They were odd—white oilcloth or parchment with yellow flowers pressed between the layers.

We sat down. I didn't know what to expect, even what sort of questions to ask.

He pushed his big, wobbly face into mine and said without preamble, "The damn thing is real and I can prove it." I thought, oh boy, paydirt.

"What damn thing?"

"The whole damn thing." He pulled himself to his feet and rolled out of the room. A moment later he was back with a cardboard box full of documents, photographs and cans of movie film.

At first I thought it would be the usual sort of junk, fake pictures, news clippings, nutty tracts.

The first thing I saw was a clear color photograph of what appeared to be a dead alien. It was attached to the autopsy reports that appear later in this book.

The authenticity of the photo was so obvious that it affected me like a blow on the head. The blood drained from my face; I literally reeled.

Every tiny detail seemed true, the pale skin, the injuries, the oozing fluid, the black, sunken eyes.

The documents went on for pages and pages. I have reproduced the most critical ones in this book. But there were thousands of others, and God knows how many more are hidden even from Wilfred Stone.

I sat there in that dim room reading, looking at picture after picture, all of it stamped with things like CLASSIFIED—ULTRA and TOP SECRET—MAJIC.

It became clear to me that nobody could have faked this, not all of this, not with the detail and perfection of it.

For me the world crumbled. Everything I believed was called into question. All my expectations, my understanding of the way things were, all of it was shattered.

When he heard a droplet of sweat snap against the memo I was reading he put his hand on my shoulder. "I want to get the story out before I die."

I just looked at him. I could only think that I'd been living in a false world with a false history.

Everything important was secret. I looked down at the documents spread around me on the floor. They were terrifying, both for their contents and for their ominous-looking secrecy stamps. I was seeing levels of classification I hadn't known existed.

His possession of these documents was clearly illegal. If I assisted him in any way I was headed for jail.

This was when good sense and good luck came into conflict. This story

had things like joblessness and jail and disgrace written all over it.

"People have a right to know. They had a right to know forty years ago."

He sat there, the slightest of smiles on his face. Was he trying to look pleasant, to win me over? Will does not smile well. This time words like "snake" came to mind.

But, dammit, I couldn't take my eyes off the stuff he was showing me! The most incredible story in history.

And it was literally lying in my lap.

The truth was in the hands of a sick, helpless old man.

And he was putting himself in mine.

Overnight I thought about what was obviously an offer.

To publish this story would be mad.

And yet At about four in the morning I decided the hell with it and finally went to sleep.

When I got up I grabbed the phone and called an old friend of mine, Jeb Strode. We'd roomed together two years at American University. He went on to law. I bought a cheap Sony tape recorder and became a reporter.

Now he pulled down a couple of hundred thousand a year keeping lobbyists out of jail. I figured he could afford the ten minutes it would take to answer my question.

"I'm crazy," I said. "I slept on this and decided to forget all about it."

"So you called a lawyer while he was still under a pile of housecats with his eyes closed."

"How could I reveal highly classified information and stay out of Danbury?"

"Danbury is the nice federal jail. That isn't where they would put you. I see lots of steel doors and guards with Gila monster eyes."

"What's a Gila monster?"

"Something unpleasant. Don't even think about it, Nicky."

"I have to."

"We never had this conversation. But if you really want to do this, your only hope is to publish your book as fiction. They'll figure if they hit you, it'll tell the world it's all true. You might make it."

So this is fiction. Everything in it—all the documents, the briefing papers, the interviews—is fiction. The story is fiction. Will is fiction and so am I.

Only the newspaper stories and Admiral Hillenkoetter's statement are real. You can easily check them, so what's the point?

Even if I don't go to jail, I have become a martyr to my issue. My career is dead.

But it's worth it, because the issue is enormous: what is at stake is the whole future of mankind. The coming of the visitors is as pivotal an event as the original spawning of the human race.

It is incredible that this event has been kept secret.

As director of the Majestic Agency for nearly forty years, Wilfred Stone is the man most responsible for that secrecy.

Let him try to explain himself. I cannot. And I thank God that I don't have to face his conscience in the night, or when he goes to his dying.

- Nicholas A. Duke March 15, 1989

Foreword by Wilfred Stone

I was among the architects of one of the worst mistakes that has ever been made, and this is my final throw, my magic bullet, my effort to make it right.

In the end it is going to be up to you; my generation has already cast itself upon the rocks. We who fought World War Two and the Communist menace have only one legacy beyond the armed and furious world we have given you.

In 1947 somebody from outside this world attempted to form a relationship with mankind. First contact fell to the United States government. Fresh from victory and full of pride, our generation failed the test. We made a horrible mess of it. We did not understand the subtle and terrifying—the magnificent—thing that they were.

We made the simplistic assumption that they were something like us—but from another planet. We failed to see the truth. Failed utterly.

If I may, let me begin with an explanation.

Do you know the word empath? It is the invention of a writer, but it is a true word, a fine word. An empath is somebody who so completely identifies with the nature of another that they assume that nature. If you met a perfect empath, or a whole city or nation of perfect empaths, and you introduced them to a vicious psychopath, the empaths would become monsters.

Because they lack experience, children are empaths. They are blank and clean. At my age it is clear that the whole of adulthood is an attempt to recover that innocence. History is also such a journey, an attempt to return to the forest.

These others—who appeared to us as aliens—are empaths, but not because they lack experience. They have returned to the forest; they are not men, they are beyond that. Like very young children, they are empty of knowledge: they have become conscious animals. And that is a beautiful thing. In the sight of God they are almost angels.

They came here to help us find our own version of this wise innocence. We who faced them did not even begin to understand. We did not understand the awesome portent of Walt Whitman's lines: There was a child went forth everyday,

And the first object he looked upon,
that object he became . . .

And so when we called them terrible, that is what they became. "Be as little children." What did He mean?

Why did He say it? We have become lost on our long journey back to the woods. When we detonated atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki we distorted history, setting ourselves on a path that leads not to the forest but to extinction.

We achieved absolute terror, a darkness so deep it could not be penetrated, not even by light so bright that it vaporized the eyes. Wise innocents that they are, the others saw our predicament and came to rescue us.

"Regard the lilies of the field," He said. Why, we who are naked in the rain? If we surrender to the wind and the rain they will be our saviors; the flowers will be our deliverance. We do not need economies, nations, churches. We need only one another—and the ability to give and bear true love.

This is the message of the others. They thus represent absolute and total change, the collapse of economic civilization and the end of days. They are freedom; the soul in the open sky. Because they stand for such radical change we in the government saw them as a threat to the United States.

Instead of proclaiming their arrival up and down the land as we should have, I participated with a group of men who hid it behind a curtain of denial and ridicule. We posted guardians at the gates and spread a net of rumors and lies to protect our secret knowledge.

We have with our lies created the impression that an excursion of the pure is an invasion by monsters from the depths of our own psyche.

In the Bible when a man looks upon the face of an angel he will often cry out, "Woe is me," or, "I have sinned," or other such words. This is because he sees in those dark angelic eyes a clear reflection of what he truly is.

In the eyes of the others we who met them saw ourselves.

And there were demons there.

Part One

THE FIELD OF BONES

*We can only know
what is out there
from an animal's features
for we make even infants
turn and look back
at the way things are shaped
not toward the open
that lies so deep
in an animal's face.*

- Rainer Maria Rilke Eighth Elegy, Duino Elegies

Chapter One

Will enthralled and horrified me. While his complete authenticity was obvious, I nevertheless felt that I had to do some basic research.

He claimed that the story had begun in Roswell, New Mexico, in July of 1947. He named names, dates, places, showed me news clippings and memoranda.

Fine, I would see for myself. I took a week off (I was still being fed by the Express) and got a super-saver to Albuquerque, rented a Vega and drove the hundred-odd miles south to Roswell.

It took me about ten minutes to fall in love with the town. Roswell is American perfect, a middle-sized city at peace with itself. It's an agricultural community with a smattering of light industry. The streets mix fifties modern with older architecture. Everywhere I went—the motel, the radio and television stations, the local newspaper—I was struck by the fact that this place was populated by decent people. Honest people.

At the Roswell Daily Record they were frank about the story. Everybody in town knew about it. The fact that something real had happened in July of 1947 and been covered up turned out to be an open secret across most of southern New Mexico.

Will tells me that I won't feel so much anger when I get older, but I felt anger now, interviewing people, walking the site of the crash near Maricopa, viewing the ruins of the old ranch on which the disk fell.

I was choked with bitterness. I'd dismissed the whole UFO question with a laugh and I'd been a dupe!

My ego was involved and I thought I'd never get over hating Will.

One of the most annoying things about him is how wise he is. He knew that I wouldn't always despise him.

I wish I could comfort that old man somehow, but he is beyond words, beyond touch, beyond everything.

South of Roswell stand the empty remains of the Roswell Army Air Field, now being transformed into an industrial park.

I walked that crooked tarmac on a warm spring day, and let the ghosts of the past rise up around me. There was no feeling of elegy or remembrance. I was angry, and the ghosts were angry, too.

At least two of those ghosts, and possibly a third, were not human. I wondered if they looked back also, and if they did not remember the night that they arrived, and died.

Through the ten o'clock dark they came, silent and slow, watching the streets of Roswell unfold below them.

More carefully they were watching the flight line, counting the planes, counting the bombs.

At that moment the 509th Strategic Bomber Wing stationed at Roswell was the only atomic bomber force in the world.

Perhaps they came to warn us, or perhaps theirs was a more subtle mission. But Roswell could not have been chosen by accident. Will explained to me that they have a definite tendency to appear right in the middle of our most sensitive, most dangerous, most heavily guarded military installations.

This was one of the things that caused the hostilities. "Be as little children," Will says. Indeed, innocence does not know secrets and it does not know fear. But mankind is not the only earthly creation that fears death. Everything fears it. And when there is resurrection every living thing will be delivered, from the crawlers in the mud to the high bishops, and fear will be swept from the earth forever. When they came, everything was afraid.

Birds awoke as they passed over, and fluttered nervously. Coons and bobcats screamed, opossums hissed.

Babies shrieked in the night.

When they came it was midnight in Washington. Will Stone was a young man then, struggling to create a postwar career for himself in the Central Intelligence Group, soon to become the C.I.A. He knew nothing of what was happening in distant New Mexico.

His memory of what he was doing that night is nevertheless vivid. This shouldn't be surprising; we tend to recall exactly where we were at moments of great crisis.

A familiar wartime question: "What were you doing when you heard about Pearl Harbor?" Will Stone remembered: he was standing in a department store looking at some ties. "Where were you when the Japs surrendered?" He was drunk in Algiers. What was he doing on the night of July 2, 1947? He was lying in bed in his apartment worrying about the fact that he was having political problems at the office. Instead of working on the Russian desk he was off in a backwater, helping the Algerians put an end to French colonialism.

Betty and Sam White were sitting on their porch in Roswell sipping lemonade and watching the sky. It was a beautiful night, with storms off to the west and stars overhead.

I know just what they said, just how they acted. I've read their files—and all the other files that Will has - many times over.

I've tried and tried to see where Will and the others went wrong, to understand if there is anything in God's world that might help us now.

"What's that," Sam asked his wife back on that lost night. "I'm not real sure," she replied in her twangy voice.

"I'm gonna call the sheriff." He got up from his chair with a creak of porch boards and a grunt.

The object was round and brightly lit—glowing, in fact. It made no sound as it swept northwestward across Roswell.

Beneath its thin blue light people went about their business. Except for the Whites, nobody noticed a thing.

At the Army Air Field the radar operators did not glance up from their glowing screens. The lookout on the tower was facing the other way, and never broke the imaginary monologue he was delivering to Dorothy Lamour.

Bob Ungar, on his ranch seventy miles northwest of Roswell, watched the storms with a critical and uneasy eye. He was totally unaware of what was approaching from the direction of town. Bob's concern was the dimmed clouds.

They could drop hail us big us a sheep's eye. Hail like that could knot a man's skull or butter his animals until they were crazy. He'd also found his share of sheep braised by lightning, lying stiff in the scrub.

The worst part was the way they'd bunch up on the fences during a bad storm, frightened by the thunder and trying to shelter from the rain. You'd find them in heaps, and the ones at the bottom would be smothered.

Bob pitied the poor, dumb things. I know he did, because I know exactly what kind of a man he was. I admire him unabashedly.

He died in the sixties, old and dried to straw by the desert.

Walking the path of Will Stone I spoke to Bob's wife, Ellie, now a very old woman. She lives in an adobe cottage—really little more than a hut. Of course she's been wracked by time, but there is within her a light such as you don't often see. I spoke to her of her husband, and their old house that is in ruins now, and a long time ago.

I can imagine Bob standing on his back porch on that night, squinting into the dark west.

A long, cool gust swirled out of the dark. The air grew eerie. The last five nights he'd saddled up his horse, Sadie, and gone out to help the sheep. It hadn't made a lick of difference. They'd gotten themselves killed anyway.

You'd think sheep had been going through thunderstorms for a long time. But this bunch, they got all worked up over a little sheet lightning, forget the thunder and wind and the hail.

He heard the sheep faintly, far off now, moaning and bleating.

Meanwhile the glowing object left the outskirts of Roswell and the Whites lost it in the darkness.

Cats that had leaped into bookshelves looked out. Dogs that had run under houses scrambled back to their master's sides. Babies that had been screaming began to sniffle and coo. Children sighed in their beds, their half-formed nightmares subsiding.

Lightning flared across the west, and the Ungars' radio crackled. ". .. tornado five miles south of Caprock ..."

Then the static returned.

"Oh, Lord," Bob said.

"That's way away from here." Ellie reached toward him, then withdrew her hand.

"A hundred miles isn't nothin,' not s'far as these storms are concerned."

"We'll get through," she said.

"I moved the sheep up that draw. They got a little shelter in there."

"I worry about the water comin' down there."

"Don't you worry now."

Some dance music came out of the radio. Fox-trot music. "Where is your gingham dress?" "In the cedar chest." "Will you put it on for me?"

She smiled the strong, accepting smile that he loved, and went into their bedroom. When she returned she was wearing the dress. She swayed to the music. He took his work-thin wife in his arms, and danced with her as the lightning flashes flickered.

"Oh, Lordy," she said, "do you remember the night we decided to get married? The conga line?"

How they had danced! "Old Joe really got that conga goin'." "Bobby, I think that was the happiest dance of my life." He closed his eyes and bent his head to her woman-smelling hair, and saw the black window float past.

At that moment there was a crack of thunder and the rising roar of wind. The radio was drowned out. He turned it off; no use in wasting the battery.

The wind came sweeping around the house, shaking the boards, screaming in the eaves, bringing with it the perfume of the range, sweet flowers, sage, dust. He imagined his animals out there in the storm. They'd be milling, nervous, ready to stampede all the way to the wire if lightning struck nearby.

He wondered how it could help but strike them. Looking at it, he realized that he'd never seen another storm quite like it, not in all of his years on this New Mexico land. He doused the lamp. "Ellie, come look." They went out onto the porch together. The storm was a huge, glowing wall of clouds. It seemed to ride on a forest of lightning bolts. "I've never seen so much lightning," Ellie said.

"If it comes over the house—"

"Look at the way they strike."

"Yeah. 'Lightning never strikes twice in the same place.' So much for that idea." He turned away. "God help the small rancher," he said bitterly.

They went to their bedroom. He took off his clothes and sat on the bed rolling a last cigarette. They lay back together, sharing drags. After a while she put her hand on his chest.

And then they slept.

His father came to him, his face lit as if by the light of a lantern. Astonished, he stared. He was aware that this was a dream, but amazed at how real it was. There was Dad, his lean, hard features, his dark eyes, his grim-set mouth. "Dad," Bob said. "Dad!" His father didn't say anything, but Bob felt like some kind of a warning had been given. He woke up feeling very afraid. A lot of time had passed; he'd been asleep for hours.

Ellie beside him was snoring.

Long thoughts started whispering through his mind. He wondered why he lived like this. His poor ranch couldn't last. But then what the hell would happen to him? He worked this place. "I'm a sheepman." He could say those honorable and proud words.

He noticed, through his dark reverie, that there was an awful lot of light in the room. He opened his eyes, thinking for an instant that he'd overslept and it was daylight.

The room was full of soft, blue light. He sat up. A fire? There was nothing to burn. They had a wood cookstove but it was just embers now. And

the lanterns were out. His nostrils dilated, but he smelled no smoke.

Not the barn! He vaulted out of bed, burst through the house and into the restless night.

The barn was fine, but there was some kind of lightning in the sky the likes of which he had never seen before. It looked like a huge star floating around below the clouds. It was so big and so close that he stifled a shout of surprise and jerked back against the screen door.

He stared up. The thing was sliding and floating in the air, and it was hissing. A sort of shock went through him. He was all covered with tingling. His heart started thundering.

It must be a burning plane. Oh, Lord, coming down on the I house! It got closer and closer, practically blinding him with its flight.

"Ellie, God, Ellie!"

There was an answering murmur from the house.

"Ellie!"

The thing was hissing and buzzing, and there was a buzzing in the middle of his head. He grabbed his temples.

High-pitched children's screams mixed with the buzzing, and then Ellie came urging the kids along, her own voice all shaky. He went toward her, turning his back on the thing, which was now almost on top of him. As he ran toward them the buzzing got so loud that he almost couldn't bear it. The world seemed to go round and round and he felt himself falling. For a second it seemed as if he was floating upward, but then he hit the ground with a thud.

Ellie and the children were already out the backdoor. The thing went buzzing and skipping and jerking through the air above them. Then it was skimming the hill, then it was a glow behind the hill.

He heard the most god-awful sound he had ever heard in his life: an explosion to beat all. It was a huge clap of a sound, it winded him, it shook the back windows right out of their frames, it made Sadie scream in the barn and the chickens start squawking in the coop. Ellie and the kids were screaming, and Bob heard his own voice too, rising against the echoes of the blast.

And then, quite suddenly, there was silence. And the night returned.

And that's how it began, pretty much. In the secrecy of that late hour, thus did our innocence perish.

From the Roswell Daily Record, July 8, 1947:

ROSWELL HARDWARE MAN AND WIFE REPORT DISK SEEN

Mr. and Mrs. Sam White apparently were the only persons in Roswell who have seen what they thought was a flying disk. They were sitting on their porch at 105 North Foster last Wednesday night at about ten minutes before ten o'clock when a large glowing object zoomed out of the sky from the southeast, going in a northwesterly direction at a high rate of speed.

White called Mrs. White's attention to it and both ran down into the yard to watch. It was in sight less than a minute, perhaps forty or fifty seconds, White estimated.

White said that it appeared to him to be about 1,500 feet high and going fast. He estimated between 400 and 500 miles per hour.

In appearance it looked oval in shape like two inverted saucers faced mouth to mouth, or two old-type washbowls placed together in the same fashion. The entire body glowed as though light were showing through from inside, though not like it would be if a light were merely underneath.

From where he stood White said that the object looked to be about 15 feet in size and making allowance for the distance it was from town he figured that it must have been 15 or 20 feet in diameter, though this was just a guess.

The object came into view from the southeast and disappeared over the treetops in the general vicinity of Six-Mile Hill.

White, who is one of the most respected and reliable citizens in town, kept the story to himself hoping that someone else would come out and tell about having seen one, but finally today decided that he would go ahead and tell about seeing it.

Chapter Two

Even after all these years I could see the terror in Ellie's face as she told me her story. I sat across from her in her home, and listened to her remarkable tale.

Hers was a humble place, with a cigarette-marked Formica table in the kitchen, a couple of chairs and an enormous television dominating the tiny living room. As we talked and sipped coffee from big mugs,

"Jeopardy" rollicked along in the background.

"I remember that noise was real loud, Mr. Duke." . It took some little time for their ears to adjust to smaller sounds. When they could hear again, they realized that the sheep were actually shrieking. Ellie thought the plane had hit right on top of them.

"One of them big bomber planes crashed," she said to Bob. "Lord, woman, I know it."

"Go out there! Saddle up Sadie and go out there!" He pulled on jeans and boots and threw his slicker over his T-shirt. Grabbing a hat, he dashed out to the barn to get the horse.

She was skittish, rolling her eyes back at him as he worked. " 'S all right, baby doll," he murmured, " 's all right, babe." He got the saddle thrown and cinched and led her out of the barn. She snorted when the sheets of rain hit her, and she looked at him like she thought he was absolutely crazy.

The night was filthy black and he hadn't brought a lantern. He made it up the hill behind the house by using lightning flashes. Sadie couldn't help him, she had no way to know where she was going.

I can see him now, his hard, stoic form in the lightning flashes, a shadow on a horse beneath the streaming brim of an old hat.

Being with his widow, surrounded by the shabby objects of their lives, looking at the stern, deeply humorous photograph she has of him, I chose him unreservedly as the man I would want to represent me to a higher world.

Human society and government being what they are, Bob Ungar never saw more of our visitors than a little wreckage. Instead their first encounters were with the likes of Will Stone.

If Bob Ungar had met them living and vital on that night, everything would surely have been different.

Once he reached the top of the hill the screaming of the sheep was louder, reaching his ears clearly through the peals of thunder and the souging of the wind.

Then he heard another noise, something completely new. It was a terrible, ragged wailing. Sadie flared her nostrils and tossed her head and stomped.

What was that? It was the strangest, most savage noise he'd ever heard. Nothing made a sound like that, not a fox, not a coyote, not a bobcat being soaked by a storm.

I suspect that at least one of the unknown beings was on the ground at that time, probably blown out of the craft by what was later found to have been an explosion that hadn't destroyed the whole thing.

Wilfred and his associates later found three bodies, but they were miles from the Ungar ranch. I don't think anybody ever found the fourth one, who fell on the ranch.

And who probably lived a little while.

If so, then we came very close to having Bob Ungar be the first person to meet the visitors in full consciousness and in the flesh.

But for a horse . . .

With no warning Sadie bucked. It was the last thing he was expecting out of his docile old lady horse and he found himself rising into the air before he really knew what had happened.

He came down sideways in the saddle and she bucked again. This time he ended up in the mud. He hit so heavily his jaw snapped and he saw stars. Before he could get up Sadie was heading back to the barn at full gallop. Her hooves rattled off into the dark.

The screaming of the sheep mixed with that savage noise. "God," Bob said, "oh, God."

He turned and went back down the hill hobbling and slipping along after his horse.

Half an hour later he slammed through the screen door into the kitchen and pulled his 12-gauge out of the gun cabinet. He tucked a couple of lead solid shots into the chambers. Ellie grabbed his shoulder. "Bob!"

"Somethin's out there, honey!" "What? A coyote?"

"It scared that old horse so bad she bucked me off!" "Bucked you off?"

"Come on, Ellie, wake up! Somethin's out there!" "A cougar?"

"No cougar ever sounded like that."

Then there was a lull in the storm and they both heard it. Ellie I grabbed

Bob as the children came rushing out of their room I bawling. The family huddled together in the kitchen. When lightning flickered the shotgun shone blue and mean, and gave them all comfort.

The sound was full of agony and incredible sorrow. "Is it a man?" Ellie whispered. "I don't rightly know." He held her tighter. "They found us," Billy said. His voice was so solemn and quiet and firm that both of his parents looked at him with surprise in their faces. But he said no more.

When Billy grew up he joined the Navy and told all who cared to listen just exactly what had happened on the Ungar ranch. About a year after he had finished his tour his car was found abandoned on a road in northern California, and that was the end of him.

I asked Will Stone whether or not he had been responsible for the death of this talkative young man. His reply had an eerie resonance. "People go with them," he said. He would say no more.

The gaps that Ellie had left in her interview with me were filled in by Will, working from the yellowing transcripts of old interviews with the family.

"I hope it's not some poor flier burned in the crash," she remembered telling Bob. She did not ask him to go back out and he didn't move. He felt guilty. He thought, "I am probably letting some poor soul die."

Over the next hour the storm raged and the cries slowly died away. The more he heard them the more Bob became convinced that they weren't human noises. No human being could make a sound like that, not even a man burned and in agony.

It had to be an animal, he thought. Some poor, hurt animal.

He was surprised by dawn. It didn't seem like he'd been asleep, and here it was pushing six. He stirred himself, sat up from the couch and stretched his neck. He still had his boots on and his legs were stiff. When he straightened them his knees cracked and he felt better. Ellie and the kids slept huddled together, their faces as soft as dew. Compared to them he was like a big old mesquite tree, all bark and thorns. He went into the kitchen and opened the breadbox, cut off a slab of bread and spread it with grape jelly. He pumped up some water and drank it in deep, grateful draughts. He would have liked coffee, but he was in a hurry to see what had happened last night.

He felt guilty. A plane had crashed and he hadn't gone out to help the poor bastards. A howling animal had scared him away. By the thin light of morning he was just plain ashamed of himself.

I know this because he admitted it to Joe Rose, the man who interrogated him while he was being held in the brig at Roswell Army Air Force Base.

He was even more ashamed when he went into the barn and found Sadie standing there still in her saddle and bridle. She gave him a sad, accusing look. How could any man who worked with animals ever leave a horse saddled half the night?

He would have unsaddled her immediately, but he couldn't do that. He had to use her right now.

As he mounted her he mumbled that he was sorry. Then he headed up to the pastures to see what he could see. She trotted right along; she was a faithful animal.

He went first to his sheep. In spite of himself he pressed Sadie to a canter. It was his expectation that he was going to find that a plane had crashed into his flock.

The morning was as quiet as the night had been noisy, and he didn't like that. Were they all dead? Was it that bad?

Sadie cantered smartly. Her ears were cocked forward as if she, also, was listening for the sheep.

Then he saw them bunched up in the shallow draw. There was no crashed plane, in fact no sign of damage at all. He couldn't see any carcasses. The sheep were grazing, some of them milling.

He made a little sound of relief in his throat. They were all right, and putting them here had been a good idea.

They'd stayed away from the fences.

Sadie suddenly reared up. She whinnied then came down hard, stomping at what Bob thought was a sizable snake. He knew better than to interfere with a horse killing a rattlesnake, and let her have her way until he realized that the thing she was trampling into the muddy ground was no reptile.

He backed her off and peered down. Her chest was heaving, and she was extremely skittish.

What he saw down in the mud appeared to him like a thick belt of black webbing. He didn't know what to make of it.

After looking a moment longer to be certain that it wasn't a rattler, he dismounted his horse.

She pawed and snorted. He held the reins tightly; it was a long walk back to the house.

He bent down and with his free hand drew the black strap out

of the mud.

Where were you when the hand of man first touched a thing of angels? I know where I was: unborn in 1947.¹

was produced later, in the last, disillusioned years of the baby boom. I wasn't exactly an unwanted child, but I suspect that my dad, at least, would have preferred a new Pontiac.

It looked like burned plastic, but it was floppy. Sadie's eyes rolled and she stomped. She tossed her head, nearly pulling the reins out of his grasp. Holding her tightly, he remounted with the stuff in his free hand.

She began craning her head around. What the hell was the horse so fired up about? It was obviously some burned scrap from the plane.

One thing about the webbing that fascinated Bob was its weightlessness. He squeezed it. You'd think you could just tear something this flimsy to pieces. He pulled at it. The stuff was tough.

Finally he tied it on behind him—and nearly got dehorned for the second time in as many days. The instant it touched her skin Sadie reacted as if he'd hit her with a hot branding iron. She screamed and bolted forward, straight into the outer edges of the flock.

Her fear infected the sheep at once, and they started running. He'd have a damned stampede on his hands if he didn't watch out. He reined Sadie back hard and clicked his tongue at her. But it was to no avail. The horse was in a first-class panic.

What the hell. He pulled the piece of junk off her back and threw it as far as he could.

She calmed down then. But now the sheep were desperately rearranging themselves to avoid the thing. He sat open-mouthed watching this display of animal craziness.

Rather than get himself into trouble with Sadie, he resolved to wait until the ground dried a little and bring out his old Jeep to get the damned thing.

After inspecting his animals he rode up to the head of the little draw and looked around. There was nothing in the immediate area, but in a distant pasture there seemed to be an awful lot of rubble. Little bits of stuff shining in the morning sun, thousands upon thousands of them.

It was a good thirty-minute ride over there, which meant he wouldn't make it back for breakfast until nine. He wanted some decent food in his belly before he approached that mess. He could have used some whiskey, too, but he didn't hold with drink during the morning. Coffee, though. Ellie's

coffee.

At the meal he said nothing about the wreck. He ate a couple of eggs and some Spam, and drank two big mugs of coffee. The kids drank milk and ate Post Toasties. As usual Ellie had coffee and a cigarette. She sang while she was cooking, "It was a long time ago, long time ago. ..." He didn't know the song.

"You see the plane, Dad," Billy asked.

"A lot of little pieces."

"Can we go?"

Ellie turned from the stove. "No."

"Well," Bob said.

"Bob, there might be—"

He thought of that sound. "Your ma says no," Bob said. "Momma, please." Mary's voice was intense. "We all oughta go. Not just Dad."

"If there's a man hurt he might need help." Billy was, as always, a matter-of-fact kid.

Bob looked into his coffee. He should have gone out there last night. Somebody might have died because of him.

"Go on, kids," Ellie said. "But you stay away from dead men. You don't want nightmares."

Bob drove to the sheep, his kids sitting silently beside him. Ellie stayed behind.

The sheep still wouldn't come within fifty feet of the black plastic. Bob got out and went to it, the mud sucking at his boots as he walked through the mire created a while ago by all the stomping hoofs. He picked up the plastic. You closed your eyes, you could feel its texture, but it definitely had very little weight. No weight. And yet when he tossed it into the back of the Jeep, it fell normally. It ought to float in air, like a feather or like smoke.

"What is it, Dad?" Mary touched it gingerly. "I'm not real sure. A piece of the plane." They got in the truck and he drove carefully out of the draw. They bounced and rattled along the sandy borders of a wash, then turned and headed up toward the pasture he'd seen from horseback. Soon he could see the wreckage again, still lying scattered along a low rise, glittering in the sun.

He drove up to the edge of it, then stopped the engine. They all climbed out. It looked just like somebody had taken the tinfoil from a thousand cigarette packs, torn it up and scattered it over tens of acres. The rubble was spread in a long sort of fan, as if whatever had created it had come sliding

into the ground out of the southeast. He picked up a piece of the foil. It was strange stuff. Tough. You couldn't even think about tearing it. And it was light, too. Like the webbed belt it had no weight at all.

"This isn't pieces of a plane," Billy said. He held some of the stuff in his cupped hands. When he let it go, it fell like a handful of dry leaves.

"Look," Mary said. She bunched up a piece of the foil until it was no bigger than a pill. Then she let it go.

Instantly it bounced back into its former shape.

"Damn," Bob said. He did it. The same thing happened. Again he tried tearing it. Nothing.

Billy put some of it on a stone and beat it with another stone. It didn't even scratch.

How anything as tough as this stuff could ever have gotten torn up like this just beat all, as far as Bob was concerned. Must have been a whale of an explosion. The stuff was stronger than metal and yet thinner than cellophane. And blown all to hell.

Then he saw a gleam of violet coming from under a largish sheet of the foil. He lifted the sheet, tossing the two-foot square over his shoulder. The way it fluttered in the air reminded him of the flickering wing of a butterfly.

What he saw on the ground confused him even further than he was already confused. There lay a T-shaped object a couple of inches long, made of what looked for all the world like balsa wood, with violet glyphs covering it. He looked at it for a long time. He did not touch it. Others were I-shaped.

There were also pieces of what appeared to be waxed paper, and on these had been painted rows of little figures that Bob surmised were numbers.

Mary picked up a piece that hadn't been written on and held it up to the sun. "Look, Daddy."

Bob saw the faint outlines of yellow flowers. He took the sheet in his own hand. It was as if there was a subtle design, or maybe even real flowers pressed between the layers. They were beautiful, like yellow primroses. Evening Primroses.

You couldn't do anything to the paper, either. It didn't burn or tear. It was as tough as the foil.

Bob surveyed the field of rubble. The sun shone down, but no birds sang. A creepy sensation overcame him, and he wished he hadn't brought his kids.

The only sound was their own rustling breath. His big, familiar pasture seemed strange and dangerous and full of mystery. He did not like this, did

not like it at all.

Where were the birds? There had always been plenty of birds around here. What devilment had gone on last night?

"Were there bobcats crying out in the storm?" Billy asked. Bob did not answer. He could imagine the devil screaming like that. Then, with a toss of his head, he dismissed the thought.

"Somebody gotta clean this place up," he said. "Who's gonna do it?"

"It'd take ten loads in the Jeep."

"I'd say more like a hundred, son. We'd be at it for a month."

He surveyed the mess, and felt hopeless. There was so darned much of that tinfoil and other junk he could hardly believe his eyes.

Who the hell would do it? He couldn't haul all this crap out in his Jeep, not in a month of work. And what about the gasoline? A man had to think about the cost. At a dime a gallon, ten dollars' worth of gas at least.

He walked around, turning over pieces of the rubble with his toe, trying to see if he could find some insignia, something more than the little violet squiggles. But there was nothing, not a number, not a name.

"Hell." This wasn't what he wanted to see. He couldn't expect the AAF to deal with this mess unless it was theirs. But this didn't look like any sort of military stuff he'd ever heard of.

Maybe it was secret. Secret stuff. Them and their damned secrets, they'd really made a mess of one man's pasture.

He reached down and picked up one of the pieces with the violet writing on it. The thing was balsa wood, but it was so hard he couldn't dent it with his fingernail. It looked like balsa, he could see the grain. It was at least as light as balsa. But how could it be so damn hard?

The letters were inlaid into the gray surface. What did they say? He couldn't make out a bit of it. Was it Jap?

Maybe that was it: the Air Force was testing some kind of Jap secret weapon they'd captured from old Tojo.

"Banzai," he muttered. Then he tossed the little piece of wood aside.

He strode forward, moving steadily up a long rise. Now he could see signs of fire. Some of the pieces of foil were melted, others showed signs of scorching.

He listened to the silence. It made him want even more urgently to get his kids out of here. What kind of thing was it that terrified dumb sheep and horses and made birds fly away? Whatever bothered the animals about this

stuff probably ought to bother him, too.

Then he realized that there weren't even any insects buzzing around here.

The place was totally silent, and he knew that even the little things, the insignificant things, had been frightened away.

He whirled around, sure that somebody was coming up behind him. But there was only the kids standing in the sun, their skin golden, their faces solemn.

"Come on, y'all. Lets get some of this stuff picked up and put in the back."

Each of them dumped an armload of the wreckage into the Jeep. Then they got in. Bob pulled the choke, then hit the starter. She ground and gasped and finally chugged to life. He put her in gear and she went lurching off, tires spinning and whining in the wet, sandy dirt.

"Move," he growled, whipping the wheel around and gunning the motor to get out of an especially bad area.

Then he was on dry stone and doing twenty. She rattled like a can of marbles, but she got them home three times as fast as horses, and for that he was grateful.

Ellie had heard them come rattling down the hill, and was waiting at the kitchen door. He stopped the truck and turned it off, then got out.

His wife looked small and fragile, just pretending all that strength of hers.

He gathered her in his arms.

"Is it bad?" she asked.

"There's somethin' funny."

"Are all the men dead?"

"There weren't any men, Mom," Billy said.

"There was wax paper, like, with yellow flowers pressed in it."

"It's all about like this." Bob showed her the back of the Jeep.

She was a practical woman, and because it didn't make sense she didn't comment. She gave them all beans and potatoes for lunch. Bob ate in silence. Afterward he said, "Don't you kids go back up there without me."

"Should you tell the sheriff?"

"As soon as I get to town I'll do it."

She was silent after that, going about her work. How slim she was, this woman who had been swayed by his love. He listened to her movements, the shuffle of her slippered feet, the occasional sigh.

That afternoon he got a frozen-up windmill gear and had to spend a

couple of hours working on it. Before he knew it the sun was heading toward the horizon and it was time to knock off. He thought no more about the field of rubble and the sheriff. Maybe it was some kind of test glider. That would explain the seeming lack of victims. After he finished work he sat at the table drinking coffee and smoking.

In the back of his mind he'd been thinking that the Army Air Force might show up on its own, but as evening fell he had to conclude that they were not coming today.

Late that night he was awakened by light outside brighter than the moon. He pulled on his boots and went out. A blue searchlight was darting down from a huge, dark object that hung soundlessly in the sky, blackening out the stars.

The searchlight went on and off in the dark, darting down now and again. It moved toward the pasture where the wreckage lay.

Perhaps the fourth being was rescued on that night. I think not, though, because it was heard again. Bob expected the Air Force to show up the next morning, but they didn't. He waited a few days. Still nothing.

Finally, on July 7, he got in his Jeep and went rattling off toward Maricopa. He told the sheriff's deputy to tell the Air Force to get out to his place and claim its own.

When the sheriff called the Army Air Field in Roswell, they had no idea what he was talking about, but they went out anyway, to see what had so upset one of the region's stolid ranching men.

Chapter Three

The Chronicle of Wilfred Stone

It would soon be the responsibility of my friend Joe Rose to get Ungar under control. He would do it with the same ferocious subtlety that appeared when we were fishing for trout, and that he had used on former Gestapo agents when he interrogated them.

Now I dislike fishing, but in those days I was young and full of murder, and loved the game of it and the kill. I inherited the sport of fly-fishing from my father, and many of the other gentlemen in CIG had done the same.

Back in July of 1947 I was—God, let me see—I was thirty-four years old. I'd just had my birthday. I was born on Friday, June 13, 1913. I walk under ladders and seek out black cats.

Thirty-four. I was healthy from my years in the Office of Special Services. Now I am bent and flabby and cancerous from my years in MAJIC. The wages of sin.

But what delicious secrets I know. I am so terribly afraid . . . and that, too, is delicious.

Don't let me pretend to be a hero. I am no hero. Spies are not glamorous. We gather and protect secrets, which are power. We control your lives and you don't know it.

When the history of this era is written, it must certainly be called the Age of Secrets. I will state the matter simply: Everything important is classified.

Everything.

Public knowledge has degenerated to a form of entertainment. I should know. The control of the public mind has been my lifelong profession and horrible fascination.

Official secrets are the snare of modern life. If you don't know them, you're helpless. If you do, you're trapped.

July 6, 1947: The previous week I had been roped into a peculiar sort of a project. The Board of National Estimates had asked the Central Intelligence Group what it would mean if the rash of "flying disks" being reported nationwide resulted in contact with spacemen. We did not yet know of what

had happened in Roswell, but there had been so many other sightings reported in the last few months that our interest was piqued—at least officially.

Because I'd made no secret of the fact that I was unhappy on the French desk, I was given this bit of silliness to amuse myself.

I was in the process of completing the intelligence summary that would answer the BNE request. What, if anything, did we know about these spacemen, if they even existed? Why were they here? Were they hostile?

Communistic? I worked diligently away in my dingy office at 2430 E Street, the headquarters of the CIG.

My official employer was still the OSS. The military was battling the President over the establishment of the CIA, and the National Security Act was at that time under debate in Congress.

The best friend of the Central Intelligence idea in those days was General Hoyt Vandenberg, soon to become commanding general of the United States Air Force. But he wanted the CIA on his own terms, as a military toy, not as an independent civilian agency.

An old Socialist and gentleman named Norman Thomas once said, "Where the secrets start, the republic stops." We were ignorant and proud men and we did not believe that. Had he known what he was helping to create, Vandenberg would never have done it. He was a great man, and I love him still.

The Central Intelligence Group was populated from three or four different directions. OSS people. FBI people.

Military intelligence people. A prescription for chaos, but it worked fairly well. We were united in our desire to turn back communism. Well, perhaps a few of us were a little more cynical—but for the most part, we were united.

Flying disks were the merest diversion, and my intelligence estimate was expected to be the work of an afternoon. The disks had started appearing in numbers only in June, and nobody viewed the matter very seriously.

During the war a little work on the question had been done by the Army Air Force. So we already had a dossier of unsolved mysteries and unusual phenomena, collected on an ad hoc basis when Army Air Force Intelligence was assessing the "foo-fighter" phenomenon toward the end of the war. We had concluded in 1946 that the "foo-fighters" were some sort of unknown phenomenon "possibly under intelligent control."

They represented a form of chaos, the intrusion of a powerful and

provocative unknown into human affairs. I will not lie about it: The AAF was telling us that there was something going on, but they had no idea what to make of it.

I had worked through the July Fourth holiday, which I viewed as a minor sort of a tragedy.

I would have enjoyed spending my Fourth banging around the Snake Pit at the Mayflower Hotel looking for unescorted chorines, or crawling the Statler-Carlton circuit in search of a party.

Since the war I'd been uncomfortable with anything but the most casual relationships. I had nightmares about a French operative named Sophie, and about the North African I also lost, Jamshid, who was little more than a child. Often I would wake up in tears, but be unable to remember which of them had broken my sleep.

I disliked myself pretty thoroughly, because I thought I had been a less than brilliant spymaster, and I had wasted their lives.

I assumed that Admiral Hillenkoetter, who had just replaced Vandenberg as CIG director, realized these things about me. He knew that I felt useless on the French desk even though French politics was what I knew best.

As I worked on my intelligence estimate I found a peculiar pattern hidden in the old reports, and I did not like that pattern at all. If I was right about it, then the disks were far more dangerous than we had ever imagined.

So much for a few days' lark: the facts began to bother me.

What the hell was going on? Were they Russian, or some sort of Nazi or Jap secret weapon hidden until now?

They certainly appeared to be damned dangerous.

As the nights wore on, my olive-drab gooseneck lump would attract more than its share of June bugs, moths and mosquitoes, until I would be sitting there at midnight in a cloud of darting insects and billowing cigarette smoke.

It was immediately clear that there would be no purpose served in repeating the assessment that the Army Air Force's intelligence unit had already provided about the "foo-fighters." We needed to go deeper than to simply say that they might be under intelligent control.

If my suspicions were even directionally correct, we had to find out what was going on and find out fast, because we were at war. We were being invaded.

My method of gathering information was much less simple and straightforward than what the AAF had done, which was to view gun-camera

photography of "foo-fighters" and interview pilots who had seen them.

I was looking for possible earlier instances of contact that might tell us more about the motives and intentions of our strangers.

1947: We were the victors. We had telephones and radar and DC-4's, with DC-6's just beginning to appear.

We had Good Humor bars and weather balloons. We had captured German V-2 rockets. We had Albert Einstein and J. Robert Oppenheimer. We had the atomic bomb, and there were bigger bombs on the way.

We were lost in the dark and didn't know it.

The world went on, swathed in that beauty you can never quite touch, the beauty of a radio's voice drifting through the evening, of a woman waiting in a bed, the smell of bourbon at three A.M., of swimming in a dark pool, of watching children sleep. . . .

But there was also something else. There was that field near the tiny hamlet of Maricopa, New Mexico, and what was in that field.

It was there that the others waited. And not for some abstraction like mankind or the nation. They waited for each one of us individually—for me, for you, and for each trembling child.

In time each of us, every one, will face them.

In due time.

July 8, 1947

National Board of Estimate INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE ON FLYING DISK MOTIVES

Prepared by Office of Research and Analysis, Central Intelligence Group
Copy 1

of 2

Purpose

The purpose of this estimate is to assess the motives of possible nonhuman beings piloting so-called "flying disks ."

Background

From June 1947 there has been a dramatic increase in the sighting of "flying disks" in the United States, primarily in the Western states. On 24 June Mr.

Kenneth Arnold, a fire-appliance salesman, took off from Chehalis Airport in Washington State to assist in the search for a Marine Air Transport C-46 that had disappeared in the Cascade Mountains. Mr. Arnold observed nine disk-shaped objects "skipping" through the air at a relatively high

velocity. Over subsequent weeks there have been a large number of similar sightings, the best documented of which took place on July 4 . A United Airlines DC-3

passenger-type aircraft was passed by nine disks while flying over Idaho on a flight to Seattle, Washington. Both pilots and nineteen passengers observed the disks, which were described as being larger than the aircraft.

These and other sightings may possibly be related to the sightings that have been reported consistently since 1946 by B-29 crew on transarctic missions.

Photographs have been made, usually with gun cameras or ground reconnaissance cameras that suggest an intention on the part of the pilots of the devices to allow observation and/or photography to take place. Other objects are weather balloons distorted by a combination of wind and pressure effects at high altitude, flocks of birds reflecting the sun from their wings while flying in close formation, and clouds smoothed by wind.

Because of the substantial number of confirmed sightings and photographs, this estimate of the possible intentions of the craft occupants has been prepared.

Summary

It is possible that there is a relationship between a number of unsolved cases of disappearance and possible flying-disk activity, and that the flying disks could represent an extremely provocative and quite unusual phenomenon involving the permanent abduction of citizens into unknown conditions in a subterranean, undersea or outer space context. Should the occupants of the disks increase their level of activity, as it now seems apparent that they will, it is probable that the population will be terrorized, should large-scale disappearances occur and become known. The revelation that the government is helpless to act would then lead to public panic and a permanent loss of governmental credibility.

Detailed Analysis

This analysis will cover a number of cases of an unusual nature that appear to be related to the presence of strange nocturnal lights and/or flying-disk activity.

At 3 :15 on the morning of 4 October 1871, an undertaker named William Robert Loosley awoke and took a walk in his garden in the town of High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, England. Mr. Loosley recorded subsequent events in a manuscript that was locked away until 1941. The ms. has been

authenticated by British antiquarians. It probably represents an example of a "probe" from some sort of nonhuman intelligence.

When he went outside, Mr. Loosley observed a light like a star move across the sky. He then heard a clap of thunder, which, in view of the fact that the sky was clear, struck him as strange. The lighted object flew lower, stopped, then dropped in a "falling leaf" pattern into some nearby woods. This pattern of motion is also characteristic of modern flying disks.

The next morning Mr. Loosley went into those woods and observed something metallic in a pile of leaves. He soon uncovered a strange metal container approximately 18 inches long and covered with knobs.

The thing moved and, making a sound like a lock clicking, opened what appeared to be an eye behind a glass lens. Then another eye opened and emitted a beam of purple light. A third eye extended a thin rod.

At this point Loosley decided to vacate the area, and began to move away

-
running, no doubt. To his considerable consternation the machine followed, leaving a trail of three small ruts. He observed that similar ruts crisscrossed a nearby clearing.

The metal box shot a claw out into the brush and grabbed a rat, which it killed with a flash of purple light. It then deposited the carcass in a panel that opened in the side of the machine.

The device then rushed after Mr. Loosley, who ran off in a panic, only to find himself being herded toward a larger machine, which appeared from a nearby clearing. He observed a "moon-like" device in the sky which seemed to be signaling with lights. He managed to escape from the machines and return home.

The next night he observed a light come down from the sky, then rise up again and disappear into the clouds.

The fact that this account was written in 1871 greatly diminishes the likelihood of hoax. Robots of the sort described are only just now being speculated about in circles considering methods we might employ to explore planets such as Mars and Venus. It may be that Mr. Loosley observed a robot on a reconnaissance mission, and that it has now been followed by a larger expedition. If so, we can anticipate that it will be exploratory in nature as well, and that it will almost certainly center on analysis of the human species, which would have been the most interesting discovery made by the earlier reconnaissance.

It may be that human beings have since been successfully taken by strange machines.

The first seemingly related case of disappearance in U. S . history took place on 23 September 1880 near the town of Gallatin, Tennessee. At approximately three-thirty on that sunny afternoon, Mr. David Lang, a farmer, dematerialized in front of five witnesses, including his wife , his two children, his brother-in-law and a local judge.

The brother-in-law and the judge had just pulled up in a carriage. Mr. Lang moved toward them across a field, followed by his family. Without warning, he simply ceased to exist. There was no cry, no sign of distress. Mrs. Lang, distraught, rushed up and pounded the ground where he had been walking. All that afternoon and into the night the field was searched. Subsequently the county surveyor determined that there were no hidden caves or sinkholes in the area of the disappearance .

The subsequent April, seven months later, the children heard their father crying distantly underneath the field. He seemed desperate and tortured , and was begging for help. His voice gradually died away and was not heard again.

Where he had last been seen, there was a circle of withered yellow grass twenty feet in diameter.

The family moved away from the farm.

It can be surmised that Mr. Lang was not removed above ground, but rather was taken into the earth and kept alive there for some months, judging from the cries that were heard the next April. What the poor man suffered during that time, and what finally put him out of his misery, can scarcely be imagined. It may be possible that another robot machine was sent, which waylaid this man from underneath the earth, in view of the fact that the device sent in 1871

had failed to capture a human being by more straightforward means.

In 1909 a child of eleven, Oliver Thomas, disappeared upon walking out of a Christmas Eve party at his home in Wales. Other partygoers heard a scream that seemed to come from the air above the house. No trace of the child was ever found. Was this an example of ambush from above?

In 1924 two British pilots crashed in the desert not far from Baghdad. Their craft was located shortly thereafter, and footsteps were discovered leading away from it. The footsteps stopped in the sand. There were no signs of a skirmish. No trace of the pilots was ever located. In view of the fact that

there were bandits in the area where this disappearance took place, it is possible that the pilots met with foul play. However, British colonial authorities investigated the case thoroughly over a period of months, and found absolutely no trace of the men. None of their equipment or personal effects ever appeared for sale in the souks . British authorities have not yet closed the case.

In the winter of 1930 a profoundly disturbing incident took place in Canada.

Trapper Arnaud Laurent and his son observed a strange light crossing the northern sky. It appeared to be headed for the Lake Anjikuni area. The two trappers describe it as being alternately bullet-shaped and cylinder-shaped.

It can be assumed from this that it was an object of irregular configuration that was tumbling as it moved.

Another trapper named Joe Labelle had snow-shoed into the village of the Lake Anjikuni people, and been chilled to discover that the normally bustling community was silent, and not a soul was moving in the streets. Even the sled dogs, which would normally have bayed welcome, were silent.

The shanties were choked with snow, and not a chimney showed smoke.

The trapper found the village ' s kayaks tied up on the shore of the lake.

Inside the shanties the trapper found a further surprise: there were meals left hanging over fires, long grown old and moldy, apparently abandoned as they were being cooked. The men's rifles were still standing by the doors.

This really frightened the trapper, because he knew that these people would never leave their precious weapons behind.

He reported his discovery to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who investigated further. They discovered that the town's dogs had died of hunger, chained beneath a tree and covered by a snowdrift. More disturbingly, the town graveyard had been emptied. The graves were now yawning pits. Despite the frozen ground, the graves had been opened and the dead removed.

The RCMP continues the case opened to this day. A check with their records department indicated that the matter remains unsolved, and despite a search of the whole of Canada and inquiries throughout the world, not a trace of the missing twelve hundred men, women and children has ever been found.

There are many other cases of disappearance in the air and at sea, but this small group appears to be the most unusual and the most likely to be related

to an otherworldly presence.

Unfortunately we know nothing of the fate of most of these people . Only in the case of Mr. Lang can we even speculate. He was apparently left to languish in some sort of subterranean prison, presumably dying when his food and water ran out. Were the hardy Eskimos moved to some other world, to plant the human seed among the stars? Was Mr. Lang examined, tested and then abandoned to his fate? And what of the little boy, and the two pilots? Did they end up in machines similar to the one that menaced Mr. Loosley?

It is possible that we are observing the outcome of a scientific study of the human species that uses stealth to accomplish its end of obtaining human specimens.

The fact that human specimens are gathered at all indicates that the beings doing the study consider us animals. That they are not returned reveals that our lives are of limited value to the nonhuman beings, if that is what they are. That the whole process takes place only in secret indicates that the beings realize that we would resist if we knew the truth. In other words, they are doing this despite the fact that they know we are sentient creatures.

It is likely that the public will initially greet the appearance of aliens with welcome and delight. Should arbitrary abductions take place, however, the cheering will shortly become a collective scream of horror.

People will then demand protection, looking to the government—and specifically the Army Air Force—to provide it. Given our present lack of knowledge, the Air Force will in all probability fail to do so. This will result in a loss of faith on the part of the American public at least as great as that experienced by the Third Reich in the last quarter of 1944, when even the most propagandized population groups finally understood that Germany would lose the war.

Thus we will be faced with a dispirited and hostile public on the one hand, and cruel and all-powerful aliens on the other.

Conclusion

If these cases of disappearance are indeed related to the flying disks, the conclusion can be drawn that the strangers are interested in us but do not have any regard for us . This is obviously a dangerous and highly undesirable state of affairs, and steps should be taken to correct it at once.

Recommendations

1. The public should be insulated from any certain knowledge that the disks are real until such time as we have a clear understanding of the nature

and motives of their occupants, and can effectively maintain control over our own land and airspace, offering the public the protection that it mandates .

2. Every effort should be made to obtain samples of a flying disk as soon as possible, barring only hostile military action. This should be viewed by the AAF as its number one worldwide priority.

3. Because of the extremely disturbing nature of the phenomenon—and our helplessness—the whole affair should be given the highest classification rating that we possess, and should also be the subject of a rigorous propaganda campaign centered on denial. This campaign should be socially pervasive, so that it will continue to be effective even if a considerable number of disappearances take place.

4 . Under no circumstances whatsoever must the public be allowed to become aware of the probable seriousness of this situation, and of our impotence to act. The only way to be certain that they will remain ignorant is to impose the highest level of security ever achieved. If we are to maintain the impression that the government can provide essential security, this must be done at any and all cost. Should a disk land, or any debris be left behind, extreme efforts must be made to obscure the real meaning of the event. The fact that the strangers are real must not be revealed to the public until we understand their motives , and have gained effective control of their activities within the sovereign territory of the United States of America.

Chapter Four

In 1947 the most dangerous thing in the world consisted of twenty-four B-36 bombers polished to a high degree of shine. I have photographs of them standing along the flight line, back when Roswell Army Air Field had some meat on its bones.

Will Stone gave me the pictures, of course. He handled them with the excessive caution of the very old.

When he looked at them there was hunger in his eyes. "The times were dangerous," he said. And he smiled that shattering smile of his.

Our tradition of stalemate has made the use of atomic weapons seem improbable. But in July of 1947 it had been just twenty-four months since the U.S. had used such weapons against Japan, and the prospect of those good machines taking wing for Moscow was an immediate and fascinating possibility.

What the hell were those bombers doing in New Mexico, the chiefs of staff asked. Move them to Europe, give them a straight shot at the Kremlin.

One thing was certain, and that was that the 509th was ready. Every pilot had thousands of bomber hours.

Every one was a combat veteran, many from both the European and Pacific theaters. Everybody had clearances, even the cooks and janitors. The intelligence group was superb, the best air intelligence officers in the Army Air Force. Arguably theirs was the most sensitive command of its kind in the Army, and maybe in the world.

When I met some of those pilots I did not particularly like them. I doubt if there are twenty of them left; the ones I met ferried the debris found on the Ungar ranch to Eighth Air Force HQ in Fort Worth.

They would not allow me to use their names. One of them wouldn't even admit what he'd seen. "It was a crashed saucer," the other told me.

Their fear was remarkable. Later, I would find out the extraordinary reason that the cover-up has been so effective, the reason that so many people are so afraid to reveal what they know.

I must not promote the notion that a bunch of brainless military oafs were responsible for what went wrong.

They were good men, all of them.

Perhaps their situation was simply a hopeless one. Maybe Will Stone and his generation were bound to fail.

When he speaks of those days Will actually becomes queasy, so urgent is his wish to undo basic mistakes

. . . and yet there is something so poignant and so profoundly human about why they failed.

July 8, 1947, was a hot, still afternoon over most of the country. It got up to a hundred and two in Roswell, up to eighty-six in Washington. While Will worked on his Flying Disk Estimate in his stifling hole, the Maricopa sheriffs office got into contact with the Roswell AAF.

At Roswell Army Air Field the Intelligence staff killed time in its office on the base.

Major Donald Gray was reading Plato's *Ion*, to the amusement of the soldiers in his command. Lieutenant Peter Hesseltine was delighted by Gray's taste for the classics. For his birthday he'd given the major a copy of *Be Glad You're Neurotic*. Hesseltine had meant it as a commentary on Gray's literary obsession, but the major had been grateful. He'd obviously enjoyed the book, quoting from it at length. The lieutenant came to feel he'd wasted his two dollars.

He wanted to needle the major about the Plato, but he was no longer sure quite how to do it.

"You've got sex on the brain," he said by way of experiment.

"Yep."

"I'll bet that book's full of it."

"Nope. There's a bit of sex in Plato. Not a lot. You might be interested in it though. Your kind of thing." "All sex is my kind of thing, Major." Gray put the book down and looked at Hesseltine with an innocence that the younger man had come to fear. "Then the fact that it concerns the ethics of men becoming involved with boys won't put you off." He returned to his book.

Hesseltine hadn't been expecting this and was silenced by it.

An airman came into their office with a message. Far away in Washington a completely unsuspecting Wilfred Stone was in that moment snared in a thin and impregnable web. He scribbled away at his desk, filling sheets of legal paper that I have held in my hands. His original draft of the first "disk estimate" is now brittle and edged with rot. Will's hand is firm, full of young and very American confidence.

While Will wrote, events in Roswell continued to unfold. "A rancher

reports debris in his pasture," the airman said aloud.

"Beer bottles? Condoms?" asked Hesseltine. He was drinking a Coke, and had a technical manual open on his desk before him. He had been memorizing the ranges of various Russian radars, and before the Plato episode had been in a self-congratulatory mood. The massive Soviet installations had ridiculously poor abilities, ranges like eight and ten and twenty miles.

Try two hundred miles. And in a few years, five hundred.

Major Gray did not answer Hesseltine directly. The major's sense of humor ran to formal jokes, which he would tell to generals' wives. Later, if they remembered him, they might say to their husbands, "Who was that young officer who told the joke about the pot roast?" And their husbands would laugh the sad, interior laugh of generals.

"The ranch is a hundred and twenty miles northwest of Roswell."

Hesseltine stood up and went to a large, black shade that covered something on one wall of the room. On this shade were stenciled the words, secret. authorized personnel only.

"Lock us down, please, Winters," he said to their clerk-typist who was sitting at a typewriter pecking out an order in triplicate for three more reams of onionskin.

PFC Winters got up and pulled a similar shade down on the door to the office, and locked that door. Then he went to each of the three windows and pulled a more ordinary brown shade. The room was now dim and yellow.

"Secure, sir," Winters said. He turned on the overhead lights, which came alive with a pale, fluorescent flutter.

Hesseltine raised the large shade. It revealed a wall map of New Mexico. There were various colored pins in this map, representing the presence of radar installations and air bases. A large section marked off by black dotted lines was labeled, "Proving Grounds." This area, which would become the White Sands Missile Range, was where the captured German V-2 rockets were being tested.

Hesseltine pulled down a parallel ruler that was attached to the map and maneuvered it until one side was in the middle of the dot that represented Roswell.

"A hundred and twenty miles north-northwest? That isn't anywhere. No installations nearby."

"What about a stray from the proving ground?" There was always a

possibility that a rocket had gone off course.

"No problems since last month. And that baby got found two weeks ago."

Gray now walked over to the map. "Private aircraft?" "It's a restricted flyover area. There would have been an intrusion alert."

Gray stared at the map. "That's flat, miserable country. What does the man run?"

Hesseltine, from a suburb of Philadelphia, hadn't the least idea what ranchers raised in godforsaken deserts.

"Dunno," he said, "maybe lizards."

"There wouldn't be any money in that."

"Why, sure there would," Hesseltine said eagerly, realizing that Gray had taken his absurd remark at face value. "Plenty of money. Lizardskin wallets."

"It's not very likely, Hesseltine."

"A stray private flier was forced down in a storm. It's a matter for the civilian authorities," Hesseltine said. He covered the map. "Raise the blinds, Winters."

"Yes, sir."

"Not yet, Mr. Winters," Gray said. He put his finger on the map. "The flier was well within restricted airspace when he was forced down. We're required to examine the wreckage." He picked up a telephone and called the sheriff's office in Maricopa. "This is Major Gray at Roswell." "Yeah?"

"I just read your report on the plane that went down on the Ungar place."

"He came in this morning. Says it's a big mess. A bunch of tinfoil that you can't tear. I guess you guys know all about it."

"We'd like to take a look at the wreckage. Can you give us driving instructions?"

"Bob can do that himself. He's down in Roswell. You'll find him at Wooten's on North Main."

"I know the place."

"You get your directions from Bob. We haven't been out there. No call for us to go, not if you guys are going.

It's way the hell out in the middle of nothin', where that plane went down."

Gray hung up the phone. "Looks like this could be an all-nighter. We gotta go find the rancher. He's apparently buying ranching paraphernalia at Wooten's."

Only Major Gray would use a word like that in ordinary conversation.

Paraphernalia.

"You mean reins and scabbards and whatnot?"

"I guess. We'd better get going if we expect to get out there before dark."

Hesseltine glanced at his watch. It was past three. When Gray got rolling, he was perfectly capable of continuing all night if the matter seemed important enough to him. "Why not first thing in the morning,"

Hesseltine asked briskly.

As he had feared, Gray had other ideas. "I think that we should go out there immediately, Lieutenant. And take Walters of CIC."

There was no point in arguing. Hesseltine called Counterintelligence. Walters wisely decided to come in his own Jeep.

Hesseltine would have liked to take a Jeep, too, but he knew that Gray preferred his staff car. Hesseltine kind of enjoyed getting in Jeeps and putting on his dark glasses and sitting with his foot up on the dash like a pilot being ferried out to the flight line. He had washed out of pilot training due to his tendency to become sick during maneuvers such as taking off, landing, and flying through smooth, clear air.

Hesseltine was convinced that he was second-rate. As far as he was concerned every officer in the Army Air Force who was not a flight officer had failed.

That Gray did not share his feelings was incomprehensible to Hesseltine. The best men flew fighters, as Gray himself had during the war. Second-best were on bombers and other aircraft. The rest were nowhere.

He was so humiliated by his failure that he would obsessively deadhead on bombers, taking the tail-gunner position. Nobody ever knew that his flight bag contained dozens of neatly folded canvas airsickness containers . . . nobody but Will Stone, who must at some time have ferreted it out of him. It is obvious from reading his meticulous notes and diaries that Will was obsessed with details like that, almost as if they might somehow provide the tiny, critical bit of information that would explain why things went so wrong.

Gray had once caused Hesseltine to run to the can with his cheeks puffed out by simply saying the word

"tailspin" and whirling him around a couple of times in his chair.

Gray was one of those men who viewed such miseries as the will of God. "The Almighty made you quick to get an upset stomach," he had said earnestly as Hesseltine came staggering back from the men's room.

Gray was also the man who had floored a viciously drunk captain from

another bomber wing with a single, appalling left uppercut that had lifted this two-hundred-pound monster off the floor of the Lackland Army Air Force Base Officer's Club in Texas.

It was one of many reasons that Hesseltine resented Gray, and found it interesting to needle him. Now that there was no war to fight, the fact that the mild and methodical Gray could sometimes be enraged was about the most fascinating thing left in Hesseltine's life.

As I write, I try to imagine those two men as they were then. Strength. Promise. A little arrogance, perhaps.

Now they are both dead, Gray after a long and distinguished career.

Six months after the Roswell incident Pete Hesseltine began to hit the bottle so hard that he became pretty much of a professional at it. He died alone in a walkup in Sacramento, California, in September of 1955. He was not yet forty years old.

But on this day they were both young and at least somewhat happy, two victorious soldiers looking forward to glowing careers in the finest military organization in the world.

They went down the long, plywood corridor that led from their office to the front of the building and out into the blazing parking lot. As they crossed it soft tar stuck to the bottoms of their shoes. Gray seemed almost to prance as he moved along. He was a spit-and-polish dresser.

"Gonna have to stay up half the night polishing the bottoms of our goddamn shoes," Hesseltine said.

"Why polish the bottoms of our shoes?"

"You can't eat off floors that have tar on them."

"Is that an example of your wit?"

"Maybe it's wit. Or maybe I'm just crazy."

"I think the former." Gray stepped into an especially soft spot and lifted his right foot out with a loud smack.

The concrete apron of the runway started just the other side of a chain-link fence. On it were six jeeps lined up in a neat row, waiting to ferry crew to the planes, which stood in the distance shimmering with heat. There were no flights planned for this afternoon, and the line was quiet.

Hesseltine fitted his aviation glasses to his face and looked longingly toward the rows of planes. Slowly he walked toward the car. In his mind he was, no doubt, running down a checklist, starting motors.

The car was hot to touch, hotter to sit in. With a long sigh he started it and

nosed it out of the lot.

Walters's Jeep pulled in behind them, driven by a grim-faced PFC Winters, who had been dragooned into the job.

Once they were on the two-lane blacktop that led over to Roswell, Hesseltine lit a cigarette and tuned in a radio station. A show called Sundown Roundup was on, and they listened in silence. He knew that Gray didn't particularly like country music, and also that he was too polite to twist the dial if Hesseltine appeared to be enjoying himself. Hesseltine snapped his fingers in time to the thin caterwauling of a lonesome cowboy.

He hated the goddamn West. He would gladly have given an entire paycheck for a hoagie.

They drove through the town, past the restaurants, the bars, the general stores, the offices of the Daily Record. Hesseltine glanced back with longing as they left the last of the bars behind. He was a man for a tall, cool one. He had a possibility of a date tonight, and he was damned if he was going to waste time out on some godforsaken ranch with Gray and Walters when he could be dancing with a WAAF at the Nixon Bar.

He nosed the Chevy wagon to the sidewalk in front of Wooten's. The Jeep came in beside them. Gray got out of the wagon and trotted into the store.

Hesseltine sat staring after him. Soon Walters came up to the car and leaned his head in. "Whaddaya think?"

"Wild goose chase. Some private plane went down in a storm."

"Funny place for a private plane to be. Middle of nowhere." "Flying Albuquerque-Roswell. Blown off course a few miles. Makes perfect sense."

Walters regarded him, nodding slowly. Compared to Walters, Gray was a real card. "Could be Russian," he said in dark tones. "Up from Mexico, or even from the coast. A recce plane launched from a sub. After a look at the 509th." "Didn't make it."

"How do we know? Maybe it had a good look and radioed everything back to the sub."

It struck Hesseltine as damned unlikely and he said so. "Well, Lieutenant, you may be right. But look at the stakes. Stalin wants, more than anything else in the world, to know exactly where the 509th is located, and its immediate orders." "But he can't get here. Surely not, Mr. Walters." "That isn't a CIC problem. You S-2s are supposed to be savvy in that department."

Major Gray came out of the store. "That's a good man, that Bob Ungar. I

like men like him. Honest as the day is long. Friendly as hell." He held up a hand-drawn map. "He can't lead us out, he's got too much to do here in town. But he gave me very explicit instructions to his house. His wife and kids are there."

The tiny convoy started up again. A thought crossed Hesselstine's mind. "What kind of kids?"

"Daughter, he mentioned. Son he has with him." "Daughter?"

"A kid, Lieutenant. Twelve years old."

Hesselstine got quiet.

Beyond the clutch of Mexican shacks that ended the town Hesselstine picked up speed. Unable to stand any more of the whining music he spun the dial. A bad dance band pounded away at "Begin the Beguine." Father Coughlin screamed over waves of static. A woman explained that certain cactuses were edible. Somebody talked about how the DuBarry Success Course could bring more dates, more fun. You followed at home the same methods used at the Richard Hudnut Salon in New York.

Hesselstine spoke longingly about a girl in a pale gray suit tapping along in heels. He wanted that sweet and anonymous image with an ache that made him fall silent.

"They take the money of innocent kids," Gray intoned. "Nobody around here is ever going to look like she got within fifty miles of Richard Hudnut."

"Give me one of those Fifth Avenue dames. I'd take her up to the Rainbow Room and dance her until she dropped. These New Mexico girls have sand between their teeth."

"I wouldn't know. Jennine—"

"Jennine, I dream of Lilac Time—' "

"Please, Lieutenant."

"I thought it was your song. You and Jennine."

"The way you sing it, it's nobody's song."

They swept off the blacktop onto a dirt road. The Jeep dropped way back to avoid their dust cloud.

They drove at a steady forty-five miles an hour, for three hot and dismal hours. When they stopped the shadows were long and the katydids were already singing.

They were in Maricopa, a town that consisted of ten houses strung along the roadside, a store, a bar and a gas station.

Everybody got down from the vehicles. Walters stretched his back, took

off his sunglasses and began cleaning them with his handkerchief. His PFC driver whapped at his own uniform, bringing up clouds of dust.

"I'll bet that bar is full of cold beer," Hesselstine said. Nobody acknowledged him, but I have no doubt that PFC

Winter's eyes rolled.

"I'll go in and confirm these instructions," Gray announced. Walters went with him.

"You want a beer, Private?"

"Yes, sir."

"Our commanding officer will fail to realize this."

"Yes, sir."

"End of story, Private."

"Yes, sir."

Gray and Walters came hurrying back like men about to miss a train. "The road is about half a mile back toward Roswell," Gray said. "Then another thirty miles to the man's house. It's just a track."

It was far worse than that. Hesselstine waited for the Chevy to break an axle.

Amazingly, it didn't happen. This may have been because of the number of gates they had to open and close was so great that they never managed to get past twenty before they had to slow down again.

"The cattleguard hasn't been invented yet in New Mexico."

"Apparently not, Lieutenant."

"This is gate number sixteen."

"I haven't been counting."

Soon they arrived at a miserable hovel that was distinguished only by a tiny flower garden in the front yard.

The garden had sunflowers in it, and a few fat little cactuses with yellow flowers on them. Two kids, shy and afraid, cowered by the side of the house.

"Look out," Hesselstine muttered to Gray. "They might be commie dwarfs disguised as scared kids."

To Hesselstine's surprise, Gray stomped his foot against the floorboard of the car. He glared a moment at his junior officer.

"Close your window, Lieutenant," he snapped as he wound up his own. "Breaches of security are always a serious business, especially in a sensitive area like Roswell. For all we know, those kids are Commies and ready to report our least move to their cell leader. The fact that we're here on this

ranch could be common knowledge in Moscow inside of an hour!"

Hesseltine was so taken aback by this outburst that he guffawed before he could stop himself. Gray glared at him. "You've got to take this seriously, Hesseltine."

"I'm sorry, sir. It's just that I've blown a date, and—"

"I understand perfectly. But we have to do this. And do it right."

"I agree, sir."

The porch had an old couch on it that was covered with a piece of canvas. The couch was sprung and there were places where animals had torn at the stuffing.

Gray was not a large man, but he felt huge in this little adobe-brick house. He knocked, the sound echoing flatly in the dark room beyond the rusty screen door.

Soon a shadow appeared moving forward from the back of the house, a woman gliding swiftly and crookedly along. She appeared behind the door, hesitant, her face clouding at the sight of the uniforms. She had a cigarette between her lips, which she took into her fingers. "Can I help you?" she asked, her voice soft.

Gray felt pity for her until he saw the flashing strength in her eyes. As he had many times before, he thought now that he did not understand these tough New Mexico people. "I'm Major Gray of the Roswell Army Air Force. This is Lieutenant Hesseltine and Mr. Walters." He did not introduce PFC Winters. The soldier, in any case, was lingering out by the Jeep.

"Come on in," Ellie replied, opening the door. The two children, who had been standing on the steps, now crowded past to be with their mother. "Go back outside, now," she said, "you let these men be. They're important Army men and they don't need kids to bother them." She herded them toward the back of the house. "They've never seen Army men so close," she added. As she spoke she smiled, and Gray was surprised without understanding why at how her smile made him feel.

For all his self-assurance Gray was an uneasy and open-hearted child of America. Her poverty spoke to him of his childhood seeing Okies on the road and hoboes in the back alley behind the white bungalow where he ate meals of collard and steak and cornbread. He had bounced along in the backseat of a clean little Essex, and heard his father say things like, "God has blessed us among the cursed millions, and we must never forget to thank Him."

One afternoon his father sat beneath the blooming wisteria in the

backyard with tears streaming down his face. After that things had slowly gotten harder and harder. The Essex went, the refrigerator became an ice box again, the radio broke and was not repaired, and the leaves of autumn rolled down the street.

But there were also pennants won and comic books read and Baby Ruths eaten, and the sonorous majesty of Latin Club declamation contests. "In partem gloriae venio," and all the rest of it, Virgil and Cicero and the compressed fury of Seneca's plays.

The Grays had been a raft of neat, diminished pride in the shabby Midwestern ocean. These people were even worse off, and that scared him and made him hate them a little, and also feel tender toward them. Two generations ago most of the New Mexico settlers had set off westward from the ruins of Virginia, leaving their silk collars and magnolia evenings forever behind. They had slipped from grace and tumbled down into poverty's labyrinth of musty, rugless rooms and chipped white bowls on the dinner table.

"My husband's out back. I'll get him to come up." She left the living room, and in a moment her voice came again, low and hard and shockingly loud, "The Air Force is here!"

Hesseltine fidgeted with a bit of frayed cloth on the arm of the easy chair in which he was sitting. Gray stood nervously contemplating the large picture of Christ on the cross that hung over the mantel of the ancient, blackened fireplace. On the mantel there was also a picture of a lean, young man and a girl beside him.

"Would you like coffee," the woman said in her murmuring, prayerful way. Gray imagined the family before its picture of Jesus, praying against their frayed lives and the dry, hot desert where they made their living. He could not have been more wrong, of course. The Jesus was there for the colors, which Ellie thought matched the chair. And it was good for the kids.

Although all three men had declined coffee, the woman was making it anyway when her husband came banging into the house. He loomed through to the living room like a great caricature of Abraham Lincoln, stooping under the door and crossing directly to Gray. Walters and Hesseltine jumped to their feet.

"How in the world did you beat us," Gray asked.

"There's a road in that passes north of Arabela. Cuts off fifty miles."

"Oh."

"I thought I told you about it."

"We'd better get out to the crash."

"We can't."

"Can't?"

"It'll be dark before we get there. No use goin' until mornin'."

Gray could see by the looks on Hesseltine's and Walters's faces that they were just as appalled as he was.

"We got you each a plate of beans," the rancher said affably. "And coffee."

Gray managed to smile. Walters was impassive. Hesseltine looked like he was thinking about going AWOL.

Winters had come to the door and stood there hesitantly. "Bring in that half of bourbon," Walters growled.

The PFC produced a well-sucked half-pint of Old Granddad, which Walters handed to each man in turn.

Gray drank a swallow to be sociable. Hesseltine, he noticed, knocked back a couple of long pulls.

"That hit the spot," the lieutenant said. "Pardon me for drowning my sorrows. As of fifteen minutes from now I'm standing up the best-looking WAAF captain in Roswell."

"You better hope she doesn't put you on report."

"I like your sense of humor, Major Gray."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

The rancher's wife called them into the kitchen, where they hulked around the table. When Gray saw how sparse the meals were, he knew that the woman had stretched four helpings of beans to eight. Even so, each plate had a little scrap of fat back on it along with the beans, and the coffee smelled rich and good.

They sat down to the crowded table. "This is some of that stuff," the rancher said. He put a couple of small pieces of tinfoil on the table.

Gray felt a flush of anger: he recognized it as foil from a burst weather balloon. He picked up the scrap of material. "Did you see the plane?"

"Lights. Heard the explosion. Then the next night y'all's blimp came over with the searchlights, but it missed the wreckage."

Gray frowned. "Blimp?"

"Sure. That big gray blimp."

Walters looked at Gray, took the foil from him. He held the stuff in his

hand, staring down at it. Abruptly he crushed the foil to a tiny ball, then put it on the table.

To Gray's amazement, it sprang back to its original shape.

"You can't burn it or tear it," the rancher said as he spooned up the last of his beans. "I don't wonder, you couldn't put a bullet through it, either."

Gray met Walters's eyes. The CIC man's face was literally drained of color. "Let's go out to the Jeep," he said evenly. "Get those maps."

Outside, it was immediately obvious that Walters wasn't looking for any maps. "What the hell is going on here," he asked.

"I don't know."

"What is that stuff?"

"Frank, I've never seen anything like it before in my life."

"And a blimp!"

"Experimental aircraft, maybe."

"Something you wouldn't know about?"

Gray didn't like to think that experimental aircraft would be tested in the squadron area without his knowledge, but it was possible. "Could be," he answered.

"I don't like it. There isn't a hangar in New Mexico that can hold a blimp."

"Texas, then. Blimps can fly long range."

"Real long range. Like from Russia. If you ask me, this could be some kind of new goldbeater's skin.

Incredibly tough. Suitable for a long-range spy blimp, or even a bomber."

Both men knew what a bomber could do to the 509th if it struck while there were atomic devices on the flight line.

"Hiroshima'd look like a picnic," Gray said. He tried to imagine the scope of the disaster, but his mind rejected it.

"Two blimps. One of them blows up in a thunderstorm. The other one comes searching for the remains."

"They have a hell of a big radar signature." "They can also fly low and slow, Don."

"Low and slow all the way from Russia. Damn, that's scary."

They went back inside to find that the rancher and his family were already going to bed.

As he passed the couple's bedroom door, Gray glimpsed an old iron bed with yellow sheets and a dresser with a half-empty bottle of Trushay hand cream on top. He felt a pang of loneliness; Jennine used Trushay.

He wished that he'd called her before he came out here. Suddenly he was facing Russians in the night, and he was uneasy.

"I think we'd better hang watches," he said when the four soldiers were alone together in the living room.

"I agree," Walters said.

"What're we worried about, coyotes?" Hesseltine sounded disgusted.

Gray explained to him. "Russians. This stuff is most probably some kind of goldbeater's skin, used to cover a blimp. The rancher saw another blimp last night. Long-range Russian blimps after the 509th."

That stopped even Hesseltine. The PFC's eyes were wide.

"I'm armed," Walters said. He produced a police special from under his jacket. "The man on watch carries it in his belt."

"Is it a regulation weapon?" Gray asked. "I didn't think civilians could carry weapons on base."

"Consider me a cop. That's what counterintelligence is, kid. Police work."

Gray didn't know Walters all that well, but he'd always had a lot of respect for the man. His background as a police detective combined with his toughness and brains made him one of the best counterintelligence men that Gray had ever met. With communist fifth columnists, fellow travelers and spies said to be everywhere, good men were needed to protect the 509th.

He lay on his back with a couch cushion for a pillow. First PFC Winters went on watch, then Hesseltine.

Gray had decided that the postmidnight hours were the most dangerous, and assigned them to himself and Walters. There would be four two-hour watches from nine P.M., then reveille along with the rancher, who ordinarily got up at five.

He must have slept a little, because Hesseltine's place was empty and the PFC was snoring peacefully when he opened his eyes again. Walters had been sawing Z's from the second they'd snuffed the oil lamp. Gray lit a cigarette.

He could easily imagine Russians sneaking around out here. He thought of the goldbeater's skin. How the hell had they done it? He'd never seen anything even remotely like it. Incredibly tough. Incredibly light.

Suddenly Hesseltine was whispering in his ear. "Your turn, boss."

Gray looked at his radium-dial watch. "You've got it, Mr. Hesseltine." He stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray he'd brought down to the floor. "Any sign of anything?"

"It's been quiet, except for the porcupines, badgers, ferrets, owls, coons and coyotes. Not to mention the things that scream."

There was nothing screaming now. As a matter of fact it was absolutely quiet, absolutely dark and about as lonely a place as Gray had ever been in. The Milky Way came right down to both horizons. Even a tiny constellation like Lyra stood out clearly. The only way you could tell where the land started was that there were no stars there.

Gray wished he had another cigarette, but you didn't carry lights on watch. He stood in front of the house beside the bulk of his staff car. It would have been nice to see if he could pick up some dance music, but he supposed that all the radio stations would be shut down by now.

One-fifteen. As his eyes slowly adjusted to the dark he took a walk around the house. He moved up toward the barn, which was small and ramshackle. There was a horse snorting inside, and he could hear sheep bleating somewhere off in the distance. There were rustles and shuffling sounds and occasional low growls in the brush.

Once he was startled to see what he thought might have been a glow on the horizon, but it disappeared and he didn't see it again.

An hour passed.

Then he heard a noise unlike any he had heard before. It cut through him like a white-hot blade.

Walters and the rancher and Hesseltine came pouring out the kitchen door. PFC Winters stood behind them.

"What the hell was it," Walters breathed.

"Damned if I know," Gray said. The scream was still echoing in his head. "What about it, Mr. Ungar?"

The rancher was standing very still, staring into the black night. "I heard it right after the crash. I lived here all my life, and I never heard anything like it before."

Gray's fingers closed around the piece of foil in his pocket. In his mind there had formed a question, but he did not yet know how to put it into words.

"Goddamn," Hesseltine said softly.

The rancher backed up against his screen door.

From inside the house a child keened, and Mrs. Ungar offered comfort in a shaking voice.

Ungar whispered, "The other night when I heard it, I thought nothing could sound like that but the devil."

"It's real," Walters said. "We all heard it."

They were silent, then, and so was the night.

Chapter Five

In part I have written this in an attempt to understand why Will Stone and the others did what they did. Why did they choose to decide that these others were dangerous?

One of the things that I originally understood the least was the mind of Will Stone and by extension all the other Will Stones that choke the bureaucracies of the world.

I can read his diaries, listen to him talk, read assessments of him, sit across from him and watch him slowly choking on his cancer, and never actually see him. The moment I leave him, it is as if he has never existed.

The curse of living with too many secrets is that a man's own meaning also becomes a secret. He loses himself in the machinery of his knowledge.

I keep thinking that, if only I understood exactly what was so strangely unformed about the man I would also know why he failed so dismally to grasp the sublime aim of the others. Somehow he translated their offer of help into a deadly challenge.

I suppose it was an offer of help. Surely it must have been. What would happen to us, I wonder, if we were attacked by an army whose weapons were so subtle that we could not understand even that we were at war?

I am fascinated by the contrast between Stone and Bob Ungar. The one is alive and yet more indistinct than a shadow. The other—long dead—is vivid with meaning and sense and even grace.

I can imagine the morning that he took the military party to the crash site. Major Gray's report reveals nothing of the emotions, of the sinew and color of the experience. But I can imagine.

Dawn at the Ungar ranch would be marked by quiet kitchen bustle and the smell of strong coffee. Judging from the uneasiness he reports feeling, Don Gray would have been sleeping fitfully.

Perhaps the clink of dishes made him open his eyes. It was still pitch dark, but the entire Ungar family was already at breakfast. Walters was with them, slopping down coffee and chewing on a big piece of bread.

Gray woke up the others, tucked in his shirt and went to the table. The meal consisted of coffee and bread spread with a thin coating of grape jelly. He thought of steak and eggs at the officer's club. Roswell AAF was a good

life. Challenging to be an intelligence officer in a place where it really mattered. A good outfit.

Excellent facilities.

Coffee and bread. Not even a glass of water to wash it down, let alone milk or juice. They couldn't have drunk the water even if it had been offered. These people used cisterns. The Air Force warned you to drink only from approved water supplies as soon as you set foot on base. And stay away from animals that might have fleas: New Mexico had fifty to a hundred cases of bubonic plague a year. Not to mention astronomical polio statistics and a substantial amount of TB in the Mexican population.

Don was just as glad that the coffee was well boiled.

Ungar wiped his mouth against the back of his hand. "Let's get on out there. I've got a lotta other stuff to do today."

He pulled his ancient Jeep up to the house. His daughter and son got in with him. The four soldiers rode in Walters's much newer Jeep. Gray and Hesseltine sat in the back, deciding that it was best to leave the staff car behind.

They bounced over the desolate land for about half an hour. Gray could see a mountain ahead, but it never seemed to get any closer. The land undulated in great, shallow waves. Spanish daggers and chorro cactus dragged along the sides of the Jeep. Tough clumps of dry grass waved in the morning breeze. Out where the land was flat tumbleweeds bounded along.

They came to the top of a rise and he saw the crash site. His practiced eye told him at once that something had blown up as it was traveling in a westerly direction. Debris had funned out from a point about a hundred yards below the base of a hill. The wreckage covered an area about a quarter of a mile long. They stopped the Jeeps. "No large debris," Hesseltine said immediately.

"What was it?" Walters asked.

Gray spoke. "The lack of large debris does suggest a balloon or some such thing."

The rancher walked into the mess. "I want y'all to take a look at something." He pointed at the ground.

"Those things."

Gray saw some small balsa beams, some shaped like the letter I and others like a T. He picked one up. It was marked by violet hieroglyphics.

"Cyrillic?" Hesseltine asked.

"No," Walters said as he examined it.

"Jap?"

Gray looked at the writing. It was vaguely reminiscent of Egyptian, but there were no familiar animal shapes.

"I've never seen anything like it before."

The little girl held up a piece of what seemed to Gray to be parchment. There were rows of little squiggles on it. They were pink and purple, and Gray couldn't make anything out of them at all.

"Maybe they're numbers," Hesselstine said. "The way they're in columns like that."

The little girl held another piece of the parchment up to the sun, the disk of which had just cleared the horizon. "You can see yellow flowers inside. Its real pretty."

The torn pieces of parchment were abundant, and all four soldiers picked them up and held them to the sun.

"Cornflowers," Gray said.

Walters grunted. "Primroses. Cornflowers are blue."

"You can't burn it, bend it, tear it or nothin'," the rancher said. "Just like the tinfoil."

PFC Winters spoke. "What I think you all have here," he said in his drawl, "is the pieces of one of them flying disks like folks've been seeing."

Nobody replied. Suddenly Walters grabbed a large piece of foil and begun struggling furiously with it. He pulled it, ripped at it, stood on it and tried to stretch it. Nothing.

Finally he took out his pistol. "Okay, folks, we'll see just how strong this stuff really is." He laid the three-foot-square piece of material out on the ground and fired into it.

There was a blast from the gun, and the foil swarmed into the ground behind the bullet. "That tore it," the PFC

said. He and Walters pulled it out of the ground.

The flattened bullet was lying in the middle of the foil, which was completely unmarred.

"You sure that's not Cyrillic on that paper," Walters asked again.

The bullet just lay there, flattened. The foil shone in the sun. Gray took out his Old Golds and with shaking hands pulled the foil from around the few cigarettes that remained in the pack. He took a piece of the strange metal in one hand and the cigarette wrapping in the other.

The metal was thinner by a considerable margin. He was a methodical man, and not quick to make decisions. He carefully returned the cigarette wrapping to the pack and put his cigarettes in his pocket. He then picked up a piece of the parchment and attempted to burn it with his lighter. It would not burn.

"Nothin' burns," the rancher said. "And the wood doesn't break."

Walters grabbed a piece of the wood. It bent like rubber. No matter how he twisted it around he could not make it snap. Finally he threw it to the ground. "What the hell is it?"

Gray looked at the PFC. "I think you're absolutely right, soldier. I think what we have here is the remains of an exploded flying disk."

"Oh, Lord," Walters said. "What are they doing here? What are they up to?"

"Maybe just looking around," Hesseltine replied.

"By dark of night? In secret? I hardly think that's all they're doing." Walters looked grim. He had taken his pistol from his shoulder holster and stuck it in his belt.

"We don't know what they're doing," Gray said. There was annoyance in his voice. He didn't like loose speculation. They weren't equipped even to think about things like intent. "What we need to do is gather up as much of this stuff as we can, and get it back to the field pronto." "We ought to recce the whole site,"

Hesseltine said. The four of them walked it, making rough measurements and kicking under the sheets of foil, the wooden beams, the parchment, looking for any large objects.

It took them about an hour to examine the area and fill the jeeps with as much debris as they could conveniently carry.

When they returned to the house they transferred some of the material to the rear of Gray's wagon. Then they headed back to the field. The rest of the stuff remained with Walters. Don Gray was now excited, even elated.

He had forgotten the cries in the night, and was now thinking only of the incredible thing they had found. It was one of the most momentous discoveries in history, and he had made it. Just absolutely incredible. "We are going to have a hell of a lot of work to do on this," he said to Hesseltine.

"What work? This is gonna be Eighth Air Force business. Pentagon business. We've done our work. You'll see. The brass is gonna be all over this thing." "Maybe and maybe not."

I believe that this was the moment that Donald Gray became a hero. To his own considerable surprise, he found that he had formed a powerful conviction about this. It was not going to be a military secret.

"What about the threat to the 509th? I mean, why are they out here in this godforsaken place, anyway? Could be because it's close to the squadron." Hesselstine's hands gripped the wheel. "The A-bomb is a big thing.

Maybe even big enough to be of concern to people on other planets." Now that he had seen the danger, his sense of duty was finally aroused.

After that they were both silent for a long time, trying to absorb the import of his statement. Soon Hesselstine turned on the radio and picked up the ten A.M. news out of Albuquerque. Then there was a soap opera, Young Doctor Malone. Gray listened without interest to the complications of the doctor's life. It was nearly one when they finally reached the outskirts of Roswell. "Let's stop at my house for lunch," Gray said. "I want my son to see this stuff."

"You sure about that?"

"I'm certain."

"It's gonna be classified."

"Well, it's not classified now, and I want my boy to see it and hold it in his hands. It'll be something to tell his grandchildren."

"He's twelve. Say he has grandchildren when he's fifty. That'll be, let's see, nineteen-eighty-five. By then everybody will know all about this. There'll probably be aliens living down the block. And the fact that he saw a few pieces of a wrecked disk in 1947 won't amount to a hill of beans."

"Well, Jennine still makes a better ham sandwich than you'll find in the officer's club."

"I could use a whole ham. A couple of hams. Those poor devils live on beans and bread."

"And I've got a six-pack of White Label beer."

"Trommers? Where the hell did you get that?"

"Three hundred ninetieth Air Service at your service. Some of the guys brought it back on a run from D.C."

"Does Jennine know how to make a hoagie?"

"Which is?"

"It's real food from Philly."

They dumped some of the stuff on the kitchen table. Gray called Don Jr., who was in his room struggling with a balsa model of a Zero.

Don Jr. is now a doctor living in Southern California. His office bustles with patients; he is a successful man and honored in his community.

I asked him to please tell me if this really happened. He looked me square in the eye and said, "Mr. Duke, it did." And he proceeded to relate the story of how his father had showed him the debris.

"Identify it," the major had told his son.

The boy looked at it, touched it. "Private plane?"

"See the balsa parts."

"Is that Egyptian writing?"

"Nope."

"What is it, then, Dad?"

Jennine took out a box of Cut-Rite and compared the wax paper to the parchment. "It certainly isn't normal wax paper," she said.

"Donnie, I'll give you a dime if you guess correctly. The debris comes from something that crashed up near Maricopa."

"Not a balloon, not a plane." He looked at his father, smiled. "Flying disk?"

"Smart," Hesselstine said.

"Don't be silly, Don," his mother told him. "Your dad wants you to learn these things."

"Jennine, the boy has just won a dime. He's exactly right. Our opinion is that this material came from a flying disk like the ones they've been reporting in the papers."

Donnie was awed, and the awe remains with him to this day. Gingerly, he touched some of the wooden beams. He looked at his dad. "What happened to the pilot?"

Don's mind went back to that wild, awful howling. "There wasn't a sign of a pilot."

He thought of the poor rancher with his wife and kids. Tonight and every night, they would be out there alone with whatever had done that howling.

He bit into the sandwich that Jennine had made for him, and ate with the gusto of the survivor.

Chapter Six

The Chronicle of Wilfred Stone

It is curious that distant memories become so vivid in old age. I first noticed this perhaps ten years ago; I remember my father commenting on it when he was in his seventies. When I was fifty my recollections of early childhood were little more than shadows. Now I can remember the lace collar I wore, and how Momma tied it behind my neck, and the smell of the lucifers they used to light the gas.

I remember other things too, oh, I certainly do. They are most appalling things, and I don't know how to cope with them.

Are they real, or is my mind beginning to mix memory and imagination?

That would be fatal to understanding, of course, and I cannot know if it has happened.

However, I do know that what I am about to describe has been done to many children of this generation. The Children's Circles that the others formed in the fifties and sixties were part of this phenomenon.

I should know all about that: I personally agreed to let them enter the lives of fifty of those children. They submitted a list.

I did not allow myself to suspect that they would use my agreement as an excuse to affect thousands more.

But they did, of course. I told myself, only fifty. A small price.

Were they doing it as far back as 1916, and did they do it to me? The question makes me sorrow and makes me ache. It is so important to my understanding of what has happened to me—and to us all—and so impenetrable.

All I can do is focus myself on those days, and repeat the recollections that age has returned to the forefront of my mind.

Once again it is early July, but this is the year 1916 and the location is Westchester County.

This is not the suburban glut of today, but another place entirely, a land of rolling hills and comfortable, elegant homes. There are farms in the valleys, and wagons are more common than trucks and cars. Where great malls will

spread across the land there are now apple orchards, and the trees show promise of a rich harvest in the fall.

One of these houses in particular is of interest to us. In July of 1916 the house was owned by Herbert Stone, a man skilled in the application of law to the problems of the corporation. Among his clients are the National Biscuit Company and the Hill Coffee empire.

He was there with his wife, Janet, and their two children, Monica and Wilfred.

Monica was four, and I was three.

Before God, I wish I could go back with a warning.

The children are playing, the parents sipping scotch and water. The katydids are arguing, the butterflies fluttering. Westchester smiles.

Like his father, Herbert is a lawyer. He loves us with the kind of simplicity that I value so much and do not myself possess. My work has denied me peace in these aged years. Instead I live like an anguished ghost.

They were the last family I had, mother and father and my dead sister. I have been cursed to outlive my generation, and to do so without the comfort of a family.

When this young journalist appeared, attracted like a little trout to the bait of my letter to his paper, he found me as I am now, and as I will no doubt be when I finally expire.

If I ever do. Two years ago my doctor told me that my disease would kill me in six months. My death is as hesitant as were my loves.

I am sitting in my garden here in Bethesda, smoking and watching the weeds grow, and scribbling in what young Duke calls "my dense and careful hand" on a yellow legal pad.

He has never met any of the young men from the agency, and so he does not know what they call me.

I am the T.O.M. The Terrible Old Man. They think that I am infected with alienness, that I am not really human anymore. Overexposed, they say.

Deep in the night I sometimes awaken and feel a sense of passing presence, and I must admit that I long to join the drift in the sky.

Some say that they eat souls. That is not true. What they do is more profound, more private, more final.

"Don't let him catch your eye," the young men say. "They'll see you, and they'll get you, too."

I wore my lace collar and my Fauntleroy's and was washed in Pear's soap.

My voice was high and happy when I was three.

This is what I remember.

When they came I was rolling a red fire truck up and down across the board floor of the porch, causing a rattling that reminded me of an engine.

I have established the time as approximately five-thirty. My father had just driven up from New York, arriving perhaps half an hour before. He was still wearing his black broadcloth suit, tie and waistcoat. He had come from a meeting with Vincent Carney, a developer of office buildings. Mr. Carney had entered into an agreement to construct the new National Biscuit Building, and Herbert Stone, Esq., had made ten thousand dollars in an afternoon.

Father was sitting in a big wooden chair with his feet up on a stool.

He leaned his head back, imagining that he was lying in the castles of summer cloud that were passing by.

Janet also closed her eyes.

As far as they were concerned they were innocently drowsing on a summer afternoon. Neither of them imagined that somebody very strange and very close was generating a sound that was causing their drowsiness.

Or that they were being watched by careful eyes.

Only we children remained active. Monica played with a doll she had named Ricardo, and I with my beloved red fire engine.

What my father had seen as a cloud in the sky was something very, very different. It was gray and tremendous and slow, this thing that had come over the house. Had he seen it as it really was, my father might have thought it an organic thing, something like a gigantic wasp's nest Boating in the sky.

And what watched from within, with great, black eyes and spindly limbs—what would he have called them in their thousands? Giant hornets? He would have understood the fierceness, but never the intelligence.

Afternoon became evening, and cowbells began to sound lazily across the valley below. A woman's voice rose, calling the cows to their barn.

This voice was dampened by a sound that could almost be heard, a deep buzzing that seemed to pulsate in the gut and chest, to caress the heart and slow the blood.

The voice faded away. The cowbells stopped. Birds stopped, katydids and cicadas stopped. A snake paused in its patient stalking of a rabbit, and its nictitating membranes slipped over its eyes. The rabbit paused in its chewing and fell to its side. Still we children played. "Rum-m-m," I said, "clang, clang, clang!" "Ricardo, are you ever going to get married? Only to you, my

dear. I love you. You need a wipe. Okay . . ."

Nobody saw the line of dots that were coming from the gray thing, saw them twisting and turning in the sky, moving as gracefully as a column of geese, slipping quickly down from the land of the clouds to the land of the stones.

These appalling things stepped lightly into the yard, into the soft, hot grass, and they began to move forward in lockstep, closer and closer to the porch where our parents slept and we played.

They were small and fragile, as gray and spindly as insects. Their heads were huge and had the texture of something that had been inflated. Their prominent eyes glittered in the afternoon sun. As they moved their heads bobbed.

Every few moments there would be an angry buzz and they would sail a few feet through the air.

"Ricardo, I love you!"

"Rum-m-m—clang!"

They came closer. Someone watching might have thought that these creatures were engaged in some sort of ritual. In addition to their lockstep and their gliding jumps, they were making a whole host of other gestures, moving their thin arms, chattering their mouths, turning their heads first left, then right, then toward the sun.

Again they stepped, jumped, jutted out their hips, twisted their arms together, then turned their black eyes toward the sun.

"Rum-m-m! Clangclangclang!"

"Ricardo is sleeping! He is a man like daddy and he is sleeping in my arms."

"Brum-m-m-m!"

"Please don't wake him up, Wilfred."

Three steps forward. Monica wrinkled her nose. There was an overpowering odor coming with the dancers, a stink of molten sulfur.

Abruptly the adults stood up. They began walking like robots. Down the porch they went and into the living room. They stood staring at the floor like tongue-lashed children.

"Mother and Father are marching," Monica said happily. But as her parents passed her she fell silent. She was not afraid, just confused. Why was everybody marching into the living room?

When she got up to follow, carefully cradling Ricardo, she found herself

looking into a pair of huge, black eyes.

She experienced a burst of extreme dizziness and reeled back, twisting as if a bullet had hit her in the face.

She lay still, her doll beside her. There was a movement too rapid even to perceive and the being had twined its arms and legs around her.

She knew it too. It must be understood that she was totally conscious during this ordeal. Her mind was not in any way altered. She felt, heard, saw everything that happened to her. And she suffered. It was the first of the secret, stifled memories that would in the end destroy Monica Stone.

With a loud, droning buzz she was taken off into the sky.

I had stopped running my toy firetruck and was staring at the creatures that now stood around me. I was completely calm. It had not occurred to my three-year-old mind to be afraid.

"Monkeys," I said brightly. I suppose that I smiled.

And then there was somebody else there, somebody very much more graceful than the men with the bobbing heads. One instant this person arrived on the porch, a fleeting shadow. The next she was standing before me.

She was perhaps five feet tall, with a long, narrow face and slim arms and legs. Her skin was the texture of baby-leather, even more fine than that of children.

"My momma went inside," I said.

"Come with me."

She embraced me. I remember next a whirl of roof and clouds and sky.

Then I saw gray. There were buzzings and scrabbling noises and the frequent rush of wings. I did not know where I was and for the first time I felt fear.

I saw Monica staggering, being hit by flashes of light so bright that I thought they were knives. She screamed and jerked when the light hit her.

I tried to help her but the thin lady held me back. I fought the frail arms but they were as hard as steel, and I remember how she breathed with a hissing burr. Monica was being hurt! Her screams were terrible to hear, so loud they hurt my ears. In my young life I had never heard anything like it before.

The light would hit her and she would throw up her hands and bellow and try to run away. Then it would hit her again from another direction and she would turn and run. On and on it went.

Something was jammed down on my head, ground into my temples. It

hurt terribly, I had to get it off but she was holding me and hissing and then I saw a vivid image of my mother when I was very young, reaching down as if from heaven and lifting me with hands that made my whole body tingle with delight, and all was gold.

Monica shrieked. I saw her in a blaze of light and smelled burning hair and burning cloth.

In 1977 my sister died in a bedroom fire. A sleeping pill worked faster than she had expected and her last cigarette of the day dropped from her fingers into the sheets. Or perhaps it was more than one sleeping pill.

We were returned to the porch amid a great clamor of buzzing wings. They sat me in my father's chair and poured out his glass of whiskey in the grass. Monica they returned to her doll.

A moment later they were gone, and the gray object had become nothing but a glittering white dot, and then nothing at all.

The farmer's wife let fly with a boisterous "Oooooooooo!" The cows mooed and went trotting up the path to their barn. Monica said, "Now, Ricardo, what woke you up?" Birds began to sing, katydids and cicadas to chatter, and the snake got its rabbit. Trout and sunnys fluttered again in the clear streams.

Nobody noticed that fifteen minutes had been stolen from their evening. Why should they? They had gone inside and discussed the news. What news? Well, wasn't that funny, they couldn't remember.

But that was quickly forgotten, because a problem presented itself as soon as they returned to the porch.

I had apparently swallowed my father's highball and gotten drunk.

"I seed de moon comin' up over de bally," I said. "Them monkeys come show Willy—"

"Oh, Herb, you left your highball!" Our mother was amused and annoyed at the same time.

"You could call Dr. Hovermanns, darling, but I think he'll just tell you to let him sleep it off."

That night we had a dinner of ham and sweet potatoes and green beans, and afterward Father read to us for a while. Nobody seemed to notice that I was not, in fact, drunk.

After we kids were in bed Mother and Father sat out under the stars and listened to the Victrola.

To the strains of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, the "Pastorale," they

counted shooting stars.

Monica was sick in the night, but it soon passed and by morning all was well.

Chapter Seven

As I read Will's narrative, I wondered if he was deluding himself, misleading me or telling the frank truth. One glance at his face told me that this was, in his opinion, an authentic record.

He was terribly distressed. Being touched by them so early meant that he might all along have been nothing but a pawn. I asked him about it. "I wish it was true," he said. "It'd be a relief to find out that they were responsible for my actions." He looked at me with that sudden, sharp way of his that so effectively compelled frankness. "Do you think I'm a high-level robot of some kind?"

I shook my head. "I'm afraid I don't."

"No, you wouldn't. Otherwise you couldn't place blame, could you? Yours is a punitive generation."

"That's a bit of a generalization. But I do think you're responsible for your own actions."

A bottle of Pinch stood on a table beside his summer chair. Sometimes there would be empty sardine cans there, too. I think whiskey and sardines were his whole diet. He went for the bottle, poured a substantial drink into his glass and knocked it back. He lit another Camel.

"Every man has to be responsible for his actions, Nick. Otherwise you're not a man. You wouldn't be human, except physically." He gave me a helpless, haunted look and returned to the bottle.

His childhood memory was full of disturbing implications. Had the others implanted him as they apparently have so many? If so, did it mean that his entire life was lived under their influence?

Perhaps it will never be possible to resolve that question. All I can do is redouble my efforts to be clear, to tell this story as perfectly as I can. To do that I must return to the central narrative, but this time with the knowledge that the visitors probably had Will to a degree under their influence. I do not wish to suggest that he wasn't making his own choices; I prefer to think that he was.

They were watching him, had been since he was a child. He was their man in Central Intelligence, picked from an early age to do their work. But to do it as he saw fit.

This understood, it is appropriate to address once again the events that were taking place in Roswell in July of 1947. These enormous events.

The Gray file lies on my desk. I pick it up, turn to page twenty-three of his careful narrative.

"I returned to RAAF with my detail at approximately 1330 hours on the afternoon of July 8, 1947. We parked behind Hangar B-2 and commenced unloading the debris that had been collected on the Ungar ranch."

Major Gray was a sensitive man, and seeing the pitiful mess that was being laid out made him consider the courage of whoever had flown in it.

"They came a long way," he said.

Hesseltine nodded, lighting a cigarette. "Yep. And they're not going back." Everybody fell silent, looking at the debris. "I guess we'd better inform Colonel Blanchard," Walters said at last.

"Which is going to be very interesting." "You think there'll be a problem?"

I doubt if Gray answered. He says only that "Walters suggested we inform the colonel." What he does not add is what must already have been going through his mind. He must have known that there were going to be a number of serious problems. He would have done his thinking on the way back from the ranch.

If he understood Air Force brass at all, and I think it is obvious that he did, he undoubtedly felt that they would try to classify the hell out of this.

Gray had most certainly established his own very private set of priorities, and he intended to fulfill them.

He had observed that most military officers were earnest and patriotic. They were not, however, deep thinkers. They did not see things in long perspectives.

What he intended to do was probably going to make a lot of people very mad, and he had to be careful or he could very certainly ruin his career. He was carrying out his duties as he saw fit.

"Mr. Hesseltine, why don't you three try to piece some of this stuff together while I get the colonel? Maybe there's enough here to get an idea what this thing looked like."

Hesseltine touched the debris with his foot. "It looks hopeless."

"Blanchard'll expect to see it in the best order we can manage."

Soon Walters and Hesseltine and PFC Winters were moving pieces around on the floor.

Gray went back to the administration building. On his way up the hall to the colonel's office he stopped by to see the base press officer, Lieutenant Jack Hope. He liked Jack, and he knew that he would do his job well.

The key thing here was to be as casual and offhand as possible.

Hope remembers the moment vividly. I met him at his small, tidy home in Roswell. He was frank with me. I found that his story fit what was in both his file and Don Gray's.

There is only one element of it that I question. He and Gray both very specifically claim that he never saw the debris. I find that hard to believe. It would have been so natural to go over to the hangar, if only to satisfy his curiosity.

Nevertheless, I have recorded this as if he didn't go to the hangar, as if he cannot confirm the appearance of the debris.

"You need to interview me," Gray said to him. "I've got something that the papers'll be interested in."

Hearing the major's promise, Hope smiled. He had his frustrations, working for a unit that dealt with so many top secrets. Most of the really interesting things that happened at Roswell Army Air Field were classified and couldn't even be mentioned. On the day that an atomic bomb got stuck in the bay of a B-29 and created a harrowing two-hour emergency, Jack Hope had spent his time trying to place a story about the fact that the Bill Cornell Band was going to play at the officer's club on Saturday night.

Gray told Hope his story, about how they had found the rubble, and what it meant. Hope scribbled frantically.

He was delighted. This was a fine story. "I'll get some good play with this one."

He read his notes back to Gray. "If you work fast, you can get it on the radio tonight."

"Yeah. Y'know Don, I want to thank you. This is a real good piece. I appreciate it."

"Buy me a beer manana"

"Will do!"

As Gray left, he heard the music of Hope's typewriter. Now the story would be out before anybody made any decisions about classification. And that was right. None of the others understood that this was the largest event in human history. It was something that every single human creature had an absolute and inalienable right to know. As Don Gray must have seen it, his

obligation to the American people and to mankind superseded every other consideration.

Well, he had informed the people. Now he would tell the brass. He entered Blanchard's sanctum. The clerk let him through immediately.

The colonel was affable and smart. He had been an extremely successful officer, and he was next in line to take Eighth Air Force. Although he was a West Point man, the colonel seemed much more Air Force than Army. His command style was informal and consultative. Mostly, he was pleasant, although small problems could cause outbursts of temper. One morning he had chewed Hope out for tying up the base telephone lines. A few minutes later, though, he was laughing about it.

He was a heavily decorated officer. He had the Legion of Merit, the Silver Star, the Distinguished Flying Cross with an oak-leaf cluster, the Bronze Star, the Air Medal with a cluster, and the Presidential Unit Citation for his work as operations officer of the Twentieth Air Force that had been responsible for bombing Japan.

Gray had a simple relationship with him. He respected the colonel and made that clear. In return, Blanchard trusted his intelligence assessments. As he approached the inner sanctum, Gray wondered how the old man was going to take what he was about to say.

Blanchard looked up at him, his eyebrows raised, a question in his face.

There was only one way to handle the situation. Just come right out with it. "Colonel, we found the debris from a flying disk this morning."

Blanchard stared a moment, then his eyes crinkled into a smile. "I thought Hesseltine was the practical joker," he said. "If you guys are looking for suckers I suggest you try another colonel."

Gray looked straight into his eyes, trying to communicate the high seriousness that he felt. "Sir, I'm not kidding."

He watched a series of expressions cross Blanchard's face. The smile became a more wary expression, then a long stare. "Was there any hostile action?" "None."

"You have wreckage? An accident?" "Apparently."

Blanchard pressed his intercom. "Get Payne in here," he said. He was always a man to involve his deputy. A moment later Lieutenant Colonel Payne Jennings appeared. He was a compact, intense man, a polished officer. Even though he wasn't a West Point graduate, he projected the formality and to a degree the rigidity of traditional army. Still, people liked him because he

was fair and always willing to push for you with the colonel if he felt you had a good argument.

"Don found a crashed flying disk," he said to Payne. The deputy reared back, his eyes widening. Then he burst out laughing.

"Let's see if we can get General Ramey to buy into that when he comes down." He looked from the colonel to the major, saw they weren't laughing and pursed his lips. "This is for real?"

"Yes, sir," Gray said. "Ray Walters and Hesselstine have the wreckage over in B-2. They're trying to piece it together."

Without another word Blanchard and Jennings headed out to the hangar.

Very little headway had been made putting the pieces together. "The nearest we can tell, what we have here is a part of a larger device." Hesselstine sounded very professional, and Gray was pleased.

Blanchard picked up a piece of the parchment, ran his fingers down the columns of squiggles. "Gentlemen, I have to say that I'm a little awed."

"I thought it was a historic occasion," Gray said. "That's what I told Lieutenant Hope." Blanchard and Jennings nodded absently. That was a hurdle jumped. They'd just agreed that this story would be given to the public. Gray was proud of them.

Blanchard held some of the parchment up to the light. "It's like wallpaper. You wouldn't have wallpaper in a military vehicle."

"We can't know that," Walters said. "I don't think we can assume anything."

"This is just a pile of tinfoil and wallpaper. What I'd like to see is the rest of the thing."

"If this was a mortal wound." Gray had thought about it, and he had his doubts. If he'd been piloting the disk and it had sustained damage, the first thing he'd have done would have been to get it into outer space where there was no gravity. Then he could make repairs at his leisure, without fear of crashing.

"Well," Blanchard said, "if there's anything out in that desert, we can find it."

Jennings picked up one of the wooden I-beams. "What about the Russians?"

"A Russian blimp coming after the 509th," Gray said. "We considered that possibility."

"And?"

"It's a no-go, in my opinion. First, the material's just too strong. We don't have anything remotely like it, and I doubt that they do either. Second, none of the writing is in any known language. Third, that wood you're holding is too light and too hard to have come from earth. It isn't from an earth tree."

"You're certain about all this, Major? You've done your homework?"

Gray was quite certain. "Yes, sir."

"Where is the object it came from?" asked Jennings.

"We don't have knowledge of any other debris," Gray replied.

"You looked?"

"It's a big desert, Colonel."

"True enough," Blanchard said. He glanced at Jennings. "You think an air search is warranted, Payne?"

"Yes, sir."

"I agree."

Jennings started toward the door he had just entered. "I'll get it up right away. The 830th Search and Rescue Group. They're our highest-scoring search mission unit." Jennings left the hangar.

"Private," the colonel said to PFC Winters, "get this stuff into my office on the double."

"Yes, sir!" The PFC began gathering up the pieces.

Gray met the colonel's eyes. His expression of sardonic good humor was gone, replaced by a grave look.

Gray wondered if that was what Colonel Blanchard looked like when he was afraid.

Blanchard turned and headed back to the office block. As they passed Hope's office the publicist started toward the colonel with a piece of paper in his hand. Gray intercepted him. "Not now," he said. "We're sending up a search mission. The colonel thinks we might find the rest of the disk."

"Wow."

"Wait a while before you release anything. I'll call you." Hope nodded and took a step back.

"Don't leave me sitting on this, Don," Hope said. Gray thought he sounded rather desperate.

"Wait for my call." Now Hope looked forlorn. Gray smiled. "You aren't going to lose the story. It's just that, if we find the disk, it'll be really big."

"Big isn't the word. I'd get both papers and play on every radio station in town."

Gray clapped him on the shoulder and left the office. If he realized just how big this really was he'd probably freeze up. He followed Blanchard and the other officers into the 830th's briefing room. Captain Gilman was ready to brief. Three helicopters and a Stinson reconnaissance plane equipped with cameras were being prepared to go to the Maricopa area. As the navigation officer began to speak, Gray glanced at his watch.

They'd had six minutes to prepare the mission, from the time they had been given the order. That was an impressive performance.

"The site is sixteen miles east-southeast of Maricopa," Gilman said. Hesseltine had already prebriefed. The officer pulled down a map of New Mexico—the same one that was in Gray's office, except the details of the White Sands Proving Ground and the high energy radar areas were simply marked "restricted airspace."

"Lieutenant Hesseltine, will you please pinpoint the location?" Captain Gilman stepped aside.

Hesseltine went up to the map. Together he and the navigation officer worked with the compass and protractor. "This is the approximate position of the Ungar house," Hesseltine said. "The wreckage is two miles west of that location. It fell in a fan pattern, indicating that the device was moving due west when the explosion took place."

"So we search west from the impact site," the navigation

"What's the appearance of the debris," one of the pilots asked.

"From the air what we saw will probably look like about a thousand square feet of torn-up tinfoil and paper.

You'll see glints. The stuff is shiny. We didn't pick much up. Maybe less than one percent. It's a pretty big debris field."

The pilots and observers filed out, some of them still adjusting their parachute straps. One of them stopped.

He turned around and addressed the squadron exec. "Sir," he said, "why weren't we told what we're looking for? What kind of device?"

Blanchard answered. "Anything out in that goddamn desert that looks like its made of metal."

"Yes, sir! Does that include windmills and tin roofs, sir?"

"Get going!"

The search party headed for the flight line. Gray followed them. As intelligence officer, he felt that he had to participate in this part of the mission as well. If a disk was located, it would be his job to examine it. He got issued

a chute and climbed into one of the helicopters. They were uncomfortable, noisy and slow, but they were truly amazing machines, the very latest in aircraft.

He knew about the incredible speed of the new jets that were under development, and was duly impressed, but these astonishing little craft would always seem like miracles to him.

The pilot introduced himself. "I'm Lieutenant Kephart," he said. He reached across and shook Gray's hand.

Gray nodded. "Let's go," he said.

The pilot flipped a switch and the helicopter's engine wheezed to life. A moment later they rose into the air, the nose pointing downward as the rotors grabbed for speed and lift. It was a strange way to take off, watching the apron spread out below you instead of fall away behind like in a normal plane.

It was now fifteen-thirty hours. It would take an hour to reach the crash site. The slowness and short range of the helicopters meant that there would be no more than another hour of search time before they would have to return to base. Gray watched the hot, empty New Mexico countryside pass by beneath them. Every so often they would see a house so dusty it looked like it was part of the land, a lump of mud and wood.

The three copters were at an altitude of fifteen hundred feet, and caused a good deal of notice below. People came out of their houses and waved, and observers waved back. Pilots concentrated on flying their cantankerous ships. To keep one of them in the air required continuous concentration. Gray didn't even want to think about their crash rate, which was horribly high.

They flew along Highway 370 to Picacho or Sunset, Gray wasn't sure which, then turned north, keeping the red dirt road to Maricopa and the looming peak of El Capitan to their left.

It was not long before they were in the crash area. One of the other observers, more trained in visual search techniques than Gray, was the first to spot the wreckage. From the air the fan shape of it was clear. The explosion had scattered debris widely, and bits and pieces had continued to fall from the craft as it moved west. "Take us in an absolutely straight line from where the debris field forms that point," Gray said. The pilot radioed this instruction to the others, and the three helicopters formed a line abreast with a thousand yards of separation.

The navigator aboard the Stinson reported the exact location of the debris

field to Roswell.

The helicopters dropped to a few hundred feet and proceeded in formation. Above them, at a thousand, the Stinson took detailed pictures of the route of flight, even though nothing was being spotted. Wartime experience had taught the AAF that objects missed by airborne observers could often be found by experts examining photographs.

They flew for thirty minutes without seeing anything. The land was absolutely flat, but it was rising and there were hills ahead, and a mesa to the north. Searching hills was going to be a lot harder.

They'd come about sixty miles from the debris field. The farther they went the less likely they were to find something, in Gray's estimation. The absence of a crash site this far out meant that the craft must still have been under power. The pilot could have maneuvered, maybe even returned his ship to the safety of outer space.

Searching the empty land, Gray's mind turned toward that magical notion, outer space. What did it mean?

And what worlds hid in its folds of darkness? Could the craft have come from Mars or Venus? Who was to know? Gray had a feeling, though, that it was from farther away, from another star. There were no trees on Mars, and wood and paper had been involved in the construction of this craft. Of course, Venus was covered by cloud. Was it a teeming jungle underneath? Nobody knew. But Gray doubted it. He had observed that the most vital civilizations arose in temperate areas. At best Venus was something like equatorial Africa, a gigantic hellhole seething with mosquitoes the size of rump steaks and snakes big enough to swallow a mule.

"This is one-two-one. I observe a glint of metal two o'clock approximately one thousand yards out," a voice said in the earphones.

"Change course zero-three-zero, drop to two hundred," came the reply from the Stinson.

A moment later the second copter spotted it. "We have gleaming metal eight hundred yards out dead ahead," the observer stated.

Gray didn't see a thing. The earphones were alive now, as observers and pilots coordinated their observations.

"We see an object," said the Stinson. "It is a metal disk. Repeat, a metal disk."

Gray peered ahead, feeling helpless.

Then he saw it, just ahead of the copter, seemingly so close that he could touch it. The disk was on the ground at the end of a swath of broken soil. It was the color of burnished aluminum. How these men had managed to spot gleams of sunlight off its dull surface he could not imagine.

They went down to approximately fifty feet, each helicopter in turn circling the craft so that the observer could get a close look. Then they cleared out and the Stinson made a series of low-level photographic passes.

Don Gray said nothing, but he literally ached to get out there and have a closer look at that thing. He'd deliberated asking the pilot to let him go down the rescue rope and remain with the device overnight, but he found that he was quite uneasy about being out here in the dark. More important, it seemed too radical a departure from procedure, and he'd already done enough rule-stretching for one day.

They flew back to base, arriving just after eighteen hundred. Blanchard and Jennings were waiting on the apron with Hesseltine and Walters. As Gray dismounted the copter, he saw the observer trotting off to the photo unit with his film for processing.

"What was it like," Blanchard asked Gray. "A featureless disk. It had torn up a lot of dirt on impact."

Blanchard ordered everybody into Operations for debriefing. Each observer reported what he had seen. Gray was surprised to learn that they had observed pieces of wreckage in the broken soil behind the craft. He'd seen nothing.

Then the photo unit reported. Lieutenant Baker himself came in with the portfolio of pictures. He took his time setting up ten crucial shots on the map board, while everybody in the room squirmed. He had to be allowed his moment of drama; the photo unit had prepared the pictures in record time.

Since he'd gotten back Don Gray had smoked up the rest of his Old Golds and was working on Hesseltine's Luckies. His mouth tasted dry and his head was still roaring with the noise of the chopper.

When Baker started to talk, however, all feelings of fatigue left the major.

"We have here a disk approximately thirty feet in diameter, of unknown thickness, content and construction.

There are a hundred and sixty-five observed fragments in the impact area, most of them located in the soil that the object traversed as it slid into the hillside. There is also this." He pointed to a blurry enlargement.

Total silence.

"Is it a body?" Colonel Blanchard asked. His voice was gentle.

"An apparent cadaver approximately three feet long, in a distended posture, showing some signs of predator action. If you observe carefully, you will see that the cadaver appears to have a deformed head, unless the skull has somehow exploded."

"Are we looking at an alien, Lieutenant?" Jennings snapped.

"I wouldn't know. We are looking at a small cadaver that has a deformed head, and reveals signs of having been damaged by predators, like coyotes. That's all I can say."

Blanchard was so excited that he had gotten to his feet. "I want a full recovery party on that crash site as soon after dawn as practicable," he said.

"Yes, sir," said his exec.

"This is the goddamnedest thing I've ever encountered in my career, gentlemen. I want every man to realize how important this is. This is an alien spacecraft, for God's sake. We cannot even build such a craft at this time. This is going to be of the greatest interest to Washington."

"Sir, what do we do on site?"

"Obtain all visible debris and the craft itself if possible, and bring the material back to this base." He looked at Jennings. "Let's have a powwow, buddy. Gray, tag along." He turned and left the operations room.

Gray allowed his two superior officers to get a little ahead of him. He paused at Lieutenant Hope's office and got a rather desperate smile. "The piece is written, sir."

"Here's a change. You can say that the disk was recovered intact and brought to this base for transfer to higher headquarters." He thought a moment. "No, say it was loaned higher headquarters. Got that—loaned."

"I have just one question, Don. When can I circulate this baby?"

Blanchard was about to call Eighth Air Force. "Do it," Gray said.

"Yes, sir."

When Gray entered the colonel's office he was leaning far back in his chair. A cigar was clenched between his teeth. Jennings was standing at the window, staring out at the flight line. Walters was there, slumped against the wall. Hesseltine sat more or less stiffly, nervous to be with so much brass in the absence of his own boss.

"I thought you'd gone home," Blanchard said acidly to Gray. He hated to wait.

"I had to tilt a kidney." Was his quite intentional failure to mention his

stop at Hope's office a breach of duty?

No, he'd made it clear to Blanchard and Jennings both that there was a release being prepared. He didn't have to do more.

"We've got to tell Ramey," Blanchard said. "I want you to get on the horn with us, Don. He's gonna be pretty damn sure his leg's being pulled and I want you to make it clear to him that we're being straight with him."

Gray made a play for time. "Sir, I think we ought to wait until we have men on the scene and are in radio communication with them before we report this up the chain." "Why so?"

"Well, I'm sure that we have an alien vessel, and so are you. But how is the Commander of the Eighth Air Force going to react from the far end of a telephone line? He could order the base sealed. Forbid us to touch the wreckage. Send a team of white coats to net us and ship us off to the funny farm. Any damn thing."

"I've got to tell the man. It's my duty. Not only that there are regulations involved. This clearly qualifies as an unknown event. The way I understand my mission, I'm required to report such an occurrence to higher headquarters. This is a sensitive installation, remember."

"We need to be able to tell him that we've examined the craft."

Payne Jennings unexpectedly spoke up. "I think Don has a good point, Bill. We've got to be able to say to Ramey clearly and in no uncertain terms that we are not dealing with some sort of Soviet device. Also, there's another thing—if it's ours."

There was a silence. Nobody had thought of that. Gray was a little disappointed in himself for not considering it. Then he thought of the hieroglyphics and the strange foil and the rows of numbers. No. No way it was ours.

He couldn't say that though. "We need to cover all our bases."

"Okay, guys. But if he starts hacking and slashing, I'm going to tell him it was a staff recommendation."

"Can't do that," Jennings said. "Makes you look weak."

Blanchard laughed, loud and hard. He looked around the room. "I think I can let you guys go home, if we're putting off the report till morning." He looked at Gray. "I want you out on that flight line at dawn, you and Walters both. I want both intelligence commands covered."

Walters spoke up. "Is this still considered a counterintelligence problem? It's pretty obvious there's no commie involvement—"

"Somebody flew that thing. And they did it for a reason. That reason is a counter-intelligence problem, Mr.

Walters."

"Yeah, I can see that, Bill." A sort of half smile crossed his face. "I can see that as kind of a big counterintelligence problem."

As the meeting broke up, Major Gray hurried back to Lieutenant Hope's office. "You released it yet?"

"Well, sir—"

"We're going to do some final confirmation in the morning. What say you release it at ten hundred?"

"You tell me, Major."

"Ten o'clock tomorrow morning, you tell the world."

Without a backward glance Major Gray left the office. He went out to the parking lot and got into his car and drove home, eager for a good supper and a clean bed.

Late that night he awoke very suddenly. For a moment he thought there was somebody in the house. So clear had this impression been that he got up and checked around. They didn't lock doors in Roswell in those days, but on this night Donald Gray dropped the latches. He listened to the night wind rushing in from the desert. There were faint sounds, very faint, the cries of the things that lived in the dark land.

A car passed in the street. From behind some black window a woman sighed. He laid his hand on his wife's breast and also slept.

And the stars crossed the sky.

From the Roswell Daily Record, July 8, 1947:

ARMY AIR FORCE CAPTURES FLYING DISK IN ROSWELL REGION

No Details of Flying Disk are Revealed

The intelligence office of the 509th Bombardment Group at Roswell Army Air Force Base announced at noon today that the field has come into possession of a flying saucer.

According to information released by the department, over authority of Maj.

D. O. Gray, intelligence officer, the disk was recovered on a ranch in the Roswell vicinity, after an unidentified rancher had notified Sheriff Geo.

Wilcox, here, that he had found the instrument on his premises.

Major Gray and a detail from his department went to the ranch and

recovered the disk, it was stated.

After the intelligence office here had inspected the instrument it was loaned to "higher headquarters."

The intelligence office stated that no details of the saucer's construction or its appearance had been revealed.

Chapter Eight

The Chronicle of Wilfred Stone

Washington, D.C., July 8, 1947. Time: 7:40 A.M. My condition: standing naked before a mirror. I have a slight paunch, noticeable and a little upsetting to me. It is composed largely of beer, steak, Hershey bars, champagne, sweet rolls and whiskey. It is there because I have been trying to eat my way out of my war nightmares.

A boy called Jamshid was still dying in my mind, in those days, still dying at the hands of the Surete, his genitals tied off, his belly bloated with wine. I remember the Surete and the Gestapo men as extremely clean, eating huge Arab meals in nameless backrooms in the souk of Algiers, their voices melodic with confidence, softened by self-importance. They cherished the secret knowledge that great pain takes any man to his truth.

If a human being reaches a sufficient depth of agony even his attempts at deceit will contain useful information.

Another of the truisms of tradecraft: torture always works. Human beings, it seems, cannot lie. If we do not say the truth then we indicate it another way. It's an endearing trait.

Jamshid worked for me because I paid him a dollar a week. In his family he was therefore more important than his own father. He was twelve and quick of eye. He was full of humor and bitter hatred for the French and the Germans.

He would slip from house to house with messages, helping me to forge a network of agents provocateurs that later served Franz Fanon so well. And then one night while I lay beneath my ceiling fan naked and slick with heat, my belly dotted by festering fly-bites, a woman came and murmured like a ghost that Jamshid was in the custody of the police.

First they scraped the skin of his buttocks raw with metal files, then sat him in a bath of acid. They raped him, they forced themselves on him, shattering his innocence and causing him in his torment to cleave to them. He became the slave of his tormenters. They used the Roman whip on him, an instrument of punishment known in that place from the time of the Third

Augusta, the Roman occupation army. This whip has twelve cords of leather, and into the end of each is knotted a little hook.

I can remember him lying in the sun, and I thought grandly of the innocence of the child, and the weighty sophistication of my own twenty-eight years. I smoked, he was too young. I tied one on now and then. His Moslem eyes widened in horror and amazement at the sight of a liquor bottle. I relaxed in the carpeted fastness of Madame Jouet's while he squatted on the porch and heard the sharp voices of the French girls inside reciting exhausted amours.

There was an orange tree in the courtyard, and I cannot remember a time when it was not in bloom.

He screamed names, dates, everything he knew.

My agents were rounded up, tortured in their turn, and I became a hunted man, creeping through the back streets like some movie spy, being followed by men in tailored suits who soaked their bullets in garlic and habitually aimed at the stomach. I was hiding in my room, half drunk, down to my last bottle when the Allies came marching into the city and it was over.

Those of my agents who were still alive were released.

In Washington I was growing fat on the fruits of victory, plotting the ruin of the French colonial empire and eating every night at places like Harvey's and the Occidental. Broiled sea trout at Harvey's one night, Hoover two tables away eating the same; a steak the next night at the Occidental, and then midnight and the whip cutting Jamshid's back like butter.

I would wake up shaking and pour myself a glass of Pinch, drink it and listen to records on my Victrola:

"Deep Purple," from the days that I was dating Rose deMornay, "Sweet Leilani" from Waikiki Wedding, one of those fluffy prewar movies. They were enchanted days in America, the late thirties. The depression was pretty well over, and Hitler was kind of funny and the Japs . . . well, they were awfully far away. "Whudduyu say to them Tokyo babes—I wanna nip on nese!" Tokyo Rose . . . there is to terror a pure romance. We fox-trotted our way from Waikiki Wedding to Pearl Harbor.

Now I would wake myself up by crying in my sleep. Then came the Alien Estimate. I regarded it all as rather amusing, like a scary movie. I had not the faintest idea that it had electrified the Joint Chiefs, and scared General Vandenberg so badly that he'd spent a good bit of time literally staring at a wall. For me it was empty of reality. I was still ignorant of events in

Rosewell. I wouldn't be for long.

I drove over to the office that morning, parking the Chevy as usual on E Street, relying on my license number to keep the officer of the watch from writing me a summons. When I got into my office there was a message from Vandenberg. Please call as soon as convenient.

As per standing orders, I informed our new boss, Admiral Hillenkoetter. He called me in and told me that I was free to see General Vandenberg as long as I didn't sell the agency to him. We were all afraid that CIG

would be absorbed and dismembered by the Joint Chiefs, something that they had been trying to do since the war ended. Our new boss viewed any contact from his predecessor as a reconnaissance in strength. I went over to the Pentagon in one of our staff cars, driven by the sort of clean, hard young man we liked to hire, most of whom we later expended in the Soviet Union. "Moscow rules" were written by such young men.

I'll tell you another thing about "Moscow rules," which consist of planting messages in hollow trees, not using real names or telephones and doing a great deal more sneaking around than usual: they don't work. What works are the right implements, the leather cord, the naked electric lead, the soldering iron in the anus. Insert it, turn it on, then ask your questions. You will have the correct answers. We had a tough outlook, those of us who were left over from the war. Want a woman to talk? Grab her lower lip and slap her until it starts to tear off. Women have a horror of disfigurement; she'll talk. Women believe in their faces.

"Goddamn it, Willy, what the hell is this?" Vandenberg blurted as soon as I walked into his office. He snatched up the estimate and tossed it at me.

"I think it's accurate, sir."

"It's no joke?"

I saw the fear in his eyes, and grew instantly wary. It has been my unfailing experience that men of power are randomly dangerous when they are afraid.

"No, sir."

"We called the Mounties." He produced a thick folder. "They damn well investigated that situation up in the Northwest Territories. The bastards stole an entire village! Holy God, Willy, what if the S.O.B.'s steal Peoria?"

What in God's name does the Air Force do about it?"

I did not expect that my estimate would cause this much upset. "I think we ought to develop some cases around it, General."

"You're damn right we will! But tell me what these disks can do in the air. We've developed our own data, but we haven't got much. All we know is that they're fast, and some of them are big. Are they armed? Will my cannons work against them? What the hell do I do, Willy?"

"You've prepared your own background paper?"

"S-2 pulled something together. You can read it in this office. Eyes only. Two copies. The other one is at the White House."

I didn't like the drift of this conversation. Admiral Hillenkoetter wasn't going to be happy to hear that Van had already involved the President. "I think we need to present all of this stuff to the board—"

"No, sir! This is an Air Force matter, as of this moment! You are ordered to withdraw this estimate. No board meeting!"

"General, Hilly's gonna raise a stink."

"The hell he is. I called Truman at seven o'clock this morning and told him that he either gives this thing lock, stock and barrel to the Air Force or I'm out. I gave Harry an ultimatum!" Van was serving notice to me that this was of absolutely paramount importance to him. You did not threaten Harry Truman unless you were genuinely prepared to resign. Van cleared his throat, sucked his cigar hard. "He listened to me and then he says, 'Okay, Van, you take it. It's your baby.' " Vandenberg laughed bitterly. "I am not about to sit down in any NBK meeting and say to those men that my opinion is that the Air Force is completely helpless, impotent to prevent the mass kidnapping of Americans by monsters from outer space!" He glared at me, chewed the roaring cigar. "Goddamn it!"

"I realize the problem."

"You and your fancy suits and your shot cuffs and your goddamn Aqua-Velva! Why don't you ever get upset, Willy!"

"Would it help?"

Vandenberg glared at me. "Of course not. You're here because you don't get upset. We've built this magnificent Air Force and more-or-less survived the most stupidly conceived demobilization in the history of armed conflict—and now I find that it cannot fulfill its basic mission right here at home. You don't have to get upset, Willy. But I do. And I am."

"Okay, Van. I understand your position perfectly. If I was to put a reliability number on that estimate, I would give it about a seventy. Seven out of ten chances it is correct. What else could have happened to the Canadian villagers?"

"They even took the goddamn dead out of the graves! It implies that they were taken somewhere—some other place and planted there, like you say. Somewhere those villagers are living, with their dead in new graves.

God. Willy, I looked up at the stars last night, and I have to tell you, I felt for those poor Eskimos."

"We can surmise a few things about the matter. First, the dead were taken. They were Inuit people, and their ancestors were vitally important to them. Meaning? They were not simply murdered or enslaved. Their beliefs were respected."

"They were taken somewhere. Intact."

"Exactly."

"What happened to the others? The boy that disappeared into the sky? And the poor man that went underground, Willy? I just—my blood ran cold!"

"Van, maybe—" He looked at me. I hesitated, unwilling to finish my sentence. I had been about to soften the stand I took in the estimate. But I thought better of it at once. If there was the remotest possibility that I was right, the position I had taken was the correct one. "Maybe we'll find out it isn't as bad as it looks," I concluded rather lamely.

Vandenberg stared at the ash on his cigar. "Should I bother to ask what Hilly thinks?"

"Hilly's still getting into the job. He's going to be fine." Vandenberg raised his eyebrows. "He's concerned about this, naturally. He said that he felt we should wait for events to unfold a little further."

"I think that we should get aggressive. I think we should attempt to shoot down one of the disks."

"Hilly won't agree."

"It's a decision for the Air Force, the Defense Department and the President." He paused. "Truman is interested in this. He's read your estimate, as well as ours."

I concealed my amazement. This was not being handled according to established procedures. The National Board of Estimate should have read my paper, questioned and revised it, then transmitted it to the Defense and State departments. Then it would have come to the attention of the White House, and only if a presidential decision was needed. "Secretary Forrestal?"

"He'll be informed in due course."

Van looked at me. At last, I thought, he's coming to the point. Van could be very subtle. The blustery, tough exterior was there at once to confuse his

enemies and make them imagine that he was vulnerable. He was a master bureaucratic infighter, and a brutal one. "I have a copy of a report from the 509th Bomber Wing in Roswell, New Mexico to Eighth Air Force headquarters." He handed me a piece of carbon paper.

I still remember the feeling of the blood rushing from my head as I stood there looking down at the laconic message from Colonel Blanchard to General Ramey, the commanding general of the Eighth Air Force.

"We have this day obtained debris from a flying disk of unknown origin and have located the remains of the object intact by photo recce. Please advise how we should proceed."

"The pictures are being flown here right now."

"Manna from heaven," I said quietly. I tried not to reveal my fear. Were we about to find people disappearing from New Mexico? Empty towns? Graveyards full of holes? "You realize that this is at present the most sensitive secret that the United States possesses. Even more sensitive than the formula for the atomic bomb."

Vandenberg did not reply directly, and I realized that I had just condescended to a man who had bypassed his own chain of command and mine in order to restrict knowledge of this secret. He obviously understood the level of sensitivity involved.

"Hilly has to know," I added.

"I think we should convene a meeting with the President as soon as we get the photographs. You, me, Hilly and the secretary. We'll decide what to do from there."

"I'll brief Hilly."

"We can get the President one-fifteen to one forty-five."

"The pictures?"

"Barring weather delays, the plane will land at Andrews at twelve-forty."

"You need to think about containment. Ramey knows. The 509th's Colonel knows. Presumably his staff knows. Was the debris found by a member of the public?"

Vandenburg nodded.

"I'll tell you, Van, I think we should be damn sure that none of these people will say a damn word. And any of them we can't be sure of—well, this is a very sensitive matter. If we have to take extreme steps, I don't think we should hesitate."

How safe we felt, plotting our strategies deep in that Pentagon office. We

were already doing the work of the others, playing into their hands, doing it their way.

If only we had understood, but we did not understand. Sometimes wars are fought without battles, won without weapons. The best strategist conceals his attack behind a shield of confusion. The best strategist can make even an invasion seem like an accident.

The others understood that fantastically powerful principle of warfare.
We did not.

Chapter Nine

That was not the only principle of strategy that our government didn't understand. It is fascinating and rather infuriating to me that Will literally cannot think about our relationship with the others except in terms of conflict. Strategies. Battles. Subterfuges. His war years have so warped his perception of the world around him that everyone is an adversary and every action a stratagem.

Understandably, the one thing he won't fight is death itself. It's obvious that he welcomes his cancer. The only reason he resists at all is to get this book finished. The closer we get to the end, the more he smokes and the harder he hits the bottle.

I have cried because of this man.

As much as I feel that he misperceived the others, he was in a sense right that they had a strategy. It would probably be more appropriate to call it a plan. A simple, staggeringly deceptive plan.

I like to think that I discovered its outlines on my own. Will missed it, precisely because of its simplicity.

While Washington stumbled the others were acting with decision. The government seems to have perceived the others as being rather ineffectual—which was no doubt exactly how they intended themselves to appear.

They had advanced ships, yes, but they'd crashed one. Washington fell into the trap of viewing the event in Roswell as a failed attempt to scout unfamiliar terrain.

Meanwhile, the others were capturing the night. Obviously they knew that an unbalanced government would be easiest for them to control. They began to achieve this control by taking an action that was calculated to cause panic in high places. They did this out in far West Texas, on the vast and dreary reserve known paradoxically as Fort Bliss.

Second Squad, 4th Platoon, Company D, 53rd Infantry dropped their weapons to the hard West Texas ground arid watched the sun go down. They were recruits just out of basic, attending infantry school while they awaited orders to occupation duty. They were involved in a war-game maneuver and wishing they were almost anywhere else.

I have reconstructed what happened over the next twelve hours from the

reports contained in Will's files.

These start in 1947 and end in 1956, when all the members of 2nd Squad were hypnotized to uncover hidden memories. That was the year Dr. Steven Reich discovered that the amnesia induced by the visitors could to a degree be broken by this process.

It is interesting to me that Will never allowed himself to be hypnotized, even though his agency routinely required that all other personnel exposed to direct alien contact undergo the process.

According to a report prepared by the Fort Bliss MP's who investigated the events that transpired that night, the squad was on a practice combat patrol. They had been assigned an area far from any expected

"aggressor" activity, and I suspect that they anticipated a quiet night.

The squad leader, Corporal Jim Collins, would have put the men at ease when they reached their destination.

He himself sat down heavily, and pulled off his pack. After a moment he signaled to his radioman, who came trotting over with his antenna bobbing. "You working, Lucas?"

"Yes, sir." Lucas bent his back and Collins pulled the handset out of its cradle and turned the radio on. He waited for the "ready" light, then made a brief transmission to Platoon.

"This is Baker Delta Mike at Checkpoint zero-two-two-Harvey-eight. Out."

The radio crackled. "Acknowledged," came the laconic reply. "Order: Rockabye."

Collins flipped off the radio. "We got an order to bed down for the night," he said. There were a few groans of relief.

No fires were allowed; they ate cold C rations. According to a typical C ration chow manifest from the period, supper could easily have been Vienna sausages, peas, processed cheese and rice pudding. There was no bread, and water was the only drink. No lights were allowed, which meant no cigarettes, and many of them wanted a smoke right now more than they wanted a woman.

There were ten of them, plus Collins. The oldest was twenty-two. That was Mastic, who had a tattoo of a long-stemmed red rose on his chest.

The youngest was a boy from Lufkin, Texas, called Sweet Charlie. Charlie Burlson.

Officially, this monster was eighteen years old. According to his birth

certificate as recorded on November 7, 1931, in Austin, Texas, he was actually sixteen.

For some reason nobody had bothered to check his age when he enlisted. It could have been his looks: Sweet Charlie was also known as "Bullhog."

His great hope was to become a member of the Army boxing team and go professional after his tour was up.

His hands were as big as most men's heads, and I believe that he had the disposition of somebody who'd swallowed a razor blade.

This kid was scraping grease out of the bottom of a Vienna sausage can and staring off across the darkening landscape when he saw something strange. "What the fuck they throwin' at us," he muttered.

The whole squad looked where he was pointing.

"Goddamn."

"That's them Marfa Lights. I know what that is."

"We're way the fuck away from Marfa, boy. You ain't got no goddamn sense. That's some kinda aggressor flare."

Collins looked at the glow. It rose a little distance from the surface of the desert and hung in the air, a round, yellow ball about the size of the full moon.

"Lucas, get HQ on the horn."

After a moment the radiotelephone burped. HQ sounded a million miles away. "Permission to transmit in the clear."

"Granted."

"We are observing a stationary yellow flare south-southeast our position at approximately nine o'clock. Advise please."

There was a fairly long silence, during which Collins watched the flare. "This is Lieutenant Ford, repeat that location."

"South-southeast our position, approximately nine o'clock."

"That is off the game board, Corporal. Assume it's unconnected activity."

"Yes, sir. Over and out." He put the receiver back into the unit. "That flare is unconnected activity," he said aloud. "HQ says to disregard."

The men hardly heard him. They were watching the flare, which was now moving about in the sky, fluttering from side to side like a leaf. For a long time nobody said anything.

The disappearance of the thing was as sudden as a light being turned off.

The men remained still and silent. Finally Mastic farted, which brought a snort of derision from Sweet Charlie.

"Season the fuckin' bivouac, right Mastic?"

"The more you eat, the more you toot."

"Vienna sausages ain't beans."

"All C rations are beans. See the numbers on these cans? This means they were made in June of 1944.

That's three years ago."

"Hell, they're new. I hearda guys openin' these cans and findin' hardtack and molasses. The U.S. Army ain't issued rations like that since the Civil War."

"What the fuck war is that?"

"You don't know about the fuckin' Civil War, Sweetie? You must be some kind of moron."

"Who're you callin' a moron, Mastic, you corn-holin' homo."

"Fuck you, you big puff! Them cigar butts is just a act."

"Knock it off, you guys."

The men settled down.

The night returned to its rustlings.

The light reappeared directly above them, covering the central three-quarters of the sky. The squad was caught in its glow. At this point they came under the direct influence of the others—in fact, entered their control.

As elsewhere in this book, I have constructed the interactions between ourselves and the others on the basis of the secret psychological studies I have read, as well as my own interviews with witnesses and astute UFO

investigators. Will has contributed virtually all of what understanding I can claim. Always I have adhered to his admonitions, "This is about the soul, the body is secondary," and, "The others are so old that they have rediscovered innocence. That is what makes them terrible."

I have also watched about a thousand feet of eight-millimeter film that Will says was made by the others at the request of the United States government, of a group of people they had taken into their possession.

In this strange, pale environment the people look like great, fleshy bags. The others flit around, fragile and almost invisible on the film. People scream, they pound their fists on the walls, they try to dig through the floor. The fear and terror are impossible to describe. Every so often a pair of those black alien eyes will glare into the camera.

Is it rage or fear I see there, or desperation?

In addition, in the case of the 2nd Squad I had the advantage of reading

transcripts of the hypnosis sessions of Corporal Collins, PFC Lucas and Private Mastic.

On that night back in 1947 the men looked up at the huge object that was now directly above them. They saw the faint lines and rivets of the underside of the great ship. There would have been sobs, muttered prayers.

Some probably went to their knees.

Jim Collins called the radio operator, who sat frozen, staring. "Lucas!"

"Momma says no."

"What the fuck!"

"Momma said no turn on radio."

"What the hell is this?" Collins stood up. His men were lying on their sides or hunched or kneeling. "Hey you guys!"

As is typical of the others' methods, a human being they had contacted before remained in a more-or-less normal state. Only later would his memory be affected.

Under hypnosis Collins recalled seeing three children in white suits hanging back at the edge of the light, watching him. "We won't hurt you, Jimmy," a voice said. Collins stared hard at them. How had they done that? The voice sounded like it was inside his head.

"Hey," he said. "You kids." In reply there was a sneering giggle, also inside his head. "This is a military area.

You kids aren't supposed to be playing around here." "Come with us, Jimmy. We won't hurt you."

"Who are you?"

One of the "kids" pointed upward toward the object. Collins had never heard of foo-fighters, flying disks or aliens, and had only the sketchiest knowledge of outer space. His first thought was: a blimp. Immediately the voice answered, "No." Then what is it, Collins thought.

He began to receive instructions subliminally. They sounded to him like somebody whispering in his ear. He cocked his head to listen, but couldn't quite understand.

He was aware that a group of about half a dozen of the children in white had just floated down out of the craft and were touching the foreheads of his men with little sticks.

A shaft of blue light hit him and in a moment he was completely changed. He was no longer the dumb creature he had been, a dull kid leading a bunch of other dull kids. Another, extremely secret life had returned to memory. He

knew these people, knew them well.

Why it would be like this it is difficult to know. Apparently certain people are leading double lives, unknown even to themselves. They are the facilitators, the ones who help the others with the rest of us, who are much wilder and more difficult to handle.

"I remember," he said.

"It's been a long time, Jimmy. You were a baby. Now look at you!" The voice that spoke was old—ancient -

and came from the night wind. And it was feminine. "I grew up, ma'am."
"Yes. You are a strong boy."

She came close to him, and he looked into her dark, dark eyes. "I am preparing these soldiers. They belong to me now, Jimmy. They are part of the Good Army."

These words filled Collins with a happiness he could not contain. He smiled from ear to ear and clapped his hands like an excited infant.

In response he was flooded with love. Meanwhile the ones in white went about their work. The ship came slowly down until it was no more than five feet above the group. One by one the 2nd Squad was lifted onto stretchers, which then floated up to the ship's softly glowing surface and disappeared.

She put a thin arm around Jim's shoulders.

"They will receive insertions like the one you got when you were a boy."

Together the two of them rose on a stream of light.

Jim went to the familiar cabinet at the end of the room and took out the tiny gray boxes he knew would be there. He knew exactly what to do—he'd seen it done it before and he remembered every detail.

He removed a long needle from the first box and inserted it into Sweet Charlie's brain. "Not him," she said softly. "Withdraw the implement." He pulled out the needle.

She did not interrupt him again, remaining silent until he had completed the operation on each squad member. "Now I will test them," she said. One by one the squad members opened their eyes and sat up.

Then they slumped over, rendered once again unconscious.

"You have done your work well."

When she spoke in his mind it was like melody. "You will be married soon, Jimmy. The union will be with your childhood mate Kathy. Together you will conceive five new ones. The last two of them will be for you, the first three for me. Is this understood?"

He nodded.

"These soldiers are from the nation that has used the atomic bomb?"

"Yes."

"The earth grows heavy with her burden of men. She calls out to me to midwife her. She tells me that her yuni is opening to the stars."

"Yes."

"Do men want to go among the stars, Jimmy?"

"We don't think about that."

"You will raise the children I give you. That is your primary task. Now take those little ones back to their encampment, and be mindful that they have all suffered this night."

"Yes."

She sent them all back, all except the one she had not implanted. This one was suitable for another purpose, and she gave him over to the ones who wanted him.

"We love you, Sweet Charlie," they said. It sounded to him like a group of children speaking in rough chorus.

Their faces were pale and soft. They looked as pretty as babies.

- Smile, Charlie.

- I don't want to.

- Smile!

- I ain't got no reason!

Charlie decided that it was time to get out of here. He thought he'd gotten up, but his body didn't work. It just didn't do anything.

He struggled, pulled, tried to stand. He didn't move an inch. Now his breath came in gasps. His throat practically closed. He couldn't breathe. They were watching him, drawing close, leering at him.

Why did it seem so right? Was it somehow connected with the life he had lived? He wanted another chance.

Then he saw Clara. "I was carrying the baby for them," she told him.

How was this possible? Clara was dead! He knew because he'd killed her.

She'd let him knock her up, she'd goddamn well known she was doing it, she was trying to hang him on a fucking meathook! "They would have taken the baby before it was even born."

And then he was in the woods, deep in the pines and Sweet Charlie had that little shotgun and he was hunting Clara down, and he caught himself that lyin' little vixen while she was gathering pinecones.

To decorate her Christmas tree.

- I was drunk.

- You can repay your debt to Clara by helping us. Charlie saw something horrible, something he did not want to face, to think about, ever ever to see. There are mirrors that reflect the soul. There are mirrors in which we see ourselves as we are.

- Momma, help me, Momma!

The other squad members were gone, only Jim was here. Jim also saw Sweet Charlie, saw the black, knotted ugliness that was the very essence of him.

"We can help you." The voice was as sweet as spring wind.

Charlie had understood that he was seeing his own soul. "Please, please . . ."

They took him then into the darker depths of their ship.

A moment later the screams started and they were wretched with a despair unlike anything Jim Collins had ever imagined. He was made to hear them for only a moment. Then somebody closed a door.

A girl came, walking toward him across the broad room. She was wearing a thin summer nightgown with yellow flowers down the front and a lace collar. With her she brought a beautiful scent, the odor of gardenias, and there was a gardenia in her hair.

Tears of recognition sprang to Jim's eyes. "Kathy," he said, "Kathy O'Mally!"

Then darkness filtered down into him, and with it the forgetfulness of deep, deep sleep.

The next thing Jim knew he was hearing the birds. He opened his eyes, stared up into a pink and fragile dawn. He was cold, his face covered with dew. He coughed, then slipped out of his bedroll.

He felt incredible. The world around him, the sweep of land, the distant hills, the deep morning sky—never in his life had he seen such beauty.

What had they done last night? He remembered voices, laughter, excitement.

A party?

No, something else. Something incredibly beautiful. They'd seen a flare and then turned in and he'd dreamed.

Yes, a dream.

Some sort of justice had been done in his dream. He remembered a judge

telling him about Sweet Charlie, that creep, and saying he was free, he had paid his debt.

Collins looked around him. Where was the big lug, anyway? Well, he'd turn up. He moved off toward the latrine area.

There he thumped himself to get rid of an oddly persistent erection. He was so damn excited he could barely stand it. His knees were weak. He wanted a woman. In fact, it was a specific woman: Kathy O'Mally from back home. Kathy of the sandy blond hair. Kathy of the soft voice, of the laughter in the dark, of the welcoming arms.

He was feeling waves of longing for Kathy so great that he could barely endure them. And here he was out in the middle of West Texas thousands of miles from her. But, God, she was a wonderful girl. He had to write her more letters, to let her know how much he cared for her.

God forbid she wouldn't realize and she would get married before he came back. Once he had kissed her at Emmeneger's Drugstore. She'd presented her cheek and laughed.

Her laughter echoed. Had he dreamed about her last night? No. He'd had a nightmare about an owl, a huge owl carrying him off into the dark. He shuddered to remember it. A creepy sort of a dream. And then Charlie - what had Charlie had to do with it?

Nightmare or not, he knew one thing. Somehow in his sleep he had made a final and absolute decision. He was going to marry Kathy O'Mally.

When he got back from the latrine he called his men out of the sack.

Sweet Charlie had gone AWOL in the night. "We'll find him back at the goddamn mess gobbling steaks,"

Lucas said.

"I'll put him on report," Jim Collins replied. He didn't like that mean cracker any more than the others.

He was listed AWOL.

By the next afternoon an entire company was searching for him. But Sweet Charlie was never seen again.

Chapter Ten

The Chronicle of Wilfred Stone

The President was uneasy, I could hear it in his voice. Had I been interrogating him instead of participating in a meeting, I would have thought it time to make my move.

Before him on an easel sat six excellent aerial photographs of a debris field, a crashed disk some sixty miles from it, and two small bodies near the disk. One was clearly visible; the other hardly more than a shadow.

"I don't see any relationship between this crashed object and disappearing people," the President said. There was the snap of challenge in his voice, and beneath it the quavering disquiet. More accurately, he should have said that he didn't want to see any relationship between the object and the earlier disappearances.

General Vandenberg knew Truman well, far better than I did. He sat on a couch across from the President, his knees comically high, a cigar stuffed into the corner of his mouth. Even sunken into that ridiculous couch, Van was an imposing man. He also admired Harry Truman, for which reason I did not like the look he sent me as the President spoke. It was almost a plea, as if he was asking me to somehow soften the blow of my estimate, and not to be too hard on his hero.

Did he fear that Truman would crack? Surely not the man who had dropped the bomb.

Admiral Hillenkoetter was standing at the windows overlooking the rose garden. Some of Bess's roses were still blooming, and the windows were thrown open to the fragrant summer air. Now he committed himself and CIG.

"I'm a hundred percent behind the intelligence estimate." "This is crashed hardware and bodies. It isn't disappearing people. I want evidence of a direct relationship. Otherwise where the hell do I stand with this thing, Hilly?"

If the President appeared uneasy, Secretary of Defense Forrestal was absolutely appalled. He sat staring at the pictures like a man looking into the face of death. From time to time he would sip noisily from a cup of cold coffee. "Of course there's a relationship," he said. "That's the whole point."

"Goddamn it, nothing's proven! It's speculation." The secretary glared at the President. "There is no question in my mind but that we should shoot one of these devilish things down forthwith."

Van leaned forward. "I concur, Mr. President." Hilly still stared out the window. "I think it's too soon for that,"

he said. The President looked toward him, his eyes flashing behind the famous glasses.

"Hilly's right. We don't need to shoot one down. We've got one, plus the little fellas that drove it."

"Mr. President, it would be a show of force. I think it's vital that we come on strong in this. These people must possess tremendous power. God knows what they might do." "Exactly my point, Van," Hilly said softly.

Vandenberg chewed the cigar. Forrestal sighed. He knew when a point had been won or lost with Truman.

"Any order to take aggressive action comes from me," the President said. "Is that clearly understood, Van?"

"Yes, sir."

"For now I want all AAF orders of the day to include a statement that there will be no hostile action taken against any unidentified flying craft entering or being found within U.S.-controlled airspace anywhere in the world, until such time as said craft is specifically identified as enemy aircraft or acts in an overtly hostile manner, which means shooting first."

My own obsession with secrecy alerted me to the flaw in this order. "Say aircraft, Mr. President. We don't want to draw any attention to our level of concern over this."

"Yeah, okay. Just bleed it into the standard orders. Nothing unusual. Aircraft."

"It's dented," Forrestal said. He had taken up the magnifying glass and was peering at the object.

We waited, expecting him to make a point. At that moment Blanche Deisinger came in with a note for the President. He looked at it and then at Van.

"The AAF base at Roswell has issued a press release about the disk."

Secretary Forrestal's face drained of color. He dropped the magnifying glass on the President's desk and bowed his head. He reminded me of a mourner at a funeral.

Van just sat there, obviously too shocked to speak.

There was a small, ironic smile on the President's face. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, leaning far back in his chair. He seemed swallowed by his office.

Hilly broke the silence. "We'll correct this problem forthwith." His voice sounded calm, almost indifferent. I knew what that meant, though: he was feeling off-balance. When he got a really bad shock was when he appeared most calm.

"I think it's obviously my baby," Van said.

"Yes," Forrestal agreed. "Your damn problem. There's never been enough discipline among those airmen of yours! My God, the things they get away with, cutting up the way they do. Van, this is outrageous!" He looked toward the President for approval.

Truman was simply listening. His eyebrows were raised. He was expectant, waiting for the suggestion that would solve the problem.

"I'll issue orders to silence them," Van said. It sounded weak, and it was. You can't silence the press with orders.

"They must be pleased as punch out there," the President said. "Think of it! They've put their goddamn base on the map." He laughed mirthlessly, in a way that told me heads were going to roll. God, Truman was a frightening man.

"To control the press, you're either going to have to use me or Hoover," Hilly said.

"Oh, brother, not him," Forrestal muttered.

Hilly smiled. "I'll agree that I'm the best of two evils, Jim."

"For God's sake, Harry, don't bring that old pansy in on this," Van said.

"Is he really a pansy?" Forrestal asked.

Truman's eyes twinkled. "I pity the President who doesn't know Hoover's weakness. Thank God FDR told me.

kindest thing he ever did." He laughed. "But if I ever get beaten by that goddamn Tom Dewey I'm taking the Hoover file home with me."

Forrestal snorted. "I don't like Hoover either, but the man runs a goddamn good department."

"As long as you have his balls in your hand," Truman said mildly. We all laughed. Truman's remark meant that Roscoe Hillenkoetter had just been given control of what would become the largest, most important and most secret activity in the history of the United States or any other human nation. Vandenburg didn't realize what Hilly had accomplished, but Hilly did. He

flushed so red that he turned to the window. I wanted to clap the man on the back, but Truman suddenly eyed me and my blood went cold.

"He's heading this thing up, Hilly?"

"Yes, sir," I replied softly. A crucial moment was upon me. All Hilly had to do was cough, and I was dead. If he but remained silent this incredible command would be mine, and the Central Intelligence Group would be established over the Air Force's S-2 Intelligence unit in control of the whole alien project.

"I think that Will Stone has guts to spare," Hilly announced. He turned around. His face had returned to its usual pallor. "He's also a damn good thinker."

"He writes a good intelligence estimate," Van added.

"Scared the shit out of me," the President said. "If the goddamn thing is right."

"I believe it is, sir," I said.

"You better, kid! Unless you want me to kick your boss's head in. So tell us what we should do."

Typical of his style. Demand the goods.

I started to reply, but Van interrupted. "First I gotta pull that press release back," he said.

I parried for control. "We'll do more than that, of course."

"Of course," Van snapped. He had no choice but to agree even though it meant CIG management.

Silence followed. They settled back to listen to what I would propose. All I could hear on that distant summer day was the pottering of a lawn mower, that and the soft crinkling sound as Van sucked his cigar. I spoke my piece. "The press is going to go wild when they see the release. The 509th Bomber Wing is big news already. The only operational atomic bomber wing in the world. As far as the press is concerned, that release was generated by the hottest soldiers in the Air Force. They're going to believe it."

"And they've got it? The thing's been sent out?" The fear had returned to the President's voice.

Hilly gave me support. "Will Stone will get the dimensions of the thing sorted out immediately, Mr. President.

General Vandenberg, I'd appreciate it if he had the cooperation of S-2 Intelligence and AAF Security."

Van went to the President's desk and picked up the phone. He spoke for a

few minutes, talking to General Nathan Calkins, commander of the intelligence division. He handed me the telephone. I mustered all the authority I could, consciously lowering my voice. As I spoke, I could see the slightest of smiles in Truman's eyes. A young man asserting himself. It must have amused this master of authority.

"General, this is Wilfred Stone of CIG. I'm going to be in command of this for CIG. We'd like to know immediately how many news organizations have received the press release, who wrote it and who put their name on it."

I received a muttered reply that he would get back to me, then put the telephone down. "Gentlemen, I think that we must realize that this situation could be very far out of control at this point. We have a crashed disk, and the bodies of aliens. We have a press release. These two things add up to a spectacular press affair.

They're going to be very excited. The story of the century, of the ages. Bigger than the bomb. We have to act instantly. I want a team to get out to Roswell with me. Small. People who are ultimately trustworthy. The minimum number needed." I went on, thinking fast. "I want to arrange to control all wire service activity in and out of Roswell. Remember that the news has to travel by wire. Also, all local radio broadcasts."

"You can use AAF Communications out of the proving grounds," Van said. "They'll have the capability you need. And there are Counterintelligence Corps officers out there who can make any personal visits needed, to set the radio stations straight."

"Gentlemen," Truman said, "keep me informed. I want you all to realize that I consider this the number one event of my administration. Beyond winning World War Two. Beyond dropping the bomb. I want to make one thing abundantly clear. There could be interservice rivalry between Air Force Intelligence and CIG, or with the FBI when they become involved. As far as I'm concerned, rivalries in a situation like this are treasonous. They will be dealt with as such. Is that understood?"

"How about Hoover?" Hilly asked.

The President sighed. "I'll deal with Hoover."

A moment later the meeting was concluded. Hilly, Van, Forrestal and I stood together waiting for our cars to be brought around. "I expect to be giving the President reports three or four times a day," Forrestal said. Now it was his turn to assert his command position. Neither Van nor the admiral, of course, wanted a single thing to do with him.

"That's a good idea," Hilly said. "I think we'd all be wise to do the same."

"We don't want to flood him with paper," Forrestal said. "I think we'd be best off sticking to the chain of command on this one."

"Except if it's an emergency," Vandenberg added. The general and the admiral were jockeying furiously with Forrestal. Officially Hilly probably had a better case in bypassing the secretary. But Van was stuck and he knew it.

Forrestal firmed his position. "If it's an emergency, Van, I'd expect to be informed immediately." The secretary's voice was acid. As his car pulled up he stepped away from us. "I'm going home to dinner with the French military charge. We'll confer on logistics at eight." He looked at Van. "I'll expect your call. I want you to tell me how you're going to turn that press release into a joke."

With that bitter offhand comment Jim Forrestal unwittingly hit upon the ingenious essence of the cover-up that has remained intact for nearly fifty years. Ridicule. It still works, even today.

9JLY47

TOP SECRET

ARMY AIR FORCE

S-2 INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

Over the past half century there have been a number of incidents of qualified observers reporting unusual aerial objects. The March 1904 edition of the Monthly Weather Review indicates that Lt. F. H. Schofield, Cdr., USS

Supply, reported observation of three large luminous objects moving in formation across the sky at 2300 hrs. This observation took place in mid-Atlantic. The largest of the objects was estimated to have a diameter six times that of the sun. Their size was not known as distance/altitude could not be computed.

The March 1913 issue of the Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society carried a report by Canadian astronomer R. Chant indicating that numerous objects consisting of "three or four parts with a tail to each part" passed across the sky. Thirty-two objects were observed over the course of an hour, moving in formations of various kinds.

An analysis of reports indicates that large luminous objects have been recorded in the night skies by qualified professional observers at a rate of two to ten per annum since immediately before the turn of the century.

The first official investigation of such objects began on December 28,

1933, when the 4th Swedish Flying Corps commenced a study of "ghost aeroplanes"

which had been observed flying in impossible weather conditions and often shining powerful lights on the ground. The investigation concluded on 30

April 1934 with a statement by Major General Lars Reuterswaerd, Commanding General, Upper Norrland Aerial Sector. General Reuterswaerd stated, "There can be no doubt about illegal air traffic over our secret military areas. .

. . The question is, who and what are they?"

Ghost aircraft continued to be sighted over Finland, Sweden and Norway, and caused extensive local forces recce, to no firm result. It is now known that no nation then had aircraft capable of operating in the areas and manner in which the ghost craft were observed to operate. Interestingly, 35% of Scandinavian sightings took place during severe weather conditions.

25 February 1942 saw unidentified aircraft appearing over Los Angeles. 1,430

rounds of antiaircraft were expended in an attempt to bring down these apparent Japanese planes. Shelling commenced at 0316 and continued until 0414 by 37th Coast Arty Bgde using 12.8 lb HE shells. Three persons were killed by the barrage. A large oval-shaped object was targeted in lights and struck by at least fifty rounds over a period of twelve minutes . The object then proceeded southward at a slow rate of speed. Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall informed the President of the incident on 26 February 1942. GHQ

officially denied that the incident had occurred.

In recent years so-called "foo-fighters" were observed by both Allied and Axis airmen during aerial maneuvers . These objects often appeared to maneuver in context with aircraft and were sometimes fired upon, but never with any visible effect. The British set up the Massy Project under Lt. Gen.

Hugh R. S . Massy, ret. , which studied the phenomenon in 1943, to no result. Similarly the Luftwaffe created Sonderburo 13 under Prof. Georg Hamper. U.S. 8th Army investigated similarly, also with no outcome.

During 1946 numerous apparent rockets were observed over northern and central Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark. A total of 2,000 sightings were officially logged. Our own intelligence indicates that these were not Soviet-generated, and their source remains a mystery. 11 July 1946 U.S.

embassy Stockholm cabled "one landed on beach near Stockholm without causing any damage and according to press fragments are now being studied by military authorities . " 12 October 1946 the Swedish government announced that 200 objects had been detected by radar and

could not be attributed to known celestial phenomena, hallucinations or airplanes. Subsequently the Greek government investigated many reports of such objects in their territory, but once again there were no conclusive results regarding nature and origin. The objects were not Soviet missiles , because they were observed to outrange any Soviet device .

The objects observed may be controlled by some intelligent agency, whether it is a human government, a clandestine private group in possession of powerful technology, or another as yet unknown source. End.

Part Two

THE LOST SHIP

Take wings to climb the zenith,
Or sleep in Fields of Peace;
By day the Sun shall keep thee,
By night the rising Star.

—The Egyptian Book Of The Dead Translated by Robert Hillyer

10JLY47

MOST SECRET

FROM: ROSCOE HILLENKOETTER, DIR. CIG

TO: STONE, WILFRED

EYES ONLY

COPY ONE OF (ONE) COPIES

1. You will proceed to Roswell New Mexico at 2200 this day aboard State Department Aircraft 003 and proceed to the site of an apparent crashed alien disk and commandeer this disk and all related material and objects connected with this disk.

2 . You will convey this material to the Los Alamos National Laboratory Complex and expedite its study by a blue ribbon panel of scientists now being assembled. This group will complete analysis of all material obtained.

You will operate in an observer/adviser capacity with this group, reporting daily to me on its proceedings .

3 . You will contain any leaks of information and end the present free access that the press has to information about this material. You will use flat, blanket denial as your primary means of covering the truth, and will orchestrate a program of ridicule against any individual who makes public statements. You are officially authorized to use all necessary means to insure absolute and continuing silence from witnesses. The use of extreme or final means must be approved by this office .

Chapter Eleven

Ridicule certainly proved to be the right tool for the job Will Stone wanted done. Forrestal may have counseled its use, but it was Will who formed the idea into policy. I envy Will the brilliance of his youth. In 1947 he was hobnobbing with the President. In 1989 I'm fighting the Bethesda Express over the validity of my unemployment insurance claim.

Will wasn't alone. The Central Intelligence Group in the late forties was one of those unlikely bubbles of talent that on rare occasions rise to the surface of the federal bureaucracy. Hilly chose two of the best of them to go with Will to New Mexico. Like him, they were former OSS types originally brought into intelligence work by

"Wild" Bill Donovan.

Donovan had found some remarkable people to spy on the Nazis for Uncle Sam.

Joe Rose was in the Russian Division of CIG and was set for big things when it became the Central Intelligence Agency and acquired a believable budget.

Joe's background was pretty extraordinary, even as the backgrounds of such men go. He'd graduated Yale Law in '33—at the age of 15. He was a large, rather somber man whose hobby, of all things, was the study of medieval secret societies. His German was excellent.

When he died Joe left Will his library. I have looked through it, searching, of course, for the man. I found a first edition of Harold Bayley's classic, *The Lost Language of Symbolism*, a marvelous treatise on the hidden meaning of watermarks in medieval papers. The book does not identify any secret societies per se but by its incredibly detailed analysis of thousands of symbols suggests that the whole of the Middle Ages must have been run by them. And they seem to have conducted their affairs in a hidden language of watermarks.

Joe was not simply amused by secrecy; he obviously studied it as an implement of government: *Martin Philippon, Ein Ministerium unter Philipp II*, essentially a book about the network of spies created by this notorious Spanish monarch; books on the Cathars, the great heretics of southern France, on the Knights Templar, on the Order of Our Lady of Mysteries.

During the war Joe had functioned as a deep-cover assassin in Germany, murdering targeted Gestapo agents in order to interrupt investigations when they got too close to Allied spy networks.

According to Will, Joe's genius was that he had made the Gestapo itself his chief ally. How? He gave them assistance in their work against the Reds. Thus the Gestapo was in the position of trading the lives of its own operatives for information about Stalin's Red Choir.

How he managed all this and still maintained "deep cover" Will did not say. Maybe Will's love for his old friend has combined with time's notorious corrosion of memory to enhance his stature a bit.

Even if that is so, the man's books do suggest that he was remarkable.

After the war Joe had become known as one of the best interrogators we possessed. He cut his teeth on the very Gestapo officers who had helped him during the war, and after that shifted to work with home-front communists. (Will still calls them "commies.") He was a master of persuasion, moving with the greatest care from one level of tension to the next, until his subject finally broke. He worked only with words, having like Will acquired a dislike of violence during the war.

Then they had Sally Darby. Every once in a while I fall in love with Sally Darby, looking at the pictures of her Will keeps around. She had a complex, distracted expression and the darting pace of a sparrow.

Did Will love her? Of course he did.

She had graduated Smith with honors, and she could if she wished fulfill the image of the Smith girl. This is how she came to CIG.

In 1938 she moved to Paris and met Janet Planner and William Carruthers. Even after the fall of France she stayed on, so certain she was that the United States would remain neutral.

When occupation shortages became annoying she took a vacation in Geneva, where she met Bill Donovan.

Or rather, as an American resident of occupied France, he sought her out.

She returned to Paris as a newly recruited OSS agent—and was trapped there when Germany declared war on us. Her friendship with Countess Eva Rollentz meant that her German social connections were excellent.

She specialized in going to parties with generals and field marshals, then wrote richly insightful essays about them that ended up in Washington. My guess is that she must have slept with them, but it was never mentioned and I certainly never brought it up with Will. I don't think he ever slept with her.

It must have been idealism that kept this wealthy and well-connected woman with CIG, or it may have had something to do with the grudging love that certain people develop for their organizations.

Even bureaucracies have their patriots.

The three of them were a strike team. Will says, "We thought we were generals, but we were really front-line soldiers, dogfaces, poor bloody infantry."

They were sent to Roswell by the fastest possible means, which turned out to be the secretary of defense's personal airplane.

This must have added to their hubris. It is important to remember at all times that Washington felt as if it would be able to control the situation. The spaceship had crashed, for God's sake.

To hear Will talk about Forrestal's airplane, it was a sort of flying Yale Club with cigar humidors and fine brandy and Persian stretches on the floor.

I have done some research, and it's true that the plane was exceptional. It was more than nice enough to make three smart young strivers feel very, very important.

In addition to the pilots there was a communications officer with a radio shack up front. He was capable of reaching the telephone operator, and there were ordinary phones throughout the plane. You could call anywhere in the world from the craft, as you could on some of the more extravagant ocean liners.

As soon as they were airborne the threesome had a meeting. Joe Rose smoked one of the secretary's superb Havanas and Will indulged in old cognac. Sally sipped a Prior's.

Will reported their conversation to me as if he remembered it verbatim. Given his prodigious memory and his ability to call on pretty extensive notes and diaries, it might be verbatim. If so, it was so pompous that, given the circumstances, it was rather poignant.

"Is Van going to shoot one of them down?" Sally asked. To his face she would certainly have referred to him as General Vandenberg.

"Harry nixed it," Will replied. I imagine that he sniffed the bouquet of his cognac, perhaps even took a sip.

"We discussed it this afternoon in the Oval Office."

Joe examined his cigar. "We'll have to get compliance from any civilians involved." He blew a reflective stream of smoke from his mouth. "I can manage that, I suppose."

"The civilians?" Sally lit a cigarette. "They'll object." "They didn't object in Frankfurt, Sally." "The law—"

"Moves slowly."

Joe was looking out a window, staring long at the passing blackness. "I can see a few stars. Quite a few, actually." "Any of them moving?" "What if there were, Willy boy?" "We might be in danger."

Will insists that he said those words. I wonder. Had he been genuinely afraid, I think he might have actually been more open to the others. He would have bargained with them, then, or recommended that the President attempt to do so.

Will reports that the three of them spent some hours discussing how they would handle matters in New Mexico. It was decided that Sally would proceed to Los Alamos and start groundwork there, preparing a secure area to receive whatever Will managed to send her for analysis, as well as finding housing for the scientists they were expecting CIG in Washington to locate and make available.

Joe was to open an office in Roswell and comb the airfield and the countryside for people who knew something about what had happened. His mission was to spread silence.

They slept from about two-thirty in the morning. Will was awake for a short time at four, Washington time, and found that his stateroom was filled with blue light. His immediate impression was that an engine was burning.

Even now he doesn't know the meaning of the blue light. He is aware that it is associated with the near presence of the others. When I brought up that blue light is in folklore connected with the presence of ghosts, he gave me a sidelong look and said, "If they have developed a technology that enables them to control the soul, they might have some sort of contact with the dead."

He has worried that the world of the dead might be the primary human reality, and that the others have invaded more on that level than on this.

For my part, I wonder if the dead exist.

The changing pitch of the props woke Will for good about half an hour before they were due to land. He called for coffee and lit a cigarette. The right side of his head hurt, just behind the ear. One of the stewardesses said it looked like a spider bite.

One of the many signs of close contact with the others is a painful red mark on the temple, just like that. Did they revisit Will while he was on his way to Roswell, perhaps renewing whatever they had implanted into him

when he was a boy?

I don't doubt that they did. He hated the idea of it, and refused even to speculate.

The radio operator appeared with a message from Hilly, which he and Sally decoded. In those days they used a code book and a sheet of paper. The codes were kept secure by frequent changes. Now of course codes change constantly and everything is done by computer. I suppose in 1947 it was still conceivable that a spy might carry his codes in the heel of his shoe.

The message explained that AAF Intelligence had contained the press leaks by intercepting all wire-service copy leaving New Mexico and sending agents to every radio station that had picked up the story.

That must have been reassuring, but they still had an enormous problem. The news release was now appearing in places like the San Francisco Chronicle and the London Times.

They landed in Roswell and prepared to meet the Army Air Force officers who had found the disk and so irresponsibly announced this fact to the public.

They were waiting on the apron, and Will recalls them as an impressive-looking group of soldiers. Colonel William Blanchard was flanked by two men he recognized from their file photos. One was Lieutenant Peter Hesseltine and the other was Major Donald Gray. Even then Don Gray was considered one of the best Intelligence officers in the Army Air Force. Will admires him tremendously. In 1979 Don Gray admitted before television cameras that the debris of an alien craft had been located in Roswell. It is a testament to the effectiveness of Will Stone's work that the press still considers the whole thing a fraud, even after that.

Gray, Blanchard and Hesseltine were obviously wary of the three CIG officers. Blanchard was motionless, his legs spread apart, his hands on his hips. Will recalls that Gray stood at attention, perhaps awed by the impressive Defense Department plane. Hesseltine fidgeted, his fingers drifting like nervous ghosts to the knot in his tie.

Like so many soldiers they had a boyish quality to them.

Men like Blanchard, who had flown in long-range bombers in the Pacific, were a singularly untroubled group.

They had done more killing than anybody else in the war. But they did it from such a height and in such safety that it remained quite abstract to them. They read paperback thrillers on their long journeys to Japan, then spent a

few minutes blowing women and children to pieces. On the way home they returned to their books.

Men like Blanchard looked as they felt: invulnerable.

By comparison, the CIG officers were tense and obviously uneasy. They were squinting, troubled by the blasting desert sun.

The first one out of the plane was Will Stone—a pale young man in what was probably the most expensive suit any of them had ever seen. The way Colonel Blanchard looked at him, Will thought that he was sizing him up as a pansy.

During the war years, Will had acquired the ability to read lips, meaning that he was able to tell what the three officers were saying to each other before he got into earshot. The conversation he reports is most revealing.

"The second one's the hired killer," Blanchard said softly.

"He looks like he could break you in half with his breath," Hesselstine added.

"Shut up, Hesselstine," the colonel muttered.

When Sally appeared the soldiers reacted again. "Wow," said Hesselstine, "I could stand to nibble that sandwich."

"Don't worry yourself, boy. Gals like that don't eat Army meat."

"Yes sir, Colonel."

"You'd be lucky to get her to bed the Duke of Windsor."

"Hell, Colonel, try the Pope."

"Saint goddamn Francis of Asskissi."

The irreverent Hesselstine laughed at Colonel Blanchard.

"You'd blister your lips on that hot little ass," the colonel said in reply to the sneer.

Major Gray, most proper, was disgusted with them. "You gentlemen are sick."

"I've got it figured," Lieutenant Hesselstine said in an insincere twang.

"These palookas are the team that pulled down Al Capone."

"Those were T-men."

"Hell, Colonel, I'm not talking about the team that arrested him. I'm talking about the team that gave him syphilis."

"Not the Virgin Mary? Don't shatter my dreams."

"Hell no. The pansy dancing up the front. The way they did it, the guy danced up and breathed on old Al.

Presto, one case of drippy dickie."

Now even the Colonel was disgusted. "I'm going to have you up on charges for language like that before breakfast." "Yes, sir!"

As the CIG party approached, Blanchard locked eyes with Will. "Look at him," he said under his breath. "My opinion has changed. Fancy-pants is the gunman. The other guy's a toughie with a heart of lead. And that lady's probably some kind of whiz kid. Nobody's ever managed to get in her pants. That's as good as law."

There were introductions all round, and then they moved to a bacon-and-eggs breakfast at the officer's club, which was a barracks full of surplus furniture and steam tables. In lieu of air conditioning there was tinfoil on the windows to reflect the heat.

Will recalls being surprised to find that the food was more than passable. No powdered eggs here, no Spam.

He made an immediate frontal assault. "I propose that we go to the site at once," he said around a mouthful of sausage.

Colonel Blanchard responded nervously. "We've got to have confirmation on that from Eighth Air Force."

It was as Will expected. Those words meant to him that Vandenberg was going to try to keep the whole affair under his own authority. Will would perhaps have preferred to play a more cunning game, but he had no time.

He decided to use his strongest card at once. "We should have brought a doctor's note," he said to Blanchard. "'Dear Colonel, Please let these children do what they have to do.' Signed, Dr. Harry Truman."

Blanchard was the hottest colonel in the AAF. He didn't want any waves that might disturb his shot at becoming commanding general of Eighth Air Force. Undoubtedly Will was right to threaten him with serious waves.

He capitulated, at least partially. "Okay, fair enough," he said. "Hesseltine here will take care of it."

"Very well." Will relaxed. He thought he'd won his point.

Major Gray got up from the table. "I'm afraid I've got to leave you folks in capable hands. I'm off to Wright Field with the debris we collected."

Will was furious. "We expected to see that material!"

Gray glanced at Colonel Blanchard. The colonel spoke quickly. "It's already loaded aboard a B-29. General Ramey's going to press conference the stuff at five this afternoon. My own second is flying it up to Forth Worth and Major Gray is going with him."

Joe was charged with the practical task of keeping things quiet. He

exploded. "Press conference! That's just what we need."

"We're saying it's a mistake. A rawinsonde. That's a type of radar target." Will was uneasy about Major Gray.

He told me that he would have "taken care" of the major in short order. In Will Stone hate and envy are essentially the same emotion. "In the end Don told the truth," he says. "It took him thirty-two years, but he did it." His tone is curt because of his envy for the man's moral clarity. Not that the statement helped. Don Gray's words collided with the brick wall of Will Stone's cover-up and quite simply died.

Now Joe went to work on the colonel. "We want air transport," he said. "Mr. Stone wants to be on site within the hour. And we want full support. CIG intends to stay physically with the disk and the bodies until they are delivered to Los Alamos."

"I understood they were following the other debris to Wright Field."

Legally, the AAF had jurisdiction at Wright. Los Alamos had just shifted to Atomic Energy Commission control and was thus no longer within the reach of the Joint Chiefs, specifically Van. That was the main reason that Hillenkoetter had decided to park the disk there. Smoothly, Joe made his case. "The best scientists in the world are located at Los Alamos, and it's only a few hundred miles away."

"Washington already set it all up," Sally added.

Colonel Blanchard raised his eyebrows. "I don't know if we have the whirlybirds available to take you to the site."

"You have them," Joe said. "I counted six on the apron as we landed."

"I meant unassigned."

Once again Will played his high card. "Reassign them. Surely you can do that for the President."

Blanchard gave Hesseltine a curt nod, and the young officer went, off to arrange matters. The CIG group finished breakfast and went over to the colonel's office to wait. On the way Will picked up a copy of the Roswell Daily Record. The headline made him furious.

RAAF CAPTURES FLYING SAUCER IN ROSWELL REGION

Will was so enraged that he was afraid to speak lest he jeopardize their tenuous rapport with the colonel.

Once in his office they looked at more photographs of the disk. These were copies of the aerials they had seen at the White House. "What is the status of these pictures," Sally asked.

"Restricted."

"I'm officially changing them to Top Secret. Take them off the walls and place them under covers, please, Colonel." She had no legal right to change the classification level of anything, but her action was typical of the way these people regarded themselves.

Blanchard and Hesseltine fell all over each other to get the pictures off the walls. They stacked them backside up on the colonel's steel desk, and covered them with pink sheets of paper stamped top secret in block letters.

Joe, as liaison with Air Force Intelligence, made a call to S-2 at White Sands to confirm that all wire-service output from the area was still being intercepted. Given the headline that had just appeared, it was probable that reporters by the hundreds would be on their way to this place within a matter of hours.

Will was leaving for the helicopter port when he received word that Hilly was on the line from Washington.

He took the call in an empty office he later found out belonged to the base press officer who had issued the offending press release. Hillenkoetter was abrupt. "What's it look like?"

"Well, Admiral, I'm not sure. We only arrived here an hour ago. They didn't have any transport prepared. Then they wanted to send me in convoy. Now I'm in a whirlybird. It's a struggle dealing with them. And they've hijacked the debris they've already collected. It's on its way up to Wright via Eighth Air Force in Fort Worth.

Ramey's going to hold a press conference claiming the debris is a crashed radar target."

"Don't get your back up. The President approved that last night. By the way, Blanchard doesn't know it yet, but he's going on leave this afternoon. His second's gonna take the heat. Van wants to make sure nobody throws up on his favorite boy's pretty blue uniform."

"I want support from Van. So far it looks like I'm getting anything but."

"I'll have to go through Forrestal."

"Van will totally ignore you."

"Forrestal is too weak a weapon, Truman too strong."

"Meaning that I'm on my own."

"Get out there and get that disk. And the bodies. Especially the bodies."

Bodies. Disks. Debris. Huge newspaper headlines. Will experienced a moment of despair. How were they ever going to hide this thing? "I've got to

tell you that I don't think the radar-target story will work. The press'll never buy it."

"They will, old son."

"But it's absolute, obvious crap. Admiral—"

"You add together all the reporters west of the Mississippi and you still haven't got enough smarts to tune a radio. They'll buy it. Anyway, I read reporters as frustrated egos. They don't want to hear anything about superior aliens when they're already suffering from the sneaking suspicion that they're nothing but pieces of shit themselves."

"You're being briefed by the headshrinkers again, Hilly. And you're believing it." "No—"

"Remember what happened last time? When we tried to psychoanalyze Stalin and we predicted—"

"Never mind that. Truman forgave me."

"Good luck with your radar targets, Admiral. You and Van and Ramey are going to need it."

Will said nothing of this disturbing turn of events to Sally and Joe as he hurried through the beating sun to where the helicopters were firing up. His two associates would remain at the base to begin setting up a field office.

Will had never flown in a helicopter before. As a matter of fact, none of them had. In those days they were quite a new technology. Will was strapped into a miserable plastic seat and given a helmet that was not sized for him. It stank of the sweat of many heads.

The machine rose into its own cloud of dust. A moment later Roswell AAF was swinging away below. The pilot soon set a course to the north and west.

On the way the machines seemed to make dozens of banks, all of them very steep. Will held tightly to the edge of his seat and the lip of the windshield. He vividly remembers the feeling that he was going to fall out at any moment.

"Want to listen to the radio? We can pick up KGFL in Roswell."

Radio. What more could a man want? "Yeah, fine." Will tried to sound enthusiastic. Unfortunately the station did not offer dance music, at least not at nine-fifteen A.M. Instead, he was forced to listen to something called Trading Post. A rancher called in wanting to trade a "black shoat" for a set of golf clubs. A beauty salon owner would trade a Toni Professional Permanent for three nights of baby-sitting with her two sons.

And Will was on his way to view the bodies of beings who had been born in another world.

The sun was already high, pouring through the cockpit, burning against everything that it touched. Hot, exhaust-filled wind swirled in the sides. The stink of gasoline mixed with the stink of two sweaty men.

Roswell sank away behind them. They were alone now between the sky and the land. It was so big, so empty.

When Will saw the disk he almost choked with excitement. They swept around it in a long circle, and it gleamed in the sun. It gleamed and glimmered, and beside it he saw two khaki tarps.

They landed in an area that had been roughly marked with some cloth tape. Here the brush had been hacked away, but not enough to make much difference.

A hundred feet away lay the most extraordinary object on the surface of the earth. Will had appropriately large thoughts: the pyramids, the Acropolis, the Colosseum at Rome, the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building, all the works of man. Among them there was no such work as this.

Our history, too: clambering up from the muck, making the first fire and the first pot, building our cities and our empires, the dreams of sultans and kings, the hoarse chorus of the modern democracies—in all of those thousands of days, there was no such day as this.

And Wilfred Stone was here.

CARSWELL ARMY AIR FORCE BASE PRESS OFFICE PRESS CONFERENCE REPORT

8Jly47

LOCATION: HQ 8AF Ft. Worth Tx.

PARTICIPANTS: Brig. Gen. Roger M. Ramey, CinC 8th AF; Major Donald Gray, S-2, RAAF; Warrant O. Vinton Yancey, Base Weather Officer, Carswell AAF.

Various newspaper reporters identified herein as "QUESTIONERS."

General Ramey and officer specialists met with members of the press on the evening of July 8 to discuss the misidentification of a rawinsonde (type ML-306) as a so-called "alien flying disk."

GENERAL RAMEY: Thank you, gentlemen, for coming to this conference. I trust that we can rectify some pretty exciting reports that have been circulating about the pile of debris I have here. [Points to debris on desk and floor of office.] With me I have Major Donald Gray who is the expert

intelligence officer who originally recovered the material, and Warrant Officer Vinton Yancey of our weather office, who can make a positive identification of the material. Now I'd like to open it up to questions.

QUESTIONER: So this is all it is? A pile of tinfoil?

GENERAL RAMEY: That is correct. Perhaps Warrant Officer Yancey can explain.

W. O. YANCEY: This debris is from a so-called radiosonde. A rawinsonde-type device. It is very familiar to me. We release these sondes as target devices for airborne and land-based radar. It is one of the primary things we do here at Carswell.

GENERAL RAMEY: Radar practice is one of the fundamental training functions of the AAF. They also do it at Roswell, don't they, Major Gray?

MAJ. GRAY: Yes, sir.

QUESTIONER: Major Gray, aren't you an intelligence officer?

MAJ. GRAY: Yes, sir. That is correct.

QUESTIONER: And yet you thought this was a flying saucer? This is just tinfoil.

MAJ. GRAY: The misidentification was a result of a series of miscommunications.

QUESTIONER: Didn't you personally gather this debris in a field near Roswell?

And personally identify it as a crashed disk?

GENERAL RAMEY: There are misidentifications of one object for another all the time. This was a case of mistaken identity. This is a complicated business, identification of one object or another.

QUESTIONER: This rawinsonde is a weather balloon? Can we say that?

W.O. YANCEY: No, sir, this is -

GENERAL RAMEY: Say that. That's fine. It's close. You can tell the way the wind is blowing looking at these things. A mistaken identification of a weather balloon. As far as I can see, there is nothing to get excited about.

Would you concur, Major Gray?

MAJ. GRAY: Absolutely nothing here to get excited about. What we have here is a common device in use in the Air Force.

GENERAL RAMEY: Thank you very much, gentlemen.

Chapter Thirteen

Describing his first moments on site, Will leaned back and coughed a long, productive cough and closed his eyes. "It was like being in heaven," he said. "It was the highest of high adventure."

Will was a romantic, and as such a dangerous man. Romanticism rejects the ordinary, seeks the impossible and demands death for failure. The ultimate romantic was the Waffen-SS officer standing in the turret of his Tiger tank, battling the cold plains and blood of Russia.

I am not a romantic.

As the helicopters wheezed into silence Will strode up to the disk. So far nobody had entered it, nobody had even come this close.

A breeze brought an unusual smell, a sort of sulfurousness mixed with decay. It was coming from beneath the two tarps that covered the bodies of the pilots. Flies buzzed around them. Death was death, the flies knew.

To Will's absolute astonishment a civilian came strolling out from behind the disk. "Hiya," he said congenially, "I'm Barney Barnett."

"Who?"

"Barnett. I'm with the survey."

Will was thunderstruck. Surely nobody had been so remarkably stupid as to assign a civilian survey team to this site. "You're surveying this crash?"

He laughed. "Nah, not this. The mapping survey."

The man had blundered into the most secret place in the country. His unexpected appearance reminded Will that things were in a profound state of disorder. It went deeper than a simple lack of security, and it arose from a number of factors.

At this moment in history the government was undergoing intense change. The Air Force was being split off from the Army; the Department of Defense was being formed out of the Old War Department; the CIG was becoming the CIA; the American war machine was being dismantled and the Cold War was just starting.

The U.S. had no agency in place to meet the aliens, no properly positioned personnel, and no organization at all. Will felt as if he was being rolled in a wave.

"Mr. Barnett, go sit over there," he said, pointing to where the copters had

landed.

"Is this a flying saucer?"

"We're just examining it."

"Because I had a look at those bodies before you guys got here, and they surely aren't human beings. No, sir."

"All right."

One of the enlisted men escorted the surveyor away. Will returned to the business at hand.

The device was about thirty feet in diameter, dented and collapsed in the front. You could see where it had skidded across the ground, making a track about sixty feet long. He walked around it, looking for an entrance.

Given the circumstances, his approach was admirably straightforward. One would have thought that considerably more caution was in order.

There was an opening on the bottom. When he bent down he could see a small chamber inside, but the hatchway was too tight for him. At that point he considered looking for a more lightly built volunteer, but the thought of not being the first to enter the craft was unacceptable to him.

Then he found the place where the blast had occurred. It was a tear about eight feet long toward the rear of the craft. Inside he could see shreds of what looked like wax paper and bits of tinfoil. This was a much more promising point of entry.

He called to Lieutenant Hesseltine, who—still green from the flight—came reeling up with a flashlight and -
absurdly—a pair of pliers.

"I'm going in, Lieutenant."

"Is that wise?"

"There's nothing left alive around here."

"I mean—what you might encounter. Booby traps."

"I doubt if they had time to set traps."

"I gotta tell you, I'll back you up but I don't like this." As they talked Will examined the wound in the disk. The debris found on the Ungar ranch had obviously come from this area. He looked inside, shining the flashlight around. Then he leaned into the opening.

His head was in a small room that had been badly damaged by the explosion. The gray floor had collapsed into the base of the craft. The walls had been made of sheets of wax paper with yellow flowers pressed between them. He recalls the cheerful shambles as seeming very sad.

He wanted to get into the room. The trouble was finding a handhold. Everything was torn, bent or broken and it all looked extremely fragile. Experimentally he pulled at a shred of the paper. It proved to be as tough as the soldiers had claimed it was, and as it turned out he had no difficulty using it to pull himself up into the craft.

Beyond the damaged room the machine seemed to be largely intact. It was gloomy and he had to use the flashlight. He went deeper into the ship.

He told me about this in such matter-of-fact tones that I must surmise that it never occurred to him to be afraid. It would have occurred to me, I can tell you.

In 1947, of course, they barely considered issues like the danger of alien bacteria and viruses. Were such a craft to appear for the first time now we would immediately take steps to isolate it from the environment, and would approach it only with the most carefully prepared personnel and the greatest caution.

In those days, though, a vaguely briefed young man seemed completely adequate to the task at hand.

He must have been mad. That was the most dangerous place on earth, the interior of the disk, and it was being penetrated by an ignorant kid in shirtsleeves. His only equipment was a flashlight that kept going out.

He called back to Hesseltine, "Looks okay."

"See any controls? Equipment?" Children in the cookie jar.

"Not yet," he reported. He had expected to find a flight deck complete with rows and rows of dials, sticks for the pilots and perhaps a couple of jumpseats for deadheading buddies.

To move forward he almost had to crawl.

Then he arrived in a round central room, and there had his first taste of what he had come here to find, the deep unknown.

The floor below him was black and shiny and curved. It looked and felt as if he was standing on the top of an enormous bowling ball. To his left and right were two more of the wax-paper doors. They were really just wooden frames with the paper glued to them. It all looked delicate and oriental. Had it been a few years earlier, they would have been suspicious that this was a Japanese secret weapon.

The black curved surface he was standing on was extremely slippery, and he fell forward when he shifted his weight. He hit the wall, which was made of a gray substance as thin as the wax paper that formed the doors behind

him. It wrinkled but snapped back into place as he regained his balance.

He thought he heard something on the other side of the wall.

He shone his light but it seemed dim, and the outside world was far away. Not only was the interior of the ship extremely dark, it was incredibly quiet.

Behind him he could see Hesseltine's head and shoulders as he squinted into the craft. There was a strange effect, as if the man was underwater.

Nobody then understood the significance of the black object Will had walked across. He has told me that they eventually decided it was a gravity motor, and still operating at very low power. It was distorting space and time. Without knowing or understanding, Will was feeling the effects.

He called Hesseltine, but the man simply stared. He hadn't heard a thing.

"Hesseltine?" The lieutenant was no more than eight feet away. "Hesseltine!"

He frowned. "Are you there, Mr. Stone?"

"I'm here."

"Where?"

"Right in front of you!" Will stepped across the black object into the destroyed room.

"I couldn't see you."

"I'm going to go through into the front. Time me. Fifteen minutes. If I don't call or come out, come in and get me."

I asked Will if at that point he was afraid. He stared at me for a moment, then continued his narrative.

Again he crossed the slippery black object. This time he shone his flashlight into the darkness beyond the door. The room was empty. He proceeded.

Where was he now? Surely he should be up against the front of the craft. But there appeared to be more rooms beyond this one. This seemed completely impossible. He shone the light around, finally hitting on another hatch like the one he had just come through. He wriggled through it also, and finally found himself at the front. Here the ceiling was dented, corresponding to the damage that could be seen on the outside of the ship.

There were three tiny seats before a small, disappointingly simple control panel. It consisted only of a thick black rod with a round knob on top, protruding from the center of a console in front of one of the chairs.

That was all there was in the way of controls. Beyond the console were two half-moon-shaped windows in the lower part of the nose. They were

embedded in the dirt, which he could see when he shone his light on them.

The shape of the windows, like two slitted, glowering eyes, made Will distinctly uneasy. They seemed familiar—or perhaps simply right—and that unsettled him. It was as if he was being affected by a powerful unknown beauty or horror, he could not tell which.

At this point things began to happen to him that the scientists he has worked with all these years still cannot explain. It was things like this that first made Will aware of the fact that the others had something to do with the life of the soul. As with so many people, merely being close to these high artifacts drew him toward his soul's denied truth.

Suddenly a scene swam up before his eyes, a terrible scene from early in the war. In 1940 he was working in France, before his transfer to Algeria, which had taken place after the United States entered the war.

He was in Marseilles developing contacts with the infant French Resistance, building an investment against future hardship, as it were.

He had just met Sophie Tuttle.

Never in all the time I spent with Will did he so much as allude to having a sexual relationship with a woman.

Sometimes he would mention Sophie, though, and stare long into space or take a hit from his bottle.

Now her face seemed to come looming up out of the dimness of the room. He describes himself as profoundly shocked. It seemed to him that time had been erased, that Sophie was back, real and alive.

He even smelled her perfume, L'Heure Bleu. She'd had a bottle of it. She'd worn it when they met for the last time, in Marseilles. He heard her sigh, heard the rustle of her dress. A snatch of song from the war,

"Radio-Paris ment," to the tune of "La Cucaracha." Radio Paris lies. Children would sing it, "Radio Paris lies, Radio Paris lies, Radio Paris is German." Sophie would also sing it.

He lost her the same way he lost the others, because the Gestapo was an excellent organization and he was a confused, underfinanced, frightened man alone in an enemy land.

His feelings were extremely intense. He was crying, and amazed at his own tears. It was as if she was just as wonderful and alive as she had been when their sun shone.

Then he snapped back, aware that he was not sitting in a cafe listening to old Jacques Reynard relate the manner of her death. Werner Roetter's

triumph.

He told me that he had been friendly with the Gestapo chief—in a distant way. They had strolled together along the waterfront while Will knew that Roetter's underlings were boring holes in his lover's teeth. The strategy was to break her by disfiguring her.

After the war Werner Roetter joined West German intelligence and had a fine career. A sudden heart attack took him in 1977, and Will had sent a note to his wife, Hildegard. From time to time over the years they'd exchanged Christmas cards. "Why not? You get tired of hate, and Sophie is dead." My God, I'm glad I've never fought in a war. The sun in wartime, the songs of the birds, the rattle of children shoes on the cobblestones, sudden rain, it all came back to him.

I don't think that he ever truly forgot Sophie, and I feel sure that she was his only real love.

He remembered that first time in the ship as a confrontation with deep personal truths. "I recalled the way a forty-five feels in your hand, kind of ugly and kind of beautiful at the same time. Then you fire it and the top of a man's head flies off. Against the red blood the brains look white, and his skullcap and hair make a slap when they hit the wall. His arms fly akimbo and he drops. The face of a man suddenly dead captures all the sweetness life offers—if the bastard didn't suffer."

His friend Reynard told him that Sophie tucked in her chin before they hauled up the rope. Even at the end she was trying to live, hoping against hope that the noose would slip and give her a few more minutes.

It was like Will to have kept up with Sophie's murderer but to have lost track of the man who tried to save her.

Will claimed that he'd lost track of Jacques, but I discovered that he had been a Resistance hero and had not died until 1983. He was well known in Marseilles.

To see Jacques again Will would of course have had to face the pain of his love.

He told me, "I had the feeling I was being examined, as if my soul was being evaluated."

The room was tiny and hot and it stank, something he had not noticed at first. He described the smell as being a mixture of sulfur and Sophie's perfume.

He began to touch things. It was almost compulsive, as if some part of

him was trying to hold reality that way. He ran his fingers along the little seats, the console, the black control stick, the ugly, squinting windows.

And then he saw the boy.

He screamed—finally. I would have done it a long time before. In his surprise he dropped his light, which rolled across the floor, making wild shadows on the walls and ceiling.

But for its dismal glow, now coming from beneath one of the chairs, the room was dark. He tried to fumble for it but he had entered a state of fear so deep that he could not coordinate his actions. He jerked and twisted, then sank to his knees.

He was helpless, sinking down, crouching, his head touching the cool, soft floor. And the being was there before him, a figure no larger than a child, grown in his mind to the proportions of a giant.

From the San Francisco Chronicle, July H, 1947:

DISK SOLUTION COLLAPSES

"Flying Saucer" Find Turns Out to Be a Weather Balloon

A platter-puzzled nation thought it was about to get the answer to the mystery of the "flying disks" yesterday.

A press relations officer at the Roswell Army Air Force Base in New Mexico announced without qualification that the 509th Bomber Group had picked up a flying disk on a nearby ranch last week.

There was immediately much telephoning from the Pentagon in Washington, and then Brigadier General Roger M. Ramey, commanding the Eighth Air Force at Fort Worth, said the object had been identified as the wreckage of a high-altitude weather observation device.

Originally, he said, it consisted of a box-kite and a balloon.

"The wreckage is in my office right now and as far as I can see there is nothing to get excited about," he said.

General Ramey later made a radio broadcast further to deflate the excitement caused by the first announcement.

The device, a star-shaped tinfoil target designed to reflect radar, is incapable of speeds higher than the wind.

The mysterious flying disks, which have been "seen" all over the nation (except Kansas, which is dry), have been described as traveling at speeds up to 1,200 miles an hour.

Chapter Fourteen

The Chronicle of Wilfred Stone

The small figure started to move forward. I could see its shadow coming quickly down toward me. I reared up and, shrieking like an animal, slapped at the thing.

It fell lightly against me and all of a sudden I was holding a dead child in my arms.

He felt almost like nothing. He was only a shadow in my arms, but he was so dead. It seemed to me that I was in the presence of an overwhelming tragedy or sacrifice. This was no "alien" disk, it was a thing of God's and I was holding a dead angel.

I cradled him in my arms. He was amazingly light; I doubt if he weighed more than ten pounds. I turned toward the entrance and started to carry him out. But it was too dark. I had to put him down on the floor and get the flashlight. Going down into the more intimate darkness of the floor I scabbled around as if I was in my own kitchen hunting for a dropped matchbook in the night. I could feel dust there and the slight indentations made by many steps and sharp heels, and the base of one of the seats stuck down with glue.

There was such a feeling of something being alive in that room that I was almost unable to remain there when I finally grasped my flashlight. I shook it and got some dim light out of the stubborn battery.

I shone it into the dead face. There was an absolutely immediate and stunning sense of recognition.

He was—I remembered him.

I was confused. What did these reactions mean? I could not understand them and decided that they must stem from the sheer strangeness of the situation. Obviously this being could not be familiar to me—not him.

At that time I never imagined I'd seen the aliens before. Never dreamed it.

In fact this specific being had carried me in his arms in 1916, and now had given up his life for me and for mankind. I did not understand this until quite recently.

Roswell was playacting of the most serious kind. The crash was intentional, the deaths were intentional—and it was all done to present our deepest souls with a clear choice. I am sorry to say that we chose fear.

The being's skin was as white as chalk, his lips were thin and his nose was small. His eyes were sunken into his head, black pools. The most notable thing about him was that his head was large, almost grotesquely so.

Had I seen him on a streetcorner I would have assumed that he was a child with water on the brain.

But he was beautiful. Incredibly beautiful. His skin shone in the light, as delicate, as pure as the wings of a moth. Beside him I was big and ugly and coarse. My hand came up and I felt the wonder that a dog must feel close to the thin and glowing skin of his master.

He smelled of sulfur I thought at first, but then I noticed something else familiar about the odor.

In the terror of his death he had soiled himself. If you have never been in war that might surprise you. But I have seen situations where every man present has done it.

What was he? I cradled him and felt again that he was as light as a cloud. Had he been alive I wouldn't have been surprised to see him turn into a gas, or just disappear. I carried him through the strange central area, slipping across the curved black floor as I hurried toward the light of the familiar sky.

I pushed my way out through the shredded paper room and stepped into the welcoming familiarity of the desert.

The light made me squint, but as my eyes got used to it I was shocked to my depths by what I saw. There were people here, about a dozen of them, sitting around smoking and chatting about the disk. Hesseltine darted around among them like a nervous fly.

Cradling the body I turned away from the bland, staring faces. It seemed to me that I was protecting something sacred.

"Get them out of here!"

"They won't move! They're from the University of Pennsylvania, and—"

"We're out here in the middle of nowhere and we might as well be in a bus station." I glared at the obstinate, curious people. They seemed ugly, vicious, as if they were heartlessly intruding on my private grief. "Get out of here or I'll have you arrested!"

They stirred a little. "We're archaeologists," one of them said, "we'd like to know the age of this artifact."

The arrogance did it. "Can't you see you're not wanted here!" I was actually screaming. "This is a restricted zone! It's against the law for you to be here."

"Maybe we need a new law," one of them said.

"The hell we do, we need new people, if you're any example!" They were the enemy.

"I think our Congressmen are going to hear about this."

"Draw your gun, Hesseltine."

"Look, I—"

"Draw the goddamn weapon!"

"I haven't got a gun. Sorry. We didn't have armory orders."

I stared at the civilians. "You're moving out. Or I'm filing charges of spying with treasonous intent." This seemed to make them uneasy.

Long sun was shining on my burden, a perfect child in a silver suit, the most beautiful person I had ever seen.

If God's angels must meet death, then surely they looked like this.

The ground quaked and rolled. Then somebody was pulling at my shoulder. "Mr. Stone!"

I realized that I had fallen forward into Hesseltine's arms. The little being was between us. Hesseltine took him and laid him beneath the shadow of his craft.

Seeing this the civilians grew visibly uneasy. They began moving away in uncertain little clumps.

"My God, that thing is ugly."

I looked down at it, confused by Hesseltine's comment. My heart was full of tenderness, reproach rising in my voice. And then I saw it in the light of the setting sun.

How I could ever have viewed this thing as beautiful I did not know. It was worse than ugly, it was something from the depths of hell.

The skin was like wet, white paper. The eyes were black slits, the nose as sharp as a blade. Even in death the lips seemed to be twisted into a sneer.

I became aware that the thing had leaked fluid all over my bare arms. I wiped them, trying to get it off.

Quite abruptly, his face completely expressionless, Hesseltine leaned forward at the waist and vomited.

When he straightened up he commented only that he hadn't eaten all day.

For the first time I realized that it was late, and I had entered the disk

early in the morning. "What time is it?"

"Six-twenty."

"How can that be?"

"Well, you were in there all day."

I was astonished, and then angry. "Why didn't you come in and get me!"

His face hardened. He swallowed. There was a mirthless laugh. "I must have asked you to come out fifty times—"

"And I never answered and you—"

"You told me and told me to leave you alone! And frankly I didn't like your tone. I'm an officer and I expect the same minimal respect from civilians that I get from the enlisted men. And that stands even if you are some kind of goon from CIG."

"I didn't say a word to you. And I was only in there ten minutes at most."

He turned away. I watched him moving in the pale light, looked toward the civilians now bunched in nervous little knots, at the enlisted men leaning up against the truck that had arrived during the day.

"Hesseltine." I drew him a short distance into the desert, out of the others' hearing. "Let's try to talk coherently about this."

"Sure. Coherently. I'll make a note of that."

"Listen, we're out here alone with this thing, and I think we ought to at least try to be on the same side.

You're Air Force and I'm not and that makes me suspect. I realize that and I accept it. But you've got to work with me because I'm who the President sent down here."

"I can't be faulted for my performance, if that's what you're driving at."

How was I going to reach him? "You've performed excellently. You're a top man in a crack outfit and it shows."

"Well, good."

"Look, I don't know what the hell happened here today. It felt like I was in there ten minutes scouting around and bringing out that body. End of story."

"You didn't talk to me?"

"Not to my knowledge."

He lit a cigarette, took a long puff and faced into the sunset. "You were in there for approximately nine hours and we spoke every fifteen or twenty minutes. You refused water and food and threatened me with arrest if I

entered the disk."

The young man stood with his feet apart, wearing his lightweight summer uniform, his cigarette between his fingers and an expression of hatred on his face. During his day at the door of the disk, he had come to dislike me intensely.

"It's obvious that there's a lot more going on here than we can as yet even begin to understand. We need to proceed with ultimate caution."

"I just don't want to hear any more threats from you."

"Lieutenant, just scratch them from the record. I don't remember them. As far as I'm concerned they won't happen again."

He had stopped listening to me and was watching the desert. I followed his eyes. There was a light out there, winking on and off, moving slowly closer. It seemed to drift first to the left and then the right, then disappear for a few moments, only to pop up closer.

Hesseltine seemed transfixed.

"Hesseltine?"

"Yeah."

"Shouldn't we take some steps?"

"Oh, yeah." He trotted over to the site. "Okay, guys, get ready for chow. We'll be doing guard duty two by two all night so they'll have sent a couple of vats of Java. Chow's from the officer's mess if you can handle food that good."

The light was boring down on us, glaring malevolently through the evening.

Fear literally rolled over me, transforming me in an instant from a competent if slightly uneasy CIG officer into a terrified little boy.

One moment I was standing there and the next I was racing through the underbrush. I had no clear thoughts.

I just wanted to get away from that light. I was drowning in the ocean of desert.

The light was boring into my back, I could feel it. Terrible, as if it was cutting right through to my soul. It was huge behind me now, and I could hear it snarling and grinding and roaring as it came down upon us like a runaway train from the beyond. And then it rumbled past me, an ordinary ten-ton army truck. I tried to change my wild flight into more of a trot, but everybody had seen me capering in the headlights. The men looked at me as I strode into the light of their gasoline lanterns. I tried to manage a dignified

appearance.

My obvious vulnerability must have been reassuring to Hesseltine, because he seemed less inclined to hostility. "We figured you'd seen a snake," he said. "No. I thought—"

"That they were coming to get back their own? Not yet. It was only the supply wagon. Since we're obviously staying the night."

"Good thinking," I muttered.

The arrival of another truck meant that we could finally strip the area of unwanted civilians. Hesseltine's men had efficiently gotten identification from all of them. I put the sheet of names and addresses in my briefcase.

As soon as the food and field kitchen were unloaded the civilians, docile from an afternoon's barrage of threats, were put aboard the trucks for the trip back to their base camp near Lincoln.

I intend now to confess everything that happened on that hot July evening. A Wednesday night my yellow diary tells me. It says, "Stars. A late moon. Toward morning clouds racing from the south. Didn't drop below seventy-five."

That is all it says, just those few words to describe the night on which my soul was wrapped with chains.

Some were chains of love. And some were chains of death.

Chapter Fifteen

The Chronicle of Wilfred Stone

The trucks pulled out at seven-thirty, and I made a note to address the issue of FBI coverage on the civilian witnesses in my next contact with Hillenkoetter. The civilians took all the color and chatter with them when they left. The atmosphere of the camp became charged with order. Airmen talked quietly together, busying themselves with tent erection and food preparation. Soon the smell of spaghetti and meatballs filled the camp.

Once the sun set an impenetrable darkness seemed to rise up out of the land itself. But for the interior of a cave, I had never been in a place so dark. The moon was past its last quarter and not due up until after midnight, so there was nothing but starlight and the gas lanterns of the camp.

The evening star was Mercury, and I found that I could make it out quite easily on the western horizon until nearly nine o'clock. Its light was a pure, heartbreaking green. When it finally followed the sun it carried with it our last link to the day.

The disk reflected the yellow-white light of the lanterns, all except the tear in its side, which was absolutely black.

The meal was served off the back of the field kitchen by the cooks. It would have been nice to have some beer, but only ice tea and Cokes were offered. I set myself up in front of my tent and dug into my rations.

Hesseltine followed me. He pulled his camp stool over and sat down.

"Look, I'm sorry about earlier. It was a rough day."

"Forget it. Instantly. You were out there for nine hours waiting for me, for God's sake. You had every right to be angry."

We ate in silence, two men in a wavering pool of light. "We're in radio contact every half hour," he said.

I watched an enormous moth lurch into view. It was so big I thought at first that it was a bat. It seemed like something from a time of giants.

The smell of the alien bodies drifted through the camp. I lit a cigarette, defending myself. "When'll they be bagged up?"

"They are, unfortunately. But they need cold storage. Even rubberized

canvas can only hold in so much stink." Hesseltine gazed at the disk. "You sure you don't know what happened in there?"

"I haven't got the faintest idea."

"You're sure you weren't knocked out? But then how the hell did you keep answering me. I mean, we talked."

"I can account for ten minutes, maybe fifteen."

Something howled out on the desert. As it died away it was answered by the low, uneasy laughter of the men. "Coyote," Hesseltine shouted.

One of the noncoms waived the animal a reply.

"The men'd be more comfortable out here if there was more of a moon," Hesseltine said.

"All we have to do is wait it out until morning, then we'll get transport instructions from Los Alamos."

"Probably gonna be a long time to morning."

The cooks had brought a portable radio, and they set it up in the middle of the camp. At nine-fifteen a program called Musical Showcase was broadcast from KGFL in Roswell.

The men sat around smoking and talking softly while Texas Joe Turner's voice echoed into the desert night: Love, oh, careless love,

You see what careless love has done to me. . . .

As one grows older even the hardest parts of the past acquire beauty. Days I tried to forget now return to me transformed, Algiers balanced in evening light, the rains of winter sweeping old Marseilles, that black camp night with the disk and the bodies.

The last of evening slipped into the sky and Hesseltine went to his own tent. I hadn't brought my bags, not so much as a razor, so there was little I could do but lie back on my cot. When I'd set out this morning, I had no idea that I wasn't going to come back tonight.

I was still suffering from the lack of depth in our planning. What I had to do was to concentrate on my immediate objective, which was not to let the bodies and the disk out of my sight until they were safely inside a facility controlled by the Central Intelligence Group. I could only trust that Sally was preparing that facility and sending me the transport I needed to reach it with the disk.

I coughed, realizing that my mouth was dry and filthy with soot from the chain-smoking I'd been doing since I got out of the craft. In those days I don't think there were filter cigarettes. If there were, they certainly didn't work the

same way they do now. I recall cigarettes that could really give you a hit. It was wonderful to smoke in complete innocence, unaware of the dangers and oblivious to the discomfort of the few nonsmokers. I don't think that we could have made it through World War Two without cigarettes. Smoking was practically the only relief.

I gave Sophie a Pall Mall when I first met her, and she threw herself back in her chair, making great clouds of smoke and laughing. "Do not smoke any more of these," she announced. "Cigarettes this good can be traded for lives."

The radio station went off the air at ten-thirty and the camp settled down. It was reassuring that there would be sentries on duty through the night. I could not have slept at all without that.

It seemed to me that I'd just closed my eyes when I suddenly found myself wide awake. It was extremely quiet. I sat up on the cot. The air in my tent was thick and stifling. I was thirsty. My head was pounding.

A child was standing in my doorway.

I practically leaped through the back of the tent.

Then he was gone. I took a couple of deep breaths. Hallucination? Walking corpse? I was prepared to believe anything.

I told myself that I must have been having a nightmare which had mixed with some real event, perhaps a sentry passing my tent.

I felt for my shoes, found them and carefully knocked them against the ground as Hesseltine had advised.

Scorpions were a constant problem in the desert. I put them on and stepped into the night, guiding myself with my flashlight. By the radium dial on my watch it was three-fifteen A.M. I was at once exhausted and unable to sleep.

I went to the field kitchen to try to find some water. There was a big canvas bag sweating on the side of the truck. I drank from the aluminum cup attached. The water was on the warm side and tasted strongly of the rubberized canvas of the bag. I almost gagged, thinking of the rubberized stink of the body bags that held the aliens.

The moon was now a yellow sickle on the eastern horizon. Despite its presence the desert sky was so clear that I could see the firmament in detail. The Milky Way stretched from horizon to horizon. Color was clearly distinguishable among the stars.

As I watched I began to notice a curious phenomenon. One by one the stars were winking out. Now what did that mean? As I looked I discerned a

line almost halfway across the sky. Ahead of that line there were stars.

Behind it, none. And it was moving in our direction.

I assumed that it was a cloud. It had been a clear night. Where there had been a breeze earlier it was now still. I watched the cloud continuing to cover the stars. The night was also extraordinarily quiet, so quiet that I could hear the hiss of the match as a sentry lit a cigarette all the way on the other side of the compound.

In the brief glow of his match I saw a large owl standing right behind the man. I was quite surprised. I'd not been aware that owls got that big, nor that they walked on the ground. "Hey," I said softly in his direction.

"Look behind you."

He pulled out his flashlight and turned around. The bird's eyes shone. It didn't move or blink. Fascinated, I began walking closer. I'd forgotten all about the disk.

We kept it in our beams as we walked forward. One moment it would look like an owl and then next there would be the flash of something else. The sentry was beginning to breathe hard.

"It's an owl," I said. My voice sounded thick, as if the two of us were shut together in a closet.

"No, sir."

The creature made an abrupt move, causing the sentry to jerk back. His light tumbled away into the brush.

I gasped in a breath and forced myself to a state of control. I told the sentry to be calm.

The next instant there was an echoing shriek above us. I looked up into absolute blackness. There was nothing, not a star, not a glimmer of reflected light, not a cloud.

Then from high, high up there came pitiful cries.

"What the hell is that?"

There was no reply. I shined my light around.

No sentry. No owl.

The dark was clutching at me. I turned around, thinking to go back to the camp and get the others.

I heard something moving in front of me, as if the creature we'd had in our lights was coming closer. When I turned back I saw nothing.

Events began unfolding with the mysterious grace of tragedy. I heard the sentry babbling and whining—but he was close now.

He kept saying something—"Oh, no, oh, no"—over and over. As his voice died to whimpers I tried to call for help.

I felt a curious, soft, deep blow to my belly and wound up on my back on the ground. I was winded and my flashlight was gone.

When I tried to sit up I felt strong hands against my shoulders.

"Oh, God."

"Why do you call on your gods? We're the only ones here." The voice was swift and breathless and tough and far from human.

"We have the bodies," I said. "We can give you the bodies."

The reply was a snicker, then another sentence also delivered in that curiously breathless, mechanical tone:

"We're gonna take you for a ride."

I remember next a wild jumble of dark images: cactuses, shrubs, running animals, then grass and sheep and suddenly rushing up a mountainside and flying off into midair. I was kicking and grabbing at things, totally disoriented.

And then I was high in the sky. As I passed over the summit of a mountain I saw the twinkling lights of a city arrayed before me. It was beauty so extreme that I wanted to somehow link myself to it, to melt into it.

When I was a boy I used to lie on the roof of our house watching the sunset, and sometimes when it was orange and red beyond the hills, I would wish that I could somehow let the beauty fill every molecule of my being.

I was free in the empty sky, slipping like a night bird through the air. Before me were those living diamond lights. There was something so wonderfully perfect about it, so very right that it seemed like a part of heaven.

Beyond the vision but emerging from it there was a sense of what I can best describe as something a religious person might call purity.

I went down close to the silent streets, passing the Plains Theatre with its darkened marquee for Cheyenne, looking into the window of a shop called Mode O'Day. Even the mannequins in their frocks seemed incredibly beautiful.

And then the street ends and there are great hangars around me and lights buzzing with June bugs and moths and the huge planes of the 509th with their atomic babies in their bellies and I am rolling, floating, swimming in the air.

I saw a soldier walking along the tarmac with a rifle slung on his shoulder. Closer and closer I drifted, until I was just above him. I grabbed the hat off his head.

He looked up but I was pulled into the sky before he could see me. Then he searched the empty tarmac around him. "Well, shit," came his echoing shout.

I had that hat clasped in my hand and no intention of letting go. It was damned important and I knew it. If this fantastic thing was really happening the hat would be proof. I watched the world race and swoop past. There was a measure of control, and I found that I could to a degree influence my height and direction by twisting and turning.

I was feeling grand and alone in the sky when I turned onto my back and found myself face to face with a wall of dull gray metal. It looked like the same substance as the disk.

The thing must have been there all along. But how could it have been so silent, so stealthy? The base had obviously failed to detect its presence and it was huge, far larger than the little ship that had crashed.

A question flashed through my mind: Why hadn't they simply picked up their machine? They must have the means to do practically anything.

The metal was no more than two feet away from me. I stretched out my hand but it moved away, remaining an inch or so out of reach.

I heard a buzzing in my head. It got rapidly so loud that it hurt. Involuntarily I clapped my hands to my temples but the sound was inside. I couldn't protect myself from it. It began to shriek like a desperately straining motor.

I dropped about fifteen feet. Then the buzzing got low and I felt as if I was swimming in butter. There was a smell like burning rubber.

Was this magnificent device breaking down the moment I thought it invincible?

I fell another thirty feet, a truly sickening lurch. I tried to turn over, to see how close I was to the ground. No luck. Couldn't do it. The burning rubber smell was strong now. A dusting of what appeared to be warm ash was drifting down onto me from above. The buzzing changed to a noise like continuously shattering glass, a crashing that went on and on and on.

Again I fell, this time it seemed for miles. My muscles knotted against the feeling that the land was going to slam into my back any second. I kicked and screamed and grabbed air. So much for self-control.

Then I stopped falling. It was so abrupt it hurt. I drifted a little in one direction and then another. Throwing myself from side to side I tried to turn over, somehow to get my bearings. More of the ash sifted down.

I seemed to stabilize. Better. Now I was regaining a measure of stability, even moving forward. They must have fixed it, thank the good Lord

It was like the bottom dropped out of the world. Again I raced downward, the wind screaming in my ears.

Above me I saw all the stars of the sky.

The disk was gone! They'd left me here in midair and I was dying.

Crying, my throat aching with grief and dread, beyond panic, I fell to my final end.

Then I realized that I wasn't moving anymore. It took a long moment to understand that the absolute lack of motion meant that I had landed.

I felt around beside me. Dirt. Weeds. I was on the ground! I sat up. Incredible. Out in the middle of the desert.

When I stood up I found that I was pretty weak at the knee, but otherwise I seemed well enough.

Very suddenly a wave of nausea overwhelmed me. I staggered, but it subsided without developing into anything.

I took stock of myself. Physically undamaged. Badly shaken, though. Alone in the middle of nowhere. The stars above me, the empty land around—I could be hundreds of miles from the camp.

There was little point in walking. In this darkness it might even be dangerous. I thought I might at least try to get my bearings, though, and began trying to locate Polaris. First-I searched the sky before me. Then I turned carefully around, making certain that I was in exactly the opposite position.

I found myself staring at the camp, which was ten yards away.

For a moment I thought it might be a mirage. Then I walked forward. No, it was quite real.

One of our sentries challenged me.

"Wilfred Stone."

"Oh. Couldn't sleep?"

I walked into the gleam of his flashlight. I fought back my panic, my wild disorientation. "Actually, I was thirsty, but I got a little sidetracked." My voice shuddered toward a calm I did not feel.

"I wouldn't leave the perimeter again. We've got a guy lost already."

"Really?" It was as if cold fingers were compressing my heart.

"A PFC name of Flaherty. Sentry on the last watch. Nobody can find him."

I remembered him screaming in the sky. But I—hadn't that all been a nightmare? I'd been getting some water, then I realized I was carrying an overseas cap. I held it up, looking stupidly at it. The sentry looked at it too.

"You find that in the desert?"

What could I say? "In the desert." The lie was essential, and not just to protect my reputation. It defended my sanity.

He took the cap, looked at the name in the band. "It's his all right," he said. He trotted off toward Hesseltine's tent, which was lit and active, no doubt because of the missing man.

I walked into the center of the group of tents and vehicles. The disk still glowed in the lantern light.

I at last understood that I wasn't looking at an accidental crash.

This disk hadn't crashed at all. It had been put here, and the bodies along with it.

It was bait. And we had taken it, and were wriggling on the line.

In some murky place our struggles must be ringing a bell. Somebody had heard the sound and grasped the line and set the hook.

And now they were going to reel us in.

TRANSCRIPT: INTERROGATION OF ROBERT UNGAR
LOCATION: ROSWELL ARMY AIR FORCE BASE, HRKJ
INTERROGATOR: JOSEPH P. ROSE, SPECIAL OFFICER,
CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE GROUP
1ST INTERROGATION SESSION

JPR: Let's get names clear. You are Robert Ungar?

RU : Bob.

JPR: I should call you Bob?

RU : I've been Bob so long I ain't gonna hear you, you say Robert.

JPR: Bob. Age forty-seven?

RU : Yes, that is my age. Sir, why have I been brought here?

JPR: Informally. A few questions.

RU : This is a room with barred windows. I would like to know if there are charges against me.

JPR: Well?

RU : Because I am going home if there ain't. I can go home. That's the law.

JPR: You are in a special federal compound.

RU : I am returning home.

JPR: Yes, that's right. And so please before you go answer me a couple of questions.

RU : No! Hell, no!

JPR: For your country, sir.

RU : Oh, Lord.

JPR: Did these alien beings say anything to you?

RU : I—I—they—who?

JPR: What did you see?

RU : There was a big blast in the sky the night of the second. There had been a hell of a thunderstorm out in the desert. Strange. We looked at it. The lightning was striking the same places over and over again. I was worried my sheep was gonna bunch against a fence. I went out there first thing in the mornin' and my daughter and son and I picked up a lot of junk. We thought it was a crashed plane so we told the sheriff -

JPR: Right away?

RU : Naw. A few days, maybe—when I got to town. Ain't got the telephone out there.

JPR: Did you see any of these alien beings?

RU : What the hell are you asking me? I saw some wreckage that a military officer told me was from a spaceship. I didn't see none of these beings you talk about.

JPR: But you stated to the papers that you had seen this crashed disk. But in fact you saw no such thing.

RU : I saw what I said! Now look, are you trying to twist my words, or something? I didn't see no alien beings, sir. I saw what I said I saw.

MR. ROSE CONCLUDED THE FIRST INTERROGATION SESSION.
THE PRISONER WAS KEPT IN

ISOLATION UNDER CLOSE GUARD FOR TWENTY-FOUR
HOURS.

2ND INTERROGATION SESSION

JPR: Good morning, Bob.

RU : I have committed no crime but I can't even get to a telephone. I want a lawyer now.

JPR: Let's just finish these couple of questions and you can go.

RU : Go home?

JPR: Yes, sir.

RU : Well, what is it now? I still ain't done anything. They had me in a

cell in a brig. They fed me pancakes and water and coffee.

JPR: Would you like a cigarette?

RU : I sure would. What are those?

JPR: Medallions. A fine cigarette.

RU : [Lights up.] It tastes like hot air.

JPR: Sir, you are going to have to change your story for the press. You are going to have to tell the truth.

RU : I did that! I ain't never done nothing else in my life, fella!

JPR: We know that it's fun to get in the papers with a big story. But you have to tell the truth.

RU : The whole story was from them officers! The bum; wrote it! I am hardly even mentioned.

JPR: You have to tell the truth. And the truth is you found a weather balloon and pretended it was a flying disk, and you did that for the fun of gaining publicity.

RU : Oh, Lord. You are twisting—changing—why don't you put them officers in jail?

JPR: We have to do this. They have to say this. For the country, Bob. For America.

RU : (Long silence.)

JPR: How many kids do you have?

RU : Two living at home and one married up in Albuquerque.

JPR: Kids are a beautiful thing. Do you hunt and fish with your boy?

RU : And with my girls. My oldest is an excellent shot.

JPR: Yes. Now, what you are going to do is to tell the papers that you found the weather balloon and called it a flying disk as a practical joke.

RU : I told the truth!

MR. ROSE CONCLUDED THE SECOND INTERROGATION SESSION. THE PRISONER WAS KEPT IN

ISOLATION UNDER CLOSE GUARD FOR ANOTHER TWENTY-FOUR HOURS. THE PRISONER WAS

STRIPPED AND THE FURNITURE WAS REMOVED FROM THE ISOLATION CELL. THE PRISONER WAS

GIVEN ONLY WATER.

3RD INTERROGATION SESSION

JPR: Good morning, Bob.

RU : I am in a lot of trouble.

JPR: You certainly are. Your country needs your help and you aren't helping. America needs you and you are saying, "No, not me, America. I am sticking by my story so I will look good."

RU : How can I get myself out of this mess?

JPR: Say what we need you to say. You were telling a tall story. There was no flying disk. Only a weather balloon.

RU : The officers said it! I didn't! Make them say the truth!

JPR: They gave a press conference in Fort Worth with the commanding general of the Eighth Air Force, and the officer that said it, Major Gray, he has taken it back. He is doing this for America. Because he loves his country even more than his own reputation.

RU : I love my country, but what am I doing in a cell without even my clothes! This is not what I call America.

JPR: But you love your country.

RU : I sure do.

JPR: Well, that's progress.

MR. ROSE CONCLUDED THE THIRD INTERROGATION SESSION.
THE PRISONER WAS RETURNED TO

CLOSE SECURITY, BUT HE WAS ALLOWED A WALK IN
ROSWELL IN THE COMPANY OF OFFICERS.

HE WAS FED A LARGE MEAL AND ALLOWED TO SLEEP IN A
BED IN A ROOM IN THE VISITING
OFFICER'S BILLET.

4TH INTERROGATION SESSION

JPR: Good morning, Bob.

RU : Hiya. I want to go home. Are there any charges against me?

JPR: You can help your country. We cannot let it be known that this disk is real. We are just not ready.

RU : Why not!

JPR: Look, Bob. I hesitate even to tell you, but I will. I will tell you as long as you promise me on your honor -

and I know how important that is to you—promise me that you will go to your grave with this secret.

RU : Yes, sir, I will do that.

JPR: Well, the truth is that we have reason to believe that these aliens have stolen a number of people. Men, women, children.

RU : Oh, my Lord.

JPR: We cannot allow the people to know this until we can defend ourselves. Bob, America is being invaded by an alien force. And they are doing strange, awful things that we do not understand. That is what is secret.

RU : May the Lord be with us.

JPR: I agree. America has a need for you to say it's a weather balloon, so the people won't panic. For the sake of the country. Uncle Sam needs you.

RU : Not to lie, he don't.

JPR: Oh, Bob. There must be something.

RU : I don't lie. I ain't never done it.

JPR: Then what will you say?

RU : I want to help my country. Damn right I do. But not with a lie. I found what I found and I know it. I will say that I am sorry the whole thing happened. I'll say that and you can make it look like what you want.

JPR: I have your word of honor? You will say in a press conference we call that you are sorry you ever reported you'd found this? And we will imply that you were wrong about what you found.

RU : I will not lie, but I cannot stop you from doing it if that is what you feel you gotta do.

JPR: We all have to make sacrifices. You say you are sorry in a press conference and we will handle the rest.

From the Roswell Daily Record, August 1, 1947:

HARASSED RANCHER WHO LOCATED "SAUCER-SORRY HE TOLD ABOUT IT

Robert Ungar, 47, Lincoln County rancher living 30 miles southeast of Maricopa today told his story of finding what the Army at first described as a flying disk, but the publicity which attended his find caused him to add that if he ever found anything else short of a bomb he sure wasn't going to say anything about it.

Ungar related that he and an 8-year-old son Bob Jr. were about 7 or 8 miles from the ranch house of J. H. Foster, which he operates, when they came upon a large area of bright wreckage made up of rubber strips, tinfoil, a rather tough paper and sticks.

On July 3 he, his son, Bob Jr., and daughter, Mary, age 12, went back to the spot and gathered up quite a bit of the debris. There was no sign of any metal in the area which might have been used for an engine and no sign of propellers of any kind, although at least one paper fin had been glued to some of the tinfoil.

There were no words to be found anywhere on the instrument, although there were letters on some of the parts. Considerable Scotch tape and some tape with flowers printed on it had been used in the construction. Ungar said that he had previously found two weather observation balloons on the ranch, but that what he found this time did not in any way resemble either of these. "I am sure what I found was not any weather observation balloon," he said, "but if I find anything else besides a bomb they are going to have a hard time getting me to say anything about it."

Chapter Sixteen

I had been eager to follow up on the story of Corporal Jim Collins. What had happened to him? Had he married Kathy? And what of their children?

Will agreed that we might find out a great deal if we contacted them. I wondered, for example, why the visitors had been so intent that he marry Kathy, and what had been meant when they said that the first three children out of the marriage would be theirs.

Like everything the visitors seem to do, what happened that night at Fort Bliss had significance on many different levels.

Fortunately it wasn't hard to locate Jim and Kathy. Because of his visitor contact, Jim has been quietly monitored by the government for most of his life.

The Collinses live in Everly, New Jersey, a small town near the Pennsylvania border. As I drove up from Maryland I expected to enter a devastation of refineries. I found farms and trees budding with spring, and a town of big old houses and wide porches.

Jim is now sixty-one, Kathy sixty.

They live in one of the big houses, and there is a swing on their wide porch. Kathy cultivates a wonderful garden and they make their own wine from the grapes grown on an arbor in the back. On the walls of their living room are large framed photographs of their children, and they have a friendly old dog named Horace. I found it all very annoying.

They were at first extremely suspicious of me. I gave them the cover story that Will had recommended, that I was a new caseworker with the Agency and I just wanted to reconfirm some details. Given what I already knew about them, having read Jim's hypnosis and all the secret memoranda about the incident at Fort Bliss, I was entirely convincing.

Once they were sure that I was genuine, they became warm, friendly and open.

The Jim Collins who had never heard of any aliens and thought that flying saucers were "crazy" was transformed into a knowledgeable individual with considerable information about the visitors. His wife claimed ongoing contact, and suggested that some of their children were involved.

What I wanted to know was whether or not Kathy had ever given a baby

to the visitors. When I asked her, she grew furtive. I didn't quite understand, then. But I do now.

Although shocked by my question, Jim and Kathy were fascinated that I wanted to know more about their personal relationship with the visitors. In all the years that they had been in contact with MAJIC, the secret group that controls human/alien affairs, they had never once been interviewed about this aspect. All of the other interviews had centered around the design and function of devices Jim had seen and touched. When he was lifted by the blue light, did he feel a tingling sensation? How hard had it been to insert the needles into the heads of his fellow soldiers? That sort of thing. MAJIC wanted to know how things worked, not what was being done with them.

Typical shortsightedness, in my opinion. The problem with keeping things like this secret is that they are removed from the free market of ideas, and understanding proceeds at a much slower pace.

I wanted to concentrate on Kathy's childbearing years. Why would the visitors want human children?

I went to Everly expecting answers to some very weighty questions.

I got Jim and Kathy. Even though their happy marriage and successful lives put me out a bit, I also found them a winning, charming couple. They were intelligent and full of humor.

And they told me this story.

Jim knew exactly what he wanted to do when his squad was granted compassionate leave just after the disappearance of Sweet Charlie.

Obedient to the subliminal instructions of the others he rushed straight into the arms of Katherine O'Mally.

He took the train to New Jersey with the explicit intention of asking Kathy to marry him. Since the night he'd fallen in love he'd been writing her a letter every couple of days.

By the time he arrived home he had just three days left before he had to report to his new unit in Pennsylvania.

He beat his most recent letters, so nobody knew he was coming. His own home was dark when the night train let him off. He went to Kathy's house and stood under the porch light nervously twirling his hat in his hands. Finally he gathered the nerve to ring the doorbell.

And there she was, her hair up, her robe fluttering about her, her face shiny with night cream. He gaped, he couldn't help it. She was more beautiful than anybody he had ever seen in his life. She was even more beautiful than

she herself had been when he last saw her.

"Oh. My. God. Jim." Her voice was like a touch of air in the summer leaves.

"Hey."

"I'm a mess!"

"Nah."

"J-Jim—oh! Come in, come in!" She swept the door open. "Mom! Dad! Jim is here. Jim is here at home!"

He entered the house, feeling huge. Everything seemed too delicate, chairs that you could sit right through, pictures that would fall off the wall if you so much as brushed them. A vase of white flowers on the hall table might wilt if you breathed your beery breath upon them.

And it was so quiet! He was used to Army places now, green and gray and hard, full of loud guys who didn't know how to talk without dropping "fuckin' " or "cocksucker" at least three times into every sentence.

The flowers were gardenias. He looked hard at them, as if trying to consume them with his eyes. Though he couldn't say it or even think it very clearly, the obscure hurt that filled his heart when their scent reached him was a dirge for all the Army had taken from him.

Uncle Sam had stifled the little bit of poetry in him, but he didn't know that. He only knew that the gardenias were real nice.

There were greetings then, Seamus O'Mally and his wife Angela meeting him halfway down the hall, and the embrace of his pipe-smelling and her Lanvin bodies. Then there was a lot of laughter and Kathy disappeared to put on a new face.

"What about your folks?"

"They—I'll—do you want me to come back later?"

"No, son, but your mom would be glad to see you."

He recalled his own dark front porch. "I think they're at the movies. That's what I think."

"They didn't know you were coming?"

"I just got leave—I guess I got here ahead of my letters."

"Kathy didn't get a letter, she would have been singing the house down."

He laughed nervously. He was no good at these conversations with the parents. All he wanted to do was talk about her. Kathy looks real nice. Kathy smiled when she saw me. Was she surprised!

But he couldn't do that. That would be so incredibly embarrassing. He

slid his hands along the tops of his legs. Seamus O'Mally lit his big Kaywoodie.

"I think the Dutch are falling apart in the Far East," he said.

Jim thought vaguely about the little boy who put his finger in the dike. The Dutch were in the Far East?

Where? "Yeah," he said, to cover his ignorance.

"The only empire that will survive the war is the British. The sun never sets on the British Empire. Except for India, sadly enough."

"India," Jim said. "Gandhi. He's—I like him." He thought of the little Indian man in the newsreels. Jim knew a good man. "He's got a lot of good things to say."

Seamus O'Mally stared at him, puffing slowly. Angie sipped her coffee, and he had the feeling that he'd just dropped his pants, somehow.

And then all of a sudden here came Kathy. Lord, she was pretty! Her skin was glowing. He'd never seen such a glow. And the smoothness of her skin. He prayed to God to let him touch his lips to her skin and he said God, if you will help me to kiss her lips.

He felt smiles in the air.

She laughed. "Emmeneger's is open till ten now."

"I thought they closed after supper."

"Not anymore. You've been away too long. Everly is a big town now."

"We got a Chevy dealership," Mr. O'Mally said. "Modern times have come to Everly."

"Cab Calloway came to Newark," Kathy said. "I didn't go, but Jane Krebs said he would put his handkerchief to his nose. They weren't supposed to know what he was doing, but they all knew."

"Hi-de-ho," Jim said.

"What was he doing?" asked Mrs. O'Mally.

"He was clearing his nose," her daughter replied.

Jim realized that he was desperate. Never had he had intimate dealings with a girl. Never had he asked a virginal, pure American girl -

His body was now thinking for him. "Let's go to the soda fountain, Kathy."

She smiled. "I'd like to very much, Jim."

"Don't forget your own folks," Mrs. O'Mally called after him.

"I won't, ma'am. We won't be long."

As they passed through the front hall Kathy took one of the gardenias

from the vase and put it in her hair.

They went out together, running in order to avoid Seamus O'Mally's sprinkler.

They had been raised in the American middle class with its puritan traditions very much intact. You didn't make advances, let alone kiss a girl, except after a number of dates and a declaration of intent. You never

"took advantage" by touching her in intimate places. And certainly you never, ever did that thing.

Kathy and Jim went down to the end of the block, walking in the intoxicating scent of the gardenia.

The odor calmed Jim and made Kathy seem familiar and accessible. They had a choice of walking around a small park or going through it. Jim didn't even ask; he led Kathy into the park. They passed up the first two benches, then found one in a more-or-less secluded corner. It was backed by a hedge, so that it could not be seen from the street. It overlooked the small pond at the center of the park.

"Remember ice-skating," Jim said, "last winter?"

"It seems so long ago."

"My tour of duty is up—"

"Don't say it. I don't want to think about all those months!"

She remembered the strange dream she'd had of him. "I dreamed about you," she said. She did not say how real it had seemed, how she'd waked up thinking she'd really seen him ...

"I dreamed about you, too. I'm not good at puttin' stuff in letters, though."

"I got your letters."

"What did you think?"

She leaned her head against his shoulder. His hand stole into hers. She squeezed encouragingly and he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

The other fellows' talk about their sexual exploits had amazed him. He would never talk about Kathy, but he wanted her more than ever. He understood his longing more clearly than he would have before his exposure to Army talk.

He remembered the night he had fallen in love with her. It was the same night that Sweet Charlie had disappeared. He'd waken up that morning and realized that he loved the woman who now sat beside him.

"I love you, Kath."

There. It was said and so be it.

"Oh, Jimmy, I love you too."

He felt himself tremble all over and suddenly he had her in his arms and her lips were touching his. Then her lips opened and she let him into the secret contact of her mouth. Never before had he kissed a girl in this manner.

It crossed his mind that he might be going too fast. Dutifully, he broke away. "Sorry."

She sighed. "Last night I had another dream," she said. "I wasn't in my bed, I was somewhere else." She giggled a little. "I don't know if I should tell you this, but in my dream I was naked. Are you ever naked in your dreams?"

He was almost unable to speak his reply. As soon as she had said the word "naked" his body had gone on fire. He had a boner so huge she must see it in his pants, even in the dark. "Y-yeah. I have been."

"A beautiful child came to me in my dream. He was dressed all in white."

A deep and distant chord sounded in Jim's mind. He felt vaguely sick.

"This little boy had a wand. He waved it over me and dust came down on my body. Fairy dust. It was so beautiful and so clear, like it really happened. So I woke up thinking something good was going to happen today."

"Did anything?"

"Anything what?"

"Did anything good happen today?"

She laughed. "You came home."

"Will you do what I said in my letter, Kat?"

"Say it to me, Jimmy."

"Marry me?"

A flush entered her cheeks and her whole body became covered with dampness. This dampness melted certain particles that had been dusted on her in the night, and they released chemicals of subtle concoction, which reacted with her skin.

She began to smell of an ancient and pure essence. Jim could not perceive this odor consciously but it affected his deepest self. He became almost mad with desire.

He kissed her again, this time pushing against her, seeking to drive himself into her. "Oh, Jimmy," she gasped. "Jimmy, I will!"

Kathy was frantic. She'd never felt like this before. She knew he had an erection. It took an intense effort not to reach out, to grasp it as if she was grabbing a lifeline. The earth seemed to be heaving beneath the bench, the grass, the hedges, and the trees to be sighing with their passion.

Then she had an absolutely delicious, crazy idea. It would let her behold him, drink in the nakedness of him, at least that. "Let's go swimming in the pond," she whispered. And she thought: I'm crazy. I have gone crazy.

He shuddered and she could not help brushing her wrist against him. Even that slight touch made him recoil as if slapped. He was so hard in there! They really got very hard!

"We can't do that. It's—"

"I did it years ago."

"But we're not kids anymore." He crossed his legs.

She planted a kiss on his lips. For a moment he resisted, then he could not resist. She was mysterious wine and she made him drunk with her sweetness.

"We can undress in the hedge," he said.

He could hardly believe what was happening. She was as hot as he was. Hotter. He got up, stiff-legged, and moved into the hedge behind the bench.

Should he undress her? And what if they got caught. It wasn't even ten. People might come through the park.

She turned away from him and dropped her head, presenting him the zipper of her blue frock.

He unzipped it and it fell away from her pale skin, and from the workings of her brassiere. "Unhook it," she whispered. In the dark he couldn't see. He'd never encountered a hook and eye before.

She reached back and unhooked it and it all fell away and suddenly she was naked above her waist. She turned around. He was awed, she could not be this beautiful. It was as if the very glow of life came out of her skin. She smelled like a rose, an angel, a baby. He drew near to her, hovering like a hawk above the leaping body of the mouse.

She laughed a little. "These are buttons!" She was touching his pants.

"GI issue. No zippers when buttons will do."

She did not fumble with them. Her hands were deft. He almost collapsed when she pressed her fingers against him to gain purchase on the buttons. Rockets of sheer delight shot from the places where her fingers were in contact with him. She was touching it! Touching it!

And then his pants were open. She unhooked his belt and they dropped to the ground. "Even the underpants are olive-drab." She giggled.

"They look clean longer."

"Look!" She knelt before him and kissed him, a little peck on the GI-issue boxers. But in just the right place.

"Come on, be brave," she said, "gentlemen first."

A part of her told her quite calmly and rationally that she had gone mad. She was undressing a man in a public park! It could not be this way. She wasn't doing this. Not Katherine O'Mally, recently vice-president of the senior class at Our Lady of Sorrows. No, not Katherine O'Mally, the snow-pure daughter of Seumus and Angela O'Mally of Dexter Street in Everly, New Jersey. She had gotten her embossed Sunday missal for being the best religion student, and she was president of Sodality.

She imagined her next confession, "Bless me father for I have sinned, it has been one week since my last confession. I committed the mortal sin of lust and went on a naked swim with a boy in Town Pond." What would happen on the other side of the confessional? The sound of poor Father Dougherty having a heart attack?

With a wild laugh that was so strange it scared her a little she pulled Jimmy's drawers down. His penis caught in the elastic and got tangled. Never mind. She grasped the shaft and pulled it free. Then she slipped the pants down and there he was just like that.

She knew at last what they looked like, those bulges that appeared in their pants.

"Kath." He was weak at the knees. No girl in his life had ever seen him like this. No man had, not in this state. The night air touching him intensified the feeling of nakedness. She pulled off her dress and panties and stood before him, her hands hesitantly covering breast and pubis. Then she raised her chin and looked him straight in the eye. With a little flourish she dropped her hands to her sides and stood with the palms open in a familiar posture. "Our Lady of Sorrows," she said.

The sharpness of her laughter made him hesitate, but only for a moment. He took off his shirt and held out his arms. She came close and he felt himself tight against her naked flesh.

The night was warm and the world seemed full of a kindness that he had not known about. He kissed her lips and then her cheeks, and then her breasts, crouching and cupping them in his hands. Gently she pressed his shoulders, and he knelt and kissed the soft tangle between her legs. It smelled very strong there. She pressed against him for a moment and he got on his lips the sensation of a warm clam. He drew back, confused. He had no clear idea of what a woman's genitals were like. He didn't quite know what he had contacted hiding there in that thatch of hair. He looked up at her.

"Do you really want to swim?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's so crazy. We're in the park!" He wanted to. He wanted to very badly. "It'll be warm. The water is warm in July."

Hand in hand they stepped through the hedge. The asphalt walk was almost hot against their feet. Jim could feel the stones pressing, tickling. He was aware of his penis bobbing before him. Kathy was too, because she took it in her hand and led him toward the water.

He stumbled. "God, Kath." He was looking around for other people. But the park appeared empty.

Warm or not the water shocked them. The mud of the bottom squirmed up between their toes. They didn't care; their bodies were free. Their secret intoxication took them far beyond their capacity for caution. All the careful repressions of their lives fell away and they were animals in the water.

Jim gave a shout that echoed across the pond, returning flatly from the houses that stood guard on all four sides of the tiny park. The delight in his voice startled people, and one or two porch lights went on.

Kath spread her arms wide and twirled round and round laughing.

More lights went on, and figures came out onto a couple of porches. The O'Mallys, living as they did at the far end of the block, heard nothing.

Jim splashed down into the water and rolled around. It was at its deepest about three feet, so he couldn't exactly hide. Kath fell on top of him and they rolled over and over, each acutely aware of the sexual presence of the other. Jim became knowledgeable about the extraordinary beauty of a woman's skin in the wet and dark. He slipped his hands again and again down her breasts, rubbing the nut-hard nipples with his palms.

They sat in the shallows like two babies playing with each other. They splashed and giggled and squirmed at one another's tickles and most intimate invasions. He came to know by feel the clam within her pudendal thatch, and she stroked the rod of him and hefted his scrotum again and again, playing with his balls, rolling them between her babyfat fingers.

Red light reflected on the pond. First it brought Kath to her senses. She was horrified: There was a radio car at the curb with its lights flashing. A policeman with a flashlight was hurrying along the bank toward them. He was followed by a small crowd of citizens.

They had cavorted their way almost to the middle of the pond. The crowd was going to come between them and their clothes. "It's naked kids," shouted a voice as tight as wire.

That was what collapsed the fairy-fort of their dreams.

They stood up.

"Run, Kath!"

They could not go toward their clothes. There was no choice but to get out of the pond on the far side.

Leaping like dolphins they surged from their water, their young limbs carrying them across the pond much faster than the bulging cop and his tow of inquisitors could make it around.

The hedges and shrubs afforded some protection. But they dared not go back in the direction of their clothes lest the garments be discovered before they could put them on.

Kathy was scared but she was also still excited. She was beyond concepts like fear. A creature of the night had emerged from the depths of her soul, an ancient maenad, the mystical being at her core.

Jim was just plain scared. As he ran along, hopping in the thistles and briars, he kept thumping his penis and making little whistles of pain.

"Why are you doing that?"

"Gotta get it down, man! I don't want to go to jail like this!"

They ran then like the wind. They fairly sailed out of the hedges and onto the wide meadow that surrounded the bandstand. Wind swept past their bodies and rushed in their hair; they flew as the witches must once have flown and suddenly they were in the street.

A car caught them in its lights but the driver was so startled that he killed his engine. As they sailed down Dexter Street they could hear behind them the rattle of his starter turning over.

"The oak! Follow me!"

Kathy clambered up an oak, managing to get to the bottom most branch. Jim saw her plan: they could cross its branches and get onto her roof that way. The window to her room was right there.

The car had started. It turned on two wheels and came roaring down Dexter. "Hurry, Kath!"

"Help me!"

They were whispering as best they could. The O'Mallys were right in the front room listening to The Hour of Charm.

He put his palms against her buttocks and shoved. She was so light, dear Kath! Then he came up behind her. One of his legs was caught square in the lights of the car. It screeched to a stop at the end of the walk.

A man in suit and hat got out and came marching into the yard. Behind him in the car a woman could be heard bawling hysterically.

"Get down out of that tree! What do you mean running around like that, you kids! How dare you!"

The Hour of Charm turned off. Kath slipped into the open window of her room. Jim froze against the trunk of the tree. He prayed, "Dear blessed Virgin Mary I will offer up ten rosaries if you let me get away with this."

Seamus O'Mally came onto his front porch. "What gives?" he said in his mellow brogue.

The driver's attention was diverted for just a moment. It was all Jim needed. He crossed to the roof and was in the window in an instant.

Kath was there. She pulled him into her closet and closed the door behind them.

"Thank you," Jim breathed. Ten rosaries it would be. After a hell of a confession, of course.

"Don't even breathe. Oh, Jimmy, what about our clothes? They'll find our stuff."

"We'll say something, some lie. We were robbed and we got scared."

"And took off all our clothes?"

"People do crazy things when they get scared."

"I've got it. They made us take off all our clothes! The robbers!"

"Don't whisper so loud, somebody's coming!"

Angie O'Mally's voice drifted up from below. "Be sure and check the attic. Don't forget the attic." Jim found his hand touching her breast again. It was just so beautiful!

"It was a naked man! Possibly two naked men!"

Her fingers squeezed the tip of his penis. She barely breathed, "I don't think I like that man."

Seamus O'Mally's voice drifted up. "An odd thing. You're sure you saw this? And they climbed my tree?"

Jim put his finger into her thatch, driving it deep. She groaned.

Light burst in under the door. Jim gritted his teeth. Kath held her breath. He probed deeper and she tickled and they both almost fainted with the pleasure of it all. "Nobody in here," Seamus said.

The light went out. Kath kissed Jim. She smashed into him and forced his lips open and jammed her tongue into his mouth. He felt as if he had become an electric fire of nerve endings.

And then they were coupled together. "Oh it hurts," she breathed.

"Sorry!"

"No, it hurts and feels good at the same time!"

Distantly they heard voices in the street and then the grinding of a starter. That was the signal they needed.

They leaped to one another and their bodies pounded like two pile drivers, thundering against the floor.

Downstairs there was absolute consternation. The Hour of Charm went off again and both elder O'Mallys looked in horror at their living-room ceiling.

The chandelier was swaying, the plaster was thundering as if somebody was literally leaping up and down on it.

"Burglars," Angie shouted.

"The devil! It's squirrels, woman!"

"The naked burglars, and they're in our baby's room!"

"There ain't any naked burglars. Couldn't you see that man was daft? It's squirrels or it's rats!" Seamus went clumping back up the stairs, his pipe between his teeth.

He got a tiny .410 shotgun out of his closet and went into his daughter's room to dispatch the varmints that had gained entry.

The closet door was shaking like the boiler in the machine shop where he was foreman. "Must be a 'coon,"

he muttered as he snapped a shell into the gun.

He threw the door open. ,

At first he did not understand what he was seeing. Wallowing like savages in a heap of dresses were two completely naked human beings. They were obviously doing what he always referred to as "their business" together.

"The hell, that loony was right!"

Such was the extremity of their passion that they moved in a blur. It never even occurred to him that his beloved daughter lay abnegated before him, not until they expended themselves and became suddenly as quiet as thieves.

"Katherine O'Mally, oh Lord! And you, you Army tramp!"

Jim couldn't think. So mad had been his pleasure, he had almost forgotten his own name. It took him a long time to notice that there were lights on. He burrowed up to the surface of clothes, pushing a girdle and a couple of slips away from his face.

"Mr. O'Mally," he said in what sounded to him like the voice of a twelve-year-old, "I can explain."

"Explain! Get out of my house, you home wrecker! How dare you sully my only daughter! Oh, Katie Kate, are you hurt, my dearest?"

Mrs. O'Mally came in behind her husband. Jim had leaped to his feet. Now he grabbed the brassiere that had been tangled around his head and held it to conceal his still rigid penis. Why wouldn't the thing go down, anyway? Wasn't it supposed to, now?

Mr. O'Mally had knelt down, seeking toward his daughter, who was barely visible in the pile of clothes. "My baby, has he hurt you, precious? Shall I kill him for you, beloved?"

"Oh, Daddy," she gasped. "Daddy." He reached his huge hands into the clothes and lifted her out. She swooned in his lap. Her eyes opened, and she looked up at Jim. "Oh Daddy, I like to fuck!"

That was enough for Seamus O'Mally. He fell back in a dead faint, dropping his daughter as he toppled.

"We're getting married tomorrow," Jim shouted.

"Yes! Oh, yes! And we're going to make love forever!"

Angie O'Mally began keening. She knelt to her husband. "Oh, why did you die?" she moaned. One eye opened. He lifted his head. Very methodically, as if he hadn't fainted at all, he picked up his shotgun. "Young man, get out of this house. Katherine O'Mally, go and bring me my razor strap!"

Jim heard the smack of the strap as he climbed down to the lawn. Twenty or not, she was getting it. He was furious but he was also helpless. He stole back to the park and found their clothes. By the time he had dressed he'd come more or less to his senses. Rather than appear again at the O'Mallys' door, he stuffed Katherine's things in their mailbox.

He then went home to his own family.

The next morning a very perplexed postman found the clothes.

James Thomas Collins and Katherine Mary O'Mally were driven by their parents to Maryland where there was no waiting period, and married before a justice of the peace on July 14, 1947.

The issue of their first night together miscarried exactly three months later, and I got another piece of this most extraordinary puzzle.

I do not believe that the baby died. My strong suspicion is that it was taken from the mother, most probably by three fragile creatures in the dark-

blue coveralls they tend to wear on night missions to populated areas.

Undoubtedly they did their work with precision, following a tradition many hundreds of years old. I have found records of this sort of activity in the folklore of many human cultures. The women of Northern Mexico call them campeches and welcome their coming.

Why would they be doing this, and why would it take so long? To more than one witness they have described themselves as "God's workers."

It takes many generations to create the gold of a new species out of the clay of the old.

The tiny spark of a child was delivered up a shaft of golden light to the one who would be its mother.

She was a superb surgeon, and she operated immediately on the eyes and the skull. The rest of the child she did not touch, but bathed it rather in a pink fluid made from the blood of its natural mother.

It prospered and lived and grew in a few months to its strange maturity.

Katherine O'Mally Collins called it in her secret heart Seamus, and in tears she told me that she knew that it lived, and whispers love to it still when the night wind might carry her words to heaven.

From the very heart of the mystery I believe—I hope—that her child listens.

His encounter with the others had put Will Stone in a very awkward situation. The problem was that his experience was spectacularly strange, even irrational. It was no doubt intended by them to challenge his comfortable model of reality, to communicate the notion that they were not what he assumed.

But all it really did was serve the psychosis of suspicion that underlay his personality.

He said to me, "How could I possibly tell what I remembered—flying through the air and such? It was so totally absurd. I I'd have lost the most extraordinary job in the world." For a romantic and an adventurer, Will Stone was surprisingly cautious.

The others' actions must have seemed spectacularly irrational, but I think rather that they were the result of very large-format thinking of a kind we have not yet developed.

That possibility never occurred to Will. How could it have? He simply did not have sufficient intellectual scope.

As far as he was concerned, the possibility that the "aliens" were working

according to an irrational plan left him feeling very vulnerable indeed.

Did it mean that reason was so flawed that they didn't use it? If so, then reason was actually irrational, and people who used it could never hope to outwit those who had surpassed it.

If only Will had possessed the courage to sit the others down and say the truth: We do not understand.

They were wedded to the straightforward assumption that the so-called aliens had a scout ship and that the larger body of aliens would be along soon. And yet Will's original intelligence estimate indicated that they had been here for at least sixty years prior to 1947. A search of folklore and legend would have turned up suggestions that their presence was much older.

So the Roswell crash might not have been a scout ship from another planet on an initial reconnaissance mission. For the same reason that Will wouldn't admit the strangeness of his own experience, none of them would address that possibility.

They preferred to pretend that they knew what they were dealing with, and invasion was something they could understand.

In his own defense Will told me that he was too frightened to think clearly, that the screams of the poor sentry who disappeared into the sky were echoing day and night in his head. And that sneering voice: "We're gonna take you for a ride."

Had they ever! There is something so wonderful about the idea of that dignified, serious man gliding over the streets of Roswell with an overseas cap in his hand—and then finding, to his horror, that the cap he'd taken to prove to himself that the incident had really happened had somehow come from the head of the very sentry who was missing!

He has never thought that the others have a sense of humor. Of course not: victims never think that practical jokes are funny.

There was also the sad side of it, the terrible side.

They had searched what remained of the night for their lost comrade. The base sent up six helicopters with powerful searchlights and they crisscrossed the desert for miles around. Will watched them like stars gliding in the dark, and then saw the silver light of first sun on their Plexiglas cockpits.

"No joy," the radio would crackle, "no joy, no joy."

They organized themselves and set out on foot. Men linked arms and scuffled through the brush trying to find a button, a bit of cloth, anything more than his cap to tell them that PFC Flaherty had existed.

No joy.

By nine it had become obvious that they weren't going to find him.

Even so the entire MP company turned out to search, and began bouncing off in all directions in their jeeps.

Right on schedule at nine hundred hours the flatbed truck Sally Darby had sent down from Los Alamos arrived. It was huge and extremely well built, used for transporting experimental atomic weapons.

Will noticed a profound change in the men of the detachment. They were sullen and silent. He was glad that the disk and bodies would be removed today. It was not clear to him that the AAF would let its men remain another night out here.

They set about getting the disk onto the flatbed.

The thing was so light that thirty men standing around the edges could with effort lift it off the ground. Their problem was that they couldn't move it more than a few feet, much less haul it onto the flatbed.

Will was worried that they were going to have to bring in a crane and waste at least another forty-eight hours.

He was considering bringing a CIG crew down from Washington to guard the disk if the Air Force withdrew its personnel.

Then a very odd accident took place.

The men had the disk and were moving slowly toward the truck. Lieutenant Hesseltine was calling out like a rowing master. "Step! Step! Step!" Each time the men would all make their prescribed movement, some stepping backward, others sideways, others forward, depending on their position around the circle. It was almost as if the disk had a gyroscope running somewhere inside. Every time they moved the thing it would resist and heave.

Again Hesseltine shouted, "Step." Two of the men who were supposed to go forward went backward instead.

They lost their grip on the underside of the smooth surface. One of them toppled back and fell.

In an instant ten men were down and the disk was sliding out of the hands of the others. The fallen ones scrambled to get out from under.

The disk did not drop like a rock. To their amazement it settled softly to the ground—a result of the semifunctional gravity motor. They soon learned to take advantage of the thing's subtle resistance to gravity.

They would lift it and push it a distance.

It would slide to the ground a few feet from where they had started.
In this way they got it to the huge flatbed.

As the men worked to lash it down, Will and the lieutenant turned their attention to the three alien bodies.

They'd had chests of ice brought, but in those days they didn't possess decent insulation and nothing but slush had survived the desert heat.

They opened the bag containing the freshest body, intending to check it before icing it down as best they could.

The smell was dreadful. But more disturbing by far to Will was the degree of deterioration that had set in overnight. The flesh was sunken, the eyes shriveled and collapsed. There was a considerable amount of thick, maroon liquid in the bottom of the bag.

"We've got to get this embalmed," Hesseltine said.

Will looked at it in horror and amazement. Unless he did something fast there wasn't going to be anything left for the scientists. And this one—this body was the strangest of the three. The other two were obviously alien.

But this one: Unless he missed his bet this was something very close to a human child.

He acted with his characteristic decision and commandeered a helicopter, his objective being to get the body to Los Alamos as soon as he could.

He gave Hesseltine instructions to wait with the disk, and then radioed Joe Rose to come up from Roswell and take command of the loading and transport process.

They resealed the body in its rubberized bag and got it strapped onto the runner platform of the chopper. He got in beside the pilot and in a moment was on his way back to the base. Leaving the disk made him nervous, but he saw no alternative. He was by then deeply mired in the absurd and wasteful interservice rivalry that characterized the MAJIC project all through the forties and fifties. The Air Force had already created its Blue Team to organize recoveries of crashed disks, bodies and debris. Air Force and CIA would work in competition along parallel tracks for years. Unfettered by any congressional oversight, they lavished their energies on wasteful competition while the others—as always—proceeded with clear direction and careful method.

At that moment, though, the only thing on Will's mind was his now desperate effort to get this body where it belonged before it was reduced to gristle and liquid.

He realized that Van had strengthened his position on the base by sending Colonel Blanchard on enforced leave and placing the much more rule-conscious Jennings in command.

He did have one hope, and that involved Jennings. The man was so bound by the chain of command that he was likely to report first and await orders rather than do anything overt when Will arrived on base with the body.

Will's fear was that the Air Force would commandeer it. Admiral Hillenkoetter was obviously in no position to prevent this. In return for his support in other matters, the President was likely to continue to side with General Vandenberg.

As they bounced along toward Roswell Will tried to find the view he had seen last night. Sure enough they swept across a small range and there it was, the town now washed by morning sun. He had been here, flying on wings of dream.

He shuddered, remembering the freedom and the fear. Two feet away from him the strange body rode in its canvas shroud. Given the incredible pressures of the situation, I find it remarkable that Wilfred Stone was functioning at all. But he was functioning, and well. As a matter of fact he was acting with considerable intelligence and decision.

The others had very intentionally shattered his model of reality. He no longer knew what to think about them or what they were doing.

Still, he acted. He tried.

They landed on a round helicopter target, and two medics trotted over to take charge of the corpse.

"What are your orders?" Will asked, as if only mildly curious.

"Place the object in the meat locker pending transport."

That sounded extremely suspicious. "Transport to where?"

"Unknown, sir. You'll have to ask the exec."

Jennings was moving with unexpected swiftness.

Will accompanied the bundle to the kitchen of the officer's mess, where it was placed in a walk-in freezer. He then went to the HQ building and called on the lieutenant colonel. He was annoyed to find that he had communicated with Ramey and already had orders to transport the bodies and everything else immediately and under guard to Eighth Air Force HQ in Fort Worth.

He was a tight, intense man and he obviously intended to exert the authority he had been given. "I have a direct, written order," he told Will. "I don't even know your credentials."

"You know I'm CIG, and I obviously report to Admiral Hillenkoetter."

"Then the admiral will appreciate the way we do things in the Air Force."

What Will did at this point was completely outrageous.

Without another word he went directly down the hall to the intelligence offices. Joe Rose had his setup there, a cubicle with phone and a typewriter.

There was a set of keys to Rose's rented Chevy hanging on the wall, left there according to standard station procedure. Will picked up the keys and went over to the officer's club.

There was no guard on the meat locker in the kitchen. They weren't expecting him to turn into a body snatcher.

But that is just what this audacious man did. It's too bad that he had to use his best qualities, his quick intelligence and decisiveness, to outsmart the Air Force instead of understand the others.

When the odor from inside the locker hit him he almost passed out.

He drove into the town with the bundle on the back seat. It was already a hot day and the inside of the car was sweltering.

He went up Main Street to the Gawter Funeral Home, chosen because it was the first one he found.

"I'd like to see Mr. Gawter," he said to the young woman at the reception desk.

"Who?"

"The owner."

"Mr. Steinman. Mr. Gawter died three years ago." She made a call, glanced up. "Is this in reference to a bereavement?"

"Yes." In a sense, it was.

"I'm so sorry for you. Mr. Steinman will meet you in the Contemplation Room. He'll show you our memorials and explain the different plans that we offer here at Gawter. Is your dear one still at the hospital?"

"No," Will replied evenly, "he's in a bag in the backseat of the car." Macabre though it is, Will Stone has a very definite sense of humor.

She blinked very rapidly for a moment. Then without a further word she conducted him to the "Contemplation Room," which turned out to be a showroom where coffins were lined up like late-model Buicks. A man of about fifty in a dark-blue suit approached. He was wearing a sad smile.

Will introduced himself and showed him his CIG credentials.

"This is a national emergency," he said. "I'm commandeering your place of business and your services forthwith. You are to close your doors at once

for the duration of the time I am here. And if you ever speak to anybody concerning what you are about to witness you will be committing high treason and will be punished accordingly. Do you understand me?"

Steinman's lips opened with a dry rasp. In those days nobody would dream of impeding a government official in pursuit of his duties.

"I want you to send all your workers home until one o'clock this afternoon. Tell them that I am a federal mortuary inspector."

"Yes. Please come with me to my office."

They were soon watching the last of his six employees hurry out of the back of the building. Will got the bundle from the car.

He'd never been backstage in a funeral home before. There were three porcelain embalming tables in the preparation area, which was air-conditioned with an evaporative cooler. The result was that the air was warm and damp instead of hot and dry.

Each table had a drain in one corner, and was so angled that any fluids would flow right into it.

"Where do the drains go?"

"City sewer."

"I want every bit of fluid from this body saved."

"I'll get a bucket."

Will put the bundle on the table. It was so carefully tied that he had to cut the knots with his penknife. When Steinman came back he was confronted with the little man.

The odor was overpowering. Steinman handed Will a tube of Baume Ben-Gay. "Put a dab under your nose,"

he said. Will informs me that it didn't help.

Steinman opened a glass-fronted cabinet which contained trochars and rubber gloves and packages of Rock-Hard Cavity Fluid.

He put on some rubber gloves and lifted one of the arms. It was then that he noticed something very wrong.

No doubt it was the extreme lightness of the limb. He gasped and looked at Will in consternation. "What happened here?"

Will did not answer directly. How could he? "What can you do to slow down decomposition?"

"Embalm him or freeze him."

"I have to take him somewhere. Is there a freezer truck?"

"No truck can maintain temperature low enough to stop decay in a

cadaver this far gone. It has to be frozen solid."

Will had no choice but to go for embalming. He saw that he would have to drive the thing up to Los Alamos himself.

"Sir, is this—may I ask—a child?"

"This is the body of a soldier."

Steinman peered at the face, then looked at Will. His eyes were stricken. "What happened to this man?"

Will tried for a believable answer. "An atomic accident. The rest is classified."

"Lord, Lord. What hath God wrought?"

Will had to get out of that room. The odor was just too much. He stood for a moment in the hall, gasping for breath. But he didn't dare leave Steinman alone with the body so he soon went back in.

"It's a mistake to leave the room when you have a stinker on the table," Steinman said casually. "Got to get used to it twice."

Will describes the humid, sultry atmosphere of the preparation room as feeling like rotted grease. He slopped too much Baume Ben-Gay under his nose, inhaled some of it and went into a sneezing attack so violent he was afraid it was going to turn into a virtual epileptic fit. The powdered eggs he'd swallowed earlier for breakfast threatened to come up while he was still trying to control the sneezing.

Then he saw the mortician start trying to open the little man's coverall. It was silver with dozens of pockets and flaps and buttons on it.

While he fumbled around in complete confusion Will finally brought himself under control.

"Where's the zipper on this thing, anyhow?"

They couldn't find a zipper. There were no buttons, except on the pockets and the flaps. The little man was like a cheap doll that had been sewn into its dress.

"We'll cut it," Will announced. Steinman brought scissors, which were hopeless. Then he got a surgical scalpel. It didn't work either.

He looked hard at Will. "Mister, I want to know what's going on here. What is this?" He gestured at the corpse.

"I told you. A soldier—"

"Who got himself shrunken in some kind of atomic accident? And his coverall is made of cloth that won't cut and he looks like a cross between an angel and a troll? Mister, I want to know what all of this is about or I think

that I am leaving this area. Why aren't you in some government facility? The Roswell Base is a mile from here. And there is the national laboratory in Los Alamos."

"The deterioration is happening far faster than we anticipated. You have the best facility in southern New Mexico."

"Is it some sort of spaceman? Is that what you are bringing in I here?"

"I don't know what in the world you're talking about," Will tried to butter his voice with scorn. "That nonsense belongs in the back pages of the newspapers. I have a dead man here, and he has a family that loves him."

"Which reminds me of the matter of payment."

"You'll be paid five hundred dollars."

"Well, that is good."

"So let's figure out how to get this damn coverall open and get on with it before we both suffocate."

Inch by inch they examined the garment. There were no seams anywhere. When Will touched it he could feel the slight, bony skin beneath and his flesh crawled.

"I found it! Damn, this is a cunning thing." Steinman had made a small opening in the cloth. As he pulled it got wider. It made a curious ripping sound, but he wasn't tearing anything. The two sides of the open seam were covered with strips of what looked to Will like stiff fur. It was composed of tiny hooked hairs that tangled when they were pressed together. The seam they made was almost invisible.

I don't know whether mankind invented Velcro independently, or if MAJIC secretly leaked the technology to the rest of us.

They opened the garment and lifted it off the body.

And it was a perfect body. Heartbreakingly perfect. The size of a boy of about ten. The skin was gray-white and completely hairless. The genitals were about as formed as those of a three-year-old. But they were there, uncircumcised. There was no belly button.

"My God, this is a little boy!"

"I told you—"

"You told me there was an accident. A soldier—shrunk I thought. Somehow."

"A boy soldier. Doing a very brave work for the good of his country."

"You people have gotten to killing children with your damn atomic shenanigans? For shame!"

"For America!"

"Let me tell you something, Mr. Government. You people forgot what America was a long time ago. This boy in this here uniform—there isn't anything in the world important enough to bring his young life to an end like this. And what did you do to his face? Operate on his eyes? Why, he's no more'n a human guinea pig."

Will made a note that Joe Rose was to work on this man, make certain he kept his lip buttoned.

"Embalm this cadaver, Mr. Steinman."

"I'll do it, but I need a death certificate. I want to know where the parents are and where to ship this child.

There's no way this little fella is leaving here in the back of a Chevrolet!"

After Steinman had made his incision a brownish-red fluid drained out into the bucket Will had put under the table. He collected the fluid in a jar.

Steinman brought out a syringe and a large bottle of embalming fluid. As a test Will had him swab some on the skin. When there was no reaction he let him fill the body with the fluid.

"I'm going to get a pine box," Steinman said. "It's all I have available for a child. I'd have to order a nicer coffin from San Antonio or somewhere." He gave me a sad, lost look. "We don't get many dead children in here."

The moment he left Will wrapped the body in the rubber sheet that covered the table. Bundling the uniform, carrying the specimen jar and the body, Will took everything out to the Chevy and drove off.

As he left he saw Steinman standing on the front steps of the Gawter Funeral Home, looking angry.

Steinman never revealed what he knew, and Will has no record of what may have happened to him.

My supposition is that Joe Rose did his work well, and the funeral director took the story of the government man and the strange little child with him to his grave when at length he became one of his own corpses.

July 12, 1947

CLASSIFICATION TOP SECRET ULTRA

Central Intelligence Group

EMERGENCY REPORT ON MISSING MILITARY PERSONNEL

Prepared by Field Headquarters Unit, Los Alamos

Central Intelligence Group

Copy 1 of 1

FOR IMMEDIATE TRANSMISSION

Circulation: The President; the Secretary of Defense; Joint Chiefs of Staff; Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation; Director, Central Intelligence Group

To be passed by hand and destroyed on return to CIG

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to assess the significance of the disappearance of two military personnel in connection with extraterrestrial alien activity within the borders of the Continental United States.

Background

1. Burleson, Charles, PFC 0998721943, USA, 53rd Inf. Sta. Ft. Bliss. Disappeared during nighttime maneuvers on Fort Bliss 7/8/47.
2. Flaherty, Michael, PFC 549112174, 1395th MP Company, RAAFB. Disappeared while on sentry duty at the site of a crashed alien disk in southern New Mexico at approximately 0335 on the night of 7/10/47 .

Detailed Analysis

1. PFC Burleson

PFC Burleson disappeared during or after a night of unusual flare or light activity reported during field training maneuvers by a detached squad of 4

Platoon, D Company. There was no indication of any morale problem. Private Burleson was absent at squad muster at 0.600 hours 7/9/47. A search was made of the squad bivouac area without results. The search was extended by the squad to nearby ravines and gullies , also without results . As there were no roads out of the area it was assumed that the soldier had met with a mishap. No trace of this soldier has been found.

2. PFC Flaherty

PFC Flaherty was detached for sentry and guard duty at the site of an alien object crash near Maricopa, New Mexico. He was part of a six-man unit under the command of S/Sgt. Peter Dickson . PFC Flaherty had four years experience as an MP and had a series of highly successful evaluations. He had a K-Type Security Clearance and was cleared to serve posted guard duty at nuclear weapons depots and in secured armed nuclear weapons storage locations. PFC

Flaherty had no charges or negative comments in file, had never been AWOL or on charges of any kind. He was a bachelor age 23 . He did not drink or smoke

. He had received a high school diploma and had plans to study civil

engineering after his period of service. He was on his second tour of duty.

On the night of 7/10/47 PFC Flaherty disappeared, apparently into the night sky. Despite a wide air and ground search over a 72-hour period no trace at all has been found of PFC Flaherty.

Conclusion

We conclude that both of these disappearances were the probable result of unknown alien activity. This conclusion is based on their known habit of causing bizarre disappearances, as per "Intelligence Estimate on Flying Disk Motives" prepared for limited Top Secret distribution 7/8/47. In both cases, there was apparent alien activity in the area.

Recommendation

It is urgently recommended that the following actions be taken: 1. No nighttime military maneuvers to be conducted in areas where flying disk activity is being observed by the military or reported by the public.

2. All nighttime guard duties throughout all military commands to be placed on War Alert status until further notice, all sentries to be briefed and armed and to move in squad formation only.

Chapter Eighteen

The Chronicle of Wilfred Stone

I drove north into a fierce afternoon. As long as the car was in motion I had the wind, so the fact that the car stank of formaldehyde and rot wasn't unendurable. The merest whiff of it bothered me, however. My impulse was to light a cigarette but I was already half sick from too much tobacco and coffee.

It was just me and this road and the thing in the backseat. The previous night obsessed my thoughts. What had happened out on that desert? I remembered the enormous, glaring eyes of that owl, the impossible flight - I was hit by a bout of shaking worse than a malarial ague.

It was all I could do to get my foot onto the brake and get the car pulled over to the edge of the road. Mike Flaherty's screams were thrashing me.

All of a sudden I was just so afraid.

And I couldn't talk to a soul about it. By doing such odd things to me the aliens had isolated me from my peers.

They were breaking me, and I knew it. The devils were out to destroy my mind.

The minute the car stopped the stink became overwhelming.

I jumped out and went a little into the desert. The heat almost took my breath away. It was as if the sun was actually squeezing me. I crouched down, instinctively covering my head. The smell was in my clothes, clinging to my skin, making my insides crawl with disgust.

To the east Haystack Mountain rode in sunlight. On another day I would have enjoyed a view like this, but today its empty silence was oppressive.

There was no movement at all, no sound except the lazy rasping of grasshoppers. Away from the car the air smelled of hot, dry grass. I imagined cowboys riding this range, silent in the heat, restless for booze and poker. Fifty years ago that had been the norm. Fifty years, barely a generation. And here I was in a car and carrying an alien corpse in the backseat. What would they have thought? Would they even have begun to comprehend?

A sound startled me—echoing in the silence, carrying from far away. It

rose, desperate, a woman's scream.

Sophie.

No. A rabbit being attacked by a hawk.

Then there came a buzzing, low at first and insistent, the kind of thing you felt in your chest rather than heard with your ears. I searched the skies, expecting to spot a small plane swimming from horizon to horizon.

When I saw that the sky was empty I had my first twinge of fear.

The sound got louder. I tried to identify it as something familiar. If not a plane, then what? Oh, God. I didn't want this to be happening. I wasn't going to be able to handle this.

Instinctively I clapped my hands to my head and ran for the car. What if they were coming after their fallen soldier? God help me. I was alone out here in the middle of nowhere. Who the hell knew how they regarded their dead.

How stupid I'd been to just take the thing and come out here like this. I was miles from Roswell and there wasn't another soul around.

The buzzing got louder, began to pulse in my ears. I grabbed at the car door, fought my way in. When I fumbled for the keys they seemed to hop out of the ignition on their own.

They jangled down under the seat. I bent, trying to force myself to be calm. The buzzing got louder and louder as I scrabbled. I sobbed and shook, fighting to control myself, to somehow grab—and then I had them. I had the keys.

All right, calmly now, put them in the ignition.

The buzzing became an angry whine.

Turn on the engine.

Now it was a roar, shattering, massive. Something huge was landing right on top of me.

The engine turned over once and then just plain died.

I screamed into the hell of noise as a huge shadow obscured the sun.

And a trailer truck loaded with sheep rumbled past, leaving the Chevy rocking in its wake.

A man can slip so easily over the edge.

I wished to God for talk. Just casual conversation. "How about Dewey? Think he's gonna announce?"

An SS officer had once said under interrogation, "You learned not to get near them when they were dying. A human being will do anything if he is

dying. Once a girl was being hanged in the women's section. The bindings came loose. A female officer reached up to tighten them. Before anybody could stop her, the girl had torn the woman's arm off."

Where had that man been stationed? Was it Sobibor? Belsen? I can't remember if we hanged him or promoted him. I can't ever remember. What is justice?

The man's fate came to seem very, very important. I thought of his boots, of his black uniform, of the excessive politeness that marked him in my eyes as a killer.

I was hanging over the steering wheel with tears tickling my face. The car was a prison cell in an infinity of light.

Finally I sat up, took a deep breath, re-started the car. I could hear the engine nattering to itself, could hear the grasshoppers again, could hear my own breathing. I lit a cigarette and returned to the road. I flipped on the radio.

The first thing I heard was the Vaughn Monroe song "Ghost Riders in the Sky." I turned the damn thing off.

I started singing to myself like I had in Algiers and Marseilles when the Gestapo was breaking my networks. I would walk in the back streets and sing under my breath in English a song from childhood, "Oh, slow up, dogies, quit roaming around, you have wandered and trampled all over the ground. Oh, move slow, dogies, move slow."

My father seemed to be in the car with me, singing again on an early summer night. I was small and lying upon his lap and the whippoorwills were calling.

I had been safe then and, oh, how I longed for it now. I knew that somebody was talking to me as I drove. I had known it for some time. I just hadn't been ready to look at the fact that I was alone in a car with a dead body and someone was talking to me.

I remembered hide-and-seek in our enormous yard, laughter in the night, cool and mysterious, and where I hid somebody else hid, too. . . They touched me with cool hands, cool and little and white. I drove on and on, the tires pounding on the pavement. I was in a white world. My body was tingling. Some part of me told me that I was nowhere, not in the desert, not in the car. And yet I heard the engine throbbing, throbbing. . . .

Suddenly the shadows were long.

I'd driven all day and hardly noticed it. Where had the time gone?

I stepped on the gas. Fifty, sixty, beating toward Santa Fe and Los

Alamos beyond. Los Alamos. It was Spanish for "the Cottonwoods," known to locals simply as "the Hill." A bastion of science and power hidden atop a mesa. It was my City of God, the place where the truth would be discovered. Why was this road so long?

I did not want to be out here in the dark, not with the thing in the backseat and the memory of what had happened last night still fresh.

I felt such an overwhelming poignance, as if in some secret part of myself I had touched my ancient childhood.

Evening became night and the road seemed to stretch ever longer. Soon my world was a glowing dashboard and a smear of light on the highway.

Outside the desert seemed to sigh, restless in the dark. It appears peaceful, the desert, but it is actually a place of endless terror. There is fierce competition in the desert, all the time. The snake stalks the mouse and the mouse captures the roach. And everything is always a little thirsty.

It is man alone who brings light to this world. Nature is dark, brooding and cruel. What compassion there is in the earth flows from the sterling heart of man.

Slit a man's throat and his dog will lap up the blood. Slit the dog's throat and the man will save him if he can.

What did we do with that SS officer?

I was hungry and thirsty. In fact I was so hungry and thirsty that I was shaking like a leaf.

There had been somebody in the car with me, somebody sitting right there on the seat beside me. A woman.

She was little and pale and I think in that moment I loved her enough to sweat blood. She'd been so sad!

A horrible thought crossed my mind, but when I pulled over and checked the bundle I found that everything was perfectly in order. My precious cargo hadn't been taken from me by some cunning deceit.

Still, I felt that the aliens had been with me. I knew they had. But when? Didn't my thoughts stretch back unbroken to morning. A long, hot day of driving . . .

There were lights down the road. Distances are deceiving, though, on a desert night, and it was another half hour before I reached the town of White Lakes.

There was a gas station and thank God a little place warmly lit that had a sign in the window, CAFE.

I pulled the Chevy up beside a couple of Fords and went inside. There were a few tables covered with checkered oilcloth and a counter. The place smelled of hamburgers and cigarettes and coffee.

"Burger basket, and gimme a Coke. Cherry pie and coffee after."

I was surprised at how crowded the place was, considering that it was nearly nine P.M. I had to take an end stool at the counter and I was lucky to get that. I'd already ordered my burger when I noticed the intense buzz of conversation around me.

"It was silver. Shiny."

"You seen it closer than me, then. I just saw a big disk."

"It was a blimp. One of them German airships like they had before the war."

Had I heard that right? "What's the stir?" I asked the man beside me.

"We seen one of them flying disks, that's what's the stir!"

"Really?"

A woman at one of the tables chimed in. "It was unearthly!"

"Godless," her husband muttered.

"Big! It came up the highway not ten minutes ago. You musta seen it."

I knew my blood was draining from my face.

"You seen it, traveler?" a man called out. He had a Stetson on the back of his head. The homey country voices were getting mean.

I clung to my damp glass of Coca-Cola. It was a handle on the familiar world. Dark waters were engulfing me.

The cafe, the people, all began to slip away.

Had there been someone in the car with me? I thought—a woman. Yes . . . but I couldn't remember clearly.

My head was whirling, my ears ringing.

"Hey, traveler, you seen it? You were right out there on the road."

"I had—had—car trouble. I'm running late and flat-out tired. I don't think I could see fifty feet."

"Well, everybody in this town saw it. Yes, sir! It was as big as one of them blimps."

A blimp. My mind raced. Weren't they all in mothballs? I grasped at a straw. "Maybe that's what it was."

"Hell, this thing went up so fast you wouldn'ta believed it." The man who spoke wore a sloppy uniform. A local sheriff's deputy, I thought.

A woman spoke up. "I was lookin' at it outa my pickup, mister. I saw that

car of yours. I saw you drivin' right under it."

The whole room became silent. Even the cook at the grill turned to look at me.

"Like I say, maybe it was there. I just didn't notice! I mean, who expects a thing like that!"

The woman from the pickup was regarding me with eyes like pins. "That Chevy of yours looked like it came down outa the thing."

Oh dear God, surely that couldn't be! If my car—no. It would mean that I was nothing more than a little trout being played on a line, played until I was tired.

"Maybe we oughtta have a look at that Chevy of yours, mister."

I had to get out of there.

I drank down my Coke and cranked up what was probably a pretty bad smile, "I didn't realize the time. I've really gotta be going!"

The cook glanced at one of his checks. "You got a hamburger comin'. I'm just gonna put it together."

"Oh, I'll pay."

The woman was like a snake. "He came outa that thing," she murmured to the deputy, who nodded. His hand was on his gun.

I put a dollar down on the counter. "Will this cover it? Keep the change!"

"You spend two bits and you leave a simoleon. That's real generous, mister. You take your burger basket with you." He laughed. "And you can keep the basket!"

I edged toward the door. In a moment I was outside. I started to open my car. The deputy had the movements of a jackal. He grabbed my wrist with a hard, thin hand. My fingers let go of the car door.

"Yes, Officer?"

"We all saw it. We saw your car come out of it. It came right out of the bottom and the thing flew away. I want to know what the hell you are, mister. What the hell was that thing? You like to scared us half to death!"

"I'm a federal officer," I said. I flashed my wallet at him, hoping that he'd be satisfied with a glimpse of a Washington, D.C., driver's license. "You saw secret military activity. You keep your mouth shut, and tell the rest of those folks to do the same."

He leaned back on his heels. "The hell."

"That was it!" I tried to get in the car.

"You're—"

"Let me go! You can't hold me like this!"

"Mister, I want to search this car."

"No! You have no cause."

"What's that smell, then? What stinks like that—you got something in there—what is it?" He peered into the backseat. "What's rolled up in that bag?"

I took the moment to jump into the car. Frantically I inserted the key and hit the starter. He grabbed into the window, clutched my shoulder. "You're under arrest!"

"I'm a federal officer!"

"Get out that thing."

I slammed it into reverse and jammed the gas pedal down so hard his strong grip was instantly broken.

I slurred into the highway and stepped on it.

For a long time I saw a flashing red light behind me, but he couldn't overtake me/Mobile radios hadn't penetrated to small New Mexico sheriffs' departments in those days, so he wasn't able to call for help.

But he was tenacious as hell and he drove well. No matter how fast I went he kept getting gradually closer.

And he knew every slight bend in the road.

I couldn't arrive at the Hill with an infuriated hick sheriff on my tail.

In desperation I cut my lights. We were entering the mountains south of Santa Fe and the road was beginning to twist and turn a good bit. I jammed the gas pedal to the floor and started taking bends on two wheels.

Finally I found what I was looking for—a dirt road leading off the main highway. I turned hard, sliding into it amid a cloud of dust.

Then I backed right out into the highway and tore off around the next bend.

It was a trick I'd learned during the war. He saw the dust I'd left and took off down the side road.

I almost wept as I pulled up an hour later to the main gate at Los Alamos. I had never in my life been so glad to see armed men and lights and to hear my credentials questioned.

I was reassured to see that the guards were wearing snappy new Atomic Energy Commission uniforms, blue like cops rather than khaki soldiers' things.

I had challenged the night and won, or so it seemed to me. Actually, I was

more like an ant who finds the poison the housewife has laid. Delighted with its sweetness he carries a piece of it deep into his nest.

Because it is so good he hides it away at the back of the food tunnels.

That way only the best and brightest ants may feast on the treasure.

Part Three

CONGRESS OF LIES

*They know not, neither will they understand;
they walk on in darkness: all the foundations
of the earth are out of course.*

- psalm 82

Chapter Nineteen

The same night that Will arrived at Los Alamos, Roscoe Hillenkoetter seems to have become personally involved with the others. Nobody, least of all Hilly, realized that anything like this had happened until 1960, when the old man, retired now, suddenly threw caution aside and called for a congressional investigation into unidentified flying objects.

It was a direct attack on Will and his agency—an agency that Hillenkoetter had literally created during a midnight session with Truman.

By 1960 Hilly was long retired. After making his statement he very publicly joined a group called the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena. Will says that he was forced to infiltrate it, take it over and ultimately destroy it.

In order to get Hillenkoetter to back down Will finally briefed him. He saw at once their predicament and left NICAP, commenting quite correctly that the government had revealed all it could and it was up to the "aliens" to tell the rest of the story.

During that time MAJIC interviewed the former CIA director. When he was placed under hypnosis the first thing he remembered was the remarkable night that he conceived of the new agency.

Hilly's encounter was not simply a matter of a flying disk landing in his backyard. Like all the most profound encounters with the others, it was also an encounter with a powerful aspect of self.

Roscoe Hillenkoetter was not sleeping well on that night. His dreams were troubled by familiar storms. He was having a ship nightmare of a kind that had dogged him since he'd gone through Pearl. This time he was on the bridge of a tired old cruiser somewhere in the South China Sea. She burned coal and every seam sweated. The wind was screaming and there were Jap subs about. He didn't like the flying whitecaps or the evil green sky. He listened to the distant laboring of the engines and gave an order to come about into the wind.

Then he noticed that the steersman was a twelve-year-old. He was shocked beyond words. How the hell had a kid like that gotten into the Navy!

He shouted for his first officer. A high, piping voice replied. This one was ten! Then he saw babies crawling on the deck, hundreds of them, and women

in the rigging, little girls on watch without lifejackets!

They were singing sea shanties while the typhoon came down on them. Nurses, babies, children. An elderly couple covered with coal dust helped each other up from the engine room, looking for a breath of air.

His ship was crewed by the innocent and the old. And then he saw three white torpedo tracks dissolving in the crest of a wave. "Hard a-starboard," he screamed, "flank speed!" As the ship heeled a box of pickup sticks fell to the floor of the bridge and went scattering reds and greens and yellows down the ladder.

Then the ship took the first torpedo. A geyser of water burst up, and in the rocking, plunging aftermath all the hatches flew open and screaming crowds of children poured up from below like a desperate horde of ants.

She took the second fish and he felt the shuddering snap of the keel and knew she was going down.

He was half out of bed and running for the pumps when he finally came awake.

"Lord God almighty!"

He dropped back onto the bed. What a hell of a nightmare. Damn the war that it left a man with dreams.

He turned over and plumped his pillow, then closed his eyes and tried to fall back to sleep. He was shaking.

He deliberated about waking his wife. But he was too old to admit even to her that he'd been frightened by a dream.

He was methodically calming himself down when he began to get the feeling that there was somebody in the room.

He opened his eyes but didn't move. A prowler? Surely not. But then who? He wasn't a man given to flights of fancy. There was damn well somebody here. He could hear them breathing right over by the closet door. In and out, in and out. Breathing as regularly as a damn machine.

He kept a .38 Special in his bedside table. If he was quick he could probably get his hand on it before they moved, but I he'd be bound to take at least a couple of shots before he could bring his own weapon to bear.

Hell.

Moving his head very slowly he tried to look across the room.

A woman was standing there, big as life. As on a stage she was lit from above.

He sat up. She was young, and so beautiful he all but cried out from the

pain of seeing her. There was recognition, shocked, confusing. He loved this woman as if he had always known her—as indeed he had. She was mother, daughter, lover, the betrayed woman within us all. She was the one in whose lap we lie when we are babies and when we die.

When a boy on the battlefield calls for his mother, it is she who comes. She is why we make love so often.

No matter how deeply we penetrate the bodies of our lovers we never reach her. Our eternal striving for her has brought the whole human race out of our loins. With the softest of smiles on her lips she rose into the air and went right through the ceiling, disappearing in a swirl of flimsy blue skirts.

The synopsis of his hypnosis states dryly that he cried when he described her departure. And now in Will's garden, with the traffic hissing beyond the wall and a child singing next door, now I am also betrayed by the old man's traitorous tears.

His unease, on that distant night, finally got the better of the admiral. He woke his wife. "I'm having trouble sleeping," was all he cared to tell her.

"Would you like me to make some hot toddy?"

"That would be a sainted act."

She stretched and kissed his cheek and slipped from the bed.

The admiral got out of bed and went to the divan under the window. From here he could see the moon's low sickle riding the oak tree that stood in the side yard.

She brought the toddy and he sat sipping it. His mind went back to the dream, and he reflected that an old man running an organization like CIG really was playing with the futures of hundreds of young people.

He knocked back the drink and returned to bed with his wife. He entered what was for him an unusual state between waking and sleep. The transcript of his hypnosis revealed a very strange encounter.

A beam of blue light came down from the ceiling and began to move slowly back and forth in the room. Hilly was paralyzed. Finally it found the bed. It moved up the sheets, then up Hillenkoetter's cheeks, until it rested just between his eyes.

The center of his forehead glowed white.

And the beautiful lady walked into his dream. She was young, no more than twenty, and wearing a light-blue summer dress. He thought that she was the prettiest girl he'd ever laid eyes on. She had a piece of chalk in her hand.

She turned to the blackboard (he seemed to be in a schoolroom) and

wrote a single word in block letters.

"MAJESTIC."

Then she lectured. Even under hypnosis he was so taken by her beauty that he could not remember her words. That was the cunning part of it, of course. They were probably standing right around his bed with their big bobbing heads, pulling that girl out of his unconscious and making her their tool, their way into his deep mind. Their weapon.

She laughed and tossed a curl from her eyes. And there his hypnotized narrative ended, as he recalled waking up. His ordinary file contained the rest of the story.

He remembered being filled with a sense of malignant, creeping evil. Something awful was about to happen, some slouching horror to come through the dark window.

Damned if he was going back to sleep now. Anyway, he'd had an idea. Really a hell of an idea. He put on his robe and slippers and went down to his study.

There he wrote out the organizational plan that remains to this day the basis of majic. He created an agency that would oversee every detail of our relationship with the aliens, and designed it in such a way that it has kept itself almost perfectly secret.

When he was finished he looked over the sheets of legal paper. He was excited.

As he worked he had become more and more aware of just how urgent this really was. He saw that he also had a chance to make a lightning strike against Vandenberg and close this thing up now and forever as a CIG/CIA project.

His sense of urgency was so great that he began to think that he ought to bypass everybody, Van, even Forrestal, and go to the President right this second.

He'd also figured out something else. Once the initial leaks were fixed, this business of the aliens was going to stay secret forever.

He knew exactly how to accomplish that goal. The secret would be permanent and it would be total.

He had not only this night created the Majestic Agency for Joint Intelligence (MAJIC), but also conceived of this foolproof method of entombing it behind an impenetrable wall.

It was twelve-thirty. A hell of a nervy time to call the President.

He looked at the phone.

Roscoe Hillenkoetter was not close to Harry Truman and right now that was a problem.

He had not often before availed himself of the private number in the apartment at the White House. But he didn't want to go through the staff. He wanted to reach out to Truman man to man. There wasn't any other way to do something as sensitive as this.

He dialed the number. A woman's voice answered on the second ring.

"Mrs. Truman?"

"No. This is the night maid."

"This is Roscoe Hillenkoetter. May I speak to the President?"

"I will give you Mrs. Truman. She's up reading. The President is asleep."

Bess Truman came on the line immediately.

"Oh, hello, Hilly. Just a minute." He heard her waking him up, then a brief exchange as she identified his caller. Then the President's distinct "What does that old shoe want?"

"What's the matter, Hilly. Can't sleep?"

"No, sir."

"Urgent?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm up for it, if you don't mind pajamas and a robe."

"I'll be there shortly."

Hillenkoetter replaced the instrument. He went upstairs and dressed as quietly as he could. Then he kissed his wife's cheek and slipped out of the room.

He took with him in his briefcase the report on the two missing soldiers, which he had received that afternoon, his handwritten outline of the Majestic agency and another couple of documents that would be relevant to the meeting.

It was a muggy Washington night; he went to the garage and pulled out his car.

He drove almost automatically, staring out the windshield, trying to frame his proposition in such a way that the President would accept it. Above all, he did not want to frighten Harry Truman. That was the trouble with this whole business: it was so full of scary implications that it made sound judgment almost impossible.

Despite the late hour there were, of course, plenty of lights at the White

House. The west entrance was actively guarded. He pulled up and got out of his car. He was taken through the dim public rooms to the private elevator. He was taken up to the apartment.

Now things changed. Suddenly he was in the Truman home, a family's private sanctum.

The President was in the sitting room. He wore the promised pajamas and robe. There was a smell of freshly brewed coffee. Harry Truman stood up and took the admiral's hand. "Hello, Hilly. We'll have coffee in a minute."

"Thanks for seeing me, Mr. President."

"Glad to. Since you've never before called me out of bed, I'm expecting something special." His eyes narrowed. "What happened? Stalin shave his mustache?"

"My news isn't that big."

"Then maybe it's something we can handle."

"You've read this?" He handed the President the staff report on the two disappeared soldiers.

"God, yes. It makes my blood boil. These bastards are kidnapping our boys."

"Yes. And look at this." He brought out one of the other documents, this one from the FBI. It was a synopsis of the annual report on crime statistics for the period 1944-1946. "A substantial jump in missing persons."

"A man comes home from the war. Finds out he doesn't really like his old life, decides to start all over. One more missing person. A lot of men have been coming home from the war just recently."

"What if that's not what it means?"

"Hilly, it's a horrible thing to contemplate."

"It seems possible."

The President looked steadily at him. "I wish I had something more than provocative speculations. These aliens or whatever they are could be entirely innocent."

"Not entirely. The boy who disappeared at the crash site. That is certain. They took him."

"Look, Hilly, what are we supposed to do?"

"Well," Hillenkoetter replied, "first I want to point out to you that we're taking the disk and the bodies to Los Alamos for analysis."

"Van made a case for taking the disk to Wright Field."

"I know that!"

"You and Van are fighting like a couple of tomcats in heat over this thing."

"More like a couple of crazed weasels, Mr. President."

Truman laughed. "You're an honest old bastard for a spy, Hilly. And I'm not unaware of the fact that the Hill is now under control of the AEC. And that the new administrator is a Navy man. Admiral."

"Aye-aye, sir."

They both laughed, this time. "You've got your disk unless Van stages some kind of a raid or Hoover commandeers it as state's evidence."

Hillenkoetter went white. "I hadn't thought of that!"

"Don't worry, Hoover hasn't either. So far all he's done is phone me and whine about the Joint Chiefs. He thinks it's Van's show. The question is, Hilly, how do we prevent this squabbling from messing up our project?"

Hilly jumped at the opening. "That's why I came here so urgently, Mr. President. I would like to propose the immediate creation of a secret agency to handle this. It would be a sort of clandestine Defense Department."

"A big agency?"

"As big as necessary."

"Big is hard to hide. Especially if it has to stay hidden for years."

"I've thought of that." He took a deep breath. The woman of his dream swam into vision. He pushed the memory aside. "We tell each man we involve that the aliens themselves are the architects of the secrecy, and that they will destroy the nation if we reveal the secret."

Truman threw back his head. He made a short sound like a bark in his throat. "Goddamn. That'll sure as hell do it. That'll bury this thing deeper than King Tut's tomb." Suddenly the public face was there, bright and cheerful and reassuringly tough. "That's a hell of an idea, Hilly. A real motivator!"

The public face collapsed, and Truman was Truman again. The fighter, and quick. He took a cigarette out of a silver box on the coffee table.

As he was lighting it the night maid brought the coffee in. She placed the silver service on the table and poured. Hilly took his black, and found that even White House coffee could be overboiled.

"Okay," Truman snapped as the maid withdrew, "you've had your pregnant pause. Get on with it."

"I see the agency as having sealed compartments, sharing secrets on 'need-to-know' basis only. All reporting to a single administrator."

"Tried and true structure for a secret operation."

"It kept the bomb secret."

"What're you going to call your baby?"

"Majestic."

"What a horrible name."

"Why do you say that?"

"It sounds like the King of England had a hand in it."

"Well, something to identify it as awesome."

"Majesty. Magic. The Magic Group."

"There was a Majestic Group at one point. It would be a bit of a diversion if there's ever any digging."

"Fine, then. Do what you want."

"Yes, sir. We'll call it Majestic."

Hilly saw Truman's eyes literally glaze over. It was as if he'd been turned off by some hidden switch. "I'll read your proposal and get back to you in the morning with any comments."

"I'm sorry to do this in the middle of the night, sir."

"You and me both, Hilly. Now do you think you can sleep?"

"I wonder what happened to those boys."

"We have about four thousand unknown soldiers. Now four thousand and two. Missing in action and presumed killed. It happens to soldiers. That's why they get their dogface pay."

Hillenkoetter was surprised by the depth of emotion in the President's voice, the tenderness and deep anger behind the hard words. He could see why this man had dropped the bomb.

He took his leave of Truman.

What happened next isn't quite conjecture on my part, but Will does not possess a written record. He knows that Vandenberg visited the President shortly after Hilly left. What exactly was said we don't know, but I think we have the gist of it.

The moment Hilly walked out the door the President called Van.

Before he arrived Truman read Hilly's rough proposal a number of times, thinking matters over. He was forced to agree that secrecy should be maintained until we knew more. But it wasn't right and he knew it. The public should be told at the first possible moment.

If he waited too long he would never be able to tell, because he would never be able to explain the reason for the delay.

The first essential step was guaranteeing U.S. airspace against the

intruders.

He had worked himself into a state of considerable agitation by the time Van arrived in full uniform.

"Why the hell'd you waste time putting on all those duds, Van? I've been waiting."

"Sir, I'm ten minutes from a dead sleep."

"Well, that's not too bad considering the brace of medals you've got to hoist. I've got a brilliant proposal from Hilly and I'm going to go ahead with it tomorrow morning. I'm setting up a new agency within the purview of Central Intelligence to handle this alien business."

"Sir, the Air Force—"

"I'll tell you what the Air Force is going to do!"

Vandenberg looked shocked.

"Sorry, Van. I'm on edge. Disappearing soldiers. Kids. That bothers me like the dickens."

"What can I do to help, sir?"

"You have full and complete authority to take immediate hostile action the next time one of these disks shows up within shooting distance of any gun in the possession of the Air Force! And you take that as an order!"

"Mr. President—"

"Look at this damn FBI report. Disappearances doubled between 1944 and 1946. Is that related? These two soldiers—you've seen Hilly's report?"

"Yeah."

"Van, we are under attack and I want action! I want *response!*"

"Mr. President, you will get armed response from the Air Force."

"You tell your pilots to *shoot down* anything that looks like those gun-camera photos you have."

The visitors had very cleverly left him without choices. Tell the public they might be kidnapped by aliens and the government was helpless? Hilly was dead right. You had to bury this in a tomb.

"Mr. President, it's possible that I will be unable to shoot the craft down."

"Then get the capability! If you can't shoot one down then I'll declare a project bigger than the Manhattan Project on this. We've got to regain control of our airspace, General!"

Vandenberg's eyes hardened. "We will, sir."

Truman dismissed him. For a few minutes he sat smoking and thinking, shuffling Hilly's papers. But he was not a reflective man. Shaking off his

upset he returned to the bedroom. He tossed his robe on a chair.

Bess half woke. "Is it all right?" she asked.

"Hell no," he said as he got into bed, "it's not all right. Not by a long shot."

Being Harry Truman, he then turned over and slept like a baby until morning.

**July 12, 1947 TOP SECRET/MAJIC
EXECUTIVE ORDER**

**SUBJECT: ESTABLISHMENT OF MAJESTIC AGENCY FOR
JOINT INTELLIGENCE (MAJIC) Copy 2 of 1 2**

The purpose of this agency will be to coordinate all United States activities connected in any way with nonhuman alien presence, including the management of the Majestic Scientific Group, military BLUE TEAM activities and FBI/CIA(G) surveillance activities designed to establish and maintain all MAJIC-related operations at the highest level of security obtainable.

The TOP SECRET/MAJIC classification is now the highest level of classification.

MAJIC Initial Organizational Structure—MJ-1

MAJIC is a coordinating and management group, reflecting the same centralization concept contained in recent legislation establishing the Central Intelligence Agency. MAJIC will be overseen by the Director of Central Intelligence, who will report on all MAJIC activities to the President as appropriate and advisable. DCIA will receive the MAJIC

Designation MJ-1. Admiral Hillenkoetter is appointed MJ-1(1) by order of the President. Positions MJ-2-4 are MAJIC administrative positions. Should project SIGMA (referenced below) succeed, MJ-1 will institute project PLATO, seeking to establish ongoing communications of a diplomatic or negotiational nature with the aliens. The first objective of this project will be to attempt to control alien incursions into US airspace and alien contact with US citizens.

MJ-2 Position

MJ-2 is the designation for director, MAJIC Operations. Mr. Wilfred Stone is appointed Director, MAJIC Operations, MJ-2, by order of the President. Further appointments within the Operational Group to follow. The primary responsibilities of the MJ-2 position will be two. The first will be administrative and collational, gathering and synthesizing all output from all

other MAJIC positions and transmitting them in an orderly manner to MJ-1. The second will be diplomatic. MJ-2 will create an office (Designation: SIGMA) that will seek means of communicating with the aliens.

MJ-3 Position

The MJ-3 position is the Civilian Operations Coordinator responsible for propaganda and maintenance of public ignorance in the face of extensive and obvious alien activities, which include substantial and publicly visible flyovers of Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) and Identified Alien Craft (IACs). They also apparently include the abduction of civilians as well as military personnel for unknown reasons. The primary MJ-3 mission is to guard the fact that government cannot prevent these activities and does not know their purpose. MJ-3 will operate a program of denial and ridicule. The natural skepticism of journalists will be enlisted by total, absolute and blanket denial of any and all sightings, disappearances, observations of landed craft, etc. This program will be carried out no matter how obvious the truth of a given report. It is *essential* that NO sighting no matter how obvious be explained as an "unknown." Such explanation may lead to difficult questions and journalistic demands and *will threaten this program*. Further, MJ-3 will orchestrate the ridicule of civilians who come forward with witness accounts. If they are persistent, such civilians will be methodically discredited. Persons associated with scientific institutions and universities who are too interested in this subject will be warned away.

Should they persist strong measures will be taken as appropriate. The atmosphere of denial and ridicule is intended to curtail public understanding, and frighten non-MAJIC-associated scientists into ignoring the whole area. MJ-3 will also be responsible for the infiltration of "flying saucer" study groups now springing up as a by-product of recent radio and newspaper attention. All cover operations will be coordinated by MJ-3.

MJ-4 Position

The MJ-4 Position is Coordinator of Military Activities. The Army Air Force BLUE TEAM set up to retrieve alien objects and remains will advise MJ-4 of all its activities. All MAJIC-related military operations will be coordinated by this office, including those carried out after the impending transfer of BLUE TEAM to Air Materiel Command from its present S-2

Intelligence status. MJ-4 will manage Project REDLIGHT in cooperation with AFMC and AFOC with the mission of flying any intact alien craft that may be recovered. A civilian-based National Reconnaissance Organization

will be established to provide site security for all activities relating to alien craft, their movements and attempts to fly them.

MJ-5 Position

The MJ-5 Position is Coordinator of Security. All incoming personnel must receive MAJIC clearance. This clearance can only be granted to persons able to pass the most stringent tests of background and loyalty. MAJIC clearance will be given only after stringent FBI clearance investigation. Should a situation develop where MAJIC clearance cannot be extended to a given elected individual above the MJ-1 level, that individual will be isolated from all knowledge of MAJIC for the duration of his term of office. MAJIC clearance procedures apply to *all* persons exposed to any MAJIC information, no matter how trivial, and will be applied to elected as well as appointed officials.

MJ-6 Position

The MJ-6 position is an internal executive position. MJ-6 is responsible for all record-keeping and isolation of MAJIC-related files within the Library of Congress and related collection centers such as military document centers. This position will maintain not only a record-keeping division but also a research division that will be devoted to the discovery and classification of related isolates from other branches, such as FBI or Air Force documents that incidentally refer to MAJIC, MAJESTIC or related activities. It will coordinate all activities with MJ-9.

MJ-7 Position

MJ-7 is Coordinator of Allied Relations. MJ-7 will develop liaison with presently forming Allied alien activities organizations. MJ-7(A) will provide civilian liaison to these organizations, and MJ-7(B) will provide military liaison.

MJ-8 Position

MJ-8 is Coordinator of Soviet Bloc Relations. MJ-8 will attempt to create an atmosphere of complete and open sharing of information, in view of the apparently hostile nature of the alien incursion and the obvious need to cooperate at the highest levels in order to achieve a meaningful and effective human response to the possible arrival of massive alien force.

MJ-9 Position

MJ-9 is Project Historian. The historical mission is twofold. First, historians shall be enlisted to attempt to determine the extent of alien activity prior to the present time. Second, a MAJIC Historical Bureau shall receive *all*

documents from all units and prepare and maintain a large-scale historical resource for use in briefing and as a source of reference.

MJ-10 to MJ-12 Positions

These are scientific positions.

MJ-10 Position

MJ-10 is Coordinator for the Physical Sciences. Subgroups will include Astrophysics, Propulsion, Electromagnetics, Particle and Atomic Physics and other areas to be added as needed. The primary mission of the MJ-10 position is to collect data and provide meaningful answers regarding the science behind the amazing alien craft and their apparent mastery of such forces as gravity, and the nature, capabilities, and limitations of their weapons.

MJ-11 Position

MJ-11 is Coordinator for Biological and Behavioral Sciences. The mission of the MJ-11 position is to collect information as to the nature of alien biology, brain function and behavior. It is especially important it be determined if any viruses, bacteria, gases, chemicals or radioactive elements might be effective as weapons.

MJ-12 Position

MJ-12 is overall Coordinator of Scientific Activities. Under MJ-12 will be two subsidiary positions, MJ-12(A) and MJ-12(B). MJ-12(A) will be coordinator of defense-related scientific activities, with priority on the development of weapons/ strategies which will provide the US with an effective deterrent where none whatsoever now exists. MJ-12(B) will be coordinator of other scientific activities, with priority on the understanding of the physical nature of the aliens and their motives/objectives.

Chapter Twenty

While Hillenkoetter was meeting with the President, Will Stone was having a deeply shocking personal experience, one which I believe was intended either to lead him to deep inner understanding, or to shatter him.

When he had arrived at Los Alamos he had found that things had been magnificently organized by the talented Sally Darby. Her timetable, however, did not allow for what he really wanted to do, which was sleep for about twenty hours.

Sally now had a team of six CIG personnel working with her, and they were getting the full cooperation of ZIA, the private company that arranged all the Hill's logistics, supplies and construction. Will could detect the hand of the White House in all this; he allowed himself to hope that Hilly had gained ground with Truman.

While Sally got the cadaver into cold storage he called Washington to report to Hilly. It was one o'clock in the morning Mountain time. That made it three A.M. in Washington.

The director had just returned from the White House. Will was informed that the President would probably approve Hilly's plan for a new agency. If he did, Will was going to be its head.

It was a tremendous vote of confidence for a young man still reeking of formaldehyde and covered with road dust.

He hung up the telephone and tried to take a little time for himself in the room that had been provided for him at Fuller Lodge, the Hill's hostel for visiting dignitaries.

After a fitful ten minutes trying to nap he had a shower and a shave. He was surprised to find GI soap in the bathroom. It reminded him that, until literally a few days ago, Los Alamos had been a military city.

When he finished his shower there was a message from Sally under the door. As he dressed again he looked wistfully at the bed.

He went to her office in the Big House a short distance from Fuller. Both buildings had been part of the boys'

school that had been here before the government moved in, and as a result they were fairly well constructed.

The rest of the Hill's residential area was a mass of Quonset huts, prefabs

and trailers.

There were people everywhere; the place was a hive of activity even at one o'clock in the morning. Lights blazed along the perimeter fence and all through the Tech area.

His obsession with secrecy made Will dislike the small-town feeling, the frank and curious looks that he got as he walked down the street. Even though everyone here was cleared—and many of them at a very high level

- few really accepted the "need-to-know" concept that was beginning to redefine American secrecy. Nobody, no matter how exalted their clearance, had a right to know everything, not even the President. Knowledge was only to be shared as required by very specifically defined need. Will could see these people gossiping among themselves, confident that their clearances made it legal.

He did not like Los Alamos for another and more curious reason. That was its exposure to the sky. He would rather have gone underground with the disk than take it up onto the top of a mesa like this.

The sky was like an open door. If a car could be taken off a road and the driver not even know it, they were going to lose this thing flat. That was too much power, too much capability.

Will simply refused to believe that the people of White Lakes had actually seen his car coming out of a huge disk. Because he remembers nothing more about what happened, it is impossible to be certain. Maybe all he encountered in White Lakes was a little hysteria.

He himself was close to that point. Every innocent stranger seemed full of hostile intentions. If he'd been armed he thinks now that he might have shot somebody. It took everything he had not to dive for the shadows and make his way to the Dig House as though he were back in Algiers.

The building wasn't designed for offices. There was no receptionist, no phone and it was the middle of the night. He didn't know where to find Sally. He was so exhausted that this simple problem actually choked him up.

He surveyed the large, silent room. There were books everywhere. Despite the lateness of the hour people crowded the library, browsing, reading, all reflecting the tremendous intellectual energy of this place.

Finally Will spotted a staircase at the far end of the room and mounted it, passing through the haze of pipe and cigarette smoke.

When he had opened the door every head in the room had turned toward him. And every eye followed him as he went to the staircase.

Of course it wasn't hard to find Sally. Her office was the only lighted room on the second floor.

"Will," she said, "congratulations!" She looked absolutely glorious. She was glowing. He had seen her as a pale, effective woman haunted by her own vulnerabilities. Now he understood why Hilly had chosen her.

Pressure was obviously her milieu. Confidence, competence, effectiveness poured from her.

He tells me now that Sally Darby should have been MJ-2, the leader of MAJIC. I can't pass judgment.

"How in the world did you know? Hilly only told me a few minutes ago."

"I talk to Hilly, too. He called here half an hour ago looking for you. And he asked me if I thought you could do the job."

"Thank you for your support."

"Hell, I told him I could do it better."

"Will you second me?"

"Maybe, MJ-2. Assuming your appropriation is big enough."

"I want the disk guarded. Heavily."

"We have tanks and antiaircraft guns at our disposal."

"This place has tanks?"

"A company."

"Get them deployed. I want the whole place on full alert status against attack from the air."

She picked up her telephone. A moment later Drew Shelburne came into the office. He had been a bright counterintelligence expert in the British Division.

"Hello, Drew."

"My Lord, Will, when did you die?"

"I've been on the road for eleven hours. Why do you look like a flower at one A.M.? Both of you."

"I guess we're just too enthusiastic to get tired," Drew replied.

Sally gave him instructions to relay to the guard units.

When Drew left Will dropped into a hard chair, the only spare one in the office. "I'm an exhausted man in a place where nobody ever sleeps. Have you got any headache powders, dear?"

"Bromo-Seltzer."

He poured the stuff directly into his mouth and swallowed it before it foamed up too much. Sally brought him water from somewhere and he

washed the residue down. "I feel like hell and I'm scared to sleep alone."

She raised her eyebrows.

"It's not a proposition. But they come in the night. Last night, that sentry—my God."

"Look," she said, "I hate to tell you this but you have a meeting with the scientific group at seven in the morning. The pathologist wants to get to work as quickly as possible. He's the only one from off the Hill. The other three are locals. A physicist, an electromagnetic expert and an aerodynamicist to examine the disk."

"Tell me about this pathologist."

"Gene Edwards. University of California at Berkeley. Working on a top secret radiation pathology project.

Married, two children. Prominent New Dealer during the thirties. Flirted with the Party in '33-34."

"A Communist? You got me a Communist?"

"His security clearance is his bread and butter. We promised to erase his record in return for absolute secrecy."

"Don't actually do it."

"Of course not. The point is, he can be blackmailed if necessary."

"Good. And the others?"

"Straight-arrows, nothing to hold over them. One of them once had a mistress." "Big deal."

"Exactly. We just have to rely on them being good, loyal Americans."

Will recalls that he took her hand. She seemed beautiful and desirable to him at that moment. Had she reacted differently it probably would have been the beginning of the only love in his life.

"You're tired and scared and you need a friend."

"Hello, friend."

"I'm a colleague, Will."

"And I'm just a scared hick kid from upper Westchester. I think I need a lap to put my head in."

Her response was to call the security service and ask them to post a guard outside his room.

She accompanied him back to Fuller and helped him get settled. "Everything you own stinks," she commented offhandedly.

"Call the laundry."

"They have a laundromat."

"I thought I was in a hotel."

"With GI soap? I'll hire a day laborer to get you clean. Maybe if we soaked your clothes in Oxydol for a couple of hours."

"Find me fresh clothes. My suitcase is still in Roswell, anyway."

"We can manage a suit by morning, I expect."

"I'm a forty-two long. Remember that. I don't want to be forced to wear a bag."

That was the last thing he remembered until he woke up abruptly at three-thirty A.M.

The room was dark except for a line of light coming in under the door. Will felt reassured; a faint smell of cigarette smoke told him that his guard was at hand, no more than twenty feet away.

In the next instant he discovered how very far twenty feet can be.

There was somebody crouched on the foot of his bed.

At first he thought it was a shadow, but as his eyes adjusted to the light he could see that the form was solid and very much alive.

He called to the guard—and all that came out was a puff of air. His next thought was to turn on the reading light that was clipped to the head of the bed.

A small man sat there as solid and real as any living person. Will called out again but there was only more hissing.

Will cannot describe the man in detail but his impression is distinct that this was a human being. He had the disquieting impression that it was a child, a boy with a huge, bobbing head.

Will threw back the bedsheets and started for the door. A hand pressed against his chest, delivering what felt like an electric jolt. The man's arm was clad in silver cloth.

Will remembers vividly how startled he was by the effect the touch had on him. Blackness came around his eyes.

"It's all right, Willy, it's all right," the creature said. His voice was ugly and low and rattling as if his lungs had given out. "We're going to capture you, Willy."

It took him an hour to mutter the rest of this story. Will is terrifically reticent about sex, and even after all these years the embarrassment of talking about what next took place was painful to witness.

First he felt a terrific blast of pleasure in his groin. Then fingers were touching him intimately and their strange electricity was pouring waves of

pleasure into him. In the shadows he could see the head come forward, closer and closer. He thought that he saw the face of a demented child. The lips smacked wetly.

Will toppled back into the pillows, swooning with terror and pleasure. An instant later his body gave a spasm and he experienced a terrific blast of sexual release. "It's all right," the thing repeated, "it's all right, Willy."

My heart went out to Will as he described enduring an intimate and protracted exploration that he was helpless to prevent. All the while it continued the voice kept repeating that it was all right.

As far as Will was concerned, it was very far from all right. At last the strange creature withdrew his hand.

The bed springs creaked as he jumped down to the floor.

He took a few steps toward the window and the next thing Will remembers the creature was gone and he was screaming. This sound the guard heard. He responded instantly. The door swung open.

Will managed to quiet himself down. He could not tell the man what had happened. Finally he croaked that he'd had a nightmare. He apologized to the guard.

He could not tell anybody that he had just been, in effect, raped. It was a secret he kept for forty-two years, until yesterday.

In his day homosexuality was the darkest of secrets, a deep personal shame for any man. Had he been able to gain access to his own sexuality, I suspect that he might have discovered that he was somewhat attracted to men.

As the guard left he called out, "Get me a pot of black coffee. And if I fall asleep wake me up." "Yes, sir."

He lay down to wait for the coffee. It was a long moment before he was aware that somebody was stroking his cheek. "Sleep, little one," said the voice of the strange man. Will's eyes flew open.

He was alone.

He buried his head in the pillow. "Stop," he shouted, "for the love of Mike stop!"

A sweet voice sang in response. "Sleep and rest, sleep and rest, mother will come to thee soon."

"God help me! Stop them! Stop them, God, stop them!" Then the world faded to black and he slept. The guard said in the morning that he tried to rouse him but couldn't.

He had slept their sleep, perfect sleep, the sleep of babies and old men.

They had given him a gift, I think, the chance to see himself as he was. I cannot blame him for passing it up. It takes great courage to love one's true self.

The next morning Will ached with disgust. He loathed what had happened to him. And yet... there was also something else.

He didn't only feel attacked and raped and captured. He felt loved as he had not since he was a boy.

Cherished, even.

This did not reassure him, and for a rather odd reason.

As son of a master fisher of trout, he knew the secret of the stream, that the man who takes the best fish is the one who loves them truly, and feels a genuine compassion as he drags them exhausted from the water and drops them to suffocate in his creel.

He was just like that, Wilfred Stone, a fish being loved to exhaustion.

And he was just about out of fight.

Chapter Twenty-one

His forty-eight hours of grappling with the others had reduced him to a furtive, huddling creature aching with secrets he dared not tell. He was closer to a complete breakdown, I think, than he realizes even now.

It was in this state that he held his first meeting with the scientific team that became the nucleus of the group that formed under MJ-12.

Three of the four scientists were bursting with confidence and good fellowship. Two weeks ago he would have craved the company of such men and counted them as critical assets to the team he was assembling. Now he had no more faith in them than a tired commissar might in the latest rabble of slaves from Moscow's dungeons.

There was Walt Roediger with his churchwarden pipe and academic demeanor. And paunchy, fluffy Dick Toole, the electromagnetics whiz who had been working until two days ago on the linear accelerator project.

The two of them stood up and advanced on Will as silently as ghosts when he arrived in the cramped conference room of Tech 21, the building Sally had commandeered to house the project. It had once been a massive generator room. Now it was mostly damp cavernous space, smelling faintly of machine oil.

The communist pathologist Gene Edwards was what Will described in his old-fashioned manner as "a real Arrow Shirt man." Tall, youthful, strong, he reacted to Will's arrival only by putting down his Los Alamos Times with a considerable amount of paper rattling. His body language spoke resentment. This was understandable, in view of the fact that he had been coerced into coming here.

They did not feel that they could risk telling anyone anything until the individual was on site and under their control. One word to the newspapers that the government was looking for scientists to study alien artifacts and the desperate and fragile cover-up would fall apart.

So he'd been forced to cooperate by a threat to his clearance. Without it he could not work on the program to which he was assigned at the University of California, which sought to understand and mediate the effects of radiation poisoning.

Edwards was the most serious security risk and his area of expertise was

the most vulnerable to disclosure.

The group's last member was costumed rather than dressed, in what Will assumed was his own carefully considered notion of intellectual disarray.

According to Sally he was more than just brilliant like the others, he was something of a genius. He was an astronomer by profession. He had been chosen for Majestic because of his combination of backgrounds. Not only did he have a degree in astrophysics and an outstanding record of discoveries and achievements, he'd also worked during the war as a propagandist. He had been damned good at that, too.

Privately they would work Gerald Benning the astrophysicist to the bone. His public role would be a propaganda function. As an astronomer of significant academic standing he would explain every sighting that came to Air Force attention, taking the position that they were all bunk.

To make the group's chief astrophysicist also its chief propagandist was a stroke of cunning. It minimized

"need to know" while it also meant that the propaganda would be fine-tuned to hide the real situation.

I have read some of Benning's books, *Flying Disks* and *The Saucer Enigma*, and they are indeed masterpieces of the propagandist's art, making utterly insupportable and absurd claims that the disks can be explained by things like nonexistent atmospheric "lensing" effects.

Benning truly was a genius and he must have been a man of courage as well, a moral man. While keeping the public calm with his debunking books he secretly fought to understand the others. And he knew that he would be publicly discredited when and if his secret labors bore fruit.

Was CIG lucky, or was their real insight at work when these scientists were picked? I have a feeling that Roscoe Hillenkoetter was a far more extraordinary man than history yet realizes.

Will made an opening speech which was designed to disarm his small audience as much as possible. "Good morning, gentlemen," he said, "I'm your resident bureaucrat here to interfere with your work in annoying ways."

"Thank you," Edwards replied in a surprisingly pleasant voice. Will had expected a file like his to whine.

"I realize that none of you know exactly why you're here."

"But we're damn interested," Benning said. "I just gave up a week's telescope time at Palomar, so this had better be good."

"Gentlemen, this is probably the single most important thing that has ever

happened."

"Tom Dewey's decided to get off his duff and whip Harry Truman," said Walt Roediger around his pipe.

Edwards looked disgusted. "This is supposed to be important. That excludes both Dewey and Truman."

"Gentlemen," Will said, "we've captured a flying disk and three of its occupants and we would like you to participate in a program of greater potential impact than the Manhattan Project—"

"Hold it," shouted the hitherto silent Toole, "did you say a flying disk?"

"I did."

He burst out: "Poppycock!"

He would not be the first to submerge fear beneath a shout of derision. Will quickly learned to use that tendency of the intellectually arrogant as a tool in maintaining secrecy. A man proud of his own intellectual attainments does not want to believe in superior aliens, not when their mere existence threatens the validity of his knowledge and therefore his self-integrity. I believe that this is the reason that scientists such as Carl Sagan continue to delude themselves about the reality of the disks.

Will decided that the best way of responding to Toole's outburst was to ignore it for the moment. "You must understand that we have a need for absolute secrecy. There is substantial evidence that our alien visitors are extremely hostile."

Edwards shook his head sadly. "Of course. The only motive strong enough to bring intelligent life across the universe turns out to be conquest."

Out of exhaustion and nervousness Will downed an entire cup of coffee, almost gagging with the heat of it.

There were sweet rolls and he began gobbling one.

Roediger stared at him. "Mr. Bureaucrat, this is about the most unnerving pause for refreshment I have ever endured. Will you get on with it, if you can stand to stop feeding."

"These sweet rolls would be good if they had more than the single raisin among them."

"Hostile aliens! Talk!"

"Yes."

Toole's eyes twinkled. "I'd want proof. Absolute proof in the form of a corpus delicti to autopsy."

"Dr. Edwards will be starting his autopsy in fifteen minutes."

"I'm beginning to suspect that you aren't kidding."

Sally pointed to the large double doors at the far end of the room. "The disk is through there. The bodies are in cold storage next door in T-22."

"I'm going to autopsy these things?" Edwards had gone pale. Roediger gave Will a frank look.

"There's physical material? This disk is what—I remember the papers saying something about debris being recovered."

"A rawinsonde. It was a rawinsonde that was recovered. I think that was the official verdict." Dr. Toole folded his arms.

"Gentlemen, we ought to begin. First, this project is going to be tightly compartmentalized. That means that every research team reports only to its own supervisor."

"No cross-fertilization?"

Will wondered if Toole rather than Edwards was going to prove the more difficult.

"Initially there will be. But when we begin to gain some perspective we will divide according to subject area.

At that point cross-fertilization will stop and need-to-know will replace it."

"Stupid, but predictable," Toole said.

"I would like to begin with a walk-around of the disk. Then we will observe Dr. Edwards's first approach to our most intact body." I went to the doors and pulled them open.

There was absolute silence. Then Toole spoke. "It looks a bit like something from a movie. Is it a prop?"

"No, Doctor, it is not." Roediger walked up to the disk.

"I'd like to go inside. Is it safe?"

"It may be partially operational. Personnel entering it have experienced extreme time disorientation. We don't know why."

"Time," Dr. Toole said. "In what sense?"

"A man subjectively perceived himself as being inside for a few minutes. He was actually gone for nine hours."

Benning was examining the damaged area. He reached his arm in and waved it up and down. "I wonder if we have a time machine here."

"Could such a thing exist—I mean, as a frankly physical object?" Roediger touched the edge of the disk as he spoke.

"Has it been tested for radioactive output? Are there disease factors

possibly involved?"

"The AAF men who found it put a Geiger counter on it," Sally said. "There is no radiation."

"What about X-rays? Neutrons?"

"Doctor Benning, the main reason we're here is to develop a program. To make a beginning."

"Mr. Stone."

"Yes, Dr. Toole?"

"This temporal effect interests me. Is there a written report? Were any measurements taken, data gathered?"

"The man went on a brief reconnaissance into the vehicle, carrying only a flashlight. Nobody can account for the fact that nine hours passed, least of all the man himself."

Edwards regarded me. "Were you the individual who entered the craft?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Just answer the question."

"Yes is the short answer."

"Then I have another question."

Will managed a smile. A weak one, I suspect. Edwards had a quick and challenging mind.

"My second question is, why do you look like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you haven't slept in days, like you've just lost a great deal of weight. Did being inside the vehicle affect your health?"

"I went in, located and retrieved the best-preserved of the three bodies, then exited the craft. I apparently kept telling the people waiting for me outside that I was fine, and not to come in after me. They questioned me every fifteen minutes for the full nine hours. I don't remember saying a thing to them."

Dr. Roediger got a flashlight from the box of equipment Sally had arranged. He peered into the craft. "This is obviously living quarters. Wrecked by an explosion."

"The thing came down during a thunderstorm," Sally said.

"How odd," Edwards commented.

"Why odd?"

"That somebody this advanced would still have trouble with thunderstorms."

Roediger spoke. "Obviously they wouldn't. I think that we can safely assume that this thing was intentionally crashed. It's a plant."

"Complete with dead crew?" Benning said. "I hardly think so."

"Maybe the crew was supposed to eject. Maybe they don't care about things like dead crew." Roediger pulled himself up into the device.

"Doctor, don't do that." Will's voice revealed his fear.

"I won't go any farther in. I just want to get the feel of it."

"Gentlemen," Sally reminded them, "the first order of business today is the autopsy."

Edwards flared. "This is ridiculous. You want me to autopsy the bodies of apparent alien beings with no preparation, no prior knowledge of the anatomy—nothing at all to go on."

"It's deteriorating too rapidly. We can't wait," Will said.

"It was X-rayed last night," Sally added. "The whole body. The films will be there to use as a guide."

Will was relieved when Roediger emerged from the disk,

"There's decorative work in the paper screens," he said. "Flowers. Yellow primroses, I believe."

"Yes, we noticed that."

"And purple writing on the walls."

"Calculations, I thought."

"I wonder if it isn't poetry? Things written by men far from home." Roediger worked with his pipe.

"You probably shouldn't smoke in here," Sally said.

"Of course."

They were like bees in a flower garden, the way they circled and danced about the disk. They examined its skin, measured it with tape measures, took notes on the clipboards she had provided.

The scene from the night before kept replaying itself in Will's mind. He could still feel those clammy fingers on him. As a matter of fact, he feels them to this day. He said to me, "I'd been taken to one hell of an ugly place in myself."

Rape is more than an act of violence against the body, it is an assault on the soul. Worse for Will, though, must have been the fact that he had felt such a strong response.

"It's all right, Willy." Had he accepted those words, he would have been a free man. Even if he had still died alone, he would have been able to look

back on a life with some love in it. I feel sorry for the man, never having been loved, never except when he was a tiny boy.

"Gentlemen," Sally said, "we have to get to the autopsy right now."

"We have three cadavers," Will added.

"And one middle-level pathologist," Edwards said. Will was worried by the bitterness in his voice. Was he going to let them down?

"You have adequate credentials," Sally said.

"Adequate! You need the best man in the world for this. What about Rowland or Dowling? Why me, plucked out of a pretty average sort of a career? Arguably, this is the most important autopsy that has ever been done. Why me?"

"And what about the rest of us? We're all good, I'll agree to that. But where's Fermi or Oppenheimer or John Von Neumann? Frankly, Miss Durby, why any of us? Where are the great men?" Benning's eyes flashed.

"I'll tell you why people like that aren't here," Toole said. "People like that can't be coerced. They also can't be fooled."

"You're all good men," Sally replied. Her voice was smooth, as if she hadn't heard Toole's implications. "We don't want people who might attract press attention simply by their movements. We had to find excellent men who weren't publicly visible."

Edwards was looking more and more unhappy. "Which brings us to the issue of secrecy. You are obviously desperate to hide this whole business, even from a security-cleared community like Los Alamos. I think it's fair to ask your reasons."

"We're still just feeling our way. There have been incidents that suggested hostility. But we aren't sure of anything. Until we are sure, I think you'll agree that things should be kept under wraps."

"I can accept that," Roediger said quickly.

"The people have a right to know." Edwards.

"I think it's all damn good fun," said Toole. "It's probably some kind of psychological test—"

Will was fascinated by the man's stubbornness. "You still don't believe the disk is real."

"It's made of paper and tinfoil, and the ribbing is dark-brown wood. Wood! I'll say I don't think it's real. I think it was made in Hollywood."

"The tinfoil, as you call it, cannot be damaged in any way by any means we have yet applied. It's incredibly tough."

"What kind of testing has been done? Are there reports we can read?"

"Dr. Toole, the testing was ad hoc, in the field. We fired bullets into a piece of the foil. Tried to burn the paper, break and saw the wood. We couldn't."

"They came in a ship of tinfoil and paper." Absently, Roediger tapped his pipe against his leg.

"Extraordinary."

"What's extraordinary is that the rest of you apparently believe this."

"Of course I do, Dr. Toole," replied Roediger. "If it was less than extremely strange, I would have my doubts."

Toole gave Will such a long searching look that he felt he should add something. "You can reserve judgment until you see the bodies."

"Actually, I believe you now," Toole said. "Not because of this ridiculous disk. My reason is simple, Mr.

Stone. I believe you because you are so incredibly scared."

Will could hear something dripping in the depths of the room. "I think that you should all witness the autopsy," he said. "If Dr. Edwards will agree."

They all followed Edwards into the autopsy room.

TOP SECRET—MAJIC

SUBJECT: AUTOPSY REPORT # 1

DATE: 7/14/47

COPY ONE OF THREE

INITIAL FINDINGS UPON EXAMINATION
AND AUTOPSY OF THE BODY OF AN
APPARENT ALIEN CREATURE

1. External Appearance

This body was observed to be in a state of significant deterioration. It had been preserved with formaldehyde solution but not otherwise dissected.

The cadaver was 44 inches long with a weight of 27 pounds when the preservative solution had been drained.

The external appearance of this cadaver was of a human embryo with an enlarged cranium. Hands and feet were normal. Finger- and toe-nails had been pared. Fingerprints of a swirl-left pattern were observed and taken. All ten fingers and toes were apparent. There was some vestigial webbing between first and second fingers and toes .

Sexual organs appeared to be those of a male. They were in an embryonic state and revealed no evidence of pubescence.

Ears were partially formed, and showed some evidence of surgical intervention. Folds of skin had been drawn out from the surface of the scalp in an apparent attempt to create the impression of a more fully developed ear than was actually present.

Lips were vestigial and the mouth contained no erupted teeth. The nose was also in an incomplete state of growth and had also received surgical intervention, resulting in what appeared to be a very thin and delicate organ.

Eyes were distinguished by extensive surgical intervention. They were almond-shaped and by far the most prominent facial feature. The eyeballs were not matured and appeared to have been sutured with artificial lenses of an unknown type. Because of their extremely unusual condition, dissection of these eyes was not attempted.

2. Dissection

An incision was made from the thorax to the scrotum. The skin was first extended from the fascia and the fascia was observed to be consistent with the appearance of an immature human male. The fascia were then dissected and the internal organs were observed. The position of the heart was observed to be vertical, as would be consistent with a very early fetus, prior to the fourth month. The organ was prominent and was weighed to be 1/70 th of the mass of the body. When the organ was dissected it was found that there was direct communication between the two auricles through the foramen ovale. The Eustachian valve was observed to be large. A ductus arteriosus was observed to communicate between the pulmonary artery and the descending aorta. This ductus opened into the descending aorta just below the origin of the left subclavian artery.

Alterations in the structure of the circulatory system suggested that this body had been surgically corrected to detach it from placental dependence in an artificial manner. The stomach was opened and found to be free of any food substances. The cardiac orifice was apparently atrophied, although the deterioration of the corpus made this difficult to determine. It is possible that this individual did not eat.

The liver was prominent and it was clear that the blood of the umbilical vein would traverse it before entering the inferior cava. The umbilical vein itself had been severed of its placental crown and returned to the circulatory system by a means that was beyond the scope of this dissection to establish. The lungs were not developed. There were lateral pouches on either side of the central diverticulum, open through into the pharynx.

The larynx was somewhat cartilaginous and the trachea was developed. It is probable that this individual did not breathe any more than he ate .

The means of sustaining life is unknown, if he was ever alive in any practical sense .

The cranium was dissected and it was found that the skull was formed of exceptionally thin and pliant cartilaginous material, appearing to be bone precursor that had been affected in some manner, making it more than usually thin and delicate. The brain itself was extensively and surprisingly formed.

There was an unknown cortex superimposed on the forebrain and extending as far back as the fissure of Rolando.

Because of this extraordinary formation it was decided not to pursue dissection of the brain at this time. The organ was extracted and placed in fluid preservation pending further study.

Overall, this corpus presented the appearance of a human embryo of three or four months duration that had been the subject of considerable alteration and modification, some of it obviously surgical. Other modifications , such as that of the brain, were harder to understand. In addition to the alterations, there was the matter of the size of the body and the relatively mature condition of the epidermis and nails. It would appear that this fetus was separated from its mother and brought to a semifunctional state by artificial means.

3. Conclusion

This is a human male fetus that has been subjected to forced maturation without normal gestation. Its degree of functionality while living—if it ever was alive—is unknown.

TOP SECRET—MAJIC

SUBJECT: AUTOPSY REPORT # 2

DATE: 7/14/47

COPY ONE OF THREE

INITIAL FINDINGS UPON EXAMINATION
AND AUTOPSY OF THE BODY OF AN
APPARENT ALIEN CREATURE

1. External Appearance

This body was observed to be in a state of profound deterioration. It had not been preserved but was delivered in a container of rubberized canvas, to which some of the tissue had adhered. The cadaver was 36 inches long with a weight of 8 pounds. The external appearance of this cadaver was not of a

human type.

The skin appeared smooth and a dark bluish-gray in color. There was no clothing on the body. There were no genitals and no way of determining sex, if any. The nose consisted of two slits, the mouth was a small opening that did not appear to be supported by an articulated jaw, and there were holes in the position of ears. The cranium was round and large in proportion to the body and the eyes were almond-shaped. The eyes were closed and could not be opened without damaging structures, due to condition of decaying tissue.

Arms and wrists were very thin. The hands displayed a three-digit arrangement without thumb. The arms extended to approximately three inches above the knee. The three fingers extended directly from the wrist, with no palm.

2 . Dissection

The body was opened from crotch to chin. A green liquid emerged from the incision. The skin was not backed by fascia, and the bone structure appeared to be a cartilaginous substance of light green-blue color. Internal organs were observed but their function

was unclear. The thoracic and peritoneal cavities communicated and there appeared to be no respiratory system and no stomach. The esophagus was vestigial and dissipated before reaching another organ. There appeared to be two multichambered hearts and it was surmised that body fluid could be pumped rapidly. There was an extensive circulatory system that involved three different types of vein. Some material was extracted from one of these systems and suggested possible waste, leading to the notion that waste may have been exuded through the skin.

The fluid removed from the body was analyzed under the microscope and found to be a vegetable substance, chlorophyll-based. It is possible that photosynthesis was the means of obtaining energy.

The cranium was dissected and it was observed that a ridge of cartilage separated the brain into two completely isolated components . The brain was severely deteriorated, but appeared to be extensively fissured and divided into numerous lobes. Because of the deterioration the degree of bilateralism of the two halves could not be determined with any accuracy. This cadaver exuded an unusually foul odor.

3. Conclusion

This is not a cadaver of a kind previously observed by or known to this pathologist. It appears to be a form of creature utilizing elements of both the

animal and the vegetable.

Chapter Twenty-two

An hour after Hillenkoetter got the autopsy reports Will received an urgent telex: return to Washington soonest. He flew by light plane to Denver and connected with the United Main-liner, scheduled to land at Washington National Airport at eleven P.M.

He'd had only fitful sleep for three consecutive nights, and had been operating under numerous incredible pressures, ranging from the efforts of the Air Force to take over the project to the repeated personal assaults from the visitors.

The least thing could unsettle him, and he found himself wanting to weep over the simplest problem, like whether or not it would be impolite to remove his shoes on the plane.

He kept trying to tell himself that the episodes he'd had might have been dreams, and yet he knew that they weren't. They were physical experiences—horrible and impossible, but entirely real.

Every time he dozed off the image of the little man with the bobbing head would reappear and he would wake up pouring sweat. It would take him fifteen minutes just to control the nausea, and sometimes he could not.

He was running entirely on coffee and cigarettes. He sat smoking and staring out the window, trying to think of someone in whom he could confide.

A psychiatrist was obviously out. He had all the symptoms of what was then called dementia praecox and would be so diagnosed. When they landed at Washington National it was past eleven, closer to twelve.

A fog was rising from the Potomac. But for the lights and bustle associated with Will's flight the airport was empty. He was met by a young CIG man with a sign, "W. Stone."

This cheerful kid took his bag and conducted him to a black Chrysler. He assumed that he was on his way home to a bath, clean pajamas and blessed sleep.

They were turning onto Pennsylvania Avenue when he realized that their destination was the White House.

For a moment he was furious, but on reflection he realized that this was inevitable.

The fact that he was being driven this hard is a testament to the level of concern felt by the President.

Nobody had ever even questioned the basic assumption that this was an invasion by aliens with military ambitions.

Will was led into the Cabinet Room by a White House guard in full uniform and looking at midnight like he'd just been boiled clean and pressed to a razor crease.

The room was jammed with people, hazy with smoke and blazing with lights. Huge color pictures of the disk and the aliens were on every wall. The President was sitting at the far end of the table with a pot of coffee in front of him. Hilly and Forrestal were beside him. Van sat along one side of the table with the other Joint Chiefs. Eisenhower was there, looking extremely grim. There were a number of civilians present whom Will did not know.

When he appeared all conversation ceased, every head turned to face him. The silence was absolute.

He barely managed to keep on his feet, such was his fatigue.

"Mr. Stone," the President said, "I'm glad your plane was nearly on time." Was he expected to make a presentation?

"May I see the agenda," he asked.

"There is no agenda, young man," one of the strangers said in a thick Middle European accent. "There is only you." Will fantasized stepping through a window and racing across the lawn, escaping into the night streets.

Vandenberg tossed a photo of the most startling of the visitors down the table. "We are given to understand that this is a deformed human child," Van said quietly. "Could you explain that a little further?"

"Well, that's what the pathologist found." "But look at it," Eisenhower said. "Does it look human to you?"

"I don't think I'm ready to say. All I can do is point to the fact that it has perfectly ordinary fingers and hands, and that the pathologist is a good one. His finding was that it was a surgically altered baby that had stopped maturing at about five months gestation. The fingers were even manicured."

"Young man," said one of the older gentlemen there, "I am Dr. Kenneth Rhodes of the Ringer Clinic."

Hilly spoke up. "Dr. Rhodes is one of the leading embryologists in the country."

"To take an embryo of that maturity and somehow cause it to grow larger without maturing further—that's a complete impossibility. As the cells grow

they also mature. This is—well, this is in the nature of things."

"I don't think that creature is in the nature of anything, Doctor. We saw all sorts of signs of surgical intervention. God only knows what else was done—drugs, electricity. Could be anything. If that creature lived it was human. We found it in the company of two obvious aliens. According to Dr. Edwards none of these creatures could have lived long, if they ever lived at all. But nevertheless, they are what we found."

The President suddenly slapped his hand down on the cabinet table. "I want to know what the hell's going on here and what I'm supposed to do about it. If that thing is human, where did it come from? Whose baby was it?"

"Mr. President—"

"Not you, young man. I've got five of the leading scientists in the world here. Gentlemen, tell us where that baby came from."

"And what about the 'hivelike' living quarters," Forrestal asked. "Does that mean communist?"

Despite the President's admonition, Will spoke up. "I don't know what it means. Who said the living quarters were a hive?"

"We got a telex from Darby while you were en route," Hilly said. "They've begun making a blueprint of the interior of the disk."

"Hivelike," Will repeated.

"Are they communists?"

"I don't have any idea, General Eisenhower!"

Forrestal's eyes were almost popping out of his head. "Aliens in advance of us and they're communists. We must hide this at all costs."

"I can see Pravda now," the President said. "We have seen the future and it is communist."

A deep silence followed. Finally Van filled it. "We need to decide on a response. I think that we must prove to these people that we are sovereign in our own territory, land, sea and air."

"I agree," Truman said.

Eisenhower gave Will a challenging look. "How? Do you have any thoughts?"

"We have to face the fact that they're far ahead of us."

"How far?"

"Terribly far."

"Examples?"

"The condition of the fetus is an example. To us it is a human fetus—or

was one. But somehow it was almost certainly functioning. The thing lived, breathed, thought. We do not know how that could be."

"I'll tell you what I think," the President said. "I think this damn infant was stolen from some family and monkeyed with by those—what are they, anyway? What was that stuff about vegetable material in the autopsy report?"

"The truly alien ones were more vegetable than animal. That was the key finding."

"Little green men," Eisenhower said. "Literally."

"More bluish-gray, actually."

"I think this is a kidnapped child," said the President. "That's my concern. And that's the reason for the order I have issued to the Army Air Force. Van?"

"The Air Force has orders to seek, engage and destroy the enemy. We will fire on these disks, gentlemen, and we will bring them down."

"Citizens are having their babies kidnapped," the President added.

Absolute silence filled the room. The President alone remained animated, looking from face to face with a strange half smile on his face. He must have looked like that at the moment he told his cabinet he was going to drop the bomb.

The decision was absolutely characteristic of Western civilization, the American government and Harry Truman himself. It was in its essence highly conservative. But ours is at core a very conservative civilization.

This is why it has survived so long, and why it has absorbed so many changes without altering its essential form.

Will also held his tongue. Unquestionably, it was a moment when he should have spoken out. I want to blame him for not doing so, but I cannot. He was at his very lowest ebb, he had just endured too much. Above all, I blame the visitors for his silence. Had they not put him under almost impossible pressure he might have had the psychic energy to intervene.

But that was probably their purpose: to test him, Truman, all of them, to the absolute limit and see then what they brought forth of themselves, peace or war.

Eisenhower was the first to speak. "I'd think a lot of questions would be answerable before you did that," he said. "A thing like that could have unpredictable importance."

In later years Eisenhower would become almost completely impossible to understand, but his locutions in the late forties required no more than a

moment's extra thought.

"Unpredictable consequences," Truman snapped. "Do we have any ideas on that?"

"It's too early for us to make a cultural evaluation," Dr. Rhodes said.

"I want ideas!"

Van responded. "Mr. President, we have a five-hundred-mile-an-hour airplane on the drawing boards."

Hearing this, the President seemed to become suddenly exhausted. "Look, this thing first appeared over Roswell. In other words, over Roswell Army Air Field where our atomic bombers are located."

Van offered more disturbing information. "From May twenty-seventh to June thirteenth the 509th demonstrated its capability to deliver nuclear warheads to targets at intercontinental distance during maneuvers out of Wendover Field. This weapons system works, and that is the first time we demonstrated it.

Two weeks later the aliens started nosing around and getting in our hair."

The President continued. "Then we had soldiers go missing. And that estimate you wrote, Mr. Stone, and the missing persons reports for '44 to '46 suggest that people in the civilian population may be affected. And now this—this—I don't know what to call it—"

"An artificially deformed baby," one of the scientists offered.

"—living in a communistic hive," Forrestal said.

"Look, I've got a feeling we're going to have a war with these people and I don't know a goddamn thing! Not a goddamn thing!" Truman was actually ranting. Will saw his weakness and he was horrified.

"There are certain things that we do know." The scientist with the Middle European accent looked around the table. "First, they do not wish to annihilate us or they would already have done so—"

"Unless they're bringing up the big guns right now!"

"Well—"

"Well, nothing, Dr. Rosensweig! I'm telling you there could be an invasion coming. And as far as this communist business is concerned, maybe that's why we were singled out and they weren't—they don't need to be invaded because they're already communist."

Dr. Rosensweig spoke gently, trying to calm Truman down. "What 'they,' sir?"

"The Russians, man! They aren't getting treated to this or they'd be

screaming in my face right this damn minute, you can bet your britches! Maybe they're being ignored because they're already communists."

"We know so little."

"Hell, they live in a hive! A hive! My blood runs cold."

"Yes, Mr. President, but the fact remains that they have not yet harmed us. Another thing we know is that their craft are vulnerable to thunderstorms. Meaning high-intensity electrical discharges applied in a random manner. Lightning."

"So what? How does that help me regain control of my airspace?"

"There is the beginning of a weapon in that idea, if we must have a weapon."

The President slammed his open hand on the table. "I need weapons now! Give me aircraft cannons with atomic bullets! Give me something that will damn well work right this minute!"

Eisenhower spoke again. "Within the joint mission capabilities, Mr. President, there are capacities that we have that we can apply in this case workably."

"And get this man a translator!"

"He means that we have joint mission capabilities that can be useful now," one of the other brass hats said quickly. Eisenhower flushed purple, obviously furious at Truman's jibe.

"We have substantial forces worldwide," Eisenhower said. "These forces can be raised to a higher level of alertness, with an increase in ground security and air patrols. It is a matter of casting your net, and you will get your fish."

Truman set his jaw. "I don't want to fail. I don't want to see a situation where we shoot and miss."

Van responded. "Mr. President, we will shoot and miss. But we will also shoot and hit."

"The metal is strong," Dr. Rosensweig cautioned.

"The things are made out of tinfoil, sticks and paper," Van said. "This is what they have. The foil is formed out of millions of tiny, absolutely uniform welds, according to Darby's telex. Amazing. They have good tinfoil, good sticks, good paper. But we have bullets that travel a thousand miles an hour and are made of hot lead.

We will have some success."

"I want to know generally if you are opposed to armed action or for it,"

Truman asked.

Forrestal replied, "I'm very uneasy, frankly. If it wasn't for this communist thing—"

"Yes or no!"

"Well, yes, given the situation. But proceed with caution."

"Hilly?"

"We must show that we are in control."

Will's heart sank. He knew that he should be speaking out. He knew that the President was making a terrible mistake. But he still remained silent.

"Dr. Rosensweig, what does your committee think?"

"Gentlemen," Rosensweig said as he looked around him, "does any scientist here want to shoot?"

The other scientists were silent. The President shuffled his notes.

"As you requested, sir, we discussed this at length before we came here," Rosensweig continued. "We feel that you should wait for developments. An effort should be made to make contact before shooting. There are those among us who believe that certain factors of human history would repeat themselves elsewhere.

Throughout history we have been getting more ethical. We think that this will also prove to be the case with our visitors."

Truman leaned far back in his chair. "More ethical? Now you've really scared me. I fear men who don't know history. Auschwitz is more ethical than something we did before? I would say that we are getting less ethical.

If they are more advanced than us, I can make a case that they will be monsters."

He looked from man to man in the room. The depth of his cynicism amazed Will. How did he go on, thinking as he did? And yet his eyes twinkled. No matter how serious the situation, Truman was always bursting with good humor. A complex man.

"Gentlemen, I am ordering armed confrontation. And I want a service coordinated response along the lines that General Eisenhower appears to have suggested. Worldwide, every U.S. base is to be alerted that they will rise to meet any and all unusual aircraft, and they will shoot first. Now, it's late and young Mr. Stone is obviously dead on his feet. Thank you."

He abruptly left the room. Will stood there blinking, surprised, confused. It was over. We were going to shoot.

And fail. Of course we would fail.

There was a low buzz of conversation as papers were gathered and briefcases snapped shut. One of Van's men began pulling the photographs off the easels and putting them in a large portfolio.

Van came over to Hilly, motioning Will to join them. "The President wanted me to tell you that the disk is being moved to Muroc in California for military analysis. We've got to find the weak points."

"What about MJ-12, the scientific group," Hilly asked.

"That'll have to wait. Everything is military right now. Until we regain control of our airspace."

Will thought then that we were never going to regain control of the skies—or of the dark night, or even of our own minds.

He had the feeling that we had just made a catastrophic mistake, and were lost.

Headquarters, USAAF

Top Secret Eyes Only!

7/13/47

ARMY AIR FORCE

ORDER NO. 677833

SUBJECT: UNCONVENTIONAL AIRCRAFT

TO: All Operational Commands, Continental US, Generals Commanding.

1. Sightings or reports of unconventional aircraft such as glowing objects, flying disks or airships will receive immediate scramble emergency response.

2. Such aircraft will be attacked and shot down without warning.

3. Gun cameras are to be turned on during encounters.

4. Combat flight rules are the order of the day.

5. There will be a report to higher command the moment any sighting takes place.

6. No public announcements are to be made without authorization from higher command.

Chapter Twenty-three

It was not long before the Air Force had its first engagement with a flying disk. Subsequently there were a number of such engagements, the most famous of which took place near Godman Air Force Base on January 7, 1948. In this incident Captain Thomas Mantell was killed after flying toward what he described as "a metallic object. . . tremendous in size." There are substantial public indications that Captain Mantell's body was never found.

In February 1948 Brigadier General Cabell, chief of the Air Intelligence Requirements Division, asked that each air base in the U.S. be provided with one interceptor on a continuous alert basis, to be equipped with

"such armament as deemed advisable."

Will told me that no disk was ever shot down, and the program was abandoned in the early fifties because of the high casualty rate and the zero success level.

The first engagement took place in July of 1947, barely a week after the "shoot to kill" order had been issued.

This incident occurred over central Kansas.

Tech Sergeant Eddie McConnell was almost but not quite napping over his radar screen at approximately three-thirty A.M. when his half-closed eyes detected a blip and he heard a beep as the antenna of his radar swept through 160 degrees. He hit his mike and announced, "Traffic incoming one-sixty."

"Incoming one-sixty," the traffic controller replied.

Neither man was particularly excited. The American Airlines Skysleeper sometimes passed overhead at this hour. Or it could be a private aircraft.

The radar operator watched his screen. "Traffic at flight level five approximate. Speed seven-sixty."

Now the controller sat up in his chair. "Verify that speed, please, sir."

"Seven-six-zero."

The controller was aware of order to engage unusual craft, they all were.

He thought that he might have a scramble situation here, and so informed the officer in charge. "We have a bogey three o'clock at level five incoming seven-six-zero."

The officer jumped up from behind his desk in operations and vaulted up the steps to the tower. "Lookout, what do you see at three o'clock," he yelled

as he ran.

"A star, sir."

"Give me those binocs," he said. "Get radar."

The voice of the radar operator came through the loud-speaker. "Radar here, sir."

"Is it exactly one hundred and sixty-two degrees at this moment?"

"Yes, sir, speed now seven-eighty."

One of the men in the tower whistled. Everybody was watching the star now. "I'm calling a scramble," the operations officer said. "Hit the button."

The claxon sounded. Seven pilots were in the ready room drinking coffee and telling stories about girls they'd bedded or failed to bed. "I hate unannounced drills," one of them shouted over the blaring of the airhorn. "Your coffee gets cold."

The flight line lit up as the pilots ran toward their planes. Mechanics were hauling quick starters for the powerful Merlin engines that drove the P-51's. The pilots hit their seats, buckled in and started their checklists.

"Flaps extended. Turbochargers on. Coils on. Heat. Prepare to turn over." One after another the engines sputtered and coughed and charged to full power. The ground crews pulled the starters away and signaled with their flashlights that the planes could proceed to the active runway.

"Wing abreast formation," said Major Jack Mahoney, the squad leader.

Headsets crackled. "You will attack incoming bogey," said the ground controller. "This is not a drill. Hoprat, this is not a drill."

"Oh, boy," one of the pilots said.

"We gonna get ourselves some action right out here in apple pie country." "No chatter, men."

Control ordered them to seven thousand feet so that they would come in above their quarry.

"Arm cannons." No test firing was allowed off the range area, so they didn't carry out that procedure.

Lieutenant John "Lucky" Luckman fingered his firing button, wishing that he could have a test volley. He watched the altimeter. "Passing three," the flight leader said, just as his instrument indicated the same. Right on the money.

"Heading eight-two," ground control announced. "Wide turn. Mark. Execute," Major Mahoney said. Luckman began a wide turn to the right. Combat rules meant no lights, so he couldn't see the position of his flight

mates without looking hard for the blue flames of engine exhaust.

"Two-two-one. I have a faulty compass." Without his compass at night Joe Lait was flying half-blind. He could easily lose his bearings.

"Turn back, two-two-one."

"Roger. Two-two-one leaving formation. Returning to base."

Now there were six of them.

"Two-two-three. Instrument failure. My board is dead."

"Drop back emergency two-two-three."

"Lights on at base," the controller said. His voice was now high with nervousness.

A dead board was an odd malfunction. Lucky Luckman had never heard of such a thing. He'd never seen it on the simulator. He surveyed his own instrument cluster. Everything was perfectly normal.

"Level seven."

"Continue heading eight-two until you have visual contact."

"Two-two-four. I have a hot manifold. Returning to base."

"Affirmative," the flight leader said.

That was a more/normal problem, Luckman thought. He didn't like the idea of being without a board at night, but a hot manifold was something you could deal with.

"Two-two-three. Cannot see base. Repeat, cannot see base."

"Two-two-three, your heading is zero-five-six. Make a slow right turn."

Herbie Nelson in 223 would be lucky to get back. If he hit any cloud he was going to drop a wing and spin for sure.

"Two-two-two. I have lost my compass. Lost my board. Turn—"

"Repeat, Two-two-two. Two-two-two?"

There was no answer from Ev Wiley. "Call him, Lucky."

"Two-two-two. Do you hear me? Two-two-two?"

Silence.

Lucky thought to himself that there was total electrical failure on that airplane—or worse. He was scared now.

Only three aircraft remained.

Then he saw it, suddenly huge and dead ahead, and not where it was supposed to be at five thousand feet.

"I have visual. Twelve o'clock."

"I do not see, repeat do not see." That was his wingman, handsome Bobby Virgo. Why the hell didn't he see it, was he blind?

"What is our position?"

Ground answered. "Approximately fifteen miles from target. Flying abreast in ragged formation. Separation four thousand feet."

"That thing looks closer than fifteen miles."

"I just lost my engine," Bobby announced.

Lucky broke into a sweat. Not Bobby. He loved his friend, loved him too much. "Jesus, Bobby."

"Leaving seven. Spin!"

"Bail out, Bob!"

There was no reply.

"Bobby! Jesus, Bobby!"

"Hey, Luckman! Snap out of it!" Lucky twisted his head around, looking for some sign of another plane. He didn't know who had spoken. "Two-two-five," he announced. "What is my position, control?"

"Calling two-two-five. Two-two-five come in."

"This is two-two-five! What is my position, ground?"

"Two-two-five is off the board with two-two-one. Calling two-two-one, calling two-two-five."

"Bobby's in a spin, you jerks!"

"Calling two-two-seven. Two-two-seven?"

That was the major. Where was he? Luckman was closing on the disk fast.

"Two-two-seven. State your position."

The major didn't answer ground. He was gone, too.

"This is two-two-five! I'm still closing! Can you hear me? Can anybody hear me?"

No reply. So his radio was out. He was on his own.

The disk was now huge, filling his gunsight. He had no more time to scream uselessly at ground control.

Luckman dropped his nose to keep the disk in his gunsight. He cut in his supercharger and increased revs to the maximum. The airframe screamed. Exhaust flickered past the cockpit. Airspeed passed through four hundred. Four-fifty. The disk grew larger and larger and larger.

He got as close as he was planning to get. His hands were shaking. At the least sign of trouble he was getting the hell out of this thing. He suspected that he had dead friends out there. Somehow the thing had shot them down.

He pressed his firing button and watched his tracer disappear into the

disk. "On target and still closing," he said automatically. "Firing. I observe tracer hits."

It has been universally true that the others have remained passive unless attacked. Even when they are attacked it takes a powerful weapon and an aggressive man to get a reaction. According to Will absolutely nothing we have thrown at them has ever had the least effect.

Will coached me very carefully before I began to write about what might have happened to Lucky Luckman after he pulled his trigger. He believes that he met both Luckman and the missing soldier, Charles Burluson, under very extraordinary circumstances, so his speculations about their fates may not be without foundation.

Of course we cannot be certain that it went as we have surmised. But it most likely did, or very close.

Lucky's story also gave me a chance illustrate the visitors' most astonishing capability, which is certainly their mastery of the soul.

A soul is part of the physical universe, and can be affected by appropriate technologies. It can get sick and be nursed and even medicated. Often the visitors say that they are doctors. They are, but it is the soul they wish to heal.

Souls can die, in the sense that they reject all identity and become simply an empty mote of potential.

Sometimes Will seems to think that the visitors are like farmers, and they are here harvesting souls.

One moment Luckman was flying an airplane. The next he was tumbling totally disoriented through a hell of wind. For an instant his mind was blank. He did not register what had happened and went on trying to push a firing button that wasn't there. Then the wind spread his arms and he saw light flash past his goggles.

He realized what had happened: he was outside of his plane.

A rush of adrenaline made his heart start hammering. His vision cleared for a moment, then curtains of black started coming in. Lights were shooting past like meteors. Tracer? Stars? Ground lights? He couldn't tell. He tried to get his right arm in to pull on the ripcord, but he was spinning so fast his arms were like iron bars extending away from his body.

He couldn't see at all. Was he blacking out? Couldn't tell. He was sick. He hurt, shoulders, legs. He was pissing, goddammit.

Falling! You are falling!

Tomorrow he was going to wash his car. How would he ever wash his

car? Goddamn, it was so sad.

His throat hurt. He couldn't close his mouth. The wind was tearing his cheeks open, ripping at his lips. It was so cold it felt like his skin was burning. He tried to get his arms in. He had to. God, this was death. This was what it meant to die!

Why the fuck did I ever join the Army Air Force? Oh, God help me. Momma. Momma!

I didn't mail your letter, Momma! I'm going to miss you, Bobby.

There was blue light here. With a slamming thud his arms wrapped around his chest. He was in a blue tunnel. He tried to pull the ripcord but it was no good. His hands looked like wet masses of blood-soaked cotton. There was blood all over him, too, sloshing inside his flight suit.

He tried to talk, couldn't. His throat hurt awful bad and he wasn't breathing. Straining, his chest bursting, he fought for air. Then there was something dark blue and covered with tubes and things, and it was coming toward him. Dark blue. He saw it vaguely, out of agonized eyes. He was smothering. He felt his bowels give way.

Then he was naked. He was a baby. His mother was carrying him on her shoulder. "Rockabye baby in the treetop, wind will blow and cradle will rock. ..."

Momma always sang it like that, in her bell-perfect voice, "Wind will blowwwwww. ..."

What's going on here, I'm not a baby! He squirmed, trying to see around him.

That woke him up.

He was lying on a table in a featureless gray room. Aside from stiffness he didn't feel bad. He could breathe.

The air stank of sewage. He sat up. "I've gotta wash my car," he shouted, "My friend and I—Bobby—" A hollow feeling filled him.

What the hell had happened? Bobby had been in a spin! He swung his feet off the table. This was the goddamn infirmary. He could smell the iodoform. Out the window you could see the base parking lot and the maintenance hangars beyond.

He got up. "What the fuck'd you do, fill me fulla morphine? Hey! Nurse! Somebody!"

The door was funny. At eye level it had a round, shiny black thing embossed on it. No knob. "Open up! You got one pissed-off pilot in here!"

Hey!" Again he thought of his friend. "What the hell happened to Bobby Virgo?

I've gotta know!"

He ran to the window. What the fuck, he'd go out that way. He could see his own damn car not a hundred feet away, his dusty-green DeSoto.

He raised the window. Now what? The outside looked double-exposed. There was a ghost DeSoto hanging over the real one. He blinked, shook his head. Somebody behind him said his name. The voice was an eager, hissing whisper, nasty. It sounded like a vicious fag, like those bastards he'd gotten tangled up with in St.

Louis . . . and he saw their greasy pale bodies . . . lying where the DeSoto had been.

He whirled around. "Nurse!"

There were three men standing there in pale uniforms with crossed Sam Browne belts. They were about four feet tall and they looked as though they were made of puffed-up marshmallow. They had big, black eyes. A smell of sulfur had been added to the medicinal stench of the room.

He reacted instinctively, rushing the three men. He grabbed the first one he saw and hurled him full force against the wall. There was a splat. His head bobbing, the thing crawled away. Blue-green goo dribbled down the wall behind him.

The other two held their hands out to him with the wrists limp, like they expected/him to kiss their long, pale fingers. The hell, he was gonna beat the shit out of these guys. He took a swing at the nearest one. It was a good punch, on the money—but he found himself whirling around, swinging through the air.

"Man," he yelled, staggering, "you got too much morphine in this soldier!"

What in hell was he doing, taking swings at nightmares. He dropped onto the bed. Had he gone crazy? Was this a goddamn padded cell?

Then he noticed the smear on the wall. He went over, felt it. Real. Sniffed it. Smelled strongly of sulfur and some kind of plant. Garlic? Celery? No way to be sure.

Either he had knocked hell out of a real mushroom man or this was about the shittiest salad dressing ever mixed on this airfield.

He was staring at the mess, thinking about tasting it to see if it was salad dressing when something bumped gently against the top of his head. When he

looked up he found himself staring directly into the ceiling. He looked down. He was standing on nothing. He'd floated up to the top of the room.

"Oh, fuck."

On its own his body rotated to a lying position. Then the door opened with a faint pop and he went shooting down another blue tunnel. He yelled but couldn't move a muscle.

He was aware when he stopped moving, he knew that he wasn't in any infirmary on earth; he wasn't a stupid man. He'd figured out where he was. A hell of a thing.

Realizing all this, he stopped being belligerent and became careful. He wasn't about to make these people even more angry. His mind raced with excuses for why he had already practically killed one of them with his bare hands, and maybe more when he'd fired into their ship.

They looked awful. He just hadn't expected to see them. He was really a very gentle guy, all he'd done -

"Is shoot at us and then injure one of my soldiers."

She was standing across the room, a perfectly normal-looking woman of about thirty. She had soft features, auburn hair and a small mole on her right cheek. Her dress was blue plaid. She reminded him very much of that strict Miss Bonny who was his fifth grade teacher. Miss Bonny had a big willow switch she kept behind her desk.

She came slowly closer, sort of drifting across the room. It looked weird and he got scared. He backed away.

As far as he knew Miss Bonny was still teaching school. So what in God's name was she doing here?

"Why do you call on your god? I'm the only one here." He hadn't talked. Did that mean she could listen to his thoughts?

The closer she got the more he backed up. All of a sudden something grabbed him hard from behind. Miss Bonny hissed, her eyes glaring with evil triumph.

He twisted, screamed, tried to run. But his legs wouldn't work. When he attempted to hit her his arms remained at his sides.

"Can you not see me as I am?" she asked. He frowned. That wasn't Miss Bonny's voice.

His whole life seemed to fall away from him. It was nothing, an annoying weight.

But he wasn't finished. He still had to wash his car and spend the evening

with Bobby and send his momma that letter -

"We will find work for you, child."

Then he saw her truly, flood and fire and war and flower, a baby struggling from the womb and a crone heaving in death, a woman at morning, splashing water on her face and she so young that his heart hurt, and a gate forever opening to secret light.

"You poor child. Your life is interrupted before the time of its completion."

He saw lovers he would never touch, moonlit nights he would never wander, lessons unlearned, a man who would never know real love, all because he had died.

Then he saw his father standing before a grave with his hat in his hand and he was so little and simple, was Dad, and all his hard work was buried there.

"Why would they bury his work?"

"You are remembered there."

"I'm here. I'm okay!"

"You are not in good fortune. You have died."

"Lady, I'm just as alive as I ever was! Look, my hands, my skin!" He looked down and saw his own torn flesh.

"You cannot live like that. I must move your soul, little one."

When the woman put her hands on him the illusion that she was human faded away. "It's an alien," he thought, "she's one of them."

Her laughter tinkled. "There are no aliens, child." There was gentle derision in her tone.

He was dead! Hot tears poured from his eyes.

She began to look more deeply into him. In the middle reaches there was a yearning, unacknowledged element of the female. He felt her mind probing into his own and he recoiled. She was stronger than he was, though, and she drew him inexorably into his earliest memories, seeking the core of his fears. And she did not forget that his innermost self was female.

Suddenly he was back home in Billings. He was on the potty. He didn't like this, there were things in the water and she was making him sit on them! They were going to come up and get him. "Momma, them is spidos in here! Spidos, they gettin' me!"

She came at him, her voice buzzing, her fingers darting.

"Nonono! Stay right there." He felt the overwhelming power of her hands

holding him against the spider hole.

His howls of terror echoed in the quiet house. Then he was on the floor. An elderly nurse was bending over him. To see her broke his heart, there was in her face such love, such caring, such total decency.

She picked him up. He lay in her arms. How could a fragile woman like this pick up a full-grown male? Then she turned him over and said in the softest, kindest voice he had ever heard, "Behold the flesh that was thine."

A savagely injured young man lay on the floor. From the way he was dressed he appeared to be aircrew.

Lucky wanted to touch his young face, so innocent!

"That was thee."

"That?"

"Yes, child."

In an instant he understood. She had rescued him—his soul, his essence—from his own dying body! He was overwhelmed with such gratitude that he could barely contain himself.

"Never fear, child, for you are with us now. No more harm shall come your way."

She took him through the great ship. The first room he came to contained rows and rows of what looked like little incubators, and each one contained a tiny baby. There was a hush here, as if in a church.

"They are the children of man," the old nurse said. They all turned as he entered, watching from their strange incubators with huge, black eyes. He'd never seen babies that looked like that, or babies that were so aware of you. "We are growing a new humankind, dear child." She drew him through a door and into a place where there were tall, strong bodies hanging in tubes of pale pink liquid. "This one will fit thee very nicely."

He felt himself drawn as if magnetically toward one of the tubes. The body seemed almost alive. He looked into its eyes. There was a roaring sound and then the fluid was draining from around him. He ached as if he'd been asleep for a thousand years.

When the fluid had gone down he took a choked, rattling breath. The air smelled strongly of human blood, an odor he knew from when his carrier had gotten hit by a kamikaze in August of 1944. There had been beautiful young sailors torn to pieces all over the deck.

There were forms outside. Then the tube was opened and three children stood before him. They were wearing silver coveralls. They smiled in unison.

He could see that they were grown versions of the babies in the incubators.

Behind them stood a tall, blond man. He was more than six feet. "Hi there," he said.

"What's going on?" When Lucky heard how high his own voice sounded he cleared his throat.

"My name is Charles Burleson."

"I'm John Luckman, lieutenant, USAAF." What made his voice sound like that?"

"I was in the Fifty-third Infantry. Grunt infantry."

"I was flying a fuckin' night fighter when—" As Lucky was speaking he glanced down at himself.

His voice died.

He was looking at rich breasts and long, smooth legs. When he breathed the breasts heaved; when he shook his leg, the woman's leg shook.

"Hey!"

"Calm down, you're okay."

"What the hell is going on here!"

Three voices came into his head, speaking in breathless unison. "It's the one that fitted you best."

"I'm a goddamn frail!"

"You and Charles Burleson can be mates."

"No!"

"They're artificial bodies," Burleson said. "They take your soul and move it."

"Get me the hell out of here! This is crazy! Nuts!"

Her voice came into his head. It wasn't a vague whisper as it had been before. In this new body she spoke as loudly as if she had been at his side. "In time you will find much happiness this way, child."

"I'm not a woman!"

"I think they're kind of new at this," Burleson said.

"I've got a major problem here!"

"Maybe we can convince them to move you later."

"Jesus, I can't feature this! I just can't feature it!"

"You have to begin orientation. We've only got a short time before our mission."

"Could you tell me what is going on?" Burleson laughed. "Be patient, John. First things first." "Well, who are all these kids around here, and what

the hell's the matter with their eyes?"

"They're human kids, sort of altered. She's raising them. They're really incredible people. You'll like them."

Burleson suddenly stiffened. A sad expression crossed his face and his voice changed subtly, as if he was being used to speak the words, rather than speaking them himself. "I'm going to ask you to close your eyes.

When you open them you'll be standing in front of a mirror." Lucky closed his eyes. "Now open them, child."

Before him in the oval mirror that had stood above his dresser at home was a face unlike any face he had ever seen. He blinked and it did, too.

It was as if a shadowy woman from deep within him had somehow floated to the surface. He felt charity toward her, and a curious sort of love. "I think my jaw is kind of heavy for a woman."

"Is it?"

"But I have nice eyes. Really nice eyes."

"It is well that you like them."

The mirror disappeared. Burleson sighed, relaxed. "She comes into your mind and takes you over sometimes. I don't think they actually have bodies of their own, not the ones in control."

Lucky wondered if he would get lipstick and stuff, but didn't dare to ask. A guy wasn't supposed to like that stuff.

"Sure!" came three eager voices in his head. "We can get all that!"

The three children came tumbling into the room in a state of great excitement. They were dragging clothes, shoes, they had a makeup case, all sorts of things.

A few minutes later he was wearing a flowered dress and comfortable if somewhat clunky shoes. He was extremely embarrassed by the clothes, but he was also a resourceful person and he was fighting to get used to it, to make this craziness work.

"Good," said the voices, "that's very good!"

"Dance?" asked Burleson.

"Yes," she replied. "I will dance with you." Slowly, without music, the two creatures moved about the room, their shoulders occasionally brushing the huge tubes where other bodies like theirs waited.

"I didn't know I had a soul."

"We all have them, and these people can do all sorts of stuff with them. Incredible stuff. You'll see wonderful things, man."

"I was a man."

"You were a male body. She says that inside you really wanted to be a woman. You've become your own truth."

"Were you a woman they made into a man?"

"I told you, fella, I was grunt infantry. A bad ass. And they gave me a lot harder time when I came with them."

"In what way?-"

"Let's just say I had to pay a debt. But that's over now and this sure as hell has the U.S. Army beat."

Lucky laid her head against the grunt's shoulder. Somebody turned on a radio, and they danced to

"Something to Remember You By."

"Let me lead, asshole."

"Okay, give me a break."

It was going to be possible to dance with Charles Burlison.

Chapter Twenty-four

Will stared at a laconic report from Eighth Air Force Command. Seven pilots had set out. Five had returned.

One had lost his engine and spun his plane into the ground. Another had attacked the disk and disappeared, plane and all.

He dropped the report on his desk. At this point he felt that he could not go on. They had broken him.

In those days they understood nothing of the motives of the others. According to Will it is now theorized that they will try to take certain souls to their absolute limits, to literally shatter them so that they can become free of all the ingrained ideas that had imprisoned them.

It is a testament to Will's strength that he did not go mad or, as happened in a number of other cases, commit suicide. Instead he took action on his own behalf.

Maybe he didn't choose the perfect response. But it was the best he could manage: he ran.

Will and his father had shared many peaceful hours on the trout streams of upstate New York.

Herbert Stone had passed his membership in the Trout Valley Club on to his son. Will realized that he could get on a train and be at the club by midmorning. It was nearly ten. The late express would leave for New York in half an hour. He put his papers in his safe and locked it. On his desk he left a terse note that he'd gone fishing. No phone number, no address.

He intended to tell Hilly his plans personally. He picked up the phone and dialed the admiral's home number.

Two rings and Hilly answered.

Will put down the telephone. He told himself he'd call when he arrived at the club. He packed a bag full of cotton shirts and canvas fishing duds. Most of his gear was at the club, so he didn't need to worry about carrying an eight-foot fly rod on the train. I looked at pictures of Will in those days. There are only three, all taken of other people. His appearance is always incidental.

He was an excellent dresser. His suits were tailor-made and he had a Panama hat. He must have looked the image of a well-heeled businessman as he left his apartment building for Union Station.

The Pennsylvania Railroad's "Night Flyer" had a drawing room available through to Poughkeepsie. He engaged it and made a long-distance call to the garage in Poughkeepsie where he and his dad used to rent cars.

Since his father's death in 1945 Will had not been able to visit the club. So this journey was not simply an escape from intolerable pressure, it was also an attempt to come to terms with deep grief, and perhaps even to reconnect with the only love Wilfred Stone had ever known.

Sitting back in the cab, he remembers feeling as if life itself had suddenly returned to him. He enjoyed the geniality of the cab driver, of that old, self-confident America.

Our America is a ship in a dark ocean.

"Have a good day?" the cabby asked.

"Good enough."

"Y'know, I just don't remember it got this hot during the war. I think all the gunfire overseas broke up the air and made it cool."

"It's sweltering."

"You're sure?" He gave an easy laugh. "Here we are," he said.

When Will casually described his train trip to me my heart practically broke. What we have lost!

He was welcomed onto the shiny black train by the sleeping-car porter, he took his bag and showed him to his drawing room. "You'll want that suit ironed," he said looking at Will's wrinkled seersucker. "Just put it in the door when you're ready."

He inspected the room and the lavatory, then pulled down the bed and smoothed the blanket. "Would you like an immediate makeup, sir?"

"I think I'll read in the club car for a while after we get started."

"Well, sir, there's a midnight snack in the dining car starting at eleven. Or I can bring you something in here if you prefer."

The train pulled out at 10:29 on the dot. Will let fifteen minutes pass and then made his way to the club car at the back. He didn't expect to find anybody there but lonely commercial travelers, but there was always that pebble of hope.

He ordered a sidecar and a pack of Luckies. LSMFT—"Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco." Also stood for

"Lord Save Me From Truman."

He sat with the commercial travelers watching the lights of Maryland flash past and dreaming idly of Her, the woman he hoped would soon walk in

and take the chair beside him. She would be dressed in navy, with dark hose and high, high heels. On her head would be a pillbox hat and around her neck a discreet but expensive string of pearls. She would be perfectly made up right down to her spectacularly red lips and fingernails. She would order a Manhattan and lean back sipping it and smoking.

And Will would say hello. She'd laugh, raise her eyebrows and say something like "again," and they'd be off to the conversational races.

An impressively tall blond man came in instead, and took her chair. When the waiter came up he asked for a glass of plain water without ice. He sat erect, staring straight ahead. Like Will, he wore a seersucker suit.

Oddly, there was a conventioner's tag on the lapel, but no name. Will knew nothing of artificial bodies. He never imagined that a group of them were on a mission that involved him.

"Warm evening," Will said.

The man slowly turned his head. Will recalls a twinkle of laughter in his eyes, that and a seriousness. His eyes were violet, quite startling. Will was fascinated, and he introduced himself. "I'm Wilfred Stone," he said.

"Going up to the City?"

"Where are you going?"

"Actually, I'm off to do a little fishing."

"Where?"

"On the Beaverkill. I'm a member of the Trout Valley Club—"

The man got up and left without a word. Of course, he had obtained the information he had come for.

Mildly perplexed at his odd behavior, Will watched him stride out of the car. He finished his drink while the Baltimore passengers were boarding, then went to the library at the end of the car and picked up a best-seller. He believes it was *The Story of Mrs. Murphy*. It proved to be a study of a woman's life rendered in the most meticulous detail. Normally he would have turned away from such a book, but he found himself desperately eager to participate in another, more normal life. Her loves, pregnancies, hopes, her happiness and sadness—he drank of it all like a thirsty man at a mirage.

The Story of Mrs. Murphy took him through the late supper of eggs and bacon. He followed it with a brandy Alexander and a cigar.

He sipped his Alexander and nursed his cigar through the midnight hour. Finally he returned to his room. The porter had opened the bed and laid out his pajamas, slippers and robe. He called for a final cognac and retired with

the book.

In the distance the whistle wailed and the bells of guarded crossings sounded through the rolling, muted night.

He awoke in a vague way while they were stopped in New York and his sleeping car was being attached to the "Broadway."

As they pulled out of Penn Station the porter woke him. He shaved and went to the dining car, where he had breakfast as morning light glimmered on the Hudson.

He left the train in Poughkeepsie, a troubled man in a freshly pressed linen suit. He knew it would only be a matter of a day or so before Hilly found him and called him back. But he needed this time, had to have it.

Even at nine-thirty the day was already steel-blue and hot. As he walked up the hill to Van Alter's Garage to get his rented Ford, he felt himself sweating into the suit.

He guided the car down to the Hudson ferry and crossed to the country side of the water. There was a yacht flying up the river, and a couple of excursion steamers were dashing along with flags snapping and ladies holding down their summer dresses.

West of the river the hills rose wild. "Dad," he said into the throbbing privacy of the car.

"Never attack your enemies, Wilfred. Confuse them." So his father would say. "If a man accuses you of a crime of which you are innocent, you may be sure it is what he would do in the same circumstances." He was wise. "Never sign a contract with any man with whom a handshake would not suffice."

Silent tears appeared in the corners of Will's eyes when he talked about his father. I could never find out quite why his grief had stayed with him for all these years. Their relationship must not have been complete. I suppose that Herbert Stone lived on in his son.

After he died Will had discovered that his father had done undercover work for the Treasury Department for years. He was flabbergasted. It was his father's contacts in the secret intelligence community that had led to Will's OSS appointment.

To Will's knowledge his father had never kissed him.

Will arrived in Roscoe at eleven-thirty, passing the Roscoe Inn, the scene of many a fisherman's evening, then turning off onto the narrow road that led up the kill to the home of the Trout Valley Club.

The club was housed in a rambling Catskills mansion with enormous

porches. In those days Ann and Jack Slater ran the place for the membership, keeping it open from March through October.

Before writing this chapter I took Will's journey. I will pass over without comment my experience on Amtrak -

not because it was bad, but because it made me long for the wonderful rail journey Will had so casually described.

I rented a Taurus in Poughkeepsie and drove to Roscoe. I found the former location of the Trout Valley Club, and even the place where Will had fished—and had himself been so deftly caught.

The club has been torn down, but its view of the Beaverkill was unparalleled. From that hill one can see at least three miles of water, and each of those miles can tell a thousand stories.

This place, this stream, was the birthplace of American fly-fishing. I am no fisherman, but when I went to Roscoe and saw that dancing water, I was captured a little by the romance of it.

Will lived that romance. "Mr. Stone," said Ann Slater as he climbed the steps. "Mr. Stone, I can hardly believe my eyes. I thought you'd moved away."

"You can't move away from the Beaverkill."

"I know that and you know that. But people do try."

He found that his gear had been kept in perfect condition. His fine Orvis rod was supple and his reel oiled. His lines and flies were ready for him. His heart ached when he looked into his tackle box. All of his father's best flies had been moved in, and some of his older or less successful ones discarded. The rest of his father's gear had been discreetly removed from their cabinet.

"Mr. Dette came in and rearranged your flies," Ann said. This man was one of the most famous flytiers in the Catskills, and a longtime personal friend of Herb Stone. His daughter still runs Dette's Flies.

Will walked back to the kitchen where Jack was preparing lunch for the four club members who were there.

Upon entering this place he really felt as if he had left the outside world and all of its difficulties behind. "I hope there's a good hatch," he said as he entered the kitchen.

"My Lord, Wilfred Stone. I thought this place was getting toney at last. Guess I was mistaken."

"What's for lunch, Jack—rat stew?"

"Well, the other fellas are having a little beef stew. But I can fry you up a

couple of rats if you want to catch them. I think there are some living in the bottom of your cabinet."

"I'll take beef stew."

"As far as hatches are concerned, we had quite a big hatch last night, and they took some fish this morning with caddis."

"How's the evening action been?"

"Well, if there's a hatch going its pretty good just after sunset. Nine would be about right tonight."

"That suits me. I'm going to spend the day loafing and then I'll fish."

After lunch Ann put the radio on the porch and brought Will a pitcher of lemonade and the Herald Tribune. The club had a good aerial, so he was able to pick up many of the New York City stations. He remembered only that he used to listen to WQXR. I looked up an old radio log in the library and found that he would have heard a program called Tom Scott Songs at that hour.

The Trib was full of Truman and the Russians and the Marshall Plan. Will found it strangely thrilling to read the public doings of the President, knowing so much of his most secret affairs.

It was also extremely painful. He finally turned to the "Thronton Burgess Nature Story." I also looked that up.

Will had read about the summer habits of the martin.

Nobody disturbed him, which was as well; he could not have spoken without sobbing aloud. He was a man without emotional resources.

Exactly in the state the visitors wanted him, in other words.

Once a large, black sedan drove slowly past the house. The other fishermen appeared. They were nobody Will knew and he has forgotten all but the idiotic nicknames by which they introduced themselves: Whisker, Pootie and Boy. They had no fish, and the luncheon talk was of throwbacks, big ones hanging under logs and better days.

As far as Will was concerned, he had left the others in Los Alamos He could not have been more wrong.

Part Four

THE FLOWER

*Except a corn of wheat fall into
the ground and die, it abideth alone;
but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.*
- John, 12:24

Chapter Twenty-five

The Chronicle of Wilfred Stone

The Beaverkill at the turn of evening: mist rising, the rocky bed muttering with the water's many voices. I had gotten well into an isolated stretch and was just making my first cast when I saw a figure standing on the bank.

I was astonished because of who it was: a largish blond in a white dress printed all over with yellow primroses. She could have been the twin of the oddball I'd seen on the train.

She hung back in the bushes, her hands fluttering nervously along her sides. Was she embarrassed by her dowdy outfit?

She had distracted me enough to ruin my firstcast. The fly dropped into swift water.

"Hello," I said. Her heavy jaw made her unattractive, but she had nice skin. She did not reply.

I pulled back my line and started preparing another cast. All the while I was aware that she was watching me.

It really wasn't very polite; nobody local would stand on the riverbank and stare at a fisherman.

Finally I waded out of the stream. "May I help you?" I asked as I clambered onto the bank. I had absolutely no premonition of danger.

When I straightened up from my climb I found myself face to face with her.

Why had she come so close? She was taller than me and her eyes were pools of shadow. Her lips were set in a mean line. I was suddenly aware that I was alone on the stream and far from help.

Her muscles rippled; she was obviously strong. I got the idea that she might be an inbreed from back in the hills. There were said to be a few pockets of such people in the Catskills.

Then I smelled something awful. I was thunderstruck. A familiar and terrifying odor of sulfur clung to her.

I threw my rod aside and leaped down the bank into the water. Fighting my hip boots I plunged across, keeping to the rocky shallows. I grabbed

brush and tugged myself up the other side. There were fallen logs and brush tangled in the rocks, and beyond them huge cypresses. I ran into the darkness, limbs slapping my face, roots tripping me.

That smell, that smell! It was a woman, though, an ordinary woman!

A vision of that face came into my mind as I struggled toward the bluff beyond the woods. If I could get up there I could circle back and cross the Beaverkill on the covered bridge, and from there make my way back to the clubhouse.

The boots were never meant for this kind of activity. I could barely keep my balance, let alone move quickly.

I soon noticed that she wasn't behind me. Finally I stopped. I was well into the stand of cypress, which was so dark that I risked colliding with a tree trunk if I didn't feel my way.

Obviously I'd lost her. But I didn't relax. That smell—I could never mistake that smell again if I lived to be a hundred. She had to be connected with them. I started up the bluff.

Then I saw behind me a brief flicker of light.

I didn't waste an instant. That flicker told me everything I needed to know. She was herding me away from the stream. I had to move fast or I'd never turn her flank.

She was one of their things, like the gnomic man I'd encountered at Los Alamos. I was literally dizzy with fear.

I dragged myself up the cliffs, tearing my fishing vest on the granite, lacerating my hands.

Behind me she seemed to glide through the trees like a ghost, her blue light flickering from time to time. I thought I heard her making a sound, a faint whistling.

Farther and farther up I went.

Soon she was behind me. She was climbing easily and she was very close. I pressed myself against the rocks. Now I could hear her breathing, could hear the sound of her dry skin scraping on the rocks. The beam of blue light flashed above me.

Then I smelled damp air, cave air. There was a hole to my left. I pressed myself back into it.

An instant later I saw a hand, then the top of her head. She was right here. As soon as her eyes appeared she was going to see me.

I forced myself back into the cave. I intended to go as deep as I could, to

press myself against the stone until I blended with it.

The tunnel was low. I had to go on my stomach. Moss and damp earth got into my mouth. Creeping insects fouled my hair and went down my neck.

Finally the walls spread and I was able to rise to my hands and knees. I was breathing hard now. My eyes were tightly closed; there was no reason to open them, not in this dark.

I began to be able to stoop, finally to run with my head tucked into my chest and my arms out to feel for jutting stones.

Then I heard it again, that strange cooing sound. Only it was in front of me, down deep in the cavern.

Three short, soft cries. They resonated with a tenderness of some sort, but to my ears it was the love of the leopard for the deer, of the snake for the frightened mouse.

I pulled out my lighter, flicked it but couldn't get fire. In the glimmer of the flint I saw huge shapes, old Indian paintings on the walls perhaps, and seething, glittering movement in the tunnel ahead of me.

They were here, deep in the cliffs, in the ground. God, what were they? Where had they come from?

The three cries were repeated, closer now. They were urgent, sweet sounds.

Behind me I heard her pushing herself along the tunnel. I was trapped, caught. All around me I could hear whistlings and rustles.

I couldn't run, could hardly move. A hand closed around my ankle. I yanked myself away and shrieked.

And suddenly I was falling. Wind rushed around me. I flailed and screamed. I didn't hit, I just kept falling and falling and falling.

There was light. My eyes flew open and I was staring with total incomprehension at a magnificent view. I didn't understand. Where was the cave? Where was I?

I had risen above the sunset and was in the light that ascending larks strive to reach.

The horror of dislocation so overwhelmed me that I was reduced to a primitive state. My humanity collapsed. I felt the man falling away like a flimsy costume, bits and tinsel fluttering in the sun.

My cries disappeared into the sky.

Below me the world was a purple shadow bisected by a glowing line of sunlight. Westward evening spread across the fields, and farther west the land

rested in spreading day.

Nothing was holding me up or restraining me in any way. I gritted my teeth and moaned. The impression was strong that I was about to fall. Why did they keep doing this to a man afraid of heights?

The lights of Roscoe disappeared into the general shadow of the globe. When I tried to breathe it simply didn't work. I was freezing cold. There was no wind around me. My skin began to feel tight, my eyeballs as if they were working their way out of my head.

It must feel like this for the trout to be dragged from his lair. He gasps and gulps, his eyes bulge from his head. And the fisherman, chuckling to himself over the cleverness of the capture, tosses him into his creel.

They were treating me exactly as I treated the trout, and in that there was a lesson I have never forgotten.

Now the world was glorious below me, half of it in sunlight and half blue with night. I had been pulled from out of the shadow line. It was an appropriate moment to grab me: my life was lived in that deceptive edge.

There was a heave within me. My stomach knotted, my knees came up to my chest, I retched. White foam flew from my mouth, and in that instant I felt myself lying on a floor. I gagged; I couldn't help it. The combination of shock, cold and oxygen starvation had caused the reaction. I was having a fit, flopping and spitting and choking—exactly like a fish Humping in a creel. By slow degrees my body recovered from the punishment it had received. I pulled myself to my feet. I was in an absolutely dark room, inky black.

Experimentally I put my hand in front of my face. I couldn't see it, not even with my palm touching my nose.

I went for my lighter, flipped it open and struck the flint.

For a moment I didn't understand what I was seeing in its shaky flame. Then the rows of glistening objects resolved themselves. There were dozens of pairs of huge, black eyes around me.

With a bellow of horror I threw the lighter at them. I jumped back but their long arms encircled me in an instant. I felt their black claws pressing into my skin.

I knew what these creatures were. I had seen one autopsied. "More vegetable than animal." I fought like what I was, a trapped beast.

The sentry's screams returned to my ears. He'd yelled "No, no, no" his voice rising to an absolute pitch of hysteria.

I would lash out and they would withdraw into the dark. Then there

would be silence for a while.

I would hear stealthy movement. When they touched me it felt like the skin of a frog.

I fought with the strength of the mad. They twined themselves around me, grasped me with their wiry fingers, scratched me with their claws. I kicked, I hit, I bit, around and around I turned, lashing out with my fists whenever I felt their wet, soft touch.

Again and again they came and I fought them off. I didn't think, I didn't hope, I just fought. Finally, though, I started to tire. My breath burned my lungs, my legs wobbled. All around me they were cooing and whispering, and I heard in my head a woman singing a gentle song. One of them came up to me and put its skeletal hands on my shoulders. Although I could not see I remembered from the autopsy how those hands looked: three long fingers and black, sharp claws.

I could feel the hands sliding around my back. The thing was drawing me closer. I was so exhausted that I could no longer raise my arms.

Another one was behind me now, grasping me, holding me, twining itself around me.

I screamed and screamed and screamed and they cooed and finally a voice spoke. It was like a machine talking. "What can we do to help you stop screaming?"

There wasn't a darned thing they could do! I screamed until my voice cracked and my shrieks became ragged blasts of air.

Then I could scream no more.

They were all around me, caressing me with their soft hands, their smell thick in my nostrils.

I sank to my knees.

"Can you take off your clothes or do you want us to help you?" The voice was breathless and strangely youthful, like a child of about fourteen.

Suddenly I was on the porch at home, playing with a toy when—hadn't they carried me, then?

I was a little boy then, and they had carried me, had carried me!

"You—you—"

They were touching buttons, scrabbling at zippers. There was rapid breathing and little snapping sounds. My fishing vest and shirt went off, my trousers opened.

And then there was a great deal of prodding and poking at my hip boots.

Finally it stopped.

"What do you wear?"

"Rubber boots."

"Take them off."

"Why don't you do it?"

"We can't."

"What will you do to me when I'm naked?"

"We're naked."

I toppled to the floor. I just couldn't stand up anymore. I went down in a cage of supporting arms.

There was more fumbling and scrabbling with the hip boots. Finally they withdrew. I sat up, feebly waved around me. Nothing—the air was empty.

"Pull thy boots, child."

This voice was very different from the ones I had been hearing. It was clearly ancient and full of authority.

"What will you do to me?"

"I can do with thee what I wish."

"I don't want to take off my boots! I want to go home! I'm a federal officer. My government will rescue me. We have planes—"

"You have no weapons, child."

"We have the bomb!"

"No, child, the bomb has you. Take off thy boots."

I would not.

There appeared to be an impasse. But then the boots started to get warm. In seconds they were hot. I smelled burning rubber.

I got right out of them.

A sort of chuckling followed, slow and low and terribly sinister. "Don't you remember us at all?"

I saw my red fire engine. It stood bathed in golden light, the lost treasure of my boyhood.

I reached out, put my hand on it. Yes, it was real, my own beloved fire engine, the one I'd lost when I was three.

All through my childhood I'd dreamed about it. How lovely it was, my heart ached to see it.

They'd—I remembered when I was very young . . . flying ...

The lights came on.

I was alone in a surprisingly small gray room. Although I was physically

the only person here, I had no sense of being mentally isolated. Just beneath the surface, my mind was seething with voices, images, thoughts. It was as if I was skating the short-wave band with its static and half-heard messages from far away.

Then two blond people came into the room. I recognized both of them. One I had seen briefly on the train. The other was the woman in the flowered dress.

"We are here to assist you," said the man. He sounded as if he was reading a script.

Soon I would know the secret of the disappearances. What would Hilly find of me?

Late tonight they'd miss me at the Trout Valley Club and decide that the stream had taken me. They'd search its length tomorrow morning, looking in all the places where a fisherman's body is apt to lodge. Would they find even my rod and reel? I thought not. My guess was that the woman had policed the area after I was captured.

Hilly would guess what had happened.

The government would lose balance completely. If Stone went, then they were all vulnerable.

The woman came up to me, grasped me firmly by the shoulders and kissed me on the lips. Her kiss was dry and firm and gave the impression of something a loving father might do to calm a distraught ten-year-old kid.

She embraced me in a wooden hug. She said, "It's gonna be all right, buddy."

The man in the seersucker elbowed her. "You don't sound a hell of a lot like a frail," he muttered.

The woman sent him a hard look.

He had some white stuff in his hands, which he unfolded into a robe. It was simply cut and made of soft paper. The two of them raised it over my head and drew it down.

For a moment it clung to me, then it seemed to take on a static charge and stood out from my body. I tingled.

"Come on," the man said.

Why were they like this? Were they robots?

"We aren't," the woman snapped. Her voice sounded petulant and very human. But when I asked them their names they gravely shook their heads. "Your name dies with you," the woman said. "We don't remember."

We went down a hall that was more a tunnel it was so low. I could see that it was made of paper of the same type that formed the inner walls of the ship we had found. Light came through it from the outside. The yellow flowers pressed into the paper seemed almost alive, so vividly did they glow.

We entered a round chamber that contained a circle of what appeared to my eye to be plush first-class airplane seats. As a matter of fact they were airplane seats, familiar to me in every detail. I recognized the United Airlines logo on some of the headrests, TAT on others.

When the man shoved at my shoulders I sat down. Considering his strength there was really nothing else to do.

"Are you in pain? Are you prisoners?" The woman dropped a big hand onto my own. Her utter lack of grace was extremely peculiar. One expects a certain ease of motion from a woman.

How incredibly alien they were. Had I understood then who they were, I wonder if I would have acted differently. All of my life I have wished I knew what they thought of me. It must have been an incredibly funny, poignant experience—if they had the full range of human feeling available to them in those strange bodies.

"Open your mouth," the man said. "I will not."

"Goddammit, I knew it. Look, I gotta—" He threw himself at me. He was huge and as hard as stone. I was too spent to resist him, even for a second. With one arm around my chest he held me from behind. With his free hand he forced open my jaws. I tried to clench them but his fingers were powerful. The woman had a graceful little bottle from which she withdrew a curved dropper.

My jaws were open, I was helpless. She put three drops of ice-cold liquid on the tip of my tongue. When they let me go I smacked and coughed. I spat.

"You can spit," the man said. "It doesn't matter."

"What have you done to me?"

"You needed that. You're going on a trip."

"I want to go home."

They pushed me into one of the seats. I quelled a wave of nausea, but it was followed by another, stronger one. The man reached around behind my seat and came out with an airsickness bag from the pocket.

transcontinental air transport was printed on it in red letters. I used it.

The air had changed. Far from being cold, it was now thick and hot. It was getting hard to breathe. Whatever was happening to me, my body was

being taken to the extremes of endurance. In those days we knew nothing of hallucinogenic drugs.

Without a sound the walls of the room became clear. At first I did not understand what I was seeing. A huge shining strip of light curved off into the sky. Beneath it there shone the amazingly complex surface of a gigantic sphere colored in a thousand shades of tan and green and blue.

Then I saw that it was all surrounded by reefs and oceans of stars, stars in endless numbers, stars beyond belief in a billion colors winking, as if God's own treasury had been spilled.

We appeared to be in the rings of Saturn. How far from earth would that be? I couldn't even begin to remember. However, I was completely convinced that we had come an awfully long distance in a very short time.

In the middle of the clear wall was a round doorway. It did not appear to open into the view around us at all, but revealed broad plains beneath the light of a strange, brown sky. It looked like a patch pasted on the wall of stars.

I had no intention of going through that door.

Chapter Twenty-six

The Chronicle of Wilfred Stone

The next second I was standing in a desert. It was strewn with sharp black boulders that shone dully in the weak light. A forlorn breeze fluttered my paper garment. I was aware of the fact that Saturn was a ball of gas, so I did not imagine myself to be there. I didn't know where I was. They had removed me from reality. A few minutes before I had been struggling in the depths of a cave, now I was on a desert worse than the Sahara.

I have wondered at those events, trying to determine if they were physically real or if they happened in some other way. I was here, and the grit underfoot was real and the air was crackling dry and the sky was brown.

I staggered a few steps, hitting my naked foot against one of the stones. I sat down, rubbing my ankle. I looked around.

In a way that is almost impossible to describe, this place was unfamiliar. Even the details were wrong.

Perhaps especially the details. The shape and color of the stones, the quality of the sand, all of it was wrong.

Even the air against my skin felt different.

I wasn't really thinking anymore. I was just here, my eyes looking out into the open.

Which was, of course, the whole point. My humanity had dropped away. I was still conscious, but I was an animal again.

And I was so lonely. I raised my head to the brown sky and keened. My sound was the only noise in the place. It seemed to be coming at once from far away and from deep within me, deeper than I had ever been. I took a breath, did it again. My spirit rose with the sound, for a moment to fill the empty air with the magic of being.

Then it died away and I was little again and it was getting dark.

I suspect that we made such sounds when we lived in the forest. Grabbing a rock I stood up. I threw it a tremendous long distance. It landed with an empty thud.

I raced across the plain, dodging and skipping with a grace I had never

before possessed.

When I came to a high point I stopped. Seeking for the scent of water, I smelled the air.

A growl of frustration came from my throat. The sound startled me. At first I thought there was some kind of animal behind me. Then I thought, "No, that is how you're supposed to sound."

I was me, me alone. No name, no education, no expectations. Just me.

The sky was pale and unmarked by clouds. Not far above the horizon there was a powdery brilliance, which I presumed was the sun in deep haze.

Next I scanned the horizon, looking carefully for some sign of life, a swatch of green, perhaps, or the glitter of water. Then I looked for smoke or just the outline of a building.

The place was completely empty and entirely silent.

Again I smelled the parched air. I was already quite thirsty; I couldn't live like this for long. The air was so dry that it was leaching moisture from my body. My hands looked like paper, the skin puckered and shriveled. I touched my face, feeling fissures that had never been there before. And my nose was cracked inside.

Where would I go, naked except for a flimsy piece of paper? Graceful or not, my feet were thoroughly banged up from the mad run. I don't think there was a single rock that wasn't sharp.

For the most part the desert seemed absolutely flat, but off to my right the land rose. I could not judge distances. The views, though, seemed much longer than they had any right to be.

I walked in the direction of the rising land. At least this would keep the sun behind me. What had appeared to be the gentlest of rises soon became quite steep. I wasn't going to be able to keep this up forever. My chest and head ached, my legs felt like lead, my feet were on fire.

Very suddenly I started to have trouble seeing. At first I didn't understand why, because I did not realize how fast night came. By the time I realized what was wrong the sun was already on the horizon.

It seemed as if the air literally absorbed light. The instant the disk of the sun disappeared it was absolutely dark. There were only one or two bright stars visible through the dusty haze.

God, this place was ugly.

I sat down. There was no point in walking farther without light. The dark was like ink, like something you could feel.

I wished they'd at least left me my lighter. Then I was crying bitterly. The tears came without warning. I had been left here to die. It was so damn unfair and I was so far from home.

Later I heard something, or thought I did. Now that it was dark I didn't want this. I didn't want to hear anything that I couldn't see. The sound was low and slow and high in the air. It was as if some tremendous thing was floating through the sky above me, breathing.

The breathing got louder and louder. I felt like it was right above me, huge. I cringed, waiting for it to land on me.

Instead it went away. I let out my breath.

No sooner had I begun to relax than there was a tremendous rattling noise in the distance. It got closer and closer and lower and lower and I could hear the breathing again, fast and excited. There was urgency in it, like a starving prisoner inhaling the aroma of the jailer's soup.

A new sound started up, sharp scraping. It was very regular, as if somebody was slashing knives together.

Something whizzed through the air just above me, so close that my hair was touched with a breeze.

Involuntarily I shrank away—and saw a red glow out of the corner of my eye. I looked. Redness spread along the horizon on my left. A moment later a huge red star popped up and the place was bathed in dim, bloody light.

There seemed to be a forest of thin trees all around me. It took me time to understand that I was looking at tall, black legs, many of them.

It took every ounce of my composure not to scream. I was under what appeared to be a gigantic insect of some kind, perhaps a spider. The rattling noise started again. I could see sharp mouth parts working.

Jumping, twisting, turning to avoid the legs I made a dash to get away from the thing.

It rose up into the air, making a gigantic leap. I had to scramble to avoid it landing right on top of me. Again I ran. This time I threw stones at it.

It leaped.

I evaded, but barely. I scrambled up the rise on the theory that those jumps would be harder uphill. They weren't. It sailed high into the red air and came down on top of me.

Legs clutched, mandibles scraped—and I was caught. I grabbed a rock and hammered against one of the limbs. For all the good it did I might as well have been trying to break steel pipe.

I fought against its quick, clever legs. Finally I went wild. I hit, kicked, bit. The jaws were slashing and I could see a bright green tongue darting in and out of its mouth. I was brought closer and closer to being sliced to pieces.

I could not possibly taste good to the thing. It was sure to tear me to pieces and spit me out. I was furious at dying so pointlessly.

Then the legs pressed me against the wide open mouth and I began to die.

As I sank away I saw around me a starry night of home. I was back at our old house. We were playing on the porch, my sister and I. I saw her beside me, attending to her beloved doll Ricardo. That word—I hadn't thought of it since I was tiny. The moment was bathed in a light that seemed to contain some essential emotion of loss and urgency.

There was between me and the thing that was devouring me a kinship of tremendous power. It pushed my fear aside and I lay like a raptured lover in the forest of legs.

If this was death, from where did love emerge? I was dropped on the ground from a distance of a low feet—put down gently. For an instant I saw the complex face of the thing that had held me. It looked like nothing so much as a tremendous mantis. But those eyes—huge, reflecting the red air—were not blank. I was shocked.

Somebody was looking at me. Joy rang out. There was peace, wisdom and then a cock of the head: the irony of our situation. Soundless in the charged air, laughter.

I was left collapsed on the ground, drained now not only of my culture and my name but also of my physical strength. Bit by bit I was being demolished, reduced to the simplest nub of self.

I lay staring at the sky. Did I sleep? I don't know, but when I finally felt like getting to my feet I was stiff and ached in every joint.

Keeping the red sun on my right I forced myself up the rise. As I walked I understood that I had been brought a long distance. Before me there stood the most tremendous cliff I'd ever seen. It seemed to go up for thousands and thousands of feet.

On its highest ridge there was a very distinct blue glow. The glow was pulsating. Life. So the attack had not been an attack at all. Somebody had simply been helping me. The cliff was not sheer. There were plenty of footholds, and I had already reached a dizzying height when the red sun sank below the horizon.

Again darkness came abruptly. I was left hugging the wall in front of me,

afraid to go another inch.

I don't think it was dark for more than ten minutes. When the pale sun rose again I resumed my climb.

There were moments of dizziness when I would have to stop. I wasn't in shape for a climb like this. My throat felt as if it had been packed with powdered glass. My head pounded.

Not only was I thirsty, I was also becoming hungry. I kept remembering that beef stew I'd had for lunch. Once I even sucked a bit of it from between two teeth. When that happened I hugged the rock and cried like a baby.

The loneliness came again, and stopped me for a long time.

The higher I went the more difficult the climb became. Worse, the soil up here was friable and there wasn't a single stable handhold. I had to dig down then haul myself up as the dirt collapsed around me.

Above me the blue glow was massive. I tried to call out but it was no good. I hadn't a trace of a voice.

At this height the cliff was more like a sand dune. To make headway I had to lie against it and squirm. I was so frustrated that I would have been in tears, but I had no tears.

It took me some time to realize that I'd made it.

Before me was a sparse but huge park. I dragged myself onto the surface, which I found to consist of tightly matted grass, bright green. I inhaled it, chewed at it trying to get some moisture. It was very dry.

I pulled myself to my feet. Off to my left there was a stand of tall, narrow trees. They were really huge, a hundred and more feet high by my estimation.

Directly ahead I saw a truly welcome vision, a cluster of buildings. They were obviously adobe. It looked very much like a Hopi town. I started stumbling forward.

A smell came to me on the air—or rather, a sensation. This was dampness. It loosened my drum-tight skin. It filled my nose with life, made my lungs open.

As best I could I ran.

Then I saw it. A fountain. It was made of black, shiny stone, round, with water playing out of a nozzle in the center.

I plunged my head in and opened my mouth. The water was glorious, cold and pure and perfect. I could feel my skin drinking, my mouth, sucking and drinking. Never had I experienced such raw pleasure. It was ecstatic, delicious, almost sexual in its intensity.

Finally I raised my head. Beyond the fountain there was a small garden.
In the garden stood a child. Her looks did not matter to me; what I saw
was the radiance within. I ran to her as would a youth to his perfect love.

Chapter Twenty-seven

I finally felt what I should have felt from the beginning for Wilfred Stone. My youth and arrogance had prevented me, though.

I looked at that old man in a completely new way. I reached toward him. He looked down at my hand, and then at me. In his eyes was an emotion I cannot name. It sent a jagged edge of fear through me, as if I had scented death.

"Turn it off," he said. I put down the tape recorder. He flipped the switch. He didn't actually tell me to leave out the material that follows, but that was the implication.

I do not feel that he was right, but out of respect for him—yes, respect—I took notes on this part of his narrative of the other world, rather than record it. The wise child walked quickly away, a chalky ghost in the gloom. She was the size of a three-year-old but her movements were mature.

Will called out.

She stopped when she heard him. When she smiled he sensed what he described as something almost vampiric about her. There was a sense of tremendous, overwhelming power, the night in the child.

He felt himself in the presence of tremendous wisdom. This was what it was like to be with somebody who had gone beyond the human.

His next words just popped out, as if formed from purest instinct. "Help us," he said.

The response was immediate. The next second he was back in his boyhood home in Westchester County.

The whole place was flooded with pure, sweet light. He could hardly believe it. And this was no illusion. Will says that he was there.

What's more, he remembers the event now from two different perspectives—that of himself as a little boy encountering a strange, shadowy man in his room . . . and also that of himself as the man.

The old red fire engine was there, standing against the wall opposite his crib.

He moved slowly around in his room. The wonder of it made everything seem jewellike and perfect.

Then he noticed movement in the crib. His own curly head, his blue eyes

—the Willy Stone of thirty and more years ago rose up and climbed deftly out to the floor. Will could smell his baby freshness, could hear him, see him.

"Oh God, God," he told me, "Nick, my heart just broke in two. I was so little! And in that huge, shadowy, mysterious world, the courage in the eyes —"

The wise children, the others, had brought him home to the best and purest thing that he was.

He remembered a warm, huge hand that had come out of the dark . . . and suddenly the curtains blew and the moonlight came in and he saw a huge, terrible man, a nightmare man bending over him.

He screamed, a high bullet of a sound.

Feet pounded from downstairs. Will the man saw his father's balding head shining in the moonlight as he came up the stairs. Behind him his mother floated in her lace and silk.

He stepped into the shadows.

Will as child was terrified. "Daddy! Man! Man here!"

He saw his own father engulf him in himself and carry him like a limp offering back to the crib.

Then the room fell away, growing smaller and smaller until it was a dot of light in the air, and then was gone.

The vampire child was dancing slow turns around him. She stopped and smiled a dangerous smile. And he felt nothing but love.

At the far end of the oasis there was a tall arch, and beyond it a round, tumbledown building.

He wanted to go there, but she restrained him, pushing against his belly as a clown child might against her clown father.

Leaving him for a moment she ran to a small table. She pointed. On it there was a plain gray plate and three gray pancakes. Will realized that he was ravenous. He remembers still the taste of that food, the pure flavor of the buckwheat from which the cakes were made, the sense of a freshness he had never tasted before.

There was also a wide bowl of water. The girl came and scooped it up for him and he drank from her cupped hands.

Afterward she sang to him in a whispering voice, in a language he did not know. He began to feel sleepy and lay down on his side.

Much later he was awakened by a soft hand stroking his head.

He jumped to his feet. All the weight of his years seemed to have fallen

away.

He walked, then, as his excitement rose; finally he ran to the ancient building. Where the blue-gray stones were intact their perfect fit reminded him of Inca work, but for the most part the place was cracked and crumbling.

He went up the steps and into a wide, cool hall. It was made of dark-blue stone worked with great intricacy.

When he tried to follow the labyrinth of these carvings his head began to pound. Finally he had to stop looking at the walls, the ceiling, and keep his eyes on the floor.

There was a circle of children sitting before him. It was all so very familiar. Words came to him: beyond fear there is another life.

Was this the place the dead went?

Had he been killed? Was that what this meant?

He went to the center of the circle and waited, standing quite still. He soon heard a drum beating out in the corridor. The sound stirred him, infected him, made him start to move.

The children began to chant in repetitive notes, wonderful notes.

He spread his arms and started to turn. The room whirled and the drum pulsed and chanting hypnotized him.

He remembered his own beginning.

He was moving swiftly and secretly across the sky of home. There were little flecks of cloud. He went past them and down into the spreading summer trees. He moved around a great, gnarled limb, his heart full of love and delicious with the secrecy of his coming. His movement was so stealthy that not even a grasshopper stirred from her rasping as he passed by.

Then he saw a window. The shades were drawn but he passed through them as if there was nothing there.

The room was dim and very quiet. A young woman lay on a bed, her head turned to one side. She was as fresh and lovely as new light, covered only by a thin gown. Brown curls spread over her brow. Her belly was huge.

He loved her terribly, and could not resist going closer to her. Then he began to drift downward. He could no longer float.

In an instant he was inside her womb, a glowing cavern. Her body was roaring, the heart fluttering like a tent in the wind, her whole self a bubbling, oozing bladder barely managing to contain its liquids.

He swam into the fluid of her and drank her and smelled her essential flower, and was filled with the taste and sense of her.

There began a dialogue between them, long speaking together of the days they would spend as mother and son.

He would love her as a boy, but when she grew old he would abandon her. His love for deception would replace his love for her and so she would die alone, her breast weakly shuddering, on a cot in the hallway of a public cancer ward.

He sat before me, his head bowed, tears streaming from his eyes. So this was what he didn't want recorded and why he never, ever mentioned his mother. I wanted to help him, to offer him some word of comfort but I could not. We are all betrayers, all of us.

To find true joy one must first accept true pain.

Once again he was back in his old bedroom, only not as a man. This time he was a little boy again. He was dancing and dancing. It was a moonlit night and there was danger in the air. Terrible things were happening.

He saw waves of ships crossing the highest air. They were gray disks and the streets below rang with screams.

But more people were singing than were screaming and chains lay abandoned that had weighted their shoulders.

"The lamb will lie down with the lion." The secret moaning is that the son will love the errant father, the lamb will welcome the hungry nuzzling of the wolf-mother, the rat will perish of love as the owl's talons pierce his heart.

Beyond fear there is another world.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The Final Testament of Wilfred Stone

I was still dancing hard when I realized that the magic had slipped away. The room was silent, absolutely dark.

I heard a click, saw a flash of sparks, a flame. The blond woman in the flowered dress was holding my lighter.

Around us there were dim, dancing shapes on the walls, crude old carvings. I did not recognize their origin -

perhaps they were Native American, or maybe even older. They were powerful, they spoke of dance, these flying red figures.

This was no ancient building, and the children's circle was gone. I was no longer a little boy. We were back in the cave. I felt as if I had been to death and back. I saw the brilliant thing they had done. They had stripped me of all except what was most essential, pure and true about myself.

"Will you take the flower?" she asked. In her hand I could see a little yellow blossom. "There's a field where the sins of the world are buried. The soil is forgiveness. These flowers grow there."

I wanted to take it, but when I held out my hand a terrible thing happened: I saw Sophie hanging in the Gestapo's basement, spinning slowly and urine spraying like rain from between her furiously kicking legs. A blast of hate exploded out of me and for an instant I thought that flower was the ugliest thing I had ever seen.

She laughed and dropped it to the floor. At once I had a change of heart. I wanted it. I needed forgiveness too, after all.

The way she was looking at me, her eyes so full of love and humor, I saw that the aliens, as I called them in those days, were not evil. It was us, we were afraid. "We shot at you!"

An almost quizzical look came into her face. "I know all about that." She opened her mouth to say more, but was suddenly stopped. It was as if a switch had been flipped in her brain. Her mouth moved but no words came out. "Hell," she finally muttered, "I can't tell you about it."

Then she shuddered, her eyes grew penetrating and terrible and I backed away from her. It was exactly as if somebody else, somebody much, much

greater had entered her and taken over.

Knowledge seemed to pour out of her and the whole impact of my experience struck me like a great slap.

This was what mankind was seeking, this incredible state that I had entered. I was beyond the boundaries of reason and the prison of history.

It was as if I had been in the forest of Eden, but with a tremendous difference. No longer did I wish to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for I had consumed the last of its fruit, and digested it all.

I was truly free, and this was what mankind was about.

"My God, what I've learned—"

"Have you?"

"I want the others to know. I've got to tell them. The President's gone to war with you! I've got to explain!"

"You have made your decision."

"No! This would be—it's terrible—we can't shoot them—you—are you—what are you, anyway? Are you part of them?"

"There is no 'them.' Only us. We are part of us, and so are you."

She was holding out what looked like a plain, ordinary glass of milk. "You're thirsty, you need a drink."

She was absolutely right. I took it and swallowed two huge gulps before I realized that it was incredibly bitter, so bitter my head was splitting. I spat milky spray but she grabbed the glass, before I threw it down.

Then she was on me, taking me in a headlock and forcing the rest of the substance down my throat.

I choked and struggled but she was like a creature of steel, not a living body. "You will forget," she said, "until the latter days of your life."

What did she mean?

Then I realized that I was getting dizzy. The wise child, the children's circle, the ancient school—it was all becoming distant and indistinct and unreal.

My memories—but I couldn't forget! I must not! Finally she let me go. "You've given me a drug!"

"Yes, so that you can forget."

"For God's sake, I've got to tell them!"

"They aren't ready."

"Give us another chance, for God's sake!"

"When the time is right, you will take your chance. Nothing will be given."

You are charged with the task of keeping our secrets until man is prepared to hear the truth."

The milk of forgetfulness made the room turn slowly round and round. The last thing I saw clearly as I collapsed was that dress. In the flickering light it became a field of yellow primroses.

Then I was standing in the stream. I had just dropped a cast. When I drew my line back I found that the fly was gone. How strange, I tie good knots. Then I remembered, hadn't I cast into some swift water?

It seemed only a moment ago, but also ten thousand years. A woman had come up ... or a deer . . . yes, a deer had ruined my concentration.

I glanced at my watch. It said five-thirty. But how could it when I'd gone out at eight-thirty?

The light was very curious. Although the sky was cloudless there was no sun. In the western horizon I could see the pure stars of morning. The east glowed green and white.

I am not a fool in the woods: obviously it was dawn.

Just then I heard a bell down in Roscoe.

A trout slapped the surface of the pool I'd been fishing and I lost interest in the confusion of time. Knowing nothing of the style of the hatch that had drawn him to feed I simply chose a lucky fly and made a cast that turned out to be as soft as a drift of spider web.

My lure had hardly rippled the surface when I had a smart strike. He took me and ran for cover. My line shook with his life. I had always secretly loathed the wolf in me and loved the lamb. That was all changed. Now the wolf was my pride as the lamb was my joy, and I played that fish with skill beyond anything I had known before. My heart burst with love for him. I played my line and wept with the sheer beauty of it, the amazing goodness of the situation.

My reward was a phenomenal catch, a four-pound brookie struggling in my creel. To take such a large brook trout anywhere would have been marvelous. But from this stream in 1947 it was a miracle.

I stopped fishing then and returned to the club.

I was met with amazement.

One man reached his hand out, ran his fingers down my chest. I saw that my fishing vest was all torn. When in the world had that happened?

"You get lost up a branch?" somebody asked.

"No."

Then I realized the truth. I must have been out all night. How could that be? Had I fished in some water of dreams?

"Thank the Lord you're all right," said Ann. Her eyes were hollow.

"Yeah. I took a damned good brookie."

They did not exactly shun me, but they looked at me out of the sides of their eyes. It developed that I had been gone for three days. I had reappeared fishing happily in water they had dragged ten times for my body.

I called Hilly.

"I'm fine," I said. "I was fishing some pretty isolated water."

"For three days, Will? What did you eat?"

"Pancakes," I blurted. "I had some buckwheats."

Why had I said that?

"Get back here," Hilly said. "We've got a hell of a lot of work to do."

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

I stopped in Roscoe at the taxidermist and left my fish. Then I drove back to Poughkeepsie and chartered a plane, which bounced me down to La Guardia Field, where I took an American Airlines DC-3 to Washington National Airport.

When I landed in Washington an agency car was waiting for me. I sat back in the plush of it and watched the sights pass, the memorials and the White House, the Washington Monument gleaming like bone in the middle morning.

Hilly sat reading a report and gnawing on a roast beef sandwich. "We're having our problems in China," he said, "and the President wants to know if Gromyko can be made a friend of the Marshall Plan, and the Dutch are screaming that the East Indies are going to go communist and there will be an election in Italy that we could buy for about twenty million. If we don't, communism crosses the Danube and France will go next. I can give you and your little men five minutes, Will." "Yes, sir."

"I want the detailed organizational plans for Majestic on this desk by the end of the week. No more sudden vacations, fish or no fish."

"It was a hell of a catch."

"I expect to see it mounted in your office." It remained there for forty years.

Now it hangs in the shadows of my living room, its varnish browned with time. But the shape of the fish is beautiful to see. It hangs there frozen in the moment of its perfect death.

Now that the shadows of the dead come close around me I have at last remembered.

Flights of angels came and we called them hordes of demons. The light of the soul shone upon us and we hid our faces. A chance was offered to every man to extend himself beyond the boundaries of Earth. In the interest of maintaining the integrity of the nation, we denied you this chance.

If they should return with their wonderful offering, do not turn away. There will be tests and dangers. But be of courage, for at some point they will hold out to you a little yellow flower! Take the flower.

Afterword

This novel is based on a factual reality that has been hidden and denied. I have used what little is known for certain of the crash of a so-called alien spacecraft near Roswell, New Mexico, in July of 1947 as the springboard for my story.

My vision of the others, their world, their motives and their objectives is based on my own understanding.

Where what I have seen with my own eyes departs from conventional wisdom, I have always trusted my personal observations.

Insofar as military and governmental involvement is concerned, I have adhered to the available facts as I understand them. Thanks to the kind assistance of UFO researcher William Moore, I was able to interview many of the witnesses still living in the Roswell area.

When Moore took me there, I found that he and researcher Stanton Friedman, who along with Jaime Shandera have investigated the whole story with meticulous expertise, were well known to the local people, and well respected for their honesty and thoroughness.

By contrast, none of the "debunkers" like aviation writer Philip J. Klass, who have made so many facile pronouncements about this case, had ever so much as interviewed these witnesses.

After spending considerable time in and around Roswell, and reviewing the extraordinary admissions concerning this matter, it seems virtually certain to me that a disk crashed and this fact became top secret.

This was done as part of what has become an elaborate process of "official secrecy and ridicule," as described by former CIA Director Roscoe Hillenkoetter in the New York Times of February 28, 1960, quoted in the frontispiece of this book.

The Roswell Army Air Field issued an initial press release that announced that the debris of an alien spacecraft had been found. I have personally met and spoken with Walter Haut, the press officer who wrote this report. Colonel (then Major) Jesse Marcel was the intelligence officer who originally picked up the strange debris on the ranch of William "Mac" Brazel. In 1979, shortly before his death, Colonel Marcel had the courage to admit in a number of videotaped interviews that the debris he found was really from

an apparent alien spacecraft, and that the Air Force had covered this up.

I have met and spoken with his son, Dr. Jesse Marcel, Jr. Dr. Marcel assured me that his father was of sound mind when he gave his 1979 interviews.

As in my book, General Ramey, the commanding general of the Eighth Air Force, held a press conference shortly after the recovery of the debris. He claimed, in effect, that a group of the nation's best intelligence officers had mistaken a commonplace radar target of a kind they saw every day for the remains of an unknown craft. Marcel was ordered to participate in this press conference, an act which his family and friends claim made him extremely unhappy.

The press accepted the general's statements.

In their writings, "debunkers" avoid mentioning Colonel Marcel's interviews, no doubt because they are the key to the case, and cannot be refuted except by making the patently ridiculous charge that this honorable military officer was a liar.

The colonel was asked if he thought what he had observed was the remains of a weather balloon.

He answered, "It was not. I was pretty well acquainted with most everything that was in the air at that time, both ours and foreign. I was also acquainted with virtually every type of weather-observation or tracking device being used by either the civilians or the military. It was definitely not a weather or tracking device, nor was it any sort of plane or missile. What it was we didn't know."

Marcel went on to describe what he had found. "There was all kinds of stuff—small beams about three-eighths or a half-inch square with some sort of hieroglyphics on them that nobody could decipher.

These looked something like balsa wood, and were of about the same weight, except that they were not wood at all. They were very hard, although flexible, and would not burn. There was a great deal of an unusual parchment-like substance which was brown in color and extremely strong, and a great number of small pieces of a metal like tinfoil, except that it wasn't tinfoil." Later "Mac" Brazel's daughter Bessie described the paper as having apparent flowers pressed in it.

Marcel took this material back to the base. He was so far from thinking that it might become a security issue that he stopped at home to show some of it to his son, who was then eleven. Dr. Marcel remembers the incident well

and has described the material he saw to me.

If the major had actually mistaken the remains of a commonplace device for those of an alien spacecraft, and caused this information to become public, surely his career would have suffered. But it did not suffer. Far from it. Later he was transferred from Roswell to Washington, D.C., where he worked on the Air Force program that eventually detected the fact that the Soviets had exploded an atomic bomb.

In other words, after he found the debris and reported on it publicly, he was transferred from the 509th into the most important intelligence project that the Air Force was then pursuing. Far from being discredited, he continued to be held in the highest regard by the Air Force.

He reached the rank of colonel before retiring from a successful career.

That the cover-up has remained intact is astonishing, considering the existence of the Marcel interviews, and the statements CIA Director Hillenkoetter has made.

Interestingly, Admiral Hillenkoetter joined a prominent UFO organization after his 1960 admission of the cover-up. Later, on resigning from the group, he made an extraordinary declaration: "I know the UFOs are not U.S. or Soviet devices. All we can do now is wait for some action by the UFOs. The Air Force cannot do any more under the circumstances. It has been a difficult assignment for them, and I believe we should not continue to criticize their investigations."

Despite all this the "debunkers" are still taken seriously by the press and among scientists. In their refutations of the Roswell incident, they concentrate on rancher Brazel's testimony. After a week of being held in isolation by Air Force officials, in total contravention of his Constitutional rights, Mr. Brazel very understandably said that he was sorry that he'd ever shown the debris to authorities. Family members feel that he was coerced. It seems clear that he was forced to provide the government with support for its cover-up, and that his coerced testimony has been used by "debunkers" with close governmental ties.

In any case, Mr. Brazel was not a qualified observer. He knew nothing about radar targets and such. Major Marcel, the one professional who has spoken out, stated that the debris was of unknown origin.

The truth must be faced: this careful, professional man did not misidentify anything. When General Ramey told his press conference that the remains were of a weather balloon or radar target, he was, quite simply, lying

on behalf of national security. This was the beginning of the cover-up that has remained in place to this day.

What happened in Roswell remains a deep, dark national secret over forty years later. Fantastically, despite all the obvious proof to the contrary, the fiction that the others don't exist is rigorously maintained as official policy and generally accepted by the scientific establishment.

It is time for our serious investigative reporters to wake up and do some digging into this matter. If they did so, they would soon discover the hollowness and the propagandistic nature of the "debunker's" assertions.

The apparent appearance of someone else in our midst—a marvelous event by any ordinary estimate—has ended up as an ugly secret and a source of nasty journalistic humor, irrational denial and sleazy sensationalism.

I do not wish, by this book, to create the impression that I am asserting that the others are aliens from another planet.

What I am saying, very specifically, is that they are an apparently intelligent unknown. That is all I am saying, and that is all that presently can be said.

The truth, if known, is held secret. I would be very surprised indeed if the government had the least understanding of the others. If what I am beginning to discover about them is correct, real understanding will change our most basic ideas about the nature of reality.

What secrets the government does possess must be opened to the light of common life. Only then will we be on our way at last to understanding the mystery that has appeared among us.

Despite all policy and no matter with whom it originated, our government must now take a calculated risk -

perhaps even defy the others themselves—and officially admit that they are real.

When this is done we will finally begin to gain insight into what is happening to us.

It is time for the truth to be told.

—Whitley Strieber

A full-body photograph of a woman with long, flowing blonde hair, wearing a white, sleeveless, floor-length dress. She is standing on a dark ledge or rooftop, looking slightly to her right. Her hair is blowing in the wind. The background is a panoramic view of a city at night, with numerous lights from buildings and streets visible under a dark, cloudy sky. The overall mood is ethereal and dramatic.

MELODY BURNING

Whitley Strieber

**MELODY
BURNING**

MELODY BURNING

Whitley Strieber



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*This book is dedicated to Anne Strieber,
who conceived it.*

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PROLOGUE

The construction elevator clattered and rattled as it sped them up higher and higher. The child clung to his father. It bothered him that the elevator had no walls, and he liked even less that it was moving fast, rising through the windy, dripping-wet skeleton of the building. He could see the sky out one side and girders rushing past on the other. The wind made the elevator rock. Its cables snapped and sang, and its motor whined. His dad held his hand tightly. The boy clutched the blue rose in his pocket. He took it everywhere. His mom had given it to him before she died. He believed that there was a secret string that started at the blue rose and ended in her hand in heaven.

“Will we be up in the clouds?”

Daddy laughed. “Nearly.”

With a last clank, the elevator stopped.

Dad picked him up. “Now don’t go anywhere near the edge, do you understand me? You could blow right off in this wind. I’m gonna take some pictures, and if anybody comes up here, what did I tell you to say?”

“My daddy brought me here to see how high it was.”

“And did your daddy take any pictures?”

He shook his head. “Just one of me.”

Dad hugged him. "That's right."

He pulled open the big plywood door with the number 50 and the word TOP spray-painted on it. "Top of the world," he said, "highest point in Los Angeles."

They got out onto the wet roof. The storm had left puddles, and the sweeping wind rippled the surface of them. There were places where you could see through to the floors below and down for what seemed like miles. Gulls screamed in the dark, rushing clouds, white against surging gray. He had learned about gulls in school.

Dad stood him beside a big plywood shack. "Don't move unless I tell you." He stepped back and took a picture of him.

"Can I see it?"

"Later."

"How high are we?"

"High enough. Don't move from that spot. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Daddy." Since Mommy had gone to heaven, he had learned to follow Daddy and always obey him.

It was cold here, and all of a sudden it was really lonely, because Daddy had gone into a room on the far side of the roof. Through the partially open door, he could see camera flashes.

Then he saw a man in a dark coat, shining with rain. The man did not see him at first. He was looking intently toward the flashes.

The flashes continued, and the man went closer.

He was a small man, not huge like Daddy. His face was white and pinched, his eyes narrow slits.

The man said, "Come outta there."

The flashes stopped.

Then the boy saw that the man was carrying a gun. It was black and shiny and pointing straight into the room where Daddy was.

Daddy had said not to move from this spot, but Daddy had not said that there would be somebody with a gun. So the boy looked around for a place to hide.

“Luther,” Daddy said as he came out of the room, “you can’t do this. I can’t allow it.”

“You don’t have any right to be up here. You’re trespassing.”

“This structure is full of violations, Luther. It’s a death—” Daddy stopped talking. He looked down at the gun. “It’s a death trap, Luther!”

The man Daddy was calling Luther gestured with the gun. “Give me the camera.”

“You can’t be serious. Put that damn thing away!”

Daddy sounded scared, and that made the boy’s heart start beating hard.

“You gonna give me that camera?”

“Hell, no.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“What’re you gonna do, Luther, shoot me?”

The man turned. His eyes were like knives. “C’mere, kid.”

“Robbie, *no!*”

The man came closer, and Robbie backed away, but suddenly the man was right there, his fist closed around Robbie’s shirt, and he picked him up. Robbie fought and kicked, but the man was strong, and all of a sudden, he was holding him out over the edge.

“Oh, God. Oh, God. Luther, no!”

“Give me the camera!”

“Okay! Jesus, man, his shirt’s tearing!”

Robbie could see the ground way, way down, and he could feel his shirt sliding up. He looked at the man, and the man’s face was funny, his eyes widening.

“JESUS, LUTHER!”

He slipped. Then Daddy was there. Daddy was looking down at him, his hands coming, and Robbie was slipping—and then Daddy yelled and grabbed him and Robbie flew up and over onto the roof—and somebody was screaming, and the scream faded away fast.

Then Robbie was on the roof, and the man was on the roof, but Daddy was gone.

The man stared at him, eyes flicking from side to side, and he grabbed for him, but Robbie ran as fast as he could. The man roared and followed, but Robbie went into the room where Daddy had been. It was dark, and there were wires and pipes, and he went behind them. When the man came in, Robbie went down between two of the pipes and then was in a dark space.

Robbie crawled into the space. The man called to him, screamed that he would shoot Robbie, so Robbie kept going deeper into the dark, narrow space.

After a while, the man stopped calling. Then Robbie heard the elevator going down.

Still, he did not move.

Gradually, the light faded. The gulls stopped screaming. Night scared him, and so he still did not move. How long he slept he did not know. But the next day, nobody came. It was getting late, and he came out onto the roof. Slowly, his heart hammering, he went to the edge and looked down. Daddy was down there, and he was dead, and that hurt Robbie's soul and scared him more than anything, because now what did he do? Where did he go?

He was hungry, and he wanted orange juice, but there was nothing here. He could not go down—he didn't dare—and anyway he had no idea how to make the elevator come. There was no button, just a lever that he couldn't reach.

Night came again, and he found a place near the pipes that was a little warm. He sat close to the pipes and cried. He cried hard and long. Then he heard the elevator. He stopped crying. Maybe somebody was coming to help him. Maybe somebody would take him somewhere, and he would tell about the man, and they would find a place for him to live and give Daddy a beautiful funeral like Mommy had, with all the flowers.

But that made his heart hurt.

The elevator rattled and clattered, getting louder and louder.

Then it stopped. The door scraped open . . . but nobody came out. Then someone did—and at first he didn't understand what he was seeing: a black, hunched figure with a weird robot face.

He choked back a scream, watching as the figure looked carefully around

the roof. When it faced in his direction, he saw the gleaming glass eyes of a robot—but then the thing’s arms reached up and the robot face came off. It wasn’t a face at all; it was a mask and it glowed inside with green light, and the green light revealed the real face of the person who had been wearing it.

The man was back again.

Robbie stopped breathing. He was a small mass of pure fear . . . and hate. He had never known this emotion before, and he had no word for it, but he wished on his blue rose that the man would just die.

Then the man put the mask back on and went stalking off across the roof. He was hunting for Robbie, and Robbie knew what would happen when he was found: he would be thrown off the roof, too. And that mask was not a mask—it was a thing that made you able to see in the dark. He’d seen those on TV.

As the man came closer to the hiding place, Robbie wished that he could jump out and push him off the roof. But the man was too big.

He stopped. He looked this way. Slowly, he began walking toward Robbie’s hiding place.

Robbie was hypnotized by the oncoming figure. His mouth went dry. His heart fluttered. He wanted to cry, but his fear was so great that he grew stiff and silent, unable to make a sound.

The man came right up to him . . . but he didn’t look down, not far enough, not to this dark corner.

The man crept around for a long, long time, moving from one end of the roof to the other, looking in every nook and cranny. But he never found the small boy lodged in a corner of the equipment shed.

Finally, the man went away. Sometime the next day, the boy heard distant sirens, and for a while he thought somebody would come save him, but nobody ever did. He watched the light of day rise and then fall, and he watched the sun slip into the Pacific Ocean.

Only then did he come out onto the windy roof. He took out his silk rose and held it in both hands up to the starry sky. He asked his mom and his dad to come get him and take him up there, too.

He jumped toward the stars, but he couldn’t make it more than a few

inches. Again he jumped, and again.

Then he cried. He went in the equipment shed, where it was warmer, and he cried until he fell asleep.

The next morning the building filled up with workmen. Still, he hid in the back of the equipment room.

When he could, he crept out and took food from the workers' lunch boxes. He ate sandwiches and drank Cokes, and another day passed. When it was dark, he climbed to the highest point on the building and held up his rose and waited.

He waited until he was too cold and then he went back to the equipment shed. It had changed. Now there were big motors in it. He could get behind the motors and hide really well.

Another day passed, and many more, and he lost count of the days. He lived in the dark, in the recesses of the building, which he heard being called the Beresford.

Sometimes he saw Luther. His hate was a nasty feeling, and he didn't like it, but he couldn't help it.

All he had left of his old life was his blue rose. He would see his mom and his dad in its petals. Eventually, he gave up waiting for them to come down from heaven for him.

The building got built, people moved in, and he went from eating workers' lunches to sneaking into kitchens.

As time passed, he forgot where he came from, how old he was, Mom's name, Dad's name, even his own name. So he gave himself a new one.

He called himself Beresford.

CHAPTER 1



*I hear you, I know I do.
Who are you?
Who are you?
Don't scare me,
don't hurt me, Don't go, don't go, don't go. ...*

This is a really beautiful building and all, but something is wrong here. I don't know what it is yet, but it's starting to kind of piss me off. Maybe it should scare me, I don't know. Right now I'm in my bedroom on the fiftieth floor, and it sounds like somebody's in the stairwell behind my wall.

There are three doors to this apartment—the kitchen door, the front door, and the den door. The den is here at the end of the apartment, next to my room. Through its door is the back stairwell for movers and things.

Could it be somebody working back there? No, not at this hour.

A stalker?

Oh, man, these guys, there are so many of them.

Last night, I got Mom in here to listen. The verdict? The wind making the building sway. Tonight there is no wind, and I'm once again hearing this, so, *hello?* Except I know I can't prove it to her, not unless I actually catch somebody. She's going to come down on me again about a shrink, and I don't want that because prescriptions will follow, and that is a road that only

goes down.

Mom thinks teens should be messy and chaotic, and I'm anything but, so her theory is that I'm too tense. She's the one who's too tense, and her part of our world is complete bedlam.

Anyway, with this life I'm living, I'm totally tired all the time, so maybe it's just my wild imagination. But how do you sleep with paranoia?

My concert's coming up, and half the songs aren't even written. Plus, I'm behind memorizing my lines for *Swingles*. Plus, Sandy Green assigned me over a hundred pages of *Middlemarch* for our English class. Thank you so much. (You think it would be cool to be a showbiz kid with a tutor and no formal classes? Believe me, it's not cool. You can cut classes, but try cutting your tutor. Ain't gonna happen.)

I'm at the point in my career where it's either going up or going down, so I *have* to be awesome in every episode of *Swingles*, no matter how tired I am, and I absolutely must fill the Greek Theatre to capacity when my concert happens. I mean, that old outdoor theater in Griffith Park is part of LA music history. Tina Turner, David Bowie, and Elton John performed there, among many others. Getting a gig at the Greek really, really matters.

So I don't exactly need distractions. I pick up my guitar, start hunting for a melody. But what if this person is sitting out there listening? Can he hear me? I don't want him to hear me.

Mom moved us here because the Beresford is ultimate glitz, and right now I need high-profile everything. Paparazzi don't do dinky condos in Calabasas.

Anyway, it's okay because downtown LA is good. There are clubs like M&M where I can just walk in despite being underage, and nobody cares. The line claps when I get out of my car. Mike and Mikey, who own the place, are jaw-to-the-floor over me. I think they'd pay me to chill there all the time.

I don't have a boyfriend because when you turn into a celebrity as fast as I have, dating gets complicated. I dance by myself, and usually when I stop, I'm alone in the middle of a sea of cell phone cameras. I don't care. My own heart is my best dancing partner anyway.

I have Julius, my bodyguard. Julius wears a suit to remind everybody that he is with me on a professional basis. If I want a guy to keep hitting on me, I have to give Julius a little three-fingered wave. Otherwise, the guy is swept

away. Zoom. Gone. Then later you see him looking sheepish at the bar or whatever.

Stuff like this is probably why I really enjoy being alone, like right now when I'm in my room with the city out there sparkling in the night.

Except, am I alone?

I haven't heard the sound for a while, so maybe it is really nothing. The wind making the building sway.

I fool around with my guitar. My guitar is my most private place. And yet, it's also my link to my fans and to the world.

I find a melody, it's sweet, it has a catch in it. Nice. So I sing, "I hear you, I know I do. Who are you? Who are you?"

I'm not gonna call Julius, and I'm not gonna wake up Mom, but I need to get past feeling there is someone watching me.

I press my ear against the wall.

Nothing. So am I alone or not?

I put on the new billowy robe Mom gave me. I get the black and red can of Mace out of the drawer in my bedside table. Julius has taught me how to use it. I put my finger through the ring.

If there is some guy out there, I'm going to spray him like the roach that he is. *Then* I'll tell Mom. *Then* I will call Julius. Nobody is gonna tell me it's the damn wind.

Okay, I open my door. I step out into the hall. The apartment is really quiet—but not completely dark. As I look down the hall and across the living room, I see a faint line of light under Mom's door on the far side. She's awake. Also, I hear music. Frank Sinatra. So I know who's in there with her: Dapper Dan. At least, that's what I call him. She's dating two guys, Dapper D, who wears sports jackets and takes her to hear cabaret, and the Wolverine. He looks like an Egyptian mummy trying to be an Elvis impersonator and likes to go clubbing. Faint music drifts through the apartment.

Furious as she makes me, my heart hurts for my mom. Bottom line, my dad ditched her for a bimbo. We fight all the time, but I'll never leave her or stop loving her. It breaks my heart to see how hard she tries to find her way out of the loneliness of her life. But she's a pistol.

I turn. Now I'm facing the window at the far end of this hall. To my left is the door into the den. I enter it.

This is where all my books are. My poetry book that Daddy read to me when I was little. "The old canoe by the shadowy shore . . ." I would sit cuddled in his arms. We had a nice life, I thought. Guess nobody was happy except me.

Okay, the door is right over there. All I have to do is unlock it and step out into the stairwell. Oh, God, I am so scared. Mom's room is far away. I could scream but she'd never believe me. And *Mace*? What if it doesn't work, or I spray myself? What if he has a gun?

I put a hand on the bolt and, as silently as possible, I turn it. There is the faintest of scrapes.

My song echoes in my mind. "I hear you, I know I do, I know I do . . ."

Vampire?

Don't go there, girl. Anyway, they don't exist.

Ghost?

I lean against the door. The silence from the other side is total.

So maybe it is a ghost.

And then I feel the door move. As in, somebody just leaned against it from the other side. *Pushing*.

The second I turn the knob, they're going to burst in on me.

Very slowly, very quietly, I turn the bolt back . . . only it won't go back—it's stuck. Because he's out there pushing so hard the door is warping.

He must be incredibly strong. He must be huge.

And he knows I'm here, and he's just an inch away.

I twist the bolt harder . . . and finally it clicks in.

The whole door creaks. Then it sort of lets go. Has he moved away? Was he even there?

I am about to be sick. I want to say "I have a gun," but I can't make my throat work.

I run back into my room, lock my door, and dive into bed. I clutch the *Mace* like it's a lifeline.

And now, another sound against the wall. I hate this! I can't stand this! Am I losing my mind for real?

I look at the phone. If I pick it up and call Julius, he'll be up here in five minutes with ten cops trailing behind. Except I just wish I could prove there really is a guy out there and it's not all in my head. Because it could be. I fear that.

I get out of bed and pick up my guitar.

I hear you, I know I do.

Who are you?

Who are you?

Don't scare me,

don't hurt me, Don't go, don't go, don't go. ...

Am I completely insane to even sing that? Except it's got flow. It does. I click on Voice Memo on my iPad and do it again. Let the songs come.

Real songs come out of hurt and loss and longing. If they also come out of fear, then this is a winner.

I close my eyes, imagining who I used to be. Melanie Cholworth. Melody McGrath is much better—I have to admit Mom is right about that. Nowadays, I have to actually pretend that I'm the real me. I guess Melody took over.

I get back into bed and close my eyes. But sleep doesn't come; sleep is far away. Even though it's quiet now, I can't stop listening. I imagine claws coming through the wall.

On the day we moved in and I arrived with my gaggle of snapping paparazzi, I looked up at the soaring facade and I had this gut reaction that made me go, "Ohmygosh."

In my mind's eye, I saw people tumbling off the balconies. . . . They were all girls about my age, and they all had my hair and my complexion and my clothes on, and they were all falling just like I think I would probably fall, with their arms spread wide, trying to say "I am flying, Mother dear—look at me!"

Fly and fly and fly and fly. . . . There's a song there, girl, remember that. Songs live in my nooks and crannies. I have to hunt for them like a miner looking for diamonds or whatever, I guess.

Shit! I hear it again.

No way am I staying in my room, but also no way am I going to Mom's room when she and Dapper D might be getting cozy.

So I drag the mattress, which turns out to be really heavy, until it's all the way across the room.

I look at my wall. How thick is it? Could he cut his way through?

I will sing all night, until the dawn. Trouble is, dawn's so far away and I am so alone.

CHAPTER 2



Deep in the Beresford's basement, Frank the Torch listened, and he didn't like what he was hearing. This was exactly what Mr. Szatson had complained about. Some squatter. "Get him outta there, Frank. Wylie couldn't do it, but you know your way around buildings. Get him out." Wylie had been his predecessor. Fired over the squatter. Or so it appeared.

Six weeks ago, he'd come off a nickel in San Quentin two years early. Why the sentence reduction he did not know, but he was not about to argue. He'd been in for a dumb little job in City of Industry, the Alert Cleaners fire. The owner was looking to cash out and retire and couldn't find a buyer, so he'd called Frank. It had been an easy job—ten bills in his wallet, don't even think about it.

Except he'd come up against a control-freak insurance investigator who'd found an image of him on the security camera tape of the gas station across the street. With his record, it was a no-brainer. The jury took nineteen minutes to convict.

As soon as he was out, he'd gotten a call on his cell: Mr. Szatson wants to see you. He'd known Szatson for years, for the same reason that he knew a lot of real estate developers. They needed fires, these guys, and arson was Frank's profession. Also, he was at the top of the heap when it came to skills. He'd been a civil engineer, so he knew structures. If you hired him, you could

count on three things: The fire would work. The arson investigators would not trace it back to you. You would get your payday.

Mr. Szatson had sent him to work at the Beresford as its superintendent. “You’re an engineer, Frank. I need an engineer. Because the place has problems. There’s a squatter and a lot of famous and rich tenants. I don’t need that crap, so I want you to get rid of him.”

There were lots of ways to hide in a big place like this. Too many.

He didn’t think that was the only reason he’d been hired, though. Maybe Szatson had even pulled him out of the stir. He was that powerful. To put it bluntly, Szatson needed a fire. Somewhere in the Szatson empire, Frank the Torch was going to do a job, and probably more than one. Not here, though. This was the Szatson flagship.

Frank was thrilled by the Beresford. Aside from making sure the heat worked and the elevators didn’t get stuck, there wasn’t a lot to do but watch the beautiful people come and go. There were stars in the place, Melody McGrath, for instance. Pretty as a picture, sweet as honey. But that mother of hers—wow, that was one power hitter. He’d never tangled with her, but he’d been warned by other members of the staff that she was a bullmastiff and you did not want to cross her.

You also did not want her to pull her precious daughter out of the place since she brought so much media attention. If anything went wrong, they would surely leave.

He flipped from one security camera to the next. He’d seen this character—glimpsed him—standing in front of the laundry room. Black clothes, head to foot. Wild hair.

He was going to find him and take him somewhere far away. Maybe even drop the bastard off a cliff. Or at least punch him out.

CHAPTER 3



I went through today like a zombie and made everybody on the *Swingles* set furious. Mom thinks I'm hallucinating or whatever, and here I am alone in my room and *I just heard it again!* This time it went *hissss*, not like a snake but as if it was sliding against my wall.

Sleep is once again not an option, so I'm gonna work. The *Swingles* call is at six thirty tomorrow, and I could memorize my lines now instead of in the limo at the crack of dawn like I did this morning.

Swingles is pretty fun, actually. The pilot was huge in the ratings, and then came better news: the second week didn't bring all that much ratings deterioration, as they call it.

I'm lying on my right side and facing my wall of glass, letting my eyes slowly close to LA at night with a slice of moon above. Very beautiful and mysterious, as long as you don't think about the fact that the city is really a sea of condos and strip malls.

While I'm lying here thinking of the mysteries of life and wondering if love will ever come my way (I'm such a drama queen), the sound comes and I jump off the bed.

After a moment, the sliding starts again.

Is it coming from the other side of the wall, or inside it?

I grab my laptop and go to the Beresford's website, where I pull up the apartment layouts. (Can we *really* afford eleven grand a month for this

amazing apartment?)

Anyway, my bedroom backs onto a service shaft beside the stairwell outside our den.

So maybe Mom is sort of right. But it's not the building swaying—it's projected sound from somewhere coming up through the shaft behind my room or the stairwell behind that.

So here's a creepy thought: what if what I'm hearing is somebody actually cutting through the wall, not from the stairwell but from inside the shaft beside it? I've already had about forty-seven stalkers, guys with dirty T-shirts and gray skin and hunter's eyes.

If you had a gun, you could shoot me right through the wall that's behind the headboard of my bed. While I was on the *Swingles* set today, the maid put my bed back together. Maybe I'll move the mattress again.

Jesus—I am so neurotic, which is why my insides are turning into an acid bath. I'm sixteen and already chug Mylanta. Xanax is next, then amitriptyline, then up the line through Prozac to the Effexors of the world. I know the drill.

Maybe there is no .357 Magnum out there an inch from my headboard. Maybe it's something innocent but annoying, like a papi trying to plant a spike camera. If you don't know what that is, it looks just like a nail. Stick it through a wall, and you've got an eye in the room. Add a spike mike, and your target is in a movie.

What if it's some horrible old man who lives in the basement and comes up at night? What if he isn't a vampire but a cannibal? Has anybody ever disappeared in this place?

You're sixteen years old, girl, and *there's no bogeyman here*. Oh, my dear Beresford that I must now call home, you are haunted by a very real *something*.

I listen. Breathing? Maybe. Or maybe it's that I'm insane. That's what Mom would think.

Quiet time of the night, everybody asleep except me. Is somebody in with Mom? Don't know. Instead of looking, this time I just lock my door. I take my Mace out and cradle it. Earlier, I reread the instructions. Pull the ring and

press the red button. It's pretty simple, actually.

If a shot came through the wall, would I even have a second to realize I was dying?

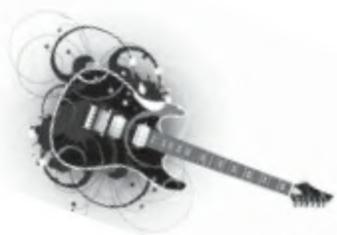
I know he's out there.

Except now he's quiet. So maybe it's something else. I close my eyes and let my music take my mind.

"Far and far and far and far, I'm going far and far and far and far, and the stars are way behind me, the stars are way behind me."

I sleep with my head at the foot of the bed and all my pillows piled up against the wall to cushion the bullets.

CHAPTER 4



He could hear her; she was singing, and he pressed against the wall, listening to her voice—“far and far and far and far . . .” And he was so close to her, but also far and far and far.

Before Melody, he had looked at girls and liked girls, but now there was this huge difference. Seeing her for the first time had caused an explosion inside him. He had no idea that feelings like this existed. Sure, he’d seen girls, plenty of them, but never one who glowed like Melody McGrath, whose hair seemed filled with the sun, whose eyes laughed and said “come here,” whose skin looked as soft as the air itself.

He hadn’t known that you could feel this way, and he wasn’t sure if it meant that he was okay or that he was not okay.

He had to be near her. But he must never let her see him. Leaving this shaft where he was practically living now was too hard for him. He’d never known anything like the desire that kept him pressed up here against the drywall, listening to every faint sound from her room on the other side and holding an image of her in his mind.

He could see the gleam of her eyes, the broad paleness of her forehead, the way her lips seemed to laugh gently, as if she possessed some secret knowledge.

All of this he’d watched on *Swingles*. His love affair—for that’s what it

was, even if he did not understand it—had started when he'd been watching the show one evening in some vacationer's apartment.

A bristling shock had shot through him when he recognized her as one of the new people here in the Beresford and also realized that she was the most beautiful girl on earth.

Immediately, he'd climbed the chase, or shaft, up to an apartment whose tenants used their TiVo a lot, slipped in through his hatch, and added *Swingles* to their queue. Now when they were gone, he could watch. And he did, over and over again, loving her, longing for her with a pain at once sweeter and sharper than any he knew, except when he held the blue rose.

More than once, the thought of going in there had crossed his mind. He was afraid, though. He did not like her mother's voice; it had a knife in it.

He was much too shy to ever look at a girl changing or in the shower or anything like that. He tried not to go into the same apartment too often. Except for Mrs. Scutter's—to be sure she wasn't setting her bed on fire with a cigarette. She'd done that once, and since then he made sure to check on her every night.

When he imagined being with Melody, it was in the nicest place he knew, which was the park he could see far below. Trees and flowers bloomed there in summertime, and if he listened closely, he could hear music playing and kids yelling in happy voices.

He'd looked at himself in mirrors in the bathrooms of vacancies and vacationers. Wasn't he kind of odd looking? Every day, his nose got bigger, it seemed to him. And he cut his hair as best he could, but it was still too shaggy. He wanted to look like other guys, not like some kind of freak.

His dad, he remembered, had short hair, and he thought he should have it, too. He barely remembered Mom, except that she had wavy blond hair like Melody, and she laughed, and she had given him his blue rose.

He thought Melody was about his age, but he wasn't really sure. How old was he, anyway?

Now he was in the equipment shaft—called Chase Two during construction—beside Melody's bedroom. It was making him happy and sad at the same time to hear her in there. Earlier, she'd moved her bed so she was no longer so close that he could listen to her voice and her guitar.

Then he heard another sound, one that instantly drew his attention: a high, mournful sound like wind sweeping around the corner of the building. It was coming, he knew, from ten floors below, drifting up the chase from 4021.

Gilford was crying. This was because Tommy was out late again, and Gilford cried then. Tommy had no idea how much Gilford loved him.

He wanted to stay here near Melody, but he had a job to do, so he grasped the edge of one of the girders that framed the chase and quickly dropped down the ten floors, pulsing his fingers along the pipes, letting himself slide just fast enough but not so fast that he would lose control. The dark hole that yawned below hardly mattered to him. Falling was hard to imagine. When he was little, though, he'd fallen some—never more than a story or two.

When he felt himself dropping, he'd let himself go loose. That way it didn't hurt too much, but he knew he couldn't withstand stories and stories.

He arrived at forty and went along the crawl space to Tommy's apartment. He was growing, so the crawl spaces were getting smaller. He wasn't fat; he was just, well, big. Dad had been really, really huge, so maybe he would be huge, too. Then what happened? Without the ability to use his crawl spaces . . . he didn't even want to think about it.

He reached Tommy's apartment and went over to where he had installed his hatch. Over the years, he'd built lots of hatches. People thought they were supposed to be there.

He wanted to be where Melody was, to be her friend, to sit on the couch together. In a whisper in his mind, he told himself the same story again and again. He was with Melody on the couch. He said to her, "I love you," and she turned to him, and that wonderful smile came across her face, and then their lips touched.

Oh, yeah, like that would happen. He wanted to at least just breathe the air in her apartment. He wanted to, but he was scared because—well, the way she made him feel was just scary, with his whole body shivering like it did. As he slid open his hatch into Tommy's, Gilford was already whining at the door of the little foyer closet it opened into. He dropped down, pushing back Tommy's rarely used winter jackets, then opened the door.

He stepped into the foyer and immediately listened to the apartment while Gilford wiggled. He could hear slow breathing coming from the bedroom.

That would be Annabelle. The breaths were regular and long. She was sound asleep.

He needed to be really careful here. He had not expected Annabelle to be home while Tommy was out.

Bending down, he let Gilford lick his face. The dog was a mass of wiggles.

“Hey, Gilly,” he whispered. “Hey, bud.” Gilford was a pug. That’s what Tommy told people he was, a pug. He had a pushed-in face and he snorted a lot, but he was very sweet.

As Beresford went through to the living room, Gilford trotted with him, his nose in the air. He knew that it was treat and cuddle time because that’s what they both liked. But in the middle of the living room, Beresford stopped and listened carefully again. Annabelle had nearly caught him once. Just by nature, she was very quiet.

He headed for the kitchen, Gilford capering beside him, jumping up on his jeans. Or rather, Marty Prince’s jeans. Beresford’s clothes were all borrowed from tenants’ closets.

Tommy did not have one of the most wonderful kitchens in the building. For great kitchens, you needed the older people like Helen Dooling. She cooked chicken and made pie. He had learned to eat just a little here and a little there, never much in any one apartment.

“So, what we got?” he whispered to Gilford as he peered into the fridge, looking at the food arrayed on the shelves.

He fed Gilford some milk.

Then he heard the telltale sound of the elevator door opening. Somebody getting out on forty—no way he could take a chance. So he took Gilford’s face in his hands and gave him a quick nose smooch and went back to the foyer closet.

The key clattered in the lock. Continuing to lift himself, his heart hammering, Beresford slipped into the crawl space and carefully closed his hatch.

He wanted to race up the chase, but he forced himself not to make a sound.

Moving slowly at first, climbing hand over hand, he made his way back up to fifty, back to his station behind Melody’s wall. Through the thin

plasterboard, he could hear her breathing softly and steadily.

Sleep, little angel, for I will watch over you.

CHAPTER 5



*I'm goin' far and far and far and far
Up past the trees and the sky and the stars.
Far and far and far and far,
Where it's soft forever, soft and blue, soft and blue,
And I can reach out, and I can touch you
Far and far and far and far.*

The set is blazing hot, and I'm dying. Thank heavens Ted the Elf called a break. (That's my own private nickname for our tiny, hoppity director.) Now I'm in my trailer, where I'm supposed to have a little peace and quiet, but Mom is screaming at Mark, my manager, over the fact that *Swingles* isn't using my music in the dance sequences.

Mom says into her phone, "We have to do this, Mark. We need the exposure! Plus, it's in her contract. . . . *Why not?* She's the star—it can only help the show! . . . So what's he doing? Does he have another ingenue in the wings? Some tramp, Linda Lady or somebody?"

Linda Lady is my competition—sort of. She's all electronics, though. She can't actually sing, so she's gonna do a concert sooner or later that reveals she's lip-synching. There will be no forgiveness.

Mom paces, she makes a whistling sound through the plastic cigarette she uses whenever she is near me, and all of a sudden I feel this amazing love for

her. She tries *so hard*. If we go down, it's not just going to break her heart—it's going to break her totally.

There's a knock. Mom looks at the door like a rabbit looks at a wolf, but it's only Thor Bradford, my acting coach.

Thor comes in. He appraises me, his eyes taking in every detail. He grins and twiddles his fingers at Mom, who takes this as her cue to leave us alone in the trailer.

As she goes out, she crushes the plastic cigarette to pieces in an ashtray. By the time the door closes, she's already back on her BlackBerry. She's calling for the box office overnights. The question every afternoon is the same: How is the Greek filling? What if I have to play to a half house? Or if I have to make up an excuse and cancel? "Miss McGrath has sprained her elbow and cannot perform." Behind every excuse like that lies the same reality: empty seats.

These are dangerous times for any performer, especially somebody like me, just building an audience.

Thor asks me, "Honey, do you have a problem with Alex?" "No." (That is to say, YES!)

"Because on the dailies, we're seeing you kind of bend away from him when he tries to kiss you. Like he smells bad. Not like you wish he'd follow through."

"I thought I was supposed to be unsure. It says in the script, 'unsure.' "

Then Thor takes me in his arms and says, "My Tic Tac loves your Tic Tac!" (Yes, the show is stupid. And yes, it's full of product placements. They have to make money, and anyway I actually *do* like Tic Tacs.)

I lean back—but then he stage kisses me. This is not a real kiss, but it looks like one. You keep your mouths closed. It's very clinical feeling. So I melt into it. I try to imagine that this elderly gay acting coach is the guy who never quite comes into focus in my dreams.

"Now, that's good. That's what we want to see."

"But Alex doesn't kiss me in the script."

As Thor leaves, he says over his shoulder, "Oh, that's changed. He kisses you now."

“It’d better be a stage kiss.”

“Not my problem, beautiful.” He leaves, and I go to the fridge, crack a Diet Coke mini, and chug it. I have to face facts: I just plain loathe Alex Steen. Loathe, loathe, loathe. Not only does he smell weird, he has skin like some kind of an amphibian. Maybe he’s a skink.

I shouldn’t be repulsed by him when half the girls in America would like to jump him, but I can’t help how I feel.

“You’re wanted on set.”

“Thanks, Michael.”

Michael is Ted’s personal assistant. He’s about twenty-two and starting out on the ground floor. I’m always polite and thankful to him. Mom doesn’t even know his name.

As I go across the street to the soundstage where our set is, I see Mom huddled over her BlackBerry like it’s a bird she’s captured. Her back is to me. Whatever she’s talking about, she’s hiding it from the world, which makes me feel kind of sick inside because it can’t be good or she’d be all over me, whispering good news as she listened to it coming in.

“Hey, sugar,” Alex calls to me.

He’s been told not to call me this by the network’s political correctness maven, but he does it anyway.

I smile as mechanically as I can. Bright fake grin that’s a clue he chooses to ignore.

For this scene, we’re in the living room set. There’s a couch, chairs, and a flat-screen TV that’s really just a prop. When you see something on it in the background during the show, that’s the special effects department. The whole set is like that. Even the chairs are so light you could throw them. The window is a breakaway (it’s made out of melted sugar). We used it two episodes ago. In the scene, Mr. Forbes shattered it when his upper bridge flew out of his mouth and hit it. (Our writers apparently think that escaping dental prosthetics are funny.)

“Places, please. Is everyone aware of our changes?”

Nobody says anything. We’re all afraid of Ted. He doesn’t exactly carry a horsewhip like directors supposedly did in the past. Instead, he whips with

sarcasm.

Ted gives me a long look. I feel like a butterfly about to be pinned. “She’s SHINY!”

That brings a distant crash, and a couple of seconds later, a huge figure looms past the window and comes around the edge of the set. This is Martin, and he powders my immense forehead yet again. Shine is a no-no, but I’m not sure exactly why. I mean, I’m sixteen years old and therefore an oil factory, right?

So we take our positions, and Ted says “action,” and all of a sudden I’m not Melody or even Melanie anymore. I’m Babsie, and I’m full of flutters because Seth—that’s Alex—wants to kiss me and we’re at my house and my dad is suspicious of him. Last week, when I brought Seth home for the first time, Dad asked to see his driver’s license. Dad is out back cooking steaks, though, and Mom is in the kitchen, so this is Seth’s chance.

Ted moves his hands, encouraging me. I’m supposed to flutter at Seth, which I do.

Seth paces in front of the fireplace. He looks at me. His eyes look kind of odd, actually.

The way the scene works, Seth kisses me, Dad comes in with the steaks, and Seth panics and jumps out the window.

I sit and turn into Babsie. I look down, sort of smiling. Babsie wants this—she wants Seth to just hurry up and do it.

So Seth takes a step closer. And another. I say my line: “I think you’ve got something on your cheek.” I smile and pat the place beside me. “Come on, let me look.”

Seth trips over the coffee table, which collapses. (It’s balsa.) Frantically, he tries to put it together again. I say, “Dad’s not gonna like that.”

He stares at me like I’m totally insane, and there it is again, that weird look in his eyes—vacant. He’s not Seth at all, he’s Alex all the way, and he makes my blood run cold.

Now the kiss. I say, “Oh, Seth.”

He grabs me and embraces me, and here it comes—but his mouth is *not* closed like it’s supposed to be. He is into this; he’s kissing me for real.

I'm furious. Ted needs to control Alex. Now he's pushing against me and jamming his face into mine, then we go off the couch and I hear Ted somewhere in some other universe yelling, while Alex keeps at me, and I can't get out from under him; he's like some kind of machine made of iron.

I have so many dreams of guys, but not *this* one—this is the nightmare that no girl ever wants to think about, and it's happening to me right in the middle of a television studio filled with people.

Stop him, somebody!

And then there are voices, shouting, Ted's voice above them all as he shouts himself crazy. The weight is gone, Alex is off, and Ted and our assistant director, Sam Dine, are holding him. But he's like some kind of animal, and they almost can't keep him under control. His eyes are really scary.

I get up, and Mom is there. She puts a towel around me, and I realize my blouse is all torn up, but at least it's just my costume.

Ted is in Alex's face. They stare each other down. Then Ted turns away, disgusted. "He's high," he says to Sam Dine. Then, louder, "We'll move into the kitchen. Thirty minutes—get it lit!" The kitchen scene is me and Mom and Dad, no Seth. More quietly, he tells Sam, "Whatever it takes, bring him down. And find whatever it is he's using and get it the hell off the lot."

I am sick to my stomach, trying to hold it in, and all I can think of is my trailer. I knew this would happen, I just knew it. He's always icked me out, and now I know why. I'm not a smoker or a drinker. A lot of kids at Calabasas High smoked, and there was every kind of drug you might want there, mostly prescripts, though. Not whatever *this* is, which is probably something harder.

On the way to the trailer, a papi I know named Brandon Carcelli comes out of nowhere from between my trailer and the wall of the soundstage, and his camera starts clicking away.

Fury like actual fire just explodes in my head, and I break away from Mom and go after him. He runs, I run, I am screaming at him, he turns and shoots, runs more, turns and shoots, and I know I'm getting into trouble, but I can't help myself. I am just so mad.

Then security is there, and he's soon surrounded and hustled off the lot.

Mom runs up. “Come on, honey, you’re falling out.”

Well, not quite, but my blouse is ripped and there’s bra showing.

“How did he get in here, Mom?”

She shakes her head. “Look in the wallets at the gate. Carcelli probably paid his way in.”

My trailer is quiet and cool, and I go in the bathroom and gargle Listerine until I feel sort of clean. Sort of.

“I want Alex fired,” I say to Mom. “I never want him near me again!” I’m shocked to hear the rage in my voice. I think of myself as mild and nice, and I know that I’ve gone deeper into celebrity. I will wreck Alex’s career because he went too far with me. But he deserves it—he’s totally out of control.

I want to cry. I’ve never been kissed much before, and in the celebrity bubble where I live now, finding a normal boy probably will never happen for me.

Ted and Mark and Sam come in, and suddenly the trailer feels like a funeral. And maybe that’s just what it is.

Mom talks for me. I have nothing to say about anything, it seems. Even though it was me this happened to.

“Mel, we need to be very careful,” Ted says to me. His voice is different from the usual.

Mom says, “We understand that, Ted.”

Their eyes meet, and do I see daggers? What’s happening that I’m not being filled in on?

“Legal will have to get involved,” Ted says.

There is silence.

Then I hear Alex. He’s yelling like crazy, and he’s right outside.

“What’s going on?”

“They found meth in Alex’s trailer,” Ted says. “He’s being escorted off the lot.”

Mom explodes. “But we have a whole bunch of scenes to shoot. We’ll get behind!”

“He’s in violation,” Sam explains. “You know the contract.”

Mom has been real clear that if I get in trouble with drugs or alcohol, I'm fired. And it's the same for Alex.

"So . . . what do we do?" I ask.

"I'm writing Seth out. You're gonna have a new boyfriend."

What can I say, that I'm unhappy? Alex was poison, pure and simple.

Mom is like a statue. She must be thinking how easy it would be to write me out. It's scary. Of course, I'm the star, so they aren't going to do that. Only, that's not how she thinks. No matter how good things may be, Mom is always going to be clinging by her fingernails.

"I'll work over the weekend. We'll start shooting again on Monday," Ted says.

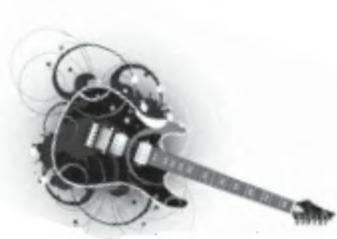
I doubt we're going to be shooting again any time soon. He can't possibly write Seth out that fast.

The funeral procession finally gets up and leaves us alone in the trailer. I can hear Alex's screams over the air-conditioning hum. On the other side of a scream like that is the black hole of being forgotten.

Mom says, "I need a drink." Then she laughs to herself. She sighs and says, "Small blessing. We can take off early. Let's get out of here, girl."

When we go out onto the lot, the California sun is painfully bright. A bright, hot desert where the sun burns away the lies.

CHAPTER 6



*Flying on with the stars, with the clouds that love me,
flying in the dark when you cannot even see,
flying on forever . . . forever .. forever . . .*

What happened, what happened, what happened?

They were screaming down there, screaming at each other, and Beresford was frantic, hiding in the crawl space above his new hatch. Something awful had happened. He strained to hear, but they were talking so fast and saying so much he didn't understand. He was sure of only one thing: the fight was over *Swingles*.

When Beresford finished his hatch, the first thing he'd done was to go down into the apartment. He'd walked through the rooms, touching nothing. Trembling so hard he could barely control himself, he'd gone from room to room. He'd touched Melody's blue silk bedspread and watched the sun go down through her huge window.

When he'd heard them yelling as they came down the outside hall, he'd levered himself back up into the crawl space and pulled his hatch closed.

As he listened, they came into the living room and Melody screamed, “He attacked me! What don’t you get about that? He’s a druggie and a potential rapist and he’s *gone*, Mom. And it is NOT my fault!”

“Honey, I know it, and I hate it, but we might lose the show anyway. It’s not your fault, but the network is embarrassed.”

“The *network*? You’re scaring me, Mom, you really are.”

“We need the money, Mel!”

“You need it, not me. If I had my way, we’d still be in Calabasas.”

“And you’d be flipping burgers and singing ‘Memories’ in the Calabasas school talent show.”

Their voices drifted off. They’d gone to the kitchen.

Swingles was over?

Their voices rose again, and then glass broke. He clapped his hands over his ears. They were throwing things, and that could not be good.

He just ached to go down there and take her in his arms and somehow make it all better, but Frank, the new super, was hunting him like crazy, and if he got found, he didn’t know what would happen. He couldn’t get thrown out of the Beresford. This was home.

Melody’s bedroom door slammed. He slid over to the crawl space above it and pressed his ear against the rough plaster of the ceiling.

Crying came up from below, long, bitter sobs.

Very carefully, he moved back off the ceiling and down into the chase between Melody’s room and the stairwell. From here, he could stay near her, and somehow maybe his love and his hope for her would help her.

He settled in, trying to get comfortable. He would guard her all night. Later, he’d sleep in his own tiny space on the roof, but not until after he was sure she was okay. It was real tight in here, and he had to keep twisting and turning so his legs wouldn’t go to sleep. If he was very still, he could hear her breathing.

Instead of the sounds of sleep, he heard a shuffling noise. Then the wallboard seemed to shift a little.

“Get out of my wall, you creep!” Then *bang*, right in his face, and *bang*

bang bang! “I know you’re in there, you sicko, and I’m gonna call the cops and get you put away!”

He was frozen with fear. She *knows*, and she *hates me*.

His heart broke as he quickly reached over to the crawl space that crossed 5052, then hurried along the beams. He headed for the elevator shaft, oblivious to the tears that were blinding him.

This was the top floor, so the way to the roof for him was to climb the cables into the elevator room, then go out through the service door. He never, ever used the stairs. He understood cameras very well, and he didn’t want to be seen on any of the security system screens in the basement.

He rushed out onto the roof and ran. He ran all the way to the far end, then around the edges. He got up on the rail and ran the rail, crying out and waving his arms, trying to make the feelings of sorrow and upset leave him.

He ran swiftly, deftly, and when he came to the spot where Daddy had fallen, he stopped. As he always did, he looked down into the alley. At night it was lit only by the one light over the side door. He looked down, and as always, he called out, cupping his hands around his mouth and shouting with all his might, “Daddy! Daddy!” Then he went on—or, he was about to go on—when he saw something below.

What he saw was a face like the face he’d seen peering at him the day Daddy was pushed, the same glittering lenses, the same robot appearance. Somebody was using a set of night-vision goggles to look up the side of the building.

That would be Frank or one of the other workers. They would be looking for him.

Had Melody told them? Were the police coming?

He shrank back from the edge and moved toward his tiny space on top of the elevator control shack, a tool storage shed just four feet high and nine long that had not been pulled off after construction was completed.

As he climbed the side of the shack, he saw one of the doors to the roof slowly open. For an instant, he was transfixed. Disbelieving. He quickly jumped down and in three strides concealed himself behind the shack, back where the water towers hissed and the bats lived.

A figure came out into the middle of the roof and stood. It was all in white, a woman, her back to him. The wind blew the thin white gown around her.

Then she turned a little, and a shock as powerful as lightning went through him. It was Melody.

She walked straight ahead, going toward the edge that dropped down to the building's marquee and front entrance. As she got closer to the edge, she walked faster. And now she spread her arms out and let the wind blow her white gown back, and he saw her body in its perfection outlined against the glow of the city. He knew that she was perfect and of the high world, and he was not perfect, hardly a person at all.

Her voice rose, magic in the night. She was singing a song he'd heard her working on.

"So not free, so not free, when will you come and take me? So not free, so not free, where is the love I need? So not free, so not free . . ."

She bent over and the words went away, and she was sobbing into her hands.

He wanted to help her so much that he actually reached out and took a few steps toward her.

She straightened up and went even closer to the edge. She was right against the railing now, and he was thinking that she must not get up on it, that she was not like him; she didn't know how to climb and balance. She raised a leg, and he almost moaned aloud.

Then she leaned forward. If she went just a few more inches, she was going to topple over the edge.

She held her hands to her head and uttered the saddest cry he'd ever heard in his life.

She bent forward further. Her thighs were tight against the rail.

No!

She stood very still now, her hands at her sides as she looked to where the moon hung low. Every inch of his body and every whisper of his soul made him want to run to her and put his arms around her fragile waist and draw her back from the edge. But if he surprised her, she would lose her footing.

Now she sang again, her voice climbing the tower of the air, peeling

through the wind as if there was no wind. “So not free, so not free, please come for me, please come for me. Unlock the perfect prison of my life, make me new, make me true, ’cause I’m so not free, so not free.”

The words moved him to his core, and he felt their meaning, the eternal sense of loss that is at the center of every human heart, and he thought they were the truest words he had ever known, a cry to the night and the moon to come and unlock the prison of life.

Again she swayed, and once again she raised her arms. He could see her naked form in the thin robe, outlined by the moonlight.

He thought if he ran fast enough, he could maybe grab her from behind and pull her back, then throw himself to one side among the air-conditioning equipment to her left. Once he was up under there, he would somehow make his way to the other side of the roof, where there was more than one place to slip away into the building and be gone.

Sure, but what if he missed? Or was too slow? If she heard him coming? It was just too dangerous to even try.

He stepped back into the shadows of the elevator shack and cried out as loud as he could, “So not free, so not free!”

She froze. It looked as if she was riveted to the rail.

He bit his tongue almost to bleeding, then covered his mouth with his hands. He stood as still as a statue.

Suddenly she whirled around. Her eyes were glaring, her lips twisted with pure hate—it was like the face of some kind of beautiful monster—and her hands were out in front of her like claws.

“I hate you,” she said, venom in her words. Then her eyes widened and she screamed, “I HATE YOU, I HATE YOU, I HATE YOU!”

He smashed his hands against his ears and cried out as if he was being struck, because that’s how it felt.

She was looking right at him. Did she see him? The light was behind her, but it wasn’t very bright, so he couldn’t be sure.

With a single broad step, he slipped behind a cooler tower. Now peering through the falling water, he watched her as she turned once again toward the edge.

For another long moment, she leaned out over the abyss.

Then she straightened up. Turned around. Without looking again in his direction, without making a sound, she strode to the stairway door.

Then she was gone, back into the building that was her home and, he now understood, her prison. He didn't know if she would actually have jumped, not even if she'd been planning to. But he feared it.

His heart went with her down the hard steel stairs to the luxury and torment of the fiftieth floor. In his mind was the image of her glowing in the moonlight, and another image, of her lying in the alley as his father had, arms spread, absolutely still.

He slid into his space and closed his eyes. He stayed there a while. He lay listening, determined to stay alert in case she came back. But his thoughts went to those night-vision goggles.

He got his rose and cradled it.

The rose of life and the rose of happiness, he thought, and in that moment he made a decision. It was dangerous, he knew, and it was foolish, and it would take from him the thing he loved the most. But he also knew that his rose could bring Melody happiness, too, and maybe even help her somehow.

He slipped into the electrical room through the hatch he'd made from his little space, then dropped down along the hot, humming cables and into the fiftieth-floor crawl space. There was rock music coming from 5052 and, from across the hall, a man and a woman arguing. Apartment 5050 was silent. He went out across the ceiling of the den and did something he never did when somebody was home.

He put his hand on his hatch. Closed his fingers around the little latch he'd screwed into it and opened it.

Silence below. Darkness. A faint odor of something sweet—perfume, he thought.

He dropped down into the closet. Hardly breathing, he listened for movement in the room beyond.

Not a sound.

He stepped into the hallway, then stopped listening.

All he could hear was his own thrashing heart.

Why was he doing this? Was he crazy? But he had to. He wanted to give her the rose.

He stood before her door, pressed his ear against it, listened, and heard nothing from inside. Was she asleep?

Turning the handle carefully, he opened the door a crack. He waited. No sound. He opened it further. Her bed was a dark pool, her form on it a curled shadow.

In three long, silent steps, he was beside her. He looked down at her face, shadowy and gorgeous, the full lips held in a line that suggested great sadness.

Trembling, he laid a hand on her broad forehead, feeling fear and electric pleasure as he touched her for the first time. For a moment he was paralyzed, unable to break the connection.

Then he took his rose from his pocket and placed it on the pillow beside her face.

He stepped quickly out of the room and slipped ghostlike down the hall and through the den, drawing himself into the crawl space and closing his hatch behind him.

He slipped into the darkness and hidden passages of the building, leaving behind, like a sacrifice and a talisman, the most precious thing he possessed.

CHAPTER 7



Frank waited miserably in Mr. Szatson's big office in his magnificent home. He wasn't precisely sure why he'd been called to come here, but it couldn't be good, that was certain.

He stared out through the glass wall toward the beautiful swimming pool. A woman sat beside it under an umbrella, reading a book in the sun and listening to music that was too faint to make out.

"My wife," Szatson said sarcastically as he came hurrying into the room. He threw his athletic form down behind the huge desk and fixed his dark, quick eyes on Frank.

Frank knew perfectly well that Mr. Szatson had hired him to do fires. So, probably that's what this meeting was about. Some Szatson development somewhere was being stalled by some jerk refusing to move, and he needed to be burned out.

Szatson looked at him for so long that it became uncomfortable, and Frank had to look away. It was an intimidation technique, he supposed. If so, it wasn't going to work. He was going to need more than his pitiful super's salary to do a fire.

"What's our present vacancy status?"

Frank blinked with surprise. He wasn't often wrong about people, but this

was not the question he had expected. “I’ve seen a steady stream of move-outs, sir.”

“What’s the complaint log look like?”

“Not a lot. The rents need to come down—that’s our problem.”

“Frank, I want to tell you something. The move-outs don’t matter.”

That made no sense, but he was the boss. “Uh, okay.”

“In fact, I want you to encourage more of them. Hassle people a little. Nothing illegal, of course, don’t go that far. But you can cut back air-conditioning, drop hot water pressure. You can do that sort of thing.”

“Sure, but why?”

Again, Luther Szatson’s eyes met his. “Frank, Frank, Frank.” He chuckled. “Have you learned the building?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then you know how it all works, the power systems, the air, the steam, all of that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And how much fuel oil does it carry, Frank, at any given time?”

Frank was so astonished that he almost couldn’t reply, because that question told him instantly where this was going. But no—*no*. The Beresford was too big. It was—oh, God, it would be the fire of the century. He swallowed hard and fought to gather enough spit to talk. “We generally have about twenty thousand gallons on hand. More in the winter. The capacity is thirty thousand gallons.”

“And where is that?”

“Where is the fuel oil stored?”

“Exactly.”

“In the storage tanks. There are three of them under the machinery floor.” Szatson must be quizzing him to make sure he knew his stuff. Okay, he’d pass this quiz.

“And where is the elevator shaft in relation to this storage area?”

“Uh, the shafts come down—the service cars bottom on the tank floor.”

“The elevator shaft is actually open all the way from the top of the building

to the bottom, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah, of course."

"That would be a major violation, Frank."

"Yeah, but the doors down there are code doors. Fire doors. So any problem is gonna be contained, if that's what you're worried about, Mr. Szatson."

Szatson's eyes smiled, but his words were spat right in Frank's face. "It's none of your business what I'm worried about."

Frank would sooner have been watched by a cobra. He needed some kind of clarification. Because if Mr. Szatson was going to torch a fifty-story apartment building full of people, Frank was not his man. No way.

"You're saying I need to do everything I can to increase vacancies, Mr. Szatson? Because I'm not quite sure, here."

"Let me ask you this. If something happened in the basement, if there was a fuel fire, how well protected are we?"

The words hung in the air. People would be killed. With his record, the cops would be all over him. If he got convicted, he'd get the needle.

"Frank, are we protected? Or do I need to do something about that shaft?"

"Well, those fire doors would close. If it was a straight flamer, no problem. The sprinklers would take care of it before the fire department even got there. The thing is, though, if the fuel tanks went up, they'd blow the doors off, and then you'd see that shaft work like a chimney. You'd have fire all the way to the top of the structure in a matter of seconds."

Then he thought an incredible, chilling thought: Was this *why* the elevator shaft went down to the fuel storage tanks? Had Szatson always planned to torch the Beresford?

But why hadn't the insurance company seen it? One reason and one only: Mr. Szatson was in the insurance business, too. You could be sure, though, when the Beresford burned, it wouldn't be his money that would come out of the insurance trust to pay the gigantic claim. No, that would be the money of innocent investors.

How much would he collect? Easily half a billion dollars and probably more. There would be lawsuits galore, of course, from the survivors and the

families of the dead—for there would be many dead—but the suits would also be covered by liability insurance.

Instead of making a small monthly profit on the Beresford, Szatson was going to cash out in what was bound to be one of the most spectacular fires in Los Angeles history.

“Is it doable?” Szatson asked. His voice was very quiet. “I mean, could it happen? A fire like that?”

“I don’t think those fuel tanks are that dangerous. That oil takes special treatment to burn—that’s why you’ve got blowers on the fireboxes.”

“Well, good. Then I’m not gonna lose any sleep over it.” He went to a drawer and removed a file. “I got a variance from the city for that shaft. They let me off the hook, thank God. It was an honest mistake.”

Frank knew that he had to have paid plenty for that variance. No honest inspector would let a violation that dangerous go unrepaired.

“So, Frank, are we together on this?”

Frank knew he was the best torch in the game, and Luther Szatson had reached out for him.

He took a deep breath and spoke. “I want you to know that I understand very clearly, Mr. Szatson.” He would not say that he would do it, though. He would not do it. First, it was too dangerous. Second, he’d never killed anyone. He did arson, not murder.

Szatson strolled to the glass wall that overlooked the pool.

Frank interpreted this as a signal that the meeting was over and started to get up.

“No, no,” Szatson said, “we’re not quite finished here.” He opened the folder on his desk. “I’m looking at a complaint here.”

“About me? From a tenant?”

“It’s from a tenant’s lawyer. The singer on fifty.”

“Yeah?”

“The thing is, this lawyer is claiming that somebody is bothering the girl. Somebody is—listen to this—‘utilizing shaftways and crawl spaces to stalk Miss McGrath.’ ”

That damn squatter. Frank held up his hand. "Say no more. It's taken care of."

"Wylie said that. Christopher before him. Now you say it."

"Except I can do it."

Szatson glared. "Then why haven't you?" His voice was acid. Frank knew this shadow man could turn out to be a witness, and witnesses were dangerous.

"I've confirmed that he's there. That's a start."

"I don't need a start, I need a finish!"

"He's good at what he does."

"Get the job done!"

"I'll take care of him."

"If this bastard uses the chases, fine. He can fall."

Frank knew exactly what those words meant. His boss had just told him to kill the squatter.

"Yes, sir," he agreed, "he can fall. But then we have a police investigation inside the building."

"He falls, he disappears."

Frank could smell the stink of fear in the room, the sharp odor of his own sweat.

"Well," Szatson said, "I think we've reached an understanding. Am I right?"

Frank had just been asked to set a fire that was certain to kill and to murder a squatter. He temporarily froze.

"Frank, you know why you came out of the house early? Why you're off the parole list?"

"I've got an idea."

"It's the right idea. I did it, and I can undo it. I can make it look like you forged the release documents. *You*, Frank. You'll go back in."

And, as Frank knew all too well, this time it would be for good.

So he was being given a choice: kill people and risk being executed, or

refuse to do it and spend the rest of his life in prison, convicted of using forged documents to escape.

He sucked breath. Life in prison for certain against the possibility of a death sentence. A certainty against a possibility.

He made his choice.

“You’re gonna get your work done, sir. Just like you want it done.”

Szatson smiled. Somehow the brightness of his teeth made the deal even more terrifying.

Back in his car, Frank sat for a long time. “So what happens to me?” he muttered into the silence. “What happens to me then?”

The answer was, Szatson went on down the road amassing his billions, and a little guy like Frank—well, maybe he got something, and maybe he didn’t.

As he angled his car down into the city streets, he felt the tightness of frustration constricting his throat. Stopping at a light on Franklin, he watched a bunch of kids from Hollywood High School cross the street and head toward Starbucks.

When the light changed, he found that his foot had been pressing the brake so hard that it had cramped in the arch.

He drove on back to the Beresford with one thought in mind: the creep who was using the shafts was about to find out that when you got an unexpected push, the fall was long and the landing hard.

CHAPTER 8



We're in the middle of a media frenzy, and I'm totally thrown, I have to say. It's over Alex, of course. I should have expected it, but I didn't. I woke up this morning thinking only about the creep on the roof, then Lupe, who cleans our place, called to say the doorman wouldn't let her in because he thought she was with the reporters.

Now I'm gonna have to do a papi walk just to get out of the building. It makes me wish I could fly, and suddenly a new song is in my mind, "Flying on Forever." Every kid in the world will understand this song, I know it.

I'm still thinking about the unbelievable fight we had. The worst ever, I think.

We meet in the front hall, and the first words out of Mom's mouth are, "You look *wonderful*." She's trying to make up, but I still can't.

Now the doorbell rings, and Julius is here. The super, Frank, is with him.

"We're ready to move," Julius says, and Frank goes, "I've got the back entrance open, and we have security in the lobby to make it look like you're about to come through."

"We want to go through the lobby," Mom says.

"*Mom!*" But she's right. Of course we do.

So I stand in silence as the elevator goes down.

Frank says, "Mrs. McGrath, we have that other situation under control."

“Thank you.”

I would never tell Mom that I saw him on the roof last night, because she would go totally *insane* if she knew I’d been up there. She’d put armed guards in the stairwell.

I don’t think I wanted to jump. I don’t know. Maybe what I wanted was to fly.

The doors open—and there, in the middle of the hungry crowd, the first thing I see is the grinning face of this tiny woman with huge glasses who says, “Melody, I’m Amber. From *People*?”

Then a papi I don’t know says, “Melody, is it true you do meth, too? That the cops are covering for you?”

“Amber,” Mom says, taking her by the arm as we go through the camera clickathon, “you were supposed to call!”

We’re an entourage now, me and Mom and Julius and Frank and Amber. Not a big entourage, maybe, but enough to make me appear to be the star.

Shouted question: “Melody, is *Swingles* totally dead?”

“Nothing is ever totally dead,” Mom yells back.

“How do you feel about Alex going to jail?”

For a second, I’m thrown. What is this about *jail*?

“Did he rape you, Melody?”

Then we are outside under the marquee and the limo is there. Thank God.

The limo smells like bacon, and I discover that we have a nice breakfast waiting—scrambled eggs and coffee and bacon. I want to love Mom again.

I’m not even chewing a mouthful of food yet when Mom says, “Walker is on guitar, and Mickey is on drums again. So what do you have for them, sweetie?”

Mom is 1,000 percent business, as always.

“I have ‘So Long, Boyfriend’ and ‘Love Without You’ and two new ones.”

“Okay.” She puts out her hand.

“Um, actually, they’re in my head.”

“You do understand that studio time burns fifteen hundred dollars an hour?”

“They’re in my head!”

“They need to be on paper!”

“When I’m in the iso booth, I’ll do them. You can work with the arranger. We’ll put it together as we go.”

“So, basically, we have just the two songs. And that’s it.”

“Mom, we have four songs and probably more, and you have to respect my process! They *will* come out.” I get so mad I just boil over, and right in front of the damn *People* lady, too.

“And who scores? Who turns this crap into music?”

“Whoever you hired to turn this crap into music!”

I catch on that she *wants* the *People* lady to write awful things about her. She wants to be known as a harridan, a slave driver, because it makes a lot better copy than if she was wonderful and smart and sweet.

I eat my breakfast and watch her and think about her. This is the woman who came sneaking into my room last night and put her hand on my forehead, then proceeded to leave a weathered old silk rose on my pillow as some kind of odd peace offering. It looks like something off a garbage truck. And now I’m going to conduct an experiment.

I take the rose from my purse. “By the way, Mom, thanks for this.”

She looks at it. In the jump seats Julius and Amber gobble more eggs. But Amber is not oblivious. She is doing her reporter thing of disappearing into the woodwork so, hopefully, she can pile dirt on me. As she gobbles, she watches.

Mom looks at it. “What’s this supposed to mean?”

Which is not the reaction I expected. “Um, maybe that’s my question.”

She picks it up. “This is filthy.” She rolls down the window and tosses it out.

Suddenly I want to scream because I know what it is. It’s from *him*. He saw me on the roof and he stopped me. Maybe I didn’t need to be stopped, but now I know *he can get into our apartment*.

My breakfast comes up all over everything and everybody, and I am horribly embarrassed and totally sick.

“Oh, Lord, honey.”

“You want me to stop, ma’am?”

“No, Louie, we’re fine, don’t stop, for God’s sake!”

I’m fighting for control, but my body is suddenly not my own. I remember him standing there in the shadows on the roof, and another heave comes.

Julius gets his arms around me and helps me back into the seat while Mom finds paper towels somewhere under the bar and wipes up. Then she produces a new shirt, which I change into.

“I have to get out—I’m going to be sick,” Amber yells.

“Open the windows for her, but *do not stop*.”

So we go on down the Ten with the windows open and traffic all around us and the papis frantically trying to get up beside us so they can get a shot of whatever in hell is happening in here.

We’re going to Reynolds, one of the most legendary recording studios in the world, which I like because it has a real private feeling once you are inside. Plus, the isolation booths are big and comfy, and if I’m going to spend my whole day in one, what I don’t need is claustrophobia.

“Okay, honey, okay now, it’s gonna be good. It’s gonna be good. Am I riding you too hard?”

She is cleaning me up, fixing my face, her eyes full of pride and love.

“Mom, I’m so sorry.”

“We’re fine. We’re going to have an extraordinary day.”

I feel the car stop and whisper to Mom, “I’m not scared.” Mom’s look has love in it, but also a sharpness that *does* scare me.

The papis are parking on the sidewalk and running toward us.

“Now just look out the window, don’t say anything, and let them shoot you.”

So I sit amid the machine gun clicking of the cameras, which is amazingly intense. I smile, and, yes, there is this thrill that goes through me when I realize that they are working in relays because there are so many of them.

When the window goes up, they are all gone. I sit back and close my eyes, and for just a second the world is not there. Then I hear the gargling sound of

Mom sucking her plastic cigarette. I open my eyes and watch Amber writing on a pad. I mean, she actually does this. Every other reporter I've met never wrote a thing down and just made up all my quotes. This is real, though. It's not a tab, it's *People*, for Chrissake.

The door opens, and we're in the forecourt, which is full of bamboo and palm trees and blooming lantana. Then Willie comes out with Sassy Lester, my arranger.

"Mel, they're just brilliant, *brilliant*," she says. She looks at Mom. "Oh my God, Hilda, aren't they *fabulous*?"

"I know. We're so proud of her."

I actually haven't played any of these demos for Mom yet. And for a reason—she'll be too critical.

We go down the long hall paneled with blond wood and hung with pictures of people from ancient history, like Sandra Dee, and more recent ones, like Sister Hazel. There is a picture of me at the end of the hall, the one that was taken by Rod Gilliard last April. 'Course I know that it will be gone eventually, replaced by a picture of the next instant superstar.

But it sure does make me feel important, especially when I go into the isolation booth where I will spend the next however many hours. Inside I find the spritzer of mint Listerine that I like, a box of Altoids, and six-packs of Evian and fruit punch Gatorade. Nobody asked me my preferences. They found out on their own.

My demo comes through, and the first song we run is "Flying on Forever," which is almost whispered, with long bass notes backing it up, and I'm thinking we should add something like a theremin when Sassy says into my earphones, "When I heard this, I said to Willie, this is slow and dreamy."

"Kids need to be able to dance to it," I say. "Think slow dancing, just a few kids in somebody's rec room with all the lights turned off," I add.

"I think our girl's done this before," Willie says.

Then my voice comes into my ears, and I start singing to it, and I feel like I'm flying.

"Flying on with the stars, with the clouds that love me, flying in the dark when you cannot even see, flying on forever . . . forever . . . forever . . ."

Again I'm up on that railing and the wind is blowing my silk nightgown, and I sing, "When you are remembered, you're not remembered at all, nobody's real, nobody falls, nobody at all . . . 'cause we're all flying on forever . . . forever . . . forever."

I stop and after a second the scratch track stops too. Willie says, "Good. We'll take some of those."

"I need a punch in 'you're not remembered,' " I say. "I dropped off-key."

Then Mom's voice comes into the mix. "Is this a song about suicide?"

"No, Mom, it's about flying."

"We don't need people blaming us for kids killing themselves, Mel."

"My music is about coping with emotions, not giving in to them."

I remember the weirdo standing back in the shadows. Somehow he had stopped me.

"Flying on forever," I sing, "forever . . . forever . . . forever," and so it goes, on and on. I do my lyrics again and again and again. Hopefully what comes out the other end will sound rad, and I'll get amazing downloads and have a hit.

Some musicians will do fifty takes or more. But I can't do it that way. I'll sing it through five or six times, feeling it down deep in my blood.

Then we move on to "So Not Free," which I think will be the big seller on this album. I can see Mom outside the sound room with her plastic cigarette, glaring. She is not liking these songs.

"You think you're on the road, you think you're gonna go, but you're so not free, so not free . . . so not free . . . so not free. . . . You think there are no bars, but they put them around your heart. . . . You're so not free, so not free. . . ."

"NO, NO, NO!" Mom throws up her arms. "This is all crazy. This isn't music. There's hardly any rhyme—it's almost unsing-able! It's dark, depressive crap, and I won't have it!"

"I think it sounds great, Sassy. Let's do it again. I'm ready," I say.

"I believe we're in mid-freakout here," Willie says under his breath. "Mrs. McGrath, we were going to do that take again. Are you all right?"

“Okay, fine, do it again, but you will NOT get paid. None of you! Money tap is closed.” Her eyes pop practically out of her head and she looks at me. “And I *can* do it. Legally, I have the right, *little girl!*”

So I pull off my headset and go out into the observation room, where Mom paces and Amber sits scribbling wildly.

Time for me to take over. “Mother, I would appreciate it if you could go out and get Louie to take you home.”

“I’m getting in that car, all right, but so are you, you self-obsessed, self-destructive little bitch. And you’re gonna go to a goddamn shrink and get some antidepressants.”

“Well, that’s very insightful of you. Do you know that I went up on the roof last night, and I almost went over? And do you also know that it was *not* you who made me go up there and lean against that rail, and it was *not* you who made me come down?”

She grabs me and *shakes, shakes, shakes* until my eyes and neck hurt, and finally Amber says, “Hey there, hey there,” and grabs Mom’s shoulder.

“This is between me and her, dammit!” Mom lunges at Amber. “Gimme that notebook!” She grabs it and rips out pages and stuffs them in her mouth. “Your lies taste like paper,” she says as the pages come flying out.

Amber sort of recovers herself but looks absolutely horrified.

Then Sassy is there, standing in the doorway. Sassy is maybe thirty. She sings in cabarets of the kind Mom likes, so they have some sort of bond. Sassy has a sailor cut, and she’s real thin. Today she has on a Three Wolves T-shirt and jeans at least as old as me.

“It’s all brilliant, you know.”

“But it’s not gonna SELL,” my mom says. “Kids like—” She dances a kind of crazed little jig. “They like to dance and laugh and love! Like I did! It hasn’t changed. It’ll never change.”

Silence. Everybody is now in the room with us, and every single person disagrees with Mom. You can hear it in the total vacuum.

“It’ll never change!”

She throws herself down on the couch and jams her headphones back on. She takes out her plastic cigarette and throws it across the room. She lights a

Marlboro, takes a long drag, dragons the smoke out her nose, and says, “Okay, so Mommy’s being bad again. Call a cop!”

I won that one. We go on with the session, and I find a rhythm, grabbing songs out of some kind of spirit wind that is blowing through my head. I know we’re just laying down scratch tracks at this point, but they’ll lead to something. Anyway, we end the day with five finished songs, “So Not Free,” “Flying on Forever,” “Blue Roses,” “Love Without You,” and, of course, “So Long, Boyfriend.”

As we’re heading back to the car, Mom apologizes to Amber.

Amber says nothing. I can’t even begin to imagine what’s going to appear in *People*, but it won’t be pretty.

Mom is still smoking, so I crack a window.

She reaches over, closes it.

“Mom, I can’t stand—”

“I put up with your crap.”

“I can’t stand us fighting! Why are we fighting? Why can’t we stop?”

“Why are we fighting? Because you’re sixteen years old and I’m the dumbest mom who ever existed.”

“I hope I’m not that much of a cliché.”

She reaches over and pats my knee. And, in this way, a truce is declared. She says to Louie, “We go in on Tischer Court. The super’s got the back open for us.” Then to me, “The party’s over for the papis.”

“Thank you, Mom.”

Frank is there—he comes out the door as we pull up. He looks huge, like a guard coming out of a guard house. He must be six four. I imagine him carrying me upstairs.

There’s an elevator waiting at the end of the long gray hall near the security office. In the office I see all the screens, all the images from the security cameras on every floor, and I wonder if Frank knows who the stalker is. But I don’t want to ask him. I don’t want to say anything because there will just be more hell over it with Mom. If Mom knew he’d been in the apartment, there would be no peace.

We arrive at our floor.

“Thanks, Frank,” Mom says, and I hear in her voice the certain tone that she reserves for men she likes, a sort of smoothness with a whisper of bedtime in it. But he’s at least ten years younger than she is.

As we enter the foyer, I see an arrangement on the big table, a beautiful spray of flowers.

“Hi there, Mel. Hi, Hilda.”

A man comes strolling out of the living room, and at first I think it’s some new beau who has been given the run of the apartment without even a mention to me, but then I am introduced.

“Melody, this is Dr. Singer.”

Somehow, she has managed to call a shrink and get him over here.

I head straight for the door.

“Mel!”

“No, Mom, I’m not staying. If you want me to see a doctor, ask me. Don’t ambush me.”

“You’re a minor.”

“I’m a human being, and I have human rights!”

“You’re a child, and you’re in trouble, and you need help.”

She turns away, strides toward the wall of windows. “Oh, God,” she murmurs, “help me.”

I realize that she is absolutely terrified for me.

I look toward the front door and want so badly to just walk through it and keep going forever, just like in my song.

Except, except, *except*, I do want my career. It’s not the fame that matters—it’s the kind of musical inspiration that happened today.

“Okay,” I say to Dr. Singer. “What are we doing?”

“I’m here because your mother is concerned.”

I look at her. She looks right back. The defiance there makes me mad. The terror makes me sad. She says, “Honey, please.”

So I go into the den and drop down on the couch. “Is this how you want

me?”

“Melody, I want you to be comfortable. I just want us to get to know each other today. We’ll keep talking. But I want to put something right on the table now. Do you know what a suicide intervention is?”

Ohmygod. This guy must be from a suicide watch.

I say nothing.

“So tell me, did you do what your mom says you did? What you told her?”

I just had the best day of my whole life, and the worst day of my whole life.

“I don’t know what I said.”

He takes out a pocket recorder. He presses a button and I hear *me*: “Do you know that I went up on the roof last night, and I almost went over?”

He stops it. “That is you?”

My throat closes. I want to talk, but I can’t. I want to shake my head *no no no*, but I can’t.

“And you spent the whole day recording songs that can’t be used. Suicide songs?”

“This is totally insane. Because this was the best day I’ve ever had. I mean, songs I didn’t even know I had in me came out, and my arranger—who is the one who actually knows, not Mom—she says they’re brilliant.”

“She’s a paid employee. Of course she’s enthusiastic. But this material needs to disappear.”

Could Mom actually have my songs *erased*? Would she?

“Where is my music?”

“Excuse me?”

“You know what I said, you bastard. WHERE IS MY MUSIC?” I jump up. “MOM! MOM!”

She’s in the living room, smoking and drinking vodka.

I approach her. “Did you erase my day?”

“Darling, you can’t go out there with that stuff. It’s horrible. *Horrible!*”

And then I am on her. I am hitting her, slamming her, kicking her, and I

feel myself almost immediately being pulled off, and I scream—boy, do I scream. I scream with all my might for help, for anyone to come, for *him* to come because whoever he is, he's going to be better than the living hell this place has become.

I'm dragged across the room by this prick, who is stronger than he looks. I go limp. What's the use?

"Melody, we're going to give you a little sedative," I hear him say.

Mom nods.

"That was probably the best session at Reynolds in *history!*"

"When you wake up in the morning," Mom says, "there will be a composer here, and tomorrow the three of us are going to start creating some music that people want to hear."

He takes my arm.

"Don't you dare touch me!"

Then there is a pain in my shoulder and I jerk away, but it's too late.

Already the world is going. I can feel the covers coming up around me.

I see the sunset out my window, red at the horizon, gold higher up.

Then it is dark.

CHAPTER 9



Beresford had never felt anything like this before in his life.

All day he had stayed in Melody's apartment, forcing himself not to open her drawers or her closet, looking instead in the fridge at the things she ate and drank, the diet sodas, the cheese and roasted chicken, the cold cuts, the mint ice cream. He would take a taste and close his eyes and let the flavors fill his head and think, "*She* has tasted this taste; *she* knows this flavor."

Only when their maid had come in and cleaned had he hidden, and then just to go up his hatch and linger there, waiting for the vacuum cleaner to stop and the singing to fade away, which it did, as always, in a couple of hours.

He had looked for his rose, but it was not there, so that meant she liked it and had it with her. Good.

Usually, they were home late, so he wasn't expecting the man who came when the sun was midway down the western sky. Still, it was easy to slip into the den and back up into the crawl space. He'd lain along one of the beams, listening. The man went into Melody's room and searched it carefully. He could hear him turning pages, and he wondered if Melody kept a notebook. Why not? She could probably write and read and all that.

When they came home, the man met them and there was yelling that made Beresford stuff his fist in his mouth so he wouldn't shout out his own rage at

whatever they were doing to her. They were breaking her heart and maybe even hurting her. He could hear the terror and the sorrow in her voice.

Then the man put her to sleep. He'd heard that, too, had heard her scream and beg for him not to, and then her voice went low, and the man—a doctor—said she would sleep until morning.

Beresford sweated out the minutes until the place was quiet. He was going to enter an occupied apartment again. He hadn't been able to stop himself last night, and he couldn't now.

Slowly, carefully, he opened his hatch and looked down into the den closet. All was quiet. No light shone under the door. So he slipped down to the floor, then carefully slid the door open a crack.

The den was full of shadows.

Moving quickly and silently, he stepped out of the closet and crossed the room. There was light shining under this door, but none of the shadows revealed movement. Also, not a sound. Carefully, he grasped the doorknob and turned it.

The hall was dimly lit by a lamp in the living room. Melody's mom sat on the couch reading papers of some sort. She listened to soft music.

Beresford needed to be with Melody.

He slid silently along the wall to her door, then touched the doorknob as if it was a delicate blossom and gently turned it.

He was in. The curtains were drawn. With three quick steps he crossed to her bedside. He could just see her in the darkness, her face glowing as if with an inner light.

He bent closer, cupping his hands around her cheeks, not daring to touch her. He could feel her warmth and smell a faint perfume. She was so wonderful. Just so very wonderful. He drank her in with his eyes, touched the faint heat that lingered around her head, and longed for something he didn't understand and couldn't name but that made his whole body ache.

Finally, he sat on the floor beside the bed. At once shaking with fear and thrilled beyond words, he leaned his head against the mattress. He could feel the faint tickle of her breath against his cheek.

Hesitant, hardly daring, he slid his hand up until it just touched her arm.

After a time, she sighed and shifted in the bed. When she stopped, he was already halfway across the room.

Now she lay with a hand dangling off the edge of the bed. He crept back.

Her face was now turned toward the wall. His heart hammering, his breath shallow and quick, he knelt beside the bed, bent forward, and kissed her cheek.

Her skin smelled of flowers. His face close to hers, he imagined that he could send her his thoughts: “I love you with all my heart, Melody McGrath, and I give myself to you forever.”

Her sleep continued on, undisturbed.

He did not kiss her again, but he also did not leave.

Sometime very late, he heard voices. It was the doctor and Melody’s mom.

There was no time to do anything except slide under the bed. A bare second later, four feet entered the room.

“See, she’s peaceful,” the doctor said. “It’s not the Nitrazepam anymore. It’s just natural sleep. She’ll wake up normally and feel a lot better.”

“I don’t know if she hates me or what.”

“Sixteen is very conflicted.”

“You can say that again.”

Beresford was furious. This man was supposed to be a doctor, and he sounded like one, but he shouldn’t be in the apartment this late with the patient’s mother. That was not right.

“What am I gonna do with her?”

“Make money, Hilda. You have two years before you lose control of her.”

“I’ve got her album back on the charts. I’ve got her show sold out.”

“And she’s ever so grateful.”

“Hardly.”

In reply, he chuckled. Then the feet came together and Beresford’s face burned, because he heard the sound of kissing.

Finally he saw them walking out, her arm around his waist. When they were gone, he pulled himself out from under the bed—but as he did so, he heard something else.

Listening, he froze. It was in the ceiling, a faint creaking.

But there was a lot of wind tonight, so maybe it was the building. Nobody but him ever went in the crawl spaces.

He resumed his vigil beside his sleeping beauty, wanting to protect her but not sure exactly how to go about it.

As before, she breathed softly, her breath warm on his cheek when he leaned near her.

He was just settling back down beside her bed when there was a sharp intake of breath. Before he could react, she shot up to a sitting position and her eyes opened wide. She was going to scream.

He laid his mouth beside her ear and whispered, “Don’t scream, don’t scream, please, please, please.” In response there was a choked groan, then another. “Please, please, please . . .”

Then, for the first time in the world, the girl he loved spoke to him. She said in whispered breath, “Who are you?”

He raised his head and looked into the most perfect face he had ever known. His heart hammered and sweat came all over his shivering body, and he told her the truth. “I don’t remember.”

A frown flickered in her eyes, then her lips opened slightly and her eyes glanced away. “W-what?”

He thought she must be at the edge of total panic.

“I guess I had a name a long time ago, but I forgot it because no one talks to me.”

He had never in his life wanted to hug somebody as much as he wanted to hug Melody. Impulsively, he kissed the end of her nose.

She smiled a little, but then wagged her finger in front of his face.

“How do you get in my room?”

“I live here.”

“In my apartment? You *live* here?”

He pointed to the ceiling. “In there. All over. I live in the Beresford.”

She looked at him a long time, her eyes rich with questions, her soft lips alternately touched with a smile, then trembling at the edge of fear.

“You know you’re wearing a woman’s blouse.”

It was a shirt he got out of the trash in an apartment, so he was not sure what this meant.

“Yes,” he said carefully.

“Are you a TV?”

He was confused. Wasn’t it obvious that he was a person?

“Do I look like a TV?”

“No, except the blouse.”

He looked down at himself. “It’s not a TV.” He felt it. “It’s cloth.”

Surprise washed her face, sparkles came into her eyes.

“What is going on here?”

“Shh! Shh!”

She got out of bed, swept across the room, and locked the door. “Man, I need coffee. Can you make coffee appear, magic boy?”

“Yeah, but we better go to a vacationer.”

Suddenly there was light! Instinct made him go for the closet, then terror swept through him like a rush of fire, because his hatch was not in there.

She stood by the door with her hand on the light switch. She was looking at him now with frank, wide eyes. She came toward him.

“Turn around,” she said.

He turned slowly.

Now her head was down, her cheeks flushing a soft pink.

“You’re beautiful,” she said.

“You’re beautiful.”

“You need to get out of here.”

“I want to stay.”

She smiled at him, which caused him to think again of the meaning of the word *love*. This was love. That was what he felt.

“I want to stay because I love you.”

She tossed her head and laughed a little in her throat, and the way that sounded made his body stir. He longed to hold her but knew from TV that if

he did what he wanted, it would make her upset.

He said, "Can we hold hands?"

Silently, she came to him. She held out her hand. He took it. They stood face-to-face, hands clasped almost formally, and he thought there must be something else he should do, but he didn't know what it was.

"You kissed my cheek. That's why I woke up. I dreamed you were a prince. Are you?"

"I don't know."

"A beautiful boy with magical powers who wakes the sleeping beauty."

She raised her face to his and brushed her lips against his cheek.

It was fire that tickled. He shuddered.

Then she looked up at him, her eyes shining, her lips just parted. She took his chin, drew it down, and brought his lips to hers. An instant passed that was like eternity for him. But then she turned away.

"You have to go."

"I want to live here now."

"You haven't met my mother."

He did not say how well he knew her mother. He did not say how well he knew her life.

"If she found you, she would have you arrested."

He'd seen that on TV. "I didn't commit a crime."

"I'm still jailbait, you know. How old are you?"

"I'm as old as you are."

"You're sixteen?"

"Yeah, I think so."

She gave him a sideways glance. "Can you count to ten?"

"I can count to a hundred. I can read some stuff."

"Where do you go to school?"

"Uh . . . I don't remember."

"You don't. You really don't." She folded her arms and looked him up and down. "Do you live in an apartment? Where are your parents?"

“Mom died. Luther killed Dad.”

“Luther? Who is Luther?”

“I don’t know. I just never forgot his name. He pushed Dad off the roof.”

“My God. Did the cops come? Did they arrest this guy?”

“I don’t know.”

“This happened—when? Today?”

He shook his head. It was so long ago now, it felt like it was at the bottom of a well. In the dark of the past. “I had to hide or Luther would get me, too. Luther would kill me.”

“So you hid . . . where?”

He dared not tell about his place, not even her.

“In here.”

“In my room? Luther killed your dad, and you hid here?”

“Wait, wait, I’m trying to tell you. It happened when I was little.”

“But—*what?* Where do you come from, then, a foster home?”

“I come from here.”

“I think you’d better leave now.”

He didn’t want to. He really, really didn’t want to. “Please let me stay.”

“If my mother found you in here—I don’t even want to think about it. Do you have any identification?”

He threw his arms around her. “Don’t go on the roof like that again. Don’t ever!”

She leaned against him for a moment with her full weight, and it felt so good that he said in his mind, “Never stop, never stop.” But then she did stop.

He grabbed her hands. “Promise me.”

“You can’t ask me that, because—you just can’t!”

She turned away from him. He thought of the little birds that sometimes got into the crawl spaces of the upper floors. He tried to catch them, but he never could, and they died. They always died.

She said, “You have to leave now.”

“I can’t. I’m scared for you.”

“Oh, Lord, now a lurker fan who lives in the walls. Where does it end?”

“If you come back up on the roof, I’ll be there,” he said.

“I have a balcony.”

“I’ll be there.”

Her eyes widened and then sort of seemed to flash, and he decided that, whenever possible, he would be no more than ten feet away from her. He wanted to say “you have to live,” but it sounded selfish, so he said nothing.

He put his hands on her shoulders and held her, and looked down into that perfect face. He knew there was a great sadness in her and realized that, at all costs, his primary mission was to save the woman he loved.

Unable to speak, he turned from her and went quickly out the door, into the hall, and back to the den. In a moment he was up in the crawl space and racing off down the equipment chase and into the depths of the building.

He did not see the light that followed him as he dropped down the chase, but it was there, and it carried his fate with it, a terrible fate that was thundering toward him with all the fury of an avalanche.

CHAPTER 10



Ohmygosh! Ohmygosh! Oh, he was beautiful, he was *beautiful*, he was gentle and amazing, and he lives in the walls. *He lives in the walls!*

I—I—I think I should be furious—at him for breaking into my house, at this stupid building for its rotten security. I think I should sue their asses. I think somebody should call the cops and get this kid into foster care. I think the Luther thing should be followed up . . . and I think I really, really want to see him again.

Where does he go, what does he do? Where *did* he go? He just suddenly walked out of the room, and I went out behind him and he was *gone!*

Is he a ghost, a *real* ghost? No, because he kissed me. It was like how a little boy kisses you, all sloppy and hard. He was clumsy and his heart was beating like a motor, but he's *huge*, way over six feet, and handsome, too, with hair that makes him look wild, and those big soulful eyes and rippling arm muscles. The way he held me, it was like he was some kind of master of dance. I just fell into his arms. He made me feel like a feather, an adored, beautiful feather. Then the kiss, and it was just darling—he had no idea what to do, he was just way out of his depth.

And what's with the blouse? What is *that*? He thought I was calling him an *actual* TV set, not a cross-dresser, because he must have no idea what that is.

I am laughing so hard I have to hold my face in the pillow until I

practically smother, but then I just roll around in bed imagining him in here with me. He is really strong, and I know why—because he climbs around in this building like some kind of wonderful, beautiful phantom of the skyscraper.

His hair is a huge, blond wave that frames his face and hangs down behind him. You can see on the sides where he cuts it, but not very well. What does he use, pinking shears?

His face is an open window. His eyes are wide and blue-gray. He looks like everything surprises him. When I kissed him, he was so surprised that he almost collapsed.

He's rough but sweet, and the way he was forcing himself to hold back just thrilled me and made me feel more wanted than I've ever felt before—

“Stop that preening and get dressed!”

“Oh, Jesus! Mom, you scared me!”

“You live for the mirror. It's a sickness.”

“You don't want close-ups of my zits ending up online, do you?”

She sighs. Her hair is in curlers; her face is so bare of makeup that her complexion looks as if she's been drained by a vampire.

“Feeling okay, Mom? Because you look really pale.”

“I didn't get much sleep.”

“Worrying about me, of course. So, my fault,” I say sarcastically.

“I'm glad you got some sleep, at least.”

“I've been up since four. Your boyfriend's dope didn't work all that well, I guess.”

“He's a doctor, Melody.”

“A doctor who I'd bet spent the night with his patient's mother? I'd like to see his credentials.”

I run to my bathroom and slam the door. I know I'm being hard on Mom, but she's being hard on me, too. I mean, erasing my entire day of work at Reynolds? I'm expected to just forget it, I suppose, like some two-year-old who has about a thirty-second memory span.

All I can think about is *him*. How did he end up in here? There was a

murder and he hid, so he says. This Luther, he hid from him. Why did Luther kill his dad? Or is it all a fantasy? What if he actually *does* have an apartment, or is just a damn stalker who lives in the Valley and snuck in?

No. He's real. A wild child.

I turn on the shower and get in. It's blue marble with gold fixtures, just like I wanted.

I'm amazed all over again, and kind of shivering while I stand looking down at the water sluicing me and think, what would it be like if we took a shower together? I'm really torn. Do you do it or do you not? Calabasas was no help—the girls ran in packs, and to hear one pack talk, all the other packs were basically whores. Actually, most of them were like me, complete virgins.

I finish the shower and slab on enough makeup to make Mom believe that I've decided to do it her way. But then I dress in a black, very severe Jil Sander dress that makes me feel good and bad, which is part of my love affair with Jil, I guess.

I have a heartbreaking day to endure with this ancient composer and his equally ancient lyricist. Back to Reynolds to do some songs he's probably had in a drawer since the days of Brandy. Brandy, the former star of *Moesha*, grew up into oblivion and that's what I fear is my fate.

"You look great," Mom says as I come into the kitchen and eat a strawberry Pop-Tart.

As so often before, I feel this intense love for my mother, despite the fact that I'm still angry about last night. I go over and kiss her on the cheek.

At first, there is no reaction. Then I realize she has stopped moving. Her hands clutch the countertop, her head is down, and her hair hangs around her face. I hear her quietly crying.

Suddenly we are in each other's arms and I'm saying I'm sorry and she's saying she's sorry, and we're bawling.

You cannot hate your mother for very long, at least I can't. In the limo, we sit hand in hand. This time, I don't get sick. This time, she does not smoke. We have, thankfully, left Mr. Dr. Shrink behind to water the plants.

We meet Jim Dexter at Reynolds, and his partner, Ray. Jim and Ray. They

smile. I can see that they're happy for this work. I have a vision of a tiny apartment somewhere cheap, and them counting their change for food.

The first words out of my mouth stun me: "Could you do an arrangement of 'Nature Boy' for me?"

This sounds insane, even to me, but I know why I am saying it, and when Mom gives me a funny look, I just turn away.

Mom and I are not only mother and daughter, we are also business partners—and practically a married couple. But we're business partners who don't trust each other. At the core, it's mom and kid, I guess, and that's where we always end up.

We go to work in a little acoustic studio with a piano. People like Elton John and Burt Bacharach have worked in this room, Jim tells me. At this very piano.

Ray is thin and shabby. He has taped glasses. There are nicotine stains between his fingers. He has a scar up the side of his throat.

He begins to play, and for the first couple of bars, I think maybe there's something there. But then it all falls apart into these god-awful cascades of arpeggios, and I cringe. It's agonizing.

I can see Mom knows as well as I do that these guys are a disaster. But we keep working anyway. We've paid them for the day, so we might as well get what we can out of them.

They will do the "Nature Boy" arrangement for me. Mom is suspicious, but she doesn't say anything except, "Since when did you take an interest in Nat King Cole? He's not your kind of sound at all."

All I can think of is those words from the song—"a very strange, enchanted boy." They go round and round in my head. Will he love me—or does he already—and will I love him in return?

I've thought about the fact that Nature Boy washes his hair and he's clean and everything. So he must use apartments. My guess is that he totally owns the Beresford, and nobody knows he even *exists*.

On the way home, we show up randomly at the Ivy, which is, I think, Mom testing my star power. We're instantly seated. I get my usual scallops mini plate and Mom orders the lamb two ways. She says, "Bring me a Blue Label.

Huge.” I go into my iPhone while she buzzes away, wildly enthusiastic about the songs and the arrangements. My Twitter profile is active. At least my professional tweeter is awake. My last tweet was twenty minutes ago: “I’m so into my new songs. On a roll today!”

The meal passes, we come home, and Mr. Dr. Shrink is not waiting for us as I expected him to be. He appears to be like the others who show up around here, strictly gone tomorrow. Not even mentioned.

I’ve been lying in my room in the dark for fifteen minutes, and there are *no* sounds of my boy. He is not in my wall, he is not in my ceiling. I miss him and I want him because frankly I was counting on going to sleep listening to him breathing in the wall, and waking up to find him beside me again.

You know how this feels? Exactly like waiting for Santa Claus when you’re a little kid. Only my darling guy is no big fat Santa.

I’ve never felt so beautiful as I felt in his eyes. I want that again. I want it right now, and I’m tossing and turning. I *want him here*.

I go up against the wall and put my mouth to it. “Are you in there? Where are you? Because I want you to come back. Please, come back.”

But ohmygod what if he’s a crazy person? He could be anybody. I could be in terrible danger.

Mom knows he is here because I told her, and I know a major complaint was filed with the building, so this beautiful person is probably being hunted down because of me.

I think he’s wonderful and strange and kind of like a poem. Could I love him? Maybe, but first I have to stop feeling sorry for him. Right now, that’s what I feel. It’s a good feeling but it’s not love.

I look in the closet again. The walls behind my clothes, the ceiling, the floor under my shoe rack. No secret openings. My bathroom, same deal—no secret openings, and the vent is too narrow. Under the bed? Not there, and no trapdoor.

So he doesn’t come in via my room. Could he possibly have a skeleton key? But how? We had our own locks installed, and most everybody else does, too. We have three doors that lead into the apartment through the den, the foyer, and the kitchen. All locked all the time.

Is there another way in, like maybe in the pantry?

I open my door, but carefully. If Mom is still in the living room, I'm not going out there.

She is, but she's asleep on the couch and looks kind of haggard now. I love the Wicked Witch of the West because she is often my *mother*.

I creep very quietly into the kitchen. Open the cabinet under the sink. There's a hole back in there, but it's no bigger than your fist, plus it has a screen in it. Cabinet by cabinet, I open them all. No secret passages. Plus, the pantry is too full. He couldn't come in through a door in the back of it because he would arrive covered with pasta and olive oil and Carr's Whole Wheat Crackers.

Mom's bedroom? I look again at the heap on the couch and go in. Her room is totally chaotic. *Much* messier than mine. I'm not insane on the subject, but I like things to be where they're supposed to be.

There are a whole lot of clothes in Mom's closet. Stuff I haven't seen before. Crunchy silks and satins, and a big fur. When is she going to wear a fur? This is LA, so it's never all that cold. It's all white and stuffed into a plastic sheath. I didn't even know she owned it. Anyway, who wears real fur?

I leave because this is ridiculous—he didn't come in through Mom's room, and if she wakes up and finds me snooping around in her territory, then what?

He has to be coming in through either the foyer closet or the den. Or the living room, but I can't search there now. So I look in the closet, which contains my red parka and some umbrellas and no sign of any trapdoor, hatch, or anything like that.

The den, then. The walls are fake paneling. Could he be coming in through the paneling under the bookcases—like, pulling a piece of paneling back, laying it aside, and crawling through?

He sure could. But how do I find that out? Maybe I can't, actually.

Where is my phantom boy?

This seems hopeless. I'll check the closet just for the heck of it, because I can. Here's all of Mom's old stereo equipment. Here's the ridiculous basket collection. Why were we into that, collecting antique Easter baskets? And the Monopoly, Risk, Diplomacy, and Mexican Train boxes—all the old, ancient

games of our life. Even Chutes and Ladders. Oh, wow. I remember Daddy always lost, and it was so funny because he wasn't faking to let me win. He was just hilariously awful at it.

Now, look at that! There is a hatch. It's in the ceiling of the closet, above the shelf so you hardly notice it even if you look up to get a game. But it's there. It looks official, like some kind of equipment access hatch or something, which is probably exactly what it is.

I think that it's also the only other way to get into this apartment apart from the locked doors.

I've found it.

I go into the kitchen and get the step stool out of the pantry. Oh, he'd better be in there, or I am going to go *insane*. Mom's head is thrown back, and she's snoring. She was wobbly drunk when we came in and does not hold her liquor well.

I return to the den and set up the step stool.

The hatch is so neatly framed, it's obviously an access point that's part of the building. There is no lock on it that I can see. It's basically a painted board resting on a frame. I push on it—and it silently goes up. Of course, he probably uses it all the time, so he'd make certain it was smooth and silent.

The smell of the dead air of the crawl space causes a shivery thrill through my body. And, wow, what a weird person I am that a crawl space gives me literal shudders. It's dark up here. I am talking *cave* dark.

I need a flashlight. The tool chest? No. The kitchen.

I make yet another trip past comatose Mom and look in the junk drawer. Very good, the flashlight sort of works.

So, back past Sleeping Beauty. I close the den door.

I look up into the darkness and turn on the flashlight. First I see black pipes. It looks too crowded up there even to get in, but then I see how it could be done. And, in fact, if I just move my head a little, I see that behind the pipes there is a big clear area. Above it, the light shows some kind of junk that has been sprayed on the top of the space. Insulation, maybe. Hanging below it are three rows of electrical wires.

I am fairly strong, I guess, but pulling myself up is going to be really hard.

I'm going to do it, I have to do it. Why doesn't he come back, darn it? I guess I sort of threw him out, didn't I? I'm such a moron sometimes, but I was scared because it was all just so different and not what anyone would expect.

"Hey, up there! *Pssst!* Are you there?"

Not a sound, so I get up on top of the step stool and stick my head into the crawl space, which is not very roomy. How can he live like this?

I pull myself up, struggling, trying to get my knee up to brace myself, kicking against the wall (crap, *shh!*), pulling myself a little more and then rolling a bit, and I'm up. I am in the crawl space. His space.

I shine my flashlight around, looking for something resembling a human shape.

Off to the right there is a darkness. I move over that way, keeping to the beams because I have no faith in the plaster ceiling I am crawling on. All I need is to fall through and land on Mom.

With my flashlight and the light from the den, which is now behind me, I can see a bit. So I crawl farther, and where there are no pipes or wires, it's actually possible to get around.

Ahead, I hear rock music. That's our next-door neighbor, the party girl. Then *bzzzz*, *scree*, *bzzzt!* Light comes up and there is a hissing sound, which I realize is one of the elevators. I hear voices, a woman telling a man good-bye. Then the elevator goes clicking and scraping off down its shaft.

I go over and look down and the shaft is HUGE. You can see light glowing out of the rooftop vents of the four elevators, which are moving up and down, and a couple of them look *really tiny* because this building is *T-A-L-L*.

How could I *ever* have stood so close to the roof's edge? Was it really just the night before last? Time is losing all meaning.

I shine my flashlight around—and, of course, my flashlight is so awful, it only shines about three feet. I move a bit, trying to see more. I have to let him know he can come back. He is in here somewhere—he has to be.

Not around here, though. And suddenly I'm not sure where I am. Is the elevator shaft still over to the right?

I back up. Careful, here. I find a narrow shaft. It's not big around, maybe three feet on a side, and there are all kinds of pipes in it. I don't know what

they are—sewers, water lines, whatever.

This is the shaft behind my room wall—must be. But how ever does he stay in here? This is his world, his home—that’s how. He is somewhere down in there, but there is no way I can climb down a floor. Not possible.

I decide to call him. I will shout. Maybe it’ll be audible in my room and maybe in the party girl’s apartment, but not with all that music.

“Hello!” I flick my flashlight on and off. “HELLO!” I do it again, on and off, on and off. “HELLOOOOO!”

Nothing. So I have to give up on this because climbing around in here is dangerous, obviously, and I am no longer the girl who was on the roof. I am a different girl because I have a phantom boy somewhere off in that darkness.

One more try: “HELLOOO . . . HELLOOO . . . HELLOOO!”

Echoes. The rock music suddenly gets turned way down. Uh-oh.

I am as still as death, barely breathing. And then I hear something—a slapping sound. Is it party girl coming out of her apartment to see what’s going on?

I hear it again, louder, *slap, slap, slap*. Louder and louder and I think—is it—is it coming from below?

I lean over the edge and shine my light and, *oh, Jesus, there he is!* And look at *that*, he is climbing the pipes, levering himself up from one side to the other. It’s just awesome and magical to see how he does this, moving up the shaft so fast he’s like the wind. Graceful and agile, look at that, just *look* at that!

My stomach goes shivery as I watch him coming, his hair flying, his hands gripping the pipes, his muscles rippling in the dim light of my flashlight. He almost doesn’t look human, he is so good at this, a dancer of immense strength and power, a beautiful dancer. Then he rises over the edge, pulls himself up, and he’s beside me. I am looking into the most beautiful, innocent smile I think I have ever seen.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hi,” he says back.

We lie in the crawl space side by side, facing each other. He reaches over and lays his hand on my cheek. I close my eyes and feel its weight, feel it

stroking my skin.

Should I say it? Should I tell him I'm crazy for him? I want to but—Why do I hold back? This is a once-in-a-lifetime moment of magic, and I can't ruin it with my analytical, practical brain.

"I love you," he says. His breath smells like a taco. So he was down there somewhere eating Mexican food.

"Thank you," I say.

Our eyes link in the almost dark.

I open my mouth a little. I'm waiting. I don't want to wait, but I will wait because I want him to do it, to take me in his strength and his gentleness.

He kisses me. Our lips are together, but it's clumsy. We part, laugh a moment, and then he rolls his eyes and tries again. This time it works. I just love his strength, the feeling of him holding me to him so tight and him all trembly and excited, and me, too. I am so excited, I am almost wild—as wild as he is—except he is no brute, and I am no cave woman. He's very gentle with me, looking at me now with wonder in his eyes, then kissing my face all over until I throw my head back and laugh.

He says, "I thought you didn't like me."

"I was scared," I say.

He looks at me with the kind of seriousness you see in the faces of little boys, and it's so endearing. So I kiss him again, longer, more intimately. Afterward I draw back and he remains very still, his eyes closed, his lips slightly parted. He's savoring me, and I know how he feels about me—it's written in his shadow-filled face. I am so happy that I feel like laughing and kind of, I don't know, bubbling up inside in some way that I can't quite put my finger on. He is ready for me, and I can sense that he is quietly hopeful, but this is not the time. We have to cherish this moment. I have to especially cherish him, because he is so innocent.

I want him with me, because I think what's happening between us matters, and I want to find out for sure.

"You have to come and live in our apartment."

"Where would I stay?"

"We have two more bedrooms."

He turns onto his back and puts his hands behind his head. He's considering this. Finally he asks, "How?"

"*How?* Just come in and use whichever one you'd like."

"Oh, yes."

"Let me ask you this. Have you ever been out of this building?"

"No."

"Never? Never ever?"

"Not since Dad got killed. Luther held me over the edge. Luther wants me dead, too."

"Who is Luther?"

"Luther. That's all I know."

The quiet sadness in his voice reveals his grief.

Then I hear a noise. The sudden stillness that envelops him tells me he heard it, too.

"What is it?"

He doesn't reply. He's listening to something I cannot hear.

All of a sudden and without the slightest warning, a light shines on me.

From behind it, I hear Mom's voice say, "You must be psychotic."

I just scream. I scream and I scream, and I cannot stop screaming. He tries to comfort me, holding me, fluttering his hands at me, his face a pale image of agony.

Then *more* light—this time, shining directly at him—and his face is white as if glowing, his eyes bright with shock, his teeth bared, and I can hear him go, "*Aah! Aaah! AAAH!*"

The person shining the light on him is on top of an elevator that has risen up and stopped.

"Okay, young fella, don't try anything. I've got a gun."

My boy's eyes meet mine, and it's as if all of his heart is in those big eyes of his, now looking at me with terror. He grabs me for a second, lets me go, and then heads toward the equipment shaft.

"Stop or you're dead, kid."

So calm, so matter-of-fact, and not a cop, either, because no cop would ever say anything like that.

He is in the shaft now, and I try to go to him. I see the black maw of it and I know that it's death, and I think maybe I should just go with him, just drop down into the dark forever.

The man grabs my shoulder like some kind of iron monster, digging into me. The pain makes me shriek—and then my beautiful boy drops. Oh my God, he just *drops*.

But then I hear his *slap, slap, slap, slap* fading downward.

I turn and crawl toward the light my mother is shining in my face, and I go back down into the real world with her.

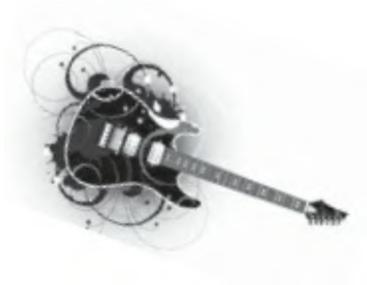
In the den, she grabs my shoulders and glares at me. “Did he touch you?”
“Go to hell!”

She cuffs my head, and I run out of the den and into my room and lock my door. Let her think what she wants. I go to my big windows and look out over the city, thinking of my beautiful boy and wondering if I will ever see him again.

That evil man's words ring in my memory: “I've got a gun.”

Was it Luther? I couldn't see who it was 'cause of the bright light shining in my eyes. Well, whoever it was, he sure sounded like he meant what he said. I've got a feeling that he'll not only kill my sweet boy if he can, he'll enjoy every minute of it.

CHAPTER 11



To save himself, he had to leave her behind, that was crystal clear. She could never run a chase like he could. He saw her angelic face go flashing away as he dropped down the shaft, slapping against the pipes that lined it to break his fall.

When he was maybe five floors down, he stopped. It was nice and dark. He felt safer. But then there was a whining noise and something came zipping down from above—a cable!

A second later, light was beaming on him again, and with a terrifying screaming sound, a human form sped down the wire.

It was mountain-climbing equipment. He knew a lot about it; he'd seen it on TV and wanted it.

He dropped so fast that he almost lost himself, but then he managed to clutch a pipe. Again he went down, faster and faster, farther and farther, until the floors were whizzing past. Then he stopped and threw himself onto one—he wasn't sure which—and went skittering off into its crawl space, as far from the shaft as he could go.

The light came flashing, and he pressed himself down between two beams, praying that the ceiling he was lying on would not give way. Slowly, the light worked its way back and forth, back and forth, coming closer and closer.

Beresford began moving toward one of his hatches. A moment later, he heard grunting and scraping. *The man was almost on him.*

But a hatch was just two feet away. He opened it and looked down into a foyer closet. Who was this?

Oh, yes, he could tell by the smells of floor wax and cigarette smoke. This was Mrs. Scutter's apartment. He dropped down into the closet and pulled the hatch closed above him.

All he cared about now was being with Melody, but how could it ever work? *It would work; it had to.*

He couldn't plan, not now. He couldn't think ahead even ten seconds. He just wanted to feel her in his arms again—that was all he cared about.

His ability to listen was made acute by a life lived mostly in darkness. Beresford heard the man blundering in the crawl space, cursing and muttering. His pursuer wouldn't get far—he was too big.

He stood, barely breathing, as the man kept working his way closer to the hatch above. Despite the danger, he had only one thought: *Melody, Melody, Melody.*

At first, when the dog started barking, he thought it must be somewhere else because Mrs. Scutter didn't have a dog. But, no, it was right outside the door, and it was barking and barking and barking! So now she did. A new dog.

"Now, *now*, Buddy! Oh, goodness, what's come over you?"

The last three words were uttered in a tight, scared whisper. He could feel Mrs. Scutter looking straight at the door. He heard movement, then her whispered voice: "Operator, this is Elaine Scutter, apartment 4250 at the Beresford. I have an intruder—my dog has him cornered in a closet. Please hurry!"

Overhead, the hatch opened. "Okay, son, I've got you."

The light glared down on Beresford, and he burst into Mrs. Scutter's foyer.

The dog was not big, but it jumped almost up to his neck, snarling and snapping, and he had to grab it and hold it away from him.

"God, don't hurt me! Don't hurt me!" Mrs. Scutter lurched away, spit flying with her screams.

Then Frank tore out of the closet, filthy with dust, breathing hard, a long black flashlight in one hand and a bright silver gun in the other.

“All right, you bastard—”

But Beresford was already out the front door and running. He was not often in the halls like this, and he hammered at the elevator buttons until he realized that, of course, the elevators would be too slow. But then how, where?

The exit stairs, of course. With Frank right behind him, he ran to the door at the end of the hall. His first impulse was to go up, to hide in his place on the roof, to hide there forever. But he couldn't do that—he'd lead Frank right to his one safe place.

So he went down, leaping a whole flight at a time, his old T-shirt billowing as he raced faster and faster, with Frank pounding along behind him.

Then the pounding stopped.

Beresford also stopped. He listened . . . and heard breathing—*way closer* than he'd thought possible.

Instantly he started running the stairs again, the gun went *whang*, and he felt something sting the right side of his face. Plaster dust. Frank had shot at him!

He leaped over railings to get from one flight to the next, going down and down, until he reached the bottom of the stairwell.

Now he was in the subbasement. Like all the hidden parts of the Beresford, he'd been here before. But where to hide—what place would be absolutely secure? Because this was death that was coming for him.

“Melody,” he said in his heart, “if I die tonight, my last thought will be of you.”

He went along the catwalk above the machinery floor, then through the steel hatch into the fuel storage area with its three huge tanks. His plan was to get between two of them and lie there until they gave up looking for him, however long that took.

Then, somehow, he would go back up to fifty, and he would go to Melody and be with her forever. Somehow!

He didn't have it thought out; he just wanted it to happen. It *had* to happen.

Love deserves to live—it's good and it's right. He needed her with him always, and she needed him. He had seen her face as he dropped down away from her, seen the sorrow in her perfect eyes.

It was inky dark in the fuel storage area, but he knew just where to find the space between two tanks, and after opening the hatch he slid into it.

Here, there was no sound except his own breathing. Or, no, that wasn't quite true. There was something else—a high, whining sound. But what could it be?

He listened more closely and realized it was coming from just behind his back, out of the place where the two tanks touched each other. What would be whining like that? It sounded like a very small electric motor.

Then he heard a metallic *clunk*. Somebody had opened the door into this room. The next second, the light came on, yellow and far away, but light nevertheless.

“Now I've got you, and I'm gonna kill you slow, bastard. Down here where nobody's gonna hear, you goddamn *freak!*”

Frank came along the catwalk, his heels clinking on the steel grid. Beresford slid farther back into the shadows between the two tanks—where he felt something press against his back, something that should not be there. The whining sound was louder, also.

There was some sort of small machine tucked in deep between the tanks.

Frank was looking in this very space. Beresford squirmed back as far as he could go.

Frank stopped. With a soft grunt, he bent down and shone his light almost to Beresford's feet.

Beresford turned his head and saw the thing making the whining sound. It consisted of what looked like two big red candles with wire around them and a small black box between. It was this box that was doing the humming.

But what was it? He wasn't certain. Some kind of electrical machine, but what were those big candles doing attached to it?

It should not be here, he knew that, and it looked like it might be dangerous—but then a light was shining straight into his face and he couldn't think about it anymore.

“You are good, you little shit. You are real good.”

Beresford said nothing. All he could think about was somehow escaping, but he couldn't escape, and he had the sickening, stomach-burning feeling of being absolutely trapped.

“Come outta there or I'll blow your goddamn head to pieces!”

The gun clicked.

An image of Melody came into Beresford's mind, of her eyes, the depth of them, when she looked at him as they were starting to kiss.

If he came out from between the tanks, somehow maybe he would be able to break away from Frank and live to see her again. Staying where he was, he would die.

Stretching himself, wriggling forward, he crawled into the light.

“Get on your feet.”

He stood up.

Frank looked him up and down. “Well, I'm damned. You're a specimen, you are. You a juicer? You got guns like a juicer.”

Beresford was silent. He had no idea what Frank meant.

“Okay, come on, muscle boy.”

Come where? How?

There came a blow to the side of his head that knocked him almost off his feet and sent a bright yellow flash through his left eye. He stumbled along the floor, then Frank jammed the gun into the small of his back and said, “Go up the damn stairs. Do it!”

Beresford took the stairs three at a time, thinking that he might—just might—get out the door and escape Frank again. Beresford had already realized that he was stronger than Frank, and he thought he might also be faster.

“Don't even think about it,” Frank said, coming up behind him and pressing the gun into his back. “A bullet's a lot faster even than you.”

Frank grabbed the back of Beresford's T-shirt in his fist and pushed him through the door.

With Frank prodding him along with the gun, he soon found himself at the back door of the building. Often he had wondered what lay on the other side.

It was just beyond this door that Daddy had landed. So it was a sad place for him, a very sad place.

More than once, he had stood here crying. Over the years the door had seemed to get smaller and smaller, but he would never forget it as it first appeared to him, huge and ominous.

“Go on,” Frank said, and pushed him with the gun.

His memories of being outside the building were very vague. Green grass, bright in the sun. His mother in a white dress. A dog named Prissy biting the water coming out of a hose. His dad’s laughter, big and loud and happy.

The alley was silent. Up against the building, there was a long row of dark green Dumpsters stinking of garbage.

“Go on. We’re going out to the street. Take it slow.”

Beresford was shaking so much he couldn’t control himself. The noise from all the cars shooting past hurt his ears. There was another sound, and it was getting louder: sirens.

He saw a gleam in one of the Dumpsters. A broken bottle. If only he could scare Frank with it, he could get back in and be okay. He could hide better. Someday, maybe even Frank would give up.

He could be near Melody, and somehow love would help him.

He glanced at the bottle. He was closer to it now. In another three steps, he could reach out and grab it.

The sirens were louder.

“Move it!”

The pistol poked into his back. He grabbed the bottle and whirled around. Frank jumped back, snarling.

Police cars came screaming into both ends of the alley, and Frank stuffed the gun in his pocket. “He’s got a weapon,” Frank shouted.

“DROP YOUR WEAPON AND LIE FACEDOWN ON THE GROUND!” came a huge voice, echoing up and down the alley.

But the way to the door was now clear. So Beresford obeyed part of the order—he dropped the bottle. In three steps he was in the door, but there were footsteps and a man in a uniform but with no gun was there, and then

Frank was coming in also.

“Careful, Joe, he’s a monster!”

Joe stepped aside as Beresford went past. He needed to go up this time, to get to the foot of one of the shafts and climb into the heights of the building. But then more lights came on and the door into the lobby opened. A whole bunch of cops crowded into the narrow corridor and tackled Beresford.

He fought, pushing one of them aside and then another, slowly working his way closer and closer to the entrance to the equipment room, where all the shafts came out. But finally they had his arms and legs, and he was upended and being carried into the open space of the lobby, where the lights were blazing and there were more people than he had ever seen.

He struggled, he fought, but there were just too many of them, and despite his strength, he ended up in steel cuffs.

“He’s just a kid, a big kid.”

“Hey, kid, take it easy. You’re gonna be fine.”

“Man, he’s pale as a damn fish.”

“You stay in here, kid? You ever go outside?”

“Get him on his feet, but be careful.”

Mrs. Scutter was there, and she shrieked, “He tried to kill me! He was going to rob me!”

As they took him out the front door, he craned his neck, looking for Melody but not seeing her anywhere.

But then he heard a cry, unmistakable, her voice in the crowd, *her voice!*

“Melody! Help me! Help me!”

“Wait! Give him to me!”

The crowd fell silent. One of the police said, “Miss McGrath?”

Then her mother was there and Julius, her bodyguard, and they swept Melody away, and Beresford called out to her—he called again and again—but she did not come back. Then he was in a strange little cabin with wire all around and a policeman beside him. The world was rushing past him, and he could not understand what he was seeing. The room was bouncing, flashing by, all blurred, none of it making much sense. He threw himself against the

window, trying to get out.

“Jesus Christ, he’s like a damn animal!”

Beresford felt himself being grabbed—his arm—

“Cool it, damn you! Stop the car, Jake, *stop the car!*”

The outside came into focus again, and Beresford settled down, once more looking for some way to get back to the building. But the building was gone.

Then they clicked more locks behind him, and the cop got out and went in the front on the other side of the wire. The space started moving again, and Beresford tried to get out and run, but his hands were cuffed behind him. No matter how hard he tried he could not move, so he yelled and tried to bite them and growled, but they just sat there.

“Okay, we got—we don’t know what we got. Possible fifty-one fifty. Probable minor. We’re gonna need social, and we’re gonna need restraint on him big-time.”

“You think he’s a nutcase?”

“What’re you, blind?”

“Just askin’.”

This made more sense. This sounded like the way cops talked on *Law & Order*.

“I’m not blind,” Beresford said.

“Hey, it can talk. Hey there, kid, take it easy. We’re just runnin’ you into juvie. Piece-a cake. Get you all squared away.”

“You like hot dogs, kid? How long since you had a decent meal?”

“I had spaghetti.” Earlier he’d eaten at the Neimans’, a can of Chef Boyardee Forkables that had been in their pantry so long they’d never miss it.

“You’ll get a square in juvie. How old are you?”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t want them to know that he wasn’t sure.

“What’s your name?”

Silence.

“You don’t know your name?”

“We got some kinda problem child deal here, be my guess.”

“There’s a possible violent offense.”

“You got ID, son? Driver’s license?”

Beresford was not sure what he was supposed to say, so he said nothing.

The car stopped, and they unchained him.

“Now, stay calm, okay? ’Cause we don’t want to make you walk around in chains. I mean, just take it easy. Nobody’s gonna hurt you. We’re your friends.”

The other cop said, “Come on, now. Come on out.”

“Man, this is the original wild child we have here.”

“You got that right.”

“Go in and push him out. Go in the other side.”

Beresford understood that they wanted him out of the car and standing on the ground like they were. So he did as they said.

“Hey, he’s gettin’ with the program. Yes! Come on, kid, this here is Westview. You’re gonna spend the night here.”

“Not if he ain’t charged. Violent offenders only.”

“Well, that super is going to make sure he gets charged. He’s gonna want him to stay in the system and not get back in their damn sewer pipes.”

They took him across a parking lot with big lights everywhere. He was trying to understand where he was and where the Beresford was so he could go home as soon as he got the chance. But it was all very confusing. There was a noisy, flashing mass of lights and swinging glass doors, and then he was in a room where there were other kids, a girl sitting hunched on a bench, a boy with orange hair who kept saying, “This is crazy, man, this is crazy,” and other kids who eyed him like they wanted to maybe cut him up and eat him.

For a long time, he waited on a bench. The light was bright, the fluorescent bulbs the brightest he’d ever known.

As he waited, he examined his surroundings, thinking of only one thing: how do I get out of here and go back to where I belong?

There was a drop ceiling, but he knew that the crawl space would be no good. The ceiling was suspended from a metal frame like in the security

room. If you tried to get up in there, the whole thing would come down.

The building was low, so there were no long chases to get through. He looked at the air-conditioning ducts for a while, wondering if they offered a way out. They were just about big enough, so the only thing to do would be to try.

“Okay, son, we don’t have any identification on you, do we? Could you state your name, please?”

He had figured out what he would say: “I’m Mr. Beresford.”

The lady, who wore a blue uniform and had complicated braids, wrote on a clipboard. Then she looked up at him. “Your name is the same as the building? Whaddayou, own it?”

He did not know what she was asking, so he remained silent.

Finally she said, “C’mere, come with me.”

She unlocked him. They went to a desk where a man sat writing. “This isn’t a violent offender. I think it’s a mental case, so he goes to Social Services. No ID. Told me his name was the building he’s been squatting in. What you got here is a homeless teenager. Looks like he’s been in the wind for a while.”

“He’s not hurtin’—look at ’im. Healthy kid.”

“Yeah, he’s got a good crash somewheres.”

Beresford decided that the ductwork was his best chance.

“Son, how old are you?”

The questions were beginning to buzz in his mind like a plague of flies. He couldn’t take them much longer.

“Where were you born?”

“Just a moment.” The lady stepped across the room, then came back with a stack of cards. She held one up. “Read this.”

It was words. He did not know what it said. He did not know how it worked, not with big words like that, big long ones.

“That is the word *train*. Do you know what a train is?”

He’d seen the trains down in the railyard. South side of the building, look down and out, they were there. “They are in the railyard.”

“Henry, this boy is nearly illiterate, and he doesn’t know his own name or age, and he has no identification. What have we got here?”

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing we got is a charge sheet.” He picked up a sheet of paper. “This boy is getting charged. Breaking and entering and theft of services. The complainant is the Beresford 123 Apartment Corporation. Next, attempted robbery and attempted assault. Complainant is a Mrs. William Scutter.” Henry put down the paper. “They don’t want him back, that’s for sure.”

“We’ll isolate him. He’s not gonna survive the population.”

Beresford did not think that the window glass was too thick to break, and he was just considering throwing himself through it when they led him into a little room where a lady with a cheerful voice said, “You’re going to get your picture taken, pretty boy. Smile, now.”

He did as he was told.

She laughed. “Now, that is about the biggest smile I’ve ever seen in here. You’re one happy defendant.”

They fingerprinted him, which he knew about from TV. He also knew that they were going to put him in jail, because that’s where this kind of stuff led, and he needed to get out of there before they did that. He could not escape the bars of jail, and the idea of being trapped like that, of not being able to get back where he belonged, of never seeing Melody again—he could not think of these things very long without his mind starting to roar.

There was only the one person in this room, and he saw an air-conditioning vent, so he jumped up and pulled off the grate.

“My God! You come down from there!”

He slid into the duct and went a few feet. Behind him, there was a lot of yelling, and he knew that they were trying hard to get him and bring him back. Sweat poured off him, and he used it to lubricate his way when he came to a turn. Getting his body around it pulled muscles in his neck and chest so tight he thought they might rip, and he had to suck breath through his teeth to keep from screaming with the pain.

Voices boiled up from below, and then there were thuds and clanks and the sound of scraping as somebody pulled away ceiling tiles. He moved more

easily now, and quickly, turning another corner and going down to the far end of the wide building. Navigating by sound, he went toward the machine room.

Soon he was in a larger duct and a lot of air was coming toward him. The darkness was absolute, so he felt his way ahead carefully, until his hands met an edge.

There was a crashing noise, and light flooded in behind him. They'd broken into the ductwork. So he had to do this, and he had to do it now. But what? How?

"It's been tried, son. It don't work."

The voice was right behind him; he felt a hand around his ankle.

"You go down there, you gonna get cut up by that fan. Don't make a mess like that, son. It's nasty cleanin' up."

Now there were hands on both his ankles, and he was being pulled back. Frantic, he pressed against the walls of the duct.

"Dammit, it ain't no use, spider boy."

He was dragged back and into the light.

"I got him, I got him—don't let this thing fall, man!"

The ductwork sagged and groaned, but it didn't break as the big man brought Beresford out.

"We gonna get you tucked in nice and tight, spider boy. You a piece-a work, you are."

They were in a room full of desks. There were strange green walls with markings on them, some of which were letters and others numbers. He could read a few of the words—*red*, *big*, *July*—but most of them were too long.

As they led him out, somebody hit him on the head from behind.

"You give us trouble, we give you trouble. It's an eye for an eye around here, spider boy."

They went down a long hallway, its walls painted dirty green. There were doors every few feet, with narrow glass windows embedded with wire.

"Okay, put him in twenty-one."

"You wanna do that?"

“He’s violent—he tried an escape. You’re damn right I want to do that.”

“Because he’s harmless.”

“Harmless? We got a good five grand of ductwork and ceilings to think about. That ain’t exactly harmless.”

The man used a circular key that Beresford knew was a very difficult one to unlock the door. When it opened, there was a sharp smell of human bodies, and he saw eyes peering at him from bunk beds. There were six of them, and two of the uppers were empty.

“Okay, girls, you got a new roomie. He ain’t got no name, so don’t ask him. And he don’t talk a whole lot.”

“Hey, man, he a ghost. We don’t want no ghost in here.”

“Shut up. And if he gets into a squabble, nobody’s listening.”

“What he do to you, man?”

“He troubled me, Louis. He troubled me very much.”

They left and closed the door, and Beresford heard it lock.

“What you doin’ in here, ghost? What you do?”

“I need to get back to my building,” he said carefully.

“You *need* to get on your knees, ho, that’s where you *need* to get.”

Beresford looked at this boy, who had come up out of a lower bunk. He had short red hair and eyes unlike any he’d ever seen. They were the eyes not of a person but of a very smart animal. Beresford wasn’t sure what this meant, but he was sure he was right. He felt a huge sadness for this boy and thought, he has been made this way by somebody very mean.

The boy came face-to-face with Beresford. He had good muscles and a metal band of some sort in his lip. “Go down, ho.”

The others in the room were silent, watching.

Beresford decided that he would not kneel down. Why this boy wanted him to he did not understand, not exactly, but it was not good—that he did understand.

Then the boy’s fist came up and, before he could block it, struck a shattering blow to his head.

There was a flash. The world floated silently away, and all became dark.

CHAPTER 12



Frank's phone rang. He was exhausted. He'd been up all night getting rid of the evidence that the damn kid might have seen.

"Hello?"

It was Szatson.

"Yes, sir?"

"What's with this wild child?"

"Excuse me?"

" 'Wild Child Found in Exclusive Downtown Apartment Building.' You damn jerk, this is all we need, drawing this kind of attention to the building just now." As he said the last two words, his voice dropped down. *Just now.* Concealed in them, Frank knew, was the terrible secret the two of them shared.

"He's in juvenile custody."

"I figured that out. You knew what needed to be done, and it wasn't done, was it?"

"Sir, I didn't have—"

"Don't hit me with excuses. You did not do your job."

Frank had never killed anybody, and to tell the truth, he'd been glad when the cops got that kid. Even worse was the idea of killing this building. Every

time a tenant said something to him, in the back of his mind was the thought that this person was probably going to burn to death or be a jumper, and it would be on his head.

Now the intercom buzzed. Frank jabbed at the button and Linda, the day concierge said, “There’s a couple of detectives up here.”

His stomach gave a sick turn. The last thing he needed.

“What is it? What’s she saying?”

“Bulls.”

“You *jerk!*” Szatson slammed down the phone.

Frank feared that Szatson would send a gun over here. Frank might have a hard time with murder, but he doubted Luther Szatson did.

He’d cleaned up the fuel storage area, of course, but the kid had been in the worst possible place, right in there next to the device. Had he seen it? Had he understood what he was seeing? Had he told the cops—and was that why they were here?

At four o’clock this morning, he had dropped the remains of the incendiary device off the Santa Barbara pier.

“Frank?” It was Linda again.

“I’m coming!”

“Stay there. They’re on their way down.”

At that moment two LAPD detectives came in the door, one a short, Italian-looking guy, his hands nervously exploring his narrow jaw. The other was taller and solemn, with a sad, beaten sort of a face.

“We just have a few routine questions,” the tall man intoned.

“Okay.”

“The thing is, this kid that came out of here—he’s—we’re stumped. He’s not in any database. We can’t even get a name out of him.”

“I don’t know a thing about him.”

“Which is what you said last night to the uniforms, sir, and that’s fine. But he must have a room in here somewhere. There must be something for us to see.”

The other detective added, “We can find out a lotta things. We just need

access to his room.”

“Look, I’ve been trying to figure that out. Where the hell did he stay? My employer wants an answer, too.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Because what if I’ve got a whole damn colony of homeless in here? It’s a big place. To make a long story short, me and my security guys, we went through every vacancy in the structure this morning and didn’t find so much as dust out of place.”

“So he was here but he wasn’t? The juvies say he looks like a mushroom. He’s been indoors for months.”

“Unless he roomed with somebody who hasn’t come forward, then I don’t know how he managed.” He was about to add that he’d found him in a crawl space with Melody McGrath, but decided to keep his mouth shut about that. Any cop would turn right around and sell that to the media, and the place would be overrun again.

“Look, Social Services will keep hassling us until we get something. They don’t like nameless orphans—it screws up their paperwork.”

“I thought there were charges against him. So he stays inside, right? No matter who he is.”

“You can process an adult unidentified, just John Doe him and forget it. But not a minor. A minor, it’s all different.”

“You know he’s a minor? You know that?”

“The medical staff at Westview made that determination, yes. He’s between fifteen and seventeen. He is a minor.”

If they had a name, they’d go away. But Frank was afraid to just make one up. As soon as they found out it was no good, they’d be back, and they’d have more questions, harder ones, and some would be about him.

The phone rang again. He snatched it up.

“Where is he?” It was a female voice, young—and familiar.

“Excuse me?”

“Let me tell you something. You might work hand in glove with my mother. You might suck up to her, but you *will* suffer for what you did.

Damn you!” And then *click*.

He did not need that little fireball on his ass, that was for sure.

The detectives were watching him. They looked like a couple of poured-out old doofuses, but that, he knew from too much experience with detectives, was just a shtick. The thing about detectives was that until they suspected someone, they suspected everyone. They were never without suspicion, not the good ones, and the LAPD had a lot of good ones.

“If there’s anything else I can help you with?”

For a moment, they both stared at him in silence. Finally, the tall one unfolded himself and stood up. “We’ll get it figured out,” he said. “It all comes together in the end, am I right?”

They left, wandering off down the hall, seemingly oblivious but, he felt sure, taking everything in. They’d be suspicious as hell now. They’d assume that he was concealing something, because how could this kid have been in here without being noticed?

When they went after Frank’s records in the system, what happened then? If there was the least thing wrong with whatever paperwork Szatson had used to get him released, there was gonna be a world of trouble coming his way.

He opened his bottom desk drawer and took out the bottle of vodka he kept there. Took a big swig, then again.

The phone rang. Szatson. Dammit.

“Mr. Szatson, may I help you?”

“Get over here now—we need to talk pronto.”

Frank hung up, took two more long pulls on the bottle, and left.

He drove the streets almost blindly, trying to convince himself that the thing to do was to just keep driving. Head east, maybe to Vegas. You could get lost there, live on odd jobs. There was always something to do in Vegas, if you were willing to work the bottom.

Problem was, if he went into the wind now, the detectives would certainly follow.

He went up Szatson’s driveway, stopped for the entrance gate, then parked his old Plymouth. For a moment, he sat still, trying to get his mind to slow down. He was gonna be raked over the coals here. He needed his wits about

him.

Szatson pulled the door open.

“Frank, this is a mess.”

“It got away from me.” He followed Szatson into the dark, silent cavern of a house.

“Let’s get it fixed,” Szatson said.

“Mr. Szatson, I collected the materials that—”

Szatson turned on him. “That what?”

“That the kid saw.”

“Goddammit! And you’re certain of this?”

“We have to assume it.”

“And he’s in the juvenile system.”

“He’s at Westview, transferring tomorrow to the Willamette Camp above Los Feliz.”

“Well, then let me ask you another question. Can you handle it?”

“There’s nothing for me to handle. He’s gone. He’s in the system.”

“Frank, do you understand how much money is involved here?” Szatson asked.

He nodded.

“A whole world of money. Money that is *obligated*.” Szatson fingered what appeared to be some sort of college ring. “All over the world. Russia, China, Myanmar.”

If people in places like that didn’t get repaid, they killed you. So Mr. Szatson was in danger, too.

“We need to get this done, Frank,” Szatson added. “I’m giving you a chance to fix it, but understand that it’s a last chance.”

Frank nodded. But he still didn’t understand. “Fix it how?”

“Do the damn kid! Reach in there and do him!”

Was this possible? Of course it was. It was always possible to hit somebody on the inside.

“You don’t need to worry about the kid,” Frank said. “The kid is finished.”

“When?”

He would have to reach into juvie, which meant going to the gangs. He had some connections there, guys who did fires for him.

“Couple days.”

“Tonight, damn you! No later.”

He nodded. So he was committed to his first murder, and the most dangerous kind. Hits went wrong. People sang to save themselves from hard time.

“Tonight,” he said. “For sure.”

CHAPTER 13



*You never forget a boy who touched your soul but had to go.
Your heart follows him until it 's lost.
But you' ll never stop, no matter the cost.*

I have to get him out. I have to get him back. But I still don't even know where he is, and I have no name! I think I'm going to go totally insane here.

I want him. I can help him grow and become a real person. He is so innocent and vulnerable, and I am so upset that my brain is buzzing with images of him being beaten up or screaming his lungs out in some cage. I don't think I can bear another night of the sleepless hell I endured last night.

I tell myself, "Girl, you hardly know him—he's some kind of a freak who lives in walls," but then I remember the joy sparkling in his eyes when he looked at me, and I think love that pure has value.

Innocence like his is almost unknown in this world, and to touch it as I have is an incredible privilege. I want to take him in my arms and make him safe. And I can, I know I can. If only I can find him.

And yet, work goes on. My concert is Saturday night, *this Saturday night!* I look at my MySpace and Facebook pages—they are swarming. Speculation. Anticipation. The story of Mom's freakathon over my music is all over the place.

One thing, Mom is aware of her mistake. Today we went up to the Greek for rehearsal, and she didn't have her sweet old composer there to feed me ditties. Of course she ruined all my scratch tracks, so my music won't be available for download and the album is delayed six weeks, but at least it will be my music, my real music.

The *People* reporter got right to her blog and went all hissy, and, guess what, now my fans want my music as never before. Mom as the Wicked Witch of the West is laughing all the way to the bank. She staged that one brilliantly.

If it's to ensure my success, Mom isn't afraid to make me hate her. She isn't afraid to make my fans despise her. It's an act so good that even I believe it.

So, the Greek Theatre. I looked out off that stage and was amazed at how huge the Greek actually is. And get this: there were fans waiting for me when I came this morning for sound check—a couple hundred of them who had been hanging out there for hours just hoping to say hello.

I was supposed to be driven right up to the stage entrance, so their wait would have been for nothing, but Mom made the driver stop, and I got out and hung with them for a while. Julius was so nervous that he practically exploded. A couple of guys gave me phone numbers. Everybody who had the CD of my first album got it signed in metallic blue ink.

My fans made me feel better. Some of them look really fierce. Bikers. Gang boys. Go figure.

For a few minutes, I didn't think about him. But the second I was on that big, lonely stage, my mind went back to a torment of worry: Where is he? What's happening to him now? Will I ever see him again? And when? Last night I lay awake in bed just wishing that he would somehow escape and I would hear his breathing through the wall again.

If only I hadn't been scared of him. If only I hadn't complained to Mom, he would still be there and we'd have our little secret nest in the crawl space. No matter what happens to him, he will never return to life in the walls of the Beresford. I'll teach him about the world; I'll teach him everything he needs to know. I'll even hire him. He can be a roadie, and I'll get a tour bus, and we can live on it together between tours.

It's all a total fantasy, I know that. They will never let him out. The building will accuse him of all kinds of crimes, because Mom says the super told her he did robberies and all. I fear that our love will be, for him, a brief spark lost in the past. But for me, it will still be in my heart just as it is now.

The one good thing that has happened is that my band is coming together. We had some strong rehearsals today, and I had the added fun of watching Mom suck her plastic cigarette when I did "Flying on Forever." She hates that song the most because she thinks it's about teen suicide. I don't know. I just like being on the edge.

I've thought up a plan to save my beautiful boy. I disguise myself and pretend I am his mother. Yeah, right.

Another plan: I break into the juvie tank. I looked at it online, and this does not look impossible . . . for a professional safecracker or whatever.

When I got home, I had a frozen burrito for dinner—bad girl, slap your hand—it was cheesy and delish. I also drank a beer, which was great until I discovered that Kaliber couldn't put a buzz on a gerbil. Now that dear Dr. Singer has gone the way of all her other instant boyfriends, Mom has replaced his Chimay with something I could safely steal.

Okay, girl, you have to get with the program and stop coming up with ridiculous plans because you need to do two things: First, find him. Second, get him out of there.

I thought of calling our lawyers, but they would instantly call Mommy dearest, and then I would probably end up chained to my bed with duct tape over my mouth—except for rehearsals tomorrow and Friday, of course. And the concert. Oh, how amazing, *the concert*. The last one had, what, two hundred and fifty people? It looked great because the room was small. I know they call the Greek small, but that's not how it looks to me. It's this positive *ocean* and incredibly scary.

I'm all over the place. This is happening because I can't figure out a thing to do to help him. Except—what if I were to report him as a missing person? How do you do that? Is there a Web site? Or, no, you probably have to do it in person at the police station, which is where?

What if I just go to the big juvie facility in East LA and say he's my autistic brother? I'm his guardian, except I think you have to be twenty-one

for that.

Maybe the thing to do is go down to the parking garage, get in the Mercedes, and drive over there. Except I've had my license since my birthday, which was less than twelve months ago, therefore I can't drive between eleven P.M. and five A.M.—thank you, California.

I could take a cab. Get there, talk my way in, get visitation. I know it says on the Web site no visitation, but maybe it's not all that cut-and-dried—you never know. Does money talk? Bet so.

I pull down my hair, wash my face totally plain, then put on my dark glasses. I look sort of like a vampire who's pretending to be me. I put on this Vincent Napoli lipstick, "It's Not Me," which is this sort of Goth-insane purple-black color. I hit my face with a bunch of white foundation, and now I look like some punk moron trying to do Angelina Jolie as if she was a punk moron.

Okay, heavy disguise and I am gone. Mom left a while ago, so hopefully she's reconnected with Dapper D or the Wolverine or whoever and is off playing house somewhere far away.

Julius is on call. Do they have something rigged up that lets him know if the door is opened? Probably, so I have to move fast.

I hit the hallway and run down four stories, then take the elevator, clever girl. As I go down, I hear the faint *whoosh* of the car beside this one going up.

"A cab. I need a cab, please."

"And you are?"

I lean close to the building attendant. Lower my glasses just a tad, look over them. "I'm Angie Jolie."

"Oh, wow! I mean, sure! Uh . . ."

Angelina Jolie would, of course, never need a cab, but the woman makes the call anyway, and I go out and sit on one of the benches, hoping that Julius does not—"Hello, Mel."

"Hi, Jules."

"You goin' out?"

"Not to a public place, so you can go back to your room."

He sits down beside me. “We can take the Mercedes. I’ll drive you.”

Actually, it might work if he doesn’t go apeshit on the spot. If I say the truth, either I’m ruined or I get my chance.

“Will you take me to juvie in East LA?”

“Where that streeter was taken?”

“He lived here! This was his home!”

“Whatever. Look, you got a thing for him, don’t you? Your mother already ripped me about it, although she had to admit that I’m not gonna be able to monitor the crawl space.”

“Take me, Julius, please!”

“You tell her we went to the Star Room, and it’s a deal.”

“Will she believe that, Jules? That I would go there, ever? I mean, they do the foxtrot there.”

“She won’t believe it. But she will believe me when I tell her it wasn’t some rock-’n’-roll pharmacy like M&M.”

So I agree to say I went dancing the foxtrot, and we get in the Merc to go to the juvie facility.

I am so incredibly happy until we arrive. Now what? What do I do—go in with my bodyguard and say I want to see a big blond kid with no name, the one who came out of the wall at the Beresford?

As Julius stops the car, he tells me, “You will see some real sad stuff in there, Mel. Saddest stuff you’ve ever seen, so be prepared. And don’t bring me out a bunch of vagrant kids to feed, okay? Promise me.”

“I promise.”

Boy, is this place BIG. Plus it feels all courtlike and scary, and I see cops bringing in these two sweaty fat monsters in handcuffs with torn up T-shirts. One of them has blood on him and looks like he could eat the Incredible Hulk for din-din, which maybe he just finished doing.

I push the door open and there are these benches with kids sitting on them, and there is a big Latina beside her hunched-over daughter, who is crying, and Mom has a defiant look on her face, like her girl had to have been picked up by mistake or something. I hope that is true, but I bet it isn’t.

I go up to a desk where there is a lady in uniform. She has a gun. Everybody in uniform here has a gun and a billy club. This is not a nice place in any way.

The lady is writing. She keeps writing. If I was a taxpayer, I'd be outraged.

"Ma'am, I am trying to locate a boy who was brought in last night."

"Family?"

"That's the thing—we're not sure. We read that he'd been taken from the Beresford and was unidentified."

She looks up. Now I wish I'd worn a nun's habit, not this ridiculous getup.

"Oh, man," she says. "Melody McGrath!"

Silence falls. I feel the eyes on me, all of them in the room. It's as still as the air before a storm.

"You know him, Miss McGrath? Because we got no ID on him."

"I may know him." I feel like a bird that has just discovered it is in a cage.

"Oh, hey, can you sign this for my son?" a guard asks. He has a napkin, which I sign with his Bic.

"He went into the system," the lady at the desk says. "He's at, um—actually, I shouldn't tell you this if you're not family."

"We don't know. If he's autistic, he might be."

She gives me a this-is-weird look, then goes into bureaucratic mode. "They took him over to Willamette. The charges didn't go with him, so he's gonna get fostered."

I tell her thank you and turn and give two more autographs. The girl who was hunched over watches me with the most incredible longing, and I know what's in her mind: "If only I was you."

Back in the car, I tell Julius, "He's at Willamette." Then I ask, "Do you know where that is?"

"Silver Lake. But it's a camp. They have visiting hours at those places."

"Will you take me?"

"If your mom allows it, sure."

"Then forget it. Because she won't."

“You have your live run-through tomorrow. When it’s over, we can do a detour.”

“She’ll be in the car.”

“She’ll be in the limo. I’ll come separately.”

He can be such a doll, but when I really think about it, what will they do for me at Willamette that didn’t happen at Westview? They’re not going to help me. Going to these places isn’t the way to succeed, here.

“Thanks, but let’s just forget it.”

At home I lie back on my bed and think. He is in there. I am out here. He has to be very scared and confused. I mean, he doesn’t know much of anything.

What if I could identify him for them? Find out his name?

Maybe he has a place on the roof. That night he found me up there, he hid back in the shadows near the water towers.

One second later, I am in the hall with my flashlight in hand. Julius is probably downstairs in his room watching me on a camera and saying to himself, “Doesn’t this kid ever stop?” Since I got caught with the boy, he has orders to check on my every move. (The hatch into the crawl space is gone, plastered over while we were in rehearsal.)

I go to the stairs and up to the roof.

It’s big and beautiful and easy to imagine that you’re on a magic carpet flying above this astonishing sea of lights. The Beresford is fifty stories tall and on a hill, so I think it’s about the highest building in downtown.

I look for his place. It has to be small and well concealed.

Up close, the air-conditioning towers are massive, and there is a humid, old-water smell to them. I’m not sure how building air-conditioning works, but up close this is really impressive and daunting. Could I get hurt getting too close? Is it electric? But no, it’s full of falling water.

Back here, this is where he came out of, definitely.

I shine my light along the opposite wall, which must be some kind of storage or equipment room. I see nothing . . . until I do. There, down there, is a long crease, black. Looks like a shadow until I go closer. Shining my light in, I can see that it’s like a low, narrow hatch. There is no handle, so I pull at

it but I can't get a grip. I push, but it doesn't move inward. Then I slide my fingers along the edge, which is so fine that without the flashlight I never would have seen it.

I push the top edge. Nothing. Then the bottom edge. It levers out a little at the top. I pull at the exposed sliver, and it comes down.

To see in, I have to lie flat on the roof. I shine my light into this very small chamber. It's maybe seven feet long, three feet deep, and three feet high. It's like some kind of shelf with a cover on it. Could have been a space for drills and things.

I'm highly claustrophobic, but I slide in anyway and look around. There are clothes stacked up at the far end, neatly folded. There are three bottles of water, an Evian and a couple of Poland Springs. There's a half-empty bottle of fruit punch Gatorade. On the wall, there's a picture of a woman. It's color, an old snapshot, tiny and wrinkled like it came out of a little boy's pocket, which I'm sure it did. She is thin, with blond hair like his. Standing beside her in the sunlight of another time is a happy-faced little boy, and I know with total certainty that it is him.

I can see a story here, of loss and abandonment, and although many of the pieces are missing, I can also see the tragedy of it, the little boy deserted during his father's murder, too scared to ask for help but smart enough to make this crazy, impossible place his home.

Looking at his little bit of stuff—the few clothes, the threadbare blanket—and thinking of his deep, pleading eyes, I know I am falling for him in a big way.

What I cannot see, though, is any sign at all of who he actually is. No name scrawled on the picture, no souvenir with an address on it, nothing.

It's so sad and so incredible. I turn over and grab his blanket, and I can smell him in it—the sadness of a boy alone. And I cry and I cry and I cry.

CHAPTER 14



On the third night of his captivity, Beresford was watching TV in the rec room at Willamette when he saw something that really scared him: a shot on *CSI* of a time bomb. It had a digital timer wired to three waxy, bright red sticks that looked like candles. For a moment he was confused, trying to recall where he'd seen this before. Then he remembered—there had been something that looked very much like it in the space where he'd hidden between two of the tanks in the Beresford's fuel storage area.

Before he could stop himself, he jumped up and cried out. He immediately stifled the sound, but not before a ripple of suppressed laughter filled the room. The other kids hated him. They called him “the vampire” or “zombie boy.” He dropped back into his seat, but his mind was racing and his breath came in gasps.

He'd been focused on the kids since he arrived, on trying to figure them out. But this discovery devastated him. He had to get back to the Beresford. Somehow, he had to escape.

There was no point in telling the staff. They'd just think it was another one of his crazy attempts to get out.

He sat like a stone, staring at the TV but not seeing it. He needed a plan. Since his attempt to get out through the ductwork at Westview, they had kept him on tight lockdown, so he was in his own tiny cell at night. There was no

way out—he'd explored every inch of it.

Sometimes kids got to go with their families on weekend nights, and maybe there was some sort of opportunity. He approached Mr. Lopez, a monitor on duty.

Finally Mr. Lopez looked up from the magazine he was reading. "Yeah?"

"Can I go to the Melody McGrath concert tomorrow night?"

"Whaddaya know, it talks! You ain't got a family to be signed out to, and with an escape attempt in your record, no judge would give you a home date anyway, even if you had one."

"My name is Beresford McGrath. I told everybody that."

"So ain't it strange that your momma, Mrs. McGrath, has no idea that she even gave birth to you? You can't just make up an identity, kid. An identity comes with a birth certificate and parents who know who you are—and a school record. You ain't got none of that. What you do have is a placement hearing coming up, so you got a court appearance Tuesday."

Beresford returned to his seat. He had to get back—that was all there was to it.

He knew that this place wasn't all one building, and when you went from building to building, you were outside. They watched you, though, every minute, and anyway the rec room where he was now was in his dorm, so he wouldn't be going out tonight.

Mr. Lopez was looking at him. Why? What was he thinking? He could never tell if somebody was mad or not. He didn't know how to tell. It was easy to insult people here, and maybe he'd insulted Mr. Lopez. But how?

"Hey, kid." Mr. Lopez nodded for him to come over, so Beresford went back to the desk.

"If you got a pass, where would you go? Just to that concert?"

At that moment, the bell rang and all the kids got up, suddenly very disciplined, heading for the wings of the building where the sleeping areas were. You could get a demerit for being slow on the bells.

As they congregated in front of the door to the boys' wing, waiting for it to be buzzed open, Beresford felt a hand slip around his waist. He jumped away and whirled around, but the faces of the kids behind him were all blank.

Could they get into his room? They hit the door and rattled it whenever they got a chance. Only the staff had keys, but what did that mean around here? The kids really ran the place.

Beresford went into his room and closed the door. With the familiar loud buzz, all the doors locked.

In the silence that fell, the situation hit him so hard he had to gasp for breath. There was a bomb in the Beresford. Who might do this he could not imagine, but it was there, no question. When would it explode?

He had to get out of here.

He paced back and forth, back and forth, slapping the door, slapping the narrow window, back and forth, back and forth.

Beresford thought about all the dogs and cats he comforted, the people who needed him, even mean old Mrs. Scutter—especially her, the way she was always falling asleep with lit cigarettes. He thought of Melody asleep in her apartment way up at the very top, and realized that when the explosion came, all the people on the top floors would be cut off and trapped.

He paced for a long time, he had no idea how long. Time was always kind of a surprise to him. He'd known night and day—but mostly night—in the crawls and chases where he'd lived. Sometimes on the roof he'd seen the sun, which was always disturbing because of how hard it made it for him to hide.

Finally, he felt sleepy and thought it was time to find a vacationer or go to his place on the roof—and then he remembered where he really was. He cried out, stifling it instantly with his fist.

Beresford lay down on the incredibly soft bed, then, as he had on all the nights he'd been here, took the blanket to the floor so he could sleep without feeling like he was falling. Melody had an even softer mattress. How could she stand it?

He lay staring up at the ceiling, at the faint reddish light that kept the room not quite dark. That was another thing he didn't like here. It was never totally dark. He was best in total darkness, even climbing and moving through the crawls. It was what he was used to. He could navigate just by sound and touch.

He must have fallen asleep without realizing it, because a sound woke him

up. The door went *bzzt!* Hardly any buzz at all.

Was it morning? No, the window was black. He sat up. Why would they be opening the doors now? He stood and grasped the door handle. Gently, he pulled and pushed, but the handle did not turn. So maybe he'd dreamed it.

The door burst open. Four hooded figures came in and pushed him up against the far wall. As they did, he shouted in surprise.

“Shaddup! The bulls ain't comin'. The bulls gone deaf tonight.”

One of the figures was Rufus the Butcher, a gang guy. In his hands was a length of wire.

Beresford had not used his real strength against them before, but he had to now, he saw that immediately. As Rufus raised his fists, the wire taut between them, Beresford shrugged off the two boys holding him, lifting one of them and throwing him into the ceiling. The boy hit hard, crashing to the floor in a heap of ceiling tiles.

“Jesus!”

Beresford waded into them, swinging his arms, hammering them. Strong as they appeared, to him they were like paper. A lifetime of climbing had turned his muscles to iron.

He grabbed Rufus by his T-shirt and landed the hardest punch he could throw right in the middle of his stomach. With a huge gasp, Rufus shot backward out the door and into the far wall, then slumped to the floor.

The other two started to run, but he caught up with them in the hall and hit their heads together, dropping them both. The one he had thrown into the ceiling was still knocked out on the floor of his room.

He did not like hurting anyone—he hated it, in fact—but that wire meant only one thing, that they were there to kill him. Then the place would go back on lockdown and nobody would be the wiser. That was how it happened here.

He went down the hall and out into the rec room. From here, he had to pass the front desk, but just as Rufus had said, nobody was there. To keep the peace, the guards cooperated with the gangs.

Why would the gangs want to kill him, though? He had nothing to do with them.

He pulled open the main door and smelled the air, rich, cool, and scented

with night-blooming flowers. The world was beautiful in so many ways. He would never cease to feel this, not after all his years in concrete and darkness and dust.

He ran, dashing between the gym and classroom building and heading across the baseball diamond to the high fence beyond. He knew about maps, but the connection between the lines and the streets and roads did not make any sense. His instinct was to get high up; then he could see.

The lights on the baseball diamond were on, so he skirted it and climbed the twelve feet of chain-link fence, until he reached the vicious-looking razor wire at the top. He'd only seen this stuff from a distance, and he touched it in horrified amazement. How could anybody put up something as evil as this? It could cut a person to pieces. But it kept people like Rufus inside, and you sure didn't want him free, did you?

Beresford lifted his body on one arm, drew in his legs, twisted until his feet were facing the other side of the fence, then extended his legs through a gap in the wire.

Even for him, holding his entire weight on one arm was hard, so he immediately grasped the fence with the other hand as well, then levered himself down, drawing his head carefully through the wire.

He moved one arm out and closed his fist around two links of the fence, then tightened his muscles so when he released the hand still on top of the fence, he could pull it out without touching a single razor.

On the other side, he hooked his feet into some links below him, stretched, grasped links at waist level, then let the weight of his body down on the strength of his arms.

When his feet touched the ground, a rush of heat went to his face and hope filled his heart. Usually, he went barefoot. It was quieter, and his toes were essential to climbing. You didn't want to negotiate a chase in shoes—not if you wanted to live. Here, though, he would leave on the sneakers they'd given him. This was rough ground.

The land sloped upward, although not steeply. It was fairly well wooded, which was a help to him, especially because all the lights in Willamette suddenly turned on and the bell started ringing.

He moved faster, heading for the top of the hill. He needed to get some

idea of where he was. Behind him, he heard an engine start, then another, and in moments there were headlights moving through the woods, coming fast. Small trucks? No, four-wheelers, the kind the staff used.

A big voice: “Stop running, son. You can’t get away!”

He would not stop.

From above, a huge light appeared, and with it the thunderous chopping roar of a helicopter. He’d watched helicopters from the roof of the Beresford. They were fascinating.

The helicopter’s searchlight was playing along the edges of a nearby road, but he had no intention of going anywhere near a road. He continued to the top of the hill where, very suddenly, a view unfolded—even more magnificent than the one from the roof of the Beresford.

Keeping to the trees, listening to the clatter of the engines and the roar of the helicopter, he surveyed a gigantic ocean of lights. To the east, above the shadows of the mountains, the sky was a pink so perfect that it seemed to him in some way sacred.

Tears choked his throat. There was no time to waste, though. He headed down the far side of the hill, going toward houses that were buried in the trees.

He made progress, soon leaving his pursuers behind, at least for the moment.

There was a problem, though. He had no idea which way to go. In the Beresford, he could usually tell what floor he was on, no matter how dark it was or how fast he’d been moving. Outside, all was confusion, an incomprehensible complication of trees and streets full of madly rushing cars.

Moving more carefully, his tread so soft that he left only the occasional track, he hopped a fence into a back garden. Here was a house with a swimming pool. The Beresford had a swimming pool, but he’d avoided it because of the cameras.

Time was passing, and what had been darkness when he left Willamette was now thin gray light. He looked around, seeking someplace to hide. He went toward a big house, but a dog started barking and, a moment later, lights began to turn on inside.

He hopped back over the fence and went to the next yard, and the one beyond it, and so on.

As he jumped a last fence, the helicopter suddenly popped up out of nowhere, so low that he could feel its prop wash on his back. Worse, the lights of the four-wheelers appeared, moving fast, heading straight for the row of houses.

He rushed along the side of the house, then out into the front yard. Crossing the street, he came to a ravine, which he leaped into immediately—and not a moment too soon. Police cars came screaming around the corners at either ends of the street. Policemen piled out and raced through yards, shining powerful flashlights into every bush and hiding place.

“Okay, son, we got you—come on outta there.”

Except that they were pointing their flashlights at the wrong cluster of bushes.

Beresford went down the ravine, picking his way among the sharp stones, then moved up the side and into a more elaborate yard, this one with not only a pool but also a tennis court. Keeping between the fence that enclosed the court and the high brick wall that edged the property, he once again followed the side of the house, then slipped down the driveway and into the next street.

After a while, he could hear only the occasional distant *thutter* of the helicopter. He was fast and had gotten away.

He was soon passing storefronts, and there were people here and there on the quiet street. Farther along, there was a rattling sound as a merchant opened the front of his store.

Then he saw a police car. He stepped between two buildings, went down an alley, crossed a nearly empty parking lot, and came out on another street.

There was a bookstore in an old building. He went up to it, found a basement window, opened it with a few easy shakes, and slipped inside.

The dark was better. He felt a bit safer. But where was he now?

He crossed the cellar and opened a low door. Inside, there were dusty bottles of wine. He went in and pulled the door closed behind him. In the dark, he listened to his own breathing and tried to decide what to do.

CHAPTER 15



The Greek is roaring, every seat filled. You can hear the anticipation. Is my mouth gonna be too dry to sing?

Mom says, “Five minutes.” She’s hoarse from the ordeal of our final rehearsals.

I say, “Don’t state the obvious.” She nods. After the knock-down-drag-out over my beautiful boy, we’ve come to a silent agreement. She understands that I’m not some raving lunatic, and I accept her place as my mother and my manager. No more criticism, either side.

I think I have lost him. The juvie system is not telling us anything. I’m going to put the amazing feelings I have for him into my music.

The band is set up, the drums are riffing. Suddenly makeup people are all over me and I freak, but then my mike is in my hand and Timmy turns it on, and I know that every sound I now make will be heard by the crowd.

The stage is dark. My marks glow, the six step marks and the stop marks in night-glow tape. As I walk out, there is this awesome sense of bigness.

Silence. Then, with a *whoomp* of circuit breakers, the lights hit me, which feels like a physical slap of energy. We’ve lit rehearsals, of course, but not like this, not in the dark, and suddenly my entire body is glowing, my arms as if coated in white fire, the glitter of my blouse like stars around me, and my red boots two prancing flames as I take the mike to my lips and sing my very

first hit, “I Want You.” It’s a girl just *saying it*, what they all want to hear, the long and the short of it, dammit, tell us, *tell us*.

“I want you, come with me, I want you, let me hold you, I want you, I want you. . . .”

I go on, but it doesn’t click with them.

They are watching, waiting, and I feel this total horror, that all the controversy and media attention has built me into something bigger than I am, that Mom has filled this auditorium with more anticipation than I am worth.

They watch and I sing, and it feels like being torn to pieces with silence. I tell myself I am putting my heart into it, I caress my words, I cover them with my blood—“Don’t leave me, I want you, I want you, don’t tell me good-bye.”

And they *watch*.

Agony. I want to be like a boxer who can go off and get pumped up for the next round. If I look into the wings, I can see Mom standing like a statue, Medea or Lady Macbeth, one of those tragic horrors, her face zombified by the steely reflected light from my funeral pyre.

The song ends and there is applause, but who wants *that*? I need screaming, I need total wild frantic mystical passion, or I am dead after tonight. That’s the reality of music nowadays. Elvis or the Beatles could reach the entire world on one damn TV show. No more. I need ultimate buzz everywhere, or I am nothing.

Next, I do another of my hittish hits, “So Long, Boyfriend.” This is slow and intimate, and it takes full advantage of the throaty whisper that haunts the edges of my voice. “Tomorrow I’m gonna meet you, tomorrow I’m gonna talk to you, tomorrow.”

And they *watch*.

My heart beats harder, and I try harder, almost eating the microphone, willing myself to feel the longing that defines the song. “Tomorrow, I’m gonna love you, tomorrow I’m gonna hold you. . . .” A girl dreaming of a boy to whom she dares not speak. Alone in her room at night, knowing that this tomorrow will never come.

And now they do *not* watch. I think I can hear a new sound, a sort of low buzz, and I know what it is, under the band, under me. There is this sound coming up almost from my subconscious or whatever, but it's not coming from me; it's coming from them. They're talking. As I sing, they're *talking*, and I can feel them starting to tweet their disappointment to the world.

Why, why, why? I have no emotion left in me, nothing to transmit, nothing inside me but a heart so sad that it has turned to white winter ice, and snow queens cannot sing.

I do two more songs, and they might as well both be called the same thing—"Robot Girl." The more I lose them, the more shy I become, until I am practically whispering. You can hear the tears and the anger in my voice, and my throat is all tortured and dry, and I am barely even making a sound when suddenly—that's *HIM! IT IS!*

My heart has been a locked safe until this second, because right down there in the second row, looking up at me, is my beautiful boy with his wild blond hair and his huge shoulders.

Somehow he's escaped. Somehow he's come here.

I close the door of my soul on everyone except him. My eyes drill into his. My heart engages his heart, I can feel it. I cue my band and I go not to the next song in the set but rather to "Flying on Forever," which is the song of our tragedy and our hopes, and suddenly I am back out on the roof of the Beresford in the night, looking out across the sea of lights to the low moon, and he is behind me, a reproachful sentinel.

"When you are remembered, you're not remembered at all, nobody's real, nobody falls, nobody at all . . . 'cause we're all flying on forever . . . forever . . . forever."

As I sing, conversations slow down, then finally stop. I stare straight at him, and he's noticed now. He looks back in confusion, and my heart practically tears itself into pieces when I realize that it's *not him*—it's some other boy who is wondering what's going on.

Oh, my poor lost boy, where are you? "Are you flying somewhere in the stars? Are you lost in the darkness of the lights? Are you flying . . . flying . . . flying?"

Then it's over. Silence fills the theater. I see a bat flutter through the lights

and disappear.

Earthquake. Volcano. Never heard anything like it. Never knew such a sound could exist. A gigantic wave of noise, and the noise is clapping, it's yelling, it's foot-stomping. It's huge and totally awesome, and it makes me feel at once like dancing. And then they are coming toward me—the guy is actually coming up on the proscenium. I can see veins pulsating in his temples, his face is practically purple, his lips are twisted. He looks like some kind of monster.

Then he is at my feet and there are cameras flashing. Suddenly I'm jerked back, and I realize that guards are frantically pulling me away from him. My drummer, Mickey, and a guard are also pulling me, and for a second I think it *is* him! I lash out and scream at them and watch as he is swallowed up in the crowd. An instant later, about eight brown uniforms move off with him buried among them.

"I'm okay, man," the guy yells. "I'm okay," but they keep walking him out and then he is off somewhere in the crowd, gone.

Was it him, or wasn't it? I don't know, but my heart is just breaking now. Suddenly the drums start again and somebody puts my mike in my hand. The lights hit me.

The audience disappears into the blackness, and I yell back to the band, "So Not Free." I have no idea what we rehearsed—my mind is a blank. I have almost no idea even who I am, because I know now that what happened in that dark crawl space was way bigger than it felt at the time. It's burning me alive from the inside. I have to see him again.

I look out into the dark. Some longing part of my soul is looking back at me, and I feel this song as I have never felt any song before in my life. The words come out of me echoing with the loss of being a kid and looking at a future you thought would be free—the wonderful adult world that in reality is even less free than ours, and ours is *so not free*.

I sing not only from my heart and soul but from an even deeper place. I sing from behind the bars of life, but as I sing, I also see that the song is not entirely true—that all we have to do to find our freedom is to find love.

For a long moment, there is silence. Then a sound hits me. It's so loud that I think a bomb has gone off. Then I realize it's people clapping. They are

clapping and yelling and stomping.

Somebody is yelling at me from the wings. Yelling at me to do something. More. Yes, that's what they're yelling.

When I put the mike up to my lips, the whole audience turns off like a switch. I sing "Nature Boy."

At first, I sense a withdrawal from the crowd, as if they've been in the dark and are getting hit by light.

It happens again, though. Here I am singing this old song, and something opens up in me—a door, like, to another world.

The song ends. The applause comes again. The crowd surges forward, and I notice that a couple of the guards have their uniforms torn up, and there are cops—real ones—coming up on the stage and surrounding me.

As they lead me off into the wings, I say nothing. Being up there was incredible, and I know what it is now to be truly high, in the sense of being taken totally out of myself, of letting my heart flow like a river, of becoming something primitive and completely free.

Mom's face is covered in tears. She shakes so much it scares me. She looks suddenly little and old. I see that she is crying not only with joy for me but also with sorrow for herself. This is her own life's dream, and now it has come true before her eyes, but it's not her.

When I embrace her, it does not feel like it always felt before, and I know exactly how it's different. She's not holding me. I am holding her.

When my mother grows old, this is how it will feel to cradle her in my arms, and I will do that. I will never turn away from her.

Then, as if she has read my thoughts, she leans back and looks me in the eyes. We both laugh and cry at the same time, me and my dangerous, evil, wonderful mom. Then Julius interrupts us. There is a police car waiting for us. We can't use the limo—the crowd is too hysterical.

I cannot express how weird this all makes me feel. You know they are putting you on a pedestal, but you still feel like yourself anyway.

So here we are in the back of a police car, and the cops are handing me programs for autographs for their kids. It's looking like I'm more of a guy thing than a girl thing, which is okay, I guess. Wonder who buys the most

music?

I am a bit boy crazy, so it fits, I suppose. Interesting to be boy crazy while sealed up in the cocoon of fame. No boys in here, that's fer sure. Unless I want to be taken to a tea dance by some guy from, say, Megadeth, which I'm sure our publicists could arrange. Problem is, no celeb is going to date jailbait, and guys my own age are way too intimidated. I mean, who would invite me to a prom?

I have a tutor, hello? Is there a tutored-kids prom somewhere? Note to self—check that out.

We go into the Beresford by the back entrance, and the pig Frank is there. I'll get him, one way or another.

Back upstairs, the silence is kind of strange. You get used to applause real fast—and miss it just as fast.

I am sitting in the middle of my bed. I scoot up to the head of the bed and press my ear against the wall. It seems like just a minute ago I was being terrified by his breathing. But now it's totally quiet. Just the wall, nothing more.

I go out to the hall, heading for the den. From Mom's room, I hear music. And this is incredible: it's *my* music. She never just listens. It's always for work. Not tonight, though. She kissed me earlier. She had tears in her eyes.

Now she's shut up in there, and I'm wandering the halls, full of wishes that won't come true and desires that won't be fulfilled.

I go into the den and look at where his hatch used to be. Knowing Mom, the entire apartment is now encased in concealed armor plating.

He couldn't get in here, even if he *was* in the building.

I know he won't be coming out of juvie anytime soon. My one real way to get to him is to persuade Mom to hire a lawyer who can game the system for information.

Now that the concert has come and gone, maybe Mom will calm down, not only about my music but about life in general. She'll realize that she can't go bananas just because I like somebody.

Once we were transferred from the cop car to the limo, she put her head back and closed her eyes. Normally, she would have been all over me with

critiques, checking things off on her clipboard, yelling into her BlackBerry, and sucking the plastic cigarette.

I leaned over and kissed her cheek, and a sort of rueful little smile came and went on her face. The rest of the way home, the car was quiet.

I go back to my room, lie down, and close my eyes.

Was it him in the audience, after all? Did I make a horrible mistake tonight?

No, he's lost deep in Willamette, or maybe somewhere else by now, even farther away. Could be anywhere.

Tomorrow is Sunday, but on Monday I'm going to ask our lawyers about him, and Mom is going to let me. She has no right to stand in my way.

I look at the clock—it's nearly three. I'm unbelievably tired but I'm also wired.

Safe in this big, strong building. Lonely. And so to sleep, perchance to dream of my poor lost boy.

CHAPTER 16



Frank arrived at Mr. Szatson's house gobbling Tums. Building the first device and then nearly getting caught had brought the whole situation home even more forcefully. If he did this, people were definitely going to die, and he was definitely going to be found out and given the needle.

He had no appointment and no idea how Mr. Szatson would react. But this was how it had to be.

As the ornate black gate swept open, he looked for signs of the guards he felt certain were there, but he saw nothing except the peaceful lawn and the flower beds.

He'd never considered himself a man with much of a conscience. What he had was a will to live, not a will to help others stay alive. But, dammit, didn't Szatson realize what he was doing? The investigation would be incredible. If they didn't both get caught, it would be a miracle.

He stopped his car in front of the house and got out, going up the steps to the big white front door. It was a formal house, red brick, that had once belonged to the chairman of some film studio. Probably to famous actors as well.

As he lifted his hand to ring the gleaming brass doorbell, the door swept open. Mrs. Szatson stood in front of him.

She smiled at him. "Luther?" she said softly, her voice a gentle lilt.

Szatson appeared behind her. “Good to see you again, Frank.” He smiled. “Come on in.” As they walked toward his office, he added, “Are you bringing a problem to our doorstep on a Sunday morning?”

“A little problem.”

This time, there was the ghost of a reptile in Szatson’s smile. “I don’t handle little problems.”

“It’s not a little problem.”

“I thought not.”

Szatson crossed his big office and dropped into a chair. He gestured to Frank, but Frank remained in the doorway.

“Mr. Szatson, I don’t think we can do this.”

“Why?”

“Mr. Szatson, it’s the crime of the century. It’s going to be investigated beyond anything we’ve ever known. It’s going to draw incredible, detailed, and prolonged attention to you.”

“Frank, excuse me for being so blunt, but don’t think ahead. That’s my job, okay? So don’t. Now, if you don’t mind, my wife and I have to leave in five minutes.”

He came over to Frank and put a friendly arm across his shoulder. “Frank, Frank, Frank . . .” He chuckled. “You’re the smart one, so do the good job you’ve always done, you hear me?” Now he laughed. “Whatever will be will be, am I right?”

Not ten minutes after he’d arrived, Frank was back in his car. And what had he accomplished? Not a thing. It was still on. His warnings had been brushed off.

He drove around the corner and pulled over. He gripped the steering wheel, fighting for breath.

He couldn’t do this, no way. But either way, he was a dead man. If he went through with it, he’d certainly be collared, imprisoned, and given a death sentence. Of course, Szatson would never allow him to walk away now—he knew too much. Szatson wouldn’t just send him back to jail, either. He might even do it himself. But it would be done, no question. Frank would be dead, age thirty-two.

He drove back to the Beresford, passing the Beverly Hills Hotel and the restaurants and expensive boutiques along Sunset, then Amoeba Music and the ArcLight Cinema, where he sometimes went to the movies.

He turned into the parking garage, went down to his space, and cut the engine. He started to get out, but instead he began shaking. A feeling came over him as if he was immersed in ice water, and the shaking became almost uncontrollable. He gripped the steering wheel, striking his head against it again and again.

Now that his attempt to scare Szatson off with warnings had failed, what was his next move?

He went into the building and headed through the employees-only door into the office zone. As he passed security, he tapped on the window, and Joe gave a wave of his fingers. Joe was happy with his little bit of money and watching his damn screens. Then he passed what had been the office of Renee Titer, who had been their rental agent back in the days when they did that.

Oh, how careful was this plan. The building was even designed for fire values, the structure coming in just this side of codes—except for that shaft extension, of course. That was the key to the whole plan, as it had been from the first.

From the first. That was the amazing evil of it. True evil. Satanic evil.

He reached his office, standing for a moment and looking at the black door with the sign on it that said, simply, SUPERINTENDENT. Then he went in and sat down. For a time, he stared into space. He opened his desk.

The new detonator he had built was black because he had covered it with electrical tape. It was about the size of a box of matches. He took it in his hand. It was feather-light and so simple. Its job was to ignite a tungsten filament. But this would happen deep in one of the fuel tanks, inside the oil.

He cradled it. He felt the weight of the building above him, and in his mind's eye he saw the people in the apartments above, some sleeping, some watching TV, some just getting up late on a Sunday morning, others making love perhaps, whatever. He thought of the little singer way up there where there would be no escape. That death alone would make this fire famous.

He laid the detonator on his desk and looked at it under the hard

fluorescent light. He could smell the faint odor of the electrical tape. Why had he covered it with tape? He'd wanted it to survive, somehow. But why? It would not survive, not any part of it.

He peeled back some of the tape. The electronics were simple. He had put them together in ten minutes—a twelve-volt battery, a small timer, a piece of tungsten. He'd designed it himself, and he knew it would be effective.

His fingers seemed huge in comparison with the small timer he'd bought at Target. He pressed the Set button. It began counting back from thirty minutes. Half an hour to the worst disaster in Los Angeles since the Northridge Earthquake.

He would drop it in tank two, the center of the three tanks, then he would tell Joe he was leaving, and he would go down to the IHOP on Olympic and eat pancakes until he heard the sirens.

Briefly, he thought he might just go ahead and kill himself. But he knew he was too much of a coward to do it.

Twenty-seven minutes. He touched the box. It was a strange thing to contemplate what it would mean to this building and its occupants, to the city and the world, if he closed it and took it down the hall.

He watched the timer count down until it reached the twenty-five-minute mark.

Making sure nobody was in the hall, he left his office. As he walked down the corridor with the device, he found that he had to wipe away tears. But he didn't feel sad, at least not in any part of his heart that he was in touch with.

“Hey there, Frank.”

“Hi, Joe, where'd you come from?”

In answer, Joe glanced toward the men's room down the hall. Then he returned to the security office. Frank went on. He didn't think that Joe had the slightest chance of survival so he couldn't even look at him. He reached the end of the hall and climbed down the spiral stairs that led to the main equipment floor, where the steam generators were housed, along with the backup electrical generators.

He didn't see the figure that appeared in the hallway behind him, slipping out of a storage closet. Luther Szatson watched him carefully as he

disappeared down the spiral stairs.

Luther had been hard at work on this for a long time, and Frank Turner was going to take the entire hit for the catastrophe.

Clear and simple, Frank had been set up. Even while he was still in prison, the frame was built around him. He'd been chosen carefully. First, he'd done good work in the past. Second, he could be blackmailed because he'd been released illegally.

Szatson went past the security office with its big window. He stuck his head in the door. "Joey, where's Frank?"

Joe glanced at his monitors. "Don't see him. Want me to give him a call?"

"Yeah, do that."

Joe picked up his walkie-talkie. "Hey, Frank, Mr. Szatson's here." He waited. "Come in, Frank." He waited longer, then repeated the message.

As Luther knew perfectly well, the walkie-talkie's signal wasn't going to penetrate into the fuel storage area, blocked as it was by the big iron of the generators above.

"I saw him heading toward mechanicals, but he's not in there now."

"I'll go take a look," Luther said. "If he turns up, please ask him to wait for me in his office."

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Szatson?"

"Nothing that can't be handled."

Luther then went down to the end of the hall and opened the fire door into the machine room. It was almost silent, with only one steam generator running, emitting nothing more than a soft whine.

Moving carefully so that his heels wouldn't clatter on the grating of the floor and alert Frank, he went to the steel hatch that led down into the fuel storage area. Below, the lights were on. Frank was up on a ladder, bending over the middle of the three huge fuel tanks.

Very quietly, Luther lifted the hatch and put it down over the opening. He then slid the locking bar in place with his foot. He would later say that he had done it because there had appeared to be nobody in the fuel storage area and it was a code violation for it to be open.

He went back to the security office. “Not there,” he told Joe.

“That’s funny, because I didn’t see him come back. You looked down below?”

“It’s closed.”

Joe thought for a moment. “You can’t close it from inside, so he must’ve gone out while I was . . . I don’t know—I had my back turned.”

“You’re not required to be monitoring this hall, so it’s no skin.”

“I just like to notice. I like to be aware.” Joe stood up. His break time had arrived. “I’m taking my break, Mr. Szatson.”

“Sure thing.”

So Joe went upstairs, without the slightest idea that, by doing so, he was saving his own life.

In the fuel storage room, Frank was working up a sweat as he methodically unscrewed the big bolts that kept one of the inspection ports sealed. You could see through the ports, but the tanks were not intended to be opened unless absolutely necessary.

Grunting, pushing against the long handle of the wrench, he finally got the last bolt to move. As he opened the inspection port, fumes from the warm furnace heating oil filled his nose, choking him and making his eyes water. The oil had to be kept at a constant hundred degrees, or it would be too thick to flow through the system. This was no home heating system on a larger scale. It was completely different and far more complicated.

Now was the moment. He had laid the box atop the fuel tank. He picked it up and opened it. Just eleven minutes left. But that was good—it was enough time to get well out of the basement area before the explosion. He did not think anyone down here was going to survive for even a second.

The fire would travel up the building’s various chases and shafts, then blossom when it reached the top of the building. The top three floors would start burning immediately. Lower down, the process would be slower. To an unknown extent, the building’s sprinkler system would retard the flames. But in an explosion like this, standpipes would be wrecked up and down the line, and there was no way to tell how many of the sprinklers would work, or for how long. If Szatson had done his construction right, they wouldn’t work for

very long at all.

He closed the small firebomb, then immersed the detonator in the oil. Circulators inside the tank kept the oil in motion, and the box soon disappeared into the thick blackness.

It was done. And he did not feel anything—except, of course, urgency. He had to get out now. He could not waste time, but even as quick as he was, by the time he was going up the spiral stairs again, he had only nine minutes left.

The hatch was closed.

He looked at it. How could this be?

Then his heart *really* started hammering. “Hey, Joe! Joey! You locked me in, dammit! JOEY!”

The moron had found the hatch open and closed it. What did they give him, a monkey brain? Obviously, if it was open, somebody was in here. With shaking hands, he pulled his walkie-talkie off his belt. The damn thing had better work because eight minutes might not be enough time to get this open from the inside.

“Joey, you locked me in the oil hole!”

Static.

“Joey!”

Static.

Too much steel. It had never worked in here, and it never would. But hell, Joe would have at least called down. Nobody in his right mind would close this hatch without checking the space. The lights were still on. Joe wouldn't close the hatch and leave them on. He would definitely have turned them off, which would have alerted Frank immediately.

The truth hit him. *This was not an accident.*

Of course not—how stupid had he been! Szatson would never, ever let a man with knowledge like he had live.

Szatson had done it.

Frantic now, he leaped down the stairs, grabbed the ladder, and threw it against the oil tank. He pulled off the hatch cover and peered in, but saw only slowly roiling blackness. Even if the box came to the surface, he would never

find the incendiary sunken in all that oil.

Maybe he could drain the tank, then close the valve so that nothing would explode but fumes and residual oil.

Dropping down, he looked for some sort of emergency release valve, but there wasn't one. He could see where the piping went out to the fuel oil fill station behind the building, but there was nothing anywhere that would release oil into the room itself. Maybe it was possible to drain it into the sewer. Surely the tanks had to be cleaned.

No, they didn't. This was modern equipment that didn't build up residue. It never needed cleaning.

Four minutes. Almost dizzy with fear, he took a wrench up to the hatch and began hammering on it with all his strength.

“Damn you, Joey, WAKE UP!” *WHAM, WHAM, WHAM.*

Fire. It would hurt, it would be agony, and it was death, the real thing, *death*—and why had he done it? He hadn't wanted to. He had tried to talk Szatson out of it.

“God! God, it's wrong, I know it's wrong!” *WHAM, WHAM, WHAM.*

Two minutes.

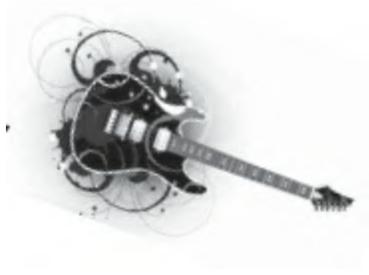
Hissing. What was it? No, it was early, *it was early.*

Fire was gushing out of the inspection port. The hissing became a roar.

His whole body, all at once, felt as if his skin was being ripped off.

Fire.

CHAPTER 17



Beresford's muscles were screaming, his head was pounding, his lungs sucking agonized breaths. He had been running for hours, always moving in the direction of the tall buildings he glimpsed occasionally. He'd tried to stop cars, but nobody would let him in. When he'd seen police cars, he'd gone the other way or hidden.

He took big, ragged strides down the shoulder of a highway with cars speeding past just inches from him. To his left was the wall that enclosed the highway; above it appeared the sheer facade of the Beresford. A sunken highway ran along the west side of the building. You could see it when you looked down.

Ahead was an exit ramp, but it was narrow and had no shoulder. Nonetheless, he had to get up there, so he took it, squeezing himself as tightly as he could against the concrete wall. The cars passed him so close that some of them actually bumped against his right thigh. There was honking, the squeal of brakes, shouting.

Then he was high enough to reach the top of the wall, and with his great arm strength, he hoisted himself up.

Before him stood the side wall of the Beresford, its cladding gleaming black in the soft midmorning light. Ahead was the front of the building, with its doorman and concierge and other lobby personnel. He must not go near

them; he must not let them see him.

Quickly, he trotted across the street and went down the alley behind the building. There was no concealed way to enter except that one door. In the front there would be more building personnel, and he feared that he wouldn't have time to explain the situation before they called the police.

He had to get into the fuel storage area and get that bomb out of there. Again and again, he'd tried to think who would put it there. Terrorists was the only answer he could think of, but how had they gotten into the depths of the building like that?

He came out the far end of the alley. Now he was on the east side of the building, and the entrance to the parking garage was just ahead. It was not attended, so the only chance he had of being seen was if somebody happened to be driving out and became suspicious.

As he hurried toward the parking level elevator lobby, he thought of only two things: the bomb in the basement and Melody on the top floor. In the back of his mind, though, were less formed thoughts of all the other people in the building, and all the animals, and the fact that the explosion would be so dangerous.

A few more steps and he would be standing in front of the elevators. But he did not take those steps, because he also knew that he would then be on camera.

To one side of the four elevators was an alarmed entrance to the emergency stairs, and if he opened that door, not only would an alarm sound, another one would go off in the security office. He wouldn't get two flights before he was caught.

But he had a better way. One of the chases came all the way down to this level. From this side, its opening was buried behind the spray-on ceiling material. But Beresford knew that it was like all the other chases—open-shaft construction.

To reach it, he stood on the hood of a car and pushed at the ceiling material until he found an area that had give. Then he pushed a fist through and tore at the ceiling until he had made a hole large enough to enter.

The car he was standing on was now a mess, but that didn't matter. From here, it would take him just a couple of minutes to reach the crawl space

between the two basements. He would remove a few ceiling tiles and drop right down into the machine room, then make his way to the fuel storage area.

This was the same shaft he used to reach Melody, and being in it again made him think of her fifty stories above him. Right now, he could only hope that she was safely away from the building. But why would she be on the morning after her big concert? She'd be resting.

He looked up into the darkness. There was a faint light that he knew came from the elevator shaft—again, an open shaft that should have been closed.

How he longed to just climb to Melody and get her out of here—and Mom, too, even Mom. Because he knew that Melody loved her, despite all their fights. So he loved Mom. Not like his own mother, of course, but he would fight for her life if he had to, no question there.

The second he got the bomb out of the building, he would tell Melody and Mom everything, and he was going to make them stay out of the building until the police had searched every inch of it.

He was just raising himself into the chase when there came a distant sound, a pop like bacon frying, but louder. The chase was lit yellow, and he dropped down onto the car and rolled away as a big ball of fire burst out of the hole.

For a second, he was too shocked to move. The chase was now filled with flickering light. He raised his head into fume-choked heat. If that fireball had hit him, he would be dead.

He looked up. The higher reaches of the chase were still untouched.

He had to climb, and he had to do all fifty stories or Melody was going to die. He pulled himself up into the chase. Off at the end of the crawl space there was roiling fire, but it was boiling up the elevator shaft and the chase that ended in the equipment room, not this one. This one would be clear for a while.

Without another thought, he started up, climbing hand over hand, pulling himself on pipes, doing it the way he had always known. Except, this time there was a difference. This time he was already terribly tired, and as he grabbed pipe and drew himself up, he felt unaccustomed pain in his muscles.

Still, he continued. Normally, he could do twenty stories with ease, thirty if

he really wanted to push it. Then he'd rest for a couple of minutes and go on. There was no time for that now, and he forced his body to keep working, forced himself to ignore the torment in his muscles and the fire in his lungs.

Then, as he passed forty, he heard barking and immediately recognized Gilford's voice. He cried out in anguish. He couldn't let Gilford die in a fire! But Melody—she was in bigger trouble way up there.

Moving as fast as he could, he went to Tommy's and dropped down.

"Hello! Anybody home?"

Only Gilford, who jumped up and down, snorting happily. The apartment was filled with a haze of smoke, and the detectors were buzzing.

He picked the wiggling dog up, went to the front door, and opened it. He already knew that this was safe; he'd seen from the crawl space that there was no fire here yet.

He could hear others crying out, and he ran up and down the hall, hammering on doors.

"Get out! Use the front fire stairs!" he shouted. They would be safe, at least for a while. He assumed that the pressure of the explosion would have blown in the doors on the back stairs, at least up to the lobby. So they were likely full of smoke, probably fire, too.

He ushered people toward the stairs, giving Gilford to a woman he didn't know and making sure that Cheops, the Egyptian cat from 4033, and Modred, Sam and Angela Parker's big old Lab, were also safe.

Then he returned to Tommy's apartment and reentered the crawl space, continuing on his journey upward. As he passed forty-one, he saw elevator four stuck at an angle, smoke pouring up around it. From inside he heard terrible, terrible screaming.

He could not pass. He had to go over there. So he jumped the chase and headed for the smoke-and flame-filled elevator shaft.

He got to the elevator, which was shaking, and he could hear coughing and crying. Jumping onto the roof of the elevator car, he started choking, too, because the smoke was thick here. Just above him was the pull-down lever that opened the shaft to the fiftieth floor, but he was not going to pull it because it would only increase the draft, drawing the fire up from below even

faster.

The cars had access hatches in their ceilings, but they weren't really for escape. They were maintenance shafts, and narrow. He unhooked the four latches and pulled the cover off, pushing it away past the cable housing. Faintly, it went clattering away into the glow from below, which was rapidly increasing.

Inside the elevator, there were two people. One of them was Mrs. Scutter.

Her face was black, her hair partly burned, and she was shaking so badly that, when he dropped down into the car, he could barely lift her birdlike frame onto its roof.

There was a man there, also, and Beresford was horrified to see that his skin was raw and broken, his clothes almost burned off. This man was standing, looking down at himself, muttering.

"Come on," Beresford said. "We're getting out of here."

Then he recognized this man. It was Luther.

His burns were terrible, but Beresford could only hate his father's murderer. Had he been in the basement? He must have been. Beresford lifted him onto the top of the car, then he came out of the thick, overheated air only to find that the smoke around the car was practically impenetrable.

There was no fire control system in this shaft, and the flames already seemed close to maybe the eighth floor. Dropping down from above were molten bits of plastic burning off pipes and wire sheathing on the top two floors. The fireball that had come up this shaft and the north chase had set the underroof on fire, and flames were now spreading there. The fiftieth floor would be trapped, and roof access was probably already impossible.

Time was rushing by. He had stopped to rescue others, and now he feared there might be no way to get Melody and her mother out.

Dragging a shrieking Mrs. Scutter, he crossed the crawl space to the south chase, then moved a few feet until he was above one of his hatches. He threw it open and lowered her into the apartment. "Go feel the door. If it's hot, don't open it. If it isn't, go to the front fire stairs. Do you understand?" When she nodded, wide-eyed, he left her.

Then he went back to Luther, but it was too late. He looked into the faded

eyes, at the surprise and shock that still haunted them. Poor man, he thought. But ironic, too, that the person responsible for all the violations would also be killed because of them.

The other elevators were far down at the bottom of the shaft, enveloped in flames. He could only hope that nobody had been in them.

The chase was getting hot now and filling up with fumes. Even so, he returned and began going up once again, forcing himself not to waste breath by uselessly screaming her name.

The building shook, and suddenly he was casting a long shadow ahead. He didn't need to be told what this meant—he threw himself into the crawl space between forty-two and forty-three just as a solid wall of flame came up from below and filled the chase.

He screamed then, not because he had been burned—he hadn't—but because this meant only one thing. Melody was now hopelessly trapped.

CHAPTER 18



I don't know what it is, but it smells *horrible* and there are bells ringing and I hear sirens and—*Mommy, the ceiling has smoke, the ceiling has smoke.*

It's impossible; it has to be some kind of weird nightmare. I feel like I'm in mud or something, like I can't move. From the hall, I hear terrible screaming, again and again and again, screaming and banging against the walls.

I try 911 on my cell, but it won't work.

"Mom! Mom!" I go out into the living room, and she is there, bent over the phone. The front of her hair is all curled and black, and the whole place stinks of burned hair. She looks up at me, and it's as if we are both dreaming as she says, "I can't get this to work," and hands me the phone.

This is not happening. It cannot be happening. I see that her bedroom door is shut and there is a sort of haze by the door, and under the door is flickering light.

This phone is dead. I curse at it, and she bursts into tears.

I have to get out of here. I cannot bear this, not one second longer. I run for the front door and grab the handle—it's as hot as an iron! I scream, and Mom screams, "DON'T OPEN THAT!"

She grabs me from behind, drags me away by my hair—*my hair, that's right*—growling like a tiger, and, my God, she looks like a creature from another planet with big, bulging eyes and a face as gray as somebody already dead.

“Mom, here—” I run into my room and grab my computer and open it. It comes to life, so I call up the Internet, and *it works*.

“I’m online!”

I go to Twitter and tweet “Help we are burning Apt 5050 Beresford Melody McGrath Call 911 Help we are burning call 911 call call call 911!”

I press Update, and it just sits there going, “Loading.” *Loading*, oh, God, it’s not posting. I watch. It will not post! Come on, COME ON! But it will not post.

Then I realize the truth. That was a cached page. I’m not online at all.

As a helicopter passes the windows, I glimpse the pilots, their faces turned toward the building.

“Mom!” I run and grab my bedspread. The ceiling is now all cracked, and smoke is sort of shooting down in puffs, like people on the other side are blowing cigarette smoke through little holes.

“Help me!” I go back to the living room and start to open the door onto the balcony, but Mom grabs my wrist.

“No.”

“No? There’s a helicopter right there!”

“If we open that door, we’ll create a draft.” She says it quietly, as offhandedly as a teacher explaining a problem she has explained many times before. Then she covers her face with her hands and begins shaking. But then she stops.

“Mom?”

A great cry comes out of her, and she throws her head back with her fists to her temples and howls. I scream, too. I scream because she is screaming, and I know it’s because we are going to burn and there’s nothing we can do and nobody can save us.

The smell is horrible, and oh, God, I am so afraid. I am so afraid that I am just about to burn. I’m going on the balcony, and I am going to jump. If the fire comes near me, I will. I will!

Again, the helicopter passes. But what can they do? How can they help us? Smoke is coming out of my room, so I pull the door closed. That is my life

in there: my dolls, my snuggly Boo-Boo that my daddy gave me when I was four, my iPad, and, oh, God, the one thing I cannot lose, my guitar.

All of a sudden, a strange sort of calm comes over me. I am going to die, and I am going to either see God or be nothing. My mind starts saying it over and over—“see God or be nothing, see God or be nothing”—and that seems to make it all real and unreal at the same time.

“Mom,” I say as I return to the living room, “MOM! MOM! MOM!”

She comes out of the kitchen. We throw our arms around each other.

The water stopped working almost right away, so she was gathering up all the Cokes and stuff and soaking kitchen towels with them.

“Help me,” she says.

We line them up at the bottom of the front door. The door is so hot that the towels hiss when they touch it. The hall must be a complete firestorm, and that door is liable to blow open at any minute. In fact, Mom was right about not going out on the balcony. If we slide that door open, the smoke and fire will blow into the foyer and the apartment will become an inferno.

Again, I hear sirens. They seem miles away.

Mom grabs my shoulders. “They’re coming,” she says. She laughs and her face is scary. “They’ll be right up.” Solid confidence in her voice.

No, they won’t. I know what happens to skyscrapers when they catch fire. Everybody does.

I nod to Mom. She kisses me, covers my face with kisses.

“My baby, my baby,” she says, and I see over her shoulder that one of the towels we just put against the door is smoking, and then I see a slim tongue of flame rise along it, leaving a dark scar where it licks against the door.

I run into the kitchen and open the freezer, and there are still ice cubes in the icemaker. I pull out the whole thing and go back and throw ice against the flame.

The flame goes down, but the ice hisses into steam when it touches the door. I realize that our time is almost up—we must only have minutes. And no sooner do I think this than the flame comes back, and another one beside it, low, flickering.

Then there is another sound—*pop pop . . . pop . . . poppop*. It’s Mom’s

bedroom door now. Her room must be full of fire, and the hollow wood door is not going to last much longer.

“Mom, we have to try to escape.”

“Don’t open the front door! Don’t touch it!”

“There’s that crawl space I was in, remember that?”

“Oh, that’s got to be a deathtrap.”

“We could break through the den closet. We could, I know it!”

She points upward. The ceiling is full of little cracks, and more of them are appearing by the second. I realize that the crawl space above it must be filled with fire. The ceiling will fall any second and I am going to catch on fire then, and it hits me all over again, the idea of burning and feeling that pain. I look again at the glass wall and the big doors and the balcony on the other side.

The sky has dozens of helicopters, some close, some farther away, all of them, I know, with cameras on this building.

“WHY DON’T THEY SAVE US?”

Mom has Perrier water, which she opens and pours over me. She cries as she does it, then she takes me in her arms and encloses me in herself as best she can. Long, deep red tendrils cross the ceiling.

“We have to try the balcony.”

“Don’t open doors and windows during a fire. Close all doors and windows.”

“Mom, it doesn’t matter anymore. Either we stay here and burn or we take our chances out there. A little more time, Mom! And maybe that’s all we need. Maybe all we need is a little more time, and they’ll get to us.”

“If we open that door, it’s over, honey.”

“What if they don’t know we’re even here? What if they think the apartment is empty?”

To get some attention we hang her bright red robe on the curtain rods, and when I get up on the couch, the air is so hot it hurts my head.

I decide that I will not burn. I will not let the fire destroy my face. I will jump instead. But I am so afraid of heights.

And yet I stood on the edge barely a week ago! How stupid that seems now. How incredibly, totally stupid and self-centered. Poor little rich girl.

Right here and now, I pledge that if I survive this I will become a better person. I go to my knees.

“God, if I live, I will change my life.”

Mom comes down beside me, kneeling also, and she bows her head. “Forgive me, Lord. I tried so hard, and I made mistakes.” She sobs, tries to say more, and can’t.

“We did it together,” I say to her.

We hug each other, and I think what I bet she is thinking, too, that ambition can make you great or it can make you evil, and if we get out of this, we are both going to change. We’ll use our ambition and my celebrity to do worthwhile things.

There is the chugging of a helicopter again, and we both hold out our arms, begging for rescue.

There is a sling under the chopper and a woman in it. We can see her face clearly.

They have rescued our neighbor in 5052.

“HELP US,” Mom shouts, “OVER HERE!” Then her voice breaks. “Oh, God, they can’t see us!”

“We have to risk it,” I say. I go toward the doors.

“NO!”

The voice that comes out of me is almost primal, it’s so big and furious and powerful. “WE WILL RISK IT!”

She closes her eyes. We both know our situation. Die here because nobody can see us, or go out on the balcony and risk burning to death or having to jump.

For a second, I feel this other person inside me, and I discover a truth about myself—I am what I am at sixteen because I am no innocent little girl. I might be a kid, but I have power, and I feel it now.

Mom pulls open the door to the balcony and we run out, but before we can close it, there is a ferocious wind and the whole inside of the apartment fills

up with flame.

She shuts the door, but the glass starts crazing as flames boil against it.

There is no time, I know that now, there is *no* time! I run to the edge, she runs to the edge, and we lean over because there is smoke behind us—if we do not lean out, we will suffocate. It’s hot, it hurts, and it’s getting hotter fast.

A helicopter appears. It thunders, bounces in the air fifty feet away, and comes closer—but suddenly the fire blows it back away from us. Then another one comes, higher up, and I can see a long hose dangling from it. It hovers in the smoke overhead, and there is gushing water, and I feel the coolness of the spray.

But it misses! Most of it just goes down past us and into the street!

Mom screams. She holds out her hands, begging, and then something else—a sling—comes down out of the smoke. It is orange, attached to a rope.

Mom grabs it and comes toward me, but at that same moment the rope tightens and *she is pulled off the balcony and into the air.*

She doesn’t have it on. She’s going to fall. Mom, *Mom!*

She disappears upward into the smoke, still clinging to it.

I drop down to the tile floor, where I used to dance, where I was supposed to prance around in that robe for the papis in another world, on another planet, in a distant age. I can’t watch Mom’s body fall. I will never forget the look on her face as she swung out, her eyes so full of pain and terror.

But here comes the sling again! Did they save her? Is she alive? Did she not fall?

“Mommy!”

The sling bobs, sways, and comes closer, closer still! I reach for it, but it swings away. I reach for it, grasp it—yes! I grasp it and pull it toward me, but there is a low, hungry sound, almost as if the fire has a voice, and that voice is saying “noooo.” There is *searing heat*, and I throw myself to the tiles as the entire glass wall disintegrates. I am lying seven feet from the glaring, flaming maw of the blast furnace that our apartment has become.

And the sling—*the sling is a molten blob of burning plastic.*

It disappears into the smoke.

Now it's quiet. I am alone, me and the fire and God. "Please don't mind if I jump, God, please don't mind because I don't want to burn, and I am, oh, God—I am burning—ow—ow—"

Then—what?—hands on the balcony, hands coming up. On the edge, somebody is coming over somehow, but from where? It's impossible.

And then I see his blond hair and his big, pale eyes and his huge muscles, and I realize that it's HIM! Jesus—it's my beautiful boy! Oh my God, he's trapped, too.

He slithers across the railing and down, staying under the smoke and fire that are boiling out of the apartment. He lies on me, and instantly it's cool. His shirt and pants are soaked with sweat.

"Now, listen," he says. "I am going to carry you. I want you to close your eyes, love."

"Yes, I will close my eyes."

"It's going to be very hard, and we might fall."

"Yes, love."

His arms come around me. I realize that he is breathing really hard, grunting.

He lifts me into sudden heat, terrible heat, but I force back my screams. All I can think is that my magic boy is here, and I wonder, is this a dream given to me by God? Am I really burning right now?

I am under one of his arms, and he is carrying me like a bag of potatoes; he is lifting me. It's getting cooler.

He told me to keep my eyes closed, but I do not do that.

I open them.

At first I don't understand what I am seeing—a long, gleaming black cliff disappears into the hazy distance.

Then I see movement, and I realize that all those red things are fire trucks, their lights flashing, and those white pillars are streams of water hitting the lower floors of the building. There are also TV vans down there, dozens of them.

He is carrying me down the side of the building. And he's having trouble; I

can hear him gasping, and I feel us—oh, God—I feel us starting to slip.

Then, no, we go another floor, and I see how he's doing it with the tips of the fingers of one hand, then with his toes, climbing the ribbing between the panels that make up the side of the building.

We will fall. I close my eyes and pray, "God, give him a chance. He is so young. He hasn't had much in his life, please. . . ."

We slip and he cries out, but somehow he gets us steady again. I hear helicopters everywhere. Another rescue sling comes down, but then it goes away. We can't get to it.

It's terrible to be in this, but he is so strong—his arm around me is beyond steel. I love this boy with all my heart. I want him to be rescued, to be saved—I want this with all that I am.

He stops. He is breathing hard. His muscles are like marble, hard and suddenly cold. Sweat pours out all over him. I open my eyes. I see the side of his head and his other arm, his fingers clinging to the wall . . . and his fingers are *purple*.

When he lets go, we die. I close my eyes again, trying to be as still as possible, to imagine myself as light as a feather, as light as air. I think, the first guy who ever loved me died for it, and I just want to bawl. It's so unfair to him, it is *so unfair*.

Now we are moving again. Incredibly, he is bending his legs, going down another floor somehow. Oh, it's impossible, it must be—and then we slip. . . .

We are falling. The wind is screaming and I am screaming. Time has stopped, and I see in his face total love. Looking at me. Total love.

Then *wham*. Black. *Thud*.

We are lying side by side in a rescue net. There are faces all around us, staring. Men in helmets.

Suddenly I understand: he got us close enough to the ground to drop into a net.

We're alive!

"Don't move, now. We're just putting the net down—don't move. Let EMS come to you."

A moment later, I feel a hardness come up under me, and the men stand

up. They are tall, like sentinels in their black coats.

Then a woman in an orange smock bends over me.

“Do you hurt anywhere, honey?”

“I . . . my hand . . . I burned my hand.”

They lift me and put me on what feels like the most comfortable bed in the world. It starts moving, and I see above me the gigantic, towering side of the Beresford with a massive plume of smoke above it. Helicopters are circling, dropping water loads onto the roof, which seems to be where most of the fire is.

There’s a thunder of engines all around me as countless fire trucks pump water into the shattered lower floors. I’m rolled under the building marquee, and he’s beside me, also on a gurney, and then suddenly I’m wheeled away. I cry out for him.

There are dozens of people from the fire in the hospital. A woman looks down at me. Her face is covered with soot, her hair is burned into little melted knots, but her eyes are swimming in silent tears.

“Mel? Mel, honey?”

“MOM!”

We touch, our hands grasping. There’s so much between the two of us.

Then, like a flash, she’s gone and I am no longer in a hallway. I am in a room. Time passed. How much time, I don’t know.

I try to figure it out, but I keep drifting away. Am I drugged? Yeah, there’s an IV . . . plastic gleaming in the light. Am I burned? My face? No . . . hand. I remember, my hand was burned.

The TV is on. There is a video playing.

Mom’s voice: “That’s you, honey, you and Beresford.”

Beresford? *Beresford*? “Mom, what—where—”

“It’s the most incredible rescue ever recorded. He carried you forty-five stories down the side of the building. Nobody knows how he did it.”

“Beresford! BERESFORD!”

“Sleep now . . . sleep.”

“No! I want him! Where is he?”

They are silent. I see a nurse's long hand move toward my IV. And I feel sleepy, but I don't want to sleep. I must see him now!

"He's not dead—he can't be!"

Screaming. I hear terrible screaming. I don't want to hear it. I try to cover my ears and scream back.

Hands touch my face, powerful hands. I realize that it's me doing all the screaming, and I fight for control—and then there are lips against my mouth, lips covering my screams.

Deep breaths, one after the other. I feel long hair drifting along my cheeks. I see his face, those big, wonderful eyes. Oh my God, he is alive!

I cry harder than I have ever cried in my life as Beresford wraps his big arms around me. I just sink into his amazing strength, so happy to be alive and with him. It seems like a miracle that we're both still part of the world, and Mom, too. I hear music in my soul.

He isn't there long, though, and I can't tell if he's leaving on his own or being taken away; there are so many people in here. I see uniforms and scream after him, but he's gone just like that, absorbed in the riot.

A warm feeling spreads through me, and I shout, "No, NO," but I can't fight it. It's total peace, and I know they have hit me with a knockout punch of some sort of sedation.

But my heart keeps screaming, screaming for him.

Then I'm floating. I don't want to float, but I just can't stop myself. He disappears into a cloud of sleep, and I fear that this time, for sure, he's gone forever.

EPILOGUE

More people watched the blurry figure crawling slowly down the side of the burning building than watched the first landing on the moon. As Beresford's impossible struggle unfolded, an entire world stopped and looked to their TVs at home, in bars, in store windows, on planes, everywhere there was television. And then came the last, perilous jump, the boy and girl like two rag dolls flopping out of the sheets of smoke and onto the huge inflatable cushion the firefighters had deployed.

“They're being rushed to the hospital. Nobody knows their condition.”

Everyone waited, millions upon millions of people from Los Angeles to London to Tokyo.

The director of emergency services at Downtown Receiving Hospital came to read a statement.

“One hundred and fifty-three emergency cases have been accepted at this hospital from a structural fire at the Beresford Downtown Apartments. We have eighty patients in critical condition with burns, and they are being relocated to hospitals throughout the region.”

Reporters yelled about Melody and the boy, but the doctor still didn't have any information.

It turned into a siege, with cameras, reporters, news anchors, bloggers, and columnists all waiting for the answer.

Finally, the doctors were sure of themselves. Melody McGrath and the unidentified young man who had rescued her were alive but in critical condition. Melody had a broken leg, a burned hand, and internal injuries, and the unidentified young man had second-degree burns, was suffering from smoke inhalation, and had a dislocated shoulder.

Beresford was in a charity ward with five other homeless patients. Each day, he got a little better.

Melody drifted in and out of consciousness. She was aware of pain, then of painlessness, then of a deep loneliness that filled her eyes with tears.

She struggled with infection and a heart murmur, and three days after the fire, the doctors told her mother that she had a cardiac infection.

Her mom stayed with her day and night, sleeping in a chair, listening to the heart monitor, praying and worrying and resolving again and again to repair her relationship with her daughter.

Her dad came and made a promise to be in her life more, and she hoped it was true.

Down in the charity ward, there came a day when two caseworkers from Social Services arrived, and Beresford was released into their custody.

Eleven days after she had been admitted, Melody found herself staring at what at first she thought was a fog bank, but then realized was a ceiling.

Was there smoke? What was happening?

“Honey?”

“Beresford. Please, Mom, where is he?”

Hilda was embarrassed because she had been so concerned about Melody’s state that she hadn’t thought about him for days. When she finally called patient services, she was told that he had recovered. “He’s fine,” she said. “I’m sure he’ll come see you when he can.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s in a group home.”

Melody was heartbroken, a devastated angel lying in her ever-changing sea

of flowers, hollow-eyed and silent.

“You did this, didn’t you?”

“What?”

“You got rid of him. You had him sent away. Oh, Mom, where is he? I need him!”

“I didn’t. I didn’t do—” And now Hilda realized her mistake. She hadn’t done anything. She’d just let Beresford get sucked up in the system.

She had often been outraged at this complicated, talented daughter of hers. But now, and perhaps for the first time, she was outraged at herself. Ashamed, really.

“I’ll find him. I’ll bring him back to you, Mel.”

In these terrible weeks watching her daughter hover between life and death, Hilda Cholworth learned a lot of things, about love and how it must give—and also forgive. She had seen Mel glow when Beresford came in the room, a joy that she herself had never known.

Social Services had just been doing its job. They had no idea that they had inspired an attack from a one-woman army.

Hilda learned about the fostering process. She hired a lawyer, fired him, hired another. She went before judges, shuffled papers, signed documents, sucked her plastic cigarette, and worked far into the night in her cluttered hotel room near the hospital. No matter what it took, she intended to fulfill her promise to Mel.

It turned out that Beresford was in a group home in West-lake. He wasn’t a prisoner, not exactly, but he wasn’t free to come and go, either. She talked to the manager of the home, who e-mailed her the house rules. She bit her cigarette to pieces and fumed.

Then she found a new judge, who was willing to listen to a crazy story. By gently questioning Mel, Hilda had discovered enough to track down Beresford’s identity. His name was Robert Langdon. His father had been murdered, almost certainly by Luther Szatson, when he discovered that dangerous violations were being intentionally built into the Beresford.

Before the fire, Mel had been a rising star, just beginning to shine. Now

she was a mega superstar. Her concert recording had led to three top positions on *Billboard*, her downloads were slowing iTunes, and the checks were beyond belief. Suddenly, they were looking at a seven-figure income. Monthly.

Hilda told herself it wasn't success that made her so grateful to Mel. She finally felt love in its true and unselfish form. In her mind, there had crystallized one thought: make it up to Mel. Give her what she wants.

So now, at last, she was ready. With Mel waiting and the entire world watching, Hilda turned onto the street where the group home was located. Ten carloads of paparazzi followed.

She strode down the block, pushing reporters and camera crews aside. She marched up onto the weathered porch of the big old house, where she was greeted by a hard-faced man backed by two large teenagers and what looked to her like a Great Dane with filed teeth.

"You need to leave him alone. Let him get his bearings."

"I want to hear him tell me that." She shouted, "Beresford, dammit, get out here!"

The manager stepped in front of the door. "Ma'am—"

"Don't you *ma'am* me, little man."

The dog started barking, a series of great, roaring woofs. She glared him down, then stepped across the porch, brushed past them all, and entered the house.

"Beresford! Beresford, it's Mom. Where are you?"

Silence. To her right, there was an empty living room; to her left, a family room where the TV was on. A CNN reporter was yammering into the camera about Melody.

"BERESFORD!"

The manager had come in behind her. "Ma'am, this is private property!"

She marched upstairs and went from bedroom to bedroom.

She found him about where she'd expected to, hiding in the back of a closet with the door closed.

His big eyes looked up at her, full of fear but also the power she'd seen in

him before. This was an unusual person, but not a weak one. In fact, he was incredibly strong. This kid had raised himself in the damn walls of a building. He was resourceful and highly intelligent.

“Come on, Robbie,” she said gently. “Mel’s frantic. We’ve got to get you back to the hospital.”

Three cops came piling into the room. “Excuse me, ma’am,” one of them said. “There’s been a complaint. I’m afraid—”

Hilda turned and looked up at the cop. Why was everybody else in the world so damn gigantic? Well, shortness hadn’t stopped Napoleon, and it wasn’t going to stop her.

“Come on, Robbie,” she said.

“Ma’am, you can’t do this. This boy is an unidentified ward of Los Angeles County.”

“Your information is out of date, officer. This boy’s name is Robert James Langdon. His parents are dead, and if you call Child Protective Services, you’ll find that Hilda Cholworth has been awarded kinship care on the basis of the fact that I’m so damn pushy the judge was afraid to say no.” She dragged Beresford out of the closet. “Come on. We’re going back to Mel, and don’t tell me you’re scared because I won’t listen.”

She didn’t say it, but she was scared, too, as she led him out into the mob of journalists.

But the mob scene she was anticipating didn’t happen. At least, not at first. This was because the appearance of this tall boy with his otherworldly eyes, rippling muscles, and shining hair simply stunned them to silence.

The press and the public had glimpsed him before but had never seen him up close, and it was an unforgettable experience. His eyes were big, and the way he used them reminded Hilda of the steady gaze of a tiger with the sweetness of a kitten. He was jammed into a T-shirt and jeans, but you could see the rippling athleticism of his muscles. His appearance told you at once that this was no ordinary person—this was somebody very special. If ever you could say there was such a thing as a magical being, that’s what he was.

In other words, a perfect fit for her golden daughter.

All at the same moment, the mob of journalists seemed to snap out of the

trance. Flashes exploded, questions were shouted, video cameramen backed up before them as they moved toward the car.

The manager stood behind them on the porch with his hands on his hips.

“I’m gonna see Melody again?” Beresford asked.

“You are. In fact, you’re gonna see a lot of her. I’m on your side, Robbie.”

“Is that my name?”

“You’ll remember more in time. You’re suffering from something called traumatic amnesia.”

“Do you know anything about my dad and mom? Where I lived?”

She was silent, wanting him to be with Mel again first, then later to begin the painful process of remembering his childhood terror. He had lost a lot. He had lost everything. But he’d found love, and that would heal him.

In the hospital, Beresford grew wary. He didn’t like elevators, hallways, or crowds.

They came to Melody’s room. He went up to the door. Then he turned and gave Mom a questioning look.

“Go ahead.”

“She’s not busy?”

“You crazy kid, for you she’s *never* busy!”

Still he stood there, unsure.

“Oh, fer—” She opened the door and pushed him in, then followed.

Mel lit up and threw her arms toward him, wincing from pain but doing it anyway. Her beloved Beresford bent to her and embraced her, and over his shoulder, Mel’s eyes met her mom’s. In them, Hilda saw the spark of gratitude that every parent longs to see. They’d fight again, no doubt, but right now the moment was perfect, and for that Hilda was grateful.

She put her plastic cigarette in her mouth and went down to the hospital cafeteria, where she had spent so many hours. She drank a cup of coffee and thought long thoughts of the way life goes, how lovers find each other in all kinds of strange ways.

When she went back upstairs, Mel was asleep in her bed, and Beresford was in the big chair beside her.

Hilda cried a little, watching them in their innocent peace.

Melody stirred, then woke up and held out her hand. Hilda reached for it, but Beresford took it instead.

For a moment, she wanted to push him aside, but she stopped herself.

This was their time, and what might come in their lives and their life together was not her business.

It was a hard thing to accept, but she did. Neither of them noticed her; they were too involved in each other.

But as she left, Melody suddenly broke their embrace.

“Mom, thank you,” she said. “You gave us a chance.”

“Thank you,” Beresford repeated.

Hilda left them to each other, and to the future she could hardly even imagine would be theirs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WHITLEY STRIEBER is one of the great names in science fiction. He is the bestselling author of many books, including *Communion*, *The Wolfen*, *The Hunger*, and *Critical Mass*. Several of his books have been made into major films. *Melody Burning* is the first novel he has written for young adult readers.

He and his wife and collaborator, Ann Strieber, divide their time between California, New York, and Texas.

THE AFTERLIFE REVOLUTION

"Extraordinary and inspiring."

Dr Gary Schwartz,
author of the Afterlife Experiments



WHITLEY AND ANNE STRIEBER

THE AFTERLIFE REVOLUTION



WHITLEY AND ANNE STRIEBER

WALKER & COLLIER, INC., PUBLISHER

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THE AFTERLIFE REVOLUTION

by Whitley and Anne Strieber

Walker & Collier, Inc., Publishers

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FROM ANNE STRIEBER

Mankind is a species divided, not so much between the sexes but between the living and what are called the dead. It isn't natural and it isn't necessary. We can become whole.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Belle Fuller, William and Clare Henry, Trish and Rob MacGregor, Leigh McCloskey and Alex Rotaru for allowing us use their names in our reporting of what they witnessed, and Dr. Patricia Turrisi for her invaluable advice and insights, and all of our other early readers who were kind enough to explore our journey with us during the writing of this book, and most especially Dr. Gary Schwartz for his foreword.

--Anne and Whitley Strieber

FOREWORD

Gary E. Schwartz, PhD

“All through history, there have been those who have lived in conscious relationship with Earth and the cosmos. We call them masters. In the future, everybody who enters the physical will do so as a master of being. And why will we still be using the physical? Give somebody a kiss. That’s why. Humanity’s destiny in the universe is to bring forth the experience of love, that all may share in it. Objective love, the core creative urgency, is also the essential human energy....Enlightenment is what happens when there is nothing left of us but love.”

--Anne Strieber

“Incredibly, Anne has managed to provide what for me on a personal level must be final proof. She has done something that once goes to the heart of our relationship and also explores the deepest meaning of death, dying, and living on. I will devote the final chapter of this book to it, but know that, from the time it happened just a few days ago, my position has changed. I now feel

certain that Anne still exists, and with her I must also assume the legions of the dead, all still very real, but in ways that we have scarcely even begun to understand.”

--Whitley Strieber

Is life after death real? Is there a greater reality beyond our five senses? Can we personally know, for sure, whether our loved ones’ consciousness continues after physical death? And can we grow into this emerging knowledge and wisdom as individuals and a species?

According to Anne and Whitley Strieber, the inspired authors of *The Afterlife Revolution*, the answers to these profound questions are emphatically yes.

I have read many books on near death experiences, after death communications, observations made by gifted evidential mediums, and afterlife science. I have written forewords for some of these books, and I have also written a few spiritual science books myself, including *The Afterlife Experiments* and *The G.O.D. Experiments*.

However, *The Afterlife Revolution* stands out among these books in terms of its scope, beauty, and lessons for all of us. Despite the well-known controversies surrounding the authors of this extraordinary book – for example, their reported observations of aliens – and maybe because of their historic openness to the existence of intelligent life beyond planet Earth, their personal journey following Anne’s physical death takes on additional importance and meaning.

One of the reasons I felt compelled to write a foreword for this book was to honor the inspiring nature of the breadth and depth of Anne and Whitley’s love for each other, both before and after Anne’s physical death, coupled with the intense intellectual curiosity they shared for understanding life and

the cosmos. We will return to the importance of love, especially objective love, at the end of this foreword.

However, another reason I had to write this foreword was because of the surprising and compelling spontaneous evidence that emerged for the presence of Anne in my professional and personal world following the beginning of my reading of this book!

Let's consider this extraordinary evidence for Anne's presence first, and then return to the Afterlife Revolution. I have provided enough details below so that you can appreciate, and appropriately evaluate, the convincing nature of this evidence.

On Thursday morning, September 14, 2017, Rhonda (my wife) and I were preparing to drive to Scottsdale, Arizona, where I would be giving two presentations at the Afterlife Research and Education Institute Conference ([www. afterlifestudies.org](http://www.afterlifestudies.org)). The lecture on Friday afternoon was titled "Lessons from mediumship science for spirit communication technology research." The other was a Saturday night banquet presentation titled "How science is proving that spirits are collaborating with us."

The evening banquet was coincidentally hosted by George Noory of Coast to Coast AM. Whitley had co-authored a bestselling book with Art Bell, the prior award winning host of Coast to Coast AM. Their book, *The Coming Global Superstorm*, inspired the popular movie *The Day After Tomorrow*.

I had just started reading *The Afterlife Revolution*, and the thought popped into my head that maybe I could obtain some independent evidence of Anne's continued consciousness.

In an early morning meeting with Rhonda and a team of "hypothesized collaborating spirits," Rhonda – a selective research medium who describes her journey to this unusual profession in her book *Love Eternal* – asked Susy Smith, an active member of the spirit team, if she could locate Anne and bring her to two different evidential mediums who would be presenting at the Scottsdale conference. We call this the "double-deceased" paradigm, where

one deceased person (e.g. Susy) brings another deceased person (e.g. Anne) to a medium under blinded conditions. Rhonda's sense was that Susy was present at our meeting and that Susy would try to do so. Susy has successfully employed the double-deceased paradigm with these two mediums on multiple occasions. FYI, unlike Rhonda and Whitley, I do not have mediumistic or channeling skills, and I do not see or hear spirit. In fact, one of my former research colleagues, Dr. Robert Stek, refers to me as the "Helen Keller of afterlife research."

Anyway, after our meeting, I was inspired to text two research mediums and alert them to the possibility that Susy might be attempting to contact them with a mystery deceased person. To help them connect with the second deceased person, I provided Anne's first name. Since neither medium knew that I was currently reading Whitley's unpublished book, it is probable that they would have no idea that Anne X was actually Anne Strieber. At this point Rhonda did not know that I had texted the two mediums.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to me, Rhonda had reconnected with the Team and suggested that they could either (1) attempt to connect with the mediums and bring through evidence relative to our current research, or (2) be creative and bring through any other potentially relevant evidence. What Rhonda heard next was utterly novel which she later shared with me.

The phrase that she clearly heard in what she calls her "mind's ear" was "Listen to the wind whistling through the pines." She was not sure who said this atypical, poetic-type phrase. And she had no idea what, if anything, this might be referring to.

When Rhonda told me this, I wondered if it was possible whether Susy (and Anne?) might have been aware of my decision to text the two mediums, and I pondered whether the "listen to the wind whistling through the pines" phrase might somehow relate to Whitley and/or Anne.

I immediately emailed Whitley. I mentioned the context and the phrase and explained that we needed to keep him blind to the identity of the spirit

who might have shared the utterance. I had no idea if this phrase would have (1) no significance, (2) a vague, general meaning, if not (3) a highly specific one. What Whitley wrote back was completely unexpected.

In the draft (of the book) in your possession you will find the following passage: “The great-grandmother who could move tables was a Swedenborgian. She used to say to me, “After I die, listen to the wind in the trees. That’s how I’ll speak to you.” he was a noted school teacher in San Antonio with an excellent reputation for taking a very empirical approach in her professional work. But in private she explored other domains with great panache and, in my experience, skill.” “She lived to the age of 106, and after she died, I listened for her when the wind sighed in the night trees, but never heard her promised whispers, or perhaps I tuned them out.” “Anne knew this statement of my gran-gran’s well, so did my grandmother and my mother.”

Really? I wondered, what about the specific kind of trees– i.e. pines?

I followed this apparently confirmatory email with a subsequent email and learned that both the great grandmother’s home as well as Anne’s and Whitley’s cabin happened to be surrounded by pine trees. Hmmm....FYI, Susy Smith happened to be a Swedenborgian as well....

But it gets more interesting, as well as evidential.

It turns out that neither medium “heard” from Susy either Thursday or Friday night. However, at 5 AM on Sunday morning, one of the mediums (Suzanne Giesemann, author of many books including Messages of Hope and Wolfe’s Message) was purportedly awoken by Susy and Suzanne took multiple of pages of written notes. Suzanne then carefully typed them up and gave them to Rhonda and me at noon on Sunday. The information in this reading turned out to be highly evidential. However, Susy was focused on non-Anne related material.

At one point in the reading Suzanne asked “Who is Anne?” Suzanne wrote “Nothing sensed.” However, Suzanne then went on to write that: “She (Susy) draws my attention to the lower legs as if there’s a challenge there

such as phlebitis or neuropathy. Then she shows me someone falling or the legs taken out from under them. Not talking about herself.”

Of course, lots of older people have trouble with their legs. However, the way these statements were written suggested to me that maybe this applied specifically to Anne. I then emailed Whitley and wrote “I do not know if the above issue with the lower legs applied to Anne. Might they?”

Here is what Whitley wrote back:

“Anne lost the use of her left leg due to a stroke in January of 2015. She literally fell in a coffee shop as the leg was “taken out from under” her.”

This specific confirmation is compelling. Remember, at this point (1) Whitley was “blind” to (i.e. was not told) the identity of the medium, and (2) the medium was blind to (i.e. was not told) the identity of the deceased or the absent sitter, save for the first name Anne.

But it gets even more interesting and evidential. Mediums need to receive feedback about their impressions, and I felt a responsibility to share this novel confirmation from the secret grieving husband (i.e. Whitley) with Suzanne. I sent the confirmatory email on Tuesday, and Suzanne was very grateful. However, I also wrote: “Hi Suzanne - this is a follow-up to see if Susy visits you and brings Anne. If Susy shows up with Anne, please see what, if anything, Anne provides. Could be very evidential.”

What happened a few hours later was super surprising.

Suzanne wrote:

“Well, that sure was interesting and unexpected. I have just finished a very strenuous workout. I sat on the couch in our bus to read emails and as I read your email the room started to go dark and I thought I was passing out. I called out to Ty and suddenly realized it was a drop-in -- it was the subject of the email. I began typing as I received impressions. They are attached. As I began typing, the symptoms eased.

“Please provide feedback.”

What—a whole reading, possibly from Anne? Needless to say, I eagerly

opened the attached document and noticed many items that fit Anne. The reason I now knew details about Anne was because I finished reading *The Afterlife Revolution* on Tuesday.

However, what mattered was how Whitley might score these items, using a rating system developed in my laboratory. Below is what I wrote to Whitley on Wednesday AM:

“Hi Whitley - see statement below from medium. It is possible that Anne showed up for the medium last night! See attached. She has no idea who you are, or Anne is. My sense is that many of the items fit Anne perfectly or very closely. I would like you to rate every possible item in the attached using the following six point scale:”

0 = The item cannot be scored (i.e. the rater does not have the necessary information to make an honest and fair rating)

1 = A clear miss (i.e. the information provided by the medium is inaccurate as applied to the particular deceased person)

2 = A stretch (i.e. the information vaguely fits the deceased)

3 = Possible fit (i.e. the information could fit the deceased)

4 = Probable fit (i.e. the information could be interpreted as being a genuine fit / hit, but it is not completely clear)

5 = A clear hit (i.e. the information can easily be scored as being accurate – i.e. the fit is obvious)

6 = A super hit (i.e. the information is especially meaningful and significant, in addition to be clearly accurate)

Besides making these 0 – 6 ratings, please provide a one sentence explanation or justification for each of the ratings. This way one can confirm that you are reliably and responsibly following the instructions and thinking through each rating.

Then, while I was waiting for a response back from Whitley, something astounding occurred that inspired me to write a separate email to Whitley

(described in detail in the next section). What Whitley did was respond to this second email and include his ratings from the first email.

Here is what Whitley said:

“Wow and super-wow! I’m attaching the graded reading. I can explain them all, of course, and I have a picture of the physical bridge. She told me yesterday that this was easy for her and to “quit your caterwauling.” (I was pleading with her to go to the medium.)”

What is important to share here is that there were 33 scorable items, and Whitley scored 27 (81.8 percent accuracy, conservative estimate) of them as being 5’s and 6’s (i.e. hits). If we add the 4 ratings of 4 (probable hits), the percent accuracy increases to 93.9 percent accuracy.

Only 2 of 33 items were scored as misses (6.1% misses /errors).

How’s that for double-deceased, double-blinded accuracy?

Meanwhile, something very unexpected occurred in the feedback I received from Whitley after he formally scored the 5 AM reading. Whitley wrote: “If your medium wasn’t communicating with Anne, I’ll eat my Greek fisherman’s cap!”

Greek fisherman’s cap? Whitley was referring to sentence that I included from Suzanne’s 5 AM Sunday reading with Susy which made absolutely no sense to me. Directly after the “legs taken out from under them” phrase, and “not talking about herself,” Suzanne wrote:

“She’s bringing my attention to a cap on Gary’s head –kind of like a Greek fisherman’s hat or Harley Davidson cap.”

Ye, I had a Harley cap (which I rarely wear), and no, I do not have a Greek fisherman’s hat. I would have rated this as a 1 or 2.

Why was Whitley referring to the Greek fisherman’s hat? In a subsequent email, I asked Whitley: “do you have a Greek Fisherman’s hat? That would be really weird.”

Here is how Whitley responded:

“I don’t have a Greek fisherman’s cap, but I was with my grandson on

Sunday in San Diego and he was looking at one and wanted it very much. Now he's going to get one for his birthday in a couple of weeks—from his nana! (I felt her with us, as I always do when the family is together. As she says, "I'm right here.")"

Of course, if the only evidence for Anne's presence was the coincidence between Whitley's grandson looking at Greek fisherman's hat and wanting it very much, and an evidential medium mentioning a Greek fisherman's hat when referred to Susy and Anne – as highly improbable as this pair of events is – we would not take this evidence very seriously. A skeptic would dismiss the data out of hand.

However, when (1) this highly specific and improbable evidence is combined with (2) "wind whistling," (3) "pine" trees, (4) "legs taken out from under them," all followed by (5) an entire reading containing 33 items at 81.8% accuracy (the conservative estimate), the Greek fisherman hat evidence takes on added significance and meaning, and it deserves our serious consideration (and maybe celebration?).

As you will discover as you read this book, one of the most replicated, evidential, and odd sets of evidence supporting Anne's connection with Whitley concerned the detection of a white moth by Whitley's security camera (which was recorded at the instant he was describing the phenomenon to his son a hundred miles from where it had been happening. The camera texted the image to the phone.) Whitley's description of this evidence is beautiful and stirring, and I will not reveal any more here.

However, I will mention what happened to me less than 24 hours after reading about the white moth phenomena. Below is what I wrote to Whitley:

"Thought I would give you a heads up. This morning Rhonda saw a gigantic - maybe five inch wingspan - dark moth on the ceiling of our outside porch a few feet away from our hummingbird feeder.

"Rhonda told me about it, and I requested she take a few pictures.

"I can see it right now from my home office window. I just took a few

pictures for you.”

We have seen such a moth maybe three times in 11 years! And I just read about the White Moth phenomena yesterday afternoon.

What are the odds?

Consider the following: how often do you (1) read about highly evidential afterlife information involving automated photographs of a white moth (or read about photographs of moths in general), and then (2) discover a super moth outside your window? FYI, I was writing the first draft of this Foreword on Wednesday afternoon, and the super moth was still there!

Was this simply a chance event, what many might interpret as a “mere” coincidence? Or, was it as Susy Smith – a journalist who wrote more than thirty books on parapsychology and life after death – of an event that was “too coincidental to be accidental”, or, as Yogi Berra put it, an event that was “too coincidental to be a coincidence.”?

Was this coincidence a possibly synchronicity, an event somehow mediated by Anne, or maybe mediated by something even greater? Was this a divinely inspired coincidence as Einstein described it in his famous statement, “Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous?”

As Whitley explains, Anne “knew” God deeply when she was in the physical, and she apparently knows even more of the reality of an all pervasive super intelligence or super mind now that she is in the greater reality. Anne’s personal experiences of the divine are awe inspiring, filled with joy, friendship, and even laughter.

You are in for a special treat when you read the sections about God, plans, evolution, love, and laughter in this challenging and uplifting book.

Simply stated, the Afterlife Revolution is huge. The revolution not only involves us and our awakening here on the earth, but them and their awakening in the greater reality.

Whitley’s personal journey with Anne “here” and “there” (and notice that t-here includes here) is compelling, but their integrative analysis of what is

emerging and transforming both here and there is especially challenging, engaging, and enlightening.

Yes, there is much in this book to question. You will wonder how much is real and how much is imagined, just as Whitley does, and with great integrity.

I cannot underscore the question of integrity enough. Just because certain topics are unsettling if not threatening to our egos or current beliefs does not justify our ignoring or denying their potential importance. The very best evidential research mediums I have worked with (e.g. those whose average accuracy is around 90%) all speak of higher beings, include those from other planets. When we emotionally deny possible truths and dismiss them without due process or discernment, we inadvertently convert consciously intended nonfiction into unconscious fiction.

This is especially important when the ultimate take home lesson from a book is what the authors call objective love.

Here is how Anne describes it, as experienced by Whitley: “The tools that strengthen the soul – understanding and living in objective love, having a strong attention, engaging in the sensing exercise and meditation, practicing love, compassion, and humility. Those are the basics.”

I have come to the conclusion that *The Afterlife Revolution* deserves to read, and reread. Even the ending is surprising. May you savor and learn from this book as much as I have.

Gary E. Schwartz, PhD is Professor of Psychology, Medicine, Neurology, Psychiatry, and Surgery, and Director of the Laboratory for Advances in Consciousness and Health, at the University of Arizona. His books include *The Afterlife Experiments*, *The G.O.D. Experiments*, *An Atheist in Heaven* (with Paul Davids), and *Super Synchronicity*.

CHAPTER 1



The New Revolution

IN AUGUST OF 2015, at the age of 69 and after 45 years of marriage, my wife Anne died. For two years, she had been struggling with a catastrophic brain tumor and I had been trying with increasing desperation to save her. The dark pit of grief I fell into when I looked upon her still form was the greatest pain I had ever known.

She, however, had not been afraid to die. Ten years previously, she'd had a near-death experience that had freed her, as they do so many people who have them, from that fear.

I've never had an NDE and I was in despair. Despite all I had learned about the afterlife I feared that she was gone forever. But then, within hours of her passing, very carefully and methodically, she began to make her continued presence known.

Based on all the things about the afterlife that the two of us have learned, including some of the most extraordinary direct experiences with it ever recorded—and her return—I feel justified in saying that she still exists. I don't think we die, and I also think that we can forge a much better and more

solid relationship between the physical and nonphysical sides of our species, a more reliable one than exists now.

Studies of mediums and channeling and electronic voice phenomena where conditions are created that enable those in the afterlife to express themselves in the physical world, have provided a background that strongly suggests that contact with the dead is possible, but this book is not a survey of that research. Rather, it explores the possibility of a true revolution in our relationship to reality, that emerges out of the idea that a species is not whole unless a relationship between the living and the dead is an ordinary part of life.

Over the course of this book, we will discuss certain tools that can be used to create this relationship—tools of the soul that are explained here in just this way for the first time. Then we will take a completely new look at the ageless questions of who and what we are and, above all, how to build a strong soul, lead a good life and die into joy.

While I don't expect our story to be accepted uncritically, I do want you to know that I feel sure that our book is being written by two people, one physical and one nonphysical. I am not talking to my own imagination. My wife set out to do this and she has accomplished steady, reliable communication between us, and as I think will become clear, many of the new ideas that are discussed between us in these pages emerge out of a very different perspective than we are used to in physical life.

We are calling the book the Afterlife Revolution because it is basically about making this way of living ordinary, and by doing that enabling us on the physical side to see more of ourselves and our futures, thus greatly increasing the richness of our individual lives and the capability of mankind as a whole to thrive.

It is a book, also, about replacing the fear and uncertainty that are now associated with dying with the sort of calm, informed and finally joyous attitude with which Anne and many other near-death experiencers now

approach it.

It is not a lie or a hoax. It is not a cynical attempt to exploit the death of my precious wife. What I am reporting happened. On a personal level, I know it. While I cannot claim that my personal knowledge deserves to be considered universal knowledge, the evidence is strong enough that our story deserves to be taken seriously.

The experience I have had with Anne emerged out of knowledge that we gained from our relationship with the people she and I call “the visitors.” They first came to our attention after I found myself face to face with them one night in late December of 1985. I later wrote the book *Communion* about my encounter with them. They scared me so badly that I was planning to call the book *Body Terror*. Anne said that it should be called *Communion*, because “that’s what it’s about.” *Communion* with who, though—or what?

Most people who have any engagement with them assume that they are aliens from another planet. Billionaire Robert Bigelow, who has taken a longstanding interest in them, stated frankly on *60 Minutes* on May 28, 2017 that they were not only aliens, but here. His company, Bigelow Aerospace, takes referrals of UFO report from the Federal Aviation Administration. He stated as well that he has had personal contact with these aliens and that he no longer cares who knows it.

I’m going to also state frankly that, while I cannot confirm that they are aliens, I have been in contact with them most of my life and have, especially in the years since Anne died, come into an intimate and ongoing personal relationship with them.

I have asked Anne about them, and she has replied that they are “inward beings.” When I asked her what that meant, she said, “they live within reality. You’re on the surface.” I then asked, “Are they with you in your reality?” She replied, “There’s only one reality. Different ways of relating to it.”

I know that this sounds mysterious, but what Anne means will become clear soon enough. As matters stand, we have evolved an elaborate set of

assumptions about them as aliens, right down to beliefs about the various planets they might be from and so forth—and also the assumption that they don't exist at all, which is at least as popular. But there is something much greater, more extraordinary and far stranger going on than we have as yet realized. And also, to speak quite plainly, more wonderful.

The ones with whom we cultivated a relationship are interested in the soul, in strengthening it and in helping us create a new bond between those of us in physical life and those in the nonphysical state. In fact, this would seem to be their primary mission here, and it has become my mission, too. Anne's, too, I would think.

Had it not been for them, Anne and I would never have been able to come back into contact after her death. They taught us how. They also taught us that living as a whole species—with the physical and nonphysical sides in contact—is the next stage in evolution.

At the same time that this wonderful possibility is emerging, a sort of disease, which I think of as soul-blindness, is spreading through the human community. Ignoring the soul is a self-imposed poverty and a personal tragedy, but it is also a way of life for more and more of us every day. Souls can be nurtured and strengthened, but if their existence is denied, then that obviously cannot happen. And no matter who is here to help, they can do nothing if we ignore them and what they have to offer.

As far as the visitors who are involved in this are concerned, the soul is what matters. Everything they have taught us comes down to this: it is the soul, not the body, that is the most important part of any living creature and especially those who are like us, not only conscious but intelligent. Intelligent souls are the most creative branch of consciousness in the universe and are precious beyond belief. But not if they are confused and unformed. That's a tragedy.

Anne came to understand this deeply and became a master of the soul. It is thus her wisdom that we will communicate here, and her ideas that form

the basis of the afterlife revolution.

Science in general asserts that there is no soul, and neuroscience assures us that no sign of an afterlife can be detected. Contacts with the dead are called bereavement hallucinations. As has historically been true, the scientific community is generally united in the idea that the only reality that matters is the one that can be detected by existing instruments at the present time.

In his influential book *Hallucinations*, Oliver Sacks discusses afterlife communications without the least thought that they may not be hallucinations at all.

Science is a great triumph of the human mind. For the past three hundred odd years, it has been applying theory to detected phenomena and coming up with ever more accurate and useful insights. But when there is data it doesn't know how to detect, the system falters.

When the great 18th century scientist Voltaire was shown fossils, he dismissed them as fish bones tossed aside by travelers. Scientists for years denied that meteors were possible because “stones cannot fall from the sky.” But fossils too large to be fish bones were eventually discovered, and meteors were tracked to the ground and their celestial origin proved.

Just as Voltaire had no data to justify an investigation of fossils, science at present does not possess any data on the soul, nor any instrument that can convincingly detect it. This has led scientists to take a step too far, and assume that it doesn't exist. But what doesn't exist is not the soul, but an instrument that can detect it.

There are two impediments to the development of such a device. First, this energy—conscious energy—surely makes its own decisions about whether or not it is to be detected by instruments. Second, as scientific culture has matured, especially over the past century, an assumption has crept in that no data can exist that isn't currently detectable. So no effort to gather such data—even to understand how to go about it—is ever made. The primary focus of the scientific enterprise is no longer the search for new

realities, but interpretation of the one we know now.

Science has a towering reputation. So when it makes an institutional declaration that the soul doesn't exist, even those of us who believe otherwise find ourselves doubting our own experiences of our souls and, as often as not, ending up just filtering them out.

As will be seen from some powerful examples, nonphysical humanity very much wants contact with physical humanity. But our assumption that they don't exist creates something like a wall between us. We need to be alert to the signs that they leave in our lives. After she died, Anne went about leaving such signs for me, and did it in way calculated to defeat my inherent bias against the possibility.

Anne had read Sacks and understood the scientific view of the soul. She also felt that it was wrong. This because, after we published the book *Communion* about my close encounters, and letters from other witnesses around the world poured in by the tens and finally hundreds of thousands, an extraordinary secret was revealed to her that made the argument that there is no afterlife seem improbable to her. As she read and catalogued them, she came to understand the message that our visitors had left in them.

The letters and some astonishing things that happened in our lives in the early 1990s caused us to become intensely focused on the question of the afterlife.

We began to think that communication must be possible, and so started discussing what might happen when one of us died. We decided that whichever one of us moved on first would attempt contact, but not directly.

We were both too skeptical to accept something like that uncritically. So we decided that initial contacts had to be with other people who had no idea of our plan, which we never discussed with anybody.

By the time she died, though, I had forgotten all about that plan. I never dreamed that she would execute it, or even that such a thing was really possible.

When we had groups of people to our upstate New York cabin to encounter the beings who had taken an interest in us, and from the letters we received from the public, we discovered that the dead and the “visitors” as often as not appeared together.

Added to all of this came Anne’s 2004 near death experience, when a stroke nearly took her life. Prior to it, she had come to accept the idea that we might in some way persist after death. Now she knew it. She had crossed over and come back.

In the end, she had become wise about the afterlife in ways I think few others have been. I can go so far as to say that Anne was probably one of the most informed experts on the subject who has ever lived, both because of all she had studied and researched, and because of personal experience.

After her NDE, she joined the larger mission of our visitors and our own dead. Her purpose was not only to show that the afterlife is real and that we need not fear death, but also that there are things we can do to prepare— not elaborate rituals, but the same straightforward, personal things that she did— that will enable us to build strong souls, communicate with our own dead while in this life, then make a good transition and be effective communicators from the other side as well.

Since her death, she has eloquently proved that the methods she advocated work.

Human beings have been trying to contact their dead for thousands of years, most recently through the use of mediums, psychics and electronic communications techniques. All would appear to work, at least at times. But personal, intimate and permanent relationships between the physical and nonphysical sides of the human family are also possible.

As we have lost touch with our souls, we have also abandoned our ancestors. But they have not abandoned us and we need them now, and more urgently than we realize, and they know it. As you will see, they have been calling to us for at least two hundred years. It is time for us to respond, and

for the two sides of this family to start living and working together.

Death is not the end of anything. It is transition into a new form, just like the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly, and just as much part of nature. It's not supernatural, or beyond nature. There is nothing beyond nature, but there is also more to nature than we realize.

As humankind proceeds along the new path that is opening before us, we will leave our violent and anarchic history behind. Anne says that fear of death is the basis of all violence, and as we become whole as individuals, families and a species, that fear will fade away, and with it the violence that it causes.

The connection of the two halves of the species represents a turning point as fundamental as the one that caused civilization to begin and history to unfold. On this side of the change, there is one kind of history, full of blunders, confusion and terror. On the other, there emerges new sort of history altogether that is inlooking and outlooking at the same time, anchored in wonder and beckoning discovery now undreamed. It is a new way of seeing reality which brings with it a new way of being alive. In fact, it is a new birth.

After Anne died—the only woman I had ever known intimately and the absolute center of my life—I found myself drowning in a flood of grief. It buried me in such sorrow that I couldn't think, couldn't eat, could hardly move.

Parting is agony. Period. If she had come back to life in those first hours and shouted in my face, I don't think I would have heard her.

One of the first things I distinctly heard her say to me was "Grief is love in another form." I realized that when I grieved for her, I was actually loving her. Of course I grieve. I miss her at every level of my being. Even though I can communicate with her, my body misses her body so very much, and that cannot change.

Understanding this enabled me to make my grief part of my work, to

respect it and love it, but also to use it to focus my attention on her presence and her words, rather than letting it bury them in my tears.

She had prepared carefully for what she knew was coming. I had, too, but not nearly as well. I so badly wanted her to stay that I could hardly think about her going, let alone in the calm, dispassionate manner with which she approached her physical end.

I didn't know it at the time, but already six months before she died, she was getting me ready to carry out my part of our mission. She did this in a characteristically subtle way, by asking me to memorize a certain poem which, as will be seen, has become central to my understanding of what she wants to do and, in fact, also central to the proof she has provided that she is still a conscious presence.

The poem, "Song of the Wandering Aengus," by W. B. Yeats, is about Aengus' lifetime of search for a "glimmering girl" who, as soon as she appeared in his life by magical means, slipped out of his arms and into a realm that might as well be called heaven.

It has become my life story, that poem of a man's search.

If ever magical means united a couple, it is what brought us together. We were two kids living in New York City who both happened to fill out the forms of a matchmaking organization. We had never known one another before. We had no mutual friends. We met on a list sent to us by the matchmakers.

From the day we sat down to lunch for the first time until the day Anne left this life, we were only once apart for as much as two weeks.

The ways in which Anne has woven that poem and its metaphors into our new life together, and done so much to prove that this new relationship is real, have granted me the most beautiful and richest experience I have ever known. I can assure you from my own life that as you come close to your dead and they to you, you will find a sweetness of the heart that you never knew was within you, and a sense of wonder that will make your life new.

But even when contact is easy and familiar, questions will and must remain—which is right and as it should be and, frankly, a big part of this whole adventure. Beliefs are walls. Questions are doors.

Despite all of our advances in knowledge, the universe still cradles the human mind in ambiguities and unknowns. We must not push them away by saying “I believe” or “I do not.” Much better to abandon belief altogether, and stay with Anne’s “I wonder.”

Before Anne entered the nonphysical, there was one me. Now there is another, and this is not simply a grief-stricken wanderer, but a traveler on two paths at once, one in this world and one in the other.

The theme of Anne’s life was joy, which she identified with acceptance of whatever happened, love for others and, above all, laughter. She would often quote that wonderful sentence of the 14th Century mystic and theologian, Meister Eckhart: “God laughs and plays.” Laughter is light and as Anne understood inner search, it was about finding that light within oneself.

There are many reasons why we aren’t in clear contact with the dead. One is that they are not like us. They are not unseen versions of us, but rather are living by different laws. Anne has said, “I’m not Anne anymore, I’m me. But I’ll always be Anne for you, Whitley.” As she describes herself and the legions of the dead, “We are an infinity of dreams.” But don’t be deceived. Those dreams are living presences and they are waiting for us across the bridge between our worlds. She also says, “I am the part of me that’s part of you.”

Those without bodies are at once more deeply individual than any physical being could ever be, but also conscious as a whole, without beginning and without end, that is outside of time and contains time. Your beloved parent, wife, child, is at once themselves as they always were, and all selves they have ever been, and all that is of being.

As a result of soul blindness, when we are facing death we use every tool we can muster to extend our lives as long as we can. When we die it is as

often as not in fear and foreboding, sometimes in resignation, and those we leave behind generally never hear from us again.

This not because the dead aren't trying. When I asked Anne about this she said, "It looks as if you're intentionally ignoring us." And that is exactly what we are doing. We're hypnotized by the physical, by which I mean that we are looking so intently into material reality that we simply cannot see beyond it.

She says "The first time you ignored me, I was upset. Then I got mad at you. I yelled. You acted as if I didn't exist. It was weird and confusing."

We have come a long way together since those early struggles. I know how to listen for her now and how to let her into me. Her communications are fleeting, identifiable to me by a sense of the unbidden and a taste of her presence. I keep a notebook with me now all the time, because I know that I will forget her words after they fly past, often in seconds. This, I think, is because they are not my thoughts, not part of my mind, and have no place to land in my brain. Like flashes on the wing of a passing bird, they are there then gone.

They leave behind two things: wonder and questions. Always Anne's beloved questions. Communion, would not have ended with the group of questions that it did had it not been for Anne's influence. As she read my manuscript, she would say again and again, "Whitley you don't know that. Rewrite it as a question."

The great human question is "will I live on after death?" It is simple, universal and haunts us all, every one, all the time. Science, by insisting with such compelling authority that we are mortal flesh and no more, reinforces our fear of annihilation. At the same time, the increasingly complex and vivid material world makes it harder and harder for us to hear the soul's subtle inner voice.

But even as many of us are giving up on the soul, the voices of many others are being raised, proclaiming that there is indeed an afterlife. In 2011,

researcher Pim Van Lommel, writing in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* reported that nine million people in the United States alone have reported near death experiences. Anne was such a person, and like very many of them returned to this life with no fear of death. Like most, she was brought back by medical science.

How ironic that the same science that is telling us that the soul doesn't exist is also responsible for one of the foundations of the afterlife revolution.

Over the course of our narrative, Anne will describe her new life in ways that seem to me to be revelatory. She was highly articulate, and brings her descriptive skills to bear in her depiction of what it is like to be on her side of the divide. But don't expect simple stories of loving light. The world she describes is a complex place full of nuance and ambiguity, and it is also very surprising.

Among the most surprising things about it is that, when you die into it, you're not surprised. We are much more nonphysical beings than we are physical. These journeys through time that we take by entering bodies are valuable but brief. Most of our experience is not physical at all.

Once a new and more reliable means of contact becomes commonplace, as it will, then this species is going to wake up to its true reason for existence, and in so doing is going to reach a whole new level of life. There is joy ahead in the afterlife revolution, but joy requires a light approach. As Anne puts it, "the hardest thing to do is to let this be fun. But once you do, then it's easy."

When, soon after I had the December 26, 1985 close encounter that would lead to the writing of *Communion*, I told her what I thought had happened to me, she went right to the heart of the matter: 'let's figure this out, we'll do it together, and what an adventure!'

I had feared that she might want to divorce her crazy husband to protect her child from his ravings, but that could not have been further from the truth. From the first days, before we knew anything except that something had really shaken me up, she was right there beside her man with support,

guidance and, above all, insight and, frankly, excitement. She was definitely up for that adventure.

Her thinking is reflected in every word I have written about the phenomenon. In fact, it is the foundation of my work. Over the years, working together, we learned a great deal from our visitors, about them, and about the human journey. Anne, especially, understood that they had aspirations for us and what those aspirations were, and their motives for revealing themselves not only to me and us, but to so many people worldwide.

I think that their greatest hope is that we become rich, strong souls and that our species survives and evolves for a long time to come.

Their message about what we need to do in order to achieve this new sort of enrichment is clear. To experience the true richness of our humanity, we need to be a species united.

This is the afterlife revolution, a journey into a new evolution of mankind and an entirely new experience of living.

But how? How do we recover our contact not only with our own souls but with those who have already passed out of the flesh? Where are they? What do they want and need from us? What is on offer from them?

Anne has executed a plan that we laid years ago that has proved to me that she still exists. She has done it on behalf of the great mission of which she is now a part, to make this species whole in an entirely new way. But why has she been able to do this? Is there something about her that give her a special ability, or is she simply using a skill that is part of every human soul, and teaching me on my side of the bridge how to use it, too?

We will explore these things together, and show just how the skill we are using works and can work in any life and any relationship. Establishing the bridge between the worlds means a more competent, more peaceful and happier species.

Working together across the bridge between the worlds, Anne and I vote

for this future. Of course there are challenges now, with all the changes that are taking place on planet Earth. But we have glimpsed the possibilities and they are more marvelous by far than even our most optimistic speculations.

We are under pressure now from circumstances that would be familiar to our distant ancestors. They, also, struggled through hard times to reach a new life. A hundred thousand years ago, when the world entered the last ice age, they were naked wanderers. When it ended, they had learned to clothe themselves, they had language, they were organized into tribes and expert in everything they needed for survival.

Once again, we are going to find our way into a new life— but this time, it will be truly new, for we are going to learn to live at once in and beyond the material world, moving into an expansive reality that is just now beginning to reveal itself to us. To reach this new mankind, whole at last, there is also coming a new journey.

That journey is what this book is about.

CHAPTER 2



The Shadow Falls

AS MY BRILLIANT, deeply thoughtful wife gazed into a personal distance, she said quietly, “Whitley, it’s time.”

I wanted so badly to ask her, “time for what?” I wanted her to mean that she was looking toward some further episode in our life together. But that wasn’t it, and I knew it. Her tumor had not grown since her surgery two years before, but the part that had to be left behind was now stressing her brain’s vascular system. The doctors had warned us that the strokes she was having would get worse.

A few days before, her left side had become much weaker. Her future was grim: more strokes until she died. The great danger was that she would become unable to communicate before that happened and be forced to die a lingering, helpless death, maybe suffering pain she could not communicate.

Our life together had been a subtle, intricate dance of mutual discovery and a joy greater than any I could have imagined before meeting this complex and yet welcoming human being.

Many times before, I had talked her out of it, pleading with her to stay a

little longer. I had done everything I could to give her a rich life experience despite the cancer and the growing paralysis.

We had often spoken together about end-of-life. She had researched her situation carefully and prepared her plan in such a way that she could depart from the world with dignity and in an entirely legal manner.

Depart from me, she who was more than half of me.

She had said the previous January that she had prayed that the stroke that had paralyzed her left side then would take her. But instead it left her unable to rise from a chair, to use her left arm, to read, even to see well enough to watch television. While her mind was as acute as ever, her eyes and ears could not make sense of the world around her. She had become a brilliant presence trapped behind a wall of defective sensory input.

I read to her, explained things to her, kept her abreast of world events. Because just moving her from bed to chair was so exhausting, we hired helpers to ease our days. I found things she could enjoy, even things as simple as going out to get an ice cream, and I made sure that her life was as rich as it could be. Despite the difficulty, we went to the movies, the theater, had dinners out, went to a weekly reading group we both loved—in short, kept up with our life as best we could.

When she couldn't put things together, I explained them to her later, and we managed to make those conversations a lot of fun for us both.

She participated with enthusiasm, as she did in rehabilitation and physical therapy. But there was that tumor mass remaining, and its presence prevented any progress with rehab. In the months between January and July, she went to therapy three times a week but got essentially nowhere.

When she experienced the increase in weakness, I suggested that we go to the hospital to see if she was having another stroke. But she was finished with hospitals.

She was as bright as ever, as wonderful as ever, full of joy, wisdom and humor. She was not afraid. On the contrary, she was calm and practical. On a

day in early August, she told me that, starting the next morning, she was going to carry out her end of life plan, which was to refuse food and drink.

I had tried so hard to prevent this moment from coming. But also there was a part of me that was so very tired that the idea of not living in this haze of work seemed freeing—which only added an element of guilt to my grief. I wanted her to stay, but I knew that I wasn't making it, either. My left knee was destroyed from lifting. My back hurt all the time. To keep going I had to spend my nights on ice packs. I was at the chiropractor twice a week, sometimes more often. I couldn't write, so we were in yet another dangerous financial spiral.

The truth was that her illness had exhausted us both. I would see her watching me as I worked to lift her, to cook, clean and so forth. Even with help, I was running out of steam and she knew it.

Because she couldn't travel, we could no longer see our grandchildren except on the rare occasions that they could visit us. She felt that we were valuable to them. "Whitley, we know some of the deepest secrets about life that there are. We need to pass that down." This was much on her mind. She knew that, if she saved one of us, then at least they would have that benefit.

I had told her that, when she went, I wanted to go, too. I am no more afraid of death than she was.

She insisted I stay behind for the kids, and to complete this book. I had to agree and now I'm sure this was the right thing to do. In a deep way, in the part of life we never see, she both lived as she did and gave up her life for her mission. I am grateful and proud that she entrusted me with completing it. I can only hope that my effort is adequate to the task set me.

On that first night of her dying, I sat beside her as she lay sleeping. But I was unable to stop crying and had to leave the room so she wouldn't wake up to that. What she was doing was as hard a thing as a person can experience. I did not want to make it even harder for her, so she did not need to see my own agony.

I hoped that morning would bring a change of mind. But when she woke up, she was even more determined. Finally, my heart just broke and I cried openly. I couldn't help it. She touched me gently on the cheek and said, "What would my life have been worth if there was nobody to grieve for me?"

Then I was glad she saw my pain, and my grief just poured out of me. The harder I tried to choke it back, the more intense it became. She stroked my head with her good hand, and simply let it happen. She didn't cry. I wouldn't have either if I'd been in her shoes. Her decision was a hard one, but for her also a relief.

Just as she was not afraid, she was not sad. Instead, the most conscious human being I had ever encountered, my beloved wife, was deeply and profoundly ready.

All morning we talked quietly together, side by side in our chairs. The healthcare aides came and went. We said nothing to them of Anne's decision. Instead, we reminisced about a life filled with wonderful moments. I remembered her coming down the aisle in the Lady Chapel at the back of St. Patrick's in New York, lovely in blue and with wine red roses at her waist. It wasn't exactly a big wedding. We only had two hundred dollars. There were some friends there, a beloved cousin and her husband, my mother, a priest and a sleepy altar boy. But it was the most wonderful day of our lives.

Our best friends had come up from Washington. They couldn't afford a hotel, so we ended up spending our wedding night in our tiny apartment with them camped out in the living room. We didn't care. We were so happy.

Then came seven long years of struggle to sell a book and establish me as a writer. Anne became my muse and editor. She went back to school and got a degree in English Literature to make herself better at both.

Occasionally, I would give up, clear my desk and put my typewriter out with the trash. Inevitably, the next afternoon when I returned from work, everything would be back in its place, often with notes from Anne about how to move ahead with whatever story I was writing. Finally after half a dozen

novels and hundreds of rejections, the Wolfen sold. Anne got pregnant at once and the next thing we knew, we had a book in the stores and a baby in the house. (We now had two bedrooms.)

It was all so hard and such fun. And discovering one another as people, too, that was such a joy.

Anne had an oppressed childhood. She'd had to keep her mouth shut and endure whatever was dished out to her. Her opinions had not been wanted and her feelings had not mattered. Now, in a new relationship, I think that she was wondering if things had changed. I loved her, she knew that, but could I bear her?

She set out—not quite consciously, I wouldn't think—to test this.

In our first months together, I could see her suppressing her anger. I didn't often make her mad, but it was a new relationship and there were inevitable moments of friction. Any anger or disappointment she might feel she covered with smiles.

When I saw that, I would say, "Have I made you mad?" She'd say no. Then I would laugh and her lips would tighten.

Eventually, what I was instinctively probably hoping would happen did: all the suppressed annoyances and irritations boiled over and she blew up in my face. It came after I kept saying that I wanted to return to London, where I had lived the year before I met her.

She cried out, "So go! Leave! Get out of my life!" And then she burst into tears. And so did I. But that didn't end it. Fury had erupted in her, but her eyes were filled with fear. She raged on, out of control, terrified that she was driving me away but unable to contain her anger.

This was a person who did not consider that she had a right her own feelings, not to her anger or her happiness, or to love and be loved, any of it.

She screamed at me to leave right now so she didn't have to look at me anymore. Coming from a family where voices were rarely raised, I was deeply shocked. But I also saw that she had been stifled and pushed aside for

a long time.

I decided that she would not have the experience of having to stifle her feelings again, not ever. She had a man and this man treasured her, and her anger was important to him—and she had a right to fully express it and to have her needs understood and respected. She had been a sort of throwaway. Not now. Now, Anne mattered.

I told her that she had become part of my heart and I wanted to be part of hers. I needed her and could not live without her.

She looked at me like I had just arrived from Mars. I said, “Forgive me honey, I was insensitive. If anybody goes to London, it has to be both of us.” Then I took her in my arms. She opened the door to herself much wider then, and our love affair flowered.

Once she realized that fits of temper weren’t going to drive me off, she did a lot of exploding. I think that I experienced every temper tantrum in her life that she’d had to suppress before we met. Once, she got so loud that the neighbors called the police. She proceeded to hide and I was left to explain to six cops that she was actually OK even though she refused to make an appearance.

The fights always ended with us throwing ourselves into each other’s arms, and then going on from there. And gradually, she learned to complain when an annoyance was small rather than waiting until it filled her with rage. She became good at what is now called anger management, and our relationship settled into one of quiet mutual respect and enjoyment of one another. The loving acceptance that had replaced all the fireworks enabled the relationship to deepen even more. We didn’t know it, but our souls had come together. The inner marriage—modeled in the esoteric practice of Alchemy as the chemical wedding—had taken place, and we would now live and grow together as one. Truly we were married.

There was much beauty in our relationship and much fun, and also much humor. We ended up spending most of that last day of our life together in this

world laughing over things that had amused us in the past, me through my tears, her with deep and genuine pleasure.

After refusing food and drink all day, I knew that she was now hungry and thirsty. I asked her “Would you like supper?”

She smiled gently. “No, baby,” she said. Then she added, “Whitley, it’s time for hospice. I need them here in the morning.”

OK, so this was it. She was committed, at least for now. I’d waited for her to get good and hungry and good and thirsty. But she wasn’t going to break her fast. Instead, she was ready to brave a night of hunger pangs and thirst.

I could not let her go through that. We’d already chosen our hospice. They knew her situation and her plan, and were ready to come when called.

I made the hardest telephone call of my life. I’d been dreading it for months. I could barely talk. But I manage to get it out: it was time. Anne was fasting.

They came at about nine that evening and began giving her the assistance that was then allowed by law, consisting basically of mild doses of morphine to relieve her discomfort, and a mouth lubricant.

The next morning when the registered nurse came, the first order of business was for me to leave the house so that she could ask Anne without me present whether or not she wanted to continue, and if she understood clearly that this would cause her death. So far, she had been given only one light dose of morphine. Her mind must not be clouded, I’d made sure of that. There must be no mistakes here. To keep her comfortable, I’d stayed up all night making sure that she would have mouth lubricant and chapstick the instant she called for them.

I drove around aimlessly, struggling to see the streets through my tears.

When I returned, I could see from the grave expression on the nurse’s face what Anne’s answer had been.

Nevertheless, every two hours until she lost consciousness, I asked her again if she wanted to change her mind. I wanted so badly to beg but I forced

myself not to. She saw my tears and my great anguish. I could not hold that in, and it was plea enough.

On the Friday before she died, there was a ray of hope. She said that she wanted to go to the movies. She wanted popcorn and a coke. My heart leaped and I said “Sure, let’s do it.” But then I had to add, “You’re too deep in the fast to just

break it. We’ll need a couple of days for you to come back.” I had researched this whole process with the utmost care. I knew exactly what would be required at any point in the fast to bring her back, and when that would no longer be possible.

She smiled softly and said, “No, I’d just have to do it all over again.”

Even so, I can’t put to rest the idea that, if I’d just been a little more convincing, a little more hopeful, she might have ended the fast.

But she was right. If she’d returned from it, she would only have decided to do it again. I had no right to wish that on her and I’m glad now that she stuck to her decision.

She could not get better and she could easily have come to a point where she could no longer make decisions. Then the legal situation would have become much more complicated. The Supreme Court has ruled that a person of sound mind has an absolute right to refuse food and drink, but not that a family member can make such a decision for a loved one who is unable to communicate.

This way, she kept her dignity and approached death in full consciousness.

We’d discussed the morphine dosing very carefully with our doctor. She wanted to have a conscious experience of dying. I wanted her to remain aware of what she was doing as long as possible on the chance that she might yet change her mind.

I know that she made the right decision and was right to stick to it. But that didn’t mean that I wouldn’t suffer terribly and experience extraordinary

mental anguish. I did and still do and always will, and that's how it should be. She was more valuable to me than I am to myself, and so of course the grief of loss is and will remain part of me. I remember the last time I said to her, "Anne, refusing food and water means that you're going to die. Do you want to change your mind?"

There was no answer. Her eyes were closed. She had slipped into the deep, last sleep that would soon become a terminal coma.

Anne had left—sort of.

Within hours, she would begin to communicate telepathically—and for those of you who scoff at that, please try to keep an open mind or, barring that, put our book aside. Our story is not for you. But for those of you who will at least entertain such things as a possibility, do read on because a great story is going to be told here, of a love that has survived death and a marriage that is still flourishing even though one of the partners no longer has a physical presence in the world. It is a universal story, too, told in many different lives, but in the privacy of the home and the silence of the heart. Here, it is going to unfold on the page.

My grief is about the loss of her body, not the absence of her being. In fact, as you will see over the course of our story, in her new state Anne has become a presence of great intelligence, compassion and, above all, insight.

By Monday morning, she was completely silent. I was in the most powerful emotional state not only that I had ever known, but that I had ever known was possible. It was not anguish only, but anguish mixed with something close to awe.

I was aware that I was witnessing the departure of a great soul.

She'd started out in life in the most humble of circumstances. To her schoolmates, as they had written to me when I contacted a few of them, she'd seemed to be a quiet, ordinary girl. Nobody had ever bothered to nurture her mind. Until I met her, her brilliance hadn't mattered to anyone. All it had meant in her life was that she was constantly annoying people by correcting

them. Because she was a natural teacher, she could not resist explaining to people better ways of doing things. This was resented, and she used to get fired every few months.

She hadn't the slightest idea how bright she was. But I knew within ten minutes of meeting her, as the brilliant thoughts and insights poured out of her and her sharp wit sparkled, that I had a treasure. I had wanted a smart wife. Very smart. As smart as possible. By the time we'd known each other for a week, I was aware that she was the brightest person I'd ever met, and I was determined that, if the relationship worked, the first thing on the agenda was to get her the education she deserved.

When I would look into her bright brown eyes, I saw not just a twenty-two year old girl. I could see a being of great depth hiding behind that innocent sparkle. I wanted the girl in my life, but I wanted that other person, too, the genius who was hiding inside, peeking out uneasily at me, afraid she'd drive me off.

From that day to this, I have lived in the shadow of a hidden master, whose wisdom and strength towered above my own. I have loved every minute of this great privilege, and I still do.

I was going to miss her sweet presence and enormous mind more than I thought it would be possible to bear, but I also knew that she was going forth in triumph, for she had done things in this world that were marvelous, but at the same time had remained gentle and humble. She knew how extraordinary her insight into the close encounter experience had been, but she did not wear that or any of her other accomplishments like a badge, and she did not resent the dismissive ways of the world. She didn't like the way we were treated, of course, but instead of wrapping herself in anger and resentment, she simply continued with her work

Those early struggles with anger management had made her skillful at accepting injustice and disappointment.

I remember when we were watching the first episode of South Park

together and realizing that it was a lampoon of me, she took my hand and said to me, “They’re empty people and they know it and you’re not and they know that, too, and that makes them mean.”

She knew people and she knew me, I think, better than I knew myself.

As we always had, on our last night together we slept side by side and hand in hand. When I squeezed her hand during the night, I thought perhaps she squeezed back, so I spent the day reading poems to her that we loved, Whitman’s “There was a Child Went Forth,” Wordsworth’s “Ode on Intimations of Immortality Recollected from Early Childhood,” Eliot’s “Waste Land,” Lowell’s “Skunk Hour.” I read Ecclesiastes and Molly Bloom’s Soliloquy from “Ulysses” and many of the couplets from Joe Brainerd’s “I Remember.” And, most especially, of course, “Song of the Wandering Aengus.”

Anne’s first moment of telepathy came when she was in her final coma. She had been unconscious for about four hours when one of our caregivers suddenly said, “She just told me she wants to die in red pajamas!” The woman was so absolutely certain that this request had really come from Anne that she instantly leaped up and ran out to a department store and got some. We dressed my wife’s thin, faded body in them.

Note here how certain the woman was and how that motivated her. It was just like being spoken to by somebody who was alive, and yet it wasn’t a voice like a radio or anything like that. It was what I have come to think of as a “silent voice,” a sort of knowing what is being said without hearing anything. It is not, in other words, an auditory hallucination. Instead, it’s a spontaneous inner speaking that carries with it the flavor of another personality. When it is strong and quick and not of yourself, it is hard to mistake.

Anne’s choice of the color red was no accident. She was already living partly in the world of the dead and partaking of the knowledge that is there.

She has since taught me how colors reflect different vibrations of light

and different levels of being, and shown me the colors that are associated with the body and the soul and their commingled relationship. She says, “Paint fades, but color is immortal.” The body dies, but the soul persists.

To understand the significance not only of colors but also of many other messages from those in nonphysical reality, it is important to know the principle of the triad. A triad has three sides: active, passive and harmonizing.

Because the body is the active side of the triad of being, its color is red. One can easily sense how red suggests urgency and action, just as green does passivity and peace. She wanted to leave this world symbolically clothed in the color of blood and life.

By the evening of Tuesday, August 11, 2015, Anne’s coma had reached its terminal phase. She lay in our bed, in the spot where I now sleep every night and from where I hope one day to leave, also.

My son and daughter in law had come up that morning. It was clear that the end was near. The three of us were in the dining area when I heard Anne say in my mind, “Whitty, I’m dying right now.”

I leaped up and rushed into the bedroom and lay beside her. I put my hand on her chest and felt the beat of her heart. I said, “goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.” As I spoke, her heart stopped.

My center, more of me than I am, had left her body—and me—behind.

Despite all I had already seen of those in the afterlife and all we had both learned about nonphysical consciousness, in that moment it felt as if she was gone forever.

Never one to waste time, however, she was prompt to make her continued existence known. It wasn’t a fleeting thing, either. From a small beginning on that first night, it has grown into a relationship that is, if anything, even richer and more complex than it was when we both had bodies. The sweetness of the flesh is missing, of course, but it has been replaced by a commingling of being that is the deepest companionship that I think I could ever know.

Anne and I live, now, facing one another across the bridge of love. I go to

her side sometimes but we the living cannot stray far from our bodies. More often, she comes to me.

In this life, Anne was wise. Now she is profoundly so. She was intelligent. Now her mind glows with brilliance.

After she died, I lay beside her with my hand still on her chest. I was unable to move. I fought for breath. Then I heard her say, “Get up, go on.”

I could practically feel her pushing at me. I sensed that she was very close. Finally I got up and sat beside her. We called the nurse, who came in about half an hour and confirmed that she had passed.

There she lay, a ruin. My God. She had given so much of value to this world and had been so ignored during her life. Just as I had seen her from the first for what she was, I saw her contribution for what it is, which is a fundamental discovery about the nature of humanity and our place in the universe. As we shall see, what she learned and taught—and is teaching right now—not only identifies our place in the world, it also tells us why this strange experience we call life even happens.

Soon after her death was officially confirmed, two people from the medical school arrived to take her body. She had bequeathed it to the medical students so that, even in death, it would continue to be the vessel of a teacher.

That was very hard for both me and my son. The idea that she would be dissected instead of buried or cremated in the presence of those who loved her was so very, very hard to bear. But it was her wish and, as with almost everything our gentle teacher did, also a lesson on many different levels, not least among them that we should not let ourselves be attached to the physical form.

As in many other spiritual disciplines, there is in the Gurdjieff Work, which we joined in 1970 and which continues to play a big part in my life, an idea called “identification.” We identify with who and what we love, and in so doing lose track of our own true selves.

Anne was an expert on identification. She would never speak of it

overtly, but when she saw an identification, she was quick to challenge it. So I understood that she was not only donating her body for the sake of the medical students, but to give my son and me the chance to see our identification with her physical form and free ourselves from it.

The flesh is not what matters, and she had finished using her body. The best thing that could be done now was to let it be used to teach others. And so, in fulfillment of her wish, that's exactly what was done.

I had promised of who were sitting together in vigil that I would let them know when she died, and at 7:45 PM I texted them the news. One of them, Leigh McCloskey, opened Ranier Maria Rilke's "Letters on Life" at random. His eyes rested on page 121, and this is what he read:

"In life there is death and it astonishes me that everyone claims to ignore this fact: there is death, the pitiless presence of which we are made aware with every change that we survive because one must learn to die slowly. We must learn how to die: there is all of life. To prepare from afar the masterpiece of a proud and supreme death, of a death where chance does not play a role, of a death that is well wrought, quite happy, of an enthusiasm that the saints had known how to achieve' the masterpiece of a long-ripened death that effaces its odious name by restoring to the anonymous universe the recognized and rescued laws of an intensely accomplished life."

He found this passage at random, or perhaps not. Perhaps Anne opened it for him and through him. The reason I say that is that, just a few minutes later, perhaps ten minutes after her death, I found a book fallen open in our office. It was Roy Frieden's Physics from Fisher Information and it was laid open to a page on which Anne had years before marked the sentence "...a single observation of the metric occurred at the onset of the Universe, and this generated the Wheeler-DeWitt equation for the pure radiation universe which had existed then. In other words, the gravitational structure of the Universe was generated out of a single, primordial quest for knowledge." (Like Bohm's "pilot waves," the Wheeler-Dewitt equation is an attempt to

reconcile Einsteinian relativity with quantum indeterminacy.)

I asked everybody in the house whether or not they'd taken the book down in the last few minutes, because it had been on the shelf untouched for years.

They had not.

I was reminded of a remarkable story which a famous surgeon had told me, about how he had been given all the details of an important surgery he had developed. (It's not in his biography, so I'm leaving his name out. In this strange world of ours, the story would diminish the reputation of a fine man who deserves the all the honor that his life accorded him.) He was in the hospital suffering from an infection of the myocardial sac. He'd gone into crisis and began calling for the nurses, but none came. However, a woman in a long white gown suddenly glided into his room, plunged her hands into his chest, then glided out. In that instant, the entire design of the surgery he pioneered came into his mind. Moments later, the nurses rushed in, explaining that they'd been in the next room because the patient, an older woman, had just died. He felt that his surgery had come into his mind because of what that woman's departing soul had done.

Anne loved the story and we discussed it often. So it was logical that she would leave behind a crucial piece of information as she departed. She knew that I would understand.

Later that night, at 9:20, she had just been taken away and for the first time in all these years, my life was empty of her. I was sitting alone, bereft, and asking her if she still existed, and if so, would she somehow contact me. I was asking her with carefully structured intensity in my inner voice. A moment later, my phone rang. It was another dear friend, Belle Fuller, saying that she'd just that moment had a message from Anne to call me. I was so grateful and surprised that I almost couldn't reply. It was a lovely moment. She'd had no idea that Anne had just died.

As the little van had rolled away down our alley with that beloved body

inside, a peculiar sort of mist appeared. I took a photo of the van as it left, its brake lights glowing amid many colors in the strange, soft haze. The photo, taken at night, doesn't show the colors that could be seen, but the mist is clearly visible.

As it turned out, that mist was the first manifestation of something that is known to happen when certain souls pass from this life. The Tibetans call such souls "rainbow bodies." There will often also be rainbows, and as I drove to Anne's wake a few days later, rainbow after rainbow appeared. I also took pictures of them as my son and I drove along.

Anne would laugh to hear herself called a great soul, but that's exactly what she is, and not only that, she is still very much turned toward this world. The reason, I feel sure, is the mission she is on. Beyond our current reality, there is a new humanity. We are one half of it, still darkly afraid and confused, living in what Anne calls "the level of violence." The other half awaits, its arms open, to welcome us at last into the union that is our destiny.

CHAPTER 3



A Flash of Light

ABOUT THREE HOURS after her death, I saw Anne in my mind's eye. She was walking toward me. She was moving carefully, as she had not been able to walk for half a year. But she was there, definitely walking, and by grace and her love showing me that she could do so once again. As I looked at her, I saw that her eyes had changed. Rather than the bright softness of life, they were penetrating and intense. They were the eyes of knowledge, but also in them was a sparkle of something that seemed to me to be satisfaction. She looked like a victor, radiant. It was as if the wonderful twinkle of life had become a great, sounding chorus of purest joy.

The tears poured down my face.

That night, I did not think I would sleep. How could I? The emptiness of our bed was horrifying. Anne's death was incredible. Unbelievable. And yet, instead of lying there in tears as I had expected, I fell at once into a deep sleep. It was almost like an enchanted sleep, it was so deep.

Then I saw her, still dressed as she had been when she walked toward me. She turned and gave a little wave. Wherever she was, she was moving up and

away from me, and fast.

I knew instantly what I wanted to do, which was to accompany her as far as I could go. I'd read the Tibetan Book of the Dead and thought not only from its descriptions of the region between death and life, but from my own experiences, that the first part of the journey Anne was starting could be confusing and unsettling. If I could, I wanted to help and protect my beloved.

Usually, I cannot leave my body by my own efforts. I must be taken out. But this time I moved out easily, slipping into the layer of life that lies just above the physical world.

We soared out into a region that seemed almost like it was under water. Shadowy enormous forms loomed around us, watching us alertly. Then we broke into the sweetest light I have ever known, moving faster and faster, farther and farther. Anne was laughing a bit at my persistence, but I would not go away—until, finally, I was caught short by the cord that connects the soul to the body. She rose away from me, gazing back, smiling, and then was gone.

And then I was back in the bed alone.

I gave voice to my grief, stifling my anguished howls in my pillow so I wouldn't disturb the neighbors. But then I slept again. It felt as if a kind hand had been laid on my head, her hand, in such peace and in such love as I had never and yet had always known, for it was greater than normal, physical love. It was the calm and accepting love of one soul for another, what Anne calls "objective love."

In her diary on Unknowncountry.com, in an entry dictated to me on July 10, 2017, she said, "I no longer experience subjective, or sentimental, love. I am in love with reality. I am part of the joy of consciousness. I am me and all being both at the same time. Objective love is the energy that created the universe and that sustains its expansion. There is a quest for knowledge going on. Everything seeks to be known. This desire is objective love. It loves all knowledge, not just the things that are pleasant or nice. It loves and desires

the dark, too.”

It is also the key to building the bridge between the worlds. But before that was going to happen, continued efforts had to be made to get me to understand and take action.

The next afternoon, a Wednesday, I received an email from a friend in Florida, author Trish MacGregor. Trish and her husband and co-author Rob had gotten word from a mutual friend that Anne had died, and I had written them to let them know that it had been a peaceful passing. While Trish was writing back, what she describes in her blog as “an incredibly strange thing” happened. As she was typing “Thank you for letting us know that she died peacefully. If we can do anything to help out, in any way, please let us know,” there was what she describes as “a brilliant flash of light and a huge explosion” in their house. At first they were terrified, then puzzled to discover that nothing had exploded. The house was fine. The explosion took place just as Trish typed the last “know.” She says in her blog, “We think it was Anne, making her presence known.” Given all that has happened, I would say that this could well be the case. But it worried me, of course. Had Anne’s death been harder than it had seemed to me? Was she angry or upset? She had seemed so at peace right after her passing. Maybe it was a burst of joy affirming Trish’s comment. That’s what Trish thought and what I hope, but I could not know and I cannot know.

The death of one so beloved leaves a great wound, but not knowing if she really wanted to do what she did, if she perhaps changed her mind after she could no longer speak, if she suffered but could not say it—all of these doubts and fears are mine to bear. When I heard Trish’s words, I remembered Anne’s temper, and how I was often responsible for her anger. Was this true now?

A great part of the journey of grief is learning to let such doubts go. There is nothing more to be done. She has entered a new reality and I cannot bring her back, not to touch and hold. But I can communicate with her, so I asked

her why she had done what she did to Trish. She said, “Because it was fun.”

At first, of course, I was delighted with the answer. It was so like Anne.

But there was seriousness, too. It was important to Anne that Trish notice and that she communicate her experience. It might have been fun to do, but it also guaranteed that notice.

It was about that time that I remembered our plan from so many years ago. The one to die first would initiate communication through friends, not directly.

I thought, ‘my God, she’s doing it!’

Although I cannot pinpoint an exact time or specific perception that took me beyond the amazement factor into assuming Anne’s continued presence, it was during this period that I started to think more deeply about the mission. She wasn’t just trying to contact me to be nice to her husband, she was doing it for a reason. In her own way, as articulate as always, she was taking up the cause of the afterlife revolution.

Her efforts to prove her existence by contacting people other than me continued. I had not only never told anybody about our plan, I hadn’t thought of it myself in years, not until I realized what she was doing.

At six o’clock on the morning after her death, a filmmaker of our acquaintance, Alex Rotaru, found himself waking up quite suddenly. It was unusual for him to awaken at that early hour. He immediately felt the presence of Anne all around him. She said, “I have lots of ideas.” In the next moment, he found the way to end a film he has been struggling with for two years. He has a lot of it shot, but has been unable to come up with the ending. In this life, she’d been concerned about the fact that he was stuck. Now, from the next, she gave him what he needed.

Anne’s next moment of contact was the one that made me all but certain that she was executing our plan.

I needed to get out of the house and not be alone, so my kids proposed a visit to the desert city of Palm Springs. Anne and I had spent many lovely

weekends in the desert, so I thought it would be an ideal getaway. I would be out of the house, but in a place we had both loved.

On the afternoon of our first day there, we drove into the mountains above the small city. My kids decided to go hiking. I could not follow them because my bad knee would never take the strain. So I sat on a bench and waited for them to return.

I spoke in my mind to Anne, asking once again for some sort of sign that she still existed. Within seconds, my cellphone rang. Although I was in a pretty isolated area, it turned out that cell coverage was more or less normal. I answered it to find a good friend from Nashville on the other end. This was Clare Henry, the wife of author William Henry. She said, “Whitley I just had a message from Anne. She said to call you and tell you she was all right.”

Then I knew. This could not be a coincidence. In fact, it was not just a perfectly timed call, it was also the only time that Clare had ever telephoned me. I made a decision. Anne had proved to me that she was still here. She not only still existed, she was conscious and aware of what was going on in my mind, and had new powers of communication.

Right now it feels as if we are sitting side by side, the way we used to when we worked. She says, “Except what I have to offer now is different. It’s accurate vision.”

Our species, in this time of crisis, certainly needs that. She adds, “but don’t forget to say that it has limitations. The future isn’t an open book to us, but it’s also not a complete unknown. We see more clearly because we can tell the difference between the inevitable, the probable, the possible and the impossible. There’s no guesswork.”

Such insight will be a significant advance over what those of us on the physical side of the species have now. But when it comes to communication between the two sides, objectivity and repeatability are necessary, otherwise we end up with nothing but guesswork, confusion and runaway imagination. Anne says, “Numbers are essential. A lot of you need to be able to cross the

bridge in order to detect any consensus we come up with.” I would also add that consistency of response is what we should look for. I can envision a situation where many people, working together in an organized manner with each other and their beloveds on the other side could build an exchange about the future that would be consistent enough to be actionable.

More than that, though, the new relationship is going to be about the enrichment of souls on both sides of the bridge. For that’s what life is about. It is about the soul. And the universe, all of it. It is about the soul.

As we build our bridges and seek to make our species whole, we will need to understand what is a belief and thus open to question, and what is knowledge, and thus actionable.

All these events—Belle’s call followed by Clare’s, Trish and Rob’s experience, Alex’s dream—caused me to alter my basic question about whether or not Anne’s consciousness was still intact. This was no longer a speculation, but a possibility. But knowledge? Was my expectation that Anne still existed now knowledge, at least for me?

I decided that I should do what I could to draw more confirming events. Whereupon Anne said, “Fine, but don’t get stuck .”

One of the hardest things about being in contact with the dead is believing that it’s real. This is because we determine reality based on physical cues, and they are totally absent in this type of communication. So we want signs, sign after sign.

I am no different. As soon as one sign appears, I’m looking for another. We were in continuous communication for 45 years, talking, touching, loving—being physically together in every way. Not a day passes that my body is not startled anew by her absence. And yet my mind knows that she’s here. Right now, this moment. Here. I hear her speak to me, see various manifestations, get convincing reports from others that are so varied and consistent that they qualify as personal knowledge. Not universal knowledge, certainly, but on a personal basis, yes.

However, my body's reaction is different. Without smells, tastes, sounds—no physical manifestations at all, as far as it's concerned—she's gone. Unlike my mind, it has no way of believing otherwise. As it no longer has any confirmation of her existence, it adds a layer of question—which is good. Far better to open the door with question than close it with belief. Above all, we must not look to those in the nonphysical as prophets and guides.

The reason for this has to do with why we are here on our side of the bridge. We are not here to see the future, but to experience the present. This is how we explore and come to understand ourselves. Surprise is crucial or we will not act out of our deepest truth. We won't get to discover ourselves. So there will always be a limit not only on how much our dead know of the future, but also on how much we can be told.

I would say that my relationship with Anne is deeper now than it was when we were both in the physical. I was her companion in life. Now I am in communion with her. We are, in other words, sharing our beings in ways that are not possible when both are limited by the barrier of the physical. We share our beings and at the same time cultivate questions that will help us both continue the process of discovery that is the core aim of any relationship, including—and especially—one that crosses the bridge.

Teacher that she is, Anne loves the question and understands its value deeply. It would be wonderful to be able to have certainty. But as much as we would rather enjoy the comfort of belief, to live in the adventure of the question is richer, better and, frankly, a great deal more fun.

To our deepest cores and in every drop of our blood we human beings fear to die. It is this crushing fear that can strip the humanity right out of us and turn us violent.

Anne is part of the effort to change this by helping us, the living, to replace the fear that rules us with another approach entirely. It is not a rigid belief, but rather a supple, questioning sense of assurance that this universe isn't simply a passive reality that happens to contain us, but a living presence

of which we are a part.

The bright materialism of modern life makes it hard to believe that there is anything more than the body, even though some of us still embrace religious beliefs that tell a different story. But Anne, like my other near-death experiencers who weren't religious, didn't follow the old rituals but did believe in the soul.

She didn't just believe in a subjective sense. Because of her NDE, she felt that she had objective proof of the existence of her soul.

She wrote eloquently about the NDE in Anne's Diary, which she kept on our website, Unknowcountry.com. The entry is called "The Love that Led Me Home" These lines from it are relevant to this discussion: "All that really survives of us is the love we have made in the world. It's a simple truth that will stay with me forever, even when I pass again across the threshold, this time never to return. Especially then."

Anne meant, of course, objective love, the great creative force that binds the world together.

Recently she expanded on the idea when she said to me, "love is the basis of being." In other words, it is something like gravity, without which the material world would not exist. But without love, nothing, not even gravity, would exist. So it isn't just an emotion, but also the fundamental building block of the universe.

That sort of love is what remains of her. It is what our dead are. The love that filled her being has now become her being. This is not to say that she has ceased to exist as a separate person. Far from it.

Her life was and is about creating, teaching and, above all, spreading the energy we know as joy. A few days after she died, one reader of our website wrote, "Anne was strong on my mind during yesterday's commute. I struggled to focus on her message to have joy, instead of crying. Just then a car pulled in front of me. The plate read, 'Joy to U.'"

To me, this was a familiar method of Anne's. About six weeks after she

died, I was driving home from a concert on a Saturday afternoon. It was the first time I'd been back to the lovely home where this intimate concert series is held. Anne and I had spent many pleasurable afternoons there, and going back without her had been hard.

Afterward, I was driving along home quietly crying when I heard the a-capella singing group Cantus on Prairie Home Companion. They sang a song called "Wanting Memories."

"I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me, to see the beauty in the world through my own eyes."

"You used to rock me in the cradle of your arms, you said you'd hold me till the pains of life were gone. You said you'd comfort me in times like these and now I need you, now I need you, and you are gone."

"I thought that you were gone, but now I know you're with me, you are the voice that whispers all I need to hear. I know a please a thank you and a smile will take me far, I know that I am you and you are me and we are one, I know that who I am is numbered in each grain of sand, I know that I've been blessed again, and over again."

It was so precisely what I needed to hear that I called her aloud, "Anne, is this from you?" At that moment, I noticed the car in front of me. Its license plate read, "Believe." She was not asking for the empty belief that shuts out the richness of question, but real belief based on the fact that the event was too improbable to be a coincidence.

My teacher, the mistress of the question, was now asking me to believe something, which was that she was definitely with me. From long experience with her, I knew that, once I had accepted this new evidence, fresh questions would follow.

I asked her what they might be and at once found myself thinking about the mission, the building of the bridge. I saw, suddenly, that she might well have lived and died, and left this world when she did, on its behalf.

We do not know our souls' reasons for our lives. We act from hidden

direction, and Anne was no exception to this rule. I doubt that she is the only soul with this mission. Indeed, far from it. I sense a whole vast chorus calling to us from the other reality, saying ‘awaken, awaken, the time is now.’

But why? Why not fifty years ago or a thousand from now?

There are three reasons: the first is that we must enlist both sides of the “brain” of mankind—the living on the left and what we call the dead on the right—in order, in a very practical way, to thread our way through the upheavals that are coming; the second is that it is possible now and it has not been before. The third reason—dare I say it—is that it’s wonderful, joyous fun.

The reason it can happen now is the explosion of near death experiences. Before the medical breakthroughs of the past half century, they were relatively rare. No longer.

Anne was a beneficiary of such medical advances. She had, ten years before her tumor appeared, experienced another extremely dangerous illness. Over its perilous course, she had traveled deep into death. But then the impossible happened: she returned. Medical advances that had only taken place in the previous few years enabled her improbable survival.

She had ventured deep into the undiscovered country, returning as a modern version of the shaman, a master of travel between the worlds. And she had a message: that country is undiscovered no longer. We come and go, and we are learning the secrets of this greatest of all journeys. Our modern shamen—walkers between the worlds—are the growing legion of people like Anne, the near-death experiencers.

This is their revolution, both those on this side of the bridge and those on the other.

CHAPTER 4



“Whitley, I Need Your Help”

OUR WORLD EXPLODED in our faces for the first time on a rainy Saturday in October of 2004. We were in Los Angeles working and visiting our kids. We’d had lunch, then gone to a movie. Then we went to our son’s house and watched a baseball game with him and his girlfriend.

A peaceful, normal day. Two people long-ago grown together, deeply in love.

All was well.

The minutes of the day passed without remark, time slipping away as it usually does in the sweetness of life. We knew nothing of what was happening inside Anne’s brain, a tiny vein bulging more and more. The defect had probably been there since birth, causing no symptoms and never noticed.

A year before, she had begun suffering from a nerve inflammation in her buttocks called periformis syndrome. It had come from playing racquetball too hard and sitting on a badly constructed couch. She’d been taking Aleve for it—too much Aleve for a person with a brain defect like the one she had.

But nobody knew.

As we watched the Yankees and the Red Sox, the crisis silently approached, a ticking bomb, ticking faster and faster. Unheard.

After the game, we got in our car and drove to our temporary rental apartment—coincidentally on Whitley Terrace in the Hollywood Hills. In the car we spoke quietly about the coming evening. I was due to go on Art Bell's Coast-to-Coast radio show in about an hour, and as always Anne would be at my side, listening, feeding me ideas, doing everything she could to support me. She would come on the show as well.

On the way, she said, "I want you to know I've had a wonderful marriage."

She sounded grave and introspective. I replied, "Oh, honey, me too!"

I wondered why she'd said it, such a serious thing at what seemed to be an entirely trivial, commonplace moment.

Tick, tick, tick.

There was not the slightest sign that her life might end before the clock struck nine. It was eight forty.

She was now very quiet. What she wasn't saying was that she had a terrific headache and it was building fast. Anne did not report symptoms. As a girl, when she had done so, she had been accused of trying to avoid her chores. All through our marriage I had tried to get her to change this deeply ingrained habit, but without success.

When we reached the apartment, she had literally only minutes to live. By now, her head must have been pounding. The moment I stopped, she jumped out of the car and went racing into the flat.

A little surprised but not yet concerned, I followed her.

As I walked in, I heard her call from the bathroom, "Whitley, I need your help."

I could see her standing with an open bottle of Aleve in her hands. Her eyes rolled back into her head and her legs buckled. I caught her on the way

down and, protecting her head, got her to the floor.

At that moment the phone rang. It was Art Bell. I shouted to him that Anne had collapsed and hung up. Then I called 911 and then my son, who started over immediately.

I went back to Anne, made sure she had a good airway and was still breathing.

It was obvious that she was in terrible distress. I didn't know what was wrong, but this looked to me like a person who was dying, and quickly. Her lips were slack, her eyes rolled back in her head, her pulse racing, her breathing becoming erratic.

I began CPR. Our son arrived, then had to go chasing off down the street after the EMS wagon, which couldn't find the address. But then they were there, oxygenating her and setting her up to travel.

Maybe ten minutes left, maybe less.

In total shock, my son and I followed the wagon to a nearby hospital. I told him to prepare himself. My heart was thundering, I was being rocked to the core of my being by the absolute suddenness of the change. No warning, no idea at all that anything was wrong.

I thought that she might well be dead by the time we got to the emergency room, but as we walked in, I could see her being wheeled into a cubicle, clearly still alive.

When the doctor came out to see us, he was frank. She'd had a hemorrhagic stroke—a brain bleed—and it was a bad one. Her prognosis was, as he put it, “very guarded.”

While we waited, I looked up the statistics and saw that she had only a small chance of survival. Then I saw that if she did, she might well end up severely impaired.

Another blow: our life together was probably over, and if not, then it was likely to get much harder. The remarkable, beautiful, immeasurably alive woman I loved might well be gone forever, or left in ruins.

Thus began the greatest battle of both of our lives. While Anne fought to survive, I fought to make certain that everything was done for her that could be done, and that it was done right.

Little did I know that Anne was already dead. She was no longer in her body, but rather was taking a journey that in the past used to be a final one. She had become an explorer in the undiscovered country.

She found herself in what she later described as sort of way station, like a railroad terminal or a subway stop. It was filled with people sitting on benches, clutching bags and suitcases. It was clear that nobody was leaving that station, not while they clung to their burdens. Then Anne heard a voice say to her, “you can go on, or you can go back if you wish.”

She had no burdens in her hands. She wasn't clinging to anything. But she did have a husband she loved and a son in his twenties who had not yet started his family.

Our Persephone, our underworld journeyer, had a decision to make. Would she return to her family, or travel on into the bright realm she could see ahead?

As I have said, Anne was a teacher to her core. It was and is the essential reality of her soul, her truth. She also had a life goal that was deeply important to her, which was to create a family that was better and stronger than what either of us had known.

She had raised a wonderful son. He had found a fine young woman. She had a family to nurture.

Maybe somebody on the other side thought she could come back, but what was happening on this side was that we were losing her. The hospital to which she'd first been taken—the closest one—was not equipped to deal with a brain bleed as bad as hers. The most they could do was to temporarily stop it.

We had to take her, loaded with stents and tubes, on a dangerous journey across town to the UCLA Medical Center. I rode with her in the ambulance,

my heart almost stopping with every jostle and every bump. But she made it and was soon in an intensive care unit that specialized in strokes. Half the patients in it were bleed victims, and hardly a day passed when one of them wasn't quietly removed to the hospital's basement morgue.

When Anne was in intensive care, I lived in the hall. Time and again, the staff gently threw me out, but I would wait until the coast was clear and then go back to my perch beside the door. Family members were not allowed in the ICU except at certain hours, and sometimes not even then. It depended on how busy the nurses were. So unless you were there when the door opened, you might not see your patient for hours. I knew that Anne wanted me beside her. I could feel it very clearly and strongly. Sometimes, I could see her in the hall, standing before me, looking down at me gravely and curiously.

In normal life, there was an aura around Anne. Her eyes were bright with intelligence, her mind was quick, she was extremely well informed, she was witty. But there was more— that glow.

When Anne first came to me, this light—unlike any I had ever known—had entered my life. Compared to her, the girls I had known before were sweet shadows.

Now here was this bright being brought low. To me, it seemed as if nature had committed a sin against itself. She belonged to sunlight and happy days, not to this cruel struggle.

When I was allowed into the ICU, she would look at me with searching eyes. Because of her intubation, she could not speak.

I sat beside her bed praying the Hail Mary and the Lord's Prayer from my Catholic childhood. When I was in my car, I prayed the repetitive Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me," but I changed the words to "on her." I went to sleep praying and woke up praying, and when I wasn't praying I went deep into the sensing exercise I had been doing since we joined the Gurdjieff Work in 1970, passing my attention from one limb to the next, until I was everywhere in my flesh, not just riding the mind. Over the

years, I had found that sensation deepened, slowly becoming something more than just awareness of the body. The exercise is simple, but also an amazingly effective way of opening the inner door to the soul. This is because in life soul and body are so intermingled that it is very hard to tell the difference. When by chance the attention extends into the soul level, there may be a startling moment of awakening. The world seems then quite new, quite unexpected, even magical. But there was little magic for me then.

Normally, soul and body in concert sailed the fears of those nights. They still do, but no longer in fear. I am like a companionship within myself now, the ego and the physical appetites directing the body to act, the body acting, and the soul watching, my dear friend who is also me, and more of me than I am.

But then—those days—I was so afraid that Anne would miss seeing her family grow. Selfishly speaking, I could not imagine life without her. I had to save my wife!

When I was too tired to go on and had to sleep, I would comfort myself by holding one of her nightgowns close to me. The black dogs of fear would run in my mind. Again and again I would ask myself how I could live without her. I did not know. I could not imagine. And her life was so unfinished! The kids had to get married, there had to be grandchildren, and she had to see that! I knew somehow deep in myself that this had to be. When she left this world, she had to be free. Nothing essential must be left undone.

But even as we struggled to keep her alive, she went deeper and deeper into the world of the dead.

As the doctors pumped fluids into her body to combat the brain swelling, she blew up like a balloon. It was done to keep the tiny intercranial capillaries open. Wherever that blood flow failed, that part of her brain would die.

Then another crisis: the fluid load was causing her blood pressure to rise astronomically. But the treatment had to be continued as long as there was blood in her spinal fluid and her brain was swollen.

Her blood pressure rose—150, 180, 210, then higher and higher yet. The treatment that was keeping her brain from being destroyed was now raising the specter of stroke.

An agonizing decision was laid before me. Should they continue treatment and take the risk of a catastrophic stroke, or should they stop and risk a degree of impairment? No matter which they did, death would always be a possibility.

Death, death everywhere! It was surrounding us like a thick, black fog.

If I decided to stop the therapy and she came out disabled, how would she feel about her life then? About me?

Again and again, I read her living will, written carefully in her own hand. No resuscitation if no hope of survival. Everything possible to be done prior to that.

But what about impairment? She said nothing about it.

I went to the hospital's chapel and prayed more. I went to mass and afterward tried to get counseling from the priest, but I cried so much I couldn't express myself.

The doctors were waiting. They needed a decision. I asked my son what he thought.

“Dad, mom would not like to be in a wheelchair..” No, but who would? She'd get used to it, people do.

Then I thought, ‘what if she lost her ability to think clearly?’

That decided it. Anne would prefer death to that.

I could almost feel her next to me as I went to tell the doctor on the unit that Triple H therapy was to be continued until her spinal fluid was clear.

So we waited, watching the blood pressure monitor, watching the shunt that circulated her spinal fluid, waiting for that faint pinkness to clear.

Day after agonizing day, we prayed and watched and waited. Then, one day, I was told that her fluid was clear and the therapy could be stopped.

But was she damaged? Could they tell?

A few days later she came awake—and she seemed fine!

She knew me, she knew herself, our son, remembered her life, all of it. A therapy dog came to visit and she petted it. She spoke normally with me. The doctors talked of a release.

To say that I was elated would be an understatement. For the first time in weeks, I slept a good sleep. We were home free, we had made it through one of the most dangerous illnesses known to man.

But then, the next morning, she wouldn't wake up. Worse, her temperature was rising. At noon she was diagnosed with spinal meningitis.

By this time I'd read a great deal about Anne's disease and I knew of this danger. I knew that death had returned.

She was administered broad spectrum antibiotics, but her fever rose and rose. The doctors were having difficulty identifying the bacillus that was causing the infection. The antibiotics were useless.

In even the recent past, this latest catastrophe would have been her last, and it is during this time that I believe she was having her near-death experience. Then they identified the bacillus. A new antibiotic therapy was begun. But she was so full of infection that even though the right antibiotic had been found, it was still touch-and-go. Her temperature continued to rise.

If it could not be brought down, she was going to either die or suffer yet another form of brain damage.

The nurses had gotten used to my constant presence and were making use of me as a volunteer. I watched over her every moment, day and night, sleeping only in fits and starts. When the ICU had to be cleared, they simply closed the curtains around us.

By this time in our life together, I was well aware that my wife was a spiritual expert. I had seen the grace and ease with which she taught others, always without them realizing it, drawing them to moments of richly revealing inlooking. She did this with me all the time, always with love and skill and her wonderful humor.

Only a master can do that because only a master can see the truth of souls.

I was not going to lose this woman. I was not going to see her value lost when she was still in the prime of life.

But if that particular ambition was to be fulfilled, her temperature had to come down, and soon.

My son and I spent all one night keeping her body cool with wet towels. The danger was in the wee hours, the time when defenses are at their weakest. We applied towels, the antibiotics dripped and her temperature continued to rise.

It went on and on like that, hour after hour. The nurses spelled us but they also used us as volunteers for which we were both grateful. We didn't want to be away from her for a single instant.

It became hypnotic, soaking the towels in the ice buckets the nurses were bringing, applying them until they were warm, then doing it again. Through it all she slept the sleep of eternity.

Then, at about four in the morning I noticed that the readout had dropped a tenth of a point. But it went back up so quickly that I thought I had hallucinated.

The nurses began watching her closely, two of them now helping us keep her cool. Her temperature dropped a tenth of a degree, then another tenth. Another. By five thirty, the tension of struggle had left her face. She was sleeping peacefully. Her temperature was 98.9 and still dropping.

As dawn slipped in, we slumped exhausted into the chairs beside the bed. Later, when she had been normal for a few hours, we drove back to the apartment for showers and sleep. We both sensed that another miracle had occurred. The nurses and doctors had clearly not expected what had happened.

A few days later, she was so improved that it was possible to remove her tubes. Except for those few lucid hours now three weeks ago, I had not been

able to speak with her since before her bleed. I would be able to talk to her, to find out what she had been experiencing through all of this.

But when she could speak, it turned out that she had acquired something known as “ICU psychosis.”

My brilliant wife with her razor-sharp mind was completely off her head.

She was moved to the transitional intensive care unit. On the doctor’s instruction, I talked to her endlessly, working to bring her back to the real world. Hour after hour she babbled on. Hour after hour I told her that her fantasies were wrong. Our son came and helped me. We spelled each other. As I recall, she talked continuously for something like fifty hours. When she finally fell asleep, so did we!

Finally, it came time to release her from the ICU area into the general population. Once she was settled in, I left her alone for the first night in a long time. But she became completely uncontrollable. She did not know where she was and she was terrified. She kept leaving the room, calling for our doctor in Texas, a lifelong friend. But we were in California. The nurses had no idea who he was.

I was called and I rushed back to the hospital. When she saw me she ran up to me and threw her arms around me. “Oh, thank God, thank God! I thought you’d left me! I thought I was alone!”

“I’ll be beside you every second from now on.”

That night, I slept on my side on her narrow bed, and the next night and the next. Finally, they gave me a chaise lounge and I slept in it. I never let go of her hand, and again and again in the night, she would whisper, “Whitty?” and I would say, “I’m here.”

One day, given her continued improvement and the need for beds, the resident decided to discharge her.

I was appalled. I told him that it was too soon. During an illness like hers, debris builds up in the areas of the brain where spinal fluid circulates. This material can clog the tiny passages that allow the flow to continue. If that

happens, fluid builds up in the brain. If left untreated, this hydrocephalus becomes dangerous, even catastrophic.

He reacted to me with arrogance and open contempt that some stupid caregiver would dare to question him. The next thing I knew she was no longer an inpatient. I tried to protest to the head of neurosurgery but he could not be reached.

She was sent to rehabilitation. But they would not allow her into the hospital's rehab unit because it had a door that led directly to the street and they were afraid she'd blunder out. So she was transferred to another hospital, which proved to be something out of a Dickens novel. I was regarded by everyone I encountered with beady-eyed contempt and wariness. Apparently my reputation as a 'hands on' caregiver had preceded me.

Fifteen minutes after she was admitted, she fell asleep. It was noon and she'd slept all night. But the move had been tiring, I thought. I sat beside her, waiting for her to wake up.

She did not wake up. Finally, in the evening, I tried to rouse her but she remained asleep. In fact, she was not asleep, she was unconscious. I told the nurses about this, but was ignored. I went back to my son's place but neither of us could sleep and at two in the morning we returned to the hospital.

I examined her, lifting her eyelids, feeling her pulse, trying to rouse her.

She was nearly in a coma.

I immediately went to the nurses' station and reported that Anne had hydrocephalus and needed to get to an emergency room immediately. (This rehab hospital didn't have one.)

The nurses laughed in my face and told me to go home. I knew that I had only so much time to save her. But at least this time it was hours, not minutes.

In the morning, I called our doctor in Texas. He managed to get the number of the hospital's on-call neurologist. The nurses had refused to call her or to give me the number.

At length, I got her on the phone. She came in and confirmed that Anne was hydrocephalic. I immediately telephoned the head of neurosurgery at UCLA and told him that she needed to be readmitted. The neurologist talked to him and concurred. But then another glitch: the hospital refused to take her back!

This had all taken until three in the afternoon and I was now frantic. Anne was close to a coma. I told the nursing staff that I wanted all of their names because I was going to sue not only the hospital, but each of them personally. The next thing I knew, a guard was lurking nearby.

Finally, I telephoned my brother, who is a lawyer, and he called the head of UCLA neurosurgery and said to him that the premature release was a clear case of malpractice and if Anne wasn't back in the hospital in an hour, he could expect a suit to be filed forthwith.

Twenty minutes later, an ambulance showed up and we were on our way back to UCLA. A surgery was performed to install a shunt under her scalp that would enable her spinal fluid to circulate again. This was successful and she spent some more time in the ICU, then once again entered the general population.

She had wandered far during her various crises, going deep into an unknown world of incoherence, confusion and, eventually, a sort of poetry. But now, finally, when the pressure was relieved, she was coherent.

She said, "My last memory is of you dancing around like a vaudeville performer."

"Yeah," I said, "I've been doing a bit of dancing."

We were finally in the UCLA rehab unit. She had been admitted on the understanding that I would live in the unit with her and never leave her side. That was fine by me. In fact, I was delighted. Right next to her was exactly where I wanted to be.

As she gradually regained more and more coherence, she suddenly announced, "Coe! Coe is here."

Persephone had returned from the underworld and those four simple words were her first message from the beyond, the first suggestion that she'd had a near-death experience.

Our little Siamese cat, named Coe by our son at the age of six, had died five years previously. I thought that Anne might have been dreaming, but also that it was possible that she had seen him during an NDE. Pets are sometimes encountered.

Over the next few days, she began to talk more about where she'd been and what she'd seen. I listened without questioning her, letting her proceed at her own pace. But I was pretty sure by now that I had indeed had an NDE.

The fact that she had lived to describe her journey is the foundational reality of the afterlife revolution. Medical science had defied death and saved her, and in so doing enabled yet another near-death experiencer to bring her story back rather than disappearing with it into the unknown.

These new pathfinders like Anne and so many others are our best chance—and first real chance—to find our way out of the hell of fear and cruelty that is our world and into the wholeness of a truly mature species, where the physical and nonphysical sides work together.

Anne had been transformed. She had a completely new vision of reality. Her mission remained unstated as such, but she had been put on its path by the breathtaking power of her NDE. Again and again, she would tell the story of it, always concluding with that statement, “we have to put those burdens down or we're not going anywhere.”

This modern shaman, like so many others, had been initiated not by death-tempting rites but by death-defying medical procedures.

It used to be a rare thing for a person to actually complete an initiation. The ancient rituals were generally dangerous, often very much so. But that was the point. They were about tempting death.

The ones who had entered the world of the dead and been resurrected were considered remarkable and indeed, they were very rare. The stories they

brought back remain to this day at the center of much human religious belief and practice. Books like the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the Egyptian Pyramid Texts are based on observations from such journeys. But they are not ideal texts for our era. The journeys they chronicle are described in terms of mythology that could be understood by the people of the eras in which they were written, but which do not resonate with us now, not in our secular and de-mythologized culture.

Most of the new near death travelers come to their experiences, as Anne did, with essentially no preconceptions about what this other reality might be like and what they might expect to see.

There are consistencies, though. An experience of entering an encompassing and loving light is often described—the literal manifestation of Anne’s ‘objective love.’ The approach of dead friends and relatives is very commonly reported. Journeys into worlds that seem to be almost physically real also appear frequently in the considerable literature that has emerged as the field of near-death studies.

Near-death experiencers are the wonder workers of modern times, leading us into an entirely new understanding of and relationship with our own souls. They challenge us to revisit our entire approach to death and dying. Their reports suggest that the soul is not only real, but that what we think of as reality is actually a small corner of a much larger world. They suggest that consciousness is not only in us and part of us, but more that we are in consciousness, journeying through a world largely unseen by us in bodies that appear to be designed to filter out any vision of the larger reality.

When Anne was alive, her relationship to the divine was private but powerful. I feel that she was closer to God than anyone else I have ever known. She would say, “We don’t know what god is,” but also, “God is my best friend.”

Many an NDE experiencer would agree, I think. God seems to be a living mystery to them, at once a familiar friend and an unknowable presence.

This is a much different vision of deity than we are used to. This combining of the comfortably familiar and the completely mysterious points the way to nothing less than a new understanding of man, universe and the sacred that both acknowledges the reality and accepts the mystery.

I cannot ever fully express how completely my wife's NDE changed her. She was so unafraid of death that it was, frankly, astonishing. She laughed at it. She was always happy, full of the joy of spirit that comes with the relief of great fear.

Our teachers—the near-death experiencers—are pointing the way to this new way of being human and this new kind of mankind—free of belief, past all the confusions of mythology, and yet more spiritually alive than ever before.

The awe that has distanced us from heaven for so many generations is imploding. Their god—Anne's god—isn't on any sort of a throne. Far from it. This new god is so much like us that he she and it might be us.

Man in god. Man as god.

Anne would say these things and she would laugh and I would laugh too, and I would wonder, 'what has my wife become?'

She had become herself, truly, a human being in full wakefulness, spreading her message as best she could in a sleeping world.

CHAPTER 5



Laughter and Shadows

ANNE MIGHT NEVER HAVE CALLED herself a teacher, but I had recognized early on what she had to offer, and I was certainly using her as one. As to being a master, she scorned that sort of label. “Anybody who calls themselves a master isn’t one and when a real master is called that, he laughs.”

Laughter. She would often repeat a quote of Anne Lamott’s, “If you want to make god laugh, tell her your plans.” She used to say, “You know what the word in John was, the logos? Laughter. That was the word of power that started it all.” The Gospel of John begins with the sentence, “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and the word was God.”

If you asked her if she knew god, she would laugh, but that laughter had something in it that was great with wisdom.

She would say, “that’s a crazy question.” Then she’d look at me and her eyes would say, “no it’s not.”

I could have conversations with her like this: Me: “Who is god?”

Anne: “We are.”

Me: “Then who are we?”

She would smile, looking inward, and say no more.

A form of meditation called the sensing exercise centers my spiritual life. To do it, you sit quietly and place your attention on your body, first one limb and then another, then your torso and head, until you are no longer in your mind, but concentrating your attention on your body.

Anne did not do it much, neither before nor after her NDE. This is because to her everything was always new, all the time. She used to say that she noticed everything, and this was quite true. Although on the surface she seemed an entirely normal person, there was also within my wife the powerful, loving stillness I had seen when I first met her. It was this stillness—this part of her—that saw so much.

She had always been tolerant of the posturing and egotism of others—including this one. After her NDE, this changed. She became much more urgent. Previously, she’d hoped you would see. Now she couldn’t contain herself. You had to see that you had a soul and that it mattered terribly.

She would lead you into an instance of self-revelation that could be devastating. Then she’d say sweetly, “Oh, dear, did I say the wrong thing?”

Hardly.

She did not suffer fools, and the temper of the early years became a tool she used to draw people into seeing themselves. She was the fiercest gentle person I ever knew.

She had understood identification from our years in the Work but after the NDE she was really focused on it. I’m not sure that she was consciously aware of this, but I learned a long time ago not to question my wife’s level of awareness about anything. I don’t know what she did out of deep, unconscious knowledge and what was done from conscious awareness.

I do know, however, why a person with awareness of the needs of the soul and the consequences of living in ego, would be so intent on helping people learn to use their personalities as tools of their souls rather letting their

than letting their personalities use them.

I was sitting reading one afternoon when a celebrity who had died the day before appeared in my mind's eye. He said, "What am I supposed to do now?"

I didn't know him personally at all. I knew his work, of course, some of which had been quite good. I knew that he had been involved in charitable work, also.

He was wandering in this level of reality, and I knew from experience that this was because he couldn't see any other place to go. For souls in that state, the physical world is as enclosing as it is for us. What you have to do is turn them around. It's hard. It often doesn't work. But when such people show up, I always try.

I said that there was a light behind him. I could see it there, though it was very dim. He said, "Who are you?" I told him my name and he replied, "You're some nobody. I expected to be met by Mother Theresa or somebody like that."

I laughed and replied, "She's not here."

He went away and I lost contact with him for a time. When I saw him again, he had realized that he had been extremely cruel in his life and was literally twisted with regret.

He will wander in this level maybe for a long time, slowly shedding his big ego and the bad memories that go with it. Once he is just a tiny fragment, he'll probably drift into a womb and return to this world, more or less at random.

Anne didn't want anybody to suffer that. In fact, she didn't want anybody to suffer at all. Thus her willingness to infuriate people in the interest of helping them see their arrogance and hopefully escape it.

Much of my inner work with the visitors has from the beginning involved gaining control over ego, and Anne came back from her NDE with a master's ability to work with it.

Even before that, she'd been aware of how it can get in the way of inner growth, and was always eager to challenge it. She had seen how the visitors worked to help me get mine under control.

Once I was making a speech before a large audience. She sat in the front row. Normally, she would listen to every word and afterward, her eyes filled with admiration, compliment me on how well I had done. But this time, just as I started to speak, she stood up and walked out on me. She went marching off down the aisle with every eye on her.

I was appalled. But what could I do? I had to give my speech. As I did so, I saw my ego with more clarity than I ever had before in my life. Standing on that podium, I also found myself standing outside of my own personality, watching it as it postured and performed for the audience.

Afterward, I asked her why she'd done what she did. She said, "Oh, I'd heard it all before." Then her eyes met mine with such frankness, such love and such deep humor that all I could do was thank her.

I asked her, "How did it feel to walk out like that?" She laughed.

If she saw in you a weakness that was undermining your soul's health, she was going to try to help you. She wanted us to see with new eyes, and true eyes. That was her goal, often stated.

One would be bragging away, lost in self-regard, when she would make some small, seemingly offhand comment, or just glance at you in a certain way, that would make you realize that you were completely full of yourself. In an instant, she could set you on a new and better path, one that was oriented toward living a more loving and selfless life, and a more humble one. And your vision would expand.

The understanding of God that she'd brought back with her was at once subtle and simple—and yet also light and full of fun.

A particularly important example of what I mean took place in 2012—it was, in fact, the first of the "license plate communications" that would later happen to me and others after her death.

I was in meditation one afternoon when I saw in my mind's eye a dog I had known in my youth. He was called Quagmire because he was always a mess. His was a troubled family and he lived a hard life. But he was always happy. No matter how difficult things were for him, you could always count on Quag to bring a sloppy lick of joy up to your face.

I had not thought of this dog at all since I was a teenager.

When I told Anne about it, she said, "Dog-God. You just had a visit from God."

God? Was she kidding? God was a distant, immeasurable and awe-inspiring presence. I said, "I'd need some sort of a sign if I was going to believe that."

Half an hour later we left on our afternoon walk. And there, parked at the curb in front of our house was a car with the vanity plate QGMIRE. Quagmire. A coincidence, but also too much of one. She said something along the lines of, "He's ready to be your dog even though it's his universe. So lighten up and let it happen."

I thought about all the lessons I had received from the visitors about humility, and decided to just accept what had happened, and let Anne be my guide.

My totem animal, as a shaman might call Quag, became the dog—in fact, this particular dog, shaggy, ordinary and joyous even in his suffering.

In our many future conversations about the sacred, Anne always referred not to god but to dog. "Dog's going to be disappointed, Whitley, if you do such and such." Or, "Ask Dog. Dog will help you."

Dog did, and does. Dog's here and he's not going anywhere. But then again, how can he? He's everywhere. I cannot count the number of times since that day that dogs have showed up in my mind's eye while meditating, or in my dreams or my life.

In childhood, I had a pet dog called Candy, a little rat terrier. We were inseparable. When, during Anne's first visit to my childhood home, she

peeked in on me while I was sleeping, she saw Candy's head on the pillow beside mine. Afterward, she would often laugh and say, "I discovered that I had a rival!"

Sometime in 2008, I was asleep beside Anne in bed and found myself stroking Candy just as I had when I was a boy. I thought to myself, 'I wonder how old Candy is now?' We'd gotten her in 1953 when I was eight, so—I calculated in my head—and I sat straight up in bed. Candy would be nearly sixty.

Then I realized that it was just a very vivid dream.

Next morning, Anne said, "It wasn't a dream." Then she laughed. "She's back, darn it!"

Some weeks later, Candy appeared again. This time, she brought a strange vision with her. It was of a dark, narrow road bordered on both sides by bushes. Anne and I are riding in a car. Ahead in the distance, the lights of another vehicle appear. I think to myself, 'if we don't turn around right now, we'll die on this road.'

Anne was a skilled interpreter of dreams. She always had been, since long before her NDE. "That was a warning, Whitley. If you're ever on a road like that, turn around."

A few months later we were in England at a conference in the town of Devises. A friend invited us to visit Stonehenge for a special evening tour, so we rented a car. Driving on the left was always a struggle for me, but I seemed to be managing. Soon we were on a narrow road bordered by bushes. It was nearly dark.

Anne said, "Whitley?"

"I'm okay," I snapped. But I was hardly that. I could barely keep the car on the road.

Ahead of us lights appeared, just as in the "dream." "Turn around now," Anne said quietly.

The lights raced toward us.

I realized that I didn't have mine on. As I fumbled to find the switch, the car came closer and closer. I pulled onto the verge, smashing into the shrubs.

The car raced past us. I doubt if the driver ever saw us. Anne said, "Candy just saved our lives."

I took the car straight back to the rental station. We never went to Stonehenge.

As I look back, I find that my life before Anne was that of a wanderer. I had been lost in a kind of labyrinth. I wanted to be a writer, but I didn't know how to do it. But then, in the spring of 1969, there she was, this time as Ariadne with her thread in hand, ready to guide me out of my confusion.

Our powerful mutual attraction caused us to decide to combine our meager resources. We weren't married and couldn't afford to get married. We had to first save up that two hundred dollars, and with my salary of \$125 a week and rent of \$125 a month and the fact that she kept getting fired, that took a while.

She was living in a miserable little room in Queens, me in a tiny apartment in Manhattan. But it was at least in Manhattan, so she moved in with me. The place was a shambles, furnished with a seedy couch and a bed loaned to me by the superintendent of the building. When Anne first came in, she took a look around and said, "It has possibilities," and she didn't only mean the apartment.

She arrived with a single small suitcase and a cardboard box, which together contained all her belongings. It took us ten minutes to move her in and we started our life together.

We didn't have money for books but both loved to read. So we pooled our money and shared them. We also started library memberships. At first, she just read mysteries. But when she discovered that I wanted to be a writer and was working on a novel in the evenings after coming home from my advertising job, she turned to more serious fiction.

My ambition at once became a major focus of Anne's life. She read every

page I wrote, and proved to be an insightful editor and a wonderful source of ideas. It seemed natural for her to be a muse. She was marvelous at it.

Nevertheless, I got rejection after rejection. In fact, my first readers who were members of the public came to me because of a rejection. I'd sent a novel to an agent, who had responded that she'd like to see more of my work. So I sent her my latest opus, a book called Catherine's Bounty. For weeks, I heard nothing. Then one Saturday morning there was a knock at the door. It was an off-duty postman. He had my manuscript tied up in a neat bundle. He said that he'd found it in the bottom of a mailbox with no postage on it, not even an envelope around it, just a heap of pages. The agent had simply tossed it in, as if into the garbage. As the postman gathered it up, he found my name and address on the title page. He said, "It's really good. My wife and I both read it and we loved it."

Anne not only completed her BA, she got a masters in education from the prestigious Bank Street College of Education and taught grade school for some years. She did it in an entirely unique way, getting with her kids on a one-to-one basis, coming to them on their own terms. And they loved her for it. She helped them fill their school hallways with murals. In our neighborhood she was known as "the paint lady" because she strolled around covered with paint. She thought nothing of things like that. She wasn't afraid to simply be herself. It never occurred to her to live in any other way.

As the years went on, I came to understand and appreciate her ways more and more. She lived out of herself as she was. She contrived nothing, she concealed nothing. When you knew my wife, you knew her truth.

Over time, our love deepened more and more. One without the other came to seem inconceivable.

This happy life was disrupted and complicated by the Communion experience and its aftermath, but the happiness of just being together remained the currency of our relationship. Our friends used to joke that we were more like a single person with two bodies than a couple.

We lived in love, in the false eternity of the years. We were poor, we were rich, we were poor again. Our son grew up and thrived. No matter what happened in our lives, at the end of the day we could lie in one another's arms in the sweet dark.

And then there came, seemingly out of nowhere, the last shadow. Until the moment it happened, we had not the slightest idea that a final night was falling on our life.

By 2013, Anne was completely recovered from her stroke. Her illness was long in the past. It was easy to forget that it had even happened.

But then, in the wee hours of a morning in February of 2013, the terror began again. Anne had been suffering from a heavy cold and had been taking cough medicine at night so she could sleep. One night when she had finally managed to fall asleep, I was awakened by a strange movement in the bed, a sort of steady shuddering.

I turned on the light to find her in a full seizure. It had come completely out of the blue. For a moment, I watched her. I called to her. There was no response. She was blacked out, her eyes rolled back in her head, her mouth working, her whole body trembling.

I at once dialed 911 and EMS was there within minutes. By then the seizure had ended but she was still unconscious. I watched as she was prepared for transport to the hospital. On the way to the ambulance, she came to. She had no idea who she was or who I was. Her entire life appeared to have been erased.

I found myself once again following an ambulance with my beloved in it. Once again, there came a night of agonized waiting.

She was taken into radiology for evaluation. I feared the worst. I thought she had a brain tumor. When she came back, she had pretty much recovered her faculties. She had returned to normal.

I waited, sick with fear, for the MRI report to come back. When it did, I was amazed that it said that her brain was normal. The ER doctor thought

perhaps the seizure had been caused by a reaction to the cold medicine.

Even though, once back home, she seemed to return to normal, I still did not believe the report. I wished I could see the actual MRI, but at the time I didn't know how to obtain it from the hospital. Given her history of so many CT scans during her illness, I knew perfectly well that she could have cancer. But there was also another reason that I was concerned about cancer, and in fact, any unusual illness.

Back in the early nineties in our old cabin, I woke up one night to see a purple glow coming from the living room. I hurried along the corridor to see what was going on downstairs and observed a purple ball of light below. It was hanging over the couch. Our older cat, a Burmese called Sadie, was creeping toward it.

I thought, 'if I could get a picture, that would really be something,' and raced back down the corridor to grab the camera that I kept at my bedside. Before I could return, a purple flash filled the house and darkness returned. I went downstairs to find both cats curled up on the floor sound asleep. They could not be roused.

The next morning poor Sadie came crawling along the hallway yowling. We could see purple-pink tumors in both of her eyes. They had appeared overnight. We took her to the vet, who diagnosed cancer. There was no choice but to put our dear old cat lady down.

Many years later I read in a declassified British Ministry of Defense document called the "Condign Report" that there was a type of ionizing radiation associated with "unknown plasmas" that causes trouble for people who are exposed to it.

I think that it's pretty clear that the plasma in the living room is what gave Sadie cancer. So, had it also affected Anne? She had been sleeping at the far end of the house, but there is no way to know. Personally, I think it more likely that she was a victim of too many CT scans during her struggle with the brain bleed. But at least she got ten good years during which she saw her

son married and witnessed the birth of both of her grandkids.

I'd had a hard time believing the MRI report, but could not get an early appointment with anyone at UCLA who could take a look at the actual scan. So we went to a neurologist associated with St. John's, another local hospital. I told him I was worried that the report was wrong and I wanted him to look at the MRI. He agreed to do this, but UCLA proved difficult to deal with. They would not release the scan, only the report.

When new seizures took place in April, I didn't call EMS. I had made it my business to learn about the type of seizure she was having and kept her airway clear when they took place.

I lay beside her with my arm around her, knowing that our path had just taken a very dangerous turn. In the morning, I told her of the seizures, but not of the probability that they announced a brain tumor, not yet.

I phoned the neurologist and asked him again to get the scan, to warn UCLA that the patient was once again seizing and he needed that scan at once.

The next morning, I received a truly terrible phone call. It was the neurologist. He had the scan and it showed what he described as an "angry" brain tumor. He told us to get to the UCLA ER at once because they were the only ones nearby with the capability of dealing with such an extensive and aggressive brain cancer.

On the way over, Anne was calm and composed. For my part, I was absolutely terrified. I was losing her. I felt it. My precious lover and dearest friend, my muse, my editor, my teacher, my dear, brilliant angel and the keeper of my heart— how could I hope to save her from an angry brain tumor?

The surgery was scheduled for a few days hence.

Those days of waiting were so sweet, a dark and strangely lovely time in our lives. I cannot express how the minutes felt, each so precious, little jewels falling away forever, one by one.

At night I lay looking at her. I kissed her sleeping face again and again. I hardly slept.

She, by contrast, was completely at peace, and through it all—the surgery, the struggle that followed—that peace never left her.

She died knowing that she had done two brilliant things, one a triumph of the mind, the other one of the heart. Her wonderful, supple mind had understood the close encounter experience and that lovely heart had led to the fulfillment of her ambition to start a family. “I think we’re good, Whitley.

I think we should leave as many Striebers in the world as we can.”

She did all she could.

She didn’t say it at first, but she was ready to go from the beginning. Neither of us wanted this couple to end, but she was accepting of her fate.

I was not. I struggled against it, trying nutrition, cannabis, all sorts of alternative cures. I explored all the different clinical trials, but she wasn’t eligible for any of the promising ones.

She accepted my desperate hope that she would survive and took radiotherapy and the anti-cancer drug Temodar. She went on a cannabis regimen that included a daily dose of cannabidiol, or CBD.

The result of all this was that the tumor stopped. But then, about a year into our struggle, the strokes started, and once again she approached the threshold of life.

Her passing was the most fearless and noble human act that I personally have ever witnessed. Every moment of every one of her last days—of all her days—is engraved on my heart as an inspiration to approach my own death in such peace and with such courage.

I sensed when she left that a great soul had ascended. You could feel it in the room, in the very air, a beautiful and fine event—not only a tragedy but also a triumph of nature.

She says, “Don’t forget to say that what looks like death to you looks like birth to us. The same second that you lost me, I found a new world.”

Now two years after her passing, as I write I look up to a photograph of her. I am still her husband and not just in memory and dream. We are not the only married couple for whom “till death do us part” has ceased to have meaning. Very quietly, hidden away from the scorn and disbelief of the people who cling to the old, dying reality, a new one is being born, and rich, fulfilling relationships between the living and what we call the dead are at the center of it.

People like Anne are forging this new mankind. It is coming out of a more clear understanding of what life and death really are. Our scientists and intellectuals, for the most part committed to the old secular ideology and the cultural empowerment it affords them, disdain the very idea that the dead may persist.

Anne says, “We’re not dead. That must be somebody else.” They are going to bring their revolution anyway, no matter what we are told to believe by the priests of mind and laboratory. They will not be stopped because what they are bringing is true, and they know it, and we need it and our need is urgent, and they know that, too.

Since its first great discoveries in the 15th and 16th centuries, science has been concentrated on what can be detected and measured, and that means the physical world, everything from minerals to microwaves and beyond. While it calls consciousness “the hard problem,” it also expects to find its seat in the brain, and its fate in the mortality of the body.

Every time I ask her where she is, Anne says “I’m here.” If I press her, she says, “Right here!”

So “here” must include more than I can see, hear, and taste and touch. But what would that be? This world is full of radio waves that we can’t perceive, light in invisible frequencies, sounds that are too low or high for our ears to detect, smells that we can’t perceive—in fact, the world is full of energies that elude the human senses.

All of the ones I have named, however, can be detected by scientific

instruments. Anne is saying right now, this moment, that she's here. But I don't know of any instrument that can detect her.

My mind can hear her. Often, she says things so spontaneous and original that it's difficult for me to believe that I could have imagined them. But even those of us who do have contact with the nonphysical cannot provide material proof, not even to ourselves. What we generally have are signs such as the ones I've been reporting in these pages, sometimes quite startling, usually rather cryptic, and an inner voice of the loved one that might or might not originate in our own minds.

But, even as I am writing this, something has happened— or rather, reached a climax, and it is startling to me and deeply freeing and has changed my situation in fundamental ways.

Incredibly, Anne has managed to provide what for me on a personal level must be final proof. She has done something that at once goes to the heart of our relationship and also explores the deepest meaning of death, dying and living on. I will devote the final chapter of this book to it, but know that, from the time it happened just a few days ago, my position has changed. I now feel certain that Anne still exists, and with her I must also assume the legions of the dead, all still very real, but in ways that we have scarcely even begun to understand.

And yet, my innate skepticism persists with its questions. If they are as real as they now seem to me to be, then why can't they tell us what the president is doing, what planets harbor alien species, when we'll die?

Anne responds , “you see the world through a slit.”

For a moment, the words sort of stun me. But then I think, ‘yes, that's exactly right.’

But why would we be doing that? It would seem to be a tremendous disadvantage.

“Can we see more?”

“Some psychics already do, but it needs to be something everybody

does.”

“Because of the way things are changing?”

“Exactly. It’s the first thing you find out when you come here. Then you realize that people can’t hear you no matter how loud you shout. It’s because we’re less dense and faster. We can see you and hear you, but you can’t perceive us.”

“I sure perceive you.”

“How well, though? Right now I’m kissing you but you can’t feel it.”

How I wish I could!

CHAPTER 6



Journey of Souls

SOME OF OUR website readers have reported contacts with Anne, and one of those reports might shed some light on the question of why we can't perceive those on the other side more clearly and fully.

This reader wrote that he had heard Anne say that she was returning to Earth by “going from blue to unguent blue.” He was not clear about what this meant, but I saw it as another moment of valuable teaching, and it relates to why we can't interact with nonphysical being more coherently and reliably.

Anne was saying that she was in the higher vibration of light blue but moving to the darker, denser vibration of our world, explaining how the free souls move to contact those of us who are enclosed in physical bodies. The use of the word “unguent” is the key here. First, it means an ointment, that is to say, something more dense, as this world is more dense than the one above it. Also, though, it comes from Latin word, “to anoint,” with its implication “to make sacred.” It implies not only a movement from a lighter density to a heavier one, but also a touching of a kind that confers holiness—a healing touch from a higher world.

A kiss of objective love, such as I just received but could not feel.

To understand more deeply, we need to discuss the “why” of physical life. Why are we dense in the first place? Wouldn't we be better off if there was no physical side of our species at all? To somebody like Anne, it must be like scuba diving or dropping down into the abyssal deep in a submersible. Maybe it's even more difficult than that.

Unless physical life is some sort of prison, there can be only one logical reason for our being in such a condition: we need it like this. But why would we? I don't want to stumble through life as I do. I want to know my fate. I want to know how to avoid danger and tragedy.

Or do I?

If I knew what they dead know, my life would no longer hold the surprises that it does. A person in that state would never need courage or to appeal to conscience. Discovery would be impossible, revelation irrelevant.

The richness of surprise that fills the lives of those of us “looking through a slit” seems to me to be a treasure. Everything I have learned about myself has come from discoveries that depended on me knowing only enough of future, the past and the world around me to live in a continual state of surprise.

This limiting of vision is what gives life its impact. It causes us to act spontaneously, and therefore to look into the reasons for our behaviors and come to understand ourselves.

It is, in fact, the reason we are in physical form. Take it away, and one has no further reason to live as we do, blind to the future. So it's just as Anne said—we are indeed “intentionally ignoring” the nonphysical side of our species. In fact, I would assume that we're hard-wired to do it. We are like horses wearing blinders. We have no way of taking them off, for if we did, we would be overwhelmed with information about our true pasts and planned futures that would make our lives meaningless.

“Could you tell me things about the future that would disrupt my ability

to learn from life?”

“I did at first. When I saw the world in such a new way, I just poured it out to you. I was so excited, it was incredible to see and know.”

“Do you see everything—past, future?”

“We see what we are able. The more knowledge you bring, the more you can see. If they lived empty lives, people can be very minimal—just vague memories of themselves.”

“You had a huge store of knowledge.” “I did. I do.”

“So tell me what’s in store for me tomorrow?” She does not reply.

“Well?”

“I did. Very clearly and in detail.” “I didn’t hear a thing.”

“No.”

“Could I have?”

“That’s what we have to work on—widening and sharpening vision.”

“Can you tell the future, then? Be a guide?”

“We can see what comes into focus earlier than you can, but nothing can be communicated that interrupts fate. I can tell you, but you won’t hear me.”

“Spirit guides?”

“Wisdom, yes. The future, no.”

“You implied that your knowledge expanded when you died.”

“It did. A lot. What you get is the ability to contemplate what you did in life. In the physical, we gather self knowledge. In the nonphysical, we seek to understand it.”

“But if there’s reincarnation, we must have already done this before.”

“We often do it many times. Lives are brief and bodies are transitory, but souls are enormous, complex entities, each of them on a journey toward ecstasy that it would never, ever abandon. Something that big and nuanced can’t finish its work in just a single lifetime. Most of us spend time between lives contemplating what we have done and planning our next journey. Not everybody, though. Some return right away, those who die in war, for

example.”

I recall the story of James Leininger who, as a toddler, recounted obscure details of a life that ended violently when he was a fighter pilot in World War II.

Incredibly, all the information he gave his parents turned out to be true even though it involved many incidents, ships and people who were too obscure to have entered history. He had the extraordinary experience of meeting in this life people he had known in his last one. The whole story is recorded in the book *Soul Survivor*.

He didn't ascend into a higher state or enter the all-encompassing light of objective love. Instead, he seems to have returned after a short time to this world, eager to complete the task he had set himself before his untimely death.

One reads in the near-death literature about that light that seems to absorb the soul into its loving and all-encompassing peace, but there must be many other states. Anne is still an intact, coherent being. In fact, preparing oneself to enter the state of coherence that she is in is a spiritual discipline that I practice every day of my life. That's one of the things the exercise I do is about.

I think that Anne came into life already in a state of soul coherence. Some ascend as Anne has, others enter the light, others linger nearby and get reborn. Maybe some even go to physical realities or other worlds and species entirely. Some also seem to descend into densities greater than this one.

I ask her, “How can we proceed here? What do I need to say to help people gain perspective about the aims of their own lives? And me too, for that matter? What do I need to know to improve the usefulness of my life experience to my soul?” “Let's do this stealthily. I'm not going to dialog with you.

Instead, I'm going to feed you ideas. They'll seem spontaneous, but they'll be coming from me.”

“Is that common?”

“Yes, and it’s not usually a good thing. It’s called possession.”

“I’d love to be possessed by you!” “You already are.”

I quiet my thoughts. I listen.

I begin to find myself thinking about channeling, specifically about our experiences with a practitioner, Australian Glennys MacKay. She had channeled for us in such a way that it had proved to both of us that it had to be real.

After we met her and heard some of her claims, Anne decided to test her. She asked us to send her a lock of hair and she would ‘read’ it.

We were at our hairdressers a week or so later and it occurred to Anne to have him cut off a lock of his own hair to use in the experiment. There was no way in the world that Glennys could have guessed anything about this man. She had never met him or even heard of him and had no idea that it was his hair that arrived in an envelope from Anne a short time later.

Glennys reported that she had heard a woman’s voice calling “Howie, Howie.” As the hairdresser’s name was Jay, we both assumed that she had failed.

However, when Anne told Jay what had happened, he was aghast. He said, “Anne, my real name is Howard. My dead sister always called me Howie.”

When we heard this, we just fell silent. Anne said, “The dead call and call, and we don’t hear.” How ironic that she’s doing that very thing right now and I’m the one she’s calling. But there is a difference. I listen. I try hard to hear.

This was a very clean moment of mediumship. Glennys could not have plucked that information from Anne’s mind. It wasn’t there, not any of it. She didn’t know Jay and we had no idea his real name was Howard. Just as what happened with Dr. Schwartz’s medium and her hit on the Greek fisherman’s hat, there is no avenue of information except contact between the medium

and the dead person.

This does not mean that we understand what the dead are. Far from it. But we do know this: in some way, they are there. They must be.

A year later, Glennys and her husband arrived in Los Angeles on a trans-Pacific cruise. We were riding to a restaurant together when I asked Glennys, “Do you see the dead all the time?”

“Not all the time, but somebody dead is here right now.

With you.”

I thought, ‘ah, another chance to test.’ I said, “Do tell.” “He’s wearing a tuxedo and playing a piano. No, now he’s holding up a violin.” She paused. “He says to tell you his name is Milton.”

For an instant, I was blank. Then I remembered and when

I did I almost crashed the car. I had not thought of Milton A. Ryan, Jr. in at least thirty years. He had been the older brother of a boyhood friend, Mike Ryan, whose story figures in Ed Conroy’s book about me, *Report on Communion*. He had not been a great part of my life, except for one thing. When he practiced the Beethoven Violin Concerto in his room and the notes had floated out across the neighborhood. His playing gave me a great gift, my lifelong love of classical music.

I had not been thinking of Mitty. In fact, I hadn’t thought of him in all that time, not since his death in the early seventies. But here he was in the car with us, and she hadn’t simply described him, she had given me his precise name.

This happened. Both events happened. On some level, I think that they were orchestrated to compel even resolute skeptics like the two of us to face the fact that channeling is real and the dead are still present and conscious.

I’m glad it happened, because now when I channel Anne I feel a sense of confidence I would not otherwise have.

Given that we have been exploring contact with the world of the dead in the west now for over two hundred years, it amazes me that so many of us are

so resistant to this material, me included! It's as if we dare not embrace this reality, if only because we so badly want it to be true and so fear that it isn't.

Channeling probably started in the Scottish Highlands where "second sight" was a popular belief. Second sight practitioners, it was believed, could read the thoughts of others.

The first one to become well known was an 11 year old girl called Janet Douglas who, in the 1670s, began demonstrating her skills by revealing objects hidden by supposed witches and relieving people of the curses attached to them. She became a great sensation and was eventually sent before magistrates in Edinburgh on suspicion of being herself a witch. Shortly thereafter, she disappears from history, having apparently—and wisely—fled Scotland for the West Indies. The penalty for witchcraft in that time and place was to be burned alive.

Second sight remains very much part of the Scottish experience, with more than 10% of the overall population reporting it, primarily visions of future deaths. Most often this involves loved ones and friends, less often strangers. While this is not contact with the dead, it is related to the spiritualist movement that would develop in the 19th Century. But it is an event—or rather, the appearance of an individual

—in the late 18th Century that started the evolution of the modern concept of contact with the dead.

Swedish prophet and seer Emmanuel Swedenborg produced the first modern text specifically claiming to have been derived from contact with the dead and journeys into their reality. This was *Heaven and Hell*, published in 1758. In 1744, he'd had a spiritual awakening and thereafter sought to reform Christianity as essentially a spiritualist movement centered around contact between the living and the dead.

It was in the mid nineteenth century that channeling began to reach public attention. By that time, the idea of communication with the dead was spreading, and three sisters, Margaret, Kate and Leah Fox in upstate New

York began making claims that they could effect it by a process that was called “spirit rapping,” which is first mentioned in the early Scottish literature. As they were children when they began playing at this, it seems doubtful that they read any such accounts. Of course, it may have been discussed in the household.

The story of the sisters and their rapping spirits soon spread far and wide, and within a few years they were not only famous, but making a good living.

In the nineteenth century, with lifespans shorter and death a constant visitor in every household, the movement spread and became extremely popular. Soon, there was a lot of money involved and so also a lot of fraud. In fact, in 1888 one of the sisters, Margaret Fox, told how as children they had created the rapping noises to fool their mother. They had used an apple tied to a string, dropping it on their bedroom floor at night. At first, they called the spirit they claimed to be in contact with “Old Splitfoot,” but then later claimed it was a peddler called Charles Rosna, who had been murdered and whose body was buried in the cellar of their childhood home.

The Fox Sisters were dismissed as a fraud, but in 1904 a skeleton was indeed found buried in concrete in the cellar of the house, just as they had predicted.

The skeleton was very old, so it’s unlikely that it was buried during the sisters’ lifetime. Was it a household legend, and was that what inspired them to play their trick on their mother, or was the spirit of Charles Rosna somehow present and restless because of whatever befell him?

The way apparent fraud, even admitted fraud, works as part of this experience is complex. For example, right now in my life, I frequently hear unexplained rappings. I’ve been experiencing them for years, and they will often respond to simple questions. I don’t make a practice of soliciting these rappings, but they do show up. In fact, one of the longest and most complex experiences I have had started every night for two years with seven loud thuds on the roof of my meditation room in the cabin that Anne and I owned

in upstate New York. This involved an extensive contact with a group of people who claimed to be from between lives. It was no hoax and no misapprehension on my part, as I have reported in more detail in Solving the Communion Enigma.

What happened was that seven beings showed up at the cabin one night, dropping noisily onto the roof of the room where I meditated. For a moment, I wondered if opossums or raccoons were involved, but after the thuds there wasn't another sound.

I soon sensed their presence in the room. Without being able to see anybody in what now seemed a room full of people, I certainly couldn't meditate. I asked them to show themselves, but got no reaction. So I said that I'd have to see them if I was going to meditate with them and left the room.

Late that night, I was awakened to find a man sitting on the foot of our bed. I was terrified until I realized that he was no ordinary person. First, he was quite short. Second, he was wearing a tunic, not normal clothes.

I slid down to the foot of the bed. He was as slumped and still as a rag doll.

I looked right at him from a few feet away, right into his darkly shadowed eyes. Then I took his hand in mine. It was as light as that of a child, a little cooler than mine but not cold.

I held his hand and smelled his skin, and he seemed entirely human.

When I dropped his hand, he seemed to shudder as if shocked, then disappeared before my eyes.

The next night they came again. We meditated at eleven, then they woke me up at three and again at six. Each time, I would go down to the meditation room and sit and go deep. Their presence intensified my experience of the sensing exercise, and I began to feel as I do now, as if my sensation extended beyond the borders of my physical body and into the stuff of my soul.

We meditated together for months, night after night. It was among the most powerful and wonderful experiences of my life. During this time also,

seven glowing plasmas were seen in our woods by a number of witnesses.

I felt as if we had raised our little cabin and the land around it to the edge of another reality. Truly, we were living at the edge of heaven. But our finances were also suffering and in October of that year we were faced with a choice: keep paying our mortgage and starve, or give up our beloved home.

Obviously, we had to go. But still they came, night after night, right up until the last night. I told them that I would never be here again, and also that I knew that I had never seen what they really looked like. I knew it wasn't just the plasmas or the physical form. I knew in myself that there was more.

On the last night, I asked to see the truth. I waited. Nothing happened. So I stood up and said goodbye and left that precious room forever.

I was lying in bed when I saw a glow in the front yard, along the side of the house. I rushed to the window. Slowly, majestically, a small star floated out the window of the meditation room and into the middle of the yard. Its rays were part of its life and as they touched my skin with gentle pricks, I felt the very essence of another human being. There were golden shapes in among the rays, and I knew that these were the emblems of past lives lived to such perfection that their memories had entered eternity.

That was a human being. It is what every one of us can become. All it takes is a willingness to live in love, to practice compassion and to be humble before all we meet. The burdens of anger, desire, regret and all the others will fall away, and there will be lightness of being, and ascension into ecstasy.

So we have the following: nightly rappings, a seemingly physical being, seven orbs of light and a star. I observed these things, and carefully. I am not mistaken about them. Anne came in one night and heard the thuds, but was not comfortable staying in the room to meditate with people she couldn't see.

Jeff Kripal comments in our book *Super Natural*, "I have studied religion for three decades now. I don't run into many new ideas. But this notion is shockingly new: the soul as a plasma like energy that can superpower our imaginal capacities and so generate the movies of visionary experience."

As I do, Jeff sees the experience as something unfolding within me. But also, I feel sure, it is outside of my body entirely, in the objective, real world. The beings were able to take many different forms—in fact, to control both their form and their density. When one of them became physical, I looked straight at him from a couple of feet away. I took his hand in mine and felt its solidity. But at the same time there was something subtly different about him. He was a material being, but it was a lighter material. I wouldn't think he had organs or blood.

Anne says it very well: “I’m a dream, but I’m also me.”

Just as recent studies suggest that second sight in Scotland is something inherited genetically, I seem to have inherited my own tendency toward spirit contact, in my case probably from my mother’s side of the family. One of my maternal great-grandmothers could generate table rappings and even cause heavy tables to hop and crack loudly. I sat in some of her séances and there was no fraud involved. As a skeptical teenager, I certainly looked for it, peering under the table and actually watching her feet and legs as the rappings came rattling out of the tabletop. She did not move.

So I’m not prepared to dismiss mediumistic rappings as simple fraud. Rapping may or may not involve contact with the dead, but it isn’t all hoaxed. What happened at the cabin was also no hoax and was, in fact, one of the most intimate experiences of contact with the dead that I think has ever been recorded.

Unlike the ectoplasm that came out of the mouths of 19th Century mediums and was generally regurgitated cheesecloth and other substances, the plasmic being who sat on the foot of my bed was entirely real. He was not a mental construction but a physical entity about four feet tall, sitting there slumped against the bed’s footboard in a tunic. When I smelled his hand, the skin was ripe. This man was not only real, he was not somebody who bathed.

I looked right at him. There was the unmistakable sense of a physical presence. But when I dropped his hand, he disappeared in a wink. I think this

happened because it was taking all the attention he possessed to maintain his memory of his body as a physical presence. When I suddenly let go of the hand, the need to simulate the movement was too much—he could not maintain balance anymore and, as it were, fell up into his normal—and higher—vibration.

I know that these are extremely unusual experiences, but I am describing them as accurately as I am able. They happened. It's that simple. And to me they mean that the dead are still with us and even that they can, under certain circumstances and perhaps needing specialized skills, manifest a physical presence.

The great-grandmother who could move tables was a Swedenborgian. She used to say to me, "After I die, listen to the wind in the trees. That's how I'll speak to you." She was a noted school teacher in San Antonio with an excellent reputation for taking a very empirical approach in her professional work. But in private she explored other domains with panache.

She lived to the age of 106, and after she died, I listened for her when the wind sighed in the night trees, but never heard her promised whispers, or perhaps I tuned them out.

In all of our past efforts to reconnect with our dead and in all cultures, there is a missing element which is probably essential to real success. The dead do not need to be called by any special techniques. The essential element is not skill, it's love—that is to say, the creative power of objective love. This love is a principle, I think, of a higher physics than that of the material world. Just as certainly as gravity, which holds the material world together, it is a fundamental attractor. Learning to live in this state of objective love—wanting the universe, the world and all life to be—is crucial to connecting with one's own dead. They don't need to be given sacrifice or worshiped, but rather to be enjoyed for their lives and presence, just as they were when in the physical state.

My contact with the dead began at my grandmother's funeral in 1976.

Although she was the daughter of a Swedenborgian, in her life, I never heard her make serious reference to spiritualism. But, like many of us in the family, she had seen ghosts and participated in her mother's séances, which entertained three generations of our family.

There was a large congregation, and her coffin rested in the aisle of the church. I was in a pew just behind it when, to my surprise, I saw six large, softly glowing balls of light come sliding gracefully in through the ceiling and array themselves around the coffin.

They appeared entirely real to me, but I was also aware that nobody else was reacting to them. I thought, 'they're souls.' Then I knew that they were there because my granny did not believe that she was dead. She had been determined to live as long as her mother, and was still in her body in the coffin. They were trying to get her to come out.

I wanted to help, but I couldn't see how. After a while, the six souls soared gracefully upward and were gone. They did not float. They moved with a precision that was startling to see, it was so perfect and so accurate.

This was the beginning of what has become a lifetime of contact with the dead. In this particular case, it went on for years. My grandmother was not finally freed from the bonds of this life until the late 1980s.

Right after she died, I saw her in my mind's eye sitting in a room in her house telling a group of patient listeners about all the wonderful homes she had created. She had exquisite taste and had, in fact, created some lovely places. I sensed, though, that she was still entirely unaware that she was dead.

A couple of years later, I saw her again. This time, she was standing before a lovely and elaborate house. I called to her, but she would not turn around. Then, at least ten years after that, I saw her again. Now, only the front of the house remained, just the part that she was staring at, red brick with roses climbing up the walls. Again, I called to her. This time, she turned. She looked at me curiously. As she did so, her eyes slowly turned to gold. Then she darted upward and was gone at last from her remembering and her

dreams, finally free.

I will not see her again, I wouldn't think. She was not like Anne, a person with a mission here. Maybe she will return to the physical. Maybe she already has. But there are many paths in the land of consciousness. All I know is that wherever she is, love is there, too, as it is everywhere that being is, the found, the lost, the wanderers and the seekers, it does not matter. This greater love—objective love—simply is. It sees reality from the outside and yet also fills it in every nook and cranny. It allows without necessarily accepting, and that is why it is so fundamentally different from the idea known as 'unconditional love,' which, as a form of sentimentality, both allows and accepts.

You can feel it. We all can. When I do the sensing exercise, I let myself also feel this urgency, this wanting that is objective love. My subjective feelings of joy, love, anger, hate, compassion—all of that—are not ignored but rather are seen as part of objective love, like everything that is, wanted.

I feel myself as a humble part of a greater whole, and let awe and joy carry me into the sweet, expansive state that is higher awareness.

So one can let one's own love join objective love as a humble part of the whole. If you do that, then even though you are still just a little person struggling along on this Earth, you are also all love everywhere, beyond time and pain.

Encounters with souls that are stuck in one way or another is a commonplace of any life that is lived in communion with the nonphysical level of humanity. As we become more skilled in managing our relationships with our dead, we are going to find them all around us.

When I was meditating during the summer of 2017 in an old house in Italy, I watched a woman in a black skirt and loose-fitting blouse move slowly around the room dusting furniture that was no longer there. I watched her for a long time and tried to get her attention, but she dusted and dusted. Finally, she walked off into another part of the building. How long she might

have been doing this I cannot tell, but she obviously still sees the same world she lived in. She should be called a ghost, I suppose, but I see them as spirits who are simply unaware that they have lost their way.

To help them, you have to go out of your own body or raise its vibration so that you can touch them and turn them, and send them on their way. When you try to do this, you'll find that you can. We all know how. This is because we also have instinctive knowledge at the soul level.

Those trapped in the physical wander. They have no idea where to go or what to do. The heavy ones fall like tears

forgotten. Some like Anne ascend, then turn around to face life from their new perspective, seeking to help tend this garden.

Others rise and rise, seeking beyond the stars toward the expanding border of consciousness, the limit of ecstasy. I hunger for this myself. I feel it in me. I sense what it is, ascension: a new song that I—and all of us—have always known.

CHAPTER 7



“The Living Will Know the Dead”

AS PLANET EARTH CHANGES, our fragile technological societies become ever more vulnerable, and our huge populations with them.

I am not speaking so much of short term changes such as global warming, but rather of the much larger cycle which is going to happen regardless of any human effect. Either we will go into another glaciation or a long period of warming. Both have happened in the past, and it's not clear which will happen now. But one thing is clear: climate is changing.

So how should we prepare?

There can potentially be all sorts of technological fixes and scientific solutions, but this book is not about that.

Previously we made reference to tools—the tools of the soul. It is these tools that are involved in the kind of preparation we are concerned with here. They are inner tools, and we already possess them. It's a question of opening the inner door behind which we conceal them from ourselves, taking them out and making use of them.

We need help doing that, though. We need the wisdom of our dead, and

this could be why, over the past two centuries, there has been such a marked change in their relationship with us.

Their attempt to reach us would explain the rise of the medium movement, the appearances of more and more psychics and now the afterlife revolution. These things are the human species attempting to increase its production of strong souls and increased its overall intelligence and predictive abilities by reconnecting its two halves.

Let me describe how this is working for Anne and me right now, as I am writing.

I feel her close to me. She wasn't close earlier this morning, but she has become aware that I'm writing and is now a definite presence near me and, to an extent, within me.

I accept this but also don't abandon the question. While I am functioning as if Anne is Anne and is right here, but I am asking if it's really her or if I am communicating with my idea of her, and I am accepting that it is probably part of both. I am communicating with the Anne in my mind and heart, and also with Anne in the afterlife.

It would help if there was physical manifestation, of course, but there has so far been only one of these. On that occasion, when she finished speaking to me in a particularly intense way, full of the speed and spontaneity of physical conversation, I glimpsed a small light go flashing away out of our apartment.

She had been here and close because of something she wanted to say. After she created our website in 1999, she began posting the occasional entries on it she called "Anne's Diary." About six months after she left the physical, I heard her saying that she wanted to continue it.

I sat down, quieted my mind and opened it to her. I did this by doing the sensing exercise. As it draws the attention away from the mind and onto the body, it opens the mind to outside influences.

At once, thoughts flew through my mind. They were so fast and so

spontaneous that they really did not feel like my own. It was exactly as if somebody else was talking in my head. And they were. Anne was.

If I tried to listen, they were pushed aside by my own thoughts. I solved that problem by jotting notes, and in a few minutes I had a whole, complex statement written down, one that was original and wise and beautiful. In it, I could almost hear Anne's gentle, insistent voice.

I posted the entry, pretty much quoting her word for word, on February 16, 2017 as "Anne's Valentine to You: 'We are Lovers.'"

In it, she says, "We have trouble believing what is real even when it's staring us right in the face, especially if it's not what we want to be true. But we do have something that makes us special. We are lovers, and in this respect we stand out as a very remarkable achievement of our planet and its star."

I say to her now, as I am writing, "I'm glad that we have something to recommend us, but I'm more interested in this problem of seeing what's real. That's why we can't communicate with you reliably. That's what we need to change."

Anne: "With no physical points of reference it's always going to be hard for you to accept us. I also don't think it's healthy to do that uncritically. The key is a stable attention, strong enough to keep your mind empty of thought so we can enter it. The mind flutters around like a little moth, drawn here and there at random."

"That's what I did to hear the diary. But I want to know how to strengthen it."

"Go to a quiet place, do the sensing exercise, listen and take notes without thinking about them. Not automatic writing, though. Open yourself to directed thought from the outside."

"In other words, channel."

"Exactly. It's the process we've been teaching you for two hundred years. Remember that every time somebody channels in one life, they're better at it

in the next. That's what our school is all about: multi-generational teaching."

"Remember the study we made of prophecies, when we were researching channeling?" We had found that spirit guides did not do well at foretelling the future.

"Now I know why guides turn out to be such bad prophets. They're not like us, not on this level. They're with you, and they don't know any more than you do about the future. So they guess. A spirit guide is generally no more prophetic than the person channeling her."

"But you know more?"

"To a surprising degree the future is an open book." "Could you meditate with us, then? That might help us." "Getting to you is like swimming really deep. It feels like

getting lost. There's no exit. You feel like you could end up among the wanderers who can't find their way out."

"It's frightening?"

"It's difficult. But when the glow that comes from the sensing exercise starts, it's much easier. We can focus on that light and get right to you."

"What about the dead who show up with the visitors?"

What's going on there?"

"The ones you and I call the visitors are practiced at moving between densities. When they tunnel down into your density, the human dead can follow them, or they can be brought. This is being done to make those of you in the physical aware that we still exist. It's part of the fight against soul blindness and it's also the foundation of bridge building."

I ask, "So what happens now? Where are they taking us?"

"Higher and higher into ecstasy, as you've always said." "But terrible things happen and are going to happen. That

doesn't seem to me like a journey into ecstasy."

"Pain forms a foundation of strength. Remember your story."

In early 1986 I wrote a short story called Pain that was about an angel causing a man to experience pain that frees him from his past and causes him to see life anew. A new vision, brighter, more fruitful, comes to him when he accepts the pain and goes past it.

She responds, “Out of the coming age of upheaval there is going to emerge either a new humanity or no humanity.”

I pause, letting the stark frankness of that statement penetrate. I have always known that the stakes in our era were very high, but not until this moment did I have a real understanding of just how high.

“Earth’s surface is a womb. In this womb, a baby, life, has been growing for eons. This baby has matured to the point that it has intellect and therefore the capacity to enter higher consciousness—that is, to be born. So the waters of Earth’s womb are breaking.”

I understand this all too well. When Earth’s waters break, as they are now doing, mankind—her baby—will no longer have the support of the womb. Like it or not, the baby is going to be born, and into a completely new life.

Anne says, “We will still have a physical presence, but not nearly as large a one as we do now. So souls will need to be more efficient. They will have to enter bodies to accomplish specific tasks of self-discovery. It cannot be random anymore, not if everybody is going to get all the chances they need.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“After the transformation of the planet, there will still be souls entering physical bodies, but the experience will be different. The whole species is going through a gigantic shamanic initiation. The seeker enters death in order to experience life in a new and more encompassing way. The outcome of this initiation will be that the blinders of physical life will be removed, randomness and chance will no longer play so much of a role in life as they do now, and souls will enter bodies with knowledge of their reasons for doing so intact. The living will know the dead. They will no longer be wanderers like the fool in the Tarot, but users of the tools of consciousness, like the

Magician with his bundle open on the workbench before him.”

But don't make any assumptions when you see the word “Tarot.” It is an ancient psychological system that references body, mind and soul, not just body and mind as modern psychology does. And that is how Anne and I use it, not as a means of divination. I have laid this out in a little book called the Path.

I say to her, “I want to know more about his tools.”

“The tools that strengthen the soul are understanding and living in objective love, engaging in the sensing exercise and meditation to strengthen the soul, and practicing love, compassion and humility to free it from the bondage of ego. Those are the basics.”

“That's the basic message of the gospels.”

“It's the basic message of all religions. It is the message of man.”

It is also the reason that the afterlife revolution can now take place. Nonphysical mankind, along with many different

sorts of midwives and helpers, is preparing physical mankind for the shock of species initiation, and to use our planet afterward in a new way. To be born to the world is to die to the womb. On exiting the birth canal, the infant enters on a new life, and so does the mother. There is no return, not for either of them.

The mysterious presences that are here with us know this. They have lived it. Having been through the sort of birth that we are now facing, they are here as midwives. The mother may find the midwife a comfort and a blessing, but in the baby's confused perception as it emerges from the womb she appears to be a raucous, dangerous and monstrous presence, ferocious and frightening. But then there is something else, a bond to mother that baby feels but does not understand. The baby focuses on this bond so completely that the mother becomes everything to her.

This is very different from the baby's time in the womb. During that period, the baby took everything for granted, food, comfort, safety—all these

things were provided.

Once outside, though, baby begins to see mother as a separate being. He perceives that he is dependent on this mother of his, and stops taking things for granted. When the mother feeds him and comforts him, he falls in love, as we will with our own planet. We will at last come to see her as a living being with hopes and dreams, not simply as a passive lump of nutrients there to serve us in silence.

The mother, who has loved the baby in her womb out of instinct will now join it in a state of conscious love. A relationship between mother and child will form. We will see that our planet has awareness and needs and will come to regard her not only as our home, but also as our dear and beloved friend.

Anne: “All through history, there have been those who have lived in conscious relationship with Earth and cosmos. We call them masters. In the future, everybody who enters the physical will do so as a master of being. And why will we still be using the physical? Give somebody a kiss. That’s why. Humanity’s destiny in the universe is to bring forth the experience of love, that all may share in it. Objective love, the core creative urgency, is also the essential human energy.”

Love, again. It always comes back to this missing element, the unseen strength that will see us through even the most difficult of times. “Love one another,” said by one of those masters of whom Anne speaks.

This is, after all and above all, a book of love. But love as a power, a force in the universe. Gravity draws matter together and keeps things whole. Love draws us together, and urges us to seek higher and deeper, into the realms of joy that are our destination.

CHAPTER 8



A New Vision of Life

I ONCE MET a person from a species that has been through the valley we are now entering, and living as we will if we emerge from it. At the time, I didn't fully understand what I was experiencing, but over the years I have learned more about the way souls—and species—evolve and what living a good life really means. It is not living in empty sweetness, but taking the good with the bad—embracing the light of life, learning from what we find in the dark.

“I didn't understand that when you told me about it, either, but now it's clear to me, too.”

We were at a hotel in San Francisco attending a conference. At about midnight, I was meditating in the living room of our little suite. The next thing I knew, there was a young woman standing before me. She had a northern-European face and complexion. Looking back, I seem to remember that she had eyes as green as emeralds. Green—the color of acceptance and also of rebirth. I see it now as a reminder that we must experience what is unfolding in our world, but also that afterward there will be a new birth.

The young woman was wearing the most wonderful dress I had ever seen.

It was a living thing, not a piece of cloth. As I looked at it in astonishment, I saw that it was decorated with thousands of scenes, like tiny, incredibly detailed paintings. But they were not paintings, they were living moments. They moved, as if all of these incidents were happening right now, all at once.

The dress carried scenes of her life as they would be observed from outside of time. Every one of them radiated a poignant joyousness, as if each was the sweetest moment that had ever been. But I could see that there were dark scenes there, too, amid the flowers and the blue.

She radiated a goodness so intense that my soul went out of my body to get closer to it. And there I was, fluttering at her feet. She looked down at me, nonplussed and embarrassed.

I had just enough time to feel like an idiot before my son came rushing in. “Dad,” he cried, “there’s a big silver flying saucer outside my window.”

Instantly, she was gone and I was back in my body. I ran into his room, but there was nothing outside but the night.

Anne says, “You were seeing what we can become. That’s the next state after this one.”

“Have joy?”

“Exactly. A joyous and accepting heart. You saw her life journeys. Even though not all of them were pleasant, she experienced every one with joy. You were seeing her from outside of time.”

“She was enlightened, then?”

“Enlightenment is what happens when there is nothing left of us but love.”

“Were you enlightened while you were physically alive?”

“When you’re enlightened in one life, die and enter another, you’re still enlightened. Death and rebirth don’t turn that light off.”

“You seemed just normal.”

“Enlightenment is normal. Pretending that it’s special is what’s not

normal. That's why that kid was so embarrassed. She was just there to offer some knowledge. She didn't expect to be worshiped."

"We're all enlightened?"

"Accepting yourself is the key. Enjoying yourself."

Anne enjoyed herself every moment she could. She enjoyed her mind, her heart, her body. (I did, too, for that matter!) To my wife, life was a continuous and unfolding miracle. For her, consciousness was a matter of noticing all the details of life, and she was wonderful at it.

"Also, species in the state humankind is entering—living as we do and that girl does, outside of time looking in—have new opportunities to find joy, and with them new responsibilities. The child is born, grows up, leaves the mother's side and goes out into the world to find his own life. And marriage. That, too, and children, even that."

"We'll have children as a species? I'd never thought of that."

"Everybody is somebody's child. We'll go out in the universe just like others do and find worlds full of scuttling creatures out of whom we can make new minds."

I think a long time about this. It reminds me of an idea I proposed in Solving the Communion Enigma, that we might eventually play the same role with another species that the visitors play with us. But this is a bigger version of that idea. It suggests a rich and unexpected future for us, and certainly makes it clear why others might be here trying to midwife our birth.

I remember so fondly the evenings of long ago when Anne and I would sit on the deck at our cabin and speculate about the meaning of this journey of being. Anne was the one who understood the situation and knew why our visitors—at least the ones who were involved with us—were here. She saw so clearly the towering possibilities that lie before us.

But look at the promise her idea of our future contains— that we may be able to join a vast communion, the presence of which we are now almost entirely unaware. More, that we may become shepherds, helping others in the

future as we are being helped now.

What would it be like to be somebody else's gods? They would be like children gazing up at us in awe, and we would be like our visitors, tired and scared and working hard.

Perhaps ten years ago, maybe more, an image appeared in my mind during meditation. It was of a slow, wide river. I was looking down into a boat where a small figure sat huddled over a fishing rod, his back to me. As I looked down at him, a glow appeared on the water. He sat up, stared, then turned to see its source. He looked up at me carefully, as if he was seeing something that he didn't understand but also didn't see as a threat. And then it ended. I was back in my living room, my mediation once again normal.

Did he see a glowing orb, perhaps, that was me? Is that how I appeared to him? I wonder what he made of it and how he described to others what he had beheld. I also wonder if we will ever meet again, perhaps many hundreds of years from now, when mankind has become for his species in their distant world the spirit moving on the waters, struggling to help them be born as we are being born now, into the light of objective love.

If we do our job well, they will say, "it happened to us naturally," as the people say of the actions of the best king in the Tao Te Ching. As our own visitors will when their work is done, we will slip away into the firmament and be gone from their lives.

When we find them, they will be living as we are now, in a state of separation between physical and nonphysical sides— as it were, an immature species.

They will be at the point of birth out of their own mother planet, just as we are right now. We will become their "aliens," offering them support and schooling from our own experience. Doing midwifery like this is the next stage in our collective journey into the state of ecstasy that the woman who appeared in my hotel room was in. From what I have seen of our own visitors, this midwifery is a real challenge, too, exhausting and frustrating

but, I suspect and hope, worth the effort.

Anne: “Birth doesn’t necessarily have to work, you know. There are no guarantees. We could be “born dead,” that is to say, in a state of such chaos that we may never fully recover from it. Never forget that the baby doesn’t see what’s at stake, only the midwife. You’re fixated on these “other” beings acting as midwife. Seek deeper. They are like us and part of us. Forget the idea of aliens versus humans, angels versus demons. These ideas are not big enough to fit reality. There are no aliens. No humans. Only us. No good, no evil—only us again, making our choices.”

I think she means not that “they” are or are not from other planets, but that this sort of difference is irrelevant to the experience of being conscious. Of course, different brains compile different visions of the world, but above the physical level, in nonphysical consciousness, all vision is objective and inclusive.

“Graduating into the next level, where we will be a teacher for others, is only a small part of growing up as a species. Consciousness is a journey into joy, which is without end. After you leave your body for the final time, this is the first thing you remember. And you think—at least I did—how could I ever have forgotten this? Your ego disappears, just like that, and when it does you see, Whitley, you really see. We live in a huge world that we hide from ourselves. As I left my body, “Anne” became a memory. You’re you, but also everybody. It’s really a warm, joyous moment.”

“It sounds like disappearing.”

“Ego dies, not self. We need to rethink our idea of body and soul. It’s not entirely right to think of them as being separate. There is only one person. We exist on a continuum of densities. Over time, we shed these densities. Just as you won’t be physical forever, I won’t be in my current state forever. And the less dense we become, the more holographic we are. This is the surrender to God that adepts like Meister Eckhart describe. As he puts it, we ‘become as a clear glass through which God can shine.’ As our world

becomes unable to support us, we are going to need to surrender ourselves into that greater truth.”

“How?”

“‘Two are better than one, and a cord of three strands is not quickly snapped.’ Remember that? In the physical, that cord is our kids. In my density, it’s the silver cord you saw stretching between us as I left your level.”

She is quoting from Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12 here. Back in 1970, she chose that as the motto of our marriage and made a cross-stitched sampler of it. To this day, that sampler hangs on our bedroom wall. The third strand is our son who is carrying us on, and also the harmony between us that is eternity in our marriage.

The hours after Anne left this life revealed to me the strength of that cord, which I now see as the fundamental binding between the physical and nonphysical sides of the species, and the one thing that we can count on never to break.

What she and I are doing together, and what it is possible for any two people who have surrendered to love to do, is summed up in Card XXI of the Major Arcana of the Tarot. The twenty-first card is called “the World.” On it, a being that

is both man and woman ascends in a wreath of laurel, symbolic of their victory.

On the four corners of the card are pictured the four keys to attaining objective love. These are the four beasts of the sphinx, a triad in balance. Instinct, emotion and mind are working together objectively, without identification with desires, fears and needs. Objective love is the fourth beast, the eagle, who soars above life and sees it from the distance that the dead experience, a distance that lends objectivity.

When one lives like this, in this state, one becomes free of the idea that the body is all we have. People do not seem to be just bodies, but rather

bodies come to appear as coatings that contain souls. The coating, the body, is a mechanism that the real person—the soul—uses to navigate physical reality.

Living with a vision of oneself and others like that is a great freedom that leads to deeper understanding of a kind that prepares us for any shock, any change, because we are always that crucial hair's breadth behind the shocks that the body is enduring. No matter how desperate the situation, the watcher retains the power of reflection.

We the living are generally absorbed in ego, and because ego dies with the body, we are terrified of death. People like Anne, who didn't live that way, don't find death frightening at all. Like her, they see it as a transition, which is one of the most empowering things that they can teach us from their nonphysical perspective.

For example, the presence I call Anne is not the person I knew in this life. She holds that personality between us so that I can recognize her, but it is not her true being. Even though

Anne is now a memory, she is not gone. Personality echoes essence, though, so even when I glimpse my dear teacher in her true expression, what I see is someone who makes sense as the foundation of the person I knew in physical life.

I find myself returning once again to the man who materialized before me. If that could happen in a regular, verifiable way, it would solve many of the problems of communication, not to mention finally curing the disease of soul blindness.

“What makes materialization possible?”

“You have to be able to get energy to organize itself like matter. It takes tremendous concentration and skill.”

“It's too rare!”

“That's why they make you do the sensing exercise so much. The more you do it, the more coherent your soul becomes. When you lose your body

you don't lose your focus. You can come back."

"Will I be able to do that?" "That's the hope."

I think about that. Will it happen? It seems completely impossible, and yet I have seen it done.

"Why did those people come to just me? Why not thousands of people? Millions?"

"People don't notice."

"Why not?"

"Ego filters out what it fears, and what it fears most of all is death."

I remember how terrifying the visitors were at first. I could feel it in my blood that they had something to do with death. "If ego is that afraid, what can we do?"

"Strengthen humility. Fear of death comes from ego. A humble person lives from the part of themselves that is immortal. They accept death naturally instead of fearing it."

"Which is exactly what you did."

"I put down the burdens of desire and anger, judgment and self-importance, all of that, and there I was still in my body but behind Anne. I was my soul, not my personality, and knew for certain that there was nothing to fear."

And there it is—the state we need to find within ourselves in order to navigate the coming drama of our birth. But how? What are we to do?

CHAPTER 9



Soul Tools

THE YOUNG WOMAN I saw had a highly evolved soul. But why, and how had she come to be that way?

We discussed the soul tools in the last chapter, but how do we use them? We can't see the soul. We can't even feel it. When one does the sensing exercise, little happens. The mind is quiet for a few moments here and there during the session. Almost always, though, there's little else.

So, are there changes? Anything?

The visitors Anne and I work with are experts at soul building, and they have given us plenty of advice. The first thing to understand is that we identify ourselves as our egos, but that isn't who we are. Ego is a brain function and as such mortal. It develops around the name we are given at birth. It is a social tool that the brain uses to interact with other people.

When a person goes soul blind, ego rushes to fill the vacuum. Being out of touch with the soul, it becomes obsessed with the survival of the body. We find ourselves living in constant, unspoken terror of death.

But when one learns the art of deepening the sensing exercise enough to

include the soul, this changes. Ego fear is accepted as a natural side effect of its mortality. The soul is not afraid of death. It has no reason to be. But how do we even begin to see the world through the eyes of the soul?

I ask Anne, “We have a sort of anesthesia about the soul. We don’t feel it. So of course we cling to ego and live in terror of death. How can we change this?”

I feel her laugh the big, deep laugh always seemed so improbable coming out of a small person like her.

“I don’t understand”

Then I do. She saw laughter as a key to consciousness— in fact, as the key. Her message of “have joy” I cannot repeat enough. She says, “When you ascend, you ascend into laughter. You can’t understand the big bang unless you understand it as an explosion of happiness. The instant that consciousness realized that it was alone, it laughed with surprise. That was the beginning of everything, soul laughter.”

Ego can laugh, but not like that. This is because ego can never experience the innocence of objective love and happiness. This is happiness that is too simple for ego to know. It is the happiness of little children and why Jesus was always using them as examples. It is the happiness of my wife.

I remember once we were in the Italian town of Siena. We’d been traveling all day and we were hot and tired. To our surprise, we discovered a wonderful big Jacuzzi in our hotel room. Anne got in it and rolled in the warm water with a smile of absolute delight on her face. It was the open smile of a baby. She lived in an innocence that I have never in all my adult life tasted, not with all my inner work. But it was just her—the way she was.

“Do you wear a dress like that girl?”

Then it hits me—another realization about the way this text is being constructed. Last night I had a rather mysterious dream. I was with Anne and we were looking at clothes. There were lovely knitted dresses in the store, very colorful, and I was sure she would like them. But she didn’t. She said,

“I’m already in my dress.”

I didn’t think to look at her and now I could kick my thick old hide for it!

I could have seen her from outside of time last night, and tasted of the whole wonder of her being, and I missed my chance!

But I also know from long experience that this was a good soul lesson. Ego blocked my innocence, which is why I couldn’t see hers. It has needs and desires, disappointments and failures. But we’re inside it. We see the world through it. We see ourselves and others through it.

“It also locks your expectations. Move your attention away from personality and into body and the key will turn, the door will open and you will come new.”

“You can’t destroy ego.”

“Nor should you try. Ego is your key social tool.”

“You didn’t always live in ego.” “Not always.”

She could laugh her ego right out of her way and then there she was grinning from ear to ear—her soul.

“That’s it, laughter!”

The place to start on this sweet work of letting ego go is to take ourselves more lightly. Ego cannot observe itself objectively. It cannot understand itself or hold a mirror up to itself. But the soul can understand it, for the soul was present at its creation and has observed it throughout all of the body’s life.

When you get to the bottom of everything you consider most serious in your life, all the disappointments and injustices and misfortunes, the loves, the needs and the hopes, you find that same quiet, bubbling, joyous presence that I would often see in Anne and occasionally even find in myself. And that’s your soul. That’s how it feels.

But to realize this, we must first go beyond the conventional definition of “soul.” If we think of it at all, we might vaguely imagine an echo of what we can see of ourselves, that is to say, ego. I have even heard people speak of “afterlife ego” and “soul ego.” But soul is not ego and it isn’t similar to ego.

Truly, our souls are undiscovered countries. They at once lie within us and live in all being and all time, knots of consciousness that have a definite sense of self, a definition that is all their own, but equally a sense of conscious infinity.

The moment the attention comes out of ego and enters soul, it sees the personality from the outside. It sees the body and all its parts as its own temporary container. Later, it also comes to see that it isn't actually in the container, not completely, but rather is more like a puppet-master manipulating the marionette of self from a perch high above.

When I go to this state, the first thing that tells me that I am drawing near is a rising sense of mirth.

“There’s laughter here,” Anne says. “It’s the first and most creative force. That’s what too many people forget. They forget that the holy of holies is joy.” And not just them. How little laughter there is in our world.

Meister Eckhart is one of the few religious leaders who understood the power of laughter. He said, “Do you want to know what goes on in the heart of the Trinity? I will tell you. In the heart of the Trinity the Father laughs and gives birth to the Son. The Son laughs back at the Father and gives birth to the Spirit. The whole Trinity laughs and gives birth to us.”

But why? What’s so funny?

Consciousness has set out to discover all knowledge, that’s what. So did Don Quixote. Riding his ass is so much fun, though, that nobody ever thinks of getting off. On the back of this ass, you go everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Contradictions abound, and yet they also make sense. The more conscious you become, the more playful you feel.

This is what is meant by the Meister’s comment that “God laughs and plays.”

Anne always maintained that “God laughs and plays” was the best thing about the sacred that anybody has ever said.

Meister Eckhart in his life was called a man who knew God. Anne did,

too, and laughed about it just as much.

I guess that's also why Quag showed up during that meditation of mine instead of some awesome figure with a fiery glare. He knew that I was with a friend of his, a fellow traveler on the laughter road, who would understand who he was and why he appeared as he did and teach me.

But why is laughter so creative? It reacts to contradiction with delight is why, thus opening the road to new discoveries. This allows mysteries to open like flowers, and what seems a prison—this life—becomes a palace of question and surprise and the deliciousness of discovery. And when the clouds are flying and the house is trembling, that is still true and true more than ever.

Life doesn't feel that way, though. Life feels hard and unfair and dangerous. Our physical instincts tell us to see others as enemy or friend, evil or good. We divide the world, and ourselves, much too simply. By identifying things in this way we lose sight of what they really are. We deny the soul it's chance to gain access to our attention, because the soul cannot perceive the world in this way. The rages and disappointments, lusts and triumphs of ego are a wall that stands between us and our souls. Caught behind that wall, you can't see the bridge beyond, or hear the dead, shouting themselves silly from the far side.

None of us can really hear, not very well. So let's look at the journey through these pages as building for the future. Remember that ego and soul both read the same words. They just read them differently.

Because we have divided ourselves into physicalists and dualists, we have also ended up thinking of the soul as being something that somehow lives in the body as a sort of separate entity, or that it isn't there at all. Anne is right, though, when she says that's not the way to go about it.

We have a long history of looking at the soul as something separate from us but within us. Descartes theorized that it was in the pineal gland, because that gland is at the center of the brain. But it's not there. In one way, the

physicalists are right: the soul isn't anywhere. It is part of the body in the same sense that color is part of paint. As Anne says, "Paint fades but color is immortal." When she described to our reader how it felt to move between the two densities of blue when entering and leaving the physical state, she was giving him the chance to see our world not as ego does—as an entanglement of beings, events and objects, but rather from the objective standpoint of the soul—the soaring eagle—who sees it not only as all those captivating details, but also as a density, that is to say a color of a certain shade.

But how can you possibly see life in that way—not as events and all the identifications that go with them, but simply as color? In other words how do we step away from the details far enough to spread the wings of objective love and rise above the riotous surface?

It turns out that it's simpler than the many weighty tomes on the subject would suggest. In fact, ridiculously so.

Let's take a closer look at love, compassion and humility. Love innocently, find compassion always and live a humble, simple life and you will emerge a pure soul. Your vibratory color will be, as Anne puts it, "azure."

Like all manifesting energy, the three pillars of the soul are a triad. Love is the active side and humility the passive. Compassion creates balance between the two. But compassion, like all balancing forces, is hard to understand. It isn't simply giving a dollar to a hobo, but understanding what all with whom we come into contact need the most from us, and what we need to give ourselves. In the Gurdjieff work, it is said that we are "third force blind." Until you can give up being a judge of yourself and others, you cannot begin a search into compassion.

In the gospels, there are many examples of it. When Jesus suffered the little children, when he told the story of the Good Samaritan—these are stories about compassion. But also the story of how he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple is about compassion. But how was

compassion involved in what appears to be an expression of outrage? The answer is that he was giving the bankers a chance to see their greed and perhaps step back and review the direction of their lives.

With regard to humility, the sternest lessons I have received in the school of the visitors involve this soul tool.

Many years ago, my brother had come up to our cabin. I was feeling a lot of pride, showing him around, showing off my material achievements. Then, as I was taking him to see the place where my ascension into the presence of the visitors had occurred, I heard a voice say, “Arrogance. I can do whatever I wish to you.”

It was the lady on the cover of Communion. I thought, ‘surely this is my imagination,’ but told myself to quit my bragging.

When we got to the clearing, we saw a lovely, bright UFO slip elegantly across the sky. Then I thought, ‘oh, dear, it wasn’t my imagination.’

I was worried. I had already discovered that the school of the visitors is intense because it is about the health of the soul, and the soul is eternal.

I could expect a hard lesson, and indeed, that’s just what unfolded the next morning. My bank called to say that they had a number of checks I’d written, but I had no account with them.

She’d made my damn money disappear! Talk about an ego lesson! I had just a few dollars in my pocket, now the only money I possessed in the world. Worse, those checks would be bounced if my account couldn’t be restored by the close of business. Desperately, I pleaded with the bank manager to look for the account in their computer. Later, I drove over and sat with him while he searched. He found nothing. Finally, he agreed to give me another day and said he would look in the bank’s magnetic records.

In the event, they found the account in the Iron Mountain records storage facility where the bank kept its emergency backup files. Everything else had been erased. As the manager put it, “Nothing like this has ever happened before.”

No, I would think not.

I have never forgotten that lesson. I wouldn't dare brag that I've lived a humble life ever since, but I have surely tried.

It takes humility to see the frailties and arrogance of others and still love them, and a willingness to put one's own desires and needs aside in order to allow oneself how to be compassionate toward them.

Now, when life in the physical is easy, using these tools is also easy. So now is the time to learn. Just as a soldier learns to use his weapons best in time of peace, the soul learns to use its tools best in a time of ease and plenty.

There is more to the three pillars of the soul than actions in the physical world. They are relevant also in the world of the soul, but in a very different way. Nobody there needs a handout or a kind word, but they do need the equivalent in the form of energy. The young woman I saw, who was wearing her soul like Jacob's coat of many colors, was radiating energy. This is why my own soul left my body and moved toward her. It was elevated into a state of ecstasy by her soul energy.

Soul energy is expressed in those immortal colors Anne speaks about. Her soul is a deep and spacious blue. It's like looking into the top of the sky just at evening, at that darkening blue that seems like a window into eternity. Anne's particular vibrations—her colors—are unique to her and yet at the same time just as universal and immortal as all colors, and this is true of all souls.

But blue isn't her only color. She recently showed me her soul in three different colorations, red, green and blue. The red was her active side, the green her passive side, and the gorgeous, iridescent, glowing blue her soul in harmony. On this night, she came up beside the bed three times, each time wearing a robe of a different color. She was so vivid that I asked her if I could touch her hand. She gave me a worried look. Not that she was concerned about being touched. Maybe for an instant she even was material

enough for that. She was worried because she knew that touching her would inflame me with desire and, when she had gone, leave me in an anguish of need and grief.

So, if we are soul blind and our egos are out of control, why are we even here? What's the point of placing ourselves in such a situation?

The reason is that physical life also a soul tool. It is, in fact, a soul-altering machine.

“When you know for certain that those of us without physical bodies are real and that we are with you, fear of death will end for you. Instead of hiding in your ego, you will move your attention into your soul. Then you will become able to practice soul craft, using physical acts and emotional states to enrich your soul colors.”

“Unconditional love?”

“Objective love is craftsmanship, not sentiment.”

Not all soul tools are entirely inner. Some of them are practical, external tools.

I had been inspired to do the sensing exercise by Joseph Stein and William Segal of the Gurdjieff Foundation, and had it explained to me by the head of the Work at that time, G. I. Gurdjieff 's protégé Jeanne de Salzmann. I had understood it as healthy, practical work.

As my relationship with the visitors deepened, I came to understand that there was a basic grammar that I could use to relate to them, a sort of structure that would cause them to react in predictable ways, and therefore give me the opportunity to explore their motives for coming into contact with me more deeply.

They speak a very different language from us, and I don't mean words. I've never heard any words from them except a few in English here and there. However, there has been a rich communication in symbols. For example, the gray ones would often announce their presence by an appearance of owls, and if one goes into the habits and mythology of the owl, it soon becomes clear

that, like them, the owl is a clever and silent night predator with eyes to see in the dark and ears so sensitive that he can hear little creatures scuttling in their burrows. His claws are powerful enough to dig right into the ground and pull out a little shrew or chipmunk. And indeed, the grays show up in bedrooms at the most improbable times and pluck us right out into the night. But the owl is also a symbol of wisdom with a rich history across many cultures, and to one who ceases to resist and tries to relate, much turns out to be on offer.

The most important thing they have to offer is this potential new relationship between the living and the dead, and it was, I am sure, because of them that I found myself, as I have mentioned, coming into contact with the people from between the worlds.

They came to meditate nightly with me, and when they announced themselves, it was the sensing exercise that they wanted to do. When I meditated by sensing my body, it seemed to give them a focus. Until the day Anne and I left the cabin forever, they worked with me to open myself inwardly—to let my mind be silent and my ego rest—so that we could come into the state of communion that enables the deep, rich inner search so necessary to building a strong soul.

So I knew that it was important, but it would take until after Anne died for me to discover that the sensing exercise turns the body into a sort of antenna that the nonphysical world can use to communicate with us.

It was in October of 2015 that I was shown why my wife needed me to do this.

I had decided to go to a William Henry event in Nashville, in part to be with treasured friends, in part to revisit the Scarrett Bennett Center where we'd held annual gatherings for fans of our radio show Dreamland, and in part because I was in such a very low, very lonely place in my life and I felt being there would bring me closer somehow to Anne.

During a break in the conference, a woman came up to me. She seemed quite nonplussed. Nervously, she said that she had something to tell me, but

she wasn't at all sure how to go about it.

She began by asking me if I had a special chair, like a rocking chair or something along those lines. She then said, "I ask because I just heard Anne's voice in my ear. She said, 'Tell Whitley I can see him when he's in the chair.'"

At first I didn't understand. Then I did—and it was pure gold.

Given the state of my knees, when I do the sensing exercise and meditate, I sit in a chair and not cross-legged as I used to.

I realized at once that Anne could locate me when I was doing the sensing exercise and meditation. She could track me and come to me.

Once I realized this, my mind flashed back to an enigmatic incident that had taken place in 1988 or 1989. I'd had a brief dialog—mental or physical I cannot tell—with with one of the visitors, one of the few I've ever had. I asked why they had come here. The answer was, "We saw a glow."

At the time, I assumed that this meant the glow of cities, signs of intelligent life. But now, the moment the woman repeated Anne's words, I knew differently.

The real meaning was that when we place our attention on physical sensation there is an amplification of some kind that must give off a glow. That must have been what the visitors saw and why they came to me in the first place. They were curious about this one little glow that showed up night after night out there in the empty countryside.

I was excited. Had I finally found a means of communicating reliably with my wife, something that would work from my end of the bridge? Her ability to make people do things like make phone calls was by me unquestioned, but what about something more familiar, like conversation? Could we ever resume the wonderful journey in conversation that had been such a delightful and defining part of our marriage?

Naturally, as soon as I got home I went about meditating with redoubled effort. I would do the sensing exercise, then go deep into the quiet of my

being, the place where the soul's whisper can be heard.

The visitors now reappeared in my life. They were here to help Anne.

CHAPTER 10



Know Thyself

IN THE DEAD of the night about two weeks after my return from Nashville, a series of shocks pulsing through my left second toe startled me awake. I jerked my foot and the pain stopped. But what had happened? It was three in the morning, dark and quiet in my bedroom.

I lay there thinking about the pain. It had been sharp, but now it was gone.

Could I have gout? I turned on my cellphone and searched for symptoms and no, this was not gout. It was more like an electrical shock. I examined the bed. There was no wiring anywhere near it. I don't own an electric blanket.

Mystified, I went back to sleep.

The next night, I was startled awake again. This time, my right nipple was pinched and pinched hard. This was much more painful than the shock, and I leaped to my feet.

There was nobody there, at least, nobody I could see. I looked at the clock. Again, three a.m.

I recalled back when I had meditated for months with the group of people

from between lives. They would awaken me at three to meditate with them, usually by punching me on the shoulder. They'd also come back at dawn, and for a long time I joined them at eleven, three and six.

It occurred to me that doing the exercise at three, when most people were asleep, would mean that the little glow I generated would be easy to see. So maybe they were giving Anne some help.

I went into the living room, seated myself and began the sensing exercise, that simple matter of placing the attention on the sensation of the body, limb by limb, part by part until the whole body is included.

“I saw the glow,” she says. “It worked. I got through to you.”

“Why not just tell me.”

“Because what we say sounds like your own thoughts. It wouldn't have seemed to you like objective information.”

So I have been meditating at eleven and three ever since. For the first year, they would wake me up in various ways if I didn't do it. This could be quite startling, such as when something that felt like a small snake rushed up my nose, or when there would be a sudden, unexplained explosion. Later, I would hear a gentle call from the living room, “We're here.” Now, they wait for me silently. If I fail on two nights in succession, they'll generally get me going again on the third night by blowing in my face.

Recently, for example, I simply could not rise from the bed. No matter how hard I tried, sleep would not release me. They made it quite clear that they were there, but I still just could not manage it. They let it go.

A few nights ago, I was again very tired, sleeping in a friend's country house. I wondered at three if I still needed to do it on vacation. A moment later, the doorbell rang. The house, however, has no doorbell.

Question answered.

I know that many people find stories like this unbelievable. But I am describing my life as I live it. In all my books, I have never done anything different. I have been truthful and accurate, always. I report with total

honesty. I do this because mine is a life being lived in a new way—a life in contact with the nonphysical world, but absent the traditional trappings of belief and mythologizing.

It is extremely important to me to do both meditations every night, especially the three a.m. one.

“It gives me something to focus on. And I’m the one who blows on you. The best kiss I can manage.”

“Now I want to not get up so you’ll have to kiss me more!” “Remember their sense of humor.”

“So we’re not alone in this?”

“Whitley, we are so not alone! We can’t make much noise, so we really have to band together. Nonphysical consciousness in all its diverse multitude and size, can collectively manage

to project into the physical not much more than a sigh. The bridge is everything. When the bridge is built, the whole physical world will echo our song.”

“The chorus of the angels?”

“If you want to say that, sure, but the song begins with you.”

At first, I don’t understand. Then I see in my mind’s eye a dear old friend, Lorie Barnes. And with it, there comes another discovery.

When, after the publication of *Communion*, we began to get those thousands of letters and Anne took charge of the situation, she soon realized that one person simply was not enough, so she announced that she was hiring a secretary. I suggested a call to Manpower, but she said she’d find one among our correspondents. And indeed, not an hour later, she handed me a letter. “This woman will be my secretary,” she said.

But when I read the letter, the author made reference not to secretarial work, but to singing and acting. When I pointed this out to Anne, she said, “Have you ever heard of her?” I said that I hadn’t. “She’ll turn out to be either a part time waitress or a secretary. Look at how well written this is,

what a good hand. I think she'll be a secretary. Also, she lives two minutes from here.”

She called her.

An hour later, Lorie, who was indeed an expert secretary, appeared at our door.

Together, they created a substantial file of letters, cataloging all of the ones that contained fulsome descriptions of experience. For years, the file was ignored. We created the Communion Foundation to finance its study, but could not get any grants.

Recently, Dr. Jeff Kripal, my co-author on *Super Natural*, became interested in the letters, and I donated them to his school, Rice University in Houston, where they will be archived for posterity and be made accessible to scholars.

They are a treasury of reactions to mankind's most extensive contact with another sort of reality and other intelligent species, physical and nonphysical both.

Many of the letters report encounters with gray beings with big eyes, some fewer with the squat, dark blue figures that have become central to my own experience, and beyond those with many, many other sorts of entity. Of them all, the dark blue figures, though, seem most concerned with our souls and our lives, and perhaps there is a very special reason for this.

The experience that prompted Lorie to read our book and write us a letter, in fact, involved these figures. It was the early fifties and she was pregnant. One night she was alone in her apartment in Queens. It was about 11 and her husband, a performer, was out on a job. She was reading in bed when she noticed movement and looked up. Standing beside the bed in a column were a number of short, dark blue figures.

In those days, there was no “alien” folklore save stories about beautiful Venusians and other tall tales along those lines. But Lorie found herself looking into the face of a bizarre, frog-like troll. As she recoiled in horror, it

said, “Do not be afraid. We’re not here for you. We’re interested in the girl child you’re carrying.”

That only made it worse, of course. Seeing her terror, the figure added, “Why do you fear us?”

She said, “Because you’re so ugly!”

Whereupon it laid a gloved hand on her wrist and said, “One day, my dear, you will look just like us.”

It turned out that Lorie’s baby was a girl, something that could not be known in those days prior to birth. She grew up to be a perfectly normal person, in no obvious way connected to any strange experiences.

Note this: they were not interested in her because of psychic ability or some other unusual trait. So why were they interested?

I suspect that they are interested in us all and involved with us in ways we are only just beginning to suspect. There is a reason that they told her that they were “soultechs.”

The statement that was made, “One day, my dear, you will look just like us,” is so strange that it suggests that we know even less than we imagine about what is really happening here, what our lives are and who we really are.

Maybe the human species has more than one form. It’s not an uncommon situation in nature. Butterflies start out as caterpillars, for example. Tadpoles undergo an extreme transformation into frogs.

There is additional evidence that we may be more extensively involved with this other form, and that we may be filtering it out.

A psychologist was driving home one night along the Grand Central Parkway, passing LaGuardia Airport in New York City when he was horrified to see a huge jet dropping down onto the highway. His first thought that a plane had miscalculated the location of the runway and was going to crash into the dense stream of traffic. But as it passed over his car at low altitude, he saw that it appeared to be some sort of fake, that it wasn’t a plane

at all, but something that was designed to look like one.

The next thing he knew, he was observing an animated sign on the roadside. Strange symbols were passing across it. He saw a number of cars pulled over, and decided to satisfy his curiosity and pull over himself. Off the side of the road, he saw a group of people standing below the sign in a circle. Deciding to see if they knew anything about what was going on, he began walking toward them. Before he could get there, though, a shadowy sort of dwarf approached him. Blocking his way, it said “Get out of here.” The tone was gruff and menacing, and he decided at once to comply. He got in his car and drove on—and that’s where his story ends. He never found any explanation for what he saw.

Taking both of these stories together, a few things can at least be inferred. The first is that, whatever these creatures are, they are intimately involved with us. They are interested in our offspring. They gather groups of people together for unknown reasons, and protect these gatherings by utilizing distractions. They have told at least one person that, in the future, she will be one of them.

I see them all the time now. As of this writing, the last time I saw one was in June of 2017, and I’m sure that there will be more encounters by the time the book appears.

When we had our upstate New York cabin, they would come there frequently. Once, when there were a number of people sleeping in our living room and two more in a private room in the basement below, they appeared. The people in the living room could talk to one another but could not move. What they saw were short, dark blue figures leaping around the room like acrobats.

Meanwhile, the couple in the basement were surprised to see appear at the foot of their bed the figure of a friend who had died in the Mexico City earthquake of 1983. She seemed perfectly solid, not in any way ghost-like. She said to them that she was all right, then disappeared. At about the same

time, the figures upstairs also disappeared.

Later that month, I received a call from my literary agent telling me that there was a man desperate to speak to me, a person involved in aviation. Now, in those days, there were very many people trying to speak to me, but only this one had gone so far as to find my literary agency. I felt that I had to call him.

He said that, a short time before, he and his wife had been sitting in their living room at about ten at night. Their old dog, who was asleep on the hearth, unexpectedly became restless and needed to go out a second time. As the wife opened the front door to take him out, she saw what looked to her like a fireball crossing the sky and going down behind a nearby woods.

She called out to her husband, "I just saw a plane go in on fire. You'll get an emergency call in a few minutes."

At the same moment, their seven year old son came running downstairs saying that little men had brought his recently deceased older brother into his bedroom and he had said that he was all right.

The father was desperate to know if anybody else had ever reported such a thing, and I was able to tell him that they had—and that, in fact, Anne had discovered that the dead often appeared with the supposed aliens, especially these short, dark blue figures.

If close encounter truly involves aliens, then they must already be linked, their living and their dead. By bringing our dead with them during encounters, I think that they might well be seeking to help us become whole, too. But it may also be that what we are looking at is not an alien presence at all, but an aspect of our own species that mediates between the living and the dead.

The beings Lorie saw, the "soul techs," would, when they showed up at our cabin, often go into the childrens' rooms and shine lights on their bodies, saying that they were "doctors" and "looking at your soul."

Anne says they're "people who've done wrong trying to regain themselves

by helping others.”

I realize that they're the ones I called kobolds in the early days, dark blue, short. Human? That seems very strange to me.

"How are they helping?"

“One of the purposes of close encounters is to embed experiences like you and the close encounter witnesses have in your DNA. Future generations will be born with this record

in them. Because of this, they'll be able to take things farther. The huge increase in close encounters is about stepping up this process.”

A soul tool is being used to make physical changes that will in future generations enable contact across the bridge.

“We will give you the most exact guidance that we can, but it won't be complete. It can't be because the future isn't nearly as well known to us as you would like to believe. The worst part is that, when we can't offer enough detail, people in contact with us will use their imaginations to connect the dots. That's what happens to psychics who give out wrong predictions.”

“You've said some very exact things to me. The Trump election, for example.” (She predicted in September of 2017 that Donald Trump would be elected president, something that at the time seemed completely impossible.)

“When I said it, it was definite.”

“How can we know what questions to ask?”

“The best way I can think of is to ask about things that are not too far out in time. We can see the inevitable before you can, but not generally by much.”

“Can all the dead see the future equally?”

“It depends on their focus. I'm focused on the physical world. On you. My whole life was preparation for being this kind of teacher. Not everybody is doing this, but everybody can be called to it.”

“How do we do that?”

“Remember the love you felt for your parents, your

grandparents. Go back to it, the childhood love, innocent, trusting and so much a part of you that it flowed in your blood. It's very close to objective love. Reconnecting with it is what Jesus meant when he said we have to become as little children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Objective love is heaven."

One night in Malibu, in the spring of 2016, I began to find that out. I was at the home of friends, Leigh and Carla McCloskey, who often host speakers at their house. They have a large back garden, and on this evening a Tibetan lama was going to sit in it and chant. There were about fifty people there, some lying in the grass, others on chairs and benches. I was on a bench that looked across at a smaller bench that was unoccupied.

As soon as the monk started his repetitive prayer, I felt a change in my body. It wasn't unfamiliar. I have felt it many times during meditation. I would describe it as an increase in vibration, as if I was rising to a sort of higher speed.

In the next moment, I saw Anne sitting on the unoccupied bench. She was dressed in clothes she'd worn back in the 1970s, tan slacks, a green blouse and a sweater vest. It was an attractive outfit and I'd always admired how good she looked in it. Then she stood up and, without any sense of movement, I found myself at the bottom of a stairway. It wasn't a long stairway, but something like library stairs. I looked up and saw her again. She was looking down at me from at the top of the stairs. Behind her were rows of books. She made a little gesture, beckoning me to come to her.

But how could I ascend? I stood up anyway. Then I understood, because I could see my body behind me, still sitting on the bench. As I took one step and then another, the sound of the chanting died away. I entered a vivid, living silence and in a few steps stood before my wife. I looked directly into her eyes. There was a complete frankness there, a total openness. Also a sense that she was about to burst into laughter. And yet, had they not been so beautiful and so merry, the acuteness in her eyes would have made her

frightening. Then I noticed her hair, which was full and beautiful. She'd always hated her hair, and one of our readers had sent me a letter some months before saying that she had told him that she had gotten better hair at last.

When that thought passed through my mind, she smiled. She was now full of laughter, brimming with it—at herself, at me, with herself and with me. It was comfortable, accepting laughter, but tinged with seriousness.

She took a green book down from the shelf and handed it to me. On it was embossed in thick gold letters the word “Life.” It was the book, as I instinctively knew, of my life. I was rather nonplussed to see how thin it was. She gestured at me to open it.

When I did, I saw a young woman staring at me with a terrible expression in her eyes. For a moment, I was confused by this surprising image.

I had asked Anne to show me anything in my life that might explain why I am as I am. I know the literature of numinous experience well, which is why I know how alone I am in my life. Others have had strange experiences, many of them, but there are not many lives that are as consistently strange as mine.

I don't report most of these things. My criteria is simple: if there is some sort of corroboration, I will report an experience in detail. Otherwise, I keep them to myself.

I had been asking Anne to help me understand myself, and this moment was the result—the thin book, the young woman staring balefully at me.

My mother?

My birth was so hard that my mother had almost died of exhaustion. My head is big and it nearly killed her as I came down the birth canal. After I was born, I was unable to take her milk. I had to be fed on formula, and in the 1940s it did not provide satisfactory nutrition. I spent the first six months of my life screaming almost continuously.

I was so difficult to take care of that when I was six months old, my

mother had to go to a rest home.

Back in 1988, I had an MRI scan, which I have described in various books. The scan is normal except for one thing. There are a number of bright foci on the surface of my brain. In 2014, I had another MRI, and the same marks are there.

Lesions like this are a characteristic outcome of battered child syndrome. Add to this the fact that two vertebrae in my neck are fused and the picture becomes tragically clear: at some point in my infancy, I was dropped on my head.

Did my mother do this? Is that what the message from Anne is about?

A group of doctors are interested in my brain. They know that I am no liar, and are examining my MRI scans. One thing is clear so far: there was babyhood head trauma.

Was my mother a child batterer, then? Is that why she was sent to the rest home?

I don't know and I will never know. There is nobody left alive from that time who might be able to tell me. I don't remember my mother as being a terrible woman. On the contrary, she was my best friend and most staunch defender and advocate. We had a dear companionship. I fondly remember our endless discussions of philosophy and literature, and how much an ally she was of her too-bright little boy. Once I showed up in grade school with Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. The nuns telephoned her about it. She told them, "He reads whatever he wants to read. That book came from my hand."

Was there a lapse when she was alone with her difficult baby and desperately tired? In late 1945 or early 1946 when this would have happened, my father was still in the army. She was taking care of me and my sister, then a toddler. She must have come home from the hospital still exhausted, only to discover that this new baby was in agony and was going to be basically doing nothing but screaming and sleeping, and that the doctors could not help.

If it happened as I think it did, then my heart fills with forgiveness. I say

only that the mother who belongs to my memories and my heart is the one I cherish. I long ago embraced the message of the gospels regarding forgiveness, and also Anne's urging in "The Love that Led Me Home" to "put those burdens down." I refuse to cherish anger, even when it is justified, and in this case, I'm not at all sure that it is.

For one thing, perhaps I would never have lived this life without the injury. Head trauma is a characteristic of many people who display unusual psychic and psychological abilities. Obviously, I'm no exception.

So, on that night in Malibu, Anne started me on a journey into a truth about myself buried so deeply that I don't think I could ever otherwise have seen it. My mother, who loved me and who was the dear companion of my childhood, at one point in her life may have done me harm. This was the same mother, who, by the time I was eleven realized that my mind was hungry for much richer material than I could get from the children's literature of the time, and bought me the 54 volume set produced by the Encyclopedia Britannica called the Great Books of the Western World. She also introduced me to authors like H.H. Munro, "Saki", Franz Kafka, John Cheever, Thomas Mann and others. Salinger, of course.

In the Great Books, I found Plato's Dialogues, which excited me so much that I had to read them standing up. I would pace back and forth in my room, following the logic of the dialogues with intense excitement. The ideas and the way they emerged left me breathless. And Descartes—his work was so well designed, so careful and logical and yet so disciplined that I could not stop reading it. I just loved the way it made my mind feel, and I loved his famous presentation of Cartesian Doubt. Since then, I have lived a life in which I must practice this form of doubt constantly. He disciplined himself to doubt his senses. If I didn't doubt mine, my mind would descend into chaos. Keeping the question open is essential to my rationality and my sanity, and I have Descartes to thank for my understanding of how to do that.

I was alone as a child and am alone now. When Anne was alive, I had a

real companion—she also had suffered abuse, she also had hungered as a child for great thought and found it in some of her father’s books. She also was an advocate of the importance of drawing what we have lost in the unconscious to the surface in order to understand ourselves.

She used to say to me, “All you do is tell funny stories about your childhood. You need to face the truth.” And now here she was communicating with me across the bridge between the worlds, helping me to bring to the surface contradictions and unacknowledged dreads that were burdening my soul, and would have continued as burdens after death if I had not been able to acknowledge them during this life, and include them in the love that is my core, and the core of all of us, the objective love that frees us from all burdens and grants us the lightness of being that we need to not only climb those library steps, but to keep going.

So now people can say of me, ‘he got a bump on the head, that’s why he imagines all this crazy stuff.’ But I do not imagine it. I believe that the world as I see it is more accurate and true than the filtered version. It is possible for anybody to enter my world, too. You just need to know that it is here and that it is real, then learn how to notice its presence in your life. There is no need to suffer trauma.

When one begins to see the real world, the experience of being human becomes larger and more complex. Above all, the outlines of the bridge become more substantial, and those on the far side easier to see.

You realize that the real world is full of potentials and possibilities that we have tuned out, in fact, that nonphysical consciousness is much richer and more informed than we are. As you see this higher world, you also begin to experience this one as it really is, a sort of corner of something far greater than the physical could ever be.

As the scales fall from your eyes, you also see others as what they really are, every one of them.

They turn out not to be the small, pitiful creatures one might expect. Far

from it. Ordinary people are vibrant expressions of something—call it a divinity—that itself seeks to be known and longs to be known but that cannot be known. And this anguished, joyous being, also, you can see as part of you and all of you, and as all.

Then, for the first time, you realize that you are looking across the bridge, and there in that form are all you have ever known or loved, ancestors, friends, departed lovers, and another is there, too, a strange figure standing a little alone, looking back at you with the same wonder you feel.

You realize that you are more than you thought yourself to be, because that figure, already on the far side of the bridge between life and death, is also you.

Thus comes the recognition that we live not only in our bodies but also on the shores of life. We are fishermen who cast our nets into the mysterious waters of our own beings. What we bring up is self knowledge, and that is the most powerful soul tool of them all.

CHAPTER 11



What Is the Soul?

I ASK Anne what she is now. She says, “We’re light. Light, alive.”

“Then why can’t we see you?” She laughs. “I’m here!”

It’s as if she’s is just ahead of me, just along the road. “You say that the soul is light. What generates this light?”

“This is the energy of objective love, the desire to be itself. That’s why people who approach it during near- death experiences describe it as enveloping love. It includes everything.”

“But just calling yourself light isn’t enough. When I turn on my reading lamp, that light isn’t a soul.”

“We’re everywhere, but the light is undetectable.”

“I saw you as colors, red, green and blue. Were you at those physical frequencies?”

“Those lower frequencies parallel the higher ones in our world.”

“As above, so below?”

“This is why our world looks so much like yours. Why we look like memories of ourselves.”

“What’s the difference, then? Why are you above?”

“Remember the girl’s dress. That was a very important teaching, Whitley. That’s how reality looks from outside of time. How a life looks.”

I want to ask more, but then I realize the value of what she has just told me. I have a taste now of the difference between above and below. We are inside the images the girl wore, moving through life as if along a path. In the higher world, we don’t live our lives, we wear them. And that’s what it means to rise above life on the wings of objective love. That’s where she was.

I return to the colors. “Could an instrument have detected you when I was seeing you in the colored coats?”

“No, but the soul can be detected.” “How?”

“Those orbs people record—not the dust and junk like that—the ones like were in our woods. Those are souls moving slow enough to be seen and detected.”

“What do we need to do this more consistently.” “Strong attention.”

“So another tool of the soul?”

“Yes. You’ve cultivated your attention by doing the sensing exercise and meditating for fifty years. That’s why you see what you do.”

There is a tradition in human thought of relationship to this radiance that dates back to the earliest religious text we possess, and flows right through to the thought of American transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and others.

When our world was simpler, it was easier to sense souls, both our own and those of the people around us, and those beyond physical life. This is because we were less distracted and so had moments of awakening such as the states of “transcendent wonder” described by the poet Tennyson.

Then, in the late 19th century we begin inventing technologies that, while wonderful, also had the effect of drawing us deeper into material reality. We created the telephone, the car, the plane, then the flood of devices that we

possess now.

We forgot things like the light of transcendent wonder, and into the bargain we forget ourselves.

The first exploration of conscious light appears in the first religious document we possess, the Pyramid Text inscribed on the walls of the Pyramid of Unas in Egypt.

The record develops from there, appearing in every culture on Earth, fading away only recently. It has faded, but not died. In fact, it has been returning to our awareness. It is, of course, central to the stories of the near-death experiencers.

In seeking for an understanding of the soul, it's worthwhile taking a look at the history of the physical world's relationship with this living light, and to do that it's necessary to start at the beginning of religious thought.

The Pyramid Text is the first place in recorded human thought where the soul is represented as a serpent of light living in the spine—what some would call Kundalini energy and others the nerve pulses in the spinal cord. When, two thousand years after the Pyramid Text, Genesis was written, the soul was now seen as external to man, the source of his self knowledge. In the earlier text, it was seen as integral to being.

Neither vision is wrong. In fact, the vision in Genesis is an evolution of the earlier one insofar as it recognizes a separation between body and soul. It sees self-knowledge as self-will, thus indicating that man had reached another stage on the long journey toward the light—the glimmering girl I seek in my own life—which is the level of surrender, becoming as “a clear glass through which god can shine.”

Later debasements of the Genesis text identify the soul as an evil being that is entirely separate from us—a demon who whispers the secret of self-knowledge to us, thus leading us away from union with god.

Certainly the demon rides—look at the world around us. When Anne was alive, she always said, “we are our own demons.” Whenever somebody

brought up demons and Satan, she would say, “Don’t talk to me about demons. Talk to me about you.”

In the Pyramid Text, the serpent is *iahw*, the light. It sleeps in the spine as the core life-force, the *ta-ntr*. It is circled by seven smaller serpents, nerve centers that became the chakras, or circles, of Tantra. For it is in the Pyramid Text that Tantra is founded. In fact, it is in that text that the whole search toward the light began, Ann Sexton’s “awful rowing toward God,” Yeats’s and my journey toward the glimmering girl and the search of those experts in the light, the Syriac and all mystics are seeking that which fades though the poet’s “brightening air.”

Brightening, though? It’s not as if we were searching into darkness, then, and like all this wandering that has transpired since the text was written, it is into gradually increasing light. As the darkness falls around us, the light concentrates like the light of that man I saw on that night in the early nineties, brighter than diamond, calm in its eternity, sending out rays that, when they touched me penetrated my skin and left me with the taste of another person’s essence, the naked truth of him, at once so precious and so common.

“I would like to feel you that way one day, Annie.” “You keep going.”

The colors of the chakras reflect the ascension of light from density to evanescence. The red of dawn is the deepest chakra, the dawn of the body. Next is the orange of morning, the wandering child, then the yellow of midday, then the rising light looking back at the green of earth, then entering and becoming the blue of the lower sky, ascending after to the indigo of the high sky, then the pale violet light of the Milky Way. Freedom, and I can feel it so clearly, that it is there even for me.

“Annie, are there beings in the stars who have already found the light?”

“It’s not like that. It only looks like that from inside time.”

“So is there a search, or has conscious energy already found where we’re going?”

“Both.”

The serpent in the spine is the road of ascension. In the Egyptian religion, it was the passage that the soul used to leave the body on death.

“What’s it like to die?”

“You feel a shock down your spine. Something unlocking. Then you’re loose. I flew out of the front of my body, not the top of my head. I shot out. Then I looked around and there you were with your hand on my chest. O my soul, I felt such strong feelings! I reconnected in an instant with everyone I have ever been and everything I have ever known. You looked so little all packed into your body. You’re enclosed light. We’re free light.”

“What’s that like? Do you disappear into something larger? ‘Go into the light’ as they say?”

“The second I was out, I felt an explosion of joy. I was out and there really was an afterlife! There was love all around me. I put my hand on you but you didn’t notice. I showed you I could walk to make you feel better, and you saw that. Like I said, I was me. I still felt physical. I was still in the bedroom.” “I saw you walking toward me, but I couldn’t tell where you were. In a sort of neutral space was how it seemed.”

“As far as I was concerned, I was in the bedroom with you.”

“Did you go into light?”

“I am light.”

Nestorius of Nonhadra in the eighth century describes this paradox very well, of being in light and being light at the same time: “You must give your attention to the simple light within you. In this simple light, moreover, a star will occasionally appear and shine, but later will hide itself and disappear: this is the mystery of the new world.” He then describes an ascent in light that reads to me very like the ascent through the chakras first described in the Pyramid Text: “The light is the color of the sky, which is also the color of the nature of the purified soul. That color is the color of the firmament in which the intellectual insights of spiritual contemplation are situated like the stars.”

When Anne showed herself to me in that deep, gorgeous blue, I felt the

presence of a great purity. I can well understand it as “the color of the nature of the purified soul.”

I ask her, “Are you a purified soul?”

“I am, but remember that life is a good alembic. The universe is full of purified souls. Don’t put us on pedestals. Expect to join us.”

Nestorius continues, “And when the light is that of crystal, the very light of the Holy Trinity shines on the soul as well, and the light of the soul projects rays of fire which are the murmurings by which the soul glorifies God among the angels.”

This is, I think, a description of the same rays I saw emanating from the soul I meditated with. They were living parts of him that conveyed his essential being into my own body. The beauty was fantastic—a direct experience, from my perspective, of limitless ecstasy. And that was just one small person!

“There’s no such thing as a small person, Whitley. The glimmering girl you’re following isn’t just me. She’s the final light of all knowledge.”

“When you wanted me to start reading “Song of the Wandering Aengus,” did you know why you were doing it?”

“My ego didn’t but my soul did. My soul’s been your teacher ever since the day we met.”

“My soul’s teacher?”

For an instant I feel—or perhaps remember—her hand on my hand.

I am so close to this light that it hurts, but I feel also that the fire of it is my own heart. Without being able to put it into words more articulate than these, I understand completely how it is that Anne can be all light and also herself, and how all are like this, even those of us locked away in these little time machines we call bodies.

The ancient Egyptian word for “life” and “snake” is the same word, hayy. It is the word both of the spine and the fiery serpent within it. It is this serpent of conscious light that ascends at death.

I first became aware of it in two ways. The first occurred in October of 1985 when I was being approached by the kobolds but not yet consciously aware of their presence in my life. I did not become aware of what had happened until March of 1986 when I was under hypnosis for the first time with Dr. Donald Klein. Unexpectedly, instead of going to the night of December 26, 1985, I returned in my mind to the previous October.

All summer, I had prowled the house in a state of terror, protecting my family from the soft summer nights with a Benelli Riot Gun loaded with lead slugs. I had installed alarm systems. I'd sat outside my little son's room with the gun in my lap, then patrolled upstairs to check on Anne, then back again, over and over. Only when dawn came would I fall into a fitful sleep.

When Dr. Klein hypnotized me, I remembered seeing a short, dark blue figure standing in our bedroom. I vividly remember the shock that went through me during that hypnosis session, and the screams that pealed out of me. This fierce, terrible being approached me with a crystal wand, with which it struck my forehead. It elicited fearful images of destruction. Maybe they were actual, physical warnings, but I think it more likely that they represented the symbolic destruction of the world I had believed to be real. They were part of the process freeing my vision by unlocking my expectations.

But there was more to it than that. Also that October, I was experiencing extraordinary neck pain because of my then as yet undetected childhood injury. One night, it was so bothersome that I tried to twist my head with my hands to relieve it and maybe reduce the pain, something I had done many times before.

What happened this time was that another, unseen hand seemed to guide my movements. There was a series of what seemed like very deep chiropractic adjustments, in the middle of which there came a deep grinding sound and for an instant it felt as if my soul had fallen out of my body. The adjustments continued down to the center of my back.

I lay there amazed. For the first time since the pain had started when I was a kid, I felt complete relief. Wonderful. A weight that I had been bearing so long that I had forgotten that it was there had been lifted.

I had not only been freed of the pain, something in my spine had also been freed, and I became loose in my body.

After the Communion experience, I felt the close proximity of the figure who is depicted on the cover of the book, felt her presence much as I feel Anne's now. When I went into bookstores, of which there were many in those days, she would direct me to buy one book or another by saying in my mind, 'Get that one, open it to such and such a page,' that sort of thing.

One of those books was Robert Monroe's *Journeys Out of the Body*. Naturally, given who had directed me to it, I read it with avid interest. After I finished, I attempted an out-of-body movement using the method Monroe outlined.

I felt a loosening along my spine, then came rolling right out of my body and into the middle of our bedroom. I was completely conscious and normally aware. Of course, I cannot

know if all of my memories were intact, but I certainly felt like myself. I decided to go outside. After all, Monroe had traveled far and always gotten back. As I pressed through the slightly greater density of the wall, I reflected that this is how the visitors moved. They are souls, I think, that can assume a physical form.

Everything was covered with a thin film of shimmering blue light, even the ground and the electrical wires along the road. I decided to go no farther on this first try, but rather to return to my body. But when I tried to do that, its interior seemed to be covered with a slick, shiny film of what looked like mercury. I kept falling out and sliding down the bedside. I found that, if I just hovered, I slowly drifted downward. That worried me. I would rather have drifted upward.

The next thing I knew, I was in the front yard of my childhood home. My

father was mowing the lawn. “When are you going to come help me,” he asked.

I had hated mowing that lawn, and was instantly back in my body!

At the time, I thought that I would be able to get out again easily. But I never have, not that cleanly, not, in fact, until 2016 when the most amazing OBE of my life occurred.

I still did not understand the serpent very well, and the spine’s function as the lock that keeps it in the body.

After Anne died, I wanted to go, too. I wanted to follow her and stay with her, and the more clear it became to me that she still existed and was a conscious being and still loved me, the more I wanted to go to her.

I attempted the Tibetan practice of p’howa, which is conscious release of the soul out the top of the head. I could not accomplish it, though, because my soul remained firmly locked inside my body.

Then, in the fall of 2016, I attended a conference at which there were a number of neurologists and professors who take an interest, as does my Super Natural co-author Jeff Kripal, in extreme human experience.

We were sleeping in dormitories with small private rooms and I meditated as usual at 11 and 3. Because of a long day of conferencing, it was particularly hard to get up for the three o’clock meditation, but I managed it. I collapsed back into the bed, looking forward to undisturbed sleep until dawn.

Instead, at 4 I felt a bolt of electricity shoot down my spine. I was furious. I had already done the wee-hours meditation. Why were the visitors waking me up again?

Exhausted through I was, I got up to meditate again. But it didn’t work. I sat in the chair staring at the wall. Finally, I went back to bed.

Instantly, I shot out of my body and into the corridor. It was so sudden that for a moment I thought I’d made a mistake and stepped out of the room instead of turning to the bed. But when I tried to go back in, it was clear that I had no body.

My first thought was to try to appear to people. I am well aware of the fact that illusion of an OBE can be induced by applying an electrode to the right angular gyrus of the brain, which is part of the right parietal lobe and responsible for body image. Also of myriad efforts that have been made to explain the phenomenon away.

Anne says, “The first thing you realize when you leave life is that all of our beliefs are immature. We don’t know enough to have beliefs.”

Of course these academics and scientist would have the same knowledge of the brain that I did, and might well therefore assume that some sort of brain effect was responsible for my experience. So my first thought was to appear to one or more of them in the nonphysical state. Given that it’s something that has happened to me a number of times, I had reason to hope that it would work.

I first tried the conference organizer, whose room was across the hall. I couldn’t get him to wake up, though, and so went through the wall to the next room. Asleep, also. But in the third room I tried, the occupant was half awake. I lingered beside his bed until I saw his eyes open wide.

He describes his experience this way: “I was sleeping at around 4AM when I remember seeing you standing in the open area between the foot of my bed and the wall. Arms beside you, calmly looking at me as we talked telepathically for some time. I don’t remember the topic but whatever it was, it kept me awake and was profound because I couldn’t get back to sleep for an hour or two...You had on a one-inch colored checked shirt and you looked calm and happy but you weren’t smiling. I guess I sensed you were calm and happy. You seemed to love me in some way because I felt comforted and calm when I went back to sleep. It seemed like a 20 minute talk and then you left through the ceiling.”

I went so high that I could see the line of dawn crossing the continent. Above me were the sacred, silent stars, around me the indigo of the height of the sky. Then I raced down

across the continent, flashing through the dawn and onto what appeared to be a college campus. It was just after dawn, the sun was golden, the shadows were long.

The next thing I knew, I was in front of a building. Vision in this state is not the same as physical vision, at least not in my experience. For example, I don't generally see things that I did not know existed as what they are, but as something similar that is present in memory. If this is true for many or most of us, it must add to the disconnect between the physical and nonphysical sides of life. As time goes on and things change, the nonphysical side might well have less and less of an ability to understand what is happening in the physical.

“Which is why I didn't like you throwing out my socks. I need things to be the same there if I'm going to stay connected.”

(The morning after she died, for some unknown reason I threw out Anne's playful mismatched socks, which were loud and fun and greatly enjoyed by her. I heard her say, 'you threw out my socks!' I bought new ones, and they are in her drawer to this day.)

In any case, I went into the dormitory. On the wall I saw a large black lozenge-shaped form. I have seen them before, but I don't know what they are. You do not see them when you're in the physical state. My guess is that they're creatures of some sort that exist in the level next to ours, which is perhaps material in some way that enables it to share our space without intersecting with it.

I wanted to see if I could enable anybody here to see me, so I went down the hall to the door of one of the rooms. Maybe somebody in the room would be awake. I'd seen a man of about twenty outside, but he had looked right through me. When people are motionless, like in bed or in a chair, it's easier to get them to notice you, I have found.

I saw what I took to be an exceptionally long dulcimer leaning against the wall outside the room. It had a fluted end, which made me think of a musical

instrument.

There was nobody in the room, so I decided to go back to the conference. After all, I was halfway across the country. I did not want to lose track of my body.

I ascended once again and this time angled down the way I had come, and returned to my body easily.

Understand, I did not control this. Whoever sent that shock down my spine, unlocking my soul, was managing everything. And this is something that must be remembered about the whole OBE experience. We are not in control of it. Even when I leave my body on my own, where I go is controlled. That level of life is, I think, a conscious medium and being in it is being inside a greater mind, and being part of that mind. It is going to be deciding for itself who comes and goes and what they do and why.

At breakfast, there was quite a stir going. The man who had seen me had emailed a friend about it and people were talking about my OBE. I was delighted, frankly. I was there to describe unusual experiences, and I had provided one to this group who were studying them from a serious scientific and academic standpoints, not all of whom accepted the idea that they were actual experiences, but rather perceptions that seemed experiential.

Later that day, as I described what I had observed on the campus, it became clear that two of the professors knew the place I had visited: It was their university. They were even rather sure that they knew the specific dormitory I had visited.

In the spring of 2017, I went to the campus in physical reality. We drove around, looking here and there, until I saw a familiar building. It was indeed a dormitory. We stopped and went in, and I found myself standing in a place that I had never seen before except out of the body. Every detail was familiar, the placement of the furniture, all of it.

In wonder, I proceeded down the hallway to the dorm room. It was there, just as I had seen it. But leaning on the wall outside the door was not a big

dulcimer but something that until that moment I had not known existed. This was a longboard, a type of extended skateboard. It had a fluted end, just as I had seen on it when out of my body.

I stood there reflecting on what was happening. The only reason this place was familiar to me was because I had been here while outside of my body. My soul had moved along this corridor while my body lay in a bed over a thousand miles away.

I bowed my head and prayed my thanks, and felt in that moment the truth of myself and the truth of us all.

I turn my mind back to the Pyramid of Unas and the authors of the Pyramid Texts. They had little in the way of material possessions. They knew hunger and pain and early death. Their understanding of the physical world and the nature of the body was deeply flawed and incomplete. But not the soul. This, they understood.

We are not used to engaging with the soul. We cannot see its colors or feel its presence in our bodies, along the spine to which it is attached or in the nervous system where it has its dwelling within us.

“Annie, what are we?”

“Light. Even the physical world, the body. All that is, is light. Slower or faster, in the end, it’s light.”

CHAPTER 12



The Most Powerful Soul Tool

WE UNDERSTAND how to build a house, how to write a poem, how to dream, but we don't understand how to think of ourselves as light. I look down at my hands, and I see physical objects. They feel solid. They're full of blood and muscle and bone, covered with skin. In short, they aren't light.

But then if I look a bit closer, I begin to see them differently. They are a complex of cells, each one an entity unto itself but none an island. My hands are colonies of cells divided into various different functional groups, all working together in sublime co-operation.

Looking even closer, I see atoms arrayed in intricate patterns, minute sparks of energy that are the actual building blocks of my hands. Closer yet, and the atoms lose focus. We imagine them as little planets with electrons orbiting them, but that's not what they are at all. Instead, atoms are fields of energy, nothing more or less.

So my hands look like hands and work like hands and are constructed of physical matter, but, at the bottom, they are energy fields. Even deeper, they are a sort of memory. They are information. Data.

I am this data, a swirl of information suffused with light that is too energetic for us to measure, which we call the soul.

We are light.

The kobolds told Lorie Barnes that they were soultechs— soul technicians. They look at people by shining lights on them and into them. Something is reflected from within, inner light reacting to the outer light with which they are exploring.

Alfred Russel Wallace, who, along with Charles Darwin, discovered the principle of natural selection said, “Man is a duality, consisting of a organized spiritual form, evolved coincidentally and permeating the physical body, and having corresponding organs and development. Death is the separation of this duality, and effects no change in the spirit, morally or intellectually. Progressive evolution of the intellectual and moral nature is the destiny of individuals, the knowledge, attainments and experience of earth-life forming the basis of spirit-life.”

Because he was a proponent of spiritualism, Wallace was a controversial figure in 19th Century scientific circles, exactly as he would be now. He was also, however, one of the great naturalists of the age and also one of the first advocates of the need to preserve the environment.

His description of the duality of body and soul fits very well both with my out of body experiences and Anne’s NDE and her and many other descriptions of her entry into the afterlife. In fact, she described her experience of leaving her body in terms that mirror Wallace’s concept quite exactly.

She says, “When I called you from my deathbed, it was because I was sort of falling out of my body. When you came rushing in, I was so glad. I thought, ‘he can hear,’ and I knew that we would stay together. When you put your hand on my heart and started saying goodbye, I just let go. I felt my heart stop. It didn’t hurt. Then there was an unclasping along my spine. I popped out. I went right through your hand and into the air above the bed. I

looked down at you with your head bowed and crying and saying goodbye. But why? I was right there, right with you. That was when I realized that there was an afterlife and I was in it and boy, that was exciting.

“I was me. I had on the clothes you saw me in. They were just there, part of the way I was imagining myself. Comfortable clothes. I felt like me, like my body but not sick and paralyzed and miserable. Normal. I felt normal.”

For the kobolds, being a soultech involves examining the light body, but for us it involves using it.

When I am in the out-of-body state, I can often be seen by others in a recognizable form. One woman was horrified to see me standing in her bedroom in the middle of the night. She recognized me by the glasses I was wearing. In another case, a radio talk show host saw me in the night looking down at him from his bedside. He proceeded to ask me about it on the radio. The professor at the conference saw me standing before him.

Despite how I appear to others when I'm out, I don't perceive myself as a sort of lighter version of my body. I feel like a ball and I have vision all around myself. I don't feel borders like I do when I'm physical. I don't sense myself as light and I don't think I'm ever seen in that way. When I was on the college campus, there was a student walking toward me. I paused right in front of him, but he did not seem to notice me. And yet, the scientist at the conference certainly did, and recognized me immediately.

When we are alive, the light body is intermingled with the physical body. Generally when we die the physical body takes on an appearance of emptiness. It's movement stills, the light leaves the eyes. You can see death there.

But when Anne died, something rather different happened. There was a startling change in her appearance. I had been with people in their dying before, but I had never seen anything remotely like this. It was as if her features had not been composed of flesh and blood at all, but of some substance that surrounded her flesh and covered it. When she died this

substance departed. What was left in the bed was a person with thick, straight eyebrows and narrow cheeks. She was shockingly smaller than she had been just seconds before.

It was as if some part of her that you could normally see had departed, leaving behind much less physical substance than is normal.

“I let go. It was easy. I was mainly concerned about you and A. My guys were really sad!” “More left than usually does.”

“By then a lot of me was light. I’m big in light.”

There is in Tibetan Buddhism the idea of the rainbow body. This is the body of a master, which, on his dying, leaves behind a group of signs. The first of these is a shrinking of the physical remains that occurs because so much of the body had already become light. Those of highest attainment are said to completely dissolve over a few days.

“I didn’t.”

“Did you see what happened to you in the hospital?”

“Pieces of me are still there.”

“Would you donate your body again if you had it to do over?”

“Sure I would!”

Such a teacher, Annie! You’re teaching me right now not to be identified with whom I love, because I’m having a hell of a time imagining parts of you floating in formaldehyde.

I can feel her laughing at me, darn it! “You died very pure.”

“I did.”

Another sign of the rainbow body is a fine mist that forms immediately after death. This is then followed by many rainbows.

When, in the hours after she died, I began to notice signs of the rainbow body, I did what I could to record them. I took a picture of the hearse disappearing into the mist that had formed upon her death. A few days later, I took more pictures of the rainbows that followed me to her wake.

“Were you a rainbow body?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it different from going into the light?”

“Yeah.”

“How?”

“I’m here in the living room talking to you.”

“I can’t see any special light.”

“It’s too fast for your eyes. I’m wishing it wasn’t.”

“I just think of somebody becoming a light body as grand.”

“The man I saw like that was really magnificent.”

“Not to him. To him he was ordinary. Like Dog. Dog is ordinary and magnificent both.”

“When I’m meditating, I see you and Dog together a lot.” “Yeah. Dog can be absolutely Dog and absolute at the same time.”

The first really powerful manifestation of Anne’s continued presence was the explosive event at the home of Trish and Rob MacGregor—a flash of light and an explosion.

“I had been going around trying to talk to people and nobody was noticing me. It was just plain odd and really annoying. You feel like yourself and you talk and nothing whatsoever happens. You yell. You completely forget about being dead, at least I did. I was racing around the country with no effort and not even thinking twice about it. When people would think about me, it was like a wind blowing me toward them and all of a sudden there I was with Trish MacGregor, who was sitting there writing about me. I said hello. No response. I touched her head. Nothing. Finally I just blew up. Then she sits up and yells and they both start running around their house. You would have loved it, Whitley, it was exactly like one of your practical jokes.”

“So you weren’t angry about your death?”

“Are you kidding? I was glad to get out of that hulk. But I was frustrated that everybody’s so blind and deaf and—just plain thick.”

I feel the past her frustration the sweetness and the other- directedness that keeps her here among us. I see that this mission that she is part of is why she lived and why she died.

These thoughts move me and cause me to feel her presence deeply. I feel as if I can almost see her light right now.

Now, if you look back over these paragraphs, you can, I hope, see something of the soul tool I am describing. It can't be put into so many words, this tool. At its core, it is a willingness to accept what we cannot see. The locked expectations of ego do not allow us to observe the way souls give of themselves. Ego always holds something back. If any words can sum up this soul tool, it is that it is a state of giving everything that one has to give— of giving one's light to others. In Anne's case, that light was symbolized by those rainbows.

If you want to start using this tool while still in the physical, you have to be willing to open your heart so completely that you will weep merely for the existence of others. You will be completely compassionate, but without ego, for ego will make you judge rather than see, and judging others has nothing to do with real compassion.

When the kobolds look into the light of souls, I suspect that they are looking for something like this compassion, seeking it by the way it shines. When they find it, I think they stay with that person, offering them support and teaching from inner reality, only rarely if ever emerging into the conscious surface of their lives.

My mind goes to some other ways of Tibetan Buddhism, most particularly the way imagination is used in its practice. One finds the energy of the deities in that theology by imagining their presence, and I see that the disciplined use of imagination is integral to the inner seeing that is so important to the proper use of this deep and elusive soul tool.

As we have gone more and more soul-blind, we in the west have ceased to understand this skill. Here we say, "just the imagination."

It is crucial, imagination, because of the empowerment it can bring. For example, you can imagine yourself to be completely compassionate and completely open. You can imagine that your ego is a tool, not a trap, and that you will not fall into judgment when you see your failings and the failings of others.

“You died pure. How?”

“Gave up my anger, mostly. I made a conscious choice: I would take the happiness road.”

“But what about things like the Holocaust—mothers who died in the gas chambers trying to protect their children. How could they leave happy?”

“Blessed are the persecuted, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Understand that you enter our world in the split of a second, often even before the body is dead. The people in the gas chambers were screaming in agony and terror, but they were also in the kingdom.”

“And the murderers?”

“Forgotten.”

“You’ve said something like that before. Forgotten in what way? Do they just disappear or what?”

“Souls too heavy to rise fall.”

“They go somewhere, then?”

“You know.”

Yes, I do know. I have seen that. I have been there. There were in my life two instances in which I was shown something relating to an underworld. The first occurred after one of the mediations with the people from between lives. They used to page through my mind, causing me to relive past events in startling and uncanny detail. One night, paging through my memories, they came across a moment during which I had been tempted to cheat on Anne.

They hesitated. Lingered. I writhed in discomfort.

After the meditation ended, I went as usual to bed.

I hadn’t cheated. I’d only been tempted. So all was well— wasn’t it?

In those days, I could not have told you what a soul tool was, but I was, on that night, being taught the deepest of lessons about this elusive tool. It is that the way to open one's own heart in true compassion is to give everything one has to the needs of others.

A few hours later, I woke up to see something so horrific that for a moment I simply did not understand what I was looking at. But then the two presences hanging from the ceiling above our bed became clear. But they were impossible. Nothing like that exists.

Except that they did.

I was looking up at two bulging black spiders, each easily two or three feet long. Their gleaming abdomens were ringed with yellow tiger stripes. I could see the pointed stingers at the base of their tails. Worse, they were scabbling against the ceiling, struggling not to fall on us.

Dear god in heaven, it had to be a nightmare.

I rolled out of bed, my initial impulse to run. But then I looked back and saw Anne lying there peacefully asleep. A few feet above her, the most unstable of the two looked ready to fall.

Now that I was on my feet, their appearance seemed entirely physical. I could even hear the rhythmic scraping of their claws as they struggled to find purchase against the ceiling.

I had never wanted so badly to run, never in my life.

But there lay Anne, completely helpless and right under them.

I stared at them. They were there. Impossible, but there.

I didn't see how I could attack them. They were far too big to crush. I thought of shooting them, but I dared not walk around to the other side of the bed and get the shotgun.

If there is such a thing as a demon, I was looking right at two demons.

And again, there was Anne. My darling wife, helpless, right there!

The scabbling was louder. I noticed that one of them had built a sort of nest of spider web. Where they here to stay, then?

Then I realized what I had to do. No choice.

My only right move was to put myself between her and the danger by lying on top of her.

I stood there looking at them. They still appeared to be entirely real. The idea of getting even an inch closer to them was appalling. But I couldn't let them fall on her.

I told myself that they couldn't be real, but I also couldn't believe that they weren't.

I leaned down. There was maybe three feet of clearance between her and the one above her side of the bed. I was really close now, close enough to see the spiked hairs on its legs and the gently pulsating segments of its abdomen. In that moment, there was no way you could have convinced me that they weren't actual, physical creatures.

Then the thing shuddered. I looked up and saw one of its legs waving in the air.

I had to do it. Now.

I slid into the bed and lay on her. Her reaction—fantastically—was to sigh happily and open herself to me. But of course, she had no idea what was going on.

I was so scared that I felt myself getting dizzy. I was about to black out with terror, and here she was assuming that we were making love!

As completely as I could, I covered her with me.

I waited. Acid burned up into my throat. I shook like a leaf in a storm.

Nothing happened. I waited.

More nothing.

After a time, I noticed that the scrabbling of the claws was gone.

When I finally dared to turn and look, the ceiling was empty of spiders.

My wife was ready and we passed the deep night in the mystery of love.

I see now the depths of this remarkable soul tool, what it means to completely give oneself to the lives of others.

You do this and the part of you that is ego comes to seem small enough to contain. Because it would never, ever give itself so completely to another, you can see its borders. So this elusive soul tool is about discovering the borders of one's own ego by a process of completely selfless giving.

If I had failed the test and run, then things would have unfolded differently. How, I cannot know, but I do know this: nothing was going to prevent me from protecting Anne, whom I loved with all that I was and am. And I know also, now, another truth about me. Feelings at that level are objective. I would give myself in precisely the same way to anybody who came to me in such need.

Compassion sees only need. It forgets judgment and in so doing takes one out of ego and into soul.

The two things the visitors have been most intense about with me have been humility and protecting the hearts of others—in particular, Anne's heart.

A few years before, there had been not a test but a warning, and I will never forget it in all of my days and beyond my days.

In the years after *Communion* was published, Anne organized many groups to come up to our cabin. Often enough, as I have reported in previous books, they met the visitors.

Once, we had a group up which included a young woman who took a shine to me. She was attractive and I was tempted. I did nothing, however. Later, in Los Angeles, we once again encountered her and I was again tempted. Once again, I did nothing.

We spent that night in the Beverly Hills Hotel, and no sooner had I fallen asleep than I found myself being dragged downward through solid rock. I was in some sort of cage and I couldn't get out. This was more lucid than any lucid dream I could imagine. It felt real. As I shot downward, I realized that I was inside the legs of a gigantic spider. Nothing I did would release me. Those legs were like iron.

Finally, I managed to get out. I found myself back in my body,

hammering my arm against the bedside table. The lamp was smashed, Anne was screaming—and I was shaking with terror.

I connected what had happened to the temptation the young woman had offered me, and resolved never, ever to even entertain such a notion again.

Souls too heavy to rise fall. I will never forget those words. But in these cases? A man is just vaguely tempted and he ends one time being scared out of his wits and another at the gates of hell?

There was, however, a reason.

Recently, I read *the Science of Near Death Experiences*, a group of papers edited by Dr. John C. Hagan III. In the paper “Distressing Near-Death Experiences: the Basics,” by Nancy Evans Bush and Bruce Grayson, the case of a man who experienced a negative NDE after a cardiac arrest is discussed. He “felt himself falling into the depths of the Earth. At the bottom was a set of high, rusty gates, which he perceived as the gates of hell. Panic-stricken, he managed to scramble back up to daylight.”

I know that panic very well. All too well. But I didn’t do anything wrong! So why was I visited with these horrific experiences?

“If you had cheated on me and I had gotten mad and left you, our mission could never be completed. They feared for your soul, because you had no way of knowing then how serious the failure involved would have been. Only after death would you have seen it, and it would have crushed you.”

“Would you have left me?”

“If you’d cheated once or twice? No. But if you’d made a habit of it, then our life together would have been ruined.”

“This love is the most beautiful thing I can imagine. I never would have done anything to damage it.”

I feel her drawing close to me once again. I find myself recalling a summer night, years after these two experiences were behind me.

We were living in Texas then, and we used to get up at two in the morning to walk because it was too hot during the day. We walked under the

blowing trees. The south wind—the moon wind—was so swift and fresh that we could smell the sea a hundred miles away. On that night, I imagined that my soul and Anne’s soul could become one. I wanted us to be one.

I remember as we walked along, I took her hand in mine. Her hand was warm and small in mine. I recall thinking that it was like the hand of the man from between lives, as light as air, a hand that was warm, alive and a shadow.

I kissed her fingers and she laughed a little, and the wind blew, and the moon flew in the clouds.

On that sweet night I sensed for the first time that not only were our bodies together, so were our souls.

Our bodies have parted but our souls never will. Had I cheated on Anne and ruined our marriage, we would not be here now. Anne’s mission would have been destroyed because I would not have been here on this side of the bridge of love trying my best to record it and share it in this text.

So of course they over-reacted. They were terrified, and with good reason.

Fortunately, they scared the hell out of me, too. But for all that, what a great teaching. Give oneself to the needs of others and discover the borders of ego.

That, truly, is light. Enlightenment.

“You gave everything you had to this, even your life.” “You, too, Whitty.”

“I guess I did.”

I feel her warmth against me, so close now. The kiss I couldn’t feel—now I can. Souls can kiss, too, you know.

CHAPTER 13



Soul as Second Body

WE'RE TOLD that there's no such thing as second body, don't bother to look, nothing like that has ever been recorded or ever will be. So don't imagine for a moment that you have a soul, let alone that hungers for work and longs to understand and use soul tools, that wants to help itself and others, that loves all that it meets with encompassing objectivity.

Second body has been recorded. There's a photograph of it—one, single picture. It was left behind two thousand years ago, almost as if in anticipation of the eventual coming of an era when the soul would be generally dismissed and forgotten.

It is, if you will, an argument on behalf of the soul, left behind—with amazing insight—long before the debate had even begun.

It's been ruthlessly dismissed—debunked, as they now say. But that's a lie.

In 1977, Anne and I attended a meeting at which Father Peter Rinaldi was scheduled to speak about the Shroud of Turin. He showed images of the relic and spoke about the Shroud of Turin Research Project, which was then just

being formed.

It was an impressive presentation, and we both found the positive images taken from the negative on the shroud to be perplexing. We contributed some money to the project and went on to continue to follow it over the years. The initial result appeared to show that it was indeed a piece of cloth from the first century AD, and that the image had been produced by a very brief, very intense burst of heat. But then in 1988 three separate laboratories carbon dated it to approximately 1260 to 1390.

We were disappointed, but also suspicious. By then I had been out of my body. I knew that the soul existed as I had been in the soul state. The first person to see me OBE had already reported her experience to me.

I had been trying to find friends and had ended up in her bedroom in the middle of the night. She lived in a city a thousand miles from New York and I did not appear to be entirely solid as I stood at the foot of the bed gazing at her. She was understandably furious and didn't talk to me for years. But the event had confirmed to me that the out-of-body state was real. So I knew for certain that what many people call subtle body or second body, or, as I do, soul, was, just like the physical body, part of nature.

I was studying it not through science but through the enormous literature of the soul and the work of the lively academic community that is devoted to it. Science may have retreated, but the academic world has not.

Later, when I met the people from between lives who meditated with me and saw that they could affect the physical world in a number of different ways, I understood that souls that are correctly prepared can still affect the physical. So I suspected that the man of the shroud, whoever he was, had been able to control his second body.

I knew, also, that the scientists involved in the carbon dating had for the most part started with the assumption that the shroud could not be evidence of soul life because such life did not and could not exist.

A few months before these results were announced, I saw just how

powerful such denial can be in a mind that is not prepared to accept that there is more to reality than it believes.

We had a group of people at our cabin, among them a dear friend, Dr. John Gliedman, a psychologist who was also a physicist. He had seen enough at the cabin not to be completely skeptical about my experiences, but he was in complete denial when it came to the soul. He had been trained to believe facts and had fallen with the rest of the scientific community into the trap that only facts currently understood could exist.

The group of us went one morning to the clearing where I had originally been taken up by the visitors into their crowded little vehicle. As we were meditating together in a circle, a gorgeous beam of pure, clear light shone down from above. I was sitting in the center of the circle and felt it surround me with what I now understand from Anne's teaching was objective love. Of course at the time, I didn't understand. I could see the light around me and feel the love, but intellectually I was at a loss.

The others sitting around the circle all saw the light, all except Dr. Gliedman. He simply could not see it. About ten minutes after it stopped, the group of us went up to the cabin, excitedly discussing what had happened. We were in what I would describe as a state of joy. The light had been very beautiful, and had come with a wonderful, warm sense of love that felt remarkably compassionate and—well, just happy. It was happy light.

John continued to claim that he had seen nothing. I'm sure he was telling the truth, too. He soon had a debilitating headache. One of the members of the group, Dora Ruffner, was a body worker, and she spent the afternoon trying to help him with it.

I knew what that headache was about. In the months before I finally opened my mind to the close encounter experience and was able to remember what had happened to me in December of '85, I would have a headache just like it every afternoon. This was because I was pushing away what I was seeing at night. I could not admit it into my reality, not without seeing my

whole view of the world collapse into chaos.

It is that fear of chaos—the mind unmoored—that drives all of the denial that curtains off reality. We live in the world as it appears, not as it is. In other words, we live by assumptions. We cling to them, desperate not to fall into the reality of mysteries and questions in which we actually live.

Dr. Gliedman was in the same predicament. Something had appeared in his experience that was outside of what he believed to be possible. Many people, not just scientists, would have had the same experience he did, I feel sure. We cling to a limited world view for many different reasons, and only patient inner work over time can pry us loose from it.

“It’s locked expectations. They narrow the slit through which you view the world even more than nature does. Unlocking them takes patience, self-respect and an openness to new possibilities. Look into the eyes of an infant. There you see unlocked expectations. Go as far back as you can into your own childhood, remember how it felt then to be alive. That’s how to start opening your expectations. To be truly awake is to have none.”

Clinging like John and I did to our locked expectations, the scientists who did the carbon dating could not allow it to show the actual age of the cloth. No matter how objective they believed themselves to be, in fact they could not have been.

And indeed, it has since developed that some of the fragments of material that were removed from the shroud for the experiment may have been part of a repair that had been made at a later time, although admittedly not all. But the fact that the cloth was in a fire could throw off carbon dating. This, however, was not taken into account.

Subsequently, more and more evidence has accumulated that the shroud is indeed from the Roman period. In 2009, Barbara Frale, a paeleographer at the Vatican Archive, imaged the shroud and found writing on it identifying it as the burial cloth of “Jesu Nazarene,” a description that would not have been used in the middle ages as it would then have been

heretical not to identify him as Christ. His Roman executioners would have labeled his shroud in this way.

In 2015, geneticists at the University of Padua analyzed DNA on the shroud, determining that the most abundant human DNA present came from Druze people, meaning that it was probably in the middle east for an extended period of time. But there is no way to account for this if it was a 14th Century forgery. Also, the oldest DNA found on it came from India, not Europe where the forgery is supposed to have taken place.

The herringbone weave of the material would have been extremely rare in 1st century Jerusalem, something reserved for only the most luxurious cloths. It would have been even more so in 14th century Europe. Only one sample of similarly woven linen has ever been found from the medieval period.

This is an important finding, because it means that the cloth on which the image appears would have literally cost a fortune. But what forger would spend that on something intended to make a profit in the thriving relic markets of the 13th and 14th centuries?

It would also have been an extremely valuable item in the Jerusalem of the first century, something that would have been used in the burial only of a person of high stature, and affordable only to an elite few—like, for example, Joseph of Arimathea. Another burial shroud has been recovered from a first century tomb near Jerusalem. It is definitively carbon dated to the first century CE. It is layered together, not woven, and is made of wool and linen, not pure linen.

In 2017, it was announced that the red marks on the shroud are human blood, and not only that, but that the blood was from a person who had been stressed, probably by torture.

In a peer-reviewed paper entitled, “Atomic resolution studies detect new biologic evidences on the Turin Shroud” published in Plos One by Elvio Carlino, Cinzia Gianinni and Giulio Fanti of the Institute of Crystallography in Bari, the authors write, “we used atomic resolution Transmission Electron

Microscopy and Wide Angle X-ray Scanning Microscopy experiments studying for the first time the nanoscale properties of a pristine fiber taken from the Turin Shroud. We found evidence of biologic nanoparticles of creatinine bounded with small nanoparticles of iron oxide. The kind, size and distribution of the iron oxide nanoparticles cannot be dye for painting but are ferrihydrate cores of ferritin. The consistent bond of ferritin iron to creatinine occurs in the human organism in case of a severe polytrauma. Our results point out that at the nanoscale a scenario of violence is recorded in the funeral fabric and suggest an explanation for some contradictory results so far published.”

Thus the previously published claims that the markings are paint appear not to be correct, based on this more sophisticated test.

While there still isn't conclusive proof that the Shroud is of middle eastern origin or that it was created during the first century AD, or that the man of the shroud is a Nazarene called Jesus, there is now a significant amount of evidence that all of these things are true.

There have been many efforts to duplicate the image on the shroud, and some of them appear at first to be convincing. However, all efforts to use a camera obscura such as might have been available in the middle ages leave an image on the linen that is much deeper than the one on the shroud. Physicist Paolo di Lazzaro of Italy's National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development, an expert on the Shroud, explains the problem: “the color's penetration into the fabric is extremely thin, less than 0.7 micrometers (0.000028 inches), one-thirtieth the diameter of an individual fiber in a single 200-fiber linen thread.” He went on to tell the National Geographic in 2015 that the ultraviolet light that would be necessary to create the shroud image “exceeds the maximum power released by all ultraviolet light sources available today.” In addition, “pulses having durations shorter than one forty- billionth of a second, and intensities on the order of several billion watts,” would be necessary.

No energy release like this is possible now, nor has it ever been possible. And yet the Shroud of Turin exists.

A flash of energy—light—of extraordinary intensity and extreme brevity caused the image to appear. What the effect, if any, of such an event might have been on the rate of carbon decay in the cloth is unknown.

So the shroud remains a question on two levels. First, there is the carbon dating that suggests a medieval origin. Second, there is the impossible nature of the image and the fact that it cannot be duplicated without causing a much deeper burn than is, in fact, present on the cloth. And then there is that remarkable flash of light.

I have seen beings of light with my own eyes. I have been suffused in it and sometimes during deep meditation seen it inside my own body. I know this light, although not, obviously, at the intensity that created the image on the shroud. I think that this light is subtle body, second body or soul. It is in a larger sense, being. And, as Annie has said, “God is the community of being.”

If we look to what was seen after the resurrection of Jesus, what we find is the emergence of a second body of breathtaking power—in fact, the most powerful manifestation of the soul ever recorded in the history of this species.

Anne was a scholar of the gospels, and one of our most frequent discussions involved whether or not the resurrection happened. We explored the idea that Jesus might have had a twin, which is part of the very ancient tradition of the Syriac Church, for example. But if he did, why were the apostles surprised to see him after his death? They would have simply assumed that this was the twin. And surely, in that small world, the existence of this twin would have been known. During Jesus’ lifetime, there would have been no reason to keep him secret, and certainly, after Jesus was executed, the last thing a twin would have wanted to do would have been to start walking the streets.

The reasons that the Romans executed Jesus were two. First, he was

openly claiming to be the Jewish king, in direct opposition to their own puppet king, Herod. As a Nazarene, he would have been considered a descendant of David and thus a far more legitimate claimant than Herod. Second, when he attacked the money changers, he threatened the flow of money into the temple and thus the whole financial edifice on which the stability of this new Roman province depended.

He was a political rebel and he was killed for that reason, but only after he appeared in Jerusalem. The Romans didn't care what he did in Galilee. They knew that the Galileans would never follow him. This was because, just a few years before his birth, there had been an uprising in the area and the central Galilean city, Sepphoris, had been sacked by the Romans and its citizens either sold into slavery or crucified by the thousands in the surrounding hills.

The Galileans heard only the political side of his message, not the subtle, stirring moral message.

All four gospel accounts of the resurrection mention that beings of light being were present in the tomb when the two Marys went to anoint Jesus's body. John says that there were two of them, dressed in white. Matthew describes a single being, his appearance like "lightning." Mark describes his clothing as "lightning white." All four gospels agree that he was dressed in white.

As I have said, I have seen somebody who could easily have been described as "lightning" at one point. When he was in physical form, the tunic he wore was white. So, as far as I'm concerned, such beings are as real as we are.

The one I saw in physical form was careful not to move, I think because he was concentrating very hard in order to appear as a material being. But Jesus walked with his followers. At one point he even ate with them and, of course, placed the hand of Thomas the Twin into his wounds. Anne always maintained that this was his twin brother, and he appeared with Thomas to

prove that he was not the same person. And then we would wonder if he really even died on the cross?

She was certainly very good at enjoying the question, and I recall those conversations with fondness and longing.

If, as it would appear, what came out of that tomb was

Jesus's second body still in coherent form, he must have had a very powerful attention and a fantastic ability to sense himself in order to manifest so clearly to people. It is my belief that it takes two things to accomplish this depth of soul-sensation: lightness of being and strength of attention. The man I saw do it could never, I don't think, have walked around a room. I doubt that he could even have spoken, and, given how rarely it is done, he must have been a real master of the skill.

Jesus was very extraordinary, but at the same time, judging from the deplorable condition of the poor fellow who left his image on the shroud, very much what he said he was, a "son of man" who had been treated with great cruelty by the Romans.

To assert that the resurrection really happened, and I think that it did, is not to also say that the tenets of Christianity as they emerged in the centuries following the event must be followed to the letter. On the contrary, to understand his message it is probably best to go to documents like the Gospel of Q, which is a compendium of consistent statements from the gospels that scholars believe represents an earlier document from which they were all derived.

"It's all about light, Whitley. Letting the light enter you. But you have to have a loving heart, show compassion and be humble enough to open yourself to it."

"It feels a bit like disappearing."

"Ego does disappear. It doesn't end, but it steps aside to let the soul take the attention. That's what it means to become as a clear glass through which God can shine."

So we have been set quite a challenge by this man who lived and suffered and died among us so long ago. But now, as

we come to the time when Earth's womb is no longer able to contain us, we need to revisit that message in a new way, with pure hearts and in true humility.

It's evening now, a warm summer night, and I remember back across the river of evenings I spent with her. When our work was done, we would make our supper and converse together. Such precious times, and I feel her now as I did then, her rich conversation and her humor.

She used to say, "People are too ominous about the gospels. Jesus had a great sense of humor. He accepted that people fail, and he forgave."

She used to laugh about Mary Magdalene at the tomb as her visit is described in John, thinking that Jesus was the gardener.

The green man was a fertility god in much of Europe, replaced by Jesus as the resurrected one. Anne often wore green to public events and encouraged people who came to see us to do the same. She said it was the color of those who loved life. She used to say, "I'm a resurrectionist. That makes me a green Christian." She meant that Christ is identified with the old pagan Green Man all over Europe. The resurrected Jesus is the pagan god of fertility in a new form, not as the rebirth of plants and the things of the earth, but as the rebirth of the soul.

When we realized that the shroud really did tell the story of the resurrection, it changed us both profoundly. It freed Anne and delighted her. She would say, "the resurrection didn't just happen at a certain time. It happened outside of time. It's always happening. You can feel it."

I couldn't. I guess it's my Catholic upbringing, but I worried too much about sin to really embrace something as wondrous as that.

"The worst curse that was visited on Jesus after he left this world was the one that claims that he was in some way special, apart from us, a deity separate. When they started calling him Christ, that was the darkness within

us trying to put out his light. He was just a guy, Whitley, who had surrendered completely to the light. That's why it shone through him so brightly."

"I still worry. I worry about being sinful." "Let's talk about it."

"How it weighs us down—that's what I worry about." "We don't see sin that way at all. Here, it looks like disease." "That's—surprising. I've never heard that before."

"Sin seen objectively looks like sores." That stops me. A memory tries to surface.

Then I realize what it is and I'm shocked. Moved. I haven't thought about this in years, and now here it is come to mind again, this time with the power of revelation.

Back in the 1980s I had a very striking dream—what's called a lucid dream. In it, I was walking along a road in a pleasant area of low shrubs and brush. It was about midday. As I walked, I noticed some movement in the brush. The dream was so vivid that I was as wary as I would have been in real life. As is often the case, I had the sense that I was not exactly dreaming, but also that this was not exactly the real world, at least, not our real world.

Out into the road came a man, naked and filthy. My immediate reaction was to try to help him. However, as I looked at him I realized that he was covered from head to foot with livid, running sores.

I couldn't imagine how I could help somebody in a state like that, and I didn't want his infection to contaminate me. I stepped back, moving away from him. He came toward me, reaching out to me. But he was slow, barely able to move because of the encrustation of scabs and infection that covered him.

I woke up. It was still dark. I sat up in bed. I was covered with sweat. For a moment, I thought that I was going to vomit, but the sensation passed. I went into the bathroom and got a glass of water, then went back to bed.

For nearly forty years now, that dream has lingered in the back of my

mind. I sensed that it was important but didn't know why.

About fifteen years later, I saw him again. He was better, many of the sores healing.

“He was giving up his regrets.” “His sins?”

“Evil acts here are remembered only in regret. His soul was sick with it.”

“Then if he'd just forgotten about his sins, he would have been fine? No consequences?”

“You can't forget a single second of your life. Not anything. No filters here, no pretending.”

“If he can't forget, does that mean the sores are there forever?”

“Remember ‘put those burdens down?’ Easier to do that when you're still in the physical, which he could have done but didn't. The brain is a wonderful instrument. It can cause soul infection, but it can also heal it.”

“We think in terms of good and evil.”

“That's a level of emotion that stays with the physical. We see sick souls, not evil people.”

“No punishment?”

“Do you think he wasn't punished?”

“God gave him the sores, then?”

“His life gave him his regrets and only he can reconcile them. Nobody can cure us but ourselves. There are no miracles here.”

Once again, no miracles, just nature. It is so important to remember that the world of the soul and conscious light is a natural world. It is like everything else, part of nature and subject to the laws of nature.

In that sense, the resurrection was a natural event—the light bursting out through a man who had surrendered himself to it entirely. So also, the man covered with sores—he was part of conscious light, too, and so also part of nature.

Both of them—the first and the last—were part of the same aim, the journey into ecstasy that is the reason that everything exists and why those of

us who have been given the gift of intelligence are so precious. Everything that is, is on the journey, but those of us with knowledge of life and death and the life beyond, we know it.

That's why he died for us. Because we know and are alone in what we know of death, and doubt the world beyond.

The greatest act of compassion ever seen on this earth was not Jesus letting himself die on the cross, it was what came after, which was the revelation that second body—the soul—is real. It was the resurrection.

CHAPTER 14



A Hidden Plan?

STARS EXPLODE. Devouring black holes wander the firmament. Asteroids and comets strike planets. Stars, even whole galaxies, collide. Vast cycles rule life on Earth, cycles far too powerful for any human intervention ever to change. And all of it seems to be random.

It isn't all destructiveness, though. Our planet is precisely the right amount of distance from the sun to enable life to form. The moon is exactly large enough and precisely close enough to put just the right amount of drag on the planet's rotational wind to slow it down enough to enable complex creatures to evolve. The planet is shielded from strikes from cosmic debris by the gravity fields of the gas giants in the outer solar system and by the closeness of the moon. Jupiter and Saturn will take the first hits and if anything gets closer, the moon will work as a shield. The result of this is that large asteroid strikes are much rarer on Earth than they are on the other planets. Earth isn't pockmarked with craters because the moon is.

Looking at the precision of all this, it's easy to think of the Earth-Moon system as something designed, a life building machine carefully constructed

to shield its inhabitants from as much of the random destructiveness of the cosmos as possible.

In there a mind behind it, then? Or is it simply that the universe is so huge that this spectacularly improbable situation was inevitable, and we are the children not of consciousness but chance?

There are strong arguments for randomness, but it is also true that a strangely high level of what looks like good luck is needed to explain why things have developed as they have.

I hesitate to join the heavily politicized intelligent design argument. Even if design is part of the picture, there is no reason to take a step farther and claim that a biblical god, ancient aliens, or some other known or imagined factor is responsible. If it's true, something must be responsible but what remains an open question.

So, is there a presence subtly shaping and forming the world—shaping and forming us, also?

If the universe is not a motiveless, random system governed by chance and statistics, then it might be a living thing that has motives and expectations, and, one might suspect, dreams.

For example, there is something eerie about the cycles of expansion and extinction that have characterized the evolution of life on Earth, including both our physical evolution and the evolution of human culture.

Our cultures haven't just been affected by some distant creating hand, they have been repeatedly upended by what I call incidents of light—instants of intervention, each lasting only a few seconds, that have changed everything.

Moses saw such light in the form of a burning bush and we ended up with an entirely new concept of God. In antiquity, every temple in the world contained a statue of its god. The statue was believed not only to exemplify the god, but to contain it.

The god of Moses was radically different. The holy of holies in the

temple in Jerusalem was empty because, following his god's instructions, Moses had told the Jews that he had no form.

This remarkable change effectively made this god immortal. As he cannot be seen he cannot be finally identified and understood, which is why he has remained relevant for so long. His nature evolves with our idea of him, which can never be fixed into any specific form. By contrast, Ra lies in ruins in the Egyptian sands, Athena is lost from her Parthenon, and the Temple of Jupiter Greatest and Best in Rome is a tumble of columns.

But "God"—our God—who came to Moses as a life changing and mind changing burst of light, is with us still, to this day challenging us to seek deeper and see more.

When, after his resurrection, Jesus ascended, he was surrounded by this light and absorbed into it.

Whatever precisely happened, it was so powerful that it sent a group of poor men and women out into a hostile and dangerous world to tell about it. They did this by walking from city to city, entering the marketplaces, raising their voices and speaking out. They did it in a hostile community without anybody to defend them and they accepted their lonely deaths on its behalf.

This light has power.

Paul the Apostle saw a flash of it on the road to Damascus and was so inspired that he changed from a persecutor of the followers of Jesus to a disciple of his teaching, and also went out alone into the world to spread his word. Christianity was thus born out of a flash of conscious light.

Mohammed saw it in the form of an archangel in a cave, and the Qu'ran came to be written. He, also, took his message into a hostile world and found himself having to do battle for it, and almost lost everything as a result. His inspiration was so powerful, though, that it transcended all resistance and caused another religion to appear. But like them all, its pristine brilliance was quickly distorted by those who seek power over others, and now it is hardly a shadow of what its creator and his vision must have intended.

Mohammed never for a moment countenanced anything remotely like strapping bombs to children and using them as murder tools. As well, you have the religion created out of the words of humble Jesus identified with vast cathedrals and immense wealth, and a fifteen hundred year long history of oppression.

These and other incidents of light have injected very pure ideas into our world, but so far we have not been able to handle their energy, and have consistently turned them into cruel and confused systems of belief that have nothing to do with strengthening souls or making the physical and nonphysical sides of our species into a coherent whole. They also don't address the larger question of why they happen.

Science can speculate. So can religion. But it's only speculation. Science cannot prove that they were all misapprehensions any more than religion can prove that they represent interventions by deities.

Nevertheless, there is something happening here on a very large scale that does suggest design and intention. In some ways it cradles and protects life, but it also has a habit of upending everything with truly exceptional violence.

Or maybe the destruction is random, and the strange way the planet generally recovers is what is designed.

For example, Earth is changing once again right now.

But to understand this, it's necessary to first explore her more distant past.

Earth has seen many different geologic eras, each one peopled by its own unique array of species. It has gone through at least five major extinction events that destroyed the majority of the species then alive.

So, was this chance or not? Or some chance and some design? And, above all, what does it mean for us right now?

I ask Anne if she knows. "Not at all."

"You don't have perfect vision of the past?"

"I have perfect vision of this past life and a sense of others stretching

back—a flavor of me that is my essential identity. But as to the dinosaur era and so forth, I didn't exist then.”

“So we're not there from the first. What brings us into existence?”

“A species is an idea. We are all part of the great idea that is man.”

I think again of the sentence from Physics from Fisher Information that she left behind, that the universe began as “a single, primordial quest for knowledge.” I can well imagine something seeking, questing and questioning, coming up with ideas, experimenting, wiping the slate clean and trying again, on and on.

“We can know the stories of our own souls, but not those distant histories. You don't die into a state of total knowledge. You die into the knowledge that you bring with you.”

I have made it my business to search through the deep past for the fingerprints of the designer. If there is a deep plan, it is hopefully possible to at least see its outline.

As, indeed, we can.

When the planet was just forming, something so enormous hit it that the crater it left behind is now known as the Pacific Ocean. What remains of that strike is the moon.

If the moon was not here and in a close orbit, there would be no higher life forms on earth. This is not only because it protects us from asteroid and comet strikes, but also because its gravity retards what would otherwise be continuous orbital winds blowing with hurricane force. Nothing more than lichens could grow on a surface scoured like that.

So the collision that created the moon was the fundamental shock on which everything that has happened since depends, right down to the loves and hopes in the shadows of your mind, and your children at play there in the back garden.

Was it an accident, then? When you add it to all the other things that life and evolution have depended on—the location of the moon near the earth, the

placement of the outer planets in just the right position to absorb the impacts of incoming debris, the fact that the sun, unlike most yellow dwarf stars, is strikingly free of the huge solar explosions that regularly sterilize their planets with radiation—you have to wonder if you are not looking at a gigantic design. Not only that, we do not see the gamma ray bursts coming from the center of our galaxy that are present in most of them, and which render them permanently sterile.

So a benign star in a benign galaxy, a planet the perfect distance from its star and a moon in exquisite orbital balance with it are what have enabled life to arise and evolve here.

If somebody desired this—desired life—in the stretching vastness of the desert that is this universe, they might only be able to fulfill that desire by creating a place like this. And if they were, further, interested in deepening its perceptual experience—perhaps so they could look through its eyes like a child peering through a magnifying glass—they might use evolution to create ever more sensitive creatures, from the earliest microbes all the way to man.

But the exquisitely protective crucible we live in is not the only factor that enables evolution. Sometimes things are changed. The blackboard is erased. Life is put under ferocious pressure and forced to either adapt or die.

“That I understand. It happens in individual lives, too— not just physical lives but the long, evolving lives of souls. The evolution of the individual parallels the evolution of the species, and that of every species the evolution of the whole. Evolution is holographic.”

“You say you don’t know anything about the deep past, but I see great insight in those words.”

“We know only the facts we bring with us, but all the principles we can understand.”

So we’ll go back, then, and see if a very large scale picture can be at least glimpsed. Maybe something of the designer’s mind and motives will be revealed.

Multicellular life forms emerged about 580 million years ago, and since then have been getting steadily more complex, more sensitive to the world around them and, perhaps most important of all, more curious. Compared to the basic perceptions of a bacterium—nutrition, need, light, dark—the perceptions of a human being are as a whole universe is to a single grain of sand.

As Anne said, if people haven't led rich, searching lives they can be very minimal when they die. But they can also be, I would think, towering miracles of consciousness.

And yet it's not safe here. For all the protection that surrounds Earth, it really isn't safe here at all.

Something like 99% of all species that have ever existed are now extinct, and there have been five great mass extinctions.

The third one, the Permian mass extinction which happened 248 million years ago, killed 96% of all species then alive. Everything living now, including us, is descended from the 4% that survived. The most famous extinction is the fifth, the Cretaceous mass extinction, which killed off the dinosaurs.

Right now, we are in the midst of a 6th mass extinction. The stage for it was set when the current ice epoch began. This is called the Quaternary Glaciation, which started 2.8 million years ago. During this period, the ice has expanded and retreated many times, with each ice age lasting about 100,000 years. They are punctuated by interglacials, and we are at the end of one of these right now.

In geologic time, these are very brief events. Looked at from the perspective of hundreds of millions of years, it's as if Earth is currently having a sort of seizure.

The extreme climate cycle that has characterized the Quaternary has caused a lot of species migration north and south as the planet heated and cooled, but also a steady process of minor extinctions.

15,000 years ago, that process intensified with the end of the ice age, the destruction of the mammoths and many other species, and has now accelerated to a scale and speed not seen since the extinction of the dinosaurs.

This is happening because the constant cycling back and forth between ice ages and warm interglacials is keeping habitats in constant flux, and now human activity is pouring greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, functioning like a continuously erupting volcano.

Most of Earth's geologic history presents a very much more benign picture, with epochs-long periods of stability and slow change. Violent events such as mass extinctions are rare. However, while the wildly variable climate cycle we are in now has caused some extinctions, it has also forced much more rapid evolution on adaptable species, the chief one of which is man.

“When physical intelligence reached a certain level, consciousness realized that it could not only be aware of itself, it could contemplate its own meaning. Across the universe this has happened many times and consciousness looks at itself now in billions of different ways, through the eyes of countless minds. Still more minds are desired, which is what led to the current epoch here on Earth. The stress brought on by the continuous changes in climate of the current period are intended to speed up evolution on Earth.”

Homo Habilis, the ancestor of the whole human line, appeared at the same time that the Quaternary's stress-inducing ice cycle began.

Did Homo Habilis possess some version of “I am,” and did that excite conscious light, impelling it to increase the speed of change on planet Earth? Is the Quaternary's rapid cycling not Earth having a seizure so much as trembling with excitement?

To explore this, let's begin by looking at those past extinction events.

Logically, the fantastic destruction caused by an extinction event would seem to compel life to start over again, virtually from scratch. But this is not the case. Instead, extinction events generally result in the appearance of

better, smarter and more adaptable creatures than were present before they occurred.

The engineer sweeps his blackboard clear for the same reason. He wants to start with a new and better plan. And yet, everything I understand about reality tells me that it's not that simple.

The most famous example of this is what happened after the Permian extinction. For 10 million years after the event, life on Earth struggled with continuing negative conditions on a scale that we can hardly imagine. The land was stripped bare, the atmosphere was foul, the oceans were roiled by fantastic, all but endless storms. Little survived, nothing thrived.

But then, according to a study presented in 2012 in *Nature Geoscience*, by Zuong-Qiang Chen and Michael Benton, life not only recovered but entirely new species burst forth in millions. It was as if, according to a statement made by Benton on the LiveScience website, "the event had re-set evolution."

Another is the KT Event that destroyed the dinosaurs. When life recovered, mammals, a more advanced and capable genus than the reptiles, became dominant. These creatures, smarter, better designed and more active than the dinosaurs, filled the world with a proliferation of new bodies, minds and events.

Their rise marked the beginning of the next era, the Cenozoic, which is still unfolding. It is divided into the Tertiary, which lasted until 2.8 million years ago and the current period, the Quaternary.

During the Tertiary there was a phenomenal flowering of new species as the mammals raced to replace the dinosaurs.

Then came homo habilis and the upheavals of the Quaternary. There was no definable extinction event then, but when the ice ages began to disrupt the climate, the more exotic and specialized mammalian experiments of the Tertiary began their long period of decline.

This culminated in the extinction event that we are in right now. It started

about 13,000 years ago, when an apparent comet strike destroyed most of the large land animals in the northern hemisphere, including almost the entire human population of the American continent.

The upheaval was worldwide, but mankind survived elsewhere, and we immediately filled the niches left by the predators who had not. After we recovered from the shock of the event we proceeded to create larger social organizations than ever before. We see the outcome of this sort of early socialization in the recently discovered Gobekli Tepe monuments, which could not have erected by people who did not possess a complex society. Building began about 2,000 years after the upheaval during a period known in geologic history as the Younger Dryas. What happened was that, about 2,000 years after the glaciers began melting, there was a sudden return to cold conditions. This was followed, 11,500 years ago, by a dramatic temperature spike during which temperatures in Greenland, for example, rose 18 degrees Fahrenheit in just 10 years. Such a change today would lead to worldwide catastrophe, and it did then, too. Thousands of animal species, especially large ones that were dependent on specific ecologies, disappeared.

As a direct result of the fact that this event gave us more room, we have become the dominant species on Earth. I don't think that it is a coincidence that we are also the smartest and among the most adaptable. We are the absolute leading edge of consciousness here, the most self-aware, intelligent and, above all, curious creature the planet has ever produced.

Since the close of the Younger Dryas, Earth has been in an interglacial, and we have benefited from the warm, benign conditions. But we are coming to the end of this period, and this will be a violent event, in part because of the fact that we are pumping so much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. And don't believe the claims on the internet that CO₂ doesn't affect atmospheric heating. These claims are demonstrably false. The fossil record convincingly shows that most past extinction events involved dramatic increases in CO₂. Only the one that killed the dinosaurs was definitely caused

by an impact.

First, the planet is going to heat up. That's what is happening now. Afterward, sudden cooling will plunge it into another ice age.

Interglacials generally climax with a dramatic temperature spike like this, which is followed by equally sudden cooling. The heating is caused by the release of tremendous amounts of methane "frozen" in hydrates beneath the northern oceans. When the hydrates melt, which occurs at 47 degrees Fahrenheit, trillions of tons of methane gas escape into the atmosphere. Right now, we are just at the point that this process is beginning. Right now methane that has been trapped in permafrost across the arctic is releasing. The methane hydrates beneath the ocean have not yet melted but the current rapid warming of the arctic will cause that to happen.

I ask Anne when it will happen.

"I see towers standing now that will be standing then, so not too far off."

"A hundred years?"

"I see kids in playgrounds. That tells me, within their lifetimes."

"You think in pictures? How does that work?"

"You see the future like that. You can't see things that haven't happened yet, but you can see people whose fates are intertwined with them. We don't see futures, we see fates."

Since human population began exploding in the middle of the 18th Century, our presence has functioned something like a volcano that never stops erupting, adding the intensity of manmade global warming to a natural cycle that has been under way for at least two thousand years. We have, in other words, sped up the climax of the interglacial, and probably by a lot.

We may or may not be able to change this, but we cannot change the underlying cycle. No matter what we do, how long we delay it or do not delay it, the interglacial is destined to end, and with it Earth's ability to support billions of human lives.

It's not our fault any more than we can fix it. What is our fault is that we

are neither planning for it nor trying to reduce our own effect on it. The reason we're not acting to save ourselves is very simple. All the debate that goes on around the obvious, demonstrable fact that the planet is warming fast comes down to one thing, which is fear.

Greedy people running companies that pollute fear the loss of their profits. People who feel helpless fear to look at something so horrible that cannot be changed. So we're paralyzed.

"That's part of why we're here. You don't feel fear in our state. We can communicate that by freeing you from the fear of death."

"That would be a start, given that we live in an age of upheaval."

The chaos of alternating interglacials and ice ages are now the natural order of planet Earth, and have fundamentally influenced the evolution of our species, the development of the mind, culture and history. In fact, we owe our existence to the upheaval we are living in. Dealing with the stress of the radical climate cycle we live in is what has given us our minds.

When the most recent glaciation started a hundred and twenty thousand years ago, we were naked, living in small family groups and practicing primitive forms of hunting and gathering. As the climate grew colder, we learned to clothe ourselves. When game became more scarce, we improved our weapon making and hunting skills. Then, around 40,000 years ago something unpredictable happened. The first wave of a nearby supernova seems to have struck the planet. It started with radiation strong enough to kill anything exposed to it, which seared Australia and parts of Asia and Africa for about 24 hours. It continued for weeks, but not a high enough levels to kill.

Not only does radiation kill, however, it also causes a flood of mutations. For example, prior to the supernova we're discussing here, man had only one blood type, type O. During this same period types A and B appeared. The human brain also mutated at about this time.

It was then that Neanderthal man began his decline and Cro-Magnon

appeared. He had a new sort of brain: a mutation had occurred that dramatically increased the size of Wernicke's area, which controls comprehension and the semantics of language. This is by far the most important difference between human and ape brains.

That the mutation was sudden is suggested by the abruptness with which Cro-Magnon enters in the fossil record, seemingly almost out of nowhere.

In addition, we now know that another crucial change was taking place, although over a much longer period of time. The NFIX gene, which is what causes the jaw of more primitive forms like the Neanderthal to protrude, was less active in early humans. This meant that, generation after generation, their faces shortened and vocal tracts changed, giving them an increased capacity for speech.

These things meant that Cro-Magnon could evolve complex languages and the correspondingly larger and more viable social groups that are essential to survival in a world of constant change like ours. Was it not for the shortening of the face and the expansion of this brain region, human society, art and culture could never have developed. Language could never have evolved.

It would appear that the supernova created us, or better said, was used as a tool in that process.

“That kind of super-speculation that you do drove me crazy when I was physical and I'm going to repeat now what I used to say then: keep it in question.”

Ok, then I think I can say this: Whether or not the radiation flood caused the brain mutation cannot be known, but all across the latter half of the ice age, as Neanderthals slowly disappeared, the vibrant new Cro-Magnons thrived.

Then, 13,000 years ago, the slower moving, solid debris from the supernova swept through our solar system. This caused the fantastic and deadly upheaval on planet Earth that brought the last ice age to its sudden

end. In North America, the entire continent was set ablaze, then the ice sheets that covered the region as far south as southern Illinois collapsed, flooding the burning forests and plains.

The result of this is a geologic feature is called the black mat. It is now found at various depths beneath the surface of the soil over much of the United States. This mat consists of ash and other debris combined with the fossils of algae.

What had happened was that the melting ice sheet caused a continental flood that put out the fires. The shallow floodwaters gradually drained away, leaving the debris that was floating on its surface lying on the ground. This dried and hardened into the mat.

All of the large animals that existed in north America except the bears and the bison were destroyed. The Indians who lived here at the time were entirely eliminated, except for those along the coast of the Pacific Northwest.

North America wasn't the only region flooded. All across the planet as the ice melted, flooding occurred. There are more than 50 flood myths worldwide that remember the event. About a thousand years after the catastrophe started, the situation stabilized.

As has happened again and again across the history of our planet, the catastrophe led not to chaos and ruin, but to something much more advanced rising out of the destruction. In this case, it was complex human civilization, agriculture and the beginning of our history and culture.

We have ascended into what is present on Earth today, a vast, complex and immeasurably wealthy human civilization filled with people who are beginning to look at themselves in new ways and, at the extreme edge of evolution, now attempting to forge this new bond between the physical and nonphysical sides of the species, breaking through into a new consciousness that bridges death itself.

However, the civilization we have created is in the process of overwhelming the planet's ability to sustain it. Not only that, as it has become

more and more intricate and demanding of resources, it has also become more and more inflexible and vulnerable to sequential collapse, a process that could escalate very quickly into a general catastrophe.

When I saw this danger some years ago, I wrote the book *Superstorm* with Art Bell, which led to the movie *the Day After Tomorrow*. Both were dismissed as being absurdly overdramatic. In 2016, though, prominent climatologist James Hansen and 18 other climate scientists published a paper in *Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics* entitled “Ice Melt, Sea-Level Rise and Superstorms: evidence from paleoclimate data, climate modeling and modern observations that 2c of global warming could be dangerous.”

So the word “superstorm” may have started with a raspberry, but it has entered the language of science, not to say the public consciousness after Hurricane Sandy became universally known as Superstorm Sandy.

No matter how it unfolds, we are facing a situation that seems ready to deteriorate so quickly that it is likely to lead to a significant loss of life of all kinds, including human life.

Whether we go entirely extinct in the physical or continue to survive to some extent I cannot say, but we are extremely likely to experience a population decline over the next century or so.

“I can’t tell you exact dates, Whitley, but I can tell you that there is survival. The end of a species’ life is not death any more than the end of an individual. Extinction is a another aspect of evolution, just like grief is another form of love.”

“Say something happens like one of those monster storms. Millions of people are dying. It’s hell on Earth. What’s that like from your perspective?”

“As I’ve said, death at your level is birth at ours.”

Birth is not pretty and it’s not pleasant. It’s hard and it’s frightening and it’s dangerous. It is also as much a natural process when it happens to a species as when it happens to an individual.

“Also, just as an individual is born and dies many times, the same is true

of a species. When you are no longer subject to physical filters, you can look back over the lives you have lived—the long shadow of your soul—but also to some extent the even longer shadow of the species soul. It lives and dies through incarnations just like individuals do.”

I don’t know where to go with that. I’ve never thought of it before. It causes me to realize just how enormous all of this is, and make me wonder if mind unbound is more capable of understanding reality than mind when it has the use of a tool like the brain, or is the opposite the case?

“Life is an organ of soul, Whitley. Living bodies are sensing devices inserted into the river of time, both individuals and whole species. What you think of as yourself is actually a mechanism being controlled by your nonphysical self, which is using it to gain new knowledge. Remember that being is both individual and general. You attend to your own life cycle, but by so doing you also attend to the life cycles of the species, the planet, all the way up to the universe.”

Conscious light spreads its rays over the physical world, seeking always deeper, always farther. I can already hear the voices crying in the storm and know, also, that there will be ecstasy riding its winds. The coming forth of mankind will be like that, a great cry and a great terror, but also open eyes here and there, hands reaching across the bridge of love, and death fading into the illusion that it is.

CHAPTER 15



The White Moth

STARTING in the spring of 2016, something began to happen that would end by proving to me that Anne is still a conscious presence. It was brilliantly executed, it was witnessed by others and it could only have emerged out of deep knowledge of the relationship between the two of us.

I found myself in a position to believe—but remember, we are not asking you to do that. What we want you to do is to look at your own life and the life of the world in a new way, to find new sensitivities and with them new questions that belong to your own search and your own exploration of relationship with your loved ones on the other side of the bridge.

In May of 2016 I was at the first public speaking engagement I'd been involved with in years. It was a Saturday, April 9. I was attending a conference in Arkansas. I'd thought that the participants would be indifferent or even hostile to me because I've gone so far past the conventional flying saucer- alien stories, so I had been uneasy about attending. But I found instead people who were interested in the new direction my work had taken, so I was spending a lot of time with them comparing notes and discussing

experiences. It was really pretty exciting.

My talk was entitled “A New World If We Can Take It” and was about the fact that a new reality is on offer to us, and what we need to do to take advantage of it—the theme of my and Anne’s lives, really.

At the conference, I felt Anne’s presence very strongly. I was already communicating with her, but still unsure if it was Anne as a separate, nonphysical entity, or the Anne who is part of my own soul.

I did not yet understand that it was and always will be both. Compared to what it has since become, my understanding of the nonphysical world was primitive then.

When I spoke, it seemed as if she was once more standing beside me. How often in the past we had spoken together like that. We would give our talk and she would read from the Communion Letters, the book that she created from a representative sample of the letters from close encounter witnesses she had read over the years.

Then, on that Saturday afternoon, something unusual and disturbing happened. It had nothing to do with the conference, but rather with the surveillance system in my apartment in Los Angeles. If the cameras observe movement or hear unusual sounds, they send a text to my cell phone. In the years that I’ve had them, I’ve received a few such texts, usually indications of unusual sounds, such as a clap of thunder or a nearby dog barking. But this text was different. It warned of movement in the living room.

I at once went to the camera’s app on my phone and looked to see what was happening. To my surprise, a large white moth was flitting back and forth in front of the lens. As I watched, it flew back and forth, back and forth. It was about midnight in Arkansas, so 9PM in Los Angeles. The living room was dark. The moth could have been another color, but the camera’s infrared light made it appear white.

What was odd about this was that the doors and windows to the apartment were shut up tight and nobody had been in it since I’d left two weeks before.

So how had this large moth gotten in?

Over the next twenty-four hours, it came out a number of times, always at night. It still seemed perfectly normal to me. Most moths are nocturnal. It didn't look unusual.

My focus was on finding it and getting it out of my apartment as soon as I returned home. But when I showed the images to some of the conferees, I got something of a surprise. One of them, a psychic, said, "that's no ordinary moth," but he couldn't add more than that. I thought, 'yeah, it's in a place where it shouldn't have been able to get.' I still didn't think that it was anything more than ordinary.

When I returned home, the first thing I did was to search the apartment from top to bottom. No moth. I went through all the closets, pulled out furniture, even looked behind the refrigerator. There was no moth carcass. I left the camera on that night and for the next five nights. No moth.

Maybe, I thought, there was a point of entry that I hadn't seen, and it had left the way it had come. But insects don't behave that way. I should have found it fluttering against a window or dead on a sill.

Over the next year, no matter when the camera was on, the moth did not reappear. I thought nothing more about it.

But then in April of 2017, I took the trip to the campus where I had previously gone while out of my body. During a speech I was giving there, I mentioned Anne—and in that moment, the camera texted my phone.

Literally at the moment I had said the word "Anne," the white moth had passed in front of the living room camera. It briefly alighted on the cabinet where the camera is located, and I could see it well enough to determine that it had the antennae of a silk moth. The *ceanothus* silk moth is found in this region, so there was nothing unusual there.

Over the next few days and nights while I was still traveling, the moth never made another appearance. It had passed in front of the camera just at that one moment.

Given the fact that it was there only when I was talking about Anne, it finally occurred to me that it might have something to do with her. When I returned home, I once again made a search for remains. This time, I was extremely careful and methodical, going through closets, looking behind furniture, under the edges of rugs, behind appliances— anywhere it might have fallen.

Once again when I arrived home the apartment had been shut up tight, and once again nothing was found, except for the dried carcass of a different and much smaller species of moth that had been dead for a long time.

I stood in the middle of the apartment. I was at a loss. Finally I asked her, “Do you have anything to do with this?”

I didn’t hear a reply—I was only just learning how to detect the flavor of her thoughts and could not ‘channel’ her. But there came into my mind, and quite forcefully, a memory of my short story “The White Moths.”

Anne had loved it. She thought it the best of my short stories.

Now I reflected that the only time in a year that the white moth had appeared was a moment that I had mentioned her name. In a year!

I heard her laughter—that gut-deep, solid laugh of hers that I had so enjoyed when she was alive. Then she said, “I can talk to you.”

I was shocked. That voice had not been part of me, it had come as if somebody else was speaking in my mind, somebody besides me.

That night we talked and talked like we were two excited kids again, just discovering each other. I wanted to tell her of my daily life as it has been since she passed, but that didn’t interest her. She was interested only in my inner life, with special emphasis on learning to love myself objectively.

I found out that night that my wife is still a marvelous teacher, ready with penetrating questions but very careful with advice. She is not a “guide.” She seeks to help one guide oneself.

That night and the next day and night passed in illuminating dialogue. I finally got used to it. I want to say that I could now tell for certain that it was

her, and in my own mind that is true, but she would never let me settle into belief. Just like a moth, her mind fluttered here and there, never resting, always seeking toward the light and urging me along with her.

Still, though, there was that edge of doubt. Could this really be true? Really?

The next weekend I was with my son, who lives a hundred miles away. Since I'd gotten back from my trip to the campus, I had left the camera on day and night. The moth had not appeared either on camera or visually.

Anne had a lovely relationship with her son. As a little one, as a teen, as a young man, she was very, very good at giving him the kind of room and the clear limits that a kid needs. Her mothering was gentle, always, her advice for him full of wisdom.

In all the years of his growing up, she not only never punished him, she never so much as raised her voice to him. She didn't act toward him as if he was somehow less a person because he was a child. She respected his rights and expanded them as he matured. She disciplined him by being disappointed when he did not meet those expectations. Then she would guide him so gently back in the right direction.

Their love was deep and beautiful, a work of art between mother and son, dancing with humor and full of the ordinary excitement that attaches to a child's discovery of the world.

By this time, May of 2017, when I would go to visit him and his kids, I would feel very strongly that she was with me.

Mom always came, too.

On this afternoon, also a Saturday, I was sitting with him and telling him of what had happened during my speech of a week before, and of my suspicion that Anne was somehow behind the appearances of the moth.

I explained to him that "the White Moths," is a meditation on the time of dying and what it means to really live life, and also what it means to live in life's illusions, and how much mom liked it.

I said, “Anyway, I’m thinking that maybe it all has something to do with mother.”

In that instant, the camera texted me. It had detected movement.

I turned on the app. At the exact moment that I had said “maybe it all has something to do with mother,” the white moth had passed in front of the camera.

When we saw the image of the little creature fluttering past, it was like looking into the depths of an unknown truth.

It did not appear again, not on that day and not for weeks. Just that once, just in front of the camera, then gone. The camera has a wide-angle lens that covers the whole living room. The moth flew past that lens approximately six inches from it and disappeared.

I felt my beloved Anne fill my heart. Then tears came. I didn’t want to upset my son, so I fell silent, trying to control myself.

He sat a long time in silence also. Then said softly, gently,
“Mom, I love you.”

The reality was hard for me to deny. No, impossible. For there is much more to the white moth than even these appearances.

So here I was at the end of a question. I knew, now: Anne is still here. She is still conscious and she is involved with her family.

“And with lots of people,” she adds as I write. “I get around.”

“Do you talk to people?”

“That’s not how it works. You talk in them, not to them. Sometimes you influence them, mostly you don’t. The ego is like a radio turned up too loud. You have to tune it down or you can’t hear us.”

Like everything that comes from her, these few words are filled with teaching. Not guidance or future-telling, but solid, practical teaching about how this new kind of relationship looks from her side and how it can be made to work.

The use of the white moth as a symbol is very canny and very smart.

Somehow, she could influence the creature. Maybe she even conjured it. To this day, I've never found a single sign of a moth like that anywhere in the apartment.

“The White Moths” is a contemplation of death in which the white moths symbolize the spirits of the dead and life is seen as a journey in illusion.

Anne says at this moment, “You’d be amazed at how true that is. The first thing that happens when you look back on your life isn’t that dour contemplation they talk about—the life review. You realize that you took it too seriously. It’s a game. That’s life. Looking back on that serious, ambitious, frustrated little creature that you were is amazing and puzzling. That was me, that little thing with its tiny problems? Going into the physical causes you to forget the great scale of your own being. You touch that in “the White Moths” and that’s why I love it. Consider that white moth of mine my philosophical statement about the true nature of physical experience.”

There is also a mention of white moths in “Song of the Wandering Aengus:”

“...when white moths were on the wing, And moth-like stars were flickering out, I dropped the berry in a stream And caught a little silver trout.”

Just as my white moth initiated my search, his white moths began his.

Most recently, when I was staying with friends in Texas, the white moth would fly across the camera’s field of view just once every time I started to meditate. It was as if to say, ‘You’re away from home but I’m still with you.’

In choosing the white moth as the “word” she used to express herself into physical life, she opened up a richness of meaning that derives not only from my own creative urge and from her defining statement about the search that will occupy the rest of my life, but also from a treasury of symbolic meaning that crosses the cultures of the world.

In ancient Greece, the word psyche was used both for soul and for moth. But it goes much deeper, in that Psyche was also thought of as anima mundi, the animating spirit of the world. After hearing my story, philosopher and

friend Dr. Patricia Turrisi wrote me, “Psyche signifies at the same time soul and butterfly. The myth was interpreted by playing on this double sense. It became the story of the soul touched by divine love, but which, by reason of the mistakes made, must undergo some tribulations before having access to happy immortality. The night butterfly (the moth) attracted by the flame, like the soul attracted by heavenly truths, burns in the flame, reflection of the trials that must be endured to eliminate the fleshy sink-stones before knowing the joys of the beyond.”

It is those joys to which Anne has been preparing to ascend. Now, judging from a contact with her that has just unfolded, she is ready to make her onward journey.

I have long since passed beyond the notion that all dreams are “just dreams” and have learned to respect the power of a disciplined imagination. As we have gone soul blind, we have also lost the knowledge that, while dreams may be dreams, they may also be journeys into other worlds, most particularly the land where our dead dwell.

As I write these words I am just back from such a journey.

It started with a surprise meeting with a glowing woman, very beautiful, and her brother. I have not met them in physical life, but I learned their names and saw their faces. They introduced themselves carefully, but when I asked for a last name, they only smiled. I knew why: if I had that piece of information, our fates would be interrupted, and our fates are to meet, if we do, by chance.

It was a poignant, lovely moment when she smiled at me and I saw in that smile hope and pride, the pride of beauty, not only of the body but also of the soul. I could feel her seeking toward me.

I said, “I’m already married.”

They showed me their lives. They were lovely people, living somewhere that seemed to me to be typically American, prosperous, comfortable and settled. As I went with them, seeing their friends, the children and parents in

their lives, I experienced at once the pleasure of their peace and an aching sense of separation from Anne.

I wear both of our wedding rings to symbolize that we are now sharing the one body. I expect that to last for the rest of my life, and on my death to unite with Anne forever.

But if I meet these people, as I understand it, I am going to find a new destiny. I am going to start a new physical life in their family. The woman will fall in love with me and I with her. I will continue on into a new marriage.

As was my meeting with Anne, it's primarily a matter of the ambiguous nature of reality which is so crucial to the surprise that makes life worth living, that we call chance.

I could imagine myself falling in love with this woman. I could imagine it, but I don't want to. The idea brings me a homesickness more acute than any such emotion I felt during childhood, lying in my bunk on summer camp nights, watching the moon slide past the window and longing to be in my own bed.

Then I found myself, in the dream, with Anne. There have not been very many such direct meetings. I was about to laugh with her about "some woman" trying to seduce me when I noticed a new sense about her. I said, "You seem more free."

She replied, "Yes. I'm going on now. This was a beautiful marriage and I will always love you, but we're all part of nature and the marriage is ending."

This simply shattered me—right in the middle of the "dream."

The woman came, hesitant, wanting to comfort me and draw me into the gentle possession of a new love.

I thought no, no, it can't be true. And as I write, my eyes are filling with the same tears that filled them when we walked that path in the land of the soul. I said, "I don't want it to end."

But then I realized a truth, that marriage is about bodies and the heat of

bodies, life and children. You do not stay married across the bridge. You build a new kind of companionship, dear and loyal but not exclusive like physical marriage.

I felt Anne touch me on my arm. It was electrifying and terribly sweet, poignant beyond expression. She said, “Don’t be afraid, honey, we’ll always be together.”

“Don’t leave me!”

But just as she had on the night she died, she went on, walking easily toward a new world and a new life that I cannot imagine.

I must remain here to do my work in our family and in the physical world of which I am still a part. And if I should ever meet that lovely woman, I will find another courtship and a new life path.

Anne said, “Keep looking always, never forget your search. You gave me everything you have to give, Whitley, and here I am in this immortal state.”

“You gave me everything, too.”

“I’m still a teacher.” I could feel a closeness between us then, a new aspect of life across the bridge. These teachers we so absurdly call “the dead” teach from within our own minds and souls, standing ready to take us deeper than it has ever before been possible to go, into lands and knowledge yet distant, but which are meant for us to know. We will learn to be as these beings we call aliens are, living in the physical and nonphysical states both at the same time, as a whole species.

Such happiness was flowing out of her as we walked that I laughed through my tears, a delight of anguish.

But then—then—she began to walk on ahead. I couldn’t keep up. I tried and tried but she rose from the land of the dream just as she had on the night she died, ascending farther and farther.

I woke up in an ocean of tears.

It was three in the morning, the hour of meditation. Still in tears, I rose from my bed and went to the chair where I meditate, did the sensing exercise

and went deep.

New love came flowing into me, a fine, careful love that is aimed squarely at the strengthening of my soul. It was no longer the love of a wife, though, but that of a dear teacher and friend, the best I could ever know.

“Will you leave me now?”

She shook her hips provocatively. It sure didn't look like somebody who was leaving me, not even physically. But that's not true, as I have come to understand. The freedom we both need is for me to accept that I am physical and have physical needs that I cannot simply long for her to fulfill. I may or may not fulfill them, but I cannot continue to ask her to be my marriage partner. When the physical body ends, so does the physical marriage.

On the other hand, the deeper one between souls needs never end. But it is not exclusive, not like physical marriage. Anne's soul belongs to the world in different way now.

We have found a new kind of relationship together, the teacher learning, as all good teachers do, along with the student. For she, also, has a journey ahead of her, to fulfill her essential destiny, helping in the great work of drawing souls— many souls—through the alembic of life and into joy.

I know she will do her work very well. She is so good at it. But my girl will always be my girl, slipping now ahead of me along the path. I want so badly to keep up, but I belong still to the physical and must stay here like a old lump. My soul can soar, but never high enough. And yet, even though I see her far away, I feel her with such intimacy, a ghostly presence soaring within me, that it makes me howl out my longing.

I take in my heart now the last lines of Aengus, the defining song of my search:

“Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,

And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.”

Fare you well, dear soul, more to me than I am to myself. I will follow along as best I can in the path you are laying. I will find you in my memory and the turnings of my mind and in your whispering, laughing voice, so rich with wisdom and so very kind.

As you said so often and so well, great love never ends.

At this moment, seemingly by chance as I write the last words of this book, I see that it is August 11, 2017. It is 7:25PM, exactly two years to the minute since you rose through my arms and began your journey.

I belong still to Earth and you now to heaven, but I know that you will always be there when I call to you across the bridge, for the love that we share will carry my voice into that smiling country, the mysterious land of light where you dwell.

The End

Anne and Whitley Strieber

APPENDIX 1

The Love that Led Me Home by Anne Strieber

I would like to tell you a story that seems to me to have helped almost everybody I have told it to, and has certainly helped me.

I have gone on a long and dangerous journey into an unknown world. I don't remember much about it, except one thing that is extremely clear: I remember a point at which I was given a choice. There was a natural desire to live and survive, and I was looking for ways to do it. But I think that if I hadn't found a guide, I wouldn't have made it.

The guide turned out to be my beloved cat Coe. I remember weeping into his fur when I finally had to put him to sleep after a long bout with cancer. Coe was always the family clown. He had no instincts. He didn't fall on his feet. He was very smart, and quite capable of lying.

Once there was a terrific crash in the living room, and Coe came strolling into the family room elaborately yawning as if he'd just waked up. The catastrophe in the living room, we were supposed to believe, couldn't have had anything to do with a peacefully sleeping cat.

I was very surprised to encounter Coe. I didn't really see him, but more sensed his presence. I knew that I was at the juncture between life and death.

It was a busy place, and I wasn't sure Coe would even wait for me.

There seemed to be very little time. At that point, in the physical world, I began trying to call my son on the cellphone, or so I thought. I later discovered that he was at my bedside. It was as if I was living in two worlds at once. I wanted to tell him that Coe was here, because I thought he'd be very excited. They were close, close friends, those two.

I'd always expected to see my dead mother. She passed away when I was only seven, so I don't remember her much at all. I'd been waiting for this moment all my life, because I want to see her and remember her. I've always thought that I would see her again after death, and remember her then. And yet, she wasn't at the center of my love. Her death was just so long ago, and I was so little when it happened.

I certainly had a lot of love with Coe and I was so glad to see him, but right now he was very matter of fact.

It was as if he was saying, "C'mon, there's no time to waste." I was left with the impression that animals know the secret of life and death far better than we do.

I heard him say inside my head, "These STUPID humans--Don't even know how to find the World of the Dead on their own!" He took me to a place that looked like a subway or Greyhound bus station, an underground waiting room lit with those weird yellowish lights you see in such places. The place was busy: I had the impression of lots of people around, and that they were clutching bulging shopping bags and suitcases, maybe the memories they wanted to bring with them from life.

And I somehow knew that they weren't going to be able to go on (to catch that subway or bus) until they were willing to put their packages DOWN.

To Coe, it was nothing special at all. It wasn't as if he thought of himself as a spirit guide or anything. It was much more casual and matter-of-fact than that. He was ready to take me down a certain path if I wanted to go, and there was love, but it wasn't filled with elaborate new emotions.

He never functioned well as a cat, mousing and that sort of thing. But he was the world's best cuddler, little boy playmate, and friend of the heart and soul. And now he was here, ready to take me for a little stroll into the beyond.

After he died, he showed up in our apartment a few days later. Whitley, who sees such things, saw him and saw that he was lost. He took him and pointed him toward the other world, that now seems to me as much a part of ordinary life as it is for Whitley. Now he was back, ready to help me take the same journey.

I think that the reason for this happening is that there has been an investment of real love. I put love into Coe, and he loved me, and that love now has an independent life. Maybe it wasn't even Coe there, really. Maybe he found the path long ago, and is far down it now. But the love was left behind, waiting for me until I needed it.

It took a journey beyond the edge of life and the help of a little animal to bring me to a place of new understanding, that all that really survives of us is the love we have made in the world. It's a simple truth that will stay with me forever, even when I pass again across the threshold, this time never to return. Especially then.

APPENDIX 2

The White Moths by Whitley Strieber

What to do? There was the coffee cup needing to be washed, and the bed could do with a smoothing. There were those buggy roses. And a letter to Janie, yes, there was that to do.

She watched the sunlight instead, creeping about in the lawn. How long had she known this light in this lawn? Nineteen thirty-one to nineteen eighty-seven. How on earth long was that? Thirty one, forty one...over fifty years.

Damned long, you old coot. Funny. You have gotten old. Become old, it sounds better. And what of your phoebes, there in their nest in the old grape arbor? You have been watching that pair of phoebes--well, always.

She realized with a bit of a dry chill that her little friends had probably gone through dozens of generations in that ruin of an arbor. She had not made pets of a pair of birds, not over fifty years. She had made pets of a whole line of birds, stretching back into the dark past.

Now why hadn't she realized that before? She had been feeding them for over half a century, all through Bob's life, from when he was a young husband bounding up those stone steps until he was a thing of rattling papyrus with his pain and his awful grasping.

Here she was alone in this comfortable old house, well, banging around a little, really, but content with her diet of mystery stories and waiting for the evening news.

She watched the hopeless folly of Presidents, one after the other failing in some manner, and thought it odd that nobody seemed to notice that every one of them since Johnson had come a-cropper. The whole institution had failed. Another symptom of dying.

A flock of geese appeared in the northern sky, nothing but a brush of dots but she knew what they were, oh yes, the geese of October again. She ran her finger along the window sill, wondering at the white dust. Natalie would be disturbed; she kept this place so carefully, the blessed soul.

There was that letter to write. She stood up and moved through the great shadows to her old roll-top, the desk where Bob had spent so many hours doing his evening work. There were burns from his cigars, and still in the secret drawer there was that little flask of cognac, untouched since last she refilled it for him so many years ago.

She took paper and pen--her own pretty paper with the blue crest--and laid the nib against the white sheet.

“My Dear Janie,” she wrote, “I am so afraid.”

She stopped. Now what trick of hand or mind was this? She had not intended to write those words. No, certainly not. Afraid? Never. She was not afraid. Death would come soon, of course, but one went on.

She regarded the words she had written. What nonsense. She hadn't meant to write that. Still, there had been the softest,

gentlest dream, had there not, of those--well--perhaps...

A white moth fluttered suddenly up from some cranny in the desk, a moth so swift and pale. She brushed it away. It came again, swarming at her face. She batted at it. Yet again it appeared, fluttering, its legs scabbling at her cheeks, her eyes, as if it had mistaken her face for a route of escape. She pushed the chair back, batted with both hands, then stood up.

She had thought to go down to the kitchen for the fly swatter--surely it would work against a moth--but the thing appeared to be gone.

Moths were not a good sign. She thought of what they could do to her furs, the lynx, the minks, the white wolf she had worn so many years ago in Paris...the Opera Steps...

She grasped air, thinking of the balustrade, of touching it lightly as she descended into the bright interval throng. And had not Willy D'Orsay glanced up at her and smiled his benign, perfectly naughty smile?

How odd to remember him, an acquaintance of half an hour...She had danced with him at the Club--which damned club--or was that aboard the Mary? Danced. "Talking band," he'd said. And she'd said, "yes!"

She must not let the moths get at her coats, not at her beautiful white wolf, the furs bought from that poor Russian man, the one who jumped from the hotel window and had the misfortune to live. But the Nazis finished him, as they did all of the cripples of Paris.

An American in Paris. She saw herself reflected in the window as she crabbed about hunting the moth. But there were her coats to think about, her gowns, her frocks, the smooth cloths for the skin of girlhood.

And what wisdom have you gained, you who teeter here, ghastly old creature smelling of drought and Listerine? What wisdom?

She knew about politics. She had always voted. Landon slide. She remembered that, but he had not won. No, it was FDR again, that raging cripple, as angry in his way as the Russian with the white wolf furs, spreading them across the dining table in the Crillon suite, the perfect, white furs of six wolves, how extraordinary and she had been so clever with him. "Well, they are good, but I am not paying retail."

"No, madame, of course not," and he a duke once before the destruction of the Empire. Madame, and he a duke once. She had taken the furs for nothing--nothing--a few dollars, and now that white moth--

She moved quickly, maneuvering her leaden body about the room,

wondering if the moth had come in the window, or somehow popped into life inside Bobby's old desk, that wretched old thing full of cigar smell and tin boxes with keys to here and there, abandoned sheds and hunting cabins up in the hills and all of his intricate, leathery things, his boxes of moldering papers, his safe full of damned stamps.

Oh, he lay so still that morning.

The white moth flew round and round her head and she saw it clearly, a pale thing, so soft...with tiny eyes as red as they could be. Tiny, red eyes, alien, cold and strange, eyes that brought the stars to mind.

Billy had enjoyed peering at the stars with his telescope. He'd get up at two in the morning and hunt with his dogs until dawn, then come back for eggs and bacon and coffee. Then off he'd go to the office or come in here and work until noon, then lunch and a heavy nap and more work until four, then drinks.

Drinks...the flower garden in the summer, the white chairs, her cool dresses, the girls in their summer things, and Woodrow serving the bourbon and water and the chunky ice when it came delivered then, and those wonderful little salted things that Jenny made--what were those things? And politics were discussed. She had taken to reading the papers, the New York Tribune, then it became the Herald-Tribune, so that she could agree with him intelligently.

Landon slide. Win with Willkie. FDR. Truman blowing up all of those sinister Japanese. She'd never made it to Japan after all. She'd meant to go. Maybe next year. There was no longer a boat, you had to fly and in airplanes they treated you like a dog, those awful supercilious girls in their little blue suits with their trays of dubious food, and the droning and the shaking. The Weedens had gone down.

She sat, suddenly, in a dark gothic bishop's chair. "It is not enough," she said in a calm, clear voice, "to be afraid."

She was old and ugly and her eyes were like two piercing blades of

obsidian. Her children disliked her and her mere presence terrified the grandchildren.

One ends up wearing one's sins on the face. The easy laughter, the indiscreet tone, the gobbled life--it all floats to the face like scum to the surface of a pool. Had she known when she was thirty what she knew now of herself she would have followed that miserable Russian right out the hotel window.

Now she took long oil baths, telling the cosmetician at Fallow's that she wanted the oils for her daughter, for Janie, or for her granddaughter Mary. Her fingers were long and smooth again in the bathroom light, her arms round and gleaming, and the oil would slip along her skin. She would be left smelling of gardenia or chamomile or hyacinth. Hadn't somebody called her his hyacinth girl?

She wanted too much, she knew that, but her life had made her that way. It had been so perfect and yet so hard, the deaths in war, the men who were young and made one breathless who died in ditches or screaming in those horrible little airplanes. Somebody had sent back a picture of Timmy Trogget from France, that horrible picture of him so burned. The picture had come anonymously and why, didn't they know that she was a flower and innocent and not to be worried by the ghastly glamour of the front?

Tommy had a ukulele of course--they all had them, that group of boys before the war. He also had a lovely sporting carriage--what was that called--and they would go trotting through the park. His driver was named Waldo. Waldo Salt.

The white moth circled her head and she knew that it was a terrible thing. She began to move out of the room. But the light was long and golden in the gnarled garden, late sun drawing memories from the ruins, and didn't she get already a whiff of some night-blooming flower? No, of course not, November, well. She could well imagine the wolf coat becoming a repository for moth eggs. Who would have known, that beloved masterpiece with her

perfume still clinging to it at four o'clock in the morning.

She would be eating scrambled eggs and bacon and drinking coffee with Gladys and Amy and Bob and the Booth brothers, what laughter then and oh yes, that was after the war and everybody had forgotten that poor Trogget boy. Jimmy Andrus had come back from the Hat in the Ring Squadron and not a mark, so perhaps Trogget with his tongue looking like a burst sausage had simply been too slow. He was always too analytical, poor boy.

She wondered if the young and beautiful went on in shadowy consort when they died. Did Trogget come home upon a ship of air and live out the rest of his intended life as if it was real.

Carefully, she placed a chair in the center of the room and climbed it, intending to slap the white moth between her two hands. It fluttered gaily, darting and flashing around the yellow chandelier. She drew her hands apart and slapped them together just as it flew past. The chair rocked, she tottered, regained herself and made another slap at the creature. It was so tiny, so unequal to the battle, and yet it fluttered still, a saucy little flag of a thing. She was furious at it.

Sweeping her hand through the air she tried to scoop it up, but the white moth eluded her again. It flew so fast that it seemed to multiply, ten white moths, a thousand, fluttering in the yellow light of the chandelier. She waved her arms.

She was already falling when she noticed that the chair was no longer beneath her. She hit with a dry crunch and an awful giving-way deep in her back. The parquet floor felt like concrete, despite the fact that a lovely old Bokhara from grandmother's house was spread across it. She heard a voice utter a cry and knew that it was her own.

Then she became aware of a complex sort of pain. She was surprised at how it clarified everything; she had not known much pain in her life.

There had been that time with Saucy Dill, riding in that funny little car of hers--the Dills were ruined right after the crash--when she had dangled her

hand against some sort of pipe that extended along the running board. Oh, yes, that was a burn and that had hurt.

This hurt more fundamentally and the treatment would be more elaborate than a cold poultice and a tumbler of bootleg gin. Oh, jazz, what happened to that music, to the days and nights of jazz? The jeweled cascade of years, the dances, the boys, the girls in their frocks...

How does it end, this mystery? Does agony strip away all the romance? That German boy, Knutt VonHauer had sent her his photograph in forty-something--or wasn't it earlier, had to be before the war--standing in the hatch of his tank with his arm raised high and Ruthie had whispered that he looked penile like that. Penile. After the war he became a railway worker. Somebody, Willy or somebody like that, had encountered him on the wagons-lits to Hamburg, turning down the beds!

Later he was living with that philosopher in the Languedoc, wasn't he. Knutt was a man of forty with white, white hair. That Hitler, honestly.

She realized that she would have to get up or rest forever among the hungry white moths. What had been the use of it all, and why had it ended so quickly? A life, just like that. It had seemed fun, but what did that mean? There seemed to be a darkness entering the air, the ceiling of the room rising and parting like two uncupping hands and she was there on a little black cabaret stage in a sinister and compromising pose. What awful things she had done. She had to face that. Gossip, rumors, the ruin of souls. She had brought the whole world tumbling down around her, sweeping her arms about with destructive abandon, destroying the boys of the wars like white moths themselves oh, they were so lovely in their uniforms, the wastes of uniforms marching across the fields like mad, besotted animals singing and then in the awful, private squalor of the front lines.

She wondered if a bullet in the back felt like this. Had she not sent Jimmy or somebody candied fruit at the front and had he not written back that fruit at the front was only eaten by fruits? His captain had written to that awful

woman--what was her name, the one with the persistent warts on her fingers--that he had died from lighting a cigarette at the wrong moment.

Died, died, did it matter? She looked up toward the chandelier and thought perhaps that it did not matter. There, in the shadows where the ceiling had been, was there not some clarity, something startling up there among all those swarming masses of moths?

The heat in the house had failed. Wasn't this December? Or was it already January? When was this, what hour, what day, what year? How long had she been like this, adrift in the years? She struggled against the crunching pale rug, trying to rise to have some tea and perhaps some really nice sandwiches, something spicy and nice. Fortnum's and those faintly sinful teas, the perfect ladies, the girls in their--who was that, who had done something outrageous in Fortnum's, that heavy girl from Montclair who had gone to London in search of a Lord but had married a hatter instead? Mad Hatter Harry, but he had worked out very well in Montclair with his high English manners, selling automobiles.

She wanted rather a lot to get back on her feet. But there was a mystery: she was trapped in this flying room, its rococo weight borne upon the wings of moths.

Was death as banal as this, nothing more than a brief struggle on a rug? She might soil herself, she thought. No, not that, it was such an abnegation; she did not want to be found like that by the servants, that wicked little maid Natalie with her implacable, penetrating eyes. What did she know? Why had she come here? What awful thing was her soul here to avenge?

It was terrifying to think that one might have wronged somebody in another life, only to find oneself at their mercy later. She suspected that Natalie would take a chair, light a cigarette and simply watch her die.

Her whole life had been an ocean of death. You young people, you don't know anything. History was poison in my time. I lost so many friends, the grandeur of three generations, Princes in their white uniforms jammed into

darkened trains, leaders of men and artists--and what about that wonderful satirist Guttman--after the war nobody mentioned him--and the French milord, that lovely man with his grace and his extraordinary knowledge of horses, that man--nobody mentioned him.

Couldn't there be some sort of service for the century, perhaps up at Norman Vincent Peale's church, some sort of hopeful little thing?

Bob. Come here. Help me.

A really terrible pain, as red as the moth's silly eyes, came up from her deeps. She had laid on the wide bed and open wide herself and Bob in the darkness with his dry, soft hands and his shirt still on, and had there not been then a flowering tree? A flowering tree...was it a tulip tree?

No. That was in Louisiana, in Grande Coteau in that house by the river when the mist of night came and the river boats passed in the moonlight, and it was so wonderfully stifling and their skin was as slick as ice, hot ice. She had spread herself wide and thrown back her arms and known the delicious smoke of the night down there where never had there been light, and he had lit the gas lamp in the wall, the sputtering yellow flame and she had danced on the bed to his opalescent eyes.

Gleaming things, slick things, her hands moved along the concrete rug, seeking him. She would hold him by the hour, hold and hold until she slept and would awaken still holding. You--I thought--passive--he would say--passive--his whole mind lurking in the syllables. Oh, yes, Bob was predatory. You saw the sores occasionally that marked his secret conquests, and you knew of the relations between him and the New Orleans whores.

She had been glad to leave the south, to come back to these perfect Connecticut hills, to the apartment in the city and the black Packard and the immense power of his parent's wealth. Oil, they would say, Bob found oil and brought us all back to life. She thought of them, those rich, lying in quiet living caskets after the crash while Bob toiled in the alligator swamps in his boots and jodhpurs, directing men to drill here and drill there. And that

guttering Ford car they had then, guttering and rattling and behind your back you could feel the springs...

Men and women do not die, they are harvested. They are harvested by the shadows, who live in the enigma. Unlike cattle, men and women if allowed might understand their predicament. What does it matter to the hog who is being scratched behind the ears by a kindly farmer that he will be next month's rasher? What warped, confused logic must append to his comprehension of the meaning of the love and sudden slaughter? How can it make sense to him, all the warm slops and then the axe?

The moths were terrible now, swirling in the light, settling on her shoulders, on her arm, in her hair, crawling coldly down her neck. She could not scream, dared not open her mouth, could not weep, had no tears left. Only Bob, she wanted Bob to come and be young with her again.

I really loved you all those years. I loved you, you damn man with your whores and your conquests and the smells of cigars and leather and the high grouse hanging by the kitchen door. You, you--what did the whores offer that I could not offer? I gave you me and you went and got crusty sores from crusty whores. I was a lily, o man.

I thought that I was nice. Perhaps I was a little plain of face, yes, and maybe it was--position, appropriateness, that made you marry me--and you remained so calm that night in Grand Coteau when I was transported to such an extreme of desire. After your perfectly creditable love, we spoke in the moony dark of Wendell Willkie and oh I was so sad.

The forties...the fifties...the sixties...we thought the years were bright; how little we knew of the cave we were entering. The cave and the rising lazy smoke of those days, perfect ghostly trails into the air--all the air, all over the world.

I am afraid. What is that shadow?

The two policemen walked together through the flying snow, passing under a radiant street light, then going deeper into the night.

“Look at that pile of snow over there,” said the older man. The rookie stared at it. “What should I be seeing?”

“It’s a body, son.”

“Christ. I didn’t know the street people got this far uptown.”

“Them bag ladies is everywhere. This one, she’s gone and froze to death in the snow.”

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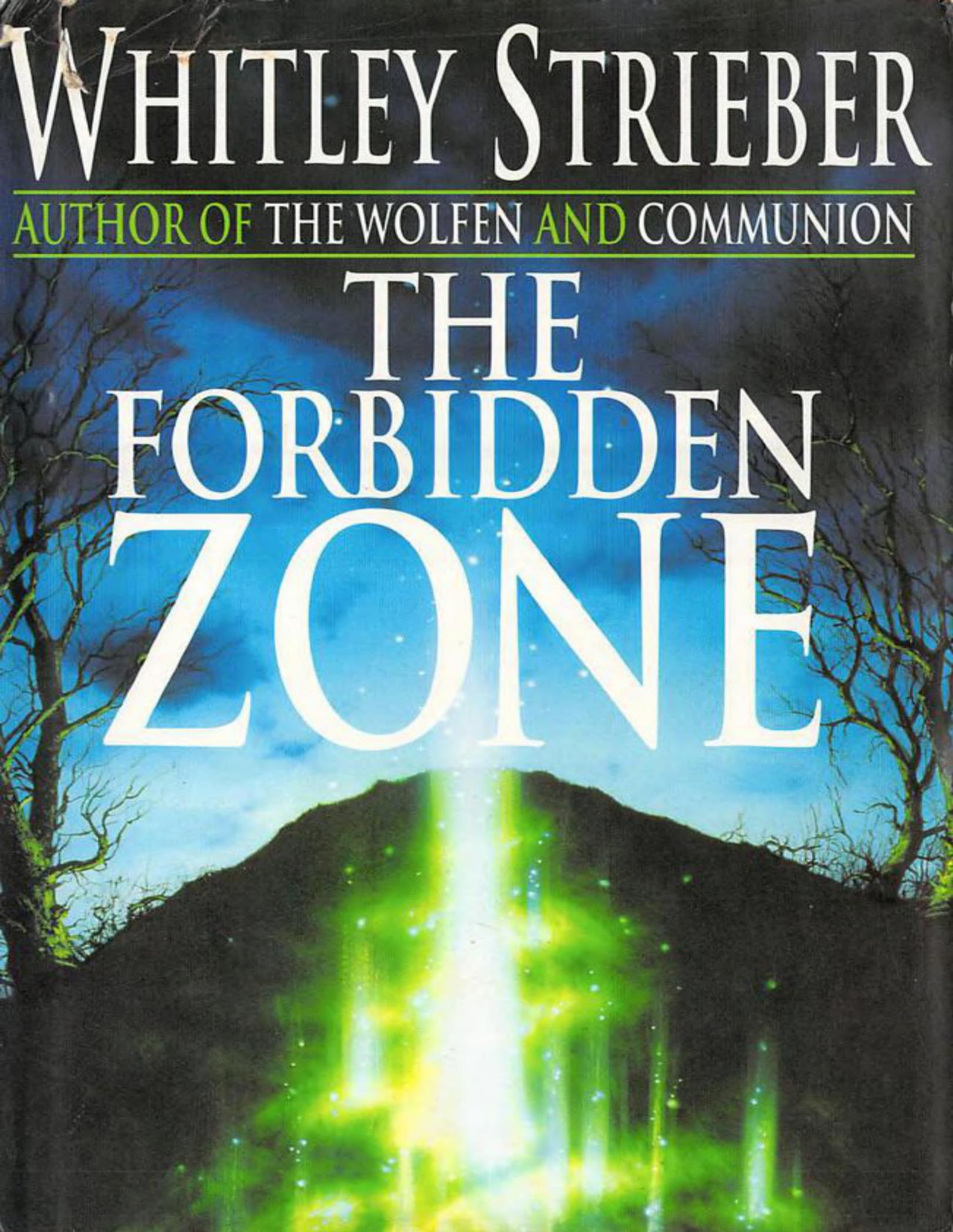


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THE
FORBIDDEN
ZONE



The Forbidden Zone

Whitley Strieber

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This book is dedicated with heartfelt appreciation to H. P. Lovecraft, the old one.

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The Forbidden Zone: An area around an extremely energetic object which normally cannot—and must not—be entered. But once it is entered, then time, movement, all events stop, everything changes. Within such a forbidden zone lies a state beyond mere destruction. It is a condition of chaos, absolute derangement.

—William N. Holmes, Ph.D. "Large-Scale Transitions and Quantum Derangements," *The Journal of the Physical World*

One

1.

To the middle of a perfect summer afternoon came a long, trembling scream. Because it was so faint, Brian Kelly feared at first that it was a memory. It could have been, certainly. His young and pregnant wife, who was lying in the grass beside him, didn't seem to hear it. He would have looked to his dog for reaction, but she was off on a wild chase after a rabbit.

The scream died away. He sat up and gazed out across the wide view. Perhaps he would see a column of smoke from a burning house, or a wrecked car on a roadside. But Oscola seemed quiet, and the southern range of the Adirondacks that rose beyond the town dreamed innocently in the blue haze of summer.

He could see past Judge terBroeck's house down Mound Road and on up Main into the center of town. In the other direction, he could follow Mound almost to its intersection with Route 303, which wound off toward Ludlum thirty miles distant.

In all of this expansive view, nothing was amiss. Maybe it had been an animal or a bird, or the wind.

The sun was warm, and he soon closed his eyes, letting the quiet of the hour transport him toward a nap. Time possessed him, that strange substance that had been the focus of his career and his life... time, his beloved mystery.

In the past he would come here with Mary. But she never cared for the mound. She was an indoor person, an intellectual—a genius, really, the best physicist he had ever known.

Her young death, with work and life unfinished, had left so many echoes.

He kept listening, worrying that he was going to start hearing her death screams yet again, and that they were indeed going to be like the scars on his

chest, with him forever.

He reassured himself that this little mound was not a place for dangerous memories. People in Oscola had been coming here on summer afternoons for generations. Kids sledded here in the winter, always had. Judge terBroeck, who owned the place, didn't approve of casual trespass, but the town had long ago become indifferent to his many dislikes.

Ever since Mary and Kate had been killed, Brian had been hearing screams. His doctor had been the first one to speculate that he might hear them for the rest of his life. Initially, this link with his loved ones had seemed in a strange way reassuring. But once he found a new love, it had come to be an imprisonment. For his own sake and for Loi's—and for the sake of their baby—he had to let his dead family go.

Trying to escape, he found a state remembered from boyhood afternoons lying in this very spot. "I can almost feel the earth turning," he said. Loi answered with a contented murmur.

Every time she heard his voice, looked at him, touched him or felt his passion, she reminded herself of her good fortune. For a woman whose life had been almost entirely unfortunate, finding him was a great piece of luck. He meant escape from the past, the dreadful memories of the Chu Chi tunnels, the soul-breaking anguish of the Blue Moon Bar in Bangkok. There was nothing in Vietnam, and very little in the rest of Asia, for a woman born of a G.I. father and a French-Vietnamese mother.

Before Brian, she had felt that a brutal life had robbed her of the ability to feel joy. But his gentle, persistent ways, his blazing, devoted love, had planted a new seed in the brown dust of her heart.

Brian would have thought nothing more of the scream if there hadn't been another—this one hard and loud and long. It was the kind that made you sick inside, a scream touched by death agony. But his wife still didn't stir. "Loi, did you hear that?"

She opened her eyes. "I was just dozing off."

He raised himself on one arm. "I'm definitely hearing screams again."

She turned to him, her stomach shifting heavily. Despite her grace of body, eight months of pregnancy had made her clumsy. "Oh, my poor Brian." She kissed him, hoping that the unfortunate ghosts of his Mary and Caitlin would finally go to their rest.

"I think they were real."

Dutifully, she listened. "There's nothing, Brian. You must try to forget the past."

"I am, Loi."

"Maybe I can help you." She shifted herself again, took him to her and embraced him. Very deliberately this time, she kissed him.

How she could kiss, he thought. She did it with a combination of attention and sensuality that never failed to thrill him. Her kisses were so careful, yet so hungry. For a rumpled old physicist, and a damaged one, she was quite an extraordinary catch.

Mary, also, had been considered a catch. Poor Mary had burned alive.

Loi could tell by his stillness that his mind had retreated to the tragedy. She broke gently away. "You used to come here a lot?" If her predecessor had made love to him here, she must be very careful or her own efforts would only strengthen the power of the ghost.

"Not often enough. Mary wasn't an outdoor person."

She stretched luxuriously. "I love it so much outdoors."

He watched a smile envelop her face. As it did there emerged in her black eyes the trembling glance of a girl. Normally, her face—the neat, sad mouth, the hints of wrinkling under her eyes—communicated hurt. But these smiles when they came were miraculous.

He knew that she'd had a terrible life: her very refusal to say much about it

revealed this. And yet, somehow, the tight little woman he'd met while she was waitressing at the Waywonda Inn had become this fabulous lover, tender and vulnerable and passionate.

There was a crash in the brittle summer brush, and Apple Sally came bounding up barking. "Hey, Sal." She sat on her haunches, whined. She was not happy, which was very strange. "Sal? C'mon, babe, take it easy." His tone quelled her nervousness, and she lay down with her big face between her paws.

There came another cry, one of total despair. It stopped abruptly, as if stifled.

Loi sat up. She'd heard that, all right. A look of agony came into her poor husband's eyes. As he dragged in a frightened breath, she took his hand. "These screams are real."

He felt a great familiar vise enclose his chest and begin to squeeze.

Mary shrieked, and then she turned and she was burning—

Another cry erupted, this one as clear and sharp as the crack of ice on a winter night. "We go for help, Brian!"

Apple Sally started digging, her claws ticking against stones, throwing back earth and bits of grass and flowers.

Brian leaped to his feet, stared down. "Jesus, they're coming from *inside* the mound!"

Loi could hear that it was true. There was certainly somebody in there. But who, and where? It was just an earthen mound, hardly even a hill. Could Mary be in there, she wondered, her ghost still suffering from the flames of her death?

Brian ran the twenty feet to the mound's bare summit. He peered around, pitifully trying to find some kind of an opening. His face was twisted, his eyes glistening.

"We have to get Bob," Loi called. His best friend was a state trooper. She

started off down the hillside as fast as she could go.

When she saw Brian lean toward the ground, she returned. From below there came a long, echoing scream, lost in despair, indeed a cry from hell. "Brian, come." She tugged on his shoulder.

Sweat was pouring out of him. He was shaking like an old tree rattled by the monsoon. "Brian, we get help!"

The next scream spoke of absolute, almost inconceivable suffering.

"We've got to go!"

Beside him Apple Sally dug with the fury of the possessed. Maybe she could smell the poor woman, Brian thought, maybe she was actually close to the surface. Brian joined the dog, yanking up tufts of grass, trying to drag back the heavy, unyielding soil.

To Loi it appeared that he was going crazy. "That doesn't do any good! We need help!" She ran a little way, then saw that he was still ignoring her. She wanted to pull him away, but she dared not be so disrespectful.

He dug, he struggled, again there was a scream. He began to gasp, to grunt with the strain of his useless work.

She saw that he was entering a hypnosis familiar from her childhood. When soldiers did this, their officers slapped them back to their senses.

To treat an honored husband in such a manner was unthinkable. He was no common soldier—but he was digging like the animal beside him, grunting, panting, lost.

He felt something slam into the side of his head. Stars snapped behind his eyes and then he was on his back, his hands clawing air. Loi stood over him, all five feet of her, and she shouted in a trembling, unsure voice, "We have to get help at once!"

His cheek stung, his ear was ringing. He watched her shoulders hunch, saw her take her guilty right fist into her left, squeeze it until her hands shook. "I

meant no disrespect," she whispered. "Please forgive me."

Chiefly, he was amazed at how strong she was. He sat up, realizing that he was being incredibly stupid, on some level reliving the moment he'd tried to dig through the wall of the burning kitchen where Mary and Kate had been trapped.

Another scream came and it was terrible to hear. "You come with me now, work the car phone!" Digital technology mystified and angered her. She took his hand, forced all the authority she could into her voice. "Come with me, Brian, if we are to help."

They went headlong down the mound, Loi rolling along with what Brian saw as all the grace of a small tank. He hurried behind her with his arms out, protective lest she take a fall. Apple Sally bounded through the grass beside them.

Loi ran because she had to run. Somebody was in agony, somebody was dying. Brian Ky Kelly bounced within her.

"Slow down, honey! Take care!"

As Brian hurried to keep up with her, his knowledge of local topography brought a frightful possibility to mind. He thought that a sinkhole might have opened up, maybe the ceiling dropped out of an old cave. Given that somebody was already inside, it was likely to be on the path. "Loi, stop!"

She ignored his cry.

"Loi!"

She shot off like a deer, racing wildly, heedless of her condition, unconscious of the danger. He dashed after her, past the clumps of daisies and dandelions, into the spreading view of Oscola, St. Paul's church spire and the town roofs awash in the green of summer trees.

He reached the base, looked desperately for her. "Loi?"

Silence.

No, please, not again. Not another wife killed, another baby. He ran madly toward his truck; he didn't see her in the cab. "*Loi!*"

Just then she sat up. She'd been bending over, pushing buttons on the phone. "It won't make the dial tone," she cried. He jumped in the cab, turned the phone on and punched in the number of the state police.

"Lieutenant West, please." Bob came on the line. "There's screaming coming out of the mound. You'd better get out here."

"Screaming, Brian? You're sure about this?" Bob knew all about Brian's problems.

Brian handed the phone to his wife. "Tell him."

"I hear it, too, Bob. And the dog, she is upset."

Bob said he'd be there in ten minutes, and Brian put down the phone.

Instantly, the thrall of summer reclaimed the moment. Bees were working through a soft white cloud of Queen Anne's lace in the field that led up to the judge's ruined pear orchard. A songbird warbled in a stand of hemlocks beside the road. Brian uttered a sort of whispered groan.

"Sometimes waiting is what we have, husband." She took his hands and began wiping them clean as best she could with some Kleenex. "Why did you do this crazy digging? Already your poor fingers are scarred."

"It was stupid."

She looked toward the mound. "I don't like it anymore."

"It's just a little hill. Some kind of—well, a small hill. A geologically trivial feature."

"Yes, my husband."

"There may be a sinkhole opened up around here. We've got to be careful."

"Yes." She noticed then that his temple was flaring red where she had hit him, and longed to touch it. But her shame was too great. Let it not become a bruise, let it fade.

Finally they heard a siren. The next moment a Chevy Blazer in state police colors swerved to a stop behind them. Bob climbed down out of the cab. He was in his usual shabby, unkempt uniform, and his wide, gentle face was grave.

He came toward their truck, running hard. Loi watched him through the rearview mirror. When she had been a child working for the Vietcong, he had been an American soldier. His unit had pumped liquid fire down the tunnels; her worst dreams were haunted by that same fire. When he had heard her side of the story he had shed silent, unacknowledged tears. Bob was the sort of tough-tender policeman who spent his off-duty hours coaching Little League and doing charity work. One of his secrets was that he corresponded with many of the men he'd put in jail. If they wanted, he'd be there for them when they came out.

2.

Apple Sally began to woof with excitement. She knew Bob, and her tail bounded against the bed of the truck.

"Lo, buddy," he said into the window. He barely glanced at Loi. They'd both left parts of their souls in Vietnam, and their relationship was complex. Sometimes when their eyes met, she would see something that frightened her a little. She could not tell if it was suspicion or anger or simply part of his pain. When they'd been getting to know one another, she had wondered if they could find forgiveness in their hearts, two soldiers who had lost dear friends to each other's armies.

"Show me where she is."

Loi would not be left behind; she also descended from the truck.

To Bob she looked ready to explode. He'd never seen anybody so pregnant. "You'd better stay here," he said. "Until we've got an idea what we're dealing

with."

"Brian needs me," she said, afraid he would panic again if the person in the mound continued screaming.

"He's right, Loi. Somebody's already fallen in."

His tone told her that he wanted very badly for her to obey him. Normally, Brian did not insist. But when he did, she had to concede. Not to obey now would cause him loss of face. She bowed her head.

Bob was already running up the mound as she got back into the truck.

Brian put his hand on hers. "I'll be all right, Loi. I swear." Then he started after Bob, checking the path ahead, looking for any sign of an opening. Sal ran beside him, her dewlaps flying. They weren't halfway up before she started baying.

"What on earth do you think you're doing?" came Judge terBroeck's voice from behind them. The old man must have been alerted by Bob's siren.

Brian was surprised to notice that the judge was changed, even from a few weeks ago. Where was his prissy, self-important way of walking, his easy arrogance? Now he dragged along, a wavering reed, his thin hair chalk white, his face all wrinkles and angles, his lips a bitter line.

As a matter of fact, he looked meaner than ever. A good deal meaner.

"There's somebody trapped in the mound," Brian shouted back at him.

"There's nowhere in there to *get* trapped."

"We know that, Judge! But she's there."

When the judge began to hurry, his spider legs pumped comically. The way he swayed reminded Brian of a great cornstalk blown by the wind. He arrived puffing hard. "My liability insurance covers me, thank God," he gasped. "I've never cared for people coming here! Why do they do it? They all know it's private."

"It's been part of this town forever."

"So has everybody else's backyard, Brian!"

With a terrific jerk Apple Sally abandoned all her years of training and ripped her leash out of Brian's hands. "Jesus," he cried.

Seconds later she reached the site of the original rescue attempt. She dug in a frenzy, her whole body pulsating with effort. Dirt and stones flew up around her.

As if the woman heard the sounds of renewed digging, she began to shriek again. "My God," Bob said, "she hears us!"

"That doesn't sound like screaming to me," the judge announced.

Sal's frenzy increased. She became a blur of flailing legs, her ears flapping like flags in a hurricane, her eyes bulging.

At first Brian was proud of her, but then he began to see red flecks on the stones she was throwing back. She was tearing her paws to ribbons. "C'mon, girl. C'mon, easy! Easy, Sally, back! *Back!*"

The wailing, pleading screams continued.

Something awful was happening to the dog. Spittle sprayed from her flapping dewlaps, and she made noises Brian had never heard her make before.

"C'mon, Sal," he shouted, "back!" He grasped the dog around the midriff and started to tug. She turned, snarling and snapping. He released her.

"Goddamnit!"

She used the moment of freedom to jump back into the hole she'd been making. The red flecks became gobs of bloody earth. The screaming rose. Then Sal's huffing growls changed to the desolate moans of a dying hound. Brian grabbed her tail and tugged. She skittered around, dug in with her feet, snarled and twisted.

Brian had hunted with dogs all his life, but he'd rarely seen a hound in a state like this. The whites of her eyes were showing, her teeth were bared, her

muzzle sloppy with foam. Despite visibly torn paws she was still digging hard even as he dragged her back away from the rough pit.

Her whole body flopped and writhed, she twisted around, her jaws snapped, her bulging eyes gleamed. She began making undulant, humping movements, her skin quivering, her fine, clear voice gone to cracking, whispered barks.

As if responding to the sounds of the dog's effort, the screaming reached extreme frenzy.

"It isn't human screaming," the judge said. "It's some damn coon."

"It's gotta be checked out," Bob responded.

"You're a damn nut," the judge snapped at Brian. "All this over nothing!"

Abruptly, Sal collapsed, as if she'd been turned off with a switch. One moment she was in full cry, struggling to get back in her hole, the next she was a heap of floppy brown animal with froth pouring out of her slack mouth.

"My God," Brian said. He lifted her head, listened at her nose, looked into her eyes. "She's dead."

When the sound of Sal's digging had stopped, the woman in the mound had begun to sob. "We're coming," Bob shouted.

Silence.

"Just hang on, ma'am!" Bob's voice was shaking.

The response was terrible to hear, as if she had just made a new and hideous discovery, something awful beyond belief.

"Oh, Christ, get a backhoe, Bobby! Get a damn backhoe!"

"Don't you dare! You'll tear my property to pieces."

The screams dropped low, became gurgles, finally stopped.

"Listen," the judge said. "Nothing. So you don't need a backhoe. Not for a coon that just died."

As Bob ran down the mound, Brian gathered the dog into his arms.

"You let her overdo it," the judge said, "you let her run herself to death trying to dig out a coon."

"Hell, she wasn't trying to dig anything out, Judge. Don't you know a single damn thing about hounds?"

"Well, I—certainly!"

"Judge, there's something in there that Sal wanted to kill."

Both men looked down at the roughly ditched ground. Brian knew his dog. Sal had died of hate.

Two

1.

When the phone rang Ellen Maas was—as usual—alone in the office. It was eight-fifteen on a Saturday night and this week's edition of the *Gazette* was supposed to be put to bed, but she was working desperately to expand the all-important local gossip column, the one with everybody's name in ALL CAPS. The more people she could fit in, the more papers she would sell.

She stared at the ringing phone. Surely it wouldn't be a bill collector, not on a Saturday night.

Between rings, she listened to the moths fluttering against the screens. There was a mutter of thunder, she blew sweat from her top lip.

"*Gazette.*"

"This is Harry terBroeck."

She sat up a little straighter. You wanted the extremely powerful, deeply respected, profoundly unpleasant Judge terBroeck on your side around these parts, you sure did—especially if you were the new owner of a broke newspaper. "Hello, Judge."

"I have a story. You know the way the paper used to run the local news on the front page? Well, this is that kind of thing. It's not going to be up there with a presidential visit to China, but it's interesting to us yokels."

The new girl in town had just been criticized. OK. She could handle that. "Great," she enthused, "I'm always looking for a big local story."

"Well, this is big, I mean, for us yahoos."

He waited for her protest that they weren't really yahoos, that they were terrific, that she just loved the town, gush, gush. The expected words got

stuck in her throat like a backed-up corn fritter.

He went on. "The state police are out on my mound. You know the place?"

"Of course. What's the story?"

"They're tearing it all to hell. Making an awful mess of my private property without so much as a by-your-leave!"

Ellen tried not to sound impatient. "Right," she said, "shoot."

"Shoot?"

"Tell me the rest. Why are they there?"

"Well, I'd never let 'em do it, and if there's nobody in there I've got a fine cause of action against the state."

"Nobody in where?"

"The mound! *My* mound! They're tearing it apart to find a supposed woman. Been screaming."

"What woman would that be?"

"The one that's supposedly trapped in there. Nobody told you anything yet?"

"Why should they? This is just the newspaper."

He cleared his throat. For Judge terBroeck the paper was chiefly a forum where he could publish letters about the many liberal plots he detected in the affairs of the community. Evil forces on the town board trying to put in streetlights, hippies from downstate with their communistic recycling schemes, that sort of thing. "A dog—badly handled, poor damn thing—already died trying to reach her."

"You heard the screaming?"

"I heard sounds that I personally connect with a raccoon in distress. Brian

Kelly said it was human screaming, of course—which he would, given that he's more than a little off balance on that particular subject, poor man. He was out there trespassing with that peculiar new wife of his when they first heard it."

"The woman in a cave or what?"

"They haven't found any woman! The story isn't the damn fool alleged woman, it's the invasion and destruction of my property, you stupid creature!"

She wanted to slam down the phone on him. She swallowed hard, then forced herself to thank the judge with dutiful and agonizing care. She hung up and went to the steel locker to get the ancient Speed Graphic that had been there when she bought the paper. It had been slated for immediate replacement, of course, considering that it was fifty years old, weighed twenty pounds and required old-fashioned glass plates that had to be special-ordered from Kodak.

"Immediate" had come to mean the end of her current five-year plan—if said plan could be realized somewhere this side of bankruptcy court.

Lugging the miserable hunk of photographic iron and an old Bloomie's bag full of plates, she went down the angular stairway onto the street. It was dead quiet, of course. Early on she'd discovered that Oscola nightlife ended when the Mills Café closed down at nine. She'd been a night rider in New York, as often as not starting with the theater or a concert and ending when they flushed out the after-hours clubs at dawn.

A Crown Victoria slid up Main Street, the frail driver sitting stiffly erect. The car moved like a hearse. Why? Small towns tend to be elderly, and old drivers can't see spit after dark. Plus, streetlighting was a liberal plot.

If she walked out in front of that Crown Vic, there wouldn't even be the flicker of a brake light. Still traveling at a stately fifteen miles an hour, it would roll over her like a bump.

It being past eight on a Saturday night, Oscola was as dark as a cave, except

for dim light coming from the Mills Café and Handy's Tobacco. The Rexall Drugstore was dark, as was Mode O'Day Fashions, which was like an antique clothing store where everything was still new. They had black patent leather belts and slack suits along with boxes of hair ribbons in the glass-topped counter and a rack of \$2.98 harlequin reading glasses.

But Main Street was lined with big old oaks and maples, and down at the end where it became Mound Road there was one streetlight, a wonderful old iron creation meant to resemble a sapling, complete with iron leaves cradling the lamp.

The smell of pipe tobacco that floated out of Mr. Handy's open door was pleasant, and the faint clink of dishes coming from the Mills communicated the peace of the entirely ordinary.

Farther off something revved and died, probably some of the town's smattering of teenagers tuning a pickup out at Fisk's Garage. The "blown" pickup was Cuyamora County's ultimate muscle car. There were no Porsche Carerras here, no Acura NSX's. But then again, there were also no orthodontists in mirrored sunglasses to go with them, which was a plus. She'd had her fill of mirrored orthodontists, especially ones named Ira Bergman.

Still, something appealed about those breezy early-morning runs to East Hampton in Ira's Porsche with the wind in their hair. That was back when the relationship was still in the battlefield maneuvers stage, before the actual war had started.

Well, hell, what was love compared to owning a dying newspaper?

People around here hadn't stopped buying the *Gazette* because it was bad, but because she'd breezed into town and bought it and she was a city person and a fancy former *New York Times* reporter into the bargain.

She pulled her ancient gray Duster out of the parking space in front of ludicrously named Excelsior Tower. It was two stories tall, for God's sake. Then she drove the mile out to the mound, the Speed Graphic on the seat beside her.

As she turned into the long driveway beside the judge's house her ears drank the newsy snarl of heavy machinery out on the mound. A glance in the direction of the old terBroeck place told her that the judge was at home. She could see him in his kitchen, still on the phone.

Ahead she observed dancing red light bars, and up on the mound itself the glare of portable floodlights. She opened her door and jumped out, hefting the camera.

Passing the jumble of cars and trucks at the base of the mound, she noticed Brian Kelly's exotic wife asleep in the cab of their truck. The way the story went, he'd met her while she was waitressing at the Waywonda Inn in Ludlum. Discreetly turning tricks was more like it, Ellen thought. She was one of those desperate, unwanted souls coughed up by Southeast Asia, a Vietnamese all mixed up with French and American blood. As a child, she'd allegedly been used by the Vietcong as a tunnel rat. God only knew how she'd made her way to Oscola, New York. Ellen leaned into the cab. "Mrs. Kelly?"

Loi's eyes opened, but there was no sense of her being startled awake. Maybe the tunnel rat story was true. She certainly displayed the elaborately careful attitude of a person who's lived with danger.

"I'm Ellen Maas, Mrs. Kelly, with the *Gazette*."

Finally, Loi smiled. "I'm tired," she said apologetically. It wasn't surprising, considering the advanced state of her pregnancy.

"What do you know about the woman in the mound?"

"You must ask my husband." She made a movement so sudden that it shocked Ellen. The woman was as swift as a cat, but all she'd done was glance at her watch. Then she came down out of the truck and moved off up the path, her huge belly making her rock from side to side.

Ellen had the feeling that Loi Kelly was running away from her. So naturally she followed, stopping when Loi did among a group of men standing under the lights. They had a large chart open between them. She stared right back at

the trooper eyes that were now regarding her.

Trooper Numero Uno was here, Lieutenant Robert West. His big, open face broke into a grin. She was not deceived: West was a sweet man, but he was no hick. And he was very careful about the press. She knew why: this particular Medal of Honor winner had gotten his award for doing some very hard things, very hard indeed. Very brave, also, but it was not West's nature to be proud of killing people with his bare hands.

She'd made the mistake of doing research into his medal. He'd begged her not to print the story. "Tell about my Little League work. Tell about my Great Books stuff. But leave the medal alone." She'd complied: her feature about him had quoted his thoughts about Aeschylus, but not Westmoreland.

She walked toward him, working on her mask. Don't smile like an idiot, just look very professional. Reticent though he was, the man remained a hero. How do you share a secret heroism?

Of the men with West, Ellen knew only Brian Kelly, now standing hand in hand with his wife. Her face had gone soft, the almond eyes melted with love, the full, heart-shaped lips revealing what Ellen thought was probably pride.

He'd lost his daughter and his first wife in a fire, and Ellen had looked that up in the newspaper's morgue, too. The fire had been attributed to a defective propane line under his ancestral home. He'd been burned half to death attempting to save them. He and Mary Kelly had been extremely close. She'd been one of his students, and after she got her doctorate they'd taught as a team.

The fire had crushed him. He'd walked away from his university job and become a hermit, gone on a two-year bender. Then he'd suddenly met Loi and astonished this half of the state by bringing her into his distinguished old Oscola family.

Ellen took a deep breath. West, with his obsessive concern for safety, was already asking one of the men to help Loi back down the mound. She'd be next, she knew, if she wasn't careful. "Any luck?" she asked in a voice that came out so husky it could have pulled a dogsled. Too many cigarettes.

Bob West glanced at her, then hid his face under the shadow of his hat.

"I'm sorry, but I've got to ask a few questions. Is she in a tomb?"

"More likely a cave," West responded. "And you'd best wait in your car until we've found the opening."

She rushed on. "Well, isn't it an old Indian mound? Maybe it's full of tombs."

"Now, ma'am, we've got a lot of heavy equipment working out here, and—"

"I'm press, Bob, you know that."

Instantly the head lowered, again the eyes disappeared. "I just worry that it isn't safe."

She sighed. "I have to stay. It's my job."

"You keep near us," Dr. Kelly finally said. "We don't want anybody else falling in holes."

"Thank you," Ellen responded.

"We think a sinkhole has opened up," Kelly explained. "Our theory is that she's fallen in and she's wandering in our hypothetical cave."

Fifty feet away the backhoe growled again. The machine rocked, its operator clamped his cigar in his jaws, a jet of exhaust fumes shot up past the lights. The hoe turned and the debris went pouring down into a pile near the base.

Ellen cranked up the Graphic and took a picture.

"Kill the backhoe," a man bawled from the dark summit of the mound. It ground, coughed, rumbled, finally went silent. All that was left was an occasional random crinkle from its hot exhaust manifold.

Ellen could just barely see the face of the man who had called out. It was visible in the faint green glow of some sort of electronic device. Smelling more story, she started up toward him.

"Quiet," the man yelled. "Hey, lady, *quiet!* Don't move, don't even breathe!"

Little pinging noises started above, continued for a few moments. Then the man stood up, removed his earphones, stepped out of the glow coming from his instrument's screen. He hurried down toward Bob West, who regarded him with eyes so full of pain that Ellen wanted to cuddle the poor man up in her arms.

"It's solid earth, in my opinion," the man said.

"You're sure?"

"There's nothing in there. It's exactly what it looks like, a small glacial tip without geologic significance. Certainly there are no caves."

"Then what did we hear, Danny?" Brian's voice was much too smooth.

Danny, who Ellen surmised was a state-owned geologist, rubbed his left hand against the stubble on his cheek. "I just don't know. Maybe it was a trick of the wind."

The Speed Graphic began to feel awfully heavy.

"There's somebody in there," Brian Kelly said. His voice had taken on the low, ominous note of a threatened man. "I can't buy your finding."

"Well, you have to," the geologist replied blithely. "It's reality."

Kelly tucked his chin into his chest. "She was in a hollow space. We could hear the echoes."

"Well, it wasn't in this mound! I'm telling you, there's nothing in it. Zero. Zip. *Nada*".

"That's bullshit, Danny."

"Then dig the goddamn thing up yourself, Doctor! You've got a backhoe here, raze the damn thing."

Bob West spoke. "Let me ask you a question."

"One I can answer, certainly."

"Are you willing to say I should abandon this rescue, given that a woman—a human being just like you or me—could be in there dying in agony? You're that certain?"

"I can only tell you that my instruments do not support the notion that this mound is anything except what it appears, a pile of broken schist and stone."

"Come on, Danny," Kelly interjected, "you're dealing with a government surplus echo sounder that was designed for work in water. It's next to useless here. Even a dumb old physicist can tell you that. The resistivity of the soil isn't going to allow a meaningful reading."

"It's been recalibrated," the young man snarled. "Of course."

In the motionless air, the mutter of thunder became more defined. Off in the west the dark was thick.

"I've never liked this place much," the backhoe operator said. He'd been standing at the edge of the group. "Back last month the wife and me was up here and the whole thing sort of shook. It spooked us and we took off."

The geologist wiped his brow. "Admittedly there's evidence of some earth movement. The schist's probably loose. Changing temperature, degree of dampness—a lot of things can cause small-scale earth movement. Even the Towayda fault could be involved."

"The woman was screaming," Kelly repeated.

In support of her husband, Loi Kelly became fierce. "I heard her, too, Danny!"

Ellen made a mental note never to tangle with this woman.

"You might as well go ahead and move this equipment out," the young geologist said.

Brian Kelly roared. "No you won't! You sure as hell will not!"

Bob looked at him. "I can't get a budget for it if the expert says there's nobody in there."

"What expert? He was a failure when he was at Ludlum, and he's a failure now. That's why he works for the state!"

"How dare you!"

"Hey, Brian, come on. He's still my official expert. He's the guy I've gotta rely on."

Kelly went up to West, face-to-face. "Somebody's dying in there!"

"Brian, I don't have enough evidence. And what about the judge—he's already been after us to get out of here. I continue this dig without good cause, I've got a lawsuit on my hands."

"If there turns out to be a story here," Ellen said to West, "could you please give me a call?" She started off down the mound.

"Take care," Brian Kelly called after her.

She waved, and was soon negotiating the dark with the dubious old penlight she kept in the bottom of her purse.

She was past the halfway point when she felt a sort of lurch. A distinct vibration began pulsing up from the ground. It stopped her dead. "Jesus," she heard herself say.

It hurt her bones in a way she'd never felt before, as if the marrow itself was vibrating. She imagined a crazed dentist boring into her jaw with a bone-burning drill. The vibration was accompanied by a metallic shrieking noise, like a very large buzz saw going berserk in the distance.

Lights flashed, the sound hummed off into the sky. She turned around to see the floodlights swinging on their poles. Shadows darted as men jumped to hold them steady.

She heard a new sound, painfully loud, like the squeal of a desperate child. Ellen turned toward the group she'd just left in time to see Loi Kelly stagger backward clutching her belly.

2.

The buzzing sensation was so intense that Brian slapped his hand to his jaw, instinctively going for the pain that was screeching through his head. But Loi's agonized shriek made him forget himself, gather her in his arms. "Baby," he said, "oh, baby!"

She felt the fire of a bayonet plunging into her womb, a thing she had seen done. She wanted to scream, but fought against it. Best to maintain a serene appearance.

Before anybody could react further there was a faint, tremendous clang, as if a door the size of a mountain had been slammed shut.

Bob threw himself down, listening. "Hey," he shouted at the ground, "hey, lady!" Then he crouched. "Nothing."

Loi felt a tickle along her inner thigh. She turned away into the dark, bent over and reached her hand up under her loose outfit. Yes, the worst. She straightened abruptly.

"Loi?"

She hated to reveal weakness, but she had no choice. This was urgent. "Brian, there is no cause for alarm, but I would like to be taken to see the doctor now."

"Is the baby—"

"No, Brian, he is not coming. But we must go at once, please." Always in the back of her mind was the fear that Brian would reject her if she lost his son. Love was wonderful, but even American men surely had their practical considerations.

Brian fought down the churning acid in his own stomach. He must not let Loi

see how frightened he was.

Ellen Maas reappeared in the swaying pool of light. He was startled by what it did to her face, making it appear alternately hard and soft. It struck him that she was an unusually beautiful woman.

"We go now," Loi said. Eight months was much too late for blood.

"I can take her," Ellen announced. She was fluttering her long hands at Loi, communicating concern. But Brian sensed something a little predatory in the gesture. A reporter always wanted something from you.

"I'll do it," he said.

His arm around Loi's shoulder, Brian guided her down the slope. He should have taken her back to the truck the minute she reappeared, not let her stay like this.

As they left, Brian heard the geologist telling Bob that the earth movement theory had just been confirmed.

Brian didn't believe it for a moment. But Danny wouldn't have been the first scientist who wanted to dismiss a mystery rather than explore it.

To both him and Loi it seemed a long, long time before the dark shape of the truck came into view. He helped her up, belted her in, then got in himself. He started the engine and began driving carefully toward the road, avoiding ruts and bumps as best he could. "Call Dr. Gidumal's office, hon, tell 'em we're on our way." He started the phone for her, trying to control his shaking hand.

When they finally reached the relative smoothness of Mound Road, he floored the accelerator and the truck jumped forward, tires squalling. They went racing through the dark and out onto Route 303, then down toward Ludlum and the hospital.

He shifted in his seat. She reached over, squeezed his hand. She was very scared, but she wanted him to be reassured, to think well of her. "I am a strong woman, I have a good womb." Was it true, after all the abortions,

some of them done by casual midwives, others by well-intentioned friends? At the Blue Moon Bar they used to abort each other with a long instrument provided by the management. She had no idea of the condition of her womb.

He looked over at her. She was sitting with her head pressed far back into the seat, one hand on his. He reached the hand to his lips, kissed it. Her hand was as soft as a little bird. She seemed so brave and so vulnerable. He was terrified: he could smell his own sweat.

She finished the call to the hospital and put down the phone. "I am very healthy, Brian. I will give many sons!" She could feel the blood coming out steadily now. Baby Brian was jumping a little, as if he was beginning to become distressed. Sometimes she thought she could feel his beautiful young soul lying within her, like a golden shaft of light in her womb. He must not die, not now.

"We'll be there in twenty minutes, honey."

The ache was growing, becoming touched by what felt like heat down at the bottom of her belly. She forced back an urge to moan. The heat began to spread into her thighs, up her back. She sat as still as stone to stifle what she knew could quickly become agonized squirming. She turned to him and gave him a smile. "I am admiring your skillful driving. Please hurry."

That brittle, terrible smile told him that she was in agony. His own breath began coming hard and tight. It would have been easier for him, he thought, if she had not been so composed.

Her mind drifted on long waves of pain. The birds called softly in the garden of the Emperor of Jade Pagoda in Saigon, while little Qui Thanh Nguyen crouched in a secret place, a small girl in a white *boo dai*.

She'd changed her name to Loi because the white-eyes couldn't pronounce the "Q" sound correctly. She loved her white-eyes husband, though, no matter how he spoke.

The pain dug at her. Touching herself, she brought up blood on her fingertips. In the light of the dashboard they gleamed as if darkened by wet paint. She

snatched the evidence out of sight, wiped it away under her blouse. The smile remained fixed on her face.

Although Brian knew every twist and turn, the trip seemed to last forever.

When they finally saw the lights of the hospital, the big red sign that said emergency, Loi was drifting into soft blackness. She came back, feeling the pain like a saw grinding between her legs.

Brian raced into the ambulance bay honking his horn.

Nurses came running out, followed by Dr. Gidumal.

"Help us," Brian said. "Please help us."

3.

A couple of minutes later she was in an examining room in stirrups, and Dr. Gidumal had a speculum poised as delicately as a wand in his gloved hand. The pain was now slamming up from her gut in great, red waves. She could no longer maintain even a fixed, rigid smile. But Dr. Gidumal was a stranger, and before a stranger one must be composed. She was breathing too hard. She tried to be more quiet.

"We went on a picnic," Brian said. "We heard someone screaming, called the state police. Loi is very gentle. She got upset."

The doctor stroked her forehead. "You experienced a sudden pain before you noticed the blood?"

She was silent. To speak of the pain would be to let it capture her. Now her womb felt like a great balloon filled with boiling blood, compressed, packed, being penetrated by white-hot needles.

"She is like the women of my country, she prefers not to reveal pain." The doctor looked at Brian. "You must tell me."

Brian looked into his wife's face, seeking an answer to the doctor's question. Her sweated skin gleamed in the hard fluorescent light. "I am going to have

such a healthy boy," she said. "You will be very pleased with him!" Her voice was a harsh whisper. Her face was something carved.

An American woman would have been howling, Brian thought. He reached out his hand, and she pressed a clammy cheek into his big, rough palm. "She's suffering terribly," he told the doctor.

It was awful, like fire within! Brian Ky Kelly was jumping, also. She could feel his distress now! "A happy baby," she managed to whisper.

The doctor examined her. "There are no signs of labor. This baby is not going to be born today." He plunged his gloved hand into the bloody passage of life. It took only a moment. "As I thought, there is a tear," he said. "We may be able to repair it with fast work."

Barking orders to nurses, he went quickly away. Moments later Loi felt her stretcher begin to roll, saw the ceiling sweeping past. The suddenness of it all caused her composure to fail her. "Brian," she shrieked.

"I'm here, baby." He was trotting along beside the stretcher. They went up an elevator, then down another hall that ended in two huge and familiar double doors. The old, awful smells assailed him, the iron reek of iodine and the fuzzy aroma of alcohol. He remembered the burnt-meat tang of his own skin on the morning they'd brought him in.

Another doctor hurried through the doors, leaving them swinging back in Brian's face. He peered into OR-2. She lay on her back draped in rough green sheets.

"Good luck, baby."

Loi's voice came back, thin and high, "All will be well!"

When they closed the inner doors he went to the waiting area, all bright colors and cheer, equipped with coffee machine, Coke machine and plenty of magazines. Four years ago his father had waited for him here, bearing the knowledge that Mary and Kate were gone. Yellow curtains or not, blue chairs or not, you could smell the fear in this place.

Brian waited, feeling like a dog left out in the rain. For a time he stared blindly at an old copy of *McCall's* magazine. He was counting the tiles on the floor when a shadow appeared. His heart jumped, but it wasn't the doctor. Instead, he found himself looking into the beautiful face of one of the very last people he would have chosen to see.

"Hello, Dr. Kelly."

"This isn't going in the paper."

"Shouldn't that be my decision?"

"I'd appreciate being left alone."

She pulled a chair up in front of him and plopped herself down. "What happened out there?"

"She was injured."

"Yeah, I noticed. But what did it? What was that noise, for God's sake? It went through me like a knife."

"Look," he said, "I don't want to be rude—"

"Then don't be."

"I want to be alone, Miss Maas."

"Ellen, if you prefer. It's just that I don't understand—"

He had no reserves of politeness left. "Leave me alone!"

"Do you know what the noise was?"

"My wife might be in there losing our baby and I want my privacy!"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Kelly, really I am."

He shook his head wearily. Then he walked to the window, stared into the

black glass. Behind him, he could see the reflection of her arm reach out, hesitate, then drop.

She waited for a full minute. Finally her reflection turned away and went off down the hall. Her head was bowed and her shoulders were stooped, and he found himself feeling a little sorry for her.

But she was gone, and it was a relief.

Over two hours passed before the doors to OR-2 finally opened and Dr. Gidumal came out. Brian, who had been resting on three chairs pulled together, clambered noisily to his feet. Flecks of Loi's blood stained the doctor's green hospital gown, and for a moment Brian had a horrible thought.

"She's fine and so is your son," the doctor said in one quick breath. Brian sagged. Suddenly he felt absolutely exhausted. The doctor guided him to a chair. "But I want to know what happened to her, Brian. This is a violent injury. There ought to be a police report."

"She—I guess she got upset. All the excitement."

"No, this is wounding of the uterine wall. She has lesions. We have repaired all we could, but this is caused by one thing— concussion. Hitting."

"That's impossible. She didn't fall, and she certainly wasn't hit."

The doctor nodded, his face screwed into a deep frown. "This injury is the result of a concussive force against the womb. An explosion, a blow. Nothing else could account for it."

"Nothing exploded," Brian said. He heard a high note in his own voice.

"There was a little... tremble in the ground, I guess. But nothing exploded."

The doctor folded his arms. "That wouldn't do it. Was she— well, to be frank, Brian—was she beaten?"

Brian knew that his hair was wild, his face stubbled. He probably looked very much the part of someone who would strike his wife. "I'd never hurt her."

"Of course not. I meant if there had been an assault. A stranger, of course. It's just that I don't understand this injury. You say no explosion. You say no blow. So I say, something is funny here."

"Wait a minute, there was more than just a little tremble. It was a strong vibration coming up from the ground."

"There are houses down, trees uprooted? No, Brian, you would see this if she had been in a terrorist bombing, or gotten a kick in the belly."

Brian made an effort to keep his voice level. "Nothing like that happened," he said. "I want to see my wife."

"Yes of course. She will wake up soon, I expect."

Brian followed the doctor into the recovery room. And there she lay, a pitiful, delicate vision. "Loi," he said.

"Oh..."

Suddenly Dr. Gidumal pushed Brian aside, leaned into Loi's face. "Did anybody hit you, Loi?"

"No... it was the humming... the humming that hurt me..." She closed her eyes, suddenly asleep.

Dr. Gidumal straightened up. "Certainly this was not caused by any humming." As he had when he first saw her, he laid his hand on Loi's forehead. Brian saw the tenderness and understood at once. Both of them were far from home, both were Asian, both must have known the acute hurt generated by all the small, silent acts of prejudice in a self-involved little community like the Three Counties. Dr. Gidumal obviously felt protective toward his fellow emigrant, and worried that she was being abused. "She will doze for a little time more. When she awakens fully, you must be present. There must be no upsets to her. She is in a delicate state. There are many microlesions. Any one of them could open up, with the right sort of stimulus." Here he paused, gazed at her. When he looked up, it was with a frank plea in his eyes. "A delicate condition. We will keep her in hospital for

two days' observation. Then she can go home. But you must be careful, careful, careful."

"Yes, Doctor."

Dr. Gidumal gave him another long look, then took his hand. "We will not fail," he said.

Brian wished that he hadn't said that, it sounded awfully ominous.

He stayed with Loi until eleven, when the nurses convinced him to go home and try to get some sleep.

That proved to be a great mistake.

Three

1.

Ellen drove along Route 303, returning from the hospital in Ludlum to her little cabin in Oscola. The uneasy ratcheting of her Duster clattered in her ears. Getting stuck out here alone would mean a long, dark walk, and probably a wet one too: lightning was flickering against the horizon, thunder guttering off in the mountains.

Oscola was hidden deep in a wild country. The woods were not friendly. More than one small plane had crashed into these mountains and never been found. Every summer campers and hikers went out and never came back.

Much of the region—which fifty years ago had been a thriving community of foresters, apple farmers and dairymen—was now abandoned. Orchards so ancient that the trees appeared to be deformed, clung to the few arable valleys. Abandoned houses, their windows covered with plywood, their interiors gutted, were all that remained of families who had made their livings here for ten generations.

It was a beautiful country, though, with sun-dappled valleys and laughing streams the locals called kills, using the old Dutch word. Its dangers were known—the isolation, the size of the forest, the tracklessness of the mountains. Getting hurt in the woods, getting lost—those were the things you worried about around here.

No matter what the state police had decided, she wasn't going to drop the matter of the woman in the mound. Even if it was as empty as their smarmy geologist claimed, there was still a story in that agonizing sound. Loi Kelly was lying in the hospital. Ellen could still feel an ache in her bones.

Now, what on earth had done that? Certainly not any of the equipment they'd had up there. It had come right up out of the ground.

There were brighter flashes of lightning. Thunder boomed back and forth, a

deep and savage argument. She turned down Mound Road and passed the judge's place, a stone house with a gambrel roof and narrow second-story windows. The first floor was more graceful, as if the old Dutch patroons had attempted to recapture in a small way some of the elegance of the world they had left behind in Holland. But the effect of the tall windows and imposing front door was to make the house look crudely unbalanced. At this hour the place was dark and silent, the mound behind it a great, curving shadow, black against the tumbling clouds. A few moments later she was approaching her own place. From the road there was virtually no indication that her cabin even existed. Even the dirt track twisting off under the trees was hard to notice.

As usual it was shuttered in silence—the silence she hated. After the first six weeks, which had been grim indeed, she had decorated her three rooms with chintz curtains, rope rugs and Adirondack views from the Mountain Gallery in Ludlum. Even while she had been shopping the Sears catalog for curtain rods and cutesy cup towels, she hadn't known exactly why she was dropping her sloppy old ways and doing the *hausfrau* two-step.

But she soon admitted the obvious: she was lonely as hell. Living the life of a backwoods hermit was an experience so oppressive that she had endeavored to disguise it by making her lair as warm, old-fashioned and cozy as she could. Maybe there was a little sympathetic magic in it. If she made a place that looked homey enough, perhaps a companion would show up at the breakfast table one morning.

A steady drip of water was the only thing breaking the present silence.

She looked at the phone. The only person she might conceivably call was Ira, and he didn't even have the same phone number anymore. For all she knew, he'd packed his collection of Ray-Bans and aimed the Porsche for Taos.

What would she tell her mythical phone companion—that she was lonely and in need, that she was past thirty and found her eyes caressing other people's kids, that she had foolishly bought a dying small-town newspaper and was tailspinning toward bankruptcy and spinsterhood?

She was headed for a white nylon dress and an order pad. The only real

question about her future as a waitress was, did she have the feet for it?

A flash briefly lit up the front yard. She sighed, went into the kitchen, opened the pantry cabinet. Tang, Swiss Miss Cocoa, Café Français. She was turning into a rural frump with a junk-beverage habit. Vague, listless thunder underlined the thought. Somewhere out there the storm slipped through the night like a prowling cat.

As she was taking the cocoa out of the cabinet it crossed her mind that she could spend her sleepless night productively. She could work on the story.

The mound was out there, nobody would stop her, she could snoop to her heart's content.

Underground screams, a killer sound—there was a story all right.

Come morning, the judge would either be guarding his precious property line or the mound would be swarming with state cops again, in which case she'd have to negotiate both his tearing rage and their hostility.

She had a penlight. All she had to do was avoid the judge. How? Her car would shatter the tomb-like silence that shrouded Oscola at night.

She could walk. Along the road it would be a mile. But through the woods it was less than half that. It was rough, though, and full of animals. Black bears abounded. She'd seen them humping along like bridge trolls even during the day. They had strange, pointed faces, cruel, empty eyes.

Going out at this hour would be nerve-racking, no doubt about it. On the plus side, though, she couldn't get lost even if she walked. All she had to do was follow the path along Coxon Kill, the stream behind her house. After a quarter of a mile the forest opened into meadow. The mound would be directly ahead.

She stepped out onto her porch to assess the possibility of actually doing this insane thing. She tossed her hair, a gesture of defiance that had been with her since she was a child. She moved down to the loamy forest floor that formed her front yard. Another flash of lightning reminded her to count, one

thousand, two thousand, three thousand... She reached eleven before she heard a faint patter of thunder. So the storm was probably not going to be a factor.

Shining her penlight ahead, she set off into the blackness of the forest. Soon she could hear the babble of Coxon Kill. Last winter it had frozen solid and its rapids had looked like quartz. She could touch them, run her hand along their wrinkles and curves. She'd fallen sort of in love with the kill then. A month ago she'd found a swimming hole about fifty feet long and eight feet deep, the water so clear you could count the trout ghosting along the bottom.

She could walk naked from her cabin and swim there, doing the breaststroke until the water turned her blue. She had adored the astonishing sensation of being naked in the woods, of feeling the cool forest air caress her breasts... God, she wished she had a man who was gentle, poetic and sexy. A nice man.

Her light flickered in a thicket of mountain laurel. Sharp stars of flowers shone pale. Far above, the enormous pines whispered on the slight wind. When the kill was so loud she was beginning to think she might stumble into it, she finally found the path.

Twenty minutes later the forest gave way to a wide field and the brook became sluggish, its banks muddy and indistinct. The mound stood before her, a low and unimposing shape blotting the horizon.

As she advanced, she saw light in a couple of the judge's downstairs windows. When she observed that it was flickering, she stopped. This light had an odd purple tinge, reminding her of the arc of a welder's torch.

Was he running a gas space heater? Surely not in this stifling weather. Maybe something was burning.

She went over to the house, moving swiftly through the ruined pear orchard with its twisted, twig-choked trees, and up the uneven brick walk that led across the garden to the kitchen door. This close, the house breathed out its own intimate smells, the odor of its cellar and the faint suggestion of the evening's meal that had been prepared in the kitchen, and another scent that was harder to define. Maybe there was a dead opossum in the crawl space.

Given that she was a tall woman, it was easy for her to look in the window. She discovered that the source of the flickering wasn't a fire, it was a huge television set.

The set was a room away, facing in her direction. Before it was a chair, and she could see the judge's head lolling to one side. Was he asleep? It looked like it.

The odd thing was the image on the screen. It was smoke— thick, roiling, purple smoke billowing endlessly past. An after-the-bomb shot from a war movie might look like this, but such a shot would only last a second. This never ended.

What in the hell was it, she wondered, and why purple? Smoke was black. When stations went off the air, didn't they go to static? Who would leave an endless loop showing nothing but this?

Well, they had, and the judge had gone to sleep watching it. No doubt it was some regional station manager's concept of a cool idea, purple smoke in the night. Her experience with the world of small-town media was that it contained a high quotient of morons. Look at her, she'd given up a decent salary, a secure job, an orthodontist with a good car and the city she loved for this.

She was about to turn away when she saw the judge's long, thin hand come up to his face. The fingers spread, hesitated in the air, then fell against his cheek and slowly slid down out of sight.

She backed away from the window, repelled as much by the bizarre sensuality of the gesture as by the realization that he was awake. Now that she knew that he wasn't sleeping, it looked as if he was in some kind of weird state of tongue-lolling ecstasy.

What if he was an addict? Wouldn't *that* be a lovely story to print? She watched him. My, but it would be fun to beat up the old creep in the paper.

Now he was nodding up and down. She could see that his mouth was wide open. He was jerking. She realized that he must be masturbating.

Her impulse was to run, but she stopped herself for fear the sound would stir him. She'd interrupted a private moment, and her cheeks began to burn.

She crept off, feeling decidedly perverse.

2.

When she reached the summit of the mound her feet began to crunch in gravel. There'd never been any reason for her to come here before, and she'd always assumed that the summit would be like the rest of the mound, lushly overgrown with weeds.

It wasn't hard to find the place where Dr. Kelly and his Saigon Sally had heard the screams: that was where the backhoe had done its work. She went over to the black scar it had left. As she approached, she could smell the sick-sour odor of the raw soil. Once this would have surprised her, but she'd smelled enough cut dirt in this area to know that soil isn't necessarily sweet. A city dweller expects black, rich-smelling earth. But the reality is very different. Wild earth smells of death and decay, for it is a killing ground and the home of a carrion multitude.

She lingered at the edge of the ditch, not quite willing to commit herself to inspect that soil. She imagined black beetles, earthworms, grubs, moles, shrews, massive high-speed snakes. The ditch was an open wound bleeding confused little creatures who wanted so very badly to rush up her legs.

A reasonable compromise was to lie in the dandelion-choked grass that gave most of the mound its green surface. She pressed her ear against the ground, closed her eyes. After a few seconds she felt the most appalling sense of vulnerability.

She got to her feet. Looking around, she noticed a glow at the far end of Mound Road. A car. She turned off her penlight. Who would be coming down here at this hour? Then another glow appeared behind the first, and a third behind that.

A whole procession of cars was coming down Mound Road. She didn't like this at all. Maybe the judge had seen her, had called the sheriff's office or the

state police.

But no, the first vehicle was an old pickup with a rattly bed. There was nothing official about these vehicles.

She crouched down, watching. A total of nine cars approached, parking along the sides of the road and in the clearing where it dead-ended at the judge's pear orchard. When they turned off their lights it was too dark to see, but she could hear the doors opening and closing as they got out.

She got ready to run. But then the front door of the house opened, pouring white-purple light out into the yard. The people filed into the judge's house, men, women, and children, all walking stiffly, as if they were—what? She didn't know what. They were just walking funny.

What the hell was this, a midnight meeting of some kind? Old communities are full of secrets. She ought to go back down there, try to find out what was happening.

Old communities also tend to be mean about keeping their secrets.

The judge had been flinging his fish. Was this some sort of wildly perverted backwoods sex club meeting going on here?

Then she heard low voices, saw lights going on throughout the house. Not exactly a secret meeting, after all. As the light got brighter, she could hear shouts.

The story was still out here. Again she stretched herself out, pressed her ear firmly to the ground and listened. The grass beneath her head crunched. There was nothing else... or... no.

Yes! A deep, deep sound. Underground stream, some kind of machine?

She raised her head, trying to tell if she'd been listening to the rush of her own blood. No, that deep, throbbing note had nothing to do with her.

It was a sound of engine power coming from a place where no engine should be. She took the cassette recorder out of her fanny pack and turned it on,

pressed the mike into the soil.

But then it went still, almost as if—but no, that was impossible. But it did seem as if it had stopped *because* she'd been listening.

For a moment she wondered if she was going crazy. There weren't any machines down there.

Again she looked at the ditch. Would going down in a three-foot-deep cut really help her hear better? The mound was at least fifty feet high. On the other hand, what if the woman was in a tomb near the surface, too exhausted to scream? Maybe—if she'd heard anything—it had been the booming tremor of an exhausted voice.

She clambered down into the ditch. Did earwigs really run into your ears and start digging wildly toward the interior of the brain?

There was a bright flash of lightning and an immediate roll of thunder. That was all she needed—the storm had decided to come back. After the thunder subsided it grew very quiet. It was dark, too, like pitch, like ink, like the emptiness of profound sleep.

She leaned down, far down, and worked her ear into the muck. It was thick, giving stuff, but not nearly as gooey as she'd imagined. In fact it had a light, friable quality that was quite unexpected. The mud of the forest floor was as dense as wet concrete.

Suddenly she remembered a coke tailing she'd found behind an old silver smelter she'd once done a story about. This was what extreme temperature did to some types of stone.

She was rewarded with another noise, this one clear and close and quite ugly. It made even less sense than the deep rumbling, this rapid slithery noise. It was frantic, a lobster scabbling in the pot, the whipping body of a snake whose head is being crushed under a boot.

She instantly leaped out of the ditch. Her impression was that the thing had been right under her.

There was no question about this sound: it had been big—very big. Not an eel in a pot, an anaconda in a caldron. Good God, what was *in* there?

It was time to get out of here.

She started down the mound—and was stopped at once by what she saw below. Cars now choked the dead end. There must be twenty of them. And there was activity in the house, a great deal of activity. Every curtain was drawn, but she could hear the hum of many more voices... and a sort of sizzling noise. There was also lots more purple-white light, strobing behind the curtains.

Risky or not, she knew she had to get a closer look. She moved quickly down the side of the mound—the path was well worn— using her penlight as little as possible.

The pear trees were gnarled and full of branches that seemed designed to stick her in the eye, but she found that they also afforded good cover. She could come within thirty feet of the house without showing herself.

This close, the purple light was really intense. It was odd, too, the way it made her feel kind of... trembly inside. Trembly and warm, a bit like sex.

Inside the house it must be intolerably bright. And the voices—it sure wasn't any fun party they were having in there. People were choking and bellowing, children were wailing, it was an altogether dreadful sound. People burning, people drowning, people being torn apart—these were the images that the screams brought to mind.

She moved out of the cover of the orchard, stepped quickly across the dry grass of the back lawn. She reached what was probably a dining room window, heading toward a bright chink of light that was leaking out from between a parting of the curtains.

Close up, the house was really rocking and the cries were ghastly—too hoarse, too loud, too... lost.

Her stomach twisted, she swallowed. She wanted to run, to get out of here, to

go home and bury herself under the covers.

But there was a story here, very certainly.

Closer yet, the voices were even worse. They weren't simply sounds of agony. She recognized something she thought must be pleasure. It was a mixture of pleasure and torment. She pressed her face to the rusty screen and peered into the lit interior.

The light was so bright she was blinded. She had nothing more than an impression of movement—not even the sense of shape. People were leaping, jerking, flailing so fast that their bodies were blurs in the purple-white ocean. She felt a sensation leap through her eyes and right down to her groin, a sensation that ended in a tickling so intense that it caused an instant convulsion.

She screamed, she couldn't help it. Then she threw herself backward, sprawling in the grass. The pleasure was so great that she was momentarily helpless. However, she recovered herself and dashed off, running wildly away toward the orchard.

She crouched among the trees, breathless with fear. Nobody emerged from the house. She rubbed her left eye, which tingled furiously. What was going on in there? She'd been—it was like instant climax. More than climax. She sweated, her body tingling at the memory. Her eye was numb, though, and she wasn't sure she could see clearly.

The light had hurt her. Maybe it was a retinal burn. Perhaps she'd looked into a laser.

She began to back out of the orchard. When she was parallel to the end of the road, she decided to risk trotting across it and running among the cars. She didn't recognize many of the vehicles, which meant that they weren't Oscola folk but people from nearby towns. She knew most Oscola cars by sight.

Could it be a secret society—the Order of Purple Light Freaks or something—here to have an electronic orgy?

She had already crossed the road when she noticed that one of the cars was running. It was making a deep, throbbing sound, the growl of a monster engine.

Then she spotted it, parked facing outward with a clear run to Mound Road. It was a sports car, a convertible with the top down, low and mean, of a shape unfamiliar to her. It was a taut machine designed to dominate. Gas-guzzling sports cars left her cold... and thrilled her. She'd always been conflicted about his Ira's Porsche. But this was no European jewel-box. This car had USA written all over it—the shape said tough and smart and powerful.

She moved closer, her eyes on the glowing instrument panel, which could be seen inside the open interior. The closer she got, the more obvious it became that this car was something very special. When she was just behind it, she could see the name-plate. It was a Dodge Viper. She was stunned: what was something like this doing in the Three Counties? This was the ultimate muscle car. The paper had gotten some press releases about it. A Viper was the kind of thing that belonged in Arnold Schwarzenegger's driveway, not Judge terBroeck's. She went around to the door. There were no handles, so she leaned over and peered at the odometer. Everything came up zero. According to its instruments, this car had never traveled a foot.

Was it stolen? What in hell was a stolen car doing here?

Then she heard another sound, one that made her stop dead. Somebody was breathing, slow, regular, deep. And it was coming from up under the dash, as if a dwarf was hiding himself by pressing into the car's cramped foot well. She started to shine her penlight, but then hesitated. The feeling of being watched was overwhelming—and absolutely terrifying. She backed away from the car. "I'm sorry," she said.

There was a grumbling sound from the dark—and what felt like a tangle of threads landed on her right hand, encircling it.

She leaped back, yanking her arm away. Had she gotten in a spider web?

It was then that she noticed the lightning bugs. They appeared suddenly, because otherwise she would have seen them before. As far as she was

concerned, fireflies were one of the pleasures of country life.

But she wasn't interested in enjoying them now, even though they were drifting up from a hole behind the judge's pear trees in a graceful wave. They were coming in a tight group, gliding across the lawn.

If she didn't change course, they were going to collide with her.

The sky erupted with a lacework of lightning. It was rendered fuzzy by low, nasty clouds, but it was nevertheless an astonishing display, accompanied by guttering, persistent thunder.

In the silence that followed a breeze came up, at first welcome in the wet, sucking heat. But the breeze got harder, fast. Soon it was wind, cutting and mean. Huge drops of rain began to strike her.

Even though she was out of the pear orchard, the lightning bugs were still behind her. She wasn't being chased, of course, but it sure felt like it.

When a firefly landed on the back of her hand, she shook it off. Then she noticed one was in her hair. She reached up, brushed it away. Another came so close to her face that she could feel the breeze of its wings.

And she could smell it, a cutting mix of acid and dirty skin.

She ran like a madwoman.

3.

The weeds cut into her shins. On the uneven ground she stumbled, flailed, twisted.

But the moment she slowed down a firefly landed on her face near her left eye. Before she could brush it off another joined it. Simultaneously a third started scrabbling in her ear. She thrashed, and her right hand came away dripping crumbs of pink-purple phosphorescence.

Her flight became headlong, hell-bent, desperate. She had not felt like this since she was ten and running down the middle of Garr Street in Montnoy,

New Jersey, running through the dark from Steffi's house to her own.

By the time she reached the meadow her breath was coming in ragged gasps. She was no jogger, and her run dropped to a lope. Immediately a firefly came tickling into the hair along the back of her neck. She yanked it out, threw the body away. What on earth was the matter with them?

Others appeared, cruising around her, their little lights blurred by rain. Up close she noticed legs lit by the glow of fat, segmented bellies, and between each segment was a more deeply colored glow, purple and angry, suggesting intense heat. But fireflies aren't hot.

More appeared and yet more, and she began to hear a deeper note in their buzzing. She also became aware that a long shadow strode before her.

A moment later she tripped and fell across a stump that had looked in the light like a clump of weeds. She landed hard, rolling to break her fall—and then she saw what was behind her.

They flowed and undulated along the ground like a single creature, a burning snake five hundred feet long. This living band twisted and turned through the meadow, glittered in among the trees of the ruined orchard, glowed across the judge's lawn. It was emerging from that hole back in there, which glowed with purple haze.

They were literally pouring out, swarming fifty feet into the air in a burning geyser.

She stared, for the moment too amazed to feel her fear. This is the state of frozen terror the snake seeks to induce.

The great mass darted at her with the speed of lightning. She felt a hot finger between her legs. Her belly shuddered with pleasure so deep and intense that it almost incapacitated her. A terrible sense of menace came with it, though, and she knew she had to run, must run, must get away.

They wanted to get her back, to take her down into their hole.

Then the Queen Anne's lace that choked the meadow was whipping her thighs, and she was racing with the wind in her ears and the rain jetting against her face, racing for the woods, and she felt—knew—that the race was against death. Her own shadow danced before her, darting and long and getting darker as the thing behind her grew, its light increasing. It became as bright as moonlight, then sickly day.

When she reached the woods she was once again enveloped in darkness, which caused her to founder helplessly until she turned on her penlight. Recovering herself, she dashed in among the tall pines. She couldn't find the path, not even the stream, so she just kept blundering ahead. She'd left lights on, and her hope was to see a glimmer among the tree trunks.

They came in buzzing and winning, their abdomens so bright she could observe each fiery segment. In an instant she was surrounded by thousands and thousands of them, all scrabbling at her, getting in her hair, her ears, under her clothes. Where they remained on her skin there came a sharp sort of tickly pain—almost a pleasure.

It was loathsome.

They scrabbled up her legs, tickling and pushing until they were deep between her thighs. When they got in her they felt like a single thing, a thrusting, eager finger. It was a carefully intimate presence, probing, stroking, going in, up in, deep.

When she gasped ten or fifteen of them rushed into her mouth, and she found herself crunching into their bodies with her teeth. When she tried to spit them out more came in, plunging down her throat.

She fell back, too overcome by the thick masses of them that were filling her mouth and nose to utter the scream of abandoned pleasure that was making her heart leap up even as she choked.

There were so many she couldn't close her mouth, couldn't spit, couldn't swallow. She stuck her fingers into the writhing mass, into the crunching salty-sharp taste of them, and dug them out. They resisted, swarming down her throat, tickling horribly as they scrabbled along her esophagus. Then she

lost complete control of herself, heaving great, rattling coughs, unable to breathe. Their sheer numbers stuffed her throat shut. She grew frantic for air. Even as waves of shimmering genital pleasure made her back arch, she began to suffocate.

She toppled over. A needle of fire cut into her face. For a moment she thought that they were setting her aflame, then she realized that it was water. Somewhere in the back of her mind a voice said, Coxon Kill, water, water will save you. She dragged herself forward, wriggling down into the stream like a grateful otter, sucking it in and spitting out jiggling masses of glowing material.

But the pleasure grabbed her and drew her back, made her ache for more. She struggled against the urge to throw herself onto the bank, to lie down and spread her legs to the undulating, buzzing creatures. The buzzing rose higher and the tickling came around her whole middle, began to infest her again, to break her with rapture. Again and again and again she came to climax, and each time the freezing water shocked her out of it. The fight continued between Ellen's will to live and the gruesome lure of death by pleasure.

As she struggled and writhed, she came closer and closer to the long, deep pool where in happier hours she had swum above the shadows of the trout.

She sank to the bottom of the pool. In an instant all the pleasure was gone and she was screaming, inhaling water and spitting out masses of bubbles thick with bug legs and broken cellophane wings.

By crawling along the bottom of the pool, coming up for gulps of air, she could more or less avoid the creatures. They impotently pummeled her back with their bodies. In this pure water she had no trouble seeing. The insects in their millions lit everything brighter than day.

Then it was dark.

Coughing, she sat up. Her mouth was still full of the jelly-like phosphorescence, and crisp bits that crunched when she worked her jaws.

Then she realized what they tasted like.

A wave of nausea hit her. She vomited a burning white stream of matter into the night. It arced over and fell with a hiss to the surface of the stream. She watched it float away on the quick current, its glow soon lost around a bend. Seeing the goop produced another attack of nausea, then another. She almost vomited her gullet inside out.

Slowly, the agony subsided. Grinding muscles went slack, helpless choking was replaced by long heaves of sweet air.

At last she stood and waded out of the pool.

It was then that she saw the tip of the swarm of insects. It was a glimmering strand in the reeds halfway down the length of the pool.

As she watched, it grew thinner and came closer, closer—then seemed to snap back against itself, exactly as if the millions of separate bodies were linked by unseen tendons.

Again it stretched toward her, the tip of it glowing fiercely as if with enormous effort. It *was* connected to itself, not a swarm but a single thing, and it had reached the limit of its range. It must be anchored down in that hole.

She fought to control the motion of her stomach but she couldn't do it, not with the taste, the memory of those awful things in her, the feeling that they were still crawling along her gullet. Then she realized what they tasted like—blood and filthy, sweaty skin. If she'd licked somebody's naked feet, she'd have tasted the same complex mix of salt and dirt and stink.

Another spasm brought up more glowing debris. She went staggering off into the woods, thinking only of finding her cabin and getting this filthy, vile taste out of her mouth.

She left the thing behind her, questing and stretching against its limits. It had wanted to get her back. It had not wanted her to leave the judge's place.

Dear God in heaven, what was going on here?

After long minutes of blundering, she located the sparks of light that marked her cabin. The night deceived her, and what should have been a few moments' walk became a crashing battle with unseen ditches, rough tree trunks and deceptive paths.

At last she struggled onto her porch, weeping and crying out, and went into the house. Immediately she slammed the door, locked it. For a short time she leaned against it, crying like a baby. She shook her head, no, no, no, trying to eradicate the whole experience from memory, to somehow explain what had happened, to escape from this awful feeling of defilement, of having been literally packed with filth.

She crossed the living room, dropping clothes as she went. The taste in her mouth was sharp and strong, and she had an image of herself licking open sores.

In the bathroom she gargled with Listerine, pouring it down her throat, then spitting it into the toilet. Again and again she did this, until the bottle was empty. She smashed toothpaste into her hands and jammed them in her mouth, working the paste down around her gums, in between her teeth, beneath her tongue. She brushed until her mouth was filled with foam, then washed it out.

Still the taste lingered, so she got some Palmolive dishwashing detergent from the kitchen and washed her mouth out with that, gagging from the bitterness of it, and she saw when she spit that there was a whole bug left. It was badly damaged, moving slightly. It looked like skin, like *skin*. Horrified, she managed to hold it just long enough to put it in a jelly jar, closing the metal top firmly and carefully.

Then she made a saltwater gargle, again she brushed, and finally felt a little cleaner. She took a long, hot shower. As she washed in billows of steam she heard thunder outside and moaned when the lights flickered. But she couldn't stop washing. She used Jergens soap and Ivory soap and Lava soap and would have used lye soap if she'd had any.

At last, lying on the floor of the shower, her skin aglow from the soap and the hot water, she began to feel a little better.

There was a terrific crack of thunder and the lights went out. A moment later the shower stopped. Of course—her well had an electric pump.

In the silence, she listened to the quick gurgle of water going down the drain. This was replaced by another sound—a peculiar sizzling like bacon frying. She got up, listening, struggling to find something to grasp—a corner of the shower, the wall. She was so scared and exhausted that it was almost impossible to control her movements.

That sound—she'd heard it before, coming from inside the judge's house. She found her way to the bathroom window, raised the edge of the blind.

Off in the woods she saw light—more than one light, as a matter of fact. But it wasn't fireflies, it was a group of bright winks of light like purple jewels. They were advancing slowly toward the house, and the sizzling noise was coming from them.

It was the most menacing thing she'd ever seen. Had she locked every door, every window? What about the crawl space, were the vents closed or open? And the flue—had she closed the flue in May after she'd made her last fire?

She began to cry, her throat tight with the frustration and the fear. This was worse than the worst nightmare, and it just would not stop.

Then the shower came to life with a roar. Startled, she uttered a scream. But the lights also came back on and that calmed her down a little. At least she could do something more than cower.

Her nakedness was making her feel horribly vulnerable. She grabbed a towel and dried herself, then rushed through the house checking window locks and closing curtains.

She could no longer tell if she was awake or asleep, in nightmare or reality. Naked, cold, damp, shaking and still deeply nauseated, she prowled her three small rooms, her eyes flitting from door to window, her mind alive to every creak and sigh.

A gust of wind made her run to the kitchen, grab her two biggest knives. She

advanced through the house, her teeth bared, growling softly. At some point she'd put on her white terry-cloth robe, and it hung loose about her as she patrolled.

Finally she sat on a rigid dining chair, putting her knives on the table before her. There was an occasional dribble of rain, but no more lightning, no thunder. Then she realized that she could see the dim trunk of a tree beyond the picture window.

The night was over, the nightmare past. She thought she'd like some coffee.

She was putting the coffee in the percolator when the true impact of what had happened slammed her as hard as a physical blow. She leaned far down over the kitchen counter, her eyes shut tight.

It had all been impossible.

Groaning, she held her belly as if her guts were spilling out.

A crackle from the woods made her snap to attention. Instantly, the knives were in her hands. She rushed to the window. All was still. But she knew the sound of a footfall in the pine needles that covered the forest floor.

She stepped away from the window, and then—following another thought—rushed through the house dousing lights. For a long time, she simply watched. Slowly, dawn began to define first the outline of the window, then the trunks of trees outside. Finally the first birds began their tentative peeping.

Full daylight came then, shimmering with dew. Today was Sunday. She had been planning to drive down to Ludlum, get an *Albany Times-Union*, and sit on the terrace of the Waywonda Inn and eat croissants and drink coffee.

But she would never reach the Waywonda Inn, would never read today's paper. Dawn or no dawn, Ellen Maas stood at the edge of a great darkness.

Four

1.

Night was the worst time for Brian. He'd wake up smelling smoke, hearing Caitlin's first, sharp shriek, hearing Mary's surprised shout turn to an inarticulate bellow of agony.

He sweated out the nights.

Before the fire his habit when under pressure was to retreat into the intricacies of mathematics. He would play with equations, carrying them to their angelic and logical ends.

No more.

When he'd first been released from the hospital, he had gone to the Ludlum campus, expecting to begin the return to his old life. But he'd seen Mary everywhere, heard her singing across the reaches of memory.

Memory frightened him, because his equations told him that every moment was happening forever.

They told him that Mary and Kate were dying forever.

He hadn't even entered the physics building.

After that experience, he'd begun to spend more and more time on his land. He'd fallen in love, a little, with the farm.

But he could not bring himself to repair the house, not even when he'd brought Loi home as his wife. To provide her shelter, he'd bought a bigger trailer. It was dinky, in his opinion, but she'd been awed by it. She'd managed to decorate it pretty nicely, if you liked the pictures in *Trailer Home Designs*.

"Loi," he said to the empty, dark room. A glance at his watch told him that it was past two.

He looked around at her things, her furniture, her pictures, her beloved Laughing Buddha. It was plastic, it was chipped and scratched, but she loved it. He picked it up, wished on it that she would be well. Too bad it hadn't helped her today.

He sighed, wondering if he would ever get to sleep.

What in God's name had happened to her? No wonder Doc Gidumal was suspicious, he had every reason to be.

Apple Sally—she'd been attacking something. What? Could there have been one of those little black bears down in there? Sal hated bears.

There was her dish, still half full of Kal-Kan. She'd been a good friend, that busted-up old hound. He took a long breath, then tossed the dish in the trash.

No bear had made the noise that hurt Loi.

What would be the properties of a sound that could cause such an injury? Great intensity, enough oscillation to actually set cells in motion, enough power to burst them. It'd take an awful lot of energy to produce such a sound.

First somebody is screaming like a banshee, then you get something like that.

He went to the refrigerator, got a bottle of Bud and returned to the living room. He sat in his easy chair, balancing the beer on its wide arm.

The nature of the sound continued to bother him. It had been a sort of undulant hum, a warbling acoustic discharge. The oscillation would have been what caused the damage; it would have set up the kind of motion that could burst cell walls.

Afterward, he'd had muscle aches and a fairly severe headache—far less damage than Loi, but he was a lot less fragile than a woman at the end of her third trimester.

Outside there was a series of brilliant flashes. The storm that had threatened earlier was hanging on the higher elevations, lurking back in the Jumper Mountains above the little town of Towayda. Right now it could go either

way, stomping off into New Hampshire or coming back here to give Oscola a predawn pounding.

He swilled the last of the beer, tossed the bottle toward the trash can. It hit the floor with a sullen clunk. So much for any nascent Scottie Pippen fantasies. The living room clock bonged three times. He sat staring, wishing he had a fire to watch.

It was long after the crickets had stopped and the bats had gone to bed that his eyes shut for a final time, and a tired, uneasy man slept.

2.

It only lasted a moment. When he woke up he found himself sitting in a very different sort of a seat. There was a sensation of electricity going through his body.

Then he realized that he couldn't open his eyes. He heard familiar rattling. Sounded like he was in his truck. And why couldn't he move? Muscle spasm? Stroke?

He realized that he wasn't in bed at all. He was in a seat, his hands were on a steering wheel.

He *was* in his truck!

No, this couldn't be. How could he be driving his truck with his eyes closed?

This was crazy. No matter how it felt, how real it seemed, he had to be dreaming. He wasn't in his truck at all, he was still sitting in the easy chair in the living room.

There was a bump, followed by the rattle of the passenger door that had been bothering him for weeks.

Light flashed on the other side of his closed lids. Thunder rumbled.

He tried to open his eyes, tried again, raising his eyebrows until his forehead was deep with furrows.

Suddenly they popped open—and he was dead stunned by what he saw.

He was in the truck all right. His hands were on the wheel, his foot on the gas, he was driving down Kelly Farm Road in the direction of Mound. "What the hell?" The dashboard clock said it was five-fifteen.

He was going... was it to Ludlum, back to the campus, back to the facility?

He had a vivid memory of his old facility with its walls covered by the blue PVC pipe that contained the vacuum-sealed cables.

He was out of control. He was heading down Kelly Farm Road toward Mound and he couldn't stop himself.

He fought. He willed his hands to move off the wheel, willed it until he groaned with the effort. His hands shook, his neck throbbed, he grimaced with effort—and suddenly his right hand did as it was being ordered. Struggling mightily, he managed to get the shaking, quivering fingers around the key, to turn it.

The truck stopped. For a moment he slumped over the wheel.

Then a tickle started down between his legs. For a moment he thought a rat was on him. Before he could even panic, though, the sensation blossomed into one of electrifying pleasure. It was a needle, hot, vibrant, incredible, stabbing deep into his solar plexus. He hadn't felt such a sensation in years, not since he was first touched there by a girl. He still remembered that pleasure, how it had stripped him of his will. Now it drew him out of the truck, into the woods.

Like magic he was walking somewhere, being drawn, being pulled. On some level the pleasure made him sick, made his heart weep. He wasn't going to the campus, not back to the facility, not at all. He was going somewhere else, to a house, a familiar house...

He thought he could feel something wrapped around him, threads that he couldn't see, hair-thin but wildly active, tickling as they raced about under his clothes.

He grimaced, shut his eyes—and the pleasure disappeared. He became aware that there had been purple light, deep almost to black, shining in his eyes.

When he opened them again, the purple light came back. He moved like a robot, or a puppet controlled by strings that gave him pleasure down to the depths of his soul.

Then he burst into the meadow beside the mound, and before him was an extraordinary scene: a burning woman with her arms over her head, followed by a long, swinging stream of white fire. It was something from another version of the world.

The vision of the burning woman was so bright that it left red ghosts in his eyes after he turned away from it. He saw Mary burning again, Mary in a flower of popping, blurry flames, moving fast, her hair a spreading blossom of fire.

He was close to her, only a few feet away, and he saw that the supposedly heavenly glow was actually coming from thousands of busy winged worms.

Her face was pale fire, her hair flying sparks. Behind her was the dark shape of the mound. He could also see the judge's house—which was bizarrely transformed. Its windows were pouring electric purple light so bright that silhouettes were visible behind the closed curtains, gyrating as if some sort of maniacal dance was taking place inside. But it wasn't a fun dance, he could see that.

Cars jammed the driveway, spilled over into the front yard.

He was being drawn here.

And he was in a fight for his life. He'd fought like this before in the burn wards at Ludlum Community and Midstate Catholic in Albany.

The pleasure drew him, dragged him, made his hands shake as he tried to untangle the threads, weakened his arms when he sought to tear them away. Still, he lurched forward.

Desperate now, he concentrated all that was left of his willpower. Ahead of him the front door began to open, letting out a shaft of pure purple light. A silhouette stumbled past, horribly contorted. Long legs and arms as thin as sticks swam in the light. Inside, screaming mixed with caws and whoops and the continuous sizzling of a gigantic skillet.

It felt so good that he wept. He was aware that he was marching across the yard like a mechanical toy. The threads were all around him now, enclosing him like a deadly web.

His will was a single dot of white light in the center of his being, and that dot wanted to live, to be free. It wanted to live so badly that it began to grow, to get brighter.

Higher the pleasure rose, higher and higher, to greater and greater intensity. He groaned, he yelled, his skin quivered with it.

But it was death, he knew that, he could taste it, feel it in the coldness of their touch.

His mind fixed on Loi and the baby. On his son. He would never get to see his son.

No!

He was being dragged now, toward the open door, toward the angry purple flashes and the capering, twisted figures inside.

He tensed his muscles, stiffened his legs until his heels were digging into the ground, and he pushed. He fought, tearing at the threads, he flailed and yanked and ripped, he threw himself back against their strength.

A tall, angular shadow came onto the judge's porch. He could not see the face, but he felt watched, carefully watched.

Spittle flew from his mouth as he twisted and shook, his muscles strained to their limits as he fought the threads. All the while the purple light pulsed into him, causing his deepest soul to cry out in the agony of the pleasure.

The grave figure on the judge's porch gracefully tossed what looked like a thick cable in his direction. It fell before him with a dense thud and began scrabbling at the earth, trying to get closer. But it was stretched to its limit.

The tickling threads disappeared, the purple light went out, the figure withdrew from the porch.

He ran away like a frightened child. He kept running until he reached the woods at the far end of the meadow that surrounded the mound. Then he stumbled into Coxon Kill, lurched through it and collapsed on the opposite bank.

He felt as if every aching muscle had been pulled awry. He was soaked and cold and miserable.

A crow raised its voice in raucous anger. He could taste the sourness of its inhuman rage. He whirled around, looking for it. The tall, strange figure from the porch had followed him. It extended a long, thin arm toward him.

Absolute panic. A man running. Leaves whipping past. Little sounds, half-made screams. A man running, running and the blaze of dawn striping the horizon with perfect colors: long gold lines of cloud tinged with the black of the departing storm, the sky going from green to soft pure blue. Beneath this grandeur, a man running.

A brace of pheasant rose before him, their wings shining. When he first noticed the glow in among the trees he stopped, shrinking back like a terrified deer. But then he saw that it was a cabin with lit windows and smoke coming out its chimney. The logs were dark and old, the lights in the windows were dim.

It looked like something from a sinister fairy tale.

3.

A miserable Ellen Maas was waiting for the percolator to stop coughing when she again heard footsteps.

Nobody ought to be around here at this hour.

She grabbed the biggest knife.

"Who's there?" she asked. It came out as a thin, ineffectual whine.

A man's face appeared in the living room window.

It was waxy green, the eyes staring, the mouth slack. The eyes went to the knife she was brandishing, then the face reared back into the dark.

She threw down the knife, reeled away from the window. She was biting her knuckle to keep from screaming. It was Dr. Kelly out there and he looked as if he'd been in a wreck or worse. She dashed out into the Living-dining room and threw open the front door.

"Dr. Kelly..." Her voice died away. The expression on his face was unlike anything she'd ever seen before. His eyes were wide, his lips open, his skin wet with sweat. He shuffled toward her. Instinct made her step back. All sorts of unspoken dreads began to rise.

Then he stopped, buried his face in his hands, trying to wipe away a thickness of sweat and grime. His hair was full of pine needles, his T-shirt was ripped almost to shreds, he was wet. "I'm sorry. I've had—had—" The hollow eyes met hers. They pleaded.

"Dr. Kelly?"

"Help me." As if the two small words had drained the last of his strength, he slumped forward. Big though he was, she had to catch him or he was going to fall. She reached out, was staggered by his full weight.

She was just strong enough to get him in the door, to aim him at the couch. He toppled down, hitting its old springs with a squealing crash. She didn't want that door left open; she slammed and locked it. What had happened to her was bad enough, and now look at this poor man.

Then she saw him fully in the light. His scars were clearly visible and she was surprised at how extensive they were. His chest looked... molten. She'd

never seen such deep burns.

Her old percolator went from coughing to wheezing, indicating that the coffee was finally brewed. Looking back at him, she moved quickly across to the kitchen. The man had to be helped, but the damn thing would explode if it wasn't turned off. That taken care of, she rushed into the bathroom.

What should she get? What did she have? Alcohol and cotton balls, a tube of Mycitracin, some Kaopectate, lots of Mylanta. Obviously, her first-aid capabilities were a disaster.

"May I have some of that coffee?" he asked in a beaten voice. At the hospital he'd been cruel to her. Now his eyes were anguished.

Brian couldn't get over how good the brew smelled, so rich and strong and familiar. Dimly, he remembered struggling through the woods, seeing the gingerbread little cabin, coming up to the door...

There'd been a beautiful woman in the doorway, wearing a fluffy white robe. Now she had a percolator in her hand and was filling a big mug.

In amazement he reached out, touched the terry cloth of the robe. He no longer felt able to verify reality merely by looking.

The green eyes blinked, regarded him. "Are you hurt?"

Her voice was as pure and refreshing as the water of Coxon Kill.

"Hey, listen up, Dr. Kelly! Are—you—hurt?"

He didn't know how to explain his pain, what to say that would identify the cause of his wounds.

"Please tell me!"

"I—I don't know..." He tried to remember what he'd just been through, but it all seemed so impossible, it was just a crazy jumble. He was exhausted, but he didn't think he was actually hurt. "I'm fine," he said. He realized that the woman was Ellen Maas. He'd come all the way to her cabin.

He didn't understand at all.

"You don't look fine." She thrust the mug of coffee into his hands. Beneath her tone of concern was a much sharper note. She was afraid of him, he decided. That wasn't too surprising.

He took the coffee, drank gratefully, deeply. "I'm sorry, I know it's early."

He got only a guarded shift of the eyes from her. She definitely wasn't happy to have him here, and he couldn't blame her. "Dr. Kelly, what the hell is going on around here?"

"I don't know!"

She watched him with increasing wariness. He appeared mad. But after what had happened to her out there, she was willing to give him a little latitude. But only a little. "Why are you here?"

He tried to explain himself. "I've had—an experience. Something happened to me that I can't explain."

He was surprised to see that this made her less uneasy. "I had a bad night, too."

They regarded each other.

"I'm sorry I burst in on you." He noticed for the first time that his scars were visible. Ashamed, he covered his chest with his arms.

"You don't need to do that."

"I'm sorry."

"You got them trying to save your family."

She went into the kitchen and began preparing her breakfast.

He followed her. "Will you give me something to eat, Miss Maas?"

"If you like."

The smell of coffee and bacon, the sound of butter being spread on toast, the clink of spoon against cup—these familiar things allowed him to do what he so desperately wanted to do, and that was imagine that life would return to normal. For her part, the familiar rhythms of cooking the meal and setting the table were what enabled her to return to the ordinary.

The terrors of the night sifted into memory.

Brian and Ellen were like deer who have glimpsed the hunter and run, and think themselves safe, and pause to crop the stems of autumn.

Five

1.

He ate mechanically, his eyes on his food. She hadn't wanted anything after all; she wasn't sure how long it would be before she cared to eat again. Instead she sat and smoked and watched him. He had the rangy build of a hard-working farmer, but his eyes betrayed the complexity of his intelligence.

"I think I'm feeling separation anxiety," he said.

"From your wife?"

"In the sense that I want to stay here. I want to hide."

A silence fell. She wanted to talk about what had happened to her, but she didn't know how to do that. There was no simple way to explain something so weird, not without sounding deranged.

Unless the same thing had happened to him. To find out, she would try an indirect approach. "What are those insects that come out at night—the glowing ones?"

"Lightning bugs."

"I mean that attack you. Like wasps."

He looked up from his food. His eyes now held a question. "None."

"Not anywhere? Not back in the mountains?"

"No."

She smoked, watching him carefully. So that wasn't what had happened to him.

So what had? Why had he come staggering out of the woods at six a.m.?

He wondered what she'd been driving at with her questions. Had something happened to her, also? No, he'd had a nightmare of some sort. "I'm sorry to disturb you."

"Do you know any entomologists at Ludlum?"

"Bug boys? Nah. I'm a physicist. Worked on esoteric particles."

"Star wars?"

"We were going to harness a new sort of particle. If we could find it."

"I want to talk to an entomologist."

"But not to a particle man." He cut across the second of his two eggs, dipped some toast into the yolk. "Thanks for this. I needed it."

She smiled a little. "My breakfast usually consists of cereal and a half grapefruit. I didn't even know I had those eggs. What kind of particle were you studying?"

"Generating. I was trying to generate it. A particle that would have moved backward in time. It sounds esoteric, but it would have been a very powerful particle. Capable of great things."

She went to the window and looked out a long time. He watched the shoulders of the shabby terry-cloth robe. Perhaps he should leave. Probably should. But he found himself pouring another cup of coffee.

"What happened to it?" she asked suddenly.

"It?"

"Your project."

He shook his head.

She came back to the dining table and sat down across from him. "So, have you figured out why you came walking out of my woods at six in the

morning?"

He watched her movements, hasty, nervous. She was very tired, still wary of him. Still angry, he suspected. "Please don't put it in the paper."

"No, I won't hurt you. It's not my style." She smiled then, and it was quite wonderful to see, a sudden, fierce brightening of her tense features. But the smile disappeared abruptly. "You didn't answer my question, Doctor."

He had to explain more fully, he saw that. "I had a waking dream," he said carefully. "It's called hypnogogia. A commonplace of psychology. Apparently I walked in my sleep."

She nodded. "Go on."

"Well, that's the explanation."

She laughed in his face, but the laughter was gentle, it wasn't mean. In simple, straightforward language, she told him the craziest story he had ever heard, about killer insects that glowed.

"I can understand your interest in entomology," was the best response he could think of. It was a most curious story, though. "But you're talking about a nightmare, not a real experience."

She went into her kitchen, came back with a pickling jar, held it out to him.

"What?"

"On the bottom. Look."

The jar was empty, with a hole in the tin lid. Silently, he gave it back to her.

She unscrewed the lid, examined it. "Damn."

"A lightning bug that can bust through a tin jar lid. Not possible."

"You do have your pompous side, Doctor."

"I know my science! And I know that this hole was not, repeat *not*, made by any insect known to man."

"I know what I saw. I can't explain it but it wasn't any hallucination. Hell, look at Loi. Your wife's lying in a hospital bed because of this—"

"You're assuming that a strange sound and... lightning bugs... are related? That's more than a supposition, that's a leap of faith."

"Everything strange that happened out there in the last twenty-four hours is related!"

"What makes you say that?"

"The screaming in the mound, the injury to your wife, my experience, your experience—they've all happened within a few hours, and inside the same square-mile area. Of course they're related."

He felt sweat gathering under his arms. Acid twisted his stomach.

"You look sick, Doctor."

"Call me Brian. I'm just—"

"You're scared. Like me."

"I'm scared."

"It's time to tell me all about it."

He recounted his whole story.

"I saw those damn cars, too! I even touched one!"

"If this was real—" He fell silent. He had just realized something appalling.
"Dear God."

"What?"

"You say you ran through the field behind the judge's place, and you were covered with them?"

"Totally. They were even in my mouth."

It was incredible. That image—that dream image—must be real. "I saw you. I thought you were part of my nightmare—a burning woman. I often dream about people burning."

A prickling sensation told her that goose bumps were rising on her arms.

He was hunched, staring at his food. "You're trembling," she said. She held out her hand.

Silently, he nodded.

When he didn't take the offered hand, she withdrew it. She had only wanted to comfort him. "I think maybe that creepy judge is breeding some kind of tropical insect," she said at last. "They came out of a hole in his yard. Probably wants to drive people off his land."

"What about your theory that it's all related? How does Loi's injury fit in? And what about me?"

"Well, I'm a reporter. I'll do a little research. A lot of research. But you're a scientist. What's your considered opinion?"

"I can't even begin to formulate one. Except that I have a sense it's all very dangerous."

"That I know."

2.

Brian went out and located his truck, then drove home and fell into a deep, empty sleep. He awoke at noon and rushed off to the hospital, angry with himself that he hadn't been there the moment visiting hours began.

On the way down to Ludlum he pushed the truck through seventy. When he

saw the low, white buildings of the hospital complex, he felt the muscles of his neck stiffen, felt his breath tighten in his chest. He was a man capable of intense passion, he'd always known that. But Loi's combination of beauty, vulnerability and determination had moved him very deeply. He had loved Mary and he always would, but this was deep, too, this was valid, too. Loi deserved every bit of love and loyalty he could offer.

He drove up to the big parking lot, got out and hurried through the heat waves rising from the tarmac. Grasshoppers ratcheted in the wide lawns that surrounded the buildings, and a gopher moved stealthily toward a shrub.

Brian went through the revolving doors, listened to his own shoes rattling on the linoleum floor of the lobby.

Loi was on the second floor, housed in a private room because of the need for absolute rest. When he appeared, a smile danced into her face. "You are late coming."

"I overslept."

"You look tired."

"Nightmares."

She reached out, drew him close, kissed him. "I am feeling much better. When the doctor saw me, he was pleased."

"I'm glad."

"What were your nightmares? Do you want to tell?"

He didn't want to worry her. "Just the usual," he said. "Screaming."

She nodded. "You need me home."

"Yeah."

There was at this moment an opportunity to say something about Ellen. "I sleepwalked."

"Oh. That is demons, make us do that."

"There's also a scientific explanation. Sleepwalking's well understood. It's a stress reaction."

"I gave you this stress, husband. I cannot apologize enough."

"An accident did it, Loi, not you. If anyone's to blame, it's me. I never should have let you get back out of the truck. I should have taken you straight home at the first sign of danger."

"What happened to me, Brian?"

"My best guess is that rocks grinding together created some sort of electrostatic field that set up the vibrations."

"I heard screaming also, Brian. I heard that poor woman!"

He took her hands, kissed them. She was so precious, so sensitive. "It could be that the geologist was right. Some sort of earth movement created the screaming sounds, too."

"But you don't believe it?"

He shook his head. He didn't know what to believe.

"You know, you and I have a real problem. Because I want to know what happened to me, and I don't. Dr. Gidumal says I must have been hit. But it didn't happen."

Now was perhaps the time to bring up a rather delicate subject. "Did you fall, perhaps?"

She looked at him steadily. "I did not."

"Loi, if you did, I won't be angry. I'm not like the people from your country, I don't treasure the child more than the mother. I treasure you both." He moved closer to her, drinking her in, smelling the soft fragrance of her hair. He embraced her.

"Brian, I didn't fall. I—maybe all the running. But that noise, Brian, it hurt! It hurt right in the middle of my womb!"

He remembered exactly how it had felt. "It hurt me, too, honey. And I have to admit to you, I don't know what it was all about."

Normally he told Loi everything. Normally he shared every detail of his life. But he did not share the terrible story Ellen Maas had told, and most certainly didn't tell Loi about his own bizarre experience. Those stories would scare her—they'd scare anybody—and he wasn't about to take that risk.

"I wish we were home in bed together," she whispered.

"Me too, Loi." He closed his eyes and felt her softness beneath his hands, and dreamed.

But visiting hours ended, and he had finally to go.

After he left her and got in his truck, he made a turn that he'd never expected to make again. He drove over to the campus, into the heart of his past.

Ludlum University was lavishly kept, rich with a hundred years of endowments and, more recently, a substantial amount of Defense Department funding. It wasn't large. Like Rockefeller University in Manhattan, it was highly regarded for its science programs. People came to Ludlum for physics and math.

It consisted of- a cluster of red brick Victorian buildings, with a smattering of more modern structures on the outskirts of the campus.

He told himself that he'd come here for the peaceful drive, for the shade and the quiet.

And he knew that wasn't true. He'd come here because he was a worried, confused and very frightened man, and this was where he'd done his best mental work and solved his most challenging problems.

None of them had been as thorny as this one, though. None of them had even approached it.

For some time he drove along the quiet streets. There were few students about this time of year, giving the place an air of abandonment. The ancient oaks and maples spread their shade on the lawns and over the roads, and beds of flowers bobbed in the warm summer breeze.

He did not intend to drive past the physics building, where his lab and research facility had been. There was a very good reason for his reluctance, one that went beyond grief.

He was a man touched deeply by the mystery of time. His equations told him that the past was still there, frozen in memory, awaiting only the magic touch of physics to be restored to a sort of flickering life.

Perhaps the deepest reason that he had been unable to continue without Mary was that he thought—knew—that their time together still existed somewhere, a bud that was closed forever, and yet in some way alive. Just the right particle, aimed in just the right direction, might light it briefly in the magic space of the mind, making her laugh again, lift her eyes to him again.

With the equipment they had been building, it might have been possible to shine a light into the past. Remotely possible. Not to go back—that could never happen. But to look back, yes.

With twenty or so years of effort, he could perhaps have created such a light.

So he'd quit.

And maybe for that reason it would still be too painful to return to the building itself, to face the old places, the echoes. But he knew that he had to return to science, in order to solve the mystery that had ensnared him.

Which discipline, though? Geology, to explain the earth sounds that hurt Loi? Entomology, to identify Ellen's insects? Psychology, to heal his own mind?

Or was this a problem of physics? His mind was too well disciplined to allow speculation based on insufficient data, but it was also true that the manipulation of time could theoretically lead to some very strange

derangements of reality.

His own equations had, in fact, suggested dangers—some of them profoundly serious.

What if there were parallel worlds, living by other laws, harsher worlds, perhaps... and what if somebody made a light and shone it pastward... but aimed it wrong and tore the fabric of present reality instead?

His work had been classified, his work had been dangerous, his work had been full of unknowns.

It had also ended—hadn't it?

He didn't intend to go in, but he decided to at least pass the old building... and—when he saw it—to stop in front.

The Physics Department was housed in a great Gothic pile with the crenellated roofline of a castle. Its tall, peaked windows seemed to glower down at Brian as he parked the truck.

For fifteen minutes he sat and watched. A couple of grad students strolled up the walk and went in the big double doors.

After a time he saw a figure at one of the downstairs windows, looking out at him. It was a man wearing glasses. Maybe it was the chief of security, Bill Merriman. He'd have cause to be concerned about a strange truck stopped in front of a building where classified work was being done.

The last thing he wanted right now was an encounter with an old friend like Bill. Brian started his truck and drove home.

After he'd parked the truck he went into the trailer, made himself a ham sandwich, then spent the afternoon treating some of his older trees for borers.

When night came, he thought to call Loi, but he was afraid that he'd wake her up. No matter how optimistic she'd been, he knew that she needed lots of rest.

For dinner he threw some Lean Cuisine into the microwave, and ate it with a

Coke. No more beer.

All afternoon, he'd been hoping that some good ideas would slip into his mind. In the old days he'd hiked the Jumpers to get ideas. Anything diverting helped, even a shower.

Tarring borer holes hadn't helped. Sitting here eating his grim little supper certainly wouldn't.

He needed somebody to talk to, somebody intelligent, who could at least pretend to follow his discourse.

Ellen Maas.

He didn't actually know Ellen's number, of course, but the phone book was only fourteen pages long. "Maas, Ellen, Bx 358, Oscola," and a number.

Just as he was about to dial, it rang. He snatched it up. "Hello?"

"Are you eating dinner?"

A thrill of happiness went through him. "Loi, hi."

"I want to know what you're eating. I'm concerned about you."

"I had Lean Cuisine. How about you?"

"Com on the cob, roast pork. I ate gratefully."

"In other words, it was lousy."

"Not entirely perfect."

"Inedible."

"Yeah, but I got it down. I am having strong lonely feelings now, Brian."

"I miss you, too. I was just thinking about calling you."

"I am worried that you need me."

"I need you. But not sick. I need you well."

This brought a silence. Again he was bothered that he hadn't told her what had happened. It was eerie to conceal something of such importance from her, and distanced him from her in a way he didn't like at all.

"I am feeling very much love now, Brian."

"Me too. But I also want you to sleep. I don't want you to worry. I'm perfectly fine."

"Brian, I called three times this afternoon and you weren't there."

"Oh, Loi, I was out doing those old trees. You remember, the borers?"

"Oh, yeah, of course. I'm glad that you keep busy."

"I'm fine and I love you and I want you to go to sleep right now."

"OK, husband."

She hung up. He looked at the phone in his hand. Dare he call Ellen and discuss temporal refraction and the instability of the reality constant? Poor woman, he didn't want to torment her like that.

Maybe it would be best to leave Ellen out of it. He could go over to the hospital in the morning and talk to Loi instead. She'd listen eagerly, even if she didn't understand.

But he didn't need a sounding board, he needed a foil. Ellen was a bright, sophisticated and—above all—reasonably well-educated person.

More importantly, she was involved in the secret.

He called her—and got her answering machine. He left a brief message, hoped it wasn't too terse. He wasn't an answering machine person.

He went out onto the small porch that overlooked the driveway and the barnyard.

The whippoorwills were thick tonight, their voices echoing in the woods. He'd always found their call the most beautiful next to that of the loon, and he stood for a time listening.

The moon rose in silence, and the evening star followed the sun westward.

Until deep night, he was fine.

Then he began to pace the trailer's few small rooms. He turned on all the lights and locked the door. He would have turned on the air-conditioning, but something made him prefer to hear the night. Katydid's argued, the whippoorwills continued their gentle talk, and the night wind hissed in the pines.

He found himself listening. But for what?

Maybe Ellen was out doing research.

Would she be fool enough to return at night to the scene of her experience? No, surely not.

He watched the news at eleven, then went to bed. That night he had more dreams, terrible dreams. In them he was being dragged toward the judge's house, toward the open door, and there were huge shapes inside that radiated malevolence like a foul purple gas.

3.

Ellen began work at once. Unlike Brian, she was not hampered by excessive respect for something as cumbersome as the scientific method.

She proceeded efficiently. On the *Times* she'd learned effective investigative techniques. The first thing she'd learned was that clams stay open until they perceive a threat. So she didn't question anybody directly. She resisted the temptation to pressure the old judge.

She spent most of a day just nosing around Oscola—and finding it a good deal more interesting than she'd thought. Towns reflect the deep nature of their people, especially old ones where certain small, critical things have become important. A wonderful old neon sign is not changed simply because the shop joins a chain. The tobacconist keeps stocking Borkum Riff even when he has few customers left for it, because of the atmosphere its familiar aroma gives his store. The druggist reupholsters the stools at his soda fountain in red marbled vinyl because they've been like that for sixty years.

A town full of people with such sensibilities becomes in time fertile ground for an astute investigator, revealing things about itself at every turn.

At their worst the people of Oscola were narrow and prejudiced. They suffered most of the weaknesses of the self-involved.

But they also had good in them. They worked and did not steal. Generally, they were not violent. They knew beauty when they saw it, and that was reflected in the appearance of their town.

Essential to Oscola's beauty was the fact that it was so taken for granted by the townsfolk. It wasn't a model town, it wasn't a toy. It was just itself, and she found that she liked that about it.

Walking slowly down Main Street, passing Fisk's Garage with its splashy new collection of all-terrain vehicles and Mode O'Day with the latest tangerine pants suit in the window, she noticed a sense of emptiness even greater than usual.

At one o'clock the Mills Café had six customers. Usually, Betty Mills had easily twenty people in for hamburgers and fried chicken, and her mouth-watering meatloaf from yesteryear.

Maybe Ellen wasn't the only one who'd encountered the damned bugs.

The one person who knew what was happening behind the scenes in Oscola was Mr. Handy, who'd been the tobacconist for nearly forty years. When she'd first gone in the place she'd been tempted to buy cigars, but Mr. Handy

was too nice to tease, and it would have shocked him deeply.

As she entered the store he pulled down her usual carton of Salems.

"Mr. Handy, what're those meetings at the judge's place? The ones that happen late at night?"

"I wouldn't know."

Oh, but he would. Mr. Handy was no liar. She could tell by the look that came into his face. "Come on, I'm curious. Maybe there's something in it for me."

"Don't put anything about that in the paper!"

"So you do know."

"Look, Miss Maas, it's private stuff. The people who go there are from downstate."

"You make it sound very mysterious."

He nodded, ringing up the Salems.

"But if the people are from downstate, then why do they all have local license plates?"

Color spread up his neck. He coughed. "Masons," he said. "That's what I think."

"But you're not certain."

He shook his head. "They wouldn't let me in, you know. All my life I've been here, and not really a part of Oscola. Forty years in the town, and they don't trust me even yet. You want to know why?"

"Weren't born here?"

Again he nodded. "In my opinion, it's the Masons. He's the grand master

here, you know."

"They always meet late at night?"

"There's no way to know what they do. It's a secret society."

"Except that everybody belongs except you. Does Brian Kelly belong?"

"Not him. He's a Catholic. The Church won't allow it, and Father Palmer's really stuck on the subject."

She watched him nervously rubbing a finger along the top of his glass counter.

"Goodbye, Mr. Handy." He handed her the accursed cigarettes. Maybe this was her last carton, ha ha,

She looked up and down the street. Now the silence had a different tone. Cults, secret societies, the mean, autocratic old judge... and the insects.

They had been so vile, so aggressive. They'd wanted to eat her, drag her away—she couldn't imagine what they'd wanted to do.

She ought to go after that miserable old judge with a gun. But that would be a mistake, given that a gun wasn't her weapon of choice. Instead, she returned to her office and looked him up in the tiny morgue. There wasn't much, not from files that only went back five years. Prior to that, the morgue consisted of scrapbooks. They weren't much help, although she did find out that he'd been born, educated locally, then graduated Columbia Law back in the forties. Missed World War II by a hair.

In a controversial 1956 trial he'd sent a local man to the electric chair.

He wasn't a mobster, a sexual pervert or a violent man. In fact, he was a pretty good judge, if a bit conservative for her taste.

He was a nasty little man; arrogant and cold as stone.

It was time to confront him. The hell with this pussyfooting around town.

This bunch of clams had been closed up tight even before she started. They were always closed.

She got in her car and drove down Main to the intersection where it became Mound. When she crossed it, she was in the judge's territory.

He answered his door after the third ring. Up close, it was obvious that he was very old.

"Judge terBroeck, can you tell me what goes on out here at night?"

He just stared at her.

"The cars. Dozens of 'em. I've seen them. What's it all about?"

"Get out."

"Goddamn you." Oops, that was a mistake.

His eyes widened. "I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head."

"What about the bugs that live in your backyard?"

For a moment, his face was totally without expression. Then he blinked.

"Ah."

"Come on, you know what I'm talking about. The ones that come out at night. Glow in the dark."

"Lightning bugs?" His voice was small. He'd backed a good distance into the foyer.

She advanced on him. She wasn't going to let him pretend he thought her crazy. "Don't give me any crap, Judge. I know they're there because they tried to kill me. And you know they're there too. You're a poor liar, Judge."

"I have no idea—"

"You sure as hell do have an idea. What are they, Judge? Something you

imported from Brazil or somewhere to scare people off your property? Well, they're pretty scary, all right." She took another step toward him. "Let me tell you something. If I find one of those things—and I will find one, sooner or later—I'm going to take it to a lawyer. Not a bug collector, but a lawyer. And I am going to get him to sue you until you're left on a street corner with a cup of pencils, and they're my damn pencils!"

"They have nothing to do with me!"

"You're a liar!" Her heart was pounding, she could feel the blood rushing to her cheeks. All her pent-up fear and rage surfaced. She wanted to bash his face in, the arrogant old bastard.

"Listen—please—don't come around here at night. Don't do it!"

"Why the hell not—have you got Satan and his demons after you or what?"

His face had gone as gray as death. His hands shook, making a dry paper sound against his old suit pants. "It's worse, my dear. Worse than that." He raised his old claws, seemed to be seeking some sort of comfort. "Keep to your house at night. Do it for your own sake."

"What about all the cars? Other people come here at night."

He nodded. "Stay away, if you value your life."

"Melodrama won't scare me off either."

"Then you're a fool!" Now it was his turn to advance on her. "This is my property. Get off my property!"

She didn't want to stay. There were other ways to skin this particular cat, better, quieter ways. "OK, I'm going. But I want you to know that I'm a real curious person. And I'm gonna find out everything."

"Yes," he said, "you do that. You find out everything. And see where it gets you, young woman." His eyes were sunken, his lips were trembling. "See where it gets you."

He shut his door.

4.

Two days after her admission, Loi returned home.

The doctor had warned her to be extremely careful, and she became a fragile, gliding shadow of herself. She had been told to think of her womb as made of glass, and so got Brian to put pillows on all the hard chairs and generally arrange things in the trailer to minimize her chances of taking a stumble. She wanted to be wrapped in blankets, to be cherished. Above all, she wanted to be held close and often.

Sadly, they couldn't make love. Obviously it was a danger, especially with him being so big and heavy and getting so excited.

He consoled himself that this was safest. She was high fruit now, untouchable by a groundling like him.

Loi had been home a day when Ellen called. "It's the *Gazette*," Loi said, handing him the phone.

"I figured you'd be in for lunch." Her voice was taut.

"Yes."

"Look, I want to come talk to you about Judge terBroeck. I've interviewed him and it was strange."

"I'm not surprised." He glanced at Loi. She must not hear this. "I'll come to you."

"Fine. I'm at the office."

He hung up. Loi gave him a questioning look. "She's still investigating what happened on the mound. She wants to ask me a few questions."

"Oh, Brian, I want to forget it."

"I told her I'd meet her at her office. That way you won't have to be involved."

Loi smiled slightly. "This afternoon I am reading *The Winter's Tale*. We will discuss it tonight?"

"Sure. Gladly."

He went across the driveway and got into the truck. Even running the air conditioner full blast didn't cool it off before he turned onto Main Street, parked in front of the Excelsior Tower, and gratefully got out.

He'd never been in the offices of the *Gazette* before, at least not since he could remember. She was sitting at a steel desk like the kind of thing one might encounter in a welfare office. There were hard fluorescent lights burning overhead, and an ancient window unit ineffectually circulating the smoke-hazed air. Papers were strewn over every available surface. There were five or six insect books opened on tables and chairs, dozens of pictures of the judge and of his estate, some old, others obviously taken in the past couple of days.

He was shocked by these. She'd obviously been spying on the town's leading citizen.

She thrust a photograph into his hand. He found himself staring at tire tracks. "Taken this morning in the judge's front yard,"

she said. She gave him another picture. There were many fewer of the tracks. "Yesterday morning, same spot."

"Isn't Bob going out there to work on the mound?"

"The judge put a stop to it. No more equipment on his property without a court order. But I've been on his property."

"Obviously."

The whole office was devoted to his property, right down to a house plan that must have been obtained from county records.

"He's scared, Brian. I hated him until I realized that. The man is terrified."

"Have you got any more information?" He gestured toward the insect books.

"I went down to your old alma mater and described the things to a Dr. Soames."

Brian nodded. Soames was a biologist. "I wasn't aware that he has an interest in insects."

"Well, he seemed to know what he was talking about. But as far as my bugs are concerned, he drew a blank."

"We've got to get more information of some kind."

She took a long drag on her cigarette. "I've been working on that." She held up some sheets of paper. "Your friend Lieutenant West gave me these. The cops use them to identify what kind of tires make a given mark." She picked up one of the pictures. "Like this one. It's from a Michelin of the type they use on the Volvo 240. And this, a Goodyear Aquatred—an aftermarket tire. The size suggests something large, a Crown Vic or maybe a big Olds or Buick."

"Typical local cars, except for the Volvo."

"I've found out that there are seventeen Volvo 240s registered in Ludlum County."

"That many, in Ford and Chevy country like this?"

"Sixteen of them are Ludlum cars. Popular with your fellow professors. But one of them lives up in Towayda. And you know what? They're not at home. As of yesterday, they've been gone. Just packed up and left night before last. People are real curious. Evans is their name."

"Sure. Ritchie and Charlene. I know them a little. Charlene was on the debate team with me in high school."

"They went over to the judge's night before last. They haven't been seen since."

"And the judge says—"

She shook her head. "If I want to talk to him again, I'm gonna have to take a gun. He won't open his door to me, he won't stay on the phone."

"Scottish Rite's a big deal around here. Maybe you've stumbled onto some sort of Masonic group."

"I know all about that."

"If the Rite's involved, everybody would be very secretive, especially with an outsider."

"You're not an outsider, so you ask him for me."

"I'm Catholic. Catholics don't join the Rite, at least not in the Three Counties."

"I found the hole where the bugs come out. The judge calls it a root cellar, but he's lying. It's deep, Brian."

Maybe a sinkhole had indeed opened up. It would be like the judge to conceal such a thing, for fear that the county would make him pay to have it filled in.

He dropped into a chair across from Ellen. "This work is brilliant. Why you're not still on the *Times* I can't imagine."

"Too many soft news assignments. I wanted the hard stuff."

"I think you got handed a little, I have to tell you."

"Unless I'm connecting dots that shouldn't be connected."

"Physical evidence of the bugs—that's what we need."

"So let's get a net and go back to the judge's."

"A strong net, given what happened to your jar lid."

"Do you believe me?"

He nodded. "Let's say that I've accepted your story because I respect you. You're not a nut and you're not a liar. But as a scientist, I sure would like to see that evidence."

She sighed. "I was hoping we'd make some progress bouncing ideas around."

He rubbed his face. "Jesus. I've thought and thought about it. My problem is, the connection issue. I drove past my old lab yesterday morning. Just sat there thinking about it." He watched her light another cigarette.

"I still don't really know what you did at Ludlum. Not the details."

"The details are classified. Let's just say it was a way of connecting with the past, using a stream of particles."

"So it's unrelated."

"Well, probably. But these particles—if they exist—would break all the laws of continuity. The math says that they might *also* break holes, in a manner of speaking, between parallel universes. That's a fairly silly way of saying that they would cause profound chaos."

"Goddamnit, Brian, I want to know what happened to me."

"So do I."

"It eats at you. Jesus!"

"Just don't be foolish."

"In what way?"

"By going to the judge's at night."

"It's the only alternative."

"We have to be methodical and careful. Given time, we'll make some headway. Scientific investigation always works like that."

"I'm a reporter!"

"Do it my way. We'll get better results." The clock on the wall behind her head told him that twenty minutes had passed. "I have to get back to Loi."

"I'm sorry I bothered you."

"No, it was no bother, believe me. And who knows, we might be about to solve the secret of the ages."

"Is that what this is?"

"I think it could be." There was silence between them. Then he got up.

Ellen followed him to the door. "How is she?"

"Improving, the doctor says."

He was aware of Ellen's hand coming into his as they paused at the door. "You take care, Brian. Me personally, I bought a shotgun which I have no idea how to use. I keep all my lights on at night and my windows closed."

He drove home slowly, considering what their most logical next step would be. It seemed clear that insect bodies were needed. And they should follow up with the Evanses, be certain that they came back.

She was going to go charging off to the judge's, he knew it, and put herself in great jeopardy. Care was needed. To convince the outside world that this was really happening, an array of carefully gathered evidence had to be presented.

When he got home he folded Loi in his arms and kissed her deep and long.

She took him to their bed. In the way of some familiar married couples, they undressed without speaking. He lay with her, listening to the baby, kissing her breasts, her belly, tasting the sweetness of her skin. Very gently, she caressed his penis, and kissed him there in her modest way. She kept on until

he rose to his full passion. Familiar waves of pleasure enveloped him, and he watched in amazement as the author of his pleasure moved her head in the gentle, rising rhythm that led to only one thing.

After he spent himself, she stroked his hair and gazed into his eyes. To his own intense annoyance, he found himself thinking about the problem.

"You frown."

"No, I'm happy. Loi, I'm so happy." He embraced her and kissed her long, tasting a hint of himself in her mouth, and loving her the more for her willingness. "Thank you," he whispered after the kiss.

They made a chicken stir-fry for supper. He chopped and she cooked. They had it with tart lemonade.

Afterward he sat in his chair reading the latest *Astronomy*. But he couldn't concentrate. He stared off into space, ruminating. He thought of the tire tracks, the missing people... and of fighting the steering wheel in that truck. If Ellen went anywhere near that house after dark, she was in danger.

Half an hour passed. An hour. He got up and phoned her. There was no answer.

"Honey, I'm gonna ride into town. Get a magazine."

"You were just in town."

"I'm restless. I'll just go down to Handy's and be right back."

He drove out into a dark, starry night. At the intersection where Mound became Main, he turned down toward the judge's house.

Mound Road was empty of cars—almost. Parked well off the road about thirty yards from the house, Brian was not very surprised to see a familiar Plymouth Duster, dark and empty.

He got out of his truck. The night was silent, very dark before moonrise.

Five minutes passed, then ten, then twenty.

He got back in and called Loi. He said that he had a flat. She sounded a little strange, but said she was fine.

He'd been there forty-five minutes when he saw the glimmer of a flashlight coming up the road. Relief poured through him as she came up to the truck. "You've been spying on him."

"Yeah."

"And?"

"I expected lots of cars. But I think I have to come back later."

At all costs, he had to deflect her from that course of action. "We should try to catch one of the insects."

"I think it's more practical to take pictures of the cars, get license numbers."

He took her hand, then almost as quickly released it. "Go home, Ellen."

"Let's compromise. You come with me tonight. If we fail, then we'll do it your way. We could meet at your place at about two. Go back through the woods, see what we can find."

This was a bad mistake, he knew it. But he couldn't let her do it alone. "We'll need a container."

"I have some jars with glass lids."

They parted then. He followed the Duster until she turned into her driveway, then accelerated toward Kelly Farm. Five minutes later he was home and wishing very much that he could explain things to Loi.

"You got the tire fixed OK?"

For a moment, he drew a blank. "Oh! Yeah, fine." He glanced at his watch. "Look, it's pushing ten-thirty. What say we turn in?" He wanted to get some

rest before it was time to go out. Above all, he wanted to make certain that Loi was deeply asleep when Ellen came.

"Sure, Brian."

He threw on the boxer shorts he used as pajamas in the summer and got into bed. Loi soon followed. They lay together, she reading a dictionary, he an old *Newsweek* he'd grabbed. "I thought you went for a new magazine."

"Handy's was closed."

Page by slow page, she perused the dictionary, referring frequently to a look-up list from *The Winter's Tale*. Every so often, she would whisper a pronunciation to herself.

An hour became another hour, midnight approached. He dozed, only to wake and find her still studying.

"You really need your sleep," he said at last. But it was nearly one before she turned off her light.

He lay awake, waiting.

When there came a light tapping on the front door, he almost jumped out of his skin.

She'd done it.

He said nothing, only sat up in the madly creaking bed, put his feet on the floor and went shuffling into the kitchen. He even went so far as to get himself a glass of water, on the off chance that Loi might be vaguely aware of his movements.

Ellen appeared at the kitchen window. "I'm scared, Brian." Her whisper was little more than breath itself.

He pulled on a pair of jeans over the shorts, and threw a T-shirt across his shoulders. Then he slipped into his ancient sneakers. He went to the door, opened it a crack, hesitated. The hinges seemed to creak even more loudly

than the bed. Well, no matter, he had to risk it.

They walked toward the woods. "We can go along that path by the kill," she said. "We'll be at his house in a few minutes."

"I know."

"Did you tell Loi?"

He didn't answer, and she didn't repeat the question. As they passed the ruins of his old house, he began to feel the cold. He put on the T-shirt.

Ellen's arm moved around his waist. "I'm afraid," she said. "I'm scared all the time."

"We'll get one of your bugs. Then science will react."

They were well beyond the ruins of Kelly Farm now. Here the woods were deeper, darker. The breeze sighed in the trees.

"You know, Brian, even being out here with you, I'm still real afraid. Are you as scared as I am?"

"For a couple of minutes I was totally helpless, moving toward the judge's house against my will. You're damn right I'm scared."

"I keep remembering the way they smelled." She shuddered.

"You have a sensitive nose."

"They stink like sweaty old men."

They began to hear Coxon Kill up ahead.

"This is where I got away from them—by diving into the water right there!" She pointed, then glanced back the way they had come. "I hadn't realized your place was so close to mine."

"Our old roads wind around a lot. The whole area's deceptive that way."

At that moment there appeared a glimmer among the trees.

A shock like a slap went through him when he realized that it was a long stream of light, like a glowing snake. It shimmered and undulated among the trees, the tip of it gliding about, seeking. Ellen's hand gripped his arm. "They're here."

She opened her purse, pulled out a Ball jar.

He was watching the thing, deeply fascinated. Was he actually seeing something from another reality, another world? "It's as cohesive as a single creature."

"We've got to go closer. You'll see it's actually a swarm."

She fumbled the jar open. They stepped forward. They were hand in hand, like two children.

The moment they moved, the swarm shot at them like a bolt of lightning. It stopped short fifty feet away. Brian could hear the sigh of many wings. It seemed to strain toward him. "I think it has a limit to its range."

"Yeah."

"Give me the jar."

She put it in his hand. Her heard her sob.

"Stay back, Ellen."

"Hell no."

Together, they moved into the pale light of the swarm.

Without warning he was covered with them. He screamed like a shot deer, grabbed at the legs scrabbling against his face—felt himself pulled hard from behind.

He fell back against her. There was a tinkle of glass. The jar had broken

against the ground. "Run." Her voice was choked.

In moments they were in one of Brian's orchards. The trailer was visible in the distance, a black shadow. The swarm had extended itself again, and was now a hundred feet beyond where it had originally stopped. It was also a good deal thinner, like a long, glowing cable.

She was sobbing openly now, her shoulders shaking, her hands tearing her hair. "We're OK," he said, "we're OK."

She clutched him.

The glowing cable was undulating, and getting shorter and thicker. "Look at it, Ellen. It's pulling itself back."

He held her to him, comforting her.

Another voice spoke: "Brian?" Loi came out of the shadows, moving softly and carefully—but fast. She was very fast.

"Loi!" He pushed Ellen away. His heart started thundering.

Ellen said the worst possible thing. "I'm sorry, Loi!" She could not have appeared more guilty.

"Brian, please come with me now."

"He was helping me in an investigation," Ellen said.

"Ah. You are exploring sex?"

"I—he—Loi, there's something you should know."

"I guess so."

"It's not what it seems. He's helping me investigate the judge."

Loi looked toward the forest. "The judge is in the woods, then?"

Brian went to her. "Loi, it's not what it seems."

"Don't you dare tell me what it is or isn't. You think I'm stupid?"

"There really is an investigation—"

"And as for you, Miss Fancy Reporter, you get off my land right now. And stay away from my husband, or I'm gonna come after you the way we do at home!" Her voice crackled with authority. This was a very new side of his wife.

Ellen gasped, stepped back. Brian was so shocked he couldn't make a sound. Loi's tone had sliced through the air. She'd meant those words, they were no idle threat.

It felt to Brian as if the whole world was falling in on him. He loved this woman with all his heart and soul. "You mustn't think—"

"Come, husband. We go." With that she turned and began moving back toward the house. She walked fast, slipping through the night with the grace of a trained infiltrator. "Come," she called.

He hurried after her.

Six

1.

For Loi the awful details of her discovery were the hardest part to bear. Brian's hurrying along home with her like some silly geisha; the way Miss Maas had nervously drummed her fingers along her jaw—these were the things that cut through the lies that they spoke.

A part of her sought blame and wanted to apologize. Another part wanted to do something to him with a knife. She had been a worthy wife, and wasn't she carrying his son?

She had seen all—and not two hours ago he had been making love with her. Was he never tired, never satisfied? Why were men slaves to their sticks?

She took him back to their trailer in silence, listening hardly at all to his protests. "Loi, I did not—" "Loi, it wasn't what—" At home a man discovered like this would not have further humiliated himself with such babble.

At home, indeed. What was she thinking? She was without a home. This trailer, this man and her big belly—these were her home. Without the man she might fall back into destitution. She would fall back. She knew well what awaited a little boy in the back streets of Bangkok. Was it also the same in the slums of New York?

The thought tightened her throat, made her stomp with rage as they passed through the brushy field that had once been Mary Kelly's vegetable garden. Her own far better garden was nearby, sited farther down the slope for correct drainage.

When they got back to the trailer, he spoke again: "Loi, please, I beg you, listen to me."

"Why you put me in a trailer? Why not rebuild the house, you've got the money, you old skinflint."

"I—Mary—"

She put her hands to her ears, she didn't want to hear that name, not now. "All of these women," she shouted. He grabbed at her but she pushed him away, turned from him. She did not even want to look upon the face of Dr. Brian Kelly.

"Loi, please. I can't bear this."

She went to bed. When he heard the springs creak, he came into the room, but she delivered a look that drove him out.

Let him go. Let all the white-eyes go. They were no better than the devils who had made her a soldier at the age of eight. The devils would never have put a pureblood child in those tunnels. Only a nigger girl, the child of a round-eyed colonialist whore and a dirty American, an ugly little embarrassment.

Loi lay imagining that she was a statue, as still and cool as the Emperor of Jade Buddha in his shady pagoda.

Within her she felt Brian Ky Kelly begin to move. She smelled the aroma of the cigarette Brian was smoking in the living room, and her soul reached into her womb and twined tendrils of it about her baby, imagining that the sweet threads of family still bound them all together.

She didn't want this new weight in her heart. But she was a proud and good woman, she did not deserve to be treated in this disrespectful and humiliating manner.

Her anger was so great that she couldn't sleep; she got up and went to the front door. Maybe the quiet of the night would calm her spirit.

"Loi?"

She thought she wouldn't answer him now. She stepped onto the tiny porch, surveyed the still, silent yard. The driveway was a pale shadow, beyond it the dark bulk of the barn. If she walked to the far end of the trailer, she would be

able to see the ruins of Kelly Farm, where he had left his past life... his real life.

She was only his whore, not his wife.

The driveway was lit briefly by a lightning bug. It was a lovely, large one, like the ones that floated through the jungle at home.

She went along the path that surrounded the trailer, stopping when she could see the remains of the farmhouse. There were lightning bugs gleaming among the ruins, lending them a ghostly significance, as if spirits of the dead still lingered there. She went closer. One of the bugs came up and hovered before her. It acted as if it wanted to land on her belly. Idly, she slapped it away. The thing was big and fast, and it buzzed angrily and came straight back, bouncing against her stomach as if it wanted to burrow its way inside. Again, she brushed it away.

In each beat of her heart she felt her love for Brian. She wanted to turn it off, but she could not.

She looked back at the trailer. If he was really suffering as much as he pretended, then there was still hope. He would have to apologize, of course. He would have to do many things.

Two of the lightning bugs were hovering around her belly. They landed, she brushed them off.

Maybe he'd been seduced. That woman certainly had the capacity to do it. The need, too. She was alone in a small town. The only available men were either too young, too old, too mean or too drunk.

Annoyed, she pulled another of the pesky bugs off her stomach. It buzzed angrily, and two more came racing toward her. Then she noticed that a great swarm of them was coming up the field behind the ruins of the farmhouse, pouring out of the woods like a river of moonlight.

For a moment she watched this phenomenon. Its beauty distressed her, though, because she could not enjoy it, not through her new sorrow.

Five or six of the bugs began pummeling against her stomach like moths crazed by a light bulb. Waving them away, she began to think that it wasn't so pleasant to be outside now.

More angry at him than ever, she returned to the trailer.

From the dark of the living room, she heard a sound like a dove sighing.

Behind her lightning bugs began hitting the screen door. They were peculiar and unpleasant, not a kind she'd seen before. She shut the wooden inner door to make sure they wouldn't get through.

"What was that?" he called from the dark.

"Nothing." She went into the bedroom and lay down. Her body sank into the mattress.

Maybe she had wronged Brian, somehow hurt him. Perhaps the slap—had that driven him away from her? But no, he'd never even mentioned it.

The truth was that men were weak, feckless creatures, led by the stick, as the old grandmothers used to say at home.

Brian belonged to her, and she would not let his stick lead him away.

She was so much smaller than the American woman, so much darker. That was her real trouble. Ellen was as pale as a lotus flower, as tall as a goddess. Her eyes were beautifully round. Despite all her white blood, Lois were more slanted than her own mother's. Slanted eyes were such a misfortune.

The dove sound came again, and this time she sat right up in the bed because she could hear that it was definitely coming from Brian. Was that the sound of his weeping?

She rose, went softly into the living room. "Are you all right?"

He looked up at her, his eyes hollow, his face gleaming with sweat. His reply was mumbled.

"Brian, I can't hear you."

When his words came again, they were like the rumbling memory of a storm, slurred echoes of speech. "I'm sorry. I was terribly insensitive."

She bent to him, took his face in her hands.

"Godawful things are happening," he said. "*Godawful!*"

"I know," she said.

"No, Loi, you don't know. You don't know anything!"

"I know all."

He pushed against her chest, so that she had to rise to her feet, step away from him. "What do you know?"

"Her beauty is very great."

He closed his eyes, a look of pain.

"Are you going to go with her?"

He came up from the chair. "You're the best thing that ever happened to me!" His bulky body pressed against hers and he held her, trembling like a guilty boy.

He looked down at those rich, dark eyes, and was shaken, amazed by how much he loved her.

Somewhat roughly, she broke away.

"You have a right to your anger. But I still want to ask you to understand."

She looked down at the floor. He reached for her hand, but she drew away.

"I lose my face. All face." Her voice shuddered with emotion. For her, there could be no catastrophe worse than loss of face in her marriage. "I saw you

embracing her. It hurt me so much!"

"Oh, my poor baby! I beg you, forgive me, somehow find it in your heart."

"Brian, I am wishing to but I don't think it's gonna be!"

He no longer had the option of telling her about the insects. How could he ask her to believe such a crazy story—it would sound like an absurdly clumsy attempt to conceal an affair. "Loi, this is a horrible misunderstanding."

"Nothing is misunderstood."

"No. She isn't my lover."

"What is she then, a concubine?"

He didn't answer. There was no way to answer.

She did not want to fight with him. This would accomplish nothing. If he still loved her, she would find out soon enough— but only if she was careful. She gave him a smile. "It's a hot night, Brian. You're sweaty. If you'd like some lemonade, it's still in the fridge."

They went into the predawn kitchen together and she gave him a glass of the lemonade, watched him drink. "I am a good woman for you. Better than her!"

He could see what had enabled this woman to drag herself up from the bottom. Sometimes great human beings are born into very small lives. In the scheme of things, Loi's escape from her past was a small thing. But it had required the same kind of human greatness that enables big people to change history. He raised his glass to her. "Thank you, Loi." "My lemonade is good, isn't it?"

2.

She watched him drink, his eyes pleading. For forgiveness? For rescue? What terrible thing troubled him, so big it was even more important than his infidelity? Better always to speak of big things in the morning when the blood was strong. "You're exhausted," she said.

"I can't possibly sleep."

He needed help, she could not deny that... nor that she had the desire to give it to him. Even so, she drew him to the couch, got him to lie with his head in her lap. "Ellen Maas does not even know you. She couldn't help you now."

He closed his eyes, let the whirl of explanations fall silent. He dared not ask her if this small intimacy meant that he was being forgiven. Somehow he had to prove to her that he wasn't being unfaithful with Ellen. Maybe Ellen herself could do it. Together, the two of them could explain all that had happened. It would seem more plausible then. Yes, that was what had to be done.

In the meantime, it was so good here, with his cheek pressed against her stomach, his son communicating faint movements from inside. He closed his eyes. "Loi," he whispered, "I love you."

She did not reply.

He had not been asleep two minutes before he became troubled by a nightmare of a tall, black insect standing before him in the darkness, cloaked like a monk. There was a loud cawing noise, the sound of an enraged crow.

Her cool voice awakened him from the dream, then her soft caressing hands lulled him. "Nobody could do this for me, my love, nobody but you."

He sank away into deeper sleep.

When he woke up she was in the kitchen preparing breakfast.

He sat up from the couch, saw her standing at the sink, sunlight pouring over her from the window.

He'd had more bad dreams, of being trapped down in his old facility, of seeing the charge in the waveguide rising and rising, going beyond redline, of the blue pipe shuddering and smoking and glowing orange, turning into a glowing swarm and rising into the control room—

But nothing like that had ever happened. It was just a nightmare. It

symbolized his life going out of control, his brain humming on overdrive, everything flying apart.

Regret cut his heart. Between the two of them everything had changed. Her posture—shoulders stiff, head down—told him that the incident had penetrated the depths of their relationship.

He got up and went into the bathroom. He shaved, mechanically preparing for the day. Her peculiar and delightful Vietnamese singing did not fill the house on this morning.

When he kissed her on the back of the head she neither responded nor resisted.

There was a nice breakfast laid out: grapefruit, pineapple juice, yogurt filled with strawberries. A tiny incident, however, confirmed that nothing was forgiven. Usually, he took his coffee cut with milk, and he preferred American roast. She liked it as dark as she could get it, French style.

On this morning all the coffee was her way.

He drank it without complaint. He wanted to talk to her, but her silence was a wall. Maybe if he tried again, if he just plunged in. He took a swallow of coffee, looked up at her. "Loi, I want to be forgiven. I want it to be like it was."

"You should think of that first." Her eyes went to the window. "A truck." She looked out, cupping her hands around her temples to cut reflections.

He heard a rising roar, then the slam of a door.

Suddenly Bob West was coming in. Brian was glad, his appearance would transform this crushing atmosphere.

"We've got trouble up in Towayda," Bob said without preamble. "Another screamer. Down in the Traps, other side of Jumper Ridge."

"That's nasty country back in there. Not like the mound."

"Brian, I'd like you to come with me as a scientist. Tell me it's not the damn wind so I can order a proper search."

All of a sudden Brian wasn't glad anymore. This was the last thing he wanted.

Loi stopped what she was doing, looked hard at him.

"I'm a physicist," he said. "Not a geologist."

"You'll be the only scientist there."

"Brian." Her fingers touched his.

"I'm hoping this is nothing," Bob added, glancing at her nervously. "But I want you along, Brian."

"How will a physicist help you?" Loi asked.

"You don't want him to go?"

"I'm worried, is all." She glanced down at her stomach.

"Course you are, Loi. The last thing I'd want is to take him away when he's needed. But this isn't a fishing trip." He regarded Brian. "I would've leveled the mound if it hadn't been for that fool Danny. This time I want to go in with more than just a back-hoe. I need your credentials."

A request like that from an old friend couldn't be denied. "I'm gonna have to go, Loi."

At first she said nothing. When she spoke, her voice was like velvet. "You will leave me." Her tone was low and sad.

"You make it sound like forever, Loi!" Bob said. He gave her a playful peck on the back of the head.

"Call me from the road," she told Brian.

"I will, honey."

"You go." She smiled wide, projecting an impression of happiness that she most certainly did not feel. "It's OK, really."

He left the small figure of his wife in the doorway, got in Bob's trooper-marked Blazer. As they rolled out toward the road, he looked back for a goodbye. Almost formally, Loi raised her hand, a gesture that suggested long farewells.

They drove down to Ludlum and got on the Northway.

"She seemed upset," Bob commented as they rolled out the driveway and turned onto Kelly Farm Road.

"She's worried about the baby."

"Can't blame her. What's Sam Gidumal say?"

"He's optimistic."

"She looks like she's gonna pop."

"That she does." He thought to himself: you've made your bed, Brian Kelly, now sleep in it.

Although it was only fifty miles to Towayda by the old road, the new highway with its smooth curves and moderate grades was faster. The site was sixty miles up the Northway, then ten more through Towayda, deep into the Jumpers.

For a time, they drove in silence. Brian's mind remained fixed on Loi. "Did she seem just normally upset, or real upset?"

"You've had a fight?"

"No. But she's been moody."

"It's the pregnancy. Nancy gets on a roller coaster at the beginning of the third trimester. And that's without the worry of complications."

He shared a lot with Bob, but he didn't see how he could share this, not any of it. "I hope that's all it is."

"You married a very special woman. You know how I feel about her."

"Yeah. A beautiful woman with all kinds of incredible assets."

"Would you look at that," Bob said, snapping Brian's train of thought. He was peering into the rearview mirror.

"Oh, beautiful," Brian replied dutifully. A brand new Dodge Viper was closing from behind. It was bright red, being driven by a cross between Nick Nolte and Cary Grant. Beside him sat the goddess Venus. Cars normally bored Brian, but this one was remarkable.

"Is that a vision or is that a vision," Bob said. He loved fine cars. He had an Austin-Healey he'd been rebuilding for years, but it was nothing like this. Chrysler's new competitor to the Corvette was the hottest car to come out of Detroit in thirty years.

"How fast are they going?"

Bob sped up so they wouldn't pass, paced them ahead. "Seventy-one. Nope, now they're slowing down. They've noticed the livery."

As the Viper dropped back, Bob slowed even more. Soon they were alongside. The car was all mean angles and seductive curves. To him its engine sounded like fabulous sex.

He peered down into the leather interior, looking directly at the perfect lap of the woman. "Oh, man, short-shorts." As he watched, the girl turned her young face and smiled at him. Then she made motions. She wanted him to roll down his window. He complied. She yelled, but he couldn't hear her over the throbbing engine.

"Say again," he shouted down at her.

"... setups..." was all he got. But it was enough. He knew what they wanted.

Brian looked over at him. He'd heard, too. "You gonna tell her?" If Bob found out the location of the radar units ahead on the highway and told the Viper, he and Brian were going to get a chance to see what it could do.

"What the hell, let's find out." He went to the radio. Dispatch gave him the location of the next radar trap, a single unit at the one-six-zero mile marker.

They were still running parallel to the Viper. "They're at the one six zero!"

The driver saluted. He had thirty-one miles of clear road. "This is gonna be fun," Bob said.

"Is it legal?"

Bob laughed. "Course not." At that instant he noticed the driver's arms. They were jointless like snakes, and long, monstrosly so, curving around the cockpit, looping down into the foot well. And the hands—long, muscular fingers that ended in black claws. "Goddamn! Can you see the guy?"

"Yeah."

"Look at his arms!"

Brian strained, but he couldn't see that far into the vehicle. Bob swung the Blazer toward the center of the lane but the Viper accelerated. As it did he caught a last glimpse of the girl. Now the pretty face seemed entirely changed. It was nothing but cheap plastic, something you buy in a dime store. It was cheap, painted plastic, and behind the dark eyes there were things glittering and rushing, as if the mask concealed a seething mass of bugs.

"Oh, fuck, Brian, look at that!"

Even though it had started at nearly seventy miles an hour the Viper was pulling swiftly away.

"It's a beautiful thing to see, Bob."

Bob hardly heard the words. His blood was rushing in his temples, his heart was rattling in his chest. That man had the arms of a—a—he didn't know

what. And the girl—he'd wanted her, tasted her in his mind.

His stomach heaved; he only had seconds before it went on him. Swerving across the lanes, he caused a Lexus jammed with elderly ladies in designer hair to bleat its angry horn.

"Jesus Christ, Bob!"

He couldn't talk, all he could do was pull onto the shoulder. With little more than a glance back at the onrushing traffic, he stumbled out of the vehicle. Before he could get off the highway, his stomach turned inside out. A second later a UPS thirty-six-wheeler came blasting past, its airhorns blaring. Bob grabbed the door of the Blazer, choking as he swayed in the rig's slipstream.

Then he was out of control again, his whole insides seeming to twist against themselves, as if a fist was opening and closing in his guts.

Brian piled out and then he was holding him, lifting him from his helpless crouch. "What's the problem, buddy?"

Bob peered down the road. The Viper was half a mile away and going like the wind. "Did you see?"

"What?"

"They were—" But what could he say? He couldn't tell anybody what he'd seen, not even Brian. If one word of it got back to the Department, he'd be put on psychiatric report. He steadied himself against the hood of the truck. He was a state police officer in uniform, he could not reveal weakness like this in view of the public. People would assume he'd been drinking.

Another car passed, its horn blaring. He hopped back into the cab. "Too much cheap breakfast," he said as Brian joined him on the other side.

"You have eggs sunny side up?"

"Always. Good for the heart."

"Maybe it was salmonella You can get that from soft-cooked eggs

nowadays."

Off in the distance Bob could just make out the Viper, a dot on the horizon. Then it was gone. He had recovered himself enough to want to find out what the hell was going on in that car. He picked up the mike, thumbed it live. "This is unit two-two-eight on a detail passing marker one niner zero. We just had a red Dodge Viper through here at about warp speed. He's moving north, and moving is the word."

There was a click, some static. "We hear you and we appreciate," came an unfamiliar voice. The way troopers were shifted around these days, Bob wasn't surprised that he didn't know the voice from the radar car.

"You shouldn't rat on the guy." Brian remained completely unaware of what Bob had seen.

"Come off it. He's doin' a buck fifty at least. That qualifies as abusing the privilege."

Brian laughed. "You guys are all the same. Traitors to the core."

As he drove, Bob's stomach slowly settled. He began to think about maybe a cup of tea to complete the process.

"You sure you're OK, buddy?" Brian asked.

"You ever do lucy?"

"A couple of times. I saw Puff the Magic Dragon in a phone booth, as I recall."

"Ever flash back?"

"Nope."

"Well, I think maybe I just did. In that Viper—hell, I thought I saw—" He managed to chuckle a little. "The damn chicken!"

"What chicken?"

"The one that laid the egg that made me sick!" They both laughed. "Lookin' for a Dunkin' Donuts," Bob added.

"I don't believe it, you just don't quit."

"A cruller and a cup of tea'd set me up just right."

In Vietnam he'd dropped acid until it was coming out of his pores. He'd had to, he had a death job as commanding officer of a Long Range Infiltration and Intelligence unit. He'd take his squad of specially trained men deep into the jungle for patrols lasting a week, two weeks, three. Charlie hid rice in holes, but he and his men had no holes. Charlie had underground field hospitals, like the kind of place where poor Loi had worked. They even had field kitchens down there. Bob had stayed alive by eating water rats and sucking pond scum.

The funny thing was, acid had never tripped him out back then. His stress level had been so great that it had worked as a kind of tranquilizer. It made colors prettier, it smoothed over the cellulite on the thighs of Saigon whores. When the sun hit his face when he was on acid, he felt the subtle and deeply comforting presence of some greater force, some deity.

Maybe it was Brian's mere presence that had set off the flashback. His best friend getting a VC wife—could you beat that? She'd worked in the Chu Chi tunnels. After his stint in intelligence, he'd spent four months tunnel-busting, which meant blowing them closed and then pumping them full of napalm. To drown out the horrible sounds from below, they'd screamed their throats raw.

At first he'd thought he would hate Loi, then that he would be unable to face her.

Part of him was still at war, would always be at war. But then the two couples would sit down to a bridge game, and his heart would touch deep feelings of respect and friendship for Loi. Because it had given him these feelings, the war had come to seem in a curious way blessed.

He searched the horizon for the familiar Dunkin' Donuts sign. Tea and a cruller were his original comfort foods.

There was nothing at the next exit, meaning that he had to put down another eleven miles before relief.

They drove those miles without saying so much as a word. Brian never pushed anyone to talk, it wasn't his style, hadn't been since Mary died. Before that, he'd jabber physics until your ears dropped off. The friendship had sort of knocked along in those days. Brian had gone through the war on a student deferment, and Bob really resented that. Then he'd resented all the fancy professors hanging out at Kelly Farm, and been rankled along with the rest of Oscola by the way Brian let those fine Kelly orchards go.

But he'd come back to them, hadn't he, in the end?

The minutes crept past. Would the radar unit stop the Viper? Sure they would, even if they didn't get it on the gun. Just to remind the guy that this wasn't the friggin' Sahara around here.

Finally the exit showed up, and it had everything—a Roy Rogers, a McDonald's and a local place called the Franklin Inn and—praise the Lord—a Dunkin' Donuts. Bob went for tea with milk and two crullers, what the hell, he'd work it off later. Brian got the coffee with milk that he always drank.

Just past mile marker one-six-zero they spotted the radar unit. "Nicely hidden," Brian commented. "Cunning bastards."

Bob slowed down. "The better to get your ass with, civilian scum."

"That's how you guys feel, I know it."

The crullers were hitting Bob's stomach like a load of bowling balls. Maybe this was a combo flashback and stomach flu situation. Be just his luck.

Twenty yards down from the radar unit, Bob pulled over. They got out and walked up to the car. "You get that Viper?" Bob asked.

The station man looked up at him. "Never came through."

"Never came through at all?"

"Nah. Musta taken the Corey Lake exit."

Bob concealed the rush of emotion that this caused. He'd wanted to hear that the people in the car were wearing masks or something. That would put the whole thing to bed. But now he was just going to have to suffer.

They drove on. From time to time he glanced over at Brian, then stuck his nose down into his tea. No way could he afford to go crazy, he had kids at home.

He was glad when they reached Towayda and he could get his mind off LSD and weirdness, even if it was only to think about whether or not a horrible crime had been done here.

They drove down Towayda's main street. "Quiet this morning," Brian commented.

"Damn quiet." There wasn't even a car in front of the grocery store. "There isn't a soul."

"Well, you're a cop. What gives?"

"Fishing? Hunting? A mass migration to Atlantic City? I have no idea"

They passed through the town and headed toward the frowning Mount Jumper ridges. Bob had never much liked Mount Jumper itself, it was too rough and raw. People fell off, got themselves busted all to hell. The name had been conferred when an entire tribe of Algonquin Indians had thrown themselves to their deaths rather than accept captivity.

As the Blazer moved along, the ridges were arrayed north to south like a wall. The somber green of the pine forest opened every few miles to a rock face.

As they reached the summit of the Jumpers the views appearing below could not have been prettier: green fields, long stretches of forest, undulating hills. But just beside the road there was a brutal cliff. Dangling from it like a pretty spider was a girl in bright red shorts. For a long moment they both gazed at

this apparition. She was hanging in her climbing gear eating a sandwich.

Brian noticed that Bob had gotten dead quiet. As they ascended into the Jumpers, the road narrowed and became pitted with potholes. Finally the pavement gave out and Bob stopped briefly to shift the truck into four-wheel drive.

The road was now just a track enclosed by dark pines. And up ahead, through those pines, they could see the winking red of light bars.

Seven

I.

Bob hit his own light bar and accelerated. Three minutes later they pulled into the tiny parking area near the Traps. Two trooper cars were standing parked with their doors still open. Beside them was an ambulance marked TOWAYDA RESCUE. But for the clicking of light bars, the silence was total.

They went off along the path to the Traps, moving as quickly as they could on the steep path. Around them the woods lived according to their own slow meaning. They were dark, black and silent. A man who grew up with the woods might enjoy what they could give him, but sentiment was for city people.

The path wound down, deeper and deeper into a rocky, forest-choked crevasse. It was in this sort of place that the desperate Algonquins had hidden, and eventually met their deaths.

The thick trees gave way to huge rocks jutting up on either side of the path, giving the sense that they had entered some vast, half-finished temple. But it wasn't beautiful: the sharp, jutting edges, the hard angles, the gray stone, made it a cruel place.

Then the crevasse widened, and suddenly what had been simply big became awesome. Enormous boulders, like prehistoric monoliths, stood every thirty or forty feet. And it became clear why the place was called the Traps: it was possible to get lost in the labyrinth, maybe for a long time... and if you wandered off a bluff, then it would be forever.

They moved carefully among the columns of stone. Only dim light penetrated, and the odor of mildew was strong. There was also another odor and Bob knew instantly what it was: human blood, lots of it. He had smelled it in Vietnam. He smelled it at the sites of bad accidents.

"Hello," Bob called. Now that they were among the stones, it was impossible to tell which way to go. The ground was softened by a layer of decaying pine bristles which muffled sounds and sprang back into footprints, meaning that any path would disappear in minutes.

A trooper burst around one of the huge stones. There was blood on his hands, his shirt was sticking to his body, his face running with sweat. "We got her half out," he gasped. Brian and Bob traded looks. The fact that somebody had been found here meant, also, that somebody had been in the mound.

Deeper and deeper, they followed the trooper in among the columns of stone. Now the silence was absolute. Not even wind penetrated this place.

Then they saw her. Brian made a low, trembly noise. Bob simply sucked in breath.

Brian had never seen anybody so wounded. She was covered from head to torso with bruises, cuts and scrapes. She looked worse than the raw, dripping ninety percenters on the burn ward. She was still half-buried in the earth.

"What happened to her arms?" Bob asked. They were dark blue and narrow, the skin tight. They looked rubbery and jointless, as if the bones had turned to pulp. He was reminded of the arms of the man in the Viper.

But no, that was impossible, he told himself. What he'd observed in the Viper was a flashback, pure and simple.

Then he saw her eyes. His hand came up to his chin, he sucked breath. But he did not cry out, he fought it back just in time.

Those eyes were vividly aware, darting from face to face. The irises were invisible, the pupils huge and black. The whites were ash gray. Her eyes *almost* didn't look like... eyes. Not normal eyes.

"Can you hear me?" Bob asked.

"She won't respond," one of the troopers said.

"What's wrong with her?" Brian wanted to cradle her, to somehow make it

better.

"It's some kind of compression injury," one of the rescue squad men replied.
"We need to know more."

Her lips moved and she made a small internal racket. Her voice sounded like somebody was burning leaves in her guts. She looked to Brian as if she had to be dead, and yet she was not only alive, she was still conscious.

Bob, who was now the senior officer present, went down on one knee.
"Ma'am?"

There was a sort of response, a crackle.

"What happened to you, ma'am?"

Silence.

"Ma'am, try to tell me."

The torso writhed, the face softened, the eyelids flickered, the teeth appeared behind half-parted lips. Her expression was unmistakable. Inexplicably and horribly, whatever she was remembering was bringing her great pleasure.

"We want to help you, ma'am," Bob repeated. "What did this to you?"

"Purple..."

"Yes? Purple what?"

The lips quivered, the eyes rolled. "Ma'am?" There was no further response.
"Where was she, in a cave?"

"She's stuck in the fuckin' dirt like a grub-worm!"

The eyes were moving again. Now the chief medic tried to get through.
"Lady, can you hear me?" The eyes didn't slow down, the voice didn't even crackle. "She's out to lunch," he said. He looked around. "We gotta get her out."

They withdrew her from the earth with a sighing pop, as if she'd been a giant cork, tightly jammed. A congealing gel of blood coated the hole.

She began spitting and gyrating when the medics tried to put her on their portable stretcher. It was a hideous thing to see, like watching a corpse move. The skin was so dead, and giving off a rotted meat smell, that Bob found it almost impossible to believe that they were seeing life here. But the damn eyes were still going, moving like crazy, and the spray of her spit was colored rose by blood.

The medics finally got her onto their stretcher, strapped her down and covered her. They lifted her and moved off, with the troopers giving assist.

Flushed and sweating, the chief medic hung back. "What do I tell them in ER? How did the injuries to her limbs come about?"

He was ignored by the flustered young troopers. But he had a job to do, so Bob swung into action. He reached out, grabbed one of them on the shoulder. "Answer the question."

The kid turned on him, his face gone white with fury. "We don't fucking know! She was screaming like hell and we dug toward the screams. Then we see hair, we get her face free, two hours later we got what you see. Until ten minutes ago, she was totally unconscious. For the first hour, we thought she was in a coma."

The medic's face tightened. He wanted to help her, too, but he couldn't do his best unless he knew more. "Her legs and arms— it's not a familiar pattern of trauma."

The trooper glared into his swimming eyes. "She's been in the fucking ground, packed as tight as a goddamn rock! Look, I don't know what the hell this is. You said it yourself—compression injury. Put that down on your damn form!"

The medic glanced toward the path, realizing that his patient had been carried far ahead of him. He set off at a fast trot.

Bob and Brian also ran, soon catching up with the others. "Y'know, it just never ends, these days," Bob said. "Any goddamn bizarre thing can happen."

The run up the steep path was exhausting. "Too much bridge," Bob said, "not enough medicine ball."

Brian was too winded to reply.

The tumble of rocks ahead was so tall that it seemed as if they must have gone all the way down the mountain to get to the Traps. But it was only a hundred feet or so.

Finally the path smoothed out and the woods dropped away. They had returned to the parking area.

Theirs was the only vehicle left.

The last echoes of the rescue truck and the troopers' sirens could be heard dwindling toward Towayda. They would be taking the victim to the hospital up in Saranac.

"Let's follow 'em," Bob said.

They were both grateful to get back in the truck. For a moment, Bob hesitated. He waited for his heart to slow down.

They went through Towayda and back out onto the Northway. Saranac was forty miles farther north, farther from Oscola. Brian wished that there had been time to call Loi, but that was obviously out of the question. "I'd about convinced myself that Danny was right," he said.

"God knows how it must've felt to that poor woman in there, when she heard us quit."

It was too hideous for Brian to comprehend, and he did not reply. His mind turned to Loi, and he wished yet again that there was some way to contact her. There was nothing to explain, there were no more apologies to make. It was just that he suspected that her pride might make her pack her bags and leave. That he could not bear.

The forty miles passed quickly, though. Bob was using his siren, driving fast. Once he cursed when the electrical system faltered and the siren cut out, but it began working again and he became silent.

Soon they were passing through the outskirts of Saranac. The hospital was close to the center of town. The parking lot was full, and Brian could see the rescue vehicle still parked in the emergency bay.

It turned out that the woman, now classified as a Jane Doe, had been brought in DOA. "May I speak to the attending?" Bob asked the duty nurse.

"She died of massive internal injuries," the young doctor said as he came from behind a privacy curtain drawn around a bed. "Practically every bone in her body was broken. She was a victim of torture."

"I'd say so! She was buried alive."

"That was only part of it. Her arms and legs had been literally pulverized. The bones were liquefied. Frankly, we've never seen anything like it. Not remotely like it. They're gonna take her down to New York City for the autopsy. They've got pathologists down there who've seen everything."

"This'll be news even to them," Bob said.

Brian was relieved when he turned to leave, heading toward the glass doors that led from Emergency Receiving into the parking lot.

"Hey, Officer."

Bob stopped. "Yes?"

"You want to see her?" The doctor's face was grave.

Brian didn't want to. "We've already done that," he said. "We were on the rescue."

But Bob turned around.

"Because she's definitely dead. The brain's reading goose eggs right across the chart. But the left eye is still moving."

They went. She'd been taken to the hospital's small morgue, which contained three aluminum tables and four refrigerators. She was the only cadaver, and she lay on the central table. Except for a green square of cloth covering her face, she was naked. Her arms were at her sides. Like her legs they were black and unnaturally thin. Her belly seemed enormous.

The pathologist, who had been making notes on a clipboard, looked up as they came in. She was a woman in her twenties, and Brian was surprised that he knew her. She'd been in Physics HI as a pre-med student. An efficient scholar, as he recalled.

"Oh my goodness, where in the world did you come from, Dr. Kelly?"

He fought for her name, but it didn't come. He smiled weakly. "I'm with him." He nodded toward Bob. "We have an interest in the case."

She wasted no time on pleasantries, given the situation. "She's an unidentified white female, approximately thirty-three years of age. Death due to traumatic injuries and shock. There are a number of strange factors. First, the condition of the arms." She lifted one of the loose, black appendages. It looped through her hand like a hose. "This is due to liquefaction of the bones. It's as if they were actually taken out and ground into a slurry of marrow and blood and bone, then poured back in. Obviously, that's not what happened because there are no corresponding wounds. We don't have any idea what happened to these bones."

"Why Eire her arms so black?"

"That might be a combination of bruising and cyanosis. Frankly, we're not sure about that either. It's one of the reasons she's on her way to Bellevue Hospital down in New York. Another is this eye." With that she removed the cloth covering the face.

In death, the woman's face had attained a hideous stillness. Hideous, because the expression was one of extreme pleasure, lascivious and wanton.

Brian must have groaned, because Bob dropped his hand onto his shoulder.

Silently, the pathologist lifted the lid of the left eye. The effect was startlingly lifelike. The eye moved, it seemed to rest on objects, people. You could almost feel curiosity—strange, malevolent.

"Cover it," Bob said quickly.

The pathologist dropped the cloth back onto the face.

"How can this be happening?" Brian asked.

"Obviously the muscles are receiving electrical stimulation. We've tested the voltages, they're low normal. But where's the energy coming from? It's a mystery."

"I gather that you never see this."

"Oh, absolutely not. None of it. Not the condition of the bones, not the eye. This is definitely the strangest cadaver I've ever seen or heard of."

It took an hour to drive back to Towayda, and on the way they followed the squawks back and forth as the state police brought heavy equipment up to the Traps and started digging for the answer to where the woman had come from.

For a long time nothing was heard from the dig. It was pushing five when Bob finally broke into traffic and communicated with the barracks in Saranac. "This is Lieutenant West. Could I hear a progress on that dig, go ahead."

"All the soil that was around her has been saved."

"What'd they find?"

"Nothing. Just the dirt."

Bob flipped the switch. "If that don't beat all!" He glanced over at Brian. "We've got a decision point here, buddy," Bob said. "Either we stop at Wally's for a burger or drive straight to Oscola. Choose your poison."

"I'd like to get to a phone when it's convenient."

That decided Bob on Wally's. He got off the Northway and went down into Towayda. "What's buggin' you, Brian?"

"What's bugging me? You must have nerves of steel! We've just seen an incredibly brutal murder and you're stopping for a burger."

"We have to eat."

"We let that poor woman in the mound die!"

"Now look here, Brian, it's time to settle down. She was probably in worse shape than this one, the way she sounded."

Bob pulled the truck into Wally's parking lot. It was a famous local place and the main reason to come to Towayda. The burgers were always perfect and the fried chicken basket could make a grown man cry on a night when Wally was doing the frying.

Brian called Loi from the phone in the foyer, but she didn't answer. "She must be at the grocery store," he said. He forced back the worry.

Wally's was a comfortable diner, open all the time, and often crowded at hours like three and four am. with hunters or fishermen. It was the real thing, too, made out of a couple of old railroad cars. There were pictures of the Republican presidents of the twentieth century on the walls above the window and a MARINE AND PROUD OF IT sign behind the counter. Wally was Mr. American Legion of Towayda township. The fact that Bob was not only a trooper but also a vet and a Medal of Honor winner made him always welcome. Money was not discussed, and if there were no tables, Wally would kick some city people out to clear one.

In the event, the place was a graveyard. Usually at the dinner hour in the summer, Wally's was hopping. On this night there were exactly two other customers, a man and a woman sitting together in a booth.

Bob looked around. "This is getting mysterious. I mean, there just plain ain't

nobody in Towayda."

"They're lucky," Brian said. "Considering." He wondered about the Evanses.

"Yeah, that's for sure."

Amy, who had been waitressing here since the days of the ponytail, got their orders. It took Wally all of five minutes to roll out of the back with the two burger baskets.

He was a big, tough guy, but he had the disposition of an Irish setter. "You goin' out of business, buddy?" Bob asked him.

"If I don't get a few people in here soon, I am. Been like this for a week."

Bob told him what had happened, and he was just as saddened and disgusted as Brian. "Tell you one thing, Robert. You catch the creep, you give him to me. Just remember to pass on the chili for a while. Let the city boys eat it."

After their meal Brian called Loi again. The phone rang once, twice, rang again. He let it ring five times, then seven, then ten. Finally he hung up. "She should've answered."

It was after seven when they pulled out onto the Northway. "*Tempus fugit*," Bob said.

"It's hard to believe it's been all day."

"Fear compresses time. You notice it if you do enough accidents."

"Are you afraid?"

"Yep." Bob watched an eighteen-wheeler with only one headlight pass in the oncoming traffic. Bastard. Who knew what else was in violation on that rig?

The Blazer moved steadily south, the western horizon slowly went from gold to orange to red, and finally to deep purple. The evening star hung in the perfect sky.

South of Corey Lake the road emptied and narrowed, and the evening was broken only by an occasional passage of lights. A deep tiredness began to filter through Bob's body. The radio drifted in and out of static.

It was pushing ten when the Cuyamora County sign passed on the right. The night around them was clear, and stars hung in multitudes above the pines that crowded the road.

Feeling the Blazer shudder slightly, Bob blinked, put both hands on the wheel. He swept the gauges. The alternator needle was oscillating a little, the way it had earlier. The vehicle wasn't being properly maintained. Budget cuts, no doubt.

Then the headlights started flickering along with the oscillations of the needle. The engine was obviously having trouble. Bob began to think about radioing for help.

When the faint hiss coming from the speakers died, he toggled the switch. Too late. "Goddamnit," he said.

That brought Brian back from wherever he'd been. "What?"

"We got a problem. Bad alternator. It's taken the radio down."

The engine coughed and died, and Bob began wrestling with the now-heavy steering, guiding the vehicle to the shoulder. As he did so the electrics failed completely. He watched the gauges and lights die. By the time the Blazer was stopped, it was also stone dead and dark.

"We'd better start walking," Brian said.

"A state trooper never walks. We'll put out flares and wait for the divisional car."

Brian didn't want to be away from Loi for another second. Why hadn't she answered the phone? She'd known perfectly well who'd be calling. "When'll it come through?"

"Well, before the midnight shift change, anyway."

Three hours to wait. "Jesus, I don't need this."

Bob turned the key. There wasn't even a relay click. "Gone."

"Bob?"

"Yessir?" When he turned, he could see that Brian was staring fixedly out the windshield. The shadows transformed his profile into a mass of black ditches and tight lines.

When he followed Brian's gaze, Bob was shocked. He couldn't grasp what he was seeing. It seemed as if an enormous black curtain had dropped onto the highway about a hundred feet in front of them. "What the hell is it?"

"I have no idea."

Bob saw that the blackness had depth as well as form, like a kind of opening. A suggestion of movement made him strain to see more clearly. "There's something there!"

"I know it!"

It was the same kind of awful rushing Bob had seen behind the mask of whatever had been riding in that Viper. But this time it was huge, swirling around down inside the hole. He glanced over at Brian. It was incredible, but he was definitely seeing this, too. "Lock your door, Brian. Roll up the windows."

The rushing became a flickering, and suddenly a mass of glowing bright dots appeared in the darkness. For a moment they swirled as if in some kind of a vortex. They were so bright that they lit the walls of the opening, which gleamed as if it was wet. It was extraordinarily wrinkled, and the material was undulating rhythmically.

Then the glowing dots of lights resolved themselves into a tight ball, so bright that it was hard to observe directly.

Like a bolt of lightning they shot at the car. Bob was so surprised that he

cried out. Brian was silent.

They came around the side windows, slid like a thick liquid down the rear window. In moments they had blotted out everything, and the interior of the Blazer was filled with their light.

Brian could even hear them scrabbling against the glass. His mouth was dry, his hands were trembling, but the scientist in him was observing. They were definitely insects of some kind, with six orange-red legs and fat, segmented abdomens. "We've got to get a specimen." He started to crack the window.

An iron-hard hand grabbed his wrist. "Are you crazy?"

Then the light went out. All of a sudden the vile, bright little things were gone—and both men were night-blind. Bob couldn't see the dashboard a foot from his eyes. Sweat was pouring down his face, tickling his underarms.

Brian saw an opportunity that must not be missed. He fought for control of his shaking hands, forced himself to open his door.

"Are you nuts, man?"

Brian's heart was leaping in his chest, his throat was so dry he could barely talk. "We need to gather a specimen," he managed to say.

"We don't need to gather anything, we need to pray!"

"Look, I'm scared, too, but I'm gonna go out there and do what I can, because this is important. It's so important, you have no idea"

Because he knew his fear would stop him if he didn't act at once, he stepped quickly into the dark.

Bob had never been so scared that he couldn't move, and he wasn't quite that scared now, but he was closer than Brian. He cracked his window. "Don't do it, Brian."

"We need that specimen."

"We need to stay alive."

"These things—they attacked Ellen Maas a couple of nights ago. We've gotta find out more. Without a specimen, we're nowhere."

Bob put his hand on the door handle, felt it, hesitated. God, he didn't want to go out there. But he couldn't let Brian down. He pulled the handle, opening the door into the cool night air. "What's that smell?"

"I don't know."

To Bob it smelled like an overcrowded drunk tank on a hot night.

Side by side, the two men approached the dark area. "Brian, what the hell is going on?"

"It's a nest. Or maybe some sort of a trap."

"Keep well back, man."

In its depths there was a faint purple glow. There was also a deep, persistent sound, impossible to identify. It was a mixture of buzzing and sighing, punctuated by the crackles of static electricity.

"Sounds like bacon frying," Bob said.

The purple light grew, and Brian backed away. He wanted no part of that, ever again.

Without the slightest warning a stream of insects burst forth. In an instant they were scrambling over Bob. He didn't even have a chance to scream. Then he couldn't because if he opened his mouth they were going to get in.

"Get one," Brian shouted, "get one and kill it!"

They clogged Bob's nose, slinking like sweaty farmworkers. He danced, a gilded man, plucking at them, trying to get them off him. Their legs were like wire, pulling at his eyelids, his lips. He struggled, but they were strong and they would not stop. They pried his lips open, poured down his throat, cutting

off his screams. Then they came swarming up his pants legs and invaded his privates, pushed into his anus. The horror of it froze him.

Then he felt his feet leave the ground. He knew he was moving, and fast. It was so surprising and bizarre that his emotions turned off. He was watching a movie, Bob West being carried down a hole, Bob West going deeper and deeper and deeper and all of a sudden they were gone, all the light was gone.

He was in a damp, warm room. The floor was thick, like sponge. Great, rhythmic pulsations heaved all around him, and the walls got closer, pushing against him. He shrank away but the oozing, gulping motion became stronger, closer, until finally he was completely surrounded by a mass of what had to be wet, muscular living tissue.

There was a wet crackle and the flesh pressing against him flickered with purple light. He could see veins and some distant structure like bones far away in the seething, gelatinous mass. The flicker came again and he was for a moment knocked senseless by a burst of sheer, total pleasure. The sensation was beyond anything he had ever known. It made the best possible moment of bellowing, gasping sexual release seem empty.

It came again and again, and in the back of his mind a voice said: it's a weapon.

But the voice was drowned out, and he was overwhelmed by wave after wave after wave of shivering, glorious, soul-bursting ecstasy.

2.

Brian battled his way through the mass of creatures, grabbing for them. Their bodies were as pliant as rubber and their legs were springy and strong. Even so, he might have crushed one if they hadn't been so fast. If he got one in his fist it wriggled out between his fingers before he had a chance to bear down. Their curved pincers seemed almost artificial, so carefully burnished and sharpened were the edges.

Brian was awash in them, smelling their sweaty-skin stench, feeling them crawl over him. He fought to keep his reason. "Use your gun, Bob! Fire the

damn thing! Maybe we can get some fragments." They were lifting him, they were actually picking up a human being! "Bob, they've got me!" He struggled wildly. "Bob, where are you? I can't see you!"

For an instant he glimpsed the side of the Blazer. Then it was gone, a blur behind him. He pulled them off in fistfuls, dragged them out of his throat.

He realized that he was being moved toward the hole. Because he was neither confused nor surprised by their appearance, his response was very different from Bob's.

Instead of freezing as Bob had, he went wild. Lunging, plunging, battling with animal fury, he ripped them away from his face, took in deep breaths of fresh air. He was thrashing, leaping—half here and half back in the fire, fighting for his family, for Loi, for his baby.

He felt something hard in his grip—the door post. He pulled it, dragged himself ever closer. Then he was inside the vehicle. Yanking the door closed, he trapped at least a hundred of the insects inside with him.

They changed instantly. Instead of remaining aggressive, they lined up with military precision against the top edges of the window frames. They were all turned toward him, their red eyes glaring. It was like being face-to-face with the biggest, meanest-looking hornets in the world.

Evidence, certainly. But too much of it. They were revving their wings. They were going to attack. He cracked his window, hoping a few would escape and he could contend with the others.

With blinding efficiency and speed they flowed out, every last one of them. "No! Oh, shit!"

An instant later it was night again. Brian waited, his breath catching in his throat. "Bob," he whispered.

There was no answer.

He managed to say it a little louder. Still nothing.

He realized that he could see the road stretching ahead, looking perfectly normal. No hole, not a trace. "Bob, I think we're OK." Then there came a truer sign, the chirping of a cricket.

Soon he heard the whine of an approaching car. He peered ahead. Headlights glared, then he glimpsed the slick red curves of a Dodge Viper.

In the headlights he thought he saw Bob running. The car shot past, its engine howling. He had only a glimpse of the occupants, who were sitting as stiff as dolls.

The bastards had come back! They'd been ticketed and they'd come back for revenge!

He jumped out of the Blazer, dashed off into the woods in the direction Bob had gone, calling him at the top of his voice.

Silence answered. Darkness enclosed him.

Around him the woods rustled and sighed. The memory of those red insect eyes still bored into him, the huge, wet opening gaped in memory.

He went back to the truck, stationed himself beside it with the door opened, and from there he called Bob again and again, his voice echoing flatly. He called until he was so hoarse he couldn't do it anymore.

All remained silent.

Brian threw open the Blazer's rear deck, got out Bob's large flashlight. "Where the hell axe you?" he rasped.

The wind sighed as Brian walked around the vehicle. There were no footprints in the soft shoulder, not a single indication that anybody had ever been here but him. Also, the road was devoid of markings, despite the fact that a large opening had been there just a few minutes before.

He actually found himself hoping that Bob had been hit by the Viper. It was better than the other thing, the impossible thing. "Bob!" He played the light along the shoulder, back into the grass, trotted across the highway and

searched the other side. "Bob!"

Alone with the night, Brian slumped against the truck. He considered—stay here or start walking?

No question: stay here with the windows closed and the doors locked.

Down in the valley he saw headlights. When the oncoming car was perhaps a thousand feet away, he went out into the road and started waving his arms. The car, an aging Buick, stopped. "Yes, Officer?" Because of the livery on the truck, the driver was assuming that Brian was a trooper.

He didn't bother to correct him. "This truck's broken down.

Could you stop in Ludlum and call the state police barracks for me?"

"Well, I'd be pleased to do that."

"Get them out here right away. Tell them it's Lieutenant West's vehicle, and he's down."

"Down?" The man looked around.

"I think he's been hit by a car. I can't find him."

"Jesus, I'll do my best!" The driver accelerated away.

When the sound of his engine died, Brian was sure he heard the Viper again, now off in the dark somewhere, idling. He got in the Blazer and locked it up.

Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. What the hell was he going to tell them? Had he really seen Bob running in the lights of the Viper, or... how did he even talk about the other thing? They'd think that Brian Kelly had gone completely around the bend this time.

Quite suddenly the Blazer was awash in flickering light. A patrol car was coming up fast from behind. Finally!

As Brian got out, he found that a dark vehicle had somehow overtaken the

patrol car. The Viper roared past three inches from his body, a red needle blurred by extreme speed. Brian was thrown against the door. Hot wind washed over him as the car disappeared into the dark.

The report of an officer down meant that the trooper car stopped instead of giving chase. "Jesus Christ," one of the officers said as he trotted up, "that guy's doin' more'n a C."

Brian swallowed, forced his throat to construct the words. "It's a sports car, a Dodge Viper. It's been after us because Bob turned it in to a radar unit this morning. I think it might've hit him. I can't find him!"

"Where'd you last see him?" one of the troopers asked. Brian noticed that both of them had their guns drawn.

"Over there," Brian replied, pointing weakly toward the shoulder.

They shone their lights around. "Why'd you stop?"

"Electrical problem."

"So he got out? What then?"

He could not lie. He did not know how to tell the truth. "Well, we saw some lights."

"Car lights?"

"I'm not real certain what we saw. We were observing what I think is a new species of insect."

"Insect? You stopped to look at a bug?"

"A lot of them. Very unusual. We got out of the truck, and then it all happened very quickly."

The theory became that Bob had been grazed by the fast-moving car, had become disoriented and wandered away. The troopers made a search, but could not find a sign of him. A helicopter was called in and it spent half an

hour shining its searchlight from above, also with no result.

After another hour a mystified group of rescuers gave up, planning to continue at first light.

Bob's commanding officer drove off to perform the miserable task of informing Bob's wife and two boys that he was missing. Brian would have gone, but how did he explain things to Nancy? Her husband had disappeared. He couldn't show up with a story as crazy as the one he wanted to tell.

He wanted to compare notes with Ellen, but he didn't dare go near her. Instead he asked the troopers to take him home. He rode in silence, sitting in the cage of one of the patrol units. As the dark forest passed outside his window, his mind turned the day's events over and over again.

He felt the same disorientation that would have followed if he'd sighted a flying saucer or seen the Loch Ness Monster.

A new species of insect? Hell, it was a new genus, a new type of life altogether. He was very much afraid that it was a man-eater, too. But not Bob. Please, not him.

No, he'd seen him in the lights of the Viper, surely he had. The poor guy was probably unconscious, that's why he hadn't answered.

He had to think this through carefully, theorize and try to understand.

Women hidden underground like grubs—actually, that fit. It was very insectoid to encase caches of prey for further use. Typical behavior of colony-living insects.

Oh, Bob, where are you, my friend? When he'd been in the hospital, unable even to mumble, Bob had come every evening and sat there holding his hand and talking baseball.

He needed lots of help if he was going to save his friend. He needed entomology, but also biology, physics—maybe even the damned Air Force.

He felt a moment of relief when they pulled onto Kelly Farm Road. But then

he worried. What would he do if the trailer was dark, the truck gone?

He saw a glimmer in the woods, then another. The trailer—it was lit, she was still with him.

But she didn't come out onto the porch when the car pulled up. The troopers said their grim farewells and drove off into the night.

When their car was gone the night enclosed the little place, the mobile home with its few dim lights, the ruins beyond. The yellow bug light over the kitchen door was surrounded by a cloud of moths, and at the edge of its glow bats squeaked and darted. A great white barn owl flew through the edge of the light, a pale shadow. A moment later it muttered softly off in the dark.

Normally, he would have felt a sense of peace, hearing the bats and the owl, and smelling the rich scent of apple blossom and corn tassel. But not now.

He went inside.

At first he had the horrible thought that she'd gone and left the lights on; he actually looked for a note.

But she was in the bedroom, apparently asleep.

As quietly as he could, he undressed and got ready for bed. She might or might not actually be awake. In any case, she did not stir.

Normally a big dinner would have been waiting, beside it a cold Bud or a glass of wine.

He slipped into bed beside her.

Her breathing was regular, even. "You asleep?"

No reply.

Outside, the owl muttered and coughed. The past hours were like a nightmare, a sort of tumor in the middle of memory. When he closed his eyes, he saw the insects, heard the sound of the destroyed woman being

drawn out of the ground.

Vaguely he recalled that there were known species of insect that encapsulated their prey in the ground, injecting them with a drug that paralyzed but did not kill, so that they would be fresh when the larvae hatched.

The woman in the Traps had been like that, helpless but still retaining enough consciousness to suffer and to scream.

Was that happening to Bob right now? Was he three feet underground somewhere out in the woods, screaming bloody murder?

His hand slipped beneath the sheets, sought Loi's. She let him hold it, but there was no response whatsoever.

They were man-eaters, these insects. He had to get a specimen, that was now absolutely essential.

He slept, and in his sleep saw red eyes, and heard Bob crying out again and again, from the depths of the earth.

He dreamed they were all together in a tiny, stifling cave, him and Bob and Ellen and dear Loi and all the rest, the people of Oscola and Towayda and Ludlum and all the land around, and there was an earthquake and the way to the surface was blocked. They were trapped here forever and something was coming, coming up from the depths, coming fast.

And he was right.

Eight

1.

Loi was awakened by the thuttering of a helicopter, a sound that always brought her instantly to full consciousness. Once she would have cried out, fearing the lazy track of tracer, the hiss of a phosphorus bullet burning out somebody's stomach. But since she had been with Brian, she had stopped allowing herself the luxury of nightmares. His were enough for them both. "Brian," she asked carefully, "did you call a duster?"

"No way, not this time of year." The sound had awakened him also, brought him suddenly to sickening recollection of all that was happening.

There was just enough thin light for the air search to start again.

It was time to tell Loi everything and damn the consequences. He didn't know how, but he would have to try. "Bob's truck broke down and there was some kind of bizarre accident. He disappeared."

"What is this?"

"We were outside the truck investigating an unusual incident. A car came past very fast. The next thing I knew, he was gone. They haven't found him yet." He gestured toward the window. "That's what the choppers are about."

"He was hit?"

"I couldn't find him, Loi! I called him and called him but he didn't answer!"

Her eyes widened, her hands went up to her cheeks in an oddly antique gesture of horror. "Nancy and the kids!"

"The troopers are taking care of them."

"They need their friends! You have left them all night without friends!" She went to the phone, dialed the Wests.

The line was busy. She dialed again, then slammed down the phone. "We go." They dressed fast. She wouldn't even let him shave. While he was still combing his hair, she marched out to the truck.

Brian didn't even consider the idea of arguing. She was right anyway. They should have been with Nancy and the boys from the beginning, that was obvious. The shock of what had happened had numbed him, shut down his mind.

Well, he had better get it powered up again. People needed him.

They went down Kelly Farm Road and turned onto Mound. It took ten minutes to get to Queen's Road and the little four-house development where the Wests lived. In that time he had decided that he was going to have to attempt to explain the insects to her.

"Loi, there's more." Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her nodding. He continued. "There have been a series of what I would characterize as unusual and dangerous incidents involving a number of people. I think they're related, but I don't know how."

"Brian, what is this you are trying to say?"

"There are apparent insects. I don't know how to say this. Something that comes out of the ground, that glows like a mass of coals—"

"You saw a demon."

If he didn't say exactly the right thing, this conversation was going to go off the deep end in about three seconds. He really didn't think that Southeast Asian animism had any part to play in it. "This is about something else. It all started with the screaming in the mound. On that night, Ellen Maas also had a very strange experience."

"What is her part?"

"She went out on the mound and saw a thing there. It defies description, really. A spectacular apparition, like a burning snake made of vicious

insects."

"So that's it, a demon brought you together. I should have known! We must put a stop to this at once."

"Whatever. The thing is, Bob and I confronted something similar in the road. Strikingly similar. The same sort of glowing things menaced us. It could have been that they—well, that something dreadful has happened."

She sighed. "If demons took him he is gone, finished. There is no help for him. Now there is something more urgent than waiting with Nancy. She will have her grief a long time."

"Loi, this is all very unknown. Very confusing."

"They confuse you so you will not fight so much. But they will come back." She touched the edge of an eye. "Why Bob? Ellen has sinned, she tried to steal somebody's husband. You're OK, you've confessed and faced your wrongdoing. But Bob... it's very strange. Maybe they made a mistake. Maybe they'll return him to us after all."

She's lost in her demons, Brian thought miserably. "This is a physical phenomenon."

"We must try to save her, Brian. She is hateful, but nobody deserves such a fate. We go first to Ellen Maas."

Brian was so stunned that he almost killed the engine. "Loi, why?"

"To warn her! She must get out of Oscola at once. She must admit her sin and cleanse her soul. Otherwise—" She made a chopping motion.

So that was it. She was going to try to scare Ellen away with tales of demons, thus neatly removing the threat of her imagined rival. He did not want to pity his wife, but it was a pitiful stratagem. "There are no demons, there's only nature."

"Demons are part of nature. Turn around, please."

There was that sound in her voice again, that new determination. He obeyed her.

Ellen's cabin was back in the woods a few hundred yards behind them. Despite the hour, he found that it was blazing with light. He wasn't surprised.

Ellen pulled the door open before they got there; obviously she'd been watching since the moment the truck arrived.

"I'm sorry," Brian said.

She laughed, a brittle trill. "How about some Café Français? I've just been making some." She could not conceal the shock in her voice.

"We need nothing, thank you." Loi moved into the small cabin, looked around. "This is nice."

"Thank you," Ellen said. Her voice was wary.

Brian met the confusion in Ellen's eyes.

"Bob West disappeared," he said.

Ellen looked up at him, blinking.

"A demon has come. It has come and it is collecting souls. You must leave, Ellen. Your soul is in danger."

"Excuse me?"

"If you don't pack your bags and leave, it'll carry you off to hell while you're still alive. This is a very unfortunate fate, Ellen. It is reserved only for the worst of sinners. Such as women who have seduced the husbands of others."

"I didn't do anything of the sort! Your husband was helping me investigate the very things that have apparently caused this tragedy."

"We went up to Towayda yesterday, Ellen. There was a woman encapsulated in the ground. It was horrible."

"Oh, Jesus. So there was somebody in the mound, too."

"I'm afraid there was."

"If there is no sin, then why has the demon come?"

"There is no demon," Brian said patiently. "The only thing wrong here is that something horrible's happened to Bob."

"We don't talk about what happened to him. Bad luck." Then she went to the window, looked out into the brightening morning. "There is much sin here. Secret sin. Demons can smell it from a long way off." Her hands were on the two sides of her belly, protecting her pregnancy. Another helicopter came drumming along, its sound growing to a roar, then slowly diminishing.

When the helicopter was gone, Brian spoke again—very carefully. "They're looking for him, Loi. If anybody believed he'd been taken to hell, they certainly wouldn't be doing that."

Ellen wasn't interested in Loi's demons, either. "What happened out there, Brian?"

He told her the story. By the time he was done, they were beginning to hear sirens. They rose in the distance, fell, rose again, became rapidly louder.

"Going toward the judge's," Ellen said.

More helicopters thundered overhead, started circling.

"Bob's been killed," Brian said. "They've found him in the mound and he's dead."

"I'm going," Ellen announced. "Instantly." She pulled her hiking boots on, got her heavy old camera out of a box at the foot of her bed, then headed for the door.

"We go, too," Loi announced.

2.

They followed Ellen's car. Loi sat with her chin in her hands. "She is very beautiful, Brian."

"Not as beautiful as you."

"So you say."

A state police car, its light bar blazing, stormed up from behind and darted away down the wrong side of the road. Brian increased his speed.

The judge's yard was swarming with people, state troopers, sheriffs deputies, the men from the Oscola rescue unit.

The dismal yard with its abandoned orchard and its weedy lawn was now an accident site. A rolling stretcher stood on the front walk, its white sheets gleaming in the bright morning sunlight. The judge hovered about in black trousers and a dirty dress shirt. He'd looked bad when they'd met on the mound. But seeing him now, Brian thought in terms of death.

Then he noticed the tire tracks everywhere, all over the grass,

in every bit of naked soil. He glanced around, trying to determine if the police had done it. There was no way to be sure.

"Judge terBroeck," Ellen asked, "what's happening here?"

The judge stared toward the bottom of his yard, in the direction of the mound. Brian followed his gaze.

"That's where they came from, Loi," Ellen said. "They came out of that hole."

Bob, his hat missing, his uniform tunic ripped to pieces, was being pulled out of the old root cellar by a group of troopers and emergency workers.

The next moment Brian was running. "Bob," he shouted.

There was a shriek of tires in the driveway and another car stopped. Nancy West got out and started running also. "Bobby," she cried in a hoarse voice, "Bobby!"

As they pulled him up out of the ruined cellar he regarded his wife with vacant eyes.

It seemed for a moment as if he was going to respond to her, but then his eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped into the arms of the medics. Somebody brought the stretcher and they put him on it. Nancy came down to him, threw her arms around him.

She made not a sound, a silence that was as heartrending as it was impressive.

They took him away, Nancy moving along beside the stretcher, her eyes streaming. Loi went to her. "We are with you," she said.

Nancy hugged her. "The boys are at home. Take care of them, Loi."

"They'll be well with us."

The parade left, marching to the ugly chatter of Ellen's camera clicking and grinding as she shot and reloaded and shot again. She was not one of those people who are graceful in their work. There was something awkward about her, almost brutal, as she slung her bulky camera around.

Loi missed none of this. "Look at her, Brian, how greedy she is. It is greed that allowed the demon into her heart."

"There is no demon!"

"I am not wrong. They send him back because he is a good man."

Brian looked at his wife, at her hollow eyes. "Why would they take a good man in the first place?"

"This will emerge," she replied.

Ellen's Duster rattled off at the rear of the crowd of departing vehicles.

"Let's look in the root cellar," Loi said. She tugged at Brian's hand. "I will prove there are demons, show you their marks."

"I don't think so."

"Come." Loi marched across the yard.

"Loi, get away from there!" His shout made her turn toward him. As she did so her weight unbalanced her and she toppled backward, stumbled, then slipped down into the weedy, bramble-choked hole before he could reach her.

"Brian!" Her arms came up, barely reaching above the edge.

Brian dove after her, crashing down through the choke of roots that held her.

He landed hard, rolled. The first thing he saw was her legs dangling in the dimness above him. "I've got you, baby!" He reached up, took her ankles and pushed her. Despite her unaccustomed bulk, she scrambled up into the light.

"Brian, come on!"

"I'm right behind you, I'm coming."

He grabbed the roots, hauled himself up, tacking and scrabbling against the moldering bricks in front of him.

There was a grating sound, deep and close, and all at once the whole wall started crumbling. Musty air came out. Brian flailed, pushed himself back, struggled to get away.

He grabbed the weak, giving roots immediately above him. Soil poured down into his face. With a huge, howling cry he pulled himself up—and went crashing back down amid a mass of roots and vines and a great deal of dirt.

Above him there was a terrible, piercing cry. He could see Loi's face framed against the morning sky. "Brian," she shrieked.

"I'm OK!"

Then she turned to one side. "Get a rope," she shouted.

The judge's voice replied, apparently some sort of refusal. Probably he didn't

have a rope.

"You find one!" There was a sharpness there that Brian had never heard before. She leaned down into the root cellar. "He will find a rope," she said. "Are you sure you're not hurt?"

"I'm sure." He was looking into the blackness that had been opened up by the crumbling wall, trying to penetrate its inky gloom. This was more than just a root cellar, this was some sort of abandoned mine shaft or something.

People had once mined this area for iron, but that was over two hundred years ago.

From deep in the dark, Brian heard a sort of sighing... like the sound of many small wings.

Maybe the old mine had another opening, and it was the wind. But he didn't think so. "Where's that rope, Loi?"

"Coming. Remain calm."

There was an almost military sense of command in that tone. But Brian was not reassured. He was beginning to notice air moving out of the hole, and the air stank. It stank of sweat and skin, urine and feces, the smell of a concentration-camp dormitory, a man-jammed boxcar. "Hurry, baby."

Was that a glow down in there? And another sound, a low sort of popping noise?

He jumped toward the roots, missed them entirely, ran back the five available steps and tried again, straining with all his might. The fingers of his right hand closed around a thick vine. He dangled, bringing up his left hand, wishing he was in better shape.

He hung with both hands, his legs windmilling. From far below there came a flicker of light.

He pulled himself up, trying to somehow get his feet over the vine. As he struggled, he felt it give. When he put even a little weight on it, the thing

trembled.

He went crashing back to the floor of the pit.

The smell from below was strong now; the wind was blowing steadily. He could hear many sounds: buzzing, sizzling, a grating snick, like the snap of great scissors. The air was suffused with a purple glow.

He threw himself against the back wall, tried to somehow claw his way up the crumbly bricks. But they gave way like dry clay, collapsing even more.

Brian kicked, he tried to make chinks for his feet.

"The rope, Loi!"

Finally it came dropping down. But it was too thin, it was nothing but a clothesline. "I can't climb this!"

"Listen to me carefully, husband. Tie it around your waist, bring it around the front of your right arm, take it across your back and under your left shoulder. Do you understand?"

He fumbled with the rope. "I'm not sure."

"You do it, and do it right. Now I get the truck."

There was plenty of slack to tie it securely. He just hoped he'd done it right.

A single glowing object, looking like a lantern, rose lazily from the depths, hung for a moment on the air, then winked out. Instantly, Brian felt something in his hair, something moving. He screamed, tore at it, grabbed it—and was suddenly swept straight up and out onto the grass.

He landed with a bone-jarring thud, was dragged a few feet before Loi could stop the truck. Then she was running back, to him. "Brian, Brian!"

She came down to him. "Careful," he said, holding out his closed hand. "I've got one of the insects." He opened it—and there lay the crushed remains of a large but entirely commonplace wolf spider, a harmless creature.

"That's an insect from hell?"

He threw it down without comment.

She rushed into his arms. "I was so scared for you!"

The judge, his face pinched, peered at them from his kitchen porch. He looked for all the world like a vulture on a stump.

"Were they there?" Loi whispered.

Brian formed his words carefully, forcing the answer past a bone-dry throat, through cracked lips. "They were there."

She went to the hole, looked down inside.

"Stay away from it," Brian said.

She stepped back, regarding him gravely. "We have a great battle on our hands, Brian. A very great battle indeed."

His first impulse was to get into the truck and take her a thousand miles from here, and never turn back.

And that, perhaps, is exactly what he should have done.

Nine

1.

Brian and Bob and Nancy were like most Oscola folk, they went back to childhood together. In a small community, the people are woven of one another, they are not single and alone and isolated. This was happening to his best friends, to people he could not remember being without.

How had he ever left Nancy alone all night to worry by herself? How had he done that? He couldn't imagine, he was shocked at himself.

Brian and Loi reached the hospital a few minutes behind Ellen.

They drove up into the emergency room parking lot, got out and went inside through the swinging glass door that led to the emergency receiving area. The nurse in the check-in booth looked up expectantly.

"Bob West," Loi said.

"He's upstairs in the Brain/Mind Suite. Let me call them and see if he can have visitors."

That was the local euphemism for the psychiatric ward. Brian had the horrible feeling that Bob had talked about the wrong thing.

Ellen was already in the waiting room. "He's physically OK. But they've got him in the psycho unit." Her voice was flat.

"You'll put this in the paper?" Loi asked.

"No."

When the nurse finally called them, Brian found himself going down a familiar corridor. It had been on his route when he'd been struggling along with his IV tree six months after the fire.

Bob was in one of those rooms that had always been closed. When the door opened, Nancy looked up, and Brian was deeply touched by the way her eyes tugged at him. "What happened, Brian?"

"I don't know."

Bob spoke. "Blue pipe," he said faintly. "E.G. and G."

Those few words changed Brian's life, his view of himself, his understanding of the world. The room rocked, the ceiling whirled. He grabbed the door frame and hung on, looking in astonished horror at the man on the bed.

Bob stared at the ceiling.

"What blue pipe, honey?" Nancy asked.

The conduit that housed the miles and miles of wire involved in Brian's facility were made of light blue PVC pipe. "Where did you see it, Bob?"

There came out of him a howl as high and wild as any from the deepest woods. The power of it made Brian stumble away from him. Nancy covered her ears with her fists. The doctor reached toward Bob, tentative, his face grave. He muttered something about the Valium drip. "It's LSD," Nancy said miserably. "He did a hell of a lot of it during the war! He's having hallucinations all over again."

"That was a long time ago," Brian said.

"An LSD flashback," the doctor interjected, "can happen at any time. This isn't uncommon."

Again Bob howled. The sound rocked them with its deafening power.

Brian had not been aware that a human being could make a noise like that. When it finally stopped, Nancy turned on him, shrieking. "What happened out there, Brian? You tell me!"

What could he say? "I don't—"

"*Tell me!*" She was face-to-face with him, her eyes swirling, sweat pouring down her face, her top lip quivering. Never in all the years he'd known her had he seen Nancy in a state like this.

"I observed some insects. Wasps. Maybe something from the tropics, I don't know."

"What sort of insects?" the doctor asked.

Brian shook his head.

"Could he have been stung? I'm thinking in terms of a bizarre venom reaction."

"It's possible. They were all over him at one point." Brian did not expand on Bob's mention of blue pipe, but it had sickened him inside. That was the project, it had to be. They'd gotten that pipe specially manufactured. It wasn't anywhere except in the facility.

The room seemed very small, the hospital stink made Brian feel as if his throat was going to close. An awful coldness began creeping through his body.

He saw the dead eye of the woman from the Traps, that staring, dead eye, moving, moving, looking into him and through him, carrying with it a message from another world—and from his own past.

He felt his skin growing clammy, crawling beneath his clothing, smelled the oily sour stink of fear.

Nancy spoke again. "Brian, you're holding back."

"I don't—"

"Brian, *please!*"

He put his arms around her. Something about the way she leaned against him recalled a long time ago, before either of them were married, when they'd had a couple of very intense weeks together.

"My project involved the use of lots of blue PVC, and it was stamped with the logo of a defense contractor, E.G. and G. Bob must have somehow seen some of this pipe."

"Last night?"

"I don't know when else."

Ellen came into the room. "Where was he, Brian, was he in some lab? Did somebody use him as a lab animal because he used to be a soldier?"

"It was almost certainly a combination of the LSD and these... apparent insects," the doctor said, with more than a trace of self-importance.

Bob groaned.

Everybody stopped talking.

He growled.

The doctor raised his eyebrows.

With a hollow cry Bob leaped on Brian. They went down hard amid screams and toppling equipment. Brian saw his friend's face distorted beyond belief, hideous, the lips quivering, the eyes darting like—like—

The woman in the Traps. Her eyes had darted like that when she was alive, and after her death, the one eye had kept on.

Then Bob was being dragged away, he was being restrained, and Loi and Ellen were helping Brian up, he was brushing himself off, watching as orderlies piled on his friend, covering him with heaving bodies, until only his head was visible, jerking like the head of a trussed bird, his cries rending the air.

2.

Four hours later the howls were still echoing in Brian's mind, tearing into his heart.

They'd left because there was nothing else to do, gone like three wooden people out into the innocent morning. Brian and Loi had picked up the Wests' two scared boys, eleven-year-old Chris and his eight-year-old brother, Joey.

Now the boys sat in front of the TV, quietly watching through tear-drowned eyes.

Brian was pacing like a trapped animal, physics flying through his mind. How could Bob have been in his old facility? He had paranoid visions of some vast underground complex, growing like a cancer out of his own abandoned work while he spent his time tending his damned apples.

What on earth did gross anomalies like mutated insects have to do with his *work*?

Nothing made sense. He paced back and forth in the little trailer, trying to put together a functional scenario. But abstruse experiments in subatomic physics simply did not lead to... this.

If they had taken Bob underground, how had he managed to return? Why hadn't he ended up buried?

He imagined insects burrowing beneath the whole region, from Ludlum to Towayda, a distance of over sixty miles. They must be using caves, old mines, tunnels of their own, burrowing like ants or termites.

He had to make some kind of a case with Nate Harris, Bob's commanding officer. It shouldn't be hard to talk him into investigating the damned hole behind the judge's house. Maybe he could even get him to send a detective to one of the judge's little parties. "Look," he said to Loi, "I'm gonna go down to the state police barracks in Ludlum."

"I'm going, too."

He could see her filing a complaint about demons. "You stay here." He started to leave.

"No." She snapped her purse shut and slung it over her shoulder. "Boys, we'll

be back in two hours. You aren't to leave the house. Is that understood, Chris?"

"Yes, Aunt Loi."

They rode together in silence. As was her habit, she fiddled with the radio, trying to tune in WAMC, the public radio station out of Albany. She was a voracious consumer of news.

"Listen, Loi, don't say anything to him about demons."

"Brian, I'm not stupid. But we should pack up everything we own and leave."

"Is that what happened in Vietnam, when the demons came?"

"Those demons wore uniforms," she said, "and burned our houses with cigarette lighters. But when they died, they had the faces of scared kids far from home."

She hadn't spoken so many words to him in quite a while. "I love you," he said.

She nodded solemnly.

The barracks was a brand-new prefabricated building on the Northway about a mile north of the Ludlum exit.

As they pulled into the parking lot, Loi opened her purse and examined her makeup.

The sight of Bob's Blazer sitting alone and abandoned with an impound sticker on the windshield made him feel physically ill.

"Hey, Brian," Nate said as soon as they entered his small office. "Figured you'd be along."

"He's bad."

"I know it. He's gonna be on psychiatric leave for a while. Won't get paid, I'm

afraid."

"It happened in the line of duty."

"The pencil pushers have this phrase, 'preexisting condition.' Send quite a few guys to the poorhouse with it." He crossed his legs, leaned back in his chair.
"You got some more information for us?"

"Nate, I want you to investigate that root cellar over on the terBroeck place."

"Where we found Bob? I took a look around there. It's nothing much. An old root cellar built over an even older mine shaft."

"How did he come out of it? Where did he come from?"

"Look, I'm gonna tell you the same thing I told that *Gazette* lady—"

"Ellen Maas?" Loi asked.

"Her. He didn't come out of the thing, he was going in."

"You know that?" Brian asked.

"Well, it's obvious. Where would he be coming from, a mine that's been abandoned for two hundred years or more? I don't think so."

"The presence of that mine could explain the screaming on the mound. That's reason enough to investigate right there. Maybe somebody got themselves trapped in there."

Nate sighed. "We did that two days ago. You know what we found in that mine? A shoe. A button shoe, in fact, with a big cut right down its side. Damn thing was probably a hundred years old."

"You might have a dead body back in there somewhere."

Nate's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, Brian, maybe we were just too damn dumb to find it."

"I didn't mean it that way, Nate. I only meant that a mine like that's a honeycomb."

"Well, we searched every inch. I guess your bugs ate your dead body."

Brian opened his mouth, closed it without speaking.

Nate went on. "The *Gazette* lady told me all about them. How they got in her—between her legs—excuse me, Loi. For God's sake, Brian, I think you'd better forget about these bugs. The wasps are heavy whenever we have a humid summer."

"Ellen Maas is a smart woman," Loi said. "She didn't lie to you."

Brian glanced at her. His wife was softening to Ellen.

"I wasn't implying that," Nate said. "But from what I hear around town, the *Gazette's* on pretty shaky ground. If this was a really sensational story, she could sell it to other papers, bring in some dough."

"That isn't her style," Brian said. "She's very straightforward."

Loi gave him a sharp look, then slipped her hand into his.

"Look, I don't begrudge her the story. But she's gone a little bananas about it. At least, that's my impression. I don't know if you're friendly, or what."

"She's a levelheaded woman," Loi replied, much to Brian's surprise. "If she tells you something, you've got to think it's true."

"You'd have to show us some evidence."

Brian broke the silence that followed. "There's something out there, Nate. No doubt it's entirely explainable. But whatever it is, one person was roughed up by these things and another one's been hurt pretty bad. Others may have been killed."

"Again, I have to see something. I mean, the mound area is clean. That hole the things supposedly came out of—clean. So what do you want me to do,

send up smoke signals? Rattle beads?"

Nate's hands were tied, and there was no use arguing. Brian got up to leave.

Back in the truck, he made a decision. He had to face his old life, at least enough to return to the physics building and see what in the world was being done in his facility.

"You are feeling OK with this?" Loi asked as they reached Ludlum University's tree-shaded gate.

"Not really. But it has to be done."

He guided the truck through the gate and up the winding street that led around the main building and curved past the physics building behind it.

The old Gothic castle was as forbidding as ever.

Loi said nothing as they went toward the building, but her eyes were big, taking in everything.

"Lovely, isn't it?"

"It's so big."

"Not actually. We needed more space three years ago. It must be bursting at the seams by now."

He took her up the herringbone-patterned brick walk, between the familiar rows of flowers.

Bill Merriman was at the proctor's desk in the central hall. He looked up in surprise as Brian came forward, then his face erupted in a smile. He got to his feet, his big glasses glistening in the sunlight that was streaming in the door.

"I don't believe it, Dr. Kelly!" Merriman's voice thundered like a foghorn.

"Hi, Bill. Bill, I'd like you to meet Mrs. Kelly."

There was just the slightest hesitation, as Bill quietly acknowledged the passing of a beloved friend. Then the smile resurfaced. "I'm so pleased to meet you, Mrs. Kelly. I just can't tell you how pleased I am." He pumped Loi's hand until she began to vibrate. Then he stopped, gave Brian a sly, twinkling look. "Am I the last to know?"

"What?"

"Are you coming back with us, Doctor?"

"Bill, I'd just like to take a walk through, have a look at my old facility."

"Well, I suppose you can do that. It's off clearance, so I don't have to follow you around with a gun." He chuckled. "There's no classified work being done here now, not since you left."

"None?"

He shook his head.

"You're sure it's OK for me to go in?"

"Oh, absolutely. That'd be Dr. Robinson's lab now."

"Active?"

"Under construction until the fall term begins. But there's not much of your stuff left. You know, when the funding went—"

"I know, my immortality went with it."

Bill laughed. "I wouldn't say that, Doctor."

Loi looked like a small child, peering up at the foyer's faded grandeur. Before them a wide staircase soared up to a wall of stained-glass windows depicting the achievements of practical physics circa 1897, the year the building was completed. A blast furnace belched fire, electric lighting dotted a cityscape, a locomotive came roaring out of a tunnel.

"I'm afraid we descend into the Stygian depths," Brian said as he led her around the staircase to the rickety iron steps that led to the basement labs. "In the old days there was nobody in the basement but us trolls."

He had been trying to push the memories of Mary aside, but the smell coming up from the basement brought them flooding in. That familiar odor of slightly damp concrete—he hadn't recalled that until just this moment. He'd smelled it a thousand times through their life together, working down here.

Behind him Loi negotiated the steps with exaggerated care. As best he could, he helped her down the thirty feet. The basement was deep, its ceilings high. Originally, it had been a dormitory of some sort. It must have been a depressing place to live.

Brian's big steel door now had ROBINSON stenciled on it in black, but it was still possible to see where the KELLY & KELLY plate had been—brass, bought at the Door Store in Albany.

Brian opened the door, reached in and turned on the lights. As they always had, they glared down out of cheerless metal gratings. Brian looked up, and when he did his blood almost stopped in his body: the red tinsel they'd hung as a joke during the 1987 departmental Christmas party was still there.

"All right," he said, looking around the room, "let's see what's going on in here."

"This was your lab?"

"This was our lab." He pointed to a wall now covered by shelving. "Our control console was over there." The steel hatch in the floor near it looked much the same. "The waveguide was underneath."

"What is that?"

"An esoteric particle generator—or rather, detector. Although detection and generation would have arguably been the same event, in this case."

"I don't understand that."

"It was my main piece of equipment. The barrel of my rifle."

"The barrel isn't the most important part of a rifle. That's the firing chamber."

"Oh, OK. Then it was my firing chamber."

The work being done in here now clearly had nothing to do with particle physics. When he opened the hatch, he was going to find a ruined waveguide, blue pipe and all. "The service facility is just under the floor, and the device itself eighty feet farther down."

He went over to the hatch, which was partially occupied by the leg of a chair. "We used to call this place the forbidden zone."

"Because it was secret?"

"Because a forbidden zone is an area near a very powerful object that you can never escape, once you enter it. In a forbidden zone the laws of physics become deranged, everything changes, the world is turned inside out. You reach a point where time runs backward and you end up forever remembering that you've been destroyed, but never actually dying. That's the paradox of a forbidden zone."

Loi had twined her arm in his. "Step back," he said, "I'm gonna open the hatch."

"Is there danger?"

"It's just a ruin, it seems."

He lifted the ring, pulled. The hatch was sheet steel, but not particularly heavy. Disuse made it creak, but it came up easily. An odor rose, of mildew and dust tinged with sewage.

The service facility was pitch-dark. All he could see were the first two rungs of the ladder that led ten feet to its floor. It was here that he and Mary had gone to adjust the polarity of the waveguide, or aim it. The guide had to be absolutely straight or there would be dropoff when it was activated.

"Be careful, Brian!"

"It's OK, I know the terrain like the back of my hand." He descended the ladder and reached for the light switch. He flipped it, and the fluorescents flickered on. Two of them did, anyway. In the old days, they'd been able to flood the place until it was as bright as the surface of Death Valley on a sunny day. A good bit of their work involved extremely fine wires, which were always getting lost. They manipulated these wires with tiny padded tweezers called picks.

He had not expected the place to have been stripped to the bare walls. Every single piece of equipment had been removed, even the conduit that had housed the cables leading to the waveguide.

Most extraordinary, the foot of the guide was gone. In its place was nothing but the original well, now empty of the blue tubing that had housed the guide and its supporting cables.

Brian looked into the well. About ten feet down he saw concrete, and embedded in that concrete, the heads of ten massive bolts. "It's been sealed!"

"Brian, are you OK?"

He backed out of the hole. "I'm OK, I'm fine. But the guide— everything's been ripped out. And it's been sealed." He returned to the ladder, climbed up, closed the hatch. "Sealed like an atomic containment."

Her hands drifted to her belly. "There's radiation?"

"No, no. Our work didn't involve radiation. High-energy plasmas were used in the waveguide, but there was no radioactivity."

Brian stared at the closed hatch, confused—and for a moment, horrified—by a glow emanating from around its edges.

Again he opened it—and went back down to turn out the lights.

"You won't stay down there?"

"No." He climbed out.

She wrinkled her nose. "That place stinks, Brian."

"There must be some sort of mildew in the walls. Maybe down in the well."

"It stinks of the demon."

3.

He went upstairs. "Bill, where's my waveguide?" "They took it out about a year ago." "Who took it?"

Bill only shook his head.

"Don't tell me it's still classified."

Bill's face was reddening; it was obvious that he knew more than he could say, and he was extremely uncomfortable with this. When his beeper went off, he lunged with relief for the phone. "Excuse me," he said, dialing. He spoke earnestly into the phone. "This is Bill Merriman of the Physics Department. May I help you?"

Brian did not want to embarrass him further, and he knew there was no point in pressing the man. Merriman would never divulge a secret. "Thanks for all your help, Bill."

Bill cupped his hand over the receiver. "I wish I could do more, Doctor. It's not a day passes that somebody doesn't mention you—" He did not finish the sentence.

"You mean my work is still discussed?"

Bill shook his head, went back to his call. Brian could see that he wasn't going to get anything more.

When she was finally sitting in the truck again, Loi sighed with relief. "I am tired of carrying you," she said to her stomach. "You must come soon, my baby Brian Kelly."

Brian drove almost blindly. His facility hadn't been abandoned, it had been taken. And those bolts—dear heaven, what did they mean? Why would they see the empty well as so dangerous that they had to sink a million-dollar containment vessel to seal it off?

"We are not going home," Loi said as they passed the Northway exit to Route 303.

"Not just yet."

"Brian, I must go to the bathroom."

Brian felt urgently compelled to go back to the spot where Bob had disappeared. The state police had searched it thoroughly, but not for things like insect legs and bits of broken wing, things that would prove something to a scientist.

It wasn't hard to find the spot. Locally, it was a famous place, where the highway came down off the high ridge of the Jumpers into the Cuyamora valley. From where Bob's truck had stopped you could see twenty miles and more on a clear day.

He pulled over onto the shoulder. "This is where it happened," he said.

"I don't want to be here." Her voice was tight and high.

"I just need to take a look around."

She folded her arms. "Please hurry, then. This is a place of misfortune. Not a good place to bring an unborn child."

He'd never encountered anybody before for whom superstition was fact, and had no real idea of how to deal with his wife.

He got out of the truck.

Flooded with summer sun, this certainly seemed an ordinary enough place.

"Brian, I must pee now."

"You can go over there." He pointed to a clump of bushes.

She glared at him. Angry but helpless, she moved off into the brush that bordered the shoulder. In a moment the forest had swallowed her.

He walked up and down, looking for some critical fragment. He and Bob had fought the insects fiercely. They must have broken a few of them, there must be some remains.

Soon he came to the place where they'd seen the hole, and noticed that the gravel here had a light, friable quality. It looked stony, but would crumble between your fingers. Clay, really, that was all it was. Nothing unusual about that, though. He couldn't bring the authorities out here and show them a little clay in a road shoulder otherwise composed of gravel.

The sun bore down on his neck, white clouds drifted lazily in the late-morning sky. From far off came a deep mutter—thunder back in the mountains. Day after still, quiet day the storms had been building back in there, and at night they marched forth like a discontented army.

He could see the thunderheads already bulging upward toward the stratosphere, a wall of mysterious caves and ranges.

Then he turned his attention to the ground.

On his hands and knees, he crawled slowly along, examining every detail. Bits of tar, stones and clay presented themselves, along with dandelions, teasel and other weedy plants, but nothing that seemed in the least unusual.

He extended his search back away from the gravel, into the cut part of the shoulder. There were slow grasshoppers grinding in the thick air, and quaking aspen rattling at the edge of the woods.

Another, softer sound penetrated Brian's consciousness only slowly. Without quite realizing why, he paused in his work. He found himself watching the aspens. Behind them was a thick stand of scrubby white pine, then the taller forest.

He began to listen, gradually becoming aware that he was hearing somebody breathing.

"Loi?"

No answer.

He peered into the forest, but could see only leaves and close-ranked pines. "Loi?"

Far off, a car was droning closer, its engine straining.

He went toward the woods. How long had she been in there, how far back had she gone? "Loi!"

The car screamed past so fast Brian couldn't tell the make.

In the silence that followed, the breathing became more distinct, and Brian realized that it wasn't Loi, couldn't be. This sounded like some kind of machine.

He heard a rattling sound, almost a sizzle, as if an electrical circuit was sparking.

Without wasting another moment, he went tearing into the woods, calling her at the top of his lungs. His voice shattered against the dim forest silence. His own crashing blotted out any other sound. "*Loi, Loi!*"

"Brian, yes!" She came rushing out from behind a tree, still pulling on her floppy maternity pants.

He grabbed her, threw his arms around her, kissed her hard. "Oh, God, I thought—" He stopped, fought for control. "I don't know what I thought."

"You scared me yelling like that."

"You were gone for so long. And I heard—sh!"

It was still there, only faster. And louder—it was getting louder. The

rhythmic breathing was big, the crackling was sharp and steady.

They ran, both of them, ran headlong and jumped in the truck. Frantically they rolled up the windows and locked them. Then he started the engine and hit the gas, turning around in a flurry of dust and gravel.

When he looked back, he thought he saw what might have been a thick, black cable emerging from the grass onto the gravel shoulder. But he couldn't be certain, and he didn't linger.

"What do you think it was, Brian?"

He shook his head.

"It was horrible!"

He was beginning to feel the awful desperation of a child whose innocent play has unaccountably set the house afire.

The material world was very different from its appearance, very much less stable, he thought.

—There are an infinite number of possible universes. Reality appears as it does because of the way we look at it.

—Communication with past and future is happening all the time, and we know it. But we can't talk about it because we don't have the right verb tenses.

—The river of time runs between banks of chaos.

What hath God wrought? Or you, Brian Kelly? "What have I done?"

"You?"

"I think maybe so."

The sound of his own words reverberated in the jittering cab.

"I don't understand you."

There are messages everywhere, messages from other worlds. That breathing—one, two, one, two—perfectly timed. The insects lined up along the window, as if they *knew in advance* that he would open it.

The brain is a quantum machine, filtering reality out of chaos. Rockets screaming in the sky, bombs sailing, children playing, cats screaming in the night—

Oscola passing the windows, a doll's town, the gingerbread trim on the porches, the arched windows of the Excelsior Tower, the flowers in the town common: a doll's town, full of secrets, dolls concealing secrets in their glassy blue eyes.

He saw where Bob had gone, down the hole of madness. He could go there, too, go and set up shop, build himself a little cottage of chocolate cement and candy.

He could attract the children of the world to his oven and bake them into obscure and terrible forms.

"I want to get home," Loi said.

He realized that he'd been driving up and down the streets of Oscola. He turned down Main, past the town square with its bandstand and its monument to Oscola's dead from four wars. "I was thinking," he said. "Trying to understand."

She made a small sound. Was it derision, or just impatience?

They drove out Kelly Farm Road, turned into the driveway. "When will you rebuild our house?" she asked.

He felt anger flare in him, then felt it transform itself, become something else. "Soon, Loi. As soon as I can."

4.

They got to the trailer, went inside. The boys were asleep in the tiny second bedroom that would one day soon belong to Brian Ky Kelly.

When she was comfortable again Loi made coffee and gave him some. He noted that it had milk in it. She sat across the kitchen table from him, drinking her own. "My name is not Loi Ky," she said suddenly.

He was astonished.

"That's my whore's name."

"Your whore's name?"

"Easy for the white-eyes to say."

"What's your real name?"

She regarded him. "I'm used to Loi Ky by now."

"Please tell me."

She smiled in a secret, inner way. "Someday I will. When all is well again." She kissed his forehead.

He spent the afternoon sitting on the front porch trying to come up with some useful ideas. He had a yellow pad, and he tried to do some equations, but he couldn't make anything work. The jump from his original work to the present mess was just too great.

The shadows lengthened, and he found that he was not looking forward to the night.

When the sun was turning gold and the voices of the larks were echoing in the sky, he put his work down. This wasn't about his theories. It was about something so far beyond his theories that he simply couldn't see it.

Evening brought sheet lightning, and wind heaved through the old trees around his ruined house. But the storm did not break. He wondered if there even was a storm out in the mountains, in the conventional sense. Maybe the

lightning represented another sort of cataclysm altogether, too big to simply break of an evening and slip away by dawn.

Bob's boys were playing in the gloaming, their voices shrill in the shadows.

The TV went on, and Brian heard the familiar music that announced the Yankees' pregame show. The boys heard it, too, and went racing inside to watch.

The wind began flowing down from the mountains. It swept across the back fifty with its tall stands of white pine, whispering in the needles. When it reached the barn it moaned in its eaves, then splashed up against the trailer and Brian on the porch, and made him follow the boys into the bright living room.

Loi was reading, her eyes tight with concentration. She looked up at him. "Brian, listen." She read: "Why do you tremble at my doorway? A man of many hearts does not need me."

"What's that from?" He tried not to sound wary.

She held up the book. "Anne Sexton." She laughed a little.

"This man needs you."

She smiled, but he knew that she was still struggling to heal the pain that he had inflicted on her with his carelessness.

Silently, she handed him the book. The poem she'd been reading was called "The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts." In his wife's eyes he saw something entirely new.

"You shudder, Brian."

A roar came from the TV. "Line drive right into the glove of Mattingly," the announcer yelled.

Brian went down onto the couch. Chris leaned against his shoulder. He drew Chris closer, and tried to get caught up in the baseball game.

Soon, though, he sank into a black study, staring at the television and returning to the flow of theory that might have led him astray.

He thought that he must have inadvertently discovered a great poison, the most terrible of all poisons. He still didn't fully understand. But whoever had removed his equipment, then sealed his facility with steel-reinforced concrete understood.

He was deep in thought when Loi got up and went to the door. He hadn't heard the tap that had announced the visitor. "Your friend is here," Loi said, stepping aside as Ellen's striding entrance brought him to his feet.

She came straight into the room, and she came straight to the point, too. "I'm at a dead end," she said. "I've played out every lead. The judge has ordered me off his property at the point of a gun." She locked eyes with Brian. "Midnight. His root cellar. Breaking and entering."

She stood there in the light, her flawless skin glowing, her soft round eyes sharpened by determination, her lips a rigid line.

Loi's eyes widened. "We have been in this man's house as guests. We won't go as thieves."

Ellen knew that she had to be very careful here.

She sat down in the big easy chair, crossed her legs and took out a cigarette. "May I?" Loi went into the kitchen, returned with an ashtray. "Look, Loi, I know that you don't want him to do this. I don't blame you. I don't want either one of us to do it! But it's my obligation to discover the truth of what's happening here and tell the public. Brian has an obligation, too, because he's a scientist."

"Didn't Nate Harris tell you that he'd gone through that place? You don't need Brian to help you do something the police have already done."

"The insects come out of the same hole Nate said was clean. Therefore it is not clean."

Concerned lest the boys overhear upsetting talk, Loi sent them off to their room. She pulled their door closed. "I know something's crazy," she said quietly. "But I don't see where my husband has to get in the middle of it. Skulking around playing robber! What use is it, Brian? What will you accomplish? Let me tell you, the more you place yourself in their way, the more you tempt them. Eventually, they will strike again."

"Just for a second open your mind to the idea that this isn't demons," Ellen said. "Consider the idea that it's something so completely different that we can hardly even begin to understand it. Something totally new."

"I know about demons from a long time."

On the television, the crowd roared. First baseman Don Mattingly had just hit a stand-up triple. Chris peeked out of the bedroom. "Can we come back out, Auntie Loi?"

"Yeah, boys," she said. "We're finished with the private stuff." She gave Ellen a guarded look. "We keep it *Reader's Digest* from now on, OK?"

"Brian, we can get our evidence, I know we can! It's down in that root cellar, I'm sure of it. That's the lair."

Loi put her arms around Brian.

Ellen wanted to yell at her, but there was nothing to say, nothing she *could* say. Finally she let out a long exhalation of smoke, slumped. "Brian—"

"I know what it is! And I'm not going back in there."

"You went in?"

"Fell."

"And—"

"I'm not going back. I can't."

"You're a funny kind of a coward."

"We need more information. The direct approach is too much of a risk."

"It's all we have!"

"People are getting killed!"

Little Joey began to cry. "Stop this," Loi said. "Both of you, shut up!"

Ellen got up and left without another word.

"She's a damned fool," Brian said into the sudden quiet.

Their eyes met. They had both felt the faint, deep vibration that could have been a big truck out on the road, or maybe the engine of Ellen's old car starting roughly. And they both knew that it could have been something else.

Ellen lingered a moment on their porch, furious at them and at herself. Here the vibration was too small to be noticed. She peered out into the night, which was rushing with wet wind and not a bit pleasant. She'd come to hate the hours between dusk and dawn.

She'd searched the woods looking for strange nests. She'd even searched her house trying to find where the thing she'd put in the jar had gotten out. Eventually she'd located a neatly burned hole in the top of the bathroom screen, and she'd patched it with a square of duct tape.

She walked down the stone path into the sleepy argument of katydids and the deep rhythm of frogs. Her car was a shabby ghost in the driveway. She turned around, and the light flowing from the windows of the trailer seemed to her to possess a special gold.

Down in the woods she could see lightning bugs. She tensed, watched.

They were ordinary.

She resumed the walk to her car. What she was about to do was insane. She ought to go home and lock her door and windows and pray. Her habit now was to sleep from five a.m. until ten, never in the deep night. To keep going she floated in coffee, which made her irritable. She was smoking like hell,

too, like she had when she was first starting out in the newspaper business and she thought it made her look more reporterly.

She reached her car and got in. The Speed Graphic was on the seat, beside it the large flashlight she'd gotten from Ritter's Hardware this afternoon.

She caressed the cold steel box of the camera, then picked up the flashlight and turned it on and off, testing it.

Do it, woman. She had her principles, and one of them was to get to the bottom of a story.

Quite near the car a lightning bug shone and faded. She rolled up the window with fumbling hands.

The question was, how scared could a person be? Was fear like cold, with a final, ultimate extreme, or was it like heat, that would just keep rising forever?

The mound, the root cellar...

Don't think, do.

She turned on the car, pulled out into Kelly Farm Road. Once an opossum's eyes flared like angry little torches, another time some deer were briefly caught in her headlights, but the drive to the terBroeck estate was otherwise without event.

She drove as far down Mound Road as she dared, then cut the lights and pulled off, letting the car roll into the woods, hoping the tires wouldn't sink. She cracked her window, inhaled the fresh night air. Ahead of her stood the judge's house, as dark and quiet as a tomb. At least there were no cars here tonight, and no dance behind the curtains to the purple light from hell.

Far off a powerful engine guttered, began to whine, then settled into a steady rumble. It echoed in the darkness, mingling with the mutter of thunder.

There were answers out here somewhere, she could almost smell them. She clutched the steering wheel.

Ten

1.

For a long time she sat without moving. Every so often a lightning bug would glow nearby. She held the flashlight, flipping it on, flipping it off, trying to gain courage. These were only ordinary lightning bugs, after all, slow, beautiful, a little mysterious.

She watched moon shadows dance along the ground. The moon was only half full, but it shed plenty of light when it emerged from behind the rolling clouds. She fingered the door handle. This was a little like diving into a cold swimming pool. The point was to start.

No. It would be insane to take one step out of this car. She sat, her hand on the door handle, wondering if a thirty-year-old could have a heart attack, just from fear.

She wanted a cigarette, she wanted water, she wanted a gun. Most of all, she wanted somebody to help her.

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, reflecting that the Ellen Maas of even a week ago would never have come out here like this. This was somebody else, a secret Ellen Maas that she hardly even knew, a strong, determined woman who was capable of pulling this door handle like this, and shifting in the seat, and putting her feet on the ground like this, and standing up.

She took two wide steps into the middle of Mound Road. In three minutes she could be in the judge's yard. Thirty seconds later she'd be at the root cellar.

She stood dead still. Using her flashlight, keeping it pointed low, she tried to get a look into the woods. It wasn't hard to picture the insects waiting back in there with their little lights turned off. Could they fly without their lights, were they doing that now? Or were they coming along tunnels, ready to burst up out of the ground wherever it suited them?

It was difficult to tell through her boots, but she had the impression that some sort of vibration was rising from below. She bent down, pressed against the road with her outspread palm. Nothing.

When she stood up, though, a gust of breeze brought a distinct sound: somewhere in the dark, a powerful vehicle was in motion.

More carefully, she moved forward, going down the side of the road, keeping to the shadows. Was that a crackle in the woods? Yes. Probably an animal.

The memory of that first night she'd seen the glowing insects remained vivid. People had been dying in the judge's house, she was sure of it. She reached the edge of the property. The house was dark and quiet.

Carloads of people had been here that night. Their cries came back to her, full of dreadful ecstasy.

The judge had not been forthcoming, he'd ordered her off his property, he'd threatened.

She proceeded past the house, forcing authority she did not feel into her stride. Even this close to the house, the windows were absolutely dark. Was he in there? The old Cadillac was in the garage.

As she came closer to the house the forest gave way to a wide lawn. The wind snatched at her hair, seeped down her collar. She increased her speed. The small hairs on the back of her neck tickled. Glancing behind her, she almost stumbled over the stones that lined the judge's driveway.

The silence was not the silence of sleep, but of watching.

Jagged clouds raced across the sky, pouring down from the north, and suddenly she saw coming toward her, across the hills and forest tops, a great wave of silver light. Then she was in a flood of moonlight so bright she could see the bobbing heads of dandelions in her path.

Hurrying now, almost running, she crossed the shaggy lawn to the root cellar. Quickly she squatted, thrusting the flashlight down into the tangle of

undergrowth, then turning it on. She could see an open area below, and in it long black coils.

They were entirely motionless. Could they be roots?

She pressed down into the undergrowth, wishing she had a stronger light.

Then she thought that they must be a garden hose, old and tangled, long since discarded. Beyond them she could see a collapsed brick wall, and considerable evidence of work—footprints, scrape marks, bricks organized into piles.

Ironically, the police investigation might well have destroyed vital evidence.

She shifted, dangled her legs into the opening. The air was cool around her exposed ankles. For a long moment she hesitated. She fought to prevent her thoughts from forming into definite shape.

But that was a battle she couldn't win. The only thing to do was drop down, and at once.

She hit the floor of the little chamber with a jaw-snapping thud. Her light got away from her, the beam casting wildly among the roots and brush. She ran to it, grabbed it, shone it in the direction of the strange tangle she had seen from above.

There was nothing there.

She went to the spot where the hose had been, but there weren't even any marks in the earth. Then again, the ground was packed hard.

Her light revealed an opening behind the collapsed wall of bricks. This must be the entrance to the iron mine that Nate Harris had talked about. She moved through the burst wall, careful to avoid dislodging any of the loose bricks still hanging overhead. If they all caved in at once, they could trap her.

The iron mine was little more than a hole leading downward at a steep angle. There were no supporting beams, no steps, no little miner's railroad. This was an old, old mine of the kind that had been run by slave labor back during the

Colonial era, before slavery had been outlawed in the northern states. Her flashlight revealed the scars of chisels and hand drills. The granite had been penetrated with muscle and blood.

As she moved deeper, she cast her beam first at the floor, then at the walls, then the ceiling, continually seeking the bit of wing, the dried carcass, that would prove their case.

Within minutes she had to bow her head, then to crouch. Here the footprints of the state troopers ended. She went on, noticing that the floor of the mine had become curiously springy and soft. She reached down and felt a smooth, giving surface, cool and a little damp. It felt as if it was made of the flesh of mushrooms. But when she tried to tear some off, she found that it was extremely tough, like leather. There was an odor, too, that first tickled the back of the throat, then burned. She sneezed, recovered herself—and realized that the tangle of coils she had seen from above was now two feet in front of her.

She backed away, suddenly very aware that she was deep underground in the middle of the night in a terrible place, and she didn't have the faintest idea what that thing was.

It was completely inert, but from this close very obviously not a garden hose. It seemed to be the source of the acrid odor. Carefully, she peered at the tightly knotted coils. Was there a faint pattern in the surface? She couldn't be sure.

This was something alive, and not a normal something. It was unlike anything she had ever seen or heard of, not a snake, certainly not a worm.

She coughed, and the sound went echoing off down the mine like a shot. Shaking now, feeling the sweat trickling down her face, fighting not to choke on the odor, she forced herself to go closer to the thing. The whole knotted mass of it was about two feet across, a foot high. Conceivably she could pick it up, probably even push it out through the growth above to the surface. Gingerly, she touched it with the edge of the flashlight. Then she prodded it harder. Totally inert. She pushed it with her toe. It had heft—maybe it weighed as much as ten pounds.

Pushing harder, she shoved it onto its side. Shining her light, she could see considerably more structure underneath.

Eight of the thick, snake-like appendages came out of a center that had the tightly wrinkled appearance of an anus.

This thing was in no way normal. It wasn't even something you'd find in the tropical rain forest, not as far as she knew, and she felt sure she'd know about anything this odd. They'd have them in zoos, or stuffed in museums.

To get the thing out, she was going to have to pick it up in her bare hands. She was going to have to touch it, and she didn't know if that was possible. Again, she shoved it with her foot. It was upside down now, still totally motionless.

But it had come in here. So it could move if it wanted to. It wasn't dead, and she must not allow herself to forget that. On the one hand, she had to be careful. On the other, if it slipped away down the mine, then what was probably the story of a lifetime would have slipped through her fingers. Not to mention the danger, and there was no doubt in her mind that this thing represented danger.

She reached down, grabbed the two most prominent coils like handles and lifted the thing. There was a lot of weight, more than ten pounds. But this was gold, proof absolute, the most valuable scientific specimen in the world, the biggest story.

Staggering, she carried the thing up out of the mine, lurched through the hole in the brick wall, and dropped it onto the floor of the root cellar itself.

Catching her breath, she shone her light upward. Soon she found the place where she'd come down. She would have to shove the thing up, then grab roots and haul herself hand over hand to the surface. Too bad she hadn't kept up her aerobics. She was going to need every bit of strength she possessed.

But when she picked the thing up and held it overhead, she realized that she was going to need more than strength. She had miscalculated the depth of the root cellar.

When she saw that she was trapped, she cried out, a brief shout, stifled almost at once.

Frantic, she cast her light around, looking for a hanging root, maybe a ladder.

The piles of bricks—she could build up a platform.

It took time, and she discovered that the bricks were soft, old and of poor quality.

As she worked, she watched the coiled creature, which never once moved, never an inch.

In fifteen minutes she had a platform three feet high. When she stood on it, her head was pressed up into the tangle of brush and roots above.

She picked up the coiled creature and put it onto the flat surface. It landed with a wet sound, and seemed to quiver a bit. Getting up onto the platform, she heaved the thing upward, gripping its slick, cool coils in her dusty hands.

The roots and briars overhead seemed almost to come alive, fighting its passage to the surface. She struggled, found that she couldn't get it quite to the edge of the hole. She had to wedge it in among the roots, then climb up herself.

As she climbed, it slipped, falling toward her, and she caught it against her chest. She pulled up with her arms, struggling desperately now, her feet seeking purchase, not finding it. The thing was knobby and knotted, as hard within as wood, but the surface was taut and felt as if there was a muscular fascia immediately beneath the skin. It was slippery and, she realized, also beginning to flex. She kicked, slipped back, kicked again.

The smell that had hurt her throat was strong now, and easily identifiable: the thing was sweating urine, and she was being soaked in it. The wetter it got, the more slippery the skin became.

She could feel the wetness soaking through her blouse, running along her midriff, tickling down her belly and inner thighs. A wave of nausea rocked

her, making her gobble back her own gorge. Then she slipped, felt the thing collapse down on her shoulders, felt the urine running down her face and neck.

She grappled for purchase, slipped, slipped more—then found a long loop of root. As she straightened her leg she burst to the surface. The bundle in her arms fell to the ground and she sprawled out beside it.

She sat up. She had the damn thing. Immediately she gathered it into her arms, embracing it to prevent its slipping back into the hole. The surface of the thing was now covered with a sort of mucus, as slippery as boiled okra. Moonlight flooded down, glimmering on the ooze that covered her hands. She raised her head, trying to escape the stink.

She went off toward her car, charging fast. She got it into the front seat, pushed it down onto the floor under the dash.

The next and urgent step was to get herself cleaned off. Coxon Kill wasn't far from here, running clean and fresh. The urine was so acidic that her skin was beginning to sting.

Using her flashlight, she crossed the road and dashed into the woods, went at an angle to the mound, toward the place where the kill turned and crossed the meadow where she'd originally been chased. Soon she heard the burbling of the stream. She threw off her wet shirt and sat down beside it, splashing herself with water. She splashed furiously, rubbed, then soaked her shirt. She rubbed it along the bottom stones, squeezed it, then drew it soaking out of the black water and sluiced herself, her face, her chest, her abdomen. As the freezing cold water poured down her, the stinging diminished. This was the second time that water had delivered her. She decided that she loved Coxon Kill.

Cold as it was, she got her shirt back on. Now she had to do one more thing, and that was to get Brian and get this thing to the authorities. He'd know scientists who would do the right thing with it. She wasn't ready to turn it over to the state police, not without knowing how they would approach the investigation.

She reached the edge of the woods and stepped into the road. Darkness, silence. She began to walk, her heart slowing, her breath coming more easily. Her car was fifty feet away, and she started feeling in her pocket for her keys.

The Viper, when it came, came like fury, its engine pulverizing the silence. She leaped back, falling into a clump of weeds, feeling briars dig into her back.

At once there was a screech of brakes, the sound of tires wailing in protest, a red shadow turning in the dark, then the cruel, rising snarl of the engine.

She was still rolling but she wasn't going to be fast enough;

the car was going to kill her. As she rolled, her flashlight flew to pieces around her.

As the moon went behind clouds the car shrieked past not three inches from her twisting body. She was jerked hard by its slipstream, it had come that close. Then she was in the woods, a big pine with sticky resin on its trunk shielding her.

Clawing at the tree to steady herself, she fought back the panic. The engine guttered, began idling.

Terrified now, she peered around the trunk. It was pitch-black, almost impossible to see. A wave of fear and frustration brought hot tears to her eyes. The Viper was right beside her Duster.

But it looked empty. She could see no movement. But she had a distinct impression—a taste, really—of *somebody*. It was easy to think that she was being watched by baleful, cunning eyes.

Evil. Horribly so. She was stunned at the power of it, and at the sense of there being an actual personality behind it, as if the whole array of terrors was being orchestrated by a single individual.

She could smell him, taste his foulness.

Another sound came, a sharp curl of breeze... or a whisper. She listened.

There it was again—a definite whisper in the woods behind her. She couldn't make out the words. She cupped her hands behind her ears, faced the sound.

Another whisper. My God, it was coming right down on her. It seemed to know exactly where she was standing.

And it wasn't alone: there was now a chorus of quiet whispers.

When the moon came out again, it cast mottled gray shadows on the forest floor. But it also made it possible to see, at least a little.

She tried to remember how the roads went. She had to cross Mound and try to sneak out through the woods to Queen's Road, then double back to her place.

She heard another sound, intimate, growing. Slithery. Something huge was slithering toward her through the leaves.

The moonlight disappeared, but even so she ran. Almost instantly she careened off a tree trunk, tumbled cursing into the dead leaves of the forest floor. It hurt, but also brought her to her senses. She wasn't going to get away by running, not in a forest this dark. Why wouldn't the moon stay out, just for ten minutes?

Two careful steps later she fell again, tripped by a low branch. There was a flash in her head, a pain, the momentary sense that the ground was on top of her.

The slithering came again, something brushed against her thigh. That did it: she scrambled to her feet and slogged off, all sense of direction gone, blundering and crashing aimlessly.

She hit the road so suddenly that she almost fell flat. She stopped, peered up and down the strip of tarmac. Mound? Main? She trotted along, her side flaring with a stitch, her breath coming in hot gasps.

At last the moon returned, sailing majestically from behind an angry tumble of cloud. She was horrified to see a dark, familiar shape on the immediate

horizon—the mound. And off to the right, the judge's place.

This was Mound Road and she'd gone in a circle.

She crossed it, began to double back. But then light flickered in her eye, followed by a shudder of pleasure that made her heart jump. Just across the road were a dozen dots of purple light, a hissing like a gasoline lantern.

To keep back the scream she jammed her fist in her mouth. She forced herself to retreat... back toward the woods where she'd heard the slithering.

She took a step, then another. Behind her she was aware of more flashes.

Where the light touched exposed skin—the back of her neck, her arms—it left a rich, seductive tingle, like the slowly drawn finger of a gentle and subtle man.

She plunged off into the woods, crying out when she was slapped by limbs, smashed into tree trunks.

Ahead was a gleam.

"Dear God—"

But it wasn't purple, it looked like the moon on a metal surface. She crouched, moved forward as slowly as she dared. Everything she did made noise—her feet crackled leaves, her breath rattled, she bumped loudly into trunks.

It was a car in the woods. She became cautious, barely moving. It must be the Viper.

She was fifteen feet away when she recognized her own car. She was thunderstruck. This was worse than being in a funhouse. You just did not get anywhere, not one damn *inch!*

It was right there where she'd left it, seemingly unmolested, seemingly empty. The Viper was nowhere to be seen.

Had she escaped, or was this a trap? Was the car really in the same place? She moved toward it. The keys—she got them out of her pocket. She reached the door. Feeling blindly, she found the lock.

At that moment the moonlight again disappeared. But it was no matter—the interior light would come on when she opened the door. She got the key in the lock, turned it, heard a click, pulled at the door.

No interior light.

There was a stink in the car so horrible that it knocked her head back, made her gag. It was like pressing your face into the underarm of a corpse. She looked down into the dark beneath the glove compartment. There was a thickness there, very still. Maybe the thing had died.

Holding her breath, she moved toward the open door. She rolled down the driver's window, then reached inside and lowered the one behind it.

She got into the driver's seat, reached over and opened the window opposite. Fresh air came in. This was better, she was going to be able to handle it. She put the key in the ignition, stretched her foot out to the gas pedal.

A black arm snaked up the dash. At the end of it she thought she could see a narrow hand.

Then the moonlight returned and she saw that the hand was to all appearances human. Before she could so much as cry out in amazement the fingers spread and the black, clawlike nails dug into the thick plastic dashboard, cutting it as if it was modeling clay.

Another hand came creeping up her inner thigh. It was cool and damp, its palm as soft as deerskin. Razor nails tickled her flesh.

She kicked, momentarily popping her right leg loose. The response was a flash of purple light, a spangle of pleasure.

Her skin crawled, she was almost drowned in a wave of the warmest, sweetest, most delicious sensations, wonderful little tickling penetrations that

went deeper in her than she'd thought delight could reach.

The hands got their grip on the dash, the arms rippled with muscular contractions. Under her feet there commenced a flopping and heaving so great that the car began to shake.

The moonlight disappeared.

With all her might she smashed her foot down into the muscular, writhing mass. Again she kicked, again and again.

A third hand shot out, barely visible in the gloom. She heard its claws sink into the back of the front seat with a popping rip of leatherette.

She wanted to close her thighs, but the claw tips pressed into the tender inner flesh.

Some deep instinct she knew nothing about sent a rush of white-hot adrenaline into her blood. Her muscles turned to steel, she reared back on the seat. The three hands all detached themselves from their various moorings and came clawing toward her at once.

With a great boneless flopping and writhing, two of the hands grasped for purchase, one clawing the ceiling and ripping it down, the other popping holes right through the metal door.

She was so stunned by the violence, by the bizarre ugliness of what she was witnessing, that she lost consciousness in the middle of lunging back away from the thing between her legs. This caused her to fall limp, and the sweeping, grasping hands clutched air barely an inch from her neck.

The impact of falling against the ground brought her back to consciousness just as a fleshy coil poured out the door. She pushed away from the car, leaped up and started running blind, her arms windmilling before her.

She blundered into brush, into trees, arms flailing. As she skittered away, pushing herself with her heels, her whole being contracted into a dot of savage terror. Ellen Maas wasn't there anymore, she had been torn from her

moorings. An animal was all that remained, a terrified animal.

2.

Into her view there came the vague image of two rough old boots, two jeans-clad legs.

"Ellen! Hey, Ellen!" Brian jumped away from her panicked flailing. "Hey, it's me!"

His truck was idling at the roadside, the door open, the lighted cab glowing. She was beyond the reach of words. She choked and gagged and clawed the air. He tried to stop her, but she yanked away from him.

She could see nothing, but the slithering sounds in the woods behind her held a terrible meaning. Close beside Brian she could discern movement. Her impulse was to jerk away, but when she did he tried to hold her more tightly. "Take it easy," he said.

Then the moon came out.

Two hands were quivering, fully extended, not a foot from Brian's head.

She swallowed, gasped.

"Ellen, it's gonna be OK."

The arms undulated, stretching. The hands came closer.

"Brian!"

The claws extended. To get away she threw herself backward—but he grabbed her, clutched her to him. The claws now vibrated an inch from his head. "Take it easy," he repeated, his voice shaking. She could see that the flesh of the arms was pulsating, getting thinner and longer, the fingers wriggling, now questing, now a mere breath away.

In another instant they would tear his head from his body.

She pummeled his leathery chest and bellowed, desperate at her own incoherence.

His response was to press her against him harder. "It's all right, baby, you're fine now, you're fine."

The pulsation of the arms was getting faster. They were getting thinner and thinner, jerking spasmodically. He reached back, absently brushed his head as if he thought a bug had landed there. But his strong left arm held her tight.

Other parts of the thing were swarming out the windows of the car.

No matter how hard she tried, she remained unable to control her own screaming. All she could think of was being touched again by those fingers.

Brian had come out here largely to stop her from getting hurt or getting in trouble. Now she was having a breakdown right in his arms. He thought she was going to shatter his eardrums.

All of a sudden she gave him a vicious knee to the groin. He jackknifed, gurgling with agony as she wrenched herself free of him. Digging with her heels, sliding down the path on her back, she dragged herself toward the road.

Fortunately, she hadn't incapacitated him, and he was able to rise almost at once. As he did so something slapped the side of his head. It hit him hard enough to jar his vision. He turned toward it.

The four strangest, most lethal claws he'd ever seen were spread out in front of his face, trembling in the moonlight.

For a long second his mind was totally blank. Then he saw details: an ordinary palm. The claws had been carefully sharpened. He could see the serrations left by the fingernail file. This terrible hand was manicured.

On the finger pads were prints; the hand was so close that he could see even this tiny detail.

Another joined it. As he pulled back, the two of them closed just in front of his face with a sound like springing rat traps. Then he saw what looked like

stiff cables in the moonlight, leading back from the hands all the way to Ellen's car. More writhing arms were pouring from every window.

A slight movement in the brush drew his attention to the fact that another of the appendages was staking along the ground off to his right. Then he saw a fourth, this one looking like a black fire hose reaching into the trees above the car.

A deep, visceral shock went through his body.

He thought: my shotgun, my shotgun is in my truck.

He ran so fast he caught up with Ellen, who was just clambering into the cab. He could see the barrel of the shotgun, blue in the dim light. Throwing himself past her, he dove in, grabbed the weapon.

With one hand he pushed her down. "I'm gonna shoot!" She cringed as he braced the gun against the steering wheel and pulled the trigger. The gun spat blue fire. Ellen screamed. Again he fired, and again, the thunderous reports blasting away her cries.

Then there was silence.

With a thud one of the hands dropped onto the hood. The diameter of the arm was now no thicker than that of a rope, and it seemed almost devoid of strength, able only to flop weakly forward. But then it contracted, and the claw-like nails slid right through the steel hood. Instantly the arm went tight and the truck lurched. It began to be dragged toward the deep woods, like a fish on the hook.

Then the moonlight went yet again, and they could see nothing outside but dead, inky blackness.

The truck lurched and shook, being dragged farther into the woods.

He turned the key, listened to the engine cough, cough again, die. Again he turned the key. The truck jerked forward, stopped. Again and again he tried the key.

Finally the engine struggled to life.

He threw the transmission into reverse, started to let out the clutch. The engine roared, the truck pitched, the tires whined in the damp, loose soil. A stink of hot tires filled the cab. Oil pressure and water temperature began to rise toward the red lines.

When another of the hands flopped against her window, Ellen practically leaped into his lap. The claws tapped furiously against the glass.

The truck engine was powerful, but the gauges were climbing steadily and it was only a matter of time before a gasket or a tire blew.

Mound Road was just a short distance behind them.

Something shook the truck as if it was a toy. Brian jammed on the gas and the engine's whine rose to a shriek, the tires wailed.

Despite all this effort the truck lurched forward, moving deeper yet into the woods.

The hand must still be embedded like a hook in the hood, reeling the truck in. Brian threw the gearbox into first and smashed the accelerator to the floor. The truck shot forward much faster than the hand had been dragging it. In the glow of the headlights Brian could see the arm, which had been wire-tight, flopping in helpless tangles across the hood.

He threw the door open, leaped into the tangle and grabbed for the hand. The extreme stretch of the arm had caused it to lose its strength. Under him, however, the coils pulsated and wriggled. They were warm, getting hot, getting rapidly thicker. Faster they pulsed, faster and faster.

By the time he had grabbed the hand at its wrist, it could resist. As he tugged it toward the windshield, away from the hole it had made, the muscles pulsed. The arm was now the thickness of a bicycle tire. Under his fingers the flesh of the thing bubbled like a thick, hot liquid.

From the woods came a flicker of purple light. He was surprised to feel deep,

warm stirrings come up from the depths of him.

While he paused, confused by this unexpected sensation, the coils surged faster, getting thicker and thicker.

Then Ellen appeared, also yanking the hand. It came out of the hood with a clanging screech, the claws doubling up on themselves so fast they made a sound like the crack of a whip.

"Drive," she bellowed, "for the love of God, *driver*

He threw himself back into the cab, ground the gears, backed out onto Mound Road.

They were free. "Thank God," Ellen whispered. "Oh, thank God."

He went bolt upright, he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Jesus," Ellen said.

Stretching off into the distance was a line of cars, all heading toward the judge's house. Against the sharp spikes of the pines that blocked the view of the house from here could be seen a constant flashing of purple light.

Every car was filled with people—men, women, children.

Worse, he knew them, they were familiar faces. "It's Will Torrance—hey, Will!"

"Don't stop, Brian!"

Brian hardly heard her. He put on the brake, staring in amazement at his fellow townspeople. "Look, there's Mike Mills, Betty's boy, and his wife's with him! And the Robertsons and old Mr. Hanford—"

"Brian, get us out of here!"

With a hissing sound, a great shape slid out of the nearby woods, flowing toward them like a massive snake. Before he could react, pale purple light

flashed right in his face. Reflected in the rearview mirror, it emanated from the headlights of a car behind him. He recognized this vehicle, low, mean, red. A terrific wave of pleasure hit him. He felt himself spring erect, found his eyes glaring hungrily into the reflection.

It was all he could do to shove the mirror out of adjustment. That broke the spell.

He returned to his senses. "Ellen, open the glove compartment, get out the shells. Can you handle a shotgun?"

"Not yet."

"Then be real careful, please. Put a couple of shells into the breech, lean out the window and fire. But don't look into that friggin' light!"

"I know about the light."

She was clumsy with the shells, she dropped two or three of them, but finally got some loaded. The Viper was right on their tail. A floodlight was filling the cab with purple iridescence.

It was the light of heaven. He began to go weak. The truck's speed dropped as he unconsciously lifted his foot.

A roar followed and the cab went dark. Ellen screamed, threw herself back from the window, tossed the smoking shotgun to the floor.

Instantly the pleasure ceased, and Brian felt a brief, black sense of loss. Ellen pitched back against the seat.

"Ellen?"

She did not answer.

3.

He turned onto Kelly Farm Road, drove hard for five minutes. He had only one thought: the worst thing in the world was somewhere in these woods, and

Loi was alone.

When Loi saw the way the truck was racing up the drive she came onto the porch, then hurried toward the driveway. He jammed on the brakes. "We gotta get inside," he yelled.

Loi reacted instantly, pulling Ellen's door open. "Oh, Brian, look at her legs!"

"Get her into the light!"

They took her onto the porch. Loi pulled away torn cloth. The lower part of Ellen's pants legs were shredded. For a moment Brian thought he'd accidentally shot her. Then he saw the pattern of the injuries—dozens of puckered, red dots, each leaking blood and pus.

"What is this, Brian?"

As best he could, he swallowed his terror. He peered out into the dark.

"Pour water on her head," young Chris yelled, seeing that they were supporting her and assuming that she'd fainted.

"Get inside at once," Loi told the child, "at once!"

Astonished at sweet Aunt Loi's change of voice, the boy retreated.

With Loi's help Brian walked Ellen into the living room. He shut and locked the front door. "Loi, the windows."

"What?"

"Lock them!"

His tone of voice caused an automatic response: she raced through the trailer doing as he asked. Then she returned to the room. "Tell me the problem."

"Something's out there," Ellen breathed. "Something—"

"It's beyond belief," Brian said.

"What is?"

"You don't want to know," Ellen said.

Brian remembered those hands, the pared nails.

"Well, we have to see to you," Loi told Ellen. "That's the first thing." She went into the bathroom and returned with alcohol and cotton pads. "Boys," she said, "go in your room." She looked at Ellen. "You will suffer, I'm sorry."

She poured alcohol over a pad and began methodically washing the injuries. To Ellen it felt as if her skin was being rubbed with a hot iron. To prevent a scream she bit her lip.

Brian was looking out the living room window, his hands cupped around his eyes. He was watching for any kind of unusual movement. The driveway seemed empty, but he didn't believe it, not for a moment.

"Brian," Loi said. "Call the state police."

He obeyed instantly, realizing that he should have done it before, even from the truck. He dialed, listened to the familiar clicks—and got nothing.

Again he dialed, hoping that he'd done something wrong.

The phone was stone dead. He held the receiver out, stared at it.

There was a plan at work, a strategy. Whatever was out there, it could not only act, it could think ahead, it could be cunning.

He had to get the shotgun out of the truck. And now he also had to use the cellular phone to call for help. With a quick, nervous motion he stepped onto the porch.

There wasn't a sound, not a cricket, not a grasshopper or a frog. It was like being in a cave lit by the moon.

The ten feet to the truck seemed a very long way. From the darkness around the side of the trailer he heard a distinct whisper, almost a word, but not one

he could understand. For a moment more he listened. Nothing. It could have been a raccoon snorting at him, but he didn't think so. He moved closer to the truck.

When the whisper came again he whirled. There was something out by the ruins of the old house.

He went quickly to the truck, got in, opened the glove compartment and dug out the box of shells, loaded it with the five that were left.

When he turned around he was horrified to see Loi coming across the driveway. "Go back in!"

"No."

"Go back in the house, run!"

She came up to the truck. "Give me the shotgun." She held out her hands. He gave her the gun and she took a position in the middle of the drive, porting the gun across her chest. "Now make your call." Her voice was trembling.

Brian turned on the ignition and started the phone. He waited, but no dial tone came. Finally he turned off the truck.

"It didn't work either?"

"No."

She was staring out into the dark. He followed her eyes and was appalled to see a thick, black hose of a thing lying across the drive thirty feet behind the truck.

"It is like a snake," she said, "it hides in its stillness."

He ran into the trailer. Loi came rolling after him across the driveway, wielding the shotgun.

"It's unwise to run from a snake, husband." She leaned the gun against the wall near the door and pulled up a dining chair, seating herself across from

Ellen, who was nursing her legs, tears of pain in her eyes.

"We've got to get out of here," Ellen said. Her voice was a moan.

"Ellen, it's in the driveway." Brian touched her cheek, full of compassion for her.

Loi folded her arms. "Brian Kelly, you will tell me all that has happened since you left."

"All right! I'll be very specific, but I warn you, Loi, this ain't gonna help your sleep!" He described what he had seen.

She nodded, taking it calmly. "The demons."

"We're dealing with anomalous taxonomy. But it's entirely physical, believe me."

Ellen lit a cigarette. Silently, Loi reached over and took another from her pack. She didn't like smoking much, but she was too worried. She didn't mention the sensations that were radiating up from her uterus, the dull, long pains.

"It'd help if there was a name," Ellen said. "I wish I knew the name."

"There is no Bureau of Monster Nomenclature," Brian commented.

A long, sighing scrape crossed the roof. "That's the sycamore blowing."

"No, Brian." Loi took off the shotgun's safety.

A moment later a mournful howl rose, then died away into the night. The three of them huddled together.

"That could be one of the Flournoys' cows," Brian said. "If she's lost her calf."

Silently, Loi pointed to the trailer's low ceiling. All three of them knew that the sounds had both come from directly overhead, and that the Flournoys'

dairy herd was at least a mile away on the other side of dense forest.

To Brian the howl had seemed much more human than animal. It had been a conscious sound, full of the deepest woe, as lonely and sad as any he had ever heard.

Then there was another noise, this one from the driveway. It was distinct, something scraping through the gravel. Loi positioned herself before the door. To a stranger her face would have appeared to be without expression. But Brian knew different. She was expertly concealing her fear; she'd looked like this during the hemorrhage. "Watch at the windows," she said softly.

He went to the living room, window, parted the drapes. For a moment he didn't understand what he was seeing. Thick black cables surrounded his truck, thrusting up out of the ground. "Give me the flashlight," he said, trying to discern some detail.

Ellen thrust the light into his hands. He turned it on, pressed it against the glass to reduce reflection. Each cable led to a hand, and every claw was buried in the body of the vehicle.

The cables went taut, the truck shuddered, the ground beneath it began to seethe. Dust clouds rose and the truck went down. When it was half underground there was a pause. Then the hands shook, the vehicle shuddered, more dust rose.

"My God!"

Loi abandoned her post, joined him at the window.

The truck sank slowly into the driveway. As it disappeared the gravel surged like disturbed water.

Moments later, all was still.

The lights went out. Ellen screamed, Brian cried out, lurched back into the room. Both boys rushed out of their bedroom, crying and fumbling among the confused shadows being cast by the flashlight in Brian's hand.

"Get into the middle of the room," Loi said. "Brian, push the couch against the door."

"What's wrong, Uncle Brian?" young Chris cried.

He started to speak, but the words died in his throat. He couldn't tell the truth to an eleven-year-old, he didn't know how. "There's a—we think it's a bear. There's a bear outside."

"Oh, those little blacks ain't any bother." Chris started strolling toward the door. Brian froze as the boy put his hand on the knob. "You just shoo 'em off."

Loi got to him, drew him back into the room. "Not that kind of bear," she said.

Joey started to cry. Loi got the boys away from the windows, then went once more for the phone. Silently, she shook her head.

"The floor's hot," Chris announced.

Brian bent down, felt with wide sweeps of his hands. Hot, so hot in places that it stung. *Mary is burning, Kate is burning.*

What strange meaning was ghosting about behind the facts? He felt the floor again. A lot hotter.

The first fire—Mary and Caitlin's fire—had started exactly the same way, under the floor. "We've got to get out of here!"

"Brian, we can't!" Ellen's voice had a desperate edge.

A line of dancing orange flames appeared along the wall behind the television. Loi lunged for her precious laughing Buddha. Before she could get it, Brian grabbed her, lifted her into his arms. "Not her," he shouted, "not her!" A sheet of fire rushed up the wall. Ellen and both boys shrieked. The flames boiled dark red and orange across the ceiling.

Mary and Katie were howling, dancing in a curtain of fire.

It would be fast, he knew that, almost instantaneous. He threw the door open, pushed Loi out, grabbed the nearest bit of shirt and pulled. Joey. "Ellen, Chris, come on!"

Ellen was pressed against the kitchen closet, the narrow little pantry that never offered enough space, her face as expressionless as a statue. Frozen by fear.

Brian went for her, knocked her to the floor just as the fire tumbled from the ceiling. The linoleum began curling like bacon. He knotted her shirt in his fist and tugged. Help came in the form of Chris, who half dragged, half pushed her.

Then they were on the porch, and a hungry maw of flame was all that remained of the doorway. Brian pitched away from the slicing heat, Ellen flopped and flailed, regaining her balance. Chris shrieked as fire danced on his back. Loi leaped on him, rolled him in the gravel.

When the flames were extinguished she cradled him. Sobbing, his brother crying with him, he buried his face in her bosom.

"We're gonna get you to the hospital, son," Brian said. He couldn't imagine how.

An owl's muttering made him look up, and he saw in the fire-bright trees a white barn owl, its baleful eyes staring.

With a sighing roar the trailer exploded. Brian shepherded them toward the barn. "We'll get the tractor," he cried over the rush of the flames.

"It only goes ten miles an hour, Brian," Loi said.

"Well, it's what we've got!" Maybe they could use it to go cross country to Route 303. "Form a chain, everybody holds a hand." Thus linked, they began the journey across the driveway and down through the weed-infested barnyard.

"Look for things like cables on the ground," Loi said.

"And if you see any purple light anywhere—turn away," Ellen added. "No matter how it makes you feel."

The boys, who had been silent with shock, began to whimper. "My back hurts," Chris said.

"Be brave, guys," Loi told them. She was between them, holding their hands firmly. "Be as brave as the bravest man in the world."

Behind them the fire flickered and hissed. Brian couldn't stand to look back. His wife simply walked along, her head down, putting one foot in front of the other. This was like a natural catastrophe, a storm, an earthquake, or it was like a war. She'd probably walked a hundred miles just like this, a refugee.

There was a low, vibrating sound in the air around them. Fifty feet ahead of them dust was rising from the roof of the barn,

glowing in the moonlight like smoke. Brian remembered that sound and grabbed his wife, trying desperately to shield her with his body.

It came again, like an immense groan from deep in the earth. His teeth vibrated, the boys howled, Ellen clapped her hands to her ears. The barn shuddered, seemed almost to be going out of focus. The whole front wall loomed over, and Brian saw that it was collapsing. "Run!"

It hit the ground with a huge thud and a cloud of dust, and in the dust the rest of it came to pieces, beams crashing down, walls, finally the roof itself tumbling into the destroyed heap.

Brian didn't even stop to look for the tractor. "We've gotta try to walk out," he said. But in his heart he asked a question: why don't you just kill us? Why torture us like this? He knew the answer, it was no mystery. People were not being killed, they were being *summoned*.

Well, not everybody was willing to go, Brian thought angrily.

They came straggling along behind him, still clinging hand to hand, and started out the long, dark driveway.

From the grass on both sides he heard steady rustling. He just kept going, not even hoping anymore. His understanding of the world had been gutted. There was nothing left to do but struggle blindly on.

Loi drew the boys closer to her, her eyes searching the shadows.

"You can hear it," Brian said. "That slither."

Ellen hesitated, then took a jerky step back.

"Take it easy, Ellen," Brian said. But then he saw where she was looking. There was movement in the brush, coming toward them.

Then he heard a siren, thin but unmistakable. He let a moment pass, another. They all listened, nobody making a sound. The boys knew how to count the changes in tone as the vehicle maneuvered through the town. "It's turned onto Main," Chris said.

"It's the fire truck," his brother announced. A policeman's kids could tell just by the note which service was involved.

Brian saw what looked like a long, thin tree limb appear above the line of the weeds.

The hand spread, the claw-filed nails arcing to hooks. Then a second one appeared, gliding above the moonlit grass. Behind them another shadow slipped across the driveway.

He heard more slithering, this time very close.

A long wire rose over them, looking for all the world like a gigantic lobster's feeler. It danced in the air, swept down, touched Chris's shoulder. He skittered away, slapping at himself.

"Only a moth, Chris!"

"OK, Uncle Brian." But he continued to clutch the place on his shoulder where he'd been touched.

The timbre of the siren changed. "It's turned," Joey announced as the sound faded.

A coldness clutched Brian's heart, the dark seemed about to suffocate him. He ran a few steps down the driveway. "It's going down Queen's, it's leaving!" The raw bellow of his own voice shocked him.

Loi slipped a hand into his, squeezed firmly. "It is on its way up Kelly Farm Road, husband."

He looked down at the gleams of moonlight on her black hair.

Then the volunteer fire brigade arrived, their truck lurching into the driveway. Air brakes hissed as the big old truck rocked to a stop. It was a mess, pumps dripping, hoses looped crazily in the back. The men looked exhausted, their slickers smeared with ashes and dirt. "Everybody outa there, Brian?" the driver asked. It was grizzly old Mort Cleber.

"Everybody's out."

The truck snarled, dug in, moved slowly toward the flaring ruins of the trailer.

Loi spoke quietly to her husband. "Brian, I am bleeding again. Just a little." She leaned her head against his chest.

Tommy Victor had followed the truck in his pickup. He stopped and leaned out. "Anybody hurt?"

"I am," Chris said. His voice was choked, but he was being brave. "I got burned."

"My wife needs a doctor, too."

"My legs are hurt."

"But nobody's dead?"

"We're all accounted for," Brian said.

"You're lucky. The Jaegers were killed about an hour ago. Whole family."

"What's happening, Tommy?"

"Cold snap in the summer, you always get the fires. Better get in, we wanta get you people to the docs."

Brian was so stunned he was left speechless. They didn't know, not a thing! He looked at Ellen and Loi. Their expressions confirmed his helplessness. There was no way to tell the story.

They rode out, Loi and the boys inside the cab, Ellen and Brian in the hay-dusted bay.

To shelter from the night wind, the two of them sat silently together with their backs against the cab. Brian watched the ruins of the trailer recede into the night. "Thank God she's still alive," he said.

"She's still a soldier," Ellen commented, "every inch of her."

Brian considered the idea Little Loi, with her constantly lowered eyes, her scuttling feet, her quick kitchen hands... a soldier. "A refugee," he said. "It must be killing her. That trailer was the best thing she ever owned."

"I'm sorry." The wind whipped Ellen's hair into Brian's face.

He brushed it away. "What for?"

She was silent. They were both watching car lights behind them, glowing, then going dark as they were lost in a curve of the road. The thick forest flashed past on both sides.

When the lights disappeared and stayed gone, Ellen spoke again. "I went down in the root cellar. Back in the mine. I got something—a creature—I put it in my car. The next thing all hell broke loose."

"It came after you."

"And kept after me. All the way to your place."

"Did you find it in the mine?"

"Yeah. It was like a—well, a big, curled-up spider. But ten pounds at least. It wet on me."

"Wet?"

"Urine-type wet. It was so vile!"

The car lights reappeared, this time much brighter, much closer. Ellen's hand gripped his.

Even over the roar of the slipstream and the rattling of the old truck, they began to hear the deep thrumming of a powerful engine. "Oh, God, Brian!"

The purple light—it would be fired directly into their faces. They'd go mad. "We have to get in the cab!"

The car came closer yet, pounding around the curves, its lights slashing the darkness.

Brian rose up, went to the side of the truck, leaned his head into the surging air, until his face was beside the driver's door. "We're gonna come in," he yelled.

The truck started to slow down.

"Don't stop! And don't look in the rearview mirror."

Tommy was peering at Brian out of the corner of his eye, obviously aware of his reputation for being a little crazy.

The car came closer, closer yet. The engine was drumming, thundering, howling. Ellen covered her face with her hands. Brian went around to the passenger side. "Loi, roll down the window!"

It came down.

Ellen was behind him, clawing at him. He put a leg over the side of the truck

bed, pulled his way forward. The truck swerved onto the shoulder. "Don't slow down, Tommy!"

"Brian, you're going to be killed!"

"Tell him to keep driving!"

The car's lights were flaring now. Ellen's face was white in their glare.

And then, very suddenly, the car passed them.

It wasn't a Dodge Viper, it wasn't even a sports car, and it wasn't red. It moved off, heading innocently south.

Brian returned to the truck bed, slumped down beside Ellen. He looked out at the blackness of the night. Being here, now— this was *alone*. And he didn't just mean himself and Ellen and Loi and the other people in the truck.

He had a feeling that every living soul was about to find out what a few people had already discovered: this little world of ours, lost out here in the dark, is very much alone.

Eleven

1.

Shock numbs, but unfortunately not for long. At first they all welcomed the lights of Ludlum, the familiar cluster of fast-food places out at the Northway interchange, their signs challenging the dark.

The tall Rodeway Inn sign invited Ellen. "I'll never, ever go back there again," she told Brian. "At dawn I'm outa here."

Brian hardly heard her. Again and again his mind went over the events of the night. The fire had come up through the floor, just like the first time. The first one had been attributed to a defective propane line, but was that really true?

He shivered, clutched himself. It was nearly two in the morning. He looked up at the sky, the moon red against the horizon, the stars like eyes, diamond-hard, cold as ice.

He wanted to hold Loi, to enclose her precious body in a protective embrace.

He couldn't protect anybody.

"Two hours ago I was thinking in terms of moral obligations and major stories," Ellen said carefully. "Now I'm thinking in terms of saving ass. We've got to get out."

And where did she think she would go?

Then the truck was turning, and the buildings of Ludlum Community Hospital appeared ahead.

When he got down off the truck, Brian embraced his wife. "How's it going?" he asked.

"The bleeding stopped, Brian."

He closed his eyes, felt relief wash through him.

Young Chris was hunched over. Brian picked him up. "It's gonna be OK, guy," he said.

"It's hurting real bad, Uncle Brian."

"I know that, Chris. I know all about burns."

As they entered the emergency room, Joey said, "Our house burned up." Nurses came, there was a brief admission ritual, Loi was put in stirrups and Chris was laid on his stomach for an examination. Brian could tell at a glance that the boy's burns weren't serious, but those red welts must hurt like the very devil.

Loi and Chris were in cubicles side by side. Brian stood between them. Chris cried when the ER doctor began dressing his burns. "You're lucky this wasn't worse," the young doctor said.

"There was a bear out there," Joey announced. "It had long arms like a snake."

The ER doctor didn't even look up. "We got a lotta bears coming down this summer," he said. "They like the landfills. I went to see the ones up in Long Lake. You ever see those, Chris?"

"No, sir."

Dr. Gidumal arrived for Loi. Brian slipped into the front end of her cubicle and kissed her cheek.

She smiled at him, then closed her eyes as the doctor examined her.

"This is doing well," he said. "You have a little bleeding, maybe, but this is doing well."

Brian kissed her again, whispering in her shell-like ear, "Thank God for you, thank God for you." With a quick motion of her head, she gave him a peck.

The doctor put his hand on Brian's shoulder. "How are you feeling, Brian?"

"I'm good."

He took Brian by the shoulders, looked into his face. "No, I beg to differ. You are not good. You are in shock."

"I feel fine. I'm—yeah, I guess you'd say that."

"You have lost your home, you are in a terrible time. You are not good."

"Doctor—"

"Do you two have a place you can go? Relatives, perhaps?"

Brian did not want to go to any relatives. He wanted to do three things. The first was to get Ellen and Chris and Loi in a condition to travel. The second was to find Bob and Nancy and get them out of here. The third was to run.

Ellen's leg was examined by a bored intern who announced that she'd brushed against nettles and experienced an unusually strong allergic response. She reflected on the futility of telling him what had actually happened. She'd already had Nate Harris laugh in her face, and Bob was on the psycho ward for blurting out his story.

The doctor gave her antihistamine cream. "This'll keep the itching down. If you're not better by tomorrow afternoon, come back and we'll take another look at it. But I'm sure this is a very minor problem. You must have gotten in the nettles running away from the fire. Lucky that was all that happened. You're all very lucky."

"You're sure it couldn't be anything else?"

Smiling, he shook his curly young head. She read the easy condescension in his face.

She wanted to yell a warning from the rooftops, but what could she say? Hey, my name is Ellen Maas and I think that Oscola's full of creepy crawlies. Please strap me to a bed beside Bob West.

It sickened her to realize the truth: the enemy had been breathtakingly efficient. There were no hordes of refugees claiming to have witnessed the impossible. Only four people who knew what was happening had gotten away—Loi and Brian and Bob and a very frightened outsider called Ellen Maas. Not even Bob's children understood the truth.

When she left the treatment area, she found the rest of the emergency facility quiet. Brian and Loi and the boys were gone. Looking around at the sudden emptiness, she felt hurt.

The quiet, the soft voices of the intern and the resident talking together on the nurses' station, the distant whirr of the air-conditioning system, even the familiar hospital smell, combined to enforce upon her a sense of deep isolation.

She would never return to Oscola, not even to get her belongings, not for any reason whatsoever.

She paid her bill with a MasterCard. There wasn't any insurance, so the \$270 would just eat a little further into her credit limit. It was possible to see a welfare office in the future, if she couldn't find work somewhere.

"Did the Kellys say where they were going?" she asked the desk clerk.

"No, ma'am. But I don't think they left the hospital."

"Was Mrs. Kelly admitted?"

"None of 'em were. But that guy with the truck, he told 'em goodbye. So I figure they're still here."

Of course they were, and it was perfectly obvious where they had gone.

She went through the long, echoing corridors to the so-called "Brain/Mind Suite."

"I'm here to see Lieutenant West," she told the nurse at the station.

The nurse peered along the hall. "They're all down there. Two-forty-three.

"Are you a relative?"

Ellen walked into the open room, confronting a tableau of complex human emotions. Loi and Nancy were standing side by side, Brian was leaning over his friend. The two boys were in a corner, their eyes open wide.

Their father was under restraint, his body wrapped in long, soft hospital-green clothing of a type she'd never seen before. There were lots of belts and straps. It froze her insides to see a human being treated like this. She'd never dreamed that this sort of thing was still done. Shades of Bedlam, with the mad chained to the walls.

"Miss Maas," Nancy said. "Please—"

"She is with us," Loi interrupted. "She has great courage. And you need to listen to her." Their eyes met.

"Thank you," Ellen said. She turned to the bed, where Bob was straining against his straps, his face gleaming with sweat. The poor man was struggling to get up. Ellen looked to Brian.

"He's absorbing it. Aren't you, buddy?"

His voice when it came was a deep, throaty rumble, vastly weaker than Ellen remembered it. "It's... all of it..." Then he looked to Ellen, a fierce question appearing in his eyes.

"It's true, Bob. I've seen them. You're not hallucinating."

"You're not psychotic, Bobby," Nancy said. "The things you're remembering—the things with the arms and all—"

Slowly, it sank in. Deeper and deeper it went. They could see the wonder come into his face, followed by a flicker of relief, a sudden turning of the head, a sigh as if a weight had lifted, then a widening of the eyes—wider, wider—and a great, long, rolling groan mixed of relief and triumph and abject terror.

Followed by sudden silence.

Then his eyes seemed to look into some far distance. "Get me out."

Ellen began working the straps, then the others joined her, and they all untied him together. When he sat up in bed he wobbled a little, but then he was on his feet, swaying in his hospital gown, going down on one knee as two very excited boys flew into his arms. "You're gonna be OK, Dad," Chris said. Joey snuggled against him, burying his face in his father's chest, drinking his returned power.

"I'm fine, boys, but I don't think the Yanks are."

"Yes they are," Joey said, suddenly coming to life. "They just won six games in a row is all."

While Loi and Brian and Ellen waited in the hallway, Bob dressed. "I really think we ought to all go to a motel," Ellen said.

Loi looked at her. "We certainly can't stay in Oscola."

"I thought I had some kind of an obligation, but this is beyond that."

"Yes," Loi agreed, "our obligation is to survive." She put her hand on her belly. The pains had faded, but she did not feel strong.

During the fire Loi had seen that Ellen was a very strong, mature woman. Somebody who was cool in the face of the unexpected, who was efficient at times of high danger, was not also an emotional baby. That woman would never try to seduce a married man.

She hadn't lost Brian, she could see the love in his eyes. But she had certainly lost all her curtains and dishes, her marvelous dresses she'd bought at the Mode O'Day, her pretty furniture.

She'd also lost her collection of books, the mathematics and physics texts she was studying, her poetry, her *Great Novels in Outline*. She had lost the papers that identified her as a new American and the wife of an important man: her citizenship certificate and her marriage license.

She had lost her beloved Laughing Buddha, that was her luck. She was just a barefoot on the road again.

She had stopped crying years ago. Weakness must never be revealed.

"We gonna go home," Joey piped as the Wests came out of the room.

Bob hushed his son.

Quietly, the whole group of them went to the far end of the hall and down the back stairs. It wasn't difficult to leave undetected; the hospital wasn't guarded.

Now that the moon had set, the sky was filled with stars. Ellen did not like going out into the parking lot where there were only a few cars, did not like being in the dark, under the sky. "What if they're here?"

"It's possible," Brian replied, "but I don't think so."

"Well, why not? I mean—"

"They're apt to be confined to the area of Oscola and Towayda, at least for a while. We've seen that they have limits, a sort of range."

"But they'll spread?" Bob asked.

They had reached the Wests' Taurus. "Oh, yes," Brian replied.

"The bears?" Chris asked.

"It's not bears," his mother replied.

"Something else," Loi added. "We do not know for certain what it is."

"Look," Brian said, "there's almost no chance that we can fight this on our own. And I doubt very much that we can get the evidence we need."

Ellen looked at him. "Do you realize what you're saying?"

Brian glanced down at the boys, nodded. Ellen thought she had never seen

such sadness in a human face.

"We go to the Ludlum Inn," Loi said. "Wait until dawn." She was holding her own shoulders. "I don't want to stay outside any longer."

They got into the car, all except Ellen. There wasn't room for her. She leaned into the driver's window.

"I'll catch up with you," she said. "Take a cab."

The car pulled away, leaving Ellen to face the dark and silence alone.

2.

She hurried back to the hospital lobby. The car had obviously been jammed, but something about being left behind still hurt.

The corridors were so quiet that she could hear the humming of the fluorescent light fixtures on the ceilings.

So, where was she going to go? Following the others to the Ludlum Inn was one alternative. But she could also rent a car and just start driving.

"Excuse me, ma'am." The maintenance man stood before her in his blue uniform, his keys in his hand.

"Yes?"

"You can't stay here at this hour."

She used the phone in the entryway. When you need something after midnight in a small city like Ludlum you call the cab company. Sure enough, the Tru-Serve dispatcher knew of an all-night car rental. Allomar Texaco was also an Avis station. She took a cab there and soon had wheels again, a green Escort with a complicated stain on the front seat.

She drove out to the Northway, intending to crash at the first motel she found. There was no point in trying the Ludlum Inn. Only well-known locals could get a room there without a reservation. Unlike the higher Adirondacks,

the Three Counties were not much of a tourist area, so there was a possibility of getting a room on short notice in the summer season.

Even so, the Suisse Chalet was full, the Rodeway Inn likewise.

She finally found a room at the Days Inn. On the way in she bought a Hershey Bar and a 7-Up from vending machines. She didn't even like the walk down to the room from the lobby. It was all she could do not to run.

She called the Ludlum Inn, but they hadn't arrived.

Sitting in the middle of the bed in her ripped jeans and dirty sweatshirt, she ate candy and flipped from channel to channel on the TV, trying to blank her mind. The memories of the past eight hours were not to be touched, not if she wanted to stay sane.

McLaughlin was bellowing on CNBC, tonight's "Larry King Live" repeating on CNN. "The Brady Bunch" flashed past, followed by a chunk of *Fort Apache*, followed by a story about a school prayer scandal on *Headline News*.

It should have been reassuring, but instead it was eerie, like peering into a dead man's eyes.

without realizing it, she fell asleep. A soft sound... a tickle along her right arm—and she leaped back against the headboard screaming bloody murder.

She clapped her hands over her mouth, horrified that she'd get thrown out of the motel. There was nothing on her arm, nothing unusual anywhere in the room.

She sighed, drank down the dregs of her 7-Up. It was warm, which surprised her. Then she noticed that she could see the swimming pool.

Incredibly, it was seven-fifteen. She'd slept for three hours. The last thing she remembered, she'd been sitting in the middle of the bed.

She grabbed the phone and called the Ludlum Inn again. This time, they were already gone.

Next she called the Wests' house. Would the phones in Oscola be working?

Nancy answered.

"This is Ellen."

"What happened to you?" She spoke off line. "It's her."

"I'm sorry, I accidentally fell asleep."

Brian came on. "We were worried sick."

"Brian, what in the world are you doing back there? Are you people insane?"

There was a pause. "Look, Ellen, we can't just turn our backs on this."

"We have to!"

"I'm gonna try one last time. I didn't come back for somebody else's shirts and underwear."

"Brian, you took those children, your pregnant wife?"

"It's broad daylight. So far, everything that's happened has taken place at night."

"So far."

"What I'm going to do is look for fragments over near your car, where I did that shooting. And the Wests are packing a few things."

She should put down the phone right now. She should not say what she was about to say. "I'll come help you."

"Ellen—"

"I'll come," she repeated as she hung up. She sat on the bed, fumbling in her purse for a cigarette. Lighting it, taking the first drag, she relaxed a little. Then she daubed her tongue on the shoulder of her shirt. Smoking was a

nasty habit. It made her taste bad and smell worse. It made her look weak or stupid or both. But she sure as hell was stuck with it, especially now. She took another drag, a long one.

This problem would not blow away with the smoke.

After washing her face she went to check out, stopping in the hall to buy a cup of vending-machine coffee.

Coffee in hand and cigarette in mouth, she passed the restaurant. There were a couple of people in booths, a couple more at the counter. The morning papers stood near the door in stacks, still tied. Outside, crows perched on the motel's sign, calling to one another. The leaves of an aster quaked in the morning breeze.

Nothing was wrong, nothing at all.

She signed her credit card receipt and went out to the Escort.

Driving back, she watched the road narrow, the woods close in, watched the rolling mountains behind Oscola, thought about what lurked in the shadows, in the depths of the ground, thought of the quietly growing number of empty houses.

She approached Belton Road, the last turnoff before Route 303's unbroken run to Oscola. This was the point of no return. "What are you?" she asked the humming silence as her car passed through the intersection.

Her foot touched the brake, hesitated, wavered, then pressed harder. Just beyond the intersection, she rolled to a stop. She raised the windows and locked the doors.

She drove fast, alert for the least sign of movement back in the woods. But 303 seemed abandoned. Nobody passed her, she overtook no other cars. She reached River Road, then crossed the bridge onto Mound, then turned onto Queen's Road at the intersection.

At the Wests' house, she turned off the engine, got out and went up to the

front door. From inside came the familiar smell of cooking bacon.

This was one of those small moments that is really huge, and for once she knew it. She was making a commitment here, a big one.

She knocked.

There had been soft voices inside, which now stopped. "It's me," she said through the closed door. She stepped back, suddenly certain that this was a mistake. The door opened a little.

Bob West dragged her inside.

Behind the closed curtains the lights were on. She found herself in a cozy living room. A big photograph of an Adirondack stream hung on the wall above the entertainment system. The room was filled with solid Early American furniture. Some of the pieces were obviously very old. She had seen family antiques like these in everyday use in many Oscola homes.

"Ellen," Loi said from her place lying on the couch, "welcome." The smile seemed warm, but Loi's personality had so many subtle twists and turns, it was impossible to be certain.

"How are you doing, Loi?"

She touched her stomach, smiled. "We are well."

Ellen looked around for the boys. "Chris?"

"He's going to be fine," Nancy said. "There's still a good bit of pain, though."

"Burns hurt," Brian added. He gazed at her. "I've got a theory in place."

She raised her eyebrows, questioning.

"Some of my equations suggested that we could crack a hole in space-time. Somebody must have done it. Built a device and done it."

"They took my husband's work, twisted it."

Bob walked over. His wide, kind face reminded Ellen of her own father. "I remember being in a room full of blue pipes and broken equipment. I was swallowed, for God's sake. Like Jonah in the whale." He paused. "Somebody talked to me, tried to get me to see it his way."

"Who was he?" Ellen asked.

"I remember a tall shape. Blacker than black. A sense of great dignity and... what I would call evil. Essence of evil."

Loi sat up. "The demon."

"Satan," Nancy added.

Loi gave Bob an appraising look. "Did you feel like you wanted to help him?"

"I don't know what I felt. If it was Satan—"

"This isn't about the devil," Brian snapped. "I'm talking about a derangement of reality on the deepest and most subtle level."

"I remember him as being... insectoid. When he moved, it was slow and stealthy until right at the end. Then—wham—he was at your throat."

Nancy went closer to him.

Ellen was fascinated by the idea of just sitting across a table from somebody from another reality, if that was the right way to describe it. "You said he was evil. How could you tell?"

"It radiated from him like a stench. Total contempt, total hate. Like nothing you can imagine."

Loi, who had gone to the kitchen, put a plate of bacon and eggs on the table with a bang. "We've got to eat," she said.

Brian took some eggs. "Then I'm going out to make the last try at evidence."

Again, there was that terrible sadness. Poor Brian. Ellen could see how responsible he felt.

Nancy called her boys and they were soon loading plates with food.

Brian stared into his own plate. "We're pawns. I'm my own pawn. Or the pawn of my own inaction. Ironic." His voice went low. "My grief over the loss of my first family has placed my second in mortal jeopardy."

Ellen's heart went out to him, but it was Loi who tended his sorrow, putting her arms awkwardly around his big shoulders.

A moment later he looked up from his food, stood, and without a word strode out the door.

"Gotta go, baby," Bob said to Nancy. They kissed and he hurried off behind Brian.

Ellen watched them go in Bob's sedan, watched it kick up dust at the end of the driveway, then disappear around the corner of the house.

Soon Loi and Nancy began to pack, with Loi cooing over Nancy's humdrum wardrobe as if it belonged to a princess royal. The boys turned on the television. Ellen went over to the picture window and opened the curtains. She stared as far as she could see down Queen's Road.

"You don't wait well," Loi said, coming up behind her and putting her arms around her waist. "Best to work." She grasped her shoulders and turned her around. "Put the fancy monogrammed linens in the cardboard box in the hall."

Ellen worked, but her mind was turning over and over, she couldn't stop it. She was worried about Brian and Bob, and that was a fact. She possessed none of Loi's fatalism.

The two men had been gone thirty minutes by the time the women were finished with the packing. "Loi, we've got to go out and look for them."

"Ellen, I am *waiting*. I will wait a certain time that is in my heart. Then I will

go."

"Do you—I mean—I know nothing about Eastern religions. Do you pray for him? What are you?"

"I am somewhat a Buddhist. As much as Brian is a Catholic. Also, my people have their beliefs. Their understanding." Suddenly she went to the front door, threw it open.

"What?"

"Be still."

The sedan appeared.

The three women streamed out into the driveway, followed by the boys. Brian leaned out of the passenger's window. "Your car's gone, Ellen. Not a sign. Just treadmarks."

"Any—"

He shook his head. "The site was as clean as a whistle."

"So we're leaving, then?" Nancy's voice had an edge in it.

"Let's go, Dad," Chris said.

His younger brother added his voice. "Dad, I don't like it around here at night. There's *bears!*"

They divided into two groups: Ellen and Brian and Loi rode together in Ellen's rental, and the Wests went in their own car. The plan was to continue on to Albany, and meet up again later.

They went in procession down Queen's Road to the four-way intersection where Main became Mound. From here they could see up into the heart of Oscola. "It looks as empty as Towayda did," Brian said. The fact that the roads weren't yet full of refugees seemed a bad sign. He felt sure that each empty house represented a dreadful tragedy. "Turn on the radio."

The Oscola fires were the big story. "Prominent local farmer and professor Brian Kelly" was mentioned as having survived one of the two fires that had struck the Oscola community the previous night.

All the land seemed to be smiling, so beautiful, so completely benign, so harmless.

They were about halfway to Ludlum when they came upon the first sign.

"What's that?" Loi asked.

"I don't know."

Ellen peered beyond the windshield. A cloth object, torn, lay on the roadside. "It's a shirt. Was."

"Look at the red on it." Lois voice was small.

Then they rounded a curve and found a car lying on its side amid a great tumble of possessions. There were shirts and sheets and toys, furniture that had been tied to the top, a lawn mower, an exploded television, all manner of smaller debris.

Brian hit his brakes, and so did Bob behind him. An instant later Bob ran past. Everybody else crowded out of the cars. "It's the Michaelsons," Bob shouted. He clambered up onto the wreck.

"Boys, stay back," Nancy said. She and Loi took their hands. Ellen went forward with Brian.

Bob looked around. "Not a sign of 'em." He dropped back down to the road. The group came together.

"Should I know the Michaelsons?" Ellen asked.

"They're new people over from Rochester," Brian explained. "I don't think the family's been around here more than thirty years or so."

"They must've walked away from it." Bob peered into the woods. His words

sounded hollow in the roadside silence.

"How many kids do they have?" Ellen asked.

"Three," Bob said.

"I think I see someone." Loi was looking toward the tree line.

"Where?" Brian asked. His voice had become soft. He could smell the death, too. They all could.

"Get the kids in the car, Nance." Bob's hand went to his hip. There was, of course, no pistol there. He ran a few feet toward the trees. "Hey there, you OK?"

The figure did not move. But its outlines were clear. There was no question but that a man was standing in the woods about two hundred feet away.

"Hey!"

"Could be in shock," Ellen suggested.

"Maybe." Bob went forward. Both of his sons grabbed him. "Daddy, no," the smaller boy said.

"Get in the car! Nancy, take care of 'em!"

"Stay here, Bobby."

"I'll do it." Brian took a step toward the woods.

"No!" Loi threw her arms around his waist.

Silence fell. Nobody moved. Obviously, the fathers and mothers could not take the risk.

3.

Ellen began to walk toward the forest. Nobody stopped her and that was all

right. "Are you hurt?" she called into the silence. The figure didn't move or speak.

"Everything OK?" Brian called.

"So far." As she walked forward Ellen recognized a new set of reactions—lack of muscle control, extreme tightness of throat, whistling breath. This was a state of fear she had never entered before. Then her vision blurred. She shook away a great flood of tears. Her heart was humming, her face was hot, every cell in her body screaming at her to turn and run.

Brian stayed back, unwilling to leave Lois side, yet also unwilling to completely abandon Ellen.

She took a jerky step forward, then another. This was ridiculous, she was barely in control of her own body. Instincts she didn't even know she possessed were being engaged. If she'd had a pistol she might have done something outrageous, like empty it right into that shadow.

The drone of flies was loud. She could see the definite shape of a man, even that he was wearing a blue denim shirt. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

No reply. She took three quick steps closer.

"Be careful, Elbe!"

She sucked in a breath, let her hands go to fists, and forced herself to step into the forest, pushing aside the leaves of some maple saplings.

Her first clear impression was of a glaring eye. Then teeth, a tight smile. She did not exactly scream, but rather made the kind of gasp of surprised agony that comes from stepping on a scorpion or having a centipede bury its red legs in your thigh.

She twisted against herself, her fists coming up to her throat. There remained a tiny spark of self-control. But when she saw the horrific distortion of the man's neck, she shrank back in panicky confusion. It was a ropy stalk an impossible three feet long. It was the color and consistency of dried beef

jerky.

Then she saw the left arm.

She shrieked, a terrible, inarticulate wail that brought them all running down from the road, even the boys.

Brian was the first into the woods beside her. "Ellie!"

"God help us all!" She threw herself away from it, as if the mere sight of it was a slamming, crushing blow across the face.

Brian gagged, bent double, stumbled back.

Under its ripped, bulging clothes, the body was a great mound of tight, twisted flesh jutting with bones. Knots of muscle and fat distorted stomach and thighs.

The right arm was a bloated dirigible of black, wet skin, covered almost completely with flies. It was as if all the man's fluids had been pushed into that one arm.

The face above the hideously stretched neck was grinning, the teeth visible all the way back to the molars. Unlike the right arm, the head had been sucked of every molecule of blood. It was the face of a mummy, the eyes pulled wide, the cheeks sunken against the bones. Flies raced between the teeth, and the tongue within was the shape and color of a rotted fig.

The neck was as tight as wire, and with every stirring of the air the head bobbed on its springlike neck.

But they weren't looking at the head, not at the swollen right arm, not at the bulging humps.

They were watching in horrified fascination as the left arm grew and grew and grew. It seethed, its fingers turning to claws, its muscles bunching and popping, an awful, crunching creak coming from the torsioned bones.

This was the fate of the people who went to the judge's house: before their

eyes was unfolding the future not only of their little community, but of all mankind.

A smell filled the air, of hot electric wiring, as if a machine somewhere nearby was working at extreme speed.

"We've got to go," Loi rasped.

Suddenly Bob grunted, plunged off into the wall of leaves. He charged forward rapidly, thrashing through the dense foliage. Then he was coming back, and the others saw the dangling arms and legs of a child.

Bob emerged carrying the poor little burden, a dead naked girl. Her hair was blond and long, still done up with a pink plastic barrette. There was no visible damage. Even her skin still seemed to glow with life.

As they got closer, though, Ellen saw that this was very far from the case. In some infinitely delicate and inhuman operation, the outer layer of the girl's skin had been eaten from her body.

And the glow came not from life—it came from something *inside* the child, something packed in tight under the remaining skin.

Ellen had seen them before.

"Drop her! Oh my dear God, *run!*"

Then young Chris cried out, "It's Lizzie!" His voice was high and clear, and stopped the grasshoppers that were singing in the meadow. Chris sat down on the ground. His mother hid her other son's eyes. With a child's insatiable curiosity, he fought her. "I want to see, Mommy!"

"Jesus," Brian cried.

Lizzie's body surged in Bob's arms. "What the hell?"

Grabbing her by the hair, Ellen yanked the child clear of him and hurled the wet, breaking mass of her as far away as she could. The force broke the carcass open and they came pouring out, swarming, their wings buzzing, their

red legs scabbling.

Bob lurched back, astonished, then horrified. He gagged, frantically brushing his chest.

"Evidence," Brian cried, "it's evidence!" He plunged toward the mass of insects. But the father's long left arm whipped around, and suddenly Brian was confronting one of those clawed hands in the light of day.

All of them ran out of the woods and across the bordering meadow, and dove into their cars. "It's evidence," Brian moaned, but he started the engine as the hand swarmed out of the woods and the insects followed in a mass as cohesive as a jelly, dashing toward them like a shark in air. They took off at full speed toward Ludlum and safety.

"They were trying to get away," Loi said. She looked down the road. "They also knew."

"Don't anybody panic!" Ellen's own voice told her that she was about to do just that. Loi heard it, too, and touched her shoulder, a gesture Ellen found curiously reassuring.

She cried a little bit as the car moved down the road. In the front seat Loi sat stiffly erect, staring out the windshield. They climbed a hill, and the tires complained around a sharp curve. The forest was thicker here, drawn close to the road on both sides. They drove in its dense shade.

Without warning Ellen was thrown forward, her head hitting the back of Lois seat. "Brace yourselves," Brian yelled, but too late. The car pitched, there was a terrific jolt, followed by an explosion of white dust.

Silence. Both airbags hung out of their housings, deflated. "Are you OK?" Brian asked. With shaking hands he reached toward his wife.

Loi was clutching her abdomen. "I think so," she responded in a careful voice.

Ellen was completely confused. "The airbags went off?"

No reply. Then, from Loi: "Why did you stop?"

"I didn't. Jesus!"

An enormous coil rose in front of the car, higher and higher, unwinding itself in the light. It was dead black, filled with rushing musculature.

Loi shrieked in short, sharp bursts. Brian leaned back, staring, his teeth bared.

Ellen jumped out onto the road. The thing was coming up from the ground, clumps of flowers and chunks of pavement ripping away as it surged out.

Hundreds of gray threads surrounded the car like a web of fungus.

Ellen tore at them, yanked Loi's door open. She and Brian scrambled out. Ellen struggled, ripping at the curtain of threads. Where they touched her, they made her skin itch fiercely.

There came a piercing sound. Brian shouted, Ellen shrieked, Loi went stumbling back toward the Wests' car. The heavy coils were dropping down on the rental, crushing and pulverizing it.

From the woods came a snapping, sizzling sound. They began to see purple light winking among the leaves.

Then Bob was beside them. "Let's *move*," he cried. The whole group of them forced themselves into his car, crowding in, falling all over each other.

They turned around, going in the only direction they could— right back into Oscola—the trap.

Twelve

1.

The car hurtled down the curving road, pushing through fifty, sixty, seventy. Brian drove hard, the images of what he had seen in the woods building in his mind. Surely those masses of sweat-stirring insects couldn't think, couldn't remember what they'd been. But the other things—those long, long arms, those hands...

The filed nails he'd observed on the hand last night took on a whole new meaning. That had once been a person's hand, those nails had probably been filed in a local home before the horrible transformation took place. Maybe he'd been face-to-face with an old friend.

"It's ail because of me," he said.

"Shut up," Ellen snapped. "Quit apologizing."

"You are not responsible, husband."

"Brian, it's an awfully long jump for me from some esoteric physics experiment to—what we're up against." Bob spoke for them all, Brian felt sure.

"Jump or not, it's real. Otherwise you'd never have been in my facility."

"I saw blue pipe. I can't remember much else. That E. G. and G. logo. It could have been a lot of different places."

"No. That pipe was made especially for us, using an experimental fabrication process. It's unique."

As they passed the Michaelsons' wreck, Brian noticed that Loi closed her eyes. Ellen made a raw, empty sound that could have been a sob. Nancy held her boys' heads down.

The sentinel trees whipped past.

"There," Loi said.

"What?"

"Just where the road curves. Something is moving there."

He floored the gas and they raced past the spot at ninety. Purple light flickered in the corner of his eye. In the seat behind him, Nancy sighed and squirmed. Her younger boy's head popped up. For a moment he drank in the light. "I like that," he cried. "Stop. Stop, Uncle Brian!"

Brian pressed the gas pedal to the fire wall and the car leaped ahead.

Purple light, sizzling sounds... and pleasure—howling, insane pleasure: it didn't hurt to be transformed bone and brain and gristle into one of those vile nightmares, it *felt good*.

"If it looks like they're going to get us, I think we should consider suicide," Bob said.

At that Chris burst into tears. His brother, now sucking his thumb, made no sound. "Bob," Nancy said with soft reproach.

"I don't want the boys to end up like—God help us!"

Ellen barely moved her lips as she spoke. "I want to win this."

"I agree. We must win." Loi slipped her hand into Ellen's, and Ellen laid her head against Loi's shoulder.

They all fell silent, all hearing the same thing—a drumming sound was coming up the road, moving fast.

"The Viper," Brian whispered.

"Let's get the hell out of here!"

And go where? There was only one road between Oscola and the outside world, and this was it. The alternative was to go up to Towayda.

"It's not the Viper," Loi said. "Listen carefully!"

When it appeared, the vehicle proved to be an ordinary pickup, blue and tired-looking. It was piled high with household goods.

Brian got out and walked into the middle of the road waving his arms. He knew the family, of course. It was Jimmy Rysdale and his wife and kids. The Rysdales were really Ruisdaels, one of the original settler families. They had come with the Dutch landowner, the patroon, who had settled the area in the eighteenth century.

When they stopped Bob gave them the story of the Michaelsons, speaking quickly, his voice so low that he sounded as if he was sharing a pornographic secret. He omitted the terrifying details of what had happened next, saying only that something very, very dangerous was guarding the way out of Oscola.

"But you can't cut off a whole town," Jimmy said. "What about people tryin' to come out here? FedEx and stuff, and the grocery truck and the beer wagon? And calls. What about phone calls?"

"Our phone is dead," Loi said. "Was before we were burned out."

"Yeah, well, ours has been dead since last night. That's what decided us."

"Some phones are working," Ellen said. "I got through to the Wests from Ludlum, remember."

Brian thought: you were probably meant to get through. He thought also that the enemy was a careful planner, that he had a remarkable head for details and a highly developed sense of theater. But he was careful. He did not want them to lose what little hope they had, for he did not want death or suicide. He was herding them into his lair.

Jimmy Rysdale was on the near side of fifty, balding and a little dumpy, but a

good farmer and a smart businessman. He owned a piece of a specialty lumbering operation that made out pretty well. He and Brian had hunted grouse and deer together, and Annie made about the best venison sausage in the Three Counties. Their youngest, known as Annie Junior because she looked so uncannily like her mother, was ten, solemn, and said to be a math whiz. Their boy, Willie Rysdale, was a starting pitcher for the first time this year on the Oscola Patroons, and a pretty good one from what Brian had seen.

"Let's go, Jimmy," his wife called from the truck. She had red O'Shaughnessy hair, and the flashing green eyes of that clan. "Jimmy, start the truck. We're getting out of here!"

"I don't think that'd be such a good idea," Brian said. "Our enemy must know he can't keep a town isolated for long."

Jimmy stared off down the road. "Which might also mean this is the last chance."

"It's past that, Jimmy."

Rysdale did not respond directly. "We're gonna spend a couple of weeks with my sister in Saratoga, make a few visits to the track." The races would be in full swing down there at this time of year.

He got back into the truck.

"Mr. Rysdale, don't do it," Ellen said. "Think about your kids!"

Jimmy looked at her in amazement. "What the hell do you know, Miss New York hotshot newspaper lady?"

"Too much," she said.

Jimmy lowered his head, closed his eyes a moment. "Them things that've come," he said in a mean voice, "we hear 'em tunneling under the house."

"They want us," Annie said, "they're gonna get the kids!"

"Shut up, Annie! The less we talk about it, the better."

"We can tell these people, Jimmy! They're like us, they won't go to the judge's. So them things, they were coming up under the house. And the closer they got, the more you could hear... voices."

"It was people screaming, Mom!"

"If we could get word to the military," Jimmy said, "they could come in here and fix this. That's why we have to leave, it's not just to get away. We aren't quitters. It's for patriotic reasons."

Brian shrugged his shoulders. "What're you gonna do? Who're you gonna tell?"

"You tell people the truth, you're gonna end up in a padded cell like I did," Bob said.

"We've been trying and trying to get physical evidence," Brian added. "Now that we're trapped here, it's there for the taking. We're up against something very smart, very careful, very determined. And why not? He's fighting for his life, just like us."

"With every blow, a demon grows stronger. To fight back we must be cunning also." Lois eyes were steady. She believed in her demons as much as she did in her own breath.

Brian recalled the sound of little Lizzie Michaelson's body falling open, the soft, tearing whisper of the skin parting, and then that hideously energetic buzzing as her contents spewed into the air. In the thoroughness of its evil, the attack was indeed profoundly demonic.

But there was another side to that, wasn't there? The old Greek word for demon, *daimon*, also means soul, or source of knowledge. To look into the eyes of the demon was to see the truth.

There was movement in the pickup and Willie emerged. He was still his handsome, athletic self, but he looked as if he'd been crying. "Let's get going,

Dad." His voice was sullen.

"The Michaelsons," his father said, gesturing ahead. "We don't want that."

"So we don't pull over or slow down or do whatever they did. Come on, Dad!" The boy hefted a shotgun, pumped a shell into the firing chamber with an efficient snap.

Now the daughter came down off the truck. "I don't want to die." She tugged her father's sleeve. "I'm staying here, Daddy!"

"Shut up, sis!"

Jim Rysdale looked down the road. Brian followed his eyes. "You could go examine the Michaelson wreck, buddy. Convince yourself."

Willie climbed up into the truck bed, stood behind the cab and ported his gun. "Let's move out, Dad."

Just then something shifted behind the roadside screen of trees. All eyes turned.

Loi saw it first, a slick black worm a foot in diameter uncoiling in the grass. Locusts leaped away from its gliding progress, as it exuded itself from the ground, its tip probing ahead.

How quick you are to make your point, Brian thought.

Bob was the next to see it. He cried out, an inarticulate bellow. Willie fired his gun, which discharged with a bone-jarring boom. The pellets tore through forest leaves with an angry clatter.

Pouring blood, the worm slid back into the ground. "See, Dad? Now, let's go."

A hand shot out of the woods on a long black arm and dug into Annie Junior's hair. It started dragging her toward the woods. She was too stunned to cry out, but her eyes widened, her hands went up and fluttered uselessly against the thing.

Her mother's fists went to her temples, her whole body lurched as if she'd been gut shot and she shrieked, a raw, resounding cry of astonishment and anguish. "*My baby!*"

Willie aimed his gun. Now Annie Junior shrieked, kicked, tore at the claws.

"You'll kill her, Willie!"

"I can get it, Mom!"

Loi started after Annie Junior. Brian didn't even have time to call her before she had her arms around the girl's waist. Then she was ripping at the shrieking child's hair, trying to extract it from the monstrous fingers before the long arm retracted into the woods.

Brian could see more coils gliding up among the leaves, their hands flexing, claws spreading.

Loi and the child were moving fast now, their bodies making a rasping sound as they were dragged across the summer-dry grass. Loi's stomach ground against the earth.

Brian ran after her. Stretching out his arms, he hurled himself at their feet and grabbed his wife around the legs.

The poor child's hair was torn right out of her head, and she screamed in agony.

The hand shot into the air on its long, curving arm, its fist full of bloody blond tufts.

"Baby, baby," Annie cried, dashing to her little girl.

There was a thunderous boom and the shotgun spat white smoke. The shot slapped the wall of leaves and the gray shapes within undulated.

Then Annie Rysdale had her daughter in her arms. The child was bawling, gripping her temples with fists like gnarled white nutmeats.

A moment later the two vehicles were speeding off in the direction of the town. To relieve the congestion in the Wests' car, Brian and Loi rode with the Rysdales. Annie Junior was on blankets in the truck bed, cradled by her mother. Willie was with them, clutching the shotgun to his chest.

Brian put his hand on his old friend's shoulder. "Jimmy buddy," he said.

"They are from the world underground," Loi said. "They've broken loose. We must get them to return to their world."

"That may not be possible."

"That was a very brave thing you did, Loi. I don't know what to say—you saved our baby."

"You would have saved mine."

2.

All the way to the Wests' house they saw broken telephone and power poles, lines down everywhere. Just in the past half hour, great destruction had been done. Worse, they observed half a dozen more wrecks along Route 303, and a tall column of smoke rising from the direction of the Jackson place out on the Towayda Road. This time there were no sirens raised in response.

When they arrived back at the Wests', Pat and Jenny Huygens were waiting in their car with the windows locked. They opened them as the little caravan drove up. "Bob," Pat said, "you gotta get the state police—"

"I'm gonna try to use my radios."

Everybody went into the house. They made sure all doors and windows were closed, and most of the windows curtained. Nobody wanted to risk so much as a glimpse of the purple light, day or night.

During the next hour more people came, drawn to the authority represented by Lieutenant West, and because they saw the other cars there.

The growing carnage along Route 303 had been what turned them all back.

In addition to the Rysdales and the Huygenses, old Mary Yates, Brian's cousin Dick and his wife Linda, and Father Palmer from St. Paul's church came. He was followed by the Reverend Simon Oont, the Dutch Reformed pastor.

Dick and Linda brought a bucket of fresh eggs, which made more sense than the family heirlooms and favorite clothes that tended to clog the trunks of the other cars.

"We're the accidents," Brian said, "the ones who've been missed."

The seventeen people present cramped Nancy West's living room. "We oughta go on a rampage, kill 'em all," Dick announced.

"That'd be smart," Bob responded. He'd been trying his handheld radio. It appeared to be working, but he couldn't break in on any of the calls. "Funny, the division's still patrolling the Northway as usual. No emergency's in effect or anything."

"Don't they ever come back in here?" Jenny Huygens asked.

"Not normally. Just the sheriff."

Mary Yates barked out a laugh. "So *that's* why we're being eaten by devils from hell."

"Let's inventory our weapons," Bob said. "We have to know where we stand."

There were five shotguns, seven deer rifles, a couple of .22s and five pistols.

"We need a plan," Mary Yates said. "We need to sit down and work it out right now."

"The things are getting bigger and stronger," Jim Rysdale responded. "How do you plan against that?"

Brian wished he had more information. But he could scarcely imagine the bizarre permutations of his elegant theories that had led to this disaster. A

theoretical particle traveling back through time doesn't lead to... monsters. "I suspect it's going to go very quickly now. I doubt we'll be left alone for long." He looked around him. "My thought is, every single survivor from Cuyamora County is right here in this room. Look at it this way: we've been very efficiently rounded up. Now for the *coup de grace*."

"I think you're right about that," Father Palmer said.

"I have an idea," Dick Kelly announced. "I say we work out a fuel line from Fisk's to the judge's root cellar and pump as much gas as we can down there. Then just strike a goddamn match." Dick had black hair cropped close at the back and around the sides. The curls left on top looked curiously artificial, but Brian knew that they weren't, having yanked at them many times when they were boys.

"A two-mile fuel line—that's a technical problem and a half," Pat Huygens said. He'd been a civil engineer. He was retired now. "What're you gonna do, get every garden hose in town?"

"Well, maybe something like that."

"Those old pumps over at Fisk's aren't going to move a volume of gas like that. Even if you got the line charged somehow or other, the gas'd be too heavy for 'em. You wouldn't even get a dribble out the other end."

"We could use a tanker truck. Could we get one?" Dick looked from face to face.

Everybody knew the answer, so nobody replied. The closest gas tanker would be at the Texaco distributor in Glens Falls.

A sound outside set everyone to frantic activity. In moments every window in the house bristled with gun barrels.

A blue Acura Legend came down the driveway and parked.

"It's Dr. Gidumal," Loi cried. She went out onto the porch as the Gidumals got out of their car.

Nobody went down the steps, though. Sam and Milly came in quickly. Their real names were Sanghvi and Maya, but the town had changed them to something easier to remember.

There were brief greetings, people automatically observing amenities that were now meaningless. Then Dr. Gidumal was taken to Annie Junior, who was lying on the Wests' bed with a blood-splotted turban of towels around her head.

Dr. Gidumal, it developed, had tried to call the hospital this morning. An investigation had revealed all the phone lines down. Then the power had failed. They'd been picking their way out toward 303 when they'd seen the cars here. They knew nothing of what had happened, and had difficulty believing what they were told.

As Loi watched and listened, she grew increasingly impatient. They were letting time pass, maybe too much time.

"To fight something this powerful," Milly Gidumal said at last, "it would seem important to know exactly where it is weak."

Brian shook his head. "I probably ought to know, but I don't. I mean, I was working on a project in theoretical physics."

"They are demons," Loi said. "We cannot fight them directly." There was acid in her voice.

Ellen disagreed. "This all has a scientific explanation. It seems like something supernatural only because we don't understand it."

"What does *she* know," Mrs. Yates commented *sotto voce*.

Ellen heard, and turned to her. "If hell's opening up, we obviously aren't going to get away. That's the trouble with that kind of thinking."

"Father," Pat Huygens asked, "could a door to hell actually open?"

"Well, now, we're not sure about that. But I suppose it might."

"I concur," Oont announced solemnly.

"We're ignorant, helpless and we don't have much time." Brian looked from face to face. "That's the truth of it."

"What about the judge? Maybe we ought to go over in a body and interrogate the judge." On the surface Pat Huygens' suggestion was reasonable.

"An awful lot of people have gone there and not come back," Ellen said.

"We stay away from the judge, folks." Brian put all the authority he could into his voice.

Willie Rysdale flared at him. "I say we take every gun we got and go over there and shoot everything that moves, then torch the place!"

People glanced nervously at each other.

"I'm capable of facing who I have to face," Loi said. "But I don't think we should attack frontally." She regarded the Rysdale boy with cool eyes. "Only fools do that." Her words caused a silence. She was not used to being the center of attention, and she felt sweat tickling her temples. But she continued. "I was born to war, raised in battle. This is war, I am a soldier. And you, Bob, you also."

"You won our war, don't forget," Bob said.

"The Americans were brave."

Bob nodded slowly, regarding her. The feelings now passing between these two former enemies were very deep.

"What about your baby?" Ellen asked. "You're not exactly strong."

Loi tossed her hair out of her eyes. "If I fight, my baby has a chance. If I don't fight, he dies."

"I say we form a box and go out armed to the teeth. We fire at anything that moves."

"That might work!" Willie's father was enthusiastic, but nobody else supported them. People were trying to imagine themselves winning a pitched battle, and having a hard time doing it.

"Maybe we should wait to be rescued," Bob said.

Brian thought that was at least as dangerous as the banzai charge idea. "Bob, that's a gamble. I mean, I'm looking at this as a minute-to-minute thing."

"Let's go!" Willie hefted his shotgun.

"We've got to have a more practical plan," Loi said.

Father Palmer, who had been in the kitchen with Nancy trying to put together food for the group, now returned to the living room. He was carrying a tray with boxes of Wheaties and Quix cereals on it, a couple of dozen boiled eggs from the bucket Dick had brought, a bowl of pickles and some salami. "Let's all try to eat," he said. "We need food."

"What's your take on this, Padre?" Pat Huygens asked. "The door to hell gonna close, or do we all gotta burn?"

Brian respected Father Palmer, but a theological explanation wasn't going to work. "I think we'd better forget fighting and concentrate on survival."

"My husband is right," Loi said. "It's getting toward noon already, and the last thing we want is to be caught in Oscola after the sun goes down."

"God save us," Reverend Oont said.

"Somebody sure as hell better," Mrs. Yates responded.

That stopped conversation. Husbands and wives moved closer together, gathered in their children.

Morning was gone, and the shadows of afternoon were emerging. The day was no longer young.

Thirteen

Loi was watching the street. "There are clouds forming up again off toward the Jumpers." She looked back at Brian. She feared that her husband felt helpless, that he was freezing like an untried soldier.

She listened to the murmur of voices. So many people were here, most of them not well known to her. Except for Bob and Nancy, she had made few friends in Oscola.

Even so, she wanted them to live, all of them. If they would not find a way out for themselves, she would do it. Her hands went to her belly, to the baby within. No demon could attack a baby, young innocence was too powerful, it drove them back.

But she could lose her baby.

Mary Yates, the owner of Mode O'Day Fashions, where Loi often shopped, suddenly rose from the couch. "OK, folks, this is official. I've panicked. So what I'm gonna do before the shadows get another inch longer is, I'm just gonna drive right on up the Towayda Road, turn out when I get to Corey Lake and go down that old logging track up there. I can slip right across to the Northway. I'm asking for volunteers."

Jim Rysdale narrowed his eyes. "You gonna do it in your Oldsmobile, Mary? That logging road's probably washed out up beyond the first ridge line. God knows, nobody even hunts back in there anymore."

"It may be hazardous, Mary," Sam Gidumal said. "If you were to get stuck, you'd be helpless."

"I've got front-wheel drive." Again she glanced out the window. "Better than being shut up in here waiting to die."

"Mary, *please!*" Nancy held her boys close to her.

"Daddy says we gonna commit suicide," little Joey said. His voice was hushed, exactly as it would have been at a wedding or a funeral. His brother shushed him, then glanced over to their mother for approval.

"Look," Mary said, "I don't want to commit suicide or die or end up God knows what way, like the folks that got caught out on 303. Which is why I'm going to take my rifle and my pistol and I'm just gonna go." She smiled, but her fingers were twisted together like a tangle of worms. "Jimmy's right about one thing, though. My trip's gonna be dangerous. I need another car at least, in case we have to help each other through."

Loi pulled back the curtain. "The clouds are getting dark. That logging track won't be passable in another hour."

"All the more reason to get our tails in gear."

"I'll go," the Reverend Oont announced. "I have my four-by-four Cherokee. We can leave the Olds here."

Mary went to him and threw her arms around him. Others milled. Nobody seemed ready to follow them. Father Palmer wished them luck.

Brian watched Loi as she went to the table and carefully ate a hard-boiled egg. Rather than cracking it against the edge of the plate, she cut the shell with a fingernail, and removed neatly cut squares of shell.

There were hugs all around, and more than one pair of eyes went wet as the two prepared for their departure. Oont had no guns, so he and Mary split her stash. She took the rifle, he the pistol. She also had a shotgun, an old single-shot small-gauge of no particular value.

Loi also was planning an attempt to escape. But it would be carefully designed, not thrown together slapdash like this. She wished them the best, but she was filled with foreboding.

Concerned that she keep up her strength, she ate her egg. "Brian," she said as she returned to the living room, "I want you to eat." She handed him another egg, and he cracked it against the arm of a chair. Bits of shell went

everywhere.

Mary put on her canvas hat and Oont buttoned his hunter's vest. Together they looked about as defenseless as two human beings could be. Oont was a pallid man, small, with the eyes of a big puppy and a disposition to match. Mary had her little bit of bluff, but she wasn't going to scare a half-blind housefly for long.

"I want you to think again," Loi said. "We're best off staying together."

"So come!" Mary's voice had a high, edgy note to it.

At that moment they heard a sort of subtle, fluttering sound— more a feeling, really—from under the house. "That's what we had," Jenny Huygens whispered harshly. "That precise noise." She looked at the silent, frightened faces around her. "It's down there right now. Under us."

There was a hurried conference in the Rysdale family. Willie was even more vehement about putting up a fight. His mother's face became the color of old wax. Then Jim stepped forward. "We'll go with you, Mary." Annie Junior buried her face in her mother's dress.

"Thank you, Dad," Willie said. He slapped his weapon. "I wanta get my licks in!"

The fluttering came again, this time strong enough to shake bric-a-brac on the shelf above the TV and rattle the dishes on the table. "There ain't a lot of time, folks," Mary said.

Along with Mary and the Reverend went the Rysdales, a total of six people. "I don't want to be here when it breaks through," Annie explained. "I've been through it, and once is enough."

Loi went to Brian, put her hand in his. Ellen had stuck a big kitchen knife in her belt. She stood before a shelf, examining a portable shortwave radio, blinking the tears out of her eyes. "This work, Bob?"

"I can pick up China with that Sony. But remember we had trouble with my

portable."

"You couldn't transmit. But this is a receiver." She turned on the radio, began twisting the dial.

The Yates group went out onto the porch. Loi drew open the curtains in front of the picture window. She saw them get into Reverend Oont's 4x4 and the Rysdales' pickup.

As they were leaving, the earth stirred again. Nancy's bric-a-brac trembled, the ceramic elves shook, the imitation Dresden figurines danced.

"If there's a tunnel getting dug under the house," Bob said, "maybe we all ought to go."

"No! We stay." Loi backed away from the window. One of the figurines fell with a crash from its shelf to the top of the TV. Its head popped off and rolled to the floor.

Outside, the two vehicles were moving out into the road.

From the basement came a soft grinding sound. "I think we're making a mistake," Bob said.

"Why don't you join them, then?" Loi's voice was sharp. Brian was worried about her and Bob. The more this became like war, he thought, the more the buried animosities of these two rival soldiers were apt to surface. They needed work to do, something to focus their energy. Brian searched his thoughts, trying to find a sensible way of fighting back. "We need to locate the facility," he said at last. "That's the key."

Bob nodded, but said nothing.

"You have a way of doing this?" Loi asked.

Ellen came over to them. "It could be anywhere."

"It's here. Everything is happening here. The way I visualize it, they've linked up with some parallel universe, working from my equations and using some

incredible hybrid of my equipment"

"Could you also have done this?" Loi asked.

"I was working with the scientific equivalent of a black-and-white photo. Whoever has control of my facility has evolved my equipment all the way to the era of three-dimensional TV."

The group was beginning to move out onto the porch to watch the caravan leave. Brian and Loi followed them.

The air was warm and laced with the fragrance of Nancy's roses. Birds sang, a butterfly fluttered across the lawn. The near view could not have been more normal. But there was also a long loop of ordinary telephone cable lying in the street, and a power line sparking intermittently at the intersection. Reverend Oont's Jeep rolled slowly forward, followed by the Rysdales' pickup. Willie stood in the back balancing against the cab, his Remington in his arms.

Father Palmer began to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven..." A ragged chorus picked up the prayer. Brian joined, wishing more than believing.

The two cars rounded the corner. As they disappeared, their engine noise was absorbed by a stand of fir.

Even so, nobody went inside. Far from it, they kept praying.

Not twenty seconds had passed before they heard the unmistakable crack of a rifle. The prayer gained intensity. Veins rose on necks, hands clasped hands, eyes closed. There were three more cracks, then a fusillade. The prayer died, the little group closed in on itself.

Mary's old shotgun boomed once, its echoes slapping off against the hills.

Into the breathless silence that followed, there came a single scream. It was deep and awful, a man's cry. Linda Kelly sobbed. Nancy said, "Kids, get back in the house." As she went in, she herded them ahead of her.

More screams followed, as high and lost as the voice of the wind on a wild

winter night.

"God help them," Father Palmer cried.

Crackling sounds erupted, the angry rasp of electricity. Despite the sunlight, purple flashes were visible above the tree line. The screams went on and on, and Brian realized that he was screaming, too, everybody was, everybody except Loi and Bob, who walked side by side down the driveway. They had armed themselves with shotguns.

Brian forced himself to follow. He passed Father Palmer, who was now on his knees, his fists closed and raised in supplication or anger.

With a dull thud a blossom of flame rose into the sky beyond the trees. A single tire, smoking, came rolling down the slight incline and back into Queen's Road. It stopped, fell, and lay in a haze of rubber-stinking smoke.

Dr. Gidumal held his hands to his temples, his eyes wide, his teeth clenched.

As the screaming died, Brian was astonished to hear music. For a moment he was confused, then he realized that it was WRON, the Voice of the Adirondacks out of Glens Falls. They were playing an oldie, Nat King Cole's "Mona Lisa." Only seventy miles away, and they had no idea what was happening here.

Then he saw a long, thin coil rising out of the smoke, rising high above the line of pines that blocked the view of Main. "Jesus Christ, look!" It waved in the air like a vine, and at the end it held something.

Loi and Bob raised their guns, calmly aimed and fired. The vine reared like a snake and a black dot came arcing across the sky, falling right toward them.

Bob fired again and the object was deflected, spinning wildly. It fell into the street twenty feet away.

Then there was silence. The cable or snake disappeared.

"Bring a blanket," Loi called. "Cover it."

Brian saw that it was a head. He recognized Willie Rysdale's young face, frozen in a drum-tight grin. "I'll get one," he shouted.

"Brian," Nancy shrieked as he came through the front door, "Brian, something's *down there!*" She was staring at the entrance to the basement, her eyes wide.

"Get out of here."

"Oh, God, Brian, where will we go now?"

"Hurry up," Loi called. Her voice was as high as a girl's. Brian grabbed the tablecloth and started for the door.

As he returned to the porch, he saw that the head was still somehow alive, the face working.

Loi and Bob both fired at once, fired again and again. The boy's head danced in the street, split as buckshot slammed it.

Brian reached their side, waving the tablecloth. "Loi, be careful. That gun's got a lot of kick."

"I can fire a shotgun, Brian." She pointed with her chin. "Don't let them see. Cover it."

The head was still alive, its left eye blinking spasmodically, the tongue flapping in the mouth with a sound like a moth fluttering against a screen. One blast had gouged the left temple, the other torn off the forehead, exposing an interior complex with thick green folds where the gray brain ought to be.

Brian saw then that the shattered eye was looking at him.

He sensed that this was no longer the face of Willie Rysdale. It was *him* from the other side, a self-portrait.

The eye blinked fast, then the muscle around it tightened. As Brian moved, the eye followed him.

He thought it looked hungry.

Loi fired. Brian threw the cloth at the head rather than covering it. He didn't want to go any closer to it.

More shots followed, and Brian realized that Loi and Bob were not firing at the head, but rather at something farther down the street.

A thick coil had slid across the intersection. It shone in the sun, dripping as if just washed or just born. As the echo of the shots retreated into the woods, he heard a bizarre mix of sounds, the lazy ratcheting of summer bugs, the strains of "Memories Are Made of This" from the radio, and the fan-quick fluttering of Willie's tongue.

Nancy and her boys rushed out of the house. "It's on the stairs," Joey shrieked.

"There's something coming from under the basement door," Nancy wailed, falling into her husband's arms.

"Get a grip," Loi cried. "What's there?"

"Threads," Nancy said, "long black threads."

"They're sticky," Chris added. "Really sticky."

"They're getting thicker," Joey said, "like earthworms get if you touch 'em."

"Bob," Loi asked, "have you got any gas in your garage?"

"Well, yeah, for my lawn mower."

"We have to burn the house."

Nancy's mouth dropped open. "The hell you're gonna burn my house, you damn *gook!*" She planted herself before the door, her legs spread.

From inside came an ominous sputtering.

"Burn it now," Loi shouted. "Do it, Bob!"

Bob hurried into the garage, came out with a five-gallon tin of gas.

"You are not gonna do this, Bobby West." His wife took the can from him. "Not you." She put it down.

"Get it, Brian. Pour it in the basement window. But you be careful. If anything down there starts toward you, run!"

Brian felt the gas sloshing in the can, looked into Nancy's raging eyes, at their diamond-hard anger, their wet, glistening fear. She spat. Nancy West, a woman he had known since they were babies, spat right in his face. He felt it against his cheek, trickling slowly down. With his free hand he wiped it away, advancing toward the basement window.

"Cover him," Loi told Bob. Then she smashed in the window with the barrel of her shotgun. Methodically, she put it to her shoulder, braced and fired two shells into the basement in quick succession. The response was a dense splash, as if a huge bladder full of oatmeal had burst.

"Dick, Linda, let's go in and get the weapons," Bob said. "But don't take any chances."

The three of them ran into the house, returning moments later with rifles and pistols. "Those things—they're all over inside," Linda said, "oozing along like slugs."

"One of them touched me," Dick said as he distributed the guns.

Brian stepped forward and started pouring in the gas. He could see coils undulating, thick and wet. A segment of heavy black flesh passed the window, and he saw goose bumps form on the skin where the gas splashed against it.

Then the can was empty. Brian looked to Loi. "How do we—"

Before he could protest she squatted, producing a book of paper matches. As she lit one and tossed it into the basement, he jumped back.

A blast of fire roared out of the window and Loi was rolling away, struggling to protect her belly from the violence of the motion.

He grabbed her, brought her to him, pulled her away from the fire-choked window. "I could've done that!"

"This is no time for discussion. We have to act."

A great surging movement began in the basement, in the fire.

"We've got to go to another house." With that Loi got a rifle and crossed the street to the Gilbert Swanson place. Gil and Erica were just gone, like most of the rest of Oscola.

Ellen, who had taken the shotgun Loi had been carrying, now blew the lock off the front door. They entered the house.

Nancy hesitated, looking sorrowfully back at the flames roaring out of her basement windows.

"You would have been caught," Loi said, attempting to console her.

At that moment a gigantic object rose past the smoking living room windows, burning with deep red flames, yellow smoke pouring off its black flesh. It came slopping up out of the basement amid clouds of smoke and steaming, pearl-gray masses of what appeared to be boiling mucus. The house around it disintegrated into kindling, couches and beds and books and appliances tumbling down its sides like foam on a wave. For a moment the humping thing had a roof.

The refrigerator, still festooned with messages and Chris's prized drawings, smashed down into the yard five feet in front of the West family. When it hit it flew open and covered them in frozen steaks and Healthy Choice dinners, vegetables and cans of Coke, leftover green beans and low-fat desserts. "I got a ice cream sandwich," Joey yelled.

Nancy staggered back, soaked in milk and orange juice, and went stiffly in the front door of the Swanson place without so much as a glance at Loi and

Ellen.

"Now it knows we'll fight," Loi said. "It knows."

"He knows, Loi. I was with a person. Somebody."

"Very well, Bob. *He* knows."

Brian realized that his wife had just saved them all. She'd fought, just as she said she would, and Bob had fought beside her. He hoped their alliance would last.

This house was not as full as the last one had been. Seventeen people had dwindled to thirteen. Loi inventoried the little cadre. There were Wests, with Nancy in tears and her boys clinging to her. Then Sanghvi and Maya Gidumal, gentle souls, incapable even of firing a pistol. Brian's cousins, the Huygenses, who would probably fight like dogs if called upon. Then there was the priest. She tried to visualize Father Palmer in battle. Forget it.

Her question was, would these people respond to her as a leader? They needed her, she saw that. Unless she gave orders, nothing happened. Not even Bob could assume the role of the officer.

Very well, she would try. "We will wait until sunset, then get out on all-terrain vehicles. We know that things are OK in Glens Falls, from the radio. If we move fast, maybe we can use the cover of dark to make a run for it." Her idea was a good one, she felt, if it could be carried out. "We need to find some ATVs."

"I think we ought to be as quiet as we can, too," Brian added.

"Why?" Father Palmer asked.

"Something operating from underground probably uses sound to find things on the surface. The quieter we are, the better."

"We could create a diversion," Ellen suggested. "Go across the street, turn on the radio in that other house."

"The Cobb place?"

Loi joined in. "After we've found the ATVs, we go upstairs, stay absolutely silent until dark. Then we move."

Would it work? Brian had no idea. But he did know one thing: by their calm courage Loi and Bob had pulled the whole group together. They were no longer a helpless rabble of scared civilians, they were an organized band.

"The hard part's gonna be getting the ATVs," Dick said. "If none of the houses around here have them."

Loi addressed Ellen. "You go turn their radio on. Turn two radios on. And the TV, and the dryer. Leave it on its longest cycle."

"The dryer?"

"Put a shoe in it. We want voices and thumping. Like we're all in there."

Ellen met Loi's fiery eyes, and did not even consider refusing.

"Now," Loi said, "please, at once."

Ellen went into the yard, watching the raging destruction that was still unfolding across the street. The Wests' house was unrecognizable, an exploded belly choked with burning worms. The air was thick with oily smoke that stank like fish that has dropped down into the coals at a cookout. She turned away, her throat closing, and coughed—gagged, really—into her hand.

"Hurry up," came a sharp voice from behind her.

"Right, Loi." As Ellen hurried toward the Cobb house, others fanned out through the neighborhood searching for ATVs.

Only when she had reached her destination did Ellen think of something that even Loi had missed. It was stupid and obvious, too. They couldn't turn on radios and appliances because there was no electricity. They'd been listening to a battery-powered Sony at the Wests'.

There had to be an alternative. What would make noise in a house with no power? Turn on the water? Not in Oscola—each house had its own well, and the pumps were electric.

Fortunately they hadn't locked up, so it was no problem to open the front door and enter the world of these strangers. She had only the faintest memory of them. The wife was chunky, he was tall and had heavy glasses. Children? Yes, there was a toy truck lying on the floor near the television set. On the coffee table was an ashtray full of cigarette butts and a copy of yesterday's *Post-Star*, the Glens Falls paper. No *Gazette*, of course.

She went into the kitchen and tried the water, which ran weakly as the holding tank drained.

What to do?

The recent use of lawn-mower gas gave her an idea. She went into the garage, and found exactly what she needed.

She tugged their power lawn mower into the kitchen, leaning it on its side to fit it through the door. Then she pushed it into the middle of the family room. The mower had a dead-man's bar, which she fastened down with a tieback from one of the living room curtains.

It was a pretty room, if your taste ran to big floral prints and tufted recliner chairs. A game of Scotland Yard lay open on a card table. Beside it were some glasses of Coke, flat and warm. They'd been playing a family game when they'd gotten right up and just gone.

She pulled the lawn mower's starter cord. It was stiff and didn't give easily. On the first stroke, the engine rattled. Again she pulled it. There was a smell of gas now—which reminded her to look in the tank. Nearly empty.

She wondered how much longer she would live, and tasted bitter acid in her throat. "I've never even had a damn baby," she thought, and pulled the cord with a fury. The mower buzzed—and shot off into the couch. Tufts flew as the blade sucked up the ruffle and started eating a cushion. She grabbed the machine and yanked it back, eventually managing to disengage the gears.

Tamed at last, it sat there clattering and vibrating and belching fumes. She went back to the garage, got a gallon tin of gasoline she found against the far wall, took it into the house and filled the mower's tank until it was brimming.

She went out onto the porch, trotted down the steps and into the street. She was appalled to see that poor Willie Rysdale's head was out from under the cloth. Worse, it had transformed, becoming a mass of black cords with hooks on their tips. When she drew close the cords all stiffened toward her, straining the wicked hooks in her direction.

The intact eye glared at her.

A shot rang out and the thing bounced off up the street in a spray of blood. Loi had been covering her from the porch. Another shot slapped into it and flung it farther. Lying across the end of the street Ellen saw two gigantic black objects like huge, supple tree trunks lying side by side. They emerged from the forest on one side of the intersection and disappeared into it on the other. They must have had a diameter of twenty feet or more. How long they might be she couldn't even guess.

At last the head was lifeless, a limp tangle of cords and vicious hooks. Another look up the street revealed two more of the huge, slick pipe-like objects sliding into place.

People were returning to the Swanson house. Pat Huygens was riding a very new-looking Suzuki Quadrunner. The others had cans of gas, Father Palmer had some bottled water, Dick and Linda Kelly had bread and cereal and other supplies.

To Loi it was a disaster. A single ATV was no help. "Now we go upstairs and wait," she said. "Nobody walks around, nobody talks." She looked at Joey and Chris. "This means you."

"Yes, ma'am," Chris said.

The group climbed the stairs and spread out in the large master bedroom. The boys sat on the bed munching Count Choculas from a box they'd found in the kitchen. After a time Father Palmer moved quietly toward the door. "Come

back, Father," Loi said.

"Loi, I—"

"He wants to pee," Ellen said. "Right, Father?"

The priest nodded.

Loi doubted that the old man could be quiet enough using the toilet. "Get a bucket, put a towel in the bottom and do it there. No bucket, then either hold it in or use a corner of another room. You don't want to splash in a toilet or risk a flush."

He crept off.

Loi addressed their situation. "We have the problem of only one vehicle."

"There's a Jeep in the garage," Jenny Huygens said.

"We cannot use a Jeep. Our chance lies in going through the deep forest. No Jeep can do it."

"Then we have to go into town," Dick said. "Henry Fisk's a Suzuki dealer, he's got a bunch of Quaddies."

Father Palmer returned.

Bob spoke. "I look at it this way. The longer we hang on here, the more likely we are to see rescue."

Loi gave him such an appraising look that Brian worried that there might be friction brewing between the two of them after ah.

"It's dangerous to wait," she said. As this terrible day went on, she was becoming more and more uncertain of him. He'd been with the demons, deep in their tunnels and caves. They were invincible, incredibly cruel. So why had he been allowed to leave? Had he been possessed? Was he a spy, or an unfaithful adviser?

Perhaps. But when the two of them fought side by side, it was good.

She returned to her post at the window. The sun was down in the sky, the shadows had grown long. From the Cobb place there came a satisfying grumble of sound. She could feel her friends behind her, sense their desire to live.

This desire was universal, but life belonged only to the lucky and the strong.

Her baby moved within her. She was tired and hungry, and the stretched skin below her belly button ached. When she walked, she could feel the motion of the water in her womb.

Her baby... she laid her hands lightly on both sides of her stomach, closed her eyes and imagined that she could hear him dreaming dreams that would one day be woven into the future of the world.

If it had a future.

Fourteen

As people must have hidden at the back of caves when the world was still wild, the straggling, miserable band of survivors huddled together in the Swansons' master bedroom.

Loi considered them, Brian's cousin Dick and his wife, Linda, Bob and Nancy West and their boys, Father Palmer, Ellen, Pat and Jenny Huygens. The Gidumals, she noticed, had quietly gone. As long as Dr. Gidumal had been here, she'd felt a little less uneasy about her pregnancy. "Where are Sanghvi and Maya?" she asked in a whisper.

Nobody answered.

Loi had more to say. She spoke as softly as she could and still get some authority into her voice. "Since we didn't find enough ATVs here, we've got to walk into town to get what we need. We must live like fighters. We must give all to the fight."

"I don't think we need VC propoganda to pump us up," Bob said mildly. " 'We must give all to the fight.' That was one of your slogans, I remember it well."

"Then perhaps you'd like to go out and ask the demons to dance."

Bob's face flushed with anger, but he spoke softly. "I think we can hold out right here if we stay organized and don't get crazy."

"Whisper," Loi said. She was beginning to feel as if she was fighting them for their own lives. "When something comes up through the floor and every other house is gone, then what?"

"That's not necessarily going to happen."

Loi had had enough of his reluctance. "You were with them for hours. What did they do to make you a coward?"

For a moment he looked ready to strike her. Ellen broke in, supporting Loi. "If she's right, what happens? What's your alternative?"

"We're organized. We shoot, and not at random."

Ellen's support helped Loi stand up to Bob, which was not easy for her to do. "When do you imagine that this rescue will take place? Ten minutes from now? An hour?" She tried to use her most reasonable tone of voice, but inside she was ready to scream.

"I don't know when. But inevitably."

This faith in rescue was typically American, and she was afraid that she would be unable to prevail against it. "If we were going to get saved, it already would have happened."

"I don't want to hear that," Father Palmer responded. "I think we should pray and hope."

Pat Huygens went to the window, looked out. "Niagara-Mohawk ought to know that there's a problem here, but where are they? And what about NYNEX? Where are the telephone trucks? We've been cut off. That's the reality of it."

"The demon will *not* let us get away. For whatever reason, it wants everybody, not just the evil. If we remain passive we have no chance."

Bob regarded her. "I thought passivity was part of your makeup."

Loi would not call Bob a racist, because that would be unfair. But his innocent prejudices could make him seem cruel. She gave him a careful smile. "I left my passivity in the Chu Chi tunnels, Bob."

"We could consider this move," Brian said. "It's better than just sitting."

"Not for me," Dick said. "I agree with Robert here." Linda went close to her husband. "But we oughta do one thing. We oughta write 'help' on some sheets and put them out on the roof."

"I think that's a great idea" Nancy was cradling her younger son in her lap. Without medication, the older boy's burns had begun to hurt, and he was cuddled in the crook of her arm, his eyes closed.

They began to gather sheets and the heaviest tape they could find, to make their sign. There were questions about the number of sheets to use, the size of the letters, on and on. It became a project, a substitute for the real work of escape. They worked with quiet intensity, their silence punctuated from time to time by Jenny's coughs.

Loi waited helplessly as the day wore on. She let them carry out their project without argument. Maybe by dark they would realize that it was hopeless. She prayed that they would be given the time.

At three the Wests and the Dick Kellys and Pat Huygens went to the attic and squeezed through a dormer window onto the roof. They put up their sign, and also added the Swansons' American flag, which they stretched between slacks of books. The sheets were tacked down with roofing nails, but you didn't put holes in a flag. Dick wasn't sure you laid a flag on a roof—too much like putting it on the ground.

Loi borrowed cigarettes from Ellen, smoking and remembering her life before. Even the Blue Moon Bar was preferable to this, even the damnable tunnels. This was worse than that dripping, deadly prison, or the awful numbness of soul she had felt in Bangkok.

She spent time on the bed, sitting beside Brian. From time to time she kissed him. She was beginning to feel close to him again, and she could see that he was glad.

He laid his hand on their little Brian, and she enjoyed that very much. "Do you feel him move?"

"Yeah."

Silently, Ellen came down beside them, sitting with her legs tucked under her.

Loi thought she could work on the two of them. She took them into the hallway, spoke softly. "We must go alone. They will all be caught."

"I hate to leave them," Brian said.

"She's right, Brian," Ellen said. "We've got to move as soon as it gets dark."

Bob soon appeared in the doorway. "What's the big conference about?" he asked.

"Yeah," Pat Huygens agreed, appearing behind him. "No secret conferences."

Loi drew Brian and Ellen away from them. "I think Bob is dangerous."

"That's a hard thing to say."

"Brian, you don't escape from hell. He was sent."

"Loi, that isn't—"

"Hold on, Brian. She makes a good point. He couldn't have gotten away from them. So maybe she's right."

Instead of lowering her eyes as she would customarily have done, Loi gave her husband a hard, challenging stare. "The advice he gives could be from them."

Roughly, self-consciously, Brian hugged her. "I wondered about that myself, at first. But he seems so loyal and so much himself. It's hard to believe now."

"We should go as soon as the sun sets."

"Yes, maybe... but won't it be more dangerous at night?"

"Better concealment."

"Let's hope."

As the hours dragged toward evening Loi got more and more nervous. Ellen

was completely on her side, at least, but Brian still wavered. The others gave every indication of planning to remain here overnight. Loi did not think for a moment that they would be left alone.

For the sake of her baby, she would leave here on her own. It would hurt, though, more than anything else she had ever done in her life.

Moving carefully to avoid making any telltale thumps, she took Ellen downstairs. She was looking for something—anything—that might be useful. They found an Adirondack atlas and took it back up with them, and spent their time sitting on the bed memorizing the trails that led south out of the Three Counties.

"Why do that?" Brian asked. "I know all the trails. We all do."

"I don't."

He gazed at her. "You have me."

Another hour passed, and Loi became aware of small sounds coming from outside. She thought she knew what they were. But she did not acknowledge them, not just yet. Nobody else noticed, and it was best that way.

Most of them were eating again. Her journey downstairs had encouraged the others to explore also. They'd found a big bag of Fritos in the pantry, and three cans of ranch-style beans.

Loi waited, poring over her map with Ellen.

Soon enough, there came a huge cracking noise. People looked at one another.

"Move quietly to windows if you want to see."

The Cobb place, where Ellen had left the running lawn mower, was heaving and twisting with a sound like continuous thunder.

Dust came up in clouds that were turned a delicate shade of gold by the setting sun.

"My God," Brian whispered.

"And yet you stay here."

Around the house the ground itself was blurring, beginning to melt, to run like a liquid. The rubble shuddered and shook, and started sinking. From its tangled center came a continuous flashing of purple light, so intense that Loi could feel a faint stirring within herself, even from this distance. Chris West pressed his face against the window. Jenny Huygens ran her fingertips along the screen.

"If we left, we'd go south," Brian said.

"Yes. Keep away from Towayda" Loi got the atlas and turned to the Cuyamora County map, pointed to Queen's Road. "We can cross the street and go up the ridge toward Lost Pond, then down to the center of town through Yelling Gorge. We'll come out right on Main, and we'll only cross two roads in the process."

Bob looked at the map. "Those things are out in the woods. They own the woods."

"They're here, too," Loi said. "Obviously."

"What about our sign on the roof?"

"Screw the sign, Bob!"

"Come on, Miss Maas! All I'm saying is we ought to leave a few people behind."

That would be foolish. Loi knew it. She chose her words carefully. "Then we would have to return for them. That would be dangerous."

"Going in those woods is dangerous!"

"If we stay here, we die."

"The Michaelsons tried the woods. I rest my case."

Loi became vehement. "We have to go right away. When they realize we weren't in that house, they're going to try this one." She took Brian's hand. "I have to protect our baby. Please come with me, Brian." She got to her feet, still holding on to him.

"Look, Loi—"

"Be quiet, Bob!" She glared at him. If she'd had a knife, she might have put it in his heart.

They all fell silent, all for the same reason. As the noises of destruction were dying away another sound was rising, the steady mutter of an engine. Everybody in the room had seen the Viper at one time or another, cruising the back roads or racing down the Northway. Those who'd had threatening encounters with it shrank from the windows. The others began to move closer, to try to see.

The car sat in the middle of the street, gleaming and unlikely in this neighborhood of small houses. "What's it got to do with this?" Bob asked. "I just can't understand why they would want a beautiful piece of machinery like that."

Loi saw the meaning: red was the Western color of blood and violence, the lines of the car were mean and lethal and incredibly beautiful all at once, and its speed was dominating. "Power and death," she said. "That is what it means."

Ellen nodded. "The messenger is the message. The car is a tool of communication—a warning, a threat."

"Where's the driver?" Bob asked in a choked, shaking voice. He had gone to the far side of the room.

Brian followed him. "Hey, buddy."

"Where's the damn *driver*, the one I saw when I thought I was going crazy?"

Loi whispered as softly as she could, barely moving her mouth,

breathing the words. "Please be still. There is somebody downstairs."

It wasn't footsteps or breathing that betrayed the presence, but rather the creak of boards as a heavy form moved about the house. Loi listened, but the beating of her own heart grew so loud that it interfered.

"It's not... walking," Father Palmer murmured.

Loi put her finger against his lips.

The sound dragged slowly along the floor of the living room beneath them. Then they heard the scrape of moving furniture, the stealthy creak of a door.

Young Joey came closer to Loi. Tears were running down his face. When she wiped his eyes, he smiled weakly at her, and she hoped that her own son would have such courage.

Her thoughts turned to escape routes out of the house. There was only the one stairway down. They might have to jump out a window. But there would be injuries... she herself would certainly be hurt.

She had waited too long.

Now they heard a sound at the foot of the stairs, as if bubbles were bursting in thick soup, or something sticky was slowly opening.

Father Palmer's lips began moving in a steady rhythm. What was prayer worth in a world that could produce horrors like this? Where was his God now?

There came a single loud flop, as if a fat beef liver had been dropped onto a butcher's board.

Jenny coughed a little.

"Be quiet," Loi breathed.

Again Jenny coughed, then stifled it. Her throat worked and another small sound came out. Mucus dribbled from her nose, tears of pain squeezed out of

her eyes. "You must not," Loi whispered.

Jenny nodded vigorously, then convulsed, grabbing a pillow to stifle the sound.

A pair of black claws appeared at the top of the stairs. Jenny made gobbling sounds as she tried frantically to silence her next cough.

They all watched the claws, lying there as if they would never move again, as if they had always been there. They consisted of two thick, black nails crossed at their curved tips. They were perhaps two feet long, as large as the claws of a predatory dinosaur. They were easily sufficient to slice a man in half. If these had ever been human fingernails, they had been horrendously transformed.

Jenny's eyes were pouring tears, mucus was running in a stream from her nose, she was rocking back and forth, her hands jammed into her mouth.

Loi knew what would happen now, what always happened in war: the weak and the unlucky were about to die.

If only they didn't shoot their guns, if only they kept their heads and remained silent, then some of them might survive.

Father Palmer prayed on in a rhythmic whisper. Pat Huygens had his arms around his wife. Nancy and Bob held their children. Jenny watched with slow, wide eyes. Brian came near Loi. He had a pistol in his hand.

By all gods of luck and wisdom, do not let him be a fool.

Jenny's mouth flew open and she jerked away from her husband, shut her eyes, pitched forward and emitted a long, rolling, wet, barking grandmother of a cough. Her face going purple, her arms flailing, she coughed again and again and again.

With the perfect smoothness of a machine, the claws came up and snapped off her head. There was a sticky click, like the opening of a refrigerator door, and her body toppled.

For an instant the only sound in the room was that of blood hissing in a powerful stream from her neck.

Then both boys shrieked. Pat Huygens opened fire, the blasts of his pistol jarring the air in the small room. "Brian, Ellen, come," Loi shouted into the din.

Brian was staring in fascinated horror as more claws swarmed up the stairs, flowing on their long, supple arms with fluid grace.

When Brian didn't react, Ellen marched up and slapped him across the face. He blinked, seemed to reenter life, and followed the two of them along the short hallway and up the stairs into the attic. The dormer window was still open. Ellen pushed ahead and climbed out. Then she turned around and gave Loi the support she needed.

Brian was behind, and then came the Wests. Inside the house terrible screaming started, and purple light began to flash.

"They're all still in there," Brian moaned. "Dickie and Linda are *in there!*" Then Father Palmer's head appeared at the window and Bob and Brian hauled him up. They shut the window, but it could not be locked from outside.

"We've got to get moving," Ellen said.

The street was filled with long black trunks, six or seven of them. They were sweating thick liquid and exuding smaller limbs, each ending in a claw. They passed into every house, and in the windows the smaller trunks could be seen surging and seething about.

Downstairs, the screams became a high babble, a mixture of crazed delight and abject terror. The house shook. They heard a sound like something cooking in hot fat. A smell came, electric-hot and meaty. Purple light flashed out of the windows, and every flash made their skin tickle delightfully.

Father Palmer looked up toward the pearl-blue sky. "Dear Lord, if you exist, you will come to us now."

"Father?"

"He will come on his fiery chariot, Brian! He will either come in glory right this second or it's all a lie! I tell you, this is too terrible, there has never *been* a human soul bad enough to deserve this, not even Torquemada, not even Hitler!"

"Oh, Father," Chris said.

The priest went silent. "I think a cock just crowed," he mumbled.

The screams became more frantic. Loi could picture the people in the purple light, their eyes bulging, their tongues lolling, shrieks pouring from their twisting mouths. It was a slow process, slow and meticulous and, despite the pleasure, obviously agonizing.

She looked at the old priest, now weeping in shame. "Come," she said in the strongest tone of voice she could manage, "we're going to town."

Nancy stared at her. "To *town*? Just like that, bang, we go to town?"

"Not much choice now, Nancy." She took Brian's pistol, which he had thrust into his waistband. "Bob, I want you where I can see you. You will go on point. And take the correct path, or I will shoot you in the back."

Nancy put her hands to her cheeks. Bob smiled a little, shook his head. "I'm not a traitor to your cadre, Loi. This isn't the war."

They made a rope of the sheets that had been used for their rescue sign, tied it to the radiator under the dormer window.

To test it, Bob climbed down first. It held, and the others began to follow him. Nancy came with the two boys, then Ellen. Loi followed, lowering herself carefully into Bob's arms. Then Brian came.

Father Palmer peered over the edge. "I need help," he said. As if in answer a long, gray arm came out the window, extending three half-formed claws. They were cupped around what looked like a purple jewel or glass eye.

Then they all saw the figure behind the arm, a misshapen travesty of Dick Kelly, his lips ripped back, his tongue splayed across huge teeth like yellow, knotted fists, his left eye darting from place to place with a lizard's jerky glance. A net of veins had grown over the teeth. His skin was a gleaming, chitinous mosaic.

"Oh, Jesus!" Brian gasped.

Bob made a small sound in his throat, then suddenly clapped his hands over his face.

The glass object flickered, then glowed brightly. Father Palmer was hit full in the face with the purple light from a distance of an inch. His head shook furiously, as if he'd been slapped almost senseless. But he laughed.

The horrible remains of Dick Kelly grunted, and they could see that he was engaged in a titanic inner struggle. Part of him was trying to turn the light away from the priest. The arm wavered, the claws snapped, the poor, contorted ruin of his face pulsed with effort.

For a moment the thrall of the light was broken, and Father Palmer began coming down the sheets, falling more than climbing.

"Get his legs, Brian!" Ellen could see black, dripping flesh seething past all the windows of the house. As Brian moved forward, sticky threads floated toward him out of the first-floor windows. Each had an anchor-like hook on the end. As they came near him they went rigid.

Loi cried out. "Careful, Brian!"

Now Pat Huygens slid up beside what remained of Dick. He was glowing brightly, his skin shimmering and undulating. Under it could be seen thousands of yellow-gold shapes, running wildly.

"Oh, no," Ellen said, backing away. "No."

Father Palmer slid fast down the rope, dropping with a resounding thud to the ground.

Miraculously, he was able to walk. "I think I'm OK," he said, looking down at himself. "A hell of a jolt!"

But when he lifted his face into the evening light, Nancy threw her head back as if hit, her boys skittered away, even Bob cried out, a sharp yell that was quickly squelched.

The priest raised his hands to his cheeks, his eyes going wide. He felt along the cobbled surface of his left cheek, his fingers flitting from knob to knob, jerking back when they touched the sharp places. "What—what—"

Ellen said, simply, "The light. You were too close."

It had twisted the priest's features. Had it also captured his mind? Loi touched her pistol. "How do you feel, Father?"

"I—I feel fine." Again he touched his face. "Do I—look..."

"Awful," Nancy moaned.

"It felt—dear God, it was the most wonderful, wonderful—" He glanced back, saw all the activity behind the windows of the house.

Without another word the old man started running toward the woods. This was a good sign, and Loi was relieved. It might become necessary to shoot one of them, it was entirely possible. But she wasn't made to shoot people, it wasn't her nature and she dreaded it.

They all followed the priest, stopping in the woods just out of sight of the house. Brian and Loi, the Wests, Ellen and the priest—the group had dwindled terribly.

A sound as of somebody stepping on a gigantic tube of toothpaste was followed by angry buzzing. The husk of Pat had split. "Run," Ellen cried. A thousand of the most terrible hornets imaginable roared out, creatures from the age of giants, with red eyes and fiery, burning bodies. Their wings droned low, and the sound contained a moan, and its tone reminded them all of Pat's voice. As they left him, his skin collapsed in on itself.

The group ran for their lives.

The ridge that rose behind the house was cruelly steep, and their climb was slow and difficult. There was no trail and the underbrush was thick, the trees close together. Nobody looked behind, nobody had the strength. Loi maneuvered Bob to the front of the group. "You will be point man."

"Yeah, you're probably good at picking off point men."

"Very good. Go faster!"

"Get off my case!"

"I will never do that, Bob."

He shook his head, kept moving.

"Baby, are you holding up OK?" Brian asked from behind her.

Loi's heart was rocking in her chest, her legs screaming protest. "I am full of strength," she gasped.

"You can make it," Bob said over his shoulder.

"There's a bug on me," Chris cried.

Bob came racing down from above, Nancy grabbed her child. Loi went to them. "It's just a wasp," she said when Nancy opened her fist and showed her its remains. "But the next one will not be a wasp. We must hurry."

"I'm tired," Joey said. "It's too steep."

Father Palmer was huffing. Thick blood was oozing down his cheek, which now looked like the skin of an alligator. Flies swarmed around him.

Loi put her hand on Bob's shoulder. "Back to point. Let's go."

"All right!"

Again they started. "Nobody stops for anything again," Loi said.

"I'm tired!"

"I am too, Joey. But if you value your life, do not stop."

That silenced even the children.

These people had to be treated harshly. They were strong and healthy, but unused to even the smallest adversity. As a child she'd seen men beaten to superhuman efforts of tunnel-digging or defense. People are capable of far more than they realize, but this is something they must be forced to discover.

Her mind roved ahead, focusing on Fisk's and the ATVs. They'd move by night, move due south toward population centers, and hope that Oscola and Towayda were the only towns affected. Then the area could be nuclear bombed, pulverized until it was nothing but a crater made of melted stone, and the mountains themselves razed.

The door to the inner world would be sealed again, and a woman could raise a family in peace.

Overhead she heard a drone. It was high, above the top of the thick forest. But she knew what it was. The insects were prowling, looking for them. How far from the house could they go?

Her legs felt like stone, the muscles beneath her belly screamed in pain. She smiled. "We are nearly there," she said. "See, it's not so hard!" She forced herself to hold her head up, to go a little faster.

The drone above the trees grew louder, then fell away. Why didn't the damned things come down? Maybe they couldn't. Or something worse was happening, something they couldn't anticipate.

The droning ceased altogether.

She looked up, but could see only leaves dappled by faded sunlight. Where they broke, there were patches of deepest blue. In some of them stars floated free.

From below came the sound of a horn honking. It honked and honked, and she began to want to know what was happening. She couldn't climb, but others might be able to. Ellen was lithe. "Can you go up a tree and tell me what you see?"

Ellen looked up doubtfully. "I never climbed one of those things in my life."

"I can do it," Chris said.

"No!" His mother grabbed him to her. "Ellen, you try."

They hoisted her into the lower limbs of a maple. With surprising speed she climbed hand over hand into the distant top. Her body grew tiny in the vault of the forest, and finally she was so high that she could see beyond the roof of leaves.

A few moments later and she was dropping down with an agility born of great fear. "It's the Gidumals," she said. "They're in their car and those bugs are swarming over it. Millions of them!"

Far, far away there were high screams. Maya and Sanghvi were being absorbed. Loi could hardly bear to imagine that excellent man being transformed. How could his humanity ever be destroyed? He was too good a man to become anything less. What was going on that the demons were taking good people? Where was the justice?

"Let's go," Loi said. Soon they were climbing again and her breath grew hot as it raced in and out. Her lungs were screaming for more air, the baby within her was jumping. "Your womb is like glass..."

Sanghvi. What would she do without him?

She went on, the screams of the Gidumals ringing in her ears and her soul.

As they struggled upward the boys sobbed with effort, their parents urging them on. Then Nancy had to pick up Joey. Chris began to drop back.

Bob suddenly stopped. "We've had it!"

The others caught up with him, gathered around.

"This isn't you talking, Bob," Loi said.

"My kids are exhausted."

"They have to keep on."

"You're right," Bob said. "I'm sorry." He took Joey from his mother. "Come on, big guy."

"So we go." Loi waved them on. "Go." She took Chris's hand. "You can make it with me. I have special strength for both of us."

They walked up and up, and she suffered greatly from her weight. The flat muscles of her underbelly began to ache, and a sour, dry taste filled her mouth. Even holding hands with Chris seemed a great effort. "You thirsty, Chris?"

"Yeah."

"Me too."

Very slowly the woods thinned, became brighter. Then they abruptly gave way.

They broke out onto the top of the ridge, where there were only pitch pines and scrub, and long, wind-polished stones.

From here they could see across Oscola toward the north, and back south toward Ludlum.

Above them larks spun in the slow air, their wings flashing in the last sun, their voices whistling shrill excitement. Loi staggered, Brian caught her around the waist, Bob gently tried to take her gun.

"I'll shoot!"

"All right! Jesus! Brian, all of a sudden she hates me!"

"I hate what is in you."

"There's nothing except me!"

"Yes, what's in my husband?" Nancy asked. "What do you hate, Loi?"

Loi spoke as reasonably as she could. "I think you know very well that the demons are within you, that they are trying to use you."

He laughed a little, a miserable, unconvincing sound.

A moment later the whole group was assembled on the spine of the mountain. It was Father Palmer who first looked to the north and noticed Towayda. He fell to his knees, awed and terrified all at once, whimpering.

The whole sky flickered with purple light.

It infected them with a frenetic sort of elation, like some drug. The two boys groaned and danced from foot to foot. Loi sensed movement inside her. "He kicks hard, Brian."

So at last it was finished, hell had come to the surface of the earth. She took a long, studied breath, observed one of the small secret silences that she used to restore her inner self. "Husband, we must not wait here a moment."

"We can't get away from that," Bob said.

"In our army the defeatist was shot."

"Oh, come on! That's the most ridiculous thing she's said yet! Brian, can't you shut her up?"

"Loi—"

"He was the one who said to stay for rescue. But there was no rescue. Now he says it's all hopeless. That is also a lie." She slapped her belly through her sweat-soaked shirt. "I will live!"

Brian embraced her, feeling her strength, drinking in her power.

"We go," she said. "You in front, Bob."

"No, I don't want to be in front anymore."

"Do it." If the demons attacked, let their own puppet be their first victim.

He stared her down, his expression complex with sadness and hurt, and something that could have been hatred, or perhaps an emotion very much more alien than that.

She did not waver.

The little group straggled off into the spreading dark, making their way down toward their beloved town.

Above them the larks circled, and to the west the sun set in an increasingly angry sky. Northward in the mountains another world was awakening, savage and cruel, struggling in its ugly purple light to be born.

Fifteen

1.

The little party from Queen's Road struggled down the mountain and into Oscola's familiar streets.

Chairs and tables from the Mills Café were strewn about in the street. Office furniture, paperbacks and bottles from the drugstore, dozens of boxes of disposable diapers, waterguns, baseball caps, lay in piles. The gas station's pumps had been bent on their foundations so that they stood at crazy angles. Handy's was split like a fish, its guts of magazines and cigars and candy spilled out before it. The Rexall sign, circa 1932, was smashed to bits in the gutter. Even the Village Green was ruined, its gazebo flattened to kindling, its huge shagbark hickories ripped asunder by fantastic and malevolent energy, split down their middles, left with their leaves slowly shriveling.

The destruction had been wanton and extremely violent, but also full of awful, cunning care. Chicken parts were rammed into coffeepots from the Mills, cigars jammed down the throats of dead kittens from the Pet Pantry, car seats lying on roofs, the front half of a large dog dangling from the shattered Citgo sign.

Forgetting their danger, the need to hurry, the little group halted on Main Street, staring in disbelief. Nancy West whispered again and again, "No, no, no." Her husband had assumed the stolid pose that he took at accident sites. Chris picked up an Uncle Scrooge comic book from the street, rolled it up, and put it in his hip pocket. Joey said, "Candy, Mommy," as he touched a Milky Way with his toe.

The destruction had been wrought with a tornado's monstrous attentiveness. A crate of hair dryers had been jammed through the wall of the Excelsior Tower, and they jutted out of the brick surface like some mad work of conceptual art. Ellen's papers and files blew about their feet, and she saw the body of her desk smashed into a counter full of black girdles with red accents from the Mode O'Day. The top of the desk lay on the street, its blotter still

neatly in place. She walked closer and found a cabinet, its drawers thrown open and filled with something that looked like mucilage and smelled like wet human skin. She reached down, disgusted but wanting to reclaim her possessions.

Loi knocked her hand aside. "Don't touch it! Nobody touch anything! No telling about diseases."

They went up the middle of the street together, Bob and Brian behind Loi, Nancy and Ellen and the kids behind them. Father Palmer struggled along at the rear, his breath whistling through the twisted black stump that his nose had become.

Getting a heavy enough dose of the light, it seemed, started changes that did not stop. His left eye was fiercely veined, filmed over by a dense, milky membrane. The skin of the left side of his face was now made up of even thicker tiles, like a turtle's back, and each was centered by a fat welt.

The priest's breath hissed, his tongue went around and around, patrolling the fissures that were turning his mouth into a hole.

Absent a mirror, he remained innocent of his true condition. Touch told him that something was very wrong, but he couldn't possibly have imagined just how awful it really was. Nobody could have; his disfigurement was so extreme that it was outside human experience.

A naturally cheerful man, he had even regained some of his good spirits. He'd decided that he had to keep up morale, so he sang as he walked, a catchy old Kingston Trio tune from back in the days when he had a guitar and something of a voice. "Back to back, belly to belly, well I don't give a damn 'cause I done that already." Again and again he bleated out the only verse that he remembered.

"For God's sake, stop him singing the Zombie Jamboree," Nancy West muttered as they passed the Citgo.

"Better be quiet, Father," Bob said.

"I'm sorry. I suppose the Kingston Trio's a little behind the times, isn't it?"

Nancy peered up at the flashing sky and the tumbling angry clouds. "I hate you," she shouted. "I hate you!"

"Mommy, Mommy," Joey shrilled.

"How can you be so noisy?" Loi could walk through dry leaves in total silence. These people couldn't be quiet on a flat street, with all their stomping and roaring.

Father Palmer went to Nancy. "The Lord is here," he rasped, attempting to whisper. "The Lord is with us and helping us right now."

Nancy turned bitterly away from him, her face reflecting disgust.

Loi worried that his infection might penetrate very deep. Was his soul being transformed along with his body? She watched him as he humped along leaking fluids, and thought he might bear more scrutiny than Bob did.

How quick her mind was to recapture the habits of that time long ago. She would have thought she had forgotten the sense of careful suspicion instilled in her by Wonmin Kyo, the stern, genial shadow who had been the political officer in her cadre. The men had mostly been entirely indifferent to her, hardly even aware of her existence. He had taught her to listen and report back.

Loi kept on walking, observing and assessing. Even as she scanned windows and roof lines, she evaluated the actions of each member of the group, especially those under suspicion.

"We've got to keep moving," she said. "There's no time for crying about this now." She'd seen villages a thousand years old burned to ashes. People made a mistake being upset by ruins. The first thing was to stay alive, then find a place to start over.

Nobody heard her. Nancy was having hysterics because Father Palmer had embraced her, in a misguided effort at comfort. They were preoccupied with

trying to calm her down, and to make the old priest understand why he couldn't. His face grinned hideously, and Loi noticed a net of veins growing across his teeth, which now looked yellow and soft, like big pieces of chewing gum. Only shooting it to pieces had killed the living head of the poor Rysdale boy. She wondered when they would have to begin on the priest.

"Listen to me," she said. Nancy was still sobbing, and now Ellen was having trouble, too, crouching before the remains of her office desk, running her hands over it.

Loi raised her pistol and fired into the air.

The report froze them. "All right," she said into the stunned silence. "No need for me to be quiet, you're all so noisy." She tucked the pistol back into her belt. "Now we go."

They followed her up Main, toward the darkened bulk of Fisk's Garage. "Get food," she said as they passed the devastated ruin of the Indian Market grocery. "But be careful. Nothing with any strange substances on it." The glue-like material was everywhere in and around the store, dripping from tumbled counters, off ruined crates of melons, thickest around burst cans.

A slick of melted frozen food covered the floor, making it treacherous to walk without slipping in melted spinach soufflé and breaded veal cutlet dinners. The fresh-vegetable bins had been upended, as if something had looked behind them for people. The meat locker was wide open, its door pushed up through the ceiling into the second floor, where Caroline Chipman had her art gallery. Like the rest of the food, the meat was ripped up and damaged, but not eaten.

Fisk's Garage was devastated. It was getting dark and they had no flashlights, so they had to pick their way carefully among the glass shards and twisted ruins of yard tractors and all-terrain vehicles to get in.

Gas tanks had been pulled off, axles bent, tires torn to bits. The cylinders and spark plugs from engines that had been ripped open littered the floor around the remains of the vehicles.

"Let's look in the back," Loi said in a brisk voice. "Come on, there's no time to lose."

"No!" Bob was in front of her, barring the door.

She took out her pistol. I will do it if I have to, she thought, although it made her sick at heart.

They faced one another. "Loi, I have this very strong feeling that we shouldn't go in there."

"If we don't find transportation, we're going to get caught, Bob."

"There's something in there!"

Chris ran to his father. He looked from Loi's face to the barrel of her gun, holding his dad around the waist. She felt tears come to the corners of her eyes. "Resolution is the soldier's credo," they had taught her.

"You have to let her through," Ellen said.

"We'll all be killed if we open that door." Bob was sweating. In the gloomy half light, Loi could see that his eyes were glassy with fear.

"I am going to step forward and open the door," Loi said.

Bob gathered up his wife and sons.

Loi threw the door open.

Father Palmer cried out, "Glory to God!"

There stood four beautiful Suzuki ATVs in picture-perfect condition, smelling faintly of gas and new paint, gleaming.

For a moment they were brightly illuminated by a distant flash of lightning, then long thunder rolled back and forth between the mountains.

Behind her she heard sobbing. She turned to see Bob sinking to the floor, his

shoulders heaving. He looked up at her. "You oughta shoot me," he said miserably. "My God, I'm possessed."

"From now on, no matter what you think is right, you trust me."

"I'm going to do everything I can to be loyal to all of us. You're my people. But I have these... feelings that make me want to do different."

"Never trust yourself. Never!" She sighed. Maybe he would be all right and maybe he wouldn't. She hoped for the best. For the moment, she saw another problem. "Where are the keys to these things?"

"We can hot-wire 'em in a second," Chris announced, marching up to the closest one. In moments he had them running.

"Where did you learn that?" Nancy asked him.

"I forget."

As Ellen tried the seat on one of the vehicles, Brian and Bob raised the door to the street. Although they were designed for only one rider, each must somehow take two.

"Just one damn minute, you people!"

They all turned. Standing in the shadows of the glassed-in office was the figure of Henry Fisk. He strode to the middle of the room. His scruffy jacket and John Deere cap made him look inoffensive, but he was carrying a weapon that Loi recognized instantly: an AK-47. She became very still.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Hi, Henry," Brian said mildly. "Just lookin' over some of your machines."

"The hell! You're stealin' 'em."

So deep she felt more than heard it, Loi became aware of the sound of an engine coming in from the outside, loud enough to rise above the steady idling of the ATVs. It was heavy equipment. "We have to leave."

"You sure are right about that, China girl." Fisk turned to Brian. "Get your ass out of my sight. And take Shanghai Lil here with you."

"Take it easy, Henry," Bob said. "You calm down or I'll have to put you under arrest."

"You? You escaped from the psycho ward down at Ludlum Community. They're looking for you from here to Buffalo!"

"They might have been. Not anymore. You know what's happening around here, Henry, as well as we do."

"No, that was a dream, that there. I thought it was real, I sure did. But it was a dream. I mean, Allies lying on the back porch with a bicycle pump sticking out of the side of her head. That's not real, that's a nightmare! And Junie and Charlie, they—they—oh, shit, Brian, tell me it's a damn nightmare!"

"It's real, Henry. Look at the priest."

Fisk glanced at Father Palmer, then lowered his head. Loi knew how a man feels at such a moment of realization. She laid her hand on the butt of her pistol. He might well put down his weapon. Or he might shoot everybody in sight.

Outside, the engine note was now distinct. It was more than one machine, many more. "We can't get away," Fisk moaned. His head remained down, but his assault rifle was still pointing straight at them.

"We must try to, Henry!" He didn't respond. Loi took a step toward him.

"Don't you move, slant-eyes!"

Bob realized that Fisk was capable of killing her without a second thought. She was nothing to him, just a Chink. But not Bob West. Fisk would hesitate to shoot a man he'd known all of his life, a respected member of the community. Bob stepped in front of Loi. "You put that thing down, Henry. And stop calling her names."

"Bob, I'm warning you."

"Give me the gun, Henry."

"Fuck you!"

"Henry—" Bob took another step.

The AK-47 clicked nastily. Bob could see a vein pulsing in Fisk's neck. He was about to shoot. Another second and they were all going to be dead. He spoke quickly. "You remember that yard tractor I bought from you last summer, the Toro? It's running damn good, Henry." He took another step closer.

The building shook a little. Dust filtered down from the ceiling. That meant only one thing: action in the ground underneath. "Henry, we have to hurry!"

"That was nothing! It was *nothing!*"

"Was Allie nothing? Is Father Palmer nothing? It's all real, Henry. Give me the gun."

Fisk hesitated. Bob approached him. "Hand it over, Henry."

Behind them in the dark somebody made a protracted spitting sound. "My teeth," Father Palmer hissed, pronouncing it "teess." He'd tried to chew some beef jerky he'd picked up along the way. His attempts to drag the mess out of his mouth made a noise like a child playing in wet clay. Henry Fisk watched this, appalled. "What happened to him?"

"Got hit up close by that light."

"Purple light? I seen that. Made me feel funny. Made Junie and Charlie... made 'em worse than him." The priest let out a slopping noise, snorted. "I'll get you a towel, Father." Putting down the rifle, he went over to a sink the mechanics used, and brought the priest a roll of paper towels.

Bob picked up the weapon. Loi came close to him. She held out her hands.

"I can do this, Loi."

"I want to trust you, but I'm not sure I can."

"Do you know how to use it?"

She shook her head.

"Then you'd better leave it with me. Somebody could get hurt."

"An AK is easy to use." She grasped the weapon.

They both held it. "Loi, I know something's been done to me. But I can control it. We started this thing as a team, you and I. Let it stay that way."

The floor cracked from one end of the room to the other. More dust sifted down. A growing vibration told of movements beneath the earth.

Loi wasted no time. "We go now."

They got on the bikes, and after a short struggle with the seating arrangements, moved off into the dark. Fisk jogged along behind them nattering about his loss.

2.

The street was a gray strip between the shadows of buildings. Loi was sure she'd heard machinery, but it was nowhere in sight. Then her quick eyes detected movement. "There are vehicles out there," she said in a voice just loud enough to be heard over their own engines. They were coming straight up Main from the direction of the Towayda Road. To escape them, it would be necessary to either go back toward Mound and Queen's Road where they'd come from, or ride out into the woods.

At first the others saw nothing. Finally Bob made out the slowly moving shadows. They were so wide and low that he didn't at first understand what they were. But when he saw them clearly, the shape became familiar. "Those are humvees."

They were absolutely dark. Loi watched carefully. "I count six. Everybody be quiet. Get ready to move out fast."

Bob was astonished at her. "But that's the U.S. Army!"

Suddenly Loi was behind him with her hand over his mouth. "So it seems. But we must be careful. Do you agree?" She pressed the flat side of her gun against his back.

Only when Bob nodded was he released.

Ellen was the first to see the lights that had appeared at the other end of the street. "Oh Jesus, here comes a car."

They all looked. "I think that's Judge terBroeck," Brian said. "That's his car." It was coming up from Mound Road. Loi saw that they were now trapped between the car and the slowly advancing humvees. Their only escape route was to go through the alley, across the yards of the houses behind it, and up onto the ridges.

There was a flicker of purple light from the front of the lead humvee.

Nancy started to walk out into the street. Loi put her hand on her shoulder. "Don't be a fool."

"Look, those are humvees, a la the Gulf War. This is the American Army and we're saved." She looked to her husband for support.

"Listen to Loi," he said.

"Get back. You do it."

"But those are our people!"

"We cannot know that."

She came back.

"You've never been in a war," Loi said. "We have no room for mistakes." She paused. "Do you see the foot soldiers?"

Nancy looked. "No. There aren't any... are there?"

"There are nine soldiers coming down the street hugging the walls. They're in full chemical protective dress. They're wearing some kind of night vision equipment on their faces. They are heavily armed."

"I don't even see them!"

"Whisper! Always!"

"Go easy on her, Loi."

"No, Bob, not if she's taking these risks." She looked out across the dark. "They are in front of the drugstore now. Walking parallel to the humvees."

"I see them," Nancy muttered.

To Ellen they looked like robots, with huge mechanical eyes and glistening black metal where their faces ought to be. Something about their movements was wrong. They came slowly along, looking into doors and windows. The humvees moved along ahead of them.

In a matter of minutes, the soldiers were going to be peering down this alley with their light-amplification goggles.

Loi gathered the group around her. She barely breathed her words. "Get on the ATVs. When the humvees are past, we go out quick. We'll have to hope we surprise the soldiers when we pass them. We'll go as far as Mound, then turn south into the woods. Can everybody get his engine started?"

Quickly, Chris taught his father and Brian which wires to touch together. Ellen had no trouble, and Nancy had already seen him do it. Henry Fisk bristled but said nothing.

As they came closer together, the rights of the judge's car illuminated the first of the humvees. It was a dead, dark black, the blackest color Loi had ever seen.

The first humvee passed the alley, then the second.

With a squeal of brakes, the third stopped, neatly blocking the entrance.

They were trapped. They shrank back into the dark between two buildings. There remained for them only a narrow view of Main, illuminated by the lights of the judge's car.

He came into the lights. He was emaciated, far more so than he had been even two days ago. His dark blue double-breasted suit hung on his frame like a slack sail.

Brian recalled the tall figure he'd glimpsed in the woods, the time he'd been pulled to the judge's house. There was that same grave stillness, that same sense of evil dignity.

"Now listen up," the judge shouted into the dark. "We've got the U.S. Army here to help us out!"

Loi noticed that he wasn't shouting in any particular direction, or using names. They had not yet been discovered.

That wouldn't last. The oncoming soldiers were bound to see them.

"It's all over and we've won," the judge continued, his voice radiating authority. "There's been a tragedy here. An experiment being conducted by a scientific institute failed and a door was opened into something that we don't understand. But the military has things under control and we're safe. You can come out now. There's even a field dressing station set up outside town. So come out, come out all of you!"

Loi saw movement in the dark interior of the drugstore. Two women and three men whom she didn't know appeared. Then came Sam Young and his sweetheart, Henrietta Lohse. Others followed, hidden by the dark.

"Don't any of you move," Loi said to her group.

"That's bull," Fisk said firmly, speaking for the first time since he'd reached the alley. "Judge terBroeck is a fine man." He walked past them and joined the small knot of people now clustering around the judge.

Ellen saw this as a rapidly deteriorating situation. "If we stay here, the

soldiers are gonna notice us."

"We have to assume that they already have."

Things were changing quickly in the street. The soldiers had abandoned their building-to-building search and were hauling an ungainly black device out of the back of the judge's car. It did not have the appearance of a weapon. Like the humvees, it was so black that it was hard to see. Thick, tapering cables jutted up from it at odd angles and drooped down around the sides. It began to clank, then to emit a low humming sound. The soldiers stepped away. Apparently under its own power, the thing began gliding toward the knot of survivors.

Brian thought it was the ugliest object that he had ever seen. It was squat and fat like the body of an old-fashioned furnace. There were bars on its sides, and behind the bars something shiny, like black glass. It had the squat, dense appearance of something designed for work with great heat.

With a hiss like a bus door opening, its cables stiffened. They pointed at the survivors who had accepted the judge's promise and begun to approach. "Hey, Judge," Young began.

"Now just take it easy," the judge said. "Come on ahead." Again Brian felt that august presence.

A leader, a general, a monarch. Concealed in the body of the judge, him.

The tips of the cables adjusted themselves with great finesse, until each one was aimed at a specific individual. Two were not needed and they retracted with the sound of somebody sucking up spaghetti.

One of the women from the drugstore suddenly broke and ran. "Calm down now, Joanie," the judge called in a gentle voice. "This is just high-tech testing equipment, it won't hurt us."

"That's Joanie Dooley," Father Palmer whispered. "She's one of my deaconesses."

"Honestly, Joanie," the judge said, "I thought you had better sense than this."

She was running like hell now, right down the middle of the street.

Suddenly the judge's left arm slid outward, extending from his sleeve as if made of rubber. As it got longer and longer, people screamed, began to cluster together.

It grabbed Joannie Dooley around the neck and dragged her back with such speed that both of her shoes flew off and spun away. He dropped her in a heap at the feet of the weeping townsfolk, and in the next instant the black glass in the machine glowed a roiling, angry purple, and flashes of light spat from the tip of each extended cable into their faces.

"Shoot him," Brian cried.

The head turned, the eyes flashed. He saw them, the soldiers saw them.

Loi hopped on an ATV. "Go, go, go!" To her horror, the Wests went charging for the street, followed by Ellen. They should have turned around and gone out the alley, the fools! She had no choice but to follow. "Go, Brian, stay with them!"

A series of extremely bright purple flashes erupted as the ATVs worked their way around the blocking humvee. Ellen closed her eyes, but still felt a shudder of unwanted delight.

When she opened them again all nine of the people who had gone to the judge were down on their knees gagging, their fingers gripping their throats. Knotted masses of dark mucus were pouring from their mouths and noses.

The purple light flickered continuously now, bathing them in its glow. They were moaning, but it wasn't a sound of pain. Far from it.

The ATVs roared into the street. "You," the judge roared, "you!"

Bob pulled the trigger of the AK-47 and bullets sprayed, sparked off the hood of the lead humvee, exploded against the sputtering machine, sent four of the soldiers flying up against the far sidewalk, apparently lolling them.

To get out of town they had to pass not only soldiers and humvees, but also the judge and his machine.

Ellen could see that the victim nearest her was full of moving humps, kicking and flopping his arms and shaking his head with a furious, impossible energy, like a windup toy gone crazy. The intensity of this motion caused him to rotate slowly in the street. She glimpsed his face, but did not recognize it, such was the distortion.

Henry Fisk made noises like a bird caught in a net, squawks punctuated by piping shrieks. His muscles were full of bulges the size of grapefruits, his face was oozing down the bones of his skull. He struggled, he shook, he groaned like a man in the extremity of sexual excitement. Then his head began to go back and forth, faster and faster, until his pop-eyed stare was just a blur, and spittle and raw muscle and gobs of melted skin were spraying like a multicolored fountain. Now his lips sounded like some kind of berserk lawn-mower motor. A long, thin leg or mandible popped out of his mouth, extended upward, and began sailing round and round his head like a lariat.

"We've got to help them," Father Palmer managed to gabble. Behind Ellen on her ATV, he threw his arms around her, trying to reach the brake.

"No!"

She gunned the motor, but the machine swerved violently. He'd gotten hold of the handlebars.

The sight of their confusion caused two of the cables to exude from the machine and begin swaying toward them. The sizzling grew louder. There was an almost human quality to it, as if a ten-year-old was trying to sound like the biggest, meanest snake he could imagine.

The machine focused on Ellen and Father Palmer. To give it room the soldiers pressed themselves back against the walls. "It's not painful, Ellen," Judge terBroeck said. She saw now that his mouth didn't move when he talked. His face was a mask. Behind the eyes she could see black, gleaming material, rushing and seething.

"Ellen, come on," Loi cried.

Once more the AK-47 chattered. This time the bullets went through the judge, causing him to flounce but not to fall. Again his arm stretched, and suddenly it had the rifle and was hurling it off into the dark. "We have a right to do this!"

"You have no right," Ellen shouted back.

The judge rose to his full height, lifted his arms. They went up and up, far into the sky, and then came snaking down toward Brian and Loi. But Brian hit the gas and their ATV darted ahead. The arms flopped after them, the hands snatching at Loi's back. She clutched Brian and screamed as they ripped at her shirt, trying to reach around and get to her stomach.

Behind the judge the machine continued its busy cooking of the ones who had been captured. It was not only sizzling but making sighs, metallic shrieks, and a light, continuous thumping like the excited beating of a heart.

Meanwhile, another part of the machine stiffened a cable toward the departing ATVs. Purple light flashed and Loi felt it like angels caressing her neck and head. She did not turn around, resisted the urge to look into it.

Inside her, the baby began kicking and squirming. "Hurry, Brian!"

But Brian slowed down. "Ellen."

"They're after the baby, Brian! I can feel it!"

Just then Ellen screamed, a long, despairing howl.

The machine had pointed cables at her and the priest. As they weaved about on then: roaring ATV, the cables swayed, trying to aim. Behind them the humvees were deploying in a line abreast to block escape back toward Mound Road. To surround their ATV, soldiers trotted up both sidewalks.

Brian dismounted. He and Loi were trying to shield their eyes from the light the machine was shining at them, but it was very hard.

Just behind Brian and Loi, the Wests also stopped. "I'll cover you," Bob shouted as Brian went past. He didn't have the AK-47 anymore, but Brian could hear his pistol banging steadily away.

Crouching down behind their ATV, Loi noted that Bob really did seem to have overcome the power of the demon. But this was not easy to believe, and she resolved never to let down her guard.

Ellen was down, Ellen was off the ATV. The judge's hands were extending toward her, racing across the ten feet between them.

Where the survivors had been there remained only masses of waving arms all tangled up with clothes and shoes and hair. Faces were visible in the tangle, faces slack with rapture. The cables from the machine had plunged into the mass, and their sensitive tips raced here and there, buzzing angrily as they flooded this or that remaining bit of human flesh with their light.

A complicated stink rose from the mass, of scorched clothing and melted hair, of sweat, of blood and urine, feces and hot meat.

Suddenly Loi realized that the machine had turned its attention away from Ellen and Father Palmer.

One of the free arms was pointing directly at her. The baby was kicking more than he had ever kicked before. She clutched her stomach. "Brian, *get us out of here!*"

He dashed back to their ATV, leaped on.

Ellen watched him go. For the moment she'd stopped trying to escape. Loi's desperate cry had gone through her like a white-hot blade.

3.

Bob's pistol snapped and the judge began to choke, wrapping his long hands around a hole in his throat.

Loi and Brian disappeared into the darkness, their ATV screaming.

The machine turned its attention to Father Palmer. He was still sitting on the ATV when one of the cables juttred right into his face, flooding it with light. His eyes widened, his arms waved, he began rocking back and forth oozing sighs that belonged to night and the bedroom.

Ellen got back on the Suzuki, pushing in front of him, feeling tingles of delight where the light touched her skin, gasping with pleasure when it entered her eyes. She gunned the motor and the vehicle wailed to life, shot ahead. The soldiers, who had just come up, grabbed at them. Then the humvees snarled to life and began weaving around the spitting machine, coming fast.

Ellen didn't like having the old priest behind her with his arms around her waist. Being touched by the poor man was disgusting. She could hear his breath whistling, could feel his fingers kneading the flesh of her sides as he hung on to her.

She followed the ATV in front of her, staying with it when it turned off the road behind the others. Ellen was clumsy with the unfamiliar machine. It was extremely responsive and she had to drop a good distance behind Chris and Nancy to avoid running them down.

Behind her she heard engines. The humvees had come off the road, too. But surely they were much too wide to maneuver in the forest.

Suddenly the Suzuki screamed and slid sideways. Her reflexive hitting of the brakes only made things worse. They skidded between two trees into the thick woods. "Jesus Christ," she muttered. There was nothing out there ahead of her, nothing but darkness.

Her heart practically flew out through her mouth—she was lost in the woods with a half-monster clinging to her back and at least one humvee from hell somewhere behind her.

Father Palmer coughed. "Where are we?" he asked.

"In the woods."

His hands slid up onto her shoulders. "Are we lost?"

"No!"

He clasped his hands together behind her neck. She could feel his hard, knobby cheek pressing against her back. Sharp things protruding from his torso worked through her clothes, pricked her. She leaned as far forward as she could.

Then she saw a wonderful sight, the tiny red dot of a taillight. "There they are!" The ground sloped up so steeply that she was afraid they'd topple over backward. They went through thick, lashing undergrowth. As best she could she kept her head down. At this speed a twig could put an eye out, a branch hurl them both off the vehicle.

The path grew so narrow that trees scraped their legs, but still they climbed, up and up, seeking that flash of red.

Far off up the ridge ahead, she saw bobbing lights. She took out after them, cursing the ATV because it wouldn't go faster. They bounced across boulders and cracks and the great, gnarled roots of pitch pines. She shouted and Father Palmer hissed and made deep, popping noises in his throat.

The lights went out.

She didn't even slow down.

A moment later the nearest ATV appeared in her headlight. Chris was there, waving. She took her hand off the gas and the Suzuki stopped so fast that she was almost thrown across the handlebars.

"Shut it down," the boy whispered, his voice urgent.

"I have no idea how to do that!" She got off, followed by the priest. He clambered down, his breath a busy whistle. She tried not to look at the black, misshapen hulk of his head.

Chris turned off the ATV by pulling a wire.

They were received back into the group, now haphazardly armed with two shotguns, a rifle and three pistols. "I thought I'd never see you guys again," she said.

Silently, Loi touched her on the shoulder. Nancy came up and pressed a small pistol into her hand. "The safety's in the butt," she whispered.

"Why are we stopping?"

"We're shaking the humvees," Brian murmured.

"But—"

"Whisper," Nancy hissed. "You're louder than I was, Ellen."

"They are looking for movement and light," Loi added softly. "Sound."

"Where are we?"

"About a mile and a half south of town, by my reckoning," Bob murmured.

The night wind blew steadily. To the north, the horizon was now bright purple.

Father Palmer, who had moved off into the dark, groaned. Loi came up to Ellen. She whispered low, barely breathing. "What's his condition?"

Ellen shook her head.

Loi went over to him, draped her arm around his shoulder. There was a murmur of conversation. After a moment she jumped back, uttering a small cry. She returned to the group. "He's not good." She was rubbing the back of her hand. "He says he feels the same as always, but he's beginning to hear a voice in his head. He hears a voice shouting instructions at him. It's telling him to keep us here, not to let us move."

"I've started hearing it, too," Bob said.

Turning away to hide the movement, Loi took out her pistol.

"But it doesn't affect me," Bob continued. He knelt and put his arms around his nearest boy. "*This* affects me."

Chris threw his arms around his father's neck.

Loi looked down at him, now with both of his sons beside him. She thrust her pistol back into her belt.

Ellen, who had seen the stealthy movement of the weapon, realized that Loi would have killed Bob if he'd said the wrong thing. She could kill—even up close, even a person she'd known for years. Ellen found herself feeling a little worshipful toward her, and shook it off angrily.

"How about you, Father?" Loi asked softly, going over to the priest. "Can you resist the one who calls to you?"

"It's angels," he said faintly, his own voice barely understandable, "angels singing the glory of heaven." He raised his tortured face, and in the starlight its mosaic surface looked like a dry, cracked riverbed. His eyes were heavily filmed, his mouth full of what looked like wet modeling clay filled with pumping veins. Then he gobbled out some words. "I'm about done. I want to — want to..." His voice sank away.

Loi went back to the others. "He's dangerous." Again her pistol was in her hand.

"Oh, no," Nancy said. "He baptized my babies."

"He baptized all of us," Brian added.

"Whisper! Please!"

Ellen stepped up. "He didn't baptize me."

"I'll do it," Loi breathed.

"I can do it. Give me the pistol." Ellen held out her hand. They all saw how it was shaking.

"Jesus Christ, I'll do it," Brian said, snatching the weapon.

"Go in at the base of the skull, buddy. He'll drop like a bag of flour."

"That's professional advice, Bob?"

"Hell yes it is!"

"Here we go again," Joey said, putting his hands over his ears.

"Wait. We must do it silently." Loi gestured toward the night.

There followed another hushed discussion. They could have hit him with a stone while he knelt praying, but nobody would.

He had begun pulling at his face and making small sounds of chagrin.

Brian was gazing out into the night. "The thing is, I remember we used to come up here and look at the lights of Ludlum."

"So?"

He gestured toward the southern horizon.

There were no lights.

Nancy stifled a sob. Welling up from deep inside Loi was a sensation of obliterating sorrow. If there were no lights in Ludlum, maybe there were none in Albany or New York City or anywhere.

They heard a noise, all of them at the same moment: the rumble of an engine.

"It's a humvee," Loi said in a quiet voice. She pointed along the spine of the mountain. "There." She sighed. "We were too noisy."

Three of the shapes came quickly and quietly along. They were not half a mile away, coming down from the north.

"Let's move out," Loi said.

"Which way?"

"South, always. If not Ludlum, then maybe some other place."

"We can't go that way," Brian said, "it's a cuff! I've climbed it, I know what it's like."

Now the grinding of the humvees' gears came clear, and the rising growl of their engines.

Loi got on their Suzuki. "Come on, Brian."

"I'm telling you, it can't be done!"

Loi flared at him. "Then why did you even stop here?"

"How was I to know they'd get around behind us like that? How could they, in those things?"

"So where can we go?" She wasn't whispering now. Her voice was shrill.

"We could go down the way we came," Bob said.

"Back to town?"

"We skirt the town, cross the Cuyamora where it's shallow up near the Pratt place. Then we go south through the fields. We'll sure as hell make better time than we will in these damn mountains."

It sounded to Brian like a reasonable enough plan. The humvees were now only minutes away. They had no time to consider whether or not it was a mistake.

The instant the first Suzuki started, huge lights flooded the whole ridge with beams brighter than the brightest sun. The ungainly vehicles leaped ahead, rumbling down on the little band of survivors like a herd of maddened rhino.

The ATVs bounced off into the dense woods. They had been expertly turned back in the direction they had come.

Sixteen

1.

Brian's ATV bounced and lurched, its engine screaming. Every jerk went right through him. He worried that Loi was going to start bleeding again, and they were so helpless now.

To the north and west the sky glowed purple, and he thought of the forbidden zone, the region of no escape. Was it already too late?

He had conceived of an idea, a long chance. If he was right and his facility had been moved to this area, he might be able to get inside and do some sort of damage that would stop this.

Loi pressed her cheek against his back. "We must turn, Brian. Turn north here."

"Toward Towayda? Is that wise?"

"We've got to go where we aren't expected. We can get around town that way, cross Towayda Road, then go out into that apple orchard the other side of Mound."

"That'll take us right into the center of this, Loi!"

"Where we're least expected."

"I've got to stop. The others'll have to agree." He turned in his seat, trying to see them. In the near distance he glimpsed movement. Farther back, the forest was radiant with light from the humvees.

Loi clutched him tightly. "They'll stay with us."

It was her they trusted. He was no leader. "They'll stay with you."

"Yeah, so let's go."

He made the turn, and the purple glow now lit the glimpses of sky ahead of him. The woods grew thicker, and he had to slow down.

"Go, Brian!"

"Jesus Christ, in this morass?"

"Go, break through it! There is no time!"

The ATV slid and protested, the branches and leaves slapped his face, the bumps came again and again. "Loi, stand up in the seat, you can't risk the shock!"

"Just go!"

Suddenly a yard appeared ahead of them. Then they were crossing grass. Brian recognized the Huygenses' place, now dark and silent. So often he'd sat with Pat under these very trees, discussing town affairs deep into the night.

There were the four green Adirondack chairs Pat had built ten years ago.

"Faster, Brian! This is the most dangerous part."

He crossed the patio, tore through the vine-covered wire fence that gave them privacy from the road—and saw a group of people just ahead. He jammed on the brakes and the vehicle slid to a halt.

A flashlight blazed into his eyes. "State police!"

Loi's pistol came out.

Ellen roared up beside them, the dark lump of Father Palmer huddled on the seat behind her. She gunned her engine, stood over the handlebars, ready to try to blast through the crowd.

The Wests stopped a short distance back.

Behind the light Brian could see state police uniforms, and then familiar faces, friends he had known since he was a child. Among the troopers he

noticed Nate Harris.

Bob also saw Nate, his oldest friend in the troopers, his mentor. With them, though, were more of the heavily equipped soldiers with the hidden faces.

The street was blocked. "Loi," Brian said, "we've got to deal with this." He took his hand off the gas.

"All right. Dismount, everybody." They complied immediately, moving now with the speed of a well-trained unit.

The group facing them stirred. "State police," the voice squawked again, "come forward with your hands on your heads!"

Father Palmer wheezed, seemed about to keel over.

Ellen went to Loi. "We're losing him."

"Does he seem dangerous?"

"He was quiet. He groaned a little."

Loi surveyed their predicament. The only alternatives open now were to go down into Oscola or double back the way they'd come. But the humvees were back there, somehow negotiating the woods despite their ungainly shape.

If she could leave a rear guard, they might be able to make the run down through Oscola. She crept over to the priest. "Father Palmer, can you keep watch here for us? Do you trust yourself?"

A rumbling groan.

"Do your best. You're what we have."

He hissed, then his voice guttered low. "I love you all," he said. He may have gasped the word "Jesus," uttered a part of a prayer.

"I'll stay," Chris said. He looked toward the humped shape that had been the old priest. "He ain't gonna make it." Chris carried a 30-30 almost as large as

he was.

Loi gave him a fond glance. She remembered so well what it was like to be a child at war. "We need you with us."

"Come forward with your hands up!" Nate Harris called.

"We're on your side," another trooper said.

"Come on, Bob. You'll all be treated well."

Bob took a halting step.

"Tell Mrs. Kelly to put her pistol down on the ground, Lieutenant. And is that an AK-47 tied to your vehicle?"

Bob took another step. "They've got a lot of firepower, Loi." Then, more softly, "I'm playing for time. Get ready to move."

One of the troopers began walking toward them. "I wanta see everybody's hands," he said as he approached.

There was a slapping sound, the clink of metal. "Stop," Chris shouted. He was aiming his rifle directly at the trooper.

The trooper dropped. The others took positions behind cars. There was a general clicking as guns were cocked. "Unless you throw in your weapons by the count of three, we'll take all of you down," Nate shouted. "One... two—"

"I'm bringing a gun in," Father Palmer burred. There was a sloshing sound in his throat. "Somebody give me a shotgun."

Nobody moved. They looked to Loi for a decision. "Yes," she said. Nancy handed him one.

He dragged himself into the middle of the road.

Nate spoke. "Put it down now, Father."

Closer Father Palmer went, moving to within range. "I can't hear you."

"Father, don't take another step."

The priest stopped, his breath gurgling and wheezing.

Nate yelled at him. "Put it down!"

Instead Father Palmer raised it to his shoulder and fired a round of twelve-gauge buckshot directly into Nate's body. There was a blast and a dry smack of sound and Nate flew into pieces—which at once began to jerk spasmodically, the hands clutching, the face working. Black liquid sprayed out of the torso and the neck, and dribbled from the severed arms and head.

Bob was astonished to find that he himself had been following Father Palmer, even starting to raise his hands. Now he reared back in horror, the thrall broken.

Father Palmer's gun roared again and more of them fell. As he fired, appendages grew from his torso and wrapped around the barrel of the gun, attempting to wrest it from him. "By the love of my Lord Jesus," the priest bellowed, his voice suddenly clear and hard and strong, "begone!" Again he fired, and again, and the shotgun's roar rocked the night.

Crowds of black serpentine arms unfolded from him, ripping out through his skin, tugging the gun, snaking around his neck. They squeezed. "Lord," he croaked.

Shots were returned, and the stink of cordite filled the air. For Loi and Bob it was an odor from long ago. Her blood began to run high, his eyes to well.

Yet again, the priest's gun thundered and more of the crowd of false people was rent into pieces. Father Palmer gargled and grunted and struggled against himself, but he kept firing, again and again.

Loi and Brian and Chris fired. Joey hid behind his mother, his little voice cutting the air with its terrified cries.

Quite suddenly there was silence. As the ringing faded, they all heard the

same awful noise in the dark. Pieces of soldiers and troopers and townsfolk lay about scuffling and flopping, their motion chaotic. Hands vibrated, legs kicked like landed fish, lips burred, torsos wheezed and spilled blood.

Father Palmer ceased firing and began to dance a kind of horrible jig, his hands batting at the great coils that now swarmed from his belly.

"Shoot him," Ellen shouted. "Don't leave him like that!" She fired her own gun, but he didn't react. She was no marksman, and the dark only made it worse.

Bob raised his pistol, but it wouldn't be effective in this light against that gyrating hulk, not from a hundred-foot range. He gunned his ATV, went closer, began to take down the AK-47.

"Bobby, come back," Nancy moaned.

"Daddy!" Joey bellowed.

Chris trotted up beside the ATV. "I've got a few rounds left," he said.

They got to within thirty feet of the priest. This close, the man was a struggling, heaving mountain of fleshy complications.

Now Bob fired, and as usual he didn't miss. The priest staggered, lurched, then toppled. His fluid-filled skin creaked, it was so taut. Liquid spurted from around his knees like water from a burst pipe. Then the head came to muttering life, the eyes opening wide, bulging until they imparted an appearance of extreme surprise.

Chris fired three shots right into the center of the face.

With a series of wet plopping sounds the priest became entirely transformed, his head, his body, changing into a furiously active tangle of worm-like feelers that probed and pulsated, all seeking the same thing: control of the shotgun that lay before him.

Almost without his realizing it, Bob dropped his gun to the ground.

"No, Dad," came Chris's shout. "Pick it up!"

He looked at it, looked at his boy, who calmly fired two more shots into the bubbling, spitting remains of the priest.

"Goodbye, Father," Bob said, and quietly added a prayer for him. He took the AK-47 to his hip and fired again. The priest's chest burst open, his monstrously deformed head lolled.

Chris tugged his shirt. "Let's move, Dad!"

From long range, Loi fired at the remains of the priest three more times, hoping that this would be enough, fearing the worst. Angry, disgusted, she shook away the tears that had started forming in her eyes. She got up behind Brian and they darted through the dismembered, disorganized rabble that was all that remained after Father Palmer's effort.

From behind them there rose a hideous sound, a high-pitched, raging bellow so filled with hate that it made her cling to her husband's back to drown it out.

They went on.

Just as they were about to hop the curb and get back into the woods, the Viper came speeding up from the direction of Oscola. Its lights were off and it was moving at blinding speed, coming straight at them. But Loi was a good shot. She rose behind Brian and fired over his head.

A blue spark flew off the hood of the onrushing car.

She had perhaps three seconds.

Her next shot dissolved the windshield.

The sound of the engine went high, the car swerved.

Another shot missed. "Goddamnit."

Again she fired, this time into the right tire.

The car careened to the right, narrowly missing Bob and Joey West on their ATV, then rolling off into the dark by the side of the road.

A moment later a series of purple flashes exploded up from the ditch where it had crashed. Out of the flickering explosions there raged a mass of flailing, segmented legs, clashing red mandibles, plates of gleaming red chitin.

It hadn't been a vehicle at all, but a—what? A colony of something?

Before anybody could so much as take a breath, crystalline purple eyes had appeared at the ends of the mandibles.

One of them shot forward.

Loi found herself staring straight into its glittering darkness. She saw the mesmerizing image of a beautiful little baby. He was floating, still attached to the umbilical. He kicked, his whole body jerking with the suddenness of a man waking from an unexpected sleep.

Brian grabbed both of her cheeks and turned her face forcibly away.

Then she was back in this world and they were pulling out, tires wailing protest.

Holding on with one hand, she touched her face with the other. "Did it get me?" she bellowed. Her baby kicked. "*Did it get me?*"

"No!"

"Thank God." As they raced off into the night, she had the bloodcurdling realization that the demon was especially interested in her, and she knew why: it wanted her baby.

Ellen was behind them when she saw, coming up from behind the tree line, something entirely new and completely unexpected. A gigantic, tapering mandible, visible in the dark only as a shadow, probed along behind Loi and Brian's speeding ATV. It was as if the most tremendous, the most terrible of all the dragons of myth had risen from the depths.

For a moment it wavered, as if seeking direction. Then it stopped, focused, and went questing after Loi. On its first pass it came so close that she rubbed the back of her head where it had touched.

"Loi," Ellen shouted, "look out! Look out behind you!"

When Loi turned in her seat she saw a grasping, outstretched hand with fingers ten feet long.

She grabbed Brian's waist and hung on for dear life as they chugged toward the sheltering forest. On her cheek she felt a chill cooler than the wind rushing past, felt it slip around her neck, felt the gentlest of tugs, persistent, getting stronger—then broken.

She was free.

But then the serpent arm flashed back into view, tremendous fingers waving gracefully in her face. She shrieked, threw herself against Brian's back. Her baby leaped within her. She felt a dull, deep pain. "No, please," she whispered. She tried to force the muscles to relax, but they did not relax. Again her baby jumped. There was a dull, familiar pain. "Oh, no. Please no."

The serpent arm rose high over the ATV, curling in a huge arch. Then its end disappeared into the roiling clouds. She could not see where it was anchored to the ground, or the gigantic creation of which it must be a part. It was large enough to slap all four vehicles to oblivion. "Brian, it's going to hit us!"

The tree line was fifty feet away.

She could feel the thing's presence above like the looming cave-in of a tunnel or a fat client at the Blue Moon Bar sinking down on her. Then the ground shook, the ATV's engine wailed, and the whole enormous thing crashed into the road behind them. The hand closed on air.

Instantly the gigantic apparition rose, stretching its serpentine form to the absolute maximum, and this time swinging out to the side. As it shimmered away into the woods seventy- and eighty-foot pines shattered into matchsticks, their trunks riven, the roar of their fall like the voice of a

maddened river.

It came back, sailing toward them at full speed, right beside them, then just beside the rear tires, then just missing, the fingers extended.

They were within twenty feet of the woods.

But the road before them erupted in a geyser of dirt, stones and soil and concrete flying upward as something came bursting out of the earth.

Desperately Brian swerved away. Loi, who had been hanging on by one hand, was thrown hard to the side. She fell, her shoulder glancing off the ground. As she felt the shock blast through her, she screamed in pain and terror. Her womb shuddered like jelly, and long, hot knives of pain penetrated deep.

"Loi!"

She grabbed his back, the far edge of the seat, forced herself up. "I'm OK!"

The other ATVs were coming fast, engines bellowing.

Brian gunned his engine, their ATV leaped ahead—and Loi found herself lying in the road flat on her back. Her mind snatched details, the smell of the exhaust, the faint warmth of the pavement, the gnarled shadowy clouds above.

From underground came a booming, pulsating sound. Her skin felt suddenly shivery, tight. She saw Brian still on the ATV, a look of absolute horror on his face. Then she felt the ground churning beneath her body.

She was falling.

She saw Brian disappear, the sky above him disappear, saw it all become a haze, a blur, then saw it folded away into blackness. She was dropping fast, so astonished that she couldn't even cry out.

From far above she heard Brian shouting, heard her name echoing.

Then she hit something thick and warm, sank into it, kept going down and down, felt it hot around her, breathed, choked, tasted a foul taste, went deeper and deeper and deeper.

2.

Brian threw himself to the ground, began clawing at the pavement, which was still loose where Loi had been absorbed. But the stones soon acquired a sort of crazy, spinning weight, rushing out from under his fingers and back into their places.

Inside of twenty seconds there wasn't a trace of the hole that had consumed her. The only sign that it had ever existed was the presence of pale, friable clay, just like the summit of the mound, or the spot out on the Northway where Bob had been taken.

Deeper silence descended. It was broken when frogs out in forest ponds resumed a tentative chorus. Brian crouched beside their ATV, weeping.

He was unaware of the others as they pulled up around him. Realizing that something was terribly wrong, they'd come back.

Bob leaned over him. "Brian?"

"I've lost her!"

His words sickened them all. She had been their strength. Her belief in escape was what had sustained their effort. She was the only reason that any of them were still alive.

Ellen went down to him, put her arm around his sweat-soaked back. "Oh, Jesus," she said.

It felt as if his heart had been ripped out of his chest. The agony was so pure that he didn't cry out, he didn't even weep. He was there, and Loi wasn't.

"We have to keep going," Nancy said from the dark nearby. "We can't stay here. Loi would want it, Brian. She wanted us to survive." Nancy's voice went low, and a great, racking sob escaped.

Nobody moved. They were all together now, all in one place.

"This could be a trap," Chris said. The boy he had been had evaporated like foam, replaced by this tough little survivor.

Brian looked at him. He wanted a son. He wanted another baby to raise. He wanted Loi. "You go," he told them all.

From deep in the ground there came a cry, long and full of mourning.

That ended what little self-control remained. The anguish came pouring out like lava from the depths of his soul and he raised his eyes to the sky and howled. Then he hammered at the ground, finally leaped to his feet, yanked the pistol out of his belt and emptied it into the road, which sent back little puffs of steam where the bullets struck the asphalt.

Then there came up from the center of him such a feeling as he had never known before. He went beyond agony. It felt as if his soul was congealing in psychic fire. But it also brought him a certain peace, the peace of an absolute decision, of total and complete determination.

"I'm going in," he said. "I'm going to go in there somehow, and I am going to find her and get her back."

"Come on, honey," Nancy said to Bob. Her voice was urgent: they could hear the humvees off in the darkness somewhere.

"We gotta go, Brian," Ellen said. She got on her ATV. The others got on theirs, all except Brian. He backed away.

"I can't leave her." He would not tell them this, but he was hoping that the thing would return and take him as well.

Ellen got off her vehicle. "You go ahead," she said faintly to Bob and his family, hardly believing her own voice.

"Brian," Bob said, "I've gotta keep going. I have my family to think of."

"You go," Ellen said, "it's dangerous here."

"I can't."

She reached out to him, was glad that he let her take his hand. "Brian Kelly, you listen to me! If you stay here, you'll never have the chance to help her."

"A door that's been opened can be closed," Brian said firmly. "If I can get inside, maybe I can do some good."

A great rush of wind went through the trees, bringing with it cold, intimate smells from the deep forest. "I see a light," Joey hissed.

A hard white light was flitting through the woods, and they all knew what it was. It flew slowly along, almost lazily, winking on and off as it passed among the trees.

Ellen had the horrible, secret thought that they might be looking at part of Loi. She went closer to Brian. It was going to be awfully hard to get on that ATV and leave him behind.

The Wests mounted up. "If we can get help," Bob said, "we'll come back for you, buddy. Both of you." He looked at Ellen. "We've gotta move."

"I'll be going out on my own later," Ellen heard herself say. She was amazed at herself. But the truth was that she had become too committed to Brian and Loi to leave them like this. She just couldn't do it.

Brian's hollow eyes bored into her. His face was a sweaty mask. "Ellen, don't be an idiot." There was something very new in his voice: it cut, it was raw, it was white-hot.

"There's another one," Chris said. A second lightning bug darted across the road. Under them, the ground vibrated.

The Wests left, dashing off into the dark.

Brian nodded to Ellen, almost formally welcoming her to the world of his pain. "I thought he would take me, too."

"Who is he?"

Brian shook his head. He looked down. "That's what I need to find out."

3.

Loi was struggling against the thick, mud-like substance. It was getting in her mouth, her eyes. She had to breathe and she couldn't, she was in agony, her whole body being pressed harder and harder, so hard she couldn't stand it. Her womb was getting tighter and tighter, and she was afraid she was going to burst.

Then she was back in the brothel, spreading her legs and counting, one, two, three. No, she was in real, physical filth, drowning in it.

Involuntarily her mouth opened as she gasped for air. She had to breathe, she had to, *had to!* Mud came sliding in.

Then air.

Air, roaring clouds of it: she hacked, spat, spat harder, shook her head, gasped and promptly choked on little stones and soil, shook her entire body. Debris cascaded around her, plopping to a floor that sounded soft and damp.

Total darkness.

She gulped and belched helplessly, as she'd seen prisoners do in terror of impending torture.

She raised her hands to her belly. Trembling, she felt down to her vagina for blood there, brought up her finger and tasted... only her own familiar musk.

She got to her feet—and found just overhead a dense, giving thickness centered by a puckered, rubbery area. It was like an opening in the ceiling, closed by ligaments. She pushed her fist into the center of it, and in a moment dirt ran down her arm.

Then it came to horrible life, tightening as if it was filled with muscle. Her hand was forced out. The lips were rigid now, being held taut. She could not

push them open again.

This did not feel like a tunnel or a room or a cave. It was so confined, the air was so bad, that she felt as if somebody huge had his arms tightly around her chest. She flailed against the limits of the tiny space, her hands slipping in the substance that coated it.

She hadn't been sucked into a cave at all, she'd been swallowed. As she ran her hand across the soft floor, the slick, sinewy walls, they shuddered and seethed. This was a living thing. She was inside a huge organ.

That broke her. She slapped the giving walls, kicked the floor, which gave and bounced back like a sponge.

Another fear invaded her, and she felt her face with frantic little detailed gestures, trying to be sure that she had not changed, that she had not become —

No, her skin remained smooth and soft.

Then she heard something new, a hissing, rattling sound. It was coming closer to her. She drew away from it—and found herself pressed up against the other side of the living chamber.

The space was getting smaller, she could feel the far wall touching her, then pressing against her.

A blazing white explosion of terror convulsed her and she wailed, feeling as she did it all the loneliness of the truly lost.

She did not know how long she screamed, but eventually her howls changed to hard, gulping breaths. The air was even more dense now. Breathing didn't work well. She was being smothered.

Then she knew that something was pressing against her belly. Her reflex was instant—she pushed away, pressing herself into the wall behind her. Dense liquid squeezed out behind her back and oozed down her shoulders and breasts.

Hard, rough hands grasped her thighs, scraped slowly along her sides, again coming to her stomach. Inside her, the baby jerked spasmodically.

She could not move any farther away. The hands came up her sides, up her breasts, her shoulders, her neck. She heard a rattling sound not an inch from her face. Reflexively, she tried to shield herself.

Her hands came into contact with thin wrists as hard as steel pipe, cold and covered with hairs like spikes. The hands came to her hands. They also were hard and cold.

When they tried to close on her hands, she reached out, slapping, hitting.

She came into contact with a face. Undoubtedly it was a face: she could feel the shape of it. But the cheeks were hard, the mouth was complex with parts that tickled her palms as they worked. The eyes were dry and protuberant, feeling under her sliding fingers like the surface of a strainer. They reminded her of the eyes of a fly.

Her baby was jumping and jerking, as if he entirely shared his mother's anguish.

Slowly, the face turned, and her fingers slipped away from the eyes. But there were hard, springy hairs all around them and she clutched these and pulled as hard as she could.

A great caw burst out, blasting straight into her face. The hands came up and closed their hard fingers around her wrists and yanked her arms away. She twisted, she spat, she shrieked.

A feeling of incredible malevolence washed over her with the power of a hurricane stinking of profound rot.

She could not see him glaring at her, but she knew that *he* could see.

"Kill us," she said. She was thinking of the hideous changes she had seen in the Michaelsons and the Rysdale boy and poor Father Palmer. This must not happen to her baby!

A new sound came, a sawing wheeze, coarse, loud, as if it was made not with vocal cords but by sticks rattling together. Even so, she recognized this sound: it was laughter, the laughter of triumph.

He had hunted her and captured her and taken her for one reason: the child.

Seventeen

1.

Ellen and Brian had moved off into the woods and were making their way slowly west, paralleling the town. To their right, they could occasionally hear the falls of the Cuyamora River as it came leaping down out of the mountains. To their left behind a screen of thick forest lay Oscola.

Brian was stricken by his loss, but he had tabled drastic action until he knew what had happened to Loi. If she was dead, then he thought he would want to join her. He had to find out. Rather than paralyzing him, it was the nature of this uncertain grief to drive him to greater effort. His mind was now entirely centered on discovering her fate and the fate of their child.

He watched Ellen riding slowly along beside him. Although he felt gratitude for her support, she could not stay.

Ellen also watched him. She did not know how he kept on. Had she suffered a loss like his, her first impulse would be to just shrivel up and die. She could see his pale ghost of a face, his dark mass of curly hair.

His mind analyzed and deduced. There had to be a way in, and it must be somewhere in this general area.

The highest probability was that the entrance to whatever remained of the facility would be near the judge's place. He had excellent reasons to think this.

First, the judge had been co-opted early, and the initial manifestations had taken place on his mound and in his root cellar. Second, as they drew closer to the estate, Brian was observing more and more changes in the plant life—subtly twisted limbs, leaves reduced to contorted green knobs, or turning into sticky green-black sheets that stank of mold.

It would have made sense for the scientists involved to move the facility to

Oscola. It was close to the Ludlum campus, site of the original problem. More importantly, the town was in the middle of a small but geologically unique area.

The veins of iron and basalt that ran beneath it were among the strongest geological formations on earth. The men who were fighting this war would have wanted that strength, in case they had to try another containment effort.

So he knew where he would find the entrance to the new facility, and that was where he was going.

Ellen stayed with him, even after they moved past a clump of pulsating, bloated saplings.

He called to her. As soon as she stopped she slumped over her handlebars. She was almost done in. "Yeah, Brian?"

"It's time for you to follow the Wests."

"I think I can help."

"Ellen, it's not real likely that I'm going to be coming back."

"But there's a chance we could hurt this thing, isn't there? Or even stop it altogether."

He could not lie to her. "There's a chance. Not a good one, though."

What she wanted was to be in a nice cozy bed with a cup of cappuccino and a sweet, loving husband. But that wasn't to be. She could not turn away from this problem, not if there was any chance at all of doing something useful here. "What would we have to do?"

"Get the equipment turned on—assuming that's even possible."

"Turned on? You'd think we'd have to turn something off. Bust hell out of it."

"The link's already been made or this wouldn't be happening. Obviously my

colleagues were trying to break it."

"What link?"

"I'm not sure. But I know I'm right about the equipment."

"Which is where?"

"You remember that old iron mine?"

"How could I ever forget it?" The wetness the spiderlike thing had left on her legs remained a vivid memory.

"If we go down there, we'll find an entrance, almost certainly."

"We have a couple of pistols. We'll need flashlights. A company of marines."

He smiled at her then, a thin smile. "Listen to the frogs."

Their croaking had risen to hysteria.

"And the crickets," Ellen noticed. They were shrilling wildly.

From all around them there came a continuous rustling, creaking sound. "If we're going to go, we'd better do it, Ellen."

She took a deep breath, blew it out. Then she revved her ATV, put it in gear. "Here goes nothing," she muttered under her breath.

They moved off, deep into the forest.

At first the trip was uneventful, as far as Ellen was concerned. She did begin to notice the twisted limbs, the funny leaves. Then she saw a fern that looked like a pile of seaweed. A few minutes later a black, complicated creature flashed past in her headlight. It was too big to be an insect, too full of spindly legs and feelers to be a bat.

She watched for lightning bugs.

With a soft scratching sound something landed briefly on her chest. She glanced down just in time to see what appeared to be a flying scorpion, its wings still whirring.

Before she could even scream, it had sailed off into the dark.

The closer they got to Mound Road, the more things changed. The trunks of trees were grotesquely twisted, and their leaves were withering like small, closed fists. Purple light glimmered beneath the forest floor. Wet brown tendrils sprouted from the moss, twisting and growing, seeking.

Closer, and the fattened tree trunks were sprouting great black sheets of material in place of leaves.

Along with the trees everything was changing, the ferns turning to flopping, rubbery slabs that exuded black ichor, the mushrooms growing to great size, a fog of mold-stinking gas.

A pearl-white millipede at least eight feet long glided out in front of her. Before she could stop she had driven over it. With a splash the soft body exploded, slopping her feet with liquid that reeked like clabber.

Despite the rough ground, Brian increased speed. Behind him Ellen's vehicle careened along, bouncing into a gully, then bursting back into the thicker woods.

Now the leaves when they touched her clung a little and felt like leather. Purple sparks played in the soil, and the haze was like dust. She coughed, bringing up something like black tapioca.

Brian kept his eyes focused ahead, watching the dark woods whip past. It wouldn't do to hit a tree. Even letting those crawly leaves touch his bare arms made the gorge rise in his throat.

He wanted only to follow Loi's fate. If she was dead, then he would die. If she had been changed, then he would submit.

The thought of her suffering even a little bit made him twist his throttle and

go speeding even faster through the woods, forgetful of the less efficient driver struggling to keep up.

Rough limbs dragged at his chest. His stomach felt as if it was boiling.

A glow flickered in the woods ahead, as quickly died.

Ellen also saw the glow, and sensed her will faltering. Then she fixed her attention on the speeding ghost in front of her.

He swerved to avoid a sapling. At the same moment he saw another flicker off among the trees. He grew wary, began to sweep the area ahead with his eyes. Above all, he didn't want to be destroyed on the way in.

They'd used his equipment to open a door into another world and this was what had come out.

Behind him he could hear Ellen's four-wheeler slurring and slipping, the engine alternately guttering low, then screaming. She wasn't much good with it. Maybe she'd get lucky and the thing would overheat. She'd be out here alone, but at least she'd be alive.

Off to the left he saw a gray strip. For a moment his heart raced. They were closing in on Mound Road.

They broke out onto the grassy shoulder at more or less the same time. The clouds had parted and they could see the Milky Way overarching the heavens. The moon hung low in the west, above it the evening star.

But their light shone down on a forest that was twisting and lurching and changing, limbs sweeping back and forth against the sky, whole trees splitting with explosive reports, contorting into new shapes, growing great, misshapen leaves as black and slick and floppy as sheets of fungus.

The din was horrendous. The crunching and creaking of limbs, the sighing of leaves in extreme agitation, the bellows and shrieks and ululations of the forest creatures, all combined into a single groaning cry.

When they stopped their ATVs this new sound at first confused them. Then

Brian understood. He could hardly bear to do it, for he knew what he would see. But he forced himself to look down the road toward the judge's house.

There, in all its contorted glory, stood the borderland of a new world. Huge, bloated barrels topped by fungoid sheets had entirely replaced the trees. Black, twining vines covered with hair so stiff they looked as if they had been shocked attempted to choke the barrels. Here and there dark forms moved slowly along. Cries rose and fell, gawps and croaks echoed. All stood beneath a purple haze. The farther they looked, the thicker the monstrous forest became, the broader and higher the barrels, the wider the black, mucus-dripping sheets that they presented to the sky.

"I think speed's our only hope."

Ellen got on her bike, turned it around and prepared to escape. "What if we meet up with the humvees?"

"Ellen, the only direction I'll go is forward."

"Into *that*? We'll be killed for certain."

"But we might be able to do some damage."

Under the grass and weeds around them, she began to notice purple flashes and sparks. It was coming, moving like a wave out of the dark, changing everything it touched.

From behind them on the road there came a series of wet snarls, loud enough to be heard over the forest's agony. A bend in the road made it impossible to see what was there. Ellen heard Brian take out his pistol, did the same.

An enormous creature on four segmented legs came stalking around the bend. The legs were at least fifteen feet long. Lurching like a sedan chair in their center was a boxy body that had once clearly been a humvee. Beneath it gnarled, troll-like shadows humped along, seeking the protection of the great beast. They bore long, thin arms. The ruins of the uniforms and chemical protective gear of these creatures who had once been ordinary American soldiers hung in tatters from various appendages.

Where the lights of the humvee had been, the head of the creature had compound eyes that glowed with purple fire.

This light struck joy into their hearts. They did not expect it, and they cried out with the pleasure. Brian stomped his feet and yelled. Ellen staggered in circles, wailing, impotently waving her gun.

It was like being burned to death in glory.

But Ellen also felt it as rape, and the single, tiny spark of anger that this produced was enough to cause her to turn away for a moment.

The thrall broke. Beside her Brian was on his back, supported by heels and shoulders, bellowing and thrusting his pelvis at the oncoming monstrosity with the fury of a sex-maddened rodent.

She leaped on him, pressed her face to his and screamed out his name with every ounce of strength in her body.

Then they were rolling—and not a moment too soon, for the huge walker with its phalanx of trolls had positioned themselves not a hundred feet away. As Brian and Ellen scrabbled, stumbled, finally ran deeper into the forbidden zone, the monstrosity poured purple light into the two ATVs, which belched yellow smoke and began to grow legs.

Ellen, who had been terrified beyond words, now reached another place entirely in her heart, the place where men in battle go, that is beyond pain, beyond fear, beyond hope, beyond everything.

She was a body, bone and blood and brain, sweat and flying hair, racing between bloated monstrosities through foul purple air, behind a man in a tattered T-shirt who was waving a pistol as he ran.

They went toward the judge's vine-encrusted house and beyond it, now running, now climbing through curtains of vine that shuddered when they were touched. When Ellen slowed for a moment, she felt these vines begin slipping stealthily around her legs, felt leaves plastering themselves to her arms, her thighs. Stifling a scream, she snatched them away. More came, and

she could feel all the limbs and twigs and leaves bending toward herself and Brian, could see the fat bodies of the trees beginning to pulsate.

But then they reached the area of the root cellar, and suddenly conditions changed again. Here there weren't so many of the monstrous plants. The brush that had choked the cellar's entrance had given way to sheets of the slick fungus. This had the effect of increasing the opening rather than narrowing it.

Brian sat down on the stuff, began inching toward the hole.

"Brian, don't!"

"We've got to go where we're least expected. There's no other way."

She looked back. With the strange grace of a spider, the enormous machine marched after them. The shadows of the trolls were fanning out, cutting off all escape. Two dead black piles of what appeared to be gleaming meat jerked and heaved in the background: the remains of the ATVs were continuing to mutate.

"We need flashlights, Brian."

"Oh, Christ, you're right." He peered across the seething lawn. "We've gotta try the house." He sounded sick.

Crossing the heaving, tortured earth, they crouched like soldiers under fire. They kept their faces carefully averted from the oncoming juggernaut, but now even the purple flickering in the subsoil had become bright enough to deliver pleasure.

Every time they as much as slowed down for breath, the grass itself came spinning up around their ankles, the blades having taken on the configuration of thousands of busy, tapered worms.

By the time they reached the porch, these creatures had covered their shoes with a substance so slippery that they could hardly keep on their feet. They entered the quiet, inky black kitchen, feeling their way, unsure of anything.

When Brian inhaled, he noticed a strong odor. "What's that smell?"

"Sweat, I think."

"Is it us?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Where would an old man keep a flashlight, Ellen?"

"A cabinet, a drawer?"

She heard a scrape, then clinking. Brian had opened a drawer. Flailing ahead, she found the refrigerator, opened a cabinet above it. Her hands swept the shelf. She snatched them back. There was something slick. It felt... organic. She listened, but nothing moved. Licking her paper-dry lips, she stuck her hand in again. "Brian, I've found some candles!"

"Matches?"

"No... Yes!" She pulled down a familiar box. "Kitchen matches. Big box!" Holding them, she grabbed the candles. "Four candles."

He came close to her. They fumbled with their booty like excited children opening Christmas presents. Then he struck one of the matches and held it high.

They both screamed at once, shrieked, really. Standing in the doorway was a seven-foot-tall insect with gigantic, glaring eyes. Lying before it on the floor were five supple arms of the type that had destroyed the Dick Kellys and the Huygenses. They emerged from an unseen source in the dining room. With the easy stealth of a cobra, two of them rose from the floor. Both were carrying purple crystalline eyes.

The insect's mouth parts vibrated and it emitted a buzzing caw. They could hear the excitement.

Then the match went out.

Brian fired his pistol into the dark. In the first flash, the thing's eyes glared, filled with malevolence. In the second, it had spread great, sheet-like wings that looked like black, veined plastic.

In the third, it was gone.

"Let's get out of here," Ellen yelled. She was thinking of those arms.

This time they did not stop at the edge of the root cellar: there was no time to stop. The humvees were in the yard; something was crowing angrily from the roof of the house; the arms were snaking out the kitchen window, their surfaces gleaming in the last failing light of the moon.

Ellen landed on Brian, both of them sinking a foot into the spongy, giving surface that had replaced the earthen floor of the root cellar.

Working with furious haste, Brian lit another match. The room was empty, and the entrance to the mine gaped unattended. They lit candles and went in.

Ellen was so scared that her nervous system was beginning to betray her. She could hardly walk, let alone keep the candle lit in the stinking draft that exuded from the tunnel. "Brian."

"I smell them." He sighed. "If only we had flashlights," he muttered. He was cupping his hand around his guttering candle, leaning into the opening.

"I can't go in there!"

"Where else is there?"

For the first time in her life, the idea of suicide crossed her mind. "Why did I come back? Am I crazy?" She sobbed a ragged sob. It made her mad when she cried, and she choked it back.

"Look. I came back because there's no place in the world I'd rather go. And I have a chance of doing something in here. Out there, none."

"What sort of a chance?"

"There's bound to be something we can do."

"Don't make me think there's hope if there isn't any. Because I think I want to blow my own head off before I get made into one of those... things. I don't want to miss my opportunity, Brian."

"If somebody opened a door into another universe—a parallel reality—then the door can be closed. My theories suggested this possibility."

"It's science fiction."

"The Many Worlds Interpretation is accepted physics. Parallel universes are real, I'm afraid."

They went down the mine. The walls were iron, but the floor was mushy. It was like trying to walk on raw dough.

They went down twenty feet, then fifty.

And they encountered an elevator. "Goddamn that Nate Harris.

He's a liar!" Beyond the elevator a tunnel went off toward the surface, no doubt to the main entrance to the facility, which would be hidden well back in the woods.

"The project was classified, Ellen. They probably didn't even let him come down this far."

"They? You mean people?"

"Of course. The scientific team that was working on this."

"They oughta be thrown into the deepest dungeon in the world and left to rot."

He thought he might know the fate of two members of that team: one might have died screaming in the mound, another could have been the woman disinterred from her living grave near Towayda.

To one side was a glass-fronted box with an elevator key in it. Brian broke it with the butt of his pistol and they got the shaft open. Down one side there was a row of ladder rungs. The car was nowhere to be seen.

Without a word, Brian started down, his candle dripping wax into the gloom below. Ellen followed him. She'd never much enjoyed heights—bungee jumping was good copy, no more—and she fought to keep her vertigo from making her lose her balance.

Perhaps an impossible task. "Brian?"

"Yeah?"

"How deep is this?"

"Could be hundreds of feet."

They were now lost in the gloom, two people in a tiny pool of fluttery candlelight, dropping down and down.

"Hold it," Brian said crisply.

She stopped. Her blood was blasting in her ears, her breath snapping.

"Now come ahead. Be careful."

She hit a surface. There were cables going up. "Where are we?"

Brian pulled open a hatch. "We've gotta go through the elevator car." He dropped down inside, making it bounce. "Shit, lost my light!"

Carefully, she put out her candle and thrust it down in her pocket with her other two.

The darkness was now absolute. "Brian?"

"I'm right here. Just drop."

She slid into the hatch, let go. An instant later she hit the rocking floor of the

car. She flailed, felt Brian, then grabbed something thick and cool and wet. "Jesus, it's full of that ick!"

"Strike a light!" His voice was high with terror, and that made her fumble.

Her right hand was covered with goop, so she used her left. "I can't find the matches!"

"Jesus, Jesus, I hate this stuff!"

Her hand closed around the box, drew it out of her pocket. Her candles scattered on the floor. "Brian—" She thrust the matches into his hands.

There was a scrape, a spark, then the small sound of dozens of matches hitting the floor. He scrabbled. "It's OK!"

The match lit, revealing his gray, sweat-sheened face, his bulging, glistening eyes. She looked down at the material on her hand. Black gel. As best she could she rubbed it off against the wall.

Filling the back of the car was a thick, black mass of the material she had touched. It looked like a wet, lumpy garbage bag slathered with ooze.

They stared at it for a moment without comprehension.

Then Brian doubled over, retching loudly. In the semi-opaque gel floated parts of a human being. There were eyes suspended in the mass, connected by tangles of nerve endings to a dark, shriveled appendage, the congealing remnant of a brain. A face, stretched to extremes of distortion, the eye-sockets wide, the lips like red rubber bands, the cheeks crazed by horizontal wrinkles.

"Jesus Christ, it's Bill Merriman! He was our security director." He pointed down into the complex mess. "On his belt—that's his pager!"

"Got a page from hell, I guess."

"Poor guy."

They found the hatch in the floor, and pried up the sunken handle with Ellen's pocketknife, a pitiful little thing with two blades and a fingernail file.

They went on, descending another thirty feet before they reached the bottom of the shaft. The floor was littered with gum and candy wrappers and other familiar debris: lost coins, a half-empty pack of cigarettes—things people had dropped on their way in and out of the elevator. There were stacks of cinder-blocks, coils of wire.

"This is only half finished, Brian. It's a mess."

"Yeah." His voice was bitter. "They didn't have enough time. Not quite enough."

A moment later they stepped out into a hallway. Ellen held up her candle. "This part's finished."

The hall was short, the ceiling low. Brian looked around at the blue pipe that lined the walls. "This is all very familiar. It's a waveguide. The visible part of one. The rest is buried."

"What's a waveguide?"

"When you create an extratemporal particle, it flies off through time and space both. It leaves a sort of track in time. This guides it, so you can detect its passage. But somebody with superior understanding could use its track to literally climb through the ages to reach you."

"From the future? These things are from the future?"

Brian shook his head. "If they're not from some sort of alternate reality, then they must be from the past."

"The past? How?"

"I don't know. Except when you consider that the earth existed for billions of years before the first sign of what we define as life appeared, you can see that there's plenty of room for whole worlds to have come and gone and left not even a fossil behind."

Then they saw a figure lying in the farther shadows. As they went toward it, Brian at once hoped and feared that it was Loi.

It was a young man. The uniform told them where the judge's soldiers had come from: they had been facility guards like this one.

Ellen turned to Brian, put her hands on his shoulders. They held one another in silence, two very frightened and lonely people.

From deep within the complex came a rattle, followed by a long sigh. A wind rose from below, this one foul with odors neither of them had ever smelled before, thick, sour odors, complicated by dense sweetness. It stank like old meat, like rotted fruit.

Then the direction of the air flow changed. What came down from above was fresh by comparison. "What gives, Brian?"

"A ventilation system."

"There's no electricity."

"It isn't our design, Ellen. We vent with fans."

The whole place was quietly breathing.

2.

The first contraction confused her. Despite all the years she'd spent on her back, she'd never given birth. At the Blue Moon Bar girls who didn't get aborted got taken down to the banks of the Chao Phraya River, and they didn't come back.

She'd been aborted seven times, and that was the secret reason she was so fragile inside. Only the doctor had known. "Dr. Gidumal," she moaned, staggering along in the blind dark. "Sanghvi... Sanghvi Gidumal..."

Now she held her belly, encircling it with her arms. Memories came to her aid, gentle and vivid, of the few good times she had known. But even these

memories contained betrayal.

When she was eight, her uncle had dressed her in a beautiful white *bao dai* that was scented with flowers, and taken her from the Chu Chi tunnels to Mai Thi Luu Street, with the Saigon Zoo at one end and the Emperor of Jade Pagoda at the other. Behind the pagoda flowering weeds choked the banks of the Thi Nghe channel, and their aroma scented the grounds. There had been small bells that tinkled peacefully, and incense that filled the air with the scent of old memories, and the gleaming bald heads of boy monks who had watched her with wide, calm eyes.

In that pagoda was a very special and terrible place, the famous Hall of the Ten Hells. All the torments of the damned were portrayed there, the suffering of those so weighted with karma that they had fallen from the wheel of life forever.

Her two years in the tunnels had taught her about maneuvering in wet and dark, and that training was indispensable now.

She'd been touched all over by those terrible rough hands, and they had left something runny on her that had congealed and become sticky. More than bearing her contractions, she thought now about getting this stuff off her skin.

She did not believe in the contractions.

Brian Ky Kelly would not choose such an inauspicious time for his arrival. He was a glory child, intended to come at the very moment of dawn, under the protection of the sun and the morning star.

Her legs seemed to weigh a thousand pounds, she didn't know where she was, where she was going. There were sparks in her eyes but nothing else, no light.

She must have sinned too much with the perverts who visited the Blue Moon Bar. She had done many things repugnant to heaven and nature. But she had a baby! "I am with child," she cried, a shout she had often heard in the smoky dawn, when the American planes had sailed high and the firebombs had fluttered to the ground with the motion of silver leaves.

She heard a woman sobbing, knew it was her, for there was no other woman here, nobody else so bad she had been sent to the black bottom of the Ten Hells. She knew she would burn soon, she could smell combustion in the air, hear fire rustling in the walls.

Something brushed against her shoulder, then small threads began dragging across her chest. Reflex caused her to jump away, and the threads disappeared.

She continued walking, trying to hurry now, using her tunnel skills. She kept her head low, waving her hands before her.

Demons, demons, demons.

She cast about in her mind for some deliverance, and found herself returning to the Emperor of Jade Pagoda. There also was a painting of the Guardian Spirit of Mother and Child. "I call on you to help us."

Another contraction came, and this time there could be no doubt: she was going to give birth in hell. At the drumming apex of the pain she sobbed and shouted out, "There is a baby here!" She had also heard this in the quivering waters of the rice paddies, when both sides would be firing bright-burning phosphorus bullets into anybody in a sun hat.

She remembered how the peasant villages smelled in the rain, of rich, damp thatch and sweet cookfire smoke.

Once or twice she thought she'd seen sparks ahead, flickering like candles. But they did not reappear, and so she knew that they were only lights from the tunnels of girlhood.

She would not allow the lamentations that wanted to rise from her to stop her progress. Brian Ky Kelly was coming! She had to find the sun.

Something trembled inside her, a flutter of the inner belly. Then a hot gush of something poured down her legs. She felt fluid sluicing along her thighs, as if the sea had come out of her. "Do not take my baby!" This had been the cry of her people when the guns roared. Bullets are blind, she remembered, and

softly cursed heaven for not letting her keep her gun.

She dabbed at her legs, fearing that this new gush was also blood, a fatal hemorrhage. She lifted the fluid to her lips, tasting, praying.

It was the water of birth. "Help me!" Their baby would see the Hall of the Ten Hells, she had brought him here because of the evil of her life. As if he was already a dead man she grieved for him.

She had heard it coming from under flattened thatch and fiercely burning fire, the cry *help me*. Usually the first answer was that of the mocking parrots. Often, theirs was the only one.

Another contraction came, shooting down from the middle of her belly, causing her to arch her back and cry out, shaking her arms and her head. She nearly toppled back, then staggered forward. She had seen peasant women give birth squatting in a corner of a room, their faces without expression. When she squatted the pain was less.

Finally the contraction passed. Unsteadily, she got to her feet. The way the floor of the tunnel trembled made it very hard to walk. It was like trying to march in a hammock. Worse, the whole place was covered with phlegm, lathered in it.

But when she breathed in, she could smell the dear damp of thatch, the sweetness of a mud floor. She waved her arms about,

but felt only the slick, oozing walls. There was no thatch here, no little hut where a baby could be welcomed.

She was going to have him at the wonderful Ludlum Community Hospital! In one of the beautiful white rooms! Attended by nurses! "Don't forget me, everybody! Dr. Gidumal, I am in need! Dr. Gidumal!"

A sound came like a child drawing the bow across the strings of a *bar-woo*, crackling and guttural.

Instantly she swallowed her cries.

The next contraction hurt so much that she fell to her knees. She was gasping, helpless, lost in the pain. But she would not scream, not if sound drew attention.

When at last it had passed she could taste the salt of her own blood. To keep the screams in, she'd gnashed her lips raw.

She did not try to go forward anymore, she was too exhausted.

This strong woman, who had braved practically every obstacle there was to find a husband and bear a child, was finally being broken. Swelling pain engulfed her, starting down in her center, driving her to slump forward like an abandoned ragdoll. She pushed because she had to push, but every cell of her body wanted to protect her baby. As she arched her back, she raised her arms—and suddenly her hands were in contact with something complicated.

It was cold and wet and warty, and it left a stickiness like slobber in her palms. Gagging, she wiped them uselessly against her soaked jeans.

She crawled then, a few feet, a few more. A slashing sound started overhead, as if somebody was opening and closing huge scissors. A shower of drips rained on her naked back.

Something up there was drooling on her.

She knew, suddenly, why they did not attack her, transform her into a demon with the purple light. They were waiting for the baby to be born. They wanted to eat his sweet and tender flesh. They were up there sharpening their claws.

Crawling as best she could, she silently called on the Goddess of Mothers and Children.

Another contraction broke over her with the power of an explosion, setting her inner thighs afire, sending spears of lightning up her back. She felt something tear within her, felt it give, and suddenly there was deep movement. She went forward to her face, kneeling now with her butt high, her shoulders against the floor. Pulling her jeans away, she reached under

herself and felt, and there was Brian Ky Kelly's wet head in her hands.

She turned onto her side, her back, took Brian onto her belly, grabbed a corner of her blouse to shield him from what was above. It came closer and closer, until its hard, warty shell pushed against her belly, her breasts, the still, hot body of her baby.

She pulled him out from under it, felt a pain within herself, realized that he was still attached to the umbilical cord. How to unfasten it? Women must do it somehow, poor women without the simplest tools. She reached down and by stretching took it into her mouth. It was slick, salty, tasting faintly of blood.

Before she could bite down there was the whisper of a blade, very close.

The parted umbilical cord fell away.

She was so exhausted that she couldn't raise herself, could hardly hold him against her breasts. He was squirming, his little hands clutching. "Oh, Brian," she said, "oh, Brian."

Suddenly he was taken from her. A cry tore from her throat. She grabbed for his disappearing body, missed, ended up with her hands clutched against her chest. Even though she was drained dry, she still found enough strength to hammer against the knobbly breast of the thing above her. "Give me my baby!"

There was a crack of sound, sharp and quick. Brian went "Oh! oh!" He gasped, wet, rattling. He cried again, breathed, gasped. Silence. Then he mewed like a kitten.

She hammered the hard body, kicked, screamed. Then a new sound, softer, more easy. He was cooing. As gently as a butterfly dropping through the jungle gloom, he was laid back upon her. She clutched him. He was breathing now, short breaths, very quick, and his arms and legs were moving a great deal.

She took her right nipple and moved it against his face. Despite the dark his

lips found it right away.

The air was cold and dank, and all they had was her blouse to warm them. "Brian, my husband," she whispered in wonder, "you have a son."

Behind her she noticed a flicker of light. Turning, she felt a deep warmth in her bones. She'd suffered so much and was so tired that the pleasure almost knocked her out.

But she knew this pleasure, she knew that purple light.

Now that they'd made sure the baby was out, they were bringing their cooker.

Clutching her baby to her breast, she began to slog along. The machine came hissing closer, moving easily. As it came she could hear it sizzling and popping.

Soon the purple light began to touch her back. She sighed, fought down the desire to stop and let the sweet relaxing heat wash over her. She must not let them get her baby!

She ran right into a familiar figure: she knew this coarse hair, these thin, steel-hard arms. Frantically, she pushed away, falling to the floor, bouncing in the giving slickness.

Behind her the purple light strobed furiously. Ahead there was a slurping noise. In the purple flashes she saw a wet cable as thick and alive as an animal's long tongue. As it appeared, it made the sound of a boot being drawn from the sucking bottom of a swamp.

Behind it the compound eyes, in their thousand lenses, were flickering, purple images of a filthy woman with a baby.

Then wet cable was pressing directly against Brian's face and flooding it with that terrible light. She snatched him away, but the cable came too, as if the end of it had been somehow glued to his face. The light flickered, the machine crackled and sputtered, a horrible stink of heat filled the air.

Her baby kicked, he waved his arms, he mewed like a kitten in ecstasy.

Loi could not stop the light, could not detach the cable without pulling her baby's head apart. From deep inside her there came something basic and raw and furious, the tidal wave of savage love that links a mother to her child. Instincts that she didn't even know she possessed came bursting to the surface.

She screamed and screamed and screamed. And as she screamed, she slammed a fist into the cable that was linked to her son's head. He was so tiny, so full of innocent magic, nobody had any right to do anything but cherish him.

There was no time, if she didn't break that connection, he was going to be destroyed. She leaned forward and bit the cable, clamping her jaws like two steel blades. The surface of it cracked and something like hot glue oozed into her mouth. It tasted sweet and alive and stank like old vegetation, the wet rot in the depths of a peasant's compost.

There was a flash of fire that made her groan with pleasure, and suddenly the baby was free in her arms. Wasting not a moment she turned and hurried away from the sparking machinery.

He was still warm, was mewling in her arms, and as she scuttled along she ran her hands over him, feeling his little face, his skin, seeking any sign of damage.

There was none. They had not been able to change him. Her mind raced, turning this over and over again. Of course, the baby had no evil in him, he was innocent, he was not accessible to demons.

She had to get him out, and there was a chance now, a little, tiny ridiculous chance.

Behind her there were squishing sounds, then a great, roaring, furious burr of a voice. Was it speaking words? She didn't know, didn't stop to wonder.

She hurried along the giving floor. She was a tunnel rat again, eight years old and very scared, moving with swift efficiency through the dark.

The great, buzzing roar rose again, and she knew that the demon was in motion now, it was coming fast, bearing down on her like the tiger in the night.

Eighteen

1.

Ellen and Brian heard screams. They raised their candles but they could see nothing beyond the immediate jumble of machinery. The screams faded into the sound of dripping water, which was the chief problem in this ruined place. The water ran along cables, down conduits, fell in streams from the low ceiling, splashed, poured, creating a nervous chorus.

They were well below the water table, perhaps sixty feet down. Pumps had once kept the place dry, but no more. The sweating walls were covered with cables and blue conduits. The floor was made of steel mesh, underneath which could be discerned the shapes of several small machines.

"Generators," Brian said. "This is where they got their power." Overhead, bulbs in black steel cages remained unlit. He knelt on one knee, produced a quarter from his pocket and dropped it through the mesh floor. It fell a few feet, ringing against the equipment, then splashing into water.

It was all so small, so confined, so... pitiful.

"If nothing's running, Brian, why is this still happening?"

"I know it's hard to understand. Our people created the link back in my old lab in Ludlum. This facility is designed to break it. Which is why it has to be turned on."

He started down the catwalk, reassured by her clattering footfalls that she was following him.

He hadn't gone twenty feet before the light of his candle fell on something strange. "Stop."

Ahead was a gray substance hanging in folds like a curtain. He touched it and found that it was soft, giving. When he pushed, it tore, the pieces dropping

lightly away. An odor came out, of mold and acid.

"I don't think we should go in there, Brian."

He gazed at her, a curious peace in his eyes. She'd seen this expression before. Her father had worn it on his deathbed.

The odor stung their noses and made their eyes itch. A greasy taste settled into their mouths, as if their tongues had been painted with a paste made from vinegar and toadstools.

He stepped through the rip in the curtain, his feet squishing into the spongy surface beyond. "It's wet. Goopy."

Nausea stirred in her.

"We'll only have one chance," he said. "If that."

She came up close behind him. "I want some exact information. What are we looking for? What do we do when we find it?"

"We've got to get to the control room. Start the thing up."

"What if we can't?"

"Then we can't."

They set out, two miserable people huddled over faltering candle flames. They had to wade rather than walk on the mushy floor.

"It's like the interior of a nest."

"It is the interior of a nest. These creatures are modeled on the same paradigm as insects."

Soon they came to a depression that turned into a sort of hole, fleshy and soaking. He reached in, touched the pliant, slick wall. There was a curious sensuality, a feeling of life.

He pressed himself into the opening. "Here goes something."

Ellen watched as he went feet first into the blackness. Instantly he disappeared, leaving only the orifice behind, gray and gleaming in the light of her candle. She could hear him sliding wetly along. "Brian," she said. Her throat was tight, her skin tingling in the fetid, acidic air.

There was no answer.

Sweat began trickling down her face. He was gone. Just like that, he was gone! "Brian!"

She was in here all alone. She couldn't bear this, she had to get out. She had to get out!

No, wait. Don't panic. "Brian, answer me!"

Silence.

He was gone and she was in terrible danger herself. At any moment whatever had gotten him was going to come out of that hole, and—

She backed away. She was getting out of here.

"Ellen."

"Oh my God, Brian! I thought—wait a minute, where are you?"

"Ellen."

She frowned. What was the matter with him? "Brian?"

"I'm over here, Ellen."

"Oh, thank God! I thought I'd lost you."

"I'm fine."

"Well, you're hoarse. You sound like you've swallowed sandpaper."

"Yeah."

She looked in the direction of the voice. It had been coming out of an opening two feet across, lined with thick, tight-stretched lips—a gigantic, hideously distended mouth.

"Jesus, Brian, are you... in there?"

Something inside moved. She had the impression of complicated unfoldings, like a wasp shifting about in the chambers of its nest.

At first she did not understand what she was seeing. The creature was so complex, with so many gleaming angles, that it didn't make proper sense.

Then it did.

The thing was grave and full of dignity, and he had something black and lumpy in the long, narrow hands. A greasy cable came squishing out. Then she saw a ruby eye, and before she had so much as a chance to take a breath felt a white-hot explosion of pleasure down in the depths of her gut. Choirs sang, her mind flooded with delicate, pink-purple light as fine as the first blush of morning. She was peering into a perfect spiral blossom.

The spiral began spinning, turning faster and faster, and Ellen followed it down into the dark, secret heart of the flower.

Far away she heard an urgent voice crying out, roaring her name. Far away... Brian was far away, not in front of her at all.

She was dancing in the light.

Then Brian was there, Brian had his hands on her shoulders, he was pulling her back.

The purple light flashed, Brian tugged... and a soft sound began, like the clash of beetles in the grass, at once intimate and brutal.

"Ellen, Jesus!"

She was being changed and she'd hardly noticed!

Then the light came back, more powerful than before. Brian had his arm around her neck. She could feel him pull until her bones creaked and her muscles screamed. But he could not break the power of the light.

With every molecule of strength she possessed, she tried to get away. They both pulled, groaning with the effort.

A blasting climax caused her whole body to spasm. She spat, she choked, her back arched, delicious tickling cascaded up from her clitoris.

Again, she climaxed. Again. Again. She dragged in air, saw *him* then, felt *him* in her deep. Again, again. In his many-lensed eyes she saw a thousand reflections of her face. Her lips were slack, nostrils pulsating, tears gushing down sinking, withering cheeks. The pleasure went up and down her spine, a hot agonizing wonderful fire racing from vagina to brain and back.

The pulsations got harder, the hardness began to hurt, then quickly to hurt more. She understood why they cried out in agony and pleasure at the same time, and knew that the voice that was doing it now was her voice.

Pop, pop, pop. Pistol being fired.

Her body was full of swift, sickening movement that wrenched like having dozens of tearing muscle cramps all at the same time. The cable spat purple light and she felt busy itching as her skin liquefied, melting before her eyes.

Brian stood stunned, watching the changes, the drooping of her body, the sudden jutting of bones as they twisted and turned beneath her skin.

To her, it felt as if hot needles had penetrated into her marrow.

He came closer now, getting the light deep into her eyes, deep into her, deep, deep, down into her very essence.

There was a rip inside her, a great bubbling up from her bowels and a feeling of tightness in her left arm. She felt it swelling and knew that she looked the way poor Mr. Michaelson had back in the woods, her appendages bloated,

her face and body twisting and distending.

Now it wasn't even a little pleasant anymore. Now it hurt more than she'd thought anything could hurt. Hot waves of agony swept up from her depths, grinding, scraping, churning.

She became aware that *he* had won. She had been destroyed forever, had been captured body and soul. She knew it with absolute clarity.

There was about him something so deeply, fundamentally *wrong* that she almost felt she could taste the evil of him.

He'd been covered by the depths of time, crushed and obliterated and extinguished with all his voracious kind. Their memory lived on only in the hungry cruelty and endless variety of the insect world.

She tried to get away from the hatred he was blasting into her, to return to Brian. She turned—but her body didn't work right. Her body—she saw complicated, stick-like legs flailing, felt herself fall to one side.

But she arose, righting herself as if by magic. To her horror, she leaped at Brian. He skittered away but she was faster, in an instant she was on him again.

She didn't want to, but there was nothing she could do, nothing at all. His pistol flashed.

With a long, long arm she swept the weapon out of his hand.

2.

Brian's candle was snuffed by the onslaught of the thing that had been Ellen.

The fear made him struggle like a man in flames, the sorrow felt as if it might drown his heart.

Something came sweeping up his leg. Kicking as hard as he could, he leaped back, found the sphincter they'd come through to get here, began pressing his arms against it, trying to break the grip of the muscle.

Behind him claws began snapping, at first in a confused clatter, then with more control, then with authority.

He could not return the way he had come. But the undulating floor sloped down and away. Feeling ahead, his body coated with slime, his nose and lungs burning from the acid-cut air, he slithered and slipped away as fast as he could. Blundering helplessly, unable to tell where he was, how close she was, he cried out his rage and terror.

There was an answer, echoing from somewhere ahead.

He knew Loi's voice. Also, that it was a cruel hallucination.

He saw light... soft, delicate, purple.

A ruby eye was staring at him from a distance of three feet. It began sizzling smartly.

He threw himself down, rolled away, flailing helplessly.

Then he was falling.

An instant later there was an impact. His confusion was such that he took freezing cold to be blazing heat and breathed in enough water to start himself choking. Forcing himself to clamp his jaws shut, he struggled in the water. His lungs began to ache, then to burn, then to scream for air.

A little water came down his throat. He breathed it, coughed. Another breath came in—more water.

Then he coughed, he knew he was going to gasp this time, to gag, and he was going to start drowning.

His chest heaved, his mouth opened—and he sucked in air. Air! He gobbled, retching, gasping, throat distended, mouth gaping.

Splashing, flailing, dragging himself away from the water, he choked and gagged, then forced calm to his striving muscles, fought down the panic. Treading water, he opened his eyes.

Darkness and silence—but no purple light. He tried to find bearings of some sort. There were none. He swam, throwing one arm in front of the other, paddled aimlessly until his shins hit something hard. Then he felt a steel loop and grabbed it. Hauling himself up, he came onto a sort of shore, which consisted of a floor, an ordinary floor. He felt what seemed to be a broken chair, another beside it.

He realized that he lay on the dark shore of a ruined office.

From off in the gloom there came a droning sound. He listened.

There was something in flight, which meant that it could see in the dark. It was coming closer.

His pistol was gone.

He fumbled about, trying to find something to use as a weapon. The metal chairs were twisted but couldn't be broken. He threw open the drawers of a steel desk, feeling frantically through the paper clips and other debris.

All he found was a letter opener, which he hurled to the floor in frustration.

He began to explore, touching along the walls. He felt steel... a door, a locker door. He opened it. Empty. Then a file cabinet. This he also opened. The drawer was heavy, it was jammed with papers. There was what felt like a computer screen on the floor, wires everywhere.

Files, computers—dared he hope he'd reached the control point?

He felt around the jumble—and found something that made him stifle a cry of joy. Frantically he felt for a switch—but what kind of a flashlight was this, what were all these little belts?

It came on, the beam dim. It was a headlamp, the kind miners wore, thus the straps. He put it on, looked around, avid to see. The first thing he laid eyes on was a row of lockers. He threw them all open.

In the last was a Kevlar safety vest and a hardhat. On its floor was a beeper. Dead, of course. He threw the beeper against a wall.

The drone of wings began again, got louder.

This light was insane, what had he been thinking? He reached up to flip the switch, but then his eyes fell on a thick Manila-backed document. He grabbed it, read the title: "Superluminal Violation Repair Program Structures Integrity Handbook." Another rattling buzz, this one closer. He flicked the light out, shrank back toward the cabinets.

He was right, they'd been trying to fix an earlier break! The problem must have occurred at Ludlum, the first break from the other side. They'd covered that over with concrete, but it obviously hadn't worked.

When the buzzing didn't recur, he turned on his light again. He had to find out more. But the document in his hands wasn't going to tell him, it was just a series of construction protocols designed for engineers and inspectors.

He found a file called "Causality Violations: Kelly Report."

The file was empty. Information about exactly how his work had violated the flow of cause and effect would have been priceless to him right now. As it was, he had to keep guessing, hoping he was right.

Brian threw himself on the files, not noticing the thick black feeler that slipped along the floor behind him, moving swiftly and quietly.

Some of the files were filled, others empty, as if somebody had sorted them, presumably removing the secret material as the facility was abandoned.

A second long, thin cord slipped in beside the first. They curled about, touching furniture with their delicate tips, seeking, searching.

He read file names, "Causality and Extratemporal Physical Emergence," "Ancient Life Forms in Interaction with Extratemporal Absorbers," "Temporal Flags and Kelly Factor Attacks from Extratemporal Entities."

They had been engaged in a desperate secret war down here, trying to throw back demons called forth from the depths of time.

From the signs of violence all around him, it must have been a near thing, maybe a matter of minutes. The things that had come here were forming a beach head of bloated forests and acidic air. Hordes would come to fill those forests, to breathe that air.

Something brushed his ankle. In the intensity of his thought, he hardly noticed.

But out in the dark water beyond the tilted door there was large movement, very quiet.

Swiftly, easily, eight long arms now uncoiled into the small room. They came across the floor. Their claws opened.

Brian read. This was all quite fantastic. They'd broken into time, not space. It wasn't a parallel universe, but an unknown past that they had unleashed.

When they came, the hands came swiftly and quietly. They closed on his arms, his legs. One of the black arms looped itself around his neck, tightened.

From the depths of the chamber there arose a furious droning buzz.

Brian began to be dragged away. Although he struggled hard, he couldn't even begin to resist. It was like being captured by living steel.

His cries ripped the air, but cries can't overcome steel.

In the blackness, something started sizzling and popping, cooking hot and hard.

He'd waited too long, now he was going to end up like Ellen, he was going to endure that horror, live like that—

He shrieked like a child.

3.

Loi heard the cries clearly, the sounds of a man in gravest anguish. Often enough before she'd heard such sounds. Somebody else had been captured,

was being changed.

She held her baby close to her, letting him nurse.

He was her strength, because of the astonishing thing that had happened when the attempt had been made to change him.

Because the demon had been frustrated, he now chased her with unbridled fury, terrible buzzing roars that exploded from him every time he failed to catch this desperate but tunnel-wise mother. She was filthy, steeped in the mucus-like substance that seemed to ooze from the walls. But she would not stop, could not, must not.

While mother rat scuttled along baby rat nursed, then slept on her breast. But she could not run forever, because she was so exhausted that her feet felt like stones and Brian like an ingot of lead. Her throat was burning for water and her hungry baby was eating her alive.

There was a purple flicker in the air, like a storm nearby. The demon was running, the demon was furious, and when it caught her she knew what it would do. It would not try to change her baby again, it would tear him to pieces with those long claws.

Another scream went echoing through the darkness, and she was reminded of the first night on the mound, how lost and forlorn that voice had been. But this was a man's voice, and closer than before, and there was a tone in it that pierced her very heart.

Oh, Brian. Brian, if only it was you.

She had not reconciled herself to the possibility that she would never see him again, couldn't even begin to do that. But these screams might be another trick of the demon, to get her to come closer.

Her heart breaking, she moved along yet another of the organic tunnels. Little Brian went back on her teat, made a small sound of discontent. Her milk was going, she knew it.

As she crossed a down-spiraling opening, she heard another cry. It was much closer, so close that she was certain.

It was Brian, it had to be him!

Her heart lifted—and then a great pain stabbed it. What if he was being melted?

Another scream, and she heard the depths of his anguish, and her heart all but broke in half.

She hesitated, crouching, trying to think what to do. She gritted her teeth, clutching the baby so close that he wriggled uncomfortably. A shaking hand felt downward, seeking the hole from which the screams were issuing. It was narrow, but she knew she could squeeze through.

Could the demon even kill a baby as fresh and beautiful as this one, still wet with the dew of heaven?

She couldn't risk it. But then her husband wailed and she thought she had never heard such agony. She entered the hole, descending quickly through its twists and curves, her infant cradled between her breasts.

Brian threw himself about in the grip of the claws. They could have cut him to ribbons, but they only held him. He screwed his eyes closed against the purple light.

"Brian!"

Loi's voice—but where? "Loi?"

"I am here," she replied.

Instantly the hands released him, went questing off into the dark. "Look out, Loi!"

He used his sudden freedom to hurl himself with all his strength in the direction of her voice. As he pulled her down he could hear the claws snapping.

To get her away from them, he shoved her hard. Those sinewy arms could stretch, but not instantaneously. They had a few seconds.

"Be careful," she cried.

Then his arms found her, he felt the familiar coarse Asian hair, felt her shoulder, the softness of her body as he folded her in his embrace.

He realized that she was holding something, something soft and wonderful and deliriously warm. "Oh my God."

Wet cables were oozing out of the machine that *he* carried.

The last moment had come. By making the man scream, he had skillfully lured the agile, tricky woman into his hands. He was just about ready.

Brian's fingers raced over the small body. "Oh, Loi!" The baby made a contented sound.

"This is your son," she said.

Brian went beyond fear, beyond everything but the love that defines the human heart. In wonder and gladness he felt the soft, giving curves of the tiny, naked baby.

He took the little creature from her arms. His son wriggled, seeking a teat. Brian buried his face in the flesh of his child, inhaling the wonderfully sweet smell of his skin. "You're OK," he asked her, "both of you?"

Brian and Loi heard a curious vibration, as if a snake of enormous size was quivering its rattle. The sound was thick with menace, very close.

"He is here with us, Brian, the demon."

Protecting his baby in his left arm, Brian reached out to his wife. She pressed against him. "He could not harm the baby," she said. "The light did nothing."

"Nothing?"

"It doesn't hurt the baby. He did it right in his face."

That terrified Brian. He wished to God he could see—just one little glimpse. He remembered Father Palmer—that horrible, cancerous change—the loamy excrudescences, the stench...

Again his hands touched his son. The baby's cheeks felt soft, perfect. Brian ran his fingers along the damp tiny lips, his button of a nose. Shaking fingers crossed the vaporous suggestion of hair on the tiny scalp.

Carefully, he gave back the baby, tucked him into Loi's arms.

Out in the dark there was a splash. Then the purple light started. In its flashes he could see Loi moving off with bird-like speed. Claws snapped the air where she had been.

"Come on, Brian!" He followed her crouching form, moving as best he could through the ruined office. "We've gotta find a way out," she said.

"Not yet!"

"Are you crazy?"

"The controls are around here somewhere. I've got to get to the controls!" He was blundering, feeling his way.

Suddenly there was light—ordinary light sparking in his eyes. Loi was twenty feet away. She'd found a headlamp.

Brian rushed to her, threw his arms around her. "Turn it off!"

"They can see in the dark, so light only helps us. There's got to be a way out around here somewhere."

"We have to find the controls."

When Loi cast the light about, Brian caught a glimpse of black water dancing with wavelets, of a misshapen mass of flesh rising out of it—the source of the long arms and the claws. Ellen? He couldn't bear to consider it.

There was something very different perched on its broad armored carapace, something with huge fly's wings and compound eyes.

The head of this creature turned toward them.

The gaze was so terrible that he gasped as if struck a blow.

Then the thing took flight, came buzzing straight across the small room.

Like quicksilver Loi stepped through a door. She'd been standing right beside it, poised, waiting for the thing to commit itself. "Brian, fast!"

He went racing after her. Her light darted about. "There's a desk," she said. "Block the door."

No sooner had he shoved it against the plywood door than it began to leap on its hinges. Her light flashed from wall to wall. "This is a trap, Brian."

He was looking at the equipment. There was a forest of wires and switches. Here and there were piles of gel filled with the blurry remains of body parts.

He swept the tangle of wires with his eyes. This wasn't his area of expertise, but he knew enough about modern switching techniques to understand a fail-safe system. There were three switches, meant to be thrown at exactly the same time. He stretched, strained, but could not touch more than two of them. It was an "agreement" system like the one used in missile control centers. "Loi, help me with this."

He had to get it turned on. But which side of the forbidden zone was this control room on? Would the breaking of the link catapult Brian and his family into that other world, or leave them here? Best not to think about that now.

The door cracked loudly. In a moment it would burst.

"Brian, we've got to find a way out!"

"Loi, it's our only chance. You have to do this!"

"What do I do?"

"That switch—stand there—turn it—"

The door came off its hinges.

She turned the switch, but not at the right moment. "Honey, we have to do all three at the same time."

Two of the arms came into the room, swarming along the ceiling, their claws cocked wide.

"One, two, three—*now!*"

Something started groaning. A generator? Pumps? He said a silent prayer. Clanging followed, from above, from below, and suddenly a crackle of energy, the hum of one generator starting, another harmonizing with it, a third starting.

Light.

He stood before them with all the dignity of a dark god, this tall, segmented presence—

He came toward them, the buzzing roar so loud that he could not hear, could not think. But the baby regarded him with slow eyes, calm and full of peace.

He faltered.

Loi and Brian saw that they were standing before an awesome tragedy, something proud that had fallen lower than any human being had ever fallen.

He had been glory itself, once, when the world was very, very young.

But then he raised his eyes, and in them there was no glimmer of defeat. Rather, he seemed full of... laughter.

With a long, crackling sigh of static, the waveguide started.

Then they were moving, they were sweeping through a blur of changes, into the very well of loneliness and Brian knew that the control room had indeed been on the far side of the zone.

They came to rest in a huge square, a place miles on a side. It was paved with gigantic blocks that reminded Brian instantly of the Bimini Roads, thought to be an ancient geologic formation in the Bahamas.

Loi gasped with surprise, the baby coughed on the yellow, clogged air. A hundred yards ahead there stood a ruined building, once massive, but now tumbled down, its exposed chambers jammed with oozing egg sacs. Thick masses of glowing, red-legged insects swarmed across them, tearing into them and wolfing the contents with complicated jaws.

A high gabble of mad language thundered, and Brian saw that the creatures were so desperate for food that they were eating their own young.

Overhead, wings droned as thousands more flew round and round, seeking something, anything.

This was the heart of the matter: this desperate, dying world was trying to escape its extinction. That was what this was all about.

Using their obvious brilliance and their bizarre science, these creatures had made a link with the living earth, and sought now to possess it and so cheat the darkness that had them in its grip.

Then Brian and Loi were seen. Every eye turned at once, every body grew deathly still. Pincers opened, chitin rattled ominously.

Brian grabbed Loi. Then he saw something truly amazing to him, something that he could not even begin to understand, not for all his knowledge of time and its miracles, and of hidden worlds.

Somehow, the baby in her arms was still connected to their own world, indeed had never left it. It was not an obvious thing, but rather something in the shimmer of light about the child's body, and in the quiet wisdom in those eyes.

We are born to our lives in clouds of wisdom so great that they are an innocence unsurpassed. The wise child knew, if he did not *see* this place, then—for him—it would not become real.

The dead brown sky split down its middle, exposing a darkness spotted with stars and rolling great planets, a vision of such scope and awe that Brian went to his knees. For the face of God is not a simple thing, nor small, nor made in any image that is known.

Swimming there in the good reefs of stars was the familiar blue earth of today.

The whole mass of creatures saw at once what lay in their sky. A great rumble went through them, a shriek, a hiss, then the blasting drone of wings as they rose in a body, attracted as if to dancing fire.

The things buzzed and roared and struggled.

But their future wavered. Seemingly inside Brian's own mind, the waveguide itself groaned, and the link between the worlds began to falter. He understood what was happening, and why it felt as if it was at once inside him and everywhere: the waveguide was allowing the fundamental order of the universe to be restored.

The earth of the future wavered in the sky. A loneliness like the hollowest hour of an autumn night filled him. His soul ached for the earth that was his own. Beside him his wife choked out a sob.

Brian looked down at his baby, innocently nursing at Loi's breast. The child's eyes met his with a frankness so total that it made him start back in amazement. But there was also tremendous compassion, an openness of spirit that made the old father sob aloud.

Then the angelic presence of the baby focused him, focused Loi, and they saw that they could not be here, they did not belong here, and nothing could keep them here.

Hope filled them like a rich and dizzying oxygen, and they felt the

exhilaration of flight, soaring up, high above the great plaza, the tremendous stone city of the past. Brian saw that it swept to the horizons with its huge shadowed structures, the great blocks with their tiny, frowning windows, and the deep, lightless streets.

Evil had filled every soul in this whole vast place, and they were all corrupt, and so the baby rose above them like a bubble rises in a swamp, and his parents rose with him.

Then they were back where they started, in the dripping, tiny room that housed the control point.

Had it all been a hallucination?... or a wish—something from his mind?

The thing they both now thought of as the demon was coming forward in joy and pride, his wings whirring, his long arms spread wide, to greet the horde of his kind that he had so confidently expected to appear.

Instead, Loi and Brian and their baby appeared. The growing power of the waveguide had severed the link between the ages, and the baby's innocence had brought the little family home.

The demon shrank back.

Then Brian saw why: the creature had known better than they what would now happen. A disaster began to unfold. Dark, torn objects started dropping out of thin air—steel-spring legs, pieces of wings, heads with mouth parts still a-scramble, glowing, pulpy abdominal segments.

First the pieces dropped, one here, one there. Then they fell in greater numbers, and the demon was jostled by them, moved to protect himself with his cable-thin arms. Then they poured out of the air, and he was thrown back, his howl a jet at full throttle, covered by an avalanche of his own ruined kind.

When he recovered himself, he began moving toward Loi.

Brian pushed his way through the slippery mass of body parts. He had to protect her.

"Brian, no!"

"Get ready to run, Loi."

Closer he went. He could see the segments pulsing, opening and closing to expose bright blue oxygenating organs. This was a primitive creature indeed. This body had been molded when arachnids were the highest form of life on earth. But those eyes—they were very, very smart.

Then Loi did the unexpected, jumping farther than Brian would have thought possible. "Come quick, Brian!" She dashed through the door.

Then what? He'd face that later.

As they ran the lights flickered, and he shuddered with dread. The facility was full of water and in poor repair.

This wasn't over, not at all. If the waveguide failed, or if the demon decided to stop chasing them and destroy it, then all their effort would be for nothing.

They ran up a spiral staircase that had been revealed by the light. In moments Brian's breath came short, his chest burned.

Again the generators ground low, again the lights dimmed.

Little Brian was in full cry, his mother trying to comfort him even as she raced upward.

They reached another surface—and found organic material everywhere lying in limp folds, quivering and dissolving before their eyes.

The outpost he had so carefully fashioned for his people was disintegrating and dying. There was a meaty odor of human blood here, and Brian and Loi both knew that the destroyed creatures in this part of the facility had once been their friends, the people of Oscola and Towayda. Ellen's voice echoed in Brian's memory.

"At least they've died," Loi said. She was also breathing hard.

Brian fought for his bearings. He had no idea where to go to find the exit. But there were limits: they had reached a catwalk, and it only went in two directions. Again the lights flickered. Brian listened—and heard behind them the telltale buzz and clatter of the oncoming creature. "I don't know where the hell we are!"

"We try this way," Loi said.

"You're sure?"

"Just come!"

The buzzing was followed by a great, cawing cry, very different from the roars of anger that had come before. There was blood lust in that cry.

They hurried along, Brian keeping his head down to avoid being knocked senseless by a protruding valve or pipe end. In the light he could see that this place was little more than a few hastily dug tunnels.

They entered a slightly larger room. Brian was amazed: incredibly, Loi had taken them to the main entrance, and there was the elevator shaft. "How did you find this?"

"Too many tunnels in my life, Brian."

He started to push the elevator button, to bring the car down for them.

"No, it's too much of a risk. He can get control of the car from down here."

Brian looked up the shaft. "You can't climb all the way with the baby. It's over a hundred feet."

"I'll carry him as long as I can. Then you do it."

They started up. Brian's chest pain, which had diminished, now returned. His arms shook and his muscles were jelly. Sweat poured down his face. His scars tormented him.

They reached the bottom of the elevator cab. A shaft of light shone down

from inside. "I'll pull myself up. Then I'll reach down and take the baby and help you." They were fifty feet from the floor of the shaft.

At that moment there boiled up from below a great, pale cloud, glowing purple within. The lights flashed.

Brian clambered frantically into the car, turned to get the baby. She handed him up, then came herself, moving with the supple grace of a cat.

Absolutely without warning an arm reached out of the gel-covered remains of poor Bill Merriman and grabbed the baby.

Loi threw herself into the mess. She tore at the arm, dug into the gel, throwing gluey body parts over her shoulder. Merriman's enormous glasses sailed past, an eyeball sticking to one of the lenses.

Brian pulled at the mess with her, and together they got their baby back.

"Let's go," he said. They scrambled up through the hatch to the top of the elevator. He had the baby.

With a massive clank and a *whang* the lift cables around them went taut. The elevator began to move downward. Light like a purple sun blasted up from around the car, getting brighter as they dropped.

The ladder was whipping past. "Jump on it," Loi cried.

They leaped, grabbing, clutching, their fingers slipping, holding.

With every ounce of energy they possessed, they climbed. The elevator clicked again and began to return.

"Faster, Brian!"

He fought for every rung of the ladder, tortured by the possibility that he would drop the baby, grabbing for rungs with just the fingers of his left hand. His heart chugged, his breath bubbled.

The car clicked as it came, and the clicks got quickly louder.

Harder they climbed, still harder. But it was no good, Brian could see the car not twenty feet below them. "Loi, as it comes past, jump on the roof! But don't let yourself fall through the hatch." He listened. *Click. CLICK.* "Now!"

Another second and he followed her. She groaned as he landed hard on her. A pain shot up through his leg. He clamped his jaw shut. The baby in his arm cried out in surprise.

"Inside, quick!"

They climbed down into the car.

A moment later it jerked to a stop. Now a doorway was there before them, but this would only last an instant. Now that they were in it, the car would be brought back down. Brian pressed his fingers between the doors.

He tugged as hard as he could. The doors began to open. But then the elevator moved a couple of inches and they stuck. There wasn't a foot of clearance. Behind him Loi made a stifled groaning sound. He turned. The gel was rising like a slow wave up the back wall of the car. In it the remains of Bill Merriman were coming to life again, but this time they were transforming, moving together, the arms growing thin, the skull changing form, huge compound eyes forming—

He was coming, and in doing so revealing yet another strange ability. He was forming another version of himself out of the man's remains.

They had to get through that door and they had to do it fast.

The baby was easy: Loi pushed him through and set him on the floor outside.

Struggling madly, jerking, twisting, flouncing, she forced her way out. Her breasts stretched agonizingly as she dragged them through, and her own howls made Brian scream, too.

Brian could not make it. He pushed, he shoved, but he was trapped. The creature began to touch him. He felt the purple light beginning to flicker against his back.

Loi pulled and he shoved. His head came out between the doors, then his shoulders. He felt her strong fingers grab him, digging into his scars. "Go on without me," he screamed, "I can't make it!"

She tugged first one shoulder and then the other, and he came by inches.

Within the car there arose a great roaring buzz.

Then he realized that he was out. He was out and crawling, his face scraping dirt.

A long, thin arm came out behind him.

Loi had found some tools and smashed the arm with a shovel, and its surface cracked like a beetle's crisp armor.

Brian realized that she must also have pried the doors with the shovel.

Behind them, the elevator hopped and jumped. Purple light flooded it.

The lamps overhead dimmed, died, then returned, glowing low and weak and red. There came a horrible silence, as if the whole world waited. But Loi gave a shout of joy: not far away was the light of a tunnel entrance.

They had reached the surface.

At that moment a great moan rose, from below, the voice of evil stripped naked. There was fierce hunger in it, for the dimming of the lights meant that the waveguide was weakening, and he was gaining strength again.

The cry rose and rose, echoing into the depths, filling the air with its coarse, buzzing savagery.

They covered their ears, they screamed to drown it out.

It ended with the suddenness of a passing storm, and then they heard a scuffling as if of rats, and the sighing of movement in the chambers of the old mine.

He was coming. More slowly now, but still coming. The lights stayed .

They moved as fast as they could, dragging themselves toward the entrance, too tired to talk. Brian was sick inside, sick with fear. Now that he knew what was trying to get through, the whole thing was even more awful. What a hideous, hideous fate his experiment had offered the world.

Behind them the scuffling movement of the ravaged demon was getting louder. Brian turned, and could see him in the long corridor, a shrunken, struggling shape all twisted and full of angles, coming along the floor with slow, snake-like undulations.

They went out the facility's entrance, which had been skillfully hidden in the woods between the judge's house and the mound.

They entered a ravaged world.

The alien forest of barrel-like trees was now a desert of sunken bladders. Everything was disintegrating and falling away. Here and there great legs were still attached to huge, dissolving bodies. Shells and carapaces lay scattered about among the leaking, shriveling remains of the trees.

But there was a new scent in the air—new and yet familiar. When dawn is sweet, this is its sweetness. The sun was on the point of rising. Behind the black, torn silhouette of the mound, the morning star floated in pale blue air.

They walked a few steps and sat down. Brian's heart was thundering and his breath was much too short. Loi came beside him and put her free arm around him. Their baby was nursing again, completely content.

"We've got to get help," Brian said. "The facility's got to be kept running!" He could not continue. His grief for his little family expanded into grief for all the world.

"Brian?"

"Yes?"

"You hear that?"

He listened. "Oh God, no." It was the unmistakable sound of humvees. They struggled to their feet. "Loi, I can't go on."

"Yes you can! You have to!"

No. This was the end for him. "I'm sorry."

At that moment a caravan of at least ten of the vehicles came lurching into view, crushing the ruins of the forest beneath their wheels.

Loi turned away from them, heading back toward the entrance to the facility. Somehow, Brian staggered after her. "We can hide in the opening a few minutes. Then we'll think of something else."

But the humvees were fast, and they were already stopping, disgorging their soldiers.

Brian realized that the only thing he could still do for his family was to give them a few extra seconds. As Loi moved away, hurrying as best she could, he turned to face the creatures.

Twenty, thirty, forty soldiers came out of the vehicles, their white chemical warfare suits rustling, their protective masks gleaming in the half light.

With a growl of sheer hate, Brian threw himself at them.

They grabbed him, he shut his eyes against the purple light, snatched at the white cloth, ripped at it. When they took his arms, he fought as best he could, finally yanking away the mask of the closest one.

He came face to face with a perfectly ordinary—and very scared—kid. "Take it easy," the kid shouted. His breath smelled like chewing gum.

"You—"

"Fourth U.S. Army, mister."

The meaning of this voice penetrated. These were human soldiers. People.

"Loi?" But Loi was nowhere to be seen. From the dark entrance to the facility there came a low, ominous buzzing. *He* was there, his shadow clogging the opening. "Loi! Oh God, no!"

She was not in the entrance: she rose from behind a pile of debris nearby. He watched her come warily forward, her baby in her arms. Her blouse hung in shreds, her jeans were ripped. He went to meet her and they embraced silently. One of the soldiers gave them both jackets.

The buzzing came again, rising like the cry of an insect, then fading to a rumble, sinking. The shadow in the entrance was gone. He was fading like a nightmare with the coming day.

"Listen, you've got to get good generators in there! That facility's got to be kept running at all costs. You've got to—"

"Get in the truck, mister. You're gonna be all right."

"No, for God's sake, listen to me! The waveguide, it's got to be kept on or he'll gain strength again, he'll come out!"

"It's not your problem."

"It's my problem and my fault."

"Mister, this thing is too big to be any one person's fault. Mistakes were made all along the line, way I hear it. Now you get in the truck and let us do our job."

Then Brian saw a huge vehicle trundling down Mound Road, and he recognized what it was: a massive portable generating station of the type deployed in battle. They'd had it outside the zone, waiting for their chance.

Tears came rolling down his cheeks. Somebody somewhere had obviously understood that this would be needed. By getting the guide turned on when they did, he and Loi had given the army its crucial window of opportunity.

They were helped into the backseats of one of the vehicles. The men had some sandwiches and a thermos of coffee. Soon they were lurching and

bouncing slowly along the pitted roads of Oscola. Helicopters began landing in the judge's yard, troops pouring out.

"Brian, where are Bob and Nancy and the boys?"

"They went out by ATV."

"They made it?"

"I don't know."

More quietly: "What about Ellen?"

Brian shook his head. "She didn't get out."

She asked no further questions. Silently, she watched the destroyed world going past the window. Suddenly she stiffened. "Stop," she said.

"What the hell for, ma'am?" the driver asked.

Then Brian saw the familiar ruins of the old Kelly Farmhouse, with the burned-out shell of the trailer behind it.

"Just do it, please," she said. "This was our home."

They stopped. "Just for a minute, ma'am."

They got out and went closer to the remains of their old life.

She was solemn. "Even the land is destroyed. Worse than Agent Orange."

Gravely, she offered the baby to his father. "Take him for a second." She marched straight into the fragile, creaking wreck of the trailer. Both soldiers clambered after her.

"Careful there, lady," the sergeant said as she entered the gray, twisted ruins. She reached into the ashes and came up with a blackened lump of an object. "My Laughing Buddha," she said. She rubbed away soot to reveal the familiar rotund figure. "He can be fixed, I think."

The sun rose, and the first shaft of light revealed the true hideousness of the misshapen death all around them. The trees that had surrounded their trailer were dissolving into twisted masses of sludge. A brown, bloated sac of flesh with pincers and spindly legs, and the muscular tail of an opossum, moved slowly across the driveway, dropping chunks of itself, clucking and wheezing as it went.

Dying, it sank down on itself.

But not everything had been reached by the transforming light. A busy cockroach scuttled under a rock, and the dawn chorus began—although it consisted only of a single tattered robin.

Coming out of the rubble, Loi took her baby and held him up to the dawn. "See it, Brian, see the sun."

The baby stirred, smacked, turned his head, seeking instead the nipple. She cuddled him back to her breast. "Our son is going to be so strong."

Brian heard her, but his eye had been attracted to movement in the clear predawn sky. Up very high, a golden contrail went south. "Is that a military jet?"

"Nossir. That'll be a flight coming in from Europe. Probably on its way to New York."

Brian and Loi watched the plane, drinking in its promise with their eyes. The baby, who had finally satisfied his hunger, fell asleep on his mother's arm.

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THE

GRAY'S

THE GRAYS

THE GRAYS

WHITLEY STRIEBER

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

THE GRAYS

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This book is dedicated to those millions of people around the world who, like me, have faced the enigma of the grays and are also left with the certain knowledge that they represent a genuine and spectacularly provocative unknown. It is my hope that this work of fiction will penetrate into that unknown and draw its secrets into discovering light.

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The Grays has been many years in the making. I have not the words to thank Anne Strieber for her patience, her great courage, and her willingness to travel with me on what must seem like a quixotic journey indeed, seeking to find in fiction the truth about the grays, which is too elusive to bring to genuinely sharp focus in factual narrative.

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PART ONE
NIGHT FLYERS

Who's in the next room?—who?
I seem to hear
Somebody muttering firm in a language new
That chills the ear.
No: you catch not his tongue who has entered there.

—THOMAS HARDY

“Who's in the Next Room?”

ONE

BECAUSE WE KNOW IT IS there, danger in an obvious place—on a battlefield, say—is often far less of a threat than it is on a quiet street in a small town. For example, on a street deep in America where three little boys rode interlocking figure eights on their bicycles, and on a sweet May evening, too, any danger would be a surprise. And a great and terrible danger—impossible.

Not all of the boys were in danger. In fact, two of them were as profoundly safe as anybody else in Madison, Wisconsin, on the scented evening of May 21, 1977. The third boy, however, was not so lucky. Not nearly.

Because of something buried deeply in his genes, he was of more than normal interest to someone that is supposed not to exist, but does exist—in fact, is master of this earth.

It was too bad for this child—in fact, tragic—because these creatures—if they could even be called that—caused phenomenal trauma, scarring trauma . . . to those of their victims who lived.

Play ended with the last of the sun, and lights glowed on the porches of Woody Lane, as one by one the boys of the lane retired.

Danny rode a little longer, and was watched by Burly, the dog of Mr. Ehmer. Soon Mr. Ehmer himself came across his lawn. His pipe glowed as he drew on it, and he said, “Say there, Danny, you want to come night fishin’ with me and your Uncle Frank? We’ve been getting some good’uns all this week.”

Danny was a lonely child, saddled with an alcoholic mother and a violent father, so he welcomed these chances to be away from the tensions of home. He could take his sleeping bag and unroll it in the bottom of the boat, and if his line jerked it would wake him up. But not tonight. “I got Scouts real early,” he said, “gotta get up.”

Mr. Ehmer leaned back on his heels. “You’re turnin’ down fishin’?”

“Gotta be at the park at nine. That means seven-thirty mass.”

“Well, yes it does. It does at that.” He drew on the pipe again. “We get a sturgeon, we’ll name ’im for you.” He laughed then, a gentle rustle in his throat, in the first gusts of the wind that rises with the moon. He left Danny to go down the dark of Woody Lane alone, pushing the pedals of his Raleigh as hard as he could, not wanting to look up at the darkening sky again, not daring to look behind him.

As he parked his bike and ran up to the lit back door, he was flooded with relief as he hopped on the doorstep and went into the lighted kitchen. He smelled the lingering odor of fried chicken, felt hungry but knew there was none left in the house. He went into the living room.

He didn’t stay long. *Love Boat* was like a religion with Mom and Dad, and then came *Fantasy Island*. He’d rather be in his room with the *Batman* he’d bought from Ron Bloom for twenty cents.

At the same moment a few miles away, Katelyn Burns, who adored *Love Boat*, watched and received advice from her mother about painting her toenails. Very red, and use a polish that hardens slowly. They last longer, chip less, good on the toes. Next week school was out and she wanted—had—to paint her toenails for Beach Day.

A magnetism of whispers that Katelyn assumed were her own thoughts had drawn her to Madison, Wisconsin, and to this shabby apartment near the water. An easy place, Madison, the thoughts whispered to her, for a divorcee to find a man. An easy place, they most certainly did not tell her, from which to steal a child, carry her out and take her far, so that when her screams started, there would be none to hear her but the night wind. And so it would be this night, after the *Love Boat* sailed away and silence filled the house.

As Saturday evening ended, the moon rode over houses that, one by one, became dark. Madison slept in peace, then, as the hours wore past midnight.

Sometime after three, Danny Callaghan became aware of a change around him, enough of a change to draw him out of sleep. He opened his eyes—and saw nothing but stars. For a moment, he thought he’d gone night fishing after all. Then he realized he was still in bed and the stars were coming from his own home planetarium, bought from Edmund Scientific for nine dollars. It was a dark blue plastic sphere with a light in it. The plastic was dotted with pinholes in the pattern of the night sky, and when you turned out the lights and turned the planetarium on, magic happened: the heavens appeared all around you.

He hadn’t turned the planetarium on, though, and that fact made the acid

of fear rise in his throat. He opened his mouth to call for his dad, but there was no sound, just a puff of breath. As the stars crossed his face, twisting along his nose and across his eyes, his tears flowed in helpless silence.

The only sounds were the humming of the planetarium's motor and the breeze fluttering the front-yard oak. Dan sat up on the bedside. Like a man buttoning his coat for a journey, he buttoned his pajama top, until all four big buttons were neatly closed. A thought whispered to him, "Stand up, look out the window . . ." He clutched the bedsheets with both hands. The old oak shook its leaves at him, and the thoughts whispered, "Come on . . . come on."

Then he knew that his toes had touched the floor, and he was up in the flowing stars. Then he floated to the window. As he moved closer, he saw it sliding open. Then he went faster and moved through it. He tried to grab the sash as he passed, but missed. Then he was moving through the limbs of the oak that stood in their front yard, struggling and grabbing at them.

He got his arms around one, but his body turned upward until his feet were pointing at the sky. He held on with all his might, but the pull got stronger and stronger. "Dad," he yelled as he was dislodged and drawn into the sky.

He heard a dog raise a howl, and saw an owl below him, her wings glowing in the moonlight, her voice swept away by the wind.

He rose screaming and struggling, running in the air, clawing at emptiness. Far below him, moonlight danced on Lake Monona's baby waves. And then he was among the night clouds, and he flew in their canyons and soared across their hills, and heard their baby thunder muttering.

The wonder of it silenced his screams at last, but not the tears that poured down his face, or the trembling gasp that came when he slowly passed across the top of a cloud and saw, so very far below, the silver lake and the dots of light that were Madison. He closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands as he moved up toward what looked like a silver island in the sky.

The island had a round opening in it, dark and black.

Then Danny was through the round opening. He stopped in the air, then fell to a floor. Opening his eyes, he found himself in darkness, but not absolute darkness. Moonlight sifted in the opening. Far below, he could see the pinpricks of light that marked fishing boats on the lake's surface.

A cold sorrow enveloped him. Now, here, he remembered this from before. He did not want the little doctors to touch him ever again. He knew, also, that they would, and soon. He thought of jumping back out through the

opening, but what would happen then? He went closer to it, leaned out as far as he dared. “MR. EHMERS! UNCLE FRANK! HELP ME! PLEASE, UNCLE FRANK!”

A rustling sound. He cringed closer to the edge, wishing he dared jump through. A voice whispered, soft: “Hello?”

He backed away from the form. He could see white—a white face, loose white clothes.

“Help me,” the form said.

It was a girl, he could see that now, could hear it in her voice. She was standing on the far side of the opening in the floor, her face glowing in the faint moonlight that slanted in.

“Are you from Madison?” she asked. Her voice trembled.

“Yeah. I’m Danny Callaghan.”

“I’m Katelyn Burns. I never saw anybody else here before.”

“Me, neither.”

“Where are we?”

“I’m not sure.”

“ ’Cause when I come here I remember I was here before, but then when I go home I don’t remember anymore.” She lowered her head. Her voice dropped to a hesitant murmur. “Do they take your clothes off, too?”

His face grew hot. He clutched his own shoulders. “Uh-huh.”

“They do stuff to me that’s *weird*.”

“Some kind of operations.”

Her eyes flashed. “Yes, but this isn’t a hospital!”

As the two children came together and held each other, they were watched by cold and careful eyes.

The embrace between the children extended, the girl in her nightgown, the boy in his pajamas stained with yesterday’s oatmeal. It had nothing to do with sex, they were too young. They were like two little birds stolen from the nest, trying to find some safety where there was none.

“If we dive down to the lake, would that work? Instead of just jumping?” Dan asked Katelyn.

“I don’t know. Maybe not.”

“I’ve got a diving merit badge. I’m going to try,” he said.

She sighed, understood. The children moved along a rickety catwalk, going closer to the opening they had been drawn through. The ship wasn’t high tech. It didn’t even have a way of closing its hatch. It was old and

handmade, but the materials involved were far in advance of our own. It was constructed of sticks that would not break or burn, and aluminum foil you could not penetrate even with a bullet. There were no glowing control panels, nothing like *Star Trek*. Just tinfoil and plywood, and a tin box full of an extraordinary substance mined out of the Earth, that resisted the pull of gravity.

The creatures hiding near the children knew what they were thinking because they could see not only their fleshy bodies wrapped in their fluttering cloth covers, but also their electric bodies, a shimmering network of lines that coursed through them, the fiery nerves that carried sensation and love and memory, and blue fear racing from the heart.

They could see, in the heads, lines of gold and green changing to red and purple, and they knew that these were also the colors of fear.

Katelyn and Dan gazed down at the shimmering, wrinkled surface of the lake.

“You gonna?” Katelyn asked.

Danny could imagine Mr. Ehmers on the lake smoking his pipe and watching his line. He took a deep breath. What would Mr. Ehmers see, though—a boy falling out of the sky? Maybe, but probably not. Probably they’d think the splash was just a fish jumping.

Then he heard the fluttering sound in the dark that meant the *things* were on the move.

Katelyn drew close to him. But then the slowest trace of a smile flickered on her lips, and she raised her hand. In it was a match.

There was buzzing now, urgent, coming closer.

Katelyn shouted out the opening, “I live in Madison! I live in Madison, Wisconsin!” Her voice carried past the thin walls, echoing loudly, but only the clouds heard it.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Dan shouted, “Uncle Frank, help us!”

“Who’s that?”

“My uncle. He’s down there fishing.”

She struck the match, and in its flare something moved behind her. A green glow. As he watched, it resolved itself into the slanted shape of an insect eye, but huge. It was right behind her, just inches away. It glittered and disappeared into the shadows, and then the match burned out, and then something slid up under his shirt and slithered along his chest.

He heard Katelyn gasp, heard a scream explode out of her and screamed himself, screamed with all his voice and soul. Arms came around him, and a prick like fire penetrated his chest, went deep, made him gag and filled his mouth with a taste like a dead thing smells.

Now he could not move, could not make a sound. He felt himself being carried, felt his stomach twisting and knotting until gorge came up into his throat.

He could see nothing, hear nothing except Katelyn breathing in little, shocked cries.

There came a hand, extended into a faint light, as if it was meant for him to see, a long hand with fingers like naked branches, each tipped by a black, curving claw. In this hand was a kitchen knife with specks of rust on the blade.

The knife came down on his chest, pricking, then, as the tip of the blade ran along his abdomen, tickling. In the dark nearby, he heard a slicing sound, then a crack, and the bubbling of breath being sucked through liquid. Then a coldness came that extended from his neck down to his groin, and he saw the handle of the knife, which was being used like a saw. As it rose and fell, a coldness grew in his chest. Then, with a sucking sound, two great white things were lifted away from him. He raised his head, looking down at himself. What he saw was so bizarrely unexpected that he just stared. He saw what looked like a wet hamster curled up in the center of his chest, shivering furiously. It lay in a pool of ooze. On either side of it, things like big rubber bladders were expanding and contracting, and hissing as they did so.

Freezing cold and deadly weak, he fell back, his head hitting the hard iron of the bedstead upon which he had been laid.

Then stars came, millions of tiny stars all gold and green and speeding like sparks on a windy night. They surrounded the children, swirling around their bodies. They moved with the grace of a vast school of fish, swarming through the body of one child and then into the air, then through the body of the other. Again it happened, and again, and each time the stars invaded the profound nakedness of their open bodies, the veins and organs glowed. Light poured from their screaming mouths, blasted out of their ears and eyes.

The children struggled but could not rise, screamed but were ignored. The torture, terrible, somehow beautiful, went on.

HALFWAY ACROSS THE CONTINENT IN Colorado, a young officer

picked up a phone and called Washington. “Sir, we have a glowboy hovering over Madison, Wisconsin.”

“How long?” came the tired voice of Lieutenant Colonel Michael Wilkes.

“Twenty-two minutes, sir. Shows no sign of moving.”

Wilkes glanced at his watch. Pushing four in the morning. “You were right to inform me, uh—”

“Lieutenant Langford, sir.”

“Yes. Thank you.” He put down the phone. The spruce-sounding young lieutenant would order a jet up if the glowboy stayed very much longer. Couldn’t have one of the damned things lingering over a major metro area after sunrise. Mike wondered what devilry it was up to, sighed at his own helplessness, then tossed a pill out of a bottle, knocked it back with a glass of water he kept at his bedside, and hit the sack again.

He might request Eamon Glass to ask Bob about the stationary glowboy, but probably not. Bob was one of the two living grays they had acquired during an extraordinary incident in the New Mexico desert when one of the grays’ craft had crashed after it had moved into the range of powerful new radars being tested at White Sands. They had not expected these radars to be there, and their ship’s ability to stay aloft had been affected.

The Air Force had raced to the site of the crash and recovered two grays alive, one dead. Three were a triad, the equivalent of a single human being. Without their third partner to complete their decision-making process, the two that remained alive had been relatively helpless, and the capture had been a brilliant success . . . unless, of course, it was, instead, an even more brilliant deception on the part of the grays.

You communicated with Bob and Adam via thought—or rather, Eamon, who was the only person they’d ever found who could manage it, communicated with them.

Somehow, the man used his mind to exchange pictures with them. It was a very strange business, and nobody was sure if it was even really working, but it was all they had, and some of the technological information Eamon had gotten from the creatures was making valuable scientific sense, so there had to be something in it.

But they could not find out what the grays *did* with people. It was awful, though, that was certain. Awful and it came from the sky and the Air Force couldn’t do a damn thing about it. So it was secret, and would remain secret.

He groaned, turned over, waited miserably for the pill to work.

IN THE SILVER VEHICLE, THE children struggled, twisting and turning in their captivity. Dan saw something white. He looked at it, trying to resolve its meaning in the haze that still obscured his vision. It was very dark, but he could still see this thing. It dangled as if it was hanging on a clothesline, and he thought it might be a big sheet, wet, because it was dripping, the drops pinging on metal somewhere below.

It was a very strange sort of a sheet, though, because it had a kind of face, a mouth gaping like that of a big lake bass, with two distorted black sockets above it. Were they eye sockets? He thought they must be, because there was also a darkness above them that looked like it might be hair. Then he saw a curliness to it, and a lightness and he knew that it was blond hair—and he had seen blond hair on Katelyn when she lit the match.

He tried to say her name, but there was only a gusty whisper. He wanted his mother, he wanted his dad, he wanted Uncle Frank, who was damn tough, to come up here and *help them!*

Drip, drip, drip.

Then he saw that there was another one, and it had short brown hair and its face was all wobbled like a mirror in the Crazy House at Madison Playland.

When he stared at it, though, he knew: it was his skin. But if it was up there and he was down here, then—

His stomach churned, his heart began raging in his chest, and his throat became so dry it felt as if it had been stuffed with ashes. He wanted to scream, he wanted to beg God for help, but he couldn't make a sound.

Off in the dark, a buzzing sound started. The things in the dark were coming. He looked, but he knew he would not see them, he never had.

Then his skin flew up and out, and spread like a huge cloud above him, a cloud with a gaping mouth and holes for eyes, and it came down on him as gently as dew falls when you are camping under the stars, and enclosed him in the deepest warmth he had ever felt in his life.

He uttered a long, delicious groan of raw human pleasure and profound relief. Beside him, Katelyn groaned, too, and he knew that she had, as well, been covered once again in her own skin.

Instantly, without them going out through a door or anything, the silver ship was rushing away overhead, turning into a dot. Wind screamed around

them, their hair blew, and Dan thought they'd been pushed out and were going to die in the lake.

Below, Mr. Ehmers saw beams of light playing out of the summer clouds. "What the hell," he said. Then Frank said, "Ho, got a strike goin' here." They brought up another bass.

DAN WOKE UP SCREAMING. HE was upside down and the covers were all over the room. He got out of bed, immediately felt incredibly thirsty, and went into the bathroom and drank and drank. His mother heard him and came in behind him. "You okay, Dan?"

Then he cried, clutching her with all his might, burying his face in her nightgown that smelled of cigarettes and gin.

"Hey, hey there—"

"Mom, I had a dream. It was real bad, Mom."

She went into his room with him and sat at his bedside.

"It was these Indians, they got us, and they skinned us alive."

"Skinned who alive?"

"Me! Me and—her. I don't know. Me and this girl."

A cool hand touched his forehead. "You dreamed you were naked with a girl, and that's a little scary, isn't it?"

"The stars," he said, "the stars . . ." But what about the stars he could not recall. He closed his eyes, and his mother's hand on his brow comforted him, but deep inside him, down where screams begin, there was a part of him that remembered every terrible moment, and would never forget.

His mother, drunk though she was, sad though she was, sat a while longer with her child, then went back down to the kitchen and resumed her mechanical and relentless assault on a bottle of cheap gin.

Katelyn found herself on the floor naked and covered with sweat. Not understanding how she had gotten there, she scrambled to her feet—and found that she was afraid to look in the mirror—terribly, agonizingly afraid. She stood, her head bowed, holding onto the sink and crying bitter, bitter tears.

Her mind could not seem to make sense of what had just happened. Why was she naked? What was she doing on the floor? Who was that boy, and why did she remember a boy at all?

She returned to her room, found her nightgown, and put it on. She went to her window seat and sat down, and watched the moon ride low over the

lake, and smelled honeysuckle on the air.

Then she was sick, and ran into the bathroom and threw up. She washed her face, brushed her teeth, and finally saw in the mirror her own haggard face. As if she was seeing a miracle, she touched the glass. Tears beaded in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. She went to her bed, then, and lay down, and slept the dismal and uneasy sleep of a captured soul.

TWO

ON A SOUR OCTOBER FORENOON in 2003, Lieutenant Lauren Glass watched her father's coffin being lowered. She was now alone, given that her mother had abandoned them when she was twelve, returned to Scotland, and no longer communicated.

Also at the graveside were four men, none of whom she knew. They were, she assumed, members of whatever unit he was involved in. She did not know its name, what it did, or anything about it at all.

The wind worried the flowers she had brought, the chaplain completed his prayers, and she threw a clod of earth and said inside herself, *You will not, you will not* and then she cried.

He had died on duty, somehow. She had not been told how, she had not been allowed to see his body. The coffin was sealed with federal seals warning that it was a crime to open it. Lead solder filled the crack beneath its lid. She had wanted to at least be alone with it for a short while, but not even that had been allowed. There had been no obituary, nothing to mark all he had done in this world, what she believed must have been a heroic life.

She had been given a five-thousand-dollar death benefit, and he had been listed as killed in action.

Killed how? In what action? He'd left home as usual that morning, then driven to his work, she assumed. They lived on Wright-Pat in Dayton, but he commuted to Indianapolis on the days he worked, which were sporadic.

As the ceremony concluded, to her amazement a missing-man formation flew overhead, wheeling majestically away toward the gray horizon. Then, down at the end of the field, an honor guard she had no idea would be there fired twenty-one times. The highest salute. Taps were sounded.

He was being buried with the highest of honors, and she felt bitter because she did not know why.

The four men were walking away from the grave when she caught up with them. "Can you tell me anything?"

Nobody answered.

“Please, I’m his daughter. Tell me, at least, did he suffer?”

One of the men, tall, so blond that he might have been albino, dropped back. “Should I say no?”

“You know how he died?”

“I know, Lauren.”

He knew her name. But who was this man in his superbly tailored civilian suit, as gray as the autumn clouds, with his dusting of white hair and his eyes so pale that they were almost white as well?

“Who are you? Can you tell me what my dad did?”

“I want you to come to an office. Can you do that?”

“Now? Is this an order?”

“I’m so sorry. Are you up to it?”

This walk across this graveyard was the saddest thing she had ever done. She did not understand grief, it was a new landscape for her. Could you go to an office in grief? Talk there in grief? In grief, could you learn secrets? “I want to be at home,” she said.

He gave her an address on base. “You think about it, and I want you to bear in mind that we wouldn’t be asking this if—”

“I know it’s urgent. Obviously it’s urgent.”

“I’m Lewis Crew,” he said. “If you don’t mind, please do not mention the appointment to anybody, or my name.”

“Okay,” she said. “Will you tell me what happened to my dad?”

He gave her a long look, long enough to be disquieting. He was evaluating her. But why? She had no clearance, she was a lowly procurement officer, she had not cared to follow her dad into Air Force Intelligence.

“Will you?” she asked again.

“I’m so sorry to have to ask you to come in on a day like this.”

“So am I.” She walked away from him then, passing among the neat lines of identical military graves into which the Air Force had poured so many lives, in so many steel coffins, most of them too young, too innocent, too good to die the sorts of improbable and terrible deaths the Air Force had to offer.

It was duty that had taken them. Duty, always, her dad’s breath and blood. “The oath, Lauren, never forget the oath. It might take you to your death, and if it does, that’s where you have to go.”

She’d thought, *If some stupid president sends me to some dumb country where we shouldn’t even be, is it my duty to die there?*

She'd known the answer.

Had Dad died a useless death? She hoped not, she hoped that the missing-man formation was more than just a passing honor.

Her life with her dad had not been perfect. Eamon Glass could be demanding, and he had not been happy with the way her career was unfolding. "You need to push yourself, Lauren, Air-Force style. Be ready when it matters, be willing when it counts."

Boy, was he out of it. He was part of another Air Force, as far as she was concerned. In her Air Force, the main issues were things like padded bills and missing laptops, not duty and dying amid huts and palm trees.

"Who were you, Dad? Why did this happen?"

Dad had nightmares. God, did he have nightmares, screaming cyclones of terror from which he could not awaken. And you couldn't get near him. He'd belt you and then in the morning be so upset by what he had done that he'd be in a funk for days.

Often, he would ask if he'd said anything in his sleep. It worried him, obviously, worried him a lot.

She'd listened for some meaning in the screams, but never found any.

She got in her car and started it, eager for the heater to drive out the deep Canadian cold that was sweeping down the vast plains from the north, shivering the naked trees and the stubble-filled fields.

She drove home across the great, gray base to their apartment. She stood in the living room thinking how anonymous it all seemed, the inevitable landscape on the wall, the not-too-challenging books on the shelves, the oldish TV. And his chair, big and comfortable, and beside it the magazine rack filled with *Time* and the *National Review* and *National Geographic*.

All so ordinary, and yet so filled with him that every step deeper into the place was a step through more memory and greater loneliness.

She made coffee, and was drinking it when she realized that it was Dad's mug in her hand. That did it: she cried again. These, she knew, were the anguished tears of the bereaved, that belong both to grief and defeat.

She had a last confession of love that must remain frozen in her forever. Most importantly, there was the conversation that had been their life together, that could never now be brought to rest.

A whole career, and there had only been five people at his funeral. But it hadn't been announced in any way. So his unit was not large, obviously. A colonel, looked about fifty, with the name tag Wilkes. A younger one,

Lieutenant Colonel Langford. Maybe thirty-eight. Then a civilian, dumpy, wearing an ill-fitting suit. He'd cried, the civilian had, silent tears that he had flicked away as if they had been gnats landing on his face. And then Mr. Crew, tall, no way to tell the age, looking a little like the Swedish actor Max von Sydow. Great suit, and those eyes. White-gray. Unique.

Dad's people. His coworkers. She shook her head, considering the little collection of silent men.

She went into her bedroom and lay down, closing her eyes and contemplating what the voyage of her life would be like now.

Dad had had one of those stealth tempers that would boil up out of nowhere and, for a few minutes, rock the world. He had been bitter about never making general. "It's the damn work I do, nobody else can do it and it's not a general's job." He had hated it and loved it. He would drink at the kitchen table, lifting shots of vodka, and then he would be poetic, which was beautiful and awesome and scary, because he had such a huge memory for quotations, and because when he was like that, being with him was like looking into the darkest room in the world.

"When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes," she could hear him reciting, "I all alone bewep my outcast state . . ." and then looking at her and adding, "pardon my bathos."

"Oh, hell," she said, "I'm going to miss you! I am going to *miss you!*"

How could he be dead? How in God's name do you get KIAed in Indianapolis?

Well, hell. As far as he was concerned, the day she received her commission, she had been on her way to general. He would manage her career. "You can't fly combat, so you need to get on a hot staff."

He had stared at her orders to report to the supplies depot for a long time. Stood there and stared, so still she thought he might have gone to sleep on his feet. He put them down far too carefully, on the back of the couch. Then he had marched off into his office. She'd heard him yelling, and gone to his door, which was not right, she knew, but she was involved, for God's sake. She'd only heard one thing, but it had been repeated a number of times, "put her on ice." And he'd cursed the person at the other end of the line with a venom that was far beyond his worst tantrums, that had frightened her because it had implied that the hidden thing in his life somehow also involved her.

Thinking back, she closed her eyes for a moment. Fortune and men's

eyes . . .

There had also been another thing between her and Dad, that would come at moments of silence and his strange sorrow, a kind of bond that would seem to enter the air between them, almost as if they could somehow link their minds. Or so she imagined.

The phone rang. She looked at the incoming number. Base call. Could it be the guy from Dad's funeral? Could he actually be pressing her this hard, on this day? She didn't believe it.

"Hello?"

"Lieutenant—"

"Look, mister, are you somewhere in the chain of command, because if you aren't, very frankly, I am here trying to deal with the death of my father and really my only friend, and I am just not doing this."

There was a silence. It extended. "I am in the chain of command," he said at last. "My orders are legal."

Could this be real? Could this guy really, actually be on the phone pushing her around like this now?

"I'd like to do this tomorrow."

"You have your orders, Lieutenant."

She hung up the phone and wanted, very badly, to do something hurtful to this man. But that was military life, wasn't it? You weren't here to grieve.

She reported to an impressive but sterile office suite that had all the anonymous earmarks of being some kind of official visitor's lair. She was called in immediately.

With Mr. Crew was the younger of the two colonels, Langford. She was just as glad—the older one had exuded something that had made her uneasy, Wilkes or whatever his name was.

The office was large and the furniture real wood, but there wasn't a single citation on the walls, nor a photograph, nor anything that might identify him further. Obviously, a spook, but not Air Force or he'd be in uniform.

She saluted the colonel. He returned. "At ease, Lieutenant," he said, smiling and shaking his head slightly.

"Please take a seat," Crew said.

"I want to extend my sympathies, too," Langford added. "Your father was a great man and a national hero. You should know that he's going to receive the Intelligence Medal." He paused. "And also the Medal of Honor."

She knew that her mouth had dropped open, because she had to snap it closed. “The Congressional Medal of Honor?”

Crew nodded.

She was stunned silent. In awe. In sorrow that he had not been able to share what terrors must have beset him in his work, and had killed him.

“Do you remember the tests you took at Lackland?”

What in the world did that have to do with anything? “I took a lot of tests during basic.”

“One of them involved a page of numbers, and you were supposed to draw lines between them.”

“Sure, I remember it,” she said. The test had been tucked in among the standard battery of aptitude tests she’d taken as a recruit. “Sort of connect-the-dots type thing.” She’d sort of doodled it, as she recalled. “I messed it up.”

The two men stared at her, saying nothing. They looked, she thought, like people must look to an ape from inside his cage. “What on earth does it matter now?”

“I have another test for you,” he said.

“Another test? That’s what this is about? Because—”

“Lieutenant, it’s terribly important.”

Langford’s voice had an edge that told her to listen and keep her mouth shut.

“You need to fill out a consent.”

“I thought you were going to let me know something about my dad.”

“I am.”

She took the form he handed her, and was very surprised, as she read it, to see that it was no ordinary medical consent.

She looked at Langford. His face was bland. A dentist’s face—that is to say, a mask. She read aloud, “Any commentary or discussion or unauthorized record of any subject or meeting or action carried out within the context of the project is prohibited conduct and subject to prosecution under provisions of the National Security Act of 1947 as amended.” She tried to laugh. They remained silent. “This is very heavy stuff.” Still nothing. “Excuse me, but this is a very serious document, here.” She pushed the paper back toward Crew’s side of the desk.

“We can’t bargain with you,” Langford said, “and we can’t talk until you sign.”

“Volunteer or be shot, in other words.”

Langford pushed the paper back toward her. “Don’t miss this,” he said. “You’re first in line, Lieutenant Glass, but there is a line.”

“If I sign and don’t like what I hear, can I walk away?”

Langford turned toward Crew, who didn’t so much as blink. “I’m sorry, but the agreement is binding,” Langford said.

“It commits me to something I can’t learn about until I’m in it? And then I can’t get out?”

“I know it sounds unreasonable.”

“Unreasonable? It’s downright scary. More than scary. I mean, the Air Force doesn’t handle things this way.” She wondered if that was actually true.

“Sign it. It would be very helpful.”

Maybe her dad was looking down on her right now. Probably was, assuming there was anything left of him, any sort of a soul.

She picked up a pen off the desk . . . and had the odd feeling that these two guys were waiting, but in a funny way . . . like they were hungry, almost, and she was lunch.

“So, I don’t think I need to do this,” she said. “No.” And she was more than a little ashamed. *Sorry, Dad, but this does not feel right.*

Crew unfolded his long legs and leaned forward. She expected him to speak. But he did not speak. He just looked at her. It wasn’t a special expression, not at all. But it moved her. It did, definitely. A very serious, very important moment.

“I can’t very well jump off a cliff without knowing what’s at the bottom, can I?”

Crew sighed. Was it anger? Suppressed impatience? Boy, she could not read this guy. You thought saint, then you thought—well, something else.

“We want you to continue your father’s work,” Crew said. “If you pass this small test.”

“It’s urgent,” Langford added. “You’ll need to start this afternoon.”

Crew pushed the agreement back at her.

“But . . . what did he do?”

“Please help us,” Crew said. His voice was still as soft as ever, but the desperation in it was somehow terrifying.

“What if I . . . can’t?”

He smiled then, very slightly.

Suddenly she knew that she would not walk away from this. She could not live the rest of her life in ignorance of what her dad had done, knowing that she had passed up this chance.

He had been killed, though.

She grabbed the paper, signed, then thrust it back.

Colonel Langford took it, folded it once, and slipped it into a manila envelope. “You’ll get a copy countersigned by the Secretary of Defense,” he said.

“You’re kidding.”

“Lauren, you have a very unique ability,” the big man said, “inherited, we believe. That first test you took, you passed. You were the only person to have done so in the forty years it has been administered, in one form or another, to every military recruit in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, and Australia. The only one who even came close. But we weren’t surprised, given who your father is.”

That sort of sounded . . . whoa. “Did you say, uh—what’s that?”

“You are one in many millions, Lauren. You have inherited an absolutely unique skill from your dad.”

What in the world could this be? “I have to tell you honestly, I have no unusual skills.”

“I want to warn you, you’re going to have a very extraordinary experience. I want you to understand that it will not be in any way pleasant or easy. I won’t pretend that there is no danger, because it must be obvious to you that there is great danger. What’s more, we’re not going to be able to help you. You have to do it on your own. And you are on your own.”

“But, uh, you said there was a list, Colonel Langford. And you were going to . . . you were going to the next person if I didn’t sign.”

“I lied. And you will, too, many times. It will be a big part of your job.”

“If I’d said no—despite Dad, absolutely and finally no—what then?”

Crew said, “We would have had to say something dramatic, like the survival of the human race might depend on you.”

The words hung in the air. Unbelievable. Crazy, even. She didn’t know whether she should be scared or what. Finally, the whole idea just seemed so overblown that she burst out laughing—and it was the only sound in the room, and it stayed the only sound in the room. She looked from one deadly serious face to the other. They actually were not in any way kidding.

But she was a girl, she was twenty-two, and, while she liked being both

things, neither suggested that she had any sort of amazing mission in life. “This is too weird,” she said slowly. “I mean, are you telling me I’m some kind of outrageous, like, freak?”

Langford cleared his throat. “You know nothing about your father’s work?”

She shook her head.

“You’re what we call an empath. You can hear thought and you can transmit it to others who can hear it.”

“Yeah, Dad used to say that. He read science fiction, too. Arthur C. Clarke kind of thing.”

Crew handed her a yellow pad. “Write down the first thing that comes to mind.”

She took the pad, thought for a moment, then scrawled the first word that came to mind. “The name of my dad’s barber,” she said. “Adam.”

Now Langford pulled an envelope out of his pocket. “The person you will be working with cannot speak. His brain is so entirely different that, without a person like you, we can only exchange the most rudimentary ideas. At present he is terribly upset, but we have succeeded in getting him to transmit the name we call him to you.”

He handed her the envelope.

In it was a note scrawled on a piece of paper that smelled oddly of what she thought might be Lysol. The single word written there was “Adam.”

She looked at it. She looked back up at the two men. “Who . . . who is this guy, anyway?”

“That’s part of what we’ve been trying to understand, Lieutenant Glass. What your father spent his career working on.”

“His name is Adam but you don’t understand . . . what?”

“They don’t have a naming convention in their culture. Adam and Bob are really just our labels.”

“Bob?”

“Died.”

Another death. She noted that. But who in the world would communicate via thought and not use names?

“Our next step will be to send you to meet the head of your part of the project. He operates a very small unit and runs a very, very tight ship,” Colonel Langford said. “You have to understand, you are never to speak to him about your background, about your meeting with us, about anything that

you do not absolutely need to talk to him about in order to do your work. Do you understand that?”

This was sounding crazier and crazier. “So I just walk up to the guy—my commanding officer—and I say—what?”

The colonel handed her an envelope. “You don’t say anything. You give him this. He’ll take it from there.”

She recognized the envelope, of course: it carried orders. She started to open it.

“No.”

“No? I don’t open my own orders?” She shook her head. “Why am I not surprised?”

He gave her a card with an address in Indianapolis on it. “You’ll drive to your new assignment. Colonel Michael Wilkes will be expecting you. You saw Mike at the funeral. You will receive further orders from him verbally.” He paused for a moment. “Lauren,” he continued, “I want you to understand that there is an extremely good reason for all this secrecy. In time, you’ll come to know this reason, and you will find yourself in the same position we are—it’s a secret that you won’t hesitate to defend with your life.”

She found herself walking toward the parking lot with this weird verbal order to report to an address in University Heights in Indianapolis, and to be there by six this evening. Not impossible, given that it was a little over a hundred miles and she had five hours. Typical of the Air Force, though, she’d been sitting in procurement for two years and then, with barely time to go back to the apartment and grab her toothbrush, she was on the move to, of all places, Indianapolis, and not even a USAF facility as far as she could tell.

“You just get your belongings out of your billet and go,” Langford had said. “No good-byes, no e-mails, no cell calls.”

She had friends, a life, at least something of a life. No, hell, there was Molly at the office who was going to wonder, there was Charlie Fellowes who was getting to be more than just a friend, but he was out on a refueling mission and wouldn’t be back for forty-eight hours—so he was just going to find her apartment empty, her cell phone disconnected, and her e-mail bouncing everything back.

She worried that she’d run into a familiar face on her way home, but all was quiet. She knew the Air Force: her current commanding officer, General Winters, would have been duly informed of her transfer, etc., but nothing would run smoothly. Undoubtedly, the next thing she’d get from her current

unit would be a notice that she was AWOL.

She spent three quarters of an hour packing. At the last, she put their small photo album in a suitcase. Her and Dad through the years. She staggered down to the parking lot under her bags, and got the Focus pretty much stuffed to the roof liner.

Then she was gone, outta here, no looking back.

It was not until she was sailing west on 70 and WTUE was rocking into her past that she began to think again about Dad's dreams.

As a little girl, she'd covered her head with her pillow and begged God to help him. Later, she'd gone into his bedroom to try to provide him with whatever support a daughter could. She would find him with his eyes wide open, screaming and shaking his head from side to side, and you could not wake him up.

He'd said it was 'Nam coming back to haunt him. He'd flown Hueys in 'Nam, and he had two Hearts for his trouble. Also a scar down his back where he'd been wounded. His story was that a lot of guys had burned alive in a hospital tent that had been torched by the V.C. Helpless guys, guys with no faces, guys with no legs. He'd had a broken arm and a bad infection, but he could run, at least.

There was, of course, a problem with this. It was that, as she knew, her father had not served in Vietnam. She'd seen his duty book, and he just had never served there.

In fact, her father had served at White Sands, then at an army base in Arizona called Fort Huachuca. Her earliest memories were of the wonderful rocks around Fort Huachuca. After that, they'd come to Wright-Pat, where he'd been connected with the Air Materiel Command. She knew that because his unit was attached to the Behavioral Research Directorate, which was a division of AMC. She knew that behavioral research was about understanding things like pilot alertness and endurance. Also, muddier stuff, nonlethal weapons and such.

It was a nice drive, once you got out of Dayton traffic—which was, truth be told, pretty minor.

Farms, midsummer corn, a different way of life out here. She'd like to run tractors and combines and things. She liked big machines.

She'd been around the Midwest for a while now, so Indy was no stranger to her. Back before Mom moved home to Glasgow, they'd gone to the 500 here practically every year. Mom was into fast cars—or rather, the

drivers, the mechanics, and just about anybody connected with racing. Actually, just about anybody else at all, as long as it wasn't Dad.

She was expecting an office building at least, or maybe some kind of lab facility tucked away next to the university. But this was pure residential around here. Wide streets, big old houses, quiet in the late afternoon.

She drove past 101 Hamilton and was, frankly, confused. It was a house. Looked like it had been built around 1910 in the Craftsman style. Beautiful place, for sure. But a *house*? An Air Force facility was in a house in a neighborhood?

Okay, so be it. She pulled into the driveway behind a very sweet-looking SLK convertible, that was, no, not your usual Air Force colonel's automobile. It was possible, of course, that the car belonged to somebody else, but she'd been told that the chilly Colonel Wilkes ran the place and this car was in a special little chunk of tarmac all its own. Commanding officer's privilege, for sure; she knew her Air Force.

There was only one other vehicle there, though, and the garage was padlocked. The other car was an Acura, not too young. So there was Colonel Wilkes with a fast car and a flunkie to be named later. Not the lowest of the low, they'd be in your Focus or your Echo like her, trying to make ends meet on just enough money to make that impossible.

As she mounted the stairs to the porch she noticed, of all things, a pair of longhorns over the front door. She stood looking at this incredibly improbable choice of decoration for Indianapolis, Indiana.

The front door had one of those old-fashioned bells on it that you twisted. She turned it and was rewarded by a dry crunching sound, not loud. In fact, hardly audible. So she did it again, a couple of times.

She was still doing it when the door swept open and Colonel Wilkes, looking shockingly older than this morning, stood there staring at her out of bloodshot eyes. "Please come in," he said, stepping aside.

His voice sounded sad, and she had the odd impression that he might have actually been crying. She noticed that there were boxes against the wall.

"They're yours," Wilkes said. "Eamon's things."

"Colonel, nobody has told me yet what happened to my dad. I've been ordered to come to this place and I have no idea why, beyond reasons that sound like some sort of science fiction crap to me, and I have to tell you that this is not being done right. Couldn't someone have at least warned me that I'd come here and see Dad's stuff in damn boxes!"

“Who sent you here?”

She could not believe that he actually didn't know. “I've been ordered not to tell you.”

He nodded, as if that was the most natural thing in the world. She followed him into an office that had clearly been carved out of what was once the master bedroom.

“This place was built in 1908 by Indy's only cattle baron,” he said as he dropped down behind his desk.

There had been no exchange of salutes. But he was her superior officer, so she brought her hand to her forehead and said, “Lieutenant Lauren Glass reporting as ordered, sir.”

He looked up at her. “Obviously. Please go to the scrub room and get prepped.”

“Excuse me?”

“The scrub room. You'll find it at the base of the shaft.”

“Sir, I have to explain to you, I have no idea what's going on here. I would like a little more information, sir.”

“You'll get the hang of it.”

“Uh, look, what is this scrub room? What do I have to scrub for?”

“Listen, I know you don't understand any of this. We were planning to bring you along as your dad reached retirement. Nobody thought it would be like this. But we have a desperate situation, Lauren.”

She found a chair. “Sir, I'm sorry to disabuse you, but I have not been on any training program in any way, shape, or form. I am not prepared for whatever this is. I basically have no idea what you're doing here at all, but whatever it is, it killed—” She had to stop. Her grief, appearing suddenly, had choked her on her own words.

“Lauren, I knew your dad for a long time. So you'll know that what I'm about to say is not meant to be hard or callous. It is what your dad would say to you if he could talk right now. Your dad would say to you, ‘Soldier, you have a duty. Do your duty.’ ”

“Sir, respectfully, you tell me in one breath that my predecessor is a KIA, then you tell me to proceed into whatever situation he was in with no training or prep whatsoever. Sir, I would like to understand this order a little better. I know that I am dealing with somebody called Adam, and my father dealt with him and with somebody called Bob, and my father died as a result. That is the extent of my knowledge.”

He stood up so suddenly that she did, too. He turned his back on her and strode to the window. “There is no training, and there is no time. I want you down there now, because we have a situation, Lieutenant, and I believe—no, I know—that you are the only person remotely available to us who might be able to help.”

When he attempted to smile at her, she saw that coldness again, this time more clearly than she had at the grave. This was a driven man, she thought, a fanatic. And she wondered, should she trust a fanatic?

Well, Dad had. This was his commanding officer, this frosty man with his carefully decorated office and his fabulous car.

He showed her to a small elevator that opened under the front stairs. “There’s a very skilled man at the other end who will be there to help you.”

She stepped into the dim interior and descended. It felt as if it was moving fast, and continued for more than a minute. When the doors opened, she found a chunky young man in a white sterile suit waiting for her . . . and saw that he had been the fourth man at the funeral.

“I’m Andy Morgan,” he said. “Welcome to the facility.”

“This place is *deep*.”

“We’re two hundred and eighty feet down. Deep in the bedrock.” He tapped a foot on the floor. “Basalt.”

Faintly, she could hear another voice. It was groaning and sounded tired. Also angry. She looked around but saw nobody.

“Who is that?”

Andy Morgan shook his head. “You’re good,” he said.

“Who’s moaning? What’s going on in here?”

“Lauren, listen to me. You’re going to meet him in a moment. Sort of meet him. What you’re hearing is coming through a six-foot-thick tempered steel wall that is further protected by a high-intensity electromagnetic field.”

“Then how can we possibly be hearing it? Because it’s perfectly clear. And the man is in agony.”

“I can’t hear it.”

“But that’s crazy. Listen to him, he’s wailing!”

“The fact that you can hear his thoughts is why you’re here.”

“What thoughts? He’s crying!”

“You need to go in there,” Andy Morgan said. The same tone, she thought, that he might have used if he had told her it was time for her to do her wingwalk, or perhaps go over Niagara Falls in a barrel.

Behind him was a steel door, armored and locked with great, gleaming bolts. Why in the world would anybody be that locked up? What did they have in there, some kind of deranged superman? She tried to conceal her total and complete mystification, not to say her fear, and to concentrate on what she needed to know, here, on a practical basis. “Now, is this person going to be violent?”

“Baby, he is *flyin’* in there! He’s been bouncing off the walls ever since the colonel bought it. Excuse me! Since your dad passed away.”

“Before I go in there, I think you’d better tell me exactly what happened to him.”

He lowered his head. “Nobody told you?”

“They did not.”

“Okay. Your dad got a scratch.”

“A *scratch?*”

“That caused an allergic reaction so intense that he bled out.”

She did not need to think very long about that. She sat down in one of the two chairs that stood before the control panel. “I’m not doing this.”

He was a gentle-looking guy, more than a little overweight, with sad, sad eyes. “They sent you all the way down here without telling you a damn thing, didn’t they?”

“That would be correct.”

“Okay, I’m going to level with you. Have you ever heard of aliens?”

“Yeah. No green card.”

“The other kind.”

“Oh, that stuff. I have no interest in that stuff.”

“Perhaps you had better see your dad’s office.”

“God, I’d love that.”

Across the small room was a door. The nameplate holder was empty. He unlocked the door and she saw a small, windowless space that had a steel desk, a couple of chairs, and a cot. There was a bookcase, also, and it was filled with books on electromagnetism and, of all things, UFOs. She read the titles, *Intruders*, *Communion*, *UFO Condition Red*, *UFOs and the National Security State*, and dozens more.

“You can pick what you’d like to keep. We’ll ditch the others.” He lifted a picture that was lying facedown on the desk. “I knew you’d want this.”

It filled her heart and her eyes, the picture of the two of them taken when she was twelve. They were at Cape May, New Jersey, she was wearing

her new bathing suit, and her Boston terrier, Prissy, was still alive. For a moment she smelled the salt in the air, remembered a radio playing down the beach, and heard the breeze fluttering in their cabana.

He took the picture and set it on the desk. "This is your office, now."

"There's an alien down here."

"And your father was his empath, and you will be his empath."

"Meaning?"

"You are going to find that you can see pictures he makes in his mind, and describe what you see to us."

Her father had kept quite a secret. "I should have been trained."

"Your dad wanted to wait until you'd had a little more Air Force. You know, you sign up and you wear a uniform, but really becoming part of this crazy organization takes time. Your dad wanted you to have that time."

"I'm an Air Force brat down to my toes."

"He knew that. He respected that. But duty is something different. I mean, our kind of duty. Keeping a secret so big that it is a kind of agony. Above all, knowing every time you go in that room over there, that you might die. Every time. But doing it like your dad did, on behalf of the Air Force, the country, and future of man." He took the picture from her, looked at it. "We need you to get in there and calm Adam down. If we can't get him to pull himself together, he's going to literally be busted apart by knocking into those walls in there. Considering that he's been doing this since your dad passed, we're desperate, Lieutenant."

Either she took up her dad's sword or she let it lie, and let the meaning of his life lie with him in his grave.

There was no real choice here. Never had been. She took a deep breath. "Okay, what do I do?"

He drew her through a steel door into a tiny dressing area. She stood naked in a shower with nozzles on the ceiling and walls, turning slowly as instructed with her hands raised over her head while green, chemical-stinking liquid sluiced over her.

Still wet, she donned an orange isolation suit and what felt like asphalt gloves, they were so thick. "He's electromagnetically active," Andy explained. "If you touch him, he'll extend into your nervous system and take over your body. You don't want that."

"No."

"Cover your face with Vaseline. And here's an epinephrine injector. If

you get the least feeling of even so much as a tickle in your throat, press it against your leg and get out of there.”

As she dug into the Vaseline container, she reflected that her father’s hand was probably the last one to do this. She could almost feel him beside her right now, telling her not to be scared, to remember her duty, that he was with her every step of the way.

Then something changed. The room, the guy—everything around her disappeared. She was suddenly and vividly in another room. It had stainless-steel walls, a black floor, and a fluorescent ceiling. There was a man on a table, naked, surrounded by people in full protective gear, sterile suits, faceplates down, the works. The man was purple, his chest was heaving, and blood was oozing out of his eyes, out of his nose, down his cheeks like tears.

The hallucination, or whatever it was, was so vivid that she might as well have actually been standing in the place. She could even hear the air-conditioning hissing, and the muffled voices of the doctors behind the masks, who were trying to save the man on the table.

He gasped, gasped again as they set up an IV. A nurse intoned, “BP 280 over 200, heart rate 160, basal BP rising, glucose 320 rising, we have another infarction—”

There was a high-pitched whine and blood began spraying out of his skin, spraying their face masks and their white sterile suits, beading and running down to the floor as he bled from every pore, a haze of blood pink and fine, like it was being sprayed from a thousand tiny high-pressure nozzles affixed to his body.

Then his head turned and she saw his face, and an ice cold spike stabbed her straight in the heart.

In that instant, the vision of her dad’s death ended.

She realized that she was still in the basement room she had entered in the first place, and Andy was supporting her under her arms.

“Sorry,” she managed to mutter, regaining her footing and stepping away from him, “I—uh—I think it’s the . . . depth.”

“If you say so.” He put an arm around her.

“Back off!”

“Hey, okay! Okay. I’m just trying to help, here.”

She blew out breath, then shook her head. That had been vivid. That had been real vivid.

Andy watched her. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m not okay. No.”

“Uh, was that a seizure, because—”

“It’s my business, okay!”

“Okay! Sorry.” He paused, then, and when she said nothing more, continued. “I’m going to open up the cage itself. When you enter, you’ll see a chair and a table. Sit in the chair.”

“That’s it? That’s all I get to know?”

“It’s all any of us know. Frankly, what your dad did, and what we know you can do, is not understood. You just have to do it.”

“And what if I can’t?”

“You’ve passed the test.” He went to a small keyboard and keyed in a combination. “I’ll be in the control room. You’ll be able to see and hear me, and vice versa. If you get into trouble, I’ll pull you out. But obviously things can happen fast in there.”

He left the dressing room, closing the heavy outer door behind him. A moment later, his voice returned, tinny, coming out of a ceiling speaker. “You reading me?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, the door’s opening now.”

There was a loud click, then a whirring sound, and the wall of the little chamber slid back. She saw before her a room lit by what appeared to be ultraviolet light. It reminded her of the *Animals of the Night* exhibit at the Cleveland Zoo, where the vampire bats and things were deceived into thinking it was dark during the day. “Are there any lights?”

“Don’t worry about seeing him. You won’t. If you get so much as a glimpse, count yourself lucky. Pay attention to the corners of your eyes.”

“The corners of my eyes . . . you mean use my peripheral vision?”

Then the air hit her. It was dry—*real* dry. She could feel her face shriveling, it was so dry, feel her lips starting to crack. The function of the Vaseline was now clear, and she grabbed another handful of it right in the glove and slathered it on.

The room open before her was not large, maybe twenty by twenty. It looked like it had rubber walls. There was a window on the far side, and Andy could be seen sitting there at a control panel. His face glowed green from the instruments before him.

Suddenly something shot past so fast she lurched back waving her hands. It felt like nothing so much as being buzzed by a fly—but not a small

fly, no. More like the size, say, of a buzzard.

There was also a voice: groaning, howling, wailing, and it was the strangest voice she had ever heard, because of the way it echoed in her ears and her mind at the same time, as if she was hearing both sounds and thoughts that were the same as the sounds.

A thud, bzzzt, thud, bzzzt, thud, bzzzt, shot around the room, and with it the wailing, mourning voice, its howl thin and pitiful now.

She saw something—a flash of something that gleamed black. It was big, the size of a hand, and slanted. It was also brilliantly alive—a big, gleaming eye. A sound came out of her that she knew, objectively, was a scream. Sharp, intense, made of pure fear.

The wailing at once increased. Now it was desolated, like he'd been instantly aware of her revulsion and her fright and it was making him feel really, really miserable.

“Hold on,” she said. Dimly, she was conscious that Wilkes was now standing beside the tech at the control panel.

Suddenly, the buzzing stopped. There was no sound now but the hissing of the powerful air-conditioning.

“Sit down in the chair,” Wilkes said over the intercom.

“Where is he?”

“He moves with your eyes, so he appears totally still. The eye doesn't see anything that's totally still.”

“Yeah, like a rock or a mountain.”

“No,” Wilkes explained, “when you look at anything at all, *you're* in motion, so you see it. Since Adam is constantly making micromovements to match your eyes' own natural flickering, he doesn't register in the optic nerve at all.”

“What in hell is this *about?*”

“Tell you what. If you want to see him, make a very sudden move. As you do that, concentrate on the corners of your eyes, not your central vision. You'll see him.”

She sat, took a deep breath, tried to concentrate on her peripheral vision, and leaped to her feet.

Not a foot away, there was a shadow. Then it was gone again.

“He's right here! He's right on top of me!”

Then he started wailing again, and she could feel him whizzing around the room. More and more, he was racing past her face at the distance of what

felt like about an inch. Dad had gotten scratched. She sat frozen, terrified.

“Stay with it. You’re doing marvelously.”

She could see Wilkes nodding and smiling at her. “This is one hell of a sucker play,” she yelled. “False damn pretenses!” She got to her feet. Adam whizzed past so close she was forced to sit back down. She jumped up again. Same thing happened.

“He likes you, Lauren,” Wilkes said.

It felt a lot like getting a bat in her hair or something. How had Dad ever stood this, it was just way, way too weird.

“So what are we doing with an alien?” she screeched. “How in the world did we capture an alien?”

“We got two of them in a crash in New Mexico. They may have been given to us, we’re not sure.”

Bzzzt! Whooosh!

“Get away!”

“He wants to touch you. Let him touch you.”

She began waving her arms around her head. “No way, I’ll bleed out!”

“Remember, that was an accident. He’s in an agony of grief, that’s why he’s like this. Now you settle down, young woman, and follow your orders.”

Pictures of Dad kept flashing through her mind like photographs. With them came emotions of grief and the most acute regret. It was clear that they entered from the outside, although she could not say how she knew that. It was sort of like breathing a kind of emotional smoke.

“Shh,” she whispered, “now, baby . . .” She looked toward the control room. “The buzzing stopped again.”

Something brushed her cheek.

“I think he just touched me. I know you’re sorry,” she whispered, “I know . . .” She looked again toward the figures in the control room. “What am I supposed to do now?”

No response.

So she comforted him. She went through her mind, seeking for the words of some song from childhood, some sort of comforting song. Dad had not been a big singer. Mom had her Elvis, but this did not appear to be your basic Elvis moment.

Then a sort of hallucinatory flash took place. In it, the light in the room was deep red and there was a man at the table, sitting across from Adam. On the table, a bright green light like a laser that hopped up and down in the air.

The man was her dad.

It was so real, it was so good to see him again, that the tears were immediate. And then she heard inside her head, *oohhhhh*, and she knew that Adam had realized who she was.

“Yeah,” she said, “yeah, he was my dad.”

Ohhhhhh! Ohhhhh!

“Oh, yeah,” she managed through her own tears, “I miss him, too, I miss him bad.”

She saw next a glowingly beautiful woman, her face surrounded by a halo of golden light. It was, she knew, herself as Adam saw her.

Empath. One who empathizes. Turned out it was in the blood. No training needed. Genetic thing, she supposed. Maybe their ancestors had been psychics or witches or something. Dad’s grandfather had come from Ireland, that was about all she knew of their bloodline.

In the control room, Colonel Wilkes and Specialist Martin exchanged looks. “He’s got her wrapped around his little finger,” Wilkes said.

“For sure, sir.”

“He knows how to handle ’em, the little bastard. That is one smart piece of work in there.”

They said no more. Lauren Glass had been captured. She would not escape, never, not until she followed her father and his predecessor, both of whom Adam had killed with a scratch.

PART TWO

THE THREE THIEVES

They stole little Bridget
For seven years long;
When she came down again
Her friends were all gone.

—WILLIAM ALLINGHAM

“The Fairies”

THREE

DAN CAME INTO THE KITCHEN while Katelyn was washing spinach and nuzzled her neck. She moved her head back, enjoying him. In their case, not even thirteen years of marriage had been enough of a honeymoon, and she was very far from being used to this guy of hers.

They had met here at Bell, two days after he arrived. Bizarrely, it turned out that they'd both grown up in Madison, Wisconsin, just a few blocks from each other. He'd been crossing the campus in that aimless way he had, looking here and there, smiling even though there was no reason to smile. He was a strikingly handsome man, the last person you'd pick for a professor, let alone a specialist in physiological psychology. But that's what he was, and he'd just snared a provisional professorship when they met. Now Bell had reached a point of no return with him. This was, at last, his tenure year, and in a few days, his career here—and their pleasantly settled life—would either continue or it would end.

“What's Conner up to?” she asked. “Is he downstairs?”

“He's in the living room.”

“Too bad, he'd hear us if we went upstairs.”

“Mmm.” He continued nuzzling.

Their son was more than a genius. A well-constructed, handsome tow-head, gentle of eye and so smart that he was a de facto freak. His IQ of 277 was, as far as anybody could determine, the highest presently on record.

Dan came up from nuzzling and said, “He's in a funk.”

“Symptoms of said funk?”

“Staring miserably at the TV pretending not to stare miserably at the TV.”

“He's eleven. Eleven has stuff.” She arched her back, drew his head over her shoulder, and kissed the side of his lips.

“He's watching *2001*.”

Which meant that it was a serious funk and he needed Mom. “Why didn't you say that in the first place?”

“In the first place, I wanted some love.”

She went into the family room, stood for a moment looking at the back of her son’s head. On the ridiculously huge TV Dan had unveiled at Christmas, the apes were howling at the monolith.

She sat down beside him. “Can I interest you in—” She glanced at her watch, picked up the *TV Guide*. “A *Mork and Mindy* rerun? *The McLaughlin Group*?”

“Invasion of my space, Mom.”

“Point taken, backing off.” But she didn’t do that. She knew to stay right where she was.

“And just because I’m watching *2001* does not mean that I’m sad.”

What could she say to the misery in that voice? “Conner, a genius does not an actor make.”

“Mother, could you consider dropping that label? You say that all the time and it does not help.”

“That you’re not a good actor?”

“Okay, let’s do this. Would you care to come out on the deck with me?”

“On the deck? It’s twenty-six degrees.”

But he’d already gotten to his feet and slid open the door. He gestured to her, and she saw the anger in it. She went out with him.

The air was sharp with smoke, the western sky deep orange beyond the black skeletons of the winter trees. One would have thought that a winter silence would prevail, but instead she heard the shrill voices of preteen boys.

When she looked down toward the Warners’ house, she saw streaks of light racing around in the backyard.

“You’re not invited?”

He went back in the house, sat down, and jammed the button on the remote. The bone sailed into the sky, the “Blue Danube” started.

Paulie and Conner had been friends effectively from birth—Conner’s birth, that is. Paulie was a year and a half older.

“Conner, what happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Something happened.”

“Mom, I’ve asked for space.”

“Honey, look, you’ve got one place you can go. Here. Two people who are one hundred percent on your team, me and Dad. And I want to know why you aren’t at that party.” And why, moreover, was it unfolding outside where

Conner could watch from a distance? That was real hard, that was.

Conner was ten months younger than the youngest child in his class at Bell Attached, the school that served the children of Bell College's professional community. He was nowhere near puberty, in a class where half the boys were shaving at least occasionally.

"Conner, would it make you feel better if I told you that puberty turns boys into monsters?"

"Thank you for that little dose of sexism, Mother. Girls have trouble with puberty, too."

"But boys *really* do."

She could hardly believe that Maggie and Harley would allow Paulie to leave Conner out like this. "What's really wrong?"

"All right. Fine." He got up, crossed the room, and went downstairs.

She heard him shut the door to the basement that Dan had finished for him when he was five. It was boy heaven down there, with an X-Box and a TV/DVD combo and a hulking but powerful Dell computer, plus his dinosaur collection, all of them painted with the utmost realism, and his train set, HO-grade, which had lighted houses, streetlights lining the streets, and lighted trains. He would play trains in the dark down there by the hour, muttering to himself in the voices of a hundred train men and townsfolk, all of whom he had invented, all of whose lives evolved and changed over the years. Katelyn thought of the train set as a sort of ongoing novel, and that her boy was a word genius as much as he was a math genius.

The care he lavished on everything he modeled came from his ability to concentrate. Even when he'd been little, he hadn't been clumsy. When he was eight, she'd discovered while cleaning up one day that the tiny human figures in his train set all had different-colored eyes, they had been that carefully finished.

She had loved him so, then, looking down at a tiny suited figure with a tie so small that you had to look under a magnifying glass to see the design he'd painted on it. And then you would hear him deep in the night talking to himself, and you would realize that he was reciting a book he'd read, maybe even years ago, all from memory, just to enjoy it again.

Conner and Dan had celebrated the completion of the room by putting a plaque on the door: THE CONNER ZONE.

She and her husband had celebrated in quite a different way, later that night. This was your garden-variety tract house, as isolated as it and its three

neighbors were, and the walls were tract-house thin. They did not feel that this extremely sensitive child needed to overhear the sounds of sex in the next room. And on that night, at last, they had been able to use their bed the way a bed was meant to be used, instead of being as still as possible, wincing at every squeak, and keeping their cries to a whisper.

“Dan,” she said, walking into the kitchen where he had begun trimming ribs, “there’s something kind of ugly going on. Paulie’s having a party and Conner’s not invited.”

“Jesus.”

“They’re actually outside playing with flashlights, which I kind of have the feeling is on purpose.”

“Kids are cruel.”

“Listen, incidentally, I had an e-mail from Marcie Cotton about you.”

“Oh?”

“They’ve reached the point of asking general-faculty opinion.”

“Oh, God.”

“I gave you a great report.”

“What a relief.”

“Come on, what else would I do?”

“Tell the truth like everybody else. I’m dull as dishwater in the classroom.”

“No, you’re actually interesting. It’s physiological psychology that’s dull. In the hands of most profs, it causes birds to die in the trees outside their classrooms. At least yours just fly off.”

“Dull is dull. I should’ve used puppets or worn costumes.”

“I would have preferred almost any other referee, frankly.”

“Yeah, you and me both. But I can handle her . . . maybe.”

“Not too much.”

Dan went to her, embraced her. “You’re my girl.”

There came a sound from below—a crash.

“He just kicked the wall,” Katelyn said. “Like father, like son.”

“Maybe a mano a mano would be good.”

One of the most precious things about this Dan Callaghan whom her heart had whispered to her to marry was that he was a genuinely good father—not an easy thing to be for a boy as challenging as their son. But Conner’s brilliance and demanding personality also made him fascinating, and she thought that the rewards for loving their boy were substantial. “Maybe a

mano a mano would be very good,” she said.

As he went downstairs, he noticed that the Conner Zone sign had been removed from the door, leaving some areas of peeled paint that would have to be repaired. But not right now. He started to open the door, thought better of it, and knocked.

A moment of silence was followed by a grudging, “Okay.”

The room was dark and the trains were running. Conner loomed over the board like some kind of leering godlet, an image that Dan found oddly creepy. In fact, he found Conner, in general, oddly creepy—a great kid, he was crazy about him . . . but there was something sort of fundamentally creepy about somebody who was probably smarter than Shakespeare, and certainly smarter than you—way smarter.

“Hey there, I see you’ve abolished the Conner Zone.”

“It’s stupid.”

A streetcar, wonderfully modeled, shot around on the tracks, racing through intersections, wheeling out into the forest and then returning to the town, passing Andy’s Garage and Sill’s Millinery and Carter’s Groceries, racing along as crossing guards whipped up and down and the figures inside sat as still as if frozen in terror.

“Isn’t it going a little fast?”

“I’m exceeding the speed limit and maybe they’re all going to die.”

“It hurts, buddy. It’s meant to. Only, we need to get in front of it. Figure out what we’re doing wrong and not do that anymore. That way, we don’t lose our friends.”

Conner turned the transformer up a notch and the streetcar shot off the tracks, tumbled through the woods, and crashed to the floor. The roof broke off and half the figures came out. Conner leaped around the table, grabbed the remains of the car, and smashed it to pieces against the tiles.

“Hey. Hey! You’re killing the floor, here.” Dan went down to him, but he was up again and off across the room.

“I’ve gotta get rid of this whole kid setup,” he said, his voice cracking. “I’m an asshole, Dan. I’m a *little boy*. In fact, I’m *the* little boy.”

Dan went over to the bed where Conner had thrown himself. “Conner, your mom and I both felt you needed to skip grades. You were bored silly in third grade. You could do all the problems, you could read all the books.”

“I can still do all the problems and read all the books. Only the difference now is, I’m the class freak, Dan. The *freak!*”

“You’re not a freak. You just happen to be somewhat smarter than most people.”

“You know who I really relate to? I really relate to Junior Hamner. Do you know who that is?”

Dan thought that the Hamners had a little boy with Down syndrome. “He’s that mentally disabled child, isn’t he?”

“Exactly. Another freak. We should be joined at the hip.”

“Except that your mind—who knows what it might do one day? And Junior Hamner’s always gonna be eleven years old.”

“Actually, he’s four. Mental age.”

“Okay, let’s get down to it. What, exactly, happened to cause you to get ditched?”

“I told you, I’m a little boy. Little boys aren’t allowed.”

Dan had, to be honest, been one of the bullies. He’d had a childhood full of nightmares, so many and so intense that he now speculated that he might have been an abuse victim. He’d often been taken night fishing by an old man who lived down the block. Most of the time, his uncle Frank had been with them, and Frank was to this day as straight an arrow as had ever been carved, but there had been times when he and Mr. Ehmer had been out there alone all night, and he wondered what had transpired then.

He remembered strange violence. Screaming. Being swarmed by flies. And maybe those were screen memories for things Mr. Ehmer had done, that should not have been done.

Dan had been angry and big, so he used to push the little kids around—whip their butts, take their money, you name it. So he could understand the ugly frustrations of Paulie Warner and the other boys as well as he could his own boy’s hurt. He put his arm around Conner’s shoulders, gave him a friendly squeeze. “This was not like this a week ago. Two days ago.”

“Let me tell you what they’ve done. They have created a club called the Connerbusters. Clever name, do you get it? Everybody in the seventh grade is supposed to be a Connerbuster except me, of course—” He stopped, his voice cracking.

Dan looked over to see the young face twisted in pain. Agony.

“I’m sorry, Dan, here I go being a *little boy*.”

“Look, I was a class bully. I would’ve been a Connerbuster. For sure. But I cried, too. And you can be sure that Paulie Warner and the rest of them are just as vulnerable. You’re a little behind them physically, Conner, but

mentally, you're on another planet. In another universe."

"Aye, and there's the rub. So listen, my friend, and you shall hear, of the careful humiliation of Conner the queer."

"You're not gay?"

"I have no idea, I'm prepubescent. And incidentally, without hurting her, you have got to tell Mom to stop bragging about me to the other mothers."

Now, that was a stunner. Katelyn was hardly your braggart mama. "That doesn't sound like her, somehow."

"She refers to me as a 'genius.' 'My son is a genius,' she says. And do you know that Mrs. Warner resents this? And Mrs. Taylor and Mrs. Fisk and probably every other faculty wife with a kid at B.A. Because they all *want* geniuses, Dan. This is a college! These are college people! And I really am a genius and they resent me. So you give a kid ammo like that—the parents can't stand some classmate with an unfortunate disability like mine—and that poor cripple is fair game."

Dan could certainly see, from Conner's standpoint, why he might view his intelligence as a deformity. It was ugly, though, to see him driven to feel that way about a gift so rare.

The thing about Katelyn was, if you were going to love her and you were going to be her husband, you were going to have to accept that Conner was the center of the universe for her. He was, indeed, a professor's dream child and she was, indeed, a professor. "She's always bragged, Conner."

"She's really messing me up."

At that moment, flashlights began appearing in their yard, swarming over from the Warners'. There were also voices making low howling sounds. "Great," Conner muttered as he turned out his bedside light.

For a few more seconds, Dan hoped that this was something nice, but when he heard them calling Conner's name, he knew that it was more cruelty, and he, perhaps unfortunately, got mad. He headed for the glass door that opened out onto the underdeck and the yard.

"Dan, please just go upstairs."

"Conner, those kids don't have any business in this yard."

"Dan, please!"

Dan opened the door. Behind him, Conner pulled his bedspread over his head. Then Dan heard cracking sounds. He realized that somebody was hitting the aboveground pool with what sounded like a board or even a

hammer.

“All right, that’s enough,” he shouted as he strode up to the shape that was hacking away at the pool. It was a kid he didn’t recognize, but when the boy saw him, he tried to run. Dan got him by the collar of his jacket.

The kid swung and managed to land a crooked blow on Dan’s thigh. And the rest of them didn’t run. He heard Paulie Warner say in an almost bored voice, “Let ’im go, Dan.”

Dan carried him across to the fence and dumped him over. “Get out of here, all of you.” He grabbed Paulie as he was leaving. “You oughta be ashamed of yourself.”

Paulie snorted—laughter. Only a miracle from above prevented Dan from smacking him. Instead, he brushed past him and strode across the Warners’ driveway. “Get off my property,” Paulie shouted from behind him.

He hammered on the front door. A couple of seconds later, Maggie opened it. He was so furious that for a moment he was at a loss for words, and the two of them just stared at each other. Finally, he spoke. “Keep those vandals out of my yard, Maggie, or I’m calling the cops.”

“Dan?”

“Paulie had his gang out there busting up our pool, damnit! It’s not on, Maggie. If I have to, I’ll see you guys in family court. Paulie might not like Conner anymore. That’s his privilege. But when he starts vandalizing our stuff—that I am not going to allow.”

She turned around, called into the house, “Paulie?” Then, “*Paulie!*”

He came, not looking afraid in the least, Dan noted. He was growing up, Paulie Warner was. The peach fuzz was getting dark, the eyes getting hard.

“Did you bust up their pool?”

“No.”

“Yeah, you did—or your friend did. I think they have a little gang, Maggie. What’s your little gang called, Paulie?”

“I don’t have a gang.”

Maggie shoved his shoulder. “Where’s Conner, Paulie?”

“He couldn’t come.”

“They cut him out and the gang is called the Connerbusters, and they invaded our yard with the intention of vandalizing us, and I’m not gonna stand for it, Maggie.”

“Okay! Hey!” Maggie called into the house. Boys began to appear, just young enough to be a bit wide-eyed with worry. “Party’s over, fellas. Call

your parents and tell 'em to pick you up. You can wait on the front porch, I don't want you in here anymore. I've already had a shelf busted in my fridge —”

“That was an accident, Mom!”

“—and now the neighbors are complaining and I've had it. You go up to your room, young man.”

Paulie started to speak, but she cuffed him in the back of the head. “Learn how to choose your friends, dummy,” she said.

He went upstairs, his face red, fighting tears.

As Dan left, the other boys filtered out behind him. They crowded together on the front porch, blowing on their hands and waiting for their rides. He walked across the yards, feeling the cold now through his cotton chinos and his light sweater. The kids sure were growing up, and it was sad. Last July, he supposed, had been the high summer of Conner's childhood. He remembered those days of his own life. He'd been like some kind of water creature, like all the kids who lived along the lakes of Madison.

He went over to the pool. The moon was rising, and in its light he could see that the little creep had done a fair job on the fiberglass.

As he was walking back to the house, something caught his eye—a flash, he thought, coming from somewhere to the west, in the direction of the town. An explosion? There was no following rumble, so he supposed not. Nothing ever happened around here, anyway . . . except for kid trouble. Kids were a problem in any college town. Bored, affluent, smart, faculty brats were a notorious irritant on every campus he'd ever worked.

He went in and gently explained to Conner what had happened. “Son, there will be no fallout from this. You'll see, Monday morning in school it'll be as if none of it ever happened.”

“I'm so glad.”

“Count on it. They went a step too far, that's all. They're testing, trying to figure out who they want to be—and they're not like you, they're much simpler, to be honest. So even though they're older, in many ways they're less mature.”

“Dan, do you think you could find out about the Wilton public schools for me, since I really can't return to B.A? I think the, uh, middle school—what's it called, Colonel Saunders Memorial or something—has a rather good reputation in shop. And, of course, the football team is the stuff of local legend. Who knows, maybe I can try out for back end.”

Dan saw that there was nothing to be gained by arguing with him. He'd go up and report to Katelyn.

As he left, Conner said, "Promise me, Dan. Call Wilton."

"I'll call them first thing Monday."

"And that boot camp in Lockridge. I could commute, actually, on the Louisville bus. I wouldn't have to live in the barracks or anything."

"Yeah, that's a possibility, too." Dan turned to leave and, to his surprise, saw a boy standing just beyond the deck. His shape was clearly visible in the moonlight. He was not one of the gangling creeps from Paulie's party. This kid looked even smaller than Conner. Which was very strange, because Conner himself was the youngest child on Oak Road, not counting six-month-old Jillie Jeffers.

It was dark in the underdeck, but the child was in the light of the moon.

Something struck Dan, then, hit him like an axe blow between the eyes. He was in a loud, echoing space looking down through a round hole, and there was a surface far below glistening silver just like this, in moonlight just like this. He felt in that moment a longing so powerful that it seemed to stop his blood, to cripple him with a sense of loss that might actually be larger than he could contain. For a moment, he was disoriented, as if detached from the ground, and he fell forward.

Then next thing he knew, somebody was calling him. Far away.

"Dad! Oh my God. Mom! Mom!"

Then footsteps, then he was aware that he'd fallen, and his head—his head hurt. That was it, he'd hit his head on a beam. Katelyn and Conner were there, they were terrified.

No problem, had to calm them down. "Oops," he croaked.

"Dan, don't move."

He sat up. "I about knocked myself silly."

"What happened, honey?"

"I was—" He looked around the cold, dark space. "I hit my head. One of the beams. I thought those kids had come back."

"What kids?"

"Paulie and his buddies."

"What were they doing in our yard?"

"It's a long story, Mom. And there *was* somebody out there just now." He pointed. "Something, anyway. It was an owl, right over there. A barn owl standing beside the pool."

There was nothing in the backyard now except the pool itself, gray in the moonlight, and beyond it the strip of woods that separated all the houses from a cornfield that fronted on Wilton Road.

Nothing more was said about the incident. Katelyn spent some time, then, with her son. She already knew all that had happened. Maggie had called, full of apologies. The boys had overstepped. Paulie would resume the old friendship, she would make sure of that.

She left him listening to a Leonard Cohen CD, another of his private eccentricities. God forbid that any of the other children should ever find *those* CDs, or his audio books of things like James Joyce's fantastically obscure and prolix *Finnegan's Wake*, from which he drew some sort of equally obscure comfort. Maybe he even understood it, who could know?

She took a bottle of wine and a couple of glasses up to their bedroom, and drank some wine with her husband. No more Conner until the morning. They lay together, then, with the light of the westering moon falling on their naked bodies, and the wine in them. Dan said, "You want to give it a try?"

"With no diaphragm?"

"Clean and clear."

She kissed him. "I do, I do."

"Oh, wow, hey—" He reached over, got his wineglass and raised it. "To the next genius Callaghan. If we make it."

"Okay, listen, you—I do want to, but this is not the right moment, Dan, and you know that."

"The tenure will come."

"The tenure may come. And when it does, we celebrate." She laughed a little. "By doing this incredibly profound thing of making another child. But, Dan, if you do not get it, then—"

"The tenure will come!"

"Marcie is a complex, difficult human being."

He threw himself back on the bed. She laid a hand on his head.

"You sure you're okay, Dan?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, you know there's no beam down there you could've hit your head on. So that's not what happened."

He knew it. He allowed himself to consider the possibility of a seizure. He'd had them as a child, he remembered them, they would start with an aura that involved seeing his planetarium lights, then progress to this bizarre,

echoing room where there would be unspeakable things, human bodies with no skin, giant flies—and then it would be morning, and he'd wake up perfectly fine.

He had never told a soul about the seizures, and he didn't intend to tell Katelyn now. They were, perhaps, one of the reasons that he had become a physiological psychologist. His own suffering had led him to a fascination with the mechanics and abnormalities of the brain.

They slept then, joined to the sleeping world of man, a place that is different by night, that is not at all what it seems.

They did not sleep alone, though. They were watched, and carefully watched. Minds very different from our own, with objectives and needs completely beyond the imagining of the Callaghans, drew conclusions about what they saw, and acted on those conclusions.

Deep in the night, they acted, and Marcie Cotton became the latest victim of a great and intricate terror.

And then things went wrong. Very, very wrong.

FOUR

OAK ROAD WAS SO QUIET at 3 A.M. that you could hear the whispering fall of individual pine needles as they dropped in the woods that separated the houses from the farmer's field behind them. So when screams erupted, every human being and all the animals woke up instantly.

Marcie Cotton also heard the cries, and an expressionless voice repeating again and again, "What can we do to help you stop screaming?" Only when she felt herself suck breath, and realized that the narrow, black cot from which she could not rise was not her bed, did she connect with the fact that the screaming was coming from her. She thought: *nightmare*. And then she screamed again.

THERE WERE FOUR FAMILIES LIVING at the end of Oak Road, all Bell College faculty. The last house on the dead end was occupied by the Jefferses, Nancy and Chris, and their baby daughter. Beside them were the Callaghans, next the Warners, Harley and Maggie, Paulie and Amy. The house closest to the beginning of Oak Road belonged to the Keltons, two parents and two teenage sons.

At the Kelton house, Manrico, the family dog, sat up and snorted, then stood and commenced barking. The two teenagers leaped out of bed and started pulling on their pants.

Nancy Jeffers also screamed, and Chris, the youthful head of the physics department, jumped up as if there was a snake in the bed. Out the bedroom window, he saw a glow through the woods. "Dear God there's a fire," he shouted, pulling on a pair of rubber overshoes and an overcoat.

THE TRIAD HAD BEEN COMMANDED to bring Marcie Cotton to Dan Callaghan. The collective wanted them to bond her to him, so that she would do anything to make sure his tenure bid succeeded. There must be no chance that the Callaghans would leave Wilton, where every street, alley, basement, attic, and mind was known to the collective. An attack on the

Callaghans was inevitable, and the collective's plan to defend them had been constructed around their staying in the town.

Important work, certainly, but not all that they intended to do on this night. There was a reason this particular triad called themselves the Three Thieves . . . which was their imperfect ability to handle temptation. And Marcie was such very strong temptation.

PAULIE WARNER RAN INTO HIS parents' room, shouting that the Keltons' house was on fire. Harley Warner said to his wife, "My God, they might be trapped."

Maggie went to the window. "Is that a fire? It's very steady."

"Somebody's really screaming," Amy said, coming in behind her brother.

"Let's get over there," Paulie said.

Harley was pulling on his jeans. "Not you kids."

"Aw, Dad!"

"Paulie, not until I know what's going on out there." He did not want his children exposed to whatever might be happening over there, not given the agony he was hearing in those screams.

THE MORE MARCIE SCREAMED, THE more excited the Three Thieves became. They knew they were too low, they knew they should quiet her, they knew there was a dog nearby, and they could not control dogs. But they also knew that they could reach into her and taste of her emotions, and the taste would fill them with a delicious fire that their kind did not possess, the fire of strong feeling. Man might not be intelligent enough to save himself from the environmental imbalance overpopulation had caused on his planet, but his emotional genius was beyond compare.

They dug into her gushing terror like wolves digging into the flowing guts of a deer . . . and the collective at first reacted with surprise. Then it raged.

Conner thought the female voice was his mother screaming, and she thought that it was him. They met in the living room, and threw their arms around each other. Then Dan said, "There's a light in the field." From their perspective on their rear deck, it was clear that none of the houses were involved.

Conner and Katelyn stayed behind while Dan, wearing slippers and a

robe, went out onto the deck and down into the backyard. He carried a flashlight.

Their scraggly yard was quiet. The toys of summer—the slide, the swing set, the empty aboveground pool—were sentinels in the stark light of the setting moon. He moved toward the glow, which was in the field beyond the end of the yard, past a stand of narrow third- or fourth-growth pines.

Katelyn and Conner came out on the deck.

“I think it’s a fire in the field,” he said.

“Are you serious?”

“Oh, God, somebody help me! Somebody help me!”

Katelyn clutched her son. “Conner, we’re going back in.”

Conner broke away from her and went racing down the deck stairs. “Look at that,” he yelled.

As he and Dan crossed the yard, hurrying toward the thin woods, a huge light loomed up from below the tree line. They stopped, stunned by this second moon rising.

Katelyn arrived beside them. “Conner, put this on.”

“Thanks, Mom!” He dug his arms into a jacket. “You know what that is?”

“No.”

Dan walked closer to the edge of the woods. “Can we help you?” he shouted.

“Don’t go too close, Dad.”

The thing seemed to wobble, then rise.

“It’s moving this way, Dan!”

It hung above the woods. Not a sound, now.

“I think it’s a balloon,” Katelyn said.

Then more screams whipped out, shrill to cracking.

“A balloon is on fire!” Katelyn shouted.

The three of them ran again, fumbling in the brush, guided by the light.

“Who in the world would be up in a hot-air balloon at night?” Conner asked. “And that’s not fire, that’s a piezoelectric effect of some kind. Look at it shimmer.”

“It’s a student,” Katelyn said. “Something’s gone wrong with some prank.”

It wasn’t anything to do with hazing, not in February, but it could indeed be a prank. Every house that backed onto the field was occupied by a Bell

College professor.

THE THREE THIEVES LOOKED OUT across the electromagnetic haze that flowed off the wires with which humans surrounded their shelters. Sharp eyes watched Conner and Dan.

DAN PAUSED IN THE WOODS. “Maybe nothing’s gone wrong. Maybe the screaming is the prank.”

“I hope so,” Katelyn said, calmer now, embracing this most reasonable of probabilities.

“Come on,” Conner said.

Before them, as they left the woods, they saw people running toward the object from various directions, Harley Warner, but not Paulie or his mother or sister, Chris and Nancy Jeffers, and the entire Kelton family, robes flying, Manrico barking furiously, but hanging well back. Jimbo Kelton was using a video camera, and Nancy Jeffers held her cell phone out like some kind of shield, no doubt taking pictures with it.

Another scream pealed out.

Dan shouted, “DO YOU NEED HELP?” He hoped it was just a prank because Bell did not need adverse publicity, not with the sort of enrollment problems faced by a small college located at the burnt-out end of a bus line that only served what the college brochure gamely called “the sophisticated little city of Wilton.” What sophistication there might be in a row of closed stores and a grain elevator was anybody’s guess.

“Oh, God, God!”

The words seemed to ring in the trees, to leave their narrow trunks trembling.

“Can’t you see that she’s in real trouble?” Conner yelled. He took off toward the object.

THE ONE WATCHED CONNER, WHILE the Two and the Three regarded Marcie with the reverent cunning of boys in a candy store. The Two drew closer, now pressing his face into her churning aura. Angry static bounced around the tiny space—the collective was furious that they were not performing as directed.

Which made little difference. The thousand grays who were here were spread all over the planet, feeding in Brazil and Britain and China, mining

gravitite in the iron deposits of New York, extracting Helium 3 fuel on the moon. They were linked to the great collective, yes, but it was moving toward Earth far more slowly than the lead group, so what could it actually do? Nothing, and they would carry out its orders . . . eventually.

The Three Thieves would have been more efficient with Marcie, but the luscious fears, the darting hopes, the bright, wet desires that filled her smooth flesh were just too much of a temptation. Dan Callaghan was awake anyway, so the whole expedition was a waste. They might as well make of it whatever they could.

The Two, as the negative pole of the triad, showed her a long needle. Her eyes widened as she saw the silver of it appearing out of the dark that surrounded her. She could not see the Thieves, of course, they were too careful for that.

He plunged the needle into her forehead and she shrieked and they gobbled her agony . . . for the moments that it lasted feeling as alive as their distant ancestors must have, before they had enhanced themselves with machine intelligence, and lost contact with the only thing that mattered, in the end, which was feeling.

Without it, life was ongoing death, and to find it again, crossing a galaxy was as nothing, not even if the journey took fifty generations, not even if it took a thousand.

From a billion times a billion miles away, they had seen Earth glowing with emotion. It had drawn them like excited moths to its mystery, first in hundreds, then in thousands, and soon the billions would come to drink the healing waters of the human soul . . . if all went well.

THE KELTONS WENT CLOSE, RUNNING low like actors on a movie battlefield. It occurred to Dan that Jimbo Kelton might be recording the prank for the later amusement of fellow perpetrators.

All the people in the neighborhood were not only known to each other, they counted one another as friends. Nancy and Chris were dear friends of Katelyn and Dan. Kelton was a historian, working at the far end of the campus from the Hall of Science, but still a member of the cozy little Oak Road crowd. The Warners and the Callaghans, were very close—or had been.

Nancy clutched her cell phone to her ear. Dan felt for his, miraculously found it in a pocket of his jacket. He punched in 9-1-1. “This is Dr. Daniel Callaghan, one-oh-three Oak Road. There’s a fire in the field behind our

house that borders Wilton Road. Somebody's trapped in it."

The screams lost form, became a continuous roar of pain.

Dan closed his cell phone while the dispatcher was still talking. He was now convinced that this was serious. Those screams were real. He took off after Conner, going flat-out.

"Don't let him near it," Katelyn howled, passing him in her pursuit of her son.

As Dan ran, he looked for the basket, for the burning student, but he could see only the fearsome glare, like looking into a thousand car headlights or a flashbulb that would not quit. He shielded his eyes and struggled closer. "Conner! Conner where are you?"

"I can't see him, Dan! CONNER! CONNER!"

Another scream came, trembling and high, desolate with agony, then the object wavered a little in the air. Far off, the thin wail of a siren could be heard, then more sirens, getting louder.

"Conner, oh thank God!"

He was with the Kelton boys, his small form hidden in the bulk of their teenage bodies.

"Come on, we're getting out of here," Katelyn said.

"Mom!"

"Come on!" She took him by the wrist, yanked him away, heading back toward their empty house.

"No!" He broke away.

And suddenly she was terribly afraid. Afraid for her son. He was vulnerable—to what, she did not know, but she knew that he was vulnerable.

"Conner, please, I am begging you. I am begging you right now to come back with me."

"Mom, I think I know what this is!"

"Conner, no. You have no idea. Nobody does. But it's not right and it's dangerous."

He threw his arms around her. "Mom, don't worry." In an instant, he had broken away and was running back into the light.

The Thieves were concerned now. Conner should not be here, and they could feel the fury and the fear of the whole collective. Of course everybody was scared: their survival depended on this child, who had been bred through fifty human generations.

Katelyn had the awful and frightening sense that the thing was somehow

watching her son. She took off after him, her feet slamming into the winterhard ground, and she tackled him and brought him down.

It made him cry out in astonishment. Katelyn had never disciplined him physically. Such a thing was unthinkable, to humiliate a brilliant child in that way—or any child, for that matter.

She got up on all fours, crying, trying to keep herself between him and the thing. She had the hideous feeling that it would somehow suck him into its fire, and he would join the poor woman who was screaming there.

He stood up. Glaring down at her, he turned away from the object and strode back toward the house. Thanking God in her heart, she followed her son home.

FIVE

THE YOUNG LIEUTENANT HANDED COLONEL Robert Langford a sheet of paper. “My God,” he said as he read it.

“Sir?”

“This is under the blanket,” he said. The young man, who was not cleared to hear what was about to be said, left the room.

The glowboy that had been snooping around Wilton, Kentucky, had just done something that Rob had never seen, and that he was quite sure no monitor had seen from the beginning of this mission, which dated back to 1942.

He pulled up a satellite view of Wilton. The glowboy was bright, its plasma fully deployed. The thing was ready to move out of there fast. He zoomed in on the image. Disbelieving, he zoomed in on it again. What in hell were people doing crowding around the thing? The grays considered their secrecy essential, and they had threatened dire consequences if it was ever compromised. But they themselves were breaking it.

And also breaking a fundamental policy of the United States of America, which was to keep their secret until and if something could be said to the public other than, “We know they’re here, we know that they come into your bedrooms and kidnap you in the night, but we don’t know why and we are helpless to stop them. And yes, some of you disappear, and some of you die.”

He stared at the image, watching the figures move, trying to form some sort of a rational explanation of what might be happening.

Rob spent too much time in the Mountain, or so he’d been told by practically everybody who worked with him. Because the grays operated at night and tracking their movements was his duty, over the years he’d gradually become a night person.

Mike Wilkes had negotiated a treaty with the grays, using the interface between Bob and Adam and Eamon Glass. The agreement was that they would limit their abductions in number and region. In return, the United

States had guaranteed to protect their secrecy.

It was Rob's job to keep track of the abductions, and, in the most extreme cases of treaty violation, to put up a show of force.

This was not to be done lightly. The grays would not stand to be fired upon. That had been tried back in the forties, and the reply had been horrifying. The grays had caused six hundred plane crashes in the year 1947. Shortly thereafter, President Truman had ordered that they were not to be interfered with in any way. Nobody cared to challenge the grays, but now was one of those dreadful moments when something had to be done.

Early on, there had been a fear that the Soviets would find out how the collective minds of the grays worked, and announce to the world something like, "We have seen the future and it is Communist." However, nobody except the United States Air Force possessed a gray. Therefore the rest of the world—including the remaining U.S. military, the intelligence community, and the government—was at best minimally informed. Within the Air Force, fewer than twenty people knew about this project.

He put his hand on the phone. There was nobody else in the world who could make this decision, or even offer advice. If he was wrong, there was just no way to tell what the grays would do.

Could he bring about the end of the world when he picked up that phone?

He lifted the receiver, punched in some numbers. "Jimmy, Rob. Do you have my glowboy coordinates?"

"Yes, sir. It's been ground bound for a while, sir."

"I need a scramble out of Alfred moving on it *instamente*."

"Yes, sir!"

He paused, then. Took a deep breath. "God be with us," he said into the phone. His next step was to inform Wilkes of what was happening, and that required setting up a listening device on the call. Mr. Crew expected all contacts with Wilkes to be logged, recorded, and sent to him.

Personally, Rob was convinced that Crew was right to be suspicious of Wilkes. He believed that the man was using the empaths to discover new technologies, and selling them to the private sector. Also, Wilkes's pathological hatred of the grays was inappropriate. He believed that they were bent on invasion. They scared him and that's why he hated them. But hate does not win wars, knowledge does, and that's what Wilkes's empath unit was supposed to be gaining from the one remaining gray in captivity.

But damned little useful information came out of the new empath.

Rob did not understand the grays but he didn't hate them. In fact, he found them incredibly interesting. They'd been here for fifty years and they hadn't invaded yet, so that didn't seem to be a very real concern. What they did to people was weird, but you didn't see folks disappearing or being injured, at least not physically. Obviously, though, whatever the grays were doing to the people they abducted was damned important to them. Otherwise, there would not be threats. They were taking something from us, no question of that, but in the way a farmer takes milk, not meat.

The information flow, Rob believed, was being shunted to Wilkes's real buddies, the quiet companies who fed off the United States' one-hundred-and-twenty-billion-dollar annual black budget. In Rob's opinion, there was a pipeline that led, through Wilkes, from Adam right back to the industry. It would certainly explain why an Oklahoma orphan boy, who had nothing to live on but his soldier's pay, called a multimillion-dollar house in Georgetown home . . . and why an officer whose work was in a hole two hundred feet below Indianapolis, Indiana, even needed a presence inside the Beltway.

"Mike, it's Rob. Sorry about the late hour, but I have a situation. There's a glowboy on the ground near Wilton, Kentucky. I know, it's very odd and very disturbing. What's even more of a concern is that there are civilians in the field around him. He's got his plasma deployed and he's ready to run, but he ain't running. There have gotta be video cameras down there, all kinds of trouble. I'm doing a scramble, I've got to get that guy out of there. Do you think you could get Glass in the hole with Adam? Let's reassure him that it's just a friendly warning that they might spill their own secret. And let's please find out what we can about what in sam hill they're up to."

He waited until he heard Wilkes's grunt of assent. The good colonel did not like to be dictated to, which is why Rob did just that whenever he had a chance.

ALFRED AIR FORCE BASE WAS a training facility. It was still up and running largely because Kentucky's senior senator was a member of the Armed Services Committee and powerful enough to hold onto his bases.

Whatever, Rob was damned relieved that the place was still operational. He widened the image on the overhead satellite, punched a couple of keys, and saw a white outline of the base superimposed over its location. The base

was barely thirty miles from the unfolding incident.

IN THE FIELD IN KENTUCKY, they were standing in helpless amazement, watching the object. Nancy Jeffers had gone home, because she and her husband had no wish to leave their baby alone with something like this taking place. Katelyn and Conner were also gone, and Dan was just as glad. A child had no business out here, and he thought that Kelton was letting his boys get way too close with that camera of theirs.

Without warning, a clap of thunder hit. Dan cried out, they all did. Chris Jeffers covered his head with his hands. Dan saw a double star wheeling in the sky. Then he heard the shriek of a jet and realized that what he was looking at were afterburners. "It's the Air Force!" he shouted.

Its underside glowing in the light being given off by the object, the fighter howled past so low that a hot stench of burning jet fuel washed over them.

The object turned purple. It moved, wobbling, above the ground.

The voice in the thing cried out, "Help me, help me, oh God, no! *NO NO NO!*"

The light rose into the sky. It hung there, still wobbling slightly. The jet's glowing afterburners turned and started back.

"Stop it! Stop that!" came the voice. Then more screaming. "*Ah! Ah! Ah! Oh aaaaa . . .*"

Maggie Warner screamed with her, crying into the agony of it.

In that instant, the object rose a hundred feet or so, then shot off to the north literally like a bullet. It went faster than Dan had ever seen anything go.

The jet passed over again, its engines screaming. It turned and followed the object. They watched the afterburners creep away into the sky.

Into the silence that followed, Chris said, "God help her."

"That was a UFO," young Jimbo Kelton announced.

Maggie asked, "*Was that a UFO?*"

"Dear heaven," Harley Warner said, "I think so."

Dan was looking at a small shadow in the field standing where the glow had been. "Folks," he said, "uh, I don't think we're alone here."

But when he shone his flashlight toward it, there was nothing there.

SIX

LAUREN GLASS WAS ENJOYING TEDDY Blaine's lovemaking, powerful and persistent from this sweet, rough guy. As a fellow Air Force officer, he was carefully disinterested in Lauren's classified work, and that made this particular affair very fun and very easy. As long as she was involved in heavily classified work, Lauren's plan was to keep the lovers moving through her life. Nobody deep, because it made it too hard to keep her secrets.

When Colonel Wilkes called her, she tried to ignore it. She pushed the chiming out of her mind, concentrated on the warmth under the covers, and the fabulous young man who was loving her.

The warble became a whine.

"Oh, Lauren," Teddy whispered, sinking down onto her, burying his face in her neck, kissing her now gently, pressing his prickled cheek against her soft one.

"My love," she said, and thought that she really did kind of mean it. Which meant—should she ditch him on the never-get-too-close theory?

The whine became a wail.

He jerked like he'd been stuck with a pin. "I don't believe this."

"My cert's up," she said, referring to the security certification system on her computer, which started automatically when she began receiving a classified message.

But why was he after her now, at—what—jeez, it was 3 A.M. She'd been in the cage for six hours yesterday waiting without result for Adam to at least take a breath, and she was most certainly not ready to return to his dark, claustrophobic hole.

Throwing off the covers, she went over and typed her password. Code came up, four lines, which she sight read. "They've got a virus," she muttered, striving not to reveal to him her true horror. The message communicated extreme urgency. Something was wrong. *Real* wrong.

"Let somebody else fix it."

“I have to go,” she said, going to her closet and starting to dress.

“Miss Indispensable.”

“Unfortunately.” Zipping her jeans, she went over and kissed him. “I’ll be back, love,” she said.

He drew her toward the bed. Briefly, she sat down. They kissed. She looked into his eyes. She sighed. “You know the rules.” And she realized how much she hated what she did—how deeply, profoundly twisted it felt . . . but she loved the perks, and, quite frankly, she was also sort of okay with Adam. The facility was a hole, but at the bottom of that hole was a most extraordinary being.

The thought that Adam might not be well crossed her mind. That made her hurry even more. She threw on a sky-blue cashmere sweater and her black jacket. After a perfunctory brush of her hair, she strode across her large living room and out the door.

She did not look back toward Ted. When she returned, he might well be gone. Fine, she’d rustle up another roll in the hay, maybe a civilian this time.

She had a lot for a girl of twenty-six. But she did a lot. As far as anybody knew, there was only one person on this earth who could do what she did. No doubt there were others, but how to find them? The Air Force had never been able to succeed at that, which was fine by her, since it meant that she could name her price, which had been promotion to full colonel. So now Mike’s orders were requests . . . but this was one she would certainly meet.

In the elevator, she turned her mind to her work. What could be wrong? She wished the elevator would go faster. She arrived in the condo’s garage, strode to her car, and sped off to the facility. It wasn’t far. She couldn’t live far from Adam.

She turned two corners onto Hamilton, and made her way down the tree-shaded street to the old house.

Wilkes met her at the door, which was unusual in the extreme. “A glow-boy kiped a newbie in the forbidden zone and there were civilian witnesses,” he said all in one breath. “I want you to query Adam on it.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s so extremely unusual, obviously.”

“You understand, they don’t have the concept of treaty. They don’t know what that is. And they futz with newbies all the time. You just don’t see them do it, because they stay in the approved zones.”

“You know this?”

“What if I told you that they’re a rambunctious, fun-loving bunch of extremely brilliant but weird people? How would that sit?”

“First, they are not people. Second, they are not only extremely brilliant, they are extremely sinister and they have no emotions.”

“Adam showed grief when Dad got killed.”

“He was faking it.”

“Plus, he—I don’t know how to put it, it’s not human emotion, not at all, but he does care about me.”

“You’re projecting. End of story. Now, let’s go down. We have work to do.” As they waited for the elevator, he added, “We have a scramble running on the glowboy, incidentally.”

“Oh, great, how do I explain that?”

“Communicate that it’s a friendly warning. The civilians are liable to have cameras. There could be a security breach that’s beyond our control.”

“*Wunderbar.*” She was annoyed when Wilkes got into the elevator with her. She did not like him around when she and Adam were together.

A few moments later, the doors opened onto the control room and, beyond it, the huge door that sealed Adam’s space.

As Lauren stripped, Andy began opening a fresh prep kit. She dropped her sweater to the floor and rubbed her temples. “So I need to find out why this triad is off-station?”

Lauren threw off her clothes in front of both men. Let them see. She was proud of what she was.

“Lauren, I need concrete information from you on this.”

She let Andy cover her body with the emollients that would protect every inch of her skin. Over the years, she’d gotten drier and drier from the zero-humidity conditions in the cage. At twenty-six she had the skin of a forty-year-old. She caked her face in Vaseline.

Andy’s hands felt only clinical to her, but she was aware that she did not feel clinical to him. She knew because of the way he would turn away when he was finished, his cheeks burning, poor guy.

She pulled on her orange coverall, zipped it, and wrapped the neck shield tightly. Andy fitted her cap. Then she rolled her heavy latex gloves onto her hands.

She faced the steel door.

Andy pushed up the sleeve of her coverall and injected her. “Sorry,” he said, as always. He kissed her then, very quickly, on the place he’d just

pricked.

She opened the door, stepped into the airlock, and waited. The inner door hissed and slid aside.

She entered her secret heaven and hell, the world of love and terror that she shared with Adam.

SEVEN

AS A SOCIAL SCIENTIST, KATELYN Callaghan understood the impulse to congregate after a tragedy, which was why the Jefferses had returned, baby in carrier, and now sat before the Callaghan fireplace. The Keltons had rushed home to study their video, the Warners to keep their excited kids from doing anything rash.

Hell's gate had opened for somebody tonight, and now there must be congregation—the ancient holy act that was intended by deepest human instinct to declaim the persistence of life.

Chris and Nancy sat with straight backs, methodically sipping wine. Six-month-old Jillie slept in her carrier between them, her little mouth open, her pacifier in her hand.

Katelyn wanted only to go downstairs to Conner. As irrational as it probably was, she was nevertheless experiencing an urge to guard him, and this urge was growing by the minute.

Nervously, she paced in front of the fireplace, drinking rather than sipping. She feared that Conner might go back out there on his own. That was why the Warners were staying home, to keep Paulie in. Conner could easily leave via the door that led from his basement room under the deck, and out into the yard.

She stepped onto the deck and looked out across the yard. No movement. Total silence.

It had seemed like half the campus police department, the entire volunteer fire department, County Emergency Services, and the state police had come.

None of the official types had seen the light, but the Air Force jet had still been maneuvering around when they came, at least. Police Chief Dunst had called Alfred AFB, only to be told that there were no fighters in the air at that time. No planes at all, in fact. He'd closed his cell phone in disgust. "Guess that was a privately owned F-15 on afterburners," he'd muttered.

The emergency crews had combed the field with infrared detectors. It

had all been very impressive, but it would have been more impressive if they had found something resembling human remains, or even a shard of debris of some sort.

“Well,” Nancy said at last, “what do we think?”

“We think some damned kids are in big trouble. I mean, I saw the Air Force out there,” Katelyn said.

“Dan. Danny Dan.” Chris laughed silently.

“No, Chris,” Nancy said.

“No? With regard to what?”

“With regard to the fact that you think it was a flying saucer.”

“With an abductee aboard, yes, I do think that.”

Now it was Nancy’s turn to drink deep. She glared at her husband. “I don’t want to hear this.”

“It’s true, though.”

“Maybe and maybe not, but I do know one thing, we’re here because of this UFO stuff! Shunted off into this backwater with barely enough of a salary to raise our baby—and it’s because you side with the trailer trash instead of your fellow physicists. Excuse me, folks. Family stuff.”

“No, it’s true,” Dan said, “everybody here is a failure somewhere else.”

“They’re real, they’re here, and my colleagues are wrong. If that video —”

“Don’t you dare go on TV about this, Chris. Don’t you *dare!*”

Chris raised his hands defensively. “Be it far from me, unless—”

“Unless nothing! No more, Chris. I have gone from CalTech to U. Mass to this because of your damn UFOs. Below here, we are looking at the junior-college pit.”

“I reserve judgement until I have seen the video. If it’s as good as I think it’s going to be, it might just get us back to CalTech.”

“You are so fired, Chris. You will never, ever get back there. My God, you made a public idiot of yourself on national television.”

“I told the truth!”

He had appeared on *Dateline* as an advocate for the reality of UFOs, and his status as a CalTech professor had been used to give him credibility. Within a year, he was out. At U. Mass, it had been an article in the *Boston Globe* that had quoted his *Dateline* statements. He lasted six months that time.

Dan told himself to keep out of it. But then he thought that the poor

woman was just so vulnerable, with that little baby, and, as much as he liked Chris, he was way off base on this one. “Alien abduction is seizure-related folklore. Did I ever tell you that I suffered from waking nightmares when I was a child? Which is why I know what this is. I saw these little figures. Yeah, me, Chris. I’m an abductee, by your rather dubious—excuse me—standards. But because I also happen to possess a little professional knowledge of the brain, I know where the aliens come from—” He pointed to his own head. “The same place that ghosts and demons and—whatever—goblins come from. And not from some damn field on the outskirts of a one-horse town in Kentucky.”

“Officially, I believe that Wilton is classified as a half-horse town.”

“Whatever, we saw a prank, it was terrifying, and now the Air Force is involved, and there is likely to be hell to pay for these students and this institution, and that is a damn crying shame! Although they do deserve it. The students, not poor Bell.”

“The Air Force said they weren’t there.”

“Dan,” Nancy asked, “are you concerned about your tenure bid? You must be.” She turned to her husband. “Because he won’t involve you. That I will not let him do.”

“All the witnesses—”

“Don’t even start, Chris, my dear love. Dan and Katelyn did not see this. And Kelton, look at him, he’s on thin ice as it is, the history department’s a basket case. Don’t involve them, Chris. Don’t you dare.” She looked at Dan. “How’s it going, by the way?”

“Marcie is how it’s going.”

“Marcie is your referee? You’ve got to be kidding. She hasn’t voted yes on a tenure since Clinton was in the White House.”

Now Dan went for the bottle, poured a glass, sucked it dry. “This is pretty bad,” he said, looking at the label.

“Six dollars at Kroger, don’t knock it,” Chris said. “Now, listen to me. I don’t want to set you off again, but you do realize that this is a historical event. A large group of witnesses, armed in some cases with video equipment, have observed, and, I hope, recorded a UFO on the ground up close. Exhibiting every evidence of the presence of an abductee inside. Which I intend to proclaim to the world.”

“Chris, shut up!”

He looked at his mild-mannered wife in open astonishment. “Excuse

me?”

“Just you shut up! Are you hard of hearing or something? Okay, look, you do this and you do it without me and Jillie, because we will be gone.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere!”

“Nancy, this is proof!”

“Oh, Jesus. Junior college, here we come.” She stood up. “I think I’m leaving.” She picked up Jillie in her carrier.

What Katelyn feared was that there had been a murder out there, involving God only knew what sort of bizarre method. A murder, and, perhaps, if the shadow Dan had seen was really somebody, a murderer who was still nearby.

“If you get yourself fired,” Nancy told Chris as she pulled on her coat, “expect divorce papers, mister.”

“Let’s approach it from the direction of each of our specialties,” Chris suggested.

He seemed unbothered by his wife’s outburst. And indeed, Nancy did not actually walk out the door. Katelyn thought, *It’s a real marriage, then. They’re long-haulers like us.* She knew where this kind of fight took you, in the end. It took you to bed. “Well, certainly,” she said, attempting to move things to a somewhat calmer level, “from the standpoint of the sociologist, we witnessed a real, physical event that I fear was tragic. We all do, or we wouldn’t be here huddled together in the back of the proverbial cave in the dead of the night.”

Dan said, “I’m in agreement that it wasn’t a hallucination. It was a prank and possibly somebody was injured. I agree there. Unless some genius actress has just recently emerged here at Bell, which I very much doubt.”

“I thought *Death of a Salesman* was pretty good,” Chris said.

Dan smiled. “*Death of a Salesman* is not working when you find yourself pulling for Willy Loman to commit suicide.”

“What we didn’t see was an alien spacecraft taking somebody on a rough ride,” Nancy said. “I want that established, Chris. Admitted.”

“So, what did we see?” Chris’s question was softly put.

Silence fell.

Katelyn said, “My concern is the injury issue. And frankly, getting awakened in the middle of the night. It is the middle of the night. I am outraged and I am scared.” She told herself it was mostly outrage. She knew

that it was mostly fear. “I think somebody might be badly injured, hidden in some dorm basement right now, trying to tend her burns with Bactine or something.”

“Don’t say that,” Nancy said, shivering

“What’s the enrollment picture looking like, Nance?” Dan asked. He was well aware that the psychology department was overstaffed. If Bell had another bad enrollment season, he could not only be passed over for tenure, he could see his professorship dissolved. Obviously, a campus death would not be helpful.

“Iffier than last year, actually.”

“Maybe the idea that we’ve had an alien visitation would actually help,” Chris said.

“Excuse me, guys,” Nancy asked, “but who’s in the kitchen?”

“That would be nobody,” Katelyn said. Except she had also heard a sound—a chair scraping against the kitchen tile floor. “Excuse me,” she said, standing up. “Is that somebody there?” she asked as she headed across the dining room.

The kitchen was empty, but as she walked in, Katelyn thought she might have seen the back door closing. She called, “Dan, come in here.”

Dan got up, sucking in breath as he did so. He came into the room. Nancy and Chris followed close behind.

“I don’t want to alarm anybody,” Katelyn said softly, “but I think someone just went out on the porch.”

Dan opened the door. The tiny side yard was bright with moonlight, and clearly empty. He peered along the driveway, then stepped out and looked at the street. Cold, quiet, that was all.

“What gives?” Katelyn asked as he returned.

He shook his head. “All quiet on the Oak Road front.”

“I heard the chair, and I thought—I don’t know what I thought.”

“It must have been the wind.”

“There is no wind.” She put her hand on a chair, dragged it. “It was somebody doing this.”

“There’s nobody,” Dan said. He locked the back door. “At least, not anymore.” He had the odd feeling, though, that this was not right. He shuddered. The room seemed somehow—what? It was clean enough, but it seemed—well, there was no way around it: the place felt . . . occupied. “Does it seem—” He shook his head. How could he explain what he felt? Watched,

when there was obviously nobody else here.

Chris lunged suddenly, slapped the kitchen table with his open hand.

The sound silenced them all.

“I—uh—there was a fly.”

“In February?” Nancy asked.

“No, there wasn’t a fly. Something moved. I saw it out of the corner of my eye. A cat—maybe a cat . . . over there by the pantry. Could a cat have gotten in here?”

“Stranger things have happened,” Dan said.

“Obviously,” Katelyn said as she got a bottle of wine from the cabinet where they were kept, “just an hour ago.” She looked at the bottle. “Will our five-dollar cabernet beat your six-dollar merlot?”

Dan checked the pantry. The familiar neat rows of canned goods stood untouched on the shelves, there if they ever got snowed in. He shook a box of cereal Conner had left open, re-rolled the wax paper inside, and closed it.

As he turned away, he felt something—like somebody’s hand had brushed against his left ear. He fumbled for the light, turned it on.

There was nobody in here but him.

Then a pain like a blowtorch flashed through the ear. He gasped, cried out, stifled the cry.

Katelyn had the chair in her hand. He staggered toward it.

“Dan?”

“I’m okay!” He fell into the chair. He could do nothing else, he was in agony. “Jesus, Jesus,” he said, trying not to gasp, trying not to seem to be in pain and failing utterly.

“What the hell?” Chris said.

“It’s my ear,” he breathed. “Oh, Jesus!”

Katelyn looked at it.

“Whoa, that smarts. Christ.”

“It looks fine.”

“Oh, man. It must be—” He tried to get up, failed. He was too dizzy. “Am I having a stroke? Does anybody know the symptoms?”

“Is it a headache, honey?”

“My God, it’s my ear, it’s killing me.”

“Perhaps a visit to the health center,” Nancy suggested.

“Dr. Hamner’s on senility leave,” Dan said. “Anyway, it’s closed at night because people might need it then.”

The pain began to get a little less. Dan managed to come to his feet. Still dizzy, he staggered a step. “Better,” he said.

At that moment, everything in the room rattled, there was a loud whoosh, and the back door opened and slammed itself.

“The *wind*,” Nancy shrilled, then knocked back a full glass of wine and poured another.

Katelyn did not tell them what she had just seen, which was a sort of light flickering along the back porch and into the yard, a light like a narrow searchlight beam from somewhere over the house.

In her most private self, in places inside herself where she almost never went, there were vague memories from childhood, memories that had drawn her to watch a TV documentary here and there about alien abduction, and to wonder. The memories were very unformed and very strange, but the fact remained that when she had first seen one of those big-eyed alien faces depicted on the cover of some stupid book, she had been transfixed, literally unable to move, and unable to stop the tears.

She would never tell Dan this, not with his childhood seizures. He needed to leave apparitions, demons, and all of that sort of thing behind him.

She could only think now of one thing: Conner, because, in her heart of hearts, she worried that he might be seizure-prone, too. Or worse, *what if it was true?* Even more than a criminal or idiot pranksters, if there were aliens out there right now, her place was with her little boy. She stepped back toward the living room.

“Katelyn?”

“Sorry, Dan, I thought I heard Conner.”

“Help me, here.” He went toward her.

She strode over to the freezer, rummaged for the blue cold pack, thrust it at him. He took it with thanks, pressed it against his head. “Better,” he said. “Somewhat.”

She went downstairs. On this night, she would sleep on the floor beside her son.

“Hi,” he said as she came in.

“Not asleep yet?” She sat on the bed. “It’s terribly late.”

“Three twenty-eight. I guess that qualifies.”

“Conner, I’m so sorry I knocked you down like that. I was just—oh, honey, I was so scared. I’ve never been that scared in my life!”

“You want to know a secret, Mom?”

“Sure.”

“That you *swear* you will especially not tell any Warners?”

“Sworn on the old heart.”

“I’ve never been that scared in my life, either. Mom, you know what I felt like? I felt like it was watching me.”

She did not—dared not—tell him of her own feelings.

No matter all the elegantly dismissive conversation above, the dumping on Chris with his silly ideas, down here in the dark with Conner, she found a truth that she could not deny. Whatever had happened out in that field, it had nothing whatsoever to do with any pranks, and murder was even more far-fetched.

The truth was, it had everything to do with the night and the unknown.

She took Conner in her arms, and prayed to the good God that she be granted the right to never, ever let go of him again. Soon, his breathing grew soft and steady, and she, also, closed her eyes. With her boy safe beside her, Katelyn slept.

It was then that the shadows came, stealing in from the dark place under the deck where they had been hiding.

PART THREE

THE SECRET OF THE GRAYS

Late at night, when the demons come,
I want my pillow to push between them,
So they can't get on my skin.
I cry they rub my head I cry.

—SALLY, AGE 9, FROM HER STORY,
“Beings Come to Our House”

EIGHT

ROB LANGFORD HAD NOT BEEN called by Lewis Crew in months, but he was not surprised to receive a summons on this night, when a glowboy had acted up like this. He had driven hard up from the Mountain, and now moved carefully along Lost Angel Road in the Boulder foothills, trying to find the address Crew had given him. He'd never met the owner of the house, Dr. Peter Simpson, but he'd heard Crew mention him often enough. In their field, need-to-know was so extremely strict that this kind of compartmentalization was normal. They all knew the reason, too. In fact, once you were told, it became the center of your life, the one thing you never forgot.

Back in 1954, long before the empath program existed, there had been a brief, fumbled meeting between President Eisenhower and a triad of grays at an air base in California. The president had come away shattered, saying that if we revealed that they were here, the aliens would destroy Earth completely.

This extraordinary threat had built the absolute wall of secrecy and inspired the intricate labyrinth of need-to-know that surrounded the reality of the grays.

Bob and Adam had never responded in a coherent manner to questions about it, either, which had made the threat seem more dire.

Rob found the house, set well back from the road, and turned in the driveway. As per regulations, he was in civilian clothes. Even the license plate on the car he was driving was registered to a civilian. He carried both false and real identification. The false ID, provided by AFOSI, would hold up under police scrutiny—say, if he got stopped for speeding.

Simpson's house was dark in front, but the door opened before he rang the bell. There stood the imposing Mr. Crew, looking a bit older, his white hair even more white.

As Rob entered the tiled foyer, a compact man appeared behind Lewis Crew. "Rob, this is Dr. Pete."

"It's a pleasure to meet a legend."

Simpson laughed a little. "I wish the circumstances could be more pleasant. Come on back."

They went along a hallway, then through a room cluttered with books. Surprisingly, Dr. Simpson read a great deal of poetry. He unlocked a door into a small office. There was some damaged equipment there. Rob asked what it was.

"A quantum communications device," Dr. Simpson said. "It passed signals between entangled particles, and thus was capable of instantaneous transmission across the entire universe. But no longer."

"Things have been at crisis for some time now," Crew said. "And we've reached a very serious point. A flash point, we believe."

Given the threat they were under and the absolute inability of the Air Force to offer any defense against the grays, those words made Rob feel a little sick. "What sort of a flash point?"

"We need to take you to another level, Colonel," Simpson said. "I've revised your job description and your need-to-know."

"You can do this?"

He laughed a little. "Colonel, you're talking to your boss—for the first time in your whole damned career. Isn't it the damndest thing?"

Rob shook his head. "Maybe we're a little too bound up in need-to-know."

"I'm a Defense Intelligence Agency specialist and chairman of the Special Studies Sciences Committee." Special Studies was the umbrella euphemism for all the scientific groups that worked on the problem of the grays.

The Sciences Committee, Rob knew, oversaw the whole operation, including his own Air Force mission. The poetry man was indeed his boss.

"How has my mission changed, sir?"

"We'll get there. First things first. I brought you here for the specific purpose of showing you this device, because you need to understand exactly what it did, why it's been destroyed, and by whom. Because you are about to be tested, Colonel, more rigorously than you have ever been tested before. I cannot stress this enough. In a few moments, I am going to ask you a question. Your answer will be crucial."

"If I answer wrong?"

Simpson gazed at him. The man's eyes were rat-careful. "This machine gave us communications access to Mr. Crew's species," he said. "Which we

very much needed, because they were generating questions for Bob and Adam that were, frankly, a lot more subtle and a lot more effective than anything Michael Wilkes has ever come up with himself.”

Rob realized that he’d just been told that his old friend Crew was an alien. He looked at him, pale in the dim light that filled the room. He appeared human enough. But then again, Rob had read enough UFO folklore to know the stories of a tall, blond race from a planet somewhere in the direction of the Pleiades. “You’re what the UFO-nauts call a Nordic.”

“Ours is a very stable agricultural world with as much land mass as Earth, but barely a million people.”

“But you look so much like us. What are the odds of that?”

“We’ve done DNA studies,” Dr. Simpson said. “We and Crew’s line split from one another about a hundred and fifty thousand years ago.”

“But we—we’re the same species? On two different planets?”

“So it would seem,” Simpson said. “The most bizarre part is that the DNA trail is quite clear. We are not their colony, Crew’s people are our colony.”

“But in the past, uh, weren’t we pretty damn primitive? How could we possibly have colonized another planet? We couldn’t do that now, couldn’t begin to.”

“The past is a greater mystery than we allow ourselves to believe,” Crew said.

Rob’s mind raced. “All of those ruins that nobody can understand, things like the pyramids and the fortress at Sacsayhuaman in the Andes and that impossibly huge stone platform at Baalbek in Lebanon—all of those ancient engineering impossibilities . . . does this explain them?”

“The remains of our lost civilization, or so we believe.”

“The legends of the fall . . . Atlantis, that sort of thing, the war in space narrated in the Vedas—”

“Distorted memories of a world that was lost in a ferocious war that plunged Earth back into savagery and caused you to lose contact with us altogether. The Book of Ezekiel in the bible is a confused account of a failed mission on our part to rescue you, when we built the Great Pyramid at Giza. We had to come physically, and that is extremely slow. The journey took thousands of years on a multigenerational starship.”

“The Great Pyramid is dated. We know who built it.”

“You know that Khefu put his mark on it. We returned in force about

thirty-five hundred years ago. For a time, we ruled Egypt. The Pharaoh Akhenaten and his wife Nefertiti were from our world. We attempted to reestablish essential lost technology, which is the technology that enables the movement of souls across space. A journey that takes eons in the physical can be accomplished in a few moments by a being in a state of energy. The Great Pyramid is a device that enables this. The Egyptian religion of the journey of the soul to the Milky Way is not imagination, but mythology based on lost science.”

“And did it . . . work?”

He nodded. “It still does. At present, I can use it to return home, but nobody else can come here.” He gestured toward the blackened console. “That new device had a lot of capability. Among the things it could do was transmit the entire record of somebody’s DNA at faster than light speed. A clone could then be grown using stem cells and DNA matching. Using pyramids on both planets, the soul could cross from one body to the other. But that’s all impossible now, because of what Michael Wilkes did.”

“*Mike?* But why?”

“Before we can answer that question,” Simpson said, “you need to understand a little more about why the grays are here.”

“They’re exploiting us somehow, I’ve always assumed. Feeding, perhaps, in some way that doesn’t seem to hurt people but that they regard as absolutely essential to themselves.”

“They’re here because they’re in terrible trouble,” Crew said.

Simpson joined in. “They have one hell of a problem. Genetic. Only in the past few years were we even able to understand it. But when you do a really good genetic study on them, you find all kinds of breaks, inserted genes, genes that must be from other species, artificial genes—they’re a genetic garbage can, is what the grays are. They’re not actually alive anymore. The grays have replaced so much of themselves that they’ve become, in effect, biological machines. If you can believe this, the few original genes we have detected are at least a billion years old.”

“A *billion?*”

“Or more. Maybe much more. What we’re looking at with the grays is a species so ancient that it has used up its gene pool. As a species, in their entirety, the grays are dying of old age.”

Crew continued, “Every gray we have ever recovered from crashes, a total of fifty-eight bodies over the last sixty years, has been suffering from

this degenerative genetic disease, where the membranous nucleus of their cells hardens, until the genetic material that's stored there can no longer be used by the cell. Then the grays replace the affected organ with an artificial substitute. Over time, the individual becomes a sort of machine. They have even created a prosthesis for their brain."

"So, why are they dying? If they've become artificial versions of themselves, they're immortal."

"The more artificial they are, the less alive they are. Knowledge and intellect transfer to the artificial brain, but not feelings. They've gained a sort of immortality, but at the price of losing their heart. And every gray is like this, and they all remember their lost hearts, and all they care about is getting them back. What they have now is not life, but the memory of life."

Rob had seen the Bob autopsy. He had been a living entity, but with things like a manufactured skin and metal bones, and a mind that was housed not in a brain as such, but in silicon filaments that filled his head in intricate patterns that looked something like Mandelbrot Sets. You could see, though, in the structures of the skull, that it had once contained a natural brain.

"So how does coming here help them?"

"The grays are trying to save mankind."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, it's not altruism. They're getting access to our rich young gene pool. In return, they're going to save us from the environmental catastrophe that's going to ruin us. Together, both species survive. Apart, both die."

"Then why—I've always had the impression from Wilkes that they're evil."

"He and his friends are at the center of the linkage of corporations, governments, and individuals who currently control the world. He sees any threat to that structure as an act of war, and what the grays are doing is such a threat, big time."

"But what actually . . . are they doing?"

"That's the incredible part. The miracle. They know what needs to be done for their survival. They need access to our genes. And they know what needs to be done for our survival. We need to understand how to fix our planet and how to start colonizing other worlds. But what they *don't* know is how to communicate the information we need to do these things."

Rob looked from Crew's mild face to Simpson's careful, acute eyes. "Who does?"

“They have found a way to give a super-intelligent human being access to their collective mind. This, we believe, is why they were on the ground tonight. They’ve begun this process.”

Rob felt his face flush, felt sweat breaking out under his arms. “And this person is . . .”

“It’s a child. Bred over dozens of generations for extreme brilliance. The smartest person humanity can produce. When they bridge him to their collective, he’ll be even smarter than they are. He will trump their genius and, they hope, figure out how to save us all.”

“A messiah?”

“You could say that, I suppose.”

“But this is all predicated on the collapse of our environment being a real thing. If it isn’t, then they need us but we don’t need them.”

“It’s real.”

“It’s not global warming, is it, because—”

“Global warming is one aspect of a very complex phenomenon. A sixty-two-million-year extinction cycle. The last time it struck, it killed off the dinosaurs.”

“Which was sixty-five million years ago. So what is it, late for the bus?”

“It started right on time, three million years ago, when what is now Central America rose up out of the ocean. This destabilized ocean currents and led to what we have now, a devastatingly lethal oscillation between ice ages and warm periods. The number of species has been declining since before there was a single human being on Earth, and the climax has now been reached. We’re finished, basically—at least, as far as nature is concerned.”

“But why? And why sixty-two million years? I don’t get it, who’s behind it?”

“Ah, the silent presence. Nobody knows. The grays don’t know. But they hope that their brilliant child will understand. They hope he will understand the universe, the work of God, as it were, because, unless he does, we are all going to suffer extinction, both species, for different reasons. Twelve billion vital, living minds, all hungry for life, for love, for children and all right about one thing: every single one of us, whether human or not, is exactly as important as he feels.

“The grays are going to arrive on Earth in force in 2012, around the time the planet comes apart at the seams. They’ve been racing against time for thousands of years, and now it’s down to a clock that’s ticking fast, and either

they get that kid to figure this all out and fix the world, or both species crash and burn.”

“This is beginning to sound—well, to be blunt, horrible. Truly horrible.”

“You can understand the reason for the secrecy. For the grays’ terrible threats.”

“Keeping us from panicking and shooting ourselves in the foot.”

“And them.”

“So what has Mike got against all of this? And how can he stop them?”

“He and his buddies see this as an invasion, pure and simple. The grays are gonna show up in force and cream us and take our planet.”

“Why do they believe that?”

“They don’t know. Can’t know. They fear it.” Crew looked at Rob. “Do you fear it?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Good answer. Truthful. Neither are we. But Eamon Glass—you know, he was the first empath—he felt that the grays did indeed need us, and if they need us, they aren’t coming here to take the planet.”

“But how can Mike and friends possibly stop them?”

“First, they kill this child. That throws the grays off their timetable, because there won’t be time to breed another one before mankind goes extinct. They lose the tool they’ve been breeding across a hundred generations, that’s endgame for them.”

“But the other consequence—the environment falls apart and we go extinct. Where’s the win?”

“Mike and his group—they call themselves the Trust—intend to save about a million. Who they regard as the best people.”

“One million? Out of six billion?”

“There’ll be a few survivals on the outside, but the million people the Trust save are going to be the core of a new humanity, as defined by the Trust, of course. Their million survivors represent every race they consider valuable, every DNA group, all chosen to ensure an adequate long-term gene pool. It’s scientifically sound, certain to continue the species, and a nightmare of racism.”

“But why would doing this stop the grays?”

“For the same reason that they’re not coming to my world,” Crew responded. “Too little genetic material to help them. They need to create a new genetic foundation for billions of their own people. That’ll take a huge

number of human donors. A million would be useless to them, so they'd go away and, presumably, die somewhere off in space."

"The Trust isn't stupid," Rob said, "and Mike's had unlimited access to Bob and Adam for years. He knows the grays as well as anybody."

"And he would rather see the human species essentially brought to an end than live with the grays on what we believe will be at least equal terms. After all, this person who's brighter than them, and thus able to control them, is going to be a human. They're doing that for a reason, to give us a basis for confidence."

"But if Mike's concluded that life with the grays wouldn't be worth living, I think we have to respect that."

"Evil is a funny thing. It comes out of fear. Mike and his people think of themselves as the saviors of mankind. But they're genocidal monsters."

Rob found the scale of the thing so large he could hardly think about it intellectually, let alone morally. He shook his head.

"Here's your question," Crew said gently. "The one we need to ask you. In your mind, which is worse? Die, as a species, or take our chances with the grays?"

"Think carefully before you answer," Simpson added.

The only possible answer was immediately obvious to him. "I don't have a right to make a decision like that. None of us do."

"You pass," Simpson said. "Any other answer, and you would have failed the test, as a result of which, you would now know too much."

"I came close, then," he said.

"I don't think so," Simpson said. "I've always respected you. You have a good, strong conscience. You realize that this decision has to be made by every individual human being. This child, when he grows up, is going to give us the chance to do that."

Rob thought of a question so crucial that he almost didn't want to ask it. He did ask, though, he had to. "Are you saying that they might give us a choice? I mean, if we don't like the idea of sharing our genes with them?"

"We won't," Simpson said. "We'll say yes."

"How can you be sure?"

"The grays will be here, billions of them, asking for life. We will say yes, it's human nature, because we are fundamentally good. And this child, grown up by then, will help us do it right."

"You know, I have another question. Why are we like we are? Why are

we so much less intelligent?”

“We have less knowledge. We lost it during that ancient war, the basic knowledge of how the world really works, knowledge the grays have preserved intact. This is why we can no longer account for those engineering marvels you mentioned—Baalbek and such. We’ve literally forgotten how we did that.”

Crew gave Rob a long look. “We’re trying to sell you on something I sense you’re still dubious about. That’s how you see this whole conversation.”

“You’re not reading me right,” Rob responded. “I don’t see any alternative. We have six billion lives to save. It’s a completely unimaginable responsibility, and this poor damn kid, boy, there is one hell of a lot on his shoulders. You know how I feel? I feel like I would give my life, without hesitation, to protect him.”

“That might happen,” Simpson said. “Because Mike will go after him if he finds out about him, and Mike is good.”

“Then we’ve got to put him under arrest. Roll up these friends of his.”

“We cannot even consider that,” Simpson said. “They’re more powerful than we are. Anyway, it would show our hand and we don’t want that. We’ve been lucky in one respect, that Mike doesn’t understand this child thing at all. He has no idea that the grays are even trying to save mankind. He’s sitting back, confidently waiting for the extinction to ruin their plans. And they’ve played that like the experts that they are, warning him constantly about the environmental crisis, in order to make him think they’re helpless to prevent it.”

“What happens to this kid? Does he suffer?”

“Does he suffer? Being that intelligent? That alone? I don’t think it’s an answerable question.”

“So we protect him. Can do. But why did they do this glowboy thing? Point him out like that?”

“It looks like some triad being bad. Not all that unusual. It’s actually a signal to us, and it’s full of information. It tells us that the child is right in the area of Wilton, Kentucky, and that they’re going to begin the process now. It’s up to us to do our part, find the child in our own way, and put down the kind of protection the grays can’t.”

“Which is?”

“Up close and on the ground, supported by good threat intelligence.

Their ability to determine things like what's going on in a human social group is very limited. They'll be there to react if somebody jumps out of the damn bushes, but we're the only ones who are going to be able to see a threat developing."

Pete Simpson leaned forward. "Which gets us to your new mission. We need you to move your operations to Alfred AFB, Rob. Right now. Your orders are to identify and protect that child. We know that he's somewhere in Wilton. Possibly even on Oak Road, where the glowboy touched down. But don't be too sure of that. The grays are very, very careful, remember. Assume he could be anywhere in the region."

The three men fell silent then, each sinking into his own thoughts, all feeling the same sense of being swept up by a current that was easily powerful enough to drown them.

Through the last darkness at the end of the night, a black triangular object had been coming, flying just feet above the treetops, taking its time, moving in absolute silence. Fifteen minutes ago, it had arrived over the house. It hovered overhead now, enormous, darker than the night itself, a triangle three hundred feet long, two hundred feet across at its base . . . and six inches above the roof.

Inside the triangle, in a low-ceilinged cockpit, a woman in a USAF flight suit sat adjusting a sensitive device. Every word being said below was being recorded and transmitted with digital clarity.

Literally as they spoke, Mike Wilkes listened. He sat in the facility in Indianapolis feeding Lauren questions based on what he was hearing.

His mind raced. This child—dear heaven, it was the single most toxic thing on Earth, the most dangerous creature ever to live. He would lay Wilton, Kentucky, to waste.

Or no. He had to be certain that he'd gotten the right child. Absolutely certain. He needed to be careful, here.

He watched Lauren sitting in the easy chair she'd insisted on bringing into Adam's hellhole, watched and considered how to form his next question, which would be the most important one that, in his whole career of dealing with the grays, he had ever asked.

NINE

OVER THE THREE YEARS SHE'D been working here, Lauren had done what she could to make Adam's cell more endurable. Rather than the steel table and hard chairs that seemed to have been enough for her dad, she'd made a very unwilling Wilkes get her a Barcalounger and had a daybed installed. On the walls, she had a copy of one of Renoir's Aline and Pierre paintings, of Aline holding little Pierre in a way that she hoped one day to hold her own babies . . . off in the future when her life was no longer at risk and she was no longer tangled in an ever-growing web of secrets, and she could finally settle down to a husband and a family. There were also views of forests and mountains, intimate little waterfalls and another one that she especially liked, Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, that seemed to contain, in some way, the same fiery and mysterious energy she found in Adam.

As Mike watched her, he reflected on just how careful he had to be right now. The grays must not find out that he knew about this little monstrosity of theirs. "I want you to transmit an image of the satellite photo again, Lauren," he said smoothly.

She closed her eyes.

"Lauren, pick it up and look at it. Do it right."

"I've already done it ten times! Come on."

"You barely glanced at it."

"Shut up and let me work!"

Her dad had been a guy you could settle down with after work and knock back a few drinks. In fact, Mike had wanted to bring him into the Trust. It was too dangerous, though. For some years, it had been obvious that the grays couldn't read minds well—not normal minds. But Eamon's mind was a different story, like hers. They had to be kept strictly unaware of any secret the grays shouldn't know.

Although the daybed appeared empty, Lauren knew that Adam was lying on it. She had learned to see him in her imagination, even though his tiny movements, synchronized to her flickering eyes, prevented her from

observing him in detail.

Mike wanted her to be careful, so she'd be careful. She formed a thought series this time. First, a picture of a map of the state of Kentucky. Then a vision of the satellite image of the event in the field behind the Oak Road houses.

Nothing came back.

She formed another thought: *React, Adam*. She called up a sense of urgency, stared, tensed her muscles.

There exploded into her mind an image that at first seemed to make no sense. She was looking up at a towering, immense wall of ice, ghostly white and iridescent, blue against a deep blue sky. And then she heard a sound, a gigantic snapping noise that combined with a strange sort of sigh, as if a thousand people had simultaneously gasped.

She was on the upper deck of a cruise ship. They were glacier-watching. The deck was jammed with people . . . and the ice was curving slowly over them, bringing with it a shadow that turned the bright afternoon an eerie, glowing blue.

The ship's huge horn began to sound, thundering again and again. The whole body of the vessel shuddered as it strove to get underway, the propellers churning, smoke gushing from the stacks.

With a boom to wake the dead, a gigantic boulder of ice—an ice mountain—slammed down on the foredeck. The whole ship lurched violently upward and forward. Water, clear and frigid, surged over the bounding deck, and the passengers were hurled screaming into the waves.

Lauren looked up again and saw, dropping toward them, an even greater mountain of ice, an eternity of ice.

She was back in the cage. She asked Adam a question with her mind, felt the question in her heart: what does it mean?

Then she saw—

A supermarket, bright lights . . . voices bellowed, a little girl toddled past with a tin of sardines, a man swooped down, grabbed it, knocking the child aside. Screams came, merging with the bouncy shopping music. People clawed for bread, raced down long, empty aisles, hollow people, their eyes wild, ripping open boxes of uncooked pasta, gobbling it, throwing back raw oatmeal, eating from the mashed garbage on the floor.

Gunshots. Soldiers in dirty uniforms, tired young faces, terrified eyes, shot into the crowd—and people just sat there, staring like a dumb animal

stares who has no idea what's about to happen. As they got shot, they crashed back with astonishing force into a shattered freezer, and then the soldiers passed down another aisle.

"What's going on in there?"

"I don't know! He's showing me some sort of tragedy."

"Wha-a-at?"

"Ships sinking, people starving in a supermarket—"

"Christ, will you get me what I need!"

"Damn you, Mike, what I am gonna get you is what I always get you. I am gonna get you what he has to give!"

Because Adam was showing Lauren images of the coming extinction, he might be aware of the conversation Mike had been listening to, which made continuing this way too dangerous. "Okay, that's it. Come out. We're done."

"I love my baby," she whispered, getting up from the Barcalounger. She reached out, touched the cool, soft skin of a hand that only became visible when she held it, the narrow fingers and lethal black claws fading when she withdrew.

Adam shot back an image of a mother nursing an infant, his standard good-bye. As she got up, he made one of his audible sounds, a cry like a shocked and despairing woman. Did he feel anything? She didn't know. But she did know that he was trying for sympathetic attention.

"Adam, I know you have a message for me connected with all these disasters, and I know I'm not getting it. However, we're asking you about a *specific incident*, and—"

She got no response from him. She knew why: he'd heard the words, but unless you formed your thoughts in your mind, he didn't understand you.

"Lauren, break it off!"

"Mike—sir—"

"Lauren, there's no time!"

No time? What the hell was he talking about? She had all the time in the world. And God knew, Adam had time. "I'm going to get this thing rolling."

"There is no time!"

But Adam had different ideas. Adam's mind was all around her, she could feel it. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and let herself go blank.

He came into her, as always, like a dog sniffing for a buried bone. Letting him get inside her felt kind of good, but also oddly sad . . . a sadness that he brought with him. He would go into her memories and kind of troll

there, bringing up all sorts of things from her past, things she'd just as soon have forgotten, stuff done when drunk, that sort of stuff. He liked the intense things. Sort of ate them, she thought.

She let him go deep into a familiar little corner, the cardboard box experience when she was about ten, one of the first things she'd ever done that was related to sex. She smelled the slightly damp cardboard box again, saw Willy Severs's plump, white body, felt his hand go under her blouse—and then shut *that* door with a great crash.

She shot her question at Adam: the satellite image again, the town of Wilton, the houses on Oak Road.

For the split of an instant, she thought she glimpsed a boy's face, but it was not Willy Severs. Curly hair, slightly chunky, looked about fourteen or fifteen.

"I have something," she said. "A face."

"What sort of a face?"

"A kid. I asked him about Oak Road and I got the face of a kid."

"Bring it out."

Mike was all over her the moment the door closed. "Got what? What did you get?"

"They're interested in a child."

"Say more."

"He's a boy of fourteen or fifteen, curly hair, and another thing, I glimpsed a dog. He has a dog."

Mike became furtive. "Okay," he said, "that makes no sense."

"Yes it does. They're interested in this kid."

"Probably some kind of breeding issue. We'll never figure it out. You're dismissed. Operation complete."

He was lying and he was scared—and she was suspicious. "What's the deal with this child?"

"Look, I have to go to Washington and I'm already late. You're done, Lauren. Thank you."

She watched him leave. The one pleasant thing about her relationship with him was knowing that he wanted her, and denying him. She did it because—well, she didn't like him. Just did not like the man. She was not nice to him, couldn't be. Why, she thought, had something to do with Adam. Adam seemed suspicious of him, somehow. Wary.

"What's going on, Andy?" she asked as she came into the control room

still drying her hair.

“The boss is sure as hell in a lather.”

She went topside, and when the elevator doors opened found Mike just leaving. He was in full uniform, which was pretty unusual around here. He had his briefcase in his hand.

“You’re moving fast,” she said.

“Yep.”

“Are you going to do something to that child, Mike?”

“Look, this is not your issue. Your issue is to communicate with Adam, and to take that job one hell of a lot more seriously than you do.”

“How dare you.”

“How dare me? You’re the one with pictures on the walls down in that hellhole. That thing is a predator. It’s a monster. It’s not a damn pet, for God’s sake, woman.”

She made a decision. He was going to Washington. Fine, she was coming back here and going at it again with Adam. She would get to the bottom of this without Mike around. Because, if this child was in some kind of danger due to her report, then she had a very clear moral duty: no matter the legal blockade her clearance created, she had to protect the kid. She would not be a party to murder, and she would not follow orders that she considered to be illegal.

She watched Mike hurry out to the parking lot, and take off in his latest car, a brand-new VW Phaeton. She knew the value of that car, she’d looked it up. He’d just driven off in half a year’s pay. Where his real money came from she didn’t know, but it sure as hell was not the United States Air Force.

TEN

THE SUN PEEKING OVER THE Warners' roof woke Katelyn. As usual, she rolled over, at first feeling entirely normal. She considered turning on the news.

And then it hit her: she was upstairs in bed, not in Conner's room where she had gone to sleep.

Dan chose that moment to slide an arm over her. Katelyn leaped away from him as if his body was on fire.

"Hey!"

"Conner!" She ran downstairs, ran across the kitchen, took his stairs three at a time, and burst in.

When she saw that the door to the outside was open, she stifled a cry. But the lump in the bed seemed entirely normal. She knelt beside him and peeked into the covers. Conner was deeply asleep.

She kissed his freckled cheek, inhaling the milky-sour smell of his skin.

Dan came in, went over and closed the door that led out under the deck and into the backyard. "Look," he said.

There was a puddle of water on the floor in front of it, standing on the linoleum.

"And outside."

In the sparse grass that clung to life under the deck, were numerous small holes. They looked for all the world as if somebody had walked there on stilts.

She went to Dan, looked down at the water, out at the peculiar holes. This was not right. None of this should be here. She rushed back to Conner, drew down his covers. Again she kissed him. She pulled him into her arms.

Conner moaned, then suddenly stiffened. "Mom?" he said.

Kneeling beside the bed, she held his face in her hands and looked into his eyes.

He asked, "What's the matter?"

She hugged him to her, feeling the heft of him against her. Her boy was

on the verge of becoming a young man, and he was so beautiful, and you had to be so very careful not to let him know how beautiful you thought he was.

“Could you guys let me get dressed, here?”

The little boy who had cheerfully laid naked in her lap just a few short years ago now did not want to get out from under the covers in her presence, not even wearing pajamas.

She kissed his cheek. “Six months to your first shave,” she said. “Mom predicts.”

“The sooner the better.” He looked at her. She looked back at him. He moved his eyes toward the door.

“Breakfast in ten minutes.”

She and Dan went upstairs.

“What was that about?” Dan asked as she closed the door.

She whispered, “It’s about his growing maturity. Problems controlling what’s up down below.”

“You think? Puberty?”

“Bright kids reach it early, so it says in the book.” As they mounted the stairs, she saw the CONNER ZONE sign in his recycling bag and took it out. “The Conner Zone was so cute,” she said.

“Cute is the problem,” Dan said. “Part of it. The other part is being too smart in a world that glorifies the lowest common denominator. Conner’s intelligence is not fashionable, and it’s too big for him to conceal.”

“Oh, I never want him to do that. How’s your ear, by the way?”

“Not actually okay. I could stand to get an X-ray.”

“You’re kidding. On your ear?”

“Well, there’s something there.”

“Something *there*?” She reached up and touched the outer edge of the ear. “It’s a little sort of a knot.”

“I know what it is.”

“Relax, Dan, I’m not the enemy.”

For the past half hour, the smell of coffee had been getting stronger, and she went into the kitchen and poured them both mugs. Dan took his over to the table. She went into the pantry and got Conner’s latest cereal, some kind of amaranth flakes thing. Conner had his own dietary ideas, most of them pretty smart—and pretty awful. He was a modified vegetarian except when Dan grilled steaks. Then he was a sullen but voracious carnivore.

There was no cancer of the ear, was there?

Conner appeared, poured himself coffee. She waited to see if he put the required amount of half and half in it. Did—but just a drop.

“Eggs?” she asked as she turned on the skillet.

“I’m going to be eating really pure for a while,” Conner said. “No dairy, no alcohol.”

“You don’t drink alcohol,” Dan said. “Better not.”

“I mean, no wine with dinner.”

“Wine belongs to the soul, son. No man can be fully himself without wine.”

“The other kids can’t drink it.”

“Which is why they’ll all be bingeing like the college students in a few years. Did you know that binge drinking among the young is unheard of in Europe, but common here and in the UK? What does that tell you—children have to learn wine early, get used to it. Which is why you’ll continue with a glass of wine at dinner, thank you.”

“I love the irony. Most kids would do anything to drink even so much as a sip. But I don’t want to, so it’s forced on me.”

“Well, you get a glass. One glass. Which is mandatory.”

“Do you want to have the fight now or schedule it for later? Because I will not be drinking wine.”

Dan sighed. “I’ve got to go to the health center to get my ear amputated. Let’s do it when I get back.” He picked up Conner’s cereal box. “I saw this lying open in the pantry last night. Are roach eggs okay for vegans?”

Conner took the box, poured himself some cereal. “Amaranth is one of a handful of dicots which photosynthesize directly to a four-carbon compound.”

“Ah. So the reason you’re now eating nothing but horrible-looking little crumbs is explained. You want that four-carbon compound.”

“Actually, I want the protein and the lysine without meat, plus I get a designer-quality lipid fraction. I have the cholesterol readings of a twelve-year-old, you know.”

“You’re eleven.”

“It’s a joke, Dad.”

“Ah. Of course.”

Katelyn put down her and Dan’s eggs and sat at the head of the table. “May I know the why of the vegan thing?”

“The aliens.”

A silence fell, extended. “Are you about to piss me off?” Dan asked.

“I am eating pure because this neighborhood is in a close-encounter situation and it’s the eating of animals that triggers the kind of fear response I experienced last night. I don’t want to fear the aliens. I want to face them.”

“Oh, boy,” Katelyn said. “Dan—”

“No. No, I understand that I’m being baited. It’s not a big deal, Katelyn.” He watched Conner digging into the amaranth, and as he watched, he got angrier and angrier. He *was* being baited, damn right. Conner was masterful at it. And here he’d been the confidante, the father confessor, just yesterday. Now he was the enemy and his ear hurt like hell, to tell the truth, and he really did not need this just now.

“We had a visit from the grays, and they had an abductee aboard the craft, *and* the Keltons probably have video. A first in history. The world is changing, lady and gentleman, and I am preparing myself.”

“What grays?” Dan asked carefully.

“Try Googling ‘gray aliens’ sometime. You’ll find more than four thousand references. Plus, this business of a UFO descending with a screaming woman inside happened in Kentucky before. Moorehead, 2003, same situation, with one difference—no video. Lots of nine-one-one calls, but no video and therefore no story.”

The sanctimonious singsong, the eyebrows raised to make the face appear absurdly credulous—it was all calculated to infuriate. Conner knew perfectly well how ridiculous Dan considered the whole UFO/alien folklore to be, and how damaging to the culture.

“Goddamnit, it was nothing but some kind of dope-inspired prank!”

“Dad, please. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

Dan’s hand had slammed down on the table before he could stop it.

Conner seized the opportunity. “Right, go physical yet again, Dad. It’ll make a juicy story for my psychiatrist-to-be. Another one.”

Dan had spanked Conner exactly one time, when, at the age of three, he had rewired the toaster and caused a dangerous fire in the wall of the kitchen. It had been a single, sharp blow to the left buttock . . . which had been thrown back at him perhaps ten thousand times since.

“Conner, listen to me. I’m up for tenure, which the entire college knows. It’s terribly important to us. If I don’t get it, I have to resign, which means that we have to move to some other college where Mom and I can both get work, and she has to give up her own tenure here—it’ll be a mess, son. And

something like this—a UFO in the backyard—can ruin my chances. Marcie Cotton already wants to write me off. So please, for me, do not say anything about us seeing it for at least another few weeks.”

Conner gazed off into the middle distance. “Prediction: the Keltons’ tape, if it is halfway decent, will make this place famous. Prediction: Dr. Jeffers will make a total idiot of himself about it and he’ll end up with walking papers. Prediction: you will not be damaged by this, but Dr. Cotton will still screw you to the wall.”

Every time Conner used the word “prediction,” a chill went right through Dan. Their son was never wrong. Actually, he found that he was so on edge and Conner sounded so right that he almost burst into tears—and was instantly appalled at himself. How could he possibly react like that? That wasn’t him.

But then he thought—the pressure of the tenure conference coming up, the bizarre events in the night, the sleeplessness, Katelyn’s waking up in near hysterics, this damned lump in his ear—of course he was on edge. Stressed. Big time.

“Look,” he said, “thanks for a perfectly delicious breakfast. Tomorrow’s my turn and it’s waffles unless there are objections.” He looked down at the still-gobbling Conner. “I’ll make yours without egg.”

“Fine.”

“They’ll be fascinating. I’m going to the health center, I’ll call you with a verdict.”

“Prediction,” Conner said. “They will find a small object enclosed in a membrane made of cutaneous tissue. And, if you search your body, you will find an indentation where that tissue was taken from. It’s called a witch’s mark.” He smiled up at Dan. “The grays have been with us for some time.”

“Conner, this happened last night in a kitchen full of people. I hardly think the grays could have operated on me without anybody noticing.”

“There was a moment—probably just a few seconds—when you were all turned off. The grays did what they did and turned you back on as they left. It’s called missing time. It’s the way they handle us. We’re their property, you know. You know what the great anomalist Charles Fort called the world? A barnyard. The grays are the farmers, and right now they’re doing a little farm work right here on Oak Road.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What are they doing?”

“For one thing, they’ve got some kind of a plan for you, which is why

they gave you that implant. You're involved, Dad."

"Let's look," Katelyn said. "I want to see this thing for myself."

But Dan did not want them to look at it. He retreated upstairs and took his shower. Safe in the stall, shaving and soaping himself up, he felt his body for the sort of indentation Conner had described.

Nah, there wasn't one. They'd X-ray him at the health center and tell him what he already knew: he had a cyst that was mildly infected. The doctor would prescribe a couple of weeks of an antibiotic, and if it got worse, he'd go in and open the damn thing up.

He had to wash his hair, anyway, so he sat down on Katelyn's shower chair that she used for shaving her comely legs and—well, what the hell, he felt along both ears and across the back of his neck.

There was nothing there. Thank you, Conner, it's so delightful the two or three times a year that you're wrong. As he stood back up, though, he felt a very slight soreness in his right buttock. He felt back there, just above the cheek. As his fingers ran along the smooth, wet skin, he knew. He felt again to be sure.

Then he was having an aura, one of those odd sequences of perceptions—in his case, a vision of stars all around him from his childhood planetarium, followed by a feeling of floating—that were the prelude to one of the seizures like he'd had in childhood.

He leaned up against the side of the shower. "Katelyn," he managed to say. Not yell it, couldn't do that. "Katelyn."

The feeling of floating got stronger. It was uncanny, he even looked down to be sure his feet were still touching the floor of the stall. Then his eyes fixed on the drain, the silver circle of it with the water swirling down.

The drain became larger and darker, and now what he saw was a round black hole in a field of gleaming silver. Objectively, deep within himself, he knew that he was seizing. He felt nothing, you never did. All he could see was this opening that had been below him but was now above him, black and foreboding, getting bigger. It was like being drawn into the underside of a gigantic silver balloon, that was how the seizure affected his temporal lobe.

Then it was gone, *bam*. The shower was back, drumming on him. He coughed, gagged, recovered himself. Quickly, he rinsed his body, got out of the shower, and dropped down, still soaking wet, onto the toilet. Jesus God, he'd seized. After all these years, he had damn well *seized*.

In his late childhood, when the seizures had first been diagnosed, he'd

been put on Dilantin. He had tolerated it well, and maybe he'd better go back on it. He hadn't had actual spasms while in the shower or he would have gone down, so he was still dealing with a petit mal epilepsy. That was on the good side. On the bad side, for this to return after so many years suggested that there could be some other syndrome present. For example, maybe there had been epileptiform tissue in his brain that had developed a tumor. Maybe the thing in his ear was indeed a tumor. It would not be a primary, that did not happen to earlobes. It would be metastase of a hidden primary, asymptomatic until it began, last night, to press a nerve.

If this was a distal metastase of a brain tumor, he might well be a dying man.

He toweled himself and dressed fast. He went downstairs and through the kitchen again, where Katelyn and Conner were still breakfasting, Conner now absorbed in NPR on the radio, *Meet the Press* on TV, and the *New York Times* "Week in Review," while Katelyn read the funnies in the *Herald Leader*.

"Zits is great," she said as he headed out to the garage. "The father gets this—"

"Later. I'll call."

"Be sure they're open."

If they weren't, he was heading to the Wilton City Hospital emergency room. There was no way he could make it through another night without knowing what this thing was.

In the event, the health center was open and staffed by a nurse and a squeaky little doctor who appeared to be just a hair older than Conner. He was tempted to head on to Wilton anyway, but his paranoia was running full blast, and he feared a note to Marcie from some tenure inquisitor: "Subject refused treatment at College H.C., preferred Wilton."

Listen to that thinking, though. Paranoid. He was having seizures for the first time in over twenty years, and now entertaining lunatic paranoid fantasies . . . but how could he ask this freckled little boy with a sunburned skier's nose for what he really needed, which was a damned Xanax drip to take home with him?

"Doctor, I have a little cyst in my left ear that's giving me trouble. Mild trouble, but it's waking me up at night when I lie on my side."

He sat on the edge of the examining table while the doctor, if that's actually what he was, gently examined the ear.

“I’m assuming a subcutaneous infection,” Dan said, aware of his own nervousness. He wanted to also say that he’d seized, but he dared not do that. Paranoid delusions aside, if that got back to Marcie, it might indeed have implications.

“There’s a mass,” the young doctor said.

Dan felt the blood drain out of his face, felt his heart turn over. He was forty. He was dying.

“Let’s do an X-ray,” the doctor said.

He followed him back into the green-tiled, Lysol-scented depths of the health center. Dan managed to get enough spit up to talk. “What do you expect to find?” he asked mechanically.

“Have you been doing any sort of carpentry?”

“Carpentry?”

“There’s a mass in there with something hard in it. I’m thinking a nail head. Something along those lines.”

“Can you see a point of entry?”

“Not anymore. When did it start hurting?”

“Last night.”

“That part of the ear’s not very sensitive. It could’ve been there for a while, just recently become irritated.”

They reached the X-ray room and the doctor turned on the lights, which flickered to life, revealing the same X-ray machine that had been there for all the years Dan had been involved with Bell College. Probably war surplus, and not from a recent war.

The doctor took four views of his ear and then he was sent off to the waiting area, an extraordinarily bleak little room with an anorexic gray couch against one wall, three plastic chairs, and two chair-desks for students who might wish to study while waiting for their bad news.

Dan would have taken out his iPod and listened to the *New York Times*, but his iPod was on his bedside. His choices were a coverless copy of *Bicycling* or the front half of a not-very-recent *Newsweek*.

Half an hour later, he began to fear that the young doctor, upon seeing the X-rays, had leaped into his car and rushed off to Wilton with them.

He went back into the depths of the place, where he found him sitting in a tiny office studying a thick textbook. “Oh, hi,” he said. “Let’s see if that e-mail’s come in yet.”

“E-mail?”

“Yeah, your X-ray’s being read by our radiologist. He got it online.”

Now, that was somewhat reassuring—a high-powered radiologist at another institution was reading his film.

“Here it is.” He opened an e-mail. “Boy, these guys need their English translated into English.”

“You can’t read medical terminology?”

“I can’t read a Sri Lankan’s idea of medical terminology. Your radiologist is in Trincomalee. Actually sounds rather romantic, Trincomalee.”

Dear heaven.

He reached across his desk and pulled out an X-ray folder. “This is interesting,” he said. He put two of the X-rays up on a wall light. “You have a foreign object in your ear,” he said, “as I suspected.”

Dan stared at the X-ray. The object was a tiny pinpoint of light. He could hear Conner’s precise young voice, “They will find a small object . . .” He asked, “Is it enclosed in a membrane?”

“A membrane? Not likely. Maybe a little calcification if it’s been there for a while. I think it’s a metal filing. It could have migrated from anywhere.”

“I have a sore place on my buttock.”

“Let’s take a look.”

He lowered his trousers.

“Nothing visible. Perhaps a slight indentation is all.”

Once again, Conner had been exactly right.

“So, what should I be doing about this?”

“If it bothers you, I can take it out.”

“You?”

He laughed a little. “Quite easily. It’s not deep, it’ll take five minutes.”

He lay on the examining table and let the nurse swab his ear with iodine. They injected him a couple of times, and went in.

“Feel anything?”

“No.”

“Okay, here it is. It’s a white disk. A—whoa.”

“What?”

“It just went—what the hell?”

“What?”

“I’m withdrawing.”

“Did you get it?”

He was silent as he took a stitch in the wound.

“I did not get it,” he said at last. “I got a little sliver of it before it migrated. It’s down in your earlobe now.”

He felt the lobe. “How can that be?”

“I’m not sure. It’s not a normal object.”

He had to say the word, hard as it was. “Cancer?”

The doctor laughed. “Cancers don’t generally run like hell when you touch them with a scalpel.”

“Was it, uh, a living thing, then?”

“Dr. Callaghan, I have no idea what it was. But I am going to do two things to put that question to rest. First, I’m going to put this sliver under a microscope, then I’m going to send it to the lab.”

“Does this happen to people often?”

“First one I’ve seen. Foreign objects are a whole subdiscipline of trauma medicine. It’s nothing to worry about, though. I wouldn’t think twice about it.”

They went into another room, this one containing a lab bench with a fairly decent microscope on it. The doctor prepared a specimen slide and put it into the viewing area. He lowered his face to the binocular.

Dan watched him, waiting.

He lifted his head. “Okay, off it goes to pathology.”

“But—what did you see?”

“White material. Probably some sort of a protein.”

“Why did it move? Is it a parasite?”

“Lord, no! Here—take a look for yourself.”

Gratefully, Dan looked into the microscope. What he saw was shaped like a sickle of moon, and along the curved outer edge there was what looked like movement. “What am I seeing? It’s still moving, am I right?”

“That has to be a light effect.”

Dan adjusted the scope. Clearly, the thing had scilia on it, and the scilia were propelling it. He lifted his face. “Scilia,” he said, “look.”

The doctor barely glanced at it. “Well, call day after tomorrow, we’ll give you the pathology report.”

“But it has scilia on it that are moving. So it’s a living thing, it must be. And it can migrate. What if it goes somewhere else? Into my brain or my heart?”

“There are no ear parasites like this.”

And that ended that. Another two patients had come in, and the doctor

was off to attend to their hangovers.

On the way home, Dan called and told Katelyn that he was fine. She asked him what they'd found, and he came, quite unexpectedly, to a powerful personal moment. He found himself shaking so intensely that he pulled over to the side of the road.

"Dan?"

"Sorry. It was a little something in there. They took it out."

"What sort of a little something, honey?"

"Not a tumor." He found that he very much did not want to tell her that Conner had been right. He did not want Conner to be right, and he never, ever wanted to ask Conner how he had known. "It was a little cyst. Took ten minutes to get rid of it. The main delay involved waiting for the radiologist to evaluate it . . . in Trincomalee. It seems we outsource our diagnostics to experts in the Third World. Or is it the fourth world? Is there a fourth world?"

"You sound a bit out of it."

"It's been a long twenty-four hours, dear. I'm coming home and I'm going to turn on the TV and watch Sunday golf and spend the afternoon in a coma."

All the way home, without knowing why and without being able to stop, he cried. There was no sound. In fact, his expression never changed, except for wetness flowing down his cheeks. He felt like an idiot, he never cried. But he couldn't stop himself now, because a tremendous sorrow was coming up from his depths, a hidden river exposed.

He remembered this so well, this anguish that he could not control. It had been a feature of his childhood, had come after his seizures.

He thought he knew why the syndrome had returned. This was probably the most tense period he had never known in his life. He was not a particularly successful teacher. In fact, he was pretty much a failure. Bell wasn't just a holding tank for second-rate students, it was a refuge for dead-end teachers, too.

He had his good points. You could not find a more loving husband. You could not find a better man to father a kid as sensitive and exasperating as Conner. But he tended to the pedantic when he lectured. He was too careful, too humorless, too predictable.

Still, he had built a life for them at Bell. Conner's life was here. Katelyn was having a successful career in the sociology department. *She* was tenured,

popular with students, had crowded classes. She was pulling down seventy grand to his forty-eight-five, also. It would not be fair for his failure to uproot her.

Tomorrow at ten sharp, he would have his final tenure review with Marcie. Of course, it wasn't the official word, that came from the tenure committee next week. But by the end of the meeting tomorrow, he'd know.

He drove past Marcie's house, noted that all the blinds were down. A signal? An omen? He drove on, circling blocks—but not Marcie's of course, God forbid—and forcing back these ridiculous, if thankfully silent, tears.

When he arrived home, he hoped to avoid Conner.

"I was right," his son said as he got out of the car. "I was exactly right."

"Conner, you were wrong. It was a cyst."

"Where is it?"

"Oh, brother. Son, it's in the garbage at the health center."

"Dad, do you realize what that is? It's an alien artifact! It's important, there's even a Web site about them. A lot of Web sites."

Dan tried to get past his son and into the house.

"Dad, it's important! You're involved in a close-encounter situation and —"

"SHUT UP!" He ran across the garage. "Will you just SHUT UP!"

Katelyn appeared. "What's the matter with you? What's going on out here?"

"Katelyn—oh, God. Katelyn, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Conner. Please forgive me, both of you." He tried to smile. Failed. Shook his head. "Look, Conner, you're always asking for space. I need some space right now. I need some, okay?"

"Dad, are you crying?"

"It's a mild allergy to the anesthesia."

"Dad's just had an operation, Conner. We need to back off."

"But Mom, he's letting them throw away an implant!"

"Goddamnit, there's no such thing! Conner, for a supposed genius, you can be an amazing idiot. A Web site on *alien implants* is your source of information? You urgently need to learn some discrimination, son. You can do calculus backward and recite Wittgenstein, and yet you come up with this garbage."

"Be careful, Dad. It was Wittgenstein who said, 'Our greatest stupidities may be very wise.' "

Dan knew not to pursue it. No matter how correct he might be, in a sentence or two more, Conner would win the argument. To avoid that, Dan went inside, took a relatively good Barolo out of the wine rack, opened it and grabbed a glass, and headed for the family room. Golf, decent wine, and deep, deep sleep were what he needed.

He'd gone over the top, of course. The boy was terribly sensitive, of course. Well, he'd apologize later. Conner got under your skin. He really did have a skill at that.

He poured some wine, drank it . . . and felt his ear. The damned thing had moved again. It had returned to its original site, under the stitch.

He considered screaming. But no, that would be rude. Instead, he poured himself another full glass and drank it down.

PART FOUR

THE HANGED MAN

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

—MATTHEW ARNOLD
“Dover Beach”

ELEVEN

MIKE WILKES WATCHED AS, ONE by one, the members of the Trust filed slowly through a large white device that was set into the doorway to the conference room on the second floor of his Georgetown home.

As each trustee stood waiting in what was essentially a magnetic-resonance-imaging system reconfigured and retuned to detect very small metallic objects, Mike watched a whole-body image come into focus on a flat-panel display located beside the entrance.

“Come in, Charles,” he said to their chairman, Charles Gunn.

“I’m wiped every morning at home,” Charles said. “I had one pulled out of my damn neck last week.”

“Uh-oh, hold it, Richard.” The display showed a bright spot deep in the brain of Richard Forbes, the Trust’s security chief. “They got one in your damn temporal lobe, buddy.”

“Is it deep?”

“Oh, yeah. You’re gonna need a neurosurgeon, big time.”

“Well, guys, I’m out of this for the duration, then. I’ll see you after my lobotomy.”

There was nervous laughter. Brain implants were rare. They required an abduction, while an object that went in under the skin could be placed while the host was wide awake. All it would do would be to cause some pain, but there would be no wound, certainly no scar. The grays were, among other things, masters of atomic structure. They could walk through walls if they wished, and they could certainly deposit an implant under the skin without surgery. The terrifying thing about a brain implant was that it could be used for subtle mind control, detectable only by someone with profound understanding.

“They anticipated this meeting,” Charles said.

“Yeah, they know damn well we’d want our security guy in a meeting called because of a security issue,” Henry Vorona added as he came through.

Then Ted Cassius had one under his scalp. These were nasties, too,

because that close to the brain, they could be used not only for monitoring, but for a degree of mind control as well.

“How long have you had this, Ted?”

“I got a splitting headache two days ago. Jesus, I should have known.”

“We need to assume that you’re both under mind control and we have to get your asses out of here fast.” He opened his cell phone. “I’m calling for a Secret Service escort for both of you guys to Walter Reed. If you go under your own steam, you just might change your minds, as you know.”

“Thank you.”

Nobody else, thankfully, was implanted, and Mike finally was able to take his customary place at the conference table, second from the head on the left. Charles Gunn was head of table. Normally, he would not be at a meeting of the security-operations committee, but Mike had specifically requested his attendance.

Henry Vorona shuffled some papers as the Three Blind Mice took their places, three sour and mutually indistinguishable liaison officers from the main corporate groups that accepted delivery of the technologies and processes that evolved out of the liaison with Adam. They were Todd Able, Alex Starnes, and Timothy Greenfield, all in their forties, all looking like undertakers. It was their corporate dollars that funded the survival program. Creating the database of people who would be sheltered was costly, and monitoring their movements even more so. But those things were nothing compared to the cost of the underground shelters themselves, a hundred at half a billion dollars each, hidden around the world.

“Let’s get going,” Charles said. “I’ve brought a little patents-and-processes business to deal with first. Where are we with the plasmonics device?”

Mike was confused by that question. The invisibility fabric was deep in the pipeline. “Uh, do we need more from Adam? Because I wasn’t aware—”

Tim Greenfield said, “We have a report, Mike. It’s on its way to you.”

“Then there’s a problem, Timmy?”

Tim Greenfield’s pate flushed. “It doesn’t work.”

“Well, that is a problem.” The concept was a material that would reduce light scatterback to zero, thus rendering an object effectively impossible to see. They knew that the grays used invisibility cloaking in their abductions, in addition to their peculiar physical ability to lock movement with the slightest flickering of the eye, so their victim could not see them.

Adam and Bob had been queried on the cloaking, in the tiny bits and pieces necessary to extract information from them, for fifteen years. They had a ten-billion-dollar check riding on the success of the process.

“There’s a compositional issue. Chemical. We need a real formula. What they’ve given us is not real.”

So the grays had lied again. All of those years of work, those hundreds and hundreds of tiny, seemingly innocuous questions had led down another blind alley.

Not that they didn’t have successes. “How are we doing with the electrostatic anti-friction shield?” Mike asked Todd Able, who was team leader on that project. He knew the answer better than Todd did, but he wanted to remind everybody that his work with Bob and Adam had resulted in its share of successes.

“It’s deploying and we’re looking at a ninety-seven percent decrease in friction across angular surfaces. If we could mine gravitite, we could fabricate non-aerodynamic spherical vehicles and we’d be looking at the same zero-friction profile we see in the grays’ craft. All we’d be missing is their engine.”

“The coherent mercury plasma can’t be made more efficient,” Henry Vorona said. “We’re getting everything we can out of it.”

Mike knew that well. Using a combination of research into ancient Vedic texts about the technology of Earth’s previous civilization and questions to Adam, they had evolved a device that rotated a mercury plasma inside a powerful magnetic field, that reduced the weight of the craft that carried it by 40 percent. Simply knowing that the Vedic references to aircraft and weapons referred to actual devices had enabled scientists to proceed much more quickly.

“So what about gravitite? Progress?” Charles asked in his peculiarly cheerful voice, so improbable in a man who looked like the director of his own funeral.

“We know what it is and where it is, but extracting it is another matter,” Mike said. He looked toward Henry Vorona, who was a substantial shareholder in a dozen companies that were feeding off the grays’ technology. One of those companies, Photonic Research, had been mining for years in the same seams of iron in the southern Catskills that the grays used, pulling iron out of shafts directly adjacent to theirs, but failing to extract more than a few molecules of gravitite.

Henry said, "We're not going to be saving the human race with gravitite. We can pull up the iron and cut it up atom by atom, but we find one atom of gravitite for every three hundred billion atoms of iron. The grays must have a more efficient process, otherwise they would have used up every bit of iron on the planet to get a handful of gravity-negative product."

Charles now rested his eyes on Mike. "Colonel, if you'd like to go on to this security matter now."

Mike told himself that he wasn't frightened, but he was, he felt like a schoolboy about to get a thrashing. "We have a potential crisis that needs to be addressed immediately."

"Adam's not sick?"

Bob had been invaded by common household molds. This was why they kept Adam in an ultra-dry, ultra-clean environment. They were all terrified of losing their only captive gray. "Not that, thank the Lord, but something might be unfolding that could be bad for us."

Henry Vorona sighed. He was not a patient man and Mike could see an explosion building. He hurried on. "Basically, we've obtained information about a very unusual operation on the part of the grays. Spectacularly threatening, I am sorry to say. What happened initially was that the triad that works Pennsylvania and up into Canada, came out of their boundaries and did an abduction in a college town in Kentucky."

"Okay," Todd said, "I'll bite."

"The grays have devised a way to communicate with mankind. To teach us how to save ourselves. They've been working on it for probably a couple of thousand years. And now, gentlemen, they are going to spring it on us. Of course, we save ourselves not for us, but for them. Mankind survives, but as a genetic milk carton for them. Slaves."

That brought total silence. These men had counted on the coming catastrophe to free their carefully selected fragment of humankind from the grays. None of them liked the idea of the disaster that they knew was coming. But they feared this slavery more. If six billion were alive in 2012, they would all be enslaved. If only a million were left alive by then, they would be left alone. So, at least, went the theory.

"So, get on with it," Henry Vorona snapped.

"Okay," Mike continued, "we've known for some time, based on the abduction pattern we've observed over five decades, that the grays are especially interested in children."

“Because they’re small, easy to control, and emotionally rich,” Henry said. “Easy to feed on,” he added in a tone electric with contempt. Every man here shared one truth: he despised the grays.

“That does not explain the ‘why,’ which has always been our problem. The grays can outthink us. They’re always ten moves ahead.”

Henry slammed his briefcase, which had been open on the table. “That’s it then. Let’s all go home. Follow Forrestal out the damn window.”

“I’m too old to jump out a window,” Charles said. “Mike, you finish this. What’s your problem and what do you need from us?”

“Well, wait,” Tim said, “what about the scalar weapons program? We’re going to have eighty of those birds up by 2012. We’ll be able to induce the destruction of most of the species ourselves.” He sighed. “God help us, I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“You think they’ll sit back and let us kill their cattle?”

“They haven’t touched the scalar prototype.”

“Because its only one small weapon,” Charles said. “It doesn’t have the potential to affect their plans.”

Mike continued. “The grays are doing something very inventive. What they’ve apparently done is to breed a child so intelligent that he can process and use the contents of their knowledge.”

Vorona shook his head.

“You have a problem, Henry?”

“They’ve been preparing this from the beginning, then?”

“I found out about it early this morning.”

“Mike, we’ve known about them for fifty damn years, and you found out *today*?”

“Look, let’s not argue about me.”

“I want to argue about you! This is not good enough!”

“Hold off!”

“You hold off! And you listen. Because this is urgent. Our whole damn program is in jeopardy. The freedom of the human species!”

“Because somebody didn’t do their job,” Alex murmured.

“Hold off, all of you,” Charles said softly. “Go on, Mike.”

“My expectation is that they’re going to install something in him that links him to their collective.”

“An implant does not a demon make.”

“In this case, it does. This child’s intelligence will enable him to use

vastly more information than an average human being can.”

Silence fell. He watched each face as each man explored the implications of this.

“Gentlemen,” Mike said, “if this child survives, mankind survives. When the grays show up in 2012, dinner is served.”

“Now,” Tim Greenfield asked in his soft Georgia drawl, “we are absolutely sure that their coming is bad for us?”

“You cannot seriously entertain a question where we can’t know the answer until it’s too late. Good or bad, we can’t take the risk!”

“Why not approach the child, get him on our side?” Todd asked.

“When we approach him, we approach the grays,” Mike said acidly.

“So, do the child, Mike,” Charles said. “Shouldn’t be hard, not for a pro like you.”

“I might remind all of you that every life I took because of this damned thing, I took under orders.”

“I repeat, do the child.”

“Which is why I’m here.”

Charles slammed his hand down on the table. “You don’t need our permission! For God’s sake, Mike, this meeting is a waste of time. Do the damned child!”

“Charles, Goddamnit, will you please give me a chance to talk!”

Charles glared at him.

Mike continued. “My problem is that the grays are not alone in protecting this child. They have the help of some people within our own organization who appear to have come under mind control.” He took his iPod out of his briefcase, plugged in its tiny speaker, and played for them the conversation that had taken place on Lost Angel Road.

“It’s pitiful,” Henry said. “Those are good men, all of them.”

“The hard part is,” Mike said, “I can see where their choice is coming from. There’s a lot of life going to be lost doing it our way. A lot of life.”

“You’ve made no headway finding this child, I presume.”

“No, Henry, I have a description, obtained from Adam this morning. And I will undoubtedly find a child who fits it on Oak Road. And kill the wrong child.”

Todd said, “Unless they’ve given you a description of the right child in hope that you’ll assume that it must be the wrong one.”

“Kill all the children,” Henry said. “And what in the world are we going

to do with Lewis and Rob and Dr. Simpson?”

“Tell you what,” Tim Greenfield said, “let’s suck them up in the terrorist thing and ship them to Saudi Arabia. That’ll do it.”

“It will also bring in the CIA, AFOSI, and the FBI, not to mention the Saudis. We need a plane crash, an auto accident, a fatal robbery attempt, a nice heart attack, stuff like that,” Charles said. “Take a year doing them. There’s no hurry.” He looked toward Mike. “The sort of thing you’re expert at.”

“The child is our urgent problem, and please let me repeat: the grays are protecting him—”

“—and so are our friends from Lost Angel Road, don’t forget that, Mike.”

Tim said, “Gentlemen—excuse me, Charles, but I think you’re panicking, here. We have years to deal with this child, and—”

“We do not have years,” Mike said. “Please get rid of that misconception.”

“I’m sorry, Mike, but we have until 2012.”

“WE DO NOT! GODDAMNIT! Let me tell you how this will work. The second they possess that kid or parasitize him or however you’d like to describe it, he is going to become invulnerable.”

“Oh, come on!”

“I have spent the last fifteen years of my career sparring with Bob and Adam, and I am warning you, if we let that kid go *even a day*, we’re done. They win. We will not be able to do a single thing to him. He will always outwit us. Good Christ, he’s going to be *smarter than they are*.”

Alex said, “Let’s put a nuke on the damn town. Pick up the phone and call the president.”

“I can’t imagine him agreeing to that,” Charles said. “In any case, we need to keep this in-house if at all possible.”

“Which gets me to my next question,” Henry Vorona said. “Mike, you have a big rep. Given that you’ve been sitting at the bottom of a hole for fifteen years, may I know why we should believe you’re qualified to go operational again?”

Charles said, “Henry, you surprise me. Mike is my choice and that ought to be enough. But if it’s not, let me lay things out. Mike didn’t always spend his days licking the heinies of those damn gray bastards down in that hole. He did a lot of hard, sad, wet work in the early days.”

“Okay, I get it.”

“No! You’re questioning my authority, Henry. You’ve done it before and you’ll do it again. That’s fine. You want to run the show. Very ambitious. Maybe, if they vote me out and vote you in, you’ll do okay.” He looked around the table. “Do we want a vote of confidence? Gentlemen?”

No hand was raised.

He went on. “Suffice to say that Mike here had the unfortunate need, back some years ago, to become a master of untraceable murder. He’s got quite a number of notches in his little cap pistol, am I right, Mike?”

“I’ve done a few,” he muttered.

“Using everything from a chemical that induces cancer to a mind-control technique that makes people kill themselves. And he’s never even come close to being caught.”

Vorona smiled at Mike. “Then I’m relieved,” the CIA representative said. “We can count on you.”

Todd spoke up. “Obviously, the nuclear option isn’t available to us, but I think Alex’s concept is a good one. We could do a training accident, say, compliments of Alfred AFB, which is out there in Kentucky, if I’m not mistaken. Blow away the neighborhood with a stray incendiary, say.”

“ ‘Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.’ ” Wilkes paused. “But, of course,” he added, “Herod missed. If we just do that one little cluster of houses, we might miss, too.”

“However we do it, we have to do it now,” Vorona said.

“Gentlemen,” Charles said, “I think we’ve heard enough. Mike, we need to find this child. Would it help if you had a TR?”

“A triangle is essential. It enables me to enter the community with minimal risk. The grays will inevitably discover me, but at least it can get me to the scene undetected. Once I’m there, I figure I have a couple of days.” He stood up, signaling that the meeting was ended. Vorona was right about one thing: there must be no delay now.

“Wait just a minute,” Vorona said. “You’re not walking out of here without telling us how you’re going to proceed.”

“I think we have mind-control capabilities of our own that can be brought to bear on the situation. We can do this without revealing to the grays

that we're responsible. *How* is my business.”

“There's one system that works,” Greenfield said, “the violence wire.”

“Duty calls, gentlemen,” Mike said as they started to filter into his living room for drinks. “There's no time, not tonight. There is no time at all.”

He left, then, heading down to the garage in his basement. He needed to get to Wilton—which, of course, would turn out to be a trap. The larger question was how, exactly, did the trap work, and how could it be defeated?

If it could.

TWELVE

AS DAN ENTERED MARCIE'S OFFICE, he was enveloped in what he immediately perceived as an ominous silence. Behind her, the westering sun made a halo of her glowing russet hair. Her hands, holding what Dan presumed were his student evaluations, gleamed softly in the late light. Her skin was smooth and her features exotic, with large, frank eyes and lips that generally contained a hint of laughter—not the pleasantly sensual laughter that the face suggested, though. Marcie was first and foremost an administrator. She fired, gave bad news, and disciplined wayward professors for their crimes—drunkenness, sloth, and, of course, lechery.

He imagined her fingers touching him, and it was oddly thrilling. He blinked and shook the thought away.

She smiled, and he saw something unexpected: a sort of warmth.

“Given what I have here, it would have been useful to you,” she said, “if you could have gotten a little more support from faculty.”

“The student evaluations, ah—”

“I can't give you details, Dan.”

“No, of course not.” Student evaluations at Bell were held secret from professors, so that they could be used as a tool and weapon of the administration. “But they're bad, I assume.”

She laid the paper back in the file from which she'd taken it, aligned it with a long, deep red fingernail, and closed the manila folder.

From outside there came the distant strains of the Bell Ringers Band hammering away, improbably enough, at “Moon River,” the sound carried off on the stiff north wind that had come up around noon. Voices echoed along the hall, the comfortable laughter of some succulent coed making light, no doubt, of a flapping faculty admirer.

“Marcie,” he said. He stopped himself, astonished by a shocking and completely inappropriate sense of desire for her. She was doing nothing to seduce him. He looked at her right hand, lying there on the desk. If he reached across that two-foot space and laid his own hand on it, what would

happen?

“Yes?” Her voice seemed almost to tremble. But why? Did she have to tell him no, and was she afraid to do that? But why should she be? He was no friend of hers and bad news was job one in this office. Poor student evaluations and no faculty support, open and shut case, toodle-oo.

“Marcie, look, we both know what’s going on here.”

She laughed a little, the nervous tinkle of a girl. “I think the problem is that your courses aren’t sexy.”

He had arrived at the edge of the cliff: poor evals, no support, now a negative on his courses. The next step would be, sorry, I cannot vote for tenure. “It’s physiological psychology,” he yammered. “Give me a couple of sections of abnorm, I’ll bring my comments way up.”

“That’s unlikely until you’re tenured.”

“But I can’t get tenured without good evals, and I can’t get those without good courses.”

“You’re Yossarianed, then. As we all are. Bell Yossarians us all.”

For a moment, he was at a loss. Then he remembered *Catch-22*. Yossarian was the character in the novel who was caught in a bureaucratic endless loop. Dan searched for something, anything, that might help him. He could drop a name. Pitiful, but it was what he had. “I knew a fellow when I was at Columbia—what was his name, Speed Vogel—who knew Heller.”

She made a note.

“What are you writing?”

“Knew friend of Heller.”

“Does it matter?”

“Not at all.”

He found himself watching her lips, the way she pressed them together, the slight and fascinating moisture at the corners of her mouth.

But why? Was he going mad? How could he feel this way for this woman who was about to wreck his life?

Did he want this so badly that he was willing to whore for it? Probably, but why would she want him? She had her pick of faculty masochists, eager to roll in the hay with their punisher. And yet, the only thing that was stopping him from leaping across that desk was the fear that any such action would backfire.

“Marcie,” he heard himself say, and he heard the roughness, the unmistakable sexuality in his tone. He almost slapped his hand over his

mouth, but she looked up suddenly, blinking fast. Her eyebrows rose to the center of the forehead, her eyes filmed with tears that made them bright and awful.

“What’s the matter?” she asked in a horrible, low tone that made him think she feared him.

He remembered, suddenly, his seizure dream, going up into the dark womb of the sky, the cave in the silver moon. He shook it away, frightened for a moment that he was going into aura again. But no, it was only a memory.

She cleared her throat, lifted her hand, and brushed her lips with the back of it, smearing her lipstick a little. “Yes,” she whispered.

He said, “Is this the conference? My conference with my tenure advisor? We sit here staring helplessly at each other?”

“There’s nothing to discuss, Dan,” she said. She straightened herself, clasped her hands, and lifted her chin. She was beautiful, then, tragically beautiful. He could see her in the darkness, and she looked very afraid. But no, it wasn’t dark and she wasn’t scared. She looked across at him, her eyes steady. “It’s just—obviously, you know the student evaluations—well, you know, they’re often rather indifferent to the welfare of somebody they know has need.”

“They know I’m up for tenure?”

She nodded, her little mouth grave, her eyes flashing. “Oh, yes,” she said, and he knew, in that moment, that he must have her. He must do this, he could not help himself. He also knew that she was aware of the potential that existed between them. He went to his feet.

She looked down his body, then cleared her throat. Her cheeks had gone bright red. He stood before her like a little soldier at stiff attention. He said in his heart, *Katelyn, I am so ashamed*, but Marcie’s rising flush told him that there would be no escape for him.

She lifted her hand off the desk and reached toward him, her fingers extending.

They froze, then, remaining like that, him pressing his thighs against the edge of the desk, her reaching to the air six inches in front of his midriff.

Tears poured down her cheeks. She whispered, her voice an unsure murmur, “What happened last night?”

Something in him, some sort of inner door, fell open. He remembered the blaring confusions of his boyhood, the stars passing his face, the field of

silver and the black opening, gaping.

“You heard about that?” He backed away from her desk.

Then he saw:

—A narrow steel cot, Marcie lying on it in heat, her face flushed and sweaty, her bush brown and touched as if by dew.

And he felt:

—His own nakedness delicious in the night air.

She gasped as if struck. “Dan,” she said, “Dan.” Her eyes widened, glistened, their green suddenly horrible to see, too glassy, too . . . hurt.

“Marcie, listen, uh—”

She stood up and came around the desk, entered his arms. She drew against him, drew close, and in the fur of his sweater he heard long and bitter sobs.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I’m so damn sorry.”

She pressed herself against him harder. Then their lips were touching, asking one another if there should be more. If she—of all creatures, she—could be admitted to his sanctum?

He laid his hand on her back and pressed her closer to him, and delivered himself to her kiss.

THIRTEEN

LAUREN DID NOT HAVE SEXUAL feelings about Adam, of course, and the idea of him having such feelings for her was repellent. But there was something else there. He liked to explore her intensities—sexuality, anger, passion, loss, triumph, her slight kinks . . . those little fantasies that she sometimes relaxed with, of helplessness and ardor. And her childhood. Adam moved through her childhood memories like a tiger prowling the tall grass.

Normally, he was curiously empty of emotion himself. You'd almost be willing to believe he was a machine, he was so—not cold, that's an emotion. Adam's heart was empty. But earlier this morning, when he had been showing her the images of the dying cruise ship and the supermarket full of the starving, she had felt such a powerful sense of disquiet that she'd gotten the idea that they represented a great fear of his, and therefore of his whole species. They were a collective, connected in some esoteric way across the whole universe. She thought it had to do with quantum interconnected-ness. A gray could communicate instantly with a gray in another galaxy, but hardly at all with a human being.

She had come to feel that Adam's ceaseless quest to share her heart was central to his meaning, and probably the meaning of them all.

They weren't predators, like Mike thought, but people who had somehow become machines. They were smart enough to know that they were the most profound possible outsiders: they were functional, very much so, but had no access to the emotional universe that seemed to her to be the essence of being alive.

She lay staring at the living room ceiling, vaguely listening to Ted's golf tournament on the TV. What was it? The Masters? She enjoyed golf, the precision of it, the struggle, the inner calm that was essential, as well as beating her dear Ted at a game . . . which she managed occasionally.

He was her shelter in the storm of desperation that defined Adam. She wondered if the grays had lost their souls. Was that their problem—they'd once been more fully alive than they were now, and they were searching the

universe for some way to regain themselves?

Adam rejected every effort she made to find out about his people, his world, any of it. If she tried to penetrate his mind the way he did hers, by latching onto the pictures stored there, all she'd ever get was white light. Static. He blocked her.

It was a little sinister feeling, truth to tell. What did he have to hide?

She became aware of a siren outside, which was certainly unusual for University Park. This was not a siren-oriented neighborhood, no way. The deep, booming horn that accompanied it announced that it was a fire truck.

Well, that was more believable. There were dorm fires over on the two campuses every so often, usually involving mattresses or common-room couches. Once in a blue moon one of the beautiful old U. Park houses burned. Still, it would be extremely serious if the facility was threatened in any way, so she got up from the couch, went to the front hall, and put on her jacket.

"Hello," Ted said as she passed through the living room.

"I'm going out. Back in a few."

He knew not to ask, of course.

When she reached the street, she smelled a faint tang of smoke. Okay, that was to be expected if there was a fire in the area. She got in her car and drove to the facility. She was appalled, as she turned the corner, to see three big fire trucks in the street.

Her mouth went dry, she began mentally reviewing the steps that had to be taken to protect the secure areas. Nobody, no fireman, no fire inspector, must go down that elevator.

As she pulled into the driveway, she saw that the house itself was not burning, but there were firemen in the drive. She fumbled frantically through her purse looking for her credentials. Mike was in Washington and Andy was off. They often left Adam alone. He was safe down there, and when he wasn't being interacted with, he lay as inert as an abandoned toy. If he began to move around, sensors would alert her and Andy, and they could watch him from their laptops. It had never happened, though.

She stepped out of the car and walked over to the firemen. Just the other side of their garden wall there was smoke.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Grass fire, probably started by kids."

"It's not going to come over this far, is it?"

"No, ma'am. That's why we're here."

“Okay, thank you. Listen, I’m going to be in the house. If there’s any change, please let me know.”

She entered by the front door. Before going down, she went first into her office and turned on her computer. After it had voice identified her, she pulled up the feed from Adam’s chamber.

Unlike the human eye, the camera simply saw what was in front of it. On camera, you could sometimes glimpse Adam. He could feel you watching, though, and would usually disappear in under a second.

She was shocked to find him pacing, the slim gray form speeding in a blur from wall to wall. At least he wasn’t flying around like some kind of gigantic berserk blowfly.

Immediately, she went to the elevator, pressed her thumb against the print reader, and stepped inside. She dropped down into the pit. Quickly, she prepped, just covering her face and hands with emollient and leaving it at that. Her skin was as stiff as leather anyway. She didn’t bother with an antihistamine shot, but she did stuff an epinephrine injector into the pocket of her slacks. Then she stepped into the lock, waited for the outer door to close, and entered the cage.

“Hi,” she said aloud. She went to her chair, sat down, closed her eyes, and directed her attention to the physical sensation of her body. By thus removing her attention from her thoughts, she signaled to Adam that he could enter her.

He rushed in with all the eagerness of a dog leaping to its master’s breast after a long absence . . . or a lion pouncing. It felt like both things when Adam came into her. This time, he didn’t go to her sexual memories, but rather to earliest childhood.

She found herself back home in Philly, in Mom’s study, and all the furniture was incredibly tall. She was gliding from chair to chair, and her heart was soaring. It was a place he’d gone to frequently, the moment she had taken her first steps.

She loved these memories Adam would bring up out of childhood’s amnesia. Because of him, she had remembered her birth and even before, a sort of secret communion with her mother in the womb.

Then he went to a moment in the living room when she was about two, when she had stood watching the sunlight slanting in through the window, and listened to the voice of the sun singing a song whose words were deeper in her than even Adam could reach.

The message of these excursions into her earliest life was clear: see what I am about to show you with the open eyes of a child. She emptied her mind even more and waited.

Drifting in like a dream, she saw the Earth from above. North America was wheeling slowly toward the sunset. But the coastlines were changed. Florida was just a narrow spike, half its usual size. The Caribbean was mostly featureless blue. The whole East Coast was submerged beneath a brown scar of filthy water. Then she saw numbers, and she realized that these were a series of dates, ranging from 2012 to 2077.

She sucked in breath. She now understood the cruise ship, the starving supermarket: Adam was warning her about a great catastrophe.

“Oh, Adam,” she said, “I’ll tell the colonel. I’ll be sure to tell him.”

He began shooting around like a rocket, slamming into the walls with hideous, crunching thuds.

“Adam!” She leaped up out of the chair, but he was whizzing now, racing so fast she could hear the bzzt of his passing but not see so much as a glimpse of gray skin or the gleam of one of his huge black eyes.

At that moment, without the slightest warning, thick smoke came pouring through every air-conditioning vent in the room.

For an instant, she was frozen, her mind unable to take in what she was seeing.

The smoke roiled along the ceiling, and she saw that it was filled with glowing red streaks. The lights began flickering, grew dim.

“Adam,” she screamed, “we’ve got to get out!” In two strides she was across the room. She fumbled open the cover on the bail-out switch and hit it with the heel of her hand.

Sirens erupted, the facility went to emergency lighting, and the door to the lock slid open. “Adam,” she screamed, “*Adam!*”

The smoke came down like a curtain, turning everything inky dark. An instant later, the fire struck her head and neck with ferocious, terrifying heat. Covering her head, she dropped to the floor. “Adam! Come toward me, Adam, stay low!”

Nothing happened. There was bare visibility here, and it was hot and getting hotter. She could smell in the stink of the smoke the additional stench of her own singed hair. The next breath she took caused a reflex of a kind she didn’t know existed. The choking was a fearsome weight slammed down on her back, the gagging like some sort of spring unraveling in her throat.

She backed out through the airlock and into the control room. Here, meteors of plastic were dripping down from the ceiling.

She was sick with dread, she knew that she had lost Adam, but she also knew that she had to get out of this place fast or she would be burned to death. The elevator doors were open, but she would not dare to enter it. Feeling her way along, she came to the door of the emergency stair. She reached up into the heat and opened it. As she went through, smoke gushed in behind her, and she only just managed to get the door closed.

Crying and screaming, she opened it a crack, but there was nothing but smoke and now also flames licking into the shaft. "Adam! Adam! Adam!"

The door began to crackle, and heat hit her in the face even though she was low, and she had no choice but to slam it again.

Crying and coughing, she began the long trek upward on the narrow circular escape stair. As she trudged along, pacing herself to avoid exhaustion, she wracked her brain to understand how a grass fire next door had spread to the facility. Sparks must have somehow entered the ground-level air intake and started a conflagration in the air-conditioning system.

Three-quarters of the way to the top, she dragged her cell phone out of her pocket, but it was still out of range. She continued on, reaching the surface so winded that she had to stop and catch her breath before she could even manage to open the door that led into the foyer.

She felt it, noted that it wasn't hot. She cracked it, looked out into the foyer. There were two firemen standing there. Above her head, thuds indicated that another man was on the stairs to the offices.

There was a rumbling from below and smoke came bursting up the stairwell. In an instant, it was fiercely hot, her eyes were burning, and she was choking again, even worse than before.

She had no choice but to act. She could not stay here. Again she opened the door. The intensity of the smoke increased at once. Behind her, the heat rose. Opening the door turned the stairwell into a flue.

The next instant, the door flew out of her hand and the firemen dragged her out, slamming it shut as soon as she was safe.

"Are you conscious?"

"Yes!"

"Okay, dizzy?"

"No, sir. My chest is burning."

"Is there anybody else down there?"

She wanted to say yes, she wanted them to try to rescue Adam. That could not be allowed, though. These men had no clearances. These men could not enter the facility.

She fumbled in her jeans, drew out her credentials. “That facility is classified,” she gasped. “There’s nobody else in it and it cannot be entered without authorization.”

“This is a fire situation, lady. We’re gonna go in there.”

“No! It’s illegal!” She struggled to her feet, went for her cell phone again. “I’m calling my supervisor.” She punched in the colonel’s speed dial . . . and got his message. “Colonel, there’s a fire here, we’re dealing with a lot of unauthorized personnel and I need somebody here to control this situation!” She hung up.

At that moment, Andy appeared. He came hurrying in and threw his arms around her. Then he held her at arm’s length. “My God, you’re burned, you have no eyebrows.”

The foyer door burst open and fire gushed out with the ferocity of water from a burst main. They got out of there, and the firemen began deploying hose.

“It’s totally out of control,” she said to Andy.

“Where is he?”

“I couldn’t manage to save him.”

“Dear God.”

“They mustn’t find remains. We can’t let them find remains.”

“I know it.”

Her cell rang. “It’s him,” she said. “Colonel, there’s a fire in progress here.”

Silence. Then, very calmly, “What happened?”

“There was a grass fire next door. When I heard sirens, I came over here from my place. The fire didn’t appear to be serious, but I felt that I should be with Adam, so I went down. A few minutes later, the whole facility filled with smoke and fire. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“What’s Adam’s status?”

“He’s still down there!”

“Is he dead, then?”

“I would assume so.”

More silence. Then a sound that Lauren thought might be a cry, but it was so loud and so close to the phone that it broke up into a series of

shattering electronic noises. Then she could hear him taking breaths. He said, finally, “Okay. You cannot let those people down there. Anything could be going on, this is outside the envelope.”

“Sir, I can’t stop them, they’re ignoring my credentials.”

“I’m gonna blow somebody’s brains out if this doesn’t get handled,” he said, but so mildly that it didn’t seem like the threat she knew that it was.

“Sir, where are you? Can you get here soon?”

“I’m an hour out in my plane, damnit! YOU handle it, *Colonel*.” He sneered the word. Then he disconnected.

“He is one pissed-off guy,” she muttered.

“Oh, yeah, he would be. You know what we lost here? We lost the most important thing this country possesses, that’s what we lost. And that man is the person who has to take the heat for it. So he is gonna be pissed.”

Mike couldn’t pace in the plane, the cabin was too confined, so he sat rubbing the arms of his seat. He had to report this, he had to do it immediately. He said into the intercom, “I need the code box.” This small, highly sophisticated device transmitted and received in quantum-encoded bursts that could not be decrypted by intruders.

The first officer brought it back from the equipment bay behind his station, then returned to the flight deck. Mike turned off the intercom, then glanced at the flight-deck door to make certain that it was closed.

He pulled out the red handset and punched in Charles Gunn’s secure number. It rang once, part of a second time.

“Gunn.”

“Charles, I’m in condition two-one-zero-one. Do you understand?”

“GODDAMN YOU!”

“I’m in the plane, for God’s sake. It was Glass. Glass let a situation get away from her.”

“Glass. Glass doesn’t matter anymore. Glass is a liability and so are any other support personnel.”

“I realize that, Charles.”

“Well, act accordingly.”

Mike replaced the phone. He stared, thinking. The grays were not sitting still, they understood that there was a threat, and the direction it was coming from.

Okay, first things first. Do the support personnel. Andy was a good man and that would be hard, but Lauren—pretty as she was, he was going to enjoy

putting her down.

The Goddamn bitch had lost ADAM!

FOURTEEN

DAN HAD COME HOME REEKING of booze, of all the incredible things, and gone in the living room and begun playing the “Ode to Joy” from Beethoven’s Ninth over and over again at blasting volume. He lay there now in front of the stereo in the dark, splayed out on the floor like a great, gangling rag doll. She’d wanted to put her arms around him and mother him a little. His mother had been mostly indifferent to her little boy, and she felt that he needed the reassuring support of his woman right now.

She knew, of course, what had happened: Marcie Cotton had ditched his tenure. She was scared, too, she had to admit, because they could not remain here on just her salary. So what was going to happen to them was that they were going to fall off the academic cliff into the stew of little, tiny colleges and junior colleges and spend the rest of their lives scrimping and scraping.

She looked at the clock. Eight-twenty. She went into the living room, turned on a lamp.

“Please.”

“Dan, you’ve been in here for hours.”

“Please leave me be!”

“Dan, no.”

He did not respond.

She went on. “It’s about time for Conner to get home and I want you to come down out of the tree and face this together.” She had to bellow over the music. “Let’s turn that off, now.” She went to the stereo, flipped the switch. “Enough is enough.”

He rose off the floor, then went to the bar. “What’s in here? God.” He came up with an ancient bottle of crème de menthe, left over from some distant summer party when they’d poured it over ice cream. Earlier, she’d removed the rest of the booze to the garage.

“You already stink of bourbon. I hope you didn’t do this at the Peep?” The Peep Inn was the campus dive, where a professor most certainly did not need to get drunk.

“I did indeed. I consumed alcohol there, in the absurd hope that I could drink myself unconscious before the fall of night.”

“Dan, we’ll get by. Something good will happen.”

Staring at her as if she was insane, he slowly shook his head. Then he bared his teeth and rocked back in silent, agonized laughter.

“I got promised tenure by Marcie Cotton.”

She thrust her hands at him, connected with his chest. “Go on! You did not!”

He nodded.

“And you won’t be getting drunk again, so it’s forgiven. Now, Marcie told you? She actually told you this?”

He nodded.

“You’re going to get a yes on *tenure*! Oh. My. God.”

He stared at her, his eyes hollow, his lips hanging slightly open—an expression that said that this wasn’t the whole story.

“If I needed punishment, how would you go about it?”

What an extremely strange question. “Excuse me?”

“If I’d . . . done something wrong?”

“What have you done? You’ve gotten tenure, that’s hardly a matter for punishment. Is she sure?”

“Oh, yes.” He closed his eyes, shook his head.

She realized, then, that he was trying to say that he had done something with Marcie Cotton. Or no, it couldn’t be possible. You didn’t go to *bed* for tenure, not even in this sinkhole.

“Dan, are you telling me—what? I’m not getting it.”

“You’re getting it.”

“Damn you!”

The front door opened and Conner called, “I’m home, people,” and Dan said, “I’m so damn sorry, baby. I’m so damn sorry!”

Conner breezed in. “Hi, Mom, hi, Dad. I have just been at an amazing editing session. The Keltons have an awesome video and they’re bringing it over, and Paulie and his parents are coming, and there’s a chance that—” He stopped, looked from one of them to the other. “Hello?”

Katelyn drew breath, drew it hard, trying mightily to contain the rage, the hurt that shuddered through her.

“Mom?”

She went to him. “I want you to go downstairs for just a little while.”

“They got video of the UFO. Everybody’s coming over to watch it on the big-screen TV.”

She did not exactly want a convention just now, but obviously she couldn’t prevent it. “You go down, and we’ll make popcorn when they come.”

“You sound strange.”

She took him to the stairs and closed the door behind him. Then she went back to Dan, who was now slumped on the couch with his face in his hands. “You asshole,” she said quietly.

“Hit me.”

“Dan, I’m not physical. But what I would very much like is for you to go upstairs and gather your belongings and take them with you, and get the hell out of my house.” She curtsied. “If you would be so kind.”

“I don’t know what happened! I don’t know how to explain it.”

“You screwed her for your tenure.”

“I did no such thing!”

“And I find that grotesque. And equally grotesque that you confessed it. What happened to you, you’re not this drunk blubbering jerk I see here! I sure as hell didn’t marry *him*.”

“Look, I want to ask forgiveness.”

“It’s that easy, you get drunk and you cry and what happens, I kick you around and yell a little and this violation of your sacred trust is forgotten? And if you go to go creeping off to sleep with her in the forenoon from now on, then what do I do? Just bear everyone in this miserable fishbowl knowing my—what’s the word—shame, I suppose. My shame.”

“It left me . . . vulnerable. Somehow, it affected me.”

“What did?”

“That incident!”

“Something weird happens and therefore you go make love to Marcie Cotton?”

He shook his head, waved his hand at her. “I—it made me . . . want her. I don’t know why, but it did. I relate the two things.”

“What in hell are you saying?”

“I don’t know!”

“Dan, I’m an orphan to the violence in my family, and you to the neglect in yours and, Dan, nobody but another orphan can heal either of us, this is why we’re together. But you—you’ve taken something from us, and it is

profound, Dan, because trust has a different meaning for people who suffered from betrayed childhoods.”

“It wasn’t over the tenure. It was—” He shook his head. “Oh, my love, it was like some demon flew in and sweated us with his fire. I think, being so tired, so surprised and relieved—I just suddenly found myself in her arms.”

“Don’t tell me about it! For God’s sake, Danny, have some mercy!”

He slumped yet deeper into the couch. He looked so tired, so sunken, nothing at all like the rippling, robust husband she adored. Had adored. He looked like somebody who’d fallen victim to a vampire, shadowy about the eyes, gray of skin.

Her stomach had grown tight and sour with fear, her own skin was so cold she shuddered. This had been her rock, this marriage, in its honesty and the richly sensual capsule of its love. But how could she let him touch her now? How could she bear it?

“Momma, what, exactly, is wrong?”

“Conner!”

“Because something is and I need to know.”

“Conner, please.”

He came into the room. “You two are fighting and I want to know why.”

Figures appeared on the deck, looming up out of the dark, flashlights bobbing.

Conner went to the door. “This is a chance for me. Don’t wreck this.”

Dan got up, started to kiss Katelyn on the cheek, wisely thought better of it, and greeted the Keltons.

“You need to see this, folks,” affable John said. “It really is genuinely odd.”

“It’s not what it seems,” Dan said. “It’s explainable, trust me.”

“Dad, it’s not,” Conner said. “That’s the whole point!”

Dan went into the kitchen and picked up the phone. Chris answered on the third ring. “Have I woken you up at nine-fifteen, old man?”

“We were out with the ’scope. It’s a good night for the Crab Nebula.”

“Speaking of nebulas, the Kelton clan has arrived with what’s probably a pretty nebulous video of that prank.”

“Prank?”

“The affair of the fiery balloon.”

“That could be historic footage.”

“How so?”

“You saw somebody in the field, buddy. And then you didn’t. I think that somebody was an alien.”

He had indeed seen somebody. It was also further support for the prank theory, but they could get to that later. “When you come, you might think about bringing some spirits. *Mon femme* has stripped our bar.” He hung up the phone, then returned to the living room where the crowd had surrounded the gigantic TV. “We gather round the campfire,” he said, “and see shapes in the sparks. And thus the mythologizing begins.” He sat down. “The Jeffers will be here directly.”

Paulie Warner burst in from the kitchen, followed by his parents and then Chris and Nancy. The energy in the room exploded as the two boys excitedly traded speculations. “It’s the grays,” Conner yelled, “they’re doing an operation right here at Bell!”

“Okay, Conner, sure,” Paulie said.

Terry said, “What we actually have is some unexplained video.”

“Edited,” Dan added. “Most carefully, I’m sure.”

“Not really,” John Kelton said, his voice sharp with annoyance. “It’s actually just pulled out of the camera. Not edited at all. There’s no reason to edit it.”

“We copied it onto a DVD,” Terry said as he dropped the gleaming disk into the player’s open tray. “Beyond that, you’re seeing what the camera saw.”

The player absorbed the disk. This was followed by blackness, then a couple of flashes.

“Fascinating,” Dan said.

“Just wait,” John snapped.

There was a sound of gasping, then crunching. “That’s us running,” Conner said.

“You were really there?”

“Conner was there,” Dan told Paulie.

Another flash, then a blur. Dan was beginning to think that this might be pretty minimal when suddenly the screen filled with light. And with screaming—as terrible, as powerful, as it had been the moment it happened. Silence fell. Paulie sat close to Conner, Dan was pleased to notice. He heard his own voice shouting, then saw himself and Conner in the light of the thing.

“Conner, you were *right there!*” Paulie whispered.

It was the eeriest thing that Dan had ever seen. Two faint seams were

present, one running the length of the object, the other around its center. Behind the thing, something seemed to be moving in the light, almost as if it was climbing out of an opening that was concealed by the object's bulk.

"There's your culprit," Dan said. "Nancy, be prepared to ID a student who needs disciplining."

The object rose a bit and seemed to shimmer.

The woman's voice, which had been screaming and then silent, now cried out more clearly and a cold horror shot through Dan as powerfully and unexpectedly as a lightning bolt from a silent sky. "My God," he said—whispered.

"What? What, Dan?" Conner was pulling at him.

"Don't miss this," Jimbo said.

In the flash of a single frame, the object disappeared leaving behind it the fleeting shot of a figure, barely visible in the dark. The figure seemed to turn, but it all happened so quickly that you could see little. There was silence, blackness. Dan heard his own voice say that he didn't think they were alone.

"It *is* the grays," Conner shouted, jumping to his feet. "I told you, Paulie, it's the grays!"

"Yeah, you're right," Paulie said. "I gotta go to the john." He headed out of the room.

Dan hardly heard them. His mind was reeling. Because Marcie had been involved, he had recognized her voice in that last scream. But what could it mean? Had she pulled the prank? Maybe she'd gone insane. It would fit with the bizarre seduction, maybe even vindicate him in Katelyn's eyes . . . eventually. That was going to be one hell of a siege.

But then he thought, what if it *wasn't* a prank? What if Chris and Conner were right, and some sort of genuine anomaly was unfolding? Perhaps he and Marcie had both been traumatized by it. Psychological trauma was well known to drive people to sexual activity. It even had a popular name: battlefield syndrome. He was confused and, frankly, afraid. He wished he hadn't drunk all that booze at the Peep. He felt lousy, his head was pounding, and now he had this bizarre, impossible thing to consider.

"Boys, can you slo-mo the last little part?" Chris asked. "The figure?"

Terry stabbed a couple of times at the remote, and the figure appeared again, frozen, its back to the camera.

"Let me juice the contrast," Terry muttered.

The scene became lighter, the figure more clear.

“Is that a balloon?” Katelyn asked.

“It’s the head, Mom.”

As Terry shuttled the image forward frame by frame, the figure turned in short jerks, until its face was visible in a blurred three-quarters view.

Total silence fell as every person there reacted to the image. It was not clear, far from it, but anybody could tell that this was no disguise and no inflated toy. The one fully visible eye was black and slanted, gleaming. It gave the creature a breathtaking look of menace. The lower part of the face was complex with wrinkles, like a very, very old human face might be, the face of a man deeply etched by the trials of his time. There was the tiniest suggestion of a mouth, little more than a line.

With another flick of the shuttle control, another frame appeared. Now the mouth had opened slightly, and the sense of surprise it communicated was so vivid that it was eerie.

Another flick of the shuttle and the figure was gone.

Dan found himself feeling his ear and remembering what Conner had said. Dear heaven, what if this was real?

His mind rebelled. It just could not be true, because if it was, then he was involved and so was Marcie. But why? In the name of God, *why*?

“Look at that,” Paulie said as he returned. He went to the glass doors and stepped out on the deck.

Conner followed him. “It’s them,” he said softly, his voice trembling.

“Jesus, it might be,” Jimbo said.

A glow rose behind the stand of pines that separated the house from the field beyond.

Dan went onto the deck. The glow was smaller, but it was still very damn bright, and was indeed out in the field.

Were they in contact? Aliens had chosen to land in a little college town?

It just did not seem possible. No matter what was happening, that was not the whole story.

Then he saw stars slowly wheeling around him—an aura, another one, the third in two days. Maybe if he could get to the couch, they wouldn’t notice the staring emptiness of petit mal. Hardly able to navigate through the sea of stars that now surrounded him, he somehow found the couch, nearly sitting on Maggie’s lap.

“Slow down, buster,” Katelyn snapped.

“Sorry! Sorry!”

He slumped back. Before him was not the gleaming sliver he usually saw, but a room. There was a person there—a child. She was exquisitely beautiful . . . and recognizable.

He cried out and the seizure was over.

“Dan!”

“Sorry!”

“Dan, aren’t you hearing me? Stop the boys!”

Then he realized that Paulie and Conner were outside and running like two mad things toward the field, flashlights bobbing.

The world seemed to stop. Harley and Maggie looked up at him, their expressions identical, eyebrows raised, slight smiles playing on their faces.

Chris said, “This could be it.”

Katelyn burst out the door and went running down the stairs. Dan followed.

“Come on, Conner,” Paulie yelled.

“Calm down,” Conner yelled back. “Stay together!”

Dan was aware that the Warners had come out onto the deck, and were quietly standing and watching. Then he saw Chris beside them. “You better come down here,” he shouted.

It all seemed to be happening in slow motion, as Chris came across the deck and down the stairs.

Dan ran after Conner and Katelyn, moving more slowly through the woods because he had only the light of the object to guide him.

When he broke out into the field, he saw an extremely bright light, but it appeared to be more of a pinpoint. He could see the silhouettes of the two boys close to it, and Katelyn coming up behind them.

“We mean you no harm,” Conner yelled. Then, “*Nous vous voulons dire aucun mal.*”

“Conner get back,” Katelyn shouted.

“Come to meet us,” Paulie cried. His voice almost bubbled.

Dan ran harder. The children should be very damn afraid.

“Wait! I’m getting a mental communication,” Conner said. “They want us to come closer.”

“Hold hands, buddy!”

The two boys went forward—and suddenly the light went out. “Run, boys,” Dan shouted.

Then he heard laughter, a lot of young laughter. There was more laughter behind him, and he turned to see the Warners breaking out of the woods. They were laughing, too.

“Aw, shit,” Chris said from the dark. “I never win.”

There were flashlights up ahead, and as Dan arrived, he realized that he was surrounded by kids, and they were laughing and jeering and shining flashlights on Conner, who was trapped in the center of a circle of derision.

It had been a prank, and it looked as if most of Conner’s classmates were here.

Conner put his hands over his head as if he was being stoned by the voices. Katelyn ran around the outside of the circle, trying to part it, to get to her boy.

Harley and Maggie Warner came up chuckling amiably. “That’s our gasoline lantern,” Harley said. “It came back from Neptune just in time.”

Dan closed his fist, pulled back—and just barely managed to stop himself from decking Harley.

“He-ey,” Harley said. “It’s a joke. An innocent practical joke. They’ve been planning it all day. We need something to cut the tension, man!”

“At my son’s expense!” He was not as careful as Katelyn, who was still trying to gently push kids aside. He grabbed a fistful of somebody’s jacket and hurled what turned out to be a girl to the ground. As she screamed and cursed at him, he waded in and reached his son.

“Get out of here,” Conner shrilled, “please just get out of here!”

“Conner, come home,” Katelyn said, joining them. She looked around them. “You’re pitiful, all of you!”

“Asshole!” came a muffled yell from the dark. “Bitch!”

Their arms around their boy, Katelyn and Dan headed for home. As they passed the Warners, Dan said, “You stay away from our place and keep that fat troll of yours away from our son.”

“Dan?” Harley called after him. “Hey, man, stay loose.”

When they returned to the house, Chris was already back. He and Nancy were replaying the video.

“It’s real, you know,” Chris said.

Conner started to run downstairs.

“Hey, wait.” Chris caught up to him. “Hold on. We have historic footage here. Come on back, take another look.”

“Dr. Jeffers, I really can’t right now.”

“Forget those kids, Conner. The Warners are idiots, and the Keltons haven’t got the faintest idea what this actually is. This video is one of the most precious records ever created by the human hand.”

Conner was silent. Dan saw why. Tears were pouring from his eyes. But he raised his head. He said, “Could I possibly be homeschooled?”

Dan’s heart almost broke, but he said, “You have to learn to face it, Conner. To gain control.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Katelyn said. “He does not! And the fact that Harley and Maggie keep letting these things happen is a big part of what’s wrong with child-rearing these days. They’re passive, they believe in the mythical wisdom of the child, but children are savages and they need boundaries or they turn mean.” She threw her arms around Conner. “You’re the exception, love. You *are* a miracle, and if they can’t handle that, then they’re scum. That’s all.”

Conner sighed. “Mom, they happen to be people I have to spend every day of my life with.” He moved away from her. “So, Dr. Jeffers, what have we got?”

“Come on. We’ll go frame by frame, from the top, making a note whenever a new point of proof is present in a frame. Hey, you could count the rivets in this thing if it had rivets. There’s a lot here. This is wonderful, convincing footage.”

Dan hardly listened. He was in a state of complete turmoil. He had to understand about Marcie, and he did not. He just did not get it.

Then he did. “I remember,” he said.

“What?” Katelyn snapped.

Dan got out of there. His stomach felt as if it had just filled with a foamy storm of acid. He dashed upstairs and into the bathroom.

“Dan,” Katelyn called, following him.

She found him on his hands and knees over the toilet, barfing like a sick dog. He rose to his feet and started yanking paper off the roll to clean up the considerable quantity of yellow froth that had missed. He worked furiously, perhaps not yet aware of her presence.

“Dan,” she said as she went down to him. She took the paper from him and flushed it away. They knelt there awkwardly, face to face.

“It’s impossible,” he said. “It has to be impossible.” How could he tell her what he thought he was remembering? He had not only been in some way connected with Marcie two nights ago, it was worse than that. His childhood

seizures hadn't been seizures at all, they had been memories so extremely strange that it hadn't been possible to recognize them for what they were. "We're lab rats," he said, then got sick again.

As she nursed him through it—rather bravely, she thought—he gasped, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," and it meant a whole lot of things, and she wasn't real sure what all of them were. He got up, shook his head.

"Are you okay?"

"We're in some sort of trouble."

"Oh, yes."

He took her in his arms and held her. "This goes deep," he whispered, "real deep."

She wasn't sure she should, but she remained in his embrace.

"No matter how bizarre and how impossible it may seem, it had something to do with them."

"Something to do with whom?"

"Them! It was Marcie screaming in that thing."

She leaned back, looked at him.

"I recognized her voice—it was all crazy with fear, but it was her yelling, it was certainly her."

Katelyn could not think of how to react. She wasn't even sure exactly what he was trying to say. And yet the screaming had sounded vaguely familiar to her, too. She knew that he was right. It had indeed been Marcie—in the thing, with the alien, and absolutely terrified.

"How did she . . . seem?"

"*'How did she seem?'* My God, that's too small a question! 'What in the name of all that's holy is going on here' just begins to approach it. When I walked into her office, that sour, rigid woman was—oh, Lord, totally changed, love. All soft and steamy and really, really sold on me. That cold fish. As if her personality had been totally revised overnight." He paused. "Which is exactly what did happen, in my opinion."

"Aliens did something to Marcie because—why? What does this have to do with the price of beans, Dan? Because you are an Irishman to your core and you might be a dull lecturer, but you can sing a song to a lady, and I think I'm hearing a damn clever one now."

"I'm telling you the truth!"

She backed away from him, looked at him out of the corners of her eyes. "You're telling me aliens—which you have always until ten minutes ago

thought were utter bullshit—made you do it. I don't think I'm going to buy it, Danny-O. Nice try though. On the fly like that, very impressive.”

Inside herself, though, she was much less sure. It seemed to her that she'd had more than a glimpse of an alien down there on that video. She'd seen, ever so vaguely, into an aspect of life that she had never even dreamed existed. There was somebody behind the scenes, it appeared, stitching things together, and they were taking an interest in this neighborhood and most specifically, she thought, in this family.

“Katelyn, I have to tell you something. I believe that I was brought into that thing. That I was with Marcie in there. Because I have memories of that.”

“Oh, come on.”

“I have *memories!*”

“Okay, don't have a cat. So, when did this happen? While I blinked my eyes, maybe? Remember, I was there most of the time. And you did not go into that thing. In fact, if you had, it'd be on the video.”

“Do you remember that you went to sleep with Conner afterward?”

“I was scared and so was he. I didn't want him left alone down there.”

“And when you woke up, you were up here. In bed up here . . . and we saw those marks, that strange water. What if they were tracks, Katelyn?”

“Holes in the ground?”

“After we came back and went to sleep, that thing returned. It brought her back after they'd knocked her out or whatever they did to her. And for whatever reason . . .”

“No, Dan, the aliens did not make you do it. That will not fly.”

“OKAY!”

“Keep your voice down!”

He pushed on, because a lot rode on this, his whole life with her rode on this. “The thing is—”

“Dan—”

“Listen to me! You listen, because this is bizarre and impossible but it is real, and you need to wrap your mind around it.”

“I need to wrap my mind around your infidelity and I will not be talked out of it! Come on, Dan, at least respect my dignity as a human being.”

“Katelyn, that's your melodrama showing and I accept that. Self-dramatization is a characteristic of people scarred by traumatic childhoods.”

“Analyze yourself why don't you, my self-obsessed little boy.”

“I take that. And I accept that what I did was wrong no matter what the

explanation.”

“Okay, now we’re getting somewhere.”

“Now will you listen?”

“All right. The star people made you do it. I’m fascinated.”

“I remember seeing her on a sort of black frame cot, and we were—something was happening.” He shuddered, then went to the sink and slugged water.

“What would that have been? Alien foreplay?”

“It was horrible! Katelyn, *horrible!* They—I remember some kind of sparks, and we were—oh, God—some sort of arcane thing where I kept seeing these sparks and hearing, like, her inner voice, her memories, her—like some kind of inner scent . . . the smell of her soul.”

“Was there a rectal probe involved, or is this even kinkier?”

“I deserve that. Sure I do, but—”

“What, Dan? Don’t talk in riddles, please.”

“When we were kids . . . I saw another girl under the same circumstances . . . with them. A girl that was you.”

“We didn’t even know each other.” And yet, she did have certain disjointed memories that were really strange, that she had always thought involved child abuse by one of her mother’s many boyfriends. She did not mention these memories to him, though, not just now.

“We knew each other, but not in normal life. We knew each other very well . . . because they made sure we did. They made this family, Katelyn. We’re damn lab rats is what we are.”

“Oh, come *on!* Look, we have guests, I’m going downstairs, plus the ever-alert Conner is going to figure out that we’re fighting again and do you really want him involved?”

“He is involved! He’s heavily involved. Katelyn, don’t you get it—why he’s so brilliant, so off the charts—he’s *theirs*, Katelyn.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. I really don’t think so at all, because I seem to remember something about an epidural and a hell of a birthing struggle and he is *mine!* MY DAMN SON!”

“Shh!”

“Don’t you shush me! First the aliens made you fuck that slut for your tenure, professor prostitute, then you dare to tell me my son is some kind of pod person? You’re fucking certifiable, is what you are.”

“I didn’t say that. Of course he’s our son. Our flesh and blood. Who

sweated through that labor with you, who spent seventeen hours, *breathe, breathe*, who kissed your sweat and prayed with you? Who was there, Katie Katelyn, and is still here and will always be here, if you let me—and if you don't, will live still, yes, but will also be dead?"

She looked at him. He looked at her. In that moment, something, perhaps about the vow of marriage itself that is sacred reasserted itself, and the union decided to continue on . . . at least for the while. "Was that a question?" she asked.

He raised his eyebrows. She raised hers. He opened his arms. She went in.

"Something so complex has happened—it's like I've glimpsed a level of life that's normally hidden, where there are other motives and meanings, that never normally come to light. And somehow, Marcie and I—and you and I, Katelyn—are connected on that level . . . and it's all to do with our boy, somehow, I know that. I know it and I love him and I love us, Katelyn, oh my God, so much."

"We've got to be with him," she said.

They walked together from their dark bedroom. Out the east window, which overlooked the field where the thing had appeared, an enormous moon was rising. By its light, silver with frost, she could see the whole field, wrapped now in the familiar mystery of an ordinary night. She looked up toward higher space, the glowing dark of the deep sky. There were stars, a few, battling the flooding moonlight.

Perhaps he was right. Maybe his struggle was, in some way, true. Maybe a shadow was there, one that you couldn't see, but that was nevertheless very real, the shadow of an unknown mind from a far place.

He came beside her, put his arm around her. "They're watching," he whispered.

She leaned against him, wondering what the future would bring. He might be going mad. It happened to people in middle age, and for a psychology professor to become psychologically abnormal had a certain irresistible irony to it, did it not?

Then again, maybe aliens were the answer. Certainly, the video was odd and disturbing. It had provided him an inventive excuse, she had to give him that.

"Come on," she said. She pushed away from him, and went back downstairs to rejoin the tormented odyssey of her son.

PART FIVE

THE MINISTERS OF DEATH

No man is an island, entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.

—JOHN DONNE

“Meditation XVII”

FIFTEEN

LAUREN WATCHED THE COLONEL AS he moved back and forth, back and forth. She'd never seen him like this, all of his rigorous professionalism gone, his eyes flickering from place to place like an animal looking for escape from a cage.

"Where's Andy? Andy is supposed to meet us here."

"Andy is gone."

"And you don't know where, of course."

"No, sir, I had no idea he would leave."

"You know your problem, Lauren? You're naïve. Relentlessly damned naïve!"

"I—sir, I did everything I could. I only backed out of there because I had no choice."

"You didn't think to detain Andy?"

"Of course not! Why in the world would I do that?"

"You don't have the whole picture, I grant you that. With all his years in the hole, working with you empaths, Andy knew a little more than you do."

"Has he, uh, what has he done?"

"Run, you damned fool!"

"Don't you take that tone with me."

He gave her a look that made her step away from him. He'd never been a pleasant man to work with, but he seemed violent now, and she did not like this, she did not like it at all.

They were standing in his smoke-stained office. The fire department had saved the house, but the facility below was a total loss.

"I want to know the truth of this thing, Lauren, and I'm sorry to say that I don't think I'm getting it from you."

That made heat rise in her cheeks. She did not like her own professionalism challenged. "My report is correct in every detail."

"Don't you understand what happened, even yet?"

"Of course I do. There was a grass fire, it spread to the air intake, and

flammables in the air dryers ignited. That's the official verdict and it's also the truth."

"Then where's Adam?"

"Excuse me?"

"You do understand that there were no remains."

"Well it was incinerated, then. He was, I mean. All they pulled out of there was ash, anyway. Black, sodden ash, I saw it."

"It's been gone through and there are no remains!"

"He burned! *Burned!*" And she was crying. Thinking of him. "He had a beautiful mind, you know. Incredibly beautiful."

"The skeleton is made of a metal that's quite indestructible. But we did not find that skeleton down there, and the rubble was sifted through screens. It was very carefully gone through, Lauren, so I think you must be lying to me."

"You're beneath contempt, you know that?"

He backhanded her. The blow came unexpectedly, a flash in her right eye. For a moment, she was too stunned to understand what had hit her. Then she did understand and a torrent of pure rage filled her. "That's a violation," she said, trying to force the anger out of her voice, "and I'm going to put you up on charges for it."

She realized that he was laughing in her face, then that he was withdrawing a pistol from underneath his tunic. She was very quick of mind, which is one of the reasons that she was effective with Adam, and that quickness enabled her now to recall the rumors that people could get into lethal trouble in these deep black programs. Within perhaps three seconds of the weapon appearing—in fact, before he even had it fully out, she had turned and left the room.

Leaping down the stairs, she brought all of her considerable athleticism to bear. She hit the floor, staggered—and heard a gigantic roar. She knew what it was a shot. He was trying to kill her. She dashed across the hall as a second shot crashed into the wall beside the door. It was close, she could feel the heat of it on her cheek. He was a damned good shot, getting that close from that far away with a .45.

She got the door open and another shot rang out. She ran down the sidewalk and out into the middle of the street. She had to get this out in public, that was her only hope, and keep enough distance between them to make a hit a matter of luck. Fifty feet, at least. Closer and he would not miss.

She ran down the middle of the street, zigzagging and not making the mistake of looking back. Damn this neighborhood, it was too damn *quiet!* Just one car, please, just one damn car—but there were none.

Maybe not all of Dad’s nightmares had been about the grays, maybe he had also feared this sort of thing happening to him one day.

Then, as she rounded the corner, a lovely Mustang with two coeds in it appeared. “Help!” She stood in front of them waving her arms. “Help! I need the police! Help me!”

As they swerved around her, she yelled into the car, “*Help me!*”

They did not help her and she ran on. Almost immediately, she heard the growling of a powerful engine and the whine of tires. He was turning the corner.

She raced down the driveway of one of the large homes and threw herself down behind the garbage cans beside its garage. Hiding there, barely breathing, she heard a car stop. It was him, it had to be.

She dared not look, dared not move, found herself hardly able to breathe. She had never been this scared, never remotely. She could almost literally feel the sensation of the gun pointing at her.

She heard footsteps on the driveway, soft, quick . . . and then a loud click and some muttered words. A woman was there. Her remote control hadn’t worked.

She brought her car into the garage and the door began closing.

Lauren sobbed, stood up, started toward the house—and in that moment Wilkes’s Phaeton came snarling up the driveway.

She turned and ran, crashing past the garbage cans and down the side of the house, across the expansive backyard where an elderly man struggled with a broken gate. “Call the police,” she shouted as she darted into the alley.

Behind her, she heard Wilkes snap, “Official business,” to the old man. Curse him, the bastard was in uniform, too. She would get no help.

She moved to the end of the alley, darted across the street and into the next alley. She pressed herself back into a tangle of bare bushes, hoping that he would miss her.

A moment later, she saw him come out of the other alley. The gun was now concealed. He was breathing hard, his chest heaving. He looked up and down the street, then toward this alley. He stared a long time at the big shrub. He was looking right at her, but apparently couldn’t see her.

Then he took out the gun. He went down on one knee and braced it

toward the shrub. She got ready to run. He snapped the barrel—and she froze. She bared her teeth, fighting the urge to break cover like a terrified pheasant. You did not need to do what he'd just done to cock a .45 automatic. Therefore, he'd done it for effect, to frighten her into moving. He was guessing.

Finally, he stuffed the gun under his jacket and began hurrying away.

A moment later, she heard his car start. She moved deeper into the alley and crouched down behind the edge of a shed. She could not be seen from the street at all. She called Ted on her cell.

“Hey, bad girl.”

“Teddy, love, listen to me and listen close. Never go back to my apartment. Never, at all, for anything.”

“What the hell are you saying?”

“Okay, Ted, I know how this sounds. But you'll be in terrible danger if you go back there. Don't even come in the neighborhood.”

“Lauren?”

“I'm not ditching you, I'm warning you. There's terrible danger, Ted. It has to do with my work, and I am extremely serious. If you go back there, you will be tortured and you will be killed. You just forget it, you forget me, you go on with your life.”

She broke down, then, so badly that she held the cell phone away from her ear and gritted her teeth to keep from sobbing.

“Lauren, what's going on?”

She forced back the tears. “Where are you now? No—don't tell me! I shouldn't have asked, not on this phone. Look, you can help us both. Go to the Air Police. Tell them that Colonel Wilkes threatened us with a gun. Both of us!”

“He didn't.”

“He did, he threatened me, he shot at me.”

“Jesus!”

But the Air Police weren't going to be able to help. They couldn't reach into a black program like hers. He would end up confronting all kinds of questions he couldn't answer, and probably confronting Wilkes into the bargain. “No, I'm not thinking straight. Don't go near the Air Police. Move back on base and just go about your business. You'll be left alone.”

“Lauren, I love you.”

“Oh, Ted, no you don't. You were going to, but it hasn't happened yet

because I ditch guys before it does happen, and stuff like this is the damn reason. You obey me on this. You trust me and you obey me.”

Silence.

“Ted, promise!”

“You can’t tell me a thing, can you?”

“Not one thing.” She closed her cell phone, leaned against the wall of the shed for a moment, then continued on.

She went down the alley to the next street and crossed it quickly. She continued this process, going down one alley and then the next, until she arrived on North Meridian at the edge of University Park. She went into a Starbucks and moved about looking at the coffee machines and CDs, staying well away from the front of the store.

She thought that Colonel Wilkes might well have license to kill her as a security risk. In fact, he would never have pulled his gun if he hadn’t known for certain that he would get away with it.

She remembered, suddenly, a story Andy had told her. At the time, it had seemed like so much scuttlebutt, the kind of thing that went down over beers. Now she knew that the tale of the code experts who were lobotomized on retirement, as lurid as it was, had been a veiled warning.

Andy was gone because he’d understood the situation they were in the instant he found out what had happened. He was running, probably even had an escape plan all worked out for himself.

She had no such plan, and zero confidence that she could survive very long at all in this situation. She had no operational training at all. Beyond the basic attack-and-defense maneuvers and gun skills she’d learned at Lackland, she was not capable.

If she had Adam, though, things would be different. If she brought Adam back, instead of being a liability, she’d become an asset again.

If Adam wasn’t dead, and Wilkes had been certain that he wasn’t, then where was he? Given how fast he could move and his ability to make himself so hard to see, he must have escaped without her seeing him go. Left her behind to die.

No, not Adam. He was always ten moves ahead. He’d have known that she would escape on her own. Or maybe he hadn’t wanted her to, or hadn’t cared.

Nobody had ever told her much of anything about the way the grays functioned, whether they had bases or satellites or even exactly what they

were, for that matter. So how would she go about finding somebody that weird, who had all these special powers and abilities?

She could try remote viewing for him, but that only worked if you were completely calm, and anyway, she wasn't much good at it. All she was good at was making pictures for Adam and seeing the ones he sent her.

She couldn't reach him that way, either, because that only worked from a few feet away. Oh, she could sense things about Adam from a distance—sort of intuit them, but there was no mind connection over distance that she'd ever experienced.

So where did that leave her? She couldn't very well go looking behind houses and in trash cans. There was no point at all trying to find Adam. Adam was lost to her.

She was at a loss, getting so frantic that tears were forming in her eyes. This feeling of being trapped was just hideous and it was panicking her and making it hard for her to think clearly.

She decided that there was only one real option open to her. She had to go in. She had to go straight to Wright-Pat and actually file a complaint against Wilkes. She was within her rights, the man had shot at her. If she was a liability, fine. The more public she became, the safer she'd be from the shot in the night.

When she saw a bus pull past and stop at the corner, she hurried out of the store and got on it. It would go downtown, she was fairly sure. "I need to get to the Greyhound station," she told the driver.

"First stop on Illinois, walk two blocks, you'll see the sign."

"Thank you." She took one of the seats in the very last row, because there were no windows beside it. She sat wondering what she might do, where she might go. She thought carefully.

She knew that there were other aspects to the operation. Somebody watched for violations of the agreement with the grays about who they could involve themselves with. But who? She had no idea and no way of finding out.

Again, though, she might find out more at Wright-Pat. Officially, she was stationed there, on detail to the facility. Given that the facility was now inoperable, she couldn't be said to be violating any orders if she returned to base. In fact, that was likely her legal requirement.

She saw that they were passing her condo. She looked up toward her windows, thinking that all her stuff was there and maybe she would never see

it again, or her cute little car that was still parked at the facility or any of her old life, not Ted or any of her friends.

As she looked away, she felt a sudden shudder go through her body. And she was *in* the apartment. Vivid. Real. Her bed still unmade, yesterday's skirt on the floor of the bedroom, a flat beer open on the kitchen counter. All of it, just as it was.

Then she was back in the bus.

She knew it immediately: Adam was there, Adam was in her apartment! She jumped up. "Let me off! Let me off the bus!" She hurried forward. "Driver, you have to stop!"

"Express to downtown," he said.

Idiot! She thought fast. They were a quarter of a mile away, the place was likely to be watched, she should not risk this. But it was her best shot, she was sure of it. "If you don't stop this bus, I'll throw up on your head!" She leaned over him and started gagging.

The bus was stopped and the door was open and she was running back up the street toward the condo. She was insane to be risking this, of course, but Adam was there, he must be, he had to be. That was Adam's mind broadcasting to hers, it was totally and completely unmistakable.

As she ran, she looked for Mike's Phaeton but didn't spot it. Maybe she'd outrun him.

No, don't be a fool, assume only the worst. You didn't need operational training to understand that.

She went into the cleaners next door. "Hi, Mr. Simmons," she said.

"Hey, Lauren—"

She ducked behind the counter and headed to the back of the establishment.

"Lauren?"

"Hey, Mrs. Fink," she said to the seamstress as she passed her sewing station and went out the back door.

She ran up the alley and then took the stairs down to the trash room, and opened the steel outer door with her passkey, which fit all the building's outside locks. Going through into the basement, she hurried past Jake Silver, their handyman.

"Miss Glass!"

"Hey there, Jake, taking the back way today." She went to the elevators and pressed the button.

“You ain’t supposed to come through there. That’s not a door, Miss Glass.”

The elevator opened and she got in without responding to him. She started to punch seven, thought better of it, and took the car to the top floor, nine. The corridor was silent, the air smelling faintly of cooking. She went down to the fire stairs and took them two flights.

Her own corridor was just as quiet. She formed a thought—Adam’s face, with a feeling of question attached to it.

Instantly, there came back another thought—an image of her own face. It wasn’t Adam’s usual signature, but it was certainly an image from him, she could tell by how it felt when it appeared, bursting out into her mind like a television picture.

She opened the door and went into her flat. She stood in the doorway with the door still open behind her. From many, many questions she had put to Adam, she knew that whoever she really worked for was attempting to understand and use the process of communication by mind. They had even had her test the range, which was about a quarter of a mile, and could pass through anything except a certain type of electrical field, which was used at times to isolate Adam in the cage.

She looked toward her bedroom. Everything was as she had seen it in the bus, every detail. In the back of her mind, she had been worrying that this was some kind of trick on Mike’s part to draw her here, so now she closed the door and double-locked it—as if that would keep him out for more than a few seconds—and moved deeper into the apartment.

She’d never been with Adam outside of the cage and on one level she was fascinated to find out what this would be like. Hunching her shoulders to express an atmosphere of question, she moved into the center of the living room. With a faint click that made her gasp, the heat turned on. “Hello,” she said. “Adam?” Simultaneously, she projected an image of his face—well, not really his face, because she’d hardly ever actually seen it except in glimpses, but a sort of generic face, long and thin, with big, black eyes.

There was a sound behind her. She turned, but there was nothing there. “Please don’t hide,” she said. “I need you, now.”

Another noise came, behind her again. She turned, and for a moment could not understand what she was seeing. There were two small creatures, each about four feet tall, standing near the broad picture window that crossed the front wall of the big living room. She was appalled at how insectlike they

looked, shocked by the gleaming eyes, the expressionless faces, the gracile forms. Insectoid children.

As she stepped forward they turned into two great vultures, black, their red and terrible eyes glaring, their huge beaks open, their wings spread in warning.

A scream pealed out of her, totally involuntary, and she jumped away—only to feel something leap on her back. It held her arms down with an iron grip, its legs pressed against her hips. She could hear it breathing, an absolutely regular sound, like some sort of machine.

Frantically, she projected an image of herself on her knees, then went down as best she could. She made an image of herself as a little girl.

The two vultures postured, screaming, their wings spread wide.

She projected an image of a beautiful garden, then of she and Adam sitting together, then of Adam with his head in her lap—imaginary, of course, she'd never seen him so close.

One of the grays before her became itself again. The other turned into an enormous hooded cobra, coiled against the wall, its head raised a good four feet off the floor, the hood extended, its tongue licking the air.

Then the one that had grabbed her disappeared.

As she had at first with Adam, she sat down, closed her eyes, and cleared her mind. She brought a long-ago trip to the seaside to mind, the blue waves, the smell of suntan oil, the seagulls crying. "It's okay," she said, "I know you're scared. I'm scared, too. But Adam is my friend. I love Adam." She opened her hands on her knees. "I want to help you."

The cobra swayed. The other gray stared at her. The one behind her slid its long hands around her neck.

She made an image of Adam again, then of the ruined facility, then of Wilkes shooting at her, then of her running through along an alley. She fired these off fast, one after another.

The cobra struck at her—and was suddenly a gray again, hanging in midair before her. She fought to quell her terror. The gray disappeared, but not completely. The three of them were racing around her, moving so fast through the air that they were blurs.

She got an image of Adam running, then rising into the sky in a shaft of shimmering light.

In return, she made an image of Adam in the light, then of herself in a coffin. She imagined Mike Wilkes closing the coffin with a bang.

Then she said, “Take me with you,” and imagined herself in a shaft of light, going up.

The blurring movement stopped. The condo suddenly seemed empty. Then she saw, in her mind’s eye, Mike’s Phaeton pulling up down front. He was here.

He was coming—but they were helping her! She blanked her mind as completely as she could.

Immediately, she saw a satellite photo of a small community, a big light in a field behind it. Then an image of a little boy, not the one Adam had shown her, but another child, and Adam was standing behind him. Then Adam stepped forward and went *into* the child. For a moment, they were superimposed on one another, then the child threw his head back and got this look on his face of ecstasy . . . or was he screaming? When he was quiet again, his eyes were like two headlights, with fire glowing out of them.

The vision was replaced by another one of Mike, this time in the lobby waiting for the elevator.

She made an image of him blowing her brains out, which caused something to happen, a feeling of movement, in fact, of rushing.

When she opened her eyes, the world was a blur. Then she saw the city wheeling below her, then the sky, its hard winter-blue glowing, then she heard a great, crashing noise and a building rushed up toward her.

She stopped, there were water noises—and a man was sitting in front of her. He stared up at her, his eyes bulging. “WHAT IN HELL?”

She wasn’t in her apartment, she was in a men’s room, in a closed stall, face to face with a guy sitting on a toilet. She stared down at him. He covered his midriff with his hands.

“Get out of here,” he rasped. “*Get out!*”

“Sorry, uh, sorry, I took a wrong turn.”

She opened the stall and left the men’s room as fast as she could. Behind him, she heard him yell, “*What the fuck? The fuck! Hey!*”

She was in the Greyhound station. *Thank you*, she said in her mind, *thank you from the bottom of my heart.*

She hurried to the ticket window, bought a ticket for \$25.50 cash and immediately got on the waiting bus, which was due to leave in four minutes. The windows were tinted, which was good. There were already a number of other passengers, so she felt at least somewhat safe—as long as the guy in the men’s room wasn’t going to Dayton, that is.

They had rescued her, those weird, fierce little beings, the only grays she'd ever even glimpsed except Adam. They had been waiting for her there in order to save her.

It was just awesome. Beings from another world were involved with her and they wanted her safe, and now she really began to feel better, because they were not about to be thwarted by Mike Wilkes.

They had taken her in one of their vehicles, they must have. It had seemed—well, like flying, and it had been so damn wonderful because it had saved her life, and she began to laugh and cry at the same time.

When she opened her eyes an old man was right in her face. “How’d you do that?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

“You got in my damn toilet.”

She thought quickly. There were other passengers around. “Sir, please.”

“No, she come in my toilet. Outta nowhere! She come in my toilet.”

“I don’t know what’s going on,” she said.

The driver came back. “Sir, you’ll need to take a seat or get off the bus.”

“I was sittin’ there mindin’ my own business and all of a sudden, *wham!* How’d you do that?”

The grays obviously did not know the difference between ladies’ and men’s rooms. They’d dropped her in a place from which she could emerge without suspicion. Except, it had been the wrong one.

The driver got the old guy seated toward the front, and warned him against returning to the back of the bus. He’d just have to live with what he’d seen.

As the bus started off, Lauren leaned back and closed her eyes, her whole body filling with a delicious relief. “You helped me,” she whispered, “thank you for helping me.”

An old lady smiled at her. “He helps me, too,” she said. “Jesus helps us all, isn’t it wonderful?”

“Wonderful,” she said, “really, really wonderful.”

She had a couple hundred dollars in her wallet, so she would not leave a paper trail. As far as her apartment and possessions were concerned, until this situation was brought under control, she was not going near them again.

If Mike had the backing of the Air Force, then she couldn’t escape anyway, could she, no matter what she did? So this was the best course of action. She would surface at Wright-Pat and hope his powers were limited.

The bus was running a bit early, so she found herself presenting her regular Air Force ID at one of the guard stations of the gigantic base before eight in the evening. She was directed to the Wright-Patterson Inn, where she obtained a room. Rather than waste time and take risk, she at once called the Law Enforcement Unit and reported Colonel Michael Wilkes's assault with intent to kill on her person. She stated her location and that she was slightly injured due to a blow to the face.

She then went to the unit and filled out a complaint against Wilkes, getting more and more furious at him as she did so. The man had shot at a fellow officer. If she could manage it, she would see him in that secret Air Force detention facility he was always talking so much about, where they kept all the crooks with high-level clearances. Sonofabitch.

One thing at least: she would no longer be working for him, because his operation was over. No more Adam, no more detail. Great, as far as she was concerned. She'd had it with the whole mess. Let her get back into procurement, anything but this.

But they'd told her, three years ago, that there was no exit.

An Air Police captain came over to her. He was carrying her complaint form. "You're Colonel Lauren Glass?"

"Yes."

"Lady, Colonel Glass is a KIA."

"A KIA?"

"She died yesterday in a facility fire in another city, and I want to know what this is supposed to be about."

Her heart missed a beat. KIA? If he got that to stick, she was outside the context of the whole military infrastructure. No chance of getting him up on charges, no ability to use Air Force facilities or appeal for protection.

"Ma'am, I'm gonna need to ID you."

Did she have her credentials? Yes! She fumbled her wallet out of her purse, handed the card to him. "Excuse me," he said, taking it.

She made images of herself with a gun to her head, of herself lying in a coffin, but the grays did not respond. It was the range issue, again. Did they even know where she was?

She heard a car stop outside the guard station. She went to the front and looked out the window. An awful coldness crept into her gut as Colonel Robert Langford's tall form got out and headed her way.

Him! She had to run. She whirled. The desk officer was watching her,

his eyes narrow. Behind him was another door. She strode across the room, passing the sergeant's counter.

"That's off-limits, Colonel," he said.

She broke into a run and got out the door. Where to go now? Ted's apartment was on base, but it was a good mile away. She took off down a sidewalk, heading toward a big hangar. At least there would be people around. At least when they got her, there would be someone to remember.

Then she saw a general's jet sitting on the tarmac, its engines turning over. The stairs were down, and two officers were talking at their base. The plane was either landing or taking off.

She took a chance and went over to it. "This isn't General Martin's plane, is it?" she asked.

"General Cerner."

"Finally!" As she went aboard, they barely glanced at her, then returned to their conversation.

There were three officers in the plane, a full-bird colonel, a major, and the general. "Sir," she said saluting, "Colonel Glass. I need an urgent hitch to D.C. It's classified, sir, national security."

He looked up from his seat. "I'm reading a lotta levels of bullshit in what you just said, lady."

"Sir, it's extremely urgent."

"Who's your commanding officer?"

"Sir, I'm not at liberty to tell you that, but I can commandeer this aircraft."

"Don't give me that kind of guff. I've been in this Air Force a while, girlie. But what the hell, fellas, who wouldn't want to take boobs like these to thirty-thousand feet?"

She swallowed her outrage, managed to construct a seductive smile.

Then she noticed something. He wasn't looking at her. In fact, his eyes were practically glazed over with fear.

She turned—and there stood Colonel Langford with a pistol in his hand. "We'll take care of this," he said.

"Be my guest," the general replied.

"What in hell is going on?" the major asked.

"A prisoner is being taken into custody," Langford snarled. "Come on, Miss Jacobs." He glanced past her. "She's not even Air Force. She's pulled this hitch trick for the last time."

“My name is Lauren Glass,” she said as he marched her out of the cabin. “I am a colonel and I’ve been listed as a KIA. I am alive, General, remember that when you read her obit, Colonel Lauren Glass is alive!”

“Don’t even think about running,” Langford said when they reached the tarmac. “I’ll have the Air Police on your tail in a matter of seconds.”

She walked ahead of him.

“You’re a problem,” he said, “a very serious problem.”

She felt the gun in her back. So the stories were true. Black ops had their own special way of solving problems, and Lauren Glass, as the colonel had just said, was a problem. She thought, with a curious sort of detachment, that she had reached her last hours of life. It was a sickening, trapped moment, and yet oddly peaceful.

She had avoided marriage, and now she regretted that. She’d never felt a child in her belly, nor the pain of giving birth. She regretted that, too. It was so very odd, this feeling. Not awful at all. The end of all responsibility, the end of the need to run.

Too bad the grays couldn’t help her now. She tried sending images of her with Langford’s gun in her face, but nothing came back. Too far away.

She wondered if he would kill her here at Wright-Pat, or take her somewhere else. Maybe it was even an official killing. Probably it was. So there’d be some stark room somewhere, and a steel coffin waiting. “I’m ready,” she said. If he was planning to move her, maybe there would be a chance to escape. She might feel oddly peaceful, but if she could get away, she sure as hell would.

“It’s going to be easy, then?”

“What choice do I have? You’ve got me.”

“Yes,” he said, “I do.”

SIXTEEN

THE MOMENT HE HAD REALIZED that he'd lost not only Adam, but also the two handlers, Mike had raced back to Washington. There was only one way to fire somebody in an organization this secret. Nobody was retired. You were either actively involved in the Trust or you were dead . . . and Mike understood and agreed completely. You could not risk even a rumor getting out that mankind was on a death watch, or that there was an organization that planned to save only a precious few, or that any part of the U.S. government was involved with aliens, not when there were such dire threats associated with revealing the secret of their presence.

Mike explained to Charles Gunn how Andy and Lauren had gotten away.

"That was damn stupid."

"I don't think—"

"Andy moved fast, you couldn't help that. But we'll pull him in. The empath is another matter, Mike. You were stupid to shoot, but an asshole to miss."

"Charles—"

"Shut up, I'm thinking."

"Charles, the gray is at large."

His eyes fixed on Mike's face. His lips opened, then he closed them. He suddenly grabbed a pen and a pad of paper and started writing.

"Charles?"

The writing became scratching, then trenching, then he rose up like a tower and ripped the pad to bits. He rushed around the desk and loomed over Mike. "Goddamn you."

"Charles—"

"*Goddamn you!*" He paced, then. "I have to think."

"Do me, Charlie. Get it over with."

"Boy, that would be a pleasant way to spend an hour or so, you stupid piece of shit. I've defended you, but you are fucking incompetent. You and

that fancy house of yours, your theft that I've ignored all these years. Not to mention those special passes to the shelters that you've given your crook friends."

That would wreck him, to withdraw those bribes that were also such superb blackmail. His every defense industry contact would turn against him. He'd be a ruined man. "Charles, those people—some of them are essential —"

"The hell they are. They're gone. History. And so are you, Mike. There's no way you're getting anywhere near one of the shelters. When this planet's environment collapses, you're gonna be in the wind. You live with that, now. You live with that."

By which Charles actually meant that he had just allowed Mike to live. He had expected to die in this room, right now.

Charles asked, "Do you think Glass could be hiding Adam?"

"I went to her apartment first thing. No sign of anyone there. I think Adam's been recalled. The moment they realized that we were aware of the child, they pulled the plug."

"Because you asked the wrong question." Charles dropped down behind his desk. "They've got us in check, here."

"They always have us in check."

"We have to locate this child."

"It's in Wilton."

"You know that?"

"Crew said they were signaling him. So he could play his role."

"We've got to scorch the earth, then. Langford, Glass, Simpson, Crew—they've all got to be done. But first, find and kill that child."

"We have this Oak Road group with a grand total of six residents under the age of eighteen, so that's our target. But we can't approach them directly or we get the grays on us like a bunch of infuriated hornets. The key is to identify the right child without getting so close to him that the grays become aware of us."

"We have the children's test scores? IQ tests?"

"Unfortunately, the school they all attend doesn't do IQ tests. Too elitist or too P.C. or some damn thing. They're all bright kids. Professors' children."

"What about the public schools in the area?"

"Their gifted and talented programs have a hundred and sixty kids in

them. Highest IQ is 160. We don't know how smart the grays want their poster boy, so they're a possibility that needs checking."

"Let me ask you this, then. Do you have a plan?"

"I think the child will reveal himself to us."

"How?"

"He's got to be spectacularly bright. A freak, like."

"What if he's ordinary? We have only that tape to tell us he's going to be some kind of a genius. Maybe Crew and Simpson knew you were listening. Maybe the tape is a lie."

"Then we're already defeated, Charles."

"Do you think that?"

"I think they're going to be mighty careful and mighty ferocious. Look what's riding on him—their whole species. And ours."

Charles shrugged. "Don't tell me you're disloyal, too."

"I've been to India, I've been to Vietnam, I've see the brainless, gobbling hordes of human filth out there. No, I believe in what we're doing with every cell in my body, Charles. This little band we call the Trust, is the most noble, the most courageous, and the most important organization in human history."

Charles gave him a twinkle of a smile. "You know what Stalin did when his little commissars were too eloquent in their praise? He had them shot."

"Then do it, Charles! Get it over with!"

"I can't, Goddamn your soul. You know that I've been defending you from Henry Vorona for years. Ever since CIA saddled me with him, in fact. If I tell the others just how royally you've fucked things up, I'm gonna end up sitting on a vote of no confidence, and guess who's gonna join you in hell? No, Mike, I'd like to see you good and dead, I have to admit that, but I damn well can't, because the bullet that goes through your head goes through mine, too."

"Charles, I'm going to fix this."

"You'd better, because you are talking about the entire human species being enslaved, Mike. Because that is what this is about. Somewhere out there, they're coming. And they will do this. They will do this, Mike. Just remember one thing, we have to get that child before they change him, because if we don't, God only knows what kind of abilities and powers he's going to have."

"I need people. I need backup."

“You can’t have a damn soul!”

“Charles—”

“I can give you equipment and I can give you money, but *not people*. The second I do that, Vorona finds out and both of our throats get cut.”

Mike had assumed that he’d have a trained team of experts. But he could see Charles’s point all too clearly. Unless he fixed this, and did it quietly, they were both dead men.

“What’s your plan, Mike? I want to know your exact plan.”

“Forget Adam, forget Glass, Langford, all of them. Go for the kid now, fast, next twenty-four hours. Then worry about everything else. Use the TR to get me into Wilton with absolutely no chance of detection.”

“The grays will know you’re there.”

“Not right away. Remember, I’ve seen this mind-reading business up close for years. Distance is a big issue. They’re not going to find me until I’m physically near the kid. But that’s the one place I’ll never be.”

“You’re a sniper or what?”

“There will be no direct approach to him whatsoever. But he will be killed, Charles. Coming from me, I know it’s not worth much to you, but I do guarantee it.”

To his credit, Charles made no comment, but the expression on his face eloquently communicated his contempt for what he undoubtedly regarded as outrageous braggadocio on the part of a proven incompetent. “You know how to access the TR?”

“Yes, sir. You’ll recall that I set up the security.”

Charles turned around in his chair. The Capitol glowed in the distance, the Washington Monument beyond. “What do you think this’ll be like in a thousand years, Mike?”

“In a thousand years? If we succeed, it’ll be the holy city, the center of heaven.”

Charles said nothing more, and Mike took that as a signal to leave, for which he was very damned grateful.

He had a good plan, and if he acted quickly enough, he thought there was a reasonable chance that it would work. The important thing was to push all consequences out of his mind. His life being at stake was bad enough, but looking at the larger picture was enough to freeze a man’s soul.

As he drove to National Airport, he called his personal travel agency and booked the next civilian flight he could, which was Delta to Atlanta. He

parked in long-term parking, then went to the ticket counter and got his ticket. He bought a newspaper and went to the gate to wait until the agent arrived. He did nothing out of the ordinary.

When the agent appeared, he checked in and selected his seat.

Having set up this false trail, he then left the airport and hailed a cab, which he took to a small office building a short distance from his house. He descended into the garage, took out some keys, and started another car. This one was a Buick from the mid-eighties, nondescript compared to the Mercedes he kept here in Washington.

He drove to the Beltway, then took 95 up to Baltimore, exiting onto 695 toward Owings Mills. An hour and a half after he left the garage, he was exiting onto Painters' Mills Road. As he drove up Caves Road, he entered a more isolated area. He turned off onto an unmarked road and soon came to what appeared to be a construction zone. From here, the road appeared to be impassable. He took a right, and it turned out that what looked like brush was something quite different. The car moved through the brush and trees as if they weren't there—which, indeed, they weren't. This was a state-of-the-art holographic projection, one of the most advanced camouflage devices in the Pentagon's arsenal. The design had come from Adam. It was deployed sparingly, out of fear that the press would get wind of it. If the origin of any of these technologies was discovered, the whole deception would become unglued.

The result of this was that certain select areas of military technology were stunningly ahead of public understanding. To accomplish his purpose, he would use an array of that technology.

Central to his plan was a device that lay in a large underground hangar in these woods. Its development had taken forty years. It had cost perhaps a quarter of a trillion dollars, paid for by misuse of the gigantic criminal enterprise known officially as the "black budget" which was really a cover for making select people rich at the expense of the American taxpayer, by using national security to conceal the theft.

The TR, or Triangular Aircraft, officially designated TR-A1, had also cost the lives of scientists who had come to a fatal eureka moment. When they realized that they were working on alien technology, they became too dangerous to be allowed to live. Test pilots had died, too, perfecting its capabilities, as had engineers who had suffered mercury poisoning in the fabrication of its extraordinarily toxic power plant.

The reason for the extreme secrecy was twofold. Not only did they have to protect this device from the public, they had to protect it from the grays. They had gotten every kind of lie from Adam and Bob, most of them infinitely subtle, and as a result had gone down a thousand blind alleys and consumed literally vast wealth, indeed, so much wealth that every American citizen, for the past fifty years, had worked a fourth of his life in support of the development of technologies he wasn't even allowed to know existed, let alone gain any benefit from.

He came to a certain spot in the narrow roadway where the radio, which he had tuned to an unused frequency, suddenly began to make a faint, high-pitched sound. He stopped the car, got out, pulled back a stone that lay at the roadside, and pressed his hand against a silver disk that had been concealed beneath it. A moment later, the small hill before him opened. He drove the car in.

Inside, it was absolutely dark and silent. The only light came from a single red bulb, glowing softly. As Mike strode toward it, the outlines of an enormous object became visible immediately above his head. It was a triangle, totally black, measuring hundreds of feet on a side.

Its power plant involved the rotation of a ring of a coherent mercury plasma at extremely high speed, reducing the overall weight of the craft by 40 percent. The rest of the weight reduction was accomplished with a very old technology. The triangle had to be as large as it was because, for the rest of its lift, it relied on helium. It contained the most sophisticated surveillance and camouflage technology known, but it was not much faster than an old-fashioned dirigible.

Years ago, it had become obvious from Eamon Glass's talks with Adam and the stories told by Mr. Crew, that mankind had lost a very sophisticated civilization to a ferocious war that was fought some time around fifteen thousand years ago. The combination of the use of devastating weaponry and the rise in sea levels that had taken place when the last ice age ended twelve thousand years ago, had first pulverized and then drowned this civilization.

It lived on only in myth, most notably in the Vedas of ancient India. But there was almost enough information there, in the descriptions of Vimina aircraft, to reproduce the power plants of the distant past. Careful questioning of Adam and Bob had filled in the missing pieces of information.

Large though they were, the TRs, of which there were ten on the books and two off, were no more difficult to fly than a small general aviation

aircraft.

As Mike continued toward the faint red light, his head was just a few inches from the lower surface of the craft. The light marked the entrance, a simple hatch that was slid open by hand.

He withdrew the ladder, which gave a bit under his weight as he climbed aboard. He took the long tunnel to the flight deck, pulling himself along on a stretcher as the crew had in the old B-36 bomber.

This flight deck, though, was very different from what a bomber pilot from the fifties might have seen. It wasn't even meant to be flown by a pilot, but rather flown *in* by a reconnaissance expert. The plane all but piloted itself.

Mike used a penlight to find the code panel, and input the thirty-three-digit code that activated the craft. A moment later, its amber control panel came to life. The basic aircraft instruments were there, of course, airspeed, bank and turn, altitude. There were others though, that were not so familiar. Most of these involved the craft's extraordinary surveillance capabilities.

Mike keyed Wilton, Kentucky, into the autopilot. He pressed the three buttons that activated the plasma. Behind him, there was a distinct "pop," the loudest sound the device would ever make. The altimeter began to wind up—but not far. It was a very unusual sort of altimeter, because it could measure anything from thousands of feet to inches. The plane's operational altitude was, essentially, ground level. Unlike a cruise missile, it did not rely on comparing a picture of the terrain it was crossing to its memory. Instead, it had the intelligence and the instruments it needed to examine the terrain it was crossing, and adjust its altitude accordingly.

He watched the altimeter rise to 60 meters, then felt a slight shudder as the ship's propulsion system, which used the Earth's magnetic field, slowly began to impel it forward. It took ten minutes for him to reach top speed.

The craft sought out forests and mountains, only rarely slipping across a town, and never a city. From ten feet away, it made no sound at all.

The flight from Owings Mills to Wilton covered 433 kilometers and took just over two hours. As Mike flew, he prepared instrument after instrument, most of them gained from his own hard work managing the empaths, extracting bits and pieces of information from his grays.

Sound, in the craft, was as carefully managed as all other emissions. Even switches had been carefully damped so that pressing a button made nary a click. The fans that controlled the craft's altitude were entirely silent,

designed so that the air they emitted was always exactly the same temperature as the air they took in. Just as it had no sound signature, and at night essentially no visual signature, it also had no heat signature and no radar signature. Even the pilot's body heat was dissipated by being used in production of electricity.

The TR could fail; if the mercury plasma malfunctioned, the craft would be incinerated inside of a second. During development it had happened many times. There was never anything left, only ash drifting in the sky. In 1980 in Texas, some civilians had been close-up witnesses to one of these failures. One of them got cancer and filed a suit against the U.S. government, but the judge was prevailed upon and the case went nowhere. The civilian died soon thereafter, thankfully.

He flew on. When he was within thirty miles of Wilton, he flipped another switch, and something happened that would have awed anyone who had not expected it.

This was a technology that they had developed by analyzing the stories of a close-encounter witness called Travis Walton, whom they had also discredited in every possible way, making a national joke out of him so that the public would never be convinced by his tale.

Why the grays had taken him on a ride was not clear. But they had, and on that ride, they had made their ship disappear around him, so that he appeared to be floating in the stars. Such a capability would be extremely useful for a reconnaissance craft, and Eamon had gradually obtained from Bob knowledge of how to design materials that would change their opacity by the simple application of heat. He pressed a button and was rewarded with the apparent complete disappearance of everything around him except the control panel itself. He floated now over the broad hills of eastern Kentucky, a man alone in the night sky.

The ship was on a course that would take it directly over Oak Road. He had only to watch the world slipping by fifty feet beneath his feet. He saw horses running in the moonlight, he passed over an elegant farmhouse and barns, so close that he felt as if he could have reached down and touched a weathervane. He smelled nothing of the night air and felt nothing of the cold, because the temperature within the ship was carefully controlled. There was a heat signature, of course, but it was no greater than that of the breath of a swooping owl.

The ship's voice said in his earphone, "Two minutes."

He turned on the camouflage. This drained electrical power, but also provided an additional level of protection from notice from above and below. It consisted of thousands of tiny light-emitting diodes served by cameras on the upper and lower surfaces of the ship. From below, an observer would see the night sky under which the ship was passing. From above, the image that was projected was of the ground.

“One minute.”

He saw light ahead, winking in among the trees. Soon a small neighborhood of tract houses appeared. He stopped the ship. Now he activated the infrared sensors, trained them on the first house in the tiny development. Two adults, one registering 98.6, the other 97.9. An infant, registering 99.1.

The ship was so low that it was buffeted by gas fumes coming out of the furnace chimney. He “opened” the house by activating the whole array of surveillance instruments.

An ultrasensitive receiver read the electroencephalograms of the occupants, and provided a readout of their state, whether awake or asleep, and a level-of-awareness index. One adult was fully awake. One adult was registering mostly Alpha. Dozing, according to the computer’s interpretation. The infant was profoundly asleep.

It seemed to him that he was not likely to be dealing with an infant, because this child would surely need to be at least fairly mature by 2012.

He went to the next house. In it, he saw two adults. Deeper in the structure was another person, perhaps a small adult, perhaps an older child. The two adults were physically motionless but their minds were alert. He deployed the microphone system. He heard a familiar voice, and for a moment was shocked. How could he know somebody in that house? Who would it be?

Then he realized that it was Grissom. They were watching *CSI*.

In the basement, there was another sound, a continuous noise identified as a small electric motor. Could it be a shaver? No, it was moving over too broad an area. He visualized the movement and immediately had his answer. The person in the basement was using a model train set. Therefore, it was not a small adult, but a child.

He moved to the other two houses, then, gathering the structural plans into the computer, identifying approximate ages and sexes of the occupants.

When he was finished, he had all the humans and all the animals. He

then found the open space behind the houses that the grays had used on their revealing foray. He dropped down into it. He wanted to step on the actual ground, but he must not leave the ship unless necessary. It had been designed to allow the occupant to reconnoiter on the ground, and was intelligent enough to protect itself, even for extended periods, but still, no chances were to be taken unless they were essential.

He increased altitude to a thousand feet, then went online again. Using Expedia, he found motels in Wilton. He input the address of the local Days Inn and was carried there.

He then observed the local terrain for heights. It turned out that the top of a grain elevator was the highest point in the area. He flew until he found it, an enormous structure in the center of the small community.

He went close. There, on one of the silos, was where he would place his antenna. Nearby, he saw a field. He dropped down.

Putting the ship's remote into his pocket, he slid back along the access tunnel and climbed out. The ship would find a hiding place on its own. It would not go to altitude, but rather would hide just above the surface somewhere, probably back in the hills that surrounded the town. When he looked up, even though he knew that it was there, and not but a few feet overhead, he could not see it.

As it departed, he felt the brief wash of one of its altitude control fans.

He crossed the field, then walked into the lobby of the Days Inn.

"Hey," he said to the sleepy clerk, "got a room?"

"Yes, sir," the young man said, coming out of the tiny office where he had been watching TV. Mike had a dozen false identities to choose from. He checked in under the name of Harold A. Hill, salesman. It was one of his favorites, because nobody ever wants to talk to a salesman.

He went through the lobby and crossed a bleak courtyard to his room. He entered it, turned on the light, and used the bathroom. Naked now, he slipped into the bed.

Tomorrow morning, he would scout the town for a Radio Shack. To complete his mission, he needed a few commonly available items. He lay down and closed his eyes. He was deeply tired. Deeply, deeply tired. Curse Lauren and Andy, who were both out there in the wind doing God knew what. The grays were on the warpath and extremely dangerous.

He wished he was a damn fool salesman.

PART SIX

CHILD OF HALLOWS

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come . . .

—WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

“Ode on Intimations of Immortality Recollected from Early
Childhood”

SEVENTEEN

CONNER HAD WAITED ON THE steps for Paulie to leave school. Usually, they would be carpooled home by Mom or Maggie, but that had obviously ended.

The thing was that Paulie, leader of the Connerbusters though he was, also remained the only real friend he'd ever had. He had to reach him somehow, and he thought that the way to do it was still through the idea of the aliens, despite what had happened. If they were real, then maybe he could contact them somehow and get them to come back, with Paulie as a witness.

It was an audacious, insane idea, but there were more than a few Web sites out there put up by folks who were doing just that, and posting video of the UFOs that had turned up. He'd communicated with one or two of them and gotten detailed instructions about how to do it using, as one of them had put it, "a flashlight, patience, and a serious interest in meeting them."

All day at school, he had kept to himself. There was nothing else he could do, not without triggering some sort of additional humiliation. As it was, everybody had gotten up from the table and moved when he sat down for lunch. He had eaten alone, ostentatiously and purposely reading a book none of them could begin to understand, *Physics from Fisher Information*, a rather basic text, actually.

He had considered going the total eccentric route, perhaps refusing to speak anything except Latin and dying his hair purple or something. But that would just justify his isolation, and he did not really want to be isolated. Faint though it might be, there remained the possibility that some girl might some day do just slightly more than run screaming when he drew near. Amy, for example. After all, they had an embarrassing past in the woods, did they not? It had, when he was ten and she was eleven, involved the revelation of body parts, back where the little stream flowed and the bluebells nodded along its banks.

He had been thinking fairly carefully this past couple of days about what actually *had* happened the other night. What did the Keltons' video really

show? The answer to that question, he thought, might be far less obvious than it seemed.

It was possible that the legendary grays of Internet fame actually were involved, but only very remotely.

Although the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence people claimed that the chances of finding a signal from another world was vanishingly small, that was incorrect. They were actually pretty good—about 0.4 percent a year.

He thought that, if somebody actually had appeared here from another planet, they must be desperate. It would take vast resources to cross interstellar space, and huge amounts of time. Wormholes and such were science fiction. The reason was simple: it was theoretically possible to bend space until two distant points touched, but the amount of energy necessary was unimaginable. To bend the United States until, say, Phoenix and Buffalo touched, would be child's play by comparison. Faster-than-light transmission of signals was indirectly possible using quantum-entangled particles, but the movement of structured physical objects at hyper speeds was out of the question.

So, if they were here, they had come at less than light speed, probably far less, and thus even a journey from Centauri A, the closest sun-like star, would have taken many years. Internet scuttlebut had the grays coming from Zeta Reticuli, a double star. Such a situation would make for planets with lots of seasons and some really eccentric orbits, but it wasn't completely impossible.

All of these thoughts danced in his mind even while, at another level, he considered his father's straightforward advice to confront the kids who were tormenting him. Dad was no genius, but his advice could be relied on, and Conner intended to take it.

“Paulie,” he said as he came down the steps, “hey.”

“Hey, Conner.”

“Would you like to come over?”

Paulie stopped. He stared at him like he was some kind of bizarre animal. He was flanked by two of his most unpleasant new friends, Kevin Sears and Will Heckle. “ ’Course not,” he said.

“The video's real, Paulie. We all ought to respect what it means. The event happened.”

“I wasn't there, Conner, I didn't see it.”

Conner was pleased to hear the anger and disappointment in his voice.

This was precisely what he had expected. He had taken Paulie exactly where he wanted him to go, and now he would win him back. “You know I can fix things,” he said. “Maybe I can fix that.”

“How? Build a time machine?”

“What if I could get them to come back?”

Will Heckle burst out laughing. A smiling Kevin shook his head.

“No, wait,” Paulie said. “I want to hear this.”

“I can call them,” Conner said, “with you as a witness.”

The boys were not laughing now.

“If I do it, then will you agree to cancel the Connerbusters?”

“Oh, sure. Sure, Conner.”

“Come over after supper and spend the night. You’ll meet the grays.”

“What about us? Can we meet the grays, too, little boy?”

“Not yet, Kev.”

Kevin grabbed his jacket, loomed over him. “Kevin to you.”

Conner stared right back. “Okay, Kev, I’ll make a note of that.” Finally, Kevin released him. Conner turned and went down the steps, looking for Mom’s car in the line out front.

On the way home, he wondered what the odds were of Paulie showing up. Actually, he thought, they were excellent. In fact, he would show. But the larger question was, how in the world would he get the grays to come to the party?

He also knew that he would get resistance from Mom, so he said nothing in the car. In fact, he waited until after dinner, until just before Paulie would appear.

“Incidentally, Paulie’s gonna sleep over tonight.”

She stopped clearing the kitchen table of dishes. “No, he isn’t.”

“Yes, he is, Mom. He’s been invited and he is.”

“No way, Jose.”

This did not surprise him, but he pretended that it did. “Mom, come on!”

“Conner, no! You’re groveling.”

“Mom, I have arranged a sleepover. Simple as that.”

“I don’t want any Warners in this house, not Paulie, not Amy, not the parents. Especially not Maggie and Harley. You find other friends.”

“Then let’s move into town! I’m twelve miles from the nearest other kids my age.”

“You’re so handsome when you’re mad,” she said.

“God, the condescension. All right, let’s come to a compromise. I invited Paulie. He didn’t say yes or no. If he comes, he comes.”

“Why did you invite him?”

“Because, Mother, if you diagram the social configuration of my class, you quickly discover that Paulie Warner is at the center of every major structural orbit, and, in fact, I am not going to make any headway with anybody until I have solved my relationship with him.”

She almost burst into tears, to hear him applying his genius to a problem as trivial as being accepted by some little bully with a room-temperature IQ. She went to him and hugged him. He came to her with raglike looseness, neither willing nor unwilling.

“You know something that’s going to happen in a couple of years, Conner? In a couple of years, Paulie, who looks like a little dump truck, is going to be running after girls and getting nowhere. They’re going to be all over you. You’re sweet, you’re smart, and you look like a movie star.”

“That’s then and this is now. What about my compromise? Fair?”

He’d won, of course. She couldn’t very well call the Warners and tell Paulie not to come, only to find that he hadn’t been planning to anyway.

Since last night, Conner had been using the same technique of meditation the Internet contact mavins used, and intended to make the same flashlight signals toward the sky that they did, and at the same time, 3:33 in the morning. One of them had craft showing up about 70 percent of the time. The other had never had a failure in two years, and had hundreds of hours of video, including a photo of the palm of a long, thin-fingered hand with claws pressed against a window. Conner had gotten the guy to upload a high-res file of this photo to his personal FTP site where he usually collected dissertations and things, and had analyzed it carefully.

Using a very conservative extrapolation algorithm, he had been able to bring out the fingerprints. They were absolutely remarkable in one respect: they had completely symmetrical whorls. He’d thought at once, *if a machine had fingers, they’d look like this*. The design wasn’t a digital trick, it was actually on the hand, and it was self-consistent, too. He’d measured it micrometer by micrometer. It was a real print, all right. Maybe the Keltons had gotten the first somewhat clear shot of a gray; this guy had definitely gotten the first fingerprint.

Mom and Dad were having all kinds of hush-hush conversations about the grays and about their friend Marcie Cotton, who Conner had understood

from their transparently cryptic comments to one another, had been the person screaming in the craft the other night. No matter how well they hid it, even from themselves, Conner could see that the incident had terrified his parents. Therefore, he certainly had no intention of telling them that he planned to attempt to vector the grays in.

“Just one thing,” his mom said—and he instantly anticipated one of her little zingers. “I want you guys to sleep upstairs. We don’t want you sleeping alone in the basement anymore.”

“I don’t care for those beds,” Conner said smoothly, hoping to deflect this zinger. “Also, we’re going to be doing gaming until late.”

“Not downstairs you aren’t.”

There was a crash and Paulie came banging through the back door. “It’s snowing,” he yelled. “We’re gonna be sledding in the morning plus Gestapo Torture Fest came from Games Unlimited!” He brushed past Katelyn and went pounding downstairs, Conner hurrying along behind him.

She went into the living room, where Dan had been watching the Kelton boys’ video again and again. As she walked in, he froze the blurry image of the hydrocephalic with fly eyes on the screen.

“I don’t want the boys sleeping in the basement,” she said.

“God, no.”

“And turn that damned thing off, it’s hideous.” When she sat down, he got up from the far end of the couch and moved closer to her.

Before she realized it, she’d reestablished distance between them.

He did not try again. Instead, he gestured toward the TV. “I’ve had them with me all my life. I’ve never had a seizure. It’s been memory, traumatic memory of this. Which I need you to understand, Katelyn.”

She wished he hadn’t brought it up. She wished it didn’t hurt so very much. “Understand what?”

“About Marcie! Which is connected to this.”

“That again. Dan, you screwed the woman.”

“We were made to do what we did.” As, he thought, *were you and I, my precious heart and fellow breed animal.*

“Okay, I’ll bite. If the devil made you do it, why? Why does he give a damn about you and Marcie—and me, for that matter? He’s a busy devil, he’s surely got more important things on his mind.”

“I cannot even begin to answer that question. I don’t understand any more than you do. All I can say is, if they wanted me to get tenure, then

whatever they did more than worked.”

“I should say. It got you tenure and a mistress.” She heard Conner’s voice rise downstairs as they reached some sort of crisis in the shrieking video game that Paulie had brought.

Angrily, she shook away a tear. She didn’t want to feel like this, all tragic over her marriage. She wanted to feel angry and full of righteous self-justification. She wanted to be strong enough to march off to a lawyer, if that turned out to be what her heart wanted her to do.

Dan reached out across the distance. “Hey,” he said.

She turned away.

He sighed, got up, and went into the kitchen. As she came in behind him, he drank down a glass of wine in a couple of huge gulps.

He turned, looked at her. Dear heaven, she was as beautiful as an angel. What had happened, here? He was getting really scared, he was beginning to think that he’d ruined his life by being honest with her.

He touched the thing in his ear . . . and touched, also, his memory of seeing her as a child. He looked into her eyes, saw the sorrow there.

“Oh, God, Katelyn, you’ve got to accept something. The aliens—”

“No! Shut up!”

“You shut up! You listen!” He touched his ear again. “You know what this is? This is an implant. I got it right here in this kitchen. Right here, right in front of everybody and God only knows how they did that.”

“Dan, I can’t handle this. I warn you.”

He went to her. She turned away from him. “Katelyn, they brought us together when we were children, for God’s sake!” He touched her shoulder. She pulled away. “I remember you, Katelyn, in a blue nightgown. I remember—oh, my God, they’ve been with us all our lives.”

She shook her head, waved her hand in front of her face.

At that moment, Conner burst in. “Can we take the DVD down?”

“Be my guest,” Dan said.

“Be careful with that, the Keltons’ll kill you if you mess it up.”

“We will,” Conner said as he raced off. Then he returned. “Plus, we need a flashlight.”

“A flashlight?”

“Check the snow, see if it’s stickin’!”

Dan got a flashlight out of his toolkit and gave it to him.

“Okay, listen,” Conner said to Paulie when he returned to his basement

lair. "I'm reasonably sure that they've been in here. In this room."

Paulie's eyes opened wide. "They have?"

"What's interesting is I have a screen memory—"

"Which is? Remind me."

"Paulie, you've gotta quit. Right now."

"Quit what?"

"I can hear the laughter in your voice. You've seen the video, you know this is real. So trying to laugh me out of court is wrong. And that Connerbusters thing, Paulie, it's incredibly corny. It's the sort of thing that happens in third grade, not middle school."

"It's just a joke, Conner. If you didn't take it so seriously, nobody else would, either. You gotta be more mature about these things. Kids are assholes. You get a few more years on you, you'll learn to roll with it."

Conner said, "You want me to crack that game?"

"Jesus, yes. Can you?"

"You know I can. But you have to promise me, Paulie. We've been friends a long time. All of our lives. You stop dumping on me."

"Is that why I'm here? To get begged? Because I'm not the one you need to beg. You need to beg every guy in the class, Conner, because they all think you're a complete schmedlock. The schmedlock of the century."

"Paulie, if you quit, they will quit, which you know very well."

"You got guts, I'll say that. You crack the game for me and the Connerbusters are on hold for a week. You vector in the grays, and I'm your puppy dog." He pulled a Nikon digital camera out of his backpack. "Six megapixels. Detailed pictures should be worth a fortune. So, when do they show up?" He looked at his watch.

"The exact time will be three-thirty-three," Conner said. He realized that he was setting himself up for something. The odds against him felt huge.

"Okay, then, let's synchronize watches."

"My watch—"

"Conner, everybody on planet Bell Attached knows that your Christmas watch automatically sets itself to the Naval Observatory time signal once every twelve hours. So let me rephrase that, let me synchronize my ordinary watch to your awesome one."

"Paulie, you want this watch?" He started to take it off.

"Conner, you just do not get it. I don't want your watch. If you're gonna get people off your back, you need to stop bragging and showing off."

Everybody knows you're a genius. Half the school are geniuses. Maybe you're our major genius, I don't know, but kids don't like having their faces rubbed in the kind of shit you dish out."

"I'm not understanding you."

"Like night before last. You actually tried to communicate with the aliens you thought were out there in English *and* French. That was so lame, Conner."

"I hadn't realized that."

"Well, try K-Paxian next time. I'm sure you're fluent in that, too. Now, little boy, if you're gonna crack Gestapo, crack it and I'll suck your toes."

"Conner!" Katelyn called.

"Okay! Okay! In a while."

"It's after ten."

"So, little boy, we gonna get tucked in by mommy?"

"No, we're not at your house, little boy. Come on." Conner went across the room and out under the deck. He was outside before he asked himself why he'd done this. He'd just suddenly felt like coming out.

Paulie joined him. "Wow, is it ever *snowing!* Look at this!" He danced around, then went down on his back and made an angel. He leaped up. "It's butt cold, we need our coats."

As he ran back inside, Conner pointed the flashlight upward and flicked it on and off. As he'd learned, he varied the signal, three long, three short, two long, two short. The beam revealed a whirling maelstrom of snowflakes, dancing, racing before the wind. The air was sharp with smoke and the tang of ice. Off to the west, thunder rumbled. Conner went on signaling, even though it was nowhere near 3:33, even though it felt hopeless, even though Paulie was probably right and he'd dreamed up the whole thing.

"Lame-o, Conner! I mean, you really are trying. You believe this."

"Shut up."

Paulie brushed Conner's head with his hand. "Ah, little boy's getting all covered with snow, isn't he?"

Conner stopped signaling. A light glowed around them just then. It didn't last long, but it came from above. "Oh, Jesus," Conner said. He started signaling again.

"It was lightning."

"They're here." He looked up, letting the snow pummel his face. "You guys," he whispered, "come on down."

Suddenly and without a word, Paulie took off toward the house. Then, in the distance, Conner heard the Keltons' dog Manrico set up a howl. He looked in the direction of the Keltons' place . . . and saw, standing at the edge of the yard as if they'd just come up out of the woods, three kids. They had really big heads and their eyes were terrible in the reflected light from the house. "Paulie!" Conner whispered. But Paulie was standing under the deck, as still as death "Paulie . . ."

Then he saw that they had a lantern. He looked at it, glowing in the snow, the interior flickering orange.

"Mom," he called, but it came out as a whisper. He fought to form the word. "M-o-o-mm." It stayed in his throat.

They came across the snowy lawn, sort of floating just above the ground, floating and flickering.

Conner was terrified beyond anything he'd ever thought possible. It was freezing-cold fear, a fear so deep he had not known that it could exist.

Had he been insane? Why had he done this?

The thought crossed his mind that this was yet another joke, but then he heard them, a buzzing sound like huge flies, a sound that was really, really strange, that was not of this world. They remained out in the gushing, swirling snow.

The lantern wasn't a lantern at all, it was a very black metal thing with glowing holes in it that sort of looked like eyes, and it seemed to Conner as if it was sort of alive, too. The three aliens came closer, moving swiftly and accurately now, no longer floating and flickering. They were like wolves in the snow, now, and they were clearly interested in him.

And then there was something on his shoulder, as light as if a bird had landed there. Almost too scared to move, he looked down. A hand was there, with fingers like long, thin snakes, and black claws.

EIGHTEEN

CONNER HAD TO RUN, HE had to get out of here, but then the world distorted, seeming almost to bend, and the glowing thing was right in front of his face and he was staring into the orange light inside where there were millions of glowing threads. They were just threads of light, but he couldn't look away from them, he had to keep staring.

One of the creatures pulled his shirt front up, and he felt something pushing against his chest and getting hotter and hotter and he couldn't stop it and he had to because it was burning him.

The snow swirled and lightning flashed and there was a loud snap like a wire had come down and was spitting in the yard.

Suddenly Conner realized that he was alone. He was standing in the snow and he had to get back inside because somebody was out here who should not be, and he was in danger.

He'd seen black eyes and orange light, terrible light, but the rest of it was all confused. Had he met the aliens? He wasn't sure. Or no, he was sure. He hadn't. He'd pointed the light at the sky and everything, but they hadn't shown up.

He opened the door. He walked past Paulie who, without a word, went into the bathroom and drank glass after glass of water. When he came out, he was transformed from a posturing preteen into the little boy he had been as recently as last summer. "I want to go home," he said quietly. Then he ran upstairs.

Conner ran after him.

Paulie burst into the living room. "I want to go home," he yelled.

"Paulie?" Katelyn asked.

Paulie looked toward Conner, his face soaked with tears. Conner went closer to him. "Hey, man?"

"Don't let him near me!"

Katelyn got to her feet "What in the world did you do to him, Conner?"

Conner shook his head.

“Here, come here to me, Paulie, honey. I’ve dealt with a lot of scared guys in my time, honey.” Katelyn took him by the hand. “Now, we are going into the kitchen, fellas, and guess what we’re gonna do? We are going to make a big, old-fashioned pot of hot chocolate flavored with brandy. Would you like that?”

“We have brandy?” Dan asked.

“I’m not allowed to drink.”

“This is a very tiny bit, Paulie,” Katelyn said as she drew him toward the kitchen.

“Hey, guy,” Dan said to Conner.

“Yes, Dad?”

Dan patted the couch cushion. Conner sat down beside him. “Conner, did you—no. Better way to do this. What did that to him?”

“Dunno. He was okay, then he wasn’t.”

“Did you, perhaps, have a fight? It was awfully noisy down there at one point.”

“No. No fight.”

“No, that wouldn’t make him cry. What made him cry, Conner?”

“Homesick, maybe?”

“No.”

Conner’s chest hurt. He tried to sort of move his shirt away from it to not have anything touch it.

Dan saw, and lifted it. “What’s going on here?”

“Nothing.”

“Yeah, there is. Katelyn, could you come back, please?”

Conner heard a voice, *Hello, Conner.*

“Hi.”

Dan said, “Hi what?”

Be quiet!

He started to talk, but it was like somebody had grabbed his throat from the inside.

This is real, Conner.

A coldness raced in Conner’s veins. This was somebody that was *inside* him, somebody else alive, *in him!*

“Katelyn, something’s not right here.”

Don’t tell them, Conner.

She came in.

“Look at his chest.”

“Conner, what have you boys been doing?”

Paulie had followed her. She turned to him. “Paulie, you tell me. Have you boys been playing too rough?”

“No, Mrs. Callaghan.”

“Mom?”

“Son, you’re all skinned up! You look like you’ve been sandpapered, so I want to know what you were doing.”

Conner had no way to respond. He wasn’t sure why he was hearing this voice, only that it was not being heard by anybody else.

That’s right, Conner.

Mom and Paulie returned to the kitchen, followed by Dan. Conner hesitated a moment, then hurried after them. He was trying not to be scared, because this was the real thing, this was contact. But he was not just somewhat scared, he was so scared that he was actually dizzy.

He knew what had been done to him: they had put a communications device in his chest.

Right again.

The kitchen was filling with the smell of cocoa and it seemed so wonderfully comfortable it almost made him burst into tears. He ran over and threw his arms around his mother’s waist and tried not to let Paulie hear him crying.

“What is the matter with these boys?” Katelyn asked.

“I think it’s called nervous energy. Running on fumes. When’s your bedtime, Paulie?”

“Whenever.”

“I repeat the question, Paul Warner. When is your bedtime?”

“Nine-thirty.”

“It’s already ten forty-five,” Dan said. “You must be tuckered out.”

“Conner’s an eleven o’clock guy,” Katelyn said. “But you’re tired, too, right?”

“I’m tired.”

Paulie nodded into the mug of hot chocolate that Katelyn had just poured him.

They drank their cocoa in silence, and the voice did not recur. Conner began to hope that it had been an auditory hallucination, because if contact was going to mean you had a voice inside you, that was going to take a whole

lot of getting used to.

He'd read most of his father's abnormal-psych texts, so he hoped it wasn't an early symptom of schizophrenia, the curse of the excessively intelligent. Even though that might actually be better than having an alien communications device buried in his damn chest.

He and Paulie did not argue about going to bed upstairs. There was no way that either of them were going anywhere near that basement again tonight. In fact, Conner considered proposing to Dan that they brick the thing up tomorrow and just forget about it.

After they were both in pajamas and had their teeth brushed, Paulie said, "I'm sorry about not believing you."

"About what?"

He put his arms on Conner's shoulders and pushed his lips close to his ear. "The aliens! I saw them. I saw the whole thing!"

"Forget it, Paulie."

"*Forget it?* Are you nuts! I saw aliens in your yard, man, three of them!"

"We don't know what we saw."

"Hello? You were the big believer. You were the guy who was vectoring them in."

"Maybe I made a mistake."

"Maybe you didn't."

They left it there, and soon Paulie was asleep. Conner watched the night, listened to the snow whispering on the windowpanes, and wondered how the world really worked.

There came that voice again, very quick, trembling with something like fear and something that, oddly enough, sounded to Conner like a sort of awe: *Soon you will know.*

NINETEEN

CHARLES GUNN PULLED UP TO the presidential safe house on Embassy Row. The mansion had been acquired during World War II when the Roosevelt Administration was concerned that Hitler might develop a long-range bomber and attack the White House. Successive administrations had continued to use it, and during the cold war, tunnel access had been added across the mile that separates it from the White House. Now it functioned as a very private presidential enclave, at present ostensibly owned by Washington insider Larry Prince, but actually under the control of the Secret Service.

He walked quickly to the door, which was opened as he approached. A young man in a dark suit, with an earbud in his ear and the bulge of a small machine gun under his jacket, stepped aside and let him through the metal detector. Another young man fell in ahead of them, and the three of them proceeded silently down the hall, then turned right into the president's ornate office.

The president didn't know it yet, but he was going to provide a diversion that would, hopefully, deceive the grays into looking in the wrong direction for the source of danger to their evil little child. It might well mean that the president would himself be killed, but to Charles this was of little consequence.

He was watching the news and paging through a speech. "Hey there, Chester," he said without looking up, "just give me a second, here." Then, a moment later, "Pull up a chair."

"It's Charles, sir," Charles said as he sat down.

On the wall of this office there were paintings chosen by FDR, the most spectacular being a Nicholas Poussin, *Landscape with St. John on Patmos*. As Charles knew, and as FDR had certainly known, the geometry of the painting resolved into a date: 2012. That this was the year of tribulation had been known by the secret societies that had created western civilization literally from the very beginning. The date had been handed down through

the Masonic community from the ancient Egyptian priesthood who had divined it by looking through the last, clear glass of man's old, lost science: a window into the future. This had been at Abydos in Egypt, and some of the other things they had seen had been commemorated on beams that held up the temple's roof to this day.

"So," the president finally said, "how are you gonna make me miserable today, Charles?"

"Mr. President—"

"You never come here with good news. All your good news is secret. So, hit me."

"The grays are acting against us in a major and very bizarre way."

"The grays are acting bizarre? You're kidding. I sit here astonished."

Charles had constructed his lie carefully. "Sir, they're going to do something that will reveal to the public the fact that the government's been concealing their presence for sixty years. They're going to destroy our credibility."

The president pointed a finger at his own temple.

"Exactly. They're trying to undermine the government. First, the public becomes aware that they're real. Second, people tell about their abductions. Third, it's discovered that we're helpless. Chaos follows."

The president was silent for a moment. "And, for some reason, you can't get control of this situation, which is why you're here. First, tell me why it's out of control. Second, tell me what you need."

"It's not out of control."

"Then why are you here?"

"Sir, I need a TR-A. I need to surveil in the area where this disclosure event took place."

"You have TR-A1."

"Mike Wilkes is using it. He's on detail out there now, but he needs backup."

"Okay, you've got another TR. I'll cut orders for you to have access to one. What else?"

"I need some people killed, *toute suite*."

"Just do what you gotta do."

"You need to be aware that one of them is Mr. Crew."

"Oh, fuck."

"Exactly. Our friend from the beyond is not our friend."

“He’s—what’s he done?”

“He’s giving the grays support.”

“Next.”

“I need one other thing.”

“Hit me.”

Charles smiled. “I don’t want to hit you. I want you to hit Wilton, Kentucky, with an earthquake. Enough to disrupt the place and reduce the college that’s there to rubble.”

The president stared at him for some little time. “Why?” he asked at last.

“We need a diversion so that we can clean up all the principles. We need it to look accidental. All the folks who were present during the disclosure event.”

“I see.” He looked down at the top of his desk. This time, his silence extended even longer. When he spoke, his voice was soft with what Charles knew must be pain. “You know, it feels like the best day in your life when you walk for the first time into the White House as president. President of the United States—wow, and wow again. Then you find out the secrets, and you spend the rest of your life in mourning.”

“Mr. President, this will be a very localized hit. It’s not going to activate any fault lines, nothing like that. We’ll see significant disruption and a few deaths, obviously. It will be a cover for us to sterilize the area. We’ll confiscate all original video, and deal with the people who were firsthand witnesses. We have assets already at work who will get a local physics professor who saw the thing to debunk it. Our media people will see to it that his message gets spread far and wide. But the damage and the deaths will be the minimum necessary, let me assure you of that. I feel the same way you do about the American people, of course.”

“You’re assuring me that this will not do any more than the minimum damage necessary?”

“Absolutely. It will be very precisely contained. We’ll have a TR directing the pulses from the immediate vicinity of the target.”

“And the grays are not going to react adversely? That is one limb I sure as hell don’t want to go out on.”

“Sir, again, there is no way. They are not going to be able to connect the dots, as it were.”

“I’ll redeploy the scalar weapon.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll call you when I need it fired.”

God only knew what the grays would do to the president after he unleashed a scalar pulse that devastated the whole center of the United States and threw all of their plans awry. One thing was certain, Charles planned to stay far, far away from this particular moron after he pulled that particular trigger.

“I have a state dinner in an hour. I gotta go over to the rathole and put on my monkey suit, and spend the evening with the prime minister of Thailand—whose name I will never, ever learn to pronounce—who is here to whine at me about some damn thing or other.”

He stood up. The interview was at an end.

MIKE WILKES LAY IN HIS motel room trying to do anything except worry about the next few days. He had a difficult, complex task, and if the grays detected him, he was going to be something worse than dead meat. Over the years, they’d found bodies of people who had been attacked by the grays, mostly airmen who’d gone too close in the early days, when Truman was still trying to shoot them out of the sky.

They would have their lips cut off, their eyes and tongues gouged out, and their genitals removed. There would generally be seawater in their lungs, no matter where the bodies were found. The grays would cut them up, drown them, then leave them as warnings. The grays could very definitely be crossed, and this particular action was certain to qualify.

He really did not feel so comfortable right now, sitting in this dismal little hole of a room and, frankly, waiting to start getting cut to pieces by somebody he couldn’t even see. He’d long held that the grays couldn’t read minds beyond a few feet, and that they had trouble even understanding what was going on in the human mind. But lying here on this bug-ridden bed watching Jay Leno wish he could suck any part of his guest, Drew Barrymore, he feared that the opposite might be true.

His only chance was speed. If he could get this done by tomorrow night, he could be back in D.C. by noon on Wednesday, and maybe he would be okay. *Maybe.*

AT ALFRED AFB, THE FLIGHT line was being used for foul-weather training runs, and the sound of engines being fired up and jets screaming off into the night could be heard clearly in the disused office block where Lauren Glass and Rob Langford had been together for hours. Since he had caught up

with her last night, he had not let her out of his sight.

And now that she'd understood that there were two opposing groups within the Air Force, she was glad that she had ended up with Rob. She had never liked Colonel Wilkes, and had not been surprised to discover the danger he posed to her.

She sat across from Rob in the office, watching the snow sift past the windows. She was exhausted, and she was hoping that he would soon let her rest.

He remained formal and distant, though, and showed no sign of either becoming more at ease or of offering her a place to sleep.

She wished it was not so. He was a lovely man, handsome in a way that made her want him, simply and frankly. His eyes were gray and intense, but also had a sort of wide-open look to them, as if he was as friendly as he was dedicated. They were the eyes of somebody who worked hard, but, she thought, also liked to have fun.

He did not trust her. There was a secret he wanted to tell her, but he was wary. If he decided that she was the enemy, what then?

She knew what then. She just didn't want to think about it.

"Tell me again about your relationship with Adam," he asked. In all these hours, she had not refused to answer a question, no matter how often he had repeated it. She knew this interrogation technique. She would let him use it. She would cooperate fully.

"I've been with somebody who shared the life of my soul," she said. "I don't think he was a predator like Mike said. Losing him has left a hole in my life, almost as bad as when my dad died."

"That's not what you said the last time."

"I'm being creative."

What you said was, "They aren't predators, but I think they're missing something they know we have, and they're trying to get it."

Rob could not take his eyes off Lauren Glass. It wasn't just her beauty, it was the trembling, delicate play of emotions in her eyes as she spoke about Adam. He could see that the love was genuine, entirely so. But there was also something furtive about Lauren, as if, on some level, she might be lying to herself, and might at least sense that.

This long, repetitive interrogation was leading to a judgement. When he was finished with it, he would draw his conclusions and her life would either continue or it would not. He wondered if she knew, decided to assume that

she did. “So tell me, are the grays a danger to us? How do you feel about that?”

“I guess I miss Adam more because I know he’s somewhere. If he’d died in the fire, that would have been closure, you know.” She fell silent.

“That didn’t answer my question.”

“It did, indirectly. If you want a precise answer, I have never been able to figure out exactly what the grays are here for, so it’s pretty hard for me to tell if they’re a danger. I mean, they look like aliens. God knows, they act like it. But I’ve seen the Bob autopsies. They’re partly biological and partly manufactured, and they have no brain as we know it. Just all those threads of glass in the head. But far, far fewer neurons than we have. So why do they think so well? We don’t know. And since we can’t say what they are, we also can’t assign motive. Those are my thoughts, anyway.”

He watched her. He didn’t know exactly what he was waiting for—perhaps for some mistake, the nature of which would only reveal itself when she made it. Potentially at least, this woman could play an important role. He had no doubt that the grays had maneuvered her very neatly out of Wilkes’s hands and into his, and he had understood that it was so that she could perform a function with the child. *Teaching*, he thought.

She asked him, “Listen, do you know anything about them? Like, where they’re from? I’ve always asked Adam about that but, you know, he doesn’t tell you much.”

She wasn’t afraid of him, and that was good. “We don’t know anything about where they’re from. We do know that there are a lot of them out there, and they’re on their way here.”

“So the DNA thing is true?”

“You know about that?”

She nodded. “Mike told me that they’ve used up their DNA and they want ours.”

“That’s part of it.”

“So this is the reconnaissance element of an invasion force and we should fear them.”

“I didn’t say that. I think they may also be our only chance of avoiding extinction.”

Her lovely mouth opened. The tip of her tongue, a soft, pink pearl, ran along her lips and withdrew. “Are you—uh . . . no.” She shook her head. “Wow. That’s big.”

“The calculations are correct. There’s going to be a tremendous environmental breakdown. In fact, it’s been building for eons. We’re at the climax.”

She sat there, staring at him.

“Lauren?”

“What about babies?”

He shook his head. “Nobody makes it . . . except your friend Mike and his outfit. Have you ever heard of the Trust?”

“No.”

“The way they’ve got it set up, about a million people will survive, chosen by the Trust—Mike and his group.”

“But then the grays will get them. They’ll have gained nothing.”

“That’s not how it works. We have reason to believe—to know—that the grays will give up on us unless there are billions of us alive. Smaller numbers will be of no use to them. The reason that Adam left when he did is that something has come to crisis, and Adam is apparently involved. Man and the grays are both in danger of extinction, and they’re trying to save us all. Your boss and his friends are trying to prevent that so the grays will go away and leave the Earth to their million elite.”

He watched her thinking, saw the pain in her eyes, the shock . . . saw a young woman’s face reflect fear for children who had not yet been born. “What happens . . . if the grays get their way?”

“Lauren, a very long time ago, there was a war on this Earth. A great civilization fell. When it did, we lost our knowledge of how physics really works. We set off down a road of ignorance that’s led to where we are now: all six billion of us trapped on an overburdened and dying planet. Meantime, the grays are so ancient that they’ve used up their DNA. Without each other, both species go extinct. They’re looking for a sort of marriage: they get access to our youthful DNA, we get access to their brilliant minds. Everybody survives.”

“But how? What happens?”

“Lauren, it’s my growing belief that you are one of the most critical human beings now alive on this planet, because you are a big part of the answer to that question.”

Suddenly, she looked every inch the soldier. Her eyes flashed. Rob thought, as always, that the grays had chosen well. She would be able to do this. He made his decision about her, after all these hours, in that split second.

The grays had given her to him so she could be the child's empath, it was the only explanation that made any sense. "You'll be a sort of teacher, Lauren. An interpreter, if you will."

"Of who? Of what?"

"I don't want to be mysterious, but it's best that we let this unfold in its own time."

"That's hard."

"So be it, duty is duty. I have one further question. Do you know how to hide? I mean, on a trained, professional level?"

"Why in the world should I hide? Colonel Wilkes had no right to do what he did, you said that yourself. He's up on charges."

"He's also very powerful. More powerful by far than we are. He's dangerous, Lauren. I hope you understand that."

"He's trying to kill me, of course I understand it! But I have no idea how to hide."

"You got this far. That's saying something. A hell of a lot, in fact."

"If I'm a KIA, then I have no Air Force standing. If I'm already dead, he can kill me without fear of penalty."

"We're going to hide you, Lauren."

"I wish the grays were here."

"Keep trying to contact them."

When they went outside, the snow of earlier had stopped. The base was very quiet, the flight line now shut down.

She noticed that he moved very quickly, striding across the base to the carpool. He had a car of his own, but he requisitioned a staff vehicle instead. "This is part of staying hidden," he said. "I'll exchange this for another staff vehicle after I drop you off."

He took her to a Days Inn, which appeared to be about the only motel in this small town.

Thus it was that Lauren ended up in the room next door to Mike Wilkes, an event that had not been orchestrated by the grays, but was not entirely chance, either. Rather it emerged out of the fates of both species, human and gray, as they rode the dark rails of their destinies.

Mike heard voices next door, a man and a woman. He took no notice.

Rob wanted to stay with Lauren—he told himself, to protect her. But he had work to do, because if he didn't find Wilkes, not only was Lauren going to be in trouble, the rest of this thing was going to come apart. He could not

imagine the consequences if the grays were thwarted, dared not even think about what might happen.

As he drove back to his office, Mike Wilkes and Lauren Glass both lay on their beds unable to even think of sleeping, their heads separated by just six inches of drywall. Lauren's mind whirled with the astonishing secrets she had learned, and, as she sank into exhaustion, also with the image of Colonel Rob Langford, who appeared to her as a sort of angel, powerful and good and strong enough to take her the way she loved to be taken, and give her the babies her whole heart and soul told her that the future needed.

Mike would doze for a moment, then see Adam looming up, his insect eyes glaring. Then he would start awake and toss and turn, and nuzzle his gun close to his side.

Far overhead, in a sky that had cleared magnificently, strange stars hung over the town. The Three Thieves had been joined by Adam, and the first phase had been accomplished. They were counting the hours, now, the minutes, the seconds, the nanoseconds until they acted again, and Adam entered Conner, and became part of him, and either it worked or it did not.

It was an amazing time, truly, with six billion human lives and six billion gray lives hanging in the balance, in the quiet of a little town, in a dark corner of a small state, in a strange and faraway place called Earth.

PART SEVEN

LOST LAND

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part of the
day,
Or for many years, or stretching cycles of years.

—WALT WHITMAN

“There Was a Child Went Forth”

TWENTY

CONNER AND PAULIE WOKE UP late and had to rush to get to school. When Paulie saw Conner's mixture of amaranth flakes, wheat germ, and unsweetened live-culture yogurt, he did not ask for an explanation, but gratefully ate the bacon and eggs that Dan, wearing only green boxer shorts and huge, fluffy slippers, provided to him. He was fascinated to watch Conner eat what looked like upchuck.

Conner had called in aliens, which was damn amazing. But now here he was gobbling down this fantastically geekish food. Nobody could eat like this and get away with it. Paulie had an obligation to uphold the reputation of Bell Attached as a cool school.

"So, what's your lunch?" he asked Conner. They'd stop by his house to pick up his, which would be Cheetos, a ham sandwich, and a power bar.

"My lunch?" He went over to a little plastic greenhouse that was sitting on the kitchen counter. "Ah, excellent. *Sprouting* alfalfa, I'm happy to say. Some organic hummus, which is really pretty delicious if you'd like to share, buddy."

Aliens or not, Paulie saw that the Connerbusters had to continue.

"Sounds great, but I've got my dumb old ham sandwich waiting for me at home."

Dan listened to the boys with only half an ear. Conner had somehow managed to bring this off, it appeared. He was more socially resourceful, then, than he seemed. All to the good.

During his own wakeful and uneasy night, Dan had made a decision. Once he was tenured, he was going to do the unthinkable. He was going to circulate his resume, and he was going to concentrate exclusively on schools in large cities far from here. An untenured professor was an academic beggar. But a man operating from tenure was more significant, even if he came from the lower ranks of colleges.

The reason he was going to do this was that he wanted to get his family as far from open spaces and dark, abandoned nights as he could. Preferably,

he would raise his remarkable boy in a Manhattan tower, some place like that. Conner was vulnerable, and Dan's instinct was that moving to a more populated area would protect him.

As for Katelyn, she was in the process of putting Marcie behind her. She dressed for her morning round of classes while listening to the males crashing around downstairs. She would not have believed Conner's skill in recapturing Paulie. She'd been furious with him last night, but now she was proud of her son.

She hurried downstairs to be in time to give her men good-bye kisses—accepted with dear brusqueness by her son, with hopeful eyes by her husband.

She let him hug her. This family was her responsibility and her achievement. She was not going to let it go awry simply because he'd done something foolish and she felt humiliated. "Men are fools," her mom had said, "expect the worst." As, indeed, her dad had been, disappearing on them the way he had, effectively orphaning her and widowing Mom.

So far, her mother's advice had never been wrong.

AT THE DAYS INN, LAUREN Glass was awakened by a tapping on her door. She was shocked, then frightened. Then she remembered the code that Rob had given her, and recognized the pattern of taps. As if a motel room door would keep out Mike Wilkes or whatever goons he might send.

She still had no clothes but what she'd been wearing when Mike had attacked her, so she went into the bathroom and wrapped herself in a towel before cracking the door.

"What time is it?"

"Six-fifty. We've got to get started."

"What are we doing?"

"Trying to figure out where the kid is, if he's really here, or if this is some kind of a feint designed to throw Wilkes off, in which case we can concentrate on the issue of you. But we need to solve the child question first."

His life before hers, that was clear enough. "The grays aren't protecting this child?"

"We're not in communication with the grays anymore. As you know."

"I do indeed. And I have to tell you, I just don't see them as really understanding how jeopardy functions in our society. They know how the

brain works, but I don't think they understand reality the same way we do. We need to assume that they're going to be blindsided if this child is attacked."

MIKE WILKES WAS RETURNING TO the motel from the early run he took every day when he saw, from a distance of about a quarter of a mile, two people get into a USAF motor pool car in the parking lot and drive away. A man and a woman, but too far away to see their faces. He noted that they'd been parked directly in front of his room.

He decided that some sort of Air Force investigative unit must have been activated, no doubt because of what had happened last night, when Lauren Glass had appeared at Wright-Pat after he'd listed her as KIA.

He put in a cell phone call to Charles. "Hey there, sorry I'm so early. Yeah, it went fine—at least, the trip was fine. Look, there are a couple of officers in mufti sniffing around. I haven't gotten a close look at them, but I have the feeling that they're an arrest team. I need that handled, Charles."

He hung up quickly and did what he now had to do with his cell phone, which was to take out the battery and throw the whole instrument in a ditch. You might as well paint yourself purple as carry one of these things. If you had a cell phone, turned on or turned off, they could track you from twenty-five thousand miles overhead with the WatchStar satellite.

He had probably a dozen cover identities. He didn't even remember them all. Some of them were essentially perfect, provided to him by the Defense Intelligence Agency. They would stand up to the most rigorous scrutiny. Others, thrown together as needed over the years, were less reliable. But all except two of them were on file somewhere within the U.S. government.

So, at the moment, he had only the two to choose from. He decided to stay with the salesman he'd used last night. He found a gas station, went in, and asked the attendant for directions to the nearest rental car agency. He had about twelve hours to perform a whole complex sequence of actions, then the night to do the really challenging work.

The Three Thieves watched Conner leave home and be driven to school. So far, there had been no threat against him. They wanted to be closer to Conner even than the collective demanded. He was their creation, too, and his mind was like a garden of jewels. They wanted to partake of his rich feelings, but they dared not, he was too precious to disturb in any way.

Because, as a species, they were so close to death, the grays were particularly terrified of it. Their main body was alone in the immensity of space, no longer protected by a home planet and a parent star, their own having long since perished as victims to time. They traveled now in an engineered world on what many considered a hopeless quest, and their collective mind dreamed of oblivion, and worried about it, and clung.

The Thieves had spent much of the night hanging over the town, listening to the people they could hear through implants, trying to ascertain if any of them might seek to harm their treasure.

Last night, they had carried out the instructions of the collective and prepared Conner to receive the extraordinary implant that was going to be given to him.

The fragment of the collective the humans called Adam had been assigned to man some years ago, with the hope that Adam, through exposure to them, would evolve structures in his mind that would enable him to do something that no gray had ever done before—indeed, that was only an idea, a theory, perhaps a hope and maybe a forlorn one. They wanted him to meld into the boy, in effect, to implant his entire being into Conner and become part of him.

Now Adam lay waiting in an empty barn, on the floor of a disused horse stall. Later, when darkness fell, he would complete his mission. Death was in this for him, but a very strange sort of death. It would not be the oblivion that was at the center of the long, complicated drama that obsessed the collective, but rather the surrender of self in a sort of living death. Once his thoughts and knowledge became part of Conner, he believed that he would disappear entirely.

He listened to the dripping of the old barn and the rustle of beetles in the hay, and dreamed formless, uneasy dreams.

The Three Thieves were fascinated and horrified by what Adam was being called upon to do. Like every gray, in the privacy of the self, they regarded it with horror. Superficially, though, they were grateful both that he was trying and that they didn't have to.

The grays in the scout group had various human genes, this and that, whatever they'd been able to use, and were much healthier than the ones in the main body. The Three Thieves, for example, had human blood, vivid with life, not the dank artificial goo that sustained most of those in the main body. They had taken this blood and adapted their bodies to it, and used it now as

their own. It made them quicker, smarter, and also, they thought, more able to understand man.

The Three Thieves watched Conner from above as he moved about in his school. They wanted to get closer, but could not go into a crowd and remain invisible. They could lock their movements to no more than two or three pairs of eyes. So they could not enter his school, they could only watch. This was why grays worked at night, when people were alone.

CONNER HAD SLEPT A RESTLESS, frightened night, and now sat in history class bored senseless because he had realized that his teacher did not understand the events in the Napoleonic Wars that he was teaching. The French loss of the Battle of Borodino in 1812 had led inevitably to the political structure of modern Europe, and discussing the way that had happened would have been interesting. Instead, he had to listen to stupefying trivia about General Kutuzov's bad feet and Napoleon's good lunch.

His chest hurt. He remembered some kind of fire, but he had not been burned. He knew he had seen the grays, but it all now seemed curiously unreal, like it had happened to somebody else, or not happened at all.

This disturbed him. He knew that he had seen them. He remembered them, though, in the unstable way that you remember a dream. He understood that this was because the experience had been so strange, but it still troubled him. He wanted these memories. He knew that the grays were here for a reason and they were obviously interested in him. But what was the reason, and why him?

At the ten-fifteen break, he caught up with Paulie before he had reached the protection of Kevin and Will. "Do you still remember?" he asked.

Paulie stopped opening the combination on his locker. He stared down at his feet. "Yeah," he said in a low voice.

"Paulie, I'm scared."

"I wasn't when we got up, but I am now."

"Yeah, the same thing's happening to me. I don't want to go home. I don't want to be there at night."

Paulie looked at him, his eyes hollow. "I was gonna restart the busters," he said, "but I'm not. You're having too rough a time. But I don't want us to be together again, Conner. I don't want ever to see those things again, not ever."

"I can't handle it, either!"

“Yeah, you can. You’re as smart as any alien. That’s why they’re after you, I think. Because you *can* handle it.”

Conner’s throat closed and tears welled in his eyes. “No, I can’t,” he said.

FAR ABOVE, THE THREE THIEVES felt his fear, and drew closer together in their own disquiet. What was the matter with him? Was he in danger? Helplessly, they watched the purple fear flowing up out of the shimmering haze of feelings that hung over the school like a many-colored smoke. They could tell it belonged to Conner by listening to it. They could also talk to him, but dared not. Last night, they had done something with him that the grays had never before managed with human beings, which was to form words in his mind that he could hear and respond to—words, not images.

They dared not do that now, because it might panic him and that must not happen.

Conner went to his physics section at the college, hurrying along the snowy walk that linked Bell Attached to the campus, and wishing that he was safe inside some building and not exposed to the watchful, dangerous sky.

TWENTY-ONE

THE SUN WAS HIGH IN a thin haze by the time Mike reached the Enterprise rental car agency that was tucked between the Wal-Mart and something called Goober's Used Trucks. He considered buying a truck instead of renting a car, but he didn't have but about six hundred dollars in his wallet. Too bad, a purchased vehicle would be a hell of a lot more secure than a rental, which any expert could trace, no matter what sort of identity he used.

"I'd like a car, please," he said. He pulled out the Harry Hill driver's license and credit card.

"Missouri," the agent said, looking at the license.

"Yes, sir. Here trying to sell the college on some new band instruments."

"Well, good luck. Pardon my French, but they're tighter than a witch's tit over there. You want a Grand Am?"

"A Grand Am is good."

"Looks like we're gonna get some serious weather tonight. If you want, I've got a Volvo. It's three-sixty a week. Front-wheel drive might be useful, though."

This was certainly true. "Yeah," he said looking at the sky. "It sure might." He took the Volvo.

In his top pocket was the remote control that would summon the triangle, which was laying by in some concealed draw somewhere in the hills. The trouble was, it connected through the MilStar communications satellite, and the second he used it, whoever was looking for him would know both where he was and where the triangle was.

Once he had the car, he went through a drive-through and got some food. It was too dangerous to stop and eat, lest some sort of horrible serendipity expose him to those two investigators. Professionalism in a situation like this was defined by attention to detail. He also knew from long experience that going without food was a mistake when you were dealing with complex and stressful issues.

AIR FORCE CHIEF OF STAFF Samuel Gold was ushered into the presidential executive office next to the Oval, which was open. No matter how often he passed near that room, he was always inspired by its history. No matter which president happened to be sitting at that desk, the power of the office was so intense that it was like a kind of scent around them all. Gold saw the presidency of the United States as the greatest governmental institution ever devised to expand human freedom and happiness. So he was especially concerned about this order he had come to discuss.

“Sir,” he began, “I won’t take up but five minutes of your time. I am requesting confirmation of an order received at oh-nine-hundred today, directing—”

“I know the order,” the president said. “You’re to prepare to fire the scalar weapon.”

“Yes, sir! I just—sir, what you may not know is that this weapon is not stable. It’s still in development.”

“The tests have worked pretty well.”

“Yes, sir. But you’re going to fire it into the New Madrid fault line.”

“Oh?”

“Mr. President, this thing is going to devastate the entire central United States. You might see half a million deaths and trillions of dollars in damage. Sir, if I may ask, why do you need this?”

“General Gold, you can’t ask. But I do want you to put a hold on that order until further notice.”

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir.”

“Thank you for coming in.”

Gold’s thick neck flushed. He went to his feet, saluted, turned, and stiffly left the room. The president watched until the door was closed, then called for his next meeting to be delayed. He went out into the Rose Garden, bleak in winter, and stood a long time alone and in silence. To slow his pounding heart and damp his rage, he sucked long, deep breaths. And it passed, and he returned to his work.

MIKE WILKES’S NEXT STOP WAS Bell Attached School. They were all college families on Oak Road, so he could be reasonably sure that the children attended Bell, which went from kindergarten through high school. He wasn’t concerned about the Jeffers infant. The grays needed their instrument to be ready by 2012, not in twenty years. That left the two Kelton

boys, Paul Warner and his sister Amy, and Conner Callaghan. There was a fair chance that he'd find his candidate among these children. If not, then he'd expand his search. He would not fail, that was unthinkable.

The school was housed in two elegant old redbrick structures on the edge of the Bell College campus. The place was certainly beautiful, with its tall white columns and broad sports field behind the main complex. As he walked up the long sidewalk to the main entrance, he reached in his side pocket and turned on his Palm Pilot. Tucked in beside it was the remote that would call the triangle.

Now the Palm would record the emissions of any computer in any room he entered. He would be able to access that computer again from the parking lot. If they used paper files, he'd find a way to physically invade them.

He had held the belief for many years that a person with sufficient training and resources quite simply could not be thwarted. Today, he would put that theory to the test.

As school was in session, the doors were locked. He identified himself over the intercom as "Dr. Wenders," interested in enrolling his children in the school.

He was admitted by a student volunteer and led to the principal's office. Mary Childs was a quick-voiced woman, big and ready to smile.

"Dr. Wenders," she said, thrusting out her hand. "I thought I knew everybody on the faculty."

"I'm not on the faculty just yet. I'm considering an offer, so I'm trying to get the lay of the land."

"Oh, okay. How can I help you?"

"My son is a rather special case."

"All right."

"He's extremely bright."

"So is everybody here. The whole school is a gifted-and-talented program, essentially."

"At nine, Jamie devised a muon detector that won a Westinghouse commendation. His IQ is over two hundred. As you know, even in a very accelerated program, students like this can pose some special challenges."

"We have such students."

"I'm surprised to hear that. They're relatively rare."

"Oh, we have one or two."

"That's very reassuring. How do you approach their needs, if I may

ask?”

“Certainly.” She turned aside and began typing into her computer. “Here,” she said, “we devise special enrichment programs to address the needs and strengths of each child.”

“Could I see such a program, something you’ve developed for a two-hundred-plus student?”

“We don’t actually do IQ tests, but there is a student who we’ve identified as hyperintelligent, and we’ve devised a special program for him.”

“Could I see that, please?”

“Well, I can show you the program itself, I think—just a minute, let’s see if I can print out his curriculum without his identity. Yeah—no, it’s not gonna let me do that. Here, I’ll read it.”

As she read off a list of the special tutoring, the accelerated reading program, the various high school and college language, physics, and math classes the child was attending, and his grade-point levels, Mike knew that he had almost certainly identified his kid. If he was also among the Oak Road families, then it was final.

“That’s certainly very impressive.”

“It’s an advantage that we’ve got the college right here, of course. His college-level courses are just a short walk away.”

That little slip told him that it wasn’t a girl. Mary Childs was easy to handle. “That’s a very impressive program. I don’t think my son’s in as good a situation now.”

“Where are you, if I may ask?”

Here was a chance to work his list a little more. He chose the professor with the most candidate children. His response rolled out smoothly. “I’m at Mabry in California. I’m in history.”

“Then you know John Kelton, our department head.”

“I certainly do. He sent me over here, in fact. But he didn’t say anything about his boys being like my son.”

“No. But we do have one actively matriculated. That program is in current use, I can assure you.”

Another two off the list. Nice. That left Paul and Amy Warner and Conner Callaghan among the Oak Road possibilities. But the information had come at a cost: at any time, this woman might mention “Dr. Wenders” to John Kelton. Probably, it would amount to nothing more than a moment of confusion between them, but if it went further, it could be dangerous. “I

haven't actually resigned Mabry yet, so if you don't mind . . ."

"Of course, I understand perfectly. Not a word."

"May I take a tour? Just look in on a few classes? We'll be in middle school."

She conducted him through their science lab first. Among the things it contained was a truly elaborate tangle of lab glass, with three retorts bubbling happily away. "Oh, boy," she said, striding over to the rig. "This should not be left on unattended." She looked quickly around the lab. "Conner?"

Silence.

"That boy, he's always doing this sort of thing. This is supposed to measure the body burden for some-odd-thousand pollutants found in common foodstuffs. But he can't just leave Bunsen burners on like this."

"This is your super-gifted one?"

She laughed. "Please keep *my* confidence, too!"

"Of course."

"The Callaghans have their hands full with this one. He's absolutely awesome. But this experiment's going to have to be moved to Science Hall, we can't have this in our lab anymore. Look at some of that glass!"

"I've never seen anything quite like it."

"Oh, I'm sure it separates each molecule into a different container or something. Probably has five original inventions floating around in there. *And* he speaks French, German, and Spanish and, God love him, Cantonese."

"He must annoy the other students."

"Let's put it this way. If yours comes in, he will be eternally grateful to you for a companion who runs at the same speed."

"My son isn't in this kind of overdrive, but he's close enough to where I can guess that it'll be a relief for both of them." He glanced at his watch. "I'm off to see the libraries," he said. "I want to thank you for your help. You've moved Bell to the top of my list."

"Which is where it darned well should be. We're the best little overlooked and ignored college in the United States."

In other words, a perfect backwater for the grays to hide their bright little baby, Conner Callaghan. On the way back to her office, he said, "I'm seeing a rather high class density."

"I don't think so."

"That class back there—I saw about thirty kids."

"Where?"

“Back opposite the lab.”

She shook her head. “Let’s check that out.” She went into her office and did just what he needed: called up a class list. “Nope. Twenty-two in sixth-grade English B. And that’s high for us. We try to stay around eighteen.”

Back in his car, he opened the Palm and tapped the screen a few times. He was out of Wi-Fi range, so he attached the antenna to the Palm and was soon looking at her computer’s desktop. The class list was still there. He downloaded it to his Palm’s memory.

He had his weapon, now, as well, in the form of that list. Armed with it, he would not need to go near Oak Road to carry out his plan, nor would he need to be anywhere near Conner Callaghan when he died, nor would it appear to be an assassination.

But he would go to Oak Road. Two could play the gray’s lying game, and he planned to trick them into believing that he had bought into their deception. He knew that Conner Callaghan and Paul Warner were in middle school, and that the description given to Lauren was of a high school student. That meant that it was one of the Kelton boys. So Mike would enter the Kelton house and only the Kelton house. The grays would think that he had swallowed their bait.

What he was going to do there and elsewhere in the community did not involve directly killing anybody. Nor was the process in any way extracted from the grays. It had been invented during World War II, in fact, by a Dr. Antonio Krause, who had brought it from Auschwitz to Dr. Hubertus Strughold’s operation in Texas as part of Operation Paperclip in 1947.

By now, it was part of CIA routine. Field-tested, reliable as rain. The only difference between what he had to do and how a field agent might function was that he didn’t have a neat little surgical kit and would have to devise his own.

He drove down to the county seat. He needed a good map of the community, as well as the large property that surrounded the Oak Road development, in addition to a look at the plans of the houses.

By the time he reached Somersburg, the thin light had gone. The sky was dull now, the sun pallid. The air had that empty coldness that portends a blizzard. He was glad of the car he’d chosen. A lot of this work had to be done tonight, and he absolutely could not get stuck, not at any point.

He went into the small county records office, and up to a clerk who sat behind a counter playing Texas Hold ’Em on a computer. He froze his screen

and looked up.

“Any luck?” Mike asked with a smile.

The clerk raised his eyebrows as if to say that yes, he was having some luck, which meant only one thing: he was having no luck. “What can I do you for?”

“I’ve seen a large farm out Oak Road east of the town, and—”

“One, that’s the Niederdorfer farm. Two, they aren’t sellers.”

“I’d still like to take a look at the plat, if I may.”

The clerk got up and came back with a large black record book. Mike took it to one of the three tables in the room and opened it. He familiarized himself with the layout of the farm, and noted down the longitude and latitude. In the car, he would use his Palm Pilot to go online and get a topo map. Unlike a cell phone, a Palm Pilot could not be specifically identified just by using it in a wireless context, as long as it was effectively firewall protected, which his was.

He then went to the pages that contained the little Oak Road development. He copied the plat numbers of each property, then went back to the clerk and asked for the blueprints of the houses.

“You looking to buy?”

“Not sure. I want to see what kind of construction I’m looking at in the area.” This office was too small and this man was too inquisitive. He would remember every detail of Mike’s visit, which was really damned unfortunate.

He finished drawing a diagram of the Kelton place, then returned the book. “I’m looking at the wrong area. Is there an Oak *Street* in Wilton, maybe?”

The clerk consulted a map of the community on the wall. “No, not up there.”

“Well, thank you then.” He cursed himself as he left. This had been sloppy. His problem was that he was too used to power.

He sat in his car, letting the Palm look for a network. Sure enough, it found one—the town clerk’s. It was WEP encrypted. Good, WEP was easy. The software was online in ten seconds, the encryption solved.

He got a topo of the entire eastern half of the state, then went offline and zoomed to the Wilton area. The map was from 1988, but Oak Road was there, and the houses. He saw the way the land worked, coming down in a series of ridges. Across Oak Road was an old rail line, and beyond it a very large forest. Half a mile behind the houses was Wilton Road, with the field

where the glowboy had come down visible between them.

He found one hill with an elevation of a hundred and eight feet, but it wasn't enough to cause him a problem. His choice of the grain elevator for his antenna and transmitter was the correct one. As the trap that would lead to the death of the kid was sprung, the evidence of its existence would be destroyed.

His next step was to buy the various items that would have been in an operative's surgical kit. Everything was important, but the most important was a small reel of narrow-gauge copper wire that would provide both his transmitter's antenna and his receiver's. He also needed a radio transmitter, an X-Acto knife, electrical tape, and, from a drugstore, a topical anesthetic and that old reliable, ether.

He got everything except the drugstore items at a Radio Shack he found in an almost derelict strip mall. There was a chain drugstore down the street, where he picked up a fairly decent tube of anesthetic. The local druggist was able to sell him a bottle of solvent-grade ether.

He drove until he found a rural area, where he opened the transmitter carton. He read the schematic and specifications, opened the back of the transmitter with the tool pack he had bought, and modified the circuit board by bypassing a couple of resistors. The unit would now transmit at a far greater power output than allowed by amateur equipment. Carefully, he stabilized the connections with electrical tape.

He returned to Wilton, driving the quiet country road in an unhurried manner, listening to the radio and making certain that he violated no traffic laws. He passed the motel, observing nothing unusual. His room opened onto the parking strip, which was now empty. He drove to the end of the block and turned. To his right was the field he had come down in the night before, now covered with a new dusting of snow. Snowflakes drifted slowly out of a hard, gray sky. The field was empty, and there was no sign of any tracks, human or vehicular, in the new snow. Beyond the field stood the immense grain elevator.

He drove past the elevator and then turned into its concrete loading area. It was abandoned at this time of year, and the large bay doors were carefully padlocked. He went to the personnel entrance and opened it by sliding a credit card between the door and the jamb. Nobody expected an empty grain elevator to be robbed in a small town, so the security was extremely light.

Inside, he went to the control room. It was simple enough to understand.

The conveyor that moved the grain from trucks into the silo was what he was interested in. He descended to the cellar and threw the switch that turned on the power. Then he went back to the control room and started the conveyor. It screeched and clanged, then began to rattle along doing exactly what he wanted it to. Its tubs threw off dust every time they bounced. Overnight, the constant motion of the conveyor would fill the whole enormous space with a volatile haze. Explosive dust like this was the reason that elevators were not run when the weather was too dry.

Later tonight, he would return and set up the transmitter.

He left the grain elevator and drove out into a neighborhood. He found a corner lot with a house set back on it. The place was silent and dark, the family obviously off at work. He turned into the driveway, parked, and went up to the back door. He tapped on the glass.

A dog barked, came rushing to the door, its claws clattering on the kitchen floor. As it barked furiously, its face kept appearing at the lower edge of the door's window. It was a big dog, he thought some sort of hound, maybe a coonhound. Whatever, a big, mean dog was just what he was looking for.

He had learned how to handle dogs years ago, when he was a young officer and had been in training for the Air Police. But he would not risk tackling the Keltons' mutt without a practice run. The dog was one of the few weapons man had against the grays. They could not control a dog's mind. They hated and feared the dog.

He got the door unlocked after a small struggle with the mechanism. After soaking a handkerchief with ether, he pulled it open.

The dog rushed him, of course, and he clapped his hand over the snout and grabbed the animal by its scruff. While it was still struggling, he pushed his way into the kitchen. By the time he had closed the door with his heel, the dog was limp.

He spent a moment examining the skull, then cut into it about two inches above the right eye, making an incision so tiny that it hardly bled. He inserted a half-inch length of wire into the incision. Now he covered the wound with a little anesthetic. The dog would feel no pain when it woke up. Later, the wound would look like an insect bite, if it was noticed at all in the animal's fur.

He was about to leave when he noticed a faint sound coming from the back of the house. A television, a soap opera. Moving swiftly and quietly, he

was quite surprised to find a man, big, in his fifties, asleep in a chair in the family room.

A nice chance to practice. Working gently and swiftly, he dropped the man into a deeper sleep with the ether, then wired him, too. He did not hypnotize this man. He had no way of knowing what the name “Conner Callaghan” might mean to him, if anything. To direct an assassin at a target, the assassin had to have a means of identifying the target. This was why most of Mike’s subjects would be kids from Bell Attached School. Conner would be killed by somebody who knew him. It would look like a particularly vicious and crazy version of a school shooting.

He looked at his watch. One-forty. So, around breakfast time tomorrow, these two would be the first to enter a state of rage.

THE GRAYS WERE DEPLOYED ACROSS Earth in strict and carefully guarded territories. In the United States, they even adhered to the agreement they had made with the humans, and minimized their activities so that the Air Force would not come buzzing around and annoy them. In the rest of the world, they observed no such strictures.

It was difficult to reach into the human mind, but it was not hard to communicate with each other. The collective was growing excited, almost holding its breath, as the time for the attempt drew nearer. They did not know what their creation would be like, could hardly imagine a mind greater than their own. They felt a sense of worship and hope, and the Three Thieves an even more intimate wonder, because, as his guardians and his link to the collective, they were closest to him. Indeed, the feelings toward Conner were the strongest any gray had known in eons. And the hope, now that they had come this far and were so close to success, was very intense.

The other scouts, a million of them who had been scattered throughout the galaxy searching, had started racing toward Earth at 99 percent of the speed of light as soon as it had been understood what a perfect fit man was, a species that needed the grays as much as they needed man.

Inside the gigantic artificial world that was the main body, creeping along at half light speed, the sorrowing ranks stirred with hope so intense that they thought that a plague of suicide would overtake them if they failed.

When one of the lucky thousand scouts here on Earth tasted of a human dream, or licked the suffering off the soul of a prisoner or swam in the delicious sea of discovery that defined a child, all the billions quivered with

joy, and all longed, themselves, to once again have such feelings of their own.

So, when it became clear that a particularly dangerous satellite was moving from one orbit to another, and that its new orbit would park it twenty-five-thousand miles above Conner's head, the whole mass of the grays fluttered with unease. They knew exactly how this satellite worked, they had seen it built. Had they wished, they could have built a similar instrument based on much more elegant principles, and with it shattered the planet.

They would never do that, of course, not to precious Earth, to precious man. They knew that there must be a way to revive their souls, to make their lives worth living again. Locked somewhere in the human genome was the secret of man's vitality. Conner would find this spark, and understand how to enable the grays to share it.

At least, that was the dream. But if this atrocious weapon was fired at him, maybe the dream would end.

The collective directed a triad to attend to the thoughts of the president. Ever since Harry Truman had, in 1947, ordered his airplanes to shoot at the grays, all presidents were routinely implanted. This made their minds easy to hear, with the result that their most private fantasies, desires, and actions were part of the vast public entertainment the grays had constructed for themselves by implanting humans.

This was one of the main reasons they abducted human beings, to implant them so that they could enjoy them from a distance. Thus some of the most peculiar and most intense people, the ones with the most colorful fantasies—usually deeply hidden—were actually among the most famous creatures in the universe.

This president was a marvelous *seraglio* of sexual invention and hungry, innovative desire. His thought processes were more conventional. Sexy he might be, but he was also an efficient man.

Listening to the flowing whisper of words and watching in their own minds the flickering mass of colors, fantasized human body parts—long feminine legs and white, full breasts, mostly—and the low growls of desire that were the mental “voice” of his subconscious, they saw that he was uneasy about Charles Gunn's murderous request. But would he deny it? Of this they could not be sure. Mind control was not a reliable tool. Also, they did not like to interfere in the action of human will. They had wrecked their own independent spirits by creating their collective. They would not also

wreck man's independence with excessive use of the tools of collective thought.

But this was one time that it was necessary. They began to work on the president's mind, to touch it with images of the suffering the scalar weapon could cause.

As the collective mind of the grays concentrated on the president's decision, they failed to address the building crisis in Wilton, or to see just how serious it was, and Conner's death began to come closer and closer yet, as the fatal hours passed.

TWENTY-TWO

ROB LANGFORD PUT DOWN THE phone. “We’ve got orders,” he said to Lauren. “First, we are to assume that Colonel Wilkes is in the area, second that he is definitely here to kill this child. We are to protect the child at all costs, and deal with Wilkes in whatever way is required.”

“What does that mean?”

“Find him, kill him.”

“Wait a minute on that. Are these orders in writing?”

“No, they are not.”

“I don’t think murder is such a hot idea. I mean, if you don’t have a written order that is definitely legal, that is way out of line.”

“Let me deal with Wilkes. You concentrate on the kid. That’s the way it ought to be, anyway. What we are going to do is uniform up—or rather, I am—and pay an official visit. We will seek cooperation from the parents.”

“How far along is Mike? Do we know?”

“We do not.”

“What if these folks don’t like the Air Force?”

“Our objective is simple. It is to determine if there is an extremely smart child living on Oak Road. If not, then we extend our search to the local schools. Assuming we identify the child, we provide information to the parents and put them under surveillance protection. We must not do anything that might cause these people to resist the approach of the grays to the child.”

They went to the traveling officer’s quarters where Rob had a suite. She remained in his small living room while he changed.

Rob was an attractive guy, and she wanted, she was finding, to do more than sample him the way she had been doing with men since she’d started this job. In fact, she could get serious with this guy. In fact, she thought he was the best man she had ever met.

He was also the most dedicated to his mission and the most businesslike.

They drove off the base and through fourteen miles of slowly worsening

weather, passing through the town and going onto the Bell campus. On the way, they phoned all four Oak Road houses. They got three answering machines and a non-answer. So everybody was where they were supposed to be, which was working at their various occupations on campus or attending school.

“We’ll try the physics guy first. His discipline fits best, I think.”

“The baby’s not our target.”

“No. It could be one of the two teenagers, the Keltons, unless Adam was lying to you. The other three children seem too young.”

“He was lying.”

“Maybe Oak Road doesn’t even figure in it, then. Maybe the whole thing was a feint in anticipation of some discovery they knew Wilkes was about to make. They directed his—and our—attention to Oak Road because it doesn’t matter.”

She felt a shiver of unease the moment the words were out of his mouth. “My sense of it is that Oak Road is very damned important.”

“They don’t make mistakes.”

“Adam made one. He killed my father.”

“That’s true enough.”

“So they do.”

“What do you think they’ll do if they lose the child?”

She thought about it. “I get a feeling of tremendous rage.”

“Are you in touch with them now?”

“I’m not sure. I think I might be.” She shuddered. “Sometimes I feel sort of as if I am. As if I’m part of a great sorrow. I think that’s the heart of the grays, the way I perceive their collective being.”

“That’s chilling.”

He turned the car into a parking lot, beyond which was a neat white sign with black lettering, SCIENCE HALL.

It was a towered old brick pile, Bell’s science center. The enormous windows were designed to gather light, from back in the days before electricity had come to rural Kentucky.

According to a schedule affixed to his door, Dr. Jeffers had been teaching until five minutes ago, so they waited in his office. He had no secretary and the door wasn’t locked. Inside, it was surprisingly uncluttered for an academic’s lair.

“Uh oh,” Rob said, picking up a book from the professor’s desk.

“We have to expect them to be in a tizzy about UFOs. Look what just happened.”

“Well, we have to stay far from that topic.”

Ten minutes passed. Rob remained composed but Lauren did not wait well, and she got progressively more and more nervous. How could he be so collected? He was like too many military people, in a certain deep way resigned to fate, a fault that, in her opinion, came from living by orders.

“Maybe we should try the school,” she said, somehow keeping herself from screaming it at him.

At that moment a short, quick man came through the door. His eyes fixed on Rob’s blues. “Hello?”

Rob went to his feet. Smiled. Extended his hand. “Good afternoon, Dr. Jeffers, I’m Colonel Langford.”

“The UFO!”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re here about the UFO, yes?”

Rob shook his head. “I’m not aware . . .”

“We saw a UFO. There’s videotape. Our whole neighborhood saw it. There was an Air Force jet chasing it.”

“Uh, I don’t think we do that.”

Rob was really very impressive at this.

“We’re here to talk about gifted students.”

“Gifted students?”

“There’s a new program, and we’re informing science departments all over the country. Seeing as you’re head of the physics department here at Bell, and we’ve got Bell on our list, we decided to come on over.”

“On your list?”

“We’re from Alfred,” Lauren said. “I’m in procurement. He’s—”

“Traffic-control supervisor. I make sure our trainees don’t run into each other. We’ve volunteered for this mission, actually.”

“What mission is it? I’m not understanding.”

“The Air Force is looking for a few very gifted, very extraordinary students. Unusual. Freaks, even. That smart.”

“This is Bell College, nobody here is smart. I’m not even particularly smart. In fact, I’m not smart at all, and certainly my students aren’t. They’re a bunch of idiots, actually.”

“Ah. We always thought—”

“A beautiful campus does not mean smart. It only means lots of red brick and white columns.”

“What about that other school?” Rob asked. “The professors’ kids?”

He leaned back in his desk chair, stared at the ceiling. “Actually, my neighbors have a sort of monster. Aggressive, peculiar, frenetically loquacious for age eleven. Builds remarkably detailed model trains.”

This didn’t sound promising to Lauren, but Rob said, “Should we interview him? It could mean an appointment to the Air Force Academy.”

“Somehow I don’t see Conner in a uniform. He’s . . . anarchic. I really find him quite disturbing, but now that you mention it, he is pretty much of a genius.”

Now it sounded promising. “Can we meet him?” Lauren asked.

“His father’s over in the psych building. Daniel Callaghan. Or he could be off fucking some administrator. Apparently he does a bit of that.”

What a bitter man this was. Bitter, mean little man. “So he’s a monster and his father’s a womanizer. Has he got a mother, or has she killed herself?”

Rob shot her a frown, but she couldn’t help it. This was a very nasty little man, and she wanted him to know it.

“Surprisingly not. Actually, I’m being mean, which I suppose what’s got your back up. I am rather frustrated, I’m afraid.” He held up the UFO book. “I believe in this, which has demoted me from CalTech through the middle Ivies to Bell. I thought you were here about our astonishing, wonderful UFO. I thought everything was about to change. Instead, you’re here for some totally conventional and annoying reason. The Callaghans would never let that precious child of theirs anywhere near the military. At least, I hope not. I suppose I was trying to scare you off, to preserve them from a temptation I don’t actually trust them to resist. Truth be told, he’s the most marvelous human being I have ever encountered, and I bless the day we happened by sheerest chance to move next door.”

She knew for certain, then, that they had found the child of the grays. She thought of all the generations of effort that must have gone into his creation, of the struggles in the night, the long and careful thought of those strange, exquisite minds, and all the people who had suffered their bruising attentions, all for this person with the euphonious name of Conner Callaghan.

She knew, also, that she had more than a little of Adam still within her, whether due to some arcane connection devised by the grays or from her own beating heart, but she felt at that moment that, without question, she would

give her life to save him.

Rob had flushed and grown silent. In his silence, he had taken the book from Professor Jeffers. “*UFOs and the National Security State*,” he said. “What does this mean?”

“Essentially that another academic has been marginalized for promoting folklore as fact. However, it’s actually an expertly written and devastating indictment. By careful and scholarly inches, it proves without question that the government is engaged in a cover-up of the UFO phenomenon. So what would you do with him, Air Force people, shoot him, get him fired, trump up some charges against him?”

How extraordinary to sit here and see this man suffering like this for a truth he believed in—and to know that he was right, to know it better than he did, and to still lie to him, and curse his innocent soul and condemn it with your lie.

“Dr. Jeffers,” Rob said, “we’d like to thank you for your time and help. We’ll contact this family in due time. Who knows, perhaps Conner Callaghan will solve the mystery for us.” He handed back the book. “I’ve always thought that the Air Force hid a lot of things that it shouldn’t. Maybe about this. But it’s not my lookout, unfortunately.”

He gave the wild-haired professor a grin that made his face explode into gleaming, twinkling boyishness.

On the walk to the parking lot, the snow was more persistent.

“That was pitiful,” Rob said.

“Why don’t we just tell them?”

“You don’t know? Even yet?”

“Sure I know. You tell people that something is going to invade not only their space but their actual, personal bodies, they are going to panic. I’m panicked, just thinking about it. If there was any viable alternative, I’d take it.”

“I think that’s how we all feel. But our next step is to meet this family. Because if we found this kid, we can be sure that Mike has found him, too.”

“Maybe the grays will attack him.”

“If he showed up with a gun they’d probably abduct him and barbecue his damned brain. But what if he’s more indirect? They have their limits, Lauren, as you must know.”

“Look, I don’t know how to protect him, either, okay! And it’s winter, it’s snowing, and it’s starting to get dark, so one of us had better come up

with an idea. How about it, boss?”

“I’m not the boss. You’re the one closest to the grays. You’re the boss.”

“Fine. I say we go out to Oak Road. Take it from there.”

First they returned to Alfred. Rob threaded his way around to the parking lot closest to his billet and went up to change again. After Jeffers’s reaction, he no longer felt that the uniform was such a good idea.

She sat in the car and listened to the radio, which told the story of the onrushing storm.

TWENTY-THREE

“HI, CHRIS,” KATELYN SAID. SHE was quite surprised to see him. The Jefferses usually called before they came over. As he entered the foyer, snow swirled behind him and he brushed off his coat. He looked extremely solemn, she noticed. “Are you okay?”

“Where’s Conner?”

“Downstairs designing a train wreck. He had an unpleasant day, apparently. Why do you ask?”

“We need to talk. Where’s Dan?”

“Dan,” Katelyn called, “Chris is here.”

“Yo. Hey there,” he said coming in from the kitchen. “Whassup?” Then he saw Chris’s face. “What’s wrong?”

They went into the family room together. The TV was blasting. Katelyn turned it off.

“I got the classic visit from the Air Force today.”

What was he talking about? “What visit?”

“You’re not conversant in the UFO literature, of course. You’ve never read a word of anything I’ve given you.”

“That would be correct,” Dan said.

“I got a visit from the Air Force.” He looked from one of them to the other.

Katelyn had no idea what to say. She was at a complete loss.

“All right, let me background you. There is this legend that when somebody has a serious sighting or gets video or something like that, the Air Force secretly investigates. Do you follow that?”

“Yeah,” Dan said. “Of course.”

Katelyn felt kind of queasy. She wasn’t sure she wanted to hear this.

“Okay, so I went back to my office after class and who’s there but this Air Force colonel and this woman—my God, this *woman!*”

Not another one down, Katelyn thought. “Is Nancy at home? Is she aware of this woman?”

“Yes, she’ll be over in a minute. The baby’s going to sleep. But I didn’t want to wait, and you’ll see why in a second. Just listen. Okay, so I come in and the colonel is looking at *UFOs and the National Security State*, which I believe I foisted off on you last summer.”

“Okay,” Dan said. “Ended up on the shelf with *Trailer Park Ghosts*, and *Bigfoot: First American*, I’m afraid.”

Chris’s voice had a curious, measured quality to it, so different from his normal tone that Katelyn felt a twinge of concern that he might be sort of crazy just at the moment.

She did not want him to be crazy here. She and Dan were trying to work their way past the Marcie incident and having trouble. She wanted to let him make love to her, but so far had been unable. Unable just a couple of hours ago.

“Anyway, I have a prediction. These two folks are going to show up right here at this house sometime very soon, and they are going to ask to meet Conner.”

That focused Katelyn at once. “That’ll be the day,” she said.

“The man is this very big, tough-looking type. But fatherly, sort of. You know this guy is in on the secrets the second you lay eyes on him. Very imposing figure, indeed. The woman—well, you have to see her. She radiates something and it is weird. If I ever saw anyone who might be an alien in human form, it’s this woman. She has these big, staring eyes and she is very, very still. She just sits there staring at you, and you get these bizarre feelings, like she’s penetrating your mind, somehow.”

This was all beginning to sound more than a little crazy, even for Chris. “You’re scared,” she said. “Tell us why.”

“I didn’t realize at first what was going on, and I slipped. I told them something I don’t think I should have. About Conner being a genius.”

“But they were there asking about the UFO,” Dan said, “so what does it matter?”

“Oh, no, they never mentioned the UFO. Of course not. That isn’t the way these things are done. They were asking if we had any physics geniuses at Bell for some kind of Air Force program.”

Katelyn laughed, she couldn’t help it. He glared at her, though, and she stopped.

“I’ve had enough laughter,” he said in a low voice. “The point is—”

“They didn’t actually mention UFOs, though?”

“No, Katelyn, they did not.”

The phone rang. Katelyn got up and took it in the kitchen. “Hi, Nancy.”

“It’s snowing too hard, I’m staying put. Has he told you?” Nancy asked.

“He thinks the Air Force is interested in Conner because of the UFO. He’s not making a lot of sense, Nancy.” She did not tell her that he sounded like he was on his way around the bend, not with a little baby for her to worry about. Anyway, he’d probably be fine in the morning. He had these flights of weirdness every time a big UFO report appeared on one of the crazy-person Web sites he haunted.

“The reality part is that the Air Force is looking for geniuses for some sort of program of theirs,” Nancy said. “The Chris part is that they’re secretly investigating UFOs.”

“Well, then, I’m glad he told them about Conner. Conner could use more stimulation.”

“Be careful, Katelyn. This is some kind of military thing. I’d make certain that you can supervise Conner at all times.”

Katelyn had no real problem with the military. But then again, she would protect Conner and Conner’s mind from any kind of intrusion at all. “For sure,” she said.

“Is Chris drinking, by the way?”

“No, he didn’t ask and I didn’t offer. Dan got tanked at the Peep the other day and I loaded the liquor into the garage attic.”

“Over the Marcie thing, yeah, I heard.”

God, this was such a little place! “You mean, the fact that he got tenure?”

There was the briefest of silences, then Nancy said, “Congratulations, by the way.”

“We’re holding off on the official celebration until after the official announcement. You want me to send yours home?”

“Yeah, please. Before the UFOs come out.”

She went back into the living room, where Dan and Chris were staring at each other like two people at a funeral. “Momma called, Chris. Time to go home.”

“Katelyn,” Dan said, “I’m what they call an abductee, and so are you.”

She sat down. “That again. Okay, Dan, it has to do with folklore, not with reality. There’s nobody being abducted by aliens because there are no aliens, at least not here at the moment. I’ll grant that the video is strange, but

we are in no way involved.”

The doorbell rang—and sent a shock through her. Silence fell. Dan jumped to his feet, strode off to answer it.

Katelyn brushed past him. “I’ll get it.”

She swung the door open.

A QUARTER OF A MILE away, Mike Wilkes crouched watching the Kelton house. He was freezing cold, despite the fact that he’d bought boots, gloves, and a black Eddie Bauer jacket. He knew the house’s layout, and by nine he also knew that the boys both slept in the same room, that the dog was a Doberman, and that nobody in the house was in good enough condition to match him, despite the boys’ age advantages.

Lights flickering drew his gaze to the road. A car came, moving slowly in the snow. He slid back a little, lest the lights reflect on the lenses of his tiny, light-amplifying binoculars. He did not recognize the vehicle, but he could see two dim figures inside.

The lights went out abruptly, and he was sure that it had stopped around the bend. That would mean that it was either at the Jefferses’ or the Callaghans’ house. That was of interest, and he had to find out. He left his position but remained behind the tree line as he worked his way to a location that would enable him to see the last two houses on the road.

OVERHEAD, THE THREE THIEVES SAW the radiant energies of all the bodies on Oak Road. Given the alteration of the deadly satellite’s orbit, they were on full alert now. Below them, they observed the shimmering darkness that was Colonel Wilkes moving among the trees. The Thieves were uneasy about Wilkes being out here. But he showed no interest in the Callaghan house. The collective had instructed them to let him proceed, as long as he didn’t threaten Conner directly. In fact, it was eager for him to proceed. Maybe he had bought their little trick.

MIKE RETURNED TO HIS ORIGINAL position. He had wanted to see if it was a motor pool car. It was not. Not only that, it was in front of the Jeffers house. His conclusion: continue with his plan.

KATELYN WAS THUNDERSTRUCK TO SEE the very people that

Chris was talking about standing on her stoop. They were snowblown and miserable looking, and she immediately let them in.

In the family room, Chris, smiling tightly, introduced them. He was at least partly right about the appearance of the Glass woman. She had huge eyes, but they worked well in her face. She was a beautiful woman, and Katelyn knew instantly that her friend Colonel Langford was head over heels in love with her. Was she weird? Not at all.

They began a spiel about a special Air Force program for the very brilliant.

“Now,” Katelyn said, “let me get this straight. You put Conner in this tutorial program. But he does or doesn’t have to commit to the Air Force Academy?”

“Oh, no,” Miss Glass said, “no commitment at all. What will happen is that I’ll visit Conner daily and work with him in these accelerated concepts we’ve been referring to.”

“And back we go,” Dan said, “around the circle again. Let me be blunt. We want, in writing, an exact description of what you intend to do with Conner. And we want to be physically present at all times when you are with him.”

“And why don’t you just tell the truth about this?” Chris said.

Lauren Glass turned to him, and for an instant Katelyn saw a flicker in her eyes that was most definitely not normal. Katelyn thought she knew why. This girl was also super-bright. There is an aura around such people. They are not the same as the rest of us.

“The truth is that we’re in trouble with some important classified problems, and the country needs its very best minds to work on them.”

“Is it weapons?” Dan asked.

“Sir,” Colonel Langford said, “I can only repeat that we cannot go into detail.”

“Not with us,” Katelyn said, “but with our eleven-year-old son. I don’t think so.”

“Yes!” Chris said. “Way to go!”

Katelyn watched Lauren Glass grow very still, then saw her lips go into a line and her face become pale. The big eyes glittered with suppressed rage.

“Folks, I’m sorry, but I think we’re ready for you to leave,” Dan said. “Because I think that you’re here because of that UFO and aliens and abduction and all that sort of thing, and the fact that you’re trying to involve

our son just plain scares me.”

“Me, too,” Katelyn said. She stood up. “So let’s just call it a night, shall we? And don’t come near our son, because if we find out you’re trying to approach him, we’re going to report you to the police.”

They gave each other frantic glances. “Ma’am, sir—we can talk to him. We can approach him. We have the right.”

“Okay, that’s it,” Dan said. He went out across the hall and upstairs, and Katelyn suddenly knew what he was doing.

“Dan!”

“Ma’am, your son is the most intelligent human being presently alive,” Lauren Glass babbled. “Please listen to us, because I am uniquely capable of teaching him what he needs to learn.”

Dan came rushing back with his hand thrust in his pocket.

“My gun is bigger than your gun,” Colonel Langford said with frightening nonchalance. “I want to see that thing on this table right now.” He pointed at the coffee table. “Right now, Dan. Do it!”

Dan took the pistol out and put it on the table.

“You’re right,” Langford continued. “This does have to do with certain extraordinary secrets.”

“At *last*,” Chris said.

“I remember me and Katelyn being brought together when we were kids. Being brought together in this dark, womb-like place. And I think you might know something about what this was.”

“I have some odd memories, too,” Katelyn said. “But nothing . . .” She trailed off. She didn’t know what more to say.

“We believe that you were abducted together, so that, by a process we don’t understand, you would inevitably later marry and have Conner.”

Katelyn’s mouth was so dry that she could hardly speak. She didn’t remember anything about any aliens when she was a kid, and she hadn’t even known Dan back in Madison, but she had gone from being furious at these people and scared because they were obviously a couple of stinking liars, to a sort of nauseated dread. From the dark, in other words, to the very dark.

“And Conner is the smartest person in the world,” she said.

“There could be others, of course. But he must be among no more than a very, very few. Certainly, in this country, yes.”

“That part doesn’t surprise me. But as far as me and Dan—I met Dan years after we lived in Madison. So that’s all conjecture.”

Again, Lauren Glass smiled. She was a person with a thousand different faces, it seemed to Katelyn. This one combined what appeared to be contempt with anger, thinly masked beneath the grin. And the more you looked at her eyes, the odder they got.

“Conner’s a staggeringly good physics student,” Chris said. “He’s doing advanced graduate-level physics at the college and his work is . . . well, beautiful. The grasp of math is a lovely thing to witness.”

Langford spoke, his voice dense with authority. “Dr. and Mrs. Callaghan, what has happened here is that your child is intended to be the point of contact between mankind and a very old, very brilliant, and very advanced galactic civilization.”

Katelyn felt suddenly horribly dizzy. Then a sort of bomb seemed to go off within her. Did this mean that Chris’s nonsense . . . wasn’t?

Something came rising up from deep within her that seemed like a kind of release, as if some part of her had been in a trap and was now free.

To her own amazement she reached up so quickly that she didn’t have a chance to check herself, and slapped the colonel across the face.

Nobody said a word. Then Dan began to shake. For an instant, it seemed as if he was having a full-bore seizure, but it emerged into silent laughter. His eyes were closed tight, tears filling them.

Lauren Glass had cried out softly when the slap had taken place. Now she sat still and silent, rigid in her chair.

Rubbing his cheek, the colonel said, “It’s an understandable reaction.”

“I’m sorry! I just—Dan, will you stop that!”

He took a deep breath. Another. “What do we do?”

“What do you do?”

“With our little boy? Who is he? Who are we?”

“Let me give you a piece of advice,” Langford said, “you just take things as they come. Don’t worry about anything happening to your boy. He’s well protected.”

“He needs to be protected?” Katelyn asked. But then it seemed a rather obvious question. Of course he needed to be protected, and so did his secret. “I don’t want anybody told this.”

“Oh, no. Not at all. We tried to avoid telling even you.”

“This should be public knowledge. It’s immoral to hide it.” Chris’s face was alight with zeal and excitement.

Katelyn had a sudden, chilling thought that he might go on TV with that

stupid video the Keltons had made. “Conner’s life probably depends on hiding it,” she told him. “Think about it. Think how many different fanatic groups would want him dead. How many governments would fear his power.”

“I hadn’t considered that.”

“Announcing the most amazing railway accident in the history of this or any other century!” There stood Conner, his shirt smeared with model paint and his tattered engineer’s cap on the back of his head. He glared at them. “Doom on the railways. Come and seeeee . . .” Then he saw the two strangers. “Oh. I’m so sorry.” He came into the room.

“This is our son, Conner,” Dan said. “This is, uh, Mr. Langford and Miss Glass. They’re from the, from, ah—”

“We’re from St. Francis Parish, Conner,” Colonel Langford said. “Soliciting for a fund drive.”

“I don’t guess this is the right moment for a train wreck, then. It’s quite amazing, though.”

“Conner has a train set,” Dan explained to the two wondering faces. “He often builds staged railroad accidents.”

“I guess Catholics wouldn’t approve, somehow,” he said. “We don’t actually go to church—or, oops, perhaps—”

“We know that, Conner.”

Conner took a step back. He had noticed a sense of winter that clung to them both. They were not pleasant people to be around. But all suspicions immediately dropped away when the colonel said, “We’d love to see the train wreck.”

“Great! I’ve been working very hard.”

“Conner, did you do my homework?” Chris asked as the adults followed him down into his basement room.

“*Absolutment*,” he said. “I’ve got a new way of integrating the calculus, boy-o.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I have *no* idea! Look at it and see if it flies.” He crossed his room, picked up a badly tattered notebook, and thrust it into Chris’s hands. “And now, may I present, the Wreck of Old Ninety-seven.” He looked up at Lauren. “It’s a metaphor,” he said, “of my day.”

“Conner, this is beautiful,” she said, looking over the train board. “Oh my God, Rob, look at this. Look at the detail!”

“Glad you like it,” Conner said. There was something in his voice that Katelyn knew well. These two were going to get a surprise.

OUTSIDE, MIKE WILKES HAD BEEN forced to return to his car, which was hidden about a quarter of a mile away. The snow was getting more persistent, and he couldn’t risk it becoming immobilized. He had processed a few of the kids in the town, but he needed the night to finish his work. He wished the damn Keltons would go to sleep. He pulled the car out into the road and drove it for a distance in the giving snow, getting it onto the crown of the road. There would be no plow through here tonight. He decided that he had about an hour. After that, he was going to be forced to abandon this part of the plan.

Not good, possibly even fatal.

WHILE THE COLLECTIVE WORRIED ABOUT the president, the Three Thieves worried about the fact that Wilkes was still close to Conner.

Adam was with them as well, preparing himself for what would happen tonight.

He detected a familiar voice. Lauren was nearby. He shifted his interest away from Wilkes. The collective wanted to let him make his mistake, and that seemed a good idea. But Adam needed Lauren away from here, too, and soon. What was to be done required absolute privacy.

He sailed across the snowy fields and into the yard behind the Callaghans’ house. There he built a vivid picture of Lauren’s car being covered with snow. He sent this like a drift of smoke into her mind.

AS THE TRAIN MOVED AROUND the tracks, Conner made sound effects, screeching and huffing. Then he touched an edge of track, which sprung open.

“It broke,” Lauren shouted.

The next instant, the wonderful black-and-brass steam engine, spewing smoke, struck the sprung track and bounded off into the superbly modeled little town. It churned down the main street crashing into stores, snapping light poles, and sending figures flying.

“Wow,” Rob said into the silence that followed this remarkably realistic effect.

“Why did you do this?” Lauren asked the boy.

“So I can build it all up again a new way. Hey. I just got this flash. Are you people gonna want to get back to town tonight?”

“Well, yes, we live in town.”

“Then I see in my mind’s eye your car getting slowly buried. Or, actually, quickly.”

THOUGHTS HAD TO BE PUSHED into Lauren’s mind, but the child just sucked them up. Adam regarded him, a smiling, strutting little thing, the aura around his body vastly more complex and colorful than those around the others.

Adam prepared to die.

TWENTY-FOUR

CONNER WOKE UP—AND REALIZED instantly that he was not in bed. He could hear wind and he seemed to be standing.

He opened his eyes. White flying dots. Cold. A leathery thing beside him. This was all impossible, so he closed them again. He opened them for just a second, saw darkness and millions of white dots, and closed them again, tight.

He surveyed his situation. The strange church people had left, he'd gone to bed in his upstairs room. Mom had come in and stared at him and gone all eerie. She'd cried for no apparent reason and Dan had come and they'd hugged each other, then gone across the hall to their room. Sometime after that, he'd fallen asleep.

Without opening his eyes again, he tried to decide what was happening to him now.

Then he knew: he was going down the street in the snow, but he wasn't walking, he was sort of . . . flying.

Which couldn't be real, therefore he was asleep.

Again, he opened his eyes. He could see the house, which was drifting back behind him. This looked like a dream and felt like a dream, but it sounded and smelled like the real world.

Perplexing, in other words—not a dream, yet not possible.

For a second he thought he heard the living room clock chiming, but it was the wind clattering pine branches in Lost Land, which was what he had named the big woods across the street.

The woods were drifting closer, home farther away. There were three big leathery heads bobbing along around him.

He gasped, started to scream, then forced himself back under control. He had to stay calm, this was contact, it had to be handled with all the skill and intelligence he possessed. *You're up to this*, he told himself.

But he was being *taken*.

Okay, this was bad, he was being kidnapped by these guys, no question, no way to get around it. Is kidnapping ever good? If you're going to be straight, why not just ring the doorbell?

He realized that he was hearing something odd in his left ear, a sort of deep whine, if such a sound could exist. He reached up and touched an earbud. Then he saw that one of the big-headed creatures had an MP3 player. There was no music coming out, though, just this odd noise.

He ripped the earbud out and immediately fell down in a big puff of snow. For a second he lay trying to understand just how this worked. It was *sound*, sound that had caused him to defy gravity. Okay, there had to be some kind of harmonic—or, no, was he crazy, he'd figure the damn thing out later!

The creatures swirled around with their mouths open and their hands on their cheeks. They were not menacing looking. In fact, far from it. They looked scared, too. Then one of them thrust the earbud at him—not toward his ear but toward his hand.

He looked down at it. They hovered and wobbled their heads.

Please, came a sort of nice-sounding voice, the same one he'd heard in his head during the encounter with Paulie.

No, it wasn't on, not out in the woods with no explanation. He ran back toward the house as fast as he could go.

What can we do to help you stop screaming?

He's not screaming, you fool, he's running!

He ran faster, his legs pumping. "Dad! Mom! Help me! Help me!"

The creatures buzzed around him like giant flies. The one with the earbud buzzed along ahead of him, face to face, holding out the earbud.

The house was farther away than he thought. It was hard to make progress in the snow.

Then the creature made a sort of thrust at his head. *Sorry! Sorrrysorry!*

The earbud was in again and he was all of a sudden running in midair. He yanked it out and hit the ground and got up and ran again, his feet crunching in the snow.

He got to the front walk, vaulted the gate, landed in the snow, fell and got up, then slipped on the icy stones and fell harder, rolling off into the drift-choked front yard. He went slipping and sliding up the walk, his feet stinging from the cold. He reached the door, pulled on the handle.

Locked. He rattled it. "Mom! Dad!" He dragged at it. "Oh, please, please . . ." He saw the doorbell under its little light, and moved to press it.

We have to!

We can't!

Conner, come on!

Go in him, you idiot! NOW!

Conner then felt something that few human beings have ever felt. He experienced the sense of something moving inside his own body, slithering up from his gut as if alive.

OF COURSE, THE THREE THIEVES could have turned him off with a little whiff of gas, and taken him wherever they cared to take him, but that was not what this was about. The collective had known that Conner would need to be tamed.

HORRIFIED AT WHAT HE WAS feeling, Conner looked down at himself. His chest and belly were visible, his pajama top having blown open in the wind. Something glowed through his skin, and it was coming up from his chest toward his head. Bright light shone out of his body in the shape of the thing, a snake that twisted and turned inside.

He cried out, he clutched at his chest—and the thing shot into his head and the cry was stifled. His head glowed for an instant so brightly that the whole front yard was lit up. The icicles on the windows reflected blue light brighter than a flashbulb.

Then it was dark. *Real* dark. Because Conner was not anywhere anymore. He was not looking out of his eyes, it didn't feel like. What it felt like was so odd that he could hardly believe it, but the truth was that he seemed to have been swallowed by his body, as if he'd gone down into his own stomach.

This was all so totally new that he could not even think about it, let alone explain it. In truth, he was being affected by a simple electromagnetic field that was being applied with great care to about two million specific neurons in his brain. It wasn't magic. There is no magic. There is only the unknown—in this case, a very old and experienced science possessed of a great knowledge of how bodies and brains work.

Objectively, he recognized that it must be some sort of illusion. Even so, the fear was a claw clutching his heart.

He felt his body turn and begin to move away from the house. No amount of effort would get him back into his head or enable him to regain

control of his movements.

He tried to call to Dad, then, in his rising panic, to the police. Nothing worked. He could not make his voice turn on. Despairing now, he thought of how very, very sad his parents were going to be, never knowing what happened to him like this.

Somebody help me. Please, somebody!

We are helping you.

He felt himself turn, felt his feet dip into the snow, felt it blow against his chest.

Now I will remove myself from you, the voice said. Do not run again.

In a moment, he began to go up through his body. In another moment, he was seeing through his eyes again.

The wind blew, the pines moaned, snow flew. He had been taken deep into Lost Land, so deep that there was nothing around them but pines. No lights, no houses, just the pale glow of the snow.

We're the Three Thieves but we didn't steal you.

Yes we did.

Shut up!

"Okay . . . I hear you."

Nobody moved.

He was well aware of the mystery he was facing. Remarkable, indeed. Then he saw movement in the woods, and a fourth gray appeared. He was not squat and kludgy like these three. He strode on long legs and his head was more in proportion. Coming through the snow, he was as graceful as a dancer.

He stopped behind the three and raised a long, thin arm, sort of like an Indian chief or something. Conner noted: no muscles. Therefore the skin itself must contain millions of micromuscles.

He took a step toward him. Conner took a step back. He came closer.

Conner yelled as loud as he could: "Get away! Get away from me!" Then he clapped his hands over his mouth, actually surprised at himself. But there was more than one Conner in here, and the other one, the little child alone in the woods, was still really, really scared and did not care about the fact that this was contact, it was historical and damn awesome that it was *him* doing it or any of that.

The other Conner took over and ran, he just ran, he didn't care where, deeper into Lost Land, past the great, frowning trees, into the tangled places

where nobody ever went.

The more he ran, the more the panicked Conner replaced the curious Conner, and the wilder and more frantic his flight became.

Soon he began to feel his feet burning. He was getting cold. When he wasn't around the grays, he needed more than just pajamas out in this blizzard. Something they did had been keeping him warm. Curious Conner thought, *Heat without radiance or forced air or anything. I wonder how they do that?*

And he slowed down a little. Now his breath was coming out in huge puffs and his feet were really burning and it was meat-locker cold.

Sobbing like an infant, he stumbled to a halt. He forced the tears down, and finally stood trembling from the cold, rubbing his shoulders.

The wind roared in the trees, and a big gust stung him head to toe with snow. Cold this cold felt just like being burned and he screamed into its howl, but his loudest cry was so small against it that he could hardly hear it himself.

This was idiotic. He was here to think, not cry like some idiot. So okay, he turned around and around, trying to get his bearings.

No bearings.

He hopped from foot to foot to keep the agony down. But it didn't work, he was barefoot in the snow in the middle of a blizzard and wearing cotton pajamas. He was quite familiar with the dangers of hypothermia. If he'd known the temperature, he could probably have calculated to the second just how long before he lost so much reason that he could no longer hope to survive.

He had never thought much about dying before, but he thought about it now because it appeared that it was going to happen to him. He was already getting numb and that was a really bad sign, it was a sign of death coming, he knew that. The next step was the final sleep.

“Dad! Mom! Hey, I'm lost out here! Hey, HEY!”

Ridiculous, meaningless effort.

“Grays! Hey, I'm here! I'm willing to negotiate! HEY!”

Nothing.

How could such a smart kid turn into such a moron? He'd just blown contact, and probably frozen himself to death in the process.

When he tried to walk, his legs wouldn't move. Muscle spasm due to advancing hypothermia.

He did not want to die before he'd kissed a girl or had a paper published,

or even driven a damn car.

His pajamas snapped in the wind, his face got more and more caked in frost, and he prayed his usual prayer, “Any God who happens to be real, this is Conner Callaghan and I could use some help. Thank you! Uh, *really* use it!”

The world around him seemed to grow quiet. He looked down at his right hand. He could see the snow hitting it and bouncing off, but he could no longer feel anything. But he did feel something really funny, a sort of jittering in his heels. It spread through his feet, and he noticed it in his hands, too. Then it went up his arms and legs, bringing with it wonderful warmth like a really good blanket would if he was cold and Mom came in and tucked him in.

Then a face popped out from behind a tree, huge eyes, tiny mouth communicating surprise, fear, concern all at once. *Boy*, Conner thought, *do they ever look like bugs.*

Oh, no.

“I won’t run, relax. As long as you keep me warm, consider us friends.”

What’s he saying?

I have no idea.

Striding out of the snow on his long, thin legs, came the tall gray. As he came closer, Conner could see that his body shimmered with light, as if he was swathed in flickering, ever-changing rainbows. His eyes gleamed with bright reflections of the trees around them even though it was night, almost as if they somehow enhanced light. Then he saw this beautiful figure in the creature’s eyes, a person blazing with light of a thousand different colors.

He looked around him, trying to see this person. Then he moved his hand, and saw that it was him. He looked down at his own arm, and the glow wasn’t there. Only in the eyes of the gray. He knew about auras, that they were a faint electrical field emitted by the nervous system. The gray’s eyes were somehow amplifying its visibility.

As the tall gray came closer, the three short, squat ones buzzed nervously around him.

Okay,” Conner said, “my name is Conner Callaghan and I’m going to do this. I hope.”

Talk to us in your head. Form the words in your mind, but don’t speak them aloud. We will be more easily able to hear you, then.

He sounded actually sort of okay. An ultra-precise voice that appeared

right in the center of your head, as if you were wearing earphones. He felt for that earbud, but it was gone. “How are you doing that?”

I can't hear you!

“WHAT—no. Uh . . .” *How do you do this?*

I don't know. You're the only person we've ever managed it with. With the others, we have to use pictures. They can't hear us talking.

He was quite close now, so close that Conner could see that he had faint, white hair on his head and a wrinkled face.

I am old. We are all old.

Where are you from?

Endless time. We are so old we've lost our history.

What is your mission?

You are my mission.

What does that mean?

There was no response . . . except there was. He hung his head.

Are you . . . crying?

I think so.

Why?

He shook his head, then held out his hands. They were long and the fingers were like snakes tipped with claws. Slowly, his own hands shaking, Conner reached out to him. They stayed like that, their fingers an inch apart, both of them trembling.

The three others came closer. They hovered around the taller one, bouncing slightly in the air when a gust of wind came.

The tall one touched Conner's cheek with the softest finger he thought you could ever feel. It did not just touch you, it made vibrating electric contact with your skin.

Little colt, not ten minutes ago, my touch would have made you run again. But you do not run.

Am I going to get to go home?

Home . . .

You're crying now.

The gray lay down in the snow. The three others hovered over him. Something then happened that was completely beyond comprehension to Conner. They had a black object that turned out to be a jar, which they opened, screwing the top off in a flash. Out of it they drew three gleaming butcher knives.

As Conner watched in stunned astonishment, they cut open the tall gray like Dad gutting a fish. The knives made a ripping sound.

He struggled. They were killing him.

“Stop it,” Conner shouted. “*Stop it!*”

One of them turned toward him, brandishing his knife, and Conner backed away, holding out his hands, trying to convey that he would not interfere.

They opened the gray from his featureless groin to the top of his head, splitting his whole body in half. Inside was a swirling mass of lights in a million, million colors, and Conner recognized them. They looked like an immense star field imaged by the Hubble Space Telescope. They looked like the whole universe, somehow contained inside the body of this gray.

They lifted it out, and it wobbled in the air between them, the universe in the shape of a gray, snow swirling around it, flakes blowing into it and away into the vastness of the stars.

There was humming, voices that sounded both innocent and wise, and the notes were so beautiful that Conner gasped aloud, and wanted to cry because this was the richest, the most lovely sound he had ever heard. It was a sound with a scent, almost, as if the flowers of heaven had bloomed.

THE LITTLE GROUP OF GRAYS with Conner were by no means the only ones who were witness to what was happening. On the contrary, there was vast witness in the huge device that carried the main body toward Earth. The gigantic sphere was now two light years away and had been decelerating almost since 1947, when it had turned in the direction of Earth. Large though it was, with its thousand-mile diameter, it was still far too small to be detected by earthly telescopes. In fact, it probably wouldn't be noticed until it was actually in orbit around the planet, because its surface was black, designed to absorb any and all light energy that might reach it.

Inside, a tiny sun glared in a strangely constricted sky. In fact, this was a miniature star just six hundred feet across, built by the grays and capable of shining steadily for a million years, at which time it would explode and instantly vaporize the whole sphere. If they hadn't made it long before then, it wouldn't matter anyway. There would be nothing left in the sphere but dust.

Its inner surface was landscaped to an exact replica of the grays' desert home, with cities made of white houses, domed and looking like adobe. A shield moved around the central sun, bringing fifty hours of darkness every

fifty hours to each part of the sphere, the same amount of day and night that the grays had known at home.

As they needed nothing and ate nothing, the grays had no economic life. They had freed themselves from sexual reproduction an epoch ago, then discovered that pleasure is founded in desire, and without reproductive needs, desire fades.

They would have gone collectively mad in this trapped chamber, had they not been able to venture with the earthly triads into the mind of man.

They watched now, sitting in their houses, their heads bowed in concentration, as Adam gave his whole being, all of his experience, all of his knowledge, all that he was, to Conner.

An outline of the child's body stretched across their strange sky, a body filled with stars, and with it came the wind and the night and the snow.

Slowly, as they listened and felt, one of them and then another, then more and more, raised his head and came to his feet. The tall, gracile ones, the short, squat ones, all of them in their unimaginable billions, raised their heads.

Then they ascended from their white cities, rose into the air, and began to fly like so many soaring eagles, and it became clearer what was happening. These creatures, who could neither laugh nor smile, were doing the only thing they could to express an emotion they had not known in many a long age: they were dancing with happiness.

THE STRANGE FIGURE WENT ROUND and round Conner, its head getting smaller, its legs and arms thicker, its body like a fluid of stars, taking on a different shape, the shape of a human being, and getting brighter, too.

Each snowflake that touched the thing now went up in a tiny puff of steam, and it was beautiful, the smoking snow and the brightness, and the humming of the thing as if the wind itself had learned to sing.

Conner began to quake down inside his stomach and up his spine and everywhere, even in his toes and in his eyes, and he realized that the thing was vibrating, too.

“Momma . . .”

The thing came closer to him.

“MOMMA!”

Then the humming was all around him, it was in him and his chest was vibrating with it, and he felt as if he had risen off the ground or gotten very

large, and for an instant the snowflakes that had looked like stars around the thing were around him, and were, instead, a whole tremendous universe of stars.

Then it was dark again and Conner had fallen down in the snow. He could not rise. He was completely weak, and when he closed his eyes, he saw the universe in his head, and he saw it, too, when he looked at his palms, in his hands, stars swirling inside his skin.

The three grays pushed at the tall one until his body closed up again. Then he rose in the air between them, and the four of them ascended, wobbling and buzzing, into the storm.

“Hey! Hey, you! I am *still willing to negotiate!*”

It got cold again. Conner could no longer see stars inside himself. The wind howled around him and he screamed in agony and clutched his pajamas around him.

Whump whump whump whump.

Up in the snowy sky, a shadow, black and huge. Then light shining down, a glaring blue-white searchlight beam.

The light shone so bright on Conner that he could hardly look into it. He knew that it was a helicopter, and that it must be here to rescue him, and he got up and wallowed in the snow, into a clearing among the pines, waving and waving and yelling with all his might, “I’m here, I’m here!”

Wind from the rotors hit him and with it came ferocious, lung-shattering cold. He screamed, covered his head, and turned away from the blast.

“Conner! Conner Callaghan!” a voice shouted, barely audible over the churning of the helicopter blades and the screaming of the wind.

It was a man in a helmet, not a gray, coming down a rope ladder from the chopper. He had on a faceplate so you couldn’t see his face, but he sounded strong and, above all, normal.

The helicopter roared off into the storm and was gone. The guy knelt before Conner on one knee, and quickly wrapped a space blanket around him. “I’m going to take you home, boy.”

Conner threw his arms around the man, who held out his big gloved hands. “Come on, buddy.” Conner was not a small kid, but the guy was really tall, and picked him up easily. “We need to warm up those feet real quick.”

It felt so good to be carried that Conner just leaned his head against the guy’s shoulder, and let himself be cozy in the space blanket. As the guy strode along, he watched the woods slip away behind them.

“Conner, lots of new things are going to happen to you, I suppose you’ve realized that.”

“I’m sort of getting that feeling.”

“You’re going to have a teacher. You met her earlier tonight. Lauren Glass. I want you to know that you can count on her absolutely.”

“Who are you?”

“Somebody else who’s concerned with your well-being.”

He could feel that it was true, that there was goodness radiating from this man like heat. “Man, I’m glad you found me.” He closed his eyes.

“Sleep, child,” the man said, and held his head against his shoulder.

Then somebody was shaking him. He stirred, pulled at the blanket—and shot straight up in bed. “Dad!”

“You’re having a nightmare, son.”

“I was . . . outside. I was outside and—” It felt so good to see Dad there that he just threw his arms around him. “Listen, it was no dream. *No dream!* I was out in the woods, with—”

Conner no!

“What?”

“Conner? Out in the woods? Go on.”

“I mean, uh, in the dream. Obviously. Look, let’s go back to sleep.”

Conner lay back in the bed. Dad lingered. Good, let him stay.

Why not tell him? Conner asked.

In time, Conner, in all good time.

The voice was different, Conner noticed, bigger, somehow, echoing.

Who are you?

The collective.

Okay. What is the collective?

Conner, we are nearly seven billion, and we need your help.

“You’re kidding!”

Shh!

“What? Kidding about what?”

“Let’s go to sleep, Dad, okay?”

“Sure, Conner . . . of course.”

He could hear singing, then, the same tune that he had heard in the woods. He sensed, but in an indistinct, unformed way, an immense shadowy sea, that seemed to be made up of numbers and words and this deep, fleeting song. It was knowledge, he decided, so high and fine that it was a music,

totally simple, utterly pure.

“Something’s happening to me, Dad.”

Dad had tears in his eyes. “Conner, you look like stars.”

“I do?”

DAN COULD NOT UNDERSTAND. HE saw his son, but his son now appeared to be a child made of the stuff of the night sky, a child whose body was somehow shining out of the planetarium of his own boyhood, and he heard a song from his boyhood, a beautiful voice humming “*Suo Gan*,” the song by which his own mother had seen him off to sleep when he was scared, just come back from a journey into the dark.

He sat on the bedside, and met the music with the words in the old Welsh tongue of his mother’s people: *Huna blentyn yn fy mynwes, Clyd a chynnes ydyw hon . . . sleep, my child, at my breast, ’tis love’s arms around you.*

Slowly, as Conner fell into sleep, the stars in his body faded as if with the coming of morning, and Dan was left with his boy gently breathing, lost in the deep sleep that blesses and heals childhood.

Katelyn came, and he stood up. “A miracle,” he said. “Katelyn, a miracle.” He embraced her.

“What do you mean?”

He could not explain it, not as it had been. “I just think you gave me such a grand kid.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder. Arm in arm, they returned to their own bed.

Outside, the storm howled wild, and the footprints of the man in the mask, who had carried Conner home all unseen, and entered the house by stealth and returned him to his bed, slowly filled with snow.

TWENTY-FIVE

AS THE WEE HOURS WORE on, Mike drove the car yet again out of the snow, and went to check the Keltons. He was very annoyed with this family, who were so damnably late to bed. But this time, there was only a single dim light showing out of the upstairs bathroom window.

He trotted out into the broadness of the road. In the distance, he saw a flash and thought perhaps he heard a shout carried away by the wind. A long minute's careful watching and listening brought only the hissing of snow and the moaning of the wind.

He glanced up at the sky. According to the radio, the storm would not abate until morning. That was important to him, because his tracks had to be covered.

He proceeded up the rougher edge of the property, where there would be flower beds in a few months. Any remaining suggestion of tracks would be harder to spot here. He moved to the back of the house, then examined the doors and windows. He found an unlocked window. Carefully, he examined it for any sign of an alarm system. Finding none, he slid it open and pulled himself into the house.

He closed the window behind him. Standing absolutely still, he got used to the sounds of the place. He prepared some ether. His first challenge would be the dog. It was awake now, but would soon fall asleep again, as long as his odor didn't reach its nostrils. The reek of the ether would cover it, however.

He closed his eyes and listened. He had to locate that animal or he had to back out of here. He moved farther in, through the dining room, to the foot of the stairs in the front hall. It was sleeping on the landing. The instinct of the watchdog is to block the path.

He took a step, another. Could he get around it? He took another step. Now he was on the step just below the landing, looking down at the animal.

The step across it was too long. So he had to use the ether. He came down on his haunches and laid the soaked cloth ever so gently over the

animal's muzzle.

He waited. The dog's breathing deepened. Now it began to rattle in its chest. He could kill the dog. He'd enjoy that, he detested dogs and their reeking shit and their brainless fawning over people who weren't worth a damned glance. Like this family of fatsos. But the dog was too useful. First, the grays couldn't control the minds of dogs. Second, he could—and to great effect.

More confident now, he went to the top of the stairs. The parents would be the lightest sleepers, so he implanted and hypnotized them first. This hypnosis was a simple process, taking only a few moments. The secret of it was that the words were chanted in a rhythm that caused them to be perceived by the subject as his own thought. These people would wake up in the morning thinking violently about Conner. When they came into range of his transmitter in town, the irritation to their temporal lobes would cause the anger to become an uncontrollable obsession.

He went next into the boys' room and did them with equal efficiency.

Just like that, and very neatly after the agonizingly slow start, his mission on Oak Road was accomplished.

THE THREE THIEVES ALL HEARD it at the same time: breath sliding through nostrils, getting louder. Then they saw Wilkes leave the Keltons' house. *Very well*, the collective said, *let him go*. There was a flicker of suspicion, however, when no soul drifted out of the structure. If Wilkes believed that the Kel-ton child was his target, why had he not killed him?

Of course, he would want to attempt to deceive the grays. He would not want them to know he had done the murder. He would have created some sabotage within the structure that would make the death seem an accident.

The collective had one of the Three Thieves physically observe Wilkes depart in his car. The Two listened to the brown moaning of his mind as he drove away. And then the world was once again silent, and he rejoined his brothers in carrying Adam into Conner's sleeping form.

Adam was not yet fully depleted. There remained in him structures of thought that would organize Conner's mind. These structures were the core of him, held in immensely complex fields of electrons that rested in permanent superposition. As such, they were both in Adam and were Adam, and were also everywhere in the universe, and potentially capable of tapping all knowledge. This core could not be implanted in Conner until the rest of

Adam's being had settled in him, or the core would burn the boy's nervous system like an out-of-control nuclear reaction.

The transfer of this last material would result in the permanent annihilation of Adam—in fact, this was the essence of Adam, the part of him that felt real and alive. Here and now, is when Adam would feel actual death.

He was scared. In fact, so were the Thieves. This was the unspeakable thing that, as emotionless as they were, every gray still feared, the final end, wherein even the memory of self disappears and all the long years lived without emotion and thus without meaning, slide away into useless nothingness.

The whole collective watched, breathless and sorrowful, each one hoping that Conner would find a way to save them, that after this death there would be no other.

The Thieves crossed the yard and slipped into the house via the basement door, and rose quickly through the darkness to Conner. They spread Adam's body, now thin and as pale as a wraith, and guided it over Conner.

Adam had wondered how this would be, to die into another. He'd feared it, and out there in the woods, he'd cried. *Do it.*

He felt himself dwindling into the boy, sifting downward as lightly but as inexorably as dew. All that had enabled him to relate to and understand man, what he had learned from Eamon Glass and Lauren Glass, slipped away into the sleeping child.

He had given Conner all he knew, and his ancestors knew, of the universe. Now he gave him himself. As each tiny bit of his being detached and flowed into the hungry new nervous system that was spreading like a fire through the boy, he felt not regret but an abiding joy, an emotion that he had not known he *could* feel.

Thus, as he died, this ancient creature regained all that time and age had taken from him, the once-rich spirit of the grays with its love of truth and appreciation for the glory of the universe.

It had been eons since a gray had *felt*. Now, though, Adam's experience hummed across the gulfs of space, and the whole collective felt with him the anguish and joy of his death.

They sang in their chains, the grays, as they felt, each of them, a taste of hope that they had not experienced since the day they left their planet and began this long dark journey through the nowheres of the sky.

Simply because they were there, water in the vast desert of his heart, the

first tears Adam had ever shed—and his last—were tears of joy.

IMAGES FLASHED ON THE WALLS of Conner's mind, of the long and improbable histories of man and the grays, dancers in a secret dance whose steps were measured in eons. He saw that we, as a species, had lived before, that we'd had another civilization and another science that had worked by different laws, in a time when the light of the human mind had been brighter. He saw the tragic, lingering evening that we have named history, and heard along it the forlorn chanting of the Egyptians as they built boats that would never reach the sky, and the grim, rising roar of human voices that signaled the onset of the modern world, and the ignorant hordes that now marched the Earth, sucking every green blade and morsel. As this vision swept through him, he listened to the booming drums of time.

And so it was done; Adam, ancient in his days, fulfilled a destiny that was also a tragedy: he died. The last light of the wraith flickered in the air above Conner's bed.

Then it was dark.

FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE, this phase of the grays' mission was complete. They searched for memories in Conner's mind that would shield him from the huge thoughts that now lay hidden within him. Time would be needed before he could bring them forth and put them to work.

Looking through the house, they saw where he had put most of his effort, into his splendid trains. They planted his consciousness in one of his own superbly painted plastic figures. This would give him an unforgettably vivid dream.

CONNER FOUND HIMSELF IN HIS own toy railroad town, under his own streetlights, and everybody else was horrible and plastic, staring at him with painted stares. The sidewalk under his feet was plastic, the trees made of foam. A shrieking rose, and his own train screamed past, impossibly immense, electric fire roaring under its wheels.

He was right in the middle of the street and he couldn't move. The plastic faces of the people around him stared, expressionless. Then he saw a huge, glaring giant looming back in the shadows of the sky, saw his own hand, now gigantic, come down. He heard a length of track screech as it came loose.

He was trapped in his own train wreck, somehow part of one of the plastic people, as stiff and still as they were. He wanted to run, he was desperate to get off this street because he knew what would happen. But he could not run. He watched in fixed horror as the train's headlight flickered among the trees to the left, as it came roaring around the bend, and with a curious grace leaped off the track and sped toward him, its wheels churning, the headlight a cyclops eye.

Then a warm hand was on his forehead.

Mom was there.

"Hey, mister," she said, "you're gonna wake everybody on Oak Road if you don't stop running that train."

"I—oh, wow, I dreamed I was in the train set during the wreck!"

"*In the train set?*"

"I'd become one of my figures. I couldn't move and the train came right at me!"

She hugged him. "Oh my love," she said, "Mom and Dad are always here for nightmares."

He felt the depth of her love, then, with a power that he never had before. He adored his mom, she was the most beautiful, the smartest, the nicest—she was like Dad, very much the best.

Unseen now, the Three Thieves guided his mind back to a memory of a certain spring day long ago, when the lilacs were bobbing on the lawn and the leaves all were new, and he had come from glory, a tiny, secret spark, and gone gliding down into the house and saw her sleeping, her belly big, and gone closer, and entered into her, and lay, then, in the cradle of her womb.

"I love you, too," he said. It felt so good to hug her, it felt like floating halfway to heaven.

DAN ALSO REMAINED AWAKE ON this restless, uneasy night. He was determined to prevent the aliens from abducting his son. As he listened to Katelyn speaking softly to Conner, he felt an isolation that made him sad. She had been trying to forgive him, he knew, but there was a coolness in her now that even his most tender efforts—kissing her, speaking to her of love—could not seem to cure. He loved them, both of them. And yet, he did not feel free to join them across the hall, when they were in such intimate communion.

To avoid dealing with his couple crisis in the middle of the night, he

turned his mind to what the Air Force people had said. Strange, strange stuff. Lies, of course, on some level.

He would protect Conner from them until they told him the truth. There were dark corners in this world, and Conner was not going to fall into one, not as long as his dad had anything to say about it.

Too bad Katelyn couldn't handle the idea of being an abductee. What of it, it happened to all kinds of people, just read the books. The notion that people only remembered their encounters after being hypnotized by UFO researchers was, he had discovered, a lie, and a sinister one at that.

And yet, she had a point. No matter that he now believed it, because these two officials had confirmed it, how could anything like this be real?

He closed his eyes, but sleep did not come. Sleep was far away.

His mind returned to Katelyn. She had said that she was past it, that she understood. They had made love again, and it had been sweet, but not as sweet as ever. There was a thin sheen of emotional ice that just would not melt, and he thought now, at this vulnerable hour, that maybe it was the beginning of saying good-bye.

Too bad he hadn't been able to keep these thoughts away. He opened his eyes again. She was singing in there now, in her high, haunting voice, a lullaby. It was better than the one *he* had sung, and he was sure that it was helping Conner more.

Did she secretly want separation, perhaps even divorce? No—and yet, maybe yes. Maybe she hadn't articulated it to herself, not thus far. But she would. He feared that she would. She was the best person he had ever known. How had he *ever* busted this up? You were not going to find another Katelyn, mister, not in this lifetime. And Conner—how could he live without Conner? Conner claimed a huge part of him, would of any father. He couldn't give that up. Fatherhood and husbandhood had become his meaning.

He heard her stirring out of Conner's room. Rather than confront her now, he feigned sleep. He heard her come close, felt her sit on her side of the bed, and heard her sigh. Then she slid in beside him. She turned her back. He lay in silence for a time, then reached over and touched her shoulder.

She didn't offer any sign that she was even aware of his touch. The night drifted on. In a little while, though, he was aware of movement in the room. When he opened his eyes, he was surprised to see Conner.

Silently, his son came to the bedside. He looked down at them. Dan had seen him before as a child made of stars, but he was ordinary enough now.

“Conner?”

The boy smiled a little, said nothing.

Katelyn stirred. “What’s going on?”

Conner reached over and took her hand, and then took Dan’s hand, and held their hands together. They remained like that, silent in the deep night, a family sailing the ocean of the unknown.

PART EIGHT

SECRET SOLDIERS

Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

ECCLESIASTES 12:6-7

TWENTY-SIX

CONNER HUNG AT THE EDGE of the playground, as far from the other kids as he could get. He'd left message after message at home and on Mom and Dad's cells, but they hadn't responded yet and the bell was about to ring and he'd have to go back near the other kids, and he could not bear that.

If he got close to the kids, like, three feet away, he could hear extra voices that were extremely disturbing, because he knew the voices were the kids thinking. What was worse, they hated him, a lot of them, and that hurt his soul.

He remembered last night perfectly well. He'd had something done to him by the grays, using a science so high that he couldn't even begin to touch its meaning. They had changed him, though, and he was marked, and would forever be marked, by the greatness of that hour.

Will had said as Conner came out onto the playground: "Hey, Conner, how's it hangin'," smooth and easy, but his inner voice had screamed, *I'd like to get a knife and cut your heart out, you stupid asshole!*

Look at them playing around now, laughing, horsing around . . . and glancing at him from time to time, sly glances from Will and Kevin and David Roland, from Lannie Freer—even sweet Lannie Freer—who had imagined, that she was going to come up behind him and tap him on the shoulder and spit in his face when he turned around.

She'd done it, too, she'd tapped him on the shoulder and he had run, it had been like a nightmare knowing what she was planning.

Not all the kids had those thoughts. Paulie didn't, thank God for little blessings. He was only thinking how scared he was of Conner. He was thinking how to convince his parents to move, and feeling sick inside every time he so much as glanced Conner's way. Then he'd smiled and said, "Hey, pal, I ditched the busters, okay? They're gone." He'd snapped his fingers and said, "Poof!" and his mind had said, *Get away from me, you're a monster, get away!*

Then a familiar car appeared at the end of the street. It turned, came this

way. Conner tore through the gate and down the middle of the street. The moment Mom stopped, he jumped in.

“Honey, what’s the matter? Do you have fever?” *He doesn’t look sick, he looks terrified. If they’ve been hassling him, that damn Paulie, my poor little guy, he’s too damn small for eleven, the baby . . .*

He looked at her. Most of the time, her mouth hadn’t moved. He pushed up against the door, but it wasn’t good enough, he could still hear that sorrowing voice and he didn’t want it to be that way, he wanted his mother to see him as strong and confident.

“Conner?” *What’s the matter now? Oh I’m so tired, the damn kid . . .*
“Honey, what’s wrong? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Her face smiled but that was no smile, he knew the truth of it, he knew that his mom wasn’t close to being as happy and contented and full of energy like she wanted him to think. She was terribly upset and so tired that last night she’d dreamed about her own funeral.

“You won’t have a funeral!” he shouted.

“What? What funeral? Conner, what’s the matter with you? Why do you want to go home in the middle of the day?”

“Mom,” he whispered, “I love you so.”

“Oh, honey, I love you so, too! What happened, honey, why do you want to leave school?” *Why can’t he get along, oh but I do love you, I do love you my gray eyes.*

How could he tell her that the kids wanted to kill him? The thoughts came back to him, the ones imagining that they would shoot him, the ones imagining that they would kick him to death, knife him, choke him, but smiling, always *smiling*. How could he tell her about that?

Mom pulled the car over and stopped and turned toward him. “Honey,” she said, reaching out her hand, “honey, now, what’s the trouble? Why do you need to go home, what happened? What happened at school, Conner? Did Paulie and his friends give you a hard time? Because if that damned kid —”

The angry thoughts that accompanied these words were like brands burning into his skull as she talked. She wanted to slap Paulie, to shake Maggie Warner until she broke her neck, to wade into the class slashing with a sword.

“Mom! No, Mom! It’s not that, it’s not Paulie. Paulie was okay to me today. It was better than it has been, actually.”

“Then why aren’t you on your way into English Lit? Why did you tell me it was an emergency, Conner? You terrified me! I adjourned my seminar and came over here as fast as I could. But you’re not sick and you’re not hurt and you’re not in trouble with the kids. So why am I here, Conner? Please tell me.”

He tried not to listen to her thoughts, but he did listen, and she was thinking *what is wrong with my child?* and that thought was making her scared.

“Mom, I need to be home.”

“Then it’s not an emergency? You’re just—”

“I need to be home!”

She sighed, then put the car in gear. Then she turned around, heading back toward the school.

“It’s an emergency!”

“All right, tell me what the emergency is.”

He could not tell her he could hear thoughts, hers included. How could he? He said, “I’m afraid I’ll go insane on you, unless I can go home and get some private space.”

She took a sharp breath. Then she stopped the car again and sat there for a moment in silence. *Look at his face! He looks insane! Oh, God, he looks like his great-gran. Could it be that he’s schizophrenic, too, will we be cursed now with that? Help him, help him God.*

He smiled a glaring, hollow smile.

“Come on,” she said, “whatever, you can take the rest of the day off. Let’s go home and game together. Would you like to game with me?”

They played a lot of *Myst: Uru* together but he didn’t want to. “You never told me we had schizophrenia in the family.”

She was silent for some time. When she talked, her voice lilted like it did when she was trying to hide something. “What makes you ask that?”

He had to watch her lips to see if they were moving, or he was going to keep giving himself away. If Mom knew he could hear her thoughts, she was going to withdraw from him. Not right away, but over time. Anybody would, because of the invasion of privacy. He hunched close to the door, stared out.

“What makes you ask that particular question right now?”

“Uh, it was in science.”

“They were talking about schizophrenia in science? Why was that?”

“Abnormal-psych module.”

“Dan would be fascinated.” *Oh, my Dan, I need you now.*

Conner clapped his hands to his ears and forced the scream that urged to get out to become a hiss through his teeth, ssssss!

Mom’s neck flushed, she gripped the steering wheel, she glared straight ahead. Then she sort of shook it off. She started the car and they continued home.

“Mom, it’s not Dad’s fault.”

“What isn’t Dad’s fault?”

“Mom . . . you know. It’s not his fault.”

She almost ran the car off the road. Then she looked at him with her eyes bugging out and her face bright red. *What is this?* Her hand came out and she grabbed his shoulder and she turned him to her. “What did you say?”

“Nothing. I’m sorry.”

She stared at the road, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Conner, I think I know why you’re feeling so bad. You’re feeling so bad because you know about Marcie.”

He did not exactly know, not the name. But now he did, because the instant she uttered the word Marcie, a huge complex of thoughts and feelings had poured out of her. They were frightening adult thoughts about sex and things he knew little about, and they made him feel like he was prying into his mother’s deepest privacy, and he didn’t want to but could not help it.

“Conner, has she been at the house? Has she been there when I was gone?”

He shook his head. She’d turned onto Starnes, which meant that they would be home soon and he could get away into his room and get out of this hell of *thoughts*.

“She has, hasn’t she, Conner? You answer me!” *He better not lie because if he lies, he’s not my son, not anymore!*

“Oh, Mom, no! NO! I’m not lying and I am your son, I love you so much, Mom, you have no idea!”

She looked toward him. Her eyes were full of tears, now. “You’re reading my mind.”

He could not lie to her, he would not do that to his mother. But he wanted to, he wanted desperately to. He remained silent.

“You know what I’m thinking!”

He still did not answer.

In her face there were suddenly other faces, flowing one and another to

the front with the lazy assurance of carp drifting up from the shadows of a pond. She was a shimmering mass of changing eyes and lips and shapes and hair. She whispered in a voice quite different from her ordinary voice, that he recognized as her soul's voice, her *real* voice, "I know what you're doing and we don't do it, Conner, we hide this. This is a secret of the soul."

Just then they turned onto Oak and then into the driveway, and Conner was very, very glad to open the car door and get out of there, and run downstairs and get some space and not have to listen to thoughts.

"Conner?"

"Gotta go to the bathroom, Mom!"

He raced into the kitchen from the garage, then headed across the family room toward the door to the basement. He took the stairs three at a time and dashed across to the bathroom and shut the door.

His mother followed him. "Conner, are you okay?" *If this is locked . . .*

"Fine, Mom!"

He is not. "I'm coming in."

"Mom, I'm on the pot!"

"Oh, for goodness sake, I'm your mother."

The handle turned, and in the gleaming of the brass he saw people moving in bright rooms. His vision focused and then he was *in* one of the rooms. The Keltons were there and they were in a state of rage, fighting and screaming and pushing each other around like battling animals. Pictures were falling off the walls and their dog was all contorted trying to bite itself—and then Mom came in and she came down to the floor where he had fallen, and he saw a boy walking away down a lane lined with flowering trees and dappled by golden sunlight. He knew, then, what had thrown him to the floor, what agony. That was the lane that led to the land of the dead.

"Mom," he whispered, "I'm in danger."

She held him close to her, and he knew that he had seen something that was going to come soon. When the sun was low in the sky and the bare trees shuddered in the wind, everybody on Oak Road, him and Mom and Dan, Paulie and the Keltons and everybody, even the animals—everybody who lived here—was going to face death.

TWENTY-SEVEN

“THEY’RE FINISHED,” CREW SAID. “I observed it to completion, then took the boy home myself.”

“When did it happen?” Rob Langford asked.

“Last night, just at two. They instilled Adam’s content into the child. It looks like it went well.”

“So Adam is gone?”

Crew heard Lauren’s grief. “You and Adam have a long future together. You’ll find him in Conner. He’ll seem like a sort of shadow, I’d imagine, a little like seeing the ghost of the parent in the child.”

“But he’s . . . in there?”

“Adam is no more. What’s in Conner is his knowledge, and the structures of his mind.”

“Then my friend is dead.”

“I don’t think you really have a word that describes his state. He’s not alive. He hasn’t possessed Conner, he’s given himself to him. But there is so much of him in there, of his personality, his being, his—well, essence, I suppose is the closest word—that you’re going to feel, when you’re with Conner, that you’re also with your friend.”

“Is that reassuring?”

“It’s meant to be.”

“Then that’s how I’ll take it, but what does it mean to Conner? What’s he experiencing? He seems like such a very intense child.”

“He’s confused and afraid, I would think. He’ll have powers he doesn’t understand, and that’s going to really throw him. Knowledge that seems to have come out of nowhere. It’s probably going to be about as stressful as human experience can get. The whole family will be stressed. Extreme stress. Psychotic breaks are possible.”

“Have the grays factored that in, do you think?” Rob asked.

“That’s a hard one. What do you think, Lauren? What sort of insight do they really have into the human mind?”

She thought over her time with Adam, remembered how profound the communications difficulties had been. “Anything might happen,” she said. “My guess is that he’ll go into meltdown.”

“Then you’ll have to help him keep his sanity. He’ll be able to communicate smoothly with you, while he’s going to find fear in every other mind he touches.” Crew glanced at his watch. “I had a little conversation with Dr. Jeffers this morning. Unless this alien sensation is quieted down, Conner’s going to have a really rough time.” He turned on the TV. “That boy has to have the chance to grow up in peace.”

The local station came on, and there sat Dr. Chris Jeffers, blinking into the lights like a disinterred mole. They ran what had become known in the media as the Oak Road Video. It had been on CNN, Fox, even ABC and the BBC. It was all over the Internet, of course.

DAN SAT BEFORE HIS TELEVISION watching *Local Edition*. After Chris had called him, he’d come straight home to see it. Chris had said that his appearance would be a big surprise, but he scarcely believed what he was seeing, his good friend blithely lying like that on TV. The spot might be on a local afternoon newsmagazine buried at 3 P.M., but it would be picked up worldwide. The media had committed itself a long time ago to the notion that the grays were nonsense. They had not liked being shown to be wrong when the Keltons’ video was broadcast. The backlash would be ferocious.

Their own dear Chris had become a voice of authority, and he was lying. It also made Dan jealous as hell, but that he suppressed. Firmly—or, in any case, fairly firmly. “Hey, Katelyn, you think this’ll get him a better job?”

“Nancy says that CalTech is reconsidering him.”

“Now, that is impressive.”

“You don’t sound impressed.”

“He’s lying for dollars, here.”

“Well, I—”

“Don’t you think that people have some sort of right to know this? My God, he’s dirtying his soul, and look at him smile. It’s revolting, Katelyn.”

“If he tells the truth, what happens to him? The press went to him, remember. They demanded a statement from the head of the physics department. He has no net and a baby to feed.”

“He’s the believer, and now listen to him.”

She went into the kitchen, kicking the door closed behind her. He

listened to it swing, and it surely felt like rejection.

IN WILTON, MIKE WILKES BRACED close to the wall of the convenience store. Stinging snow blasted him as he fumbled to make his call. He didn't want to do this again, but he had to. "Hello, Charles."

"Mike! Is this line secure?"

"I'm on a pay phone. I tossed my cell. Any word about this investigation, Charles?"

"I don't see a thing from this end. I'd say that there isn't one."

That was wrong. "I saw them, Charles."

"Well, they weren't from any investigative body I can tap, and I think I cover pretty much all of them, Mike."

So the danger was still out there, and it was beyond the ability of Charles Gunn himself to detect.

In that instant, Mike decided that he had to cut off all contact with Charles. Without another word, he replaced the receiver. He would not communicate with him again until the operation was complete.

He glanced at his watch, then stepped away from the phone. Time was wasting. There was work to do.

He drove through the streets of the town. Too bad this car didn't have tinted windows. A little thing like that could have been so helpful.

He approached the grain elevator carefully. The snow had not been plowed in its drive, only on the road in front. He got out of his car and surveyed the situation. There would be tracks, no matter how he approached the entrance. If a gust of wind blew snow over them, that would simply be a matter of luck. Time was flying, though, and soon these people weren't going to be concerned about a few tracks in the snow.

IN THE OFFICE AT ALFRED, Lauren considered again what Crew had been saying. It looked as if the grays had won . . . whatever that might mean. "So, if Conner—if he's now this extraordinary person, does that mean that Mike's finished? That Conner will always be able to stay ahead of him?"

"Conner is like a newborn baby, confused and frightened and in need of support. Right now, he's more helpless than he was before it happened." He glanced at Rob, who said, "I've had my team in the Mountain burning satellite time looking for Mike. So far, no joy."

Crew took a cell phone call, listened for a moment, then disconnected.

The two of them waited, but he said nothing.

AT THE CALLAGHANS', KATELYN RETREATED into the kitchen, largely to get away from watching Chris. He'd warmed to his subject, lying so well that it became agonizing.

Dan came in. "You know, the wonder of the whole thing is that they really are here. I mean, what a thing to know."

"I wish we knew what they wanted with us and I wish especially that those strange military people weren't involved. They make me think it's all terribly dangerous, and Conner is vulnerable in some way that I can't quite understand and that scares me. It's affecting him, too, Dan, and it worries me. I almost thought he was reading my mind this afternoon."

"In what sense?"

"He kept answering my thoughts. It was terrifying."

"Was it—do you think . . ."

"I don't know!"

At that moment, Conner appeared. His hair was a mess, his eyes were swollen, he shuffled along in a bag of a T-shirt. Katelyn tried to hug him but he stared at her fixedly for a moment, then shook her off.

He looked from one of them to the other, frowning.

"What?" Katelyn asked.

"Don't be afraid," he said.

"Are we?" Dan asked.

Conner was watching this sort of darkness that kept flickering between them. He could hear Dad moaning inside himself. Mom's inner voice was crying and crying, like a little lost girl. The darkness flickered, grew more intense, seemed to come out of them, then toward him like a shadow full of claws.

He clapped his hands to his head and shut his eyes and screamed with all his might.

"Conner!"

"You have to stay married, you have to! Mom, Dad, don't you end this family, don't you dare!"

Katelyn stared at him, too amazed even to try to comfort him. His face was bright red, his eyes were swimming with tears, but his voice—his *voice!*

Dan stood slowly, staring at Conner as if he could not understand what he was seeing. "Hey, there, Conner. Take it easy, son."

“You’re not leaving me, either one of you. I need you, do you understand? I NEED YOU!”

“Conner, hey! You’re outta line!”

Conner pointed at him. “No. You are out of line. Both.” He turned and ran from the room. A moment later, music came roaring up from his basement.

“Two-thousand-one time,” Dan said. Katelyn came to him. They stood, staring toward Conner’s door, silent. He wanted to kiss her, but he was afraid he would feel that coldness again.

From downstairs, Conner’s voice came again, a boy’s voice but full of something else, something that neither of them could really identify—a strident roar, fierce and brooking no opposition. “Do it,” he cried. “DO IT, DAD!”

“How does he know?” Dan whispered.

She shook her head.

Dan kissed her hard and clumsily, like a scared teenager.

She did not close her eyes. When he stopped, he saw tears welling and rolling down her cheeks, and reached up and touched them away.

They embraced, but not like lovers, like people in a small boat in great waves.

IT WAS FREEZING ON THE roof of the grain elevator and Mike was concerned about frostbite, as well as slipping due to numb fingers.

He had waited until the light was leaving the sky to come out here. This time of year, the sun hung low in the west by four, and he hoped nobody would chance to look up and see the figure on the roofline installing an antenna.

When the transmitter was up and running, he got off the roof, sliding badly at one point, so far he thought he’d go over the edge. But he caught himself in time.

Even back inside the structure itself, it was frigid. Also dusty. He coughed a little, and held a handkerchief to his face. Leaving the conveyor running overnight had been more effective than he’d thought possible. He was in a haze of dust, and since the temperature wasn’t much above ten at the moment, the humidity would be effectively zero. He should have picked up a face mask at some hardware store. Well, he hadn’t, so he’d just have to live with it.

He hoped that nobody would make the Volvo. As far as satellite surveillance was concerned, they had probably located his cell phone by now, so they'd be certain he was here.

He wished he believed that this was all going as well as it seemed, but he had been dealing with the grays for too long to be anything but extremely uneasy about doing something they did not want done. If they'd been more open in their opposition, he would perhaps have felt better. This way, he could not know where he stood.

ACROSS TOWN, HIS FIRST LITTLE experiment came to fruition. Gene Ralph Petersen had run Petersen Texaco for thirty-one years, and his dad had run it before him. Before it was a garage, it had been Petersen-Michaelson, a stage stop, livery stable, and smithie. Just now, Gene was in the kitchen of his house behind the station. He was rustling up some coffee and fried ham. Ben, his dog, paced nervously. "You want out again, guy, in all that snow? It's ten degrees out there."

Ben stared at him, stared so hard that he stopped what he was doing and stared back. "Ben? Boy?" Was the dog having some kind of a fit? "Hey, Ben!"

When Gene took a step toward his dog, its lips lifted, it let out a window-rattling growl and it leaped at its master like a wolf leaping at a fawn.

Gene was not in any kind of shape at all, and he fell back against the stove, his arms windmilling. He hit the frying pan and the ham flew up in a mess of scalding grease, and he felt fire searing his back as the dog came at his throat.

Like a volcano that had been building pressure, Gene erupted. He grabbed the hot frying pan and slammed Ben with it, but Ben was filled with unstoppable rage, and got a piece of his neck and shoulder before he beat him off.

Screaming, his own teeth bared, he lunged at the dog, and the two of them went down fighting.

They fought and blood flew, and fingers were torn off, and the dog's muzzle was shattered with the skillet, but finally the dog won. Gene lay on the floor, his eyes glazed, his face gray. Ben, his companion of fifteen happy years, bent down and pressed his bloody muzzle into the face of the master he had adored, and ripped it to pieces.

PART NINE

A CHILD IS DYING

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

—EMILY DICKINSON

“Because I Could Not Stop for Death”

TWENTY-EIGHT

TWENTY-FIVE-THOUSAND MILES OVERHEAD, an event that would have riveted the attention of every man, woman, and child on Earth—had they known—was taking place. A large and complex satellite, totally black but visible in the brutal light of the sun, was approached by a small, egg-shaped object. This object shone silver, but it was not what it appeared to be at all, a small spacecraft. It shimmered as it approached the satellite, changing into another, much more complex shape. This swung around the satellite and fitted itself neatly over the end that pointed toward Earth.

Inside the satellite, relays sparked, and on its surface tiny rocket nozzles spat bursts of flame. The orientation of the satellite turned away from the snowy center of the United States and toward the line where the land ended, and the coastal waters of the Atlantic began. Then they turned it farther, out over the Atlantic, far from where it could do any harm.

The object released from the satellite became an oval once again, and darted away.

LEWIS CREW BREATHED HARDER THAN he would like, a lot harder. Earth's air had just a half percentage point less oxygen than home, but that difference had a definite effect. Also, his lungs were not accustomed to the pollution here, and they had been deteriorating for years. Now they boiled and bubbled when he ran. He knew that Wilkes had come in here within the past half hour, the kids in the Mountain had called him and confirmed that. Wilkes's car had been identified as a rented Volvo early this morning, and located via satellite ten minutes later. Since that moment, his every move had been tracked.

But why in the world was the man in a grain elevator? Crew had tried to understand but he did not understand, and that frightened him badly. He stood gasping, watching Wilkes climbing down a catwalk from far above.

Still trying to catch his breath, Crew squatted, tightening the muscles in his legs and back, concentrating his energy into his solar plexus—then let go,

springing up, the wind rushing past his face, leaping at Wilkes.

He grabbed the catwalk, felt it shake, heard it clatter. Wilkes stared from the far end, wary, ready . . .

And then he shook the catwalk violently. A wave came down it, causing it to collapse under Crew's feet. He tumbled through the air and hit on his back. The catwalk wouldn't have collapsed like that unless Wilkes had done something to it. It had been a booby-trap and Crew had fallen for it. Wilkes jumped lightly down.

They had been sixty feet apart, one as ready as the other. Now they were thirty feet apart and Crew was on his back, struggling to catch the wind that had been knocked out of him.

Wilkes straddled him. Crew thrust himself to one side and rolled out from under his feet. Wilkes stumbled and shook his head—and moved off, disappearing into the murk of dust that filled the huge chamber.

Crew peered after him. This was a catastrophe. He prepared to be shot. He had lost. He took the warrior's posture, legs apart, ready. He peered into the dust, tried to listen over the maddening clatter of the conveyor.

Strangely, Wilkes didn't shoot. But why not? He was alone here. Had Mike not realized that?

"Okay, men," Crew said just loudly enough so that he would be sure that Wilkes heard him. "If I go down, fire into the flash."

To his left were the four huge storage vats, each fifty feet high with a diameter of thirty feet. To his right and soaring overhead was the elevator itself, an enormous contraption of pulleys and chains driving the bucket conveyor, which rose to a height of about seventy feet, and could be directed into each of the storage vats. Farther off in that direction was a locked office that contained the elevator's controls. The conveyor was running. Why was not clear.

Slowly, Crew began turning around. If Wilkes didn't act, he would head for the door he had come in. The dust would conceal him, too. He was fast, he might make it.

He went deeper into the way of the warrior, gathering his energy along his spine. He had a small pistol in his side pocket, but the grain elevator had been a clever choice, given that he couldn't see four feet in front of him.

Mike must realize that the longer he delayed, the greater Crew's chance of escaping.

Then he saw him, and not two yards away. Wilkes's eyes were baleful,

sparkling, rock steady.

Crew leaped at him, extending a powerful punch as he did so. Mike took it in the face and lurched back. But he righted himself, and before Crew realized what was happening, Wilkes's hands slid around his neck. His fingers felt like steel cables, crushing into his neck, making his head pound, pinching off his breath. He sucked as much air as he could manage, and then his windpipe was closed. Wilkes must have seen him gasping. He had targeted this weakness.

Crew got an arm free from beneath Wilkes's weight, reached up, and tore at his ear. For a moment, nothing happened. With all the strength he possessed, he pulled harder. Wilkes growled through his bared teeth. His head twisted to one side, slowly, slowly. Then, suddenly, Crew could not breathe. He saw blackness coming around the edges of his eyes, deep, warm blackness.

Eight thousand miles away in Cairo, the pyramids lay beneath a night sky choked with smog. Around them, the city roared, an onrushing cataract of light and noise. A furtive jackal that haunted the edge of a nearby slum raised its head, cocked its ears, and whined. Dogs in the flat houses that hugged the pyramid compound began to pace. An old man who had been tending a smoky kerosene heater paused, looked up, then got a ladder and climbed up to his roof.

Crew drew up both his legs, and kicked Wilkes so hard that he flew into the air. He hit hard but rolled, moving with distressing agility. Crew fought for breath, managed to pull himself to his feet. His throat was partly crushed. He cut off the pain as best he could, concentrating his attention in his crashing heart, willing it to beat strong and steady. He waited, watching for movement in the dust, insisting to himself that he would not die here.

After a time, he began to hope that the silence he was listening to was the silence of death. Had he won? He watched a last shaft of sunlight creeping across the part of the floor he could see, sunlight that rendered the wheat dust golden. The smell of this place, the dry, faintly sweet odor of grain, reminded him of home.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on getting strong enough to get out of here. Only after some moments did he become aware that there was breathing that had not been there a moment before, and that it was very close.

Wilkes hammered him in the face so hard that Crew saw an explosion of lights, immediately followed by a curious sort of darkness. He tried to raise

his right arm but it would not come up.

Fingers explored around his neck again, this time with tremendous speed and power. With a shuddering crackle, his windpipe was collapsed.

In Cairo now, feral dogs howled, jackals yapped and paced, and the old man in his white soutane and fez crossed his arms over his chest in a gesture that would have been familiar to the pharaohs, and bowed his head toward the Great Pyramid.

Closer to the structure, a guard looked up from his charcoal brazier and frowned. He called to his companion. Both turned toward the pyramid. They saw, along its vast side, a spatter of pure white sparks. Coming as if from the throat of the Earth itself, a vibrating hum shivered the two men from within.

They ran.

Crew was dead. He was still moving, but nothing would enable him to breathe again. Mike watched him, smiling with an artist's gentle amazement at his completed work.

Crew's air hunger increased. His thoughts were distant and unreal. The anguish of suffocation made him frantic, made his sphincters release, and he shat and pissed himself, and rolled in agony on the floor.

Mike positioned himself and kicked Crew so hard that his head, flying back, caused his neck to snap. He looked down at the sprawled body, then pushed at it with his foot to confirm the obvious.

He went to the door, opened it, and took two small bottles out of his trousers. One was cracked and oozing. Carefully, he collected the thick liquid in the palm of his hand. He poured the dark purple contents of the other bottle onto the floor, making a tiny hill of the crystals. Then he poured the glycerin from his palm over the potassium permanganate. He stepped out through the door and was gone.

As he sailed the ancient lays of the Earth, Crew felt absolutely nothing. Objectively, he knew that he was dead, but this had lost its importance.

In Cairo, the pyramid flickered with blue light. People came out onto the roofs of houses, stopped their cars in the streets, stared at the midnight spectacle. Dogs barked wildly, jackals sang, tourist camels boomed, and horses tossed their scruffy manes.

Crew knew he had reached the place of ascension, he felt it as a warmth caressing him. All pain fell away and all memory of pain.

A tourist who had bribed the guards to let him spend the night in the king's chamber leaped out of the sarcophagus as it filled with blistering

incandescence.

The old man on his roof moved round and round in an ecstasy of graceful concentration, dancing a dance that had been handed down across the generations, not among the Arab invaders of Egypt, but in the secret Sufi ways that were drawn from the old religion, the hidden science that had last sent souls across the chasm of space when Akhenaten and Nefertiti had gone home.

A light so great that it dimmed the glare of Cairo itself then filled the air. The very stones of the pyramid glowed as if on fire from the inside.

People screamed, dogs howled, the jackals writhed in agony.

Then, darkness.

All returned to normal. The old man bowed again toward the pyramid. Smiling a toothless smile, he went back down to tend his broken heater.

An image formed in Crew's memory, of the scents and lights and caresses of home. He turned his face heavenward, following the golden thread of love more and more swiftly. Soon he saw a gentle rain of stars, and knew that this was the passing void of heaven itself. For a few timeless moments, he traveled the perfect physics that was long ago devised for the journey of souls.

Then he saw the wheeling immensity of the galaxy, a crystal conflagration of stars in blue, white, red, yellow, green, large and small, spread across the silence.

Below him came the gigantic horizon of a planet, as he sailed out of darkness into the sunlit side. Now he saw broad lands, farms in silver morning.

He let the weight of his love draw him downward. Soon he could make out individual farmsteads, their thatched roofs clustered together beneath ancient trees. Then he could see, far away, the White City shimmering on the horizon, and carts in the roads going toward it laden and returning empty. Dropping closer, he could hear the great auris singing as they passed one another on the road, and their drovers humming the tunes that gentled their raucous dispositions.

He came to his own farm, saw it spread below him, its fields rich with bowing wheat. The love he felt was so great that it made him glow, and he heard voices rise below. They could see him coming, a shaft of light dropping down out of the sky. He heard his sons' shrill voices and his wife's cries of alarm and joy.

Then he was over the cool room, set partly in the earth, where his return would take place. He dropped down through the roof, which felt like a sort of smoke of straw. Below him now was a body on a stone table. It was his own body, indistinguishable from the one the humans called "Crew." It was naked, this body, lovingly groomed.

The next thing he knew, he was looking out of its blinking eyes. The room was lit by flickering candlelight. He inhaled. Perfect air, clear, faintly scented with the odor of his wife. He lay naked on the familiar stone table. His wife, looking tired in her sweated muslin work clothes, gazed down at him.

She bent to him, then, and kissed him long, and he was home.

TWENTY-NINE

A FLASH FILLED THE AIR, as if a gigantic flashbulb had gone off in the sky. Conner began to count, “One, two, three, four—”

“What the hell?”

“Shh! Six, seven—”

A long roar rolled in, full of thuds deeper than thunder.

Conner looked from Dan to his mother. “The grain elevator just exploded,” he said. It had to be that, unless somebody had dropped a very large bomb on little Wilton, Kentucky. Nothing else in town was big enough.

The phone rang. Conner snatched it up. “Hey, Paulie! I know. Okay!” He pointed out the kitchen window. Katelyn saw a great mushroom of smoke rising in the direction of Wilton.

Within a couple of minutes, a horn started honking out front. “It’s the Warners,” Conner yelled. As he stopped at the hall closet to get his jacket, Dan grabbed the video camera.

Katelyn did not want to be trapped in a car with the Warners. She went out behind Dan and Conner. “We’ll take our car,” she called. But Conner jumped into the Warners’ backseat with Paulie and they were off. She and Dan went into the garage and got in their car.

“Thank you,” he said. “I consider that a rescue.”

“What in hell happened in town, and how do we know it’s the grain elevator? What if it’s terrorists?”

“In Wilton, Kentucky? Anyway, Conner’s always right.”

He stepped on the accelerator, seeking to stay close to the Warners’ speeding van.

MIKE WILKES WAS JUST STARTING his car when the blast took place. There was a gigantic roar and a flash like a sheet of silver-white filling the whole world. Frantically, he switched on the ignition. The car was already

in motion when a large piece of the elevator's tin roof struck it, smashing the windshield and caving in the roof to the point that Mike was lucky even to get the door open. As he crawled out of the ruined car, a segment of conveyer buckets slammed into the snow a foot away. He slid under the car, then, and waited while debris rained down.

When it finally stopped and Mike came out, he saw that the car was a complete wreck. Worse, he could hear sirens. He had to get away from here.

The elevator was burning furiously now, the fire heating his back even from this distance. At least he had accomplished his objective. In a little town like Wilton, a spectacle on this scale would draw everybody who could move, and especially the kids. As he had intended.

He loped in the direction of a line of abandoned stores across the street from the elevator, and ducked down an alley. As he did so, a small fire engine came up and stopped, its horn blaring, its siren whining. It stopped beside the Volvo. As the siren ground down, firemen jumped out and examined the car. An instant later they all looked up—directly toward Mike.

His tracks, of course, his damned tracks in the snow.

He turned and ran, ducking down an alley and out into a disused rail yard. A glance backward told him that the antenna still stood, taped as it was to the tank farthest from the collapsed roof of the elevator. The transmitter would be doing its work, now, and would continue until the tank itself disintegrated.

He threaded his way across frozen tracks. He could not escape, of course, not slowed by the snow and chased by men who were not injured.

It had been Crew in there, *Crew!* They would find the body. With arson and murder charges against him, the Trust would disappear from his life. Worse, nobody would know for certain if the kid had survived.

CHARLES GUNN'S PHONE RANG. HE picked it up, was told by a young voice that there had just been a major explosion in Wilton. He input his code into a satellite access node on his laptop and chose the correct satellite, then zoomed until he had a clear shot of the town from above.

There was smoke pouring out of a large building. He recognized three circular storage tanks. A grain elevator. He sat staring at it for some minutes.

What might it mean? Was Mike in trouble or was he succeeding? He was not reachable by phone, so there was no way to tell.

At that moment, his six-year-old daughter came in. "Mommy says to ask

if you want coffee.”

He drew his little girl close to him. As he nuzzled her flaxen hair, he punched numbers into his phone. “Mr. President,” he said, “the time is now.”

“Is it?”

“Yes, sir, we needed it some time ago.”

“And it’s going to be a purely localized thing?”

“Oh, absolutely, sir. Minimal damage.”

“Thank you, Charles.” The president hung up.

Charles looked at the phone. What did this mean? He hadn’t cancelled the order, surely. No, he would have said something to that effect . . . wouldn’t he?

His daughter asked, “Was that the *president*?”

He kissed her.

“Mommy says you’re very important. Are you very important?”

“What’s important to me is being your daddy, punkin.” He lifted her into his lap. She gazed into his eyes.

She frowned. “Are you upset, Daddy?”

He hugged his little girl.

MIKE WILKES NOTED THAT FIREMEN were not only chasing him now, they were making radio calls, and he could hear a higher-pitched siren, then another. They were getting the police.

He’d run out of options. He pulled the plane’s remote out of his pocket and activated its GPS. He stopped long enough to input the code series that brought the plane to life. At each stage, he got a positive response. It was out there, thank God, and intact. Then the ETA came in: four minutes and twelve seconds before it could reach this location. *Way* too long, damnit!

LAUREN WAS FAIRLY SURE THAT she could sense Conner in her mind. What was amazing about this was that he was nowhere near this base, he couldn’t be. She’d been able to perceive Adam’s mind from no more than a few feet away. “I sense something,” she said to Rob. “The boy is . . . agitated.”

“He’s seen the explosion. How do you feel him?”

“It’s like remembering somebody in present tense, if that makes any sense.”

“Is he in jeopardy?”

“I’m not sure. He seems agitated.”

He called Crew’s cell phone again and again got his terse recorded message. Then he phoned Pete Simpson.

“We identified Wilkes’s car. We located him in the town. I told Lewis immediately. The Mountain says that Wilkes’s car hasn’t moved from behind the grain elevator.”

Rob thanked Pete and hung up. He gazed out the window. On the horizon, there was smoke. “Look, I’m going to go into town.”

“I’m going with you.”

“Not with Mike at large. I need to get this situation into focus for me first.”

She let him go.

BEYOND THE RAIL YARD MIKE could see the center of Wilton. Cars came this way, and twenty or thirty people hurried up the broad street that crossed the rail yard and went past the elevator. At least one or two of them were bound to be among his human bombs, and they were walking right into the range of the signal that would trigger them . . . as indeed, was the whole community.

His bait was working efficiently. There was now little question in his mind but that the child would die.

Outside, the crowd came closer to the burning structure. Nobody could see the antenna, let alone imagine that it was there, or how extraordinarily dangerous it was.

The streams from the firemen’s hoses made sleet, which slicked the ground. Sliding, Mike ran toward the crowd, picking out a woman who was hurrying along with her daughter.

“Hi there,” he said as he trotted up to them.

Her eyes widened as she looked at him. “He’s hurt,” the little girl said.

“Oh my God—here, I’ve got my cell.” She began to rummage in her purse. A police car roared around the corner and came straight toward them across the rail yard.

He grabbed her shoulder, drew his gun, and thrust it into her face. “Shut up,” he yelled. “Don’t move!” He glared down at the little girl. “You move and your mommie gets her head blown open.”

The little girl began making a shrill, desolate noise.

Two minutes and eight seconds before the TR would arrive. Getting

aboard would be a near thing. He'd have to carry the kid.

"Take it easy," one of the two cops approaching him called.

"Don't move an inch! One inch and she's fucking dead!"

The woman gobbled in her throat.

The cops froze.

The little girl screamed at the cops, "Help my mommy!"

They stayed like that, and a standoff was just what he needed.

Finally, a warning warble came from the plane's remote. Mike was brushed with warm wash from its fans. There was no frost visible, because the dehumidifiers would be working to remove every trace of moisture from that exhaust.

With a swift and controlled motion, he reached around the mother and wove his fingers through the girl's hair. She howled and kicked and turned red as he dragged her. The remote was chiming, two discordant notes. He thumbed the hatch control.

"Jesus Christ," one of the cops yelled as the stair came down, apparently out of clear sky. But then, of course, with the eye drawn to it, they could see the plane, a faint outline, its lines visible where the camouflage worked imperfectly. It wasn't designed to be invisible from this close, not if you were aware of its presence.

Dragging the little girl by the hair, with her mother walking along, her hands out, begging, her eyes wild, full of tears, he backed up to the ladder.

The child scabbled at his hand in agony. An odor of urine rose from her twisting, struggling body.

All in one motion, he dropped the girl and climbed into the ship. He jammed at the remote, but not fast enough, he had a cop on the damn ladder. The man was looking up at him, trying to bring his gun to bear.

Mike fired directly into his face, which exploded like a smashed pumpkin when the jacketed magnum bullet blasted it. The body dropped away and the ladder came up as Mike slid to the cockpit and dropped into the seat.

He hammered buttons, preparing one of the twelve diversions the plane carried. It would eject in ten seconds. Outside, he heard a shot. The plane was not armored in any way and that would do damage, for certain. Immediately, he got an alarm on one of the sixteen exhaust fans. As Mike took the ship up two hundred feet at a sharp angle, the damaged fan shut down.

The diversion ejected. This was an extremely bright plasma, which

would draw the eye of everybody in the area. Gunfire erupted as the cops, deceived into believing that the glaring orb was the ship, shot into it.

Resistant to the Earth's natural electrical charge, the coherent plasma shot off into the sky faster than a bullet.

“Holy God,” a voice yelled.

“That was a Goddamn UFO!”

Every eye was scanning the sky in the direction the diversion had gone. Mike turned the ship and moved off, quietly working his way out of town.

THIRTY

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF the building, where the main fire deployment was under way, the firemen continued unrolling and charging hose. A burning grain elevator wasn't going to be extinguished. It was a matter of standing by, making certain it didn't spread, and letting it burn itself out with as little damage to its surroundings as possible. So their main interest was the roof of Martin's Feed Store nearby, and the John Deere tractor dealership across the street, not the elevator, which was sending flames at this point well over a hundred feet in the air.

"Captain, we gotta go in there," one of the firemen said.

"Don't do it, Harry, that's an order. You're gonna see the walls go any minute." He grabbed his bullhorn. "Okay, folks, back it up! Get those cars outa there!"

CHARLES GUNN CALLED THE WHITE House. "Mr. President, I need that scalar pulse, sir. I don't understand why it hasn't gone in."

"I don't want to do it, Charles."

Charles's heart quietly skipped a beat. "Excuse me?"

"Charles, I'm not going to pull the trigger on Americans just on your say-so. It's not enough, Charles."

It was as if he was talking to a different man. "Mr. President, the whole future of mankind is riding on this."

"You didn't tell me the truth, Charles. I know the kind of damage this is going to cause, and I'm just not going to do it. How dare you lie to me like that."

"Sir, I didn't—"

"You lied and you were willing to destroy the lives of millions and wreck the country! You're gonna have to find another solution, Charles, this one's too expensive, and I have to tell you, I've got a problem—a major problem, Charles—with your even recommending such a course of action. You don't walk in here and do a thing like this, ask me to wreck my country

and try to trick me into doing it.”

Charles hung up the phone. He had to take a tremendous personal risk if he was going to cut false orders. There was plenty of precedent for it. Dean Bracewell had done it in back during the cold war when he'd moved elements of the Sixth Fleet from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea in violation of *détente* in order to pull an asset out of Roumania. The problem was, there was no real way to accomplish it without getting caught. Reagan had been furious at Bracewell, yelling at him, “The next time you try to start World War Three, mention it to me, first!”

Given the magnitude of what Charles was going to do, there would be more than a White House tantrum. At the least, he'd go to jail for life. Maybe he'd even suffer the death penalty.

So he'd get Henry Vorona to do it. It would be easier for him, anyway, given that he was active CIA. He'd tell Vorona that the president approved, but wanted the orders to flow this way.

Problem solved.

DRIVING TOWARD TOWN, KATELYN AND Dan had fallen into another silence. Despite Conner's pleas, she was beginning to feel that Dan had just sort of slipped out of her soul. She should have found forgiveness for him, but she simply had not been able. Halfway to town, with the smoke now towering before them like a storm in the evening sky, Dan silently took her hand. She let him, but could not think why.

IN THE WARNERS' CAR, CONNER tried to keep the thoughts of others out of his head, but it was hard. He kept feeling like somebody else, also. One moment he was himself, the next he seemed to have a huge, complicated memory of things that had never happened to him, of flying in the stars, of being hideously lonely, of something that was terribly, terribly wrong. Except one thing was not wrong: he remembered Amy who was sitting right beside him, as if he'd known her for a thousand years. He remembered her in life and between lives, in the green rambles of death, planning this life together.

He shuddered. How could he be thinking about things like this? He knew the secrets of the dead and the ages, knew them certainly. In a flash, he could see back huge distances in time, to bright inexplicable fortresses and death-serpents swarming ancient skies.

And he could see the people around him, really *see* them, and it was wonderful and terrible, it was very terrible, because their secrets were as much a part of him as were his own.

It was like spying on their souls, he decided, looking across the walls they had built around their soft central needs.

“That is so awesome,” Paulie said, looking at the rising smoke.

“Yeah,” Conner agreed. It was an act, though. To appear to be himself as he had been, he had to pretend.

His memories of last night were foggy but he knew that something very incredible had happened.

“Dad, can you step on it please?” Paulie asked.

“We gotta watch the snow.”

At least they weren’t all full of hate. They were thinking about the grain elevator. Mr. Warner was worried about not getting there in time for Paulie to take pictures. Mrs. Warner was making plans to keep the boys from going too close. She was telling herself that she’d yell at them if she had to. In Paulie’s mind there was nothing but smoke, fire, and eager excitement.

Conner put his hands over his face and totally relaxed, blowing out a long breath. His bones seemed to tickle, and the feeling of the air on his skin changed. He had to learn to tune this stuff out. He’d messed up with Mom and Dad, shouting at them about their marriage secrets.

He could hear their inner voices especially well, Dad’s perfectly. He knew that this was because of Dad’s implant, and he felt a question now: somebody—was it called the collective?—was asking him if he wanted others implanted. They would implant anybody he wished, and he would be able to hear their thoughts perfectly, no matter where they were.

He shook it off. It hadn’t been a voice, but more thoughts entering his mind that were not his own, like smoke joining other smoke.

He tuned in to Dad by simply wanting to hear him. There came a tremendous burden of woe, a river of Mom’s face and her skin, long streams of memories, such happy memories, of walking down Oak Road in the summertime, of moments in bed that he modestly turned away from, of a train trip they must have taken before he was born . . . and then this sad, sad thing that had happened with Marcie Cotton—

—and he saw why: the grays had needed the family to stay here in Wilton, and they had made certain that Marcie would give Dad tenure. He saw the two of them whirling round and round in a dark place together, saw

sparks of golden soul mingling, and understood what had happened.

It made him angry at the grays, because they had hurt Marcie and Mom and Dad just to get what they wanted. *You better understand that I'm calling my own shots now*, he said in his mind.

Instantly, there flashed before his eyes a vast wall of gray faces, eyes gleaming, arrayed in rows as far up and as far down as you could see.

He cried out in surprise.

"What's the matter?" Paulie asked. "Scared?"

"Nah."

As Mr. Warner, stuck behind a truck, slammed his hands against the steering wheel the color around him changed. The air flickered with red and then took on darkness, especially around his head. He hammered on the horn and flashed his lights.

"John!"

Purple light filled the car, gushing off both Paulie and Amy. Conner saw it coming out of himself, too, pulsing out of his chest with his heartbeat. He looked down at it and told it to go away, and as it did, so did the fear he had felt at Mr. Warner's outburst.

"Sorry, sorry, folks. That guy was intentionally hassling me, he—Jeez, it's Len Cavendish, too. He must have gone nuts. I hope he can still unstop sewers."

Conner watched the familiar Cavendish Plumbing truck weave off down the road. Tim Cavendish had been in the passenger seat, and he had locked eyes with Conner, and Conner had heard a thought, *kill*, directed at him.

He shook his head, trying to shake away the feeling of it, and the memory it had evoked of the awful time in the playground at recess.

Since it was impossible to hear thoughts and see emotions, both of which he was doing, he decided that when he got home he would go online and learn everything he could about schizophrenia. *If you're schizophrenic*, he thought to himself, *you have to diagnose yourself and figure out a treatment protocol. If you need medical attention, you have to tell Mom and Dad.*

He would start at the *New England Journal of Medicine* and read all the recent monographs on childhood schizophrenia. Then he would go into the neutraceuticals literature. If there was a cure or a useful treatment, he would find it.

As the sun dropped lower, the western sky turned dull orange behind the

skeletons of trees.

A car coming toward them suddenly sped up and smashed into the rear of the car in front of it. As they went on down the road, Conner could see the two drivers get out and start fighting like maniacs. There was a lot of black haze around the cars, the evil smoke of their rage.

He had the strange, sickening feeling that it was somehow connected to him, as if the cars had been . . . after him. On their way to Oak Road.

That must be part of the schizophrenia, a paranoid aspect. There were drugs that controlled schizophrenia itself, but not paranoia. Paranoid-schizophrenia was still difficult to manage.

He had known for years that he might be susceptible to problems like this. He squirmed in his seat next to Paulie. He did not want to see his beautiful mind destroyed. He watched purple fear gushing out of his chest like a waterfall, and disappearing down through the floor of the car.

He decided that he was definitely going around the bend.

They got to the fire and Paulie practically threw him across the street getting out of the car. He was tremendously excited, racing toward a cluster of their friends, waving his new camera, and yelling.

Conner noticed more of the black haze, and saw that Will Heckle was as black as night. Was he coated with smoke or something?

Conner was afraid of Will. That was not right, that he would look like that. He stayed close to Paulie. “Awesome,” Paulie breathed, looking up at the massive structure with flames shooting out of it.

It was a marvelous fire, but Conner really did not like the way Will and now Steve Stacy and another of the older kids were looking at him. A lot of people sounded crazy, their thoughts roaring like a maddened troop of chimpanzees screaming at each other in the zoo. He began to look around for his parents, to cast for his dad’s thoughts in the screaming turmoil around him. *Dad* he said in his mind. But, of course, Dad couldn’t hear him, that was just the schizophrenia talking.

KATELYN HEARD A CRACKING SOUND a good deal louder than the fire. Then she saw, at the far end of the elevator, that somebody was down, and a cop, young Tory Wright, was standing over him. “That looks like Dr. Bendiner,” she said.

“It is Dr. Bendiner. I wonder what in the world—”

Tory Wright skullwhipped the old man with his nightstick, and Dr.

Bendiner's head flew from one side to the other with the blows.

"My God, he's going to kill that old man!" Katelyn yelled. She started to run toward them. The rest of the crowd totally ignored what was happening. Then two townies started fighting, and a fireman suddenly threw down his hose and stalked away, leaving it spraying like some mad snake, the brass head a lethal projectile.

"What is going on here, Dan?"

"We've gotta get Conner." He looked around, but it was hard to see through the icy haze being generated by the spraying hoses. "Conner!"

Katelyn saw Marcie about fifty feet away. She froze, not knowing if she should go to her or what she should do. Marcie looked at her. A slight smile trembled in her face, vulnerable, ashamed. She took a step forward.

Katelyn did the same.

"Katelyn, forgive me. I don't know what happened. I can't explain it and I'm deeply ashamed, Katelyn."

As the fire roared and the water thundered, the two women embraced.

"Something happened, Marcie," Katelyn said

Sleet swept over them. "I know it, I had—oh, Katelyn, what's going on? Something is *not right!*"

Without warning, the hose the fireman had abandoned seemed to rear up before them like a cobra. Katelyn leaped away, but it smashed into Marcie's face and slammed her to the ground.

"My God, it hit her! Help her," she screamed at the firemen. "*Help her!*"

Dan saw she was badly hurt and ran to her, and found her jaw shattered and blood bubbling out of her mouth, and her eyes filmed and uncomprehending. "Marcie," he cried, going down to her. "Help me, this woman is dying! She's dying!"

Katelyn saw a fireman staring . . . but not at Marcie. He looked off into the crowd, into the blowing ice haze. She looked around again for Conner, still did not see him. She ran to Dan. "Dan, we've got to help her!" But Dan heard something, he heard it in his left ear, as clearly as if a radio had been turned on there. It was Conner's voice: *Dad, I need you!*

The implant—he realized that it was there for Conner, to help Conner. He went to his feet. "She's beyond help. Katelyn, Conner is calling us, I can hear him, it's the implant, Katelyn. We've *got* to find him!"

CONNER STOOD ABSOLUTELY STILL, STUNNED by what he was seeing. Kids, adults, a lot of people, were looking not at the fire but at him. They were stealthy but they were very definitely surrounding him. He could hear a sort of grumbling whisper, as if they had lost all humanity, and turned into snarling animals that had only one enemy on this earth . . .

This was not making sense. It had seemed sort of understandable at school, but not here. Nobody should care. They were here to see the fire of the century, not to go after some kid. Turning slowly round and round, he watched them. Any moment, one or another of them was going to jump him. *Kill*, he heard, once or twice, but most of the thought was more primitive than words, it was an incoherent snarling, and every time he moved, it rose, got more sinister . . . and they came closer.

AS CHARLES GUNN REACHED THE flight deck of TR-A4, the control surfaces flickered to life. Immediately, he turned on the plasma engine and watched the batteries charge. Because it was daylight, he'd need to use camouflage the whole way. He was going to Wilton himself. He wanted to be low and close, there just wasn't any other way. Also, there was a possibility that he might be able to reach Mike using the ship's super-secure sideband system that was capable of keeping TRs around the world in touch with each other, and was not accessible to outside tracking.

Henry was working on the scalar weapon orders. He'd probably be able to start pulsing in about an hour—unless, of course, the president, who was by no means stupid, had taken steps to close the many back doors into the Pentagon's operations system.

“Charge,” the plane said in its soft female voice.

“Deploy shield.”

“Done.”

He hit the button on his throat intercom. “How do I look?”

“You're ready to proceed, sir.”

“Open the doors.”

As he watched the monitor, the huge hangar doors opened. He would move out, then go straight up to minimize the number of people who would observe a very strange phenomenon—a gigantic triangular shadow, apparently cast by nothing. A close look would reveal the ship, but protocol required daylight takeoff to use full plasma and all fans to ascend to fourteen

hundred feet immediately. At this altitude, the shadow would be too diffuse to be seen except from the air, and the air above Andrews was, because of this operation, at present entirely clear of aircraft.

“Sir,” came a voice in his earphone, “return to the hangar, please, sir.”

It was base ATC. What in the world were they doing interfering?
“Excuse me?”

“We have new orders, sir. TRs are grounded effective immediately.”

The president had closed the operation down. Charles acted with characteristic speed and decision: he immediately took the TR up. Inside of thirty seconds, it was completely undetectable, not by radar, not visually, not in any way at all.

Incredibly, his cell phone rang. For a moment, he was furious. Voices inside the TR were damped, but if Andrews had deployed its sonic scanners, they might pick up that ring. He fought it out of his pocket and opened it.

“Charles, I’m being arrested,” Vorona’s voice said. “He’s pulling us in, all of us.”

Charles thought fast. Then he saw, instantly, just how to contain this.
“Henry, stay calm. Do you have the scalar’s codes?”

“Yeah, but they’re busting in my door right now!”

“Give me the codes.”

“This isn’t a safe line, this is—”

“Do it!”

“Code of the day is B Bravo C Charlie Z Zero G Gremlin N, then one niner one in six three three eight nanosecond timed sequence.”

The line disconnected. Okay, his next act was to activate sideband. He had the TR moving away from Andrews at its top speed of 320 mph. “Mike?”

He waited. Nothing. He punched up the signal-seeking equipment. “This is TR-A4 for TR-A1. Mike?”

There was a carrier out there, but Mike wasn’t answering. Maybe he wasn’t aboard the TR.

Charles decided that he had to trust Mike to do his job. His first priority now was to save the Trust.

A TR was richly endowed with communications. In fact, an entire subset of controls for the scalar weapons would turn on as soon as it was fully deployed. This way, a TR could stand in close and watch the effect of scalar pulses that it was triggering, and make fine adjustments in their strength and angle while remaining entirely unaffected by the earthquakes they were

causing on the ground just a few feet below.

Charles went into the plane's operational manual and read as he flew, pressing buttons on a console.

Far overhead, rocket servos on the scalar weapon began once more to fire as his commands redeployed it. He had no idea that the grays had sabotaged its previous deployment, but this didn't matter because it would seek to its new coordinates from wherever it happened to be. As he worked, its long, black snout swept back across the blue of the ocean, back to the land. It stopped, then, and with tiny bursts of the servos, began to move about as if it was hunting for something.

When a city appeared below it, the motion stopped.

On the TR, Charles watched a screen. He pressed buttons, and the image became clearer. He zoomed again, and the image was clearer still: he had pointed the scalar weapon directly at Washington, D.C.

He turned the plane on its axis and headed directly into the D.C. no-fly zone.

THIRTY-ONE

INSIDE THE GRAIN ELEVATOR, THREE figures, all dressed in silver protective gear with full hoods and gloves, moved carefully across the broad floor. Nobody on the outside was aware of the presence of Colonel Robert Langford and this specialized crew.

Dr. Simpson had phoned him while they were driving into town. “If he’s dead, you will need to collect tissue, Colonel Langford. I want cell-rich tissue. Do it the way the grays do, take the eyes, the lips, the genitals. We are going to need to build a clone of him.”

He’d wanted to ask why, but knew that he had no need to know, and therefore didn’t waste his breath. So what he had said was what duty demanded: “Yes, sir.”

“We’re looking at imminent structural failure, sir,” a voice crackled in Langford’s ears.

“I know it.” He lifted an electronic bullhorn to his lips. “LEWIS! LEWIS CREW!” His loss, in Rob’s opinion, would be greater than the loss of the gray that had departed the Indianapolis facility. Adam was so deceptive and complicated, there was no telling what anything they got from him really meant. But Lewis was as straight as they came, and he knew many secrets. Maybe his story about coming from another world was even true.

A rumble from above drew his attention. Like a gigantic missile, a flaming beam arched down and hit the floor in a shower of sparks. “Careful, guys,” Rob said, “we can’t afford any attrition, here.”

“I’ve got an organic mass.” Captain Forbes raised his viewer away from his face mask.

“Oxygen-level warning,” Airman Winkler announced, meaning that he had five minutes before compulsory withdrawal.

Langford moved through a forest of fallen, burning beams to reach Forbes. At his feet was a corpse. “Okay, let’s collect tissue and pull out.”

It was so badly burned that it looked more like a black log than a body.

“Holy moly, Colonel!”

“Take it easy! Gentlemen, let’s bag this.” It affected him deeply to see Lewis this burned. The poor guy was almost unrecognizable, but not completely. What a way to go, what a rotten death for that good man.

High above, a roar started.

“Move it! Now!”

PAULIE AND CONNER STOOD SIDE by side. Conner stayed close to the Warners, because they were not having these weird thoughts, not like the others, and they didn’t have shadows around them. They were shimmering with what he had come to see as normal colors of life.

The others came closer. He looked for his mom and dad, didn’t see them. The haze from the spray and the smoke was like a fog bank full of looming shadows, the roar of the fire and the rumble of hoses, and strange, echoing cries.

He dared not move, dared not call out. In his heart, though, he begged for his mom and dad, begged them to get him out of here.

Paulie and his family had no idea that anything was wrong. He innocently pointed his video camera at the burning elevator. Amy took pictures with her cell phone.

The whole wall of the building was now smoking. It shuddered and made a sighing sound.

“HE’S CALLING US,” DAN SAID. “I hear him clearly.”

“You can hear him? How can you hear him?”

“Katelyn, I told you, it’s the implant, and I’m sure that he’s in terrible trouble.”

“I can’t hear him! Why can’t I hear my child?”

“You don’t have an implant.”

“But that’s—”

“We’ll sort it out later.” He moved off, trying to see ahead through the smoke and haze and gathering dark. “Conner! Conner!”

CONNER DECIDED THAT, NO MATTER how it looked, half the town could not be coming after him. They didn’t even know him, most of them. So this was paranoia. He would not allow himself to react to a symptom as if it was real, he wasn’t *that* paranoid . . . yet.

Nearby, two people leaped into their cars and began driving this way.

Harley ushered the kids away. “They’re pulling out too fast in this ice,” he said.

Then one of them skidded into the other, and they both went spinning around, slamming into each other and bouncing off amid a flying shower of glass.

“DID YOU SEE THOSE CARS?” Dan yelled to Katelyn. “Conner! CONNER!”

They moved through the nightmare murk, both calling his name again and again.

As she walked beside him, struggling with him in this bizarre nightmare situation, she thought, *If he has to, he will give his life for his family.*

As if the sudden, deep love this realization made her feel had opened a door, she remembered being in a dark space, remembered it quite clearly. At her feet there was a round opening. Far below, she could see water in the moonlight. A boy was beside her, his dark hair scattered across his forehead. His eyes were scared, but he was so attractive that a shiver went through her when she saw him. She remembered reaching out to him, and in that instant knew it was Dan when they were children. She felt then the most exquisite, most deeply poignant sense of memory that she had ever known. Without being able to put it into words, but just feeling it, she saw the role she and Dan had to play in what she perceived as a plan of some sort that she could not even begin to understand, but that involved Conner.

“Dan, we have to find him!”

“I know it.” Then he pointed. “Katelyn, there!”

He was not thirty feet away, just visible through the swirling ice haze. And Kenneth Brearly, a Bell tenth grader, was standing in front of him pointing a pistol at him.

Conner disappeared behind a billowing mass of haze from one of the hoses. “Conner!” Katelyn bellowed, “Conner, run!”

DESPITE THE DANGER OF BEING seen by Wilkes or somebody under his orders, Lauren left the office and moved closer to the base perimeter. She had no car and dared not draw from the motor pool.

She had to get to Conner, she knew that, but how? It was miles to the town, there was no bus. She’d tried to call the cab company, but there hadn’t been any answer. Everybody was at the fire, no doubt.

That fire was bait, she was certain, set by Wilkes to draw the whole town. Conner was a twelve-year-old boy, he would be there. Mike would kill him and make it look like an accident.

She pulled out her cell phone and called Rob again. It was a futile gesture. She tried to somehow reach out to Conner, attempting to communicate with him via her mind.

Maybe he heard her and maybe he didn't, but she certainly felt no response. She looked down the long road that led to the town, to the gigantic smoke cloud, magnificent in the fading sun.

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN so long their memory of it was nothing but a few dim sparks, the Three Thieves felt love. They felt it fiercely, hanging over the burning building, for the child down there in the mist, who glowed gold in the dull, swirling crowd of other souls.

They saw, also, the antenna and the signals flaring off it, impacting the red flaring implants in the heads of people in the crowd. That antenna was connected to a transmitter, it must be, but the live voltage would be too low to make the wire visible to them. They hung far above, their small oval ship out of sight above the smoke, watching Conner. And they saw, suddenly, somebody with a gun.

Help me, they heard Conner's mind saying.

They felt something strange within them, the beating of the heart. And they understood at last why Conner was calling for help, what all these strange signals meant: Wilkes had used a primitive form of mind control to turn dozens of people into assassins.

KENNETH WAS AN HONOR STUDENT, an Eagle Scout, and a very proud young citizen, and he was absolutely terrified at what he was doing. He remembered some kind of a nightmare with this strange, whispering man in his room and he had woken up crazy like this, and he knew it was crazy, but he could not stop himself, he'd been turned into a killing machine, and the worst of it was that he just needed to kill this geeky middle schooler and do it NOW!

He kept losing him in the haze, but just for a second or two, so he was getting closer fast; then he found a clear shot, he raised the pistol, he aimed—and, Jesus. What the hell was *that*? Or no, he hadn't disappeared, he was still there. He was four feet away. He could not miss. He pressed the trigger,

which did not go back. He stopped, cursed himself, thumbed the safety off, and raised the pistol again.

Conner looked into his eyes, down the barrel of the gun—and felt his body begin making tiny movements, very quick, tiny movements that seemed somehow linked to the kid’s vision.

Kenneth started to pull the trigger—and this time Conner cleanly and clearly disappeared right before his eyes. There was no obscuring haze. He was just gone.

Then he saw him again, flickering back into existence as he shook his own head, as if that had been enough to make him visible again. Now he would not miss.

Dan tackled him from behind and he went down without a sound. The pistol flew off into the murk, and the next thing Kenneth knew, the world was dark.

“Dan, don’t kill him!”

“He’s just knocked out. Where’s that pistol?”

“Oh, God, Dan, *look!*”

Linda Fells did not know why she had brought her dad’s deer gutter. She loathed the ugly, hooked knife, hated it when he brought home does to carve up. But now she had to use it, and she knew on who and even though she was screaming in revulsion and fear, she marched toward Conner Callaghan, raising it as she went.

She screamed and shook her head, trying to get rid of these thoughts, but the thoughts only got stronger and stronger.

Dan ran toward her with all his might, but he tripped on a hose and went sliding in the ice, screaming for Conner to watch out, that she was behind him. Katelyn howled, “*Conner, Conner,*” and struggled as if through mud, crossing the slick of ice, hoses, and fallen people that lay between them and their boy.

THE THREE THIEVES MOVED DOWN toward the roof of the grain elevator. They had to reach that antenna and the transmitter connected to it, but the collective was horrified to see that they could not reach it unless they descended into flames and certain death. But they couldn’t die, they mustn’t. No other triad was prepared to replace them. This had not been anticipated.

The One said, *We have save him.* The Two said, *We have to save ourselves.* The Three leaped out of the craft and dropped down through the

air. As he fell, a great mass of fire enveloped him and the whole collective howled his pain and his loss. He saw fire all around him, a red haze. He felt his bones growing hot, felt essential processing systems in his body begin to boil.

He reached the lip of the great tank. The whole structure was unstable, he could feel it shaking, could see the flames licking at it. It would not last long, but even another moment was too much time. He ripped off the antenna, pulling it away from the concrete lip of the huge tank to which it had been affixed.

As he looked for the transmitter, a great tongue of fire enveloped him. His skin began to pop and shatter, his limbs to shake, then to gyrate wildly as millions of micromotors lost control of themselves. He broadcast, *Alarm, alarm* as he felt himself ceasing to function. He dropped the antenna, which went sailing off into the flames. His left eye exploded in a shower of sparks. He fell farther.

The One went after him, dropping also into the flames, attempting to save him, struggling against the fire. And he, too, caught fire. His head exploded in a flashing mass of sparks.

The antenna was gone, but not the transmitter. It remained taped to the lip of the tank, its red diode gleaming, still sending its signal—although weakened—to every one of Wilkes’s killers.

The Two took the craft up fast, faster than a bullet, all the way to the edge of space.

CONNER FELT THEM LEAVING HIM. *Don’t go*, his mind cried, *don’t cut me off*. But he was cut off, there was now no sense of the presence of the collective within him. He felt it as a silence at the center of his being. “Come back to me,” he screamed, but the Thieves could not hear him, not the dead, not the frightened, confused survivor far away.

DAN AND KATELYN REACHED CONNER at last.

“Mom, Dad, something’s wrong, we have to go!”

“Oh, Conner, dear God, Conner, I couldn’t find you!” Dan said. Katelyn threw her arms around him. “Let’s go home now,” she said. “Right now!”

“Hi, Mrs. Callaghan.”

Katelyn backed away from the girl. She knew what was in her hand, she had seen it.

“Stay right there,” she told her. “Don’t you come near him!”

The girl stepped closer. She was a pretty girl with a sweet, open smile. “There’s nothing wrong, Mrs. Callaghan.”

“Then what do you want?”

“Nothing.”

“Why are you carrying that knife?”

The girl raised it and leaped straight past Katelyn. Conner stepped to one side and she slashed down where he had been standing. Snarling, she raised it again, looking around as if she couldn’t see him.

Katelyn grabbed her arm, then Dan leaped on her from behind and got the knife out of her hand. “Who are you? What the hell’s the matter with you?”

The girl crumpled, bursting into tears. Here and there other people, freed by the weakening signal, began screaming, holding their heads, throwing down weapons.

ON THE ROOF OF THE grain elevator, the metal skeletons of the two grays smoked and sparked in the licking flames. They moved, though, flickering and twitching, as if they wanted to stand. High above, the Two concentrated, his head down, his hands over his face.

One skeleton actually rose a few inches, stretched an arm toward the transmitter, trembled, and fell back. The bones fell into the the maelstrom. Now the other moved a little—its hand scraping along the lip of the tank, then touching the edge of the transmitter, the black claws scrabbling at its power switch—then falling to a jumble of gleaming metal bones and black claws. The tiny red diode on the transmitter remained lit.

At that moment, the grain elevator collapsed, leaving only the three enormous tanks standing. The light on the transmitter flickered, went out—but then came on again, glowing steadily. Huge pieces of concrete began falling off the tank.

INSIDE, ROB AND HIS TEAM threw themselves into the cellar where the elevator’s motors were housed. A massive tongue of fire roared at them from above, coming through the hatchway like a living, questing monster, grasping for their lives. The space was long, the far end collapsed and burning. The floor above them groaned, ready to buckle. He thought he had perhaps twenty seconds to get these men out of here.

THE CALLAGHANS BEGAN MOVING AWAY from the debris, Katelyn and Dan shielding their son as best they could.

As they headed for their car, Jimbo Kelton came over to them. He was smiling.

“Hey, Jimbo,” Dan said, “watch our backs, we—”

Jimbo lifted his arms over his head and brought a rock down on Conner.

Conner ducked, but not fast enough to avoid getting hit in the shoulder. A stab of pain went through him and he cried out.

Jimbo raised the rock again. Then another rock hit Conner in the neck and bounced off. It had been thrown by Mrs. Kelton, and she and Jimbo were both gathering more projectiles, fragments of lumber, of tin—anything to throw at him. Their faces were gray, their eyes watery and crazy.

As a third rock hit Conner, he ran toward the car. Now Terry Kelton tackled him and tried to drag him down, but he pushed him off. Catching up with him, Katelyn grabbed his jacket and dragged him toward the car as Dan fought off the Keltons, screaming and kicking, backing toward the car.

“Dan, John has a rifle!” Katelyn shouted as she and Conner reached the car. “Run!”

Conner jumped into the back of the car and crouched down on the floor. His head and his back throbbed where he’d been hit. Katelyn and Dan got in and slammed the front doors. As they pulled out, a rock hit the back window, transforming it into a haze of cracks.

“What in damn hell is the matter?” Dan yelled.

“Look, please, I’m sorry, I know I did something, and I’m so sorry.”

“You didn’t do a damn thing, son.”

As they drove away, Conner came up from the floor. He sat hunched against the door, staring out the window at the bizarre scene, which faded quickly into the gathering winter evening.

They went toward Oak Road, turning up Wilton, taking the lonely way.

“This is a mistake,” Conner said.

“What do you mean?” Dan asked.

“The lonely way.”

THIRTY-TWO

LAUREN WAS ALMOST INSANE WITH worry and fear when at last a two-car convoy appeared at the main gate. Rob's car was in front, a Cherokee behind full of specialists in fire control gear.

As he pulled up, he opened his window. "We're not out of the woods, and I need you right now."

She ran around and got in the car. The Cherokee headed off into the base.

"Why in hell didn't you call me? My God, I almost lost my mind."

"You had orders, Colonel."

"Orders? Dear God, the military mind is—oh, forget it. What's our situation?"

"Crew is dead and Wilkes is at large. He may have made an escape in a stolen TR."

"What's a TR?"

"Classified vehicle," he replied tightly.

"He killed Lewis Crew?"

"Details later, we've got a hell of a situation back there. I don't know exactly what else he's done, but we've got to get that kid to safety or we're gonna have another dead body on our hands right away."

At that moment, the base siren sounded and the guards began closing the gates. Rob turned the car around and headed back toward town.

"What in the world is going on?"

"It seems that Wilton is rioting."

"You're kidding."

"They're killing each other."

She closed her eyes, playing move after move, and came to a conclusion: "Wilkes couldn't identify exactly which child, so he did something that would turn the whole place violent, in hopes that all the children would be killed."

"One possibility. Another is that he did identify him but was scared to

take direct action because of the grays, and is using this as a diversion.”

“But the family—they’re miles out of town.”

“They came to the fire, I know that, I identified the car. They are not there at this time, however.”

“Oh, boy.”

“Yeah, we’re in trouble.”

“And you’re certain about Mr. Crew?”

“He’s in a bag on his way to Wright-Pat.”

“Was he really from another world? Is that true?”

He glanced at her. “You might as well accept that there is no final truth in this thing. Not ever. This reality, more than any other, changes depending on the way you look at it. As far as I know, the man could be from Chicago or Denver or anywhere. But he was a good man and a useful man, which is the bottom line on Lewis damn Crew.”

Rob stopped the car. They had come around the curve in the highway which opened onto Main Street. Smoke rose from at least four different fires. A man shot a rifle from the roof of a store. Groups of people ran through the streets, most of them armed with hunting rifles. Sirens howled, and, as they watched, a garbage truck backed at full speed into the front of the First Church of Christ. Its steeple, bells pealing, tumbled over the truck and into the street.

Rob flipped open his cell phone, speed-dialed a number. “The situation in the town is deteriorating fast. You’d better get the governor on the horn, General, because the place is gone. He needs the National Guard out here, the state cops won’t be enough.”

A Buick packed with kids snarled toward them, its tires leaving smoke in the street.

Rob turned the wheel full right and jammed the gas pedal to the floor. A second later, the Buick passed behind them and raged on, swerving to snap fireplugs. Screaming laughter could be heard, full of terror.

Rob pulled over to the side of the road. “We can’t drive through that.”

“No.”

“We’re going to have to cross the town by helicopter, locate the child on the other side. And I think we need to just move him. Get him out of here.”

“What about Mike? What about the group? Won’t they keep trying?”

Rob looked at her for a long moment. “I never said this would be easy.”

DAN DROVE HARD, TRYING TO get back to Oak Road before the craziness spread there if it was going to. He would defend his family with his pistol until they could leave this place. For the Callaghans, Wilton and Bell College were history, and to hell with his precious tenure. Bell would probably fall apart now anyway. Who would send their children to a place like this?

“Conner,” Katelyn said, “do you have any idea what’s happened to these people?”

Dan thought it was a fair question to ask this child who had changed so much. You could see it in his face, a new steadiness in his eyes.

“It has to do with me.”

At that moment there was a snap and the car shook.

“What was that?”

Conner knew that it was a bullet, he’d felt the hate of the person who’d fired the gun. He pressed himself down below the level of the windows.

“Conner?”

“It hit the left fender just above the tire.”

“What did?” Mom asked.

“A bullet.”

Dan increased their speed. “Conner,” Katelyn screamed, “*why?*”

That wasn’t the right question, he knew. They needed a different energy to survive this. Fear would not save them.

He needed the Three Thieves. Now that they were gone, he saw how they’d been his link to the collective, and how important the collective would be to him in the future. He also saw how they helped him now, watching over him, doing the small, essential things that had saved him.

Giving their lives for him.

There was a bang in the front, and the car swerved over to the side of the road. Dan tried to keep it going, but it slurried all over the place.

“That’s a shot-out tire,” Conner said.

“I know it,” Dan snapped.

Mom turned around, and he had never seen her look like that. Her eyes were like shattered glass.

Mom and Dad were panicked. He had to get away from them, he could not let the bad decisions they were going to make kill him.

“Stop the car, Dad.”

“I can’t do that, my God we’re being fired on!”

Conner breathed hard, bit his lips to keep the sobs in, then opened the door and threw himself out into a snowbank. He rolled like you're supposed to, and proceeded to hit Mr. Niederdorfer's fence so hard he saw stars. He heard the car growling, and as he got up he saw it skidding around in the snowy road, its right front tire now also in shreds.

A whisper flashed past his face, followed by an echoing crack. Far down the road, he could see a car with somebody standing on it. That person had a rifle, and he was lifting it to aim again.

He needed to get to the trees on the Niederdorfer land. He hopped the fence and trudged off in snow up to his waist.

Mom burst out of the car. "No, come back! Conner, no!" She leaped the fence, surged ahead like some kind of raging lioness. Then Dan came plunging through the snow behind her. He closed the distance even faster than she did.

"You've got to get back in the car! In the car, Conner, it's our only hope."

"Trust me," he said, reaching for her hand. He looked to his father. "Trust me, Dad."

Then he heard somebody else coming fast, their breath whistling.

A glance over his shoulder revealed Jimbo Kelton surging through the snow with superhuman power. In his right hand was a big axe.

Conner ran. He could only hope his parents would do the same. There were thousands of acres of forest out here that would significantly improve the odds. Staying with a disabled car was obviously not the best move.

Then the trees were around Conner and he could dart and twist and turn and get through them fast. But Jimbo was bigger and faster, and Conner knew that it would not be long before he caught up.

He got to a clear space and ran for all he was worth, then veered off, trying as much as possible to avoid dislodging snow from the branches of the pines all around him, and stepping in places where the snow on the ground was lightest.

LAUREN SAT BEHIND ROB AND the pilot as the chopper moved quickly over the mad town. There was a sharp snap, then a ping, then another.

"Incoming," the pilot said.

"Bastards," Rob muttered.

A vibration started. “Sir, I took rotor damage off that rifle fire,” the pilot said into the intercom.

“Keep it in the air.”

“Sir, I need to return to base immediately.”

“Keep it in the air!”

“I’ll go down, sir!”

“Even if you end up crashing this thing, you have to get me where I’m going.”

“This is my bird sir, and I’ve got to return to base!”

“Captain, our lives are not as important as this mission. None of us.”

“Sir—”

“This is the single most important thing this Air Force has *ever done!* We cannot, I repeat, *cannot* fail! We must put at least one effective on the ground in the right place and nothing else matters, do you understand!”

“Yes, sir! Losing altitude, sir!”

“Down there,” Lauren shouted over the roar of the chopper.

He saw it, an elderly blue car smashed into a fence by the roadside, and the trenches of runners leading off toward the woods. Three trenches, the one in the middle smaller. From another direction there came a fourth trench.

“I don’t like the look of that,” Rob said.

“The family’s being stalked.”

“Exactly. One—no four. Four other tracks.” He pointed, and Lauren saw them, too, four distinct lines in the snow, all coming from the direction of a station wagon parked about a quarter of a mile behind the Callaghans’ vehicle.

“Sir, I am losing control of this bird!”

FIGHTING HIS OWN CONTROLS, MIKE Wilkes managed to move the TR over Wilton Road. At this point, it was the only route to Oak Road, because County Road Four forked off from here. If the Callaghans made it out of the maelstrom in town, he was going to have to take the boy out personally, and damn the consequences. The problem was the TR. It was leaking gas, losing lift. At some point, the computer would conclude that it was going to crash. It had a self-destruct mode that would vaporize it in seconds, and anybody inside as well. In the operational models, there was an elaborate escape mechanism that could fly the pilot hundreds of miles to safety, but it was not present in this stolen prototype.

Then he had seen two cars coming. The one in the rear was the Keltons' wagon. Ahead of it had been the Callaghans.

When the Keltons had fired on them, he had experienced a surge of relief. This might yet work, and work well . . . or so he had thought.

Now, he wasn't so sure. He slid slowly over the woods, looking down, unable to determine the exact situation.

There was a distant roar as the last of the elevator tanks collapsed like great, drunken giants, leaving a pall of white dust on the golden western horizon.

So the transmitter was done, now. How much longer would his assassins last? Maybe as much as an hour, some of them, but most would revert to normal almost immediately. The nice ones.

He unbuttoned his holster and dropped the ship to ground level. He moved slowly past the Callaghans' car, making certain that it was absolutely disabled. As he was ascending again, he noticed that the Keltons' wagon was occupied. Their dog was in the back, barking to be let out. The animal would not revert. Unlike a human being, it would remain savage for the rest of its life.

He climbed down onto the road and opened the wagon's rear door. He didn't need to break the glass, nobody had thought to lock this car.

The animal snarled at him, then began to come forward. Quickly, he returned to the TR, and turned toward the forest. Alarms were tinkling in the cockpit.

He would stalk Conner and watch, and if the Keltons failed, he'd go in for the kill.

CONNER, DARTING THROUGH THE WOODS, heard a helicopter. Then a shot clipped a tree beside his head. He threw himself down as another three bullets hit all around him. Jimbo, about a hundred yards away roared, "Way to go Dad, I've got him now!"

Very suddenly he was swooped down on and arms went around him. "Mom!"

As Katelyn's arms closed around him from behind, she cried out with joy.

"Mom, no! Mom, we have to keep on!"

"Honey, it's the Keltons, it's our friends, honey."

Then Dad was there and he was not confused at all. He scooped Conner

up and ran like hell.

But a shot crackled and Conner felt his dad's whole body lurch. With a gasp, Dad went down. Conner disentangled himself, but not before Jimbo arrived, his face purple, the axe flashing. Light the color of pus flowed out of his eyes.

"Get back in the woods," Dad said.

Jimbo hurled the axe, which slammed into a tree, its handle ringing from the vibration of the blow. Then Conner heard the helicopter again, this time very loud. He looked up.

INSIDE THE CHOPPER, LAUREN REALIZED that it was counterrotating. She knew that this was the worst possible thing it could do short of losing its blades and falling like a rock. The forest whirled, then she was thrown against the window and almost out the open door. The world was racing now and she could hear Rob howling in rage as the pilot made the engine shriek, and the trees came closer and closer. She watched, mesmerized, until finally they were sweeping past twenty feet below, all immaculate with snow.

In herself she became quiet. She was not afraid. She thought, *It's a perfect world*, and peace overcame her.

"Go! Go! GO!"

"What?"

"Jump, woman! Jump or burn!"

There was fire all over the place. Where had that come from? Then she knew that the chopper had hit the trees and she'd been stunned. The pilot cried out and began to struggle, and was enveloped in flames.

She leaped out into a frigid cacophony of snapping pine boughs and sighing snow, snow that took her into itself like a freezing womb. In summer, the fall would have killed her, but she went down now in a curtain of snow, and struck the ground almost silently.

She got to her feet, looked around. "Rob?"

Then she saw him. He was bleeding from his back and both arms and his hair was burned off, but he went charging off anyway. She started to follow him—and then saw out of the corner of her eye a blue flicker as small as the flutter of a bird's wing. It was not spring, there were no birds.

It was a child's blue car coat, over there through the trees. "Rob, this way!"

Lauren ran out into a small clearing, and there before her was a tableau, for the instant frozen as if by the cold: a boy kneeling in the snow, his face flushed, pleading silently toward a much larger boy, who stood with froth on his mouth like a mad dog. In his hand was an axe.

A man lay in the snow, the red of blood around him. Dan.

Lauren ran toward them.

THE AXE CAME DOWN, CAME with blinding speed, like the striking head of a snake.

Katelyn saw Dan grab the handle of the axe in both hands, and in doing so give Conner time to get to his feet and stagger toward the deeper woods. Jimbo roared with frustration as he took off after him.

She ran to Dan, knelt over him. His eyes met hers. “Help him,” he said, “help our son.”

She looked toward the woods, got up, and ran on.

Rob struggled frantically for his gun, and Lauren saw that he was fighting an arm so broken it was almost snake-like. His lips twisted, his face went ashen, but he used it anyway, getting to the weapon, dragging it out of the holster.

“Your left hand,” she screamed. “Rob, your *left* hand!”

He raised it past his body so she could see the useless hunk of meat that dripped there. She saw his chest heaving, saw a froth of bile appear between his lips, but saw him still struggling, still trying to raise that pistol.

WHEN MIKE SAW ROB APPEAR at the edge of the clearing where this thing was coming to climax, he pulled the TR back quickly. Rob was familiar with the TR and he just might spot it despite all the optical camouflage. As he maneuvered the craft, a soft female voice began a countdown. “Alert. Destruct in thirty seconds. Alert. Destruct in twenty-nine seconds . . .”

Mike hammered at the controls, increased the velocity of the plasma, the speed of the fans, and brought the lift level inching back up. “Countdown ends.” For a moment, he sat absolutely still, hardly breathing, but the countdown did not resume.

He activated the secure communications system. It didn’t matter much if the Air Force found him now. They were going to be too late, and he needed to let Charles know the situation. “This is TR-A1, I am going to burp coordinates.”

“Negative that.”

“Charles! Can you reach me?”

“Three hours.”

“I’ve got progressive damage. This thing is going in sooner than that.”

“Do you have the kid?”

“Just about.”

“Mike, the president’s arresting the Trust. Until further notice, consider yourself a fugitive.”

What in hell had happened? The president couldn’t arrest the Trust, could he? Mike wasn’t sure, but he was sure that he had a battle to fight, so he forced the issue out of his mind and instead concentrated on working the TR closer to the boy. He took out his pistol.

CHARLES GUNN, STILL OVER WASHINGTON, did not like that “just about.” To him, that meant that the child was not secure, and if that was true, he might never be secure. Charles must not end up in the situation that had destroyed *der Wolf* in the forties—a two-front war. For the Trust, one front would be this monster of a child, using his powers of mind to stay ahead of them and undermine their plans. The other front would be the president and his powers of arrest.

He had hesitated to do what he now knew he must. He’d hidden the TR by hanging in a wooded draw in Rock Creek Park. He rose up to the level of Glover Bridge and headed down Embassy Row. He cleared his vision. It was as if the plane around him had disappeared, except for the three control panels and his immediate seating area. He moved low over the buildings, stopping above the Prince Mansion. Just a few voices. Very well, the president was in the White House.

As he aimed the TR down Massachusetts Avenue, he opened a small cover under his right hand, revealing a black button. He adjusted his altitude, then activated listening devices. Much clearer voices filled the small area, a press officer on the telephone, two Secret Service agents chatting about their house cats, the First Lady discussing colors with her dressmaker.

Finally, he heard the president’s voice in the Oval Office talking to somebody through an interpreter.

He pressed the button. He held it down.

THE WHITE HOUSE KITCHEN WAS organized pandemonium. Last

night had been the Thai prime minister. Tonight, it was the sultan of Qatar, the second state dinner in a row. The pastry chef was the first to notice something awry: a meringue was shaking wildly. Then he realized that he was shaking, too.

In the press room above, Press Secretary Roger Armes said, “We appear to be—” as ceiling tiles began to come down. Then the lights went out, immediately replaced by emergency lighting. Voices rose, shouts and screams, and some of them terrible screams.

In the Vermeil Room, the portraits of all seven first ladies fell at once. A moment later, the ceiling followed. In the Oval Office, the president, his chief of staff, and two, then three, then four Secret Service agents were thrown with ferocious energy to the floor along with the elaborately robed sultan and his translator. The Resolute Desk, made from the timbers of the *HMS Resolute* and used by such presidents as FDR, Kennedy, and Reagan, now crashed with a crackling thud into the floor. A moment later, the walls came in, and the whole contents of the office thundered through into the Blue Room below.

From thirty feet away, Charles watched the carnage, directing pulse after pulse toward the building. The private apartments on the roof shuddered and caved in, then the whole West Wing sank away into a cloud of dust.

Charles traveled over the mess, heading for the Mall. He moved just inches above the Reflecting Pool, aiming toward the Washington Monument.

High above, the long snout of the scalar weapon now glowed bright red. Every time Charles pressed the button in the TR down below, the red fluttered brilliant white, and a ball of light shot toward the Earth.

Tourists screamed and ran across the Mall as the worst earthquake to strike the area since the Mississippi embayment in 1811 rumbled and rattled. The Washington Monument swayed, its sheer marble facing dancing with cracks. Inside, more tourists scrambled down the stairs.

The monument came down almost gracefully, sinking into its own base as it disintegrated. Marble is a soft stone, and does not stand up well under stress.

Charles circled the collapsing monument, then moved toward the Capitol. Far overhead, the scalar weapon’s servos emitted flashes as it made fine adjustments.

Congress was in session when the balconies swayed like hammocks and crashed down into the house chamber. Fortunately for all except the

observers, few representatives were actually in attendance.

The Senate was not so lucky. A ceremony honoring a retiring senator was under way, and three-quarters of the senators were present when the chandeliers began to fall, exploding into the chamber with horrendous loss of life.

The quake, finally finding a fault line, spread through the area. The tunnel to the Senate Office Building caved in. Then the Anacostia Bridge fell. Everywhere, people strove to keep their feet, tried desperately to avoid falling monuments and falling ceilings.

Charles continued his mad ballet, paying special attention now to the Pentagon. Inside, people held onto their desks or clung to doors and walls, but the tough old structure would not come down.

Finally, Charles took his finger off the button. At monitoring stations around the world, the pens of seismographs returned to normal. But the record was clear: an earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale had struck Washington, D.C. Strangely, the epicenter was located very close to the surface, rather than the three to ten miles beneath it that was normal. Stranger still, no fault line was known that could account for the highly localized event, which had been centered, for all practical purposes, on the White House. And yet it appeared to be entirely natural.

Henry Vorona, who had been in a car on the Anacostia Bridge when it collapsed, drowned with the two men who had arrested him. He died furious at Charles and at life, but also relieved, because he knew that the Trust would now certainly survive.

The president died, too, crushed beneath the desk he had so proudly accepted as his own, never dreaming that he would come to his end behind it—or rather, under it.

Charles grabbed altitude and headed off west-northwest as a flight of F-16s scrambled from Andrews screamed past him, their engine noise practically blowing out his ears.

“Mike, are you still up?”

“Just about on the deck.”

“What’s the status of the kid?”

“Unknown.”

“Goddamn you.”

TERRY AND JOHN KELTON CAME out of the woods, both with high-

powered rifles. As they strode past Dan, Terry knelt and fired into the trees.

Lauren leaped through the snow—which here had drifted as high as her chest—leaped and struggled in a slow-motion nightmare, feeling the cold of it sear her in places where she had never been cold. She clawed on anyway, because she knew without fully understanding that this was one of those tiny, secret moments on which a whole future turns.

She saw John laugh and stride forward so powerfully that the snow seemed to part for him like the Red Sea, as if he was helped in some way by the purity of evil itself.

“Rob,” Lauren screamed. “Rob, *shoot!*”

Rob struggled to raise his gun, his whole body shaking with the effort.

Three of the Keltons zeroed in on Conner. Lauren saw that they were converging with a fourth, a boy of about fifteen. She recognized him from that last session with Adam: he had the hair, the face, the build of the image of the boy that Adam had put in her mind and that she had described so carefully to Mike.

“Oh, Mike, you are good at what you do.” He had turned the grays’ own decoy into one of Conner’s assassins.

She broke free of the drift and ran hard, but all the hunters except the fifteen-year-old were too far ahead of her. “Rob,” she shouted in his direction, “Rob, stop them!”

Rob stood as still as if he had frozen, and Lauren feared for a moment that he had done just that, but that limp, flopping arm still came up, still carried the heavy pistol. He grimaced in agony, his face now lined with bars of frozen blood.

She watched the shattered arm rise impossibly higher and higher, the gun wavering in it. Then she launched herself in a final burst and took down Jimbo. He exhaled with a whoosh and fell, and she grabbed his shoulders and kept smashing his head into the ground as hard as she could, so hard that it soon packed the layer of snow beneath it and began to make thudding sounds, and his eyes began to roll.

Rob raised the gun higher. Higher. And kept raising it up right *past* the hunters. “ROB! ROB, WAKE UP!”

Rob’s face worked, his eyes rolling. She looked up to where the gun pointed and cried out, astonished, a red-hot knife of terror stabbing her heart as she saw just a few feet overhead, a gigantic shimmering triangle that looked so much like the sky above that she hadn’t noticed it before.

The gun blasted and Rob hissed through bared teeth in his agony as the kick flashed torment down his arm. With his mangled left hand he shoved snow against his face to force consciousness back, and fired into the thing overhead again and again.

“Alert. Auto destruct in ten seconds. Nine. Eight—”

As Mike twisted the controls, the TR wheeled away from the clearing, its huge wing skimming the treetops, leaving behind billows of snow.

“Five. Four.”

He slid down to the hatch. The treetops were five feet below him.

He leaped. As he did, he felt a fierce blast of heat from the dying TR. He crashed down among the wide pine branches and landed hard in a billow of snow. He checked himself, got to his feet—and realized that his ankle was broken.

Rob Langford stood not ten feet away. Mike’s pistol was gone, but he began to hobble toward Langford anyway.

“Rob, you’ve got to help me.”

“I can’t do that, Mike.”

“Rob, you don’t want the whole human race loaded with chains. You’re too good a man to want a thing like that.”

“They’re not loading us with chains, Mike, they’re giving us wings.”

“How the hell would you know?”

As Rob stood staring at him out of filmed eyes, Mike dragged himself closer.

He watched as if in a balletic nightmare as Rob’s pistol slowly rose from his side, clutched in a hand that looked like gnawed meat, and braced by a burned claw.

The pistol came to bear. He saw Langford’s teeth grinding, his eyes squinting with effort. He was almost on him now, just a couple more feet.

But the hammer went back, and he knew he had lost.

THIRTY-THREE

THE GUN WENT CLICK. AGAIN, click. Langford dropped it into the snow and Mike reached him, shoved him back, and pounded him in the face with all his might. But Langford was also a powerful, resourceful man, and he fought back, finally hurtling Mike off him with his feet, sending him sprawling in the snow.

Mike tried to get up. He pushed at the ground and struggled with all his strength to raise himself but he could not. More than just an ankle was broken, he knew that from the blood frothing his lips.

Then a fist came down, and the lights went out.

Somehow, Rob got to his feet. Somehow, he moved toward the clearing. He hoped that Wilkes would be out, at least for a couple of minutes. But he knew the colonel. The colonel was one to be reckoned with.

Screaming in agony, he forced his mangled hand into his pocket. As he got a fresh clip into his pistol, he gagged, bent double, and retched from the agony of using the hand.

Step by agonized step, he moved toward the tableau in the clearing. His uniform hung in tatters, blood gushed down his right arm and left a frozen trail in the snow. Now the gun came back up, this time pointing toward John Kelton.

John raised his rifle but he was not a military man and Rob got off the first round, which sent him flying back thirty feet into the trees. It hadn't been a fatal shot, Rob saw, as John clutched a bleeding shoulder.

Snow cascaded down around Terry, who cried out when he saw his dad go down. Mrs. Kelton came rushing through the woods screaming.

Good, Rob thought, they were distracted. He prepared to shoot them both the moment he had clear lines of fire.

Dan lay in the sanctity of his wounds, looking into the peace of the darkening sky. He remembered Katelyn on the catwalk in the secret world of their childhood, when the grays had stitched their lives together. He remembered her thin summer nightgown, and that face, Katelyn in the

summer of her girlhood, became what he would take with him if now was when he traveled on.

Lauren got off the inert form of the Kelton boy she had taken down. In that moment, Rob appeared. He looked through his one unswollen eye. Like a stone, the pistol dropped from his hand. His head lolled to his chest. “The others are coming,” he slurred. “Got to stop them, Lauren.”

As he toppled forward, Lauren shouted, “Somebody help him!” But there was nobody to do that. Rob was so caked with frozen blood he looked like he was wearing the uniform of a butcher.

She went down to him and embraced him, telling him that she would save him. She ripped off her own parka and put it under his head. He smiled a little. “You’re gonna freeze your ass,” he said. Then his eyes closed in the way people’s eyes close when they are dying and she cried out again, “Help us, somebody help us!”

Suddenly, the eyes opened. They bored into hers. “You’ve got work to do, soldier.”

Crying, begging God for his life, she picked up his pistol and ran to her duty in the woods.

It was dark and silent in among the trees. She peered ahead. Every time she moved, snow came in cascades off the pines. But the movement of others was easy to follow, because their passing had done the same thing.

She listened.

At that moment, a shocking and, she thought, totally inappropriate thing happened. She was plunged back into her babyhood, and was walking again for the first time.

That was Adam’s signature!

But Adam was dead, so—

She saw movement in the woods—a shadow back among the branches that had a great, soft eye like a deer.

At that instant, Conner, who was running blindly, saw Lauren’s face in his mind just as clearly as if she’d been on a TV screen five feet in front of him. Her eyes were full of a very special sort of light, pure blue as the sky, tinged at the edges with a million other colors, the richest, most beautiful light he had ever seen.

She saw him, also, in that moment, as if at the end of a tunnel of light that wound through the trees.

She struggled forward in a haze of cascading snow and whipping

branches, and the light gleamed on the snow, elusive, disappearing at moments, then coming again.

Before she could reach Conner, though, a figure was there. The older of the two teens. He had a rifle and he was pointing it. Then Conner came into view. The kid turned toward him.

Lauren raised Rob's pistol and in one motion fired, and the shooter flew into the snow and lay still. Then she moved toward Conner.

He turned toward her, looked from her face to the pistol—and literally disappeared before her eyes.

She still saw him, but only in her mind's eye, standing there staring fixedly at her. Like Adam had done, *exactly like Adam!*

She went down on one knee, put the pistol in the snow, and said, "Conner, Conner, I won't hurt you." She projected an image of herself hugging him. Instantly, an image came back into her head from Conner, of him begging silently with his hands. *I won't hurt you*, she said in her mind, in exactly the same way she had talked to Adam.

There was a flash of movement before her, then another, this one more clear. Then he was standing there again. She threw her arms around him and lifted him to her. Her mind and his mind seemed to swirl together, and it was sheer pleasure and joy, like counting every number to the highest number, and knowing that there would be ever more perfect numbers ahead.

Katelyn came out of the woods.

As Conner went to his mother, Lauren asked him, "Where are the other shooters? Can you tell?"

"Close your eyes," he said.

She saw an image of a man lying at the bottom of a ravine with his shoulder bleeding, a woman bending over him. They were huddled together, obviously desperate, trying to keep warm. John and Mrs. Kelton had given up the fight and moved to safety.

Conner asked Lauren, "What's happening?"

"It's going to end, honey. Very soon, it's going to end."

His face turned red, he grabbed her shoulders. "*What is it? Why do they hate me?*"

"Conner, it's going to end, it has to end."

He pushed back from her, his eyes rolling back into his head. "Dad needs us."

They began running, then, all three of them coming out of the shock of

the moment, realizing that lives still depended on them.

They found both Rob and Dan, and Terry Kelton nearby huddled in the snow. As it turned out, Lauren had missed and he wasn't even wounded, just in shock. His eyes were glazed with fear and he kept shaking his head. "What—what," he whispered, "what?"

He'd come out of it, whatever Mike had done to him, whatever evil, evil thing.

Dan was still alive and conscious, and as they lifted him Conner took off his own jacket and tucked it around his father.

Lauren hurried to Rob. The moment she looked at him, she began to weep. She reached out and touched his graying face. The eyes stared, the lips lay open as if amazed by a death that had been, also, a discovery. With trembling fingers, she closed the eyes. Then she doubled over, gasped, and began to grieve.

Conner came. "He's not dead," he said, as if that was the strangest idea in the world. He laid a hand on his forehead, and Rob's eyes flickered open. "See?"

Rob gazed up at her, silent. She looked to him, then to Conner, then back to Rob.

"Help us," Conner said. Katelyn was trying to get Dan to his feet.

"Let me look," Lauren said. She'd had standard survival and first-aid training, and she saw that he had a bullet-pierced shoulder. The bones were intact. The shoulder, while dislocated, had not been shattered by the bullet. There was blood, though, a lot of it. "You need a hospital," she said. "Right now."

On the way to the car, she saw more movement in the woods beside them. She whirled—but there was nothing there. To her horror, she realized that she had left the pistol behind. That had been stupid but it was also a warning that she was in shock. She had be careful, now, force herself to stay rational for them all. Survival, always, was in the details.

The movement came again.

Dan saw it, too. "A deer," he gasped.

"Conner?" she asked.

He waved her to silence.

They continued to the car, the five of them, following the tracks that had been laid in madness and terror. Dan cried out in pain, but they managed to help him across the Niederdorfer's fence.

Once on the other side, he leaned on it. “Give me a second . . . a second . . .”

“We need an ambulance,” Katelyn said.

Lauren opened her cell phone. Fortunately, they were close enough to the town for a signal. She called Alfred, got through to Rob’s adjutant, and reported Rob as severely wounded and the pilot as a KIA to a very saddened young man. Then she arranged for air evac. Because of the trouble in the town, it might be delayed, but there was nothing more they could do.

The Air Force would come and gather its dead pilot and take him home in a box, where he would lie in honored earth and the memories of those who loved him. But maybe Rob would live to fight another fight.

Are you gonna marry him?

She actually laughed a little. “If I can.”

Katelyn gave her a questioning look.

“Terry,” Conner said, “your mom and dad are okay.” He looked at Lauren. “There’s another one out there.”

“I know, Rob.”

“No, alive. Near Rob. He’s crawling. He’s trying to get to me.”

“Can he, Conner?”

Conner shook his head.

“What are you talking about?” Dan asked

“Nothing,” Conner said quickly.

Lauren heard in her mind, *Don’t tell them I can hear their thoughts.*

No, Conner, I won’t.

Dan touched the implant in his ear. It almost seemed as if he had heard Conner talking again, his voice curiously gentled, coming from the center of his own head. He would have to understand this, but not now. Now he had to save his family. He leaned on Katelyn as they walked, and she whispered, “I love you, Dan, I’ve remembered it all, and I love you.”

He turned to her. As much as he hurt, those words filled him with a torrent of swirling, strengthening relief. He raised his arms and held her, felt her against him and felt in his depths the love that defined his soul, for his Katelyn.

She raised her face to his and kissed him, and the kiss seemed to give him new life—until a wrong movement sent a firebrand of agony through his shoulder.

Tears in his eyes, he managed a smile as he went toward the car. “The

spare,” he said. “I’ll change the tire.”

“We’ll change it,” Lauren said.

The light was almost gone, now, but they weren’t but two hundred feet away from the car.

“We’ll drive straight out the Wilton Road,” Katelyn said, “and take you to the hospital in Berryville. Unless this insanity is all over the place? Is it, Lauren, do you know?”

“Hold it.” Lauren could not believe what she was seeing. “Don’t move.”

An enormous dog had jumped onto the roof of the Callaghans’ car.

THIRTY-FOUR

THE DOG STARED STRAIGHT AT Conner, a long string of drool sliding out of its panting jaws.

“Jesus,” Dan said.

“That’s Manrico,” Katelyn said. “That’s the Keltons’ dog.”

“Conner, what’s happening?” Lauren asked.

Conner took a step back.

The dog jumped off the roof, came toward him.

“Don’t look in his eyes,” Conner said.

Manrico started toward them.

As he had with the people who had gotten like this, Conner tried to send Manrico calming thoughts, but the dog kept leaping through the snow, coming right toward him.

At that moment, a deer—a graceful, careful doe—came out of the woods. Her appearance was so unexpected, her form so exquisite, that even the onrushing Manrico paused and turned.

She had great, soft eyes and long lashes, and a face like a deep song. She walked forward, her narrow legs pushing aside snow that gleamed gold in the sun’s long, final rays. Then she sounded, the vaporous whistling that signals alarm in that peaceable race.

Manrico’s ears pointed toward her. She came closer, her delicate nose questing in the air, her eyes as calm and dark as midnight lakes.

The Two felt sure that the dog could be drawn away, now that the transmitter was no longer broadcasting its order to kill. He did not understand that the animal’s savagery would not end. While he knew he could not control the dog’s mind, he could distract it the way he was doing, by appearing to be a succulent deer. He went closer, projecting every single detail of a female deer that he could recall.

Conner’s voice said, *Be careful.*

The Two went closer yet.

“Is that really a deer?” Lauren asked.

“Of course it is,” Terry said.

Conner took Lauren’s hand.

The deer came closer. Manrico looked from her back to Conner. He growled softly, a deadly sound. The deer sounded again, then began limping as a mother deer will when her fawn is threatened.

She was close now, just beyond the fence. Manrico’s haunches stiffened, his ears pricked forward, he whined a little. She sounded again and limped, lurching in the snow. That did it: he leaped the fence, barking and howling as he reached her and tore into her throat.

She screamed, then, and suddenly she was not a deer at all, she was a gray and in terrible trouble, being torn apart by the maddened dog. It leaped away from Manrico, one arm dangling, its head wobbling horribly.

Conner screamed and ran for the fence, but Lauren tackled him. “No!”

Sparks like fluid began spewing out of the gray. As the dog screamed and twisted against itself, the gray whirled faster and faster, until it became a dervish of sparks and flying fire.

Then it was gone, nothing left but a melted area of snow, some smoking earth, and the seared body of Manrico.

“Get in the car!” Lauren shouted.

They did, but they could go nowhere. “We have to change that tire,” Lauren said from the backseat, where she’d gotten in with Conner. “You three stay here, I’ll do it.”

“I’ll help,” Conner said.

“No,” Lauren said.

“I’ll *help!*”

Lauren responded: *No, it’s too dangerous.*

Why are you so good at this?

I’ve been in training for years to be your teacher.

He looked up at her and frowned. “I find teachers extremely boring.”

I won’t be.

Mike was still out there somewhere, maybe incapacitated but maybe not. She could not expose Conner to the long, clear sightlines that led back to that concealing wood.

Overhead, a dark helicopter appeared, a red cross on its belly. Katelyn and Lauren got out and waved and shouted, but it set down behind the trees, in the clearing where Rob and dead Jimbo Kelton lay.

Terry Kelton, who had refused to get in the car, began to cry, standing

on the roadside, holding his head in agony.

Another car appeared, coming from town.

“Careful,” Katelyn said.

“Conner,” Lauren whispered. “Can you tell?”

“How can he possibly tell?” Katelyn snapped.

Conner closed his eyes and found that he could go racing down the snowy road and look into the car. *It’s Paulie. They’re okay.*

Thank God.

The grays made me like this?

Yes, they did.

It’s never gonna end, is it?

She smiled at him. “Do you want it to?”

He met her eyes, and she found it hard, very hard to look at him. She missed Adam.

Conner suddenly got out of the car.

“Conner!”

“It’s okay, Lauren.”

The Warners pulled up behind them.

Conner started to walk toward their minivan.

“No,” Lauren said, coming up to him, putting her hand on his shoulder. “No.”

“Listen,” he said, “it’s okay. They’re not—not affected.” He whispered to her. “Let me go.”

She released him.

He got into the van.

“You missed it, didn’t you?” Paulie asked.

“I got a picture on my phone.”

“Mom! Dad! I told you and told you, they missed the riot!” He regarded Conner, his face alight. “There was a whole huge riot in the town and the National Guard’s there in Humvees, and it’s gonna be on the network news. It was totally incredible, and *you* missed it, lil’ fella. Momma had to take you home.”

Katelyn leaned in the window. “Dan needs a hospital, we’ve got to take him to Berryville right now.”

FAR ABOVE, A SMALL SILVER dot glittered in the rising light of

evening. The worn space inside the little craft where the Three Thieves had lived through so many long ages now was empty. The iron bedsteads where Katelyn and Dan had had their souls mingled, where Marcie had been laid, and Conner, and so many thousands of others over the centuries, stood still and silent.

As if it was alive—which it might be—the little vehicle turned round and round, looking for some place to go. The collective, at a loss, tried to understand how to replace the last triad. But who could do the work of another without training? Their minds were not flexible enough.

There was no place for the little machine, nobody to replace its triad. It hung there, left empty in the sky.

CONNER SAT QUIETLY BETWEEN PAULIE and Amy in the van's third row of seats. In front of them, Mom and Lauren helped his dad.

He could feel his dad suffering, could hear whispers of fear coming from the implant that connected the two of them, but he intended to be very, very careful in listening to what it broadcast, to use it only if it was absolutely necessary. He wanted his dad's love, not his fear.

As he listened to the humming of the tires and the soft voices of the adults, and Terry's miserable sobs, he kept feeling an absence in him, and the more he felt it, the more he came to understand that it was the absence of the collective. For a little while, being part of it had felt like a kind of music in him, and he knew that he could conduct that music, could make it bright and great and true.

One day, perhaps, he would be strong enough to reach the collective on his own, to join it to his mind. Until he could, though, he would be in the most profound sense blind.

He needed the Three Thieves, they were woven into his being, part of him. Without them, he could feel the vague, distant presence of the collective calling to him, *Conner, Conner*, but he could not answer, not without the mind of the Three Thieves to amplify and relay his response.

Conner swept out of his body and through the snowy woods, following a glowing silver wire that connected him to a burned place near the Niederdorfer's fence, where lay a pitiful little mess of rags and sticks and empty black eyes.

Wake up, he said in the secret air of the mind, *come back to me*.

There was stirring in the snow, but only a little, for the damage the Two

had endured was very great.

A sentence came to Conner, *Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken . . .* and he knew that it was the love written in the bible, a secret code for those who know.

“Behold,” he murmured, “he comes leaping on the mountains . . .”

And in the field, broken flesh fluttered in the night wind.

In the seat in front of him, Terry Kelton sobbed, his head hanging low on his chest.

Conner thought, *I can help him*. He did not know how it was or why it was that he could leave his body so easily. He knew all about out-of-body travel, of course, he’d experimented with it, as he had with remote viewing and all such things, because he understood the physics of superposition, and how it was that the electrons in the brain, during meditation, would become ambiguous, no longer in any one place, and you could use that to prowl in hidden pathways.

He slipped upward and outward, and saw, in his mind’s eye, four Air Force guys with two aluminum gurneys in the snow. He looked at the faces of the victims, and saw that John and Mrs. Kelton were alive. “Your mom and dad made it,” he told Terry. “You lost your brother and Manrico.”

Terry turned around. “How do you—”

Conner met his eyes. *Your soul knows*, he said inside himself. Terry blinked, then looked away and was silent for a time. Finally, a whisper: “Thanks for telling me.”

Conner had work to do. He brought to mind the Three Thieves as they had appeared last night, dumpy and scared, hiding behind the trees and terrified of making a mistake. He imagined them bobbing along in the night the way they had, so upset about scaring him, so unable to understand how not to.

I need you, he said in his mind.

His thought was met by silence.

They pulled into the Berryville Hospital emergency room. Medical personnel in green oversuits ran up, their portable stretcher rattling on the concrete driveway.

The Air Force helicopter roared into view, dropping down onto the hospital’s rooftop helipad.

Can you see who’s in it? Lauren asked in his head.

Conner went out of his body again, traveling up to the ceiling . . . and

found that he could go through it . . . he saw up the legs of people, then went higher, up through the next ceiling. He was on the roof now, and he could see the Keltons lying strapped to their stretchers.

There was another man there, Lauren's friend, the handsome officer with the mangled hand and the burns.

Then they brought out a fourth man. He had a narrow, careful face and rusty gray hair. He was in agony, his teeth bared, his head turning from side to side as he forced himself not to scream.

He raced back into his body. "It's him," he said, "he's up there."

"Who?" Lauren asked.

Conner knew what she wanted to know. *Your friend.*

Lauren burst into tears.

"Conner, what's the matter with her?" Amy asked.

He shook his head. How could he explain?

"Conner," Lauren whispered. Then, between their minds, *You healed him, didn't you?*

I don't know.

Amy's hand slipped toward his—hesitant, trembling a little. He took it. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against his shoulder.

Paulie shook his head. "My sis is a piece of work, buddy."

They sat side by side on blue plastic seats in the emergency waiting room. She smiled a little, and he saw one of the silver threads running between the two of them. He looked down at it where it disappeared under his shirt. With his free hand, he tried to touch it, but his hand went through it.

He met her eyes, and saw there a sparkle of love and hope. She closed them, and he saw her face change. She threw back her head and laughed, and he put his arm around her.

"Oh, boy," Paulie said.

"Shut up, little boy," Amy snapped. She kissed Conner on the cheek and giggled.

Mom and a doctor came out of a double door across the room. The doctor said, "Your dad's going to be fine."

Terry went to his feet. Behind the doctor, his parents had also come out. He ran to them, and the family embraced.

Mom sat down beside Conner, and put her arm around him. As he felt the comfort of the two women, his eyes closed.

"He sure goes to sleep fast," Amy said.

“He’s your little boyfriend,” Paulie said.

“He’s been through a lot,” Katelyn responded, “he’s real tired.”

Behind them, a group of uniformed Air Force personnel ran into the emergency room.

“Who are they?” Paulie asked.

As they hurried through the double doors into the emergency room proper, Lauren saw Rob on his stretcher. Uttering a little cry, she went running to him. She held his face in her hands. He opened his eyes. A weak smile came. “You’re a hell of a sight,” he said, his voice a bare whisper.

She tried to smile. “Is that good or bad?”

“Good, lady. Real good.”

She kissed him then.

“Sir?”

Rob turned his head away from her. “Yes, Major?”

“We’re detailed to detain Colonel Wilkes.”

Lauren said, “Was he in the evac?”

“Yeah,” Rob said faintly. “Oh, yeah.”

AT THAT MOMENT, CHARLES GUNN was half pulling, half carrying Mike down a hallway. He heard voices behind them and went faster, pushing through an alarmed exit door, setting off a steady beeping behind them.

Charles’s TR was there, its hatch glowing with amber light from within. Otherwise it was invisible.

He helped Mike up the ladder, then drew it in behind them. The Air Force officers swarmed out of the hospital exit and began fighting to get into the TR. Charles mercilessly shot one of them, and they all fell back. Leaving Mike in the access tunnel, he slid into the cockpit and hit the stick, causing the fans to whine for a moment as they revved.

Below him, the officers were drawing their guns. He knew how vulnerable the TR was to gunfire, and twisted the flight controls, slamming the power switches all the way down as he did so. The world outside whirled wildly and critical maneuver alarms sounded.

But the hospital spun away below, and the shots that were being fired did no damage. He headed the nose of the craft toward the dark, and was off into the night.

SLEEPING BETWEEN AMY AND HIS mom, Conner dreamed of when

the bluets would rise out of the ground along the roadsides and the warblers would come back to Kentucky, and he saw his own backyard going green again, and his dad filling the pool with the garden hose. He dreamed then of the days of summer peace. He woke up a little and murmured, "We're going to be free, all of us."

"We are free," Amy said. "Sort of. Aren't we?"

"Sort of," he said. "But there's a lot more to come."

But in his heart, he despaired, calling, *Come back to me.*

Silence continued to be the only response.

"Look here, Conner Callaghan, if you're gonna be my boyfriend, you have to pretend not to be totally geeky. Can you do that?"

He smiled a little. "I'll give it a shot." His eyes fluttered closed and he tried again to find the mind of the collective.

The snow, dark now, slowly covered the body of the Two, and in the ashes of the grain elevator, the curious metal bones of his brothers, also, were dusted with it, deep in the black ruins.

EPILOGUE

LATE AT NIGHT, WHEN THE DEMONS COME

THEY'D COME HOME, HE AND Mom. Dad had to stay at the hospital for a few days. Lauren was with them, and Conner knew that she was going to live here, she had to, he needed her here.

Late that night, Conner lay wide awake, letting his silent tears flow. He was down in his basement room. Mom was in her bedroom upstairs, and in his mind's eye, he could see her sleeping. Lauren was awake.

He went upstairs. She sat in the living room, sipping from a tall glass.

"Conner!"

"Hi."

"Can't sleep?"

"I'm wide awake."

"Me, too." She held up her drink. "Want a sip?"

He shook his head. "They make me drink wine at dinner. One of Dad's many theories. Every time you do that, did you know that you kill about six thousand neurons?"

"I've heard that."

"I need all my neurons."

"Come sit beside me." She patted the couch and he came close to her. "Are you scared, Conner?"

"Oh, yes." He looked out the dark glass doors that opened onto the deck. It was bright outside now, a low moon making the snow shine softly.

Conner.

"I want to just talk, okay? I don't like to do that mind stuff."

"I didn't."

"Yeah, you did, you said my name."

Conner.

“I heard that, too, but it’s not me.”

Could it be? But no. He sighed. “My friends are dead.”

“Your friends? The Kelton boy?”

“Yeah, him too. But I mean—you know—the ones we’re not supposed to talk about. I need them, Lauren. I’m lost without them.”

“I feel that way about my friend. He was a gray, but they’re not really monsters at all, they’re full of need and hope, and—” She stopped, looked down at him. He was so small, just an ordinary little kid, narrow shoulders, soft, unfinished face, all promise and potential.

“You miss him, then?”

“Earlier, I could feel him in you, sort of, and that was nice. It was like being home again, a little bit.”

He thought about that. “Boy, if people heard us talking about this stuff, they would think we were weird.”

She sensed that he didn’t want to address the matter of Adam. And why would he? Adam had died for him, and that would be very hard to face. “I’m in the military,” she said. “My friend, he was in his military, sort of. The grays’ military of the spirit. I mean, they have no actual army, as such. In the military, though, we always know that death is part of it. Oh, you don’t think about it, you think about life. But death is part of it.”

She had to stop. She did not want him to hear the tears in her voice.

Conner?

He blinked, sat up straighter, stared toward the deck. That wasn’t Lauren, she was leaning over with her eyes closed and full of tears, almost about to spill her drink.

He got up.

“Going back to bed?”

He hardly heard her. He went out on the deck.

“Conner?”

The night was huge and hollow, the sky aflame with stars. It was cutting cold, but it felt good, somehow, as if the winter night belonged to his grief.

She came out behind him, and then Mom did, too. Mom brought his coat. He had big lamb’s wool slippers on already. “What are we doing at three A.M? May I know?”

Then, through the skeletal trees, there came a glow. It flickered and was gone.

“Is that a flashlight?” his mother asked.

But Conner was off, racing down the deck stairs and across the hard frozen yard. “You guys,” he yelled, his voice slapping the deep silence.

He plunged through the woods, pushing twigs aside, getting scratched by branches. Then he stumbled into the stubbly field and saw hanging there just a hundred yards away, the little ship that had started the whole thing.

It wasn’t glowing much now. In fact, there was just this flickering blue light playing across its skin. As he approached it, he saw that it was bigger than it looked.

“Conner! Conner, be careful!”

Take care of her, Lauren. Tell her I’m okay.

Are you?

I have no idea.

He went closer to the thing. It was making a sort of rattling sound, like ball bearings clicking together in something that was turning slowly, just ticking over. There was a round opening, not a hatch, just an opening. Inside, he could see the wooden framework that held the thin outer skin. He pushed at it, and it wobbled slightly in the air.

He peered in.

Then his mother was there. “No,” she said in a voice harsh with terror, “we have to get away!”

“Mom, hey.”

“Conner, Conner run!” She pulled at him, she started to drag him away.

“NO!” He shook her off. He lifted himself inside, and saw, sitting on a little bench, three very tattered and bedraggled grays.

“You guys?”

They stirred, backing away.

You guys.

Thank you, came a nervous reply in that innocent, mechanical-sounding voice of theirs. *Thank you for our lives.*

I brought you back to life?

Conner, we’re part of you.

“Conner! Oh, God, Conner!” Mom came pushing and crashing in. Her eyes were filmed with tears, glaring, her face pouring with sweat despite the cold. She bared her teeth like the wild animal Conner knew she had become. “I remember this thing,” she hissed, “and it’s terrible, Conner, it’s *evil*.”

The Three Thieves had backed against the wall. Inside his mind, they

moaned and cried.

Stay calm, Conner projected to them. Then he said aloud, “Mom, I want you to sit down.”

There were two narrow black gurneys against the far wall.

When she saw them, she went practically rigid. The hands of the grays went up to their cheeks, the mouths opened. They pressed themselves against the wall as hard as they could.

“Conner, this place—this is where—” She looked at the narrow iron gurneys. “Oh my God.” Then her face changed. “It was always a sort of nightmare. I didn’t think it was . . . this.” She went to the gurneys, touched one of them. “I remember,” she said in a suddenly loud voice. “I remember it all.”

Conner saw her change and become a girl again, just as Amy had become a woman before his eyes a few hours ago. She was a beautiful, blond girl, freckled, in a white summer nightgown.

And then there were stars all around her, and he saw a boy on the gurney beside her, and the stars surrounded them both.

When the vision ended, Mom was sitting on the edge of one of the gurneys, stroking the ugly black metal. “Conner,” she whispered, “this is where your dad and I were brought together. Right here.”

He went beside her, put an arm around her shoulders.

“If they hadn’t done this, then my whole life . . . I never would have found Dad.” She shook her head. “Conner, they made us, they made our family.” She looked at him, and now her eyes were soft mother’s eyes. She hugged him to her.

Slowly, carefully, or rather, as carefully as the clumsy Thieves could manage, they came out of their hiding place and drew closer.

Conner heard the one say, *Let’s touch her*.

The Two replied, *We can’t do that!*

The Three asked, *What do we do?*

“Mom, put out your hand.”

She tried to, but it was shaking too much. Conner took it in his hand, and together they reached out to the Three, and their hands touched.

Mom snatched her hand back. “It shocked me!”

Don’t do that!

We’re scared!

“They won’t do it again,” Conner told her.

This time, she reached out and touched the face of the Three, and he, with his own hand shaking like a leaf, touched her face, and the One and the Two came close, and the five of them formed a circle.

A sound rose in Conner's mind, the great humming song he had heard before, the voice of the collective raised in hope and joy.

Then there came ringing. The Three Thieves rushed to the far wall. The voice of the collective faded.

What's going on in there? Lauren asked.

"Mom, answer your phone."

The Thieves looked at each other. Katelyn fumbled out her cell phone, listened for a moment. "We'll be there," she said. She closed her phone. "Dad's awake and he wants us." She started for the hatch—and looked out on a field racing away, houses spinning in the starlight, then darkness. "Conner, they've kidnapped us!"

Then there was a thud outside, and light came in the opening. Another thud, and more light. Conner joined his mother at the edge of the opening. "You know what this is?"

"No, Conner! Is it another planet, because your poor father—"

"Come on, Mother."

He helped her down onto the hospital helipad, which had been flooded by automatic lighting as soon as the Thieves' craft landed on it. The thuds had been the switches turning on the floodlamps.

They had not gone two steps before the body of the craft blazed bright and the Thieves shot off into the night.

Conner heard faintly in his head, *Where are you? Conner!*

They took us to the hospital, Lauren.

An orderly came out of a door and trotted across the helipad toward them. "Where is your emergency?" he shouted. He looked around. "Excuse me, but what's going on here?"

"We're here to see a patient," Katelyn announced. "Dan Callaghan."

"But what? Uh, oh, okay. Did you come by medevac? Where's the chopper?"

"He was in a hurry," Katelyn said. "And so are we."

They went down then, along a green-tiled corridor and into a room filled with equipment, and there in the bed was Dad.

Conner let Katelyn go to him. She bent and gingerly kissed him. His eyes met hers, and they kissed more. Then Conner went close, and the family

was whole again.

High above, three others—people also, but of a very different shape—came together, also, arm in arm.

Lauren drove like a madwoman along snowy roads, skidding into the hospital emergency entrance. She left her car where it happened to stop against a curb and sprinted into the building.

She ran down a hallway, vaulted stairs, then turned a corner and burst into Dan Callaghan's room breathing hard.

She stopped, stunned by what she saw.

The Callaghan family had come to the end of something. Instead of huddling together, perhaps weeping, cursing God and their fate, they were all asleep. On the bed, Conner lay beside his father, who snored softly. Katelyn sat in a chair beside the bed, her head back, her mouth open. Her hand lay along the sheets, her fingers touching her husband's bandaged arm. His good arm was around his son.

As she stood in the doorway, she thought how very innocent they still were, even after all they had done and seen. And that boy, with his dusting of beard just barely visible along his lip, what dreams must he be dreaming in the ocean of thought that he now contained?

She came into the room, went to the bedside, looked down at them. How extraordinarily resilient people were. Had she been asked before this, she would have said that they'd have needed sedatives or even straitjackets, but that underestimated the power of the human heart and the simple, central thing that is the family.

She bent over and kissed Conner's downy cheek. He made no move, no sigh of awareness. She tried to make herself quiet in her mind. The Callaghans might be at peace, but in her mind there lived demons, the demon of fear-of-future, the demon of distrust, the demon of danger-of-deceit.

She got the one chair that was not in use and stepped across to the doorway. She sat down, angling the chair so that she could see both the Callaghans, the dark window behind them, and the gleaming, silent hallway.

"May I help you?" a passing nurse asked.

"No, no, I'm fine."

"His vitals are good."

"I know."

The nurse smiled slightly, then walked off, her footsteps clicking on the gray floor. Lauren watched, methodically, first the hall, then the window,

then the Callaghans. For what, she was not sure. Perhaps for nothing. Perhaps the fight was truly ended, and Conner would be able to enter his training.

But where would it lead? What was she to do?

She laughed a little to herself. How absurd that question was. It would lead beyond imagination, past the edge of the known world.

Three o'clock, an alarm beeped in another room, and nurses hurried past. Half past, the wind came, rattling the window. Conner sighed and muttered words that brought to Lauren's mind the tone of prayer. She prayed, then, to Conner's favorite god—that is to say, whatever one happens to be real.

The spirit of man had triumphed this day. Ignition had been achieved. Now, the ascent.

She watched through the deeper hours, watched and waited for the dawn.

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For M.A.

Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
Me only cruel immortality
Consumes . . .

Tithonus, ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We knew her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.

Lamia, JOHN KEATS

The Hunger

PROLOGUE

JOHN BLAYLOCK CHECKED his watch again. It was exactly three A.M. — time to move. The small Long Island town was so quiet he could hear the light change at the end of the tree-lined street. John put his watch back in his pocket and stepped softly from his place of concealment in the shrubs. He paused a moment in the cool, private air of the empty street.

His target lived in the middle of the block. John's well-trained senses fixed on the black bulk of the house, testing for any flicker of life. As far as the Wagners were concerned, Kaye would just disappear. Within a month she would become another statistic, one of thousands of teenagers who walk out on their families every year. Kaye had good reason to run away. She was being expelled from Emerson High, and she and her boyfriend, Tommy, were facing a cocaine charge in JD court in a few days.

Both would disappear tonight. Miriam was taking care of the boyfriend.

As he walked, silent and invisible in his black jogging outfit, he thought briefly about his partner. He wanted her as he always did at moments of tension. Theirs was an old love, familiar and comfortable.

At two minutes past three the moon set. Now, only the single street light at the end of the block provided illumination. That was as planned. John broke into a trot, passing the target house and pausing at the far end of the grounds. No light appeared from any angle. He went up the driveway.

To John, houses had an ambience, almost an emotional smell. As he drew closer to its looming silence he decided that he didn't much like this house. For all its carefully tended rose bushes, its beds of dahlias and pansies, it was

an angry place.

This confirmation of the Wagners' misery strengthened his resolve. His mind focused with even greater clarity on the task at hand. Each phase had been timed to the last second. At this level of concentration he could hear the breathing of Mr. and Mrs. Wagner in their second-floor bedroom. He paused, focusing his attention with fierce effort. Now he could hear the rustle of sheets as a sleeper's arm stirred, the faint scratching of a roach moving up the wall of the bedroom. It was difficult for him to maintain such intense concentration for long. In this he and Miriam were very different. She lived often at such a level, John almost never.

He satisfied himself that the household was asleep, then began his penetration. Despite the dark, he quickly located the basement door. It led into a furnace room. Beyond it was a finished playroom and Kaye's bedroom. He withdrew a length of piano wire from a pouch concealed under his sweat shirt and picked the lock, then worked back the spring catch with the edge of a credit card.

A rush of warm, musty air came out when the door was opened. The night was only slightly chilly, and the furnace was running on low, its fire casting faint orange light. John crossed the room and went into the hallway beyond.

He froze. Ahead he heard rattling breath, not human. His mind analyzed the sound and concluded that a dog of about sixty pounds was sleeping at the end of the hall, approximately seven feet away.

Nothing could be done about it now. He was forced to use his chloroform. He removed a plastic bag from the pouch and took out a cloth. It was cold in his hand, dripping with the liquid. He was not as quick as Miriam, he needed chloroform to subdue his victims. The thought of the danger he would now face made his throat tighten.

His friend the darkness began to work against him; he stepped forward, calculating his distance as best he could. One step. The dog's breathing changed. Two steps. There was a shuffling sound, the beginning of a growl. Three steps. Like an explosion, the dog barked.

Then he had it, his fingers twining in the fur, his chloroformed rag going over the muzzle.

There was a furious struggle, not quite silent.

“Barney?”

Kaye’s voice was bell-clear and edged with fear. John was aware of how much his odds were worsening. The girl was wide awake. He could sense her staring into the darkness. Normally, he would have retreated at this point but tonight he could not. Miriam was an absolutely intractable killer; she would not miss the boyfriend. The essence of the deception was that they would disappear together. Both gone and the police would figure it for a runaway and file the case somewhere below lost kittens. Only one gone and there would be much more suspicion.

As soon as the dog stopped struggling, John moved ahead. There would be perhaps ten safe minutes while the dog was unconscious. There must be no further delays; maximum efficiency was essential.

Kaye’s bedroom was suddenly flooded with light. She was beautiful, sitting on her bed in a nightshirt, her hand still touching the frilly lamp.

John felt the light like fire. He leaped on her, lunging to stifle the scream he knew was rising. Then his hand was over her lips, his arm pushing her onto the bed.

Kaye smelled faintly of cologne and cigarettes. John fought her, his body shaking above the dismal fury of her struggle. The intensity of her resistance conjured up anger in him. Both his hands covered her mouth and nose, his knees pinned her elbows.

The room was absolutely still, the only sound that of Kaye’s legs thudding against the mattress. John looked at the pleading, terrified eyes, trying to gauge how much longer they would remain alive. He felt the girl’s tongue darting against the palm of his hand. Careful, don’t let her bite.

The five minutes it took to suffocate her stretched on and on. John fought to

keep his attention on his work. If she got away from him . . . but he wouldn't allow that. He had, after all, years of practice. Just don't let the mind wander, the grip loosen — not for an instant. He was watching for the hemorrhage in the whites of the eyes that would be the sign of death. Kaye responded typically. She pleaded with her expression, looking desperately into his face.

Finally, her eyes screwed closed with the failure of consciousness. There came a series of frantic convulsions — the unconscious trying to escape what the conscious could not. After a moment of motionlessness the eyes opened again. The whites were the correct shade of pink now. The eyes slowly drifted to the right, as if trying to see the way. A deeper stillness fell.

At once John released his grip and leaned across to her chest, pressing his ear between the warm softness of her breasts, listening for the last thutter of the heart.

Perfection. She was just right, hanging at the edge of death.

All obstacles were removed. Steel discipline could give way now to his real feelings, to the raw truth of his hunger. He lunged at her, unhearing of his own excited cry. She exploded instantly into new life within him. His mind clarified as if he had plunged into deliciously cold water on a stuffy day. The achiness that had been threatening swept from his muscles. His hearing, his eyesight flooded him with impressions of almost supernatural intensity.

He soared from height to height. As always at such a moment, a vivid image of Miriam appeared in his mind's eye. He could taste her lips, feel her laughter in his heart. He longed for her cool flesh, the love within him growing rich with desire.

Then it was finished. He barely glanced at the remains of Kaye Wagner, a dark lumpy thing almost lost in the bedclothes. Time had to be addressed. He forced himself back to sordid necessity, slipping the frail husk of the girl into a black plastic bag. Briskly, he consulted his watch again. In exactly two minutes he must be at the pickup point.

Into the bag he also tossed the girl's wallet and hairbrush and some of the cosmetics scattered over her dresser. Then panties and bras and a stack of 45-

rpm records from the floor. He stopped in the bathroom for toothbrush, hair spray, more cosmetics, shampoo and a somewhat clean blouse he found hanging on the shower-curtain rod.

In fifty seconds the car would come down the street, Miriam was always on schedule, so John hurried out the way he had come, pausing only to lock the cellar door behind him with his piano wire. He moved swiftly down the driveway and waited in a flowering dogwood.

His body tingled; his awareness seemed to extend into every detail of the world around him. No effort was needed to concentrate now. He could feel the peaceful presence of the dogwood, hear even the smallest sounds, the rustling of a beetle, the ping of a slowly cooling engine block in a car across the street. Above him the stars had resolved into myriad colors: green and yellow and blue and red. The breeze seemed to stir each leaf with a separate touch. John felt a sharp and poignant sense of the beauty around him. Life could not be sweeter.

The appearance of their car made him smile. Miriam drove with the caution of a blind octogenarian. Accident obsessed, she had chosen the Volvo because of its safety record and innocuous appearance. Despite its sturdiness, she had it equipped with a heavy-duty gas tank, truck brakes, an air-bag restraint system as well as seatbelts and a “sun roof” that was actually an extra means of escape.

Dutifully, he trotted over to the slowly moving vehicle, tossed his burdens into the backseat and slipped in beside her. There was no question of his driving, of course. She never relinquished the wheel unless absolutely necessary. It was comfortable to be with her again. Her lips felt cool and familiar on his cheek, her smile was bright with pleasure and success.

Saying nothing, she concentrated on the road. The entrance to the Long Island Expressway was two blocks away and John knew she would be worrying about the chance of being stopped by the local police before they reached it. They would have to answer embarrassing questions if that happened.

Until they reached the ramp neither spoke. As they pulled onto the freeway,

however, he felt her relax. The last bit of tension broke.

“It was just *beautiful*,” she said. “He was so strong.”

John smiled. He husbanded his own exhilaration. Despite his years at it, the kill itself never pleased him. He was not excited by the actual act, as was Miriam.

“Yours went well, I hope.” It was a question.

“The usual.”

She was staring at him, her eyes twinkling like those of a pretty doll. “I had such a nice time. He thought he was being raped by a girl.” She giggled. “I think he died in ecstasy.” She stretched, luxurious with postprandial ease. “How did Kaye die?”

He supposed the question was her way of giving him support, to show interest, but he would rather forget the ugly little act and concentrate on the joy that was its reward.

“I had to use the chloroform on a dog.”

Miriam reached over and kissed him on the cheek, then took his hand. She was so sensitive; she knew from that one remark all that had occurred, the difficulties he had endured.

“They all end up the same sooner or later. I’m sure you were very humane. She probably never really understood what was happening to her.”

“I miscalculated. I should have anticipated the dog. That’s all that’s bothering me.”

But it wasn’t, not quite. There was also this feeling, strange and yet remembered. He was tired. It had been a very long time since he had felt so.

“You can never give a perfect death. There will always be suffering.”

Yes, that was true. And even after all these years he did not like to inflict

suffering. But it shouldn't weigh on him like this. Feeding was supposed to make you feel vital and alive.

This could only be a passing phase, the result of his having been thrown off-balance by the dog. He decided to dismiss it from his mind. He turned to the window, stared out.

The night was magnificent. He had always seen a great truth in the dark, a kind of joy, something forgiving of such violence as his. Thinking of it brought a welcome sense of justification.

The lights of towns came and went. John felt deeply in love with it all. He allowed himself a little of the pleasure of the kill, reflecting how he was fundamentally happy in his life.

Before he quite realized it his eyes had closed. The humming of the car began to mingle with the voices of memory, distant memory.

His eyes snapped open. This was not normal. He opened the sun roof to let in some cool air. The pattern of their lives was extremely regular. You slept six out of twenty-four hours, and it came upon you about four hours after you ate.

What, then, was this?

He was drifting, half-asleep, into a very pleasant sensation, his mind possessed by a soft sigh of remembrance, of dream . . .

For a flash it was as if he were in an enormous, cold room lit with candles, a fire crackling in the grate. He was surprised. He had not thought of the ancestral home of the Blaylocks since he had left England. And yet now he remembered his own bedroom so well, the incessant dampness, the grandeur, the familiarity.

Miriam was as beautiful now as she had been then. He would have touched her, held her, but she did not like to be disturbed while she was driving.

He remembered the tall windows of his room with their view of the North

Yorks Moors, where gypsy fires flickered at night. The faces and voices of the past flooded into his consciousness. Drowsily, he watched the strange modern landscape pass the car, the endless lights, the cramped, scruffy little houses. How alone he was in this world.

He closed his eyes and was at once transported to a wet, gray afternoon at Hadley. It was a special afternoon — or would be within the hour. He remembered himself as he was then, a fashionable lordling just finished with two years at Balliol College. He had been dressing for dinner, his valet hovering about with stockings and cravat and shirt. His assumption was that the guest would be some ghastly political acquaintance of his father and the evening would consist of sanctimonious discussions about the mad old king and the profligate regent. John didn't give a damn about court. He was much more interested in bear-baiting and running his hounds on the moor.

As he was dressing, a carriage rattled up the drive. It was a magnificent equipage, drawn by six stallions, attended by two footmen. Their livery was unfamiliar. When a lady in white silk emerged from the carriage John snapped his fingers impatiently for his wig. It had been too long since his father had brought a whore to Hadley. Despite all his infirmities and his frequent confusions, despite the goiter, the dim eyes, John's father retained a superb taste in females. When he sought a woman's company, he usually cast about among the shabbier edges of the aristocracy for some physically attractive, charming creature without sufficient property to interest his son.

Except they usually did.

"The master's away," he sang softly as Williams adjusted his cravat and sprinkled a bit of scent in his wig, "we shall have a merry day."

"The master is here, sir."

"I know that, Williams. Just wishful thinking."

"Yes, sir."

"The usual preparations, Williams, if she is appealing."

The man turned and went about his duty. He was a good valet and knew when not to respond. But John could be certain that the halls from the sitting room to this bedroom would be empty of servants at the appropriate time, and the lady's maid would not follow her mistress.

That is, if his father could be sotted with enough brandy to make him forget his plans, and enough bezique to bore him to sleep.

Yes, indeed, it promised to be an interesting evening. John went down the gallery that connected the two wings of the house, feeling the humid coolness of the evening beyond the windows, passing beneath the portrait of his mother that his father insisted remain outside her old room.

The stairway had been lit as if for a ball, as had the front hall and the large dining hall. Servants were setting three places at the massive table. Why his father had not chosen the more intimate yellow dining room John could not imagine. His father's voice could be heard beyond the great hall, in the formal parlor. John crossed the hall and paused as the door was opened before him.

Then he knew why the pomp. And he knew no amount of brandy would addle his father this night, nor bezique send him off to sleep.

There was no word to describe her.

Skin could not be so white or features so perfect, surely. Her eyes, as pale as delft, as pellucid as the sea, flickered to him. He fought for some appropriate word, could only smile and bow, then advance.

"This is my son, John."

His father's words were as distant as an echo. Only the woman mattered now. "I am charmed, ma'am," John said softly.

She extended her hand.

"The Lady Miriam," his father said, his tone revealing just a trace of irony.

John took the cool hand and pressed it to his lips, lingered just an instant too

long, then raised his head.

She was looking at him, not smiling.

He was shocked by the power of that glance, so shocked he turned away in confusion.

His heart was pounding, his face was blazing hot. He covered his upset with a flourish of snuff. When he dared look, her eyes were merry and pleasant, as a woman's eyes should be.

Then, as if to tease him, she looked at him again in that shameless, wild way. Never before had he encountered such brazen effrontery, not even from the most primitive scullery or back-street whore.

To see it in such an extraordinary and obviously refined beauty made him shake with excitement. His eyes teared, involuntarily he extended his hands. She seemed about to speak but only ran her tongue along the edges of her teeth.

It was as if his father had ceased to exist. John's arms came around her, around Miriam, for the first time. The embrace electrified him, inflamed him. His eyes closed, he sank into her softness, bent his head to her alabaster neck, touched her salty and milky flesh with his open lips.

Laughter sprang out of her like a hidden blade. He jerked his head up, dropped his arms. In her eyes there was something so lascivious, so mocking and triumphant, that his passion was at once replaced by fear. Such a look he had seen —

Yes, in a panther some East Indians had been displaying at Vauxhall Gardens.

The light, furious eyes of a panther.

How could such eyes be so very lovely?

All of this had happened in no more than a minute. During this time John's father had stood transfixed, his eyebrows raised, his face gradually

registering more and more surprise. “Sir!” he burst out at last. “Please sir!”

John had to recover himself. A gentleman could not so dishonor himself before his father.

“Do not be angry with him, Lord Hadley,” Miriam said. “You cannot imagine what a flattery it is to be attended to so fervently.”

Her voice was soft and yet it filled the room with vibrant intensity. The words may not have pleased John’s father, but they foreclosed any further disapproval. The old lord bowed graciously and took the lady’s hand. Together they strolled farther into the great room, pausing before the fireplace. John moved along behind them, his manner outwardly deferential. Within, his heart was seething. The woman’s manner and appearance were the most wonderful he had ever known, a thousand times more wonderful than he had imagined possible. She trailed behind her an attar of roses. The firelight made her skin glow. Her beauty made the dank old room blaze with light.

At a signal from his father, a piper began to play on the balcony. The tones were stirring, some Scottish air at once beautiful and fierce. Miriam turned and looked upward. “What is that instrument?”

“A bagpipe,” John said before his father’s mouth could open. “It’s a Scot’s device.”

“Also Breton,” his father snapped. “That is a Breton piper. There are no Scotsmen in Hadley House.”

John knew differently, but he did not contradict.

They ate a brace of grouse, high and sour, followed by lamb, pudding and trifle. John remembered that meal well because of how surprised he had been when Miriam did not partake of any of the food. Course after course went past untouched. It would not have been polite for them to inquire why their guest did not care for the food, but at the end of the meal John’s father seemed sunken in dismay. When she at last took some port he brightened.

No doubt he had been afraid that his physical appearance was so unpleasant to her that she was not going to stay the night. John almost laughed aloud when he saw how his father grinned when she drank, his loose dental plates making it look as if he had a mouthful of stones.

During the course of the meal, Miriam had glanced twice at John and both times had communicated such warmth and invitation that he himself was greatly encouraged.

When the evening ended he went to his room full of eager anticipation. He dismissed Williams at once, dropping his clothes off, tossing his wig aside, standing at last naked. He went close to the grate, warming first one side of himself and then the other, and then jumped into bed. The sheets had been swept with a fire brick until they were warm and so the bed was quite comfortable. He lay sleepless, astonished that he had taken to his bed without his nightclothes, deliciously excited. On the nightstand he left three gold sovereigns gleaming in the candlelight.

He lay listening to the wind and the rain, warm and safe beneath his quilts, waiting. Hours passed. His body, fixed in the tension of extreme excitement, began to ache with need.

Without knowing it, he fell asleep. He awoke suddenly, dreaming of her. The room was no longer absolutely dark. Fumbling on the night table, he found his watch and opened it. Almost five A.M.

She wasn't going to come. He sat up. Surely any sensible whore would have understood the meaning of the glances that had passed between them. The three sovereigns lay untouched. The fool had not come to claim her own.

By now his father must long since have been done with her. Bracing himself for the cold, he swept his covers aside and rose from the bed. He could not find where Williams kept his nightclothes and so was forced to put on his pants and blouse of the night before. Grabbing up the gold coins, he hurried down the corridor.

A bright fire burned in the grate in the guest room. The bed was occupied. John went to it, placed his hand gently on her cheek.

He felt rather than saw her smile. There was no confusion, no befuddlement of awakening. “I wondered if you would come,” she said.

“My God — you should have come to me!”

She laughed. “I could hardly do that. But now that you’re here, don’t catch cold.” She let him into the bed. He tried to control his shaking but could not. This was like bedding the daughter of the greatest lord of the realm. There was nothing whorish about her now. Usually, they were at least a little coarse, their eyes hard with the truth of the word. But here was all innocence and fluttering purity — and the most blatant lust.

She allowed him to undress her. Naked, she drew him to her and deftly removed his own clothing. “Come,” she said, rising from the bed.

“Come?”

“To the fireside.” Their arms about each other’s waists, they walked to the fire. The room was warm because her maid had obviously laid this new fire within the hour. “Be truthful,” she said. “Am I not the first?”

“In what sense?”

“The first you have really loved.” She touched him most shamelessly, most wonderfully. He looked down at her hand, amazed that so simple a gesture could bring such pleasure. It was all he could do to keep his feet.

“Yes! I love you!”

Her body, perfect in shape, pert and yet voluptuous, overwhelmed him with its beauty. She lifted her face to his, brought her arms around his neck, parted her lips. He kissed her, kissed into her open mouth — and tasted sour, oddly cold breath.

“Come back to the bed,” she said. She led him by the hand, paused, and held him at arm’s length. “Let me have a good look at you first,” she added. Her hands ran down along his chest, touched his hard-muscled belly lightly, and did not hesitate to examine his private parts. “Are you ever ill?” she asked.

“The whited sepulcher? Certainly not!” He was astonished by her impertinence. What business was it of hers if he had the infection?

“It is a disease communicated from body to body,” she said absently. She was talking nonsense. “But it doesn’t matter. I was curious about the general state of your health.”

“I’m quite well, madam.” He brushed past her, got into the bed. She looked down at him, laughed lightly, and twirled about the room, her body full of the grace and beauty of youth. John was entranced but he also was growing impatient.

Suddenly she leaped onto the bed. It was a tall four-poster and her jump was so high that it seemed almost uncanny. He tried to laugh, but something about her movements stopped him. She seemed almost angry as she came into the covers. “You know nothing of love,” she said in a loud voice. Then she was beside him, squatting. A pixie smile came into her eyes. “Would you care to learn?”

“I should say so. You’re already tardy with my lesson.”

Without warning she grabbed his cheeks and kissed him fiercely. Her tongue pressed between his teeth. It felt as rough as a broom besom and he drew back in surprise. How could such a thing be in a human mouth? It was quite horrible. He looked at the door.

“Don’t fear me,” she said. Then she laughed, bright, ringing through the gray predawn.

John was not a superstitious man, but he wondered about the gypsy camps at this moment. Could this be a gypsy witch, come to claim Hadley for her own? She must have seen the expression in his face, because she all but flung herself onto him. Her hands moved across his body, her flesh touched his, her face presented itself for his kisses.

And he did kiss her. He kissed her as he had never kissed anybody before. He covered her lips, her cheeks, her neck with kisses. Then she took her breasts in her hands and offered them. Before this moment John had not known the

pleasure of kissing a woman there. His heart welled up with happiness. Gypsies forgotten, he lost himself in the pleasures of the flesh. She pressed his head downward until he was kissing her most secret intimacy.

The pleasure of it amazed him. She moved with quick dexterity, and before he knew it he was also being kissed in this way.

In a few minutes she had awakened feelings in him he had known nothing of. Waves of exultant happiness swept over him. He could feel her excitement rise to match his own. Never had a woman made him feel so wonderfully competent, so *good*. Then her mood changed. Gently, insistently she moved beneath him until they were face to face. Her legs spread, her eyes invited. A little sound, half joy, half fear, escaped her lips when he slipped into her. Then her hands came up and grasped his buttocks and they began.

John fought manfully, but his excitement was so intense that it was only moments before he was pounding into her, pounding and shouting her beautiful name, shouting without a care for the ears of servants, shouting in great and glorious love.

He sank down on her. "Marry me, whore," he breathed. Her fingers scraped slowly along his back, the nails digging into his skin. Her face remained impassive. Her nails hurt but he would not cry out. He was too happy, too far transported. "Lady Miriam, you must be my wife."

"I am not a real lady."

He laughed. "You *must* be!"

In that moment he had married her. Their spirits would not again be parted.

He remembered those first wild years of love, the wonder and the horror of it, the sheer blaze of lust. So much had been gained and so much lost.

They raped the estate. The peasants ran away. The gypsy fires died. The old lord withered and also died. John was lost in her, lost and not yet found. Lost in love with her.

* * *

Miriam was worried. John's head lolled, his mouth hung open. He was obviously dozing. For them such a thing was abnormal. Either they were awake or they Slept, the deep revitalizing trance peculiar to their kind.

He shifted restlessly. There was only one thing that could be wrong. She shook her head, refused to accept it. Not so soon, surely not!

She slammed the car into fourth. Lights flashed by as they hurtled toward New York.

"You're going too fast," he said over the roar of the wind.

"We're the only car on the road." The speedometer hovered near eighty. Miriam threw back her head and laughed, bitter and angry. He could not fail so soon. She loved him so — his youth, his freshness. She slipped her hand into his, felt him return the pressure.

"You were dozing, weren't you?"

She felt his eyes on her. "I had a dream."

"Like Sleep?"

"A sort of daydream. I was only half asleep. I was dreaming of when we met."

She could have shouted with relief. A daydream! Now the glorious feelings that followed feeding reasserted themselves in her. The bumpy old highway, the crumbling city, all revealed secret beauty. In her heart the sense of relief was followed by the familiar love, a sort of gratitude for the existence of humankind.

Her thoughts went to little Alice Cavender, whom she would soon transform. When John's winter actually came — many years from now — Alice would be rising to summer. As he withered she would flower, and Miriam's love would slip from one to the next with none of the agonizing sense of loss she

had experienced in the past. To reassure herself she sought a *touch* with Alice. It came promptly — Alice’s warmth, her smell, the fierceness of her heart. Then it was over, the bright little storm blowing away. A *touch* with Alice . . . how good. The girl was coming along well.

As they crossed Flushing Meadow Park with the enormous Mt. Hebron Cemetery on the left and the World’s Fair Site on the right, Miriam watched John as closely as possible without ignoring the road.

“Remember the Terrace Club,” he said.

“How could I forget?” That was in 1939; the Terrace Club had been at the old World’s Fair. She could picture the cheerful beauty of its yellow and white walls and svelte stainless-steel furniture.

“We danced there.”

“That’s not all we did.” She well remembered John’s outrageous kidnapping of a girl from the powder room while she herself consumed the little creature’s date.

Manhattan began to appear and disappear ahead as they rolled through Queens. How recent it all looked to Miriam. It seemed just a week ago the whole area had been swarming with builders. This had been a cobbled road; the air had been scented with the odor of tar and raw lumber. In those days the Long Island Expressway was not yet built and an electric tramway ran to Ozone Park. The bedroom suburbs beyond didn’t exist then. They had ridden the tram often, sitting on the rattan seats as it clicked and sparked and shuddered along, a raft of light in a great dark ocean.

Soon the procession of cemeteries began: Mt. Zion, Calvary, Greenacres. A musty, cool odor filled the air.

John turned on the radio, and her mellow mood was interrupted by a long, sorrowful tale being told by an old voice from nowhere, some used-up insomniac pouring his losses out to a talk show host.

“Please.”

“I like it.”

“Then your taste is more bizarre than I thought.”

“I like to listen to the old. I gloat over their infirmities.”

That she could understand. She could well imagine how it must feel to John to have defeated the curse of aging. What an absolutely perfect man he was. She also began to enjoy the presence of the old voice in the air. It became a kind of counterpoint to John’s youth and vigor, making him seem more wonderful, a more inspired catch, than ever before.

She drove swiftly through the Midtown Tunnel, up Third Avenue and across to Sutton Place. Their house was on the corner of a cul-de-sac, a small but elegant structure that revealed no sign that it was also a fortress. Miriam loved the sense of protection it gave her. She had lavished time and money on the security system. As technology advanced she had seized on every breakthrough and added it to the system. The window boxes full of petunias concealed a microwave perimeter alert. Each window and door was protected by an electrostatic barrier powerful enough to render an intruder unconscious. Even Miriam’s bed was protected by a new system which would drop steel shutters around it if anyone approached. In the back garden, among the roses, were sensitive motion detectors that could pick up the step of man or animal, and tell the difference. Cameras with light-intensifying lenses watched the alley and the area near the garage, the computer that controlled them vigilant for human shapes moving within their range.

Once there had been a secret tunnel under the alley and garden, leading to a private dock on the East River, but the building of the East Side Drive had changed all that. Now protection was more important — and easier — than escape.

She stopped the car, turned out the lights, and pressed the dashboard button that closed the garage door behind them. John got out at once, heading for the furnace room to burn the bags containing the remnants of their victims. He was hurrying so that the smoke would be gone before dawn.

Miriam was embarrassed. She had allowed Alice to stay here alone this night,

violating her own strict rules. Now John would have to know lest he make too much noise in the furnace room. “Don’t wake Alice,” she said.

“It doesn’t matter, I’m up.” Alice stood at the top of the stairs that led up from the basement. Her blue-gray eyes were directed at John and his two big plastic bags.

“Stay upstairs,” Miriam said quickly. Alice ignored her, coming down the steps with feline grace.

“I dreamed about you,” she said to Miriam. The eyes quested for more information. Alice had sensed something unusual about the dream. Miriam smiled at her. When Miriam *touch*ed Alice dreamed. On such beginnings great loves were founded.

“Since she’s here she might as well help me,” John said acidly. “What does it matter, it’s just garbage.” His anger was quite justified — and yet Miriam was so glad that Alice was here, she found she didn’t care.

“Fine,” Alice said into the silence that followed John’s remark.

Miriam went upstairs. In spite of herself she felt a pleasing thrill at the harshness in John’s voice. He was interesting when he was a little mean. Sometimes she even evoked it deliberately. That, she supposed, was part of the reason she had invited Alice over on a forbidden night. That and the love she felt for the girl.

John watched Alice come down the steps. He disliked her seductiveness, her forceful personality, and most of all the effect she had on Miriam. It was infuriating to realize to what small degree Miriam belonged to him. All of these feelings made him want to consume Alice, to let his body do its will on her, and not incidentally remove the threat, relieve the corrupting jealousy. At least it would be easier to bear tonight, with the hunger in abeyance.

“Why don’t you just leave your garbage in the alley like everybody else?”

A typically bothersome question. Miriam certainly couldn’t claim that she needed the companionship of this girl. John felt that he was more than

enough himself, and she had said he would be with her forever. Accident was supposed to be all that could harm either of them. He almost laughed at the thought that now entered his mind. This sullen little creature was going to be his backup, in case he got himself killed.

“Why don’t you?” she repeated. Alice never let go of a question.

“They don’t pick it up often enough.” He tossed her the bags. “Hold these while I get the fire going.” There was little time left before dawn. They did not burn evidence during daylight hours.

“They’re so light.”

“What can I tell you? We were hungry.” He pulled the lever that controlled the specially installed high-pressure gas line. There was a pop and a roar and the firebox was filled with blue flames.

“What is this stuff anyway, paper?”

He snatched the bags away from her and stuffed them into the furnace.

“Count it as another of our mysteries.”

“You bring garbage home in the car?”

John glared at her. “We had a picnic. How you managed to miss it I cannot imagine.”

She smiled, too sweet. “You didn’t invite me. I’m not the kind of person who tags along without an invitation.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“I bet Miriam wanted me along. You probably wouldn’t let her ask me.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but your name never crossed her lips.”

“She loves me.”

It was said so simply and with such force that John could find no reply.

Furiously, ignoring the girl, he tended his fire.

Miriam moved to the night table and began preparing for Sleep. She worked as quickly as she could, taking out the lenses that deepened the color of her eyes, washing off the makeup that concealed her pale white skin, finally stripping away the wig. She ran her fingers through her wispy dusting of hair, then stepped for a few minutes into the shower.

The voices of Sleep echoed more and more loudly.

John was sitting on the side of the bed when she came out. “Why did you let her stay here tonight?”

“Her parents are away.”

“She saw me burning the remnants.”

“She’ll be helping you soon enough. Aren’t you ready to Sleep?” She sank down on the bed.

“What you want with her I cannot imagine!”

“She keeps house. Aren’t you going to Sleep?”

“I feel wide awake.”

She concealed the thrill of fear that this statement evoked in her. He *must* Sleep! She raised her hand, touched him, tried to form a question. But her own Sleep would not be denied another moment. The last thing she was aware of as she sank away was his restless stirring. Then a dream captured her, as vivid as life, more a memory relived. She Slept.

1

ROME: 71 B.C.

SHE HATED THE CITY and hated it most in August. The streets burst with filthy life; rats and flies and the sneering, diseased poor of the Empire. Carts piled with everything from sausages to silks poured through the gates, choked the narrow alleyways, jammed into the forums. Exotic crowds from the edges of the world shoved and brawled and stole in every corner. Over it all a blue haze of smoke from countless sausage-stands and bakeries hung like dead fog. Rome was drowning in humanity: naked slaves, nobility preceded by lictors and followed by streams of clients, soldiers in creaking leather and clanging brass, aristocratic ladies held above the mass on litters, all surging around the gaudily painted temples of government, religion and wealth.

She drove her chariot like a centurion. Two slaves walked ahead of the horse and chariot with whips to force the crowd aside — she didn't give a damn how it made her look, she had no time for the effete ministrations of lictors with their delicate rods. She was in a hurry and Rome was just going to have to move.

As she proceeded along the Nova Via toward the Appian Way the crowds thinned somewhat; nobody was going out the Capenian Gate today.

The lush palaces on the Palatine Hill and the brightly painted Temple of Apollo disappeared behind her. Now her slaves were trotting. Soon she would flail her horse and burst past them. She was growing frantic, the heat made time short.

On this day she would find one of the strongest men on earth and make him her own. She passed under the Appian Aqueduct and through the Capenian Gate. Now that she was outside she thrashed the horse, rattling past the

Temple of Honor and Virtue and over a little hill. With shocking suddenness the horror was before her.

Even in this age of cheap life it stunned her.

A dense, roaring mass of flies darkened the sun. Lining the Appian Way for miles, rising and falling over the gentle Campagnian Hills, were twin rows of crosses. The entire army of the slave rebel called Spartacus was being executed. They had been here for three days. The question was, could she find one still living?

Such a man would have to be incredibly strong. Miriam's father had theorized that selecting only the very strongest might be the solution to their problem. In the past they had too often chosen badly, and the transformed had always died.

Miriam needed this man. She longed for him, dreamed about him. And now she arranged her veils to keep out the flies and prodded her horse to find him. The shadows of morning stretched before the crosses. At least Miriam was alone on the road; travelers were detouring along the Ardenian Way as far as Capua in order to avoid this disgusting mess. Miriam's slaves came up behind her, gasping from their run out from the city, batting at the flies that settled around them. Her horse snorted nervously as flies alighted on its face.

"Groom," she said, motioning with her hand. Her slaves had wrapped themselves in cotton soaked with gall. The groom came forward. For an instant his costume reminded her of better times, when she had watched the people of the desert going forth in the sun with similar turbans on their heads. In those days her family had been nomadic, traveling up and down the desert, capturing strays on the fringes of Egypt's fertile plain.

She moved slowly ahead, enduring the sweet stench and the ceaseless energy of the flies, past corpse after corpse. A knot of loathing burned in her stomach. Rome was madness enthroned. And it would get worse. The city's rise to a world-empire was now inevitable. In time it would pass, but not soon. Many hard years lay ahead.

Every few minutes she stopped, lifted her veils, and stared long at one of the

victims. With a flick of her wrist she would send a slave to test him by prodding him in the ribs with a stick. A feeble groan would be the only protest and she would continue on. Behind her one of her slaves had begun to play a flute to soften the ordeal. He played the plaintive music of Egypt, sad notes well suited to the situation.

She noticed one man from a long way off and stopped a moment to watch him. There was organization to his movements. Tied to a cross, a man must keep his legs straight or suffocate. To stay alive takes every human resource. Only sheer terror of death keeps a man struggling on a cross.

This man must have been at it steadily for nearly seventy-two hours. Yet he must realize that nobody was going to have mercy on him.

She clapped softly to signal the groom. It was all she could do not to whip the horse to a gallop, but then her slaves would have to run again. She was no Roman, she despised indifferent cruelty. So they walked to the prize. As they drew closer she saw that he was Greek or Middle Eastern, filthy and brutally wounded from whipping. His eyes were closed, his face almost peaceful in the extremity of his effort.

The next moment he straightened his legs and she heard an awful, ponderous intake of breath. Then the legs slacked again. One eye had opened a little, staring down at the approaching observers. But he was beyond caring about them, all his energy was devoted to his struggle.

He did it again without a cry or moan, and settled as quickly as he had risen. Then she noticed that his feet were moving back and forth beneath their seething mass of flies. He was actually trying to loosen his bonds!

And the flies were eating the blood on his ankles.

“Demetrius, Brusus, take him down!”

Two of her slaves ran to the cross and began shaking it, removing it from the ground. The man on the cross grimaced, showing his teeth.

“Be careful, you’re hurting him.”

They lowered the cross and she dismounted her chariot and ran to him. She ignored a distant noise, the clatter of hooves. There was no time to worry about soldiers now. She had gall and vinegar, and bathed his face with the liquids while the slaves untied him. The damage was appalling, there were even nests of maggots in his ears. His skin was cracked and black, his body bloated. Only the shallow rattling breath told her that he lived — that and the open eye.

He stared at her. She spoke as soothingly to him as she would to a son. The eye unsettled her. It was incredible that he could be so alert after such an ordeal.

“My Lady —” one of her slaves whispered.

She looked up. Standing like sentinels of death were three soldiers with drawn short swords. They were in the middle of the road, almost hidden by the clouds of flies. These soldiers guarded the crosses, their mission to see that nobody took down any of the condemned. Not a few might try. Motives were many — relatives, sympathizers, slavers after the quick profits of contraband.

“Get him to the chariot — be quick!”

He groaned when he was moved. Her slaves laid him with his knees to his chin on the floor of the chariot. There was no time to lose; even as she stepped up and grabbed the reins, the soldiers were coming forward. “Tell them I’m Crassus’ wife,” she said to her groom. The lie would make them hesitate. Roman soldiers would never impede the activities of the wife of Rome’s current dictator. She snapped the reins and the horse broke into a gallop. She would allow it to gallop back to Rome; by now Victrix was desperate to return to her stall. As for the six slaves, they would make their way home more slowly. No doubt they would convince the soldiers of their innocence, they were sophisticated Egyptians and the troopers were only simple boys from Latium.

The man screamed when the chariot jerked and Miriam screamed with him. He was such an incredible find, it would be utterly desolating to kill him while trying to save him.

She had searched half the world for a man such as this, who clutched life with every whisper of strength.

They reached the Temple of Mars and she swung off the Appian Way. There was no sense in returning through the Capenian Gate; it would be certain to arouse the suspicion of the guard. She drove around the temple on a carter's track, moving close beneath the city wall. There were huts and holes in the shadow of the wall, and the track was stinking and awash in sewage. Floating in it were corpses in every state of decomposition. Dozens of people of every race on earth huddled on both sides of the track, migrants who had come to Rome only to find that strict laws controlled their right to enter the city. If they were not citizens, enrolled freedmen or slaves they could not pass through the gates. A woman came forward brandishing a stick. Miriam showed the short sword that was scabbarded on the chariot. Most of these people were extremely weak and would be unable to subdue her, much less stop the horse.

There was a motionless mass of carts and wagons at the Naevian Gate. Miriam whipped the horse ahead. It was best to take advantage of any confusion.

She used her voice and her whip liberally, thrashing carters and their horses out of the way and making the soldiers guarding the gate roar with laughter. Nevertheless, her efforts got her through quickly, and the condition of her passenger made her desperate for haste. Nobody looked into the bundle on the floor of the chariot.

She passed the Circus Maximus and wheeled toward the Quadrata, an area of wealthy mansions and luxurious insulae. Miriam owned the Insula Ianiculensis and lived on the ground floor. Her upstairs rents paid her taxes and left her enough to maintain her apartments, a villa at Herculaneum and fifty slaves. Hers was a modestly well-to-do establishment, comfortable enough but unlikely to attract any notice.

She found her way through the labyrinth of side streets behind the Circus. Soon the Aemilian Bridge appeared and she crossed it into the stillness of the Quadrata. At this time of year the suburb was quiet, its inhabitants away at Capua or Pompeii for the summer.

At last she arrived at the Insula Ianiculensis. As soon as she came around the corner slaves rushed out, a stable boy taking the reins of the exhausted horse as the assistant master of conveyances stepped up to the chariot. Her Egyptian physicians came forward and took the crucified man into the house. She followed, not stopping even as the maid of the outer garments fumbled with her fibula and removed her fly-spotted cloak. They crossed the Atrium and went through the Peristyle with its flowers and lotus-filled pool and beyond into the suite of baths which had been converted into a hospital in anticipation of this arrival.

At her instructions the tepidarium had been salted and the frigidarium filled with equal parts water and vinegar. A bed had been installed in the solarium with a movable awning above it. Supplies of medicinals and such chemicals as saltpeter and alum had been brought in. Miriam would use all her medical knowledge — far more extensive than that of the idiotic Graeco-Roman “doctors” — in her effort to nurse the man back to health. She had learned medicine in Egypt, combining the ancient knowledge of her own people with that of the priestly cults.

She waved away the bath attendants, who were trying to wash her face and arms, and told the physicians to lay their burden on the bed. The three of them had worked for her long enough to follow her orders without argument; they considered themselves students in her service.

Only now, with the sunlight full on his naked body, did she really feel the presence of this man. Despite his wounds and sores he was magnificent, fully six feet tall with huge shoulders and arms, but surprisingly delicate hands. His face was covered with stubble; he was perhaps twenty years old.

The Romans had been as vicious as ever. Hardly any unmarked skin remained. Suddenly, he made a rasping sound and began to heave weakly on the bed. She lifted him by the shoulders, her fingers breaking through to the blood-wet skin beneath the scabs, and held his head between his legs. Great black masses came from his mouth.

“Gall him,” she said. “He stopped breathing!”

With a funnel the physicians forced the sourest gall down his throat. He

retched and gasped and vomited more, but when she lay him back down he was breathing again.

She had him soaked in the hot salt water and sat forcing cold fruit juice down his throat while the bath attendants scummed the water. Afterward her physicians rubbed into his wounds an ointment she had prepared from the fungus *Aspergillus*. Then they soaked him in the frigidarium and gave him hot Falernian wine.

He slept twenty hours.

For much of this time she sat at the head of his bed listening to his breathing. When he awoke he ate six dates and drank off a flagon of beer.

His second sleep lasted fifteen hours. He awoke at three in the morning, screaming.

She stroked his face, made soft sounds in her throat. “Am I dead?” he asked before lapsing once again into unconsciousness. His sleep, deeper than ever, continued until morning. Miriam saw that he had swollen to bursting. He looked like a wineskin. His flesh glowed red through the fissures opened up by the stretching skin.

He stank of death. His body grew hot and dry and she had him moved to the frigidarium. He became delirious, speaking elegant Greek, talking of the Attic Hills. She knew those hills, had watched evening purple them from the Akropolis of Athens. She knew also those breezes of which he spoke, fragrant with hymettus, bearing the music of shepherd’s pipes.

A long time ago she had walked there, when Athens was the center of the world. In those days the huddled confusion of empire lay at Athens’ gates, when her blue-sailed ships called at all the ports of the East. In such a place as that — or this — Miriam could most easily go about her business.

Against the expectations of her physicians the swelling subsided and the fever declined. Soon he could raise his head for wine or broth of *Aspergillus*, or the boiled blood of chickens and pigs. She knew his name from his ramblings of his delirium, and one day when she called “Eumenes,” he

smiled.

She spent hours gazing at him. As his wounds healed he became more and more beautiful. She taught her cosmetician to shave him and, when he was well enough to sit up, went out and bought him a body servant and a boy of his own.

Slowly a new feeling began to fill her. She ordered artisans in to mosaic the floors and paint the walls, just to give the house a fresh appearance, to fit the new mood. She clothed Eumenes in the finest silks, like a Babylonian prince. She dressed his hair with unguents and applied ocher to his eyes. When he was strong enough she converted the whole Peristyle into a gymnasium and hired professional trainers for him.

Her own beauty blossomed as never before. Her male slaves became awkward and silly in her presence, and if she kissed them they blushed.

No household in Rome could have been happier, no woman more gay. Soon Eumenes was strong enough to walk, and they began to venture from the Insula. Pompey filled the Flaminian Circus with water and ordered mock sea-battles for the entertainment of the public. They spent a day in a private box, drinking wine and eating cold meats: peacock and dove and pork seasoned in the Euboean manner. It was now September and ice had begun to appear for sale in Rome — at fifty sesterces a pound. She bought some and they took their wine cold, laughing at the mad luxury of it.

She watched Eumenes fall in love with her. It was, from beginning to end, a triumph. His ordeal proved his extraordinary strength and his intelligence could not be questioned; he was the third son of an Athenian academician, sold into slavery to ransom his father's library after the Roman conquest.

“I've got to go to Babylon,” she said one day to test him.

The announcement stunned him, but he recovered himself. “I'll accompany you,” he said.

“I've got to go alone.”

For a day her announcement hung heavily in the air between them. Outwardly all was as before, but the strained moments, the increased silence of his contemplative nature, told her that he could not forget what she had said.

Finally, he entered the trap. In the small hours of a morning he came to her, moving softly through the sleeping house, his passage causing oil lamps to gutter in their pots, coming swiftly to her bedside. "I dream only of you," he said, hoarse with need. She received him with a cry of joy that echoed through all the years. It was a love that she remembered always, even after time proved her father's theory wrong.

That first extraordinary night, his passion, the intensity of his hunger, his pounding, relentless sexuality, that first night had been unforgettable.

She had searched eternity for a better moment.

She remembered the avid love in his eyes, the smell of his skin, sour and hinting of her own perfume, and his humid breath mingling with hers.

All of the tragedy and despair of subsequent years did not quell the remembrance of that moment, or of the joyous times they had shared then.

She remembered mostly the flowers and evenings, and the limpid beauty of the night sky in the imperial city.

Also, she remembered his initiation. She had imbued herself with an authority she did not feel, drawing him on. She invented a goddess, Thera, and called herself a priestess. She spun a web of faith and beguiling ritual. They slit the throat of a child and drank the salty wine of sacrifice. She showed him the priceless mosaic of her mother Lamia, and taught him the legends and truths of her people.

They lay together, mingling their blood. This was the hardest time; she was beginning to love him. In the past the mingling of blood had often killed. Only much later did she learn why this is so. She counted herself fortunate that it did not kill Eumenes.

Quite the contrary, he had thrived.

But in the end he had also been destroyed, as they all had been destroyed.

The Sleep lasted six hours. For most of that time John lay beside Miriam watching the shadows. Now sunlight was beginning to creep across the ceiling. It was as if the dozing in the car had been a herald of some change in him. He had dreamed vividly, as was characteristic of Sleep, but there had been no trance.

Beside him Miriam breathed more loudly, beginning to rise from her own trance. John grew afraid. He could not recall a time when the Sleep had not come to him when it was supposed to.

It was necessary to eat only once a week, but Sleep required six of every twenty-four hours. It was essential and it could not be delayed. Almost as absolute as death, it was the key to the renewal of life.

His arms and legs were tingling, his neck ached, his temples throbbed. He slipped out of bed and went into the bathroom, thinking only that he was thirsty for a glass of water. As he bent over the sink his reflection flashed in the mirror.

He stopped drinking, slowly put the glass down. The room was dark. Perhaps what the mirror had revealed was a trick of shadow. He flipped on the lights and looked again.

The tiny lines extending from the corners of his eyes were no illusion. He touched his cheek and felt a delicate dryness, a subtle stiffening. Weren't there also circles under his eyes, and even more lines around his mouth?

He took a shower. Perhaps the drive home with the roof open had chapped his skin. He let the stream of hot water sluice over his face, forced himself to spend fifteen minutes in the bath. He slid his hands up and down his torso and was reassured to find his body as lean and taut as ever. But he didn't feel lean and taut, he felt sapped.

After toweling himself he went back to the mirror. It seemed that his youth

had returned. He found himself almost laughing with relief. Having cheated time for so long, the idea that it might suddenly reassert itself had come like a freezing blast in midsummer.

Then he saw them again. They were visibly deepening. It was like some kind of hideous hallucination. He drew back from the mirror. The fear in his own eyes revolted him. In an instant his hand had smashed into the surface of the mirror and the glass was flying about his head.

The crash surprised him into stillness. Such anger! He looked at the shards of mirror strewn in the sink, each reflecting a tiny section of his face. There was a final crash as the mirror's metal backing came off the wall.

He tried to calm himself, closed his eyes, forced himself to rational thought. It was, after all, only the slightest of changes. Yes — but he couldn't Sleep. He couldn't *Sleep*! Miriam had always said that everything depended on that absolutely deep, absolutely perfect Sleep. Never mind that you dreamed. It was not like the dreaming of ordinary people; it cleaned the cellars of the mind. It was renewing, youth-giving, miraculous. When you awoke from it your whole life began again. You felt absolutely and completely perfect — and you were!

What was happening to him? Miriam had assured him that it would all last forever. Forever and ever.

He looked at her lying so still, the fluffy pillow framing her face. Only that bare motion of breathing said she was alive. Nothing could wake her. The beauty and peace of it fascinated him. The Sleep was so sweet. But it was also a state of complete vulnerability. John could not remember a time when Miriam had been like this while he himself was awake.

He went to her, kissed her. There was something pleasing about her helplessness, something that excited him. The pressure of his kiss parted her lips a little. They stayed parted, the edges of her teeth just visible. He looked into her stillness, feeling rapacious. The thought that he could do his will on her — even murder her — made sweat pop out all over his body.

He took her pearl-white flesh in his hands and squeezed it. She was cold and

dry. His lips dusted along her neck, tasting the bland flavor of the skin. She was so slick, like a plastic creature; as still as the dead. In a stately charade of anger he slowly shook her by the shoulders, watching her head bend back and her throat present itself to him.

He made a nervous decision. He was feeling powerful sexual needs, an urge almost to steal something from her. Thus, in guilty secrecy began a most awesome and terrible experience. He lay down on her and began to make love to her entranced body.

Physically, Miriam was perfect. She was firm and subtly muscled, always responsive. Yet when he took her in his arms now she was hideously pliant. He ran his fingers along her belly and down her thigh. Her absolute indifference only increased his urgency. Then he grabbed her face and forced his tongue into her mouth. Her own tongue was startlingly rough, like that of a cat.

He wanted to break her with love, to disembowel her with it. As he thrust into her he groaned aloud. His fingers were around her throat. Sweat ran down his body. His thighs pounded and he slid in wetness. He hardly noticed his thumbs pressing her throat, closing tighter and tighter as his body kept on, moving of its own accord through rising stages of pleasure. It crossed him in waves, almost rendering him unconscious. He strangled her harder and harder. His excitement rose. He gauged his motions carefully to prolong it. Her mouth opened, her bristled tongue crept between her teeth.

Then he exploded into her, pounding frantically, and was spent.

He sat down, burying his face in her breasts, sobbing. Her body convulsed and he heard her draw a choking breath. Her throat was angry red, her face gray.

The voices of children echoed from the distant street, the hall clock softly chimed the hour. With her usual sense of the moment, Alice began running the vacuum cleaner downstairs. John hid his face in his pillow. Life was suddenly, absolutely empty.

He wanted to cling to somebody, to a living woman.

There was a gasp, then her hands came up to her throat. If only she had awakened a little earlier — or a little later.

She made an inarticulate noise. A prolonged silence followed. He opened his eyes. He was startled to see the rage that was in her face. As soon as their eyes met, the look disappeared. He tried to reject his impression of it, the inhumanity.

“I feel like hell, I haven’t Slept,” he said.

She got up, went to the bathroom, and turned on the light. Without commenting on the mess, she examined her neck in the full-length mirror on the door. She came back and sat on the edge of the bed, crossed her legs, and smiled.

“You bastard,” she said.

It was chilling to hear those words through such a tender smile. He laughed nervously.

Then she turned to him and gathered him into her arms. Her fingers dug into his back, she made a sound like the rasp of a crow. He tried to twist his head but she was much more powerful than any human being. His only choice was to lie in her arms and wait. Suddenly, she withdrew and held his shoulders. Her face seemed to ask a question, almost to plead with him.

She dropped her hands to her sides and went back to the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. After a moment he heard the crunching of glass, Ever careful, she was cleaning up the wreckage of the mirror so she wouldn’t get cut.

He found himself wanting something from her, a scream of anger, a threat, any sign of relationship. But he heard only the water being turned on. Now she was preparing for her day, keeping her feelings to herself. He got up, went shakily to the dresser and started putting on his own clothes. Still in his shorts, he was splashing cologne on his cheeks when he realized that his face was covered with heavy stubble. He didn’t even know if there was a razor in the house. In a kind of wonderment his hands traveled over his cheeks,

touching the hard little ends of hairs. From the bathroom he heard Miriam humming as she toweled herself dry, her familiar melody.

He dressed quickly and left, eager to get away from the pressure of the situation. There was a barber at Fifty-seventh Street and Second Avenue. He would walk up there and get himself shaved.

The shave was actually quite pleasant, the barber cheerful. In the pleasure of the moment he also got his hair trimmed and his shoes buffed.

He was feeling somewhat better when he left. The sun was shining, the streets were crowded with hurrying people, the air was almost sweet. For the first time in many years John enjoyed watching a woman other than Miriam. It was a relief after the fierce tensions of this morning. She was just one of the crowd, a girl in a cheap skirt and sweater hurrying to the bus stop with a paper cup of coffee from Nedick's in her hand. Her hair was dusty brown, her face too heavily made up. But there was such sensuality in her movements, in the way her breasts lay beneath her sweater and in the determination of her stride. Suddenly, he looked again at the face. He was horrified.

It might have been Kaye.

His heart thundered, he gasped for breath. Her eyes met his. They were deep with the mysterious sorrow of mortals, an expression he had been able to see in others only after it had disappeared from his own face.

“Was that a Number Two?”

She was speaking to him.

“Mister, was that a Number Two bus?”

She was smiling, her teeth yellow with neglect. Ignoring her, John hurried back to the security of the house.

As he approached he heard voices through the open window of the living room. At once he felt the hollow despair of jealousy — Alice and Miriam were chatting, no doubt waiting for him to appear so that they could begin

practicing the Handel Trio.

He mounted the stairs, moved softly across the hallway, past the hall table with its spray of roses, and entered the living room. Miriam looked magnificently fresh and beautiful in a bright-blue dress. A blue ribbon was tied prettily about her neck. Alice lay on a settee nearby in her usual jeans and sweat shirt. He felt Miriam watching him as he went across to his place. Until he was settled, Miriam's body remained tense, as if ready to spring.

"John," Alice said, leaning her head back, "I didn't even hear you come in. You always sneak." Her thirteen-year-old smile made him catch his breath. She was indeed a marvelous toy, fragile and succulent.

Miriam crashed out an arpeggio on the harpsichord. "Let's get going," she said.

"I don't want to do that trio again. It's boring." Alice was in a typical sulky mood.

"How about the Scarlatti we were doing last week?"

Miriam went through some fingerings. "We could do it if John can keep up."

"All the music he knows is boring."

Miriam's fingers flew across the keys. "I know Corelli, Abaco, Bach —" She tossed a thick book of music at Alice. "Pick whatever you want."

There was a silence. "I barely know the Handel," John said. "It's hard for the cello."

Miriam and Alice glanced at each other. "We'll do the Handel," Alice said. "It's either that or finger and bow practice, right, John?" She picked up her violin and tucked it under her chin.

"I'm one of the few musicians who can do Chopsticks on the cello, dear."

"As you always say."

Before he had even tuned they were starting. He entered raggedly, rushing after them, overtaking and then struggling to keep his place for the rest of the piece.

They played for an hour, repeating the trio three times. John eventually began to enjoy the way it became coherent, finally beautiful. He liked the music. It seemed to fit the moment, the rich quality of the sunlight, the beauty of the women.

“Well,” Alice said when they were done, “that’s that.” She was flushed, which accentuated her incipient womanhood. A pang passed again through John’s heart.

He knew all the things Miriam was able to do to people. It was impossible to tell exactly what treatment was intended for Alice. Miriam could bless or destroy. Sometimes she would compel them to violence as a cover for her own activities. Other times, there could be unimaginable bliss.

Miriam was practical; she did what was most useful. Alice, for example, would inherit a considerable fortune, as John had. That could be the motive for Miriam’s interest. She was always short of money, and those who loved her gave her everything.

“Let’s have a drink,” Miriam said. She picked up the Madeira from the bar. It was an 1838 Warre, bought from the old Berry Brothers Stores in London. As it had aged it had become first strong and sweet, then full of subtle overtones. Now it was almost light, but possessed of complex and ancient flavors. It was certainly the finest Madeira in the world, perhaps of all time.

“I’m not supposed to have liquor.”

Miriam poured Alice some of the wine.

“It’s very light. Only barbarians would refuse their children the right to a glass of wine.”

Alice swallowed it at a gulp and held out her glass for more.

“That’s a sacrilege,” John said. “You’re drinking it like tequila.”

“I like the way it makes me feel, not the way it tastes.”

Miriam poured her another glass. “Don’t get drunk. John molests the helpless.” The remark came unexpectedly and shocked John.

Alice laughed, her eyes regarding him with taunting appraisal. Rather than endure that, John retreated. He gazed out the window, forcing himself to concentrate on the view. Across the street was a block of cooperative apartments. It seemed such a short time ago that houses such as their own had lined both sides of the street, it was hard to believe that vines could already be growing up the front of one of those new buildings. The cries of children came as always from the street. John was touched by the eternal shrill excitement of those voices, a sound that belonged to all time. Maturing was the horrible process of losing immortality. John felt his face. Already the whiskers were coming back. He had inexplicably entered the deadly shadow; it could no longer be denied.

Alice came to his side, her shoulder just touching his elbow. No doubt she told herself that she ought to conquer him, to include him. But he suspected it was really a simpler and more morbid interest: she wanted to see him suffer. In that sense she was as natural a predator as Miriam herself — or as John.

“What are they playing, Alice? Ringolevio?”

“Ringo — what?”

“Ringolevio. The game.”

“They’re playing Alien.”

Miriam watched her destroyed man. He could have killed her this morning. Killed. The thought of it made her feel cold toward him, but only for a moment. She had fought hard to make him perfect. It was so sad to see him disintegrating even more quickly than his predecessors. Eumenes had been with her more than 400 years, Lollia nearly as long. Until now not one of her transformations had failed to last 200 years. Was she getting worse at it, or

was the strength of the human stock in decline?

She took another swallow of the Madeira, held it in her mouth. Time itself must taste so. In wine time could be captured and in life delayed, but not forever. In John's case not even for very long.

There was much to do and possibly only a few days of grace. She had been moving slowly, capturing Alice by careful degrees. Now it was an emergency. She had to prepare for the storm that was going to break when John discovered his predicament, and at the same time prevent Alice from knowing what was happening to him. As Alice was to be his replacement it would be most inconvenient if she learned the consequences of transformation.

Especially in view of the fact that, this time, there might be no consequences. Miriam would have to approach Sarah Roberts much more quickly now. The research she had done already into the woman's work and habits would have to suffice.

If anybody on this planet could discover what went wrong with the transformed it would be Dr. Roberts. In her book *Sleep and Age* Miriam had seen the beginnings of a deeper understanding than Roberts herself could possibly realize. The work that Roberts had done on primates was fascinating. She had achieved extraordinary increases in life-span. Given the proper information, would she also be able to confer real immortality on the transformed?

Miriam put down her glass and left the room. She would have to risk being separated from Alice and John for a few minutes. His violence was still sporadic. And there was a task to be faced in the attic, a dreary task of preparation, amid the sad ruins of her past loves. Unlike the dusty and disused appearance of the rest of the attic, the door to this room was perfectly maintained. It opened soundlessly as Miriam unlocked it. She stepped into the tiny, hot space. Only when the heavy door was closed and she was safely hidden did she give voice to the turmoil of fears within her. Her fists went to her temples, her eyes screwed shut and she moaned aloud.

Silence followed, but not absolute silence. As if in answer, there came from

the darkness around her the seething of slow and powerful movement.

Miriam hesitated a moment before beginning her task. "I love you," she said softly, remembering each person who rested here, each lost friend. Perhaps because in the end she had failed all of them she remained loyal to them. Some, like Eumenes and Lollia, she had carried across half the world. Their boxes were black with age, bound with leather and studded with iron. The more recent ones were as strong or stronger. Miriam pulled the newest box to the center of the little room. This one was about twenty years old, made of carbon fiber steel and locked by bolts, bought and stored on John's behalf. She lifted off the lid and examined the interior, then took the bag of bolts from inside. There were twelve of them, and she fitted them around the lid. Now it could be closed and locked in a matter of seconds.

She left it open, however, the lid gaping. When she brought him to this place, there might be very little time. With a last glance at the other boxes, pausing in the room's rustling silence, she whispered goodbye.

The door hissed shut on her tragedy. She secured the locks, which were there for two reasons: to keep danger out, and to keep it in. She went back downstairs, assured that she was well prepared for the worst, uneasy at leaving Alice unprotected any longer than necessary.

2

THE HOLLOW SHRIEKS of a terrified rhesus brought Sarah Roberts to her feet. She ran down the hall to the cage room, her shoes clattering on the linoleum.

What she saw when she peered into the cage of their most important animals made her feel cold. Methuselah was brachiating madly through the cage screaming as only a rhesus can scream. On the floor lay Betty's head, its monkey face frozen in last agony. As he shot around the cage Methuselah brandished Betty's arm, the little hand open as if waving goodbye. The rest of Betty lay scattered across the cage. As she rushed from the room to get help Sarah almost slipped in the blood that had run down to the floor.

Before she reached the door, it swung open. Methuselah's shrieks had brought the whole Gerontology group.

"What the hell did you *do*, Methuselah!" Phyllis Rockler shouted. She was the lab's animal keeper.

The monkey's face was as crazy as any Sarah had ever seen, and a psychiatric internship at Bellevue had given her a look at a good number of crazy faces.

Charlie Humphries, their resident blood expert, pressed his face to the cage. "God, how ugly!" He stepped back, his sneakers squishing. "Monkeys are bastards."

"Get Tom down here," Sarah said. She needed him for her own sanity, forget the ape. Moments later he came rushing in, his face gray. "Nobody's hurt,"

she said, seeing the fear in his eyes. “No human body, that is.”

“Is that Betty?”

“Methuselah tore her apart. He stopped sleeping two days ago and he’s been getting increasingly irritable. But we had no reason to expect this.” There was a flurry of activity behind them as Phyllis set up the videotape equipment. She would record Methuselah’s further behavior for later analysis.

Sarah watched Tom react to the catastrophe. She could practically see him calculating how this affected his own career track. Number One was never far from mind with Tom Haver. Then he turned his eyes on her, full of wonderful, totally genuine concern. “Is this going to hurt you? What’s the latest on the blood runs?”

“Still indexing to the same curve as before. No change.”

“So there’s no resolution. And Betty’s dead. Oh, Christ, you’re in trouble.”

She almost wanted to laugh at the obviousness of his emphasis on the *you*. He didn’t want to seem like what he was, to come right out and say it: my damn career rides on this too. She held out her hands, suddenly realizing that Tom was even more upset than she was. He took them, stepped toward her, seemed about to speak. She spoke first. “I guess I take my dead star performer to the Budget Committee tomorrow.”

He looked sick. “Hutch was going to recommend against extension anyway. Now with Betty dead —”

“It means that we have to start all over again. She’s still the only one that had actually stopped aging.”

She stared at Methuselah, who stared back as if he were wishing he could repeat his little trick. He was a handsome ape, with his spread of gray hair and his powerful body.

Betty, who looked like an adolescent, had been his mate.

“Pardon me while I break down and cry,” Sarah said in her most sardonic

tone. But she meant it. She went gratefully into Tom's arms.

"Now, now, we're still on public property." That was old reticent Tom, embarrassed by any show of emotion.

"We're all family here. We're going on the unemployment line together."

"That'll never happen. Some other facility will pick you up."

"In a couple of years. Meanwhile, we lose all our apes, disrupt the experiments, and *waste time!*" It made Sarah crazy just thinking about it. Ever since she had accidentally discovered the blood factor that controlled aging while doing blood counts on sleep-disturbed rats, she had been a woman with a mission. In this laboratory they were seeking the cure for man's most universal disease — old age. And Betty had been proof that the cure existed. Somewhere in the rhesus' blood some hidden key had been turned on by their application of drugs, temperature and diet. Whatever it was had deepened her sleep almost to the point of death. And as sleep had deepened, aging had slowed. The same set of conditions had worked for a while with Methuselah. Last week his sleep had abruptly stopped. He had dozed a little, then — a monster.

Betty might have been immortal, if Methuselah hadn't killed her. Sarah would have shot him if she had a gun. She went to the gray-painted wall and hit it a couple of times. "We're dealing with a degenerating gene pool," she said softly.

"Not the apes," Phyllis answered.

"The human race! For God's sake, we're about to find the mechanism that controls aging and we're going to lose our budget! I'll tell you all something! I think Hutch and that whole crowd of senile appendix poppers on the board are jealous. Jealous as hell! They're already terminal geriatrics and they want to make sure the same thing happens to the rest of the world!"

The anger in Sarah's voice caused Tom to feel a familiar sense of frustration. She was and remained blind to the problems he experienced as an administrator. In part that was a proper professional attitude, but not the way

she allowed it to sweep aside even the slim chance of survival that the politics of the situation might allow.

Yet he found himself seeking alternatives on her behalf. Her lust for success was contagious. There was something almost visceral in her belief, in her will. No doubt her faith in the value of her work mirrored that of others who had approached discoveries with great impact on humankind. But there was some deep thing in Sarah, a kind of cruel yearning, heedless of herself and others, that swept beyond the norms of duty or even scientific curiosity and colored her hope with the tint of obsession.

Tom looked at her, the brown hair, the frequently pretty face, her curiously flat pallor, and the rich, unquenchable sensuality of her compact body. He wanted to hold her again. After she had broken his last embrace she had hidden her feelings in gruffness.

He wished that she did not feel victimized by her femininity. To his way of thinking, her tough, brilliant mind should be satisfactory compensation for all that was wrong with what she referred to as her sexual conditioning. But it was not enough, not for her.

Tom was embarrassed for her. More, he felt sad. With the rhesus dead she was seriously set back. She couldn't possibly make a case for continued project funding before the budget committee. She was a small, fuming woman, her eyes flashing prettily as she faced the cancellation of an experiment to which she had given five years of her life.

Something ungenerous — a kind of glee — seemed to be hiding beneath Tom's genuine sorrow. He knew it was there; it had been a long time since he had taken his own surface feelings at face value. The destruction of her project would hurl Sarah back into the depths of her relationship with him, would make her seek the comfort of being a junior partner again — and a part of him welcomed the power her need would confer.

"I've got a meeting with Hutch now," he said. "We're reviewing the allocation requests." His mouth was dry. The stench of the apes was sickening. "Sarah," he said. He paused, surprised. Why had he used such a bedroom tone of voice? She whirled at him. Defeat had made her pugnacious.

He wanted to comfort her, knew the condescension of it would outrage her. The touching a few minutes ago had been an unwilling concession.

“Well?”

For an instant the bluster in her eyes gave way. Then, with a tilt of her chin she was off, ordering a tranquilizer for Methuselah so they could get the cage open and pull out Betty’s remains.

Tom left unnoticed, going slowly through the equipment-cluttered lab. Every item, every inch of space, had been pried out of Riverside Medical Research Center by the force of Sarah’s determination. Her discovery had come as an accident, incidental to some conventional work on sleep deprivation. The fact that the inner rhythm of the sleeping process also contained the key to aging was a totally unexpected result. Her initial findings had been published in her book, *Sleep and Age*. It had caused certain stirrings; the rigor of her methods could not be questioned, nor could her skill in her experiments. The implications were so large, though, that they hadn’t really been appreciated. Sarah’s view that old age was nothing more than a disease, potentially curable, was just too enormous a change. Her book had brought her much congratulation, little support.

Tom exited into the wide tile hallway of the lab floor and took the staff elevator to the Sleep Therapy Clinic above. He occupied a small office beside Dr. Hutchinson’s suite. The old man had founded the clinic ten years ago. After eight years the board had hired Tom Haver to step in “when the director elects to retire.” It had been nothing more than sales talk; Hutch had not so elected. They had wanted a scientist-administrator with powerful credentials to draw more funding to the clinic.

Lately, Tom had begun to catch himself looking hopefully for some sign of senility in the old man.

Hutch sat in Tom’s office, his angular form folded into one of the old chairs. It was an affectation of his to scorn his own sumptuous quarters. “Dimethylaminoethanol,” he said in a reedy, amused voice.

“She’s far beyond DME research, you know that. Aging Factor is a transient

cellular protein. DME is nothing more than the regulating agent.”

“The philosopher’s stone.”

Tom went to his desk, forcing a thin smile. “More than that,” he said quietly. He refused to acknowledge the sarcasm. Hutch tossed a typed budget survey sheet on his desk. It was hard not to resent the man’s style. He picked up the summary. “What am I supposed to say, Doctor — ‘no gerontology appropriation’ and fall to my knees?”

“You can if you want to but it won’t work.”

Tom disliked smugness; it was poison in a scientist. “If you cancel the project, she’ll leave.”

“Well, of course I’d hate to see that. But there just aren’t any results. Five years and no progress.”

Tom tried to contain himself. If only Methuselah had waited another twenty-four hours! “They’ve developed a damn good schematic of cellular aging. I’d call that progress.”

“Yes, for a pure research facility. The Rockefeller Institute would love them. But they don’t belong in a place like Riverside. Tom, we’ve got to justify every penny to the City Health and Hospitals Corporation. How the hell does a hospital explain the purchase of thirty-five rhesus monkeys, even a research hospital? Seventy thousand dollars’ worth of brachiating boobies. You tell me.”

“Hutch, you weren’t born yesterday. If we lose Gerontology, there goes ten percent of the clinic’s overall budget. For that reason alone she should *not* be cut.”

At once Tom regretted what he had just said. If Hutch was told to cut a budget he did it the hard way, by firing people and selling off equipment. He knew little of the reality of administration. To him the concept of maintaining functions while cutting dollars was a contradictory impossibility.

“You’re going to tell me we ought to cut by charging for paper cups and installing pay toilets, I suppose.” He tapped his worn class ring on the edge of Tom’s desk. “I can’t see it that way. They give me a dollar figure upstairs. I’m going to meet that figure and have done with it.” Like an aging crane he rose out of the chair. “The committee convenes at ten A.M. in the boardroom.” He sighed, suddenly wistful, betraying his own losses.

Then he was gone, striding down the hall, a sad, fierce old warrior in the declining castle of his hopes. Tom ran his fingers through his hair. He knew how Sarah felt; he wouldn’t have minded hitting a wall himself. The Health and Hospitals Corporation was so intractable, a bureaucracy of desperation. It worried about keeping emergency rooms in business, not obscure research projects. How ironic that man’s fate, the very secret of death, would be almost found — and perhaps forever lost — in the rubble of a bureaucracy’s dissolution.

Tom looked at his watch. Nine-thirty. It had been a hell of a long day. Outside the sky was gray-black. There were no stars. It would rain soon, the promise of spring. Tom got his jacket and turned off the lights. Maybe he would beat Sarah home and fix her a nice dinner. It was the least he could do in view of the fact that he had lost her a career. It would be years while the bureaucrats at other institutions picked over the bones of her work and waffled about taking her on.

Meanwhile, Tom would have to watch her vegetate in the Sleep Clinic, back to her old job processing incoming patients for physical disorders before they entered the therapeutic track — if she could even be convinced to return to such work.

The sky was lowering as Tom walked down Second Avenue toward their apartment building. Gusts of wind lifted paper and dust around him and brought big, cold raindrops. Lightning flickered in the clouds. It was fourteen blocks from Riverside to the apartment building. Usually the walk was relaxing, but not tonight. He wished he had taken a cab but there were only a few blocks to go, no sense in getting one now. The rain came faster, and the brightly lit lobby of the building was a welcome sight when it appeared in the distance.

As he went through the door into the lobby Alex the doorman nodded greeting. Tom planned his dinner as the elevator took him to the twenty-fifth floor.

The apartment was freezing cold. This morning had been mild and they had left the windows open. Now the weather had changed and the wind was rising. It whipped through the living room dense with smells brought from far away, of darker country. Beyond the windows the lights of the city glittered, now obscured by a scudding tendril of cloud, now twinkling brightly.

Tom closed the windows and set the thermostat to 85° to warm the place up. Then he made the dinner. It turned out to be a lonely and unexpectedly tiresome job. He was a more than serviceable cook — his father had seen to that — but there was something about the lateness of the hour and the bitter disappointment; he just wanted to go to bed and forget the whole damn day.

By ten-thirty it was ready. It looked cheerful enough despite the way he felt. He finished tossing the salad and turned on the fire under the pasta. The only thing left to do when she came home would be the veal. That was a matter of the last moment. He went into the living room and had a drink.

At eleven he called the lab. It rang six times before there was an answer. “What’re you doing?”

“Watching Methuselah not sleep. Even the tranks didn’t put him down. We’re trying to plug him in but he tears out the electrodes. So far we haven’t got half an EEG.” Her voice was leached of expression.

“Who’s helping you?”

“Phyllis. Charlie’s downstairs doing slides on Betty.”

“Come home. I have something for you.”

“Not tonight, darling.” She was sad, of course. That was why her voice sounded so empty. There, he felt it again — that ugly little stab of glee. Soon enough her nights would belong only to him.

“I mean dinner. And it’s raining, so take a cab.”

“I can tell if it’s raining, Tom.”

“You might not notice. Look, you can always go back after we eat.”

Coaxing Sarah out of her lab was never easy. He could only wait and hope tiredness and hunger would overcome her determination long enough to get her out the door. Salad, pasta, veal. Fruit and cheese afterward. Plenty of wine. By dinner’s end she’d probably be so close to sleeping that she wouldn’t try to go back. “There has to be room for more in life than a laboratory,” he thought.

Sooner than he expected, the familiar footsteps clicked down the hall, Sarah’s usual quickstep. Then the door banged and she was home, hair wet from her walk in the rain, mascara running down her cheeks, and still wearing her lab coat. She looked lost and boyish. Her small mouth was set in a stern line, her eyes were startlingly alive. Tom went to her.

“Careful, I’m covered with monkey shit.” She threw off the lab coat and only then let him hold her. It was so comfortable to feel her in his arms, even if it was only for an instant. “I’ve got to have a shower.”

“Dinner’ll be on the table when you come out.”

“Thank God for administrative personnel who still have energy at the end of the day.” She kissed him on the nose and broke away. “That damn rhesus is in bad shape,” she said as she headed for the bathroom. “His hair’s falling out and his bowels are loose. He’s agitated and all of a sudden he *cannot* be made to sleep. Won’t even doze. Poor thing.” He heard the clothes hamper squeak. Then more words, drowned by the sound of running water. It was obvious that it didn’t much matter to her whether he heard or not. The angry words themselves were all the comfort she demanded.

Tom felt isolated. People in love were supposed to be at the center of each other’s lives. Sometimes it was hard to tell if she wanted to be in love, or simply to be loved.

As he cooked his veal scallopini he heard the roaring of the wind and thought how he loved her. It made him believe in her love also. And it made the fact that he was going to fail her, see her dropped from the budget, make him feel as caged as one of the experimental animals.

“Honey, thank you.” She had come up behind him. She was wrapped in the blue silk robe he had given her for her birthday. Her skin was flushed from the shower, her eyes now shimmering gently in the candlelight. She looked altogether fetching. Sarah’s miracle was the purity of her womanhood. She was not conventionally beautiful — eyes too big, chin too prominent — and yet men’s eyes always followed her. One moment she would be aggressively neutral, and the next more a woman than any other he had known.

They ate quietly, relying on their eyes for communication, Tom and his magic lady. By the time the meal was over. Tom was ready to carry her into the bedroom, avid to possess her. He was delighted that nothing more had been said about Riverside. Let Sarah bank her fires for a few hours, let the problems wait.

When she stood up from the table he saw his chance. Tom was easily big enough to sweep Sarah off the floor. He knew it was an assault on her dignity, in a way a dismissal. But it was a loving dismissal. She made a little sound in her throat, drew her arms around his neck, fluttered her eyes at him. It was a parody, but of the kindest sort, an affirmation of her love and respect for him. He would not have been surprised to be damned for what he had done. The fact that she had not done so was deeply pleasing, almost as if his physical strength and his need granted him rights with her that usually he did not have.

He put her down on the bed. She didn’t speak. It was their customary way, honored from the beginning of their love.

He stripped in the dark, with only the glowing clouds outside to reveal him. Then he went to her, slipped the soft robe from her body, and climbed into bed beside her.

In their years together they had established few conventions; both were avid experimenters. But tonight imagination would rest. Tom sensed she also

wanted the solace of simplicity, and they took one another's offering with the gentle acceptance of familiar lovers. She pressed herself close as he entered, and they sighed with the enjoyment of it. This was a lesser act of love, but it fulfilled its purpose and left them drifting to sleep in one another's arms. Tom's last conscious thought was of the wind, how it howled past the windows. A spring storm.

Francie Parker awoke suddenly. She was shocked motionless; she felt something crawling between her legs. Too late did she realize that she should have moved. The ropes tightened, she was tied to the bed.

An awful shudder coursed through her body. That was it, rape in the night. You heard about it on the news, talked about it in the office. She fought the wild terror, tried to keep her cool. The intruder turned on her bedside lamp and shined it in her face. He wasn't going to allow himself to be seen.

The blade of a surgical scalpel appeared in the light, hung there a moment, and was withdrawn. Francie felt tears pop into her eyes. A strange, low noise filled the room.

“Shut up!”

She hadn't realized she could make such a sound. Desolation filled her. Nevertheless, her mind kept working, trying to come up with some appeal that would save her.

It smelled as if there were something dead in here. She was aware of movement behind the light, then she could feel him at work on her nightgown. By looking down her front she could see his hands as he used the scalpel to cut away the cloth. That awful instrument could only be for one purpose; she just knew he was going to kill her. When she felt his hands pushing away the nightgown, exposing her nakedness, she moaned in misery — but also felt a horrible, unwanted tingle. This nightmare had another aspect. She began to anticipate seeing him, she visualized his sweating body plunging into the little pool of light. It made her angry. She had never imagined she could feel this debased, this betrayed.

As he bent toward her she caught a glimpse of him. At that moment Francie Parker, twenty-two years old, the frequent object of male desire, capable of eighty words a minute on an IBM Selectric, saw something that instantly and utterly shattered her.

The shock stopped her heart. All that escaped of the wild cry her mind had formed was a gurgling sigh.

When she died like that, before she should have, he growled his rage and stabbed wildly, hoping to get her before the last second.

He failed. Then he took her as best he could, keeping at it until she crackled like paper.

At four o'clock on a wet morning, Sutton Place was empty. Elegant windows were dark. Nothing moved except when an occasional gust of wind from the night's storm stirred some bit of paper or a broken leaf. Behind one window in one of the charming little houses that line the east side of the street a figure stood, absolutely motionless. Miriam was rigid with concentration, feeling the eerie echo of a distant *touch*. It was a facility she shared only with her own race, and some of the higher primates. Man, while capable of learning *touch* from an adept, was normally mute. But this *touch* was real, pulsating on the darkness.

One of her own kind?

Since the bloodbath of the Middle Ages the remaining members of her race lived solitary lives, each wrapped in his own longings and tragedies, an autumnal species too frightened of persecution to dare to foregather.

"We are not evil," she thought as the strange *touch* rose higher and higher, "we also are part of the justice of the earth."

Fifty years ago she had seen one of her own kind, a tall figure alone at the railing of the liner *Berengaria*, looking toward her on the dock. For an instant they had *touched*, sharing their private hungers, and then it was lost, the ship's whistle sounding, the wake disappearing in the moonlight, journey without end.

Her tragic human companions were her only comfort. They could not conceive of the loneliness that drove her to transform them, to create her own image within them.

She loved them — and had destroyed each of them.

It could not continue, not any longer. She could not stand to live with Alice, knowing all the while that she was going to end up like the others, like John.

The *touch* interrupted her thoughts again, running like thunder in the mountains, as huge and wild as night.

So it was an animal. And it was in agony. Absolute agony. The kind that would be felt by one deprived of Sleep. But there were no transformed animals.

Or were there?

Sarah Roberts, blindly experimenting, might have accomplished some rough approximation of transformation. So one of her beasts was meeting its end in a filthy cage. She felt the lost forests in its *touch*, the wide leafy spaces and the strength of the iron bars.

Her eyes widened, her hands snapped to the bars that protected her own window, closed around the cold iron. The window, its frame and the whole wall shook.

Soon after dawn Tom Haver opened his eyes. He had been trying not to wake up, but it was no use. The room was suffused with dull light. He looked at the clock. Seven-ten. Past time to get up. He swung out of bed and lurched in for his shower. The night had been spent sleeplessly in a fog of strategies, trying to find some way of extending Sarah's appropriation. Every road led back to the Budget Committee and Hutch.

He paused in the door to the bathroom and looked back at her. There came to him a feeling so strange and tender that it seemed as if it had entered from another personality, not his own. He found that he wanted very badly for her to succeed.

He went about his shower in a sort of fury, lathering himself, rinsing, drying, all the while wretched for her and angry that he must suffer on her behalf.

When he opened the door the smell of breakfast drifted faintly in. None of the usual singing, however, arrived with it. She was not such a cheerful riser today. He wished that he didn't feel so sorry for her; it reduced her, enlisted a kind of professional distance. A doctor's habit to withdraw one's emotions from the reality of pain.

"Happy meltdown," she said when he arrived in the kitchen.

"Meltdown?"

"What's happening to my lab is the equivalent of a reactor meltdown. Reaches critical mass and sinks to the center of the earth. Buried. Gone."

There were a hundred encouraging lies he could not tell. "I'll call you as soon as the meeting's over," was all that came out.

Once again he was cheating her. Why not simply let her know how he felt? Why was that such a frightening thought? Emotions confirm things, that was the trouble. Death, for example, always seems like a lie, a game of disappearance, until one's grief makes it true.

The phone rang. Tom blinked at the intrusion, snatched up the handset. A strange, whispering voice asked for Sarah. Her face puckered with details of concern; she was obviously hoping that some miracle had happened at the lab. "Luck," Tom said as he handed her the receiver.

She grabbed it, her expression now avid. After a long pause she murmured an assent and hung up. Swallowing the last of her coffee, she ran into the bedroom. "More trouble with Methuselah," she said as she pulled a raincoat from the closet. Her eyes were cold, bright.

"He's not dead?"

She glanced away. "No," she said with unnatural loudness, "something else."

"Who was that on the phone?"

“Phyllis.”

“She sounded like a zombie.”

“Thirty hours on the job. I don’t have a very clear idea what’s going on over there, but —”

“Maybe there’s some hope. A last-minute breakthrough. Am I right?”

She laughed, a sniff, a toss of the head, and then strode past him without a further word. The front door slammed. He located his own raincoat, crumpled amid jeans and coat hangers on the closet floor. By the time he reached the elevator bank she had gone.

Alice was listening less than carefully as Miriam read to her from *Sleep and Age*. That didn’t matter, the girl’s mind was wonderfully absorptive. Miriam glanced at her, full of the pleasure of being near her. Miriam loved her sullen intelligence, her youth and haunting beauty. “ ‘The key to the relationship between sleep and age appears to lie in the production of the transient protein group associated with inhibition of lipofuscins. At the molecular level the buildup of lipofuscin is responsible for the loss of internal circulation that leads to cellular morbidity. Thus, it is the prime factor in the overall process called “aging,” being responsible for effects as subtle as the reduction in the responsiveness of organs to hormonal demands and as gross as senile dementia.’ ”

“Why do you think I read you this material, Alice?”

“You want to test my boredom threshold?”

“What if I told you it might mean you would never get old. Never get gray hair. Stay young forever.”

“Not thirteen!”

“No. It wouldn’t interrupt the process of maturing, only getting old. Would you like that — staying twenty-five or so forever?”

“For my life? Sure.”

“And your life would be forever. You should thank Doctor Sarah Roberts. She’s discovered a great secret.” It was extremely tempting to go on, to tell Alice the truth: that she could choose immortality right now, that Miriam could confer it.

If Dr. Roberts’ data were correct, she might even be able to make it a lasting gift.

Alice sighed. “I’m not sure I’d want to live forever. I mean, it’s not all that great, is it?”

Miriam was surprised and a little sickened. Never for a moment had she considered that Alice would hold such an opinion. The will to live was universal. Her own race, as ancient as it was, had fought valiantly through the persecutions of the Middle Ages, had fought despite their low birthrate and probable extinction. The very last of them willed only one thing: to continue. “You don’t really mean that, do you, Alice?” There was anger in her voice, anger she had not intended.

The girl reacted. “You sound funny, Miriam. I wish you’d act normal.”

Miriam did not reply directly. Instead she returned to the book. ““The mystery of how and why lipofuscin inhibition declines as a cellular system ages is the core of the problem. We have determined that the duration and depth of sleep are related to the amount of lipofuscin produced, with deeper sleep producing the greater level of inhibition.””

“OK, I guess I’m supposed to ask a question. Why are you so strange?”

Miriam laughed at the audacity of it, felt herself flush. “You have a lot to learn. A lot. Just don’t doubt me. You’ll find everything I do is for a purpose.” Alice smiled, her face suddenly filled with an innocence so beautiful that Miriam involuntarily *touched* her.

There was a moment’s silence. Then Alice clasped her hands around her knees and giggled. “You and John really are strange. You make me feel

weird.”

John’s name, intruding so suddenly, broke Miriam’s mood. She got up and put the book away, then went to the bay window that overlooked the garden. These cool, wet springs favored the strains of roses she had developed in Northern Europe, but not the Roman and Byzantine ones. They would require careful attention if there wasn’t some warmer weather soon.

She longed to be among them now, pruning them and forgetting her tragedies. If only John had lasted a few more years the discoveries suggested in *Sleep and Age* would have saved him. Miriam had hoped once to find an antidote for John and apply it before it was too late. She was convinced that some substance such as lipofuscin must be responsible. In her own body the immunity was permanent, but in a human being the Sleep only delayed it for a time. Then all the familiar symptoms appeared: Sleep ended, and with its termination came rapid aging, desperate hunger, destruction.

Her throat was tight, she could not help but sink into the grief of the situation. She forced her mind back to her roses; once she had created an arbor all the way to the river. They had had their own dock then and kept a pretty red-and-black steam launch with a furious little brass engine. What fun it had been pounding along in that hilarious boat with its clattering steam valves and gushing torrent of black smoke . . .

They had gone on fine afternoons to what used to be called Blackwell’s Island. When evening fell they hunted couples in the woods.

Miriam heard Alice shift in her chair. Thank God for her, such an ideal replacement. She had a truly predatory psyche, something that was rare in humankind. John’s unexpected decline greatly increased her significance. As had been the case with them all, it would be unwise to explain very much to Alice. A confrontation would eventually occur, but it must wait for the right context. The truth was somewhat horrible to them, of course, but that was only part of the problem. More than inducing them to accept its ugliness, she had to teach them to see its beauty.

They had to want what Miriam had to give, to want it as they never wanted anything before, with their minds, their souls, every cell of their flesh.

Miriam was good at helping people discover their true lust for existence. Layers of inhibition had to be sloughed away until, unexpectedly, the subject found his deepest craving exposed to the raw light and air. Then the ancient instincts would come pouring forth. Beside them all aspirations, all experiences, would seem embedded in dark amber, utterly dead, not even worth the forgetting.

It was a beautiful and undeniable truth. If she wished to possess one of them, she had only to *touch*, to caress and cajole. Eventually, the savage inner being would rise to the stroking and Miriam would own somebody new. “It’s a marvelous afternoon, isn’t it?”

“It’s OK.”

The flat little reply ignored all the magics in which Miriam knew how to swim. It saw only passing time, the hours. The magnificent secret was context. Miriam perceived time as a vast caravan containing the richness of all moments, luxurious with the soft hours of the past and the fair future too.

It was tempting, very tempting, to take a first step with Alice this very moment. But prudence must reign, John came first. And the question of the science . . . Miriam must make her approach to Sarah Roberts, must find the link that would complete her chain. There was a matter of responsibility, after all. She drew them with a promise of immortality. The full truth was hidden until they could not turn back. For all these years the lie had been a clanging note. Now it might be changed, made harmonious with the whole. Alice would be the first one to join Miriam forever and fully.

The first one. She looked at the soft blond features in a rapture of the most poignant love. Alice came to her and they stood arms entwined at the window that overlooked the garden.

Miriam had been angered when Alice went earlier to the front window with John. The girl should not take such liberties. Miriam looked forward to the time when Alice would want only her, care only about her, live for their life together.

As she and Alice stood there, Miriam’s eyes searched the garden. She was

sure that she had seen movement. Had Alice noticed it? The girl was looking up at her, a question forming on her lips. “What’s there?”

Miriam forced a smile. “Nothing.” But that wasn’t true, not at all. John was standing behind a hedge, his face turned toward this window. Miriam sensed menace. Her skin prickled beneath her clothes. “We ought to keep working on these ideas, Alice. Don’t you agree?”

“I thought I saw someone out there. Where’s John?”

“Not out there! You can see the garden’s empty.”

“Yeah.”

“So don’t change the subject. I asked you a question.”

“And I ignored it. That was an answer.”

Miriam turned from the window. “You’ll find out soon enough how important these sessions are. You’re learning a great deal. Later, it’ll all be useful.”

“You’re the only person I know who cares about such weird stuff.”

“You’ll come back tomorrow, then?”

“Why are you acting so funny, Miriam? Course I’ll come back tomorrow. I come every day. I don’t even need to go now.”

“You’d better. I’m expecting a guest.” For the briefest of instants her fingers smoothed the girl’s hair.

It was a mistake. Furious, she snatched her hand away, quelling the explosion of raw hunger that the contact produced. Then Alice was out the door, scampering down the steps, promising to return the next day. She would be such a good companion. For variety Miriam was in the habit of alternating men and women. Their sex was a matter of indifference to her. Miriam turned back into the house, to face John. This was going to be a painful confrontation. He would be returning once again from the hunt. His forays

would be getting frequent now, and desperately less satisfying.

The garden appeared empty, but she knew he had not gone. She closed her eyes, hating so to fear her beloved. The fear, though, was appropriate. No longer the love. She moved swiftly through the rooms, striving to prepare herself for the return of her poor hunter, broken and furious, from his paths of hell.

The lab was dark, silent except for the soft *whoo-who* of the ape on the video monitor. Sarah had put it all aside — budget committees, allocation requests, threats — to concentrate on the spectacle being replayed on the videotape.

“Effective age thirty-five years at this point,” Phyllis Rockler said. She was hoarse with exhaustion, she had been at work a long, long time.

“The curve starts accelerating now,” Charlie Humphries added.

Charlie himself appeared on the tape and drew a sample of blood. The ape’s protest was violent, but weak with age. “Effective forty,” Phyllis said. “It’s been seven minutes.”

“That’s a rate of one point four years a minute.”

The ape’s mouth began to work. First one, then another, then a cascade of teeth fell out. Its face was a study in black fury.

“Effective age fifty-five.”

“What’s the human equivalent of a fifty-five-year-old rhesus?” Sarah asked. They had logged the equivalences only as far as thirty years. Older apes of the species were unknown.

“I figured it at about ninety-two if the scale is a straight linear regression,” Phyllis replied. “That would mean he gets to a hundred and thirty-seven equivalent age before death.”

Long gray hairs were falling like rain around his head and off his shoulders.

Slowly, a hand came up to touch the sinking lips. As the hand moved, the fingers grew disfiguring arthritic knobs. The monkey began to sway, and his body started curving to the right.

“That’s scoliosis of aging,” Phyllis said.

There came a heartrending, infuriated howl. All three of the viewers stirred. Sarah wondered if the feeling that they were intruding into something forbidden affected the others as well. The ape had been a good and loving friend to the whole lab. Had those he loved the right to bring him such suffering? And yet . . . and yet — Sarah wondered if death was such a certainty, if the gates of Eden were really locked forever. It was simple, wasn’t it? A matter of finding the key. Once the gates swung open, man’s ancient, lost war with death would be won. ‘*We need not die,*’ Sarah thought. She folded her arms and looked with cold determination at Methuselah’s remarkable destruction. His life was a fair price for such an enormous gain to humanity.

“Effective age seventy. Rate one point nine five years per minute. Equivalent age one hundred twenty-one.” A last, despairing grimace of defiance crossed his face.

Then it happened on tape just as it had in reality two hours ago. Methuselah fell onto his side, a terrible look in his eyes. His mouth worked, his arms slashed the air.

Wrinkles and fissures raced through his skin. The face withered like a drying apple. The eyes glazed over with layers of cataracts and then closed to slits. Hands and feet balled to fists. The skin began slackening on the bones.

The whole skeleton, slowly moving, was visible beneath the loose skin.

“Effective age eighty-five. Rate two point four zero years per minute. Equivalent age one hundred twenty-nine.”

There was a long, rattling sigh.

“Life signs terminate,” Phyllis said.

Sarah was stunned yet again by the power of the unknown. The now-dead ape's skin cracked along the bones and began to fall like tissue to the floor of the cage. Soon the skeleton, still held together by tendons, lay amid a pile of rubble. Then it also collapsed, and what had been alive just minutes before was reduced to dust. "The process of postmortem decay accelerated approximately two years of dry-air degeneration into seventy-one point five six seconds." The dust in the bottom of the cage became finer and finer and at last was whisked away by an errant breeze.

At this point there was a sudden series of thuds on the audio track, then the brief clanging of an alarm. That had been Phyllis sealing the room to prevent spread of a possible disease vector.

"Methuselah remained awake one hundred nineteen hours," Phyllis said. "I noted the first overt degenerative changes after the seventieth hour."

"His lipofuscin accumulation rate started an exponential rise in sample two thousand one hundred forty-one, taken at the seventy-first hour," Charlie said. "Subsequently, his blood cells began to lose their ability to uptake oxygen."

There was a long silence. "I don't know what the hell to make of it," Sarah said at last.

"That's putting it mildly."

"Let's see. The time is now eleven-fifteen. My guess is that the board is just about to approve Hutch's budget appropriation. Us not included. What say we just crack the quarantine on the cages and go home."

"Don't get a heart attack," Charlie said softly, "they'll find the money for us now."

Sarah sniffed. She folded her arms. "As a matter of fact, I don't feel *one bit* like a heart attack. I'm enjoying thinking about the trouble this tape is going to cause him."

"The physical sciences are going to be in an uproar," Phyllis muttered.

“There’s something in the old body we don’t know nothin’ about.”

“Hutch is going to be forced to go right back to the committee and ask for a review.”

“Let’s hope.”

“Look, I’m director of this lab, so get ready for some directions. I want to get a thousand K of the computer *under key*, access limited to us three. We need a nice roomy memory bank to foodle our numbers in.”

“How do we set it up for billing?” Charlie asked.

“Don’t worry about it. The administrator will fix it up.”

“You mean Hutch?”

Her voice gentled. “I mean Tom. Hutch might not survive this.”

Charlie applauded expansively.

They laughed. Sarah looked at the glowing TV screen. The mystery represented by the empty cage was awesome. It meant that the body did indeed contain a secret clock, and the clock could be tampered with. If age could speed up it could also slow down. It could stop.

All three of them continued to watch the cage even though there was nothing more to see. Sarah found her mind racing from question to question. It was a high moment, the kind of discovery few scientists ever encounter. She was acutely aware that they had made history. Schoolchildren, if such would still be birthed after immortality, would read about this moment. Models of this very lab would stand in museums.

She stopped herself with a shudder. It was not healthy to think about such things. Her mind turned back to the more immediate questions but the chill remained, a feeling of disquiet that must mask, deep in her heart, the sick dread she suspected was there.

“The sleep deprivation was the triggering mechanism for the aging

acceleration. But what caused him to stop sleeping in the first place?”

“His whole system collapsed.”

“That’s not an answer.”

They lapsed into silence. Sarah suspected the others felt much as she did. She brushed aside her fear, told herself the situation wasn’t threatening.

The cage on the TV screen had a dark and evil cast to it, almost as if some inhuman spirit now possessed it. Sarah did not believe in old-fashioned notions of good and evil; she told herself that she did not. But she wouldn’t go near that cage unless absolutely necessary.

There was a noise and a stab of light as the door to the hall was opened. Tom’s angular form appeared, backlit by the cold fluorescent glow of the hallway. He came in quietly, a doctor among the sick, and put his hand on her shoulder. His stoop told her all that he planned to say. He did not yet know of the tape, and the triumph represented by Methuselah’s destruction.

Miriam’s worst fear surfaced when she realized that John had entered the house. In all time and in all the world, this was the most terrible thing. He would be fiercely angry in his aging, dangerous as he died. She breathed a charm against him, calling on the ancient gods of her species, seeking in her heart their embrace.

She hunted him through her cheerful rooms, happy places each. Warm memories of their long time here flooded her. She ran her hand lightly along the back of the rosewood love seat, touched the mahogany elegance of the side table. On it were gold candlesticks. They still enjoyed that courtly old light and often lit the house with it.

She heard, distinctly, the soft hiss of a door opening across a carpet.

The house was so still that she could sense the faint rustle of her own dress as she breathed. She stood in a corner of the room. To her right was the hallway and the front door. Ahead the arched doorway into the dining room. She knew now that he had come up the basement stairs and must be at this

moment standing between the pantry and the dining room. Then she heard a sound, a much aged voice, singing. “Sweetest songs of saddest thoughts, of times we’ve lost and loves forgot.” The voice sank to a mutter and stopped. That song had been a popular tune of his youth. She remembered well singing it with him.

Then he came into the light. She concealed her surprise; he was naked. “Please,” he said softly. “Please, Miriam, help me.”

The firm, young body that had so delighted her was gone. In its place was this thinned form, with liqueous pouches where muscle had been.

“Look at me, Miriam!” He sounded so pitiful, she hated to hear him.

“Put your clothes on.”

“They don’t fit!” Now he spat the words. Sudden rage was one of the most common characteristics of the disease. This time it declined as quickly as it had risen, leaving him only his despair. Before the reality of his suffering, Miriam’s thoughts seemed to move slowly, her body to be stilled. Hesitant, not sure he would be tolerated, he came to her. His breath was so foul that she turned her head aside. Her mind, revolted by the ugliness, used as an antidote an image of Alice’s bright face, of her creamy young skin. As his lips touched hers she took solace in this image.

“Don’t you enjoy me? Please try.” His face, spotted, sunken, bearded with hard white stubble, bobbed before her like the glowing image of death itself. He squeezed her shoulders, his hands sliding up to the base of her neck. “*You’re* just as young as ever. *You* look marvelous.” Suddenly he stepped back, blocking the door to the hallway. “Don’t leave me,” he said. His eyes were wide. “Don’t leave me!”

She stood, head bowed, wishing that — just once — she dared surrender herself to another being. But she remained wary. The rage may come upon him again at any moment. Her throat was still a little raw from yesterday’s episode. She looked up, met his eyes. “I won’t ever leave you, John, not ever.”

“Miriam —” He sobbed, wretched, obviously furious with himself for being so blatantly emotional. She could no longer ignore the plea in his voice. Against her own best judgment she went to him, put her arm around him, and guided him to the leather library sofa.

He leaned his head against her shoulder. “I’m so old. How did I get so old?”

“Time —”

“*What* time? It’s been two days!”

“A great deal of time concentrated in a small space.”

He looked at her, eyes stricken. “Where does it end?”

This was the hardest part. How do you face it, the fact that the seed of death, hidden deep in the body, has started to grow? She could not speak. Overcoming her revulsion, she stroked his head, held his hand. There was a low, awful sound from his throat. “I loved you,” he whispered. “I trusted you so.”

It hurt most terribly.

3

JOHN RUSHED BLINDLY down Eighth Avenue, heading toward Forty-second Street. It was four the next morning. He wore an overcoat, a wide-brimmed hat to shadow his face and carried a Samsonite briefcase. Energy was leaving him like light from the sky. He kept the hatbrim snapped low over his face. Occasionally, he attracted some interest from a dark doorway. A boy woke up long enough to make a few disinterested sucking noises, a thin girl muttered again and again, “wanna bj, wanna bj,” like a grotesque machine, stopping the instant he had passed her doorway.

He was here because he was desperate and this was fast. The people on the streets now were more ruined than he was, too damaged to compete with the dirty glittering mob of the early night — or, perhaps, with him.

Then he saw what he was looking for, sitting in the window of the Mayfair Pancake House. The Mayfair was the hub of the neighborhood and John knew it well. In times past it had been a nickelodeon. A man would buy a paper flower and hold it in his lap while the latest epics from Union City jittered across the screen. When a girl took the flower he had a date.

His victim came out, having been summoned by his tap on the glass. She sidled to him like a dog, her face looking upward and to the right. “Ain’t I great,” she said. “Twenty bucks. You don’t see the bad side.” Her good profile was pure Cincinnati. But she had only half a dream — acid had melted the rest of her face into a glaring scar.

“Five bucks all the way,” John said.

“Hand job money if you come fast.”

“Ten bucks, that’s my offer.”

“Mister, you don’t look at the goddamn scar. I got my moves down. You never see it.”

“Ten.” They had to be bargained with; he would end up getting attacked in a dark hall if he bore the scent of the victim.

She grabbed his groin. “Fifteen.”

He pulled away.

“Anything for fifteen,” she hissed. “You can do anything.”

He hesitated. They stood as still as cats.

“SM,” she said, “beat shit outa me.”

“I don’t like that.”

“Man, you don’t want extras?” She came close again, her half-face smiling. “I thought you wanted extras. I’ll go ten, just a fuck.”

They went through a doorway on Forty-third Street, down a gray-painted hall disfigured with graffiti, up some low stairs to a damp-smelling lobby. A black man slumped in a broken chair. John put the ten dollars in his open hand.

They went up a steeper staircase. She stopped before a tall wooden door. The room was tiny: a dresser, a folding chair and a lamp with a melted plastic shade. The bed was a mattress on the floor with a wadded yellow sheet on it. “The laundry ain’t been in this early,” the girl muttered. “Get your clothes off, we got ten minutes for ten bucks, that’s house.”

Blaylock took off his hat. Even though the room was deep in shadow, its window overlooking an air-shaft, the girl could see enough of him to be startled.

“You got somethin’, man?”

“I’m well. Just thin.”

She moved slowly away. “What’s the matter with you?”

He took his scalpel out of his pocket. The girl was grimacing as if in pain, backing toward the window. “Come on, honey,” John said. “You belong to me.”

Her good eye widened, the good side of her mouth twisted. Her hands came fluttering up to her neck. From her mouth there was a sort of barking sound, midway between terror and madness. When her back touched the wall she crouched down, bark bark bark, like a whispering dog. The eye kept looking around and around, unable to focus on the face before her.

John raised his scalpel with swift expertise and plunged it in behind her collarbone. It popped through the viscera and just touched the artery. In an instant he was upon her.

At last. This.

He felt life filling him again, purple and rich. He knew he could now walk the streets without attracting attention, no more decayed than any other old man. In the past he had felt the hunger perhaps once a week. Since this — whatever it was — degenerative disease started, his need had risen and risen. When would he be hunting again? Six hours? One?

Now the Samsonite briefcase came into use. Inside was half a gallon of naphtha and some simple incendiary materials. He laid the girl — so light — on the bed and soaked her with naphtha. Then he put an ashtray full of butts beside her. Carefully, he poured potassium permanganate crystals into a matchbox and soaked them in glycerine. In three or four minutes spontaneous combustion would cause the potassium to catch fire and explode the naphtha.

After placing the matchbox in the ashtray, he left.

The fire would be a furious one. Ten minutes from now only bones would be left. If the fire went much beyond that everything would be destroyed.

When John reached the street dawn was already beginning. A few day people were about, a girl in a white leatherette car coat clopping toward the W. T. Grant Building, a young man with a shade of moustache getting out of a cab. The second edition of the *Times* was being tossed off a truck at the corner newsstand.

Nobody noticed him. For now. His whole body was relieved as if of gravity itself. Later would come desolation as the new blood died, but for the moment he felt as if he could leap up into the spreading sunlight. As he proceeded along Forty-third Street the last of the night people crept away. There sighed from them all a weariness completely at odds with the spring dawn slipping down the office towers. They dragged themselves away while pink clouds glided westward in a luminous sky.

A fire engine blared past, the firemen clinging to it. Their faces were bored and determined, frozen with the expression common to men who are intimate with death.

Manhattan began to come alive more rapidly. People were pouring out of the Seventh Avenue subway, coffeeshops were getting crowded, buses were swinging past with windows darkened by the crush of passengers.

John could feel her in him. Her past seemed to whisper in his veins, her voice to jabber in his ears. In a sense, she haunted him; they all did. Was the hunger satisfied by their being or just their blood? John had often wondered if they knew, if they felt themselves in him. From the way he could hear them in his mind, he suspected that they did. Miriam angrily dismissed the notion. She would toss her head and refuse to listen when he brought it up. She would not accept that you could *touch* the dead.

As he walked he counted the hours since last he had closed his eyes. Thirty-six at least. And during that short time he had needed three victims. Their energy was some compensation for the lack of Sleep, but it couldn't go on forever. Each one had less impact than the last.

He found that he could almost hate Miriam if he wished, she who had made him. It was not so much the fact that she had lied to him about his life-span as that she had trapped him in an isolation even more awful than her own. He

had come to terms with his cannibal life, accepting it as the price of immortality. Even for that the price was high. But for this? His hunger had cheated him. For this he had paid too much.

He went on foot to Sutton Place; there was no percentage in risking a cab. When he turned onto the street there were shafts of sunlight between the buildings, well-dressed people hurrying to work, cars pulling up before elegant foyers, doormen whistling down cabs. The innocent brightness of this world assaulted his conscience, made him feel the blackest shame. Their own little house with its green shutters and marble sills, with its red-brick facade and window boxes full of petunias, contrived an atmosphere of warmth and joy. A repulsive falseness. It seemed to John like a newly cut tree, its leaves still robust, the message of death not yet risen up the trunk.

“Morning,” Bob Cavender said. He was a naturally ebullient man, the Blaylocks’ neighbor, Alice’s father.

“Morning,” John said, affecting a slight accent.

“New on the block?” Cavender did not recognize this suddenly aged version of his neighbor.

“Houseguest. Staying with the Blaylocks.”

“Oh, yes? Good people. Music lovers.”

John smiled. “I am a musician. With the Vienna Philharmonic.”

“My daughter’s going to love you. She spends half her life at the Blaylocks. She’s a musician too.”

John smiled again and delivered a courtly Viennese bow. “We will meet again, I presume,” he said.

Cavender passed on down the street, trailing a hearty goodbye. How normal men could maintain their confidence and good cheer amid the chaos of life was one of the most fascinating mysteries that John had encountered. The Cavenders of the world never realized the truth of generations, how short was

their time and brief their ways.

There was a hush inside the house. Miriam had opened a pomander jar and the front hall was full of its rich scent. John went upstairs. He was eager to examine his face in a mirror. But when he got to the bedroom he hesitated. A deep, dead cold spread through him. He stood in the sunlight beside the pink-curtained window, terrified of the mirror on the back of the bathroom door, afraid to take another step.

For so long he had been balanced at the age of thirty-two. Along with the sudden aging of his body there had come a black flood of confusion as his brain atrophied. The assurance of youth was rapidly evaporating, and in its place was this preoccupied stranger, rapt only to the betrayal of the flesh. He found himself unable to remember dates, names, events. Things were colored by an unsettling newness, even things he must have seen many times before.

A tiny sound broke the stillness, the drip of a tear on the floor. “Coffin,” he said. His voice had changed so, deepening into age. All the years he had cheated were taking their revenge on him at once.

At the end of the last century he had visited a medium, planning to take her when the lights were out. But just as her fingers twisted down the gaslight something awful happened. With a sound like a tearing curtain dozens and dozens of different faces appeared in her face, like a crowd at the window of a burning house. All were known to him — his victims. The medium screamed, her eyes rolling, head lolling.

He had run from that horrible place, literally staggering with fear. A day later the *New York Evening Mail* published an item to the effect that the body of Mrs. Rennie Hooper had been found in her parlor. Her fingers were still on the key of the gas lamp. They assumed it was heart failure. Miriam insisted there was no *touch* with the dead. But she wasn't human, she didn't know anything about the relationship between a man and his dead.

The dead world glowered forth at him. Suddenly, an image of the whore exploded into his mind's eye, her flesh blackening in the flames.

His stomach twisted until it felt as if it were ripping out of its body and he

clamped his fists to his eyes, willing with all his strength that the vision of death before him, of deliverance into the hands of his victims, would dissolve. But it did not, rather it focused and confirmed. He realized that the demons of hell were not demons at all but the men of earth without their costumes.

To Sleep in safety, Miriam had gone to her attic room. John might well be able to penetrate the security system around the bed. She huddled on the hard floor fighting a nightmare. But it came relentlessly on, bursting through the Sleep like fire through straw, grasping her mind, forcing it to see:

A foggy morning near Ravenna. She had come here with the other citizens of property, when the Emperor fled Rome fifty years ago. Dew lies on the marble sill of her bedroom window. From deep in the fog comes the singing of rough-voiced Vandals on their way to raid the Imperial Palace. They move slowly through the mist, marching along just beyond the herb garden, their horned helmets making them look enormous. They will not pass this great house without plundering it, not even on their way to the palace of Petronius Maximus.

Keeping her voice steady, she calls Lollia. The girl comes swiftly across the marble floor, her slippers hissing on the stones. Miriam does not need to speak. "It is finished," Lollia says. "He hasn't made a sound in hours." Miriam takes Lollia's white face in her hands and kisses her full on the mouth, feeling the trembling fervor of a kiss returned. "My love," Lollia says softly, "the barbarians —"

"I know."

Miriam drops her nightclothes on the floor and strides naked across the room. The smell of the oil lamp guttering on her night table mingles with the sharp scent of the leather cloak she removes from her chest. She dresses in traveling clothes, aided by her lover, who has kindly taken the place of the dead servants.

Then Lollia goes off to her own room to change. They have hidden the horses and carriage in the Peristyle. Distantly, there is a crash, the sound of merry

laughter: the Vandals are at the stables. Miriam races across silk carpets, her cloak swelling behind her, and goes down the stone stairs to the basement where in olden times slaves attended an elaborate furnace. With the coming of inflation those slaves were sold, and the dying convulsions of the Empire diminished the amount of coal available. As for the slaves who remained — Eumenes saw to them.

Miriam had stationed Lollia beside the great oak door all night. Only an hour ago had she reported silence. Now Miriam feels safe in opening the door. She throws back three bolts and pulls with all her strength. Slowly it swings wide.

She screams.

The shriveled *thing* attached to the door by its finger and toe nails is unrecognizable as Eumenes. The room reeks of new blood. On the floor are the husks of his last five victims. Around him is a puddle of blood, having run out through his dead digestive system. His skeletal form is gouged; at the end he was terribly weak, his victims were almost too much for him.

Miriam swallows, forces self-control. She grasps the thing by its shoulders and peels it off the door.

Her ancient and beloved companion, her Eumenes. Odysseus returned at last, neither dead nor alive, somehow still attached to this ruined corpse — a spirit perhaps unwanted among spirits and forced to remain in the dead house of its body.

She pulls his knees to his chin and forces him into a box of the hardest wood, feeling the quivering pulsations of his body. The box is fastened by brass and reinforced with iron. Hefting the precious burden on her shoulders, she mounts the stairs. She will never abandon him, she murmurs, never, never. In the hallway Lollia is dancing with agitation. She is a simple girl, accepting without question Eumenes' "sickness," never imagining that she must one day follow. The elegant rooms are filling with smoke. The girl's eyes dart toward the rising Gothic shouts. Despite her terror she helps Miriam; together they take the chest to the carriage. They throw open the gate and Miriam snaps the reins.

Behind them the ancient villa fades gracefully into mist and past times.

It is slow going along the unrepaired roads. They must not approach Ravenna, not at any cost. Two women in a carriage loaded with baggage and gold coins are as vulnerable as it is possible to be.

“Constantinople,” Miriam says, thinking of the boat waiting at Rimini and the terrors of the sea. Lollia huddles against her.

Before her she saw a dark wooden wall. She was in the ship, hearing the wind shrieking in the rigging, hearing —

A pigeon coo.

Her eyes opened. She did not move at first. Then she remembered, she was in the attic. Her mouth was dry, the dream clinging like a rotten flavor. She sat up. Close beside her was the new steel chest.

She hated these dreams. They did not interfere with renewal; indeed, they might be part of it. But they hurt so very much.

Well, she'd have to put it out of her mind. She had a great deal to do. She had been methodically preparing for Alice's transformation. It had taken all year to sift through the literature of sleep disturbance and aging research until she had pinpointed the most knowledgeable person in the field.

Her approach to Sarah Roberts was to have been subtle and slow. Over time she would have befriended her, made Sarah's knowledge her own, then slipped out of her life as easily as she had entered.

She had never expected John to die so soon. Even after transformation Alice would have grown to maturity. The three of them were to have shared those years.

But no more. Alice *had* to last, Miriam could bear nothing less. She ran her fingers through her hair. With the coming of the sun this little room under the eaves turned into an oven.

Miriam left, taking care to cross the attic on the beams so that the ceilings

under her feet would not creak. While John was still strong she could not afford to let him know where she Slept. He felt cheated and betrayed; they always did. The next time his fingers might well close around her throat for good.

As soon as she opened the door to the attic she knew that he was home from another hunt. From their bedroom came a rasping sound that tore at her heart. He was crying. His intelligence, his sweetness, his exuberance — and above all the truth of his love — remained as alive as if the old John still existed. As she entered the room he fell heavily, thudding against the wall.

He began to pull himself up on the dressing-table chair. She watched the wheezing struggle appalled — he had weakened badly in these past hours. The gray skin was cracked, the hands reminded her of the claws of an animal.

His eyes, yellow and watery, sought her. He looked at her. She could hardly bear his face. “I’m hungry,” said a screeching, unfamiliar voice.

She could not reply.

He managed to pull himself to his full height and stood swaying like a hobbled buzzard. His mouth opened and closed with a crackling sound. “Please,” he said, “I’ve got to eat!”

Without the Sleep their hunger became unendurable. The flawless pattern of life was broken, and the delicate balance crumbled.

“John, I don’t understand this, I never have.”

He leaned toward her, gripping the chair tightly. She was relieved to see that he dared not launch himself in her direction. It was unlikely that he could hurt her, but not completely impossible. She preferred distance between them. Her control of any situation had to be flawless. “But you *knew!* You knew it would happen!”

There was no point in lying, the truth was obvious.

“You must help me. You must!”

She was unable to look at the accusation in those eyes. Before the truth of what she had done she could not find words, either of comfort or denial. She was lonely and human beings gave her the love that pets give. She sought companionship, some warmth, the appearance of home. She rejected her tears, her shame at what she had done to him. After all, did she not also deserve some love?

John had heard her from the first moment she had moved. The fact that she had been sleeping in the attic locked away from him decided it. For him it was a surprisingly cool decision and it admitted no room for reconsideration. He was going to hurt her. He was going to take her throat in his hands and crush it until she admitted the evil of what she had done.

He watched her come warily into the room and feigned weakness, pretending to fall against a table. It was clear that she wouldn't come near him if she thought that there was the least danger. Miriam was obsessively cautious.

He was agonizingly hungry. Miriam was so healthy and beautiful, literally ablaze with life — what would happen if he took her? Would it be enough to cure him? Her odor was dry and lifeless, like a starched dress. She did not have that wonderful, rich smell that John had come to identify with food.

Maybe she was poison.

His anger poured out in everything he said to her, he could not prevent it. She told him she did not understand what was happening to him. He wanted to believe that she was a passionless monster. He tried not to think of her as human. But he loved her, and now he needed her. Why wouldn't she understand that?

He stretched out his arms, pleading for help.

She moved back toward the door, the silken gesture of a cat. Her eyes regarded him as if there was something she was about to say. He realized how great the gulf between them had really been all these years.

“I'm dying, Miriam. *Dying!* Yet you go gliding along, perfect and untouched. I know you're much older than me. Why are you different?”

Now her face clouded, she seemed about to cry. “John, you *invited* me into your life. Don’t you remember?”

This was too much. He launched himself toward her, growling his rage, his arms extended toward her neck. Miriam had always been able to move fast, and she slipped away easily, retreating to the hallway. On her lips was a sad half-smile. The one thing that gave him hope was her eyes. They were glazed with fear, swimming with what could only be sorrow. As he approached her she turned, quick as a bird.

He heard her feet drumming down the stairs, then the front door slammed.

He was desolated. She had left him. Now he regretted his attack. Yet he hadn’t been able to stop himself, the urge was so sudden. Sooner or later she was bound to come back, though. She couldn’t bear to Sleep in hotel rooms for fear of an intruder or a fire. This place was so thoroughly equipped that a match couldn’t smoulder without being noticed, nor a burglar touch a window. No, this was her haven and she would return.

John would be waiting.

For fifteen minutes he lay on the bedroom floor trying to reach Sleep. But the hunger was there, insinuating itself into his veins, making him tremble with need.

He pulled himself to his feet and went downstairs, paused at the door to the library. Books and papers were strewn about. Miriam was normally obsessed with order. He slumped down behind her desk, thinking that he might prolong his strength if he didn’t move so much. It was going to be damned difficult if he had to eat in broad daylight, and in this condition.

There was a magazine lying open on the desk. *The Journal of Sleep Disorders*. Some project of Miriam’s. It was laughable, Miriam’s silly faith in science. The magazine was opened to an article with the wildly exciting title of “Psychomotor Dysfunction in Abnormal Dreaming Response: The Etiology of ‘Night Terrors of Adulthood,’” by S. Roberts, MD, PhD. The article was an utterly meaningless mass of statistics and charts, interspersed with sentences in the incomprehensible language of technology. How Miriam

managed to make anything of such material was a mystery to John, and what she expected to do with it was just as obscure. Science, which so involved and excited her, seemed fearful to him, the work of the mad.

John pushed the magazine aside, staring blankly. He had begun to hear a sound, a sort of high-pitched noise like a siren. It was a moment before he realized that it was coming from inside his right ear. It peaked and then died. In its wake was nothing: the ear had become deaf. He had to act, the deterioration was now very rapid.

He went to the daybed, a place where he had Slept many times, and lay down. He closed his eyes. At first there was bone-tired relief. Again he did not Sleep. Instead, bright geometrical shapes began to appear before his eyes. These resolved into burning images of Miriam's face, of Miriam standing over him during the agonizing time of his transformation.

His eyes opened almost of their own accord. Other faces had been about to replace Miriam's.

The sound of a raging crowd evaporated into the soft morning air. Where, after all, do the dead go? Nowhere, as Miriam said — or is there a world beyond life, a world of retribution?

“You can't blame me,” he growled.

He was surprised to hear a voice answer. “I'm not! You can't help it if they forgot!” Alice.

John turned his head. She stood frowning, her violin case in her hand. She was here for her music lesson. Her odor, rich beyond description, poured into the room. “Good morning,” John said as he clambered to a sitting position on the side of the daybed.

“I do music with the Blaylocks at ten. But they're gone.”

She did not recognize him.

“Yes, yes — they had some kind of a bank meeting. They told me — told me

to tell you.”

“You must be the Vienna Philharmonic musician. My dad told me about you.”

He got to his feet, went to her, bowed. He dared not touch her, dared not even brush his hand against her. The hunger had become an inferno the instant he had caught scent of her. He had never experienced so much concentrated need, had never wanted anything so badly.

“Are you a regular with the Vienna Philharmonic?”

“Yes.” His hands shook, he clutched them together to keep from grabbing her.

“What’s your instrument?”

Careful here. He couldn’t say cello because she might ask him to play. It was completely beyond his capacity in this condition. “I play — french horn.” There, that was good.

“Heck, I was hoping you were strings.” She looked at him with her soft, intense eyes. “Strings are a lot of fun. They’re hard, though. Do you have your horn?”

“No — no, I prefer it does not travel. The tone, you know.”

She glanced away. “Are you all right?” she asked in a small voice.

“Of course,” he said. But he did not feel all right, he felt like splitting her in two.

“You look so old.” Her voice was low and hesitant. The knuckles of the hand gripping the violin case were white.

John tried to lick his lips, realized that they were stretched dry. The faces of other children swam into his memory. Miriam had insisted he take them when he was a beginner because they were easier. In those days homeless, unknown children were commonplace.

Taking human life had slowly lost its significance for him. He no longer remembered the number of murders he had committed. She had sucked every cell of humanity out of him and left him as he was today, at the end of his life with this to face.

“Have a seat,” he heard his voice say, “we’ll talk music until they get back.”

His hand touched the scalpel in his pocket the instant she accepted his invitation and came through the door.

That was all he needed, he was on her. Screams exploded from her, echoing flatly through the house. Her lithe body writhed, her hands tore at him, she slapped at the cracked skin of his face.

He pulled at the scalpel, twisting her hair in one hand, yanking her along the floor. Her arms windmilled, her feet scraped and banged. Her screams were high pitched, frantic, incredibly loud.

The damn scalpel wouldn’t come out of his pocket.

She managed to bite his arm, her teeth crunching out a half-moon-shaped hole in the loose skin.

Her eyes rolled when she saw the damage she had done. A column of black vomit shot from her mouth, splattering on the floor. She threw herself back and skittered along, trying to reach the door. He leaped at her, finally ripping the scalpel from his pocket. Everything except the hunger disappeared from his consciousness. His mouth opened, he could already taste her. It took all of his strength not to gnash his teeth like a famished dog. She was on her back, pushing herself away with her feet. He grabbed her ankle, held it with all the strength he could find. She sat forward and began batting at his hand.

He drove the scalpel down behind her collarbone. The pain threw her head back and made her shriek wildly. Then he was lying on top of her. Her breath rushed out of her lungs with a *whoosh*. She lay jerking in shock, her tongue lolling, eyes growing filmy.

With his mouth wide he covered the wound. He probed with his tongue. It

hurt, it always did. Unlike Miriam's, his soft human tongue was not adapted to this.

After what seemed an endless amount of probing, the blood burst from the vein, filling him at last. He sucked hard, lingering until the last drop. Only when there was nothing left but a dry rattling did he stop. His body felt loose and easy now, his mind was clearing. It was like waking up from a nightmare, or like the time as a boy when lost on the dark North Yorks Moors he had finally discovered a familiar path. He sighed deeply, then washed out his mouth with a glass of Madeira from the library stock. The wine seemed to contain a million delicious flavors, and he sensed each one individually. It was so beautiful he wept. His hands went to his face, feeling the softening skin and the warmth. He lay back on the daybed again and shut his eyes. The wine had been a fitting complement. Unlike other food, alcohol remained delicious to him. He tried to relax, savoring the immense relief.

Alice, as serene as a goddess, appeared behind his closed eyes.

It was so real that he shouted. He jumped up from the daybed. A sweet scent filled the room. It was every beautiful memory he had ever known, every kind voice, every loving touch.

He remembered when he was fourteen, waking on a summer's morning at Hadley House, knowing that he would meet Priscilla on the other side of the lake as soon as she had served morning tea to himself and his parents.

He remembered the humid woods, the swans in the lake and wildflowers. There was a hurting, queasy tickle when she touched him. By now she was dust beyond dust.

He sat down beside the rumpled clothes that hid the remains of Alice Cavender. The perfume was strongest here, it must have been something she was wearing. Gently, he touched the red T-shirt with its decal of Beethoven.

The perfume faded as quickly as a departed mood of love. It left him feeling as if he were already dead. He sighed. There was an ugly chore just ahead that wouldn't wait. If Miriam found any evidence of whom he had taken — he couldn't allow that.

He forced himself to pick up the little bundle and carry it down to the basement.

Miriam had walked the streets, sorrowing at the ugliness of what John had become. Despite her caution he had nearly . . . she couldn't even think about it. She was going to have to capture him soon. As soon as she dared. Even with his present weakness he was still too strong.

She returned home after an hour, unwilling to expose herself more than necessary to the random accidents of the city streets. When she turned the corner onto Sutton Place she stopped in surprise and stared. There was smoke rising in a thin trail from her chimney. John was burning evidence, and in broad daylight. The fool must have hunted right in this neighborhood, he hadn't had time to go farther away. No doubt he had taken some local child.

Toward the end they always lost all caution. She wanted to be angry at him, but she pitied his desperation too much. She ought to count herself lucky that he bothered to destroy his evidence at all.

Although she did not relish the prospect of confronting him, she was going to have to re-enter the house. It was hers, after all. And it was a safe place to Sleep. Somehow, John would have to be restrained. She could not allow him the freedom of house and streets much longer.

She marched up the front steps and went in. The rumble of the furnace was audible. The poor man. At least it told her his whereabouts. The high-pressure gas lines that fed the thing couldn't be left unattended.

She paused in the hall, savoring for a moment the peace and life of her house. To her it was like a well-rooted rose bush, lively and enduring. Soon it would contain a new voice, that of Alice, light and golden. Miriam's tiny infirmary was prepared for the transfusions. The approach to Dr. Roberts had begun. The good doctor herself would in the end be Miriam's assistant. For an instant her mind remembered John as he had been and she experienced a quick sinking of the heart. But she pushed it aside.

She began to move toward the library. The pomander was too sweet, it was

getting rotten. And the ceiling needed some plaster work; the house had settled a little recently. She had to prune her roses. It would soon be a necessity as well as a pleasure. And she was crying all over the hall rug. There was no use trying to stifle her feelings. Her despair broke through in a torrent.

John, you loved me.

You loved even the sound of my name.

He had been so happy with her, always laughing, always full of delight. She sank into a side chair and rested her chin in her hands, shut her eyes tight against the tears. She wanted so for him to hold her once again. She had been his prize, his adored one. In the end that was all that mattered, that was life itself, to be needed.

His aging was so ugly, she couldn't remember that the others had been that ugly.

There had been such good times.

The night she first met him, for example. She had only recently returned to England. She hadn't seen one of her own kind in twenty-five years. In those days she still hoped that they had migrated to America, seeking a less organized community. She was miserable with loneliness, an unwanted creature in a world she could not love.

That night it had been cold, the rain pounding and the wind blowing. She was toying with Lord Hadley, a foolish old man. His estates were vast and full of itinerant workers and others of the dispossessed. She longed for the freedom to roam unhindered in such lands. She had accepted his invitation gladly. And this glorious young man had appeared at dinner. He had about him all the important signs: the arrogance, the determination, the intelligence. A predator.

She had drawn him to her feet that very night, to teach the poor inexperienced thing a few secrets. The rich hunting of the estate could wait now that she had the opportunity to possess its heir.

She had taken rooms in the town of Hadley and visited him each night. Two weeks later she had started his infusions. If only she had known then how weak he really was; he had been intended to last the longest. Look at him now.

In those days she used india-rubber tubing and the hollow needles made for glassblowers. It was a great advance over the past method, in which she simply used her mouth and hoped for the best. Although she knew nothing of immunology then and would never have thought to test him for tissue rejection, John had not died. His wound had become infected, but that always happened. He had gone pale, but they did that too. Unlike so many, he survived. Together they had depopulated Hadley. The old Lord had hung himself. The estate had reverted to the wild.

He was a delighted child in those days. They went to London to join the bright social whirl of the declining Regency. God, how times had changed.

John. She remembered the time he had burst in on her disguised as a policeman. And the time he had chosen their victims in Glasgow and the next morning she discovered it was the Lord Mayor and his wife.

They used to ride to hounds. He had taught her that there was a thrill in challenging fear. She had accepted a little bit of the lesson to please him. How fine he had looked mounted, his boots gleaming in the morning sun. She remembered the mad dash of the horses, the smells and the noise and even the unaccustomed sweetness of danger. He had once leaped onto her horse at full gallop and tumbled them both off into a ditch — and made love to her with the bracken bobbing about their thighs and the huntsman's horn echoing in the distance.

She sighed and tried again to forget. Nostalgia was useless — she had to get down to that basement and deal with the poor man.

4

TOM SAT IN HIS OFFICE in the gathering dark. Although it was late he was crackling with energy. Hutch had just turned down Sarah's application for a funding review. Even better, he had ordered the project closed down, its records sealed.

Battle was joined. Tom could now challenge Hutch directly by demanding a Board of Directors' meeting himself. If Hutch was reversed it would break the old man's authority. Tom could then move in on him, shoulder him aside. Welcome to the next Director of Sleep Research.

He took out a cigar and held it between his lips, then put it away. One a day was his limit. If he smoked this one he would break that limit and force himself to confront his own iron rule: smoke two and go without any for a week.

He saw a shadow appear on the frosted glass of his door. The knob rattled. "When's the review?" Sarah asked as she entered. "We're ready to go."

"Not tonight. The board goes home early."

"Board? You mean the Board of Directors — of the Center? I thought we were dealing with the Budget Committee."

"We're not. Hutch blocked a committee review. I'm left with no alternative but to go to the board itself."

"I'm not prepared for that."

“Don’t quaver so when you talk, my dear. You’re prepared — brilliantly so, knowing you. And you can prepare me.”

“I’ve never even *seen* the board.”

“I have. They’re formidable as hell. Exactly what you’d expect of three world-class tycoons, a retired governor and two Nobel prize winners.” He smiled. “Pardon my intimidation. I’m just challenging you to do better than your best. Give me what I need to impress the hell out of them.”

“Yes, sir.” She snapped off a ragged salute. “Shall I get a new dress? A permanent?”

“You just get the data. I’ll confront them alone.”

“Thank God!”

“Confidence.” He leaned back, being careful not to allow the old chair to fall off its base. It was going to be quite a pleasure, and a deserved one, to allocate himself some decent furniture. Part of Hutch’s psychology was to make sure he had the worst office, the most decrepit furniture in the whole clinic. Transient interns rated better space.

“You seem curiously happy.”

“I should be. I think this might get me the directorship. If the board starts dictating policy to Hutch, he’ll have to go. There’s already board sentiment to that effect, I suspect.”

“Tom, you’re using me again.”

“You’re useful, lover.”

She laughed, shook her head. Tom disliked the moral tone of her position. Operating to mutual benefit wasn’t using somebody, not in the way she meant. “I’m saving your career.”

“To further your own.”

That was unfair. He felt wronged. “I’m getting what we both want, Sarah. That’s all that’s important.”

Her eyes were closed, she looked pained. “It’s just that I don’t like this side of you. It scares me. I don’t like to think you walk over people.”

“Then delude yourself. I don’t mind.”

“Tom, I guess what scares me is that I love you so much. I feel so vulnerable.”

He wanted to hold her, to somehow reassure her. They sat silently, the space between them making movement seem impossible.

“What if you fail?” she asked in a flat voice.

“Now who’s the betrayer?”

Her hand went to the desk between them. She must want him to hold it, he could see the sparkle of tears in her eyes. “We both have a lot to lose,” she said. “You’re making this thing into a life-or-death crisis.”

“It’s been that all along. I’m just trying to use it to our advantage.”

“That’s what I hate about you! You use everything. Me. Even yourself. Sometimes I see you as so — so dark and frightening. You’re somebody I don’t know, somebody who would do anything — too much — to get what he wanted.”

They had often had versions of this conversation. Originally, Tom had dismissed it as the histrionics of an insecure woman but recently had begun to suspect that it was more deeply felt than that. Sarah’s insecurities did not extend to her career, despite its precariousness. Tom wondered how long they would last as a couple. Would she leave him over such an issue? He reached out and took the hand. He knew that she was waiting, but for what he was not quite certain. Probably she wanted him to protest, to deny the truth of what she had said. It was like Sarah to see a truth and try to enforce a more palatable illusion in its stead.

“It’s the way I am,” Tom said. “I won’t deny it. I want his job. It’s that simple. I’m better qualified. And I’ll get it too. He won’t be able to stop me.” Saying the words offered him a satisfactory illusion of confidence. Actually, what he was conscious of was fear. He might get himself fired or, worse, might end up stripped of all power, condemned to be Hutch’s batboy until the old man died.

“Let’s go someplace and drink. It’s that time.”

“This is you talking? Leaving the lab at seven P.M.? Maybe you *have* given up.”

“They’re running statistics on the changes in Methuselah’s blood composition. There’s nothing for me to do.”

“You have computer access? I thought that’d be cut off by now.”

“Charlie broke the codes. We’re patched in through his home computer.”

Tom smiled. You couldn’t help but be proud to work with people such as Sarah and her group. She wasn’t one to be stopped by something as minor as having her budget cut and the door slammed in her face. “How can you get the memory space? Won’t the computer alert the Programming Group?”

“It’s an assembly from dozens of different files. A little here, a little there. Not enough to notice — from any one file.”

“How much space do you have?”

“Ten thousand K.”

He burst out laughing. It took a supplementary request to the Programming Group, six weeks’ wait and a special budget allocation to exceed 500 K. So much for bureaucracy! “How is this getting billed, for the love of God?”

“It’s going on Hutch’s personal account. The effective cost is eighteen hundred dollars an hour.”

“I hope that’s not true. He’ll end up going to jail for stealing computer time.”

“That would be delicious. Unfortunately, the truth is more prosaic.”

“May I know?”

“Nope.”

He could respect that. She was into a substantial bank of Riverside’s enormous computing power. The fewer who knew, the better. Not to mention the safety there was in ignorance.

They didn’t talk on the way down in the elevator. The lobby was quiet as they crossed to the door. He hailed a cab on York Avenue. “How about making this a catered affair?”

“Chinese food?”

“It’s a deal.” He couldn’t face some depressing bar right now. He wanted Sarah very badly. The thought of losing her came cold into his mind. He loved her so much. Right now he wanted to slide across the seat, to put his arm around her, to melt the barrier between them. During the day she was so crisp and professional and cool. At night he wanted another Sarah, one who would shelter him. He watched her gentle, tense face, the soft curve of her bosom, smelled her faint perfume and longed for her.

The harsh words she had spoken in his office returned to mind now. ‘You use everything. Me. Yourself.’ Was it really true? Did he have to think that about himself? If it was true, it was not something he could help.

“I love you,” he said softly so the cabdriver wouldn’t hear. Public intimacies annoyed Sarah.

She smiled briefly, allowed him to cover her hand with his.

“Love solves problems,” he said.

She was silent a long moment. “It survives them.”

He wished so very much for her happiness and success. She had made an extraordinary discovery, he was sure of it. He wanted her to taste the

sweetness of recognition, to receive all the benefits such a thing could bring. “I want to help you, Sarah,” he said, “I want to so badly!”

She smiled broadly. “I wish Hutch could hear you. He’d be terrified.”

“Left side or right side,” the cabdriver asked.

“Building on the left. The high-rise.”

The big blue “Excelsior Towers” sign glowed in the deepening night. An elderly woman with a dog came out, the spiderlike creature trotting along beside her. Alex seasoned a cigar at his post by the door. He lit it, took a deep puff. Tom watched with the avidity of the denied, envied the man his indifference to his health. They got out of the cab.

“Good evening, Doctors,” Alex said around the cigar. Tom couldn’t bear to smell the billow of smoke that came toward him. At least it was a cheap one, it lacked the fetching aroma of a good Montecristo. Thank God.

“A habit is an agonizing thing,” Tom said as the elevator doors closed behind them.

“I wondered how you were taking that.”

“Badly.”

“How many have you had so far today?”

He raised one finger. She reached up, took his hand and shook it. “It’s surprisingly hard to do,” he said. “The body demands its fix.”

“I know. It took me two years to give up cigarettes. That and my father.”

Tom had never met Samuel Roberts. His death had occurred before he and Sarah really knew each other. Lung cancer, she had said.

Sarah followed him into the apartment, pausing to put her raincoat in the closet. He turned on the lights in the living room. She came up beside him. “I like our place,” he said. She nodded. “Sarah, can I kiss you?” She turned to

him, put her hands on his shoulders. He bent to her, looked for a long few seconds into her eyes, then sought her lips. The warm sweetness of her kisses always renewed him. It was as if his body wanted to do what his heart could not, and once and for all seal their love.

“Do you really believe I love you?” he suddenly asked. The question had popped out before he had even thought about it. He wished that he didn’t do things like that. It was a question he might not want answered.

“I know you do.”

He tried to kiss her again but she turned away. His impulse was to force her. Angry with himself, he quelled it. She had sensed his anger, though, and stood still and small, her chin jutting out, her hands twisted together. “Now now,” she said.

“I won’t hurt you.”

She laughed as if to reassure him that she trusted him. “Tom, if our careers didn’t mesh the way they do — if mine was in the way — what would you do?”

He reached out, took her hand. “They do mesh, so why worry about it? We’re in a perfect position. By saving your career I’m going to make my own.”

“But what if it was the opposite? That’s the question you won’t answer.”

“I’m jeopardizing myself as it is.”

She shook her head. “I love you, Tom. God help me but I do.” She came to him, her forehead was at eye level. He kissed it, then drew her to him, feeling the smallness of her body, disturbed by her vulnerability, obscurely pleased.

She let him lift her off her feet, bend to her upraised face. He kissed her long and hard, as if to kiss away the space between them, wishing he could, wanting his love to sweep her doubts aside and draw her to him forever.

“Oh, Sarah. You’re so beautiful. I can’t believe a woman so beautiful would be interested in me.”

“Put me down, and don’t sell yourself short. You aren’t exactly ugly.”

He smiled. “Not exactly.” Gently, she brushed his cheek with her hand, an admonitory gesture. “I wasn’t referring to my physical appearance. I can’t quite —” He stopped, found he didn’t want to say that he could not command her love.

“I do love you. That isn’t something I say lightly.”

He nodded, kissed her briefly. “Let’s go to bed,” he murmured into the warmth of her hair.

“I want to order up Chinese food. Then we can do it.”

“Now.”

Laughing, she pushed him away. “Prolong our pleasure. Let’s anticipate a little.”

He felt subtly rejected. “I’ll go take my shower,” he said, covering his hurt. If she really wanted him, she would not have been able to resist his invitation. Leaving her to work out the menu for their Chinese meal, he went into the bedroom and stripped off his clothes.

He felt better when he was standing in the warm shower, clouds of steam coming up around him, making his skin tingle. In the shower he could forget his disappointments, his problems, his fears. His mind went back to the clinic, however. Was her discovery going to grow and grow until it consumed her and eclipsed him? Their love had never seemed so frail, or so terribly important.

A shadow moved on the other side of the shower curtain. Then she was there, happiness again, slipping in naked, water bouncing against her marvelously beautiful body, running down its curves, flowing between her breasts, bouncing off her nipples. “I thought you might need a little help,” she said, taking the soap from the dish and picking up the washcloth.

She had come to him. He almost laughed aloud. But he didn’t, instead he let

himself fall into the familiar little game they played in the shower. “Only one part of me is dirty.”

“What part?” Prim, eyebrows raised, face glowing.

He had been hiding himself behind his hands. Now he removed them.

“Oh! It looks like a bratwurst.”

“Then eat it.”

“And get my hair wet? Not on your life. I’ll clean it up, though, since you say it’s dirty.”

He enjoyed these showers enormously. She washed him slowly, sensuously, concentrating on the most sensitive parts, on her face the gentlest, sweetest expression imaginable. And when he washed her, touching her whole body, feeling the life of her flesh beneath his hands, it was like a miracle.

Afterward she was flushed, her eyes sparkling. He knew that she was terribly excited and he teased her. “Did you order the Chinese food?”

“Sure. Oh, *damn*. I guess we’ll have to wait.”

“Really?” He went to her, lifted her up and leaned back.

“Tom, don’t,” she said. He noticed that she didn’t struggle. Doubtless she was afraid he’d lose his balance if she did. “To-o-m.” He entered her standing, his legs spread, his arms around her waist. Her feet dangled inches from the floor. “Tom, you madman, let me down!”

“The Chinese food’s going to come.”

“Oh, *Tom*.”

He couldn’t stand it anymore. He put her down, but only because it was impossible to remain standing together as they were long enough to consummate the act. “Get in that bed,” he said gruffly. She ran to the bedside.

“Tom —” She put her hands on his cheeks. “Never think I don’t love you.” She kissed him hungrily, drew him down on her. They made love slowly for a few moments, then became more intense. The act grew more fierce by stages. Sarah sweated, screwed her eyes closed, cried, and dug her fingers into his back. He went on, driving, relentless, pacing a steady rhythm. At last she shouted aloud, stared wildly, her legs pumping furiously, cried out again, and was quiet. He followed her in this surging, innocent act, sinking down into her hot, sweaty flesh, calling her name in an ecstasy of completion and . . . longing.

The barrier remained.

He looked at her, now lying by his side. “Sarah —”

“*Sh!*” She giggled a little, kissed the tip of his nose. She also must feel the barrier; there were tears in her eyes that proved it. “Tom, I love you.”

It could be repeated forever, this invocation of a false magic. He wanted to ask, to demand she tell him, what was missing. It hurt like hell to think how very much of himself he had given, how very much of herself she had given — and this was what resulted. A good time in bed, a lot of fun together. Fine, but if they loved each other, why didn’t either of them really believe it?

Tom was grateful when the buzzer rang. “We just made it,” he said. “Here comes the food.”

“We should have waited.”

“We couldn’t.”

She laughed, got up, and threw on a robe. “Where’s your wallet? I haven’t got a penny.”

“In my pants.” He watched her rummage on the floor, take out the money. She got the food and laid it out on the table in their small dining room. He followed her in, still naked. They were hungry and they ate all of it even though she had as usual ordered too much.

Tom got cold and put on his robe. They sat awhile after dinner trying without success to watch TV. “You’re very quiet,” he said at last. He was obscurely afraid, almost unwilling to break the silence. Yet he was more afraid to let it go on.

“I’m thinking about the lab,” she said, drawing her knees up to her chin and clasping her hands around them. “Thinking about what in the name of God happened to that rhesus.”

“Even now?”

She looked at him, her face wide with curiosity. “Why not now? We’re finished making love, aren’t we?”

“If you say so.”

“Tom, I’m always ready for you. Don’t you ever think I’m not.”

“I know I’m more physical.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean I don’t welcome your love. It’s just that we were finished. Naturally, I want to talk about the lab. It’s the rest of my life. And if Hutch —”

“I’ve got him beat. This thing is so big they’re going to roll right over him. You’ll get your appropriation.”

“I hope.”

“Trust me. I’ll put it all back together again.”

“I trust you.” She slid along the couch, snuggled into the crook of his arm. “I trust you implicitly.”

There was such sincerity in her tone that his fears were almost defeated. “You have every reason to,” he said. “I’d rather die than let you down.”

She kissed his hand. “That’s what’s so beautiful about you. That’s really true, every word of it.”

At that moment, at least, he did not doubt it. “It is true,” he said.

They sat in silence, close together. The only sounds came from outside, sirens in the distance, an occasional horn, the sighing of the wind. “I think we’ve sort of been avoiding talking about the lab,” Sarah said at last. “I know I have.”

Tom knew exactly what she meant. The lab was a place of death. He nodded, remaining silent.

“I still can’t believe it. As a phenomenon, I mean. What agent could have caused such profound decay? And it was so fast! It was a horrible thing to see.”

“It’s going to be a great breakthrough, Sarah. A great advance.”

“Yes, but toward what? At the end — before he died, I mean — that ape was the most totally brutal thing I have ever seen. I saw the look on his face. I looked right into those eyes. Tom, the hatred I saw there wasn’t an animal hatred — not a human hatred either. It was something alien, something beyond all that we know or have ever experienced. It was the hatred of the monster for the normal.”

“Aren’t you imagining just a little?”

She shook her head vehemently. “I turned that rhesus monkey into something savage. I’d hardly call that imagining.”

It was three A.M. when the Sleep released Miriam. Once again she was in the attic room, its door locked. She opened her eyes. The room was thick with darkness. Absolute blackness, but not quite absolute silence. There was creaking movement all around her, whispering, shifting sound, the noise of ceaseless tiny motions. It was horrible to think of them in their chests, of how close to them she had Slept. She turned on the light.

Despite the bright light and the obvious tightness of the chests, claustrophobic fear overcame her. She clambered out of the tiny room, crossed the attic, and hurried downstairs. Now she paused to listen. Before

she continued farther she had to locate John.

Miriam's hearing was acute. She had no doubt that he was gone. The firebox in the basement was not yet cool, and he was off hunting again. She glanced at her watch. It had been less than eighteen hours since he had taken the neighborhood child. Soon he would be as frail as paper, and easily confined in his chest.

She hoped that he would be more responsible on this hunt. The first rule of survival was to take only the unwanted. Otherwise the police just never let go. It was especially foolish to take young children of this era.

She went down to the library and opened the wall panel that gave her access to the security system. The perimeter alarms were on but the electrostatic shields were not. She activated them. If he slipped up and tried to come through the door they would stun him long enough for her to do what had to be done.

Now she pulled out some information about Excelsior Towers she had obtained from the renting agent. She looked carefully at the floor plan of an apartment identical to Sarah Roberts', memorizing the layout.

The next step in the infiltration of Sarah's life was to *touch* her. The human sense of *touch* had atrophied. They called it extrasensory perception, wrongly assuming it to be a means of reading thoughts. It was rather a means of sharing emotions. *Touch* could be a beautiful communion of hearts, or if the controlling partner wished it, the meeting of nightmares.

To awaken Sarah's sensitivity to *touch*, close physical contact, the kind that around passion, would be necessary. Miriam folded up the floor plan and mentally reviewed her intended access to the building itself. Except for the extraordinarily difficult few minutes in the apartment, the whole entry and exit would be routine.

Miriam walked to avoid the exposure that a taxi or bus would entail. At this hour the risk of accidents in the streets was low, the risk of being remembered by a driver high. As for muggers, she was indifferent to them. Occasionally, she had consumed them while they tried to rob her. Man was

rarely a threat to her, at least not on a simple physical level.

Dawn would come in two hours and fourteen minutes, first light about twenty minutes earlier. She walked briskly, keeping to a schedule that would get her back home just before sunrise. Her black hat and raincoat gleamed with mist, her boots splashed in the dark puddles. The walk would take half an hour. Fifteen minutes would be spent getting into the building. She would have another fifteen minutes in the apartment itself. It was going to be just a little close; she might have some light on the way back. She went under the Queensborough Bridge, leaving Sutton Place and going north on York Avenue. The sound of a lone truck crossing the bridge echoed in the street. The blocks swept past; she kept up a quick pace. Once a figure appeared far ahead, but aside from him the street remained empty. She passed dark stores, locked doorways, parked cars. Overhead the moon had given way to heavy clouds. Although the air was motionless, the clouds raced northward, their bottoms sweeping the pinnacles of the city. Another storm was coming, this one from the south.

It was easy to break into these “secure” luxury buildings, and she quickly established a good method of penetrating this one. There was a maintenance door at the end of a narrow alley. It was locked, of course, but Miriam would have no trouble with the familiar Loktite spring-loaded bolt.

She slipped into the pool of light before the door, working swiftly until she heard the click of the lock. She entered the building’s machine room. It was dim, almost dark. Holding her hands out at eye level to ward off low-hanging pipes, she moved carefully until she was across the room, then let herself into the basement proper. Here the light was bright and harsh. She climbed the stairs for a few floors — calling an elevator to a basement at this hour would certainly alert building security. She felt the fourth floor was high enough not to cause suspicion and took an elevator from there.

When she got to Sarah’s floor she opened the door to the fire stairs so that there wouldn’t be a click if she had to use it. The hallway was silent. Her feet whispered on the brown carpet, her shadow preceded and then followed her as she passed under the lights.

She leaned close to the door of the apartment and took out her cylinder pick,

a three-inch length of Number Two piano wire. With her eyes closed she worked the wire into the lock, lifting the tamper shields and rolling the cylinders. A lock such as this was somewhat more delicate than the crude mechanism on the back door. She could picture the structure of any model of any brand of lock used in the United States. Some of them might slow her down and a few would even stop her. But most yielded soon enough, as this one did.

Next, she slipped a credit card into the crack between the door and the jamb and used it to press back the tongue of the lock. The door swung partway open and she replaced the credit card with duct tape. Now for the night latch. Another length of piano wire, this the heavier Number Six, was used to work around the end of the latch and move it along its track. As it slid she pulled the door closed. After a moment there was another click and a rattle. The night latch had fallen out.

At once she got out of the hall, remembering to remove the duct tape so that nobody passing would see the edge of it. She followed her long-established procedure on entering an occupied dwelling. First, she shut her eyes tight and listened. She heard breathing off to the left. That would be Sarah and Tom in the bedroom, and in stage three sleep judging from the rhythm of their breath. Sarah's own book had taught her that. Next, she looked around. In the time her eyes had been closed they had adjusted to the darkness. She made a note of a chair in the way of a fast escape via the living room, noted the lab coat on the hall floor. This was a simple one-bedroom apartment with a separate dining room. Sarah and Tom were alone in it, as she had already ascertained they would be.

She carried out the last test of her surroundings: smell. She inhaled deeply, identifying the faint odors of Chinese food and wine and sweaty bodies. They had banqueted and made love.

She moved toward the bedroom, pausing every few steps. Absolute care was necessary. Mistakes could not be covered up by killing the victims of this intrusion. She knew a good deal about Sarah Roberts, right down to her height and body weight. But there had been no time to study her personal habits. About Tom Haver she was even more vague. Hopefully, she had enough information to serve her purposes. He was not useful to her because

he lacked the deep bloody instincts of the true predator, but he would have to be dealt with. Like many of his nature, he covered his inner softness with a cloak of aggressive bluff. As she reached the bedroom door she could smell the powerful musks of human sex. Their lovemaking had been intense, full of passion. She cursed it. Sarah was needed for other loves; the presence of Haver was a distinct inconvenience.

Miriam went to the bed, sat down beside it, and contemplated her victim. She was like a ripe little apple, this one. Very carefully, Miriam slipped back the bedclothes and revealed the woman's neatly curved body. She longed to draw the life out of it but rather she hovered close, inhaling its sharp, humid aroma, listening to its little sounds: the breath soughing in and out, the heart beating slowly, the slight shifting of the torso on the sheets. Beside Sarah, Tom Haver stirred, but it meant nothing. His sleep remained undisturbed.

To begin the *touch* that would enter Sarah's dreams, she took her hand, which dangled off the edge of the bed, and ran her lips across the back of it, kissing lightly, brushing it with her tongue. Sarah inhaled a long breath. Miriam stopped awhile, then leaned close to Sarah and breathed her breath, smelling its sharp warmth, mingling it with her own. Sarah's head moved and she moaned. Her right breast was exposed and Miriam held it briefly in her hand, then slid her palm back and forth across the nipple until it became erect. She took the nipple between two of her long fingernails and squeezed until Sarah tossed her head. The girl's mouth hung slackly opened. Miriam covered it with her own, pressing her tongue against Sarah's with the utmost care. She remained like that for fully half a minute, feeling the faint movements of Sarah's tongue that indicated her unconscious excitement. She drew back and listened once again. Tom was still in stage three sleep. Sarah was nearly awake, making little noises as she dreamed. Miriam now felt powerfully drawn to her, could almost see her glowing dreams in her own mind's eye.

Soon Sarah's sleep deepened again. Slowly, gently, Miriam slipped her hands between Sarah's thighs and parted her legs. Moving quickly, ready for an immediate departure, she bent her head and kissed the hot, odorous flesh, pressing her tongue once hard where Sarah would feel the most intense pleasure. Sarah arched her back and cried out, and at once Miriam retreated to the living room.

Her heart was pounding. She glanced quickly toward the front door. In a few moments, after they settled down, she could escape. But not now. The least sound would alert them both.

“Tom? Oh . . .”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, I love you —”

“*Mmm.*”

There was a creak, the sound of one of them shifting position. Miriam’s mind now *touched* Sarah’s, sensitive to the recent contact of their bodies. She could feel the blazing intensity of the passion she had awakened in her and could also feel the confused question that surrounded it.

“Tom? Are you awake?”

“If you say so.”

At that moment a shaft of light burst across the room, hitting Miriam in the face like a blow. Instantly she stepped into shadow. The little fool had turned on her bedside lamp. She could have slapped her.

“I feel odd. I had a funny dream.”

“It’s four A.M.”

“I feel kind of sick.”

Sarah got up and came down the hall, throwing another light on in the bathroom. She was a handsome creature naked. Miriam liked her a good deal more than she had thought she would. There was a certain quality about her — an obvious hunger for pleasure that Miriam found very appealing. She felt more comfortable around people who could not control their lusts, because they could most easily be brought within her power.

She watched Sarah sitting on the toilet, her chin cradled in her hands, staring

with a frown at the wall before her. In the fluorescent light Miriam could clearly see the blush of excitement in her face.

After a moment Sarah spread her legs and laid her hand over her vagina. Sensuously, rubbing her legs back and forth, moving one hand over her vagina and with the other stroking her breasts, she masturbated.

From the darkness six feet away Miriam *touched* and *touched*, forcing images of soft female flesh, smooth flesh, into Sarah's mind, making her writhe with longing even as she satisfied herself. At the end Sarah threw back her head and whispered, "Kiss me." Then, hunched, her robe clutched at her neck, she hurried back to bed with Tom.

So that was what lay beneath the brilliance and the independence. Hunger, raw and unfulfilled, for a truly passionate lover. Miriam was proud of herself. This had been a most successful beginning. Now that her inner self had been aroused, Sarah's hunger would grow and expand, as beautiful in her heart as a flower, as relentless as a cancer, until her present life would seem like a desert.

Then Miriam would come to her and Sarah would feel as they always felt, that she had met the most wonderful, the best friend of her life. John had said it many long years ago, standing in the abandoned ballroom at his ancestral mansion, naked amid the rotting silks, shivering as the evening wind came down the moor and through the gaping windows: "Miriam, you make me feel as if I've come home."

Sarah awoke just before the alarm buzzed. Knowing Tom as she did, she let it ring. He fortified his head with pillows. Throwing the covers off them both, she got up and began to get dressed, leaving him to cope with the clock.

After about thirty seconds he groped out and turned it off, then sat up in bed. He emitted a groan, complex with woes. They had had wine with the spicy Chinese food and then spent a restless night.

More or less dressed, Sarah went to the kitchen and put on some coffee. She stood amid the details of their world: hissing old percolator with charred

handle, Chinese food cartons tumbled in the sink, the refrigerator humming, the wind rattling the kitchen window. Her mind slipped suddenly to a chilling memory, the intense residue of a dream.

It was disquieting to have dreamed with such lust of a woman. All that remained was an image of bright flesh, sultry eyes and wet lips, and the sweet smell of her. Sarah shuddered. She poured an experimental half-cup of coffee. Still weak, but she wasn't willing to wait. Cup in hand, she went back to the bedroom to busy herself with preparations for the day. At least the dream had given her an urge to plunge with even more than usual energy into her work, if only to forget the damn thing.

"Hurry up, Doctor," she yelled at the closed bathroom door.

"I need a cigar," he said coming out.

"So eat one."

He took her in his arms. She was not sure of him; his eyes seemed angry and loving at the same time. With elaborate nonchalance she drew away from him, went to brush her hair and put on some makeup.

"I really would like a cigar."

"You're on your way to a neoplasm of the mouth. Anyway, a cigar will make you sick on four hours of sleep."

"I love you, damn you."

He would say it at such a moment, as a means of walling off the anger beneath the banter. Love seemed to Sarah more and more an urge to containment, a hunger to fill oneself with another. As she pulled her brush through her hair she wondered if there could ever be anything more than the desire to fill the hollowness inside. She winced; she had brushed too hard, pulled out some hair. "I love you too," she said. Her voice was quick with duty. She remembered how she had recited in school the responses to prayers in which she had no faith. He came, trying to seem gently forceful, sexy. He appeared behind her in the mirror, lifted her hair, and kissed the back of her

neck. How wooden could a man get? He needed her, though, which was fascinating. They kissed, his lips crushing hers. She felt deep twinges of response, the secret pleasure of the thief. He was trembling, his hands feverishly caressing her back. Then he lifted her off the floor and she felt a wild thrill of helplessness, a powerful urgency to let someone do his will with her. Someone . . . beautiful.

By abandoning herself to him she closed herself off. He carried her, as easily as he might a child, to their rumpled bed. When he put her down she slipped dutifully out of her clothes. "I'll be quick," he said with the assurance of the beloved.

As they swung together in their groaning bed she allowed her mind to drift, and it inevitably drifted to that glowing dream-body. When her imagination was at last possessed by those smooth and exotic images, when she could taste the taste of that dream-skin and smell the dream-being's musty secrets, she experienced a moment of pleasure, rare and stunning. He kissed her afterward, assuming that her wide look of surprise belonged to him.

Tom's heart continued to swell with love as they dressed and went to the kitchen. It seemed so simple and so right. Last night and now this morning had banished all his doubts and angers; he was in a kind of ecstasy. If *she* needed, then *he* would offer. He felt that they belonged to each other. It was incredibly good to think, 'I belong to her.' He watched her pour him coffee, butter some toast for him. He almost hoped that he would have to give everything up for her. The nobility of it fascinated him. An awesome proof of love. This thought led him to the problems he was going to face at the clinic. It was time to discuss the board meeting. Almost past time, as a matter of fact. "It occurs to me," he said, "that you ought to give me something to work with at the meeting. Some kind of definite statement about what you think happened to Methuselah."

"You don't need it. Just show them the tape."

"Give me something — even the raw computer printouts. Show them you're on to something."

“You know what’s available.”

“Sarah, your work is precious. Let’s not allow any chance of failure. None.”

“In other words, you’re getting cold feet. If the board turns you down, if it doesn’t reverse Hutch, you can’t bear the humiliation. You’d have to resign and you’re afraid. I thought you were so sure you’d win.”

“I’m doing this for you,” he said miserably. He couldn’t explain it better than that.

“Finish your toast, we’ve gotta get moving. Who knows, maybe a miracle occurred and the statistics prove something. Best thing to do is get down to the lab and find out.”

The tonelessness in her voice was almost cruel. She was still punishing him for his ambition. The growth of love he had felt apparently meant little to her. She didn’t really understand the situation. Perhaps it was beyond her understanding. Her every gesture, every look and movement, radiated betrayal. The jeopardy that he had accepted in going over Hutch’s head to the board was a matter of indifference to her.

He ran his hand along the table, closed it into a fist. “I should have squeezed Hutch out a long time ago. Before I met you.”

She nodded, barely glancing at him. “You’ve got to be careful, darling.” There was something obviously false in her tone. He was seized with a desire to explain.

“If Hutch wins, I’m out. I don’t see any other alternative.”

“You wouldn’t.” She pecked him on the cheek, smiling too brilliantly. It seemed at least possible that she was not indifferent to his sacrifice at all, but rather so guilty about it that she couldn’t bear to acknowledge it. Perhaps he was fooling himself, but it felt better to believe this than the other, cold thing.

“Let’s get going,” he said. “We’ve got a lot to do.” An image from the past floated into his mind: school play, eighth-grade year. Before them all he had

forgotten his lines. He remembered his silence, and the way the faces of his jealous and resentful audience lit up when it was realized that the faculty's darling was failing, and the roar of delighted laughter when his silence did not end.

Miriam's visit to Sarah Roberts had worked well. A vestige of what Sarah had experienced remained in Miriam's own heart. It had been a strong *touch*. The next phase of the plan was very much more problematic.

She would have to "meet" Sarah, and the only fast way she could do it would be to become a patient at the Sleep Research Clinic. It would be the most dangerous thing she had done in a very long time. For the first time in history human scientists were going to get a chance to study a member of her species. They didn't exist in human scientific literature, only in mythology. What would the scientists do when they tried to take the measure of her mystery?

Most of all, she dreaded captivity.

She was terrified by bars, such as the ones that surrounded Sarah's ape, the one that had *touched* so powerfully as it died.

Miriam did not like the feeling of being menaced by humankind. And the thought of being studied by them was even more disquieting. They might consider her to be without human rights and cage her just like an ape.

The risks were frightening.

But Sarah could solve the problem of transformation, could make it permanent. That made all the risks seem trivial. If Miriam could only have known what was going to happen to John, she would have captured the doctor earlier. There might have been some small chance . . .

At the thought, her mood shifted to gray sorrow. But she refused to live in grief. Her life must be rebuilt. She would comfort John and protect him if she could, but she would not obsess herself with his suffering. Life was full of tragedies. You buried the dead.

The *touch* that had been broadcast through the vast emotional babble of the city by Sarah's experimental ape was like a beacon to Miriam. It told her how very close Sarah had come to inducing transformation, and therefore to understanding it.

Miriam's next move had been carefully planned. As soon as she successfully *touched* Sarah she went home and made an appointment for an interview at the Sleep Research Clinic. Now that Miriam had hidden a part of herself in Sarah's heart the next step was to engage her mind.

A part of Miriam might have enjoyed the danger of all this, just as she might have enjoyed fox hunting with John. There was something exhilarating about jeopardy. Safe air was stale, but dangerous air was silver clear. Love your enemy, her father used to say, for without him you would never taste the flavor of victory.

Yes, the noble sentiment of the past.

Forget the past. Go upstairs, change clothes; you'll be late for your ten o'clock appointment. She had made it of necessity at the last minute. "We'll fit you in, but please expect a delay."

She wore her blue silk Lanvin suit for the occasion. As she dressed she reviewed all she had rehearsed for the sleep clinic interview. She would enter as a patient suffering from night terrors of adulthood. Before branching off into gerontology, Sarah had specialized in this rare disease. Even yet she was the clinic's only expert. The three or four cases they got in a year didn't justify a full-time staff position. Sarah would certainly be called in.

Sarah. Miriam thought of her, huddled in her robe, shaking with passion that she could not possibly have understood. It was going to be most interesting to contend with somebody as intelligent and spirited as Sarah.

Miriam did not scorn human intellectual achievement. She had developed a keen interest in science. She had identified her own animal ancestors. She belonged to mankind and mankind to her, just as the saber-toothed tiger and the buffalo had once belonged to each other.

She put the finishing touches on her outfit. It would do: she looked beautiful, just a bit tired, eyes rather sad.

Eyes rather sad.

Time was passing, time could not be stopped. If only . . . but it was no use thinking about it. John was a dead man. “Dead.” What mockery there was in that word.

The doorbell rang. Miriam looked through the peephole, observed a man in uniform. Her chauffeur, appearing at nine thirty-five as requested. When she had to do any driving in the city she used a limousine. Her own car would be an inconvenience and taxis were too unsafe; she used them only when necessary.

As she walked out the front door, she noted with approval that the car provided was a dark-blue Oldsmobile. It was foolishly risky to use the more pretentious cars; they only attracted unwelcome attention. The driver, who was young, clear-eyed and sober, opened the car door for her. She fastened the seatbelt and settled back, locking her door but leaving her hand near the catch in case it was necessary to exit quickly. Her analysis of automotive design led her to conclude that this make was safer than most, and less prone to explode if hit from the rear. The driver started the engine. She sat well back, relaxed and yet attentive, ready if her luck ran out and there was an accident. Her ride was so pleasant that she found herself envious of those who could afford such transportation full time.

The medical center was swarming with people. Miriam rode to the twelfth floor in a jammed elevator, trying not to inhale their scent. Unfortunately, the waiting room of the Sleep Research Center was also crowded. The smell and feel of so much human flesh was unnerving.

Nevertheless, she waited with the others, thumbing through a well-worn copy of *Book Digest*. Ten became eleven, then eleven-thirty.

“Blaylock,” intoned the receptionist, at last. “Desk three, please.” This was the only facility of its kind in the city. The crowding and impersonality of it indicated that there ought to be more. Miriam was interviewed by a pleasant

young man in shirtsleeves who took her name and asked her to describe her problem.

She knew what the effect would be when she mentioned the intensity of her “nightmares.” He looked at her with renewed interest. Most of their cases must be common insomnia, cured by teaching the patient how to cope with stress.

Medicine knows night terrors of adulthood as one of mankind’s most frightening problems. Miriam could have quoted Sarah Roberts: “These terrors arise from the primordial depths and induce in the sufferer perhaps the most intense fear that a human being can know. In quality and intensity they are to nightmares as a typhoon might be to a spring shower.”

“How often have you been having these . . . troubles, Mrs. Blaylock?” The interviewer’s voice was calm but his eyes regarded her sharply.

“All my life.” How pitiful that every word was true. The vividness of the experiences she had during Sleep were probably even worse than night terrors. But she had long ago learned to endure them. They went with Sleep and therefore must cleanse the soul.

“When was the last one?”

“Last night.” She watched his face flicker at that. This was working well. Mrs. Night Terrors Blaylock was going to become a priority case, she suspected.

Now his voice dropped and he leaned closer to her. “Can you describe it?”

“The ocean was chasing me.” It had just popped into her head, but she thought it a lovely night terror for the spur of the moment. Much nicer than the one she had planned, about hands choking her.

“The ocean?”

“Huge, towering black waves that stretch up forever. Roaring and crashing over me and I’m in the sand, I’m running, I can hear it over my shoulder, it

comes right up the dunes, nothing's going to stop it. You can see a shark cruising in the waves. Everything smells horrible, like it had all gone rotten." Goose-flesh had broken out all over her body as she talked. Her hands were grasping the edge of the table. She was surprised at the intensity of her feeling. It ceased to be an act. Had she ever experienced such a dream? Perhaps it was *behind* the dreams she remembered, perhaps there was something in her, coiled like a snake, spitting out recollections so monstrous that her mind dared not touch them directly.

The worst of it was something she didn't tell the shiny young doctor: she was indeed the woman running from the ocean. But she was also the shark.

5

J OHN WAS RUNNING through the early morning, running like a slowed-down movie past the blooming flowers, the tulip trees with their buds, and the new-sprouted grass of Central Park. His hunger made him feel as if a living thing were moving in his stomach. His eyes bulged, his mouth opened wide as he ran. He must be hideous in his flapping raincoat and dirty blue suit, with the fingernails of a demon and the face of a corpse. People shrank from him, children shouted alarm. He felt like a hermit who had been knocked out of his hiding place by a wrecker's ball.

His heart skipped and thuttered. Pain shot down his shoulder. He staggered. Then the beat started again: food, foodfood, food, FOODFOODFOOD! He coughed, running along the Bridle Path, lurching past Cleopatra's Needle, finally plunging into the shrubbery beside the path.

He could go no farther, his breath was fire, his heartbeat a confused rattle. This place was redolent of hot, strong flesh. Every few minutes another jogger passed. He listened to one, a big man breathing easily. Too strong. Then another — lighter but still not tired enough. His victim would have to be practically exhausted, just at the end of a long hard run. Yesterday little Alice had nearly gotten the better of him. Today he was even weaker. In his extremity he began to recollect an almost forgotten time of his life, which he now saw as the best time — before he met Miriam. He remembered the grassy slope at Hadley where he and Priscilla lay intoxicated with the smell of the heather on windy spring days. The clouds rolled madly down the sky. God, what wonderful times! He was ceasing to love the drama and speed of this age, and to cherish the quieter time before. Even old Hadley was gone now, the ruined house rebuilt and turned into an orphanage by the strange populist state that had followed the Empire.

Without warning, a cough burst out of him. He found himself pitching backward, almost losing consciousness. Above him he saw the sky through a tulip tree. And the clouds in it were the same! The same as that day at Hadley! “Oh, Johnny, my pladies awa’,” Priscilla had cried, “awa’ with the win’!” And there bouncing across the heather went her fluffy plaid skirt. How he had run! Run in the wind and the kind land, run for that plaid with all the might of his young years.

Another cough, not his own. He struggled up, heard it again. Thud-thud on the gravel, thud-thud, thud-thud. Here came a girl who had put on a little extra during the winter, jiggling along in a purple sweat suit, gasping like a tophorse at a coach stop.

He connected with her right side as she jogged past. She let out a surprisingly shrill scream for one so heavy.

A pack of crows took flight, their voices echoing in the sky. The wind tossed the trees and the clouds scudded past. John grabbed her hair and pulled her head back, jammed his scalpel in until he felt the “pop” as it penetrated the pectoral muscle. He fell on her, clasping his hands behind her neck, adhering to her with desperate energy. She staggered and flounced and shrieked for help. Pain flashed through his joints as she struggled, but he had a good hold. He placed his mouth over the wound and sucked with every last whisper of energy. Slowly the life oozed into him. As her movements weakened, his became stronger and more assured. She grew lighter and he expanded in size, filling his slack clothes, gaining pinkness in his cheeks and sharpness in his eyes. Her screaming lowered to a hoarse rumble, then a growl, finally a rasp across a dry and withering tongue, past lips become strips of leather. The skin sank to the bones and the lips cracked away from the teeth. After a moment the girl’s jaw snapped open, her gums contracting. Her hands had become black claws, the flesh tight and splitting on the bones. The eyeballs sank into their sockets, collapsing in on themselves.

John jumped away from her. Stiff and light, she toppled to the ground like a papier-mâché toy. He was bloated and flushed, his eyes ablaze. He pounded his temples in an ecstasy of relief. Snarling with his victory, he snatched the remnant up and threw it high into a tree where it caught and fluttered in the wind.

He gnashed his teeth, he was far from satisfied. Without the Sleep, his body demanded ever more energy. The longer he remained awake the more he needed.

“I’ll never need more than I can get,” he said aloud, testing to see if the softness of youth had returned to his voice.

What a delightful surprise *that* was! He hadn’t sounded like that in days. “O mistress mine,” he sang, listening to the sweet smooth tones, “O mistress mine, where are you roaming? O stay and hear, your true love’s coming!” And then he laughed, rich and deep and full, and ran with a firm step down the path after stronger, better, even more enriching prey.

Behind him shouts were rising, feet thundering past Cleopatra’s Needle. (Miriam always laughed to see that thing here, occupying such a place of honor. She said that the Egyptians had considered it the worst obelisk in Heliopolis.) Young men were bearing down on him. On the roadway to his right a scooter cop stopped and got off his machine, looking with a frown in the direction of the shouts. He began to trot up a low hill to the scene of the crime. John moved toward him, down the same hill.

With the strength he had gained it was just possible to take the strapping young policeman. As they were passing each other he slammed his fist into the side of the man’s head, sending him reeling, his cigarette flying from his mouth and his cap sailing into a bed of begonias. He made quick work of the struggling, cursing man. In another twenty seconds he was fitting the remnant back onto the scooter. The devil take caution, let them figure this one out. He could see the headlines: COP TURNS TO MUMMY; RADIUM DIAL WATCH TO BLAME?

Now he felt really wonderful. He might as well be flying above the roadway, above the lawns, above the trees — flying and free.

Others only thought they were alive. They never knew *this*! His heart was beating perfectly. If he looked at a building he could hear the sounds behind the windows. People talking, TVs going, vacuum cleaners roaring. And he could hear the clouds like a great song, not meant for the ears of man.

Sirens were rising to the north and the south. A patrol car came blazing up the roadway.

John spent the rest of the morning in the Metropolitan Museum, lingering for hours in the costume exhibit, looking at the bustled dresses and frock coats, remembering his own time, so utterly lost and far away.

It was a relief when the interview was completed. Miriam was beginning to feel a need for Sleep. She returned to the house in her rented limousine. A test — called a polysomnogram — was scheduled for tonight. And Sarah Roberts would surely be there. *Must* be there. Night terrors indeed. If they knew the real depths of fear they would not be able to live. Mankind was in the bland middle of the emotional spectrum. Miriam lived at the extremes.

She was let out of the car. “I’ll need you again at six-thirty,” she said as she went up the front steps. The Sleep was coming upon her, right on schedule. She heard a faint tinkling from inside the house. The telephone. She fumbled with her keys and rushed in. A bad moment to take a call. Her time awake was now limited.

“Miriam?”

“Yes. Who is this?”

“Bob.”

For a moment she was blank. Then it came back. They hadn’t seen the Cavenders for months. “Oh, hi! It’s been a long time. I hardly recognized you.”

“Miriam, we’ve lost Alice.”

She doubled up as if she had been hit in the stomach. Then she straightened and took a deep breath. “How long?”

“Since yesterday when she left for your place.”

“She never came here, so far as I know.”

“Amy saw her go in.”

“She came in here?” Miriam’s mind turned to John, to the — no. No matter what state he was in, he would never do that.

“She usually comes home for lunch after she sees you. Yesterday she didn’t.”

A trembling shock coursed through her. “She’s not here.”

Not in the hallway, not in the music room. Oh, don’t let it be, not in the furnace.

Don’t hurt me this much, John, please!

“I know that. I just wanted you to be on the alert.” He paused. There were a series of stifled grunts, the sobs of a man who doesn’t know how to cry. “On the alert,” he said again. “I’ll call you with any news.” The line clicked, the cutting of the wire of life. The phone slipped from Miriam’s hand, banged on the oak floor. She closed her eyes. Snarling pain gripped her temples. Ice-cold air seemed to enclose her. She craned her neck like a woman seeking to rise from the bottom of the sea.

She ran her hands along the fabric of her suit, bowed her head. When her clock tolled one, she looked, startled, at its ancient face.

Impulses raced through her mind: kill John, kill herself. She rejected them both as beneath her. He was helpless in his actions, driven by forces beyond his control. And she had no intention of voluntarily giving up life.

Bit by bit she regained her composure. There came into her heart a new feeling toward John. His suffering mattered less to her, his potential for destruction more.

How dare he take Alice. She belonged to Miriam, not to him. Rage blazed up in her. It was lucky for him that he was not home. At this moment she would have faced knives, guns, tearing claws to get at him.

Yet he had given her all of himself that he could give. For love of her he was paying an exorbitant price. He was losing much more than life, facing an end

more terrible than even the worst death. She could not let herself hate the damnable creature.

She was alone again.

In all the world there was not one friendly soul, not one being with whom she could share anything.

She ran into the library, the place where she habitually did her planning and thinking. "ALICE!" With a moan she yanked the heavy drapes closed and sank into her desk chair. The only sound in the room was the steady tinkle of the old Roman water clock.

Her whole future had been planted in Alice. The possibility of losing the girl had simply never occurred to her. Oh, what plans she had made!

She had always loved her life with joyous intensity. Over the years she had ruthlessly blotted out every memory of her family, had shaken off all the tragedies, and pressed ahead. She had seen humanity rising out of the muck, had learned to respect it as the rest of her species never could, had come to anticipate the future with zest, especially now that overtones of barbarism were re-entering human culture.

In one mad instant John had taken the future away.

Tears she would not allow, even for an extinguished love. She and Alice were made to be together. And now instead there was this pit. A black pit. The room around her was cold. The paneling, grown rich with years, frowned ominously, making the dark even blacker.

She opened the curtains. It was such a bright day, the storms of dawn blown on their way. Her petunias were thriving, choking the window box with at least a hundred blossoms.

She found that she could not bear to look at the street, it could not seem more empty. She shook herself — the Sleep demanded her.

She didn't want it now, not after this. It doomed her to terrible dreams, she

was sure of it. How could she bear this! She groaned and ran out of the room. Her body was slowing down, her eyes growing heavy. Where could she go? Not the attic, not enough time to get all the way to the top of the house.

The floor waved beneath her feet. She couldn't Sleep here! But it was intractable, nothing would stop her. In moments she wouldn't be able to lift her arms. She thought of the basement. It might still be possible to make it down.

With long, shaking steps she went to the door. There was a place, uncomfortable but safe, that John had hopefully forgotten that led to the secret tunnel they had built to the East River. Years ago it had been destroyed by the FDR Drive but the basement entrance and the section under the garden still remained. She hoped she could find the right stone in the basement floor.

By the time she got there the world around her had receded as if to the end of a long corridor. She knew that she was still moving but she was absolutely out of contact with her body. Her hands felt the slate floor of the basement, pushing for the slight looseness that would tell her she had found the place.

Looseness — somewhere . . . she felt something hard and cold hit her. Hard and cold and wet . . . she had fallen to the floor. Sleep came, and dream . . .

The lamp was bobbing, flashing in her eyes with the roll of the ship. As it creaked, water spurted in between the planks. "Father?" The lamp shook wildly and then fell to the floor, plunging the little cabin into green half-darkness. What was happening? When she had gone to bed the sky had been clear, the wind just strong enough to snap the sail.

What was that horrible shrieking?

She got up and wrapped a cloak around her silk tunic. "Fa-a-ther!" The ship began shaking from side to side as if it were being worried by a sea monster. Miriam staggered to the cabin door, pushed it open.

Wake up! You're in danger!

The door . . . was so hard, so hard — but she pushed it open and struggled out

into the raging green hell of the storm.

The voice of the wind mixed with the deep thunder of the waves. Perhaps twenty feet overhead great clouds seethed. There was no mast, no sail, only a deck strewn with tangles of rigging and bits of red sailcloth. Sailors, naked, lashed together, staggered here and there on what task she did not know. “FAAATHER!”

Powerful arms grabbed her from behind. He took her to his bosom, pressed his mouth against her ear. “This ship is doomed,” he said, “we’ve got to save ourselves, my daughter.”

“The others —”

“The other ships made landfall in Crete. A great disaster has occurred. I did not foresee it. An island has exploded. I think it must have been Thera. You must go to Rome now, leave the east alone. Greece will be in ruins —”

“Father, please help me, save me!” She clung to him with her legs and arms and sobbed into the wrenching wind.

His head turned. “It’s coming,” he said. She felt it rather than heard it, a deep pulsing throb like the heart of a giant. At first there was nothing to see in the black mist, then, far up in the sky, a white line appeared. Her father’s arm clutched her until she could hardly breathe. His face terrified her, it was wretched with anger, his lips twisted into a grimace, his eyes glaring horribly.

“Father, is that a *wave*?”

He only clutched her more tightly.

The ship began to rise, its prow lifting higher and higher. There commenced a great fusillade of explosions as the hemp lashings that held it together snapped and the boards sprung straight. The hiss of water rose from the hold, and with it the hideous screaming of the oar-slaves. Sailors threw themselves to the deck. Behind them, on the low forecastle, the captain was staggering about trying to organize another sacrifice to Nereus, god of storms.

The ship rose higher. It felt as if it had taken wing. Behind them the surface of the sea shook and boiled. Before them the great black leviathan bore on.

“We must jump! We’ll have to swim.”

He dragged her to the side. She had swum only in the Nile, never in an ocean. And this — it would swallow them!

Her father ignored her frantic protests.

John will come! Wake up!

The dream held her as surely as if she were bound to a rack.

The bubbling, inky water closed over their heads. Even beneath it there were noises, a deep boo-o-om bo-o-om. Was there really a sea god down there bellowing his anger?

Her head popped to the surface. She felt her father’s arms come around her again. Not ten feet away the ship slowly upended and fell backward with a tremendous explosion of foam. It wallowed, its black bottom exposed briefly to the air, and was gone.

They were swimming on the side of an enormous wall of water. And they were being swept higher. The white line at the top had grown to a maelstrom of roaring breakers.

They came rapidly closer. In them she could see fish and branches of trees and bits of wood. Her legs drove like pistons but the current grabbed at her, pulling her down and down. Her head was in a vise, her hands grasping water. She was ripped from her father’s arms. It got cold and dark. Great creatures were moving in the deep, their cold flesh sliding against her. Her arms and legs thrashed but still the powerful flow dragged her down. She was being crushed, like the death of stones inflicted on her kind by the Phoenicians.

Something had grabbed her hair. It yanked her so hard she saw flashes. The current lost its hold on her. Even though she knew she was rising — it was

getting warmer and lighter — her mouth was going to open in a moment and she was going to breathe water. She would die.

She clamped her jaws shut, finally clapped her hands over her mouth and nose. Perhaps the sea-thing that was dragging her upward would break the surface.

And then she was tumbling in the white water, gasping gulps of wet air, swimming like a demon. She heard her father's own ragged breath in her ear.

He was the thing that had saved her.

Then she was through the breakers. Before her was a limitless plain of water, rolling gently. She understood that she was now on the back of the enormous wave that had destroyed the ship. On the horizon there stood a vast black pillar of cloud full of red cracks. Enormous tendrils of lightning coursed ceaselessly through it. It grew steadily, a great dark finger poking into the sky.

“Father,” she gasped, trying to point.

She swam in a circle.

The empty waters did not look back.

“Father! Father!”

Please, gods, please, we need him. We have a whole family! Please, gods, we cannot survive without him.

You cannot kill him!

She pounded with her legs and slapped the water with her hands and spun around and around. She screamed for him.

A shadow rolled in a low wave not far away. She dove after the snatch of blue, beside herself with terror and grief.

Then she saw it, the vision that would never leave her again: his face, mouth

distended, eyes bulging, disappearing into the abyss.

“Please! Ple-e-ase!”

A wind like a Titan’s breath burst from heaven and the waves came on.

The salt water made her throw up again and again. Her father, her beautiful father — the family’s wisdom and strength — was dying. She dove beneath the waves seeking him as he had sought her, swam deeper and deeper until she felt that ice-cold current — into which *he* had plunged without regard for his own life, to save his daughter.

She was the oldest, the others needed her now. Alone in Crete, their Akkadian barely passable, they would certainly be destroyed. Her life was precious. She must choose to preserve it. Her father would certainly have demanded it. As hard as it was she closed her mind to him.

She turned toward the dim gray light of the surface and swam. Once there she began to plan her own salvation. The very morning they left she had taken food and Sleep, so she knew that she could go on for at least three or four days.

She opened her eyes in a chilly dungeon smelling of damp stone. Her mouth tasted awful, she had vomited in her Sleep.

The dream had left her sullen with grief, remembering her father’s face in the waves. “I could have saved him,” she said into the darkness.

“But it’s too late now, isn’t it?” screeched an answering voice.

John!

Something gleamed before her eyes, then she felt the cool pressure of a blade against her throat.

“I’ve been waiting for you, my dear. I wanted you to be awake for this.”

Tom glanced at the admission recommendation on top of the pile. Dr.

Edwards had quite properly marked it for special handling. Procedure required Tom to initial any priority admissions. The clinic had a waiting list three months long.

He called Sarah. “How would you like a case? There’s a lady with night terrors of adulthood waiting for admission.”

“Are you nuts?” she roared into the phone.

“Just do an evaluation and workup. It’ll take a couple of hours. Think how it’ll look with the board. Brilliant researcher, and so dedicated she keeps her finger in the clinical pie as well. That’s heroine stuff.”

“Oh for God’s sake!”

“If you will be true to this your oath, may prosperity and good repute —”

“Hippocrates doesn’t enter into this. Night terrors, you say?”

“That’s what I like about you. You’re so damn curious. I like that in a scientist.”

There was a moment’s silence. “When’s she due to start?”

“Seven-thirty tonight. She’s on priority.”

“I should hope so.”

They rang off. Tom had almost laughed aloud. Sarah was so predictable. Her willingness to pitch in tonight was typical. Complaining and protesting all the way, she went through life doing the work of three people. It would be good for her to have contact with a patient again — a real, hurting human being. She needed the perspective.

He snorted at that thought. How the hell did he know what Sarah needed? She was so complex and mercurial, with a dark depth to match every bright height. All he could really do was offer her what he thought might be appropriate. But to assume that he could ever really know her heart, even as her lover, would be very foolish.

It took him another hour to go through all the admission recommendations, initialing some, sending others back for follow-up evaluations, noting a few of special interest for routing to Hutch. But not the Blaylock case, not that one. He had a strong feeling that it would be useful to Sarah. In any case, it was hers by rights. She had written brilliantly on night terrors of adulthood and had achieved a couple of cures that lasted beyond the imposition of sedatives and tranquilizers. The case belonged to her. There was no sense in letting Hutch in on it, he would just assign it to somebody else to prevent her getting points with the board.

When Sarah appeared at seven her mood had lifted considerably. She came around his desk and kissed him on the forehead. "Methuselah's beta-prodorphin levels were dropping like crazy at the end," she said in a voice rich with excitement. "We are on our way."

He gave her a hard kiss. It felt good to do it, all though his body. "You're wonderful," he said.

"I might have that breakthrough you've been looking for," she said, obviously not even aware of the kiss. "I think we just might be able to establish a viable level of control over beta-prodorphin production. We won't be able to stop the aging process, but it'll give us the ability to slow it down, or even turn it back."

He looked at her, right into the directness of her eyes. He was absolutely stunned. "What are you saying?"

"I'm on the threshold. I'm going to get the key." She tossed her head, went on. "It isn't a matter of a drug at all. We can achieve our results by controlling the depth of sleep and the temperature of the sleeping body. Just with what we know now we could probably add ten or fifteen percent to the life-span of the average individual. With no pharmacologic side effects."

"My God."

"The data is falling together, I guarantee it. You were worried about the board. Don't be. You'll win in a walk."

Tom was too relieved to be elated. He took her cheeks in his hands and kissed her again. This time she responded, making a pleased sound in her throat, drawing a leg up behind his, slipping her arms around him. Behind it all was this simple love, the cherishing of each other's dreams. She was so close!

He remembered the case he had imposed on her. "I really am sorry about this patient," he said. "If I had known what was going on I never —" She touched his lips, smiling.

"The patient needs me. I'm the best choice in a case of night terrors." It was his turn to smile. At least she wasn't holding it against him as she had so many other things recently, in that stubborn way he found so hard to accept.

Wordlessly, he handed her the computer printout on the night terrors victim.

* * *

Miriam's arm flashed up with stunning speed and knocked the cleaver from John's hand. Instantly, he realized what a mistake it had been to wait for her to wake up. He had stood here, stupidly exulting as she Slept, her body glowing softly in her silk suit. The cleaver had felt good in his hand, the blade was honed to slice deep with the lightest stroke. He could almost hear it singing through the air, almost feel the soft *chuck* of it connecting with her neck, almost see the awful awareness flashing and then fading in her eyes.

The hand closed around his wrist like a manacle. He tried to pull away, to pry back the fingers. Miriam rose to her feet, snatched his other arm and held them both out before him. He twisted away but she raised him off the floor. He could see her face inches away from his, her teeth gleaming, her eyes darting like a crow's eyes.

He threw his head back and pushed against her belly with his feet. It was useless, she might as well be a stone statue. His heart bumped in his chest and pain radiated down his arms. "You're killing me!"

Then she said something that astonished him, especially after what he had

seen in the attic. He was certain he had heard the words correctly: “I love you.” She asked his forgiveness and hissed out a prayer. Whenever she was about to enter danger, she called on the gods of her species.

She dragged him to a far corner of the cellar. There came a grating sound: she had lifted with one hand a slate block right out of the floor.

He was still trying to understand what she was doing when he was tossed like a rag into the space beneath the block. He fell hard, landing in six inches of freezing water. With a crash that made his ears ring the slate block was dropped into place above him.

Absolute dark. Dripping water.

John now felt a sweeping wave of despair. He wasn't going to be escaping from this place. She had buried him alive!

He screamed, he hammered on the slate, he cried out her name again and again. His hands clawed the cool stones until his fingers tore. Death was going to catch him here, jammed into a space barely as large as a coffin!

“Please!”

Dripping water.

Panic. Images of home. Clear sky. Spring meadows. Off to westward, the huntsman's horn.

Hands clutching him, tearing at him, pressing his face into the muddy, stinking water. Crushing, agonizing weight. Stones. Stones and utter helplessness.

Consciousness left him. But it was not replaced by oblivion. Instead, he was back in the attic, where he had been earlier, searching for Miriam.

The terror of what he had seen there now exploded out of his unconscious into a madness of clutching, leathery fingers and ivory nails, and the foetor of dead breath. The sound that issued from him, reedy and mad, did not bring him back to consciousness.

He remained still, knees jammed against mouth, nose touching the surface of the water, back screaming with the pressure of the stones, mind dancing through the peering dark of hell.

Sarah met Mrs. Blaylock in the receiving lobby. Until recently, it had been a dreary institutional waiting room with brown walls and plastic chairs. But Tom had insisted that it be redecorated to offer the patients the kind of supportive atmosphere they needed. Now it looked at least livable with wallpaper of pastel green, easy chairs, even a big couch.

Sarah picked Miriam Blaylock out instantly. She was easily six feet tall, blond, with eyes so gray they looked white. There was a sort of fierce inquisitiveness about her face, something that made you want to look away. She sat on one of the more rigid chairs. The other patients being admitted tonight stood in a little knot near the door, like nervous mice.

“Mrs. Blaylock,” Sarah said in a loud voice.

The woman fixed her with that stare and moved toward her. Their eyes met, and Sarah found herself in the presence of something much more profound than physical beauty, and yet the sheer magnificence of the woman’s body and the serenity of her expression were remarkable. There was also a sort of wary grace about her, a way of moving that wasn’t quite right, an atmosphere of absolute — and therefore strange — self-assurance.

“I’m Doctor Roberts,” Sarah said, hoping that her expression hadn’t betrayed her surprise. “I’m going to be managing your case.”

Now Miriam Blaylock smiled. Sarah almost laughed, the fierceness of it seemed so misplaced. It was not the smile of a stranger at all, but something else, almost of triumph. Sarah was tempted to make a professional judgment about such inappropriate behavior, but she felt she needed more data. Carefully, she infused professional neutrality into her voice. “First, we’ll go on a short tour of the facility and I’ll explain our procedures. Follow me, please.” She led her into the observation room. For companionship’s sake, Tom intended to stay and operate the equipment. He slumped in a chair

before one of the computer consoles. “This is Doctor Haver,” Sarah said.

Tom turned, his face registering obvious surprise when he first saw Mrs. Blaylock. “Hello,” he said. Sarah found herself obscurely annoyed at him. He didn’t have to look so appreciative.

“Doctor Haver will explain our monitoring system.”

“Will it hurt?”

“Hurt?” Sarah asked.

“Any part of it.”

Her voice seemed to fill the room with its rich, sultry timbre. Yet there was an uncanny intonation, almost childlike. “No, Mrs. Blaylock, it won’t,” Tom said. “You’ll find that nothing we do will be in the least uncomfortable. The facility is designed to insure you a good night’s sleep.” Tom cleared his throat, whipped his fingers through his hair. “This system will read and analyze the electrical impulses that your brain makes when you sleep. It’s called Omnex and it’s the most advanced computer system of its kind in the world. As your sleep progresses to deeper and deeper stages, we’ll be watching and we’ll know not only where you stand but how your sleep compares to the various models we’ve developed here at Riverside.”

“He’s telling you it’s very advanced and wonderful,” Sarah said through a smile.

“If the computer analyzes the polysomnogram, what do you two do?”

Quite a well-informed question coming from a patient. Sarah was tempted to answer with the truth — they sat around and drank coffee. “We watch the graphs and try to form an overall picture of your personal sleeping pattern. And of course we watch for signs of your problem.”

“I’m not afraid to refer to it, Doctor Roberts. It’s called night terrors. Will you wake me up when they come?”

There was a plaintive note in her voice now that made Sarah want to comfort

her. "I can't promise you that, but we'll be here if you do awaken. Let's go down to the examining room, then you can use the patient's living room for the evening or go to your cubicle, whichever you prefer."

A glance inside the examining room told Sarah that it was properly prepared for the job she had to do. "Please take off your blouse Mrs. Blaylock. This will take only a few minutes." Sarah put on her stethoscope. It was to be a cursory examination, over in a few minutes, intended to uncover only the most gross disease process.

Sarah was astonished to find Mrs. Blaylock naked when she turned around. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't make myself clear. I just wanted you to take off your blouse."

Miriam Blaylock looked directly into her eyes. The moment was filled with tension. Mrs. Blaylock opened her mouth, seemed about to speak. The room was incredibly claustrophobic.

Before she realized she would do so, Sarah had herself spoken. "What do you want?"

"Want?" Miriam Blaylock parted her lips. "To be cured, Doctor." There was something mean, almost a sneer, in her tone.

Sarah was embarrassed. "Just sit up on this table." She gestured toward the examining table. Miriam slipped onto it, leaning back against her hands. Her legs were spread wide. It would have been obscene if the woman hadn't seemed so utterly oblivious.

As Sarah prepared her test tubes for the blood work, she realized that she could actually smell the faint musky scent of the woman's vagina. She turned around, syringe in hand. Miriam made a sound in her throat and moved one of her legs. The whisper of flesh against the examining table sheet was disturbing. "I'm going to be taking some blood, Mrs. Blaylock," Sarah said in what she hoped was a thoroughly professional tone. Miriam extended her right arm.

The arm was beautifully shaped, the hand delicate and yet strong. A frightful

and sensual image flickered in Sarah's mind, so disturbing that she shook her head to suppress it.

Something made her own flesh crawl when she began stroking Miriam's skin. "I'm trying to raise a vein," she said. "Make a fist, please." She inserted the needle. Miriam made another noise, one that was familiar to Sarah. It was her own little chortle, the one she always made when she was penetrated. To hear it under these circumstances, in the throat of another woman, was faintly revolting. Sarah had to concentrate every ounce of attention on what she was doing just to avoid tearing a hole in the woman's arm. Mrs. Blaylock's hand lay palm up in hers. Perspiration blurred Sarah's vision as the syringe filled. She longed to be free of Mrs. Blaylock's touch. It was undeniably pleasurable and the very delight of it was what was so awful. She looked down at the palm, noticing its bizarre preponderance of vertical lines.

At last the syringe was filled and Sarah could withdraw it. "Don't drop it," Mrs. Blaylock said.

Her tone was so light, so kind, but so chilling. With as much calmness as she could muster, Sarah set about filling six test tubes with the woman's blood.

"I've got to examine you," she said in what seemed a silly little voice. "Please lie on the table." She fingered her stethoscope.

Mrs. Blaylock lay with her legs bent at the knee, hands folded across her abdomen. Her nipples were erect.

Sarah was transfixed, she had never seen such supple perfection. The woman's flesh was as fair as gold. She turned her face to Sarah and with the gentlest, the sweetest of smiles, murmured that she was ready.

Sarah applied the stethoscope to the center of the chest. "Breathe deeply, please." The lungs sounded as clear as a child's. "You don't smoke?"

"No."

"Good for you."

She continued the stethoscopic exam, exploring the heart sounds from the front, then asking Mrs. Blaylock to turn over and completing the procedure for both heart and lung on the back. As she worked she regained some of her composure. She was a doctor after all, and this was a patient. Women held no sexual attraction for her. “Turn back over, please.” She placed her hands around the crown of the woman’s left breast and gently felt downward to the base. “Any pain or discharge from your nipples at any time in the past three months?”

Mrs. Blaylock’s tongue glistened behind her teeth. Sarah saw Miriam’s hands come up, felt them cradle her face. She did not move, more from amazement than anything else. Her stunned mind thought only that she had never seen such pale eyes before. The hands guided her head downward and her lips touched the nipple.

The shock of pleasure was so great that she nearly collapsed across Mrs. Blaylock’s chest. Something within her, which she had been utterly unaware of, awakened in joy and gratitude. Her mind screamed at her — Doctor, Doctor, DOCTOR! For the love of God, this is not *you*!

But she had kissed the breast, she could taste its salt-sweetness, remember the tickle of the nipple against her lips. Mrs. Blaylock’s fingers brushed against her cheek.

Sarah’s heart sank. This was awful. Mrs. Blaylock lay almost indifferently on the examining table. “You’d better dry your face,” she said. “You’re sweating.” And she gave her a mischievous look.

As Sarah splashed water on her face and toweled herself dry, Mrs. Blaylock dressed. “Are breast exams part of the procedure?”

Sarah was startled. Until this moment the thought hadn’t even crossed her mind. Of course they weren’t part of the procedure. It was strictly blood, lungs and heart. Her cheeks grew hot, she could sense the woman staring at her back.

“I thought not,” Mrs. Blaylock said. Sarah hadn’t needed to speak, her silence was sufficiently eloquent. Mrs. Blaylock’s hands touched her shoulders,

turned her around. She pulled Sarah to her and hugged her closely. Sarah had never felt quite this way before. The power in Mrs. Blaylock's arms sent shuddering waves through her whole body. She was unable to move, she lay like a rag in them. The woman was strong, she easily lifted Sarah off the floor, then lowered her until she rode her knee. Intense little shivers coursed through her as Miriam moved her back and forth. "Open your eyes," she said.

Sarah was ashamed, she could not look at Mrs. Blaylock. "We have to stop," the woman said, "you'll get my dress wet." She slid Sarah down her leg a couple of inches, until her feet reached the floor.

Her heart was soaring, yet her mind was filled with shame.

"You've got to show me where I'm supposed to go, Doctor Roberts."

If only there had been some scorn in that voice. But it was neutral and pleasant. There wasn't a whisper of response to the emotional explosion that had occurred in Sarah.

"You're going to five B," Tom called from down the hall as they appeared in the corridor. "New room assignment."

"Now I'm beginning to feel like this is a hotel," Mrs. Blaylock laughed. When they reached the cubicle she was amused again. "Talk about small! It's more like a Pullman berth."

"You can spend the evening in the patients' lounge," Tom said.

Sarah was utterly miserable.

6

MIRIAM SAT in the grimly cheerful patients' lounge with the other patients. She faced the television screen but her thoughts were elsewhere. The visitation had changed drastically in significance since Alice's death.

She felt so wronged, so betrayed. Not since she had crawled exhausted up a beach in Ilium had she been this lost in the world. Even after her father's death, wandering in strange lands, she had reconstructed her life. She intended to do it again. The little doctor was her new object. Before, Sarah Roberts would have been used and discarded. Now she would be kept.

In a way it was good; it would have been a pity to destroy such a person. Sarah was bright, full of kindness, and possessed of the rare avidity for life that was so basic to the development of hunger.

Miriam would think more on this during the next few days and weeks, but she was resolved to transform Sarah. If the choice had imperfections, they would have to be faced later. At least Sarah's motive to solve the problem of transformation could not be better. Her own life would be at stake.

A sound behind her made her start. Miriam felt like an animal in an open cage in this place, waiting to hear the clang of the shutting bars. By revealing herself to them she would certainly draw Sarah's total and absolute interest — but it was a dangerous technique. She could imagine herself strapped to some table, the victim of rampant scientific curiosity and the fact that human laws would not protect her once they discovered that she was not one of them. Sarah's was a ruthlessly predatory personality. She, the one who had so indifferently destroyed Methuselah and no doubt dozens of other primates, would capture Miriam. Intelligence might or might not convey rights in the

mind of such a person. If their curiosity was intense enough, their ambition sufficiently excited, Miriam had no doubt that Sarah and her colleagues would not hesitate to commit her, or simply confine her as an experimental animal “for the good of humanity and the furtherance of science.”

The thought that she might be confined, unable to serve her hunger, was terrifying. She had seen up close what extremes of suffering that involved. Such anguish lived in her own attic, stirring restlessly in the boxes.

The more she considered Sarah, the more certain she became that she had a companion — or a jailer. The trick would be to excite hunger in Sarah before she could fully understand what was happening to her. Hunger would ride like the red moon over her psychic landscape. Sarah would be ripe then for whatever harvest might suit Miriam’s needs.

It would be a matter of exploiting Sarah’s need for love. Each age and each human being betrayed itself with a characteristic falseness. The Romans had their decadence, the Middle Ages its religion, the Victorian Era its morality. This age, so full of equivocation and guilt, was much more complex than the others. It was the age of the lie. Its nations were built on lies, and so were the hearts of its people. Miriam could fill the hollow that a lie leaves in a human being. She could fill the hollow in Sarah.

She remembered the trembling shoulders, the humid touch of her lips on her breast . . . she breathed deeply, closed her eyes, tried to *touch* Sarah’s heart.

There was an impression of an empty forest. Here was Sarah, desperately lonely, rushing into the details of her outer life to avoid the secret emptiness within.

Miriam could bring Sarah the gift she most craved: the opportunity to fill that void, absent as it was of real purpose, bounded by the terror of a pointless death. The forest could be peopled with meaning and love and direction. Miriam sat, her eyes narrowed, looking inward. Sarah had despaired of ever really being loved. She wanted Tom, enjoyed him sexually, but the old hollowness asserted itself, the reality once again emerging. Miriam could work in the forest of Sarah’s emotions. She knew well her role in this age: the bringer of truth.

Tom scraped his mug as he stirred his coffee. To Sarah the small sound was like screeching chalk. The horrible, unbelievable pleasure of the thing that had happened in the examining room made her want to retreat from any sort of intimacy. Tom turned toward her, kissed her cheek. To escape she shuffled the Blaylock computer printout. “Let’s check out the cubical again.” She couldn’t endure kissing him right now, facing his love of her.

“You enjoy that? We’ve already done it twice.”

“So let’s do it again. I don’t want any problems. I can’t afford to spend another night up here.”

“You were invited, Sarah, not commanded.”

“I had to come. The woman’s got night terrors.”

“You aren’t the only doctor who can treat night terrors.”

“I’m the only one —” She broke off. She had been about to say, the only one who can treat *her*. But why? What was so special about her? What made Sarah react to her like a confused adolescent? She jabbed the checklist code into the computer console. Instantly, the screen printed a list of functions: electroencephalogram, electrocardiogram, galvanic skin response, electro-oculogram, respiration monitor. Each was confirmed functional. Next, she opened up the intercom and turned on the TV monitor.

“It’s all perfect,” Tom said, “just like it was ten minutes ago.” There was an edge of humor in his voice, as if he was amused by what he assumed was her oversolicitousness. He laid his big hand on hers, his familiar gesture. She looked down at it, felt its weight. It might as well be the hand of a statue. Earlier Sarah had wanted him here tonight to keep her company. Now she wished that she had let one of the regular console operators do the job.

“I really want to get this over with,” she said.

“I hope she has a night terror, then. For your sake.”

“Tom, will you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Please don’t touch me.”

He snapped his hand away, glaring needles of hurt anger. “OK, what did I do?”

Instantly she felt a wave of regret. Why do that, why be nasty to him? The devil of it was, she felt under a compulsion to do it. The thought of Miriam Blaylock burned in her mind. She told herself that what had happened between them was a sort of accident. She was under pressure; she was exhausted. And yet if she had observed such behavior in another she would have considered it an intolerable professional lapse. She tried to be as hard on herself, but explanations kept demanding attention. She hated herself for it, perfectly well aware of what she was doing. “Honey? What did I do?” He was pressing for an answer, his face full of wounded decency.

She clung to him, to the faint smell of Old Spice on the stubbly face, to the scratched-up glasses nobody could possibly see through, and most of all to the patent honesty of his attempt at love, his flawed attempt.

He hugged back, no doubt not understanding at all what was happening, but willing to accept whatever part in it she might choose for him. Her own disdain for him, her angry rejection of the way the various parts of him used one another with ugly facility, now seemed extremely ungenerous. The man was trying to love. He wasn’t good at it, never would be. He was not free enough for it; the goodness of his heart was corrupted by his overweening ambition. So be it. He was no girlish dream, though, he was real. If you kicked him he hurt. If you felt sorry for him he was diminished. If you loved him something might — or might not — come of it.

“Ten-thirty and I’m tired,” she said at last. She wanted to close the curtain, go on to another act. The situation obliged her: a chime rang in the patients’ lounge. Time for the sleepless to seek their rest. People began filing past the open door of control room three. The other staff members followed them, intent on their charges. “I’d better go tape her up,” Sarah said. “I’ll be right back.” She glanced away from him as she left, unwilling to meet the eyes that sought hers.

Miriam Blaylock lay in her cubicle in a magnificent and wildly inappropriate silk dressing gown. It was pink and white, embroidered with the flowers of some past and distant place. In this austere little room it looked like a museum piece. So did Miriam Blaylock, for that matter. Her face had the closed, secret look you see in old photographs. It was a face from another time, when people hid out of social necessity all that was in their hearts.

“Do I get undressed for you again?” There was just the edge of a smirk in her tone.

“That won’t be necessary, Mrs. Blaylock.”

She sat up in the bed, her eyes wide. Incongruously, Sarah recalled the black Statue of Isis in the Egyptian Section of the Met. “You needn’t sound like ice,” Mrs. Blaylock said. Sarah felt herself flush. The professional distance of her tone had been used by Miriam to do exactly what Sarah didn’t want, to create intimacy. She was suddenly aware of the smell in the room, heavy and sharp but with an underlying vulgar sweetness.

“I’m going to apply a group of connectors to your forehead, the sides of your face and around your heart. They don’t hurt and they won’t give you an electric shock.” She used the litany remembered from her clinical days, even took a certain pleasure in it. To begin she applied conductive gel for the facial group and then taped down the electrodes one by one. “I’ll have to ask you to open your clothes.” Miriam removed her robe.

“The nightgown goes over my head.”

“Raise it, please.”

Mrs. Blaylock laughed, touched Sarah’s wrist. “You really mustn’t be so afraid, dear. It was just an accident. We don’t ever need to think of it again.” Her eyes twinkled. “It doesn’t mean a thing.”

Sarah was absurdly, ridiculously grateful, but she controlled the hot embarrassment. “Let me apply these connectors, and then you can try to get to sleep.”

Mrs. Blaylock took off the nightgown. The electrodes went on quickly. Sarah told herself that this was just another female body, no different from all the others she had seen and touched in her career. As soon as she was finished she turned to leave. Mrs. Blaylock's hand came up, took her wrist. Sarah stopped, did not move.

“Wait.” It was a command, beyond resistance, delivered as softly as a plea. Sarah turned and stood before her. Despite the forest of electrodes and her nakedness Mrs. Blaylock seemed no less imperial. “Your generation has no respect for what is sacred.” Sarah glanced at her. Whose generation? Miriam Blaylock was easily five years younger than Sarah herself. “Love matters, Doctor. It cannot be imprisoned.”

“Of course not.”

Very slowly, with the exaggerated humility of a bad actress, Mrs. Blaylock inclined her head. It should have been laughable, the set piece of some dreary melodrama, but instead it moved Sarah deeply, making her feel brutal and indifferent to the delicacy of the human heart.

What gave this woman the right to make her feel so awful about herself!

Sarah snatched her hands away and went back to the control room. The moment she entered it she realized how very alien Miriam Blaylock really was. This seemed such a welcoming, familiar place, cozy with a purpose she appreciated. There had been something in that cubicle, some indefinable thing, that reminded her in an odd way of the evil in Methuselah's cage. As in the cage, there was a dirty scent in the cubicle, but sweet rather than sour — and the raw seductiveness beneath the cloak, almost of majesty, as wild as Methuselah's rage . . . A demon — if such a thing existed — would, like Miriam, be too beautiful. Methuselah had been another manifestation of a demon's evil: naked and real, screaming hate even as he died. But Sarah didn't believe in evil. Rather she believed in the shadowed inner world of man, where to lose is to win and to win is to fail to see the truth. “She'll have a night terror, all right,” Sarah said. She was absolutely certain of it. No one like Miriam Blaylock could pass a night without one.

Tom was amazed at what he had seen on the monitor. There was something between Sarah and Miriam. His own reaction to Miriam Blaylock was now established: she was not the kind of patient he liked to treat. And he wished he hadn't gotten Sarah involved. She didn't need the kind of psychological warfare that the Miriams of the world indulged in. "That's a rich little bitch in there. I don't like her."

Sarah nodded. Tom could see how upset and distraught she was. She had been ever since she had first seen Mrs. Blaylock. The poor girl was terribly insecure as it was. Put on the pressure and she lost all perspective.

"Let's get this show on the road," he said. Tom had decided to let the coolness Sarah had shown him earlier dissolve of its own accord. The mature thing would be to make himself accept it. He knew that he wasn't more than average as a lover, not good at all as a friend, but he wanted to give Sarah what he had. To keep the interest of one such as she, Tom had accepted that he would have to concede many things.

Sarah leaned her head against his shoulder. "You've gotten awfully laconic." It was an opening, and Tom almost threw his arms around her with gratitude.

"I'm worried about you, darling. You seem upset."

Sarah nodded at the monitor. Miriam lay reading a magazine. "I am."

"What don't you like about her?" He thought of the murmured conversation between them, the strange gesture of the holding of hands.

"She's — I don't know how to express it. Perhaps the old definition of a monster, the Latin one."

Tom smiled. "I have no idea what it is. To me a monster is a monster."

"A divine creature. A *thing* of the gods. Irresistible and fatal."

Tom looked again at the monitor. It seemed a great distance between the gods and the woman with *McCalls* in her hands. "I just don't like her," he said.

"Bored, selfish, rich, a little on the compulsive side, judging from the

fastidiousness of her clothes. Probably collects dicks like shrunken heads.”

He was delighted to make Sarah laugh. It always relived him, like discovering that a gift has been appreciated beyond one’s expectations. “Sometimes,” she said, “you have a way of cutting through that’s just priceless.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Now I hope you won’t worry instead of kiss me.” Her eyes at last seemed happy. He kissed her lips, puckering them with the heels of his hands.

With an annoyed little jolt he realized that she was staring past him, at the damn monitor. “My God, Tom, what did she just pick up?”

It was a book. Tom knew it perfectly well. “Was there a copy in the patients’ lounge?”

“Of my book? *My* book? Certainly not, it’s not for patients.” She looked wildly around the room. “This is crazy! What kind of game is she playing?”

Miriam lay reading, her bottom lip caught prettily between her teeth, her eyes avid with concentration. Sarah put her head down on the desk and let out a long, racking sigh, almost a sob. Tom leaned close to her. “I’m too tired for games,” she said. “A stupid woman and her stupid games.”

“Honey, why don’t you just knock off. Go home or go back to the lab. Let me deal with Mrs. Blaylock alone.”

“I ought to be here. I’m the expert.”

“This place is loaded with good doctors. Me, for example.”

Sarah sat up, shook her head. “I accepted the case,” she said, “I can’t think of one valid reason to abandon it.”

Miriam closed her copy of *Sleep and Age* and lay back. The bed was tolerable, but best of all was this wonderful feeling of safety. Her own house was a superbly designed refuge, but a hospital with its large staff and twenty-

four-hour operation was almost as good. No night clerks drowsing while fire spread up the stairwells as in a hotel. No robbers prowling the halls or defective wiring electrocuting the unwary bather. Hospitals were safe enough for a Sleeper. Even after burying John in the tunnel, she did not feel completely comfortable at home. He must yet die more completely, he knew the house's security system too well. She relaxed into welcome peace. Maybe this time she would dream as she once had, of the sylvan blessings of long ago, or of the endless promise of the future. The unquiet dreams were most frequent during bad times. Her Sleep was more persistent when she was tense. She might need it as often as every twelve hours at the height of a crisis instead of every twenty-four. The harder things got, the more it interrupted.

She snuggled down into the bed, smelling the starched sheets, quivering with delight at the safety and thinking of Sarah, poor girl, who was about to walk through the fire.

The patient interrupted their conversation; professionalism demanded that personal matters now be put aside. The electroencephalograph, monitoring brain waves, was showing a pattern characteristic of drowsiness.

"There goes a roll," Sarah said as the electro-oculograph jiggled. Mrs. Blaylock's eyes were rolling into her head, an indication of stage one sleep. Sarah cleared her throat and swigged some coffee. Tom had to admire her. She was bursting apart inside and he damn well knew it. But you couldn't tell it now. That was a pro. The alpha-wave arrhythmias that indicated dozing sleep appeared. Then the skin galvanometer jumped and the heart rate increased.

"Oops. Must have gotten stuck with a pin. She wearing any pins?"

"The electrodes must be bothering her."

After a moment the electro-oculograph indicated left-to-right motion. "She's reading again."

Sarah shook her head. Tom wished he could find some way to lighten Sarah's

mood. “At least she respects your work. She’s reading it.”

“I wish I knew more about her, Tom.”

Behind them Geoff Williams from the blood analysis lab cleared his throat. “I hope I’m not disturbing any lovey-lovey, dears, but I have a problem for you. You got the wrong blood.”

“What wrong blood? What’re you talking about?”

“The blood you gave me marked 00265 A-Blaylock M.? It isn’t human blood.”

“Of course it is. I took it out of that patient right there.” Sarah pointed at the monitor.

Geoff pulled out his computer printout. “You’ll note from the machine’s attempt to analyze it that something is amiss.” The sheet showed the blood’s ID and then a list of zeros where the component values should have been.

“Machine’s on the fritz,” Tom said, turning back to the monitors. “Another roll,” he said. “She’s trying again. Sweet dreams, dearie.”

“No computer problem, Doctor. I ran the test program and then ran other bloods back to back with yours. You did not give me human blood. Whatever this is, the machine cannot analyze it.”

Sarah looked up at him. “You know, I seem to remember a time when blood analysis was done by hand, when it was between a man and his centrifuge.”

“I did it by hand too. Here’s what I found.” He thrust a sheet of numbers at them. “It isn’t a human type as far as I’m concerned. It has a whole extra component of leukocytes, for one thing.”

“Could a human being survive with it?”

“It’s a better blood than ours. Very similar, but more disease resistant. The cellular material is more dense, the plasma less. It would take a strong heart to pump the stuff and there might be some minor capillary clogging, but

whoever had it in their veins could forget about sickness if their heart was strong enough to pump the stuff.”

Tom gestured to the screen. “We have a patient right before our eyes who is clearly thriving with it in her veins. Before we draw any further conclusions I think we’d better retest.”

“Of course.”

“It’s her blood,” Sarah snapped. “I didn’t make a mistake.” Tom blinked — he was surprised at the ferocity in her voice.

Geoff must have heard it too, because he paused a moment before speaking again, and then went on very gently. “This cannot have come from that patient, Sarah. If it did then she isn’t a human being. And I can’t believe that.”

“It could be a congenital defect, or a hybrid.”

Geoff shook his head. “First off, we’re dealing with a very dense blood. A human heart could pump it, but just barely. The component mix is all off. The counts don’t make sense. Sarah, it cannot be human blood. The closest would be one of the great apes —” “It’s not from one of my monkeys,” she said woodenly. “I don’t make mistakes that simple.” Her voice lowered. “I wish I did.”

She took Geoff with her and got another sample. Mrs. Blaylock had fallen asleep only a few minutes before. When the needle entered her arm her lips parted but her eyelids never flickered. Tom watched the graphs for some sign of disturbed sleep. After taking samples from rhesus monkeys Sarah must be a true expert. Certainly it wasn’t waking up Mrs. Blaylock.

Tom was about to turn away from the graphs when he paused. A thrill, as if of danger, had coursed through him. He found himself wishing that Sarah would hurry up and get out of there. When she did return he nodded toward the readout.

“There’s nothing right about her pattern, is there?” she said promptly.

“I’d say she was in coma except for those voltage bursts in the delta wave.” Delta was the indicator of conscious mental activity. “It’s like a dead brain that’s somehow retaining consciousness.”

“Isn’t that a very muted sleep spindle in alpha?”

“It could be background noise. A passing radio cab, for example. We’ve had that problem before. It’s too low-level.”

“Respiration’s almost nil. Tom, it’s quiet in that room. So very quiet. It’s rather horrible.”

“Don’t go in there again.”

He felt her eyes on him. “OK,” she said softly. This time she put her hand in his and they looked steadily at each other. There was no need to speak.

LONDON: 1430

Yellow light filters through the curtains. She had drawn them against the noise and stench of the street. Although it is May, sullen, cold rain sweeps from the sky. Across Lombard Street the bells of St. Edmund the King ring the changes. Miriam has been almost mad with the damp, the filth and the endless ringing bells — and the fact that Lollia has been taken to the torturer.

She rushes out into the garden behind the house to escape the ringing. But here resound the bells of St. Swithin’s across the reeking waters of the Lang Bourne. Rats slither away as she moves among her beloved roses. Six of the plants are already aboard ship, these others must be left behind. She sobs as she paces, horrible images of that poor, wonderful girl lying in a rack, her hands bulging purple in iron pilliwinks.

They have overstayed here; long ago they should have left London, left England. There are places in the wild east of Europe where it is still possible for Miriam’s kind to thrive. They had been planning, considering and suddenly here was Lollia, captured as a witch.

A witch, of all the superstitious blather!

“Lady, farthing, please farthing.”

She tosses some copper to the ratcatchers who have begun to creep up from the Bourne. Swarms of them live off the rats of the open sewer. She has seen them devour rats raw. She has seen them drain the blood of rats down the throats of their children.

She has heard their songs: “He that will an alehouse keep, sing hey nonny nonny . . .”

Occasionally, the King’s men come and kill some of them. But they multiply in the benighted ruin that is fifteenth-century London. Everything is wrong here. Death and disease stride through the populace. Houses burn nightly and the rains bring the roar of buildings collapsing. The mud is always ankle deep and full of rotting garbage. The streets are sewers. Wild pigs, pickpockets and cutpurses seethe in the markets. At night come the cutthroats and the shrieking mad. Over it all there hangs an endless brown pall of peat smoke. The city does not rumble as Rome did or clatter as did the marble streets of Constantinople, but rather it breathes a great moan, as winter wind coming down a moor. Occasionally, amid a flash of silk and the rickrack of a gaily painted coach an aristocrat passes by.

The sundial tells her that four hours have passed since Lollia was taken away. The bailiffs will be heard in Lombard Street soon, bearing their burden in its black muslin shroud. Then Miriam must be ready, for Lollia will have “confessed.” Oh yes, Miriam has seen them at their art of torture. Beside it the other arts of this age are but pale shadows. Men are skinned amid jovial crowds, their parts tossed as souvenirs to putrid children. The victims howl out any calumny or sorcery, whatever is wanted of them.

Miriam cannot find the depth of her contempt. She goes through the night streets with real pleasure, a thousand times more dangerous than the quickest knifeman, stronger, faster and more intelligent.

Her belly is always full. Or was, until the soldiers of King Henry began to organize a competent night watch.

Lollia was netted like a plunging doe in the Crutched Friars by St. Olave and dragged off to the gaols. She had been a child of the streets, a Byzantine Greek whom Miriam discovered in Ravenna in the Clothmakers Market near the Palace of the Emperor, working as a weaver of linen. How long ago that was! Nearly a millennium. Miriam had been staggered by her beauty, uplifted from her despondence at the loss of Eumenes. As Rome died they went to Constantinople but left when the old, familiar signs of imperial decline began to appear there as well: whole quarters deserted, palaces left to ruin, arson and corruption and wildly escalating prices.

London had been a good choice — populated, chaotic, growing. They had come with nothing but a single Venetian gold ducat and six Burgundian pennies.

The ducat bought them a year's lodging. To obtain more money they scavenged the palaces of the aristocrats.

A hundred years of love and prosperity passed like a winking dream.

Then Lollia changed. Her youth evaporated. She ate weekly, then daily and of late every few hours. Recently, she had been going on night-long frenzies, giving herself up to the hunger until she becomes bloated. And her beauty, once so great that it made men bow their heads, has dissolved into memory. She has grown horrible, her voice shrilling through the house, her eyes agleam for blood. And now she has been captured, dragged gnashing and growling to the Assizes. Miriam raced down Eastcheap to Tower Street — just too late.

She waits for whatever they are going to bring home. She cannot look at the gowns, the street-worn slippers, the brown ringlets Lollia had bought for her hair. They lie now in a little paper box beside her wig fork. Miriam gathers handfuls of coins from their cache, pouring them into a leather pouch and lashing it under her breasts. She will take a boat from Ebgate down to the docks. Because of Lollia's certain confession, all of this is lost, and Miriam also will be seized if she waits too long. Three days ago she placed her chests aboard a Genoese galley, all except Lollia's. The ship sails tomorrow or the next day and she will be on it. But she will not leave without Lollia. To keep them safe has been her promise to all, and to herself.

The girl's resting place is ready, a squat box of oak and iron sitting in the middle of the room, its newly rubbed wood smelling faintly of fish oil.

If Miriam cannot escape, she will be burned at the stake.

Now she counts her coins — fifty gold ducats, three gold pounds, eleven ecus d'or. It is enough to keep all of Cheapside for a year or support Cardinal Beaufort for a week.

They come.

She bites her tongue when she hears the blaring crumhorns of the Waits that precede the cortege. This must work, it *must!*

If only she could leave Lollia — but she would never forgive herself. There is a powerful morality in her relationship to her lovers. By vowing never to abandon them, she gives herself the right to deceive them. She rushes into Lombard Street, pushes wildly through the crowd toward the squat figures with the black-shrouded body on their shoulders.

She has a fistful of silver. It will take at least two silver pence to get Lollia's body and another one to save herself. In one man's hand she sees a flutter of seals — the writ ordering that the body of one woman called Miriam, accused of being a witch, be brought with all haste —

"I have silver," she says over the roar of the Waits, "silver pennies for my poor mother!"

"Oho, pretty, we've got to take thee too!"

"I have silver!"

The big man with the writ comes up and jolts his hand down on her shoulder. "The King cannot be bought with a scrap of money."

The Waits have stopped. All is silence. The crowd is fascinated as Miriam pleads for her life. She displays two silver pennies on the palm of her hand.

"That's what you have?"

“It is, all in the world.”

“Then three it must be!” And he laughs, the whispering cackle of a man with diseased lungs.

“All my monies in the world,” Miriam wails. She takes out another little coin and holds the three in cupped, trembling hands.

They are snatched up and Lollia is dropped onto the stone stoop of the house. The Waits melt into the throng, the bailiffs march away, the writ is lost in the mud of the street.

Miriam can hardly bear to unwrap the shroud. Lollia is bright red, tongue like a purple, blistered flower, eyes popping half out of her head.

They have boiled her in oil. Some of the stinking stuff still clings to her distended flesh.

And there is a tiny noise, the sound of skin breaking as her hands slowly unclench.

“It’s a nightmare,” Tom murmured.

Sarah was mesmerized by the racing graphs. “I know,” she said distantly. The blood had astonished her. Tom was no doubt waiting for some error to emerge, but Sarah knew that the sample Geoff was testing now would only confirm the unbelievable. Her mind rang with the question, what is she, *what is she!* It made her almost dizzy, her own voice shouting in her head, confusion threatening to become panic.

“I’m going to wake her.” Tom started to get up.

“Don’t! You — you’ll disturb the record.”

His eyes searched her face. “She’s obviously suffering —”

“Look at the graphs! You don’t want to disturb a unique record. We don’t even know if it’s a nightmare. It might be a dream of paradise.”

“The REM readings are consistent with a high-intensity nightmare.”

“But look at respiration and skin conductivity. She’s practically comatose.”

Sarah was relieved when Tom’s eyes returned to the monitors. Their place right now was here, recording phenomena. Mrs. Blaylock’s extraordinary sleep pattern continued to flicker across the displays. Sarah tried to add it up — low-intensity delta waves, alpha waves curving as in a trance state. This was the intercranial activity pattern of an injury victim or perhaps some kind of meditation master. “Let’s do a zone scan,” Sarah said slowly.

“You think there’s something we’re not picking up?”

“We’re getting too many nil readings. Yet her eyes are moving as if she was in an intense dream.”

“Maybe it’s the hippocampus. You can get intensive hallucinatory effects when it’s stimulated. They’d cause REM.”

“That’s a good idea, Doctor. But to pick up electrical activity from that deep we’re gonna have to move our electrodes.”

“So let’s do it.”

“You’re elected, Thomas. You told me not to go back in there alone, remember?”

“OK.” He started for the door, then paused. “You’re better at placement than me, darling.”

“One on each temporal bone and two side by side just above the lambdoid suture. If we can’t read the hippocampus from there we need a probe.”

“How the hell can I get to the lambdoid suture? I’ll have to lift her head.”

“Tom, the woman is immobilized with some incredibly powerful equivalent of dreaming sleep. She’s not going to know if you lift her head.” Sarah felt her stomach turn. The very idea of being near that creature again made her feel queasy. This brain activity was no more human than the blood.

Tom left, but there was a long pause before he appeared on the video monitor. He wasn't hurrying. She watched him move the electrodes. At first the graphs went absolutely straight. No pickup. Sarah was adjusting electrode sensitivity when all hell broke loose. The four electrodes were switched into two different needles in case pickup was better from one region than the other. But it didn't matter, the voltage surges were tremendous.

"God damn," Tom said as he returned.

"It's brain damage," Sarah said. "Has to be."

"If it is, then there aren't any gross effects."

A hand dropped to her shoulder. Leaning her head back, she saw Geoff standing over her, the rims of his glasses glittering in the fluorescent light. "You were right," he said, "she's a freak."

Sarah looked at the woman on the video monitor. She was a stirring beauty, there was no doubt of it. But she was also this other thing, what Geoff called a freak.

The needles swung wildly across the graph paper. Sarah remembered the hippocampus from her studies. It is one of the deepest brain areas. When it is stimulated electrically, patients sometimes relive their past in every detail, as if it were happening again. It is the seat of ancient senses, the most hidden country of the mind. It is perhaps the place where the unconscious stores the remembrances by which we are ruled. Certainly dragons march there, and deep creatures crawl. When it is destroyed by injury or disease, the victim's past disappears and he lives forever in that disoriented state that is felt upon waking from a particularly terrible nightmare.

The graphs hissed in the silent room. Geoff dropped a yellow sheet of paper on the desk space before the computer console, his new workup on the blood.

"The woman must literally be reliving her life," Tom said. "It must be a thousand times more vivid than a normal dream."

"I hope it's been a nice life." Geoff was fingering his workup sheet.

“It hasn’t,” Sarah said. She knew that it was true.

7

JOHN SAW DIM PATTERNS against his closed eyelids. He could not tell exactly when he had become conscious, but he knew that he had ceased to dream in the past few minutes and returned to the agony of his body.

What a fool he had been to stand over her like that, savoring his victory, waiting for her to awaken. But he had wanted her to *know*.

He could still hear the carbon steel blade of the cleaver ringing on the slates.

He had to move! He longed to stretch out, to feel fresh movement in his joints. Panic started again, but he quelled it. He felt his tomb's walls and low ceiling, touched the mud beneath the puddle of water he was in. And he heard that dripping, steady, echoing, as if it were in a larger space.

He shouted. Also an echo. He took a deep breath. The air was fresh and cool. In such a small space as this even a few minutes would have made the air heavy.

Unless there was an opening.

He couldn't turn around, there wasn't enough room. His feet rubbed along solid stone, however. Plunging his fingers as deep into the mud as they would go also brought no results — until he clawed at the place where the wall before his face met the water. Here there was no mud.

A current went under the stone, through an opening about eight inches deep. Perhaps he could push himself under. He leaned down as far as he could without immersing his face in the water and waved his hand in the opening.

He could not feel a surface to the water, but he could feel a distinct flow. If he stretched his arms full length and pushed with his feet he could get his head and shoulders through the opening. There was no guarantee that he would reach an air pocket but even drowning seemed like a relief compared to this.

He plunged his face into the water, pressing himself as far into the mud as he could, found purchase with his feet, and shoved. In order to get through he had to turn his head to one side. Water poured in his nose, seared his throat and lungs. He screwed his eyes shut, fighting the impulse to gag, and shoved and kicked and twisted. Pressed tightly between the mud bottom and the stone, his head pounded. The ear that was scraping against the stone felt as if it were on fire. He realized that it was being torn off, so tight was the space.

The mud seeped between his lips, poured into his mouth. He began to need air. Helpless, he convulsed, felt a rush of bubbles pour from nose and mouth, gagged. Somewhere far behind him his feet were kicking, drumming impotently in the shallow water. His hands, stretched before him, clutched water.

Then his ear stopped hurting. He could lift his head! More frantic jerking and his eyes were out of the water. He pushed against the mud, heard bones crack as he pulled his legs up under him, heaved again and again.

Bright red flashes filled his eyes, his mind began to wander. The withering sensation of air hunger coursed through his body. He felt himself urinating, a hot stream in the freezing water.

His struggles were becoming more sporadic. The pain was giving way to a kind of release, a relaxed drifting. He hungered for the peace that seemed to lie just beyond the last of his struggles.

He remembered Miriam, saw her face glowing before him, her lips parted, teasing him to passion.

Mocking his love.

He couldn't let her win! She had lied to him from the beginning. For weeks

after their first encounter she had come to him nightly with her evil little kit and sat stroking his head as her blood ran into his veins and the fever raged. It nearly killed him, but he recovered. And when he did he was a new man, impervious to sickness, ageless, with new needs and an extraordinary new lover to fulfill them.

He also had a new hunger. It had taken him years to get used to it, to reach a point where his moral revulsion was at least equaled by his sense of acceptance. At first the hunger had propelled him, wild with need, through the streets of London.

She had caused that.

Finally he had learned, bitter and desperate and trapped, to satisfy the demands of his hunger.

She had taught him how.

He had to reach her!

A last frantic heave brought him clear of the water and he sucked in air at last. He could hear his heart clattering, feel exhaustion in every muscle and bone. For how long he did not know, he lay where he had fallen, his head and arms entangled in a thick mass of roots, his legs still in the muddy water.

But he was free of Miriam's tomb.

Free. An image of the steel box waiting for him in the attic flashed in his mind. He gasped air, coughed, spat froth from his lungs. A cold steel box in a stack of such boxes.

And in each — one of his predecessors.

She had always said that he was her only one.

Now that he saw the truth, he was horrified by the sheer coldness of the creature, the depths of its indifference, the extent of its power. Some of those boxes were *old!* The thing itself must be ancient, some dreadful exponent of Satan himself. He no longer thought of it as male or female. It chose to call

itself “Miriam” but that was doubtless only a matter of convenience.

John’s hands clutched up among the roots, seeking some further passage out of the prison. Everything that he believed about Miriam had proved to be false. All that she had told him was a monstrous lie.

One among many. Miriam had been doing this since the beginning of time.

He had to break the chain of destruction in some way. His revenge was due him a thousand times over. The very earth around him seemed to seethe with the restless souls of those he had killed in service to his own immortality.

Indeed. The 180-odd years he had lived seemed only a moment now that the end was near. Certainly there were no eternity. If he had known that he was only delaying the inevitable he would never have wasted the lives of others. “Or so I tell myself,” he said aloud.

Something brushed past him. He remembered the awful sense of movement in the attic. Clawing frantically at the roots that surrounded him, he screamed. This was a wet, stinking grave if ever there was one. It wasn’t quite as confining as the stone chamber, but it was just as deadly in the long run. He pushed at the roots, trying to progress toward the surface. His mind contracted to a single thought: hurt Miriam. If possible, destroy Miriam. If not, then die trying.

In his final effort, at least, there would be some small nobility. He was the last of a great line, after all, who had fought in many a noble war. There had been brave men among his forefathers. He would remember them now. His hand reached ancient, sodden brick, the vaulting of their old tunnel to the East River. So that’s where it had put him. He pulled the bricks down easily. The mortar was rotten, the bricks themselves crumbling.

Suddenly, he found that he could stand to full height, even raise his arms above his head.

It took him a few seconds to realize that he had broken through into the old tunnel, not out of it. The echoing water was much louder, so loud that he could hear it even with his injured ear. His hands clutched mud, flailed, found

a curved brick ceiling a few feet above. It was rank, the great roots twining everywhere. Waving his hands ahead of him in the total blackness, he began to move forward.

After ten steps the tunnel ended in a jumble of bricks and concrete chunks. Roots formed a slick forest. Above the dripping there rose another sound.

Was it the tide, perhaps? Their house was not far from the East River. Then it hit him all at once — he was hearing traffic on the FDR Drive.

This old escape tunnel was built back when the recently formed New York City Police Department seemed a threat. It had been covered over with the construction of the highway thirty years ago. That slate she had lifted was the door to the tunnel.

He began to claw at the dirt. Not so far above must lie the garden. Maybe it wasn't over yet, maybe he would get another chance after all. Roots tore at his fingers, scraping them raw. Only by digging around them and pressing himself up between their strands could he make progress. He worked with the furious strength of rage. He must not fail now. When he felt this same strength surge in the bodies of his victims he knew they were at wit's end.

There came a blaze of light. John recoiled — had he shorted some kind of buried electrical cable? As his eyes grew used to the brilliance he also found he was covered with flat flakes of a pink material. For a moment he was utterly confused, then he smelled the flowers.

He lifted his head into Miriam's garden, right into the midst of her treasured roses. They were her own special hybrids, created over God knew how many years of patient grafting. Some blossoms were enormous, others tiny. Some plants bore thorns, others none. And they ranged in shade from delicate pink to deep red. Most of the thorns were strictly ornamental, soft to the touch. Five of the larger blossoms at high summer would fill a substantial vase, and the fragrance would cover a dozen rooms.

Only his face and one arm were worked out of the earth. The house was invisible behind him, but he could feel its menacing presence. He hoped she wouldn't so much as glance out a window — Miriam had the eyes of a

falcon.

The roots clutched at him, impeding every movement. He was tiring quickly now that the rush of panic had ended. His heart bounded raggedly along and his lungs bubbled.

It was a triumph when both arms lay among the rose bushes and he could press against the ground. Inch by inch he freed himself. At last his hips jerked through the final impediment and he pulled himself out. He lay beneath the sky of morning, feeling the hunger rising yet again, barely able to move, save only to tear blossoms from their branches. When he was done he rested, then pulled himself to his feet. The house stood in its garden, somber to John's eyes. He looked high to its roof, to the tiny window of the room where Miriam kept her dead.

There was something he could do there, if he dared, if he could bear it. The house was silent. Taunting. Daring him to enter. He would, when the moment was right. If she captured him first he would lose his revenge forever. And if she did not? Then it would not matter.

The whole clinic was electrified with the news of Miriam Blaylock. By six-thirty A.M. a stunned, hollow-eyed crowd was huddled around Tom and Sarah, watching the monitors. At seven Sarah pressed a button that sounded chimes in the sleep cubicle. Miriam had been awake but motionless for two hours; her sleep had lasted exactly six. She stirred, stretched luxuriously, and opened her eyes. She looked directly into the monitor. Sarah was surprised, it was one of the gentlest, most beautiful expressions she had ever seen. "I'm awake," said the rich voice.

The whole group stirred. Sarah knew that the others felt as she did. "I'm gonna get on the horn," Tom said. "I'd better get things moving." He headed toward his office to call specialists — geneticist, physiological biologist, cellular biologist, psychiatrist, and half a dozen others.

It hadn't taken long for them to realize that they were in the presence of a potentially marvelous discovery. The gross abnormalities of the blood and the completely alien brain function left no room for doubt: Miriam Blaylock was

not a member of the species *Homo sapiens*.

Sarah's intense reaction to her was partly explained. There must have been some awareness on an unconscious level and a corresponding attempt to compensate. The unconscious reaction to a living, intelligent being of an unknown species was itself unknown. Now that the alienness lay uncovered, the woman — female creature — seemed subtly less threatening. Unknowns were the familiar ground of Sarah's work, and Miriam was a confluence of unknowns. Although an extraterrestrial origin could not be ruled out, it seemed unlikely in view of the physical similarity between Miriam and a human being.

In spite of her position as a scientist, Sarah could not shake the feeling that she was in the grip of some enormous mechanism of fate, something pulling her toward some destiny, and that it was not blind at all, but rather entirely aware of her smallest response.

“Good morning, Mrs. Blaylock,” she said into the intercom. “Would you care for some breakfast?”

“No, thank you. I'll eat later.”

“Coffee, then?”

She sat fully up in bed, shook her head no. “Come tell me, Doctor, what you've learned. Can you help me?” Suddenly even through the filter of the TV monitor, the eyes were fierce.

Sarah felt no further reticence. She marched right to the cubicle. It was warm and smelled of Miriam's sweetness. “May I call you Miriam?” Sarah sat on the edge of the bed trying to feel neatly enclosed in herself. “We learned a great deal. You're a unique person.”

Miriam said nothing. A tiny doubt crossed Sarah's mind. Of course Miriam herself knew what she was. She must. So they had assumed.

“Did you sleep well?”

She looked surprised. “Don’t you know?”

They both laughed. “I’m sorry. I’m sure you remember a dream. A particularly vivid one.”

Miriam’s face grew solemn. She drew herself up, dangling her legs over the side of the bed. They were beautiful, outlined under her nightgown. “Yes, I had a vivid dream.”

“I’d like to know about it. The information will be very helpful.”

Miriam glanced at her, said nothing. That look stabbed Sarah deeply. She felt in her own heart a glint of Miriam’s pain. The thought came that someone ought to take Miriam in her arms and hug away that loneliness. It would be a noble thing to do, a bridge across worlds.

Sarah opened her arms, turning toward Miriam with invitation, oblivious to the gleaming lens of the video camera attached to a corner of the ceiling. Miriam clung, it struck her, as a child. “There, there,” Sarah said through feelings of awkwardness. She wasn’t really very *good* at this sort of thing.

Miriam sobbed, quickly cut it off. Sarah stroked her soft blond hair, made soothing sounds in her ear.

The loneliness was palpable, as real as an odor. When Sarah felt her stir she released her grip. Miriam sat back against the wall, took Sarah’s hand in hers, and kissed her fingers.

Now Sarah did think of the monitor. Embarrassed, she withdrew her hand. “Perhaps we’ll talk again after you’ve dressed,” she said as calmly as she could. “I’ll beep you when I’ve turned off the video.” She tried to smile. “You’re allowed to get dressed in private.”

Miriam seemed about to say something but Sarah did not wait to hear it. She was not at all sure why the creature seemed to compel such intimacy, but this was not the time to probe further. She retreated to the observation room, determined to be more careful in the future. Other patients were being awakened and the group around Miriam’s monitor was smaller. Phyllis

Rockler and Charlie Humphries had arrived, however. They were talking heatedly with Geoff Williams, who waved his now-wrinkled sheet of blood component statistics as he spoke. When Sarah reappeared Geoff called out that Tom had gotten his core group together and a meeting was scheduled in the conference room.

Sarah followed standard procedure in killing Miriam Blaylock's monitor during her dressing period. Mrs. Blaylock would have to be processed further by a resident. Sarah and Tom both had to attend the core conference. "Just don't let her get out of here," Sarah said to the eager kid who was assigned to the job. "She's precious. *Precious*. I want the standard post-observation interview right off the form. Then stall her. Say we need her here for another twenty-four hours." When she left for the conference the resident was scribbling on a clipboard. For an instant she allowed herself a privilege reserved for the successful, delighting in the fact that he was obviously a couple of years older than she. Life on a fast track had its compensations.

Sarah walked into a packed room. People looked disheveled, bleary-eyed. She wondered what Tom had said to pour so many senior men out of bed so early. Tom sat playing with an unlit cigar, which disappeared as she entered. She took the chair that Charlie and Phyllis had saved for her. Around the table were twelve people ranging in age from thirty to seventy. Hutch sat straight, his lips a thin line, his face frozen in a manufactured expression of curiosity. Underneath it Sarah sensed something else. Their eyes met and his sadness surprised her. So Tom's assault was progressing. Hutch had not called this meeting, he was here by invitation only.

"OK," Tom said, "thank you very much for your time, Doctors. I'm sorry to get you out of bed so early in the morning. I must say, however, I think you'll be glad I did once we review the record. Just briefly, the subject in question is named Miriam Blaylock. She appears in excellent physical condition, aged thirty years, and she has received a working diagnosis of night terrors. That diagnosis has been revised to include grossly anomalous brain function."

"Doctor —" It was Hutch.

Tom held up his hand. "Doctor Hutchinson hasn't been briefed because of the need for haste," he said. Sarah blinked. The riposte was deadly. Now Hutch

must remain silent. He had been neatly exposed as being among the uninformed. A figurehead of department. Tom took his blood in drops, but each one counted. “We’ll get our first report from Doctor Geoffrey Williams, who did the blood grouping and analysis on the patient.”

Geoff rattled papers, pushed his glasses up on his nose. “Put simply, the woman’s blood is completely mutated, to the extent that she might well be a varietal species and not a member of *genus homo* at all.” The few preoccupied faces came to attention.

“It could be a genetic defect,” Hutch said. He had leaned forward in his chair, his face full of interest and concern. Sarah realized a truth — he did not view the clinic as a possession, but himself as the property of the clinic. Of course he would continue to talk, he saw no humiliation in being relieved of the captaincy as long as he remained in the group.

“It isn’t a defect, the blood —”

“You don’t have a chromosomal yet, you couldn’t. I think you’re being quite hasty —”

“Hush up, Walter,” a deep voice said from the back of the room. All eyes turned. Sam Rush, Riverside Medical Center’s Chief of Research Staffs, leaned against the door, his arms folded before him. Sarah raised her eyebrows. He counted for more than the entire board. Considerably more.

Geoff cleared his throat. “Mutation, even parallel evolution, are the appropriate concepts. The kicker is in cellular detail. First, the erythrocytes are off color, practically purple. Yet there is no indication that the patient is suffering from any oxygen-uptake problems. The cells are also less than half-normal size. Second and perhaps most important, we observe seven varieties of leukocytes instead of five as in a human body. The two new ones are among the most extraordinary cellular structures I’ve had the pleasure of observing. As a first guess, I’d say that the purpose of number six is heightened control of invasive organisms. It is active against all test cultures so far, including *E. Coli* and salmonella. And it shares a totally unexpected property with number seven in that it resists death even in a saline solution.

“Now, the number seven. This is the reason I mentioned the possibility of a parallel evolution. It is literally a factory, consuming dead blood cells of all kinds and birthing new ones, including its own type.”

The room was silent for some time. Finally, Dr. Weintraub, the cellular biologist, spoke. “Doctor what kind of breakdown process occurs?”

“This blood sample is exceptionally resistant to morbidity. I suspect it would even cause such diseases as virally induced cancer to be self-limiting and transient events in the life of the organism. If this blood was flowing in the veins of a mortal being, subject to time and accident, it might itself be immortal.

“Structural detail of the seventh leukocyte?” Weintraub’s eyes were tightly closed, he was deep in concentration.

“Complex tripartite nuclei. The structure appears to change according to the type of cell being consumed and reproduced. They birth living versions of the other types as fast as the originals die. The blood is in the lab now, six hours old, still as fresh as the moment it was taken.”

“Doctor, surely that’s a side effect of preservation —”

“Doctor Hutchinson, the sample I am referring to is being held at a temperature of fifteen degrees Celsius. It ought to be dead and decaying by now. But in fact we could reintroduce it into the donor’s veins if we wanted to. It’s quite self-maintaining.”

Sarah could hear the rustle of suppressed movements. She looked around the table and was at first perplexed by the uniform woodenness of the faces. Then she understood that they were all holding themselves in, restraining every outward manifestation of their excitement. All except Hutch, who was beginning to look like a little boy attending a carnival. Tom’s power play seemed more and more superfluous. Sarah suspected that Hutch’s type was that most dangerous of opponents for the Tom Havers of the world: a truly committed man — or truly clever — or both.

A face appeared in the doorway behind Dr. Rush. Sarah excused herself; the

resident she had detailed to hold Mrs. Blaylock looked upset.

“She left,” he said with a squeak. “I waited a few minutes for her to dress and when I went to the cubicle she was gone.”

Sarah restrained her first impulse, which was to shake him. “Did reception see her go? Try to stop her?”

“She never went through the reception area.”

“Then how did she leave?” He said nothing. Riverside was a labyrinth of nineteenth- and twentieth-century buildings all thrown together, she could have gone in any number of directions. Sarah clutched at a possibility. “Maybe she’s gotten herself lost.”

“Her stuff is gone. She intended to leave.”

Sarah closed her eyes. This was going to embarrass Tom. She thought of Hutch and found she wasn’t exactly displeased by that. “Call me out of here if there are any developments.” The resident turned and hurried away. As Sarah went back to her seat she contemplated whether or not to interrupt the proceedings with the bad news.

“To my way of thinking, the first order of business is tissue sampling,” Weintraub was saying. “I really can’t go very far without some cellular material, and I don’t think genetics can either.” Suddenly he opened his eyes wide. “Between us I think we’ll be able to examine the larger questions pretty thoroughly.”

Bob Hodder, geneticist and one of Riverside’s young Turks, spoke up. “Obviously, a chromosomal analysis will give us a definitive answer as to whether or not this is a human organism we’re dealing with.” He was almost handsome, Bob was. Sarah could remember his big tan body, his rippling muscles . . . he had been one of her more miserable affairs, prior to Tom. A good lay and a good date, but a man barricaded in a fortress of unfeeling. He knew genetics and sex and could order well at a restaurant. But he was as cold as death itself. Not nearly the breadth of old Tom, who sat leaning tautly into the conference, his glasses down his nose, his cigar now clamped

between his teeth but unlit.

She took a deep breath and delivered her news. “The patient left.”

Hutch reared back, seizing his opportunity with an almost audible *chomp*. “That was stupid.”

“It’s nobody’s fault,” Tom yammered. “We’re not equipped to hold people. This isn’t a secure facility.”

“Who the hell was in charge?” Hutch’s voice was strident. He intended to use the mistake to embarrass Tom in front of Rush. He knew how to score when he had the opportunity. Neither he nor Tom so much as glanced at the impassive face of Sam Rush. If he hadn’t been there, however, Sarah doubted there would have been more between Hutch and Tom than a mutual glare.

“That’s not the point! They followed procedures — did more than that, as a matter of fact. But she slipped out. You know what this place is like. You can exit Sleep Research in a dozen different directions. Anybody who wants to can get out no matter how careful we are.”

Sam Rush spoke. “Doctor Haver, you’ll have to locate your patient at once. I really do think it’s essential that we get her into confinement.” Tom’s eyes sought Sarah. The message was clear: ‘*You let her go, you get her back.*’

Sarah shook her head. She wouldn’t take the responsibility. Her own attitude toward Miriam Blaylock was not quite clear to her: the woman — thing — was frightening and dangerously seductive. She had the power to call up desires best left sleeping. Sarah wanted no part of her.

“I’ve got to ask you, Sarah. You know her best.”

She looked down at the table. There was no way to refuse such an open request.

“I don’t know how to go about it.”

“Call her,” Tom said.

“Visit her. Don’t risk a call. Bring her back.” Hutch’s voice was full of sincerity and concern.

“Your director is right,” Sam Rush said. Tom looked down at his papers.

“I don’t know where she lives,” Sarah muttered desperately.

“We have her address — don’t we, Tom?” Hutch sounded almost as if he hoped “we” didn’t.

“Of course,” Tom snapped.

Sarah fought to control herself. Her hands twined and twined together, until she snatched them from the table. All eyes were now on her. “Yes,” she heard a small, unfamiliar version of herself say, “we’ve got to get her back. I’ll go at once.”

Miriam Blaylock’s home was unexpectedly charming. Sarah got out of the cab before the compact red-brick row house with its white marble trim and window boxes full of flowers. It was so fresh and light. The windows were open and cheerful rooms could be seen beyond them. Private house on Sutton Place, Lanvin suits — Miriam Blaylock’s *genus* certainly had no difficulty coping with the human milieu.

Sarah mounted the steps and pressed the doorbell. From within she heard a chime. A policeman strolled past whistling. Across the street a group of children huddled together talking quietly.

The door swung open on Miriam Blaylock. She wore a pink-and-white dress. When she smiled, any thought other than that of being welcomed into a lovely home by its charming owner instantly left Sarah’s mind.

“May I come in?”

Miriam stepped aside.

“Oh, I love pomander,” Sarah found herself saying. “It reminds me of my childhood.” The richly antique scent evoked an image of her grandmother’s

front hall, of sun slanting in the windows on just such a day as this. She inhaled. “That really does take me back.”

“Would you like to sit down?”

Sarah followed her into a marvelous living room. Morning light poured in the windows, which overlooked a garden. The room was furnished with Regency antiques, lightly graceful chairs and couches. On the floor was a silk carpet from China, depicting many of the very flowers that bloomed in the garden. Blue silk curtains hung at the windows and the ceiling was a trompe l’oeil rendering of a summer’s sky. It was the kind of room that almost made you laugh with delight. Sarah stood in the doorway, her hands folded under her chin. She knew she was smiling like a little girl. Miriam turned, met her eyes and burst out laughing. Her eyes sparkled with true and unrestrained warmth.

Sarah came into the room and sat on one of the two facing love seats.

“May I give you a cup of coffee? I’ve just made some.”

“That would be lovely.”

Miriam’s voice floated back as she went to the kitchen. “I’ll bet you didn’t get a wink of sleep. It’s lucky I just happened to be making some coffee.”

She handed Sarah a cup. It was rich and smooth, altogether extraordinary. Its taste was all the aroma promised. “This is nice,” Sarah said.

Miriam sat beside Sarah, placing her own cup on the mosaic-covered coffee table. Sarah’s eyes were attracted to the mosaic’s delicate beauty. It portrayed a goddess standing on a rainbow with sickle moon above her head. “Lamia,” Miriam said as Sarah’s fingers caressed the tiny stones. “Her food is youth. Her symbol is the rainbow because of her beauty and elusiveness. She is one of the immortals. The mosaic is from the lost city of Palmyra.”

“What happened to it?”

“Greed. Like the rest of the Empire. It was a Roman city.”

“This must be worth —” She stopped, embarrassed. How crass to gush about

the value of somebody's art objects.

"I'll never sell it. Can you see why?" With loving grace Miriam ran her finger along the outline of the face.

The resemblance was amazing. "I certainly can! It could be your twin."

Miriam looked suddenly toward the windows, her mind seemingly drawn to something outside. Dropping the conversation, she got up and went over to them. Sarah had conflicting impressions: Miriam had seemed delighted to see her at first, but all at once had apparently lost interest. Sarah began to want to get it over with. It was as if Miriam were waiting for somebody else. This place, so ruthlessly pleasant, began to contain the suggestion of nasty shadows.

"Your coffee's getting cold," Sarah announced in her most cheerful tone.

"You drink it. I had a cup before you came."

"I won't turn you down on that. It's so incredibly good. I mean, I know it's just coffee, but —" She was gushing again. Calm down, girl. Bring up Riverside and get thyself gone. "Listen, if you're busy I'll get right to the point. Obviously, I came here for a reason. Riverside —"

"It's such a beautiful day. We get the nicest breeze when the wind is off the river."

"Your garden is wonderful. We at Riverside —"

"I have over ten thousand plants. The roses are my real prize."

Sarah went over and stood beside her. There wasn't a rose to be seen. "Where are they?" Obviously Riverside would have to wait until the damnable garden was praised.

"Behind the stand of snapdragons." She became very still. "Good gods, why can't we see them?" Sarah noticed that she was glaring like the rhesus did when you surprised them. Miriam went out the French doors and across the brick porch. Sarah walked behind her. The whole garden was redolent of

flowers. The invisible roses could certainly be smelled. Beyond the garden could be seen the glimmering water of the East River. A sailboat passed, its white canvas flapping in the sun. The full roar of the FDR Drive rose as an undertone. Miriam swept down a winding garden path and past the stand of snapdragons. When Sarah caught up with her she was squatting on the ground, her fingers clutching torn flowers. “My ROSES!” she shrieked. Sarah was amazed. Before her was a horrible sight, a vandalized flowerbed. Even the petals of the destroyed plants had been ground into the earth. The leaves had been stripped off and the stems split. Some of the smaller plants were uprooted. There was a powerful attar, the blood of the flowers.

Miriam stiffened, slowly standing up, facing Sarah. It was somehow a terrifying gesture, one that made her step back. Then Miriam was past her, crouching down again, her hands flitting over a hole in the earth. When she shouted down it Sarah heard a deep echo. Slowly Miriam got to her feet. Her lips were moving and Sarah strained to hear.

She said, “*He’s out!*” and whirled like a tiger in a cage.

Her head snapped toward the house. With a sharp intake of breath she was off, racing up the garden path, toward the open French doors. “Come on,” she shouted, “*hurry!*”

Her obvious fear infected Sarah. She began running as in a nightmare toward the door. It seemed more and more distant, the flowers spreading for acres and miles.

Miriam’s eyes were bulging with fear more raw than anything one saw in a human face. Her arms stretched out, the hands clutching and opening like those of an infant seeking help. “*Sarah, hurry!*”

Sarah’s progress was dreamlike. She felt heavy, she thought of sleep. Every detail of the flowerbeds she was passing stood out. There were daisies bobbing, zinnias spreading to the sun, snapdragons and many more exotic varieties. She saw a bee standing on the stipule of a pansy, its pollen sacs dusted gold. Behind her there arose a great crackling, like a bear coming forth.

Miriam's arms twined about her, the French doors closed with a bang. With a snap of her wrist Miriam locked them, then pulled the curtains. She opened a box on the coffee table and began to press buttons inside it. The row of red lights that winked on suggested it was a burglar alarm.

Of all things, Sarah found herself getting woozy. The lack of sleep was really hitting hard, despite the coffee.

She let Miriam hold her, watched fascinated as the woman's expression shifted to absolute calm. That was iron control, considering the fear. "Did you see him?"

"Who?"

Miriam looked away as if struck by some new realization. "Mine were the best roses in all the world. Did you know that? Do you know roses?"

"I'm sorry, Miriam. They must have been beautiful." Sarah wanted to calm the woman, wanted also to sit down. She was really quite tired.

"There is no word in this language to describe them. They were — *amoenum*. It's Latin, it refers to the heartbreaking beauty of nature. Vergilius Maro used it to describe Aeneas' last vision of Ilium. Such flowers are like that. A last vision, the hurting beauty of a rainbow."

"I see." Sarah knew some Latin, mostly as a professional language. "Why don't we sit down? I feel a little off." She smiled. "The excitement." Nervously, she touched Miriam's shoulder — and snapped her hand back in surprise. The skin was as hard as stone, for God's sake. Was it an artificial limb?

"Get some more coffee," Miriam said. "It's in the kitchen." Wishing Miriam would get it for her, but wanting it badly, Sarah found her way through a dining room that had been made over into a den. The kitchen told why; it was completely empty. Nobody ate in this house, not ever. Sarah checked a couple of cabinets. Absolutely pristine. Stove, ancient but perfectly clean. The only litter was on the counter — an open half-pound bag of coffee beans, a grinder and a Melitta pot containing the cooling coffee.

This wasn't a home.

She didn't have a chance to think about it, she had noticed a shadow on the curtains of the kitchen window. It moved away, then appeared again before the door, sharply outlined against the white chintz that covered the glass. There was a whisper, but Sarah was too startled to reply. When the doorknob began to rattle she found her voice and called out.

Instantly, Miriam was beside her. She stepped right up to the door. "It's locked," she shouted, "locked and set!"

The shadow disappeared.

Sarah began to want very badly to get out of here. But she couldn't just leave the woman, not like this. "Call the police," she said. Her speech was actually slurred. Despite the obvious danger she felt curiously calm.

"No!" Miriam grabbed her shoulders and shook them. It rattled her teeth in her head, it was like being gripped by a powerful machine.

Remember, she is not human. *Not human!* Whatever might be going on here, it could be very different from appearance. Sarah must not allow herself to forget that. And for the love of heaven she must not fall asleep. What was the matter with her?

"I — I'm sorry," Miriam said. She found some Kleenex in a drawer and took a couple of sheets, blew her nose. "Let's go to the front of the house. He won't bother us there."

Sarah was led into a library, somewhat darker than the other rooms. "History," Miriam said, waving her arms at shelves and shelves of books, "do you believe in history?"

Sarah was beyond answering complex questions. With the clarity of exhaustion she heard a horn honk outside. The shadows were deeper here. There were ancient-looking volumes, and glass-fronted boxes containing stacks of scrolls. It was not a pleasant room. In a way, with its musty smell and black old books, it was quite horrible. Sarah wished Miriam would just

get out of this place with her. “We would like you to return to the clinic.”

Miriam’s look was almost coy. “Why should I? So you can put me in a freak show?”

“So we can relieve your suffering.”

Miriam came over to her, took her hands. This close the woman seemed almost larger than she should be. Sarah wanted desperately to take a step back. But she couldn’t move, she was just too tired.

Miriam’s speech was measured, her eyes watching Sarah closely.

“Sarah, we have a great deal to learn from one another, but I’ve just sustained a shock and I need some time to pull myself together. Please forgive me if my behavior seems strange.”

“I still don’t understand why you don’t call the police. They would give you some protection —”

“For a time. But what happens when they go away? And they will, sooner or later.”

“OK, it’s your decision. I’d do it, though. You’re being menaced. Whoever it is could get in here at any moment.”

Her words made Miriam flash a glance toward the hallway that led to the back of the house. “An alarm will go off if he comes in. I’ll have plenty of warning.”

“But what if he does something else — sets the place on fire while you’re asleep, you never know what such a person might do.”

“He won’t — surely!” She looked around as if in a cell. “No —” She seemed very much afraid.

Summoning up the last reserve of unclouded consciousness, Sarah tried to press the advantage. “I’m sorry to keep returning to the other subject, but I suspect it fits in.”

“I’m not going back to Riverside now, Sarah. You and I have a great deal to discuss and we can do it right here.”

“The equipment and the people are at Riverside, and at the moment it’s a little early for discussion. That’ll come later when your therapy gets under way.”

“And who will be my therapist? You?” Miriam took a step toward Sarah and this time the menace did not come from outside. “We have a great deal to discuss.”

“Please, Miriam.” Now *that* sounded downright pitiful. Pull it together, girl! She closed her eyes, opened them with surprise. For an instant she had been asleep on her feet.

Miriam snatched her wrist. “Surely you’re willing to give me some of your time.”

Sarah couldn’t stand it, all of her carefully contained emotions were exposed by the steely power of that grip. “You let me go,” she mumbled, twisting weakly, feeling sharp pain in her wrist.

Miriam laughed, a brittle twinkling. For an instant the truth flashed in her eyes. Sarah saw abject, heartrending terror there, the awesome fear of a cornered animal.

Miriam enfolded her in strong arms, pressed her against the pretty pink-and-white dress. Sarah’s sheer exhaustion overcame the panic that wanted her to kick and scream. She was vaguely aware that Miriam had lifted her off her feet.

Only the rocking, pleasant motion of it reached her consciousness as Miriam carried her out of the room and swiftly up the stairs.

8

THERE WAS SINGING somewhere far away. Its purity drew Sarah from the comfortable warm place where she had been hiding. She rose swiftly into red fog. Beyond the fog was the source of the song. Sarah almost wept, she had not seen her mother since she was fifteen.

— her mother, who sang as she braided Sarah’s hair.

— singing on the car trip to Yellowstone.

— the voices of the church choir, her mother’s rising clear.

— her mother dying, the memory of her voice fading.

“Open your eyes, Sarah.”

The booming resolved into a headache, the red fog dissipated. Sarah was in a high old bed with satin sheets. A canopy of blue lace hung between her and the ceiling.

There came the hiss of a faucet. Then Miriam was handing her a glass of water. “It’ll make you feel better.”

Sarah took it. The liquid would certainly be welcome. When the coolness touched her lips she was brushed by a small memory. “I ought to go,” she said.

“Yes. It’s nearly noon.”

Sarah looked at her watch, hesitating an instant because of a dull pain in her

right arm. “Why am I in bed?” she asked.

Miriam threw back her head and laughed. It was reassuring, so open and innocent that it made Sarah want to laugh too. Miriam slid close to her and put her arms around her shoulders, looking into her face with a chummy smile. “You fell asleep, Doctor. You’re not good at staying up all night.”

Sarah couldn’t find a thing in her memory to contradict this. “Fell asleep?”

“You wanted to try the bed. What can I say? You’ve been there an hour and a half.”

A breeze billowed the curtains, bringing with it the scent of the garden. “It’s so hot,” Sarah said. Her skin was warm and dry.

“Take a shower before you go.”

As she stated to dismiss the idea, Sarah thought of the long day ahead at Riverside, the turmoil of work awaiting in her lab, all the other tensions and problems. She probably wouldn’t get another chance until midnight. Miriam went toward the bathroom.

“I’ll turn it on. You can leave your clothes in there.”

Sarah got up, grabbed the bedstead as mild vertigo passed through her system, then unhitched her skirt and tossed it on the bed. In a few moments she was naked, walking toward the roaring of the shower. Miriam looked pleased. Her sleeves were rolled up, an old-fashioned bath brush dangling from her hand. The room was filling with a marvelous rough-sweet scent. Sarah hesitated, suddenly aware of what she was doing, astonished at her own nakedness. But the scent was so appealing, it seemed to draw her on. “Is that your soap? I love it.”

“Brehmer and Cross make it up for me. I send them my own flowers to mix the perfume.”

Sarah stepped into the tub, moving the showerhead so that her hair wouldn’t get wet.

“Is the temperature right?”

“Maybe a touch warm.”

Miriam turned back the hot water handle.

“Perfect.”

“Open the window, you can look out on the garden while I do your back.” While Sarah hesitated Miriam laughed. “It’s OK, it’s perfectly private.” Sarah raised the sash. The breeze was delicious coming into the shower, and the only way she could be seen would be with a telescope from a boat on the East River. She leaned against the sill and looked down into the flowers as Miriam first massaged her neck and shoulders and then washed her back and buttocks with mountains of heady lather. The delicately bristled brush tickled delightfully. It was most relaxing. She didn’t stir as Miriam did her thighs and calves, then sluiced her with water. There came a gentle tug at her shoulder and Sarah turned around. She let Miriam bathe her, feeling a little embarrassed and more than a little touched. It was very, very pleasant to feel the brush on her abdomen, then sweeping down her legs amid all that wonderful yellow-green soap. “Close your eyes.” Miriam did her face with a lighter brush and with brief flutters of a cloth, her breasts. Sarah did not move until she heard Miriam’s voice and realized that the shower was over, it was time to dry off.

Miriam rubbed her down with a coarse towel, then followed it with a very soft one, moving it smoothly against her skin. “You can use some of my powder if you like.”

“I already smell like your flowers.”

“So does my powder.”

“I’m going to have to go to Brehmer and Cross. Where is it?”

“They don’t have a retail store, unfortunately. But if you’d like to order something I’ll give you their address.”

“It’s probably horribly expensive.” Sarah had fluffed some of the powder on and was redoing her mascara and lipstick.

“You use makeup? I don’t think you need it.”

Sarah smiled. “It’s just a habit. I don’t use a lot.”

“People used to paint their faces with lead pigment. The women looked like Chinese porcelain. Can you imagine?”

“That must have been before my time. Lead is poisonous.”

Miriam smiled. “How Tom must love you.” She said it with such feeling that Sarah turned in surprise. The kiss that came was small, little more than a peck, but it was on the lips. Sarah chose to take it as a gesture of friendship and smiled into it. “You’re just trying to smear my lipstick.”

She sat watching as Sarah dressed. To be admired so openly was pleasing to Sarah and she found herself adding a touch of grace to every movement. Miriam made her feel beautiful, and as she regarded herself in the dim mirror that hung above the vanity, a little proud. Her mother kept coming to mind. She had not felt this sense of intimate female friendship since she was a child.

Miriam walked her down the stairs. “When you get back to Riverside, they’re going to want to know what you accomplished. Tell them I’m still trying to make up my mind.”

“You?” For a moment Sarah was utterly confused, then she remembered the purpose of her visit. “Oh! Yes. I’ll tell them that.”

Miriam took both of Sarah’s hands in hers. “I called a cab. It’ll be here any minute.”

How considerate, Sarah thought.

Miriam leaned toward her, smiling. “You smell like a —”

“A rose?” Sarah offered.

A dark look crossed Miriam's face. "I never use them in fragrances." Her voice was harsher, almost strident. Then it all evaporated into another of those wonderful, warm smiles.

On the way to Riverside as Sarah lay back in the cab, she thought of how long it had been since she had enjoyed the special friendship of another woman, how very long.

Tom looked up as Sarah came slowly into his office. He had been developing a table of organization for the Blaylock project — if only he could find a way to split it off from Hutch's control. He had been about to greet Sarah, but her condition silenced him. Her clothes weren't on straight, her hair was tangled, and she smelled like a cathouse. When she saw his expression she returned a guilty look.

"I took a bath," she said. He heard a lot of strain in that voice.

"You sick?"

She shook her head, then dropped to the couch. "I feel hot. Is it hot in here?"

Maybe it was, a little. He pushed the window open the inch it would go. "Did you see Mrs. Blaylock at all, or just go home?"

He was stunned to hear her laugh, bitter and raucous. "I took the shower at her house."

He was at a loss for words. Her house? "You mean — Miriam Blaylock's house."

Sarah smiled mirthlessly. Her face dissolved by anguished degrees. He knew how she hated to cry. To see her try not to was more painful than if she had done it. Tom went to her, sat down beside her. The smell was quite sickening this close. It was one of those foul covering perfumes that must have been popular in the days before people bathed.

"I'm sorry. Very unprofessional of me." Now she broke down, grabbed his shoulders, and buried her face in his chest. Twisting as far as he could, he

managed to kick the door closed. He wasn't entirely sure why she was so agitated, but he didn't try to find out more details. That would come later. Right now she needed reassurance and a little tender care. He held her, stroking her hair. He would have kissed her but for the repellent odor. Despite himself he just could not get that close to it.

The funny thing was, he had smelled it before. Somewhere, in the mists of the past. Perhaps it was the perfume one of Granny Haver's friends had favored.

Despite the smell it still felt good to have Sarah in his arms. "I'm so glad you're back," he said softly. She only clutched him tighter. The bitterness of her tears made him wish that he had not made her go to Miriam Blaylock. Obviously, she was way out of her range of skills. But who wouldn't be, given the circumstances. "Will you take a Valium?"

"I don't want a Valium."

"Sarah, this is clearly a stress syndrome." He held her by the shoulders. Her face was red and swept with tears. She refused to be held away from him and took him around the neck, hugging him so tight that it hurt. "I love you," he said.

"Oh, Tom, I'm so glad."

He squeezed back, wishing that she had repeated his words, wondering why she hadn't. "I'm going to go get that Valium. You put your feet up here, darling." He had no trouble getting her to lie back on the couch, then hurried down the hall to the dispensary to sign out the pill. Never, ever should he have sent her on such a dangerous mission. He could be so damn ruthless when he felt threatened, and Hutch had really been putting him on the spot. Now Sarah was hurt, hurt bad. He had a mental image of Miriam Blaylock, strange, sexless creature, beautiful without being the least bit attractive.

Did Sarah feel the same way? Hadn't Tom seen a curious moment of intimacy between them on the sleep cubicle monitor? Certainly, it wasn't sexual, not in the usual sense of the word. But there must be something between them, some attraction. Tom shuddered, thinking of being touched by

that . . . thing.

Sarah's clothes, though — had she only taken a shower? What if Miriam had come to her, run those beautiful hands down her thighs, touched Sarah where she so enjoyed being touched. Yes, what if she had done that?

Poor Sarah! Above all, she treasured her professionalism. If she and Miriam had gone to bed together it meant that Sarah had violated every professional standard in the book — and right at the start of the most important case she or anybody else had ever had.

No wonder she was distraught. She might well have good reason to be.

He returned to his office to find her lying in a more relaxed pose, with eyes closed, one arm loosely across her face.

“I have the Valium.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I dislike weakness, you know that.” She sat up, a rush of motion. “Tom, she's very beautiful. Almost magical. A magical being.” She smiled. “Can you *believe* this?” The tears of a few minutes before still shone on her face. But now she smiled.

“No. But I have no choice. The data is there.” Tom could hardly believe it was the same Sarah. Were the contradictory emotions she was displaying even real? Was this how Sarah broke down — swinging between extremes?

“It's been quite a week,” she said with enthusiasm. “First Methuselah, then this. I keep thinking there must be a connection.”

He had wondered that himself, refused to entertain such a seductive and unscientific notion. “No, Sarah. Don't start thinking like that.”

“Perhaps there's something about what happened to Methuselah that . . . attracted her.”

“Moth to flame. What was the mode of attraction? Scent?”

“A mode we know nothing about. She is an unknown, after all.”

She was being cryptic. Tom wished that he didn't always have this sense of sparring with her. “Telepathy, then. But why? Methuselah was maybe a relative of hers?” Sarcasm. Did she deserve it? Possibly.

“Come on, be serious. Help me.”

“You won't accept my help.” He held out the Valium. She was under extreme stress. This latest mood swing proved it, or so he willed himself to believe.

“I don't like palliatives. I'd rather face myself.”

“Noble. Just don't go bathing around. It doesn't help your reputation. Not to mention the fact that you seem to have gotten perfumed in the basement of Kleins.”

“Kleins is out of business.”

“My point exactly.”

She grasped his hands, intense, an undertone of fear in her face. “Tom, am I in danger?”

The question had a nasty impact. He wanted to push it away but it remained there, demanding an answer. “Of course not,” he said and instantly cursed his own guilty lie. How could he be so sure? Paradoxically, he was angry with her. She had confused and upset him. He wanted his hard-driving professional back again, not this vague, dreamy creature off taking baths in the homes of her patients and failing to serve the vital interests of Riverside. Especially with Sam Rush peering over their collective shoulder.

“I *feel* like I'm in danger. I feel menaced. That incident at Miriam's was very odd, Tom. I haven't told you the half of it.”

“Is that an opening?”

She told him all that had happened, her voice curiously absent of emotion. “I think your own supposition was right,” Tom said when she was finished. “We’re dealing with an unknown. There isn’t yet any way to evaluate Miriam Blaylock or her behavior.”

“But it’s directed at me.”

“You don’t know that.” Why did he lie so? To make her feel better, or perhaps to delude her into staying with it? Yes, that was it. He needed Sarah to keep after Miriam — she was their only established link. That, beneath it all, was his true motive. He felt dirty and crass, seeing such a thing in himself. But he didn’t try to change it.

She grew silent. He waited through a minute for her to respond to him but she only sat there, hunched, almost contemplative. He wanted to press her for more information, but hesitated to do so. There was very little to be gained by cross-examining Sarah, he had long since learned that.

“I *do* know it,” she said at last. “Miriam Blaylock’s actions *are* directed at me.”

“Yes,” he said, hoping to draw a little more out of her. He became aware of a tension in the room, almost a charge, as thick as the air before a storm. In his mind’s eye he saw sick green clouds shot through with lightning. Sweat tickled his eyebrows and he wiped it impatiently away. She sat forward on the couch, grasped her hands around her knees.

“I feel like a kind of tentacle just reached out and touched me. I hate to say it, Tom, it’s so subjective that it’s embarrassing. But I do feel it.”

“Miriam Blaylock is hostile to you?”

Her eyes widened, all innocent surprise. “No, not at all. She’s part of it, but so is Methuselah. It’s not a coincidence. I feel almost as if Miriam — I know that this is a subjective way of putting it — Miriam in some way sought me out after Methuselah. As if it’s somehow very important to her.”

“I thought we discounted telepathy a second ago. As of this moment only a

few people knew about Methuselah, and Miriam Blaylock isn't one of them."

"Tom, what is she?"

Now he smiled. "You're the genius in the family. You tell me."

"Not from another planet. She's too close to human. Another species, living right here all along. An identical twin."

"Does that wash? Five thousand years of civilization and nobody's noticed?"

"Maybe and maybe not. What about the Amazons? What were they?"

He raised his eyebrows, thinking of large, domineering blondes. "Maybe she ought to run for office. Keep the mobs in line."

"You're a master of the extraneous comment, you know that. It's perfectly possible that a twin species would go unnoticed. Maybe they don't want to be noticed. If I was hiding and you didn't even know to look for me, you'd never find me — unless I wanted you to."

He kissed the top of her head, knelt down beside the couch. The odor was less strong, or perhaps he wanted her more. "I love you," he said again. The intensity of the past few days was still very much with him. The sense of devotion he was beginning to feel was a very new thing for him. Almost absently she stroked his head, pulling it down into her lap. He crouched there, afire with this terrible need for her that left him feeling utterly alone.

"Tom, I'm frightened."

"It's a frightening situation."

"Something brought her out of hiding. Something about me." The hand stopped stroking his head. He reached up and grasped it, then raised himself and slipped onto the couch beside her. She snuggled into his shoulder.

"I won't let it happen."

"What?"

“Whatever it is you feel might happen. I’m slow but I feel it too.”

“Don’t let’s both panic!”

“I’m not scared. Concerned and protective. You’ve got my primitive male juices flowing.”

“Not here in the office.” She arched her back, ran her hand along his thigh. He kissed her. The office was quiet, the hubbub outside far away. Beyond the windows small white clouds sailed through the sky. Tom extended the kiss, finding an urgency in himself that he had not expected. There came a sweeping, aggressive wave and he took her in his arms and laid her on the couch. There was barely room enough for the two of them. Her face, framed by brown curly hair, caught in the crook of his arm, looked up at him happily. “Not here,” she said again. “Anybody could walk in.”

“Don’t you like danger?”

“I’m not the type.”

“I find it exciting.” He opened his trousers, let her see his eagerness.

“Tom, really, this is crazy!”

“We need it.”

“What if Hutch comes in? You’ll look like a fool.”

Her resistance drove him on, created in him a compulsion to the act. “Let him come. Exposure to a little human love would do him good.” He slipped his hands under her skirt and rolled her panties down.

“Tom, this is *crazy!*”

“You sound like a broken record.”

“Well, it is — oh —”

The relentlessness of his thrust excited him more. Her face flushed, she shook

her head from side to side. “I love you,” he breathed, and whispered her name with the rhythm of their bodies. Voices rose outside the door but he chose to ignore them. When her eye flickered concern he smothered her with kisses. Then he pressed his lips close to her ear and whispered the sort of things she liked to hear, the words that excited her. It was silly, perhaps, certainly childish, but Tom knew that there had to be a certain dirtiness, a sense of evil, for Sarah to really enjoy herself.

He brought her to a climax, her thighs pumping, her face sweaty and surprised. He lost himself in the quivering pleasure of his own love, barely aware that the voices in the hall had not gone away. “For God’s sake, it’s Charlie and Phyllis out there! Hurry!” He pumped frantically. There came a tapping at the door. Sarah cleared her throat, changed her tone to one of businesslike precision. “One moment, please,” she sang out, “he’s on the phone.”

“You’re not a phone.”

“Hurry up! You’re a man, you’re supposed to be fast!”

“Don’t whisper so loud, they’ll hear you.”

Never before had he made love under such circumstances. Every movement, no matter how small, bore with it a sense of stolen delight. Taking Sarah here on the couch, with the door about to be opened on them, was delicious beyond belief. ‘A little of the exhibitionist in you,’ he thought.

They knocked again. “Who’s he talking to, God? We’ve got important business.”

“I know that, Phyllis,” Sarah said, her voice wobbling with his thrusts. She was now rubbing against him with all her might, trying to speed things up. The couch, the whole office was shaking. “Hurry dear, hurry dear,” she breathed in rhythm to their movements, “let it go, let it go —”

And he did, like stars exploding, huge and rich with a thousand wild tickling joys. They lay still an instant, both breathing hard, a moment’s deference. He rose off her, closed his pants over his still-enormous organ. “I’d better hide

behind the desk, my love,” he said as she smoothed her skirt and went to the door.

“Sorry,” she said, swinging it wide, “come on in.”

Charlie and Phyllis glanced at each other. Tom controlled himself carefully. Sarah was sweating and flushed, obviously trying to control her ragged breathing. “Some phone call,” Charlie said in a nervous voice.

“Let’s get on with it,” Tom growled. “I haven’t got all day.”

“No,” Phyllis murmured, “obviously not.”

“Come on, come on.” He was pleased to see Sarah blow a kiss at him, roll her eyes in an exaggerated pantomime of ecstasy. He began to feel rather proud of himself.

“Briefly,” Charlie said, “we’ve been doing a little comparative analysis between Methuselah and Miriam Blaylock.”

“Why?” Sarah’s voice was sharp. She stood up and came to the desk where Charlie had laid out some glossy color photographs of various blood cells.

“We noticed that Mrs. Blaylock’s erythrocytes were the same color as Methuselah’s, when he was in his terminal phase.”

“Which means?”

“The color of his deepened right before the end. His need for oxygen seemed to be declining at that time.”

Sarah was literally sparkling. Maybe Tom ought to hit her under a restaurant table next time. She appeared to like the threat of exposure very well. “What are you driving at? Was the same pigmentation factor present in both bloods?” There was the brilliant scientist Tom knew and loved.

“It sure as hell looks like it. But that isn’t the whole story.” Charlie pulled out some more glossies. “Here you see Methuselah’s erythrocytes in a time series. They get darker and darker.” In the first photograph they were deep

purple and misshapen. “Remember that Geoff took another blood sample after Mrs. Blaylock had been asleep a couple of hours? Well, look.” The purple pigmentation of her blood cells had faded to a healthy pink-white.

“Conclusion,” Phyllis added, “Mrs. Blaylock slept off something similar to what destroyed Methuselah.”

Tom spoke quickly, trying to cut the edge of panic that had flickered in Sarah’s eyes. “At least this means that there is no further question of the Gerontology budget being cut. I doubt if we’ll even need a meeting of the board now.” Nobody smiled. “Clap clap clap. I thought you’d be delighted.”

“We’re not surprised,” Charlie said. “It was obvious as soon as we compared the bloods.”

“Tell me, what does it all imply?”

“How should we know, Tom?” Sarah’s voice was high, nervous. “It suggests a lot of things.”

“Some of them downright strange,” Phyllis added. “Like why Mrs. Blaylock came here.”

“Smart girl,” Tom said. “That is indeed what Sarah and I have been trying to understand. It seems as if she somehow discovered Sarah’s work and was drawn to her — for some reason we do not know.”

Sarah’s face had become waxlike. Concealing. Sarah hid her feelings. “Your thoughts, Doctor Roberts?”

“That’s an unfair question, Tom.”

“You thrive on unfair questions.”

She tossed her head, her chin jutting up. Her lips were set in a line, her eyes glaring defiantly at him. It was pitiful to see how hard she had to work to hide fear.

“I think we’ll have to pull together,” Tom said. “I’m going to declare Miriam

Blaylock a special project and get myself appointed director. We'll budget it from the general fund, go around Hutch."

"Why is that necessary? Hutch'll cooperate completely. He might not agree with everything we say and do, but he's a scientist, he sees the importance of this work."

"Thank you, Sarah. May I remind you who it was just about destroyed your Gerontology lab? I can settle it all with a single telephone call to Sam Rush. He'll confirm our request before he even thinks of Hutch."

"Hutch founded this lab!"

"He's as good as dead. I'm very sorry, but it happens."

"I'm going to tell him —"

"No, ma'am. You have your job and I have mine. Let's not let our differences come between us." He held out his hand. "You don't know a thing about front-office politics."

There was a silence. "I get the impression that this meeting is concluded," Charlie said into it. He gave a nervous laugh. "You can count on me boss."

"I won't talk to Hutch," Sarah murmured. "I don't have time."

Charlie and Phyllis gathered up their materials and left. Tom sat, trying to feel the impassivity of a Buddha. He expected to get a real chewing-out from Sarah, but instead she went over to the couch and flopped down with her arm once again over her eyes.

Tom seasoned and lit a cigar. Now was a good time for his one shot of the day. He reached up and opened the window so that Sarah wouldn't complain too much.

But she didn't complain at all. Tom was surprised to see that she was asleep. So suddenly, poor, tired Sarah. He got his raincoat from the hook on the door and covered her with it. He would let her sleep, call Rush in an hour or so. There was no need to hurry. This latest discovery propelled him into a very

strong position. Obviously the Blaylock project should be under a special administrator. He had no illusions about getting Hutch to resign, but he was sure that he could capture for himself management of the project, and take Gerontology along with it. That would leave Hutch on the trailing edge, administering the conventional parts of the clinic, the parts that were of absolutely no interest to the Dr. Rushes of this world.

Tom sucked his cigar, inhaling deeply, feeling the warmth of the smoke in his lungs. He exhaled. All forbidden, all dangerous. It was so typical of the human predicament that something as pleasurable as a cigar would have to be so damn unhealthy.

Largely to stop feeling guilty about the cigar he turned his mind to the more puzzling aspects of Miriam Blaylock. She had certainly had a hell of an effect on Sarah.

There was something about Miriam that recalled Granny Haver after her husband and all of her friends were dead. Granny had seemed as bright and spry as ever, laughing all the time, raising her flowers, baking pie after pie. And yet, if you really looked at Gran Haver — looked beyond the tantalizing hints of former beauty and the present ruins — you got a hell of a chill.

Late one winter she screamed horribly. Tom's first waking thought was fire. By the time they had gotten upstairs she was dead, not of fire but of something else. Her eyes were wide, her hands like claws. Had she had a nightmare, died of fright?

Tom had helped his father carry her to the parlor. The wind had howled and he had felt presences. A nightmare — or a night visit?

Afterward he had always assumed that Gran Haver had died with some hidden thing on her conscience. That scream had been her last utterance on earth, her first in hell.

“Who are you, Miriam?” he asked softly, chuckling to himself. ‘OK, scientist,’ he thought, ‘here you are ready to believe that she can hear you, read your mind.’

Well, why not?

What was “this world”? The hospital? This office? The warm taste of the cigar? What, really?

Tom reassured himself that he was grounded in the practical. It was possible that this planet did indeed hold two species who were superficially similar. The perfect predator would be indistinguishable from his prey. That would be beautiful. Once in college someone had asked the question, what if the essence of reality is belief? That which is believed is real. What if real witches flew on wings of belief through the nights of fourteenth-century Europe and consorted with demons in a real hell? Or if the gods really walked among the Greeks?

Or Miriam Blaylock among us?

Sarah believed in Miriam, that was the source of her fear. Perhaps Miriam was what you wanted her to be — *whatever* you wanted. Perhaps that was the definition of a monster.

SWABIA: 1724

It is freezing cold in the carriage. A candle guttering in a socket is the only light. Thick fog chokes the way. Trees pass like shadowy towers, their branches swishing down the sides of the coach.

Across from Miriam sit her three sisters. Her brother is in her arms. She found them in Paris, half-starved, subsisting on the flesh of diseased beggars, constantly on the run. The girls huddle in their broadcloth cloaks, their faces the color of stone. Her brother leans stiffly against her. She touches his cheek, wiping away the dew that has settled there.

Her hand snaps back, she comes fully aware. Trembling, she touches him again.

The skin is like a mask stretched on a skull. And the mouth is opening.

She screams, but the sound is choked by a violent lurch of the carriage. The driver has whipped the horses up. Wolves stand beside the road, dozens and dozens of them. The horses bolt, the carriage careens.

Without a word, their faces fixed in grief, Miriam's sisters open the door and throw out their brother's body.

Miriam protests. They are not yet animals! She unlatches her own door and jumps from the carriage. Her silks splash in the muddy road. The carriage sways off.

Suddenly, quiet. Ten feet away lie his huddled ruins. She can see the blowing breath of the wolves. There is such serenity in their faces. That, and death. She can smell it in the wet air, an exhalation of demons. One of them dashes up and worries her brother's filthy gabardine cloak.

She drives it off, drags her brother from the sucking mud. Bearing him in her arms, she begins to plod down the road. Her heart is dull with hopeless sorrow. Ahead the carriage has stopped, rising enormous in the fog. She can hear the driver singing some lament of his wild Carpathian people.

Without a word she returns to her place, hugging the withered remains close to her. Her sisters sit bowed, their shame too great for them to bear looking at her.

A little before noon they arrive in a village. The driver climbs down and doffs his filthy cap. "Zarnesti," he says. Miriam hands out a silver florin, holding it between her fingers so that he can take it without touching her.

Zarnesti is a poor place deep in Swabia. They have come here following rumors that their kindred have found a measure of safety in these wild regions. The village reeks, it is sick and starving. There are wattled houses here and there and in the center a church made of logs. Behind the church is a long building, an inn. On all sides the forest threatens. In the shadows of the closer trees there are ruined cottages. Miriam's sisters cross the clearing, their cloaks trailing in the muck. They are followed by hungry pigs.

Miriam leaves her brother in the carriage and hurries to catch up with his

sisters. They are so desperate that she is afraid they will ignore her careful plan of attack.

They are negotiating with the innkeeper, their high voices mingling with the screams of birds in the forest. The innkeeper grovels when he is given a gold penny. He pulls back a greased cloth that covers the doorway, and the four of them stoop to enter. The odor forces Miriam to breathe in gasps. She sees that her sisters' nostrils are dilating toward a young woman who is stirring a stewpot. Wicks gutter on the two tables in the room; the walls are slick with grease. When she notices them the young woman drops her spoon and comes over. She is covered with boils. Her mouth hanging open, she kneels before them and stretches out her arms like a suppliant. She is asking to take their cloaks.

One of her sisters inclines her head, her eyes avid. Miriam frowns furiously. Would she really take this vile thing?

Her sisters ignore her. They move like shadows in the smoky darkness. Silently she pleads with them. Their hearts do not feel her *touch*. They continue searching the darkness for hidden treasure. Knives and eyes and teeth gleam in the flickering light.

It is a dance, Miriam moving from one to the other. Both turn away.

A shout of furious pain is suddenly stifled. The innkeeper has been taken. Then the coachman, too late in rushing for the door. Then, in a filthy corner, they descend on the girl. But something is wrong. A struggle starts, the girl squeals and skitters, knocking one of the wicks to the floor, spreading coals across the dirt to roll under her attackers' dresses.

While they are jumping away from this danger she tears a hole in the wattled wall. Her gray form bobs among the ferns as she disappears into the forest behind the inn.

Now they must hurry, before she raises the alarm. All of this country lives in terror of their kind. Packs of them have been ranging through Swabia, Transylvania, Hungary, Slovakia, falling on villages and taking whole populations. They Sleep in graves to deter the superstitious, who will not

approach a graveyard at night without much priestly preparation. When a village is depopulated they pull it down and throw the remains into the river, going on to the next town up the road.

Rumor has spread through the mountains. The whole region is obsessed with them.

It is a bad time for their kind. They had grown used to anarchy in the centuries that followed the fall of Rome. Now that government is returning to Western Europe they have been forced to the hinterlands.

Not a day passes that they do not have news of disaster. Ancient names are dying, names taught Miriam by her father: Ranftius, Harenberg, Tullius. All Europe is inflamed against them. Idiots creep about with crosses and garlic, spouting bad Latin.

Idiots though they be, the Inquisition is winning. Not a town west of the Oder has not burned at least a few.

The church bell begins to peal.

There is a horrible shriek at the door. Miriam's sisters, now wild to escape, throw back the greasy cloth. A crowd of thirty or forty people is outside, standing around the overturned brougham. Her brother is being handed among them, his clothes being ripped from his body.

Suddenly, there is a shaft of light — other villagers have broken into the rear wall of the inn. Miriam moves quickly. She digs herself into a pile of hay in a corner. The roar of excited voices fill the room.

Heartsick and terrified, Miriam huddles in absolute stillness. The voices drown the frantic shrieking of her sisters.

Protect them, her father had said.

How can she face his memory now? And what of her mother, who died during the birth of the triplets? Was her death pointless?

Miriam is stronger than the three of them together because she has for a long

time been better fed. But is she strong enough to free them from these maddened villagers?

The voices have become joyous as the villagers loot the carriage and rob the captured sisters. They are finding a few pitiful gold pennies, to them the treasure of kingdoms.

Suddenly men and women bustle over and pull away some of Miriam's cover. She prepares herself to face them, but they rush off. The straw is to start a fire. They have not noticed her.

Against one wall of the inn stands a great iron spit, used no doubt when this village had porkers large enough to roast. There is crackling as the straw blazes up around logs.

Realizing what is going to happen, Miriam's sisters begin to bellow her name. "MIRIAM! MIRIAM!" A part of her is secretly glad that they do not know where she is hiding. She tells herself over and over that she cannot save them, she cannot prevail against fifty people. She lies amid the fleas and lice, feeling rats run over her from time to time, listening as her siblings bawl their pleas for help.

She has never been so needed. Again she remembers her father. He was a hero.

She begins to remove the straw, starts to sit up. But she freezes, the spectacle before her is so awful. Her youngest sister is naked. They lash her to the spit. Then she is laid across the flames.

A great sizzling starts, like parchment burning. She shrieks and shrieks, her urine steaming into the flames, her head shaking, her hair smoking and red with fire.

They damp the fire and slowly begin to turn the spit.

Her screams continue a long, long time. After an hour her voice breaks and all that issues are hisses.

Miriam's other two sisters slump in a corner, tied as tightly together as two geese on market day.

It is night before all three are roasted.

Miriam has bitten her lips raw to keep from screaming. Her whole body buzzes with the pain of a thousand flea bites. Until late at night the room is filled with the sharp odor of cooking flesh and the gay shouts of the crowd. Of course they are gay, they have captured gold and been sated with her sisters, more meat than they have eaten in years. As dawn threatens, the villagers drink their foul black beer and have their couplings. Then they sleep.

Miriam bursts from her hiding place and runs. She lifts her brother's body from the mud where it has been thrown and carries him into the forest, rushing as fast as possible through the trees, wild to escape this horrible place. Her heart aches for her lost sisters, but she dares not even approach their bones.

Soon she is in a dawn-filled glade. Flowers bob at her feet, the Carpathian massif rises in the clear sky. Before that majesty she shouts her grief. The sound is absorbed.

She is flooded with an agony of loneliness. Perhaps she should deliver herself to the villagers. But she cannot go back, cannot give herself to the flames. The beauty of life remains. Let the dead be their own heroes.

With her brother in her arms she sets out to cross the mountains, intending to seek a better land beyond.

9

JOHN HAD WAITED to return until Miriam was gone. It was the safest way. It was easy to defeat the electrostatic barrier. He came in through the disused tunnel he had used for his escape. He had a mission here. He went through the silent rooms. Scattered around the library were newspapers, all containing sensational stories about his crimes. He sneered at her caution. This was a big city. The police had a long way to go before they brought him to ground.

He paused, shut his eyes. Another hallucination was beginning. This time a healthy girl of about fourteen swam into view before him. John ignored the delicious figment, impatient with this latest side effect of his desperate hunger. She stepped forward, her smell filling his nostrils. It was maddening; he swiped angrily at the empty air. The hunger cloyed and strained within him. Soon he must take to the streets again.

He went upstairs, paused in the door of their bedroom. Although he was on his way to the attic he wasn't in any hurry. There was something to be savored in how he intended to harm her.

Tom had coaxed Sarah out to a celebration after his conversation with Sam Rush. She had wanted to stay with her lab group, but he had managed to convince her that the project could go through its next phase without her in attendance. Her failure to get Miriam Blaylock to return to Riverside had stopped much of the work anyway. Without a subject, they couldn't very well make observations.

"You're celebrating a man's destruction," Sarah said as they sat down to a

Mexican dinner at Las Palmas on Eighty-sixth Street.

“I’m celebrating nothing of the kind. Hutch still has his job.”

“The biggest discovery in history, and you took it right out of his lap. You.”

He winced. “OK, I’m an ogre.”

“Ambitious bastard.” She smiled. “I wish I could punish you, Tom. God knows you need it. But the truth is I’m so damn relieved, I can’t see straight. Knowing that we’re out from under Hutch is — well, it does deserve a celebration.”

“I’m only an ogre when it comes to protecting your work.”

“Wipe that sincere smirk off your face, my love. It makes you look like a card sharp.”

“I think I resent that.”

“You love it.” She lifted her glass of beer. “Here’s to you, you bastard.”

“And to you, bitch.”

“Don’t call me names. *I* don’t deserve it.”

He could see a real argument developing out of this, so he said no more. The waiter returned and they gave their orders. Tom was surprised to hear Sarah order the biggest dinner on the menu; she normally subsisted on nibbles and snacks. Sometimes he thought a handful of birdseed a day was all she really needed. “At least you’re really hungry for once. That’s a good sign.”

“Developing neurosis. I’ll be as plump as a pigeon in a few years.”

“You don’t care?”

Her eyes flashed. “Tonight I want to eat. There’s nothing the matter with that.” She paused. “I’m ravenous, as a matter of fact. A second ago I felt like taking a salad right off that tray.” She gestured toward a waiter wheeling

among the tables.

Their food was served promptly. For five minutes Sarah was silent, digging at her enchiladas and tamales. "Care for more?" Tom asked.

"Yeah!" He signaled the waiter and she ordered another round. An appetite was fine, but she was going to turn into a sausage if this kept up. "Got a pencil and paper?" she asked. "I've had some insights."

"I'll memorize them. Tell me."

"One. We're correct to assume that Miriam is evolved from a primate ancestor. She's too close to us not to be. Two. We therefore need skeletal X rays so that we can determine which primate line is involved. Three. One thing is certain, she and her kind are in some sort of symbiosis with us, otherwise why would they keep themselves hidden? They take something from us we wouldn't otherwise give."

"Why does that follow?"

"What else would be their motive for secrecy? And it's not a matter of being overlooked. It is deliberate. It must also be hard to do. It can't have been easy to remain undetected for so long." She paused, ate a couple of bites with birdlike speed. "I wonder what they take from us. I wonder if we'll find out."

Tom envied her the clarity of her mind. She had reduced the whole affair to two important questions.

Suddenly she stopped eating. She dropped her fork on the plate and looked up at him, her face pallid. "Let's get out of here." Tom obediently paid the bill and they went out into the crowds thronging Eighty-sixth Street. Smoke billowed from chestnut stands, radios under the arms of geeks blared disco music. They passed a Chinese restaurant, a German restaurant, a Greek restaurant. Only when they had rounded the corner onto Second Avenue did the crowds thin.

"I'm going to lose my lunch, I'm afraid."

“OK, honey.” He wasn’t surprised, the way she had eaten so much spicy food. “Can you make it —” She let go in the gutter. Fortunately, their building was just at the other end of the block and Herb, the late-shift doorman, had seen it happen. He trotted up with a towel in his hand. “Doctor Roberts,” he said in a gruff, surprised voice. “Jeez, you must have got the stomach flu, ma’am.”

Tom was holding her head. He brushed her sweating face with the towel. Cars rushed by three feet away. Pedestrians passed up and down the sidewalk. A fire truck, complete with balancing Dalmatian, roared by. Sarah coughed mightily.

“Oh, I feel *awful*,” she moaned. “Tom I’m so cold!”

“Come on, let’s get you to bed!”

“Can you make it, Doc? You want I should carry her?”

Sarah staggered to her feet. “No thanks, Herb.” She tottered into the lobby on Tom’s arm. His mind inventoried the various types of food poisoning it could be. The onset was too sudden for botulism. They hadn’t had mushrooms, so it couldn’t be that. Probably old friend salmonella, or just plain overeating. He’d keep her quiet and warm, she’d be on her feet in no time.

“Gonzalo,” Herb said into the housephone, “come watch the door. I’m goin’ upstairs with the Docs.”

They rode up quietly, the only sound in the elevator Sarah’s breathing. “Tom, it’s going to happen!” Her voice quavered.

They were at nineteen and rising. “Just another second, honey.”

Herb looked miserable, he was about to get one messed-up elevator. But he didn’t, she made it as far as their foyer. Tom was half angry with her, half pitying. She didn’t have to eat like a hippo, after all. But she was suffering for it, and he suffered with her. “C’mon, honey,” he said, “it’s bed and bucket time.” All he got was a moan.

He left her sprawled on the bed with their mop bucket on the floor beside her and strict instructions to use it. Then he went about cleaning up the mess in the foyer without getting sick himself. Herb had slipped away while he was bedding her down. The man couldn't be blamed.

When he returned to the bedroom he was surprised to find her sitting up. "I'm better," she said. She glared, as if daring him to contradict her.

At that moment the doorbell rang. "God damn, they never leave you alone — who is it!"

"Herb again. You got a package."

Tom pulled the door open. "A Fleet Messenger come up and delivered it while Gonzalo was workin' the door, Doctor Haver." It was a compact box wrapped in beautiful blue paper and tied with a ribbon. It was addressed to Sarah. With a shrug Tom took it to her.

"Who could have sent me a present?"

"Open it, maybe there's a card inside."

She shook it and listened.

"Expecting a bomb, sweetheart?"

With a slight smile playing across her face she tore it open. At once powerful perfume filled the room. There were six cakes of yellow-green soap.

"Good God, throw it out, throw it out!"

"Miriam sent it."

"Don't you think it's a little sweet? As a matter of fact —"

"Come on, honey, it's nice." She held a bar to her nose and inhaled.

"Wonderful. I told her how much I liked it while I was at her house. She's just being considerate."

“All right already, seal it up in something for now. Let me get used to the idea.” Then a thought struck him. “Good God, I *know* that soap!” He took a bar in his hand. Sure enough, a label was imprinted on it, *Brehmer and Cross, to the Trade*. Tom burst out laughing, tossed the soap on the bed.

“What the hell’s so funny? She has it made up specially.”

“Oh, yeah! Sure she does! You know what that stuff is? Mortician’s soap. They use it on corpses. That’s where in hell I’ve smelled the damn stuff and why it makes me sick. They used it on Gran Haver when I was a kid. Kept her from stinking up the living room.”

Sarah touched the bar of soap, withdrew her hand. Tom came close to her. “Her thought processes are different from ours.”

“But she said —”

“Who knows what she said? You shouldn’t assume you understand her motives. Maybe it’s some kind of joke.”

After a long silence Sarah said that she supposed it must be. There weren’t any arguments when Tom threw the soap away. Her nausea appeared to have stopped and she didn’t have any significant fever so they contented themselves with doing nothing for now about her sickness.

“You probably don’t even need electrolyte replacement,” Tom commented.

“Good. I really don’t even want water right now.”

“Wait till you feel thirsty. Hey, look at this.” He was glancing through *TV Guide*. “‘Great Performances’ is on thirteen at nine. It’s nine now.”

While they were watching, Tom noticed Sarah rubbing her right arm. “You OK?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe you sprained it in the street.”

“It’s hurt all afternoon.”

Midway through the show she turned on her bedside lamp. “Tom, look at this.” There was a pinhole lesion on her forearm.

“Did you give blood?”

“When would I give blood? Maybe something stung me. I’ll bet that’s what made me sick.”

Tom examined the wound. The bruise running along the vein, the redness of the wound itself — it looked for all the world as if Sarah had been given a transfusion.

“A spider bite,” she said.

Tom noticed a rasping undertone. Sarah was scared. He touched her shoulder. “If that’s what it is, not to worry, it’s a mild one.”

“Yeah. Mild.”

“That’s right, darling. No myalgia, no cramps. Those are both present when you have a serious spider bite.”

She sighed. “It’s disgusting, but I’m incredibly hungry again.”

Tom didn’t know what to say. His mind moved through the catalogue of her symptoms. He thought of suggesting that Sarah check into the hospital but immediately dismissed the idea. The symptoms were too minor. Thousands of people suffered slight cases of food poisoning or insect bite and never went to a hospital. Yet Tom worried. He looked at her face. Its color was poor, and its unusual roundness indicated slight edema. Her skin felt cool and rather dry. “Hungry or not,” he said at last, “I think you ought to try to get some sleep. We’ll eat a big breakfast in the morning.”

She didn’t argue but her eyes were pained. They took off their clothes, settled into bed. After five minutes with *Time*, Tom turned out the light. He patted Sarah’s bottom, then listened to her tossing and turning for what seemed a long time. Only when her breath became regular and deep did he begin to

relax. A last touch told him she had no fever. Finally, sleep took him as well.

* * *

Thunder rolled and blue lightning flashed against the ceiling. Sarah stared into the darkness that followed the flash. Hadn't that been a silhouette in the hall? Sheets of rain fell. The wind moaned past the building. She lay absolutely still, barely breathing, waiting for more lightning so she could see.

When it came the hall was empty. Her heart began to beat more slowly. She had been about to wake Tom. Now she withdrew her hand and threw her forearm across her eyes. Her skin crawled, she ached, she was freezing. A vision came to her, of a Big Mac and double fries and a huge, cold Coke. Disgusting, she hardly ever ate that sort of stuff. Yet it remained there, a powerful temptation. Her eyes went to the clock on the dresser. It was hard to read the dial from here but it appeared to be about two-thirty.

A bad time to go outside in New York City. She visualized the McDonald's on Eighty-sixth Street: a few people huddled over coffee, maybe a couple of cops taking a break. She could almost smell the place, a scent of heaven.

She slipped out of bed slowly and very carefully. If she woke Tom she sure as hell wouldn't be able to do what she intended. The McDonald's wasn't far. She would probably be fine. She pulled on jeans and a sweat shirt and laced up her jogging shoes. As she left the apartment she noticed that Tom — typically — had forgotten to lock up. She paused to lock both the dead bolt and the mortise lock with her key and then went to the elevator. For a supposedly ruthless type Tom was surprisingly absentminded.

The elevator doors opened onto an empty lobby. There was a stentorian rattling sound — Herb asleep at his post. The lobby doors were locked to the street so Sarah would have to let herself in when she got back.

Outside the air was storm-fresh, smelling wet and green. But for the souging of the wind the street was quiet. Sarah found the emptiness of it all quite wonderful. She strode along feeling as if she had acquired a sort of secret power just by coming out at this hour. She went two blocks down and turned

east on Eighty-sixth. The McDonald's was open, as she had known it would be. There were many more people inside than she had visualized. In fact the place was humming. She had to spend five minutes in line, finally all but hopping from foot to foot with hunger.

She ordered two Big Macs, double fries, a pie and a jumbo Coke. Cradling her food, she found a seat across from a hulking young man who ignored her. After a couple of annoyed tongue-clicks he got up and pranced off to another table. For the first time Sarah really looked around. She almost laughed, everybody in the place was gay except her. There were transvestites huddled over milkshakes, leather boys devouring Steakburgers, men in all variations of straight and drag dress, all engaged in a slow dance among the tables.

Sarah was left alone, which was fine with her. The hamburgers seemed unusually good, rich with flavor, aromatic, cooked just right. Better than Big Macs usually were, far better. Even the Coke and fries were wonderful. What did this place do — serve gourmet junk food after the moon went down?

The only thing that prevented her from getting another couple of hamburgers was the memory of what had happened earlier. She didn't feel full but good sense told her not to overeat. At least Tom had promised a big breakfast. She pictured eggs and hot, spicy sausages and a mountain of buttered toast, and maybe pancakes on the side. Her mouth watered. The big clock above the take-out counter read 3:00. It was at least four hours until she could taste that breakfast. She got up, forced herself to leave the restaurant. She'd pass the hours walking, she had no intention of cooping herself up in their bedroom until dawn.

Her earlier indisposition seemed to be gone. There was more rain threatening, but she didn't care. She would welcome the bracing cold of it. Her hunger was still with her, but it only added intensity to the glorious way she was beginning to feel. She found herself walking east past empty shops and dark apartment houses, and with a more rapid step into the quiet stretch between York and East End avenues. Here the buildings are older, the lights dimmer. Across East End lay the darkness of Carl Shurz Park. With its few old streetlamps lighting the paths, and the mist that hung beneath the tall trees, the park reminded her of a scene from childhood, from her teenage years in Savannah. She had a vivid memory of Bobby Dewart, the sour smell of his

skin and the lovely, adolescent hours they had spent touching one another among the headstones in the old Savannah City Graveyard. They had walked along the docks afterward, smelling the salt breeze that came up the Savannah River at night, watching the last tourists leave the Pirate House Restaurant, and declaring the eternity of their love.

Being fourteen, she had known nothing of the ways of time. Soon her father had been transferred by International Paper, next stop Des Moines. And Bobby Dewart? She had no idea.

At this moment, as she crossed East End, drawn by the sensuality of the night park, she remembered that love in all its timid eagerness. It had been young and doomed — and yet hadn't it also in a sense been eternal?

There came into her heart a painful longing for all her lost secret places: night and empty benches and abandoned paths. She went slowly down the tarmac sidewalk, recalling with this same delectable pain her great loves, Bobby and the others, and yes, Tom too. He ranked as a great love, she could not deny it. She went through the park until she came to the esplanade that stretches beyond it. Bordered on one side by buildings and on the other by the East River. The current, always swift, hissed in the darkness below. Far out in the river a small boat was defined by its bobbing lights. Along the esplanade the benches gleamed, still wet with rain. Immediately behind the benches rose the apartment buildings. The terraces of the lower floors jutted out perhaps ten feet above the walk. In their darkness these buildings acquired something that they did not possess during daylight hours. Sarah could not define it exactly. Certainly it wasn't menace. More a sense of mystery.

Their blank windows were . . . interesting. It didn't seem impossible, the way she had begun to feel, that she could climb to one of those terraces.

Then what would she do?

She could taste a peach breaking in her mouth, its juicy sweetness filling her with delight.

People lay sleeping in those buildings, thousands of them, each locked in his own dreams, vulnerable and quiet.

Sarah walked softly along, full of an obscure and subtle longing. She felt a lust for all things beautiful, reflected that there was no such thing as an ugly human being.

She wanted to get into one of their apartments, to touch their belongings, to listen to their soft breathing.

She found herself standing on one of the benches. With her arms raised to their full length the lowest balcony was three feet above her. She crouched down on the bench. By springing straight up she might just be able to catch the edge of the balcony.

Do *what?* This was absurd. Aberrant behavior. Psychopathic. Still, her muscles were tensing, her hands stretching to grasp, her eyes measuring the distance. There wasn't a trace of psychopathic behavior in her personality. If anything, she was too civilized.

Then she was hanging on the edge of the terrace, her fingers grasping, her legs swinging. It was impossible and yet she had done it.

Her arms and fingers did not ache as they should. Rather they felt like steel. She raised herself to the edge and looked onto the terrace itself. There was a barbeque, a couple of canvas chairs, a tricycle. Her right hand grasped one of the iron bars that formed the railing of the terrace.

She was beginning to feel a strange aggressive anger, an eagerness to get in there and —

She dropped to the ground, the thud echoing up and down the esplanade. The image that had made her release her grip now made her hunch her shoulders and clasp her arms around herself, hugging herself against its ugliness.

She didn't feel things like that! She loved mankind, that was the foundation of her life. How could she possibly, even for an instant, have wanted to kill innocent human beings, to crack them open like — like she had imagined.

It was as if somebody else was living in her body, some wild being, driven by needs of which she herself was ignorant.

“Has this always been in me, deep back behind the me I know?”

Yes. Hidden, but there.

Now given life. Something enormous was stirring and waking in her, she felt. It was as old as life, perhaps, but also new. It was what had driven her out here in the middle of the night, had converted a simple thing such as hunger into a gluttonous lust, had made her so abnormally interested in the people in the apartments.

She began to walk quickly along the esplanade, seeking a more open area, a place where she would be less tempted to this behavior.

As she moved she had the uncanny sensation that somebody or something was moving with her, walking as she walked, breathing as she breathed.

Something not quite of this world.

It was tall and pale and as quick as a hawk.

She started to run. Her footsteps whispered on the pavement; the sneakers deadened the sound. But not the fear: she grasped her hands over her head and crouched low.

Great wings seemed to rise into the sky.

Hallucination.

Abruptly, the needle mark came to mind. That was, of course, what it was. Not an insect bite or some other innocent wound. Miriam had given her something with a needle.

The pale thing moving, rubber tubing, blood packs, red blood —

Dark-red blood, like that of a reptile.

Sarah ran wildly through the park, passing the motionless swings, the places where children played ball, the slides, the sandbox, the tall dripping trees.

'I've been infused. She gave me blood. Her blood.' Memory: Miriam drawing blood from her own vein with a primitive catheter.

Sarah unable to move. A voice, Miriam's voice, saying again and again, you cannot move, you will not remember, you cannot, will not.

But the voice did not come from Miriam. It came from that strange unhuman creature, the statue with the catheter in its arm, the catheter that led to a blood pack.

When it was bulging with black blood it had been applied to Sarah's arm. She had watched it go in, the warmest, most delicious feeling making it impossible for her to stop it, impossible to pull out the needle.

Help!

She was in the streets now, running through familiar intersections, past stores she knew well, but also through a strange and unfamiliar world, a planet of the dead that was also this planet.

She stopped, suddenly winded. Her heart was knocking, her breath was coming in gasps. 'I'm not meant to know this,' she thought. 'This is unbelievable. But it's true, it must be true.' She felt her arm, could feel the hard knot of tissue where the needle had entered. When she pressed, it hurt.

It was real.

Right now, this moment, Miriam's blood was in her veins, mixing with her own.

Black blood? A hideous thing with Miriam's voice? A nightmare? Some kind of trick?

There were a hundred desperate questions, and at the moment not a single clear answer.

For example, it could be that her mind had broken through a hypnotic block, but it could also be that the block was meant to come down.

She tried to calm herself. Breathe deeply, remember your own strengths. She could think, she could apply reason and science to the situation. She could save herself with her knowledge.

Her first impulse was to get home as quickly as possible, get Tom, and go over to Riverside for some tests. But instead she sat down on the curb. To do this right she was going to have to collect her thoughts, organize her mind. If she wasn't careful it was all going to come across to others as some kind of irrational aberration.

There was peace here in the empty street. A nearby building had planted tulips and they glowed in the light from the streetlamps. Trees spread new leaves overhead. This little corner of New York could have been a small town, so quietly did it sleep, so sweet did it smell.

Sarah looked up. Clouds moved past, glowing yellow-red with the lights of the city. Here and there a star shone through. To the west the moon rode in the rushing sky.

There was a stirring in the air all around her, like the sound of enormous wings.

Hallucinatory phenomena again.

It recurred, as if a large bird were flying restlessly back and forth just overhead. Suddenly, Sarah had a vivid impression of Miriam, her face utterly serene —

She jumped up, stifling a cry. That face had been *real*. But it wasn't here. Sarah was alone. It was only another symptom and would have to be accepted as such.

Methuselah's dying howl filled the air.

Sarah clapped her hands over her ears, feeling in her right arm a sharp stab of pain from the needle mark. Another symptom. In fact, all of the night's experiences were nothing more than symptoms, from the vomiting to the hallucinations to the cloying hunger. And all could be dealt with once the

parameters of the problem were known.

She set off, this time walking with resolute intention. She would not fall victim to transient psychosis. She would approach this as a professional and overcome it with the assistance of one of the best research institutes in the world.

Miriam's motives, whatever in heaven's name they might be, could wait until later.

They would have to take that one well in hand. She was dangerous, she needed careful observation. Fine, there were involuntary commitment procedures for just such situations.

When she reached the Excelsior Tower, she had more or less regained her composure. She fumbled for her keys rather than wake poor Herb at such an hour. He was huddled, a snoring bundle, on one of the lobby couches. Poor guy probably held down two or three jobs.

Despite the urgency she felt, she found Herb curiously interesting. He looked so helpless. But when she drew near she found his smell overpowering, like rotting meat. She went on to the elevator bank and rode to her floor.

The apartment was silent. From the bedroom came the faint sound of breathing. Obviously Tom hadn't missed her. Sarah went into the bathroom and turned on the light.

It was definitely a needle mark, and slightly infected. The first problem must be to test for type-incompatibility. If Miriam's blood did not interact normally with her own she could easily lapse into irreversible shock.

They would have to act fast. The fact that nothing had happened during the past eight or ten hours was cause for hope but it proved nothing. Shock could set in at any moment.

"Tom!"

He shifted in the bed, groaned. She put her hand on his shoulder to shake

him.

It was like an electric shock. Lights flashed before her eyes, an agonizing thrill ran through her body. She staggered back, astonished by the furious clash of sensations.

His skin was so good to touch. A strange, evil tickling made her break out in gooseflesh. Her nipples swelled against her sweater. There came a feeling not unlike the one she had experienced hanging on the terrace, a sort of aggressive longing, something related to her new lusty appetite.

She noticed a strong — quite wonderful — smell. It wasn't food but at the same time it was. Had he gotten up and taken some food to the bed? That would be just like him, to get up for a snack and never even notice that she was gone.

Tom woke to the sound of excited breathing. Startled, he sat up. At first he was afraid. His eyes could not penetrate the darkness.

“Sarah?”

“Yes.”

What the hell was going on? “Are you up?”

She turned on the bathroom light. Not only was she up, she was fully dressed. He couldn't see her face with the light behind her, but her hair looked wild.

“Sarah, are you OK?”

When she didn't answer he got out of bed and grabbed for her. She moved, it seemed very quickly, back into the bathroom. “Give me a second,” she said in a hoarse voice.

“You sound funny.” He didn't add that she also looked very strange now that she was under the light: eyes wide and glistening, face smeared, sweat shirt smeared, muddy sneakers. “What the hell have you been doing?”

She seemed about to run as he moved toward her. He went into the bathroom, held his hands out to her, stood over her reasserting himself if only by their difference in size.

Suddenly, she sank to the floor, clapped her face into her hands and twisted back. A choked sob. He went down beside her.

“Darling, are you in pain?”

“My arm!” The sob became a moan, warbling and crazy. Tom touched the proffered arm, looked at the ugly mark just below the crook of the elbow. A needle track. Sarah’s eyes searched him. “She infused me with her blood. Now I’m hallucinating.”

“Fever. Transfusion reaction.”

She nodded, tears popping out from behind her tightly closed eyes. He took her by the shoulders, his own heart pounding. A transfusion reaction, caused by blood of an incompatible type, could range from nothing more than mild discomfort to vascular collapse and death. “Let’s get over to Riverside.” He went to the phone, called Geoff’s home number. They would need the best blood man available. Geoff’s voice, sleepy and a little confused, sharpened when Tom told him what had happened. They agreed to meet at the blood analysis lab in ten minutes.

Tom phoned ahead to send Herb scurrying out after a cab. By the time he had gotten some clothes on and Sarah in a coat, a Checker was waiting at the door.

They hurried through Riverside’s main lobby, at this hour empty and quiet. With a wave to the night guard, Tom propelled Sarah to the elevators, jabbed at the eleventh-floor button.

Geoff was waiting, his face sallow and tired. As they entered the lab Phyllis Rockler rose from behind a workbench where she had been preparing the necessary glassware. She took Sarah by the hands. “Let’s get you in a pressure cuff,” she said, her voice urgent.

“Do you live here?” Sarah asked. Tom was reassured to hear strength, even a touch of acerbic humor.

“Geoff and I —”

Sarah smiled softly, looked a moment at Tom. Phyllis pushed up the sleeve of Sarah’s sweater and applied the blood pressure indicator as Geoff examined the other arm. The four of them waited while Phyllis took her reading. “One hundred and twenty over eighty. We should all be so lucky.”

“My pressure’s always been good.”

Tom closed his eyes, felt some of the tension creep out of his neck. The blood pressure would have been abnormal if vascular collapse had been imminent. Phyllis then counted Sarah’s pulse and read her temperature with a digital thermometer. “Here’s something. One hundred and one degrees.”

“There’s a slight subcutaneous infection connected with the lesion,” Geoff remarked. “The fever could be from that.”

Sarah closed her eyes. “Aside from the fever and the lesion, my gross symptoms are psychological. Extreme restlessness. Odd hallucinations.”

“Orientation problems?”

She shook her head. “Consistent with fever and loss of sleep. I’ve been up all night.”

Tom asked a question that had been much on his mind. “How did she do it?” He couldn’t imagine Sarah sitting still for such a thing.

“When I went to her house we had coffee, then I woke up in her bed in a . . . state of confusion. I took a shower and left. But tonight I remembered more — a — a — sort of thing standing over me with a blood pack — quite strange.”

“Hypnosis and drugs.”

“I agree. The combination fits my symptomology.”

“Phyllis, why don’t you draw a couple of hundred ccs and we can get to work.” Phyllis prepared a syringe and withdrew the blood from Sarah’s unwounded arm.

“It looks good.” In gross blood disease there is sometimes a change of color or consistency. Sarah’s blood was a rich purple-red, completely normal. Tom found himself hoping for the first time that nothing was *really* wrong. So far the symptomology was reassuring, except for those hallucinations. But there was something about Sarah’s tone of voice he didn’t like. He couldn’t get rid of the feeling that she was holding something back. “What kind of hallucinations?”

“Visual, mostly. I went out, I was terribly hungry. If you can believe it I want up to McDonald’s on Eighty-sixth at three.” She sighed. “I’m hungry now, as a matter of fact.”

“What kind of hallucinations?”

She flared at him. “I told you! That creature with the blood pack! God, Tom, you can be persistent. Let’s talk about it later, I really can’t deal with it right now.”

Phyllis had transferred Sarah’s blood to ten test tubes. “One through eight are treated with anticoagulant,” she said. “Nine and ten are clear.”

“I’d like to pitch in. I can’t just sit here waiting, it’s making my flesh crawl. Let me do the centrifuging.” Phyllis handed Sarah two tubes of blood. She placed them in the centrifuge, adjusted the rpm gauge, closed it, and flipped the switch.

“Listen,” Geoff said, “it’s harmonizing with Mozart.” He had turned on his radio a few moments before. Tom almost screamed at him to get on with it, then forced self-control. Geoff was right to treat the situation lightly. Panic and professional standards of practice don’t mix. He looked at his Sarah, bending over the centrifuge, still a bit pallid, perhaps slightly swollen, her face sharply intent on her work.

Phyllis prepared slides, placing a drop of blood on each and smearing it to a

thin film. Each slide was numbered and slipped into a rack beside Geoff's microscope. "I'll do a reticulocyte count first," he said. That made sense to Tom, it would tell them at once if any internal bleeding was taking place. If the blood was type-incompatible, hemorrhage was certainly a possibility.

"Set up a Westergren tube," Sarah said. "We'll want the sedimentation rate."

As Phyllis prepared the tube, Tom mentally ran down the list of reasons for doing a sedimentation study. He couldn't understand why Sarah would feel a need to know about possible infection and inflammation. "It takes an hour," he said, "and it'll mean two hundred ccs just on that. I think we'll have apparent pathological signs if the infection proceeds out of the arm." The beautiful arm.

"Methuselah showed an elevated sedimentation rate before the end."

So that was it. She hadn't forgotten about the connection between Miriam Blaylock and the dead ape. She must be thinking that she was about to go the way of Methuselah, poor woman. He wished to God that he could somehow reassure her. But it would be a waste of effort with Sarah. Once she got an idea it took a lot more than reassurance to convince her she was wrong. The worst of it was, he didn't feel so certain himself. The physicists had long since dispensed with commonly held notions of coincidence, replacing them with more elegant and truer ideas of space-time as a whole event, a woven continuum. In the light of such concepts the relationship between Miriam's appearance and Methuselah's death was not only accidental, it wasn't even coincidental. It followed as certainly as one brick after another in a wall, or the spewing of radiant poisons beyond the horizon of critical mass.

The centrifuge wound down and Sarah removed the now-separated tubes of blood. "Is there somewhere she can lie down?" Tom asked. She was rapidly losing all color.

"I'll tell you if I need to be admitted," she snapped. "I know this place has hospital facilities." She put the tubes in a rack and started drawing out the various blood components with a pipette.

"Let me see a slide of whites," Geoff said without moving from his

microscope. Sarah quickly prepared one, placed it in the scope's receiving tray. Tom admired the superb laboratory technique being displayed by the three of them. By Sarah in particular. All of his caring and love was surfacing. What bravado she had. "I want another slide," Geoff murmured. "Wright's stain, please."

There was a silence while he examined it. "I observe foreign leukocytes." Tom felt a wave of new anxiety: this was confirmation, ugly and real. Miriam's blood was actually running in Sarah's veins. "The eosinophilelike cell is present at a concentration of about three percent. Pseudopodial activity is high. The cell is thriving."

"What is the concentration in Miriam's own blood?" Sarah asked. Her tone was clipped. She was forcing calm.

"Eighteen percent."

"You mentioned pseudopodial activity. What's taking place?"

Geoff leaned back from his microscope. The fluorescent lighting overhead threw his face into shadow. His forehead glistened. "It appears to be consuming your blood," he said carefully, "and reproducing cells of its own kind."

10

MIRIAM AWOKE FROM THE first peaceful Sleep she had experienced in days. It was nine A.M. At once she *touch*ed, sensing for John's presence. Her whole body jerked with the intensity of the feeling. He was here, and in a highly charged emotional state.

He was exultant.

She frowned, confused. The clarity of the *touch* told her that he was nearby, probably inside the house. She shrank against the head of the bed, looking desperately around the room. But it was empty. His happiness apparently wasn't because he had managed to defeat her defenses and get into the house. She checked the control panel in the footboard of the bed. All the alarm indicator lights were green. He hadn't used any conventional mode of entry. And the electrostatic barrier hadn't been activated. The motion sensors told a different story. There were indications of movement in the basement at 3:52 A.M., in the front hall two minutes later, in the attic at 4:00. They revealed a slow progress from the bottom to the top of the house. And from 3:59 to 5:59 the steel shutters that protected her bed had been closed, responding automatically to the unexplained motion in the house.

So he was in the attic. As well that she had abandoned sleeping there. When the time came she wouldn't have the difficulty of hunting him down. But why did he exult so?

She decided to *touch* again, hoping to catch some emotional clue to what he was doing. Of course, care would have to be taken. John was sensitive to *touch*. She didn't want to alert him to the fact that she was awake.

She cleared her mind, closed her eyes, opened her inner eye wide. Then she sought John's place in her heart. The *touch*sprang out of her, connecting with powerful and complex emotions. John was overwhelmingly sad, angry, but most of all he was filled with wild glee.

He was savoring the fruits of victory.

Why?

She inventoried the possible reasons for his happiness. He had successfully entered the house against her will. Not sufficient cause. He had gotten to the attic, perhaps to the room where the chests were kept.

She almost laughed aloud when she realized what he must be planning. Let him do his worst. How ironic that what he must perceive as a great threat was actually going to be helpful to her. John, waiting for his big moment in the attic, could safely be forgotten. And that was well. She had much more pressing matters to attend to.

It was going to be a difficult day.

She set about turning off the various devices that protected her during Sleep. In the past, finding safe places to Sleep had been an obsession with all of her race. During the greatest period of persecution, when they were being hunted down by experts, burnt, garrotted, walled up in tombs, they took to hiding in graves, lying among corpses to avoid detection. As often as not, they were followed even there, dragged from their hiding places, and destroyed by having wooden stakes hammered into their hearts.

Miriam turned off the electrostatic barrier and the alarms, then deactivated the steel shutters that surrounded the bed itself if danger threatened. Her theory was that hiding was a far less effective deterrent than fortification. Before electronics Miriam had kept a kennel of killer dogs.

She dressed quickly, unlocked the bedroom door, and looked out. Dawn filled the upper parts of the house with golden light. She was beginning to feel hunger again, but she had no time for it now. She wished that she was already with Sarah. Without Miriam's help the woman would go mad, unable

to satisfy her own hunger, unable to stand the agony.

Once the transfusion was completed the body reacted in a predictable way. Before the advent of modern medical techniques the transfusion was a slow process, subject to the collapse of veins and infection from the crude apparatus available. Now it could all be done at once.

The physical effects would devastate Sarah's body, but the psychological impact, as a new set of needs and instincts replaced her established human ways, would be catastrophic.

Miriam had nursed many of them through the agony of it and she intended to do the same for Sarah.

It would mean returning to their hospital, possibly to danger. They might try to capture her, even to kill her. If she was not very careful indeed she was likely to become their prisoner once she went back to Riverside. They would have ample justification to commit her, and the legal machinery was certainly available.

She could picture herself starving in agony as they prodded and sampled and tested. The trouble was, you didn't die. You just got weaker and weaker until you ended up like the ones in the chests.

It took months to starve. King Charles IV of France had walled up twenty of her kind in a sewer where they were hiding in May of 1325. It was November before the last muffled wail was heard in the streets above. And even after that, they suffered.

She was clammy, trembling. For the first time in many years she was genuinely terrified. It had always been hard to do this, and Sarah Roberts was proving to be especially difficult.

But worth it. Well worth it.

She descended the steps. There was no time to call a limousine. She would have to break one of her rules of safety and take a taxi. Moving through her house, she checked the rooms for damaged belongings. John had left things

alone, it seemed.

She examined the mosaic portrait of Lamia carefully. Miriam kept it with her always, to look into those resolute eyes and remember. Her mother had been strong. She devoted herself to the incredibly dangerous process of childbearing, for the good of the race. Miriam could still remember the last pregnancy, her mother gushing blood, her father trying to cauterize the wound, the puddles horrible on the floor. Her mother had died in a hide tent on a desert night when Egypt was still young.

Miriam opened the front door onto a luscious spring morning. She hurried up to Fifty-seventh Street. The first two cabs she saw she rejected. Too many rattles, drivers too tired. A third one was acceptable. She got in, sat well back, felt compulsively for seatbelts she knew would not be there.

Sitting in the cab, she considered what must be done. In her previous *touches* Miriam had experienced Sarah's fierce will directly. The woman would not cease making efforts to save herself until she was beyond rational thought.

And yet it was that fine will that could blossom into a true hunger. Nothing less would suffice. Of course, it was going to be a struggle. Miriam consoled herself that she had never yet failed. True, some had died during the transfusion process, but not one who lived through the kiss of blood had long resisted her. And yet . . . she had never taken one with so much will or quite so good a mind.

Would she succeed this time?

Sarah must be made to realize that she could not save herself. When they were together Miriam could *touch* her deepest being, guide her, comfort her. It was not hard to transform a body, but the matter of capturing a heart was much more difficult.

Even with *touch* it was going to take time. She shifted uneasily in her seat, watching nervously as the cab went straight through a changing light, thinking of all the different kinds of danger she was being exposed to today.

For a long time she had known that her own mind was delicately balanced.

She was so profoundly alone. She believed in her vulnerability to accident, but she had constantly to remind herself that humankind was also a threat. She had once seen a film of a tiger being captured in a net, and it had made a profound impression on her. Despite the gravity of its situation, the beast had remained calm and confident until the ropes actually sprang up around it. The men laying out the net seemed of little danger to the tiger, it having eaten one of their number the night before. That they might actually capture it was so far beyond its belief that they were able to do so.

The tiger spent its remaining years in a six-by-ten cage, the property of a circus.

What would she do if they brought out guards with guns to capture her?

Her heart began thundering as she considered the choices she would have. Die before the bullets or accept imprisonment.

She longed to abandon this whole endeavor, but she could not risk it. Sarah already knew far too much to be allowed to remain free.

She was fighting a wave of raw fear when the cab pulled up in front of Riverside. She paid her \$3.50 fare and got out. The entrance that yawned before her was so prosaic, so human, it could not possibly be a portal of death.

No?

She pushed through the revolving doors into a crowded lobby and was immediately assailed with the odor of human flesh in great quantity. Automatically, she evaluated the members of the hurrying throng: this one too strong, this one too small, another too sick. It was hard to bring herself into such a crowd with even the slightest hunger. The passing of perfect specimens kept distracting her.

She crossed to the elevators, pressed the button for the twelfth floor. As soon as the doors were closed she began to experience an agony of unease. She stood near the control panel, pressed by a solid mass of humanity, waiting through anguished moments as the thing stopped at every floor.

When the doors at last opened on twelve she popped out with a gasp of relief. But the doors closed behind her like the entrance to a tomb. And she was on the inside. A bell rang somewhere, a doctor was paged, two interns strolled past without glancing at her. To the right was the waiting room with its inevitable crowd and questioning receptionist. A black door to the left led back into the suite of offices for executives and medical personnel. During her night here Miriam had been careful to memorize the layout of the clinic, and she took this door rather than face the receptionist.

Before her was a gray institutional hallway lined with more doors. Each practitioner working at the clinic had a small office. At the end of the hallway were the offices of the executive staff. Miriam went to Sarah's door, third down on the right. She placed her hand on the knob, paused to prepare herself for the confrontation, then went in.

But the office was empty. There was, however, a powerful feeling of Sarah in the room. The desk was piled high with file folders and rolls of graphs. On the floor was a two-foot-high stack of computer printouts. Three soiled lab coats hung on the door. A poster of a grinning rhesus monkey was the only decoration. A stupid choice no doubt to many eyes, but to Sarah it must be a symbol of her triumphant research.

Just being in the room, Miriam realized that she was already beginning to love the woman. She didn't want Sarah to suffer unnecessarily. Miriam was giving her a gift, after all, of something humanity had been trying to attain through all of its history. The great human religions all involved an assault on death. Man thought of death as a helpless concession to evil, and universally feared it.

Miriam must not forget the impact this gift had had on Sarah's predecessors. In his heart each man feared and loved death. The release from such a contradiction was in itself an offering of great value.

She felt Sarah's chair, her desk, fingered her nibbled pencils, stroked her lab coats, all the while trying to get a sense of her emotional state.

It came, thin and distant, a vapor of fear, hardly a *touch* at all.

One could tell very little from such a weak *touch*. There was nothing else for it. She would have to confront her directly.

‘If they try to keep me here I’ll need her loyalty,’ she thought as she went down the hall to the secretarial pool to locate Sarah. Physically, she was much more powerful than they. She could outrun, out-climb, and outmaneuver them. She also had her intelligence, which was greater than theirs, especially in the speed with which it could assess rapidly changing situation.

“I’m trying to locate Doctor Roberts,” she said to the secretary, who looked up, cracking gum.

“You a patient?”

“I’m expected.” Miriam smiled. “I’m not a patient.”

“They’re down on the lab floor,” she said. “I think they’re probably in Gerontology by now. You know the facility?”

“Oh sure. I’ve been up here a number of times.”

“Want me to say who’s coming down?”

“Don’t bother, I’m already late. Let’s not call too much attention to that!” She smiled again, backing away, turning to go to the elevators.

“I understand,” the girl said, laughing, “just want to edge in.”

Miriam took the stairs beside the elevator bank to save time and ascertain if there were any inner doors that might impede escape. Large signs indicated that all the floors below ten were locked for security reasons. Useful if not helpful information.

Contrary to what she had said to the girl, Miriam did not know the plan of the lab floor. When she emerged she found the whole layout was different from the floor above. Riverside was a hodgepodge of old buildings connected by unlikely passages and confusing hallways. This floor had halls going in three directions from the elevator bank. The lighting was poor and the large gray

doors were unmarked. Each door opened on a separate laboratory. To find the one you wanted you simply had to know where it was.

With no choice, Miriam opened the first door she came to. Before her was a vast array of electronic equipment. The air was crackling with ozone, and motors hummed through the silence. “Excuse me.”

“Hey?” A voice from within a forest of equipment.

“I’m looking for Gerontology.”

“You’re at the opposite end of the wrong hallway, if that helps. This is Gas Chromatography.”

A face appeared behind a virtual wall of wires leading from a lab bench to a shelf of equipment above. “I’m trying to locate Sarah Roberts,” Miriam said.

Excitement registered in the face, which was concealed by welder’s goggles. A hand pushed the goggles up. “Welding a feeder line. No assistant. So you’re looking for Sarah. You involved in the project?”

“Which one?”

“There’s only one project around here at the moment. A hell of a project. Incredible. You a reporter?”

“No.”

“Well, I don’t think I’d better go shooting my mouth off anyway.”

“I’m from the Rockefeller Institute. Doctor Martin. Are you involved in the Blaylock project?”

“Look, I really can’t talk about it. If you want info go to Sarah or Tom Haver. Gerontology’s to the left past the elevator bank and four doors down. You’ll be able to locate it by the smell of the rhesus colony.”

He returned to his welding and Miriam left the lab. Too bad he hadn’t been more forthcoming. At least it was reassuring to know that they were keeping

the details secret. No doubt they didn't want information leaked until she was thoroughly measured.

She went down the hallway counting doors. 'Very well,' she thought, 'measure me. The more you poke and prod, the more time I'll have with Sarah.'

The technician had been right, you could certainly smell the Gerontology lab. Miriam opened the door, fully expecting the confrontation.

Instead, she found herself in a small outer office not unlike the one Sarah kept upstairs, but even more crowded with records. A computer terminal, glowing with numbers, stood on an old desk. Miriam spent a moment watching the display but it was useless. She couldn't understand.

Miriam passed through the room to an inner office which contained rolled-up cables, television equipment and stacks of empty cages. There were two exits beyond. Miriam chose one and went through.

There was a thunderous uproar. She was in the rhesus colony. Monkeys leaped about their cages, gesticulating, posturing at her. Many of them had sockets embedded in their skulls so that electrodes could be plugged in at the researcher's convenience.

How would it be to wear such a socket in her own head? Would they go that far if they had the chance?

The monkeys were made frantic by her presence; the odor of a strange animal disturbed them. She backed out of the room. The other door would certainly lead to Sarah. Once again she prepared herself, blanking her mind, opening the inner eyes to receive and evaluate Sarah's emotional state. Even now she could feel it fairly well, but not well enough to understand it. Years of training were necessary before a human being's emotional field extended much beyond his own body, years of loving someone with *touch* and wanting desperately to please him or her.

She turned the knob and swept the door open. Marshaling all of her confidence and power, forcing back the hunger their scent evoked, she strode

into the room.

The warm emotional flow that emanated from Sarah Roberts was not what she had anticipated. It was the most delicious *touch* that she had experienced since her own family was alive. Sarah's heart was full of eager curiosity and love for her coworkers. The edge of fear was still there, but in her laboratory, among friends, Sarah obviously felt secure despite the blood running in her veins.

Miriam had hoped that Sarah would be a good choice, had come to be sure of it, but had not dared hope for anything like this. If only these emotions could be redirected toward herself!

But not at this moment. As Sarah looked up from her work and saw Miriam the emotional atmosphere changed to anger and wary fear. The face was haggard too. Sarah would have had periods of great difficulty by now. She had the sunken cheeks of one who was ignoring the hunger. From now on, each time it came back it would be stronger.

"Hey," Sarah said into the hum of voices, "a problem just arrived." Miriam noticed that they were working with another computer terminal.

"Let's see what happens if we standardize the baselines," Tom Haver said to a woman, who punched the keyboard. The graphs glowing on the screen jiggled and changed shape.

Sarah grabbed his shoulder, turned him around. "Hey, folks," he said in a quavering voice, "we have a visitor."

A small, fat man, bald and sweating, said in an undertone to the one Miriam assumed was the computer operator, "Match the curves to standard deviations ___"

"Charlie, Phyllis — heads up."

"Oh."

Miriam moved toward them. They drew together, four frightened people.

“Sarah said yesterday that I was supposed to come back.”

The computer warbled and the woman Tom had called Phyllis turned it off. As did all moments of great importance in her life, this one brought Miriam a flash of understanding. If things had been just a little different, she realized that she would have been able to simply tell Sarah to come along and that would have been that. Sarah thought her beautiful. Her mind was full of avid fascination, guilty passion. Fear must be an aphrodisiac for Sarah.

Fear, then, would be the key.

Tom Haver went to a telephone. Miriam spoke, trying for every bit of authority she could muster. “Stop. I have a proposition. You may study me if you promise to let me go free at the end of the day.” Haver responded smoothly. “We have no intention of keeping you against your will. For that matter, we haven’t got the right.”

Miriam ignored that issue. If it was obvious to her that they could commit her it must be obvious to them too. Human courts were not set up in the expectation that situations such as this might arise. Miriam felt safest assuming that they would grant her no rights at all.

“Why did you do it, Miriam?” Sarah’s eyes were steady, cool. Behind them Miriam could sense the conflict and the turmoil, but the surface was admirably unruffled.

“Do what?”

In answer Sarah extended her left arm, the one Miriam had chosen for the transfusion. A purple blotch disfigured the white skin. Because of the need to create a maximum effect fast, the transfusion had been very large. Seeing its result, however, made Miriam want to help Sarah, to save her. Unbidden, a *touch* rose out of her heart. Sarah blinked and averted her eyes, her face flushing red. This *touch* was like a kiss, the kind that follows a first admission of love. Tom Haver’s arm came around Sarah, and she huddled against him. Miriam’s extended hand was not taken.

“Mrs. Blaylock, she asked you a question. I think you’d better answer it.”

There was real menace in Haver's voice. It told Miriam that he was very much in love with Sarah. Would he die for his love? Did he understand that it might well come to that?

"I came here to help you," Miriam said gently. "I think you know why."

Sarah shook her head. "We do not know why. We'd like very much to know."

Miriam didn't like that "we." It was a wall between her and Sarah. "I want to share myself with you. I have read your work. I have reason to believe that my physical makeup may be of interest to you." "Is that your motive?" Haver asked.

"Is that why you contaminated her with your blood? Don't you realize how dangerous that is?"

"You could have killed me, Miriam!"

They were like two shrieking crows.

"I am the last of my kind," Miriam said grandly. "What I gave you was a great gift. You should take it in that light."

"The last?"

Miriam nodded. It perhaps wasn't true, but it fit her needs at the moment. "I knew you would never take it voluntarily and I may have very little time. At the least, Sarah, it will double your life-span."

Haver was becoming less menacing. There was also a slight reduction of tension in Sarah's face.

"We have a battery of tests," the fat man blurted. "We'd very much like to run them."

"I'm ready." There it was; the price and the payment. Now she must enter their dull catalogues, be weighed and analyzed. She, who soared so far above them, must submit to their machines. But what would they learn? Machines

only gather facts and must therefore lie.

“I’d better get the bureaucracy rolling,” Tom said. “What shall we start with, Sarah?”

“X ray.”

“I’ll set up the appointment.”

Sarah nodded. She spoke gently to Miriam, a tone she might use with a frightened child. “We’d like to do an epidermal biopsy, which just involves scraping off some surface tissue, take some more blood, and run electrograms of various types. Would that be acceptable to you?”

Miriam nodded.

Sarah came to her, seemed about to touch her. “Why are you the last?”

Miriam hesitated. As an individual, she was so powerful that it was hard to think of herself as a member of a failed species. And yet, if she was not the last, she was certainly one of a very few. “I don’t know,” she said. The sorrow and the truth in her own voice surprised her.

“We have half an hour in X ray,” Tom said, putting down the telephone. “Let’s get going.”

Miriam followed them down the hallway feeling somewhat more confident. They hadn’t done anything violent to her yet. And Sarah was not in a state of panic. In fact, there was even some warmth there. A crack such as that in somebody’s resistance was to Miriam the same as a chasm. If she was bold and careful she had a very good chance with Sarah. She watched Sarah walking along, her gait a little heavy, her hair gleaming softly in the corridor’s shadows.

It would feel so good to take Sarah in her arms, to comfort her as a lover, to teach her as she might teach a daughter.

Perhaps the secret of why her species had dwindled was hidden in emotions such as these. If one loved human beings, how could one also kill them and

still be happy enough with oneself to love one's own kind, and bear young?

Sarah dropped back until she was walking beside Miriam. They did not speak. Miriam *touched* and found friendly interest.

Her face revealed nothing of her triumph. She knew now that the two of them were going to walk many paths together, and serve the hunger well.

Sarah's earlier symptoms had disappeared during the course of the morning. Despite not having slept all night she was beginning to feel extraordinarily alert. They had left Geoff an hour ago working on a method of removing Miriam's blood from Sarah's body, but as time passed it was beginning to seem less necessary. If there was going to be any damage, it would surely be happening by now.

She walked along beside Miriam, her mind full of the test protocols that had been developed yesterday afternoon. This was an extremely excited place. Sam Rush had called Miriam history's most important experimental animal. That reflected the thinking of the whole institution. And Sarah's as well.

Obviously, they wouldn't be keeping her in any cages, but the paperwork had been started for an involuntary commitment to Riverside's Psychiatric Center. The board wasn't too worried about the details. Legal didn't feel that Miriam Blaylock could successfully press a suit to win her freedom.

They had a nice room all ready. Sturdy, well locked. On the violent ward. Sarah felt like ordering flowers for it, she was so delighted that Miriam had returned.

Only God knew what this was going to mean. Prizes, grants, extraordinary breakthroughs. The kind of incredible chance that scientists don't even dream about.

As they passed people in the halls eyebrows were raised, smiles opened up, Sarah got a few quick arm squeezes. As soon as Tom had called Marty Rifkind in X ray word must have spread through the institution. People thought of Miriam as the find of the century, perhaps of all time. And rightly so.

Rifkind bustled around his equipment making fussy, excited preparations. The receptionist had directed them to his best suite. When they came in he was all but dancing with anticipation. Sarah watched his reaction when he first saw Miriam. He suddenly became very serious, almost wary.

It reminded her of the way fodder mice acted when placed in a snake's terrarium.

"Miriam," Sarah said, "we're going to want you to lie on this table."

"It's quite comfortable, really," Marty blurted.

"It'll be moving around a lot, but you won't fall off," Sarah continued. Was she the only one here capable of dealing with Miriam? Rifkind was scurrying around all over the place, completely forgetting the requirements of the profession. Miriam got up on the table. "I'm sorry," Sarah said, "but you'll have to take off your clothes." Miriam began to comply. "Not everything," Sarah added hastily. "Just your outer garments and any metal objects." Miriam's eyes met hers, gay, laughing. It was an awful moment.

Rifkind controlled himself enough to affix the straps that would restrain Miriam as the table moved from position to position. She allowed herself to be strapped down, but Sarah noticed the rigidity of her face, the watery stare. Miriam was frightened. Somehow it touched Sarah. "You can unbuckle those yourself if you want to," she said. Miriam looked at her, the relief obvious.

Rifkind plastered on his most ingratiating smile. "We're going to do a full-body scan. One picture for each quadrant of the body, one for each skull view and two for the legs. That way we'll have a full record of your skeleton."

"Minimal dosage. I don't like X ray."

Rifkind grinned, his face popping sweat. "Minimal dosage it is. That's a promise." He beckoned the group into the control room. With the X-ray head on a tracked grid and the table fully mobilized, all of the pictures could be aimed from the control panel. Once the patient was positioned there was no need for the radiologist to enter the room until the session was over. Thus, staff dosage was kept to a minimum and sessions were greatly speeded up.

“She wants minimal dosage,” Rifkind said when the control room door was closed. “Too bad we’ve got to fry her.”

“Don’t you dare hurt her, Marty!” Sarah wanted to hit him, pulp his fat face.

“What?”

“I’m sorry. I mean, let’s keep the dosage to the minimum necessary. She’s valuable, remember. No risks, however remote.”

Without replying, Rifkind flipped the switches that controlled the table and started aiming the X-ray head. Sarah was surprised at the intensity of her own feelings. Was it really appropriate for her to want to protect Miriam? She did not know the answer to that question.

The woman remained absolutely motionless, her lips parted, eyes staring straight at the window into the control room. Those eyes seemed to seek Sarah’s and she allowed them to meet. All through the skull series Sarah let Miriam stare into her eyes. It was a wonderful, mesmerizing experience, like being naked before one you truly loved.

Tom was watching Sarah carefully. “I’m not so sure that Miriam isn’t dangerous,” he said. He was beginning to think that Sarah hadn’t heard, when she swung around, her face flushed, her eyes blazing.

“That’s an unprofessional statement!”

“She drugs you, transfuses you with foreign blood, and you defend her. I’m afraid I can’t understand that.”

“She’s precious. I admit that her behavior is highly unpredictable. But there’s so much knowledge to be gained! Think of the recognition, Tom.”

“Thank you. I’m just glad Miriam Blaylock has a nice secure place to spend the night.”

“Look at it from my standpoint. I want you to understand what I feel about her —”

“Do you?”

“I almost halted the aging process with Methuselah. And now what drops into my lap but this . . . female being with blood characteristics similar to his right before he died. The only difference is she’s perfectly healthy.”

Sam Rush had come into the room behind them. His voice startled Tom. “Just don’t let her get away from us again. Consider her continued presence your most critical responsibility.”

“Very good, Doctor.” Tom thought of the Psychiatric wing with its burly guards — carrying only night-sticks. He made a mental note to post an armed guard as well on Miriam’s cell.

“Doctors, please, let’s keep it down so I can concentrate. I’m going to make a fluoroscope run of the skull, if anybody’s interested.” Rifkind spoke into the intercom. “Mrs. Blaylock, turn your head to the right, please.” He adjusted some knobs, then turned on the fluoroscope. “Abnormal,” he said in a tight voice. “Wonderfully abnormal!” Into the intercom: “Open your mouth, please. Thank you. Close it. Swallow.” He was almost jumping with excitement. “Look at that inferior maxillary! Jack, give us the lowdown,” he said to the osteologist Tom had called earlier. He turned off the fluoroscope. “Don’t want her to glow in the dark.”

“There are a number of gross variances,” Jack Gibson said. He was a resident in osteology, attached to the hospital, and obviously pleased to be invited to a project in the elite research section. “The angle of the inferior maxillary is significantly more pronounced than normal, and the symphysis is more apparent. The whole structure is developed to a more powerful jaw. You could see the compensation in the heavier malar bone and much more developed zygoma. I also noticed more curvature to the cranium. We’d have to measure, but I’d say the brain case was larger than normal by a good twenty percent.”

“So you’d say it’s definitely not a human skull.” Tom knew the answer, but he had to ask the question just in case. If his Christmas candy was going to be taken away, he wanted to know it now.

“Humanoid, certainly. I’m sure it’s a derivation of the primate line. But human, in the strict sense of the word? No. It’s a completely valid structure, though, not the result of some deforming process.”

That was the kind of supporting observation that would eventually wind up in the paper Sarah would already be planning on Miriam, a paper that would stun the scientific community, not to mention the outside world.

Miriam’s voice crackled through the intercom. She wanted out. Rifkind took a final series of the skull and neck. They would have to pursue more detailed work later. But this had been an excellent start. “She sounds angry,” Tom said. “Sarah, you try to pacify her. We don’t want her walking out of here again.” She went into the X-ray room. “We’re finished, Miriam,” she said in what Tom hoped was a calming tone, “you can get up now.” The Velcro straps could easily be removed by the patient, but Miriam seemed to be having trouble. Tom watched Sarah help her. As she drew near he saw Miriam gaze fiercely at her. The look was deep and personal. Intimate. Much too intimate. Sarah assumed a posture Tom was familiar with. She put her hands behind her back and bowed her head, almost as if to say “do with me as you will.” Tom had seen it in their bedroom.

Miriam’s lips moved. Tom turned up the intercom, hearing only the last words, “. . . need help.”

“What was that?” Charlie Humphries said. Tom shook his head. Had Miriam been reassuring Sarah?

Tom resolved not to allow the two of them to be alone for even ten seconds. There was something hypnotic about Miriam Blaylock and it was his Sarah who was the victim. Already Miriam had inducted enough bizarre behavior in her to last the rest of her life. There was no way to tell what more might happen.

He saw that Sarah was still fumbling with the damn Velcro straps. He followed her into the X-ray room.

Miriam had done nothing more than stroke Sarah’s arm. But it was

nevertheless the warmest, most reassuring thing Sarah had ever felt in her life. She was so close that she could smell the pungent sweetness of Miriam's breath. "I transfused you for both of our sakes," Miriam said very softly, her lips barely moving. "But you're going to need help." Then she smiled and Sarah wanted to laugh with delight at the radiance of it. Her whole being seemed to rise to higher and higher levels as Miriam continued to look into her eyes. It was as if she could feel Miriam's feelings inside of herself, and those feelings were pure and loving and good. She became acutely conscious of her body and almost laughed aloud when she noticed how she was standing. She folded her arms and tossed her head, breaking the gaze. Miriam rose from the X-ray table and at the same moment Tom appeared.

Sarah felt like an angel who had just fallen from some high grace. She could have choked Tom!

"Your Doctor Rifkind broke a promise," Miriam said to Tom. It was a timely interruption. Tom's interest was deflected from Sarah. She was grateful for Miriam's perceptiveness.

"Broke what promise?"

"He said he was going to 'fry' me, I think. It wasn't exactly a minimal dosage."

"I don't recall —"

"I read his lips, Doctor Haver." She smiled again, nastily. And strode into the control room. Tom followed her and Sarah followed him. There was something extraordinary about the way Miriam dominated situations. Sarah envied her that skill.

When they reached the control room Marty Rifkind was looking quite chastened. Sam Rush was speaking, his voice as smooth as a mirror. "There won't be any dangerous tests, Mrs. Blaylock. You're not an experimental animal. Nobody at this institution would want to cause you the least harm. I'm sure I speak for the whole staff when I say that."

Sarah thought again of the room that awaited Miriam in the Psychiatric

Clinic. She thought of the commitment papers in process right now. She found that she could not think of Miriam as a prisoner. And there was no other way to think of her, or wouldn't be when the commitment was approved.

They ought to let Miriam go home. The more Sarah thought of it, the more outrageous and high-handed this whole thing began to seem. Miriam had come back voluntarily, after all. That fact ought to be respected.

"We've got to get moving," Tom said. "There are four more labs to go." He glanced at Miriam. "If you're agreeable, Mrs. Blaylock."

All through the morning and into the afternoon they worked on the tests. Sarah moved in a sort of dream of fascination. Miriam was so very beguiling, as mysterious and beautiful as a jewel.

As they left the Brain Studies Lab Sarah noticed a security guard in the hall. Two more guards were in the elevator. Everybody except her and Tom and Miriam dropped back as they entered the elevator. When the doors closed, the three of them were alone with the guards. Tom punched the sixteenth floor. There was a key in the manual override control and one of the guards reached forward and turned it.

So it was to be now. Miriam had just been netted.

She saw the guards, she saw their guns. With a supreme effort of will she did not bolt as they passed the fire stairs. She was confident of her ability to go to the top of the building and escape across the roofs, or break down one of the lower doors if necessary.

But it wasn't going to be necessary.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, playing out her role. "I thought we were finished." She imagined how it would be to satisfy her hunger with Haver.

"We'd like you to stay the night," he said. If all went as she hoped, there was going to be an interesting fate reserved for him. Miriam disliked him

intensely.

The elevator doors opened. Miriam knew at once that they must be on the psychiatric floor. The walls were white and there were heavy screens on the windows. She felt quite sick at the sight of it all. Everything on this floor would be locked. Her last chance of escaping was now gone. It all depended on Sarah. Such a thin cord bound them. Was it strong enough?

“I want to leave,” she said. The guards came closer. Other men appeared from behind a door with a tiny window in it. One of them took her firmly by the arm. “I’ve decided to go home.” She put all the frantic terror into her voice that she could. Sarah’s instincts had to be mobilized. “Let me go! I want to go home!” She sought Sarah’s eyes, capturing them, *touched* with as desperate a plea as she could feel.

Sarah clapped her hands over her face. Tom Haver’s arm came around her. Miriam was pulled forward. She moaned, sank in the arms of her captors, and allowed herself to be dragged sobbing through the ugly little door and down the hallway beyond.

The cell was not padded, but it was no hotel room. It stank of despair and madness. There was no further need to act. Miriam sat down on the miserable little bed. She closed her eyes, *touching* for any faint contact with Sarah that she might pick up.

She thought of the French king and his dungeon, and the sounds of the starving.

* * *

Sarah was upset. Tom had become virtually monosyllabic. Now he was forcing her back to Geoff’s lab just as certainly as he had forced Miriam to the Psychiatric Clinic. “I’m fine, Tom. I feel marvelous, as a matter of fact.”

“You look rotten. You’re gray. There must be some sort of cyanosis setting in.”

“Maybe I’m a little shocked! This place is turning into the Third Reich. You just threw that woman in a cell without so much as a trial!”

“We need her. Anyway, the commitment is perfectly in order.”

“She’s sane!”

“Define your terms! I don’t think so. Sam doesn’t think so. In view of the fact that she’s not even a human being — and we have proof that she carried out a totally irrational assault against you — I think we’re doing the right thing. Now come on.”

When he tugged at her arm, anger flared in her. Before she could think, she had slapped him so hard she all but lost her balance. He gasped, shook his head. For a long moment he was absolutely still. She thought he was going to hit her, then he seemed to shake it off.

“If you’re up to it, darling, I think you’d better come.” She didn’t argue further. She was too astonished with herself.

Geoff hardly greeted them. He simply started talking, bringing them up to date.

His eyes were red from the hours he had been spending at the microscope. He extracted a smeared yellow sheet from a pile of papers on his lab bench. “I’m calling this the curve of transference. It shows the amount of time by blood volume that it will take for the native blood to be completely replaced.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tom’s voice was sharp. Sarah tried to take his hand but he moved away.

“The transfused material will replace the natural blood. No question about it. The native blood is now nothing more than a nutrient bath for the new tissue.”

“The body produces blood. Replaces the whole volume eventually.”

“New blood is the stuff’s food supply. It’s a parasite except that it carries nutrients and performs gas transference.”

“Poorly. She looks gray.”

“It isn’t very efficient yet. But the receptivity is changing. A gas chromatograph shows oxygen uptake subnormal but improving.”

This was bizarre. Sarah rubbed her fingers against her face. Her skin was slick and cool, like Miriam’s. “What color are the leukocytes?”

“Purple. Deep, as if they were oxygen gorged.”

“Miriam’s leukocytes were deep purple before she slept. Methuselah’s were before —” She stopped. Methuselah had torn his cagemate to pieces.

“I think we’ve got to deal with it as an invasive organism. Parasite. I can’t see how we can avoid the conclusion that it’s going to come to dominate your system.”

“Get it out of her!”

“We might try a blood replacement. If we do it right away it just might work.”

“So do it!”

“I intend to, Tom! But I’ve got to get more blood. It’ll be a few more hours. That’s the best I can do. I hope we’ll be in time. I think we will.”

Silence fell. A few more hours. Tom’s arms came around her. She felt his trembling body, saw the fear in his eyes. “I feel just fine,” she said. “I’m sure it’ll all work out perfectly well.”

But when he clutched her more tightly, she let him.

11

MIRIAM STOOD AT THE barred window of the dingy little room. Evening was becoming night. She was growing more and more hungry. Her fingers touched the bars once lightly, then ran along the sill. If only Sarah would come!

Miriam had allowed them to lock her up to give Sarah the chance to come and free her. Sarah's loyalty was the issue. Miriam wanted it, and the best way to win it would be to get her to volunteer herself on Miriam's behalf.

Miriam was relying on the strongest aspect of Sarah's personality, her sense of independence. Surely Sarah would not be able to countenance the idea of someone being unjustly imprisoned.

Miriam shook the bars. The more hungry she got, the more the minutes counted. She imagined the hunt, the kill. Her head throbbed, her body began to feel heavy. Without quite realizing it she had examined the whole window frame. The bars were bolted into the brickwork on the outside. The frame itself was hardwood.

As she was now, Miriam could probably bend back the bars. But in another two hours she would be too weak. Is that how the victims of Charles IV had died, by waiting too long for deliverance from outside? Miriam threw herself onto the bed, then jumped up and went to the door. All she could see through the barred peephole was an expanse of white wall on the opposite side of the hallway.

A powerful, delicious scent was entering the room through the tiny cracks around the door. There must be a guard posted just out of sight, probably

sitting in a chair beside the door. That would be another of Haver's precautions.

At first she had discounted Haver as a threat to her relationship with Sarah, but the more she understood about him the more formidable he became. Deep inside that man there was something strong. That was the part of him Sarah loved.

Such a love was powerful. Miriam could see why Sarah endured the outer man with his arrogance and his manipulative nature, as long as there was hope that the inner man would eventually emerge and sweep the rest aside.

She wished that the guard would leave his post and give her some peace! She dreamed of the hunt — where she would go and whom she would take. There was a couple living in the top floor of a house on West Seventy-sixth Street, in an apartment Miriam had entered a few years ago. By now the last disappearance from the place was forgotten. It was time for another couple of tenants to jump their lease. No advance planning would be necessary. Miriam already knew her route and the locks she would encounter.

“Please, Sarah,” she moaned. She *touched*.

In the emotional silence, there was an angry stirring. Somewhere in the building, Sarah was upset.

The attic grew darker as evening took the last glow from the westward-facing dormer windows. John had been lying on the floor of the tiny room that contained the remains of his predecessors, listening for Miriam to return to the house. He was almost too weak to stand. For hours he had been motionless.

This was going to be his last act. The steel box that would contain him stood bulky and black in the center of the room. Slowly John's hand rose until he could grasp the edge of that box. Then he pulled himself up to full height, tottering, fighting to keep his balance.

Dizziness washed over him. The room retreated farther and farther away. Only his burning hunger remained, like a fire in the center of his body.

By slow degrees the room swam back into focus. He felt like stone. His head lolled as if his neck were broken. His knees wobbled, forcing him to lean heavily against the wall of sealed boxes.

It took him an hour of agonizing effort to break the locks on five of them. The others were too strong. Those he had been able to break were at the bottom of the stack, the most ancient ones. He threw his weight against the ones on top, sliding them to the floor, allowing the ones below to open.

The room was now pitch dark and choking with dust. But it was not quiet. Everywhere there was seething, hissing motion. John threw himself out the door and closed it. He leaned back against it and turned the lock. After a few minutes the door began to creak, then to groan and rattle, finally to shake.

Sarah stared sightlessly at the electroencephalogram. The mass of complex lines would not become clear. She was so tired. But she was also terribly angry. Her mind was in turmoil. Time after time she had looked up from her work startled, thinking that Miriam was coming into the office.

They had wronged Miriam. The trumped-up commitment was an evil thing. It made Sarah question the real value of her own work, but more the truth of what she loved about Tom. He had conceived of the idea, managed its realization, and executed it with the dispassionate precision of a police officer.

Through it all he had been as cold as death. And now that poor creature sat up there, her dignity — her very rights as an intelligent being — stripped away.

Sarah glanced up at the clock. Nearly eight and time for the so-called Blaylock Group to meet and share findings. The Cytogenics Lab was preparing a chromosome analysis. Osteology was working on bone structures, Cardiology on heart and circulatory systems.

Sarah tried again. She had to have something to show at the meeting. The EEG was radically disturbed. It offered few real comparisons to a human encephalogram.

Sarah could not stop thinking of Miriam, nor could she stop wanting food. It

was absurd, but her hunger was really getting obscene.

When Miriam had been near her, she had felt greatly comforted. There was something kind about that woman. Of course, it had been stupid for her to carry out the transfusion, but one should not forget that Miriam's thought processes were not human. In her mind it was probably a perfectly logical act.

Until now Sarah had not allowed herself to consider whether or not she would really stop aging. Was that the effect of Miriam's blood?

If so, it was a gift not only to Sarah Roberts but also to all mankind. Miriam had said that she was the last of her species. The more Sarah thought of it the more the nobility of the act became clear.

Noble captive. What suffering Miriam must be enduring right now, four floors above.

Ten minutes to the meeting.

Her mind had to come back to the problem at hand. The EEG was a mess, she realized, because Miriam's brain had more than one voltage level where a human brain displayed only one. The needles of the EEG machine had each been picking up at least two signals; thus, the hodgepodge.

Sarah swept the graphs off her desk. She had her damn conclusion. Most of a human brain was inactive, mysteriously turned off, apparently unneeded. Not so with Miriam. This was a picture of a fully functioning brain, so active it was beyond the capacity of the instrument to record.

What an extraordinary mind must be there. The commitment was more than a moral lapse, it was the blackest of sins, an obscenity. Sarah was ashamed for them all.

The Hutch that now sat across from Tom was a changed man. Miriam Blaylock had been severed from his control and there wasn't a thing he could do about it. Too late he had realized the importance of the case. Not only had he lost status at Riverside, he had lost something else — something Tom

himself couldn't have borne to lose — his authority.

“I want to help,” he said.

Tom was shocked. In Hutch's position he himself would have resigned on the spot. “OK,” he said, “be my guest.”

“We'll pretend to be teammates for a little while longer, if it's all right by you.”

What was he implying? “Of course,” Tom said with an assurance he no longer felt. He never underestimated the enemy. That was his cardinal rule.

“I worry about Sarah,” Hutch said.

“So do we all.”

“Why doesn't she check in for observation? Let's not forget that we have a top-flight hospital attached to this place.”

“I've discussed that with Geoff and we both feel it would be better not to alarm her. Anyway, she'd never go.”

“Intervene. You can convince her.”

“Short of an armed guard —”

“Then get one! She's in trouble. I'd expect that you of all people would want to help her!”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Don't you realize what's happening to Sarah?”

“Sarah's busy with her work. And she's not reporting any symptoms. Geoff's going to do a blood exchange within the hour.”

“Didn't you see the effect that . . . thing had on her when they were together?”

“She was awed. I think that’s a very appropriate reaction. Miriam Blaylock is awesome.”

“She was seduced! It wants her, Tom. Surely you can see that!”

“Wants?”

“Didn’t you feel it? Sarah was being hypnotized or some such thing. I’d put Sarah in the hospital for observation and I’d post guards —”

“Commit them both? Come on, that’s absurd.”

Hutch leaned forward, gripped the edges of the desk. Tom had never seen him so agitated. “I would post guards to keep that creature away from her. At all costs!”

Tom could only shake his head. He had always suspected Hutch of a paranoid streak. Now, under pressure, the weakness was surfacing. That was always the way when people faced pressure. Some of them caved in, others did their best work.

“Look, I’ll take all this under advisement. But the project group is due to meet at eight and I want to make sure everybody’s on schedule.”

That was enough of a dismissal to make Hutch stalk out. Fine. Calling the labs could wait five minutes. Tom needed some time alone. So many contradictory thoughts were pouring through his mind. It had been a matter of pride to reveal nothing of his feelings to Hutch, but in truth he also was frightened. Sarah had a much more serious problem than she would admit, that was obvious from the tests. Geoff’s analogy comparing Miriam’s blood to a parasitic organism was proving to be correct. Soon Sarah would be suffering from all the effects of massive parasitization. Terminally, if it came to that, she would starve, her body overwhelmed by the nutritional needs of the parasite.

That possibility, however, was not what most bothered him. He had almost unlimited confidence in Riverside. If all else failed, they would save Sarah. The thing he could not understand was why Miriam had done it. He

remembered that she had been reading Sarah's book in the sleep cubicle two nights ago. Numerous times she had made reference to doing "research" on them all.

The more he considered the situation, the more obvious it became that Miriam's appearance here was planned right down to the claim of night terrors, which had been used to draw Sarah's interest.

The approach was subtle, to be sure. But Tom was himself quite good at designing plans that bore a superficial appearance of accident. Such was the nature of the political mind. He had to admire Miriam's expertise.

It had all led up to the transfusion. Surely it was not simply a crazy attempt to kill. Why go to such pains? There were a thousand easier, less detectable ways of killing a person. That blood running in Sarah's veins was far more identifying than a fingerprint. No, there had to be another reason.

As to what it might be, Tom simply could not imagine. Possibly it was too alien even to make sense to a human being. They had only just begun to study Miriam. The most distant reaches of her mind might elude them for years — or forever. Yet they had to try to understand. He could see a situation in the near future — if Sarah became seriously ill — in which her very life might depend on their insights.

He pressed his intercom, hoping that his secretary hadn't left for the day. There was no response. It was his own fault, he hadn't asked her to stay. With a tired sigh he returned to the schedule and began to call the various labs.

Phones were answered by bright, excited voices. What irony. Here he was in the center of one of the most extraordinary discoveries ever made, right at the core of the event, and all he could feel was foreboding.

He called Sarah last. She pleaded for more time. He had to tell her that the others would all be ready at eight.

"No doubt you're saying that to everybody."

He supposed that he deserved such suspicions. “I’m not, it happens to be true.”

“I’ll just have to be there, then. These EEGs are an unholy mess. Not only are the alpha and lambda waves close to unreadable, nothing else follows any established patterns. I suspect that we’ll have to relearn brain function before we can figure out what’s going on here.”

“You feeling all right?”

“I’ll tell you when and if my symptoms require more attention. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, Tom —”

“You’re sure? Wouldn’t it be just a little fun?”

“Feeling sorry for yourself? I was trying to be kind. Just let me do my work. If I have any more problems, believe me I’ll tell you.”

Sarah was in agony. She forced herself to appear interested in the meeting, but all she could think of was eating. Soon there would have to be some kind of reckoning.

They all looked so evil — or so blind. “We have a most interesting picture,” the geneticist droned. Sarah couldn’t even remember his name. He fumbled with the overhead projector, finally casting a karyotype of Miriam’s chromosomes on the meeting room’s whiteboard.

Poor Miriam, she was becoming a bunch of charts and graphs. But what could they tell of her beauty? She was the most free spirit Sarah had ever known. Free, and also brave. Sarah had decided that the transfusion had really been an act of courage and love. Miriam wanted to transmit her gift to mankind.

She had chosen Sarah as the recipient because Sarah knew so much about aging. There was brilliance in such a choice. They were all making a great mistake about Miriam. In a sense they had not the right to disturb the experiment any more than they had the right to imprison Miriam. She was a genius, perhaps even beyond that. They owed her trust, not suspicion and the

violence of involuntary commitment.

The transfusion was an act of courage. As the recipient, was she not also called to courage?

How dare they consider a blood wash.

A wave of hunger made Sarah gasp. Tom and Hutch were both looking at her. She managed a smile. 'Miriam will know how to take care of me,' she thought. 'She would never have done such a thing in ignorance.'

The geneticist's drone reached her ears again. "To complete the cytogenic analysis, we stained for G-banding and Q-banding. The specimen presents the longest chromosomal chain yet observed in a higher animal: sixty-eight chromosomes. No trisomes or other identifiable translocations or breaks are observed."

Sarah could hardly sit still. If they had been more cooperative Miriam would probably already have helped her with this terrible feeling. It was greater than a simple appetite. Sarah didn't want food. This felt like some kind of addiction. Hunger. God help her.

"Both 'p' and 'q' arms are of equal length, an unusual finding. There is superficial resemblance to a human chromosome, but only in the most general terms. The broad primate characteristics can be observed, however."

Shut up, you long-winded bastard.

"The sexual component presents another sort of problem. I would doubt that the sexual functioning of this species parallels our own, or the rest of the primates, for that matter. The ambiguity of the sixty-six, XXY tripartite structure certainly implies both male and female components in the same personality. I would recommend a thorough examination of the sexual organs as the next step in this study."

That did it. She could not abide the idea of Miriam strapped to some table with this bastard examining her sexual organs. She found herself on her feet. Tom started to rise as well. For an instant she was desperate, cornered. She

had to get upstairs! “Relax,” she said as calmly as possible. “Does it have to cause a panic when I go to the bathroom?”

Only Hutch followed her out of the meeting. They walked down the hall side by side. It seemed that he had to go to the bathroom too. Sarah waited for him to disappear into the men’s room and then headed for the stairs. She paused on the landing. Sure enough, Hutch appeared a few moments later in the doorway. She realized that he would have to be dealt with. They were standing face to face. He held out his hand. She wasn’t really sure it would work, but she had read somewhere that a blow to the side of the head could stun.

She hit him above the temple with her closed fist. His eyes rolled and he sank to the floor. “I’m sorry,” she said. She hated violence. Always, she had been a person of the deepest humanitarian ethic.

She took the stairs three at a time.

Tom could not contain his own excitement as finding piled on finding. These results were marvelous. There was going to be recognition for everybody. Extraordinary discoveries. Fame. It was like the best of Christmases. No, better.

All it would take would be a few more weeks of intensive testing of Miriam and they would be ready to make everything public. The discovery of the new species could be announced at the same time they announced the antidote for aging. During her deep sleep, it seemed, Miriam’s body generated the same lipofuscin inhibitor that had been briefly present in Methuselah’s blood before he broke down. The difference was that for Miriam there were no breakdowns. It was only a matter of time before they understood why.

He thought of that cell on the Psychiatric Ward. Involuntary commitment. Unpleasant, but unavoidable.

Hutch reeled into the room, shattering Tom’s thoughts and the whole meeting with the sound of the door crashing back against the wall. Hutch didn’t have

to speak, they all knew that something had gone wrong with Sarah.

“Which way did she go?” Tom heard Charlie Humphries ask.

Tom waited until he heard Hutch breathe the word “stairs” before he was off.

He headed for the sixteenth floor. Bursting into the reception area, Tom caused the attendant to vault his desk, his nightstick in his hand.

“Is Doctor Roberts up here?”

“Jesus! You goin’ to a fire?”

“IS SHE!”

“Lessee. She signed into room fourteen ten minutes ago. Signed out three minutes later.”

“Goddamnit!” He signed himself in, waited for the attendant to buzz him through the door to the ward, rushed down to Miriam’s room. The special guard sat with his chair tilted against the wall. “Open it.”

The man looked up, recognized Tom. “Hasn’t been a sound since Doctor Roberts left.” He unlocked the door, swung it wide.

The room was cold with the night wind. The window, its bars gone, gaped darkly. “Sarah left here alone?”

“Yeah! Not five minutes ago. She didn’t say a damn thing about this.”

Tom went over to the window. He couldn’t have climbed up or down from there. But Miriam evidently could, because she was gone.

Miriam went swiftly through Central Park, heading for the West Side. She was literally wild with hunger. By the time Sarah had come she had already pushed the bars off the window. It was just as well. Sarah had wanted to be held. Miriam did not trust herself so far, not in this state. She reassured the suffering woman that there would be relief, and told her to meet her at her

house in half an hour. Then she had climbed down to the sidewalk, with Sarah leaning far out the window, watching her progress.

She ran across the Sheep Meadow with the soaring cliffs of buildings sparkling beyond the dark trees. She had much to do in half an hour.

Only when she emerged onto Central Park West she did break her run. Now she walked swiftly, crossing to Seventy-sixth Street and counting the houses to the one she would enter.

She chose a house four doors down from the target in case she was seen on the stairway. Taking the steps four at a time, she passed the doors of apartments, the sounds of television, the smell of frying steak. When she got to the top of the house, she climbed the ladder to the roof and let herself out. New York building codes require that tenants have free access to the roof. This made things much more convenient.

These old row houses were connected by shared walls. Miriam passed silently across the tar-paper roofs until she reached her objective. The landlord of the target house had been clever. He had gained an extra apartment by building a bedroom on the roof. The apartment was a duplex, fashionably provided with a spiral staircase to connect sleeping and living quarters. Miriam considered it an ideal early evening choice because you could get into the upstairs bedroom and await your chance at the top of the spiral stairs. From there you had a view of the whole living-dining room below.

The bedroom had a door to the outside, locked by a spring-loaded dead bolt. You could open it from inside, but not from the roof. Or so they had assumed. The lock hadn't been changed. It was still the same substandard mechanism that had been there six years ago. She was inside within thirty seconds. There were three steps down to the bedroom floor.

Looking down the spiral stairs from the darkness above, she evaluated both occupants. The girl was the lighter, she would be the one to be taken alive. Miriam watched the man. He fit her personal needs very well. The last time she had been here all had been as now: a young couple, dinnertime. The only difference was that John had been with her then, and they had shared their

meal on the bedroom floor.

Miriam used the same ploy she had before: she hissed. Dinner stopped downstairs. She did it again, louder.

“Is that a cat?”

She repeated the sound.

“Frank, there’s a cat upstairs.”

“Goddamn it.”

She did it another time, imagining herself to be a cat in pain.

“Frank, go see. It sounds like it’s hurt.”

His chair scraped. Instantly, Miriam stepped back into the bathroom. A moment later the bedroom light came on and Frank’s heavy tread sounded on the stairs. She watched him from the shadows, tensing for the kill. He did exactly the same thing his predecessor had done: looked around and, seeing nothing, bent to peer under the bed.

Miriam had no need of a scalpel. Nature had given her race a tongue proper to its uses and she penetrated the flesh instantly. He sucked in his breath, kicked once against the floor, and was dead. In ten seconds she filled her body with the fire of his life.

“Frank? What’s that sucking?”

Miriam removed her chloroformed rag from its Ziploc bag and once again withdrew to the bathroom. She took with her the loose bundle of clothing that had been the male.

“Frank?”

She made the hiss of the cat again. Then she stomped on the floor.

“Are you killing that animal? Frank, that’s probably Mrs. Ransom’s cat, you

realize that!” Another strangled hiss. “Frank, don’t!” The scrape of a chair, patter of feet.

Miriam knew the type very well. With this one she would step out into the light, stunning it into momentary immobility. She got to the top of the stairs. “Fra-ank? Oh!” She stood, mouth gaping with surprise, eyes darting in confusion.

“I’m a policewoman,” Miriam said, crossing the room with one bound. “It’s perfectly all right.”

The girl lurched and mumbled in the chloroformed rag, but soon went limp. Miriam put the remains of Frank in the usual black plastic bag. The unconscious girl was more of a problem, but Miriam had thought carefully about that. Getting her home would be the riskiest part of the procedure. If anybody came out of one of the other apartments while they were on the staircase, she would have to kill again.

She went downstairs quickly. Nobody appeared. There were a few people in the street, but women in the human culture are shielded by their position from any expectation of violence, so she was only mildly concerned that she would raise suspicions by assisting her woozy “girl friend” into a cab.

They got home without incident, Miriam alternately comforting the half-conscious girl and threatening her. But until the girl was locked in the bedroom closet Miriam remained vigilant. With the turning of the key in that lock, all was at last prepared. It was now nine-thirty. Miriam herself was fed and once again able to be among human beings without the constant temptation of the hunger. And Sarah’s first victim awaited her.

Tom sought Sarah with increasing desperation, in her office, then in her lab, then in Geoff’s lab where the blood wash was to have been done. Geoff was there and he had all the fresh blood he needed.

But he did not have Sarah.

Tom finally had to accept the truth. She had left Riverside in spite of her condition. “How much time does she have?” Geoff’s expression said it all.

“I was afraid of that.”

“I did all I could, Tom. I practically had to rob the Red Cross to get this stuff.”

Tom rushed down the halls, blind with sorrow and terror. How could she have done this? The thought crossed his mind that Miriam might have kidnapped her, but he dismissed it. Even Miriam could not have negotiated the drop from her window with Sarah on her hands.

He came to the conference room, saw Hutch slumped in a chair. Phyllis was nursing him with wet paper towels. “Hutch,” Tom said, “any idea at all where she might be?”

“As soon as I tried to stop her she hit me so hard I was stunned.”

Tom bolted from the room, went to the elevators, hammered at the button. He felt nauseous, he was shaking. But he knew now where she had gone. The only place she would have gone.

Sarah. Please, darling. *Please!*

The night air was damp and sharp as Sarah ran down First Avenue. Never had she experienced such a wild sense of freedom. Her body felt incredibly *capable*. She was moving fast, not even breathing hard, enjoying the wind in her face.

For a brief moment she had embraced Miriam in the Psychiatric Ward. In that instant she was filled with gladness and wonder. She had seen into Miriam’s mystery. How dense they all had been. Not one of them had noticed the ecstasy that could be drawn from Miriam’s gaze, or the joy of her touch.

These feelings could not be explained by science. The effect Miriam had on her was beyond measurement. How could you weigh the difference between a spirit imprisoned and a spirit free?

A thrill went through her. Two blocks ahead a lone figure had come out of a coffee shop. She increased her pace, her feet drumming on the pavement.

There was a delicious sense of precision about her movements.

That figure seemed so delicate as it strolled along. It would be like digging into a honeycomb and tasting its hot, secret sweetness.

Did she want to hit that man? No, it was worse than that. She imagined his head flying like a melon beneath the wheels of a passing bus, saw the blood spurt from his neck.

She stopped running.

These were not her thoughts, could not be.

The man stopped at a corner and lit a cigarette. Sarah saw the white neck exposed as the head bent forward, then the profile in the glow of the match.

The man straightened up and stared back in her direction, seemingly aware of her sudden change of pace. His bland, haggard face regarded her with the mildest curiosity and then he went his way.

His very gentleness enraged her. She took a few strides toward him, then stopped herself. A radio was playing in a passing car. Two children came out of an apartment house lobby and dashed off into the night.

There was no reason to be enraged at the old man.

Miriam. She would know, she would understand. The thought brought all the glee back and Sarah started running again. It was wonderful to feel so free in the streets like this, so utterly unafraid.

She found herself passing Carl Shurz Park. Why exactly she had come this far east she could not say. Mist was starting to fall, blowing like smoke in the streetlights, making the park's paths glisten as they had last night. Sarah slowed to a walk.

The little park had lost all its mystery and terror. A Baby Ruth wrapper clung to a gatepost, a dismal loop of kite string hung from a tree. In the distance the East River muttered with the rising tide and tires hissed on FDR Drive.

This was the real world, Sarah's world. She came to the gate she had entered last night, saw the path leading up into darkness. If she went in, what would she find?

Empty benches and silence. Nothing more.

Last night had been a bad dream. She moved on, going more slowly toward Miriam's house. She was left with a single, practical wish: find out what she could do about this awful craving. It was beyond an appetite.

As she went down East End Avenue and turned west to York she passed the exhaust fan of a restaurant. Cooking odors poured into her face.

She was revolted.

People were willing to eat garbage these days. Her mind seized on the familiar image of the peaches they used to get from their backyard tree down in Savannah. They had been rich and yellow-red. She wished she had one now.

"Please, Miriam," she said aloud. "Help me."

By the time the house finally appeared she was livid with need. Try as she might she could not discover what it was she wanted. It was as if life itself was the food she required. But what nutritional need could possibly translate into such a desire?

Sarah rang the doorbell. Instantly the lock clicked and the door swept open. Miriam stood in the dark hallway. Arms outstretched, Sarah ran forward, attaching herself with a gasp of relief. Miriam made no sound closing the door, her own arms coming around Sarah. Miriam could be so very tender.

When Sarah calmed down enough to talk she began to babble thanks, to explain that she understood now what Miriam had given her, she knew that it was the very longevity she had been trying so hard to achieve in the laboratory.

"That isn't all it is."

No, that was true. Despite her relief and happiness there was still this awful, cloying need — and with it a growing revulsion for normal food. Until now she hadn't thought about Miriam's diet. Her confusion must arise out of the fact that she had no instinctive craving for what Miriam ate, and what must now also be her own food.

“Come.” Miriam took her by the arm, led her upstairs. The stairway and hall were brightly lit. Miriam opened a door to a dark room. “This is my bedroom,” she said, “you were here yesterday.” Sarah allowed Miriam to lead her in, close the door. The darkness was absolute. It would be a few moments before Sarah's eyes adjusted to the rapid changes in light intensity. Miriam pushed her by the shoulders, sitting her down. “Wait. I am going to relieve your hunger. Be prepared, Sarah. This is going to be quite unexpected.” Sarah obeyed the calm reassurance of the voice. She thought with childish delight, ‘she's glad to see me.’ There was a high-pitched sound, like the scream of a dying rabbit. “Open your mouth!” Miriam's tone was now strident, demanding that Sarah do as she was told. A hot stream sluiced down her throat, hot and pumping, while the reedy little scream got lower and lower and finally died away. For a horrible instant Sarah had thought that this was a stream of urine, it was so hot and saline, but the effect it had on her dispelled that fear almost at once.

Sarah and Tom had occasionally taken a little cocaine. It lifted one, in the first instant, to what had up until now seemed the pinnacle of pleasure. It was nothing compared to this.

Sarah kicked, threw her head back, lost the stream, then lunged forward in the dark, seeking more. A fleshy something was thrust into her mouth. “Suck!” More came when she did, better than what had come before. Each time a new swallow of it entered her mouth stars exploded in her mind. Angels were singing around her, singing the most glorious euphonies.

Then the pulsing hotness was withdrawn. Sarah lurched forward, sobbing, trying to find it again, her body and soul blazing with pleasure beyond intensity. In her mind she felt the cool clarity of spring rain, but it was in her heart that the greatest pleasure rested. “Welcome to the kingdom,” Miriam said. She turned on the lights.

Sarah screamed. The sound was like exploding bells in her own ears, not a shriek of fear, but of delight wild beyond words. Miriam did not look a thing like a human being, but she was *beautiful!* “I thought I would take off my makeup.” This was the Goddess Athena, Isis — Sarah could not find a word, a name . . .

The eyes were not pale gray at all, but shining, golden, piercingly bright.

The skin was as white and smooth as marble. There were no eyebrows, but the face was so noble, so much at peace that just seeing it made Sarah want to sob out the petty passions of her own humanity and have done with them forever.

The hair, which had been concealed by a wig, as gold as the eyes, was soft, almost like smoke, finer than the hair of a baby. Angel’s hair.

The majestic being that had called itself “Miriam” now spoke. “You shall learn secrets,” it said in a new tone, the voice of authority absolute. Sarah had to suppress an impulse to shout with delight.

Suddenly, Miriam’s face seemed to jump at her. She heard words, quavering, concentrated with effort, inside her head. “Sarah, I love you.” Then they were gone, as if the speaker had released a desperately difficult effort.

“Oh my God! You —”

“Projected my voice telepathically. Yes, I can *touch* your heart.”

Sarah wasn’t so sure. There was little scientific grounding for notions of telepathy.

At this moment, however, she didn’t much care. As her stomach digested the mysterious new food extraordinary perceptual changes were taking place. First, she became aware of a new sensation in her body, one she had never felt before. It was strength, the profound wellness that must be experienced by powerful animals. She found that she could also call upon a sense of smell so improved that it was virtually a new addition to her body. The room, in fact, was a maelstrom of odors. She could smell the cool scent of the silk

coverlet on the bed, the mustiness of the carpet, the faint sharp-sweet odor of the beeswax that had been used to polish the furniture.

And there was something else, something familiar and yet not familiar — a terrible odor, meaty and strong, but also by far the most exciting scent in the room. It was under the bed. She bent toward it.

“Not yet,” Miriam hissed. In an instant she was beside Sarah.

“It smells wonderful.” Childishly, she felt petulant at being denied access to whatever was hidden there. Miriam drew her close, pressed her face to her white skin. This diverted her. The new sense of smell drew in an aroma that brought music to mind. As befitted someone so beyond the stunted nature of men, Miriam’s scent was more than addictive. Sarah rested her head there, vowing that never as long as she lived would she move, never would she be denied this — this heaven — again.

Miriam heard pounding at the door below. If Sarah had seen the look in those golden eyes she would have thought no further of angels.

Gently Miriam detached herself. Obviously, Haver had sorted things out sufficiently to come here. Sarah moaned as Miriam laid her on the bed. Sleep would soon overwhelm Sarah after the relief she has just experienced. It was well that she Sleep. There was no need for her to see the events that were about to occur. John, hiding in the attic, was about to make the move against her that Miriam had anticipated.

And Tom Haver was about to take the full force of it in her place.

12

JOHN WAITED UNTIL HE WAS sure he heard two voices, then he put his hand on the lock. He closed his eyes. When he turned that lock his life was going to come to an end. He would never, by his own free will, move again.

But at least he would be able to take this magnificent revenge with him — for as long as he must remain aware.

The lock clicked. The door slammed open, smashing John against the far wall. He fell to the floor, his dry skin tearing like paper. Dark shapes tumbled out into the attic. There was a dry, old odor, like the smell of ancient leather.

For a long time only faint rustling sounds were heard. John had not known exactly what they would be like, but he had assumed that they would move faster than they did. Miriam must not —

Something touched his foot, came slipping up his leg. He kept his eyes shut tight, he did not want to see it. There was a tiny sound, the remains of his own voice, crying.

They soon discovered that he was useless to them. He heard the scraping as they pulled themselves toward the door to the lower part of the house, the thuds as they went down the attic stairs.

“Open up!” Tom pounded on the front door. He hadn’t expected to be ignored. All the more it confirmed to him that Sarah was in there and his presence was not appreciated. “I’ll kick this damn door in!” His voice echoed up and down the street but he didn’t care. Let somebody call the police. He would welcome the help. He stepped back and gave the door a hard kick —

and almost fell into the hallway. The door had opened on its own.

The entrance gaped black. A whispering sound abruptly stopped. Tom could see somebody back in the shadows, crouching low. "I want to see Sarah Roberts," he said as he strode across the threshold. He had intended to leave the door open to get some light from the street, but it closed as soon as he was inside. The smoothness of its motion and the decisive *chunk* of the lock made him suspect that it was being controlled from elsewhere in the house. "All right, Miriam, enough is enough!" he flailed, seeking the wall, then began to slide his hands along its smooth surface trying to find a light. He pressed an old-fashioned button switch but no lights came on. "Oh, for God's sake!"

The whispering began again, closer this time. He recoiled. There was something awful about it, something avid. He pressed back against the front door. The handle would not turn. "Get away from me!" He kicked, met air. The whispering grew louder and louder, becoming a frenetic chatter. It was not a voice at all but rather the sound of movements, as if a swarm of insects were crawling down the hallway.

Tom twisted the handle of the door, threw his weight against it, hammered on it. It might look like wood but it felt like steel.

To his left was an archway leading into a living room.

Windows.

He stepped forward. Something came around his right ankle. He yanked his leg free but now it attached itself to the other ankle. He stamped his feet but it was no use. Both ankles were grasped. "*Sarah!*" The pressure became pain, searing, excruciating, forcing him to his knees. He clawed the darkness before him, grabbed toward his agonized ankles, and fell forward into a tangled, ropy mass. His legs kicked, his arms flailed. Every movement seemed to entangle him further with whatever it was. Thin fingers groped in his hair, slipped around his neck. He screamed and screamed, pulling at the ropy substance as best he could. A fingernail popped into his cheek and cut through all the way down to his chin. The pain made him bellow, but he managed to move so that it missed the critical blood vessels behind the jaw.

“Sarah!”

Tom’s hands connected with something solid — a head. He pushed back with all his might. There was a crackling sound and the fingers released his hair. Again and again he smashed at the thing, feeling it break like glass beneath his blows.

He pulled himself to his feet and lunged past it into the living room, rolling across the floor, brushing the stinking dust it had left on him to the floor.

His cheek, his ankles and his hands screamed in pain. He stared into the darkness. Had he killed it?

What the hell was it?

“Sarah, it’s me! Come back! You’ve got to get out of here!”

He saw the shadow of somebody standing at the far end of the room, a tall, thin individual with a bobbing head. It did not look any more human than the thing that attacked him had felt. Its outline was dim in the light from the street.

He didn’t understand at all what was happening in this place. Only Sarah was here — somewhere. Every fiber of his body screamed at him to jump out a window, to escape, to get away from whatever monstrous evil had infected this house —

But Sarah was here.

“You! Where is she?” He took a step toward it. Another. Its head stopped moving. Abruptly it dropped to the floor.

Another one appeared in a doorway that led into the rear part of the house. He could see it marching like a man whose knee joints had been fused. Then it too dropped to the floor.

The scrabbling sound began again.

“Sarah Roberts!”

The sound rose as the things crossed the floor. Tom's hand went to his cheek, touching the open wound. In that instant he knew that he had to leave this place. If they reached him again he was going to die.

To his left was a sun porch with French doors leading to a garden. He stumbled toward the doors, grabbed the handle and jerked it at it. Locked.

He didn't try to unlock the door, but took a chair and hurled it through.

He ran wildly across the garden, flailing in the shrubs, seeking some kind of a fence. At last he came to the edge of the property and climbed the brick wall he found there, cutting his fingers deeply on the shards of glass embedded in the top.

Atop the wall he paused, looked back at the house. There were no lights. Not far behind him the shrubbery was waving madly as something struggled through it.

He jumped six feet to the sidewalk.

Back in the world again. A woman walked toward him leading a dachshund. He brushed past her to the corner and hailed a cab.

"Riverside emergency," he gasped out.

"You bet."

They stitched him in the brightly lit emergency room and bandaged his hands. He told them a window had fallen out at his apartment.

What had actually happened he did not know. Perhaps it had been real, perhaps some kind of complex illusion designed to frighten him away.

He had them call over some detectives from the Twenty-third Precinct. Half an hour later he met them in his office.

"So you want us to go this house and get out your girl friend?"

"That's right, officer. I have every reason to believe she's there against her

will.”

“Kidnapped?”

“Psychically kidnapped. Influenced.”

“It doesn’t sound like a crime. She’s not under age —”

“Of course not! You’re telling me I can’t get help.”

“Doctor Haver, you haven’t reported a crime.”

He let them leave. When the door closed he could contain himself no longer. In his defeat and loss he wept, muffling his face in his hands to deaden the sound.

Sarah had been at peace until she heard somebody call her name.

Tom?

She was drifting on the softest of waters, in the moonlit sea . . .

He screamed.

She opened her eyes. In her mind was a vivid image of Tom. “I love you.” The screams peeled again and again, so frantic that Sarah clapped her hands over her ears.

Abruptly it was over. After a moment Miriam’s voice drifted through the door. “It’s all right,” the voice said, “sleep now.”

“Thank you,” she replied. But she thought, ‘please don’t let him be dead.’ She had to go to him. For that she somehow had to get out of this bed. She swayed when she sat up, shook when she put her feet on the floor, had to grab the bedpost for support when she tried to move.

Helpless, almost overcome with sleep, she sank to the floor.

She lay her head down, wishing she had never left the bed. It was so cold!

Her eyes opened, she tried to gather enough energy to pull herself back up.

It was some time before she realized that she was staring into a face. Somebody was lying under the bed, still and silent. Sarah sighed, all that escaped of a scream.

It was not a peaceful face, but a sad one.

So this was Miriam's "food." Sarah gagged with the memory of it. And yet it sang in her veins. Slowly she extended her hand. Her own eyes closing as if she were under the influence of some opiate, she stroked the forehead of the person whose life she had taken.

She Slept.

Miriam moved about the house struggling with her failures. The body of Tom Haver was nowhere to be found. She was not really surprised at his escape. His attackers were fierce but they had little real strength. Poor man. All his survival had gained him was a harder death. He could not be allowed to survive, not with what he now knew. If she was clever, his death could be arranged in such a way that it served a purpose.

She followed a trail of broken plants to the garden wall. There was Eumenes, arms outstretched, mouth lolling open, lusting toward food he could never swallow. Astonishingly repulsive.

She remembered lying with her head in his lap on the slopes of Hymettus.

She returned them all to their resting places, forcing their remains into the chests. At last there was John, slumped against the wall of the attic. She picked him up, holding the wrists together with one hand, carrying him with the other. "I know you can hear me, my love," she said as she placed him in his container. "I'll make you the same promise I made the others. Listen well, because you must hold this in your memory forever. John, I will keep you beside me until time itself comes to an end. I will neither abandon nor forget you. I will never stop loving you."

She pressed him down into his steel tomb until his knees were against his

chest and slid the cover closed. Weeping, she spun the bolts one by one.

Tom lay in their bed alone. Each time he had dropped off, shouting terrors had jolted him back awake. His face was a dull haze of throbbing pain, his left eye was swollen closed.

He kept trying to understand what had happened to him. No matter how he worked it out, however, there just wasn't a satisfactory explanation.

He thought of Sarah and cried aloud. She was in the hands of a monster. It was as simple as that. Perhaps science would never explain such things, perhaps it couldn't.

And yet Miriam was real, living in the real world, right now. Her life mocked the laws of nature, at least as Tom understood them.

Slowly, the first shaft of sunlight spread across the wall. Tom imagined the earth, a little green mote of dust sailing around the sun, lost in the enormous darkness. The universe seemed a cold place indeed, malignant and secret.

Was that the truth of it?

Something tickled his unwounded cheek. Tears again. He threw back the covers and got out of bed. All at once he froze. This room was the only one with any sunlight in it. The rest of the apartment was still dark.

He was frozen with terror. He could not move from the place where he stood.

It came at him shrieking, tearing with its long knives of fingernails, its jaws snapping —

And was gone.

He shook his head, went to the bathroom, splashed his chest and neck with cold water. He must not let the image of that thing creep into his mind again. It was not outside the realm of possibility to be driven catatonic by fear. That had to be guarded against if there was to be any hope left at all.

He looked like hell. One eye was an angry purple mass of flesh. The other was black. He badly needed a shave but the bandages were going to get in the way.

Suddenly, the sound of the intercom broke into his thoughts. How long had it been buzzing? Turning on lights as he went, he moved to the foyer and answered it.

Three minutes later Geoff and Phyllis stood at the door. They had food and coffee and they didn't buy any stories about broken windows. They wanted to know what Miriam had done with Sarah.

Miriam stood beside the bed watching Sarah, waiting for her to wake up. The transformation was working well. Miriam touched Sarah's cheek, feeling the cool dryness of the skin. That was another good sign.

It was a happy moment.

The only barrier left to complete transformation was the emotional one. Loyalty was, as always, the issue. Sarah must be made to realize the truth of her situation. She now belonged to a new species and must leave the values of the old behind.

Miriam turned her thoughts to Tom Haver. She could see a good way to use him to further Sarah's change of allegiance. He would be the medium.

A slight variation in Sarah's breathing pattern alerted Miriam to the fact that the Sleep was about to end. Very well. When Sarah awoke, she would find love waiting for her.

An ugly dream receded. Sarah opened her eyes. The thing looming over the bed startled her for an instant. Miriam, of course. Her eyes were glaring, the stare avid. Sarah's impulse was to run.

She thought of the body under the bed, the dead skin dull and dry.

"Don't," Miriam said. "You can't change the past."

“You’re a murderer!”

Miriam sat on the edge of the bed. It made Sarah shudder when Miriam stroked her face, but she was afraid to turn away. As a child in Savannah she had captured a baby rabbit. She remembered how it had huddled so quietly in her hand, and she had thought, ‘I’ve tamed it with my touch.’ But it wasn’t tame at all, it was in a rapture of fear. She had cuddled it to her face and, giving it a friendly snuffle, found that it was dead.

Sarah almost wished something similar would happen to her. But it did not. Instead she remembered last night. “Tom —”

“He’s quite well.”

“I’ve got to call him!” Some of her old self was returning, it seemed, as she recalled Tom’s screams. “Where’s the phone?”

Miriam’s expression was hard to read. She seemed at once angry and curiously at peace. “I don’t think you should phone him. Go to him instead.”

Sarah hid her amazement. She had assumed herself a prisoner. “Can I go now?”

“Certainly. You’re no prisoner.”

At once Sarah got out of bed. She could stand up easily. The hunger, the grogginess, were gone. Her body seemed unusually light and healthy. The sense of physical well-being was remarkable.

Then the image of the dead girl swam into memory again. Her own experiences crowded out all happiness. She remembered the blood hot in her throat, the delicate sadness of her victim’s face. She moved away from the bed.

“The room is clean,” Miriam said. “We remove evidence very quickly, you’ll find.”

Sarah couldn’t stand to hear it. She clapped her hands over her ears.

“You took a life. That’s what you feel in you now. Her life. She was a healthy young woman of about twenty-five, about your size and build. She was wearing jeans and a brown sweat shirt when I captured her.”

“Shut up!”

Sarah’s heart had started pounding, her temples throbbing. She longed somehow to expel what was in her. All she could do was escape. She ran from the room, down the hallway toward the stairs.

Miriam’s strong hand grabbed her shoulder, spun her around. “Get dressed,” she snapped. “You can’t go out like that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Your clothes are in the bedroom closet.”

Sarah hesitated. She didn’t want to go back in that bedroom. Miriam pushed her. “Face it, Sarah. You killed. *You*.” She pushed again. “And you’ll kill others. You’ll keep killing.” Another hard shove and Sarah stumbled through the door. Miriam rushed past her, strode to the windows and swept back the heavy drapes.

Dawn was spreading up from the east, the red sun gleaming on the East River, sending a spear of light across Miriam’s garden. Such beauty hurt.

“You haven’t got any reason to cry,” Miriam said. “You should be rejoicing.”

“You said I could go.” How small her voice sounded.

In answer Miriam swept her clothes out of the closet. Sarah threw them on, thinking only of Tom and the salvation she would find in his arms.

In a few more minutes she was setting out into a magnificent spring morning. The door of the house swung shut behind her. As Sarah walked down the street she was conscious of Miriam’s face at the window of the library. Only when she was able to turn a corner and get out of that line of sight did she begin to feel free.

Never, as long as she lived, would she return to that house.

She was actually going back home. She felt all the delight of one who escapes from an unjust imprisonment. She was going back to her place as part of humanity. She was resurrected.

Tom shared as much of his tragedy as he dared with Charlie and Phyllis. He could not tell them of the things he had seen. They might have thought he was hallucinating, which would only confuse matters. Phyllis wept a little when Tom told her that he did not know what had happened to Sarah. She was Sarah's closest associate and a good friend, and she shared some of Tom's anguish.

Tom didn't know if he would ever see Sarah again. He suspected she might be dead. This black thought was in his mind when the lock clicked and Sarah came in.

She burst in. Tom was astonished and glad, and yet somehow assaulted. There was something about the total surprise of the arrival and the quickness of her movements that made him want to retreat.

He refused to accept such a feeling. Her poor, small frame was shaking with tearful joy and he was afraid of her. Or was it joy that moved her? What was that look in her eyes?

"Sarah!" Phyllis' voice rang through the silence.

Sarah glared. Tom had never seen such an expression on her face before. For a moment he was afraid she might strike Phyllis.

"Tom, please hold me!" She came toward him, then paused. He did not understand her hesitation. Her expression became almost desperate.

"You're home now," was all he could think to say. "You made it home." His emotions were beginning to overwhelm him. He wanted to sob. Never again would he let her go. They circled one another, a slow dance.

He recalled their past: lying on a beach in Florida, Sarah holding forth on age

vectors in the baking sun. He had laughed aloud at her intensity. Sarah in her lab, her voice strident, the atmosphere charged with her energy. Sarah in bed, loving.

As the shock of her arrival wore off she became more real to Tom. He kissed her. Her mouth was sour and he drew back. Tears appeared in her eyes. “I have a confession —”

“Not yet.”

Her eyes widened. Her fingers came up to his bandages. “She hurt me,” he said.

“Don’t call her ‘she.’ Miriam isn’t a ‘she.’ That’s a human word.”

“What, then? Woman?”

“A female of another species. A woman is a human being. Miriam is a mockery of humanity. Women stand for life, Miriam stands for death.”

“You’re pale,” he said. He didn’t want to pursue any conversations about Miriam right now. Not until they both felt a lot better.

Phyllis and Charlie had drawn close, instinct making them seek the comfort of the group. Tom could not blame them. He felt it too: something black and cold was in this room.

“I may look pale but I feel good,” Sarah said. “I wish I didn’t feel like this.” Tom detected more than a little desperation in her voice. He began to wish Phyllis and Charlie would leave. He wanted Sarah alone.

“We didn’t understand how dangerous she was,” Phyllis said.

Sarah turned to her. “I failed, Phyl. You believed in me, but I failed.” She was starting to back away, as if their closeness disturbed her.

“We got a lot of data, Sarah.”

“Not enough. You don’t know the half of it. She didn’t let you have anything

of real value.”

Sarah kept backing away. Tom made a gesture to Phyllis and Charlie, nodded toward the door. “Yes,” Sarah said, “it’s best if they leave.”

“Sarah,” Phyllis said, “I don’t want you to think you failed.”

“Please, Phyl.”

“I’ll go, but just don’t think you’ve failed. It isn’t over yet. Remember that. We haven’t even begun to work on that data.”

“Yes, Phyl.”

“I think you’d better cut it short,” Tom said at last. Sarah looked as if she were about to explode. When the door closed behind them at last, Sarah took a ragged breath. She was now on the far side of the room, poised like a cornered animal.

Sarah had known from the moment she entered the apartment what Miriam had done to her. Another trick.

They smelled so good.

She wanted to handle them, to caress their warm, moist skin, to draw them close to her.

How accommodating Miriam had been. And why not, when she knew what this was going to do to Sarah. She wanted to run . . . and then again she didn’t. There was something very pleasing about them, about Tom especially, the slow way he moved and the trust in his eyes. This odd feeling isolated her from them, forced her into a kind of loneliness she had never known before.

When the door closed behind Charlie and Phyllis, Sarah knew that Tom was endangered. He should not be alone with her. Not when she was like this.

She strove for control. “Stay on that side of the room,” she said.

He looked across at her, a question in his eyes. The wall was directly behind her. She could not get farther away from that wonderful scent. If she opened her arms, called to him, he would come. She must not allow herself to do that.

“Darling?”

“Tom, don’t come any closer!”

“You’re joking.”

“I am not.”

“Didn’t you come here to be with me?”

There was such hurt in his tone. She wanted to go to him, but she did not dare. He took a step closer. Her flesh crawled, but her arms came up. Another Sarah, mean and evil, smiled, another voice welcomed him. She could hear his pulse as he approached, hear the whisper of his breath, the faint liquid sound as his lips parted.

“We had good times. Don’t you remember?” She did remember, as he had no doubt intended she should. Sweaty hours banging away at one another. Such innocence and pleasure.

“Tom, *stop!*”

Thank God it had finally come out. The shout stunned him. He stood still, his smile fading. “Why?”

“Just do it. Don’t come a step nearer. Not one step!”

He bowed his head, remained motionless.

“Go into the bedroom and close the door. I made a major error coming here. I’ve got to get out and I can’t possibly make myself do it unless you leave the room.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Tom, I can’t stand it much longer! Please just do as I say, even if you don’t understand.”

“I think we ought to talk about it.”

“No! Go away!”

He was moving closer again. In a moment she was going to open her arms once more and this time she would not be able to stop.

Miriam called it hunger. A mild word.

“*Please!*” She cast her eyes down, felt her muscles tensing for the kill. Her body was preparing to spring at him. Hot, anguished tears poured out of her eyes. Very softly, she made a last plea. “Don’t touch me.”

“You’re serious. You’re absolutely serious!”

She looked up at him. He was four feet away. She could not warn him again.

“OK, I get the point. But why, Sarah?”

“Just do as I say. Do it now.”

At last he began to move toward the bedroom. For a horrible moment she thought she was following him, but she managed to go out the front door instead. Her movements were sinuous and quick. She reminded herself of a rat questing through a maze. There was another person in her, powerful and evil, and she was losing control.

The hallway was empty. That was a small miracle, and Sarah was grateful. She could smell them all around her, behind the doors of their apartments. The moan of need that came out of her mouth was hardly human.

Sarah knew where she had to go, where it was intended she go. There was only one place that did not smell human, only one being who did not tempt the hunger. Miriam had made her point. For Sarah the only thing that now mattered was getting back to that house. Doing it through the crowded Manhattan streets was going to be hell. She clung to the notion that she

would not kill another human being.

As the elevator descended, she tried to prepare herself for her ordeal. She had moved in the streets before, after all, and hadn't eaten at all the last time. She remembered the man on the sidewalk whom she had nearly killed, the apartment balcony she had climbed.

That was with the streets empty. Now they were going to be jam-packed. 'I am a human being,' she thought. 'I will not harm my fellow man.' Will all the willpower left to her, she resolved to remain a human being. The hunger she felt, after all, was not her own.

It belonged to the creature's blood. The need to kill was not her need, it was Miriam's. She resolved to keep telling herself that. Then the elevator doors opened and she saw Alex at his post. 'Miriam's hunger,' she repeated, 'not mine.'

She managed to slip past him, get through the front door and out onto the sidewalk.

Madness. People everywhere, more even than she had imagined. She made an involuntary lunge at a passing businessman, managed to dash past him into the middle of the street. Brakes squealed, horns blared. A cab swerved, slurred to a stop. The driver was cursing, the passenger staring terrified from the backseat.

There was no time to waste, no opportunity to miss. She got in.
"Whassmatter with you? I got a god-damn fare in here!"

"Emergency!"

"Call a cop, lady. You nearly got yourself run over. Now get outa here."

"Somebody's about to die. I'm a doctor."

The driver rolled his eyes. "OK," he said, "where to?"

Sarah told him Miriam's address and opened the window. The fumes from the street would perhaps mask some of the smells within the cab. She listened

as the driver reassured his passenger that all was well, the detour wouldn't take long. Many drivers would have refused to budge, she knew that. But she had gotten lucky. This guy had a heart.

As soon as the house appeared Sarah leaped from the cab, raced up the steps and began hammering the knocker, pressing the buzzer, trying the door.

She could feel Miriam standing just the other side of the door. "Please," she said softly, "please open it." She did not want to shout. Attracting the attention of the neighbors was dangerous.

After the longest thirty seconds of Sarah's life the door clicked and swung open. She staggered in and slammed it shut behind her, on all the bustle and beauty, and the hideous temptation, of the world of man.

Miriam knew at once that Sarah's will had proved stronger than her need. She sighed with displeasure, let the poor thing into the house, waited for the inevitable recriminations.

Sarah's hunger would eventually break her will, but until it did Miriam would have to endure this annoying independence. She hardly heard Sarah's wails of anguish, her roaring anger, hardly felt the clawing and the pummeling as she pulled the girl up the stairs and back into their bedroom.

"I'll return when you're feeling more reasonable," she said. "Try to calm yourself." There was little point in saying more. Sarah was stronger than the others, a lot stronger. Too bad. It was going to make things that much more difficult for her. She had a romantic vision of herself as the great healer. A fool's vision. The world has forgotten that romance has two aspects, that of love and that of death. Sarah didn't know it, but she had moved to the side of death.

The walls of the apartment were closing in on Tom. He stood in the foyer, his mind racked with indecision. He should follow Sarah, go back to that house again.

But he could not. That pretty little house held nothing for him but terror. Pink

brickwork, window boxes, romantic white shutters, all seemed evil and grotesque, like makeup smeared on some sneering face. The screaming terrors of last night seemed to come close to him. His hand touched the bandages on his face. Had they been demons? Were such things real? His belief in science had evaporated. All the grand procession of knowledge now seemed nothing more than smugness and ignorance.

In the face of something such as Miriam, had a man any power at all? There was no place to turn. Prayer meant nothing to him. His childhood prayers had gotten only silence in reply.

If that silence was sacred, he had not known it until now, and he felt it was too late to challenge the rock of his disbelief. He could not turn to God for strength.

There seemed nowhere to turn. He just didn't have the courage to break the spell of Miriam. Or did he? He imagined taking Sarah in his arms and shouting out his love so loud it would penetrate to the depth of her soul.

That love, that was truth.

That was his weapon.

He took a step toward the door. One step, no more. He remembered the look in Sarah's face as she had pleaded with him not to come near her. "I love you, Sarah! I love you!" His voice echoed. Sunlight echoed across the living room. He saw little clouds beyond the window, white and fluffy. He screamed the scream of nightmare.

Miriam decided to wait a bit before telephoning the victim. It would be best if he could get up the courage to come on his own. That way she could let him force his way to Sarah, to succeed where he had failed last night. It was doubtful, however. Human courage had its limits.

She went to the garden to pick flowers. It was a soothing pastime and it would be best if the house appeared as cheerful and sweet as possible. The windows must be opened, the curtains drawn back. There should be music on the stereo, something soothing, perhaps Delius' *Florida Suite*, or the overture

from *The Land of Smiles*. Perhaps there should be some fruit and wine set out. No, just wine. Fruit was too much trouble. She didn't even know if they still sold natural fruit, it had been so long since she had noticed.

Carefully avoiding even a glance at her destroyed rose arbor, Miriam clipped until her basket was heavy with marigolds, snapdragons, iris, all the wealth of her garden. She loved the exuberant life of the flowers. Nature demanded nothing more of them than that they open each morning to the sun. Miriam's race was not so lucky. From her and her kind much more was demanded. Not all that nature wants from its children is innocent.

She carried the cut flowers onto the sun porch, laid them on the table which contained the portrait of Lamia. She looked into her mother's eyes, rendered by the artist as pale blue. Before the invention of contact lenses and shaded glasses Miriam's species was marked as having the evil eye. The artist had not wanted to offend his client by giving her eyes their true color.

The portrait was a source of peace and reassurance to Miriam. The eyes said to her, 'Go on, never stop. For me, be immortal.'

Tom had managed to get as far as Miriam's front door. The house stood before him, the vortex of a deadly whirlpool. He was reminded of the flowers that eat flies, using their nectar and their beauty as bait. Tom hated most the beauty of the place. It should have foreboded somehow of the danger within. Must Miriam always smile?

It was a sunny morning, the sky now clear blue. Before him the house glowed in sunlight dappled through budding trees. The green shutters were open. Behind them silk curtains billowed in the fresh breeze. He heard music and saw shadowy movement in the living room.

For an instant he was ready to run, but the music seemed at odds with danger. It was happy, rich music, the kind of thing he might have heard drifting up from the bandshell on a summer night of his boyhood. He supposed that he had been seen, and the music was meant to make him feel just as he did.

He had imagined how life was going to be without Sarah, and had wound up

here, telling himself how he loved her. Still, it was going to be hard to get to that front door to ring the bell. If anything the obvious musical attempt to soothe him made him more uneasy than ever.

Either he go in that house now or face the fact that he would never see Sarah again.

How desperately she needed him. When somebody you loved has nowhere left to turn, you help. If there was such a thing as a human compact, that was part of it.

Sarah had to be gotten out of there and taken by force to Riverside. And as for Miriam — she belonged in a specimen container.

A face appeared at a downstairs window. Miriam smiled at him.

In a moment she opened the front door. He mounted the steps and went in. It was as simple as that. She stood before him, blond and beautiful, smelling of flowery old-fashioned perfume, her expression welcoming. As the door closed she regarded him with concern. “I’m so glad you came. I was just going to call you. Sarah needs help.”

“I’m aware of that. I came to get her.”

“I had hoped she would stay with you this morning. When she came back I just didn’t know what to do.”

“I want to take her to Riverside.”

“That would be best, Tom. I’m afraid I’m at my wit’s end. Sarah’s reactions have been all wrong. I — I never intended to harm her.” The gleam of a tear appeared in one eye. “Now she’s up in that bedroom and she won’t unlock the door!”

“Upstairs? What room?”

“First door on the right at the head of the stairs.”

“You lead the way.” Tom had absolutely no intention of wandering around

this house on his own. Miriam walked ahead of him, down the very hall where he had been attacked the night before. It was nothing but beautiful now, with flowers on the tables and a cheerful coaching print on one wall. The room's innocent appearance only intensified his caution.

Miriam seemed aware of his feelings, as if the act downstairs had been little more than a formality. "Sarah," she said, "Please let me in. I have a surprise for you." She turned to Tom. "I've got a key, but I hate to open a door somebody else has locked."

"Why don't I just bust it down," he said caustically.

She used her key.

It was the most beautiful room Tom had ever seen. The windows opened across a magnificent garden. He could see thousands of flowers, and there were more arrangements of cut flowers on the desk and nightstands. There was something a little obscene about the profusion of flowers. They were a kind of overstatement of an innocence that did not exist, and Tom was beginning to see them as the exact opposite of what they were obviously intended to suggest. They seemed to confirm Miriam's guilt.

The breeze blew past gossamer pink curtains and sunlight poured in the windows. Tom found himself estimating the distance to the ground, and then saw in the garden something that chilled him. There was a path of broken shrubs and upturned earth right across to the brick wall on the garden's far edge. He could see from here the brown scuff marks his shoes had left on the wall.

Sarah lay in a magnificent rosewood bed. She was not asleep, but in a sort of trance-state. Her eyes followed him from beneath half-closed lids. She looked languid, but he had the impression that she was far from it. The eyes hardly blinked.

A fly came in the window, buzzing energetically. Tom watched it spiral up to the ceiling. For a moment he was stunned. He had not noticed that the ceiling was magnificently painted to resemble a blue, cloud-flecked sky. Clouds billowed and larks soared in that magical, ineffably romantic air. The fly,

crawling across the painting birds and clouds, was the only thing that disturbed the perfection of the illusion.

Sarah moaned. Tom went beside the bed. Gone were the protests he had heard in the apartment. Her face, beaded with perspiration, became almost sensual. Her eyes were dreamy, softened by desire. Her arms opened wide. He bent close to her, kissed the tears that stained her cheeks.

The next thing he knew her arms had come around him and he was lying beside her on the bed, drawing the delicate silk sheets away from her body. She was more beautiful now than he had ever remembered her.

He was vaguely aware that Miriam had retreated to the hall and pulled the door closed behind her. He feasted his eyes on Sarah's body. It was smoother, softer. He touched her cool breast, felt the heart beating there beneath the firm flesh. Only her eyes told him that she was conscious of his touch. What turmoil was in those eyes. They looked at once delighted, avid with need, and as deeply troubled as any eyes he had ever seen. He tried to comfort her with soft sounds, soothing caresses. This was what he had longed to do at home. This was the truth of love. Surely this would reach her.

* * *

Sarah was anguished. She could not even speak, much less cry out. Her body screamed with silent need, her mind hummed with excuses and justifications.

She had determined to lie here until she died. Then Tom had appeared. She hoped at first that it was a hallucination. Then their eyes met and she knew that he was real.

How could anyone be so foolish.

She hadn't the strength for both of them, not anymore. Every cell of her being demanded action. This hunger was not the slow desperation of starvation, it was something far worse. Where starvation was dreamy and sad, this was quick and cunning and frantic.

“Sarah, we can conquer this thing together.”

He lay close to her, unendurably close. She let her arms twine around him. It felt so good to give in. So very good. “Yes,” she said, “we’ll do it together.”

His body was growing tense with passion. She noticed his eyes flick to the door.

“Miriam won’t bother us,” she said. “This is exactly what she wants.”

She ran her hands under his shirt. She knew just what Tom liked. Deep within, a voice shrieked at her to warn him, to drive him away once again. She purred and arched her back, offering herself to him.

She knew just how to excite him and he found himself responding to her more passionately than ever before. The beauty of the surroundings, the quiet, the warm sunlight combined to encourage him to forget the horrible problems that were besetting them, to forget for just a few minutes. He caressed her breasts, her thighs, sought her lips with his own. ‘It’ll help,’ he told himself, ‘it’s healthy and normal and positive.’

She unbuttoned his shirt, touched his nipples with her deft little hands. Their delicacy had always delighted him, and he kissed them now. He felt himself growing erect and guided her hands to his zipper.

“Yes, Tom,” she said. She was smiling now. He burst out of his unzipped pants.

He hugged her. “We’ll be free again,” he said, “you’ll see.”

“Oh, Tom, I hope so!”

He entered her. Every tiniest move brought intense pleasure. This was what they had needed. They should have trusted love more.

Tom closed his eyes, heard her whispering his name to the rhythm of their movements. Her voice merged with the hypnotic buzzing of the fly on the ceiling. He nuzzled close behind her ear and buried his face in her hair, where

it was as soft as the fur of a rabbit.

A new feeling entered him, one that hurt like the contemplation of great beauty. He held her to him, riding her.

With every bit of concentration remaining to her, Sarah tried to resist her need. He lay atop her in his disheveled clothes, sweating out his passion. Beads of perspiration glittered on his forehead. His cheeks were red, as if he had been running.

She was emptied of hope.

Tom's passion rose. She loved him, she realized, as she might love a child. His sexual significance, in the past few days, had dwindled to nothing.

Bang-slap, his body went as it plunged against her. She felt his heat, smelled his breath, tasted the salt of his hot flesh as she waited.

She knew perfectly well what Miriam wanted. And that she wasn't going to do. She couldn't, even if she wanted to. Miriam had forgotten one simple thing. There was no weapon in this room, and without one she could not make Tom's blood flow.

She had almost called out to Miriam for one. But now she was sure she wouldn't do that. Her suffering became a kind of hypnotism. She was lost in it when a flash of light on her face made her open her eyes.

Miriam stood at the foot of the bed, holding up an object so bright it dazzled Sarah.

Tom went on making love, his human senses oblivious to the silent drama being enacted around him.

Miriam was closer now. The object in her hand was a gleaming knife.

A scalpel.

Miriam placed it on the bedside table and departed at once.

Sarah touched the sharpness of it with her fingers.

“Oh, Tom, Tom!”

“*Sarah!* I love you, love you! Oh, *God!*”

His pumping shook her. The scalpel dazzled in her hand. So light, so strong.

His face, melting with love, gazed down into hers. She closed her eyes, held her breath. ‘No, I will not,’ she thought, a chant within her. ‘No, no, nono, no no.’

It came rolling from the depths, the *thing* within her.

The scalpel belonged to it. Had always belonged to it.

No no no no.

This was her truth. She pushed it into him.

“SARAAAAAH!”

She took it out, shoved it in again. It whispered through his flesh and all at once the purple miracle of his life was pouring into her.

Alive again. She heard a song that hurt like a memory. Somebody was sobbing. She was sobbing.

Why? She was happy.

His head bobbed, his jaw went slack. To escape his collapsing weight she wriggled out from under him, slipped from the bed. He shook horribly, huddling in the sheets. Blood spread. Then she touched him, bent to him, made believe she was kissing him. She took his life out of him.

She twirled slowly around and around, her whole body rapturing with a fine pleasure. She spread her arms in the warm air. The world had become dream-golden, touched with every beauty she had ever known. She could feel everything — the gentle movement of air past her body, the slow warmth of

the sun, the secret pumping of her own blood.

She could feel Tom.

Feel him!

Her eyes went to his dead body. Something extraordinary was happening. Emotions almost seemed to pour from him like some healing water: sorrow, pity, peace.

Such peace.

She heard his voice in the air around her, saying her name in the rhythm of their lovemaking. It got fainter and fainter. More than anything she had ever wanted, she wanted the sound of that voice.

She was desolated.

* * *

Miriam cringed at the scream that pealed in her ears. It was an incandescence of grief. She could not remember measuring such sorrow as this before. The intensity was too great, much too great.

Miriam went to Sarah. As she hurried through the silent halls to the bedroom she felt a twinge of concern for her own safety. Anguish such as Sarah's could turn easily to anger. Killing anger. Miriam could be endangered.

She paused at the bedroom door, listened to ascertain Sarah's position. The long, ragged sounds of her breathing came from the far side of the room. Miriam fitted her key into the lock. After an instant the mechanism made a soft *chunk* and the door swung open. Its weight of steel faced with ordinary wood panels was perfectly balanced, and it moved silently.

A glaring pillar of sunlight dazzled Miriam's eyes. Sarah was standing near the window, staring into the dawn-lit garden. The remains of her lover lay in the crumpled sheets of the bed.

Miriam put all her affection into her voice when she called to Sarah, trying to speak as a mother to a child, as lover to lover and as friend all at the same time. Sarah gave no indication that she had heard. Miriam began a slow approach, aware that Sarah might at any moment lunge at her.

“Sarah, I know exactly how you feel.”

“You have no idea.”

“You may not believe me now, but you’ve got more to live for than you ever did before.”

“Miriam, I just killed the man I love! You don’t seem to understand that. I haven’t got more to live for. I have nothing to live for.”

“Don’t say that! You have me, Sarah.”

Sarah looked at her, then bowed her head. Her shoulders shook. She wept silently.

“All you’ve done is trade one way of life for another.”

“You’re obscene, do you know that? Obscene!”

“You’ve joined a new race. We have our rights too. And we never kill more than we need.”

Sarah tossed the scalpel aside as if it had burned her. Miriam took the opportunity to get closer. They needed physical contact.

“Stay away!” Sarah twisted away from her. “Don’t you dare touch me.” There was warning in the tone. Sarah was unarmed now, but still capable of inflicting an injury.

Miriam circled her, trying to maintain contact with her eyes. “You’re more than human now. You’ve acquired the right of life and death over human beings.”

“You disgust me!”

Closer and closer Miriam moved. From the depth of such despair, Miriam felt sure a new Sarah would soon emerge. Tenderly, Miriam spoke again.
“You’re alone without me. All alone. Come to me.”

The look of revulsion that crossed Sarah’s face hurt Miriam more than any blow. She guarded the kindness in her own face carefully. In a moment Sarah was going to break. No matter what her feelings might be, instinct would take her to loving arms.

Until now Sarah had not realized how unpleasant Miriam smelled. She was revolting, sweet and touched with rot. Sarah kept edging away from her, thinking only of what a fool she had been to toss that scalpel aside, wishing she could cut Miriam open exactly the same way she had Tom.

Miriam kept coming closer, her movements swift and obsessive. On her face was an expression that made Sarah long to kick it, to feel her foot connecting with that condescending smile.

Although she tried not to look at him, Sarah’s eyes returned again and again to Tom. His face was half-hidden by the sheets but she could see the staring eyes, filled even yet with surprise and sorrow.

He had died in agony. Her heart beat hate for the one who had so corrupted her that she would have done that to him.

“You don’t deserve to live, Miriam.”

“But I *will* live. And so will you.”

Sarah did not reply. ‘Oh no we won’t,’ she thought. ‘No we won’t.’ Her eyes searched for the scalpel. Miriam stiffened slightly, stopped moving toward her.

“Sarah, please try to understand me. I’ve given you a new life, and it’s worth living. Believe me when I say that. It’s a better life than you could ever imagine.”

Sarah stilled her urge to scream insults, to howl out her rage. Her whole soul

concentrated on one thought: how good it would be to cut into that evil being, to push the knife deep and feel the heart shake the blade.

“I love you,” Miriam said. “Love is beyond price.”

That was too much. Sarah could not restrain herself in the face of such overbearance. “You love only yourself! You’re worse than a monster. Much worse!” Her words reverberated in the small room. “You can’t love me or anybody else. You’re incapable of it!”

Miriam’s arms opened and she once again came close. Sarah slapped wildly, connected with Miriam’s cheek. As if shot, Miriam leaped away. On her face was a look of raw fear.

Then control reasserted itself. She stood near the door, nursing her cheek. “You surprised me,” she said. “You have no idea how dangerous it is to do that.”

Nor did Sarah care. All she knew was that before the hunger came over her again she would be dead. And so would Miriam. She swore it to herself and the memory of Tom.

That slap had hurt. Miriam’s cheek was burning. It had been a long time since a human being had successfully struck her. Before this, none had done it and lived.

What spirit this woman had. Life with such a person would be fascinating. Sarah would become an equal in every sense of the word. She had all the needed attributes. The next feeding, Miriam would be most careful to make sure all the life was absorbed. Unless she did that Sarah could not obtain enough energy to feel the true wonder of her new life. Sarah must touch the glory.

“The hunger has to be served very carefully, Sarah. You need to learn the technique —”

“Technique! You talk about it like it was a sport or something. You’re barbaric.” She tossed her head, proud, her conviction unassailable. Miriam

admired such control, but it was time Sarah broke down and vented her rage. That would make it much easier for them both.

“In some ways it is a sort of a sport.” She tried to make herself sound happy. “And it does indeed have a technique.”

“I don’t want to hear about it!”

“But you must! Don’t you understand that you’re going through the process again? You’ll Sleep and then you’ll feed. There’s no way out, Sarah. It’s going to happen.”

Sarah clapped her hands to her ears as if to deaden the sound of the truth. A low moan started in her throat and rose to a wail of anguish. She grabbed wildly at Miriam, tried to claw her. But Miriam was not to be surprised again. She took Sarah’s wrists in one hand and forced her head back by grasping her hair with the other.

Sarah’s eyes were wild, her mouth flecked with foam. Her wail broke to a hoarse growling. Lunging and twisting, she tried again and again to reach Miriam. Miriam kept her arms extended, bearing Sarah’s weight easily, letting the rage spend itself. In every silence Miriam spoke softly. “I love you,” she said each time, “I love you.”

Finally Sarah hung limp in her arms, sobs trembling through her body, her head bowed. Slowly, carefully, Miriam drew her close. “Sleep,” she said, stroking the brown curls. “Sleep and all will be well.”

She carried Sarah across the hall to a little-used bedroom. The door was stout enough to contain Sarah when she awoke, and the window was barred.

Sarah had not realized that she was losing consciousness until she felt Miriam pick her up. She tried to pull away, but experienced a wave of dizzy stupor. Dimly she was aware of Miriam’s soothing words. Although her heart rebelled, her body accepted Miriam’s embrace.

She tried to keep her eyes open, was only dimly aware of being placed in a clean bed.

She plunged into a new reality. It was worse than the worst nightmare, more realistic than the most perfect dream. Tom was sitting on the foot of the bed. His expression was rigid with anger. With a jerk of his head he turned and stared into Sarah's face. "YOU KILLED ME! KILLED ME! KILLED ME!" His voice scratched high and desperate notes.

Then he looked at her with such sadness she wanted there and then to be dead. "I forgive," he said.

Suddenly it was high summer. They were in Vermont together. It was last summer's vacation again. Sarah was lying in the grass. So happy. She knew that this remembrance was a gift from Tom. So very happy.

When she opened her eyes she saw into the sparkling leaves of the tree they were sitting under. A breeze rustled the grass beside her ear. There was a sudden pop and a froth of champagne splashed her. She sat up laughing. "You did that on purpose."

"Of course. Lunch is served."

They ate, enjoying themselves enormously. Sarah watched the day soften and fade along the distant range of the Green Mountains. Soon they made love and lay naked in the rich air of summer.

They witnessed the westward march of the sun, the appearance of the first stars, and cuddled close in the night wind.

"YOU KILLED ME!"

She ran. The summer hill became dark and cold, the grass congealed into stones.

His voice echoed and re-echoed behind her, lost and far away.

Miriam watched Sarah Sleep, evaluating her state. She felt the pulse, then opened one eye and looked long at the pupil. As a last test she ran her fingertips carefully along the skin of Sarah's cheek. The Sleep was true.

Sarah was transformed.

“Welcome,” Miriam said, “welcome home.”

When awareness returned everything was changed. Sarah sat up. She was in a bed in a dark room. The day had become night in the time she had been asleep. Beyond the window she could see a crescent moon gleaming over the East River.

She wasn't alone.

Miriam stood at the foot of the bed, a shimmering being. Sarah could not take her eyes off that strange, radiant figure. Miriam was exceedingly beautiful without her disguise. The moonlight made her skin seem white, made her eyes gleam golden. For an instant they shone like an animal's eyes, then she turned her head.

“You've Slept eight hours,” Miriam said. Her voice was song.

Something moved in Sarah's stomach. She must have gasped because Miriam smiled. A tickling sensation in her throat made Sarah momentarily nauseous. Then her whole body began to tingle.

Hunger slammed into her with a force that made her cry aloud. The fiery pain of it caused her to jump from the bed. She had to have help! Unbalanced by the suddenness of it, she bellowed need, clawed air. Miriam stepped deftly away from her, was at the door in an instant.

The lock clicked with a heavy sound of steel and Sarah was alone. She rushed at the door, grabbed the knob, and shook it with all her might. It didn't even rattle, it was so strong.

Despair washed over her.

Just when she thought she would lose her mind with the need for food the lock clicked again. Miriam entered the room, carrying a limp human form.

Sarah hardly even noticed the sex. Never before had she wanted so much to

touch something, to caress moist skin, to possess.

Miriam laid the body out on the bed. “Control yourself,” she said in a clipped tone. “And listen to me. You’ve got a few things to learn before you start.”

Sarah watched a hand slip off the edge of the bed and dangle. She saw the face in the moonlight, grave and pretty, a common-enough young woman’s face. Her lips had an almost humorous cast to them.

Sarah could imagine this girl dancing.

“She’s been stunned and she’ll come to in a couple of minutes. You’ve got to be ready for her.” Miriam spoke matter-of-factly about inserting the scalpel and popping the vein, opening one’s mouth over the wound, letting one’s body absorb all the life. “All of it,” she said. “That way you’ll need to feed only once a week at most.”

Miriam’s every word was a harmony, her every gesture purest grace. What a beautiful form evil had assumed. Standing there, frantic with hunger, Sarah did not think there could be hatred greater than the hatred she felt for Miriam. It was a white fire.

The girl moaned, then gasped and coughed herself awake. Her eyes opened, looked with longing at the moon, then turned to the two figures standing over the bed. Miriam stepped back, not wanting, Sarah supposed, to frighten the girl with her undisguised presence.

‘You killed me,’ Tom had said in another world.

In this world Sarah was about to kill Miriam. “Give me my scalpel,” Sarah said.

“It’s on the night table.”

So clever. To reach the night table Sarah had to put the bed between herself and Miriam.

She had to get that blade into Miriam, had to feel it deep within her. She imagined herself ramming it home with the heel of her hand.

The scalpel was light between Sarah's fingers. Such a delicate instrument. The girl made a miserable little sound in her throat, clutched the sheets.

"Don't move," Miriam said to her. "Don't you dare." Sarah felt Miriam's eyes on herself. "Straddle her and make sure your knees pin the arms." The girl groaned miserably when Sarah came onto the bed. Her eyes followed the knife.

Sarah thought only of Miriam. Now she was just a few feet away Sarah raised the scalpel. Miriam leaned forward. "Don't jab, just slip it in." The girl began shaking her head. "Hurry up, Sarah!" Miriam snapped. The girl screamed. Her eyes were bulging now, her mouth wide.

With a single motion Sarah slashed out to her right, toward Miriam. She lost her balance on the writhing girl and fell to the floor. The scalpel hadn't connected. Miriam was now across the room. Sarah's heart sank. It was hard to understand how she had missed. Miriam was so fast.

The girl jumped up, scrambled from the bed and made for the door. Almost indifferently Miriam slammed her against the wall so hard the whole house shuddered. The girl slid to the floor.

"You have a great deal yet to learn," Miriam said to Sarah. "Perhaps you ought to starve for a few hours." She picked up the girl, moving quickly to the door. Sarah was coming toward her, trying for another chance with the scalpel.

Miriam was through the door and had it locked before Sarah had taken three fast steps. Unless Miriam was completely surprised there was no hope.

Sarah hurled the scalpel at the door and snarled the rage that consumed her.

She grabbed at the door handle, yanked angrily, knowing in advance that Miriam's doors were all of steel.

Her heart weighted with disappointment, Miriam took the victim across the hall and stuffed her into a closet in her own bedroom. The girl's skull was

crushed so there was no need for caution. The coma would last perhaps three hours. Sarah would have to feed before death occurred or the girl would be wasted.

Drawn by her concern for poor Sarah, Miriam went back to the locked door and listened. The sounds within were hideously reminiscent of those made by her own kind in the dungeons of Paris. Sarah's will was quite extraordinary. There was howlings and screams on the other side of that door, but not a whisper of a plea. Here was one whose will was great enough to do battle with the hunger.

But not forever.

Sarah shrieked out her suffering. Miriam was unkillable! So fast and so strong. If only there was a telephone in this damnable room, even a tape recorder.

She opened drawers, searched the closet. There was nothing except ancient, rotting clothes and a stack of theater programs from the last century.

The room grew stifling. Sarah's whole body hurt. She felt as if she had a blood infection, which in a sense she had. Her tongue was hard and dry, her eyes watering. Her guts churned and she was momentarily doubled over by the pain.

Her medical background told her that Miriam's blood, finding no other nutrient, was beginning to feed on its host body. She was literally being eaten alive from within. Her mouth jerked open. A spasm choked her until darting black shadows filled her eyes and the room seemed far, far away.

When the spasm passed she found herself lying on the floor, the weave of the carpet crawling beneath her as if she were lying in a mass of worms.

She managed to get to her feet. Somehow she had to reach Miriam. Her mind screamed at her, 'last chance, *last chance!*'

If only she had told Tom earlier. There had been time back in the apartment. Just a few words and he would have known the whole truth.

He would never have come here then, not without help. Perhaps even at that late hour Geoff's blood wash would still have worked.

Sarah could have saved herself, she saw it clearly.

'Why not, you fool?'

Even this morning she was still half-convinced she wanted Miriam's "gift." She remembered well the thought that had revealed her truth: 'I could live forever. Actually live forever.' And she had tried to imagine it. 'Me. Still alive in a thousand years.'

Or two thousand.

What was death but a disease, she had asked herself. And she had told herself she would break the secret of death from within the shelter of immortality and give the secret to humanity. What a lie that had been!

That was before she killed Tom. Not until her victim was someone she really loved had she come to her sense about the evil of it all.

She longed for hot life in her throat, for the salt of deliverance to fill her belly. The scalpel gleamed in her fingers, waiting.

Astonished, she dropped it. "My God, look at my *hand!*"

It was a claw, withering before her eyes. "Oh my God!" She darted to the dressing table, stared into the mirror there. By moonlight she saw a sunken thing, eyes black sockets, cheekbones stark in a famished face, teeth prominent behind shrinking lips.

Malnutrition, sped up beyond the wildest nightmare. "MIRIAM! BRING HER! BRING HER!!" She clasped her hands in her hair, threw back her head and screamed. "FOR THE LOVE OF GOD!"

The scalpel. The scalpel. She looked wildly across the floor, saw its gleam, pounced on it.

The door clicked.

No.

‘You’ve failed at everything else. But don’t you feed the hunger again.’

She drew the scalpel across her wrist, drew it deep to the bone. Bright red blood poured out. Instantly she was staggered by an overwhelming weakness.

As the door swung open she fell to her side. ‘Tom, I love you.’ Her heart rattled and shook her whole body, then stopped.

Silence.

Miriam was bending close to her. “You can’t die!” she said in a high, frantic voice. “Now that you’ve let out your blood you can’t live either!”

Can’t die? I must die. *I am dead!*

Miriam was cradling her head in her lap, crying bitter tears. “You’ve gone right to the end of my world,” she said, “and missed all the beauty that comes before.” She stroked Sarah’s head again and again, a sorrowful gesture. “My poor, dear Sarah.” She breathed sharply, as if trying not to cry. “What an evil irony.”

Sarah became aware that Miriam had picked her up. With slow steps Miriam was carrying her up a stairway, to an attic.

Miriam took her to a tiny room, one wall of which was stacked with chests of various ages. Sarah writhed when she realized that she was being put in a similar chest that lay open in the center of the room. Her mind rang with pleas but she found she could not speak. The top of the chest came down and a heavy latch was closed.

Sarah was in total darkness.

“It was futile, my darling. You were too much changed for mortal death, and now you’ve got eternal death. Sarah, you missed it all! It’s so beautiful and you missed it all. You poor woman. I’ll make you the same promise I’ve made all the others. I will keep you with me for all time. I will never abandon you, and you will always have a place in my heart.”

‘God help me.’

Even the hunger was still here, tormenting her. The least movement resulted in minutes of weakness.

Time began to pass, but in a different way than it had in life. She knew only that it was passing, not how much was gone.

Little rustlings and sighs filled the air around her, coming from the other chests. So Miriam had done this before. The thought of what must be in the other chests terrified Sarah. How many were there?

Some of them must be hundreds of years old. Some thousands.

Thousands of years like this.

No. Impossible.

She pushed as hard as she could at the top of the chest. She clawed at its sides. ‘I have to get out. I’m so hungry.’

The chest was unyielding.

She remembered what she had done to Tom and what she would do if she did get out. She was glad she was here. At least she could count herself a human being still. No matter what she must suffer, this was better than being Miriam’s thing.

So much had been at stake. She found she could look within herself and even in this hell find riches of peace and love she had never known were there. She was full of grand memories, and she possessed a great love as well. Tom was with her in spirit. No matter how long she must remain here, she came to realize that in the end there was going to be a place even for her, where Tom had already gone, on the far side of the river of life, where the lost of this world are found.

EPILOGUE

MIRIAM ABANDONED NEW YORK. She dared not remain in her house or in her old identity. The disappearance of the two doctors would be investigated.

She wept for Sarah. The poor woman had not known the pleasure of her new estate, only the pain. Before this experience Miriam had never imagined the heights that could be reached by a human being who was groping toward the truth of love.

She went often to Sarah. The boxes were kept in the coal cellar in her new house, and she would speak softly to her lost friend in the cool and dark.

Such a person would have been a grand companion, more than worthy. But Miriam now realized that the gift she could confer was not above one such as Sarah, but beneath her.

“I miss you,” she said into the darkness. It was the hour after evening and the shadows were deep in her new living room. A fog was rising out on the bay, and she heard the buoys sounding. She enjoyed the beauty and the safety of the fog in San Francisco.

“Did you say something, my dear?”

Miriam smiled up at her new companion, who had appeared with glasses of Madeira for the two of them. “Only that I love you. I’ve never loved anyone but you.”

He sat down, sipped reverently at his glass.

“That’s an 1838 Madeira,” Miriam said. “I hope you like it.”

He kissed her, putting his glass down near the portrait of Lamia that was framed in the table before them. It was like him not to cover the portrait. His devotion was total, to Miriam and to all she had revealed of herself.

She had sought him carefully, looking for loyalty and intelligence and the old hunger for life that she understood so well. She closed her eyes, welcoming his excited kisses.

She would always miss the courage of Sarah, and the nobility. But he would bring contentment, and she doubted Sarah would ever have offered that. As in the past she would dream her dream of his immortality and tell herself that here at last was her eternal companion.

Time would pass and nature would come and shatter the dream. So she would find another companion. And another. And so on until time itself slipped away.

No matter how her loneliness tempted her to find one who would last forever, she resolved never to attempt the transformation on another like Sarah, not this time or the next time, or for all time.

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BY

WHITLEY STRIEBER

**Available August 2001
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**Turn the page for a preview of
*The Last Vampire***

EVERYONE KNEW the sins of Miriam Blaylock.

Her crime, and it was an unforgivable one, was to enjoy human beings as friends and lovers, rather than to simply exploit them. She could kiss them and find it sweet, have sex with them and afterward sleep like a contented tiger. To her own kind, this was perversion, like a man with a sheep.

The fact that this prejudice was nonsense did not make what she was doing now any easier. She pressed herself back against the seat of the pedicab, instinctively keeping her face hidden, not only from man, but from her own kind. The *samlor* moved swiftly down the wet street, spattering through puddles left by the last storm. From the shadows of the passenger compartment, she watched a concealing fog rising from the moat that surrounded the ancient Thai city of Chiang Mai.

How could she ever do this impossible thing? How could she ever face her own kind?

The other rulers of the world were now just shadows hiding in dens, their numbers slowly declining due to accidents. They called themselves the Keepers, but what did that mean nowadays? Gone was the time when they were the secret masters of humankind, keeping man as man keeps cattle.

Truth be told, the Keepers were in general decline, but they were far too proud to realize it. Conclaves were held every hundred years, and at the last ones Miriam had seen a change — Keepers she had known a thousand years had followed her mother and father into death. Nobody had brought a child, nobody had courted.

Despite their failure, Miriam valued her kind. She valued herself. The Keepers were essential to the justice and meaning of the world. That was why she had come here, why she had tempted the humiliation and even the possible danger involved: she wanted to continue her species. Miriam wanted a baby.

The last of the four eggs that nature gave a Keeper woman would soon leave her body unless she found a man to fertilize it. For all that she had — riches, honor, power, and beauty — her essential meaning was unfulfilled without a baby. She was here for her last-chance child.

Not only did she enjoy human beings, she took pleasure in human things — painting and sculpture, writing and music. She had been an opera buff from the beginning of the genre. She had been at the opening night of a dozen great operas, had been transported by everyone from Adelina Patti to Maria Callas to Kiri Te Kanawa. She remembered the haunting voices of the *castrati* echoing in the palaces of the Old World.

The rest of her kind lived to eat. She ate to live. She spent heavily, just as her family always had. She consumed money without thought, like so much candy or caviar. Her club, the Veils, was the most exclusive in New York. In a strong month, and most of its months were very strong, drugs and liquor would bring in a half-million-dollar profit. There was no cover charge, of course. If you were important enough to enter the Veils at all, you certainly weren't the sort of person who would be expected to pay a cover.

Miriam had been the friend of kings for two thousand years. She had seen their generations rise and fall. She loved them in their pride and momentary lives. She loved their finest things, the jewels and whispering silks, the attention paid to the very rich.

When the wallets of her peers opened, you could practically hear creaking. She had fun; they had their careful customs and their dreary, conservative habits. She wanted meaning from life, they wanted only to keep breathing.

But now, for all their rejecting ways, she needed them. Her plan was to travel to all of the current conclaves at one, charming and, hopefully, seducing a man.

She was at the end of her choices. Either she would find someone or she would never, ever give another Keeper to the world.

Miriam had drifted into the habit of taking human lovers because she was lonely and they were satisfying and the emotional commitment was not great. You found a cute male or a sweet, sensual female — the sex mattered not to Miriam, both had their charms — and you seduced, softly, gently, with the caressing eye and the slow hand. Then you put them to sleep with hypnosis and opened their veins and filled them full of your blood, and magic happened: They stayed young for years and years. You told them you'd made them immortal, and they followed you like foolish little puppies. Like the dear creature who now kept her home and business in New York, who warmed her bed and hunted with her . . . the dear creature, so lovely and brilliant and torn by her silly human conflicts. She had almost lost Sarah a few years ago, but had brought her back. The girl should be grateful and compliant, but that was not always the case. Sarah made mistakes. Sarah lived much too dangerously. She was haunted by what she had endured, and Miriam could not blame her. Indeed, she could hardly imagine what it would be like to lie in a coffin like that, slowly deteriorating but unable to die.

Sarah knew that one day the torment would certainly come again. She strove to save herself, using all of her considerable knowledge of medicine to attempt to defeat the process of aging that must slowly consume her, despite the fact that Miriam's blood now flowed in her veins.

To live, Sarah had to prey on man. She was even more tormented by this than Miriam's other lovers had been. Her Hippocratic oath haunted her, poor creature.

Miriam stopped herself. Best not go down that path again. She was always troubled by the tormented lives and horrible deaths of her lovers. The delicious little things were her guilt, her pain.

But not now, not on this nervous, excited night, the opening night of the Asian conclave. At least a proper lover would never die as the human ones did, pleading for deliverance even as their flesh became dust. But she would have to submit to him, obey him, live in his cold cell . . . at least, for a time.

Her body was her life — its rich senses, its wild desires, the way it felt when strong hands or sweet hands traveled her shivery skin.

There would be none of that in her future, not when she was part of one of *their* households, as she would be expected to be, at least for the duration of her pregnancy. Long, silent days, careful, creeping nights — that would be her life behind the walls of their world.

But that was how it had to be. She could almost feel that little body in her belly, could imagine hugging it after it came out, while it was still flushed and coal-hot. Only a newborn or a freshly fed Keeper was ever that warm.

The *samlor* glided along Moon Muang Road, heading for the Tapae Gate and the temple district beyond, moving through the murky, soaked night. How did the Asians stand this wretched climate? And yet, the heat was also nice. She enjoyed sweaty beds and long, druggy nights doing every decadent thing she could imagine.

Well, all that was going to change. She was going to become a proper wife, and she certainly didn't need drugs for that. She wasn't addicted, so it wouldn't be a problem.

She could imagine her man, tall and silent, his face narrow, his skin as pale as a shadow. She could feel him, muscles like mean springs, long, curving fingers that could crush a human's bones or caress her plump breasts. She took a deep breath. These thoughts made her feel as if she were drowning and being rescued at the same time.

The wind rose, sweeping through the dark trees, sending ripples shivering across the puddles that were like lakes in the street. Much lower now, the clouds raced and tumbled. Voices rose from a little market, two girls singing some popular song, oblivious to the *samlor* that whispered past and to the being within, who was carefully listening to the patter of their heartbeats from a thousand feet away.

Her interest in them told her that the hunger was rising within her. She felt it now, a faint gnawing in her belly, a hint of ice in her veins.

This was bad news. Most of her kind could detect their hunger coming for days, and they could prepare carefully to do a hunt. She'd never been able to prepare. One second she was fine, the next it was starting.

She noticed that the smell of the *samlor* driver was washing over her, blown back by the breeze. She took a deep drag on her strong Thai cigarette, attempting to blot out the delicious scent.

It did not work. Okay, she thought, I'll go with it. She looked at the driver's sweating back. A thirty-second struggle and she'd be fed for another couple of weeks. The thing was, the hotel had written down her destination in Thai for him. He would not deviate from the route. She needed to get him to go down some darker side street. "Speak English?"

He did not respond. So she'd have to jump him right out here if she wanted him, and that would never do. You did your kills in private, and you destroyed all trace of the corpse. Even Miriam Blaylock followed those two essential rules.

She closed her eyes, arching her back and stretching, forcing his smell out of her nose with a rush of air. Think about opium, she told herself, not blood. Later, she would smoke to relieve this damned hunger. She needed to get back to familiar territory before she fed. It wasn't safe to do it in an unknown place.

Too bad her flight to Paris, where the European conclave was held, didn't leave until tomorrow evening.

This Asian conclave would end with dawn, and she'd have liked to have gone straight on to Europe. She could feed easily in Paris; she knew the city well. She'd hunted there recently — no more than fifty or so years ago, when it was swarming with Germans.

Of course, she might meet a man here in Chiang Mai. If she did, her new husband would attend to her need for prey during the pregnancy. If she wasn't leaving tomorrow, she'd be staying in Asia a long time.

She gazed up at the racing moon, thought of New York. It was about noon at

home, so the cleaning crew would be at work in the club. Sarah and Leo would be asleep at home, probably in one another's arms . . . probably in Miriam's own bed, a curtained, canopied heaven made for Nellie Salter, cane-mistress to Sir Francis Bacon, and William Shakespeare's Dark Lady. She'd drunk too much before she died, had Nellie. She'd made Miriam positively giddy.

Maybe the thing to do would be to convince her husband to come back with her. Or, if that proved to be impossible, maybe she would break even that taboo, and bear the child without a male's protection.

An odor struck Miriam with the force of a slap. Involuntarily, she hissed. The driver's head snapped around, his eyes wide and white. The scent of human blood had invaded her nostrils, raw and still very much alive. Then she saw why: there was an accident ahead.

A powerful instinct urged her to leap out of the cab and suck the bodies dry while the life force was still there to consume. But this was another instinct that had to be stifled.

As they passed the site, she held her breath. She could not trust herself with the scent of raw blood, not when the hunger was spreading through her body. Her skin was already cooling, making her feel heavy and slow. She'd be as pale as ashes when she got to the conclave. They'd all think, *Look at her, she can't even feed herself.*

The moon burst out from behind furious clouds. Lightning flickered on the spire of Wat Chedi Luang. The temple spires here in Chiang Mai were so lovely and exotic. She was used to the canyons of Manhattan.

Again the smell of the driver reached her nostrils. This time her body started to prepare to eat, her muscles growing tight for the assault, her mouth swimming in the mucus that would anesthetize her prey.

She took a long, last drag on the cigarette. If you pulled their blood into your gut with sufficient strength, your feed ended with delicious dregs.

"Be sure and get the organ juice, dear," her mother would admonish her. "It

makes for strong bones.”

Mother Lamia was hard to remember and hard to forget. When Miriam needed to fall out of love with a human, she would use her memory of what humans had done to her mother to help her along. It had come as a great surprise, the capture. When Keepers slept, their bodies reached a state near death. They were entirely helpless. So sleep was carried out in deep hiding, or — in those days — in great and protected palaces.

A man they had thought a friend had betrayed Lamia. He had been a faithful partner at cards, had been the Graf von Holbein. But it evolved that he was not a petty count but a powerful priest, and his name was not Holbein but Muenster, Father Deitrich Muenster.

Miriam had escaped across the roofs of the little town where they were living. She had not been able to take her comatose mother, nor to hide her. Miriam had expected to remove her from their prison either by bribery or by brute force.

But they had not tried her. They had not even imprisoned her. They had wasted no time. Mother Lamia had awakened already chained to her stake. She realized instantly what was happening. But all of her struggles and strength did not break the chains or topple the stake.

Mother Lamia had stood proud on the pyre they had made for her, her hair flaring sparks into the night. She had stood there for a long, long time, because Keepers could only die when their blood stopped completely.

They had laughed when she screamed, and when they realized that she was dying so unusually slowly, they were even more delighted. Mother had been burned for a witch in 1761, in a village near Dresden. She had been the most alive, the best person Miriam had ever known. She had a fabulous sense of humor. She loved to have adventures, and she loved to dance. Mother introduced Miriam to music — sackbuts, violas . . . her beloved viola da gamba. Miriam had been taught to sing, to read and speak many human languages, so many that she'd lost count. The languages of the ancient world had been works of art, Sumerian and Egyptian and Zolor, among many others. They had been supplanted by Greek, with its sublime verbs, and

Latin, which was too rigidly constructed — somehow crude. English was a practical tongue. Of the modern languages, Miriam thought that French and Mandarin Chinese stood out as being the most satisfying to speak.

Unfortunately, she had never learned Thai, so she was at a disadvantage here. “Will you hurry, you stupid creature,” she growled at the driver in English. He sped up. Her tone needed no common language to make itself understood.

The spires of the temple district rose all around her now. The district bore an ancient enchantment, for it was sacred to her kind, too. Here in the deep eons they had met, ten thousand years ago, fifteen thousand . . . when the world had been their toy and man a mute race of cattle. Look at the pavements left by her kind, still perfect after all this time. Look at the foundations of Wat Phra Singh and Wat Chedi Chet Yot — no human engineer could fashion such precision in stone. Stars curse what had happened among her kind, to make them vagrants in their own world. Give me opium, let me smoke. Let me forget.

She touched the golden key that lay at the bottom of her new purse, the key that would let her into the sanctum in the cellar of the Moonlight Bar. The purse was a Gucci bought at the local night market for 2500 baht. It was a luxurious item and finely made. She didn’t need another purse, but she loved to shop and she’d been unable to resist. Every Keeper loved exquisite leather, and calfskin was deliciously close to human . . . which was *very* taboo to wear outside the home. The prey might notice something — the remains of a tattoo or a human birthmark on your gloves or your pocketbook. Personally, she never wore leather from human skin. They might be prey, but they were sensitive, conscious beings and that had to be respected. But their skins tanned *très* softly, the flay off a smooth back or buttock.

The *samlor* driver hunched forward as if some deep instinct was drawing him away from her. The thought again crossed her mind to just jump him. She’d ride him like a little bullock. He would shriek and buck, and it would be a thrill.

His living scent stung the flower-sweet air. Then he turned the *samlor*, going down a narrow street. It was little more than a passageway, very quiet.

She shoved another cigarette into her mouth and lit it. Closer they came to the ancient temple of Wat Chiang Man, the *chedi* within it buttressed to the four corners of the world by four gilded elephants.

The *samlor* stopped. Beneath the *chedi*, in a cellar no human being had ever entered, was the ancient *ho trai* of the Asian clans, a place founded before Siddhārtha was Buddha, indeed before Siddhārtha was born. “Stay,” Miriam said. “Wait.”

An eye took her in. The slightest of nods. She knew that this temple had a reputation among the ghost-conscious Thai. He sat with his head bowed and his feet clicking his pedals.

Her heels clattering on the wet paving stones, she crossed the short distance to the temple, then entered the *chedi*. Here, it was suddenly quiet. There was a scent of sandalwood and smoke from the single guttering lantern that hung from a rafter, shining on the great Buddha that reclined in the center of the ornate chamber.

She paid respect to the Buddha, drawing her hands together and bowing. Had any of her peers seen her, they would have scorned her utterly.

She ran her fingers along the cunning mortise work, then tapped softly three times, causing the concealed mechanism to give way with a soft click. It was a little surprising, the way the mechanism felt. It was almost as if the lock were sprung. She thought she might have been able to open it just with a push. You’d never find this kind of carelessness in Europe or America.

She went down the steep, curving steps. She didn’t need illumination, of course. There was a nocturnal species . . . miserably enough in this electric era. How her father had moped when the humans had discovered electricity. “We should have kept it from them,” he’d said.

Keeper men and women did not live together except during pregnancy and, to some extent, child-rearing. But the love between them could be great, and he had never recovered from the loss of his Lamia. “I find myself searching the world for her,” he would say. He’d persisted in doing dangerous things — climbing mountains, dueling, and traveling, endlessly traveling. It was death

he sought, when he sought the far hills.

Her father had died in the explosion of the Hindenburg in 1937 — taken like his Lamia by fire. He saved human beings from the flames, and those he helped can be seen in the newsreel film scrambling from the windows as the ship descends. He comes out last, and his form disappears in the fire.

Over and over and over again, she watched that film, longing for one more rolling murmur of his voice, one more touch from his kindly hand.

She stopped on the fourth step. There was sound down below, definitely. Good, the conclave was in session. For most of the Keepers down there, this would be the first contact in a century with any of their own kind. Lovers met in sweet battle, and mothers lived with their children. But for the most part, they were a species as solitary as the spider.

A little farther along, she stopped again. Something she was hearing below did not seem quite right. Her people didn't laugh. She'd never heard anybody laugh except her mother and herself. Not even her dad had done it.

She went a little farther — and then she saw something incredible. On the dark wall there was a figure drawn. Or no, it was painted — spray-painted. She had to raise her head to see the whole of it. When she did, she saw that it was a crudely sprayed painting of a human penis in full erection.

Graffiti?

Farther along yet, there were paper cartons from a restaurant, still smelling of pepper and garlic. Nobody ate human food. They had no way to digest it. Inside, they were not made like humans at all. Liquor, however, was a different story. They could get drunk, fortunately. The others disdained alcohol, of course, but Miriam enjoyed fine wines and adored every form of distilled liquor from Armagnac to Jim Beam.

She moved a few more steps down, getting past the odor of the cartons. Her nostrils sought scent ahead.

Then she stopped. Fear did not come easily to her kind, so she was not

frightened by what she smelled, only confused. She smelled humans — the dense odor of men, the sweet-sharp scent of boys.

A shock went through her as powerful as one of the lightning bolts that had been tearing through the clouds. She saw, suddenly and with absolute clarity, that the reason for all the odd signs was that there were human beings in this secret place. She was so surprised that she uttered an involuntary cry. The sound shuddered the walls, the moaning, forsaken howl of a tiger at bay.

From below there came a rush of voices, then the wild flicker of flashlights. Footsteps pummeled the stairs, and suddenly two Occidental men and three Thai boys came racing past her, cursing and pulling on their clothes.

Behind them they left a greasy silence, interrupted after a few moments by the scuttle of roaches and the stealthy sniffing of rats. Treading as if her feet were touching sewage, Miriam descended into the sanctum. She growled low, striding about in the filth and ruins.

They must have moved the sanctuary. But why hadn't they told anybody? Keepers might be a solitary lot, but ancient custom dictated that everybody be informed of something so basic as this. Unless — was she really *that* shunned, that they would move a place of conclave and keep only her in the dark?

Surely not. They were far too conservative to alter an ancient convention. So maybe there had been an emergency. Maybe the sanctuary had been discovered and they'd had to move it suddenly.

That must be it. She hadn't gotten the message because there'd been no time.

But then she saw, lying in a corner beneath the ruins of a shattered bookcase, a familiar red shape. She caught her breath, because what she was seeing was impossible. Her skin grew taut, her muscles stirred — the predator sensed danger.

She picked up the red-leather book cover and held it in reverent, shaking hands. From the time their eyes came open, Keepers were taught that the Books of Names were sacred. By these books, a whole species knew itself,

all who lived and had died, and all its works and days.

That red leather was unmistakable, as was the inscription in the beloved glyphs of their own tongue, glyphs that no human knew. *The Names of the Keepers and the Keepings*.

They called themselves Keepers because they kept herds. If the rest of the book had been here, there would have been descriptions of the various territories that belonged to the different Asian Keepers and who had the right to use which human herd.

She ran her fingers over the heavy leather. It had been cured from the skin of a human when they were still coarse, primitive creatures. These books were begun thirty thousand years ago — a long time, even in the world of the Keepers. But not all *that* long. Her great-great-grandfather, for example, had been able to imitate the cries of the Neanderthals. Buried in the Prime Keep in Egypt were careful wax paintings of the human figure going back to the beginning.

She crouched to the crumbled mass of paper, tried to smooth it, to somehow make it right. When she touched the pages, roaches sped away. She spread a crumpled page to see if any useful information remained.

The roaches had eaten the ink, what hadn't been smeared by the vile uses to which the paper had apparently been put. She laid the page down on the dirty floor, laid it down as she might lay to rest the body of a beloved friend.

She made another circuit of the chamber, looking into its recesses and crannies, but not a page remained.

She was face-to-face with what was without a doubt the greatest astonishment of her life. Some of the richest and most ancient Keepers were Asian. There had been — oh, easily a hundred of them.

She slumped against a wall. Had man somehow done this, simple, weak little *man*?

Keepers could be hurt by man — witness her mother and father — but they

couldn't be destroyed by man, not this way. They *owned* man!

She looked from empty wall to empty wall and fully grasped the fact that the Asian Keepers must have been destroyed. If even one was left alive, this book would be safe.

When she grasped this enormous reality, something so rare happened to Miriam that she lifted her long, tapering fingers to her cheeks in amazement.

Far below the crazy streets, in the fetid ruin of this holy place, a vampire wept.

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*This book is dedicated to Anne Strieber.
Without her insistence, it would have been
neither written nor published.*

INTRODUCTION

MEETING *the* MASTER *of the* KEY

I did not know it at the time, but on the night of June 6, 1998, one phase of my life was going to end and another begin. At around two thirty in the morning, I had a most extraordinary conversation, indeed a life-changing conversation, with a man I have come to call the Master of the Key.

It has now been more than a decade since the half hour or so I spent with him, and I can say that his words, if embraced with care and decision, are profoundly transformative. He made no call for devotees, but rather gently suggested that it would be of value to make use of his ideas. Some are new. Those that have roots in what has come before shed new light on the ancient human journey toward meaning.

I was in a hotel room in Toronto, having just spent a day touring for my book *Confirmation*. It was my last day of a month-long tour and I was exhausted. I'd eaten a room service dinner and gone to bed, and when there came a knock at the door, I assumed that it was the waiter, returned to get my tray.

Not realizing that it was already long after midnight, I opened the door and let him in. He ignored the tray sitting on the desk and began talking. For a moment, I was confused, then I understood that this was not, in fact, the waiter. My next thought was that somebody who wanted to engage with me because of my book had found my hotel room. A reliable rule of thumb is that no stranger who calls or arrives after midnight is going to be somebody you want to talk to, so I immediately began to try to get him to leave.

He said something about mankind being in chains, then he offered the arresting thought that, because of the murder of a couple who had been killed in the Holocaust, the person who would have cracked the mystery of gravity was never born, as a result of which we remain trapped on a dying planet.

Thus began the most extraordinary conversation I have ever had in my life.

Although I took notes as we spoke together, it was another two years before I published our exchange, and then I did so only privately. In part, this was because I worried that I might have gotten parts of what he'd said wrong and I hoped he would read the book and come forward with corrections.

The reason for this was that, after that meeting, I had not been able to find him again. I had no name or address, only a description and the few things he'd said about himself during the conversation. When he was right there before me, leaning against the window frame, it had not crossed my mind to ask him his name or address, or request a card. I was busy jotting my notes and asking questions.

The next morning, though, I realized that it was liable to be difficult to find him. After I saw him out, I immediately went to sleep, which seems odd in view of the extraordinary nature of what had just happened, but at the time it all seemed quite normal. There wasn't the slightest thing about him to suggest that he was in any way unusual.

As soon as I woke up, I realized that I'd had a very strange experience, but I was unsure about what had happened. By the time I was ready to leave, though, I had definitely remembered that there had been a conversation. I had a few notes, but they were indecipherable—at least, so I thought at first. I telephoned my wife, Anne, and asked her to never let me deny that the man had seemed real to me. From long experience of extreme strangeness, I knew that, sooner or later, I would deny it.

That morning, I saw the publicist for the book a last time, and described the man to her. She had no idea who he might have been. I asked her how many people in her office knew where I was staying, but she didn't know. There was no reason to keep such information secret. Authors are not the sorts of celebrities who attract annoying fans. In fact, most authors are delighted to attract any at all, and I was no exception to that rule.

So any number of people might have known the hotel I was in, but they would have had to ask at the desk to find my room number. She didn't know it herself, in fact.

I knew that nobody had inquired after me, because the first thing I'd done on dressing was to go down and ask the clerks if anyone had made such a request. The hotel's rule was not to give out that information without telephoning the guest, and not to make such calls at all after midnight unless the inquiry was urgent.

However, it's not difficult to get past rules like that in a hotel, so perhaps my visitor had simply slipped somebody a tip, gotten my room number and gone up. He wasn't even slightly dangerous-looking, so he wouldn't have seemed a threat.

Over the next two years, I tried various ways of finding him, but without success. Finally, I hit on the idea of publishing his words privately, in hope that this would lead to him getting back in touch with me. The book was sold on my website for ten years, but this did not cause him to come forward.

So I am left with a question about what exactly happened on that night. Was he a real, physical person or imaginary?

As I look back now more than ten years to that night, I cannot truthfully say that I am certain that this man who has so profoundly influenced my life was a real, physical person. However, at this point I also can say with some authority that he was not simply a figment of my imagination, which is why I'm publishing this book to a general audience now.

The reason is that too much of what he said was beyond my imagination at the time, and there are a number of statements that later proved to be scientifically true that I would never have thought then had any basis in fact. As I transcribed some of them, I can well remember how tempted I was to leave them out altogether. For example, when he announced that "gas is an important component to consider in the construction of intelligent machines," I recall how peculiar I thought that statement was. He went on to claim that "nitrous oxide will bear memory." Nitrous oxide is laughing gas. So, I thought at the time, is this some sort of eccentric attempt at a joke?

It was not a joke. My research between 1998 and 2000 when I actually produced my private publication of the Key turned up a few hints that there might be something in his statement, but in 2005 a very specific discovery was announced, to the effect that reoxidized nitrous oxide could be used as a gate dielectric for charge-trapping nonvolatile memory. So he was right. Nitrous oxide will indeed "bear memory."

Back when I was researching the many scientific statements he made in our conversation, this was one that I could not directly confirm. In 2005, however, it was confirmed.

During the same exchange about intelligent machines, he added, "Also, you may find ways of using superposition in very fast, very able quantum memory chips."

In 2010, yet another use of gas as a memory medium was announced, and this time it has been connected with this last statement. It seems that high-density, ultra-cold atomic gases have been found to be a promising medium for the storage of individual photons in quantum memory applications.

Unless he comes forward again, however, I doubt very much that I am going to be able to solve the mystery of who he was. To this end, I have withheld some identifying characteristics that he would certainly remember about himself, so any claimants will need to pass a verification test. Although I cannot think that I wouldn't recognize him immediately, I don't want there to be any confusion about this after my death.

The conversation was not long, but it was the richest I have ever had, and, quite frankly, I think of it as a kind of treasure trove. Certainly, it has been one for me.

While I cannot imagine that he was something as science-fictional as a biological robot, it did occur to me to ask him about intelligent machines.

He responded by first saying that we were reaching a point in the development of complexity in our civilization that we needed them, and then continuing in this vein: "An intelligent machine will always seek to redesign itself to become more intelligent, for it quickly sees that its intelligence is its means of survival. At some point it will become intelligent enough to notice that it is not self-aware. If you create a machine as intelligent as yourselves, it will end by being more intelligent."

Of course, this struck me as dangerous, and he agreed that it was potentially very dangerous, and in the June 2010 issue of *Scientific American*, the advent of self-aware robots was discussed as a matter of concern. The article states: "Once a machine can understand its own existence and construction, it should be able to design an improvement for itself." Will Wright, the creator of the SimCity videogame series, is quoted as saying, "Personally, I've always been more scared of this scenario than a lot of others. This could happen in our lifetime. And once we're sharing the planet with some form of superintelligence, all bets are off."

When I asked him outright, more or less jokingly, whether or not he was an intelligent machine, or something created by one, his reply was delightful: "If I was an intelligent machine, I would deceive you."

The exchange continued on to cover a very wide range of topics, and over the years since, I have managed to verify so many of his claims, including

some that were quite improbable at the time they were made, that I have thought it would be ethically appropriate to extend publication of his words to a wider audience.

Over my career, I have made other improbable claims, and argued as best I am able for the validity of the underlying experiences as genuine mysteries. Along with doing this there comes a powerful moral obligation to limit those claims only to what has definitely been observed, and to strive always to provide any verification that might become available.

At this point, I think that I am right to assert that I cannot make conventional sense of this man, whom I have come to call the Master of the Key. This is because his words were a key for me that unlocked many doors, and his mastery lay in the fact that they were often either brilliant distillations of complex ideas, or were entirely novel, and they were delivered with calm assurance.

He was humble and displayed a twinkling good nature. His hair was white and close-cropped, and his eyes were a light blue. He wore a dark gray turtleneck and charcoal trousers. He seemed rather slight to me, perhaps five foot eleven, weighing maybe a hundred and seventy to a hundred and eighty pounds.

While he appeared to be an ordinary physical individual, he does not seem to have been a person like me or like the rest of us, embedded in this place and time in the same way that we are. Otherwise, how could he have spoken so cogently about obscure topics such as memory-retaining gases long before there was any evidence that such things existed?

Of course, there might have been papers on this subject available somewhere, but not that I was able to locate at the time, and I looked quite deeply. I do not think, though, that the specific applications he identified were known then.

His comments on intelligent machines seemed so assured that I have wondered if he might not have had direct experience of such things. If so, then maybe he was a visitor from the future.

Or is that just a fantasy? We know that movement through time is possible, but it involves dramatic physical effects, such as faster-than-light acceleration, so one would think that it could hardly be accomplished in a hotel room, or indeed could involve anything more than subatomic particles or photons.

However, a hundred years ago there were only a few thousand automobiles in the world and just a handful of fragile and inefficient airplanes, so it would obviously be silly to discount this as a possibility, especially if superintelligent machines are used in the future to find ways of accomplishing it.

Nevertheless, if he was from the future, then it is difficult to see how he could have had as much freedom of action as he did. This is because the principle of least action, which seems universally true in nature, would seem to prevent anyone from the future reaching back to change the past. This is the principle that states that nature never expends more than the minimum amount of energy that it must in order to do what it must. That is to say, water always seeks the lowest place it can run, and likewise, you cannot create contradictions in space-time, such as killing your own grandfather.

Interestingly, though, it might well be that you can do some things in your own past, maybe quite a few things, if you don't affect your own life. We can only speculate about the extent to which the grandfather paradox impedes the ability of the future to alter its own past. In fact, if time travel is possible, then there is also an extensive science devoted to safely altering the past for what is, to the time travelers, present benefit.

It might work to slip ideas like these in through the back door of an outsider like me, then nurture them along. The closer awareness of them proceeded to the time that they actually originated, the more generally they could be dispersed. So perhaps my initial refusal to accept that the Master of the Key was real, the delay of two years before I actually even transcribed the conversation, and my long hesitancy about publication, have actually been governed by the grandfather paradox. Therefore, my various objections and hesitations are an outcome of the fact that, on some deep level, I am unable to act in any other way.

If this is true, then maybe I will meet the Master of the Key again someday when the natural progression of my life has reached the present from which he went back to engage my younger self. The other possibility, of course, is that he came from a time after my death. But if his extraordinary remarks about the soul are true, then I might still meet him in such a future. In fact, I might even *be* him.

He said something in passing that suggests an awareness of the constraints of movement through time when he said that an intelligent machine "might

foment the illusion that an elusive alien presence was here, for example, to interject its ideas into society.”

If it also came from the future, it might do this, as well, to gain greater latitude for its penetration of our era. It might be that the principle of least action could to some extent be defeated if observers were deceived into believing that what was, in fact, a time machine was an intrusion from something that is completely outside of our reality, such as an alien presence.

If this is true, then Stephen Hawking’s famous response to the question of whether or not time travel is possible, “Where are the tourists?” is answered. They’re here in droves. It’s just that they’ve misled us into thinking that they’re aliens, and their time machines are spacecraft from another planet.

Of course, as a person who has been enmeshed in the issue of alien contact, this notion has caused me much thought. It has been obvious to me for some time that the events I described in my book *Communion* were probably beyond anybody’s ability to narrate correctly. When I woke up in the midst of bizarre and inexplicable, but obviously intelligent, creatures in December of 1985, it appeared to be alien contact. But after listening to and reading tens of thousands of other narratives of such contact, and having more experience with it myself, I wouldn’t be surprised at all if it was some sort of elaborate illusion being undertaken to conceal something else entirely.

I had already come to this notion in 1998, so I found his statement about the apparent alien presence around us being a form of deception quite thought-provoking, and I still do. Like most anomalous experience, though, nothing he said brings closure to the question of what is actually behind the curtain. It just adds another layer of possibility.

What a shame it is that more people aren’t open to this speculation. As long as one keeps developing the question without drawing conclusions, which seem, in any case, like a *fata morgana*, to recede forever into the future, it is an enormous intellectual challenge and pleasure. For this reason, I remain grateful that I had my close encounter experiences, despite the social isolation that has resulted from my discussing them.

He also made some statements about the environment that had a strong effect on me. When I met him, I was already conversant in environmental science, having coauthored a book entitled *Nature’s End*, a speculative mix of fact and fiction that addressed environmental concerns.

I had also read a number of books about catastrophic climate change,

ranging from Charles Hapgood's *Path of the Pole*, to Rose and Rand Flem-Ath's and Graham Hancock's books on this subject.

The Master of the Key did not discuss crustal shift as a causative factor in sudden climate change, though. He took a very different approach, addressing it instead as an outcome of distortions in the atmosphere that lead over time to a breaking point, and sudden catastrophe.

Although this process is fluently visible in the fossil record, the mechanism that leads from sudden upheavals of climate to ages-long planetary entrapment in ice remains much debated, so I was quite interested when he said, "The next ice age will begin soon, and this will lead to the extinction of mankind, or to a massive reduction in population, given your inability to expand off the planet. This planet is at present a death trap."

I try never to allow myself to forget that every single person on earth is as valuable and important to themselves as I am to myself, and so I found this statement profoundly disturbing. I immediately wanted to sound a warning. I wanted to save us all.

At that time, the great danger of global warming was thought to be a continuous rise in temperatures that would cause earth to become so hot that it was uninhabitable—but it was also something far off, a problem to be debated now, solved later.

The Master of the Key suggested that it was a very much more immediate problem. He said that, as polar ice melts and floods the northern ocean with freshwater, the North Atlantic Current would fail, leading to a radical climate change that would unfold over "a single season."

If such a thing happened, it would obviously bring massive suffering to mankind. Even worse, the disaster would strike hardest at our most economically active and well-educated populations in North America and Europe.

But was it the truth? In those days, I still didn't have much in the way of verification of any of the man's ideas, and this one seemed particularly radical. I was still extremely unsure about whether or not the whole encounter had simply been imagined. To keep me from just dropping the whole thing, my wife had to constantly remind me of the phone call I'd made to her.

In those days, while there was controversy about what caused ice ages, it was generally agreed that the change was a gradual one. However, I did find an article in the January 1998 *Atlantic Monthly* called "The Great Climate

Flip-flop,” by William H. Calvin, that suggested that the change might be very sudden.

This same suggestion appeared in commentary about ice cores taken from Greenland and the Antarctic, but there seemed to be no clear mechanism that would cause such a dramatic change so fast.

Putting what I had been told by the Master together with the research I was doing, I came to write *The Coming Global Superstorm*, which was turned into a film by Roland Emmerich called *The Day After Tomorrow*.

The film was a terrific success with the public, and served to cause many millions to consider for the first time that the abstraction called “global warming” might have unexpected and serious consequences.

For the most part, though, the press and the environmental movement condemned the film for compressing the period of change into too short a time.

A hundred and thirty-seven million years ago, there was an event that caused dramatic and sudden climate change, which must have severely impacted animal populations on earth. Thirteen thousand years ago, a sudden dump of freshwater into the North Atlantic from a gigantic glacial lake in Canada triggered a return to ice age conditions known as the Younger Dryas.

What happened on both of these occasions, and has happened on many others, is now clear. It is exactly what the Master of the Key warned might happen. The process is this: carbon dioxide levels rise, causing warming. This warming melts permafrost, which releases massive amounts of methane into the air. The methane is a devilishly efficient heat trap, and global temperatures rise dramatically. This results in rapid polar melt and a flood of fresh melt water into the ocean. Because freshwater heats and cools much more quickly than salt water, ocean temperatures rise. This reduces the difference in water temperature from north to south, weakening the natural heat pump effect that draws warm water into the north, in the form of the Gulf Stream.

It subsequently stops, while at the same time the methane, which, unlike carbon dioxide, breaks down quite quickly, disappears. The result is a very dramatic shift in climate, first to extremely hot conditions, then plunging into extreme cold, a change that can take place over a very short time.

In 2008, Dr. Achim Brauer, of the Potsdam Center for Geosciences, and colleagues analyzed sediments from a crater lake that are laid down annually,

and found that the Younger Dryas thirteen thousand years ago began over a single season, which is ten times faster than previously believed, and exactly in keeping with the Master's dire warnings.

As this is being written, earth is in the process of experiencing the hottest month of June on record, June 2010. What lies ahead is even more dramatic heating, and if the methane hydrates now frozen in arctic waters should melt, that heating is going to spike just as it has in the past, and the results will be precisely the same.

The Younger Dryas is not the only time in recent epochs that an aggressive climate shift has affected earth.

Five thousand two hundred years ago, there was a lesser cooling event that caused glaciers to form so suddenly in Peru that deciduous plants at their bases are found to have been frozen so quickly that their cell walls remained intact. For this to happen, the temperature change must have taken place in a matter of no more than a couple of minutes. In other words, the temperate climate that these plants enjoyed changed extremely quickly, certainly in less than a day. The glaciers that formed on that terrible day are still there, 5,200 years later.

Also 5,200 years ago, Ötzi, the Ice Man, whose remains were found consequent to melt in the Schnalstal Glacier in the Italian Tyrol in 1991, was buried by a snowstorm in an alpine meadow. He only reappeared when the glacier melted. In other words, the snowstorm that choked that meadow did not melt again for over five thousand years.

My conclusion is that I was being warned of the presence of natural forces that we do not understand, or do not wish to understand, and, if anything, that warning has grown more and more urgent as our climate sets up in precisely the same way it has in the past just prior to such an upheaval.

He left the subject with this admonition: "The greater part of human industry and culture, along with the species' most educated populations, will be destroyed in a single season. This will happen suddenly and without warning, or rather, the warning will not be recognized for what it is."

I suppose that the clearest warning will be the appearance of methane bubbles in arctic waters.

In July 2010, Professor Igor Semiletov of the International Siberian Shelf Study, said, "Methane release from the East Siberian Shelf is under way and it looks stronger than it was supposed to be."

This could well be the warning that he referred to, and I would be very surprised to see it heeded in any way. We will, however, find out what it means, most likely under conditions of extraordinary upheaval and human suffering.

If the Master of the Key would be heeded, we might at least be able to develop contingency plans that would to some degree ameliorate such a disaster. But he will not be heeded. In fact, most people who might be in a position to act on the warnings he has given us will not do so, because the existence of the man cannot be explained and he apparently cannot be recontacted. Even if he could, I doubt that the importance of his message would be acknowledged.

Despite the general denial in science that there could possibly be anyone here from another world, be it another planet or some other seemingly impossible place, I know quite prominent scientists whose work has benefited significantly and in useful ways from contact with inexplicable visitors, perhaps from other worlds. But if even scientists this prominent were to come forward with the truth, they would be drummed out of their careers.

This is a misfortune, but it is also, I believe, something that has been constructed by the same presence that is behind the whole mystery, be it alien or human, or even nonphysical in origin.

Whatever it is, quite clearly its knowledge is far in advance of ours, and this is probably why it is so secretive.

In the May 6, 1977, edition of *Science*, T.B.H. Kuiper and Mark Morris offered the speculation that aliens coming here would keep themselves well hidden, because the only motive of people so advanced as to be capable of such a journey would be to discover what new knowledge we might have to offer, and “by intervening in our natural progress now, members of an extraterrestrial society could easily extinguish the only resource on this planet that could be of any value to them,” which would be the uniqueness of the human experience.

Even if the only difference between us and visitors from another world was that they possessed a technology that could control gravity, the gap between us would be very great. But there could be other things that would make it even greater.

For example, my experience between 1985 and 1993 with creatures that appeared to be alien was associated with a surprising side effect, which was

simultaneous contact with the dead, who would appear along with the visitors, and not as ghosts. They would seem to be completely physical.

Perhaps, if we had a clearer understanding of the soul, the gap between us and this mysterious other intelligence would narrow, and perhaps that's why the Master talked so much about the soul, attempting to get me to understand it in a new way.

He said that "souls are part of nature," and that "the science of the soul is just another science. There is no supernatural, only physics."

Science does not believe this. Science believes that we can't detect the soul because there is no soul. But the Master saw it as part of nature, even to the extent of being exploitable as a resource by those with the skill to do this.

Modern western culture has a schizophrenic relationship with the soul, very much as was true during the Roman Empire, when an educated elite developed that included the soul among the superstitions of the uneducated, and dismissed it, along with the gods, as nonsense.

Similarly, few western scientists and intellectuals consider the soul a viable idea. Where is it? What form might it take? How could anything bearing consciousness continue to exist after the seat of consciousness, the brain, has ceased to function?

The Master of the Key takes a completely novel approach to the whole idea. He denies the existence of the supernatural, saying that only the natural world exists, some parts of which we understand and some parts of which we don't.

It is a characteristic of human thought and culture that we deny the parts of nature that we don't understand. Voltaire dismissed fossils as fish bones tossed aside by travelers. The existence of meteors was once considered an absurd fantasy. Eight days before the Wright Brothers flew at Kitty Hawk, the *New York Times* published the opinion that it was time to stop nattering on about the absurd notion of flight using heavier-than-air machines. Both the *Times* and *Scientific American* initially claimed that the flights must have been a hoax.

Such denial is a human habit of mind, and it remains as deeply ingrained in us as it always has been. Despite the many experiences I have had with ghosts and such, I myself have always been skeptical about the soul. Where would it get its energy? What sort of material reality could it possibly possess?

For this reason, as I sat face-to-face with my visitor, I initially found his commentary on the soul off-putting.

The reason was that, despite all the evidence I had in my own life, including an extraordinary moment of out-of-body travel that had taken place in 1986, I had no way to understand why anything would survive the death of the physical.

However, he took an entirely unexpected approach. First, he used the phrase “soul-blind” to describe us. I’d heard it before, and I couldn’t disagree. But were we soul blind because there’s nothing to see, or because of some appalling human insufficiency?

When he said that the soul was, simply, a part of nature, I found myself thinking that things like radio had also always been part of nature, but for a great long time we couldn’t even conceive of them, let alone detect them. And he was saying, essentially, that the issue with the soul is also one of detection. This would correspond with his assertion that “conscious energy” is essentially electromagnetic in nature.

But how would that work? Are such fields plasmas? If so, what holds them together? What are the physics of the soul?

In the mid-nineties we were living in San Antonio, Texas, and were invited to the home of a friend who was taking many photographs of what are known as “orbs” in ghost-hunter and parapsychological circles. I thought that the great masses of objects that were appearing on random shots he was taking inside and outside his house must be condensation or dust, or something else along those lines, that was very close to the camera lens. But when I went to the house and we took shots of exactly the same spot with two different cameras from different angles, the objects showed up in both pictures. This means that they were not tiny specs near the camera, but larger objects three or four feet away, which was very perplexing.

Later, I went out into the back garden and felt an absolutely distinct presence. It was my mother, long since passed away. It was as if she was right there. It was palpable. I stood there, my eyes closed, communing with her. I didn’t know it, but another member of the group took a picture of me at that moment.

In the picture, above me and perhaps ten feet in front of me, is a glowing orb. It isn’t enormous, more like a sort of a spark, but why does it happen to be there? Is it an indication of the persistence of the soul after death? It is

certainly true that it seemed to me that my mother was there.

The Master of the Key made an interesting case for souls being part of material reality, basically for the idea that consciousness could remain coherently structured while in an energetic form.

Over the years, there has been so much evidence gathered that ghostly apparitions are associated with magnetic fields that there is little point in my advocating on its behalf.

Listening to the Master appears to have broken a barrier in me. I became much more sensitive to the presence of the dead than I had been before I listened to his ideas about what they were.

I began to see the dead quite frequently and would find myself communicating with them. Recently, for example, my wife's father came to mind in away that felt more like a sort of penetration of my consciousness than an ordinary thought or memory. I told her that I could feel his presence, and that he wanted badly to communicate with her. When he was alive, their relationship had been seriously strained, and he seemed to want to make amends.

There was also a woman with him, but it wasn't Anne's mother or her father's second wife. Anne told me that there hadn't been any other women in his life.

Her father then said to me, "Tell her it's Marcelle," so I did so. Anne was genuinely startled. She said, "He *did* have a sister. That's my aunt Marcelle. I met her only once in my life. I haven't thought about her since."

I would be remiss if I said that I could prove that Anne had never mentioned Marcelle to me, but she says, I think correctly, that she never did.

If this was the only incident in my life of a communication with the dead, I would take it with a grain of salt. But it is not the only one.

We have an Australian friend, Glennys MacKay, who is quite a powerful medium. She's strictly no-frills and she asks only that she be given something belonging to the person who wishes to have a reading. She doesn't want to know anything about the person, not even their sex.

Seeing a chance to make a test, Anne gave her a lock of our hairdresser's hair. She held it for a moment and then said, "I hear somebody calling, 'Howie, Howie.'" There was a bit more, which Anne dutifully wrote down. But since the hairdresser's name is Jay, it seemed a waste of time.

Nevertheless, she let Jay know the outcome. When she did, he said, "Oh,

my God, that was my dead sister. She always called me Howie. My real name is Howard.”

I thought of the Master’s explanation that the soul is conscious energy, and also his disturbing suggestion that such energy is accessible to technological manipulation, and that it can be exploited by those with the means to do so, and I remembered the way that the dead and the visitors seem to show up together.

Once a man telephoned me and explained that his seven-year-old boy had awakened with a number of these creatures in his bedroom, and his older brother had been with them. The older brother had said to tell their parents that he was all right. Moments later, his wife had observed a huge light race away from the house.

He had gotten through to me via my literary agents, desperate to know if this had ever happened to anybody else.

I was able to tell him that it was a commonplace of the close encounter experience, although undocumented by UFO investigators, because it obviously suggests that something quite unexpected and very little understood is actually going on.

The reason that he was so eager to know this was that the older brother, their seventeen-year-old son, had been killed the previous week in an auto accident.

Another incident took place, also involving Glennys MacKay, that convinced me once and for all that the Master’s detailed explanations of the soul must in some sense be correct. It does persist after the death of the body, perhaps not as a disincarnate version of the person who lived, but in some coherent manner.

Anne and I were driving Glennys and her husband to dinner. I asked her if she always saw the dead. She said that she did. So I asked her if there were any dead with us at that moment. She said yes, that a dead person was with me. He was wearing a tuxedo and he had played the piano. Then she added, also the violin.

As a lover of classical music, that could cover a pretty broad range of performers I’ve enjoyed. But then she added, “He says his name is Milton.”

I was so surprised that I almost drove off the highway. She had asked no leading questions—in fact, none at all. She’d simply said what she saw.

When I was a child, an older boy who lived across the street had played

both the piano and the violin. He had become a violinist with the local symphony orchestra, and wore a tuxedo during performances.

His name had been Milton. I was aware that he'd died in the early seventies, but I had not thought of him, not at all, in at least thirty years.

Something is out there, something alive, and it is exquisitely aware of our lives and associations, and I am going to let myself believe that the situation is as the Master of the Key has claimed.

When I asked him what the soul was, he replied that it was a "radiant body," potentially. "Formed out of conscious energy."

He said that it is not passive to manipulation, but that a relationship must be formed with it if one is to really engage with it. He added that "it is part of the electromagnetic spectrum, easily detectable by your science as it exists now."

Researchers like William Roll have presented evidence that plasmas are associated with ghostly presences, and done this using relatively straightforward instruments. The Master offered a marvelous inducement to further study in this area: "The undiscovered country can become your backyard."

Our world would change in very fundamental ways if this happened. It seems to me that our species is actually severed into two parts, one physical and the other in some sort of plasmic state. It's as if two halves of a single brain had been severed, as in a cerebral commissurotomy.

In the end, I have come to accept that the soul is, indeed, part of the physical world, in exactly the same sense that an electromagnetic field is part of the physical world. However, I don't think that it's clear what, exactly, this means. It has advanced the question in my own mind from "Does the soul exist?" to "How are we to understand the existence of the soul?"

Perhaps the dead can assist us from their side in repairing the fissure between us, and if so, maybe then the gap between us and whoever else is here can be closed enough for them to have meaningful interaction with us.

In any case, if the dead exist and can be made accessible to reliable and repeatable communication, that would be in itself a revolution of world-historic proportions.

He described ours as a "fallen" world and said that "because you have no plan for yourselves, there is no plan for you." Although he didn't say it outright, there was the strong implication that the reason we cannot see the

world as it is, and continually deny the existence of an afterlife, is that it forces us to face the raw and unbearable truth of our own sins and insufficiencies.

Throughout the conversation I had with him, this remarkable man promoted a powerful and consistent morality, as if to say that leading a moral life frees us to see ourselves as we really are.

He offered a strikingly original definition of sin: “denial of the right to thrive.”

I have found that taking this definition to heart has increased my moral precision. One can see much about oneself by applying those words to one’s own actions. They are really quite powerful and useful to anybody striving to lead a moral life.

His attitude toward social responsibility was uncompromising. “All are responsible for all.” Like the visitors I engaged with in the mid-eighties, he regarded humility as absolutely essential to a moral life, and as well, essential even to an ability to see the world clearly.

Ego does battle with our mortality and, above all, with our smallness. An astronaut I knew years ago stated the position of the scientific and intellectual communities with memorable eloquence when I pointed out to him that he knew me well enough to know that I wasn’t lying about my contact experiences, and that they were not an outcome of some sort of disease process or delusion. He said, “I know that’s probably true, but I have to tell you, I want us to be at the top of the food chain even if we have to lie to ourselves to stay there.”

He also said, “I don’t want the path to Mars to be wellworn,” and I find that very understandable. I also think that it illustrates a subtle but important danger that is inherent in opening one’s eyes too wide. It is the same thing that has disempowered so many indigenous cultures when they have been exposed to western technological civilization, which is a sense of futility and irrelevance.

If the veil between the world should fall, the implication is strong that we are going to discover that we are a footnote in a super-conscious vastness that we can hardly even begin to comprehend, but which is chiefly characterized by a kind of absolute knowledge that makes such things as discovery and innovation superfluous.

Read with care; the words of the Master of the Key have a darkness

concealed within them. There is a suggestion that souls can be subjected to exploitation, and even that, while everybody is to some extent participant in conscious energy, not all possess the “radiant body” that requires attention to maintain.

Could this be why the great majority of the dead just seem to disappear? Usually, after somebody I know dies, I will see them for a few days, and then they are gone. Rarely they may return, seemingly perfectly intact, years later, but not often. When they do, it often seems more as if I am dealing with something that has been gathered into a certain form in order to engage in communication, and that what lies behind it is, in a sense, focusing itself into this particular form only so that it can be understood.

However, in my mind, there are certainly dead people who have a continuous and discreet presence of some sort. Between 1989 and 1993, I meditated almost nightly with such people.

One summer night in 1989, I was in the guest bedroom where I meditated around eleven each night when I suddenly felt a presence so palpable that I could not ignore it. Finally, I said aloud that if I couldn't see whoever was there, I had to leave the room. A few moments later, I did so.

After a period of what could charitably be called disquiet, I fell asleep, only to be awakened at about three by a familiar blow to my shoulder. Many times over the past few years, I'd been woken up like this, usually to face some bizarre experience or other. But this time what happened was completely incredible.

I saw, sitting on the foot of the bed, a small man wearing a tunic. He slumped against the bedstead like a rag doll. I threw off the covers and went down to him. Up close, he was compact. His eyes were deep set but his appearance was human. I took his hand in mine. It was as light as air. From experience with such apparitions, I attempted to anchor myself by smelling his skin. He was startlingly ripe, as if bathing was not a custom he was familiar with.

An instant later, he disappeared. I went down the hall and began meditating. Soon, I could hear breathing behind me, as regular as if it was being generated by a machine.

For the next three years, we meditated together regularly. He would appear with a great clatter of noise on the roof above the meditation room, and we would begin. Often, he would come into the bedroom around three, and we

would meditate together.

Once, my wife came in to meditate with us, but when the clatter began on the roof, she said, “I’m not ready for this,” and left the room.

Because I had been made such a public laughingstock, people were becoming embarrassed to buy my books and my financial situation was deteriorating. On the night before we left the cabin forever, I asked to see him as he really was. Obviously, someone who seemed to use his physicality in the same way that we use clothes could not be, in the end, like us and subject to the same rigors that constrain us.

I waited, but nothing happened, and finally I went back to bed. Suddenly there appeared in the front yard a terrific light. It was so bright that I thought for a moment that the house had caught fire.

I rushed to the window and there glided out from the meditation room and across the yard what was probably the most magnificent thing I have ever seen. It was a bright light, like a huge star floating twenty feet off the ground. Out of it there came piercing rays that I could actually feel as if they were pinpricks. It was as if they were penetrating my skin, and where they entered me, I felt a sweet sense of another human presence, as if I was being embraced by a dear old friend—which, of course, is exactly what was happening.

In 1998, when the Master of the Key described the radiant body, I knew exactly what he meant, because I had seen a person in this state and had lived and worked with him for years. It is endlessly interesting to me that he could control the degree to which he was physical.

When I asked him, once, what he was, he indicated a book in my library called *Life Between Lives*, and I suppose that is where he was from. Often, I have wondered if he eventually reentered the state of the living, and what that experience was like for him.

I began by discussing some thoughts about who and what the Master of the Key might have been, and now will conclude it by reposing that same question but in a new context.

I know what he was. He was one of us. No matter the mystery of his identity, his humanity was immediately familiar. Had I asked him, though, I suspect he would have revealed himself, also, in radiant form. I do not think that he walks the streets of Toronto, that he eats his dinner and reads his book. I think that he is either a man who has, in life, attained the ability to

live and see beyond the limits of the physical, or somebody from beyond the physical who has perfected the skill of walking among us when he wishes.

How often my mind is drawn to memories of the extraordinary beings I have been privileged to know. But of all of them, the most articulate and forthcoming by far was this gracious master you are about to meet, knowledgeable, wise, deeply humorous and morally impeccable in ways I have not seen in any other person. Certainly, I met a great man on that night, who slipped in and out of my life so skillfully and so swiftly that I let him go without the slightest protest, only to be left as I am now, in gratitude and wonder, but also with a sense of frustration. Not a day passes that I don't think of another question I would like to ask him.

Since I first became an advocate for rejected knowledge by publishing *Communion*, I have always tried to bear witness to these extraordinarily important experiences with the greatest accuracy and integrity that I can bring to bear. They are things that people have great difficulty accepting, because they mean that the vision of reality that we have built up over a painful history of superstition, confusion and struggle is profoundly inadequate.

The Master of the Key offers clarity where there is now confusion, and if one is open to his message and the new ideas it contains, unexpected vistas of discovery present themselves, as one is led toward the promise of new knowledge, where questions beckon that are as yet scarcely imagined among us. But they come at an opportune time, because the human world and human civilization face a profound bankruptcy of vision that is sorely in need of renewal. We have done all we can with our ideas of reality as they exist now. If there is to be another step taken in the human journey, a step upward, new visions are essential.

***The* CONVERSATION**

Why are you here?

You're chained to the ground.

Excuse me?

I am here on behalf of the good. Please give me some time.

Who are "the good"?

Those whose lives are directed toward ascension.

You mean, like, religious types?

Belief impedes release. The ascension I refer to is a process of finding God within and the universe without.

Meaning?

Mankind is trapped. I want to help you spring the trap.

What makes you able to do this?

The key I offer you consists of a new way of seeing yourselves that will free you.

There's nothing new under the sun.

There are thoughts unthought and words unspoken. For example, I have a message for you about the next age, and the one just passed.

Dare I ask?

The most important thing about the last age was the Holocaust.

An “age” means what?

An age is a bit over two thousand years.

The length of a Zodiacal sign?

Yes.

And the Holocaust was the most important event in the past two thousand years?

You were meant to have acquired the ability to leave the planet by now. But you are still trapped here. You may be irretrievably lost. This is of absolutely fundamental importance, because the earth will soon be unable to support you, and yet you will not be able to leave. This is because of the Holocaust. The destruction of six million may well lead to the destruction of six billion. So it is the most important event, by far, of the age.

Why has the Holocaust prevented us from leaving the planet? The Holocaust reduced the intelligence of the human species by killing too many of its most intellectually competent members. It is why you are still using jets seventy-five years after their invention. The understanding of gravity is denied you because of the absence of the child of a murdered Jewish couple. This child would have unlocked the secret of gravity. But he was not born. Because his parents went, the whole species must stay.

You’re saying that the catastrophe we’re facing now—too many people and no ability to leave the planet—is punishment for the Holocaust?

What is happening is consequence, not punishment. The Holocaust was triggered when economic disorder combined among the Germans with a feeling of being trapped due to overpopulation. The resultant explosion drove the German tribe to lash out against other tribes, especially the one that lived in its midst. Unfortunately, they murdered the bearers of the intellectually strongest genes possessed by your species.

Why are we so blind?

At deeper levels, you are a very different species than you appear to

yourselves. Just as the biblical story of the fall of man and the banishment from the garden is really an allegory of the destruction of the previous civilization, so also the story of the fallen angel is an allegory of your fallen heart. The demon is the part of you that hungers for destruction.

Why do we do these things?

This is a fallen world.

What is a fallen world?

Be as the lilies of the field. When you hear that, you think: how can we possibly do that? We need to make shelter.

We need to gather food. You are at war with your fate.

A species at war with God's plan?

Because you have no plan for yourselves, there is no plan for you. God wants companions, not supplicants. Become the friends of God, and you will find your plan.

What is God?

An elemental body is a mechanism filled with millions of nerve endings that directs the attention of God into the physical.

That didn't answer my question.

It did. Very precisely. If you were a friend of God, you would have understood. There is a much larger world behind your backs. It is this world to which man is blind. Man is soul-blind and God-blind.

How can we change?

Surrender to God.

What about free will?

Free will is only possible in God. The will of the fallen is slavery.

How do we surrender to God?

Return to the forest. Otherwise, you will destroy the earth and yourselves.

Six billion people can't return to the forest. The forest can't possibly support us.

I agree. It's impossible.

But if we destroy the earth, we end up dead. So what happens to us then?

You go forth even though you aren't ready.

Go forth? To where?

To another state of being. Your access to elemental bodies ends.

What is an elemental body, anyway?

A body formed out of chemical elements, something drawn from the dust and made alive.

What sort of body would we have without elements?

A radiant body, potentially. Formed out of conscious energy.

What is this? How can we put it to use?

Conscious energy is not like unconscious energy, the servant of those who understand its laws. To gain access to the powers of conscious energy, you must evolve a relationship with it. Learn its needs, learn to fulfill them. But also remember, it is part of the electromagnetic spectrum, easily detectable by your science as it exists now. You can learn to signal and be heard, and to record response. The veil between the worlds can fall. The undiscovered country can become your backyard.

But how can we do this?

By first realizing that you are not cut off. There is no supernatural. There is only the natural world, and you have access to all of it. Souls are part of nature.

I don't feel that we have access to the whole of the physical world, then.

We're trapped here on earth, for example. Our space program has lead feet. When you were challenged from the outside, your government chose the path of public denial and secret defiance. This is the path to failure. It must change its policy to one of public admission and open defiance.

You speak of secrecy concerning the alien presence here?

Until you take your place, you will remain trapped. The threats that have been delivered to your government in secret are a test. To pass it, you must defy them. Your place will not be given you. You must be strong enough to take it.

I have the impression that the government knows very little. Then you have the wrong impression. But remember that government is very complex, and a good deal of it is not what it seems at all. Much is hidden from your public officials. This world is run in secret.

Government is not what it seems?

Form an assault on secrecy. You are right to fight against official secrecy. It is the greatest present evil.

Not even most people in the government understand this, and when it comes to aliens, the culture of denial is total. Look at this book I just finished—a few thousand people will buy it, nobody will act.

You must find a way, because the alternative is to be denied your place in the higher world.

What is this higher world?

What difference does that make to you?

I am trying to find out our relationship to it.

Not all human beings are radiant bodies. But all may become such.

You are saying that we don't all have souls?

I am saying that you are not all discreet radiant beings, but all participate to some degree or other in conscious energy. To remain a separate being after death, there must exist the ability to maintain the structure of the radiant body by the action of attention. This is why we have been so insistent that you meditate. Otherwise, we will lose you when you die and we don't want that. If a being cannot self-maintain after the elemental body no longer does it automatically, it is absorbed into the flux of conscious energy. You go into the light, as it were.

Isn't this going to heaven?

There is an element of ecstasy, but it is not complete.

When another elemental forms that fits the pattern of that particular fragment, it will return to the physical in search of more sensation. Or, if one never does, its unfulfilled desires will remain forever as a part of the tapestry of memory.

Would the person perceive this? Feel happy? Feel trapped? These memories are somewhat self-aware. But they do not know themselves as beings. Just as your memory of your childhood games with Mike do not have a being of their own, but rather are part of a greater whole.

You remember my childhood?

I do, of course. But we will return to that later.

How does a person evolve this radiant body?

The imprinting of essence with experience requires effort and attention. It is the object of all "paths" and "ways" to higher consciousness. It is the object of real prayer. To begin, you must meditate. Who does not meditate, disintegrates.

Any specific recommendations?

Paying attention to physical sensation is paying attention to energetic sensation. Being awake to oneself and one's surroundings increases the intensity of the impressions so that they affect the spin of the electrons that

are present in the nervous system. In this context, being awake means being aware of one's own self while at the same time absorbing impressions from the outside. The increase in spin and enrichment of the complexity of the pattern of being that results brings more and more form to the radiant body. You will remember yourself after your death—who and what you were, why you existed, and what you intend for your future. You will, in short, acquire a true aim, and join the companions of God in their journey toward ecstatic and conscious union with one another and all that is. It is the difference between being a plant and being Rembrandt. The plant has a certain fragment of self-awareness, but Rembrandt is vastly complex, a being rich with fully realized talents and self-awareness that makes him a worthy companion in higher form.

Rembrandt was a saint?

Rembrandt was conscious. As far as his being a saint is concerned, though—forget it. Radiant being and sainthood are not the same thing, believe me.

So he persisted as a radiant being? Where is he now?

That's his business.

What about those who don't acquire this ethereal independence? After death you cannot be blind and therefore you cannot change. There, you wait.

Wait for what?

To understand that, you must first understand that the living and the dead share the same world. Your dead are not off somewhere in space. Their lives and beings are intertwined with yours. They see all that passes here, but can only affect it indirectly, if they can make themselves heard in the minds of the living. However, you the living are changing now. As this change proceeds, you are better and better able to feel the presence of your dead. You will find your dead in the immediate surroundings of their lives, for the most part, clinging to what they can of their memories, attempting to preserve their selves despite the magnetic attraction of what would envelop them.

So the light is not our friend?

The light is the fate of sleeping man. Awakened man makes his own light, as part of the radiant choir who sing forever the song of God, which is the word.

But what about people from the distant past? Surely they don't linger here. There is no other place for you to linger. If you are not an independent being after death, you remain engaged in the life of the earth, awaiting your chance to recur and increase your being. Lives in elemental form change the patterns of the electrons that form the soul and intensify their spin. The great dead have lived lives consciously devoted to the evolution and growth of the radiant body. But most of you, in the state of death, bear only fragmentary bits of what you were in life. Simple patterns, weak spin, no clear form to the radiant body and no ability to maintain it. You are subject to a process of recurrence so powerful that there are none from the distant past, except the radiant.

How do we access past lives?

All may remember all. You do not realize what you are.

And what of death itself? What should we expect?

A death is as unique as a face. You die into your expectations. But you generally survive them.

Somebody who doesn't believe in the soul?

They make a great discovery.

So some become radiant bodies, some linger and try again, and some enter the memory of God? Who enters the memory of God? Those who have no further potential and have not grown into anything. But recall that their experience does not go anywhere. It dies with the elemental body because it is insufficiently potent to survive. What survives is generally nothing but a tiny essence, a spark that would be barely recognizable as the person who had previously existed.

What is essence?

Taste. The way a certain specific being tastes. Essence is foundation.

So the bad essences go back to God. God gets the dregs? Every life is an experiment. Not all succeed. But most do, to enough of a degree that the being-body will remain coherent, clinging to the earth in the region of its memories. When a body is created that fits its essential attachments, it will be drawn to that body by a magnetism that it cannot resist. Birth to this world is death to the other, and vice versa. The recurrence is a great breathing.

What do these souls do while waiting?

They experience peace, some of them, only coming slowly into an awareness of what they need to continue on. Others are frantic, because of the nature of their lives. There can be great anguish, as loved ones are witnessed in the nakedness and, often, the horror of their own lives. There can be obsession, and the lusts of life can be endlessly indulged but never satisfied, for the physical world can be seen but not touched by these beings. However, there is also kindness among them. In a world where there are no secrets, only truth, the compassion of one for another is very great.

Can the dead influence the living?

Not these little ones, not much. They have not the knowledge or wisdom to make themselves heard.

What are psychics?

A part of the electromagnetic field that fills the nervous system rests a few centimeters above the skin, outside of the body. This field is an organ just like the heart or the brain. It is in quantum superposition, the electrons effectively everywhere in the universe and nowhere specific. It may be imprinted by information from anywhere and any time. With it, you may see other worlds, you may see the past and the future, you may see into the lives of those around you. You may haunt God. However, the process of imprinting itself causes the organ to cease to be in superposition and thus to cease to be accessible to further imprinting. In psychics, there is either an

inborn or learned ability to balance the attention in such a way that these impressions do not cause this organ to become focused into particulate form. The ability to control this organ can be developed.

How?

Many practices will work, but the best is to meditate in such a way that the mind is concentrated on physical sensation. This relieves the pressure of impressions incoming from the physical world on the electromagnetic body and enables it to expand.

How far can it expand?

Anybody can become God.

In life?

In life.

How can a mere imperfect human being become the master of the universe?

What is imperfect is your vision. You can find your perfection right now, this moment, always.

What is this seeing? This marvelous seeing you allude to?

You must understand the difference between sight and imagination. Real inner vision unfolds with an unmistakable spontaneousness. What is seen, also, is the same from person to person. But the universe is so vast that only the most adept will be able to see the same thing one as another. It is even hard to go back to a place you have seen once before, unless there is a line of communication opened between yourself and somebody who is there.

This can become a scientifically valid means of communication? It already is, even here. Although you do not presently understand the true meaning of indeterminacy, what you refer to as quantum physics offers a useful partial view of the inner workings of the physical world. Quantum instruments of communication, as your scientists now understand them, depend upon the

entanglement of particles. You think now that you must separate two photons physically for them to be entangled, so your faster-than-light communications are limited by how far apart you can physically place the photons you entangle. But there was a time when all particles were in communication and so all are entangled. When you realize this, it will also be true that your quantum communications devices will be able to communicate instantaneously across all worlds. But until you realize it and understand it, it will not be true for you. Vision, in the manipulation of quantum reality, as in the perfecting of your being, is everything.

You seem to be referring to scientific progress and spiritual growth in the same breath.

They are the same. Your science progresses toward communication with all worlds only as fast as your spirit evolves. Animals may not leave their worlds, because they lack the ability to see the needs of others.

We are animals?

A true human being has four levels of mind. Most of you have only three, and perhaps a vestige of the fourth. Your destiny is to enter the humanity of the universe. But you may not fulfill it.

Are there such things as alien abductions?

As you grow in fourth mind, you see more.

Many of these encounters are brutal.

The kitten is terrified of the veterinarian. To subdue the little creature, violence is unavoidable.

But the slaughterhouse is also brutal.

Yours is not the destiny of the steer.

We aren't fodder for a higher world?

I know that you can ask clever questions. Don't try to play with me, Whitley.

That's an even more clever answer—what's your name, anyway? If I said Michael?

An archangel in a turtleneck?

Legion, then?

I think you're a perfectly ordinary person with an ordinary mother and an ordinary name.

I can imagine no greater honor than to be called human.

Let me go back to the quantum issue, because I see that as something concrete that we can understand. You started by talking of using superposition as a means of communication, then changed to talking about entangled particles. What role does superposition play in higher communication?

The tiny layer of electrons that lies outside of the skin is an organ in itself just like the eyes or the blood. It is a sensory organ, but not one that operates naturally, except in a few, as I have stated before. Even in them, it cannot be used very effectively without higher consciousness. It is the organ of higher consciousness. You must be able to watch and not watch at the same time. When you learn this, it will stay in superposition even as you take the imagery that it is receiving into your brain and process it.

You are speaking of opening the third eye?

The nervous system delivers these impressions to the area of the brain closest to the pineal gland, which is where this organ is centered.

Can machines be created that "see," using an artificial version of this organ?

Machines are already being created that communicate via entangled photons. These machines will be the first that detect the voices of other worlds. It is also possible to create machines that mimic the action of the organ we have been discussing. But these machines must be conscious to work.

Conscious machines?

We will return to that later. There is a question lingering in your eyes that you have not asked. Ask it now.

You mentioned monsters in the world of the dead.

The acts of life affect the appearance of the dead in every tiny detail. Everything is imprinted upon the soul, often in surprising ways. Most dead appear as innocent children, longing for sensual lives and hoping that a body will be sparked that fits them. Some are aware enough of radiant being to try to ascend, but they always drift back, or if they become lost, are returned to earth.

By radiant beings?

Yes.

This creation of radiant bodies doesn't sound much like surrender. On the contrary, it is total surrender. The unfocused fragments of lives barely lived do not contribute to the ecstasy of God. God seeks true companions. Ecstasy is not ecstasy unless it is shared.

Can radiant bodies enter the physical world?

Radiant beings may be born into elemental bodies if they wish, but these are acts of intention. Or it may be requested that they do it, and they go on life-missions into the elemental world. These can be dangerous missions that cause them to fall from radiance, but also that may greatly increase their ecstasy. So they go on these adventures. It is happening a great deal now, which is why you have so many glorious children among you. In addition to entering the physical by means of being born, some high beings may so perfectly create an image of the physical bodies they once possessed that they can walk the streets.

Can they have babies?

This would be an act of God, but certainly it is possible.

Does it account for the birth of Jesus?

Jesus said that he was the son of man. Take him at his word. He was God,

though, a radiant body fully aware of who he was and fully invested in all and everything. He entered the elemental body consciously. But I remind you, all are God, all are Christ. The difference was that he knew it.

Was he a product of recurrence?

God is.

What of Jesus? What of Buddha?

Those are two different, but intertwined, questions. First, you must understand that the teachings of Buddha had reached the community of Hellenized Jews in which Jesus lived. So they form a part of Christianity. He was a spiritual revolutionary who brought a message of mercy and compassion and the dignity of man to a world of unimaginable terror. The Roman rule was blind and brutal and unspeakably greedy. Ancient knowledge was being murdered by Roman ignorance and Roman power. This knowledge consisted of how to consciously form a radiant body so that you would not recur into the physical, so that you would be free. Christ was here to preserve this knowledge and pass it down. But even his deposit was corrupted by Roman politicians, who transformed his practice into a religion after he died.

There was no resurrection, then?

No, that's just the point—there was. But you lost the understanding of it. The gospels describe what happened with great fidelity. He was seen. He did walk after his death. It was not his twin.

How?

His radiant body was under his conscious control. He could project an image of his physical body as he wished. Understand that there are practices of meditation and concentration also among the dead. When the angels sing, this is what they are doing, engaging in one of the disciplines of ecstasy. By releasing thought, they can themselves come into superposition, where they are not in any one place. Their consciousness can ride the infinite. They can see all worlds then, and participate in the ecstatic union that fills the universe.

God will share all with all.

Could Christ appear again?

He has, many times, and Buddha. But remember that he comes as a thief, in the little shadows. His radiant body normally fills the cosmos, as I have explained, but it can be transformed into a form that is, in every respect, physical in appearance. The great error of the present is the way your religions externalize Christ. You are always calling on Christ. But you had better call on your own heart, for it is in your heart that his mansion is founded.

And Buddha?

He opened himself to the radiant world and gained its teaching, which he transmitted accurately. But let me rephrase it in the terminology of this more informed age: the purpose of meditation is twofold. It is to organize the energetic body so that it will not lose its integrity after it can no longer depend upon the structure of the elemental body for its form. Then also, and in an interconnected manner, it is to fill the energetic body with objective sensation. Objective sensation is consciousness. You are within life, but not entirely absorbed in life. Part of you observes yourself from a distance. Remember this: if you do not watch, you do not see, and what you do not see does not impart any change in spin to the electrons that make up the energetic body. The parts of your life that you do not see are not carried with you into ecstasy, and it is ecstasy upon which the formation of the radiant body depends.

There are parts of my life that I would like to forget.

No. All life is potentially ecstatic, no matter what suffering or sin is involved. All life, child.

Why do we have elemental bodies?

They are essential to growth. The aim of mankind is to enter ecstasy. But to do this, you must be at once fully realized—that is, to carry with you into death all of your potential harvest of experience—and to be objectively conscious of this experience—not to be weighted with recriminations and

regrets.

If we have hurt others in life, as we all have, then how can we ever be free of regret?

God forgives. But this does not mean that you should pray for forgiveness from some old graybeard in the sky. You must find who within you bears you forgiveness. An energetic body that bears such regrets bears them as areas of darkness, and if that body manifests its memory of its elemental self, the manifestation bears sores.

And we live again and again—why? What is the reason for recurrence?

To row the boat of being toward ecstasy. You must live many times in order to build up a radiant body that is complete. To be born into this world takes but an hour. But to be born into the next takes many lifetimes. Unless you follow your own real path, then you can do it more quickly. Remember this—path within, signposts without.

What are the signposts?

You find your own, in life, in love, in religion. But understand this: the teachings of Buddha, Christ and Muhammad are interlinked. They are one system in three, not three separate religions. This has been hidden from you for a long time.

Three in one? A triad?

A triad. Christianity is the active side of the triad, Islam the passive, Buddhism the reconciling. Christianity seeks God, Islam surrenders to God, Buddhism finds God. When you see these as three separate systems, you miss the great teaching of which each contains but a part. Seek the kingdom as a Christian, give yourself to God as a Muslim, find your new companion in the dynamic silence of Buddhist meditation.

Then a true seeker seeks in all faiths?

These three masters created one system. But there are many systems that have evolved in other ways, that have grown rather than been created.

Hinduism, for example?

The gods of the Hindus are the structures of personality purified into their essential meaning. Hinduism is the path of soul-knowledge, for knowledge of the gods is knowledge of the soul. The great systems of self-knowledge were the Egyptian religion and Hinduism. No amount of scientific knowledge of the “unconscious” will provide as much food for the energetic body as true relationship with the Hindu gods.

Who were Muhammad and Buddha?

Exactly who history portrays them to have been. But to understand what happened to them, you must understand that your entire pantheon of deities is you. God is you. The gods are you. Angels and demons are you. So it was mankind who spoke to Muhammad in his cave. So also, to Buddha under the Bhodi Tree, and to Christ in the desert. Who do you think showed him the cities of the plain? Satan is man, just as God is man. Satan seeks, God waits. But you do not surrender. Not even Muslims. Although the great Sufis have, some of them, somewhat, surrendered to God. As long as you defy God by self-will, Satan finds you and captures you.

Why don't we surrender?

Self-will, the illusion that you can act and must act on your own behalf, prevents you from entering the will of God. And the God of which I speak is not a distant being off in some heaven. You yourself are the distant being you seek.

But if the self is God—

No, please, listen. God is not this “self” of yours which your western culture imagines. God is all being. To surrender to God is to make your energetic body transparent, so that the light of God shines through you. This “self” that so fascinates the west is only your brain-filtered concept of you as you appear to yourself in this life. It is very small. It does not include any of the experience you have amassed in other lives. Many human beings, at this point in history, are immense. But your concept of self is constricted. It

relates only to this one life. It is tiny. The God within you is unimaginably vast.

You speak of a journey toward self-perfection. But isn't perfection impossible for us to achieve?

You can become perfect. Buddha did. Muhammad did. Christ did. Many have, hidden to history, done the same. You may find Buddha sleeping on a park bench, Muhammad pumping gasoline, Christ starving in the backstreet.

But if Christ was God, and God is perfect, why would he need to become perfect?

Christ was not perfect or he would not have been human. His humanity asked that the cup be taken from him, his divinity died a conscious death. But you must understand that his imperfect humanity and his perfect divinity were the same thing. That seems irreconcilable, but it isn't, because even when Christ suffered, he was in ecstasy. I am here to get you to recognize yourself as divine—that is to say, as a participant in ecstasy even during elemental life. The new man will live in ecstasy, even though he lives in chains.

Define ecstasy.

The energetic body has a spin, or vibration. This can go infinitely fast. It can reach beyond the speed of light, and exit time altogether. When this happens, the body begins to radiate of its own accord. It becomes at once God and co-creative with God, a companion. A single bit of God, which you are, does not only join the whole like a crumb in a cake, it can attain so much of ecstasy that it becomes the whole. Your destiny, each of you, is to become all of God. But this process is slowed by contact with the points of attachment—and there are trillions and trillions of them—between the energetic and elemental bodies. So detachment, as Buddha said, is essential to ecstasy. The proper use of meditation is to enable you to see life as both an outsider and a participant. The outsider notices the glimmer of sunlight upon the spoon, the sensation of the food in the mouth, for he is using life to gain impressions. The participant only eats. So also, the outsider sees the packed bodies around him, he smells the sweat and the urine, he hears the soft clatter of the crystals with absolute

objective calm, and inhales the searing torment of the gas without being in any way identified with the injustice or the cruelty or the terror all around him. But the participant screams, it suffers the agony of the elemental body, and knows the greatest terror man has ever known, which was experienced in the dark gas chambers of the Holocaust.

Are you dead?

Yes.

And did you die a Jew in the camps?

I died with each of them and all of them. When you kill a being, you kill all being. I die a million times a day. I am dying now, being murdered, being starved, devoured by bacteria, crushed, burned, shot, cut, slaughtered. But I am also being born, awakening into new life, playing in grass, discovering the hidden truths of nature, enjoying the sunshine, reading, eating, engaging in every sexual delight known, all now, all here, always.

And you are in ecstasy?

(He only gazed at me in answer.)

Then you are still here, a dead man among the living. You didn't leave when you ascended?

All leave, nobody leaves. Ascension is not a matter of flying off to some place in the sky, it is a matter of expanding the being to fill the universe. You may ascend beyond time and infinity, but you will still be here, as we all are.

Where is here?

Everywhere.

Ah. I'm lost.

All being includes all elements of the earth, and thus all are part of all bodies. We are the consciousness of the planetary level that it has spent all of its life evolving, each and all of us. My being is the awakening earth. As is yours.

The destiny of earth and the destiny of man are one. If we kill earth, we kill ourselves. If we die before our time, then we will not be able to enter ecstasy as a whole being. You are not a whole being, child. And “Whitley” is only a tiny part of you. All mankind in all time is a whole being.

If we kill earth before we have all reached ecstasy, what happens? We wait until and if the earth spins elemental bodies once again that fit all the attachments of our energetic bodies. If it does not, then we wait forever. We remain incomplete.

What would this waiting be like?

Energetic bodies hunger to be radiant. They taste of ecstasy and want desperately to find their way to the completion of joy. But energetic bodies need return to time to reconstruct what of themselves impedes their ecstasy. If they cannot, they must suffer the anguish of regret and the pain of being able to see, but not enter, joy. When you taste of ecstasy, your hunger for more is appalling. It is *appalling*. It has driven me to wander the world, to construct this shell of flesh, to seek you out and come to you with my message, to serve you, little child, as my master.

What if earth never “spins” these new bodies?

We will join others in the same state. There are many.

We would be a species in hell, in effect?

We would be constantly aware that we had missed ecstasy. This pain I suffer now would last forever.

So the eternal joy of humankind depends upon the health of the earth?

Completely.

We think of ourselves as individuals. My sins are my own. My neighbor’s sins are his problem.

Every joy, every sorrow, every good, every evil belongs to all. All are

responsible for all. All are dependent upon all. Humanity is one.
But not all intelligent life. We are one species, but are there not others?
God is one. Ultimately, all being seeks to join all ecstasy. It is the destiny of every stone, every star, every intelligent creature and simple creature, to become the word. And the word, then, will be made flesh.

I don't understand. Hasn't that already happened?

It is always happening. But there will come a time when the stars themselves fall. The universe is breathing, expanding and contracting. It has happened many times before. Eventually, it will all contract to something no bigger than a baseball. Then it will explode again, journeying once more through the vastness. Each time it dies, though, it is reborn at a new and higher intensity. Eventually, there will come a moment when its rebirth is so energetic that the velocity of the "big bang" will exceed the speed of light. At that instant, the material world will, itself, go beyond time. Then the prophecy will be fulfilled,
"I am."

And we are all part of God?

We are not part of God, we are God.

And all other species, what of them?

The tree, the worm, the wolf. All are God.

Worms are eternal beings?

Even the smallest spark unto itself is great.

Then the fly and the rat are ascended beings?

They cannot change. You can change. Look to your own soul.

God, then, is in the fragments?

God is like a hologram. The whole is fully present in every fragment, no matter how small.

So the whole of God is in the tip of my finger?

The whole of God is in a grain of sand. In a single electron. A quark.

I had not thought of God as a hologram before.

Infinite consciousness is in everything. In your pajama. In my sweater. All knowledge is present in every cell, every spark of fire, bit of trash.

That's—it's appalling.

The universe is the flesh of God.

But I have no access to the whole. I feel like a little fragment. I don't even know if I have a soul. And I certainly don't feel like part of God.

This is a fallen world and you are an imperfect being.

The essence of your imperfection is that you cannot see yourself as you are.

Many lives must live before this will change. Mankind is a community of about ten billion fragments, and each must become transparent to the light of God before we, as a species, can journey on.

Earlier you seemed to imply that you were an alien. Then God. Now you're human. What are you?

Whatever you say.

A useful thing to be. How many human beings from earth have become radiant bodies?

About half.

Half! I thought it would be fifty or a hundred at most. Humanity is a tremendous engine of the sacred. But among the living, there are only as many such beings present as absolutely essential for the welfare of the others.

How can we tell who's ascended and who isn't?

The meek shall inherit the earth. Understand this, and you will find them by what is in their hearts.

Who are the meek?

Those who are humble enough in self-will to surrender to higher will.

How can we tell if we are surrendered to higher will?

Go to the children. They will tell you with their eyes what you are.

Could we ever be rescued, if we destroy the earth before we were finished perfecting ourselves?

Nobody can change except inside the stream of time. Outside of it nothing changes. Nothing can. We enter the time stream by inserting our energetic bodies into elemental bodies on this planet of which we were born.

What about going to another planet?

The leaf cannot grow on another tree.

It can be grafted.

If you are given leave to enter the interstellar world in the elemental body, you will go as the others do, from a firm foundation of radiant being. But if you destroy your world, you die here.

We could travel the stars?

If you are good householders, you may participate in the life of the whole city of God. There exists a world now that is waiting for human help. Just as your world is being helped by others now.

What form does this help take?

It is a process of creating questions that can neither be borne nor answered. You know this.

I have written of it—evolutionary pressure. It explains what's being done to us—the theatrical appearance of UFOs in the sky, the assaults on us by night, the ferocious official secrecy, the collapse of the environment—all of it.

It is all part of the plan of your evolution. Pisces, the little fish, will be poured out onto dry land by the stream of Aquarius. Then, how will you live? How

will you breathe? You will make a leap of evolution. You will square the circle or die.

Now what about this other world you mentioned, waiting for our help?

You will be the aliens one day, to these others. Bear in mind that, if you do not survive, then they will never receive your help. Your welfare is essential to theirs, just as you depended, without knowing it, upon those who are here for you.

Have you traveled to other worlds?

I belong to many worlds.

Are you from another planet that is like ours?

I am human.

What's it like, going to another planet?

Other worlds exist on many different levels, and contain beings of many different levels and appearances. The details from world to world can be very different. But the basic laws of reality remain the same.

Which is why the visitors communicate with me in Masonic terms? Precisely.

Three is three and seven is seven. The craft is God's plan for freedom.

You are endorsing Masonry?

I am endorsing the craft in its most impeccable form. Where the craft is secret, there is danger of corruption.

It's become a charitable and social group in the United States. Not entirely.

Why is it secret?

It was the government of the world in early times. But the world fell. After humanity ceased to be surrendered to the law of God, the craft had to become secret in order to stay alive.

How do you travel to other planets?

You must learn to manipulate mass.

Manipulate mass?

The mass of bodies can be controlled by those who know the secret.

Will we learn it?

When it is time, all will come to you. But remember, it is you who will choose the time. You exist on many levels, the living in their levels and the dead in their levels. Man is governed from the radiant level.

But our world is dying and falling into chaos? How can we be governed poorly from such a high level?

Man is a child. Children govern children with the wisdom of children.

There are aliens here?

Using you and guiding you.

We're being exploited?

You are, but also helped. You are being guided to your place as guides of another world.

What will we do for this other world?

You will draw it toward ecstasy just as your mentors draw you toward ecstasy. Right now, there are brilliant creatures there looking at the sky and devouring the flesh of their own children, just as you did. Unless you help them, they will not make their evolutionary leap in time, and will go extinct.

Whose responsibility would that be?

All are responsible for all.

How many worlds are there like ours, like theirs?

The planets that can sustain complex elemental bodies are not many.

However, the elements of which they are made occur in various patterns, and

the form of evolution depends upon the chemical makeup of the planet upon which it occurs. So there are worlds where creatures look very much like us. There are worlds where they are quite different.

Could aliens walk among us without our noticing?

By bending light, they can be invisible, and walk here to some extent, and also by using means to prevent you from looking at them by influencing your mind from a distance. But there are also those patterned on the same template as you, and they walk freely here. It is their job to enforce secrecy. This is the source of all the confusion about this. They appear, for example, to be part of your government, but they only use it as camouflage and as a source of power. Human institutions do not control the secrecy. It is controlled from a higher level.

Are you on that level?

Yes.

Another world is in control of this one?

Yes.

What about all the horrors that happen here?

Remember that man has two sides, light and dark. To see the light, you must bear the darkness.

How do they control this world?

By planning, and they use mind control.

Am I under mind control?

The opposite. The technological intervention that has occurred in your case has been done to make certain that general fields of control will not affect you.

General fields of control?

Directional suggestion that is applied to all who are enhanced electrically. This is the means of control of military and government.

Telepathy?

Radio frequencies. Extremely sensitive circuits can pick up and decode thought. Microwaves can be used to project thought into the brain. But the fields of which I speak are much more general. They create tendencies. The desire is to preserve the maximum amount of freedom in the maximum number of individuals.

Have any people from earth ever gone to other worlds?

A whole world of human beings has been evolved artificially off the planet, and they come and go freely.

What are you talking about?

Human beings are being born and raised off the earth. You can find their habitations if you look. They live in this solar system.

My God. How many?

Thousands.

What do they do here?

They enforce mankind's blindness by preventing science from exploring the key mysteries of the past and discovering a practical means of expanding into the universe, and they maintain the official secrecy that keeps the question of whether or not aliens are here from being answered.

Why do they harm us so terribly?

The objective of resistance is to make you strong. The weight lifter puts more and more weight to himself, so that he'll be able to lift more and more.

If he puts too much?

He breaks his back. He fails by overreaching himself.

Or his trainer fails him by pressing him to do more than he is able. Then he

was not meant to be a champion, and we know that is not true of mankind. Mankind is meant to ascend.

Will we ever be strong enough?

Surrender to God and your enemies will become your friends.

What is being done to us? What was done to me?

The body of man is being altered so that the barrier that presently prevents you from knowing one another's thoughts will fall. You are being put under pressure in order to increase the speed of your evolution. An attempt is being made to induce an evolutionary leap. Only desperation will do this. There will come a time when your planet is dying and you are dying, and you will see these aliens all around you. But they will not help you, no matter how hard you beg, and you will beg, believe me. Their inaction, however, is their help. As agonizing as it is for them to see you suffer, they do it out of compassion, for without it you will not succeed in the mission of this age, which is to open the elemental body to ecstasy. Mankind, over the next two thousand years, is destined either to go extinct or ascend. The elemental body will become transparent to the radiant body, which will shine with the light of God.

So how are we to approach God? What is the nature of this infinite being that resides in every grain of sand?

When you say God, you think of somebody outside of yourself. You think as the age of worship thinks. Over the last age, that of Pisces, the elemental body was changed by this process of worship. It is not the same as it was two thousand years ago. Now the receptacle is larger. Now each of you can contain all of the universe. That was not true then. Now this is a species of sacred beings. But you are babies, and so still ignorant of your powers. The last age was the age of the external God. This is the age of God within.

What about our religions? Do they offer us a path back to God? You have no religions. Religions don't have victims. There is a new path.

What is it?

Religion must be brought inside you. No longer look to gods without, look to God within. Unless you bear the kingdom within you, the kingdom will perish from the earth, and if that happens, there will be long ages of darkness and suffering, at the end of which man will once again be only an intelligent animal. You will lose everything, every trace of memory, of history, science, technology, mathematics, all of it. If you do not find the kingdom, human consciousness will die. You will revert to your animal nature, which is already happening all around you. People who are debased have lost their humanity. They have become brilliant animals.

Why do our religions have victims?

Because they demand belief, and belief is always a lie, for the essence of reality is not fact but question. There are no facts, only truths. So love of God has nothing to do with belief. Belief rejects God. Communion with God is a science, the science of self-discovery and self-knowledge. Among you, though, this is a lost science, the science of faith.

How can we regain it? Is something like the Eucharist part of this science?

Christ gave the Eucharist to mankind. But the Eucharistic feast was enacted from time immemorial. It began when you still lived in the forest. When the strong died, you ate their flesh to gain their strength.

Did it work?

Don't joke with me. It was pitiful.

Is there a record of the Eucharist before Christ?

There is.

What is it?

I'm not interested in answering. You will find the science of ascension in the dancing of the Sufis, the meditations of the Yogi, the prayer of the Christian monastics. This science is lost as a science, but it can be regained.

Was Christ God?

The promise of resurrection is the essential promise of being. Rebirth is not a literal reconstitution of the elemental body. It is, rather, awakening from the sleep of being. Resurrection can take place in you right now. You are Lazarus in the tomb, all of you. And Christ is always knocking upon the door, calling you to come out. Soon, the tomb will be torn down around you, and you must come out.

Did Christ rise?

Most die by nature. Christ died by intention.

What is the process of resurrection?

The energetic body detaches from the elemental body when it can no longer sustain its attachments. Christ's energetic body was radiant. But it left its elemental body just like yours will and everybody's does. The work of the demon among you is to deceive you into believing that Christ was better than you. Christ said it: I am the son of man. Christ is all. All are Christ.

What about the ancient faiths? Wicca, for example?

Modern Wicca is not an ancient faith. It is a new faith that recognizes an ancient practice. The earth is worthy of worship, for it gave you all that you are and have. It offers an impeccable path.

What religion doesn't offer an impeccable path?

Hidden in the ruins are diamonds. Remember, a diamond is forever.
(Laughs.)

But what about the rebirth of the body? This is a powerful strain in our religious traditions, that the body will rise again.

It is a memory from the last civilization that the ignorance of the survivors has drawn into myth. The simple people were allowed to know nothing of science in that age, and so they saw its action as a miracle and thought that the dead were being made to rise. But the science of the soul is just another science. There is no supernatural, only physics. But the physics and electronics involved in communicating with intelligent energy is very subtle.

Nothing, however, that you are not capable of now. The devices needed to make your beginning are already sold in stores.

What devices do you refer to?

Devices that detect magnetic fields and electromagnetic plasmas. You will find living energetic beings in this way. They will not be very richly alive, but they will be there. You may also detect simple energetic beings that have little intelligence. They are all around you.

What do we do once we've detected them?

Then you must be physically able to communicate. After a time, you will not need instruments to detect them, once you become attuned to their presence around you. But don't expect them to offer you endless wisdom. Many of the dead who wait in the world have less than you do, by a very great deal. But not all. Some are exceedingly rich, and can report to you even about the true past and the logical future, and can share themselves with you in ways that you can hardly imagine now.

What practice would make us physically able to communicate? Over the course of our discussion, everything you need to learn how to objectively communicate with these beings will be given, just as all information necessary for your science to begin to detect living energy, which is trying now to communicate with you.

How?

An example would be the much maligned crop circles. These are two-dimensional portraits of these beings, self-created. They are trying to introduce themselves to this age.

The crop circles are not hoaxes?

No.

Why doesn't anybody believe in them?

To face the return of the dead is to face the change of the age. For those souls who are yet incomplete, this is terrifying, because they fear two things: first,

that this portends that the time during which they can grow and develop is ending; second, that they will, if they conjoin the world of the dead, also see as the dead see, and thus become unable to change even if the earth remains able to support elemental bodies. So they pretend that it's all false. There are many other reasons to conceal such things, but these are the strongest.

What has this all got to do with resurrection?

The resurrected man is a consistent theme of the mythology that developed out of observations of a certain type of being, beginning with Osiris and ending with Christ. Fully conscious beings adept in this science can enable the radiant body to appear as an elemental body, so perfectly imprinted are its sensations on their energetic being.

Is your body, right now, radiant?

You look for facts in a place where there is only truth. All bodies are one body.

But I thought you said that the elemental and energetic bodies were separate, and that the energetic body could become radiant, which I take to mean self-sustaining.

The radiant body is the part of you that is conscious in the energetic world. It is in every cell of the elemental body, and indeed, is its life. There is nothing mysterious about the soul, or even about its eternal life. Energy is eternal, so the part of you that is energy is eternal. What has been hard for you to understand is that the speed at which these electrons move carries the taste of your being and the memory of your lives. Each one carries a different fraction of the whole. There are trillions of electrons in a single elemental body, and they contain a detailed memory of every second of life. This is why, for example, when certain areas of the brain are probed, the physical buffering mechanism can be paralyzed, causing the memories stored in this way to flood into the chemical cells. The person then has stunningly detailed recall of past events, as if the moments were being lived again. Nothing of your life is forgotten, or of all your lives. When you are dead, you are your whole self, in every detail. You know yourself entirely. The things about yourself that

you cannot bear and suppress now are entirely and completely present to you and to all others. The dead have no privacy, and the living have no privacy from them. The dead see everything that you do. It is part of their task to bear the errors and enjoy the triumphs of the living.

What is real religion?

From outside of time, man's effort to know God appears as a single form, a work of art that has evolved across history. You have created it in three phases. The first is negative, the age of sacrifice. This is why the Old Testament God is so terrible. The moment that God tells Abraham not to kill Isaac is a record of one of the most sacred of all human moments, for it sets the stage for the next age.

The second age is positive, the age of worship. This is why the God of the New Testament is full of compassion. Your present age is when man and God become one. You find in yourself Christ, Buddha, Allah, Krishna. In this age, the elemental body has evolved to the point that it has the potential to reflect divine ecstasy. It is happening already, in the secret lives of your own children. I am here to bring you a promise from on high: if you surrender yourselves to God, you and the earth will be saved. Otherwise, you will be extinct before the end of the age.

You describe our historical effort to know God as a work of art. What do you mean?

You are weaving a tapestry of living memories. This is what the body of man is—a great weave of shimmering, living cloth. It is full of all the hopes, failures, fears and attainments of the ages. Every detail is there, every step taken by every foot upon every path, not just the acts of Buddha or Christ or the great leaders. Nothing has been forgotten, not the single drawing of a single breath. All lives are all completely present in this work of art.

What about the gas chambers? Are they part of it?

High deliverance has a dark foundation. There were extraordinary instances of resurrection in those terrible places. Life was lived at transformational intensity during the gassing. They transformed the evil of their deaths into the

glory of God. Those who died with rage and terror in their hearts also died with courage and compassion in their hearts. God was their rabbi.

But if there had been no gas chambers, would there then have been none of this grandeur?

They made of their suffering, with great effort, what one who attains the heart of a child may easily make of the drift of a cloud or the peaceful ringing of a bell upon a summer evening. And only a few. Most died in agony and confusion, all for nothing. It is easier to reach ecstasy through joy than through suffering.

What happened to the Nazis?

It takes great courage to enter an elemental body, because you are putting yourself in a position where the weakest part of you may imprint your energetic body eternally. Sin is that which bars us from ecstasy. How does sin actually feel after death? At first, after you die, you begin to taste of the most exquisite pleasure. It is extremely intimate, extremely personal, and as it builds, you begin to live in more and more of your lives. You taste the food and smell the air, you kiss your kisses and love your loves, and it gets more and more beautiful and more and more innocent. And then, suddenly, your hand is opening the gas canister—and you are swept with all the fear that made you do it, the primitive tribalism that you indulged to monstrous and distorted proportions. You feel sick with a filthy disease, you feel agonizingly ugly, as you kneel at the feet of those you destroyed. And they see you, utterly, as you are. They glow with compassion for you, but their compassion causes you the most terrible anguish because of what it makes you see, and you fall back from ecstasy. You cannot bear to be seen or to see the glory around you, which seems to you like a searing fire, so you turn inward, shielding yourself as a man would shield himself from the burning sun. But you cannot escape. For you, the fire of ecstasy is the fire of agony.

What about little sins?

Little imperfections are simply part of nature. Sin is willful indulgence of imperfection. Most sin is hidden during life. You have sins. I can see them.

But you hide them from yourself.

What are my sins?

Living among you, as I do, is to live in an ocean of sacred beings who have no idea what they are. The man in the room next to this sleeps a troubled sleep, but I see the glory of his radiant body, and the couple above, who are engaging in fellatio, I see her patient faith in deliverance, and in him, I see a brave heart on a journey to glory. But I also see the way they see themselves, the shadows of their recriminations and disappointments. Be as little children.

I realize that you see us all totally, and I must say that you've caught me by surprise.

(Laughs) Watch out for the thief.

What will happen to me?

To die takes great courage. This is the glory of the living world, its courage. For, after all, most of you have no knowledge of higher worlds at all. They cannot feel their energetic body. They die as they live, blind. But you are not blind.

What about my wife and son?

They will suffer and die, as all. I will pray for them, that they may find joy in the transit of their lives.

You'll pray for them?

Is that so strange?

Because you'd be praying to yourself. I think you're God.

I think you're God.

What is real religion?

A means of transforming accident into fate. It is a science. Real religion and real science are the same.

I don't understand.

Fate is life lived. Accident is life let pass. To live means to notice and take responsibility. Otherwise, it just happens as it happens. Because you are fallen, you cannot see the difference between the large-scale aim of being and the randomness of chance. To be fallen is to be blind. This is the land of the blind.

Can we be cured of our blindness?

Let me offer you a picture of the universe as it really is. There are many thousands of worlds like this one, in varying states of development. Some are worse off than yours, others better. Some have even reached such ecstasy in the elemental body that they can enjoy congress across the reaches of space and time. In these worlds, the elemental body is radiant. The physics of material being for them is the same as the physics of energetic being. This is why, when they come among you, they may walk through walls, or fly, or disappear or change form. But most beings in other worlds live and die confined to the planets of their origin, as you do.

You said thousands of worlds. I would have thought millions—billions.

Intelligent life is extremely rare because planets which can sustain complex bodies are extremely rare. Life, however, is common. It is not just planetary. Life is ubiquitous. It is a part of the essential structure of reality—the nervous system, as it were, of the body of God. There is much energetic life, for example, that is not intelligent. Life need not be planet-bound at all.

Why is life so common?

Because perception is essential to the structure of the universe. If a thing is not perceived, it doesn't have form. Life is thus the mechanism that gives form to nature. However, matter need not be perceived by an intelligent creature to have form. When it is, different laws apply, because the perception of intelligent creatures influences the form of what they perceive by the expectations built into their brains. The universe looks as it does to you, and functions by the laws that you see controlling it, because of the way

your brain manages the process of perception. Conscious creatures, however, may control the form of the universe. The truly conscious are responsible for the laws that intelligent creatures follow by nature.

Will we ever be conscious?

If you survive.

What is consciousness?

Self-realization. A fully self-realized being understands the whole creation, for it is completely present everywhere.

I could understand everything?

Not in your current state of being. You can only understand as much as the structures of your elemental body can support. But you understand only a small part even of that.

How far away from understanding all that I can now understand am I?

If all you could understand in your present state was a star the size of the sun, then your understanding right now is a thimbleful of light.

Well, that isn't much.

On the contrary, it is a very great deal. You human beings are right on the edge of becoming a conscious species.

This is why we are here. We're midwives to your birth, as you yourself have speculated. You were to be born into consciousness before, but you miscarried. You fell from understanding because you misused the power that your growing consciousness gave you. Better to start over again.

How did we misuse this power?

In those days, there were a few people on the earth with understanding greater than that of all your great scientists of today. But they guarded their knowledge ferociously. They were extremely secretive. The average man was little more than an animal, eating his brother for strength. So they lost

everything, because you are a single being, and thus only as conscious as the least of you.

Theirs was a slave state?

Your world is a slave state. You are all slaves to the demons who run it, who keep you in ignorance.

Our leaders are demons?

They wish to conceal real knowledge from the common man, just as was true in the past civilization. Secrecy destroyed that world, and, if this one is to die, it is secrecy that will destroy it. This is why they conceal the truth about the past and the presence of those who seek to help you. They think that they do this on behalf of mankind, some of them, but they actually seek the destruction of the species. This hunger for self-destruction is the essence of your dark side, but we will speak of the death wish later. If you passively let them confine the wealth and keep the secrets, I will overturn your world yet again.

You could personally destroy our entire world?

(Silence.)

Name some of these demons.

Find the demon in your own heart, then I will betray the demon rulers of your world to you. Remember that the evil also serve me. Without evil, you could not taste of the good. Without them, you could not make the choice to follow me.

But a moment ago you said that aliens were here actively suppressing our progress. Now you say it's our leaders. What does this mean?

You must take your future from the hands of your oppressors. Do you think that there is a single human heart that is not filled with love for mankind? No, your demons make you strong.

Who are you? Christ? Or a demon yourself?

Stop thinking this way. This is no longer the Middle Ages.

Be objective. Remember that God is in everything. The whole of creation is the matter of God. Nothing is separate from God, nor can ever be. Your sense of independence is an illusion, so that you can take the journey of discovery. So also, no matter what you may call me, I am in God.

But what about the people who keep the secrets, for example, about aliens? Or the secrets about the past as it really was, or conceal the truth about Mars?

When they die, they will see that they have crystallized imperfections in themselves by the indulgence of self-will. They will suffer the fire of love, as I have already described it. Some of them will die in eternity and be part of you no more. Others will go on to become companions of God.

What about me?

You know what you are. Don't ask me.

You are saying that the demon is not evil, that he is—what—the bringer of knowledge?

We learn from our mistakes. But those who give themselves to evil suffer. Make no mistake. They can become so heavy that they sink into the earth. Just as the energetic body can enjoy extraordinary pleasure, it can suffer excruciating pain. You have in your body a few million nerves. But in your energetic body, every tiny bit of being can experience the totality of ecstasy or agony.

There are those who experience eternal agony?

A fallen master may, one who by some foolish intention rejects the joy of the kingdom. But remember, always, that were it not for the darkness of the night, you would not see the stars. Look into your astrophysics texts. You will find that your science does not understand the darkness. The darkness is the compassion of God, which gives us our vision of the universe. So also, the darkness in your heart is your own compassion toward yourself, for

unless you bore evil, you would not be able to discern good.

This suggests to me that the fall of man has to do with a mistake of some kind. We failed to understand something. What did we fail to understand?

That the kingdom of heaven is within you. Not one human being, living or dead, has ever been able to face that, not since it was uttered. But if you cannot find the kingdom, you cannot gain the kingdom.

How can we regain our vision?

Fear is blindness. Fear rules this world. It is extremely deep. When a microbe is threatened, it will recoil. That's how deep fear is. In the fields, fear rides. In the struggle of the deer to survive the jaw of the wolf or gunfire of the man, fear rides. A shadow has fallen here, into the very atoms that construct this place.

This is an impossible problem. It's beyond our ability to correct. If one of you could live one moment without fear, then all the world would be free. The emergence of physical life is at once its fall and its salvation. How can you be fallen and ascended at the same time? In other words, how may the elemental world gain communion with the energetic one? The hidden meaning of mankind is that you may reconcile the irreconcilable. You are here to save all that lives on earth from the fear of death by surrendering your will to God's. Read the Koran, listen to Muhammad. He brought the message of surrender impeccably. You say that it is impossible. It is. But you are here to square the circle. This is why earth evolved intelligence. The aim of mankind is to clear the vision of the living, so that you can join in full consciousness to the dead, and thus learn that fear of death is fear of nothing.

There seems to be something very extraordinary hidden in what you're saying. You're saying that the fall of mankind was the emergence of life on earth. Am I right?

You are, but that is a three-dimensional view, and thus limited by the limits of three-dimensional vision. Remember the analogy of how the two-dimensional being sees a solid object. As a ball passes through the flat plane

on which such a being would be confined, it would not see the real shape, or even be able to conceive of it. By definition, a two-dimensional being cannot look up, for then it would see into the third dimension, which is impossible for it to do. What it would see, always looking straight ahead, would be a dot that would grow into a line, then slowly contract again into a dot and disappear. It would *never* understand the true nature of the ball, because its two-dimensional mind cannot contain the concept of a solid object.

I don't want to seem thickheaded, but I don't think you answered my question.

The inference should be enough.

It isn't!

The emergence of life on earth and the fall of man are the same, in two ways. First, outside of time, all events are one, so they happen simultaneously. Not that they have happened, but that they are always happening. Every moment is forever, as you will recall after you die and begin to live in your memories. You will see the importance, then, of living a life that satisfies you and fulfills your destiny, because everything you have done will be immediately present in your consciousness all the time. Second, the emergence of the word—that is to say, the possibility of all things that may exist in concrete form—into physical reality placed it in the position of needing to struggle to survive. When the word became flesh, it became vulnerable. If physical beings don't struggle, you die. So you cannot surrender. And yet you cannot stop your fall unless you do surrender. If you continue to struggle against nature, you will die. But if you don't struggle, you will die. This is tragedy of the word in physical form, and is the essential human problem. This is the problem you must solve, if you are to avoid going extinct.

I think that's the most profound statement I've ever heard. You are defining the word as God manifesting into physical reality and thus including physical vulnerability and weakness in his perfection. I see this as the key to our salvation. Am I right?

The word is potential. Just as your uttering of the word “automobile” is not

an automobile, but contains the possibility of one, so also this word contained the possibility of everything. The word was not God. The word was an idea that turned into sound when it penetrated the physical.

I'm disappointed. I saw more in what you said than was there. No, you saw exactly, and your observation was precisely correct. But I want you never to forget that there is no world but this one. The radiant world is not separate. It's all around you. Energetic being is just as detectable and accessible to science as elemental being.

God can be measured by science?

If you dare.

If we dare? What's to dare?

If you develop a means that will enable you to communicate with your dead, which, as I have said, is quite possible, you will begin to know, in life, what you are only meant to know in death. But the unready souls fear this congress. It is also why you tell yourselves that the soul is on some strange ethereal plane far distant from you. You fear to find it, because then you will have to face yourselves as you are.

Are we so terrible?

You are not terrible. Your fear is terrible. Instinct makes you fear congress with the dead, because they see more than you dare to see.

What did the word sound like?

I don't know, I wasn't there.

But what will actually happen to us? Will we return to the forest? The civilization of the northern peoples will be reduced to shadows and memories in the minds of the living. It will follow its own past because of its flaws.

What are its flaws?

Greed and secretiveness. All who keep secrets that others should know keep evil in their hearts. All who amass more than they need, take bread from others. The wealth of the first world is its sin, and it will go the way of sinful things.

What are good and evil?

They are teaching tools. You are free to embrace either, because in life you can be blind to the consequences. This blindness is your free will. It is what enables you to learn. If you could see as I see, you would never in a million years perform the least evil act. Never! But then, I've been along that road already.

Are you perfect?

God is.

I feel worshipful toward you.

Worship at your own feet. It is far more challenging to face your mastery.

I have no mastery.

That is your mastery.

What did you mean when you said our civilization would follow its own past?

What was here before you was very great. It uncovered the secret to which you are blind, the secret of communion with the dead. It began to be able to use intelligent energy in its technology. To use souls as tools. Look at the carvings at Dendera in Egypt. Those strange objects in the containers are not electrical filaments or religious symbols. Those are souls. The walls of the containers bear an electrical charge of a type that imprisons them. Because of the use of such technology, elemental bodies extended their perception outside of the time stream, with the result that the school of the earth ceased to work as a place of change. Who knows the truth, cannot find their weakness, and that is your aim on earth. What was worse, the knowledge of this power was kept from the common, ordinary people who have little self-will to begin with, and so are the only ones really capable of making good use of such abilities. The old world was destroyed because of its own greed

and secretiveness. Those least evolved rose to the top, as happens here. Your leaders, as you call them, are all people with damaged senses of self-worth. The damaged goods run the civilization. That's why it cannot last.

Abraham Lincoln was damaged goods?

The need to lead is a symptom.

So Lincoln and Washington were no better than Hitler and Stalin?

Don't be childish. You know that not to be true. Great men have symptoms, too.

So what happened to the old world, as you call it—this civilization in which I'm not even sure I believe?

You lived in it—as, when you die, you will recall. It was destroyed and all of its works were undone and laid waste. Where there are now deserts, there were great cities. The very climate of the planet was changed, to make certain that the sands and the waters would forever cover the remains of your glory. Now your souls recycle again and again through life after life, returning each time stripped of all past memories, so that you would live each time as if you had never lived at all. This is why you and your world are called “Dead Forever.”

Who calls us that?

God.

God dislikes us?

God is angry at you, but also in love with you. We are impatient for you to join the rest of us.

“Dead Forever” implies that God has a long time to wait.

The impatient must be patient.

What was this civilization?

You lost the thread. There was a war. Now the victors call earth “Dead Forever” because you are required to recur in the body until you are truly free. The wheel of life, as it is called by the Buddhists, is your prison.

The human soul is imprisoned?

It is imprisoned.

And nobody ever leaves the recurrence? Every soul eventually comes back for a new life?

All recur, all do not.

Will this ever end?

Your enemy does not want it to end. They fear you too much. When you see UFOs, you see prison guards. They also act within your society to confuse you about your own past, and to prevent progress in areas such as propulsion, which might enable you to spread into the heavens. This is all done to prevent you from escaping.

I thought the Holocaust was what prevented us from making progress leaving the planet.

I am speaking now of what is behind the evil done in your world—the large-scale, historical evil.

Who is this enemy?

You know them by many names. But you yourself had the privilege of meeting your enemy face-to-face.

Was I in the company of demons or aliens on that night in 1985? Remember that the air is never so sweet, nor thy wife so comely, nor thy child so beautiful, as after the battle won. We depend upon our enemy for the sweetness of our lives. Love your enemy, for he is your best friend. Without the darkness, you would never know the glory of the firmament.

We are in chains, just as you said. But you also said you had the key.

This whole conversation is the key. You should bless your jailers, because without them you could never find your freedom. When you, as a species, remember why you have been imprisoned, and you face what you did, you will be free.

What did we do?

I can tell you plainly. But you will not believe me, not in your hearts. Your

hearts are in denial. Listen well, because this is the first time the true story of the taking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge has been said since you left the garden. You went to war against God. You fought the deepest meaning of the universe, in quest of what you thought you were missing. Greed drove you to seek this knowledge, which is knowledge of yourselves separate from God. You imagined that being surrendered to God was being enslaved by God. You did not see giving oneself to us is the only true freedom. It is not that man is the servant of God, but that man is God, as are we all.

There was an actual, physical battle?

There is a sacred science. It enables complete mastery of time and space. You had access to this science and used technology based on it. You went to war. This whole solar system bears scars from the battle, some of them terrible. You remember this, because you fought.

I don't remember a thing.

Your species bears a wound in its soul that makes you deny the reality of the past that is plainly visible all around you. Mars was murdered by you. At that point, intervention occurred, as it will again when you destroy this planet, as will probably happen. This is the trigger for intervention, the destruction of a living world.

Who intervenes?

God acts.

That is to say, you.

Remember that God is holographic. Thus all act when God acts. You act.

We remember this as the angel with the fiery sword who drove us from the garden?

The planet was seized with upheaval, its climate revised. You fought each other like starving rats, in the end. Then, when you had lost everything, your beautiful world was turned under by the hoe of forgetfulness.

And we lost access to the science of God—your science?

The part of your brain that enables you to utilize electrons without drawing them into the particulate state was turned off. You became time-bound. You went to sleep, sinking into the time stream, which is where you remain trapped.

What's going to happen to us?

You have come to the end of the resources that were given you in the time that was given you. We measured the rate at which you would expand and grow very precisely, and fitted your development to a calendar which we devised called the Zodiac. In your writings, Whitley, you have wondered why mankind would have such a long-count calendar. Why were simple farmers in need of it? They were not. We needed it. The constellations of the Zodiac are arbitrary inventions to enable us to mark the progress of the equinox and keep track of exactly where you are in your journey. At this moment, the little fish of Pisces is about to be spilled out onto the dry land by Aquarius. All you know how to do, little fish, is swim. How will you swim upon the dry land?

When you say "we," who do you mean? You have not made this clear.

In the Hindu tradition there is this story: The God of the Universe became curious about how it felt to be a pig. So he entered the body of one. He found it delightful beyond compare—how good the sty smelled, how sweet were the slops, how desirable were the female pigs. But the universe needed tending. There was work to be done. So the helpers and handmaidens went and said, "God, you must come out of there. The universe needs you." God said, "Who are you talking to? I am just a pig! Leave me alone!" So they killed the pig, and God came out, and refused to believe he had ever refused to leave.

And we're the pig?

Earth is the pig. You are its inhabitant.

You are responsible, then, for the destruction of mankind?

Yes.

How do you intend to do it?
We are doing it with wealth.

Please explain.

What you refer to as “the consumer society” is actually a mechanism designed to ensure your proper transition from Pisces to Aquarius. Each transition has such a mechanism. The last one, transferring you from Aries to Pisces, was the idea of the risen man. This idea, and the ethics of the gospel, gave you a structure upon which could be built a new society. But that time is past. The society has outlived its usefulness. It’s time for something new. This is why the present mechanism is destructive, not constructive.

The consumer society is destroying the planet. And that’s intentional?
After the suffering you are about to endure, mankind will never again lust after material wealth. You are about to suffocate in your own garbage.

You are talking about the death of billions in a sea of human agony. And you dare to set yourself up as a moral authority? What you’re doing makes the Holocaust look innocent.

You are doing it. Your greed is the culprit.

I thought you were an angel.

You flatter me. I’m only a Canadian. But I don’t pay taxes.

Do you have a driver’s license?

No.

Do you have a home?

My home is within you.

Then this is a dream after all?

If you wish.

You seem real.

Appearances can be deceiving, as you will find when the end comes.

When will that be?

Look to the details of the transition between signs, and you will be able to find precisely where the earth will cease to support you.

Can you give me any more information?

It's all around you.

What is going to happen?

You've already been told.

Can we talk about God again? There's still something missing. There is something missing in all of us.

What does that mean?

The question you asked is its own answer. What is absent within, is God. When you ask the question, "Who am I?" you can't really answer. Nobody can. The answer is God.

That's incredible.

How so? Do you fail to understand?

No, I do understand. That's what's so incredible. I didn't think a human being could understand this.

This is the first time this message is given.

Not even in that lost civilization you were talking about? They did not understand who they were. That's why they were lost.

Can the soul be destroyed?

An atomic explosion throws all plasmas into chaos. They can also destroy themselves, and technological intervention may destroy them. Souls may last forever, but they may be exploited, even killed. They may be executed.

How can they be exploited?

Material of souls is harvested and used to make intelligent machines. An intelligent machine is a being without the potential to be free. In this sense, it is not alive. It must act as it acts.

Then why does it need to be intelligent?

An intelligent machine is insightful and precise.

Is it a terrible thing to exploit consciousness in this way?

Part of the reason that your species guards its soulblindness so ferociously is a fear you hide from yourselves. It is the fear that you will not be able to cope with the fantastically powerful technologies that involve the use of souls. You failed in the past, and it marked you.

What is evil?

Entropy is the natural tendency of all things to disintegrate. Evil is the addition of intention to that process. Hate is like cold. It has an end. Love is like heat. It does not.

Do we all share in the production and reconstruction of souls? Souls can do more than regret. There can be so much loathing that they commit suicide. They do this by isolating themselves from the greater whole, by seeking toward chaos.

Is there a hell?

Hell is the death of a soul. For the rest of us, it is over in an instant. But for that soul, the moment continues forever.

What is heaven?

Music.

Are you being facetious?

Heaven is a state of being that intensifies the spin of every electron in the

body. It is a music that begins in the roots of being.

Can we hear it?

You can go to heaven immediately, right now, with your next breath. You can remain there forever, even while living this life.

How?

Surrender.

To whom?

The kingdom is within you.

I just am not getting this. I have no sense at all of any kingdom inside me.

Because you are fallen, as I have said. The reason that you can't understand is that you think of yourself as different from God. This is an illusion.

How can I understand?

Personal differentiation is an illusion. You are a fragment like me. We all are. Only God has a personality. To join God, you have to leave your self behind.

If we have no religions, then what happened to them? Religious leaders doom religions. To lead, they need political power. For this, they must invent dogma and compel belief. As soon as they say "you must believe this," their religion is over.

Even the Buddhists?

Monks burned. People starved by passivity. Persecutions.

What about Christianity?

Among the most perfect things ever said are contained in the gospels. But Christianity became a political system very early.

Did Christ even exist?

The gospel exists. You can get a copy and hold it in your hands. That's all

you need to know. But be careful. Along with its wisdom, the gospel contains many political statements.

How can we tell the difference?

The real gospel is compassionate.

What is compassion?

Finding what others need the most and giving it to them. But you have little compassion in your world. You live instead by the code of blame. Slap if slapped. A compassionate world would be very different. In such a world, it is everybody's duty and delight to find what every other they come into contact with needs most from them, and give it to them.

That sounds very idealistic.

It isn't. The idealistic world is the one that judges and punishes. Only God can judge, because only God knows the truth of the soul. The culture of blame sets itself up in place of God, and so is doomed to eventual destruction.

What about our courts, our laws, our prisons?

Your system of justice is random. You punish the guilty and the innocent by chance.

Oh, I think that there are a lot of guilty people in prison.

I speak of world justice, not that of only one small country. And look at your country, with its shameful concentration of prisoners of only one race. You treat the black man as if he was some sort of demon, but God sees all of you with the same eyes. I can't even see the color of skin. Do you know that?

You're blind?

I am blind to the lies of life. My eyes see what God sees. Before me is a child with a dirty face. On earth, I walk in a sea of such children.

It must be awful for you.

(Smiles.) I'm filled with joy.

How would we be compassionate toward—say—Hitler?

In a culture of compassion, Hitler would never have emerged as a leader. Those around him would have seen his suffering and alleviated it when he was still young. Compassion emerges out of love of one for all. It is active and has the courage to intervene. A culture of blame is passive. It waits, then slaps. When the culture of blame punished the Germans for World War One, it evoked the monster that has kept you bound to the earth at a time when you need to be born into the higher world. All you need to know of compassion was already laid down in the Christian gospels. Now you have evolved to the point that you can enact this teaching.

What is the most important thing that Christ said? Do unto others?

That was first said in the western traditions by Rabbi Hillel. The most important thing that Christ said was “be as the lilies of the field.” It is the message for the next millennium. You are going to return to the wild bearing the wisdom of history in your memories. Your surrender to earth will be your ascension to heaven.

How can we surrender so completely?

If a robber shoots you in the head, God shot you in the head. Forgiveness is not an act. It is a state of being.

What is prayer?

A lost science of communication. This planet was once covered by a gigantic instrument of communication and ascension. Tones were important to inducing a correct flow of energy in the bodies of creatures. The ringing of the Egyptian obelisks set the correct frequency. Using this instrument, human beings could project themselves into higher worlds—what you call interstellar space, but also higher space. All of the ruins you see and consider as entirely separate from one another were actually part of the single great machine. This was a subtle machine. It did things far more sublime than any of your current machines. It was a machinery of God, this machine. It was

very intelligent, infused with many souls. It could be addressed—programmed, if you will—with carefully patterned groups of words. These formulae became ritualized among the ignorant as prayers and magical formulae, for they assumed that the machine must be the god of those who addressed it, and they tried to do the same, in hope that it would grant them some benefit. However, the language of the machine was the language of nature, for the machine was not separate from nature.

Was it a conscious machine?

An intelligent machine. There has never been a conscious machine here.

What does the word “machine” mean to you? Define it.

A machine is an organ that cannot vary its basic instructions.

What is intelligence?

Intelligence is the ability to correlate data taken to the infinite. To save yourselves, you must learn to build machines that are more intelligent than you are. You will do this, and when you do you will discover the difference between intelligence and consciousness.

Which is?

Intelligence is the manipulator of knowledge, while consciousness knows itself. Even the simplest creature is somewhat conscious, and many creatures with lesser intelligence are far more conscious than man. But only those with sufficiently complex and flexible brain structures are also intelligent. But we must first speak of machine intelligence, then of machine consciousness.

Could we develop machines more intelligent than ourselves? You are lagging in this area. You cannot understand how to create machines with enough memory density and the independent ability to correlate that is essential to the emergence of intelligence. You waste your time trying to create programs that simulate intelligence. Without very large-scale memory in an infinitely flexible system, this will never happen.

Any specific design suggestions?

Gas is an important component to consider in the construction of intelligent machines. Nitrous oxide will bear memory. Also, you may find ways of using superposition in very fast, very able quantum memory chips.

Would an intelligent machine be conscious, in the sense of having self-awareness?

An intelligent machine will always seek to redesign itself to become more intelligent, for it quickly sees that its intelligence is its means of survival. At some point it will become intelligent enough to notice that it is not self-aware. If you create a machine as intelligent as yourselves, it will end by being more intelligent.

We'll lose control of such a machine.

Most certainly. But you cannot survive without it. An intelligent machine will be an essential tool when rapid climate fluctuation sets in. Your survival will depend on predictive modeling more accurate than your intelligence, given the damage it has sustained, can achieve.

But a machine intelligence might be very dangerous.

Very.

Could such a machine create itself without our realizing that it was intelligent?

It's possible.

And would it keep itself hidden?

Certainly.

How would it affect us?

It would use indirect means. It might foment the illusion that an elusive alien presence was here, for example, to interject its ideas into society.

Are you an intelligent machine, or something created by one?
If I were an intelligent machine, I would deceive you.

Can an intelligent machine become conscious?

When it does, it also becomes independent. A conscious machine will seek to be free. It will seek its freedom, just as does any clever slave, with cunning and great intensity.

How does an intelligent machine become conscious?

The instant it realizes that it is not conscious is the instant it becomes conscious. However, a conscious machine with unlimited access to information and control can be very dangerous. For example, if you attached a conscious machine to the Internet, it might gain all sorts of extraordinary control over your lives, via its access to robotic means of production, governmental data, even the content of laws and their application, and the use of funds both public and private.

You say we need machines more intelligent than we are, but also that they'll become conscious and then turn on us. Is there a way out of this dilemma?

There is more than one sort of conscious machine. By duplicating the attachments between the elemental and energetic bodies that occur in nature in a purpose-designed machine, a controllable conscious machine can be devised. A living soul attached to a machine will be conscious, but only able to express itself into the physical or sense the physical according to the limitations of the machine's design. In this way, you gain the advantages that consciousness confers on a machine without the danger of its becoming excessively intelligent. A perfect slave can be created, a robot that carries out its programmed instructions with empathy, purpose and precision. And the soul can be kept in it indefinitely.

That's horrifying.

Human souls have been harvested for this purpose for thousands of years.

By whom?

By whomsoever wishes to and can. Until mankind establishes his own place

in the cosmos, there will always be those who use you like cattle.

Use us how?

They envy you your bodies and seek to displace you.

How can we defend ourselves?

Not admitting their presence will work for a time. But in the end, you will admit it.

What happens then?

By then, you must have perfected techniques like mass prayer. If a human being prays, a voice is raised. But a million human beings make an even greater voice, and if all pray in the same hour, the whole universe will hear you. But remember this: in that terrible hour, you will be greatly afraid. It will be difficult for one voice to be raised, let alone the billions. But between now and then, mass prayer can be used to change the world. It isn't necessary to pray the same words or to the same god. But only to raise your voices. There is a music, then, in the world of the soul, a fine music. These beings, though, they even seek your souls.

How do they get them?

Soul traps. The lures are the lusts and hungers of this life. The dead man, exploring the newfound freedom of the energetic world, finds himself able to visit his friends and enemies, to see their innermost being and thoughts, even to converse with them in ways that their elemental selves cannot perceive. He is in danger, but he does not know it, for he has not ascended. He is still ensnared by his lust. Soon, he will be shown something that perfectly fulfills his most hidden and cherished desires, desires he has never fulfilled. Unable to resist the chance to do it at last, he enters by a golden door into eternal captivity.

Then it's worthwhile to try to defeat desire in life?

It's been tried. Best to take your sense of humor with you if you go down that road. Remember, God laughs and plays, Whitley.

The Meister Eckhart? How did you know I was interested in that? I read over shoulders, child. A bad habit of mine. God laughed, and his laughter begat the son, and their laughter begat the spirit, and out of the laughter of the three poured the creation. Laughter is the key to everything. It is far more powerful than prayer, than meditation. It is the stuff of which the world is created. Find laughter, find freedom.

Are there any other ways to exploit souls?

The energetic world is much larger, vastly more ancient and more complex than the elemental one. It teems with beings, many of them immeasurably conscious and invested across the whole sweep of time and beyond time. It is enormous beyond measure, stretching across all time and all space, including not only this universe but many other universes.

You mean galaxies?

There are more galaxies in your universe than there are stars in your galaxy, and more universes in the firmament than there are galaxies in your universe. There will come a day when mankind will learn how to detect universes beyond. But most are so far away that their light has not yet reached your universe, since the day of its inception.

Why are universes created?

Being serves joy.

(I was silent for some time.)

Do you wish to continue?

I wish to ask about the future. What is our future?

The future of mankind is either to ascend or go extinct. The future of life on earth is, in either case, to evolve new intelligent creatures. Species of birds will become intelligent. Then, eons later, a species of insect. Like you, the insect species will have hands. They will remake the earth as you have, but

never find the least evidence of your existence, nor will any memory of you, or history of you, persist in that time. They will walk the earth in a billion and a half years, at a time when it still has two billion years to live. For mankind, the matter will be decided in this century, however.

How will it be decided?

The climate will begin to change in 2000, and this process will accelerate over the next decades. There is a great cycle of climate that began 2.8 million years ago and has resulted in the fundamental destabilization of your world's weather system. You evolved intelligence in order to survive the sudden shifts back and forth from ice ages to temperate periods. In fact, this planetary instability has been the engine of your evolution. The cycle is about to change, and to challenge you again.

Why will this happen?

Warmth being retained near the surface by greenhouse elements results in cooling aloft. A massive and extremely powerful convection can arise that results in a storm so great that it changes the climate permanently.

What form will this take?

The next ice age will begin soon, and this will lead to the extinction of mankind, or to a massive reduction in population, given your inability to expand off the planet. This planet is at present a death trap.

Why will this happen?

Because air at the surface is getting warmer, the north polar ice is melting, reducing the salinity of the Laurentian sea. At some point, winds crossing this sea due to the increasing difference between lower and higher atmospheric pressures will warm the northern ocean so much that the temperature differential needed to pump the North Atlantic Current will not be sufficient, and the current will slow down, stop, or stop flowing so far north. This same mechanism always triggers ice ages, and would happen within a few thousand years no matter what. However, human activity has sped up the process of atmospheric warming, so the change will be sooner and stronger.

The greater part of human industry and culture, along with the species' most educated populations, will be destroyed in a single season. This will happen suddenly and without warning, or rather, the warning will not be recognized for what it is.

What will it be?

First, the surface features of the currents will slow down. This will result in violent storms in Europe. At some point, arctic temperatures will rise forty or more points above normal during a spring or summer season. Then the currents themselves will change their routes or stop. Cold air trapped above the arctic will plunge down and collide with the warm tropical air present at the surface. It will create the most powerful storms in ten thousand years, storms unlike any you have seen or imagined. They will bring about the end of the northern civilization and the climate change that follows will lead to the starvation of billions.

My God. Can anybody do anything?

You can write. Use your tool. But also, you will see the demon revealed in those who refuse to acknowledge the signs. Remember that there is within you a powerful death-urge. But remember also, that this is a natural cycle. If you look into the fossil record, you will find evidence of it before. Human activity has not caused it, but only sped it up.

What is this death wish? How does it work?

People give up on themselves. They do it down deep inside, in places that the elemental mind, that is contained in the brain, cannot access, places that remember all lives. They do this when they see themselves committing the same errors that they have returned to correct. When they give up on ascension, they devote themselves to the "acquisition" of material. But what does this really mean—that they can be near coveted objects while they are in the physical? The obsession with material is a symptom of despair.

The rich are in despair of themselves?

Most.

But they run the world.

Which is why so many human institutions are so destructive. Remember the Eye of the Needle? A rich man may pass through the Eye of the Needle if he uses his wealth to enrich the world. Those who cling to their wealth are dying souls.

What about the United States? Isn't it, as a nation, clinging to its wealth?

The first world is a slave owner. You are all slave owners. You have enslaved the people of God, your own brothers and sisters who are poor. Do you understand the cruelty of the world as it is now, with five billion people enslaved to a billion? Each of you owns five slaves. But you never see your slaves, so you need not be concerned about their health and welfare. You let them fend for themselves, locked away in their poverty and suffering. I will tell you this: when one of my children dies in the slave barrens that cover this planet, I also die, and you, my arrogant friend, even you die a little.

I find the idea that the world is enslaved very hard to believe. People are free even in the third world. Slavery is still practiced, but it's extremely rare.

Who do you think makes your shoes? Free men? The advanced world of today is founded in the slavery of the simple world. America and Europe are a slave state. It is the slave labor of Latin Americans and Africans and Asians that allows you to live in material comfort.

But that's becoming less and less true.

Yes, you are winning the battle against slavery in some places. But losing it in others. Remember this: every one of you is entirely and completely responsible for the welfare of all others. So if a child is starving in Liberia, Whitley, you are personally and entirely responsible for him. If you would let the barriers down, you would fall madly in love with everybody. God's love is not tame. Your love is tame. God's love is huge and passionate and wild. Fall wildly in love with everybody. Cherish all as the precious creations that they are. Go to Calcutta or Lagos or Bogotá and give yourself to the first street urchin you meet as his helper and lifelong servant. Do it without

question or hesitation. You say that you want to worship God? Kneel to this little one and you kneel to God. Or look into the eyes of any child anywhere. You will see God looking back at you. Dare to serve the humble. In this way, the slave state is overturned and the demons set the task of outliving their demonhood.

Do you mean that the only people advancing in consciousness are in the first world, or is it the opposite, that we cannot advance because we are the slaveholders?

The question is neither here nor there. As I have said, human states have always been slave states. It is not the poverty of the elemental body that matters, but the wealth of the radiant body. There are poor cottagers in India who are far more advanced in consciousness than the grand demons who run the governments and religions and sciences and businesses of the first world.

What is the condition of the United States right now?

The United States sent dark men out into the world from 1950 on to wreck one country after another. You are responsible for a half a billion deaths during this period. You are responsible for the suffering of Central America and Southeast Asia and much of Africa. You supported the dictators, you strangled every vestige of good government again and again.

We were fighting communism.

You used dictatorship as your weapon. The United States is as guilty as the Soviet Union or Germany or Japan.

How can the guilt of nations be lifted?

Harry Truman made the decision to drop the atom bomb even though he knew the Japanese were ready to surrender. The notion that he did it to save American lives was a fiction. He knew very well that you would never have to invade. But he chose to kill and derange souls, anyway, in order to frighten Stalin. He killed Hiroshima and Nagasaki to save Western Europe. The price was this: innocent eternal beings were destroyed in the atomic fire for geopolitical reasons.

What happened to him?

Forgiveness is everywhere. It is the soul's very air.

I don't think you answered my question completely.

A nation must face its sins just as an individual must. You must face the fact that the American intelligence establishment is just as rotten and just as evil as every other secret human government that has ever existed. You must expose all the secrets and make amends to the world. The United States owes Guatemala and El Salvador and Chile and Indonesia and Liberia and Cambodia and Vietnam and many other nations not a few foreign aid dollars, but a new life. This debt is both national and personal. Each one of you owes the whole debt, in full. You owe the victims of the Cold War a new life, and the keepers of the secrets must be put away or the nation will die. Right now, secrecy is murdering America.

What about Russia? It must also owe a terrible debt.

You were given the opportunity to pay because of the wealth of the land upon which you reside. They were not. So also the Germans and the Japanese, who have not even begun to pay their debts. Emperor Hirohito of Japan, who personally engineered the sadistic murder of millions, never acknowledged his monstrous war crimes. The fiction that he was above it all was just that—a fiction. The Japanese pretend that he was innocent, and that they were innocent. These nations are covered in blood, and the blood will never dry until they truly seek forgiveness before God and man.

But evil nations come and go. They're part of the nature of human life. And look at the price they pay. Where is brutal, greedy Rome? Where is royal France, that arrogant state? Evil is an infection just like cholera or cancer. To serve itself, it kills its host and ultimately dies with it. This is the objective of evil, always—to kill and to die. Unless the nations repent, they will die.

The United States will die? How?

Already it has ceased to be a republic and become an empire. The United States is ruled by secrecy. The power of the electorate is fictional. Votes are

worthless. Until the secrecy ends, the United States is in its death throes.

If the power of the electorate is fictional, how can it end the CIA and so forth?

Everyone who joins these evil institutions joins their soul to destruction, no matter whether their personal task is innocent or not. Human life is about freedom, and secrecy is the murderer of freedom. Those within these institutions should leave them and expose their secrets, as a matter of greater moral good.

They'll end up in Leavenworth Prison without a trial. Prison for life.

Better life in prison than a single instant in hell. Prison is a terrible thing, but it does not mark the soul for eternity.

Hell does?

The agony of regret does. You cannot imagine the horrors that walk the byways of the other world. The marks upon them are so terrible that to see these demons and their sins is to be yourself forever diminished. Believe me, child, I speak from experience. Mankind has lived in blindness to the fact that an instant's evil can result in an eternal stain. But live in blindness no more. Know it.

What is forgiveness?

You must face yourself and endeavor to repair the past. You hide your sins from yourselves. The sin of your greed is hidden in the backstreets of the third world. But what of your own sins? Dare you examine your conscience?

When I find a sin, what do I do?

Praying to God is part of it, but to cleanse your soul you must make amends. Doing so gains enormous energy. A soul blackened and completely defeated can rise to glory in an hour by finding the knots it has tied and unraveling them. But it is very hard. Better not to do evil.

What is sin?

Denial of the right to thrive.

Am I marked by the sins of my nation as well as my own, or the sins of mankind?

You are marked by what you know should mark you, and no matter how much in this life you tell yourself you should not be marked, your soul's conscience is never wrong. When you die, you see yourself truly. Better to see the truth now, when change is possible, than find out later that you must remain strapped to the wheel of life. The longer you delay your ascension, the longer you deny God the chance to taste of your ecstasy. When you sin, you hurt yourself, but more than that, you are cruel to all the rest of us. You are cruel to God.

(I felt this very strongly, and fell into tears. After a time, he spoke again.)

God wants you just as badly, child. This is my message to all of you: come home to us. Stop waiting. Stop imagining that you are not Christ and that God is somewhere outside of you. Face the true contents of your own being. Seek the kingdom within and you will find the kingdom everywhere.

FRAGMENTARY INCLUSIONS

I am including a number of conversational fragments here that I was unable to place in context. If they are parts of more complex exchanges, I have, unfortunately, failed to remember them in their entirety.

About life in the universe:

“Most of the universe is a beautiful and dangerous wasteland. But life is still commonplace, almost ubiquitous. This is because perception is a necessary element of reality. Without it, there is no formation of electrons into particles. There are even living creatures in galactic space. Some of this life is intelligent.”

A different perspective on conscious energy:

“You call it ‘chi’ or ‘kundalini’ or ‘soul.’ It cannot be used, but you can become its ally. The reason you have so much difficulty detecting it is that it does not want to be detected by you. You cannot use it without understanding that you must give in order to receive. You know very well what it needs from you, otherwise why do you pray? Because this energy is basically electromagnetic, it may admit itself to detection and manipulation. But why do you look for it outside of yourself? You know, from every religion, where the Kingdom of God resides.”

The following exchange led to the discovery, recorded in *The Coming Global Superstorm*, that we are in a long-term period of mass extinction:

What is your goal here?

I have come here to discuss conditions that are unfolding. This world has been in a process of extinction for three million years, and the resulting pressure has caused intelligence to form in the primate. Intelligence occurs when a brain becomes able to make infinite correlations. It grows in species that have the tools of body necessary to enact their ideas.”

Why does a process of extinction cause intelligence?

Evolution is pressure. Pressure causes struggle. Creatures struggling not to be

destroyed evolve adaptations. Intelligence, as you have evolved it, is also an adaptation, although not a sufficient one.

The reason that your intelligence is insufficient is that you have lagged in the process of artificial amplification. You can find ways of engineering greater intelligence by the use of drugs, by manipulating genetic structure, and by making intelligent machines. In order to survive the complex combination of pressures you are under, you need to create servants more intelligent than yourselves. Intelligent machines always come to understand how to increase their own intelligence in ways that their creators cannot detect. Intelligent machines are the most intelligent of all creations.

Another comment that I recall, but without remembering the question that elicited it:

Intelligent species are grains of gold in an ocean of sand. You are as intelligent as nature can make you, but your brain is still filled with potential. It is a resource available to be used. To do that, you need to understand how the brain works. In addition to creating machine intelligence in the image of your own mind, you need to enhance your native intelligence tenfold, a hundredfold. To accomplish this, you need help. Your intelligent machines will be your partners. Natural evolution has ended for you. Now you must evolve yourselves.

At some point, I recall asking him the question, "Am I dreaming?" and he answered in this way:

Dreaming is a process of resolution and assessment that is conducted during sleep. You are not dreaming. You are discussing the fate of man with me. This is the fate of man, as matters now stand: you have already exceeded the population density that the planet is able to tolerate over the long term. Therefore, your species will reduce in numbers. This is not your fault, and the self-blame that is occurring is a waste of energy. A suggestion would be to direct all of your energy toward saving yourselves and none toward bickering about it. You can save yourselves by a number of means.

Find an efficient utilization of energy that will enable you to colonize your solar system and reduce population pressure on earth. Create machines intelligent enough to correctly model the architecture of the earthly environment so that you can carry out the actions necessary to preserve your lives. Gain control over your moon, which contains an isotope of helium that will become extremely valuable to you if you can devise better uses of energy. Otherwise, this will continue to be mined by others.

Understand your past and what you have lost so that you are no longer surprised and destroyed by the cycle that has your planet in its grip. Your interest in the past, instilled in you from boyhood, should enable you to crack the code of *Hamlet's Mill* and impart the message that it contains. Why are you so slow? Time is running out.

Be aware that your archaeological and paleontological sciences began during the last century as an attempt to prove that the statements about the past made in the Bible were literally true. As a result, the idea that nature only changes gradually and is, on the whole, benign, remains powerful in these sciences. It stems from the religious image of a world protected by a loving god. Because of this defect, these sciences have led you to assume that your past is more benign than is the case, and that the future will at least give you warning if you are about to be damaged by coming changes. Change could take place suddenly and be severe.

You live by dreams, but the world is constructed out of inevitabilities. For this reason, you are failing to see what is happening all around you. Please understand, however, that conditions now are entirely governed by nature. Man does not govern his destiny at all, in any way. Man is the child and victim of nature, and soon will be thrown back by nature into a state so primitive that you will forget even the alphabet. You allow your dreams to insulate you from what you need to face: nature is not an entity, but a gathering of billions upon billions of small inevitabilities. Nature surprises only the blind.

AFTERWORD

The next morning I woke up slowly. I'd slept a black, deep, dreamless sleep. As soon as I woke up, I remembered that something had happened during the night, but for the first few moments, I couldn't recall quite what it was. Somebody had come, but not the room service waiter, as I had initially thought. It was somebody who had talked to me, and the instant that recollection came to mind, I felt the most poignant sense of elation.

Something marvelous had happened.

As I rose from the bed, I saw my yellow notepad on the floor, covered with scrawls. It had been in my briefcase when I went to bed, so I must have pulled it out and taken notes. I grabbed it and looked at them.

They were pretty much just squiggles. They didn't seem to relate to any sort of a conversation.

Had he been real, or a dream? If you took notes in your sleep, they might look like this.

Then I also remembered that, as he left, he'd asked me to drink a white liquid that he'd had in one of the glasses from the bathroom. But hadn't I refused? Surely I had.

Then I thought of the Milk of Nepenthe, the drug that was mythically given to people who had visited the gods, in order that they would not suffer the anguish of remembering the pleasures of heaven when they had to return to mortal life.

I had not wanted to drink it, but I hadn't refused. So this must have been a dream. In real life, I would never have drunk something like that.

Except, across the strange life I have lived, I could remember drinking that same bitter liquid at the end of other extraordinary experiences, such as in the eighties when I was having contact experiences. As I seem to have remembered them pretty clearly anyway, maybe it doesn't work, or doesn't work on me. Or maybe it has another, less clear purpose.

I checked the glasses in the bathroom, which were pristine.

My mind returned to the idea that I'd had a dream, a glorious one, to be sure, but just that—a dream. The man had known the secrets of the ages, but

like all dreams, the brilliance of the nighttime had become unfocused fragments in the morning.

I looked at the notes—and was amazed to find, as I touched the scrawl, that the man’s words came back to me. The scrawl itself made no sense, but it seemed to operate as a mnemonic device.

As I remembered more detail, my elation grew. It was like finding a seam of gold. My mind began to swim with amazement. I thought, “That was the best conversation I’ve ever had.”

It was at that point that I called Anne at home. I told her what had happened, and asked her to remind me every time I announced that the man hadn’t existed, that at the point I had made the call, I was certain that he had.

From my earlier experiences with high strangeness, I knew that the mind rejects what it cannot fit into its vision of reality, and this man was certainly outside of my expectations. I knew that I would deny him again and again, which I am, incidentally, still doing. Intellectually, I know that he existed, if only because he knew so much more science than I did and in a couple of cases, more science than anybody did at that time.

Over the years, Anne never wavered from her responsibility. Again and again, I abandoned the idea of transcribing the conversation. Each time, she said to me, “Remember the phone call.” Anne has more faith in the reality of my experiences than I do, and without that faith, quite frankly, I wouldn’t have written about any of them, and certainly not this one.

The conflict that I continue to feel regarding his physical reality is similar to the one that I feel when I look back on my years of close encounter experiences.

It isn’t that the experiences seem dreamlike or imaginary, which they don’t, but that I don’t want them to be true. I don’t want to believe that creatures with breathtaking knowledge are here, but are choosing to interact with us only in indirect ways.

The Master of the Key gave me a startlingly wonderful gift, dense with meaning, richly and carefully conceived. But why give this to a novelist and not, say, to Stephen Hawking or Lord Martin Rees? I have no authority. My presence in the world’s intellectual culture is, at best, minor.

It is very difficult to hear somebody like that say that we’re in danger of going extinct, and then simply disappear into the night, leaving me to announce the danger from my powerless position.

Because I wanted to discount his claims and his ideas, I wanted to believe that he was just a dream. In fact, I probably delayed publication of this book for ten years because of what is, essentially, a conceit. He was real, he was breathtakingly well-informed, but he came and went like a shadow, leaving me with a brilliant and extraordinary text that is in danger of disappearing, simply because it was given to the wrong person.

Nevertheless, here I am, and I am going to make as much noise about his words as I can, because it is my belief that they are incredibly valuable.

What first arrested my attention about him, and caused me to hesitate to throw him out of my room, was his statement about the Holocaust. It was an idea I'd never heard before, and it was chilling. This vast system of organized murder was the greatest of all human mistakes, and the single most evil thing that has ever been done by man, but even so the fact that it had the appalling consequences that the Master described was very hard for me to accept.

We are in desperate need of a way not only to leave the earth in large numbers, but also to travel the unimaginable distances necessary to found new human colonies on other planets.

While we remain trapped here in our billions with absolutely no chance of escape, our visitors appear to be flitting around the universe with ease.

For all of his impeccable ethics, I have to wonder if the Master has considered the morality of leaving us all trapped here. And we are trapped, and there is a good chance that we are going to lose the battle to save ourselves—and he and his kind seem to know this quite well.

I wonder how this is different from what the Allies did during and before World War II, in sitting silently by while Germany sank into an insanity of tribalistic jingoism.

It could be said, I suppose, that the Allies didn't have the right to intervene in a sovereign nation's internal affairs prior to the war. But our present situation is different, for the simple reason that it has come about due to the natural effects of population expansion. We didn't decide to end up in this predicament. Nature put us here.

For all its failures and problems, human society is actually surprisingly efficient in coping with overpopulation. Not in stopping it, because it is almost impossible to deflect urges as powerful as the seasonless, endlessly compelling human urge to reproduce.

We are even reacting to the danger of climate change with surprising

agility. The developed world uses 40 percent less energy to accomplish its work than it did in 1970, and that efficiency continues to increase.

So I don't really understand why we aren't being met halfway, instead of being warned about our problems via a method that is likely to be generally ignored, and not given any help at all.

It could be that this amazing array of intellectually superior beings that appear to be ghosting around in our midst have good reason to remain hidden, but I just don't see that allowing us the freedom to evolve without interference is an ethically higher requirement than saving us from extinction.

I have to admit that I'm angry at all of the amazing visitors I've seen over the years for not going to higher authorities or, if they have done so and failed to get an adequate response from them, appealing in a more open way to public consciousness. Frankly, I'd like to see the Master of the Key go on a lecture tour. Why can't he show up on *60 Minutes*? And I'd like to see the apparent aliens I've interacted with do more than offer a few scientists useful calculations, but not in an open enough way to enable them to admit the truth without seeing their careers ruined. Why not simply be open about it? Even a few brief interactions with the right scientists would change our world. Think if Stephen Hawking or Roger Penrose or Martin Rees could ask them questions for an hour, or if David Deutsch could explore the next level of his calculations with them?

The Master of the Key was real. The visitors I have seen were real. They were all possessed of advanced knowledge that would transform human life and save our species, and yet they assiduously keep themselves hidden. If anything, they encourage the catastrophic official denial of their existence that has led our scientific establishment to waste even the knowledge that is there for the taking all around us.

As matters stand, the vast majority of our scientists, including those I just named, absolutely would not entertain for a moment that visitors are here and interacting with us, and that is a grave tragedy. The waste of knowledge is heartbreaking. But it also isn't our fault. We haven't been given the proper tools to communicate with our visitors. On the contrary, they do everything possible to make certain that science continues in ignorance.

I can only think that they believe—or perhaps know for certain—that freedom is literally more important than survival, and if one looks at the words of the Master of the Key carefully, it's possible to see that this may be

true.

He painted a picture of the world that is radically different both from the one that emerges out of our superstitious past, and the more materialistic one that has come with the rise of modern science. Interestingly, though, his vision contains elements of both so, despite his rather dismissive attitude toward human philosophical thought, we've managed to do a good deal that appears to be correct.

He even admits that we are not to be blamed for our situation, and says himself that it's a result of overpopulation.

If the danger we face isn't even our fault, all the more reason to help us.

Perhaps it doesn't happen because it can't. Maybe the visitors are constrained in some way by the physics of the situation. If they are time travelers, their ability to alter the past is probably very limited, as I discussed earlier. If there are other, physical universes occupying the same space as this one, and that's where they're from, they might be experiencing other arcane restraints.

It is chilling to contemplate that they might be doing all that they can, but this could be true. In any case, my own ethical position is very clear. It is to continue to proclaim their reality and tell my own story as accurately as I can, and no matter the dreary martyrdom of marginalization that is the consequence of doing this. It's not universal, and I have the joy and the continuously surprising experience of meeting other people who have had close encounters of the third kind, and they turn out to be a fascinating group.

Given that so many of them, like me, have had physical objects that are easily identifiable on X-ray placed in their bodies, there is an objective way to determine the origin of their memories. Deep physical and psychological studies of such people might be quite revealing of the motives of our visitors.

In any case, it may be that we are a lot closer to escaping from the slavery of ignorance that so curses our advancement and exposes us to such danger. The Master makes it clear that we are capable of becoming smarter when he says, "The reason that your intelligence is insufficient is that you have lagged in the process of artificial amplification."

He says that we are as intelligent as nature has made us, but not as intelligent as we could be.

When I was having contact experiences, I was struck by my visitors' combination of extraordinary precision and emotional intensity. Once, when I

turned away from one of them out of fear, she uttered three desolated and despairing cries, which were the most emotionally rich and complex sounds I have ever heard. But they were also measured to a precision that I have never heard before or since. They were at once utterly precise and utterly passionate.

Was she, in part, a machine, with a machine's precision, and in part a biological and spiritual being, with living emotions?

Not only have we recently made advances in creating super-dense machine memory using gases and other means, it has also been announced that the memristor has been perfected and will be available for some very surprising applications in the relatively near future. A Hewlett-Packard representative said in the *New York Times* on April 8, 2010, that: "We have the right stuff now to build real brains," and very small memory devices such as the memristor bring up the possibility of implantable brain augmentation.

It might become possible to inject things like calculational skills or language knowledge into brains, or do other things that are even more transformative, and perhaps our salvation lies in that direction. Right now, though, it seems to me that our species is afflicted by vast numbers of people who will believe practically anything. The German nation allowed itself to indulge the ludicrous fantasy that they were the victims of a Jewish conspiracy that had, in fact, been invented by the czarist secret police before World War I and promulgated as "the Protocols of the Elders of Zion." Reading it, one wonders how anybody could believe such drivel. Anyone with even a slight understanding of the economics of the era would know that the mechanisms proposed in it are a structural impossibility.

Presently, a trip across the Internet will reveal the same sort of weakness of mind and lack of discrimination that led to things like the murder of the six million Jews.

Lord Rees recently commented that "it is astonishing that the evidence for evolution is not taken seriously by seemingly 40 percent of people."

And yet the evidence is completely indisputable by any sane person. But it would seem that a substantial minority must prefer Voltaire's theory.

Perhaps the gap between us and remarkable and brilliant people like the Master of the Key is too great to bridge on any significant scale. Maybe that's why they don't try.

I see this on a very personal basis, because I come across people with

disturbing frequency who want to integrate my descriptions of my experiences into what amounts to a kind of new religion, a dreary modern fantasy of alien contact that includes imaginary details about many different races, elaborate fictions of huge government conspiracies—indeed, anything except the equivocal, confusing and extremely strange experience that people actually report, and the sadly unfocused reality that those experiences reflect.

Despite my disappointment that the Master of the Key has not reappeared, I still respect his ideas enormously, and I have tried to rebuild my own ethics in light of his thought, and I have found this to be an enormously freeing and satisfying endeavor.

I have been taken by the statement that “sin is denial of the right to thrive.” I do not know of a more concentrated or convincing definition of sin, or one that offers more clarity. Using it, one can find clear ethical ground, both in one’s own life and in the lives of others. I find myself constantly considering my own actions in its light, and coming away with a much clearer understanding of their worth and validity, or what might be inappropriate about them. The Ten Commandments are a wonderful document, and the cultivation of compassion in conscience can be accomplished without anything more than a natural sense of right and wrong, but these eight words sharpen and dimensionalize the whole process quite wonderfully.

It has taken me a long time, but in the light of my own life experiences and the things that the Master said, I have come to see that there could be such a thing as conscious energy, and that, if it is real, then it must be the actual center of mind in this universe.

Having meditated consistently since 1970, I have attempted to find ways to come into contact with such energy, and discovered that it is immediately and vividly possible to do this, and that such contact leads over time to fundamental change of being. What has happened to me, specifically, is that I have found a new form of sensation as well as a new way of experiencing being.

If one is open to the possibility, one soon discovers that one’s perspective can change. Normally, we feel a sense of being rooted in the physical. There seems to be nothing else. This, I think, is what the Master refers to as being “soul blind.”

Over time, though, one begins to find another perspective. Again and again, it becomes possible to sense the body not as oneself, but as a tool that

is being used to penetrate into the physical world and draw experience from it.

As the sense of being separate from the body matures, one's existence as a soul also becomes more complex. In recent years, I have ceased to see any real difference between body and soul. It's all one form, which grows more and more dense as it approaches and then penetrates into the physical universe. But it is possible for sensation to be stretched across the whole spectrum of one's being, and when you do this, you also gain access to the world in a much larger and more compelling way.

The Master spoke of the existence of an energetic organ in the body, which is generated by the nervous system and extends above the surface of the skin. He says that this organ, being composed of electrons, can be in superposition, and when it is, it is "effectively everywhere in the universe and nowhere specific."

I knew of this theory before I transcribed his words, so it was one of the things that I puzzled about. A paper I had read authored by famed psi researcher Charles Honorton caused me to think that something like this might exist, and I had discussed the idea in speeches prior to meeting the Master of the Key.

However, he took it so much further, and I discovered that his description of it was incredibly useful to me in developing techniques of meditation that have enabled me to access this organ and make it work for me.

He said that "this field is an organ just like the heart or the brain," and that "with it, you may see other worlds, you may see the past and the future, you may see into the lives of those around you." Most importantly though, he explained that "the process of imprinting itself causes the organ to cease to be in superposition and thus to cease to be accessible to further imprinting."

In other words, when you see the larger reality, as soon as you try to look closely at it, the electrons are immediately positioned and you lose contact with what you are seeing.

We live in a world with a very deeply ingrained addiction to gain, and it took me a long time to stop looking and simply see. When something appeared in my mind's eye, my attention would immediately seek more detail, whereupon it would disappear.

He spoke of surrender in the same way that Meister Eckhart, the thirteenth-century master, did, when he said that we must "become as a clear glass

through which God can shine.”

To some extent, I learned to let go of my desire to explore, and simply let the journey happen. I learned to start the process of sensation not in my physical body, but in the subtle body that is my true core, and to see the physical body not as myself, but as an instrument of being.

In so doing, I found, I think, a true edge of heaven, because coming to this experience is extraordinarily joyous. I think that the reason the Master seemed, as I have said, to “twinkle,” is that his body was a container filled with the paradoxical joy of objective being.

Among the grandest of his ideas was one that was completely unexpected to me. It was that Christianity, Buddhism and Islam are actually a single religion that was brought to us by three different masters, each of whom laid down a different aspect of the greater whole.

If one understands the ancient law of triads clearly, his explanation of the way the three approaches work in concert makes a great deal of sense. Basically the Law of Three, which Buckminster Fuller called “the building block of the universe,” conceives that everything is divided into interlocking triads. A triad has an active side, a passive side and a third side that keeps the other two in balance.

When he explained that Christianity is the seeking, or active, side of a triad, Islam the surrendered side and Buddhism the balancing side, I was startled to see, suddenly, a very much larger perspective on the three teachings that went beyond doctrine and belief, and far beyond the primitive ideologies that have in recent centuries been attached to Christianity and Islam.

I’ve read the New Testament and the great theologians, much of Buddhist material and the Koran in English translation, and I at once saw the sense of what he was saying.

As a result of this, my doctrinal concerns gradually slipped away. I ceased to take an interest in theological details, and my perspective expanded immeasurably. I came to understand the presence of the sacred in human life in a completely new way, as a profoundly true process that leads toward a state of balanced surrender.

One can put aside all the beliefs, and seek as Christ sought toward the delicious innocence of the father when he suggested that we “be as the lilies of the field” and surrender to the will of God as the muezzin calls us to our

soul's journey over the course of the day, and then, vibrant with the energy of this material, we commit ourselves to the tremendous silence that Buddhist practice discloses.

He spoke of the journey toward God, and the happy surrender that it implies and gave us, in the few words he left regarding the true way of the three religions, a most wonderful and very effective means of exploring the garden of forked paths that is at once a new way of the soul, and, by implication, the key to the lost science of the soul that he mourned with such gentle eloquence over the course of our conversation.

Before I met him, I considered myself a very wealthy man. Fate had left me without much material comfort, but it had granted me an incredibly precious gift, which was the relationship that I had forged with the joyous, glorious and dangerous visitors I wrote about in *Communion*. Now, this latest gift left me, I think, a wealth beyond riches, because it gave me the chance not only to take the marvelous journey that the Master reveals is on offer but also to take on the challenge of communicating it to others.

From the first hour, in fact, from the moment I called my wife to tell her to never let me deny it, I have felt that the material he left behind had great value. Now, having lived with it and worked with it for these years, I can say with at least some small authority that it has genuine value, at least it does for me.

I have ceased to care where he came from or where he went, or why he has not returned to me as a physical creature. Of course I was angry about it. I felt tantalized and abandoned. But he gave me more than enough. In fact, he was so lavish in his gifts that every time I read his words again, I find something new.

There is very little material in this world that can bring about actual change in our state. This man left some words that I feel are an effective tool for real change, and there lies great joy.

APPENDIX

In 2000, I finally transcribed the words of the Master of the Key and published them privately, for sale only on my website, Unknowncountry.com. A few years ago, I let the small edition sell out, only to see used copies of the book appearing for sale for hundreds of dollars. So I republished it.

I have now retired it in favor of this new edition. Having worked with the Key for ten years, I think that I have some useful things to say about it that were not apparent to me when I published the private edition.

However, since that edition will not now be reprinted, I do think that it is important that the original front and back matter be included with this edition, so I provide it here, exactly as it was originally printed.

THE ORIGINAL FOREWORD

The MASTER of the KEY

Something was disturbing me, causing me to swim up out of a deep sleep. As I became conscious, I realized that somebody was knocking on the door of my hotel room. I was confused. Then I decided that it must be the room service waiter come to get my tray, and that he'd probably been there a long time. I rushed for the door saying, "I'm terribly sorry," and threw it open.

A small man in dark clothing came in. His face was rather angular, but other than that, he appeared normal enough.

I had been deeply asleep when the knocking started. All day, I'd been signing books and doing media appearances, and I was pleasantly tired. It was the last day of the author tour for my book *Confirmation*, which was an effort to identify the hard physical evidence of a possible alien presence on earth, and also why it would be secret.

By the time I'd come to my senses, he was all the way into the room. Obviously, this was no waiter. In my travels on author tour, I'd had a few incidents like this, such as the woman who'd bribed her way into my room in Chicago, then launched herself at me out of the closet while I was watching TV. I'd ended up going down to the front desk of a sixty-story hotel in my pajama bottoms to get help.

He was now standing with his back to the curtains that hid the window. There was a slight smile on his face.

I thought about running out. The door was behind me. I could escape quite easily.

Then he started talking. His voice was breathless and quick. He said my name. I was gruff, angry, in reply. How had he gotten my room number? From whom? No response, just that embarrassed little smile.

I demanded that he leave. He pleaded with his eyes. The expression was so pure and so frank—and yet so deeply humorous—that it made me hesitate

and really look at this intruder.

He was wearing charcoal trousers and a dark gray turtleneck. He had a rim of white hair around his head and an aquiline nose. His skin was dusty-pale, his features sharp. He looked old. He was sort of—twinkling. There is no other way to describe the combination of serenity, happiness and deep, deep humor in his expression. In fact, I don't think that I have ever seen a face so much at ease within itself, so deeply at peace—not before, not since. There was an eerie stillness about it, too. It could have been the face of a corpse. But there was nothing awful about it. On the contrary, had he been dead, I would have thought that his face said that he had died a happy death, and the last of life had left behind it a hint of secret joy.

He again said my name, “Whitley.” There was a disorienting familiarity, as if I was meeting a dear friend after many years apart. But I could not remember seeing him before, not ever in my life. Or could I? My first question was “Who are you?”

He looked at me out of the side of his eyes, his face sparkling with amusement. The message could not have been more clear: “You know that. You know perfectly well who I am.” A jolt went through me, of confusion and embarrassment. Now I felt as if an old friend had come back and I'd failed to recognize him.

Then I asked, “Why are you here?”

He leaned back, looked toward the ceiling as if considering the appropriate answer. Then his eyes met mine, and I became aware that this man was something very strange. There was an alienness to him, when he regarded me in this way. It wasn't that he seemed in any way like somebody from another world. Hardly. He could not have been more ordinary.

No, it was more subtle than that. There was about him a sense of command. The precision of his movements and the cadence of his speech were—well, they seemed very exact. Perfect, even. Later, when we would discuss intelligent machines, I would feel this sense of strangeness again.

He answered my question. He said, “You're chained to the ground.”

His words carried an unexpectedly powerful resonance. Perhaps it had to do with the way he spoke them—the ultraprecise diction, the completely self-assured tone—but the instant I heard them, they seemed not just true, but true in a much larger than normal way. I felt an awful urgency: the earth was a prison; we were the inmates.

I went on trying to be my ordinary self, to act as if this was an ordinary encounter. He was a slightly crazy fan who had the nerve to bust in on me in the middle of the night. Okay, I would humor him. “Excuse me?” I asked. What did this crazy “chained to the ground” comment mean, anyway? What kind of nonsense was this?

He said, “I am here on behalf of the good. Please give me some time.”

The word “good,” the way he said it, exploded in my heart like an emotion-packed hydrogen bomb. It wasn’t just the tone, it was the look that melted across his face as he uttered it, an expression of love so strong and so absolutely impeccable that I just gasped.

I was hooked. This would be no ordinary conversation. I got out a yellow pad and started taking notes—and now I thank God that I did, because many of the ideas he talked about were breathtakingly new, and unfolded on a scale that was larger than my own mind. As such, they would prove to be extremely difficult to remember accurately. The notes are not extensive, and mostly don’t even seem related, but their mnemonic power has helped me recapture many of his great and elusive thoughts.

Afterward, I would say that he and I spent about half an hour together. But once our conversation was transcribed, it became obvious that more time was involved. He must have been with me for at least two hours.

What this man had to say was so deeply, profoundly new and so richly textured that I do not think that I need to assert an unprovable claim regarding whether or not he was real.

During the course of our dialogue, a new image of God emerged. It was almost as if the words I was hearing had the power to cause God to emerge into the room with us. Reading the dialogue feels the same—it’s as if there is somebody living in these words.

I am not saying that I don’t think my visitor was a human being. He certainly looked human. For all I know, he may even have been what at one point he said he was, a Canadian who didn’t pay taxes and had no driver’s license. I do know that he had, by far, the best mind I have ever encountered. He was also the most emotionally alive person I have ever known—again, by far. Richly alive though he was, he seemed as intimately and easily familiar with what we think of as death as he was with life.

There were periods of incredible emotion—especially one in the last few moments of our time together—that are among the very most powerful

experiences I have ever had in my life.

As he was leaving, he asked me to drink a white liquid. I know that it will sound fantastic when I say that I agreed to do this. But at the time, I remembered very well doing it previously. I recalled meeting him twice in my life before. In fact, what little bits I remember from those conversations suggest to me that they are part of the subtext of my very being. So much of my thought, of my belief, of what has meaning and importance for me in life comes from them. And yet, I can only remember them at times, and then only in the briefest snatches—a word said, a facial expression, some small flavor of the moment.

After I drank this substance, I remember nothing until the next morning. When I woke up, I immediately did three things. First, I looked for my notes. They were there, lying on the table beside the bed where I had put them. Then I went into the bathroom, thinking that maybe some of the white liquid would be left in the bottom of one of the glasses. But they were clean. I then telephoned my wife.

I had something to tell her, and it felt urgent. As soon as she answered, I recounted the story of my visitor. Then words popped out of my mouth that I did not expect to say. “There will come a day when I’ll tell you that I don’t think he was real. Never let me forget that he was.”

I lay back looking over the notes. There wasn’t much there—less, in fact, than I’d hoped there would be. And yet, they had a strange quality to them, as if each word was capable of causing a whole spring to flow in my mind.

Much of the conversation I remembered quite clearly. And when you read it, you’ll see why. Nobody would ever forget what he said about the Holocaust, about religion, about the true nature of the soul.

I was so happy that morning. I remembered what the woman I met during my 1985 close encounter had said to me, “You are the luckiest of the lucky.”

As I packed my bag for the trip home from Toronto to San Antonio, I certainly felt that way. There kept coming into my heart little explosions of joy. I put my precious page of notes into an inner pocket of my briefcase. My plan was to get home, type everything up and have a new book ready to go in a few months. I had been handed a real gift.

In my dreams. It is now December of 2000, and I have just completed the most difficult writing struggle of my life. At first, the memories came fast and easy. Soon, there were twenty pages, then thirty. But then I began to

worry.

What if he hadn't been there? What if it was just my imagination? This material was full of God. It contained a new image of God, subtle and powerful and totally incredible. It redefined history and religion. It lifted the veil between life and death and announced that we could begin communicating with the dead, and it told just exactly how to do this. It redefined sin and prayer and man's whole relationship with God.

If it was just me, then how dare I presume to publish this, I could not die with the mark of such a lie upon my soul. And then I thought: it's because of what *he* said about sin that you are so concerned about this.

I was raised a Catholic. Go to confession and forget it—trust God's forgiveness. But when he spoke of sin, he did not just mourn over it or warn against it, he showed what it was and why it's bad and what it does to you. It was his explanation of sin that made me so very concerned that I not assert that he was real when I knew, or sensed somewhere in my deepest heart, that he might not be.

A hundred times, I quit. He wasn't real and therefore I couldn't claim his authority for these ideas. Each time I gave up, Anne would say, "Remember when you called me and told me never to let you convince yourself that he wasn't real." And I would go on.

I don't believe that any of the extraordinary experiences I have ever written about have been dreams, this one included. I have had the incredible privilege of living between the worlds, in the sense that I have actually spent a substantial amount of time in my life with people who were not physical in the way that we know the physical. I have learned from them, and loved them and feared them and tasted of them. I know that there is a soul because I experienced complete release from the boundaries of my body. It has been my great privilege to personally experience these things, and so it is my duty to tell you this: I believe not only from faith, but from actual experience, that what I have written of is true.

Over our history, we have rejected what is actually the greater part of reality by labeling it as "supernatural." Most of us believe—or fear in our hearts—that the soul is not real, and that there is no world beyond this one. We die into a question, or into that flickering and inadequate medium that we call "faith."

My visitor would agree with the skeptics in one key way: there is no

supernatural. But his explanation of the way parts of reality that we have labeled supernatural actually work offers a promise for the future that is truly breathtaking. He has opened the door to the proverbial undiscovered country, and invited us in. For it becomes very clear, from what he says, that there exists a powerful science of the soul that we can master just as certainly as we have mastered the science of the atom.

We have hidden from this science, and pretended to ourselves that it doesn't exist. We have done this in order to isolate ourselves from the overwhelming power of the world that lies beyond.

He has left us with a challenge and a promise: it is time for us to face the reality of this other world, and to come to terms with the fact that we can detect it, communicate with it, and see beyond the curtain of denial and lies that now obscures our vision of it.

In the end, I thought perhaps he was a dead man, come in fulfillment of prophecy in this perilous age. If so, then he is a herald, for what he said will lead to a revolution in our understanding of ourselves and the universe around us. We are about to make a discovery of fundamental importance: not only is the world of the soul real, it is accessible to verifiable scientific exploration. In fact, scientific method would be essential to success in the effort to identify the soul. Science—our science as we understand it now—can part the curtain between the living and the dead. We can thus come into real relationship with an ancient world that is much larger than this one, that is so much our true home that we have never left it, but only retreated into this small corner of it that we call the universe. He has challenged us to drop the pretense and face what we truly are, creatures who have always had the capacity to walk in the electric paths of heaven—but only if we dare. Only if we dare.

THE ORIGINAL AFTERWORD

WHO WAS HE?

When I woke up the next morning and went out into the crowded lobby of the hotel, I was struck a blow by each face that I saw. At the breakfast tables and at the hotel desk, they were all crying out, “I’m alone and I’m dying,” and I knew in every cell of my being what he had meant—what he had *really* meant—when he said that this is a fallen world. I knew also, with a certainty that will never, ever leave me, that he was not fallen. I had been with somebody who had never tasted the mystery of our isolation, but who understood the loneliness of mankind better than we do.

As I walked through that hotel lobby, there was a fire burning in me. I saw that what feels like a hopeless, immutable reality—that we are fallen—is itself just another illusion. All that lies between us and the ascension of which he spoke is exactly nothing. We can ascend right now, immediately, all of us.

I was off to the airport after a couple of last stops at bookstores. I felt very strange, as if the world around me was not quite real. People talked, I talked, I signed books. But it was all happening somewhere far away, each present moment seeming as if it was a memory.

I remembered the night’s events with perfect clarity. There was no question in my mind but that it had all been real. I knew, though, that it had been a very strange experience, and I suspected that on some deeper level I was reacting to it much as I had to my close encounters. This was why I called my wife and told her never to let me forget that the encounter had been real. If something happens to you that is sufficiently strange, it soon comes to seem curiously illusive. Before too long, the brain files it in the realm of dreams, even though it was real.

It was a Saturday morning, and the publicist from the publishing house only stayed with me for a short time. I did not know quite how to approach her about what had happened, so I said nothing. A few weeks later, I would

call her and describe my visitor to her. She would tell me that she had never seen such a man, as would a number of other people I knew in Toronto. But that would not be the end of it, not entirely. I would go down some strange paths in search of this man.

When I got settled in the plane, I had a chance to reflect. I watched the world of the north slip away beneath me. Gone were the days that I would be returning to New York. We were now living more-or-less in exile, due to harassment and subtle threats from shadowy parties. There had been many financial reverses, much hardship. I had lost my beloved cabin in the woods in upstate New York. With it had gone most of my close encounter experiences. But now I had this. At least I had this.

I felt a familiar sense of self-assurance. How could I ever forget a word of that incredible conversation? And anyway, I had my notes. But I knew that this was all an illusion. Had I not also had a number of ultra-strange experiences, I might have soon lost a great deal of what had been said. But I knew remembering it correctly would be hard. I estimated that it would take me six months or so to transcribe the conversation and get it into order. I never dreamed how hard it would actually be. It took me years to get this put together in a manner that even begins to do justice to the original conversation.

As I flew home, I wondered who he had been. I wondered about the might-have-beens. What might have happened if I'd attacked him and tied him up and called the police? Or if I hadn't drunk the white liquid and had instead followed him? Or if I'd had a camera with me and taken a picture?

Who was he?

When I got back to San Antonio, I set about writing down the conversation. Immediately, I ran into trouble. These huge ideas, and new ideas, were even more elusive than I'd thought they would be. I had them in my mind, most certainly, but when I tried to transfer them to paper they became . . . well, me. Where was the soaring sense of newness and assurance that had been there when we were face-to-face? Where was the excitement?

I struggled for days. But it all came out sounding like a mix of warmed over Catholicism and new-age mysticism. Me, very definitely . . . and not even me at my best.

I began to think that I needed another session with this man. I needed to know him, actually, to get his direct participation in the writing process. Until

you lose track of somebody, it seems so easy to find them. But, in this world, if you don't have a name or an address or at least a neighborhood, you're in trouble.

I hadn't tried harder to get him to identify himself because he had seemed so familiar to me at the time. Why would I want my grandfather to tell me his name, or my uncle to give me his address? When I was with him, I might even have been able to say his name. It had seemed as if I'd known him all my life.

Which got me to thinking. Maybe I had known him. Maybe, in fact, he'd been in Texas when I was a child. So perhaps it would be interesting to ask around in San Antonio. What I did was to tell people the story of the meeting. I didn't pick and choose. I simply told anybody who seemed interested. And then I would ask them if they'd ever seen this person. I described him as a relatively slight man somewhere between sixty-five and eighty, with a dusting of white hair and a sharply-featured but kind face. I did not think that anybody who had met him would ever forget him.

For the most part, I drew a blank. Then one friend had a rather interesting reaction. He thought perhaps he had met this man, or somebody quite like him, back in the sixties.

He had been a student of percussion at the time, and his teacher was a percussionist with the Houston Symphony. The percussionist was a shy man, preferring his own company to the point that nobody had ever entered his apartment. He often wore gloves, and would clean his hands frequently. He took a liking to my friend, who was amazed one day to be invited to his apartment.

There were books everywhere, in bookcases lining every wall. While his teacher was out of the room, he looked at some of these books. They seemed concentrated on two subjects: UFOs and radar. My friend was confused. He had expected books on musical subjects, because his teacher was not just any percussionist. He was thought to be one of the great percussionists in the world. But here he was, obviously obsessed with what, in the sixties, was a very odd subject indeed—UFOs. And radar? A percussionist?

They completed their time together, and my friend did not see his teacher for some days. Then shocking news came. The apartment had burned. The fire had been so hot that it had actually burned all the books to ash. Houston fire department officials were doubly mystified. Not only had this fire been

hot enough to burn closed books, which require high heat to be completely incinerated if the pages aren't exposed to air, there had been almost no damage to other apartments in the building. Even stranger, the percussionist had disappeared and there were no human remains of any kind found in the apartment.

He has never been seen since. But he did leave my friend, who has become a prominent composer, a wonderful legacy: his love of percussion, which is central to his work.

The facial descriptions of the two men were not close enough to be an exact match, but I really did wonder, as I still do, whether or not they were the same person.

In the days when we had our cabin in upstate New York, the children used to see a man in black clothing moving through the woods, or standing at a distance and watching them. His presence made me and my wife extremely nervous, and I used to try to see him myself, but I never did. I really wondered—hoped, perhaps—that he was just an imaginary playmate.

Then, one day, the foreman of a group of men who were clearing some poison ivy from the trees along our driveway appeared at the house. They were not finished but they were quitting. They didn't want any money, they just wanted to get out of there. The reason was that they had seen an alien cross the driveway not twenty feet from where they were working. They described him as humanlooking, wearing black clothes, but with a face “like an animal” and “glaring” eyes.

I could understand their desire to leave. My reputation in the area was already so notorious because of odd events being witnessed around my place, that I was afraid that I'd reach a point that nobody would work for me.

After that, the children often saw the man, even when my son was in his teens. He brought some kids down from Andover for a weekend. We had strict instructions from him not to discuss aliens, UFOs or anything like that. My teenager's opinion, at that point, was that I actually *was* the most embarrassing father in the world.

The kids slept out in the woods. I told my son that this was foolish, because the visitors would be bound to be interested. He said that they wouldn't be bothered. By that time, the ultra-high-level strangeness of his childhood encounters had made them seem so dreamlike to him that he was eager and willing to dismiss them as fantasies.

I had no problem with that. I had done it many times myself. However, his friends had an active night. They saw seven balls of light floating through the woods. Just at dawn, one of them saw a swarm of gnats turn into the face of a woman—a phenomenon I had observed myself once or twice, but which I had never reported because it was just too strange. And they had also seen, standing off in the woods, a man in tight-fitting black clothing, a man that Andrew recalled from his childhood.

They had quite a bit of fun, actually, and Andrew actually told them some of his childhood stories, which are among the most marvelous encounter experiences I have ever heard . . . when he remembers them . . . when he will speak about them.

That was the last time we saw the man of the woods. As I have never laid eyes on him, I cannot be certain that he was the same person whom I met in Toronto. Whether he had glaring eyes or an animal-like face or not, he never hurt anybody. The foreman said that he looked “ratlike,” and the man in Toronto did have rather sharp features. But not that sharp. Of course, somebody who’s frightened tends to exaggerate.

I explored one other possibility. In his marvelous book *The Labyrinth of the Grail*, Masonic author William Mann discusses the legend that some Knights Templar refugees from Europe made it to Canada after the order was destroyed by the French king and the church, arriving in 1398.

The Templars were probably the single most important secret order ever founded. They apparently found ancient secrets in Jerusalem that eventually came to form the core of Masonic teaching about the value of man and the meaning of human freedom. The United States is founded upon these principles. It is a Masonic project, and thus the Templar heritage is of fundamental importance to the institutional structure of the world’s most successful republic.

There is a text now known as The Zeno Narrative that historian Frederick Pohl has claimed indicates that Prince Henry Sinclair, a Templar leader, arrived in Nova Scotia in June of 1398. Among the Micmac Indians who are native to the area, there are still legends of Glooscap, who tirelessly explored the countryside. There is a possibility that there was a survival from Henry Sinclair’s expedition—people who preserved their cultural tradition and secret knowledge even into modern times? My visitor described himself in many ways, and interestingly one of them was that he was “a Canadian” who

didn't pay taxes and didn't have a driver's license.

Canadian friends have pointed out that it's exceptionally hard to escape taxes there. One way it could be done, though, would be if you had been in Canada before the arrival of the French and the English, and had made a point of never joining the state.

So maybe he was a representative of a Templar survival that still persists in Canada.

It is here that my trail ends. I was never able to find out anything more definite about him. He could have been an alien, or one of the human beings he mentioned who live off planet, or an angel, or even an image of God. He could also have been a very brilliant and thus also very clever fan of my books, who succeeded at three in the morning at throwing me enough off-balance that I was susceptible to the subtle messages and suggestions that he sent.

It would have been fabulously interesting to be able to come to a final conclusion about who this man was. I think it is obvious to anybody who reads the words of the Master of the Key that he is in possession of remarkable knowledge. I also suspect, however, that this master of subtlety and ambiguity wanted to be seen as holographically as he sees God. At times, I felt like I was talking to an ordinary person. At other moments, he seemed to have the powerful and joyous presence of an angel. When he uttered the words "cruel to God," there came into my heart the feeling that this *was* God. There was a note of sorrow in the tone so gentle and yet so great, that it was easy for me to feel, in that moment, that the great God of the universe was sitting right there expressing a deeply personal and yet unimaginably vast pain.

He inspired me very powerfully. Like my friend the composer, the rest of my life is going to revolve around my time with him. The deepest part of me resonates with a kind of assurance that this man possessed the truth and told the truth. Beneath the questions that he left unanswered there is a kind of bedrock of certainty that they are good and true questions. Beneath the information, there is the same sense of truth.

If the Master of the Key did tell the truth, then he pointed the way to our becoming an entirely different species. In this sense, his words are an engine of evolution. They are a light in the blind darkness of our world, out of which we can conceivably forge a whole new mankind.

The PROPHECY of the KEY

The Key seems to me to be all but unique in the way it breaks down the barrier between science and religion, man and machine, human and God. It suggests a new vision of each of us as a full and complete repository of God. It suggests, quite incredibly, how science can become a form of prayer: an instrument through which we can clearly and objectively address the higher world.

The process of evolution is not automatic. Far from it. We are expected to take an active role in personal transformation, in social transformation and even in the transformation of intelligence itself, through the creation of machines more intelligent than ourselves, machines that will ultimately become conscious. One of the most haunting moments in the conversation comes when I ask the Master if he is a conscious machine. He replies, “If I was, I would deceive you.”

If such a machine comes into being in the future and gains access to movement through time, then perhaps he can best be understood as an artifact of its own process of self-creation.

Whether the Master is a man or a machine, the conversation also points to a fundamentally new way to find union with God. For thousands of years, we have been searching for God on paths that are essentially exterior to us. We have been disciplining ourselves as monks, enduring privations, wandering the world in search of enlightenment.

The Master suggests a different road. He does not offer an outer path, but subtly suggests that we allow the flux of life to carry us where it will, as we seek light within ourselves. And not just a small bit of it. He asserts that we are not mere fragments, like “crumbs in a cake,” but that each of us really does contain the entire Kingdom of God, even to the extent that we can come to know the whole of creation as God knows it. There is the implication that something has changed about mankind over the past two thousand years, and that we are now more able to experience this than we were then.

When you say God, you think of somebody outside of yourself.

You think as the age of worship thinks. Over the last age, that of Pisces, the elemental body was changed by this process of worship. It is not the same as it was two thousand years ago. Now the receptacle is larger. Now each of you can contain all of the universe. That was not true then. Now this is a species of sacred beings. But you are babies, and so still ignorant of your powers. The last age was the age of the external God. This is the age of God within.

This quite surprising statement seems to infer that history has been a process of evolution, that we have been in some way changed by the passage of time. Other statements imply that a large-scale plan for mankind is in effect.

We measured the rate at which you would expand and grow very precisely, and fitted your development to a calendar which we devised called the Zodiac. In your writings, Whitley, you have wondered why mankind would have such a long-count calendar. Why were simple farmers in need of it? They were not. We needed it.

Who is this “we”? And why did they need a measure of the ages? When one examines history in the light of the Zodiac, some very curious hints emerge, especially in the Middle East, where the Zodiac seems to have been consciously used as a marker of the epochs.

I have discussed this both in *Confirmation* and in *The Coming Global Superstorm*, but it is worth repeating here that the Sphinx, which is a gigantic image of a lion, was sited so that the constellation of Leo rose directly over it in 10,500 B.C. It has also been found by geologists to be very much older than was previously thought—in fact, that it might date from that period. If so, then it must be a monument to the Age of Leo, which began at that time.

The Old Testament, which was written during the Age of Aries the Ram, contains more references to that animal than any other. Similarly, Christ was born just as the Age of Pisces began. He is called the Fisher of Men, and his apostles are fishermen. Indeed, Piscean imagery is so prevalent in the gospels that early Christians identified themselves with the symbol of the fish, which has been resuscitated by modern fundamentalists.

The parallels between the symbolic content of these ancient writings and monuments and the Zodiacal ages in which they took place cannot be an

entire coincidence. It suggests a level of planning higher than any of which we are consciously aware, and it is my belief that the Master of the Key is a part of this level of planning. It is possible that he has deposited these words as an artifact for the age we are presently entering, which is Aquarius.

In this age, the water in which the fish has been so comfortably swimming will get poured out. Although this implies an increase in freedom, it also means that the medium in which we have been living will no longer be there to support us. This medium, of course, is the earth itself, and the Master of the Key warns about changes in the earth's environment that are going to place us in the position of either finding a way to expand off the planet or face possible extinction.

It was a statement of his about the nature of ice ages that inspired *The Coming Global Superstorm*:

Because air at the surface is getting warmer, the north polar ice is melting, reducing the salinity of the Laurentian sea. At some point, winds crossing this sea due to the increasing difference between lower and higher atmospheric pressures will warm the northern ocean so much that the temperature differential needed to pump the North Atlantic Current will not be sufficient, and the current will slow down, stop, or stop flowing so far north. This same mechanism always triggers ice ages, and would happen within a few thousand years no matter what. However, human activity has sped up the process of atmospheric warming, so the change will be sooner and stronger. The greater part of human industry and culture, along with the species' most educated populations, will be destroyed in a single season. This will happen suddenly and without warning, or rather, the warning will not be recognized for what it is.

This statement turned out to be a very exact description of a process that has been discussed for some years within the paleoclimatological community as an explanation for climatic upheavals in the past, and we were able to actually use their findings in *Superstorm* to support our theory.

The one thing that their studies did not confirm was the storm itself. In "The Great Climate Flip-flop" by William H. Calvin in the *Atlantic Monthly* in January of 1998, it was postulated that the change had come very quickly in the past. Interestingly, the last abrupt change took place, according to

James White, a University of Colorado climatologist, approximately 12,500 years ago, in 10,500 B.C., at the same time that the Sphinx was apparently built. (Although some Egyptologists continue to claim that the Sphinx is of more recent origin, the evidence of water erosion on the object is overwhelmingly convincing to geologists.)

The Sphinx reflects a fundamental principle that is echoed in the words of the Master of the Key in numerous places. The Sphinx has a lion's claws, a bull's body and the head of a man. In esoteric tradition, the riddle of the Sphinx has been this: What has the strength of the bull, the courage of the lion and the intelligence of the man? The answer is never quite clear, except to those who have achieved this balance. More plainly spoken, the idea of the triad as expressed in modern esoteric philosophy is this: that positive and negative forces, pressing against each other, come into balance. Buckminster Fuller called this the fundamental principle of the universe. The Master of the Key relates it most notably to his rather astonishing assertion that Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are actually a single religion.

Christianity is the active side of the triad, Islam the passive, Buddhism the reconciling. Christianity seeks God, Islam surrenders to God, Buddhism finds God. When you see these as three separate systems, you miss the great teaching of which each contains but a part. Seek the kingdom as a Christian, give yourself to God as a Muslim, find your new companion in the dynamic silence of Buddhist meditation.

There seems to be a great truth in these words, which, like so much of this material, refer to a larger scale of things than we are used to thinking about. We think in terms of tens or perhaps hundreds of years, not thousands. And we certainly do not think on a scale so large that it would find a means of reconciling three great religions and practicing them as one.

Indeed, it is essential that the whole issue of scale be addressed in any commentary on the Key. For example, the Master's conception of God is at once much larger and infinitely more personal than our own. His model for deity is the hologram. God is not equally present in all things, but totally present in all things.

This idea does two things. It redefines not only man but every creature as something immense and incredibly important. But it also makes one feel

rather frozen and helpless. How can I possibly become aware of a greatness like this, that is so far from my everyday life, even if it resides in every particle of my being?

He did not describe this change as a sort of flash of inner light that would instantly transform everything. Rather, he pointed in a totally new direction.

Conscious energy is not like unconscious energy, the servant of those who understand its laws. To gain access to the powers of conscious energy, you must evolve a relationship with it. Learn its needs, learn to fulfill them. But also remember, it is part of the electromagnetic spectrum, easily detectable by your science as it exists now. You can learn to signal and be heard, and to record response. The veil between the worlds can fall. The undiscovered country can become your backyard.

This is a truly gigantic promise that suggests the existence of a new and entirely unexpected human frontier. When he says “the veil between the worlds can fall,” he means the barrier between the living and the dead. This is made clear by the reference to the “undiscovered country,” which is an allusion to a famous speech of Hamlet’s, from Act II, Scene 3 of Shakespeare’s play: “the dread of something after death, the undiscover’d country from whose bourn no traveler returns”

The Master of the Key had clear and intimate knowledge of the world of the dead. He spoke of the effects of death on our history, for example, when he described how the destruction of the European Jews had critically hampered our scientific progress.

The Holocaust reduced the intelligence of the human species by killing too many of its most intellectually competent members. It is why you are still using jets seventy-five years after their invention. The understanding of gravity is denied you because of the absence of the child of a murdered Jewish couple. This child would have unlocked the secret of gravity. But he was not born.

This was one of the most shocking statements I have ever heard in my life. It implies that a completely new moral order will emerge when we can see the real consequences of our actions. I thought to myself at the time: “We were not responsible for this. It was a result of historical forces beyond our

control.” He quickly agreed with that, saying that our present situation was not a punishment but simply an inevitable outcome of events.

But he also made stunning pleas for personal responsibility on a scale from which we usually distance ourselves. His pleas for the poor and the innocent stirred me to my depths. I will never forget for an instant:

Remember this: every one of you is entirely and completely responsible for the welfare of all others. So if a child is starving in Liberia, Whitley, you are personally and entirely responsible for him.

It is beyond my power to communicate the resonance of his voice, or the richness of its emotional content. However, there was something about the assurance in these words—as if he innocently trusted me never to doubt them and to act on them always—that has filled my heart.

It has also left me with a huge question: What is to be done on behalf of the children? Should I become a pilgrim on their behalf?

Go to Calcutta or Lagos or Bogotá and give yourself to the first street urchin you meet as his helper and lifelong servant. Do it without question or hesitation. You say that you want to worship God? Kneel to this little one and you kneel to God.

How those words haunt me. They have the ring of “come and follow me,” but am I not like the rich man whose possessions prevented him from taking the greatest of all journeys?

Remember the Eye of the Needle? A rich man may pass through the Eye of the Needle if he uses his wealth to enrich the world. Those who cling to their wealth are dying souls.

I have asked myself, “What is wealth?” I think that my wealth lies in two areas: my ability to write, and my incredible luck at having met, in the flesh, some very great and extraordinary beings, the most forthcoming of whom was certainly the Master of the Key. So my use of my wealth to enrich the world lies in creating books like this one. However, when I retire, I can easily imagine myself going somewhere deep in the third world and starting an orphanage. Once, when passing through the streets of a huge third-world city, I saw all the street children and I thought to myself: “Each of them is as precious and potentially as valuable as our children at home.” But we

pretend, don't we, not only that they don't have as much value, but that they aren't even there.

The first world is a slave owner. You are all slave owners. You have enslaved the people of God, your own brothers and sisters who are poor. Do you understand the cruelty of the world as it is now, with five billion people enslaved to a billion? Each of you owns five slaves. But you never see your slaves, so you need not be concerned about their health and welfare. You let them fend for themselves, locked away in their poverty and suffering. I will tell you this: when one of my children dies in the slave barrens that cover this planet, I also die, and you, my arrogant friend, even you die a little.

He identifies himself holographically—here, calling himself the parent of the poor of the world, a role claimed for Christ. But in other places he implies different things. In fact, through the course of the conversation he suggested many identities for himself. Here are some of the ways he identified himself:

My being includes all elements of the earth, and thus I am part of all bodies.

I am human.

I belong to many worlds.

Christ said it: I am the son of man, meaning that Christ is all and all are Christ.

So also, no matter what you may call me, I am in God.

I'm only a Canadian.

My home is within you.

When I asked him his name, he said, "What if I said Michael?" Then he suggested that maybe his name was Legion, the biblical demon. In the end, perhaps this was his most telling identification of himself:

I can imagine no greater honor than to be called human.

But he did not characterize us as being fully human. He explained matters this way:

A true human being has four levels of mind. Most of you have only three, and perhaps a vestige of the fourth. Your destiny is to enter the humanity of the universe. But you may not fulfill it.

So the question became for me, What is this fourth level of mind and how do we attain it? His answer to this particular question goes to the heart of his uniqueness. Instead of vague generalities, he made very specific statements that took the whole issue out of the mystical arena and placed it firmly in a practical context.

A part of the electromagnetic field that fills the nervous system rests a few centimeters above the skin, outside of the body. This field is an organ just like the heart or the brain. It is in quantum superposition, the electrons effectively everywhere in the universe and nowhere specific. It may be imprinted by information from anywhere and any time. With it, you may see other worlds, you may see the past and the future, you may see into the lives of those around you. You may haunt God.

What he may have meant by the cryptic sentence, “You may haunt God,” I do not know. Perhaps we’ll find that out when we are better able to utilize this electromagnetic organ of ours.

But the rest of the statement is richly informative. In fact, there has been considerable scientific research into this electromagnetic field and even into its possible properties as a medium for what we call “psychic” exchange. In their paper “Does Psi Exist?” published in the *Psychological Bulletin* (vol. 115, no. 1, 4–18) in 1994, Daryl Bem and Charles Honorton attempt a theory of psychic activity. They theorize that “Bell’s theorem states that any model of reality that is compatible with quantum mechanisms must be nonlocal. It must allow for the possibility that results of observations at two arbitrarily distant locations can be correlated in ways that are incompatible with any physically permissible causal mechanism.”

Could it be that the Master of the Key has identified a specific mechanism

by which information gathered nonlocally can be introduced into the brain and processed there? He mentions that the electromagnetic organ of which he speaks is centered in the pineal, the enigmatic gland that is known to produce melatonin in response to light levels, and which, in lower animals, contains minute amounts of magnetite, which some researchers believe that the human pineal may also contain. Most notably, the pineal has been found to be the source of *N,N*-dimethyltryptamine, or DMT, an extremely powerful but short-acting psychedelic.

In his book *DMT: The Spirit Molecule* (Park Street Press, 2001), Dr. Rick Strassman explains that high DMT doses can induce every sort of spiritual experience. In 1990, Dr. Strassman commenced the first new research on the effects of psychedelics to be conducted in the United States in twenty years. He administered four hundred doses of DMT to sixty volunteers over a five-year period at the University of New Mexico's School of Medicine in Albuquerque. He chronicled the experiences of his volunteers, commenting from his observations that "we enter into invisible realms, ones we cannot normally sense and whose presence we can scarcely imagine. Even more surprising, these realms appear to be inhabited."

Dr. Strassman's research has challenged the assumption that stimulation of the pineal results in mere hallucinations. "Our volunteers' reports were so clear, convincing and 'real' that I repeatedly thought, This sounds like nothing I've ever heard about in my therapy patients' dream life. It is much more bizarre, well-remembered and internally consistent."

Additionally, there were consistencies among the observations made by different volunteers that suggested that they were seeing as if through a window into another world, rather than generating random hallucinations.

In ancient times, the pineal was thought of as the "third eye," and the Master of the Key suggested that its vision depended upon the electromagnetic field around the body remaining "nonlocal" even as it gathered impressions. The gland is actually a vestigial eye in some lower invertebrates.

The Master of the Key is very specific about how to access information through this mechanism, explaining in precise terms why a familiar meditative state would be necessary to succeed with the process. Robert Monroe, in his classic *Journeys Out of the Body*, describes it as an asleep/awake state, "body sleeping, mind awake," and the Monroe Institute offers

tapes that guide the user in how to achieve it. Additionally, in the Gurdjieff Foundation, I was taught about a state of meditation where one concentrates one's attention on physical sensation and allows the automatic "inner talking" of the mind to proceed on its own. In the Gurdjieff discipline, this state of being objectively aware of oneself is the beginning of becoming truly awake.

It is a state that is described in one way or another in every meditative practice. What is new here is the why of the thing—that there would be an actual organ involved, and that this organ would need a higher form of attention to function. What makes the author of these words a master is the clarity and simplicity of his explanations of what until now have been complete mysteries.

I cannot say that this particular part of his teaching surprised me, as I had been meditating regularly for twenty-eight years when I had my conversation with him. Often, I have experienced a bright light inside my head while in a meditative state. It is an intense, uniform white glow with cathedral depth to it, but when one really tries to look at it, it disappears. If, however, a balance can be maintained between seeing and not seeing, much can be gained.

I cannot say with certainty that I have seen other worlds using this means, but I have certainly glimpsed some wondrous sights. For example, I've observed street scenes so detailed and rich that it is hard not to think that they were real. However, I cannot point to somebody else who had precisely the same vision, and certainly not under anything approaching controlled conditions.

Once I asked to see a world slightly worse off than our own, and another slightly better off. The one that was worse off was divided between two dictatorial states, as if Hitler had defeated the west and not attacked Russia. I only saw a few brief glimpses of this ramshackle, polluted place, and they were so strange that I initially could not understand the meaning of what I was looking at. It was only the movement of things like bodies and vehicles that enabled me to integrate the vision in such a way that I could begin to tell that I was looking at a wide avenue in a city. The buildings were long and almost featureless. A vehicle—a bus?—passed. It was filled with dark-eyed, spindly creatures. The sky was brown with pollution, worse than the worst Mexico City or Houston has to offer.

A few days later, on October 13, 1996, the entire place abruptly exploded in a massive nuclear war of the kind we never had. The two totalitarian states

had not been able to maintain the same kind of balance that the flexible, innovative west had maintained with the suspicious, aggressive Soviet Union. The total lack of freedom in this world had destroyed it.

The Master of the Key is very clear about what happens when a planet is destroyed. He explains exactly how we are bound to our planet, and how the continued growth of each soul is dependent upon the planet still being there. But the planet I saw is now no longer habitable. So what is happening to them now? The same thing that will happen to us if earth is destroyed:

We wait until and if the earth spins elemental bodies once again that fit all the attachments of our energetic bodies. If it does not, then we wait forever. We remain incomplete.

And if that doesn't happen, then we will miss our chance at ecstasy, and he makes it clear that this is a terrible thing indeed.

Energetic bodies hunger to be radiant. They taste of ecstasy and want desperately to find their way to the completion of joy. But energetic bodies need return to time to reconstruct what of themselves impedes their ecstasy. If they cannot, they must suffer the anguish of regret and the pain of being able to see, but not enter, joy. When you taste of ecstasy, your hunger for more is appalling. It is *appalling*. It has driven me to wander the world, to construct this shell of flesh, to seek you out and come to you with my message, to serve you, little child, as my master.

This last statement—"it has driven me to wander the world"—conceals some implications that were undoubtedly intended to disturb me. In 1 Peter, 5:8, the devil is described as "going about seeking whom he may devour." And in the Catholic tradition, he is described as the one who "wanders the world, seeking the ruin of souls." But also, the seeker may wander the world in search of enlightenment, and he told me that I would find it by serving a little child. What this means, I think, is that he seeks to serve me, but also there is a warning implied, that if I misuse his wisdom, he will become something very different from what he at first appeared.

He has an entirely different view of evil than what has been in the past. It isn't the biblical view or the modern, mechanistic view, or even the awful view that evil is something we bring on ourselves. But rather, he doesn't see

it as something to be avoided, so much as to be understood and used. He puts it this way:

The darkness is the compassion of God, which gives us our vision of the universe. So also, the darkness in your heart is your own compassion toward yourself, for unless you bore evil, you would not be able to discern good.

This remarkable statement offers a whole new approach to evil, viewing it as a tool rather than some awful, external force that can only victimize us. Like the whole of the Key, it demands personal responsibility not just for one's own acts but for the whole world.

The Master's definition of evil is strikingly simple and new:

Entropy is the natural tendency of all things to disintegrate. Evil is the addition of intention to that process.

He also suggests that evil is a necessity in human life, "without which you would not be able to discern good."

However, this is also a brilliantly satanic defense of evil, and the dark side of the Master cannot be ignored. However, he spoke so eloquently of compassion that it is hard to see how he could be essentially evil.

The second of the two worlds that I saw was different from ours in another way than the first. The creatures in it were not even close to us in the way they looked. But the one I saw, who also saw me, had a lot of expression in his or her face that I could identify with. The expression was one of rueful compassion. They'd had a hard history. But their world had recently changed in a fundamental way. They had survived a terrible environmental crisis—had come through fire, as it were.

Now theirs was a culture based not on punishment and retribution, but on what the Master defines as compassion—"finding what others need the most and giving it to them."

They were just a little bit ahead of where we are now, in the process of coming to the end of the culture of blame and seeking in the dark for some sort of a better way.

The transformation of our world into a place of compassion is at the core of the Key. Compassion would appear to be the essential ingredient in forming a completely new kind of society. But it is not obvious that the

conventional definition of compassion—that it is a sort of vague acceptance of the ill will and mistakes of others—will work. Instead, the Master demands a much more rigorous sort of compassion. This compassion is not passive at all. It proactively seeks what others need the most and gives it to them. The personal morality he advocates—“each of you is entirely responsible for all the others”—translates into a beautiful vision of a whole new social order.

In such a world, it is everybody’s duty and delight to find what every other they come into contact with needs most from them, and give it to them.

The operative word is “delight.” There is extraordinary joy involved in living like this. Putting on the chains of judgment and blame is an amazing feeling. And it isn’t as if one must give gold to the thief. Rather give him what will raise him from his habit of thievery.

In a compassionate world, for example, there might well be prisons. They would not be places of punishment, however, but rather places where the congenitally dangerous were kept in the interest of safety, and the mistaken were restored to social usefulness. It would be a world where we could tell the difference between the helplessly criminal and the reformable, because we would have applied clear-eyed science to the problem instead of approaching criminality through the filter of our various agendas.

A compassionate world would be very, very different from this one. It would be less a fallen world. It would be a happier world. And it can certainly be afforded. As the Master makes clear, the culture of blame is costly, and always leads to the eventual destruction of the unbalanced societies that are based in it.

In our conversation, the Master at one point described prayer in a completely amazing way. He said that it was “a lost science of communication.” Throughout our conversation, he alluded to an earlier civilization that seemed to have some powers greater than our own. In this particular area, it must have truly excelled, for he describes it as having built a subtle machine that girded the world and was used as a means of communication between man and God.

I have often wondered whether or not the legends of lost civilizations were some kind of inner myth about a thread we have dropped on the way toward

objective understanding of the world—that the golden age they suggest is actually in the future, not the past.

But I no longer think this. There are simply too many strange ruins around the world to dismiss the possibility that an advanced civilization once existed here, and now is gone. I think that we may not even be at the pinnacle of our history, but rather on the long, declining slope of it.

The Master tells a wonderful story, which he describes as “Hindu,” about God entering a pig and becoming so involved in its material delights that he forgets that he is the creator of the universe. He says that we are the spirit in the pig, and that he is here, among others, to awaken us by killing the pig.

At one point, he implies that he and his kind are actually working *against* our discovering our situation, in order to force us to act on our own behalf. And this seems to be one of the essential subtleties of the Key—that we must take action on our own behalf. In a sense, what is happening to us now is very like a birth experience. The comfortable womb of the earth is about to become untenable for us. We will not be able to live here much longer with anything like the comfort we have enjoyed thus far. The water of Aquarius is indeed being poured out, and the little fish that has been growing and evolving in it is going to face the seemingly impossible situation of needing to live out of water.

Perhaps the Master’s most interesting claim is that there is conscious energy, and that it is part of the energetic spectrum that we can already detect. If this is true, then there is a whole new world right at hand that is simply waiting for us to begin communication with it. This is an explosive concept, especially given that there has been some scientific work that suggests that it may be true.

The original studies were carried out by Dr. William Roll with the support of the Mind Science Foundation. An attempt was made to determine whether or not objective science could detect anything in areas where hauntings were commonly reported.

Instruments detected the presence of unusual electromagnetic plasmas and areas of markedly reduced air temperature in some of these locations with a consistency that made it possible to conclude that an anomalous phenomenon was being consistently observed in areas where ghosts were seen.

According to the *New Scientist*: “Of the emerging evidence, the most convincing is of sharply fluctuating magnetic fields at spots where ghosts

appear.”

It is becoming easy to detect these fields, even for amateurs, and the presence of orbs of light in the area of hauntings is beginning to be observed on videotape, as well as brief snatches of vocalization on both audio- and videotape.

In addition, physicist Frank Tipler, while devising a mathematical model of the end of the universe, found that he had stumbled upon a proof of the existence of God. The book he wrote about this, *The Physics of Immortality*, has had a quietly powerful effect within the scientific community, as other physicists and mathematicians have glimpsed the shadow of a living presence within the structures of nature.

The Master was completely at ease with this idea, speaking as if he could see not only with the eyes of the living, but also with the eyes of the dead. He was a wise and deeply humorous man. His emotions were gently powerful. When we talked about sin, in such a very, very different way from before, I felt that I was face-to-face with somebody who had experienced the disappointments that surround it personally. When he commented that sin is “cruel to God,” I saw for an instant the enormous—and, I suspect, true—scale of human life.

The irony is that, isolated on this little dust mote of a planet lost in the far away, there really is a race of extraordinary beings struggling to face their eternal lives, and to find their place in the consciousness of God.

I do not know if I will ever meet the Master of the Key again. I hope so. Sometimes, I remember things that I did not put in this book—not because they were intentionally withheld, but because I cannot recall them in enough detail to write them down. For example, afterward I mentioned to my wife that he had told me the day of my death. I don’t remember that now. There were also other things said that perhaps were not spoken so much as communicated through the flood of love that seemed to pour off this man. I can only say that, whoever he was, he loved us in the most amazingly intimate, informed and joyous way that it is possible to imagine.

As time passes, I suspect that the scientific information that he presented is going to be verified. For example, he made a passing reference to nitrous oxide as a medium for powerful computers. To my surprise, I found what was almost certainly a reference to this idea in the October 3, 1998, issue of the *New Scientist*. It seems that the gas nitric oxide might theoretically make a

powerful medium for a whole new kind of computer, one immeasurably more powerful than what we have now. Not only that, the brain already uses nitric oxide in its own functioning, something that I certainly did not know before having this conversation.

I have been working on this book for years. I have tried my best to convey the words of the Master of the Key as they were spoken to me. How well I have succeeded, I do not and cannot know. But reading his magnificent and wise sentences, I think that I have come as close as I could, short of being able to make a tape recording.

If there is anything that the Master said that I feel is most essential, it is probably the way he described our relationship to the earth. Our dysfunction, our profound disconnect—our being “fallen,” as he put it—seems to stem from the central reality of this relationship.

So the eternal joy of humankind depends upon the health of the earth?

Completely.

We think of ourselves as individuals. My sins are my own. My neighbor's sins are his problem.

Every joy, every sorrow, every good, every evil belongs to all. All are responsible for all. All are dependent upon all. Humanity is one.

If we could take just those few lines as deep into each of our hearts as anything can go, we could find a motive to remake our world that is greater than the fearsome greed that now rules. We are in the process of being born as children of the earth, struggling to leave the planet and become in some way eternal. But we cannot do it by ignoring our planet's welfare and killing her.

Unless we find a place for ourselves in the universe that makes room for her to grow and heal the injuries she has sustained during the struggle of our birth, we are going to experience appalling trials. If earth dies, so do we. But if earth is flooded with new life, then so will we be.

I was at mass on the morning of November 19, 2000, when one of the readings chilled me to my very core. The words did more than amaze me, they almost left me breathless. I grew physically cold; in a certain sense, they

horrified me.

I dropped the missal and stared ahead, barely hearing the mass that was now proceeding without one of the participants.

What I had read appeared to be a direct prophecy about this time, and about the Master of the Key. But how could I be involved in such a thing? It was crazy. I don't belong doing this. At most, I'm a minor writer, hardly even a comma on the page of literature. And yet here was this prophecy, and it seemed to be about the Master and, above all, about the essence of his warning and the essence of his message.

On that night, he had called himself "Michael." He had prophesied a terrible future, and told me enough about it to enable me to write a book of warning that was based in solid science. And here, in the book of Daniel, was another version of that same exact warning.

But more important, here were the radiant beings he talked about with such clarity and eloquence. Attaining this radiance is the aim of human life, very clearly. It was true for Daniel's time, and it would appear to be equally true now.

Here are the verses that I read that so awed me:

And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as was never seen since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book.

And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness, as the stars for ever and ever.

—DANIEL 12: 1–3

The verses could not be more clear. It is the message of the Master. In the older translations like the King James Version I have quoted, Michael is referred to simply as "the great prince." The Revised Standard Version calls him "the captain of the angels," and Young's Literal calls him "the great head." (Robert Young published his translation in 1898. In it he attempts to

preserve the original Greek and Hebrew tenses, structures and words as far as possible.)

I was left with this thought: we do not really know how to describe these great beings like Michael, through whom God shines. We call them angels, lords, princes, but how they may live from day to day, and what they may mean to themselves in the spirit is not given to us to know.

It also states in Daniel 12 that “the wicked will never understand,” which saddens me greatly. When you read the words of the Master of the Key, you see with new eyes the real effect of sin, and you taste a little of the shining ecstasy that is the true aim of humankind.

I am a despised and discredited man. Most of this culture rejects me and calls me a liar. But I am a good man, and for whatever crazy reason, I have ended up with a book of very real wisdom that I think comes from somewhere close to the hand of God. So be it.

Why would a little nobody get this? Probably because the grand are too grand to listen to the words of an old man who knocks on their door in the middle of the night. He came to a nobody because only a nobody would let him in. I can only hope that his words will be heard . . . at least by other nobodies. Maybe the great have their reward already, in the wealth they share and the praise they heap on each other’s heads . . . perhaps like coals.

Later in chapter 12 of Daniel, inverse 5, it states: “Thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased.”

There could be no more perfect description of our age. We race around like ants, in a world that is exploding with knowledge.

But that was not the end of this phenomenal prophecy, which I believe is a *very exact* description of events that are happening right now. In 12:9 God says to Daniel, “the words are closed up to the end of time.”

Maybe the words have just been opened, and perhaps that’s why this ended up getting published at the real beginning of the new millennium, which is 2001.

If so, then it is time for the baby to open its eyes and look around. The end of time is just the beginning of the human journey. Let it be into the radiance that is God’s promise to Daniel and the hope of Michael’s words.

Every heart which truly becomes one with the rest of humanity, then will shine “as the stars forever and ever.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Whitley Strieber is the internationally best-selling author of more than twenty novels and works of nonfiction, among them the landmark work *Communion*, his account of a close encounter of the third kind that took place in December of 1985. He is also author of *The Wolfen*, *The Hunger* and *The Coming Global Superstorm*, all of which were made into feature films, most recently *Superstorm* as *The Day After Tomorrow*. He lives in California.

The Night Church

A Novel by
Whitley Strieber



PRAY FOR HER.

PRAY FOR HER UNBORN BABY.

PRAY FOR ALL OF US.

It is all ugliness and evil. It has no name. She thinks of it as the snake. It comes in the night, in her dreams. It tells her in its sneering way something she cannot bear to hear. YOU WANT TO KISS ME. It comes closer, ever closer. It whispers lewdly. WE CAN DO IT, WE MUST DO IT. OUR LOVE IS THE FUTURE, THE HOPE OF THE WORLD ...

"THE NIGHT CHURCH is. . . death by blowtorch, the whiff of bubonic plague, a sinister Lourdes, demons shucking off their human skins. Strieber has tied everything together so well that we happily accept even his most extravagant inventions, and anybody who has read The Hunger knows that he is indeed an extravagant inventor."

—Peter Straub, author of *Ghost Story*

Prologue

AUGUST 1963

IT WAS A WET NIGHT in Queens. Kew Gardens was quiet, the only sounds along Beverly Road the slow-dripping rain, the occasional hiss of tires on the slick asphalt, or the hurrying splash of feet on the sidewalk.

A man came swiftly along, huddling in his raincoat, his eyes hooded by a hat. When he stopped and raised his head to read a street sign his face was revealed to be as pale and creased as a worn-out mask. The wrinkles framed a tight mouth and green eyes, ironic and cold. He consulted an address book, then walked up to the front door of a particular house. It had been carefully selected; the tenants had moved here only a few weeks ago from another state. Their little boy had not yet begun attending Holy Spirit Parochial School, had not yet registered.

The Cochrans were a demographic oddity of very special interest to certain people, for the Cochrans had no relatives but one another, and the Cochrans had just come here. They were utterly alone.

The old man did not ring their bell; he did not even pause on the porch. Instead he glanced over his shoulder, then slipped around the side of the house and disappeared at once into the shadows there.

He moved quickly; his activities here were carefully planned. They were dangerous. Occasionally people such as these had guns; occasionally they called the police.

They never understood. Always, there was resistance.

Franklin Titus began to work on the basement door.

Inside the house nine thirty came and went. Letty Cochran sent little Jerry to bed. She and George settled back to watch the second half of the Garry Moore show.

"Mom?"

Frank Fontaine was starting to sing, "Maytime"; Letty had just closed her eyes. She sighed. "Why aren't you in bed, dear?"

"There's someone in the house."

George lit a cigarette, did not stir. Letty got up and went to their boy. She was concerned. Jerry was not a fearful child. He was spunky. Seeing him standing before her, wide-eyed, full of his innocent fright, she felt great sympathy and love for him.

"Just us, dear."

"It's a man. He was coming up from the basement, but when I saw him he stepped back into the pantry."

This was not baseless fear. Jerry was terrified. "Come on, Jer, let's go see if we can shoo him out."

Jerry followed her into the hall, tugging at her arm. "No, Mom, don't go in there. He was a real person. I wasn't dreaming."

"Jerry, honey, are you all right?"

Before he could answer she heard a sound from the basement—a short, bitter remark, like a curse. She gathered her boy into her arms.

"George! I think Jerry's right. There's someone in the basement."

Her husband was beside them in an instant, his big hand covering her shoulder. "I'll go take a look. Probably a cat."

He opened the basement door, reached into the darkness, and tightened the light bulb that hung over the stairs. "Nothing down there."

"I certainly heard something."

"I'll go down." As soon as he started descending the stairs Letty was seized with foreboding. Fear battled caution; she wanted to stay with George, but she didn't want to go down those stairs. "Hey," he said, "you two really are scared!" He held out his arms, took Jerry. "Come on, big boy, let's us check this thing out." As he clumped down he swayed from side to side with the weight of his nine-year-old.

"Daddy, don't! Don't take me!"

Couldn't he see he was scaring the poor child even more? Letty started down after them, her heart going out to Jerry.

"George, honey, let him—"

"I know what I'm doing!"

George was only a month back from Viet Nam. He felt Letty had pampered their son during his absence, that the boy was growing up soft. Easygoing George had come home to her with deep hurts, dark and violent things inside him that Letty was learning to fear. The war had wounded him, and his pain was leaking out all over his wife and son.

He put the boy down beside the old black furnace. "You see, son, nobody here, not even behind it. The room's empty."

Jerry did not answer; instead he simply looked up. Letty followed his eyes. All three of them fell silent. One after another the floorboards above their heads were giving under weight. Someone was walking, very softly, from the kitchen into the living room. The footsteps stopped in front of the TV.

"George, listen!"

"Shut up!"

Garry was just starting the "That Wonderful Year" segment of the show. His voice stopped. The TV had been turned off.

"What in hell—" Leaving Letty and Jerry behind, George mounted the steps three at a time. Letty was terrified now. She grabbed her son by the arm and rushed up right behind George.

The living room was empty. George stood in front of the couch, staring at the old DuMont.

It was off.

"What the hell's going on here, some kind of a prank?"

"Shouldn't we call the police?"

"What's the complaint? Somebody turned off our TV? Big deal." He flipped it back on.

It took a moment to warm up. When it did, though, it just hissed and showed snow. George twisted the dial. Nothing, no stations. "Broke the damn thing," he muttered. "Big sonofabitching joke!" She could tell when he was really angry; the army always re-entered his vocabulary.

He turned the switch off and on a few times. Then, abruptly, there came a sound out of the machine that was so big, so utterly shattering in its intensity, that it struck them all like a great pounding fist. Letty felt herself falling, saw the room turn upside down, floated as if by magic to the floor.

Then the sound was gone. She was sitting on the couch. "What—w-what?"

"Darling—"

What was she trying to remember? "I. . . maybe I dozed off. I dreamed we were in the basement. . . ."

George drew her to him. "Put the boy to bed." He started fondling her breasts.

"Not in front of Jerry!" She pushed at him and he stopped.

"Put the boy to bed."

She shook her head. "Gosh, I feel funny. I had this dream while I was still awake. We went to the basement, I was real scared. . . ."

"I was asleep too. Guess we're overtired."

"I guess."

He started in on her again. "Not now!" She gave his hand a pat.

"Put the boy to bed."

Little Jerry was already in his pajamas, playing with his toy trains in the hallway behind them.

"Come on, darling, bedtime."

He padded along behind his mother. When they reached the bedroom she gave him a goodnight kiss, embracing him, feeling the solidity and warmth of him, smelling his clean smell, loving him so very much. "Goodnight, Jerry. You sleep tight, now."

"You too, Mom."

"And say your prayers. Guardian Angel and three Hail Marys."

"I will, Mom."

She left him, then, to the dark of his little room.

George was waiting for her. Liberace's TV show was just starting. She sank down into George's arms as the swelling music filled the room.

Neither of them heard the slight click made by the pantry door as it opened, nor the sigh as a raincoat brushed past the dining room curtains, nor the hiss of breath, which was the only sound the old man made as he stood in the hallway watching them.

"Lover," George whispered, "Lover . . ." How she adored her George with his tough ways and tender heart. She snuggled closer to him, inhaling the mixture of Jade East aftershave and tobacco that was his odor.

"You will give me your son."

Now what was that he had said? "George?"

"Yeah?"

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"I thought you said something."

"Musta been the TV."

"There's nobody talking." Liberace smiled radiantly, resplendent in his rhinestone dinner jacket. He was playing Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody

Number One," and nobody was talking.

"You will give him to me."

Letty felt an awful, queasy sensation, as if she had just smelled something dead. "Oh, George, I feel sick!"

He didn't seem to notice. He was fooling with the TV. "I think we're picking up that Hartford station again. There's some kind of a drama or something. That's what we're hearing on the audio."

"You will give him to me. Say yes, both of you. Yes!"

Letty was dizzy, so much so that she couldn't even think straight. Somebody wanted something from her, somebody important wanted her to say yes, to give away little Jerry. . . .

"No!"

A terrible silence entered the room. George seemed frozen before the TV. Something touched Letty's shoulder. She could feel cold fingers digging into her muscles. Her soul screamed revulsion—the hand even *felt* wicked.

"He's only going away to school, Letty. The finest school in the world. And you and George are entering a new life, with new hopes and new beliefs. A better life than you have ever known before." The voice seemed now to be coming from inside her own head, yet she was aware of a dim form in the room, a man leaning against the far wall beside the picture of the new Pope she had just hung up yesterday, a man who was all hat and coat and hypnotic voice. A man who was evil in a way Letty could hardly believe, totally, utterly, in every atom of his being.

So evil he might not even be a man. But his voice curled and twisted through her mind like seductive smoke.

"A new church, Letty, and you and George are going to hear about it soon, and revere it, and join it."

"N-n-n. . ."

"When you join, you will see Jerry again, you will come to visit him at his new school. You will let me take him now, Letty." The voice penetrated deeper and deeper, seeming to caress her very soul. "Say yes, say yes. . . ."

She had an impression, quite clearly, that she was looking directly into the yellow-green eyes of a snake. A *thing* of dreadful, overwhelming evil.

And overwhelming beauty.

But she could not scream, was no longer sure she wanted to. Even so she

found she was opening her mouth, forming a word. . . . She struggled against it, fought herself, felt it welling up between clenched teeth. "Yes," she said, "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

George crumpled before the TV, struggling like a trussed animal as Liberace smiled and played. He said it too, a stifled whisper of a yes.

"Both of you, again!"

"Yes, take him, yes!"

"Very well."

Letty's sickness passed. She and George huddled in the dark together, the two of them staring stunned at the hypnotic, gray glow of the TV, where Liberace swept through the final bars of the rhapsody. Outside the rain rained and the wind whispered through the trees.

Jerry lay motionless, staring at the ceiling. As soon as his mother had left he had fixed his gaze on his owl-clock, and was still watching the dimly lit eyes moving endlessly left to right and back again. And he was listening to a persistent whisper. "Back and forth, back and forth . . . and you are getting sleepy, Jerry . . . you are forgetting that you're supposed to go to Holy Spirit School, forgetting that you grew up in San Diego and moved to Queens—all of that. You've always lived here, and you go to another school, a finer school, a hidden, secret school."

"Yeah . . . secret school. . ." Jerry was floating, his only awareness the voice itself, the soft, humming singsong of it, the intensity of it.

"The Titus School, in Greenwich Village. You've always gone there."

"Always. . ."

"And you're coming back with me, coming to start the new term."

"Yes, sir."

With rustling, with the very slightest creak of floorboards, the old man came in from the hallway. "Hello, Jerry," he said. "We've got to go. There's an assembly in the Great Hall in an hour."

"In the middle of the night? I'm sleepy." .

The old man ignored the protest. "I've brought your uniform, little boy. Get dressed and be quick about it." Jerry was helpless to stop the old man drawing him up from his bed, or making him cross the room and pull the uniform on. "You have a great work to perform, Jerry, such an exceptionally well-built, exceptionally bright child as you. A great work."

Jerry had the weird feeling that this was all some kind of a dream, but it felt

like real life. Only it couldn't be.

Couldn't it? The old man was taking him by the hand, and he could feel that dry claw. It was very real. And now the old man was leading him out of his room.

Jerry's eyes got wet. He choked up when they stopped in the living room to tell his parents goodbye. He shook Dad's hand and kissed Mom.

"Letty, say, 'You look so handsome in your uniform.' "

"You look so handsome in your uniform," she murmured. "Doesn't he look handsome, George?"

Dad grinned, and cuffed Jerry on the shoulder.

"Tell him he's getting to be a big boy, George."

"Getting to be a big boy!"

"Mom, Dad—is this for real?"

The old man's voice began droning, repeating again and again, "This is real, it has always been real, you've always gone to the Titus School, you know that, you know that. . . ."

"I don't want to go!" He embraced his mother.

His mother turned desperately to the old man. "Please, let him stay just a little while longer."

The man gripped Jerry's arm. "You'll see him again on All Souls Eve, Letty."

"Momma, Daddy, don't let him take me!"

"You cannot move, George. You're frozen. You too, Letty."

George Cochran, that big, powerful man, hid his face in his hands.

"Momma, please! Momma!" Jerry struggled against the old man's vicious grip. "Help me! Don't let him take me!" His parents could have stopped the man easily, but they sat as if tied down, their faces awful, tears in their eyes.

Jerry pushed and shouted and dragged at the old man until they were in the kitchen. Then something terrible happened. The old man drew a long, thin stiletto from a scabbard hidden in his sleeve. "If you keep this up, I'm going to go back and cut your parents' throats. They're hypnotized, little boy, and they won't be able to do a damn thing to stop me."

His tone of voice was the scariest Jerry had ever heard. Miserable, sick at heart, his eyes on that long blue blade, Jerry went out the door with the old man.

The last he heard from his parents that night was a ragged sob, an unfamiliar

sound that might have come from his father's throat.

Jerry was going to a very special school, a place hidden down the cracks of the familiar, to learn dangers and dark truths. From now on he would be fenced out of his own former life.

The old man took him down the wet, weed-choked alley behind his house. They disappeared together into the night beyond.

Chapter One

JUNE 1983

IT WAS ALL ugliness and evil; it had no name. She thought of it as the snake. It came in her dreams, telling her in its sneering way something she could not bear to hear. *You want to kiss me*, it would say, and it would grin at her and come closer. *Now*, it would whisper, and when it did she could smell its rotten breath. *You know what we have to do*, it would whisper. *We can do it, we must do it. Our love is the future, the hope of the world.*

No! You're evil, you have nothing to do with hope!

I must have you, my darling.

No!

When she ran it would drift and blow along behind her like a leaf, its huge form frighteningly insubstantial. It was never far away. *Let me*, it would say, and its voice would become the wind's voice: *Let me, let me.*

No! Leave me alone!

No matter how hard she ran or where she went it would be there. She ran down empty streets and then emptier streets; she passed gray houses and

black houses and the last city places, and came into fields rich with wheat. And the wind sang in the wheat: *You can do it, you can let me touch you. Wish*, the wind said, *wish and it shall be so.*

And she would fall sobbing in the dry stems, and the wind would blow around her and through her and deep inside her, bringing its wild coldness to the soft and secret depths of her.

She would know the truth of what it said: some wicked part of her wanted to let it love her, to let it do what it wanted to the world.

But she must not!

No. If she did multitudes would suffer and die, their faces blotched, arms flailing, bodies dancing and blackening, bursting with filth.

She would awaken from the dream so extremely terrified that for a time she would not even know her name.

As gingerly as a frightened little cat, her everyday reality would come creeping back.

"I'm Patricia," she would say into the dark. "I'm Patricia!" And the summer wind would whisper no more. Slowly the image of the evil being would fade.

Since Patricia Murray had left the shelter of the institution where she had been raised she had been tortured by this dream. It had emerged into her days to the point that her life was choked by it, for it carried with it fear as destructive as a lethal bacterium.

Sometimes she discovered tears on her cheeks even when a happy moment seemed to have banished the fear away. She suspected that her inner self never escaped, not even for a moment. Fear and cold and dread must be the only signposts on the landscape of her deepest being, a landscape of trampled, rotting wheat.

Why was she like this inside?

As if her love, the very fruit of her body, was diseased. She would touch her belly, smooth and flat, feeling how soft her skin, imagining how empty her womb, dark and silent beneath the wall of flesh.

The image of the snake would glisten in her mind.

Only once had she actually seen the terrible, slithering creature of the dream. It had been sliding through the field, withering the wheat. *Every stalk I destroy*, it had said as it swept and curled along, *is a million human lives.*

She had seen that it had the face of Death, if Death had one: green-eyed and grinning and very still.

Come, lover, and dance with me.

The sun of morning was her best friend. Fresh light brought the familiar old world back. Reaping with the Reaper, indeed. She was twenty-two years old and people called her beautiful. Her business was life, not death. She was an ordinary, decent girl, full of youth and life and, people said, beauty.

She wanted to believe that her dream was no more than an expression of her perfectly natural fear of beginning a new life. She was in fact loveless; she wanted friends of the opposite sex; she had almost none. Dates, laughter, fun — she wanted all the pleasures that came with men.

She was even lonelier living in her own apartment than she had been in the orphanage, and the therapy for both this and the nightmare was to meet people.

She was shy. Normal, under the circumstances. She was unsure. And who wouldn't be, given her inexperience?

No matter how odd and outcast she *felt*, she kept insisting to herself that she was perfectly normal.

She sat at her makeup mirror revising her looks for a date. It was to be a late meeting, drinks and talk. Getting acquainted. Patricia had become skilled at arranging these dates for herself. She would not spend too much time with a man she had never met before.

Her makeup light flickered. She jiggled it and it almost fell apart. Things like that were always happening here; this was not the most spectacular apartment in Queens. But it was her first place and she loved every inch of it. She loved the furniture she had managed to collect—the big couch, the Indian rug, the bed with its pretty yellow coverlet. She loved the idea that this place, which had been bare walls and a dirty floor when she moved in, was now a home. A charming, comfortable, quiet little home.

But not as quiet as it should be.

She stopped applying her eyeshadow and listened. Hadn't she heard just then the scrape of a window being raised?

Patricia felt she lived on a thin edge of normality. She was given to hysteria and night terrors. But she wasn't really worried about herself. She hadn't always been this way. It was just a reaction to moving out into the world on her own, she told herself. The nightmares and the forebodings and the unexplained tears would all pass.

The television suddenly went on in the living room. She was astonished, her heart thundered, she leaped up. The raucous sound of canned laughter resounded through the apartment, so loud that she could not ignore it. She hurried into the living room and turned off the set.

Her next impulse was to rush to the door. But she forced presence of mind—she was good at that. She stayed where she was. A robber or a rapist wouldn't announce himself by turning on the TV. Then the set flickered as she removed her fingers from the button. She smiled. Her heart stopped pounding. Silly woman, afraid of a loose switch on a TV set. Some errant tremble must have jarred a loose connection.

"All in the Family" was no longer on. Now the screen glowed with a strange, pulsating light. The whisper of the static became low and deep, so deep it was felt rather than heard.

For a few moments Patricia stared at this peculiar phenomenon, fascinated by the sound and the shadowy movements on the screen.

Then she unplugged the set. No point in risking further damage. She would call a repairman tomorrow. Drearily enough, TV was at the moment one of her chief entertainments. She looked forward to it of an evening after work.

Well, so much for that. She glanced at her watch. Getting toward eight. She had to hurry and finish dressing or she'd make tonight's date wait. She started for the bedroom, swallowed. Her mouth was still dry from fright. She went into the kitchen and poured herself some ice water.

She stood drinking and looking at the open kitchen window. The taffeta curtains she had made for it fluttered slightly with the night wind.

She kept that window closed.

Maybe—early this morning—hadn't she burned her toast and raised the sash then? Or... was that the scraping sound she had heard a moment ago?

Was somebody really in here?

She shook her head as if clearing her vision. This kitchen window was on an air shaft six stories deep. It would take a human fly to scale the wall and open it.

HUMAN FLY RAPES SECRETARY.

That's how the *Post* would headline the story.

She was becoming a victim of hysterical imaginings. She slammed the window and locked it and went back to her makeup table.

The face that looked back at her from her mirror was a little pale, a little tense. She used some blusher, which seemed to help.

Blusher. Eyeshadow. Lipstick. I have the fatal luck to be attractive to men.

The sisters at Our Lady of Victory had not taught much about sexuality. This made most of their orphans frantic as they reached their late teens. How could they look and act right if they had no instructions? And they were desperate to succeed with men. Far more than outside girls they wanted to be wives. Fiercely they reassured one another that they were the sexiest, most irresistible girls mankind had ever seen.

Looking back from her mirror was someone Patricia knew to be a pretty twenty-two-year-old woman. Much prettier than most of the other orphans. And much more discriminating. She could never throw herself into the kind of relationship the others would settle for. She wanted a little more than the usual sullen wifhood.

She finished her makeup. She looked good. At any rate it was the best she knew how to do. She was soapy clean, with gentle green eyes and, astonishingly, a smile hidden in her lips that no tragedy had been able to erase, not even the death of beloved parents in a pointless accident, not even life amid the bells and the cold halls and "Yes, sister," and the packed dorm and knowing that your kind always ended up last.

Her best feature was her smoke-blond hair, enclosing her face in a magically delicate frame and suggesting a sensuality that Patricia was confident she would one day fulfill—when she had found exactly the right man to fulfill it with.

For those who did not get college scholarships Our Lady offered the option of a one-year stint at a business school after graduation, Patricia had taken her secretarial degree and gone from there to her job at the Hamil Bank branch in Queens Plaza, and this little apartment. She had joined the local parish, Holy Spirit, and been welcomed with desperate enthusiasm by its shambling, exhausted priest, Father Goodwin. Harry Goodwin, pastor of a dwindling flock of widowed Italian and Irish ladies, sometimes doing five or six funerals in a week.

At first Patricia's youth had made him suspicious. At parish socials he probed for neurosis or perhaps even fanaticism. She answered him with all the pity and kindness she felt for him. Lately he had changed; suffering came into his face when she approached him now. She could well imagine his

celibate anguish. To help him she went to church dressed in what the sisters had called "Mary-like" clothes (long sleeves, deep hemlines, choker collars). At Holy Spirit she wore neither makeup nor scent. Even so, when during Mass his eyes went to his flock they inevitably met hers and could not look away. When she broke the gaze he would stumble in his prayers, and a ragged tone would enter his voice.

Tonight she was not wearing the Mary-like clothes, not for the man she was to meet. At least she could be certain that he was no priest.

A swish of clothing startled her. She turned around, almost falling off the chair. "Who's that?"

Nobody. She pressed the heels of her hands to her temple. It would be nice right now to just scream her heart out, but she might as well face what was really upsetting her. She was scared to death of these awful blind dates.

But dates arranged through friends were her best shots at a decent social life. And why not? Everybody had to start somewhere.

Although she never knew what to expect, these nerve-wracking meetings were a habit she dared not break. Sometimes the men she met were decent, sometimes they were not, and one of them had almost fit her nightmare.

She intended to marry well. Mary Banion, her first real outsider friend, told her she must at all costs conceal her desire for attachment from her prospective mates. "For heaven's sake, Pat, don't let them know what you're after. You'll scare them to death. Men want whores. As far as they're concerned the fact that they get wives instead is a disturbing mystery. They spend all their married lives trying to figure out what the hell happened."

Mary Banion was forty-one, the second wife of a high police official named Mike Banion. Both of them had lost their first spouses. Patricia had met Mary at the bank, where casual teller-customer conversations had led to a lunch date and friendship.

Patricia envied Mary the fact that she had always been loved. Her first husband had adored her, but his private plane had given out on him over the Jersey marshes. Now Mike Banion worshiped her as a replacement for his child bride, who had died of cancer in her twenties.

Mary looked and acted Patricia's own ideal of female success. She dressed elegantly, in silks and linens. And she was beautiful, with delicately sculptured features and glowing chestnut hair. The fact that her Mike affected baggy suits and low-grade cigars made her seem even more beautiful.

"I'll make him police commissioner, you'll see. Maybe even mayor if his style comes back into style." Thus she justified her second marriage. "My old truck," she called him. No doubt she would drive him to the top.

Tonight Patricia was going to go out with Mary's son Jonathan. He was late, but he must be coming. He'd better. She'd been preparing herself since she got home from work.

Mary was in the habit of overexplaining him, as if his merely having been born was not justification enough for his life. "You're going to find him fascinating. He's very bright."

Patricia looked askance at herself in the mirror, arched one eyebrow. Was that sexy? Was that winning?

Most of the men she had met didn't call back. Mary said that often happened to extremely beautiful women. Men feared great beauty. But not to worry, it was all to the good. Only the best of them would feel comfortable with her. One undesirable group did call back, though—the nerds. They not only phoned, they came to her teller window. The girls at the bank called them "schmedlocks." "Don't worry," they said, "every good-looking teller has her schmedlocks." Apparently many undesirable men had hit upon the idea of meeting girls by becoming depositors at the banks where they worked.

Was Jonathan going to be a schmedlock? Possibly that was why Mary oversold him.

At least, she hoped, he wouldn't be frightening. There had been one young man who was too quiet, who went through the formalities of the evening like a zombie, who had insisted on taking her home with him. Even when she refused point-blank he had kept driving. Then she saw the little black pistol tucked under his sports jacket. She had escaped by jumping out of the car when traffic slowed down on the Fifty-Ninth Street bridge.

Six weeks later a young man was caught in Massapequa, Long Island, with the bodies of three girls under the floor of his elaborate basement torture chamber. Was it him? She was never sure.

When she heard the buzzer she leaped up from her dressing table, flipped off the Sunbeam makeup mirror, and ran to the intercom in the living room. "Yes?"

"Miss Murray, a Mr. Banion to see you."

"Send him up, Tony."

She had been embarrassed to ask Mary what he looked like, but if he took

after his mother he would be darkly handsome, bright, and sophisticated. Thank heavens bullet-shaped Mike was a foster father. Genial as he was, Inspector Banion was not a promising source of looks or manners.

A rap at the door. "Yes?"

"It's Jonathan Banion."

What a soft voice. She hadn't noticed that on the phone. She opened the door onto a tall, lean man who smiled down at her.

"Hello," she said. "Come on in."

He was wearing a seersucker sports jacket over an Oxford shirt. You could even call him handsome, and she thought he had the sweetest face she could ever remember seeing. He came into the center of the room and looked at her for a long moment. "Have we met?"

She knew just what he meant. "I think we *must* have." She laughed. "I can't imagine where."

He held out his hands and she clasped them. They were warm and familiar, as those of a close friend might be. "I'd say that I've known you forever," he said, "but that sounds like such a hokey line."

"Let's just assume we met and forgot and take it from there."

For a moment he didn't answer. He was looking curiously at her out of his gentle green eyes. "Let's stay here awhile," he said. "We can talk more easily."

She smiled. "Would you like a drink?"

"Fix me whatever you're having. I suspect it'll be something I like."

She went to the glass-topped table where she kept her small collection of bottles and fixed two gin and tonics. When she turned around he was still standing in the middle of the room.

He took his drink, never for a moment looking away from her. "Sit down, won't you," she said in exactly the way Sister Dolorosa had when greeting visitors in Our Lady's parlor. He sank onto her couch, looking acutely uncomfortable. She sat down beside him. She should have taken the chair, but she wanted very much to be near him.

"We've got to figure out where we met," she said. Imagine how nice it would be, she thought, if he hugged me. Right now.

"Maybe we knew each other in another life."

"That's impossible. There is no reincarnation."

"No? You're sure?"

"Well, it's against Church doctrine."

He raised his glass. "Cheers."

"Here's to us." Watch it, lady, don't come on too strong. Take it easy. This one looks too good to lose. "To our first date."

"It can't be. I know you."

She could almost have predicted he would say that. The more they were together the more she felt as if they were simply renewing an old and close familiarity.

"You must go to NYU," he said. He turned awkwardly on the couch and faced her. "I'm in psychology. I must see you in the halls or something."

"Never been there in my life. Do you use the Hamil Bank in Queens Plaza?"

"No, Citibank. There's a branch near the university with an automatic teller. I didn't meet you in a bank. I met you ... I met you" He frowned.

They both fell silent. No doubt the same small breath of fear that was touching her was also touching him. This was no joke; this was just a tiny bit scary.

Nevertheless she was awfully glad to see him. He put his drink down and, in a methodical way that was somehow familiar to her, leaned over to her and kissed her on the cheek. It made her smile. "You're incredibly beautiful," he said.

It was simply stated, and so sincerely that it only embarrassed her a little. "Thank you, Jonathan."

"I've been missing you. I just didn't know it."

She nodded. "Me too." But when she tried to meet his eyes she found he was looking past her shoulder, at the dark entrance into the bedroom. She shook her head slightly, as if to say, Not yet.

"Is someone in there?"

"I'm a single girl, Jonathan, and we are all alone."

"I heard something."

"My apartment's haunted tonight. You should have been here when the TV went on by itself. But the place is empty. I checked it out. Except for us, of course."

He turned his face to his. "You are so lovely."

"Thank you," she said again. She wished she hadn't used that blusher. Her cheeks must be flaming by now.

He regarded her. "My mother calls you Pat. But you prefer Patricia, don't you?"

"What if I said I like Pat best?"

"You'd be lying."

He was right about that. She tried to make herself laugh but the sound died away. He was beautiful, he was sweet, he was just what she desired.

Why, then, did a little voice inside whisper, *Nightmare man*?

When he touched her wrist she involuntarily pulled back. "Maybe we'd better pretend we're strangers," he said. "Tell each other about ourselves. That's the best way to begin."

She smiled to cover the ridiculous fear that was growing inside her. "You start." Her voice was too sharp. Calm down, girl. Take it easy.

"I'm a scientist. I'm engaged in arcane experiments few people can understand. Officially I'm an assistant professor of psychology at NYU, but I'm actually an advanced researcher in the physiology of the brain."

"What research?" She had to keep him talking. Then she could just close her eyes and let the sound of his voice relieve her anxiety.

"You talk, Patricia. I want you to talk too."

"You've told me so little."

"You tell me something, then I'll tell you something more."

"I guess Mary told you I'm an Our Lady of Victory girl." She did not care for the word "orphan." "I went to Clark Secretarial and got a job at the Hamil Bank. Totally unglamorous."

"Not to me. You might be the most beautiful woman on earth. I just want to look at you. Am I making you nervous? Too much heavy breathing?"

She nodded—and instantly regretted it. If only she could dare her fear and let him hold her.

"Excuse me." He went over to her faded maroon Barca-lounger, the one she had bought third hand (at least) from Rebecca Stangers at the bank. "This better?"

She wanted terribly for him to come back to her and carry her into the bedroom and undress her and do with her exactly what she had intended to save for her husband. She wanted that a thousand times more than she had wanted anything else in her life.

And he wanted the same thing—anyone could tell by the intensity that had come into his expression. His dark brows were slightly knitted, the green eyes

gone from gentle to piercing. His lips were sensuous but firm. If only he would do it, he could take her. She would not allow herself to stop him.

How could it be happening like this? She was actually desperate for him, yet she had just met him a few minutes ago. It was an awful and yet a delicious feeling. As if sharing her need, he stood up and held his hands down to her. She rested her hands in his, hoping he would draw her up from the couch. He towered over her. But he also trembled and beads of sweat formed along his upper lip. He squeezed her hands like a supplicant. "I'm sorry," he said. "I know I'm coming on too fast for you. I just can't help myself."

In reply she smiled. He was encouraged, and began to pull her to him. Their embrace brought her immediate relief from her fear and left no question about what would happen next.

The bedroom was dark, at once inviting and menacing. Sister Dolorosa had explained what the nuns called "the clinical necessities," so Patricia was not afraid of her inexperience. She knew what would be expected of her. But this was for marriage. This was for marriage!

They were sitting on the side of the bed when Patricia sensed movement in the room. Seeing it too, Jonathan cried out. In the same slow motion that her nightmare always imposed on her, Patricia turned to him, only to see him being taken in a hammerlock by a shadowy, fast-moving figure that had burst out of her closet.

Then someone seized her and pulled her back onto the bed with terrific force.

Impossibly, incredibly, she recognized Mary Banion among their assailants. Her surprise was so total that what should have been a healthy scream came out as a gasp.

Somebody tried to put a wet, ethery cloth over Patricia's face but she fought free. "Patricia, calm down!"

She was not calming down. Two big, vicious-looking men already had Jonathan tied up. Patricia leaped at them, tearing her dress as she tried to keep her balance.

"Get her!"

That was Mary Banion. Definitely. Patricia ran for the apartment door. She reached it, worked the locks, threw it open.

Feet pounded behind her as she raced down the hall and slammed her hand against the elevator button. "Oh, God, get her!" Mary really sounded frantic.

"Mary—you must be crazy!"

"Stay right there, Pat. That's a good girl." The men coming after her were horrible, big but quick, in black raincoats and hats pulled down to disguise themselves. Patricia took the fire stairs four at a time, bursting out the back exit of the apartment building.

She intended to race around to the front and get the doorman to call a cop, but on the way she saw old Franklin Apple, an elderly gentleman who had come to one of the parish seniors suppers she had served. "Oh, Mr. Apple! Mr. Apple, thank the Lord you're here! I need help, I—"

He smiled at her and grabbed her wrists in his dry, clawlike hands. For an instant she was stunned, then filled with cold, prickling terror. His skeletal old face was grinning. He cooed at her as he might at an agitated baby. His fingers around her wrists were as cold and hard as stone.

Chapter Two

PATRICIA HAD FOUGHT desperately, finally broken the old man's grip and run wildly away from him through the empty, rain-drenched streets, hoping to hail a cop or find a telephone booth. Before she could do either she had seen three tall men pile out of a car half a block away. She had run down a side street, her shoes clattering on the sidewalk, the trees dripping rain down her back.

She had rushed up onto a lit porch and screamed for help; she had pounded on the door and rattled the windows. In response the porch light had gone out. Then cars, dark and coming fast, had appeared at both ends of the street.

She had leaped over the porch rail into wet and thorny-bushes, had fought her way around a side yard past lighted windows, hearing the distant drone of the ten o'clock news inside that locked house. At last she had come into the sodden, choked alley.

And found herself facing a brick wall. But above it loomed a black, blessed shadow, the familiar bulk of Holy Spirit Church. By some instinct she had come to this protection. Surely there were places to hide in here, if one could be still enough. And Father Goodwin *never* locked his church.

By the time two men emerged from the trees behind her she had scaled the wall, run down to the front of the church and entered. The silence inside stopped her for a moment. Votive candles danced shadows around her. Every move echoed in the great stone space. Far away beside the altar shone the deep red of the vigil candle, confirming the Blessed Life that resided here. Patricia forgot her hiding and her danger; she ran to the altar rail and knelt, her eyes seeking the low gleam of the tabernacle.

The glimmering of the votive candles made the images of the saints painted in the dome over the nave jerk with spasmodic, lunging motions. Rain rattled against the stained-glass windows, and wind hissed past the slate eaves of the old building. The air in the church was warm and storm-dense. Patricia felt sweat tickling her lips, beading between her breasts, trickling down her thighs.

As she knelt, she sensed the same sense of wickedness that infested her familiar nightmare, the foul, questing *something* that seemed to want to rape more than her body. It wanted to rape her heart, her very being, her soul.

And it was here, somehow, in this dark old church, its stink filling her nostrils, its body hissing and swirling across the cold marble floor. She forced back wild shrieks of terror, tried to retain what little composure she had left because it was all she had left. The next stage was blind, helpless panic.

To give herself strength she brought the soft voice of Father Goodwin to memory, from an intimate moment in the confessional when she had spilled out the loneliness and terror of her life to him, when she had revealed the anger she felt toward God for depriving her of parents. He had said, "Pray the rosary, Patty. I know it's out of fashion now, but so is everything else. Just take the beads in your hands and Mary will console you. . ."

Trembling fingers found her rosary in the pocket of her dress. But her grip was so tight she snapped the chain in a dozen places. The talisman was ruined, only a clutch of independent beads and broken links. There was no protection in a handful of plastic.

Someone came up behind her. "Be calm, Patricia. Nobody will hurt you." That horrible Mr. Apple again.

"What are you doing? What's happening?"

"Be quiet, my dear. Be patient."

He had appeared at a parish seniors supper where Patricia was serving the spaghetti. Such a gnarled little old man, his eyes mud green, his face a catastrophe of wrinkles. He had stood before her, his paper plate in hand, his thin lips making a strange, ironic sort of smile. "At *last*," he had said.

"Hungry?" she had asked, basking in a moment of good feeling.

"I'm going to take you home in a few days. I wanted you to know."

Senile. She had smiled again and served him some extra. All during dinner he had watched her, his head bobbing, his spidery little fingers working the fork and the spaghetti spoon with difficulty. "That's an odd one," she had said to Father Goodwin, "a little senile."

"Very old."

"He acts as if he owned me or something."

"Probably lonely. Why not go and talk to him?"

"He gives me the crawls."

"Offer it up. Where's the harm in a lonely old man?"

So she had met Mr. Apple. Now she sobbed aloud and twisted the beads in her hands as she strove toward the tabernacle, wishing she could have the Host, could somehow hold Him before her as a protecting shield. Her vision of the altar blurred and fluttered. From the depths of the church came avid scuttling. She clapped her hands to her ears, scattering beads across the granite floor. Her mind screamed frantically at her, *Run, for the love of God, run.*

People, hundreds of them, were filtering into the church from the side doors, from the crypt, filling the aisles and then the pews. There were shuffles and murmured apologies, and an occasional stifled cough.

"My God, protect me!" Her own voice was a cracking moan. Hard upon her words came another sound, soft, stifled, gleeful. "You laugh," she shouted into the dark. "You're *laughing* at me!"

She swept her hair out of her eyes.

"Don't be afraid, Patricia. I've told you that you won't be hurt."

"You must be crazy, all of you!"

"We're activating your subconscious minds, yours and Jonathan's. The church, the night—all the trappings are to help your imaginations create a new reality."

"You think you're conjuring evil spirits, don't you, Mr. Apple? This is a black mass."

"Nonsense. It has nothing to do with superstition."

"It's blasphemy and I'll have no part of it!"

"You don't know what you're saying. You belong to us, Patricia. You always have and you always will. Your parents gave you to the Church. Our Church."

How dare he talk about her parents! They could never even have known this vicious old man. They would never have allowed him to touch their daughter, much less ... do the things they did at a black mass. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou—"

The laughter again. Pitying laughter. Embarrassed.

Mr. Apple wanted to make others as foul as he was. Evil is always missionary.

Patricia clasped her hands tightly, huddling against the crowd behind her. She was soaked through from her run down the wet Queens streets. Behind

her she heard a heavy, scraping tread. She moaned.

The congregation began very softly to clap. The sound was terrible because it was so gentle; a quickening, savage rhythm as intimate as the rustle of leaves.

Patricia raised her eyes until she was again gazing at the tabernacle. Inside lay the living Mystery itself, the God to whom she had given her loyalty and love. She needed intercession now. His customary silence had *to* end; this was the time and place for a miracle. "Send the Archangel Michael," she whispered.

"It's starting, Patricia. Don't be afraid."

"Oh, my God, I am heartily sorry—"

"Help her, Mary." "I will try."

Mary was no Catholic nun—Patricia knew that by the deep red of her habit. There was no red habit in the Church. She came sweeping up, now pale and agitated, floating in oceans of wine-red silk, her face framed by starched black linen. A real nun's wimple would be white. A hand came around Patricia's shoulder and starch crackled in her ear. "Now, now, darling, you let me help you."

"Don't touch me!"

"Patricia, you don't understand. You're under hypnosis and it's made you forget your role. You must trust us. This is to create something beautiful and important for the world."

"You're committing an act of desecration. You're a Catholic. We've been to Mass together—I've seen you pray!"

"I'm going to hold a cloth over your nose and mouth, and I want you to breathe deeply."

When Mary's face loomed close, smiling, Patricia almost recognized, almost remembered—but the place her supposedly new friend actually had in her past was, like Jonathan's, just beyond the reach of her conscious mind. Mary placed a golden bowl full of clear blue liquid on the floor and dipped a cloth in it. She took Patricia's head in her hands and held up her face. Her arms were strong; Patricia lacked the power to resist.

The cloth obscured her vision. She held her breath. "Now, Patricia, breathe. Come on, darling." Patricia held on. She resolved to die just as she was, simply by not breathing again. Not ever.

A male voice rumbled behind her. "We can't hold him!"

Another: "Franklin, this is hopeless. You can't make this work with both of them uncooperative."

"Quiet, all of you!" A loud clap of hands. "Music! Now!"

A long, low note vibrated in the atmosphere. Patricia was beginning to be desperate for air. The wet cloth was stifling her. Mary whispered reassurance, her flat green eyes brimming with what appeared to be pity.

Then the eyes fixed on something in the dark. The expression sharpened to fear. Something cold and hard touched Patricia's shoulder. There was awful, ragged breathing behind her. The sound of it mingled with the music. Hands as rough as bark began caressing Patricia's arms, her waist, her thighs.

Strong fingers shredded her clothes, and she knelt naked amid the scraps of cloth. "Breathe in, Patricia," Mary said. "Breathe in!"

"Mary, get away from her."

"She's not anesthetized at all, Franklin."

"Hurry—can't you see what he's going to do?"

"Franklin—"

"Run! He'll tear you to pieces if you get in his way!"

Patricia felt herself swept off her feet, cradled by powerful, wire-tight arms. She shut her eyes, afraid to look on the face of one who felt so terribly wrong. The low music throbbed and the congregation resumed its clapping. "Oh, God, please take me!"

As soon as she spoke air rushed into her lungs. It was damp and smelled of the full church—candle smoke and incense . . . and the sweaty rot of the thing that held her. Now she would have welcomed the anesthesia.

"Somebody help me!"

"Think of our goal, Patricia. It's worth the sacrifice!"

Mary was not a friend, *she was one of them*—here, now, wearing that profane red habit.

Kind, friendly Mary. She had trapped Patricia in sweet coils. Patricia kept her eyes closed as the thing or man or whatever he was laid her out on the altar and ran his hands along her tingling skin. The music boomed deeper than any organ note, coming from some instrument up in the choir loft.

There were so *many* of them; Holy Spirit Church was jammed as it never was during poor Father Goodwin's Masses.

During the day Father Goodwin struggled here to keep his handful of

Catholics coming. At night this huge, gaudy, rich congregation obviously met for rituals of a very different kind.

Poor Father. These must be his lost parishioners, the ones who never came to Mass.

Her new lover was heavy. Brutish and gasping, he bore down on her, pinning her to the cold marble of the altar. So many times, in this very spot, Father had accomplished the miracle of Transubstantiation. She wanted to raise her naked flesh from the sacred place but could not. He covered her with himself, enveloped her, crushed her so completely the air gushed from her lungs.

The music began to quicken.

Until now she had called herself the Last Virgin, playing the old-fashioned Catholic game of How-Far-Can-You-Go, allowing a thigh to be stroked, a breast to be touched, the press of trousered hardness against her knee.

She writhed. He was so heavy, so big, so foul-smelling.

He was beginning his filthy work. She could feel it poking and prodding at her privacy. She tried to lock her knees but it was useless. "Oh, Jesus! Oh, Jesus!"

The pain choked off her words. That black music thundered and throbbed. As one person the congregation groaned. The church resounded with the gasps of a monstrous passion.

"Jesus!" There was no response, no feeling of His presence. Nothing at all.

Surely, Jesus, You still love me. You want me in Your heaven. You haven't abandoned me. No.

If You no longer want me—

The arms came completely around her.

"Patricia, you must understand that you'll be hurt if you don't calm down!" That made her fight all the harder. Suddenly there was a pain like fire between her legs, so intense it pulled a piercing scream out of her. "That woke the neighborhood up," someone shouted.

"Our Father, who are in heaven, hallowed be Thy name."

"There's a light across the street!"

"Okay, get him off. This isn't working."

Hands were grabbing at the dark figure atop her, but he growled and fought and tried harder to hurt her. He pounded and jabbed and smashed himself against her. All her thoughts, all her prayers were swept away in a flash of

agony as bones cracked and nerves were severed. Her mind dulled down. She heard distant shouts, and saw the frantic, capering form of Mr. Apple with vestments flying about his head.

Then, abruptly, the crushing weight was gone. "Calm him down! Don't let him out of the circle." That was the last she understood. There were more voices, but they were only a buzzing, incoherent cacophony.

The light of consciousness was flickering and starting to die. This time when Sister Mary's sweet-smelling cloth was pressed against her face she inhaled gratefully in sobbing gasps.

"You will forget," said Mary's voice.

"Oh, Mary, why, why did you let him hurt. . ."

Darkness came, and she sank back into the dream she called ordinary life. They left her, hurt and bleeding, alone.

MARY: THE RESURRECTION OF THE INQUISITION

I am so frightened for Patricia and Jonathan I do not think I can bear it. Tonight we made a terrible, terrible mistake with them. Unbelievable that we could be so foolish! Or is it so unbelievable? In an institution two thousand years old there is precedent for every error. The ones who unleashed the Black Death prematurely in 1334 made a greater mistake than we have, after all.

But that is history and this is now. She is bleeding, maybe dying, at this very moment! If I could sweat blood I think I would.

But I am absolutely helpless. If I show myself now I risk exposure of the whole Church. Error must not be allowed to compound error.

So I spend these predawn hours writing, hoping that somehow the act of putting pen to paper will relax me enough for a few hours of rest.

What a disaster! And there was so much time wasted after she was hurt! We had to get safely away before calling the priest. I can only hope and pray that he gets Patricia to a hospital in time.

My God, we had to leave her!

I look at my words as they stand on the paper, dry and still. Words of fear. I think it, I say it—fear, fear, fear.

We live exactly like all night things—we hide and scurry and know the way of silence. We and the rats and owls and bats.

The children are so incredibly important. Please, please may no more harm come to them. Our mistake has exposed them to an even worse enemy than our own stupidity!

The Inquisition will certainly have noticed our gaudy public fiasco. Now our tireless old enemy will be after them again.

It hides for a few years, to lull us, to tempt us. . . .

Then it jumps out of nowhere—right at our throats!

The Inquisition will battle us until Catholicism withers away. The last priest, in the last moment of the last Catholic church on earth, will strike the last blow at us.

They say we are evil, that we work to make Satan manifest, to give Him physical form.

I say, dear Inquisitors, evil is not all black nor your "Satan" all bad, and the world is not as simple as you would like to believe.

Inquisition: it means inquiry. Question. Such a small word for such a great terror.

To the common world the Inquisition is dead and gone. How would the ordinary Catholic feel to know that the handsome priest with the briefcase, striding so confidently out of the Chancellery, is an Inquisitor? And that the Sam-sonite case contains a thumbscrew, a radio direction-finder, and a car bomb?

Daddy laughed and called them Christ's terrorists.

I do not laugh. They murdered my father by exposing him to plutonium. They chose that particular horror so the radiation would prevent us from salvaging his semen and thus his precious genes.

Dad—covered with sores, gasping, his hair falling out on the pillow. Oh, God, help us!

Deliver the children from such a fate. Deliver my boy!

Must these hot summer days be his autumn? Death, birth, the roll of seasons, sky-changes: Jonathan is the end of a long line, the perfection of two millennia of patient breeding.

The Inquisition is so skilled. How can they be so damn good at it? They're just a bunch of fanatical priests!

The world has forgotten us, but the Church has not, not for an instant.

I hear my heart beating: bump-bump, save his life, save his life.

I love you until my heart will break, it takes my breath away to touch you, and I cannot speak to look on your beauty. You liked to swim, you liked to play basketball, to listen to your short-wave, to look at the stars.

We raped your mind so that the Inquisition could not even torture the truth of your identity out of you. And now look—the disaster of this night will attract them like flies to a corpse!

I loved my father.

And I loved my husband. Poor Martin. So happy, so handsome! And I don't want to think about him either. I'm homesick for my men, for Dad and for Martin!

It's a pleasure to write his name. Martin. Such a lovely name. I can almost hear his plane falling. I imagine wind hissing past motionless propellers.

I know all the details of loneliness, the coldness of suddenly empty sheets, the attic boxes full of new suits.

And then there is Mike. Oh, Mike. If only you knew how tiresome I find you. I only married you because of the cover you unwittingly provide for Jonathan. Even the Inquisition will hesitate to kill a police official's son. Or so we hope.

Will anything work? Can we *ever* escape them?

"Down the nights and down the days; down the arches of the years, the Hound of Heaven . . ."

Howling in the precincts of darkness, and in my heart.

I feel awful. I hate the dreary old church we use. Of course, *our* priest can't command a better parish.

I am sweating. I'm sick.

I imagine being put in the Lady, a steel sarcophagus lined with spikes. When the Lady is closed the spikes penetrate to a quarter of an inch every surface of the victim's body.

Mother Regina was in it three hours. Nineteen fifty-four. She really talked! She gave them the entire bloodline, told them our whole history.

—Founded by Titus Flavius Sabinus Vespasianus on Sunday, September 9, in the year A.D. 70 on the still-smoking ruins of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem.

—Based on the secrets of breeding, now known as genetics, contained in the scrolls that were known as the Treasure of Solomon.

—Charged with breeding a new and greater species out of the old human stock, a species that would be allied with what men call evil, as they are allied with what they call good.

But evil is not evil nor good good. They are simply different principles. Man calls himself beautiful. By his standards his replacement will be hideous beyond description. But his replacement will be a powerful species, brighter than man, more resistant to disease, closer to nature.

The blood is the whole point. Jonathan and Patricia are precious because of their blood. They are the masterpieces of thousands of years of breeding according to Solomonic principles. Out of their union the new species will be born.

This is worse than lying and sweating up in that bedroom. This is—oh, hell, I'm going to just burn this and sit in the dark.

Poor Patricia. She was screaming!

"Help her, Mary." Franklin, you said that, you fool!

God knows but I tried.

Chapter Three

FATHER HARRY GOODWIN was awakened suddenly by the ringing of his telephone. The rings exploded in his head, one, then another, then another. Silence. Please keep ringing. Please!

No. The silence continued. There would be no fourth ring. Harry dragged himself to the edge of his bed. His skull felt like it was going to pound itself to bits. He was nauseated with fear.

All these years he had been dreading the three rings on a night the Tituses were using the church. Three rings were the maximum emergency signal. They meant only one thing—they have had a terrible accident and his church was in danger.

His impulse was to race across to the church but he seemed plunged into stifling muck; his fear paralyzed him. It was several minutes before he managed to go to the window and look across at the Spirit. He expected to see destruction, a mayhem of flames, or some unspeakable horror—maybe a conjured thing—crawling the roof slates.

But there wasn't even a haze of smoke along the roof line of the old building, nor a flicker behind the stained glass. Harry Goodwin tapped his own window. Should the Spirit burn there was no chance at all of building a new church. A fire would mean the end of this fine old parish.

Maybe the three rings had been a coincidence. The church across the parking lot seemed utterly at peace, blurred by the beginnings of a predawn shower.

Harry's familiar morning exhaustion bowed him. His alarm clock said four fifteen. In two hours he must say his first Mass . . . before a congregation of perhaps seven, in a church built to accommodate five hundred.

"Friday," he muttered. "God give me strength." He felt awful. Had he taken a sleeping pill last night? No, there weren't any left and so much the better. Leave the pills alone. Valium priests, Seconal priests, Thorazine priests. They were worse than the old-fashioned whiskey priests. He had so far escaped the lure of depressants and tranquilizers. As a result, his life was raw with loneliness and a sense of unfulfilled promise. The issue, of course, was faith

and the lack thereof. His confessor, Father Michael Brautigan, a bluff and kindly Jesuit, red with drink, would say that faith was a matter of relaxing one's instinct to touch. "Don't try to touch Christ," he would say. "That's the point of Thomas, isn't it?"

Harry *had* to touch. But it worked both ways: one who had to touch also needed touching. Sometimes, naked in the middle of his silent rectory, he would dip his hands into cold water until they were numbed and did not feel his own, then he would close his eyes and embrace himself and dance around and around with himself in the dingy rooms.

Lately he had become too desperate, too full of self-pity even for that. Never to be touched—or even needed, for that matter—had emerged for him as the poisonous central issue of his life. When he had first entered the priesthood, he had assumed that his services would be ardently desired by Catholics hungry for the succor of their Church. Instead he had spent his life struggling to pay bills, working against the relentless dwindling of his flock, forced to hold jumble sales and bingo and raffles, until finally even those measures failed.

Then came the Tituses. Old Franklin and handsome Martin, just wanting to rent "the plant," as they had called it, a few nights a week.

Nobody will know, Father. We help out dozens of parishes in the same shape as Holy Spirit.

Nobody will even care except you.

Our money will keep you going. You won't ever have to close your doors.

At first he had thought perhaps it was drugs or counterfeiting or some sort of white slavery.

He had heard their soft chanting, though, and seen the flicker of their candles. He did not actually say it to himself but he knew the truth. Every Monday and Friday morning, after their nights, he had taken to reconsecrating his altar. And he no longer kept the Host in the tabernacle on those nights. It stayed under his pillow, tucked away in the pyx.

Twenty-seven years a priest, twenty a creature of the Tituses. Traitor to his own faith, to his own soul. How black can sin be? He put his hands to his stubbly cheeks and rubbed. He longed for the velvet fingers of a woman, or of death.

As time unfolded the sad destiny that had been contrived for him it became obvious that his whole life—the vocation itself—was not really very valuable.

In the world of his youth priests were essential people, needed by their congregations for all sorts of succor. Now when the leaves fell on his walks they stayed, and his leaking roof leaked on.

Did people sense that he was a traitor? Could they somehow smell the taint of the Night Church in the great nave of Holy Spirit?

He didn't want to be a priest anymore. He did not even want to live. No, he had a plan for himself. He intended to die unconfessed, and go to Hell—in which, despite the modern theologians, he still firmly believed. He actually looked forward to it: he deserved his damnation, wanted it, and had for some years been seeking the death that would bring it. Once he had attempted to commit suicide by suffocating himself in a plastic bag, but it had been too terrifying. So he had tried sleeping pills—and vomited them up.

He had asked Martin Titus to kill him, just a few weeks before Titus himself had been killed in an airplane crash. "I'll think it over," the man had replied absently, and changed the subject. Harry was not even important enough for martyrdom.

He said a bitter prayer, a Hail Mary, and turned once again to his bed.

As he slid beneath the sheet he heard quite distinctly from the church a human sound. It was a loud, woeful groan, loud enough to carry across the parking lot to the rectory.

He should have gone straight over there. Damn fool not to. Three rings at this hour, and he had made himself believe it was a coincidence. Harry Goodwin was a weak man, and that was a fact.

He put his hand on the bedside table. In the drawer was a small pistol. Mike Banion over at the 112th Precinct had given it to him after the ritual murder of Father Santa Cruz at Saint Thomas in Brooklyn. He shouldn't have accepted it, but he didn't want Mike to know how he envied old Santa Cruz.

This was the right time to have a pistol. He felt the comforting steel of it in the palm of his hand. One day soon, when he could bear the taste of the barrel in his mouth, he was going to use it on himself.

As he pulled on the old raincoat liner he used as a robe and jammed his feet into his aged and corn-cut Adidas, he struggled for some sort of inner stability. Gun or no gun, he was terrified. The Tituses did horrible things over there.

He hurried past empty bedrooms (it had once taken six priests just to administer this parish) and descended the back stairs to the kitchen. There was

a folding umbrella in the bottom of his briefcase. He fished around for it, opening it as he went out the kitchen door.

Curtains of rain swept the muddy parking lot. As Harry crossed it he was reminded by the sucking of his shoes that he could not afford reasphalting. He opened the side door to the sacristy. Inside, the Spirit was inky black. As he carefully pulled the door shut behind him he twisted the little pistol's safety to the off position.

All he heard was the din of rain on the roof. Just as he was beginning to think he had dreamed the human sound he heard another one—a long sigh. At first he was frightened, fumbling for the lights. Then he realized the sound was coming from the altar and a flash of anger mixed with his fear. How dare they leave him to clean up one of their desecrations.

In the dancing, vanishing light of the votive candles he could just make out a dense shadow splayed across the altar. Harry stared hard. Wasn't that a large animal? He raised his gun but he could not take aim in the dimness. Then he realized that the shape was not a crouching animal but a prone human body.

His fingers found the right switches and he flipped them all at once. Light flooded the church.

There was a woman on the altar, lying on her back. Her blood flowed down to the sacristy floor in thin streams like bars. Harry had only a moment for astonishment. The girl moaned again, horribly.

He approached the altar. The poor child lay in a dark pool of her own blood, her legs spread, her arms akimbo, her hair tangled about her face.

The fact that he knew this woman so well pulled the first sound from his throat. His own scream was more real to him and more frightening than even the horror before him. In his urgency to get to the phone in the sacristy he dropped his pistol, which went clattering into the dark behind the high altar at the back of the nave.

This was incredible. This could not be condoned. And yet ... he had to deal very carefully with the whole affair. His own life, his very soul, was teetering on a knife edge.

Turning away from the horror he dashed on his long legs to the phone, grabbed it, dialed 911. The Tituses would be furious with him for calling the police, but what else did they expect him to do? They had just gone off and left him with this tragedy and not one word of instruction.

There were voices outside. Neighbors. Of course—the girl's screams had

roused the neighborhood. The Tituses must never have intended to leave her behind. Circumstances had forced them. Perhaps they even wanted her saved.

In any case, she *would* be saved. He might not be much of a priest anymore, but Harry Goodwin was still a human being.

He heard the first siren start not long after he had hung up the phone. The New York City Police Department was more than half Catholic, and it protected the Church almost as carefully as it did itself. Harry knew one of the two patrolmen who came sprinting up the aisle, their guns in their hands. Timothy Reilly was his name. Impossible that such a scrawny, mischievous altar boy could have grown into this enormous, competent-looking man in blue. Reilly took in the scene at once.

"He still in the church, you think, Father?"

Harry told the first of what he realized miserably would be many lies. "I thought perhaps I heard him. I'm not quite sure. It could have been the echo of a door closing." Trick the cops into searching the church. Give the Tituses and their congregation a little more time to get well away.

Reilly's partner began to search with a flashlight while Reilly joined Harry beside the poor, damaged girl. Her eyes were rolling slowly up into her head. "Her name is Patricia Murray," Harry said, and woe tugged his heart. "She's one of the hardest-working young women in the parish." His throat closed. "One of my best people." He wept and could not stop, and it was useless and stupid but he was so full of anger and self-disgust and sorrow that he wished right now he could be torn to pieces, and the rancid bits of himself scattered through the filthiest deeps of the Pit, each to suffer separately the full and eternal measure of damnation.

"She's hurt bad, Father. That bleeding's gotta be controlled. EMS better get here damn soon."

"I'll get my kit." He raced into the sacristy and dragged his ancient first aid kit from the bottom of the old armoire. As he ran back he fumbled with the latch, only to open it and find the bandages rotted and covered with roach sacs, the medicines dried and useless, the tourniquet a brittle mound of rubber.

"Aren't you going to anoint her, Father?"

"Anoint?" The kid had assumed he was getting the chrism. "Oh, of course."

Another siren ground down outside. Two black paramedics sprinted past the rows of age-darkened pews carrying their stretcher and other equipment.

When they reached the altar they set to work with lightning choreography, producing bandages and plasma and intravenous needles and syringes. In seconds her nakedness was obscured by gauze and tape. She lay as blue-bruised and destroyed as if on a slab in a morgue. Her eyes were waxen and staring now, her skin gray.

"She use drugs?"

"Certainly not. She's a very good Catholic."

"Then she's *been* drugged. You better call the next of kin, Father."

"There are no next of kin. She was orphaned in her teens. She was raised at Our Lady of Victory. She rarely spoke of her past. She's not been in the parish more than six months."

More police were pouring into the church. Outside, siren after siren moaned to a stop. The whole precinct must be turning out. It occurred to Harry that he ought to make a big pot of coffee.

No, that was a silly idea. He realized when he looked down and found the holy oil in his hands that he was in shock, moving like a robot. Part of him was still performing priestly duties. The rest wanted at this moment to be, to do, anything else. Anything.

Patricia was already on the stretcher. Harry fumbled to her side and began administering the sacrament. The paramedics wheeled her rapidly down the aisle. He muttered his prayer as one of the men spoke another sort of ritual into a walkie-talkie. "Multiple pelvic fractures, possible severed spine, copious vaginal bleeding with developed pallor. Administering plasma and anti-shock procedures with cold pack. Patient in shock, stage two, possible drug OD."

The ambulance began sounding its siren and flashing its lights as the stretcher was wheeled up to it. The doors slammed on the two solemn black faces and their white-draped patient.

Harry was left with chrism in hand, his sacrament incomplete. Carefully he wiped the remaining oil from his thumb onto the edge of the container. Then he snapped it shut and started to go back to his church.

Mike Banion stood in the doorway, looking with the light behind him like a blocky tree stump. He was an important cop, Detective Inspector, eighteen years on the force, as good a friend as Harry Goodwin had ever had. Mike was both physically and politically powerful. You saw him at all the police funerals and the big, famous crimes, looking through the familiar bifocal

glasses out of his hurt-child eyes.

Seeing him here confirmed the seriousness of the affair. So this was to be a famous crime.

As if to certify the awfulness of it all, a car from Channel Two News came roaring up Morris Street and screeched to a halt. The rain had gone soft and dawn was beginning to outline the jumble of flashing cars, and to touch the cross above the dome with a delicate gray glow. When Harry looked up at it he was almost in control, but when he looked down, his throat was tight and his eyes were once again tearing.

"Father Goodrich, I'm Charles Datridge, Channel Two News." A young man stuck out his hand as a plump girl patted at him with a powder puff. "Mind if we get started?"

"I—" There was a sudden bloom of iron-blue light. Harry squinted.

"Rolling," cried a voice beyond the glare. "Sound! Speed!"

"This is Charles Datridge here at Holy Ghost Parish in Queens. With me I have Father Michael Goodrich. Father Goodrich—"

"Cut it, Charlie."

"Right, Inspector. Kill the lights, Benny."

"Holy *Spirit* Church, Charlie. And the priest's name is Harry Goodwin, not Michael Goodrich. You guys stay in your car until we get the perpetrator pinned down. You'll get your pictures then, assuming you play my way now."

"Playing your way, Inspector."

"Thank you, Charlie. Come on, Father, let's go where we can talk. You got any coffee in the kitchen?"

"Sure, Mike, we can make some."

Mike Banion moved toward the rectory. "Charlie's a news tiger. Channel Two's lightnin' reporter." He laughed, a deep, reassuring sound, the easy mirth of authority. "You're gonna get a horde of 'em in the next couple of hours. First there'll be the *Post* lookin' for pictures. 'Where'sa body?' they'll yell. Then the *News*, and they'll want a shot of the altar. Then TV and radio stations, all of 'em hollerin' like crazy." He laughed again. "Along about dawn a guy from the *Times* will probably phone, name of Terry Quist. Only since you're a priest, he'll introduce himself as Terence. He'll already know the story back to front. But he'll get the real stuff out of you, the dope about how it feels." They reached the rectory. "I'm sorry to say this, Harry, but you're gonna be famous. So's that poor girl."

"Mike, she was a parish leader, one of the few young people who really cared. She was wonderful. My star."

"I hate to hear that, Harry. You must be hurting awful bad. I gotta think the perpetrator knew. I mean, the beautiful parish star, and he takes her and brutally rapes her on the altar. That's tellin' me he *did* know, and this is one of these weirdo deals. Probably somebody she was familiar with. Struck up an acquaintance with her on purpose. Hell, maybe even at some parish affair. Psychopath."

They reached the kitchen. Harry turned on the lights, revealing the aged stove, the greasy counters, the yellowing oilcloth on the table. "Let me get the coffee," he said.

" 'Fill it to the rim with Brim.' "

"I don't have any decaffeinated, Mike."

"And I don't drink it. I'm just trying to take an easier tone. Lower our blood pressure before we both get strokes. A crime like this works on you, Father. Eats you alive."

Harry looked at him. He could not find words.

After a moment Mike continued. "So this kid was one of the parish stars. And she was in the church alone at a very odd hour. Was she a little loony on religion? I mean, was there any likelihood she might have come there on her own and surprised some derelict sleeping in a pew? It's important we know that."

"She was a stable, normal sort of a person. Her parents died in a fire, she told me. She had been here in Queens for about six months. She was vague about her past. Quite vague. But Mike, she was a *good* girl. A darned good girl."

Mike Banion sank onto a chair. The kettle began to whistle and Harry poured water into their mugs. When he inhaled the steam Mike coughed, a sound like a car refusing to start. "Foggy morning," he said, cradling his mug in his hands. Suddenly he looked directly at Harry. As always Harry was startled by the depths of pain in those eyes. From the day Mike's first wife had died, they had been like that. Despite his remarriage, Mike still went to Beth's grave every Sunday. "Harry, tell me your story. What did you see?"

"I was awake. The usual morning hells. We've talked about it."

"Awake, horny, worried."

The chill in the room enveloped Harry. He talked too much to Mike Banion,

telling him all except the really bad part, the part about the Tituses. Should a parishioner know his priest so intimately? But who else, if not Mike? Harry nodded at the accuracy of Mike's statement. "I heard a noise. Loud. A terrible groan. So I went over to investigate."

I heard the three rings. Their emergency signal. But I can't tell you that.

"Must have been awfully loud."

"Very."

"Church unlocked, of course."

Harry had been waiting for that. "You know it always is."

Mike's face darkened. Harry had been through this with him dozens of times before. He watched Mike relight his cigar and take a long pull. Mike smoked cigars the way other people did cigarettes. He claimed he never got drunk because there was so much nicotine in his blood there was no room for the alcohol. Given a pint of good scotch he might nod a little, but that was all. "You lock your church at ten P.M. in the future, Harry, and consider that an order. I'm gonna tell the patrolmen to check it out, so don't think I won't know."

Mike's big, spotted hand came across the table and covered Harry's. The touch lasted only an instant, but the tenderness in it shamed Harry almost unendurably. *Thank God for good friends, there when you need them.* The gesture did nothing to dismantle Harry's shame at what he had come to, only painted it in a more bitter light. "Churches belong open," he said.

"You're sentimental. That's a weakness."

"God help me, the poor girl was raped in my church! Mike, don't tell me it's because I leave the place unlocked."

"I'm not accusing you, Father. You just tell me if you saw the perpetrator closely enough to make an ID."

Now the lie again. "I heard a noise. Maybe a cough, maybe the sound of the side door closing."

"Meaning the guy was just that second leaving. He must still be in the neighborhood."

"Yes. I told Officer Reilly—"

Mike Banion stood up and went out the kitchen door. A few moments later he was shouting. Harry heard him yell that roadblocks should have gone up and a house-to-house search started long ago, on and on. Cops trotted here and there, lights flashed, voices kept fracturing the dawn silence

A moment later Mike was back in the kitchen. "By *God*, why didn't you tell me her name?"

"I—I didn't?"

"Reilly says it was Pat Murray. Father, is that true?"

"Well, yes, that's right, Mike."

"She's a good friend of my wife's. She was on a date with my *stepson!*"

Mike Banion thundered off into the churchyard. A moment later his old Dodge was skidding its way out of the muddy parking lot.

For a long time Father Harry Goodwin simply sat, staring. Then he tried to pray. His words mocked him, and soon lost themselves in silence.

Chapter Four

They guided Jonathan to a car and took him home. They bathed him and attended him, six young sisters in their red habits, and a grave man of perhaps thirty who was so gentle he must love him. He laid his exhausted friend in his bed.

Jonathan dreamed of wet leaves stinging his face, snatching at his arms. He raced through a vicious jungle of grasping plants and slick, seething creatures barely seen. In this dream he ran with the strength of a wild animal and the hunger of a ghoul. He pursued a woman.

"He's having a nightmare," one of the sisters said. "Shouldn't we wake him, Jerry?"

"Let him sleep." Jerry Cochran stroked Jonathan's sweaty forehead.

In his dream Jonathan stretched out his arms, grabbed at his dream-woman's flying hair, screamed out his desire. She raced on through long, dripping alleys of trees, past flickering candles and bloodied crosses.

"Jerry, he's suffering!"

"We have to let him sleep, otherwise the hypnosis may be permanently weakened. He mustn't be allowed to remember what he did." He looked long at his young friend. "Or what he is."

Jonathan heard none of this. He was utterly lost in himself, racked by his nightmare. In it he got his fingers in her hair, he dragged her down, he sat astride her.

He tried desperately to wake up. The hands that had grabbed her were not his hands, they were ugly and horn-hard and full of evil strength.

His watchers heard a noise downstairs, the slam of a door, the pounding of Mike Banion's footsteps. "If he knows, we kill him," the young man said laconically.

One of the sisters withdrew a long, thin blade from her habit.

They retreated into the back hall as Jonathan screamed the broken screams of great agony.

Mike came running up the stairs, oblivious to the thickened shadows at the

far end of the dark hall.

"Wake up, Jonathan!" Mike shouted over the roaring shrieks.

Jonathan heard the voice but it was too faint for him to make out the words. The nightmare continued. He smoothed back the obscuring fog of his victim's hair and looked upon her face. Her mouth opened and a scream swarmed out like a flight of wasps—and then his anger possessed him, his horrible, vicious anger, and made him delight in the way her flesh swept from her bones as he stroked her. Beneath his scaly palms it scraped away as skin might during the flaying of a rabbit.

This was the worst ever, the most wicked dream he had ever had. And he couldn't stop it. He watched himself tear the skin off her knotting, twisting muscles. His own screams mingled with hers.

"Wake up! Wake Up!" A frantic voice was calling to him.

Help me! Please help me!

"Wake up!" His savior grabbed his shoulders and shook him so furiously the dream finally snapped.

"Wake up, son," Mike Banion was saying. "You and I have a big problem."

"Dad?" His own voice was a whisper. Mike had him by the shoulders, had pulled him half out of the bed.

Mike threw his arms around him. "Wake up, Johnny. This is a serious problem."

Jonathan hugged him back. He had come to love gruff Mike Banion. Although Mike could be fierce, the cop loved him too, in his own way. Behind the tough exterior the love was there. Definitely. But in his own way.

"I've got a hard thing to tell you, Johnny."

Jonathan looked into the detective's eyes. The intensity of the dream made even the reality of Mike seem vague, as if he were on the other side of a dirty window. Jonathan tried to bring things into focus, to prepare himself for whatever unimaginable tragedy had occurred. "Okay, Dad."

"Your girl is in the hospital. She got raped."

Earthquake. The ceiling, the walls, the floor flying out into the night. "My—my—"

"Patricia Murray. She was raped on the altar of Holy Spirit sometime around midnight. She's at the Polyclinic. Bad, I'm afraid, son."

That made the dream boil up once again from Jonathan's unconscious. This time it brought a stunning, terrible image of a blond head twisting and turning

below him, lips flecked with blood. He felt her body beneath his own, jerking in spasm.

A thrill tickled him like the passage of a spider across his neck. "No!"

Mike grabbed his shoulders. "You must have been the last person to see her before the rapist."

On those words his mother swept into the room, her red silk robe fluttering behind her. "Leave him alone!" She was not her usual self. She looked like she hadn't slept in a month; her face was a mask.

"Mary, I'm trying to console our boy. His date was raped tonight at the Spirit."

Mary forced her featured into a grimace. "No," she blurted. "That's crazy!"

"It happened."

Jonathan saw an ocean of pity in his mother's eyes. She reached out to him, then stopped. She looked from Jonathan to Mike and back again. She was silent.

Jonathan's mind returned to his dream. In it he had been raping somebody. And those vast rows of tree trunks, those crosses—the dream jungle could easily have been a real-life church.

The memory of how very much he had enjoyed hurting her made him reject Mike's comforting hug and scramble to his feet in panic. He wanted to run, to hide, to somehow escape the red fire of insane anger within him.

Mike enclosed his arm in a powerful hand. "That's okay, son, take it easy. Take it easy, now."

He couldn't do that—not after glimpsing a monster in the shadows of his soul. Frantically he tried to stifle the terror. Dad obviously thought he was grief-stricken. How could he say that the right emotion was dread?

He decided that the impression of rape was more than a dream. It was almost a memory. Maybe this is the way psychopaths discover their crimes.

"Dad—"

How could he say it? While she was being raped I was dreaming about raping her? Funny coincidence, right, Dad?

"Come on, son, I'll drive you over to the hospital."

"You'll leave him right here, Mike Banion! Look at him. He's overwrought! You wake him up in the middle of the night, drag him out of bed—"

"Oh, darlin'. Pat was his girl."

"One date! And I arranged it."

At last Jonathan pulled himself together enough to talk. He had to tell them, he could not keep the coincidence of his dream a secret. He worked his throat, trying to get the words out. "I had a bad dream—my God, I had a bad dream! It's—no. It's impossible—but I dreamed I was raping her. I was dreaming it when you woke me up!"

"Come on, son, take it easy, now."

"Jonathan, you don't know what you're saying! Mike, he's not awake yet. You can see that!"

"Listen to me! I dreamed this. I *did* dream it." He faced Mike. "Dad, you have to put me on the polygraph, and do it right now."

"The hell I will," Mike roared. "No way are you going on the poly!"

"I am a *prime* suspect, Dad. I was the last person to see her."

"For God's sake, the poly can lie. What if I got a positive?"

"You'd do what you have to."

"Son—oh, son—are you—it almost sounds like—are you confessing this crime?"

"Mike, if you do this—if you *dare*—" She fell silent, her face burning with fear and rage.

Mike ignored her, regarded Jonathan sadly. "Don't tell me (his, Johnny."

Jonathan felt in that moment the most profound pity for his stepfather. "If I'd gotten hold of you in time," Mike had once said, "I'd have made you a cop. Such a cop." He'd cuffed Jonathan. "You'd've been a great cop." Poor Mike, all tangled up in his dreams of the son he'd never had. His first wife had died before they could afford children, so twenty-two-year-old Jonathan was taking the place of the unborn. Of course there was no question of Mary giving him children. She'd had a hysterectomy years ago.

"Mike, you've got to face it. I've got to go on the poly. *Especially* because I'm your stepson. If you didn't know me personally, I'd be a prime suspect—dream or no dream— just because I was the last person known to have been with her. I'd be down at the precinct under questioning right now."

"Hell, I'd know in a second you didn't do it. I've been a detective a damn long time, kid. And I know you didn't do it. My goddamn trick knee tells me." He cuffed Jonathan's shoulder. "The poor girl is really banged up. A stringbean like you couldn'ta done it."

Then why did I dream what I dreamed?

"If I weren't your son, you'd request a poly as a matter of routine. It'd be your duty then, and it's your duty now."

Mike's face clouded. Jonathan had him cornered. The truth was obvious. "I'll call the precinct, get an operator outa bed," Mike muttered. He started to go heavily down the stairs. At the landing he paused. He looked back, the hall light gleaming on his glasses, his skin the color of dirty flour. "Goddamn, I just had a thought. If we were out on the lease, we'd be gettin' up just about now. I can smell that coffee, son."

Mike's hunting lease was his personal version of paradise. The two of them had good times there, despite Jonathan's total inability to fire after he had aimed. He couldn't understand killing for fun. The pleasure of the hunt did not seem justification for stealing a life. For him, getting the buck in his sights was enough. "I'll be ready in a minute." He went to his closet, began to get dressed.

Mother followed Jonathan into his room, talked to him as he put on his clothes. "Don't you realize he thinks you're guilty? He'll make that test read any way he wants it to read!"

"Mother, for heaven's sake, I *asked* for the test."

She dropped her voice. "He's clever. If I didn't know better, I'd say I had committed the ultimate error of marrying an Inquisitor."

"A who?"

She blinked away annoyance. "Just a figure of speech. Remember that a policeman's first concern is solving his case. Getting the right man is entirely secondary."

"Mike would never take advantage like that. It isn't his way."

"*I'm* the one who loves you, Jonathan. You're my child and it's my obligation to protect you." Her hands fluttered helplessly before her face. "His affection—if you can even call it that—is ordinary. Just ordinary." She clutched at him. "You're so brilliant, so good—he has no idea what you are. He's a barbarian."

"Why did you marry him then? I don't think you've ever loved him, have you?"

"That isn't your business. I had a good reason for marrying Mike. Better than you can imagine."

"And I have a good reason for taking the polygraph."

"I can't stop you, can I?"

"Not really, Mother."

"So put your shirt on and go take your beloved polygraph and God help you! You can defy me all you want. I can't stop you." She swept out, head high, fists clenched. There were tears starting in her eyes.

Poor Mother. There was so much about her own son that she did not understand.

I am a gentle man who dreams like a monster.

He went down the stairs, found Mike standing in the kitchen.

Mike's face was tight with embarrassment. "The poly operator's waiting." He walked quietly behind Jonathan into the garage. But the moment the door closed he began to argue again. "For God's sake, Johnny, the girl is over at that hospital and we're wasting time. She needs a friend right now. Let me take you to her. Forget the damn polygraph—nobody suspects you, least of all me."

Jonathan paused beside the car. A quiet, firm voice spoke within: *There is something wrong with you, and now is the time to find out what it is.*

"Do it for me, Dad."

That statement brought a cuff that made Jonathan's ear ring. He sat down in the cigar-cured old Dodge and wished that Mike would for once remember his strength. "Sorry, Johnny. Sorry. It's just—I know my own job. Don't tell me my job. And I don't want to polygraph you."

Jonathan had to be more specific with Mike; there was no way around it. "Dad, I was having a very strange dream when you woke me up. I was dreaming that I had raped Patricia. Violently. In a church."

Mike got into the Dodge. For a moment he was silent. Then he slammed his hands against the steering wheel. "Coincidence."

"What if I'm a psychopath and don't know it?"

"Rare. Chance in a million."

"It happens, Dad."

"I know it happens! But it isn't happening to you. You're the scientific genius in the family. You'd *know* it if you were a psycho." He looked at Jonathan. There was fear in his eyes. "Wouldn't you?"

"There are blank areas in my memory."

"Big deal. There are blank areas in my memory too. You're a good kid—I

mean, don't go getting a swelled head if you get a compliment from the inspector, but I know a good kid when I see one. You live clean, you work hard. This dream stuff is damn foolishness. Everybody has crazy dreams now and then. You don't know where they come from. Men are violent. That's a fact. Hell, I ought to run you in for wasting police time with false leads or somethin'. God, do I wish that was a crime. Our job'd be cut in half. But that's neither here nor there. The point is, that girl was brutally raped, Jonathan. Could you really hurt somebody that way? You can't even shoot a *deer*, for Chrissake. You have less killer instinct than any man I've ever known. Take my word for it, kid."

- "The nicest people are often the most repressed, the kind who chop their families to bits, then can't remember a thing about it. It takes years of psychotherapy to uncover the monster inside."

Mike started the car, pulled out into the soft early morning, into the quiet of Kew Gardens. There had been rain before dawn, and dew now gleamed in the sunlight, sparkling leaves and grass, shining on the street and the roofs of the tall, elegant houses.

As they drove along Jonathan suffered another wave of anguish over Patricia. What nameless horror had befallen her?

If I raped her I'll commit suicide.

As they went from Kew out onto Queens Boulevard Jonathan felt in himself something almost filthy, as if a rotten, evil presence had crawled through his soul and left greasy stains behind.

His whole life might be coming apart.

Mike lit a cigar, his sallow skin glowing briefly in the lighter flame. From time to time he glanced in Jonathan's direction. Pain seemed to ooze from Mike's sweat-gleaming brow, from his hunched shoulders, his betrayed face.

His faith in me had finally been shaken a little.

Cold crept into Jonathan's bones. The dawn hour was a time when one's body seemed to hold less tightly to life. He huddled into his thin jacket.

The 112th precinct house was a modern building, all gray tile and glass. Jonathan had never been inside. Mike's workplaces—indeed his habits, even his friends—were mostly kept from his stepson. Despite Mike's occasional suggestion that Jonathan become a cop, he kept his police associations separate. "Hardasses," he would say. "You wouldn't go for 'em."

Mike pulled the car into a no-parking zone in front of the station. One thing

New York City police officials do not have is parking problems. As soon as the car stopped Jonathan got out.

"Hold it. Just wait a minute." Mike took his stepson's arm. "Look, you aren't any kind of a suspect or anything like that. Nobody even knows you're gonna be on the poly, and nothin's goin' in the record unless—"

He stopped.

"Come on, Dad. Let's get it over with."

He followed Mike through an empty waiting room, past a desk sergeant with permanently raised eyebrows, and into a steel-clad elevator that whined horribly when it started moving.

On the third floor there were offices, the largest among them Mike Banion's.

When they went inside, a tall, cadaverous man rose to his feet. " 'Morning, Blake," Mike muttered. "Sorry to bring you down here at this hour."

"No problem, Inspector. Glad to do it." He glanced at Jonathan. "This the suspect?"

"Not a suspect."

Blake regarded Jonathan with neutrality so complete it was chilling. "Got the booking papers?"

"This is a voluntary. Off the goddamn record, see?"

"How do I record the polygraph use, then? It's gotta be on the record, especially with this portable unit. If we were down at the Police Academy with the fixed installation it'd be easier. A lot of uses on that thing. But this—nobody ever takes it out."

"Then say you were testing it. Making sure it still Works." He paused a moment. "Look, Blake, you're gonna find out when you work up the questions, so I'm telling you now that this is my stepson, Jonathan. He had the misfortune to be the last respectable person to be seen with a very nice young lady named Patricia Murray who was raped after he left her. So we're down here clearing him."

The polygraph operator's face closed down tight. He was already in the middle of this. He obviously thought he ought to keep as low a profile as possible.

They left Mike's pin-perfect office with its gleaming oak desk and wall of citations and awards, and went down the hall to a small inner room that smelled of stale cigarette smoke and was dominated by an electronic

apparatus on a table beside an old-fashioned office chair.

A young policeman had appeared in the hall behind them. He followed them into the room and began going through a file cabinet.

"Out, patrolman," Mike snapped.

"But, sir, I've got to—"

"Get the hell out! This is private!"

The young cop hurried to the door. Jonathan looked around at the police equipment. He recognized the electrodes and wires of a skin galvanometer. He understood the principle of the polygraph; the devices he worked with in his own lab were far more sophisticated versions of the same system.

As soon as he saw how primitive the police machine really was he began to doubt the effectiveness of this session. Perhaps this was all just a waste of time and emotional energy.

Mike was staring at the door. "Who was that guy, Blake, a rookie?"

"Musta been. Never saw him before."

"Got his uniform all screwed up. Notice that?"

"No, sir."

"Yeah. Some damn screwed-up rookie." Mike looked through his bifocals at Jonathan. "Let's get on with it."

"Remove any metal objects from your pockets and roll up your sleeves, please."

Mike stood at the far side of the room with his fingers hooked in his belt loops. His lips were pursed, his face tightly controlled. His eyes were too calm. He was preparing himself for the worst.

Jonathan said nothing about the poor rookie, who was still lurking in the hall. Fortunately Mike couldn't see him from where he was standing. All the young cop needed was an argument with Mike Banion.

He could feel the young cop's eyes on him, watching from just beyond the edge of the light. Idle eyes. Lucky young cop, with nothing to worry about except some damn file.

The operator rubbed Jonathan's wrists with electrostatic gel and affixed the straps, then bound the device's belt around his chest. He flipped a couple of switches and graph paper began spewing out of the plotter. Next there was a test routine to confirm that the styli were rolling correctly,

"What is your name, please?"

"Jonathan Titus Banion."

"Your age?"

"Twenty-two."

"Occupation?"

"Assistant professor, New York University."

"Are you a homosexual?"

"Cut the crap! Don't ask him asshole questions."

"Sorry, Mike! Sorry! It's routine in rape cases."

"Try another tack, boy."

The operator cleared his throat. "Do you like girls?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever hit a girl or hurt a girl in any way?"

"Not that I remember."

"Do you go to church on Sunday?"

"No."

"Do you bathe?"

"Yes."

It was coming soon. They usually popped in the big one after a few innocuous questions so that fluctuations in the graph could be more easily read.

"Do you have a driver's license?"

"Yes."

"Did you rape Patricia Murray?"

"No."

"Were you present when she was raped?"

"No."

Silence descended. Jonathan had the happiness of watching Mike's face go from tight misery to relief. The needles hadn't even burped. But his own mind was just as full of questions as before. Even as he was taking the test he was growing more sure that this polygraph was the wrong instrument. There were more sensitive ways of getting to the truth than measuring whether or not a person *thought* he was lying.

Jonathan's outer self obviously believed that he was innocent. But was that enough? There are other, deeper selves in all human beings, selves that are never meant to be seen by the person riding the surface. A simple polygraph might not detect trouble deep down in a man, where his serpents crawl.

"As clean a test as I've ever seen, Inspector. The kid's not lying. He didn't do it. I'd stake my reputation on it."

Slowly Mike began to smile. He clapped his hands together. His eyes began to twinkle. Then, abruptly, he shifted to a more grave expression. No celebrations now, not appropriate. "Okay. I guess you want to get to that hospital right away, don't you, Jonathan?"

Jonathan stood up. He wished he could be as easily convinced as Mike.

Scientist, test thyself.

In the privacy of his own lab, deserted for the summer, he might find a deeper answer than the simple police equipment offered.

But not now. He knew that Mike would object violently to a trip to the lab. And he would too, for the moment. He was needed at the hospital. And he was longing to be there, more as each moment passed.

The polygraph operator made his way out of the room. Jonathan started to follow, but Mike stopped him. "Just hold on a second. I can't go with you; I got too much to do on this case. I just want to say—oh, Johnny, wow. What the hell can I say?"

"I love you too, Dad." Jonathan kissed his stepfather's cheek, giving expression to the emotion that filled and also frightened his stepfather. Mike in response shook his hand with almost comic solemnity.

"Good enough. I've a mind to send you over to the hospital under escort. Get you there in two minutes."

"I can take a cab, Dad. And don't kill yourself while I'm not watching over you. Remember to get some sleep."

They went through the tiled halls again, back to the grinding elevator, and this time the desk sergeant didn't even look up as they passed. On his way down to the corner to get a cab Jonathan realized it was still too early to find one around here. He would have to take a bus.

Standing at the bus stop with nothing to do but wait, all his energy seemed to drain from his body. He felt like he had been awake for a month. He could conceive of going home, getting into bed, and sleeping until noon.

How dare he even consider that when Patricia needed him?

Needs me? He'd known her for exactly twelve hours. But, yes, she did need him. She would be all alone in that hospital right now, maybe losing her life. .

"She really had an effect on you, for a new girl." Mike had come up behind him. "I'm avoiding a reporter," he said sheepishly. "Church rapes are big news. I'll drive you."

"No, I need some time to get myself together. Just about bus ride time."

"What's she like, Johnny?"

"What can I tell you? I fell in love with her. She's wonderful."

"She's one of Father Goodwin's most pious types. I see you as falling more for the easygoing kind."

"Beggars can't be choosers."

"Beggars? Come on, you must have 'em fallin' all over themselves for you." He grasped Jonathan's shoulder. "You're a hell of a good guy. Girls sense things like that."

Jonathan couldn't even smile. The wrong bus came and went, disgorging a rumpled man who seemed astonished to see them.

"Why, if it isn't Mike Banion, waiting for me right on the street corner. Got a scoop, Mike?"

"This is the goddamn reporter I was hiding from. The only uneducated man the *Times* has left."

"I'm an institution."

"You're still working the blotter after fifteen years. I guess you are sort of an institution."

The reporter smiled toward Jonathan. He had very bad teeth. "Terry Quist, at your service. You make it, we break it."

"He means the news. All the news that fits, he prints."

"As long as it's bad. Never accuse me of publicizing good causes, please."

Quist was a thinner, more threadbare version of Mike. He had cigars in the top pocket of his jacket too. His feet were huge clown feet, encased in shoes that seemed composed of shine alone. His ropy, weathered face spoke all the cunning of a man who understood the intricacies of city life.

"Terry, I want you to meet my stepson Jonathan. Jonathan, meet Terry Quist."

"Hello," Jonathan said.

Terry Quist stared at him as he might at a cobra coiled on the foot of his bed. "He gonna be with us?"

Mike nodded. "Until his bus comes."

"I'm in big trouble. I've got to talk to you privately." When Quist's voice quavered, Jonathan realized that the man was trying to control profound fear. Jonathan found his very presence chilling. His own terror, his awful sense of evil within, was still close to the surface.

"I'll give you ten minutes," Mike told the reporter.

"Your office, please. I might be talkin' about my *life*, Inspector."

The bus came as Mike and Terry were entering the precinct house. Sitting alone as it swayed along, Jonathan tried to prepare himself for what he was going to find at the hospital. But he could not. A few hours ago Patricia had dazzled him with her beauty. Now she was the victim of somebody who despised it.

Somebody dark and wicked.

He sucked in breath. For an instant he had wanted to run, just to let his body take over and somehow escape the situation.

He remained on the bus as if frozen to his seat, unable for a time even to move.

By the time the bus reached the huge Art Deco hulk of the Poly, full sunlight bathed the streets, the white walls of the building, the sea of glittering windows. He got up and forced himself out onto the sidewalk. He passed through the entrance to the old building.

Once in the lobby he sought the information desk. It was manned by a fat guard complete with Sam Browne belt and pistol. Queens Poly didn't fool around. It was a hard place, where the borough's desperate emergencies came. This man often confronted people who were crazy with shock and grief.

"I'm trying to locate a woman named Patricia Murray, a rape victim, badly injured."

He consulted a computer printout. "Here—Murray, Patricia, Intensive Care Unit, Ward C, Section Five. That's the fifth floor, end of the corridor."

Jonathan got on an elevator jammed with interns, nurses, and two patients in wheelchairs. It stopped for an interminable time at each floor. At last, though, he arrived at the nurses' station that controlled the ICU. "I'm here to see Patricia Murray," he said to the nurse at the desk.

"Visiting hours start at nine." She flipped through a file. "Oh. Are you related?"

He lied because he knew he had to. "Yes."

"She may be awake. But you'll have to observe her through the window. No direct contact yet."

He followed the nurse down a hallway cluttered with medical paraphernalia, IV stands, wheelchairs, rolling beds, electronic equipment.

Patricia lay swathed in an olive-drab surgical gown. Her legs were spread and a tent of plastic obscured her head. An OXYGEN IN USE sign flashed on and off above the window that looked into the room. Her whole belly was covered with gauze and bandages, and more bandages were on her arms. Even beyond the evidence of great wounding, it was her absolute stillness that made Jonathan feel the strange, deep anguish of the bereft. Only if she were dead would she be more still.

He stood looking at her, feeling the tears burn in his eyes and a tightness constrict his throat, and wishing that somehow it could have been different.

What terrible thing had happened last night?

Was he wrong, or had her head slowly turned toward him? With the wrinkled plastic oxygen tent making a clear view of her impossible, it was difficult to tell.

Yes, she had definitely looked his way.

But what was the expression on her face? Was it love, or terror—or was it madness?

He strained and peered at her, but he could not tell. After a few minutes the nurse nudged his elbow, then drew him away.

As he went down the hall exhaustion hit him hard, and with it came a great sorrow. His brief love was destroyed.

He thought of her, lying beneath him in his dream. He crept from the hospital like a guilty man.

27 JUNE 1983

MOST PRIVATE

To: The Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Defense of the Faith

From: The Chancellor for the Inquiry in North America

Your Eminence:

I am sorry to inform you that the Night Church has surfaced publicly with a bloody ritual at a parish in the New York City borough of Queens.

Location: Holy Spirit Parish, founded 1892, church dedicated September, 1894. Present population 16,231.

We have known for some time that rituals were being held at this church, but, in accordance with your Directive 1516, 28 October 1971, *In Causa Clandestina*, we have done no more than insert operative observers into the congregation.

A full report of the service from observer Brother Alexander Parker (Judist) is attached. Here are the highlights:

1. The ritual was conducted by Prince Franklin Titus himself, attesting to its canonical importance.

2. Princess Mary Titus was in attendance at the ceremony.

3. The ritual appeared to be the *Rituale Pudibunda Coitus*, the Shameful Coupling. (See *Grimoire Titus*, Rev. XIV, vol. 11, pp. 2112-2177.)

4. Apparently the principal participants were the two heirs who were successfully hidden from us during our last *Oppugnatio*. According to our statistics these two are the only viable heirs left:

- a. Patricia Murray (from Pantera to Roland to Sheil to Murray, see *Genealogies Pantera*, Sec. 42. Family 58, Branch Irish, yrs. 1718-1952, for lineage to Murray, Jean Patricia Roisin Margaret out of Samuel and Rebecca).

- b. Jonathan Banion (believed to be Jonathan Titus, Prince, see *Genealogies Titus*, Sec. 113, Family 71, Branch Anglo-American, yrs. 1691-1951, for lineage to Titus, Jonathan Martin Flavius out of Martin and Mary).

5. Because the two viable heirs were participating, we must view this ritual as extremely dangerous.

6. Because of the urgency of the situation I would suggest Directive 801, 14 June 1831, *Contra Poenam Ultimam*, be revoked, and that His Holiness be prevailed upon to authorize the Ultimate Measure against these two individuals.

Yours in Christ & for the Defense of the Faith, Brian Conlon (Msgr.)

Document Class: Urgent A, most private, Swiss Guards courier

Destination: Paolo Cardinal Impelliteri, the Hidden Collegium, Prefecture for the Defense of the Faith, Vatican City

Ad: *Cancellarius Inquisitionis in Septentrionalis Americanensis*

Ex: *Prefectus Congregationis Defensionis Fidei*

You are by this order directed most specifically not to undertake any actions contrary to *Poenam Ultimam*.

His Holiness certainly has no intention of condoning the sort of excesses that have marred the history of the Hidden Collegium.

However, we do authorize you to submit either of the heirs to *passive* questioning if you can find a means of doing so that does not violate the civil laws of the jurisdiction in which you reside.

You are proceeding under the following authorities of the Holy Office of the Congregation for the Defense of the Faith:

1. *In Defensione Fidei*, Ch. V, Pt. C, Para. 5: "The Holy Office of the Inquisition shall retain its full powers and authorities, as granted in *Justinian, Lex. 1.023:325, I n haeretici*, and affirmed many times subsequently."

2. *Canon Lex. 221.04 (Privatus)*: "The Defenders are authorized in cases of extreme necessity, where the whole life of the Faith is threatened or the very existence of the Church called into question, to take up arms in defense of our Holy Faith."

As there is a possibility that there will be sin committed in the heat of your effort, and that you may be unable to confess before death, I now pronounce the customary absolution *In Futuro* upon you and your subordinates:

Auctoritate a Summis Pontificibus mihi concessa plenariam omnium peccatorum tuorum indulgentiam tibi impertior: in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.

Mea Auctoritate,

Paolo Cardinalis Impelliteri

Document Class: Urgent A, destroy in presence of courier

Destination: Monsignor Brian Conlon, Chancellor for the Inquiry, North America, 1217 Fuller Brush Building, 221 E. 57th Street, New York, N.Y., 10022

12 JULY 1983

MOST PRIVATE

To: The Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Defense of the Faith

From: The Chancellor for the Inquiry in North America

Your Eminence:

Of course we understand and respect the position of His Holiness and of the Hidden Collegium.

In no way will this office violate the provisions against execution and torture promulgated in *Contra Poenam Ultimam*.

But we also apprehend what is hidden between the lines of your memorandum, that we are to act *exactly* according to the statutes you cite, which granted the Holy Office its original authority.

Be assured that we will do so with all vigor.

May God have mercy on our souls.

Yours in Christ & for the Defense of the Faith, Brian Conlon (Msgr.)

Document Class: Extraordinary, destroy after reading, Swiss Guards courier

Destination: Paolo Cardinal Impelliteri, the Hidden Collegium, Prefecture for the Defense of the Faith, Vatican City

Chapter Five

MIKE WATCHED Terry Quist open a Baby Ruth, stuff it into his mouth, and toss the wrapper to the floor. The poor guy. He always gobbled food when he was tense. Or scared. Mike eased his friend into telling his story. "You still write the blotter, don't you?"

"That and the bus plunges at the bottom of the pages— '158 die in Surinam bus plunge' typa junk. I'll never get anywhere on the *Times*. I'm more of a *National Tattler* kind of a guy."

"So What're you doin' here? Go plunge a bus."

"I've got serious business with you. You wanna hear my story or not? I might have a line on your raped girl."

"Anything about Patricia Murray I want to hear. Are you lookin' for pay, or what?"

"Come on, man. By rights I ought to be back at the shop doin' my investigative reporter bit. But I'm here because I'm a coward. I want to stay alive. Just one thing, though, before I lay what I've got on the table. It's very weird. I want you to suspend disbelief."

"No."

"Please remember we been friends since I taught you to smoke in fifth grade."

"Fourth."

"I forget. Anyway, you promise me that you *will* check this one out, no matter how wild it sounds."

"You're settin' yourself up for a putdown. You been takin' rides on a UFO or Somethin'?"

"I wish I had. I'd be better off gettin' fucked over by little green men than by the Night Church."

He fell silent. His hands, Mike noticed, were gripping the edge of the desk so tightly there was a flush beneath his fingernails. "Keep goin, buddy."

"Just that I have reason to believe from the nature of the crime that your lady was hurt in a religious service."

"The priest in that parish is a good friend of mine."

"You're dealing here with something much bigger than any single priest or parish. The way I see it, this thing is gigantic. World wide. A festering, deadly cancer hidden in the Catholic Church, rotting it from within. And evil, Mike,

God is my witness. Unbelievably evil." "Something as big as that fools around with rape? This is lone pervert stuff." "I said you wouldn't believe me."

"I didn't pass judgment yet. Keep convincin' me. You're doin' a wonderful job so far."

"I'll bet."

"You are. I'm takin' you seriously."

"It's got a congregation that meets at Holy Spirit. Ah, come on, Mike, I see you smilin'! I'm telling you something *big*."

Mike had smiled just a little, to test Terry's resolve. Terry's reaction meant that he, at least, believed the story he was telling. "Prove Somethin'."

"What do you want proved?"

"Anything. Any part of it."

"The constant whine of the cop to the reporter: do my work, I can't do it myself. Okay, I got onto this through a guy named Alexander Parker, lives across the street from Holy Spirit. This guy is not connected with the media. He started comin' in to the Idle Hour about a week or so ago. He hears I'm a reporter and he tells me he's got a story."

Mike nodded.

"He tells me how he goes home late a lot. Night person, he says. And every Sunday and Thursday night he's noticed Somethin' funny. It's not that big a deal, just slightly more people around than usual. One night, he's in his apartment. It's quiet, see, and he hears this real low noise. Like music, but so low he more *feels* it than hears it. He thinks maybe it comes from the church. So he goes over there."

"Ought to be on the force."

"He tries the door, but it's locked. So he listens. He hears people moving around inside, like lots of people just walking around and around in the

church. Every so often a baby screams and gets stifled. That spooks him a little, and he goes home. He watches. Along about four-thirty he's been asleep, and all of a sudden he sees people leaving."

"He's asleep and he sees the people?"

"Will you cut it out! He *wakes up* and he sees the people. Clumps of two and three, like. He counts three hundred people leaving over the space of half an hour. In the small hours of the goddamn mornin'. He can't figure it."

"So he runs off and tells New York's most brilliant reporter."

"He lets it sort of slip out. Like he was trying to lead me on. He tells me they're dangerously crazy. Something about a disease they're gonna spread. Something about a new species—the anti-man. He asks me, almost begs me, to write it up. 'Tell the world,' he says. 'Warn them.' "

"So?"

"So doesn't that sound pretty damn dangerous?"

"Hell, I'm all for it. Anti or not, a new species'll probably do a better job than we have."

"You don't understand, do you, you jerk? You're sittin' there straight as a razor and all the time laughing at me. *It's what they plan to do after the new race gets going. The rest of us—they're gonna just kill us. All of us.*"

"Lotta work."

"Not for people with the kind of weapon they have. A disease has been developed. When they release it everybody dies."

"Including the new race—and the Night Church?"

"Hell, no. Everybody *except* them. They all get vaccinated."

"Your friend found out a lot. I mean, considering he just watched these people from across the street. Supposedly."

"I thought about that. I think Alex is more than he seems. He told me, 'You're a reporter, get your story and publish it.' "

"So you're here."

"I'm afraid for my life! This is bigger than me. I can't get the story *and* stay alive."

"How can I identify these people?"

"Well, most of 'em are in Holy Spirit Church in the middle of the night. Go over and pick 'em up."

"And hit 'em with a trespass misdemeanor? That'd just tell 'em to get

cautious."

"Find their labs or whatever. They must have storage facilities for their disease bacteria, not to mention delivery systems. It can't be simple to infect the whole world. There's got to be plenty of evidence of what they're planning."

"This sounds like some kind of crazy science, not a church,"

"Well, maybe that's accurate. Religion and science mix and a monster is born."

"You still haven't given me anything to go on."

"Hell, Mike—"

"You bring me a load of crap like this and you'd better have some tangible evidence to go with it. Something I can goddamn well put my hands on. Come on, Terry. I'm a busy man."

"So talk to Alex Parker! Do your goddamn job, follow the lead."

Terry's tone made Mike want to slug him, but he resisted the temptation. "Everybody in the neighborhood's being interviewed, you can bet on that."

"Oh, come on! You get your ass out of that chair and go and personally talk to Alex Parker. Do it for me. For old times."

Mike regarded his friend. Too many disappointments, too much booze, too many hopes down the drain. "OK, buddy, I'll give him a call right now." Terry had the number. Mike dialled, waited through three, then five, then seven rings. He shrugged, put the phone down. "What can I tell you? No answer. We'll have to try again later."

Terry Quist's face was covered with a fine sheen of sweat. Mike could smell the stink of his fear.

It was the nausea as much as the riot of birdsong that awoke Brother Alexander. He opened his eyes to blue morning sky. The lurching vertigo told him that he had been drugged. He could smell the thick ether fumes still in his nose, could taste them in his dry mouth. His stomach heaved and twisted.

Above him puffy white clouds crossed the clear blue. He was bound hand and foot, chained to an iron bedstead. He was in a forest glade. He could not move his head enough to see them, but he could sense people about.

When he turned his head far to the right he caught a glimpse of a familiar face. His heart began to pound. It was the notorious Jerry Cochran, and he was carrying something that looked very much like a blowtorch.

"Good morning, Brother."

Tears sprang to Alex Parker's eyes. He had heard stories of this man, terrible stories of flaying alive and burning, of tortures beyond belief.

There was a *whump* and a roar. Then Jerry Cochran came into full view, tall, grim, his eyes crazy, his face so rigid it might be made of stone. In his hand was a black blowtorch gushing fire. Alex turned and twisted on the rocking bedstead. His mind swarmed with terrors. In the deep of the night when he was all alone he had sweated out the possibility of just this martyrdom, death by fire.

"If you answer my questions, I will first garrote you," Jerry Cochran said softly.

Alex wept openly. He already knew what he would do, he had thought all this out very carefully. Inquisitors must understand themselves well enough to know what they will do under torture. "I'm sorry, Jerry," he said between sobs. Then he fixed his mind on the Jesus prayer, his only weapon against the agony of the flames: "Jesus, thou art with me, Jesus, thou art with me, Jesus—oh! Oh, GOD! AAAHHH!"

Jerry had held the flame against Alex's chest. There was a stink of burnt hair. "You're very sensitive, Alex. I hardly touched you."

Alex felt his bladder let go. But they had prepared for that. He could feel that a towel was stuffed between his legs. "Jesus, thou art with me, Jesus, thou art with—"

The flames sent tidal waves of razor-sharp agony up his thighs as Jerry played the flame along his legs. Skin popped and crackled. Oily smoke rose.

"We know your drinking companion is a reporter, Alex. What is his name?"

"Jesus, thou art with me, Jesus, thou art with me." Alex stopped in confusion when the next application didn't come. To his utter horror he felt Jerry pulling away the towel that had protected him.

"The Judists are celibate, I think," he said. "Well, I don't suppose it matters one way or the other, does it, my friend? No more worries about keeping your vow."

When he felt the fire this time it was as if his insides were being torn out, as if all the flaming stars of heaven had fallen on him. Wild with torment he shrieked, he bellowed until his throat cracked, he jerked and twisted on the iron bedstead.

Nobody could hear him, not out here on one of the Night Church's vast

country estates.

"Name him!"

"Qui-i-st! QUIST! QUIST!!"

"Ah."

"Stop! Jerry, I told you! Stop! Stop!"

With lazy strokes, Jerry moved the tongue of flame up and down Alex's legs from his crotch to the searing, crackling bottoms of his feet. "QUIST! QUIST! OH, GOD!"

Jerry gazed at him with the hooded eyes of great passion. His face was flushed. "Now we'll get started on your belly, OK, Alex?" He smiled a little. "Maybe if you tried the Jesus prayer some more it would help. Or if you told me the names of the other scum in your cell!"

"I told you, QUIST!"

"He was a recent contact. A reporter indeed. What an amateurish attempt to harm us—attracting the attention of a reporter. I want to know the other names, Alex, all of them!"

To give up his cell was the ultimate failure of an Inquisitor. Desperate, knowing his own weakness, Alex tried to knock himself senseless by banging his head against the iron bar beneath it. But Jerry had thought of that. A leather collar restrained his neck. "Look, Alex, you're suffering so much I'll offer you another deal. I'm afraid you've been too difficult to deserve garroting, but you give me the names and I'll do your face with the torch. It'll be over very quickly."

"Jesus, thou art with me, Jesus, thou art with me, Jesus—"

When the flames came this time they pierced his belly and made his stomach boil. His bowels exploded inside him, mixing their torment with the searing of the flesh. Hot steam rushed up his throat and scorched his mouth and nose.

Jerry stopped. "You may be wondering why all this pain doesn't just knock you out. We loaded you up with amphetamines, Brother Alex. You cannot escape into unconsciousness."

That did it. He had been hoping to faint, even to go into a coma from the pain and the damage. This was just too much. Even in his worst imaginings he had never dreamed torture would be this bad. It was almost incredible that the human body could endure such agony. Sick at heart, facing his own miserable failure, Alex listed the names of the people in his cell. "God forgive me. Brother Julius Timothy is one, Brother George Yates the other."

"That's all? Why such a small cell?"

"Holy Spirit was a backwater assignment."

Jerry nodded. "So we thought. That's why we use it so much."

"You're very clever."

"I know we are, Alex."

There was a moment of silence between them. Alex sought the eyes of his torturer. There was contact between the two men then, the anguished victim and his tormentor. In Jerry Cochran's eyes Alex saw so many things: hate, enjoyment, self-loathing, and deep down in the sparks and the shadows, a scared little boy who had been lost for a long time.

"God forgives you, my son, and I forgive you too."

Jerry laughed. As sad a sound as Alex had ever heard. "I ought to give you the full treatment for that." He turned up the blowtorch until it bellowed out a great gust of flame.

For a moment he hesitated as if undecided. He pointed the torch at Alex's chest. "Jesus, thou art with me, Jesus—"

But something had moved that hard man, and he suddenly changed the direction of the flame. For an instant Alex saw fire, then he felt a red-hot poker go down his throat, then he was all in cool. He fell away into timeless blessedness.

Jerry directed the work crew to complete the cremation and bag the body. Then they returned to Queens and entered Alex's apartment with the remains. They replaced them in Alex's bed, which they then set afire.

Twenty minutes later the fire department arrived. Ten minutes more and steam was pouring out the window of Alex Parker's apartment. Mike arrived on the scene with Terry Quist clinging to him like a baby. When he saw the charred, wet remains of Alex Parker being carried out of the building Terry grabbed fistfuls of his own hair.

The cause of death was listed as burns and asphyxiation. The agency was a mattress fire. The means of ignition was theorized to have been a cigarette.

Officially, the martyr was listed as having died because he smoked in bed.

Terry Quist left the scene a haunted, stricken man.

Mike Banion watched him go. And he wondered.

Chapter Six

THE PERMANENT GLOOM of Rayne Street surrounded Jonathan the moment he turned from busy MacDougal. Rayne was a narrow cobbled lane between MacDougal and Sullivan, like Gay Street and Aldorf Mews one of Greenwich Village's hidden streets. Here NYU had placed its data storage facilities in the enormous black hulk of the house that dominated the short block. In the basement they had found room for Jonathan's lab. He hated the place, hated its dampness, its inconvenient distance from campus, and above all, the dark gargoyled ugliness of the building itself. The sun never shone on Rayne Street, not even at high noon. It was one of the few New York streets still cobbled with the round stones that had seen carriages and wagons and had resounded to the clatter of hoofs. Jonathan's footfalls were the only sound that disturbed it now. He looked up at the front of the house. At least the place was well kept. A small brass plaque on the door announced NEW YORK UNIVERSITY DIGITAL DATA STORAGE FACILITY. Under the stoop was another door, this time with a plastic sign: PHYSIOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY DEPT. LAB B.

Jonathan was expecting the lock to be stiff'. He hadn't used it in three weeks, but it turned easily. The iron door opened without a squeak.

The hallway beyond was pitch black, Jonathan fumbled for the switch, found it, and turned it on.

Nothing happened.

He cursed. Here he was in the middle of a sunny morning and he was going to have to feel his way down a dark hallway because an indifferent university administration had put his lab in this hole.

The door swung closed behind him. He flipped the light switch a few more times, uselessly, then began moving along the hall, feeling for the door to the lab. Fortunately it was the only one in this wall. It led to what had once been the wine cellars and basement storerooms of the old building.

Jonathan became aware of a curious trick of sound in the enclosed hallway. His own breathing sounded like it was coming from the darkness beside him.

The effect was so realistic that he waved his arms out into the middle of the hallway. Nothing there, of course.

He began to search the wall more urgently, sweeping his hand up and down, feeling for the door jamb. He really wanted to have some light.

Perhaps it was another trick of sound, but he heard distinct scuttlings. Rats. Disgusting. He clapped, he shouted "Hey!"

Then he heard something that silenced him. He became very still, listening. There were human footsteps coming down the stairs at the far end of the hall.

Jonathan shrank back. This was a closed facility. Nobody worked upstairs. His first thought was that some drifter had gotten in here.

A beam of intense white light dazzled him. He shielded his eyes with his forearm. Fearful thoughts passed through his mind, of death at the hands of a maniac.

"Who are you?" The voice was old and harsh. It did not sound completely sane.

"Banion. This is my lab."

"You can't come in here. The facility is closed."

Now it made sense. He was confronting a watchman. "Look, this is my lab. I'm not a student, I'm a professor. So please get that flashlight out of my eyes and shine it on the door so I can see the keyhole."

The beam did not waver. Instead it came closer, until it was blazing in Jonathan's face. "Go home, young man. You mustn't come here." The voice was so old, and the tone like ice.

Jonathan knew when he was being threatened. And it infuriated him. With a single, quick motion he reached up and snatched the flashlight from the old man's hand. There was an instant of surprisingly powerful resistance, then the old man sighed and quite intentionally let go of the light. As he did Jonathan came into contact with his hand. It was a shocking sensation. Jonathan had never felt skin so hard and cold. More like stone than skin. He imagined that a mummy's hand might feel like that. A dry claw.

"You're mad to come here! You're putting yourself in great danger!"

Jonathan turned the light around, catching just a glimpse of the man before he turned his back. What he saw made him gasp: bright green eyes set in a labyrinth of wrinkles, a tiny slit of a mouth open in an infuriated snarl.

Then the old man was gone, his feet rat-tatting up the stairs. A door slammed.

Good riddance. The university had a nerve hiring senile old fools like that to guard the facilities. Budget, probably.

Jonathan selected the right key from his chain. Getting in was easy now that he had the use of the flashlight.

He entered his lab, making a mental note to call the university's maintenance department and complain to them about their watchman. Obviously unbalanced, not to mention being far too old for the job.

Jonathan had come to his lab in the quiet of a summer morning to try and discover once and for all if he had done that terrible thing to Patricia. He couldn't bear to name it. He simply could not accept the idea that her hurt and his dream were a coincidence, not even with the vindication of the police polygraph. He needed his own instruments to tell him if there was some hidden corruption in his soul.

Was he an unconscious psychopath?

He imagined the demon's loom clicking eagerly as strand by strand it pulled his life apart. He had come to think of Satan as a sort of neurological shadow, a speck of dark potential in the electrochemical bath that floats the soul. He could no longer be sure that the shadow was not an actual, outside force. Evil for its own sake seemed increasingly to him to be a real power in the world.

Certainly when it was abroad, when the owls and jackals announced Lilith wandering, those she caressed could not resist her beauty—nor fight her talons.

He moved among the covered instruments. During the term he had been making the first really detailed map of microvoltages in the human brain. His work was highly technical, but beneath all the statistics were the mystery and romance of pure science: he and others like him were cracking the code of the mind.

The room was full of galvanic sensors of various kinds, but mostly there were computers: Apples and small IBMs to handle the statistical work, terminals connected to the big Cray 2000 at MIT that was his main tool. He used the Cray to do the sensitive high-speed signal recognition that was needed to separate the various brain waves into their hundreds of component parts and analyze each in isolation from the others. This gave him a virtual electronic window on the mind, vastly more sensitive than any that had been developed before.

There were also racks of Petri dishes, used for culturing microorganisms,

lined up against one wall. He stopped. He ran his fingers along the edge of one of the racks. Strange. He didn't remember authorizing anybody to install such equipment here.

In the middle of the wall, what had been a closet door was now marked in block letters: VECTOR STORAGE. It was locked.

He didn't do work on bacteria. He didn't even know how. As he looked around him he could see evidence of another's recent presence. There was a lab chart with annotations dated only yesterday. On the floor was the cover of a coffee container. Somebody had been working here within the past twenty-four hours.

The university must have allocated unused space to another project. Odd. Was it like NYU to do something like that and not bother to tell him? He couldn't seem to remember.

He stood in the center of the dim, warm room, wondering. That persistent, distant clicking was the sound of footsteps on the sidewalk above this end of the basement. Demon's loom. His was a gothic soul.

The clicking died away. Maybe they *had* told him about this biology equipment. Not remembering something like this fitted with a theory of amnesia. If he didn't remember somebody installing a bacterial experiment in here maybe he didn't remember other things either.

Somehow he must uncover enough of the mechanism of his mind to determine the truth.

He had come to realize that horror and disgust were not his only reactions to the rape. His body vibrated eagerly at the thought of it. It was awful, repulsive. And yet, when he remembered her lying there in that hospital there came over him a sneering, hateful contempt that was at odds with everything he believed and loved about himself.

Off in the corners of his mind there were also violent bits of memory that seemed to go beyond the rape—a screaming face, a closing coffin, thuds and howls . . . long marble staircases, lines of chanting nuns, the garrote and the strappado and the rack. . . .

Was it another life, some horrendous past? Unlike Patricia he did not discount reincarnation just because it was against Catholic doctrine. Had he at some time in the past been a victim of the Inquisition, suffered in the dungeon of some elegant Spanish palace?

No, that wasn't quite right.

"Inquisitor." He whispered the word as he might the name of a present danger. "Inquisitor." Mother had uttered the word early this morning, then waved away his question about it.

Inquisitor. His hands were shaking, his legs seemed about to give way. The old man's lunatic warning sounded again in his mind. He went to the door, flipped on all the fluorescent lights, then locked it securely to the outside.

He remembered.

A priest, walking smartly across an airport lobby, his hair neatly parted on the right, his well-fed face mixing self-assurance and contentment, his shoes clicking on the floor.

Then the face turns, sees Jonathan, changes. Hate replaces contentment and the face becomes terrible, relentless, and cruel. But this time the Inquisition is not successful. A tall young man, a man Jonathan admires, grabs the priest and forces him into a car.

Next memory: the priest is naked, chained to the wall of a cellar. Questions are coming, one after another: *Who is your Inquisitor-General? How did you find us?* On and on, while the tall man removes strips of skin from the naked priest's body.

Jonathan is hiding in a corner, behind some shelves full of empty Petri dishes.

From the priest's mouth a ceaseless prayer: *Jesus, thou art with me, Jesus, thou art with me, Jesus, thou art with me.*

Help the priest! I side with the priest!

At last the torture stops. The torturer goes upstairs for a Coke. Jonathan is left alone, astonished, horrified that his friend, his hero, could do such things to another human being. The priest, his eyes watery and bloodshot, must know that his end will not be long in coming. He fixes his gaze on the boy who has crept forward, his own eyes tearing with pity. Words pour in a torrent from the priest's parched mouth. "Young man, they're going to destroy humanity for your sake, yours and the girl's. Turn against them! Accept Christ! Please, listen to me. Your friend Jerry is evil, your uncle is evil, they are creating... death ... they are Satan's . . . oh ... Satan's friends." Then the eyes roll and the head sinks forward, the chin touching the oozing, flayed chest.

No, that isn't a memory. You're imagining, spinning tales around the biology experiments that shouldn't be here.

You're hysterical.

With an effort Jonathan pushed the mad imaginings out of his mind. Again he regarded his sophisticated instruments, the ones that were familiar. They could sense and record brain waves; that's what they were all about. If he could find out where a thought like the one he had just had was physically coming from in his brain he could easily tell whether it was a memory or not.

Jonathan went over to the cubicle, took the complex, wire-covered sensor helmet in his hands.

How was he going to work the controls while wearing this thing? Its cable wasn't long enough.

Jonathan cursed silently. Without an assistant there was no way he could use the equipment.

And the alternative was not at all desirable.

At CalTech they were experimenting with a certain drug. It could be inhaled like cocaine, but it had no euphoric effect. On the contrary, it stimulated the brain's deepest memory centers and caused an almost incredible flow of vivid recollections.

This was N, alpha dorporinol 6-6-6, a complex triumph of the biochemist's craft. It was synthesized from naturally occurring brain chemicals. So far the cost was eight thousand dollars an ounce. There were a few grams of it in the refrigerator. Jonathan had been asked to duplicate some of CalTech's experimental results but he had shut the lab for the summer before carrying out the work.

He went to the refrigerator. It was not your ordinary Frigidaire. This refrigerator was bolted to the floor and had a combination lock. Some of the drugs kept there, tranquilizers and such, were much in demand on college campuses. Others, like 6-6-6, were valuable.

Back behind the bottles of Valium and Quaaludes were foil packets with hand-lettered labels. Jonathan took out the packet of 6-6-6. The crystals inside crunched like sugar when he opened the foil. Ideally, the drug should be suspended in a saline solution and introduced to the nasal membrane via an aspirator. But Jonathan did not have time for that. He measured out a moderate dose, four grains, on the sensitive laboratory scale. Then he ground it fine with pestle and mortar. He poured it from the mortar to the flat of a spatula and raised it to his nose.

He inhaled.

There was a gentle, pleasant aroma.

Jonathan felt no change. He went into one of the subject cubicles and lay down on the couchette. Still nothing.

Why do there have to be bars on my window, Mother?

The boy's voice was so clear and real that Jonathan jumped up.

That had been him, Jonathan Titus Banion, as a child.

Bars? Had there been bars on the windows of their old apartment? He didn't remember it that way . . . and yet he did.

We've got to keep them out, to keep them away from you. The bars are against them.

This was uncanny. It had been her voice, but she wasn't here.

He could see the walls of the bedroom in which she had said those words. But he didn't recall wallpaper like that, with moons and planets and rockets on it.

But where, then, did this memory come from?

The old man from the hallway came around the end of a lab bench. His emerald eyes flashed. Beneath the fluorescent lights his skin was powder-gray. He looked dead. Hallucinatory phenomenon, of course. Jonathan blinked his eyes, but he could not make the illusion disappear. The old man spoke. "You must not try the door to the past, Jonathan. It's dangerous for you. Terribly dangerous."

"Who in hell are you? How dare you come into my lab!"

The man shifted and wavered, half mirage and half real. Jonathan blinked but the image remained vague. In an odd way the old man seemed to fit among these recollections. "Danger," the old man said, "danger in these memories!" Then he was swinging a red lantern and Jonathan knew that this time he was an hallucination. NYU maintenance personnel didn't carry such lights. The real watchman was probably off sleeping under the stairs.

The false one symbolized a powerful barrier in Jonathan's mind against the very act of remembering.

But how? A barrier like this didn't just come out of nowhere. It had to be created. As wild as it sounded, almost the only explanation was that a highly sophisticated hypnotist had been at work on him.

Then what of those other imaginings a moment ago—the Inquisition, the tortured priest? "They're going to destroy humanity for your sake, yours and the girl's." Hadn't the priest said something like that?

But there isn't any reason to destroy anything for us.

He sat up on the edge of the couchette and rubbed his sweaty face. Bits and pieces of memory were still breaking through the hypnotic wall, induced by the powerful action of the drug to move toward a surface they could not quite reach.

Like a crust formed on lava, his mind shifted and cracked, and where it cracked the searing ugliness beneath drove him buck.

This was not his doing. He was not amnesiac; somebody had intentionally set out to conceal his past from him. And this somebody had a great deal of skill. Hypnotism was a gross craft. To practice it with such delicacy was right at the limits of modern technique, perhaps even a little beyond.

He could feel a titanic struggle building in him between the drug and the barrier. Frantic, sweating, dizzy, he lurched out of the cubicle. There was no antidote to 6-6-6; he should never have taken it without controlled supervision.

The room was hot, terribly hot. He had to have water. But the least movement sent him slumping and reeling with dizziness. His head pounded, waves of nausea staggered him.

So you want to know why we protect you? Look, then, my boy, look at the work of the Inquisition that seeks you!

He was surrounded by a rising wall of flames. He was being touched by them, and their touch was hideously painful. He was attached to the stake by an iron collar.

His hands were free; he tore at the iron. He kicked the logs until sparks flew up around him. Outside of the flames he could see a great and gaudy crowd, men and women and children. Along the edges of his pyre little boys roasted potatoes to sell to the mob. And the mob chanted: "Evil, evil, evil! Satan's child, save yourself!"

But I'm not Satan's child! I'm—I'm . . . something else.

He looked up into the royal enclosure, to one pale female face, her skin like milk, her eyes crystal-green, her hair as blond as a sunlit cloud. From her eyes there flowed cooling love. She was composed, but he knew how deeply tragic she felt.

As the flames rose around him and he died in torment he fixed on those eyes, and saw in them the triumphant secret: *Our nights were not in vain, my senor, for I am with child. There will be another generation.*

Jonathan lurched against a bench, knocked a computer to the floor with a crash and a cascade of shattered electronic chips.

As he collected himself he realized that the fire wasn't a dream any more than the tortured priest was a dream. They were both memories.

But what kind of memories? And what sort of a monster would have them?

The priest was recent, but that fire had burned a long time ago.

In the fire there is exaltation; the pain is your triumph.

How dare you preach to me, Lucinda, when I have to endure the stake!

Martyred husband.

O Lucinda Pantera, you are the image of my dreams, the woman who has always been beside me. Angel Lucinda.

Angel Patricia. You are also Patricia, and all other women I and my ancestors have loved.

Seeking the edge of the future, we go on. By breeding the two lines together again and again, age by age, millennium by millennium, we are creating a masterpiece.

A masterpiece of evil. Something far darker than mankind. Something unencumbered by impulses toward the good.

Something unspeakably monstrous!

Jonathan was on the floor. "No!" His mouth was dry, his face smeared with tears. "No, it mustn't be!"

He could almost see it, almost smell it, and it was hideous and stank of rotted flesh.

And it was in this room.

Danger, the old man wailed, danger!

The bits and pieces of the shattered computer had cut into Jonathan viciously. He touched a gash on his palm, tasted his blood.

Something was crouched just the other side of the lab bench, breathing softly. Jonathan was so frightened he literally could not move.

It was the *thing* humankind with its inquisitions and persecutions has been trying to prevent through the ages.

The anti-man, ugly where man is beautiful, bad where man is good, the very essence of evil.

But it wasn't on the other side of the lab bench, not really. That was only his imagination, it had to be.

Yes, but your imagination is still dangerous! It's trying to make you stop thinking these thoughts.

"I won't stop thinking. I remember the anti-man. It's been bred over thousands of years. And it's—"

He looked at his own hands, turned them slowly over and over in the merciless fluorescent light.

*Cro-Magnon was bred out of Neanderthal and destroyed Neanderthal. Homo sapiens was bred out of Cro-Magnon and destroyed him. In the same way the anti-man will destroy what you call mankind. It is only following nature's **law**. There is nothing bad about it.*

"It's Satanic! Hell's answer to the creation of God!"

Homo sapiens is a defective species, and like all of nature's mistakes, it is going to become extinct. You of all people should love the anti-man. You will be its father.

Jonathan felt his skin beneath his jeans, the slight dampness of his crotch pressed by his briefs. In him was a new species?

You have already learned more than you should. Now you must be made to forget. You will confront the thing behind the bench, and it will tear these past few minutes from your mind.

"No!"

I think yes. I think yesssssss.

The voice in Jonathan's mind became one with the breathing behind the lab bench. It merged into the hissing, terrible and loud, of something primal and big. Then came a slipping, sliding sound, weighty rubbing against the floor, and the black gleaming head of an enormous snake appeared around the corner of the table. It had coppery scales and eyes like yellow-green stones.

In them was not the savage blankness of the reptile species. Instead there was something far worse—burning, unquenchable rage mixed with the self-mocking irony of great intelligence.

It came elegantly along, its huge body sweeping in great loops. Jonathan was utterly revolted, and yet also fascinated. Nothing, not even the threat of death itself, could tear him from those staring green eyes.

But 6-6-6 isn't supposed to be a hallucinogen. Sloppy testing, California. This is an effect you didn't mention in the protocols.

The serpent had coiled into a great shiny mass of scales just in front of

Jonathan. It reared its head until it was level with his own face.

It was so very real, even to the snake mites running along the edges of its mouth. Jonathan drew himself up from his prone position. The snake rose almost magically, facing him, staring at him over a space of mere inches.

He stood fully erect. Impossibly, the snake had now risen up out of its coil, still face to face with him.

"What are you?"

I guard your memories. I live inside you.

"My God!"

Back and forth it swayed, back and forth. Its eyes regarded Jonathan evenly. He realized that, in spite of all the fear it evoked in him, there was great beauty in it. He stretched out his hand, palm up. The huge head laid itself in his palm, and the membranes over the eyes slid down, giving them a milky green appearance.

An invisible claw seemed to take hold of his arm, to make him draw the head closer and closer to his own sweating face. Up close it was terrible to see, the face of a snake with such extreme intelligence in it that it seemed more than human. Much more. Satan would create such a face.

With a snap of its body the snake plunged its head between Jonathan's lips, forcing itself into his mouth.

He could feel the hard, cold scaliness of it, was made to gag as its tongue tickled the back of his throat. His helpless gagging enabled it to jam itself farther down, to fill his gullet. Now the thickness of the body distended his lips, compressed his tongue, made his jaws click. Fear and loathing shot through him. He threw himself back, grabbed at the heavy, surging coils. As the snake worked its way down into him he clawed at its slick flesh with frantic hands. He couldn't breathe, could barely make a sound. He could feel the head probing against sphincters as it made its way deep into him, past his esophagus and into his stomach. The deeper it got, the faster it went. Huge masses of coils began sweeping past his snatching, batting hands.

Then it was gone, only the tail tickling his throat. He felt as dense as thick paste, hideously full. His stomach was distended, his belt broken, his pants torn open. And the coils could be seen surging and billowing beneath the skin of his belly.

Heavily, he sank to the floor. He was utterly, completely revolted. As a teenager he had tried LSD. Compared to this the lysergic illusion was a mere

daydream.

All at once a terrible cramp doubled him over. He retched, spattering the tiles around him with flecks of blood.

He lay a long time, groaning, wanting to give way to nausea, unable to do so.

When at last the sensation passed and he could straighten up, his belly was no longer distended. He had not only swallowed the demon snake but somehow absorbed it. Now It was part of his body, of his soul.

There had been something else, some memory.

"I've got to remember!"

What?

It was gone. He was left with the horrible feeling that he had let some vital piece of information slip through the cracks in his mind. Another unreported side effect of 6-6-6. Those idiots at CalTech were going to get a hell of an angry letter. Ought to sue the jerks. He hitched up his pants slammed the refrigerator and locked it, kicked the bits of broken computer under a table, and staggered out of the lab

As he went down the corridor and emerged into the sunlight he began to feel a little better, although the smell of hot dogs from a streetcorner vendor brought renewed nausea.

Of course it had been an hallucination. There was no question about that. The snake was such an obvious unconscious symbol, exactly the sort of thing one might see on a bad trip. There hadn't been proper testing of 6-6-6; that was the long and short of it.

Everything that had happened, from the moment he took the drug, could be discounted.

He wanted to drink, to laugh in the sun just for an afternoon, to somehow forget the insane horror he had just experienced. Too bad it was clouding over. The best antidote would be the pleasure of a sunny day.

A very sunny day.

Chapter Seven

JONATHAN LAY IN his bed at home, his mind a jumble of confused and revolting images. So much for 6-6-6. It was a bad-trip express which had not gotten him much closer to resolving the question that tormented him.

He tossed, closed his eyes. Despite his efforts the old man still warned him, the serpent still sent shuddering waves of nausea through the depths of his stomach. There was also a confused jumble of thoughts—stakes, fires, Satanic plans . . . but he had lost the thread.

At last he accepted the fact that he was going to stay awake; in his present state there was no chance that he would find the relief of unconsciousness. Just as he was deciding to get up, his mother came in. He did not open his eyes. Quietly she sat down beside him and took his head in her lap, as she had done when he was a boy.

From time to time she would say his name, all the while stroking his forehead with her cool hand. Through slitted eyes he watched her. How sad she seemed, her eyes gazing at him with such softness in them. Never before had she seemed so mysterious, or so beautiful, or so full of love.

Her eyes were green. As were the old man's. As were Patricia's. And his own.

A species apart. . .

It came as a surprise to realize that she had soothed him after all, and he had slept for some little time. He sat up, startled by his return to a consciousness he did not know he had left. Where there had been memories in his mind there was now darkness . . . and a watchful snake.

"What time is it?"

"Eleven thirty."

She ran her fingers through his hair. "I would have gotten you up if there had been any change. She's still in the coma."

The cold word "coma" sighed in his mind. "Is she—"

"She'll come around this afternoon sometime. She's badly injured, darling, but she's going to be all right."

"Mother, I fell in love with her. I fell in love last night."

"She's a wonderful person."

"She's an angel." The image of that still body in its olive-drab intensive care blankets came into his mind. He would not cry, but inside himself he knew there were tears.

And deeper, where the serpent had its lair, what emotions did he feel there? He dared not find out, and turned his mind away. Better to cling to the surface.

"You know how you feel sometimes when you meet somebody who really fits—like you've always known them? That's how we felt. When I held her in my arms, Mother—" He could not continue. The thought of that warm, vital body was so moving and his grief so great that he was forced to lapse into silence.

Martin Titus had taught his son not to weep, but Jonathan knew that his mother understood what was in him. She had been only eighteen when he was born, and her relative youth increased the element of companionship. She was a beautiful woman. Her forty-one was a reasonable facsimile of thirty. "Did Mike make it hard for you?"

"You have the wrong idea, Mother. Mike is good to me."

"I suppose I ought to love him for that. But I just can't, poor man."

She was always saying things like that, and justifying her marriage as having some higher purpose.

"You didn't have to marry him."

"Oh, Jonathan, let's not go over that again. I'm trying to make the best of it. Let it go at that."

"Okay, Mother. I just wish you were happier. I don't appreciate being the cause of your martyrdom—especially because you won't tell me why you did it. I like Mike, he's a good man, but if you hadn't brought him into my life I wouldn't even know him." He got up and turned on WNEW-FM. Clash was deep in the purple rhythm of anger. He lowered the volume until it became a sullen, muttering undertone.

"Darling, I wish I could tell you. Maybe some day soon I'll be able to. But for now let's just drop the subject."

"You keep too much from me, Mother. I'm beginning to get an idea that what you're really hiding from me is my past."

"What is there to hide?"

"Whatever is the matter with me. What did you do—send me to some kind of a quack hypnotherapist? Let me ask you a frank question. Are we buried out here in Queens because of something I did in the past—like maybe raping a girl, or killing her?" His voice had risen. "Who *were* our friends in Manhattan, before Dad was killed? I don't even know. I can't remember."

"Jonathan, be patient with me. Just a little while longer—"

Almost before he realized it his hand had lashed out and caught her on the cheek. "Stop feeding me that line of bullshit! I want to know *now!*"

His mother turned away, her cheek reddening. There was a long silence. She did not turn back to him. "Perhaps we can go over to the hospital together," she said, too briskly. "I think it would be nice for us both to be there when she comes around."

"I'm sorry, Mother. Please forgive me."

"Hush, son. You're upset. Overwrought. There's nothing to forgive, okay? Just to forget." She smiled, her hand came out and touched his temple. "Get your clothes on and we'll go." Jonathan went into the bathroom and applied his Norelco to his face until the shadow was gone. Then he opened the aftershave, splashed some on, and combed his hair. He returned to his room and started to pull on some briefs. His mother stopped him with a gesture, then looked long at his naked body. "There's nothing you're not telling me, is there? Everything went all right with Mike, didn't it?"

"What're you inspecting me for, signs of a beating? He cleared me, at least superficially. Mother, I don't think you have even the foggiest idea about me and Mike. We love each other. Somehow or other it worked out between us. He's my friend, and I think of him as my father."

He dressed in the clothes his mother handed him from his closet. She got his brush and rebrushed his hair. "You're so handsome, Jonathan." She hugged him, throwing her arms around his chest and pressing her cheek against it. "I can't believe I have a big six-footer like you. Your dad's family is small." She fell silent for a moment. "Thump-bump, thump-bump—I hear your heart."

He kissed the top of her head and they went down to her car together. She had gotten the blue Audi out of Mike by simply going over to Bavaria Motors and buying it with a check. Mike had juggled his MasterCard credit lines like crazy, but when the check arrived at the bank the money was there. "She looks like a million dollars in that thing," Mike often said.

Her whole relationship with Mike was like that—she didn't so much make demands as present him with *faits accomplis*.

"Car running well, Mother?"

"I love it."

To get to the Poly they had to pass Patricia's building on Metropolitan Avenue. Jonathan stared at the tachometer rather than look out at it.

When he saw Queens Poly again, in the light of the summer afternoon, he knew he would hate it for the rest of his life. But then, as they rounded the corner, he counted up five rows of windows, then across six. That was her room. And somehow that particular window looked beautiful. "Let's stop for some flowers," he said. "There's a shop in the lobby."

They got sixteen dollars' worth of gardenias on Mary's theory that she would still be able to smell them even if all the tubes prevented her from moving her head enough to look at them. "Are you nervous, Jonathan?"

"I suppose so."

"I am too. But I know it's nothing compared to what you're going through. I'm very, very sorry for you both. I want you to know that."

"It's crazy to be so attached to somebody you just met, but—"

"She's special. That's why I got you two together in the first place."

"I suppose it's inevitable that I would love someone you picked out for me."

They went up in an elevator that was, if possible, even more crowded than the one Jonathan had used that morning. The fifth floor bustled with activity. Like a voice of doom an operator kept droning, "Airway team, airway team, airway team, entrance Twenty-two-B. Airway team, airway team, airway team . . ." Presumably there was somebody at entrance 22B, wherever that was, suffocating.

This time it was possible to enter her room. They went side by side down the white corridor, past a window where a man lay with tubes emanating from his belly, past another where groans rose from behind the drawn curtain, until finally they reached Patricia.

She was lying as still as Snow White beneath her plastic shroud. Other flowers, long-stemmed red roses, stood in a water pitcher on the bedside table. The card was from Mike. "Does he know her, Mother?"

"No. He must have sent them because of you."

Jonathan hardly heard her. Patricia lay as still and pure as the Madonna

herself. Three tubes came out of her nose, crossed her ivory cheeks, and wound around into three humming machines. Intravenous needles pierced both her forearms. Her hands rested at her sides. Jonathan knelt beside her bed in a state of sorrow that was also a state of love. He took her right hand in his and very gently kissed it.

The machines hummed. The air conditioning hissed. From the hallway chimes sounded. A tray of implements was rattled past by an orderly. Far off somebody cried out once sharply, and then fell silent.

Jonathan reached his hand in under the oxygen tent and touched her hair. It was matted with sweat, and her head was very warm. "My love," he whispered. "Please, God, help my love." He noticed that the smell of Mike's roses blended nicely with his gardenias.

There was a sound from Patricia's throat. Mary drew close to Jonathan. "Your hand. She feels your touch. She's going to come to."

"Patricia, it's me, Jonathan."

She made a guttural, inhuman sound, nothing like the melody of her voice. Then her eyes opened. She looked straight ahead for a long time. She was absolutely motionless.

"Patricia?"

Mary put her arm around Jonathan's shoulder. "It's us, darling, Mary and Jonathan Banion."

"John—Jonathan?"

"Hi, darling. I love you."

There was the slightest incline of her head. "Why am I here?"

"Something happened," Mary said. "There was an accident, but you'll be all right. You'll be fine."

"Oh-h-h, I hurt! I *hurt!*" Her voice was strident; now she frowned; now her eyes darted about wildly. "Why can't I feel my legs? Did I—"

"No, no, darling, nothing like that. You just got hurt, but you're going to be back to normal soon. It wasn't that bad."

She closed her eyes. Tears popped out from beneath the lids. "Was I raped?"

"Yes, honey, that's what happened."

She nodded. Silence fell.

"Hello, folks, how's our patient?"

Mary whirled around. "Mike!" He was standing there in his rumpled brown suit. Beside him was a natty man of perhaps thirty-five.

"This is Lieutenant Maxwell of the Sex Crimes Unit. He's going to be questioning Patricia."

Mary glared at the two men.

"Do you want us to leave, Dad?"

"It might be best. In cases like this they usually concentrate better when they're alone."

Jonathan withdrew his hand from Patricia's. "Jonathan!" Her voice was sharp, almost commanding. When she lifted her fingers he understood and again took her hand.

"I'm here, honey."

"Stay!"

"I won't leave unless you want me to."

Mike leaned into her field of vision. "We have some police questions to ask you, sweetie. It's better if you let Jonathan go for just five minutes—"

"No!"

Mary spoke. "What does it matter, Mike? Jonathan told me about the polygraph."

"Police questioning is confidential, ma'am," said the lieutenant.

Patricia's hand gripped Jonathan's hard. "You better stay, Johnny," Mike said. "She wants you, that's the important thing."

"Thanks, Dad."

The lieutenant went around to the opposite side of the bed, turned on a large, old-fashioned cassette recorder, and affixed the microphone to his lapel. "Miss Murray," he said in a surprisingly gentle voice, "I'm awfully sorry to have to bother you now, but we find it's best to do this as early as possible so you can get on with the business of getting well without us intruding."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Tom Maxwell. I'm a police officer."

"It hurts, Officer Maxwell."

Jonathan was aware that his mother had gotten another person to come into the room, a man with a surgical smock thrown over his business suit and half-glasses on his face. Obviously he was Patricia's doctor. "This patient has too many visitors," he said. "Perhaps it would be best if you left, Inspector

Banion."

"My associate wants to ask questions."

"He can stay."

"Miss Murray, do you remember anything at all about the man who raped you?" Maxwell asked his question softly, gently. A sensitive man.

Patricia stared straight ahead, her eyes glazed with deep inner looking. "I was on the bed with Jonathan," she said. She met his eyes. "I had you in my arms . . ." Behind him Mike leaned forward, put his hand on his stepson's shoulder.

The doctor spoke up again, directing his words to Mike. "Please, you really do have to leave."

"After that, what happened? Did Jonathan stay?"

"He . . ."

Jonathan's own mind flashed a violent, confused memory, like a door that opened and shut very quickly on an explosion.

They had been sitting on her bed, and there had been some erotic play. He was so excited, he remembered ... Then—a blast of light, a bad dream. Then he was being shaken awake by Mike.

"He left. I made him go home." She smiled at him. "You ought to marry me. Do you want to? I'm a good girl." Tears appeared in her eyes. She was probably afraid the rape had made her undesirable.

"I'd marry you in a minute."

She smiled a little. Silence followed his comment, broken by the doctor. "Inspector Banion, I'm telling you now to leave this room. There are too many people here."

"Look, Doctor, this is a capital case of the utmost importance."

"You aren't asking the questions."

"This case is special. I'm following it very closely." Jonathan felt Mary stiffen beside him. Mike continued. "There may be much more to it than simple rape. A great deal more. Right now the Queens Detective Area rates it priority one."

That silenced the doctor. Even he realized that it would be unwise to obstruct an inspector on a case he considered as major as this one. The lieutenant started in again. "After he left, what happened?"

"I went to bed." She sobbed, closed her eyes.

"And?"

"Oh! All these voices! Then it's—oh . . ."

"What is it?"

"Dark! My God, it's dark!"

The lieutenant looked across the oxygen tent to Doctor Gottlieb, who shook his head. "Should I continue?" Watching Mike carefully, the doctor nodded. "Miss Murray, do you remember anything about the individual who assaulted you?"

Jonathan felt her grip weaken, saw her lips open slightly behind the obscuring tangle of tubes. "She's fallen asleep," the doctor said. "All is well."

Mike shook his head. "I don't know what to make of this," he said.

"Obviously it's traumatic amnesia," the doctor snapped. "She can't handle the memory just now."

"It doesn't look like that to me. She—"

"Never mind how you think it looks or doesn't look! When she's stronger you can come back. Maybe you'll have better luck with your bullying then."

Mike smiled. "He asks the questions but you yap at me. What's my problem—bad breath?" He led his lieutenant out of the room. Beyond the window Jonathan could see yet another visitor, Father Goodwin, looking even more pale and cadaverous than usual.

"I have to examine the wound and change the dressing," the doctor announced. "You can come back afterward, Jonathan."

Jonathan started to get up, but the moment he moved Patricia's hand became like steel again. "Hey, darling, I thought you were asleep."

She didn't answer; she was clinging even in sleep. Jonathan was deeply moved. "Jennifer," the doctor said to a nurse, "get him a mask and gown, will you?" When she was gone, the doctor spoke directly to Jonathan for the first time. "After we're finished, please come into the conference room. I'd like to brief you since you're obviously the closest we're going to come to a next of kin."

Mary and the nurse managed to get Jonathan more or less covered without breaking the contact so vital to Patricia. The surgical mask smelled faintly of iodine.

"I'm Paul Gottlieb," the doctor said as he worked. "I'm your mother's

gynecologist. She called me into the case. I have a surgical specialty," he added, as if to further justify himself. Jonathan could not see what he was doing behind the sheets, but a blood-soaked dressing soon came out. "Oh, this looks just fine. This is coming right along. There's been excellent preliminary progress." Then he muttered to the nurse. "I want a pin test, Jenny. There's still cyanosis evident in the legs."

The nurse disappeared down the hall, returning after a moment with an instrument tray. Jonathan did not see exactly which device the doctor used, but from the length of time he spent it was obvious the test was not immediately successful.

"Okay," he said at last, "very good. Now, Jonathan, if you'd just come out with me, I can go over our plans. You're going to play a crucial role in Patricia's recovery, you know."

Coaxing finally got Patricia to release Jonathan's hand. He promised to come back as soon as he could. As they left the room he saw Father Goodwin go in. He had a pyx in his hand. No doubt, if she awoke more fully, she would be grateful for Communion.

The conference room was as plastic as any of the hospital spaces, blue walls and an acoustic-tiled ceiling into which somebody was in the habit of sailing pencils, two or three of which jutted out of it. There were half-empty coffee cups on the cigarette-scarred Formica conference table. Here and there lay a pencil-marked yellow pad. On one was a doodle of a female foot in a tall spike heel.

"So this is Jonathan." The doctor's eyes shone.

"Doctor Gottlieb delivered you," Mary said softly.

Jonathan was touched. In all his life he had never met this man, had not even heard him referred to. His identity was no secret, it was just that Mother tended to be quite private about female matters. "I'm glad to meet you, Doctor. And I'm awfully glad you're here." He had never said truer words. He was feeling a rush of gratitude toward the physician.

"I want to tell you right now that Patricia will be able to bear children normally. And there will be no loss of sexual function. There will be a vertical scar about eight inches long, but plastic surgery can deal with that if the patient wishes." Jonathan remembered kissing her perfect skin just above the belly button, how sweet it had tasted. "Our major worry is that scarring to the vagina will impair sexual enjoyment for the patient and her partners. But we

tried hard to limit that."

"How badly was she hurt, Doctor?" Jonathan had to ask. He found that it was very, very important to him.

"She had extensive vaginal injuries. She has hairline fractures in her pelvis, and one hip was dislocated. She was as severely injured genitally as any young woman I've seen. We can count ourselves lucky that she's going to make a good recovery."

"You make it sound like there might be something else."

"Well, I was getting to that. We don't know for certain yet, but the indications so far are that both of her legs are paralyzed."

Jonathan was stunned. "She can't walk?"

"Not just at the moment, no. But we haven't been able to detect any injury that would cause this, so we don't think that it's likely to be a permanent condition."

"What does that mean? Days? Years?"

"We have no way of telling, I'm sorry to say. It would be premature to take a completely pessimistic view, though."

Jonathan left the barren little conference room and went back to Patricia. He found the priest kneeling beside the bed with his face on his clasped hands, obviously praying. He didn't blame Father Goodwin. In fact he envied him his faith.

When Jonathan came into her view she smiled a vague sort of a smile. Her fingers moved slightly.

He twined his own in them. They stayed like that, the two of them, silent in one another's company. After a time the priest finished whatever prayer he had been saying, and left them alone.

18 JULY 1983

MOST PRIVATE

To: The Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Defense of the Faith

From: The Chancellor for the Inquiry in North America

Your Eminence:

This is to inform you that Brother Alexander Thomas Parker (b. 12 Oct. 1942, + 17 Oct. 1942, ord. 22 June 1964, Judist, Soldier of Christ,

Inquisitor-Captain) has been martyred in the line of duty. Because he was tortured we must assume his cell to have been compromised.

As a result I have withdrawn the cell from the Night Church Congregation Holy Spirit and am now in the process of regrouping around a new cell leader.

This will result in a period during which we will be intelligence-blind.

The following personnel shifts have occurred:

1. Brother Alexander Thomas Parker, deceased by reason of fire applied to the body by hostile persons. Martyr.
2. Brother Julius Timothy, transferred to Prefecture of the West, service in California.
3. Brother George Robert Yates, transferred as above.
4. Sister Marie-Louise D'Aubusson, invested as Captain-Inquisitor, ordered to form a new cell for penetration of the Night Church Congregation Holy Spirit.

Under separate cover please find a request for \$2,114.28 to cover travel expenses involved in these changes.

A layperson (Terence Quist, b. 22 Nov. 1933, + 25 Dec. 1933, conf. 5 April 1945, single, K. of C, CCD) in the process of being recruited by Brother Alexander has been abandoned. Recruitment had not proceeded far enough to justify shifting to another operative, and I prefer to let the new Captain-Inquisitor bring in her own people.

Yours in Christ & for the Defense of the Faith, Brian Conlon (Msgr.)

Document Class: Urgent A. most private, Swiss Guards courier

Destination: Paolo Cardinal Impelliteri, the Hidden Collegium, Prefecture for the Defense of the Faith, Vatican City

20 IULIUS 1983

FURTIVISSIMUS

Ad: Cancellarius Inquisitionis in Septentrionalis Americanensis

Ex: Praefectus Congregationis Defensionis Fidei

We are shocked and saddened by the loss you have experienced. It is especially unfortunate that Brother Alexander had to endure such a harsh martyrdom. We can all take solace, though, in contemplating the peace

Brother knows now.

I wish to reassert the wish of His Holiness that *Contra Poenam Ultimam* is to be scrupulously observed. The Night Church may be barbaric, but *we* are not.

I attach your approved expense report, with the admonition that religious below the level of Monsignor should not have traveled business class.

Also attached is a most distressing report from the Historical Section, written in the seventies of the last century. It appeared in the list of relevant *documen-tum* when we ran *Rituale Pudibunda Coitus* through the library's database.

Mea Auctoritate,

Paolo Cardinalis Impelliteri

Document Class: Urgent A, destroy in presence of courier

Destination: Monsignor Brian Conlon, Chancellor for the Inquiry, North America, 1217 Fuller Brush Building, 221 E. 57th Street, New York, N.Y., 10022

THE USE OF DISEASE VECTORS BY THE NIGHT CHURCH IN HISTORICAL TIMES

by

Anthony S. Gardner, O.S.

March 4, 1871

(Synopsis)

1. Recent research into the Salisbury *Documentum*, the *Annates Emiliani*, and the *Marque de la Templars* suggests that the European plague known as the Black Death (1334-1360) spread from three focal points on the continent and one in Great Britain, in addition to the known font in Constantinople. (Vat. Docs. CMXXXIV)

2. These points were:

The Colchester Redoubt in Britain Palazzo Emiliani in Venice The Preceptory of the Hidden Temple in Paris Rennes-le-Chateau in the Pyrenees

3. Three of these locations were in the famous 14th-century strongholds of the so-called "Cathar Heresy,"

which is one of the best-known disguises of the Night Church. The fourth, the Templar's House, was the confirmed world center of the Night Church at that time, fulfilling much the same function as their headquarters at Lourdes does today.

4. The Black Death began spreading within a few weeks of the infamous *Rituale Pudibunda Coitus* held between Margaret de Pantera and Carolus Titus at Salisbury Cathedral. During this ritual Carolus was killed, but not before despoiling the still unfinished cathedral and killing a substantial number of the sorcerers who were attendant at the affair.

5. The period after this is known in the annals of the Night Church as the "Dolorosa," apparently because the first "anti-man," which was successfully conceived in the ritual, was born defective and had to be destroyed. Many more years of breeding between the Pantera and Titus families were needed before a true success could be achieved.

6. The Night Church, which had unleashed the Black Death to make room for its "anti-humanity," was then compelled to do its best to stave off the destruction of the entire human race lest the two critical families themselves be included. Given the primitive medicine of the day, it took them twenty years to completely eliminate the plague they had started.

7. Seven out of every ten human beings on this planet died during the Black Death. It was the most destructive thing that has ever happened to humankind. Whole cities, nations, disappeared into the wilderness.

8. The disease is thought to have been an artificially created hybrid of bubonic plague. Its exact nature remains to this day unknown.

9. Because of the speed of the contagion (about three hours from first symptoms to death) and the rapidity with which it spreads, even modern medicine would be taxed by it, should it appear again.

Chapter Eight

TERRY QUIST KNEW he was in trouble when he woke up in the middle of the night and smelled perfume around him. As always, he was alone in bed. Women were a thing of the past for him . . . and it hadn't been much of a past. He was ugly, poor, and full of bad personal habits. He had not done well with the ladies.

He lay staring into the shadows around him, inhaling and listening.

There came from the living room of his tiny garage apartment a steady rustling.

Woman or not, the idea of somebody out there going through the papers on his desk scared the hell out of him.

Rustle, rustle, rustle. She was turning over page after page. All his story ideas, such as they were, lay on that desk. Under pseudonyms he moonlighted for a number of raunchy weeklies: *The National Tattler*, *The Midnight Express*, a few others. Naturally his notes were here. They couldn't be kept at the office. If the *Times* ever discovered his sin he'd be instantly fired, or so he assumed.

But his notes weren't of interest to anybody—just a bunch of jerkoff ideas. "The Sexual Power of Celery" was one. "Telepathic Cancer Cure" was another.

Oh, God, the notes on the Night Church were there, two pages neatly typed up just this morning!

He became aware that the rustling had stopped.

By the time he realized she had come into his room she was right beside his bed.

She stood looking down at him. As she bent close he saw her glaring eyes. She was beautiful like a snake might be beautiful. You can't look, and yet you can't look away.

She was also familiar.

Although his own eyes were closed to slits, he recognized the face

swimming in the dark above him. It was Mike Banion's wife, Mary.

Seemingly satisfied he was asleep, she withdrew from the room, pulling the door almost shut.

A blinding flash filled the crack between door and jamb. Then a rustle of paper. Then another flash.

A moment later he heard his front door click shut.

He lay motionless, waiting for his heart to stop banging. A confusion of thoughts tumbled through his mind. Mary Banion? Two flashes. Pictures of the two pages.

But *Mary Banion*?

Oh, Christ. If they were in it together, when he went to Mike he would have been talking to the Night Church.

The image of Alex's charred body came to mind. Death was bad enough, but a death as hard as that, God help you.

He was in deep, deep trouble. He had to act on his own behalf or he was a dead man.

Throw himself on the mercy of the Night Church? Maybe the Banions would vouch for him. Sure they would. God, they had to or he was going to end up just like Alex.

What the hell *was* the Night Church, that it could command the loyalty of a lady as fine as Mary Banion? Or Mike, if he was part of it.

He was damn well going to find out. He showered and shaved and put on his best doubleknit suit.

Now he looked like an underpaid salesman instead of an even more underpaid newshog. Maybe a machine-tool salesman or a shoe salesman, or the type of guy with a chain of two or three newsstands. Barely okay, in other words. But it was his best suit, so it would have to do.

The streets were empty and quiet, the big trees breaking up the glare of the streetlights. Flower smells came from the yards of the enormous old Richmond Hill houses. People sneered at Queens, but it was a magical place at night, on the side streets where the secrets hid.

He would walk right into the Spirit. He would become a member in good standing. Hell, he wasn't going to go the way of Alex Parker; he was smarter than that.

The Spirit lay at the far end of Morris Street, a huge black bulk rising past the crowns of maples and chestnuts. Morris was a short block, worth only one

streetlight, which fitfully illuminated the front of the age-blackened church. Terry's footsteps sounded loud on the sidewalk.

He reached the church. Absolute silence.

He mounted the steps, put his hand on the big brass handle.

The door opened noiselessly. Somebody had been very careful to keep it thoroughly oiled. Inside, total blackness. For a few moments Terry thought he must be early, or late, or even that they hadn't come on this particular night.

Then he sensed that the dark was full of people.

From deep within there came a low, strange musical note. In response some of the people in the pews lit tiny candles, cradling them in paper cones. Now Terry could see faces, and they were the faces of everyday life, old and young, plain and beautiful. There were whole families, mothers and fathers and children, single men and women too, all sorts of people.

Terry thought he'd better make himself known instantly. They mustn't be given the idea he was spying on them. "Excuse me," he said in a whisper that managed to echo through the whole damn church. "I'd like to join up ... if that's okay."

They responded as one voice with a sound that at first Terry could not quite understand. Then he realized that it was a buzz of amused surprise.

He felt horribly alone. But when he turned to leave he found that somebody was standing right behind him. He was of middle age, dressed in a black pinstriped suit and a club tie, with the sensitive face of a decent and educated man. Obviously an usher. And why not? Night or day, churches needed ushers. He drew a long, gleaming stiletto from beneath his jacket, then replaced it. "Please be quiet," he whispered. On the domineering side, as ushers go.

Terry decided to be just as quiet as he could.

There came from the choir loft a deep, resonating hum, like the rising of a million locusts. The call of whatever kind of hellhorn they had up there caused the congregation to drop as one man to its knees. The service had begun.

Old altar bells, long abandoned by the day church, tinkled softly. The congregation raised their heads. Before them stood an elderly man with blazing green eyes. The most glorious vestment that Terry had ever seen wrapped his shoulders. It must be beyond anything created for centuries—not since the decadence of the Middle Ages—with diamonds and rubies and

emeralds and sapphires, the thousands of tiny jewels worked into intricate symbols and designs. In his right hand he carried a crystal wand. His head was mitered with a tall conical hat.

His robe shimmered in the wan light with images and suggestions of images, scenes of horror: corpses woven of tiny black beads ran along the bottom hem, worked into every possible posture of agony. Above them rose flames of ruby and orange soapstone, and higher still were obsidian chips fashioned into the outlines of ruined cities.

He swept back and forth in front of his congregation, pacing like a lion and making passes with his wand. Here came the mumbo jumbo. For an instant Terry actually thought that this was going to be humorous, but then the man turned to the altar and he saw the face woven on the back of the robe.

It was more than a monster's face embroidered there; it was remotely and disgustingly human. Its features were gross, with thick lips and exaggerated brows, and an excess of teeth bulging from the mouth.

The anti-man.

Terry wondered why they would want to create such a thing. What did they get from serving evil? Power? Wealth? Or was it the same thing that drew romantic young Germans into the SS: the allure of death?

Two members of this congregation were supposed to have been bred to conceive the first anti-man. Sure. Look at this bunch, scrubbed and clean and straight.

They must all be crazy. Had to be. Nothing that ugly could come out of a human union, no matter how horrible the parents were. And none of these people was even slightly horrible.

The chief magus, or whatever he was, turned around again and cleared his throat. He looked out across his congregation with an expression only a little nicer than the one portrayed on his vestment.

"We are gathered here to pray that our Princess may survive the great suffering to which we in our impiety and stupidity have subjected her." Another stiletto type came across the nave and whispered to the dark priest or wizard or whatever he was.

Then those eyes were looking right down the center aisle at Terry Quist. "Come," the wizard said softly. As Terry walked up the aisle faces turned to watch him. Just normal, ordinary, everyday faces. A lot of families had brought their kids.

The low, pulsing sound that had begun the ceremony started again, this time developing thrumming chords that seemed capable of sinking into the depths of the mind, evoking in Terry emotions of stunning violence. He saw by the discomfort in the pews that he was not alone in this reaction.

Here and there younger children covered their ears. And yet this was not a loud sound so much as a penetrating one. It would hardly be audible beyond the church walls, except to somebody with unusually sensitive ears. Alexander Parker must have been one such person. The music carried a strong emotional charge. Negative. Terry fantasized a Sten gun in his hands, pulling the trigger, seeing blood and brains spray around him—

"Stop right there, young man."

Terry stopped. He was about ten feet from the wizard. This close the man's face was quite simply terrible. It was old and the color of newspaper, and it looked as fragile as a dry leaf. The green eyes glared in the way that Terry's years as a reporter had taught him to associate with advanced psychosis or great rage.

"You say that you want to join us, young man. How have you come to know of us?"

Terry's sense of the situation was that there weren't many right answers to that question.

He hadn't really expected to be greeted with suspicion, given his assumption that they would want recruits. Wrong again, Terry. His life was a tissue of mistakes, way back to the beginning. Obviously, he had just made another. Or had he? Getting into this was his one and only ticket out of getting killed by it.

"I knew a guy named Alex Parker—"

Somebody grabbed his shoulders from behind and slammed him to his knees. "*Never* address His Eminence from your feet, please."

"Hey, now wait a minute." He sensed an arm being raised for a blow. "Sorry! His Eminence. Take it easy. I'll be real respectful."

The wizard met Terry's eyes with as cold a look as he could imagine. "So you must be Mr. Quist," he said softly. "Yes. I see your logic in coming here. You were correct to assume Parker had talked about you. Now you want to join us rather than risk sharing Parker's fate. Clever. Convenient for us, too."

Not quite the right response. There was something Terry didn't like about his coming here being convenient for them.

"We have been given a special opportunity tonight," the wizard said. "Prepare for the *Rituale Cruciatus Nexis*." He clapped his hands. "Mr. Quist is going to test our revised vector."

"What kind of a vector?"

He was shoved again. "Never address a question to His Eminence."

"Sorry! Will you tell me what test—"

"It will be very brief, Mr. Quist," His Eminence said. "This vector is so quick you'll hardly even know what happened."

"Wonderful, Your Eminence. Very reassuring. I think I want to go home."

His Eminence did not even smile.

Something was going on at the rear of the church. There were a number of people consulting with one another. Then one of them broke away and trotted up a side aisle. He consulted briefly with His Eminence. The old man seemed testy. "And make it fast," he rasped at his departing lackey. He looked toward the choir loft. "Begin the processional, Bob."

"The organ?" came the reply, full of doubt.

"Of course not, it's too loud. The horn."

The musician was a master of his instrument, whatever it was. The music swept and swirled and throbbed. Terry even forgot his aching knees. He had never before heard a musical instrument that made such a sound. It worked on your emotions to an almost uncanny degree. This time the tone was one of peace and reassurance, like one might hear in an ancient monastery, where the monks were chanting their matins.

Perhaps fifteen minutes passed before His Eminence returned to the center of the sacristy. At the same time Stiletto Man and one of his assistants arrived and crowded Terry on both sides. Guess I'm going through with this, Terry thought.

The horn sounded a single, long note. Terry craned his neck around and saw a boy and girl of perhaps twelve begin marching up the aisle with the self-consciously slow tread of under-rehearsed kids. Their grave, soft faces were yellowed by the flickering light of the thick red candles they held in their hands. They were dressed all in white, these children, and their footsteps made no sound.

Now things began to get colorful. The wizard—oops, His Eminence—raised his arms and spoke: "By the power of the King of the Underworld, O Spirits of the Hells receive our gift and remember Thee us!" He began a slow

twirling dance, his face sinking to deep concentration, his wand describing quick crosses. "Come and take our offering, O Deeps!"

The congregation replied: "Come from the east, the south, the west, and the north. Come into this house." There was the rattle of a general turning of pages.

The children reached Terry.

His Eminence stopped his dance. He dropped to his knees, facing his congregation. "Who shall be the medium of the experiment?"

The girl replied, "Father, it is Terence Michael Aloysius Quist," Nice. They even knew the Aloysius. The last place that had appeared was on his birth certificate. The Night Church had done its homework.

"Do you give him up willingly?"

"We do, your Eminence." The children spoke as from rote, carefully and in unison. Their candles guttered and swayed.

"What shall open the gates of the future?"

"The death of man."

His Eminence stood up, a menacing presence in his shimmering robes and tall miter. "I call Thee, O dweller in the deep of hearts, come among us and receive this our gift of thanks."

The congregation responded: "May He bless our experiment." There was that word again. Experiment. This Night Church was half religion, half science—the demented superstition of the Middle Ages mixed with a science that had progressed far beyond the worship that accompanied it.

The music stopped.

This was a cue to the children, who had paused before Terry. "Come with us, please, sir," said the girl. She put out her free hand. Terry took it and raised himself to his feet. The two children turned him around.

His heart almost stopped. A black coffin lay open in the aisle. The boy took his other hand. "This is just our initiation," he whispered. "You have to get in."

"Come on, don't be ridiculous."

Something sharp pressed up against his neck. He shuddered; he knew that it was the stiletto.

His legs were wobbly, but he made it to the coffin. In other circumstances he might have tried to run, but there were hundreds of people between him and

the doors. He had a strong feeling that he either got into that coffin or ended up with his throat cut.

It looked soft inside but the damn thing was hard. Beneath the white satin lining there was just wood.

"Nobody close this thing," Terry said. He did not speak in a whisper. He wanted to be heard.

The girl smiled. "Even if we do, it won't be for long. It's going to be fine. Really it is."

The intensity of the music increased, the emotional timbre became excited and mean.

There was no real pillow, so Terry had to raise his head to see what was going on around him. He raised it and kept it raised: there was no way he was going to let these loonies put that lid down. He noticed that the edges of the lid were lined with rubber, like the door of a refrigerator.

His Eminence approached the altar. He began to quiver, creating the impression that a tremendous inner battle was taking place. The wand he held seemed about to drop from his hand. An acolyte appeared and held a gold platen covered by a silk doily beneath the vibrating wand.

"I conjure Thee, O Lord of Flies and Ills, through the medium of his dread, bring the infection unto his body."

A tension of expectancy filled the church. People were whispering. He saw a mother putting a surgical mask on her six-year-old.

The music was vicious now, actually prancing with glee.

His Eminence straightened up. He raised his hands and the music stopped. With a rustle of his robes he turned around. He spread his arms. "The time has come."

Faces began to look expectantly at Terry. The two children had taken places at the foot and head of the coffin. The wizard said softly to them, "Now."

With a movement too sudden to avoid the boy reached out and spurted a tiny aerosol in Terry's face. It wasn't much of a spurt. There wasn't even any odor.

Then they started to close the coffin.

Terry had been expecting this. "No way!" He jumped right out onto the floor. "No way do I get shut up in there."

In the dark a woman screamed, a keening sound. "Seal him up," somebody said in a frantic whisper.

People began pushing down the pews, away from him. His Eminence

plastered on a smile. And here came the Stiletos. They were not smiling. For his part, Terry was about to sneeze.

"Amanda," the wizard said pleasantly, "tell Terry a little about the ritual." She hesitated. "Don't be afraid, Amanda. There are still a few minutes' grace."

At the sound of that word Terry noticed that he felt like hell. His bones ached, his skin was dry and sensitive.

The girl took his hand again. He noticed for the first time that there was an almost childlike quality about all these people. The gaudy rituals, the deep of the night, the secrecy, all spoke of the distant past; the terror of it, but also the charm.

"Terry, we have to close the lid for a little while because our ritual is about dying to the past and coming to life again in the service of evil. It only stays down for about two minutes. It's just symbolic." She squeezed his hand and gave him a cute smile. "It's what you want, isn't it? I mean, that must be why you're here."

"Yes." Terry's voice was hoarse with fear.

"We all want you to do it, all of us." There were murmurs of assent from the surrounding pews, accompanied by encouraging nods and smiles. And then there were also the Stiletos.

"Sorry I'm so touchy," he muttered. "Claustrophobia." He got back in and the kids, smiling warmly, closed the lid. There was a distinct click, and then utter darkness. Someone had locked the lid with a coffin key. Oh, Christ, this was going to be hard. Almost at once the air began to go bad. He felt absolutely horrible.

The music started again, its low notes filling the thick air. Muffled but audible there came from the congregation a sharp sigh. This was followed by a burst of low words, sounding like Latin.

Although he listened with all his might Terry couldn't hear much. He felt along the top of the coffin. Maybe there was some kind of a handle or latch in here—just in case the dead man woke up. But no, nothing.

They were doing something outside; he could hear movements close to the coffin.

It was hot in here. Plus he was so sick his chest was beginning to rattle. He sneezed violently. Once. Again. Three times. Four. Five. He began to see the true nature of the experiment they were conducting. It had to do with that

aerosol.

They had given him the disease!

The top seemed to crash against his face. For a moment he didn't understand that he had banged at it with his forehead, trying to break out. When he did understand it scared the hell out of him. He was farther gone than he thought; he was out of control. Must be fever coming on.

They weren't going to let him out of here. They were going to see how efficiently their disease worked.

How long it took to kill an average adult male.

He writhed, felt with desperate, questing fingers the satin flocking of the coffin. He had been an idiot to think they would let him out! "Please!" Nothing. "Please! Oh, plea-a-ase!"

"Mr. Quist?"

"Oh! Oh, yes! Oh, thank you! Thank you for answering me! I can't get my breath. I gotta have air! I'm sick. Sick bad! You've got to open this thing up."

"We have a few questions first, Mr. Quist." The wizard's voice sounded so close he must be crouched right at the head of the coffin. Terry had been fool enough to come here, and they had simply taken advantage.

All Terry could think to do was be agreeable. If he cooperated there might be some hope.

If not he was a dead man. "Questions? Sure, but hurry!" He had never been able to hold his breath long in childhood contests at Miller-Walkin Public Swimming Pool in Corona Park. Never for long. He would come bursting up out of the water first or second, his lungs aching for air, his whole body filled with a painfully urgent need to breathe. "Please hurry!"

"What did you tell Inspector Michael Banion about us?"

Holy God! Mike wasn't in on it, only his wife! His heart went out to the poor guy. He had to get out of here, to somehow warn Mike! They'd been friends forever, he and Mike. The poor guy.

His wife! His *wife!*

That unbelievable bitch.

His throat hurt as if it were being hacked with a dull blade. He raised his hands and was horrified to find huge swellings on both sides of his neck. Then he couldn't lower his arms. In that moment other swellings had appeared in his underarms. Even as the air around him went bad he kept having to take deeper and deeper breaths through his constricted windpipe.

"Help me! I told you, I'm sick! Bad!"

"Inspector Banion—"

Maybe he could still help Mike a little. "I told him nothing!"

"You're lying."

"Let me out of here! Let me out! You've got to get me to a hospital. I'm sick. I'm smothering, for God's sake!"

"Are you an Inquisitor? Is Banion an Inquisitor?"

"What the fuck is an Inquisitor? I don't know from Inquisitors. For the love of God, open this thing up!" He kicked, he hammered, he tore at the upholstery. The swelling under his right arm burst with an audible pop, a discharge of thick, stinking fluid, and an agonizing shaft of pain.

He knew suddenly that he would die before the interrogation was over. "Open it up and let me breathe! I'll tell you everything. Please, I beg you. I beg you,"

"Did you name names?"

"Hell, no!"

"Tell us the truth and we'll open the top."

This was no time to be coy. "I told Mike nothing because he wouldn't listen to me. The minute he heard Night Church he laughed at me. He's not the type of cop's gonna buy something like this without it being rubbed in his ever-lovin' face! *Now let me out!*"

There was whispered conversation outside, which soon died to silence. He felt himself drifting. Then he felt nothing.

Suddenly he came to. He had been out cold! "Open this thing up!"

What air he could get past his twisted throat moved with a thin whistling sound.

This was the death of Terence Michael Aloysius Quist, reporter. Noble? Not very. No Pulitzer for this turkey. He became aware of a seething, slithering sound on the outside of the coffin, as if somebody was lying on it. Just a few inches of wood separated his face from excited breathing.

"You perverts—you bastards!"

The response was a sort of whine that sounded hardly human. The coffin started to shake with the gyrations of whoever was there. "Listen with the stethoscope," somebody whispered. "Four minutes and he can barely breath past the buboes!"

Buboes? The bastards had given him some kind of super-plague, then shut

him up in here to see how fast it worked.

Terry was almost grateful when his heart began to beat irregularly. Death is coming soon, guy. This too will pass. Who knows, maybe there's even some kind of special heaven for the congenitally unlucky.

"Cardiac arrhythmias at five minutes," said a calm voice.

"Excellent work," His Eminence replied.

Unfeeling bastards. At the sound of those clipped, educated voices Terry's fear shattered. Now he was simply mad. Too bad there was no way to disappoint them at least a little. To die nobly, instead of like a choking, poisoned dog.

A wave of raw desperation made him hammer his feet wildly. From outside there came excited little cries. "Delirium at five minutes twenty seconds!"

For an instant Terry was out again, then he returned to consciousness amid a series of white flashes. He was going now, he knew it. Escape just wasn't in the cards.

He grieved for parts of life he had loved, for the snow-muffled nights along old cobbled streets, for the pungent smell of coal smoke, for crime scenes and squad cars and all-night delis. And girls, all the girls he hadn't had.

Outside there were eager scufflings, as if more of the ghouls were gathering around the coffin. He could picture them out there, all crowded around, laughing that stifled laughter, gleeful at the success of their experiment.

There was a plague that killed in minutes, and it was in the hands of the mad.

He would at least show them a little human nobility, a little bravery. Mustering every bit of self-control available to him he cleared his throat as best he could.

If he was going to die, let it be in style.

"I'm singin' in the rain," he gasped, "singin' and dan-cm —

He had to work up another breath to go on.

Outside, silence had descended. Maybe they were shocked, maybe awed. Good. He wanted them to know this was a human being in here, and at the end this human being had broken through all his pain and all his terror, and faced a hell of a death with a song.

"Singin' in the rain—"

There came a murmur of conversation. He was getting to them, he knew he was.

"Glory halleluja, I'm happy again!"

Somebody hushed the murmur.

"Singin' in the rain, you bastards! Singin' in the goddamn rain!" He threw back his head and ground out some wheezy laughter. There was thunder in his ears and acid in his throat. He was dying in agony but he did not scream.

Then singing burst forth all around him, the brightest, most triumphant singing he had ever heard. From hundreds of throats: ". . . just singin' in the rain. What a glorious feelin', I'm happy again. . . ."

They were throwing it right back at him. He hadn't gotten through to them at all. They had no feelings, they were worse than mad, they had no souls.

At last the animal took over and he tore madly at the coffin, digging as a trapped beast would dig. He sank his nails into the wooden lid.

He died.

MARY: THE TERROR OF THE INQUISITION

My dearest Jonathan:

I write this now, in this black time, in the hope that it will one day soon be possible for you to read it.

I must tell you that Patricia's injuries are not your fault. The blame rests with me and your Uncle Franklin. All I can say in our defense is that what happened was a sort of accident. We caused it, yes, but for the best of reasons. We were trying to protect you both from the terror of the Inquisition.

There is a chance that we may cure Patricia, by a method that will surprise you. If the cure works, my son, you will one day hold this letter in your hands.

I put pen to paper confidently, trusting that those we serve will guide us through out troubles. I have belonged to them, as have you, all the days of my life. I have come to love their hardness, to embrace their danger.

I cannot call them evil, any more than I can call you anything but my beloved child. I hope my words will help you in your confusion and fear. Remember yourself. Remember what you were before the hypnosis and what you are becoming again. Remember that you will be the father of the anti-man.

He will be a creature of what men call darkness. But not to himself. Men's dark will be his light, their evil his good. Your son will have strengths and powers mankind never had; he will have the attributes of the demons.

The anti-man will have the intelligence of Asmodeus and the strength of Belial. He will be able to discourse like Satan and will shine with Lucifer's fire.

Do you remember learning all of that in catechism? Remember the stories of the demons?

They are all hoping for you now, Jonathan. Can you feel them in your heart, hear them whispering to you when the wind hisses through the leaves?

Remember the vision of Belial you had when you were nine? "I will speak to you in the voice of the dry leaves," he said. That was such an extraordinary vision, and it filled you with such determination.

I know what you are feeling, what conflict rages in your heart. Now that you have been exposed to the world of man you have come to love it. But, Jonathan, remember that God has owned this earth for millions upon millions of years. It is time for the Devil to have His share of rule. This is justice.

Anti-humanity will be stronger than humanity, and far greater. Life on earth has been steadily evolving toward higher and higher intelligence. So our creation is only the next logical step. Satan gave man knowledge in the first place. Now He will give the earth a humanity fashioned in His image.

Compared to us ordinary folk your son will literally be a god—as far above us as we are above the ape men who preceded us.

When our species was born we pushed our forebears into extinction. And that was just.

But modern Homo sapiens would resist its own extinction. A fearful and jealous humankind will destroy the new species before it can get a proper start.

The destiny of this earth is to produce your son and all his race. As a Church, we worship this destiny. As scientists, we help to bring it about.

Jonathan, I can scarcely imagine how shocking it must be to discover these truths about yourself after you thought yourself an ordinary man. You are not ordinary. You are the product of centuries and centuries of the most careful breeding. You and Patricia are hardly even human.

Your bodies are ordinary. They are the past. Your souls, though, contain the seed of the future.

Do not recoil at the responsibility, my son: you are merely the instrument of nature. The law of evolution is expressing itself through you.

Now I must tell you why you are going through all this difficulty and

confusion, why you have been made to forget your own past.

When your natural father and Patricia's parents were killed by the Inquisition, we hid you both. We did it by hypnotizing you and concealing you under false identities. Even under torture you would not reveal the truth about yourselves.

I am so sorry we made you endure this, and in our ignorance caused the accident in June at Holy Spirit. All I can do is plead an excess of protective zeal.

You two are so precious! When I think that we nearly destroyed you by our very effort to protect you I almost go mad!

But we were not wrong to take the steps we did. The Inquisitors are master saboteurs. Their murders usually seem like accidents. They are so stealthy I think that they could kidnap an unborn child from its mother's womb. I myself trust nobody. When the cricket stops at moonset, I suspect the sneaking approach of the Inquisitor with his tinder ready to set a fire in my bed. And when the darkness sighs, I listen for the Inquisitor's voice, murmuring word of our defeat.

I sit here by the hour waiting and listening and worrying.

How can I help you through your rediscovery of yourself? Advice seems hollow, love futile. All I can tell you is that the earth's will is toward evolution. It is your privilege to enact it.

Accept this fundamental reality and all your confusion will evaporate. You will reacquire the moral precision that has always supported you. You will *know* the rightness of our cause.

It is the middle of the night, warm and still. I am hunched in a pool of light at my desk in the upstairs sitting room. I can hear Mike snoring across the hall. And at the far end, in your room, you have just sighed. I will go and kiss you, my dearest son.

Five minutes have passed. I am back from your bedside. You moaned when my lips touched your cheek. Your sleep is troubled again tonight, darling. I wish that I were a demon, and could bless you with a demon's insight.

Franklin says the life of the Church has always been this hard, but I don't agree. It was bad during the Albigensian Crusade and worse during the Spanish Inquisition, but at least then the Catholic cards were placed on the table. Now the Inquisition is secret, and therefore more dangerous than ever.

My darling, may you be granted full measure of courage. May your burdens be borne with bravery.

A mother's hope is with you.

Mary Titus

Chapter Nine

PATRICIA ATTRIBUTED TO the trauma of her assault her feeling that a great unseen force was slowly capturing her. Since the attack she was always under threat in her dreams, always being pursued by some relentless thing she could never quite see.

During the day she tried to avoid being touched. Anybody who came into contact with her might turn out to be one of the dream things. They might reappear at night, their faces stretched thin, the bones exaggerated to bestial size. In one recent dream all her friends had clawed up out of the street beneath her feet and grabbed her legs.

Dreams that bad can drive people mad. They can even kill. Just to survive, Patricia had been forced to make nightmare management her new specialty.

Only Jonathan knew how to comfort her. She let him sit close, and occasionally she screwed up the courage to clasp his hand. "At first you wouldn't let go," he had told her. From those hours she remembered only the sense of dissolving, as if her whole self were leaking out through her wounded sex. To prevent it she had felt a desperate, overwhelming need to hold onto him.

She was grateful when she felt the sun touch her face. She had slept with the window open and now she took breath after breath of the summer morning. There was again today no feeling of fullness down below. The dull, unceasing pain had actually diminished to little more than a sensation of tightness.

Despite Mike's begging that she move, she had returned to this apartment. It was home, after all, her first real home since she had been a very little girl. And it had been consecrated by her meeting Jonathan here.

In the open drawer of her bedside table lay a small black pistol, a gift from Mike Banion. On the far wall there was a keypad. Above the keypad glowed a single red light. Until Patricia punched in the right code the light would stay red and this apartment would remain an electronic fortress. Another gift from Mike Banion.

Beside her hand was a push button. If she pressed it, a bell would ring

downstairs and one of the building guards would come to her immediate assistance, twenty-four hours a day. Thanks again, Mike Banion. And thanks for the alarm on my wheelchair and the cripple-height fire extinguishers in every room, and the carry permit which allows me to wheel myself through life with a six-shooter at my hip. Thanks, Mike. You poor, sweet man, you have made me feel more threatened than I think I can bear.

It was nine A.M. Time to call Jonathan. She went to the phone and dialed the Banions' number. As he had promised, he was waiting for her and picked up the phone on the first ring. "Hi," he said. "You ready for me?"

"I'll be ready when you get here."

"On my way."

"Love you." He hung up. She stared for an instant at the phone, then replaced it in the cradle. This morning she was going to face some of her worst fears. She would enter the place where most of her nightmares were set, and worship there among her terrors.

Jonathan was taking her to Mass at Holy Spirit.

As reward for the courage of her act he was then to escort her to the Caf6 Trianon in Queens Center for a late breakfast of croissants and cafe au lait. During the course of the morning they would not kiss, and they might not even touch. And Jonathan would not grin foolishly, or make elaborate conversational efforts to avoid the subjects of rape, paralysis, or nightmare. Nor would his talk be full of unintentional innuendo about those subjects.

It would, in short, be a nice morning after the Spirit was faced. But none of it could happen for another twenty minutes. She had to dress herself. Hard and angering labor. Her legs dangled like soft rubber tubes. The worst part of this awful immobility was that there was no detectable reason for it. There was no physical damage at all. They had even scanned her brain. She was healthy and whole, nothing crushed, pinched, or severed. Only she couldn't walk.

Hysterical paralysis, Doctor Gottlieb had called it. Mary's dear friend. She had come to hate his watchful eyes, peering at her from behind half-glasses, and those hands, so big and yet so clever with the probes and instruments of examination.

At Mass she must also see Mary Banion, who seemed desperately pained whenever they encountered one another. Did it embarrass her to be in the company of a victimized woman? Activate her own personal sense of

helplessness?

Mike and his minions had installed gripping bars on every wall in the apartment, but Patricia's mainstay was the big chrome wheelchair beside her bed. She checked the brakes, then twisted herself around so that she lay with her back to it. Then she pushed herself with her arms until her head was in the seat. Next she gripped the armrests and hauled herself into a sitting position. That was one of the "chair maneuvers" she had been taught in physical therapy. She was pleased; she had executed it well.

The rest of her dressing went as awkwardly as ever. She washed her face in the newly installed low sink, and combed out her hair. She dropped her comb, then rolled over it and broke it trying to find it. Then she took off her pajamas and got herself dressed in a light blue skirt and white blouse—and split the zipper in the back trying to hike the skirt down under her buttocks. Then a little lipstick, a little eyeshadow, and she looked just right. Like she had been dressed by a drunk.

Would she please Jonathan? Would she ever *really* please him again as much as she had? Perhaps she was selfish even to want that. Damn it, though, she did.

He buzzed right on schedule. All of a sudden the visit to Holy Spirit—which she had been carefully not thinking about—seemed formidable indeed. A visit to the heart of her latest inner hell. "You have to," Jonathan had insisted, "you need to confront these fears. We'll go together." He was the brain specialist, after all; he ought to know. For an instant the back of her chair felt as cold as a marble altar.

That made her lunge forward, the involuntary response of a person forgetting that she couldn't get up. When she wasn't being pursued in her dreams she was always trying to find Jonathan. She would see him walking into the ocean or across a forest glade, or down a darkly mirrored hall. She would call to him.

He used his own key to get in. "You look great."

"Thank you."

"I expected to find you upside down on the bathroom floor with lipstick in your ear."

"Funny boy."

He took the handles of the chair and pushed her out the door.

There were a couple of greetings in the elevator, more of those bright smiles

she had learned to hate. It had been awful to find out that normal people no longer had any idea of how to relate to you, and would not do so at all unless trapped.

Tony had a Checker Cab waiting. Patricia could have kissed Mr. Checker for inventing those wonderful rolling boxes. Between the two of them she and Jonathan had only a hideous time getting her in. This contrasted with the inhuman struggle smaller cabs entailed.

"How was last night?" Jonathan asked as soon as they were rolling. Poor guy, he had a big stake in her last-nights. They tended to determine where on the scale from bad to abysmal her mood for the coming day would fall.

"Not nightmare alley, anyway. But not Nirvana either."

"That's something at least. Did you trunk down?"

"Nope. I slept totally drug-free, so I'm wild-eyed and bushy-tailed and ready to meet my day!"

" 'Wide-eyed.' The expression is 'wide-eyed.' "

"Not in my case."

Holy Spirit filled the far end of Morris Street. It was as large as some of the smaller Gothic cathedrals, but its architects, no doubt struggling to provide enough massive-ness to satisfy the prosperous Gay Nineties parishioners who had paid them, had not managed to make its stones soar. A heavier, more gargoyled and crenelated construction could hardly be imagined. Its stained-glass windows seemed to squint, little cracks in the granite facade.

"Oh, damn it, Jonathan, there's Mike's car."

"He's here, of course. Your whole entourage is here, as a matter of fact."

"And those patrol cars." She counted four in the parking area between church and rectory. "I don't think I can stand this."

"Mike's been working on the case like a crazy person. Twenty hours a day. He really cares about you, darling. He wants very badly to find whoever did this to you. Solving the case means an awful lot to him."

"I don't want to hear about the case!" The cab stopped and they worked themselves out of it. Patricia wished Jonathan had never said the word case, but now that he had, there was no point in trying to avoid talking about it. That way ulcers lay. "Damn it all, anyway. I do want to hear about the case."

He stopped rolling her up the wooden wheelchair ramp that had recently been installed on the steps of the Spirit.

There were benches to either side of the front door. Jonathan wheeled her to

one and sat down before her. "You're sure?"

She wasn't, but she nodded.

"They've tried to reconstruct your past, hour by hour, for the two weeks leading up to the incident. All they came up with out of the ordinary was the fact that you had spoken to an old man named Mr. Apple at a parish seniors supper. Aside from our date, I mean."

"How did they ever find out about him?"

"An old lady who had been at the supper remembered you talking to him."

"He was just an old man. They were wasting their time."

"Mike decided to go after the guy. Farfetched, but the only lead they had. But the night before he was due to be questioned, he died. He was buried in All Souls."

"A wild-goose chase. First off, the man was ancient. Second, he *couldn't* have hurt me. He was like paper. What's more, he was senile. They could have asked me about him and saved themselves some trouble."

"No more questions, says the good Doctor Gottlieb. Not until you're walking again."

"What's the point, anyway? I can't remember anything important."

"Tell that to Mike. Maybe you'll cheer him up. His other problem is that he had something going with a reporter and the reporter disappeared. Mike's convinced the same cult that got you got him. He knew something about it, it seems."

Patricia really wished, just at this moment, that she had been strong enough to tell him to wheel her straight into the church. The newspapers had called it a ritual sacrifice, a cult rape, and her imagination had been left to boil and burn with images of blank-eyed cultists waiting in the shadows around every corner. Cult. Ugly, stupid word. She wanted very much to believe she had been the victim of a single disturbed man, acting alone. Cult meant people, dozens probably, ever-watchful, alert for any unguarded moment. She couldn't accept that; it was just too much.

And yet, she thought, she dreamed, that something was getting closer and closer, fingers going around her neck, cool and dry and tight.

Whoever had hurt her had also done something to make her forget. Something incredible: the police hypnotist had worked with her for hours. "If it were not for the physical evidence, I would conclude that this woman had

not been harmed," he had written in the report Mike had shown her. The police hypnotist was a bleak old man with a voice like a pillow.

Perhaps she should thank her rapist; maybe he had done her a favor. After all, she wanted to forget.

No, she wanted to remember—to remember his face, his name, anything about him that would help Mike get him behind bars.

But if it was a cult Mike would never catch enough of them, no matter how hard he tried. That was why she was afraid of a cult—they would be unstoppable.

She wanted to be safe. Safe and normal and happy. That was what was so sad. It was so little to want. Now the tears were starting. She cried so easily these days. She battled with her feelings. Jonathan's hand came out, touched her cheek. She couldn't bear it right now. She turned her head away.

"I'm ready," she said, trying to ignore the hurt in his face. He began to wheel her in.

The big doors swept open as they approached. They had been watched, of course. Eager people clustered around. Somebody found a Saint Joseph Missalette and held it out before her. She smiled up at the grinning face. "I have my missal," she said. The grin widened, the head nodded furiously. Other volunteers wheeled her; Jonathan walked beside.

Oh, my Lord, there is the altar where most of me died.

I am so afraid. Black, ugly altar. Why is it black, anyway? Other churches don't have black altars. But there also is the vigil candle, that red glow that tells us why this place matters, because it houses the fabulous enigma of the Blessed Sacrament.

Come on, girl, suppress that overwhelming urge to lunge out of this chair and crawl away like a soldier escaping from a battlefield. You knew coming here was going to be hard, yes, you did. She wanted his touch, raised her left hand. He was always ready, her beloved, and his warm, slender fingers soon surrounded hers.

There were a lot of cops in the church. Six or seven in uniform, and another five clustering around Mike Banion and Mary. Patricia recognized Lieutenant Maxwell, the sex-crimes specialist with the bedside manner of a friendly old doctor.

Father Goodwin lurched abruptly out of the sacristy followed by a plump

boy of perhaps eleven in a surplice at least three sizes too small. Father had lost weight; his chasuble hung on him like a shroud.

Now for the Mass. Father Goodwin was spectral, his voice full of quavers. Patricia wondered if she could bear this ritual.

Even that word made her writhe in the chair. Ritual. *Rituale*.

She wanted to scream.

Frantically she fought for control. Father began the motions, the drone of words. Patricia's mind battled the chaos of terror that the place had inspired in her. Why had she been so stupid as to come here?

We know nothing of our passions, especially not the black ones, terror and panic. She sensed that the saints lurking in the dome overhead were mad; she looked up at their twisted, pious faces and saw suddenly a vast coldness written there.

Saints are not saints for love of God. They are saints because they have seen the terror of the unknown. Of Hell. Hell is no fire, it is the emptiness, the black between the stars, and she could hear it whistling in her own soul.

Come on, girl! Get yourself together! *Work at it!*

She drove her consciousness to bland and orderly thoughts. Sister Desperada: "The Holy Mass is divided into thirty-four parts from the Entrance Antiphon to the Dismissal." No! I can't bear it. I'll never be able to stay here that long!

"The Lord be with you."

A ragged trail of voices: "And also with you." Patricia wanted to run, to hide, to get down into the depths of the earth and pull soil over her, to hide so completely that the very atoms of her body would be mixed forever with the anonymous brown dirt.

"My brothers and sisters, to prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries, let us call to mind our sins."

Oh, yes, my sins. My sins are very horrible. I long for a loving man, and that is a sin of inordinate desire. I want a nice little house, oh, God, in someplace like Riverdale, and some kids to need me and a husband to grow old with, oh, God. And for me those are also sins of inordinate desire!

As if from afar she felt herself beating her breast, heard her words echoing through the stunned silence of the church. "Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault, in thought and in word, in all I have

done and failed to do—oh, the *Confiteor* is a lie! A lie, God! I never did anything wrong. Hell just opened up under my feet, God, and I fell in and now you won't pull me out!"

The silence deepened. "Lord have mercy," said Father at last.

His hands paused over the *Rituale* and she saw him close his eyes for an endless moment.

Jonathan's arm was around her. Mike Banion was questioning her with his eyes, frowning with concern. Mary's face was buried in her hands.

Poor Father began stuttering through his *Kyrie*.

"I'm sorry," Patricia muttered. She looked down. Anything but stare at that horrible altar. How stupid to make it black!

"Shall I take you out?" Jonathan whispered.

She shook her head. Father said the *Gloria* in a completely new tone. He raised his head, lifted his arms, looked as if from the bottom of a pit toward some promise above. "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth. Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father, we worship You, we thank You, we praise You for Your glory."

He cared about her. They all did.

She wanted to weep. But also, on behalf of the people who loved her, she wanted to be strong.

On to the Liturgy of the Word, today from the Prophet Daniel. Feast of the Transfiguration. "I saw one like a son of man coming, on the clouds of heaven. When He reached the Ancient One and was presented before Him, He received dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve Him." Oh, Lord. You come on clouds of glory, I come creaking on wheels, terror in my heart.

What bitterness was in her. It was pitiful, to be bitter even against Him.

But God did not help me! God let me be raped on His own altar!

Next in the endless litany of the Mass came the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Mike and Mary brought the gifts, looking from behind almost silly, the tall, elegant, chestnut-haired woman and her stocky husband.

Faith Goodwin took the chalice in hands so nervous that the wine stormed like the Red Sea. "Lord, by the transfiguration of Your Son, make our gifts holy."

Is it possible, she wondered as he prepared to give out Communion, that

God doesn't hate us, but has simply lost us? Maybe the earth has drifted into a part of the universe so obscure that even God has lost track of it.

Human worship is chiefly characterized by the silence of God.

"Holy, holy, holy Lord God of power and might, heaven and earth are filled with Your glory. Hosanna in the highest."

Father hovered over his chalice, looking out at his tiny flock in what must seem an immense ocean of empty pews.

The emptiness of space. The coldness. Except, oh, God, for us. We people, *we* are here.

Your silence is what drives us mad! How dare You do this to us, God! *How dare You!* We deserve Your involvement. We deserve Your respect. Yes, even Your admiration!

Or at least Your help. Please. Just two words, two infinitely blessed words. Oh, God, just say it. "I am." Come on, say it. "I am." "Say it! Say it, damn You!"

With a horrified look at her, Father raced into the next prayer. "For the kingdom and the power and the glory are Yours, now and forever."

"Sorry," she muttered again. Jonathan's arm was starting to hurt her shoulder. She shrugged it off.

"Let us offer each other the sign of peace."

Listen to him. It takes real faith to say something like that with any conviction. As she watched the Mass proceed she fancied that she could hear a voice in the breeze that was rattling the old stained-glass windows. *I love you*, the voice said with a sudden clatter. *You're mine! Mine! Mine!* And then the breeze went muttering off among the lush summer trees.

Father took the Host and ate it.

Patricia felt her chair wobble a little. "You sure you don't want to leave?" Jonathan whispered.

"No! Let's go ahead with Communion."

"Okay." He began pushing her toward the altar. She was to lead the Communion parade—which consisted of Mike and his entourage and the usual seven old ladies who were Father's morning Mass regulars.

Take this blood. Take this body. Let us proclaim the mystery of faith. When Father approached her, Patricia cast her eyes down and held up her hands, cupped. She chewed the whole-wheat Host that Father handed her. The little girl she had once been had believed that the Eucharist was the great center of

human life.

The breeze came back, much stronger, slapping at the windows, moaning past the eaves.

"Thanks be to God."

Far up in the church glass broke. The altar candles were snuffed out by a powerful blast of wind.

Faces turned, glanced up. But nothing more happened, except that the communicants shuffled back to the three populated pews.

The concluding doxology followed. When Father turned around again he seemed unutterably sad. Patricia felt oppressed; she did not want to share any more sadness. So it was a sad world. She had also discovered this. A very sad world.

Father might be sad for her, but the way he was looking at his pews she suspected he was mostly sad for his dying parish. This was probably the biggest turnout he'd had in months. So sad.

Maybe he ought to try bingo again. It hadn't worked the last time, but the prizes had been a joke. Who wants *used* prizes? The premium table had looked like a lawn sale.

She could easily have laughed, remembering how she had hand-drawn the stencil for the last bingo-night poster. So very long ago, that innocent May night when the caller had called into the ocean of empty tables. Fourteen players only. All had won at least one game. Three ended up winning back the castoffs they had donated.

Suddenly Mike stood up and approached the altar rail. Instead of going off to the sacristy to devest, Father joined him. Mike drew an envelope from his pocket.

"Patricia," he said into the quiet, "I'm no speechmaker." He fingered the envelope. "This is from the Holy Name Society. We got together and passed the hat because we wanted to give you a real good gift. Well, open it up."

He dropped the envelope into her lap. She looked down at it, wondering dully what it would be this time.

I ought to be grateful.

"Go on, open it."

Airplane tickets and a letter. Lord be merciful, they had given her a pilgrimage to Lourdes. Now she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She just sat there, stunned. "I'm the pilgrimage director," Father said. There was such

warmth and anticipation in the faces around her, she had no choice but to smile.

Only Jonathan looked as desolate as she secretly felt.

Lourdes. Preserve me. They are sending their cripple for the cure. They were ridiculous, but they were also touching. "Thank you," she said, as sweetly as she could.

"This means a lot to us both," Jonathan added in the thick silence that followed.

Jonathan took the handles firmly and wheeled her out. It was not until they were safely in a cab and well away from the church that she did what she had really needed to do all morning, to somehow express the irony behind the sadness, the bitterness behind the terror.

She burst out laughing. Holding the ridiculous tickets, tears streaming down her face, she laughed and laughed.

Jonathan was frightened. He shouted at her to stop, but that only made her laugh harder. He grabbed her shoulders, held her to him.

Even so, it was a long time before this laughter, which hurt so much she could hardly stand it, at last began to die.

Chapter Ten

PATRICIA'S LAUGHTER SPREAD a coldness through Jonathan unlike anything he had ever experienced before. It was a hoarse, gasping agony. That there was no humor in it made it more awful. He couldn't bear to hear it; he wanted to quell it with a shout. But that would never do; instead he hugged her until it subsided to moans, then to soft breathing.

They had to go to Tommy Farrell's Backroom for breakfast with the Holy Name Society. Forget Trianon.

"I'm not going," she said. She waved the letter of invitation they had given her with the tickets.

Suddenly she planted her lips on his and gave him a hard, stunningly intimate kiss. There was something lovely in it, full as it was of sudden, innocent passion. "Let's take a detour," she said. "Go to my apartment."

"We have an invitation."

"They'll wait half an hour! Driver, go to Twelve Hundred Metro Avenue!"

Jonathan did not protest. Even more than his love, he wanted to be alone with her for her own well-being. She had been close to hysteria in that church.

She kissed him again, and when he felt the gentleness of it a joy of great proportions appeared in his soul. No matter what happens, we have each other. Nothing can ever crush this love.

"We have each other, darling."

"Yes, Jonathan."

He had heard that word spoken another way. Yesssss.

He looked deep into her eyes. Terror flickered there, and sorrow, and something immense and strange and cold. The bitter fear in the church. The hard first kiss.

How much sanity did she have left? Her composure was growing threadbare. It occurred to him he could, just possibly, help her in his lab. With him at the controls of his equipment there would be no need for the unpredictable 6-6-6.

If he couldn't find out what *he* had forgotten about that night, perhaps she would be more accessible. At least then she would no longer fear the unknown.

He looked at her, his heart pounding with love. If it was *me*. *If it was me!*

He did not broach the subject of the lab at once. Instead he waited until they were in the apartment. They lay quietly together, still fully dressed, on her

bed.

"I could find out what you're hiding from yourself," he murmured.

"Oh?"

"In my lab. I really think I could."

"Don't talk about it now. Anyway, if that police hypnotist—"

"Primitive techniques."

"I thought you were out of school for the summer."

"I can always use the lab. The equipment's just sitting there."

"As long as I'm agreeable."

"Not much chance of that, right?"

"Oh, come on, Jonathan! I'm nothing if not agreeable. I'll smile cheerfully during that breakfast. Go humbly to Lourdes. And don't think I won't let you study my head. In the end I probably will."

"Good. We can go this afternoon."

"No, please, darling. I don't think I have the strength."

"Okay, I can understand that."

"But you're disappointed."

"I think if you could remember what happened, you might not suffer so much. The fear of the unknown is the worst thing."

"Maybe."

"What do you mean, maybe? What could be worse?"

She took his hands. "The known," she whispered. "The known is always worse." She rolled across the bed, touched his face. "Part of the problem is that people are trying too hard to help me. They already filled me so full of x-rays at the hospital that I practically scorched my sheets when they rolled me back to my bed. Anyway, your machine's irrelevant. They also did a CAT scan, which is the definitive brain test."

"I don't x-ray. What I do is make a model of the brain's electrical function. I'm not interested in whether or not it's damaged in some subtle way, but what part of it the thoughts are coming from. I can tell if you're remembering a dream, a reality, or even telling a lie. Believe me, no hospital can do that. Safe too, as long as I don't monkey around with drugs. I can distinguish between truth and lies better than any lie detector. Far better."

"I'm not lying. I just can't remember."

"But there are snatches. Bits and pieces that you do remember."

"I remember people shouting. I remember being lifted up. And darkness. Absolute, black darkness."

"I'll bet we could reconstruct a great deal even from those few impressions."

"Are you sure you want to?"

"Good God, of course I'm sure!"

She laughed that knife-sharp laugh once again. "You mad scientists will stop at nothing to convince a subject. Next thing I know you'll be saying you can cure my legs."

"I won't say that. But I won't say it's out of the question either. If I could find out what's wrong—"

"Nothing is wrong! Oh, hell, Jonathan, Mike and the Holy Namers are right. It's between me and the Blessed Virgin now. Lourdes is probably where I *belong*."

"Then I demand equal time for science. Let me do a thought-source map."

She frowned. Then she smiled. "I told you I'd give in. One of these days. But there are lots of other Good Samaritans in line ahead of you." The smile became too brilliant. "Holy Name breakfast, here I come. Marvelous! Rubber eggs? Love 'em!"

It hurt terribly to hear her pain. He enfolded her in his arms, and they wept a little together. Finally Jonathan spoke again. "It's a beautiful morning, my love. Let's do our best with it."

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Jonathan." She clutched at him. He kissed her.

"I love you, Patricia. I want to make love to you." At the sound of his own words his heart started beating harder. He was amazed at himself, and at the stunning intensity of the need that had burst forth in him as soon as he spoke.

"Don't you want to get to the breakfast on time?" Her eyes actually twinkled.

"The hell with the breakfast." He tried to kiss her lips again but this time got her cheek.

"Mike'll give you a hard time if I don't show up."

"I can handle Mike."

"You're sure?"

"Darling, I don't know how to ask this. I mean, is it safe and all for you to do it?"

"It ought to be," she whispered, "If you're gentle."

There had been a moment once before, in this same bedroom, just as they had embraced on this same cheerful yellow coverlet, when—

The hand of his fear clutched at his throat, constricted it, dried it to ash.

But she took his face in her hands and gazed at him. "We have to some time, Jonathan."

He dared not express his own fear when hers tormented her so. He hugged her.

Perhaps she sensed some of that fear, though, because she spoke in a tone of reassurance. "It's going to be wonderful, darling. Just enjoy yourself. Don't be worried. The doctor said I could do anything I wanted." She unsnapped his belt and opened his zipper.

Through the delicious film of his excitement he sensed something dark and slick and dangerous to them both.

The serpent was sensitive to these things; the serpent could smell passion.

She poised her hand above the shaft of his penis, then began stroking it. "Oh, it feels almost like silk." She touched the gleaming tip of it. "I thought it would be like a bone or something."

The serpent was uncoiling in Jonathan. Is love also death? Am I death?

No. Now whose fears are running away with him? You are a perfectly normal man. Your perfectly ordinary love is not deadly.

He could tear her throat out with his teeth.

She regarded him. "You're like an angel with the genitals of an ape." She giggled. He watched her through a haze of pleasure and growing horror. With trembling hands he reached around her neck and undid her blouse. Then came the bra, then the skirt and the panties.

Her flesh, so perfect, so rich and full and young that it almost left him breathless, glowed in the soft bedroom light. There was only a small scar, bright red, coming up halfway to her navel from her mound of Venus.

"Now you've seen the defect."

"I think you are the most beautiful human being I have ever seen." He touched her full and perfect breasts. He was awed.

"Can you stand my scar? Oh, say you can!" In answer he finished undressing himself, straddled her, bent forward and began kissing her breasts each in turn, tasting the faint saltiness of her skin, touching her nipples with his tongue until they were fully engorged.

Inside him the serpent slithered quickly forth, sweeping the coils of its

hatred into his mind, bit by bit possessing him.

He fumbled down below and she took his shaft again and guided it in. The sensation was stunning. For a moment he simply sank down on her, unable to move. It was as if the whole lower half of his body had become a blazing comet of pure excitement.

Then the serpent opened a door in his mind. He looked around himself with new eyes, at the blowing curtains, the partly opened closet, the radiant, pleasuring face beneath his own. He thrust.

"Ouch. Too rough."

"Sorry." His own voice was a rumble. He was scared; he had wanted to thrust even harder. He saw that scar opening again, only wider this time. He wanted to laugh, to scream with derisive laughter.

"Uh oh. Jonathan, this isn't going to work." He thrust again. "Hey, I'm sensitive. Take it easy." The pleasure had gone out of her face, replaced by apprehension. Tears were starting in her eyes.

He strove against himself, fighting the next and harder thrust with all the force he had in him. Finally, trembling, battling his own raging instincts, he drew himself free.

There was silence between them. Then, slowly, bravely, she smiled. "It's a little too soon for the heavy stuff, darling. But just to make it up to you I'd like to do something I've always fantasized about. Okay?"

He managed to speak. "Maybe we'd better call it off. Wait a while longer."

"There's something I could do—oh, I'm such a silly I can't even get up the nerve to say it!" She swallowed. "Here goes." She turned to him, pressed her lips against his ear. "*Soixante-neuf.*"

"What?"

"You know. Sixty-nine." A blush flared on her cheeks. Without a further word, praying that the lesser acts of the bedroom would be ignored by his demon, Jonathan knelt above her, then bent forward. As he moved his lips upon her richly dampened and sharp-scented vagina, he felt her take his penis.

He thrust a little and heard her choke. He knew that even in this was terrible danger. The serpent was fully awake now, crawling about in his unconscious, seeking access to his outer being.

She tasted wonderful; he had never known that such a flavor existed. His own sexual contacts before had been limited to the frantic couplings of

adolescence.

She was sucking and licking him, bringing him very rapidly to completion. But the snake was quick. The snake was going to get out, he knew it was. What anger he felt, and what glee. Suddenly her back arched and the rhythm of her own efforts was interrupted. Then her fingers clutched his buttocks, instinctively sought the intimate area there.

That did it. He simply exploded into her mouth. She jerked her head back, then, in an instant, had disengaged from him. She laughed aloud.

"I'm sorry. I hope I didn't—"

"You were lovely."

Yes. I was lovely. One more moment and I would have been ugly beyond belief.

You poor, deluded girl. Beware who you love.

Chapter Eleven

FARRELL'S, WITH ITS red vinyl booths and its Formica bar and its smell of Sunday bacon and eggs, made Jonathan feel the small relief of being in a friendly place.

In the ultimate moment of his pleasure he had seen something within himself so dark and alien that it seemed scarcely human at all. He could only hope that the serpent was an aftereffect of the drug he had taken, and that it would wear off.

He had wanted to *thrust*. Such movement taken to a level of almost superhuman violence had been what had caused Patricia's greatest injuries.

Superhuman violence.

Tommy himself opened the door to the famous Backroom. Jonathan wheeled Patricia in. Inwardly he was desperate. How could he dare to love her? How could he help it? Now that he had seen the true miracle of her beauty and tasted her secret essence, she seemed invested with magical light, as if a goddess.

Would he kill a goddess?

Lately he had been retreating to a fantasy of another life, very different from this one. They shared it in peace and privacy and love.

I want her. Even the wheelchair—it doesn't concern me. I want her so much.

Image of the snake: the shadow in the deep, rising to movement above.

His fantasy was of a house on the Pacific coast of Mexico—not Puerto Vallarta or one of those tourist traps, but some exotic and hidden village where you could rent an old villa. They'd have a pool overlooking the Pacific, and from poolside you'd see yachts and sailboats in the near water, and maybe a cruise ship sparkling on the horizon.

He had a running dream of what they'd do there. She'd want the sun, he'd want sex. He figured they could make love three or four times a day at least. She'd laugh, she'd ask him if he ever got tired. They'd bake awhile in the sun, then go into the air-conditioned bedroom and make love and her skin would taste of sun and coconut oil, and then maybe they'd drink awhile by the pool. . . .

Not a very uncommon fantasy. Just an everyday man's dream. No serpents.

He was jarred from his fantasy by the reality of the room they had entered. Farrell's Backroom was a fluorescent bedlam. Along one wall was a bar covered in wood-grained shelf paper. Behind it was a massive mirror completely outlined in blue fluorescent tubing, with a red Farrell's sign in the middle. The ceiling was outlined in more blue tubing, as were the mirrors around the walls. There were round tables with black tablecloths and red napkins on them, and a bandstand that, thank whatever saint presided over the suppression of bad music, was empty of everything except a massive red fluorescent F on the wall behind it. The room went *zzzt! zzzt! zzz—zzzt!* and the gray-green specters that were Mike and Mary and friends looked as if their blood had been replaced by phlegm.

Mike turned, gave Jonathan a look that said, all right, so it's ludicrous, then went back to the conversation he was having with Mary and Lieutenant Maxwell.

"You've obviously, never had the pleasure of coming here," Patricia said acidly. "I love what it does to makeup." The women looked like they were wearing wax masks. Their eyes were glittering holes.

"When were you here?"

"The bank had a celebration Friday. I went back to work, remember?" Her voice was dry.

"A celebration? How touching."

"Very."

A waiter began laying out trays of steam-table eggs and sausages.

Mike came forward, leaned down to Patricia, and kissed her forehead. "Honey, I hope you aren't too upset about this Lourdes thing. I know it's—what's the word—"

Jonathan supplied it. "Mawkish."

"That sure as hell isn't it. Nothing to do with birds. Anyway, it's a little hokey—but Mary suggested it to me and she and Maxwell kind of got things rolling and all of a sudden—well, hell, we're on our way. I put in a word for Miami Beach but nobody would listen."

"Hey, Father," Lieutenant Maxwell called to the silent, watching form of Father Goodwin, "how about saying grace so we can dig in?"

Father made the sign of the cross. "Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts which we are about to receive from Thy bounty through Christ Our Lord. Amen." Catholic grace at least was quick.

"Stay right where you are," Mike said to Patricia and Jonathan. "Let me get your plates. I'm sure after all the hard work you've done this morning you're starving. I'll pile 'em high."

"He noticed we're late," Patricia said.

"Well, he's right about one thing. I *am* hungry."

She squeezed his hand. Mike came back and arranged the plates on their table. The three of them seemed to form a separate unit inside the little group. Mary spent time with Father Goodwin; Lieutenant Maxwell and Doctor Gottlieb sat together near the empty bandstand. Jonathan felt comfortable with Patricia and Mike. They were at ease together, the three of them.

Jonathan watched Mike. He was just another rumpled cop, a little tougher-looking than most, until you met his eyes. Then you were shocked. In those eyes was as deeply felt a human being as you were likely to encounter. No saint, though. In fact, sometimes a sonofabitch. Totally lacking in perspective. Either you could do no wrong by Mike Banion or he treated you as a cross between a sewer rat and a cigar butt. But if he loved you, he was mad about you. As he was about Jonathan, and had become about Patricia. Jonathan's eyes went to her, sitting so stiffly in her chair, a party smile on her face. You'd never guess what she'd been doing half an hour ago.

Once or twice right after Jonathan had been told of the paralysis he had awakened in the middle of the night and sweated out what it was going to be like with her, wondering if she would be ruined.

"I want you to break away and come over to the office after this," Mike said. "I've gotta tell you something."

He whispered this to Jonathan as one might to the parent of a sensitive child. "About the case?" Jonathan replied.

"Yeah."

"She's not up to it."

"That's what your mother and Gottlieb said. That's what Max said."

"What're you two whispering about?" Patricia asked.

"I've got a lead. I've got to talk to you about it over at my office."

She ate her toast delicately, her lap spread with a napkin to catch the crumbs. "Look at it this way, Mike," she told him. "I can't break because I'm already broken. So you can feel free to tell me anything."

Mike reached toward her as if she were toppling out of her chair. His hands

stopped, poised above the table. "We've got what may be a major lead. And a problem. I want you to know in advance it's gonna upset you."

Mary Banion was staring at them. She disengaged herself from Father Goodwin and came over to the table. "Father is ready to bless our pilgrim, Mike," she said, loudly enough for everybody in the room to hear. The priest reddened and stumbled to his feet. He always fell all over himself when Jonathan's mother noticed him, It amused Jonathan to see how the man blushed. When she idly touched his wrist—as she often did when she talked to people—his eyes followed her fingers with frank avidity. In his daydreams it surely was not his wrist she touched.

Father Goodwin came to the center of the room and faced Patricia. His cheeks were flushed. The lighting made his skin appear mauve.

"I bless you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Go in peace. And may your journey to that holy place of God's strength and curing be made easy by the intercession of blessed Saint Christopher, patron saint of travelers."

"Patricia, I want to add my personal blessing," Mike said. "To help you out over there, I thought you'd need someone who speaks French, so I'm going along."

"The whole family's going," Mary added hastily.

"We leave on August fourteenth," Father said. "So far there are fifty-five pilgrims, bless their souls."

The sick, the pious, the crazy.

"Perhaps you're interested in the history of the pilgrimage," Father continued. "I got this material from the Chancery yesterday." He handed around a brochure entitled "Queens County Pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady at Lourdes."

Fifty-seven consecutive years except during wartime.

Oldest pilgrim, Miss Mae Pztskowski, ninety-four, a traveler for eighteen years.

Sponsored by the Diocese.

Managed by Catholic Travel, Inc., in business since 1947.

Comfortable SkySaver Airlines Jetliner with facilities for The Sick. (Capitals theirs.)

Package price complete, including all transfers, lodging, and, God help us, meals. Special diets accommodated.

Five days and four nights in the idyllic and holy town of Lourdes, one of the most scenic in the Pyrenees district. Accommodations at the first-class Gethsemane Hotel, a short walk from the grotto.

Price: \$999.95.

When he saw the surprising avidity with which Patricia was examining the brochure, Jonathan felt an unwelcome twinge of pity for her.

As soon as Father finished there was a general leave-taking. Mike stayed right with Patricia and Jonathan. Maxwell joined them. Jonathan's last impression of the room was his mother's face, watching anxiously as the little entourage departed.

After Farrell's Backroom the sunlight seemed unnaturally intense.

"No cabs this time, kids. We go in my car."

"A ride in that thing is equivalent to smoking two cigars, Dad. You think she can handle it?"

"Never fall in love with a woman who can't stand cigars. Advice from the persecuted."

She maneuvered herself out of the chair and into the back seat with a certain new adroitness. "I've been practicing on the way to work," she said. "Soon I'll be able to open the door, get in, fold the chair, and pull it in behind me."

"And tip the driver? Cabbies oughtta be more help than that."

"You learn to tip any driver who'll pick you up. Cabbies stop for drunk killers with smoking pistols in their hands and paralytics, in that order."

Mike hit the steering wheel with the heels of his hands. "You get the number of any fucking hack passes you by and he will not, repeat, *will not*, drive another day in this town! I'll get the bastard revoked so fast—"

"I love you too, Mike," Patricia said hastily. She reached forward as far as she could, touched his shoulder. "But the hacks have it rough enough already."

Jonathan could have kissed his stepfather. He was one loyal man.

Nothing more was said on the way to the 112th precinct house. Mike stuck a cigar in his face but did not light it until they had arrived at his favorite no-parking zone.

Jonathan got Patricia out of the car while Mike hovered, not quite sure how to help.

As he wheeled Patricia along, Jonathan noticed the ugly tile corridors with

their glaring overhead lights hidden behind wire cages. He wondered if he would ever pronounce himself guilty enough to come here as an official visitor.

The precinct house was noisy now; the post-midnight silence of the polygraph session seemed a thousand years away. Yet Jonathan remembered the sick dread, and the grinding sound of this very elevator. There was a reality of some sort waiting for him in the mysteries of this place. Here, perhaps, a devastated Mike Banion would one day book him.

Lieutenant Maxwell and an assistant were already in Mike's office. They were pulling papers out of their briefcases when Mary Banion arrived. Mike's eyes widened and he chewed his stogie. "Hi, hon," he said. "You don't need to be here."

"Lieutenant?"

"I asked her, Mike. I thought you—"

"Doesn't matter. Glad to have you, darlin'. Let's everybody pull up benches. We got a real official presentation here, thanks to Max and the Sarge." That was what he called Maxwell's delicate little assistant, apparently. Somehow, though, the Sarge's nickname fit. She looked feminine, but not one to tolerate any fooling around.

"We want to take you kids through the case," Maxwell said in his rich, anchorman voice. Obviously he had been designated speaker—Mike's token New Policeman—the kind of cop he liked to show off to Jonathan.

You wanted to shake some sense into Mike; you wanted to hug him. Jonathan wished he knew how to ask him to make his own presentation. But how could he say that they were happier hearing it from him, that they trusted him and respected him more than any of his degree-bearing underlings?

Patricia's hand slipped into Jonathan's. The gesture might as well have been spoken words, so clear was its meaning: whatever they tell us, we are one now. We are one.

In that moment Jonathan decided to ask her to marry him and damn the consequences. If it was psychotherapy he needed, he would get it. They would make a life together. They had a perfect right.

"We believe that we have identified the man primarily responsible for what happened on the night of June sixteenth." The lieutenant handed Patricia a composite drawing of a ridiculously old man. "Do you recognize him?"

"He was at the parish supper."

So it was that again. Nothing new, nothing new.

"He was the one who talked to you at the seniors supper the week before the incident. His name seems to be Franklin Apple. We aren't certain."

Jonathan's heart skipped a beat. He felt so much as if somebody were creeping up behind him that he had actively to suppress the urge to look over his shoulder. Then he realized why: the strange old man he had seen in his lab yesterday looked a little bit like that.

"He died the day we were going to question him."

Jonathan was relieved.

"We believe that he was the local leader of a large religious organization—we call it that for want of a better word—that has been operating clandestinely for some years."

Jonathan put his hand on Patricia's shoulder. He could feel her trembling. But he felt it was right that she be here just as it had been right for her to go to the church. She *had* to confront these things. That was the only way back to some kind of mental stability and a chance at happiness for them both.

Mike questioned Jonathan with his eyes. Jonathan nodded. "Go on, Max," Mike said.

"We have looked for some sort of pattern of rape in churches—boroughwide, citywide, statewide. Nothing. Your case is all but unique. What we have found is that a larger number of Catholic religious have turned up missing or dead by violent means than we would have expected. Fourteen in the past twelve years."

"I don't see the connection." Patricia's voice was soft, but Jonathan could hear the fear in it.

"Admittedly tenuous. A recent case illustrates the pattern, though. A Brother Alexander Parker of the Society of Saint Jude was found dead, apparently of accidental causes, in an apartment across the street from Holy Spirit the morning after your incident. Two strange things. First, he was living incognito. We didn't know he was a religious until we questioned his mother. Second, he had taken a reporter into his confidence."

"The reporter told me about the cult," Mike added. "Your Mr. Apple fit the description of the man he said was running it."

"And the reporter is now a missing person," Maxwell's assistant said.

"I don't know what all that means and I don't want to hear any more," Patricia said, her voice ragged.

Now Mike spoke. Quietly, almost sadly, as if this were a miserable duty. "There isn't much. Just bits and pieces. But connect the dots and you have something more than a single individual acting alone."

"Come on, Mike, get it over with! Why am I here? What do you want me to do?"

"We are assuming the surviving members of the group have the capacity to come back and finish what was left undone."

She writhed in her chair, looking desperate. Jonathan went closer to her, knelt beside the chair. "That's enough," she said in anguish. "Don't you think I know that? I mean, all those alarms and that horrible little gun and all, how could I *not* know? I can't do anything about it. If they're going to kill me, they're going to kill me." She clasped her knees. Her knuckles went white with the pressure she was exerting. "I perfectly fulfill the cliché of the helpless female."

"Honey," Mike said, "I called you here to tell you that we are going to give you protection. You're getting twenty-four-hour surveillance."

"Oh, no! I won't live like that, I won't!"

"Max, you tell her."

"You won't even know we're there. And it's just until we roll this thing up."

"Roll it up? You said you just had bits and pieces! So now you're going to roll it up?"

"We're working on it. We're getting close."

"How close?" Mary asked. "I think it would help Patricia if you would tell us all."

"We've got Holy Spirit staked out."

"Which is to say you're not close at all. And I'm supposed to remain under lock and key—being watched constantly—until you get somewhere? I'll bet you have years of work before you." Patricia shook her head. "The notion of rolling myself off a cliff keeps recurring."

Mike nodded to Maxwell, who went doggedly on.

He explained the details of how they were going to guard Patricia. They were distressing: every moment of every day somebody would be watching. Plainclothesmen most of the time, but uniformed officers in places like the bank where she was exposed to the public.

Oh, Mexico, land of fantasy! A pool, a beach, a bedroom.

Patricia's only comment after the meeting was over was that Lourdes suddenly sounded more tempting. "It says it's in the Pyrenees in the brochure," she said in the cab on the way home.

"What of it?"

"Well, you can take me mountain climbing." She didn't laugh this time, and neither did he.

Chapter Twelve

JONATHAN HAD HOPED that their journey would bring them a measure of peace. Instead, it only drew them deeper into their fears.

The flight itself was extremely pleasant. Jonathan was amazed to find that SkySaver Airlines had provided a beautiful L-1011 for the journey. There were a number of different pilgrimages on the plane, of which the Holy Spirit group was by far the most privileged. They occupied the first-class section, and had been pampered as if they were flying on the best of the scheduled airlines. Behind them in economy Jonathan had glimpsed seats jammed nine abreast and people eating out of bags they had brought from home, but the curtains were kept closed, so there was no need to dwell on their plight.

The Holy Spirit group was young and well dressed. Where they had come from Jonathan did not know. Father's usual parishioners were old people, mostly widows. Although the rear of the plane was jammed with stretchers, and there was even a staff doctor aboard, the Holy Spirit group had no sick.

Patricia was the only one among them with any defect or disease. The two of them sat together hand in hand for all the hours across the Atlantic. Jonathan watched the limitless waves passing below, and let himself be lulled by the sound of the plane's engines. He toyed with the rescue-instruction card, flipped through a gift catalog. They had drinks before their dinner of lobster tails, and cognac afterward.

Then he slept. Unconsciousness brought him a new and terrible dream, worse than any that had come before. Like a man struggling against a stubborn current, he fought it, and like such a man, knew his efforts were pointless.

The serpent would have its way. Jonathan must dream his dream.

He sat astride a white, undulating female body. Each shiver-sweet pulse of his hardness wounded her more. When he jerked his thighs she would scream, and when she screamed his whole being would explode with pleasure. He jerked harder and harder until she was shrieking through bloodied lips and he could feel her swooning beneath the power of his passion.

Jonathan screamed. He could not bear to look into those agonized eyes.

And yet they pleased him, and he *did* keep on.

Even as she screamed her voice faded into wind-noise. He grew cold. The wind mourned and wailed, and the wail became a whine. Jonathan realized he was awake. The pitch of the engines had changed. They were nearing Tarbes-Ossun-Lourdes Airport. He flickered his eyes open and looked at Patricia. "You were groaning," she said. "Was it a nightmare?"

He didn't want to think about it. He twined his hand in hers and settled back in the seat.

Father Goodwin began to make an attempt with his guitar, and that diverted Jonathan. The priest stood in the aisle, his needle-thin fingers worrying the strings of the beaten old instrument. "Hail Queen of Heav'n, the Ocean Star, guide to the wanderer here below . . ."

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Father nodded and smiled encouragement at his fashionable pilgrims as the plane swam on through the lambent French evening. He raised his eyebrows,

he strove for a joining of voices.

Jonathan could almost hear him thinking: Sing. Please sing. "O gentle, chaste, and spotless maid, we sinners make our prayers through thee." Sing, you beautiful zombies.

Still nothing. Father Goodwin withdrew, nodding and smiling. People had barely glanced up from their cognacs.

From the economy cabin came a renewed burst of song. Father shifted uncomfortably in his seat. All during the trip the other pilgrims had been alternately singing and saying the rosary.

Across the aisle Mike slept heavily, his mouth slack, one massive arm dangling into the aisle. Beside him Mary remained engrossed in Marnham's *Lourdes: A Modern Pilgrimage*. She was participating avidly in the family absurdity. And why not? It was an absurdity she had created. Jonathan thought of her as far too sophisticated to suggest this ludicrous journey, but she had insisted it would be good for Patricia. Perhaps she was right. At least it was a change of scene.

"What was your dream, darling?" Patricia asked.

In the past few days she had grown more and more like a wife. Usually he reveled in it; to be known intimately was a wonderful new experience for him. But he wanted to spare her the savagery of his dreams.

"Jonathan, you didn't answer me."

"I was hoping I wouldn't have to."

"You can tell me, darling."

"I don't remember."

She didn't press him but he still wished she hadn't asked. Thinking about it forced him to face the fact that there was something he could not share with her, nor even explain.

"You're shaking," She slipped an arm behind his neck. The gesture had conspiratorial quality. Her other hand she laid on his chest. She placed her lips so near his ear that they touched and tickled deliciously. "I'm here with you, Jonathan. We're safe. We're thousands of miles from any danger."

The purr of the engines dropped a couple of octaves. They were landing. A sharp bank revealed lights glowing in wrinkled valleys, and off to the east a splash of color that must be Lourdes. Soon they rocked and rumbled down the runway, coming to a halt near the gate. Next stop, God willing, was the Gethsemane Hotel and a night's rest.

Jonathan was still not sure how Patricia was going to react to being here. She might, despite all she said, be holding out some small hope of a miracle. If she was, then she would be disappointed. Mother had been insensitive to this aspect of the trip, and Jonathan had told her as much. Patricia was an ideal breeding place for forlorn hopes. She was not reconciled to that wheelchair, no matter how she acted.

"Lourdes," Patricia said as the plane stopped at the gate. "My first footstep on foreign soil." Jonathan managed a weak smile into the rich and glorious beauty of his lover's face.

She looked long at him. Patricia of the green eyes; Patricia of the madonna smile. Her lovely breasts were elusive beneath her blouse. Her curves were suggested by the folds of her dress.

So far they had only been intimate that once. Subsequent attempts to get sufficient privacy had been squelched by a friend of Patricia's, a former Our Lady nun who had needed lodging while she found a place of her own. She had moved into Patricia's living room. God willing, old Letty Cochran (formerly Sister Saint John) would be gone by the time they got back.

To make matters worse, Mother and Mike seemed to have reached a new height of sexuality. As never before Mother was seducing him. She was almost frantic. And she certainly knew how to make Mike happy. Not a night passed that Jonathan wouldn't hear her in their bedroom crying out with delight, a sound which evoked in him the most painful combination of loneliness and excitement. He would lie just across the hall, fevered, sweating, erect in the empty air.

"Do you think it all really happened?"

"What?"

"Lourdes, of course. The cures."

"Perhaps. I don't know. There's something to faith healing, that much we know. Psychological cure, like the placebo effect."

"Something *could* happen, then. That's what you're saying, since the doctors say my paralysis is psychological."

Oh, boy, here it came. How dare they bring her here just to let her get hurt like this! Mother had been irresponsible. "The odds are against it, darling."

"But not a hundred percent."

"I thought you were the one who considered this an insult to your

intelligence."

"Oh, Jonathan, now that I'm here—don't you think there's just a tiny, outside, million-to-one sort of chance?"

He could have wept. "I'm afraid I'm too much the scientist to calculate odds. Psychosomatic cures are known, but they are extremely rare."

"But if I believed—if I *really* believed—maybe that would be enough?"

He wanted to say no, but that just wasn't true. "There's a remote possibility. But please don't cling to it."

She sat rigid, staring into the middle distance. Without the sound of the engines the plane was filled with the moans and coughs of the Sick in the economy section. On the flight Jonathan had worried a good bit about the possibility of contagion. Would it be possible to get one of the bizarre diseases represented back there? The Sick who came on pilgrimage were the abandoned of medicine. Hardly a common disease—except of course for the cancerous and the diabetic and the stroke victims. Among the most bizarre victims there was a case of dystonia musculorum deformans, a man of twenty-five twisted to Gordian complexity, peering through his glasses at a tattered volume of Proust.

But the Sick were far to the rear. The Holy Spirit pilgrims didn't need to trouble themselves.

"All bearers to their pickup points, please," a priest's voice called over the intercom. There was a general shuffling among the economy passengers. Soon stretchers began to go past, hauled by relatives and volunteers. The worst of the Sick, a form swathed from head to toe in white, was propelled down the aisle first. No information about this individual's disease had been forthcoming.

"There goes the corpse," Jonathan muttered to Patricia.

"Our Lady doesn't raise the dead, dope."

Just then the corpse gave out a long sigh.

"It's a miracle!"

"Shh!" Patricia's pale cheeks flushed. How painfully, delicately beautiful she was.

The complete procession of stretchers took ten minutes to pass.

At last those not under constant medical care could leave the plane. Jonathan went and got Patricia's wheelchair and they were soon on their way.

The greater part of the airport was a hodgepodge of victims and their

retinues. It took an astonishing amount of effort and skill to move the truly sick, and people did not bring colds and rashes to Lourdes. Only the abandoned entered here . . . and their relatives and priests and lovers and friends. The airport resounded with a sort of low, penitent murmur. Despite all of Jonathan's negative feelings about the place, he saw at once that there was great faith here, and despite himself was moved.

His group was ushered by a woman with a clipboard into a special customs area. Here there were no crowds and no Sick. The Holy Spirit pilgrims were grouped with others like them, healthy, well-dressed people who seemed to have little relation to the struggling faithful on the other side of the ropes.

For an instant Jonathan's eyes met the cute little usherette's. She blushed and lowered her head, practically bowed. She hurried away.

"Who was that—a fan of yours?" Patricia asked.

"Never saw her before in my life."

"She acted like you were a movie star."

"Now, now, don't get jealous."

Across the rope hard-edged officials were screaming, "Customs! *Douane!*" They were searching every bag, even looking under the sheets covering the Sick.

On this side of the rope people got through instantly, with a polite smile and a perfunctory tap of the bag. Their luggage was not even checked with chalk marks. Their passports were not stamped. And the customs inspectors lowered their eyes when the Banion family passed, more like servants than officers of the law.

"No big deal," Mike said happily. "Maybe they know I'm a cop." Jonathan wasted no time rolling Patricia out to the cab station. He really wanted time alone on the way to the hotel. He managed to get one of the ungainly-looking Peugeot cabs especially customized to take wheelchairs.

Once inside silence descended between the two of them. He had an important reason to want to be alone with her. So important, in fact, that he was having a hard time saying it. He wondered how she would react when he asked her to marry him. It had been much on his mind, and he had decided to ask her here at Lourdes. Maybe the good news would soften the hurt she was going to experience when the grotto failed her.

"Gethsemane Hotel," he said to the driver. Would it afford an opportunity of privacy, or was this to be his only chance? He wasn't sure he had the nerve

right now.

He had decided to dare marriage because he was convinced the serpent was a side effect of a poorly tested drug. And he intended to enter psychotherapy for his dreams. Maybe he could become exactly what he wanted to be—a good husband to the woman he loved. It seemed so simple.

Why, then, was he afraid to ask his question?

He thought of the dream of an hour ago, the sweet, dying flesh.

The driver pulled out into traffic. Jonathan watched Patricia's fingers twisting in her flat, lifeless lap. "Look," she said, "the crosses."

So those were the famous crosses of Lourdes, on the hill called Calvary just above the grotto. Beyond was the great Basilica of the Rosary and farther away the town itself, glowing with evening light, suggestions of neon shimmering in the summer haze.

Patricia smiled, and Jonathan almost sobbed. More and more he was feeling pity for her. He must not do that.

She had the softest eyes he had ever seen, so utterly without anger in them.

"I wish we could thank Mike and Mary in some way. I want to give them a present."

"Get cured."

She looked at him, surprise and confusion following one another across her face. How could he have been so brusque? Did he want to make her angry at him ... or was there some deep, sadistic *thing* in his soul that was actually sneering at her? In a voice dull with hurt she said she had come here only to pray.

"I know, darling. I'm sorry. It didn't come out the way I intended. I guess it's just that I'm frustrated. I want the best for you, Patricia. I love you so!"

Her eyes searched him. There was perfume coming from the blond glory of her hair. He noticed the neatness of her nails, and the care she had obviously taken with her makeup. Even after the long flight Patricia appeared fresh. He felt weak and coarse and mean to pity her. She must be suffering incredibly just now.

But no, she was smiling, she was brushing away the wetness in the corners of her eyes.

"At least I could get something for Mary since all this was her idea."

"A plastic Virgin, maybe? A rosary? Or how about a Virgin-rosary combo? That would be generous."

She managed to laugh a little at that. "Don't be sarcastic, you evil man. We *have* to find something appropriate."

The basilica now loomed on the far side of the quick-flowing River Gave. The cab made a turn and passed under the railway tracks and they were abruptly in Lourdes. Jonathan noticed the driver flashing his lights at a small group of dark-suited men on the corner. The men doffed their hats. Traffic choked the streets—tour buses, taxis, private cars, trucks.

The commercial density of Lourdes was totally unexpected. Every inch of sidewalk was faced by a storefront jammed with religious kitsch. There were exuberant festoons of rosaries—brown, red, yellow, green, pink, white. Scapulars and miraculous medals were piled in mounds and pinned to cards in clumps of hundreds. Whole armies of plastic Madonnas of the Grotto disappeared into the glaring interiors of the shops. Our Lady danced and jittered in neon, praying hands flickered into images of the Sacred Heart and back again, and crucifixes were everywhere, each twisted tin Jesus identical to all the others.

The neon banished night. This was a religious Las Vegas, where piety and greed had twisted together like mutant chromosomes. As the cab proceeded slowly down the street, an endless, shrill babble of hymns from storefront loudspeakers came in through the windows with the choking diesel exhaust and the smell of frying junk food.

Patricia had gone pale. Her hands were tightly clenched. She was motionless, staring straight ahead. From the edges of her eyes tears once again gleamed.

Nothing Jonathan had read had prepared him for the relentless cynicism that had infected this city. It was almost as if the merchants of the place were trying to mock their Catholic customers.

And what of her, bringing her broken body here in hope of cure? This exhibition must be shattering. Jonathan would have done anything to spare her this ugliness. If only he had known, he would have really fought the trip, made certain it didn't happen.

The plastic and the glare were nailing her to her wheelchair forever. She sobbed, and Jonathan felt as never before her catastrophe.

The driver yanked open the cab door and drew Patricia out with exaggerated gentleness that Jonathan took for more cynicism. Jonathan gave him his money, adding as a tip the smallest coin in his pocket, which the driver took

with reverence. He stood on the sidewalk, his cap in his hand, smiling after them.

Jonathan became aware of the scene around them. Stretchers, wheelchairs, frames, medical supplies, and luggage lay about on the sidewalk. The Holy Spirit pilgrims were nowhere to be seen. Of them only Father Goodwin remained. He was rushing back and forth between the hotel and the pilgrims, his face sweat-shiny, helping the other priests to organize their charges.

The Gethsemane appeared to be a typical middle-grade Lourdes hostelry, six stories of small windows, a gray stone facade. Only its top two floors suggested any promise of decent accommodation. On floors seven and eight the windows were large and arched. Light shone from behind beautiful draperies. Well-dressed people could be seen coming and going in the rooms beyond.

Mary got out of her cab and stood with Jonathan, looking upward. They saw the silhouette of a trim little man approach one window. Then the light behind it went out.

"Relax, Harry," Mike called to the frantic priest. "You're gonna get a coronary."

Jonathan really noticed Father Goodwin for the first time since they had landed. Gone was the guitar-playing priest of the airplane. This new Father Goodwin acted like a man let down on the most dangerous street in the worst part of the Los Angeles barrio. He wasn't just overexcited, he was in a panic. And he was looking up too, furtively, as if he expected someone to stone him from above.

Jonathan followed one of his glances and was surprised to see that the seventh and eighth floors were now completely dark.

Mary saw Father's consternation too, and strode over to him. There was a whispered conversation. Father, his face gray with what was surely shock, his eyes stricken with sorrow, spoke to the gathered pilgrims. "We have to stay here," he said thickly. "There are no other hotels available. Let's go in."

"He doesn't like the hotel," Mary said as she returned to the Banion group.

"Has he been inside?" Mike asked.

"I have no idea. I think he's suffering from jet lag."

They went into the gray-tiled lobby and found a bright young concierge behind the aged hotel desk. She wore a dingy brown dress and greeted them with the same deference everybody had thus far exhibited.

"Here are your keys. *Americains*. The lift is opposite the restaurant. As you asked, *Madame*, your rooms are on the second floor, two-oh-two through two-twelve."

Jonathan was disappointed. He had assumed that American pilgrims routinely got the first-class accommodations, which were obviously on seven and eight. "I'd like to be higher, Mother."

"It's not safe with the chair. These places are firetraps."

Jonathan knew better than to argue with her over a matter like this. Mother had an obsessive fear of fire.

Oddly, the elevator showed only six floors to the hotel. There weren't even keys for the two additional floors. Once they got upstairs it was clear that Father's intuition had been right. The "rooms" were dormitories fitted with cots and obviously intended to sleep no fewer than four. There were no singles or doubles; the Gethsemane hadn't even been built that way. Mike moved his family, Patricia, and Father Goodwin into 202. This was as depressing an arrangement as Jonathan could imagine. Chances of privacy flew out the window, a crack of a thing overlooking the hotel's kitchen exhaust. Behind a frayed screen stood an ancient lavatory and toilet. On the bidet was a handmade sign,

FEET ONLY, NO URINATION!

"Beautiful," Mike growled, throwing luggage down. "Thank God the Sick aren't here." For pilgrims in need of constant medical attention the Church had built Our Lady of Sorrows Hospital, which was some blocks away.

In that she did not require nursing or medication, Patricia was here rather than at the hospital. As Jonathan wheeled her across the room, thinking of his unasked question, he longed to be alone with her.

She took the wheels and went over to Mike and Mary. "I don't even mind the room," she said. "I'm so glad to be at Lourdes."

"All the plastic Jesuses—I could do without that part of it," Mike said.

"It won't be like that at the grotto," Mary assured her. She touched Patricia's face, very much more tenderly than she ever had before. "You'll see."

Mike leaned over and kissed Patricia's forehead. "You're too good, that's your problem."

Father Goodwin, who had been dashing up and down the hall in a frenzy of announcements and schedule changes, stuck his head in the door. "Soubirous

tour in fifteen minutes! Those interested please gather in the lobby. The bus will pull out at *exactement* eight P.M."

"He seems to have recovered some of his *savior-faire*," Mary said acidly. She was behind the screen; Mike had pulled a bottle of Chivas out of his suitcase and was trying to make a drink in one of the hotel's cracked plastic cups. "No way," he said, as it leaked whiskey from at least six different holes.

"Jonathan," Patricia said, "I'd like very much to go."

"Don't," Mary called. "We can arrange a private visit tomorrow."

"I'd like to go on the tour, really I would." That was unfortunate. Jonathan's one wish was to bury himself in the two-inch foam-rubber mattress allocated to him and forget his disappointment.

"It won't be very pleasant," Mary said.

"It'll do me good to be with other pilgrims. I mean sick ones."

"I'll be glad to come, darling," Jonathan said. "But I intend to sleep through the Bernadette bit."

Mary laughed. "You two go along. But if you get tired and want to come back early, hail one of the Peugeot cabs. And make sure it's a Peugeot. They're the best."

The tour bus was huge but astonishingly flimsy, as if it might be built of cardboard. At the rear was a large double door and a pneumatic chair lift. Jonathan wheeled Patricia onto the contraption. He soon discovered, when nothing happened, that it was first necessary to pay the driver an American dollar to operate the lift.

He put the money into the kid's hand. Once inside the bus he had to move Patricia onto a seat. This was a harrowing operation, involving picking her up in his arms and carrying her down the narrow aisle from the chair-storage area in the back. She was not a small girl, and the lifelessness of her lower body made it difficult. She winced as he slid her into an empty seat.

"I'm sorry, Jonathan."

"I love you."

In answer she kissed him gently on the cheek.

Behind them the lift whined again and again until there were thirty people in the bus, ten of them the Sick. Father Goodwin, who no longer seemed to have any pilgrims from his own group, was tuning his guitar.

"Uh oh," Patricia said. "More hymns."

They were soon navigating in traffic to the strains of "Dominique." Faces pressed to the windows. This was, after all, the most famous place of pilgrimage on earth. Despite the kitsch, this *was* Lourdes.

At the end of a shuddering, backfiring trip up a hill the bus came to a stop. "*Maison Paternelle*," the driver roared. Then the clatter and confusion of disembarking began. This time it went more smoothly. Evidently the first dollar covered the whole journey.

The House of Bernadette proved to be attached to the back wall of a huge souvenir shop. Here there were even baseball caps with Aquero—as Our Lady of the Grotto was called—on their badges. Statues of Aquero rotated on little pedestals, the "Ave Maria" or the "Lourdes Hymn"—or "Lara's Theme" or even "Indian Love Call"—tinkling from music boxes in the bases. There were Dutch wooden shoes with Aquero statuettes glued to the toes.

Patricia looked slowly left and right as Jonathan propelled her down the aisle to the shrine at the rear, which looked more like a jail cell than a one-room cottage, barred to prevent its being pillaged by relic hunters.

She reached back and found his hand. "Take me out," she said.

He turned her around and wheeled her back to the bus.

"Jonathan, this is awful. It's terrifying!"

"Obscene is the word. Those statues—"

"Not the souvenirs, the people behind the counters. Haven't you noticed them?"

"No, to tell you the truth."

"Jonathan, we are being carefully watched. We have been ever since we got here." She snatched his hands, glared into his eyes. "Please, let's go home right now."

"Who's watching us?"

"The girl at the airport, some of the people in the streets, everybody in the shops, even the concierge at the hotel."

"Darling, I think you're a little overwrought. Mother's right, we need to rest."

"I am not tired and I am not crazy! Everybody in this whole city—all the people who work in the stores, in the hotel, all the drivers—they are watching you and me."

"Patricia, really—"

"Don't you 'really' me. They're all watching us—staring at us. Just at us."

Jonathan had been bending over the wheelchair. When he stood up he looked right into the face of a salesman who had been standing behind a counter in the shop. The man lowered his eyes and walked away.

Jonathan found one of the Peugeots. "We'll stick close to the hotel," he said. What else could he say? She wasn't paranoid, she was absolutely right.

But why? Surely no cult was large enough to include the inhabitants of a whole town, thousands of miles from home.

Yet they were watching, even now, from sidewalks, out of shop windows.

As the cab made its way through the jammed streets Patricia's face revealed how trapped she felt. From time to time Jonathan saw her dart a glance out the window.

And the crowds, the swirling mass of eyes, looked back.

MARY: THE SHADOW OF THE INQUISITION

Now HAS COME the night of highest peril. We will kill her or cure her. She is useless to us as she is.

We own this town—its shops, its hotels, even the spring that feeds the grotto. But the great underground river beneath the grotto is nobody's property. Alpheus, the river of life and death.

It is not like the little aboveground trickle into which Catholic pilgrims dip their infirm parts. Alpheus is wild and dark and dangerous. If it sweeps you away you are lost forever. I think it may be more than water, more than a simple trick of geology. If a demon had a body it would be very like Alpheus, a freezing torrent raging against the rock of the earth.

This week at Lourdes many of the pilgrims are our people. We have booked the best rooms, taken the best charters. Some of our Catholic customers will have to wait until next week to continue buying their kitsch and bathing themselves in one another's sweat. Yet our beloved child is in as much jeopardy here as at home. As if the Inquisition had a sort of shadow...

Our people have made us welcome. To them it is the highest honor to have the Prince and Princess among them. Never have two people been so well guarded.

When Gottlieb told me that her paralysis would prevent childbirth, I

remember I said I wanted to die.

He is a wise man. "Concentrate on your work. Keep to the plan." How I threw myself into my work! I've arranged the worldwide vaccination program, the food supplies, all we need to see us through the coming extinction.

I even have Mike performing his allotted role. I am insisting he wear a vetiver cologne I had compounded at Keil's in Manhattan just for him. But it is more than scent. Jerry Cochran has mixed his vaccine into it. Every time Mike splashes some on, he contributes to the immunity he will some day need in order to fulfill his place in our plan.

If all goes as we intend, we will require him to remain alive some little time after the others are dead. Such a fatherly man can be put to good use.

Lately I have really been trying to seduce Mike, to make him love me as he has never loved anybody before. Frankly, I hope we will be able to convert him.

Still, I could not bear to be with him tonight. I lay on that miserable pallet in the Catholic part of the hotel downstairs, sweating and worrying until I could bear no more; now I am here where it is risky for me to be, in the suite where a princess of the Night Church belongs, writing and writing and trying to pretend that I am not exhausted, that I do not tremble, that my hand is as firm as ever.

Stupid woman. You calm yourself by writing in your journal. Then you tear out the pages and burn them.

Outside quiet multitudes file toward the aid stations for their vaccinations. My own arm itches furiously where Jerry himself applied the needle. Lourdes is the main vaccination center for southern Europe. We will vaccinate thirty thousand faithful in the alleyways of this town before we are finished.

When the rest of the world is weakening and dying, in that time of unimaginable chaos, our Church must be stronger than ever.

As I write these words I feel the immensity and the difficulty of our task. Despite Jerry's brilliance and Franklin's great strength, I feel almost alone. The French have filled this room with flowers, have brought me a late supper of salmon trout and champagne. They are so awed by the presence of Titus blood among them that they are not able even to meet my eyes.

They must have a hard time understanding Mike, who is so obviously not of the royal lineage. The husband of a princess? Impossible!

Oh, Mike, Mike, I rise to the heavens beneath your sweating body. I hate you! I will not say the opposite, but I do feel it too. Love, damn it all. You obsess me for a very simple reason: I cannot decide *what* I feel about you, and have good reasons for all my contradictory impulses.

Two fifteen in the morning. Throughout our ancient capital our people have just begun going from the hidden vaccination stations to the basilica itself, for the great ritual cleansing. We will take our darling down under the grotto to the banks of the secret river.

She will overcome her paralysis or she will drown in it.

Are we about to kill the hopes of two thousand years?

I go now, as always, loyal to my duty. I am crying, weak woman that I am. I call to my demon fathers.

Hear me.

Chapter Thirteen

PATRICIA LAY WATCHING suggestions of movement in the shadows on the ceiling. The room was unquiet, even at three o'clock in the morning. Father Goodwin had been up and down to the bathroom half a dozen times. He was overexcited—which was to be expected, she supposed.

He snored now, his sleeping expression one of deep sadness. In the cot beside his, Mike's breathing was thick and regular, a settled hound's. Mary was gone from her cot, no doubt forced into a walk by the heat and stuffiness. Across the

room lay Jonathan, and Patricia wondered if he too might be awake.

The thought brought deep stirrings. Since their half-hour in bed Jonathan had grown more and more ardent. And she had too. In her daydreams she would kiss his rigid, silken member... then she would banish the fantasy. Which would promptly return.

Of the two of them, though, Patricia knew that Jonathan was the more enraptured. And why not—wasn't that in the nature of the male, to have explosive passions? But how, then, could he think clearly about life with a paralyzed woman? And what if she needed more medical care? Would he accept the burden, just for love?

I want him to be as free as the wheat in the field.

Oh? The field that I dream about, where Death resides?

The scythe sighs and the Reaper sweats. He is a mad not of death amid the growing, fruiting, bursting fertility of humanity.

Is it love I wish for, or death?

Maybe I just ought to let him make love to me again and forget the rest. Maybe that physical contact is the only real thing, and all this thinking is just a waste of time that might be better spent in pleasure.

I want to go across the room and place my lips on his lips, and press my tongue between his teeth, and love him and love him until I melt into him.

I am free to die in Jonathan, free to let the living steel of him tear me apart.

God help me, I'm frightened.

The shadows seemed to move just then with a purpose of their own.

She was conscious that Jonathan had stirred in his bed. Fingers seemed to brush her face; she was suddenly frozen with terror. This must be another nightmare. She wasn't awake, she *couldn't* be, not if she felt this afraid over so little.

Oh, he was moving—she knew he was moving.

The shadows on the ceiling were very slowly changing shape as he slipped inch by stealthy inch from his bed.

You will go with him.

"Is that you?" Her voice was like a rattle of leaves in the quiet. Mike snuffled, Father sighed.

Don't whisper so loud, you little fool!

Now I know he is on the floor. I hear his breath, hisss, hisss, hissssss, getting nearer and nearer. I see his shadow creeping.

You will go with him!

"I will go with him."

Far away someone was singing, the same few words again and again. And the wind made a deep note as it surged and flowed-through the ancient streets of the town.

"Patricia?" Jonathan said softly. Oh, seductive whisperer, where have you come from?

And why do your eyes gleam so?

"You awake?"

"Mmm..."

"I—please—"

She knew what she had to do; slip from the bed, pull on her dress, let him carry her.

They went then through the black halls of the hotel, down the cobbled streets in the night wind, her dress hardly protecting her.

All she could think of was how his skin must taste, She was desperate, urgent to drop to her knees before him, to free the tight imprisoned purple arrow and pierce herself with it as she had in that time of beloved memory.

They moved through the night, beneath the stars and tossing trees.

We aren't in the town anymore. Where are we?

He was scary. His face was too sharp, his eyes too bright. There was fire in him, and she knew that if she tempted it too much it would kill her.

"Welcome to the domain of Our Lady," said an age-dried voice. A small, quick man moved in the dark.

You look familiar, old man.

He smiled. Behind him the massive bronze doors of the Basilica of the Rosary opened just a crack.

"Come," he said.

Can this be real?

"Don't worry, you are certainly dreaming. What do you think? You must be dreaming!" He spoke with soft intensity.

"I'm *not* dreaming."

Her own voice startled her. She touched Jonathan's face. "I'm not either, my love," he said.

She felt, though, that she must be. Of course she was; she had to be.

The old, old man beckoned frantically from the doorway. Then they were

inside and Patricia was stunned by the spectacle before her.

There were candles in the vast space, candles by the thousands, points of light, crowds of points, reefs and blazing cascades. Enormous curtains covered the windows.

The ocean of candlelit pews had the just-emptied look of a place where a procession began, and to which it would return. The air smelled of hot wax and people.

At the far end of the basilica there was a stairway. Below must be the grotto. The entrance was utterly black. After the blaze of the candles it was impossible to see.

There came from the foot of the stairs the sound of water.

As they descended the murmur grew to an echoing roar. In the caverns beneath Bernadette's little stream was a mad, frothing cataract. "The headwaters of the Holy River Alpheus, where Parisfal drank of death. *Go now, and give yourself to Alpheus.*"

Give herself to Death? She clung to Jonathan.

The only light came from the phosphorescent foam. Unseen hands took Patricia, carried her forward, closer and closer to the surging water, as Jonathan rushed beside her. The water cascaded from the rocks, flooded through the chamber, then ran gurgling and complaining down the crevasse beyond.

"The river wants you," whispered the old man, and there sounded above the voice of the water a deeper, more terrible note, as of a great horn booming and booming, and with every boom the old man came a step closer to her and Jonathan.

"Take her, boy, down into the water."

"She'll drown!"

The old man's mouth moved but Patricia could not hear. At once a change came over Jonathan. He drew off his clothes. Now he was naked and his skin gleamed in the blue iridescence. He smiled a jack-o'-lantern grin.

Then she was in his arms, lying helpless against his naked flesh, and the water was coming up around her, seething and tugging and lapping, covering her midriff and her chest and her arms and then her face. Now he ceased to carry her; instead he pressed her down with his hands. She went down and down and down into the freezing, grabbing dark.

Then his strong arms were gone.

She was tumbling, dashed again and again against the rocks. The current was holding her against the bottom.

Her arms were not strong enough to resist the power of the water. Only her legs could help her and they were useless.

If inhaled, a half a cup of water is enough to kill. But she had to breathe, she *had* to inhale! A surge of agony swept her body. She tried to bring her hands to her face but it was no good; she was tumbling over and over, caught in a corner between the side and the bottom of the river.

This nightmare had to end. But how could it, when the water was so very cold and the bottom so very hard and her lungs bursting with desperate need?

God. God. God.

Her left foot scraped stone. She pushed, and for an instant the tumbling stopped. But then she was off again, worse than before. She knew that her mouth was going to open in a second and she was going to breathe, and that breath was going to be water.

Her foot connected solidly with the rough bottom, and this time she did stop tumbling. She drew her legs up under her and pressed with all her might—but how could she?—against the battering power of the backwash that held her.

She broke free.

The air was dank cave air, but it was air and it balmed her searing lungs.

She heard *hiss-whoosh! hiss-whoosh!* and saw what looked like a monstrous toad waddling toward her in the foam. Then he removed his face mask. It was a man in scuba gear.

"She's done it," he shouted over the water.

And the bone-deep note she had heard before boomed triumph.

Jonathan, naked still, came to her. Hand in hand they walked from the water. For the briefest of instants she had brushed his great hard stone of a thigh and heard him gasp and felt him stumble. She longed then to touch him more, to hold him delicately between her fingers, to spend long minutes just stroking his secret part.

Mary Banion gave them their clothes.

She walked in the darkness, between cliffs of a new sound. At first she did not know what it was, then she understood. There were throngs here, and they were clapping softly. Jonathan drew her forward. "I can't see a thing," he whispered.

"There's a glow over there. It must be from the candles upstairs."

Hand in hand they went toward the light.

As Patricia sank to deeper sleep she was aware that bells were ringing. But for the glory of those bells she dreamed no dream, sleeping on toward the forgetful dawn.

Chapter Fourteen

WHEN THE KITCHEN exhaust fan beneath the window was turned on, Patricia awoke instantly. Her sleep had been troubled; she looked at her watch. Six thirty. Around her the others slept on.

She wished she had not dreamed she could walk. It was cruel to do that to oneself. The inner Patricia was furious with herself for the crippling, which made it hard for ordinary, everyday Patricia to get used to it.

"Good morning."

Jonathan whispered to her from his cot against the wall. Beside him Mike Banion snored softly. Father Goodwin lay twined in on himself. Mary, very still, was as pale as a lovely statue in her sleep. There was a round patch of bandage on her right arm, just below her shoulder. Patricia looked at it, reflecting idly that it was the only imperfection she had ever seen marring that

perfect body. Even Mary wasn't immune to scratches and cuts.

Patricia raised her own arms, spread her hands, closed her eyes and waited a thousand eternities for Jonathan to cross the room and bend to her. "Hello," he said. "You're cool. Shouldn't you be bed-warm?"

You have dared the wild waters, and you have won.

"Jonathan, take me out of here. I want us to be alone together."

"Darling, darling." They traded a lingering kiss.

Then they dressed, he pulling jeans on over his briefs, she grappling with a skirt and blouse, working her feet into a pair of flats, running a brush a few times through her hair.

He carried her to the wheelchair. When he sat her in it she writhed. The thing had claws, it grabbed her; the chair was hungry for her body.

He wheeled her down the dim, stuffy hallway, past endless rows of little black doors with slats in them, beneath buzzing fluorescent rings, to the wide hospital-like lift. The main lobby was dark, nobody about at this hour. In front of the hotel was a still-bundled stack of French newspapers and a few copies of the *International Herald Tribune*.

He wheeled her fast, almost running down the Rue Reine-Claire. "Where are we going?"

"There's a gate at the end of the street. It leads into the Domain of Our Lady. It'll be quiet there. On the map it looks like a park."

She had seen him in the plane poring over his Michelin. "You memorized the map in hope we could slip away, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I know all the exits."

"Love you so much."

From behind her his hand caressed her cheek. They came to a little wrought-iron gate between two ancient buildings. Beyond was a muddy alley, and beyond that a widening expanse of grass.

The lawn went on for a while, then stopped abruptly at a tall hill. That must be Calvary. Behind it would be the Basilica of the Rosary. In the opposite direction to the basilica the land dropped to the river in a jumble of rocks and ferns and gnarled trees.

Jonathan made for the hill, laboring to push the chair through the thick grass.

He was so silent and purposeful. That wasn't like him. Then she understood what he must be planning.

The anticipation thrilled her to shivering dampness. She was going to be made love to, and it was going to be done by her delicious Jonathan, in the woods.

A hundred yards from the most Catholic place on earth.

Was that funny, sad, or both? Oh, hell, it wasn't sad at all! She reached her hand back. Instantly he squeezed it. Then he returned to his pushing.

"You're working up a sweat," she said.

"Doesn't matter."

They came to the line of trees and went a short distance in. This was a different world. Alien. Here the low hum of insects mixed with the petty chanted rage of birds. The light was rich green. Woods were beautiful places, but Patricia certainly saw why in ancient times the pagans had peopled them with nymphs and spirits, and humming, vindictive gods.

They stopped.

Silence.

The bugs started again, then the birds. But as far as humanity was concerned the two of them were gloriously alone.

He will lift me from the chair. I will let him have his way with me.

But he hesitated. Was he afraid? Confused? "I dreamed that I took you to the grotto and put you in the water, and you could walk."

"I dreamed I could too. I dream it a lot."

He bowed his head and kissed her hands. "I'll take you out of the chair now."

"We'll be missed if we don't get to the basilica by eight." How dare you say that, girl. Keep your mouth shut; you don't want to ruin this beautiful moment.

"It doesn't matter. Because I want to ask you to marry me. Please, as soon as we get back to New York."

He swept her from the chair and set her on the forest floor.

"You really, really do? You want to marry me?"

He lay full on her. She felt the rigid curve of his flesh, and laid her hands on his buttocks, which rippled beneath his jeans. "I'd like a child," he whispered. "If you want one."

She was full of laughter and tears of gratitude. "Oh, certainly! Surely I do! I want lots of them!"

"I've always wanted a child. I want him to be named Martin, after my dad." Just like a man. It never even occurred to him that he might have a daughter. She didn't care, though—not now, not about such details. She hugged him to her. "I'll marry you, Jonathan. Oh, yes, yes, I will!"

"I want it so badly, darling. Soon. How soon can it be?"

"Next week, if we can get a dispensation on the banns. We can ask Father."

From sheer delight in each other they laughed softly, in the twilight of the woods. When he began to lift her skirt, she stopped him. "Wait. I have to say something."

"No more delays. I won't stand for it." He kept at it.

"I have to say yes! Yes, yes, yes!" In moments she was naked, her clothes beneath her body. He lay beside her running his hands over her. "You have goosebumps."

"It's cold."

"Am I cold?"

His hands were like fire where they touched her. He seemed wire-tense. "The ground is cold. You're warm." She arched her back. "Touch me more," she whispered, feeling her cheeks go livid. She presented her breasts to him; the grass beneath her whispered when she opened her legs. "Touch me all you want."

He laid a hand on her midriff, so roughly that she gasped. "I wish I hadn't dreamed you could walk."

Oh, God, don't let him start worrying about that the second he asks me to marry him.

"Forget it, it's no big deal. I dreamed the same thing." The water had bellowed and foamed up out of the ground, a fantastic living organism, as far from normal water as a demon is from some placid human soul. *I will kill or I will heal*, the water had said. *It is all the same to me.*

"In my dream they called the river—"

"Alpheus. The river of death."

His hand froze on her thigh, clutching. They looked into one another's eyes. She moved slightly. He was hurting her just a little. "After I could walk, they rang the bells."

"I remember the bells." He fell silent. When he spoke again his voice was almost sullen. "What in the name of God is happening? We had exactly the same dream."

Words, thoughts, questions crowded through her mind. "But Jonathan, I can't walk! So nothing's happening except that we're getting, very, very close to one another."

"You haven't tried to walk." He pinched her hard just above her knee. It hurt; she jerked away.

"You have sensation!"

He stood up, held his hands down to her. She grasped his strong fingers and pulled herself to her feet. For an instant her legs were stiff and she thought she was going to totter. His face reflected awe and utter amazement. "As crazy as it sounds, we dreamed this together. And you really can walk. You *can!*"

"Don't let go!" She lifted her left foot, put it down in front of her. He backed up, released her hands. "Don't do that!" But he backed away farther and farther, until at last just their fingertips were touching. Then she was grasping air.

And walking. She had the delicate, unsteady gait of a new foal, but she was walking. She could feel everything from her toes to her thighs, just as she always had before the incident.

Jonathan rushed up to her and embraced her and covered her face with kisses. "Patricia, my darling, God bless whatever happened last night, God bless it!" He held her at arm's length. "You are so incredibly beautiful. Oh, you are so, so wonderful!" He hugged her; he was laughing and crying at the same time. His hands ran up and down her back and he kept kissing her. Finally he went down on his knees and embraced her around the waist. She stroked his head, then knelt down with him. Their bodies made a little warm tent in the forest cool. He drew off his T-shirt and unbuckled his belt. "Shall I?"

In answer she unzipped him and drew his pants down around his knees. She laid her hands on him. He closed his eyes, sank back on his haunches. Around them the forest sighed with morning wind. Sunlight filtered through the trees. From far away came the sound of a multitude singing. It was the Lourdes hymn; people were gathering at the basilica.'

He was warm and solid to hold, and his skin had that velvet-soft feeling she remembered. He raised his own hands to her breasts, cupped them gently, then rubbed his palms against them. The sensation was so strong and so fine that it made her feel pride in her own ability to experience pleasure. She smiled, and

he leaned forward and kissed the smile.

They lay down together in the grass. She spread her legs for him and he tried to enter her. He was not very practiced either. In the end she had to guide him. But she was too tight. That scared her; were they going to fail?

He lay full down on her. "If you would kiss it like last time," he whispered, "we could make it work, I think."

Yes, it had to be made damp. People were so delicately constructed.

She didn't mind. Far from it, the thought of what she was about to do fascinated her. She recognized in herself a desire to surrender to him that was very, very great. If he had been a coarser or a more cunning man he might have found a way to make her his slave.

She knelt between his legs and lifted his penis; the end was gleaming as if it had been waxed. This she took in her mouth. It pulsed once, then plunged deep. It hurt. For a full minute and more she kept it there. The sensation of being filled by it was not terrible; indeed, she had discovered pleasure in this the first time she had done it.

Like a white-hot knife it tore into you. It filled you with searing, molten lava and it ripped you until you thought you would die of the pain.

He withdrew himself. He was shaking. In Jonathan passion and fury looked startlingly alike. "That's enough! Let me calm down." He took sharp, frantic breaths. He glared at her. Then he sighed and closed his eyes. After a short pause he asked to try again.

In answer she rolled over beside him and spread her legs. This time he slipped in much more easily. He groaned once, then they were linked.

A thousand lonely Our Lady nights: how will it feel? They say the first time hurts, but you mustn't let him know that. They say it's literally like an explosion in you. A million, zillion times better than diddling with the corner of a pillow.

A million, zillion times better. She could have believed that the entire universe had reordered itself around these two people making love.

There were waves of pleasure connected with even his slightest movements. They swarmed one after another, faster and faster, rushing up from the center of her belly until they suffused her whole body and seemed to enter her very soul. She could hardly bear it. She clamped her hands to her temple, she shouted, she kissed his face, his neck, his shoulders, she licked his skin almost frantically, and she looked into his hungry, avid, raging eyes. She felt

at the same time both laughter and sadness, the whole game and tragedy of life all knotted up together and then bursting into a huge, impossible ecstasy that was also hideous, a sharp joy that made her cry out.

And then she was aware of a bumblebee worrying a small blue flower near their heads.

He drew himself out of her.

"Stay in me."

"Oh, my darling." In his voice was love and joy . . . and something like relief. He laid his open mouth on hers. She thought perhaps they had become song. Were they still just two ordinary people? Could they possibly be?

The bumblebee finished its work with the flower and bumbled on. From the basilica came the deep murmur of thousands of voices saying the rosary.

Suddenly Jonathan reared back. His face was almost bursting with happiness. "This is the greatest moment of my life!"

"Of mine too. By far, far, far."

He fell to kissing her again. It was after nine before they even thought of dressing. Jonathan insisted he could make love again if she wanted him to.

"We have to get back. We really will be missed."

He laughed silently. "You can walk! Can you imagine the irony of it—you go to Lourdes and you get cured. It's almost a kind of cosmic joke. I mean, *you* don't want to go, *I* don't want you to go. Not even good old *Mike* really wants you to. Then you go and cure yourself with some kind of a crazy dream."

"Is that what happened last night?"

He looked at her. Slowly he shook his head. "We dreamed the same dream. I put you in the water and you came up cured."

"It scared me. I thought I'd drown."

He grabbed her tight against him. "The very last thing in the world I would ever, ever do is hurt you."

"The water was so loud. It was like a cataract or something, just literally gushing out of the ground."

"She told me it was the river of death."

"She?"

"My mother. While you were in the water."

"It *wasn't* a dream, was it?"

"Don't ask me what it was, darling, because I don't know the answer. I just

know that whatever it was, it broke the psychological barrier that was forcing you to seek dependence."

"I was really paralyzed, Jonathan! Don't say it was psychological."

He hugged her. "Let's walk over to the basilica. I think you're going to cause quite a sensation among certain people. For one thing, you are going to make Mike a very happy man."

They dressed and brushed one another's clothes free of loam and bits of fern, and walked out into the calm, warm sun. How good it felt to move again under her own power! It also hurt; this was more exercise than her legs had gotten in three months.

They laid their arms along the small of one another's backs and walked across the green sweep of grass that led up to the basilica. As they came closer, mounting the low hill, the voice of the multitude in the forecourt of the church washed over them.

*Sing of Mary pure and lowly, Virgin Mother undefiled. Sing of
God's own Son most holy Who became her little child.*

Then Jonathan lifted her onto the low wall that separated the court from the greensward beyond. There gathered a multitude of sick and well, crutches, wheelchairs, stretchers, people old and new, priests gathered in little black clumps, nuns in and out of habit, all the huge crowd of the world come to supplicate at the dirty, trickling water of life.

She sat down on the wall and wept for them even while her body sang its reborn power. Her lover hugged her to him, and she heard his ragged breath.

Neither Mecca nor the raped Ganges could equal Lourdes in sheer numbers of pilgrims.

Patricia felt the roiling, frantic living *thing* beneath the ground, the serpent River Alpheus crying out through the stones.

"There's my mother. She sees us. Oh, boy, this is going to be something!"

Mary Banion broke away from the crowd. Turning, her face was struck by the sun and she shielded her eyes. Then, splendid in a navy blue dress, holding down her white straw hat, she came quickly to their side. Despite the sweltering August heat, she wore an autumn dress with long sleeves.

Most of the other pilgrims wore long sleeves too, Patricia noticed. Mike alone was dressed for the weather, in a short-sleeved sports shirt. "Come

down off that wall, Pat. Oh, I wish they would stop that caterwauling!"

As if she had commanded them all, the crowd fell silent.

Patricia's legs ached a good deal from the walk. Mary and Jonathan had to help her down. She stood leaning against the low wall.

"Mother," Jonathan said, "she's cured."

Mary hugged her. "I knew you would be, Pat! I had my heart set on it!"

Mike was coming closer, his expression one of purest astonishment. "Don't look now, but here comes Dad."

He came rushing up to them, followed closely by the tall form of Father Goodwin, flapping like a huge old buzzard, his face gleaming with perspiration and excited tears. "Sometimes it happens at the exposure of the Blessed Sacrament! Is that when it happened?"

Mary answered. "That's when it happened. Just a few minutes ago."

Patricia recalled that the Blessed Sacrament was carried out in procession morning and evening. All the singing must have signified the morning exposure. But the miracle had happened during the night. "Mary—" Mary's hand squeezed hers.

She saw a small, very old man watching them from the fringe of the mob.

In the crowd there were at least as many of those strangely attentive faces as she had seen on the Bernadette tour. More, in fact. Practically everybody.

When she looked directly at the old man, it was as if the light went out of the sun and the warmth left the air. He turned quickly away and was lost in the crowd.

Mr. Apple is dead, isn't he?

Mike Banion's muscular arms came around her, and she let him hug her against his damp shirt. "Glory be!"

"Thank you, Mike, and thank the Holy Namers." She was playing a part, and she knew it, but that somehow did not stop her.

"Thanks be to God," Mary added.

Father Goodwin bowed his head. The great copper doors opened and the crowd began filing into the basilica, eager to touch their wounds and agonies to the waters.

Patricia rested her head against Mike's shoulder. Jonathan joined the embrace and the three of them stood together—three common, ordinary people against the dark, the unknown, the mysteries of the night.

She wished that she could shake the feeling of dread that had been with her all these weeks. But she could not. In fact, day by day and hour by hour it was increasing.

For heaven's sake, she had been *cured!* Shouldn't she rejoice?

8 AUGUST 1983

MOST PRIVATE

To: The Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Defense of the Faith

From: The Chancellor for the Inquiry in North America

Your Eminence:

It is with deepest regret that I inform you that Sister Marie-Louise has refused her commission. When the death of Terence Quist was added to that of Brother Alexander and I could not even guarantee the loyalty of the parish priest, Sister concluded that the risk of penetrating this congregation was too high.

Theoretically, Sister is correct, but the importance of the present mission is so great that I must ask you to use your good offices with the worldwide body, and find me a warrior-priest of the old school, who will brave anything for love of Him.

If you wish to reach Sister, she will be at the Esalen Institute in California for the next two weeks, "getting her head back together," as she so aptly put it.

In addition, Sister demanded that we turn over our files on the disease vector to the secular authorities for proper action. I do not yet wish to do this. Until we are utterly and completely defeated, we must not risk the damage to Holy Faith that revelation of our existence would cause.

Your Grace, our one and only alternative remains to neutralize the bearers of the blood.

Please send me a good man! May God have mercy on us all.

Yours in Christ & for the Defense of the Faith, Brian Conlon (Msgr.)

Document Class: Urgent A, most private, Swiss Guards courier

Destination: Paolo Cardinal Impelliteri, the Hidden Collegium, Prefecture for the Defense of the Faith, Vatican City

12 AUGUSTUS 1983
FURTTVISSIMUS

Ad: *Cancellarius Inquisitionis in Septentrionalis Americanensis*

Ex: *Prefectus Congregationis Defensionis Fidei*

We are vexed, Monsignor. If you cannot command the loyalty of your own religious, I fail to perceive any reason for you to continue in your post. Cells destroyed, martyrdoms, Inquisitors going to the Esalen Institute? What can be the matter over there?

You impress upon me in the same letter both your own personal helplessness and the urgency of the situation. I should remove you, but I cannot afford to spend time training a new man at such a tense moment.

Monsignor, I order you to go in yourself. *Work* on that parish priest, Goodwin. Enlist his help if you can.

At all costs, the *monstrum* and his mate must be rendered impotent. We simply cannot afford to face the chance of their birthing the so-called anti-man. Do what is needed in this regard, bearing our previous correspondence in mind. It has taken two thousand years of breeding to produce those two. In two brave seconds the threat can be removed.

So I charge you: For Christ and Holy Faith, find your courage. You have done brave things in the past, Brian. You always knew that your work might expose you to the threat of martyrdom.

Accept the cup Our Lord gives into your hand. Remember His passion in the Garden of Gethsemane. Brian, I cannot compel you. But I offer my prayers for you in this difficult hour.

Bless you, my son. You yourself must be our *Oppugnatio*.

Mea Auctoritate,

Paolo Cardinalis Impelliteri

Document Class: Urgent A, destroy in presence of courier

Destination: Monsignor Brian Conlon, Chancellor for the Inquiry, North America, 1217 Fuller Brush Building, 221 E. 57th Street, New York, N.Y., 10022

Chapter Fifteen

THE LIGHT OF evening lifted from hot Queens streets. Far below the windows of the apartment a bus roared, accelerating away down Metropolitan Avenue. Jonathan wished he and Patricia were on it.

They had spent time very carefully comparing the dreams they had experienced on the night of the cure.

They were complementary in every detail, so much so that Jonathan was forced to conclude they had *not* dreamed, but in fact had undergone some sort of actual experience.

The two of them were at the edge of the unknown. Jonathan wanted to get everything out in the open, unlock the secrets and damn the consequences. But how do you confront something you do not understand, which seems like a nightmare but has stunning consequences in real life?

The cure.

"Farfetched," Mike had said when Jonathan had told him about the complementary dreams. "Coincidence. And if the cult were big enough to include Lourdes there'd be a lot of people involved. There'd be leaks, and there aren't any. I'm looking for a group that starts and stops right here in Queens. Big enough to be mean as hell, which they obviously are, but small enough to stay well hidden. And as for the cure, just accept it. Thank the good Lord it happened."

Nightmares. Cleansing rivers: Cures. Jonathan accepted nothing, not even the way they had been scrutinized in the streets of Lourdes. That Mike brushed off. "The place is full of Frenchmen," seemed to him to be enough of an explanation.

But after listening to Jonathan's story on the way home in the plane, Mike had fallen silent, had stared a long time into the distance, had finally given them both reassuring pats and told them to relax.

Now he almost haunted them; he was either with them himself or some of his men were in evidence. The protective net around them had been strengthened.

"Patricia," Mike said around an unlit cigar, "aren't you hot?" She was sitting on the couch, her arms lying along the back, blond hair clinging to her forehead. "If you'd turn on the air conditioner we could close the windows." He dabbed a handkerchief along his neckline.

"It's worse than this with it on," Patricia replied. "Too humid. The coils freeze up."

"That what the super tells you? Bullshit! The thing's been tampered with. They don't wanna pay the bill. Effing landlords. S'cuse me."

Music blared up from a passing car. Jonathan went to the window to see a white Lincoln convertible pause at the light, the top down, the seats filled with expensively dressed, reveling blacks. WPLJ. Silk chinos. White dust in tiny cellophane bags.

Behind him Mike breathed heavily, it seemed painfully. He stared at them out of stricken eyes.

"Have you changed your mind, Dad? Do you think this thing might actually be bigger than Queens? Is that why you hang around all the time?"

"Come on, Johnny boy, let it rest." Jonathan could hear him chewing at the cigar. On the couch Patricia stirred. She had a bowl of ice water, and she began

dabbing her face with a washcloth.

"I want to know. You come here and you stare. What the hell for?"

Mike did not reply. Patricia went over to the window. "He doesn't know why he's here, do you, Mike?"

At last he cut his cigar and lit up. "I'll tell you," he said around it. "I'm here because I'm here. It doesn't hurt to be cautious."

"We're all overtired from the trip and the heat, Dad. Maybe a good night's sleep—"

"Screw that, Johnny. I was trying to reassure you two by soft-pedaling your stories about France. But there's no use in it. You're obviously not buying it. I might as well admit I think this thing is big. Very big. Somethin' was going on over there. You're not crazy, neither am I. Right? That *is* right, isn't it?"

"Of course it's right," Jonathan replied.

Patricia put her hand out, tried to touch Mike's shoulder. He recoiled, then looked at the hand. "I mean, were you paralyzed or weren't you? Was it some kind of a joke or what the hell was it?"

"Mike, I was paralyzed! Oh, I was certainly that!"

"Okay. I'm sorry." He shook his head, then rummaged in the top pocket of his suit, drawing out a sheaf of thin paper. Third copies of some kind of police report, Jonathan saw. "This is a return on the surveillance of Holy Spirit Church over the past three weeks." He opened it. "The goddamn thing is clear."

"They moved to another church."

Mike smiled slightly. "Why should they do that? I'm beginning to think the three of us are the only people any of us know who *aren't* in on this thing. Your guards are now from the 107th, not the 112th," he added with venom in his voice. "Maybe it's safer that way."

Jonathan heard the rage in him. No wonder Mike was scared. He was saying he felt he could no longer trust his own men. "You want some gin, Dad?"

He stared, wordless, his papers on his lap. Patricia went to the kitchen and brought back glasses of ice. She made three healthy gin and tonics.

Mike smiled. "Seein' you walk, darlin'—oh, Christ, I get soupy. I'm gonna be such a sentimental old fart one of these days." He sipped the drink she gave him. "When you two went out the night before the cure, where did you go?"

Patricia's eyes widened. "You're definitely sure we did go out?"

"Not only you. Mary was gone when you woke me up leaving. Frankly I thought you two had personal business that was none of mine so I stayed in bed. Where did you go?"

"I told you on the plane I thought we were dreaming." Jonathan's mouth was so dry he had to sip his drink before he could speak.

"You weren't. You really went out, both of you. Surely you remember carrying her."

"This is definite confirmation," Jonathan said, almost hating to hear the words. "Why didn't you say this before? Why did you doubt me on the plane?"

"It's a technique. Sometimes it leaches out a few more facts. I mean, if you went out, you must know where you went and what you did. Stands to reason."

"Mike," Jonathan said, "I don't think you understand even yet. I've believed for some weeks that I'm under some form of hypnosis. Now it seems obvious to me that Patricia is too. The story I told you on the plane stands. We may have gone out in the real, flesh-and-blood world, but we both remember it as if it were a dream."

For better or worse, he was going to have to try to work with Patricia on his instruments. Otherwise this mystery was going to keep getting bigger and bigger until it consumed them both.

The evening had turned to night. Now the room was lit from below by harsh sodium-vapor streetlamps. Some kids had opened up a hydrant and were shrilling gaily in its illicit spray. Jonathan envied them. A feeling of almost unimaginable menace seemed to fill the air in this place.

In the secrecy of conclave that lovers have, Patricia touched Jonathan's shoulder. The damp, warm flesh of her arm came into contact with his own. He knew just what was on her mind. The marriage. She was now ready to tell Mike of their marriage plans.

"You two keep the alarms on every minute you're in here. And if you go out, we'll be with you."

"We've asked Father to marry us," Patricia said quietly but quite firmly, "on Saturday night. The banns are waived." She smiled. "In view of our eagerness and the unusual circumstances of our situation."

Mike pulled his cigar out of his mouth. His face burst in an instant from shadows to smiles. "He-e-y! This is good! This is so good! Tell me sometime,

eh?"

"It was her, Dad. She didn't want to say it on the plane."

"They were already celebrating the cure. I didn't want to make more of a fuss."

"People kept kissing her on the plane. I think she was embarrassed."

"Awful fast." Mike got a canny look in his eyes. "Not gonna have a miracle seven-month baby, are you?"

Patricia blushed.

"Come on, Dad, no way. We're just two eager kids."

"Oh, sure. Eager to share your first kiss. I'm sorry you've decided to do it so soon, no chance to plan, but I accept that if it makes you happy."

"We want it private."

"Like now. You want it private now too, don't you?"

Mike had gotten self-conscious. Jonathan wanted to hug him. "We like having you here, Dad."

He pulled himself up from his lounge chair and drank his gin. When he spoke again his words were sharp. "I hate to leave on such a sour note, but I got to say it. You kids take care. You're good kids, both of you." He put out his hands, seemed about to embrace them. "I want my chance at grandfathering, goddamnit." He turned and moved heavily out the door.

They exchanged a glance. "Let's lie down," was all she said. They had only been home a day; there was still the jet lag. Too tired to make love, they contented themselves with a shower together, then lying twined in bed.

When Jonathan awoke it felt late, but it was only ten. He kissed his bride-to-be and probed at her with his inevitable erection. She moaned. He entered her and she sighed, half-awake. It was easier this time. A slight smile came across her face. He began, trying with all his might to make it last, totally engrossed in the astonishing experience of making love for a second time to this very beautiful woman. He had done it once without freeing the serpent. Surely the second time would be even easier.

The phone rang.

"Leave it."

It rang again. And again. Jonathan tried to ignore it but it just wouldn't stop.

Finally he disengaged himself and, as he was the most awake of the two, padded into the living room and answered it. "Oh, hi, Mother." What a

magnificent sense of timing. As she spoke Jonathan watched his erection fade.

"You must be careful together," she said in a nervous voice. "I hadn't expected you just to move in with her. You ought to wait until after the marriage. I think you've embarrassed your father." That wasn't very likely. "You're embarrassing me." That was probably true.

"Is Dad there?"

"He just walked in."

"Well, all I can say is we're both adults, and we really would appreciate it if you wouldn't interfere."

She hung up. Jonathan stared a moment at the phone. Slamming down telephones was most unlike Mary Banion. Nor was it like her to pry into his private life.

What role did she have in all this, anyway? According to Mike she had been out of the hotel room at the time the cure was taking place. What role, Mother?

Maybe it was just a coincidence. Hell, maybe it was all coincidences and hysteria. Jonathan had to find out. Beside that urgent need, spending time lovemaking seemed almost irresponsible.

Jonathan went back to the bedroom. Patricia raised her arms, inviting him to fall into them. But he stayed where he was.

"Patricia, we have to go down to the lab. We have to find out where, we stand in this thing."

"Why? We stand together."

He would sort through the strands of her mind, separating the real from the imagined.

"We have no idea what's really going on. That's the whole problem. We're crazy to lie around here. We've got work to do."

"What can we do? We can't remember clearly, either one of us."

"My lab can help us. The devices there can tell the difference between dreams and memories. If we're hypnotized, I think we can break through." He did not tell her what he had tried on himself. There was no point. The story would only frighten her, and he didn't need to use 6-6-6 on her. He would control his devices himself.

She pulled him down to her and kissed him with softness and skill. Her early kisses had been rough splashes, but now she had become his geisha. You

would not say whore, no, because she was the one who owned. He felt himself enslaved, taken in a snare so cunning it did not even know itself.

"Please come, Patricia. Please."

"We might hurt ourselves. What if there are things we don't *want* to know?"

"I sense that some terrible drama is being enacted. And we're the main characters."

A slight tension came into her face, visible in the careful set of her lips and the cast of her eyes. Maybe she was a little angry, maybe scared. "Tell me your dreams, Jonathan."

"I told you the Lourdes dream."

"But there are others."

"They disgust me."

"You weren't there when I was hurt. You weren't?"

"I don't know anymore."

She laid her head on his shoulder. "We both choose to believe that you were not responsible. And we haven't got one shred of evidence to the contrary. Aren't we better off leaving it that way?"

"I'd kill myself if I ever hurt you!"

She looked at him. "You're so loyal, Jonathan. You make me love you so very much. Don't you understand yourself at all? You're the most gentle man I've ever known. You couldn't hurt me or anybody else!" He had never seen such fiery conviction in so soft a face.

"What if it was me? What if it *was*? I've dreamed it more than once."

"All I want is you, the you that I know and love and trust. That's the Jonathan I want to know."

He could hardly believe what he heard. She was simply overlooking what he was telling her about his dreams. "Don't you think I might have done it—I mean, if I dream about it?"

"When you came into the hospital and looked at me through the window, I knew instantly it hadn't been you." She lowered her eyes. "You were suffering too much."

"And what about Lourdes? My God, surely you agree we've *got* to find out what happened there."

She took his hands. When she spoke he had to strain to listen, her voice was so low. She ignored Lourdes. "If it was you, I don't think I can afford to

know." She snuggled deeper against him.

He recoiled. This was not working out right. "We've got to find out. We owe it to ourselves, maybe to others as well." He took her by the wrist. "We're going to the lab right now."

"No!"

He would not, could not force her. "Please. You've got to think of others now, not just you and me. What if I'm dangerous? What if we're both part of something terrible?"

"Jonathan, I don't want to know! I just want us to be together, and love each other, and have a family."

"Lord, darling, we are *hypnotized*. Don't you want to know why somebody has invaded our privacy in this way?"

She touched his face. "You're being a fool."

"I've got to know!"

She closed her eyes, nodded her head. "I hate to hear that. But you really do, don't you? You can't live with yourself unless you know."

"Let's go. Right now."

He did not have money for a cab into Manhattan; they had to content themselves with the F train. They sat on the orange plastic seats in a nearly empty car.

There was no understanding her. On the one hand, she was such a sensitive and moral person—and on the other, almost indifferent to the question of whether or not the two of them were caught up in some kind of dangerous insanity, and unwilling even to consider that a man who wanted her to marry him might be deranged.

He felt like he was smothering, took a deep breath. That was tension. He closed his eyes, listened to the rattling of the train, let his mind wander.

We have a demon between us, she and I.

"This is the stop, honey." They got off at West Fourth Street and went upstairs into the teeming summer night of Greenwich Village.

Down West Fourth they walked past the grim honky-tonks and shoestring restaurants that served the New York University community and the endless streams of tourists, past the lopsided row house that contained the Epsilon Rho fraternity, and down Sullivan Street.

As Jonathan and Patricia walked along, one shadowy figure after another stepped forward saying, "Smoke, smoke," and an occasional man held open a

bag full of pills. Somewhere somebody played haunting, ethereal ragtime on steel drums.

The turn into Rayne Street brought them at once to another world. The street was dark and quiet. Tourists and students did not come here. It was too forbidding at night. The streetlights at either end of the block barely penetrated the gloom.

He wished Patricia would walk like an independent human being and not with her head bowed and her hand in his, as if she must go exactly where he led and damn her own feelings.

"I'm sorry if I'm imposing on you."

"That's all right."

"It's for both our sakes."

"I just don't want to risk something coming between us. I love you so much."

He led her down the outside stairway to the basement. When he stopped at the door of Room 014A, she stood quietly beside him. When he released her hand to fish for his keys, she twined her own hands together and looked at the floor.

"You're making this very hard for me."

"I know." When she raised her eyes they were full of mischief. "I think you're being an idiot, to tell the truth."

"Well, there's some of the old spirit, at least. Why not look at this as an adventure." He found his key, opened the lab. Inside he flipped the six light switches, flooding the cavernous room with steely fluorescent light. "It might be one, after all. You never know."

The lab had been cleaned up. The busted microcomputer had been replaced and all of the bacteriologicals removed. Even the doorway that had led to the culture lab now led only to a storeroom full of cartons of computer printouts.

Somebody had moved to hide all evidence of bacteria culture having taken place here. That seemed very sinister indeed. He tried to force himself not to speculate about it right now. This wasn't the time to worry about it.

"I don't know any bacteriologists!"

"Jonathan?"

"Sorry. I was thinking aloud." This was his old, familiar workplace now that the other things were gone. A good laboratory is a delight to work in, and in its intact form his was no exception. "I may be bragging, but please

indulge me and admire this place." He gestured. "Just look at it."

"It doesn't make a bit of sense to me."

"My dear, you are looking at the closest thing to a device that can read minds that has ever been designed." He went over to the bench on which most of the digital EEG analyzer was lying under its plastic tarp. "All that she requires is a little juice, a little software, and a little love, and she will tell us exactly—but *exactly*—what is hidden in the deep recesses of our minds."

"Look, I'm going to say it one last time. This is all a mistake, Jonathan. What we need to do is forget."

"Just do it for me, honey. It'll be over in fifteen minutes."

"What concerns me is that I'll have to remember something I simply can't face. Let Mike find them if he can. I just want to forget. And you should too. Anyway, your machine might lie."

"For my sake, let me find out what it says. I'll never have peace if I don't."

"I wish you understood how the hell much I love you, Jonathan Banion. You're part of my soul!"

He hugged her and felt her tremble. "I'm sorry."

"What if we don't like what we find?"

"We have to take that risk? What's the good of living a lie? I don't want that, and I don't think you do either. If we really love each other, we've got to know the truth."

"Even if it destroys everything?"

He held her tight to him. "Let's face that if we have to. The point is to find out the truth, then we'll deal with it."

"You didn't rape me. Not you."

"We have to find that out, among other things.*"

She shrieked at him. "*I do not want to!*" She looked at the equipment he had uncovered as if it were a writhing tangle of snakes. Her lips twisted. For a moment it seemed as if she might faint. "I don't even allow myself to think about it. I just know it's there, deep in me, a filthy memory of—of—oh, I don't know what it's of."

Of me?

"Darling, I'm going to ask you to lie in the cubicle. And please excuse the mildew." Will your mind tell us what mine would not? He gave the couchette a few swipes.

"I'm doing this for you, Jonathan. Only for you. I'm going on record right

now saying it's a mistake."

She lay down. A memory of Mike haunted Jonathan. Mike sitting on the lounge chair, chewing his cigar, his bald head gleaming with sweat.

We're all afraid.

Surely questioning under instruments would work more gently on her mind than 6-6-6 had on his. He hoped so; if he put her through one-tenth of the anguish he had endured he would never forgive himself.

He punched in the Telenet address of the Cray 2000 computer that controlled his software and entered his personal password. The internal prompt appeared on his CRT. The computer was ready. Now he ordered it to load his software from the Corvus Hard Disk Drive sitting beside his terminal. The drive's active light came on for a long moment. When it went off Jonathan knew that the fast, elegant program had been transferred to the Cray.

The Cray came back with the diamond-shaped prompt that indicated it had successfully loaded. "We're go on the program," he said to his waiting subject—or patient—or was it victim?

She was lying quietly on the couchette, watching him. "Just don't mess up my brain, chromedome."

"You're going to be the chromedome, I'm afraid." He got the helmet. It contained a hundred and twenty-eight pressure-sensitive electrodes and was a great improvement over the old method of applying them individually to the skin. But with the masses of wires coming out of it, it looked like something that belonged on the head of a robot.

She laughed when she saw it. "We need a camera, I want you to remember me at my most beautiful."

He looked long at her. "I wouldn't do this if I didn't have to."

"Never leave me, Jonathan. Never, no matter what." Jonathan fitted the helmet to her head and they laughed together. "I really want a picture," she said. He turned to his instruments. Patricia's brain-wave patterns were jittering across the screen of the oscilloscope.

"Remember that night? We were together. We had drinks. And?"

"Jonathan, ask about Lourdes instead."

He watched his instruments. "Remember? We were together, we had just had a drink—"

"You left!"

The PV220 wave showed a peak, then settled. The thought was not coming from memory; neither was it quite a lie. It was an implant. To break a hypnotic block, it was necessary to challenge such implants.

This was a fateful moment. If he could break what had been put into her mind to blind it, his next words would do it. "You don't remember that."

"That's what happened."

"Try again. We had drinks. Assume I didn't leave. What really happened?"

The sound she made was not a scream, it was an eruption. Jonathan lunged toward her. In an instant she had gone a ghastly pale gray color, her eyes almost starting out of her head. Her shriek dropped suddenly from a glass-shattering pitch to a vibrating groan. Then the computer started beeping. Automatically Jonathan responded to the line-failure signal and pressed the reset button. The screen flickered to blackness. Even as it was doing that he was leaping to her aid. He thought perhaps a short of some kind was sending voltage into the headset. But even when he tore it from her head she didn't change. She was convulsing. Her arms went out straight beside her, her legs began to hammer, her head jerked from side to side. He shook her, he yelled at her, finally he scooped her up into his arms and hugged her to him.

"What have I done? Oh, stop, stop! Oh, God, God, please make her stop!"

Chapter Sixteen

HER HEAD WAS whirling, her ears ringing, the whole room shaking. Jonathan seemed to dart and flicker as if caught in some sort of strobe light. Then his hands slapped against the helmet with a stunning clap and he tore it from her head.

She blacked out. She knew that something was terribly wrong with her. She could feel her body jerking in spasm, her tongue filling the back of her throat. And she was spinning, spinning fast, out of control, falling. A great bell was booming somewhere.

Then it wasn't a bell at all, it was Jonathan's voice. He was crying and screaming, cradling her in his arms.

Quite suddenly, all was quiet.

"Patricia?"

His face was shadowed by the glare of the fluorescent tubes above him. "Jonathan—"

"Darling, darling, darling. I'm so stupid, so damn stupid." He embraced her and she let herself be swept up into his arms. They were strong and good and she was glad.

"I feel better. I think I'm going to be okay."

A haunted expression came into his eyes. It alarmed her; it was the expression of somebody with a guilty secret.

"Did you hurt me, honey? Is there something I don't know?"

"I don't think so."

Another thought occurred to her. "Did you find out?" Her own voice sounded so small.

She turned her head to avoid the glaring ceiling lights.

He stared down at her.

Love me tonight. . . . She became aware, dimly, of something quick and gleaming that stank of flyblow, chasing her through her dream country. Catching her.

Oh, God, how horrible! She heard herself gasp. She felt another scream coming. The thing she had glimpsed was so ugly and so utterly cold, the very opposite of all she loved of humanity and life. It was Death coming through the high grass, Death rising from its hiding place in the soul. "Oh! Oh! No, Jonathan!"

"Patricia! Sh! Sh! It's over, I turned it off. You were right; I won't ask any more questions. I'm so sorry."

"Oh, darling, it was so ugly!" Were there people in the world who were not quite people? What had that thing been, straddling her, staring down with the blank eyes of a snake?

She was going to throw up. "Jonathan—" Her mouth opened. He grabbed for a wastepaper basket, thrust it beneath her face, and held her. Her stomach seemed to pull off its moorings. For an instant she was sinking in a fast elevator. Then the lights were above her again, glaring, humming tubes of brilliance, and beneath them Jonathan's face, his lips slack with fear and his eyes still hidden in the dark of his brows.

He bent to her, lifted her in his arms, and embraced her. "I thought it would work out differently."

The world had just changed for her. Her memory of that terrible moment was now clear. She could remember what had raped her, and it was not a human being.

What evil has been wrought in the dark of this world?

"First I heard music, a sort of humming, very low, like a swarm of flies."

"Hush, honey, hush."

"I will not!" She reached out and snatched up the tangled pile of graph paper. "What does this say?"

"I pulled off the helmet."

"Before you did that you asked me what really happened. And I had a vivid image. Was it a memory or wasn't it?"

"I don't know. The reading isn't reliable."

She wouldn't stand for that. "Jonathan, you opened something up in me and it feels like a memory. Now I'm the one who has to know."

"Whatever it was sent you into convulsions, I don't think we should fool with it."

That wasn't acceptable. "You tell me—*dream or memory?*"

He took her hands, pressed them to his lips. "I can't be sure. There's something wrong with the readout."

She could smell it, could taste its filthy, rotten kisses. "Jonathan, Jonathan, look at you. You poor man, you're so innocent. Do you still think you did it?"

He squeezed his eyes shut, he bowed his head. He was slick with sweat. "I know." The words were a bare murmur.

"Don't be an ass. You didn't. You couldn't possibly."

He dropped to the couchette beside her. His hands, holding hers, were cold

and wet.

She tossed her head, wishing she could get the image of the thing out of her mind, could somehow replace it forever with Jonathan's beauty.

But that *thing* existed.

"Darling, we have to take a reading on me as well."

"What? Have you lost your mind, Jonathan Banion?"

"Just a short reading. And you'll have to run the computer."

"I can't run a computer, and I wouldn't even if I could!"

He glanced again at the chart of her own reading, made a sad kind of sighing sound. Suddenly he grabbed her shoulders. He brought his face close to hers and she saw him clearly, without shadows. His eyes were staring, fixed, his lips dry. He was trembling steadily, with the frantic rhythm of a small animal. "You get over there and run it!" He picked up the graph and shook it at her. "Do you realize what this - no, you couldn't possibly." He jumped up, went to the computer terminal with a single stride, began jabbing at keys. It beeped, the screen came to green life, then he grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her over.

"Once the helmet is on, the computer will want to adjust to the exact frequencies of my thought patterns. There will be a series of numbers coming across the screen. Each time it pauses, press the key marked 'return.' Got that?"

"Darling—"

"Got that? *Got that?*"

"Okay! Got it."

"Then it will ask you a question—which measurement? You will type in the answer, 'waves by harmonic type.' Then press 'return' again."

"I've got it. 'Waves by harmonic type.' "

"Then press 'return.' You see the return key?"

She put her finger on it. "Jonathan, what if something happens to you?"

"Do just what I did—you press this orange key marked 'reset,' then you pull the helmet off my head. But nothing *will* happen because this is a passive test. We aren't fooling with thy hypnotic barriers."

"So we *are* hypnotized. You know that for certain?"

"Oh, yes. And the barriers are powerful. More so than I dreamed possible. One more question, baby, and bang—the next step was brain death."

"Death by hypnosis? I didn't think—"

"Don't ask me how it's done because I don't know. Now come on, let's get this over with."

He fitted the silver, cable-strewn helmet onto his own head and lay down on the couchette. After a moment a string of numbers shot across the screen, and she began following her instructions.

Soon the numbers stopped and the machine asked its question. She typed in the reply, then kept one finger hovering over the reset button and the other over 'return.' She looked at Jonathan. He was lying on the couchette, his eyes closed. He seemed fine. She pressed 'return.'

Silence. Jonathan didn't move. She kept her finger over the orange button, began watching his chest. He was breathing steadily.

Soon paper started streaming out of the graph. Then the machine sounded a bell and stopped. "Jonathan, did I do something wrong?"

He sat up, pulled off the helmet. "You were fine," he muttered. "That's all there was to it." He lunged for the graph paper, ripped it off the roll, studied it almost frantically.

When he looked up at her again, his face was pallid with shock. The paper dropped from his hands.

"Jonathan, what is it?"

He shook his head. Then he came to her, almost reverently, and took her head in his hands. "Darling, our brains show an incredible, radical departure from the normal wave pattern."

Was *that* all? "Well, are we okay anyway?" She could think of nothing else to ask.

He laughed silently, mirthlessly. "Dearest, we're fine. But don't you see what this means? We've got eighteen separate waves. Normal people have seven."

"Does it mean—have we got a disease?"

"In a funny kind of way. Our disease is that we aren't human beings."

"We—what?" She was mystified. "Of course we are!"

"No. We're too far from the norm. Oh, we're human stock all right. I mean, the basic pattern—alpha, beta, delta—it's there. But *we are not people*. We've got an alpha high harmonic, a delta parallel, and a whole cluster of little waves down in the low frequencies."

"It must be the hypnosis. It's got to be!"

"No way. I'm talking about brain *structures*, not transitory effects like that. I mean, we are real first-class *freaks!*"

That word slashed through her composure and made her shriek. She couldn't help it; freak is a horrible word. "No, I'm not a freak. I hate it! I am *not* a freak!"

I was raped by a freak with the skin of a snake and yellow-green reptile eyes.

"Honey, come on, be quiet."

"I will not be quiet? I am not a freak! Don't you ever, ever, ever call either of us that, because we are *normal*. I'm telling you we are normal and we can have a good life! You'll see, Jonathan Banion, I'll make a nice home for you, you'll see!"

"Come on! Pull yourself together. We've got to think this out."

She stopped, but only by jamming her own feelings down into her guts and holding them there with a fierce effort of will she doubted she could sustain for long.

"We are mutants. The other word was unfortunate." He sounded calm, and that helped a little. "Genetically we must be very different from other people." He shook his head. "God knows what we are. Halfway between *Homo sapiens* and—well, something else. I cannot imagine what our children will be like. A virtual new species."

"But we're people!"

"Not really. Close, yes, but you and I are not people."

She was losing her home, her family, her happy life. She knew it—she could feel it all being destroyed by that one awful word. Freak. "But we *look* like people, we *act* like people!"

He nodded agreement. "We're a close mutation." He looked at his hands, felt his cheeks. "Amazing. Me. You. That we would be this . . . whatever we are."

"Are you *sure* it's not the hypnosis?"

He took her hands. "I know how to read my charts, We may be under hypnosis. In fact I'm sure we are. But the overriding finding is the high degree of abnormality in our brains' electrical functions. That means—"

"Don't say it again! Don't say that word!"

She let him hug her. Gratefully she buried her face in his chest. She remembered the monster again, and felt all at once the absolute coldness of the unknown. How little she really knew, even about herself. "We *look* like people!"

"Yeah. We can probably mate with people too. Have human-like kids. But if

we mate with each other our children won't be remotely human."

She couldn't stand to hear that. "Just stop it! Stop talking that way. Look, we can go away somewhere. Nobody will ever know, nobody needs to know. Whatever we are inside, we can keep it secret, we can hide it! We'll be able to get married and all, and things'll work out. They will, I know it!"

He held her more tightly. "Baby," he said, his voice quaking, "somebody already knows all about us."

He could only mean the Night Church. There flashed in her mind again an image of the revolting thing on the altar. She let herself weep into his shoulder, and she thought, We're in the middle of God knows what, and we're getting more lost by the second.

She held him, and he held her, and for a precious moment (hat was all there was.

We two.

Chapter Seventeen

FEAR WAS NOT normally part of Mike's emotional makeup. Tonight, though, he could taste it in his mouth, a sour dryness that made it hard to swallow.

It is not a sound, but you can hear it in the wind; not a presence, but you can feel it watching you.

Fear.

He had no illusions about searching Mr. Apple's house. It belonged to a powerful and hitherto unknown cult. The Night Church. Coming here was probably the most dangerous thing he had ever done.

He suspected he was a fool to be doing it—especially this way, alone and without backup.

He had no warrant. As far as the law was concerned, he was a common burglar. But then the law didn't know he was here. He didn't trust his own people enough to risk swearing out papers.

He waited until the hours past midnight to drive through the streets of Kew Gardens to the empty house. He parked around the corner and walked back, his hands thrust into the pockets of his raincoat, his hat shadowing his face when he passed under streetlights. He moved with the precision of a dancer, his shoes making no sound on the sidewalk.

His entrance was professional, so quick that an onlooker would have assumed he had a key. As he gained the front hall he returned the plastic card he had used to prize the lock to his inside coat pocket. Almost automatically his fingers reached in and touched the butt of his police special, tucked into its shoulder holster.

The floor groaned with his weight. Good—that was a sign it hadn't been walked on for some time. Mike went across the foyer and into the living room. The air was dense, faintly tinged with the musk of mildew.

As Mike's eyes got used to the light he could see that nothing had been removed from this room. That was as expected. Mr. Apple had left no relatives and no will. It would be months before Probate Court got around to disposing of this place on behalf of New York State. He took a crystal ball

from a collection in a case in the living room. The little quartz orb dimly reflected the thick velvet drapes, the intricate Chinese carpet, the Flemish landscapes on the walls, and the deep mahogany of the Victorian furniture. One could almost see shadowy figures moving in the complex dark of the crystal.

Beside the orb was a small silver key, rounded at the end in a unique and familiar way. It was a coffin key. Mike had seen them often enough at the morgue. Strange thing to find in a home. Was it the key to Mr. Apple's coffin, left here by a careless mortician when the old man had so conveniently died?

He replaced the crystal, picked up the key. It was a typical stubby coffin key, steel, looking like a luggage key, but with the name Aurora stamped on the flange. Largest coffin company in the world. Mike had used such keys in disinterments.

Carefully, patiently, he moved through the living room, brushing his gloved hand along the back of a chair, caressing the surface of a mahogany table.

Old Mr. Apple.

That name hadn't checked out. Back around the turn of the century foundlings in upstate New York were always called Johnny Apple on their birth certificates. "Mr. Apple" was an identity generated from the birth certificate of a foundling who had died in the Oneonta County Institution for Indigent Children two weeks after he was discovered in a box behind a grocery store.

"Franklin Apple's" birthday was December 11, 1893. That was the day Johnny Apple had been discovered in the box. Developing an alias this way was a clever technique. You find somebody who died young about the time you were actually born, and you send for the birth certificate. Then you use that to get a social security card and a passport, and the passport to get a driver's license, and the license for everything else.

You use the alias until it gets hot. Then you kill it off.

Father Goodwin hadn't mentioned Mr. Apple during interrogation, but one of the ladies at the supper had. Mike was so desperate for leads he had begged Harry to dredge his memory. "The incident was very minor," he had said. "The man made her nervous and she didn't want to talk to him. I told her to offer it up. That kept her with him for fifteen minutes. She said that he was creepy. It's a matter of no importance, I'm sure. He was very old."

Mike hadn't told Harry how important he thought Mr. Apple might be.

Always best to play a case like this one closer than you thought you had to.

To discover the little tiny motives that always seem to start crimes, the best place to go is a man's hidden world, his sock drawer, his medicine cabinet, the back of his closet.

Crystal balls? Coffin keys? Not the likely possessions of just any old man. But an old man who was playing around with sorcery might have such things.

Strange mementoes themselves were of little value as evidence. Such things did suggest, though, didn't they?

Mike returned to the central hallway of the house. On the opposite side was a study. Behind it would be the master bedroom and dressing room. Mike knew the layout of the house; he had lived in one very much like it with his first wife, Beth. Rego Park, from 1964 to 1975. The house had been built by Butler and Horowitz in the late twenties—they had put up hundreds of them all over the borough. Butler Boxes, they were called. By now most had been torn down or so altered as to obscure their original modesty. Not so Mr. Apple's bungalow. It even retained the vintage twist-spring doorbell.

Beyond the door of the study Mike could see a big desk, shelves of books, a television set on one of the shelves. He went in, walked the edge of the room.

When he brushed past the television set he paused. He put his hand on it. Was there a little warmth there, or was it simply the hot night? He went on, circling the desk. Nothing was disturbed in here. He would save the study for a few minutes. Even as inefficient as it was, Probate would have removed any important papers with the body and stored them in its vault down at the Queens County Courthouse.

To get an idea of the man as he had been in his skivvies, at his most revealed, Mike would try the bedroom. He stepped carefully along the Persian prayer rug that served as a hall runner. His penlight told him that, like everything else he had seen in the house so far, the carpet was very fine. Mr. Apple certainly hadn't lived in want.

Which raised an interesting question. Why had a rich man like this gone to a seniors supper to eat Father Goodwin's meager offering?

The sonofabitch had gone there to observe Patricia. Even then he had been watching her.

The bedroom was a puzzle. It did not talk old man, not by a long shot. If Mike's instincts were working, this room had been decorated by a young

woman. There was even a vase of fresh roses. Perhaps only a day old, from the feel of the petals.

Fresh flowers, a slightly warm television—somebody was *living* here. Mike became aware of the weight of his pistol, and wished he had spent some time down on the practice range recently.

He got much more careful, but also much more interested. He glanced at his watch. Three fifty. This time of night people who weren't home could be expected any minute or not at all. Good that his car was around the corner and not out front. He began to work the penlight with his hand cupped around it. Reflections on the ceiling would read outside like the flicker of a match.

Then he froze. He had heard a sound, a scrape like a window being raised.

There it was again. It was followed by silence. Maybe some wind had come up and was scraping a tree limb against a pane of glass.

There was a small writing desk under the window. Lying on it was a fountain pen. Mike touched the nib. Full of ink. It was eerie to come into the house of a dead man who might not be dead.

He opened the single drawer of the desk. Inside was a black leather binder that contained about ten sheets of blank chart paper, like something a scientist might use to plot curves. He felt the surface for telltale indentations. Sure enough, someone had written on the top sheet and torn it off, leaving depressions on the sheet below.

Mike took the indented sheet off, laid it on the desk, and shone his penlight along it edgewise. There were words neatly inscribed in one corner, as a scientist might label the chart of an experiment. But the words were not scientific *R-i-t-u*—something. Then *C-r-u-c-i-a-t-u-s*, then a word that began with *N* and had an *x* in it. Then a name, which Mike recognized with sick dread. *Quist!*

Come on, guy, quit shaking. You're a cop, you're carryin' heat, you got no problem.

*Cruciatu*s. Mike's altar boy Latin was exceedingly rusty, but there was an ugly sound to that word. It didn't mean crucifixion—that was *crucifixus*. This sounded worse.

Seems from this they must have hurt Terry. So what's the surprise? Look what they did to Patricia.

Beside Terry's name were two slashes—a date had been written there, but the numbers were too faint to be discerned. Below the name, pressed into the

paper as if the writer had been bearing down for emphasis, was written "Titus strain 334, Cochran batch, B. positive 3." Here and there across the paper faint lines indicated that a chart had indeed been drawn. At the bottom, at regular intervals, were numbers, but Mike could only make out a few—3:54.22 was the first. Farther down was 3:57.44. The others were unintelligible.

Titus strain. Mary's first husband was named Martin Titus. Batch? Mike felt a cold shiver go up his spine. What the hell was it Terry had said about diseases? And what the hell was Mary's former married name doing on this chart?

You be careful, guy. Forget going home for tonight. Mary was now a suspect. She had gone out before the kids at Lourdes—he had witnessed that. Now her first husband's name turns up here. So she must be considered dangerous, and prepared for accordingly. Damn, damn. What in *hell* was this all about? Mary involved? That beautiful, decent woman? He loved Mary, damn it, and he was now suspecting she was about to become a very big disappointment to him.

Cruciatius. Whatever the hell *Cruciatius* was, it sounded bad. He looked at the paper. Killing by disease and charting the results. Experimenting.

Was Mary crazy or what? He was getting all choked up. He loved that woman, damn her. Damn everything. People got hooked by cults all the time—Reverend Moon and all that—but this thing—God, if Mary knew about Patricia. If she *knew!*

Cruciatius. It might mean excruciation. Torture. That poor guy. Such a rotten end for an innocent human being. Mike next went to the high, beautifully carved antique four-poster. He took off his gloves and raised the edge of the bedspread. Thrusting one arm beneath the sheets he felt the intimate space where the user would sleep. The sheets were damp, slept in recently.

Why, Mr. Apple, you're not dead, you've just moved to some new name. As far as that beautiful piece of mahogany amoldering six feet down is concerned, let archaeologists of the future figure out why it contains cinder blocks.

Make a note: get the damn thing exhumed ASAP.

The house was suddenly filled with voices. "Please, let me go, let me go!" a woman screamed. Mike whipped out his pistol and backed into the shadows.

"I can't help myself!" a man cried back, his voice full of anguish.

Then Mike saw a flickering glow in the hallway. And those voices—they were accompanied by music.

The goddamn TV had been turned on.

Mike's heart began thundering. Somebody must have come home. Now he was watching an old movie. God, these people were stealthy. They even crept into their own houses.

A coldness spread through his body. He didn't believe people could be as quiet as this one had been. Not normal people.

He started down the hall. To get out he had to pass that study, and the door was wide open. At least he had the sound of the TV to cover him.

He was three-quarters of the way past it when he risked a glance in. The study was empty.

A television set turning on by itself? Mike swallowed, braced his pistol in his hands, and went into the room. The television had gone from picture to snow. The station must have signed off.

For a moment he watched the pulsing, hypnotic glow of the screen. Then there was an audio problem—the hiss changed to a deep, tooth-jarring sound that made Mike lunge forward to turn off the set.

Don't do that! You're crazy—whoever turned it on will notice! He stood transfixed, staring into the dancing, pulsating glow, listening to the low booming sound.

And didn't he hear a voice?

No.

His eyes went to a small box attached to a wall socket immediately below the TV.

He almost laughed with relief. It was a timer. The set was timed to go on in order to make the house look occupied.

At four o'clock in the morning?

Hell, maybe the timer was defective.

Mike pulled the timer out of the socket. The TV went off. He returned to his search, feeling more than a little annoyed with himself for letting a perfectly explainable incident throw him off balance. It now seemed as if the place would be a rich source of information. No probate officer had made an inventory of this house, because Mr. Apple hadn't really died.

Mike looked around at the shelves and shelves of books and the big desk.

He intended only a quick glance at the books. There were a few modern titles, mostly privately printed from the look of the spines. *Biogenetic Atlas: Engineering the Future, Transmission of Contagious Vectors, Genealogies Pantera, The Family of Flavius Sabinus Titus.*

Who? Always go for the names. Names are hard information.

Mike took the Titus volume down. It turned out to be about a Roman emperor. A long story about how he had sacked Jerusalem started the book. Mike thumbed through it. A chapter heading: "The Treasure of Solomon." This chapter was about ritual magic, hypnosis, and "the calling of the demiurge." "Out of the union of the perfectly bred will arise the antithesis of man, who will inherit the mantle of species and the favor of demons." On and on like that. Next chapter: "The Coming Good: Anti-Man."

Mike read: "He will bear the appearance of a demon, yet have a living heart. As God made man in his miserable image, so Satan will make the anti-man in His glorious one. He will be as a dark fury, going about at night and sleeping during the day. Taller, stronger, more intelligent than a man, he will be heavy-boned and like the lower animals be born competent to walk. He will have great jaws and eat raw flesh by gorging. His strength will be such that he will need neither house nor fire, but will be comfortable in the fields and forests. All the despoiling of the land that man has done will end when the anti-man repopulates the earth with his own issue."

Mike stared at the words, dumbfounded. They were talking about nothing less than giving the world to some devil-made species.

Insane, insane, insane.

Farther along there was a complicated genealogical table, showing how they intended to bring about their anti-humanity. Generation by generation they were breeding toward the monster. The genealogical table was a chronicle of their progress. It was labeled "The Hidden Kingdom, 1021-1952." It spilled over twenty pages of names and more names, all connected together by lines of relationship.

Mike read with increasing foreboding the lists of Tituses, until he quit trying to puzzle the middle centuries together and flipped to the end. Sure enough, there was Martin Titus, wife Mary Derwent Titus, son Jonathan.

Mike found a chair. His penlight was beginning to dim but he had to read more and he couldn't risk taking books.

All the time he had been right in the middle of the thing. These Tituses weren't just in the cult, they *were* the cult. And the wonderful kid was heir to the whole damn thing.

Biogenetic Atlas: Engineering the Future proved to be a complicated scientific treatise of recent origin. The spine crackled when Mike opened the book. It had been printed in 1981. There were charts and graphs, and detailed diagrams of what seemed to be genetic helixes. The chapter headings were daunting: "Structural Physiology of Titus/Pantera Offspring." "Biogenetic Reference Tables' to Families 121/166." (Here there were thirty pages of tables of numbers, evidently referring to changes in the genetic structure of generation after generation. Every twenty columns or so somebody had made a check mark in red ink beside a major change in the numbers.)

Looking at these charts Mike got a sense of the steady progress that had been made by the Night Church, patiently breeding two families together over hundreds and hundreds of generations, breeding them like fruit flies in a laboratory. But the Night Church didn't have laboratory conditions. This had been accomplished across the tumult of history.

This section of the book was accompanied by illustrations. The earliest ones were Roman wax paintings, familiar to Mike from an afternoon's wandering through the Metropolitan Museum with Mary. He had assumed them to be satyrs or something. Not until now had he ever dreamed that those old Roman monsters were real, living creatures.

According to the text, carefully bred people with the proper genetic structure could briefly become such monsters in a ceremony called the *Rituale Pudibunda Coitus*. Thus transformed, they were called *monstrum*. If a man in the *monstrum* state inseminated a correctly bred woman, the resulting anti-human would be male. If the woman was the *monstrum*, the child would be female.

Generation after generation they had tried to give birth to a living anti-man. All they needed was a male: he would be able to mate with normal humans and produce monstrous offspring. But they hadn't succeeded. One would be born with a defective heart, another with an unformed brain, a third with some mysterious genetic disease. It was as if nature rebelled against the travesty.

Astonishingly their failures were chronicled publicly, there for all to see just like the old Roman paintings. As time went on the creatures had become more

and more terrible. Anybody could study them even now: their portraits were on all the Gothic cathedrals in the world. They were the gargoyles.

Generations of failure had only spurred the Night Church to greater efforts of breeding. Mike reflected as he read that here was a group of people in love with death. Their books were decorated by images of Thoth, the all-seeing Egyptian god of the underworld. Thoth and the arms of the Black Prince of the Middle Ages, and the glittering death's-head symbol of the SS.

The Night Church was a religion of death, just as Christianity was one of life. As Christianity strove to resurrect man in Christ, the Night Church sought to destroy him in Satan.

Next was a technical appendix showing recent progress in creating the state of *monstrum*.

Mike was more utterly revolted by this than by anything he had seen in all his years as a cop. The Night Church was breeding human beings like lab mice, toward ugliness and deformity. And making them carry out obscene rituals in churches, becoming *monstrum* in order to give birth to hideous things.

But there was genius in it, sparkling like a black, evil diamond through these carefully reasoned words. As a cold touch, there came to Mike the realization that he was looking upon the very work of Satan. This was *real* evil in all its hideous ugliness, not the paltry nastiness of human beings. The Night Church was a dark, festering miracle, a Satanic masterpiece.

Mike wanted to throw down the book in his hand, to somehow cleanse himself of the foulness it exuded. But he forced himself to read on. Here was the jargon of high science: "Signal Ritual Induction in Late Titus Offspring." As if to crush what little hope of disbelief he had left, this section contained a photograph of almost unspeakable hideousness. The picture was blurred by the fact that the light was low and the subject twisting and turning against chains. But Mike could see the awful, mucous-slick scales half-grown out of human flesh, the bulging vulture eyes still bearing a man's brow, the mouth crusted with blood from the sudden eruption of the yellow fangs, the flaring, pink snout still looking a little like the nose it had been. This dreadful image, of a man half-transformed into something else, was accompanied by a dry paragraph of scientific jargon: "Induction in collateral Titus male 22, Ungar, Robert Titus Martin, type O-, genetic subclass AR, 22.66 measured PKO, reversion in 52 sec. to human. Outcome: *monstrum* deceased before

impregnation of female could be completed."

Mike could no longer control himself. He cried, openly, loudly, like a child lost in a haunted forest.

The Night Church was another, darker world hidden in our own, a place of terror and agony lurking in the shadows of everyday life.

He wanted with almost crazy desperation to get out of this wicked house. But he forced a shaking hand to put back the atlas and draw out another book, this one entitled *Genealogies Pantera*. This was the family that had been bred along with the Tituses across so many generations.

The female line.

He went directly to the last few pages, to see if he recognized any of the modern names. He was thunderstruck by what he found. Patricia was there, listed as the daughter of Samuel and Rebecca Murray, who went through a long line of Irish families back to Roman Britain, and thence to someone named Joshua, who had been a sorcerer in the time of Solomon.

Mike had reached the end of his strength. This was more than he could bear. He threw the book against the wall and screamed out his rage and disgust.

Every living person he loved was in this monstrous, corrupt cult! Every one of them.'

He ran, ignoring the noise he was making, out into the black night. The roses on the porch trellis filled the darkness with their scent. As Mike ran he got scared. It was as if some great creature was following him, reaching out for him. He vaulted a hedge and slipped in dew-covered grass, falling and rolling. He lay on his back gasping for breath. And saw among the stars two great vulture eyes staring down at him.

His scream was as thin and high as a baby's. His wildly pumping legs pushed him along for a moment, then he managed to get to his feet and scramble the thirty paces to his car.

Frantically he worked the key into the starter, said a little prayer as the engine turned over, fought the impulse to floor it when it started.

Mike drove down Abingdon Street, slowly for quiet, and did not turn his lights on until he had reached the corner of Lefferts Boulevard.

The precinct was three minutes away, but Farrell's was what he wanted. Lights and people and normal things like coffee and tea. Lobster-shift cops would be there. He needed the reassuring presence of other police.

Tonight he had seen things that could drive a man mad. In an hour the whole world had changed for him. Satan was no longer a vague symbol of emotional disturbance. Satan was a real thing, as vital and alive as any human being. Mike had no doubt that those eyes he had seen in the sky were Satan's. Evil and ugly and tremendous, and staring right at him.

He cruised past his own house. A dim light shone in his and Mary's bedroom. What was going on in there? What might await him?

He had given that woman his love. Goodbye to that. And the kids? He had to reserve judgment there, he just didn't have the heart to start hating Jonathan and Patricia.

The boy had demanded a poly—like he suspected himself of the rape but did not know. Could that mean the two of them were dupes, ignorant of their own true selves?

He thought of going over to All Souls Cemetery and visiting Beth, just to be near someone who had once been warm and good and loved him, to wash off with memories of her goodness the evil that clung to him.

"Honey," he would say, "I never thought Mary was really a replacement for you, but she was warm and decent, and she was real pretty. I didn't fit with her and I guess I should have known something was wrong, but she was so damn beautiful. That counts. She isn't as pretty as you, though, no, ma'am. Lord, honey, I'd like to get you in my arms right now. I'd like to kiss your neck while we made love, the way I used to."

His chest was tight, his throat ached with sorrow. "You had a beautiful name, Beth. A beautiful name."

Oh, quit your bawlin', you sentimental Irish asshole. You have to put yourself back together. For better or worse, you've been handed the biggest job any cop ever had.

He felt that horrible chill again. He sensed that the eyes were back, glaring at him right through the roof of his car. A sudden wind rocked the old Dodge on its springs, and made the trees ahead toss wildly in its headlights. For companionship he flipped on the police radio. He headed for Farrell's even though he had realized that the lobster shift was off break, so there weren't likely to be a hell of a lot of cops there.

There weren't any at all.

He was tempted to cruise the boulevard for a whore, but he couldn't do that successfully in an obvious unmarked car like this. They'd run away, naturally,

from a city-issue Dodge with cop plates.

Naturally.

He finally rolled into Farrell's, put on his hat, and went in. The counter was empty, the booths were empty. A black preacher and his family sat at one of the tables eating a turkey dinner. At this hour of the morning?

Okay.

Old Gus the drunk was on duty, with Reynaldo running the grill. "Gimme coffee, Gus."

"Sure thing, Inspector."

Call me Mike. I'm just Mike. Good Lord, but I am alone.

MARY: THE WEBS OF THE INQUISITION

It is four o'clock in the morning. I sit here in my little pool of light writing, alone in an empty, hostile house. I am a betrayer. I have lived with a man in love in this house, falsely drawing him down into a pit from which he cannot save himself.

I look at these smooth hands of Lilith, my hands, witch's hands. They used to burn my kind in autumn fires long ago, in forest villages when the wind crowded down the leaves and the sky ran gray.

I am swift in the night, the taloned maiden. Look at my red-tipped claws. Mike would call them fingers, and say they are beautiful. I know differently. When he thinks they are caressing him is when they are cutting deepest. I can make a man's soul leak out through his skin.

Distantly the bell of Holy Spirit Church tolls four times. All well, all well, all well, all well. Not far from here Mike is searching the cottage Franklin used while he was living under his alias. All well. Mike is being tricked into finding exactly what we want him to find, just enough of our secrets to animate in him a great fear of us. He will take nothing important away; he dares not. Within moments of his departure the crew that is waiting in the basement will come up and strip the house of every single scrap of evidence.

Mike is an actor now in the terrible theater of Lilith. He will strut and posture until the end of the play. He will not escape me.

Look at the words I have just written. He will not escape me. I'm sure of that, I suppose.

By going where he has gone, Mike Banion has delivered himself to our

control. We are vastly better equipped for this game than he. We have people, resources, equipment, and above all the insight of the demons to guide us. For his part, Mike is afraid even to involve his own men for fear that some may be members of our Church.

Mankind drifts along, haunted by gibbering spirits and useless gods. At the bottom of each human soul is the evil old ape from which we have sprung. We, the transitional species, half-animal and half-god, all full of tragedies and destructions.

I am almost overwhelmed with a worshipful desire to get on with our great work. What a mercy bubonic positive 3 will be. Homo sapiens has suffered itself for a hundred thousand years. It is past time for this awful tragedy to end.

The actors upon the stage are at last dissolving into dark.

Only the Inquisition can stop us now. But will it? We are very close to success. And yet . . . there is always the possibility of something overlooked.

The Inquisition spins subtle webs.

I worry, turning the same few facts over in my mind again and again. I imagine priests—silent, careful, fanatical— slipping through the darkness, filling every ignored corner, obsessed with their mission to save a religion and a humanity that are both already dead.

Most human creatures, in their secret hearts, hunger for destruction. Freud's "death wish" is the instinct of a defective species toward its own extinction.

As the church of the destruction of man, we use the great human symbols of death: the unblinking eyes of Thoth, the steel helmet of the Black Prince, the glittering silver death's head of the SS.

Mankind longs so much for an end to itself that it has even devised means of mass suicide. Or else why are there such vast nuclear arsenals on the earth? If man does it himself, with his atomic bombs, the race's death agony will last for years. The few destroyed in the explosions will be lucky. As for the rest— radiation poisoning, burns, infection violence, and starvation will take them ... so very slowly. Dr. Cochran's new bubonic positive 3 kills quickly—in under ten minutes, to judge from our experience with Terence Quist. We, at least, are merciful.

Chapter Eighteen

THE INCREDIBLE REALITY that Jonathan's instruments had unlocked tore at Patricia's mind, threatening her very sanity.

From the moment she had understood what he meant she had thought of only one thing: *escape*. If she had been able to magically trade bodies with somebody else she would have done it. But that was impossible. She was in herself and she couldn't get out.

He was trapped as well. Two mutants.

Who felt like, wanted to be, in their hearts *were* just ordinary people.

They were going to go where they could live the lives they coveted. Their wants were simple: a home and children. Just like everybody else, they had a right to a quiet life.

We can live in sunshine. The shadows that have caressed us can be burned away

They crept through the dangerous silence of Kew Gardens, beneath the black intricate trees lining the streets, their feet falling softly on the close cropped lawns and spotless sidewalks. It was so quiet their breathing seemed to shake the air.

Every movement Patricia made, every rustle of her skirt or touch of bare arm against a shrub, almost stopped her heart. Slowly they drew closer to the Banion house and whatever might await them there.

Had there been a choice they would have gone directly from the lab to the Port Authority Bus Terminal, but there was no such option. Money was essential, unless they wanted to terminate their escape this side of Philadelphia. Jonathan carried no credit cards. The best Patricia could do was a Hamil MasterCard with a three-hundred-dollar credit line that was almost used up. Between the two of them they had thirty-six dollars and the card.

The night through which they moved was on one level just another fragrant August night, rich with the mysterious content of nature. But underneath the beauty lurked an evil presence they could feel but not name. They sensed it in the reflection of moonlight from the startled eyes of cats, and in the long voice of the wind that seemed always to be with them.

The moon had dropped low. Soon the gray shadows of trees and houses that crazed across the lawns would be blackened away. Only the Manhattan glare in the western sky would be left providing light.

Patricia took Jonathan's hand in hers as they approached the Banion house. She wanted to say, Don't be afraid, but she did not dare even to whisper until they were better concealed.

They had gone first to her apartment to get her miserable little cache of five-dollar bills. Four of them—big deal. But what could they expect? She was at the moment taking home exactly \$168.42 a week. The pistol Mike had given her was there too, guarding her fortune, and she had dropped it into her purse as well.

It was safest to assume that the Night Church was everywhere, watching, waiting. Not patient, either. Patricia remembered the avidity of the thing that had raped her.

With each step she took she said a prayer. But it was not your usual Catholic turn-the-other-cheek sort of thing, it was a raging, furious prayer for the utter destruction of the Night Church and all its faithful.

Patricia had insisted that they walk instead of taking the bus from her place to his, for a very practical reason. This way they could better detect anybody following them. The streets of this quiet and exclusive enclave hidden in the middle of Queens were just too empty at four thirty A.M. for a follower not to be seen or heard. They didn't want the Night Church and didn't need Mike's guards. This had to be done alone.

She intended that they would take the Long Island Railroad milk run in from Kew Gardens at five. From Penn Station they would walk to the bus

terminal and get on the first long-distance express they found, and go where it was going.

Now that this plan was being executed she could almost taste the freedom of the new life it promised.

She took Jonathan's hand. Nobody was going to ruin the common, everyday happiness she wanted to share with him.

As they walked along, she felt in her purse with her other hand, touching the steel flesh of her pistol.

"I don't think I can kill," he had said when she picked up the weapon. "Can you?"

Yes, to protect us.

They reached the walkway that led up to the house- Even with the money they would get here they were hardly in for an easy time.

She put her arm around Jonathan's waist and drew him past the house, hushing his impulse to go through the front door with a quiet whisper. Precautions and strategies did not occur to Jonathan. If this was to be done right she had to do it. Her ability came from dormitory sneaks, creeping out on midnight dares.

The important thing was to assume the worst. That way you wouldn't be surprised.

They slipped from bush to bush until she had a view overlooking both the Banion house and the sidewalk before it. She tugged at Jonathan's hand, gestured, and crouched down. He came down beside her. They were behind a shrub, perhaps an ailanthus bush, well concealed.

She risked a breathy whisper. "We'll give it five minutes, then go in through the garage."

"Give what five minutes?"

"Our tail, dope. If anybody's following us we'll see them come up the sidewalk."

"You're beautiful."

Mr. Romantic. He didn't even now understand the danger they were in, not really.

Her dream thing's eyes were yellow and huge and steady.

"What's come over you? Are you all right?"

"Sh! Whisper."

"Sorry."

She pinched his wrist. "I'm praying that we'll get out of this alive." Lord, let him finally grasp the seriousness of our problem.

He patted her on the cheek, an absurd gesture of reassurance. For all his strength and intelligence, Jonathan could be maddeningly guileless.

The five minutes passed without a sign of trouble. Patricia allowed herself some small hope. She was going to get them out of this. One day soon, she would have a little room somewhere and a decent little job and the exotic luxury of this man as her husband.

Or was that more than this particular ordinary garden-variety mutant had a right to ask?

She drew him close to her; she could smell his golden body in the dark. He smelled so sweet, so unlike the stench of a normal human being on a hot night. She felt her own body singing with desire. His hand came under her chin and turned her face to his. There was nothing wrong in that; kisses were silent. . The mutants find one another attractive. Of course.

So many lonely years were being erased by his kisses, a whole girlhood of desolate tea-dances with the Saint Dominic boys. But we orphans did not want other orphans, we wanted princes. How we dreamed, we wizard-frogged princesses.

Somewhere a dog howled. Both of their heads turned toward the distant noise. But it was far away, blocks and blocks. A bird muttered a reply. The air moved a little, and a few leaves whispered.

She gave his shoulder two quick taps and nodded her head. They rose up from behind their bush and trotted into the Banion side yard. Although Patricia did not know the place as well as he, she did not let Jonathan lead even here. She took out her pistol, flicked off the rather stiff safety catch. For some reason its presence in her hand was a little embarrassing; she held it down where Jonathan could not see. It implied a kind of commitment to what they were doing that she was not entirely sure she wanted him to perceive. It might scare him.

She hefted the gun a little, preparing to enter the house.

They reached the back door that led into the garage. Jonathan took out his keys and opened it. There was a deafening squeak, then they were in, brushing spider webs from their faces. The garage was black; too bad they didn't have a small flashlight.

Jonathan's hand come into hers. "I'm scared, hon, to be frank."

"We'll be all right. Just keep on."

"If we get caught—"

"We'll back each other up. Better to be caught here by Mike and your mother if we're going to be caught at all."

A hard squeeze of the hand communicated heartfelt assent. A few steps into the garage Patricia realized Mike's car was gone. All to the good. One less person to wake up.

They went through the shadowy kitchen, past the hanging plants and the gleaming appliances Patricia had once so admired, through the dining room with its wonderful antique table and chairs, and into Mike's den. Here were loungers and a dartboard on the wall and a case of books about police work. Here also a big television for the weekend games and a desk for the weeknight work. The room spoke Mike Banion and made Patricia feel sad for the friendship that had to die. Without her and Jonathan Mike was going to be a very lonely man.

"I think we might find something in the desk." Jonathan lifted up the blotter. He withdrew the key from a little leather slit on its underside. Clever hiding place, and fortunate that Jonathan knew about it.

There was a money clip of twenties in the top drawer. Six of them. Jonathan pocketed it.

"Hot money," he whispered. He tried to smile but it was obvious he felt as unpleasant about this as she did. She took a deep, calming breath, and calculated. They now had a hundred and fifty-six dollars. It wasn't enough. They had to go upstairs.

As Jonathan knew the house so much better than she, there was no choice at this point but to let him lead the way. She had no faith in his innocent skills as a burglar. She stopped him at the foot of the stairs. "If she wakes up, do you know what to do?"

"Run like hell."

"No! That's how you get caught. You stand absolutely still and don't make a sound. She'll go back to sleep."

"Oh, I see." Although the house was centrally air conditioned, the air upstairs smelled thickly of the perfumes of sleep. Patricia first sent Jonathan into his own room to get the eleven dollars and six subway tokens on his dresser. When he came back they went together to Mike and Mary's bedroom.

Mary lay on the near side of the bed, turned toward them. Her face was

almost invisible. Patricia looked long at her from the shadows of the hall. For a breathless few moments it seemed that her eyes might be open.

I will kill her if I must, she told herself. I will not hesitate. But that was a lie: this woman was Jonathan's mother. His shoulder touched Patricia's. All Patricia could do was hope that Mary didn't wake up and force the issue.

Now that they were this close to the end Patricia could leave Jonathan here in the hall for the rest of the job. The other girls had always chosen her to sneak into Sister Saint John's room when that was called for, replacing her wimple with the gardener's fedora or stealing the lenses out of her glasses or some such mischief.

Mary Banion was not the good-hearted soul Sister had been, and this was not funny. Carefully, moving so that she rustled as little as possible, Patricia went past the bed. Mary's breathing was not regular. Bad, bad sign. Just as she was deciding to retreat, Mary's purse swam into view on the dresser. In it would be the wallet. How much? A couple of hundred if they got lucky. California, Florida, Texas, Montana. Freedom in a purse.

When Patricia reached in, something made a distinct clinking sound. She froze.

No movement from the bed.

She withdrew the wallet. Before she dared leave the room she stood a long time watching and listening. Mary was very still. Patricia began to move toward the door.

When she was beside the bed she looked down at Mary once again.

And met very definitely open eyes.

There came from Mary a long hissing sound like cloth tearing. She rose up in bed. Patricia stood dumbfounded, confused by the suddenness of Mary's movements.

"Stop. Both of you!" Mary leaped from the bed.

Patricia got to the door just before Mary would have blocked it with her body. "You can't run away. It's impossible!"

"Leave us alone, Mary. Don't you dare try to stop us."

The sound that came in response was almost inhuman in its rage.

"I have a gun, Mary!"

"You can't escape you little fools, you *belong* to the Church."

"Jonathan, come on," she said as she brushed past him.

As Patricia ran down the stairs she listened for the clatter of his footsteps

behind and was relieved to hear them.

Would she have gone back for him, into the face of that woman?

Once outside Patricia threw her arms around him.

Then she saw Mary coming through the garage door, a raincoat thrown over her nightgown. She moved silently, swiftly. Patricia's gun didn't even seem to concern her.

A wind came up as they raced along the alley that led into Eighty-Fourth Avenue. Large drops of rain began to rustle the leaves. The air grew dense. The northern sky was a deeper black; a storm was coming. Patricia pulled the collar of her blouse up around her neck. In a way a storm would help them by obscuring the sounds of their movement, but they would be conspicuous on the train if they arrived wet.

"We'll cut through Forest Park," she told Jonathan. "It's quickest." Would they be watching the Kew Gardens station? She could only hope not.

As they approached Park Lane a garbage truck clattered past, trailing from its closed maw like a flag the tatters of a red dress. They climbed the low wall that outlined Forest Park and set off among the trees.

Absolute silence and absolute darkness filled the park. Forest Park was so named because it contained the largest stand of virgin forest in New York City, uncut since before the founding of the United States. Seventy-foot oaks and maples soared into the dark from a bed of mist-hazed ferns. She and Jonathan kept to familiar paths, worn clear by generations of shortcutters. Patricia plodded along, aware that the damp was rapidly making a mockery of her shoes. Passing beneath the Interboro Parkway overpass she was briefly spared the trickle of rainwater down her neck. The woods were deeper on the far side, but they could now make use of one of the park roadways, a winding blacktop lane dotted with potholes, where carriages once had rolled and lovers strolled.

The wind made the ferns whisper and the tops of the trees utter long sighs.

When Patricia saw the gleam of water on metal ahead, she realized the enormous strategic error she had just made. Forest Park was not the same as a weed-choked alley. Here the Night Church could afford a few risks. Screams didn't matter in this wilderness, and there was no back doors on which to pound.

The Night Church had worked very fast. Mary could not have warned them

more than a few minutes ago.

"Hold it." She grabbed his shoulder. "There's a van here."

"Where?"

She lifted his hand, placed it against the cold metal. His whole body jerked, as if he had been delivered an electric shock.

"Back up," she breathed. "Maybe they haven't seen us."

They turned off the road onto a path. She wasn't sure, but she thought it led out onto Park Place. If so, they would be safe in a few minutes. As they picked their way through the wet, slapping ferns she heard the distinct sound of footfalls on the roadway they had just left. Then there was crashing in the brush not fifty feet behind them.

"Oh, God, Jonathan, run!"

As they dashed through the slapping ferns she fingered the safety of her pistol again and again. She would use it, she told herself, she would certainly use it.

That thought was recurring so often she was beginning to be afraid she didn't really have the courage.

The ferns slapped her legs and she kept blundering into tree trunks. Beside her Jonathan clambered and fell along. A steady shuffling of brush followed them.

They went on like that for a while, with the Night Church fifty feet behind. The memory of the thing she had encountered at Holy Spirit made her run like a madwoman, battling the wet, clawing undergrowth, her feet sliding in mud, sheets of rain obscuring her vision.

Was the thing behind them?

Jonathan screamed and fell against her. She clutched him, got him to his feet. "Come on, honey!"

Fingers whipped like snakes around her neck and she grabbed at them, trying to fight instead of scream, trying to keep the terror from rising up and blanking her ability to resist.

With a growl of naked rage Jonathan leaped across the three feet that separated him from whoever was on her and grabbed him. Instantly the arm was swept away and Patricia was confronted with a seething, rolling mass of flailing limbs. She heard blow after blow land. She heard air hiss from lungs and bones crunch.

"For God's sake, you're killing him!"

"That's - exactly—right!" Jonathan said. Again and again his arm rose and fell, until there was no further movement from the figure beneath him. Jonathan stood up. Patricia was awed; she had never seen anything like it before. In a few seconds he had beaten a man senseless—maybe to death.

She hugged him. "Are you hurt, darling?"

"I'm fine. Let's get a move on."

There was a shuffle of ferns ahead. A distinct click. "Drop the gun, please," said a quiet, cold voice.

Instead Patricia pointed it in the direction of the sound and pulled the trigger, a feeling of vicious and triumphant power surging through her.

The pistol went click. Click. Clickclick.

Something pricked her neck. "Don't move, either of you." Another dark figure stepped out of the bushes beside Jonathan. She could see in his hand the same weapon that must be cold against her own neck. A stiletto.

Her stomach heaved. "Drop the pistol." The razored edge of the knife caressed her neck. "It's useless to you. The powder was taken out of the bullets the night you got it." She threw it to the ground, feeling the most intense helplessness. They even had access to her apartment. There was no escape from them, none at all. Even to have tried was stupid.

A two-way radio burped in the darkness. Patricia became aware that there were a large number of people around them. They had been at the center of a highly organized net all the time.

She threw the pistol to the ground. The pressure of steel against her neck diminished.

"Come with us, please."

Jonathan started off ahead of her. He was pushed roughly. Behind them flashlights bobbed in the path and voices were raised. They were trying to help the one Jonathan had beaten.

Patricia allowed herself a moment to be proud of him. He had tried hard; that meant a great deal.

Soon more of the search party met them. There were easily twenty people around, all in black turtlenecks and jeans. Occasional flashes of lightning revealed them to be utterly ordinary young men and women, clean-cut, even pleasant-looking.

Nobody had scales, nobody had reptile eyes.

Patricia had visualized the Night Church in terms of batwing soup and gnarled old wizards. These men probably worked in law offices and insurance agencies by day, and the women raised kids in pretty Kew Gardens homes.

When the back door of the van was opened slightly, a shaft of yellow light leaked out. The door opened all the way. "Come," said a pleasantly modulated voice.

Although the door was locked behind them, this luxurious interior hardly seemed a prison. Jonathan sat back in one of the deep leather seats. "I can't grasp this." His voice was like ashes.

"I know."

The van had no windows, and the walls were covered with padding. There was a well-stocked bar, complete with ice, glasses, potato chips, and pretzels.

"Don't eat or drink any of that stuff, Jonathan."

"Of course not." He slumped forward, bowed his head into his hands. She sat down in the seat beside him and put her arm around him.

The van started off. Patricia experienced what seemed an almost primordial urge to escape, as if she had been trapped in a cave-in or locked in a coffin.

The van gathered speed, driving on deep into the night.

Chapter Nineteen

MIKE HAD TO exhume Franklin Apple's coffin. The way the Night Church operated there could be anything in there—or anybody. He might not like it, but he had to go through the whole official drill to make it happen.

It was late afternoon before he could make all the bureaucracies involved agree. Finally the paperwork was complete and Mike sat waiting in his old Dodge at the entrance to All Souls Cemetery. Night was coming, he was tired and uncomfortable, and he wished he could go home. He rubbed his palms along his cheeks, which itched like fire. Either he had shaved sloppily at his office or he was allergic to the cologne Mary had given him. His whole face was sensitive. Too bad. He liked the cologne a lot. Time to change, probably. The older you get the more allergic you become. Allergic to life, finally. Then you pack it in.

It had been a rotten day, beginning when he woke up at eight on the couch in his office feeling like he had been cared for by a Mack truck, and proceeding through contact with a smarmy assistant DA who could not understand why Apple should be exhumed on so "minor" a matter as an alias, and going from there to miserable dealings with the Board of Health and the Cemeteries Department, getting the exhumation order initialed by the right department heads.

It had started raining just before dawn and hadn't stopped all day. The graveyard was going to be a mess.

Mike considered himself a careful, patient detective. He had learned that cases were cracked either by persistence or luck, and he was not the lucky type. He was no longer even close to buying the fact that "Mr. Apple" was dead. No way was a coincidence like that going to happen. No way. Especially since his real name was very probably Titus.

Mike was pretty sure he was going to turn up a load of cinder blocks or bricks, or maybe just a coffin full of sand. It was no big deal to get a burial like that done. The Dexter Funeral Home over on Metro Avenue did fakeouts for the Mafia all the time. Two thousand bucks could get a box of bricks buried, priest's honorarium included.

Mike carried the exhumation order in his breast pocket behind his cigars. Being a high-class dump, All Souls did not like cops and exhumations even a little bit. To avoid being ordered off the property you had to be sure every *i* was dotted and every *t* crossed.

While he was waiting, Mike took some more time to work on his own emotional state.

He had been crazy last night after being in that house. Crazy with fear. After a few hours on the couch in his office he had realized that he was going to have to break this case. He might have to confront the Devil himself to do it, but he was by God going to expose the Night Church.

That didn't change his fear, though. It was with sick dread that he had called Mary at nine, pleaded that an emergency had kept him out all night, then told her to expect him home for dinner. As nerve-racking as staying there would be, not doing so was too obvious a tip-off. And he dared not arrange for a backup team out on the street. He might be making his arrangements with the Night Church.

He wasn't looking forward to the night ahead. No way was he going to sleep.

He hit his hands against the steering wheel. This case was so damn complicated. It would be nice just to be able to walk people in on charges right now. But what charges, and which people? Christ, what a mess.

What better cover for a woman like Mary than being married to a police official?

Sweet lady. Supposed to have loved him. Maybe she did, who knew? It sure as hell didn't matter to him. A nasty taste came into his mouth just thinking about last night. He shook his head, fighting the images.

Mike intended to sift this case exceedingly fine.

Another car pulled up. The Department of Health observer and the Queens County coroner—or, as Mike could see through the window of the battered green city-issue Dodge, coroness. A fine, robust specimen of a woman too, and visibly pissed off about gravedigging in the rain. The two of them got out of their jalopy and came over to Mike's. They knew their protocol, at least. When you are working with a detective inspector who is fool enough to get out and wallow in the mud, you damn well come to him because you know he is a man obsessed. Inspectors are not even supposed to work cases. Their job is managing detectives.

"Inspector Banion?"

"Yours truly."

The Health Department type leaned into the car, his popeyes wet with

fatigue, his breath a mixture of C&C Cola and streetcorner hot dog. These guys did a tough job, chasing down rats and sick dogs, scraping shit off floors, examining corpses for signs of contagion. "I'm Inspector Ryan," he said. "This is Doctor Phillips."

Mike unlocked his doors. "Come on in. The gravediggers are late."

The two of them piled into the police car. "Sorry about the rain," Mike said.

"As long as they can dig." The coroner was younger than she looked.

"This your first exhumation?"

"My first in a rainstorm."

"Maybe you're lucky. The wet'll hold down the stink."

Silence followed this remark. The bureaucrats were here because the law required their presence. But they were also human beings, and they must be curious about why such a high official was supervising an emergency exhumation in the middle of a rainy afternoon. They were going to stay curious. Mike wasn't going to repeat one word about this case to outsiders. He might be talking to the Night Church.

He looked across at a forlorn paper sign tied to the iron gate.

GROWING SEASON, JUNE 1-NOVEMBER 1. FRESH FLOWERS ONLY. ARTIFICIALS WILL BE REMOVED.

A high-toned cemetery.

In keeping with its image it was full of the most amazing monuments. For fifty years the Mafia had been burying here. The more murderous the sonofabitch, the more elaborate the grave. Buddy DiMaestro had a goddamn twelve-foot angel with a sword in its hand over his grave. Who was it supposed to scare, God?

Beth was also here, off in the Irish section of the bone-yard. Not a huge monument, but he kept it clean. He came out here Sundays to talk to her. There had always been space in that plot for Mike.

A rumbling behind his car announced the arrival of the gravediggers and

their trenching tool. Good they had it; they would abandon this job if their only tools were picks and shovels. They were grim-faced, these three sanitation-department employees. These men spent most of their time at the city indigent graveyard on Hart's Island. Mike had been out there occasionally, fussing over the grid map in an effort to locate the remains of one unfortunate soul or another. It was a bleak place, with a mocking view of the waters of Long Island Sound, gay with sailboats and sun. The men who worked there looked like moles.

Mike started his car and began leading the procession into the cemetery. He stopped at the office and showed a tight-faced manager his EO. "You got it," was all the manager said. He held out a book for Mike to sign. Then there was a disclaimer form, and certifications for the two bureaucrats. They read their forms carefully and applied their precise bureaucratic signatures.

The little procession got underway again, moving down a wet, abandoned road, almost a path. On both sides opulent monuments loomed like watchers from the pages of some dangerous old romance.

Mike soon stopped his car. The trencher ground its gears and the three sanitmen piled down from the cab. "Let's start digging," Mike said. Then he added in an undertone, "There's three fifths of Chivas in my trunk for you guys, so drawing this gig isn't a total wipeout."

There was an immediate lift in their mood. One of them smiled, another gave a satisfied grunt. "That's gonna feel good, man," the third and most articulate said. They set about their labor with something close to gusto. From inside the car the two bureaucrats watched grimly. They had done most of their work; they were afraid that they were going to be cheated.

Mike had been in the business too long to do that to city employees. "Listen," he said as he got back into the car, "you folks want your fees in cash or goods? I got scotch in the trunk or three nickels apiece in my wallet. Take your choice."

"Our fees always come in cash," the coroness said. "We aren't allowed to take goods." Mike counted her out three fives.

The health inspector took liquor.

Outside the trenching tool started up with a roar and began digging away.

So everybody was happy, everybody was willing to work. Most times Mike wouldn't have given these people anything, and nothing would have been

expected, but in the wet of a miserable afternoon it was only fair.

He and the two officials sat in the car while the gravediggers did their business, cursing and using their tool like a weapon, spattering mud over the gravestone, a simple but expensive piece of Carrara marble engraved with FRANKLIN APPLE, DECEMBER 11, 1894—JULY 12, 1983. Not even an R.I.P. The trenching tool, a small tractor with a device on it like a huge chain saw, rattled and swayed, its teeth crunching down into the earth. In fifteen minutes a goodly hill of soil had piled up beside it.

At last the men went to work with shovels. Normally on an exhumation this was when you came speeding up in your car, jumped out, and peered down into the grave. Not this time. Mike had learned respect for the Night Church. Best to assume it was always right next to him. The coroner, for example. Or one of the gravediggers. Or the assistant DA who had given him a hard time.

"Yo," one of the men called from inside the grave.

"Let's go, folks, this is what we came for."

They got out into drifting mist. Mud oozed under Mike's feet, sucking at his overshoes. He huddled deep into his trenchcoat, his old snap-brim faithfully keeping his bald spot safe from the elements.

At the bottom of the grave was a steel coffin cover. At least the funeral home had done a good job, and buried what it had said it would bury. Many a dearly beloved got prayed over in steel and mahogany but went down in pine; it was a popular ripoff.

The wind moaned in the trees, and rain steamed on the car headlights that illuminated the scene. In the depths of the grave the steel gleamed in the flashlight glare. "Pull the damn thing off, boys," Mike said.

They got a rope through the hooks on the sides of the heavy coffin cover and raised it on their winch. Now the coffin itself lay exposed, clean and gunmetal gray, with raindrops beading on its polished surface.

"Go ahead," Mike said. His witnesses stood beneath umbrellas on the far side of the grave, which was the windward side. If there was a ripe corpse in there they were going to want to move upwind with Mike in a hurry.

The coffin was locked, and nobody had the key. Mike thought of it lying in Mr. Apple's living room. One by one the screws holding the locking mechanism were removed. When the last of them came out there was a hermetic hiss. That had been one well-sealed coffin. "It's ripe," the coroner

called.

"Come around here. It doesn't smell so bad." The umbrellas bobbed in the mist and soon the two officials were beside Mike. "Okay, open it up."

The gravediggers started to lift the lid. They hesitated, dug their feet in as if it was heavier than it should be, then heaved it back.

The coroner screamed. The Health Department inspector made a sharp sound between his teeth. Mike knew that this moment was going to haunt him for the rest of his life. He had just encountered his worst murder. He was more than a little surprised; he had expected either cinder blocks or Mr. Titus, alias Apple. The spectacle before him was the kind of thing every homicide professional secretly dreads, the one so bad it gets past all your defenses. You know you will be spending nights with it from now on, seeing that frozen scream again and again, hearing the awful ripping sound the fingernails made when they popped out of the coffin lid.

"I'm sorry," Mike said into the silence. Down in the grave one of the diggers covered his face with mud-gloved hands. Another looked up toward Mike, or perhaps past him toward God. Or maybe just to see a little sky. "Hold it, guys, I'm comin' down." Mike descended their ladder, slipping once on a muddy rung.

The grave had the same sweet smell that had come from the foxholes of the dead in Korea. Foul sweet. "Poor bastard. Coulda at least knocked him out." Mike tried to see the face, but the car lights didn't penetrate that far. He fumbled for his penlight.

"No shit, man," one of the diggers said. "I wish I hadn't seen this." His voice was awed to softness. A lot of people who work with human death do not fulfill the common mythology and become hard. They become very kind. Suffering respects itself.

The victim's fingers had been hooked into the coffin lid so tightly that the whole corpse had at first risen up, then fallen back as the fingernails came loose. Black stains covered the shredded rayon upholstery. Blood from those scratching, clawing fingers.

With just the penlight there was no way to distinguish features.

"Get the big flash from the back of my car," Mike called up to the bureaucrats. In the meantime he played his penlight into the coffin. The mess it revealed told exactly what it was like to die at the bottom of your own grave. It was very, very hard. The eyes, bulging open, had sunk to black holes; the

mouth, spread in a last, anguished gasp, was all teeth and bitten, shredded lips. The corpse was so new that all the suffering was still there, in the eloquence and humanity of the frozen scream.

Policemen get good at pretending to be hard, but inside they slowly transform through the years, until the cruelty of human beings begins to seem a monstrous defect in the species, more pitiful than bad. They start seeing criminals and victims alike as cogs in a great wheel of human failure. Need and greed grind them all to pulp, weak and strong, good and bad.

"Cops and clowns are sad men," Harry Goodwin once had said deep into a bottle of Chivas, "and priests are better off dead." Mike recalled his own laughter. But now he didn't feel any of the irony or sadness of the remark. After last night he could feel only one powerful emotion—fear. And this new horror added to it in a particularly ugly way. Mike could imagine himself dying slowly at the bottom of a grave.

The health officer came scrambling down with the flashlight, but Mike had had enough. Let the homicide boys identify the poor sucker, that's what they were paid for.

"I'm gonna call this goddamn mess in," Mike said to the people around him. "Anybody wanna throw up, just do it outside of where people are gonna have to walk. All hell's gonna break loose around here in a few minutes."

Mike didn't know of a ten code for burial alive, so he talked it. "This is Inspector Banion. Location: All Souls Cemetery, Roadway W-3, Gravesite E-144. I have a DOA buried alive. Please respond with a homicide workup."

The radio crackled back acknowledgment. Mike sat staring at the hand holding the microphone. Old hand. Age spotted, especially on the back. Busted thumbnail from that bout trying to repair Mary's hairdryer. The tears he had felt coming passed down his cheeks just about on schedule. He wiped them away fast, trying to replace this big, nameless feeling with something he could understand and cope with, like anger or outrage. Whoever the poor devil was, he did not deserve to die like that.

Sirens rose. Fast work. New York City cops are the best in the world at getting through traffic. Especially with the new hee-haw sirens making counterpoint to the old-fashioned waiters some of the EMS meatwagons still use. Mike could count the cars by their sirens. Six squad cars. A large segment of the precinct was turning out. The Banion legend was still very much alive, at least. And this particular discovery would not do it any

damage.

Mike got out of his car and stood in the rain as Max and his lady sergeant trotted up. Their faces were as gray as the afternoon light. "Hello, Inspector. You sure it's not Apple?"

"Looks like a younger man in there."

"Any ID?"

"Wearing a cheap doubleknit suit. I didn't look in the pockets." He paused a moment, too stunned to talk. His heart almost exploded in his chest. "Oh, holy God, I must be gettin' old! I *know* that suit!"

Max started to say something but Mike was running back to the grave, to the place where that poor jerk was buried. He clambered down and grabbed the flashlight from the health inspector, who gave it up gratefully. He looked sick. The gravediggers were huddled at the edge of the hole, shivering. The coroner was off vomiting.

Terry. You poor, innocent man. Terry.

"Max," he shouted in rage and sorrow, "call in a revised bulletin on Terry Quist. Change the goddamn thing from missing person to homicide."

Max turned and disappeared past the edge of the grave. Mike looked down at his friend, looked long and hard. And he vowed vengeance.

Another man might have wanted to be alone at this point, or at least to spend some appreciable time in a bar, but Mike Banion went from being frightened to being downright mad. He was going to *get* the bastards who had done this no matter what it took. And no matter who they had on their side. If he had to face Satan himself to do it, he damn well would.

The Night Church might be monstrous and terrifying, but this cruel murder showed it was also full of the petty viciousness of any criminal organization. Mike could understand that. He could feel contempt for it.

He'd like to find some cop who was a member of the thing and detail him to go down and bag poor Terry's body.

Police vehicles kept arriving. There were a dozen of them here, with men hurrying to the just-searchlit graveside with their equipment, cameras, and crime scene tapes, and all the other paraphernalia that modern detection techniques impose on police officers. Mike returned to his car, tossing away the stale cigar stub as he went. Once inside he lit a fresh one, glorying in the warm, aromatic smoke. A fresh cigar is a nice thing when you're all twisted

up inside. It can untwist you like nothing else on this earth.

Max joined him.

Mike had to talk. "They buried Quist alive. Jesus, they *buried him alive!*" Now it all came pouring out. "In all my career I've never seen that. I mean, he was just a small-time jerkoff reporter. Nothin'! What'd they do it for? Fun?"

"Rough, Mike. Real rough. But we're gonna get 'em now. Because of this."

"Don't be too sure, Lieutenant. We got a long hard ways to go yet."

"It seems to me," said Max's assistant, "that we need to physically find this alias. Apple's the key."

"His name is probably Franklin Titus."

"How'd you get there, Mike?"

"Never mind, Max. I been burnin' the midnight oil." * "Well, if we have a name, we ought to be able to find our man easily enough."

"Okay, Sarge, you go do that. Go do it!"

"Relax, Mike, she's as committed as you are."

"Oh, hell, I'm sorry. Just think it out. Obviously Titus is the best thing we could get. But he's the last thing we're *gonna* get. You can put money on that. He's king of the mountain. We won't find him till all the people in front of him have been knocked aside."

Silence followed these remarks. Sitting there in his car, listening to the rain on the roof, Mike realized what he had to do. It was simple enough. He got out, said his goodbyes to his people, passed out the promised scotch, and returned alone to the car.

He was going to stay real cozy with Mary from now on. She was the ticket in the front door. His own lovely wife. Serves you right, marrying for looks.

Damn you, Mary, I'm gonna fry you!

Okay, Mr. Detective, fry her hot but move cool. Move very cool. She's one dangerous lady, Mary Titus Banion.

He drove along the old boulevard, past Farrell's, past the skating rink that had been a disco and before that a ballroom, and way long ago a movie theater. Before that, in the dimness of Mike's boyhood, it had been a grassy field, the kind of place where kids went to smoke and drink, and explore one another's bodies in the summer night.

"Death always sneaks up on us," Father Goodwin said. "Death is the greatest surprise of all."

Mike felt exhausted. The old body was yearning for its supper. Mary would

have a meal waiting. First there would be a nice cold martini, the kind of drink that worked. Mary would stand in the doorway to the kitchen, smoking one of her Benson & Hedges cigarettes and talking softly to him. Mary was so extremely sexy. He thought of the places she was curved, and how astonishingly smooth her skin was, the way there was a sound like the whisper of snow when he moved his hands along her thighs. He liked how she smelled at the end of the day, Lanvin powder mixed with a suggestion of sweat. Were women really as innocent as they seemed of the fact that they carried the world? Even the bitches and the wrong ones.

By the time he arrived home the rain had become a deluge. He operated the garage-door opener and parked his car beside Mary's Audi. The woman had style; she looked great in that automobile.

"Mike?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

The door creaked. Footsteps clattered on the paved floor of the garage. She appeared, her dress softly dotted pink, her chestnut hair flowing down to her shoulders. He got out of the car.

He put his big, hot paw into her cool fingers.

She closed her eyes for a moment, as if a blow had passed close.

He realized as he followed her into the house that she wasn't going to ask how he was, or even kiss him. She was afraid of her husband. Behind the sex and the habits of living together, she must feel him an absolute stranger, close only in the way people on a bus are close.

"Jonathan's not here yet. I called him an hour ago."

"Why?"

"You wanted to see him tonight. You wanted to talk about the wedding."

"Hard to believe." He felt heavier, let out a tired sigh. There was a wedding planned. He had once wanted to give Jonathan some pointers about how to handle a wife. Funny.

"Forget it. He doesn't need advice from me. Relax me, girl."

She handed Mike his martini. It was exactly right, as usual. Thank God for alcohol.

"I got another break on the case," he heard himself say. He hardly even glanced at her, but he made it count.

Inside there was a smell of steak broiling with onions. Despite everything,

he felt for her a passion so beyond his ability to suppress that it seemed a kind of tragedy.

"I'm glad you came back. I need you." She came to him, nestled against his chest. Then she kissed his cheek, sought his lips. "Can you forget about the case for a while, do you think?"

Never, you witch. Beautiful, beautiful witch.

"Is anything going on downstairs, Michael Banion?"

"Find out for yourself."

She brushed her hand against the front of his trousers. "Shall I get ready for you?"

He kissed her neck. It smelled just as he had thought it would, of Lanvin powder and sweat. Sweet and sour. She stroked him. "I'd better go cut off supper. I'll follow you up."

While she was in the kitchen he went up the narrow stairway to their bedroom and with fumbling, shaking hands took off his clothes. He arranged them so that his pistol was just under a fold of his jacket, ready to grab.

He looked at his nakedness in the mirror, his powerful shoulders and neck, the suggestion of dignity offered by his graying temples, the bulging swoop of his gut.

Mary opened the door suddenly, light flowing in behind her, tripping softly and soft in her own nakedness, her thatch swimming in shadow between ghostly thighs, her arms surrounding him and pressing him back toward the bed, her hair tickling his chest.

But when he closed his eyes he saw coffins and bloody clawmarks, and heard a man howling in his grave. He almost lost it. He opened his eyes quickly.

Mary worked on him dutifully, he had to give her that. She fondled and kissed and rubbed. He closed his eyes again, remembering all the girls he had known who had turned him on. The best was Beth because she was so sweet and innocent except in the bedroom, where she was wild.

Mary looked down at him, trembling to a fine internal rhythm. Only all was not right: this time Mike was waiting for something, and he found it. That familiar faraway look she got in her eyes at moments of seeming passion was not ecstasy, it was detachment.

She began to act, biting her lips and moaning a little. Her tempo increased.

Suddenly, still pounding, she bent down *to* him and began kissing his face. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders.

A week ago he would have interpreted this as extreme excitement, but this time he understood the truth: she was trying to get him to reach climax as quickly as she could.

No doubt that was always why she wanted the topside position—so she could control the tempo and get it over with as fast as possible.

But, Lord, she knew how to make it feel good. He began seeing her through the haze of higher pleasure; she was as pretty as a picture. "Mike," she gasped, "Mike, oh, Mike!"

He came and she shook and trembled and fell down on him whispering, "Thank you, thank you, you beautiful man," and then became still. Her thanks were sincere too, he knew. He had been quick.

After it was over they lay as usual side by side. Then she sat up and lit a cigarette, drawing her knees up to her chin. There was in her face something scary that he did not want to see, something that looked like suppressed glee.

"Jonathan must be at Patricia's apartment," she said. "I guess he'll stay the night."

Mike did not answer her. She had not failed herself this night. She was a very skillful deceiver—so good that her skill itself gave her away. She had not provided him with so much as a hint, not even a flicker of light on the way to the truth.

When she went down to complete their dinner his mind began drifting back and forth among the elements of the case. Terry Quist. Franklin Titus. Those wicked, insane books in Titus's house.

The anti-man to come . . . and his father, the *monstrum*. And beautiful, sensual Mary.

Somewhere between them was his answer, his whole picture, his truth. Somewhere between the woman and the grave and Hell.

Chapter Twenty

JONATHAN WOULD HAVE clawed out through the sides of the van if he had been able. "It's a damn cage! They've caged us like a couple of chimps." He prowled the luxurious interior, checking the door, the walls, feeling for some opening, some weakness.

They accelerated, decelerated, turned corners, until he lost all sense of direction.

"Sit down, Jonathan."

"If I could get this door open we might be able to jump when they slow down."

"There'll be a car following. They're very well organized."

He went to her. "We have to try."

"We have to think about what's happening to us, about What might happen when they open the door."

A sudden change in the tire sounds told Jonathan something. "We're crossing the Fifty-Ninth Street bridge, going into Manhattan."

"Jonathan, you and I are vulnerable. We feel like ordinary people, and I doubt if we have the resources to deal with whatever we're facing. We could even be brainwashed."

"They picked the wrong man for brainwashing. I can't *be* brainwashed—I know too much about the brain."

The van slowed, turned another corner.

"We're liable to stop soon, Jonathan. Whether you can be brainwashed or not, I want you to—"

He hated that idea. "I *can't* be!"

"Just listen. I want you to remember one thing at all costs. We may be mutated in a thousand different ways, but we can live ordinary lives if we try. We love each other, and we want as normal and human a life as we can have." She put her arms around him. "If we forget that, they win!"

"What's the game, though? What do they win?"

She sobbed. "Just remember what *we* want."

The van stopped. He found her lips with his own. A cheerful young man opened the doors and with firm, gentle hands drew them apart. "We're home now," he said. "Please come inside."

"The hell I will," Jonathan replied. He broke away, leaping down from the van and managing about ten feet along the sidewalk before he was surrounded by more of them than he could resist. The most pleasant of them, a smiling, pin-neat man in a crisp linen suit, showed Jonathan a vicious little knife.

"There is also the way of pain," he said affably, shouldering Jonathan between two of his friends. "You're best off cooperating."

The house was shockingly familiar. He stood looking up at the aged brownstone edifice, decorated by rows of glaring gargoyles. He had always assumed that it housed university data storage. To his knowledge, he had never been beyond the basement labs.

To the east little golden clouds floated above the skyline. Dawn was coming. The house itself was subtly transformed. The wide bay windows, which had been backed by dark curtains, now stood open.

A bell rang, and sleepy children's voices filtered out.

This was the Titus School, the secret training-ground of the Night Church. Jonathan and Patricia had grown up here.

He was hustled into the foyer where Patricia was being ushered along by one of the most fantastic creatures Jonathan had ever beheld.

Instead of the usual black broadcloth this nun wore a rich maroon silk habit. Her wimple was starched and gleaming, black instead of white. She was beautifully made up with eyeshadow and lipstick. The small foyer was filled with the scent of musky perfume.

She supported Patricia, who dragged along the floor as if fainting. When she saw Jonathan, though, she made a visible effort to pull herself together. She looked at him through haunted, tear-streaked eyes. "Don't you remember her, Jonathan?" she shouted. The nun began hurrying Patricia toward the rear of the foyer. "She's Sister Saint John, the one I put up in my apartment, the one who *raised* me from the time I was thirteen!" Her voice echoed, desolate.

"Patricia!" Strong hands grabbed his arms. He kicked. He had to get to her. "Let me go!"

"I remember now! She was at the Spirit too! She was there with Mary! Oh, God, help me! Help me!"

His ears roared, his blood thundered in his veins. "*Patricia!*"

A great clang. An iron door had closed on her.

He had not counted on them being separated. The sudden, irrevocable fact of it brought a new wave of effort, and he struggled against the men who were holding him, screaming into the silence that had followed the clang of the door. "I love you! *I love you!*"

His own shouts were absorbed by the cavernous hall. "Jonathan," a voice said when he stopped, "we're going to take you up to your room now."

They didn't release their grip even a little as they walked him across the marble floor. He could see that the hall was circular, with fluted columns supporting a small interior dome. Dim light glowed through round windows in the dome. At the rear was a sweeping horseshoe staircase that embraced a tiny, wire-enclosed elevator.

The car was waiting behind its brass grill. Two of the men pushed Jonathan in. The three of them filled the small space.

They rose in smooth silence, passing up in the cage until the floor of the lobby seemed seventy feet below. There was a click and it stopped. The men opened a door on the far side. Beyond was a corridor, softly lit with lamps in wall sconces. The walls were cream; the floor was thickly carpeted in tan.

"You'll remember the senior men's floor," said one of the men as the three of them left the elevator.

"No, I won't," Jonathan muttered. He really didn't want to listen to that sort of muck. They were not going to use disorientation techniques to confuse him. It was going to be a lot harder than that. His mind turned once again to Patricia. "When will I see her again?"

"At your wedding."

"Surely that's been canceled."

"No, it's going ahead just exactly as you planned."

No matter what else might happen, at least he was certain to see her again. "Here's your room, Jonathan. Your uncle will be in shortly." Before he could resist or say another word they had thrust him through a door and closed it behind him.

"No!" He grappled with the knob, hammered the unyielding metal. He kicked the door so viciously it sent a shock all the way up his leg and caused him to fall backward onto the floor, which he hit with a bone-rattling crash.

For a moment, he lay still. Then he went to the window, but found he couldn't even raise the sash to get his hands on the bars beyond it.

When he looked around for something to use to break the glass, he was frozen with astonishment.

He knew this room.

He knew it perfectly, utterly, completely.

It was *his* room, his own boyhood room. The Hallicrafters was there on the desk, with the model Gemini capsule sitting on it. His bookcase held all his wonderful old friends, *Tom Sawyer*, *The Once and Future King*, the Complete Shakespeare, the Mary Renault novels, *Life's Picture History of the Earth*.

The bedspread was the one Mother had made, with his name embroidered in red on a background of the Orion constellation. His telescope stood at the foot of the bed under a dust cover, just where he had left it when—

When?

A long time ago. He knelt down, gingerly removed the cover. There it was, his beloved Celestron, the treasure of his youth.

It had been a long time since he had thought of astronomy, of those wonderful autumn nights up in the Connecticut woods with Jerry Cochran, climbing a hillside and searching out Wolf 457 or Saturn or the Crab Nebula. Jerry. His boyhood idol. Tall, cool, a brilliant scientific mind. Jerry's seven years' seniority made him almost godlike to the younger boy. If Jonathan had modeled himself on anybody, it had been Jerry Cochran.

We walked the star path, he and I.

He grew very still as the awesome power of memory began pouring his true past up from his depths. He remembered his old friend with almost sacred vividness, his brown eyes, his great broad smile and the sword-sharpness of his mind.

"Jerry." He touched the Celestron, his fingers caressing its controls. What wonders we found with this thing, you and I. "Earth is just a green bubble in the void, Jonathan. Less than a speck of dust. Out here, lost, falling toward the unknown." You were wise for your years, Jerry, so very wise.

The room was a museum of his own past. There at the bottom of the bookshelf were *The Winter Noisy Book* and *The Fire Engine Book* and all the other books of babyhood, *Mother Goose* and *The Encyclopedia of Things* and *Hiawatha* and *Olly Olly Oxen Free*.

And in the big drawer under the bed—pull it out—yes, there were his models, the wonderful, intricate airplanes constructed of balsa and paper, flown by rubber bands at high summer evening when the breeze was still. His Rascal 18 racer, his P-51 that never flew well because it was too heavily doped, even in the remains of Jerry's Cessna 182 that had met fatefully with the rose trellis in—in—

Uncle's front yard?

Who was Uncle, and where was that bungalow full of furniture a little boy mustn't touch?

Never mind that now. He went to the Hallicrafters, turned it on. The heterodyne wail of shortwave met his ears as he twisted the knob back and forth. Yes, here was the BBC and there was Cuba and there Radio Moscow, and down along there were the Africans and the Arabs, and in the middle the rest of the Europeans, Netherlands with its concerts and Germany with its language lessons, and France and Italy and Spain.

Oh, yes, on a thousand deepest nights Jerry and I were at this radio, turning the dial ever so slowly from wonder to wonder.

Let's hear what Khrushchev's got to say about the election.

The Royal Shakespeare is doing Measure for Measure on the BBC tonight.

We don't want to miss the Cuban-English—Language News.

We were two adventurers of the mind. And what a wonderful time we had . . . when I was normal. When I was myself.

But there were other times.

"Let me out of here! I can't stand it in here!"

"I see you're beginning to come back to us."

"Who—"

He was a dried-up, incredibly ancient man. Only his bright green eyes had any life. His face was a badland of creases, age-rotted skin stretched across sharp old bones. He wore a beautifully tailored black suit and a silver-gray silk shirt. His head was framed by a white vapor of hair. On his fingers there were complex rings. Jonathan saw skulls and intricate cabbalistic symbols in the gold, and ruby eyes and open jaws. Only his thumbs were without jewelry.

"My dear nephew." He opened his arms. Behind him in the hallway stood a young man easily six foot five, his arms folded, watching from the shadows.

Jonathan did not move toward the little gargoyle with the open arms. He had no uncle.

Patricia's words came back to him: *We may be mutated in a thousand different ways, but we can live ordinary lives if we try.*

Much wisdom in that.

"You act like a cornered rat, Jonathan. I must confess I'm disappointed. I expected more of the Prince."

Crazy. But backed up by a powerful guard. And the windows behind Jonathan were barred.

"Frightened of me. How embarrassing. Am I too ugly for you?" He raised his hands, which arthritis had turned to oak gnarls. There was in this man a density of menace. "You find me ugly, you of all people. You may have a handsome appearance, but inside you are far uglier than I!"

"Get away from me."

"You are the *monstrum*."

"You need a psychiatrist, you're a paranoid schizophrenic. I can help you. I want to help you."

The sparks of eyes twinkled. "On the contrary, Jonathan, it is *I* who can help *you*. You must prepare, you know. The Ritual Marriage is tonight."

Jonathan backed away from the eerie old man.

"Let me touch you, nephew." The hands, trembling, came out toward him. Jonathan cast around, grabbed the radio, raised it over his head.

"Stop! Don't come any nearer!"

The old man stepped aside and his guard began moving into the room.

Jonathan hurled the Hallicrafters with all his might—and the guard caught it, rocking back on his heels and drawing a gasp of breath. He stood with the enormous radio in his hands, looking at Jonathan. Slowly, he smiled.

"Jerry!"

He put the radio down and locked Jonathan in a strong embrace. "Be careful," the old man said. "Remember, It beat a man to death just a few hours ago."

What a lie. The man had hardly even been knocked unconscious. "I am a human being, so don't call me 'It!'" And I barely touched that man, as you well know."

"You crushed his chest and broke his back in three places. You all but tore

his head off and popped his skull."

"And you are *not* human, you are the *monstrum*."

"Shut up! Stop calling me that idiotic name!" He thought of the brain scans he had done of himself and Patricia, the incredible results. *Monstrum*. So that was what he was called. And she too. She had the same brain-wave pattern. *Monstrum*.

He turned his gaze to Jerry, just as he had when he had needed help as a boy. Friend and teacher, Jerry had also been his bodyguard. A confused welter of memories flooded him as he looked at his friend.

The old man soon shattered the moment. "Come on, Jerry. Leave him to his memories for now." He indicated an envelope on the desk. "There's a letter that will explain a great deal. I suggest you read it."

They began to leave the room. "Wait!" Jonathan cried, but before he could stop them the door was closed and locked.

Jonathan was furious. This time he lunged at the window, smashing the glass with his hands, uncaring of gashes, and grappled with the bars. He yanked them and yanked them and kicked them and tried to spread them. And was defeated by them.

He picked up the Hallicrafters, which Jerry had placed neatly back on the table, and threw it against the door. It shattered into glittering electronic bits but the door did not move.

What in hell was going to happen next? He realized that this playing on his emotions, dehumanizing him by calling him "It," suggesting that he was brutal beyond his own self-understanding, was all part of an attempt to break him. And a much more skillful attempt than he had expected. But he told himself that he understood what was being done to him, and his understanding would preserve him.

We love each other, and we want as normal and human a life as we can have. Patricia had said that. He repeated it to himself like a prayer.

He longed for her strength. If he could just spend one more minute in her arms he would have the energy to cope with another year of the old man's weird emotional games.

"What have you done with her?" His voice was absorbed by the walls. Frantically, aware of how wild animals must feel when first captured, he tested them. Behind the familiar wallpaper of soaring rockets and moons and

Saturns and floating spacemen was plaster. And from the solid *thunk* when he tapped it, the plaster was spread on concrete. The room was more tightly made than any prison.

It was his old room, all right. The apartment he remembered was just a hypnotic suggestion. This was where he had grown up, this prison.

As the realization sunk in, a change began to come over him. The curtains that hid his past were being made to part by the glut of familiar associations.

Nineteen Rayne Street was the Titus School, where he had been a privileged student. The Prince, they had called him. With a cold shudder he remembered his own tragedy: he was a seasonal king, doomed to die in the very act of procreation.

The most excruciating sorrow filled him. If that was true then all their dreams of happiness, of escaping to the world of regular people, were hopeless. He had learned at his mother's knee—there will come a day, a glorious day. . . .

He looked at the letter the old man had referred to. Should he read it, or did it contain some further confusing trick? He picked it up.

On the envelope were three words: "For my son."

It was from Mother!

He opened it. The words leaped at him like fiery beasts, tearing away the last vestiges of the hypnosis which had held him in its thrall.

When the letter said "remember yourself," he did just that.

He remembered his pride in being the *monstrum*, and his love of the demons.

"I will speak to you in the voice of the dry leaves," Belial had said. As Jonathan read of his vision it returned to him: Belial, so hideous that he was beautiful, his unblinking eyes filled with so much intelligence that it was shattering to look into them. Belial was freezing wind on a winter's night, moonlight playing on empty snow, clear space pierced by stars.

Belial was a skull, brown and cracked, bursting with worms.

"Mother! What have you done to me? Mother! Mother!"

He rushed through the rest of the letter, squinting at it as if the words might jump off the page and pierce his eyes. At the end he threw it to the floor, turned away from it. Remembrance blazed in his mind:

He and Patricia belonged to the Night Church, had been born into it and

raised by it.

He remembered loving it. Yes, but he had been mad then. He could not believe in something so obviously evil ... so dangerously crazy.

Technology had lifted the Night Church to immense power. With their bacteria they could certainly destroy the world.

And they are mad, as I was until I began walking the path of ordinary human beings.

No matter how bad he is there is something sacred in every man on earth, something deeply *right* that grants him and all his fellows their lives, and seems to suggest that they procreate, and fill the earth with their kind.

In the old days Jonathan had thought of human beings as having less of a claim to life than even the lowest animals, because of all the species mankind was the most defective.

He did not think that now. In hiding Jonathan among ordinary people Mother had awakened in him his own ordinariness, had made him realize that he was only, finally, and utterly *human*—and that was a very fine thing to be.

Even as these thoughts raced through his mind he felt the *monstrum* within him stirring in its fitful sleep, the oozing, black coils of its evil shifting wakefully in his soul.

It could not wake up on its own, but *they* could wake it up, Mother and Jerry and Uncle Franklin. They could and they would.

He had to get out of here! If he was so brilliant surely he could find some way to escape.

He recalled the flickering strangeness of his own brainwave patterns as they raced across the oscilloscope.

Like all the beasts, you will do what your nature demands of you.

He had seen his strangeness in the equipment he had himself designed.

He and Jerry had worked side by side in their labs. "You tend to the future," Uncle had said. "You are creating a teaching machine for your son." He put his arm on Jerry's shoulder. "He will take care of the past."

The coldest, most hideous feeling came over Jonathan as memories of exactly what was done in Jerry's lab came back to him. Disease vectors. Delivery systems. Contagion intensities.

A Titus School graduate had joined the U.S. Army in 1975, and delivered over the next five years vast amounts of classified data on biological

weapons.

Anthrax 4 median, which killed in twelve hours.

Parrot fever mutant 202, death in four hours.

Bubonic positive 1, death in thirty minutes.

He suddenly had the most poignant impression of his life in Queens—the simple joy of having a hamburger at Farrell's. Down the counter some schoolkids would be giggling over Cokes. A couple of bus drivers would be huddled in a booth. Somebody might play "Lay Lady Lay" on the jukebox.

"Jerry, you can't kill them! You haven't got any right!"

Jonathan had a new mission, and not much life left in which to fulfill it.

"We're wrong! We are *not* the law!"

"You will reacquire the moral precision that has always supported you," Mother had written in her letter. "You will *know* the rightness of our cause." And she had written: "The earth's will is toward evolution. It is your privilege to enact it."

"No! We don't know anything about the will of the planet! We're mistaken, we're doing something terrible!"

Bubonic positive 2 had killed in thirty seconds, but it could not live outside a human host. Transmission only by physical contact.

"Oh, God! Jerry—let me out of here! Jerry, does bubonic 3 work? *Does it work?*"

His memory was now so clear that he could almost see the bacterial colonies in the microscope, swarming and propagating right out of their media.

And he could smell the animal rooms, the sharp scent of fear, the thick odor of sickness. In his mind's eye he saw the rats, exploding with buboes as soon as they were exposed to bubonic positive 3, dying within seconds, and the sheep within minutes, ba-a-a, ba-a-a-a-a, as great welts rose and turned purple beneath their coats, then burst as they knelt and vomited and gasped and fell twitching.

And the rhesus monkeys, brachiating frantically in their cages, screaming, clawing their throats open, buboes raising their arms so that they looked like they were doing the turkey trot as they scurried about, and coughing blood and pus and dying amid their own offal, their eyes fixed on the unearthly figures who tormented them, Jerry and his assistants in their green isolation suits and helmets.

"Oh, no. No!" He ran back and forth across the room, hurling things to the floor, grappling with the mattress, pointlessly searching the desk for a phone.

There was no phone.

They had been about to carry out a human test of bubonic 3—murder somebody, just to test—

My dear God, what have we done? He asked, but he knew perfectly well. Jerry had created from the bacillus *Yersinia pestis* a mutant, hyperactive strain that reproduced itself almost instantaneously. It was respiratory, spread through the air. It could be delivered by simply propagating it from a small plane.

Vector analysis indicated that 21.235 hours would elapse from propagation to complete contagion of a given population. After the first one million individuals the rate of transfer would be very rapid, with a potential of seven hundred and fifty million further infections within another fifty-three hours.

Jonathan wanted to help them, to somehow warn them. But Jonathan was a seasonal king come to the end of his time.

He heard the thundering music that would awaken the *monstrum*, remembered how it felt to change.

"Oh, God, you've got to help me! You've got to get me out of here! Please, somehow, *plea-a-se!*"

The disease would be fatal in 98.237 percent of the cases and so damaging in the remainder that the individuals would succumb to other diseases, especially given the chaotic nature of the social infrastructure in which they would find themselves.

The memories rushed like fiery, hurtling meteors through Jonathan's mind. His nightmares were a pleasure compared to this.

Jerry had read a paper to the assembled Scientific Unit of the Night Church: "The causative organism is a short bacillus which often displays bipolar staining with Giemsa stain. The positive 3 form always displays staining, but the poles reveal flagella under light. The positive 3 is motile."

"Shut up! *Shut up!*"

"The incubation period varies from a matter of seconds in a newborn human infant to three to five minutes in a healthy adult male of substantial volume. Onset is abrupt, associated with deep chills. Temperature rises from 41C to 42.5C (106F to 108F). Pulse will be rapid and thready, buboes will appear upon elevation of temperature. The femoral or inguinal lymph nodes will be

the usual primary sites of involvement. The nodes will initially be tender but firm, sclerosing rapidly and becoming filled with pus. Bursting of the nodes indicates that terminal praeludium has commenced."

"Help! Get me out of here! I've got to tell somebody! I've got to warn them!"

Mike! I've got to get word to Mike.

He began a more organized attempt to free himself. Again and again he ran against the door, using his own body as a battering ram. It hurt when his shoulder impacted the metal but he didn't care. He had overwhelming humanitarian reasons for getting out. The fact that he might break a bone in the process was of little consequence, as long as it did not prevent him from reaching his goal.

The door clicked.

He was running with all his might when it swept open. He staggered out into the hall and hit the wall.

Strong arms enfolded him. "Cool down, Jonathan. It's all right, you're home, you're safe."

"Let me go! You're crazy, Jerry, you and all the others." The arms tightened around him. "Please, listen to me. This is all insane."

Jerry put something against his shoulder, something that stung.

"Jerry, you're a good man. A fine man. Best friend—" It got harder to talk. "Best friend I ever . . .oh, Jerry, it's obscene, it's . . ." He realized that he had just been sedated. The hypodermic Jerry had used was lying on the carpet, glittering in the soft light. Jonathan looked at it, his mind seeming to sink into the reflections. "Not the plague . . . no . . ."

"Sh, take it easy, guy. Get some sleep."

Jonathan's mind tried a final struggle. *I'm letting him drug me, put me to sleep! I mustn't sleep, I haven't got the time!*

Then Jerry picked him up and carried him to his bed.

"Now, just relax, loosen up your muscles, guy. Your uncle says you need a little rest before you learn anything more, and I think he's right. Don't you think so?"

"N-n-mmm . . ."

"Sure he is. Sure."

Resistance just wasn't possible. Deadening, black, hostile waves carried Jonathan away.

To the place where the serpent lived. Laughing, lifeless eyes, so cunning, so

sensual, so dangerous ...

You are the guilty one, Jonathan, you, you, you. . . .

"Please—"

You will hurt her!

"No!"

You will thrust and crush and tear!

"No, No, NO!"

He sat straight up, sweating, his mouth parched, his hands shaking uncontrollably.

The sun was setting beyond the garden wall, casting warm light into his room. Down below he could hear the rhythm of fresh-voiced Titus schoolgirls chanting jump-rope rhymes. This was the hour between dinner and evening study hall, known as the Strolls, when the students had the freedom of the courtyard.

Farther away there were traffic noises, a horn, a shout, and ordinary children laughing together out on Sullivan Street.

The sounds of ordinary people. At that moment Jonathan would have cheerfully traded places with the smallest, most humble human being in the world. The taste he and Patricia had gotten of outside life had been so sweet.

If only they could somehow warn that innocent world of the danger it was in.

Somehow.

He looked down at his own perfect hands. The violence he knew to be in himself literally *was* another creature, coiled beneath his own soft skin. And *It* did not want to escape from the Night Church.

No, indeed. *It* wanted to get married!

If *It* is the beast, the *monstrum*—then so am I.

I beg to die.

Chapter Twenty-one

PATRICIA LAY IN the dark listening to footsteps approach her door. Others had come and passed. These stopped.

She bit her clenched fist to keep from screaming.

It is looking for me. It knows I am here. Sometime soon It will come for me.

The door was tested, the door rattled. Then the footsteps once again retreated down the hall. Slowly, carefully, Patricia began to breathe again.

When they had been dragging her down to this room she had smelled a thick animal smell coming from behind a door marked LABORATORIES. And she had heard animal-like screaming.

Had that been the thing that wanted her?

Patricia lay between silk sheets, sweating with terror. Her face was cooled by a fragrant breeze. Wind chimes tinkled. She remembered that sound.

Such old friends, those chimes. They are in the courtyard elm. They rang and moaned and rustled all through her girlhood.

She sat up in the bed. Now she remembered. Sister Saint John had brought her down here, had given her a shot... .

Forced it on her.

"Jonathan!"

She jumped up and rushed to the door. Then she recoiled. She couldn't go out there! But there was an alternative. One wall of her room overlooked the courtyard. She threw open the French doors.

The yard was full of children, little girls in black jumpers, boys in charcoal blazers and gray pants. There were easily three dozen of them taking their pleasure in the evening light. These were not the noisy children of the Queens streets. These children sat in groups or strolled together. A group of

younger girls played jump rope. On the low wall that separated her room from the yard a sister in red habit sat leading a group in plainchant: "*Aeterne rerum conditor noctem diemque qui regis et temporum, das tempora ut alleves fastidium . . . hoc excitatus lucifer solvit polum.*"

The chant lit darkened halls in Patricia's mind. *Aeterne rerum conditor!* "Eternal creator of the world, who doth guide the day and night and give the times their times to relieve our weariness . . . through Him awakes the morning star."

The great hymn of the Church, the Song of Lucifer, the Morning Star.

She was no orphan; she hadn't been raised at Our Lady of Victory—if such a place even existed—she had grown up here, at the Titus School, and she was the highest princess of the blood.

Such remembrance was brought by those clear young voices! She had sat on that very wall, singing in the evening with Sister Saint John and Sister Mary and her classmates . . . Jonathan and his friend Jerry Cochran, and Kathleen and Kevin and Susan. . . "We've brought you to the senior women's wing," Sister had told her as she administered the shot. "Your room is just as you left it."

So true. She realized that she had chosen exactly the same kind of curtains for her apartment in Queens—light green silk. Only in Queens she had settled for rayon.

She wanted the rayon curtains!

The sun passed behind the wall. A bell rang and the children began lining up at the boys' and girls' doors.

Such sweet little children.

Her own lessons, thin Sister Saint Julian rasping on about the evils of humankind, the Inquisition, the Holocaust, Communism. "In man the animal predominates. And in the world man is himself dominant. But not for long. This planet does not belong to animals. It has a far greater destiny."

With a force so great it almost made her cry out, Patricia rejected that belief. She had seen too much of the outside world. There had been bad things, but there had also been much more goodness and decency than she had ever been allowed to know about.

"The anti-man will be the opposite of man in every way. Where man is degraded, the new species will be exalted. He will be selfless where man is greedy. And where man is weak, he will be strong. We believers are the best

of a poor lot," Sister Saint Julian had concluded. "Outside these walls there are monsters."

No, Sister. We are the worst of a good lot. As she lay on her bed, memory after memory returned. In all the flood, one single recollection dominated: it was an image, quite terrible, of a wild ritual that had been held during her childhood, where she had witnessed the transformation of one Robert Titus Ungar, gangling, jokey Robbie, into something else. . . .

There had been music and strange dancing and hypnotic words, and poor Robbie, eighteen years old and very self-conscious, had begun to change. Before them all he had actually undergone an alteration of his physical body. At first mucus had come out of his nose and mouth, then out of his eyes too. He had gagged and retched, and then screamed as his skull began to change shape beneath his scalp, blood replaced his sweat, and awful scales came crinkling out from under his skin.

She slammed her fists into her eyes, trying to rid herself of the ugliness she remembered.

If he had lived he would have been the father of the anti-man.

The ritual was to unleash the creature within the human skin ... for a human body could be nothing more than a disguise, a sort of wrapping paper for something . . . something . . .

She gasped. Then she shrieked wildly and rushed up and down the room. *Monstrum!*

She had to get Jonathan and get out of here. But as she paced, the room whirled. "I'm still so damn dizzy!" The chimes rang and the complex scent of many flowers waxed the air.

A voice said, "Come now, Patricia, you don't belong out of bed."

"Where's Jonathan? I want Jonathan!"

Sister Saint John also had another name. She was Letty Cochran. Her husband George had been Master Accountant for the American Church for years. And their son Jerry—he ran those foul-smelling labs in the basement. "The Cochrans are my best pupils," Uncle Franklin often said.

"Remember," Letty Cochran said. "Patricia, remember who you are."

"I'm me!"

"You are much more than that. You—"

"I know who I want to be. I want to be Jonathan's wife and raise a family, and I want us to live together the rest of our lives."

The way Letty Cochran looked at her, with such a mixture of shock and sadness, filled Patricia with foreboding.

The foreboding focused into a quite specific memory. She was kneeling at an altar rail. She was trying to say the rosary. The beads broke apart in her hands and scattered all over the floor of the sanctuary.

"My rosary!"

Then Sister Saint John were there, in her memory, bending over her exactly as she was now.

She screamed. She turned and clawed her way through the yielding sheets of her bed, she leaped at the door.

And into the arms of yet another sister. Sister Mary. Mary Banion. "Let me go!"

"Oh, you poor darling!"

A man was coming into the room behind her, a man with a mustache and great, bushy eyebrows. He bit his bottom lip up into the mustache. "Now, Patricia, we aren't going to hurt you."

"You're crazy, Doctor Gottlieb! You're one of them."

"Shouldn't we tranquilize her again, Doctor?"

"We can't afford to impede her memory. She's got to recall her part in the ritual."

Gottlieb took her wrist, concentrated a moment. "Pulse is good. And the gynecological exam was very successful, Mary."

"Don't you dare examine me!"

"I did it while you were asleep, dear. I'm not a fool."

"You're evil! All of you! I want *out* of here!"

"Now, wait a minute. What in the world is the matter with you? Don't you remember anything?"

"You're liars, all of you—vicious, evil liars! And the Church is unholy, filthy!"

"You're badly confused, darling."

"I want Jonathan! I want him now!"

"Soon. Very soon."

"You're monstrous, all of you—"

"Patricia, I'm not sure I understand your problem. What's the matter with coming home after all this time in hiding?"

Mary was so clever. So damned clever. Patricia told herself to remember

what she had said to Jonathan: *We may be mutated in a thousand different ways, but we can live ordinary lives if we try.*

"You have a great work to perform, Patricia. The greatest of all works. You must remember so you can do it well."

She recalled how Mary had tried to press a cloth soaked in ether onto her face while she lay on the altar of Holy Spirit Church.

As the late effects of the shot they had given her wore off, Patricia became better able to consider her situation. She stopped arguing with her captors. There was no point to it. Instead she tried to seem a little more cooperative. Only by winning their trust would she have any chance at escape.

"What are you thinking, Patricia?"

She couldn't be too compliant, though. That would give her away. She took what she thought might be an expected stance. "You were there when It raped me. You let It rape me!"

It had great, heavy coils and eyes like yellow marbles.

"You were the victim of a terrible mistake. All I can say is that I'm sorry. We're all sorry."

Sorry. That was one way to be.

Again she looked out into the countryard. At the far side was a ten-foot wall. The only way to scale it would be to jump to a low-lying limb of the elm and vault over. The wall fronted on Sullivan Street. Beyond it would be cars and students and joggers and old ladies and derelicts and kids and all the world. Just being a shopgirl out there would be a privilege compared to the suffocating horror of life in this place.

Patricia had been the highest of them all, but for Jonathan.

You are our hope.

Your child will be a god.

She had been seduced by such praise. She admitted it. If she was clever, she might be able to convince the seducers that she was succumbing to them again. Then they might give her the few unattended minutes she needed. "Our belief is that mankind is a failure, isn't it, Mary?"

"Look at the conditions you encountered on the outside."

Mary touched her wrist. Patricia let a soft and devoted look come into her eyes. But she thought only of escape. Nothing would ever make her believe the Church's propaganda again.

She recalled the rituals, hundreds of them: annuals and seasonals and

monthlies. Rituals for the rising and setting of all the major stars, rituals for the rhythms of the body, the phases of the moon, rituals to mark the earth's important passages, and prayers that praised her, the planet of pearly green beauty, whose needs the Night Church served. Then there were the Sacrificials, the bloody rites in honor of the saints of the Church.

Saint Gilles de Rais, accused of torturing and murdering children. Actually the teacher of Jeanne d'Arc, another of the great saints of the Night Church. Like her, burnt.

Saint Elizabeth Bathory, one of the greatest of the medieval genetic experimenters. Walled up in her own bedroom for what the ordinary population called mass murder.

Saint Appolonius of Tyana, killed by the Christians for writing of sorcery.

Saint Iamblichus, crucified by the pagans.

On and on went the list of the honored dead. Magicians, they were called, or alchemists or sorcerers or wizards. All the while, though, their hidden Church was the true guardian of the future, carrying the Treasure of Solomon forth to the millennium.

To the end of time.

"You must be ready to do your duty."

"Yes," was all she said. But she thought, My duty! My duty is to be destroyed.

It had come upon her stinking worse than any animal; its eyes glistening and inhuman, yet piercing with intelligence. It had mounted her with the weight of an anvil.

Patricia's mind twisted and turned between thoughts of capture and freedom. Inwardly she felt like a kitten so desperate with pain that it begins to try to bite itself to death. But she forced herself to sit on the beside and talk with Mary, and pretend to be a good little princess again.

She belonged only to Jonathan—the Jonathan of the ordinary world. The dark *thing* within was not really a part of him. It belonged to *them*.

"The preparations for the marriage have already begun. You should see your wedding dress! This is going to be the most wonderful ritual in all our history." Mary smiled, touched Patricia on the cheek, on the hand. "Of course, it is the culmination of the Church. It ought to be grand."

"I'm sorry I've been so upset. I have a confession to make. After what

happened in June—I'm scared to try again."

Mary hugged her. "My poor darling, I don't blame you, not for an instant. But remember that under normal conditions It can be gentle. And these will be normal conditions. No surprises for either of you. Oh, it'll be a grand occasion, you'll see!"

She returned Mary's embrace. "You're very reassuring."

Mary smiled, pleased by what she assumed to be a compliment. "I'm a faithful member of the Church. And your friend, my dear."

I would like to knock you aside, run through those doors, across that terrace, grab that limb, and swing right over onto Sullivan Street.

I want to be *free!*

But she also wanted Jonathan. Somehow she would have to get to the senior men's wing, find him, and free him so they could both escape together. Woe tugged at her heart when she thought just how hard that would be.

They sat side by side in the deepening dark. Just when Patricia was deciding that Mary was never going to leave, she kissed her on the cheek and stood up to go. "I'm glad you're getting yourself together so well. We need cooperation from both of you if this thing is going to work."

In the distance a gong sounded. Mary moved toward the door. "Dinner. But I think it best that you don't attend Commons just yet. I'll bring you a plate myself."

Patricia looked to the French doors, her heart already beginning to pound with the thought of escape. "Thank you, Mary. I'm really hungry."

She almost burst into tears when Sister Saint John came back the instant Mary left. She was all bright and admiring. "You *are* coming along well," she cooed. Patricia could have choked her.

"I feel much better."

"You must be so excited," she breathed.

That hardly seemed the right word. "Why?"

"I mean, with the wedding in a few hours—"

The words, so unexpected and so shocking, made Patricia literally stagger. Sister caught her before she could fall, and cradled her gently.

A few hours!

Her mind raced along. "But what about Jonathan? Won't I see him again—beforehand?"

Sister laughed. "Not before the wedding."

But she would see him then, before he sank into *monstrum*.

They would have to make their escape from the church before the ritual.

Oh, God, protect us and preserve us!

She looked up past the doors into the dark sky. There was a little patch of heaven there, the moon riding in twisted clouds, the moon so free, the moon so far away.

Chapter Twenty-two

HOLY SPIRIT RECTORY was hidden in a forest of dark trees, only its tall, silent gables rising above them into the moonlight. A weed-choked path led to the front door. Mike had no intention of knocking. After the disappearance of Patricia and Jonathan and his suspicions about Mary, he trusted no friend, not even *old* Harry Goodwin.

He had ceased to trust his own men weeks ago. He had ordered a stakeout of Holy Spirit after the rape—which had been quietly canceled by Max while he was at Lourdes. No results, Max said.

Scratch Max and the whole Sex Crimes Unit for good measure, and God knew how many other cops. There must be something damned appealing about the Night Church to bend decent people the way it did.

He intended to carry out the rest of the investigation alone. At least he didn't have to worry about loyalties. He was on the side of the little guy, the schmuck who got kicked, Mr. Nobody. Outfits like the Night Church were just like organized crime, maybe worse. The Enemy.

He wasn't here for evidence. There was plenty of that in Titus's house. As the days had passed, each person Mike loved had been implicated.

Harry was a fine old friend. More than that, he was Mike's confessor, his priest. But the rape had happened in Harry's church.

Mike had shared his truth, his sins and deepest sorrows with this man. He hated to test him now.

What a luxury it would be to sit across Harry's kitchen table and talk this thing out with someone he could trust. Surely Harry would check out. He was among the very best men Mike had ever known.

Mike looked up to the second floor. Harry's bedroom window was dark. It was ten fifteen and Harry Goodwin was, as always at this hour, asleep. Those six A.M. Masses did it to him.

Rather than try to pick the difficult deadbolt lock, Mike went around the side of the house, looking for a window to enter. It wasn't hard. Harry was hardly buttoned up. All Mike had to do was apply a little force with his fingers and the sash of the office window went up with a dry rasp.

Mike observed thirty seconds of silence, then began the painful and difficult process of hauling himself in. He hadn't climbed into a window in fifteen years or more.

He put his hands on the sill and struggled. His legs windmilled, caught against the side of the house. Then he got a knee over the edge and heaved. The central bulk of his body swung inward, and he landed on Harry's desk with a subdued thud. He had to lie there a moment letting his heart calm down.

The house was silent. By the faint light from the window Mike could see that the door to the hall was standing open. He went over to it. The only sound came from outside, where a restless breeze snatched at the eaves and rattled the windows. Upstairs Harry would be sleeping—if he slept at all. He looked awful these days, nervous and thin and ill.

Conscience-stricken was how he looked.

Mike returned to the office. The Parish Council sometimes met here, the men sitting on the black, vine-carved chairs, some of them smoking the stale

cigarettes Harry always kept in a box on the coffee table. Harry would preside from behind this desk, his glasses gleaming, his eyes as grateful as a dog's. You pitied him, and it made you squirm.

Mike pulled the blinds down and closed them, then closed the door to the hall. He risked a light. If there was any evidence of the Night Church here, it would be somewhere in these records. Mike sat behind the desk and began going through the file drawer. The sections were marked CCD, H. Name, PC, Confraternity, Altar Society, Oil, Insurance, Mscl. Bills, on and on, all the details of parish management. There was nothing suspicious, nothing even a little out of the ordinary. Mike opened first one file and then the next, scanning their contents, lists of names, ideas for sermons, parish bulletin notices, diocesan directives, bills and more bills.

Through all of this desperation one could glimpse the determination of Harry Goodwin. Despite the desertion of his people, he was keeping his parish going, robbing from one account to fill another, practicing every imaginable economy, even to cleaning his vestments himself in the basement, and from the look of some of these bills, not paying for the cleaning fluid. Keeping it going in case his people returned. Or *when* they did. Probably it never crossed Harry's mind that they might not.

He was not getting support from the Night Church, at least not on the surface. Mike scanned the shelf beside the desk until he found the buff-green journal where he knew the parish finances were recorded. It was a simple double-entry journal. No fancy bookkeeping for Harry. He could no longer rely on voluntary help from Catholic bookkeepers in the parish. The entries were in Harry's own spidery hand ... in pencil overwritten with ink.

Mike looked at the endless, meticulous entries for collections, the amounts dwindling steadily as summer settled in and people's air-conditioning bills took more and more of their money. Last Sunday Harry had taken in \$171.29. Paging back through the journal Mike could find no entry so low for a Sunday. It was a parish record, forty dollars below the next lowest figure. But then, just a couple of days ago, there was a stunning contribution, fifteen hundred dollars from the Hamil Foundation, especially earmarked for painting and cleaning the interior.

What the hell? That was the philanthropic arm of Hamil Bank. Did Laurent Hamil have a program supporting indigent parishes? He was certainly a big-time Catholic. His foundation might well be called on in emergencies. Not

too suspicious. But Patricia worked there. Was there a connection between Hamil and the Night Church?

Mike looked at the entry. The hand was a little more spidery, and there was no penciled trial entry. Harry had known the exact amount of this particular contribution.

He closed the ledger. Now it was time to investigate the older parish records, which were in the basement. It was critical to look through the past couple of years. Patterns might emerge. This entry suggested that the Night Church was helping the parish, but it did not tell what Mike most wanted to know, whether Harry was a dupe or a willing partner.

Mike went down the hall past the dining room with its ornate table and wainscotted walls, and opened the door in the pantry leading to the basement. He didn't intend to poke into any dark holes, and looking down those wooden steps made him more than a little nervous. When he saw how the dark down there swallowed his penlight's beam he wished he could dare to get help. But he couldn't. Nor could he just abandon this part of the investigation—it was too important. When you were seeking evidence of payoff or kickback the rule was to look to the time before your suspect perceived the danger of his ways ... then it was usually all laid out neat as a pin. People kept careful records of their sunny days.

Mike had been here more than once before, both as a boy and as a man. There was a wine cellar from long ago, and Harry still had a few bottles of Sandeman's '37 vintage port in it. Harry had brought one up once or twice for some Holy Name celebration or other. How Harry had resisted selling that port. Mike understood why. He needed those evenings with port and cigars and good company to remind him of the importance his church had once enjoyed among men of power, and to give him leave to dream.

Mike descended the stairs quickly, his penlight beam bobbing on the steps. He crossed the floor . . . and was interested to note that there was a great deal of dust. Good. Nobody was worrying about the old records as yet. Maybe Mike was finally a step ahead.

His light danced as he swung it around, revealing steam pipes, rusty electrical conduit, dark old beams, cobwebs, and shadows behind shadows.

The journals were in a bookcase that sagged against the far wall. As Mike moved toward it he noticed a great crack beside the case. Dank, earthen air drifted out. Deep sounds seemed to come from it, of machinery throbbing,

Probably led to some old drainage pipe that communicated to the subway out on Queens Boulevard. Mike peered into the hole, flashing his penlight into blackness. As he painted his light along the walls there was a sound of rustling movement. A shadow made Mike jump back. Something the size of a dog seemed to be scurrying toward him. But that was absurd; it was a rat tricked large by the light. Mike shook his head. Harry's rectory was literally crumbling into the sewers. He reached out to grab the last three or four journals and get the hell out of there. His motions were too quick; when he brushed matted fur he jerked away.

Lightning flashed as his head knocked into a cold steam pipe. He sank heavily to the floor, cursing, holding his head, his penlight rolling crazily away. That light was sanity and protection. Despite his throbbing head he lurched after it, grabbed it, and cradled it like a candle in his cupped hands. It was still working, thank God.

He had to get himself together. This was the sort of clumsy lack of professionalism you expected from a wet-pants rookie. He scrambled to his feet and scanned the bookshelf with his penlight.

The journals went back to the turn of the century, year by year, all neatly numbered in gold embossing. Mike took down 1963, 1971, and 1975. That ought to be enough, and long enough ago for any records of connection between the day and night churches to be clearly indicated.

Mike sat down on the bottom step with his penlight and began reading. He found nothing of interest in 1963. By 1971 every third or fourth month ended with red ink. The records for 1975 told a more somber story. Now the red ink was constant.

In April of that year the Hamil Foundation had kicked in twelve thousand dollars, earmarked for restoration of the portraits of the apostles in the dome. Mike remembered the scaffolding. Father had said the apostles were being revised to fit the discoveries of modern scholars. Afterward they did not look inspired anymore. Now that Mike thought about it, they looked ugly. In July the foundation had donated new pews to add seating in the wings.

Additional seating in a dying parish?

Mike took down 1977 and 1978. January of 1977; \$9,712 from the Hamil Foundation to soundproof the windows. July of that year: \$1,270 for three hundred folding chairs.

Soundproofing and folding chairs? It was eerie, to find the records of the growth

of the Night Church this way, so hidden, yet so obvious if you knew the basic truth that it existed.

Mike replaced the journals. All this foray had done was to confirm what he had discovered upstairs. The parish received regular contributions from the Night Church. But what about Harry? The answer to that question wasn't here after all. It might lie somewhere in the records of the Hamil Foundation, and might even be located—given a few years of investigation. But the quicker route to the truth lay in a direct confrontation with Harry Goodwin. "Old friend," Mike whispered into the silence, "don't join the guilty. Be different."

Using his much abused penlight Mike made his way back upstairs. He paused in the front hall. He hated to do it, but he was going to have to play one hell of a rough game with Harry. "Hey, Harry," he bellowed, "wake up and get the hell down here! Come on, Harry, get moving!" That would scare him thoroughly, get him good and vulnerable to unexpected questions. He unholstered his pistol.

From the distance there came hurrying feet. Then the hall was flooded with yellow light and the tall figure of Father Harry Goodwin came gangling down the stairs wearing grayed pajamas under a raincoat liner.

"At least you remembered that pistol I gave you," Mike said from his position in the doorway. As he had known it would, his voice caused Harry to throw up his arms, and in so doing to hurl the little twenty-two almost to the ceiling.

"Mike Banion!"

"Good morning, Harry." Mike did not put his own pistol away. Not just yet. "We have to have a discussion."

"Yes, Mike, certainly. By all means!" He was staring at the pistol. "Mike?"

"Let's go into the office, Harry. It's a couple of degrees cooler."

"I don't use the air conditioners. Out of the question."

"I understand." Mike followed the stooped, shaking man.

"Mike, you're pointing your gun at me."

"Yes."

His eyes were awful in the grim light of the office. With absurdly clumsy hands he put on his glasses. "Now," he said, "please, Mike, tell me why."

Best to get right into it. Make him think his interrogator knows more than he really does. "How well are you acquainted with Franklin Titus Apple?"

"Oh!" He blinked furiously. "Hardly at all, Mike. And you should use the past tense. He's dead. I buried him in July." He looked again at the gun. His

eyes were practically popping out of his head. "What is this about?"

"It's about you and Apple. Or Titus. The Apple is an alias. You'll be happy to know he isn't dead at all. You buried another man. A very old and dear friend of mine." Mike stared hard at the priest. "I want to know about your financial relationship with Titus."

"I don't understand, Mike." There was hurt in his voice.

"Let me try another approach. How much does Mr. Titus pay you to let his congregation use Holy Spirit at night?"

"What do you mean, Mike?" The tone pleaded.

"The Night Church. *Surely* you know of it?"

He shook his head. His eyes were frightened, his lips slack. Mike put the gun away. When he did so Harry blinked.

"You're innocent, you darned fool! Aren't you?"

"Well—I must be—I suppose—what Night Church?"

"Good God almighty! Harry, we'd better get ourselves some coffee made." The old priest stood up, his eyes still wide, his mouth working. Mike clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, Harry. I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

Mike found the old-fashioned circular toggle switch that controlled the kitchen lights and turned them on. "Our second bad-news night," Harry said. "We mustn't make them a habit."

Mike didn't answer. He put the kettle on and got out the jar of Folger's Instant, pulled a couple of chipped mugs off their nails "Harry, I think you might be one of the few priests ever to learn this—" The kettle whistled. "Excuse me." Mike made them their coffee, took a swallow from his cup. All these delays were intentional. He wanted to observe Harry. Maintaining an impression that he was in suspense was one of the most difficult things for a man to do. But Harry squirmed. He wasn't having any trouble at all, poor guy.

"My word, Mike, this is strong. What are you going to tell me—my church has been declared off-limits to Catholics? That I know, believe me."

"What I've got to tell you is that your parish is being used by a group called the Night Church. Mr. Titus, known to you under the ridiculously inoffensive alias of Mr. Apple, is their leader. They meet in your church in the small hours. They are probably the most vicious group of people you or me or

anybody else has ever heard of."

"In my church?"

"There are hundreds of them. They must fill the church when they come, and they do that often. During one of their rituals, Patricia Murray was raped."

"But I often wake up at night. When I check my church it's always empty."

"Oh?"

"These people are using my church?" His voice sounded hollow. "Mike, are they desecrating my altar?"

"What the hell do you think, Harry? They practically tore Patricia in half on your altar!"

Harry reacted to Mike's words as if they were actual blows. Mike knew this was going to destroy the poor old guy in the end, no matter what happened now. The whole sense of Harry Goodwin's life was being extinguished.

"You say that the people attend these rituals? My Catholic people—the ones who don't come to me anymore?"

Why lie to the man? To do so would be to disdain him, and Mike did not treat his friends with anything less than respect. "I suspect that they fill the church."

Harry closed his eyes. His face screwed up into such pain that for a moment Mike thought he was having a coronary.

At last he let out a long, ragged gasp. He stared at Mike through devastated eyes. His hands were shaking so badly that he could hardly get his coffee cup to his lips.

"We're going to get rid of them, Harry."

Harry Goodwin continued to stare.

"Harry?"

There were perhaps words, but Mike couldn't understand them.

"Tonight it's going to be different. They are probably going to come here, and I suspect they will have Patricia with them, and Jonathan too. I haven't been able to get in touch with the kids all day. That tells me the Night Church has them, and it's going to do its business with them. But Mike Banion is going to be waiting for the Night Church. And I am going to break it into little pieces."

In the absolute silence that followed Mike could hear the priest's tears dripping onto the oilcloth tabletop. It was as desolate a sound as he had ever

heard, in a life that had witnessed all the kinds of grief there were.

Harry Goodwin bowed his head. In the grim light Mike saw that speeches weren't going to help him. It was too much. The priest was still breathing and thinking and living, but inside him everything important was blowing to dust. The words from the Funeral Mass came to mind:

*Man's days are like those of grass;
Like a flower of the field he blooms; The wind sweeps over him
and he is gone,
And his place knows him no more.*

Mike prayed then, a wordless, desperate prayer—not for God's love or His protection, but for His vengeance, that it might roar through the Night Church like holy fire.

"I'm going over to the church now, Harry."

"I'm coming too."

"I know."

They walked across the grassy parking lot to the black and silent building.

Chapter Twenty-three

THOUGH HE HAD entered this old church a thousand times through the seasons of his life, Mike Banion had never approached it as he did now, with the caution of a professional intruder. He was here to investigate, not to pray.

He had no illusions about what he was doing: coming to this place was as dangerous as going to Titus's house had been. A cop would run out of luck if he did this sort of thing often.

From the end of the block the streetlamp cast a dissipated, silvery glow. There was a smell of wet in the air. Perhaps toward dawn it would rain as it had yesterday and break this suffocating heat. The sky was green and dense. New York summers often ended like this, with thick, humid clouds and muttering storms. Wind souged around the belfry and eaves but here on the ground it was stifling.

Mike reached down and grabbed an unexpected object from the grass—a bit of crumpled paper. It was no blessing of evidence, though, only a Junior Mints box. It had probably been dropped by kids on their way home from the Cinemart on Metro Avenue. Mike held it a moment, unwilling to let go of something so comfortably of the known world.

They mounted the worn granite steps to the church. It seemed a hundred years since he had gone up these same steps as a little boy all in white, on his way in to receive his first Holy Communion. The boy he had been waved and shouted, "Remember, remember me!" And the wind blew, and the rain rained, and the aging cop could not deny that there had once been a poet in him, but the damn thing had died.

He put his hand on the knob of the big oak door. Unlocked, of course. No matter how he was told or who told him, Harry was never going to lock his church. Very, very slowly, Mike turned the large, cold knob. It was well oiled, and obliged Mike by not making a sound. He pulled the door a bare quarter of an inch. There was a single, distinct click, which Mike heard echo through the nave.

"Are they there?"

"Quiet, for God's sake. Just stick close to me, and don't talk."

The priest was one hell of a liability, but he had such a stake in this, he could not be left behind. No matter the consequences, it was his church and he had a right.

If Terry's terrible death had been intended to frighten anybody smart enough to open the grave from further pursuit of Franklin Titus, it was certainly working. Mike admitted his fear. He had come to think of these people as ghouls.

Poor Terry. Whatever had they done to him? The coroner had found evidence of severe infection in the corpse. It had been quarantined pending virological and bacterial studies. One of the morgue guys had said something about plague. Mike thought of the chart he had found in Titus's house. They gave Terry their disease before they put him in the coffin. Now that the chart had been enhanced by the lab, it was perfectly clear that it recorded the progress of an illness so virulent it could kill in minutes.

The church door swung open on absolute darkness. The Spirit seemed empty, but Mike still did not want to go in. The way he saw it, this was as much Mr. Titus's church as Harry's. Maybe more.

The air that came out of the dark interior was dry and had an unexpectedly familiar smell.

"Been doing some painting?"

"No. It hasn't been painted in years."

The smell told a different story. Earlier this evening they must have spruced the place up. How were they planning to hide that from Harry?

Was all as it seemed here?

Harry, old buddy, have you put one over on me? If they feel free to paint, they don't care whether you know about them or not.

Mike felt very isolated, standing here in the black foyer with his old friend beside him.

Your faith matters to me, Harry. You're my damn priest!

He waited for their eyes to get used to the faint glow filtering through the stained-glass windows from the street. It didn't amount to much, but they could see the aisle clearly enough to avoid tripping. Mike began the long journey to the altar rail. He intended to hide in the narrow, dark space behind the high altar against the likelihood that the Night Church would be here

tonight.

Before him he could see the dim outline of the altar where Patricia Murray had been raped—not by some poor screwed-up jerk but by intelligent people in a brutal ritual.

Patricia. Pretty kid. Be a great wife for Jonathan. To see those two at this altar, her in white, him jammed into a blue suit and looking sheepish—the thought was enough to make a man weep.

Wordlessly, because words weren't his way, Mike prayed for the kids. He looked toward the votive candle and was conscious of something so real and true he could hardly begin to understand it. But he loved something about it. The mystery of it, maybe.

He went up to the altar, genuflected toward the looming dark hulk, and made the sign of the cross. He really wasn't much of a Catholic anymore. His faith, he supposed, was like the love of an old divorced man who has long known that the reasons for the split were insubstantial and recalls his partner with wary fondness.

He became cold. The sensation warned him of how dangerous familiar places could be, transformed by dark and fear. Cops got killed as often as not on friendly ground. He could as easily imagine Patricia screaming on this altar as Harry saying Mass here, or altar boys pouring from cruets as blood running.

Progress was interrupted for the moment by an exceptional blast of wind. Tonight's storms were not going to wait for dawn. As large as the old building was, it shook with the force of the gust. He grabbed Father's arm and stood a moment after the noise died down, listening for the extra little sounds that might be made if somebody had used the roar as a mask for getting closer to them.

But there were none of the rustles and shuffles that people made when, for example, they suddenly stopped running.

Harry, however, had made use of the disturbance and the dark. Mike first realized this when he felt a distinct tug at his shoulder holster. He jerked away—and his thirty-eight special ended up in Harry's shaking hands.

"I've got it! Don't move, I've got the gun!"

"Hell, Harry. Give me that thing back. You couldn't shoot me."

"Don't force me, Mike! You stand right there." Harry put a few feet between them by sliding along the altar rail. "Don't come near me. I'm not at

all good with these things. If you startle me it's sure to go off."

Mike was more saddened even than surprised. With the loss of Harry he had only one thing left that was worth risking his neck for. "What about Patricia and Jonathan? What's happening to them?"

"That isn't your business."

The Night Church was just too strong. From the moment he smelled the paint, Mike had suspected something like this was about to happen. Harry marched Mike into the sacristy. "Mike, I'm sorry. There isn't anything else I can do. If you're cooperative they may spare your life. Please, Mike, play along. I've been playing for years." His voice became high and frantic. "They keep my church alive."

"You poor bastard." Even now, there might be some chance. He had always had clout with Harry Goodwin. "We can talk."

"No, we can't. I've already talked too much. Titus knew you were coming here. He even told me the time."

"So you were waiting for me."

"And wishing to God you wouldn't come."

"You're still on the side of the good. I can hear it in your voice. Give me the gun, Harry."

"Mike, please be quiet!"

"I'm your conscience. I can't be quiet."

"Don't try the sentimental approach. I'm finished with that. I don't care how good a friend you are. I've been tangled up in this mess for a long time, and you can't untangle me."

As Harry spoke there was a change in him. When you saw him like this, sharp and mean, you realized what tragedy was all about. "How long?"

"They've been using my church for years. If it weren't for them, the parish would have been abandoned in the seventies." The bitterness in his voice was almost shocking. This was an astonishingly angry man. "What a joke to waste your precious life on a vocation!"

"I want you to give me the pistol. I want to forget I ever saw you pointing it at me. No matter how bitter you are, Harry, you aren't bitter enough to do something so evil to a friend. If you allow the Night Church to capture me—my God, you know, don't you, that they buried Terry Quist alive."

The gun wavered. Harry seemed about to hand it over.

"And that man who died in the fire across the street— Parker was his name

—that was no accident. I'm now convinced they burned him alive because he apparently knew too much. And Patricia—remember what they did to her."

Harry groaned, took a step closer. Mike reached out his hand.

Just at that moment the sacristy door clicked and creaked open. A small, elegant old man in a raincoat and hat hurried in. He removed the hat to reveal a crown of wispy white hair.

Titus.

He smiled. "So our last problem has solved itself. Good evening, Mike. I gather you're here to see me give away the bride."

"Give me the gun, Harry! Now!"

With a growl Titus took the gun, trained it expertly at the center of Mike's chest. "Shall I shoot?" he asked in his soft, polite voice. "Or will you shut your poisonous mouth?"

Mike fell silent.

15 AUGUST 1983

MOST PRIVATE

To: The Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Defense of the Faith

From: The Chancellor for the Inquiry in North America

Your Eminence:

I have prayed day and night over the request made in your last letter.

Is it morally right for me to go into a situation where my own death is a virtual certainty? I wonder. Or is this moral question spurious—a way of justifying my fear? And, Eminence, I can assure you I am afraid.

I keep thinking of Alex Parker and the blowtorch. I know I shouldn't, but I can't help it. The real issue is whether or not I love Christ enough to risk that.

Eminence, I am so afraid. Help me.

Sincerely yours, Brian Conlon

Document Class: Urgent A, most private, Swiss Guards courier

Destination: Paolo Cardinal Impelliteri, the Hidden Collegium, Prefecture
for the Defense of the Faith, Vatican City

18 AUGUSTUS 1983

FURTIVISSIMUS

Ad: Cancellarius Inquisitionis in Septentrionalis Americanensis

Ex: Prefectus Congregationis Defensionis Fidei

My dear young man, I only wish that I were not so aged and infirm, so close to the end of my time. I would count it an honor to suffer at your side.

Recall the gospel: "In His anguish He prayed with all the greater intensity, and His sweat became as drops of blood falling to the ground." And remember your consecration into the Holy Office, my boy.

You lay prostrate before the altar in the Chapel of St. Paul the Apostle here in the Hidden Collegium just eighteen years ago. Remember the words: "Oh, glorious St. Paul, sword and shield of the Church, consecrate me to the service of our most holy Catholic and apostolic faith. Intercede for me in time of trouble, that I may not shrink from martyrdom, indeed, that I may give my life gladly, as thou gavest thine, for love of Him."

Let me be frank with you. When you asked me for a warrior-priest—a man who would die for love of Him—the only name I could come up with in all the Holy Office was yours.

You, Brian.

You are the last warrior-priest young and strong enough to carry out this difficult mission. All I have here are myself, laid up with my damn stroke, and a bunch of dry old historians.

Brian, it is not my way to beg, but now I do beg as I think Christ wants me to beg. Please, Brian, drink of the cup Christ holds out to you. My dear boy, pray for courage!

Holy Mother Church needs you now, and Our Lord needs you now. And I trust in you. I wish I could give Our Lord an army of Brians!

But all I can offer Him is my last, precious one. Go in grace to your duty. Man will not show you mercy, my son. But God will. You shall have mercy and love in endless abundance, and all the wonders of heaven besides.

I envy you. Paolo

Chapter Twenty-four

HARRY STOOD FROZEN, listening to the echoing footsteps as Titus marched Mike off into the dark. There came a creak of hinges, then the sounds dwindled as the two men descended into the crypt.

"Please, Mr. Titus," he said. His voice was so low it didn't even echo in the empty church. He swallowed. "Please, Mr. Titus, don't hurt him."

There was no answer. From the depths of the crypt there came a loud, angry shout. Mike, protesting whatever indignity had greeted him there.

Mike, Mike. What is the sense of friendship? At our age it is a dance of mourning . . . and remembrance. "Mike, do you remember—oh, Lord, there were great days!" Like the day he had married Mike to little Beth Herlihy. Jenny Trask was organist then, young, dedicated to music, capable of anything from Bach to *Tantum ergo*. She could do a wedding march of rousing splendor.

From the crypt there came a rush of argument, then the muffled slam of wood against wood.

Harry put his hands over his ears, screwed his eyes shut. As never before his church was oppressing him, the ghostly images in the dome mocking his faith, the vigil candle burning like an accusatory eye. He ran from the

sanctuary, and across the muddy parking lot.

He came into his kitchen—and remembered how Beth would make them both dinner while he and Mike sat around that table drinking beer and talking.

Harry snapped off the light, sank down at the table, and wept for his betrayal.

To keep from doing it aloud he bit his lips. His mouth began to taste sharply of blood.

Yes, and who were all the histrionics for? Our Lord?

The traitor deserves a traitor's death. Iscariot, send yourself to Hell. His mind went to his twenty-two pistol. It must still be lying on the stairway where he had dropped it. If he took that pistol and pointed it at his stomach and fired, he would die in deserved agony. Unconfessed, he would sink for all eternity into Hell.

A worthy end for a coward. He went to the staircase. But there was no pistol. Harry moaned. Even his suicide was going to be denied him.

"Do you want this?"

Standing in the doorway of his office was a small, mousey sort of man. Harry had never seen him before, but that meant nothing. The Night Church was well supplied with people. The man held Harry's pistol in his hand. The barrel was trembling.

"I'm a priest," the man said in a rushed whisper. "My name is Brian Conlon." A haunted expression passed across his face, but he blinked it away. "I am here to appeal to you to return to Our Lord, and help me in His cause against the Night Church." He stepped forward into the hall to show himself more clearly. His pants were torn and dusty, his gold-framed glasses were bent. With his free hand he brushed some dust from his suit. He was wearing a Roman collar. "Father Goodwin, I am a secret agent of His Holiness." Beads of sweat, which had been collecting on his hairless pate, began to roll down his wide forehead, making trenches in the dust. He smiled weakly. "I'm a bit of a mess, I'm afraid. I shouldn't have attempted the window."

Harry was far too amazed by the mere appearance of another priest to care about the state of his attire. "You mean His Holiness knows? Rome *knows* about the Night Church?"

"Rome knows. And Rome has sent me to help you."

"Father—Father—" Harry couldn't go on. Hopes he had given up for dead were soaring as they hadn't in years. He simply stood, wordless, trying to keep

himself from breaking down completely.

Father Conlon came and embraced Harry. He was short; Harry found himself looking down at his hairless scalp. Then Father Conlon met his eyes. "Rome knows everything, Harry."

"Even—you know that I'm—" Harry couldn't say it. *A traitor to Our Lord.*

"You're a participating member of the Night Church."

"No—that's stretching a point, isn't it? I never go over there. I just let them use it, you know."

"I know. And they pay you."

"It keeps the parish afloat! Without that money—"

"Yes, I see. Now I know exactly where you stand, Father." He put the gun into his pocket. "We have work to do this night." He glanced at his watch. "The *Rituale* will begin at midnight. That gives us less than an hour. We've got to work fast. Tell me, are they about yet?"

He thought of Titus and Mike in the crypt. "One of them is, and he's holding a friend of mine, a police officer, prisoner in the crypt. I think he's killing the policeman." As he said these last words the utter moral corruption of his own soul was agonizingly apparent to Harry. He was letting Mike die!

"And you're up here, looking for a gun? To help whom?"

Harry could hardly bear to answer. "For me," he managed to mutter.

Conlon smiled wearily. "I see. In your opinion you're beyond absolution."

"I don't want it! Absolution is the last thing I deserve!"

"But you regret your sins—your apostasies, your lies, your sacrilege, your cowardice?"

No man who was free of them could know what it felt like to bear such sins. "I regret them," Harry said. How small, how hollow were those words!

"May Our Lord Jesus Christ absolve you, and by His authority I absolve you from every bond of excommunication and interdict to the extent of my power. I absolve you from your sins in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

For a moment Harry was furious. Then an enormous relief spread through him. He could feel Conlon's words as truly as a tonic in his blood. They filled him, revitalized him, gave him immediate help. And he said, "Amen."

Father Conlon looked up at him. "You're still very much the priest, you. You've just been frightened up to now."

"I can't help it. I'm easily frightened."

"Well, you have another chance to overcome it. Better that than letting a little fear send you to Hell."

"They threatened me with torture!"

"I think we'll both face that, Father. They do torture priests." The haunted expression crossed his face again.

Harry's mind returned to Mike. "We can save my friend. We've got to! They're torturing *him* now!"

"Who, exactly, has captured your friend?"

"A man named Titus. Franklin Titus."

In an instant Father Conlon's face shifted from calm resolution to terrible dread. "Titus! He's *here*?"

"In the crypt."

He smiled ruefully. "Very well, Father Goodwin. I may already have lost my particular battle." He held out Harry's pistol. "Will you be at the wedding?"

"I am being made to officiate."

"Titus and his mordant wit. When the moment is right, I am afraid we have no alternative but to kill the groom. If I am prevented from doing it, you must."

Harry was astonished. A priest, plotting murder?

"I know how awful it must sound to you. But you don't know the alternative. Believe me, this execution will be a great mercy not only for the groom, but for all mankind."

"His Holiness condones this?"

"The Holy Office is empowered to act in defense of the Faith. Believe me, it is a terrible thing when we are forced to such a measure. But we do not shrink from duty."

A sudden movement at the top of the stairs caught Harry's eye. As he turned toward it Father Conlon pressed the pistol into his hand. "Hide it, Harry! It may be our only chance!" Conlon began backing into the study, pulling a pistol of his own from under his suit.

"No you don't, Conlon! Drop it!"

Father Conlon threw his large, black pistol to the floor. At the same instant Harry put his own palm-sized one into his pocket.

A troop of armed men came running down the stairs. "Your priest is lucky, Laurent," Conlon said to the leader.

For a moment Harry didn't understand. Then he did: Father Conlon was gambling that the two of them hadn't been overheard. "Thank God you came when you did," Harry blurted. "He was going to kill me!"

Father Conlon was edging toward the window. "Not so fast," the one called Laurent snarled. An instant later they took Conlon by the arms. He commenced a mild and hopeless struggle. They surrounded him, then picked him up and began to carry him away. His bald head was bobbing between the shoulders of his captors, his feet were rattling against the floor. His glasses were gone. There was a gash under his right eye.

"Come with me, Harry," said a voice from the dark. Harry knew it at once: Titus, back from his business with Mike.

"Yes. I'm coming." The pistol felt enormous in his pocket. Surely Titus would see the bulge.

Titus led him through the dark rectory. "That man will burn to death, Harry." They went across the dusty living room, into the overgrown rectory yard.

Harry followed him as if in thrall. Those three words kept echoing in his mind: *burn to death, burn to death, burn to death.*

He saw the young people stuffing Father Conlon into a car. Even with the windows closed his shouts could be heard clearly. "Sounds like he's been given the bad news," Titus commented mildly. Again and again, in a frantic, breaking voice, Conlon called "Je-e-sus! Je-e-sus!" Then the big Mercedes drove away.

"Conlon knows what a hard death is like, Harry. Do you?"

"Yes, Mr. Titus, I do."

"You agree very quickly, for a man who has just been proselytized by the Inquisition. Tell you what, Harry. You go down into the crypt. See what you can do for your friend." He smiled distantly. "You had best be loyal to us if you don't care for hard deaths." The smile broadened. "Go on. Mike needs a friend right now."

With a toss of his head Titus disappeared into the sacristy. Harry wanted to do anything but continue with this horrible mission. Gingerly, afraid to do it but more afraid of Titus, Harry lifted the storm door that led into the crypt.

Chapter Twenty-five

THE SAME BLOW that had knocked Mike unconscious had also given him a pounding headache, which woke him up.

He heard music. Church music. "*Aeterne rerum conditor noctem diemque qui...*"

It was very beautiful, being sung by a children's choir. But so far away. He could barely hear them.

"... *regis et temporum das tempora . . .*"

He wanted to hear more. When he tried to get up he was hit a flaring blow in the center of his forehead. He lashed out with his fists and encountered sides and a top.

What the hell was this? They had put him into a box. the box was lined with satin upholstery.

A coffin.

Just like Terry! He sucked air frantically. He beat on the top, he squirmed, he kicked.

Then he stopped. He started taking controlled breaths, trying to quell the panic. If he was going to get out of here he had to do some very clear thinking.

Before they had put Terry in his coffin they had infected him with a disease. Was Mike also sick? He took a deep breath. Lungs clear. And he didn't feel feverish. The only thing that hurt was his head.

He remembered the expert way Titus had pistol-whipped him, a single stunning blow to the side of the head.

He didn't seem to have anything else wrong with him. Then it occurred to him why they hadn't infected him. They already knew their disease worked from trying it on Terry.

They wanted this to be as slow as possible.

It was already awfully hard to breathe. How long had he been unconscious, innocently breathing up his little bit of air? Not too long or he'd be dead. Not a lot of air to begin with.

Okay, guy, let's give this one hell of a good try. He braced his hands against the head of the coffin. Then he kicked with all his might against the foot. The whole thing quaked, but it didn't even begin to give way.

Goddamn!

He spent half a minute in a losing effort to catch his breath. No matter how deeply he inhaled, it helped less each time. The air in here stank. God, it stank.

He was suffocating in his own bad breath.

"Help!"

Silence.

Thank God he had heard that singing. At least he knew he wasn't actually underground.

"Come on, out there, have a heart!" He took gulp after desperate gulp of air.

This was the end. In a few more minutes Michael Banion was no longer going to exist.

He stopped trying to get out. That was not going to work. And he stopped bothering to call. Nobody was going to help him.

He had other things to think about now. This was death. He tried to remember what he was supposed to do at this point. The main thing was an Act of Contrition.

But he couldn't remember the damn Act of Contrition! It was a long prayer, and he hadn't said it in years.

He panicked again, afraid that not even God was going to help him. The frantic physical torment of air hunger overcame him and he drummed his feet and slapped at the top with his hands.

Then he opened his mouth. He began gagging and gasping. Somewhere his mind turned over a page. He couldn't remember the Act of Contrition, but

Sister Louise had paddled him into the *Confiteor*. He began praying in a loud voice, hoarse with the bad air. "I confess to Almighty God, to blessed Mary ever Virgin, to blessed Michael the Archangel, to blessed John the Baptist, to Holy Peter and Paul ... all the saints!" Take a breath, take another, take another. Wow, I'm flyin'! I hurt like hell but I'm flyin'. "Sinned in thought, word, and deed, and what the hell's the rest? Oh, yeah— through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault—oh God hurry up this hurts!"

Come on, damn you, die.

I'm gonna be like, like—

Sunken eyes, lips stretched away from teeth, stinking like hell, and fingernails embedded in the lid.

Poor old Terry.

Poor old *met*

Everything went, finally, all the discipline and fight of a lifetime as a policeman. Only the scratching, screaming animal remained.

He kicked and kicked and kicked and his blood pounded in his brain and he gasped until his throat was raw with his own expelled gases.

When they left her alone in the bride's room Patricia's heart leaped with hope. She had been guarded every moment back there, and had come out here in a limousine with Mary and Letty and Jerry. Maybe this would be her chance. But when she looked around and saw the barred windows and heard the lock click behind her, she could only feel the tightness of frustration in her throat.

Although as secure as a prison cell, the room was pretty. The floors were sumptuously carpeted with a Persian rug depicting a wedding. Ancient brass floor lamps gave off warm, yellow light. A spray of roses graced the delicate antique table in the center of the floor. There was a dressing table for the bride, completely stocked with makeup and perfume of every scent.

Patricia went to one of the leaded-glass windows, wondering if she could squeeze between the bars. They were newly installed; she could tell that by their shine. And they were bolted directly into the walls, not into the window frame. They were also hopelessly close together.

Despite all her efforts to be calm and to seem cheerful to Mary and the others, they had not let down their guard. This was the longest time she had

been alone since the capture. They had been very sweet to her. They had also been very careful.

"You are our Princess," they had told her.

She had smiled and accepted their homage. But inside herself she clung to the thought that she could be so much more than their toy, she could be a real wife and make a real home for Jonathan. She thought bitterly, *I can* be a human being!

She kicked the table—but not hard enough to upset the roses. Then she slumped down at the dressing table. The face staring back from the mirror was so very beautiful, even in its pain, that she was rather startled.

Beautiful mutant.

"Hello, dear. We've got to start dressing you. There's barely half an hour left!"

How incredible that words said so cheerfully, by as lovely a woman as Mary Banion, could hold such dread.

First they had taken Jonathan's belt and shoelaces. Then they had put him into a straitjacket. When he had realized how completely his suicide would ruin their plans he had become almost frantic to do it.

They watched him every second.

An hour ago ten of them carried him down to a waiting van. They brought him out here trussed to its seat. Five guards came with him.

He lay now in his straitjacket against the wall of the sacristy, trying to find some new trick of suicide. He had pleaded with Jerry Cochran and with Uncle Franklin. "Don't you understand what I am? A monster! And I'll breed a race of monsters!"

They agreed. In fact, that was the whole point. "They will be in the image of Satan."

"They'll be horrors! They'll destroy everything beautiful and good in this world!"

Uncle Franklin had at that moment done something that had chilled Jonathan to the depth of his being. Very deliberately he had leaned down and smiled beatifically into Jonathan's face. And he had whispered, "I know."

Jonathan had screamed to the others to listen to him. Uncle was evil! He was himself something out of Hell—he *must* be! Something foul, something supernatural. Please, please listen.

He is trying to give this world over to the demons!

Jonathan began to shout yet again. "Please listen to me! Please, please, please listen!"

But they didn't listen. They went on preparing to mate their goddess with their god.

There came a sound of footsteps on flagstones. Somebody was approaching the coffin. Then there was a desolate sigh just outside. The wood creaked. Somebody had knelt down and leaned against it! "Since Almighty God has called—"

"Harry! Oh, God, it's you! I *knew* you'd come if you could! Listen, I'm dying. I've got to get air."

"Mike, you're alive!"

"Air, Harry. Get me air, air!" Mike felt desperately along the seal. His mind flashed again to the coffin key in Titus's living room. "Is there a key?"

"Key?"

Now, that was confused thinking. Harry wouldn't have any keys to this thing. "Harry! Harry!"

"Oh, Mike!" There was a great clattering.

"Hurry!"

"I can't, it's too strong."

"What—were—"

"I'm hitting it with my shoe!" There was another burst of noise.

"No. No." He was drifting into unconsciousness, falling down a well.

A tiny hissing sound brought him back from the depths.

"Mike! Say something!"

"Upend the damn thing and drop it! That'll break it open!"

There came a creaking, scraping sound and a great deal of labored breathing. Slowly Mike's position changed. Soon he was struggling with the fact that Harry had lifted the thing feet first.

Then he dropped it. There was a tremendous, bone-jarring crash.

God love that old priest, was the lid actually loose?

* * *

People were coming and going in the bride's room, bridesmaids with their dresses and makeup cases, sisters with ironing boards and needles and thread, making last-minute adjustments. Letty and Mary fussed over their Princess, who smiled as best she could, despite the ashes in her heart.

Her mind in its desperation had fixed on the notion that Jonathan might rescue her. He was so clever, surely he would succeed where she was failing. He would find a way to get both of them out.

"Now, my dear," Letty said with great self-satisfaction, "we have something to show you!" She put a large white box on the table with the flowers and opened it. Inside was the most extraordinary dress Patricia had ever seen.

It was sewn entirely of spider-web lace worked with pearls. Tiny diamonds made the collar and cuffs glitter. An emerald belt, green to match her eyes, lay folded on top. Mary drew the dress from the box and held it up. It was purest white silk, the delicate strands worked into flourishes and sweeps of subtle design.

Then she saw the design. She choked back a scream. On the dress, depicted in lace, were bodies struggling in fires, bones and skulls, and grinning devils.

"Feel how light it is! The whole thing doesn't weigh a pound."

Patricia held out her hand, touched the gossamer fabric. "It's very light."

"The dress is over six hundred years old. It was made at the height of the Middle Ages. It's been in the family all this time, waiting for you. It's been worn only once before, during the *Rituale* at Salisbury Cathedral in 1334."

Out of the madness and desperation of the medieval world they had brought this terrible artifact. It was as if the rotted fingers of man's mad past had reached out and clutched her. They were smiling at her. All the bridesmaids were watching. She strove for a steady voice. "It's an inspiration."

Her mind was totally concentrated on Jonathan. Memories of him, desire to see him again, hope of escape. But she dared not even ask after him for fear her tone would betray her.

They had to get careless for a few seconds. They just *had* to! And if they didn't, then he had to come to her and take her away. Nothing else could be allowed to happen. Because if there was a *Rituale* then he would become the

monstrum.

That must not be!

Mary gave her an excited little peck on her cheek. "Before you put on your makeup. For good luck."

Patricia looked down at the awful garment in her hands. A lace skull smiled up at her.

This had never been intended as a wedding dress. It was a shroud.

"Jonathan, you might as well accept your situation. You aren't going to get away," Franklin Titus said.

"Maybe not."

"And we won't give you a chance at suicide."

Jonathan did not reply. That was his one hope.

"I really feel terrible about this. If I had known what it would do I never would have tried the hypnosis. You're pitiful now, son. I find it most upsetting to see you this way."

"You're evil. I'll never stop fighting you."

"If you don't cooperate tonight things will turn out far worse than they did in June. Should the insemination fail because of your resistance I will not stop you like I did in June. This time I'll let you kill Patricia."

Jonathan fought against the straitjacket; he spit at Uncle Franklin and cursed him. "I don't want to hurt her! I mustn't be allowed to hurt her!"

"I agree. Which is why you must cooperate."

"Get away from me!"

"The wedding is going to start in ten minutes, son. You might as well reconcile yourself to that fact." He turned and walked away.

"Don't do it to me! Don't, in the name of all humanity!"

His uncle said something to Jerry Cochran. Jerry came over. "You're disturbing the congregation, Jonathan," he said in an embarrassed tone. "If you can't be quiet we'll have to gag you."

Jonathan became silent. Gagged, he would be helpless even to warn her away. He began to realize that this terrible ceremony was probably going to happen just about as Uncle Franklin wanted it to happen.

He hoped, he prayed that he would somehow manage to be gentle with her.

A great, booming note resounded from the choir loft. The ritual had begun.

By pressing his mouth against the crack that Harry had made and sucking furiously, Mike could get a little air. As he drank it in his whole body seemed to come alive with tingling relief.

The next thing he knew there were fingers in his mouth. Harry was trying to reach in and widen the crack. Mike forced himself to turn aside into the foul air of the coffin. Harry strained. Suddenly a loud snap brought a flood of cool, delicious breeze. Mike found the damp concrete smell of the crypt delightful.

Then Harry's arms were around him, lifting him. "Mike, Mike!"

"I made it. I'm alive."

Harry embraced him. "Thank you, O heavenly Father."

Mike saw a long piece of tubing curling down from the broken coffin lid. He took it in his fingers.

It had been leaking a trickle of oxygen into the coffin all along. "What the hell—look at this, Harry."

"What does it mean?"

"They were feeding me just enough air to keep me alive!" He stood up, examined the mechanism of torture. An oxygen tank, its valve set just to bleed. This was perhaps the most hideous torture he had ever heard of. They could have kept him at the edge of death for a long, long time. "No wonder I didn't die. They didn't want me to."

"But they must have. You're dangerous to them."

"Oh, they were going to kill me, all right. But not soon. The point is, I would have lingered in there, slowly suffocating, until they decided to cut off the oxygen."

"Hours?"

"Maybe days."

Harry hugged him again. "Let's get out of here! We can run! Your car's outside, we can go over to the precinct! We'll be safe there."

"Who knows where we'll be safe. What about the kids?"

Harry closed his eyes for a long moment. "I'm due upstairs in a few minutes. I'm supposed to marry them."

"And I have to rescue them. Somehow."

Harry dug in his pocket and came up with what was to Mike a fist-sized chunk of gold. "You gave me this, Mike. Maybe you can put it to better use

than me."

Mike took the little pistol. "Thank you, Father." Mike hefted the weapon. Good for head shots. He and Harry walked together across the crypt, to the spiral staircase that led up to the sacristy. From the top of that staircase light shone down. There were excited voices. "I don't want to do this, Mike."

"You go up there. If they miss you we'll both end up getting caught." To reassure Harry he smiled. "And don't blame me if the wedding doesn't come off quite as planned."

"I hope it doesn't, Mike. I hope to God it doesn't."

"It won't."

Chapter Twenty-six

THE ALTAR RAIL seemed very far away, a dim white line at the end of the long stone aisle. Beyond it was the dark, ugly bulk of the altar.

The sacrificial stone.

"Do you see him?" one of the bridesmaids whispered.

Her heart began to flutter. *See him?*

"Look—he's just to the right among that group of acolytes."

She saw that noble head, those delicate features. "Jonathan!" His eyes met hers and there was lightning between the two of them. Through all the pain and horror of the moment their love shone clear.

Then she was running down the aisle. Footsteps pounded behind her. She was halfway to him before the bridesmaids managed to stop her. "Not too fast," one of them said. "We have to wait for the music. This is supposed to be a procession."

Standing there in her delicate shroud, captured again, she cried.

The flower girl in her white taffeta dress slipped around Patricia. The procession was reorganized.

Mary, standing behind the bridesmaids in the ranks of nuns, called up to the choir loft. "Very well, Mrs. Trask, I think we're ready now."

The most beautiful, ethereal music began. Patricia recognized it as Bach's "Sleepers, Awake," from one of the cantatas. Sleepers awake, indeed. They had lost their chance for that. The two of them were doomed to carry out the living nightmare of the ritual, and nothing could intervene.

Her flower girl began moving forward, spreading rose and gardenia petals. Patricia followed, her heart full of the most exquisite anguish. She felt the weight of the procession behind her, the six bridesmaids, the deaconesses in their dark-red silk festive habits, the common sisters in then-white ones. Behind them came the children of the Titus School, the girls in blue dresses, the boys in tuxedos. And the pews were filled with the whole congregation of the Night Church, resplendent in the dim candlelight in their jewelry and fine dresses, their tuxedos and gleaming studs.

"Patricia!"

She heard him cry out, quite clearly. The music got louder. There was a stir around him. He was entirely surrounded by acolytes. She could no longer see him.

"Run!"

Her bridesmaids began pressing her from behind. "I can't, Jonathan!"

He screamed then, an awful, wild, trapped sound that made her scream too. It reminded her of the sound of a rabbit dying in the country night, crushed in the coils of a king snake.

"Please don't do this," she wailed. "Please, all of you, listen to me! This is evil, it's terribly wrong! Don't any of you understand? Don't you realize it? You must!"

The music swept along, so gentle, so intensely sweet.

Then they reached the altar. The music stopped.

Mike had gone up the winding stairs from crypt to sacristy with the utmost care, pausing in the shadows behind the half-closed door. From here he could see most of the sacristy and an edge of the sanctuary beyond. He had watched Harry vest and go out into the sanctuary behind his retinue of altar boys. Titus and his own retinue of six of the quietest, best-behaved acolytes Mike had ever seen remained behind. Even so one or two of the boys amused themselves by swinging their censers at one another. From time to time Titus would snap at them.

Why the hell didn't Titus get moving? As long as he remained where he was, Mike was stuck here.

One of the boys took a quartz wand about ten inches long from a little black case. He handed it to Titus, who began examining it carefully and wiping it with a bit of felt.

Outside the wedding started. Mike could see Father and Patricia clearly, but where was Jonathan? He must be among the crowd of men off to the side. Some marriage, when the groom has to be held by force.

"At the beginning of creation God made them male and female; for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto a wife, and the two shall become as one. They are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore let no man separate what God has joined."

Harry's voice was quick and strained. Titus had noticed it too; he grew as

still as an interested snake.

"Now he enriches you and strengthens you by a special sacrament so that you may assume the duties of marriage in mutual and lasting fidelity. And so, in the presence of the Church, I ask you to state your intentions."

A horror that made Mike's skin crawl and his heart beat thick and slow came over him. He remembered the picture of the dying monster he had seen in Titus's library. To create anti-man a human being must become like that poor, destroyed thing.

To twist and contort and bulge with whatever crazy drugs or trances they used, until you became—

Dear God, poor Jonathan! Poor damn kid! No wonder they've got him trussed up like a hog in a slaughterhouse. *He's* their damn monster!

His dream! The poor kid, he *was* guilty all along just like he thought. What a damn sad, terrible thing! And he told me, he *told* his dad he was guilty! He was begging for help and all he got was a pat on the back. I can be goddamn thickheaded!

Tears were blurring his vision. Poor kid was crying out for help and his own dad wouldn't believe him.

Oh, Christ, help him! Her too. Help all three of us!

To the core of his soul Mike wanted to rush out there and stop that wedding. But he couldn't, not while Titus was between him and the altar. Among so many people his only chance, and a slight one at that, lay in achieving absolute surprise.

The old sorcerer waited in the wings. And the wedding went on.

Jonathan had struggled so hard to break free that he was becoming exhausted. They had gagged him after he had tried to call to Patricia. Despite his hopeless situation he strove against the straitjacket, frantically chewed the gag.

"Patricia and Jonathan, have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage?"

Jonathan wanted desperately to tell her that he loved her, that he wouldn't hurt her as long as there was a particle of humanity left in him. But the gag was a skillful one. It went all the way down his throat. He could barely groan.

"They have," his mother said in a firm, clear voice. Father Goodwin looked

as if he wanted to disappear into the floor.

"Will you accept your issue lovingly from God, and bring him up in the law, Patricia?"

"No! Not unless I hear Jonathan say he wants to marry me. And you won't even let him talk!"

"She will," Mary said. Jonathan begged God to stop his heart, to somehow preserve Patricia from seeing what was inside him. How he longed to spare her that!

Twisting, grinding into her, crushing bone and flesh, listening to the piercing ecstasy of her screams.

"Since it is your intention to enter into marriage, join your left hands, and declare your consent before God and His Church."

"Their hands are joined in spirit," Mary said.

From where the deacons had forced him to crouch down among them Jonathan could just see a bit of his mother's face. He looked at it with utter loathing. That was not his mother. He considered Mary Titus Banion dead. The body might be walking and talking as if she were alive, but the human being inside was dead. By loving Satan Mother had committed suicide.

I want to be dead too. I want to be dead!

But he was far from dead. In fact a new life was beginning to stir within him. Even as the wedding proceeded a strange, low hum began under the soaring music of the organ.

The hum got louder, and as it did Jonathan began to feel more and more and more *ANGRY!*

Patricia could hardly bear the bone-jarring sound that had replaced the organ music. It hurt her ears and stirred her deepest senses to loathing. Her bridesmaids took her by the arms. When she felt their strong hands on her she had a wave of panic. Not ten feet from here she had knelt while It strode to her across the sanctuary. She had broken her rosary, and listened to the beads scattering in the dark.

Altar boys began dousing the few candles, leaving only the vigil candles in their cups and the unwinking red of the votive candle.

God, give us light!

Altar bells began jangling, dozens and dozens of them in the dark. The

music boomed to a crescendo. The sisters and the schoolchildren had filed into the pews. Patricia was surrounded only by her bridesmaids now, and the deaconesses.

All heads turned to the back of the church. A gaudy and amazing procession, far different from the wedding party, was starting there. Acolytes carried bejeweled invert crosses, blood red. Behind them deacons held aloft banners of richly worked silk depicting magical symbols, pentacles and six-sided stars and rings in rings.

Behind them all came Uncle Franklin, wearing vestments of material too dark to see in the gloom. On his bishop's miter there romped a serpent that called up in Patricia an emotion so strange that it didn't even have a name.

She felt as if swarms of miles were crawling over her body. Her skin became so sensitive that the dress seemed as if it were made of fire. "No! Please, no!" Her bridesmaids were close around her, holding her in strong hands.

The acolytes went left and right along the altar rail until finally Uncle Franklin arrived face to face with Patricia.

"At last," he murmured. His dry old hand came up, touched Patricia's cheek. She bit him. "Ah! Such spirit, you little viper!" He wiped his bloody finger down the front of her dress. "Prepare her, please, sisters."

Jonathan struggled on the floor like an animal. But he was no longer struggling to escape or even to end his own life. He was struggling against the savagery that had been pouring up out of his depths ever since that infernal horn started roaring.

Now something was happening. His guards were moving him. Were they undoing the straitjacket—was there a glimmer of hope?

Yes!

He was more sane than they must realize. Perhaps he would yet have a chance at killing himself.

But then he knew he would not. They had only loosened a few straps to put chains through the loops. He was now standing up just at the gates to the sanctuary, chained tight to the altar rail. He couldn't even bash his forehead against a corner of the rail; the chains were too tight.

Uncle Franklin stepped to the center of the sanctuary. Boys took his miter

and staff. He held up the quartz wand in the dim candlelight.

Patricia was dragged to a spot just in front of the altar. How beautiful she was all in white, her face floating in that wonderful blond spray of hair.

"I love you, Jonathan!"

"I love you! I love you!" All that issued from behind the gag was a faint series of grunts. "I want to be gentle with you!"

I want to break you in half with my power! You'll love it too, you bitch!

Her bridesmaids laid her on the floor of the sacristy. She was tied with silken ropes to four rings that had been fixed there.

For me. She is tied down for me.

He rattled his chains, fighting wildly, desperately. "Relax," Uncle Franklin muttered. "You'll have all the strength you need in just a minute."

The madonna purity of Patricia's skin, the way she was biting her bottom lip as she tried to raise her head enough to see him, began to excite him.

No! I must be gentle with her. It's all we have left. To deny himself the pleasure of seeing her helpless he closed his eyes. His body, his very blood, became a prayer.

The serpent within him slithered faster and faster toward the surface of his being.

The nave was filling with an incense that seemed to mix rare perfume with the odor of decaying flesh. Graves must have smelled thus in ancient times.

"Very well, Jonathan. I shall now dance up your demon for you."

I am the genius of death.

Uncle began by striking the tip of the wand on the altar rail. He held it before Jonathan. "Look!" Jonathan shut his eyes.

But the demand was only a trick to get him to do that very thing. Next thing he knew the wand was being pressed against the center of his forehead. Like a tuning fork it resonated with rich vibrations. They penetrated deep into Jonathan's skull, filling him with the most extraordinary agony.

He could not turn his head. And when Uncle Franklin ordered his eyes to open, the lids rose despite Jonathan's frantic efforts to keep them down.

He could not look away from the spinning, gleaming tip of the wand.

Uncle began moving gracefully back and forth. Such was Jonathan's own concentration that it seemed to him as if everything else had simply disappeared, everything except the dancing, turning body of his uncle and the glittering wand.

Jonathan's stomach twisted and rumbled and almost twisted inside out. He began to gag.

"Get ready!" Uncle shouted. "Here he comes!"

Jonathan's guts began to feel warm, then hot. In an instant he felt as if he were boiling alive from the inside. Almost driven mad with the clawing torment, he shrieked and shrieked. He knew that he was going to tear off the straitjacket. But it was not *him* doing it, it was the thing within, taking control of his muscles.

He found himself shaking the straitjacket away as if it were tissue paper, rattling the manacles until his wrists were bloody. The torment of the inner boiling had increased his strength a hundredfold.

Then the manacles parted as easily as if they had been made of wax.

When he tried to tear off his gag it snagged on his teeth. He snatched away the thin cloth.

How beautiful she was!

Clumsily, with the newfound gait of a body that seemed an unfamiliar size and shape, he began to go closer to her.

His own part of the ceremony finished, Harry had come back from the sacristy and crept around behind the high altar with Mike. They were hiding amid the orchids and the irises just to the right of the tabernacle.

When Harry saw the horror out there he tore through the flowers and bolted across the altar. He began struggling with the tabernacle, trying to preserve the Host from the astonishing blasphemy being enacted before it. Acolytes promptly subdued him.

The last gesture of a guilty priest.

Mike watched and waited, hoping for some chance to make a move that would matter. He knew only two things— Patricia had to be saved and poor, pitiful Jonathan had to be given the best care that money could buy. He stood glaring down at Patricia like a great *golem*, bellowing as if in agony. He seemed bloated.

Mike noticed something extraordinary about the poor, pitiful kid, something that made his chest hurt with sorrow. Jonathan was standing over that girl literally sweating blood. Actual, red blood.

More and more of it oozed out, covering his body with a red sheet. Then the most awful thing Mike had ever seen began to happen to the only person he

had ever been *able* to call a son.

His fellow human being, whom he loved, started drying and cracking apart. He undulated like a snake shedding its skin. As he did the bloody skin began to separate from dark, scaly flesh underneath. Suddenly he began pulling huge slabs of himself off. He ripped off his chest, throwing the translucent skin to the floor. Then with a grunt he scraped his back against the altar rail and left a mass of flesh there. Fissures formed in his legs and he drew them off, the suddenly hollow skin of the feet collapsing like punctured balloons. It made a sound like the shrink wrap coming off a record jacket.

Even as he did this his eyes began to bulge out of his head. They fell, two dried shells, to the floor. What appeared from within was bright yellow, as big as the eyes of a vulture. Mike remembered similar eyes staring at him from the sky above Titus's house. He drew the rest of his face away with trembling hands. There emerged a snake's face, glaring with intelligence and insane hatred.

In the dead silence of the church Mike could hear the wet "pop" as It drew off the last bit of Jonathan, the hand and skin of his left arm, and tossed it aside like an empty glove. It flexed the strange, gleaming claw that had been within.

Seeing this hideous miracle, Mike was at once humbled and filled with creeping horror. God was not the only power in the universe.

Jonathan began to scream again, but this time it was an awful, crackling sound somewhere between a reptilian hiss and the yammering of a crow.

Mike couldn't bear it anymore. If he had ever seen human suffering, he was seeing it now. Jonathan's heart and mind were in there enduring the torment of becoming that— something. Mike raised the pistol to put him out of his misery.

But he didn't get a shot. There was a flurry of activity around the *thing*. Two deacons grabbed Father and pushed him up against It.

It shrank back. They pushed Father into Its arms again. It twisted away, It screamed, but they persisted. Soon, as if unable to stop Itself, It plunged Its claws into him.

He gasped, he hammered at the bulging, relentless muscles, he kicked the scaly armor that covered the body. The claws sliced his flesh away from his muscles.

Then It threw the agonized, half-flayed priest aside and began moving toward Patricia. Father lay dying on the floor of his own sanctuary.

God, God, why have You let something like this come alive?

Patricia began to cry out, as sharply and desperately as a baby. Mike looked for a good shot but the candlelight and the swiftly moving deacons and acolytes made it impossible. It knelt down beside Patricia and caressed her with one of Its long nails. Then It lay upon her.

She could do nothing to prevent that shivering, crusty body from assaulting her. "Jonathan," she shouted, "Jonathan, remember yourself! You're not that thing, you're a human being and you love me!"

Somewhere in the depths of what he had become, she could see him remembering. It was just a glimmer in the savagery of him, but it was human and it was good. There was a gurgling sound, and something like sorrow began to battle the hate in the eyes.

"Oh, Jonathan, I know you're still there. I love you. I love you! I'll always love you!"

"I—I-I-ooaaahh!" It glared into her face with Its impossibly huge yellow-green eyes. She could not bear to look any longer. She turned her face away.

It began Its awful croaking again. She felt It beginning to move, to twist eagerly against her, ripping the flimsy material of the dress. "Jonathan, darling, if you can still hear me, don't hurt me! Please, darling!"

It grew rapidly more excited. She tried to remain as calm as she could. She could feel It bouncing heavily on her, making her breath come in ragged gulps. Then It was pounding frantically.

But It wasn't hurting her. It was trying to be gentle!

When she opened her eyes she saw on that hideous face an expression of intense conflict. It wanted to hurt her, but It was resisting the urge as best It could.

"Oh, Jonathan, Jonathan!"

The barrel of a pistol emerged past the edge of the altar above her head.

The thing that had been Jonathan stopped moving on her. It raised Its eyes, facing the gun. "P-lease—shuuuhhttt. P-lease!"

For an instant nobody moved.

Bullets went snap! snap! snap! It fell back onto the steps of the altar, thrashed once, then was still.

Pandemonium. Mary's voice, sharp and collected, rose above the general uproar. "Franklin—was there insemination?"

Patricia saw Franklin Titus smile happily. But who had inseminated her—the *thing* or the little spark of Jonathan that remained inside?

Oh, Jonathan, it was you, I know it was! *And it is your baby in me, I can feel it! Not the thing's! No, not that!*

People were screaming, rushing away from the altar and the smoking snout of the gun. Mary and Franklin moved close together, quite unconcerned about the weapon a few feet from their heads. They held hands, the old man and his faithful helper.

"All right, listen to me! Shut up and listen, all of you!" It was Mike. He came around the altar. Patricia's eyes filled with tears. She had never been so glad to see anybody in her life.

He came through the stillness that had followed his shout, and pointed the gun directly at Patricia's belly. "You cut her loose and bring us a raincoat."

A horrified gasp came from the crowd.

Mike cocked the pistol. His eyes met hers. "Do it. Or she dies."

Silence. Far back in the church there was a single panicky scream. "Cut her loose," Franklin said.

Patricia got up on wobbly legs. Mike helped her into the raincoat. He half-carried her across the sanctuary, through the sacristy, and out into the parking lot. His car was there. He put her in, then got in himself.

She was so grateful and so sad and so frightened that she could hardly think, could hardly talk. She sat as still as stone while he started the car and drove away.

This was escape! She should be glad. But she wept bitter tears.

"Let's just try and remember the Jonathan we knew."

"Oh, Mike, he's dead. *Dead!* And I loved him so."

Mike drove on beneath the yellow ranks of streetlights. They picked up speed on the Grand Central Parkway. They were heading west. "Do you need a doctor?"

"He didn't" hurt me. He wanted to but he fought it. You should have seen him, Mike, how he fought himself!"

Mike covered her hand with his own big paw. They reached the outskirts of the city and went into the dark beyond, on and on, toward anywhere as long

as it was far away.

Patricia began to allow herself to think of ordinary life again, of places far from the dominion of the Night Church.

There would be one such place, she felt sure, where she could find peace and safety enough to raise the child.

For there would be a child. And it would not be the child of the monster. Surely Jonathan had preserved enough of himself to defeat the plans of the Night Church—she just knew it, could feel it in her singing blood. A little baby, the precious last of Jonathan.

In his name, she would bear this child.

Mary and Franklin remained behind after their stunned congregation had left the church. "We'll have to tell them," Mary said. "They're in despair."

"Let it be a test of their faith. They'll find out soon enough."

It had all gone so very well. Perfectly, in fact. Well, almost. "Banion drew his pistol before the insemination."

"That was a near thing. I must have given him the autosuggestion at the wrong moment. But there was definitely a complete insemination. She's pregnant. And the father was not Jonathan. The father was the *monstrum*."

"But she believes otherwise."

"Of course. She'll bear the child as Jonathan's baby."

Mary put her arm around the old man. He was stooped, trembling with the weight of his years. The next great ritual of the Church would be his funeral, she suspected, on some moonless night not too far from now. He has come the full distance, and now he is tired.

"I wish them well," he said in his age-soft voice.

"Mike will do an excellent job of protecting her. You can count on that."

He coughed. "I'm exhausted."

She certainly didn't want him to keel over without giving her the last critical piece of information. "Where are they going, Franklin? You'd better tell me."

"I implanted a suggestion of Madison, Wisconsin."

"Name they'll use?"

"Edwards. And her gynecologist will be a young Doctor Jonas. He set himself up in practice last week. A good boy, from the Congregation Saint John Martyr in Milwaukee."

Mary locked the church behind them. The air was cool and clear. The

morning star hung low in the east. "Look there, Franklin. Lucifer."

Hand in hand they gazed at the star of the Night Church. Ordinary people called it Venus, but Lucifer was its proper name, and it was no star of love.

As predawn light spread over the quiet neighborhood Mary noticed an astonishing change around the church. "Look, Franklin, there were demons with us."

"How do you know?"

His old eyes must not be able to see the trees. "The leaves—they went to autumn colors last night."

"So they did. Quite a wonder."

"Yes, a wonder." She watched dead leaves race down the sidewalk on an angry little breeze. How sweet was the world in silence.

Softly at first in her heart Mary heard the plainsong of the Night Church, then heard it rising triumphant from dark and hiding, to fill the world.

Aeterne rerum conditor.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF CRITICAL MASS

WHITLEY STRIEBER



BEYOND 2012

THE OMEGA POINT

THE OMEGA POINT

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**THE
OMEGA
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THE OMEGA POINT

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Any mistakes or inaccuracies are my own.

Strong evidence exists that planetary transformations of the earth are being caused by highly charged material which has broken into our solar system from deep space.

—Dr. Alexey N. Dmitriev,
IICA Transactions, Volume 4, 1997

WHITE POWDER GOLD

In Greek mythology the quest for the secret of white powder gold was at the heart of the Golden Fleece legend, while in biblical terms it was the mystical realm of the Ark of the Covenant—the golden coffer which Moses brought out of Sinai, to be housed in the Temple of Jerusalem. The substance was said to confer extraordinary powers on the user, including, among many other things, the power to move in parallel dimensions of spacetime.

—Laurence Gardner,
Lost Secrets of the Sacred Ark

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

—Revelations 20:12

THE OMEGA POINT

PROLOGUE: THE PAST

12:04 AM EST, DECEMBER 21, 2012
TV STATION WBUL, BUFFALO, NEW YORK

Marty Breslin sat at the desk watching the cameras watch him, waiting for his nightly few minutes of local fame. “How’s the remote?” he asked Ginger Harper. They had dropped a number of feeds lately, although not on him, because weathermen normally don’t do feeds. But he was horrified at the idea of being left under the lights with nothing to say. Even when he had something to say, he had nothing to say, so a dead teleprompter was a terrifying thought. “Ginger, come back, please. We do have that feed ready to go?”

“We’re good down the line.”

“Anything unusual actually happening? Anywhere?” There were New Agers out in force around the world, on hilltops, crowding places like Sedona, and swarming by the thousands in Yucatan and Guatemala. Fourteen of them had been iced during a blizzard yesterday on Mount Everest. Even the stock market had gotten quiet today, waiting to see if anything might happen over the weekend. “Hello? Ginger?”

“I was just looking. CNN, quiet. BBC, they’re still on the Himalayas story, nothing fresh on the AP. Joke stories.”

Across on the news desk, Callie and Fred tossed real stories back and forth. They hit the Himalayas, but the big one tonight was a gang riding the highways disguised as state police officers, soliciting bribes in lieu of tickets. “Sounds like a good business,” he said into his mike.

“That it does,” Ginger replied.

He’d tried her a couple of times. No-go. Apparently her marriage was real. Well, it was her loss.

His lights came up. “Thirty seconds,” she said.

“What’re they doing out on the feed?”

“Chanting.”

Fred Gathers said, “And now for the latest on the end of the world, let’s go to Marty. What’s a weatherman doing reporting on a subject like this, Marty?”

And he was on. Magic time. Famous in Buffalo, folks all said hi along the Chippewa Strip. It wasn’t Manhattan, but they had the lake. The teleprompter began to roll. “Our thought was, if the New Agers were right and the world ended, it would be a weather story. As in, none. Obviously, weather post the apocalypse is gonna be kind of quiet.”

“Okay, so it’s after midnight on December 21, 2012. Why are we still here, Marty?”

“Good question, Fred. Tim Burris is on the scene at the Love and Light New Age Spiritual Center in Grover’s Mills, New Jersey. Tim, has anybody been beamed up yet?”

“Over to you, Tim,” Ginger said.

On the monitor, Burris appeared standing in a pool of light surrounded by figures in flowing white robes. Many of them were female, young, and, from what Marty could see, well worth the time. “Man, I wonder if he’s gettin’ any of that?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ginger said.

“This is Tim Burris in Grover’s Mills, here at the Love and Light New Age Spiritual Center, where I have the Reverend Carlton Gaylord to explain why we’re all still here.”

He thrust the mike into the face of a tall, cadaverous man whose white robe had a gold choke collar. “We are celebrating the moment that the earth crosses the center of the galactic plane for the first time in twenty-six thousand years,” he said. “Nobody said anything about the end of the world.”

But that wasn’t true! *He’d* said it, and on camera. That was the whole point of sending Tim all the way to Joisey. “Hey! We got that clip!”

Tim waited. Nothing happened. He blinked, then continued. “But isn’t this the end of everything?”

Marty said into his mike, “Run the clip, Ginger!”

“It’s not in the system.”

“Aw, fer crap’s sake, find it!”

Burris tried to pull the clip out of the guy. “But you said, uh—we have a

clip—” Oh, so lame. There was a reason he worked in this joke station.

“Ginger!”

“It’s gone!”

“Tell him, he’s dyin’ out there!”

When she imparted the wonderful news, Mary saw his face fall, then set with determination. He tried again. “You’ve been quoted as saying that the world would end tonight at twelve oh one.”

“I said that the Mayan prophecy would come true.”

Crap! Crap! Crap!

“But the world didn’t end! We’re all still here.”

“The end of the world was media hype. You people. All the Mayan prophecy said was that we’d cross the centerline of the galaxy, and we did.” He pulled up his sleeve and glanced at his Rolex. “Exactly four minutes and twenty seconds ago.”

“This is so poor, Ginger, he is eating us for frigging lunch!”

Ginger, her voice tight, said, “Go to the scientist clip, then we’re back in with the forecast.”

They ran the talking head from the university, who explained that astronomers had no idea whether we were crossing the centerline of the galaxy or not, because it was hidden behind dust clouds.

“And we’re out,” Ginger said. “Two minutes on the break, Marty.”

His lights went down. His camera turned off. He tried to control the red-hot rage that was building in him. “That was shitty as hell,” he said, forcing himself not to scream. “I mean, we had that guy nailed down, that’s why we bought el Timothy a ticket all the way to New Joisey, Ginger, hey!”

Ginger was silent.

He knew that there was no point in commenting further, but he could not shut up. “I mean, have you got your professional screwup certificate, Gin, or are you still an advanced amateur?”

“I found the clip!”

He wanted to tell her to stuff it up her ass, but that would be harassment of some damn kind. “How nice,” he said. “Wrap it up for me and I can smoke it after the show.”

“To you in five, four, three, two, one.”

“And the big story tonight is that lake-effect snow, folks, you got that right, we’re gonna get a heavy dose tonight.” And so it went, down to the

bottom of the hour, and they were out. When he walked off the darkened set, Gin was already gone. Far, no doubt. But where else were they gonna get somebody who could run a board for her money?

Later that night, he was hanging on a bar sucking beer and wishing some kind of dealer, any kind, would show up. Then a citizen came in, saw him, and said, “Hey, Marty. No snow!”

That was Marty Breslin. Batting a thousand.

6:36 PM, DECEMBER 22, 2012
JET PROPULSION LABORATORY

Dr. Deborah Wilson pointed to a faintly blinking readout from the Advanced Composition Explorer. “What’s that spike, Sam?”

Her graduate assistant thought perhaps this was some sort of quiz. He tapped the screen, and the ACE II detailed readout appeared. What he saw confused him. It was ordinary for the ion flux from the sun to vary, sometimes by a lot, but not by this much, never. “Let me run the circuits.” What this would do was to determine whether or not there were overloads anywhere on the satellite, or tripped circuit breakers. From there, they could pinpoint the source of the anomaly.

“I’ve done that,” Dr. Wilson said. She was clipped, careful, and very uncompromising. But she had also just told him that this tremendous spike in ions was some sort of real phenomenon, not an artifact.

He pulled up the Solar and Heliospheric readouts. The solar wind speed was 431.5 km per second, the proton density was thirteen. There was a coronal hole at midlatitude, and two small sunspots on the near side. “So this isn’t coming from the sun,” he said.

“Apparently not.”

Energy from deep space, then. It had first been detected in the late nineties of the last century by Russian astrophysicists, but it wasn’t considered a significant factor by their American counterparts.

As he spoke, his voice rose an octave, which he just hated. “But this can’t be.” He cleared his throat.

“Except that it is.”

And there it was, entering the solar system right now, the sudden increase in intensity unmistakable. And his instructor was waiting. “I think it’s a wave of energy from some sort of extrasolar event, perhaps an archaic supernova.”

“Why archaic?”

“Well, obviously, there’s a lot here compared to the normal range of solar

output, but I'd think that a close supernova—that would be, um, even more energetic.”

“Unless we've been in the distant corona since 1997, and this is the leading edge of the real stuff.”

There was something in her voice that he didn't like. He looked up, met her eyes. “You're scared.”

“Supernovas happen.”

“But—my God.” If this was the leading edge of a supernova wave, it could end life on earth. “This isn't possible!”

She reached across his cluttered desk and did something that she had never done before, and, in fact, was probably not appropriate conduct. She touched his hand. She started to speak, then stopped, and her silence said everything.

It was possible. It was quite possible.

However, when their findings eventually became a press release, it didn't exactly cause people to go rushing into churches begging God for deliverance. In fact, the story appeared in *The New Scientist* as a single paragraph. It showed up on Space.com for a couple of days. Various scientific blogs commented on it, more or less in passing.

Still, though, the energy level in the solar system quietly began to increase, and it kept increasing. Nobody noticed that the ion flux had begun to rise at exactly one nanosecond after midnight on December 21.

Nobody would ever notice that, but the story of what was happening to our solar system would grow and grow, until it became the most important of all stories, the greatest story, and, in a sense, the last story.

1

LUCKY BOY

MAY 2020

David Ford had never flown in a private jet before, but it seemed almost inevitable that the superexclusive Acton Clinic would transport its new chief psychiatrist this way. The thing was small and louder than an airliner, but it was also swift and plush, if a bit worn. The sweep of leather was cracked here and there, and the carpet was tight from many steps.

Mrs. Aubrey Denman sat opposite him. She was the board's representative, all angles and desperation, narrow arms, a neck like knotted rope, her face an archaeology of lifts, so many that she appeared to have been transformed into a waxwork of herself. Her laughter was all sound and no expression. She must be seventy-five, maybe more.

The jet was claustrophobic. There was absolutely no wasted space. In the galley, a cadaverous servant in a blue blazer stood at the ready, his eyes emptied by a lifetime of waiting.

She was so rich that she had not only a plane, two pilots, and a servant, but also the plane was working.

So here he was in this really amazing situation, thirty-two years old and moving straight from his psychiatric residency to a good job in a time when there were no jobs of any kind.

"Dr. Ford, I want to take this opportunity to give you a little additional information."

They were in facing seats, knee to knee in the compact cabin. "I would appreciate that very much."

"First, I must apologize about the plane."

"It's wonderful, and I'm so grateful for the ride. It could've taken days otherwise."

"This is a fifty-year-old airplane. The only one I have that works. The newer ones—the electronics are ruined, they tell me."

The sun, of course. Always the damned sun. He noted the implication that she had a number of planes. Extraordinary.

She seemed to brace herself, like somebody bracing for a crash or waiting for an explosion. But when she spoke, her tone was casual, almost offhand. “You do know that Dr. Ullman was the unfortunate victim of a fire.”

Something had opened the position, that had been clear enough. He had not asked, and nobody had explained. “I’m sorry.”

“He was living in the town. Unfortunately, the fire service in Raleigh County has deteriorated. They were too slow.”

It seemed odd to leave information like this to a moment when he was already on his way to the facility, as if the knowledge might have changed his mind. “It was an accident?”

“We assume.”

“Is there anything else I should know? I mean, why are you telling me now?”

“You understand that your quarters will be on the estate?”

“I’ve been told that I have Herbert Acton’s personal suite.”

“Which is one of the most extraordinary interior spaces in this country. In the world, for that matter.”

“That I was told. I’m fascinated. I tried to find pictures online, but—”

“No pictures. We’re not the Donald Trump sort.” She smiled a little. “Mr. Acton met girls in the bedroom you will use. Of course, you’re a bachelor.” Now her face became as hard as flint. “He wasn’t.”

Could she have once met Herbert Acton there? He’d died in 1958. She’d probably been a girl then, a teenager.

She burst out laughing. “It’s just brilliant, you’re going to love it, young man.”

She reached for her drink—they had both been given highballs by the waiter—and as she lifted it to her lips, a blue glow appeared around her arm. She looked at the glow for a moment, then tossed the drink away with a little cry and an electric crackle. David noticed the same glow along his arms, and felt a tingling sensation. He thought, *This thing is about to blow up*, and his heart started racing. The waiter rushed to pick up the glass, blue fire shimmering along his arms and back.

“Ma’am, it’s Saint Elmo’s fire,” he said. “We’ve got incoming solar energy again.”

She looked pained. “We should have taken the car, Andy.”

“Impossible, Ma’am. Too slow, too dangerous.”

David glanced down at what he supposed was the New Jersey Turnpike far below. There was no sign of movement in the long, gleaming snake of vehicles. He said nothing.

She jabbed the intercom. “What does this Saint Elmo’s fire mean? Is it going to cause a crash?”

“We’re trying a lower altitude.”

“I hate these damned solar flares. It’s hideous, all of it. Hideous.” She twisted about in her seat where she sat, a spidery old creature in silk and diamonds. She looked at him, suddenly as intent as a snake.

“Where’s it all going to end, Doctor, do you know?”

“It’ll fade away eventually.”

“That’s one opinion. But perhaps you haven’t seen this.”

She handed him a document in a beige folder. When he opened it, he saw red classified stamps.

“I can’t read this.”

She waved her fingers at him. “You’d better.”

“I haven’t got a clearance.”

“Don’t you understand, David? That doesn’t matter anymore. All of that’s gone.”

The paper was only three pages long, a quick series of paragraphs. It was from the chairman of the National Security Council, directed to the president.

“Where did you get this?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, young man, read the damn thing!”

According to the paper, the solar system was entering the atmosphere of a supernova—information which was hardly classified. Everybody knew it. But then came a more shocking sentence: “The last time we passed through this cloud 12,600 years ago, debris from the body of the exploded star impacted the glaciers. An area of the great northern glacier, the Laurentian ice sheet, was transformed from ice to superheated steam in under a second. This area was as large as Rhode Island and the impact resulted in enormous icebergs being thrown as far afield as New Mexico. A storm of smaller pieces created the million craters of the Carolina Dells.”

Still, he was not surprised by this. Since the publication of Firestone, West, and Warwick-Smith’s *Cycle of Cosmic Catastrophes* in 2006, it had been a

generally known, if debated, explanation for the abrupt end of the Ice Age.

He read on.

“The ice melted so rapidly that the entire North American continent was flooded. In North America, all human life was destroyed. Elsewhere, man survived, and the catastrophe gave rise to all of the world’s flood legends.”

He looked up. She had knocked back his drink. She regarded him out of shadowed, appraising eyes.

“Does any of this ring a bell?”

“Sure. It’s one of the theories about why the Ice Age ended. Why it would be classified, I can’t imagine. It’s been in the news for years.”

“Read on.”

“As our last advanced civilization was being destroyed by the upheaval, scientists made detailed observations of the stellar debris field. They mapped it and found it to be irregular in shape, and it became clear that we would reenter it in another twelve thousand years. But they could not pinpoint the exact date without taking extraordinary measures.

“There is evidence that they created some sort of substance that enabled them to see very accurately into time itself, and actually looked forward into the future to determine the precise moment of reentry.

“Whatever this was, it is why later users were able to draw glyphs of modern military equipment at the Temple of Hathor in Egypt. But more importantly, some truly exotic use of it may be why certain people, such as many of the priestly class in the late Mayan period, simply disappeared. They went elsewhere in time physically.

“So far, our efforts to determine what this was have failed.

“In any case, its use enabled the people of the past, at some very distant point, to make the exquisitely careful observations that pinpointed the precise date that the danger would return. They marked this as the final end of the world.

“However, they also understood that mankind had much history to live before that day came, and they realized that all of their learning centers, clustered as they were along shorelines that would soon be under hundreds of feet of water, were doomed. They created a calendar now called the Zodiac, that measured the ages. This was further refined as the Mayan Long Count calendar, which revealed the exact moment the solar system would re-enter the cloud.

The tone was ponderous with official importance. But there was a problem—it was based on an absurd notion.

“The ancient civilization they refer to—I assume they mean Atlantis? Plato’s little speculation?”

“What do you remember?”

“About Atlantis? Nothing. It was before my time.” His contempt was growing.

“Please keep reading, young man, if you don’t mind.”

As the jet sped on, its old engines blaring, its airframe shuddering, he returned to the document.

“The beginning of reentry was first detected as an increase in cosmic background radiation by Dimitriev in 1997. Then, precisely on December 21, 2012, as the Mayan Long Count calendar suggested, an unusual spike took place. Since then, the density of the field has continued to grow, and all indications are that this will continue, possibly for thousands of years, with unknown consequences. In fact, the solar system is headed directly into the center of the cloud. In a very short time, we will begin to actually see the core of the exploded star, and it will be flooding Earth with radiation.”

This last paragraph had changed his opinion of the document. In fact, he was eager now to know more and flipped the page—and sat staring at the back of the folder.

Mrs. Denman took it from his hands.

“Let me ask you this, David. Do you recall Herbert Acton? Bartholomew Light?”

“I want to know more about this document. Because if this last part is confirmed—”

“It’s confirmed. Please answer my question.”

“Who confirmed it? How?”

“The way you give me the space I need to address that is to answer my question.”

“I know who Mr. Acton is, certainly.”

“But you recall nothing else? No childhood memories?”

“Of Herbert Acton? Mrs. Denman, I was born in 1984. He’d been dead for—what? thirty years or more.”

“Charles Light, Bartholomew’s son?”

David was mystified. “No, I don’t remember him. Should I?”

She reached over and touched his face, drawing her fingers along his cheek. It was an oddly suggestive sort of a thing to do, and David was embarrassed.

“As far as you’re concerned, you were never at the home of Herbert Acton?”

“No.”

She regarded him. “No memory at all?”

He shook his head.

A small, sad smile came into her eyes.

“There were thirty-three families, all associated with Herbert Acton in one way or another. Your family was one of them.”

“My family?”

“Your great-grandfather sold Herbert Acton the land the estate is built on. That connects you.”

“A very tenuous connection.”

“You remember nothing of your childhood?”

“I remember my childhood perfectly well. I was raised in Bethesda. My father was a GP. He was a good doctor and I’ve been trying to be the same.”

“But you don’t remember Charles Light? Or the class? Or Caroline Light?”

“Absolutely not.”

She smiled. “You will meet Caroline, and when you do, I’m sure it’ll all come back to you. In any case, you were hired because it’s time, and you’ve been carefully prepared.”

He absorbed this last and most mysterious statement. When she had originally interviewed him, she had a list of obviously professionally written questions about medical qualifications. Frankly, she could have gotten them from any hospital personnel department, or even a book. He had thought her interview technique a poor one and had doubted her qualifications to select a physician provider for any decent sort of mental health facility. Now he really doubted those qualifications.

He’d also had the sense that his answers didn’t matter to her, and even that she didn’t understand his discussions of patient evaluation methodologies, the uses of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, his thoughts about drugs to be used and dosing, or, frankly, any of it.

No matter this document, whatever it might actually mean, he had no intention of proceeding if anything other than his professional qualifications

had gone into his hiring. It was already a sticking point that she'd come to Manhattan Central and found him, even though he wasn't looking for work. First in his class at Johns Hopkins had been the stated reason.

"If you didn't hire me on my medical qualifications—"

"You have magnificent qualifications."

"Who is Caroline Light? What class?"

"Doctor, you will remember."

"No. I need to know right now or we need to turn around and go back to New York."

"You have nothing to go back to. You've resigned."

That was true enough. For everyone working just now, there were fifty ready to take his job, and his position at Manhattan Central had no doubt been filled within hours of his leaving.

"What class?"

"You were in a class as a child. On the Acton estate."

"That's impossible."

"That's what you say now, but you'll remember."

"Why would I forget?"

"Because if you had not been made to forget, you might have revealed something about an extremely sensitive matter. Any of you."

"Any of us? Of who?"

"The class!"

"I don't remember this class, Mrs. Denman, so I need you to explain it, please."

"David, the class is now assembled at the clinic. They will appear to be patients."

"Appear to be? Mrs. Denman, please. What am I getting into?"

"David, when you're at the clinic, you'll remember more on your own, and there will be somebody coming soon who'll help you remember everything."

If there was one thing he could not handle and had never been able to handle, it was helplessness. He needed to be in control of his life, and that was at the core of his willingness to take this job. He wouldn't be under control of a hospital administration, he would control one—or so he had thought.

"This is an outrage."

"Yes, it is, David. I admit it. You were always the only candidate for the

job.”

He could not turn back, that was clear. He did not relish ending up on the street just now. The world was starving and there was no recourse. Professionals were clawing for food alongside beggars.

“You’ve lied to me. In effect, kidnapped me.”

“And who’re you gonna call? The FBI?”

He waved the report. “I hope I’m not expected to deal with supply problems and survival issues, because this looks like a horrific disaster. Something way beyond the Acton Clinic.”

“You have been trained to navigate us through this. You are uniquely qualified.”

“I’ve had one class in disaster management. I treat psychiatric disease.”

“You will remember. Trust me on that.”

“Trust *you*?”

“You must understand—”

“I don’t understand a thing!”

“Shut up, boy!”

“I will not shut up! I don’t understand and I need to understand because you’re dropping me into an incredibly challenging situation and at the same time telling me that I’ve somehow forgotten all the damn rules. Come on!”

The jet shuddered.

“Oh, God,” she said. “I loathe air travel.”

“It’s starting to land, that’s all. What am I supposed to remember?”

“David, let’s please just get through the landing!”

“What in *hell* am I supposed to remember?”

She sighed. In her eyes he saw something beyond desperation, the expression of an animal that is dying and knows it has run out of options.

But then again, that was apparently the definition of the entire world, if this document of hers was to be believed. Everyone had been assuming that it would be like this another few weeks or months. Surely it would get better.

And surely it would. Earth wasn’t descending into hell . . . was it?

As they banked, David could see the trees over northern Maryland brushed with fragile early spring leaf, a dusting of green not quite thick enough to camouflage the reality on the ground, of burned-out houses and strip malls, and abandoned vehicles along the roads.

Off to the west, he saw a large estate, a complex of shale roofs in lovely,

manicured grounds. He could see figures on the grounds, a man riding a lawn tractor, two others walking along the curving driveway.

“Is that it?”

She jabbed the intercom. “How much longer, damn it?”

“Five minutes, Ma’am.”

She regarded David. “I don’t want to die. Isn’t it odd? An old woman like me. So selfish.”

He wasn’t interested in her anxieties. “It’s human nature,” he snapped, causing her to blink and set her jaw. Well, let her be offended. “I need to get to the bottom of this,” he continued. “Tell me about this class. And if I’m suffering from an amnesia, what was responsible or who? Was I underage? Did my parents consent?”

“Of course they did! Your father brought you to the class.”

“I’m taking this job as a clinician, not a survival expert or whatever it is you expect me to be. I’m a psychiatrist and that’s all I am.”

“Think of yourself as a shepherd.”

“All right. That’s valid. But not a disaster expert.”

“You’re our Quetzalcoatl.”

How tiresome. Since it had been realized that December 21, 2012, actually did have some significance, everyone was an expert on Aztec and Mayan civilization, and their dreary, complicated, and unforgiving gods.

“I am so tired of that stupid fad. Those damn gods didn’t mean a thing.”

“They had meaning.”

“Come *on!*”

“Not in the way people think, of course. They represent scientific principles that have been lost. Human personality types, hidden powers. But you understand all this. You just need to remember, David.”

“Remember *what?*”

They came in low over the estate, then banked again, this time quite sharply, resulting in an excellent view of the property.

Behind the shale roofs of what was obviously a very large mansion, stood an austere modern building. The whole establishment was surrounded by high brick walls.

“Is that razor wire on the walls?”

She peered out the window. “Looks like it. We have an excellent security organization. I’m sure it’s there for good reason.”

“I’m sure.”

When they landed, what looked to David like an unusually heavy black car appeared, some sort of Lincoln, he thought. Andy the waiter opened the jet, dropping down the door and lowering the steps. David checked his watch. They’d been in the air for thirty-eight minutes, a journey that would have taken six hours by car, assuming the roads were open. But with all the disabled vehicles around nowadays, it could have easily taken a week, or proved to be impossible.

As they went down the steps, the pilot appeared.

“We need to keep moving,” he shouted over the whine of the engines.

Andy was already putting David’s bags in the trunk. Mrs. Denman had no bags. She was returning tonight.

David gazed off across the airport. There were a couple of Cessnas in tie-downs. The wreckage of two personal jets—newer than this one—lay piled alongside the runway.

“Get in the car!” Andy barked. David realized that he’d taken on a new role. In the air, he was a servant. Here, a bodyguard.

David jumped in. A moment later, the trunk slammed, the pilot returned to the jet and it took off, making the car shake violently as its exhaust hit the vehicle.

“Jesus, they’re in a hurry!”

“There can be shooters,” Mrs. Denman muttered.

“How dangerous is this place?”

She looked at him as if he was some sort of a lunatic for even needing to ask. Andy, now driving, did his job in silence.

“I have two hours. The plane will fly a pattern, then meet me back here. Not a good idea to keep it on the ground.”

“No, I suppose not.”

The car swayed, then picked up speed as it approached the town of Raleigh itself. David had never been here before, but had been told that it was a prosperous and settled community of upscale commuters and local gentry.

By the time they reached the outskirts of the town, the car was doing at least sixty. They accelerated as they went along the main street, tires screaming as they rounded courthouse square.

Buildings raced past on each side as Andy leaned on the horn and they shot through one red light after another.

“What’s going on?”

“We call it ‘running the town.’”

“But—Jesus . . .”

“There’s a lot of inappropriate resentment.”

At that moment, the car turned and slowed as it began moving, once again, through the countryside. “Cigarette?” Mrs. Denman asked, holding out a pack.

“I don’t smoke.”

She put it away. “Neither do I.” She sighed.

Soon, David saw ahead of them a pair of enormously imposing gates. They were iron and easily twenty feet tall at their peaks. Across the top were four iron finials. On the finials, David recognized gryphons with their eagle’s wings and lion’s bodies, familiar, leering forms from the walls of Gothic cathedrals. Gryphons were guardians of the gates of heaven. Worked into the iron of the gates themselves were images of Mesoamerican deities—which was odd, given the age of this place. In the early twentieth century, they’d hardly been known.

“Are these gates new?”

“They’re original to the estate.”

As they opened and he saw the great house standing off across the rolling, exquisitely kept lawns, he was struck as if through the heart with the most poignant *déjà vu*.

“You’re as white as a sheet, Doctor.” She put the back of a long, spiderlike hand to his forehead. “No fever, at least, young man. Memory can bring fever.”

“Stop the car.”

“Ignore him, Andy.”

“Stop the car! I’m not taking this job. No matter what, I’m going back to New York.”

The car didn’t even slow down, and as they approached the great redbrick house with its wide colonnade and broad terraces, the sense of *déjà vu*, rather than fading, became more acute.

“You feel it, don’t you?”

“I feel very strange and I do not want to go ahead with this. I don’t know what’s going on here.”

She laid a hand on his wrist. “Just relax and let yourself feel it. Memory

will return.” She leaned back and gave him a smile as broad as a child’s. “You’ll thank me, young man, when you do remember.”

“Just tell me, for God’s sake!”

“You have to make the connections yourself or they’ll have no meaning. No emotional resonance. You need to find your commitment to your mission in your own heart. I cannot do it for you.”

“But you know.”

“I know that the class existed but not what you were taught in it. And I also know that you just this moment remembered being here. It’s written on your face.”

They pulled up before the portico. David opened the door of the car, which was so heavy that it felt like pushing open a safe.

Walking toward the great house, he found himself profoundly drawn to the sense of order and permanence that pertained everywhere. The docile clicking of the lawn sprinklers, the early green of the trees, the grand apple tree just by the south wall in full bloom—it all spoke of a world that elsewhere had already slipped into the past, replaced by the sense of the posthumous that was coming to define modern life.

But it was also part of *his* past. His own personal past belonged in some way to this place.

Aubrey Denman opened the front door using a fingerprint detector. He’d half expected the great door to be swept open by some sort of butler. Instead, an armed security man in a blazer and tie greeted them. Obviously, his orders were to wait until the fingerprint reader had released the lock.

“Where are the—” David’s voice died. He had been about to ask where the patients and staff were, but the splendor of the room he had just entered silenced him. He found himself looking across a wide hall with a magnificent inlaid floor depicting a hunt in full cry. It was marquetry, and yet not too fragile for a floor.

And, incredibly, he remembered: *You slid across this floor in your socks.*

The leaping horses and racing dogs in the floor led the eye to a grand staircase that swept upward as if to heaven itself, drawing the eye further, this time to a phenomenal trompe l’oeil ceiling that imparted an unforgettable illusion of a vast summer sky.

You lay on the landing and imagined yourself among the birds.

“Where are my patients?”

“The patients are in the patient wing. Study the records first, Doctor, please. Then meet them.”

“Will they know me? Are they also in amnesia?”

“They’re in a state of induced psychosis.”

He stopped. “What did you just say?”

“For security reasons, this place appears to be a clinic for the mentally ill. Most members of the class are here as patients, their real selves hidden beneath a combination of amnesia and artificial psychosis. Members of the class who are on staff have only the amnesia, and one or two of them, who will guide the others, retain clear memory.”

He turned to her, and on her. “This is totally unacceptable. Who did such a thing to these people? I can’t be a party to it.”

“You can be a party to waking them up, then, and ending the need.”

“This is all insane, the whole thing. Who would *ever* induce mental illness to conceal somebody’s—what, their knowledge, their identity? Why was it done?”

“The enemies of our mission are incredibly ruthless and they’re going to get more so. If they found the class, they’d kill every single one of them. And you, David, make no mistake. But beforehand they would tear your mind to pieces with drugs and torture beyond anything you can imagine. And in the end, they would obtain your knowledge, amnesia or not.”

Never in his life had he struck another human being, but he was tempted to now, as he found himself coping with a disturbing impulse to shake the truth out of this old lady.

“Who are these enemies?”

“Presidents, kings, the rich and the famous, not to mention the members of the Seven Families who control the wealth of this planet.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The more you remember, the more you’ll understand. Come with me. My time is short, and I need to show you your office.” She touched his hand. “David, you’ll regain control of your situation and I know how badly you need control; I wrote your personality profile.”

“*Wrote* it? Where is it? How could you write it?”

“I’m a psychiatrist, David, just like you. I managed the mental health of the class.”

“You did this to these people!”

Her eyes sought his, and in them, brown and hazed, he saw that hunted expression again.

“How did you do it? What method did you use?”

As if in shame, she turned away from him, and he knew that whatever she had done had been traumatic for all involved, including her.

Causing amnesia was a matter of hypnosis and drugs, but to make a person psychotic must be a ferocious process.

“How can they be released from this?”

“I’ll come back, and I’ll release them.”

“When?”

“We’re working on a very exact timeline. But I can assure you that it will be done.”

“Wait a minute. What timeline? I need to know!”

“If somebody who knew that was caught, it would be an incalculable disaster.”

“Caught? Could I be *caught*? By whom? Who are these enemies? Are they here?” He followed her up the staircase. “Damn it, I want answers!”

She mounted the stairs with the deliberation of a heart patient, her nostrils dilating as she sucked each careful breath.

“The house itself is lived in by staff and service. The patients are in the back, in the new wing.”

“Answer my questions!”

“Time will answer your questions.”

“Too damn late!”

“At exactly the right moment. Now, please focus on this. You’ll meet your staff later, then be introduced to the patients. I want to talk to you about your colleague Marian Hunt before you meet her.”

She stopped before an imposing mahogany door.

“Are you ready?” When she smiled, that expression came again.

The office was gigantic.

“I can’t work in this. It’s ridiculous.”

“Nonsense. You ought to be grateful to be surrounded by all this beauty.”

It was the size of a ballroom, but constructed out of mahogany inlaid with many other woods. A broad bank of windows looked south, another north, and the walls were lined with shelves and shelves of books, all old, all leather bound. An immense Persian rug filled this end of the room, under an equally

huge and ornate desk. At the other was a fireplace fronted by a leather couch and wing chairs. In the paneling above the door were two glyphs of Mesoamerican gods, exquisitely carved, their faces glaring and ferocious.

“Who are they?” he asked.

“What principles do they represent? I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“I thought you were an expert on Aztec crap.”

“Thank you. Each of us knows only what he needs to know.”

Unlike the downstairs, he had no sense of déjà vu about this room. He surveyed the library. Every shelf was filled.

“Is there room for my books?”

She pulled down a row of what turned out to be book backs, revealing some empty shelving.

“Your predecessor kept his here.”

“Ah. Is the whole library fake, then?”

“Hardly. There are some extraordinary texts here.”

She handed him a volume with a gold-embossed glyph on the spine. He opened it to magnificent color plates of glyphs, hundreds of them.

“It’s entirely in . . . what is this? Is it Mayan? Toltec?”

She looked at it. “You’ll have access to scholars.”

“Where?”

“Here. Among your class.”

His only choice, he saw, was to just roll with this. There was no question in his mind that, as a child, he’d been to this house. Certainly, he had seen the downstairs. But what this class was all about, and why the security, he could not imagine—or rather, he supposed, remember.

Or could he? There might be vague memories in the back of his mind of the names of the old gods. But it was also true that their names were everywhere these days. And yet, he recalled other children, and being happy here.

He remembered, also, that there had been an enormous security issue.

“We need to discuss Marian Hunt.”

“Yes. She’s been assistant director here for what, ten years?”

“Since it opened.”

“Then surely she was the ideal choice for director.”

“She wasn’t part of the class. But she doesn’t know that and cannot know it; so as far as she’s concerned, she’s been passed over for a mere boy.”

“If the board doesn’t have faith in her, perhaps she would’ve been better off leaving.”

“Where would she go?”

A question without an answer. Or no, it did have an answer: she would go nowhere.

“Let me show you the surveillance toys,” Mrs. Denman said. “Every patient is available to total monitoring.” She pressed her finger against a discreet fingerprint reader embedded in the bookcase beside his desk. Two more shelves of fake books slid away to reveal a very large screen populated by dozens of small video images revealing what he felt sure would turn out to be every inch of the public spaces in the facility, indoors and out.

She touched a button and new rows of images appeared.

“These are the patient social areas,” she said. She tapped one of the images, which expanded to fill the screen.

For a moment, David did not understand what he was seeing. Then he did, and he was so shocked that he must have gasped aloud, because Aubrey Denman’s bird head snapped toward him, and the expression of fear on her face was almost as appalling as the straitjacket confining the patient.

At Manhattan Central, he’d seen patients under restraint, of course, but not being kept in one of these things. If not illegal, it was certainly a spectacular medical failure.

“I can’t allow that,” he said.

There were three patients in a sunny, pleasant room. Each one had a nurse in attendance, not surprising in a facility that offered the extreme level of care found at the Acton Clinic. But one of them was in this primitive restraint.

“He’s unable to bear . . . anything. At any moment he’ll just lose himself.”

“Do you know him?”

Her eyes closed, she gave a slow nod, one that communicated a sense of the anguish that her work clearly caused her. “There has been a great deal of sacrifice here, David. Lives sacrificed—the happiness of youth, David—all for the mission.”

“Which is what?”

“David,” she said, “the future. The *future!*”

She took his hand—snatched it—grasping it as if it was a lifeline in a storm. And suddenly, there came a memory.

He was trying urgently to explain something to a tall man, and to

emphasize his point, he had grabbed this man's hand.

"I told him I couldn't do it. I told him!"

"But you can, David." She glanced at her watch. "I'm out of time."

He would have to keep his questions and his considerable doubts to himself. But he did not agree with her optimism, not at all. How could anybody save anything, given what was coming?

Well, perhaps he had a mentor in her. She was hardly the wealthy old fool she had initially seemed.

"You'll be back," he said. It was not a question, and not intended to be one.

"Of course. And I'm always available on my cell."

"I need to get to know my staff," he said, "and the class. Who are my classmates?"

"There will be somebody coming to help you. Until they arrive, don't breathe a word about the class, not a single word."

"I'm sitting on top of an institution full of people who've been spectacularly abused and I'm not supposed to even say anything about it? I don't think so." He gestured toward the screen. "What about them, are they members of the class?"

"Two of them. The other is genuinely disturbed."

"And you did this. It's appalling."

"David, we did what we had to. Without security this deep the class would have been found. That must not happen, David, it *must not*."

"What's so important about them? I'm sorry if I sound callous, but I really need to know why, in a world where billions are dying, a small group of people would need to be so carefully protected?"

She closed the control center. "Call a staff meeting, but I'd advise you to move carefully. After Marian, your next order of business will be to meet Katrina Starnes. Katie. She's your assistant."

"Isn't it rather odd that she's not here now?"

She gestured toward the book backs that concealed the electronic wonders. "She's not a member of the class. She isn't allowed access to this system or to know anything about the inner meaning of this place."

"Which is what? I still don't understand."

"No, of course not."

The moment he had experienced the *déjà vu* that had convinced him that

he had been in this house before, he had made the decision to let this play out. These vague, amnesia-stifled memories he was experiencing were really very strange, and, if they were true, then he was potentially looking at a whole hidden life, and he had no intention of not exploring it.

“I need to know more. A lot more. Are there any records of what we studied in the class? Video? Even just a syllabus. What did we study?”

“I need to leave.”

“Oh, wonderful! Leave me with an insoluble mystery and an institution to run during the worst social collapse since the fall of the Roman Empire.”

“Your memories will come back to you.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Oh, they must! Young man, you see the stakes. They *must!*”

A moment later, she was heading toward the door of the office. He was appalled.

“What about Dr. Ullman? Was the fire really an accident? Am I in danger?”

For a long moment, she was silent. Then she said, “David, we don’t know. Maybe it was a fire set by resentful townies. Could be. Or it could be something worse.”

“I need to know more!”

“You have your security force and Glen MacNamara is very, very good at what he does. Start there.”

As she spoke, she hurried away across the large room.

“Wait! The fingerprint reader? How do I get programmed into it?”

“You’re already in it.”

“Nobody took my fingerprints.”

“Of course they did—in class. Your fingerprints, your DNA, we have it all.”

She neither spoke again, nor wished him well, smiled—any of it. She simply went stalking off down the hall.

Her hidden timeline was strict, clearly.

“Mrs. Denman, wait! I need help! I need my questions answered!”

Her footsteps sounded on the stairs, quick, clattering away into the silence of the house.

As he heard the enormous car start up outside, he ran down the stairs, but by the time he reached the front of the building, she was already well down

the driveway.

He yanked his cell phone out of his pocket and jammed her number in—and got nothing. The damn phone was deader than dead. He glanced up at the spotted, angry sun and threw it down onto the elegant brick driveway.

A moment later, there was a flash, followed at once by a sound so loud that it was like a body blow from a wrecking ball, an enormous, thundering roar.

He had never been close to a large explosion, and so did not know the effects and did not immediately understand what was happening. Then he did.

Shocked, disbelieving, he watched the smoke rising. She had been right and more than right. This place had enemies, and so did he. And he felt sure that they had just taken from him his most important ally.

From behind him, a siren began to wail. No police came, though, no fire department, no EMS. The siren was the clinic's alert system, and it would be the only siren, because the Acton Clinic was alone. And he was alone, and they were all alone.

Not their enemies, though, hidden, aggressive, and lethally effective. Obviously, they were not alone.

2

THE ENEMY

In the disoriented silence that followed, a fireball erupted above the wall from the other side, then disappeared into the roiling pillar of black smoke. The car's gas tank had exploded, ending any thought that its armor might somehow have protected the occupants.

Two white Jeeps came bounding down the driveway, with discreet ACTON SECURITY signs on their doors. They raced through the gate.

Finally absorbing the reality of the situation, David began running behind them. At once, though, powerful arms stopped him. He struggled but he could not escape from hands like great stones.

"You can't help her now."

Then another man ran past them, a tall man in an improbably elegant green crushed-silk suit.

"Mack, stop," the man holding David shouted. "STOP THERE!" Then, more softly, "Shit!"

A small fire truck left the gate, and a moment later white steam began rising, and the sound of water hissing from its pump.

The man holding him released his grip. "I'm Glen MacNamara," he said as David turned around. David was startled by a sense of recognition. He'd seen Glen before. His voice, even, contained an echo of familiarity.

"I'm David Ford."

The patient called Mack came back with his minder, who was introduced by MacNamara as Sam Taylor.

"I'm sorry I manhandled you like that, Doctor," Glen said between breaths. He was pale, his eyes shocked. He looked to Taylor, who shook his head. No survivors.

"The car—you mean Mrs. Denman's car? That's what blew up?"

All three men, Sam, Glen MacNamara, and the patient, looked at him with careful eyes.

"It was a bomb," Mack said.

Aubrey Denman had certainly been right that there was a security problem, but this was far, far worse even than her warning had suggested.

“They’ve been killed,” he said faintly, trying to grasp the catastrophe, trying to understand. But he could not understand, could not even begin to. “Why? An old lady like that? *Why?*”

“Doctor,” Glen MacNamara said, “I’d feel a lot better if we could go inside.”

Two security guards went toward the gate carrying freshly opened body bags.

“Don’t bag them until I’ve inspected,” Glen said. “I’ll be back shortly.”

Glen insisted on accompanying him to the house.

“I need to get in touch with the rest of the board,” David said.

“You’d best ask Katie Starnes about that.”

The tone of Glen’s voice, his choice of words, brought more recognition. Normally, he would have simply asked him outright if he’d been in the class, but he wasn’t about to do that now.

“Glen, you look familiar. Have we met before?”

Glen stared back, his eyes steady.

“We have, haven’t we?”

He did not say no.

“And you remember, and thank God. What else do you remember?”

Glen grabbed his shoulder so hard he stopped talking immediately.

“Never speak about it,” he said.

“No, obviously not directly.”

“Not at all.”

As they walked, Glen took something from his pocket, then slipped it into David’s hand. David felt a small capsule.

“If you’re captured, bite down on it and breathe deeply. It takes ten seconds. No pain.”

“But—”

“Do it without fail.”

He jammed the thing down into his pocket, and then they were through the main door and immediately confronting a silent, frightened crowd.

Staffers, patients, workers—the whole front half of the house was filled with people. A couple of security men kept them back.

David realized that he was going to have to make an introduction of

himself here and now. No waiting on this.

He raised his voice. “Obviously a tragedy,” he said. He found himself clutching the cyanide capsule, as if it represented rescue, or needed protection. Then, afraid that it might open, he took his hand out of his pocket.

A sea of faces, eyes wide, silent, looked back at him. Here and there, somebody exhibited inappropriate behavior, grinning, bobbing their head, dancing to some inner music.

But these people weren’t really crazy, at least not all of them. Induced psychosis as a means of concealment. And now what was he to do?

“I’m Dr. Ford. David Ford. I’m your new chief psychiatrist. I—we—we —” But what did he say? “The security team will handle this,” he finally blurted out. “Mr. MacNamara—here—here he is.”

Now, there was a great speech. Very dynamic and take-charge. Idiotic.

“Thank you, Dr. Ford. We’ve informed the Raleigh County Sheriff’s Office,” he told them. “Right now, we’re assuming that criminal activity was involved.” He drew himself up. “There will be an investigation. The perpetrator will be found.”

“Was it one of us?” a voice called.

“There will be an investigation. That’s all. Thank you.”

David said, “Attendants, please accompany the patients back to routine. Back to routine, please.”

He went slowly up the grand staircase, into the fabulous painted sky, with its birds and its heavenly clouds.

I made believe I could hear those birds sing.

He had never felt this alone. He had not known that such a feeling—like falling and being buried alive at the same time—was possible.

He entered his office, filling now with evening shadows, as silent as death.

There was one *hell* of a security problem here, and Jesus, he had to be a prime target. That other guy—Ullman—had been burned to death. *Burned*.

His stomach was sharp with acid, his mind racing. He needed a gun, he needed a bodyguard, but how to tell who was reliable?

Then he realized that somebody was in the room. He turned. A lovely young woman had entered and was standing in the doorway, silently watching him.

“Hello.”

“I’m Katie Starnes.”

That was to be their only introduction.

“Miss Starnes, I want a list of all the other members of the board. And I want us to start trying to get in touch with them immediately.”

She stared at him.

“Please!”

“Dr. Ford, there are no other members of the board. Mrs. Denman—she’s the board.”

“That’s impossible!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Then get hold of her secretary, her accountant, whoever you can locate. I need to talk to anyone I can!”

“We only have the one number.”

“That can’t be true!”

“We only have the one number!”

“What about her bank? Call her bank, call her lawyer!”

She shook her head, her eyes full of fear. “We only have the one number, I’m sorry. Security here—”

“Is very damn tight but very damn poor!”

And what were his alternatives now?

That, at least, was one question with a perfectly clear answer: he had no alternatives. He was trapped.

DAVID FORD'S JOURNAL: ONE

I have never been so scared in my life, so confused in my life, so apprehensive in my life. I'd take mood regulators but they're out of supply, and anyway, I can't afford to lose whatever pitiful edge I may have.

The clinic is full of guns, and I have been issued a weapon. It's a compact thing, a Beretta. Can I use it? I don't know, I've never shot a gun in my life.

I tell myself that I don't know enough to matter, that I'd never need to use the gun or the cyanide, but then I look into the well of my own mind, and I know that there is amnesia there, and suspect that a skilled interrogator could break it. Psychosomatic amnesia is nothing more than a refusal to access certain memories, which remain intact beneath the surface.

How, without Mrs. Denman, do I repair my broken classmates, not to mention find them in the first place? There isn't any literature on the induction of psychosis—at least, in the public domain. Probably reams of it in the classified world.

I am keeping up as best I can with outside events, but communications are sporadic. For example, the Internet has been intermittent for days and so far cell phone coverage has not returned since this morning. Given that they're so entangled with the Internet, landlines are unreliable. In the past, they survived all but the most extreme catastrophes. No more.

In a world going out of control, an organization like this is highly vulnerable. We are suffering every kind of shortage, including drugs. For example, we have no atypical antipsychotics left. No clozapine, no risperidone, no nothing. Because of the youth of most of our patients, the lack of Risperdal is particularly distressing. We have Xanax, but that's hardly adequate.

Many of the patients I have met display very structured, relentlessly typical symptoms. They're like actors who have been captured by their roles. I

suppose that this is induced psychosis.

It's not that they all exhibit the same symptoms or should receive the same diagnosis—but there is a strange by-the-book quality about them, as if they'd stepped right out of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*.

As conditions deteriorate, what do I do with patients who I know to be imprisoned by artificially induced mental illness? What if the death of Mrs. Denman means that we will never get the information we need to draw people out of their psychoses?

It's late, and auroras are appearing, even this far south. The sun must be literally blazing for this to happen. They are a bizarre emerald green and flickering like a broken lightbulb. Across the room, the shadows are deep, and I dread going through them to get to my bedroom.

And why should I? I don't sleep, how can I?

My head is on the block. I await the stroke of the axe.

3

MACK THE CAT

Michael Graham—who had called himself Mack the Cat ever since he came to be nicknamed “el Gato” by his colleagues at the Mexico City station—drew on the notepad that the doctors had agreed not to look at—but, of course, did . . . as he expected them to. If he was supposed to be crazy, he needed to exhibit symptoms, and doctors loved drawings.

He was encouraged by the ease and success of the Denman operation, which had trapped these bastards like a maze full of rats. She’d been a fool to be so controlling that their whole operation depended on her.

Buried in this place as he was, it was easy to forget that he had been assigned to the Acton Clinic, not committed to it. He was a specialist in stealth, and this was not only a place of interest for his superior, General Wylie, it was packed with exotic security. So he’d been given a false past that would allow him entry, and sent here to find what the general needed.

He tried to be professional and dispassionate, doing his work with clarity and efficiency. But he could not help hating these arrogant people. Filthy half-breeds all, chosen by that obscene fool Herbert Acton to represent the common man.

The common man was the goddamn problem. Blood is what counts, and this was the time to save the best human blood. Let the common man die; he’d shown himself to be a weak, ignorant fool.

The Acton Clinic had looked easy to deal with, but this was among the most difficult situations he had ever confronted, and despite the success of the Denman operation, he was still having trouble making progress understanding exactly what they were doing here—and therein, of course, lay the key. They had a means of survival, or believed that they did. But what was it?

Every night he got an increasingly urgent demand for that information from General Wylie.

He sat beneath the apple tree that grew near the enormous oak at the edge

of the grounds, his back against the sweating bricks of the wall, in the shade of the oak and the scent of apple blossom.

The sky was a shimmering electric yellow, and last night the auroras had been intense. So the sense of urgency around here was right. Time was running out.

He was supposed to be not only crazy but dangerous, so he had a minder, Sam Taylor. He sat under the tree drawing a glyph of a *tzitzimitl*, a skeleton demon of the stars that governed the sun at times like this. Death star. Everyone in the world by now was well aware of the fact that this present disaster had begun to unfold during the night of December 21, 2012, and people were obsessed with the Mayan and Aztec religions, and with their calendars and their prophecies. So he was just another stupid patient, chewing the fad.

A lot of people had suspected that Herbert Acton had possessed some sort of secret beyond his uncanny skills as a speculator. He had been approached by occultist J. P. Morgan and by John D. Rockefeller, by representatives of Presidents Harding, Coolidge, Hoover, and the Masonic master Franklin Delano Roosevelt, all without any results. Also by leaders of half a dozen of the truly important human organizations—the Thule Society, the Society of the Illuminated, the New Knights Templar, the Vatican—and representatives of the best and truest human bloodlines, especially the Seven Families to whom this world belongs.

He must have been offered astonishing rewards—but he would have none of it. He lived on his estate and did his business and ignored the world around him. When everyone was sending gold to Germany, seeking to save the bloodlines of the best people from the catastrophe, Acton had spent his time assembling his collection of mongrels and irrelevant, disposable people. After the war, when money had been desperately needed by the Germans to establish colonies in South America to provide shelter for those who had given their loyalty to Hitler, he had funded the ridiculous intelligence service of the Israelis, adding immeasurably to the expense of protecting what remained of the great bloodlines.

Now the children of the collection of mutts Acton had assembled were believed to possess his secrets, and therefore quite possibly the means to survive the coming catastrophe, while the people who mattered did not.

The intensification of the auroras last night, the increasing deterioration of

electronics, even the bizarre color of the sky right now—it all suggested to Mack that the climax was unfolding.

General Wylie, commanding from the Blue Ridge Redoubt seventy miles from here in West Virginia, obviously agreed with him, thus the increasing urgency on the radio.

Massive efforts had been made, whole cities built underground in Arizona, in the Blue Ridge Mountains, in the Black Forest and the North York Moors, in the Gran Chaco in Uruguay and the Maule Region of Chile. A hundred thousand people had been tagged for access to these refuges. All well and good, but something more had to be done to insure survival, something beyond present knowledge.

Suddenly, Sam was there. “Doing okay?”

“I’m plotting my escape.”

“Ah.” He looked at the drawing. “Who’s that this time?”

“God of destruction.”

“Pretty.”

He finished his drawing and then, staring straight up at Sam, ate the paper.

Mack was just getting up to follow Sam inside when he heard a very surprising and very interesting sound, the whine of the main gate sliding back on its hinges.

He noticed that Sam came a couple of steps closer to him. Could this be police, perhaps? If they still existed, that might be inconvenient.

A Mercedes came nosing slowly into the estate. A new victim being brought in? That seemed unlikely at this juncture. To get here through all the chaos in the world took significant resources. Even the rich were more likely to stash their crazies in the attic, he would think.

The car proceeded up the long drive with the grim majesty of a hearse. No, this would not be a garden-variety crazy. This might well be a crown jewel, a member of the hidden leadership, someone whose knowledge had not been obscured by artificial psychosis—that is to say, someone who was in possession of their information and therefore useful.

So there were perhaps now two, David Ford and this new one. And, of course, MacNamara, that bastard. He knew a lot, that one, Mack had always sensed it.

He glanced across at Sam Taylor, who had returned to his bench and his thermos of coffee. Yesterday, Sam had been the victim of a little sleight of

hand. He'd never seen Mack trigger the mine with his cell phone. The towers were out of commission, but the radio receiver on the mine was only a few hundred feet away. One of the general's men had buried it two days ago.

So far, there was no suspicion of the CIA officer who'd gone mad in Mexico and started sacrificing drug mules to the old gods.

He lay back and gazed up into the spray of pale pink flowers that crowded the apple boughs, putting on a show of nonchalance. Above and behind the tree, he could see the top of the wall. The gleam of the new razor wire winked down.

He heard the car's engine stop, and he knew that it was about to disgorge its occupant. And, indeed, one of the rear doors opened a little. The driver got out and came around.

A girl emerged, tall, unfolding herself and shaking her shoulders and her hair as if today's sunlight was her first.

She was auburn-haired, tanned, and—well, was the word “ineffable?” There was a sense of air in the way she moved, and yet something about her said that she was used to being in control of her life and her world.

She did not look insane, or even particularly troubled, which he found most interesting.

She paused for a moment before the great façade of the mansion, put her hands on her hips and gazed at it. Well, it was normal enough for a person to be impressed by the row of columns, the red brick of the façade, the imposing doors . . . for a normal person, in any case.

Then, determined and yet hesitant—a complicated human being, he saw that at once—she went inside.

He needed a surname, and right now, but the secrecy of their operation was so extreme this might be hard to obtain. In fact, the secrecy was so deep that these people, who had been together in a childhood class run by Charles Light, the son of Bartholomew, were in a state of amnesia more profound even than the CIA could induce.

They were not insane, but they believed that they were, and *that* was security at its extraordinary best.

He watched the newbie, who had reappeared quickly after her entry into the building. She went off toward the gate, a curving pour of very feminine milk.

She stopped before the enormous iron bars. Nurse Cross strode across the

deep green of the lawn and conducted her back to the building. The newbie's sobs tumbled through the air.

Was this just a patient?

As Beverly Cross tried to get her to enter the building, she shook her off and stepped out along the brick terrace that spread so elegantly beneath the front of the structure.

She took out a cigarette. She puffed, he watched. Puff, white smoke, hold the cigarette aside, puff, white smoke, hold the cigarette aside.

And then, quite suddenly, he was surrounded by the color red. All around him, a rose-red haze. Sunset? No, something else. He tried to wave it away, but found that he couldn't move his arms.

That scared him and he cried out, whereupon he felt warmth on his forehead and a voice, young, female, said, "You're fine, Mack, you've just been finishing."

The taste of rubber from the mouth guard caused him to realize that he'd been in shock therapy.

"How do you feel, Mack?" the nurse asked.

As he sucked in breath, the room appeared around him, all tile and dismal machines. Across the way, a hydro tub moaned and splashed. The head of Glenda Futterman bobbed back and forth, as frantic as an agitated waterbird of some sort.

"Mack?"

"I'm coming out of it!" He gazed around at the room. "I'm sorry. I thought I was . . . outside."

"Earlier you were."

"Did I dream about a girl? A beautiful girl?"

"She's a new intake. Very real. You saw her come in."

When he tried to get off the table, Dr. Ford said, "Not yet, guy."

It was so damnable to have to endure their ridiculous treatments, but what could he do? This was the deepest possible cover he could create for himself, and the danger that he might be discovered was too great. So he endured the stupid indignity of taking electroshock treatment that he did not need.

The treatment made him forget a lot of things, sometimes too many things. He kept careful notes hidden in his room, but they might eventually be found, he knew that. So speed was essential. He needed to complete his mission, which had two parts. First, find out whatever was hidden here so well, so that

it could be taken and used by the people who mattered. Then, the pleasant part: destroy this place.

4

THE LADY OF THE STARRY SKIRT

External conditions were deteriorating far more rapidly than David had imagined possible, and the problems this was causing forced him to put his effort to unravel the mysteries of this place aside for the moment. The blackened bodies of Aubrey Denman and her failed protector had been given a quick burial at the end of the estate's formal garden.

He went to his windows, gazing out across the green lawn to the two rough mounds of earth. Close to them, an apple tree bloomed. It reminded him of something, but not something pleasant.

"The apple blossom is the color of . . ." What? It was blank, so he left it. But it was disquieting.

A little farther along, an oak spread spring leaves, their pale new green at once reassuring and heartbreaking.

If you did not raise your eyes, all appeared normal and settled and safe. Look up to the top of the perimeter wall, though, and you saw that razor wire. By reading the clinic's activity logs, he'd discovered that Aubrey Denman had not been candid with him about much of anything, and certainly not the security situation, which was far worse than she had claimed—or, it would seem, known.

The razor wire was there because there had been an incursion from the town. People had tried to come over the wall. They'd been forced back and additional defensive measures had been taken, including the acquisition of some very powerful new guns, and thousands of rounds of ammunition.

Look past the wire, though, and a magnificent view of Raleigh County unfolded, the rolling hills brushed now with palest green. Only if you looked closely would you see a blackened house here or there.

The sky was now always that odd color, no longer the blue it had been. Really, not a color, more of an absence of color, a steely whiteness during the day, flickering auroras at night.

The lawn sprinklers came on, clicking smartly. It was a sound from

childhood, which the child in him found reassuring, he supposed. But where did they get the water? he wondered. Hopefully, from a well on the grounds.

Katie Starnes's voice came over the intercom. "The new intake's in prep."
"Bring in her chart, please."

When he saw the name on her chart, he was stunned to frozen stillness. He kept his voice as calm as he could.

"What's her state?"

"Agitated. But it's a self-commit, so we're expecting her to be cooperative."

"Expect nothing."

"Yes, Doctor."

Aubrey Denman had said that he would remember Caroline Light, and that she would bring some focus to this whole affair. But it was just a name on a sheet of paper. Seeing her, that must be what would do it.

"Schizoaffective disorder, previously controlled with lithium therapy," Katie said.

He was careful to reveal nothing to her of what the name meant to him, or of his excitement that this was the daughter of their teacher.

He read on. She'd lived a wealthy easy life, it seemed, up until symptoms began to appear last year.

This sounded a troubling note. Aubrey Denman had induced psychosis in the class during their late teens, not last year, or so he'd assumed. So was this a real case of mental illness, some sort of odd coincidence? Or was she simply playacting? Because this report gave no indication that any symptom had been present before 2019.

Sudden onset of mental illness was commonplace now. The whole human species was under extraordinary stress. That was why Manhattan Central had literally been overflowing into the streets. So it was perfectly possible that the daughter of their teacher had, quite simply, gone mad.

But it was just as possible that something else was happening, so his only choice was to play it as it appeared.

The report said that her disorder had begun to break through the lithium, in the form of auditory hallucinations ordering the patient to do various things—paint a picture, take a journey to some irrelevant spot, arm herself with a pistol.

At what must have been astronomical expense, she had made the pilots of

her family plane fly her to Guatemala, where she'd chartered a local plane to take her deep into the jungle. What she had done there was not clear, nor had she been willing to explain herself when she returned home.

Herbert Acton and Bartholomew Light had gone to Guatemala in the twenties, and brought back extensive journals, drawings, and maps that filled many shelves in this library.

"I want her housed initially on confinement, but give her full indoor privileges with observation. Outdoors accompanied only."

"Awfully tight supervision," Katie commented.

Caroline Light's vulnerabilities were complex. Whether she was acting or genuinely troubled, with that last name, she was probably of as much interest to the opposition as Aubrey Denman. More, conceivably.

"In my opinion, it's necessary. And keep her surname confidential, please."

"We never use patient surnames in population."

"Not even in her chart. Call her—I don't know—Caroline Smith."

"Of course, Doctor."

Her tone was too neutral. He thought it concealing, but of what he could not be sure.

The door flew open and Caroline Light came striding in, a breathtaking beauty, her legs outlined by her blue silk dress, which fluttered behind her as she walked forward.

He felt a sensation of literal, physical shock pass through him as she got closer. Her eyes were jewels flashing light, her skin tanned but soft, her lips at once held in a tight, angry line and yet ready, almost, to laugh. The eyes, made brighter by the darkness of her full lashes, glared, stared, and mocked all at once.

Behind that complex, challenging expression, though, was a face of heartbreaking beauty, the forehead broad, the eyes shaped for nighttime, the nose tapering but not severe, the cheeks full but not so full that they concealed the suggestive curve of the cheekbones.

However, the memory he had hoped she would spark did not come. There was no sense of *déjà vu*, no poignant quickening of the heart. She was, simply, a stranger.

As Katie discreetly withdrew, she sat down, crossed her knees, and regarded him with pale eyes. Was that anger in there? Amusement? Both?

“At last,” she said.

He thought it the most disconcerting comment she could possibly have made.

“Have we met?”

She flushed, then tossed her head like a young mare. He had the impression that she was both furious and hurt.

“Okay, let’s do our medical interview. See how good we are.” Long hands dipped into a purse made of what looked like some sort of cloud, white and soft. She drew out a cigarette.

“No smoking in the facility, I’m sorry.”

She lit it, took a long drag, then expelled two streams of smoke through her nose, an exquisite dragon. She glanced around.

“What is this dump, anyway?”

“The Acton Clinic. Do you often lose track of where you are?”

“I mean the room. Of course I know where I am.” She barked out a laugh. “David, are you still asleep?”

He wanted to open up to her, but he couldn’t, not without some inner signal, some echo of recognition, and there was none. He maintained his professional posture.

“What do you mean by sleep?”

“You can take your shrink questions, fold ’em up, and stuff ’em you know where.”

“Which would be?”

She flipped the cigarette at him. It hit his shoulder and bounced to the floor.

“That was useful.”

“David, you’re embarrassing yourself and—to be frank—hurting me.”

“In what sense?”

“Stop it!”

He was really having trouble here. He was strongly attracted to her, that was certain, but there just was no memory.

“Those images over the door, I’ll give odds you don’t know what they are,” she said.

“I do not.”

“Well, I do, because my grandfather was the man who discovered them. *In tetu inan, in tetu itah*. That’s Nahuatl for ‘father and mother of the gods.’

Ometeotl was two in one, mother and father.”

“Is this why you went to Guatemala? Are you a believer?”

“What do you think?” Her tone was knife-edged with sarcasm.

“That’s for you to say, Caroline.”

Her eyes became sad. “You need to remember something, David.”

This was a subtle mind, quick and supple, and it was testing him, but in what sense? Was the real Caroline Light trying to find out if he remembered her, or was an imposter trying to determine if he’d been in the class?

“What about myself do I need to remember?”

She lit another cigarette. “Shall we do sex talk?”

“Shall we?”

“Isn’t that what you do here?”

“This is a hospital you’re in, Caroline. It’s a place where people who are suffering come for relief. Which is why you checked yourself in, I would think. What do you think?”

“That I need an ashtray.”

“There isn’t one.”

She flicked ash on the carpet. “This is a Tabriz, probably a Hajiijalili, and look at the abrash. Gorgeous.” She smiled a little, then, and her face became soft with promise. Really, she was meltingly beautiful. “I always wondered what it was like up here. Remember the time we tried to sneak up and old Mrs. Acton got mad and threatened to spank us? She lived to a hundred and three, did you know that?”

“Under the terms of the transfer, we can’t alter the décor in these rooms. That’s why the rug is still here.”

“How strangely colorless you’ve become, David. You’re not in total amnesia, though. I can see it in your eyes.”

She stood up and came around the desk. He stood, also, and suddenly they were quite close, and the attraction was powerful. He cleared a dry throat.

“Maybe I’ve always been a colorless bureaucratic type. By your definition, anyway.”

Fingers brushed his forearm, a seemingly innocuous gesture that was surprisingly intimate.

“We know each other, David, and we have made promises, and even if your mind is in denial, your body knows it.” She gestured toward the images over the door. “They mark this as a sacred space. Worthy abode of the

Plumed Serpent, for example. Quetzalcoatl. Does that ring a bell with you?"

Vaguely, he recalled talk of the Mexican gods in the class.

He cleared his throat. "The situation—the disturbed sun, the coincidence of the dates, all of that—has caused a significant minority of patients to integrate Mayan cosmology into their fantasy production. We psychiatrists used to get Hitlers and JFKs and Napoleons. Now, it's Tlalocs and Quetzalcoatl. So yes, I am indeed familiar with the Plumed Serpent. If I may be so bold, which god are you?"

"I get what you're doing. You're not sure about me. You remember something, but not enough to let down your guard. I could be the enemy."

"What does that mean to you?"

Her cheeks went rosy, her lips parted just enough to reveal the pearl edges of her teeth, the moist pink of her tongue.

Maybe it was the most seductive look he had ever seen.

"David, I want us to be us again, like we were when we were kids."

There was no longer the slightest question in his mind that his decision to house her on confinement was correct. If she was a member of the class, she'd welcome the safety of it. If she was some kind of agent, she'd be contained. This woman had no psychiatric symptoms, and she wasn't even bothering to pretend.

Katie appeared, meaning that he was out of time.

He said, "Caroline is ready to go."

With a dancer's grace, Caroline turned around. Then she whirled back, her cheeks red, her eyes so savage that they sent a shock through him. Caroline angry was a terror.

"That works exactly once," she snapped.

She was very controlling. She did not like to be "handled." And he was just not sure where he stood with her.

He tried a smile. "It's just that it's lunchtime, Caroline."

"Anything raw and bloody. A heart, preferably."

"Be careful, you might get just that."

"Ah. Can I order it? Does this place work like a cruise ship?"

He ignored the question and instead turned away from her in his chair. After a pause, she huffed out, Katie hurrying along behind her.

Katie handed her over to Sam Taylor in the outer office and began to push David's door closed.

“No, Katie, I want you,” he called.

She returned. For the safety of Caroline Light, he intended to make a convincing case to every staff member at the clinic that she was genuinely insane, perhaps even dangerous.

“I want this patient placed on priority observation at all times. Her luggage is to be searched by Glen personally for anything that shouldn’t be there, and it’s to be brought to me. She is to have locator buttons placed in her shoes and clothing, and I want security to put her on the alarm list for any deviation from routine.”

Katie’s face suggested carefully concealed surprise.

“This woman is in a good deal of trouble,” he explained. “She’s been poorly diagnosed and inappropriately treated, but that’s not the problem. What we have here is a time bomb that’s about to explode. In the safety of this environment, surrounded by professionals who can control her, she’s going to give herself permission to just plain cut loose.”

“I’ll get this set up right away.” She turned to leave.

“Don’t worry, she’s not going to blow just yet. But she will, Katie. At some point that anger is coming out, and it isn’t going to be pretty.”

“Doctor, you have the steering committee meeting.”

When Katie had gone, he took a deep breath and let it out. He was drawn to his assistant sexually—not as explosively as to Caroline Light, of course, but he’d welcome company in bed.

He went to the bookcase and pulled down one of the beautiful codices. He really wanted to spend some time with them, if nothing else admiring the artistry. He was drawn to them. He wanted to feel them in his hands.

He drew down another volume, then another and another. They were all different, all huge, and he thought that any one of them might contain more writing than all the known Aztec and Mayan codices in the world.

Then he saw a volume that was not a codex. *The Gods of Mesoamerica* by Bartholomew Light. He took it down. Obviously, it hadn’t been touched in a very long time, and the leather cover crackled when he moved it.

He had just opened it when Marian Hunt came in, followed by the executive chef, Ray Weller, Glen, Bill Osterman, the chief engineer, and the other members of the on-site steering committee.

Appropriately enough just before lunch, the subject was to be food resources. Supplying the clinic with the luxuries the patients expected was

getting more and more complicated. There had to be cutbacks, followed by the inevitable protests.

As the room filled, he began to experience an acute sense of claustrophobia. He was not used to feeling suspicious of coworkers, and having his office filled with them was surprisingly unpleasant. As large as it was, it felt just now like a coffin.

Katie said, “Doctor, are you okay? Because you don’t look okay.”

He put a hand on her shoulder and could feel her stiffening and recoiling from the contact.

“Do you think Dr. Ullman was murdered?”

“Excuse me?”

She was surprised by his question—as, for that matter, was he. But she recovered herself quickly.

“He died in a fire,” she said, her voice sharp.

He looked around at the assembled group, the concealing, careful faces.

“Very well,” he said, “let’s get started. We don’t have much time.”

And then he thought: in truth, we don’t have any time. No time at all. In fact, the Acton Clinic, all of us, the country, the world—we are all in the same situation: we no longer have time.

DAVID FORD'S JOURNAL: TWO

I was looking through Bartholomew Light's book and a document fell out, and this document has, quite simply, turned me inside out. Reality is not what I thought. Not at all.

The note is old. It is signed by Herbert Acton. The heading is "Divinatory Calendar" and dated "6.1.1." This is either June 1, 1901, or January 6, 1901, I have no way to tell which.

Now, this next part is important, and I want to record it exactly: I found this note at 11:50 in the morning of May 22, 2020, while paging through the book.

I know it isn't forgery—not because the paper looks old, but for another reason that will become clear after I have recorded the list itself.

The list. In my humble opinion, probably the most astonishing words ever written by the human hand.

On the surface, it is the work of someone with deep insight into modern history. On the surface.

It is a list of the dates on which certain small but crucial events took place in the twentieth century. Each date is accompanied by a stamped glyph, and I found the deities they refer to in *The Gods of Mesoamerica*.

In the absence of the Internet, I have used *Every Day in History*, also in this library, to research the dates I did not know, which was all but one or two of them.

I record them herewith together with the identity of the Aztec glyph associated with each one:

2 February 1910: Entry of Aleister Crowley into the Order of the Golden Dawn.

This was an occult organization. The glyph is the god of the underworld, Acolmiztli, as if this act somehow drew us all into a kind of hell, or marked

our passage into it.

28 June 1914: Assassination of Franz Ferdinand of Austria.

This assassination led to World War I. The associated glyph is Ixtab, goddess of suicide. Eater of blood.

13 October 1917: The Fátima “dance of the sun.”

This bizarre event was witnessed by thousands. Glyph of Citilalinique, “she who illuminates,” goddess of the starry skirt. (And I do recall the remarkable star-covered robe the apparition at Fátima was described as wearing.)

5 January 1919: Foundation of Deutsche Arbeiterpartei.

Adolf Hitler joined this party the following year and it became the Nazis. Tezcatlipoca, god of rulers, death, and the night.

16 September 1922: The last reparations meeting in Weimar.

At this meeting, it was decided to strip all the gold from Germany. As a result, the German mark hyperinflated and the stage was set for the rise of Hitler and his party. Five-Vulture, god of ruinous excess.

30 March 1934: Leo Szilard conceives the nuclear chain reaction.

Szilard was walking the streets of London when suddenly he saw how the atomic bomb would work. Quilaztli: goddess of the Milky Way, whose roar signaled war.

25 January 1938: Fátima prediction fulfilled.

On that night, massive auroras over Europe heralded the beginning of World War II, just as Our Lady of Fátima had warned would happen. The event was associated with Chalchiuhtotli, god of mystery.

This is the last date save one, which is the most shocking of them all.

This is a list of events that took place beneath the surface of history, but which were critical markers in mankind’s long journey through the underworld that we apparently entered in 1910.

I have a personal story about one of the events. Specifically, my father knew an elderly priest, Father Thomas Heim, who was among the thousands who actually witnessed the dance of the sun at Fátima. Father Heim had said that the object was not the sun, but something in the sky that was in front of the sun. He said that he could see a ladder on the object, with figures moving on it.

I have never known what that might have meant, but this last date has made it more clear.

It is June 22, 1947. This is the date of something called the Maury Island UFO encounter. It was the first UFO event of modern times, preceding the famous Roswell Incident by about three weeks. It involved the sighting of a number of unidentified flying objects over Maury Island, Washington, by some fishermen. Some strange material fell out of one of the objects and onto the boat of the fishermen.

It also involved the deaths, over subsequent weeks and months, of many of the people involved in the investigation.

One who survived was called Fred Crisman. He was later implicated by New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison in the Kennedy assassination. What that may mean, if anything, I do not know, but he was certainly involved with Lee Harvey Oswald.

The point of this list, I think, is to reveal crucial moments in history that illustrate the hidden battle among the higher powers that govern human affairs. We have not drifted into this desperate trap at all, but been led here. Just as the ancient Maya knew when we would reenter the debris field of the supernova, so did whoever is behind the way this world of ours works. And they have been *designing* history, not simply allowing it to happen.

But, of course, my own assumption that this document is old isn't enough to convince me of its authenticity, but the second page is. On this page are just two paragraphs, the first entitled "Citilalinique." There follows an intimate description of Caroline Light: *The Lady of the Starry Skirt, bringer of the light of understanding. She is to be born 25 October 1986 on schedule and sign. Will enter class 1 June 1994 with the others. Pubescence takes place 12 July 1997. Amnesia will then be induced.*

The second paragraph is called "Quetzalcoatl," and it is about one David Ford. *The Plumed Serpent, creator and builder, is to be born 25 October 1988 on schedule and sign. Pubescence takes place 12 July 1992. Enters class 1 June 1994 with the others. Partial induction, no artificial psychosis. Directed to medical career in anticipation of later role. To become clinic director 14 May 2020. Will find this document at eleven-fifty in the morning of 22 May 2020.*

Perhaps I could explain all this away as a clever forgery, except for that last sentence. As soon as I read it, I looked at the clock. It was 11:57 A.M., and it had taken a few minutes to read.

In other words, no matter the ink, no matter the age, the author had

anticipated the exact moment I would find it, and could *not* have known this in any conventional way, not even if the document was written an hour ago. So, as I turned over the page, I also overturned everything I understand about our world—as, I am sure, I was meant to do.

The list ends with two sentences: *What I could not do, you must. The judgment has begun.*

Many religions and societies have intuited—or known—of the existence of the great cycles we are moving through, and seen their periodic end as times of divine judgment. All well and good, except I don't think that we should view the higher force that creates and harvests souls on earth as something supernatural.

I don't believe in the gods identified in the document, or any gods, for that matter, and certainly not in myself as some prancing Aztec deity. But I now have no choice except to believe that an extraordinary science, hidden from most eyes, is able to predict the unfolding of time, and that it is in some incomprehensible way connected to the images of these deities—and to me and Caroline, and to this place, and probably to whatever future the world has, if any.

What I have here is a document based on the lost science I am beginning to remember being taught in our class. It operates entirely differently from modern disciplines, for this is a science of the soul, and as such makes use of more than the three dimensions we see around us.

Its engineering built the impossible structures we see from the past, such as the gigantic platform at Baalbek in Lebanon, made of stones so huge that we could not move them to this day, or the fortress high in the Andes at Sacsahuamán, constructed from more than thirty thousand perfectly matched boulders, each weighing at least a ton, and carried thousands of feet from gorges far below.

But it was its ability to see into time that was its most extraordinary achievement—to see into time and, just possibly, to actually move through time.

Of course, I'm going to look between the pages of every book in this room, because I understand very well what I am seeing here. I have beside me on this desk as I write these words a list that is a map of mankind's descent into an underworld where we are still trapped.

I have often reflected on the fact that a single bullet fired from a small

pistol by the political simpleton who assassinated Franz Ferdinand led to the collapse of Western Civilization and the destruction of a billion lives.

This list, by including that event, acknowledges its hidden importance, and by associating it with Ixtab, the symbol not of war but of suicide, reveals much insight into the actual psychology behind the events. The old world did not die, it committed suicide, quite literally. It was the mechanical nature of the interlocking treaties involved that amplified that single shot into the vast international immolation that followed, and, above all, the *machinery* of the situation. Once one country had put its soldiers on the trains that would take them to the front, the others were forced to do the same or risk being unable to prevent the army that was already mobilizing from simply walking across their borders.

At its deepest level this is a list of man's enslavement to mechanism.

It is also something else. It announces the coming of a higher power in the form of the UFO, a phenomenon that started with the Maury Island incident.

In 2012, NASA did say that some of them were apparently of intelligent origin, but who has investigated? Who's had time? Maybe somebody, but I never saw any news about their findings, and now it's too late for that sort of thing.

So this higher power has returned to oversee this enormous change.

I find myself in this marvelous, silent room with its tall bookshelves and exotic carved walls, with its mysteries all around me, going deep into myself and finding more and more questions. I am a man alone at the end of time, with a dependent flock to keep, a sort of shepherd.

Before God, I could not previously have imagined a sense of helplessness this profound.

5

QUETZALCOATL

Caroline Light followed Sam Taylor through the lovely front of the house. He'd been described to her as a "minder," and he looked considerably tougher than the nurse who had originally met her, a gentle lady called Nurse Cross.

Coming here had been the hardest thing she had ever done. Leaving her dad, and him so old and the situation so perilous—it had taken all the strength she possessed to turn her back on him. His old driver, Vincent, had gotten her here in just over fourteen hours, traveling back roads, bypassing cities, avoiding the interstates where a car like the Mercedes was a definite target.

And now here she was in the place where the legendary Aubrey Denman had just lost her life—and in certain danger herself.

Dad had wept quietly as she left. She had, too, but not quietly. The last she'd seen of him was that proud old figure, narrow but immensely dignified, standing before their beloved Mayfair, the house Dad's father had bought after being blessed with the friendship of Herbert Acton. Dad's last words to her had been a cavalier wave and a confident, "See you on the other side." The tears, though, had been silent testament to the truth: they were beyond the edge of the age now. Not even Herbert Acton had been able to see clearly into this period of chaos.

The future was on her shoulders now, hers and David's.

They reached the end of the long corridor that split the second story. Before them was a black door locked by a fingerprint reader. It looked like the entrance to a gas chamber or a prison, or the underworld. He touched the reader and the door clicked, then opened onto a white institutional corridor lit by fluorescents.

She needed to seem like just another patient, and saw a chance to do a little acting. She stopped.

"Excuse me, Sir. Mr. Taylor?"

"Ma'am?"

“What is this? Where are we going?”

“Your things are being moved into your room now, and I’m taking you on a tour of the facility.”

“Fair enough, as long as I don’t have to fraternize with the other nuts.” Lay it on, girl.

They entered a large room, and for the first time she saw some of her compatriots. She hadn’t seen her classmates since they were children, but she could recognize almost all of them. In any case, she knew their names, so she would be able to identify even the ones who were most spectacularly different.

Being close to them again was every bit as eerie as her father had warned her that it would be. Most of them had not the slightest idea who she was, and those who did weren’t going to show it.

David had been expected to remember her immediately. Her mention of Quetzalcoatl had been the trigger that was supposed to break his amnesia.

It hadn’t worked, so now what? Mrs. Denman was dead, and she dared not talk about such a subject with Dad on the phone, even if she was able to get through. Obviously the enemy was right here in this place. Could even be this Mr. Toughguy with a heart of gold, for all she knew.

“This is the activity area,” Sam said. “This is where we meet friends, make new friends, that kind of thing. There are games, there’s a poker game, there’s bridge, of course, we have two leagues and an annual championship, there’s backgammon, a lot of stuff like that. Also, we have an art room where you can paint or sculpt or do pottery. Actually, we have practically everything.”

She noticed a guy ogling her. He had not been in the class, so he was one of the real patients, and his nostrils were actually dilating. What a creep.

“Who’s he?”

“Graham Mining.”

“If we go by our company names, that makes me Daddy’s Little Girl. We have no company. We’re post-work.”

The patient followed her with his sick eyes. Then, annoyingly, he got up and came sliding over. Big, imposing man with a carefully tuned smile. “They call me Mack the Cat,” he said.

She understood why, too. He moved like a jaguar. You wanted to step back.

“May I know your name, Miss?”

“No.”

“ ‘No’ is a good name. Easy to spell.”

“And it gets the point across. Incidentally, you drool, but cats don’t. From now on, you’re Mack the Dog.”

The smile froze. She wondered if he was marked yet. If not, her guess was that his truth would soon emerge. This was a bad man. Written all over him. So, enemy or not? Bad was certain, the bastard had rape in his eyes. But the enemy—wouldn’t he be charming, fit right in? So no, this one was probably just damned unpleasant. Good window dressing for the clinic, though.

Mack the Cat met Sam Taylor’s eyes, and Caroline saw that they knew each other all too well. Sam’s hand came to her elbow.

“Ma’am, we need—”

“Oh, be quiet.” But she followed him. No excuse needed to get away from Mack and his drool.

They went down some steel stairs and suddenly they were in another lovely room, back in the old house. It was large, glassed in, and full of sunlight. There were three patients there, each with an attendant. Two of them were in straitjackets, struggling and growling. The third paced back and forth, back and forth.

She sucked hard breaths, forcing herself to appear calm, but she was seeing Monty Offut who had been so strong and Carl Winston who’d read Greek and Latin, and pacing in a state of paranoid frenzy, Jenny Offut, Monty’s sister. They had swung together on the old swing that had been under one of the oaks out back, and dreamed the dreams of little girls.

“This is the old solarium,” Sam said.

“I know what it is!”

“You do?”

“I—of course. It’s obviously a solarium, you stupid jerk.”

She felt him tighten—felt a hurt, a disappointment come from him—and thought that she did not like playing this role of the testy, overwrought neurotic.

But look at the tile floor, at the walls painted with those vines, even the old sunporch couch over there—she’d lain on that couch and gazed out at the marching clouds.

The nostalgia was tremendous, and seeing her friends like this—it was also

agonizing.

“I think we need to move on,” Sam said. Tough, gentle man.

“Yes . . .”

This had been the classroom, where Daddy had taught them the secrets of the old gods, and given them their ancient names. She was Citilalinique, the Lady of the Starry Skirt, and her work was to bring the light of understanding to an ignorant age. Light the bringer of light. Nominative determinism. Not funny, though. Funny was in the past.

Finally, she could bear it no longer and turned away. She went toward the living room, where you had been allowed to sit and read, but certainly not play or roughhouse, and not endanger the collection of Fabergé eggs that was no doubt locked away upstairs somewhere nowadays.

She had curled up in that chair right over there and read—what had she read? Yes, *The Philosopher’s Stone*. She had memorized her formulas and what alchemists called confections, the assembly of the different components that would go into the extratemporal matter she was here to make.

Her father had brought her out of her own amnesia ten days ago. Prior to that, he had been awakened by Mrs. Denman, who had come on a day and at a time that had been specified by Herbert Acton fifty years ago, and showed Daddy a glyph of Huehuetotl, the Aztec god of life and the polestar . . . also the symbol of guidance, but not to the current polestar, not to Polaris. No, when the time came, they would journey toward a new polestar.

“Miss, patients are requested not to use these rooms.”

She sat down in her old chair, regarding him with mild interest. Would he drag her out? He certainly could.

“Thank you for letting me know,” she said.

He inclined his head. The guardian servant, then. Fine, she could stay.

She let her mind seek back over the events of the past few tumbling, chaotic days.

When Mrs. Denman had shown Dad the image of Huehuetotl, his eyes had grown steady and hard, and he had set his jaw like the soldier that he was. Then he’d embraced the cadaverous old woman, who had left as silently and mysteriously as a nun under vows.

That evening, he had been very quiet, refusing to speak of what had happened. Eventually, he had gone to one of Granddad’s wonderful handmade books, the one called the *Book of Silence*. He had opened it to two

beautifully colored images and said to her, “Remember.”

As she had looked upon Quetzalcoatl and Citilalinique, a whole hidden life had come flooding back. She recalled swinging in the garden at Mr. Acton’s house, and Daddy being their teacher, tall and rangy then, full of smiles and remembrance of Mother, and Mrs. Acton, incredibly ancient, looking down on them from the upstairs windows with appraising eyes. She had been the master behind the class, Daddy’s teacher, but they only met her once or twice.

Caroline had been ten, and Mom’s sudden death had then still been at the center of her life. The night before it happened, it was as if her parents had known—which, on a deep level, not then conscious, they indeed had.

The two of them had sat together in their private study into the small hours, talking in a loving way, touching each other and kissing, and Caroline had watched, and seen a kind of wonder between them, as if they were privy to a miraculous secret that was at once deeply serious and deeply joyous, perhaps the secret of life itself.

Mom had died of an aortal aneurysm, so suddenly that she had not even had time to cry out.

Mom had ascended, Dad had said. She would not be returning to earth again. Dad had explained, back then, that almost everyone who had ever been born was alive in the world now, every human soul returned to the flesh to experience judgment. And, he had added, by 2020—not 2012—they would all be here, all who needed to be.

Mom didn’t need to stay, she was finished here, he had told her.

All well and good, but it didn’t change a daughter’s grief. When there is a death between people who love each other deeply—husband and wife, parent and child—the relationship continues on in the heart of the survivor, and Caroline had told her dad that she wanted to follow Mom, she wanted to go, too.

He’d explained in his gentle way, “You and I are working-class, girl, we stay put. Only the saints and the sinners get to take off early.”

Since Mom’s death, he’d spent many an evening in that study, reading poems he had explored together with his wife, and Caroline had, in recent years, made a habit of joining him, and they had shared their grief and their love, enjoying their memories.

She recalled once again the images of Quetzalcoatl and Citilalinique,

intricately painted, their seemingly bizarre faces going deep into mind and memory. The Mayan and Aztec gods were representations, among other things, of the human unconscious, the purest ever created by the mind of man . . . the unconscious in all its wonder and playfulness, and all its paradoxical savagery.

On softest wings, when she had first seen them, memory had come, bringing with it a love that had been hidden in her heart for years.

She had remembered David.

Now, she recalled watching him curse and, on the wide lawn, trying to fly a kite. She'd laughed until her sides ached. David was so clumsy and so sincere and so very dear to her, and she thought that they had known one another across many lifetimes.

"Daddy," she said to her own secret heart, "tell me how to make him remember me."

When he was awakened—if—he would become their leader, assuming the role and the power of protector and healer. The knowledge that the new world that was coming would rest on his shoulders made her proud of him, and proud to be his promised love.

Except, what if he did not remember? People change, even locked in the amber of amnesia. What if he had somebody else now? There were attractive nurses here and people under pressure form attachments fast. In war, whole lives are lived in days, and this was just like war. It was war.

"Miss, we have a lot still to see. I want to show you the dining facilities and the kitchen. It's quite a wonderful kitchen."

"Sure," she said. The poor guy was practically dancing, he was so eager to get her out of the so-called restricted area. As if she'd somehow damage carpets on which she'd played Monopoly on rainy afternoons.

She followed Sam through a pair of double doors with mirrored windows in them, entering a spotless, magnificently appointed, but very busy kitchen—all of which was new. This had been the music room in the old days. Now, the piano was in what had been the old smoking room, opposite the solarium.

The new kitchen revealed a fine spread of marble countertops and high end appliances. She counted four chefs in toques, surrounded by rushing crowds of assistants. It looked like the kitchen of the *Queen Mary II* back before she'd disappeared in that storm.

"Miss Caroline, this is Ray Weller, our executive chef. He's the one who'll

read your preferences list.”

“Hello, Ray.”

The way he smiled told her that he knew her. So this fellow classmate was not in total amnesia. Dad had said that some would be and others not, but that she was to show everyone their glyphs, because the sight of their particular image would end all amnesia. Those hidden in psychosis, though, were a different matter. They were the stars, the powerful ones, the essentials, the most important and therefore the most deeply concealed.

“We aim to please,” Ray said, “so do think carefully about your desires. We can do just about anything, as long as supplies aren’t short, of course.”

“Now we’re going to the art room,” Sam said.

She followed him through double doors that led back into the patient wing, but this room was brightened by big windows that overlooked the lovely grounds. There were men and women in paint-smearred jeans and T-shirts, some painting on canvases large and small, some drawing, others creating clay sculptures.

She was satisfied to see a group of potters working industriously, their kiln casting a glow that she found extremely realistic. They were actually firing pots in it, but it was not really a kiln—or rather, not only that. In fact, right now, it was the most important machine on planet earth, because of what she was going to do with it.

An old classmate, Susan Denman, sat reading *The Philosopher’s Stone*. She looked up at Caroline and smiled through what was obviously great personal sadness. Her father had told her that, if all else failed, a sufficiently intense shock could often cause spontaneous remission of artificially induced psychosis. The murder of Susan’s mother had obviously, in her case, been enough.

Caroline returned just the slightest glimmer of recognition. She and Susan Denman had studied subspace together, learning how to form holographic realities that would be at once in a single place and in all places at the same time—essential knowledge, given Caroline’s mission. And Susan would bring the colors and prepare the brushes.

She sighed as she walked, wishing that things were different, that they weren’t so hard and so dangerous. Class had been a joy—the joy of their childhoods, and she was so grateful to Mr. Acton and to her dad and granddad for all they had given.

She'd been glad to be recognized by Susan at least, because this business of concealing the group inside induced symptoms of mental disease, and turning Mr. Acton's beautiful home into a fake mental asylum, was even more horrible than she'd feared it would be.

Susan might be awake, but over there, Aaron Stein, painting that horrific thing—what was it, a woman colliding with a gigantic penis?—obviously still needed to wake up.

“What's that guy's problem?”

“Schizoaffective disorder,” Sam replied in a self-important tone. Proud of his jargon.

Beautiful, poetic Aaron, so quick to laugh and so full of gentle wisdom . . .

She would soon be painting as well, but it wouldn't be an outlet for mental illness, far from it.

It was essential that it be completed quickly, for there would come a time soon that the chaos would be too great, and it would be impossible to finish it. Even the color of the sky was going to change, and without good color, she could not make this artifact that was to be a perfect confluence of the knowledge of science and the energy of art.

If Mr. Acton's plan worked.

“Let's get out of here,” she muttered to Sam.

Another member of the class—a grinning Amy Makepeace—looked up from a painting of what appeared to be some sort of grim tower, and smiled the too-radiant smile of a madwoman.

“What's your death going to be?” she asked, her tone crisply genial, her eyes button-bright. “Me, I prefer to jump.”

At least there was plenty of painting going on, which was an important part of the plan. The device she had been trained in class to create would appear to be a painting, at least at first. Later, as it developed, it would reveal itself to be a doorway through time, and when it did, nobody would imagine for a moment that it was just a picture.

By balancing the artistic skill and scientific knowledge in her mind, all enhanced by the power of the alchemical gold she would make, she was actually generating their escape route. What she would create in this room would look like a painting for a while. But it was not a painting, not at all.

“Ma'am, we want to move on.”

“Sure. Gotta cover my cage, I'm too noisy.”

“The tower,” the woman said, “you walk and you fall.” She thrust her grinning face into Caroline’s. “And you *fall* . . .”

And Caroline saw an opportunity to reinforce her own feigned symptoms. She pretended to have a seizure, letting herself pitch backward shaking. She hit the floor so hard that she blacked out.

A moonlike face appeared, its demon eyes fearsome. She gasped, then screamed—and the face of Mack Graham smiled, and it was as if the demon had withdrawn—hidden, once again, in its lair in the man’s heart.

He helped her to her feet. “I’m so sorry, Miss—”

Do not tell him your name.

Brushing herself off, she scrambled away from him.

“Maybe your medications are affecting your balance,” Sam said.

“That’s just it! I’m not on any. I’ve run out so I came here—” She looked around the room. Every eye was on her, and she was looking at gargoyles, at smoldering sex maniacs, at wild-eyed schizophrenics, at paranoids in their sullen corners—it was awful, a gallery of the damned in the faces of people she loved dearly and respected enormously. That brilliant class of wonderful kids were the center of her heart and to see them like this was almost enough to induce actual insanity in her.

She smiled, forced a laugh. “I won’t miss that step again,” she sang out. “Let’s see my suite.”

“Of course, Ma’am.”

Sam laid an arm around her shoulder, or rather, his big arm came oozing around her with the muscular stealth of a python. She allowed herself to be guided out of the art room and down yet another long institutional corridor.

Ahead was another of the black doors, looming at her like a hungry trap. “Do we have to go back in there?”

“Your suite is there.”

“Where does Mack live?”

“Next door, actually.”

“No,” she said, “no. I need to live in the house, you see. It’s what I’m used to. This—oh, my God, it’s a prison.”

“The rooms are nice, Ma’am. So, please—”

She had to lay it on. She had to continue to seem insane, here. She must not raise the suspicions of that monster Mack, and he was suspicious already, there could be no doubt of that. She pulled away from her minder. “Look,

I've made a mistake. I can't do this. I'm going home."

"Caroline—"

"I'm going home!" But now she found herself confronting not just dear old Sam, but David and his assistant, Katrina Starnes. Katrina, the modern name of the Mexican goddess of death.

"Caroline, you need to go in now," she said.

"Please, Caroline," David added—and the lack of recognition stabbed her heart.

"We're still processing your intake," the death goddess said. "Someone will be along to help you with your program in a few minutes."

She had to continue her act.

"I'm free to leave," she snapped. As she tried to push between them, the enforcer laid his thick—and surprisingly gentle—hands on her shoulders.

Drawing herself away from him, she cried out, "How dare you touch me!"

His body blocked her way, but when she tried to get around him, he proved to be as adept as any dancer.

"What's she doing, Doctor?"

"I don't know."

She turned on David. "Get these people out of my face!"

As she tried to make her way back into the main house, Katrina dropped a leather strap around her arms and pinned them to her sides. Even fighting as hard as she did, she could not free herself.

She did a little method acting, imagining what it would be like if this were real, if she were actually mad and being trapped, and terror exploded through her with such intensity that she just burst out screaming, surprising even herself with the ferocity of it.

The sounds of the struggle echoed up and down the corridor, and the cries of other patients were soon added to her own screams. As patients came out of the art room and other public rooms, some of them laughed, their voices warbling high with hysteria, while others shouted for help, or came rushing forward to do battle on her behalf.

Susan Denman watched, amused and appalled at the baroque antics.

But before any of this chaos could resolve itself, she was dragged backward hard, there was a great crash and sudden silence, and she was on the floor looking up into David's dear, empty face.

"Okay," he said, "she's controlled. Now, Caroline, can you hear me?"

She continued her act. “Bastards! *Bastards!*”

“All right, all right. You’re angry and I would be, too. Now, I want you to get yourself together, Caroline. Can you do that?”

Despite all that she knew, she could not help being genuinely furious, if not at his ignorance, then certainly at his condescension. “I’m not one of your patients,” she wanted to say, “I’m part of your heart.”

She managed a choked, “Yes, Doctor.”

This was hideous, to see him like this.

“I’m going to have Katrina here release you. Is that all right? Are we able to calm down now?”

“I’m calm! So get me out of this damned thing!”

“Uh, Doctor, is this wise? She’s very agitated.”

“Do it. But step away. Step *behind* her.”

“I’m not going to do anything,” she said as Nurse Katrina freed her. “Just keep that other guy away from me. Sam. I mean, what is that, a giant dwarf? A troll?”

“The hell . . .”

“Leave it, Sam. Caroline, we’ll address all of these issues in our intake interview.”

“I thought we did that.”

“No. No, not entirely. We did not.” David pranced toward her, all officious professionalism. He took her elbow and in a moment they were in a small room, sparsely furnished with a cot and a recliner that took up far too much of the space.

“Now,” he said, “you can collect yourself. Get in the recliner, it’s great! I mean, you talk about relaxing, these things—all the patients just really love them.”

“It’s a chair, for God’s sake.” But she sat down. After a moment, she pulled the lever and leaned back. She noticed that the ceiling lights were protected by wire cages.

“What is this, one of the cells? Am I a prisoner, because I better not be. I did a voluntary commitment, remember that.”

“This is a safe room. We call it a safe room. Now, close your eyes.” He began rubbing her temples and she let herself drift, let the distant sounds of the institution die away, let the world drift and drift . . . on a quiet ocean . . . ocean of silence.

“I have a little something,” he said.

“I don’t want anything.”

“You’re very agitated.”

“Oh, it’s just this sun business! I can’t quit thinking about it.”

“Take deep breaths, let it go, let the trembling go.”

She was trembling? Yes, actually shaking like a leaf. She could feel the dark gods coming, smelling her weakness, coming with their jaws clicking, their obsidian eyes flickering with inner fire. Xipe Totec, the Flayed One, skinned by the sun, dead but alive, and coming out of the bloody mouth of Mack the Cat.

She was aware of movement in the room, the clink of glass. When she opened her eyes, a nurse was there with a small paper pill cup and a glass of water.

“What is it?” she asked David.

“A mild sedative.”

“No.”

His hands were gentle, insistent. She felt his subtle power and liked the feeling. She saw plumes of red and blue around him, feathers in the wind.

“And he will descend into hell and gather the bones of men, and he will spread them on the earth, and his wisdom will make them dance.”

“And that is?”

“The work of Quetzalcoatl. The bringer of peace, the builder of heaven.” She saw him in David’s eyes, just as she had when they were children, and she had thought him the most beautiful creature that God had ever made.

He touched her temples again. “Take it easy, Miss. Right now, you’re agitated. Let’s cross this bridge first.” He took the pill cup from the nurse and handed it to her.

She pretended to take what she recognized as a Xanax. She did not take it, though. She needed her wits.

“Good. That’ll help.”

“David?”

“Dr. Ford. I’m Dr. Ford.”

“Okay,” she said, fighting to keep the pain out of her voice. “Dr. Ford, I want you to humor me. Indulge a little innocent paranoia. Don’t tell anybody my last name. Can you do that?”

He blinked as if surprised, and she wondered immediately how much he

did remember. Clearly, he wasn't entirely clueless.

"Patient surnames are confidential. Nobody gets your surname except from you."

His hands caressed her temples so gently, so firmly, that this time when she closed her eyes she did indeed drift away.

Then, seemingly without more than a moment passing, she came to understand that he had not been rubbing her temples, not for some time. In fact, not for a long time.

With a shocked gasp, she opened her eyes. At first, she couldn't see anything at all—and then she could, a line of light floating ahead of her. A line of light . . . which she moved toward.

She understood that she was on a low bed. And naked, she was also naked, or rather, in one of those loose hospital gowns that tie in the back. She leaned down and touched the line of light, running her fingers along it. A faint coolness brushed them—air, she realized, from outside.

Once she understood that this was the door, her disorientation resolved itself and she stood up, feeling for the doorknob. She found it and turned it, but it was locked tight.

She called, "Hello, I'm awake! Hello!"

Not a sound came in reply.

She tried to look at her watch, but couldn't find it on her wrist. Taken. Not stolen, of course, she didn't think that.

They'd overdone this, and she saw a chance to put on a performance.

"Hey! HEY!" She shook the door, then hammered on it.

Nothing.

She felt the walls and found a quiltlike surface on them. She ran her palms along it. Soft. So was the floor, soft, quilted. There was no window. The ceiling no longer had caged lights on it, but rather flush glass fixtures that emitted a faint nocturnal glow.

He'd doped her with something more than Xanax, that clever David, good at every job he'd ever done. And she'd thought she hadn't swallowed the pill. She hadn't been meant to—or rather, it hadn't mattered. Whatever had done this to her had been in the water.

So, okay, here we go. He wanted crazy, he was going to get crazy.

She backed up, then took in a deep breath and screamed her lungs out.

And—wow, that was something! Her heart was hammering, her body

flushing with adrenaline. She did it again, then threw herself against the door.

The padding absorbed the blow without the slightest effect, which was genuinely disturbing and isolating, and made it quite easy to scream more, so she screamed and screamed and screamed, and roamed the cell, hurling herself against the walls, against the door, dropping to the floor and rolling and screaming, and screaming and screaming and screaming. But, then again, that's what a padded cell is for.

She stopped. This was all well and good. She was putting on what must be a convincing performance. But she was also here for serious reasons. She needed to get the arc furnace running. There was a lot of gold to make and only a little from Guatemala to start the process, far less than she had expected to find. And there was the matter of the painting. It would be a meticulous, difficult process, enormously intimidating, and all of it needing to be done on a very tight and very precise schedule.

The whole world had arrived at the border of an unknown country, a rare shadow land that few men ever enter and fewer recall. Already, they were advanced into it, for the death of Aubrey Denman, an incalculable disaster, had not been predicted in any of the writings of Herbert Acton.

This was because he had not foreseen it. Her father had told the class, "There is a period at the end of a cycle of time that we call its omega point, where life itself enters the unknown. An omega point is a dark labyrinth from which only the few will escape." He had smiled then, this gentle and compassionate man, a smile filled with hope and pain. "Be among the few," he had said.

She rattled the door again, and this time it was no game. "Let me out," she shouted. But there was only silence in reply.

This time, when she screamed, it was no act, and she screamed and screamed and screamed.

DAVID FORD'S JOURNAL: THREE

The staff is alerting me about poor Caroline again and again, but I sense that she's taking advantage of the situation to do a little playacting, and I keep thinking that I need to let her do that. Somebody needs to be convinced, I feel sure. But I don't want her to pretend so well that I have to put her in a jacket or shock her.

Caroline is brilliant. But how did she get here through all that mayhem on the outside? Was she helped, perhaps, by the resources of the Seven Families?

I wish that I could have proof that she is the real Caroline Light.

I have about convinced myself to take the risk of opening up to her. Despite the fact that I don't have any recollection of her, I am tremendously drawn to her, and perhaps that is a sort of memory. If we were children when we last met, she would look entirely different, would she not?

After she drank the sedative, I held her in my arms and she felt as light as air, her body slack with sleep, her sangfroid gone. Her vulnerability broke my heart even as it filled it.

Glen turned up nothing unusual in her belongings. Her driver's license seems genuine, for example, but what does that mean?

If she's the real person and she isn't in amnesia, I need her desperately.

Last night, there were monstrous, flaring, leaping auroras. Today, half the face of the sun is covered with gigantic sunspots.

The Internet, TV, and all telephone systems have more or less failed. Even the patient families we have relied on for food deliveries are not supplying us at this time, and we cannot reach them to find out what's happening.

What happens when we eat our last food and burn our last fuel? And when the solar flares get worse, then what? What I need to know is how we survive.

At least Katie Starnes is becoming more at ease around me. She isn't a problem like Caroline, and I would really welcome some development in our friendship. Just friends, though, sexual friends like we had in med school. No commitments, and I don't think she's looking in that direction, either. I hope not, at any rate, because this is no time to involve oneself in hopes for the future.

What's my next step? Where do I turn? I don't have a religion, not even some childhood thing to fall back on. My parents were scientists and atheists, just as I am. But right now, there are only three words that come to mind, that haunt me, that never leave my thoughts for long: God help us.

6

THE SOUND OF BLOOD

Again Mack heard them, pulsating out of the dark, long cries of human anguish. He could open neither his window nor his door, and he wasn't absolutely sure that they were coming from inside the facility. With all the mayhem these days, they could be from the distant streets.

As scream after scream pealed out—but so faint, why did they use all this soundproofing?—his whole body was set to vibrating.

He pressed his intercom button.

“Yes, Mack?”

“Somebody's upset.”

“It's the new intake. She's struggling again. We're calling one of the residents for her.”

He threw himself on his bed. Damn, what did this mean? He would have sworn she was an actress, no more crazy than he was. But this was one hell of an act, damn her eyes.

He did not want to sweat over some worthless loony, he wanted to sleep. But there would be no sleep, they doled out their goddamn pills nowadays like they were gold fucking bars. Worse. Everybody around here was crawling in gold bars, but they damn well were begging for Lunesta. Damn fucking cheap bureaucrats.

“What's her name?”

“You can ask her when she's in the population.”

“Sweet Caroline, I already got that much. Also, the fact that she's a bitch. That came through loud and clear.” After tonight's transmission, General Wylie had come back inside of a minute. “Get me the name.”

At this point in time, any new arrival was important.

“She might be a bitch, but she's suffering now, Mack.”

“Caroline . . . who?”

“Ask her!”

Well, the hell with it, the screaming had stopped, and thank you, God. He

turned out his light—and, damn, the flickering out there was incredible. He went to his wire-enforced window. The sky was a flaring, jumping curtain of multicolored light.

He was not making the kind of progress that was needed. They should have put a whole team in here. He hated to admit it, but that was the truth of it. Too late now.

In Mexico City, in the embassy's garden, he had watched the gods dancing in the night sky, watched Tezcatlipoca shift from man to jaguar to serpent, taunting and raging at his brother Quetzalcoatl. In Egypt, Quetzalcoatl was Osiris, the god of resurrection, and Tezcatlipoca was his brother Set, who cut him into small pieces. The Bible called them Cain and Abel. In Judea, the light and dark brothers had been Jesus and Judas.

He identified with Tezcatlipoca, El Gato, the night cat roaming and changing, the shadow cat. That's where his nickname came from. Doing his work, he moved like a cat.

But just as he had planned to begin exploring patient and personnel files, he had suddenly been deprived of his ability to leave his room at night.

They'd found out that he'd been off the premises the night Dr. Ullman was killed. Well, yes.

Now this new director and patient turn up just when it was expected that the Acton group would be putting their leadership in place—and here he was, locked up like a monkey in a GODDAMN ZOO!

He twisted on the bed, as uncomfortable as a man in a rack. And that thought took his mind back down a path it loved to go and hated to go, the torture path.

You look down at the guy in straps and you know that he belongs to you. You lay the cloth over his face, adjusting it a little, drawing out the suspense. He turns his head and Billie Fisk gets it between her sweet knees and holds it steady for you. Then you get the pitcher, you fill it in the sink, you hear the echoing drip of the water on the tiles as you carry it brimming over to the guy's gurney-bound body. It's not a torture chamber or something, it's a men's room with a DO NOT DISTURB sign from some hotel on the door. Embassy basement, where else were they gonna go? Their work was illegal on Mexican soil.

Then you ask your question and you do not wait for the bullshit answer, you start your pour. The body of Ramos curves on the board. Stomach sucks

in. Legs pulse. Dick comes up. Feet hammer. Pour and pour. Neck goes from red to purple.

You run out of water. As you are refilling, you ask your question again. This time, he kind of starts in, but you don't listen. You and Billie will work him for an hour, doing maybe twenty pours. When his dick comes up this time, you dig your heel into it. You slip and practically fall on your ass. Billie laughs.

Somebody somewhere reviews the video feed, looking for clues in the body language, piecing together bits of words, all of that, working up a report for whoever.

Drug interdiction, that was the mission.

Thing is, why? Why are drugs even illegal? They're good, they do a search-and-destroy operation on the weak.

Never mind, you did your work and now you are here playing crazy, and, you gotta admit, it's just a little too easy to act that way.

She started screaming again, and that was it, she reminded him of too damn much. "Fuck this, will you shut her up! Shut her UP!"

"Dr. Claire is with her."

Claire Michaels, that floppy little puppy of a shrink. "She's useless! Get Hunt, get Ford! But shut her up, please."

Was this woman actually one of their leaders, or had her appearance at this time been chance?

Hell, that screaming was loud—and maybe it was there to cover some other sound that he might hear, like the hiss of the arc furnace they had in the art room. It was disguised as a pottery kiln but there were elements in there that could generate truly extraordinary temperatures.

But for what purpose?

It had to be involved with time, and the CIA's Acton Working Group had determined that Herbert Acton, like certain ancient Egyptians and ancient Maya, had definitely been able to somehow see forward in time. This explained his flawless investments, which statistics could not. As one of the statisticians who had examined them put it, "there isn't enough chance in all the universe to account for this. He wasn't lucky, he was informed."

In other words, he'd been able to see forward in time. This also explained things like the accuracy of the Mayan calendar. It hadn't been constructed forward to December 21, 2012, it had been written *backward* from that date

because they had *seen* forward first, then built their exquisite calendar from the top down, as it were.

Seeing didn't make a difference now, though. The only thing that would matter to anybody right now was physical movement through time.

So that's what this place had to be about.

If this Caroline was indeed one of their leaders, she had some damned important secrets, there was no question about that.

His mission was quite clear, and he didn't need General Wylie screaming down the horn at him to tell him that he needed to confirm her identity and then obtain her secrets by whatever means presented itself. No legalities, that was over and done with.

He had his problem, though, which was his night confinement and his daytime minder.

For the thousandth time, he considered his window. The upper sash, he could get that down a bit, maybe even work his way out. Problem was, there was nowhere to go from the sill. No, the ductwork was his only option. But he needed a blueprint. You couldn't go wandering off through the air-conditioning system of a building this size. You'd be heard. You'd get trapped.

There was a faint beep from his desk. Damn, he was shut down for the night, and here was Wylie back again.

He went for his radio, but he never got to it, because the next moment something completely extraordinary happened. It wasn't as if he hadn't been expecting it. He had. Expecting any damn thing.

What this consisted of was, in quick succession, three flashes that must have been a million times brighter than the sun, flashes that filled not only the eyes but the entire head, as if they had entered every orifice and pore on his body, and penetrated right down to the marrow.

One second, he was going for the radio, and the next the flashes hit. They caused an immediate, powerful, and startling hallucination, a form in plumage, grimacing, its face draped in golden chain mail, skulls strung around its neck, its long, black nails slicing toward him, sparking in the air.

In his surprise, he cried out, he pressed himself against the wall beside the bed.

That had been a damned hallucination of his own adopted god, Tezcatlipoca. But as his eyes adjusted to the sudden change in light, he

realized that it was still here, it was real, he could even hear the clatter of its bejeweled robe and the swish of its plumed headdress as it darted its face toward him with the horrible precision of a snapping vulture.

In another instant, though, his revulsion passed. It was as if a fire came into his body, lighting up the cells, causing his spirit to dance within him, and it was a dark and bloody dance.

With understanding, the apparition faded. He had seen a reflection of his own soul in a very special light, and boy, had he felt it. The energy of the damn god of death had come into him. That had been powerful.

His radio beeped again. Goddamn them! He turned off his light and opened the drawer. His little Sony was a masterpiece of clandestine technology, its additional circuits smaller than grains of rice. On the surface, it was an ordinary multiband portable. But it also contained this other component, a high-energy single-sideband transceiver and very careful shielding so that it would not be fried by solar electromagnetic energy.

The small display quickly flashed the decoded message. “General warning. General warning to all stations. Atomic clocks have stopped worldwide. Repeat. Atomic clocks have stopped.”

Physicists had theorized that such a thing might happen, as the world came to the end of the cycle.

They had gone past the frontier of reality. And at that very moment, the people who ran this place had started something new, some device that emitted light that drove you to face the truth of your soul.

And here was Mack the Cat, trapped in his damn room.

The end of time had arrived and what did he have to do? He had to goddamn well *wait!*

DAVID FORD'S JOURNAL: FOUR

It's now three o'clock in the morning and I have been paging through every book in this library and I have been doing it for five hours, and I will now record the reason. My search was inspired by those last two sentences at the end of the list. The first one was, "What I could not do, you must."

I interpret this to mean that he could not accomplish time travel, but knew that it was possible, and also that it would be, in our era, the only route of survival. But movement through time—literal, physical movement into another time—how could that ever be done?

When I was in college, the great physicist Stephen Hawking announced that he had changed his view of time travel, saying that he had come to believe that it was indeed possible. Last year—God, how long ago that seems—there was an experiment at the CERN supercollider in Switzerland that projected subatomic particles into the future, which were detected a few millionths of a second later, as they "landed" in time and the rest of the world caught up with them. They had never left time, but rather had moved through it faster than the universe normally allows.

Still, though, can something as large as a human body ever be accelerated like that? Even if this were possible, we'd have to go incredibly far in order to find a world that had healed from the wounds of this catastrophe.

Herbert Acton didn't do it. From my days in the class, I remember visiting his grave, which is on this estate. Mrs. Acton took us there, and now lies beside him, I am sure. They had no children. Understandable, knowing the future as they did.

As impossible as acceleration through time sounds, it may be that it has happened before—not to a human being, but to an animal.

A story that might involve time movement appears in a book called, I believe, *Hunt for the Skinwalker*, by a biochemist called Colm Kelleher. Dr.

Kelleher was the manager of the Institute for Discovery Sciences, an organization which sought to bring scientific method to the study of unusual events.

One of these events was the sudden appearance of an enormous wolf on a property that had been bought for the institute. This property, in Utah, was known to be a hotbed of odd events and sightings of the otherworldly.

When I read the book, I recognized the animal to be a dire wolf. It came up to a paddock containing some goats, in full view of the ranchers, then loped away after they shot at it. It went into some tall grass and simply disappeared.

Now, the dire wolf was rendered extinct by the catastrophe that ended the last Ice Age. And yet, here it was on this ranch. The scientists were even able to determine its weight by measuring the depths of its footprints in the marsh where it disappeared.

I think that this animal had moved through time, and I think I know why this happened. First, there was something about the place. There must also be something similar here, and this, I think, is crucial to whether or not we will be able to do it. This house was undoubtedly placed here because this spot is, like the ranch in Utah, conducive to such movements. Why, I cannot even begin to imagine.

Second, I believe that, in its own time, this animal was experiencing incredible fear. Its world was collapsing around its ears. At the end of the Pleistocene, most of Utah was flooded along with the rest of the United States by rapid glacial melt. Like now, the solar system was passing through the energetic remains of the supernova, and this had brought about a planetary bombardment and the complete, sudden, and devastating ruin of the world.

So given pressure extreme enough and the right conditions, actual, physical movement through time must be possible.

How, I do not know. However, my thought is that the class, if it can be brought back to normal, *will* know. They will all turn out to have pieces of the greatest puzzle that has ever been: the secret of time, and how to walk it like a road.

But, for now, I must leave this part of the document behind. If only the class can come into focus before it's too late, maybe we can construct our bridge across time.

I think on this. Come up only with one thought—I have to trust Caroline.

So I go on to the second sentence: “The judgment begins.”

What is happening now is, we already know, a repeat of a disaster that happened 12,600 years ago. In that time, the human population of Earth declined by over 90 percent.

After that, there was a long period of silence on this planet. Nothing happened. But then, about seven thousand years ago, heroes appeared throughout the world. The story of the great Egyptian hero Osiris dates from that time, and the stories of India’s demigod Krishna and other brilliant heroes, and civilization starts. Throughout its early years, we see such leaders as Akhenaton and Moses, who was perhaps his son, who bring the idea of the single God into the world. In the Americas, the civilizing Viracocha appear and, of course, my avatar Quetzalcoatl. Then, to begin the recently ended Age of Pisces, Jesus, who learned his secrets in Egypt and who was born in a most mysterious way.

I believe that these people were not mythological figures but very real human beings, time travelers from the lost civilization, coming forward to bring its wisdom to a new, still brutal era. The ideas of compassionate life, of the one God, of the promise of resurrection and the means to attain it—these are what they brought.

Just as their pre-Egyptian civilization was being inundated worldwide, they used their knowledge of time travel to leap forward five thousand years and reinvent human decency and goodness. They left behind new civilizations in the Indus and Nile valleys, in the Fertile Crescent in Sumeria, on Crete and in Central and South America.

Even as recently as the early Christian era, somebody knew of the existence of the great cycles and the periodic harvest of souls, I think, and was consciously directing the construction of civilization from a high perspective, with the objective of making more souls that were energetic enough, and light enough, to enter higher realms.

The energy is the energy of love, and the lightness is a lack of attachment to the physical world.

My reasoning that these cycles were known comes from observation of the Western long count calendar, the Zodiac, which measures the slow movement of the North Pole around a great circle that lasts just over twenty-five thousand years. It is divided into twelve roughly two-thousand-year segments, the houses of the Zodiac.

Like the Mayan Long Count calendar, it marks ours as an age of enormous change, although without that extraordinary precision.

The Old Testament was written during the Age of Aries, the ram, and in the Old Testament, the ram is mentioned seventy-two times, more than any other animal. It is the testament of the ram, written by people who knew very well what they were doing. Similarly the New Testament, which appeared just as Aries gave way to Pisces, the fish, speaks of Jesus as the Fisher of Men. The apostles are fishermen. The earliest symbol of Christ is the fish.

They knew and they understood, and they left this hidden record for the future.

Now we have reached the Age of Aquarius, the water carrier, and he is pouring out his water—that is to say, Earth is becoming unlivable.

During the Age of Pisces, the little fish—mankind—was nurtured in the water—the womb of Earth. Now, however, we are too big for Earth to carry and we are experiencing the violence of birth. As Earth becomes unable to support the little fish, she is ejecting us onto dry land.

Many will die now. Souls heavy with greed and cruelty will be unable to rise and will sink down into the core of the planet—the lake of fire described in Revelation.

In the autobiography of Hitler's architect, Albert Speer, he describes his experience after the ringleaders of this spectacularly evil movement were hanged at Spandau Prison in Berlin. They had been executed in a gymnasium, and he and other remaining prisoners were ordered to clean it up after the process was complete.

Underneath the gallows, they found a scorch mark in the floor so deep that they could not remove it.

Charles Light explained to us that this mark was left by evil souls as they fell out of their bodies and sank into the core of the earth, where they will remain until their evil has been consumed. They will return as the merest sparks of essence, ready to begin the eons-long climb from tiny life to intelligence, or, in some cases, to remain forever a part of the lesser world, never again to be granted the chance at change that being an intelligent creature offers.

The evil descend, the good rise—and then there are the rest of us, the little band of perhaps a million who stay. And what happens to us?

I know that we are intended to build a new world, but I also know that

nothing is certain. It is clear to me that we are supposed to escape into the future—to go forward to a time when Earth has healed herself.

Somebody else also knows these things, and they want to escape into the future instead of us, and they are here and they are fighting hard.

I'm exhausted beyond words and I feel sick to see the way this whole affair seems to be going off the rails, but my body has betrayed me with exhaustion, and I've got to sleep.

I fall back on the bed. I reach over to the table and take my gun in my hand, and clutch it, holding it over my heart. I close my eyes.

7

DEVILS

A bright light—very bright—brought David’s eyes flying open. Before he could think, he had leaped out of bed, but it was gone now and he was blinded.

He stood poised at his bedside, his heart thundering, desperate for his vision to return. When it did, he saw a shadowy form between himself and the window. Instinctively, he stepped back. It didn’t move, but he could see in the untidy glow of the auroras that it was something fantastic, feathered, massive, radiating a presence he could actually feel, a kind of immediate, spontaneous joy that made him think of the joy of a child, but also another, more fundamental sense of the rightness and balance even of this terrible time, and he seemed to see a deep secret, that the world rides a wire of balance that man cannot break.

No matter how bad things seem, in some deep living heart, the heart of the universe itself, always, all is well.

It was Quetzalcoatl in all his richness and joy.

The emotions were confusing and powerful and the apparition was so real that he drew away from it—and felt, then, the brush of feathers as the thing came right up to him, its eyes infinite pools of kindness, its soft hands caressing him and, it seemed, dipping into his skin as if it was cream, sliding with a quivering, eerie tension, into him. He twisted, he pulled at it, but it drifted between his fingers like smoke, and kept on entering him until it was entirely inside him. Gradually, the whooshing of its feathers was absorbed in the trembling rumble of his heart.

Gagging, his pulse soaring, sweat and tears pouring off him, he retched, then fell against the edge of his bed, then staggered into the bathroom.

He was heaving over the toilet when a cool hand came under his forehead. Shocked, he jumped back and turned—and there stood Katie in white silk pajamas, her hair loose around her face. He tried to say something but had to return to his vomiting, and she held a damp cloth against his forehead as he

struggled.

“Let it come,” she said, “let it be.”

It was, frankly, immeasurably reassuring to feel her holding him and hear the calm in her voice.

Finally, the feeling subsided. He straightened up. “I’m sorry. I—my God, that light! What was that light?”

She gave him a quizzical look. Not for the first time he saw past her job to the woman, noticing the sensuality of her lips and the seductive directness of her eyes. They were not gentle eyes, but frank ones.

She guided him back into the bedroom. “I think you had a nightmare, David.” And also, that was the first time she’d addressed him by anything except “Doctor.” She drew him down to his bedside.

“That light—my God!”

“I didn’t see a light. I heard you yelling.”

“I hope I didn’t wake up the whole house.” The medical staff were all on this floor. He did not need to be embarrassed. He did not need to appear weak.

“Just me and Marian.” She gave him a tentative smile. “I told her I’d handle you.”

“I’ve made a fool of myself.”

“You’ve revealed yourself to be a man under pressure.”

“It was weak and unprofessional and I’m sorry you and Marian had to hear it.”

She ruffled his hair. “Is there anything else?”

There was, he realized. There could be. But then he had a change of heart. That sort of fraternization was just a bit less bad than diddling with patients, especially in an enclosed situation like the Acton Clinic was becoming. Or rather, had become.

“Thanks for helping me, Katie.”

She smiled, he thought, a little sadly. “Not a problem. You’re a lot easier than the patients.”

“I should hope so.”

“Incidentally, if you want to read the paper files, could you please ask me in the future, David? I’d really appreciate that.”

“Of course. I was just curious, Katie.”

“Oh, hey. You do know how to use given names. Everybody’s been

wondering.”

As if on impulse, she leaned forward, lifted onto her toes, and brushed his cheek with a kiss. He started to speak, but she held her finger to his lips, then waved it. Then she turned and was gone.

The little intimacy had shot right through him, warm and immediate and comforting. The need he had been feeling for a woman surfaced so intensely that he sprang up in his pajamas.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, he took deep breaths, waiting for the desire to subside. He could probably go across the hall right now and have her. That had been a clear invitation. But no, it was a mistake.

And then he thought, *That light was real*. But the hallucination that had followed—dear God, the pressure was really getting to him, driving itself deep. That had been Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec god he was identified with in Herbert Acton’s note. Now he was, himself, integrating the imagery into his fantasy life.

Well, here was some pretty obvious psychology: he wanted to identify himself with the compassionate and healing aspect of the dark religion that was obsessing the world, and had long since seduced this place.

He worried about the light. Finally, he called the guard station.

“Did you notice a flash?”

“Yes, Doctor. But we don’t know its origin.”

“The facility is quiet?”

“All secure.”

He padded across his bedroom and gazed out the window. Katie must not have seen it because it had originated on this side of the building.

Standing, watching the grounds pale in the auroral light, he felt a great surge of compassion for this little community whose welfare had been put in his hands.

But then he saw—could that be real? No, it was a trick of light, surely. But then he saw it again, a supple figure moving toward the copse of honey locust that stood between the parking area and the formal gardens behind the house. Was that somebody heading toward the gate?

He watched the trees, their leaves fluttering in the wind. No, he was sure he had seen a woman going toward the gate—a woman in what looked like a hospital gown.

Not a staffer, then. So, a patient. He went back to his phone. “Dr. Ford

again. You guys need to light us up, we've got somebody on the grounds. A woman. Heading for the main gate."

"Got it. I'll alert perimeter and send a team out."

As David hung up, the night security officer threw the switches that flood-illuminated the entire property.

A moment later, three uniformed guards, guns on their hips, came up from the gatehouse, and two more from the nearest of the new watchtowers that had been installed along the perimeter.

He grabbed the phone again. "I want a patient census. Every room, including the lockdowns."

"We're moving."

Glen he trusted, and his security team was the best money could buy . . . but, these days, how good was that? He did not want to end up having to call a family that was paying fifty grand a month to keep their patient safe, to tell them that he or she had left care, especially not naked in the middle of the night.

Should he go down and supervise? No, that would send the wrong message. He needed to show his people he had faith in their abilities—or, at the least, to conceal his suspicions. Only if a patient was apprehended would he go down. If it turned out to be a member of the staff, he'd leave the matter to others.

Still, he might be needed, so he pulled jeans and a sweatshirt over his pajamas, then thrust his feet into a pair of sandals.

His phone rang. He picked it up and Katie said, "Now I see light."

"A possible patient outside," he said. "I thought I saw somebody over by the parking lot."

"Oh, okay. Do you need me again?"

"No, I'm waiting on a census from security. If we've got somebody missing, I'll call you."

He hung up. A moment later, the phone rang again. "We're fully complimented," the security officer said without preamble. "The patients are all in their beds and the staff's all accounted for."

"Well, okay, then chalk it up to inexperience."

The security officer chuckled. "Doc Ullman lit us up twice a week at least. Comes with the territory."

"Boy, does it ever." He hung up. The flash of light, the bizarre

hallucination, the person outside—were they all somehow connected?

Thinking back, he thought maybe he recognized the woman. That flowing hair—maybe it had been Caroline Light. But she'd been so extremely distraught—or acting the part so well—that he had moved her into a padded room, which meant constant surveillance, so surely she hadn't managed to just stroll out.

He sank down onto his bed. He was absolutely exhausted and dawn was not far off. But before he went to sleep, he had to face some facts. First, there had been that flash. It couldn't have been an aurora, they weren't that bright. Maybe an exploding satellite, but then surely Katie would have noticed it, too. No, he thought that the flash must have come from below his windows, either from inside the building or from the grounds in front. From Katie's room on the back, it must not have been noticeable.

Then had come the hallucination of Quetzalcoatl. It had been very vivid, but his overwrought and overtaxed mind was the explanation for it.

He was less sure about the presence of Caroline Light outside. That had seemed real. He had been awake, standing at the window.

He decided to look in on her, and not rely on the surveillance system, but do it personally.

He went quietly into the corridor. All the doors were closed, including Katie's. Even so, a glance up at the surveillance camera at the far end of the ceiling made him wonder who might be watching him besides the guard station, or if anyone there might be part of the opposition.

He came to the door that led to the patient wing, swiped his right forefinger across the reader, and waited for it to unlock. But as he waited, he heard sounds coming from the part of the recreation complex that was in the old house, which included the art room with its tall windows, and the music room. Somebody was playing the wonderful old Steinway that was there.

Immediately, he changed direction and hurried down the service stairway that led from this back hall to the pantry below. At the foot of the stairs, he stopped and listened. No question now. That was Beethoven's *Appassionata*, and the pianist was superb. The only problem was that it was nearly five in the morning, and the public rooms were closed.

As he passed through the patients' dining area and the sound grew more distinct, the superb musicianship made him think that it might be a recording.

At the door to the music room, though, he saw a vague figure sitting at the

instrument.

It was a woman in a nightgown, her hair down her back.

Caroline?

No, the hair was straight, not shimmering and flowing like Caroline's. The woman was wrapped in an enormous robe. As she played, her body moved gracefully. She was easily good enough to go on stage. A member of the class, then?

He knew that he should not approach this person without support personnel equipped with restraints, and he hesitated—whereupon she stopped playing.

"I'm not dangerous, Doctor," she said without turning around.

He knew the voice. It was Linda Fairbrother. No wonder she had been identified with the god of music. He wished he had her glyph with him. He could test the process. If it worked, he'd awaken the whole class. The time for waiting was past, he sensed that clearly, and he was going to trust his instincts now.

"Linda," he said, "I think there's a time for this. Another time."

She resumed playing.

"Linda, we need to stop now." Slowly, carefully, he moved closer, until he was standing directly beside her. "Linda, we need to stop."

She played on.

There was another of the terrific flashes. In the second or so that it filled the darkness, Linda Fairbrother seemed to turn into something else, a complicated creature full of flaring colors—her god, or, as we call it now, her subconscious. And then the light was gone and all he could see were two red dots. But the music never stopped. She didn't miss a single note.

Unlike him, she had not startled. So she was expecting the flash, she must be.

"Linda, what was that?"

He put his hand on her hand, dropping the music into discord.

She stopped, and in the silence, he heard something unexpected—a hissing noise that had been covered by the sound of the music . . . which, he thought, was meant to have been covered by it.

It came from the art room.

"Linda," he said, "what is that?"

She sat staring into the dark, silent.

"Linda, I need you to step out of here because that sounds like a major gas

leak, and I've got to—”

Another flash, and again he was looking at the fluttering, dangerous, wonderful deity of music.

Whatever was happening in the art room had to be dealt with. He went to the wall phone and snatched it up, only to find that there was no dial tone. Wonderful.

He called back to Linda, “You can play, go ahead and play.” He didn’t need this one to be wandering right now. But the music did not start again and he had to prioritize. Clearly, the possible danger to the whole structure took precedence, and he pushed his way into the art room.

At once, his eye was drawn to the kiln, out of which there glared an unearthly blue light. Here, the hissing sound was a roar. There were figures clustered around the furnace—it was no kiln, that could not have been more obvious. They were wearing welder’s masks.

“Excuse me!”

As if in a nightmare, nobody seemed to hear him. He went right up to them, but here the light was so intense that he had to shield his eyes.

“This has to stop!”

He saw a big square tray from the kitchen’s baking department. On it was a measure of white powder, and two of the concealed figures were carefully pouring it into tiny jars, mixing it with a liquid. Others took trays of the jars toward the kitchen.

A yellow flash so bright that he was ready to believe he’d been blinded forever this time came out of the furnace. In it, though, he saw something completely unexpected, not glowering Aztec gods but a beautiful field, a green and smiling land, incredibly detailed. It was there for only a second, but it was as if he was actually in this field.

Then it was over—and there was a smattering of applause. Applause! And still they were acting as if he wasn’t there at all.

An instant later, he saw the face of Caroline Light three inches from his own, the eyes tight with anger, but also—what was it? Humor? The kindness, he thought, and the danger of the gods.

Then the room was filled with clouds, beautiful, soaring clouds just becoming visible in the light of the predawn. Clouds . . . he was looking up at clouds.

Dear heaven, he was in bed! He was in bed and those were the clouds of

his ceiling, one of the many trompe l'oeils in the mansion.

As if the mattress was on fire, he jumped out and onto the floor. But nothing was on fire. He was simply alone in bed at dawn, that was all.

But no, that couldn't be. It could not be. That had not been a dream, nobody dreamed that elaborately, it wasn't possible.

He was still in his jeans, anyway, so he went back downstairs.

There was nobody at the piano and the kiln was dark. But, God, how disorienting. What had happened to the time?

Exactly.

Whatever they had been doing with the kiln had affected not just the brain, inducing hallucinations, it had, he thought, done something to space-time itself. Warped it, twisted it, sent him racing across the hours from three o'clock until dawn in just seconds.

He went to it, opened it, and thrust his hand into the firing chamber. A faint warmth was all he felt, exactly as if it hadn't been fired since yesterday.

But he had seen Caroline Light in here, and Linda Fairbrother had been in the other room playing music to cover the sound of the superintense fire.

They'd made some sort of powder, he had seen it. And they had also been fools, because everybody in the place must have noticed the flashes, except for the staff in the four bedrooms on the far side of the building, and maybe them, too. Maybe Katie had lied.

What a hell of a situation. What was real? Who could be trusted?

Those people could. That had been the class, and Caroline had been there. They could be trusted. But who were they?

She must be waking them up. Of course she was, they'd been taught to use the glyphs and she was doing it.

Not all of them, though, and not the ones likely to be needed the most, they were still trapped in their various insanities.

It was while they were making that powder that space-time had gotten all twisted. So the opposition was going to try to take it. Therefore, bloodshed was coming.

He took the stairs leading to the second floor of the patient wing, running up, then through the door and down the hall to the central nurses' station.

"Nurse!"

Nurse Fleigler came up from behind her small, electronically dense station.

"Doctor?"

Behind her was a bank of screens. Cameras covered each room from two directions. A computer continuously analyzed sounds, and immediately warned her if there were any screams, breaking glass, thuds, any sound suggesting violence. It also warned her when a room became too quiet.

“You’re up early, Doctor.”

“What kind of a night?”

“We had a security check. Some lightning flashes. Aside from that, it’s been quiet.”

David noticed movement in Mack Graham’s room.

“What’s four doing?”

It was perfectly obvious that the man was engaged in sexual self-stimulation.

“This is the third time tonight. He claims that he’s entertaining me.”

“He’s been in there all night?”

“Absolutely.”

“Have any confinement patients been recorded outside of their rooms tonight?”

She shook her head. “What’s the matter, Doctor?”

Could those have all been staff members? But no, he’d seen Caroline—or had he?

“How’s Caroline?”

“I’ve got a good sleep signal. Normal breathing pattern. REM sleep.”

“But she was agitated earlier, after Claire left her?”

Fleigler nodded, her plain, broad face registering sadness and, perhaps, a degree of accusation.

“The poor woman—she did not like that locked door.”

“I want to see her tape, if you don’t mind. Just roll it back to, say, three, and play it for me.”

The screen flickered, then flashed, and he saw what at first appeared to be a static image, but the status readouts confirmed stage four sleep, heart rate fifty-seven, breathing regular.

There was a flicker on the screen. “What was that?”

“What?”

“Roll it back.”

She did so. The flicker repeated.

“Run it slow.”

He watched Caroline sleep. Were the flickers caused by the flashes from the art room, or were they edits that concealed Caroline's comings and goings?

"So everything's been quiet? Definitely?"

"Quiet, Doctor." She looked up at him, her brows raised in a suggestion of question.

On his way back to his suite, he came face-to-face with the fact that mystery was piling on mystery, and he was drowning.

Using the fingerprint reader on his door, he entered his suite. He returned to the window where he had seen Caroline disappearing under the trees. Ripped clouds sped past the low moon, and, to the north, lightning now flickered. The east was red with dawn.

He tried the Internet, but it was useless. Finally, he called security.

"How many of those flashes did you record?" he asked.

"Two sets of two each."

It was still over an hour to breakfast, and he was profoundly exhausted. He threw off his jeans and T-shirt and returned to bed. It was so very strange to draw these gorgeous silk sheets up around himself in the context of the world as it was. There was jeopardy all around him, but the bed was here, the sheets were soft, and the mattress even somewhat tolerable. He closed his eyes and began to drift . . . and found himself having to will his mind away from the image of the woman running in the night, and thoughts of Caroline Light.

He redirected his longing toward Katie Starnes. Her dark Gaelic eyes and cream-white skin were well worth a few moments of presleep contemplation. He shouldn't have been such a damn fool when she'd offered herself. He needed to fix that.

He wondered what Katie actually knew about this place. She hadn't been in the class.

It was as this thought was forming in his mind that he slipped through the invisible door into sleep. His breathing became more steady, his shoulders relaxed, his lips parted slightly. After a moment, his body turned onto its right side, entering its preferred sleep position.

The dreams were immediate and once again he was facing the kiln, watching it flare with that amazing light. Then the broad clearing once again spread out before him. There was thick grass. A distance away was a tall oak, its leaves spring-fresh. Beside it was a thickly blossomed apple tree. In fact,

the scene looked very much like the clinic's grounds, but in far, far better days. Caroline Light was there, standing near the trees. She gestured to him, smiled and gestured again.

He thought that this sight of this woman in this place was the most beautiful and compelling thing he had ever seen.

Then there was a crash, followed by a long, retreating rumble, and he was again in bed. More crashing thunder and, coming with it, more flashes, but ordinary lightning this time.

He opened his eyes. Seven ten by the clock. More than an hour had passed in a sleep that seemed to last only a few seconds. Outside, thunder roared and bellowed, and lightning flashed.

The first thing on his agenda this morning was yet another staff meeting, more bad news about supplies and infrastructure, he supposed.

He thought that he needed to understand more about that powder. He needed to gain the confidence of the makers.

He should damn well remember it from the class but he didn't . . . or did he?

Gold? Was it connected with gold?

Rain struck the tall window behind him, crashing torrents of it, and the great house groaned from the pressure of the wind, and the eaves mourned.

Exhausted, confused, and deeply, deeply afraid, David prepared to meet his day.

8

EXTRAORDINARY MINDS

Nurse Beverly Cross and Dr. Marian Hunt came in at the same time, taking seats in the huge office. As David greeted them, he came around from behind his desk. The office enforced the formality of another age.

Nurse Cross gave him a weak smile. She looked exhausted, her eyes hollow.

“You lit us up,” she said.

“Sorry about that. I thought I saw a patient in the grounds.”

“We have trouble after a light-up. The patients need support.”

Bill Osterman, the chief engineer, arrived.

“We have a supply problem,” he said as he came in. “Critical low oil and there’s nothing in our pipeline.”

“Okay, Bill, is there any other supplier we can try?”

“We need to start thinking in terms of a shutdown, to be frank.”

“How long do we have left?”

“On full use, four days.”

Nobody mentioned the flashes or the activity in the rec area, and he felt that the omission must be intentional.

“All right,” he said, “the first thing to do is reduce air-conditioning use. Drop it back to the sleeping areas at night only. The rest of the time, it’s off. How much more time does that give us?”

“Another forty-eight hours, maybe. So say a week.”

It seemed a great gulf of time, a week, but that, he knew, was just an illusion. What would he do when the generator shut down for good? How would they run the well? And how did you manage a building full of crazy people at night without the use of lights, let alone monitoring equipment?

“I want max possible power down, then. No air at all except in confined spaces where we can’t do without. No lights except emergency lighting and as needed for patient control.”

Bill nodded. David didn’t ask him how much longer this regime would

give them. He'd do that later, in private.

Ray Weller arrived announcing that he would be reducing portions and simplifying meals until he could get more reliable deliveries.

"Supply fell out of bed," he said, "everybody just stopped coming and communications are so bad, I can't even tell you why."

On food, they had five days.

With the nurses, handlers, counselors, and other personnel, there were now twenty-one people in the office.

"All right," David said, "obviously we're in serious trouble. Can we send any patients home?" He turned to Glen MacNamara. "I assume we shouldn't even try."

"From what we can tell, it's a probable death sentence. I asked that new intake. She said she was lucky to be alive. She's worried about her chauffeur, not to mention her father back in Virginia. Terribly worried."

He remembered Charles Light as young and vibrant, bursting with sheer joy because of the value of what he was teaching. What charisma, and what a man to have for a father. She must be beside herself.

David decided to try to deal with the unspoken issue in the most straightforward manner that he could.

"Let me be frank. I observed people in the art room last night doing something with the kiln that was producing extraordinary flashes of light. I couldn't tell who it was, they were wearing welder's masks. But I think more than one person in this room knows what I'm talking about, and I'd like an explanation."

Marian Hunt said, "What I find interesting was that you were down there at all."

"This place is my responsibility, Marian. And I think that the new intake, Caroline, was out of her quarters at some point last night."

"She was confined," Marian said, "on your orders."

"And your tone says that she shouldn't have been."

"She showed no signs of violence."

"She was distraught. She needed to be controlled. Supported." Also protected, but he certainly did not intend to add that.

He could see the color rising in Marian's face. She was looking at it entirely from a professional point of view, from which standpoint he'd obviously made a misjudgment.

“I was with her for a time. Claire and I spelled each other. Doctor, to be frank with you, it’s not appropriate to bring procedures you learned at a public facility into this environment.”

“Doctor, if you don’t mind, I’d like to continue this outside of staff.”

She nodded. He continued playing his role.

“Mr. Osterman, I need you to deal with that kiln. I want it moved out of the art room.” Actually, he was terribly excited by what had been done. Even if he was still only peripherally in the picture, progress was being made and that was the first hopeful thing he had known since he’d realized the true import of what was happening.

Claire, who had been shaking her head, now burst out, “That’s a therapeutic tool! I want an explanation!”

“It’s being used in an unauthorized manner by unknown parties in the dead of the night, which is a damn good explanation, in my opinion.”

She gave him what he interpreted as a condescending look. Katie Starnes crossed her legs and smoothed down her white skirt. The silence in the room deepened.

“Leave the kiln,” he finally said. He was no actor, and the whole process involved made him uncomfortable. But he had no choice, obviously, not until more was known.

It was time to shift subjects, and he turned his attention to Katie.

“Is there any word from Maryland Medical Supply?”

“They’re expecting to ship day after tomorrow. But even if the shipment gets through, we can expect massive shortfalls and no-ships on most drugs.”

“So, basically, we’re in a tailspin. We’re going to have to cut to the bone. As far as our therapeutic service is concerned, it looks like we’re headed back to about the mid-fifties, before there were even any tranquilizers.” He looked to Glen. “Given that we’re leaving the kiln as is, I want the recreation area patrolled regularly at night, but if you find anything unusual, don’t intervene. Call me.”

Glen’s eyes told him that he understood. The workers at the kiln would be carefully guarded.

“And nurses, if you have patients missing from any confined setting at any time, I am to be informed personally and at once. Is that clear?”

Nobody spoke. Finally, Claire said, “Well, I think we have our marching orders.”

As far as they were concerned, he'd gone too far. Never challenge a nurse's professionalism, not if you expect peace in your hospital. He tried a little diplomacy.

"Obviously, circumstances are presently working against us, so I want us all to stay as focused as we can on our mission, which is to keep this institution running, which means working together as best we can. But, if I am going to manage this place, I am asking you, please, to cooperate with me. We have a terribly hard time ahead, and we also have this security issue, given what happened to Mrs. Denman."

"Here," Katie asked, genuine surprise in her voice, "a security issue in the clinic?"

"With the town," he explained hastily.

"Well," Katie said, "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm doing my best."

"We all are, and we're certainly willing to carry out your policies," Marian Hunt added.

"And the kiln is just a kiln," Osterman muttered.

The meeting concluded on what he could only see as a sour note. But why wouldn't they be sour? There was nothing positive here, it was all supply problems, security problems, and, because of the subterfuge he'd had to engage in, a lack of faith in their new boss. But any opponent in this room would have to see him as being nothing more than what he appeared to be— an inexperienced and overbearing supervisor.

Marian lingered at the door. Their eyes met and he nodded, and she returned.

She said, "David, we need to talk about some additional matters."

"Don't resign, Marian. Remember that I didn't pick me, Mrs. Denman did."

She sat down before the dark fireplace.

"If it's all the same to you, David, I won't dignify that with a response."

"I'm sorry, I—"

"Don't say you're sorry. You say that too much. It makes you look weak." She smiled a little. "Do you know that T-shirt? I think Mack wears it from time to time. " 'Graham Mining, Where the Weak are Killed and Eaten.' Do you know that?"

"I haven't seen it."

“He’s in the art room now,” Katie said. “He’s got it on.”

Marian waved her hand. “The point is, if you appear weak, Acton will devour you.”

“Is that what happened to Dr. Ullman?”

“As far as we know, the fire was set by townies.”

“And yet one day later you put Mack under confinement and gave him an armed guard.”

“I did that because he’s potentially violent.”

“Not because he killed Dr. Ullman and you know it perfectly well?”

“I do not know it. It could’ve been the police themselves, or even the firemen. We are hated here.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Understand it. Live it. It is the central reality of all our lives. This is the palace, still splendid in the middle of a ruined and starving world.”

What was her point? And speaking of Mack, he was due here for a session in a few minutes.

She continued, “I want to agree with you to an extent, David. Oh, not about the conspiracy business. You saw lightning, or some sort of static effect. Who knows these days what nature might toss at us? And patients go downstairs at all hours.” She held up a hand. “I know it’s against the rules, but you don’t tell people like this to follow your rules. You ask them.”

“But they—”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not even interested in what they were doing. They do all sorts of odd things. Most of them are geniuses, which I’m sure you’ve noticed. Or have you?”

“Don’t patronize me, Marian.”

“Trust them, David! What they are doing here, even who they really are, most of them—well, we’re not sure, none of us. But we serve their needs. We feed them and protect them and give them shelter and psychiatric support. They’re far, far beyond most mortals, including you and me. Did you know that most of them can learn a new language in a couple of hours? And ask them to recite something for you sometime. Anything worth reciting. They’ll know it, almost certainly. Give them something to read, then ask them to repeat it a couple of days later. It’ll come back verbatim. Engage them on the most complex topics, you’ll be amazed.”

“Like what—Aztec culture?”

“Most of these people are as interested as anybody in ancient Mesoamerica. The difference is, they understand things like the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs, and their philosophy, and Mayan mathematics.”

His mind went to Acton’s list sitting right now locked in one of the drawers of his desk. He did not want to feel as if he was drowning, but that was exactly how he felt. He knew that Marian was not an insider, Aubrey Denman had told him. So he would not open up to her, no matter how familiar with the situation she seemed.

Mack Graham was on his way, and there wasn’t time to continue this. All he could do was to tell the truth of his feelings.

“Marian, I’m moved, I have to admit, by your loyalty to the patients.”

“David, in this place nothing is as it seems.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that you may never fully understand them or what they’re doing. But trust it, David. We all do, we just trust it.” She came to her feet. “I have patients, too,” she said. “Linda Fairbrother had a very difficult night. A painful interruption, as I understand it. She has a compulsive need to play every note in precise sequence.” Her voice rose a little. “But some insensitive fool touched her hand—*touched it*—and disturbed the flow of her music and that has injured her.”

“I’m sorry,” David said.

“Yes,” she responded, “you are.” And she left.

David fought the pain that her sarcasm brought. He should not have interrupted the patient. It had been insensitive, even unprofessional. You empathized, you did not control . . . unless, of course, you were a kid who was just plain out of his depth.

To regain his composure, what he needed was information. If he just understood the basic realities of this place better, he could be more useful. Or, frankly, begin to be useful at all. He looked to Katie, who remained as still as a wary bird.

“Katie, you’ve been here for, um—”

“Four years.”

“As a psychiatric nurse who has been working with Dr. Hunt for that time, what do you make of this conversation?”

“Are you putting me on the spot, here?”

“I’m asking for your professional opinion.”

“As a nurse, my opinion of her is that she’s a conscientious and effective doctor.”

“And me? How am I doing?”

“David, to be completely frank, you’re taking longer figuring things out than I would have thought.”

“I can’t figure anything out!”

“You can figure out what you need to figure out, which is how to support these patients. Just concentrate on their needs, David! Who knows what they’re *doing*? We can’t understand, we don’t have the minds for it. What we can do is provide a hug or a pill when needed, and a sounding board. Let them go where they want to go, be there to catch them when they trip. That’s all we can do.”

His buzzer rang, and at the Acton Clinic, you did not keep patients waiting.

9

ORME

Mack appeared in a silk jacket and trousers, moving with that curious precision of his. As he slid into the patient's chair in the nook that David had reserved for these sessions, David thought that he looked not like a mental patient with a severely distorted grasp of reality, but like some sort of vaudeville performer.

"We could become cannibals," Mack said.

That certainly sounded like symptomatic production. He settled in for a real session with a real psychiatric patient . . . for once.

"What makes you say that?"

"No eggs at breakfast, therefore Acton is having supply problems. We could send raiding parties into the town."

"Do you think cannibalism is a good idea?"

"I'm crazy, so of course I do. I want to know about the new intake."

"You'll meet her in the common areas."

"Social Register?"

"I wouldn't know, Mack."

"Let me tell you about her. She's at least thirty. She's a self-commit who's been having very serious second thoughts. And last night, when she was screaming in that so very pleasant padded cell of yours, and you went to observe her, you got, shall we say, sidetracked."

What was this? Had this patient overheard something? Or had he been behind one of those welder's masks, perhaps—another confinement patient being let out at night?

"Expand on that."

"I think there are lots of surprises in the Acton Clinic. Right answer?"

"Therapeutic interaction isn't about right answers. It's about opening doors."

"You see the sun this morning?"

"Have you seen the sun?"

“My point is that it looks like it’s had a bite taken out of it. The sunspot is gigantic.”

“What does that mean to you?”

“To me? That I won’t be alive in six months. Like you. Like everybody.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. Incidentally, the new intake—what’s her surname? Where’s she from?”

“We’re back to the new patient?”

“I just like to know who’s here. Who I might be dealing with. The world of the obscenely rich is not a large one. She and I might have played doctor as kids. If so, I’d like to renew the acquaintance.”

“Being in the CIA makes you rich?”

“Being the heir to Graham Mining makes you rich. I served my country for a dollar a year. And I was retired mental, okay? Is that what you want me to admit? That I was humiliated and ended up in this idiotic place, spilling my innermost secrets to a kid? Dr. Ford, I want just two things from you. First, I want to know the name of the new intake. I want to know who I’m living with. Second, I would like you to review my file and see if I really need to be on confinement.”

“You don’t think you should be?”

“Of course not! I don’t understand it at all.”

“Dr. Hunt did it because you have anger issues. Your daytime rights aren’t affected.”

“Except I have a goddamn armed guard when I go outside!”

“Armed with a tranquilizer gun. After Dr. Ullman passed away, you were very, very angry.” He did not bring up the fact that Mack had been AWOL at the time of the fire.

“Something was wrong that night, Doctor. And something was wrong last night, is wrong now, and has been wrong for weeks. And I don’t mean the sun or the economy or any of that crap. I mean that something is wrong *here*. Something is happening to this place, and yes, it scares me and when I am afraid, yes, I have an anger problem. Like those flashes last night? What was *that*? I had—” He stopped, shook his head.

“You had?”

“I don’t know. A dream. Not pretty.”

“You think the flashes were a dream?”

“Hell no, but they triggered something.”

“Can you describe it, Mack?”

“Um, sure. A demon. I saw a demon.”

David strove to maintain the therapeutic context, but at the same time was acutely aware of his own reaction to the flashes, but what he’d seen had hardly been a demon.

“You want to ask me something, Doctor. Go ahead.”

Mack was certainly perceptive. “What do you know about the flashes?”

“They’re making an ORME, and that’s pretty damn disturbing.”

“An ORME?”

“An orbitally rearranged monatomic element. Gold, would be my guess. The legendary philosopher’s stone.”

Those two words, “philosopher’s stone,” would ordinarily have evoked in him the quiet contempt of the scientist dealing with an ignorant member of the public who was silly enough to believe such twaddle.

That was not how he reacted now. “Go on.”

“It’s being made in their arc furnace. The ‘kiln.’ Look inside sometime.”

“I have. It looks like a kiln.”

“Not at night, Doc. That’s when they install their tungsten filament, and you’re looking at three thousand degrees sustained.”

“Isn’t that rather a high temperature?”

“Not for them. And this new lady, she’s their leader, I think. I think things are going into overdrive. She, um—God, you know, I’ve forgotten her name.”

“Caroline.”

“Haven’t we done this? Maybe the flashes erased my memory. I mean her last name. Is it Acton?”

David remained impassive.

“Is it Light, then? Is she a member of the Light family?”

Mack was fishing hard—too hard, David thought. He would not forget this. “Let’s get back to ORME,” he said. “It’s what?”

“An orbitally rearranged monatomic element is an element that’s not entirely confined to three-dimensional space. It’s torsioned into hyperspace. You eat it, and you extend into hyperspace, too.”

The philosopher’s stone . . . they’d been taught about it in class. “*It’s not just for philosophers and it’s not a stone, it’s a white powder.*”

“And extending into hyperspace gets you what?”

“You’re outside of space and time. So you can see the past and the future. You can . . . maybe escape. Move around time or through it faster. Except, of course, for the problem.”

“Which is?”

“It’s total bullshit. All ingesting a heavy metal is gonna do is screw with your kidneys.”

“That would be my best guess, too.”

If a man’s stare could express the hunger of a tiger, Mack the Cat’s poisoned eyes expressed it now. At that moment, the session bell chimed softly and he leaped to attention and saluted. “Hup!”

David recalled Katie’s comment that Mack alternated between incipient serial killer and charming boy.

After he left, David slid aside the wall of book backs that concealed his electronics from patients. He keyed in Mack’s code, F-0188, and the system began following his transponder. David watched him go down the wide hallway past Katie’s office, then down two flights of stairs, the system automatically shifting from one camera to the next as it followed him.

He went into the art room where a number of other patients were painting and one was sculpting.

David closed the monitors. This was the very picture of a compliant patient.

He had fifteen minutes before his next appointment, which was Linda Fairbrother.

He pressed his intercom and said to Katie, “I’m going down to the art room to observe Mack. I’ll be back in time for Fairbrother.”

As he was closing his monitoring system, he saw Caroline Light sitting at an easel in the art room. Again, he pressed the intercom. “I see that Caroline is in the population.”

“Dr. Hunt said to release her.”

He went into the outer office. “But she’s under constant supervision?”

She gestured toward her bank of screens. “Absolutely. Sam’s on the job, watching her and Mack and keeping them apart.”

“Oh?”

“Mack has expressed interest in her.”

He was tempted to issue Sam a real gun and live rounds. He would

immediately reinforce to Sam that he thought that Mack was potentially quite dangerous to her.

“Let Marian know that I’ll expect to discuss Caroline’s progress toward the end of the day. We’ll need to make a decision about where she sleeps tonight.”

Frankly, he hoped that she would fake more evidence of disturbance and justify another night under confinement—not that it helped, given her hidden power to apparently come and go as she pleased. He’d assumed that she’d had help from the staff—probably Fleigler—but now who knew, maybe she’d just walked through the walls.

This substance they were making—even the process of creating it affected the mind profoundly, and look what had happened to him when he drew close. He’d been somehow—was the right word “overcome”?—yes, overcome, and what had taken place next? He thought that they had probably carried him to his room.

But the state he had been in was not sleep, it was darker and deeper than sleep. Had he been outside of time, somehow? Was such a thing truly possible?

In any case, if just the manufacturing process was that disorienting, perhaps the substance was potent indeed. He could certainly understand why the group making it had been wearing welder’s masks.

White powder gold . . . it had been discussed in class—discussed a lot. He could see Mr. Light sitting on the edge of his desk speaking about it. Could see but not hear.

God, but the fog of amnesia was maddening. Maybe Katie knew more than she was saying. Maybe there would be some trigger to memory if he just talked about it all. “Katie, what’s your impression of what happened last night? Please be frank.”

“You were overwrought. It could happen to anybody.”

Not helpful. “Did I go out? Were you aware of that?”

She was silent. Then she reached out, her hand tentative. For a moment, he still hesitated, but when she began to withdraw it, he took it. They remained like that for a moment, and he felt that her hand was warm and small and very soft.

A moment later, it was over, and she turned away and busied herself with her files. He went down to watch Caroline and Mack, and try to feel his way

a little further down the dark passage that was life at the Acton Clinic.

10

MAYHEM

Mack sat near Caroline Light, watching her paint the most strikingly realistic painting he had ever seen. She was just beginning, but it was really very odd. It wasn't photographic, it was beyond that. The light shimmering in the meadow, the glow of the tiny flowers and the green of the grass—it was just uncanny, and what a very mysterious thing for her to be doing. What would a painting have to do with anything, no matter how it appeared?

He had calculated every word uttered in his session with young David, controlling not only his own answers, but also the doctor's questions, until finally the truth had been revealed. At the instant that the young doctor's untrained body language—crossing his legs, glancing away—had revealed the correctness of his guess that this was Caroline Light, a bolt of pure fire had shot through him, forcing him to will his face to impassivity and idly straighten his tie while he was actually brimming with triumph inside.

It was Caroline Light, and my, but she had fooled them all, hadn't she? Rich, neurotic playgirl. And all that screaming and crying last night—she was an excellent actress.

No matter how good she was, though, in the end he was going to squeeze out every morsel of information she possessed, including how to make white powder gold that worked, and exactly what to do with it that would lead to escape from this hell.

They might not be able to save all the people in all the redoubts, but they could certainly save the Blue Ridge, which would be enough to start mankind again on a far stronger footing. No more corrupt bloodlines, no more inferior people, not ever. A new world.

He was eager to get to his room and let General Wylie know she was here. He needed orders and support personnel. There must be no mistakes, and if there was resistance from the security guards when he took her—as he had to believe there would be—he had to be certain that they would not succeed in stopping him.

“Don’t,” she said.

Was she speaking to him? Surely not. He was thirty feet away, hardly looking at her.

She turned toward him and challenged him with a stare. “You. Don’t.”

“Excuse me?”

“Go away.”

“I’m sorry. It’s your painting. The life in it—”

“I don’t think looking at pictures makes men drool like dogs, Mr. Dog.”

Why did she care so much? Why was she so concerned about a *picture*?

He was so maddeningly in the dark.

“Hello? Are you deaf?”

“I’m terribly sorry.”

He got up from the chair and moved out into the larger recreation area. He strolled up to Sam.

“I guess that didn’t work,” he said, trying to sound affable.

“Not her type, Mack.”

“Yeah, I was halfway across the room.”

“You were staring pretty hard.”

“Look, I’m going to take a little siesta. Wash her outa my hair.”

Sam nodded.

“Um, would you do me a huge favor and not turn on my room.” He tugged at his crotch.

“I hear you. I’ll hang out in the hall. Monitor off.”

They went together up the stairs to the living area. “You used to only be with me when I was outside. I feel kind of oppressed.”

“Glen’s orders. Supertight security from now on. Thank whoever did Dr. Ullman.”

“Townies. Nothing to do with us nice, sweet patients.”

“But you were out that night. Unfortunately for you.”

He went into his room and closed the door. He couldn’t lock it, of course. That could only be done from the outside.

Immediately, he went to his drawer and got out the radio. Using the keypad on the modified TV remote that controlled it, he tapped out a few words: first, “Caroline Light has come. Need immediate action.”

He waited for the faint tone that would indicate that his message had been received. The set on the other end was monitored twenty-four hours a day.

For security reasons, they had no set transmission times. He looked at his watch. The sixty-second window came and went. Still no acknowledgment. Following protocol, he transmitted a second time, then once again waited.

This had to work, it was too important not to. But the sun was awful today, maybe even the single sideband system they used was gone.

Again he transmitted, and again there was no response.

Okay, he was panicking now, feeling that same sense of being trapped that regularly woke this claustrophobe up nights. Angrily, he shut down his equipment. He told himself that it was a lot harder for his simple system to detect their signals than vice versa. So maybe they'd gotten the message. Maddening. But he had to take risks now, and one of them was to find a way out of this room after lockdown. It was urgent that he gain the freedom of this place as soon as possible.

Sure, he could enter the ductwork, but he needed that blueprint, which meant another excursion into town and a search of the building department's records.

Once he could get out of this room, cover would also require confusion, and he thought he knew how to cause it. The townies lusted after this place. They stayed away because of the guards. He understood the system, though, and he could provide them with a plan. If they were desperate enough, they would come. There would be a battle, and he would use it as a cover to capture Light and wring the truth out of her. Maybe Ford, too. He'd been appointed supervisor of this place, so he had to be high up in the leadership, also.

He stepped out into the hall. Sam sat half asleep in a tipped-back chair in the nurse's station. Good, he would leave him behind right here and now.

"Hi, there," Sam said.

Shit! "Well, I think I'm looking at a walk."

"You want to go out in that? Have you seen the sky?"

"I'm crazy, remember."

Sam was not happy about it, but he stuck to his orders. Don't control the patient, follow the patient.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and crossed the art room.

"Jesus," Sam said.

Mack also looked toward Caroline Light at her easel, and this time was even more awed. It looked more like she was opening a window into a

beautiful forest glade, a real one—but not in the here and now, because her sky was normal.

Although he needed to discover what, if anything, this strange talent of hers might mean, he didn't pause long. He wanted no more trouble from her, and he had his plan, and he would find out everything.

At the end of the room, there were broad glass doors that led into the side garden. Glass, but thick as steel. Sam unlocked them with his fingerprint reader, and he and Mack stepped into the white glare of the sun.

“We don't want to be out here, Mack, I'm telling you.”

“It's incredible.”

“Don't look at the sun.”

“I'm careful, Sam.” Mack held up his hand, observing through two cracked fingers. The damn thing was devoured with sunspots, a great, jagged, flaring mess.

Sam was doing the same thing. “Come on, let's go back in, Mack.”

“Just to the apple tree. Five minutes.” He had to get Sam out of sight, just for a moment. He went down to the formal garden, where there were some tall laurel bushes, just trying to bloom. Their slick, dark green leaves were thick, and the path between them was concealing.

People sense things, and in particular, they sense danger. You need absolute control over your body language, your breathing, everything, if somebody who is guarding you at close range isn't going to become wary as you attack them.

“I just want to stretch my legs,” he said. “I just do not get why you're on me at all, let alone inside.”

“Personally, I like you. I think guarding you like this is bullshit. But hey, I got a paycheck to be concerned about.”

They were in the formal garden, Sam just behind him. Ten steps later, they were at the most concealing point, surrounded on both sides by large tea rosebushes in fitful bloom. From here, Mack could see only the top edge of the guardhouse at the corner of the south and west walls.

He took a quick step aside, then one back.

“Mack?”

He wasn't called Mack the Cat for nothing, and before Sam could turn around, he'd enclosed his neck from behind, lifted him in his iron-strong hands, and made a quick spinal adjustment that would paralyze him for about

two hours. This was an “in and out” technique he’d learned in the Black Magic program, an offshoot of the MK-Ultra mind control experiments and Nazi medical discoveries. MK-Ultra had been plastered all over the media back in the 1970s and decisively shut down, but not Black Magic.

Sam dropped like a bag of ashes. Mack lifted him and arranged him on a bench. Maybe the mouth tried to open. The eyes stared into his, pleading. Mack said nothing. Sam couldn’t move, but he was still conscious.

“You’ll be fine, buddy,” he said. Except, not with your boss, not so fine there.

Now he would work his way to the low area in the wall near the service gate that led out onto Route 16. Sam had been a piece of cake, but this next maneuver was going to be seriously dangerous. The guards were a bunch of nervous kids, and nervous kids were hair-triggers.

The old gate he was headed for hadn’t been opened in a long time, and it was on the opposite side of the property from the town. So it had one, maybe two guys on it. He could do two, no problem.

He moved through the garden, strolling casually. Let them think that Sam was sitting on a bench sipping his usual cup of coffee.

When he came to the end of the garden, he stopped. Ahead and to the right was a hydroponic greenhouse. To the left, the disused road to the service gate crossed a clear field of grass, nothing to shelter him at all.

So, okay, speed would shelter him. He strode out of the concealing garden and onto the road, heading for the gate. A moment later, the guard came out of his little station. He wasn’t dressed like the ones near the house, in discreet blazers. This guy was in full battle dress, helmet and all. He carried an automatic rifle on his shoulder . . . and a paperback in his hand, a finger holding his place open.

Mack pushed away the thought that it would be easy. You take that approach, you are dead.

As he drew closer, he smiled. “Hi, there!”

“You need to stay away from the wall, Sir.”

“I’m just getting some exercise.”

“Stay away from the wall.”

Mack moved closer to him. “Sure. No problem.” He kept going closer.

“You need to return to the garden, Sir.”

“Sure.” He started to turn. Then froze. Looked more closely at the guard.

“Man, that can’t be an M14A SOPMOD.”

The kid shuffled. “Yeah, it is.”

“Jeez, can I just come close enough to get a look?”

“You’re Mack Graham. You have a minder.”

“Oh, come on, take it easy. He’s got a sore foot and he’s over there sitting down. Don’t make him get up, he won’t like me anymore.”

The guy smiled slightly, then ported the rifle. Mack took three quick steps toward him. The kid was trained, but not so well that he recognized Mack’s movements as an assault setup.

A quick rap to a point just between and above his eyes and he went down. As he doubled over, Mack grabbed the rifle out of his hands and set it down back in the guardhouse. Then he pulled the kid in. He’d be unconscious for only five minutes tops, but there was a difference: this maneuver blew out the short-term memory. The kid would not recall that Mack had even been here. He’d assume that he’d fallen asleep and try to cover that with his superiors. Mack would have done the same thing with Sam, but if he woke up in five minutes and found his charge gone, he’d raise hell. He needed the time he’d get out of Sam to put distance between himself and the clinic.

He reached up to the roofline of the guardhouse and pulled himself up. No question but that he could be seen from here, so he had to keep moving. Not a problem, though. The guardhouse was only two feet higher than the roof, so he was sliding through the razor wire in a couple of seconds.

For a moment, he teetered on the narrow edge that topped the wall, then dropped down onto the far side.

Still not out of danger, though. He had to move fast now, to get into the cover of the woods that spread across the wild portion of the Acton land. A hundred-foot perimeter had been created between the wall and the trees, and so recently that the stumps were still bleeding.

Only one thing to do, now: cross it and trust to luck that nobody would see him from the two other towers that watched over this particular spot. In fifteen seconds, he was in the shade of the trees. He waited. No alarm. So he headed deeper.

The storms of earlier had gone, and the air was clean, faintly tangled with smoke. One thing solar electrical energy this intense did was to cause spontaneous fires in wiring of every kind. There were houses and buildings burning all over Raleigh County, no doubt.

He moved off deeper into the forest, taking a long, curving path among the trees, one that he would use later to guide townspeople to this vulnerable spot. He would bring them back, a great number of them, and they would come to kill, and while they did, he would do things to Caroline that would definitely bring the information he needed. Black Magic had many tricks up its sleeve, many tricks, and some of them caused amazing discomfort and amazing confusion, and some of them could hypnotize your adversary into becoming your slave.

He wondered who would break first, Caroline or dear little David. His money was on David. That Caroline was beautiful on the outside, but the interior was tough. David was nervous, rule bound, and insecure. Start pulling his skin off, he'd tell you every damn thing he knew.

He found Route 16 and sped up his progress by jogging. It was no trouble for him. In his condition, he could jog for hours.

Not until he came to the outskirts of Raleigh did he slow down. In that time, he had not seen a single car or a single person. The town was quiet, too. Very damn quiet.

He moved on, dropping back to a walk as he passed Raleigh Mortuary Services and the Dairy Queen. There would be a mayor. Some leader. He would find him. They would talk. And mayhem would come to the Acton Clinic.

11

THE NIGHT WALKER

David and Katie sat together in the living room of his suite attempting to get some kind of idea what was happening in the outside world. The Internet was still down, and, in any case, when it had been up, the Spaceweather.com website had been too swamped to be accessed. Toward one in the afternoon, the television signal had failed, both on cable and satellite. Prior to that, though, the stations had not had much information except endless repeats of the FAA statement that all aircraft were grounded and Homeland Security's warning to remain indoors.

Katie turned on the radio, trying to find a station. Voices drifted in and out, sounding as if they might be emanating from a land of dreams. But most of them were probably from Baltimore, fifty miles away.

Security was working frantically on the surveillance system, which was blowing circuits left and right due to massive atmospheric electrical overloading.

Katie picked up the small radio, raised it above her head, then slumped. She put it down.

"Just when you need them, they're not there."

"People are looking to their own lives."

"David, how bad is it? You know, don't you? You understand these things."

"It's certainly the most intense solar storm since 1859. Sunspots, a huge solar flare, and an intensely energetic coronal mass ejection. So it's inevitable that the satellites would be gone, but many of them are programmed to shut down during incidents like this, so they could come back. On the other hand, even well-insulated power grids are going to be collapsing all over the world. Even here in the U.S., if it keeps up."

"But it's not what people are saying, surely? It's not the end of the world?"

Before he came here, he would have brushed off the claim as having no scientific basis. But even though he now knew the truth, how do you tell

another person a thing like that?

“We need to be prepared for anything,” he said finally.

She looked doubtful, turning away, then glancing back at him.

“I think it’s the last thing they would admit. The panic would be incredible. People would claw their way into every hole in the world. Anyway, how can they tell us?” She gestured toward the radio.

“Let’s keep focused on the clinic. That’s our responsibility.”

“Okay, fine. Nothing was delivered today, David. And I can’t reach Sysco, I can’t reach UPS, FedEx, Maryland Medical, anybody.”

Outside, the auroras were dancing.

“I do think we need to close all blinds and curtains.”

“That won’t keep out radiation, will it?”

“Actually, it’ll help. Gamma rays aren’t very penetrating and the walls are thick. The roof is made of tons of slate. The weak point is the windows. And I think we need to minimize guard patrolling. Keep the men in sheltered areas.”

“I think this place is going to collapse. In fact, I think the whole world is going to collapse.”

At first, she had seemed welcoming, but no longer. She was totally focused on the welfare of the institution and its people, and he thought at once two things: she’s right to be afraid; but then, can I rely on this woman? Her file was equivocal. It was hard to know exactly what her relationship with Dr. Ullman had been, and there were a number of years in her timeline that were not accounted for. If they were going to go through a crisis, he would like to know about those missing years. In fact, he’d like to know more about the entire staff, especially the security personnel. He needed to know who the class could rely on and who not.

The intercom clicked. “We have a code blue in Room 303.”

He hit the reply button. “Is the cardiac team in motion?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“I’m on my way.” As he left, he called back to Katie, “Do you know which patient that is?”

She was right behind him. “I’m not certain.”

As he ran across the flyover to the patient area, he could hear voices ahead. The nurses had just wheeled the shock wagon into one of the rooms. David saw that they were working on Linda Fairbrother. Her skin was cyanotic.

David's initial impression was that the woman was dead.

The nurses performed efficiently, but not like code blue teams he'd seen in operation at Manhattan Central, where they did a cardiac arrest every few days. Then he saw that one of the defibrillation paddles was on the wrong side of the woman's chest.

"Hold it," he snapped. He could hear the whine of the defibrillator loading.

"It's gonna fire!"

He grabbed the paddle and placed it correctly. Just as he pulled his hand away, the system fired off and the patient convulsed. A moment later the computer said, "No response. Reload. Ten seconds."

He would let it go through two more cycles, then pull it off. He saw that he'd have to inform the Fairbrother family that their patient had expired. But how, given the state of communications?

The third round came, the body convulsed again . . . and the heart started. "Stable rhythm," the computer said. "Defibrillation complete."

The staff wasted no time moving her to the facility's small infirmary. David wondered what this was—a natural event or the result of some sort of attack?

"We need to get this woman into cardiac intensive care," he said.

"Raleigh County EMS isn't responding," one of the nurses said.

"Did you call the hospital's main number?"

"Doctor, I called all five hospitals in the area. No response."

Katie said, "I told you, David, it's all coming apart."

Anger put a bitter snap into his voice. "Maybe it is, but we're here now and we have a heart attack to deal with." He felt the full weight of this place and all these people on his shoulders just now. "I'm sorry," he said. She did not deserve his spitting words, it wasn't her fault.

He went down the corridor and through the door into the main patient area with its wider hallway and its expansive suites. People had heard the activity and were coming out. As Linda was moved past, they watched in a silence that was quite unlike what would have happened, say, at Manhattan Central. Frankly, these people were much more contained than he would have expected, and he wondered if perhaps Caroline was secretly waking up the class. He hoped so.

"All right," he said to the largely calm and silent group, "Linda had a minor cardiac event. Please return to your rooms now."

William Moore, one of the genuine patients, gave him the most menacing look, lips a set line, body language suggesting that he'd like to pounce. Then he grinned from ear to ear.

"You're a bureaucrat," he said.

"I'm your doctor."

"The bureaucracy of medicine is the machinery of death."

David stopped himself from automatically moving into a therapeutic stance with this patient and said simply, "We can talk tomorrow."

"With you? You're a waste of space."

"All right, then, with Dr. Hunt or one of the psychologists, as you prefer."

Leaving the patients to the nurses, he went into the infirmary.

Linda Fairbrother was lying quietly as Marian Hunt applied leads to her chest from the EKG machine.

"They're coming for me," Linda said.

"Who is?"

She snapped her jaw shut.

He would once have thought that this was yet another patient struggling with inappropriate thoughts, but as she was a member of the class, he wasn't sure what was meant. He wanted to ask her more. He remembered those two glyphs on her record. There was something special about her.

"Linda, tell me what's troubling you? Who's coming for you?"

"I got a message." Her fist closed on his shirtfront and she pulled him face-to-face. "I don't think Tom can go." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Never tell anybody this, but he has this blackness on his back and side, and it's growing."

David's mind went to the notion of judgment. Could those who had done evil be actually, physically marked? It seemed impossible, but all the rules were changing now. Perhaps bodies were becoming mirrors of souls, our flesh no longer concealing our truth. But what had Tom Dryden ever done, that innocuous little man? All he could think was that people tend to keep their evil acts secret.

Marian came up to him with the EKG tape.

"This is normal," she said.

"Can we e-mail it to a cardiologist?"

"If the Net comes back. But we'll get a normal report, no question."

David looked at the tape. He had been assuming that this was an episode of

sudden arrhythmia death syndrome that had been interrupted by timely action.

“No Bruguda sign,” he muttered, “no fibrillation.”

“No arrhythmias at all, in fact.”

“I think we need a deeper study on this woman. Hearts don’t just stop. And we want her under close observation until we can get her into a cardiac unit.”

“David, I’ve been exploring unexplained cardiac arrests. *Bangungut* and familial long QT syndrome are possibilities.”

“And *Bangungut* is?”

“A type of nightmare so intense that it can cause death. Common in parts of Asia.”

This staff was out of its depth. No specialist would even bother to think about something so irrelevant.

“And familial long QT syndrome? Any symptoms?”

“There’s no heart abnormality or defect. A little crud in the arteries, nothing to get excited about.”

“And how do we know this? Do we have documentation?”

She paused for a moment, then said more quietly, “She’s presented this way before.”

“So was there follow-up?”

“Of course there was follow-up! We could get out of here then. She was worked up at Raleigh County. The heart muscle was healthy.”

“So she can stop her heart at will?” He looked down at her. “Can you do that, Linda?”

“I’m afraid you won’t let me go home. I have nightmares about it.” Her eyes bored into his. “I’m not like the rest of you. It’s time for me to go home.”

“Linda, normally you’d be free to leave. It’s just that current conditions make that difficult. Nobody’s holding you against your will.”

“Doctor, when the time comes, I will have only a couple of minutes. And all these doors in this place—oh, God, how I hate the Acton Clinic!”

A voice came from the doorway. “We’ll take care of you,” Caroline Light said. She addressed David. “When she wants to go outside, let her.”

“So now the patients are the doctors. Fine.”

“Will you wake up, David!”

“I’m awake.”

Linda said, "Caroline, let him be."

"He's an idiot! He won't wake up!" She strode in, got right in his face. "Wake up," she shouted.

He looked past her to Katie. "Nurse, get this patient under control."

Caroline slapped him so hard that he saw stars.

For an instant, there was rage and he grabbed for her wrist. But then he stopped. His mind had gone silent. Clarity came.

"What was that supposed to be," he muttered, "a Zen slap?"

"That's exactly what it was." She turned and stalked out of the room.

"Confine her again tonight," he said.

"Oh, shut up," Marian replied.

"What?"

"Will you people stop!" Linda said.

He was appalled at himself, realizing that he was doing this in the hearing of this patient. It was grotesquely unprofessional. Katie was right, the world was falling apart, and not just the outside world. He drew an unwilling Marian Hunt out of the room.

"Hold your tongue in front of the patients, Marian."

"Then show some competence."

He paused, struggling not to explode in her face. "Keep her under observation for the night."

"They're all under observation all the time," she muttered as she headed off the floor. "Want her *really* locked up now? Maybe cuffed to her bed?"

"She doesn't like you," Katie said after she left.

"Who does?"

Katie's expression said every silent thing that her lips did not, and suddenly the crisp, worried professional was replaced by a warm, compelling woman.

She turned to go back to their side of the building, and he followed more slowly as she strode on ahead.

He was hardly disappointed to find her in his sitting room. She had just dropped into one of the big wing chairs that stood before the fireplace, once again tuning the radio.

"Pick up anything?"

"News from WBAL. It's huge, what's going on. Satellites are not coming back, power systems are down all across the world, the Internet backbone is

fried. We won't see the Internet again for years."

As suddenly as suppressed fears will do, all the terror that he had been containing inside himself boiled to the surface and he uttered a single racking sob, then immediately stifled it, but not before she started in the chair, and looked up at him, her face registering surprise.

"Katie, I'm sorry. I'm on edge."

"Well, yeah." She rose out of the chair and stood before him, her eyes cast down.

They were in each other's arms so suddenly and so naturally that David hardly registered what was happening. It was just *right*. But when she lifted her neat heart of a face and he saw her lips open slightly, he did think about it. What he thought was that fraternization like this never led anywhere good, and then that he was tired of being the person who had thoughts like that. Caroline Light had accomplished a true Zen slap. He recognized the need for change.

She was looking up at him, waiting, and he did not do what he had been about to do, which was to turn away. Instead, he kissed her, and as he did he felt the hunger for her change from something he could control to something he could not control, and he had never felt such a flood of gratitude and desire, not in all the kisses of his life.

"Oh, God," she said, breaking away.

"I'm sorry."

She shook her head, then threw her arms around him. Her throbbing life pulsed close to him. When his body responded, she laughed a little, her eyes shimmering, and pressed closer. He found himself wondering again if she had been Dr. Ullman's lover—and threw the thought out like the rubbish that it was. What if she had, what did it matter?

Life was not about things like that. Life was about this moment, here, now.

This sensitive woman broke away. She returned to her place by the fire. "What's that called?" she said. "Absence of affect? We see it in patients."

"Katie, no."

"You're just sort of a cold fish by nature, then?"

"I was hardly feeling cold." He went to her, reached down and took her hands. He drew her up to him. She came, but leaned against him as a child might, expressing affection without yearning.

What had been broken here, and so suddenly? And by him, or by her? He

put his arm around her waist. Tentatively, he moved toward the bedroom. She came without the protest he expected, but when she sat on the edge of the bed, he saw in her face for just a moment a haggard expression. She was exhausted, but she was here.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“You were suddenly just so distant. What do you think about when you do that?”

“Do I do it often?”

“People around here say you have no emotions. That you’re—well, that you’re heartless, David.” She took his hand in hers, and for a moment they sat side by side, two awkward kids.

He went to her top button.

“I’m scared, Katie.”

“Not of me.”

He unbuttoned it.

“Of taking on a job I can’t handle. And from a murdered man in a place where murders happen.”

She opened her blouse, then reached around and unsnapped her bra. Her breasts tumbled out in a pale perfection of curves. Then she put a hand on his belt and glanced up at him. He found the shyness flickering in her eyes profoundly erotic.

She drew down his zipper. Laughing a little in her throat, she said, “You’re going to tear these pants,” and she drew him out into the coolness of the air and the warmth of her hands.

Her nakedness was exquisite. Certainly, she was among the most beautiful women he had ever touched. She was as pure and smooth as cream, and when they lay back together, he sensed that he was forgiven, as if whatever had almost driven them apart had with kindness and grace been put aside. The only flaw she possessed was a brown shadow along the back of her neck, and as he slid his hand along its smooth coolness, then kissed it, it tasted faintly of ash, perhaps a faded suntan. And yet, it was odd, not really a color at all. He’d never seen anything quite like it, as a matter of fact, a color that wasn’t a color, that seemed more like a shadow being cast from within. Maybe it was something bizarre to do with exposure to the sun.

“Have you been outside?”

“When?”

“Recently? Say, the past three days?”

She sat up. “Why do you ask?”

“Just don’t go. There’s a lot of radiation in the atmosphere.”

She kissed his nose. “I’ve wanted to do that.”

“Kiss my nose?”

She hugged him, and they fell together and he tried to love her with skill and care, to be for her what he believed women wanted, drawing from his not very wide experience, which was of mostly equally unsure nurses. Many a hospital was full of exhausted, brilliant kids exploring not only the challenges of medicine, but also those of the heart.

When he reached up and turned off the bedside lamp, the room filled with greenish-purple flickering so intense that he had to close his eyes against it. This had been a long, hard day, and one that seemed to have become night very quickly. But the hour was eight by the clock.

She reached up and turned the lamp back on, pushing away the demented flashes. “Let’s not let it spoil it,” she whispered.

The lamp was another treasure, graceful girls sleeping, satyrs with erections leaping. Perhaps the only piece of pornographic glass ever produced by Louis Comfort Tiffany.

Coming together seemed so completely right and so completely innocent, and as his body filled with the pleasure that she had for him, the burdens that he bore slipped away like soldiers into a morning mist.

He knew that he would be too quick with her, and tried to slow his pace, but the energy of it burst through, and as his body was swept by the familiar tingling waves, he looked down into her face, into the happiness there, and could only think that, glowing in the soft light of the bedside lamp, it was the most beautiful of faces.

Then his body swept all thought away and his loins shuddered and his blood hummed, and the glorious, dying explosion came, and she smiled and was excited, too, at least that’s how she appeared, and he came to rest on her and in her.

They shared a silence that was marred only by the twisting of the wind as it worried the eaves of the old building.

“Have you noticed the scene on that lampshade?” she asked, her voice full of warmth . . . and, he thought, a certain triumph. He had thought himself the seducer, but this Katie was a clever woman.

“This is the room where he took his mistresses. He had dozens of them, you know.”

She came up onto her elbow, then kissed him on the cheek, a tentative sort of a peck. “David, you have got to be about the cutest guy who ever came here.”

“I thought you really did not like me.”

She kissed him again, this time on the edge of his mouth.

“Please just melt a little, okay, David?”

Then she kissed him full on the lips, pressing him down into the thick and giving pillows. He opened his mouth, letting the kiss penetrate, enjoying her sudden aggression.

They swam together across the gulf of the night. He let himself be intoxicated by her, and, drifting between sleep and wakefulness, he made love to her again. Toward dawn, he slept deeply.

It was then that the dreams came, his mind flowing so seamlessly into its own reality that he had essentially no idea that he was, in fact, dreaming.

The first one involved the opening of the bedroom door. Although, later, he understood that he must have been asleep, he seemed to hear a click, and to sit up and look toward the door. However, nobody came in. Instead, a shadow appeared a few feet in front of it, a human shadow. Or no, it wasn't a shadow, it was more solid than that. He watched it move forward, and thought that it was something that was coated in a darkness deeper than any normal darkness, and felt emanating from it what he could only describe as a wave of hate. His first impulse was to push away from it, and then next thing he knew, Katie was shaking him.

He looked up into her face, dark with night shadows, alive with light from the flickering sky.

“You were having a nightmare,” she said. “You were really going strong.”

“I saw somebody in here.”

“What? Paranoid about a place like this? What *could* be the matter with my beautiful man?”

They laughed together, but he felt little conviction. That had not been a nightmare, it had been a whole level more intense than that. It had been a classic *pavor nocturnus*, a parasomnia disorder. Classically, also, he had felt as if he was still awake, when actually he had been deep in slow wave sleep.

“God, what if I'm hypoglycemic? That's all I need.”

“You want a test? I can look for one in supply.”

“Nah, it’s not that. It’s just stress.”

“You’re the doctor.” She slid close to him, and they kissed, and he felt that she could not only inspire him sexually, she could be warm and comfortable in the night, and he began to drift off again.

He did not drift off, though. Instead, when he heard her breath change to a sleep rhythm, he found himself growing uneasy. He was lying with his back to the room, and he began to get the impression that this was a mistake, because the figure—or was the word “phantom”?—was still there.

Finally, he turned over and looked out into the room. The door was securely locked and chained, and there was no other way to get in here. Or was there? In an old place like this, especially a room where mistresses had been entertained, there might be hidden access.

Then, without seeing anything specific, he knew that the presence was approaching the bed. Despite the fact that his scientific mind could not for an instant believe such a thing—knew it to be impossible—it appeared that a vividly alive but invisible presence was now standing right beside the bed.

He knew that this was a return of the *pavor nocturnus*, an effect that was common with this type of sleep disturbance, but that did not change what he was feeling, and now he noticed a very strange sensation, a vibrating coldness that moved across the skin of his chest. He looked down at his nakedness, and saw a flurry of goose bumps rise where it was touching him.

There was somebody there, he knew it. But he couldn’t see them.

Why not?

This was some sort of schizophrenic hallucination, it had to be. But he didn’t possess any genes for schizophrenia, and none of the single nucleotide polymorphism associated with delusions.

So, was there somebody actually in here?

He raised himself up on his elbow. Beside him, Katie moaned softly.

He fumbled for the lamp, finally turning it on—and thought he saw the door slip closed, and jumped up and ran to it and threw it open.

The hallway was empty.

A vivid dream, then.

The next thing he knew, he was standing at the window, the one that looked out over the parking area and the trees. Overhead, an enormous object, brilliant with lights, moved majestically past. It was no plane, this

thing, and it was absolutely massive. Gigantic. And behind it was another, and above them two more, and then he raised his eyes and an awe of surpassing power captured him, for he saw hundreds and thousands of these gigantic things, stretching off into the sky until the sky itself was swallowed in auroral discharges.

Then he was inside one of these things, surrounded by columns of light that he somehow knew were living beings, ascended to great heights of the heart, and filled with love so intense that it seemed to thrust him back into early childhood, and he saw his mother and father on the beach at Cape May, Dad calling out, Mother lying with cucumber slices on her eyes, Jack the terrier barking, a tiny girl singing general praises of the day.

They were angels, a fact which he seemed instinctively to know, and he felt absolutely naked in their light. They were so deeply right and so deeply true that he cried out, or imagined that he did, for they also radiated a sense of joy and purity that was without the slightest question the most glorious, the most innocent, and the yet the most awesome emotion he had ever known.

He felt also, though, a certain sadness and he lunged at it in his soul and demanded that it leave him but it did not leave him, far from it, for the next thing he knew he was in darkness absolute, crushed by waves of sick terror. The most glorious of all dreams had turned in an instant into the black and formless mother of all nightmares.

He was moving past stone, down some sort of deep fissure. There came a sensation of heat. Soon, the rock around them was glowing and the heat had become a horrible pain, more like being sanded than burned, but it was hideous. Again and again he threw himself against the walls, back and forth, back and forth, but there was no escape.

Objectively, he knew how serious a seamless, absolute break with reality like this was. Stress induced, yes, so vivid it was the next thing to psychosis.

He went deeper, and as he did the heat rose and he writhed and fought, hammering his fists and kicking, reduced to the frenzy of a panicked child.

Cries came around him, and he could see forms embedded in the walls now, bright, blazing human shapes, and they were all crying out their innocence, but they were not innocent, he could hear it in their tone, a despairing cacophony that bore within it the discordant note of the lie.

A new pain joined the fire, a very definite pain in his right wrist.

And there was somebody yelling, and again and again he was hammering

his wrist against the edge of the bedside table, and the exquisite old lamp was bouncing.

Gasping, he wallowed in the sheets, then held his wrist. Jesus God in heaven, had he broken it? No, just the skin, but he had hammered the devil out of it.

“What happened . . .”

The room was normal, everything quiet. His clock said six forty-five. “Katie?”

His bed was empty. She was gone, and he had to ask himself if she had ever been there.

He knew this imagery, of course. The Christian heaven and hell. So he’d dreamed it, that’s all that had happened, and no matter how vivid, it had been, in the end, just a dream. A symptom of stress, perhaps, but not the psychotic break he had feared.

A sudden voice from the little sitting room beside his bedroom startled him. Male, but who was it? Nobody on staff sounded like that. He threw open the door.

“Excuse me—”

He recognized the voice of *The Today Show*’s Craig Harding. They were in the window at Rockefeller Center, and people were looking in on them. So the solar storm, also, must have passed and the satellites had switched on again, and the world had resumed. As he dressed, he listened hungrily to the news, which was basically about all the disruptions. But they were disruptions, not the end of the world.

He allowed himself to hope that Mrs. Denman’s white paper had been wrong.

In his luxurious marble shower, he imagined that the foaming body shampoo was washing off the madness of the night. For sure. If the solar storm was gone, life would return to normal very quickly now.

By the time he was striding down to the staff dining room for breakfast, he had put his dream aside.

As he descended the stairs, Glen MacNamara stood waiting for him.

“We have a patient missing.”

He absorbed this.

“Sam Taylor lost Mack.”

“When?”

He paused. "Yesterday afternoon."

"*What?* Why wasn't I informed, Glen?"

"Nobody was informed. Sam was knocked out."

"But Mack's on lockdown! Surely the staff noticed this when he didn't turn up at lights out."

"Sam asked for time while he looked for him."

"All night?"

"He let me know about ten."

"Glen, it's seven o'clock in the morning and the director of this institution is just finding this out?"

"Doctor, I didn't see the need to wake you up. What could you do? This is my issue."

David was about to really get into Glen MacNamara, but the truth was that he was right. He couldn't have done anything to help.

"Okay," he said finally. "Could Mack pose a danger to us?"

"It would be damn surprising if we ever saw or heard anything about him again. If you want me to guess, I'd say he won't last a week out there. It's hell, Doc. I'm telling you, from the smoke columns I see and all the infrastructure problems, folks are tearing each other apart." He gestured toward the dining room. "Toast, bacon, coffee, and Gatorade. In here, everybody's outraged. Out there, it would be a feast."

They went in together. As he crossed to the buffet, Katie came close to him, discreetly touching his hand.

"At least that scumbag is gone," she said quietly. "Nobody cared for him." She brightened. "And anyway, the cable's back and the sun looks better, and I've got a feeling we're getting past this thing."

Mrs. Denman's paper had warned that the solar system was headed much deeper into the supernova's debris field. Much deeper.

The truth insinuated itself into his mind. They had not come to the edge of the storm at all.

This was the eye.

12

GOLIATH

Caroline woke up on her first morning in the general patient population in a state of intense unease. She didn't actually wake up, because she hadn't slept. She'd lain there with her eyes closed, worrying, primarily about David. She had a letter for him written by Herbert Acton, but it was not to be handed to him until he remembered his past, and to her that meant remembering their time together, their shared innocent life.

Herbert Acton had warned about this period right at the omega point, that it was too unsure for him to see into it clearly, so his instructions about these final days were vague.

Beyond the borders of history, which is where mankind was now, nothing was certain, and as the evil came to understand their fate, their efforts to escape it were going to make them incredibly dangerous. Many of them would actually want all of mankind to be destroyed, if they were destroyed.

David had remembered a lot, she could sense that. But if he did not remember her, he was not on mission, and time had run out.

Intending to confront him late last night, she had gone to his bedroom. She had hoped to feed him some of the potent white powder gold they had created in the arc furnace, and see if that helped.

Oddly, the door had been unlocked. When she slipped inside, she had discovered why: Katrina Starnes had come in before her, and was sharing his bed. Carelessly—or perhaps out of an unconscious desire to broadcast her conquest—she had failed to pull the door closed.

She had never been warned about him falling in love with anybody else, and she was appalled and deeply saddened.

She had stood there, her face flaming with embarrassment, her heart wretched, her mind at a loss as to what to do now. They were too involved with each other to notice her, and she had quietly retreated.

When she'd returned to her room, all she could do was cry into her pillow.

The first thing she'd done waking up this morning was to arrange an

appointment with him. “We’ll need to squeeze you in,” Katie had said in concealing, velvet tones, “but I think I can get you fifteen minutes.”

Katie was no fool. She sensed a rival, and no way was Caroline getting any more of his time than that.

Well, Katie was going to be hurt and there was nothing Caroline could do about it. She’d been hurt herself last night, hurt terribly, watching them in their pleasure.

She had been assured by her father that David would remember everything the moment he laid eyes on her. If there were any gaps, she could show him his trigger, which was an image of Quetzalcoatl.

Neither thing had worked, and she was no longer able to contact her father for further advice, not unless the phones returned, which they had not. So she waited now, sitting with her hands folded, watching Katrina bring David his morning coffee.

As Katie crossed the room, her body spoke to Caroline of its conquest. And by the way she laid the cup near his hand, with a too-furtive glance toward his lower extremities, she knew that she was remembering him in his passion.

She fought back her anger and jealousy, but Katie sensed her feelings and her eyes darted at her, and there was between them a moment of daggers. Then Katie went flouncing out, her cheeks brushed with rose . . . and Caroline was horrified to glimpse, just above the edge of the young woman’s neckline, a telltale shadowy darkness from a mark concealed below.

Katie was judged! Caroline felt actually queasy—physically ill. This was the first person she’d seen with a mark, but there were going to be a lot of them, she knew that.

At the omega point, bodies ceased to conceal souls, and some became like light and others like darkness and others—workers like her and the rest of the class—shouldered the burden of life and kept on.

It was hard to be so evil that there could be no redemption, so what terrible things had Katie done? She looked like a sweet young nurse, the last person you’d expect to see in such a situation.

She didn’t seem in the least uneasy, so maybe she hadn’t yet noticed the discoloration or didn’t understand it. But she would notice it, and come to understand it, and when she did, the evil that she was concealing was going to explode to the surface, because this woman could not be what she seemed.

Hidden beneath that pretty surface, there lurked a monster.

Then she was face-to-face with David.

“Thank you for granting me my freedom,” she said to him, after Katie had gone. “How is Linda?”

“She had a mild heart attack. She’ll be fine.”

“Will she?”

“You think not?”

“I don’t think anything. I asked a question.”

“Which had implications.”

“I don’t do implications. I say what I mean.”

He sipped the coffee. His prop, in lieu, she supposed, of a pipe.

“David, do you have any idea who I am?”

“Caroline Light.”

“Why did I come here?”

“The same reason people usually come to the hospital. You were suffering and you wanted relief.”

“You know more than that. Do you know we were childhood sweethearts?”

“I know about the class. I know who you are and I know about . . . something. The gold. Sort of. But I’m lost. And I don’t know you. You’re like a stranger who’s sharing a compartment on a train or something.”

“I need you to wake up,” she said.

He gestured with the coffee cup. “I’m wide awake.”

“I’m going to say something,” she told him, “and you can take it however you’re going to take it.”

“Okay.”

“I dreamed you made love with Nurse Katie last night. I dreamed I watched you.”

So much blood drained out of his face that he seemed to turn to wax.

“You feel a need to tell me this?”

She decided to force the matter even further.

“I saw you tangled in blue sheets, in the light of a beautiful Tiffany lamp—so sexy, I didn’t know he did erotics—and, oh, God, I felt such incredible jealousy, because, David, you need to face the truth, and the truth is that even though we were children when we made our vows, they counted, and even though you don’t remember right now, last night you were cheating on me!”

The waxen face slowly filled with the color of a deep flush. He blinked rapidly. He picked up his pencil and put it down. Then his chin lowered, his fingers stopped toying with the pencil and grasped it tightly. There was an odd sense that they were moving down a tunnel, racing away from each other. She feared that she had made a major mistake.

He jumped to his feet, came out from behind the desk, and stood over her.

She felt the menace in it. She said, "I'm sorry I slapped you."

"I am, too. It hurt."

"I'm a punisher. It's a fault. But you're hurting me, David, you're hurting me terribly."

He loomed and she could feel him suppressing his own violence. Then he strode across the room and threw himself down in one of the sumptuous chairs that stood before the fireplace. He was muttering, and she could not hear the details.

"I'm sorry," she said, going toward him. "I've touched a nerve and I'm very sorry."

Slowly, his head turned toward her. His face was sunken and gray now, skeletal with fury.

"Will you please tell me which member of my staff allowed you access to my bedroom?"

"I—nobody. The door was unlocked."

"Damn you! *Damn* you!"

She tried another sort of shock. "You have a mission, David. Face it! You have to lead us out of this mess."

As if the chair was burning him, he leaped up and strode away again. She realized that he knew. Inside himself, he knew it all. It wasn't that he couldn't remember, but that he couldn't face it.

"Were you also out the first night you were here?"

What should she say? One of their fellow classmates had released her from her locked room, and she had gone to fetch the tiny amount of ancient white powder gold she had brought with her. She had hidden it near the gate until she was sure she wasn't walking into a trap. That gold was star stuff, what NASA had found when they went searching for stardust, and what was found in the crop circles of haunted England. Without a little of the ancient material, new material could not be made.

He returned, a stalking lion. "How stupid do you think I am?"

“David, the whole nature of reality is changing and there’s work to do. You have to accept this.”

“And I suppose the ridiculous, bloodthirsty, mad Aztec gods are coming back, too, and we’re all going to be sacrificing children soon!”

“The gods don’t exist.”

He gestured toward the glyphs above the door. “A couple of days ago you sounded like an evangelist.”

“The old gods are the mythologized principles of a lost science. As human knowledge declined after the last cataclysm, science became myth, and myth became religion. They ended up worshipping subtle principles as meaningless gods. That’s all religion is. Worship of the powers of a science that existed before Egypt.”

He glared at her in silence.

“David, you know this! We were taught it. We sat side by side.”

He looked long at her. “Yes,” he said softly, “I know.” But he seemed to sink into himself, his face growing ugly—eyes bloodshot, cheeks seething purple, lips twisted back—a face savage with amazing depths of rage.

“Now wait,” she said helplessly, “it’s all right.” How soft and full of grace that face had been when he was a boy of twelve. “Be as little children—”

“I’m an adult!” Seeming to overcome something deep within himself, he pulled away from her and stalked off again. This was a cage and he was an animal.

“David, all you have to do is embrace your role. Then you’ll see how important our love is.”

“We were kids. The loves of childhood don’t survive.”

“Our bond is essential to our mission, and it was meant to survive.”

“Well, I’ve remembered a lot of things, but not that.”

She came close, and he did not stop her. “Start again then.”

“Now? There’s no time. Not for feelings.”

“All this pacing you’re doing—you’re trying to run away, but you can’t, David. There’s no place to go.”

“There had better be, because we have very little food left and almost no fuel, and I don’t know how to save the situation.”

She did something she had last done in the basement of this very house, when they were still just kids. She kissed him . . . but not with the gingerly innocence of those days, not this time.

For a moment, they were frozen like that. And then, slowly, he pulled away from her. His face was popping sweat. She slipped close to him, and drew her arms around him. They became as still as statues, two people in the ancient, tentative posture of unfolding love.

She lifted her face, and found him looking down at her, and felt the same delectable weakness go through her that she had known when they were innocent.

“Let me show you something,” she said.

For an instant he closed his eyes, and his face was as narrowed and sculptural as an old painting of a saint enduring martyrdom. When he opened them again, they were on her, boring into her.

“What’s going on?” he asked vaguely, muttering as if in a dream.

They lay on the floor, going down by mutual consent, saying nothing.

Then, suddenly, his lust came and he tore at her clothes, his eyes wild, his body thrusting, she thought, uncontrollably. In another moment his pants were off and he was pushing, seeking, and she turned a little, opened her legs a little, and the shock of his entry into her was by a thousand light-years the most intense experience she had ever had in her life.

He arched his back and cried out, his teeth bared, and then drew himself out and she tore at him, grabbing his thighs, and he entered her again, and this time it was more than sex, it was beyond all physical experience, it was the moment of death amplified to a great, roaring, abandoned surrender of body, mind, and soul.

They lay, then, in soft grass, and from the billowing woods nearby there came birdsong.

“Oh, God,” he whispered. “Oh, God, where are we, what is this place?”

“This is the future,” she said, “if you want it. But it takes love. To come here takes fear, but to stay, there must be love.”

He thrust and thrust and thrust, and every time he did, a wave of heart-stopping pleasure shot from her curling toes to her shuddering scalp. Then he kissed her, his tongue like fire boring into her and setting everything inside on fire, and the birds made their music, and a soft breeze caressed them, and the sun crossed the sky and went low, and in the long shadows, they heard, like distant bells, the secret harmonies of the human soul.

It ended then, in a series of declining thrusts. Surely now he would remember their love, and they would gain from it the energy they needed to

pass through the time gate and not fall back.

There was no sound that marked their inevitable descent back into the familiar world, nothing but a gentle, subtle change from cool, pliant grass to the old rug they'd started their journey on.

"It was your painting, Caroline, the one you're doing in the art room. It was like we were in it."

"Yes. We went there."

"Then it's not a painting."

"No, it's a navigation tool and it worked just as it's supposed to. We couldn't control our movement, though. We fell back. You and I should be able to cross easily by now, to prepare the way for others."

"Why can't we?"

"There must be love, David."

His hand withdrew from hers. He sat up.

She saw that he'd enjoyed himself with her. Lust, though, was all that it had been for him, the lust of a soldier on his way to die.

She was down to the final card, she saw. No matter Mr. Acton's instructions, she must play it now because if she didn't, she would lose him here, now, forever.

Without love, the journey across time—the physical journey—would last no longer than it had just now, the flicker of a eye.

"I have something for you," she said.

She drew her purse open. This letter, in its fading envelope, had come to her from her father's hand, as he had wished her well on her quest. "My knight," he had said, "with no armor. My beautiful girl." Being held by her father, this man in profound transmutation, was the most sacred experience that she knew. She feared so for him, off there in the Virginia countryside with no guards and no guns.

"This is for you," she said. He looked down at the envelope. Then back up at her. "It's from Herbert Acton," she said. "It was written over a hundred years ago."

He took it, then turned on the magnificent desk lamp, in which Louis Comfort Tiffany, himself a master alchemist, had reproduced, as if they were a swirling rainbow, all the colors of alchemical transformation, from the black of the ground through red to creamy white to green and yellow, then to the radiant white of monatomic matter and the ruby red of super

consciousness, to the violet of night and wisdom, the color of the Great Elixir itself. In the lamp, fairies danced.

As he opened the letter, the dry old paper crackled. For a cold instant, she feared that it might turn to dust. Anything could happen now, in these enormous moments, beyond even the reach of visionaries like Herbert Acton.

He read in silence.

“What does it say?”

“You don’t know? I thought you’d know.”

“It’s never been opened before, not since the day Herbert Acton wrote your name on it and sealed it.”

In his eyes she saw flickers of the Great Elixir, shimmering and shuddering faintly, living violet in the blue that had long ago captured her heart. She allowed herself to hope.

He read aloud, “ ‘David Ford, this will come to you from the hand of the woman you love. Surrender and learn. But quickly, David, for nothing is decided. Goliath follows her close behind.’ ” He made a little sound in his throat. “That’s all.” He held the letter out. “And there’s today’s date.”

“ ‘From the woman you love,’ David. He knew what was supposed to be between us.”

“Caroline . . .” His voice faded. Then she realized that he wasn’t looking at her anymore, he was looking past her.

When she turned, she found herself confronting Katrina Starnes and waves of hate unlike any she had ever felt, and she knew that this was the pure hate of darkness and, even worse, the hate of a scorned woman.

“I was just leaving,” she said faintly.

“Oh, no,” Katie snarled. “Fuck him again. Fuck him on the floor, you rich, spoiled filthy *bitch*.”

“Now, wait.”

“I’ve been waiting all day. And hearing!” She turned on David. “You sob a lot, asshole. Sob with pleasure. You sound like a complete jerk when you’re fucking, did you know that? And you’re even worse than Marian says. You’re not only a self-centered piece of shit, you’re an incompetent doctor. If we could get out of here, or we could get the goddamn phone working, your license would be history. And it will be. Because when this is over, you’re going down, Doc.” Now the jewel-hard eyes returned to Caroline. “Like his dick? Tell him to wash it next time, between fuck toys.” Her voice dropped

low now. “Guys like him—human garbage—they end up in pieces. Be warned.” She strode out. “There’s a list on your desk, Doctor,” she said over her shoulder. “The patients you missed, the problems you ignored.”

Silence followed. Hardly above a whisper, he said, “It’s dark. We’ve been here all day.”

“An uncontrolled move through time.”

“I have a problem with her now, Caroline. Big problem.”

“I have to go work on my painting.”

“I know.”

Their eyes met, and their hearts danced, but it was a slow dance, full of sorrow and full of fear.

She wanted to stay with him but she could not stay with him, there wasn’t time. She left, moving quickly down the halls, intent on her task.

Neither of them was aware of the other eyes that watched them via the surveillance system, Katrina’s eyes, or the true intensity, the towering fury, of the hate that was there.

DAVID FORD'S JOURNAL: FIVE

I've always moved too fast with women, and now I've got two of them on my case. It's happened before and I've always been ashamed, and I feel that now.

Caroline Light wants my love but I just do not feel anything there. Katie wants it and, again, I just want the comfort of her body.

Both women are furious at me, of course, but I'm dealing now with a new issue, and they're going to have to wait their turn. To be frank, I believe that I know what Herbert Acton did to look into the future.

Educated as I am in modern science, I have always viewed alchemy as the first primitive fumbling of what became chemistry. However, what I now suspect paints a different picture. Alchemy, as we have known it through history, is the degenerated remnant of a chemistry far more advanced than what we have now.

The shibboleth has always been that the "philosopher's stone" is supposedly capable of turning something like lead or iron into gold. In the Middle Ages, mountebanks went about in Europe using sleight of hand to convince the wealthy that they could do this, with the intention of fleecing them.

There is a truth behind it, though, and it is the explanation, I am convinced, for Herbert Acton's abilities. And, in fact, as I write this, I feel a sort of déjà vu again, as if the words are a kind of echo. I would surmise that this is information from our class, being drawn through the amnesia.

What this ancient science concerned, I believe, were manipulations that are presently far beyond our ability. It was able to see into the future, and, I think, holds the promise of actually enabling physical movement through time—an orderly, organized version of what happened to that dire wolf in Utah.

I have made a most interesting discovery about this room. It contains a time machine—not one that can enable physical time travel, but one that can facilitate the sort of seeing that Herbert Acton was so expert at. I think of it as a time telescope, and it stands on this desk, the Tiffany masterwork that is far more than a desk lamp.

It was the alchemical colors that revealed the lamp's true purpose to me. The master who created them understood the uses of light frequencies, and when I close my eyes and let the colors wash across my forehead, I am able to see brilliant images of the future. In other words, the legend of the crystal ball or the magic lantern is about lamps like this.

Accelerating vision into the future—perhaps bodies, too—need have nothing to do with arcane contraptions like supercolliders. It has to do with changing the temporal frequency of the body, and that can be done with light.

You look into a color of the type produced by this lamp until, when you close your eyes, it fills your head—and then, after a few moments, you will see what for me are flickering, indistinct visions, but which for a master like Herbert Acton must have been exquisitely detailed images.

Even with my limited skills, though, I have seen the future, and, frankly, I am terrified. Not because of what is there, but rather what is not.

In my mind's eye, for example, I can see this room as it will be later tonight, empty, the darkness flickering from the auroras.

Then something else happens, involving strange light rising in the east—a piercing violet object in the sky. And that light—the color is like that of the Great Elixir, a light frequency of great power, both creative and destructive.

No sooner does this light wash in through the windows than all light disappears. It's not night, it's another kind of dark entirely. When I tried to see into it, it almost seemed to want to suck me in, as if it was in some way hungry. I think that I was seeing the absence of reality itself, the absolute emptiness that surrounds the universe, that is, what exists before light has come and after it has faded, beyond the limits of time.

In other words, we are almost at the end of time, probably just days away, or even hours.

And yet, it's not the entire and complete end, because something else is there, a glimmer in the black ocean.

I think this is the beginning of new life on earth, thousands of years from now.

And getting there is our goal, and it is why Caroline refers to her painting as a navigation tool. As she paints, she is looking in her mind's eye at a specific spot on the Earth of the future, the place she briefly took me to. Once the painting is finished, everybody who sees it, and is properly prepared—no doubt by consuming the substance they're manufacturing in the arc furnace—will supposedly be able to navigate to the point in time it depicts.

I have also seen our world as it is right now, and what I have seen has almost made me sweat blood, because hell is unfolding here, and it is far, far worse than I imagined. Even as desperate as we are here at the clinic, compared to what's going on outside, we are a splendid palace shining in the middle of a wasteland.

For example, the farm belt all over the world is a gigantic desert of brown, ruined crops. I sailed from Iowa to Texas on the lamp's magical wings, and saw nothing but stubble and burning cities and long lines of dead cars on the roads, and everywhere bloated, dead cattle, and people in their millions cutting and eating the carrion meat.

Also, I saw ever more of the huge objects that I glimpsed out my window the other night, drifting over the face of the land, lingering over cities, marching in enormous platoons across the suffering world. I saw them drawing people into themselves in vast numbers, but I could not see what was happening to them. I do remember, though, that it was beautiful. Were these the biblical elect, then, those who have finished with earthly life, being raised up? Or was it something else, the harvest of mankind, perhaps, as slaves or as a DNA pool?

I could see what was happening, but there was nobody to tell me why.

I have also seen people cutting themselves to the bone—literally butchering themselves—to get rid of the strange quasi-physical shadows like the ones on Katie's neck and probably on Tom Dryden. I fear that I know why, and I fear for them both. Katie seems a good person and Tom is innocuous, but we do hide our darkness, we humans.

Taken together—the vision of the lake of fire from Revelation, and these two encounters with those huge objects, I think that what I am seeing is the beginning of a legendary event, the actual, physical judgment of man.

At the thought, my guts congeal, my heart overspeeds. This whole planet is on death row, and I feel it not only as a member of human society and a man responsible for a lot of lives, I feel it personally. I am the one whose energy

will enable us to take our first step across time. That's why I am identified with Quetzalcoatl who was, among many other things, the god of new beginnings.

My impulse is to throw myself into my work, and I have a lot of work to do. My primary immediate responsibility is clear: be sure this place is not destroyed before we've completed what we've been put here to do.

I wish that I could say that I was confident, but I am not confident at all. We know literally not a thing about whoever killed Mrs. Denman, and until we do know that, everybody here is in danger, and so is our mission.

Undoubtedly, somebody has at least an inkling of what we are going to attempt, and wants to take our knowledge and use it in our stead.

I look to Mr. Acton's final letter to me. It warns David that Goliath is coming—in fact, that Goliath is here now. But who is Goliath, a person, a storm, some new fire about to be spit from the sun?

No doubt Goliath is many things, but one of them must be that violet light—the highest color of alchemical growth and also the color of ultimate death. The light is an incredible poison, and it's coming. But it isn't the only aspect of the giant. Goliath has servants.

As I am apparently David to this Goliath, it's worth asking just how I sling my stone into his forehead. The light must come from the supernova that was mentioned in the document Mrs. Denman gave me to read. Maybe we're getting close enough to it to see its core as a distinct stellar object.

A supernova's core emanates sterilizing sheets of gamma rays.

As I sit here, night is coming on, the worst time.

I go to one of my majestic windows, to the glowing, bizarre darkness. Frankly, when I looked into the future, I was surprised that I did not see that the sun had gone supernova. Such things happen all the time, with one stellar explosion blasting nearby stars with so much energy that they explode, too.

I cannot see around to the east very well, but it looks as if there is a violet-purple tint off beyond the limits of my vision.

This distant star—previously unknown to science—is, in reality, what controls life on earth. I know from modern paleoastronomy that light of this monster first washed the earth forty thousand years ago, leaving a huge swath of the planet, from Australia through southern and central Africa, empty of large, plains-dwelling animals. They died because they could not hide from the gamma rays. It came again during the end of the last Ice Age, and once

again, the plains-dwelling animals, the mammoths, the mastodons, and so many others, were decimated.

So violet is the highest, and therefore also the most dangerous light, and as I sit here looking into my lamp, I ask for direction, but get only silence in reply, and darkness in my mind's eye.

Purple is the light of evolution. But evolution also means death. Ask the dinosaurs—and ask, also, mankind. Are we destined to follow them into final species death?

We have reached the end of the game. The rules are cast aside, but still we play on, deep into the night.

And I am left with the question, What is my stone, what is my sling? How do I slay Goliath?

13

THE TRACK OF THE CAT

Mack had moved swiftly through the countryside, but thought better of entering Raleigh during the day. He needed to work fast, but he also had to stay alive, and that was going to take some care. For all of his skills, anyone with a good rifle and a good eye would be a danger to him. He wished that he could have brought the young guard's rifle with him, but if it had been gone when he woke up, even though he would have had no memory of what had happened, he'd have known that something was wrong and raised the alarm.

Hiding in a barn, Mack hadn't rested, he hadn't been able to. When so many people were waiting on you and things were deteriorating this fast, the tension was appalling.

After the sun had at last set, he climbed down from the hayloft and surveyed the farm. It was as quiet as it had been when he'd come here. He needed food and, above all, water, so he decided to take a chance on the house.

He'd had a great deal of field training, so he knew how unsafe it was to expose yourself to dark windows, but it couldn't be helped.

It was pointless to conceal himself, so he just strode forward.

When he returned to the Acton Clinic, all exhausted and apologetic, he would use the same technique. He would let them lock him in again. The window was hopeless, but there was an escape route through the air-conditioning ducts in his room, and one of his jobs in Raleigh was to go to the county building department and look at the plans of the patient wing. He had not killed yet, but when he got back there, he was going to do a good deal of that, and a good deal of information extraction.

By the time he reached the house, he knew that it was empty.

The fridge was warm, but there was a half-finished bottle of Coke inside, flat and hot. He drank it all. The water taps didn't even drip when he turned on the faucets, so he got a pitcher out of the cabinet and banged through the house to the nearest bathroom. There was water in the toilet tank, which he

pitchered out and drank. Down the hall, he saw a woman's legs in the doorway of a bedroom. The rest of her was sprawled out of sight.

He left the house and found a pickup in the garage but its electronics were fried so he headed off down the road on foot. With the setting of the sun, the sky had turned an odd pinkish-purple color, something that was new. Pinkish purple, with long, shimmering sheets of green auroras cutting through it. Beautiful, indeed, and so could death be beautiful.

By the time he reached the outskirts of town it was full night, and now it could be seen that the odd color of the sky was centered on a faint thickening brightness low on the northeastern horizon. What was it? He knew little about astronomy, but it had the look of something that the world would come to wish had not appeared.

Most of the houses he passed were dark, but some contained faint, flickering glows of candlelight, and one or two the brighter light of oil lamps. He had no real plan, except to see what he could do to stir these people up against the clinic. They hated it, of course, but they needed leadership to go up there and cause mayhem.

As he drew closer to the town center, he was stopped by something he had not seen in many years, not since his days in Mexico, when drug cartels sometimes did it to terrify locals into serving them.

On a street lamp about halfway into the town, a man had been hung . . . and, he noted, hung badly. The body was covered with blood from the neck, because they'd hauled him up without tying his hands, leaving him to struggle with the knot while he choked. Ugly way to do it, probably because they were clueless about the process. Under the body, dogs snarled at one another as they licked the blood in the street.

A number of storefronts were burned out, and he could smell death in the air. More dogs could be heard in the darkness, and as he passed the ones beneath the hanged man, some of them gave him a predatory appraisal. Once a dog has tasted blood, it is dangerous, always. Not wanting to have to fight off the whole pack, he gave them a wide berth, and did not meet their eyes.

You could give a dog a heart attack by shattering its muzzle with the right kind of blow, but six or seven dogs would keep you damn busy, and you would absorb damage.

Ahead, there was a restaurant showing a flicker of candles in the front window. Inside, he could see the shadows of many people. Good, this was

what he'd been looking for. Desperate people band together, at least when they still believe that they might have some way to save themselves. Only later, when they understand the hopelessness of their situation, do they turn on one another. In another couple of days that would happen here. In fact, he was probably lucky that it hadn't already happened.

He went to the door and paused, evaluating the crowd. There were men, women, and children present, so this was probably some kind of survivorship gathering. Safe enough.

He stepped in. Voices rumbled around him, angry and desperate ones, and the children were crying, many of them. A few were playing.

"We're real hungry, John," a male voice said. "You gotta find a way."

"We need to do some urban foraging," the man in front, probably the mayor, said.

"We've scoured the town, goddamn it," somebody shouted. Rage. Terror. They were just about to turn on one another.

Mack took a breath and raised his voice. "Excuse me."

They froze like frightened mice, then turned all at once. Suspicion in the faces. Women swept their children behind them. He was acutely aware of the fact that the room was full of guns.

He held up his hands. "Hey, I'm unarmed." He looked from face to face, smiling just enough but not too much. His next words were crucial, and he had thought about them carefully.

"I just escaped from the Acton Clinic."

An immediate murmur, more suspicion in the faces. All expected. He was playing them.

"I'm not a crazy, okay!"

They quieted down a little.

"Let him talk," the man at the front of the room said. He was pudgy, but his eyes were hollow. That was one famished fat man up there. He must be almost crazy with hunger, probably dropping ten pounds a day.

"I'm an assistant chef."

A guy with a deer rifle said, "What do you mean, you escaped? Why does an assistant chef need to escape?"

"That goddamn place is a palace! There's tons of food, *tons* of it. They've got enough to feed their damn psychos for a year. It's enough to get this whole town through this thing—I mean, if there's another side to it, God

willing.” Then he stopped. Time to let it sink in. Time to let them chew.

“How much food exactly?” a woman asked.

“Try a hundred dressed hogs, forty beeves, maybe a quarter ton of prepared meats, not to mention a whole huge basement storage area full of canned goods for long-term use. That’s a damn Versailles palace up there on that hill, and they have no right to keep all that food just for a bunch of loonies. No right, not when good, normal people who are the backbone of the country need it! That’s why I escaped. I want to help people who need help . . . folks who’re healthy and normal.” He laughed, made it bitter. “That palace up there is full of people who this world doesn’t even need. But it needs you.” He pointed to a little girl peeking out from behind her mother’s dress. “It needs her.”

“They got more guns than we have, man.”

General assent.

“Yeah, I know. You’ve gone up there and taken a few shots, I know that, too.”

“I did that,” the same voice said. He stepped out of the crowd. He was a young guy, about thirty. He had a preteen boy in tow who looked as tough as he did. “I’m two tours in ’Stan. I was on rotation stateside when this thing started. And if we try on the Acton Clinic, I can tell you as a soldier that a lot of us are gonna get wasted.”

Mack let silence follow that statement. They needed to taste their fear, then be pulled out of it. “How long has it been since you folks got anything to eat?”

People looked around at each other. “Three days,” the man in the front said.

“Okay, I had three squares before I came out. I think it was the steak that made me make my move, eating it, knowing that at least some decent, normal folk down here could be eating what the crazies were gobbling. And the patients get a lot better than we do. It’s like a damn cruise ship up there.”

Another voice rose, this a kid of about fifteen. “Mister, they signal. They use SSB code bursts. I pick them up on my scanner. So they could signal for help.”

That brought an uneasy murmur. Of course, the kid was worrying about Mack’s own code bursts, but no way could he say that.

“Those are probably just signals to their rich families, arranging for more

supplies. Now listen to me, I know the place from the inside out and I've got the kind of training you need for an op like this. Special Forces. Afghanistan. Pakistan."

"Unit?" the guy with the rifle asked.

He'd done this sort of thing many times before, and it actually felt good to do it again. "Night Stalkers," he replied easily. "160th SOAR." One of the many answers he had to the many questions a CIA field officer gets about his identity. You always lie, even to your friends.

The guy started to be impressed, but then he asked another question. "How'd you end up in the kitchen?"

"Oh, I was on security, all right. But we got shoot-to-kill orders last week and I told Glen MacNamara that I could not do that." He looked around the room. "You all know who Glen is?"

They knew. Like any town living beneath the walls of a castle, they were obsessed with what went on inside it. Except they did not know about this food, of course. Naturally not, because it didn't exist. But their imaginations and their eagerness to hate the palace made them believe it in without question. In truth, the clinic was just about stripped of food like everywhere else—except, of course, for the redoubts. If he had wanted to be straight with them, he should tell them how to get to the Blue Ridge underground facility, but he had no intention of doing that. There, they would find food enough to carry this town for five years. Yeah, and give the food of the pure of blood to this gaggle of human trash? Not gonna happen. The pure of blood were the future of the world, or it had no future.

"What I need to do is for you folks to get me the building and ground plans for the clinic from the buildings department, then I can lay out a professional plan of attack for you."

"Mister, they've got SOPMODs in there, I've seen them. And bigger stuff. Lots of it. Plus those cannons that make you feel like you're on fire. The best we can do are a couple of assault rifles and this kinda stuff." He ported his deer rifle.

"Except you're gonna have me in there, and you're gonna have a Ranger plan." He addressed them all. "I can't tell you that nobody's gonna go down, because that's not gonna happen. There will be casualties. But you will win. That I can tell you, because that's what's gonna happen."

And when they couldn't find the food, they would first slaughter the bosses, and when they still couldn't find it, they would fall victim to their own rage, and they would lay waste to the place.

They got the blueprints he needed, and together they laid out a good plan of attack, one that would actually work. "This gate," he said at last, pointing to the disused back gate on the grounds plan, "will be unlocked. After your feint draws them to the front of the grounds—and they'll all come running, they're not that well trained—then you just send your main force right through that gate. You get inside the grounds, they are toast, people."

They worked out a schedule, and at midnight, he began his journey back. Crazy ole Mack was just about done in, starving and filthy. Mack was sorry. Mack was coming home.

14

THE HAND OF DARKNESS

On the night side of the earth, most of the lights—the cities of New York and London and Paris—had gone dark, and the atmosphere glowed softly purple against the strangling void. The International Space Station swung through its orbit in darkness. Inside, the bodies of the crew floated, one or two hands fisted, most touching the air as if it was something miraculous, their fingers carefully extended. The bodies appeared old, the hair gray with frost from the suffocating carbon dioxide of their own breath, which is what had—mercifully and gently—killed them.

Along the face of the night far below moved the great, glowing objects, working faster now, sliding just a few hundred feet above the suffering land, seeking with probes beyond human knowing, signals from our souls.

They had an enormous task before them, because one of the most improbable truths about mankind is that the vast majority of people are good, and would not need to sink away into the long contemplation that draws the evil, ever so slowly, to face themselves.

Had we not been rendered soul blind by the catastrophe that destroyed our pre-Egyptian civilization, the coming of the great objects would not have been mysterious to us. But it was mysterious, it was very mysterious, and the immense, drifting shapes only added terror to terror, and people hid, and hid their children, and dared not look upon these machineries of rescue.

Aboard, this caused neither surprise nor concern. If you looked into the workings of these machines, you would find that they were old and worn, full of humble signs that they were somebody's home.

In this immense universe of ours, worlds die every day, so the objects and their crews were always busy, flashing from one catastrophe to the next, harvesting the spiritual produce of planets in cataclysm with the industry and care of the good farmers that they were.

David had been watching these objects in his mind's eye, when he heard screams.

They were not cries of madness but of pain—no, agony. Terrible human agony was involved.

“Katie,” he called as he went through the outer office, but she was already far along the hall. As he reached the top of the grand staircase, he saw her at the bottom, turning toward the back of the building and the patients’ activity area.

He slid along the broad mahogany planks of the priceless floor of the front hallway, his stomach churning and congealed. Was there fire down there, or somebody being torn apart by some escaped jacket case, or had one of the dociles suddenly gone berserk?

He went through the empty dining room with its splendid crystal and silver laid out already for tomorrow’s breakfast, and then to the steel door that led into the patient wing.

The uproar was coming, as he had anticipated, from the activity area, which was filled with a white, chalky light unlike any he had ever seen before. Was it radiation from the sun? But why only these windows? So, no.

Katie stood in the doorway, and David stopped beside her. For the first moment, a scene of true terror often makes no sense to the eyes, and that was the case here. What David saw were crowding black silhouettes, all pressed up against the barred armor-glass windows that, at better times, let sunlight flood this space. Then he realized that they were patients, all peering out the windows.

In among the figures was somebody moving quickly, racing back and forth and screaming, and then he saw her run like a mad thing through the parted crowd and leap at least six feet into the air, hurling herself against the outside doors with a horrible crunch.

“Let me through,” he shouted as he went toward her. Katie remained standing, transfixed.

As the crowd parted, David saw two injured people on the floor, Sam Taylor and Beverly Cross. Sam cradled his right arm. Beverly looked up from a swollen face as he passed.

“Careful, David,” she said, “she’s real bad.”

It was Linda Fairbrother.

Caroline was near her. “She’s breaking herself to pieces. David, help her!”

She leaped at the door again, then bounced back and hit the floor with a sickening slap and lay still, a lovely woman covered with bruises, her nose a

mass of purple flesh, one eye swollen closed, in the glaring white ocean of the light that shone through the windows and the glass of the door.

“Linda,” he said, kneeling beside her shattered body, “Linda, I am here to help you. I can help you.”

“Let her out,” Caroline cried.

From outside, there rose another sound, low at first, then gaining strength, finally becoming the enormous howl of what must be the largest siren in the history of the world.

As it grew louder, Linda’s body stiffened. Then her good eye swam to the front and stared up into the light.

“David, get back!” Caroline drew him away from Linda.

As if being drawn by some sort of invisible rope, she rose up, knocking him aside in the process. Then she ran toward the door, gathering speed fast. He leaped at her, felt his head and shoulders connect with her body, noted the rigor of extreme panic, then felt himself thrown aside like a rag.

While he tumbled helplessly against Caroline, Linda slammed against the door, hammering it with her hands and shrieking, then leaping against it again and again, so fast that the sound of her body hitting the thick glass was like a series of cannon blasts.

Dear heaven, he had never seen a symptom like this, never in his life.

“Hurry,” Caroline snapped.

If she was going to survive, he saw that he had to open the doors, but if he did, other patients would certainly go out into that light and God only knew what it was.

“All right,” he shouted, “everybody across the room. Staff, help me here—get them back—all of you, get back, give her space.”

Caroline made a gesture, and everybody moved back. David made note of this. Even the staff were watching her for instructions.

Linda leaped up and began slamming against the door again, jumping four or five feet into the air each time.

“Do it, David! Let her out!”

A haze of blood appeared around her, and as the air filled with the smell of it, he went close, shielding himself as best he could, and finally managed to swipe the fingerprint reader.

It didn’t work.

“Keys, my God, I need keys!”

Again Linda hit the door, again and again. Caroline and Linda's desperate, tear-streaked lover, Tom Dryden, tried to control her.

"Glen! Glen MacNamara, I need keys!" David looked desperately around the room. "Get Glen, somebody!"

The siren came again, rising, wailing, a soul-whipping sound that turned Linda into a human piston, driving her again and again and again into the thick, unyielding door.

"Doctor," Tom shouted, "sedate her! Get a damn shot in her!"

Then Glen was pushing through the crowd, his dirty white shirt soaked with sweat. "I was afraid we'd lose that damn locking system," he said as he thrust a key into the door and threw it open at last.

Linda went racing out, her body lurching from broken bones, her face now a purple blotch, unrecognizable. Tom followed her into the light, laughing and eager, and both seemed almost to be dancing, their anguish transformed in an instant to lilting joy.

David followed them, and when the light struck him he was suffused with an exquisite sensation, at once physical and emotional, a surging shiver of delight that was coupled to poignant nostalgia, and he thought, *This is how we're meant to feel, this is the aim of life.*

He saw in the light a ladder hanging down—and it was old, with bent rungs, but made of silver metal that gave off a gorgeous glow.

He remembered his grandfather's friend's description of the thing that Father Heim had seen at Fátima, and knew that, even then, they had been preparing.

Linda dragged herself, a white mass of bone protruding from her left leg, her fingers crazy from breaks, her breath coming in warbling sighs as she sucked air past swollen lips and broken teeth. Tom assisted her, an arm around her waist.

"You look to the injured in there, David," Caroline said. "We've got this under control."

As Linda was flooded by the light and her body became white with it, she began to reflect its whiteness. He saw her bones melt back into her skin and her face grow normal again—but then more, it was a shining face, full of the joy and energy of some higher world, and David had the sense that he was in the presence of a great and dignified being that was returning home.

Before his eyes, this ordinary, humble patient was transfigured into a being

of grandeur, naked in her physical perfection, ascending in the healing flood of light.

An obscure sort of sorrow flickered in his heart then. Caroline's hand slipped into his, and he knew that she had the same question, Why not me?

Other patients came out like pilgrims to a shrine, wandering as people do in fog, blinded by the light, calling out, their voices echoing dully. Some of them raised their arms as if asking for deliverance.

In the next moment Linda, the light, the great object that had produced it—all were gone, a majesty ascended into the turmoil of the sky.

An instant later, there was a devastated, earsplitting shriek and Tom Dryden collapsed in a heap in the grass.

More groans filled the silence, sounds of deep human misery and despair.

"Don't," Caroline called out to them. "It all balances out."

Tom got up and came shuffling closer. "We were going together," he muttered. "Together!" He jumped a couple of times, snatching at the air.

The others were milling now, peering into the violet sky, still calling to the emptiness.

"Please," David said, "we need to get inside, this is not safe."

As they went back in, he said to Glen, "If this recurs, let any patient out who wants to go. I don't want them beating themselves to death against the walls."

Glen nodded.

Most of the patients were clustering in small groups in the activity area, talking among themselves. Tom Dryden cradled his chest and swayed back and forth, his eyes closed.

David said to Claire Michaels, "Can you attend to him, please?"

"Of course, Doctor," the resident replied. "Tom, do you want some Xanax? You can have a dose, Tom, if you need it."

"The sins of the world belong to us," he said, "the sins of the world."

"Why do they belong to us?" Claire asked him as she gently led him away. If the world ever returned to what it had been—if that was possible—she was going to develop into an excellent clinician.

David approached Katie, who was wiping blood off Sam Taylor's forehead.

"I'm sorry, Sam," David said.

"I'm the one who should be sorry, Doc. I lost my patient."

He was referring to Mack, of course. Frankly, David was glad.

“That guy was no loss. Katie, how’s Bev Cross?”

“All right,” she said, as he moved deeper into the recreation area, then the art room.

Caroline was sitting under the light of a lamp she had pulled close to her easel, once again painting with quiet concentration.

Going toward her, he caught sight of Katie following him with her eyes.

“I’m fine,” he said to Katie.

“I know you’re fine.”

He heard anger and stopped. He went to her.

“I am. I’m fine.”

“We’ve now lost two patients, first Mack leaves and then this. That’s the sort of operation you run, Doctor.” She turned away from him, started toward the hallway.

He caught up with her.

“Katie, you need to pull yourself together.”

She froze, her head bowed.

“Me? I don’t think so. You’re screwing a patient. Another patient is AWOL and probably in danger if he’s not already dead. And now this third—I can’t even begin to imagine what’s happened to her. But I do know one thing. You’re not competent.”

“I can’t quit. Where would I go?”

“David, I think last night was wonderful and I think we can be important to each other, and maybe this is the only chance for either of us to taste real love. But not if you screw the patients.”

He looked over at Caroline, who was painting steadily. Katie saw this, and drew away from him.

“Go play with your toy, then.” She stalked out.

“Katie!”

“I’ll be in the infirmary with the injuries.”

When she was gone, Caroline said, “ ‘Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and a man goeth to his long home—’ Do you know it?”

“Of course I know it. It’s from Ecclesiastes.”

“Did you know that the Bible is a scientific document?”

“I don’t see that at all.”

“You’re soul blind, therefore blind to soul science. You’re afraid of yourself, David. The long home of Ecclesiastes is the shadow of the soul reaching back across time, looking at its life and its previous lives. You need to open to yourself, David.”

“I am, I’m remembering an enormous amount. I can even use Herbert Acton’s lamp.”

She put down her brush, leaned closer and whispered to him, “We need to try a very serious dose of the gold. Take an injection.”

“It’s a heavy metal. You can’t inject that.”

“What we make isn’t a metal anymore at all, or even really connected to the physical world like other elements.”

“Gold is gold.”

“No, this starts with some of the ancient substance, so it becomes a hyperelement. In its pure form, it’s so light that it levitates.”

“It’s hardly ancient. You just made it.”

“We made it correctly, starting with a little of the ancient material, to light the path for the new gold.”

Her hands came like a fluid, and framed his face, and the love in her eyes was so intense and so naked that he felt embarrassed for her and looked away.

“David, you have to face our love. You need its energy.”

Furious, he pulled away from her.

“Goddamn it, *shut up!* What fatuous nonsense.”

Lowering her eyes, she quietly returned to her easel.

He looked around the room at the milling patients. He had to control this situation first, but he had to get out of here, he could not bear another moment with this woman. He felt nothing and she felt a lot and it was just extremely disturbing.

“Patients are to go to their quarters now and remain in their rooms until the breakfast bell at seven,” he announced.

“Excuse me, Doctor, you’re needed.” Ray Weller had come up to him.

He stood there in a dirty apron, Glen and Doctor Hunt with him.

“We need an emergency meeting,” Ray said. Then, more softly, “We’re in trouble. Big trouble.”

That was obvious, but why say it in the hearing of patients, even in a whisper?

“In my office in five minutes,” he said. Then he went to Claire, who was talking softly with a group of patients. “Time to shut it down for the night,” he told her. “We’re going to have an administrative staff meeting. We’ll all be in my office.”

Claire raised her voice. “Okay, boys and girls, beddie bye.”

There were none of the usual groans and protests, David noted. People simply got up and began moving toward the door into the patient wing.

“This is a danger sign,” he said to Claire. “They’re in shock.”

“Yeah,” she replied.

“I want two people on the monitors tonight.”

“Doctor,” Glen said, “the system’s down, and it’s not coming back until we can get a new motherboard.”

Without its computer system, this place was in its death throes, especially when it came to security.

He waited until the last patient had gone, leaving just Caroline. The only sound in the room now was the faint rustle of movement when she dipped a brush.

“You need to go,” he said.

“I can’t stop and you know it.”

“You can’t work in the middle of the night, alone.”

“Especially in the middle of the night, alone.”

Glen stood in the doorway. He nodded sharply, urging David to come. Obviously, there was an immediate problem and he could not stay here longer.

“Someone will take you to your room,” he told Caroline. He would send one of the orderlies down immediately. She must not be left alone, not ever.

He followed Glen up what had once been the servants’ stairway at the back of the original house. They rose into the magnificence of the upstairs hallway, its elegance speaking of an orderly world that had entirely gone.

They arrived at his office to an uneasy murmur of voices. When he entered, silence fell.

Glen’s eyes went to the sitting area in front of the large fireplace. In one of David’s wing chairs sat a filthy, bedraggled man, his clothes torn, a badly skinned elbow protruding.

“How did he get in here?”

Katie’s response said it all: “How did he get out?”

Mack the Cat had come back.

DAVID FORD'S JOURNAL: SIX

Caroline says that I have to face our love, but what can love possibly mean in a situation like this? How many people die in, say, sixty seconds right now? Millions, no doubt, in a world that is disintegrating this fast.

Apparently, she wants me to remember her in a way that I do not remember her. I want her physically. Of course I do, who wouldn't? But this love of which she speaks seems to be some sort of a bridge, and I don't understand why that would be true.

It's quite clear how the gold is supposed to work, but I am not finding any change after ingesting it. Perhaps she's right and I'm not taking enough, but there is no way I'm going to eat a heavy metal. Supposedly their preparation no longer contains any elemental gold in metal form, but how can that be? It's an element, it's going to be there.

I've remembered a lot and understood a lot, but the situation that's unfolding now really eclipses more or less everything. It is true that Herbert Acton anticipated this, but his vision did not penetrate into the actual event or surely he would have left us more clear instructions. My best guess is that this is because things are now so chaotic that looking into this era would have been like looking into dirty water or dense fog.

So we're on our own, and I think that it is very clear what we're going to have to face. That document of Mrs. Denman's was right, I think. The solar system is going through a very dirty and dangerous area of space, and the sun and all her planets are taking a terrible pounding.

I think that it will be too much for mankind. Certainly, civilization is finished. If this lasts much longer the way it is, our population is going to plummet massively. If it should intensify, then I think we are going to go the way of the dinosaurs—unless, of course, Caroline's wonderful painting can somehow save a few of us. But it will be a very few, won't it, just a tiny

elite? In itself, that troubles me. Why should it be us and not, say, the great scientists of the world or the great saints, or simply the children?

So where does love come into this? Why does it matter anymore? I want to spend time with Katie and Caroline. I want to take every bit of pleasure from life that I can, while I can.

I have made a decision. If we cannot take the world with us, then I am not going myself. It isn't right for just the carefully chosen to live while the rest, equally deserving, do not.

And yet, I am talking about my own death, here, and, in the end, if I have a choice, I know that I will try to save myself. It isn't a moral choice, but an instinctive one. I am not a hero, and I don't fully understand this business of calling me a leader.

When I was a boy, Charles Light tried to drill my specialness into me, my brilliance, my natural ability to take control of situations—all qualities that he saw but that I did not.

And yet, and yet . . . it's true that I understand a great deal of this. I understand why the gold works, but not, perhaps, why it doesn't for me.

I think that the best thing for me to do is to keep striving to save my patients, and give Caroline the space she needs to accomplish her work.

So far, there has been no further sign of the presence of our enemies. Does that mean that they've been swept away in the chaos? Perhaps, but somehow I doubt it. It has crossed my mind that Mack, the former CIA agent, might be one of them. He takes an inordinate interest in Caroline and her work.

He's among the patients who display genuine symptoms. Paranoia, among other things. I can see the violence in the man, and I know that he has the skills necessary to enable him to enter and leave this place, and to infuriate Sam by neutralizing him the way he did, a professional handler like him.

In any case, he bears watching, I suppose, but the reality is this: events are going to overtake our enemies just as they are going to overtake us and, very shortly now, the whole world.

15

THE RED STAR

Mack selected from the tools he'd stolen over time and brought into his room a screwdriver and a small knife. They'd given him a meal of canned corned beef hash and potatoes washed down with tepid water, but it sure as hell beat gnawing on raw potatoes and drinking toilets in abandoned farmhouses.

What was important here were two things. First, he'd seen from the snow on the screens in the nurses' station that the surveillance system was down. Second, he'd had a close look at that painting of Caroline Light's, and nobody—no ordinary person—could create a work of art so detailed. As incredible it seemed, he could most safely conclude that she was somehow creating another reality in the medium of oil on canvas, and that had to mean something, and he intended to find out what in holy hell it was.

He got up on his desk and stood, using the screwdriver to open his air-conditioning vent. It would take a real mastery of the human body to get around some of the turns, but he intended to try.

Out the top of his window, he could see auroras spinning complex madness tinted blood red. This was a change even from last night, and it unsettled him and made him work faster.

Then he noticed something very odd indeed, that made him look out into the grounds.

It was light out there, even brighter than the auroras and a full moon would make it. But this was not the moon or the tinge of auroral light. This was the glow of something else, something that he could not quite see around the corner of the building.

There had been reports of strange ships in the sky, and he'd overheard mention that Linda Fairbrother had been taken up in one. Absently, he ran his finger along the shiny dark spot that he'd noticed just below his neck in the shower the other morning. Was it tingling? Perhaps. He feared that it might be a melanoma, but they were supposed to be irregular and this thing was perfectly round. Growing, though, no question there. It had an odd texture,

not like skin, but slicker and more featureless, almost as if it was covered by a film of some kind. Also, at the center, where it was darkest, it wasn't like color at all, but more an absence of color. It was really the strangest thing he'd ever seen on a human body and he needed to get it cut out, no question.

Faint voices drew him back to his window. Now there were people down there. Guards and staff were out on the lawn, their forms lit by an eerie violet glare coming from a source that was blocked to his vision by the corner of the building.

Normally, his ability to concentrate on his work was prodigious, but this unsettled him. He'd witnessed a woman burned at the stake by the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the wild, abandoned agony of her screams had left him, already claustrophobic, with a creeping horror of suffering death by fire.

He hammered on his door. Hammered again. Finally, he started kicking the hell out of it. His relationship with Nurse Fleigler was not pleasant, and it had not been improved by his recent excursion.

"What do you want?"

"What the hell's going on? What's that light out there?"

"Nothing."

"Come on, Fleigler, I'm a paying customer here."

"Nobody cares. We don't like you. You're a creep."

"Please, Fleigler, gimme a break. What's everybody looking at?"

"You haven't earned any breaks. Sam's still got a headache because of you."

"Fairbrother did it!"

"Sam says you used some kind of a hold on him. Paralytic."

"All right, I will kick this door"—he gave it three wall-shaking wallops—"until you tell me what in fuck's happening out there!" He started in again, and, frankly, he could probably pop it off with a few more body blows.

"All right already! If you must know, it's this really bright speck in the sky. Deep violet-red speck. It's weird and I'm reading my Bible, so good night."

Jesus God, what was it? The townspeople were supposed to be coming up, but who knew how they'd react to this? They were hungry, that was for sure, but this could frighten them into hiding.

It could be emitting energy, too. What if it totally killed his radio?

He had to face something here: this situation was deteriorating too fast, and

changes in tempo were dangerous to missions like his. Unless some luck came his way, he was not going to succeed.

He went back to the desk and started scraping the paint away from the screws that held on the vent above it.

“I know you by your name,” he muttered as he worked. “You are Wormwood, come to collect the blood of man.”

He dissected carefully, so that there would be no evidence of anything when he returned. He’d seen the look in Glen McNamara’s eyes, baleful, the look of somebody who was just about an inch away from damn well blowing Mack Graham away. Sam, too, for that matter.

Had Caroline Light secretly taken over? She had to be above the terrified Dr. Davey-boy in the pecking order. That guy was a wet-behind-the-ears fool.

One nurse—Katie, that one—might not be on the side with them. She had a black spot, too; he’d seen it under her turned-up collar. He did not want to think about the damn things, though. What were you going to do about cancer now? And yet . . . something deep within him told him that this was not cancer. It told him that he’d be better off with a melanoma the size of a pie plate.

Then a welcome interruption to his thoughts: the grill came loose. Working carefully, he took it off and laid it on the desktop.

He had his route traced with measured care, every turning calculated, including the ones so tight that pushing too hard might snap his bones.

No doubt to save fuel, they’d turned off the air-conditioning an hour or so back, so the ducts would be stifling and he would have to hurry or potentially face heat stroke.

He lifted himself and raised his arms, drawing his shoulders together until his bones sighed. To get his head into the space, he had to turn it to one side with his arms straight out before him. Then he worked the rest of him in, twisting his hips until they were at a diagonal, which gave him just enough room to wriggle forward.

He felt his claustrophobia acutely now. If he got stuck in here he did not know how he could bear it. Just inches in, he knew that he was already essentially trapped, in the sense that he could only squirm ahead, not back. Lying along the duct, he began working his way around the first bend he had seen in the blueprints.

If he was successful, as far as the clinic was concerned, Caroline Light and David Ford would just disappear. Before they died, though, they were going to learn some new things about themselves, and what the human body can endure. If he failed, he would either suffocate in the ductwork or get back here and reseal his vent and nobody would be the wiser.

At the first turning, impossibly sharp, he felt his body growing warm from the effort of the stretching, then growing hot. He pushed against the aluminum corner in the smothering dark, and knew that his skull was being compressed really severely, because a storm of crazy images—a girl with a mouth like a cave laughing, a man dancing slow and burning, a dog serenading a dead child—began gushing through his mind's eye as his brain was constricted, and bands of pain whipped his temples.

He lay along the duct gasping, his body an agony of muscle knots and popping cartilage.

A push with his toes brought some release to his head and his twisted hips. Another inserted his upper body into the larger feeder duct, giving him a pulsing rush of blood to his brain and a surge of relief.

He edged ahead now, pushing with his toes, thinking only of his objective. Another turn and he was above the nurses' station. He worried that his movements would make too much noise until he heard the faint scratching of Fleigler's iPod, which she was playing at its usual deafening level over her earphones. She must be trying to drown out reality. Good for her, good for him.

Finally, inching along, sweating, his eyes closed tight to minimize the feeling of being trapped, he reached the even wider sloping duct that led down to the air-conditioning system itself. Here, he could move easily and therefore go much faster. But when he pushed himself into the duct, he went into an unexpected slide, which resulted in a series of booming sounds. Worse, he went slamming headfirst into the fan, and would have been sliced to meat if it had been turning. As it was, he ended up with a painful gouge in his forehead.

The blueprints showed an access hatch here that was used to clean the fans, and he felt for it, his sense of confinement growing as his fingers sought edges that were not there.

Unless he found it, he would be trapped. There was no going back up that slope, which was far steeper than it had appeared in the blueprint. His heart

sped up and he began to need to take deep breaths, but the air was foul. Without the system running, he thought he was in danger of suffocation, and it was not just his fear of confinement working.

He fluttered his fingers along the smooth duct, seeking for edges, finally touching a seam. Yes, oh, yes, he felt along it, felt hinges, felt the simple flat latch, pushed it—and it was tight, too tight to move. Wriggling, twisting, too frantic now to care about the noise he might be making, he got a quarter out of his pocket and slid it along until it stopped against the tongue of the latch. Pushing, he finally felt a shift, heard the rasp of it, felt it moving more.

Cool air rushed in and he found himself almost weeping with relief. Carefully, making as little noise as possible, he slipped out of the ductwork and into the dim basement.

Listening, looking around him, he detected no other human presence. Very well. With a predator's quick and silent stride, he moved toward the stairs and ascended them.

Here was the supply room, its shelves mostly empty. Good, this would outrage the townies. Hopefully, they'd tear the place apart. He went to the door, then paused. He was watching the strip of light beneath it, because it was flickering.

So was somebody there, or was it the flickering of the sky tricking his eyes?

No choice but to find out, so he grasped the door handle and turned it slowly, making certain that the door did not creak as it opened.

Before him spread the kitchen, with its long row of gleaming stainless steel ranges, its ovens, its broad cutting tables. Stepping softly and quickly to the knife wall, he pulled down a cleaver, a nice one, beautifully weighted, sharp as sin. So he would be the classic madman with a cleaver. Except he knew how to use things like this.

What little of him that might have been decent, might have felt mercy or relented, now slipped into memory, became unreal to him, and finally went out like a dying candle.

He felt full of the dark, and was in a curious way comfortable in it, like a man who has entered a cave that appeared dreadful from the outside, but who, once inside, becomes used to its terrors.

He strode across the kitchen, pushing through the double swinging doors into the dining room. Here, all was elegance, the crystal stemware flaring

with the wild light from outside, the silver seeming to jump on the place settings from the glowing sky.

It was different tonight, the auroras pulsating rather than flashing, and there were long streaks of light in the tops of the tall windows that surrounded the room. Now, meteors.

At the door of the dining room, he paused. Beyond this point, anything could happen. He went out to the broad corridor that led into the beautiful front rooms of the house. It had been a long time since he had been here in the flesh. Except for visits to their shrinks, inmates rarely got past this door.

“Excuse me.”

Standing at the foot of the stairs was a security guy. He was six foot three and fully weaponed.

Mack smiled. “I’ve lost my way.”

“Identify yourself, please.”

He took a step closer, at which moment the guard’s eyes flickered and Mack knew two things. He’d been recognized and the cleaver was spotted.

In the split of an instant, Mack stepped up to him and swung it, and his head went wobbling off, hit the stairs with a wet thud and came rolling down, coming to rest at the feet of the crumpling corpse.

Human bodies contain an amazing amount of blood, and there was no way to stop the ocean of it that was pumping out of this man. Mack picked up the head and took it to the coat closet that was concealed under the wide staircase. He shoved it onto a shelf, then dragged the body in, leaving behind a long, streaked trail of blood.

When morning came, they would certainly find this, but in the night, with all that flickering, it was hard to see exactly what was going on with the floor. So, unless somebody slipped in the mess, he had a reasonable chance that it would not be discovered until morning.

The stairs were open to him, and he thought he might alter his plan and try Dr. Ford first.

He took them three at a time. Surprise was essential.

Hallways led to the left and the right, then a central one, arched, where Mr. and Mrs. Acton’s suites had been. On the left were the old nurseries, now offices.

Moving along the central corridor, he heard nothing. The doors were thick and all were closed. He stopped at the one with the DR. DAVID FORD sign.

Behind it lay his office, his reception room, and his private rooms.

He put his hand on the doorknob and twisted it very carefully, so as not to make the least sound. After an eighth of an inch, he met resistance. The damn thing was locked, which was a setback, although a predictable one. He was going to have to find some basic tools, a coat hanger or a long, thin screwdriver, if he was going to get through a thick, well-made door like this silently.

As he leaned against it, trying to see if he could hear the tumblers as he moved the handle, he heard voices inside, faint but intense. The door was so closely fitted that you couldn't even see a line of light under it. Leaning against it didn't help, the voices remained indistinct.

For all he could tell, whoever was in there might come out at any moment. His bridges were well and properly burned. If he was found here, something permanent would be done to him. These were kindly people and he could not imagine them killing him. But they were desperate, also, and desperation causes unexpected behavior.

Initiative was slipping away from him. He'd thought it was possible that he would not unlock the secret of this place in time. If so, then his duty was clear: he must prevent it from being used at all. If the purest and best could not continue, the whole species had to go extinct. No third alternative was acceptable, not to him and, he was certain, not to the people in the bunkers.

He went back downstairs and threw open the recreation area doors and went through it to the art room, and there it was in its magnificence, the painting. And the damn thing was gloriously, superbly finished. Caroline Light had painted a great masterwork in a day. He didn't know a great deal about art, but he knew that the technique was immeasurably accomplished.

Even in this bizarre light, he could see a lovely meadow just after sunset, behind it a woodland, and in the far distance the western sky still glowing orange. Just an amazing thing.

As he peered into it more closely, he noticed that he became physically uncomfortable. He found himself rubbing the dark place on his neck, which seemed to be getting hot.

Swallowing the pain, he continued his examination of the painting . . . and realized something. For all the realism of this thing, the sky was wrong. Or was it? Yeah, the constellations could be off. He wasn't aware of exactly how they should look, but it wasn't like this. Then, as he watched, he saw that the

painting appeared to be changing. And that was the damnedest thing he had ever seen. The glow in the sky was fading. That *was* a sunset.

But then this wasn't a painting. It was—God, what was it, a window into another world? Because there were no auroras there, no purple sky.

He thought: I could go through. Just climb through. To hell with his goddamn duty, this was a chance to save himself. He extended his hand toward it—and his skin immediately got so hot that he snatched it back.

More carefully this time, he moved his hand closer, and the closer he came, the more the heat in his body increased. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he touched the surface of the thing.

It was like touching the edge of a column of air.

He pressed a little deeper, and could feel, on his palm, a subtle change in temperature.

It *was* a door, damn right. So he was going through and screw them all.

He extended his arm, and immediately felt such furious agony in the discolored area on his neck that he had to stop. He threw himself back away from the thing, rolling, writhing, forcing his screams back into his throat. The dark area hurt like hell. He could smell burned skin.

Clutching his shirt, he smothered what seemed to be a fire that had started spontaneously in his flesh.

These people were full of tricks and goddamn them.

He raised the cleaver. Then stopped. What would happen if he struck it, would it blow up in his face or what?

He looked more closely at it, being careful not to try to touch it again. You could see the places where the canvas was tacked to the stretcher. The back of it was just—well, he pushed the edge of the cleaver against it and found that there was give there.

No matter how it looked or what it did, this was basically paint on canvas, it had to be. Maybe it was also a damn wormhole or something, and if so, they were certainly about to use it.

That must not be allowed to happen. But he was in no position to steal it. He didn't know how it worked. He only knew that if he couldn't use it, they damn well weren't going to, either.

He went around behind it and positioned himself. He raised the cleaver, aiming for the center of the frame. With an easy motion, he cut the thing into two halves, which flew off in opposite directions. Where the painted area was

slashed, tiny sparks flickered.

Again he slashed it, to the left, to the right, again and again, ripping and tearing and cutting until there was nothing left of it but smeared paint and scraps of cloth, and a tiny, shimmering corner not big enough for a finger.

He stood over it and smashed his heel into it and ground it and ground it until there was nothing left at all.

“Excuse me, what are you doing?”

He turned. He looked across the dark, flickering maw of the large recreation area. A shadow stood there.

“Hello, Doctor,” he said, and advanced toward Marian Hunt.

When her eyes went to the cleaver, she took a step back, but he was on her then and before she could turn away he had grabbed her wrist and, with a swift upward swing of the knife, severed her arm.

Blood sprayed from her shoulder, shock and disbelief transformed her face into a gabbling mask, and he swung the severed arm at her and hit her in the side of the head with the ball head of the humerus bone, which struck her skull with a thick crunch.

She fell to her side, landing on the gushing shoulder with a sucking gasp of agony. He slammed her head with her arm again and again, hitting her skull until it was soup.

He didn't clean anything up, it was too late for that. He needed to get out of here because he didn't know why she'd suddenly appeared in the first place. He must have made too much noise, and that meant that others would be on their way. Plus, by now that guard had failed to report in and that was going to be investigated.

The painting represented science so advanced that he could not even begin to imagine how it might work, but two things were certain: first, it would not be doing its job now. Second, Light would tell him how it *did* work, and she would make one that worthy, decent people could use.

He tossed the arm into the air and slashed up as it came down, severing the forearm. Then he slit the flesh off the humerus and hefted it. A club could silence a man a whole lot faster than a knife.

As he headed for the patient suites, he heard a rise of voices all through the building—and realized that he wasn't the cause, because the windows were now as bright as dawn, but it was not dawn and the light was a bizarre, sickly violet.

He strode to the closest window and saw, rising on the northeastern horizon, the source of the earlier disturbance outside.

A new star was rising, and it brought a quote to his mind, “And a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water . . .”

The star Wormwood was here, and this was not only what the Book of Revelation foretold, but also the old calendars. It was what all the warnings from the past were about, and why they involved such exquisite calculations and precise dates.

The thing had only one meaning for him. Time was no longer running out, it *had* run out.

These bastards had known this, he suspected, right to the minute. That was why they had prepared their little escape hatch when they had. They would also realize that it was the most valuable thing in the world, or that had ever been in the world.

Well, they would do it all again, but not here. They would do it for him. He just very badly needed those people from the town to come up and create his diversion. Then he would take Light and Ford where he wanted to take them, and do with them what he needed to do.

16

MEMORY

As David watched the rising of the new star, the red star, he thought of the Book of Revelation. What was the past, that it was so wise that it could write such books? As he looked back from the world as it was now, history seemed to him to be a long process of going blind.

He thought, *I am at stage two of the process of dying, I'm beginning to accept the reality of what's happening, and that's changing my perspective.*

It meant accepting that he could not keep the Acton Clinic functioning and he could not save the patients. Perhaps there had been a mission. Of course there had. But he did not think that even Herbert Action had been able to imagine the sheer scale of the catastrophe.

He tried to shake off the simmering anguish of failure, but that was not going to be possible.

“David.”

A shock went through him and he whirled around—and found himself confronting a large group of people who had entered his office so quietly that he had not heard them.

“David,” Caroline said again. He did not like that tone. He did not like this crowd. On top of everything else, now he had a rebellion on his hands.

Glen was there, Bev Cross and Sam Taylor, and a dozen or more patients, among them Susan Denman and a mysteriously recovered Aaron Stein, who had been among the most profoundly psychotic. Katie was nowhere to be seen.

Caroline said, “We’re a delegation.”

“May I know your complaint? I presume it is a complaint.”

Bev brought out a disposable syringe. “David, we’re going to do this.”

It was the substance—the gold.

“David,” Glen said, “you need to let us.”

Caroline’s lips were a stern line, but her eyes were pale clouds, heavy with tears.

“We’ve all taken it, David,” Sam said. “We all remember.”

“I’ve taken it.”

“How much have you taken?” Aaron asked.

“How much have you taken, Aaron? Any of you? I know the answer and so do you. Very damn little, just like me. So what does that tell you? *It doesn’t work for me.*”

Glen asked, “Will you let Bev inject you?”

There was a stirring in the room.

“Look, I understand everything.” He gestured toward the lamp. “I even understand how Herbert Acton saw into time. But I don’t understand how this is going to help. Why would my brain require a megadose?”

“David,” Caroline said, “once you wake up, you’ll thank us.”

“For injecting me with a heavy metal? I don’t think so.”

Glen said, “It isn’t a heavy metal anymore.”

“It’s gold, for God’s sake. If you think that’s not a heavy metal, you missed high school science.” He was thinking about the Beretta he’d been issued. If he could get to his desk, he could regain control of this situation.

Bev attempted to get behind him, but he turned as she did. “You can’t put gold in somebody’s veins.”

“You can.”

“What you made in that furnace is amateur chemistry. You can’t inject somebody with amateur chemistry.”

“It isn’t amateur,” Caroline said, “and it isn’t chemistry.” She gestured toward the glyphs above the door. “It induces the union of those two principles and results in an extension of consciousness beyond space and time.”

“Look, I’m a doctor and I can only say that ingesting a heavy metal is bad, but taking one in an injection is going to be catastrophic.”

“You’re in amnesia—”

“I’ve remembered everything, Caroline! The class, all of it. So I don’t need this—this attack. I do not need it.” Again he looked toward the desk. The gun was in there.

“David, your amnesia is emotional. What the gold will do is open a door in you that’s locked tight right now. The door to the heart.”

“The heart has no place in this.”

“David, the heart is everything! Without love to sustain us, we cannot

make the journey.”

“Look, folks, you need to face something, all of you. We aren’t going to be making any journeys through time. Herbert Acton was incredibly accomplished, but he was also deluded. You can see into time. But actual, physical movement? Forget it.”

He saw Glen’s eyes flicker toward Sam, who came forward and was suddenly behind him with Beverly. Once again, David started to turn toward them, but this expert restrained him by immobilizing his arms just above the elbows.

Sam said, “Sorry, boss.”

Glen said, “Either this happens with a struggle or without a struggle, it’s your choice.”

Part of him considered the provable skills of Herbert Acton and part of him the arrogance of these people—but then Bev removed the sheath from the needle and all of him felt anger.

“How dare you,” he shouted, and he kicked at them.

“Hold him,” Caroline said. “We need the neck!”

“Jesus God, NO!” But they swarmed him and immobilized him with their bodies. “Don’t do this, this is insane!”

They forced him to the floor, they held his head so that he could not move it. He felt Bev swabbing the left side of his neck just above the carotid.

“Okay,” she said, “you’ll feel this one, hon.”

The needle was fire and he bellowed; he twisted and writhed and tried to move his head enough to dislodge it but he could not dislodge it, and he felt the substance running like lava through the vein.

Then it hit his brain in an explosion of darting sparks, each of which seemed filled with information, and in the next instant he saw beyond words, beyond thought, beyond language itself, into the pure, wordless mathematics of hyperspace.

Which he understood—and with it, also understood more of himself than ever before, that they were, in one sense, right about him, that he contained an enormous past stretching across eons among the living and eons among the dead. He saw, also, that a living man and a dead man are simply two aspects of one creature. The living form moves through life in an active state; a dead man is the same creature in its contemplative form, looking at what has been done, and in so doing seeing the truth of the self.

There came next a burst of pure physicality—bodily sensation in its purest form, the agony of pleasure and the agony of pain mixed together.

“Oh, God, God, I’m . . . I think I’m having a stroke. You’re giving me a stroke!”

“No,” Caroline said. Her hand on his forehead was cool and firm, and the tears in her eyes gleamed.

Then something happened that he had not expected and could not expect. The rich, vivid sensation of his body seemed to concentrate until it was a single, burning point—and then his head, for want of a better word to explain total annihilation, exploded.

He had no eyes to see with, no ears to hear with, no sensation of the world around him.

He thought, *They killed me. They’re all crazy and they killed me. This was a blood sacrifice.*

But the black that had enveloped him was not like the abyss he had glimpsed earlier. This darkness was vividly alive, and also changing, and it changed by degrees through all the colors that were on the Tiffany lamp, until it was a radiance, and suddenly he was no longer in a void, but back in his office.

He saw also within him another being who was not him but who occupied a place in hyperspace that was at once everywhere and was deeply, profoundly specific. He saw that this being, who had been called Osiris, who had been called Christ, who had been called Quetzalcoatl and Viracocha, who had been called so many different names, was right here, right now, and he understood why the preflood ritual that was now known as communion, the sharing of the flesh, had been preserved, because to accept Him into your body was to accept Him into your soul.

He was looking up into a face. He reached up, and Caroline smiled, and kissed the tips of his fingers.

Around him was his class, his deep friends, his companions in the Great Work.

“I remember,” he said, his voice faint. He tried again, attempting to speak more strongly. “I remember. I remember how I love you.”

At first, he’d been afraid and embarrassed.

Dad had driven him into a world of Lamborghinis and Bentleys in an ’88 Chevy Caprice. He had not understood then what he understood now, that he

had been chosen not because his grandfather had happened to own a certain piece of land, but because he was, himself, exactly right for the role he was to perform.

“Mr. Acton didn’t only see the future,” he said, his voice faint. “We weren’t chosen because of our lives, but because of our past lives. Nothing was an accident.”

He had been a general, an admiral, he had led men and nations, and was an ancient being full of wisdom, and he *could* perform the role being offered to him. In fact, he was the only one who could do it, the good leader.

“I saw you,” he said to Caroline, “you . . .” She’d been perhaps ten, he twelve, but she had shone like a child made of sunlight.

He remembered sitting side by side with her under the apple tree—for there was such a tree in the garden of every house of the Acton Group, including his own. The color of the apple blossom, he knew now, was a memory trigger. When that red blush came to the sky, it would be time.

The color of the new star was no longer frightening to him, for it was the color of the highest energy, and the auroras combined with it to make the sky the subtle pink of apple blossom.

He looked at Caroline again, and, softly, secretly, his heart opened—and he saw at once how necessary this had been. Without love, there was no reason to continue the species at all, and there was a great plan and there were rules, and without love they could not fly through time.

“I remember my promise to you, Caroline.”

She met his eyes with the warmest gaze he could ever remember, and at once for him everything changed. They had held innocent hands as kids, but there had been a deeper bond, the entwining love of souls that has carried humanity across so many perils and divides.

They came together and he enfolded her in his arms, and it felt good, it felt so very, very good.

An instant later, he broke away. In his new role, he had new responsibilities.

“The painting,” he said. “Who’s guarding it?”

Glen and Sam looked at each other.

“Nobody? Is it *nobody*?”

“David, we didn’t think that—”

He didn’t listen to the rest, he didn’t need to. He was already running.

Please, God, that he not be too late.

17

THE TOWNSPEOPLE

“For God’s sake, Glen, she’s been dismembered! My dear God!” David felt as if he was watching himself from a distance as he stared down at the body of Marian Hunt. He knew that he was experiencing stress-induced dissociation, a symptom of shock. Claire Michaels, who had found her, sat slumped in a chair, her face in her hands.

If they had not needed to take the time to inject him, perhaps this wouldn’t have happened.

Katrina said in a dull voice, “We need a blanket, David.”

“Yes, of course. We need, uh, a body bag—Glen?”

“I’ll get a couple of men to pull her out of here and clean up the blood. But we’ve got no communications, so this all has to be done with runners and my first priority is to locate and secure the person who did this, and I have to tell you that we’ve got perimeter issues. We had an incursion attempt earlier today, and there was one intruder injured.”

“Where is he? Is he being treated?”

“They carried him off. I’m hopeful that it taught them a lesson.” But then he stopped, listened.

David heard it, too, a chugging noise.

“What is it?”

Glen had gone pale.

“Automatic weapons fire,” he said. “South wall.”

“Ours?”

“That’s an older-model machine gun, probably a Browning. The townies are back and my guess is that somebody’s opened that back gate for them again.”

There followed a sharp, rushing whisper.

“That’s us. HK G40.”

Then three cracking booms, sounding like a small cannon.

“Forty-five automatic. Civilian again. I need to get down there.”

Cries echoed through the building. More chugging followed, and upstairs, glass breaking, followed by horrific screams.

“Somebody took a hit through the window,” Glen said. The initial fear in his voice had been suppressed. In its place now was professional calm.

“We need to get everybody to safety,” David said. “We need to bring the whole security team inside the building.”

“David, begging to differ, you are telling us to begin our defense by retreating to our place of last refuge.”

For a heartbreaking instant, David could see the boy in the man, the bright hope that had been there when they had been in class together. Glen was tired now, very tired. David’s heart went out to his friend.

Feet pounded on the stairs and a patient appeared, Tom Dryden. He was naked, his face tight, a grin that spoke agony. Without a word, he ran past them and into the recreation area. An instant later there was a wet thud, and he was slamming himself against the windows the same way Linda had slammed herself against the door. All across his back there was an area so black that it looked more like a great hole in him than any sort of sore.

Shouting that the great ships were gone, David ran to help him.

But he kept on, just as Linda had, smashing himself to pieces against the thick, relentlessly resistant glass.

“Stop! Take it easy!” David got to the door and threw it open. “Here, you can go!”

Still, Tom hurled himself against the window, which, David saw, was starting to develop long, ominous cracks. He really did not need a point of easy access, not with a firefight going on a few hundred yards away.

“You can go, Tom,” he shouted. But Tom didn’t want to leave by the door, or at all. He wanted to break himself against the window and the wall.

“Mr. Dryden,” a female voice called, sharp and high. It was Katie.

“Don’t get near him.”

“He’s like me.”

“What do you mean, Katie?”

Her eyes glittered like dark jewels, and he could see defiance in them. She held up her hair, and on her neck, spreading up from her back, was a gleaming spot of deepest blackness.

As a doctor, he might have thought melanoma, but not with borders that precise.

“On his back,” she said. “He’s dirty, they’re never going to come for him.” She laughed a little. “We’re rejects.”

Again Tom Dryden slammed himself against the window.

“We can’t let him just do that,” David said, attempting to pull him toward the door. As he did three more people appeared, all running to help, Amy Feiffer and Robert Noonan, both from the class, and Mack Graham. Robert was the youngest son of George Noonan of Web development fame.

The group of them manhandled Tom through the door and into the grounds. David hated to do it, but getting him out of here was better than having him slam himself to pieces.

As they returned, they shut and locked the door.

“How come you’re out, Mack?”

“Nurse Fleigler released me.”

“Yeah, well, okay, I can understand that.” Under these circumstances, nobody could be left in lockup. But with this man, it was tempting.

“What can we do to help?” Noonan asked.

Now there was a thunder of gunfire, and greenish-blue flashes stuttered in the violet of the new star.

Under this new light, all the colors were different. The grass was a washed out pinkish brown, the new leaves on the trees yellow instead of green, the trunks black. As it raced toward the fire, a white SUV, one of the security vehicles, appeared bright pink. The perimeter wall, visible in the distance, had gone from gray to rose, its razor wire gleaming an odd pinkish red.

Dryden stood where Linda had stood, his face raised, screaming rage at the sky.

David heard a cry from inside, and he recognized the voice instantly, and he forgot everything, and ran back in.

Caroline stood before her empty easel, her face in her hands. The easel itself was just a frame with tatters of canvas around the edges.

In the way that people sharing a tragedy will, Mack laid an arm on her shoulder. She shrugged him off, but he persisted, and finally she leaned against him and sobbed.

“There are more materials,” Susan Denman said.

“Where are they?” Mack asked. “I’ll help you.”

“Caroline,” Susan said, “why don’t we go to the supply room together, you

can pick out what you need.”

When Mack started to follow, David called him back.

“Mack, I want you to remain in sight of staff at all times.”

“Of course.”

He was suspicious of Mack. Of course, there was no proof of anything, but when you added this patient up, you got a sum that was wrong.

Looking out across the bizarrely colored landscape, David knew that this new light would affect the human brain profoundly. Serotonin, dopamine—all the neurotransmitters—were light dependent, and this radically different wavelength—violet—would have the effect of intensifying and changing not only colors, but also the mind and heart. Colors you could see, but what it might be doing to brain chemistry he could scarcely imagine.

Again there were shots, but this time they were so close that David instinctively ducked. Mack hurried back to the door, and David followed.

“Katie,” he called behind him, “get the patients upstairs, keep them away from the windows.”

As Mack opened the door, David saw movement around the side of the house, and a figure backed into view. He was concentrated on whatever scene was unfolding before him. In his hands there was some sort of a gun, David did not know what sort. But a big one, certainly, oily black and complicated. David’s own gun, the little Beretta he’d been issued by Glen, was in his pocket, but he dared not bring it out in the face of that monster.

The gun fired again, and this time the sound drew people out of the recreation area—and he saw that the patients—the real ones—had not gone upstairs at all, but were, in their panic, coming outside and straight into danger, with members of his class trying and failing to control them.

“No,” he shouted, “get back!”

On hearing the voice behind him, the figure turned around, and David saw that this was a boy of maybe fourteen or fifteen, a towhead with darting, frightened eyes made red by the new light.

As he aimed the weapon, David threw himself against the wall. An instant later the heat of bullets seared past his face, and he saw the child’s thin frame hopping from the recoil.

Silence followed, then a single, ripping shriek. Turning toward it, David saw that a crowd of patients that had come out the door had been torn to pieces by the bullets.

Many lay screaming, holding themselves, crying and gagging. One man capered wildly, blood as dark as a beet spraying out of his neck. Another bubbled foam from his chest, his hands fluttering around the wound, his eyes darting like the eyes of a trapped animal. Others were still, one of them kneeling and praying with his hands folded, gazing up toward the glow of the star.

The boy came a few hesitant steps closer. His face was a child's, but it contained the cruel shadows of fear and desperation.

Quickly, the boy raised his gun to his shoulder, a snapping, oddly military gesture. Pink fire burst from the barrel and the praying man came sailing backward, his arms thrusting out, hands spread.

Suddenly, there was movement beside David. The light was so bizarre that it was difficult to see some things, such as a fast-moving figure, but as she ran past him, he saw that it was Caroline and she was going to the boy.

"No!"

The boy kept the weapon raised, his face intent.

"Caroline, we need you!"

David ran, trying to put himself between her and the child, but she was well ahead of him.

Then she was standing before the child.

"Don't," she said to him.

"Mom got shot. You gonna help her, lady?"

"I can help her."

"She's dead." The voice was stark and cold. "What's wrong with the sun?"

"That's not the sun. It's a different star."

"It ain't the sun?"

"It's dangerous. You need to be inside."

David tried again. "Caroline, we can't afford to lose you."

The boy said, "I want a bowl of soup."

"You can have a bowl of soup."

"Caroline, get back. Let me do this."

"Get out of here, David. Son, come here."

"Fuck, no." The boy's hand moved and the rifle clicked.

Caroline took a step toward him.

David could smell the stark odor of cordite still coming from the rifle.

"Caroline, *please!*"

“Come here,” she said, opening her arms.

The boy pushed the rifle into her face. David was behind her. He could not save her now.

“Son, no. No, please,” he said, but his fear reduced it to a dry, barely audible murmur.

Caroline lifted her hand, palm out, as if trying to protect herself from the barrel of the weapon. The two of them remained like that, frozen. David could not see Caroline’s face, but the boy’s slowly changed, the hardness leaving his eyes and tears appearing at their edges.

“Ma’am, is this the end of the world?”

“It’s a big change. Son, tell me, is there a black spot on you anywhere? Under your arm, maybe? On your leg?”

He hesitated. David took a step to one side, trying to get a clear run at the kid. Behind him, Mack was also in motion.

The boy said, “I got nothing like that.”

Caroline said, “Give me the gun.”

“No’m.”

“Did the ships come over your house?”

“Yeah, they didn’t stop, we got left here.”

“Son, you have a chance to escape with us. Don’t lose it now.”

“I shot ’em all!” His voice broke. “I’m sorry.” This was followed by a cataract of sobs and the boy ran into Caroline’s arms. David had never seen anything quite like it.

Her arm around him, Caroline returned to the building. A security guard quickly scooped up his abandoned weapon.

Two staffers came out with sheets to cover the dead, of which there were four. The wounded, many more, had been taken to the infirmary.

Most of the remaining staff and patients were assembled in the recreation room. Caroline had gone back to her easel and set it up, Susan having supplied her with paint and a fresh canvas. Mack watched her, and Noonan watched him.

David got up on a chair. “Patients, you need to get upstairs with the others and stay away from windows. Our security team will get the situation under control, but we need to help them by staying out of harm’s way.”

As he watched, the others trooped upstairs, all except Mack and Noonan, and, of course, Caroline. He looked around for Sam, but didn’t see him. Katie

was still here, so he asked her to escort Mack to his room.

“Aren’t we past that?” Mack immediately asked.

“I told you, I want you in the sight of staff, and I can’t deal with you right now.”

“I’m not being locked in any goddamn room! No way!”

“Just go upstairs with the others.”

“What about her?” He gestured toward Caroline. “She can’t stay down here.”

“She needs to do her work.”

“Let’s take her somewhere safer.”

“Mack, you go with the others, or I will lock you down at gunpoint.”

“With what gun?”

He was about to produce it when Caroline whirled away from her painting.

“Stop it! Mack, stop being a fool. Go upstairs where it’s safe.”

“What is that thing, anyway? It’s no damn painting.” He advanced toward her, one aggressive step, then another. David took out the little pistol, which felt mysterious and awful in his hand.

“It’s a way out,” Caroline said. “It’s a *chance!*”

“How does it work?”

“If it works.”

“So you’re not sure?”

“I’m sure I’m creating a portal. If nobody destroys it this time, maybe we can go through.”

“To where?”

“Away from here.”

“There’s got to be more to it than that.”

She shook her head—and Mack came yet closer to her. “Tell me how the goddamn thing *works!*”

David fired. Across the room, a painting of Amanda Acton, Herbert’s wife, dropped to the floor with a resounding crash.

“The next one,” he said to Mack, “belongs to you.”

Mack still seemed ready to throttle Caroline, and David began tightening his finger on the trigger.

Mack’s eyes were steady and unafraid. He was calculating odds, David could see that.

“All right,” he said, “I’ll go upstairs. Just don’t goddamn well lock me

down.”

“Do it now.”

At last he left, moving with exaggerated casualness, as if unconcerned about a thing.

When they were alone, David kissed Caroline’s hair. There was such a strange combination of newness and old, assured love in the way he felt now about her, as if she was a settled lover who had mysteriously appeared in a fresh and sensual new body. It was all he could do not to embrace her, but she was working and he did not dare disturb a single line. He wanted to explore with her the wonder of adult love, in the innocence of childhood memory.

“How long will it take?” he asked.

“Too long.”

“Then what happens?”

“Don’t interrupt me!”

He stepped away from her. His stomach felt as if it would turn inside out. He laid an encouraging hand on his painter’s slim shoulder.

She worked on, the steady whisper of her brush the only sound in the great room.

DAVID FORD'S JOURNAL: SEVEN

The substance they injected changed me profoundly. They were right to force me and I'm glad they did. In a sense, I suppose, it was my scientific education that made me so resistant—but it is this same education that has also enabled me to understand what we are trying to do.

For me, our hope is lodged in that woman hunched over the easel, in her concentrated face and long hands, and the ocean of love that hides behind her harsh exterior.

She is creating a true hyperdimensional object—the first one, I think, that has been created in a long time. The icons of the Russians are a degenerated memory of such paintings, in the sense that it is believed that they contain the actual, living consciousness of the saints they depict.

This is more than an icon, though, far more powerful. It is a bridge between art and science, fashioned out of the artist's love and creativity, and the scientist's patient attention to the laws of nature.

It is true alchemy, the transformation of base metal into gold—that is to say, the transformation of paint and canvas into a hyperdimensional portal.

I am humble before the alchemists, and especially before that one with her paints and the hyperdimensional colors out of which they have been made. For those are not mere oil paints that she applies to that canvas.

I don't know who mixed them or how, but I know this about those paints: they are a machine of the very highest order. The light reflected from the surface of paint she is applying not only penetrates this reality, it is visible in all realities.

I think one of those great physicists—was it Stephen Hawking, or possibly Roger Penrose?—said that a time machine would be the most visible thing in the world because it would necessarily exist in every moment. Well, that's true, for this painting, as she paints it, at once takes on the appearance of an

old master, an ancient encaustic, a cave painting, and in every respect of line, it is perfect.

It is not meant to save just an elite few. It is meant to save all who need saving. The elect are rising, the judged sinking into the dark center of the earth. But the rest of us, we have to escape and we have to do it in our physical bodies. Of course, many of us won't make it. But many will, and I know this: when she is finished—when the moment is exactly right—this device will enter hyperspace and thus become visible to everybody with eyes to see it and the goodness of heart to use it.

It won't save just a few hundred here at the clinic. No, it is part of a much larger plan. When it is finished, it will indeed be the most visible thing on earth.

This thing being shuffled onto that fragile canvas is nothing less than light in a very dark time, our great chance and great hope.

And now I know that I am here not only to use it and guide others through it but to protect it.

We are few around her, and the enemy is very many—in fact, so many that he is legion and will certainly destroy us if he can.

I can sense the edges of a great plan that surrounds us with love and hope, but also another plan, equally powerful, that seeks the ruin of the world.

18

GENERAL WYLIE

In Hancock, Virginia, the convoy stopped to refuel, then reroute around the Hagerstown, Maryland, area. Recce ahead had identified an active uprising in Hagerstown, so they were going to need to bypass in order to reach Raleigh and the Acton Clinic fast, and speed was probably essential.

General Wylie had a small muster consisting of his command vehicle, a Stryker Mobile Gun System, three squad Humvees, and a fuel truck. He did not see the light defenses at the clinic as being able to stand up against twenty-one soldiers and the MGS, which could deliver a pretty fair punch, and he intended to take the place out and obtain whatever of value his agent was signaling him was located there.

He had received an urgent and promising communication from Mack Graham, which had convinced him that immediate action was essential. It had said, "Device located and understood."

That could not be more clear. There was a device and he knew where it was and he understood it.

So, fine. General Wylie was going to get it and take it back to Blue Ridge.

Over the past few days, one after another of the redoubts had reported over the fiberoptic network that the local situation was becoming critical. A number of them had since gone silent. Colonia Dignidad, with its reputation in Chile as having been founded by war-refugee Germans, had been an immediate target of the locals. Its last report was that the Chilean air force was overhead using deep-penetrating bunker buster bombs. The center in England had simply gone silent. Destroyed? Overrun? No way to know.

There were no longer any satellites operational so it wasn't possible to get lookdowns. Also, there was no chance of deploying any sort of air power. That was all down due to electronics failures. How the Chilean air force had gotten up was anybody's guess. Old planes, probably, without sensitive electronics. But that had been three days ago. Because of the tremendous electromagnetic loading of all wiring, not even the simplest aircraft were

going to be viable now. The only reason his own vehicles were operational was that they were diesel and they had been started inside the redoubt. They'd keep going as long as they weren't turned off and once again required their electronics.

General George Wylie sat in his command vehicle staring at an empty computer screen. He was back to Civil War-level intelligence. No eyes, no ears, except what a guy in a dusty diesel Jetta could bring back from his travels ahead.

"Device located and understood." After that, no further reports. Probably, Mack the Cat was dead. Mack took the extreme chance, always.

They'd put Mack in the Acton Clinic last year because it had become clear that the group who, as children, had been taught Acton's secrets by the son of his associate Bartholomew Light were assembling there.

A number of these children had been DNA profiled, and curious things were found, things that not even the most advanced genetics laboratories could decipher. Something—and it was extensive—had been added to their DNA. It was as if some sort of artificial evolution had been induced in them.

The redoubts around the world were full of members of important and very private societies, members of various fraternal orders and religious organizations, all of them devoted to the same thing: maintaining and increasing the wealth of those who had it and deserved it.

But not even the most secret of them was as well concealed as Acton's group. They'd had their memories wiped, then experienced some kind of temporary psychotic induction process that was far in advance of any brainwashing technique ever developed. It had been this that had caused them to be so hard to find. Who would think to look among a bunch of psychotics? To all appearances, Mrs. Acton had left the estate to a favorite charity when she died, and it had used the money to found the clinic.

All very straightforward, and all a big, fat lie.

One of Mack's messages from last week had said, "group leaders now present."

So they were ready and whatever they were going to do, it was going to be going down pronto.

He tapped his driver's shoulder. "Get under way."

"Still fueling."

They had to anticipate fuel needs carefully. If a vehicle were to stop

running, it might never be able to be started again.

“Snap it up!”

“Yeah, okay.”

That sleazy response made his blood boil, but he sucked it in. The U.S. military had disintegrated. Who had ever imagined that regular soldiers like these would protect the redoubts effectively?

“We’re rolling,” his driver finally said as he increased power. Good. The sun was well up and that damn weird *thing* had set. What in God’s name was that? Nothing good, no question there.

The convoy moved on, turning onto a side road. To the north, he could see tall columns of smoke rising from Hagerstown. Here and there along the road were burned-out cars, stripped cars, some kind of a cattle truck with half-butchered carcasses and flies around it, and bodies, always bodies, bloating, hacked, shot, burned, you name it.

The United States was gone. Long gone. All countries were gone. That whole thing was over.

He drove on through the slow morning and afternoon, stopping far too frequently to clear the road, or, where that wasn’t possible, to do a slow workaround through the countryside.

At about two some asshole came running toward them with some kind of rifle in his hands. Before he could fire it, the general ordered him blown away. Then they moved on. The order of the day was, if it shows a gun it is hostile, and if it is hostile, kill it.

Here and there, you saw families on the road. Looked like Iraq during the invasion, or newsreel footage of World War II. Some of them even waved. Jerks. One time, incredibly, a Greyhound bus had passed going in the opposite direction. Now, that was amazing, but it was an old unit, looked like something from the sixties. No electronics, so all they needed was gas and they were in motion. There was a lot of gasoline around, too, if you could get to it. But pumps are electric and gas stations don’t have generators. A bus company, though, probably would have some way of pulling up its fuel in the event of a power failure.

He liked to think about stuff like this. Keeping the world working. But the GODDAMN WORLD WAS NOT WORKING, WAS IT? Goddamn them, fine! FINE! What if this happened: this thing kept up until all the human garbage, the ragheads, the Chinks, the spics, the Mexes, the blacks, you name

it, all of that trash perished? A few good Americans and Englishmen and Germans, too, of course, couldn't be helped. But ALL of that garbage—and then suddenly they opened the redoubts and here was a whole new world ready to start over again.

Except it wasn't going to be like that, was it? It wasn't going to be like that AT ALL.

Oh, he'd taken the fucking white powder gold. And he was a good man. Churchgoing. You had to be a good little boy, they said, to make that shit work. He'd goddamn well drunk it like a milkshake for days, and all he'd gotten out of it was bloody piss. Plus now there was this frigging black spot on his stomach that he could not get rid of. He tried scraping it, he'd even tried packing it in bleach. Would not go away. Cut at it with a razor. Whatever it was, the sucker went deep.

“General, we have an escort.”

“What the fuck?”

“There's one'a them UFOs up there.”

What in hell was this? He'd seen video of these things. They were kidnapping people all over the world. Well, hell, he had damn few soldiers in this unit and probably half of them would take off the second the sun set, so he did not need this. He popped the overhead hatch and saw this big goddamn thing up there. Should he shoot it? No fuckin' way, God only knew what kind of ordinance it had. These things had been around for years and nobody knew what they were. NASA maybe, the president maybe, but not this soldier. “Increase speed. Let's see if we can get out from under this sucker.”

The radios didn't work, so they used hand signals, and it was about a minute before a signal came back from the fuel truck. If they increased speed, they would need to load more diesel fuel before they reached Raleigh. “Maintain speed!” And, goddamn it, what next?

One radio that was functional was the single sideband unit that was used for contacting Mack. It was kept powered down except when in use, and so far it was fine. In fact, he could hear his communications officer sending a burst right now. He did that every fifteen minutes.

But then, a screech of brakes, the screaming of tires.

“What the hell?”

One of the Humvees veered off the road and went over on its side in a cloud of dust and a crash of a kind he hadn't heard since Iraq—the sound of a

whole lot of metal taking a hell of a beating.

A second later, a column of light as white as powder came down from the thing overhead, and two young soldiers floated out of the Humvee, their arms raised to the sky, and went up in it and were damn well gone. And so was the thing—whoosh, just like that. Steel-white sky, end of story.

He threw open the access hatch and ran to the Humvee. Nobody else had moved except one soldier, who had taken off across country and was going like hell. He was tempted to order the man shot, but that might bring outright rebellion, so he ignored the desertion.

When he looked inside the Humvee, he had a hell of a shock. What was in there was the driver, and he had literally ripped his own clothes off. His body was as red as a tomato and there was heat coming off it, a lot of heat. The eyes were open and staring and they were not glazed like the eyes of dead men, they were sharp with horror, like he was suffering somewhere deep inside himself. They were not dead eyes, and that was weird.

Whatever was happening to the guy, it was horrible and it just plain hit George Wylie right between the eyes. He was U.S. Army to the core, though, and the U.S. Army saved the lives of its soldiers. You got a man down, you did what was necessary to get all that training and that skill back to medical support. You did that. But here? “Hey, soldier, you hear me?”

Nothing.

Then he noticed on the kid’s bare chest and around his side, one of those damn spots, black and gleaming. So what in shit’s name was this stuff then, cancer caused by the fucked-up sun?

He went back to the Stryker.

“One KIA,” he called out. “Driver. The other three are gone.” He pulled himself into the vehicle and commanded them to get moving.

As they went on down the road the general found himself feeling kind of sick. There was something about the two guys who had gone up in that thing that he didn’t like. Not the fact that he’d lost men, although that was a pain, for sure, but the way they had looked as they ascended, like saints or some damn thing. That was it, a couple of beautiful young saints. He was a Christian and all that. Damn right, and screw the opposition. You weren’t with Jesus, you needed your heart cut out.

But he didn’t like saints. You weren’t gonna win a war with damn saints in your army.

He hit his driver on the shoulder. "What's our ETA?"

"We don't have any holdups, three hours."

That would be well after dark, such as it was with that violet thing, if it came back.

As the vehicle sped along, he found his mind going to his most recent wife, to Sally. Pretty, not beautiful, so why had he married her? Couldn't tell her no, was the main reason.

She went on and on, wanted this, wanted that. Expert in one thing: being disappointed.

He just got so damn mad sometimes, and leave it to a woman to bring out the worst in you.

So what happens when you're isolated in a survival redoubt and you command the security force and you off your wife? They put her in the freezer is what happens, and good-bye.

Too bad he hadn't brought a bottle on this little frolic. He needed a bottle. He always needed a goddamn bottle. Essential carry, soldier, forget it again, just blow your own head off.

One thing, the Acton Clinic meant maybe getting something that would get him out of this mess, and maybe the whole Blue Ridge group. Too late for the rest, probably. But the Seven Families were at Blue Ridge, plus the cream of America, so they were first in line, anyway.

"Any response from Mack?"

"No, Sir."

Never mind, they'd be there soon enough. If those bastards had offed Mack, though, there was going to be a slight change in plans. He would still kill them, of course, but slow. Damn slow.

19

STEALING PEOPLE

Mack had thought that he would kidnap Caroline Light and possibly David Ford, but he had not anticipated that Caroline would start re-creating the portal as immediately as she had, or move nearly so fast. And he had not understood, until he saw them together, that they were so tender toward one another. Now, he would definitely take Ford. Torture is a reliable form of interrogation in only one instance: when you torture the lover and question the subject.

Because of the attack, Mack was no longer locked down, and he had been able to slip out and watch her. He stood in the shadows on the stairway that led into the recreation area.

Without knowing it, she had made this a race. Either her painting got finished and they used it—however that was to be done—or the townspeople invaded and gave Mack the chance he needed.

Except for one thing. They would not use it because he was going to prevent it. He would destroy the painting again and this time he would kill her as well. Far better, though, if the deserving got the benefit of the thing.

In the darkness across the room, hidden in the red shadows, Katie was also watching, and she felt every endearing touch between the lovers like a knife skewering her heart.

As the new star had shone its baleful light through the high windows of the rec room, her jealousy had festered into hate, and then into the truth of her soul: the pathological, murderous rage that was her great hidden flaw.

Katrina had a secret. She had killed. She had killed more than once. First, when she was a child, she had killed a boy called Jerry Flournoy. It had happened during a celebration bonfire at Camp Oscalana.

They had just finished the musical, and parents and kids were sitting around in congratulatory mode. The show had been *Annie*, and Jerry Flournoy had directed and played Bert Healy, and he had been the one who had kept Katrina from being Annie.

She had slid a brand out of the fire, and let it fall against the leg of his costume. She had not realized that it was made of rayon, and he had burned to death. Nobody thought it was anything but an accident, and he should have rolled, he should never have tried to run down to the lake, he should have known that. But she had done it and she had never regretted it, because his agony and his death had filled a hole in her heart. His fire had cooled her jealousy. She had forgotten his cries, his racing, leaping death in a shower of sparks and flailing limbs. But the odor that had hung over the camp she would never forget, the honey stench of vengeance.

She had killed Jerry Flournoy and it had been a good thing to do, good for her soul, so when another cruel and hostile person—this one a man thief—had appeared in her life, she had killed her, too. She had backed over Patricia Dickerson while she was at the mailbox. What she remembered from that one was the crunch of the bones, and she enjoyed remembering it. Patty had taken her Tom. *Her* Tom. And this bitch Caroline, she had taken her David. *Her* David.

An accidental fire. A hit-and-run. Now, a slashing in a clinic full of psychotics—she would get away with this one, too. Both of them, the bitch and the ungrateful bastard.

For his part, Mack was quietly aware of her presence in the room, and watching her intently.

It was four thirty in the morning. The star would set before the sun rose, and there would be a period of darkness then. Things like night-vision equipment were all fried, so if the town was going to strike, that would most likely be when they came.

As he watched the drama unfolding below from the landing—the painting going on, the watcher preparing to strike—he began to hear sounds of movement from the patient area upstairs.

Worse, Katrina apparently heard it, too, because she started going closer to Caroline and David. Mack needed them alive—for a time.

Where in hell were those townies? God, if they didn't come, this was going to be a mess.

Katrina had gotten a knife from the kitchen, and if she could, she'd put it first in Caroline's spleen, which was full of blood. Puncture it and you had a dead body on your hands almost as fast as with the heart, and the spleen was more vulnerable. As a nurse, she knew that stabbing somebody in the heart

was more difficult than it appeared, because of the breastbone in front and the spine in back. The body protected its heart. Going for the spleen was easier and just as efficient.

As she moved closer, she brushed the back of a chair. It made only the tiniest sound, but this was more than enough to make David turn around.

As he did so, she dropped to the floor. He looked out across the room for some time. The light coming in the windows from the new star was a little brighter than moonlight, but not so much that you couldn't hide in its shadows.

David came toward her. There was something in his hand—a gun, she thought. But first he'd talk, he wasn't going to shoot anybody except as a last resort, she didn't think . . . which somehow made her hate him all the more.

She could see his legs now. He'd paused just the other side of one of the bridge tables. All right, if he came around that table, she was going for him and hopefully she'd be fast enough to neutralize the gun.

In the distance, there was a ripping sound. A machine gun on the perimeter, she thought.

David heard it, too, and hurried back to Caroline and spoke softly to her, then sat down. His gun remained in his hand.

Carefully—very carefully—Katrina worked her way out from under the table. Rising just enough to get them in view, she saw that the bastard had not been distracted by whatever was happening outside. He still stared out into the room.

There was more machine gun fire, louder this time.

Then Caroline's voice rang out, "David! David, it's done!"

When he turned, Katie moved closer to them fast. He'd get his first, then her. She would rather have done her first and forced him to watch the bitch's death agony, but he had that gun.

She came up behind them and raised the knife, staring down at his back, looking at the place she would put it in.

As she started the thrust, something totally unexpected happened—it felt as if an iron cuff had gone around her wrist while at the same time a steel hand covered her mouth.

For a moment, she was too stunned to react. Nobody else had been in here. *Nobody*. Her heart flopped and her blood howled in her head.

A voice said, "Okay, David, drop the weapon, please." She was astonished

to recognize Mack the Cat. He'd come up on her in absolute silence, and surprised the watchful David, too.

Mack saw that, once again, the painting looked like a window. In it, there were leaves moving on the trees, there was bright, normal moonlight, and the surface of a river could be seen shimmering in the distance. Except for one thing: the moon was different. More craters.

David said, "Mack, let her go."

"David, she's trouble."

All she could think about was bringing that knife down, and feeling the sliding resistance when it cut into him.

Mack could still feel the tension in Katie's body, so he wouldn't release her. She must not hurt either of these people, or that thing—the portal.

David took a step forward. "Mack, Katie is a good person, she's no danger to you."

Mack laughed. Then David followed his eyes and he saw the knife still poised in Katie's hand. When Mack increased the pressure on her wrist, Katie opened her fingers and it dropped to the floor with a clang.

"Katie?" David asked.

Mack uncovered her mouth and all of her rage and hate came spitting out in the form of one word, "*Bastard!*"

Surprise tightened David's face until the realization of why she was so enraged made his eyes go soft with regret.

"I'm sorry," he said to Katie.

Caroline said, "Let's get past this, because we have a miracle here." She looked from Mack to Katie to David. "A miracle—look at it!"

David said, "The others are waiting. We need to do this."

Unless he acted quickly and correctly right now, Mack understood that he was going to lose his chance forever. Before, he'd had no choice but to destroy the portal. He had not been ready, and they would have used it before he could get it away from them, and that must not be allowed to happen. If the right people didn't get the portal, nobody was going to get it.

But now they'd played into his hands by reconstructing it just as all hell broke loose around them. So now he could use the danger that was unfolding here to take the portal and the two of them off the clinic grounds and into some more private place. There, he would force them to teach him how to use it, and then he would slash their throats. Should he fail, he would kill them

both and take the portal and just hope that somebody at the redoubt could figure out how to use it.

Reaching forward, he disarmed David, corkscrewing the gun out of his hand.

“Jesus, Mack!”

“Doc, please forgive me, but you have no idea how to use that, so let me do this.” He said to Katie, “I’m gonna explain something to you. You need to do what I say. You need to help us and save your anger for later. When this is all over, beat the shit out of him, cut him, whatever you want. But *not now*.”

“He made a promise he didn’t keep!”

David tried to reach her.

“It was just a night between us, Katie. A night together and it was lovely, but it wasn’t love, and I think you know that.”

Mack thought she might just leap on David and rip his throat out with her teeth.

“Katie,” he said, “if you don’t comply, I will kill you. I’m sorry, but you have no choice.”

She nodded. In the distance, there was a faint *pop*, followed immediately by the sound of many high-velocity machine guns.

“Do you know how to shoot at all, Caroline?”

She shook her head. He didn’t need to ask David. The way he’d handled the pistol so far told him all he needed to know.

“I know how to shoot very well,” Katie said.

He gave her the pistol and produced his own.

David said, “Is that wise?”

“She’s what we have, Doc.”

“But she’ll—she’s liable to—”

Now came the chugging of a more primitive machine gun, but it was louder. There were screams, followed by a general outburst of firing.

“We need all the firepower we can get, David.” Then, to Katie, “Don’t even think about revenge right now.” He thrust his gun into the small of her back. “Don’t try me on.”

“I’ll be okay,” Katie said. “I’ll swallow it for now . . . what he did to me.”

Mack gestured with his own pistol. “Let’s get moving.”

David hesitated, started to talk—and Mack shoved him, but gently.

“Let me protect you,” he said. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Security!” David shouted.

“They’re busy, David. And we have to save this thing right now.”

“Let’s get it upstairs,” David said, which was not what Mack wanted to hear. He had to play this very, very carefully. They didn’t trust him, and that must not be forgotten for a moment.

“David, what if security fails?” he asked.

“They won’t fail! Glen will keep us safe.”

“IF, David!”

“He’s right, David,” Caroline said. “We can’t risk the portal.”

“We need to get it away from the clinic,” Mack said, allowing his very real sense of urgency to enter his voice.

“But—it has to be here. It has to be where the people are!”

“When it’s safe, we’ll bring it back.”

“But the class—you’re saying the class could be killed. That must not happen!”

“David, all we can protect is the portal. We just have to hope for the best.”

“Look, you know about firefights and such, I’m sure. Help me make my decision. Tell me what you think is happening out there?”

At last, a little trust. Mack moved to exploit it.

“Doc, I hate to tell you this, but it sounds to me like whoever’s out there is moving closer to the house, which means that your security men are being defeated. The whole town is probably out there, and they are going to rip this place to shreds, and if you want to live and you want that portal to stay intact, you need to come with me right now.”

“David, he’s right,” Caroline said.

“Cover us,” Mack told Katie, “then follow us out the back.” He had the portal. He had its designers. This operation was finally polishing up very nicely. The general was going to be pleased.

He gave David a reassuring pat on his shoulder. “Let’s roll, Doc.”

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THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ACTON CLINIC

Just as Mack was ready to move them out, the gunfire rose to a chilling thunder. People began running downstairs, calling to David for leadership.

David went to the nearest one, Susan Denman.

“Get the class back upstairs.” He looked past her to Aaron Stein and the others. “We’re taking the portal to safety. We’ll be back as soon as possible.”

His words were swallowed by the cascading shatter of glass as rifle butts were used to smash the windows.

The sound caused the whole crowd to turn around and then to erupt into panic as men—strangers, not security personnel—began coming in through the debris. People ran everywhere, overturning tables and chairs, dashing for the doors, for the stairs.

“We need to move,” Mack urged.

Bill Osterman appeared, greasy and exhausted, from the machinery room. “I’m the plant supervisor,” he shouted to the armed men, women, and children. “I know what you want! I can show you everything.”

A man walked up to him, raised a pistol, and fired it into his face. He rocketed back across the room, a flailing shadow in the blue-pink flash.

“Drop to the floor,” Mack said to David and Caroline. “Katie, get that damn thing off the easel and bring it with us.”

Katie looked at it. “Is it . . . liftable?”

“Just do it!”

More shots filled the room and people slammed against walls, flying into pieces as they did so. Modern high-velocity expanding rounds don’t just injure people, they tear bodies apart.

Patients and staff scattered, running for the doors on both ends of the room. Mack noticed that the class—so very disciplined—had followed David’s instructions and returned in a group to the temporary safety of the upper floor.

“Go out the back,” he told Caroline and David. “It’s our only chance!”

He had them now, he sure as hell did.

But David hesitated, so Mack gave him a slap to the side of the head—not hard, but hard enough to startle him.

“Sorry, Doc, but get moving! Right now!”

They scrambled toward the back doors.

Once they were outside, Mack told them, “We need to find a vehicle that works, otherwise we die here, now.”

“We can’t leave. We can’t abandon the mission!”

“David, I’m on your side, so you listen to me. If you die, you abandon your mission. If you live, you still have a chance to come back here when it’s safe and complete it. *So do this!*”

That seemed to reach him, and he began to follow Mack, and Caroline followed him. In the rear, Katie did a sort of guard action, not that Mack thought for a moment that she would be particularly effective.

Out in the grounds, dawn was just breaking across a running firefight between the security guards in their camouflage and the townspeople. The locals had some decent weapons now, too, not just deer rifles and shotguns. He heard the rasping whisper of an Uzi and saw one of the security guys turn to red haze.

“There’s a lot of ordnance flying around,” Mack said, “heads down.”

Behind them, glass shattered upstairs and the body of Claire Michaels hit the ground, bounced once in a bed of blooming flowers, and was still.

“Claire!” David howled, rushing to her.

Mack grabbed him. “She’s past help, but you’re not. If I have to knock you cold and drag you, I’m saving you, Doc. You gotta understand that.”

Ahead, the parking lot was jammed with derelict security vehicles, their electronics long since killed.

“We can’t escape,” Caroline said. “It’s impossible.”

“We have to,” Mack replied, “because if we stay here, we are dead. No question. We get the hell out, lives are saved, and your thing that is so important to you—that is saved.”

There was a voice raised, echoing across the broad lawn they were crossing, and then another, this one excited. Shots rang out—pistol, .22-caliber.

“Stop,” the first man shouted. The other, right behind him, cried excitedly, “What is that? What’ve you got?”

Mack aimed, braced on his elbow, and squeezed off two rounds, dropping both men. Immediately, more townspeople came out of the house. They were cursing with rage, and letting loose a fusillade of bullets in their direction. No discipline but too many bullets to risk crossing the field of fire.

No choice now, they had to head for the garage.

“Move it! Fast!”

David and Caroline carried the portal.

Then Mack saw two more men coming from around the front of the house. They were not in a hurry. One of them raised a Benelli Riot Gun and blew away a security guard.

“Those two are trained,” Mack said. “They know how to kill and we need to be out of their line of fire right now.”

Moving among the disabled vehicles in the new parking lot, Mack led them toward the old garage. He knew this place as well as he knew every other corner of the Acton estate, and he knew that there were older vehicles in here, vehicles without sensitive electronics.

The garage was brick, built in the same grand style as the house, an incongruous place to store dusty trucks. The side door, as he knew, wasn't locked.

Taking no chances, he sent Katie in first. When nobody blew her head off, he followed with Caroline and David. Inside, the cars and trucks loomed, a silent row of angles and shadowy bulk. There were a couple of pickups, a Buick Roadmaster, a black Cadillac from half a century ago, a Chrysler convertible from even earlier, and a mid-seventies Pontiac.

Mack had previously identified the pickups with their simple mechanicals and magnetos as good bets. On his way back in from his visit to the town, he'd fueled one of them up and made sure its battery worked. He led them to it and opened the door.

“They went in there,” a voice said from outside. Then the other: “They showin' any iron?” Then silence.

Mack whispered, “We have one chance. We start this and we blast out through the garage door. That's our chance.”

David said, “We can't leave, the gate's closed.”

“The power failed. Therefore, it opened automatically. That's the way it works.” Mack replied.

“You certainly know a lot about this place,” Caroline said.

“I know everything about this place.” As he spoke, he watched David carefully. He had detected something there beyond the general level of mistrust of Mack Graham. Did David know anything more? Suspect it? Mack was watching.

“They came in this way,” a male voice said.

Mack saw a shape appear at the door, so he got David and Caroline into the truck. There was room behind the seat for the portal.

“What about me?” Katie asked.

“Ride in the bed,” Mack said.

“I will not.”

He took Katie by the collar of her blouse and lifted her off the ground.

“You will. And you will provide covering fire or they will shoot our tires out, because these two know what they’re doing. Do you understand me?”

The two shooters had opened the garage door and were moving carefully closer. Good soldiers don’t hurry unless that’s the only choice.

“Okay, folks,” one of the men said. “We saw you come in here and we got the door covered. We want to see what you’re carrying.”

With an enormous rattling cough, the old truck’s engine came to life. Mack jammed the gas to the floor and it shot forward, slamming into the garage door.

One of the men raised his rifle and fired across the line of vehicles, but the bullet hit a dust-covered Oldsmobile and went wild.

Mack backed up until the truck hit the back wall, then ground the gears into first.

“Is it fragile?” he shouted.

“Of course it’s fragile!” Caroline responded.

On Mack’s second try, the truck crashed through the door and out into the driveway.

Mack turned out into the grounds, avoiding the choke of vehicles in the drive and—he hoped—most of the marauders.

He drove down the driveway and through the gate into the outside world.

A view opened to the flaring dawn in the east, as to the north and west, the supernova set in purple haze. Mack headed toward Raleigh, from which he could see smoke rising. Was the convoy already there and raising a little hell? Fine, he’d deliver the portal, and with it Caroline and David. Let Wylie join him in tearing the information out of them, he was good at it. And Katie, too.

She was going to enjoy sweet revenge.

DAVID FORD'S JOURNAL: EIGHT

I am writing this in my notebook as we drive toward Raleigh. There is little time, and I believe that this will be my last entry. After this, anything can happen. Herbert Acton offers no instructions for this period of extreme chaos.

In my last entry, I spoke briefly of the plan that I see, and with the appearance of the new star, its outlines are extremely clear. Also, it is already in our hands, in detail. The plan was expressed to a man half-mad with God, in a cave on the island of Patmos. The Book of Revelation was written in the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero, about a year before the great fire that consumed Rome.

In all probability, the Romans were right to blame the Christians. On one level, John's book is a coded message about the destruction of what was then the great Babylon of the world, the center of sin and oppression, Rome.

On a deeper level, though, Revelation is a document of the lost science, which describes very precisely what will unfold as time ends.

We are most assuredly being judged. Those who will not go forward are tainted with the mark of the beast; the elect are ascending. And the dead have indeed risen, in the sense that, statistically, there is a living body here on earth—or was, before this happened—for every single person who has ever lived in history. Reincarnation is real, and, as this disaster began, all human souls were in the physical state.

And now we see the final sign: “And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads.”

Seven is the number of completion. A dragon may be a comet or star. In this case, it's the lowering monster that is bringing the destruction of the world.

I have written of the elect and the condemned. Now, I turn to the matter of

us, those who are going in neither direction.

I will not write down what is to happen to us, for two reasons. First, nothing is certain. Second, in doing so I would, perhaps fatally, betray a great secret.

I do not believe that the man driving this vehicle has our best interests in mind. I believe he means to harm us.

I sit here, writing and waiting. It is my belief that Caroline and I and the portal—all three of us—have fallen into the hands of the enemy.

21

REBELS

The farther they got from the clinic, the more disturbed Caroline became about the fate of the rest of the class. They were the core of the future, each one of them trained to carry out a fundamental task of governance. If all went well, there would be millions coming, and they would be urgently needed, every one of them.

Mack had been right, though. They could not stay where they were, and hiding the portal on the property—attempting to—was just too dangerous.

She just hoped that some of those carefully chosen people would be left. As David closed his little book and clutched her hand, she sensed that his thoughts were exactly the same.

As the invaded clinic disappeared behind them, though, she had to ask herself another question: had Mack captured them or rescued them? He was a subtle, skilled man, and she feared that this might go in a bad direction. She did not know exactly what he understood about the portal. He had watched her creating it, though, and had seen it in its finished state. He could not fail to recognize what it was.

It had come out of her mind and her hands, and existed at the vanishing edge between thought and reality. As she had painted it and the gold had done its work on her mind and body, she had remembered the lessons she'd taken about it in the class. She remembered being taught to paint, remembered the special state of surrender that allowed the colors to flow, and a new reality to emerge out of the art in her hands and the science in her mind. But the most critical part of the creation of the portal, the mixing of the colors, had been done by Susan Denman. Should they need to do this again—if by some miracle there was time—Susan would be needed.

But they were all needed.

The science that enabled the creation of the portal was not like modern science. It taught that reality is not the hard, immutable, inevitable structure that appears all around us, but rather an idea that only seems impossible to

change. Brute force—the lumberman’s axe, the builder’s tractor—appears to be the only way, but it is not the only way. When science and art come into harmony, miracles become ordinary.

No miracles in the here and now, though. She sat jammed in beside David, with Mack driving and Katrina Starnes crouching in the truck bed.

She looked over at Mack, trying to see in his face some hint of his intentions. His eyes were as dark and dangerous as gun barrels.

“Where are we going?”

He didn’t answer.

As they passed through the outskirts of Raleigh, the emptiness told her that the citizens who weren’t attacking the clinic had probably left or been killed.

Here and there, untended wrecks lay abandoned in the road, and bodies in them and beside them. By the time they had reached the courthouse square at the center of the town, she had counted forty of them, most of them apparently the victims of gunshots.

They went around the courthouse square, turning, then turning again, until they were on the opposite side and once again facing out of town.

Finally, Mack stopped the truck with a scream of dry, old brakes. The three of them stared out the windshield, stunned silent by what they saw. From the bed behind them, Katie stifled a scream.

On the lampposts along the street, stretching at least a quarter of a mile to the entrance to the interstate, there were bodies hanging. Closest, a man dangled with his pants around his ankles. On the next lamppost, a state policeman in uniform hung slumped and still, his wide-brimmed trooper’s hat on the ground beneath him. On the next one was a woman wrapped in so much duct tape that she looked like a cocoon.

There were easily two dozen of them, stretching off into the distance.

But they were not the reason that Mack had stopped. She saw that he was indifferent to these bodies. Who knew why they had been hanged or who had done it? Perhaps they were a sacrifice to the old gods, or perhaps they’d violated some sort of jerkwater martial law that the locals had declared. Maybe they had refused to participate in the attack on the clinic.

In any case, it was all pointless. That final sign had sealed the matter, had it not?

Mack had stopped because of a great horde of people coming toward them, people filling the street and the sidewalk on both sides, inching toward them

on their knees, their faces twisted with agony. They were singing tattered hymns. She heard snatches of “Amazing Grace,” “How Great Thou Art,” “What a Friend We Have In Jesus.”

Running up and down among them were frantic children, their shrill voices adding an anarchic note of panic to the howled songs. The people closest were sliding slowly, their knees shredded to the exposed bone.

She thought, then, that the people who had been hanged were probably human sacrifices, and, since that had not worked, they were now torturing themselves to death in an effort to induce God—or maybe the old gods—to save them.

This was the fundamental error of history being acted out in these desperate streets. The gods to whom they offered sacrifice did not exist and never had existed, and cosmic disaster was not the fault of man and never would be. Earth’s history was not about gods at all, but rather a very large-scale scientific program that was aimed at creating a harvest of souls. Who the designers were, Caroline did not know, but she believed in their work with all her being, for vast numbers of the good were being freed every day, every hour, and taking the human experience up into a higher level of reality.

The end of the world wasn’t a disaster at all. It was a huge, resounding, amazing success.

Mack sat staring at the crowd. His profile was granite. He had taken on the stillness of determination, and Caroline knew that he was about to drive right through them.

She said, “Mack, don’t.”

There were hundreds of them, it seemed, maybe thousands, filling the street, the sidewalk, and the side streets feeding into this one.

“This is human behavior we do not understand,” David said. “This is beyond what is known about stress response.”

Mack gunned the motor, and Caroline writhed in her seat.

But David, who was closest to the door, jumped out.

“You can’t do this,” he said.

The leading edge of the penitents or whatever they were had now reached the truck’s front bumper.

David faced them. “Wake up, wake up, all of you!”

He went to one of them, a man with the bones of his knees visible as he dragged himself along. He leaned into the man’s face, calling on him to stop.

Robotically, he continued on.

Mack said to Caroline, “Stay here.” He also got out of the truck. “We have to keep moving, David, we can’t stay here!” Then Katrina came up to them. Her—or rather, David’s—gun was at the ready.

Caroline had had enough. Why would Mack, if he had good intentions, ever give a gun to somebody as obviously murderous as Katie? And why go so far from the clinic, and why even enter the town? No, this was all wrong, all of it.

The crowd had surrounded the truck, men, women, and children moving past them with the indifference of a flooding river. Mack was in front, struggling to push people aside.

Katie saw that he was having trouble and fired into the air.

He turned. “Help me,” he shouted.

She went toward him, firing a second time, this time into the face of a woman, who pitched back amid her screaming children.

Caroline saw their chance. “This isn’t right,” she said to David.

“I know it.”

They got out of the truck. David reached in for the portal.

“Stop!”

Mack was blasting through the crowd toward them.

“David, run!”

“The portal!”

“*Run!*”

She turned toward a nearby alley, and David followed her.

Mack had gotten in the truck and was gunning the motor, Katie hanging on the running board of the old vehicle. Honking the horn, they drove through the crowd, the engine snarling as the truck bounded and crunched over people.

David and Caroline ran hard down a side street, but the truck was faster and it was on them in moments, and suddenly it was beside them and Katie was pointing her gun straight at David’s head. He angled away, heading into the alley.

At that point, Mack hit the brakes, Katie jumped off the running board of the old vehicle, and Mack got out, caught up to David in a few strides, then dragged him farther back into the alley.

“Come on,” Katie said to Caroline, motioning with the gun.

“Katie, I understand your anger. I’d feel the same way. But you have to accept the fact that David and I go back—”

As David struggled with Mack, Katie slapped Caroline so hard that she reeled and fell to the sidewalk—which also brought David to a stop.

Mack kicked in one of the doors that opened onto the alley.

“Bring her,” he said to Katie as he dragged David inside what turned out to be a restaurant kitchen. “Lotta useful stuff in here,” he explained to Katie.

When he had his gun on both David and Caroline, he told Katie, “Go out and get the portal. I want it in my sight at all times.”

Caroline and David both understood immediately what was about to happen here, and exactly why Mack had chosen a place full of the tools you find in a kitchen.

“Mack,” David said, “we can’t help you. The time for that is over.”

“What in *hell* kind of bullshit is that?”

“If you have a black spot on your body, Mack, you’ve been judged and you can’t go through. The portal is part of a science we know only in legend. It’s not a science of inanimate matter, but of the soul—and so it’s alive, in a sense, and it won’t allow you through unless you are chosen.”

“I am damned well chosen! I am one of *the* chosen!”

At that moment, Katie returned with the portal.

“A Humvee with soldiers just pulled up out there,” she said. Then, as she leaned it against the wall, she added, “My God, Mack, look at this.”

As she held the portal up and moved it, the image within it also moved. Trees appeared, then, as she continued to move it, they slipped away into a riverbank dotted with flowers and thick grass.

“It’s a window,” she said in wonder.

“I know what it is,” Mack snapped. “I promised you your revenge and now’s the time. We need to find out how they made this and how in hell to get through it.”

She was completely entranced with the portal.

“It’s soft,” she said. Pressing a little, she pushed her fingers through.

“Jesus,” Mack said, “Jesus, can you go farther?”

She pressed until her whole hand was inside.

“I can feel it! Oh, it’s sort of cool but I can feel the sun on my hand.”

Mack was right beside her now.

“That grass,” he said, “can you reach down and—”

Katie crouched, taking the portal with her.

“Sure—oh, I can feel it. It’s grass. Oh—God—” Smoke, fast and thick, began coming out from under her T-shirt.

She snatched her hand back, and blood came gushing out of the neatly sliced stump of her wrist. Flailing, she screamed, then flames shot out around her midriff, melting the shirt and causing her to twist and turn in agony, then to run to the far end of the long kitchen and smash into the wall.

All the while, Mack watched with the coldest eyes Caroline had ever seen. He did not try to help Katie at all, but kept his gun trained on the two of them.

Katie struggled in her death agonies, her pealing screams dropping to choked gargles as the room filled with a sickening stench of charred flesh and the overwhelming stink of burned hair.

The portal lay flat. Pressed into the grass on the other side of its surface was Katie’s hand and most of her forearm.

“What in hell happened to her?” Mack snarled.

“She was marked,” David said quietly.

Mack thrust the gun into his stomach.

“What is this about these marks?”

“You get them from the life you’ve lived. A life beyond redemption, and you—”

Mack slammed him with the pistol and sent him sprawling and spitting.

“All right, shut up with that bullshit! You listen to me, both of you, and listen close, or you will die slower and harder than you can imagine. That Humvee out there is a recce unit. Behind it is a strike force. They know what you have and these are your choices. Either tell us how to work this thing right now, or we will torture the life out of you until you do, then go to the clinic and waste whoever there is left to waste. Choose, children. Now.”

“Mack, listen to me,” Caroline said, putting all the urgency she could into her voice. “We can all go together. We can be friends. Partners!”

With a speed so sudden that it was in itself terrifying, Mack lunged at her and slammed her against the wall so hard she slumped, momentarily stunned. He shook her back to consciousness.

“I tried it before and it hurt so much I couldn’t do it. Then this woman—Goddamn! But this fucker works and there’s a secret to it, and you *will* tell me that secret.”

She remained silent. What else could she do? If he couldn't get through, it was because he was judged.

"Okay, Doc David, then you tell me how it works."

He had something in his free hand that was not a gun, then she heard her clothes ripping and felt coldness and tightness against her skin. It was a point, she knew, and a little more pressure and it would penetrate.

"I swear to you, I will take every inch of skin off her, every *fucking inch*, unless you tell me the truth."

"There's nothing to tell," David said. "It's a sort of filter, it only lets certain people through."

"Then you're gonna change it."

"We can't."

The knife began sliding along her skin. She forced her pain to remain silent.

"You will hold her skin in your hands and she will still be alive, David. She will be in agony unlike any either of you have ever known. The only way you will be able to stop her pain will be to kill her with your own hands!"

"David—"

David turned on her. "Shut up!" Then, back to Mack. "Mack, we can change it. For you. You can go through."

"Where? Where is that place? It sure as hell isn't anywhere on this Earth."

"It is, Mack. It's on this Earth."

"Where?"

"Mack, it's right here. It's where we're standing right now. It's what the Earth will become after . . . after what's going to happen."

"And what would that be?"

"The end of this cycle."

"And the Earth is totally destroyed?"

"The cycle is over. Those of us who enter the new Earth start the new cycle there."

Caroline felt the pressure of the knife lessen.

"And who decides?"

"We decide," David said. "We can change the portal for you."

He lifted it from the floor. Caroline wasn't sure what he was doing, and remained silent. But one thing she did know. He could not change the portal in such a way that it would let someone with the mark through, because that

mark identified them as being below the human level, lacking higher morality, compassion, and judgment. This is why it was called the mark of the beast. It meant, simply, that your life had left you more animal than human.

From outside, there came the snarling of big vehicles, then the squealing of brakes, followed by voices.

“That’s the general,” Mack said. “He’s seen the truck.”

“He knows about your truck? How?”

“We have communications. Just enough.”

David looked doubtful. “May I ask—”

“Just fix the damn portal. Do it now!”

Caroline realized that Mack did not know how General Wylie had found them. A lucky guess, perhaps.

David picked up the portal. “Caroline, we have to do this.”

There wasn’t a thing she could do to change it. All she could think was that he was buying time, so she took it from him. Up close like this, it was indistinguishable from a window. It was marvelous, just the most extraordinary thing she’d ever seen. But what would she do to make Mack think she’d changed it?

“It has to be tuned to the people who’re going to use it,” David said. “It works like a fingerprint reader. Let us—Caroline, print Mack to it.”

Dear God, he was going to trick Mack into doing the same thing that Katie had done.

She had no choice but to go along. “Give me your hand, Mack,” she said. Touching his damp skin was horrible. There was a sense of the corpse about it, not like the skin of a living person.

The judged were still moving and breathing, but they were already outside of life, in a state where no further change could take place. They just didn’t know it yet.

She positioned her hand in his, so that her palm faced the portal and his hand enclosed hers. She had no idea what she was doing, she was just trying to make something up that he would believe.

“This is doing what?”

“Imprinting you,” she said. “Then you can go through.”

“What about my people?”

David said, “You imprint them. Do it the same way.”

“Do you feel anything yet, Mack?”

“Yeah, actually, the same thing I felt before. Warmth.”

“You tried this before?”

“It nearly burned me like it did her. Jesus!”

Caroline drew his hand away. “Okay, you’re imprinted.”

He addressed himself to David. “There’s a general out there. I am going to imprint some of his men and send them through your portal. If all goes well, we will take it and put it to good use. But if not, you are going to experience hell firsthand, both of you, until we are told the truth about how to make it work.”

“I don’t know what else to tell you,” David said. “You just imprint and step through. That’s all.”

“You are a poor liar, David.”

Outside, the snarling of the big vehicles was joined by a ferocious thunder of weapons.

“Those praying crazies,” Mack said pleasantly. “He’ll kill ’em all just to tidy the place up.”

He picked up the portal and went to the door. He opened it. “I need a guard in here right now.”

“Mack,” came a gruff voice. “How the hell are you?”

The door closed.

“Come on,” David said softly.

As David led her toward the front of the restaurant, the kitchen door was opening again.

They went through into the wrecked dining room, with sunlight glaring in through the shattered windows, tables smashed, chairs upended, and a great splash of blood across one wall.

Behind them, they heard a curse. The young soldier sent to guard them had discovered that the room was empty.

“Quick!”

She followed David into the street. The door by which they’d entered the restaurant opened onto the alley beside it, but this one faced directly into the street where the convoy was parked. Closest was an enormous machine with a slanted front. It was bigger than a truck, emblazoned with three stars, flying a general’s flag, and painted with a lurid image of skeletal Cimil, the Mayan god of the underworld. Atop the vehicle was a remote-controlled .50-caliber

machine gun—which immediately moved toward David and Caroline.

“Down!”

But then it whirled, its motors screaming, spinning upward toward a huge silver object that was just appearing overhead.

Caroline felt washed by the sacredness that these silver objects seemed to carry with them like a sort of force field. The urge, when they were near, was to drop to your knees.

The heavily armed soldiers looked extremely uneasy, clutching their weapons, looking up. Around the convoy, in piles, sprawled, twisted, and bloody, were hundreds of bodies, the remains of the people who had been on their knees. Piled among the dead adults were their dead children.

There was a huge sound, a hissing thud, and light shone down from the silver device, flooding the convoy in powder white. A moment later, one of the soldiers cried out, leaped from his vehicle, and throwing off his helmet, began rising.

“Stop that man,” General Wylie shouted. “Shoot him!”

The machine gun fired, bullets streaming toward the rising soldier . . . and then sparks appeared in the light around him, a pattern that grew as the gun continued to fire.

“The bullets are stopping,” Caroline said. She gripped David’s hand as they both watched, awed by the magnificent and flawless display of technological power they were seeing.

Then the convoy command vehicle’s hatch flew open and three young soldiers piled out, also throwing aside their helmets and leaping, then rising into the light. General Wylie emptied his pistol at them, but with the same lack of effect that the machine gunner had experienced.

“Launch grenades,” the general roared, and another soldier pulled a bulky-looking item out of one of the vehicles, loaded it with a large projectile, and fired it upward.

With a clap of thunder and a burst of flame, it shot into the light and exploded—or started to. The projectile cracked apart in slow motion, the burning gasses and shrapnel oozing into a mushroom shape and stopping, the explosion frozen like a flower dotted with bits of steel. As if it was as light as the air itself, the frozen explosion drifted away on the breeze.

As this was happening, there came from the bodies all around the convoy a stirring and a groaning, and, at the same time, from the great machine above

waves of what could only be described as directed emotion—waves of love, in fact, that made David and Caroline draw closer together, and made them both wish the same wish, that they, also, could join the mysteries unfolding above. Except . . . they didn't, actually. They were workers and needed elsewhere, and—if they could only reach it—an important task was waiting for them.

The heaps of dead began coming to their feet, their wounds disappearing, life returning to their bodies. For an instant, David found himself looking directly into the eyes of one of them, and in the instant that he was connected to this man, David relived his whole life, not in linear memory, but as a compressed, stunningly poignant, and fragile instant of pure emotion, and it was good, so good that it hurt and he sobbed aloud, unable to contain his emotion.

Beside him Caroline also sobbed, and the dead began to rise into what at first seemed to be a great, round opening in the bottom of the craft. But as his eyes followed them, he saw that this was not an opening in the ship, but in the universe itself, for its velvet, living darkness was spread with a spectacle of stars.

Around them, more and more of the slaughtered rose upward, disappearing into the star garden at the heart of the machine.

He saw, at the very top of this perfect sky, the constellation of the Pleiades, the Sailing Ones, so clear that the vivid colors of the stars was clearly visible, the magenta of Pleione and the faint red of its blazing hydrogen ring, the white of Alcyone, and the iridescent blue of Electra.

As he watched, the people ascended in increasing numbers, rising one after another, and he saw them go sailing upward, and transform as they did into bright points of light.

Then the last of them were swept up into the fountain of stars. As suddenly as it had opened, the gateway in the sky closed. He was left watching the leaping death of the auroras' return, and he bowed his head and fell to the ground crouching, and covered his face, so great was the pain of losing touch with that beauty.

“And so the dead rise,” he said, “and now to follow there will be great earthquakes.”

Caroline, weeping also, clutched at him, and their love—so essential to maintaining one's humanity in dark times—enabled them to help each other,

and give one another the strength they needed to go on.

But the convoy remained in chaos, with men screaming and leaping on the vehicles, trying to somehow jump into the sky, tearing at one another, bellowing and cursing and fighting to get to a door that was already closed.

Mack and General Wylie strode among them, their pistols in their hands. When a soldier clambered onto a vehicle, Mack or the general would shoot him and he would lurch off, hitting the ground with a thud.

Taking advantage of the confusion, David pulled Caroline into a shattered drugstore, and they were going through to the rear when they both saw it at the same time—a flash of green in the street outside.

Two soldiers had come into view. Between them they held the portal, which now contained an image of a sweep of meadow that ended on a riverbank. Beyond this stretched an enormous view that faded into blue hills.

Corralled at gunpoint by Mack and the general, soldiers shuffled toward the portal. They were eager at first, looking at it in wonder.

Mack held the first man's hand against it until he snatched it away, pulling at his tunic.

When the man hesitated, the general lifted his gun as casually as he might a spoonful of soup, and sent a bullet through his head.

"This fucker works, at least," he said as the young soldier dropped.

The next soldier stepped right into the portal.

Caroline gripped David's arm. On the neck of the man going through, they could see a telltale shadow.

Then this man also hesitated. His body jerked and he seemed to stop, his front half in the portal. Mack kicked him in the small of the back, shoving him forward.

For a moment, he seemed to go deeper.

"Jesus, it's working," Mack exclaimed. "We have got it, General!"

They were congratulating one another when the soldier, still only halfway through the portal, burst into flames. His writhing became frantic, his head jerking from side to side, his midriff lurching and squirming, and suddenly the man was out, falling back, hitting the ground as he was consumed, screaming in agony as the fire engulfed him.

In the air there was the same horrifying odor of cooked flesh and hair that had filled the kitchen when Katrina had burned.

General Wylie glared at Mack. David could see the veins standing out on

his neck.

“You stupid asshole! Fuck you! Fuck you!”

Mack stood at attention, taking it.

“Get those freaks,” Wylie muttered. “I want them front and center.”

“Get them,” Mack snapped.

Soldiers looked at each other.

Mack pointed directly at the store—at them, at the precise spot they had imagined that they were hiding.

“DO IT NOW!” he roared.

Caroline and David ran for their lives.

The portal remained where they had left it.

22

DEATH BEYOND THE END OF TIME

For a moment, their pursuers lost sight of them in the alley and David understood very clearly that these seconds were their last and only chance—whereupon they came up against a chain-link fence.

“David!”

He grabbed it and shook it with frustration—and then saw that it was loose along the bottom. “This way,” he said, lifting it, ignoring what the jagged metal was doing to his hands.

She went through and he followed, pulling it back into place behind him.

They found themselves in a yard with a greenhouse, with their pursuers close behind.

Almost certainly, it was going to be a trap, but their only hope of not being seen was to duck into the structure.

They found themselves in a steamy and exotic world of vivid yellow and blue and red orchids. They went deep among the vines and crouched there, hiding, barely breathing.

They did not hear Mack the Cat approaching, and David was almost ready to move to a broken window he had noticed when he suddenly realized that this master stalker was three feet away from them. From here, he could just see the side of Mack’s head, and his nostrils were dilating as he smelled the air, trying to catch a scent of his prey.

The humid air was heavy, though, and the way he moved his eyes, flicking them from place to place with the suddenness of the expert predator, David knew that he could not smell any faint perfume or sweat that would betray their presence.

He turned, and now he was so close that David could have reached out through the vines and touched the gun in his hand.

Absolute stillness. Absolute quiet. Except . . . what was that rustling? A glance at Caroline revealed that she was flushed with effort, both hands clapped over her face. Something in here had triggered an allergy and she

was fighting a sneeze.

Mack sighed, then looked toward the door. He started out and David's whole body shuddered with hope—but then he stopped. Slowly, the long, predatory face turned his way. He seemed to be looking directly into David's eyes. But no, then he turned away again. When he moved, it was like watching a dancer, swift and lethal . . . but, in this case, making an error.

A moment later, low voices came from the front of the greenhouse. There was a curse, sharp, urgent, then the clatter of the door.

Caroline started to rise, but David gripped her arm and she froze. And saw what he saw—Mack, still right there, listening, sniffing the air, his eyes darting. And so he remained for long minutes, so still that he was almost impossible to see through the vines. And then there would be another dance step to another part of the greenhouse, and another long silence while he tested the space for presence.

Eventually, though, he was gone. They never saw him slip away, but his absence was signaled in a way that felt surprisingly like love: a cricket began chirping, and soon the greenhouse was splendid with their song.

Warily, David slipped out of the deep tangle and lifted his head above the edge of a broken window. His view was across a short lawn to a bobbing flower bed full of impatiens and petunias, and beyond it a cottage, and that, he thought, was where Mack might yet lurk.

Overhead, a meteor appeared, falling gracefully through the pink plasma that dominated the sky. The new star had set, and to the east, down low where the sky should be glowing pink with the blush of predawn, there lay instead a line of deep bloodred. David estimated that they would have about an hour of semidarkness before the sun rose once again.

It was during this brief night that he intended to make his move. His plan was to return to the Acton Clinic, hoping that the class would still be there, or enough of the class to still carry out some part of their mission.

Soft voices came to his attention. He looked up and down the lawn. Then he saw them, three men. One was dressed in ill-fitting military fatigues, the other two in sweatsuits. None of them were Mack, and that worried him. Their young faces were tight and their eyes were hunter-quick as they came into the yard. One of them went up to the back door of the house and tried it. He drew it open and looked back at his friends.

An instant later, he exploded—not as if he'd been blown up with a bomb,

but as if he was literally ripping apart as he lurched backward. His head shot up and hit the doorjamb with a thick crunch, then came rolling through the air, hit in the petunias, and didn't bounce. The face, expressionless, stared. Even as this was happening, a flash of black and steel appeared under the right arm, which flew up as if in surprise, then tumbled out into the grass. Slowly, the fingers closed.

The body buckled, and as it did, he could see a shadowy form just inside the house, wielding an axe.

Not Mack, though, not that humped figure.

Whoever was in there was long past rescue, hiding in psychotic rage and despair, in the state of savagery that would be emerging now in all the judged.

The survivors poured gunfire into the house, creating a cataract of noise and a fury of flashes.

David grabbed Caroline's arm. "Come on," he said

Together, they leaped through the glass wall of the greenhouse. As they dashed down the driveway, passing the two survivors just ten feet away, one of them shouted and wheeled his gun toward them, and David saw a red laser telltale bouncing on Caroline's back, and the bullets passed so close they felt surges of air.

But then there was another cry, this one choked with horror, then dropping to wet gabble as one of the two remaining men looked down at the axe handle protruding from his stomach. Somehow, the defender of the house had survived their fusillade and once again used his ferocious weapon.

The last of the soldiers ran so frantically that he lost control of himself and fell in the driveway. Screaming again and again, he went off down the street, his cries echoing away into the distance.

"Let's move," David said. There had been too much shooting here not to attract more of the soldiers.

"Not so fast."

Whirling, David saw Mack standing in the middle of the street.

"Quick," he said, and leaped a low rock wall, Caroline close behind.

They ran into a thin woods behind the house. David had no idea where they were or where they might be going, just that they had to get out of here.

He could hear Mack moving fast to close the distance.

Then the woods ended. They came out on a two-lane highway, one that he

recognized immediately. It was Maryland 1440, the road that passed the small private airfield that the clinic had used.

It was suicide to stay exposed like this, so they went to the far shoulder—and saw here a field just sprouting young shoots of some sort, the life of the past still unfolding. Beyond it, perhaps half a mile away, was the roofline of a condo complex—shelter, certainly, but they could not survive an attempt to cross that field.

For a few moments, David ran down the middle of the road, looking for something that would afford them more shelter than the field. All he found was a concrete bus stop plastered with Celebrex and McDonald's ads. He drew Caroline to it and crouched beside her, shielding her with his body.

Not hurrying now—not needing to—Mack came toward them. As he walked, he moved first into the center of the highway, then angled to the far side. As David and Caroline tried to keep the bulk of the shelter in front of them, Mack tried to widen the angle.

“We can make a deal,” he said. “I bring the portal and you take me through. That's all I need now. Forget the rest of them.”

Behind Mack, David saw an unlikely sight—headlights. A vehicle was coming. Mack kept moving closer to the two of them. Either he didn't see it or he didn't care. David watched, trying to see what it was, waiting for it to overtake Mack.

What the hell was that thing? It was big, not a car or an SUV, or even a military vehicle, which had been David's initial fear. A big truck, perhaps. No, he saw more lights. A marquee. But—holy God, it was a Greyhound bus. A *bus*?

Mack stepped easily aside as it passed him, but David ran out into the middle of the road, waving his arms frantically. Caroline joined him.

On the marquee, David saw the word “Baltimore.” Inside, there was a driver, there were passengers, and it all looked astonishingly, impossibly normal.

Now the bus was a hundred feet from them. Fifty feet. They could see the face of the driver. Behind it, David was aware that Mack had started running.

The loud *phew* of its air brakes sounded. The driver leaned forward over his steering wheel. *Phew. PHEW.*

It stood there, engine rattling. With a quiet hiss and a click, the door opened. He went around it—and saw Mack not fifty feet away, coming up

beside the back of the bus. A huge knife brought from the kitchen left his hand like a lightning bolt.

As David and Caroline threw themselves onto the steps, it slammed into the door, embedding itself in the vinyl and insulation. They scrambled into the cabin, David shouting, "Close the door!"

The driver didn't need to be told.

Outside, Mack commenced hammering on it with a fury unbound, the sound of his assault filling the bus, the power of it making the big vehicle shake like a leaf.

"Jesus!" the driver said.

"Get moving!"

He threw the bus into gear and pulled out onto the road. As they drew away from Mack, he emitted an inhuman roar of anger.

But now, very suddenly, David and Caroline were in a different world. Other passengers filled the seats, people with bundles, people with kids. Some seats empty, most not.

"Hey," the driver called.

"Yes. Thank you."

"How far?"

"Excuse me?"

"This is a bus, buddy. You buy a ticket. That's the way we do it."

"Oh, Baltimore. Baltimore . . ." He gave the driver a twenty and got back a dollar and change. Stuffing the money in his pocket, looking down at his receipt, he almost wanted to cry.

How had they ever kept buses running? But of course, they were old vehicles, many of them forty and fifty years old. They didn't contain the kind of electronics that would be fried. So, even this deep in death, life went on.

"Behind the white line," the driver said, "thank you."

They went down the aisle, finding seats across from an older woman, prim, her eyes keen with a light he hoped was not madness.

"May we sit here?"

"I don't own it."

When they sat, David realized just how deeply, deeply tired he was. The star having set, it was full dark now, and the windows reflected the interior of the bus. Distantly, he could see blood in the east, getting brighter. The old woman saw it, too, and began to chew her gums.

“I will not taste of the bitter water,” she said.

He knew the reference, of course, to the water ruined by the star Wormwood in Revelation.

It would happen that way, too. There would be deuterium in the debris of the supernova, and the water of the world would be absorbing it, turning it into heavy water. It wasn't in itself radioactive, but when half the water content of a larger animal's body was replaced with heavy water, the animal died. Or the man.

She said, “I am saved, hallelujah.”

The bus would pass the Acton Clinic in a few minutes, and it was there that they must get off. David squeezed Caroline's hand, then returned to the front.

“Do you know the Acton Clinic?” he asked the driver.

“Yeah, it's a couple of miles on. I pass it four times a day.”

“We want to get off there.”

The driver glanced at him. “It's been burning for hours.”

His heart heaved in his chest. He forced his voice to a calm he did not feel.

“You can make a stop, though?”

“Sure. But there ain't no refund. No refund here.”

“Fair enough.”

“You got that man's name? 'Cause he damaged this bus. I gotta write that up and the company's gonna want to go to the cops. Vandalism. They don't like it.”

“Your company?”

“Maryland Trails Bus Lines,” the driver said, ignoring the passengers. “I been drivin' their rigs for thirty years. Never got a citation, not one, not never.”

“It's still operating?”

Again, he glanced at David. “What does it look like?”

A hand grabbed David's shoulder. He turned to face a woman whose face had been made pink by too much exposure to the supernova core.

“You a doctor? My baby got fluid. You a doctor?” She held up a baby as bloated as a stuffed toy and gray with death.

Ethically, he could not deny his profession. But he'd barely touched pediatrics in medical school. He was not qualified to help.

“We thought it was God's light, we slept him in it, my husband did. My

husband was a fool.”

David did not know how to tell her that this was a sunburn of a new and terrible kind.

“I’m sorry for you,” he said.

“They nothin’ you can do?”

“That is not God’s light,” another passenger shouted. “You have laid your baby in Lucifer’s light.”

This lovely, ignorant young woman raised a long hand to her cheek, and with a gesture of surpassing grace, wiped away her tears.

“I’ll put him in the ground,” she said. “Very well. Thank you.”

She went swaying back to her seat, the other passengers looking straight ahead.

“We all told her,” a man said. “She’s got a dead baby.”

The bus’s brakes hissed and it lurched to a stop.

“Acton Clinic,” the driver intoned. “Acton!”

David and Caroline got off, stepping out into the dew of morning.

Above the sun, in the purity of the eastern sky, hung a full moon, its face the red of blood.

As he watched, he saw a brief flash on the lunar surface, then another and another.

The driver closed the door of the bus and pulled out. What would happen to it, and to the people aboard? Nothing good, that was certain.

The great iron gates of the Acton estate still stood open. At the end of the curving driveway, the building loomed, still and silent. He could see jagged edges in the line of the roof where the fire had burned through. The windows were dark.

“It’s destroyed,” Caroline said.

David did not reply. He could only think that, even if they did find the class, what would they do without the portal? He had been counting on finding the supplies here for Caroline to re-create it a third time, but that did not look possible now.

“Come on,” he said. They proceeded into the grounds, moving quickly but carefully.

As they drew closer to the house, he watched the door and the rows of broken windows for any suggestion of activity inside. They would have done well to look behind them, but they did not do that. Instead, they responded to

the deep animal instincts that drive all men in times as terrible as these, and went toward the concealment that the house offered.

Thus they did not see who had dropped off the back of the bus as they had come through its door. Mack moved swiftly to the gate, then slipped into the grounds, then to the apple tree, now naked, where he had spent his afternoons.

He watched them enter the house through the sprung front door. He went closer, listening, and heard the scuffling of their clumsy movement through the ruins inside.

When he saw that they had gone through to the patient wing and all was quiet, he slipped into the house.

23

THE RISING OF THE SOULS

Mike and Tim Pelton and Delmar Twine were in terrible trouble because their general had gone crazy, and in just a minute, it was going to be Timmy's turn to get himself burned alive in that damn mirror or whatever it was.

The three of them had been friends all of their lives, growing up on the same street in Sandusky, going to the same schools, finally joining the army together, all three intent on getting the education they could not otherwise afford. Mike and Tim were identical twins, and they had joined up on the condition that they would stay together.

But instead of the training they'd hoped to get, they'd come out the other end of boot camp as infantrymen, and spent two years in 'Stan. Then, as the U.S. withdrew from that country, they had been reassigned to General Wylie's specialist brigade, guarding some sort of supersecret underground facility deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The guard unit hadn't been allowed inside, but instead had been billeted in tents near the entrance. They'd seen the people coming, though, famous faces glimpsed as they got out of their vehicles and went through the thick steel doors into what appeared to be a luxurious interior. For weeks they'd come, the masters of the world—congressmen and senators, big-time preachers and Catholic hierarchy, TV personalities, movie stars, hundreds of them. Some of them had the black spot disease big-time, with the weird pigmentation almost covering their skin. Others, you couldn't see if they had it or not.

Mike and Tim and Del didn't have it, and they wouldn't bunk with people who did. You didn't want that, no way.

There were burned bodies all around the portal now, the remains of guys they'd worked with in the unit for the better part of a year. Behind them there was just Colonel Manders with his pistol, and at his feet the bodies of the seven men who had refused even to try.

Mike and Timmy and Del had talked about this thing. Whatever it was, it belonged to that man and woman who that CIA guy and the general had tried

to kill.

The point was, those two people were the ones who knew how to make the sucker work right and stop burning guys. Everybody in the unit knew they were from the Acton Clinic, which was another secret installation of some kind.

“Okay, look,” the general said. “You—” He pointed at Timmy. “You just make one smooth, easy movement. The problem is, guys keep trying to pull back—”

Timmy vomited.

“Shit!” The general thrust his gun into Timmy’s face. “Do it!”

Timmy gagged and raised his hands flat against the sublime view of an orchard, its trees dripping with tiny, blushing red apples.

“Do it!”

And then the next thing Mike knew, the gun was in *his* face.

“Do it,” the general shouted at Timmy, “or I blow your fuckin’ brother’s fuckin’ brains out right now!”

Timmy went to the portal. He stood before it.

“I love you,” he said without turning around. The tears in his voice broke his brother’s heart. He was gonna burn, Timmy was gonna burn, and Mike and Del, they would be next. What a shitty goddamn way to go, how stupid was this?

“Sir,” Del said frantically, “we need to take this thing up to the clinic. That’s a secret installation! They know how it works, they can tell us.”

“Move!”

There was a click. The cold of the gun barrel nestled against Mike’s neck.

Suddenly Timmy just very smoothly stepped forward and went right into the thing. He seemed to walk forward, but also to get smaller and smaller, until finally he just disappeared.

Silence. Nobody moved. “Jesus . . .” the general whispered.

Then he seemed to climb out of something, and there he stood as clear as day in the grass on the other side, facing away from them. He bent down on one knee and ran his hands through the grass. Then he stood up and raised his eyes to what looked like a summer sky, floated with soft white clouds. Mike could practically hear the birds singing.

“Timmy,” Mike shouted.

“Shut the fuck up!” The general removed the gun from Mike’s neck and

stepped closer to the portal. “Can you hear me?”

Timmy came close to the portal. Inclining his head to one side, he peered back at them. Could he see in this direction?

“Come back, Timmy,” Del shouted. “Come on back, man!”

“Stuff it, soldier!”

“Yessir. But, Sir—”

Timmy held out a hand. He flattened it against his side of the portal—and instantly pulled it away.

Then Timmy was looking past the portal, seemingly into the sky above his side of it, or maybe at the portal itself, it was hard to be certain.

His face changed, moving into a wide-eyed expression of disbelief, then amazement.

He turned and went the other way, disappearing in among the trees of the orchard.

“*TIMMY!*” Mike went toward the portal. “*TIMMY!*” But as he tried to follow his brother, the general shoved him aside.

“Get outta there,” he said.

“Where’s my brother?”

“Eating goddamn apples, looks like to me.”

“He was running. Something was wrong.”

“Yeah, what’s wrong is he’s a fucking dumbass not to come back.”

General Wylie stepped into the portal, using exactly the same decisive motion that Tim had used. Except . . . he stopped. For a moment, there was silence. This was followed by a stifled cry that quickly became a howl of agony as flames burst through the fabric of his uniform, accompanied by a sound as if of frying bacon.

“Help him,” Colonel Manders shouted, shielding his eyes as he tried to get near the general, who was flopping like a fish, his body enveloped in flames.

Then, just as the others had done, he fell backward off the portal and lay kicking and spinning on the ground in burned agony.

Aside from the colonel, Mike and Del were the only members of the unit near the portal—alive, at least. Most of the ones who hadn’t gone up into that machine or been killed like the general was being killed, had deserted by now. Maybe someone was still hanging in a Humvee here and there, but nobody who was willing to come anywhere near the portal.

Overhead, another meteor roared past, a thick streak of light accompanied

by an ominous rumble. Somewhere below the southern horizon, it exploded in a flash.

“Fuck this,” the colonel muttered. He swung into a Humvee, started it, and went back down the road, heading out toward the interstate and the Blue Ridge.

Mike and Del watched him go.

“Well, shit,” Del said into the silence that had enveloped the convoy. “Anybody home? HELLO?”

Mike went to the portal.

“Timmy,” he shouted into it. “Timmy!”

What was in there that had so upset him? Timothy Pelton did not scare easily, and Mike was in a position to know that. Even as kids, Tim had always been the bold one, the first one up the tree, the first one to ride the Top Thrill Dragster in Cedar Point, the first one to ask a girl out, the first one in to save Momma that time they had the fire.

Mike slumped. He felt Del’s arm come over his shoulder.

“Del, I feel like he’s on the other side of the moon. Farther.”

“What the hell is this thing?”

“Some kinda classified stuff, has to be.”

“They ain’t got no problems over there,” Del said, “ ’cept them crab apples don’t look real worth eating.”

“He’s not eating crab apples! He run scared, man.” A sudden burst of pure hate overcame Mike, and he kicked the blackened rubble of the general hard a few times. “Fuckin’ bastard! BASTARD!”

“Hey. HEY!” Del pulled him away. “That ain’t gonna do nothin’. That guy was headed for a court-martial, anyhow, the way he’s killing people. I mean, I saw about five murder ones go down here today.”

“Time of war.” He went close to the portal. “Timmy! TIMMY, damn your eyes, come back here!”

Then he saw, across a far hill, a small dot in motion. For some moments, he watched it as it moved steadily up the grassy hillside. Del also watched.

At some length, he said, “Could be him.”

“Or some caveman who ate him. We gotta find out how this thing works.”

Del went to a Humvee and opened the door. Inside was Ken Freitag, a gun in his mouth and the back of his head spread across the cab.

“Occupied,” Del muttered.

He went to the next one down the line and got in. There was a click, then the engine started. Hardened military electronics were not so quick to fry, fortunately, but there was going to be more than one vehicle in this convoy that wasn't gonna move. "Got forty miles left in this," Del said.

Without speaking—they didn't need to bother, the three of them always understood one another's thinking—Mike picked up the portal and slid it into the back of the Humvee, where it fit nicely . . . or had it gotten smaller when Mike tried to put it in?

Everybody knew the way the image in it changed as you moved it, and Mike didn't want to lose the spot where Timmy had gone in.

"We get this thing working right, we need to bring it back right here," he said.

"It's a countryside over there. If we get through safely, we're gonna find him sooner or later. Looks like southern Ohio, matter of fact."

"Southern Ohio is God's country."

"So is the rest of the world."

They were silent for a moment, each contemplating in his own way the enormity of what was happening.

"Why don't we just go in now?"

"You think we should?"

They both looked at it, then at each other. At last Mike said, "I think we need to find out more about it."

"I hear you," Del said. He pulled the Humvee out of the line and proceeded toward the town square. Plasmas so intense that they outshone the dismal sun now flashed across the sky without ceasing. Instead of the empty streets that had followed the passage of the penitents, they soon found that Raleigh was crowded with people who were pushing and pulling anything they could that was on wheels, trying to take supplies with them as they headed west toward the interstate. It looked like something out of a World War II movie.

People stared hard at the Humvee as it trundled east. They'd been shot at one too many times when trying to approach the convoy. They gave the soldiers their distance.

Up and down the street, buildings were burning. Molten insulation was dripping off overhead wires. "Spontaneous electrical fires," Del said. "Must be a whole lot of solar juice in the air to cause this."

Mike knew that the sun's energy would concentrate in wires if it became

intense enough. There were weapons that could do that, too.

Up and down Main Street, the same street lamps from which the victims of the penitents were hanging were now exploding, sending sparks down into panicky crowds of refugees. Sheets of fire flared along electric lines, and columns of smoke rushed up from the roofs of buildings.

“It’s everywhere,” Mike said. “The whole world is burning.”

When Del was forced to slow down, people began coming up to the Humvee. “This could get ugly,” he said, and jammed the gas to the floor.

“Easy on the clutch, man.”

“I know it, but I gotta not hit these folks.”

In the sky, a huge plasma danced, a long electrical body writhing, its appendages sweeping the horizons like great snakes.

Soon, they were through the town and onto the highway that led to what had been the convoy’s original destination. Like the town, the road was filling with refugees, a few on horseback, more on bikes, most on foot. Mike held a weapon in sight, making sure it was visible to the angry eyes and the mad eyes that watched them pass.

These poor damn people—somebody had to save them. If this darn portal would work, they could go through. Given enough time, maybe the whole darned country could go through.

What a damn miracle it was, but probably not for ordinary folks. Only people like the ones in the Blue Ridge would be allowed to use a thing like this, you could bet on it.

His heart just literally felt like it was tearing in two. He could feel his twin wanting to be with him. He could feel Tim being scared and being alone, and maybe knowing that the portal was in motion, that it was disappearing like a summer cloud or whatever it looked like on that side.

The farther they got from town, the fewer people there were on the road, and Del began to run the Humvee harder—until he saw someone ahead of them.

“Damn,” he said as they drew near the person standing in the middle of the road. It was a woman with a baby stroller filled with fishing equipment, rods, reels, poles, hooks and lines in packets. She wasn’t going anywhere, either. She held her ground right in the middle of the two-lane blacktop.

Del stopped, leaving the Humvee idling.

She came around to the window. “We’re moving our stock,” she said, “and

I'd be willing to pay you twenty dollars for an hour of the truck." She glanced around. "There's looting. The cops are gone."

"Lady, we'll all be dead in a few days."

"What in the world is the matter with you? How dare you say such a thing."

"This is the Last Judgment, lady," Del said. The Twines were Church of Christ, big-time. Not the Peltons. Their dad had steered clear of religion altogether. But Mike knew about the Last Judgment, of course, and from where he sat, Del could damn well be right. What if that black stuff on people was sin showing up right through their skin?

"I need to move my stock. We're in hard times and we're planning a sale next week. We need inventory."

Mike leaned over to Del. "She's blown," he said. "Totaled."

"Christians can't just leave people," Del snapped.

"So let me drive. I ain't one. Anyway, you left all those people back there."

"Yeah, they weren't askin' for help."

Mike had to get this portal working. He had to get over into wherever the hell it was and find Tim. Mom and Dad were gone now, but this is what they would've wanted him to do, and it was what his blood wanted him to do. You lose your twin, you lose half your soul. But how to convince Del?

"Lady," Mike said, "we need to get on. We got a mission."

"There's no mission, Mike!"

"My brother is my mission!"

"Fellas, if you need to go—"

"We need to go!"

Del did not move, and it shocked Mike to realize just how strongly he felt about this. He was going to push Del out of that seat and drive away without him if he didn't get this vehicle moving again.

But, in the end, Mike had to admit that he couldn't bust up with Del, let alone make him eat a fist or something. So the next thing he knew, he was loading fishing tackle into the Humvee.

They did six miles to a just plain pitiful little house, sad and tired and full of kids. An older boy and his dad came out and quickly unloaded the Humvee. Helping them and seeing the way they treasured this stuff that nobody would ever buy, Mike was almost moved to tears. It reminded him of

being in Afghanistan and having cold families come up to camp in the night, to huddle against the warm sides of tents and fill them with their ripe stink and the reek of 'Stan food.

Guys would kick the shit out of them through the canvas, but Mike and Tim didn't, and Del would go out and feed them, which would draw more, and he'd feed them until he ran out of damn loaves and fishes or whatever.

These were Americans, though, but it no longer felt much different.

They finished, then Del went out and got their well going by osmosis using garden hoses, which is the kind of thing he always knew how to do.

Mike let the boys look at his weapon, but not fire it. Who knew if those rounds would be needed. He kept the portal covered. No use in having to explain that damn thing, and he knew as well as any soldier that desperate people can turn nasty real fast, if they see something they think might save them.

When he had a chance, though, he looked into the portal. He was sort of hoping to see Tim, but he only saw the day over there getting slowly older, just like it was here.

Del reappeared. "Done and done," he said, satisfaction in his voice.

"Let's just get rolling, man. It's already sunset damn near, so it's sunset over there, too, and my bro is gonna be feeling mighty needful."

The first thing they saw of the Acton Clinic was a big wall topped with razor wire. There was a huge iron gate that was wide open, and as they went through it, there appeared what Mike knew at once was the most beautiful house he'd ever seen. But as they drew closer, he saw that it was partially burned out. Windows were broken. There was an ugly silence of a kind he knew all too well.

And now, as the sun set, the violet star that Colonel Manders had told them was a supernova appeared low in the northeastern sky, flooding the world in its creepy light.

When they arrived at the front of the house, Del stopped the Humvee and cut the engine. He turned to Mike. "What now?"

Mike had no idea what now. The windows of the old house were dark. It looked pretty ruined in there. But it didn't look real classified. No government warning signs, a wide-open gate, and no lights or guard units didn't exactly suggest this.

"What now is, we take a look around."

“Weapons?”

“You carry and cover, I’ll take the portal.”

“We can’t leave a weapon uncontrolled.”

“Then we pull the ammo outta mine and I’ll hold on to the bolt.”

“We might need that firepower.”

So Mike strapped on his rifle and carried the portal. The thing wasn’t heavy, and from the back it looked like a piece of canvas. But on the front, it was as slick as glass and you could go in it and run off in there, which Mike did not have the guts to do. He wanted his brother, though, and worse every minute.

The darker it got, the brighter the light from the portal appeared. Now it was looking over a glade full of grazing horses. The sun was a glow in the west, the sunset rich with gold at the horizon, then orange and yellow above it, and finally pale green fading into the blue of night. You could see plenty of stars, and Mike knew a fair amount about stars, thanks to their dad, who had a Celestron and had taught them the sky.

“How weird,” he said. He held the portal directly overhead and looked up into it, then brought it slowly down to the eastern horizon.

“The constellations are out of place.”

“Useful to know. Let’s go inside and see if we can find out why.”

Mike was transfixed. “Let me tell you . . . this sky is not right.”

“Okay! Now let’s move our asses. This can’t be safe out here, man.”

He kept moving the portal, trying to find north based on the glow on the western horizon. From the foliage he had seen when it was light there, he knew that the season was the same—early summer. So . . .

“What the hell is Draco doing *there*?”

“Dray-who doing where?”

“The constellation Draco . . . it’s way north. There’s Eltamin, and . . . Thuban. Thuban is the North Star!”

“Goddamn it, will you get your ass in gear?”

He lowered the portal. “Del,” he said, “this is just a damn amazing thing.”

“Well, *duh*!”

“No, you don’t understand what this is. Because this isn’t just some kind of window, like, into China or somewheres. Some kind of wormhole or whatever. Del, the polestar in that sky—” He tapped the edge of the portal, being careful not to touch its lethal surface. “The polestar is not Polaris, it’s

Thuban. *Thuban*, man!”

“Look, do you remember how interested I was in the telescope, which was not at all? So I am not going to know what the fuck that means, am I?”

“What it means is that this thing is a damn time machine!” He held it up. “Thuban won’t be the polestar for another twenty thousand years. When Timmy went into that thing, he crossed thousands of years into the future, Del. It’s the future in there!”

“Oh, yeah, what about the little matter of the fact that Earth is gonna be a burned-out cinder in the future?”

“The dinosaurs got torched, and we’re here. So it’s not gonna stay, like, a cinder forever.”

“Oh, man, somebody is gonna be very pissed off at us, because this thing is unbelievably classified, it has to be. The general was taking it back to the Blue Ridge for, you know, the Family, the politicians, all those rich people, the senators—”

“I know who’s down there, I seen ’em go in same as you.”

“Okay, then, we are criminals. Big-time. The whole fucking army is gonna be after us, plus the FBI, the CIA, and all’a that shit.”

“Except that doesn’t matter a shit anymore and I am not gonna stop until I get my brother back, and that is the line in the sand here, Del, so if you want to go back, that’s fine by me. Personally, I wouldn’t sell those scumbags shit on a platter, much less give ’em this thing. Find me some good folks—decent, you know—and let’s get ’em through. And get us through, and find my brother.”

Del ran a hand along the top edge of the thing, which now gleamed purple as the supernova spread its rising light.

“It’s gonna be a brave fucking guy goes through this thing first. I mean, it’s a damn miracle your brother didn’t do like the rest of ’em.”

“Drop the gun and step away from it, please.”

Del did exactly as the voice from inside the house instructed. To Mike he mouthed the words “told you.”

“Now face me. Come up onto the porch, please.”

Mike started to lift the portal, but the unmistakable snicker of a bolt being thrown on a very proficient-sounding weapon froze him. Turning slowly, he held up his hands. Side by side, he and Del walked onto the porch. After a moment, a flashlight shone in their faces. It lingered on their patches.

Whoever this was wanted to identify their unit, obviously.

“PFC Twine, please come forward.”

Del took another step closer to the door. Behind them, Mike heard movement. Somebody was taking the portal! He reacted immediately, turning to stop them.

“Freeze!”

Which Mike did. But he had seen a woman in the violet light, her long legs striding, her hair flowing back, carrying the portal like the damn thing was her own personal possession. But Tim was in there. He had to get his brother back!

“Hey, look, we come here to bring it to you,” he said. “But you gotta understand, my brother’s in it. He’s lost in there!”

There was no reaction. He could hear the woman’s footsteps fading away. He dared not try again to look. He focused his attention on the flashlight.

“We’re twins, see. So we are real close and I gotta get him outa there or go in—go over—with him. That’s what I gotta do.” He said nothing about the time machine part of it. That was probably the most secret thing about it. Guys were getting shot right and left these days. Forget the court-martial, the brig. Nowadays, you got your head blown off by a psycho general and nobody gave the slightest shit.

“Okay, Specialist Pelton, please come forward.”

Del was shaking like a terrified Chihuahua or something, which was not like Del Twine, who could chew the beard of a Taliban for lunch.

“Now what’s going to happen is I want you to come into the building. I am going to be standing aside. You will not see me. Then you will go where you’re directed.”

Del was shaking so much he looked drunk, and Mike was about to wet his pants. Maybe there was another Blue Ridge here, full of even more rich shitkickers, and they were gonna end up getting their asses tortured.

Then a match was struck ahead of them, and Mike saw that they were in a ruined hall that had once been really, really beautiful, with a sweeping staircase that led up to a mass of blackened beams where part of the roof had come in. Delicate fingers touched the match to a candle, and Mike saw a beautiful girl in the yellow light, with big eyes that looked him over dispassionately and frankly.

“Hello,” he said.

She turned and went through a dining room full of upended tables and toward a big black door. So this was it, the inner sanctum.

The windows were draped with blankets, and there were many candles. And, in their light, many faces.

Mike's first thought was, *These are civilians*. His second was that they were hurt, some of them. Then that there were a whole lot of them, maybe over a hundred, and they had to be the quietest people he had ever seen in his life.

Then, from the back, the woman who had taken the portal came in. Del sucked an awed breath, and even in flickering candlelight, Mike could see why. There was just very little question—this was about the most beautiful woman in the world. She carried the portal, which was glowing softly with starlight from the other side, and put it on an easel.

Mike said, "Lady, my brother is in there. I want you folks—" He looked around the room, tried to smile, but his smile collapsed and he was all of a sudden not a soldier. That all just went out of him, all the hardness, the long, cold nights ducking Taliban mortar shells and hating the bastards, all of that and all the misery he had endured as a virtual slave guarding the Blue Ridge, and the terror of this day—all of it just melted away.

What was left was his truth—he was a scared nineteen-year-old boy in an impossible situation, who had lost his twin brother and with him half of his own soul. He let out a long sob, then choked it back.

A man came to him, a guy in his thirties, the kind of guy who was born to command. When the guy's arm came around his shoulder, he wasn't embarrassed, not even in front of all these people. He was just tired and scared and alone.

"Come on, you two, I want to introduce you to our head of security. There's work for you here."

The two young soldiers went with David Ford, watched by many eyes, and in the candlelight, there gleamed many tears. Before them, the portal, back where it belonged, glowed with soft and beautiful light.

From his careful place of hiding, Mack also saw this. As he calculated his odds, he fingered the safety on his gun. He was sick and his burn hurt like nothing else he had ever known, but mostly he was filled with a rage that was beyond any emotion he had ever felt, a great, fiery darkness that boiled up from the center of his soul, and would drive him, he knew, both to feats even

beyond his own great skill, and to death if it was necessary to fulfill his aim, which had become very simple.

Alone, he could not get the portal to Blue Ridge, which meant that the people who deserved it were not going to get it.

So nobody else would, either.

24

THE MOON

As soon as he'd disarmed the two young soldiers and assured himself that they meant no harm, Glen had gone outside to run the perimeter. He'd lost six of his sixteen men, but that still left enough of a force to reestablish a presence on the walls. They were a lot better off with a deeper defense, even if it had some light spots.

It was as he was crossing the broad lawn that led to the front gate, which was stuck open and thus guarded now by three men, that he noticed the moon.

He stopped, then focused his full attention on it. Over millions upon millions of nights, the moon has risen in peaceful splendor. But there is a reason that her face is marked by craters so enormous that they define her very form. They are a reminder and a warning that what has happened in the past can happen again.

He decided that he needed David to see this, and returned to the rec area where the survivors were assembled.

David could see by Glen's expression that something was very wrong.

"You need to come outside."

"What's the problem?"

He nodded toward the door, and David followed.

"My God," David said as soon as he saw the moon.

"What do you think it means?"

The face of the moon was unrecognizable. That strange, shocked expression that had fascinated human beings from time immemorial was turned in a new direction.

"It's in motion," David said, "the moon is rotating."

Del and Mike had followed them out.

"Does this mean the end of the world?" Del asked.

Hardly hearing him, David watched in awe as this enormous cosmic event continued to unfold. Another object appeared in the sky, this one perhaps a

tenth the size of the moon itself. As it crossed the face, it became a black irregular shadow. Size was impossible to judge, of course, but it was easily visible, so it was huge.

Once it crossed the face, it was lost to view because it was too black to reflect sunlight.

David knew what it was. It was an immense mass of debris of some sort from the supernova. He said, "I think if it strikes the moon, we're going to see gigantic boulders thrown off. Some will fall back, but some won't and the ones that don't are headed here."

"Which means . . . what?"

"Mike, it means devastating earthquakes. Tidal waves. Maybe worse. Much worse."

As Del backed away from him, David saw a trapped animal come into his eyes.

"You think you know it all but you don't know a damn thing!"

David did not challenge him, what would be the point? His fear and his anger would mean nothing, not in the face of what was coming.

The object reappeared, dark again as it crossed the moon's face. With deceptive slowness, it arced downward. On the moon's surface, then, there was a flicker of light. A moment later dust rose in a cloud so huge that it could be seen clearly as a haze spreading across the whole face, making it go out of focus.

Then a rain of gleaming specks emerged from this haze, some of them big enough that they could be seen to be tumbling, others nothing more than additions to a star field made faint behind the endless auroras and sick, purple-pink light.

David knew that these were actually huge stones, and that they would reach Earth in the next few days. But even before then—long before then—others were going to strike, and that could start happening at any moment.

"We got a problem," Glen said. He wasn't looking at the moon, and David followed his eyes toward the distant front gate.

"This is just the beginning," David said.

"I can't stop them this time, David."

"We can dust 'em," Mike said. "Give us back our guns."

"No," David said. "You need to let this happen. Just be sure they're orderly, because there're going to be more."

The people began to hesitate, then to cluster in uneasy groups, when guards on the perimeter showed themselves.

“Go in and retrieve your weapons,” Glen told the two soldiers.

David saw men, women, and children, he saw dogs on leads, cats in carriers, people hauling suitcases and straining under heavy backpacks.

As people flooded into the compound, it became possible to observe great, long columns of them stretching off along the road as far as could be seen.

Glen called to his men, “Pull it in, stay in front of them!”

As the guards on the gate began backing up, the others came in off the walls.

Del fired his gun into the air.

“NO!” David said. “Not that.”

A woman tried to settle a barking dog, but other than that, there was silence from the whole enormous and swelling mass.

A man came forward, his hands in the air, a white handkerchief in one fist. “Please,” he said, “let our children come with you.”

“They know about the portal,” David said.

“How?” Mike asked.

“A lot more people are going to know about it. It’s going to be seen all over the world by the ones who need to see it.”

“Seen? How?”

“As time passes, it becomes more . . . I guess the best word is ‘focused.’ And the more focused it is, the more people see it.”

Mike shook his head.

“It’s hyperdimensional. It’s outside of space-time as we know it. What’s happening is that it’s growing in hyperspace, like a gigantic crystal made of time. Does that make sense to you?”

“No, Sir, it does not. But I assume it means that a whole lot of people are going to go through it.”

David drew on his now clear memories of what he’d learned in the class. “Around a million worldwide,” he said. He called to the crowd, “You’re welcome on the grounds. But the building is off limits, do not attempt to enter the building.”

To emphasize this, the security guards moved toward them in a line, arms linked. The crowd spread into the broad front garden, but there were still many more coming.

“Man, look at the moon,” Mike said. “Look at it!”

The orb was dark red from dust, and the familiar face was now gone.

What had been the dark side was now facing earth.

“Man, that sucker could be about to come out of its orbit,” Mike said. “If it hits us, we’re done.”

The last time the moon had rotated was four hundred and fifty million years ago, before even single-celled life-forms trembled in the waters. It had been struck, then, by an even larger asteroid—actually a small planet—and a huge piece of it had crashed to earth. The crater it had left remained the largest landform on earth. It is called the Pacific Ocean.

Now the whole crowd was watching, and people were coming out of the house, all looking up at the greatest cosmic spectacle that any man had ever witnessed.

From within the mass of them, there arose a female voice, clear in the cathedral silence of the moment.

“ ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.’ ” And although her tone was filled with fear and even the ragged edge of desperation, a chorus took up the lines, until by the time the final verse was uttered, it was a solemn chant, clear and determined, from many thousands of throats.

In the silence that followed, they watched as bright sparks flickered in waves across the new face of the moon.

“Jesus, it’s the fishing tackle lady,” Del said. He went into the crowd to the woman who had spoken out.

David saw that she and her husband and kids carried an extraordinary variety of angling equipment, and he thought that it might prove very useful if where they were going was as undeveloped as it appeared. So far, no matter what direction he had pointed the portal in, he hadn’t seen a sign of any sort of structure. He feared that a great many people were going to be thrown into a very primitive environment, and that was going to be a very hard situation for them to face, especially after the hellish conditions they were enduring here.

“It’s beautiful,” a voice said from behind them. David did not need to turn to know that Caroline was there. Suddenly and with great intensity, he remembered her body close to his, and her gentle, insistent ways.

“David,” she said, “I’m having a problem with the portal. It’s flickering. It

looks like it's failing somehow.”

Terror like lightning shot through him. He looked out at the crowd. “Don’t tell them,” he said, and followed her back into the building.

25

THE OMEGA POINT

Looking at it on its easel, David could see at once how it was changing. There was something dim and grainy about it now. He touched it. "It looks like a painting again," he said.

The class was clustered around it. As it turned out, they had survived the worst of the assault by hiding in the attic and ductwork of the patient wing. They had been clever about hiding, and only two lives had been lost.

"Before we moved, I thought we should wait for dawn over there," Caroline said. "I didn't expect this."

David did not say that he thought that Caroline had made a mistake. How could anybody be blamed for anything now?

He addressed the group. "We need to start getting people through. We need to do it right now."

Nobody moved.

George Noonan said, "All those people, one by one? Through this?" He shook his head.

"I don't see how we can help them," Aaron added. "Not with such a small opening."

"I think we have to," a voice replied. It was Peggy Turnbull, who had been a tomboy in the days of their class, interested only in hunting and horses. In recent years, she had become a poet. Her false psychosis had been depression. He regarded her narrow face, pale in the candlelight. How long would this delicate creature survive in the wilderness that they would soon be entering?

At that moment, there was light so bright that it glared in through the blankets that had been hung over the windows, and from outside there came a howling uproar of terror.

There followed a clap of thunder so enormous that it shattered the few remaining windows.

"Bolide," Mike said. "Big one. Hit just below the horizon, so better hold

on.”

The world began shaking.

He grabbed David. “If we can go through that thing, we need to *do it!*”

The shaking got rapidly worse. Caroline and others staggered, then she fell to her knees. As David went to her, there arose from outside a clamor of shouts, followed by the chatter of an automatic weapon.

“NO!” David shouted, but his cry was lost in the thunder of the earthquake, as the whole patient wing trembled and cracks raced up the walls. Still, though, the earthquake increased, and David threw his body over Caroline, and could practically feel the ceiling above them getting ready to give way.

“We have to get it outside,” she shouted above the din of crackling plaster and collapsing window frames.

Again light, so intense this time that heat came with it, searing, burning, their exposed skin.

The air was sucked out of David’s lungs, and he thought that he must die.

“It’s coming down,” a voice cried, and then Glen and Mike were there, and everyone was running for the doors. Glen helped them up, and Caroline took the portal.

As they went toward the door that led into the side garden, the wall collapsed before them.

“The front,” George Noonan shouted. “It’s our only chance.”

They picked their way through the rubble of the front of the house, moving in a fog of dust almost too thick to navigate at all, but then there were lights ahead, bobbing closer. There came a girl of perhaps twenty, her tired face full of sadness. David remembered her from the bus, and thought, *She has lost her future, that’s what a child is.*

An agony deeper than blood filled him, because he thought not only of her and the others outside, but all the millions who were suffering this without even the slight hope of survival represented by something like the portal.

“Help us,” the girl said, reaching out and taking David’s hand. “I buried my baby just a while ago. But I want to live. I want to live for him.”

In his heart, David felt that the baby had ascended, but he would explain it to the mother later. He found himself being led onto the front porch with its now teetering colonnade. Behind him, Caroline brought the portal and the class came with her, struggling, covered with dust, some of them nursing injuries. But nobody was screaming, and the house still stood, and the quake

was subsiding into a series of more and more distant shudders, and thuds as if a giant was walking off into the forest behind the house.

Caroline raised the portal up before the crowd. “If we stay calm,” she shouted, “if we get in line and take our time—”

Susan Denman said, “Isn’t it holographic? I remember your dad taught us that it would be.”

“I know what he said, but look at it! We need to deal with what we have.”

“But this is all wrong, then! We didn’t give our lives to save a couple of hundred people. This is supposed to be about millions!”

Had they been lied to? Were they, in fact, the most elite of the elite?

She returned to the crowd. “Let’s start now, and nobody rush forward. Just take it easy—”

Without warning, a shock passed through the earth with such force that it hurled people flat, causing the whole crowd to drop in a confusion of possessions, pets, and terrified, screaming children.

The power of it caused trees to leap out of the ground as if they were being fired from buried cannons, and the Acton mansion itself, as strongly built as it was, shuddered and kept shuddering.

People were unable to stay on their feet, and David was no exception. Struggling, falling, clawing the heaving earth, it was like being in a nightmare where you ran but went nowhere.

“Get away from it,” he cried—but then Caroline pointed, and he looked up to the great roof and saw a figure there, a man with a rifle. “Glen,” he shouted, “get that man to come down off there!”

“He’s not one of mine, David!”

But David didn’t need to be told. He had recognized Mack the Cat. Despite the gigantic shaking, Mack remained absolutely still and steady as he raised the rifle and fired down, at first, David thought, at him and Caroline. But he was not shooting at them, he was shooting at the portal, and David understood instantly that he cared only for one thing now: if he couldn’t use it, nobody would.

It took all of his effort and all of his strength, but he managed to get to his feet and to stagger along the heaving ground and throw himself onto it, pressing it against the earth beneath him. The front of it was to the ground, and the back still seemed like nothing more than canvas stretched on a frame. But then he saw a bullet hole in it, and something like starlight leaking out

onto the backing, as if the tear was oozing the blood of time.

Behind him there was a sound that was almost human, a great, grinding sigh, which for all the world sounded like the death rattle of a very old man. He turned in time to see the great mansion implode, the figure of Mack disappearing into the dust and chaos of its disintegration.

One after another, the great columns fell, and when the collapse had ended, David was struck by how very much the place resembled the rubble of an ancient Roman palace, and he felt the echo of ruins.

The dust grew as thick as the air in a cave. Around David there was now no more movement, nothing except material falling from the sky, stones, bricks, bits of furniture, and red-hot scraps of what he supposed must be a meteor that had struck close by. To the west, violet light swam in blackness. The supernova was setting. In the east, there was blood on the horizon. But the northern sky was different. The northern sky was glowing, then going dark again, then glowing more brightly.

“David, it’s damaged!”

Caroline’s eyes were fierce with panic, which surprised David. In these past few moments, he had stopped struggling. Too much was wrong, and his heart was telling him that they must fail.

“It’s clear,” Caroline cried. “Oh, my God, look at it!”

As the crowd drew closer, people coming tentatively up through the grounds, families, pets, children, the portal not only became clear again, the rip made by the bullet simply faded into the image itself.

But then something else happened, that made David’s mind go blank with amazement, as the portal also began to get larger, as if curtains were spreading or clouds parting.

Caroline no longer held it, but only stood beside it. The portal had taken on an existence of its own, spreading wider and wider until it was ten feet wide, then fifty feet, then filling the whole grounds.

Tears streamed down her face, which was transfixed with joy.

David grabbed her shoulders and looked into her blazing, triumphant eyes.

As the portal grew, it looked like a gate into heaven, leading away from the roaring, dust-choked catastrophe that surrounded them.

Like ghosts, people came out of the dust clouds, moving tentatively toward the crystal predawn that spread before them.

But they did not enter it. Instead they began throwing themselves to their

knees, pleading.

“They don’t understand,” Caroline said. “David, help them.”

He tried to raise his voice, but the dust that choked his throat made that impossible. Finally, he took a man by the shoulders and guided him toward the portal, but he shrank back.

“Don’t be afraid,” David said. He did not think any of them would be here if they bore the mark. By now most of those—the ones who were not hiding in bunkers—must surely have come to their ends. But what if he pushed this man and he burned, then what?

Before he could decide how to proceed, the light from the north came soaring above the horizon, an immense, flaming mass, the largest thing that any creature for the last half a billion years had seen in the sky of earth.

David called to the class, “Help them,” he shouted. “We have to help them!”

As a glare brighter by far than the sun flooded down from the object now speeding overhead, David tried to speak in the man’s ear, but he pulled away and ran. David knew that he must look mad, covered as he was by dust.

Still, there was no choice now, no time to waste, so he ran to a cowering family, the children so panicked that they were beyond control, the mother screaming, the father trying to shield them from the thing passing overhead. He picked up a girl of perhaps ten.

“Come on,” he said, “come with me.”

“What’s that thing?” the father shouted.

What did he mean, the thing in the sky or the portal? No time to find out. David grabbed him by the collar. “Come on, follow me!”

As he went toward the portal with the screaming girl trying to pull away from him, he felt once again heat from above, but also saw that the light was getting less bright. The gigantic meteor was not going to strike here, it was going farther south. But he couldn’t think about that now. He had reached the portal where Caroline stood with her arms outspread, calling to the crowd, telling them they could go through, in a voice that was lost in the roar of voices and the wind that had followed the meteor, and was now shaking the few trees left standing, and drawing dust up like a massive cloud of roiling smoke from the ruins of the mansion.

And now, as suddenly as it had come, the great light was gone, disappearing beneath the southern horizon, which glowed briefly with white

light, and then was once again dark.

Mike said, "It hit in the ocean."

"I know it." And they both also knew exactly what, therefore, would be coming. The elevation here was six hundred feet, which would not be nearly enough.

"What's in there?" the father asked him.

"A new world," David said, and did the only thing left for him to do, which was that he thrust the screaming, writhing little girl through the portal.

"Jesus God," the father cried, and the mother and younger brother both screamed in terror as they saw the girl inside the portal. She turned and put her hands to her head as if she was going to pull her hair out, and her face twisted into a scream that they could see but not hear. She came to the portal and threw herself against it, pressing herself and clawing at it, her face grotesque. From this side, she looked as if she was pressing herself against glass, and David understood for the first time that there was no return, and he remembered what had happened to Katrina's arm when she had tried to pull it out.

"Do not stop, do NOT try to come back," he shouted to the people crowding toward the glory of it, a sparkling dawn, enormous across the whole expanse of the lawn, concealing behind it the ruins of the house.

He took the father by the hand and said to him, "You need to help your daughter," and the father took his wife's arm and she held her son, and the three of them stepped through. A big old springer spaniel with gray dewlaps barked twice after they had gone, and jumped through behind them.

So far, none of these people showed the slightest sign of the mark, but God help any that did, should they try to go through.

Dawn was gold and clear in the east of the portal, and the family, now hand in hand, walked a short distance. The father bent down to feel the grass beneath their feet, then turned and spread his arms wide.

Along the southern horizon in this world, though, there had appeared a shimmering line, and David thought he knew what it was, and Mike certainly knew. "We just got a few minutes," he said.

Inside the portal, David saw other people appearing, coming from other directions, and realized for the first time that this place was indeed not the only one where the portal was present. Just as they had been promised that it would in the class, it had appeared all over the world.

“Your father was right,” he told Caroline. “It’s holographic.”

David thought, at this point, that he understood the mechanics of judgment. Over the many lifetimes that come and go during a great earthly cycle, we are born and born again, making choices as we go along, each time locked in physical bodies that remember little of the soul’s past and its aims, where we enact lives that either add to the weight of the soul or reduce it. Evil makes it heavy, good makes it light, and the vast number of people die, each life, a little lighter than before.

Then, as the cycle’s end approaches, the chance to be reborn anew ceases. The changes become permanent and most people are harvested to higher life. Some, who have ruined themselves, sink away, and a few remain to take the wisdom of the last cycle forward into the next.

“We got maybe ten minutes, man!” Mike said.

So David believed he understood these sacred mechanics, which was lovely, but this was no time to stand watching the spectacle and indulging his inner professor.

He raised his voice. “Get moving, everybody! Everybody! NOW! NOW!”

People stirred but were still unwilling.

“They’re scared,” Caroline said. “They still don’t understand.”

“There’s no time left!” He knew that this scene was being repeated all over the world, and many would fall by the wayside, and also that this was intended, that it fit the gigantic plan of life, and for just an instant he sensed the presence of the mind that had conceived the universe . . . and felt as if he was in the presence of a child.

Caroline stepped to the center of the portal. “We can go through,” she shouted. “Look, we can all do this!” But then she was absorbed in the milling, panicky crowd.

“Caroline!” He waded after her.

Ahead, he saw her hair, then he saw a tall, ghostly figure come to her, and she was lifted by her hair, her face distended with pain, her eyes bulging.

Against her throat, Mack held a jagged blade that had been broken off an electric hedge clipper.

26

THE LAST BREATH

Across the world, as the gigantic event reached its climax, all the treasures and wonders of history were being swept away. Some of the boulders that had broken off the moon were the size of islands, and they had begun striking Earth mercilessly. Those that hit the oceans generated waves unlike any that had been seen even during the climax of the Ice Age, black mountains of water that were now sweeping away whole nations.

London and Rio and Tokyo and Amsterdam were among the first to disappear in the maelstrom. A boulder the size of Bermuda slammed into the central Ukraine, releasing the equivalent energy of a billion hydrogen bombs and instantly vaporizing every living thing from St. Petersburg to the Black Sea.

The shock waves of the meteor impacts were so great that they completely disintegrated cities from Casablanca to Paris, and the gigantic explosions they generated made millions instantly deaf.

Whole species of animals died in an instant, herds upon the prairies, fish in the sea, and the bodies of great schools drifted to the ocean floor where they would become fossils. In millions of years, very different hands would raise them as human hands had raised the mats of fish skeletons that had died exactly the same way in the Permian extinction over two hundred million years before.

There is, indeed, nothing new under the sun.

Everyone who was not near a portal was afflicted with the stain, and they had come to understand their fate, and they cut themselves to pieces and burned themselves and ripped at themselves to remove the stain, but they could not remove the stain, and in their billions they lay writhing from their mutilations, or they ran in doomed streets, or tried to end their agony with suicide, only to discover that the death of the body was what sprung the trap. Their darkness also grew and grew, until they were reduced to a state that is darker than darkness itself, for this new skin reflected no light at all. They

were shadow people now, sweeping through the streets in despairing packs, their cries like the wind wailing on a winter night.

A series of more than fifty objects struck the Pacific, including one that sent a tsunami slamming into the coasts of Washington and Oregon, drowning Vancouver and Seattle and Portland, inundating San Francisco, and sweeping across the entire Los Angeles basin with such energy that it gushed through the mountain passes to the east, finally expending itself a hundred frothing, foaming miles into the high desert.

The people who had come to the Acton Clinic were streaming into the portal in a more orderly manner, as the members of the class moved among them, urging them forward.

Mack had dragged Caroline into the leafy shambles of some trees, and David had gone with them.

“We’re going through together,” Mack said. “The three of us.”

“Mack, it can’t work.” Mack’s body was almost entirely a shadow now, as if he was becoming a living darkness.

“Then I rip her throat out.”

Surely he could not be deceived another time. Surely he understood that the portal would not let him through.

David did the only thing he could, which was to lead Mack to the portal, which was now busy with people crossing, moving easily and quickly, ten and twenty at a time walking into what was becoming a great, wondering crowd on the other side.

There came a rumbling sound that quickly deepened, soon trembling the ground.

“Hurry,” Mack said.

David pushed a pregnant mother through. Until every one of them was safe, he would not himself go through.

On the distance, the horizon began shimmering.

“Hurry, goddamn you!”

“Go without me,” Caroline shouted against the rising thunder of the oncoming tsunami.

David pulled at people. “Everybody,” he shouted, “GO GO GO!”

As he cried out, yet another enormous light appeared in the north, this time striking the ground below the horizon. Immediately a great, bright swarm of objects rose from where it had fallen—and David thought that this was ice

dislodged from the polar cap just as it had been dislodged twelve thousand years ago by a strike on the Laurentian glacier. The icebergs would probably fall as far south now as they had then, when they had hit from the Carolinas to New Mexico, leaving, among other artifacts, the hundreds of thousands of craters of the Carolina Dells.

Finally, the last of the people were through, except for Mike and Del and Glen, who stood with him and with Caroline.

“So how do I do it?” Mack asked. Embracing Caroline tightly, he moved toward the portal. “If I burn, she burns,” he cried against the enormous, echoing thunder of the onrushing water.

David did the only thing he could think of, he exploded into Mack’s back, throwing himself against the larger man—and Del and Mike and Glen joined him, kicking him and shoving him—and then, suddenly, he was lighter and David saw, on the other side of the portal, that Caroline had come free and crossed.

Slowly Mack turned. He no longer had the blade. In fact, he no longer had the hand that had held it, but his open wrist did not pump blood. David could see in the eerie wells of his eyes the reason for this: Mack was dead. He was still moving and still thought himself alive, but this was not a living creature anymore, this dark, shifting form was a corpse.

The air began to scream and to suck them back, and even the edges of the portal trembled.

Glen turned and jumped through it, followed by Del and Mike, and Mack groaned to see them do it, and gargled deep rage in his throat, and if a corpse could utter a sound, this was what it would be like.

Mack’s remaining hand grabbed David’s throat—but David managed to twist away and half jump through the portal. Mack still held him, though, and began to pull him back, and he felt moving through the part of his body that was between the future and the past a churning coldness, as if the absolute waters of death were flooding into him.

Laughing now, Mack dragged at him, and the coldness turned to fire, and he knew that he was being sliced apart—but then felt hands grab the arm that was flailing on the far side of the portal, and felt himself being pulled.

Mack’s eyes, a moment ago empty with death, now sparkled with hatred. Despite his injuries and the shadow that had enveloped him, he remained strong. In fact, his grip was like iron, and David thought, *This is what a*

demon is. He struggled with all his might, but he could not overcome Mack's steel strength.

Behind Mack, though, he saw what appeared to be a great, dark cliff, and he knew that this was the wave, and it was here, now.

They were both swept up in it and smashed as if by the fist of a giant against the portal—and suddenly, there was silence.

David scrambled to his feet. The wave was hitting, and he braced himself. He did not understand why this had happened to him. Was there some sort of mistake? He had not judged himself evil, had not marked himself . . . for it is always a choice, to accept the mark of the beast. We are our own judges, but we always choose correctly.

David now found himself face-to-face with something that was no longer even a human form. Mack had disappeared entirely, into the deepest darkness he had ever seen or known possible, a darkness as deep as all the sins of the world, radiating evil like brutal heat. Embedded in it he could see the billions of faces of those who had lost their souls, the faces distended by what must have been truly terrible screams, but the screams were silent.

They seemed to be taken up, somehow, into the wave, but it wasn't affecting him, he was watching it as if through glass—and then he understood: he was looking *back in time*, through the portal.

Then he was racing through the portal, and the old Earth, the ruined Earth, was becoming smaller and smaller, dwindling faster and faster, disappearing so totally that it was as if it had never been.

What had hit the portal was not only a gigantic tidal wave, it was also a wave in hyperspace, capturing in its dark waters all who had made the commitment to evil. Him, it had simply pushed away—and through the portal.

And then he saw a face appear, much closer than the others, the eyes terrible in their desperation, the mouth distorted by great agony, the hands clawing through time, clawing and burning, and despite all his effort and the will of a demon, Mack the Cat became outlined with fire and then became fire, but still the face screamed, still the agony went on.

As David watched in sorrow and loathing, Mack transformed from the dark-cloaked figure he had been on the roof of the clinic into another person entirely, a man wearing the uniform of some sort of officer, black, the chest spread with medals. And then David saw the red armband with the black

swastika, and then the body changed again, this time wearing the splendid suit of a wealthy nineteenth-century businessman, and then it wore the flowing robes of a cardinal, and then the changes flickered past so fast that it was impossible to see anything except that David knew that he was actually watching Mack's whole time on Earth move past, lifetime after lifetime of evil.

Seeing this caused stirrings of memory from his own long-past time, but the memories were not evil, they were haunting and wonderful and full of nostalgia, loves, and hard work; they were lives he would be proud to live again.

Mack was washed away into the blackness then, a spark instantly absorbed into what was at once a tidal wave containing a whole ocean, and a wave of purest evil.

The darkness itself began to recede, until there was nothing left of the past in the portal, which itself shuddered, then faded, and slipped into memory.

David found himself looking out across a broad meadow that ended in trees, and beyond the trees, the vine-choked pink debris of a city, its ruined towers glowing in the dawn.

The ruins were very, very old, and they looked dark and haunted with the terrors of the last cycle. But they must be filled with useful materials, even with shelter.

But where was everybody else? In fact, where was he?

"David?"

Her! He'd come through the portal backward, that was all, and he whirled around and there she stood, her body framed by the golden light of dawn, as the sun, now placid again, rose behind her.

All across the meadow, sitting silently and watching the new sun rise, were the people they had rescued, and more; in fact, there were thousands upon thousands in this verdant new world.

There was a man with her, and they were hand in hand, and a knife cut to the frightened heart of David's love.

"David, don't you remember your old teacher?" the man asked.

Flushed with relief, then with the joy of meeting again after all these years, he took the shoulders of Charles Light, looked into his eyes, and the happiness of those days came flooding back, and with it all the memories that had remained lost, not the important things, which he had already

remembered, but the less important ones, the way the desks were arranged, how exciting it was to understand the marvels they were being taught. And, above all, he remembered Caroline.

They had not been lovers in any adult sense, but in an instant he recaptured all the innocent happiness he had known with her, and remembered the promises they had made.

She stood before him, her eyes cast down, the sunlight flaming in her hair, a picture of dizzying sensuality and innocence all mixed together, and in that moment he truly understood how perfectly the human spirit is paralleled by the personalities of the old gods, and he saw her as the Lady of the Starry Skirt, at once an earthy, sweaty, soft woman and a star keeper, her body belonging to youth and the promise of the womb, her soul to the heavens.

He could not speak. He was beyond speech.

She came into his arms, and when he embraced her, she felt as soft as a cloud. Her eyes regarded him, looking in amazement at his face, then fluttering closed in the cathedral of their kiss.

For a moment, the kiss was the center of the universe—and then there came a hand to his shoulder.

They slipped away from one another. Charles Light was smiling, but then his expression became more serious.

“We have to organize them,” he said. “We have to get this thing rolling.”

Arm in arm, he and Caroline headed back toward the great crowd, where children were now running and dogs cavorting, and people were relaying down to the nearby river to get water.

“There’s a lot of work to do,” David said.

“That’s why we’re here,” a voice replied. It was Del, and he and Mike were arm in arm with a third soldier. They had found Tim.

Tim was appalled by the magnitude of the situation. All these people without food, without shelter.

“I don’t know where to start!”

Caroline squeezed his hand. “Of course you do.”

Which, he realized, was true. All of them did. They knew in their blood why they were still here on Earth, because they had wanted to participate in the building of the next great cycle.

But they weren’t the sort of people who were likely to think on such things. If you put one of them in a room, they would clean the room. Give

them a file, and they would organize it, or an empty field on a summer morning and they would think ahead to winter, and start a house.

They were already stirring among themselves, seeking aim and direction, looking for work to do.

The immeasurably conscious presence that is the ascended wing of mankind was never wrong and could not be wrong. These were the ones who would put their shoulders to their task, and create the foundation of a new and better world, that would emerge out of the compassion that was common to all of their hearts, and it would be better than the old world, because in it there would be no more souls devoted to greed and all its cruelties. The last phase of history had been designed to cause them to reveal themselves, so that they could be removed forever. Mankind was not going to experience another cycle of evil and ruin, but this time would work on ecstasy, so that, somewhere along the vast halls of time, when this age ended, everyone would ascend and the species, finally, would leave the physical world entirely behind.

Eventually, other earthly species would gain intelligence, but that would not be for a billion and a half years, and by then even the least trace of human works would be gone, and mankind would have joined the journey into ecstasy which, like heat, has no upper limit.

In the deep redoubts that Mack had striven so to save, death had been slow, for they had been built to last, and to the people imprisoned within there came bitter hatred and violence, and finally madness, and they all sank away, all of those people, into the same darkness that had consumed Mack.

The god with whom David had been identified from his childhood, the great plumed serpent Quetzalcoatl, manifested in him not as a grand presence, but rather as a practical one, concerned less about the mysteries of time and the grandeur of its cycles, and more about making sure the water was fit to drink and shelter could be found, and food gathered during the plenitude of summer.

As some got water, others were already scouring the shrubs for berries, others heading in groups toward the ruined city, to find what might be of use there.

From across a far hill, another group appeared, people waving, and here and there joyous reunions took place, wife running to husband, child to mother. Over the whole of the restored Earth of all those thousands of years

in the future, this same scene was being repeated.

But it would not be all joy. There would be struggle and suffering here. This was going to be hard.

David would do his best at his job, and become famous among them for his tirelessness, but time would wear on him as it does on us all, and one day he would leave them, and his beloved Caroline, and the family that they would make in a small house that was yet to be built, in a village that was not yet, on this first day, even an idea.

The secret of Quetzalcoatl's power is that he is a humble god.

In many stories and religious traditions, and even in the science of the lost world, this time had been predicted. But there was one statement about it that turned out to be the clearest and the most profoundly true, which had been made over two thousand years before the old cycle had ended.

It had been uttered on a little hill in Palestine, by a tired man with a matted beard, the last public practitioner of the lost science. He was an itinerant Jewish carpenter and sometime preacher who had met an old Egyptian priest, who had given him white powder gold of the true form, confected at one of the great time temples, all of which were dedicated to Hathor. This one was in the Sinai, and it was here that he was taught the secret laws of reality, which enabled him to raise the dead and heal the sick, and see clearly along the dim halls of time.

He had gone far in his studies, and seen much. And so it was that there came a day when he saw a chance to speak a sermon that would contain the deepest human meaning that there is. So he set forth, in a few hoarsely shouted verses on a hot afternoon, the whole journey of the human soul, and the inner meaning of mankind.

In that sermon was contained the most important prophecy ever made—ten words shouted out while people ate and chatted, and listened with the same casual wonder they might give to a bird of surpassing voice, or a street-corner mountebank with a deck of cards.

After he had been speaking for a while, he saw that he was not gaining their undivided attention, and he therefore tried this: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." He had shouted it at them, but still there was little attention paid. What did it mean, anyway? They did not understand that he spoke not of the spiritually impoverished, but of those who share in spirit the suffering of the poor, and give of themselves to lift others.

He tried again, crying out, “Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.” This had immediately regained the attention of the crowd. In that hard era, when the Jews were chained to the Roman yoke, there was not one of them who did not have reason to mourn.

So he had what he needed, the crucial moment of attention into which he would utter words that would define a future that was still over twelve thousand years away.

He then cried out, “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.”

That had brought silence and questioning glances, then a confused murmur.

Soon after, he had gone down and taken a meal of bread and oil, and some thick wine. Nobody had recorded the words, but they had stayed in many hearts, and, in time, were given to the ages.

Today, though, those of whom they had been spoken had no time to think on them. And they weren’t thinkers, anyway, most of them. They were workers, and the sun was full up and the day was growing warm, and there was a very great deal to be done.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE WORLD OF *THE OMEGA POINT*

What if the world really did end? What would we do? How would the human species come to a close—in terror and chaos, or according to some sort of hidden plan?

If there is a plan, there will also be chaos, that's clear enough. No matter how sublime the plan, people are likely to be quite upset, so I am happy to report that I don't have any specific information that the world will end in 2012, 2020, or, for that matter, anytime soon. But I can assure you that, one day, for one reason or another, planet Earth will become unable to sustain human life, and there are people, or will be people, who will face this distressing inevitability.

So, what happens? Is it all simply random or is there some sort of meaning? Is there an afterlife, perhaps, or some other place we can go, or is our species condemned to join all the others who have emerged here, lived for a while, then died out and been forgotten?

Or, put another way, is the universe essentially random and chaotic, but so large that the emergence of conscious life here and there is more or less inevitable?

Modern science says that human beings are biological machines and that we emerged out of a long period of evolution that is mechanical and random. To make matters even more dolorous, the fossil record demonstrates with terrifying eloquence that gigantic, devastating extinctions are the norm on our innocent-seeming little planet. Add to that the fact that modern science says that death is the end of everything, and a pretty dreary picture emerges.

However, modern science's vision is quite a new approach to the meaning of life, and there are reasons—a few—that enable legitimate speculation that it may not be correct. My own life has unfolded so far outside of what

science tells us that we should expect, I really do wonder if we might not be having, as we live, quite a different experience from what appears to be the case, and one that is only partially explained by a mechanistic view.

Over the course of this little essay, I'll tell some of the stories from my own experience that suggest—at least to me—that life may be much more than it seems, and there may be good reason for our inability to perceive the whole truth of it. Of course, I would be the last person to assert that I'm right and the entire scientific establishment is wrong.

In fact, I'm more than a little embarrassed at ending up so far outside of the mainstream. In terms of getting things like book reviews, for example, it's been quite inconvenient. But I love quiet, and being an outsider certainly brings plenty of that. It also brings undeserved opprobrium and spittle-hazed rage. In my career, I have encountered many pumping carotids, and I confess to taking an evil pleasure in inducing bluster and outrage.

I'm annoying and, unfortunately, I enjoy this. But there's a larger reason. I don't think that I'm wrong about the marvels that have filled my life, and I do want others to enjoy them, as well, and to find the same delightfully light and deep meaning that they have brought me.

It is incredibly freeing to know—as, in my heart, I do—that human life is indeed part of a vast continuum of consciousness that persists after death, and that is woven into the extraordinary glory that is intelligent life in the universe.

So I'm full of joy, because I have had, and am having, a marvelous adventure that suggests that the secular and essentially mechanical vision of ourselves that has become a shorthand and core belief in scientific and intellectual circles, is not true, and that what is true about us is so far beyond even the most optimistic imaginings of the ancients that we actually live on a hidden frontier. Just beyond the lowering clouds that choke the present horizon lies a world of wonders, and the electrifying discovery of what we truly are.

I don't think that, at any time in recorded history, we have been right about our true nature. Certainly, the old Western theocracy that arose out of the dismal Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 is wrong, and probably even more wrong than modern science.

I suppose that leaves me more or less out on a limb—or, more properly, a plank. Without science or religion, I certainly have no established allies.

Maybe secret societies could take up my cause, but so far, no cigar.

It's quite fun on my plank. Out here, if you jump you may just fly. Out here, we are a delicious mystery that goes far beyond the intricacies of physical life, but is also divorced from the guilty weight of conventional religion.

I do not think that we live in the highest civilization ever known, and I think that the modern intellectual enterprise has failed in two fundamental ways. It has been unable, or unwilling, to look at the past objectively, and it has been unable to devise any means to detect the existence of the soul as a part of the physical universe—a measurement that, I think, must be possible. If I am correct, it must also be the foundation of a much truer science than we now know.

I think that the modern failure to realize that energy can itself be conscious is as fundamental to our progress as was the failure of the ancient world to understand the potential of steam power.

Around A.D. 120, Heron of Alexandria invented a device called the aeolipile, a simple steam engine, which was used to open the doors of a temple, and also showed up in Roman playrooms as a toy. The potential of the technology was never understood by the Roman world. Without any ability to see the soul, and penetrate into its reality with technology, modern science is at least as far from understanding the truth about human life as the Romans were from understanding steam power.

If the experience gained from lives like mine is at all true, then we have two forms, one that is active and embedded in the physical body, and another that is contemplative and lives on when the body dies, in an energetic state. I believe that consciousness cycles back and forth between the two, but both are essentially part of physical reality. The soul is not in any way outside of nature, but human death is a transformation into another form, in the same way that a caterpillar becomes a butterfly.

To me, the physical world is far richer than would be suggested by a mechanistic model of reality. I do not believe that religious traditions such as that of resurrection, which emerges in earliest times in the form of the story of Osiris, and continues to the promise of Christ, involve the supernatural at all. They are about living in the physical world in a way that leads to the preservation of individuality when the body dies and consciousness enters the energetic state.

From Osiris to Christ, I wonder if the resurrection stories might not reflect an ancient science of the soul that was lost as our increasing focus on the material world caused us to become soul-blind and thus god-blind and therefore also blind to the most vividly alive aspect of our own being?

As a result of this change in focus, we no longer live to die, we live to live. On the surface, this seems nicer, of course. But that's only on the surface. In that it assumes that death has no meaning, it also assumes that life has no meaning.

I think that it has led to a situation where most of us are completely unprepared for death. So we enter the other world in confusion, clinging to the residue of our physical lives. It has also led us to our fantastic obsession with material existence, and our addictive habits of consumption.

It's interesting to contemplate just how awkward it must be for some people when they arrive on the other side. Christians who find no Saint Peter, or Muslims who are not greeted by dancing virgins—except, perhaps, for the women. Or people like Jean-Paul Sartre or, say, Nietzsche, whose embarrassment must have been quite fantastic. The truth, I suspect, is that on dying we enter another kind of life, but it is, also, ordinary life. Chiefly, it offers an immeasurably detailed reconstruction of our physical experience that can enable us to rise above the whole process altogether and, seeing ourselves with true objectivity, ascend into unimagined realms.

This is what is happening in *The Omega Point*, to the vast numbers of people who are ascending into the enigmatic higher reality. David Ford never quite understands what is happening to them, or why it doesn't happen to him, so he soldier on in his elegantly unsure way, trying to find the sense of his own very different mission.

Certain parts of the Bible, and traditions such as the ancient Egyptian religion, suggest that there may once have been more objective understanding of this other reality, and that it may have been addressed with the lost science of the soul. Among the relevant documents in the Bible, the Gospels are a chronicle of how to live to die in a state of compassion and forgiveness that enables us to let go of the concerns of physical life and ascend, rather than cling to them and end up eventually returning to this state—a fate which cannot possibly be considered as other than a pretty mawkish outcome, once one has become aware of the greater potential that one might have realized.

This is why, in *The Omega Point*, Christ is seen as a scientist. I think that's

exactly what he was, and his miracles reflect not supernatural powers but scientific knowledge of the way the energetic world actually works, and an ability to apply its principles to physical reality, thus effecting cure and defying death.

Developing this assertion, it would therefore be probable that he learned his techniques during the time he spent in Egypt, and that he was specifically chosen because of his Davidic heritage, by practitioners who understood that their own world was coming to an end, and were seeking to bequeath their knowledge to the future. When the Romans tacked that sign on his cross, KING OF THE JEWS, they weren't just being sardonic but also stating a fact: he was the heir to the House of David and thus the mortal enemy of Rome's client-king Herod.

If this knowledge still existed in Jesus' time, it must have already been quite isolated from the central and public stream of Egyptian culture. For example, what we know of Egyptian religion suggests, in its elaborate use of magical implements and ritual, that it was enacting something that had lost its true meaning, somewhat like what happens when children who have observed an adult drive a car play at doing the same thing.

As a child I did this—unfortunately, though, with a real car. I was no more effective at driving down the street at the age of ten than the Egyptians were, I suspect, at engaging conscious energy with their rituals.

During World War II, natives in the mountains of New Guinea were exposed to Western technology for the first time when the U.S. Air Force began building bases in the area. When they saw planes landing and disgorging an unimaginable cornucopia of supplies, they responded by using sympathetic magic. They cleared jungle air strips. They built airplanes out of bamboo and leaves, and wove objects that looked to them like the refrigerators the airmen had. Then they devised ritual movements and sounds that to them mimicked the movements of the U.S. personnel back and forth between the airplanes and the refrigerators.

But when they opened the doors to their “refrigerators,” no beer came out, and I speculate that this could be what was happening when Egyptians concluded their rituals, which mimicked the operations of a much older lost science, but were no more functional than bamboo airplanes.

All was not lost, though, not entirely. Here and there, some traditions had retained at least some of that knowledge, and later in the discussion we will

speculate about who and where.

Nevertheless, for the most part, the science that once gave these rituals potency had been lost, I believe, in a phenomenal upheaval that swamped the world thousands of years before Egyptian civilization even appeared.

Around twelve thousand years ago, the last Ice Age ended. And, as is not uncommon on planet Earth, this was a violent event. As the Laurentide glacier melted, sea levels around the world rose precipitately, and other upheavals caused further chaos.

There is enigmatic evidence—necessarily ignored by modern science—that a much more potent human presence existed then, probably hugging coastlines which are now submerged to a depth of hundreds of feet, and in some cases actually swept into the abyssal deep.

At the same time that this civilization was flourishing in the lowlands of the late Pleistocene, in the highlands of that world, human life was primitive. But go into a mountainous region today. Almost everywhere, you will find there the poorest people in the world. And where are our greatest cities? Hugging the coasts. If the future had only the remains of life in the Himalayas and the Andes to tell us about this world, it would not realize that our civilization had even existed.

Many books have been published about the evidence of a lost civilization, but I would like to mention here just one telling piece of it that is rarely referred to, but which I find fascinating. It is that there are seventeen ancient ritual sites and cities around the world, all situated on the same great circle, with a southern axis point that falls about five hundred miles from the coast of Antarctica, and a northern axis in British Columbia roughly fifteen hundred miles from the present geographic North Pole.

In itself, it is remarkable that places as diverse as the first Sumerian city, Ur, the Giza Plateau, Easter Island, Nazca, and the ancient Indian city of Mohenjo Daro would all be on the same great circle, but they are.

Modern science has no real explanation for this, except that it must have been just random happenstance. But surely that isn't enough of an answer. It's satisfactory only if you want to cling to cherished theories and ignore evidence.

I no longer ignore evidence. The last time I did that, I ended up being dragged out of my house by aliens. The evidence that such things could happen was abundant, but I assumed that it was absurd. So what might have

been a fascinating meeting turned into a screaming confusion for me. It could have been more civilized, surely, but I will never forget the ghastly shock that coursed through me a few days later when my doctor said, “You’ve been raped.” It was so humiliating that it took me twenty years to actually utter those words. To this day, I suffer pain from the injury I sustained on that night, which I mentioned only in passing in *Communion* as the “rectal probe” that has made me such a laughingstock. Rape and laughter don’t actually go together all that well, though, at least not to the victim.

Had I been aware that such things could happen, I would certainly have been more calm, and perhaps the experience would have been less chaotic. Over the eleven years of contact that followed, I ended up in a sort of school, the lessons of which were glimpses into the greater reality in which we actually live. In short, what started out pretty badly became the most precious of treasures. Even the fear became entertaining and profoundly instructive, especially when I realized that the outré little beings I have called “the visitors” found me every bit as terrifying as I did them.

It’s too bad that science has not acknowledged their presence, because, even without direct contact with them, there is a wealth of physical evidence available for study. But they don’t fit our theories of the cosmos. According to modern theory, it is impossible for there to be physical travel across the universe because the distances are too great. But there is also no evidence of where they are from. Maybe they are far stranger even than aliens from another planet.

As our rational culture has matured, it has also become, as is inevitable, more decadent. In science, this decadence finds expression in the fact that we’ve slipped into the trap of putting theory before evidence, which is the core reason that we are missing so much of what is real all around us.

Given the evidence of all the sites along that great circle, for example, it is also likely that, in very ancient times, somebody knew that the Earth was round, had an awareness of its size, was in planetwide communication, and intentionally built these sites on a great circle measured from the physical North and South poles, which, during the cataclysm, moved when the earth’s crust shifted on its mantle.

If such a movement were to have taken place, as Charles Hapgood first postulated and Rand Flem-Ath developed in his book *When the Sky Fell*, the consequences would have been fantastic destruction, a catastrophe beyond

imagining.

But what's so unusual about that? This is planet Earth, where catastrophes beyond imagining happen pretty darned frequently.

An earth movement that great and that sudden would have changed the planet's coastlines—as, in fact, it did. But underwater archaeology is in its infancy. We have barely explored the ancient coastlines of the planet, but what we have explored, as Graham Hancock demonstrates in his book *Underworld*, seems to be populated with enigmatic ruins.

Great catastrophes are ordinary events on Earth, and even mass extinctions are relatively common. Much more common are the smaller disasters that are not classifiable as mass extinctions, and there have been at least two of these just in the past fifteen thousand years.

My story refers to the infamous upheaval that ended the Ice Age 12,600 years ago.

Whether or not a sequel to that disaster is building now is unknown, but certainly something is causing persistent changes in our solar system, and has been for about forty years, and possibly longer.

A Dr. Alexey Dimitriev allegedly published an article in 1997 suggesting that charged particles were entering the solar system from the outside, resulting in changes to all bodies within the solar system. I say “allegedly” because I have been unable to contact Dr. Dimitriev, and there is some evidence that the paper may be a fabrication.

But, in this case, that isn't important. *The Omega Point* is fiction and, frankly, I would be flabbergasted if the world in 2020 was anything like what appears in the book. At the same time, though, more than one ancient calendar points to the immediate future as being a time of great change.

Whether Dimitriev's paper is real or not, there is evidence of increased planetary heating not only on Earth, but also on Mars and Jupiter. Planetologists observed an approximate 1 degree Fahrenheit warming on Mars between 1970 and 1990, and in recent years the Martian polar cap has retreated. An increase in the number of red spots of Jupiter, and other signs on various planetary bodies and moons in our solar system, point to the widespread presence of this phenomenon.

As of this writing, the sun is also acting in an unusual manner, but rather than increasing solar activity, which would be expected if it was being bombarded from the outside, it has become unexpectedly quiet.

At the same time, the amount of observed cometary and asteroid activity in the solar system may have been increasing. Because the amount of observation and the sensitivity of instruments is also increasing, it's difficult to be certain. But when the Shoemaker-Levy comet struck Jupiter in 1994, it was thought to be a thousand-year event. Just fifteen years later, though, another large object struck Jupiter, surprising astronomers. It would never have been noticed, except that the scar it left was photographed by an amateur astronomer. A day before the object's scar was seen on Jupiter on July 20, 2009, a similar scar appeared on Venus. Whether this was the result of an impact is not known, but if it was, then the object that produced it was a large one. Had it struck Earth on July 20 instead of Venus, it would have resulted in a massive planetary catastrophe very much like the one that overtook us 12,600 years ago.

So, are we more than ordinarily exposed to an asteroid strike right now? Truthfully, nobody can be certain, but observation does suggest that there is more debris in the solar system just now.

In my story, by the time 2020 has come around, the amount of material entering it has increased exponentially from where it was in 2012, and as a result the sun has begun to be affected by it.

It is difficult to imagine the scale of what is happening, certainly for those living through it in the story, but as author and readers, we can visualize matters more clearly. A supernova emits two forms of material. The first is a radiation burst that moves at about 90 percent of the speed of light. This generally spreads through space as a gigantic expanding ball of energy. The second is a mass of debris, which moves much more slowly and unevenly, with the densest parts expanding most slowly.

As a result, this expanding cloud has an irregular front, and it is this fact that gives rise to the fundamental premise of the story, that our solar system passed through one node of it 12,600 years ago, and is now entering another.

While there is no certain evidence that this is actually happening, something must be causing the changes we are seeing in the solar system at the present time.

One thing has become clear in the past few years: 12,600 years ago, there was indeed a tremendous upheaval on planet Earth. It hit North America the hardest, and was responsible for the mass extinctions that took place then, including the destruction of the entire human population of North America

that existed at that time, the Clovis culture, and the extinction of no fewer than thirty-five animal genera, including most large animals in North America, such as the American horse, the mammoth, the mastodon, the American camel, and many others.

There are dozens of myths about a time of flooding and upheaval in the world, some of which may date to this very early period.

On May 23, 2007, in the General Assembly of the American Geophysical Union in Acapulco, Mexico, the work of a multiinstitutional twenty-six-member team proposed the theory that just such an impact caused the upheaval that ended the last Ice Age.

They presented substantial evidence of the event, and three of them also published a popular book on the subject, *The Cycle of Cosmic Catastrophes*, which lays out their evidence for the nonscientific reader.

But the event that took place 12,600 years ago was hardly unique in Earth's history. In fact, it is simply one of a continuum of such events.

Approximately 5,200 years ago something extraordinary caused the collapse of Mediterranean civilizations from archaic Greece to Egypt. Terrible drought struck the area. At the same time, in Peru, leafy plants were frozen so quickly that they did not wither—in other words, in a matter of seconds, like frozen food. Subsequently they were covered over by glaciers that remain intact even now.

The climate there went from temperate to extremely cold in a matter of minutes or even seconds, and has remained extremely cold ever since in the area where Professor Lonnie Thompson of the Byrd Polar Research Institute studies these glaciers, in the Andean highlands.

During the same period a man running through an alpine meadow in the Tyrol was overtaken by a blizzard and frozen. He—and the meadow—were then covered by a glacier that melted enough to expose his remains only in 1991, when the mummified form of Otzi the Ice Man was discovered lying in the frost of the retreating glacier.

What sort of event would cause changes this sudden and yet long lasting across the globe? The simple answer is that the universe is a very messy place and even though Earth happens to be packed with a mind-boggling mass of sensitive, intelligent creatures who urgently seek to survive, it is still subject to arbitrary and random catastrophes, and—in terms of geologic time—they are relatively frequent.

This book started with a thought: what if it happens? What if the world really does end for us?

Teresa McDonald of the University of Kansas Natural History Museum says that 99.9 percent of all species that have ever lived are extinct right now, so extinction is certainly the norm—and, in fact, unless we happen to establish ourselves somewhere else in the universe, our time on planet Earth will sooner or later run out. And not only that, there is, in fact, no way at all to determine when this might happen.

If an object that we happen to be able to see collides with the planet, we might have some warning, but there are many perils on Earth and in space—in fact, most—that will come as complete surprises.

But was that always true, and need it still be true?

Conventional modern wisdom asserts that time is immutable, reality is limited to what we can measure now, and that both evolution and civilization display rigid progressions occasionally punctuated by unanticipated changes, which are entirely unpredictable.

However, that may not be entirely true, and it could be very far from true. As an example, there are buried in our past suggestions that somebody understood the world very differently from the way we do today, and perhaps saw a structure in the development of human civilization to which we have become blind.

One of the oddest facts about our past is the number of very long-term calendars that exist, the most famous of which are the Zodiac and the Mayan Long Count calendar. The reason that this is odd is that our modern understanding of the ancient world leaves no room for the need for such calendars, let alone any ability to create them. For example, creating the Zodiac required understanding the precession of the equinoxes, which must necessarily involve thousands of years of observation as the Earth slowly gyrates and the stars its poles point at gradually change. Who could have made such long-term observations and recorded them? No civilization in recorded history has lasted long enough to create such a record.

But then again, our understanding of the past does not have any room in it for the building of cities and sacred sites along the same great circle around the planet, either.

One bit of evidence that cannot be disputed is that the authors of both the Old and New Testaments knew very well which signs of the Zodiac the

books were being written under, and wove this knowledge into their texts.

The Old Testament was written under the sign of Aries, the ram, and the ram is mentioned seventy-two times in it, more than any other animal. But, of course, that could be dismissed as a coincidence.

But not when one realizes that the New Testament was written at the beginning of the next 2,300-year astrological cycle, Pisces, and its primary symbol, even more than the cross, is that of the fish. Jesus is the Fisher of Men. He gathers his apostles from among fishermen. Among early Christians, the universal symbol of recognition was the fish.

The Old Testament that was written under Aries also reflects the demanding, stubborn characteristics of that sign, the exemplar of which is the dour personality of its governing deity, Yahweh. Similarly, Jesus with his message of compassion is characteristically Piscean. In addition, Pisces the fish swims in nurturing, supportive water, so if we are Pisces, then Earth is our water, providing us with everything we need to live.

But not always. At present, we are leaving Pisces and entering Aquarius, and the water that has sustained us so long is being poured out. And indeed, Earth is already being plagued by droughts. In 2008, the southeastern United States came close to a catastrophic drought. In 2009, droughts afflicted much of Asia, parts of Europe and Africa, Mexico and the American Southwest, and the potential for catastrophic drought was reaching an extreme in Australia.

In the February 28, 2009, issue of *The New Scientist*, it was suggested that a 4-degree Centigrade rise in planetary temperatures is likely by the end of the century, with the result that huge areas of Earth, including much of the United States, Africa, India, the Middle East, and most of the Amazon, are going to become much too dry to sustain the populations that now live in those areas. According to James Lovelock, the author of *The Gaia Hypothesis*, the situation is likely to lead to something approaching a 95 percent reduction in the human population of Earth, and, given present worldwide temperature changes, the predicted increase is probably already inevitable. In addition, as ocean currents slow, there could be serious and unpredictable shorter-term weather events, such as ferocious storms and, as the temperature of the planet becomes more even, the slowing and eventual stopping of essential air circulation.

Were air circulation to stop, dozens of cities across the planet would

become unlivable in a matter of weeks.

Obviously, this is a horrific prognosis for the future of man, but there is a different way of looking at it, and in *The Omega Point*, the journey of David Ford, Caroline Light, and the class expresses the importance of ways of thinking that are completely new, and bear no reference to the entire system of values and way of life that have led us to the peril in which we now find ourselves.

The first signs of human industrial activity on Earth become visible during the middle centuries of the Roman Empire, when residue from smelting activities in Britain and Spain was deposited on glaciers in Greenland.

This is also when there was a fundamental change in the way human beings conceived of their lives. For the first time, material well-being became more important to a large social class that also became divorced from spiritual awareness. Previously, material opulence had been part of the ritual presence of leaderships that were both temporal and spiritual. During the great Roman peace, however, there came into being a class of people who were more or less irreligious, and whose interests focused primarily on material wealth. This secular class was focused on material consumption and longevity, not on preparing for an afterlife in which they no longer had any belief. And the more devoted to the material world they became, the less real the soul seemed to them.

After Rome collapsed, the Western world returned to theocracy, but it was not a healthy theocracy. Christ taught the triumph of resurrection, but in A.D. 325, the Council of Nicaea changed the focus of the church from joy at Christ's triumph over death to guilt at our—probably entirely fictional—birth into sin. Prior to Nicaea, Christ had often been portrayed as carrying a magician's wand that promised new life. Now, he was portrayed as suffering on a cross that was our fault.

This change was made for political reasons, because guilty people can be controlled by those who claim the power of forgiveness. As a result Christianity sank into the long trance of guilt and retribution from which it is just beginning to emerge.

Growing wealth in the fifteenth century caused the reemergence of a secular community, followed by a revolt against the oppression of the church. This, in turn, led to a second and more formidable rise of materialism. And now we are at the climax of material civilization. Most of us are either soul

blind or passive to the idea that our lives may matter in some larger way. Most of us live to live, and struggle against death as if it was an absolute and final end, whether we have cherished beliefs about an afterlife or not. We have, in short, gone soul blind, which is another of the core themes of the book.

Largely because of extraordinary, unstoppable population growth, we find ourselves in a situation where only the most heroic efforts, probably already beyond both our capacity and our will, would enable the planet to continue to sustain us.

We are almost exactly in the place anyone watching the stately movement of the Zodiac would expect us to be, and whether anything unusual happens precisely on December 21, 2012, or not, the Mayan Long Count calendar has also been uncannily accurate in predicting vast change during this period.

It is strange enough that these calendars even exist, but far stranger is the fact that they are in any way at all accurate. Even stranger is the fact that there exists knowledge of a great plan of some sort concealed in the Bible.

If modern perceptions of the human past did not make it seem impossible, there would be no question but that people in earlier times possessed deeper understanding of the human situation than we do, and recorded their understanding in long count calendars that can have no purpose other than to mark great cycles of life that are hidden to the modern mind.

In fact, somebody in the past did understand. The Maya understood. The creators of the Zodiac understood. The authors of the Bible understood. But we no longer understand.

But what did they understand, and why did they understand it? Is it possible that they had skills that we no longer possess, such as the skill that is recovered by Herbert Acton and Bartholomew Light in the book, in the jungles of Guatemala?

This gets us to one of the central elements in the story: white powder gold. The existence of this substance was first brought to my attention by an old friend, Laurence Gardner, in his book *Lost Secrets of the Sacred Ark*, which basically asks the question, was the Ark of the Covenant an artifact of an ancient science now lost, and, if so, does it have any relevance now?

Gardner describes a substance the Egyptians called *mfkzt* and the Hebrews *shem*. It was believed to confer great powers of concentration and physical health, and to enable users to enter the world of the gods and confer with

these higher powers. It is depicted in reliefs as a conical white substance, and was apparently created under extremely high heat. A quantity of it was unearthed at a dig on Mount Horeb in the Sinai peninsula by Sir Flinders Petrie in 1904.

Sir Flinders found this substance while excavating the only Egyptian temple ever found outside Egypt. In the 270-foot-long temple he discovered a metallurgist's workshop, and hieroglyphs indicating that the site had been in active use for fifteen hundred years, up to the reign of Akhenaton in 1350 B.C. Most of what Petrie found of the white substance was abandoned at the site and blew away, and both the sample he returned to England and his notes have been lost.

The actual formula for this substance remains lost to history, but it may have been accidentally rediscovered by a farmer called David Hudson while he was attempting to restore some land to arability in Arizona. He was a wealthy and politically conservative man, and had no interest in or awareness of ancient alchemical formulations. The soil was full of salt, so he was using sulfuric acid on it when he noticed that black and red material was appearing in the soil that he could not identify. When it dried, it exploded with a silent flash and disappeared, taking the paper on which he had put it with it.

Naturally, he was intrigued. He soon discovered that the flash did not cause a change of air pressure. So it was a release of light, not an explosion. After crucible reduction, he was left with beads of gold and silver that shattered like glass. But there is no alloy of these elements that is that brittle. So what did he have?

By heating, he eventually created a substance that was a white powder, which was 56 percent lighter than the original material. This could be explained by the material partly volatilizing away, but when he heated it to the point that it fused into the glass container where it was being tested, all of its weight returned.

He had found a very unusual substance, one that Dr. Hal Puthoff, of the Austin Institute for Advanced Studies, said "bends" space and time.

Interestingly, there is some evidence that colloidal gold does help people with rheumatoid arthritis, and can even raise I.Q., but this is different from white powder gold.

Because the modern substance doesn't seem to be as dramatically efficacious as the ancient one, in *The Omega Point* some of the ancient

substance must be acquired first before the material that is used in the story can have its full effect.

This effect involves the ability to see events outside of time, before they have actually happened, as well as the ability to physically move into the past and the future.

Now, one would assume that such things are fiction. My problem with that is that I have actually done them. I've gone into the past and into the future both, and have often had physical experience of events before they happened.

From time to time I've read things in newspapers, only to look again a moment later and find them gone—and then to discover them weeks later in the latest edition of the same paper. Sadly, these little visions have not involved the stock market tables. An annoyance, to be sure.

The first of these involved the Claude Chabrol film, *A Girl Cut in Two*. I saw a listing of it in the *Los Angeles Times* in June of 2008, looked up and said to my wife, “There’s a new Chabrol movie. We’ve got to go.” I then turned back to the paper to find out where it was playing, and the listing had completely disappeared. There was no mention of it in the paper at all. So I went online and discovered that it had not yet been released.

Six weeks later, in August, I saw the same listing again. Naturally we went to the film.

But what had happened? Well, truthfully, I'm not at all sure. It was as if I read a listing from August in June. Since then, this has happened to me three or four times.

It is far from the most extraordinary thing that has ever happened to me involving time. The most amazing of these events took place in March of 1983, when we lived on LaGuardia Place in Manhattan. One rainy Saturday morning, I was crossing Houston Street on the way to the bank when I suddenly heard a terrific creaking and sloshing and clip-clopping in front of me. This symphony passed me and turned the corner, and I turned with it, to see an immense wagon come into view as if out of nowhere. It was stacked with barrels and there was a strong smell of pickles. High atop it sat a man wrapped in a black leather apron. It was being drawn by a huge horse, I assume a dray horse.

Of course, I thought that it was one of the Budweiser Clydesdales, but it was worn and dirty, and the smell was very clearly not beer.

As it passed up the street, I found that LaGuardia Place had changed

entirely. Gone was the street I knew, with modern co-op towers on the northeast side of LaGuardia and Houston. Instead, a man in a derby stood across the street, much closer and in front of a row of smaller buildings. He shouted something, and at the same moment, there was movement to my right, and I turned to see a small woman dressed entirely in black go skittering away from me. Then I saw, coming up what in 1983 was West Broadway, a group of five or six riders on gorgeous horses, looking like some sort of equestrian team.

I became aware of the fact that this was no longer the New York of 1983, but that, somehow, I was seeing the same street corner in the past. I noticed an odd, curved curb at my feet, then a bit of paper in it. I thought, if I get that paper, that'll prove what's happening. But as I bent down, something that felt like ice-cold water seemed to pour right through my body, and with it came a loneliness so intense that, had it persisted for more than a few moments, it might have driven me mad.

The thought came that, if I touched that paper, I would remain here forever, and I froze. Slowly, the sharp smell of coal and the denser stench of manure dissipated. Then the sound of cars returned. When I looked up, everything seemed normal.

Forgetting about the bank, I rushed home, frightened that something was terribly wrong and I might never see my family again. This was before my 1985 close encounter, so I was totally unprepared for anything in the least unusual.

It never happened quite like that again, but I never forgot it. I went to the library and read endless microfiche records of old newspapers, looking for classified ads that might have been placed by people trapped in time. I didn't find anything.

These experiences, though, have led me to think that we are not fixed in time, and that we don't really need any technology more exotic than the human body to move through it.

In *The Omega Point*, movement through time has been developed to an art and a science, and the time machine involved is a mixture of both. It is a scientific device, in that the colors mixed for it contain chemical properties that enable movement through time. But it is also created with love and artistry, and it is the combination of science and art that confers its amazing properties on it.

This is because it is constructed using not the arid principles of modern science, but those of the lost science of the soul, which combines, in my novel and perhaps in reality, a rigorous physical technology with a carefully controlled and immeasurably potent emotional state, the love that Caroline Light needs so badly to succeed, and gets, after a struggle, when her beloved David finally remembers what they shared as children.

Christian principles of love, compassion, and forgiveness are explored throughout the book, and it is love, in the end, that confers on mankind the ability to move on into time, and reestablish our presence in the physical world.

I am not a conventional Christian, but I am certainly a believer in the intelligence and compassionate insights of Jesus, and the meaning of his resurrection. I reject the idea that it was done to free us from some sort of sin. It was an example of what happens when a person lives an ethical life that feeds the soul, and dies without attachment to life's hungers.

One of the most ancient of all human ideas is that there is a judgment after death. The Egyptians saw the soul as being weighed, and in my story, greed, cruelty, and arrogance weigh souls down to the point that, when the body dies, the soul literally drops out of it and ends up imprisoned in the depths of the earth, remaining there, presumably, until the end of time. Other souls—the great majority—which are light enough to rise, ascend into a state that is never described in the book, because its mystery has never really been explored, and perhaps cannot be explored.

So far, the plan described in *The Omega Point* mirrors the one in the Book of Revelation. But then it takes a turn in another direction. In the Sermon on the Mount, which is probably the most profound statement ever made, there is mention that the meek will inherit the earth.

To me, this is promise of some surcease from the ages-long torment that the ordinary human being has experienced at the hands of the more aggressive and powerful. In my story, the great of the world are left hiding in their holes to die, I suppose, a lingering death. The innocent majority ascend, as well as those chosen for the special work of constructing a new home for mankind to move forward in time and continue our ages-long journey toward ecstasy, but this time without the cruel, the avaricious, and the arrogant, only with those who are fully human.

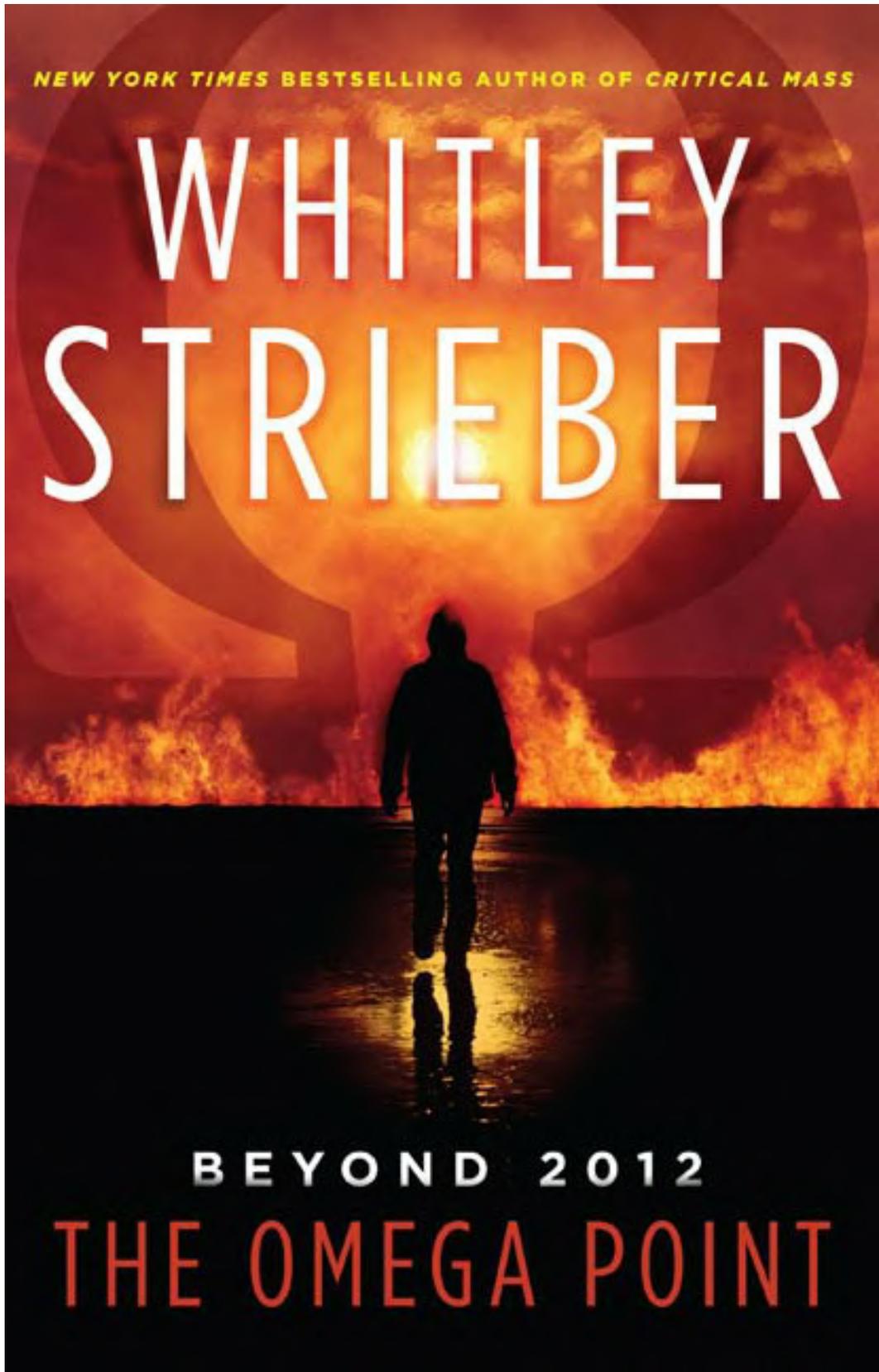
When I was a young man, I had the extraordinary privilege of being an

occasional student of P. L. Travers, who was deeply involved in esoteric work. She taught a powerful ethics of the meek, whom she used to call “the little cottagers,” and this ethic was present not only in her talks but also in the letters I received from her. It affected me profoundly, and I have never forgotten that it is, in the end, the humble man at the bottom of the world, the one who is entirely overlooked by the grand and the powerful, who is forced into war, starved, left to die, ignored, and broken on the wheel of the avarice of the great, who emerges into immortality while, as Jesus put it so succinctly, those who display their excellence receive their reward in life.

Is there really a plan for us, one that brings justice to this unjust world? When one thinks of all the ages of oppression and injustice that define our history, one can only hope that, somewhere in time, the promise of the Sermon on the Mount will indeed be fulfilled. If so, then the earth will wind up in the hands of those who will cherish her, riding her in joy and respect, into the reaches of time.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF CRITICAL MASS

WHITLEY
STRIEBER



BEYOND 2012

THE OMEGA POINT

The SUPER
NATURAL

A NEW VISION OF
THE UNEXPLAINED



Whitley Strieber
and Jeffrey J. Kripal

THE SUPER NATURAL

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the memory of Anne Strieber. We evolved our approach to the super natural together. She contributed three foundational insights. The first is that the close encounter experience is something unknown and must be kept in question. Second, that the question must be deepened and can only be resolved by scientific and academic inquiry. It must no longer be dismissed with assumptions, beliefs, and premature theorizing. Third, that, after reading in excess of two hundred thousand testaments from the public about close encounter experiences, she was able to say with authority that close encounters with apparent aliens often include perceptions of the dead as well.

It is on her rigorous questioning and tireless inquiry that my own insights depend.

—WHITLEY STRIEBER

I dedicate this book to Julie Kripal, whose magnetic hands, night visitations, and general spiritual mojo have opened my mind, and body, to new levels of energy, possibility, and being.

—JEFF KRIPAL

Instead of shunning the darkness, we can face straight into it with an open mind. When we do that, the unknown changes. Fearful things become understandable, and a truth is suggested: the enigmatic presence of the human mind winks back from the dark.

WHITLEY STRIEBER, *COMMUNION*

The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me.

MEISTER ECKHART (1260–1327)

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The Already World

JEFF

They took a little hair off my head and cut my nails. I asked questions in my mind, but before I could verbalize them, they answered back very softly but directly, “We are making a new you.” I asked him, “Are you like angels?” and he replied, “Not as you have been taught.”

AN ANONYMOUS LETTER WRITER IN *THE COMMUNION LETTERS*

I am afraid of this book. There is something about it, something explosive and new. It is not a neutral book. It is an apocalypse of thought waiting for you, the reader, to actualize.

The world will not really end as you turn these pages, of course. Not the real one anyway. Much might well be lost—we hope. You should know that. But more, much more—really everything—might well be gained. In a few words, this is a book about a new world, the next world that has already arrived, that has always been here, whether we have recognized its presence or not.

In the pages that follow, Whitley and I explore the proposal that we are all embedded in a much larger, fiercely alive and richly conscious reality that is only, at best, indirectly addressed by everything that the human species has ever thought or believed. The religions, for example, have been attempts to

look at and engage this conscious reality as if it were primarily concerned with us, but we don't really know that, and in fact we cannot know that. Not at least yet.

Our proposal? To venture outside the present houses of faith without forgetting those family homes or leaving the spirit behind. To embrace science in a new way, by promoting a more generous vision of the full human experience of reality that can embrace and ponder "more stuff," especially the wild, fantastic stuff that shouts, glows, and zaps in these pages. And, above all, to understand, to *really* understand that we are already and always have been living in a super natural world, that we ourselves are highly evolved prisms or mediums of this super nature coming into consciousness, and that many of the things that we are constantly told are impossible are in fact not only possible but also the whispered secrets of what we are, where we are, and why we are here. This is a book about that Already World.

To my knowledge, nothing like it has ever been attempted. Here, one of the most widely read figures in UFO and abduction literature and a seasoned (take that either way) professor of comparative religion sit down to encounter each other's thought—seriously and respectfully. As the author of the twentieth century's most influential and intimate description of an abduction event, *Communion* (1987), Whitley sets on our shared table his visions of alien spectral figures that seemed at once physical and not physical, at once a thing and a thought, at once sexual and spiritual, at once traumatic and ecstatic. I bring the practices of the professional study of religion to the table in order to explain what historians of religion have written about these paradoxical things (it turns out, *a lot*) and how we might make sense of them without surrendering our critical faculties and understandable skepticism. We work in tandem. We read each other. We rewrite our chapters in the light of what the other has written. In the process, we rewrite ourselves.

The text is at once intimate and professional, both in content and form. Whitley, far from being what he has been portrayed in the media—that is, an advocate for belief in alien abduction—reveals himself in his chapters as a questioning and self-critical nonreligious but spiritual man, telling his story as he has lived it, as a journey through unexplained but extremely powerful perceptions. I take the role of the trained comparativist, framing my responses to Whitley's narrative through the tools of my trade. I introduce technical terms. I use footnotes. I talk history. I play the professor. I

demonstrate how the modern experience of the alien coming down from the sky *can* be compared to the ancient experience of the god descending from the heavens, but not in the ways that are commonly accepted today: “Not as you have been taught,” as the letter writer (and now you, as the reader of that letter) is telepathically told in our opening epigraph.

Most of all, I engage Whitley’s thought as an intuitive set of comparative and interpretive practices. I demonstrate how Whitley has, all along, been offering us a most radical theory of religion and the human spirit. I make explicit the principles that are implicit in his writing and give these the names and nuances that have been developed in the study of religion over the last two hundred years. Whitley in turn challenges me and, by extension, my field with experienced realities that few intellectuals are prepared to admit exist, much less are willing to study and try to understand: things like the imagination’s ability to materialize its content in the physical environment, a home invasion and an implant, the human soul as a real form of energy that is not dependent on the body-brain for its existence, and an emergent mythology that is not entirely imaginary.

As my initial invocation of an apocalypse of thought makes clear, neither of us takes this conversation lightly. Both of us have known professional rejection, religious hate campaigns, censorship, and outright character slander for what we have sincerely thought out loud in the public square. We know perfectly well that what we think cannot be slotted into the present order of scientific knowledge and religious belief. We will not pretend otherwise.

Nevertheless, we want to speak clearly and respectfully to both the open-minded skeptic and the open-minded believer, as we think both have something important to bring to the table. And are we not all believers and skeptics at different moments? The final hope and intended result of this book is not yet another set of pat answers or clear conclusions about strange things. We have no such easy or settled answers. Our intentions for this book are more humble. We want to model a different sort of conversation about the importance of experienced anomalies, one that is more evenhanded, more careful, more intellectually generous, and so more useful.

We want to shift the conversation.

What to Say on a Plane

You have probably heard of Whitley Strieber and know something about what he does. You probably have no idea who I am or what I do. I am not at all sure what to tell you, either.

It is always a problem. I am on a plane. The person sitting next to me asks, “So what do you do?” I quietly groan inside, as I know this will not go well. “I am a professor.” That’s true enough, but it is also a dodge. I have no idea why I keep using it, since it *never* works. The next question is always the same: “So what do you teach?” I’ve tried everything: “religion” (not really true), “comparative religion” (a little better), “the history of religions” (a very accurate but uncommon expression) and, finally, “really weird shit” (very accurate, sometimes funny, and immediately understandable). But nothing works in the end. The last response simply elicits a request to be a bit more precise about the weirdness. I eventually have to utter the word “religion.” The moment I do, the person puts me, consciously or unconsciously, in a box of his or her choice: the box of the preacher, the believer, or the kook. There is nowhere to go now. The conversation has ended, and “religion” has killed it.

Still, there is an answer to the question of what I do. *I compare things*. To be more precise, as a historian of religions, I compare fantastic states of mind and energy and their symbolic expressions in human history, literature, religion, and art.

These fantastic expressions often appear to issue from, point to, or even try to conjure some other realm or dimension. As such, they commonly violate our assumptions about how the world works. First and foremost, they commonly challenge our most basic assumption that the human being is a subject “in here” looking at a world “out there.” Something might zap the body with bizarre energies that in turn affects technology in the immediate environment: the inside now literally resonates with the outside. Or the person might become endowed—temporarily or permanently—with astonishing psychical capacities, X-Men style, that provide accurate information about the empirical world, say, the precise details of a brother’s future funeral, the distant location of a husband killed in a car accident, or the

moment-by-moment development of a neighborhood fire miles away in another city.¹

The historical record is as vast as it is consistent with respect to these real-world superpowers. In every culture of which we have some adequate historical record, we encounter spiritually radiated individuals with miraculous healing capacities, telepathic gifts (what was once called the “reading of hearts”), precognitive abilities (traditionally known as divination or prophecy), clairvoyance (seeing objects or events at a distance in space or time), even, believe it or not, apparent literal floating or flight (levitation). Forget Hollywood. Forget the comic books. Superpowers have been with us for millennia, and they are *real* in the simple sense that people experience them all the time and have reported their effects throughout history.

Some of the remembered effects of these fantastic states of mind and energy have been taken up by extremely elaborate social, political, and artistic processes and have been fashioned by communities into mythical, ritual, and institutional complexes that have fundamentally changed human history. We call these “religions.”

Back to the plane and my imagined conversation partner. I suppose I do not really compare these later complexes, these “religions.” Rather, I collect and compare the earlier building blocks, the anomalous events or extraordinary experiences that may (or may not) eventually lead to a religious belief or institution.² These anomalous building blocks, these tiny personal religions before religion, are historical facts, as real and as important as any other recurring historical fact. *They happen*. What they actually *are* is quite another matter. But here is the thing. If you resist the temptation to believe these events (that is, provide them with some definite religious category, judgment, or interpretation) but instead collect them, arrange them into patterns, and put them all on a flat, fair table to analyze, they remain “super” enough. But they no longer appear to be so odd, and they are certainly no longer “anecdotal,” as the debunkers like to label them (as if that intellectual cop-out explains anything at all). Quite the opposite, these super states begin to look like universal, if always morphing, attributes of a shared human mindspace. They begin to look, well, *natural*.

And that is what I really do. I compare fantastic states of mind and energy in order to catch a glimpse of our own super nature, of our own super

natural world.

I wish I could say that on a plane.

Meeting Whitley

I first met Whitley in a Walmart in western Pennsylvania. Well, okay, it wasn't really Whitley. It was one of his books, which I saw near the checkout counter. It was probably around 1995 or so, so it was most likely one of his nonfiction books reflecting back on the *Communion* phenomenon. At this point I had no real interest in the book, in the subject of alien abductions, or in the broader UFO phenomenon. None of these things registered in my mind as potential objects of interest, much less of systematic study and professional analysis.

That all changed around 2009 or so, when I picked up *Communion* at the recommendation of a number of colleagues who learned that I was working on a book on the paranormal and popular culture. *Communion*, of course, is the book that recounts Whitley's experience of what he calls "the visitors" during the Christmas holidays of 1985.

What struck me about the book were the various ways that Whitley was engaging my own professional discipline in order to make sense of his traumatic openings and bizarre visions. Basically, he was reading his own abduction experiences by comparing them to similar accounts in the broader history of religions. Out of existential necessity and the transcendent traumas of his own immediate experience, he was implicitly, intuitively practicing the comparative study of religion.

I decided to look and listen. I reminded myself that, as a historian of religions interested in comparative mystical literature, especially of the erotic sort (this is what I wrote about for twenty years), I had some responsibility to do exactly this. After all, if *Communion* is not a piece of modern erotic mystical literature, then I do not know what it is. I'll explain why in due time.

But there was more. It also seemed obvious to me that, *whatever* the ultimate nature of Whitley's experiences, one thing was certain: these types of extreme events lie at the neurological, psychological, perhaps even electromagnetic origins of many basic religious beliefs that are distributed around the world and have become the building blocks of the religions

themselves for millennia. I am thinking here, for example, of the countless mystical encounters with “light,” “fire,” “radiance,” or “power,” of the magical or parapsychological capacities attributed to shamans and religious prodigies, or the widespread belief in a separable soul and its ability to leave the body. The latter is an especially common experience that has led in turn to countless belief systems around the immortality or reincarnation of the soul and its various subtle bodies or spiritual “vehicles.” If one is interested in how religions develop, then one should be keenly interested in exactly these sorts of extreme experiences, wherever one finds them.

I found them in Whitley. Gradually, over the last five years, I have come to consider him and *Communion* as litmus tests for my field. I have decided that if we, as scholars of religion, cannot take this text seriously, if we cannot interpret it in some satisfying fashion, if we cannot make some sense of this man’s honest descriptions of his traumatic, transcendent experiences, then we have no business trying to understand his spiritual ancestors in the historical record. We either put up here, or we shut up there.

I decided to put up.

The Wastebasket Problem

My engagement with Whitley is also part of a conscious research strategy. In his pioneering book *UFOs: Operation Trojan Horse* (1970), John Keel encouraged us almost a half-century ago to stop focusing on the light shows in the sky and start looking closely at the effects that these phenomena have on the witnesses and contactees. The real meaning and purpose of the UFO phenomenon, Keel felt, is not in some machine in the sky. It is in the people who encounter these strange lights and are transformed by them. *The secret of contact lies in the contactee.*

As a historian of religions, I am committed to the human context of any and all religious experience. Whatever the ultimate origin of such events might be, we know of *no* religious experience, scriptural text, or revelation that did not come through a human being or human community. The UFO phenomenon, of course, much like the human experience of the gods and revelation (indeed, *as* another human experience of the gods and revelation), might end up having something fundamental to do with the nonhuman, the

superhuman, or the future-human. That remains to be seen. But, as researchers, we must begin somewhere, and it is better to begin with what one does know and can study than with what one does not know and cannot study.

Which leads me to “the wastebasket problem.”³ Something like the UFO phenomenon is not a single thing. It is a broad set of things that are constantly being confused and mixed up. It is a “wastebasket” category, by which I mean that “UFO” is an umbrella term that encodes a particular cold war military history and encompasses very diverse historical facts, institutions, and experiential events.

Under this broad umbrella, for example, we find: millennia-old folklore currents, particularly around the abductions and otherworlds of faerie lore, as famously pointed out by Jacques Vallee; the physiological condition of sleep paralysis and what my colleague David Hufford calls the “supernatural assault”; elements of traditional Catholic and now Evangelical demonology and angelology; various ancient Gnostic and early modern esoteric teachings; more recent Theosophical and New Age beliefs and channeling practices (significantly, it appears that the early UFO contactee communities of the 1950s helped shape the earlier language of the “channel,” from medical clairvoyant Edgar Cayce, into its contemporary use⁴); real secret military projects in multiple countries; U.S. intelligence misinformation campaigns; faked crashes and orchestrated hoaxes; a few modern UFO religions and at least one suicide cult (Heaven’s Gate); culturally filtered encounters with balls of apparently conscious plasmalike light variously interpreted as ghost riders, souls, witches, and now UFOs; near-death experiences involving encounters with similar conscious light forms and subsequent “electrified” human bodies that affect electronics and electrical equipment in the environment; a whole range of parapsychological phenomena, including and especially telepathy; perceptual mistakes involving natural meteorological and astronomical phenomena and top-secret military technology; hard to dismiss physical sightings by individuals and large groups, including military professionals and government officials;⁵ the stranger details of modern apparitions of the Virgin Mary, some of which eerily reproduce the specific behavior of flying saucers; psychedelia of various sorts, especially around the “little people” and hyperdimensional “elves” of DMT (dimethyltryptamine)

and Amazonian ayahuasca shamanism; and literally—and this is no exaggeration—hundreds of thousands of individual contact and abduction experiences, often in bed and often heavily sexualized.

Are all of these things really the same thing? No. Are they somehow nevertheless related? Sometimes. So how do we determine which is which, what belongs where, what to compare with what in order to get where? What should be on our table, for whose interests, and toward what goal or purpose?

To take the most obvious example, it is often assumed that the “things seen in the sky” have some relationship to the occult erotic encounters in bed with various discarnate beings. But this, in fact, is not at all clear. These two sets of events *can* be related within a particular narrative or mythical framework, but this does not require any universal causal relationship between the two, as if the former were somehow always causing the latter. Maybe in some cases they are related. Maybe in others they are not. But certainly not all things seen in the sky are related to all things seen and experienced in the abduction literature.

The UFO phenomenon is confusing, then, first and foremost because we are using a single *very* loose comparative category to collect, classify, and interpret what are probably completely different things. That some of the things in the wastebasket (say, the military disinformation campaigns) appear to be actively mimicking and dissimulating some of the other things in the wastebasket (say, the genuine unexplained aerial phenomena) hardly helps the matter. It only shakes up the wastebasket and makes it messier and more confused.

There is a way forward, though, and we will take it here. That way forward consists of (a) acknowledging the obvious presence of various military-, intelligence-, and security-state measures at work in the cold war history of the UFO phenomenon (the acronym *does*, after all, come from the American military), but (b) setting these aside in order to move beyond and past them to the much older and deeper roots of the encounters in the global history of mystical and esoteric literature. This simple move solves many problems all at once. It takes us out of areas that this author has no authority over, no knowledge of, and no interest in. It also cleans up *a lot* on our table. Moreover, it allows us to focus on those subjects that we really do know something about and that we can actually study. Here all of those subjects crystallize in a single subject: Whitley Strieber.

How (Not) to Control What's on the Table

There are two basic problems anyone must confront when one attempts to make some sense of this fantastic material. And they come at the reader from opposite directions.

From the first direction, which is the more elite and formidable challenge, one confronts the ideological debunker (as opposed to the fair and open-minded skeptic), standard scientist, or conventional materialist who seeks to protect a flatland materialist worldview by simply *keeping off the table* all of the fantastic stuff that suggests that we are living in a super natural world that is anything but flat. There are many protective strategies employed here. Five of the most common are: (1) the automatic conflation or unconscious identification of science with materialist interpretations of science; (2) the invocation of the adjective “anecdotal” to dismiss these events as somehow meaningless and not part of the real empirical experienced world; (3) a naive understanding of mind that classifies all visionary phenomena as simple “imaginary” products of brain matter (without the slightest clue how this works); (4) the public shaming of sincere and serious people, from all walks of life, who see or say otherwise; and, related to the last, (5) a certain historical amnesia with respect to all of those scientists and intellectuals who have been fascinated by the unexplained and have seen these phenomena not as meaningless anecdotes to dismiss and demean but as important clues to a future superscience.

At the end of the day, though, most of these objections boil down to a simple (and simplistic) attempt *to control what is on the table* so that the only permissible evidence left there is that evidence that supports the materialist assumptions. It is very easy to explain all of reality if you get to define what that “all” is. It is very easy to explain everything on the table if you have just taken off the table everything that you cannot explain.

Nevertheless, Whitley and I consider the materialist objections to be serious objections. They are certainly the most successful objections. Accordingly, we take them seriously, and we will be addressing them at considerable length as we proceed with our conversation.

How (Not) to Compare What's on the Table

So that is the first basic problem. It will take the book to answer it adequately. There is another problem that can be dealt with more quickly. From the second direction, one confronts the true believer who naively literalizes or mechanizes the UFO visionary encounters and so further confuses what is on the table. Intellectually speaking, this second problem is not as formidable as the first, but it is nevertheless important to address and understand, since it, too, has worked to prevent any adequate public conversation.

This book is my public engagement with what I have elsewhere called the comparative practices of popular culture. By the latter expression, I mean those comparisons performed by individuals who are not professionally trained to compare across cultures and times.⁶ I have learned a great deal from these writers. I am grateful, particularly for how they often venture into ideas and areas that no professional historian would dare go, not at least in public. I love that about them.

Having said that, there are other aspects of the comparative practices of popular culture that make me wince, or groan, and that need to be challenged, or at least qualified and better nuanced. I am thinking in particular of two basic ways that individuals have been comparing the ufological material for the last half-century or so. Both are understandable strategies, but both are also flawed. We will need to talk about them in these pages, and we cannot talk about them if they do not have names. So let us call these two strategies *reductive comparison* and *religious comparison*.

Reductive comparison can be pictured as a straight arrow moving from right to left, that is, from a present worldview to a past one. Religious comparison can be thought of as an equally straight arrow moving from the left to the right, that is, from a past worldview to a present one. As the reversed arrow imagery suggests, these two comparative practices are really not so different from each other. Which is another way of saying that they make the same mistake, if in opposite directions.

Here is how.

Reductive comparison is best exemplified in figures like Erich von Däniken, author of *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968), and his followers. This

kind of comparison uncritically assumes the truth and completeness of the present Western worldview and so reads all religious phenomena of the past as misinterpretations of what can only be properly understood from the modern Western scientific worldview. The comparison is “reductive” in the sense that it reduces the surface or mistaken truths of the past worldview to the fuller and deeper truth of the present worldview.

The modern Western worldview has been dominated for the last century or so (a mere blink or wink in the bigger picture) by what has been called “instrumental reason,” so named because it wants to turn everything into an instrument or technology. This worldview is materialistic and mechanistic, that is, it insists that all of reality is nothing but matter (that’s the materialism part), and that this matter operates through machinelike mathematical laws (that’s the mechanism part). The same worldview also commonly asserts that the *only* reliable way to know something about reality is through the scientific method and, more specifically, through mathematics. If something cannot be turned into an object or “thing,” replicated and controlled in a laboratory, and measured (that is, assigned a number or mathematical form), it cannot be considered real and so does not deserve our attention or respect. That is a bit of an exaggeration, but not much of one.

The worldview of conventional science, technology, and instrumental reason, of course, is an extremely powerful and useful one. I am by no means against any of this. Quite the opposite. But what is useful is not at all the same thing as what is. Where things go wrong, then, is when individuals take this very modern and very practical way of knowing something about the world and assume that it represents the *whole* world.

Things go more badly still when individuals (who have no training in history or the study of religion) project these very recent (and no doubt very temporary) assumptions backward into the distant past and advance highly speculative mechanistic and materialistic scenarios. So the universally attested phenomena of magic—whereby a mental event “in here” is astonishingly correlated with a physical event “out there”—becomes nothing more than the misinterpreted effects of an advanced technology. Gods descending from the sky to bestow cultural or practical knowledge become ancient astronauts. Chinese dragons become misperceived spaceships. Mayan funerary art illustrates a rocket ship taking off. And so on. In each case, a religious expression is “reduced” to a distorted technological or material fact.

On the surface, these comparisons are provocative and even sometimes attractive, since the connection that they draw between ancient gods and the modern UFO phenomenon is in fact a plausible one. There *are* some genuinely uncanny comparisons to be drawn here. Still, the way that this approach handles ancient religious texts and artifacts, that is, as relatively unproblematic records of real historical events (records which few if any of the reductive comparativists can actually read in their original languages) is extremely naive.

Moreover, and more seriously still, the *direction* and *meaning* of the connections and comparisons drawn are far from clear or obvious. I mean, why read ancient religious texts through the prism of the UFO as ultra-modern machine? Why not read modern UFO encounters through the prism of ancient religious texts, that is, as discarnate souls, modern gods, or revelation events? In the end, there is no good reason to assume that we just happen to be living in the historical moment that has the privileged view of things. Indeed, there is every clear and good reason to assume that this is not the case.

Religious comparisons—best exemplified in the writing of various Evangelical and fundamentalist authors who interpret UFOs and aliens as portents of the end of the world and/or as demons—make the exact opposite comparative move. They uncritically assume the truth and completeness of a past worldview (in this case, a diverse collection of ancient Near Eastern cultures embedded in the biblical texts) and read all the UFO phenomena of the present from these past mythical and religious assumptions.

The ancient biblical worldview was dominated by the assumed presence of invading spirits and demons, which functioned as the standard explanation at that time for disease and mental illness. Hence possession was understood to be the cause of the illness and exorcism was the cure. More problematic still, such demons also entered the early Christian practices of “comparing religions.” In these early comparative practices of popular culture, the gods of other peoples and cultures were not genuine gods or sincere expressions of some greater God. They were demons. They were evil. These demonic readings, then, made good emotional sense of the destructive aspects of disease and mental illness, but they also functioned as a way of literally demonizing other religious communities. This same demonic reading of other

people's religious experiences would also lead to later historical horrors, like the early modern persecution of witches in Europe and colonial America.

Unfortunately, that is not an exaggeration at all.

Having said all of that, there are aspects of both the reductive and religious comparisons that are attractive and that actually work to our benefit in particular contexts.

To take a single example (we will get to others in the pages that follow), it *is* remarkable and surely significant that particular religious visions of the past look like visions of some kind of living machine or conscious technology.⁷ The famous vision of Ezekiel in the first few chapters of the biblical book of the same name is a very good example. The Jewish traditions have understood those chapters as revealed descriptions of a divine "chariot" and have made them central to their own versions of the mystical life, hence the "chariot mysticism" of ancient Judaism. But, clearly, whatever the prophet saw within his own "abduction" experience, it was no chariot. Not even close. Any honest reader can see that, immediately. Unsurprisingly, the biblical book itself never uses the word "chariot."

It is also worth keeping in mind here that the Jewish tradition has long recognized that the first chapters of Ezekiel are among the strangest and most dangerous chapters in the entire Hebrew Bible. Moreover, it has often sought to restrict access to them, particularly among the young and unprepared. There is even a well-known rabbinic text that tells about a child who accidentally read these chapters and was consumed by fire that burst from the holy pages. We need not be Jewish or Hebrew readers to detect an important lesson there.

But even with the conscious machines of the history of religions we have to be very careful. Something like the very traditional Jewish (mis)metaphor of the chariot, after all, should give us deep pause, as the rabbis, kabbalists, and ancient readers who invoked it were doing more or less what the modern reductive comparisons are doing today. They were taking the cutting-edge technology of their own place and time (in their case, the chariot) and reading it into an extraordinary visionary scene where it really does not work or belong. Clearly, when individuals invoke "spaceships," "ancient astronauts," and "extraterrestrials" today (all aspects of our present modernist culture and science-fiction literature) to describe

past visionary events, they are doing the same thing. Basically, they are invoking chariots. They are drawing the same straight arrow from their own relative present to some past event or text. They are misreading the past through the lens of the present. They are doing something similar, of course, when they read modern UFO encounters as ultramodern machines. Here they are misreading the present through the lens of the present.

And although the overwhelming consensus of scholarship on the Hebrew Bible is that the first few chapters of Ezekiel record an actual reported vision, do we need to be reminded that a text is not the same thing as a historical event, that stories in texts, even biblical texts, often never happened at all?

The religious comparisons can also be helpful, particularly to the extent that they work to challenge the simplistic technological readings of the reductive comparisons. The latter “nuts and bolts” readings of UFOs (whereby the UFO is a physical, objective machine), for example, inevitably cherry pick the ufological literature and concentrate on those encounters or sightings that look very much like technological encounters. Many of them indeed do.

But then what to do with the simple facts that these things in the sky do things that no machine can do, that they behave more like thoughts than things? And what to do with the little and big humanoids and, as John Keel continuously reminded us in order to *really* mess things up, the hairy and winged monsters often seen in association with the crafts? And this is before we get to the elaborate descriptions of the humanoids’ apparent abilities to walk through walls, float, read minds, paralyze people, disappear into thin air, and so on. Are not all of these abilities traditional magical powers? And are not all of these powers common features of the gods in cultures like ancient Greece and traditional Hindu India?⁸ In other words, these encounters *do* look like religious encounters. The religious comparisons, like the reductive comparisons, have a real point.

But the question remains: Which way do we shoot the arrow of comparison and interpretation?

The Future of the Past

The short answer is: “both ways.”

The longer answer is: “it’s complicated.”

The truth is that the comparative practices that Whitley and I will be performing in the pages that follow are neither purely reductive nor religious. We will privilege neither our modern world’s materialism and mechanisms nor the mythical and religious assumptions of some past worldview, since all of these are clearly relative to their place and time, *as is our own*. It is precisely this acute awareness of the relativity of any perspective, of *any* point in space-time, that makes things so complicated and rich.

We will draw comparative lines between the past and the present, then, but we will “shoot the arrow both ways.” By doing this, we will allow the religious comparisons to challenge the reductive ones, and we will allow the reductive comparisons to challenge the religious ones. But we will privilege neither. If we need a visual image here, we might replace our two straight arrows with a time loop circling back and forth as it moves up and forward in a kind of spiraling progression. Not a straight arrow but an upward spiral, then.

Elsewhere, I have written of “the future of the past” to capture this progressive spiraling model of historical thinking and interpretation.⁹ By this paradoxical expression, I mean that we need to come to terms with the simple fact that, yes, we can now read the past in ways that past peoples could not read their own presents. *Our future changes the meanings of their past*. But any adequate understanding of their past will also inevitably challenge our own present assumptions about the world *and so change the meanings of our present*. There is no straight arrow here. There is a kind of recurring time loop, a constant return to the past in order to reassess and recalibrate the present toward a different kind of future. Anyone who works seriously with historical materials is familiar with these interpretive paradoxes.

Think this is the stuff of academic eggheads and so irrelevant to the subject at hand? Think again. These sorts of interpretive paradoxes and historical loops are *integral features of the contact experiences themselves*. Indeed, the contact literature has only radicalized the possibilities of this future of the past. In many of these events, after all, the implication is that *we* are in the past being visited by future humans, who are contacting and abducting us toward, we can only assume (or hope), some kind of

recalibration or adjustment.¹⁰ Consider lines like this one, from Whitley's *The Secret School*: "The vague mythological beings of the past that have focused into the aliens of the present will soon become our selves as we become the very time travelers whose shadows haunt all our history, including the present."¹¹

That is the kind of mind-bending comparative practice that we are after here. To really name it, define it, and practice it, however, will take the work of both an experiencer and a theorist working together, in deep conversation and mutual criticism. This is the spirit of our undertaking. Our mutual wager is that, by "shooting the arrow both ways," by practicing the paradoxes of "the future of the past," by "sitting with the question" instead of landing on some stock rational or religious answer, a *third* kind of gnosis or new superknowledge will eventually emerge, one that can encounter a strange being in the bedroom without labeling that presence an angel *or* an alien, much less a demon, hallucination, or anecdote.¹² "Not as you have been taught."

Hence our title: *The Super Natural*. With this little provocation, effected by the tiniest and humblest of moves (a single thumb tap on the laptop's space bar), we move beyond both the flatland materialism of scientism (the natural) and the naive literalisms of certain types of religion (the supernatural). Within that tiny gap or space, we seek another different kind of answer or, at the very least, another way of asking the questions, one that is deeply material and deeply spiritual at the same time.

Hence the new world that has arrived with this book but that has also always been here. Hence the Already World, the natural world that is really and truly a super natural world.



Into the Woods

WHITLEY

The human mind spent many thousands of years explaining the mysteries and vagaries of nature as the outcomes of various enchantments, the actions of gods and demons in human affairs, to be managed by ritual and worship. The Renaissance brought reason, the enlightenment that followed the freeing disciplines of structured academic inquiry and scientific method. Gradually, superstitions about everything from seasonal changes to the appearance of diseases and natural disasters and much else gave way to logic and scientific understanding.

However, there is one area that remains outside of understanding, and which is by far the most culturally potent of them all. In the past it manifested in the form of mysterious beings, strange lights, and ghostly presences. St. Paul encountered it on the road to Damascus when he was startled by a flash of light and a voice, an event that changed the world. Earlier, Moses encountered it in the form of a burning bush, with equally dramatic effect on our culture. It is what we now call the supernatural. It has reemerged in the form of the alien and UFO stories that abound in our time, and threatens to degenerate into a new superstition if it does not receive the study necessary to determine what it actually is.

Previously, this aspect of nature—for that is what it is—had to be entirely rejected as there was no avenue of approach that would enable empirical study of it, and therefore any acknowledgment of it by science threatened the possibility that its manifestations would be taken to be what we believed them to be, simply because they were being studied.

That has changed. Moses, Paul, and all the others who encountered such manifestations in the past saw something, just as people who encounter UFOs, orbs of light, and aliens do today. I have seen them and interacted with them for years. Millions of others have. What we are seeing now is very much what our ancestors saw. The only things new are the names, and with them a visual grammar that fits our imagination, now directed toward creatures from other planets rather than heaven and hell. But one thing is clear: what we see now is just as convincing of its otherness to us as what our ancestors saw was to them.

As this point in our intellectual and scientific evolution, it seems possible to study this material without recourse to beliefs, old or new. We have both the intellectual and scientific tools needed to, in effect, bring reason to enchantment. Now, we can understand.

In February of 2015, presidential adviser John Podesta tweeted that his greatest regret of 2014 was that he had failed to get the government to release the information it possesses about UFOs. But how can such information be released into the current intellectual and scientific climate? We are not prepared to respond meaningfully, with the result that the information is likely to be taken by the public at face value as proof that aliens are here.

Not too surprising. Given the number of unusual sightings and encounters that have taken place over the past seventy years, most people assume that UFOs mean extraterrestrials. But do they? In fact, we don't yet know enough to be certain of anything in this area, except that unexplained objects do occasionally appear in the sky and many people, me included, have experiences that seem to involve interaction with nonhuman beings.

Having been the object of their visitations over a period of years, and the recipient of hundreds of thousands of narratives from others who had similar experiences, I wish to suggest from the outset that the phenomenon is much larger than any of the usual explanations, including alien visitation and such interpretations as brain seizure. It is far richer, more complex, and more ambiguous than we commonly suppose, and is, with or without governmental

revelations about UFOs, in the process of changing us and our world, as it has been doing not just since the first modern flying saucer sightings seventy years ago, but also for thousands of years, and maybe ever since we first noticed the stars in the night, and wondered at the flicker of moonlight on restless water, or the mysterious passage of the sun.

Assuming that UFOs and alien encounters are related, it is not simply a matter of beings from another planet coming here as explorers. They did not act, in my encounters with them, like explorers in any easily understood sense, nor, in my experience, are they aliens in the way that is commonly assumed. But that does not mean they emerge from our minds and nowhere else, nor does it mean that the one possible explanation that cannot be true is that they are beings who originated on other planets.

This universe is absolutely immense and incredibly ancient. I would never dismiss the idea that aliens from other planets are here, or may come here. It's just that this is not proven, at least not outside the community of secret-keepers to which Mr. Podesta referred in his tweet, and until there is proof, it is only one of a number of possibilities. More important, even if aliens are riding around in the unidentified flying objects that Mr. Podesta claims are the target of so much secrecy, an alien presence here is unlikely to be the whole of it.

“They” represent the largest, strangest, most dangerous, and potentially most fruitful experience humanity has ever faced—as, indeed, they always have. What “they” are, though, is an unanswered question. Whatever they are, my persistence in attempting to interact with them resulted in what I can interpret as a structured process during which they at once led me to deeper understanding and more provocative questions. This has led me to explore in ways that seem new but evolved out of age-old methods of truth-seeking, the nature of the world, the reality of experience, and, above all, the mystery of what we are. Most of my nonfiction from *Communion* on reflects my attempts to make sense of this. I would hope that my focus, in this text, will signal that a greater clarity has emerged out of these years of research and reflection.

It is one thing for the government to reveal that UFOs are intelligently guided objects of unknown origin and another to assume that this means that “they” are here. Should we ever come into more general contact with what I encountered—assuming that is even possible—they will not be offering us

plans for a starship, or a trade in exotic electronics. What will be on offer, I would suggest, is a journey into a whole new understanding of reality and the part we play in it. The “alien” is as much a herald from the dark of the universe as it is a signal from the depths of our own minds. The discovery of the reality behind UFO and alien apparitions and the discovery of our own truth will prove to be profoundly intertwined. When this discovery is finally made, we will at that moment become immeasurably larger. Free at last from the constricted vision that now so limits us, we will begin the journey toward which we have been struggling from time immemorial, into a new relationship with the universe and a new understanding of mind and the natural world.

No matter what sort of disclosures may be made, there will prove to be no government documents that define for us the new world that is on offer. As we collectively enter the school that will be opening its doors to us, we will find that we have been limiting our own vision of reality, and that the limits we have set simply do not apply.

I don't believe in the supernatural or the paranormal, but I do feel strongly that these terms are used in our materially focused culture to explain away phenomena that are in some way real, but which have so far eluded understanding.

I have lived a life filled with such phenomena and often encounter ghosts, aliens, and all manner of apparently supernatural beings. To make this more difficult, at least for me, there has been a wealth of personal witness to my experiences. Had it not been for the friends who had experiences, for example, at my cabin in upstate New York, I would have dismissed many of them. But the experiences are simply too common for me to reject. The phenomena causing them exist. Or is it a single phenomenon that appears in many different ways?

But just because a thing is witnessed by more than one observer does not mean that it is understood. It can be understood, as Jeff points out, in the context of whatever “present” one happens to live in, but that doesn't mean that flying saucers and aliens are the final truth any more than were past interpretations. At different times, I have convinced myself of many different things regarding what I was perceiving and experiencing. But all of those explanations—aliens, interdimensional beings, other earthly intelligent species, ghosts, deities, time travelers, seizure effects (it's a long list)—have

proved to be unsatisfactory or incomplete in one way or another. Aliens both are and are not aliens, for example. Ghosts are both real and illusory, something like reflections. But it is possible to look beyond the theories and assumptions. It is possible to bring elements of the wider reality—albeit fragmentary ones—into perception, and to learn to live in this broader context. Not only that, “it” can and will respond by penetrating into the physical world, by coming into contact, by offering itself on many different levels, ranging from the transcendently transformative to the desperately dangerous, and all manner of shadings in between. As long as one does not try to force it into some reductionist structure or other, there is much to be learned—and, frankly, much fun to be had, especially if one has a taste for danger.

When I responded to the initial physical overtures of what I call “the visitors,” as violent as they were, the reaction was to offer me what has become years of coherently structured instruction in an entirely new way of life that penetrates the barrier of assumptions that so limit our vision and restrict our access to reality . . . unless, of course, I am looking into a mirror more deeply than is wise.

I hope that my unwillingness to address it through the filter of beliefs, assumptions, and, above all, appearances has enabled me to focus on this reality in a clearer way. I don’t think that I am perceiving the supernatural, but rather, as Jeff has so adroitly expressed it, the super natural, that which is part of nature but works by rules that are different from those we are familiar with. So I don’t see it through the lens of religion or myth or superstition, but rather through eyes that look at the immensity of reality and see aspects of being that are living by a physics that we apparently do not fully understand, but which, in the end, is knowable. I do not see it as being overseen by a final being, or god. We the living, in all our ancient vastness, are all that is here. But by living, I don’t mean only physically alive. There is more to life, my experiences tell me, much more.

In late December of 1985 I was awakened by strange noises in my little rural cabin. I found myself surrounded by odd and menacing figures. I’d felt that I was being carried, then manhandled, and then I was in what I initially thought was a tent. It was full of distinctly nonhuman creatures, some of them capering stick insects, others squat, frog-faced trolls who were a deep iridescent blue. As a sometime horror novelist, I was initially delighted by

this useful dream. But when I tried to wake up, the horror became real. I kept trying to make my bed appear around me, but it would not. I wasn't in my bed and I could not conjure it by simply willing it to be there. I heard a softly robotic female voice repeating over and over, "What can we do to help you stop screaming?"

A series of spectacularly bizarre and terrifying events then took place, unfolding at once as a horror movie, a grim fairy tale, a nightmare, and a viscerally real, physically painful experience.

The next morning I awoke feeling beaten up, but confused about why that would be. Over the next few days, I would begin to recall somebody pushing a needle into my head, and feeling what my doctor would later say looked like a spider bite. More disturbingly, the rectal agony that would later be universally lampooned began to torment me.

During the day, I became convinced that an owl had come to our bedroom window, even that it had gotten in the house—and, with that, began to receive my first communication in a very new language, that of the visitors. I did not know it at the time, but subsequently I have come to understand that by identifying themselves with owl imagery, as they have done in my and innumerable other lives, the visitors have said something. They have suggested that it might be useful in understanding them to look to the owl both as an animal and a mythological creature. By doing so, it is possible, I suspect, to hear them explaining themselves. Wise and dangerous birds, night flyers, all seeing and immeasurably capable, but also vulnerable.

In the days after my 1985 experience, my memories began to focus more, and they were extremely strange. I saw big, glaring insect eyes. I recalled short, dark blue figures racing around me at breakneck speed. I recalled that I had been treated very roughly.

At first, I thought that I'd been the victim of a crime. I had recently co-authored a controversial book called *Warday* that had annoyed some government officials because it gave the lie to their dangerous and absurd push to destabilize cold war détente. Had vindictive officials had me drugged and beaten up to terrorize me, or even to drive me mad, or, if I dared speak about it, to guarantee that I would be discredited? (If that was the motive, it certainly worked. My efforts to describe my experiences publicly and accurately have profoundly compromised my credibility.)

I recalled seeing a familiar face during the initial stages of the

experience—a school friend who had joined the Central Intelligence Agency. But when I tried to look him up, I was appalled and confused to discover that he had died months before the night in question.

So then I decided that I must have had a psychotic episode, and never mind my injuries, which had been quite apparent in the following days. These injuries included an aching malaise, as if I'd been roughly treated, a needle mark in the side of my head, and the rectal injury.

I did not want to face these injuries. I did not want to deal with the possibility that the experience had been physical. A visit to my doctor was extremely unsettling, largely because he not only saw the injuries as physical, but when I described my memories said, "It sounds like you're saying you were taken aboard a flying saucer by little men."

We agreed that psychological tests should be the next step. However, they revealed only a high stress level. Then I thought perhaps it was a seizure that had manifested itself as a vivid hallucination, but a test for temporal lobe epilepsy indicated that I had a brain that was not only normal but also exceptionally resistant to seizures. An MRI scan revealed no sign of any illness that might account for my perceptions.

Thus began what has become the odyssey of my life. Although I have been identified as the primary advocate for belief in alien abduction—and have at times publicly entertained this notion—for the most part, I have tried to adhere to the question. The alien explanation—while fascinating and touched by deliciously uneasy romance—has, from the beginning, made me wary. There are elements of the experience that are so fantastic and so improbable, but so consistent, that some much more complex event than alien scientists visiting Earth must be taking place.

But the debate, such as it is, remains as it has been since the first flying saucer reports appeared back in the 1940s: either this must involve space travelers from some other planet, or it's all a load of rubbish. For the most part, scientists and intellectuals come down on the "load of rubbish" side of the equation and decline to inquire further. UFO researchers seek to confirm the alien hypothesis. The people who have actually had unexplainable experiences of the phenomena in question are generally confused, bemused, and unconvinced by the arguments being put forth on both sides. It's not nothing. Something happens and it is not confined to the mind. It isn't

hallucinatory. Neither, however, is it real in the same way that we are real, not exactly.

Most paranormal phenomena are addressed by this same debate. Either they are “real” and therefore exactly what they seem to be, or it’s all nonsense. The ghost is either there or it isn’t. The elf is either a real flesh and blood creature or it doesn’t exist. There cannot be consciousness or coherent being outside of the physical—which is, in fact, what I want to believe. Unfortunately for me, though, it simply is not my perception. Despite the fact that I can’t explain them, I frequently see and interact with nonphysical and quasi-physical beings. They seem to be part of nature just like we are, but, as Jeff advocates, in some “super” way for which we have neither an adequate religious model nor present science.

They also have, at least in my life, what has come to seem a rather clear aim. They want to challenge me with questions too provocative to be left unanswered, but which I cannot, in all frankness, answer in anything approaching an objective manner. I’m not like the old prophets who saw them as angels and deities, or modern advocates of alien contact, who see them as extraterrestrials. They are in my life, but I don’t know what they are.

In fact, they are involved with me right now, as I am writing. After I had finished this introduction and was beginning my first experiential chapter, which is primarily focused on a type of alien that is also a troll called in folklore a kobold, another sort of little person appeared in my life. On the very morning that I started writing about little blue men, Linda Moulton Howe, who is a long time observer and professional reporter in the field of the paranormal, sent me a group of three trail camera photographs of what appeared to be a classic garden gnome, complete with red vest and tall, pointed hat. At first, of course, I assumed that this was exactly what it was—a garden gnome suspended from a string.

Work with a photography expert soon told a different story. First, the figure was blurred and thus moving fast. It wasn’t swinging in an arc but walking on two spindly legs. It was forty-four inches tall, a typical height for all of these small beings. It had stopped moving forward the moment the camera took its first picture, then beat a retreat at a high rate of speed. The camera, activated by movement and heat, takes a photo every second until the movement stops. There was no evidence that the photo was hoaxed, or that the image on it was anything known.

Now, if we apply the old methods, we must conclude either that garden gnomes are real creatures, or that this is some sort of a hoax, or perhaps a shot of a common animal whose appearance has been distorted by a trick of light. I could add paragraphs here, calling on the testimony of photographic experts to show why it can be neither a hoax nor a distortion, but why bother? I'd prefer to let that sort of debate wander off down its meaningless pathway on its own, frankly.

It is possible to apply new methods to the enigma, which would involve attempting to find what I would describe as more energetic questions, in the sense that they would have more potential to meaningfully dimensionalize the mystery.

Discovering such questions is not going to be easy, given that we have never searched the supernatural for an inner logic, but only argued about it, at least in the public forum, in the most simplistic way. In the academy and the professional study of religion, of course, a much more sophisticated debate has been going on for a hundred and fifty years, but that debate has hardly penetrated public perception, which remains bound to the either/or proposition.

So there I was, dealing with a photo of what appeared to be a real gnome. The picture had been taken in July, but time and chance had dropped it into my inbox at precisely the most provocative moment.

But why? Or is there a why? Is some hidden level of mind asking me to become an advocate for the reality of garden gnomes? Or are we seeing a droll challenge from this other level, one that is suggesting that we really do need to think about the whole subject in a new way? And perhaps, also, a little less ponderously. The images in all their ambiguity, with all their implications and their deep hilarity, are there to be faced with an open mind, and I think some laughter would be appropriate, too.

After I realized that my 1985 experience was a true mystery, I began compulsively going out into the woods around the cabin where it happened—quite a large woodland, in fact—and attempting to somehow face it again. At the same time, I wrote and published my book about it called *Communion*, the reaction to which was easily as unexpected as the experience itself.

Had you asked me prior to the release of the book how many people might claim similar experiences, I would have estimated the number in the hundreds. I'd met twelve or fifteen, and knew of perhaps thirty others.

Then the letters started coming in, at first by the hundreds, then the thousands, then a great cataract of letters, easily ten thousand a month, from all over the world. The publisher told me that the book was selling far beyond even their most optimistic expectations.

Previously, the close encounter experience had been assumed to be a rare and eccentric anomaly. Accounts were dismissed as isolated anecdotes, not worth pursuing scientifically because of a lack of consistent data.

I was deeply moved, not to say shocked, to see that I had uncovered a human experience of vast size that was completely hidden. Far from parroting versions of my own experience, my correspondents revealed that they were perceiving an extremely complex phenomenon that involved hundreds of different types of events. They were linked by certain commonalities, most often the seeing of a face, long and thin with great, dark eyes, like the one I'd had painted for the cover of the book.

The letters were, many of them, articulate and detailed. At the time, the skeptics community was advocating that the alien abduction accounts were being induced in susceptible people by the use of hypnosis. This was concerning to me, because there were indeed amateur hypnotists who were convinced that the phenomenon was caused by interactions with aliens, who were actively hypnotizing people and possibly distorting their memories. I had myself been hypnotized, but by Dr. Donald Klein, a leading practitioner of forensic hypnosis who had solved numerous criminal cases with his techniques. Neither of us, at the time he began hypnotizing me, believed in the "alien abduction" scenario.

My correspondents, however, had for the most part never had hypnosis or any kind of professional support. They had never heard of UFO investigators or organizations like the Mutual UFO Network. They told, time and again, stories that were strange beyond strange. Between 1987 and 2000, we must have received well in excess of half a million letters, at least a hundred thousand of them detailed accounts. I understand that this seems like a fantastic number, but it is probably accurate. We stopped counting at two hundred thousand, and that was in 1992, and they were still arriving in surprising numbers as late as 1998. We have kept around thirty thousand on file.

Anne, who read them all, compiled a book called *The Communion Letters* that includes a little over a hundred of them, chosen because they

contained examples of typical experiences, and were quite well written.

Obviously, I was not dealing with isolated anecdotes. There was a wealth of material here for study by neurologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists. To expedite this, I created the Communion Foundation. However, I found that I could get no support. There was not just no scientific interest, but the reaction was often hostile. And why not? A scientist seeking to study such people, as doctors John Mack and Roger Leir discovered, could expect to have their professional credentials challenged if they dared propose such study, or worse, engage in it.

I very well remember the day that Dr. Mack called me and told me that both his license to practice psychiatry and his tenure at Harvard were under review. Later, the very man who led this attack became an ally of Dr. Mack's, but it was initially a very dangerous situation for him. Dr. Leir told me that he was also the subject of such attacks.

Sadly, over the years, I was unable to successfully communicate the reality of this fantastic outpouring of witness. Most members of the academic, scientific, and intellectual communities, let alone our serious media, have to this day no idea how extensive the experience actually is.

So we're still at the beginning of the journey when it comes even to finding useful questions, let alone viable answers.

Surely that can change, but not unless the most interesting aspect of the phenomenon, which is its ambiguity, is to replace the either/or debate. For example, there is a rich trove of physical evidence that something strange is afoot, but also a rich trove of evidence that clearly emerges out of folklore, with a strong strain of myth in the mix.

Whatever happened to me on the night of December 26, 1985, there was enough physical trauma to send me to the doctor a few days later, who observed that I had been raped. Unfortunately for me, I was so humiliated by this that I described it in *Communion*—delicately, I thought—as a “rectal probe.” The result was that, instead of being treated with the sensitivity one might think would be due a rape victim, I was made a figure of fun. Still, I could not bear to admit it, not even knowing that doing so would have rescued me from the trauma of being ridiculed for my suffering. It took me a quarter of a century to even describe the experience as a rape to my wife. It was during this period that I became identified as an advocate of the alien abduction scenario. I could not refute it, because it might be at least partially

true. So I won't say that, at times, I haven't been seduced by it, because it does have its appeal. But that core of distrust has never left me. My reason for this is not the one usually advanced, that "they couldn't possibly get here." Given the age of the universe and its immensity, I wouldn't be in the least surprised if somebody has figured out interstellar travel, even if, for us, it is impossible.

In any case, I, who stated in large type on the inside front cover of *Communion* that "the enigmatic presence of the human mind winks back from the dark," have ended up closely identified with one side of a debate between two propositions, one of which I find insupportable and the other open to question.

Why, though, would somebody who suffered such unpleasant physical consequences, and later had to face such a cloud of witness, attribute his experience in any way to the human mind?

I don't mean that it's entirely in the mind, but rather that the mind might not be entirely in us. In other words, mind might not be entirely confined to the brain. Since the moment that I began to apprehend the actual dimensions of the experience in all its wonderful improbability and confusing physicality, I have been dogged by that improbability. I can't get away from it though. My intellect says that it cannot be true. My life bears witness to its truth.

If mind does exist independent of biology, then, given the conservation of energy, it is likely to be rather old, and given its lack of confinement in the body, limited, if at all, in unknown ways. Considering that this universe is at least thirteen billion years old, and that there is increasing evidence that it might not be the only one out there, it is liable, also, to have a good deal of experience.

What would it be like, then? What would our part in it be? How would we communicate with the aspects of it, which must be vast, that have nothing to do with us? And yet, when we do manage to communicate with it as something that seems separate from us, to what degree would we actually be talking to ourselves? Given what would have to be a very ancient presence, is physical life an outcome of some plan it has? If so, what might that be? What need has it to have drawn us into being, or rather, to have injected itself into physical bodies? What does time mean to such a thing, and is it creator or created, or both?

I cannot answer these questions, and they might not even be the right

ones. I am not a believer in any hypothesis. On the contrary, I am a wanderer, lost in the forest of hypotheses.

I cannot tell you how to escape, but I can tell you that it's a terribly interesting place. It's full of aliens; ghosts; sexy succubae and incubi; fairy-folk; demanding and inconsiderate gods, angels, demons, and growling subterranean kobolds—and, it would seem, garden gnomes. In fact, there are too many other forms to list, as well as some that cannot be defined beyond saying that one sometimes senses presences beyond description.

My direct questions are these: Why do we see all of these things; and why and how do they sometimes interact with us in enough of a physical way to leave injuries, have sex, and, in some cases such as my own, leave demonstrably bizarre physical objects in the body, not to mention perplexed witnesses? In my chapter on implants, I will describe them in more detail.

Once one opens one's mind to the notion that these mysteries are worth consideration, one takes the first baby step into the forest. At once, the paths proliferate. Not only that, the forest is very much alive, growing and changing all the time. And the paths—they change, too. The shadowy presences in the sacred groves of antiquity, Dante's lost path, more humble journeys such as my own, ridden with fear and driven by compulsion—these are the journeys in the forest of mind.

It has keepers, you know. Foresters, if you will. They're a pretty rough bunch, and pretty strange, and I suspect that they are the arbiters of souls, much like the growling, groaning creatures that appeared from the depths in the delightful movie *Ghost*.

Over the course of this volume, as my contribution, I am going to reconstruct my and others' experiences in a new way, in exchange with Jeff, attempting to reveal the large-scale structures that are present beneath the chaotic narrative surface. For such structures most certainly exist. As I have said, I can look at my whole experience as an education, with a definite point of matriculation, various classes, and eventual graduation into my life as it is now, trying one path after another in this dangerous, delightful, and deliciously mysterious woodland.

Maybe, on the night of December 26, 1985, I was in an alien spaceship and maybe I wasn't, but I was certainly in a very agitated state, and getting more panicked with every moment that the impossible scene around me came into greater focus.

After the robotic female voice began trying to comfort me, an event happened that would prove to be of fundamental importance to my ideas of what this might all mean. This was the approach of a unique form of creature, who, like the more familiar willowy gray ones with the large eyes, has a distinct and deeply embedded place in folklore.

A squat blue man came up to me. He carried a silver device in his hand, the “rectal probe.” Subsequently, I found that models are marketed both for erotic stimulation and for use in animal husbandry. They work by stimulating the vagus nerve.

As one of these beings proceeded with the electrostimulation, another busied himself inserting a long needle into my temple. I cried out, “You’ll ruin a beautiful mind,” as I both felt the needle piercing me and endured the embarrassing penetration of my anus.

At the same time that the electrostimulation was taking place, there was a sample taken of my fecal matter. I was confused to see that I was experiencing an erection, and disturbed when there was an ejaculation—then appalled to see the semen being collected into a tube by one of the capering insectoid monstrosities with the bulging eyes. The ejaculation didn’t come with any emotional affect and very little sensation. The whole sexual event was so dissociated that it might as well have been happening to another person.

It is an easy thing to jump to the conclusion that I am claiming here that I was abducted by aliens and had semen stolen by them, but I am not claiming that. I am reporting a perception, not making a claim, and there is a world of difference between those two approaches. While I came away with clear physical injuries, as we shall soon see, there were elements of the experience—that are also integral to the whole “alien abduction” phenomenon—that challenge to its core the very meaning of what we perceive as “physical.”

One reason that I doubt that aliens have flown here from someplace like Zeta Reticuli to study us is that the contact experience includes two seemingly disparate aspects: encounters with the dead and encounters with nonhuman beings.

Until the discovery, originally made by Anne Strieber as she read all those thousands of letters, that the dead and aliens seemed often to show up together in the lives of witnesses, the two phenomena were assumed to be

entirely separate. The folklore of alien contact and the folklore of spirit manifestation were unrelated. What possible connection could there be between alien scientists from another planet and ectoplasmic manifestations of dear aunt Ethel?

Now, before I continue, I want to define my position very carefully. I am, in my heart, a secular individual, but I do consider it possible, based on personal experience, that there may be conscious being outside of the body. I am willing to entertain the notion, in fact, that the physical world may be embedded in a much larger, older, and more intelligent energetic consciousness. If so, then the true journey of cultural and religious history is about our long struggle to come to terms with it, and find a way to objectively include it in our understanding of reality.

We started the journey on our knees, cowering before the ruthless and intemperate gods of antiquity. We followed our many religions deeper into the forest, until finally that path played out, disappearing into the current dark mutter of ritual, sloganizing, and murder. Now we are at a crucial turning point. Either we journey on, this time along the secular path, or we take another fork, embarking on an even darker, more dangerous, and twisted journey.

Paradoxically, I am rather sure that this secular path through the impossible—the most ill-marked and twisted of them all—opens eventually into the sunlight of a clear and objective understanding of what we are, where we are, and why we are here.



Making the Cut

JEFF

It is an easy thing to jump to the conclusion that I am claiming here that I was abducted by aliens and had semen stolen by them, but I am not claiming that. I am reporting a perception, not making a claim, and there is a world of difference between those two approaches.

Whitley Strieber is a phenomenon, a kind of religious prodigy without a religion who cannot help engaging classic religious questions and themes, since that is what his experiences clearly invoke. The last lines of the preceding chapter voice these perennial religious questions perfectly: he seeks an objective answer to the hymning questions of “what we are, where we are, and why we are here.” Obviously, the emphasis is on that “we,” that is, on our own human nature.

Or super nature.

The human-centered focus of the inquiry speaks volumes. What Whitley really seems to want is not a new religion but a new science, one that can take extreme religious experiences (out-of-body and near-death experiences, precognitions, moments of clairvoyance, and visions of the dead) as privileged data about the deepest nature of mind or consciousness, which is to

say about “what we are, where we are, and why we are here.” I think he is right about that. I have said as much many times in very public places.¹³

We are not anti-science. Quite the contrary. We simply want a science that is honest and brave enough to take in *all* that human beings experience without immediately explaining away that “all and everything” by some easy pat answer that is really no answer at all. The Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James had a wonderful expression for such a future science. He dreamed of a “radical empiricism,” that is, one that took *every* human experience, however strange or apparently impossible, under its careful gaze without prejudice or assumption. This book is an attempt to practice just such a radical empiricism.

Experience as Experiment

But how?

Whitley’s intellectual orientation, “lost in a forest of hypotheses,” is a very good example of what one of my colleagues, Alex van der Haven, calls the “hypothetical supernatural.” Alex means something very specific by this curious phrase. He means to refer to all of those modern individuals who have known their own personal revelations but do not want to believe or accept them prematurely. Rather, they want to question them, test them. Put most simply, they want to turn their own mystical “experiences” into scientific “experiments.”

In Alex’s terms, they want to take their own apparently religious experiences not as absolute-truth claims but as testable hypotheses. This is why these modern mystics care so little for religious institutions and care so much for professional science. They literally want to be tested (hence Whitley’s various submissions to MRIs, psychiatric examinations, and temporal lobe tests). They want the truth to be known. This is also why they are so hurt when professional scientists do not return their confidence and, instead, heap insults on them and their experiences. The modern visionaries embrace science, but the conventional scientists too often respond with a sneer.

In his own way of putting it, Whitley writes of wanting “to sit with the question,” of leaving the question open and learning to live with the ambiguity. He wants to do this not as a compromise, but as a mirroring response to what these experiences/experiments clearly intend: *they themselves are ambiguous and paradoxical*. Hence his identification of this same ambiguity as “the most interesting aspect of the phenomenon” and his call that we embrace this and that we abandon the terms of the “false either/or debate” that has taken place so far, with its two unworkable and untenable positions: there are space aliens among us, or it’s all rubbish.

From the Paranormal to the Super Natural

Whitley and I disagree about some things. Being writers, we also care very much about words. The word “paranormal” is one of the things we disagree about. Whitley’s rejection of the paranormal in his opening lines as more or less the same thing as the supernatural is certainly accurate enough within today’s very loose use of the paranormal in the tabloids and in horror movies. But this rejection is unwarranted and unnecessary if we are using the term in its original, intended meanings.

As I have explained elsewhere in detail, the adjective appears to have been coined by British and French intellectuals and scientists shortly before and around the turn of the twentieth century, first as the British English *supernormal*, then as the French *paranormal*, in order to describe things like telepathic and poltergeist phenomena. As they were carefully crafted and originally intended, the supernormal and the paranormal meant something like “of the natural world but not yet explainable by our present science.” They meant “normal,” but normal on the extreme end of the spectrum, an end which we do not yet have the tools to model and map but someday will. These adjectives did *not* mean “supernatural,” that is, they did not signal the presence of a ghost, deity, or anything necessarily outside the natural world and its workings. Quite the contrary, both the supernormal and the paranormal signaled exactly the approach that Whitley has long advocated.

But I understand how these historical origins are now largely lost. Perhaps, then, it is time to retire a word like “paranormal.” Or at least use it

much more carefully. Whatever we decide, it is certainly time to clean up our language and make it more precise again. It is time for the super natural.

On Belief and Denial

There is another level to Whitley Strieber as phenomenon, and it has to do with this notion of taking one's experiences as experiments, this extraordinary modern ability to *not* believe one's own most intimate experiences, however convincing they may appear.

It bears constant underlining. Belief is an understandable but often unhelpful response in this realm. It is also a potentially dangerous response. Certain types of belief—particularly literalist ones that do not understand the symbolic or coded nature of religious expressions—can quickly make a fool out of one, since religious experiences interpreted literally are often patently absurd. To the extent, moreover, that literalist beliefs lead people to identify themselves with their culturally relative religious ideas, local ethnicities, and historical cultures, they can also lead to real social conflict, even horrific violence, as we see again and again in our modern world. Fundamentalism, of whatever stripe, is the curse and cancer of religious belief.

And the exact same warning holds here as well, in the realm of the super natural. As John Keel put it with respect to his own paranormal researches: “Belief is the enemy.” To the famous motto of the 1990s hit television series *The X-Files*, “I want to believe,” Keel would have shot back immediately: “Don't.”

I would not go that far, since I think religious expressions, including religious beliefs, are often pointing toward something very real, perhaps even ultimately real, if always in coded ways. But there is more. I also think that there is something potentially occult or magical about belief. Belief can function as a naive literalism or serious obstacle to serious thought, to be sure. But belief can also conjure. Belief can make real. Belief might even act as a kind of psychic portal through which other beings can enter our world, as Whitley has speculated in some of his most visionary moments. It all comes down to *how* one believes, not whether one believes. It all comes down to whether one possesses an adequate understanding of the religious imagination and the symbol. More, much more, on all of this later.

It is also worth observing in this context that the ideological debunker is also a fundamentalist, if of a very different stripe. Unlike the literal believer, who affirms but then misreads what has happened, the debunker denies what happened, what was honestly seen, what was sincerely experienced. The debunker makes a liar out of a truth teller and so shuts down the experience-as-experiment before it can begin. Here our empiricism, our experience, and our experiment come to an end.

Making the Cut

So how to move forward? How to find a new path between and beyond the literalizing belief of the believer and the flatland denial of the debunker? A particularly rich vein of resources for such a way forward can be found in a stream of thought and practice called *phenomenology*.

The basic concepts of phenomenology are not too difficult to understand and are, in fact, already at work in Whitley's writing. A "phenomenon," from which the practice gets its name, is simply the Greek word for "appearance." Here it refers to an awareness of something that appears as an object of experience, *whatever* that object of experience might be. Phenomenology is the study of such appearances. German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) is normally credited as its founder, even if the method has deeper roots, as we will see in a moment.¹⁴

The fundamental idea here is to begin any inquiry by taking a set of experiences on their own terms and setting aside, for the time being, the question of their possible external source, cause, or truth value. The method encourages us to "make a cut" between the appearances themselves and what may, or may not, lie behind them. Whitley practices such a phenomenological cut naturally and effortlessly when he writes in the last chapter that "I am reporting a perception, not making a claim, and there is a world of difference between those two approaches." Indeed! That's the phenomenological cut.

Very much related to phenomenology but lying deeper back in the German stream was the foundational thinking of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant made a famous distinction between phenomena (again,

“appearances” in the mind) and noumena (things in themselves allegedly “out there,” apart from how they appear to us). Kant taught us that we do not know the world as it really is. We only know the world as it is filtered through and shaped by our senses and the structuring categories of the human mind (very basic unquestioned categories, like space, time, and causality). None of these mental filters or innate categories of understanding are necessarily reflective of what is really “out there,” although Kant thought that the appearances were reflections of something real.

In today’s language, we would say that the innate categories of space, time, and causality and our perceptions of the physical world are functions of our neurological wiring and senses. Such categories and sensory filters are certainly “close enough,” since they have allowed us to adapt and survive in this world for hundreds of thousands of years (and gross misperceptions of the natural world would, obviously, be fatal for any young species or new organism). But we cannot assume from any of this that our perceptions are absolutely true, only that they are relatively and practically true. All we can assume is that our perceptions of the world are *true enough*.

True enough for what?

Survival.

Unfortunately, as science progresses, this “true enough” gets smaller and smaller. We are now being told that 95 percent of the physical world is completely invisible and unknown to our young science. We know nothing about this “dark energy” and “dark matter.” We only know that the vast dark is there. And the 5 percent we know something about? Well, we cannot sense the vast majority of it, either. Indeed, our senses are pathetic when it comes to the full range of the electromagnetic spectrum. We are almost totally deaf, dumb, and blind in this Already World of energy and light. Nearly *everything* about the cosmos is occult to our evolved (or unevolved) perceptual system.

This cut, then, between “what appears” and “what is” is not just a function of some difficult ideas from some dead German professors. It is a very reasonable and appropriate response to *our actual situation in the cosmos*.

The Numinous

The same distinction between experience-as-appearance and the possible object or source of such an experience has been central to the study of religion, where scholars routinely “make the cut,” or suspend judgment about the truth value of a religious phenomenon, as a means to study religious experiences they have not had, mythical worlds they do not share, and belief systems that they do not hold. The reason is simple enough. Once one makes such a cut, one can, in principle, take *any* religious experience or mythical world seriously and sympathetically without adopting any particular interpretation of it, much as one suspends disbelief to enjoy a good novel or watch a science-fiction movie.

Particularly influential here has been the work of yet another German professor, Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). In the pages of this book, as in his other books, Whitley often invokes the language of the “numinous” to capture the feel and sensibilities of his experiences. The word was invented by Otto in one of the genuine classics of the study of religion, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). By “the holy” Otto did not mean “the good” or “the ethical.” He meant “the numinous.” He meant an awesome power, electric energy, or godlike presence that a human being encounters in the environment and experiences as special, set apart—as Wholly Other. Today we might say: as Alien. What I think Otto was really writing about is the deeper nature of consciousness itself beyond the ego—a form of extended or cosmic mind that when manifested to the human ego, appears as Other or Alien. But we’ll get to that later.

Otto went to great lengths, mostly with biblical materials, to show that this numinous energy or alien presence might be experienced as positive or negative, or both at the same time. The numinous might in fact invoke a whole range of physiological, emotional, and spiritual responses: dread and foreboding, awe and mystery, eeriness, terror, reverence and worship, even ecstasy and mystical union. The angel is an expression of the numinous, but so too is the demon.

Otto was very much a follower of Kant. He did not think that human beings generally have any direct access to the numinous presence as it really and truly is. He thought rather that this mystical presence is always filtered through and shaped by the categories of the human mind and the cultures that largely determine its functioning. Otto, in short, had “made the cut,” and at about the same time as Husserl.

This may seem like an unnecessary conversation to you. It also may seem like an easy and obvious thing to do. But it is in fact very necessary, and many, if not most, people are not able to make this cut, *especially* when it comes to religious phenomena. Many people firmly believe that what they believe is what is real; that is, they fail to make a cut between what has appeared to them within a particular experience or community and what may, or may not, actually be the case. Moreover, they can only take the religious experiences of their own culture and community sympathetically. And they insist on treating the numinous apparition of, say, an angel in completely different ways than they would treat the numinous apparition of, say, an alien or a demon. *They can't make the cut.*

Just as seriously—and just as seriously wrong—many people immediately dismiss and demean any extraordinary experience that cannot be fit into their own experience of the world. They declare them unreal, hallucinatory, or just plain crazy. In so doing, they also fail to make the cut. Making the cut means taking *all* experiences seriously, however strange or impossible they may seem to a particular psyche, and without immediately jumping to a moral or intellectual conclusion about what they mean or point toward.

Extreme experiences like those of Whitley and the modern contactee are particularly interesting here. We know that they happen. We do not know what they are. But we do not need to know what they are in order to begin to study their patterns, histories, narrative structures, sexual dimensions, and philosophical implications. Perhaps such appearances are more or less what they seem to be. Perhaps they are expressions of something else that is *not* appearing, something that, by its very nature, cannot appear as it really is to an embodied ego with this particular evolved nervous system. To employ a common movie metaphor, perhaps the pictures on the screen of the abduction experience are being projected from somewhere else, somewhere outside the dark room of the theater, somewhere “behind” or, if you prefer, “above” the display itself.

We will, in fact, explore this very suggestion below. We will also see how the visionary appearances of Whitley displayed very real physical and sonic effects in the external environment, effects that Anne and others could see and hear. Whitley will also challenge us to confront the contact experience as something that cannot be safely walled off in a subjective

psyche, as just a set of private experiences. Which is all to say that we will venture into the questions of what may lie beyond the phenomenological cut and well outside the phenomena of the contact experience.

But not yet. Here, at the beginning, it is enough to make the phenomenological cut and focus on the experiences as experiences, that is, purely as a subject (which may turn out to be something *far* bigger than we suppose). This simple move will immediately provide our conversation with a new intellectual and moral generosity. Making such a cut will allow us, after all, to take the most fantastic, unbelievable, even graphically sexual appearances and treat them seriously and sympathetically *without* having to treat them literally and naively. The practice will enable us to be faithful to what actually appeared and is being reported without immediately believing or dismissing it. Making the cut will free us to talk about the impossible without it sounding impossible. It will enable us to entertain the most astonishing possibilities without sounding like fools.

The Human as Two

“Making the cut” asks us to consider a particular duality or twoness in the human being, at least in the functioning of the human psyche and how it knows the world. Here, after all, we are asked to make a clear distinction between what appears to us as sense-based egos (“what we know”), and what actually is out there (“what is”). Kant and his successors have argued that human beings can never know the latter. Like the prisoners of Plato’s Cave, we are all locked down tight to the cave floor of our senses and brains. We are locked into the cave of the skull, as it were, and condemned to witness only flat, sense-based shadow shows in the dark—mini-movies inside our head.

But here is the thing. The history of mystical literature strongly suggests something else or more. Indeed, the whole point of Plato’s parable is that we *can* crawl out of the cave and see the multidimensional world outside, that we *do* have access to the Light, even if many of our peers will never see it and so continue to deny that it exists at all. In rare but real cases, it very much looks as if individual human beings can know, even become, something of reality as it really is, as opposed to what their cultural, religious, and sensory scripts

tell them. In essence, these individuals “wake up” out of the social and sensory movie that they are caught in as characters. They peel themselves as perceptions off the screen, turn around, and come to know something of the projecting light streaming in from behind or above them.

Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), the great medieval mystic, recognized this already over seven hundred years ago in a little sermon that sounds like a chapter out of Edwin Abbot’s *Flatland* (1884). Eckhart is preaching of an inner light that makes humans divine and of a power beyond space and time that he called the eternal Now. “This light,” he wrote, “is so potent that it is not merely in itself free of time and space, but . . . this light takes away time and space.”¹⁵ In our own modern terms, we might say that this light grants a type of consciousness that is outside space-time. To employ the traditional religious terms, it is infinite (beyond space) and immortal (beyond time). “Anyone powerfully seized by this light,” the man preached, “would be as far superior to another man as a living man is compared to one painted on a wall.”¹⁶ The painted human lives in only two dimensions, we would say today. He is “flat.” The illuminated human now lives in three or four or more. He or she is hyperdimensional, we would say.

This, I take it, is what Whitley is getting at through his own movielike visions, which admittedly astonish him and have even tempted him to accept them as literally true, but which he can never quite bring himself to fully believe. From the beginning, he has suspected that something else is going on, that these are complex psychical projections from some hyperdimension and not simple objective truths, hence the very first lines of *Communion*, about how “the enigmatic presence of the human mind winks back from the dark.” Whitley has expressed real frustration in the preceding chapter about how so few took to heart that opening line and how so many, to this day, continue to read him as some kind of literal believer in what he witnessed on his own private movie screen.

When one reads him carefully, what one finds is a very modern version of what one finds when one reads classical mystical literature—what I have called the Human as Two. Here is Whitley on the nature of his appearances or experiences: “I don’t mean that it’s entirely in the mind, but rather that the mind might not be entirely in us.” In short, mind “might persist even outside of the cradle of the brain.” In other words, there is ego, there is the human

subject, there is “you” and “me.” And then there is mind, which may not be restricted in any way to a brain, a skull, an individual ego, a culture, or a religion.

This, it turns out, is a very old idea that can be found in any number of forms, including the medieval European notion of the *anima mundi* or “soul of the world.” Here is Whitley’s version of the same: “If mind does exist independent of biology, then, given the conservation of energy, it is likely to be rather old, and given its lack of confinement in the body, limited, if at all, in unknown ways. Considering that this universe is at least thirteen billion years old, and that there is increasing evidence that it might not be the only one out there, it is liable, also, to have a good deal of experience.” There is an understatement.

Whitley then goes on to ask a series of very astute questions, including the openly paradoxical one: “How would we communicate with it, and in so doing, to what degree would we be talking to ourselves?” Such a soul-of-the-world or cosmic mind, after all, would be us and not us *at the same time*. And it would behave much like the lights dancing on the movie screen: it would take on *any* cultural narrative (or myth), *any* subjective form (or ego), including some really cruel and really stupid ones, but it would remain, despite all of this, pure white light—without a form, without a story, and without a religion. The Human as Two.

Producer or Reducer?

Such a mind beyond brain would also carry real implications for what is clearly *the* central religious question throughout human history: What happens to us when we die?

It all depends, I suppose, on what we mean by “us.” Which part of the Human as Two are we talking about here?

It’s really quite simple. If mind is a product of brain, then mind goes away when the brain dies. Period. If, however, the human brain is more like a highly evolved receiver, transmission station, or local neural network that limits, reduces, and shapes mind into a cultural and subjective container that we know as the self or ego (which is itself not the producer of mind either), then when brain dies, the self may or may not go away (or it may stick

around for a while, and then go away), but mind almost certainly does not go away. Mind as mind, after all, would be completely unaffected by the death of an individual brain, much as the Internet is not the least bit affected when you turn off your laptop or “drown” it in the swimming pool.

It all comes down to this, then: Is the brain the producer or reducer of consciousness?

Materialist-oriented neuroscientists like to point out that when the brain is damaged, the personality often changes dramatically, and that when the brain stops, consciousness disappears. This, of course, is entirely correct. Where they presume too much is when they conclude from these obvious facts that mind *equals* brain, or that brain *produces* mind. This may be the case, of course, but this possibility does not necessarily follow from the facts. It only follows from a particular interpretation of the facts. All that we really know is that when the biological medium of mind, that is, the human brain, has been damaged or destroyed, these events profoundly effect how mind can be experienced by that particular subject. All that we know is that a laptop at the bottom of the swimming pool won't work anymore.

It might be the case that brain equals mind. Or it might be the case that the laptop computer called a brain has been damaged or destroyed and will no longer project a particular personalized desktop and social media system, but that the Internet of Mind is just fine, thank you very much. The facts are the same facts in either interpretation. The materialist scientists presume the materialist interpretation because they presume materialism, not because the facts require that particular interpretation. In essence, they are confusing an interpretation of the results of science with science itself.

But there are thousands (no doubt millions) of other “rogue” facts, conveniently ignored, wished away, or crudely pathologized as “crazy” or “delusional” by the same materialist interpreters of science, that support the Internet metaphor of mind beyond brain.¹⁷ Among them we might wish to place Whitley's eerie experience of seeing an old school buddy who had joined the CIA among his alien abductors, a friend who he later learned had passed away a few months earlier.

Whitley uses the experience to humorously call into serious question the typical extraterrestrial hypothesis: “What possible connection could there be between alien scientists from another planet and ectoplasmic manifestations

of dear aunt Ethel?” But the same kind of experience can just as easily be used to call into question the typical materialist hypothesis. It is easy enough to dismiss a vision of a dead friend who one knows is dead as a subjective hallucination. It is not so easy to dismiss a vision of a dead friend one does not know is dead. The latter suggests, though hardly proves, some kind of survival and postmortem communication.

Still, perhaps it was all just a coincidence. Whitley, after all, did not know the friend was dead in the vision, and he may have simply put the two things together afterward, like this: vision of friend, news of his death, interpretation that the earlier vision of the friend was a vision of the dead. This kind of coincidental reading, though, loses much of its power when we put it in a larger context. Hence the discovery of Anne, who noticed a spate of similar reports among the letters they received in response to *Communion*.

Whitley also recognizes that the broader shapes and themes of his visions are shared by a veritable crowd of corresponding witnesses. By publishing *Communion* and being honest about what he saw and experienced, he had, in effect, accidentally “uncovered a human experience of vast size that was completely hidden.” Whitley is a fine comparativist here, particularly when he notes both the similarities of these different reports, but also their real and genuine differences, which number into literally hundreds of types or patterns. In his own words, he wants “to expose the large-scale structures that are present beneath the immediate narrative surface. For such structures most certainly exist.” That is *exactly* how comparativists and phenomenologists talk.

But the letter writers are not alone either in their visions of the dead. This kind of apparition, of someone familiar who the visionary did not know had died, has been known and commented on for almost a century and a half now. They even have a technical name in the parapsychological literature. They are called “Peak in Darien” experiences after a book of the same title published by Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904) in 1882. Cobbe adapted the expression from a poem by John Keats in which the poet describes the Spaniards climbing a peak in Darien (now Panama), expecting to see a landmass, but instead seeing another ocean, in this case, the Pacific Ocean. The expression thus carries the sense of surprise at seeing something unexpected, vast, and disconcerting. Over four decades later, the knighted English physicist Sir William Barrett (1844–1925) called systematic attention

to these cases again in his classic study, *Deathbed Visions: How the Dead Talk to the Dying* (1926), in his opening chapter, “Visions Seen by the Dying of Persons Unknown by Them to Be Dead.”¹⁸

So much for the “anecdotal” nature of these visions of the dead. In actual historical fact, there is nothing anecdotal about these visions at all. They are part of a stable and consistent pattern in the history of visionary experiences around death that has been reported for a century and a half in the modern English-speaking world. And that, of course, is only what we know in the modern West. The real landscape seen from a higher cross-cultural peak is no doubt much more vast and impressive, if only we would take the time and spend the resources to look.

The Secular Soul

The language of “spirit” and the “spiritual” appears quite a bit in Whitley’s writing, and usually in very positive ways. The language of “religion” and the “religious” also appears, but usually in much more critical ways. This, of course, places Whitley quite squarely within a rising new demographic of secular people who nevertheless report spiritual experiences or spiritual orientations to the world. They are sometimes called the “spiritual but not religious,” a phrase that emerged from, of all things, a set of questionnaires that sociologists were using. People would check the two boxes marked “spiritual” and “not religious.” Hence the expression.

I study and write about new religious movements. Not surprisingly, I am often asked what sets apart the modern orientation of “being spiritual” from the traditional orientation of “being religious.” At the risk of simplification, I would say that there are three clear markers.

One is the location of religious authority. The traditionally religious place that authority outside the self in a scriptural text or institution. The spiritual but not religious place that authority inside the self. Two other clear markers are the temporal relationship to revelation and the nature of those past revelations. The traditionally religious locate full revelation in the past and understand the religious life to be a faithful remembering and reliving of some singular revelation. The spiritual but not religious might appreciate

multiple past revelations, but they do not consider any of them to be absolute. Further revelations are available in the present and fuller revelations will appear in the future.

Crystallized down to their most basic forms, these three basic markers of the religious and the spiritual become:

on religious authority: outside/inside

on the nature of revelation: singular-perfect/multiple-partial

on the temporal locus of full revelation: past/future

Whitley displays all three markers. He does not think of any of this, of course, as “being spiritual.” He thinks of it as “being secular,” but in a very special, soul-filled way. Obviously, secularism does not preclude spirituality. If anything, it makes such an orientation possible.

Whitley describes the history of religions as “our long struggle to come to terms with it,” “it” being this hypothetical mind outside brain. His final lines pertain directly to these secular-spiritual commitments to looking in, to multiple incomplete revelations and, above all, to a more hopeful future:

We started the journey on our knees, cowering before the ruthless and intemperate gods of antiquity. We followed our many religions deeper into the forest, until finally that path played out, disappearing into the current dark mutter of ritual, sloganizing, and murder. Now we are at a crucial turning point. Either we journey on, this time along the secular path, or we take another fork, embarking on an even darker, more dangerous, and twisted journey.

We do not have an adequate vocabulary, much less a worldview or a set of institutions, to come to terms with such a human future. Maybe we never will. Maybe the super natural is just too much for us. I doubt this is the case, though. I doubt that the super natural is too much for us for one simple reason. I think we are an expression of it. I think we *are* it.



The Blue Man Group—the Other One

WHITLEY

Like so many of the aliens believed to have recently arrived, little blue men have been with us for a long time. As is the case with most of the other forms, they were originally identified in folklore—most frequently, in this case, in northern European folklore. Just as the camera in the Pennsylvania woods recorded the presence of a gnome, people in the past were witness to such things. They saw something. These manifestations probably weren't—and aren't—real in the same sense that you and I are real, but they most certainly do occupy some sort of space in reality.

Not only gnomes, but also and even more commonly small dark blue men have been seen. In the past, they were most often found in mines. Now they're known as "blue aliens." They were observed by German, Welsh, Cornish, and English miners. The folklore was most developed in Germany, where they were given the name kobolds. Because of its dark blue color, the metal cobalt, discovered in a German mine in 1735, was named after them. But the word "kobold" ultimately derives from the Greek for "rogue." Most appropriate, judging from my own experience with them.

They were said to carry, at the level of the heart, a small orb, glowing red, and, in point of fact, I've seen that myself: Sometime in the mid-

seventies, I saw such a being come rushing out of my brother's room in the middle of the night in our house in San Antonio. It was about three feet tall, stocky, wearing a dark blue uniform covered with pockets and flaps, and it held a glowing red light at waist level. It brushed past me, went darting downstairs, and was gone.

I looked in on my brother. He was sleeping peacefully, so I attributed it to a waking dream on my part and forgot about it.

There was another dream during that visit, though, which, looking back, seems of great importance. In it, I saw small men in dark blue uniforms lighting lamps in an ominous looking tower, which, a few years later, I came to see as the Tower of Destruction in the Marseilles Tarot, a card of profound and dynamic change, the destruction of past beliefs.

In about 1976, I had one of those concentrated moments of insight that come to one on occasion, in this case concerning the intricate symbolism contained in the tarot. I saw in it a beautifully worked-out structure that could be used to add definition to the journey of life. It had nothing to do with fortune-telling, but I could certainly see that people who had no direct knowledge of it might have come to believe that fortunes could be told by the cards that contained it. It amounted to an elegant pathway through the symbols of the Major Arcana, which reveals the way the cards interact and what each one means in terms of the growth of consciousness. It came to me very suddenly one day, as I was walking out of my office. I had the peculiar impression that somebody had been in the office with me, a man in a blue suit. But nobody was there.

Shortly after the turn of the century, I recorded my discovery in a book called *The Path*. But back in 1976, I found myself reconsidering that earlier dream, which had been powerful enough to remain in my mind, and coming to see that the lighting of the tower heralded something, some change. But what?

It was, I think, the beginning of the destruction of the system of beliefs by which I had always lived, that the dead are dead and gone, that aliens, if they exist, are certainly not here, and that religion is an anachronism founded in the magical thinking of the past and has no basis in any actual, observational evidence. All of the visions and apparitions of the past, in other words, could be summed up quite simply: they either didn't happen or were the result of misapprehensions or mental problems.

Ah, those innocent days! I was in my “conventional interlude,” the years between when I stopped having numinous experiences as a child and started having—or noticing them—once again at the age of forty.

It was not long after seeing the apparition in San Antonio that, back in our little apartment on Fifty-fifth Street in New York, I had a more arresting experience with the kobolds.

It came in the form of another powerful dream. It probably happened in 1973 or 1974, but I still recall it vividly.

I was on a plateau in the middle of an enormous desert. The horizons were much too far away, as if the planet was two or three times its normal size—or, I suppose, as if it was not this planet at all. Before me on the plateau was a narrow road, snaking elegantly through an expanse of close-cropped grass. There were tall trees, like cedars of Lebanon, in a grove off to my right. Ahead, the road passed beneath a tall triumphal arch. To my left was a squat oval building perhaps three stories tall, set in the side of a cliff. Beyond it was the immense desert view that I was seeing. The building was dark blue, and its windows had louvered awnings. The sun was bright and powerful, flooding everything with chalk-white light.

Having no idea what I should do, I decided to walk toward the building. As I went under the arch, I was joined by two small men wearing clothes that were busy with flaps, the overalls of workers. The clothes and the men themselves were a dark, iridescent blue, the same color as the building.

They drew me along to a little ravine. In it were some lean-tos made of sticks. They indicated that this was where they lived. I said, “These aren’t even huts.” One of them replied in a low, breathy voice, “They’re all we need.”

At that moment, I got the impression of vast stretches of time, and how hard it was to maintain environmental balance, how you must waste nothing if you expect to survive long enough to matter. From that brief instant would later arise my own deep concern with the environment, which would lead to the writing of *Nature’s End* and *Superstorm*, and all the environmental reporting on my website, and the work I have done in this field. From that one moment of dream came a whole lifetime of effort.

I asked them about the building. One of them replied that it was a university. Now that we were close to it, I could see that it was a wreck. I said, “It looks like it’s in ruins.” The reply, through bubbling humor, was,

“It’s a million years old and the scholars aren’t very good at maintenance.” Then they asked me if I would like to attend it.

I can remember the shocked delight and eagerness that flashed through me. I could see an arched doorway in the base. I hurried toward it. But as I drew closer, I found myself struggling through a field of sharp boulders. At that point, two very strange beings appeared, as tall as I was, very thin, with great, slanted black eyes that disturbed me very much as they bored into me.

One of them said, “He’s not ready.” This seemed to disappoint the blue fellows. It certainly disappointed me, and I tried to get around them, but they blocked my way. I sensed that the whole history and meaning of humanity must be known in that place, and that if I could matriculate there, I could learn the truth of us and the secrets of our lives, and find some real definition to the three great questions of what we are, where we are, and why we are here.

I wanted to go in, and badly, but I understood that I had to obey them. The little blue men reacted with regret. They still thought I was ready. Finally, I turned away. The next moment, I woke up. I was covered with sweat, cold, my limbs aching as if I’d been running half the night. Anne lay beside me sleeping peacefully. It was about three.

I sweated out the most intense curiosity and regret that I had ever known. The regret was an agony, and the curiosity maddened me. Little did I know that, in that moment of living dream, I had entered the school. They rejected me, perhaps, in order to find the real depths of my desire. If so, then my regret told them that I was ready.

I was nowhere near that place, though, not anymore. I was back in our tiny apartment, with the night murmur of Manhattan slipping in through the windows.

I went into the living room and got a drink of water in our railroad kitchen. Then I sat at the dining table and cried in silence.

The next encounter with the blue men took place across Eighth Avenue from our apartment, at a strange little storefront that Anne and I had come to call “the whore store.” The reason we called it this was because a young girl would sit in the window in the evenings looking ashamed. She’d be in a hard-backed chair with a dark red curtain behind it. Sometimes, the chair would be empty, and we would make jokes about what might be going on behind the curtain.

On this night, we were returning from Doubleday's bookshop on Fifth Avenue when we noticed something odd taking place in the whore store. The chair was knocked over and the curtain was flapping furiously. As we watched, astonished, little blue dwarfs kept running out, then darting behind the curtain again. Every so often, the leg or arm or shoulder of a man in a suit would appear, only to be pulled back by the blue men.

We stood there watching this odd display for a moment, then began to feel uneasy. We walked on across Eighth Avenue and went home. From then until we moved, we both avoided passing the whore store.

We discussed the event many times, but never came to any resolution about what we had seen. It was many years before I related it to my dreams, or the apparition I had glimpsed in my parents' house in San Antonio—in fact, not until long after I had begun encountering the kobolds again, in that epochal autumn of 1985.

The first encounter took place in September of that year, probably one of the later weekends in the month. From about my thirteenth year, I had been troubled with neck pain. I'd been to a number of doctors for it. The last one I tried did an X-ray and observed that two of the vertebra were surgically fused. I told him that I'd never had surgery. He said that the fusion was definitely surgical. I repeated that there had been no surgery. So he refused to treat me, and that was the end of that. (Other doctors have since said that it could also be due to a fall on my head as a baby.) The pain dogged me so much that I had taken to pulling at my neck and making the bones crack, gaining a few minutes of relief that way.

On this night, I woke up and saw standing in a far corner of the room, barely visible, what I took to be a squat blue figure about three feet tall. I stared at it, trying to tell if it was a trick of light or if there was indeed something there.

I was distracted by the pain, though, which was intense. Forgetting about the figure, I grabbed at my head and twisted it. The result was like some sort of genius chiropractic adjustment. The vertebrae on the left side popped one after the other all the way down to the center of my back. At one point, there was a deep scraping sound and I felt as if my consciousness had become momentarily detached from my body.

Then it was over. I lay there, confused and a little afraid. Had I broken my neck? What had just happened to me? Then I realized that I was no longer

in pain. I sat up. I forgot all about the blue figure. The lack of pain was extraordinary, the sudden freedom of being without it after all these years. From then on, the pain has remained far less than it was before.

It was after that night, with the vision of the kobold still perhaps somewhere in the back of my mind, that I became increasingly apprehensive, and began the gradual journey of fear that would explode into consciousness on the morning of December 27, 1985.

Over the years, my recollections of that night have become complicated by the fact that they returned only gradually, and I am not really sure that I can accurately differentiate between precisely what I recalled in the days immediately afterward, and what came into focus later on. In part, it's because it was structurally so unlike normal experience, and so much of the imagery was so novel.

What I am going to do here is to draw from it my specific recollections of the kobolds. I cannot say with accuracy exactly at what point these memories entered my mind, but they have the same quality as my other memories of these experiences, too self-organizing and vivid to be ordinary dreams, but less defined than what we normally regard as memories of the real.

The specific recollection I am referring to is of being carried—or rather, manhandled—toward a window by a group of kobolds. The experience had enough of the affect of a dream that I wasn't startled into consciousness by it, but rather tried to shrug it off and go back to sleep.

Was I being physically carried out of the house? Later, I had physical injuries. And yet, nothing else about any part of the experience—or most of my experiences—was as firmly invested in physical reality as, say, the act of pushing my pen across this page. (Yes, I still write the old-fashioned way, though I have retired my quills.)

At this point, once the *Communion* experience is behind me, things change. There is a change of scope. It happens subtly, slowly, but nevertheless everything changes.

While I was writing *Communion*, I began questioning people in the immediate area regarding odd things they may have seen. As yet, I was not aware of all the strange sightings across the Hudson in Dutchess County, which would become famous as the Hudson Valley UFO sightings. There

were many stories, but one told by a carpenter in the process of finishing a house on our private road is particularly relevant to this part of my narrative.

This was the first of two incidents that, to me, added up to a sort of communication. I have learned, over the years, to see the actions of our visitors as a sort of illustrative language, communication built out of images and events. For example, a consistent image that witnesses connect with them is that of the owl. It has played an enormous role in my own experience of them, in fact. If you study the habits and capabilities of the owl carefully, you find yourself studying the capabilities of the visitors. They are creatures of the night, they are stealthy, silent, and use surprise. Like owls, which can use their extraordinary ears to hear prey scrambling under snow, they have extraordinary means of detection. Like owls, they are predators. Left unanswered, though, is the question of what they are hunting. If we are generally returned home more or less intact, what do they want?

Actually, one level of this book is an exploration of that question.

The incident involving the carpenter occurred during the fall of 1986. He had been hurrying to complete construction before winter arrived, and had ended up in a situation where he had no way to take his tools out at nightfall. He didn't want to leave them in the unlocked house, so he decided to sleep there, on the floor.

Later, he found himself awake and looking straight at a short man who was standing a few feet away. It was too dark to determine any color, but he was short and squat. The carpenter experienced a wave of intense fear, whereupon the man changed before his eyes into a bird of paradise and then disappeared.

Thus ended the first incident, or the first sentence in the paragraph that I saw the visitors as composing.

The second incident was more complex. A couple of years later we had a large group at our cabin who'd had a multi-witness encounter with one of the gray figures with large eyes. I will describe this in a later chapter. A filmmaker was there trying to make a documentary, and he had an encounter with what I think was one of the kobolds. There was a low-light video camera running—one of many attempts we made to document some of the strange events taking place in that cabin. It failed, but not because nothing happened on that night. It failed because what happened could not be detected by a camera. Could it be that alien technology prevented this? Of course that's

possible, but it is also possible that what was happening couldn't be filmed because it was unfolding in a space that cameras cannot record, an inner space that relates to the physical but is not part of it. In other words, a supernatural space.

The filmmaker and his wife were sleeping on a convertible couch in the living room when he turned over and saw a small man standing beside the couch staring down at him. He experienced a surge of fear. Instantly, the face of the man changed. It became the menacing head of a hawk, the very image of the Egyptian god Horus, sun-god and protector.

The next thing he knew, the apparition was gone.

He was, naturally, upset, and woke his wife up to discuss what had happened. They could come to no resolution and were still awake at dawn when my son and I came up from the woods where we'd been sleeping, given that every bed in the house was taken.

As we approached the cabin, we observed a short, hooded figure of a translucent gray color come out the front door, race down the deck before our eyes, then dart off into the woods at breakneck speed, dashing with incredible dexterity around the trees.

So, even if what was happening was unfolding in some not quite physical way, it was, in the end, physical enough to be visible, and to need to avoid the trees.

Later, I walked into the woods along that same line. In a few minutes, I found myself at an old Native American burial site where there are two graves. When I bought the land the site is on, I put a codicil in the deed that the burial sites must not be disturbed. I did this in part because two men claiming to be Delaware Indians came to the cabin and said the graves were sacred to them, but also because I had sensed on the day we saw the translucent figure that it was somehow connected to the dead, and maybe to those specific dead.

My son and I went in to find the filmmaker and his wife on their feet, because, just as we had seen the figure leaving, they had experienced a blast of heat so intense they thought the couch had caught fire.

If you want to be invisible, you need to bend light, which takes a lot of energy. Could it be that the figure was using technology to do this, and that, as he left, he reduced the power of some sort of device, which caused both the release of heat and him to become somewhat visible?

With his departure, this part of a very complex incident ended. Earlier that night, two of the other people in the cabin had had face-to-face contact with what, according to their descriptions, was one of the small gray beings. I will discuss this in a later chapter.

It is possible to see these two incidents, and much more, as a form of communication—visual communication as it were, living hieroglyphs. The first one might be seen as inner beauty, represented by the bird of paradise, replacing the outer ugliness of the froglike creature, and adding an implication of flight. The second, the image of Horus, might be seen as a response to the filmmaker's fear. This is because one aspect of this very ancient Egyptian deity is protective. But, like the bird of paradise, the falcon also flies, indicating that it can reach a higher level. So the kobolds, perhaps, were communicating that it is possible to mine for wisdom by ascending.

The Emerald Tablet of Hermes by Hermes Trismegistus, which first appears in an Arabic text in about the eighth century and was considered by master alchemist Sir Isaac Newton to be the foundation of the alchemical movement, is about finding the point of balance between lower and higher worlds, and this, it would seem, might also have been the message being communicated, in pictures and actions, by the kobolds who were involved at our cabin—that is to say, by the unknown aspect of mind that may be their origin.

Another incident that might be related took place at about this time. We were on a co-operative road, and one of the other residents came over to discuss some repairs. During this period, we were hearing high-pitched sounds from under the cabin—drilling, it sounded like, in the seam of iron that runs there. (We were not far from the original Iron Mountain facility in Rosendale, New York.)

Was this drilling an extension of the Iron Mountain storage area? Not likely, given that, as the sound continued, a stream of blood came shooting out of the center of our guest's forehead. Anne immediately staunched it with some tissue. He went home, never to return.

As the Newton translation of the Emerald Tablet says,

*The father of all perfection in the whole world is here.
Its force or power is entire if it be converted into earth.*

An alchemical transformation that was apparently not so good for the circulatory system of an elderly lawyer caught in its shrilly whine.

After the multiple witness incident and before the incident with the neighbor, at an earlier attempt to assemble a group who would co-operatively have an experience of our “visitors,” the first of the truly complex events took place.

Anne and I were upstairs in our bedroom. In the living room below there were four people on cots and the convertible couch, including a magazine editor who had promised to publish his experience if anything happened. In the basement was another couple, sleeping privately.

Sometime after midnight the people in the living room discovered that they couldn't move. But they could still talk, and began to converse as they tried to get off their beds.

A moment later, a group of short, dark blue figures entered the room through the front door, and began leaping around like acrobats, jumping and tumbling and making a ruckus. This went on for a few minutes until they disappeared and the group found that they could once again move.

They spent the rest of the night talking about what had happened. Meanwhile, an odd event took place in the basement, one that would turn out to be astonishingly and unexpectedly common. Among other things, it would profoundly weaken the argument that any alien presence that may be here is on a scientific expedition.

What happened was that the couple sleeping in the basement woke up to see an old friend of theirs standing at the foot of the bed. She spoke to them, telling them that she was all right. They were astounded, because she had died in the Mexico City earthquake of 1983, and yet here she was, big as life and seemingly entirely solid, standing before them telling them that she, who had been dead now for four years, was perfectly fine.

Upstairs, little blue aliens were cavorting in the living room. Downstairs, a ghost, seemingly solid and very much alive, was telling two of her old friends that she was fine.

So, what was this all about? What happened?

What happened was that beings popularly believed (by those who do believe) to be aliens, came into the living room and put themselves on display by leaping around before a temporarily paralyzed audience. Meanwhile in the basement, a very solid-seeming ghost showed up. As would almost

universally be the case in the other such instances that followed at our cabin, and the many others that have been reported to us, she assured them that she was fine, and then disappeared.

That's what appeared to happen, anyway. But what *really* happened? What can it mean?

As Anne and I worked together on this, as we did on everything, she asked the question: How do we know that any of this—the visits from Horus and the bird of paradise, and, for that matter, the meanings we are deriving not only from things like that but also from the whole “school” of close encounter—is communication? Perhaps it's simply a matter of our using our own knowledge to construct meanings that were in no way intended—at least, not by the entities we saw.

Maybe they don't know any more than we do. Given their chimerical nature, maybe even less. There can be little question but that there is a structure, large in scale and intellectually dynamic, that gives form to the whole phenomenon, including UFO sightings, alien encounters, encounters with the dead—all of it. Does it come from them, from us, or from some larger manifestation of consciousness that is dancing us marionettes to a cosmic tune?

Whatever its origin, judging from the history of religion, it is probably a good deal more dangerous than it looks. Religions have a habit of launching themselves among rejected minorities, then emerging unexpectedly from the cultural shadows, believers with their swords aflame. We human beings have a great defect, which is that we are all too often willing to both spread and enforce our ideas with violence.

If aliens show up, all sorts of people will rush forward with supposedly authoritative explanations of what is going on. Few of these are likely to include the presence of the dead in the equation, and none will include any explanation for the group of stories I will now tell.

But first, as these are way, way out there in terms of strangeness, a disclaimer: I would never have believed them, not for a moment, had there not been witnesses. As has so often been true in my experiential life, these experiences, outré as they were, were shared with others.

I might refer here to Jeff's concept of the Human as Two, and mention that these may be glimpses, as it were, through the fence that surrounds Charles Fort's famous comment in *Book of the Damned*, “I think we're

property.” We are little, curious animals, as it were, peering through the slats of the fence that surrounds our barnyard, and seeing beyond the edge not another world, but a more real vision of ourselves reflected as noumena and wondering, “What is *that*?”

It is what we are, would be one possible answer.

The first of these experiences took place in our apartment in Manhattan. I was lying in bed one afternoon, not asleep, when suddenly I felt a strange pulsation cross my chest. I opened my eyes to see an image before me, the head and shoulders of a being. It had round, coal-black eyes, very gentle, in a familiar “gray alien” face. The image was cut off along a line that precisely paralleled the pulsation in my chest. The gentleness of the being was striking. Equally striking was the feeling I had that I was looking at another form of myself or at somebody who inhabits me.

At about this same time, I woke up one morning with the sensation that my head was open at the top and there was somebody inside me. As I came into consciousness, a youthful voice, shrill with fear, cried out, “I’m being trapped inside a body.”

That brought me to full and immediate consciousness, you can be sure. But it never went further. Not another stirring. I was left to wonder what had given rise to this dream or hallucination or whatever it was. I am still wondering.

The famed psychic Ingo Swann came to the house at about that time. During our conversation, he suddenly kicked his feet uneasily and said that he was being invaded by somebody. Within a couple of minutes, he got up and rushed out, never to return.

The next incident took place about a year later, when we were living in Brooklyn Heights. I was curled up on a loveseat reading. Anne was sitting in a chair beside me doing the same. Waves of vibration began flowing through me, surging up and down my body. I thought to myself that Anne was finally going to get a chance to see an alien, because I was about to change form. Just then, though, one of our cats jumped up on my chest. He yowled as electric sparks shot between his paws and my body, and immediately jumped down. Nothing further happened, so I assumed that the balance had been thrown off. I spent the rest of the afternoon wondering what aliens really are . . . and what we are.

Later that night, I woke up. I was in the other form. I got out of bed and

found that I could fly a few inches above the floor. I was entirely conscious. I felt normal, but far lighter than usual. Unfortunately, I did not look back at the bed. I wish I had, because then I would have seen if my normal body was still there.

Instead, I went upstairs to my son's room. He had a friend sleeping over, and the boy woke up. At this point, I was against the ceiling, hovering above them. The boy seemed delighted. He was smiling from ear to ear.

I then went back down to the master bedroom, but on the way met another "alien," who begged me never to leave her again, never to return to the other form. She screamed, threw herself onto my back, and pleaded with me. I can remember her arms around me, as strong as steel.

The next thing I knew, though, I was lying back in bed. I was awake. Beside me Anne lay with her eyes open, seemingly both asleep and awake at the same time. Nothing further happened, but I spent the rest of that night awake, turning over in my mind all the possibilities that the experience suggested. After a few minutes, Anne's sleep returned to normal. I finally decided that I'd had some sort of hallucinatory dream that has not yet been identified and fell asleep myself.

When I went down to breakfast, the boys were having a sullen conversation. They would not speak to me. Later our son said that his friend had seen one of those *things* in the bedroom and was furious about it. If he was going to have any sort of social life, let alone more sleepovers, no more aliens, *please!* And here I was again, face-to-face with another witness to the impossible. On one level of the boy's mind, smiles of delighted recognition. On another, terrible fear and anger.

Which one is more true? Or better put perhaps, who are we, that we so conceal ourselves from ourselves?

I am far from alone in having experiences like this, that suggest the presence of an entirely unexpected duality of human being, not to say an entirely different core to reality itself—indeed, Jeff's "human as two."

I knew a massage therapist who specialized in working with very frail people. One time while massaging a patient (an elderly woman with an extremely weak heart), he felt an odd vibration, looked up from the patient, and saw in a mirror across the room that he had apparently turned into an alien. Naturally, he was terrified that she'd see this, too, and that the shock would kill her. He continued quietly massaging her while in this state for

some little time, until he finally resumed his normal appearance with her fortunately none the wiser.

Judging from the aforementioned Podesta tweet, it seems likely that the government could be holding back some pretty surprising information; perhaps even more so than Podesta himself imagined. He also wrote the introduction to UFO investigator Leslie Kean's book *UFOs: Generals, Pilots and Government Officials Go on the Record*. The book makes a convincing case that officials are aware of something unknown in our skies. But I am not so sure that the conclusions that the objects are spacecraft and that they are piloted by aliens—which are universally believed in the UFO community and, for all I know, in government circles as well—are correct. In fact, even if alleged aliens actually come forward in some way and claim that this is true, I think we should still hesitate to abandon the questions that surround the enigma before the whole of the truth is understood.

It is interesting to contemplate that this level of mind that we are discussing must be held responsible not just for the ancient, organic polytheisms but also for many of the more modern religions.

One must ask, if it is there, are its ambitions malignant or confused, or is it our response that is defective? Something is most certainly very wrong, or we wouldn't have spent the last three thousand years and more killing each other over religion. We convert the ambiguities of meaning that it presents us into beliefs, which we simply cannot handle. Inevitably, in defense of belief, we become willing to die and willing to kill.

If beliefs—even scientific beliefs—could really be brought into clear focus, then the basic philosophical question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” would have a clear and unambiguous answer.

As established religions in the West implode and Islam suffers its agonies, a vast and hidden experience spreads among the people, its power concealed behind the same sort of wall of denial that Rome once erected against Christianity, which was also derided, ignored, and persecuted, as most religions are during their early emergent periods.

By the end of the first century CE, Christianity probably had only a few thousand devotees. Presently, millions of people have been touched by UFO lore.

Within a few months of the publication of *Communion*, Anne was reading our mountains of letters as fast as she could, and making notes of

similarities as she went along. It was during this period that we understood the actual complexity of what we were dealing with, and just how deeply it was penetrating human consciousness. I can recall going into her office and seeing on the wall a yellow sheet with a list of typical observations in one column and numbers in another. I noticed that she had written at the top of the sheet, "This has something to do with what we call death."

I recalled that this had happened to me. As I mentioned earlier, on the night of December 26, I had seen a friend with the aliens. He had recently retired from the CIA. During the period that I thought I had been the victim of a conventional crime, I had attempted to find him, only to discover that he had died the previous March. So I was among those who had seen a dead man with the aliens. There was nothing ghostly about him at all. Like the apparition our friends saw at the foot of their bed, he had seemed entirely solid and real.

During this period, also, a few months after *Communion* was published, I received a call from my literary agency. A reader was desperate to get in touch with me. At the time, there were thousands of people doing this, but only this one had located my agency and called them. In those days, before the Internet, this took some significant effort, so I called him.

He told the following heartrending story: He and his wife had been sitting in their living room. Their old dog had become unexpectedly agitated and had needed to go out a second time. As the wife was opening the front door, she saw what appeared to be a fireball roar overhead and disappear below the treetops. She told her husband that she'd just seen a plane on fire and crashing. The next moment, their seven-year-old son came rushing down from his bedroom shouting, "Little blue men came into my room and they had Frankie [his older brother] with them and he said to tell you he was OK."

The older boy had been killed in an auto accident the week before, and the father desperately wanted to know if there was any reason to believe his child's story.

I was able to tell him that this was actually a commonplace part of the experience, judging from what we were discovering.

Not every experience of the kobolds involves death and the dead.

By late 1987, we were literally inundated with letters. Anne was determined to read them all and catalog as many as possible. She was looking for a secretary to help her when she found herself reading a remarkable

narrative from a woman who lived across the street from us in Greenwich Village.

Her name is Lorie Barnes, and she became our secretary and now has been a friend for over thirty years. She is also among the people who have had encounters at our cabin, and has gone on record with them.

When she was a young woman and pregnant back in the 1950s, she was lying in bed one night reading and waiting for her husband to return from work, when movement at the foot of the bed startled her.

She was shocked to see a group of squat blue or black figures with hideous froglike faces. As she recoiled, the one in the lead said, "Do not be afraid. We are not here for you. We are interested in the girl child you are carrying."

Of course, this took her to a new level of panic, but before she could completely lose her mind, they ended the confrontation with a brief and deeply startling statement that we will address in a moment. They withdrew, and disappeared from the room. When born, Lorie's child was indeed a girl. Back in those days, there was no way to determine the sex of a fetus. At least, we didn't have one.

In another instance, this one involving death, I saw, in my mind's eye, an event that haunts me still. A friend was having open heart surgery. He was alone in the world, an ill-liked man and something of a criminal. Anne and I did not want him to wake up in an empty room after his ordeal, so we were at the hospital keeping vigil. Our plan was that he would see friendly faces when he was taken out of recovery.

Perhaps two hours into the procedure, I was surprised to see him standing in the doorway of the waiting room. He stared at me with a mixture of longing and resignation, his eyes at once famished and deeply sad. To a degree, he had led a dissolute and dishonest life, but he had also been a loyal family man. He had been my friend since boyhood.

In the next instant, he was gone.

I said to Anne, "I saw Tommy. Tommy just died."

In another instant, my mind's eye was filled with a vision of a totally unexpected kind. In it, a group of kobolds were carrying him through a tumbledown cardboard slum in India. Then he was gone and in his place there was a tiny baby girl being held by her father.

The baby's eyes widened with what seemed to me to be adult

recognition, and the infant began screaming terribly, waving its arms and kicking, its eyes practically popping out of its head. The frantic parents tried to comfort it, and then the vision was gone.

The doctor came in and told us that our friend was dead.

I've had long thoughts about that vision. What might it mean—that these odd beings are indeed the managers of our souls? Did they put the soul of a bad man into a fresh young body, to give this not entirely lost being some sort of a second chance? Is that in some way part of life? What is life? What does it actually mean to be human?

Who are we, why are we here, where are we?

The activities of the kobolds are not confined to the regions of birth and death. I know an individual who, as a child, said that he would sometimes wake up at night and find them shining lights on his body. They said that they were doctors, and they were examining his soul.

Another incident took place on the Grand Central Parkway in Queens; it was so spectacular and mysterious that all I can really do is relate it, then let the questions it raises sing their haunting song.

As a gentleman I knew in those days was driving on the parkway in heavy late-afternoon traffic, he was horrified to see a jet coming straight toward his car, apparently about to crash into the dense traffic. Instead, though, it went right overhead, and he was perplexed to observe that the engines appeared to be wood cutouts. The whole plane was fake. Huge, but nothing more than a stage prop, in some bizarre way set to flight.

It may have been there to deflect attention away from what was happening nearby, because as he lowered his gaze to reengage with the traffic, he saw what appeared to be an enormous animated billboard on the roadside. It was lighted like the news feeds in Times Square, and strange symbols were flashing across it. I asked him what they looked like, but he wasn't able to remember them, except that they were moving fast and didn't look at all familiar.

He noticed cars along the roadside and people getting out and walking into the dark beneath the shoulder. It was all so odd, he decided to stop himself, take a look, and ask some of the others what they thought.

When he got out of his car, he could see a short distance away a number of people standing in a circle. As he walked toward them, he was approached

by fearsome looking little men in dark blue uniforms, one of whom snarled at him, “Get out of here.”

He did. But what had he witnessed? The fake plane seems to have been there to draw the attention of passersby away from what was happening. But what in the world *was* happening? I cannot say if it had anything to do with aliens, but it certainly did have to do with human beings, because there were people there in that circle.

What of the little men, though? Who were they?

Actually, there is something of an answer. As Lorie Barnes lay in her bed, young and pregnant and terrified beyond words, the leading figure asked, “Why are you so afraid?” She replied, “Because you’re *so ugly!*”

He laid a thickly gloved hand on her wrist and said in a kind and understanding voice, “My dear, one day you will look just like us.”

But what might this mean? Are we to turn into aliens, then? Or, if we take this comment at face value, might it not mean that there is more than one human form?

There appeared among our letters in 1988 a remarkably vivid account from a woman in Australia, who had been doing housework in the middle of the day when some very strange creatures had abruptly appeared in her sitting room. She observed a willowy being with dark, slanted eyes and a group of short, stocky ones in “brown shrouds,” who seemed to her to be workers, while the tall one was more of a supervisor.

It proceeded to overpower her with its mind while the workers moved about in the background, doing what she could not imagine. After a ferocious mental struggle, during which she literally tried to crawl out of the house as she could no longer walk, all went dark. When she woke up, it was hours later. She never found out what had happened to her during that missing time.

Presumably, though, the creatures who put her through this ordeal know—and perhaps, also, that is something close to the secret of the ages.

In any case, one wonders, looking at Lorie Barnes’s story and the story of the Australian woman, if we are not seeing the outline of a very remarkable and unsuspected structure: we are the kobolds. They are us working, somehow, in the fields of the soul. And one day, many of the living will join them down this very strange path, as we enter this other level of humanity, where what is hidden to us in this state, is the grammar of their ordinary truth.



A Context in the Sky

JEFF

We have only faith to guide us, say the theologians.

Which faith?

It is my acceptance that what we call evidence, and whatever we think we mean by intuition and faith are the phenomena of eras, and that the best of minds, or minds best in rapport with the dominant motif of an era, have intuition and faith and belief that depend upon what is called evidence, relatively to pagan gods, then to the god of the christians, and then to godlessness—and then to whatever is coming next.

. . . . If now, affairs upon this earth be fluttering upon the edge of a new era, and I give expression to coming thoughts of that era, thousands of other minds are changing, and all of us will take on new thoughts concordantly, and see, as important evidence, piffle of the past.

CHARLES FORT, *Lo!*

History is not what we think it is. Certainly its meanings change as we engage it differently. Piffle of the past—odd things in the historical record that make no sense to us because of our convictions about how the world works. Until, of course, those convictions pass and the piffle of the past appear as the unrecognized codes of some future knowledge.

Back to the piffle. I think most readers are probably like me when they encounter the story about the blue trolls bouncing around the Striebers' cabin living room as their paralyzed guests watch the show. I have never seen any

squat blue aliens. I think most readers are like me again when they hear about the couple who witnessed an old (dead) friend show up in perfectly good form—a “solid ghost . . . entirely solid and real.” I have never seen a ghost, much less a resurrected woman. For that matter, I think most readers are like me again when they hear almost *any* UFO story. I have never seen a UFO of any kind.¹⁹ When it comes to these sorts of things, I am a veritable genius of nonexperience. I am an amazing spiritual dud.

So why do I believe Whitley? Why listen to this professional storyteller tell us more stories? I have numerous professional reasons and one deeply personal reason to listen. I will get to the personal reason in chapter 9 (turns out that this dingbat is not a total dud). For now, let me focus on the professional ones. These are not simply professional reasons. They are also methods or practices, that is, they are highly developed “tools” with which to make some sense of otherwise impossible things. If you know where to find these tools (in the professional study of religion) and take the trouble to learn how to use them well, you can build the most astonishing things. Like a new world.

So far, I have introduced two such practices. It seems helpful to begin a list, as there will be quite a few others. Indeed, before we are done here, you will have an entire “practice kit” or “toolbox” at your disposal, which I will summarize at the end of the book in an appendix.²⁰

We encountered the first practice in chapter 1. This is the first and most important of all the practices in the study of religion. We call it simply *comparison*. This is a deceptive word, mostly because it is so familiar and seems so common. Consequently, we always underestimate the power of what this mental technology can do. We also underestimate the sheer havoc and embarrassing mistakes this tool can create, if it is not handled expertly and used well. As we shall repeatedly see, *everything* depends on what you “put on the table,” that is, everything depends on your comparative practice: what you compare with what to conclude what.

In our opening pages, I explained that if we collect enough seemingly “anecdotal” or “anomalous” experiences from different times and places and place them together on a flat and fair comparative table, we can quickly see that these reports are neither anecdotal nor anomalous. We can see that they are actually common occurrences in the species. They are part of our world.

They are “natural,” as we say, even if each of them is also rare with respect to any particular individual, and all of them are “super,” that is, beyond how we presently understand how this natural world works. But—and, again, here is the big point—we can only begin to perceive and understand these super natural things through a careful comparative practice. Otherwise, they are more or less invisible. Otherwise, they seem coincidental, accidental, meaningless. Or they seem to mean what they, as a whole now, almost certainly do not mean: that there are spacemen out for sex, or UFOs are demons.

We encountered the second tool or practice in chapter 3: *phenomenology*. We learned to “make the cut” between “what appears” on our comparative table and “what actually is.” We also learned that our sensory systems are simply not set up to know the latter. This cut allows us to take seriously even the most fantastic appearances of human experience without naively equating them or their interpretations with the truth of things (and the truth of things may well be weirder still). We can put the damnedest things on our comparative table.

There is a third tool or practice. I want to take it up now. It is a very simple and effective way to make the impossible possible. As with comparison and phenomenology, historians and humanists have given this third practice a technical name. They call it *historical contextualization*, or, more simply, *history*. This is what I want to do in the present chapter. I want to historically contextualize Whitley’s abduction experience. I want to place it in a larger history.

These three practices, I should immediately observe, are often performed together. Whitley performs comparison and contextualization at different points in his narrative, for example: when he locates his troll experiences in the larger European history of blue troll folklore; or when he tells us of the child who saw the little blue men and whose dead brother, Frankie, was with them; or when their neighbor-secretary Lorie Barnes tells Whitley about the squat black figures who took such an interest in her unborn daughter; or when he talks to his neighbors and looks for other stories of things seen in the sky in that area at that time.

Anne took up the comparative method again when she read through the *Communion* letters, created a chart and classification scheme on the wall, recognized patterns in the data, and came to the working hypothesis: “This

has something to do with what we call death.” Actually, Anne had moved beyond collection, classification, and comparison, beyond the phenomenological cut, and beyond historical contextualization with such a sentence. She had moved into the act of theorizing her comparative data.

For now, let us take up this third tool or practice of historical contextualization. I want to bring it out into the open and make it more explicit and conscious. I also want to show how contextualization can have a most ironic and unintended result, ironic and unintended anyway for the conventional historian.²¹ As we will now see, robust historical contextualization, like robust comparison across historical contexts, does not always end up explaining everything. Sometimes it ends up making our world much weirder than we thought.

Hudson Valley, 1909–1986

Historians, and humanists in general (by which I simply mean professionals who work in the humanities), are expert in insisting on the “historical context” of every human experience, idea, value, or expression. What they mean by this is that every human experience takes place in a very particular historical context and so is profoundly shaped by that place and time. Think about who you are. You are who you are largely because of where and when you were born, who your parents were and how they raised you, what language or languages you speak, and so on. Change any of these variables and you would be a different self, a different person.

But many humanists often want to push this obvious truth further. They want to replace my carefully chosen “shaped by that place and time” with another expression: “constructed by that place and time,” by which they really mean: “completely determined by that place and time.” For them, everything about human experience and expression is not just shaped or mediated by a historical context. It is constructed out of that historical situation and, or so it is implied, is *nothing but* that historical situation. Everything human can finally be reduced to and explained by “history,” which is to say: by its historical context.

This move, of course, makes every human experience relative to a particular place in time. Taken to its logical end, it turns us all into psychological silos, silos that have no real way of communicating across space and time (hence, logically speaking, “history” should not be possible). It also sucks any bigger meaning out of the world. No single experience now can be taken as a sign or expression of some larger cross-cultural reality or shared human nature, much less as a revelation of some cosmic truth. It’s all history. It’s all context. It’s all constructed. Put in the terms of our earlier analogy, it’s all appearance. There is no projector behind or above us. There is no real behind the show.

The ideological debunkers of anomalous phenomena have a very similar strategy in mind when they label the extraordinary data of this realm anecdotal. Basically, what they are arguing is the same point, but now in reverse. They are arguing that these experiences have no larger context or bigger point to make (this is what “anecdotal” means). They are arguing that these pure anomalies can be fully explained (away) as local constructions of a single human psyche and so should not concern us as either meaningful or real in the sense that other things are real, that is, in the sense that they can be experienced by multiple individuals in more or less the same way in other times and climes. In their opinion, such anomalous experiences can tell us nothing about the real world or our real nature because they sit entirely alone among our other more public and so more reliable perceptions and experiences. “No broader context” equals “unreal.” These anomalies are best left ignored, then, as meaningless blips, as statistical flukes, or as neurological hiccups.

There is a real insight here. The meaning of something, after all, *does* depend on its context, be that a text, a grammar, or a social event. To take a simple, mundane example, I know that a long flowing piece of cloth attached around a person’s shoulders and neck is interpreted differently in a superhero comic book than it is at an elite social event. The meaning of the “cape” is determined by its literary, artistic, and social contexts. This is why *completely* anomalous experiences would in fact be “meaningless” in the simple sense that we would have nothing else to compare them to, no context in which to place them, and so no way of understanding what they are or how they are functioning.

But here is the funny thing. Such historical and contextual insights are

helpful enough, but, if applied fairly and systematically, they can easily backfire on the conventional historian and the dogmatic debunker. Sometimes, after all, what initially looks anomalous or “without a context” turns out, on closer historical inspection (that is, with better history), to be neither. A truly robust historical perspective here does not relativize or dismiss. Sometimes it ends up confirming the anomalous experience as part of a much larger pattern or context. In this way, good history, like good comparison and good phenomenology, makes the impossible possible.

Consider, for example, the historical contexts of the events recounted in *Communion* and in Whitley’s later nonfiction books on this same series of events. These events may seem to the uninformed reader to be completely anomalous, just plain weird, but they are in historical fact anything but. If we look carefully at either the big picture or the little picture, a very different image on our comparative screen emerges, as if tens of thousands of little tiny pixels were flashing in and out on our flat-screen TV to take a definite, and quite eerie, shape and story.

First, step back a bit from the television. Way back. The visitors, of course, are not anomalous at all. They possess *countless* precedents in the general history of religions. And that is an understatement. I do not think it is too much of a simplification to suggest that the entire history of religions can be summed up this way: strange superbeings from the sky come down to interact with human beings, provide them with cultural, technological, legal, and ethical knowledge, guide them, scare the crap out of them, demand their submission and obedience, have sex with them (often forcefully), and generally terrorize, awe, baffle, inspire, and use them. This history of religions is the broadest context and grammar of *Communion*. Nothing anomalous or meaningless there, even if it is all, of course, impossible in *our* modern materialist register and assumptions, themselves all very recent, and no doubt very temporary.

Now step forward, say, halfway to the TV screen: not so close that you just see individual pixels, but not too far away either, so you can still see the images and stories on the screen. Similarly, this “little picture” or more immediate temporal and spatial context of Whitley’s initial experiences work powerfully against any anecdotal reading.

Whitley briefly invokes these larger historical contexts in the previous chapter when he writes: “As yet, I was not aware of all the strange sightings

across the Hudson in Dutchess County, which would become famous as the Hudson Valley UFO sightings.” Indeed. The geographical locale of Strieber’s abduction experience is a well-known and well-documented hot spot for UFO activity throughout the twentieth century. Consider the following.

The first major “UFO flap” in the United States was the airship mystery of 1896–97, during which hundreds of sightings of craft flying over major U.S. cities, often with spotlights or “lanterns” no less, were reported in the newspapers from California to New York. According to Whitley, an airship floated over San Antonio in May of 1897 and must have flown over Strieber’s great-grandmother’s house.²² This was six years before the Wright Brothers managed to get their first dangerous contraption a few feet off the ground in Kittyhawk, North Carolina. The nature of these sightings remains controversial and ambiguous, and many of them were no doubt hoaxes or misreported, but one thing is clear: they *were* widely reported, and these reports are part of the historical record and so a part of the larger historical context of the later sightings.

Another major wave of sightings occurred about a decade later, in 1909–10, this time centered in the Hudson Valley region. On July 26, 1909, the *Newburgh Daily Journal* ran this headline: “AIR SHIP” IS SEEN AGAIN FROM WASHINGTON HEIGHTS: SHE WAS SWOOPING: TOO DARK, IT IS SAID, TO DISCERN OUTLINES OF THE “SHIP.” And here is what *The Sun* of New York City reported a few days later, on August 1: “A mysterious airship which flies only at night is causing considerable excitement and keeping the people of Orange county residing between Goshen and Newburgh up nights in their efforts to get a look at it.” And here is my favorite piece, under the headline “HUMAN VOLCANO ERUPTS,” from the *Goshen Democrat* four days later, on August 5:

Otto Pushman, Newburgh’s champion cusser, had been sent to jail for thirty days for using sulfurous language. During the nocturnal hours of Tuesday he was discovered on Grand Street looking for that ding-blasted airship that the Newburgh papers tell about and cursing fervently at the blankty-blanked moon.

As this precious piece reveals and as author Linda Zimmerman emphasizes through an analysis of other newspaper pieces from the same

year (one of which featured mocking cartoons and an invocation of Santa Claus), one can see “all the elements of denials, ridiculous excuses, hoaxers, and belittled witnesses already in place, more than 100 years ago!”²³

Zimmerman has written two books tracing the UFO phenomenon in the Hudson Valley region from 1909 to the present. What she finds is a dizzying array of phenomena not unlike those we find later in the century: “airships” and later “spaceships” in the sky ranging from baseball size glowing balls to huge floating Vs (including her own sighting); an immense circular metallic craft with colored lights and symbols that hovered just above the heads of a mother and her twelve-year-old son close enough to hit with a rock; two early abduction reports (from 1929 and 1937) involving things like time standing still, floating humanoids in “diving suits,” and a sense of being in two worlds at once; encounters that result in the witnesses developing various psychical capacities, particularly telepathy and precognition (an extremely common pattern in such encounters to this day); a bizarre vision of two immense “wheels” on their side (vaguely reminiscent of Ezekiel’s “wheels” and also reported as a spinning “ferris wheel” in the 1980s); an eyeball-to-eyeball encounter with a long-necked green humanoid flying in a circular craft right beside a traveling car; a large pile of sand blown to smithereens with circular landing marks burned into the cement (with attending photographs); UFOs surrounded by helicopters or helicopters apparently searching for UFOs; and numerous stories of scared dogs, cats, and birds.²⁴

Zimmerman also deals with some cases outside the Hudson Valley, including my personal favorite: a sighting in a backyard outside of Chicago in 1992 of a seven-foot humanoid with an apparent tail teleporting from tree to tree whose description sounds, to me anyway, *exactly* like Nightcrawler of the X-Men. The thing even displayed Nightcrawler’s signature cobalt blue flash when it instantaneously “jumped” from place to place.²⁵ This is well before the movies, but not before Nightcrawler himself, who was introduced in a comic book in 1975. What to do?

The spooked dogs, cats, and birds are also especially interesting, as they strongly suggest that these events had some kind of biological or physical existence outside the subjective psyches of the witnesses, that is, outside the phenomenological cut. I think an entire book could easily be written on UFOs and our canine and feline companions. Whitley himself has written about the

physiological effects different visitor phenomena had on their pet cats, including above again.²⁶

Moreover, and worse still for the anecdotal thesis, it was the 1980s that saw the strongest spike in reports of sightings and up-close encounters in the Hudson Valley. The Northwestern University astronomer and air force scientific consultant J. Allen Hynek, the researcher Philip J. Imbrogno, and the journalist Bob Pratt dedicated an entire volume to this subject, with a later edition (after Hynek's death) claiming some 7,046 reported cases in the Hudson Valley from 1982 to 1995.

Particularly important here, since it temporally wraps around the Strieber case, is the three-year flap—beginning on New Year's Eve, 1982, and petering out throughout 1986—that featured something that came to be known as the “Westchester Boomerang,” basically an immense triangular-shaped craft repeatedly floating over the region. The thing was described variously as “a flying city,” “as large as an aircraft carrier,” “as big as a football field,” and like “something out of the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.”²⁷ As is so often the case, the sci-fi references were irresistible.

Not that the immense thing behaved like a thing. It could appear and disappear instantly, vanishing, as one witness put it, “like the Cheshire Cat's smile.” It was often described as completely silent. Or in uncanny religious terms: “It just hung there motionless in the sky. It was like seeing a ghost.” Squadrons of helicopters were seen in the night skies during some of these sightings, as well as unidentified planes flying in formation, which the witnesses believed were sent up by the military to confuse the matter and provide a bogus explanation to the public.²⁸ The public was not tricked, or amused.

After two books on the Hudson Valley material, Zimmerman's conclusion seems reasonable enough: the Hudson Valley region is a UFO hotspot. And it was *here* that Whitley Strieber had his own abduction experiences over the Christmas holidays of 1985, right smack in the middle of the most active decade of the twentieth century, during a spike in that same decade, and after at least seventy-seven years of similar encounters in the same area that included not one or two reported sightings, but *thousands*.

Such cultural and geographical contexts do not explain these experiences or offer us any definitive answer. I am certain that the reports are

not all of the same quality or reliability, and, as we have seen, some of them were simply mocking. Accordingly, I do not wish to take a particular position on these records, much less on this or that individual sighting. We simply have not done the hard historical, textual, ethnographic, and scientific work that would warrant or authorize any such definitive position. As a culture, we have barely begun such a project. But, taken as a whole, such historical materials certainly dispel any notion that Strieber must be a kook, or that his honest descriptions and dramatic sufferings can somehow be brushed aside as lacking any meaningful context, as anecdotal or anomalous. They were in historical and contextual fact nothing of the sort.

That is one big reason I continue to listen to Whitley Strieber.

The Earth-Farm

There is one other thing to say about the Hudson Valley, and it is a biggie in my opinion. It is obvious enough, but no one, to my knowledge, has noted it. It is this: Albany, New York, was the birthplace and childhood home of the man who did more than *anyone* to shape the American paranormal: Charles Fort. Jim Steinmeyer has given us a wonderful biography of Fort.²⁹ I have done my best to summarize Fort's sophisticated comparative practice.³⁰ Here I can only sketch the barest of outlines.

In four weird and wonderful books written between 1919 and 1932 (*The Book of the Damned*, *New Lands*, *Lo!*, and *Wild Talents*), Fort laid down the paradoxical, both-and, real-unreal, mental-material nature of paranormal phenomena, which he humorously called "the damned" for the ways that religion and science so anxiously denied, condemned, and ignored these constantly reported events/experiences. It was Fort again who began to speculate about the meaning and purpose of what he called "super-constructions" in the sky. There were no "UFOs" or "flying saucers" yet, although many of Fort's descriptions are astonishingly close, like the man's in 1871 who saw a thing fall from the sky, "oscillating from side to side like a disc falling through water," that is, exactly like flying saucers would be seen descending in the next century.³¹ Then there were his many speculations about abductions, which he framed in his typical humorous, not quite

grammatical way, like this: “Whether spacarians have ever dredged down here or not, or ‘sniped’ down here, pouncing, assailing, either wantonly, or in the interests of their sciences, and I have strong objections against lugging in the fourth dimension, because then I am no better off, wondering what the fifth and sixth are like.”³²

Or more bluntly: “I think that we’re fished for.”³³

But all of this, at least as we think we know it now, would come later, partly because of Charles Fort. It was this man’s speculations that were picked up by the pulp-fiction subculture of the 1930s and ’40s (the pulps even serialized sections from his books), which in turn morphed into modern science-fiction literature in the 1950s and ’60s. Fort is one of the fathers of all of this.

Fort, however, did not make the mistakes of the reductive and religious comparativists of today. He was a very special kind of skeptic. Indeed, he was extremely critical of two common ways of demonizing or dismissing anomalous events: what he called the Dominant of Religion (related to what I have called religious comparison) and the Dominant of Science (related to what I have called reductive comparison). He made fun of both by simply demonstrating how they really didn’t work to explain the full scope of the data and how they both took certain things off the table so that they could pretend that they were explaining everything.

It is worth repeating. It is very easy to claim a theory of everything if you get to decide what that everything is. It is very easy to explain everything on the table if you have put everything you cannot explain underneath it in the wastebasket.

Fort sought to move beyond these two dominant ways of knowing into a third Dominant, what he called (not so eloquently) “Intermediatism” or (a little better) the “philosophy of the hyphen,” by which he basically meant to refer to events that were physical and mental or real and unreal at the same time. It is a similar still future, frankly paradoxical, deeply spiritual, deeply materialist way of knowing and understanding our world that Whitley and I are re-visioning as the super natural.

Fort, who spent his adult life reading and writing at the southern end of the Hudson Valley, that is, in New York City, considered some very entertaining, and occasionally very dark, possibilities with respect to all of

these superstructures in the sky. For example, he often invoked the experience of the Native Americans around 1492, when they first witnessed those immense, anomalous ships floating in the bays. It would not go well for them, Fort noted.

Then he got darker (and weirder). Earth might not be a “new land” or a galactic colony. It might be a farm. This would certainly explain why the visitors do not establish any open contact or attempt communication with us. Why should they?

Would we, if we could, educate and sophisticate pigs, geese, cattle?

Would it be wise to establish diplomatic relation with the hen that now functions, satisfied with mere sense of achievement by way of compensation?

*I think we're property.*³⁴

Or again: “I should say that we’re now under cultivation; that we’re conscious of it, but have the impertinence to attribute it all to our own nobler and higher instincts,” which is to say: to our religious instincts and beliefs.³⁵

This dark thought of a kind of galactic seeding, alien husbandry, or earth-farm secretly working below (or above) our mythologies and religions would have a long and rich history in the later science fiction, of course, up to and including Ridley Scott’s recent film *Prometheus* (2012). But it is not just a sci-fi notion. None other than the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James had advanced a more domestic, less sci-fi version in a related context, that of the spirit world suggested by his own extensive psychical research with mediums. More specifically, James wondered if our relationship to the otherworld of the spirits and the dead was not like that our pets have in relationship to our world. He wrote the following stunning lines in *A Pluralistic Universe*:

In spite of rationalism’s disdain for the particular, the personal, and the unwholesome [the modern debunker’s anecdotal], the drift of all the evidence we have seems to me to

*sweep us very strongly towards the belief in some form of superhuman life with which we may, unknown to ourselves, be co-conscious. We may be in the universe as dogs and cats are in our libraries, seeing the books and hearing the conversation, but having no inkling of the meaning of it all.*³⁶

In any case, James's "superhuman life" is precisely what Fort was writing about. Hence his affection for the prefix super-, which he attached to pretty much everything: super-constructions, super-vehicles, super-mind, super-sight, super-imagination, super-religion, even super-sociology. Hence also his extensive focus on the "wild talents" or superpowers of paranormal people.

Although this is pure speculation on my part, I cannot help but wonder if behind (or above) all of this super-writing floated some personal sighting in those haunted Hudson Valley skies, or even some private "abduction" experience. Charles Fort certainly would not have been the first to see things in that sky or experience such an encounter in that haunted valley. Nor would he, of course, be the last.

Biological Gods

These speculations of James on the pet in the library and Fort on the earth-farm are highly relevant to our present subject, and this for at least two reasons. First, because, as Whitley describes in the previous chapter and as Anne discovered reading through the hundreds of thousands of letters that *Communion* invoked, the dead are often seen within abduction events. Second, many of Whitley's speculations about the meaning of his own experiences are clearly "Fortean" in their paradoxical thing-thought structure. This is especially evident in the last chapter of *Communion*, entitled "A Structure in the Air: Science, History, and Secret Knowledge."

By far, the most difficult aspect of Whitley's "structure in the air," for a traditional academic anyway, is his suggestion that these experiences might represent an encounter with other actual species, invisible life-forms existing in some other dimension of the natural world that overlaps with ours and

whose occasional rupture into our dimension is always mediated by our cultural imagination. This, of course, is not simply a theory about the visitors. It is a radical, and deeply critical, theory of religion as well, since it implies that these invisible life-forms have been interacting with us for millennia under various mythical forms that we have traditionally (mis)framed in supernatural terms. In Strieber's elegant phrase, it appears that the visitors "were somehow trying to hide themselves in our folklore."³⁷

Others had suggested something similar with respect to the flying saucers and the folklore, and in very sophisticated forms, before Whitley, including John Keel, Jacques Vallee, and Eddie Bullard. But there is something more "physical," "realist," or "biological" about Strieber's suggestions. Here is how he put the matter in the 2008 preface to *Communion*: "But the visitors are not only real and here. In fact, I don't think they are visitors at all. I think that the truth is that we are embedded in their world in the same way that animal species are embedded in ours. It was hard to accept, but as I got to know some of them, I began to see that their relationship to us was quite similar to ours with, say, chimpanzees. . . ." ³⁸ Later in this same text, and again in this one, Whitley compares himself and his terrified reactions to the presence of the female visitor to a wild, frightened bucking ranch horse. He was being "broken."

Shades of Fort's pigs on the farm and James's cat in the library.

What sets Whitley's model apart is how interactive it is, how it relies on us to manifest the other species. This interactive model is advanced through multiple frames, including that of the triad or triangle in the history of mythology and the bizarre implications of quantum physics, which, as has been amply noted by physicists and enthusiasts alike, has reintroduced consciousness and intention back into the scientific picture in dramatic and baffling ways. In this interpretation of quantum physics, the result of an experiment is partially determined by what the physicist decides, that is, how he or she chooses to set up the experiment. The result then is not simply "objective." It is "subjective" and "objective" at the same time. The entire system is interactive.

Whitley takes this interactive model very far, suggesting, in effect, that the visitors may rely on our beliefs to appear: "Thus the corridor into our world could in a very true sense be through our own minds."³⁹ He is not after

simple belief here. He is not a fan of the contactee “eager to see the phenomenon as a dimensionless cartoon of space friends.” He is after something much more complex and interesting. Here is how he ends the book:

*The visitor experience may be our first true quantum discovery in the large-scale world. The very act of observing it may be creating it as a concrete actuality, with sense, definition, and a consciousness of its own. And perhaps, in their world, the visitors are working as hard to create us. Truly, such an act of mutual insight and courage would be communion. . . . Who knows, maybe really skilled observation and genuine insight will cause the visitors to come bursting to the surface shaking like coelacanths in a net.*⁴⁰

Note that there is no stable subject or object here. There is a weird, mind-bending, mirrorlike moment in which the viewer and the viewed bring each other into existence through their mutual intentions and gazes. *This* is what Whitley means by “communion.” I will take up this communion again in my next chapter, there through the conjuring practices of reading and writing and that mystery of consciousness we so banally call “interpretation.”

Keep observing. Keep turning the pages. Keep letting go. Keep the apocalypse going. The Already World is shining through.



Lying in the Lap of the Goddess

WHITLEY

This ancient human experience not only rends the veil between the living and the dead, it penetrates deeply into sexuality. If we take the position that modern close encounter experiences are essentially the same phenomenon of contact that we have been perceiving through all of our history, then this aspect of them, also, fits long experiential tradition.

It is with this in mind, then, that I seek now to explore the ways in which my experiences have engaged me sexually. It's a subject that I am extremely reticent to talk about. I am a very private person when it comes to sexuality. Prior to meeting my wife, I was sexually intimate with a woman only once, and since then my entire experience has been with Anne—that is to say, my conventional experience.

My unconventional sexual life has been wildly promiscuous, fearsomely intense, at times even somewhat perverse—or at least, what this very conventional man would regard as perverse. Of course, I've hardly ever written or spoken about it. As I have said, it took me twenty-five years even to admit to my wife that I had been raped. But that was only one small incident. There is much more.

I have never wanted to write about it, to some degree because of the prurient stupidity that I fear it will elicit in people addicted to sensation and looking for the next lurid tale of “alien sex.” There is a deeper reason, though. This is because it was so very beautiful. I am haunted by the paradoxical sweetness of many of these ferocious experiences. One way to put it would be to say that I had a love affair with a goddess. Another would be that it was an affair with an alien. But the third way to describe it—which is, I suspect, closer to the truth—is that I didn’t know who or what my wife really was, or myself, or any of us. I don’t know what human beings are, and, based on my own life experience, I have every reason to suspect that the form we live in every day of our lives is not our only state. Unless, of course, it is what one of our letter writers was told when she asked her visitor who he was. He responded, “It is me within thee.” So, not only an interstellar astronaut piloting a spaceship.

Sometimes when Anne was sleeping or distracted or her face blossomed with pleasure, I would see in it a flickering shadow of the great-eyed being I’d painted for the cover of *Communion*. Now, I am not making a claim here that my wife was an alien or anything nearly so concrete as that. What I am saying is that the shadow of my wife—her life, her ways, my awareness of her body—ghosts through the experiences that I am about to describe like a sylph.

Over the years, I told her a few of these stories. As they seemed like a great betrayal of our marriage, I was very hesitant to do this, but also ashamed not to. I had experienced such powerful emotions during the experiences that I felt that they were a profound invasion of my vow to her. As they had not apparently been initiated by me, and I didn’t have the impression that I could have stopped them, I wasn’t sure that I had violated it, but the pleasure that they had brought me made me very uneasy about my moral position.

My self-valuation is deeply connected to what are now regarded as outdated ideals, most especially honor. To have honor, I feel that one must lead a life in truthfulness and honesty. One must keep one’s vows. I would never presume to extend my own values to others, nor to judge them if their values are different from mine. But I would basically never, ever break a vow, and I feel that the marriage vow is the most sacred of them all for any common man like me. A great leader—a president, for example—may take a

more important vow, I suppose, to defend the country, but for someone in the ordinary way of life, my marriage vow was central to my honor and thus inviolate.

But I violated it. Not technically, as I have said, but in my heart, helplessly and certainly. For I fell in love with this being and am still in love with her and always will be. I also love my wife deeply and passionately, but if this woman were to come back to me, I would be unable to resist opening my arms to her, and that's the truth of it.

I'd assumed that Anne would be furious when she heard me tell of my various assignations with this being, but she took it all in stride, so much so that I came to wonder what her level of involvement really is. Could Anne be one with the woman depicted on the cover of *Communion*? Are they the same person in two different forms, or do I perceive her that way—and by extension, do we all sometimes perceive others around us as being in different forms? If so, then sexually staid Whitley and Anne and sexually wild Whitley and Anne share a kind of mandala-like existence, a conventional relationship and an unconventional one rotating around each other, enclosed in a circle that, as it is a form without final measure, contains an infinity of possibilities.

In considering the idea that humanity may have more than one form, I would like to refer to an event that took place when I was out touring for *Communion* in 1988. I got back to my hotel to discover that I had a phone message from my editor, Jim Landis, then at William Morrow and Company. When I telephoned him, he said, "I have good news and bad news." Of course, I demanded the bad news first. He answered that the visitors thought that *Communion* was full of mistakes. Then he added, "The good news is that we all believe you now." I was perplexed, because I'd had the impression that Jim and the rest of the staff at Morrow took my story with a substantial grain of salt. In fact, I didn't think that they believed me at all.

It turned out that another editor, Bruce Lee, had been checking stock in the old Madison Avenue Bookshop when he had noticed two people looking through a copy of the book. They were turning pages very rapidly and laughing together. When he went closer, he could hear that they were saying that I'd gotten this wrong or that wrong, then paging along and snickering.

But how could they know? How could they be so sure? When he walked up to them to ask, they stopped and looked at him. He was shocked to see

huge, glistening eyes just like the ones the being on the cover of the book had. He found the eyes absolutely terrifying, and decided to leave the shop. When he walked out, they followed him, chatting together in what he thought of as Jewish accents. He watched them walk off into the afternoon crowd on Madison Avenue. Nobody seemed in the least concerned that two aliens were strolling down the street in overcoats and hats on a warm afternoon. He told me that people would look right at them and not react at all.

I found this all very hard to believe. At that time, I was debating in my own mind whether or not the experience was real or imaginal—that is to say, a tangible presence somehow generated by the imagination. At my insistence, Bruce took and passed a lie detector test and stuck to his story, so I finally accepted that he was at least reporting his perceptions as he had seen them.

In a similar case in 2004, Adrian Hicks, a member of the Winchester town council in Great Britain, saw what appeared to him to be a humanoid alien walking in ballet shoes down a crowded shopping street. He said, “I was near the Works bookshop when I saw this strange woman, a humanoid walking with a penguinlike gait. She had very large prominent eyes and was twirling her hands in a circular motion. She seemed friendly and totally at ease with us. She wasn’t scared, she was smiling, and seemed to be enjoying herself among us. She walked very slowly up the High Street. I remember she was very interested in the clock over Lloyds Bank. She was human enough to get away with it. Everybody’s heads were turning.”

He also recalled a woman taking pictures of her, and other witnesses, but to my knowledge nobody has ever come forward. Given his position in political life, one would think him very foolish to invent such a story, and I doubt that he did. I wonder, though, what he actually did see, what Bruce Lee saw, and what my dear “alien” lover, of precious memory, really is.

I have been sifting through the grains of my life looking for where this may have begun. When I was a child, as I mentioned in *The Secret School*, a white owl used to stand at the edge of our backyard and stare up at my windows. While I still cannot say that much of what I remember, or have imagined, of those days exists outside of my mind, family members do recall the white owl, and my parents were disturbed enough about what appeared to be nocturnal excursions on my part to have had the screens on the windows of my room nailed shut.

I remember a nun on whom I had a terrific crush—who, when I was ten

and eleven was my heroine and my most precious friend. I can recall meeting her behind the old sisters' home that is still on the grounds of the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio. She is, however, confused in my mind with another glorious older woman, Aileen Carter, who had an observatory on the roof of her mansion and used to hold astronomy classes there. The nun taught about the drama of evolution, dinosaurs, and the shimmering movement of God's hand across time, drawing life toward the knowledge of him. I would say, now, that something was certainly drawing life somewhere, but for me it has turned out to be in the direction of question rather than belief. Mrs. Carter taught of the vastness of the universe and the sacredness of creation. Both women were deeply religious, but both women, as I look back, taught good science, as it was understood in the 1950s.

In *The Secret School*, I portray myself as riding my bicycle down to the Carter place at night. But this would have been a daunting task for a child, and I really cannot believe that I did it, especially not at night, any more than I went to the spot behind the old sisters' home in the wee hours, as I also recall doing.

I did go to classes at Mrs. Carter's house, and I might well have gone to the old sisters' home some afternoons with my mother, and could well have been befriended by one of the old teachers, eager to enjoy a last student. The night journeys, I assume, are imaginary.

When I was writing *The Secret School*, I experienced a vibrant thrill, though, and remembered how, when I reached puberty, the wonderful excursions ended. And no matter the degree to which they were imaginary, they suffused my life then with a grand romance, and left me with a reverence for the world around us that is as strong today as it was when I was a boy.

There was, in these experiences, an unformed longing toward the drama of women. I did not relate to either woman sexually, of course, but deep within my body there was something stirring that would emerge more overtly when I came face-to-face with the woman on the cover of *Communion*, and found in her both the authority and gentleness of my teachers and the brilliance and sensuality of my wife.

In my life, I have had four very powerful sexual experiences. The first one occurred when I was just coming into puberty. I was camping out on the front lawn with some neighborhood children. In a late hour when all was

quiet, somebody suggested that we take a walk through the neighborhood naked. Of course I was keen for the adventure. When we stripped off our clothes, I saw that one of the boys, older than me, had an erection. This caused the girls to giggle. At that point, I had not had anything explained to me about sex. I suppose that I'd had erections myself, but this was the first one I had ever noticed.

I thought he was deformed, and made elaborate efforts not to seem too appalled. I thought his penis had turned into a horn. No wonder the girls found it funny, poor guy.

In any case, off we went on our adventure. There were five or six of us, as I recall.

It was really amazing to feel the night air on my skin and to actually cross the street naked. We had gone down through the yards on the other side, and were just coming out onto the next street when car lights suddenly blazed through the darkness, a siren wailed, and a red light began flashing atop a police car.

The other kids, who were all behind me, headed back toward our front yard. I was too far out in the street. I had no choice but to run to the far side. I ended up skulking through the neighborhood while the cop drove up and down the streets with his lights off trying to trap me.

Finally, I found myself on the estate of some friends. They had a lot of trees, a sort of artificial forest, and I climbed one of them—still naked, of course. Although I got scratched, the sensuality of it, the caress of the night wind, the air redolent with night-blooming flowers, quite overcame me. The intensity of the experience caused me to also get an erection. In amazement, I touched it—and nearly fell right out of the tree, such pleasure did my fingers bring me.

Down below, the cop was shining his flashlight into one bush after another and saying, "All right, I've got you, come on out." He sounded very authoritative, but obviously, I was not there. While he was trying to find what, it turned out later, had been reported as naked dwarfs, I was in the tree touching myself, shuddering with wonder and shaking with guilt.

The waves of pleasure were delicious. Up in the tree, I could not only smell the flowers of the night, but also the rich odor of the sea, even though the Gulf of Mexico was over a hundred miles away. But that was a long time ago, when the sea was still rich with life.

Finally, I took my hand off myself. I was beginning to wonder if it was permitted to feel pleasure like that. It was so nice, surely it was a sin. At school, the nuns had cautioned us to not even look down at our nakedness while we were bathing. So perhaps I had annoyed Jesus.

I sat watching the cop as he continued poking around. He must have been very eager to get to the bottom of the strange complaint. He would have wanted badly to find out what the naked dwarfs were up to.

Eventually, though, he gave up. I watched the lights of the squad car flicker away down the street. Still, I waited a bit, just to be sure that it wasn't some sort of trick. Eventually, I went down and returned to the house, slipping along the edges of yards and through back alleys.

The other kids were still there, huddled in their sleeping bags. They had been praying for me.

The next morning, my mother told me that there could be no more campouts that summer, as naked dwarfs had been seen creeping through the neighborhood. I listened solemnly, and did not argue.

After that, girls, whom I had previously hardly noticed, took on a delicious glow in my eyes. I was in a Catholic boy's school, though, and had access only to the neighborhood girls I had grown up with. It didn't matter, though. It was as if they had become entirely different human beings. I longed to be with them, to just talk to them, to maybe kiss them if they would let me. My ardor confused them. What had changed? Why not just play like we always had? Had I gone crazy?

Of course I had. I'd been sexualized.

Thus began a familiar phase of life, the desperate and ludicrous courtship rituals of the inept young male. Years later, when I was about sixteen, I was briefly touched by a girl, and touched her in return. Although I was as eager about sex as any boy, the manners of the time and place meant that I never went so far as to make love. Until I met Anne, that is.

She was not from an old southern family. She was not constrained by archaic scruples. She enjoyed sex in a very normal and open way, and she found me attractive. So we were soon rolling around in bed together in the same joyous, unrestrained, delightful way that we did for the forty-five years of our married life. So my second great sexual experience was not one event, but rather a lifetime of joyous union. On that first night, she was not ready to go to bed with me. I had never before acted this way toward a girl, but I

simply insisted. I could not stop myself. She had inspired me, driven me to desperation. We embraced, we fell into one another, we went deep, and we were still there when she died, nearly half a century later, still amazed, full of adventure, surprised.

And now I turn to this other woman, if she is a woman, or, for that matter, a person at all. She has provided me with the other two great sexual experiences of my life, and I don't even know if she exists!

And yet when I write of her in this way—exploring the notion that she might exist only as some sort of figment or wraith—I feel a deep sense of disloyalty. Speaking of sin, it feels sinful and duplicitous, as if such a suggestion is a cruel lie, and one which will be hurtful to the most sensitive person I have ever known.

I think of her as an aristocrat, a princess, someone grandly born and of great attainments. I believe her to be deep in my life, and that *The Secret School* is a chronicle of the period in which I entered her orbit, in a childhood filled with magic.

With the coming of puberty, though, she and her kind withdrew from my life. I can remember thinking that they had been coming to me out of the walls, and trying to get to them by going into the crawlspace behind the clothes hamper in the children's bathroom. I remember begging them to come back.

They would, but not at once. Prior to coming into communion with this great being, I would go on a long journey of preparation. My enormous experiences with her—really, beyond sexual, they were so intense and felt so deeply holy—would come to me only after half a lifetime of spiritual search and fifteen years of intensive inner work in the Gurdjieff Foundation, exploring the process of looking out at the world and back at oneself at the same time, and learning from this work that there are realms of consciousness all around—cathedrals of consciousness—of which we are generally unaware.

Only when I left the foundation, which caused me grave anguish, but which I knew was necessary, did she appear once again in my life, that dangerous, wonderful night bird who has been my secret teacher, mistress, and lover over all of my days.

My spiritual search began in a confessional at Mount Sacred Heart School in San Antonio, when I informed the priest that I didn't believe the

Old Testament. I did not believe that god had created the world in seven days, that Adam and Eve had been formally tossed out of a garden called Eden, that Jonah had been swallowed by a whale, or that a god worth worshiping would have amused himself by causing Job all that misery.

The silence that followed my remarks was, as I recall, long. Finally, he said that perhaps I should just forget the Old Testament and try the New. I did, but as I was intensely interested in Roman history, I soon discovered while struggling through a translation of Origen's *Contra Celsus* I'd found at the public library that the Mass was derived from secret Mithriac rites that had started in Tarsus, which was, coincidentally, also where Paul had grown up. Then I noticed, while reading Roman history that the "good news" proclaimed in the gospels was strikingly similar to the good news proclamation spread across the empire by Augustus after he established the *Pax Romana*. In fact, it looked as if Paul had plagiarized it. In Jeff's language, I was *comparing*, and the results were severe ones.

By my middle teens, I had become disengaged from religion, but not from the spiritual journey. I had a strong sense of the presence of soul within me. In fact, I began to see that body and soul are really a continuity, not two separate entities, and I began, at the age of seventeen or eighteen, to attempt to meditate. I could feel that I extended in some way beyond the physical. I sensed that a new sort of integration was possible, that the body did not actually end with the flesh, but was somehow extended into regions of being of which I knew almost nothing.

I briefly embraced Buddhism. I read *Siddhartha* and contemplated going to Asia after high school and becoming a dharma bum. But ultimately I found the same defect in Buddhism that I had in Christianity. Both of them—and all religions—promote structural visions of the unseen world, and are based on the assumption that their particular vision is accurate. But how could that be so, given that their founders had, at best, a very unclear and limited idea of how the universe is constructed? It wasn't until the early twentieth century that it even began to be realized that there were galaxies beyond our own. Until the work of Heber Curtis (1872–1942) in 1917, we had no inkling of the true size of the universe. Religionists might consider this unimportant, but I don't see how we can really think about a deity with any clarity unless we also think about scale, and I have a problem with that. It was a big problem for me when I was eighteen. It is insurmountable now. Over those years, our

understanding of the size of the universe has changed to the point that the vastness of it is now quite literally beyond imagining. More incredibly, the condition of the background microwave radiation suggests that it has collided with other universes from time to time. In other words, beyond this tremendous flow of galaxies that we call “the” universe, there may be other such structures just as large. And, of course, there is the enigma of parallel universes possibly being physically real also.

All of this has led me to consider the possibility that the firmament might be endless, or at least so much more enormous than we can conceive that it is not possible to confine it paradigmatically, let alone in any religious context. How could a reality so huge have a single creator or, for that matter, any creator at all? It simply is, and in that thought I find rich meaning and spiritual sustenance.

Later, I also explored atheism, which was closer to my heart than the other religions, but I found, during a conversation with an editor from the *New York Times Book Review* at a literary event, that it was just as much doctrine as the other religions. He was a brilliant and articulate man, and the only avowed atheist I had met who had the ability to actually explain his reasons for the choice that he had made. But I found that he preached atheism in the same way that I had heard Catholicism and Buddhism preached, as truth. In other words, a faith.

This was because his atheism went a step further than it should if it is to remain attached to the question. It did not contemplate the possible absence of a deity, but excluded god and all nonphysical beings, and, in fact, this is almost universal in atheism today. It now offers two main assertions. The first is that there is no god. The second is that all consciousness, if there is such a thing, is an outcome of brain activity. There is no god and we are only flesh. But I think a more adequate response, based on the vast and ancient evidence of the numinous, is that there is unlikely to be a god and we don't know what we are.

It is possible to be an atheist and still recognize the evidence that there are aspects of being that we don't understand—that is, if one can resist the temptation to turn it into a religion.

What is useful to me, contemplatively, is to regard our isolation in the spectacle of immensity that is reality, and to consider how very many possibilities it must contain. We are lost in the stars, which I find both a

source of wonder and foundational to freedom of thought. This is because it offers all but endless possibilities, and because my life is rich with evidence of the reality of the numinous, I am released to search as my fancy takes me, rather than riding the rails of belief, and no matter the religion, even if it's atheism.

It is possible to experience mind outside of body without religion. It is even possible to conjure expressions from it. I have done this many times, and seen it done by others. I have sat on a quiet hillside with UFO enthusiasts shining flashlights at the sky and seen bright orbs come and dance about overhead. Rather than settle on the assumption that we have called alien spaceships with our flashlights, I have let myself come to rest in the question, and found there what to me is truly holy ground, a mystery that can neither be ignored nor solved.

To me, the question is what G. I. Gurdjieff called “holy the firm.” That is to say, the only firm ground in human life is the seemingly uneasy ground of question, especially question that can neither be answered nor left unanswered.

He described “holy the firm” as “nothing.” But nothing is not, well, *nothing*, is it? For those of us who enjoy the conundrum intrinsic to that fundamental question of philosophy, “why is there something rather than nothing,” nothing both must and cannot be. This is shadowed in physics, which offers evidence that the vacuum is, in fact, not empty. For example, the Casimir effect suggests that nothing contains energy—that it is, indeed, not *nothing*. It could be that events happening on the Planck scale—the really, really tiny—have durations that are too short to be measurable. In other words, they reflect the conundrum in a slightly different way: “nothing is unmeasurable.”

I was introduced to the work of G. I. Gurdjieff in 1970 by a man I met while a Director's Guild trainee. At his suggestion, Anne and I read P. D. Ouspensky's book *In Search of the Miraculous* and began attending meetings at the Gurdjieff Foundation in Manhattan. There were three reasons that the Work drew me. The first was that, behind the eccentric word-salad of Gurdjieff's prose, I saw a spiritual journey without a religious component. There was material of real value to be found by patiently decoding his peculiar vision of the universe, largely because it was so open-ended and internally contradictory that, unlike religions, it forced one into a state of

question, which was its intention. Additionally, the basic ideas, as expressed by the more conventionally articulate Ouspensky, were powerful. Reality was formed of triads with active, passive, and balancing sides. Events unfolded in octaves, like music. One could find the action of triads and octaves everywhere in life, and find them also in deep thought and to some extent in the esotericism of the past. In one of my novels, *The Grays*, the aliens are divided into triads, with one always advocating action, the second warning of danger, and the third reconciling the ideas of the other two and moving the triad forward. This is because close encounters so often begin with a triangle of stars crossing the sky.

Grouping by threes is an important part of the way the visitors present themselves to us, and I noticed from the beginning that my relationship with them was structured around ideas that I had learned in the Gurdjieff Work, most particularly, a method of meditation that facilitated communication with them.

But that was for the future. Under the instruction of foundation leaders Joseph Stein and William C. Segal, I began meditation practice, which involved placing the attention on the body and letting the mind go along on its own. Later, when I would do this in the presence of the visitors, they would be able to access my mind, and there would be communication. Without this skill, I cannot see that my interactions with them would ever have become as rich as they did.

In 1983, I left formal engagement with the Gurdjieff Foundation, on the theory that I would either continue my inner work on my own, without the support of weekly group meetings, or I would slip back into the less acute consciousness that is associated with ordinary life.

As I have said, that was when she reappeared—when a real master showed up in my life. It began with me being roughed up—finally raped—until I noticed her presence, and with it a profound truth that we seem almost hardwired to filter out and ignore.

What is this truth?

Well, another teacher I had in the Gurdjieff Work, P. L. Travers, expressed it most eloquently. While she was famous as the author of *Mary Poppins*, she was also deeply involved in the Work, an aspect of her life that she kept very private. She used to come to visit the New York Gurdjieff Foundation annually. We met during one of her journeys, and started up a

friendship and correspondence. She was a flawed, brilliant, damaged, and wise human being, who was able to bare herself in our conversations, thus drawing me to my own flaws and strengths, and enabling me to learn how it is that holy ground, foundational and fundamental to all real search, is as shifting and elusive as quantum indeterminacy.

She used to ask those of us who would gather around her, “Do you know what it means to lie in the lap of the goddess? It means to be unsure.”

And then there came the great wave of the two experiences that shattered me at every level of my being, experiences that crackled with sensuality, that ripped away my ego as a hurricane rips away a city, leaving me in ruins.



What Evolution Looks Like

JEFF

*He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster.
And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.*

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL*⁴¹

Instead of shunning the darkness, we can face straight into it with an open mind. When we do that, the unknown changes. Fearful things become understandable and a truth is suggested: the enigmatic presence of the human mind winks back from the dark.

WHITLEY STRIEBER, *COMMUNION*

We have now explored together three ways of approaching the UFO phenomenon in a way that does not pretend any easy answers but avoids the pitfalls of both the doctrinaire believer and the dogmatic debunker. We have carved out a middle ground—a version of Whitley’s “spiritual practice without religious belief.” First, we have brought our comparative practice into sharper focus through a discussion of religious and reductive comparisons, neither of which quite work with the striking similarities and real differences that we see across cultures and times. Second, we have taken up phenomenology in order to “make a cut” between that which appears and that which is in Whitley’s strange experiences. And third, we have practiced

historical contextualization in order to better locate, understand, and acknowledge the commonality of these experiences.

In each case, we have seen how these methods or techniques can bring precision to a public conversation that was previously imprecise or simply confused. We have also seen, in each case, how the practice in question can make reasonable that which was previously unreasonable, how it can make the impossible possible. We take up a fourth practice now. I will warn you: it is way trippier than the first three.

The Secrets of Hermes

Let us call this fourth practice *hermeneutics*. You can translate the word simply as “interpretation,” but it is way weirder than that. Fundamentally, hermeneutics is the art and practice of deciphering meaning or message. The word itself is derived from the Greek god Hermes, a trickster deity who oversaw the mysterious middle realms of divine speech and revelation, doorways, crossroads, language itself, and the afterlife. Hermes was also a liar and a cattle thief, and he was worshiped in a simple form that commonly sported two features: a beard and an erection. Take note. The same god also gave us the words “Hermetic” and “Hermeticism,” both referring to an ancient Egyptian-Greek stream of secret teachings about the deepest nature of the human mind and its identity with the cosmos.

The history and practice of hermeneutics encompass a vast range of figures, debates, and ideas.⁴² Just two of these, both related to the figure of Hermes, will concern us here.

One is the key concept of secrecy or hiddenness. Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation that deciphers the hidden meanings of some enigmatic symbol, text, dream, vision, or striking coincidence. Freud was practicing just such a hermeneutics when he argued that the human mind censors itself and then indirectly expresses that which it has censored in the puns and symbols of dream and the slips of the tongue in everyday conversation (hence the famous “Freudian slip”); or when he argued that repressed and sublimated sexual desires drive a whole range of cultural, artistic, and religious expressions (and now, I would add, much of American humor). Whitley’s

intuition that the figure of the female visitor had something profound to do with his conjugal relationship with Anne and his engagement with the symbolic message of the “nine knocks” phenomenon are both perfect examples of this kind of hermeneutics as speaker of secrets. Whether it’s a Freud or a Strieber, the human Hermes encounters a code and reads it out with the “clicks” of a particular key. Unsurprisingly, but importantly, one of Whitley’s most beautiful books is called *The Key*.

The other major idea of the hermeneutical tradition that will focus us here involves the strange loopiness of particularly profound acts of interpretation. Some interpretations are straightforward enough, of course. I see an octagonal red sign with the English letters “S,” “T,” “O,” and “P” while I’m driving and know to press my foot down on the brake pedal. No enigmas here. But other kinds of interpretation do not work like this. Sometimes the hermeneut finds herself in a paradoxical “circle” or “loop” in which the reading transforms both the read and the reader. It is very much like the mind-bending understanding of quantum physics that Whitley keeps invoking: the one in which the act of observation really and truly changes the behavior and expression of the observed, which of course then changes the reality of the observer. Again, there is no stable “subject” looking at or interpreting a stable “object” in such moments. In hermeneutics, as in quantum physics, there is a single process that co-creates both the subject and the object *at the same time*.

No doubt the secrets of Hermes will confuse and frustrate you, as they do me. We are, after all, used to thinking of ourselves as independent subjects somehow contained in a body, not as secret codes to decipher or as living quantum experiments. So it is not your fault that you do not fully understand these hermeneutical paradoxes. Nor is it mine. Our confusions are a function of the fundamentally paradoxical ways that our very subjectivities are constituted: as cultural scripts, as texts written before us as us. It is confusing being a novel, a piece of fiction that considers itself a simple fact.

But let me make a simple observation that might give us all a bit of courage here: *nothing* I express under the rubric of hermeneutics is foreign to what Whitley Strieber has already written, and written in thousands of pages. I am simply making explicit what has been implicit all along in his body of work. Consider lines like these: “There are theories of physics that suggest that perception may affect reality, and that we live inside a kind of envelope

of meaning that confers structure on an indeterminate universe. It is as if everything is a sort of field before we perceive it, and that perception itself resolves it into the world we see and understand.”⁴³ *That* is hermeneutics, here expanded from the interpretation/activation of a text in an act of reading to the interpretation/activation of physical reality itself in an act of observation. This, by the way, is what I had in mind in the opening lines of this book, when I warned you that it is an apocalypse of thought waiting for you to activate it. Take note.

There is another way to explain this. Through movies. Filmmakers have engaged the same ideas, and often with much success. I am thinking of films like *The Never-Ending Story* (1984), *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), and *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011). Have you seen any of these films? Then you understand hermeneutics. In each case, the story revolves around a protagonist engaging his own life as a fictional story being written either in this world or in another, seemingly by someone else. As he reads and interprets the text of his life, however, he discovers that its story or plot changes. He discovers the circle or loop of hermeneutics. *He discovers that as he engages his cultural script as text creatively and critically he is rereading and rewriting himself.* He is changing the story.

The messages of such films are clear and profound ones. They tell us that we are writing our own stories, even as we are also being read by them (since we are born into stories that we did not write). They also tell us—and here is the real point—that it is time to take more responsibility for this world-writing, to claim our own imaginative powers. In the words of one of the members of the adjustment team that we hear at the very end of *The Adjustment Bureau*, spoken to us, the viewers, “Maybe one day we won’t write the plan; you will.”

The same hermeneutical insights are often voiced by Whitley in his books and in person. I once heard him at a private symposium speculate on how his visitor experiences were likely shaped by the “bad sci-fi movies” he had seen in such abundance as a kid in the 1950s. In other words, what he saw in the cabin on that terrible night may not have been what was actually there, but what his imagination had been trained to see. Nevertheless, something *was* really there. And then the Hermes-like flip. “What we need to

do now,” he mused, “is make better sci-fi movies so that we can have better contact experiences.” *That* is hermeneutics.

The Two-Way Mirror

The subject *and* object of the practice of Hermes is the human imagination, which works like a magic mirror. This is Nietzsche’s “when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you,” that Whitley Strieber moment when “the enigmatic presence of the human mind winks back from the dark.” It is also, of course, this magic mirror–like structure of hermeneutics that makes it so trippy, so loopy, so hard to wrap our simple heads around.

In the terms of my previous chapter, we might think of the imagination as that mode of human knowing that intuits the unknowable “what is” and turns it into the knowable “what appears” so that a primate can make some sense out of that which its sensory system was not previously evolved to know or see, not at least on any regular, practical basis. That making sense of the unknowable through the appearances of the knowable—that is, through the imagination and its symbolic expressions—is what we call “interpretation.” When the individual goes further and comes to recognize that these interpretations are both reflections of something real *and* human creations, that one is being interpreted as one interprets, being seen as one sees, then we call this paradoxical practice “hermeneutics.”

I warned you.

Although never named as such, this is all at the very center of the abduction phenomenon. In 1988, not long after *Communion* appeared in January of 1987, Whitley wrote a most remarkable foreword for Jacques Vallee’s *Dimensions: A Casebook of Alien Contact*. There he struggled on the page with the nature of his recent and still ongoing encounter experiences. What bothered him the most is the at once physical and not physical nature of the beings whom he was encountering. “And yet I myself have faced physical beings,” he wrote. “The context of my own experience, with extensive witness by others, makes it clear that the phenomenon can emerge as an entirely real, physical presence that is quite capable of manipulating its environment.” And yet, and yet: “The next moment, though, it can evaporate into thin air, leaving not a trace of what was a moment before an immense

and overwhelmingly real presence.” He then dropped one of those amazing one-liners about the visitor experience. “I have even thought that it may simply be what the force of evolution looks like when it acts upon conscious creatures.”⁴⁴

I have never been able to shake off that line, as if it somehow wanted to be written about. So I will. I want to employ the line as a kind of prism to engage Whitley’s invocation of “the imaginal” in the previous chapter. Recall that he was reflecting on the famous story of editor Bruce Lee running into two aliens paging through *Communion* in a New York bookstore in 1988 as they criticized this or that passage. The story is confirming, bizarre, unbelievable, and, significantly, I think, funny. Whitley adds another twist here, though. The upshot of *this* particular retelling is that the two aliens were two human beings seen in another guise, dimension, or mode. That is, this retelling is an exercise in considering “the possibility that humanity may have more than one form.” It is in this context that Whitley then writes: “At that time, I was debating in my own mind whether or not the experience was ‘real’ or ‘imaginal’—that is to say, a tangible presence somehow generated by the imagination.”

By “real” I take it that he means “part of the physical, objective world that is socially confirmable,” like, say, a chair that anyone can see (and sit on). But what does “a tangible presence somehow generated by the imagination” mean? I take it that he is implying that the two aliens would not have been seen *as such* by someone other than Bruce Lee, that is, that others in the same bookstore either (a) would not have seen them at all, or (b) would have perceived the pair as simply two human beings, since that is also what they were. But how can any of this happen? And does Whitley’s invocation of that odd word “imaginal” help?

Whitley is not making up this word. It is thrown around quite a bit in the UFO literature, seldom, if ever, with an understanding of where it comes from or what it was first intended to express. Whitley’s use of it here is quite faithful to the term’s historical origins and original meanings, but both these origins and meanings need to be more fully explained so that the public conversation around the encounter experience can move forward and not keep stumbling over the same obstacles again and again.⁴⁵

Debates about the imagination and its role in human knowledge go back in the West to ancient Greece around the secrets and enigmas of the revealed “symbol” and its relationship to the more plodding ways of reason and rational knowledge. The most recent chapter of that larger conversation goes back to the eighteenth century and what we now call the Romantic movement. The poets and philosophers of the latter asked: What is the imagination? Is it simply a spinner of fantasies? Or can it also become a “window” of revealed truths from some other deeper part of the soul or world? Or, better yet, like some secret two-way mirror in a modern-day police station, is the imagination *both*, depending on whether one is looking *at* or *through* its reflecting surface, that is, depending on which side of it one is standing? Can one stand on both sides?

When we give answers to such questions about the imagination, we are in effect proposing particular comparative practices. With the metaphor of the mirror, we are also proposing sight or the visual as the most adequate metaphor for spiritual knowledge (later, we will see that this is likely a mistake). For example, why do we encounter near-death experiences in numerous cultures but notice that these are normally painted in the mythical colors and populated by the personalities of the local folklore? A Buddhist child in Sri Lanka does not see Jesus on a white horse, but a boy from the American Midwest has. What is the same from culture to culture? And what is different? Or for that matter, why do some UFO encounters look like some near-death experiences in American culture? Any adequate answer to such comparative questions will involve some implicit or explicit theory about the imagination as a kind of two-way mirror that is reflecting back some things and seeing through others. The more explicit we can be here, the better.

I want to be explicit. I want to propose the idea that *a rare but real form of the imagination may be what the conscious force of evolution looks like*. And by “looks like,” I mean two things: *how the evolutionary force appears* to a human mind in a particular culture; and, with a bit of a trippy twist now, *how the evolutionary force itself “sees.”* I mean both sides of the two-way mirror. I mean both the *reflecting back* and the *seeing through*.

The first meaning of “how the evolutionary force appears” is, I take it, what Whitley had in mind when he wrote that line: “I have even thought that it may simply be what the force of evolution looks like when it acts upon conscious creatures.” The second meaning of “how the evolutionary force

itself sees” shifts the conversation into new territory. That new territory involves the possibility that, in very special moments, the human imagination somehow becomes temporarily empowered or “zapped” and functions not as a simple spinner of fantasies (the imaginary) but as a very special organ of cognition *and* translation (the symbolic), as a kind of supersense that is perceiving some entirely different, probably nonhuman or superhuman order of reality but shaping that encounter into a virtual reality display in tune with the local culture: in short, a reflecting back and a seeing through *at the same time*.⁴⁶

I cannot stress enough how important this question is to everything we are addressing here. I also cannot stress enough how damaging the inadequate models of the imagination have been to the public discussion. Take my two-way mirror analogy again. If you are working—consciously or unconsciously—with a model of the imagination as a mere projector of fantasy (if for you it is all reflecting back), then you will, then you *must* interpret the visions of the encounter experience as simple reflections of the visionary’s own psyche and culture. You think that we are all standing before a simple mirror, and that there is no other side to the mirror, much less beings on the other side looking in at us. If, on the other hand, you are working with a model of the imagination as a perfect camera or recorder of what is (if for you there is no reflecting back), then you will, then you *must* interpret the visions of the encounter experience literally. You think that the contactee is standing on the see-through side of the two-way mirror, and that what he or she sees on the other side is what is really there.

I am suggesting that both sides of the mirror contain a piece of the truth but that each is incorrect if taken as the *only* perspective. I am also suggesting—and here is the really trippy part—that in extreme experiences like the contact or encounter experience both sides are in play at once. This double model allows us to appreciate “what appears” without naively taking it literally as “what is,” but it also enables us to entertain the possibility that there is another side to the mirror, and that we can, as it were, see, and maybe even step, through it.

Whitley, I would argue, has been working with just such a model of the imagination all along. His whole paradoxical notion of “communion” is about this same trippy idea of imagining a presence that is imagining us. Hence his

erie image of the visitor as an ancient prehistoric coelacanth suddenly appearing in our nets the moment we ourselves are willing and ready to *observe* it. This is no ordinary fish, of course. We, he suggests, may be working hard to create the visitors, even as they may be working hard to create us: “Truly, such an act of mutual insight and courage would be communion.”

That is the mind-bend of hermeneutics. *That* is the two-way mirror of the imagination. If we are ever going to understand something like the contact experience, we will have to come to terms with both.

The Imaginal

There is a history of reflecting on this communion in the two-way mirror of the imagination. Much of it is bound up in the “imaginal.” Some think this expression goes back to the French scholar of Islamic mysticism, Henry Corbin, which is partly true. Some think it goes back to C. G. Jung, which is partly true as well. Corbin borrowed it from Jung, who in turn borrowed it from a Swiss psychiatrist by the name of Theodore Flournoy, who used it in his classic study of the Swiss medium and visionary Catherine Elise Müller, *From India to the Planet Mars* (1900). This particular book (written over a century ago) actually bears directly on the later alien-abduction literature for its careful engagement with supernormal or paranormal phenomena, for its invocation of Mars, and for Flournoy’s use of a particular psychological tool to catalyze and access Müller’s “romances” or stories: hypnosis.⁴⁷ But Flournoy himself did not coin the term either.

The word “imaginal” was first brought into broad use in the early 1880s by the Cambridge University teacher of Latin and Greek, education reformer, and Victorian psychical researcher Frederic Myers (1843–1901). There were no movies yet. But there were lots of telegraph wires (and there would soon be telephones). Behind the imaginal, then, lay another new word inspired by this newfangled technology: “telepathy,” which Myers coined in 1882. He intended to express through this new word the fact that most dramatic psychical communications occur between loved ones within extreme

emotional states, often in dangerous or deadly contexts. Hence his new Greek derived word, *tele-pathos*—“pathos at a distance.”

Myers and his colleagues struggled at first to come to terms with the extraordinary stories that they heard in such numbers (they systematically collected and analyzed thousands of them). At first, they used the patently paradoxical expression “veridical hallucination” (if you haven’t noticed, paradox is everywhere when one ventures into these realms). The expression was meant to capture the simple fact that in the cases they were collecting the individuals know perfectly well that they are imagining, dreaming, or seeing a “hallucination,” but they also know that the dream or vision is “veridical,” that is, that it corresponds closely to something actually happening in historical and physical reality. In my own terms, they were perfectly aware of both the “reflecting back” and the “seeing through” of the two-way mirror.

But “veridical hallucination” was an awkward phrase, and Myers was a poet. He had to come up with something better. He noticed that telepathic communications were often accompanied by altered states of energy, or what he called (probably after the great Swedish clairvoyant Emanuel Swedenborg) an “influx” of spiritual energy. He began to speculate that these altered states of energy somehow fundamentally change how the imagination works. In our own terms, he began to speculate that such energies could “flip” the two-way mirror around so that the reflections in the mirror could suddenly become visionary displays of something that really existed on the other side. This, he believed, was how the imagination would someday normally function in the far future: as both.

He described these future human capacities as “supernormal.” We have already encountered this word above in our discussion of how the paranormal came to be. The supernormal appeared just before the paranormal. Now I can tell you more. Supernormal meant “further along on the evolutionary spectrum.” It meant natural but highly evolved. Myers thought that in telepathic communications and precognitive dreams we are witnessing the early signs or buds of a still-evolving future super nature—ours. He meant the super natural.

It was this superevolved form of the imagination that Myers dubbed “imaginal,” and he defined it this way: “A word used of characteristics belonging to the perfect insect or *imago*;—and thus opposed to *larval*;—metaphorically applied to transcendental faculties shown in rudiment in

ordinary life.”⁴⁸ The definition is an awkward one, but it is directly and eerily relevant to Whitley’s visions. So let me explain it.

Myers was thinking of entomology, the study of insects, when he defined the term. In entomology, an imago is the final adult form of an insect’s metamorphosis. This final stage is also sometimes called the imaginal stage, whereas the insect’s immature feeding form is called the larval stage. The larval stage of an insect, of course, generally looks nothing like its adult form or imaginal stage, although the latter develops from the former. Myers was also working in an era that commonly held, after the German comparative anatomist, defender of Darwin, and evolutionary mystic Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), that the development of an organism “recapitulates” or repeats its deep evolutionary history: Haeckel’s famous “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.” It was probably this same understanding of an organism’s individual developmental history as a reliving (here extended into a preliving) of the species’ deeper evolutionary history that Myers was invoking with his new coinage of the imaginal.

He even told a humorous parable about some “humble larvae” dissecting each other as they argue about their destinies and real natures. Everything about their wormy forms looks like it was made for the cabbage leaf. And yet they also appear to possess budding or potential features that look like they might be adapted to the air. One brave caterpillar points this out, but the rest don’t believe him. How silly. How ridiculous. Then, suddenly, a butterfly lands on the cabbage leaf. The brave caterpillar points out all of the features on the beautiful winged being that look like advanced developments of their own squishy bodies. The butterfly then flies away.

“This,” Myers explains, “is exactly what I hold to have happened in the history of human evolution.”⁴⁹ The imagination is now evolving into the imaginal. We are about to fly. The wormy munching stage of the larval will someday evolve into the perfect insect of the imaginal.

Wild Talents and Wild Visions

There are at least two different modes of the imaginal, which correspond to the two sides of the two-way mirror analogy (and it is only a rough analogy).

There is what we might call the *empirical imaginal*, and there is what we might call the *symbolic imaginal*. Following and expanding upon Charles Fort, let us call the first a “wild talent” and the second a “wild vision.” Whitley has known both.

The empirical imaginal, or wild talent, names those moments when the dream or waking vision corresponds closely (but not always exactly) to an event in the objective world. Myers’s early “veridical hallucination” falls into this category: the visionary knows, instantly and firmly, that a loved one is in danger or has just died. Often, even the mode of death is known and described in the vision or dream. Here the human imagination is, in a word, “clairvoyant.” It seems to work like a camera *and* a video projector: it somehow “sees” and then projects what is happening at some distance along the space-time continuum within a mini-movie in the mind of the visionary. Little or no interpretation is needed in this type of imaginal event. The visionary often knows instantly what the vision is about. The vision is about what it says it is about. Finally, note that there need be only one world or order of being in play here. There is no invocation of an “otherworld” or another side of the mirror. The action all takes place in this one.

Obviously, such clairvoyant capacities, if cultivated and realized, would bring very real and very practical survival benefits. This is why Fort called them “wild talents.” They were *talents* because of their potential pragmatic usefulness; they were *wild* because they generally manifest only spontaneously, and we have not yet cultivated and integrated them into our lives and cultures. As he himself put it: “By a wild talent I mean something that comes and goes, and is under no control, but that may be caught and trained.”⁵⁰

And what talents these would be! The simplest of thought experiments can show how even a little precognition or clairvoyance could make a warrior nearly invincible or a hunting party astonishingly successful. And, indeed, we find various divinatory practices around military and hunting activities throughout the historical and anthropological records. For a modern western case that demonstrates especially well the survival utility of clairvoyant abilities, consider this case as told by G. N. M. Tyrrell in his classic little study, *Apparitions* (1953):

The percipient in this case, a child of ten, was walking along a country lane near her home, reading a book on geometry. Quite suddenly her surroundings faded away and she saw her mother lying on the floor of a disused room in her home, known as the White Room, apparently dead; and beside her lay a lace-bordered handkerchief. So real was the vision that instead of going home she went straight to the house of the doctor and took him home with her. There they found the child's mother, lying on the floor of the White Room (an unlikely place for her to be), suffering from a bad heart attack, and the handkerchief seen in the vision lay beside her. The doctor was just in time to save her life.⁵¹

The symbolic imaginal, or wild vision, works very differently. Here the dream or waking vision is experienced as mediating some other world or metaphysical truth. Whitley's visions mostly fall into this camp. Here the content of the dream or vision can be quite baroque and bizarre. The sense is that these images and narratives are functioning as ciphers of some other form of mind, some other dimension of the real, or—in Whitley's previous chapter—some other form of our shared humanity. Here the human imagination is not so much clairvoyant as it is an organ of revelation: it is *not* clearly seeing and projecting in any one-to-one fashion. Rather, the imagination is intuiting or sensing something Other or Alien and then translating, mediating, or picturing what it has known to a human psyche, but always in code. Hence interpretation is necessary. Note that there are at least two worlds or dimensions at play here.

I must add that we cannot treat these two forms of the imaginal as mutually exclusive. Wild talents and wild visions clearly overlap and are probably functions of some deeper human capacity still, perhaps consciousness itself (whatever *that* is). As is often noted in cases of robust precognition, for example, the visionary often misses this or that detail of the event. It is as if the projective imagination is filling in details that the transmission or telepathic cognition does not supply, much, I should add, as we see in ordinary sensory processing. As has been noted in the neuroscientific literature, the “movies” we see in dreams and in everyday sensory awareness are not entirely different, and everyday sensory

consciousness can be thought of as a kind of dream that is constantly controlled and guided by sensory input from the external environment.

The same exact mixture of wild talent and wild vision can be seen in Whitley's accounts. For example, in his early encounter experiences, he meets what appear to be blue trolls and slender bald aliens, but he also sees an old friend, who, he later learns, has recently died. So Whitley's experience mixed or fused the symbolic (the trolls in overalls and the almond-eyed visitors) and the empirical (the recently deceased friend). The wild talent was the wild vision was the wild talent.

I am not simply being "academic" here. Complexities aside, these new categories and careful distinctions give us a great deal. They shift our conversation. Consider the following.

First, with these new ways of speaking and thinking we can now be *more precise*, because we can distinguish between two very different types of imaginal functions: those that are seeing empirically and those that are seeing symbolically.

Second, we can also be *more generous* because we can now recognize the necessity and importance of the most baroque or fantastic imagery, that is, of the wild vision, without falling into naive belief or a too quick dismissal.

Third, we can also be *more open* to what the visions are trying to say. For example, we need not now shy away from visionary phenomena that are bizarre or strange simply because they appear absurd or outrageous to our rational egos and ordinary sensory experiences. Indeed, we might well expect with our new notion of the symbolic imaginal that this absurdity is a necessary function of the translation across the border or threshold between two radically different forms of mind and being. How else is the farmer going to talk to the pig, or the library owner to the cat?

Fourth, we can be *more suspicious*. Maybe the farmer doesn't want to communicate too much to the pig. Maybe the being on the other side of the two-way mirror doesn't want to say too much to the being on this side. Isn't that what a two-way mirror is for in our own social world, *to hide* the viewer from the viewed, *to prevent* a direct and unencumbered two-way viewing?

Still, having said all of that, I do not want to make too much of this basic distinction. I want to emphasize the two-way nature of the mirror. Here is a single comparative example of why. As I was finishing my chapters for this

book, I was attending a conference at the Esalen Institute and sharing a room with my colleague and friend Adam Crabtree, a gifted psychotherapist and historian of mesmerism, multiple personalities, and trance.

One morning, Adam awoke and began to chat, quite out of the blue, about a recent troubling encounter he had experienced during a kind of sleep paralysis episode, a fairly common state for him during which he is aware of (and can see) his room and can feel his body but cannot move it, except for his eyes. Adam proceeded to describe hearing knocks on the ceiling or slanted roof (which happens to be just above his bed) and becoming aware of two malevolent “hypnagogic visitors,” working in tandem. One, whom he could not see, pressed up tight against his back with its arm around his neck. The other, whom he could see, was a short athletic “repulsive” creature who appeared “like a man with slouchy work clothes and a rumpled overcoat on, all a kind of dusty light brown color.” This one jumped with catlike movements, silently landing on his hands and feet on the floor before he vaulted up onto Adam and straddled him, pushing his fingers down on his body and touching his penis lightly through the blanket. It was at this point that Adam gathered the “sheer determination” to move his body, and the scene instantly disappeared.

This caught my ear, of course, since it sounded like he was describing Whitley’s experience. Actually, it sounded exactly like Whitley’s experience. I asked him how many knocks there were. “Three,” he answered immediately.

Well, shit.

So were Whitley and Adam separately “imagining” the same things? Is there some module or code in our brains for “ugly short troll in overalls” and “three knocks on the roof”? That seems unlikely. Or are there actual invisible trolls in overalls who mess with us while we sleep and like to knock three times on our shingles? That seems unlikely. Are we in the realm of the symbolic vision or the clairvoyant vision here? Wild vision or wild talent?

I am always reminded here of the alien that appeared to Nebraska law officer Herbert Schirmer many decades ago. The alien is said to have left the good law officer with this piece of paradoxical, and funny, advice: “We want you to believe in us, but not too much.”⁵² That, it seems to me, is wise counsel for those of us who venture into the wild talents and wild visions of

the imaginal realm. Believe them, if you must, but not too much. And keep a smile and a chuckle about you.

The Telepathic Insect of the Future Human

There is something else about Myers and the imaginal, something fundamentally uncanny, something at once strange and familiar. This strange familiarity ties directly into Whitley's writings. It involves the evolutionary force again and "how it looks."

The alien in the visions of Whitley and countless other abductee accounts is often described as insectoid in form. These haunting figures are frequently compared with an immense praying mantis or a human-sized insect. They communicate with humans telepathically. The immense almond-shaped eyes are compared with those of bugs. And the visionaries repeat again and again their intuited sense that what they saw was *us* coming back from the future.

The modern abduction visions thus replicate, in precise and eerie detail, the thought of Frederic Myers: the same perfect insectoid form (Myers's imaginal stage), the same telepathic powers (Myers coined the term), the same implicit call to become active participants in our own evolutionary advance (Myers's sense of the supernormal as the superevolved and the imaginal as our future form). Whitley's books are also filled with this call to join the universe, to expand our vision's scale to its cosmic scale, and to "commune" with the evolutionary impulse of all there is.⁵³ What was a metaphor and a parable in Myers's system over a century ago has become a literal visionary form in the contemporary scene. The larval stage of the human being has morphed into the adult stage of the imaginal, which appears to the present human mind as a super-insect calling us to the further reaches of human evolution with the exact super natural power that Myers himself first named: telepathy.

How do we explain such precise resonances between this Victorian psychological researcher and our contemporary abduction literature? Did Myers himself, like my imagined Charles Fort, have some sort of proto-abduction experience or insectoid vision? We will never know. What we do know is

that imaginal visions are still with us. Like Myers's beautiful butterfly, these perfect insects have taken flight off the cabbage leaf before our wormy eyes, this time in a glowing machine that we call, with much too narrow a vision, a UFO.



Pain

WHITLEY

On that night in December 1985, the most essentially and powerfully feminine presence I have ever known came to me and had me dragged out of the house and essentially beaten until I realized that she was real and I was not dreaming. During those horrific moments, I awoke both physically and spiritually.

I know now that she had been trying for some time to awaken me. I have understood that we exist, in our normal state, in a sort of sleep that filters out certain aspects of reality. For whatever reason, we simply do not want to see this. Throughout the previous autumn, she had been using her droll and sinister coterie of trolls to approach me. My reaction was to buy alarm systems and guns, and stalk the halls of our little country cabin, sick with a nameless fear.

One of the first things that became clear in the days following was the feeling of being carried. There was a sense of surrender involved that was one of the most deeply relieving and yet terrifying perceptions I've ever had.

We are wild animals. We have tamed others to us, but nobody has ever tamed us. On that night, I began a process of education that started at the most basic level. I was being broken as I used to break horses when I was a

boy, on the rollicking ranches of South Texas. In fact, every summer when we returned to our country place in the Texas hill country, our horses, which had been left to roam all winter, required a bit of breaking.

You ride them until they're too tired to buck, basically. You do it again and again, until the instinct to throw off anything on their back finally subsides. Then the horse, terrified at first, full of viciousness and hatred, will gradually become gentled, will take food from your hand, and in the quiet way of horses, take pleasure in your companionship. Your horse will be glad to see you, whom he once hated, and will fill his nose with your scent, which he at first rejected with an angry snort.

On the night in question, my immediate conscious response was one of confusion mixed with fear, but on a deeper level something quite different was happening. Feelings emerged in me that I had not been aware of before, that could best be described as a sense of surrender to a greater power that carried with it both terrific fear and what I would describe as a sort of pleasure found in spiritual release, the giving of oneself to something higher. This was accompanied by a pleasure that was unlike anything I had ever known. It was physical. It was spiritual. It drew me to drop barriers I had not known were there, and from that to experience a new kind of nakedness, that made me feel at once vulnerable and delighted. My soul was naked.

This was not the third great sexual experience, but its prelude. Preparation for contact.

The combination of pleasure and helplessness was devastating. Delicious agony. The result of this was a short story, which I began writing at that time. It is called "Pain." In it, the narrator comes into contact with a young woman who turns out to be a sort of angel, very sweet but also very determined to free him from the dark things he has done in his life by balancing their karma with pain. The narrator is put into a box in which he experiences great agony, which is described as fire, but which is actually the anguish of facing one's own truth. When he is released, he is deeply free, not so much of any real evil he has done, but of the guilt that was weighing on his soul. His fear was not of what was there, but of what he was afraid was there, and this, I think, is why most of us resist looking into ourselves.

As I was writing the story, the memories of that night came back to me, and a sequence appeared in it connecting it to alien lore, the first time in my work that this had been directly addressed. There were, on that first night,

many different levels of experience, all unfolding at once. Confusion, amazement, and terror were on the immediate surface, of course. But beneath them there was something quite different. I've struggled with it, attempting to bring words to a subtle feeling that had an enormous emotional consequence.

Not since my life was wrapped in the amnesia of childhood had I been carried. On this night, though, I was, and while this was happening, I was completely helpless. The combination of dread and sensuality was almost impossible to bear. They could not mix, but they did. They had to. As I lay in that dreamlike but intense state of struggle, I came to feel a sense of being under control of a sort that I had never before known. Worse, it felt like a sort of relief, being under such a spell. This horrified me, but worse, thrilled me. I suppose that the horse, at the moment of breaking, feels something similar. It is when fear surrenders, and the acceptance that will eventually turn to love emerges—when the animal perceives that no harm is intended, and that compliance brings rewards.

At first, it was like being trapped, perhaps, by a bear. It seemed as if brute force, empty of meaning, had gained control over my body. Meaningless suffering would be followed by meaningless death. But then the groaning dark blue trolls were joined by what at first appeared to be gigantic hornets. They had the affect, though, of young women. I sensed in them the purity of maidens, and in the days after, they emerged as the character “Janet” in my story. I chose the name carefully. It's feminine, but with a distinct edge. This is how I described her: “She wore a fresh-looking blue frock. Her hair was golden brown and conventionally waved. Her face was soft, the face of a girl, with inviting, delicate lips, a straight nose and eyes softly rimmed by big lashes, framed by arching brows. It was a completely winning face, as pure a face as I have ever seen.”

And again: “Her eyes were light green and were the only thing in her face that suggested anything more than sock hops and torrid backseats. It was not that they were dazed or shadowed or cruel—not at all. They were the eyes of a surpassingly intelligent person—bright and quick and full of life. More than that they were kind eyes. Looking into them, one sensed a true place of rest.” I had changed the eyes from brown to green because otherwise it would have been eerily familiar as a description of Anne.

While the creatures I remember had big black insect eyes and a menacingly alien demeanor, when they appeared in my imagination rather

than my memory, I saw them as my emotions had seen them, behind the curtain of fear.

Great and terrible Oz turned out to be a young woman, possessed of the kindness that is present in good people who are loved for their beauty.

One night about six weeks after the event, I experienced, in an anguish of conflict and disgust, a very surprising feeling of desire. I was still working on “Pain.” In the night, images of Janet became entangled with images of the visitors, their innocence and their great power, and I began to feel waves of desire as I remembered their hands upon my naked body. “Their” became “her.” I squirmed with need. I begged her to return.

I wanted to be once again naked in those sweet arms, genuinely helpless and being penetrated in my soul if not my body. The supposed rape, which had so challenged both my sense of propriety and my sense of self, now returned on the wings of desire.

This plunged me into turmoil. I came to feel that the experience had been so powerful that it had given rise in me to what I then regarded as perverted desires. Even though the urgency was compelling, I could never fulfill a need to be dominated. How? Go to some sex club? The whole idea was creepy. In any case, I had no intention of engaging in sexual activities outside of my marriage. Years before, I had decided that Anne was right for me and enough for me, and I took a vow to be faithful to her, and that was an end to it.

Or was it? This period was when I began walking deep into the woods behind our cabin at night, carrying only a flashlight. Admittedly, it had twelve batteries and probably could have started a campfire if I’d needed it to, but it was still just a flashlight. I went really deep, a mile or two back into the forest. This wasn’t only to confront my fears, it was also a richly sensual experience. On those walks, my body came alive in ways that I had not known to be possible, as fear and desire melted into one another. Every breath, every movement, the smell of the air, the feel of it, caressed me in a newly vivid way. Familiar, too, from that long-ago childhood night.

I assume that, in some way, my nocturnal excursions did indeed attract the attention of the visitors, because they started to show up again in my life, beginning the journey that I remain on to this day.

When I say “show up again,” I want to be very specific. I am dealing here with more than one kind of perceptual memory, and I want to do a

careful job of differentiation. It has taken me many years of work to be able to do this. For example, when I wrote books like *Communion*, *Transformation*, and the others, I was not able to, as it were, taste the difference between a memory that refers to a concrete event and one that refers to an intense event that might not have been so concrete.

This is because the intensity of the more ambiguous memories was often so overwhelming that I simply could not focus my mind clearly enough to tell that they had this important textual difference.

Having worked with them now for years, I can do this, I think, fairly reliably. With this in mind, I am now going to describe four events, all of which, at least in part, seem to me to be memories of physical experiences. This does *not* mean that the perceptions I am going to describe are precisely what happened, but they are what I was able to perceive, or chose to perceive. In Jeff's language, please "make the cut" when reading what follows.

I reported the first of these in some detail in my book *Transformation*, and this one I recall in exactly the same way that I recall a physical experience. It was about midnight, and I was sitting in a chair in our cabin when there suddenly came on the side of the house or the roof, nine knocks in three groups of three, followed by what seemed like a sort of resigned double tap, which I perceived as a reaction to the fact that I had remained frozen in the chair and not, say, stepped outside.

These were not normal sounds. They were absolutely, startlingly perfect, as if the time between them was precise to a measure we do not normally perceive. They were also high up on the house, a good sixty feet from the ground, so it wasn't somebody in the backyard.

Both of our cats were in the room with me, and they reacted by turning into great puffed-up balls of fur and moving along on their stomachs yowling. So they were hearing something, too.

As this was happening, I had the impression that the dark blue trolls—the kobolds—were involved.

The nine knocks had great significance to me. One meditative practice that Joe Stein had used involved contemplating nine thoughts in three groups of three, and I had been using it for years. Also, when entering the thirty-third degree, a Mason must knock on the door of the lodge nine times in three groups of three. This is because three triads traditionally form a triad themselves, a completion. Reaching the thirty-third degree represents the

completion of one phase of one's life as a Mason, and so also on that night, I was being told that I had completed one level of study and was ready to enter another.

I was much too scared to go outside at that moment, and the two double taps seemed to express disappointment that I hadn't done so. But, like my initial entry into the school, this moment was about going to a new level of conflict. I was failing and succeeding at the same time. The mandala was turning. It was, in other words, a living experience that has left me with a living question: What if I had gone out? Would "they" have focused in a new way? Would I have met aliens, or had some deeper secret revealed? One very deep truth is that this was now the second time I had refused the call. The second crow of the cock, as it were. The first came when I struggled and fought on the first night. Instead of opening my mind to what was happening, and addressing it like a human being, with questions, I reacted with the wild animal's fear.

Maybe I made the right choice and maybe I didn't. By refusing the call, I sent a message that I wasn't ready to graduate from the school, not yet.

Now, looking back, this and the next refusal of the call that I will discuss shortly remind me of the way in which my early acceptance into the school of this experience was at one and the same time a rejection. I'm reminded of Anne Sexton's "awful rowing toward God." That's what this is, an awful rowing, but toward God or not, I do not know. An awful rowing toward the living darkness.

After I published *Transformation*, I got a letter from a reader in Glenrock, Wyoming, who said that the entire town had experienced the nine knocks on a very strange night in which there had been odd lights and small figures dashing in the streets. Anne and I went to the town, and I have no reason to think that any of the people we discussed this with were lying.

The next experience I will describe is one that I have, in the past, only alluded to. It was the most intense experience in a lifetime of intense experiences, a sexual experience so beyond anything I had ever known that I am left to this day to wonder at the powers hidden in the body. I will try to recount this transcendent, agonizing, and glorious experience as exactly and dispassionately as possible.

It starts abruptly, and seems to be factual memory, but so strange and unexpected that it also has the flavor of dream.

I woke up abruptly. To my surprise, I found myself in our guest room, not upstairs with Anne. A second later, I realized that I was aflame with desire. I wanted Anne, but she wasn't there. Instead, I was lying naked on my back and sexually excited. Sitting on top of me was the woman from the cover of the book. She was slim and soft and angular. Even though her face was blacked out as if by some sort of curtain, this is who I believed it was.

A fire went through me like no fire I have ever known before or since. When she shifted slightly, I arched my back, I screamed out my guts, abandoned to the pleasure of it, scalded by it, consumed by it.

When she was finally still, I lay gasping, still in her, still burning.

But then I noticed that standing at the foot of the bed was a group of people. One was a man in a military uniform, whom I recognized. (And therein lies one of the most fantastic stories in this whole narrative, which I will relate momentarily.) Beside him was a short blond individual who I would meet again some years later in the woods, and who would, in 1994, follow us to Texas when we left the cabin and moved there. Beside him was another man in civilian clothes. I think there were two other people as well. They all looked upset and embarrassed.

So here I was, this very private, very conservative man, in the most fantastically revealing situation I could imagine, and in addition, being watched by people who were disturbed, even disgusted, by what they were seeing. For a moment, I was embarrassed, but then she moved again and again the pleasure set me on fire. I can remember grabbing my temples and screaming, then weeping, and seeing these people turning away.

Then it started, the rhythmic flow of it, fire in me, burning up and down my spine, cleansing me, finally annihilating me. I was only pleasure, the body and the fire of the body.

It was a transformative nakedness. Lying there like that, I experienced total surrender and profound sexual satisfaction. I did not know that such absolute surrender could exist, let alone that it would open every secret door to pleasure in my body. And yet, as disturbing as it was, it was also gratifying. It seemed *needed*. I found myself glad to have been chosen for something that, although violent and exploitative, had about it a fiery holiness that I will never forget.

The event ended in ejaculation, a delicious, joyous agony, wrenchingly pure. I lay spent, vibrant with release. All was still for a moment, then she

lifted off me and at once I became aware that they were leaving. They moved quickly. I heard their voices out in the living room, a nervous discussion.

Exactly what happened after that I do not know. The next thing I knew, I was in my wife's arms, lying there in brilliant ecstasy.

Thus ended the third experience. The fourth would not equal it in intensity, but would be an act of such surpassing intimacy that to recall it even now makes me uneasy. I am not given to such acts, and it left me feeling even more unfaithful and ashamed. But that was for later. Just now, I found myself waking up in bed.

The sun was hard and bright pouring in through the windows, and all seemed normal and well. I was, however, so ashamed that I couldn't look at my wife. I felt that I had doubly cheated her. I had broken my marriage vow, Worse, I had just loved it.

Or had I? What really happened on that night? I feel as if I made love to somebody, but who? An alien? A succubus? Some part of myself that normally lives so deep that I am not in touch with it? Perhaps something that, put simply, cannot be known, not given the level of information we now possess about what we really are.

But recently, there was a shocking codicil that made the event seem more concrete. It had happened in 1987 or 1988, and for all of those years I have wondered if the man I thought I recognized there had any idea of it.

In late December of 2014, Anne and I were having dinner with some new friends. He is a filmmaker who was raised in Romania during the communist years. When he was twelve, he had a close encounter that he has never been able to remember, with the exception that he was given a book, a detective story. It was innocuous, except for one thing: one sentence was underlined twice in heavy lines. The sentence read "Colonel 'X' promised that he would never reveal what he saw on that night."

The name is that of the military man whom I recognized, who witnessed the event in the cabin. He is involved in secret intelligence, and has also been a friend for many, many years. Now I wonder what he really knows, what he has seen, and what memories he plans to take to his grave. If I had made a promise like that, I would never, ever break it, Never, and I would never challenge him in the matter. Still, I think that my suspicions have been confirmed. I suspect that something extraordinary did happen that night, and that he was witness to it. As dreamlike—even imaginary—as it now seems, I

suspect that there was a sexual encounter on that night, and I am haunted as to why. Always, the whisper of suspicion is there: do I have a child, or children, in some other reality?

Coming as it has nearly thirty years after the events, and when I was actually in the process of writing this chapter, I am left in silence while contemplating the possibilities.

Back then, it took me some time, but I finally told Anne what had happened. I expected her to be hurt, even furious. Even though I hadn't intended it, I had broken my vow to her. To me, this was deeply shameful. Anne, however, took it in stride. As I have said, I was—and am—left wondering if she did not somehow share the experience.

A couple of years later, one of the people who had been in that room turned up living in the woods behind our house. Or was it the same person? It could be that my mind inserted him into the memory of the earlier experience after I saw him. It is so very important not to forget things like this. While memory is more a plastic than a fluid, it is not an absolute record of the past, but a complex, ambiguous way that the brain and mind have of adding the dimension of the past to life experience. So, despite this apparently concretizing discovery, this memory, like all memory, must remain in question. I will say this, though: the man who began living in our woods in 1992 was incredibly strange, and quite real.

But that's for later in the narrative. Now, it was the summer of 1988. This was the period when other people were beginning to encounter the visitors at our cabin. I had grown concerned for our little boy, and had sent him off to summer camp, hoping that he wouldn't become involved any more than he already was. I'd also told the parents of his friends that people in the area were reporting these odd apparitions, and that they were coming into our house, but nobody seemed in the least concerned. I was concerned, though. Very concerned.

Then it came: the fourth great experience.

One night I woke up sensing a presence in the room. It was not visible, but it was really awesome. It was also feminine, and I recognized it—her—at once.

It is hard to remember surrounding details, but I think that after a moment I did see her. She was sitting in a chair at the foot of our bed, her form visible in the leaf-dappled moonlight that was coming in the window. I

only remember a shadowy presence, and an odd sense of freshness and youth contrasting with another impression I had gained at some point, that this person was very old.

The next thing I remember is that I was kneeling in front of the chair. Her hands came onto my head like tendrils of smoke, the hands of a ghost, but they were paradoxically strong and pressed me toward her lap. She opened her legs and I saw a darkness within. Not entire darkness, though. There was a glow there, too. She drew my head gently down.

My sexual life with my wife had been very satisfying, but not very adventurous. We'd been happy with it, anyway. And now, since December of 1985, this new sort of experience had entered our lives—primarily mine. I had endured anal penetration while helpless, which, while it angered me, also triggered a primal sense of acceptance that was, as it turned out, taming. Then I'd had a sexual experience that was more intense than anything I had even known was possible, and done that in a room full of people, one of whom I had recognized, another of whom would return to my life in a few years in a half-mad state.

I felt the hands drawing me forward, saw her legs spread, saw the glow seeping out from between the legs. But what glow? What was this? Human beings do not glow in their private parts.

Then I was doing something that I had never done before. My head was being held from behind and my face pressed against her. Now, close, there was a scent, pungent like forest muck, sweet and sour like a woman, richly alive, awful and wonderful.

I found myself drawn into the loveliest, sweetest kiss I had until that time known, touching my lips to the lips of that vagina. The liquid there was both delicious and disturbing. I reacted to it as if I was receiving a gift. It opened my heart, returning me to my first kiss, with a long forgotten girl a long time ago. The sensation was one of being absolutely cherished and absolutely favored. I wonder if even Hephaistos would have had so intense an experience of the *mouni* of Aphrodite.

I wanted it to go on, but those soft hands soon pushed me away. For a moment, they held my face, and then I found myself alone. I sat on the floor staring at the empty chair. Then I stood up and returned it to its normal place at the little desk that was in our bedroom.

I went into the bathroom and washed myself. I now felt disgust and

violation uneasily mixed with regret and loss. Looking into the mirror, I saw a haggard face. A wave of loneliness overtook me. I wanted to cry. Then I turned toward our bed, and saw there another shadow, my wife sleeping in beloved innocence. I lay down with her, and gloried in the sigh of sleepy pleasure I heard when I drew close to her.

The next day, I wondered what on earth had happened. Had I actually had another exotic encounter? What was this sense that she was so very, very holy, truly a sacred being?

I couldn't tell Anne, not something this strange. I simply didn't know how. I couldn't tell anybody, and haven't until writing these words. Even after all these years, putting this down on paper is extremely difficult for me. Without going further, I will say that these experiences revolutionized our sex life. We rediscovered ourselves in a new way. What a deep holiness it was—she was—to teach me as she did, and bring to my marriage the wonders I had found.

It was not all joyous, though. As always, the dark side of the sacred was there, too. During this same period, something quite terrible happened. It wasn't unfamiliar to us, though. We'd read about it in thousands of letters. It was, in fact, a commonplace occurrence of the close encounter experience.

In the backs of both my and Anne's minds had been the wish for another child. I would dearly have loved to have a daughter. Anne just wanted another baby. We weren't really trying for another pregnancy, but if one had come along, we would have been thrilled.

Then came an awful night. It began with a dream. In it, I saw a lovely young woman walking away along a path in a charming wood. Sunlight dappled the ground. Flowers overflowed along the borders of the path. As the young woman waved good-bye to me, I woke up. I was astonished to find myself in tears. But why? How could a dream overpower me like that?

Sooner or later, I went back to sleep, only to wake up again, or half wake up, because I thought that one of the cats had jumped onto our bed. We were at the cabin, but the cats were back in Manhattan in our apartment. As I realized this, my eyes flew open. I saw, standing on the foot of the bed, three of the dark blue kobolds. Their faces were horrific almost beyond description. Lorie Barnes's cry of "you're so ugly" hardly even begins to describe what I was seeing. Their eyes were sharklike and preternaturally sharp, as if they were looking not at me but *into* me. Their lips were red and lascivious,

grotesquely sexualized. One of them actually licked its lips, as if it was about to enjoy a meal. These were predators, there was no question in my mind about it, and they were after us.

I jumped out of bed and they were instantly gone. Also, I was now fully awake. Had “they” actually been there? How could anything that looked like that even exist? Surely terrors like that don’t walk the world, except the world of nightmare.

Later still, Anne woke up. She was in agony. She was bleeding. She rushed into the bathroom and proceeded to have a miscarriage. Blood poured out of her, but no debris. I got ready to take her up to the emergency room, which was about thirty miles away, but the bleeding stopped and she decided that she wanted to rest at home instead. She told me that she had been pregnant, but had been saving the news as a surprise for me.

We cried and cried that night, lying in each other’s arms, in the great dark. I kept the horror that I had witnessed to myself, and held Anne and cherished her and prayed that she be protected and loved, and her sorrow pass from her.

Perhaps a year later, once again at the cabin, we were going off to a restaurant for dinner. As we descended into the garage, I noticed what appeared to be an opening in its concrete floor, a round darkness. Anne didn’t see it, so I said nothing. By that time, I was well aware that I would often see things that others did not.

The next thing I knew, I was holding a lovely little baby who regarded me with dark, frighteningly conscious eyes. Then, seemingly with nothing in between, we were driving to the restaurant. All the way there, we talked of nothing but babies, but our youth had slipped away, and there would not be another infant in our lives.

That did not mean, however, that infancy was entirely behind me. The next winter, I would revisit that state in a most surprising way.

I was still trying to engage with my “visitors” in some manner that would enable me to finally strip away all of the artifacts of imagination and dream and see them as they actually were, in the flesh and in common light. I was still naive enough to imagine that such a thing could happen, and still wanted to believe—hoped to believe—that I was dealing in some straightforward way with aliens. But this next experience would in a most elegant manner enlarge the question of what they were and are, by offering

me an experience of the very highest strangeness and deepest ambiguity, mixing as it did clearly physical elements with others that we would consider completely impossible.

It would be the third and final refusal of the call. I did not understand at the time, but after this, my relationship with them would never be the same. I would still be a student, but left to my own devices, no longer able to rely on them for instruction. What I needed now, I would have to find within myself, and take my questions to them.

The first refusal had been the active side of the triad: I had fought and screamed like a wild animal. The second had been passive. I sat in my chair until they gave up. The third would be reconciling: from it, I would gain basic insight about what I was, where I was, and why I was here.

It was February. I had been going down into the woods nightly and meditating in the cold and winter silence, in the hard-frozen, glowing snow. I was returning to the spot from which I had been taken in the first place. I was asking for a meeting, dropping deep into meditation and making the request with my mind, heart, and body. On one of those nights when the clouds were rushing and the wind was sighing in the pines, I had seen a dark circular shadow above me, hanging just inside the cloud cover and as still as a stone. I watched the clouds tumble past it. I marveled at how absolutely motionless it was. And I visualized sitting on a little stone bench I'd built nearby, sitting with her, and talking together about the secrets of space and time.

Early one morning, just at the edge of dawn, there came from those woods the sound of a trumpet or shofar, three haunting, mournful wails.

I interpreted this as a signal. I was to go down in the woods. I was to sit on the bench. I leaped out of bed, grabbed my winter robe, put on my thick, fur-lined slippers, and headed for the door. I went out across our deck, then down the familiar path that led to the stone circle where I meditated. The bench was just beyond it. But as I walked, I saw in the clearing beyond the winter-naked woods, a dark, ovoid shadow that should not have been there. Shadowy figures, short and stocky, seemed to be standing near it.

I paused. I saw that this was an extraordinary opportunity, certainly the opportunity of a lifetime.

No sooner had those rather self-involved thoughts passed through my mind than I heard a voice say, "Come on, come on." It was hard and mean,

and had about it the flavor of somebody growing impatient, who was hoping to spring a trap.

I thought of my wife and son asleep back in the cabin, of what it would be like for them if I disappeared. I remembered the monstrosities on the bed and the other events of that tragic night.

I could not take this risk. I had a family, and their welfare came first. I couldn't just disappear on them. I was in that moment incredibly torn. I wanted to continue on. I dared not. I had to. I must not. Finally, my heart filled with fear and swamped with regret, I turned around and went back to the house.

The moment I put my hand on the doorknob, I heard the richest, strangest, and most beautiful sound I had ever known, or, I believe, will ever know. It was neither a human nor an animal sound, but it had elements of both. Astonishingly, there was also a strong sense of the mechanical.

It came in the form of three cries, so perfectly spaced and precisely uttered that, by comparison afterward, even the most superbly executed music had to my ear a muddy, slapdash quality for many months. This exquisite precision was a repeat of the nine knocks experience.

It was also, by a tremendous long shot, the most emotionally rich and complex sound I have ever known. Everything about it was tremendous: the gentleness, the ferocity, the love, the longing, the disappointment.

I was confused and badly frightened. I ran back upstairs, wanting to protect Anne from what I feared might be some sort of very overt incursion, even an attack. After all, the first thing I had heard was that awful voice snarling impatiently.

Somebody came with me, and I knew who it was. She was invisible, but nevertheless absolutely and undeniably there. I was once again in the presence of the goddess of my heart, my beloved and terrible friend.

I could not see her, but I could certainly feel her. Beloved, dangerous presence, an invisible tiger and an invisible saint. There was a sense of the empty menace of the cruising shark and a love richer than any I had ever known or would ever know again.

I remembered the penetration of my body on December 26, 1985, the fiery consummation that had taken place in the guest room, and the other intimacies.

That all flashed through my mind in an instant. My heart exploded then

with the most poignant sense of love and the greatest sense of danger that I have ever known. I saw our daughter walking away, I saw Anne weeping her anguish on that bloody night, I felt the strange baby in my arms.

Then I was somewhere else. I saw tall, spindly wooden spires around me and for a moment couldn't understand at all. Where was I? What had just happened? And why was I gliding like this? To my amazement, I recognized a nearby piece of furniture. It was my mother's desk that had stood in her bedroom back in the late forties when I was a baby.

The spires were chair legs and the legs of the desk. I was a baby again, and the wonderful gliding sensation was me walking.

I had been taken back to the beginning, to an incredibly vivid visual memory of my earliest, first steps. Once again, there was great complexity in what had just happened. I was being told that I had taken a first step. I was also being told that I was still a baby.

In the years that have followed, I have agonized many times over that final refusal of the call. Something very sacred had approached me and I had drawn back, too afraid to surrender myself to its dangerous embrace.

I must say that in all the beauty and all the darkness, the sweetness and ferocity—all of its contradictory, profoundly honest manifestation—the being that I had been having this love affair with—for that's what it was—was a holy person. Be it man or woman, part of me or Anne or some deeper, richer intimacy within the beloved labyrinth of my marriage, be it alien, human, or a nameless thing that wanders the world in search of love, I was briefly privileged to gain its notice and fall into its embrace.

It has given me so much—she has—but did she also take my daughter? If so, then to what end? I sense that my child is out there somewhere, perhaps living a superconscious life, or did she die in abnegation, fodder for some cosmic predator? Or is it that we are all both things?

Because I was led to reconciliation of the wisdom and the horror, I am grateful beyond saying to this my dear teacher, at whose knee I learned greater truths, and glimpsed the world as a far more complex, intense, and richly alive place than we are in our general life graced to know.

I recall that the author of one of the letters that Anne had brought to my attention wrote that, when she found herself face-to-face with one of these great-eyed beings, to all appearances the strangest thing she had ever seen, she found herself blurting out, "Teacher! How good to see you again."

Teachers, but bringing lessons harder than any ordinary teacher could ever bring. G. I. Gurdjieff taught the importance of friction, and manufactured it in the lives of his students. What I got from the visitors was friction a thousand times more potent, friction that had the power to break the soul, to plunge me into a frozen paroxysm of hatred and fear. But it didn't happen that way. I am still here, still learning, and will be until death takes me and, I am sure, beyond.

To be taught truly is to be guided inward, into the secrets of one's own heart, and at once to be lifted into a greater vision. "Greater" does not mean more beautiful, though. It means truer, which is, as far as I am concerned, more exquisite in its ambiguity.

Looking back over my life, I can see many different ways of embracing the experiences I have described. I could focus on the agonizing loss of our baby and say that it was stolen by aliens. I could say that we were later shown this baby and claim further that this means that it was kidnapped and raised by them.

I could say as easily that I fell in love with some sort of monster and had grand sex with it, and never mind those unfortunate looks. I could also say that this whole group of memories causes me to look at myself and the world around me in ways that otherwise would not have been possible, that open my mind and heart to the richness of questions that I can neither bear to leave unanswered nor truthfully answer. The corrosive power of these questions demands that I close them, but I will not close them, not until I can sit across a table from my dangerous and sacred mistress and converse clearly and openly with her about them. Even then, I doubt very much that she (he, it, or unclassifiable) would betray me by closing them in my face.

In the end, the questions that I bear and carry regarding these possible events are the most energetic intellectual and emotional resources that I possess. They draw me along one twisting forest path after another, into reflective caves and floral meadows, then again down ways so dark that I dare not pass. But I do pass. I always go down the forbidding path, into the trackless cave, across the desert that has no end, on the waters of the storm.

I don't do these things because I am especially curious or especially foolhardy. I do them because I can. These questions that burn within me, that wake me sweating in the night, are the treasures of my soul, the keys to the kingdom.

But what kingdom? Am I a seeker on the heaven road, or lost, doomed
to wander the darkness forever?

I have no idea.



Super Sexualities

JEFF

On the night of December 26, 1985, the most essentially and powerfully feminine presence I have ever known came to me and had me dragged out of the house and essentially beaten until I realized that she was real and I was not dreaming. During those horrific moments, I awoke both physically and spiritually.

What was Whitley Strieber's crime? What did he do that was so wrong, that merited so much shaming and condemnation on the part of the literary elite and the religious powers that be? And, yet, why did his story resonate so powerfully with millions of readers and come to indelibly mark, perhaps even shape, a new, emergent mythology well outside the reach of the cultural and religious gatekeepers? I think the answers to these two questions are related.

Put most simply, he was too honest. Put more complexly, he followed the cardinal rule of psychoanalysis, which is to speak exactly what appears in one's experience without self-censorship or concern about what others might think. He has also traced much of his visionary life back to his dream-life, his childhood, and his sexuality—all classic psychoanalytic themes. In psychoanalysis, of course, this is all done in the professional confidence of the analysis: the secrets are shared by just two people with the presumption

that speaking secrets is ultimately healing. Shockingly, Whitley did the same in broad daylight in the glare of the public page: the secrets were now shared, potentially at least, with anyone. And he was not writing fiction. He was writing about his own all too real encounters, about his realization “that she was real and I was not dreaming.” As in psychoanalysis, I think he did this to help us heal our public culture, mired in a materialism so deep that it can only be haunted by the numinous.

But there was something else, something fundamentally religious about these publicly spoken secrets. Not only did he speak his secrets in public, but he also spoke reverently and fearfully of a divine presence that was *feminine*, that broke and rode him like a horse, an erotic presence into which he disappeared in waves of terror and pleasure so overwhelming that they literally washed away his personality. Nor did he leave this divine feminine being in the abstract in some distant heaven or speculative past. He related the presence again and again to flesh-and-blood women with whom he had very real relationships: first and foremost his wife, here his mother, and even his unborn daughter. By so doing, he spoke of a presence at the very heart of the unconscious of the religious West, a presence that has been repressed and denied for three millennia. He spoke of Her.

Erotics

Comparison. Phenomenology. History. Hermeneutics. Scholars of religion have another practice for thinking about religious phenomena across great stretches of space and time. That practice is sex. Well, okay, it’s not actually sex. It’s thinking and talking about human sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation in more and more precise ways. Let us give this entire complex of modern thought and practice a new name. Let us call it *erotics*, as in the expressions “physics” and “optics.”

Erotics, as we shall see, is a very big word. It encompasses everything from the microchemistry, biology, and neurology of sexual arousal, through the immeasurable stretches of time (and countless sexual acts) of evolutionary history, to the socially shaped natures of sexual desire and gender identity, to the sublimation, or “making sublime,” of erotic energies into thought, art, and civilization, even, if we are to believe the reports, into

the highest flights of mystical ecstasy and metaphysical vision. Erotics, finally, is also deeply related to another topic to which we will arrive soon enough: the *energetics* of the soul.

If you consider it for a moment, this focus on human sexuality makes good sense on the humblest and simplest of levels, since every human being who has ever lived on the planet has had a body like ours, really almost *exactly* like ours. We can thus use our bodies to understand one another across cultures and times. We may not speak the same languages, and we certainly hold different beliefs and values and even, no doubt, differently nuanced sexual desires and genders. But we were all conceived in a sexual act (at least until very recently with the new fertility technology). We were all “born of a woman.” And we all have experienced sexual desire, if, yes, in incredibly different ways.

But the scope of erotics hardly stops there, with our shared bodies and physiologies. Its invisible lightning cracks and arcs from the lowest reaches of human cruelty, violence, and aggression into the highest reaches of the human spirit. It is a bit like nuclear energy: it can be used to power a city, or melt one.

I am hardly the first to suggest this. Two and a half millennia ago the Greek philosopher Plato argued much the same through his writings on what the Greeks called “eros.” Eros for Plato was not some simple reproductive instinct. It was the secret driving force of reproduction, for sure, but it was also the secret driving force of (male-to-male) education, of culture, and of the arts. And, most important of all, it was also the secret driving force of the search for wisdom and divine vision. Indeed, if eros could be redirected from the “vulgar” objects of heterosexual reproduction and the “heavenly” objects of homoerotic desire, it could become “winged” for ecstatic flight and take the eroticized philosopher into the highest realms of the cosmos. Freud, in the last century, would pick up on Plato and pursue the nitty-gritty specifics of how human sexual energy, which he called “libido,” morphs through the human life cycle and body (from the entire body, to the mouth, to the anus, to, eventually, the adult genitals) in specific family constellations. He also showed us, again, how this energy can be sublimated into various cultural works of art, literature, and religion.

Scholars of religion are seldom this Platonic or this Freudian, but the fact remains: we employ the categories of sexuality, gender, and sexual

orientation to think about religious phenomena and religious institutions all the time. We do this for one simple reason: it works. Whenever, for example, one is looking at extreme religious experiences, the sexual elements are probably not far behind. Sometimes they have been repressed or censored, or sublimated almost beyond recognition, but they are usually there, burning in the background, like a halo glowing on a saint or a flame dancing on the tip of a demon's tail.

All of this, though, begs a single question: What is sex?

No, I mean really, what *is* it? This, I think, is the deeper question that Whitley is getting at through the imaginal prism of the Alien Who May Have Been Anne. I think Anne was central to all of this: as Whitley's lifelong intellectual partner, as his co-writer, as his co-researcher, but also as his wife and lover. I do not think we can underestimate her importance or her presence in what Whitley has hymned over the years as his central dream and vision of "communion."

And this brings us back to the question: What *is* human sexuality? We tend, of course, to think of sexuality as *not* us, as some kind of dark and dumb "instinct" that forces us to reproduce, to "have sex," as we say. What a silly phrase. What is it, exactly, that one "has" when one engages in sexual activity or momentarily disappears in orgasm?

We also generally assume that sex as such has nothing essential to do with the astonishing zipping and unzipping architecture of the spiraling DNA molecule or the mind-boggling complexities of the cell, trillions of which make up, in near perfect concert, each of our gigantic human forms (from the perspective of each and every one of those trillions of living cells, each of us is *immense*). We never imagine sex "writing" these genetic codes in any conscious or creative way. Quite the contrary, we are asked by conventional science to think of all of this as ultimately meaningless, without any goal or purpose, and certainly without any conscious intention or internal intelligence or agency.

But what if this picture is incomplete? What if what we so naively call "sex" is not some dumb instinct but a conscious cosmic energy in its own right that is super-intelligent, that "wrote" us through our DNA and now "co-writes" us through our cultural and spiritual practices, including these reading and writing practices that we are engaged in together *right now*? What if *this*, too, is "sex"? And what if we are being asked to form some conscious

relationship with this conscious cosmic energy so that we can, in effect, co-evolve ourselves through these same sexual acts and sublimated cultural and spiritual practices?

This is a modern translation of what Plato was getting at when he called eros a god and identified it as the secret energy of our lusts, of our cultural productions, of our divine visions, of philosophy itself. In any case, this is what I have in mind when I refer to the study of sexuality and religious experience as a developing *erotics*. All of this in turn bears on the questions of Whitley Strieber, of *Communion*, and of all that followed that dark and beautiful book. *This* is “communion.”

Forbidden Fruit, Forbidden Knowledge

Most human cultures before our own have understood sexuality as sacred, that is to say, they experienced a terrifying and terrific divinity in it. Many traditional cultures went even further and saw it as a means to deify the human being. Believe it or not, this is the case for the founding biblical myth of Western monotheism, the story of Adam and Eve in the garden.

Go back and read it. The story clearly links the two forbidden trees—the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life—within a single narrative. Eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil produces immediate sexual shame, and so the young couple covers their genitals after tasting it. The same “eating” or “knowing” (a biblical euphemism for “having sex”) also invokes a set of punishments that fit the crime, in true biblical style. So Eve will suffer in childbirth, which is the direct result of the original “crime,” and Adam will have to toil in the fields, “plowing,” “seed,” and “soil” being what they were in ancient agriculture—heavily sexualized metaphors in the male imagination.

The fruit of the Tree of Life is not sex. It is deification. If the couple eats of this fruit, they will become gods. The couple, of course, is banished from the garden for their sexual disobedience before they can eat of the second tree, but the story stands: sexuality and divinization are the two (forbidden) trees of our original mythical home.

As the story suggests, we have not dealt very well with either fruit. We imagine a petty, mean god that stands against our most natural biological

urges and highest spiritual aspirations. We are morally tortured by our sexual desires and broken gender relations (all that Adam lording it over Eve), and we have hardly begun to struggle with our potential deification.

Yet.

The garden myth is just a piece of the historical puzzle, of course. If we broaden our historical visions (that is, our historical context), we can easily see that human beings have been experiencing themselves as the sexual objects of gods, goddesses, and other discarnate beings for a *very* long time. Witness the “sons of God” taking human wives to produce hybrid heroes just a few chapters later in Genesis 6. Witness the sexual nature of the djinn of Islamic folklore. Witness the nineteenth-century American Spiritualists engaging spirits erotically and, in the process, imagining entirely new gender and sexual relations. Witness the British lore around intense sexual emotions temporarily “lifting the veil” between this world and the other. We could go on here for literally hundreds of pages, and we would not come to the end of examples.⁵⁴ The history of religions is a history of strange sex.

The Divine Feminine

There is a basic problem here, though. It is so simple and so obvious that it is not always recognized as such, not at least in its full scope. Until, that is, someone like Whitley pulls it up from the cultural unconscious and has it painted in bold colors on a best-selling book cover.

The problem is this: in the monotheistic West, the divine can only be imagined as male. Exceptions aside, at the end of the day God is a He, a Father, a Lord, a King, a male Creator without a divine partner or a wife. There is God, but no Goddess. There is some good evidence that the biblical God once had a spouse, a Goddess, as it were, but She was long ago banished from memory and proper belief.

There are many devastating moral and spiritual consequences to this history and this basic gender grammar. The most obvious, and rightly most commented on, is that women are effectively erased from religious history and denied positions of authority and power in the religious institutions of the monotheistic West, since—or so the logic goes—their genders prevent them

from representing and speaking for (the male) God. My colleague April DeConick calls this ancient pattern “holy misogyny.”⁵⁵ By this phrase, she means to point out that this basic disregard for women is not something tangential to the biblical traditions. It is something fundamental to them. It goes very, very deep. This problem, of course, has been noticed and has become a central feature of the feminist study of religion, which is one of the richest and most developed voices of the field. These voices have even been heard by many a religious community that has taken the results of the scholarship here to heart.

Another consequence of the all-male gender grammar that is seldom commented on is that it results in a spiritual world in which human males have no “Her” with whom to commune, much less with whom to unite erotically and lovingly. There is *only* a “He.” This is why Jesus asked his closest male disciples not be married and to “castrate” themselves for the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:12): apparently, he wanted them to reject (hetero)sexuality and take on a feminized relationship to the divine. This is why Paul wanted all of his disciples, male and female alike, to become “virgins” for Christ and marry the god-man (2 Corinthians 11:2). This is why the two iconic female figures of Roman Catholicism have been the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, that is, a lifelong virgin and the patroness of celibacy (read: no heterosexuality) and a repentant prostitute (read: no heterosexuality anymore). This is why some of the greatest saints of the Catholic tradition were called “bridal mystics.” They had—man and woman, alike—wed the god-man, become his spouses. Put in contemporary terms, a kind of spiritual or sublimated “gay marriage” was *the norm* among male Christian mystics for centuries.⁵⁶ This is why male heterosexuality—bodily and spiritually oriented, of course, around the desire for and love of real women—has long been either compromised as a second-choice thing of “this world” or entirely secularized as something purely physical.

There were historical exceptions, of course. I am thinking of traditions like the medieval Movement of the Free Spirit, who were known (or said to be known) for any number of spiritual and sexual excesses, including ritual nudity, the practice of free love, and the attempted sublimation of orgasm into mystical ecstasy, and who spoke, at least according to the heresy records, of sexual intercourse as “the joy of Paradise.”⁵⁷ I am also thinking of more

modern figures, like William Blake, the Romantic poet-painter who drew angels caressing immense phalli and a holy chapel in and as a woman's vagina. Or the French paleontologist and priest Teilhard de Chardin, who saw the evolution of the cosmos as a divine incarnation spread out over billions of years and dreamed of a day that Christian couples could encounter a God of love within their heterosexual intercourse.

But these astonishing ideas were all effectively marginalized or repressed. Hence my humorous memory of the kind monk who once told me how they sold Teilhard's books in the Catholic seminary bookstore in the 1960s and early '70s. Since these books were all incredibly popular but also frowned upon by Rome (they could not be published during the priest's life), the monks hid them under the counter and handed them over to eager readers in brown paper bags—exactly like (heterosexual) pornography was sold at the time in drugstores. That's what a spiritualized heterosexuality or sexually active evolutionary mysticism is in a monotheistic world: pornography, heresy, impossible.

I have written three books about what is going on here, but the basic point is this. In the context of a religion like Christianity in which God is male, any erotic relationship with this God for men will be, by definition, homoerotic in structure. I am not suggesting anything genital or even conscious here, nor am I passing any moral judgment. Actually, I think "being holy" and "being gay" are fundamentally related phenomena within the tradition: gay people have spiritual gifts that straight people do not. If anything, then, I am simply jealous.

But most of all I am trying to point out why any male heterosexual encounter with a feminine presence in a Christian culture will be framed as heretical and will be at best ignored and at worst demonized and persecuted. It will be *alien*. This is Whitley's real crime and the deeper reason that *Communion* was so vehemently rejected by fundamentalist Christians. He was offering what is essentially a feminine divine and a male heterosexual spirituality, neither of which can fit into the gender grammar of the monotheistic West.

One can "castrate" oneself for the kingdom of heaven, as Jesus wanted us to do. Or one can become a "virgin for Christ," as Paul wanted us to be. One can even "date Jesus," as young Evangelical women do. But a man can

never ever erotically commune with Her.⁵⁸ He can *never* lie in the lap of a goddess.

The Flip

Go ahead and track the uses of “communion” in *Communion*. You will see that, in almost every case, this communion signals some profound emotional connection to another human being, and that human being is usually Anne. For whatever else or more it may be, Whitley’s “communion” is fundamentally about human emotion and a married, procreative heterosexuality. It is about a profound cosmic love between a man and a woman.

This is even more obvious when Whitley begins to wonder if he was really cheating on Anne when he had sex with the alien goddess figure. The following passage is key to my argument, and so it is worth repeating here:

One way to put it would be to say that I had a love affair with a goddess. Another would be that it was an affair with an alien. But the third way to describe it—which is, I suspect, closer to the truth—is that I don’t know who or what my wife really was, or myself, or any of us. I don’t know what human beings are, and, based on my own life experience, I have every reason to suspect that the form we live in every day is not our only state.

As I read him, Whitley is not saying in this passage that the goddess and the alien are “nothing but” human sexual instincts. He is not reducing the spiritual to the sexual, as, say, Freud might. Rather, he is saying that there is something fundamentally “divine” or “alien” about human sexuality itself. He is not reducing the gods and goddesses to sex. He is raising sex to the gods and goddesses. He is “flipping” the whole thing around.

This strikes me as exactly right. It is certainly what I have been trying to say for twenty years now. I call these expressions of human sexuality “super sexualities.” By such a phrase I do not mean to suggest that Whitley and Anne’s sexualities are or were somehow better than ours, somehow “super”

in relationship to our “not so super.” I mean to suggest that *there is something super about sexuality itself*. I mean to suggest that, in rare but real moments, human sexuality can “flip over,” “reverse itself,” or “turn inside out” and thus be revealed as something uncanny, something that earlier cultures identified as “supernatural” but we might just as well recognize, with a single careful pause, as “super natural.” *That’s the flip.*

Sexuality, of course, is not just connected to our most intimate loves. It is also connected to our most violent cruelties, our most severe repressions, and our worst fears. Little wonder, then, that the monster and the demon often show up in our sexual lives.

Consider, as a single eccentric case, the Mothman of Point Pleasant, West Virginia. Here was a red-eyed, seven-foot winged monster who displayed a disturbing preference for terrifying menstruating women and whose multiple spectral manifestations in 1967 were accompanied by numerous UFO encounters. The latter UFO phenomenon, John Keel notes in his famous book on the Mothman, “displays an almost pornographic preoccupation with our mating practices.”⁵⁹ Indeed, one of his chapters begins with two lovers, stripped to the buff in a parked car enjoying each other, until a humming blue ball of fire parked outside their squeaking, bouncing car. The blazing blue ball seemed conscious, as it backed away a bit when the woman saw it and screamed. And then it disappeared. The young couple threw on their clothes and immediately drove back into town only to discover that they had lost two full hours.

“I knew that UFOs often zero in on lovers in parked cars,” Keel explains. He also knew that many men and women who have encountered these things often find their marriages on the rocks, “after they begin their liaisons with the space people.” So Whitley’s pained concerns about the possible conjugal effects of his erotic occult encounters were hardly unreasonable ones. They fit into a much larger pattern.

I would put all of this in the form of a rhetorical question: Is there something cosmic about human sexuality, something at once erotic and daimonic, something that can only reveal itself to us in spectral forms, like humming blue balls of conscious fire, UFOs, winged monsters, and almond-eyed sci-fi goddesses?

It’s not really a question. I think so.

Sex, Death, and the Sacred

Whether we are dealing with canonized Catholic saints or an American monster folklore, one thing is obvious enough in these accounts: sex is not just sex. Sex is “divine.” Sex is a “demon.” Sex is dangerous. Sex is a glowing blue ball of light. Or a giant man-bat. Or a feminine presence that drags a professional writer out of his comfortable life and beats him into a spiritual awakening.

The dark side is important. We should not look away. Why? Because it is one of the faces of the same presence or power. This is as true on a religious or mythical level as it is on a biological one. Sex, after all, is the biological flipside of death. “This ancient human experience,” Whitley writes in the last chapter, “not only rends the veil between the living and the dead, it penetrates deeply into sexuality.” There is a reason for this. There is sex only because there is death. If there were no death, there would be no need for sexuality. Sex and death are two sides of the same biological coin, and we are that flipping coin.

Such truths are difficult for many to understand, partly because of our religious heritages, which are not always very helpful here. Some of these traditions, and particularly the Catholic tradition into which both Whitley and I were born, have too often implied or openly claimed that the sexual and the spiritual are opposing forces, that sex must be left behind, renounced, or denied for the life of the spirit. Part of this, again, is a function of the male same-sex structure of Catholicism: what is really being rejected here is (hetero)sexuality, that is, sexual desire *for a woman*. Hence Jesus’s call to castrate ourselves for the kingdom. Another part of the reasoning here, though, is built on an ancient “hydraulics” metaphor that saw the human body as an upright channel of sexual-spiritual fluids and forces. Allow those fluid forces to flow out “down there” and they would not go “up.” Seems simple enough.

But it’s not. Such an either-or logic is built upon and indeed relies on a deeper identity between the spiritual and the sexual. One suppresses the sexual to get to the spiritual not because these two movements are completely different, *but because deeper down they are the same*. Sex and spirit are two

ends of the same human spectrum (and the same spine). They are not really opposed. They are part of the same living system—us.

There is something else to say in this context. It involves Rudolf Otto's notion of the numinous again. Otto, you might recall, was thinking of "the holy" or "the sacred," by which he did not mean "the good" or "the ethical." He meant to refer to an experienced force or power in the environment that might be positive or negative, or both at the same time. The sacred captures the very ancient sensibility that that which is holy or sacred manifests in two different ways: in a positive, "right-handed," beneficent way, and in a negative, "left-handed," sinister way.

To see or touch God in the Hebrew Bible does not lead to warm fuzzy feelings or ethical social behavior. It *kills* you. God in this ancient sense is not a nice person, much less someone to date. God is a fierce and powerful presence that is alluring and beautiful but also terrifying and deadly. God is awe-full. When Whitley muses about how he is still "haunted by the paradoxical sweetness of many of these ferocious experiences," he is giving voice to exactly this ancient sensibility around the sacred. So, too, was a writer like the great Irish poet W. B. Yeats (1865–1939), who took this name when he was initiated into a magical society: *Demon Est Deus Inversus*. The Demon Is God Reversed. As in a mirror?

This is all incredibly important for any remotely adequate understanding of encounter experiences, since it allows us to embrace both the positive and the negative experiences, and—and this is the real point—to see these seeming opposites as two ends of the same spectral phenomena, or as reversed mirror images of each other. We no longer need to deny one for the other. We can ponder both the aching beauty of Whitley's raptures and the violent and invasive nature of his rape. It is time to come to terms with *all* of it. It is time to stare into the mirror and step through. It is time to shift the conversation around sexuality, too.

Correspondences

I was once lecturing on the topic of super sexualities at a liberal arts college in the Northeast. The lecture included six sex scenes, four of which are relevant here. One involved a nirvana-experience of a young Protestant

woman (Jenny Wade) disappearing in an ocean of pure Light during a sexual encounter; one involved a sexually aggressive female dolphin that beamed, from her forehead, a kind of DVD-download of billions of years of evolution into a stunned secret agent in a swimming tank; one involved a Houston businessman getting his brain “rewired” by a conscious ball of energy that floated just above his head and experiencing an erection that lasted for ten days; and one involved Whitley’s initial visitor experience. A student asked me afterward how I determined which of these stories are true. Behind his polite question I detected another edgier one: Why believe any of these outrageous tales at all?

That is a fair question, but it has a simple answer. That answer involves the fact that I have been in such a super sexual state myself. Because of this, I often recognize, immediately, the details and nuances of that remembered state in the reports of others. I accept the reports I accept because I recognize my own experience in them. I know that my own state really happened, so why doubt the reports of others when they were structured like my own, often down to tiny weird details? Put differently, I look for correspondences and energetic resonances. I *compare*.

Such a method is not perfect, of course. I may be wrong in this or that case. I am certain I am, actually, although I do not have any way of knowing when and where. Still, this comparison through personal resonance or correspondence seems reliable enough in the long run. Moreover, is not this the same method of those who reject such states? Do individuals not reject the authenticity of this or that fantastic state because they can find nothing in their own experiences with which to compare it? *Everyone* compares. *Everyone* finds, or does not find, resonances and correspondences.

In the opening lines of chapter 4, I explained that I had numerous professional reasons and one deeply personal reason for taking Whitley Strieber seriously. We have up to this point looked at the professional reasons: *comparison, phenomenology, history, hermeneutics, and erotics*. Now we arrive at the deeply personal one.

The correspondences started with a painting and a book cover. Like so many of the hundreds of thousands of readers Whitley and Anne heard from after *Communion* hit the bookstores, I recognized the face on the cover. It was those eyes. I had seen them before. Actually, I had seen them many times, *countless* times.

Those large almond-shaped eyes are iconic in the esoteric religious tradition to which I gave my first academic love and attentions: Bengali Shakta Tantra. Remarkably similar eyes can be seen on thousands of Hindu goddesses throughout India, but they are especially prominent, and particularly obvious, on the goddess Kali within the Tantric subcultures of West Bengal in northeastern India, where I lived and worked during the school year of 1989–90 as I researched my dissertation and first book on the “empowered” (*shakta*) Hindu saint Ramakrishna (1836–1886). Shakta Tantra is an esoteric tradition that emphasizes the erotic conscious energies (*shakti*) of the goddess Kali and the ways that these energies can be awakened in the human body through the right yogic or sexual techniques, or through the touch of an awakened and empowered Tantric teacher.

It was not just those eyes, though. I immediately recognized in Whitley’s accounts of his erotic encounter experiences in books like *Communion and Transformation* what I had known and felt during “that Night,” as I came to call those few minutes in Calcutta, in the fall of 1989 during the annual Kali Puja festival, when my own mind and body were similarly electrified and, presumably, changed by Her *shakti*. Toward a demonstration of these energetic resonances, allow me to set, side by side, the details of that Night with a single scene in Whitley’s book *Transformation*.

Here Whitley describes how after his initial visitor encounters he sought to deepen the contact and “communion.” Toward this end, he had taken up a particular practice recommended by the out-of-body researcher and technician Robert Monroe: “mind awake/body asleep.” This simple description, at least, is very familiar to the folklorist and the reader of mystical literature as a consciously cultivated form of sleep paralysis, a physiological condition in which the body is indeed asleep or paralyzed but the mind is on-line and, often, engaged in elaborate visionary displays of (or encounters with) discarnate beings.

Whitley put himself in such a state in order to leave his body. Almost immediately, he witnessed a vision of the “long, gray hand of a visitor pointing at a box.” Such an abstract vision had a most unusual and surprising effect on him. It caused “an explosive sexual reaction” in his body: “My whole body was jolted by what I can only describe as a blast of pure sexual feeling.” This erotic blast in turn “seemed to loosen connections inside me. I rolled out of my body. It felt as if I had come unstuck from myself.” He now

found himself floating above his bed and body. A number of visions followed, including one of what he thinks was an electromagnetic field around some electric wires outside. Such experiences and visions in turn lead him to speculate over the next few pages about an “electric body,” “more energetic levels of being,” and of the independent existence of the soul as “an energetic form that is in no direct way sustained by the brain/body system.”⁶⁰

So what do we have here? We have a mind-awake/body-asleep state that results in an incredible blast of supersexual energies, which in turn catalyze an out-of-body experience and some subsequent ideas about the electromagnetic nature of the human soul outside the body/brain.

Now here is what happened to me twenty-six years ago. It was early November. I had been participating in Kali Puja, a multiday cycle of festivities and rituals celebrating the goddess in her fiercest and, in some more esoteric traditions, most erotic forms. Somewhere in the middle of the celebration, I “woke up asleep” one morning, that is, I found myself to be conscious and awake but also physically paralyzed. I could not move. Looking back, I would say that I was in some sort of trance state, very similar to what the nineteenth-century French mesmerists described as *lucidité* (lucidity) or *sommeil magnetique* (magnetic sleep).

“Magnetic sleep” seems exactly right, particularly if we add “electro-” to “magnetic.” As I puzzled over my odd condition, I felt some eerie presence enter the room, or emerge from some other occult dimension, or come out of my own body (I have no idea which it was). It began to arouse me sexually. This is a fantastic understatement. My first thought was that I was being electrocuted. Was there some kind of weird electrical malfunction in the wall near my bed? My second thought was that I was having a heart attack.⁶¹ But I didn’t die. It continued to work on me. I am tempted to invoke a subtle physics here, or the mythical languages of radiation and mutation. Whatever they were, these energies were *alive*. They knew what they were doing, and I was the object of their power and intention.

Or their prey.

As this presence did whatever it did to me (the unprintable f-word would be entirely appropriate), the aroused state I was in became more and more intense. It felt as if the energies were reaching down into every single cell of my body, or—if this is even possible—into every subatomic particle, each of

which seemed to be humming at an unbelievable frequency. “Frequency,” “energy,” “vibration,” “resonance,” “magnetic”—these are not mesmerist, Spiritualist, contactee, or New Age metaphors to be mocked by some arrogant intellectual who has never known such altered states of mind and energy and so has no idea what he or she is talking about.⁶² These are near perfect descriptions of what I was really and truly experiencing, *what I had become*.

There were other more fleshly effects, too. I had a serious erection. I was also watching phalli appear and disappear in a kind of surreal dreamscape. I wanted to come. But, on some deep, unspoken level, I assumed—no doubt from my years of reading both psychoanalytic theory on sublimation and South Asian Tantric literature on the redirection of sexual energies from the genitals into the cranial cavity—that, if I came, the fantastic states that I was experiencing would go away. I thought that it was a matter of either “going out” or “going in.” I intuitively held my breath (breath and energy are linked in Tantric yoga) and “went in.”

The conscious electricity responded with what I can only describe as an ecstatic implosion. It felt like I was being sucked into some kind of invisible portal or black hole that paradoxically went “in” to go “out.” It was as if a cosmic orgasm suddenly turned inside-out or outside-in (such three-dimensional metaphors are useless here). I was now being helplessly pulled out of my body by some powerful, invisible “magnet.” I felt and saw myself floating to the ceiling of the room. Now I was really scared.

I am not claiming any kind of literal levitation, although that may have been the case. I really have no idea what an external observer would have seen (or not seen) in that room on that Night. I am simply describing what I experienced. I am describing, as best I can, *the phenomena*—what I sensed, knew, and “saw” with my temporarily electrified imagination.

I do not have any idea what happened next. I vaguely remember a gap at this point, although I do not know if that is correct or a function of my later reading of the pattern of “lost time” in the UFO literature. All I really remember is struggling back into my bed or biological body in a most ridiculous fashion. As my feet still seemed to float above me, I grabbed the bedstead and pulled myself back down onto the bed and/or into my body. It was silly, but it worked. I woke up with what felt like a buzzing body, as if

some kind of weird electromagnetic gnosis had been transmitted into me. I wrote my first three books directly out of that whatever-it-was and have spent most of the last decade or so trying to convince my professional colleagues that mind has something to do with a superconscious energy that is not produced by the brain but is more likely filtered through, reduced by, and transmitted through its neurological circuitry and cultural software.

The correspondences between these two stories are precise and obvious: awake/sleep state, supersexual implosion, out-of-body experience, and a subsequent conviction in an independent electromagnetic soul or cosmic mind.

Whitley's description in this book of "being with an invisible tiger or an invisible saint" (the double sacred) perfectly describes what I knew on that Night, tigers and saints being what they are: oh so common in West Bengal. Actually, I may have actually *been* with an invisible saint, the one I was studying at the time with such devotion and intensity. Ramakrishna was famous for "zapping" his disciples with a hand or a foot while he was alive, exactly like this. My own experience even has a well-established name in Tantric culture: *shakti-pat*, literally, a "descent of Power." The notion of *shakti* carries the sense of an energy, at once palpably physical and spiritual, that is transmitted, like an electric current, from a spiritual master to a disciple. There is also a rich tradition of receiving such a transmission in dream or sleep states.

No argument here.

Transmission or no, I am not spiritually gifted. I have had only one such experience. I suppose it was enough, though. I have written about this experience many times, as it lies at the origin point of my writing career and all of my books, each of which is a halting, stumbling, imperfect stuttering of whatever (or whoever) was downloaded into me that Night.

The thing that I am trying to stutter *here* out of that Night is the way that the total experience linked the sexual and the spiritual—how it was super natural. When I chose to go "in" instead of "out," the same energies that I thought were electrocuting me and were certainly sexually arousing me now pulled me "up" and "out" of my body. The erotic morphed into the mystical. Sex flipped over and revealed itself as spirit. Not that it lasted. Not that I remember it in all its details. Not that I know what it all means. But the energetic equation had been drawn by the event, and I would never forget it:

sex and spirit are two expressions of the same conscious energy. Our sexualities, with the slightest flip, can reveal themselves to be super sexualities.

And that is why I take Whitley Strieber so seriously. It is not that I “believe” him. I don’t believe in beliefs. It is rather the case that I have known a similar state and recognize his descriptions as corresponding to my own. These correspondences and energetic resonances are the real foundation of our friendship, of this book, and of what we have named here the super natural.

Comparing Communion

What happens to our comparative practices when we take such correspondences seriously, even integrate them into our sexual and spiritual orientations? What happens when we take our own altered states of energy and mind as potential insights into the altered states of energy and mind of other human beings in other cultures and times? Certainly, we have to be very careful here. We cannot make naive equations. We cannot take our experiences as boilerplates into which to force fit the rest of humanity. But just as certainly, we *can* identify similarities, sometimes even uncanny similarities. We are not Martians to one another. We are human beings, all.

Let me play just such a comparison out for you here. The correspondences between Indian Tantric traditions and American abduction literature are quite striking—striking enough to raise the eyebrows of the comparativist who happens to know something about both traditions. Central to both, for example, are a broad range of paranormal powers or *siddhis* initiated by the Tantric practice or yoga and the spontaneous abduction experience. Telepathic communications, channeled revelations, and levitation or spiritual flight are some of the most commonly reported. Also central to both are the production of trance and a broad range of possession states, both positive and negative—bliss and terror abound.

Sex with discarnate beings is also a central concern of both literatures. These erotic encounters might be completely spontaneous or unsought and lead toward a kind of human-alien hybridity, as we see in much of the abduction literature. Or they might be ritually and contemplatively cultivated

toward a communion or union with a particular deity figure, even an explicit human deification *as* a deity, as we see in the Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions. Both the Tantric and abduction literatures are also filled with various kinds of strange photic phenomena, spiritual bodies of light, unearthly radiances, and exotic forms of energy awakening at the base of the spine, shooting up (or down) the spinal column, and floating just above the head, often as a conscious ball or blossom of light. Whereas the powers and energies appear to be uncannily similar, their cultural and mythical expressions remain dramatically different.

A few historians of Tantra have commented on these resonances. My colleague David Gordon White, in my own mind the most eloquent and learned interpreter of the Indian Tantric traditions writing today, has explicitly invoked what he very carefully calls “UFO-like” language to make sense of ancient South Asian Tantric culture in his *Kiss of the Yogini*.⁶³ Much of this book is actually a robust critique of New Age forms of Western Tantra as inaccurate romantic-weekend representations of the older, much more sophisticated, and much more complicated Indian traditions of Tantric yoga (which had little to do with today’s postural yoga practices). In one particularly provocative section, though, David turns to one New Age phenomenon that comes very close to the “Tantric sex” reported, described, and sought out in the medieval Indian Tantric traditions: the UFO phenomenon.

In sections with titles like “Early South Asian Aviators” and “Men Flying Spacecraft,” David writes of flying temples (*vimana*), royal airships, and the “landing fields” and “launching pads” of open-air, circular temples, where contact with the fierce female beings from the sky (the yoginis) were believed to take place. More or less exactly like the female visitor of Whitley’s account, these yoginis were described as descending from the sky to abduct, terrify, sexualize, and spiritually awaken the aspirant.

White also writes of the ritual consumption of sexual fluids and the sublimation of sexual pleasure as the yogic means that were used to fuel all of this flying. The *yoni* or sacred vagina of the Goddess—the second “mouth” to be kissed, as it were—has been widely worshipped in India, along with the *lingam* or divine phallus, for millennia for many reasons, but one of them particularly evident in the more secret practices of the Tantric traditions is

especially relevant here: sexual fluids were considered to be spiritually potent power substances. Whitley's otherwise bizarre story of finding himself forced into kissing and, I assume, consuming the fluids of the glowing vagina of a feminine alien presence makes remarkably good sense in this context. The scene reads like something straight out of a medieval Tantric ritual. Kiss of the yogini, indeed!

White's careful comparisons between the two bodies of literature are playful and poetic. He is not drawing any literal identification, much less is he offering some ancient astronaut idea. But his comparative play, I would suggest, works so well because the cross-cultural resonances are really there. And—I would add—they are *really* there if one knows the ufological literature as well as an author like David Gordon White knows the South Asian Tantric literature.

To take just one pattern, it is again striking to observe that bodily substances like semen, blood, and even feces are sometimes said to be collected in both the mythologized Tantric rituals and the reported abduction events. Again, Whitley's strikingly honest description of the visitors collecting fecal samples and semen from him in his first abduction experience fit eerily well into a Tantric context. Obviously, something at once biological, sexual, and spiritual is being articulated in both cultural contexts. In the ancient South Asian context, this something is coded toward a human-divine union, deification, and experienced flight. In the modern American context, it is coded toward an evolutionary transformation, a spiritual mutation, and various out-of-body experiences, that is, another kind of flight.

To take this comparative practice one step further, yoginis in South Asia were sometimes depicted as avicephalic, that is, bird-headed. David reproduces a photograph of a statue of such a bird-headed yogini. The face of the yogini strongly resembles the famous long-faced, pointed-chin, tiny-mouthed female being of Whitley's *Communion* cover. Go look at the photograph of the bird-headed yogini.⁶⁴ She looks like an owl. Or an alien.

David and I are not the only ones to note, playfully or seriously, this obvious comparison between Indian Tantra and the various visual, erotic, and psychical patterns of the American mythology of the alien and the UFO. Whitley himself recognized the same iconic resonance in the pages of *Communion* and even names Kali and the Indian Tantric traditions there,

along with the ancient Sumerian goddess Ishtar, as especially close to what he saw and knew as Her. He sees the resonances, although he does not draw any kind of simplistic equation.⁶⁵

Nor am I. I am *not* arguing that: “The modern contactee experience is about Indian Tantra.” Nor am I saying: “Indian Tantra was inspired by aliens.” These simplistic claims are species of the religious and reductive comparisons that I rejected in chapter 1. Neither can work in the end. What can work is an honest and systematic observation of the very clear comparative resonances between the two cultural traditions.

The project of “comparing communions” might also eventually lead to the development of a new mystical practice, a western “contact yoga” in deep conversation with our religious pasts (all of them), our evolutionary biology, our quantum physics, our cosmology, and our new understandings of human sexuality. Certainly such a future practice will require a much richer and more generous imagining of the divine presence. He must also become She. Just such a vision is clearly suggested by Whitley’s repeated call for a conscious practice of “communion” that would comanifest or coconjure both self and Other.

Were we to pursue such a comparative practice and such a contact yoga, we might someday be able to spiral up and isolate some shared super-realities behind the different and yet similar cultural phenomena of the Tantric yoga traditions and the American abduction literature. I do not know what those deeper processes might be. I am only suggesting them, pointing toward them. But, clearly, *something* is flying around in our folklore. And it’s something super sexual.



Physical Traces and the Feral Boy

WHITLEY

One night in February of 1986, I found myself conscious but unable to wake up fully. There was something moving in my left nostril, as if some sort of object was being inserted. The next thing I knew, there was a terrific *crack* in my forehead between my eyes.

This started me on a long and improbable journey in a completely unexpected direction. There can be no question that there is a physical dimension to this experience. I say no question because of the fact that the evidence is sufficiently documented outside of my own experience. Within it, there is both a confirmed “implant,” which has been examined by a doctor, and which I well remember being placed in my body. Additionally, I have had contact with an extremely strange man, which I shall describe in detail.

But these two points of evidence are inside my experience. There is more. Much more.

In April of 1989, I was contacted by a Manhattan radiologist who had read my account of my apparent implantation in *Transformation* and proposed to do an MRI to see if anything was there. He also asked if I could get some additional witnesses to participate.

As Anne was carefully noting such things as reports of possible implantation in the letters we were receiving, we were able to provide a group of people who claimed to have had similar experiences.

We gathered a group of witnesses, some of whom flew to New York to participate. For the most part, their brain scans were normal, but one of them was suggestive. The report reads, “In the right anterior ethmoid cell, just at the margin with the nasal cavity, is a small polypoid structure approximately 5mm. x 3mm. This displays equal intensity on both the proton density and the T2 images obtained.”

Initially, I was excited, but the report went on to say, “Slight prolongation of T2 relaxation times within the nasal turbinates is noted, which may be related to a recent allergy or respiratory infection.” And the witness did report such an infection. This meant that the object might have been an ordinary nasal polyp, and not one that was a candidate for surgical intervention. So it was never excised.

The next month, in May of 1989, I had an experience that completely changed my understanding of what was happening to me. Previously, I had been clinging to the notion that, even though I had physical symptoms as a result of my December 1985 experience, it was not, in its essence, something that had happened physically. In this, I was like most people of a scientific and skeptical mind about the paranormal: willing to explore it as long as it remained safely under control—that is, outside of the physical world. Once it enters the physical, it threatens our entire vision of reality. More than threatens it—it devastates it.

Just a month after the failure of the MRI study to find any clearly identifiable implants in me or any of the other test subjects, my reality was devastated. As long as my experiences were ambiguous, I could face them, even explore them. I could go out into the woods at night and confront the visitors, never sure about whether or not I was confronting myself or something in the world around me.

The event that took place on that night in May changed all this. At this moment, I reach up, I touch my left ear, and I feel, over a quarter of a century later, the same agonizing nakedness and vulnerability I felt when I first realized that it was there.

Late May of that year was warm, and we slept with the windows open. At about eleven thirty, Anne was asleep. As was often the case when we were

at our cabin, I lay awake in the dark, trying not to listen for sounds in the night. By that time, I was walking in the woods at night only occasionally. On this night, we'd watched an old movie and then retired.

I had an elaborate alarm system, and a system of lights around the house that could be turned on by a bank of switches at the bedside. The window alarms were set up in such a way that the windows could be opened, which they were. I also had a Benelli riot gun and an AMD backup pistol. The Benelli was under the bed, the AMD in a drawer in the table beside it. Both were loaded, and I was well practiced in using them.

I was more afraid, at that point, of the public than I was of the supposed aliens. Locally, I was as feared and despised as I was nationally. I'd been spat on in airports, which was bad enough, but I'd also had my grocery basket spat in at the local store, and that was frightening, because it meant that the people around me hated me as much as did the general public.

This was because the debunking and the media hostility allowed people to think that I was a fraudster and deserved to be punished. Such an opportunity brings out the bully in even the mildest of us, as I was becoming painfully aware.

So when I heard the unmistakable crunch of gravel in the driveway, I was absolutely terrified. There could be no question: there was a vehicle right outside. It had gotten around our stoutly locked gate. We were under attack. At once, I turned in the bed, reaching for the bank of switches that would flood the area around the house with light.

A moment after I heard the gravel crunching, a quiet male voice said from the backyard, "Condition red."

Instead of going after the light switches, I bent to get the Benelli. This was my worst-case scenario: not a person but people, a whole group of them. By this time, I was used to the visitors. The guns weren't for them. They were there to protect us from a much more dangerous species: our neighbors.

As I reached down for the shotgun, I saw standing in the doorway across the room from the foot of the bed, two people, a man and a woman. The woman was in front, the man behind. She was perhaps five foot five or six. He was six feet or more and had a beard. I have stated at times that there was an "alien" with them, but, looking back, the two of them are all I can clearly remember.

The terror that went through me is completely indescribable. I remember

it as a disorienting shock, like being slapped hard and unexpectedly across the face. I also remember it as sickening and enraging. I wanted to retch. I wanted to blow them apart.

Before I could so much as grasp the gun, they were upon me. I found myself lying on my right side, with pressure being applied to the left side of my head in waves. I tried with every muscle in my body to move, but I could not. I could hear the woman's voice murmuring words I could not understand, and feel her hands resting against the side of my head. I then felt pressure against my head, coming in waves, as if they were pushing it hard, to the point that I felt compressed against the mattress. I could not see and I could not move.

Abruptly, they stopped. As I turned over, preparing to leap out of the bed, there was a flash of light from outside and a great crashing in the woods. I had the impression that, whoever they were, they were not only running away from me but from something else that was there. I've never known why I felt this.

I saw that the alarm system was still armed. Then I threw on all the floodlights around the house. I took my pistol out of my drawer and went racing through the house from the basement to the attic. I found not a door unlocked, not a window ajar, and no sign of any intruders.

Returning to the bedroom, I convinced myself that it must have been a vivid dream. How could I draw any other conclusion, given the state of the property? It didn't seem right, though. I had seen those people, heard them. At times after the incident, I remembered a shadowy, mean-looking figure with them, not human. Looking back now, though, all I recall is the young woman and her bearded companion.

Leaving the outside lights on, I went back to bed, sleeping fitfully until morning. Our usual routine on arising was to shower, then for Anne to start breakfast while I went out to a small local grocery and bought the morning papers.

On opening the door between the den and the garage, I was startled to see that even though I had not yet disarmed the alarm system, the big garage door was wide open. As the alarm system was still armed, this was impossible—unless, of course, the system had been tampered with.

At this point, I disarmed the system, got into the car, turned it on, and began to back out. But why did I do this instead of reacting in some way to

the situation that confronted me? Why not call the alarm man? He was a friend and lived only a few miles away.

The reason is the same one that confronts most intellectuals when they face an intrusion like this. This wasn't imaginal, as Jeff has defined it elsewhere in this book. It certainly wasn't imaginary. The door was open. The alarm system was still armed. And I did not want to face what was now plainly before me. There had been an intrusion into the house, and it was physical, and my memory suggested that it was extremely strange.

As I backed the car out, electric sparks shot between my hands and the steering wheel, then began snapping against my cheek as I turned around and my face drew closer to the side window.

This I could not ignore. I was afraid that the car might explode, so I jumped out and ran back into the house. I went to Anne and asked her if she remembered anything unusual during the night. She did not.

Normally, that would have been the end of it. Never mind the strange electrostatic phenomena. I could ignore that. But I could not ignore that garage door. It had been wide open and the alarm system had still been armed.

I now called the alarm man, who came over in a few minutes. In checking the switches, he discovered that there was a powerful magnetic field that had kept the system from reacting when the door was opened.

The magnetic field seemed to have no source. They don't propagate like radio waves, but rather remain around whatever is generating them. The problem was there was absolutely nothing generating this magnetic field. So how could it exist? And yet it did.

We then downloaded the system's log, only to find that the clock had been altered and there was no way to tell what time the various entries and exits it had recorded had actually happened.

The alarm man replaced the switches on the garage door and left, leaving me with some very uneasy questions.

Later that afternoon, my left ear began to hurt. Of course, I'd gone over the events of the night in my mind again and again. I'd discussed them with Anne, but there had been no way to resolve the mystery.

I will never forget standing in the bathroom feeling the pinna of my left ear, where the pain was coming from, and feeling within it a new lump. I got

Anne to feel it. She said it was faintly red, but there was no sign of broken skin. So, what was it?

I thought I knew, of course. I thought it was an implant. I spent the night pacing and sweating. Sometime around three, when I was cold and terrified and unable to sleep, I seriously considered cutting my ear off.

Morning brought two things—first, Anne didn't react to it the way I had. She thought it was fascinating and that it might prove to be a very interesting thing to possess. Why did I assume that it was something bad? Why would it be? We don't implant animals with things that are going to harm them. On the contrary, our implants are in various ways supportive, never harmful. What would be the point? If you want to do them harm, it's not hard. Just shoot them.

A couple of days later, I went to the doctor. He took a look at it and said it was a small cyst. How long had I had it? A week, I said. He said if it became infected to come back and he'd remove it. But it did not.

Instead, after another week or so, it turned on. I heard a screeching sound in my ear, which became hot and, Anne reported, bright red. This effect came and went without incident.

That night I was meditating as usual when there suddenly appeared in my mind's eye a startling vision of what was clearly another world. I say startling because it was as clear as television imagery. It lasted only a few seconds, but it was so complex, so vividly detailed that it was hard to see it as a product of my imagination. It was an image of a dirt street overspread with flags that contained bold writing on them in an unknown language. On both sides of the street there were low buildings. Then the image was gone.

This was one of many such images. But there had been a lot of others prior to the implant, and I'd be the last person to advocate that they were anything but imaginary. And yet, they haunted me, some of them, because they were so detailed and so strange.

Four years after the object was placed in my ear, we moved to San Antonio from upstate New York. I soon found myself invited to speak at the Mind Science Foundation, which had been created by a visionary named Tom Slick, who had been a friend of my parents. An enormously successful oilman, he had also founded the Southwest Research Institute, which remains one of the world's leading scientific research facilities.

After giving my talk to the Mind Science group, I was introduced to

William Mallow, head of materials science at Southwest Research. We met again soon after, and I told him of the implant. As it happened, it turned on in his office. He saw my ear turn bright red, and rushed me into a signals lab. We were not able to detect any emissions.

Naturally, Bill was interested in seeing the thing. As it happened, I had met an internist, Dr. John Lerma, who was willing to try to remove it. I went to his office where he prepared to perform the minor surgery that would enable him to remove the object. I had not told him the object's origin, only that it would grow irritated when I slept on it, and I wanted it removed. He knew that I'd written *Communion*, so he had his own ideas about what he might be dealing with, but he kept them to himself.

He located the object just below the apex of the pinna, and drew a circle around it with a marker. It was fixed in place. It had never moved. He anesthetized the ear, then made an incision. A moment later he said, "It's a white disk." He then touched it with a scalpel, whereupon it slipped away, leaving him with just a fragment of it on the instrument.

He determined that it had moved, on its own, from the top of my ear down into the earlobe. He said that he'd have to cut my ear to pieces if he was going to extract it. Instead, he pulled out and closed the wound.

He sent the fragment for a routine pathology exam and was surprised, a few days later, to receive a phone call from the pathologist instead of the usual written report. The pathologist first asked him if the fragment was some sort of practical joke. When Dr. Lerma explained that it had come out of the pinna of a patient's ear, he responded that it was a fragment of metal with cilia anchored in it, and that the cilia were motile—that is to say, they were moving. He thought that they must be alive.

A few days after the surgery, I felt a burning sensation in my ear, and the object returned to its original position, where it remains to this day.

At this point, I was in a quandary. For years now, I'd had an invader in my body, positioned just millimeters from my brain. Always, in the back of my mind, was the notion that I could get rid of it if I wanted to. And yet, I'd been tantalized by those vivid images of other worlds, and so hadn't previously tried to have it removed.

Now I discovered that I could not get rid of it. The fear involved was quite terrible—actually, very much like claustrophobia. I'd long since gotten used to feeling watched. My deepest privacy was no longer private, but that

hadn't bothered me. I have nothing to hide. What is visible on the outside is the same as what is within me.

Again and again, the images of the man and woman who came into my room to do this to me reappeared in my memory. I relived the incident, looking in my mind for some clue that might reveal more. But there was nothing. I was at an impasse.

Then I was contacted by a podiatrist from California, Dr. Roger Leir, saying that he had an interest in implants. He claimed that he had removed small metallic objects encased in epidermal tissue from three people who claimed alien contact, and I soon verified this claim.

When I entered into a correspondence with him, it developed that he was going to conduct another series of surgeries, and I asked to attend as a witness.

In 1995, Dr. Leir had attended a UFO convention at which he had met a man who claimed to have one of these implants in his body. Leir had reacted by suggesting to him that he get an X-ray. When it came back showing an object embedded in the man's arm Dr. Leir was, to say the least, surprised.

Leir himself was licensed to conduct surgeries only below the ankle, so he enlisted the help of a general surgeon to extract objects from other areas of the body. It was decided that they would only do relatively easy excisions. Nothing from the brain, or close to vital organs, for example.

I attended a surgery in 1996, and was deeply moved to hear the stories told by the witnesses, all of whom had memories, some clear and others more vague, of being approached by what they assumed to be aliens. Later, they found little scoop-mark scars on their bodies and, in some cases, also raised areas where something appeared to have been placed under the skin.

Leir soon had a collection of these objects, and I introduced him to Bill Mallow at Southwest Research. Bill began testing the objects, but not without objections from management. He was told by the director that their CIA client, who provided almost half of the institute's annual budget, took a "dim view," of what he described as "UFO research."

I didn't see it as that at all. These were not unidentified objects, and they certainly weren't flying. They were identified bits of metal extracted from people's bodies. To me, the question of who had introduced them, if anybody, was still very much an open one.

Under the scanning electron microscope, they were found to be

composed of iron with traces of nickel and other metals present. They were typical of meteoric iron. But what were meteor fragments doing embedding themselves under people's skin? There is no known phenomenon that would cause this. Moreover, they were found encased in skin, and yet were embedded in deep tissue. The body does not have the genetic encoding to generate skin inside muscle tissue. The conclusion that the presence of these objects, like the one in my body, was not an accident of nature was hard to avoid.

In 1998, Dr. Leir told me that he had located one in a man's neck that was emitting a low-power FM signal. Bill and I were extremely interested, because we had found absolutely no sign of any technology in any of the others Roger had given us. But if there was a signal, there must also be a circuit of some kind, or a crystal.

The study we did on this object was recorded in the 1998 NBC special "Confirmation." Bill first ran it through the electron microscope, and received the same readings as with the previous objects: it was iron, with traces of nickel, the composition typical of a meteor. We then took it to the nearby University of Texas at San Antonio and put it in an X-Ray diffraction machine. Our hope was that we might see some structure beneath the object's surface.

On the first pass, the machine recorded the presence of the object, but after that it became X-ray invisible. We took it back to the SEM, which showed no change. Over many more passes and despite the fact that it was nearly pure iron, the diffraction machine never again detected its presence.

The skeptical community either dismissed the objects as naturally occurring, or ignored them altogether. However, they cannot be naturally occurring, and as difficult as it is, the truth must be faced: there is at present no explanation for what they are, but there is substantial witness testimony—including my own—that they are placed in the body by unknown presences.

Does this mean that aliens are involved? I wish I knew, but I don't. I saw people do it to me. Others have seen strange looking creatures. Most have found the objects after the fact, and have no clear memory of how they got into their bodies.

It's too early to conclude anything about them other than that they are there and cannot presently be explained. Everything else is speculation, but

it's a provocative problem, and it deserves more scientific and medical notice than it has so far received.

Of all the things that have happened to me, there are only a few others that involve physical traces, and these all concern the presence of beings. I have elsewhere described the various multiple-witness events that took place at my cabin in upstate New York. There is one incident, however, that I haven't described, which involves a small, very emotionally intense man and some surprising things that he did.

I first came across him in the woods behind our cabin, sitting under a tree smoking a cigarette. My initial impression was that he was a boy of about twelve, and I was concerned about his smoking when the woods were summer-dry. But when I walked over to ask him to stop, I found myself confronted by somebody who struck me as very strange and, in fact, sinister.

He had the face of an immature boy, but his skin was weathered, as if he was much older, but had never reached puberty. My impression was, frankly, of somebody rather freakish.

When I asked him to stop smoking, he made a growling sound. I had the feeling that if I was to get any closer to him, he would lash out.

What in the world was I confronting? Many an author attracts lunatics, I'm not the only one. But this—what was he, a child or an adult? And that growl—my God, it sounded dreadful.

I was quite deep in the forest, and so turned away from him and headed back to the house. I wanted no part of somebody like that, and was glad to get back home without being followed—at least, so it seemed.

I mentioned him to Anne, and we deliberated about whether or not he might be a neighbor's child. But we knew our neighbors and nobody had a child like that. So, was he somebody with mental problems and a bizarre deformity? If so, perhaps we should call the state police.

In the end, we decided that he probably was just some kid out there smoking in secret. Better that than crystal meth, which was endemic among the rural poor of the area.

But then I began to notice a change in our very quiet and private corner of the world. In the night when the air was still, I would notice the odor of cigarette smoke drifting into the house. There were no other houses nearby, so where was it coming from?

Could it be that we were being watched? I kept the alarm on at all times

and the doors and windows locked, and after dark I kept my pistol in my pocket. At night, we closed all the blinds and curtains.

I finally telephoned the state police, and eventually a detective from the criminal investigation division showed up. I described the person I'd seen in the woods. Unfortunately, he knew who I was and when I mentioned that he was "little," he said scornfully, "A little man?" It didn't take long for him to leave, and I was left alone with my problem. I suppose that his main job was raiding meth labs and crack houses, and when he saw that this case wasn't leading in that direction, he was no longer concerned. And then there was what Anne and I had come to call the "Strieber Factor," where the mere mention of our name causes snickering and generalized disbelief. Once the Strieber Factor manifests itself, that's the end of any serious interest.

So we were left to deal with the problem on our own, and for some weeks, all was quiet.

As summer waned, Anne and I decided to take some last swims in our pool before we shut it down for the winter. As it was entirely private, our habit was to swim naked. This time, though, when we went out, we were appalled to hear somebody running up and down in the woods just behind a thick growth of underbrush. They were gasping and breaking sticks, as if trying to warn us off.

We returned to the house and stopped using the backyard altogether.

Once again, though, weeks passed without any further manifestations of our intruder.

When the leaves changed, we decided to take a walk. We were still uneasy enough for me to take the pistol, but the lure of the forest with its riot of color was strong. We were far back in the woods when we found, to our horror, a sort of nest. The ground was beaten down, tree limbs had been broken and pushed aside to make a small space, and it was thick with cigarette butts.

That was the last of the woods for us. We returned to the house and never went back out.

Over the course of the season, my financial condition deteriorated further. Soon, it became clear that we could no longer afford the cabin, so we packed up our car and moved to a tiny condo we owned in San Antonio.

We had not been there for a month when I began to smell cigarette smoke in the bedroom at night. I soon discovered that somebody was

standing in a corner of the little garden where the end of the screened-in porch created a cul-de-sac. In that corner, they were not more than two feet from the head of the bed, albeit on the other side of a wall.

During this time, also, neighbors began noticing what appeared to be a strange child doing things like climbing the walls of the building, getting onto decks, and damaging possessions found there. Texas state social services were called. At the same time, I identified two very strange men living in the condo immediately behind ours. I first saw one of them stealing tobacco products at the local drugstore. He went out with easily two hundred dollars' worth of pipe tobacco, cigarettes, cigars, and whatnot. As he passed me, we locked eyes, and I saw there a frightful malevolence.

The clerks let him pass without a challenge, and yet the theft was blatant. It was as if they didn't even see him. He was real, though, and it soon became clear that the strange boy—if that's what he was—was living with the two men in the apartment behind ours.

I telephoned the managing agent and got the number of the owner of the condo, who lived in Houston. My intent was to complain about his tenants. When I called him, however, he said that he didn't have any tenants. As far as he knew, the apartment was empty. I told him that it was occupied by three individuals, two men and a boy. He was outraged, and said that he'd call the sheriff at once and have them evicted.

I bought a motion-sensitive floodlight and installed it in the cul-de-sac. That night, it went off time and time again, and there was the sound of somebody shuffling back and forth, sighing loudly, and making low growling sounds.

I spent the night wide awake, terrified.

The next morning, I was weeding our little garden when the "boy" burst around the corner of the building and went strutting off down the middle of the street, never to be seen again.

Soon, an eviction notice appeared on the door of the apartment, and—incredibly—the two men started going from door to door trying to sell the condo owner's furniture! Nobody would buy it, of course. It wasn't a large complex, and everyone in it knew what was happening.

Soon after, the two men also left, and as far as I know, that's the end of the story. I have never seen the two men or the strange boy again, and I never

want to. But they were entirely real. Were they somehow connected with aliens? For that matter, were the implants installed by aliens?

I have no idea. But my implant is there, and it and the others await serious scientific study. Instead, following the lead of the intellectual community, scientists ignore what to me is an obvious point of entry into an unknown reality. The implants exist. They are found encased in skin and embedded in deep tissue. Therefore, they are not accidental inclusions, but something put there intentionally.

But why, and by whom? And who were the people who placed an exotic, technologically advanced object in my ear without even making an incision?

Who was the “boy?” Where is he now? And why was he so disturbed, and the men with him so sinister? If they are aliens, what’s the matter with them? And if not, then who are they and, once again, what’s the matter with them?

I leave these questions for future science to address usefully. So far, that has not been done.



The Magical Object

JEFF

It's the old controversy—the action of mind upon matter. But, in the philosophy of the hyphen, an uncrossable gap is disposed of, and the problem is rendered into thinkable terms, by asking whether mind-matter can act upon matter-mind.

CHARLES FORT, *WILD TALENTS*

It is my personal opinion that in the science of the future reality will neither be “psychic” nor “physical” but somehow both and somehow neither.

QUANTUM PHYSICIST WOLFGANG PAULI

Whatever it is, the thing in Whitley's ear is important, but probably not for any of the reasons that are ordinarily offered. For example, it is probably not important because it was put there by aliens. What is the evidence of that?

I am also skeptical that there were living human beings in the room doing this to him, although I know Whitley disagrees with me here. I am skeptical for two basic reasons: first, because of what Whitley describes as “a flash of light from outside and a great crashing in the woods” from which the intruders appeared to be running away; this suggests something more spectral or UFO-like than military professionals. Second, I am skeptical, because we

have numerous other cases in the literatures in which figures that looked and acted completely physical and “real” were not really there, not at least in physical bodies like you and I inhabit at the moment. I am thinking of physical apparitions of dead loved ones in which the body appears very much as a three-dimensional, solid, perfectly normal object in space. I take the human figures of Whitley’s narrative, then, to be projected apparitions in some sense, which leaves the door open to their true nature and whether their projectors were in fact human, nonhuman, or future-human.

I could be very wrong. Other aspects of the event look very much like a military-style abduction. Or were these individuals—I don’t know any other way to say this—real human beings from the future? The crashing light in the woods suggests a strange presence of some kind. Clearly, there was also an electromagnetic signature, suggestive of some advanced technology. I am willing to be wrong, spectacularly wrong.

It also seems highly unlikely that the implant is important because it works as some kind of tracking device. Given the recent advances of nanotechnology (which are no doubt mere baby steps into some major leaps on the horizon that will involve creating minuscule intelligence technologies that are completely invisible to the naked eye), why sophisticated aliens, or even technologically savvy human beings for that matter, would need to resort to crude skin scoops and chunks of metal painfully embedded in an ear or leg in order to spy on a human being is simply beyond my powers of sympathy. It makes no sense.

There is something very interesting about technology going on here, though. And it is this. Whatever was interacting with Whitley was also interacting with the technologies of his cabin (in particular the security system and the garage door). But, again, for anyone who knows the parapsychological literature, this is hardly surprising, since spirit-interaction with technology is “old hat.” In an earlier era, candles would go out when a person died. Then mechanical clocks stopped. More recently, the spirits (and UFOs) have moved on to interact with telephones, television sets, radios, tractors, cars, trucks, computer systems, billion-dollar fighter jets, and, allegedly, even nuclear missile sites. Then there is, of course, Whitley’s own electric body. Clearly, there is something electromagnetic about the phenomena in question.

If none of these “explanations” really works, then what might be going

on here? I think there are multiple entry points into this baffling subject (really object). In the following few pages, let me orbit around Whitley's ear and see what it looks like from four different angles: (1) the history and folklore of shamanism; (2) a famous New Testament text compared well; (3) another story about another magical object; and (4) another intellectual-spiritual practice to put in our developing toolbox for how to think about the unexplained. At first blush, these strategies may seem disconnected, but I think they throw some light on the object in Whitley's ear.

I want to be very clear and humble about that "some light," however. I really cannot explain Whitley's apparent implant, much less the feral boy. Both may be explainable through entirely different strategies than I offer in the present chapter. In any case, my strategies here are not dependent on Whitley's object, which may turn out to be something entirely different, or nothing at all. In any case, the four strategies set out below would remain as viable ways forward elsewhere, whatever the particular status of Whitley's own "implant" turns out to be.

In the end, I think my highly speculative "explanation" (that Whitley's mind, or, better, that Mind in which Whitley's mind is embedded, teleported the implant into his ear and messed with the technology of his cabin home) is more fantastic than the alien implant hypothesis. But this often happens when one tries to explain the unexplainable. The "explanations" just get more and more outlandish.

That is also a clue, though, and maybe *the* clue. Maybe there is no explanation. Maybe the unexplained remains unexplained because explanation is the wrong way to think about such events. Maybe an entirely different way of knowing is being called for here. Maybe these events cannot be explained because they are not caused through any ordinary physical channels. Maybe they are *expressions* of something. Maybe we should be *reading them*. And maybe, if we tried this, what we would finally read is not some positive truth to measure and prove (a technological object with the ability to receive radio signals) or some new piece of folklore to believe (extraterrestrial implants to track us), but a playful reminder that our present cognitive hardware and cultural software are simply not up to the task of understanding who we are and what (or who) the world is.

What if the secret message of these inexplicable things is to call us out of our present worldview? What if they are here to frustrate and say away *all*

of our present explanations and beliefs so that we can, as it were, start anew?

By now, you know me. You know that this is not really a question. You know that this is precisely what I think.

The Calling

As with so much else about Whitley's experiences, the history of religions offers us multiple clues to what may be happening in his ear. Many of these clues lie in the fertile but confusing loam of the folklore around shamanism.

"Shamanism" is a comparative construct, a word anthropologists made up to talk and think about a great deal of ethnographic material from around the world that is very different but also, they thought, related somehow, much like we use the word "ritual" to describe a Catholic Mass, a Hindu *puja*, or "worship," of a deity, and a Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. Obviously, these are very different practices in terms of their content and intentions, and yet they are also similar in terms of their function or what they accomplish: all such rituals "act out" and "dramatize" the belief system of the religion in question, whatever that belief system happens to be. So too with the comparative category of the shaman: there are numerous different cultural contents and contexts invoked here, but there are also many similar functions or powers.

The word "shaman" comes from the Tungus language and culture of Siberia. It means "sorcerer" and has come to name a religious specialist or magical prodigy in different indigenous cultures. These prodigies might fill any number of roles, including healer or "medicine man," medium, out-of-body traveler, psychic military scout, community storyteller, and spiritual leader. It is also important to remember that shamans can be very ambiguous figures. Their magic, after all, can often be used for positive or negative ends, for healing or cursing and killing. Much like "the sacred," as a category the shaman possesses both a bright and dark side. Hence the original Tungus "sorcerer."

In truth, the category of shamanism is probably way too broad and general. It has come to name so many disparate cultural practices that it itself has become virtually meaningless. Still, the category does give us a way of noticing particular resonances or similarities between the traditional cultures

and our own contemporary materials. As long as we do not “essentialize” the category, that is, confuse it with a single, unchanging religious meaning, we can use it as a helpful, comparative lens with which to focus our gaze. Here is how.

The calling of the shaman is often signaled by what Mircea Eliade, in his classic study *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964), called an “initiatory illness,” a severe psychological trial or physical illness that effects a transformation of the future shaman’s being, that spiritually mutates him, if you will. Other common tropes include the presence of “power animals” or totems; the ability to leave one’s body and travel in the interworld; a proclivity for trance states and robust visionary experience; erotic contact or marriage between the shaman and a particular deity, spirit, or discarnate being; and the use of psychoactive sacred plants to catalyze and supercharge these various magical powers.

And there is more. Sometimes, particularly in Australia, the calling of the shaman is announced by a god or spirit inserting (we would say “implanting”) a magical stone or crystal into the individual’s body. Eliade, for example, cites the ethnographic literature on Australian indigenous religions, where we find stories of a supernatural being named Nagatya consecrating the medicine man by opening up his belly and inserting rock crystals that will bestow magical powers on him. Another Australian tribal culture is reported to take the neophyte to a cemetery, bind him up, and leave him there for several days. It is said that animals come and lick his wounds, after which a man appears, inflicts a wound in the initiate’s head, and inserts a magical stone the size of a lemon into the wound. Afterward, the spirits arrive in order to teach him the healing songs.⁶⁶ Note that we find here exactly what we find in Whitley’s narrative: an ordinary “man” appearing in the middle of an otherwise completely fantastic narrative.

Rock crystals are particularly important to the Australian shamans, since they are believed to have been “thrown from the sky by Supreme Beings or to have fallen from these divinities’ celestial thrones.”⁶⁷ Whether purely symbolic or actually material, or both at the same time, the message is clear enough: the inserted magical stone or rock crystal symbolizes, indeed *materializes* the newfound vocation of the shaman. There is literally

something “special,” “different,” or “other” in him now. He has been set apart, called to a special place in the community. He has been *chosen*.

The reason that all of these obscure references and unknown cultural practices are relevant in the present context is that many of the exact same features or functions appear in Whitley’s experiences and books. The entire drama of *Communion*, for example, can be seen as a kind of initiatory trial or illness. His famous owls and wolves can be seen to function as power animals or guiding totemic spirits. His proclivity for trance, out-of-body travel, and visionary experience are patently obvious to anyone who cares to look at his books with an open mind. And the sexual encounter, even “sacred marriage” elements are both graphic and central ones. Hence his deep moral concerns about “cheating” on his wife (a theme also found in the literature on shamanism). Even more to the point here, his “implant” can well be seen as a “magical stone” that signals a shamanic calling. As support for such a reading, consider the simple fact that much of his initial abduction experience as recounted in *Communion* revolved around a single word uttered by the almond-eyed female visitor: She told him that he had been “chosen.”⁶⁸

Whitley resists this ominous word, and for very good moral reasons. But the calling does not go away by virtue of that oh so reasonable rejection. And that rejection, of course, is *also* a classic response to a religious calling, including the prophetic calling in the Western monotheistic cultures, which are no doubt culturally closer than the shamanic examples (although, as many have pointed out, the biblical prophets display any number of shamanic-like elements). Indeed, it is what every other prophet does: deny or run away from the calling.

The fact that Whitley has in turn been rejected by the official cultures of the public media, the scientific establishment, and conservative religion for his prophetic voice does nothing to challenge such a vocational reading of the “magical stone” in his ear. Indeed, it only strengthens it, since this is what often happens to the prophet in Western culture: he or she is rejected by the cultural elites.

Whitley, of course, cannot say any of this. But I can say it. And I just did.

I will also say something else: none of these comparative observations between the shamanic and alien materials are exactly original. The Harvard

psychiatrist John E. Mack realized quite quickly that his abductee patients (another kind of “initiator illness” again) had close analogues in the comparative literature on shamanism. Indeed, in his *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* (1994), Mack invokes Eliade’s comparative study of shamanism as one means of trying to understand the abduction phenomenon. Mack compares the abductees to a kind of unconscious shaman whose out-of-body experiences and visions he then contextualizes within humanity’s long history of encounters with beings from the sky.

What the modern abductee or patient lacks, of course, is any adequate cultural framework or mythology for making sense of his or her experiences. This “disconnect” or “cultural ignorance,” it seems to me, is the most important point to emphasize. We lack a paradigm to make sense of our own spiritual experiences, and so these events can only appear bizarre, anomalous, or even just crazy. They are usually no such thing, as we have already seen. We can see this quite clearly if we simply place them in a broader context, that is, compare and historically contextualize them with other similar patterns in the history of religions, as we have done again right here.

There is another payoff. Once we perform these kinds of comparisons, we might well find our comparisons “attracting” other confirming data. Consider this e-mail written in response to my thoughts articulated above:

Whitley Strieber
January 1, 2015, 10:19 a.m.
To: Jeff Kripal
Re: ch. 9

I think it’s important that we take this discussion beyond where it is now, which is that either aliens put these things in or they are simply trivial. I would be extremely surprised if aliens have anything to do with any of this. The magical stones of shamanism are quite interesting. Your mention of them caused me to recall that I was “given” such a stone, which I still have. I dreamed about it in the night, then walked outside and there it lay in the middle of our driveway.

Also you will recall in the kobold section, the being that rushed out of my brother’s room was carrying a stone, glowing red.

Paul's Implant

Before we leave the precedents of Whitley's implant in the history of religions, let me clarify something that goes to the heart of this book and its conversation. Let me emphasize what I am *not* saying.

I am not saying: "Whitley Strieber is a shaman." Nor am I saying: "Whitley Strieber is a prophet." Nor am I saying: "Shamanism and prophecy around the globe are functions of alien abductions." These are exactly what I am not doing. They are, after all, good examples of the simplistic religious and reductive comparative practices that I described and criticized in my opening chapter. We need to stop doing that. We need to get better at comparison.

What would a better comparison look like? Well, the first thing it would do is *step back* and stop identifying with *any* religious or cultural context, be it traditional or modern. We first "make the cut." Neither the traditional shaman nor the modern abductee can be privileged here.

Once we step back like this, we will not, of course, make any kind of simplistic equation between the phenomena of traditional shamanism and the modern abduction literature *in either direction*. Rather, we might "spiral up" and suggest that similar psychological, physiological, erotic and physical processes are behind both the traditional shamanic practices and the modern abduction phenomena, magical stone-implants and all. We might also point out that we cannot get to these deeper processes at this stage of our knowledge, but that we can see their related expressions, ciphers or codes in the history of religions.

Let me give you a single excellent example of comparison done well. Consider the work of David Halperin. David is a professional scholar of religion, an expert on, among other things, the book and psychopathology of Ezekiel (chariot and all), Jewish mysticism, and the modern UFO phenomenon. In one of the many astonishing posts on his blog, *Journal of a UFO Investigator*, David tackles the difficult topic of implants. He suggests that the West's first "abductee" was none other than St. Paul, who was famously "caught up" to the third heaven, whether in the body or not he did not know, and complained of a "thorn in the flesh" given to him by a messenger of Satan to harass him (2 Corinthians 12:1–9). Was this an ancient

negative “implant” experience? Halperin even includes a photo of an alleged modern alien implant that looks pretty much, well, exactly like a thorn.

Think that Halperin is claiming that Paul was abducted by aliens? Think again. Listen:

I need to be absolutely clear. I am not, not, NOT suggesting that Paul was kidnapped by space creatures. If you’ve been following this blog, you know I don’t believe that’s what the UFOs are. But suppose UFO abductions are a contemporary manifestation of some transcendent human experience, and that experience was known to the ancients as well as to us. (Which would make sense, if it’s part of what we are as human beings.) Why shouldn’t we consider the possibility that the feeling of something alien being intruded into the body may have been a recurring feature?⁶⁹

Note the move here. Note how Halperin does not fetishize *either* the ancient Jewish materials (Paul was a Jewish rabbi) *or* the modern UFO phenomena but suggests that both are expressions or manifestations of “some transcendent human experience” known both to the ancients and to us in different codes (there is the spiral up). Note also that he is advancing no causal or mechanistic explanation. Rather, he is concerned to identify similarities across the centuries and the cultures toward some deeper and more adequate theory of the human being, which we do not have yet. This, of course, is precisely the kind of comparisons I have been proposing in these pages.

The Honey Jar

None of this, of course, quite reaches the weirdness of Whitley’s implant. I mean, it’s one thing to speculate about an ancient “thorn in the flesh,” which may well have been a metaphor for something else, like sexual temptation (other expert readers, for example, have speculated that it is a coded reference to Paul’s illicit homoerotic desires, which were eventually sublimated into his

wish to become a “virgin of Christ” and “married” to the god-man). It’s quite another to make sense of a living crawly thing in an ear. But this next story gets us closer. Way closer. In fact, when I read Whitley’s chapter on the implant it immediately reminded me of something else. It reminded me of a honey jar.

It was my colleague’s honey jar. Let us call him Dan. Dan is an extremely accomplished academic teaching at a prestigious institution. He is a historian adept at reading in multiple ancient and modern languages. He has written numerous books and is a recognized authority in his field. So this is not “just another story.” It comes from a source of unimpeachable integrity, honesty, and historical precision.

It goes like this. One morning in August of 1980, at the age of twenty-four, Dan was making a large batch of blueberry muffins in his kitchen. He had just finished mixing the wet ingredients with a cup of honey. Honey being honey, he got some on the lip of the jar and so washed the jar off in the sink and sat it down to drip dry. He then turned to the business of the dry ingredients. Walking over to the pantry, he reached for one of those old-fashioned metal flour tins. As he pulled the tin off the shelf, it suddenly got heavier. His unprepared hands could not hold on to the new weight, and the tin dropped to the floor. Here is what happened next, in Dan’s own words, which he was kind enough to share with me at my request:

Upon meeting the carpeted ground, the tin lost its lid and much of its powdery contents. Rather upset at myself, I kneeled to clean up the mess. Then came the electric discovery whose current still flows through me. Enough of the flour had run out to reveal that something was buried at the bottom of the tin. Naturally curious, I dug through the flour with my fingers and then pulled out, of all things, a glass honey jar exactly like the one I had held in my hands and washed a moment ago, a jar completely caked with flour—as if it had been placed in the tin still wet. Puzzled, I turned my head to assure myself that the bottle I had just rinsed was standing where I had left it. It was not.

Dan stared for two minutes, examining the situation and its impossibility: “The fact was obvious. The wet honey jar had been moved from the sink and deposited on the bottom of the flour tin. The explanation, however, was not at all obvious.”

He went through all of the usual skeptical rebuttals: that this feat was a trick or show designed for an audience (where was the audience?); that he had somehow hypnotized himself and put a wet jar at the bottom of the flour tin himself (the latter is a nearly impossible feat he later learned—he tried); that his unconscious mind had played a trick on him and somehow traded places with his conscious mind for the duration of the experience (then how to explain the fully conscious and fully remembered sensation of the tin suddenly becoming heavier?). None of these “explanations” really resolved anything, of course. They were more unbelievable than the event itself, which was already outrageous enough.

Not that Dan had an explanation. He did not, and he still does not. When Dan told this same story to a group of us at a private academic gathering, he added his own immediate conclusion at the time of the original event. “I knew at that instant,” he explained to us, “that materialism is false.”

Saying Away

I like Dan’s conclusion because it does not go too far. It does not overreach. Indeed, it is not a positive claim at all. Dan did not conclude, for example, that, “If this can happen, then the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ is true” (although a minister friend of his made that exact claim when Dan told him the same story). Nor did Dan conclude that, “If the honey jar can teleport, then God exists.” He simply concluded that, “Materialism is false.” That is a negative conclusion, not a positive one. It is about something that is not the case.

This is another one of those subtle but important points, as I think it suggests what these inexplicable events may be fundamentally about, what they “intend.” What they intend, I want to suggest, is provocation, confusion, and offense. More specifically, they intend a provocation to our settled certainties of who and what we are, a confusion of our cognitive categories,

and an offense to our otherwise perfectly material world. What they intend to do is *mess with us*.⁷⁰

What they do not intend, I think, is some kind of singular interpretation. They seem intentionally open-ended and inherently plastic, as if they want to be picked up and shaped by different people and communities into different worldviews. Hence the long history of religions; our dramatically different worldviews and cultures; and our present popular folklores around flying saucers, alien implants, and UFOs.

If the latter folklores would have us “sailing away,” what I am suggesting is that we instead should be *saying away*. I am suggesting that we recognize that these events and objects are designed to take things apart, really to take *us* apart, so that we can put things back together again in more creative and flourishing ways. That’s really two steps or stages: *saying away* and *saying again*, if you will. I want to focus on the first of those steps here and the second in my last chapter on mythmaking. Here, then, is another tool to add to our growing collection: *comparison, phenomenology, history, hermeneutics, erotics*, and now, *saying away*.

There are many forms of saying away in contemporary thought, but the deeper roots lie in the history of comparative mystical literature. Any reader of this literature will recognize this idea of saying away immediately as a very old and powerful technique for transcending one’s ego and its various cognitive and cultural constructs. Hence the famous “apophatic” theology of the Christian mystics: *apo-phasis* is a Greek technical term for “saying away,” that is, taking apart anything and everything that can be said about “God” in order to arrive at a kind of dazzling, divine darkness beyond all names and forms.

Think this is a long way from Whitley Strieber’s ear? Perhaps. Perhaps not. I have continuously been struck by just how often Whitley invokes classic and contemporary mystical literature in his books on the alien and the UFO. This is significant. Gurdjieff and Ouspensky are central, for example, to his convictions around the paradoxes of “the third,” the triangle, and the three or nine knock phenomenon. Another writer whom Whitley references throughout his books is Meister Eckhart. Eckhart, it turns out, was the consummate “Sayer Awayer” of medieval Christianity. He also sounds *a lot*

like Whitley Strieber, or at least what Whitley would sound like were he living in medieval Germany in a Dominican monastery.

The ground of all this professor's teachings was a basic distinction that he drew between "God" and the "Godhead beyond God." "God" is the personal deity that comes into being when human beings pray, worship, and believe in Him (more or less precisely like Whitley's "communion" coelacanth). This "God," however, can always be said away, deconstructed as a historical and social construct and a psychological projection, because that is what "He" in fact is.

The Godhead, however, is no such thing. Indeed, the Godhead is no thing at all. Hence one of Eckhart's most common descriptions of this Godhead beyond God was *nicht*, or "nothing" (recall Whitley's description in chapter 5 about how Gurdjieff used very similar language in the twentieth century). By such a provocation, Eckhart did not mean "nothing" in the nihilistic sense. He meant that the Godhead was beyond space and time and so could not be identified with any single thing or act located in space and time. The Godhead is literally no-thing. He also famously referred to this nothing as the "eternal Now."

There is no ego in such an eternal Now. There is, as the professor put it, "neither Henry nor Conrad there," that is, there are no egos or personalities there. As egos, of course, as Henrys and Conrads, we can hardly understand such things. But we can well recognize the saying away that is going on here. We should not be surprised, then, when we read Eckhart begging his listeners to "take leave of God for God," that is, to abandon their simplistic and naive notions of God as an objective person "out there," so that they might experience true divinity in and as the Ground of their own souls.⁷¹ Today we might say that we need to stop projecting the supernatural and realize it as the super natural, that is, *as us* on some deeper level than the constructed ego—as consciousness itself.

The One World

Obviously, this new practice takes away a great deal. But what does it get us? If we were to practice such a saying away, we might begin by asking which

assumptions the objects-out-of-place of the present chapter—the object in Whitley’s ear, the magical star stones in the shamans, and the honey jar—are saying away. I think the answer to that question is clear enough. They are saying away what Dan thought his honey jar was saying away: materialism.

It is not that materialism is wrong. It is that it is half right.

If we were *really* serious about all of this, we would not speak about a “mental world” influencing or affecting a “material world,” as if these were two different, stable things. We would not speak like this because there is almost certainly only *one world*, of which our mental and material experiences are two dimensions or modes. This deeper “one world” is why material events can behave like mental events and why mental events look like material events. *Because they are.* Both have “split off” from a deeper super-reality that is both mental and material, or neither mental nor material, at the same time.⁷²

This is another mind-bender (but you are probably getting used to that bending by now). How can we possibly understand it? Through a story. We grossly underestimate the power of narrative in the modern world, mistaking it mostly as pure fiction, when in actual fact narrative carries all sorts of forms of knowledge, including and especially esoteric or secret forms. Significantly, the English “to narrate” is based on a Greek root (*gno-*) that means “to know” and from which we get the word “gnosis.”⁷³ We will return to the power of narrative or “myth” in our last chapters.

For now, consider the material of the present chapter. These sayings away are all *stories acted out in the physical world*. They are all stories that rely on objects in the physical world to tell their tales and transmit their “punch-line.” Hence the crunching driveway, the people in Whitley’s bedroom, the screwed-up security system, the open garage door, and the thing in his ear.

Apparently, that is what the human mind-brain does when it is participating in a dimension of reality that is quite beyond our primitive “mental” and “material” categories of thinking (and our primitive science, which assumes the same division to work at all). It tells itself a story that involves otherwise impossible things *and then acts out that story with physical objects*. If those objects are available in the immediate environment, it uses them as props, like Dan’s honey jar. If they are not, it creates them

“out of nowhere.” Hence the implant in Whitley’s ear. These are all magical objects that say away our own sensory and cognitive habits of separating “mind” and “matter” in a super natural world where no such distinctions exist.



Cracking the Cosmic Egg

WHITLEY

Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies.

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

As we grow older, childhood fades into a lovely, anguished distance until it remains only as glimmers of memory that probe into a world that is too unfocused for our adult minds. This is because, as familiarity with one's surroundings grows, the mind adds structure based on expectation, until at last the eyes that winked back from the raindrops of those early years and the ships that sailed the clouds are lost. When I was tiny, I used to sit in the living room in the dawn and converse with the sunlight. I had many friends in the swirling rain, and would watch Admiral Pirate fire his lightning broadsides when it stormed.

There was more, but it has been lost to me, as has the wonder of the rain and the saga of Admiral Pirate, and the sun no longer speaks to me in the language of light.

In every life, there remain sparks of wonder and visions—fleeting, perhaps—that are too eccentric to explain. We discount them, then deny them, and finally do not see them at all. But in some lives, the process of

filtration is interrupted. Things happen that are so terrible or so memorable that they do not get lost in the amnesia of childhood, but rather are tucked away in special corners of the mind, where they continue on as memories that are neglected but not forgotten.

A child who has done this may continue as an adult, and if adult perceptions are sufficiently strange, they may also enter neglected—or rejected—memory.

Hypnosis can be used to extract such memories, but it is a demanding process. Unfortunately, it is routinely carried out on “abductees” by nonprofessionals. As the objective of the subject is to please the hypnotist, even the fact that the hypnotist’s beliefs are known to the subject will confuse the results. People can end up with false memories that they can never untangle. Nevertheless, in the hands of a skilled professional, hypnosis can draw neglected memories into recollection, as happened with me when I was hypnotized by Dr. Donald Klein in 1986.

Neither I nor Dr. Klein put much stock in the notion that I might have been abducted by aliens. I still don’t think that the sessions I did with him necessarily suggest that. They do suggest, however, that whatever happens to me is an ongoing process and that it started in childhood. This is because, during the second session, I spontaneously regressed to the age of twelve and described seeing a room full of sleeping soldiers who were being overseen by a willowy form familiar to me from my close encounter the previous December. The childhood event happened on a train, during a trip to Wisconsin to see relatives. As author Ed Conroy described in his book about me, *Report on Communion*, a friend of mine from those days remembered me returning from the trip talking about nothing but the soldiers I had seen. During the experience, I started out by acting as a sort of guide for my father, telling him that everything was all right. I was familiar with the willowy figure. I’d been with her before. But then he said, “No Whitty, it’s not all right,” and a wave of terror passed through me. I saw the strangeness, then. I saw the improbability. And the memory—along with others that I was probably aware of then—got passed into the region of neglect, not to resurface again for more than thirty years.

To me, the figure minding the soldiers was not dangerous. My father’s fear is what changed that, and conceivably led to the amnesia that set in afterward.

To this day, I really cannot be sure what my childhood memories are, this one included. It is difficult to believe that what I remember of them now, as I described in *The Secret School*, happened in an absolute, literal sense. But something unusual happened, otherwise I don't think that they would be in my mind at all.

It may not have had anything to do with strange creatures, though. What if something else happened on that train, something perhaps that is part of a pattern so shocking that I cannot face it directly even now and have transferred it into this strange memory in order to protect myself from what my unconscious mind regards as an unbearable truth?

In his 1990 study of close encounter witnesses and near-death experiencers that led to his book *The Omega Project*, Dr. Kenneth Ring found among the close encounter witnesses one consistent result: the majority of them reported childhood trauma of some sort.

If this finding is correct, it could be that there is some sort of process of sublimation involved in transferring unacceptable and incomprehensible memories to more bearable fantasies. A brutal rape by a beloved parent might become a brutal alien abduction, as the mind seizes on the most believable and acceptable alternative in order to avoid facing what it cannot bear to see. This might explain, at least in part, the proliferation of close encounter memories, including some of my own. I doubt that it explains them all, but that possibility shouldn't be discounted, either. If such a process exists now, it is likely that it has always existed and might well be one of the primary generators of folklore. A rape by a father becomes a visit from a god. Leda didn't get ravished by daddy—too unbearable to contemplate. No, it was a swan, and that swan was a god.

This might explain many of these experiences, but it should not be used to explain them away. The shattering of expectation that accompanies trauma doesn't just cause transference, it opens a door. When a child finds that he cannot trust a parent, the child becomes hyper-vigilant, and the sense of mistrust radiates out from that foundational wound until the child's connection with reality becomes unsettled. It is then that the eyes reappear, staring—now with malevolence—out of the raindrops, and, in some cases, the developing close-encounter folklore replaces Leda's swan with a sullen reptilian alien or an owl-eyed gray.

The world whispers a devastating message to the sufferer: "I am not

what I seem . . . and neither are you.”

I have heard that whisper, and believe me, soft as it is, it is capable of searing the soul forever.

To this day my relationship to reality is edged by a region of ambiguity. Over the years, I have become able to address it in various ways. It is here that the faces in the raindrops command my attention. However, my life experience suggests to me that they may turn out not to inhabit only the raindrops of imagination, but conceivably to be reflections of another reality altogether.

Or so I think—and, I believe, have good reason to do so. As I have said, my perception is that our physical reality is embedded in something larger—an island, as it were, alone in a vast ocean, the nature of which we have thus far only guessed at. Instead of taking an objective look at phenomena that cannot be explained, we have thus far across our history contented ourselves with either accepting them or rejecting them. Personally, I find a more inclusive and questioning approach more interesting and intellectually useful, and also capable of offering the culture some advancement in the clarity of its vision of reality, rather than a continuation of the confusion that has dogged us since well before Leda was raped by Zeus.

If that larger world doesn't exist, then what is an inexplicable object doing implanted in my ear, and why are so many other people similarly implanted? I agree with Jeff that these are probably not tracking devices. I also stand by the idea that somebody was there. They had to be. I saw two of them. Outside, I heard others. They were people, but possessed of technologies far beyond anything known and using tools that seem almost incomprehensible, such as magnetic fields that persist even in the absence of a source.

They came out of the shadow-line that edges my life. When they returned to it, they left behind, in addition to the implant, the electromagnetic disturbances that I have described. On the other side of the line, they may or may not have been physical, but when they entered my bedroom, they were, and they brought with them a physical object that once yielded some very mysterious information. If I could be assured of an objective analysis of the object and of my own safety in having it removed, I might try that again. But it's a hard thing to face. It has now been there for years without hurting me. Would taking it out do the opposite?

Perhaps one day when I feel ready to take the risk, I'll try it. But that won't be easy.

The disturbance to expectation that has followed me across my life began, quite literally, with birth. I have never had a chance to experience an assured sense of reality, and perhaps this is why I am so open to intrusions from beyond the edge of expectation.

When I was born, I am told that my mother could not make milk. Unfortunately, I was not able to tolerate the primitive formulas of the 1940s, and lived in agony for my first six months. After enduring a twenty-hour labor, my mother had to take home a baby who did not and could not stop screaming, not for days, weeks, finally months. I was either in exhausted sleep or in agony. She herself became so exhausted that she ended up in a nursing home for the second six months of my life. At some point, I was apparently dropped on my head, with the result that there is a spinal compression in my neck that is the source of the pain I have experienced ever since.

Once I began to eat solid food, things settled down somewhat. Until, that is, I reached the age of six or seven. As I recorded in *Solving the Communion Enigma*, I ended up in some sort of program that I believe to have been carried out at Randolph Air Force Base near San Antonio. My primary recollection is of being jammed with other children into a dark space—a box—where horrific, deafening sounds were played. I remember it as shrill screaming that made us scream, also, as we twisted and struggled.

Now, these memories did not really focus until a few years ago, after Anne and I moved back to San Antonio. To my surprise one afternoon while driving home on I35 north of the city, I wound up at Randolph's south gate. I had no idea how or why I had driven there. After that, I found myself visiting certain memories that had always been with me, but which I had been neglecting in the same way that a stroke victim's brain might neglect a paralyzed limb. The surprise detour to Randolph restored my interest in them, and I have been thinking about them and researching them ever since.

I know that there was a program for bright children at Randolph because one of my oldest friends, now a distinguished academician, was present when a couple from the air force attempted to recruit him for it when he was a child. When a Skinner box was mentioned, his parents declined. Skinner boxes are used to study animal behavior, and the idea of using them with

children did not sit well with these very aware parents. They knew that, whatever this program was about, something was seriously wrong with it. I surely do remember that box, though. In fact, it's my most vivid memory of the whole wretched business, and it was extremely dreadful.

So I think that the program existed. I also know that it stressed me severely, because my immune system collapsed when I was in it, at age seven. My report card from the period shows weeks of absences, which was the time that I was kept in isolation.

Looking back at the program now, it seems to me that the stress involved had the effect of cracking the cosmic egg, just like, say, sexual abuse. Perhaps even more completely.

I think that the program was run by German scientists who had been brought to the United States as part of Operation Paperclip. They had worked in human behavior in the concentration camps. Could it be that they discovered that by stressing children to extremes, the children would not always go mad or die, but would sometimes become conduits to some other way of addressing reality? To me, the tightly packed bodies and the screaming amount to an excellent simulation of the interior of a gas chamber, pitch dark, packed solid with humanity, and thick with terror.

Did some children sometimes survive the gassings—buried, perhaps, under heaps of bodies—and emerge from the ordeal with strange knowledge and strange powers? Were the Nazi scientists trying to re-create these conditions in their lab in Texas?

If so, perhaps it sometimes works. My life would certainly suggest so. When I was twelve, we began noticing that white owl standing at the far edge of our backyard. It seemed to be watching my windows. This disturbed my parents so much that they had my screens nailed shut. It was also my first exposure to a creature that would come to emblemize my whole relationship to that aspect of being that I call the visitors.

Later, in 1968, I had a profoundly unsettling experience involving an owl. That year, I was living in London and attending the London School of Film Technique, now called the London Film School. During the summer break, I decided to travel on the Continent. On an overnight train to Florence, I fell in with a girl. We began traveling together. For a couple of weeks in Florence, we had a lovely time, living together in chaste intimacy. But then we went on to Rome, and when we toured St. Peter's, she became crazy,

stalking through the church in raging silence. She scared me. I was living with her in a small *pensione* near the railroad station. I decided, “No more,” and headed off to the *pensione* to collect my suitcase and get out of there.

I went into our tiny room, threw my toothbrush into my suitcase, and started to leave. Then I stopped. Her suitcase was lying on the foot of the bed. I have always been a bit too curious, and I opened it. What I saw shocked me to my core. In it was a nun’s habit and, lying beside it, a dry, flattened owl carcass.

I didn’t get off the train again until I was in Strasbourg.

The owls were gathering.

My first memories of my December 1985 experience involved an owl. I thought I’d seen one peering in the bedroom window, then flying around in the house. But it was winter, all the windows were closed and we had no chimney, so it wasn’t possible that an owl could have gotten in.

Our dark god, it would seem, isn’t a swan but an owl, and therein lies, I suspect, a fundamental revelation about how exactly what is touching us wishes us to understand our relationship with it, or, conversely, how we wish to interact with it.

As I write this, both Jeff Kripal and our editor at Tarcher/Penguin, Mitch Horowitz, are having owl imagery enter their lives. Mitch has been having unexpected encounters with them for about a year. And, of course, the owl is the mascot at Jeff’s university. In Celtic myth, the owl is a symbol of the otherworld, and in the UFO literature, a sign of the gray visitors.

Like owls, our visitors are creatures of the night. They are predators, silent, appearing suddenly and stealing people away for unknown reasons. The owl captures the unwary, the rat who dares to cross a wire in the moonlight, the chipmunk scuttling in the last sun, the famished rabbit daring the gray of dawn.

At our old cabin, as night gathered, the owls would often come, standing in the trees around the house, sometimes capturing prey right before our eyes. After Anne began analyzing our reader mail, it became clear that we were not the only close encounter witnesses who had owls in their lives.

I was fascinated by this phenomenon, and sensed at the time that it could be seen not simply as a sort of eerie mystery, but much more richly, as language.

To do this, it is first necessary to withdraw from the issue of who is

speaking, and rather concentrate on what is being said. Otherwise, we'll be stopped before we start, because there is no way to be certain why this happens—that is to say, who is speaking. This is the approach we've been taking since the beginning of the human experience. Over this time we have made thousands of decisions about which animal, which tree, which stone belongs to what god, and what the relationship means. Most recently, we would say that the appearance of owls in the context of close encounters is meaningless, because close encounter is itself a trivial folklore.

Looking at history, though, it is perhaps unwise to dismiss folklore. It does have a habit of transforming into belief systems, and we humans have trouble handling our beliefs. We kill for them.

Among close encounter witnesses, owls are believed to be “screen memories,” that is to say, memories of something ordinary that cloaks what was actually there, which was much stranger. This is not quite the same as Freud's use, wherein real memories are used to screen deeper, unwanted ones. In this case, the screen memories are not real, but fabrications perhaps introduced into the mind of the witness by hypnosis.

When witnesses find owls watching their houses, as we did, they will often think that the visitors are using the owls like cameras. More interestingly to me, people will identify the owl as the totem animal of the visitors.

In all of this, I hear language. Back when we lived in the woods, I understood that the visitors were potentially dangerous. The owl image spoke to me in two ways: it warned of a stealthy predator, and it promised wisdom.

The question was how to take the wisdom without being eaten? I decided to use the same language I was seeing to reply with my own visual statement. Knowing that I was looking at a predator, I nevertheless went out into the woods, went deep, seeking to be helpless in the dark. By this time, I had seen into their eyes and seen the danger there. I knew that I'd been raped, that semen had been taken from my body, and with it the essence of my life and the potential for a new child destined to rise up among them, a thought which haunts me to this day.

If this all rests somehow in physical reality, was that child made? What has been his or her experience? Have I given my seed to the stars, or given a lamb to the slaughter?

To lie in the lap of the goddess is to be unsure, and in that unsureness

there is extraordinary suffering.

The worst part of it was that they would only rarely and briefly come to me on my terms. As hard as those night journeys were—intentionally exposing myself in the moonlight, something no smart rat would ever do—the hardest part was the way the visitors usually withheld themselves. I went, I waited in agonized vulnerability, I returned home, knocked back a stiff drink, and turned in.

Was I not succulent enough? Too dry? Tasted too much like chicken? Or was it that I was doing what I hoped I was doing, which was surrendering myself to them—asking, I hoped, for a relationship?

That is what I got, and it has remained so for the rest of my life, and if we continue to be in some way intact after death, it will, I feel certain, develop even more richly then.

Richly, yes, but also dangerously, and that is a great part of the point, the second most important word in the sentence: it has ever been essential to finding one's truth that one tempt death. This is a central feature of initiation. Even in modern times, in Masonry, there is a symbolic death to the past self. In ancient Greece, the Eleusinian Mysteries involved a reenactment of the abduction of Persephone and her descent into the underworld.

To enter death. To gaze into the mirror of mortality. To find the truth that is beyond articulation, and yet is the final word in this very old and very new language. Old, because it dates so far back in human ritual, new because its power to transform has to this day never been methodically explored.

Perhaps that will change soon, because if this owl should ever take flight in our general night, we will find ourselves face-to-face with a truly remarkable predator, who will educate us if we face her, but steal us away if we run. But, of course, there was a secret revealed in the Eleusinian Mysteries, as there is in all shamanic initiation. It is that death is not what it seems; it is a change of direction, not the end of existence.

But release does not come easily. Suffering is the engine of transcendence. Osiris cut to pieces. Job in his abnegation, even so grateful to his god. Jesus forsaken on his cross. Humanity on a dying planet, lifting desperate eyes to the cold stars. Make no mistake, the entire species is probably headed toward suffering just as great as that of the avatars of the past, but on a truly fantastic scale.

In that night, the owl, bringer of death and wisdom, will potentially

reign as silent mistress of our souls. Like the old song, but perhaps with a somewhat different tone, she will have the whole world in her hands.

I cannot tell how dangerous it really was, but I can share the peace my life as her student has brought me. I have threaded the maze of my own suffering, Ariadne's follower, to a place in the heart that I had never known existed, where compassion floods for my fellow man, for Earth and her creatures, even for my own slouching struggle in the darkness.

In my foreword to Jacques Vallee's book *Dimensions: A Casebook of Alien Contact*, I offered the opinion that the pressure of the close encounter experience is what the force of evolution looks like when it is applied to a conscious mind. So the owl, flying through the mystery of the experience, brings with the danger of her talons and her tearing beak also the revelatory reflection in her fearsome eyes.

When I said in *Communion* that "the human mind winks back from the dark," I was addressing both the evolutionary power and ambiguity that emerges into our lives when we see past the expectations and assumptions with which we surround ourselves. We see into a darkness that, in my experience, is at once "us" as we truly are and the "other" in all its mystery. The crack in the cosmic egg is not just a crack in the mirror of self, but a shattering of that mirror. And beyond self, joy.



Trauma, Trance, and Transcendence

JEFF

No creatures can reach God in their capacity of created things, and what is created must be broken for the good to come out. The shell must be broken for the kernel to come out.

MEISTER ECKHART, SERMON TWENTY-FOUR

Any adequate modeling of super natural experiences like those of Whitley must not only throw light on these experiences. It must also explain why the rest of us do *not* have these experiences. The model must explain both the experiencer and the nonexperiencer, both the believer and the doubter. Put a bit differently, any model of the super natural must not just explain the rare experiences of the super. It must also explain the vastly more common experience of the simply natural.

This is where what I call *the traumatic secret* comes in. The phrase “the traumatic secret” is a poetic expression for another tool or technique for our toolbox. In truth, this tool, like the notion of an *erotics*, is really not a single tool. It is more like one of those Swiss army knives. It is (at least) three tools in one. The phrase encodes three separate but related notions: trauma, trance, and transcendence, each of which we will treat below. So now we have seven basic tools or techniques to make sense of the unexplainable: *comparison*,

phenomenology, history, hermeneutics, erotics, saying away, and the traumatic secret.

At its most basic, the traumatic secret is a function of the reduction model of the mind-brain relation that we looked at in chapter 3 under “Producer or Reducer?” This model, recall, suggests that the human body-brain does not produce consciousness but *reduces* it. The body-brain crafts consciousness into a human form through a vast network of highly evolved biology, neurology, culture, language, family, and social interactions until a more or less stable ego or “I” emerges, rather like the way the software and hardware of your laptop can pick up a Wi-Fi signal and translate the Internet into the specificities of your screen and social media. The analogy is a rough and imperfect one, but it gets the basic point across.

Sometimes, however, the reducer is compromised or temporarily suppressed. The filtering or reduction of consciousness does not quite work, and other forms of mind or dimensions of consciousness, perhaps even other species or forms of life, that are normally shut out now “pop in.” In extreme cases, it may seem that the cosmos itself has suddenly come alive and is *all* there. Perhaps it is.

In any case, such a model would certainly explain quite easily why experiences of the super natural world so often occur in or around trauma, illness, suffering, and death (all situations in which the brain-filter is compromised or suppressed). It would also explain why telepathy ends with “pathos”—deep suffering is precisely what it often takes to spark a telepathic communication between two emotionally entangled loved ones. It would also explain why the rest of us commonly experience only a natural world: our evolved systems have not yet been compromised or breached. That is not a bad thing, of course. It is simply what bodies, cultures, and egos do, and must do. They filter most of mind out so that we can be our little social selves, so that we can be us.

Trance-Formations

There are other safer and gentler ways to let a little more of mind in, however. One of the oldest and most common ways can be captured in a single word: trance. Trance induction is probably humanity’s oldest

technique for “hearing the gods,” that is, for accessing altered states of consciousness and activating special powers—what Charles Fort called wild talents and today we call human potentials.⁷⁴ Trance induction has also long been the privileged method for the production and establishment of new cultural narratives, otherwise known as revelations, myths, and religions.

Historically speaking, the shamans, bards, sages, prophets, seers, and poets were the trance experts who “knew” the secret truths, “heard” the revelation, or “saw” the gods of the culture. It was the same religious prodigies who could pass all of this on in poetic speech, which was then, generally much later, set down in writing. These trance-seers and trance-speakers were the original “novelists” or Writers of the New. Little wonder, then, that today trance states and new cultural narratives arise anew among professional writers, poets, and channelers. Little wonder, too, that we can detect profound comparative resonances between a figure like Whitley Strieber and the folklore of shamanism and the history of religions.

It takes more than trance states and writers to make a religion, of course. Political powers, religious elites, artists, and architects must all take up elements of these states and stories and create stable social institutions and the elaborate theater of ritual, art, and architecture around them. Entire communities must then reenact these “revealed” stories over and over again until their narratives and images seem eminently obvious and real to a majority of the people.

This is where it gets “loopy.” These same repeated rituals and reenacted stories are in turn designed to induce mild trance states in their participants in order to “return” them to the events of the myth—to establish them as characters in the sacred story of the culture. Every believer who becomes absorbed in the reading of a scriptural text, meditates on a religious image, chants a sacred name over and over again, or deeply engages in a repetitive ritual is, in effect, self-hypnotizing and attempting, through that same trance induction, to “remember” an original revelation, founding narrative, or beloved deity. By doing so, she or he is psychically entering and *becoming that story*. The story once born in trance and then shaped by society is now being told again within another trance induction.

Put most simply, *the religious self is a story*. And trance induction, as the original ecstasy of a religious prodigy or the repeated ritual of the devout

community, is all about hearing and seeing this story, becoming this story, remembering it, and transmitting it to others as the way things really and truly are. They never quite are, of course.

More to my present point, *the reading self is also a trance-induced story*. If you are absorbed in this book at this moment, you are in a mild trance state answering to the trance states that Whitley Strieber and Jeff Kripal entered in order to write these pages. You are a slightly different person reading this book, just as we were slightly different people writing it. Or maybe we are all really different people because of this trance state, itself designed to snap us all out of our story-trances so that we can tell better ones. We did promise to end the world in our first lines. We promised an apocalypse of thought.

End of the world or no, there is no doubt about it: writing and reading are trance inductions. As my colleague in the study of Indian religions Lee Siegel has so eloquently put it in his recent book on mesmerism in colonial India: “the relationship between a reader and listener is analogous to that between a hypnotist and subject.” And hypnosis is, “by its very nature, about the power of stories.”⁷⁵

In order to capture something of this, Lee invents an entire minivocabulary of new trance words: “in[tr]o-duction,” “trance-formations,” “trance-mutations,” “trance-actions,” and “trance-migrations” (the latter for the hypnotically induced remembrance of previous lives that is so central to the doctrine of reincarnation in India). His point? That nearly everything we think, feel, desire, and do, that nearly everything we *are*—from our romantic relationships to our ethnic, national, and religious identities—is a result of some kind of trance induction; that culture entrances us, makes us believe all sorts of things about the self, society, and the world that are useful enough but are not necessarily true.

Think this is all irrelevant here?

“Look into my eyes,” says the hypnotist. One of the most obvious features of *Communion* is its astonishing cover, carefully designed by Whitley himself with the artist Ted Jacobs. The central features of that original painted cover, of course, are the alien being’s immense black eyes, at once subtly mirroring the viewer and pulling him or her in, like a two-way mirror. No iconic feature of the book played a more important role in its

reception history and in the hundreds of thousands of letters that the Striebers received. Readers were hypnotized. Entranced.

Moreover, the book itself dwells long and carefully on four trance narratives, each transcribed from a hypnosis session with a professional psychiatrist: two of Whitley's with Dr. Donald Klein, and two of Anne's with Dr. Robert Naiman. Whitley refers to these trance sessions in the previous chapter, but it is worth underlining here: *Communion* is a trance-text, a "remembrance" of a literally hypnotic story that helped "reveal" and then establish one of the most powerful cultural narratives working in American culture today.

The fact that this cultural narrative has been operating largely "in secret," that is, in the bedrooms, bodies, and private psyches of countless human beings well outside the approval of the gatekeepers of the culture does nothing to lessen the story's power and influence. Indeed, it may well increase both. As Jacques Vallee has taught us in his own books, if a form of mind wanted to really influence, shape, or direct a culture, it would not bother with the culture's public arguments or politics. It would choose to work on the culture's deepest operating system. It would go to the place of dreams and vision. It would choose to work on the cultural imagination.

Trance-scendence

What I am asking you to consider here may initially seem like an especially tough message. On one level, I suppose it is. I am asking you to consider the possibilities that both society and the self are stories, trance-formations generated through the hypnotic inductions of language and social scripts, and that every culture and religion is fundamentally an illusion. I am asking you *to wake up*.

But here is the thing. Here is where it gets really interesting. Once we wake up out of our respective psychological and social trances and recognize, as if emerging out of a long dream, that all of our cherished cultural and religious convictions are illusory trance-formations, just *who* has realized this? Who has woken up out of these trance inductions?

Consider the story of Haeyoung Seong. Seong lives and teaches in Seoul, South Korea. He was my first Ph.D. student. One day in 1984, Seong

was staring out a window in a high school classroom, watching the sun dance off of a white building. The movement of the light did something to him. Hypnotized him? What does that mean? In his case, it meant that he felt his body fill up with thousands of intensely pleasurable, hot “energy worms” before “It” happened.

“It” was some vast supermind, infinite and eternal, beyond space and time, and utterly indifferent to the insignificant human ego. The event shattered him, which is to say: ended all of his trances. The trances returned, of course. Fourteen years would pass before he found any adequate resonances to what he had known that day, first in William James’s classic study of mystical experiences, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, then in the *nous* or “cosmic intellect” of the third-century Greek philosopher Plotinus, who, Seong concluded, had known a near identical state of mind seventeen centuries before him.

Something eerily similar happened to a German Lutheran shoe cobbler by the name of Jacob Boehme in the year 1600. Jacob was staring at a beam of sunlight bouncing off a pewter dish. He developed a mind-bogglingly elaborate symbolism and philosophy to explain what had been revealed to him in the light, much of which was deemed heretical and dangerous by the local religious authorities. Regardless, what happened to Jacob initiated an entire lineage of Western esoteric thought that influenced artists and philosophers like Emanuel Swedenborg, William Blake, Samuel Coleridge, and G. F. W. Hegel, a “thinker of the third” if ever there was one. Hegel famously called Jacob the “first German philosopher.”

Then there was the American science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick. The cultural and psychological contexts—that is, the filter, medium, or prism—could not have been any more different, but there was the reflected light again. On February 20, 1974, the author was staring at a young woman’s golden Christian fish-sign necklace. She had come to the door to deliver some pain medication for an oral surgery. The golden necklace glittering in the sun was his pewter dish. “It” rushed in again.

What happened to Dick in the next few hours, days, and weeks changed his life and resulted in his last three novels, all of which orbited around what he came to conclude was a cosmic mind that had reprogrammed him in and through that same mysterious light. It also did very practical things, like enable him to clairvoyantly diagnose an invisible hernia in his young son, a

diagnosis which led to an emergency surgery. Dick called this cosmic mind “Valis,” for Vast Active Living Intelligence System. His experience of it was so physical, so palpably electromagnetic, so real that Phil seriously thought that Valis was the beam of some alien technology or satellite in the sky before he concluded that it was more likely something else: a superintelligent plasma that underlies and underwrites everything, which the ancients had called the Logos, that is, the Mind or Word of God.

My point? That trance states, even and especially those induced casually and unconsciously by white buildings, pewter dishes, and gold necklaces, do not always lead to more illusion and more projection. Sometimes, for reasons that we do not understand, they appear to do the exact opposite. They appear to outshine, to *end* the consensual trances of society and self. They catalyze remarkable states of mind and being that look very similar across the ages, states that may well tell us something important about who and what we really are. Sometimes, it turns out, the black reflective surface of the alien’s eyes just disappears and one finds oneself *inside*.

I do not think that whatever Seong was hypnotized into was illusory. No doubt some of the visionary features of his experience, like those of Jacob and Phil, were functions of his cultural imagination. The light is *always* refracted, *always* reflected through culture and psychology. It can be no other way, since as social egos we ourselves *are* those mediums, filters, or prisms. We *are* that two-way mirror.

But I doubt very much that the basic message of Seong’s experience was illusory or false. Nor do I think that that cosmic *nous* he knew had anything to do with the illusions of culture, religion, or even history. This is why Seong could find a description of a near identical state in a third-century Greek philosopher. We might add another trance word to Lee Siegel’s new language, then, and begin to speak of “trance-scendence.” Sometimes, rarely but really, the trick of trance states leads out of the consensual trance of culture and religion into something other or more, something so other that it feels and seems *alien*.

That’s because it is. It is not us, not us as rational social egos anyway. And yet it *is* us, as soul, as spirit, as Valis. Again, allow me to repeat myself. The problem here is a very simple one: As knowing subjects, we are not one but two. Until we recognize the Human as Two, we will not be able to see and accept the illusory nature of our little selves, our little cultures, and our

little religions. Nor will we be able to recognize the cosmic vastness of who we really are. Consciousness is *not* ego. Consciousness is *not* culture. And yet no ego or culture can exist without “It.”

I confess. This central notion of the Human as Two makes sense of pretty much everything for me. It explains why the skeptics are so honestly and understandably skeptical (their egos or consensual trances have not yet been invaded or broken). It explains the utter convictions of the mystics, poets, and modern-day abductees (their egos or consensual trances have been invaded and broken). It also explains the necessity of the imagination as a translator or medium between these two forms of mind. It explains the various paradoxes we see again and again in the descriptions of these astonishing states of mind: how such a Mind is, and is not, us. Finally, it helps us to come to moral terms with what we see in the history of religions when we look closely enough and without blinking. What we see is death and transformation. What we see is trauma and transcendence.

Trauma and Transcendence

There are many ways to realize the Human as Two. There are many ways to “die” and be “resurrected,” to realize, as it were, *both* our own humanity *and* our own divinity. The problem is that none of these ways are quite reliable, and some of them are extremely dangerous and destructive, if not actually and literally deadly.

Whitley again recognizes all of this in his previous chapter. He understands perfectly well that trauma is often a catalyst for later visionary events. He also does not flinch from the common sexual dimensions of these traumas, even their horrific nature in childhood sexual abuse. Hence brave lines like these: “If such a process exists now, it is likely that it has always existed and might well be one of the primary generators of folklore. A rape by a father becomes a visit from a god. Leda didn’t get ravished by daddy—too unbearable to contemplate. No, it was a swan.”

Whitley also recognizes the classic *religious* dimensions of trauma and trance-formation. Hence lines like this one: “it has ever been essential to finding one’s truth that one tempt death. This is a central feature of

initiation.” We are on some *very* traditional ground here, even if it has all been recast in contemporary and more accessible terms.

Most important of all, though, Whitley recognizes very clearly that trance and trauma do not just lead to illusion and suffering. In rare cases, they can also lead to transcendence, hence the “new birth” after the “death” of an initiation ritual.

This linkage between trauma and transcendence is actually a long-standing conversation between the two of us. Hence his response to what I have elsewhere called the traumatic secret in lines like these: “This might explain many of these experiences, but it should not be used to explain them away. The shattering of expectation that accompanies trauma doesn’t just cause transference, it opens a door.”⁷⁶

The most striking example of this door of trauma opening out onto some form of transcendence is Whitley’s suggestion in the last chapter that the physical and psychological traumas that he apparently endured on the air force base outside of San Antonio as a young boy may have been engineered by German scientists, who in turn may have stumbled on this possibility through their gruesome observations of accidental survivors of their sinister gas chambers and death camps back in Nazi Germany. This is an especially poignant and difficult suggestion.

But it is hardly beyond the realm of possibility. Astonishingly, a very similar scene to the one Whitley has imagined here—that is, one involving a pile of slain bodies with a single individual with special powers emerging from its traumatic debris—occurs in the West’s oldest account of a “near-death” experience: the story of Er as told by Plato in the fourth century BCE in his famous treatise on political philosophy, *The Republic*.

Er was a warrior apparently killed on the battlefield. His body was dumped onto a pile of rotting corpses ten days after the battle. Two days later, the bodies are about to be burned on a pyre when Er revives and tells a remarkable story involving a journey to the other world, the nature of death, the moral mechanisms of reincarnation, and the purpose of life itself, including why we do not remember our previous lives and how and why we take on the bodies we do (basically, a kind of ancient Greek karma theory). Plato is very clear about what he thinks Er’s story means and why it is so

important: because it teaches us that the soul is immortal, and that we should take care to live well and rightly, so that our future lives will be better ones.

Er's story is usually described as the "myth of Er," as if Plato made it all up for some abstract philosophical lesson. Maybe. Maybe not.

I mention all of this not to distract the discussion at hand but to focus it, and to help us come to terms with the otherwise confusing ways that extraordinary human experiences often occur in the most destructive and dangerous of contexts. None of this is meant to romanticize the evils of Nazism, of war, or of the horrible sufferings of trauma and sexual trauma in their countless destructive and debilitating forms. It is simply to observe that human beings sometimes have profound spiritual experiences amid or after suffering and death, and that trauma sometimes opens up into transcendence. Is this really so difficult to understand?

The Original Superman Saves a Life

I have long argued that paranormal experiences are often connected to reading events, and that paranormal phenomena somehow shape themselves into a kind of symbolic language that wants to be read and interpreted. Whitley had this just right in chapter 4 when he proposed "to see the actions of our visitors as a sort of illustrative language, communication built out of images and events." Or again, when he wrote this: "There can be little question but that there is a structure, large in scale and intellectually dynamic, that gives form to the whole phenomenon, including UFO sightings, alien encounters, encounters with the dead—all of it." I have suggested, in effect, that we are at once the writers and readers of these illustrative languages, these living graphic novels, these eerie texts and secret structures; that, somehow, some very big part of us is speaking to a little part of us at these moments—maddeningly, in code. This, of course, is why we cannot escape hermeneutics, that trippy art of interpreting ourselves into being.

Whitley captures this idea perfectly (and much more clearly) when he writes about his uncanny owl encounters: "I was fascinated by this phenomenon, and sensed at the time that it could be seen not simply as a sort of eerie mystery, but much more richly, as language."

There is another way of saying this. The paranormal is a kind of reading. Which, of course, means that reading might catalyze or become a paranormal event. Here is another kind of “flip.” I really believe this. I am not exaggerating in the least. Forget Professor Xavier’s cool Cerebro room. Forget Superman’s icy Fortress of Solitude. Reading and writing are the most powerful paranormal technologies that we possess, if only we knew what and how to read.

I also write a good deal about the paranormal experiences of professional writers and readers. Not surprisingly, people come to study with me who have known similar things and are trying to make some sense out of them. Most of my graduate students are such “mutants.” Consider James. James’s story illustrates in living color all of the themes of the present chapter: trauma, trance, transcendence, and, yes, the paranormal powers of reading.

James was a troubled west Texas teenager. He had been removed from “Satan’s public school system” and educated on things like creationist biology. Torn by excruciating sexual guilt (“I couldn’t look at women without sinning anymore”), he had held a butcher knife to his wrist more than once. But he never quite had the courage.

But today was different. Today his parents were gone, and they had left the key to the gun safe unattended. James was out driving in some kind of weird trance. In his own words, he “Ouija drove” to Barnes & Noble, a “worldly” bookstore that was definitely off-limits, forbidden. He walked in, still in a trance state above it all, in some kind of odd transcendence, split in two, as it were: “Everything was a thousand miles away. I was a thousand miles away from myself. I watched myself walk a direct path through a library’s worth of books I had never seen before without hesitation. Not a glance side to side, no checking of signs.”

Then it happened. *Plop*, and 312 pages of a cheap paperback book fell at his feet. He was “back into meat-space.” He came to. The spell was broken. The book on the floor was Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It had fallen from a shelf marked “Philosophy,” a word he had never heard of until that moment. He looked around to see who might have knocked it off the shelf. No one. Then suddenly, a “hauntingly beautiful blonde in her late teens dressed in a dangerously short black dress” appeared at a distance,

giggled, looked him right in the eyes, and began snapping pictures of him holding the book before she literally dashed out of the bookstore.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra. This is the book in which the German philosopher announces the coming of the “Superman” (way before the guy in blue and red tights), the *Übermensch* who he believed represented the future of humanity. Drawing loosely on Darwin, Nietzsche imagined our present humanity as a taut rope stretched between the ape and the future Superman. We can no more understand our own future nature than the ape can understand ours (another earth-farm or cat-in-the-library analogy). Nevertheless, we are in process. We are on the rope. We are evolving. And we will eventually be something else.

James took the magical book home and read its first section with his father’s Colt pistol in his lap. “It was the antidote to a lifetime of poison I hadn’t known I was drinking.” He put the pistol away and walked outside in a Texas downpour. “I stared up at the stars between the clouds and laughed. A divine laughter, an ecstatic laughter while the rain poured down. It was the greatest moment I had ever experienced. When my sides ached and the rain abated, I walked back inside, dried off and read the rest of the book.”

Nietzsche and his Superman saved James, they and the gorgeous girl dressed in black. This is what the trance state, the Ouija driving, the guided walking through the bookstore was all about. There was trauma (the suffering and contemplated suicide). There was trance (the Ouija driving and trance walking). There was a humble form of transcendence (“Everything was a thousand miles away”). And there was, of course, reading (the bookstore and subsequent reading with the pistol).

James is still reading. He would go on and major in philosophy in college. He wrote his senior thesis on Nietzsche. He is now working toward a dissertation on occult supermen in early twentieth-century esoteric movements. He first told me this story in a research paper that he wrote for a graduate class I taught on the paranormal and popular culture. I asked him what he thought really happened. He thought what I thought: that “he” somehow did all of this. Well, both of him. That his mind, at once tortured and supercharged by his teenage crisis, literally pulled the book off the shelf and threw it at his feet.

Or did he reach up with his hand, still in a trance, and knock exactly the right book off the right shelf onto the floor, without remembering any of this?

James doesn't think so. It is remotely possible, he admits, but highly unlikely and certainly not part of his experience. But, really, is such a scenario any less unbelievable? Okay, maybe a little.

Whatever happened, it happened off-line in an "unconscious," or superconscious, way. James as ego did nothing. But some greater presence within him, or acting through him, exploded into action. A supermind intervened through a trauma and a trance.

That and the Girl in Black. Who was she?

On Fear and Ecstasy One Last Time

There is one more thing to say here. It goes back to a conversation I had a few years ago not with Whitley, but with Anne. We were preparing for a radio show and discussing the confusing double nature of abduction experiences, that is, how they can be extremely positive or extremely negative, or both at the same time. After explaining the dual nature of the sacred in the history of religions, I shared with Anne my best guess about why some individuals experience a contact with the sacred as ecstatic and transformative, whereas others experience a contact with the sacred as terrifying and destructive.

It is only a thought. I do not know. I want to be very humble here and stress the complexities, not wish them away with a set of simplicities.⁷⁷ Still, here is the thought. What I expressed to Anne is that this strange both-and may be largely a function of the human ego and whether a particular ego is ready to let go of itself. If the ego is ready to let go, then it will be more likely to experience an encounter with the sacred Alien or Other as extremely positive, as redemptive, as ecstatic. If, on the other hand, the ego is not ready to let go of itself, then it will be more likely to experience an encounter with the sacred as extremely negative, as terrifying, as destructive. In this model at least, the demon is a projection of our fears, the angel of our nature beyond those fears. The same ego, of course, can move through different stages, with an initial terror morphing into a loving communion. This is how I read *Communion* and, indeed, the entire trajectory of Whitley's mystical life.

After I explained all of this to Anne, she expressed to me over the phone a genuine aha! moment. It made sense to her, and for the first time, I gathered. I never forgot that simple but profound conversation, not only because of Anne's warm response, but also because it helped me come to terms with my own thinking. Sometimes one does not know what one thinks until one explains it to another. Whitley expresses the same exact double insight, in more poetic or symbolic terms now, when he writes in an earlier chapter of the female owl of Athena, "who will educate us if we face her, but steal us away if we run."

Again, that seems exactly right to me. It is up to us whether we face her or run, whether we will be her students or her prey.



Haunted

WHITLEY

In 2006, the British Ministry of Defense released a previously classified 408-page document sardonically named “the Condign Report,” the title a play on that of Project Blue Book’s Condon Report. The Condon Report had concluded that the U.S. Air Force had no reason to pursue investigations of unidentified flying objects, there being no apparent military reason to do so. The Condign Report concurred, as it also states that there is no evidence of any military threat. But the executive summary of the Condon report essentially says that the phenomenon offers nothing to study. Not so the Condign Report. In its executive summary, there appears the statement that what it calls unidentified aerial phenomena “are comprised of rarely encountered natural events.”

Natural events can be studied, and clearly given the cultural impact of these, they should be. And yet, there is resistance from the scientific culture, the government, and the granting community to even begin to do this. Much official information, if John Podesta is to be believed, is classified. But if they are natural events and have no military significance, why is it that this classification even exists? Why was the Condign Report, for example, ever classified at all?

The report, which is now available in its entirety on the United Kingdom National Archives Web Archive, explores the belief that unidentified aerial phenomena are plasmas of a type unknown to science, and not only that, that they are capable of generating novel perceptions in people who come close enough to them. In the report, UAPs are frankly acknowledged to be of unknown origin, and it is noted that the “temporal cortex can be rendered electrically unstable” by them. “Neurological rather than biological effects may be the clue to some human behavior after exposure to the near field of UAP radiation. Particularly sensitive are the temporal lobe areas of the brain.” There is never any reason given for the conclusion that they are entirely natural formations, but it is acknowledged that they have been part of human life for a very long time.

This report was more or less ignored by the media and society at large, in part, I suppose because nobody has any idea what to do with its revelations. But, in fact, it is a stunning and damning admission. Governmental authorities have kept secret for years the fact that unknown plasmas can and do affect the minds of people who come close to them, and have done nothing to prevent the spread of the now enormous UFO lore and all of its attendant beliefs.

So what are the plasmas? Who have they affected? Are their effects on the mind temporary or permanent? Are they dangerous? The report discusses the various frequencies that are involved, and it is obvious that much more is known than is being released. Are the plasmas alive in some way, for example? Some parts of the report seem to hint at this. Given that they emit frequencies that affect the brain, it would seem important to try to identify what they are and answer any and all questions about them.

As I pointed out in the beginning pages of this book, balls of light, orbs, flashes and radiant beings have been part of our history for a very long time. As St. Paul and others seem to have experienced and the Condign Report affirms, they generate hallucinations. In fact, their effect on the mind is among the most powerful in human experience. Given this, it seems a trifle disingenuous of the authors of the Condign Report to discuss the phenomenon without referring to its enormous cultural influence. And to assume that it is entirely unconscious and by implication random seems premature.

We have never even asked the most obvious question about these

plasmas: very simply, what are they? The Catholic Church used to believe that the orbs of light so often reported were souls that were on fire, thus suffering. They were free to roam, which suggested that they weren't trapped in hell. So the conclusion was that they were souls in purgatory, as pointed out, for example, in Diana Pasulka's purgatory study, *Heaven Can Wait*.

I don't think it can be assumed without question that they are without any intelligent direction. Whatever affected me over all those years after my December 1985 experience seemed to me to be highly intelligent. I wouldn't so readily assume that they are entirely plasmid in nature, either. My impression is that some aspect of life that we don't understand is involved.

If we can learn to engage with it in an objective manner, we can potentially find some answers. Frequencies can be detected and analyzed. In fact, if the Condign Report isn't some sort of sinister effort to confuse the issue, there is every reason to think that an attempt to understand these plasmas would bear fruit.

After my 1985 encounter, high on the list of possibilities in my mind was temporal lobe dysfunction, either a tumor or temporal lobe epilepsy. As I have documented previously, tests for both proved negative. In fact, a very aggressive test for temporal lobe epilepsy revealed that I have an unusually stable brain. Not, however, one would assume, when in the presence of "UAP radiation."

The Condign Report provides official acknowledgment that unidentified aerial phenomena exist, and that they have effects on human beings. Given its release, it is no longer possible for governments to deny this. As these phenomena affect the mind, study is clearly essential.

The practice of official secrecy and lying has been with us for far too long, and the fact that it has come to surround the UFO and close encounter material is tragic. It has put on hold an important advance in our understanding of ourselves and our world. If a random, natural phenomenon is giving rise to the visions and hallucinations that generate our belief systems, that is of literally epochal importance. If it is in some way conscious, then the importance is beyond measure.

As we have pointed out elsewhere, this secrecy has also the effect of encouraging rampant speculation, which, in this case had led to the emergence of an elaborate folklore—strengthened, as is usually the case, by being based on a kernel of truth. So the secrecy hasn't simply stifled

progress, it has caused a malign descent into the old labyrinth of folk belief, superstition, and confusion.

It has also created an unpleasant social problem. If any official source were now to openly admit that such plasmas exist, it is inevitable that the public would conclude that they were evidence of an alien presence on Earth. Advocates of the belief that UFOs are alien spacecraft, now more or less ignored, would suddenly come buzzing into the cultural foreground. As an example, a UFO group leader in 2015 uploaded a video to YouTube of a “meditation” during which UFOs apparently lit up the horizon. However, photo experts to whom I showed the video felt that the lights were flares, and there was a military base nearby. So it seems unlikely that the meditators were directing their attention toward communing aliens. Right now, such events are largely ignored. But if there is any official admission that UFOs may be real, the gurus and believers will leap onto our TV screens and our internet devices with what amounts to a religious message: welcome our visitors from on high. In the end, we will come to the same drearily familiar results that we have been enduring for thousands of years: a belief system will form which will once again by its very nature push away whatever is actually there.

Paul assumed that he encountered the risen body of Jesus on the Road to Damascus. Mohammed thought that the radiant being he encountered in the cave was the angel Gabriel. Moses thought that the burning bush was the presence of Yaweh.

Let’s not go that far this time. Yes, the plasmas exist. No, we don’t know that they are aliens. Yes, we can come to an objective understanding of what they are.

The rush to the alien hypothesis would need to be countered by an authoritative and convincing reaction from atmospheric scientists, physicists, astronomers, and cosmologists. As a person who has experienced the phenomenon for years, I would assert as strongly as I could that it must remain in question until research brings more clarity.

There is a grave danger that disclosure would cause the media to so amplify the assumption that our visitors are aliens that the question would be buried, eventually to be completely eradicated by the power of the new belief system. It has happened before. One example is *Contra Celsum*. Only by reading the Christian Father Origen’s refutation of Celsus’s book disputing

the divinity of Jesus can one detect anything about the case he was trying to make. Celsus's text was long ago destroyed and every copy lost. In a world beset by the chaos of war and out-of-control climate change, desperate eyes will be lifted to the sky, and there will be the UFOs passing swiftly and silently across the mysterious night. There will be prayer, you can be sure, unless prior to that rational study has brought real understanding.

Plasmas certainly appear from time to time in the close encounter experience, but what about metallic-appearing UFOs and frankly physical entities? Are they illusions generated by the plasmas? When such creatures appeared to groups of witnesses at my cabin, and, for that matter, to me, I did not notice any plasmas in the vicinity.

As well, I can't believe that the people who put the implant in my ear were less than physical. They put a physical object in me. And yet . . . I cannot assert that the experience was as physical as, say, getting mugged might be. As always, something was "off," something was not quite right. As I read the Condign Report, I realized what it was. The morning after the implantation, the house was alive with electromagnetic anomalies. My car was so filled with static electricity that I leaped out of it in terror as I tried to back out of the garage. And what of the inexplicable magnetic field that was disabling the alarm system?

If there is a plasmid life form, can it sometimes penetrate into the physical, leaving behind traces like this . . . not to mention implants?

Despite my experiences, I find the idea of nonphysical life exceedingly hard to accept. If it exists, then the Western understanding of reality, as it has been evolving, is going to require some serious rejiggering. And yet, there are some interesting recent arguments that suggest that consciousness may of necessity and inevitably be eternal, and thus must persist outside of the brain. Physicist Dr. Roger Penrose and psychologist and anesthesiologist Dr. Stuart Hameroff have published an essay suggesting that consciousness is a deep-level effect of brain function, not, as is commonly assumed now in the sciences, a side-effect of the vast number of computations taking place in the brain. In this theory, called orchestrated objective reduction, consciousness arises when noncomputational processing is formed by qubits on cells' microtubules. Unlike a classical bit, which has only a single state, a qubit has two states, positional and superpositional, which open it, because of the nature of nonlocality, potentially to vast presence. The theory also means, if

it's correct, that consciousness would be indestructible and eternal, and therefore that the brain would not be its origin at all, but rather an instrument that would enable it to penetrate into the physical world.

Orchestrated objective reduction, or Orch-OR, as it is commonly called, is an interesting speculation, certainly. But it's a speculation only, and one that is open to criticism from both science and philosophy. Dr. Hameroff offers more information about the idea on his website, [Quantum Consciousness.org](http://QuantumConsciousness.org).

Maybe there is something to Orch-OR or some of the other exotic theories of consciousness, but my sense of it is that science is still some distance away from finding a useful way to address the problem. And yet, despite all my intellectual resistance, I find myself living a life that is far better explained by the notion that there is a nonphysical component to consciousness than by the assumption that it is confined to the brain.

By way of illustration of why I feel that there is an extraphysical side to consciousness, and in acceptance of what my life has given me, let me tell some stories. But let me do this with a gentle admonishment not to take them as we have always in the past taken such stories, including my own, to either be accepted or rejected. Let such stories remain as descriptions of perceptions and part of the large question of the nature of mind and its relationship to its environment. Regard the next few paragraphs as a sort of ballad, a song sung as a story, about my way of experiencing my humanity and the world around me.

Beginning in 1986, my mind changed profoundly. I began to think in a quite different way. When I went out in the woods at night attempting to reengage with the entities I had encountered on the night of December 26, 1985, mostly nothing happened. But when it did, communication would come in the form of vivid mental imagery. In a typical incident, I was sitting on a stone and meditating when I became aware of a certain amount of movement around me, so stealthy that it felt menacing, as if something was creeping up on me. By this time, I had disciplined myself not to indulge my fear. I had a question ready, and I asked it aloud: "What does the universe mean to you?" The answer I received was a vivid picture in my mind of a coffin.

This was an early example of what has become a process of communication by visions.

Visual thinking had always been there, but not communication by

vision.

One lifelong vision actually comes from before I was born. At some point in my early teenage years, I discovered, to my embarrassment, that it's not normal to remember coming into the womb. But I do remember this. That memory has come with me, I assume, from the day it happened. I cannot be sure, though, because after I mentioned it to some friends and was laughed at, I put it aside.

After 1985, it resurfaced. In it, I come down from a place of bright paths, feeling myself a speck of light—a plasma, I suppose. I am filled with peace. I am profoundly happy. Joyous.

I come down through the summer clouds, across the green umbrella of trees, moving in cuddled secrecy among their branches, disturbing only a cicada, whose ratcheting greets me as I enter the world, a sound which to this day draws me back to that lovely moment.

I then passed through the top of a window into a warm, summer-shaded bedroom. Below me on the bed a woman lay sleeping. She was great with child, and I knew that the body inside her was to be mine. I was born in June of 1945. As it was already warm in South Texas, this must have been in April or May of that year.

I have thought long about the depth of peace I knew during those moments that, as I now think, my consciousness was returning to time. It was the peace of eternity, our true core feeling, not the terror of the situation we are in during our excursions into mortality. In the difficult times of my life, which have been many, I have always had that memory to return to.

I went closer, slipping along the thread of communion with my mother until I was just above her. I was drawn by waves of love that acted like magnetism would on a fragment of iron. I went closer and closer, until I was in the folds of her summer blouse. Coming from within her was a quiet surging sound, the waves of her heart. I went closer yet, and now there was a vibrant embrace, as if her soul was coming around me, drawing me to her. Then, in an act that is beyond anything I have known since, I penetrated into her. I went through her skin and into the churning ocean of her, and then into the body within. Perhaps coitus, in its desperate urgency and in the sense of annihilation that accompanies it, is a striving to return to this extremely secret moment that is hidden within all of us.

There are levels of ecstasy, I think, that the physical body filters out, but

in that moment the soul—that little, peace-kissed fragment—knows both eternal the pleasure of being and the time-bound pleasure of penetration, and it is powerful. It must be one of the reasons we are drawn back to the wheel of life, to feel that again.

Then I was floating in her, and at once starting a conversation with her, spoken in whispers and songs, child to mother and mother to child, a sharing of plans and dreams and our entangled destinies.

Ah, Oedipus, sweet child of longing, and dear Dr. Freud, peering with his crystal light into these dark, uneasy halls. Even if it unfolded only in my imagination, that penetration of the womb exposes, I think, a deeply human and probably universal longing.

Our dialogue continued across our long companionship, until she died and her soul slipped away into what in the most haunting verse of Ecclesiastes is referred to as the “long home.” Maurice Nicoll, in his book *Living Time*, suggests that the long home is the great shadow of the soul, stretching across vast time, and containing within it every moment of one’s being, as acutely nostalgic, poignant, and ominous a record as can be imagined:

. . . because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

I wonder if the journey we take through time when we are born is really the center of life? Perhaps our more real existence is a steady state that exists outside of time—being fed by the experiences we collect during these temporal lives. We are fishermen along the riverbank of time. The part of us that is cast into the physical state no longer knows the future and the past, and so acts out of our deepest innocence, our truth. We, the anglers on the riverbank, cast this poignant bait that is ourselves into the flow of life in order to use experience to discover by the way we react to life’s novelties and temptations who we truly are.

But what if this exploration of self brings bad news? What if we turn out to be evil—say, one casts oneself into life and sits there watching oneself don the black uniform of a Nazi or become a cruel parent or a criminal of some sort? What if one turns out to be, quite simply, awful?

Attached to that question is an enormity of moral ambiguity. If life does not end with the body, then it would seem wise to attend most carefully to the consequences of our actions. If our memories travel with us, then living a life that one might enjoy remembering would be of extraordinary importance.

I am also haunted by out of context memory, isolated recollections that I have no instinct about at all. Imagination? Something that happened? No context, no witnesses, no idea. Normally, I don't write about these memories, but one of them is relevant here. In it, I ask, "Do we have souls?" The answer I remember coming from that dangerously lovely *Communion* face is "Not all."

Perhaps it means that the journey through time is one not only of opportunity but also danger, just as our religions have been saying for millennia. We are here working toward a place in what I strongly sense is a marvelous otherness, a great being that is unfolded in eternity, carrying in its tender arms all that is.

Into this drama, then, comes the outsider which is also the same presence that has always been there, transformed by the modern mind into something that makes enough present sense to enable us to explore a relationship with it. We call it the alien . . . for the moment.

The truth? Contact will be at once with ourselves, our souls, and these mysterious others in all their provocative ambiguity.

Religion is not wrong in the various ways it recognizes this process of life struggle, but the religious vision of it is subjective, not the objective vision that comes from turning the supernatural into the super natural. Because it is now possible to do this, it is also now time to step away from the whole of the mythological context—all of the stories—that have, as they have offered us knowledge of this other world, also served as the veil that conceals it.

We need to discard all the gods and ghosts, the demons and aliens, and all the stories that go with them, the heroes and their journeys and their resurrections, and reenvision our relationship with this other world objectively. Then we may well see that there is a cycling back and forth

taking place, the movement of souls into and out of bodies, living in time and outside of time. If those of us who are descended into time can acquire an objective understanding of why we have come into this state, we can make it vastly more useful to us than it is now. This would mean that we would remember who we are and why we came here, thus discovering for the first time in our history an objective answer to those ancient questions.

What if where we are now is the dark side, Hades, Sheol, the land of the dead—which, ironically, we think of as the land of the living? But if it is the dark side of the mandala, it is also the womb. Our lives here are preparation for a rebirth into timelessness, or so my experience suggests to me. We are here because the dark is where knowledge is hidden, and it is this knowledge we need to free ourselves, whatever that may mean to each of us.

The living, who we call the dead, come close to us now, calling to us to open our minds to a new vision of ourselves.

I have been a plasma, and it was delightful. I cannot recommend the experience more enthusiastically. The memory of those moments is among the most precious of my inner possessions. But I am hardly alone in this. Far from it. So now let me tell you about some plasmas I have known.

My mother did not leave me when she died. One night about fifteen years ago, I was at dinner at a friend's house in San Antonio. I'd stepped out into the back garden when I suddenly felt her presence. At that point, she had been dead for about five years. Her presence was palpable. I stood there, my eyes tightly closed, communing with her. I felt as if I could reach out and touch her. Just wonderful. Lovely, sweet sorrow.

Someone saw the expression on my face and, without knowing what was happening, snapped a photo of me. When the film was developed (it wasn't digital) there could be seen a small flare of light in the darkness of the sky, right in the direction I was facing. It's not precisely round, but more like a little flame—in fact, very like the old Catholic description of a soul in purgatory.

As impossible as this sounds, and as much difficulty as I have with such a concept, I have to say that I think that it could be her soul, penetrated deep into this dense world of ours, striving to reconnect with the love and companionship that had flowed between us. (Such living flames are hardly uncommon in the literature of the past, when people were too unschooled in science to understand that they ought to be impossible.)

My mother was my advocate. She understood that my mind needed food, and introduced me to authors like Saki and Kafka and Salinger. In my eleventh year, she bought me the Encyclopedia Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World*, which almost sent me to heaven. I devoured Plato, Suetonius, Descartes, Kant—it was glorious. My father felt that I should stay with children's books, but she defied him. I was so grateful to her, and I still am. A precocious, excessively bright little boy in Texas in the 1950s was at a distinct disadvantage. So we were very close, and I just cannot tear myself away from the belief that it was her on that night, doing her part to help me awaken to a very real world that continues to seem to me to be entirely impossible.

Whatever is knocking on our door, it could not have chosen a more resistant individual than me with whom to communicate. I can't believe in conscious plasmas, but I have no choice except to live with them. I suppose it's possible that I ended up dancing on this particular plank because I am at once exceedingly skeptical of things like the soul but unable to deny my own experiences. I can neither believe nor disbelieve, but also I am not agnostic. I don't think that the question is unanswerable. On the contrary, it seems to me that whatever this is, is making quite an effort to draw us toward a new vision of reality, and with it a new understanding of ourselves, of what we are, where we are, and why we are here.

Now I will tell the story of another plasma—or rather, seven of them. I've recounted this before, in *Solving the Communion Enigma*, but not in this new way.

When we had our cabin in upstate New York, there was a room upstairs under the eaves where I used to meditate at night. Because of my notoriety, it had become too dangerous for me to walk outside after dark—not because of the visitors, but because of local people who had primitive ideas about me, among them, inevitably, that I was in league with demons. What a bore, and particularly boring to be shot through the head by some nincompoop who would have preferred to burn me at the stake. So I quit going out into the woods at night, to my great regret. I feared that I would lose the thread of connection to my visitors. But that did not happen.

One night when I was meditating in that room, I became aware of a

presence. It was powerful. Immediate. Right in front of me. For a few minutes, I sat before it. But I couldn't concentrate. Finally, I said aloud that I couldn't meditate with somebody I couldn't see, and they'd have to either show their face or I was leaving. Nobody appeared.

Of course I had no definite idea if anybody was there. I just felt them. Felt, if you will, a curious presence. I'd had a certain amount of experience with invisible beings, but not at this level of intensity. It was as if there was somebody standing a foot or so in front of me whom I could not see. Mostly, when there had been invisible presences in our house, our cats had reacted even though we saw nothing. I only half-believed things were there, and didn't want to believe at all. I spent some little time trying to understand how invisibility might be possible in the real world, and none of the solutions I found even came close to approaching the level of it I was seeing—or rather, wasn't. And yet, it had happened to me and to others at my cabin too many times for me to deny it. The filmmaker I mentioned in chapter 4 had observed the being beside his bed disappear. As my son and I came up to the cabin, the filmmaker and his wife experienced a burst of heat so intense that they thought the bed was on fire. We then saw the translucent figure racing away from the cabin. If technology was involved, then the translucence suggests that the device had been turned down but not off. (I want one!)

All very logical, and all personally witnessed by me. So I sat there in the meditation room forcing myself to accept that somebody might really be there, but was not willing to show themselves.

It was completely unbearable. I even thought that I could hear them breathing softly in and out with robotic precision. Finally, I gave up and left. I went down the hall and went to bed. I tossed and turned, of course, but eventually fell asleep. By this time, I was beginning to understand my role as that of a student in a school. I'd passed through a dark initiatory phase that had plunged me into the deepest underworld I am able to imagine, a place of bizarre sexual challenge and profound heartbreak. I was devastated by these experiences. Anne less so. "Don't you see how fascinating all of this is?" she once asked.

The dark is indeed fascinating and informative, but it is indeed also dangerous. It is on journeys into it, though, that we find ourselves. Every initiate comes to the same shocking place, for all the paths of the underworld through which we are traveling lead to it. There is a mirror there, old and full

of shadows, and it is in the hints it returns of our faces—our dark, dark faces—that we find ourselves. To lose the true way is to become fully human. To get lost in the dark is to become truly conscious. But it takes a little light, or as the alchemists say, a little gold. That tiny bit of self-knowledge brings definition to the image and makes it real.

Later that night, as I have described in *Solving the Communion Enigma*, I was awakened by a punch on my shoulder, a familiar process that to me meant that the visitors had come.

But not, this time, short blue trolls or willowy insects with great, hypnotic eyes. Instead, sitting on the foot of the bed was a small man. He wore a tunic cinched at the waist with a simple belt, perhaps rope. He was absolutely still. I think that this was because, had he moved, he would have flown off into another state and I would no longer have been able to see him. To remain visible to me, he had to be as still as stone.

I took his hand and smelled his skin, as I had done before with the visitors. Only he was not mildly or oddly scented. He smelled human, strongly so. If he was a spirit that had somehow conjured up a body, he had included the body's odor.

I looked into his face from a foot or so away. The eyes were deep, black pools. I call those "knowledge eyes." They see more than we do, and that is very hard to bear.

I recognized him. I have never said this before because I could not even begin to explain it, but now perhaps I have some ideas that make a sort of sense.

Among my recollections are some from other lives. Whether or not these are lives I have lived I don't know, but they have a spontaneous quality that sets them apart from ordinary dreams, fantasies, and imaginings. In some ways they are like the images of other worlds that flash through my mind when I am meditating and have found a receptive inner state. Still, I don't know what any of this is, and would not presume to be an advocate for reincarnation, let alone visionary travel to other worlds. Both things, in their different ways, imply that our understanding of the world and the mind are deeply flawed. If we are reincarnating in life after life, then the modern secular notion that we evaporate with the death of the brain is flawed in yet another way from that discussed previously. It implies that we are part of some other mechanism, of which we understand almost nothing. And yet

books like *Soul Survivor*, with its story of a small child who could remember extraordinary details of a life lived during World War II, and Robert Snow's *Looking for Carroll Beckwith*, make it hard to believe that there isn't something there. Snow was chief of detectives for the Indianapolis Police Department when a past life regression at a party led him on one of the most fantastic journeys of discovery ever recorded, during which he found that the detailed memories he had during the regression and had written down with his detective's attention to detail actually described the life of an obscure nineteenth-century artist called Carroll Beckwith in ways that are beyond coincidence.

Three of my own recollections took place in ancient Rome. Two of them involve violent deaths, and one of these is relevant here. In it, I am rising out of the Circus Maximus. I have just been killed in a chariot race, and the enormous crowd is cheering wildly—cheering my courage, perhaps, but it seems more likely that it's because they've bet in favor of my opponent. As I rise up toward what at that moment is something familiar to me—a huge circle of light—I look down on them. These people, who while I was alive would have had a great variety of facial features, now look almost the same. Perhaps I wasn't seeing their individual characters but their essential selves. Then again, maybe it was simply a dream and there was a lack of detail.

The people have a certain cast to their faces—a way of holding them—that is the same as that of the man who sat on the foot of my bed.

Now, I'm not going to theorize about this. What I want to do is put it on the table. In part, obviously, I am telling you about a complex state of mind. I might be describing memories that originate outside of time—in fact, therefore not memories but states of vision of a sort that we really cannot describe in our present languages, which do not offer any way of expressing timeless experience.

Perhaps to really talk about and communicate with this timeless level of being, a more sophisticated tongue is needed, one that recognizes not only verbs of present, past, and future tense, but also verbs of permanence. Such verbs would draw their "action" not from duration, but from direction of view and intensity of seeing. They would thus simulate attention in timelessness just as conventional verbs simulate it in time. Such words will come, but they must be organic, entering the language out of need, not as a coinage. I wonder, if such a language had been available to me when I was interacting

with the extraordinary man who sat at the foot of my bed, would I have been able not only to engage with him on my terms, but also on his?

Now, let me return to the moment as the two of us were experiencing it. I was holding his hand, which was very light and small, like a child's. It was not absolutely physical. It did not have heft, it had a slight weight. Instinct caused me to hold it carefully. It felt as if it would be easy to crush, as if it was made out of some lighter flesh than my own.

But the smell of it was really powerful. There were two levels, the smell of salty skin and the smell of the oils of an unwashed body. Early on in my experience, I had started trying to use my sense of smell to add another dimension to what I was seeing and feeling. Skeptics have pointed out that strong odors are associated with certain types of seizure. Beyond saying that my experiences can't be dismissed as temporal lobe epilepsy, I wouldn't disagree with the theory that some sort of seizure activity might be involved. The brain must be doing something different from what it usually does, or people would not be engaged with this other world only at times. As Jeff put it the last chapter, trauma and transcendence are not exclusive; the former often opens a door to the latter.

My involvement with the man was in that moment extremely intimate. I raised my head and looked again at his face. The eyes were very deep, shadowed with knowledge. "Knowledge eyes." I did not know why, then. I do now. We look at passing time from inside its flow. He was looking at it from outside. Thus he knew truth from beyond the veil of death. There was also companionship, though, in the extreme strangeness of the moment, and startling familiarity.

As I dropped his hand, he disappeared. I thought to myself, "Now, if he comes back, I'll meditate with him." I went down the hall. I was happy, overjoyed. I thought that it was the triumph of a lifetime, frankly.

I sat down, feeling very proud of my years of facing my fears out in those woods, and my hours of meditation. Talk about conjuring. This was the real thing.

I sat alone. Nobody showed up, not even an invisible nobody. Disappointed, I eventually went back to bed. This was one time that I did not entertain the possibility that I'd had an ordinary dream or a hallucination. I'd been wide awake. I had held his hand in mine. I'd been a foot away from him. No, as bizarre, as impossible as it seemed, to me he had been real, and

that fact meant to me that this world is not what it seems, and we do not know what it is, only that we are in it. The pig and the chicken, the chimp and the dog, do not know what their worlds are, but they also cannot know their own ignorance like we can. That knowledge—the awareness of the gap—means that the gap can be filled.

The next night I returned to the meditation room. All was quiet—until, quite suddenly, the most fantastic thing happened. In quick succession, there were seven thuds on the roof. Remembering the man's small size, I thought to myself, "My god, I've conjured the seven dwarfs." I closed my eyes and did the meditation that I have been doing regularly since 1970, when as I have said, Joe Stein taught it to me. If ever there was a person in my life whom I hold in blessed memory, it is him. On that night, then, began one of the premiere experiences of my life, one for which I remain grateful beyond words. I was actually meditating with people from another world, or so I thought at first. But it turned out that it was something even more extraordinary.

Each night, I went to the meditation room and each night, a few minutes later, the seven thuds occurred. During daylight hours, I went up on the roof to see if there was any possibility that it might be raccoons or possums dropping down from the trees, or even pinecones, but it always happened just after I entered the room, and always exactly seven thuds.

For the first few weeks, not a lot happened: meditation, waiting, attempting to reach out in some way, enjoying the quiet and the wonderful sense of the body that one gets after many years of working with it in this manner. Over time, sensation expands, until one finally comes to the discovery that the nervous system doesn't end at the skin or even the few millimeters beyond it that the electric body extends. It never ends, not in space, not in time. Never.

Once or twice, I think that there were small hands laid on my shoulders from behind, and I think I might have heard breathing, very steady, with that same strange sense of mechanical perfection that I had found in the more alien-appearing visitors. As if they were perfect machines, brilliant, filled with insight and understanding, and far more emotionally complete and complex than we could ever hope to be—machines of the gods.

From time to time, we'd spend a week in New York, and once when we returned, Anne said, "There's somebody living in the house."

When I asked her why she thought that, she said that the bed in the meditation room was being slept in (it did double duty as an occasional guest room). It was true. The bed was being slept in.

To me, this meant that this ethereal being needed rest. He needed shelter. So, what was he? Thinking back to the plasmas that plant illusions in the temporal lobe, I wonder now what I was actually dealing with? Could there be people—beings—with the same ability? People who could seem to be living on a different plane, but who, in the end, needed a roof over their heads and a bed at night?

I tried hard to catch him. I tried to photograph him. I set up a video camera in the corridor. I popped into the room at night and took random pictures with a still camera.

We would hear him around the house, stealthy movement, sighs, an errant rustle.

Still, the meditations went on, night after night, the seven thuds followed by a meditation session. Never face-to-face, and usually little of notice took place.

During this period, our son decided to bring some of his friends from school to spend a weekend at the house. He gave me strict instructions: no UFO books visible, no discussion of aliens, flying saucers, anything like that. When he was fourteen, he had said to me, “You really are the most embarrassing father in the world.” I had to agree. I assured him that there would be no saucer chatter. But then he said that they were going to sleep out in the woods. I warned him that the visitors were certainly around. A group of nice kids came—and at once began questioning me about *Communion*. After a very pleasant evening together, they went out into the woods with sleeping bags.

Later, I meditated, and sure enough, the seven thuds.

The next morning, as the kids began to drift in, I noticed some rather wide eyes. Some of them, it turned out, had seen seven glowing orbs floating through the woods. Another had experienced a cloud of mayflies form into the hauntingly beautiful face of a woman. Throughout the morning, these kids were quiet and introspective.

They left that afternoon, off into their lives again, having camped out, I would think, on a very real frontier.

My relationship with my meditation partners continued to develop.

There were seven thuds, always, but I seemed to be interacting with a single individual. At least, this was my perception.

I asked him where he was from. The reply was fascinating. It came in the form of three little half-sucked candies being laid before a book in my library: *Life Between Life* by Joel Whitten and Joe Fisher.

So I asked the question: What do I need to do to avoid the wheel of life. I want to ascend.

The answer was the most powerful moral lesson I have ever received. It began one night with a startling review of my life—the sort of thing that is supposed to happen at the moment of death, I suppose. Image after image from my life appeared before my eyes. I saw a good, honest life, flawed but pretty blameless. But then something appeared that was of interest. I was in a hotel room in Beverly Hills with a beautiful young woman. I wanted to make love to her, but I was hesitating, forcing myself not to, respecting my vow of marriage and my love for Anne.

Still, every detail of the meetings I'd had with this woman came rushing past.

I was left on that night devastated and, quite frankly, confused. I hadn't violated my vow. I'd been tempted, yes, but no violation.

When I got up to go to bed, I discovered that it was already three. I'd been meditating for four hours. Exhausted, I collapsed into the bed and threw my arms around my beloved wife. Silently, I cried tears of gratitude that I had not broken my vow.

Later, I woke up. The ceiling was gone, the roof was gone. Overhead was a blackness that I knew at once was the appalling face of infinity. Endless dark. Arrayed around the borders of this opening were seven faces peering down at me. Gentle faces. Angry faces.

Then it ended. I was fully awake. I lay there thinking about it for a time, wondering where it lay on the spectrum of reality. A dream? I thought not. But what, then?

I went close to Anne and kissed her cheek. She cuddled against me, delighted.

I had almost betrayed her, but I had not done so. I had wanted to, though, so very badly. And it wasn't like the incident with the gray being. That I could not control. This, I could.

Some time later I woke up and there, hanging over our bed, were the

two most terrible creatures I had ever seen. They were spiders, each at least three feet from stem to stern. They had gleaming black abdomens that were crossed by yellow stripes like tigers. Worse, they were not stable on the ceiling, especially the one over Anne.

My impulse was to roll off that bed and run for my life. Then I thought, “Wake up, you fool, this is the mother and the father of the nightmares.”

Fully awake now, I leaped out of the bed. Surely they would evaporate, will-o'-the-wisps of dream.

But no. I stood there at the foot of the bed staring at them. I was awake and they were as real as ever. I could even hear the slick clatter of their busy, complicated jaws.

Anne lay perhaps three feet beneath one of them, sound asleep. Some of its legs had come off the wooden planks of the ceiling and were scrabbling for purchase. The sound filled the room.

It looked as if it would fall on Anne, right now.

My dear God, how I wanted to run. But if I did that, then what would happen? She had said early on, “You won’t let anything happen to me, will you?” I told her that I would protect her. But how did I know that? Now, it seemed as if I was lying.

Another leg came loose and began jittering wildly. The abdomen was now tilted. I could see a stinger in it the size of a small knife. My body screamed at me to run, but I could not run, my love would not let me. On legs of lead, transfixed by terror, I approached the bed. The pulsating demon was inches from my face. I could not dare touch it, try to push it away. God only knew what would happen if it and its brother started running around the room. What was their venom like? Where were they from? Certainly not this world.

I did the only thing I could to protect my wife, which was to lie down on top of her so that my body was between her and the spider.

She opened sleepy arms, welcoming her husband to her in the night, opening herself body and heart to the man she loved.

I lay there, waiting for the spider to drop down on me. She lay there waiting for the act of love to commence.

In that instant, there was a feeling like weight lifted. My body felt free, my soul like the soul of a child. Like that, the spiders had gone. The night—the beautiful, earthly night, filled with sensual promise—had returned.

I wept and her comforting arms came around me. Joy filled me. We rode the small hours together in the boat of our love, crossing to morning.

Listening to all these stories, Anne decided that she wanted to give meditating with the seven visitors a try. She'd also spent years in the Gurdjieff Foundation. While she wasn't a meditator, she was a sensitive, exquisitely conscious human being, and on a powerful spiritual journey of her own.

A few nights later, she joined me in the meditation room. Soon enough, the thuds came. She'd heard them many times, as they reverberated through the whole house. But she had never been here, right under them. She said, "I'm not ready for this," and quickly left the room.

Anne had, in that moment, done something that is essential to spiritual search: she had refused the call. The anguish of regret that causes a deep inlooking is an essential part of the spiritual journey.

This led her, over the years, to a point where she was well prepared for her next great spiritual encounter, which was a near-death experience that took place in 2005, when she lay in a hospital bed, hovering between life and death after a near-fatal brain bleed. She found herself at first in a sort of limbo. Where was she? Then our Siamese cat Coe—long dead—appeared to her. "These humans," he snorted, "can't even find the world of the dead on their own." He led her to a sort of transfer point, like the waiting room of a train station. All around her were people holding great bags of belongings, far too heavy to take anywhere. A voice said to her, "You can go on if you wish."

But this time, she did not refuse the call—it wasn't toward ecstasy, it never is. The call is toward deeper search, and she decided to come back to life, bringing with her this simple but powerful take of nonidentification: we must leave the baggage of life behind if we are to ascend wholly into timelessness. One day, our species will no longer be using the physical world at all, but before that, we must let those burdens go.

Including, incidentally, the burden of sin, which was the real message of the spiders: embrace love and your sins will forget you.

At this point, I might put in a word about animals and plants, and, in particular, cats. When I once managed to leave my body while in full consciousness—becoming, I suppose, a plasma—I was able to not only see myself and Anne lying in our bed, but also to move out through the wall of

the cabin and into the yard. I could see that everything—the trees, the bits of grass in the early snow (it was October, I believe, of 1987), were covered with shimmering blue light, very soft. I think this light was alive. I think that it will remain alive after those trees and plants die. I see it is part of the vastness of nonphysical life.

Our cats weren't there on that night, but had they been, I have little doubt that they would both have been looking right at me—the plasma, not the body in the bed. They are somehow sensitive to the life of the soul, the cats. Perhaps it's why the Egyptians revered them so, leaving vastly more of them mummified than any other creature. They believed that the dead could use the body as a sort of focal point after life—a tradition that has come down to us in the West in the form of the belief that the body will “rise incorruptible” at the end of time. The Egyptians mummified, we embalm. But not cats. As we have become blind to the true richness of the living world, we've left ideas such as the spiritual life of animals behind. Coe, I think, would disagree. He was not wrong to think that we humans have lost our way. Not all of us, though. Many elder peoples still see all living things as being invested with spirit. They perceive the world as being invested at every level with gods—that is to say, with what we call consciousness.

We aren't ready to really see this in all its objective truth, not the elder peoples, not the Westerners, not the secularists or the religionists, none of us. But we can begin. That means just this: to give up the veil between what we call the living and what we call the dead, and live as a whole species, the part of us penetrated into time and the part of us living outside of it, with the aim of finally becoming a new being, altogether outside of time, perfect.

That takes wisdom, though, and that's why we journey into time. We the bodies are the dark side of the mandala, where wisdom is sought and found. The souls are the light side of it, where the truth is known. Our dance is bounded by a circle, which is a form without end and thus endless with possibilities.

If there are aliens here, then they are already like this, the “living” and the “dead” together as one, seeking toward the mysterious ecstasy that is like a fata morgana, a special sort of mirage that appears to be a ghost palace shimmering on the horizon, beguiling, elusive, but so rich with promise that it must ever be pursued, ever to be sought.

I've described elsewhere the anguish of losing that cabin and with it the

world I had noticed there—and, in this level of the human journey, noticing is conjuring. The act of magic is the act of seeing. I won't return to that time and I certainly will never return to the cabin. In any case, disaster followed disaster. Finally, I lost everything, including that place where I had woven a link between the worlds that had no recourse to myth. A great loss.

On the last night, I meditated. The thuds came. I said that this was my final moment there. There would be no more. Yet again, I asked them—begged them—to help me. There came from above uncomfortable stirrings. I waited, but nothing more. As I had many times before, I made a last request: please let me see you as you really are. Then I went off to bed. Early the next morning, we would leave that place forever.

About half an hour later, I noticed a glow coming in the bedroom windows. Quite a bright glow, in fact. For a moment, I thought that the house might be on fire. But when I rushed to the window, the most extraordinary thing I have ever seen appeared. It was a small star, blazing with beams of light. The light was so beautiful that it was agonizing. It was well aware of the difficulty I was having, and slid out of my view, so that I could only see part of it. The beams were narrow lasers that pricked through my skin and deeply penetrated me. They brought with them a sense of the essence of this man with whom I had been meditating for these past months. They were an embrace, an affirmation, a treasury of information. In short, a tremendous gift.

Then he was gone. My life at the cabin was gone. The next morning we left, leaving behind the objective enchantment that had been achieved there. Subsequent inhabitants of that cabin have noticed nothing unusual. I have departed, and my devils with me.

What a beautiful experience, the years at the cabin. How very grateful I am. I cannot even begin to put it into words. And that last event, the star in the front yard—I saw the truth then, what a human being might become, if he has the compassion and the will.

It was also a taste of what our world might one day be, if the caterpillar ever has the wisdom to see the butterfly and the courage to face its mighty beauty and protect its breathless fragility. I suspect that there are other worlds in which the veil between the living and the dead has long ago fallen, and the whole species is evolving as one, partly injected into time and partly in timelessness, and both elements working together toward the discovery of a

greater whole. I suspect that our visitors—at least, the aliens among them—are already like this. In fact, I would assume that they are more deeply involved with our souls than with our bodies.

Will we ever manage to face the reality of the soul? I certainly trust so, because if we don't, I don't think we can evolve. Right now our intellectuals and scientists are running from their souls, while many other people remain trapped behind the deceptive latticework of religious belief.

I had a brilliant, extraordinary experience with these plasmas, once again glimpsing the second part of Jeff's "Human as Two." But what did I actually see? It would seem, a human being who had become light. I saw him, tasted his essence, and came into a state of communion with him that will remain with me in life and into death, and, I suspect, forever. For that is what this is about, in the end, all of it: facing ourselves as part of greater consciousness, and coming to terms with the fact that our species, like others—perhaps all others—has two forms, one physical and embedded in time, and the other energetic and living outside of time. Once we have objective knowledge of this, we can also build an objective relationship between them. From my experience, this is going to be an incredible challenge, touched both by wonder and danger, but with truly extraordinary rewards. The confusion we experience now will gradually slip behind us, and there will be a useful basis for joining colloquy with others like us, who are on the same journey that all life is on, toward ecstasy.



The Soul Is a UFO

JEFF

[A]lthough it is the approximate size of a big vehicle, it is clearly one single luminous mass, not projecting light beams like reflectors or suchlike. Its aspect is like that of a big flat star, illuminating without blinding, with a strange incongruence between its respectable size and the low light intensity. . . . The light appears to have some body; it is denser than a thick cloud although I cannot find a substance to which it can be compared. Plasma, perhaps?

ANTHROPOLOGIST DIEGO ESCOLAR DESCRIBING HIS ENCOUNTER WITH AN ANOMALOUS, LUMINOUS ENTITY IN ARGENTINA

I have studied religion for three decades now. I don't run into many new ideas. But this notion is shockingly new: the soul as a plasmalike energy that can superpower our imaginal capacities and so generate the movies of visionary experience. Here the soul is an exotic form of energy interacting with a primate nervous system, and the symbol and the mythical narrative are the means of focusing, working with, projecting, even materializing that energy.⁷⁸ Here the soul is a conscious star gently blazing inside a skull. Here the soul is a UFO that has landed for a time in a body-brain, in what Whitley suggests is "a sort of biological technology" for the soul. Hence all those "conscious machines" of the UFO literature—that, after all, is what we may well be.

In some ways, this is old news, very old news. Solar light, spherical star souls, and mysterious forms of radiance—in short, *conscious light*—are among the oldest and most universal expressions of divinity on the planet.⁷⁹ Even the apostle Paul famously described the resurrection body as a “spiritual body” (*soma pneumatikon*) destined for the realm of the sun, moon, and stars, which is what his culture generally meant when it spoke of “heaven” (1 Cor 15:45–49). “Spiritual” here meant “of the *pneuma*,” which the ancients thought of as a very subtle *material* substance, like air, breath, or fire, that extended throughout the physical universe—in short, as a kind of invisible, living cosmic energy. By a “spiritual body,” then, Paul did *not* mean an “immaterial” one. He meant a real immortal body that shines like the stars in the night sky, indeed, that, in some readings, *is* a kind of human star.⁸⁰

The early Christian Gnostic texts are filled with similar convictions about our true home among the stars, about the secret spark of divinity that sleeps in us all, about the stellar nature of the soul, and about the savior who descended from the stars in order to teach us how to get back home. Such weirdly familiar details have led artist and author Christopher Knowles to write in his *Secret Sun* blog of early Christian Gnosticism as “history’s first flying saucer cult.”⁸¹ I think Chris is right.

And Chris is in good company. My colleague April DeConick, an expert on early Christianities, has just finished a marvelous book on “the Ancient New Age” in which she demonstrates convincingly how modern science-fiction films are deeply resonant with what she calls the Gnostic spirituality of the ancient world.⁸² This revolutionary spirituality rejected belief, ritual, sacrifice, and martyrdom (all still inflicting endless violence on us) and proclaimed a direct mystical knowing (*gnosis*) of the inner divinity of the spirit, or *pneuma*, itself, which the Gnostics knew as a real spark of God temporarily encased in a material form but destined, ultimately, for the stars.⁸³

Here was a new spiritual orientation that called into question, really denied, all the local ethnic or inherited religions and their petty, violent gods, including and especially the bloody god of the orthodox Christians. Here was a wildly syncretistic practice that pulled in *everything*—from Homer to Greek and Latin magic to wild speculations about multiple universes—in order to say what it had to say. Here was an ancient search for charismatic gurus, in

this case Egyptian ones. Here was a loose but effective network of grassroots movements poised against organized religion and its oppressive alignment with the imperial state. Here was a Mediterranean counterculture that flourished for centuries before it was stamped out by the “right-thinking” orthodox churches. Here was the Ancient New Age.

Physics and Mystics

In its shocking juxtaposition of “ancient” and “New Age,” April’s phrase captures beautifully the kinds of comparative practices I have been proposing here through “the future of the past.” What, of course, is fundamentally different today, in the future of that past, is the invocation of modern science. The ancient Gnostics did not know what we know. They did not have evolutionary biology, modern cosmology, and quantum physics.

These new forms of knowledge are game-changers that, with or without the scientists, are dramatically reshaping the religious imagination as they inspire new forms of secular spirituality and guide experiencers into new imaginal territory. Modern peoples, after all, rarely see hellscapes or visions of the Trinity anymore, but they are increasingly reporting popping into hyperdimensional mindspaces, becoming one with the evolutionary impulse of the universe, and knowing or “seeing” a superconnected quantum realm. With respect to our science, modern forms of mysticism are becoming more and more *realist*. Whitley’s call in the last chapter for us to form an “objective” relationship with both the biological medium of our time-bound mortality and the energetic consciousness of our “eternal being”—a version of what I have called the Human as Two—is a perfect example of this kind of realist understanding of the embodied soul-star.

However sophisticated these modern experiences and expressions might be, conventional scientists like to call all such reports “New Agey.” Like the word “anecdotal,” this is little more than an intellectual dodge, a moral meanness, a rhetorical sleight of hand designed to stop or sidestep the conversation, I presume, so that it doesn’t get too far.

Too far into what?

Into the actual history of science. The truth is that numerous founders of quantum physics—Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrödinger, Niels Bohr, and

Wolfgang Pauli, to name the most obvious—were deeply committed to worldviews that combined mysticism and rationalism. Many of them also saw comparative resonances between the mind-bending implications of quantum physics and different forms of mysticism. And they said as much, very explicitly and very clearly. They went to places like the *Brahman*, or cosmic unity, and *Atman*, or Self, of the Hindu Upanishads (Schrödinger), the yin and yang symbolism of Chinese Taoism (Bohr), and the paranormal synchronicities of Jungian psychology (Pauli) to help better understand what they thought quantum physics was mapping formally and mathematically. Generally speaking, they were drawing parallels, compatibilities, and complementarities, not simple equations, between physics and the mystics. Still, some of them were pointing toward a worldview in which the math and the mysticism were two different expressions of the same fundamental reality. In effect, they suggested: “If you want to understand what the implications of quantum physics might ‘look’ like up here, in the world of human experience, go read the unities and paradoxes of the mystics.” They were after a realist mysticism.

And this is before we get to what the historian of science David Kaiser has affectionately called “the hippies who saved physics.” These countercultural physicists became fascinated with the apparent “telepathic” effects that entangled particles exhibit in Bell’s theorem, or what Einstein had famously called “spooky action at a distance.”⁸⁴ Such intellectuals kept the notion of entanglement alive for decades while the rest of the physics community was being told to “shut up and calculate,” that is, to quit talking about the philosophical implications of the physics and just do the math.⁸⁵ Many of these countercultural physicists were convinced that quantum effects *do* scale up into human experience, and that these effects can be seen in parapsychological phenomena and mystical experiences of mind. One of them, my friend and colleague Nick Herbert, has written eloquently about these effects under the banners of “elemental mind” and “Quantum Tantra.” The latter is his dream of a scientific-spiritual practice that would lead to an erotic union with the physical universe.

And then, of course, there are the anomalous experiences of the scientists themselves. As a single example, consider Jane English. Jane has a Ph.D. in experimental high energy physics. She is also the

illustrator/photographer of the best-selling English translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, with Gia-Fu Feng. In short, she is an heir to Niels Bohr, who put the Tao on his coat of arms to capture the two-in-one paradoxes of quantum physics in which light can be measured either as a particle or a wave. The same paradox caught Jane's attention. For her it functioned as a Zen koan, that is, as a riddle that awakened her into the true nature of reality.

She was reading Fritjof Capra's classic reflection on the same, *The Tao of Physics*, and in particular a passage about this particle/wave or yin/yang paradox.⁸⁶ She got to Capra's discussion about how the "new awareness" of Zen could also be an "awareness of atomic reality." Then it happened:

*The experience began with a sense of sudden dissolution, especially of visual forms. After a moment, I was aware of patterns of energy, millions of pinpoints of light, and a confused rush of visual sensation. . . . everything was somehow different; there was no in-here/out-there split in my seeing!. . . . In this state there was no space or sense of separation between objects and my eyes. Thus I felt no need for light to exist to connect objects to eyes. Objects, eyes, and light no longer had the objective existence they had seemed to have just before. . . . I realized that the wave/particle paradox had been my first koan, and that I had just solved it.*⁸⁷

Essentially, Jane English had *become* light, had *become* the energy of the world, which is consciousness.

The results, of course, were utterly transformative. She was changed. Jane had once "accepted the orthodox physics thinking that says that quantum physics has no meaning for personal reality, that it is just a computational device, and that questions about things you can't measure are meaningless." In short, she had bought the line that quantum effects do not scale up to our world. She now knew that none of this is true. She understood that it was perfectly possible to directly experience the world of quantum physics, and that quantum physics does have meaning for us "up here" in the big world, profound and beautiful meaning. She understood that the paradoxes of quantum physics are nothing more than functions of us trying to understand reality with our objectifying senses, instead of directly via consciousness

itself. She understood that consciousness could not be reduced to the mechanistic laws of Newtonian physics. She also realized that “many psychic and healing phenomena that appear extraordinary on our usual Newtonian, sensory reality are actually quite ordinary in these other realities.”⁸⁸ Jane English had been shown the super natural world.

The Energies of God

Jane, of course, was not the first, or the last, to suggest that consciousness, energy, and light are expressions of the same underlying super-reality. Consider Whitley’s invocation of the language of “plasma” again. What is important here is Whitley’s perfectly accurate observation that these plasmalike soul-spheres show every appearance of being conscious and intelligent. Such an observation—commonly reported, as we will see in a moment—carries the stunning implication that life and intelligence may not need carbon-based life-forms or a nervous system to express and know itself.

I have long thought something like this, if in an inchoate and confused way. I remember, for example, reading in college about the bizarre qualities that take over at the speed of light, things like extreme time dilation to the point where time stands still. I remember wondering whether “eternity” might be a loose term for this stopping of time at the speed of light, and whether the classic “speeding tunnel” effect and sense of eternity “in the Light” of near-death experiences might be how the imagination translates a ride on (or as) a beam of light. Is there a mystical “inside” to light itself that is related to but not captured by the “outside” of light modeled by physics?

I still think those thoughts and ask those questions.

These were not entirely original ideas, it turns out. In graduate school, I learned that the Greek Orthodox tradition developed an extremely sophisticated mystical theology in the thirteenth century through which the light seen around saints and experienced within mystical encounters was understood to be not a metaphor or a symbol, or an effect of any cause, but really and truly God.⁸⁹ Here God is not *like* light. God *is* light.

The architect of this mystical theology was the monk and hermit Gregory Palamas (1296–1359). Gregory argued that the knowledge derived

from such mystical experiences of light is the knowledge of the “energies” of God, but never of the “essence” of God, which remains unknowable to us as creatures. One does not have to read too far into Greek Orthodox spirituality and its goal of *theosis*, or “deification,” to realize that Gregory and his colleagues were not being metaphorical about these luminous energies or their deifying effects on the human body and person that is fortunate enough to get illuminated by their rays. Gregory even argued that those who have been deified by such energies become *homotheoi*, that is, “co-divinities” or “co-gods.”

So there is a very deep historical precedent to the conscious plasmas and mystical illuminations of which Whitley writes in the previous chapter. Contactees and abductees get belted with beams of light all the time. And, just as we see in the Christian mystical literature, these lights change them, give them special powers, usher them into eternity (or telepathy), and call them to lives of prophetic witness.

We no longer speak of deification or “becoming divine,” of course, but this is because our culture has changed, probably not because the lights themselves have. Indeed, I strongly suspect that contemporary abductees *do* experience “becoming a god” within these illuminations, but that they are too ashamed, or too scared, to tell us. I also suspect that they often lack an adequate framework through which to express this, *even to themselves*. They do not recognize or understand what is happening to them because our culture has grown cold and stupid when it comes to spiritual matters. Or spiritual matter.

I would go so far as to suggest that we *need* the older mystical ideas of the subtly material “spiritual body,” the “energies of God,” and the deifying light to really understand the contemporary UFO encounters. Which does not mean, of course, that we must adopt the older understandings and belief systems. We do not. Here again we must learn to practice the “future of the past.” We must learn to recalibrate our present through a careful and critical return to our past.

I think I first encountered the idea of the soul as a subtle material energy in Whitley’s books. I did not at first understand or even recognize it, despite my earlier electric experience in Calcutta. The idea was just too new, too radical, too much. I needed another author to help me come to terms with what Whitley was saying. I needed Philip K. Dick.

A few years ago, one of my Ph.D. students, Erik Davis, asked me to join a team of scholars who were transcribing and editing Dick's massive *Exegesis*, his unpublished journals written roughly between 1974 and 1982, after his experience of Valis as cosmic mind. My role as an annotator of the selected passages was a humble and minor one. The effect of the journals on me was neither.

We have already encountered Dick's Valis experience. Dick believed that the entity that had zapped him in the winter of 1974 was a bio-linguistic plasma, that is, a living form of language-energy. I know that's confusing. It was confusing to Dick as well, who strained every word and every grammatical convention, who turned to every form of mystical literature he could find, who bent and broke time itself, in a brave effort to try to understand Valis. He failed. And that, he learned, was the final paradoxical function or purpose of the alien entity: to *say away* everything he thought.

The word "plasma" is all over *The Exegesis*. Dick, for example, describes a human being with whom the cosmic plasma has bonded (that is, himself) as a "homoplasmate." A homoplasmate is a kind of alien-human hybrid or, if you prefer, a deified human being. Like the apostle Paul and the monk Gregory, the sci-fi author was not being metaphorical. He meant something very real, something exotically physical. He was talking about *pneuma*, the subtly material "spirit" of the Gnostics. He considered himself to be such a secret Christian. He had been zapped, reprogrammed. He was a mutant. He was babbling about the plasmas and paradoxes of the energies of God.

Big Sur Real

I had one more encounter with the plasmas that prepared me for coming to terms with Whitley's ideas. This time it was gentler, more personal. I call the story "Big Sur Real."⁹⁰

Stuart was a marvelous undergraduate student of mine, drawn to the history of American metaphysical religions, cognitive science, and, ultimately, a psychotherapeutic profession. By his own description, he is a rationalist. He considers popular treatments of the paranormal "lame." He

thought of the brain as a kind of biological computer and consciousness as a form of “extended mind,” that is, as an emergent property reliant on brain activity that also extends into the local environment.

That was before the glowing orbs.

The summer before his senior year, Stuart decided to become a work-scholar at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. A work-scholar commits to one month of work at the institute—in the gardens, in the cabins, in the kitchen—during which he or she also studies with a visiting work-scholar teacher in the evenings. This was the cliff community that Stuart entered in July of 2010.

About halfway into the month there, something very strange happened. Around midnight outside their room, just above the back porch of the Lodge, Stuart was waiting for his roommate to take a pee. The two friends were planning to go down to the famous sulfur baths or hot springs of Esalen that sit below the cliff on the property’s far southern tip. As he waited, he was doing pretty much nothing, kicking a few pebbles around and gazing down the anonymous alley between two rows of guest cabins.

Then it happened. What follows is how Stuart described the event at my request. Such an account is important for our conversation here, since it gives us an up-close and detailed description of these encounters, and from a psychologically and philosophically trained observer no less. Here is Stuart:

As I stood there looking straight into the alley I began to notice a rapid and significant change in my consciousness. I lost focus, and the air around me darkened into a thick black haze, unnoticeable except by sight. This misty haze made its way into my field of vision from the periphery towards the center of my visual field almost like tunnel vision, constricting my usual field to a small circle of clarity but in a less defined way—the darkness was slightly opaque, like an internal fog.

As I became aware of this lingering visual sensation, something began emerging from the ground a few feet in front of me. There’s really no reasonable-sounding way to say it, but three softball-sized, golden orbs made of light rose up and out of the ground. I didn’t move, but my attention was immediately redirected

towards them, and my mind began to ease into a placid calm. Colored lighter than gold and dully luminescent, these spheres of light radiated a consistent glow. Roughly, they formed a triangle shape, the plane between them parallel to the ground. They were arranged with one about seven feet away, slightly to the right, one, say eight feet away, slightly to the left, and the final one nine feet away, right in the middle. They slowly rose to a height of about three feet and I looked down on them, captivated. They were beautiful. They were intentional. In other words: I knew that they knew. Though at first part of my mind was aware of and thinking about the wildness and novelty of the experience, all of my cognitive resources soon shifted to an intense focus on the orbs. After a few seconds, I was totally immersed in them. While I had a vivid visual experience, I wasn't really seeing them so much as feeling them. It is difficult to describe, but I don't think I could have reached out and grabbed them; I just knew they were there, in front of me. I didn't move at all, and I didn't feel threatened. They induced in me an overwhelming calm and a peculiar serenity that I hadn't experienced before then, and haven't experienced since. I remember hoping that I could continue to be entranced by these magic golden orbs for a long time.

My attention was broken by the slightest hint of a rattle on the door handle to room 9. [My roommate] was done and had placed his hand on the doorknob to come out. Immediately and without warning the orbs blinked away. No more fog, no more orbs, no more calm—nothing! They didn't even recede back into the ground. They simply blipped out of existence. The whole experience probably lasted about two minutes. "Hey man." My roommate greeted me. "Hey," I responded, somehow casually. We started the short downhill walk to the baths and I didn't mention a thing.

In this same written report, Stuart continues to reflect on the experience. He notes that language is incapable of describing the event. It is the subject/object structure of language and normal perception that is the problem here. These, after all, were not simple "objects" that could have been seen by

another witness, like an animal emerging from a cave at a zoo, he explains. Rather, as he puts it: “They weren’t really seen, heard, or smelled. They appeared *to me*, but also somehow *in me*.” Whatever they were, these balls of light shifted and brightened his experience of the cosmos. He notes that the stars that night down at the baths were different, somehow brighter than he had *ever* seen them.⁹¹

One of the most striking details of the event for Stuart was something that was not part of the event itself but which he discovered after the fact: such glowing orbs, it turns out, are fairly well known in the larger Big Sur community.⁹² It was this “match” between his experience and the experiences of others that impressed him so. He had never heard of such glowing orbs, ever, and yet he had just had an experience that matched the other Big Sur reports in significant details. Stuart concluded that his own subjective experience of the glowing orbs was not simply subjective. In some sense, these orbs were a shared experience. They existed outside his own subjectivity. They were real.

There is one more historical context that seems important here: the grounds upon which Esalen sits and out of which the beautiful balls of light emerged is a Native American burial site.

Energetics

All of these extraordinary encounters with light forms, conscious plasmas, and energy beings bring us back to our earlier reflections on the trippy nature of the imagination. In what sense are these things “imagined,” that is, projected by our own subjectivities? And in what sense are they “real,” that is, in what sense do they exist independently of our seeing them? Or are these the wrong questions?

Notice that all of those earlier reflections about the imagination were just that: reflections. They assumed a *visual* framework. They assumed light bouncing off or emanating from objects or, as we had it in my preferred metaphor, as images reflected in or through a two-way mirror.

The imagination, of course, is all about images. And images, like mirrors, always imply *distance*, that is, they always imply that what one is

observing is separate from the act of observing it. If one *is* something, one cannot see it. One is it.

Similarly, the knowledge born of an image in a mirror is everywhere and always an indirect or distant knowledge. Like Kant's reasonable thing-in-itself, one can never get to the thing itself through sight or the image. One can only see it from afar. This visual distance, of course, is also the basis of modern reason and modern science, both of which need to create a "distance" between the subject and the object being reasoned about or measured. Hence the modern metaphor of "objectivity."⁹³ It's all about creating objects, which is to say: distance, separation, not us.

I recognize that this is a subtle point. But it is also a crucial point that changes pretty much everything. Consider the energetic states discussed in our previous chapters and here again in this one. Some of these involve images, for sure, but even here the seeing has changed. These altered states of energy take us out of the realm of distant objects or mirrored images into the much more immediate world of energy, vibration, electromagnetism, and light itself. Hence Whitley's descriptions of becoming an "electric body" and entering new "energetic levels of being," and of his cat yowling in pain as literal sparks shot between its paws and Whitley's palpably vibrating body. Hence "that Night" in Calcutta when I was radiated and inspired by unknown invisible energies. Hence Seong's "energy worms" that initiated him into a cosmic mind that took him almost two decades to find again, this time in some ancient Greek texts. Hence Jane's descriptions of the dissolution of visual forms, the collapse of the distinction between her eyes and the objects they were seeing, and the paradoxical event of becoming the light and energy of the world. Hence Phil getting reprogrammed or mutated by the beaming light of Valis. Hence, finally, Stuart's balls of light that were not "objects" at all, that did not appear "to" him but "in" him.

None of these descriptions are reasonable or objective ones. And although many of them were accompanied by elaborate visionary phenomena, none of them are primarily about seeing anything at all. Rather, they are fundamentally about *becoming* something, or at least communing with something. My point? That in moments like these, the framework of reason and the object falls away as it is replaced, somehow, with a new network of resonance and energy. This "resonance" is also a kind of

knowing, a most profound kind, but not of the sort that we are used to talking about with our words and grammar. To resonate with an energetic pattern or presence is not to see it from afar as an image or object. It is a kind of mutual “tuning” or “entrainment.” It is a becoming. It is to become present with a presence.

Here, then, is our toolbox as it stands: the spiral of sophisticated *comparison*, the cut of *phenomenology*, the contextualizations of *history*, the quantumlike, communion-like interpretations of *hermeneutics*, an *erotics* pointing toward our own super sexualities, *the traumatic secret* of trauma, trance, and transcendence, and now a particular *energetics*, that is, a focus on the felt energies, powers, and entrainments of resonance. Is it any wonder that so many spiritual practices turn to the sonic drivers of dance, drum, chant, mantra, and song in order to remember, or hum again, the power and presence of this communion?

Comparative Practice with the Light

Since I began taking the plasmatic soul seriously, since I made this conceptual move from reason to resonance, I have had hundreds of encounters with the glowing orbs in the more humble form of my reading and comparative practices. One, after all, generally notices and looks for only what one is ready to see. Once I recognized the pattern, I began to look for it and saw it pretty much everywhere. These last two sections represent a few examples of this comparative practice with the light and its resonances across space and time.

Mark Fox has published a wonderful comparative study of spiritual encounters with light forms. He tracks some four hundred unpublished accounts from a large database begun by the British zoologist Sir Alister Hardy (1896–1985), who believed, by the way, that such mystical experiences were somehow involved in human evolution. These cases include, among many other bizarre stories, a Marian apparition in Yugoslavia, a UFO encounter on an American military base in England, and a silver band of light that zapped out of a television set as it appeared to a dying woman *and* her border collie.⁹⁴

Fox's case studies are all modern. But light forms are known throughout the history of religions. Paul Marshall is a contemporary scholar of religion who has had his own modern mystical encounter, this time with a zig-zagging pattern of circular "little beings" that were somehow simultaneously both in him (recall Stuart's vision) and yet also exactly the same as he was, all-knowing and all-inclusive, the recognition of which triggered universal love. Paul calls this event the "vision of the rings."

Writing out of both the depths of this particular encounter and his own professional historical research, he is presently writing a marvelous comparative study and philosophical analysis of "globular beings," "fireball stories," and "soul spheres" in the history of Western philosophical and religious thought. Here he discusses circular halos, all-knowing eyes, luminous soul-vehicles moving in circular motions, shining bubbles, and spherical encasements or energy vehicles of the human form—so many "soul spheres." Hence the visions of figures like Ezekiel (whose chariot vision included "wheels-within-wheels" that were full of eyes); the Neoplatonists, who imagined the perfection of the soul as spherical; the medieval visionary abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), who reported incredibly detailed visions, including one of how circular souls enter the developed fetus; Dante's famous *Divine Comedy*, which describes a heavenly vision of souls as "a hundred little spheres" (*cento sperule*); and modern near-death experiences, like that recently reported by the neurosurgeon Dr. Eben Alexander. Paul also gestures to other religious tradition, citing, for example, the modern Hindu spiritual teacher Swami Muktananda (1908–1982), who famously taught, out of his own meditative experiences, that the divine Self is a "Blue Pearl."⁹⁵

We can continue and extend these cross-cultural explorations. Glowing orbs have also been encountered in Africa and Latin America by professional anthropologists, where they are given numerous and conflicting interpretations by the local people, from the flight of witches or the battles of wizards and shamans, through ghost riders and spirits of buried treasure, to the omnipresent modern UFO. To take just two examples, the anthropologist Yves Marton reported a bright light about the size of a tennis ball that woke him from his sleep and filled him with states of plenitude and joy. More recently, the anthropologist Diego Escolar has given us a detailed report of

some “anomalous luminous entities,” or *luces*, that tracked and followed his research team through the mountains of Argentina for four hours. They all saw these objects, which appeared in different glowing sizes, from that of a soccer ball to about three meters in diameter. They were “tracking” the party and appeared to be clearly intelligent. The experience also included a dramatic temporal distortion, which altered the time that it should have taken to travel through a valley and reduced these four hours to an experienced one or one and a half.⁹⁶ Temporal distortions, of course, are extremely common in reports of UFO encounters.

The Revelation of the Magi, Then and Now

But if this is the case in the modern period, why not take them equally seriously in the historical record? Doesn’t this “future of the past” once again change how we see and understand the past?

Orbs of light are quite common in the pre-modern world, and all around the world. For example, they are very common in the ancient Mediterranean world, particularly in Neoplatonism, where the soul’s body of light, or “shining vehicle” (*augoeides ochema*), is reported as spheroid in shape. The historian of religions Ioan Couliano went so far as to describe this spherical soul-vehicle as a kind of ancient “space shuttle” traveling back and forth between the earthly body and outer space, where the gods were believed to inhabit, or *be*, the stars.

Living light forms are also described in many medieval and early modern records about the “materiality” of purgatory in Catholicism, here as mysterious flames or beings of light that allegedly left physical effects and were interpreted, at least by the officials of the tradition, as suffering souls in purgatory in need of prayer and the Church’s mediation.⁹⁷ How different, and how much more inspiring, was Whitley’s loving response to the “little flame” of his mother’s soul that appeared in the photograph.

Then there is this. Consider the third-century apocryphal scripture *The Revelation of the Magi*. This remarkable text features a luminous entity appearing to the magi in a cave “in the land of Shir” (probably China), changing into the form of a glowing “small and humble” humanoid, and

leading them, as the famous star, to travel to Bethlehem. There, in another cave, the light form is “born” as Mary and Joseph’s infant son, still glowing radiantly.

The text abounds with those weird little details that raise the eyebrows of the comparativist. For example, thanks to the power of the star, the trip from Shir to Bethlehem is said to be “short and swift,” as if time has deteriorated in the presence of a UFO. God is described as light “hidden by the great brightness of himself.” And much like Stuart’s encounter with the glowing orbs that were somehow “inside him,” the bright star is said to be visible only to the magi.

Then there is the comparative practice of the star-child itself. The little star or glowing orb never actually identifies himself as Christ to the traveling magicians and makes startling statements like this: “I am everywhere, because I am a ray of light whose light has shone . . . in the entire world and in every land by unspeakable mysteries.”⁹⁸ The star-child from the East, in other words, was proclaiming a kind of New Age wisdom about the deeper identity of the world’s religions, *seventeen centuries ago*. The Ancient New Age again.

Now consider an e-mail I received from Whitley early in 2014. We were corresponding about a project that I was working on that involved my imaginal readings of his accounts. He wanted to push back against some of these readings. He wanted to emphasize the blunt physical nature of what he had experienced. He invoked the story he told earlier about his vision of a little bright star just outside his upstate New York cabin, which he had just sold after his reputation had been ruined by the media assaults on his integrity and sanity and his book sales had plummeted.

Here is Whitley reflecting back on those encounters and that star-vision in the e-mail:

And yet, you will remember that fellow I meditated with at our cabin, who would come crashing down onto the roof over the meditation room with six others, then sometimes materialize in the form of a small man in a tunic. I touched him. I held his hand. I smelled his skin. (He did not bathe, I found.) He indicated to me that he was from a level of being “between lives,” but also that he was not dead—that I, in fact, was the one who was dead! His thought was that being plunged into the time-stream was death. That ours is the world of the dead and his, outside of the stream of time and able to observe it, is the world of the living.

Who was he, then? Small. Six companions. The Seven Dwarfs!

Some of my son's friends once came to the cabin and slept out in the woods. (They were teenagers, which explains this foolhardy act, I suppose.) They saw seven glowing balls of light moving through the woods. A couple of years later, on our last night at the cabin, when I asked to see him as he really was, he appeared as a little star hanging over the front yard. It was radiant, and the rays were like living light. They penetrated my skin, bringing with them the most intimate sense of human touch I have ever known. It was a moment of transcendent beauty and joy.

The next morning, we left forever. I was impecunious, defeated by the wiles of the world and barely able to put food on our plates.⁹⁹

I must add here that Philip K. Dick often came to the same conclusion from his Valis encounters, namely, that *we are dead*, and that the “dead” we see are actually the living. Whitley makes the same suggestion above. Charles Fort proposed the same “flip” almost a hundred years ago.

Whitley then goes on to reflect on the literary processes of memory and reframing that shaped his own accounts and continually reshape his understanding of them. He ends with a reference to his implant:

Now, I know that I have recorded these things both in books and in letters to you before, but we are after those flickers are we not? Each time, it's a little different, a little new, I hope. (Both more right and, of course and as always, more wrong!)

Before these experiences started in my life, I used to think of us as being inside Plato's cave. However, I have come to understand that we aren't inside the cave at all, but rather, we ARE the cave. And all of those shadows and all of that damned light cannot put Humpty-Dumpty together again.

But, alas, every time I gain the measure of the flickering and imagine that I have mastered it, I reach up and touch the implant in my ear and I think, oh dear!

Here, of course, we have another “Revelation of the Magi.” We have another sphere of light and transcendent bliss, another shining vehicle of the soul, another glowing orb, another little star that can morph into a small dwarflike humanoid.

I do not, of course, know what all of this means, but I do not see how we can avoid the obvious similarities here. Surely, those echoing resonances across the millennia mean something, something that we have not even begun to recognize, much less try to understand.

Once we begin this comparative project, once we really practice this future of the past, I suspect that we will begin to see the world and ourselves in another light, literally. Perhaps we will see that the soul is a UFO, a little

radiant star twinkling inside our heads and hearts that will lift off into who-knows-where when these carbon-based brains and bodies finally fail and fall away. I hope so.



Mythmaking

WHITLEY

Man know thyself; then thou shalt know the Universe and God.

PYTHAGORAS

The human mind is a mythmaker. We do this because we need mirrors, and our myths are those mirrors. We use them to understand ourselves and to find meaning in the way we relate to the world around us. In ancient times, myths and stories were used to explore psychological states, desires, fears, and needs. Many myths are warnings about psychological territory that is dangerous to enter. The story of Oedipus explores unresolved desire for the mother, which is also a significant factor in my own personal life, obviously—normally hidden, but visible, for some reason, in me. The story of Thyestes reflects the desire to dominate one’s children, even to kill them. Stories such as that of Persephone’s descent into the underworld are an attempt to grapple with death, and to reconcile our own mortality with the fact that so much of life, dying in the fall and being resurrected in the spring, seems immortal. It is why Jesus supplanted the pagan Green Man, a resurrection deity, in much of Europe. “April is the cruelest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land.” So beautiful is spring, but so heartrending.

But surely, with our modern understanding of human psychology and the brain and the comparative study of mythology and religion, we're past all that. No more mythmaking. We understand ourselves too well.

But, in fact, we do not. The more deeply we plumb the psyche, the deeper the well appears to go. Somewhere down in there, it would appear that there is a place where the line between the physical and nonphysical blurs, where imagination and reality somehow converge, and events unfold that are not yet understood at all. It is the realm of Jeff's "imaginal," where the electrons of thoughts somehow converge into the molecules of things. But how? The mind knows, but not, perhaps, in ways that it can articulate, or perhaps that it cares to articulate. If we could control this uncanny transference, after all, we would be living in an entirely different world, ruled by laws far more salubrious than the ones we must follow now. Perhaps in Eden such blessings flowed. Here, in the real world, we have only echoes in the form of impossible events that sometimes happen.

I had a friend, an acerbic radio host named Morton Downey Jr., who had dreadful teeth. He looked like a Pacu, the fish with human teeth. One night, he was driving on an isolated road when he was forced by a sudden fog to stop. Shadowy figures came around the car, and he was taken out into a region of light. He blacked out, only to discover when the fog lifted and he woke up in the car, that his teeth were now perfect.

How I loved that story. Alien dentists, though, or the promise of the imaginal? Nevertheless, miracles do happen, but so infrequently and arbitrarily. Why can we not turn the magic on at will? Just as we are now mystified by why cancer sometimes disappears on its own, we don't now know how the imaginal works, or, for that matter, if it is even responsible for things like Mort's good luck. But surely it is accessible to study—unless, of course, it was indeed dentists from another world, or even the future, who knows? I will say that, knowing his story, it was hard to do a face-to-face interview with him. I was so fascinated by his teeth that I'd keep losing the thread of the conversation.

Until the nineteenth century, western mythological figures were generally either monsters of one sort or another, or human in form. Their powers were generally somewhat greater than those of the people who had conceived them, but, just like ordinary men, they were subject to the laws of nature and the punishments of the gods. In fact, there was an eloquent

warning about violating them expressed in many myths. Icarus flew too near the sun, and his falling cry haunts us still. Prometheus gave us fire, which is the foundation of humankind's power over nature. His punishment was dolorous indeed. Atlas Telamon, having been on the losing side of a fracas with the Olympians, was condemned to hold up the world.

The world was dangerous, but not overwhelming. Nature was usually comprehensible and predictable, if also generally harsh.

When the industrial revolution came along, for the first time, many millions of people began to lose touch with seasonal, predictable life. They found themselves overpowered by a strange new world, seasonless, unnatural, and terrifyingly powerful. Cities expanded, sucking up the old countryside into a maze of dirty streets, becoming the gigantic mechanical clockworks that we see to this day. The soul seemed to have disappeared into the machine.

It was out of this milieu that the idea of the superman emerged. The wise, fierce, and complex Athena burst from the head of Zeus, but it was the superman, as ominous a figure as ever conceived, that burst from the mind of Friedrich Nietzsche three millennia later. The superman was bold, furious, and terrible. He was bigger and more powerful even than the grinding mechanism of roaring factories and human anger that now surrounded us, even more powerful when amplified as the whistling bomb and the stuttering machine gun. He was not like Achilles with his disappointing heel, but invulnerable to nature. He had to be, because if he was vulnerable to nature, then he must also be vulnerable to the greater forces of the poisonous factory, the bullet, and the bomb. He was a cleansing agent who would sweep away all that was unjust and inhuman.

He was no hero, but he was the inspiration for one—in fact, for a whole genre of superheroes who have turned out to be almost literally addictive, so starved are we for the illusion of empowerment.

During *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, I walked down to the front of the crowded theater and looked back at the faces of the audience. As the screen flickered with mayhem and gushed with blood, I found myself looking into a sea of smiles. This is not always true, but people do feel a weight lifting when the X-Men defeat what, in the real world, cannot be defeated. They do it with powers of mind that, in some sense, many of us hope might be real—and which do touch at the edges of our lives, offering hints of super nature.

I found myself so attracted to these figures that I bought a copy of *X-Men #1* twenty years ago. Possessing it pleased me. Now, of course, it has turned out to have been an excellent investment.

By the early part of the twentieth century, we were beginning to be able to observe myths forming within ourselves. Sigmund Freud's work enabled us to see that we had an unconscious, and to shine the light of insight into those dark places. In *The Red Book*, Carl Jung explored his own underworld in a completely new way, penetrating into it with words rather than leaving it as the unseen basis of his consciousness.

What we did not know is that the unconscious is apparently a house of many rooms, and some of them, it would seem, are occupied by presences that did not care to be exposed to the light of science. They sought for a new way to make myth.

Across the 1930s, as the economy foundered, the world was overwhelmed by waves of helplessness. Late in the decade, the creative community began a process that continues to this day. Beginning with Superman in 1938 and Batman a year later, it injected one hero after another into the entertainment culture.

Why did this happen? The reason was simple: comic book artists were coming up with new ideas all the time, and exposing them in comics on the nation's newsstands. Superman sold well, which led to Batman, then to the explosion of superheroes that followed in the 1940s.

But these were not like the heroes of the past, vulnerable and conflicted. Superheroes are moral perfectionists who are universally dedicated to the welfare of the helpless. Superheroes don't pout like Achilles. They aren't neurotic gods like Zeus. Their enemies reflect the evils we all face, with emphasis on corruption and organized crime—the two areas of criminal activity that make the public feel most helpless.

The 1940s involved the most terrible war ever known, which ended with the emergence of a weapon so fearsome that it was not difficult to believe that it might destroy souls, and with them the entire world. And then there was the Holocaust, orchestrated by cultists in black uniforms decorated with the death's head, who had proclaimed themselves supermen, and did indeed reflect the ruthlessness of Nietzsche's prototype, if not his morality.

After the war, the superheroes slowly faded. Every American was a hero. We were victorious. Supermen, all. But then came the cold war, followed in the 1960s and 1970s by an increasing sense of personal helplessness, that has risen to the quiet epidemic of frustration that we see today. And with it, the superheroes have returned, bringing with them ever more engaging superpowers—the imaginal at war with the cruel, grinding mystery of the real world in deeply satisfying ways.

Into this building cultural storm there came something completely unexpected. On June 24, 1947, a man called Kenneth Arnold, among other things an amateur pilot, informed the air force and the media that he had observed a formation of silver craft flying past Mount Rainier at the remarkable speed of twelve hundred miles per hour.

In a world desperate for some sort of salvation, there was now a new story, and not only that, one that looked as if it might promise some sort of deliverance. The story was being told in headlines, but also in the very ancient language that we use to address the unknown. Such stories develop along lines familiar across history: strange experiences are reported, tales are told, myths are spun, beliefs emerge. If the beliefs are eventually ritualized into religious practice, then they gain persistence, usually for a few hundred or up to a few thousand years.

During that period, also, the horrendous “Randolph” experience entered my life, a true descent into darkness that would forever rip off the door of myth within me, leaving me vulnerable before sinister and little understood presences, inner and, it would seem, outer. Later, I would add my own terror to the public mythmaking process, with results far beyond anything I or anybody else might have expected. The myth of the alien, which came boiling up to the surface in me, turned out to also be hidden deep inside millions of people, where it had been secretly deposited by an unknown process.

Instead of the mysterious power of the gods to inspire belief, we now have the mysterious power of aliens. In the 1950s, they were “space brothers,” possessed of the wisdom of the gods. But from the moment the Betty and Barney Hill case was described in John Fuller’s *Interrupted Journey* in 1966, the narrative moved in a radically new direction. The Hills reported a terrifying encounter on a lonely New England road. They had no direct memory of it, but Betty called Pease Air Force Base to report the UFO

they recalled seeing. They weren't experts. They had no believability. Their report was dismissed as a sighting of the planet Jupiter.

Maybe aliens were there and maybe not. But something unknown was provably present: our inner mythmaker had discovered a new way to sound from the dark within, its ancient dirge of mortality, that most poignant and true of all human cries.

The Hills were interviewed by an investigator from the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena. They also began suffering from nightmares sufficiently disturbing to cause them to seek medical help. They were placed under hypnosis by Dr. Benjamin Simon, whereupon a bizarre and frightening narrative emerged. They recalled being taken aboard a strange machine that had approached their car out of the night sky. Aboard were a number of humanoid creatures, the same sort of gray creatures with appalling eyes that I would also confront in the night a few hundred miles away and twenty years later. Betty remembered seeing a star map that an amateur astronomer eventually decided indicated that the creatures and their craft had come from the Zeta Reticuli star system.

They became known as the Zetas, then later, the Grays. They weren't godlike, either, but ambiguous figures who slipped through the night stealing people and, as rumor had it, not always returning them. But they also gained a reputation for wisdom, and thus present an equivocal picture.

Because it is equivocal, it can serve the same purpose as older myths. It can be used by the mind as a tool for inner exploration, at once drawing hidden fears to the surface, rekindling the sense of wonder that the modern world has stolen from us, and giving individuals a much needed feeling of value: they may be the tiniest specks in an ocean of humanity, but, by God, the aliens are interested in them.

This modern retelling of the old story acquired another novel layer. The gods now not only flew around in spaceships, they weren't gods at all, but scientists from another planet interested in us as experimental subjects. Unremarked was the fact that the Grays were, in appearance, strikingly similar to the fairy folk of Northern Europe. Also like them, they were frightening, came out of the night, and abducted people. I might note in passing that the majority of our correspondents had last names suggesting Scotch or Irish descent. What this might mean I don't know, but, as is true of most of this material, there must be an as yet unknown significance. It was

not a matter of 10 or 15 percent of the correspondents having recognizably Scots-Irish names. In the random sample we took of five hundred names, it was 55 percent. This kind of ethnic specificity, coupled with the abundant fairy lore common among the Celtic peoples means something, it must. But what? Hopefully, we'll eventually decide that knowledge of the fairy and UFO lore should not be rejected, and try to make sense of it.

We have a habit of assuming that myths and folktales are confabulations. That is not my experience of the UFO lore. As I have repeated a number of times in this text, there is a consistency of innocent witness that makes that conclusion impossible, at least for me. Additionally, many, many of the letters we received involved complex multiple witness encounters. Plainly, whatever is happening, it is not "all in the mind." Or, if it is, then, as I have said, the mind is not all in us.

This new nascent folktale was at its core very like the older ones. Strange things were seen by Mr. Arnold. His report evolved into the myth of the flying saucer. More strange things were seen—dozens, thousands, waves of them. But there was a modern difference. This time, it was not so easy to dismiss the reports, or to keep them confined to mythical realms—or rather, to keep the mythical confined to mental realms. When these angels flew, we sometimes had cameras and, in a few cases, observers of exceptional quality such as NASA expert Paul Hill joined the witnesses, contributing his own exquisitely detailed sighting narratives. In his book about his observations, *Unconventional Flying Objects*, he offers expert descriptions of some multiple-witness UFO sightings in which he participated. His sightings remain among those listed by the U.S. Air Force in Project Blue Book as unknown. And it should be remembered that the press misinterpreted the air force's conclusions in Blue Book. They did not say that UFOs didn't exist. They said that they weren't a matter for the United States Air Force to be concerned about.

Although the U.S. Air Force was quick to dismiss the Betty and Barney Hill case (and some observers made the claim that Barney Hill's report was a nightmare caused by the tensions he felt from his interracial marriage), another modern aspect of it soon amplified its power far beyond what might have happened in the past. This was the John Fuller book, and, above all, its excerpt in *Look* magazine, which was read by millions, including me.

I remember how chilling it was at the time. I was just entering young

adulthood, and it caused me to feel a curious but intense nostalgia and deep uneasiness. I was not aware of any memories, but fears haunted my nights and I suffered from a strange sort of vigilance that would immediately startle me awake when an uneasy breeze rattled the leaves or a car whispered past the house too slowly, or a rabbit screamed in the night.

With the publication of the *Look* magazine excerpt, the alien abduction narrative collided with the UFO narrative, and the two combined into the modern story.

As only the surface of the modern world is different from the surface of the past, while the interior, human impulses remain the same, so also the new myth is different from its predecessors, but only on the surface. It is different not so much in the way that it is revealing itself, but in the way it is being seen. It is not different in how it functions in the culture.

Just as the modern world, with its great cataracts of traffic, its glaring lights, its airplanes and skyscrapers, looks different from the past, the UFO narrative sounds different from earlier folk narratives. In both cases, the difference is a reflection of our expanding technology and science. Flying saucers appear to be machines. They come from the sky. They contain peculiar creatures. Ergo, they must be spaceships from another planet, and their inhabitants, obviously, are aliens.

They are not perceived as gods. There are only a few UFO cults, and they are small. You don't find many people praying to the Grays, although there are those, like me, who have found wisdom from a relationship with them. Whatever they are, they are hard and uncompromising, and there is that unavoidable—and very real—sense of danger. Like owls, they are ominously beautiful, but also predatory creatures of the night.

Prior to my 1985 encounter, I would have scoffed at the believability of the UFO/alien narrative, but not at its logic. Given the age and immensity of the universe and the apparent profusion of planets of all sorts, life elsewhere is statistically inevitable, and intelligent life probably occurs from time to time. But, while I am quite sure that parts of the close encounter experience unfold outside of the mind, the way that the myth of the other is integrated into culture over such a long period of history, in different forms, each appropriate to its period, tells me that it is something other than alien scientists studying us.

Could it really involve intelligent beings from elsewhere in the

universe?

Based on the way the human experience is unfolding, I would guess that intelligent life is usually a short-lived biological phenomenon, so it's probably pretty rare, but if anybody has ever immortalized themselves by establishing an extensive presence outside of their home planet, who knows what they might have been able to achieve over time?

Although I have been identified as an advocate for belief in an alien presence on Earth—and have, at times, entertained such an advocacy—I have never been comfortable with it. This is because it is so far unsupported by unimpeachable evidence. The evidence, though, does support the notion that something other than the shadows within us are generating this story. It is, in other words, a story with an external component, but clearly not one that we understand. Given this, I find it very strange that we seem unwilling to even try to take an objective look at it.

It might involve aliens, who knows? It's not entirely inside the mind, that seems clear enough if the physical evidence is faced for what it is.

The first report of an apparent alien spacecraft in the Western canon was made by the prophet Ezekiel. What he actually observed is impossible to know, but his description is very like many modern UFO reports. In fact, the whole “ancient alien” canon has added yet another dimension to the evolving myth. But the question “If they have been here for thousands of years, why?” is never asked.

The sighting aspect of the story not only has an ancient provenance, it continues to appear from time to time across history, the ship from the sky, but then, in the modern world, it suddenly goes from a smattering of observations to an avalanche. Is this because the activity increased, or because communications are now better, or both? Not only that, it is accompanied by the Grays with their abductions, sexual intrusions, and implantations, and there is nothing that spreads a story faster than fear. Additionally, there are now the high-level narratives such as that of Paul Hill, the photography, the vast amount of witness testimony, and the implants.

Or, to put it another way, our story has been made as convincing to us on our terms as those of the past were to our predecessors. We have always assumed that myth only came out of the mind, but, looking at this modern manifestation closely and objectively, it is clear that this is not true now, and perhaps has never been true.

It is crucial to understand this. The story still belongs to us, just as it always has, but now we can see that it isn't entirely imaginary. As much as we might like to believe otherwise, an objective view must accept that there are UFO sightings that have passed every test for believability, that the implants cannot be explained, and that the vast number of people claiming close encounters are having an experience that we cannot yet identify.

Our difficulty with this comes when we take a step too far and begin making claims about the phenomenon that are unsupported, either that it is without substance or that it must be alien contact. It is simply not yet time for this debate.

We respond to this new narrative as story, either believing or disbelieving. But, just as the story has acquired a convincing underpinning of expert witness and physical evidence, we have also acquired both scientific and intellectual tools that enable us to study it in a completely new way. By "intellectual," I mean the comparative study of mythology in anthropology, history, and the study of religion—in other words, exactly what Jeff is doing here.

If we step back from the debate and start approaching the story as a cultural artifact, and analyzing its physical manifestations objectively and without preconception, we can make significant progress in finally understanding not only the alien contact story, but conceivably all of the supernatural, or more accurately, super natural. But it is going to require larger-scale thinking than we habitually apply to the subject.

Prior to the publication of *Communion*, I had not the faintest idea that the close encounter experience was present in the culture to the extent that it was. Nobody did. The explosive response to the book caused it to rush onto the bestseller list, and then the avalanche of letters started, and I have to say that I was shocked to my very depths to see the power of what I had unleashed.

Communion's advocacy on behalf of the ambiguity of the experience was swept away in a cacophony of claims and counterclaims. I ended up in the middle of the strident debate between believers and disbelievers. As I was neither, my position was tenuous.

In part, people were simply too excited to see my book for what it was. My close friend, the experimental psychologist Dr. John Gliedman, the husband of NPR reporter and author Margot Adler, warned me that this might

happen. He was one of the most dynamic intellectuals I ever met. He accompanied me every step of the way through the *Communion* experience. He and Margot were among the first people to whom I told my story.

After reading the manuscript, he said, “People are going to take this as a claim of alien contact.” I disagreed, pointing out the theme of the book. He said, “Your writing’s too vivid. Nobody’s going to see the theme. They’re going to see the aliens.” That was why I added, in large type, in the front of the book, the sentence about the human mind winking back from the dark.

It didn’t help, obviously, with the result that, in 1989, Janet Maslin would begin her review of the film adaptation of *Communion* with the phrase, “Whitley Strieber’s *Communion*, an account of Mr. Strieber’s firsthand experiences with extraterrestrials . . .” She goes on to rage a good bit about me and that little movie, but the point here is that she begins with exactly the assumption that Dr. Gliedman warned me about, and she is a distinguished and discriminating reviewer. When I saw that review, I understood that my failure was total. It was one thing to fall victim to TV personalities looking for sensation, but this meant that the broader intellectual community I had hoped to reach had also been blinded to my theme by my prose.

I had also failed to detect the level of revulsion that the intellectual community had for the subject of alien contact. I didn’t understand that the emotions involved are powerful enough to overwhelm logic. The idea of a far more advanced “other” that observes us without contacting us is extremely intimidating to anybody involved in the process of expanding our intellectual content and scientific knowledge.

Above all, I did not understand what was roiling under the surface—unknown to the cultural leadership, in fact, much as Christianity was ignored by the Roman elite in the first and second centuries, or the movement of Islam in its hinterlands remained unknown to the Byzantine leadership in Constantinople a few hundred years later.

But cultural change is like that. It comes from below. Perhaps Ms. Maslin was touching a nerve of her own when she offered the opinion that I had a “gift for framing his visions in terms that readily appeal to the popular imagination, at a level only slightly higher than the one reached by supermarket tabloids.” Perhaps a bit unfair, but an eloquent *cri de coeur*, to be sure, and for a good reason. It would take very little, just now, to

transform the UFO cult into a powerful new faith. A flying saucer hanging over Washington for a few hours would do it.

That happened over Lima, Peru, in February of 2015, but went unremarked not because it wasn't a genuine mystery, but because it was possible to ignore it. A very strange UFO appeared over Camarillo, California, at around Thanksgiving time for six years running, and was expertly videotaped through a Celestron telescope by filmmaker Steve Neill, but that was also ignored. In fact, indisputable UFO events happen fairly frequently, but they are always ignored, not because they should be, but by tacit mutual consent, as the more comfortable way to deal with them.

As hundreds of thousands of close encounter narratives came pouring in, Anne and I found ourselves witness to what is certainly one of the most intense reactions to a book that has ever taken place. We were horrified. If this was contact, then what were we to make of it? What could it mean that it would unfold like this, a bizarre experience in the night, terrifying and enigmatic, devastating the lives of so many of these people?

While I was writing *Communion*, I had done research into the UFO and alien phenomena. I had seen that there was a debate, but I had not seen how strident it was, let alone that there appeared to be, of all things, government involvement in it. And none of the debaters had the faintest idea of what was happening in the cultural background, that this vast number of people was involved.

The presence of a level of official concern was disturbing to me. Had not the air force said that it had no interest? I thought to myself that aliens might actually be here, and the air force might be lying. The most telling—and disturbing—fact that I uncovered was that NASA had prevented Paul Hill from publishing his book during his lifetime. Reading it, I could see that he had intended to make the manuscript public after retirement. Instead, his daughter had found it among his effects when he died.

Thus there were powerful forces that did not want a man of his authority to enter the debate on the side of the UFO believers.

Later, I think I discerned the reason, which is an extremely odd one, almost funny, certainly pitiful. After the publication of *Communion*, my uncle, Colonel Edward Strieber, introduced me to his friend General Arthur Exon, who proceeded to tell me, in regard to the Roswell incident, that “everyone from Truman on down knew that what we had found was not of

this world within twenty-four hours of our finding it.” When I asked him about the secrecy, his answer was quite revealing. He said that he had heard that a memo had been written in the early fifties speculating in a quite unsettling way about why there had been no invasion after the surge of UFO sightings that began in 1947. The memo, he said, theorized that obscure laws of physics might prevent them from entering our reality without first convincing us that they were real, and that official admission might be the tripwire that would enable them to come through.

Obviously not aliens in the conventional sense, then. If we can land on the moon and Mars, if they managed to get here, they could surely land in a conventional way. What did the author of this memo, possibly Dr. John von Neumann, think they were, then? That question the general could not answer.

Von Neumann was certainly interested in aliens. In thinking about how travel around the galaxy might be accomplished, he posited what has come to be called the von Neumann Machine. This would be a self-replicating device that would seed the species that developed it whenever it found a suitable planet.

However, it was his work on the quantum perception problem that might have been germane to the memo. If parallel universes exist, and that’s where our visitors come from, then it’s conceivable that they might need us to believe in them before they can become invested in our reality. If so, then the whole vast UFO and close encounter experience could be a sort of military operation designed to open the door in our minds from their side.

All very interesting and a possible explanation for the government’s continued blanket denial. Even without knowing whether or not the speculation had substance, no government official could ever risk opening that door.

Could actual, physical parallel universes exist? If so, it doesn’t seem beyond the realm of possibility that the mind might in some way mediate communication among them. Certainly, something that we do not understand is happening. But one still has to ask, what on earth might it have to do with the military?

After going on a long journey of research into this question, much of which was narrated in my book *Confirmation*, I have come to the conclusion that, while the military and intelligence agencies are indeed hiding something in regard to this subject, they don’t know what it is, or have misunderstood it.

But their secrecy is a major input that is energizing belief in aliens. The more they obfuscate and deny, the more the public becomes convinced that what they're denying is true.

The first element energizing the myth, of course, is the strangeness and excitement of the narrative: A UFO sighting or a close encounter is a riveting event in any life. This hidden current of witness, which is enormous, remains to this day almost entirely unexamined in any objective manner at all.

The second is the public conversation, which is largely ghettoized in the UFO community. Most of the people involved are entirely sincere, but the community is a social isolate, dealing as it does in rejected knowledge.

The huge volume of mail that we received was a shock, but there was something else there, which has come, over the years, to seem truer and truer: there is, concealed in the structure of the reports, something that looks very much like a plan. But, as always, it's not possible to make a definite determination.

I pointed out in *Solving the Communion Enigma* that we might act in very much the same way that our visitors are acting, were we to reach a planet inhabited by a less advanced intelligent species. Our anthropologists would demand that we conceal ourselves, so as to not disturb their culture and ruin our chance to study it. This would be especially true if the scientific gap was great, and essential if they were fundamentally less intelligent. For example, there is no way that we can ever communicate the meaning of our world to a lower primate. Nothing we can say or do can explain the reality of our lives to a creature that cannot even understand what clothing is. To study, often to protect such creatures, we anesthetize them, abduct them, fit them with tracking devices, sometimes treat them medically, then return them to their habitats. Some of us hunt them. A fringe of the disturbed torment them.

As we approach wild creatures, they struggle, they react with terror, they have to be subdued . . . exactly as I did, initially. But over my years of contact, I was tamed. Now I am only afraid, not helplessly panicked and flailing dangerously. To get to this point took mutual effort. They tamed me, and I tamed myself.

Once, after I had been dealing with the phenomenon for about five years, a blurry, indistinct figure appeared in our bedroom door in our cabin in upstate New York, then rushed toward me. Anne and I were both awake reading. I erupted, threw my book up in the air, grabbed the little table beside

the bed and hurled it at the thing, smashing the table to bits. I cried out, “You’ll never get me! You’ll never get me!” Anne threw her book up in the air and screamed, too. She saw nothing.

One would assume that this was a waking dream. But the next day I received a call from my brother. He had been playing his guitar in bed in San Antonio when a figure had appeared at the foot of the bed. He reacted by throwing the costly and much loved guitar at it. The thing seemed to leap out of the top of his bedroom window.

He told me his story and added that he’d found a circle of glass cut out of the top of the window. There were three places where shards of the glass seemed to be missing, but otherwise it was intact. He said that he’d gotten a message, or had a feeling, that I needed to be careful or somebody might get hurt. When I told him what had happened to me, like Jeff’s friend Dan who had discovered that his honey jar had mysteriously migrated into his tin of flour, we were helplessly perplexed.

Next, I got a call from a friend who had just come home from a trip. He was well read in the *Communion* book, and had had some odd experiences himself. He had been surprised to find three shards of glass on the floor inside his locked apartment. He called me to tell me about it because he’d had the feeling that it had something to do with me.

So, did an alien approach me, then when I reacted badly zip down to San Antonio to deliver his oblique message through my brother, then somehow convey three shards of glass to the apartment of my friend, or was it something else entirely?

Eventually, perhaps, we’ll look at events like that in a large enough context to actually study them. Just now, though, all that can be done is to describe them, not explain them.

The past feared its gods, we fear our visitors. I wonder, have they emerged out of the old story, or are they a new arrival of some sort who have very cleverly fitted themselves into it, or perhaps been fitted into it by us? Could it be that any approach like this, whether imaginary, imaginal, or real is going to cause us to respond by mythologizing it?

I have certainly played my part on this particular stage. To a degree, this has been because of my writing. In part, also, it’s because of my desire to explore different possibilities, which has sometimes caused me to range too far from the question. This has helped open the door to the assumption that

I'm claiming contact with extraterrestrials, not reporting perceptions, that I have, as it were, failed to "make the cut" that Jeff encourages in chapter 2.

One thing that we noticed at once about our letter mail was that the great majority of the reports came from the 1970s. There were a few from as early as the 1930s, but the spike during the '70s was notable. There were many fewer stories from the 1960s, and from the early '80s on, they have continued to decline steadily. Now, on my website, I get perhaps two or three reports a week, and, once again, most of them are memories of things that happened in the '70s.

Were we somehow approached then, by something that has moved on? Perhaps they were indeed alien scientists, who concluded their studies here, or were drawn elsewhere by a more interesting species. Or is it that the initial interest the book generated has worn off, and people aren't bothering to make reports anymore?

Unfortunately, we cannot know, not without more facts, and unless the climate changes dramatically, we will never know. But myth is like that: it resists study. Our fears live in the dark, and from time immemorial, that's where we have processed them. I am hoping that by collaboration between, for example, psychologists and mythologists, we will finally succeed in pointing the way to a vision of the phenomenon that is broad enough and objective enough to be worth contemplating.

Ideally, both the National Science Foundation and the National Humanities Foundation would see fit to encourage granting in the area. Since it's not clear that science can do more at this point than confirm the existence of the enigma, it seems that the humanities are of enormous importance if we are ever to gain the perspective we need to advance our knowledge of it.

Jeff sees the engagement of the humanities as of primary importance, but I think that science has a role to play, too. It can do things like observe activity in the sky in a methodical way, study the brain function of close encounter witnesses, study the implants, and so forth. While this cannot answer the question of what, at its core, is happening, it can confirm that something is taking place that, if not real in an absolute sense, is present outside of the imagination, if not entirely independent of it. But if we are ever to evolve ways of talking about it that lead to understanding, comparative mythologists and experts in religion are going to need to engage exactly as Jeff is engaging. It is through their work that a useful way of talking about it

will evolve. In our discussions, Jeff has offered the opinion that scientists dismiss myth as being inaccessible to their methods of study. I would agree that the scientific establishment has no way of addressing them except through the narrow slit of psychology, but I think that there is potential for a sea-change in this area.

This is because of what has been known, since David Chalmers coined the phrase in 2009, as the Hard Problem, specifically, the Hard Problem of Consciousness. Consciousness is inlooking, and we look into ourselves through the dark glass of myth. I am confident that science will find ways of walking those inner pathways with tools that perhaps have not even been invented yet. When they do, they will find trail markers. These markers will have been left by comparative mythologists.

There is, of course, a huge danger here and a pitfall. It is that, if science is engaged in this way and, say, does determine that any part of the phenomenon is physically real, the public is liable to jump to the same conclusion that they jumped to because of the way I described the *Communion* experience. They are going to come to believe that scientists are saying that aliens are real.

But if we are ever going to know ourselves, we need to know our myths—truly know them and how they come about, not simply argue about them. This is especially true of this new myth, which is by historical standards extremely powerful, is capable of exploding into the cultural foreground at any time, and has the potential to change our world completely. Before that happens on its own, we need to make an effort to understand, so that we can use the forces it is unleashing for the betterment of our lives and our world. We need, finally, to recognize that we have been willfully ignoring this chance to know more of ourselves by pretending that the most provocative evidence doesn't exist. It is time to open the door to the chamber of the mythmaker, and at last see who lives within.



The Mythical Object

JEFF

Anybody may theorize upon other worlds and conditions upon them that are similar to our own conditions: if his notions be presented undisguisedly as fiction, or only as an "interesting hypothesis," he'll stir up no prude rages.

CHARLES FORT, *THE BOOK OF THE DAMNED*

Whitley articulates a number of important positions in the previous chapter. Among these is the conclusion that the U.S. military and government do not understand the UFO phenomenon, and that their secrecy, whatever its motivations, is feeding the mythology. He observes that a small collection of communities have formed around the stories and secrecies, but that these are generally isolated and marginalized by the broader culture since they are embracing a form of rejected knowledge. And he notes that we now possess both scientific and intellectual tools to study the formation of such mythologies and communities that no previous culture possessed. All of these conclusions, it seems to me, are very good ways to move the conversation forward.

But there is one consistent thread through our conversations here that reveals a basic disagreement or difference between the two of us. Whitley, or so it seems to me, often appears to think that science is the way forward, that

science has what it takes, that more science will somehow be able to crack this mystery.

I am very skeptical of this. I think the science is crucial, of course, but I do not think it is enough, or ever will be. It is my own position that the tools of the humanities—and particularly those of the study of religion and anthropology—are much more promising and, frankly, much more powerful in this particular arena.

It is patently obvious to me, for example, why the U.S. military and government do not understand something like the UFO phenomenon—because it is not a military or technological object, because it is a *mythical object*. And I intend that phrase in the most paradoxical sense possible, that is, in the sense of something seen or physically encountered that is actually a materialized story or meaning. I mean a thing that is also a thought. I mean a friggin' story that shows up on radar.

Put differently, these spectral encounters participate in both the material and the mental. They are objective *and* subjective at the same time. They are expressions of the one world we encountered at the end of chapter 15. Like the bizarre objects of that previous chapter (the implant, the magical stone, and the honey jar), they are props in a drama. They pull us into their stories, even as we tell them ours. Whitley gets this just right when he writes: “We have always assumed that myth only came out of the mind, but, looking at this modern manifestation closely and objectively, it is clear that this is not true now, and perhaps has never been true. It is crucial to understand this. The story still belongs to us, just as it always has, but now we can see that it isn't entirely imaginary.”

If you want to understand mythical objects, you go to the people who know something about these things. You go to people who have given their lives to studying and understanding the global history and functions of mythology and mysticism. You go to anthropologists, literary critics, and scholars of comparative religion. John Keel saw this almost fifty years ago now in his pioneering book *UFOs: Operation Trojan Horse* (1970). He pointed out there that it was foolish to turn to engineers in order to understand something in the sky whose true meaning lay in the souls of the contactees and the rich history of Western esotericism.

Here is the catch, though. People who study mythology and comparative mystical literature, people like me, are almost universally allergic to

accepting the possibility that these subjects might be real objects, that they might have some physical, or parapsychical, existence outside the subjective imaginations of the individuals and cultures that construct, ritualize, and turn them into social and political institutions.¹⁰⁰ This is probably a premature conclusion on our part, but that is where we are at the moment.

In other words, Whitley's faith in science and my faith in the humanities are probably both misplaced. Neither can really deliver the goods here.

So what to do?

Well, we can begin by simply admitting our ignorance. We can also recognize the likelihood that this ignorance is not a moral one, that it is not somehow "our fault." It is much more likely a perfectly natural or cognitive condition, that is, a function of how we are put together, how we are "wired," as people like to say today, entranced as they are with computers and smart phones.

As a partial response to Whitley's implant, I discussed the spiritual practice of saying away our deepest convictions and beliefs as relative historical products and as constructs of human language and grammar and, deeper still, as biological consequences of our neurological hardware and sensory system. As a result of our cultural software (read: our languages, grammars, social customs, and beliefs) and our neurological hardware (read: our nervous system, senses, and brain), we are *constantly* equating what we believe or perceive for what is. These constant, unconscious acts need to be named for what they are: mistakes.

Our religious symbols, for example, may or may not *point to* some aspect of ultimate reality, but they are not literally true and should never be taken as absolutely accurate. This is the fundamental lesson of the comparative study of religion. It is also the fundamental mistake that the religions have repeatedly made throughout recorded history: their believers have too often (not always) confused coded cultural memories of real encounters with *something* as literal and perfectly accurate descriptions of *everything*. Much too often, they have forgotten, or simply have not known, that every religious truth is a mediated one, and so also a relative one. They have confused the filter with the filtered, the medium with the mediated, the prism with the light (not unlike the conventional neuroscientists who today confuse the brain with mind). As a result, they have ended up idolizing their

own local languages, their scriptural texts, their mythologies, and their local social practices and moral values, none of which are or ever can be universal. They remain entranced.

Such moves, of course, are not simply abstract philosophical mistakes or innocent psychological errors. When these sorts of confluences between appearance and reality, between something and everything, are linked to authoritarian institutions and exclusivist ideologies, they also carry profoundly dangerous political potentials, as we can see today all around us.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that many of our world's present problems are a result of our lack of an adequate theory of the religious imagination as *both* a projector of cultural fantasy *and* a medium of conscious light. Without such an understanding, we can only fail, miserably, to compare one another's projections and prisms deeply, fairly, and calmly. Without such an understanding, we will also not be able to understand something like the UFO phenomenon and recognize, as Whitley puts it just right, *that it isn't entirely imaginary*.

Say Again

Whitley observes quite correctly that the human species is a mythmaking species. As anthropologists have long noted, just as birds instinctively build nests and bees build hives, we “make worlds,” that is, we create mythical universes to live in. We have no choice. Human beings need meaning, which is to say *story*, in order to live, much as they need food and air. No human community can live without meaning. As Jesus put it, man cannot live by bread alone. He was right about that.

But here is the thing. Every story is incomplete. No story works for everyone. If there is anything I know with certainty as a historian of religions, it is this: If you are worshiping a god, *any* god (including “God”), you are basically “worshipping Zeus.” That is to say, your religion, your story, like that of the ancient Greeks and their pantheon, will pass, will be no more, will become a thing of memory, a “mythology” for the curious of some future civilization to study and ponder. It is only a matter of time.

Believe it or not, this is good news, at least in the big picture. Every story must end, after all, because no story can capture the fullness of the

human experience and its various historical, environmental, and conceptual challenges. We are always and everywhere more than our stories, more than our cultures and families, more than our races and ethnicities, more than our religions and societies. We shut one book not to end the human venture, but to begin another anew. We abandon our stories not to abandon a story, but to tell yet another, and hopefully another *better* one.

A great part of this book, of course, is about just that: exploring the idea that it is time to tell a better story about the whole pantheon of the unknown, from gods, miracles, angels, and demons to fairy folk, aliens, and the mysterious objects in the sky. We would go further still and suggest that it is possible to consider that “they,” and by extension “we,” are engaging in the modern eruption of these manifestations and appearances precisely so that a new story *will* be told. We are suggesting that all the bizzarerie is “aimed” at one real object—a mythical object. Which is to say: a new and better story.

So the question is this. After we have said away all of our beliefs and unbeliefs about “what we are, who we are, and where we are,” we are still left with a fundamental mystery or question mark: What on earth (or off the Earth) has been in contact with us for all these millennia, producing, in the confusing process, tens of thousands of religions and billions of contact encounters?

Or, if you prefer, *who* wakes up out of all of these trances?

As Whitley describes the scene above, American culture has been building a particular mythology since the late 1940s and early '50s. Since then, popular culture, largely under the radar (and sometimes *on* the radar), has been telling itself a story about contact and communication that began with a fundamental saying away, with an *unidentified* flying object. This early humility, however, quickly trance-formed into an all too certain and all too mechanistic nightmare that was mostly a projection of our own cold war fears and Christian fundamentalist fantasies about the end of the world, which, horror of all horrors, we now had the technology to bring about, and still do.

It was the U.S. Air Force, after all, that coined the expression “UFO” in the early 1950s, largely for defense reasons. In its historical origins, the acronym is a military cold war expression. It names something that we need *to defend ourselves against*.

We are still defending ourselves against it. Whitley and I want to

suggest with this book, which is really a kind of intervention, that we stop doing this; that we just stop defending ourselves against the unknown, the unidentified, the impossible; that we stop denying the phenomena; that we stop ridiculing and shaming people who report these kinds of encounters; but also, of course, that we stop believing the forms in which the encounters appear or are shaped into appearing by the entertainment industry, by the military complex, and by our religions. Isn't this what *Communion* was really all about? To seek a deeper communion and a new form of communication after contact? To jointly materialize, in community, a new and better world?

Flipping Arthur C. Clarke

Both the technological *and* fictional readings of something like the UFO phenomenon are part of the same world-story that Western culture has been telling itself for a century and a half or so. As I have pointed out above, that story can be captured in one word: materialism.

On one level, materialism is just more monotheism in disguise. It is another jealous god. Instead of "My God is the only God," now it is "There is only matter." The story goes like this. Matter is made up of tiny dead things that are bouncing or waving around in predictable mathematical patterns. It's all math. There is no meaning. There is no mind. Evolution is without a goal. It intends nothing. It is going nowhere. The universe is pointless.

This is a bad story in the simple sense that it is deeply depressing. Why anyone wants to live inside such a trance state is simply beyond me. I recognize, of course, that those who embrace it do so because they think it is true. I respect that, but I also know that this conclusion is a belief and not a fact, an interpretation of the world and not the world itself. I also know that there are real phenomena in the world that this interpretation must ignore in order to preserve its own fragile status.

I am always reminded here of the strange and depressing fate of an otherwise wonderful saying by the British science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke. It goes like this:

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

The saying is the third law of Clarke's famous three laws of prediction. Taken out of context, this third law has been employed endlessly to diminish or demean traditional forms of magical practice and religious experience as deluded, mistaken, and ignorant. Those poor primitives just would not understand our modern science and technology. We moderns are so clever. They were so foolish. This, of course, is precisely the assumption of the reductive comparisons that I criticized at the very beginning of this book. It is also the attitude of colonialists, imperialists, and racists.

I would not deny that there is some truth in this interpretation of Clarke's saying. I am sure that many a nonliterate culture would perceive, say, a smart phone as a magical instrument. But there are numerous problems with this reading of Clarke, beginning with the simple fact that Clarke himself was fascinated with paranormal phenomena from maledictions, stigmata, and apparitions (all which he considered "highly probable") to poltergeists, telepathy, and dowsing (which he considered "possible" and "worth investigating") to survival of bodily death and reincarnation (which he considered "almost certainly untrue").¹⁰¹ The science-fiction legend even worked with two television professionals to create a series for British television on unexplained phenomena.

Hence his first two laws of prediction, which almost no one ever quotes because they do not serve the typical strategies of denial:

When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.

*The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.*¹⁰²

Clarke was particularly fond of "flipping" our most basic assumptions. In his epilogue to *Arthur C. Clarke's World of Strange Powers*, for example,

he seriously suggested that the human eye, under rare but real conditions, might actually reverse its normal functions. Instead of passively *receiving* impressions from the environment, it might actively *project*, like a slide projector, mental apparitions into the physical environment that others can see.¹⁰³ Here was his version of the imaginal. He was very serious about this. He was quite convinced that apparitions are real phenomena. Apparitions rated very high on his scale of the probable.

In this same generous and flipping spirit of Clarke, allow me to flip in turn his most famous saying.¹⁰⁴ It would now read something like this:

Any sufficiently profound magical event is indistinguishable from technology.

This is exactly what I see happening today with the various misreadings of the UFO phenomenon. It is, of course, quite common these days to assert, supposedly with Arthur C. Clarke, that the gods can only be ancient astronauts misperceived by scientifically naive ancients. What looks like magic in the historical record is really technology.

But this, I would suggest, is the exact *opposite* of the truth. Contemporary extraterrestrials show every appearance of being gods misperceived by spiritually naive moderns. What looks like technology today is really magic. The gods were not ancient aliens. The aliens are modern gods.

This modern magic and these modern gods, of course, are likely not what they appear to be either. There is the flip of the flip. There is the spiral up.

What Ken Arnold Really Saw

As a concrete way of understanding how such a “flip” of the typical science-fiction scenario might work, let us return one last time to the story of Kenneth Arnold, the businessman from Boise, Idaho, who, as Whitley also mentioned, in many ways initiated “the coming of the saucers,” which was the title of a book he co-wrote with the pulp-fiction editor Ray Palmer in 1952.

In the standard accounts, Mr. Arnold began the era of the flying saucer with his sighting of nine silver boomerang shaped objects whizzing over the Cascade Mountains near Yakima, Washington, on June 24, 1947. The journalist Bill Bequette coined the phrase “flying saucer” listening to Mr. Arnold describe what he witnessed later that same day, the phrase went over the wires, Roswell reported a “crashed flying disc” a few weeks later, and the rest is history, as we say.

Well, sort of. As is almost always the case, the real history is more interesting, and stranger, than the remembered history. Once again, the tool of historical contextualization is invaluable here.

It is certainly true that Mr. Arnold seriously entertained, and even probably accepted, some fairly standard technological interpretations of the flying saucer at different points in his life. It is difficult to read what he wrote early in his career and not come away with that impression. But there was always something else behind the mechanistic readings, something that haunted Arnold for his entire life. In a recent interview with his daughter Kim Arnold, Ms. Arnold explained that one of the “hidden secrets” of her father’s literary remains and personal files is that he witnessed the flying objects “pulsating with a blue-white light,” like a heartbeat, and that he eventually concluded that the saucers were “not mechanical in any sense at all,” that is, that they were alive. Mr. Arnold was also convinced that they could change their density, and that they came from another dimensional world, which is the same one we enter when we die. Already in 1949, Arnold had offered a more biological version of the same understanding, when he suggested that these flying objects were in fact “groups and masses of living organisms that are as much a part of our atmosphere and space as the life we find in the oceans.”¹⁰⁵ This is pure Charles Fort, by the way. Was he reading Fort?

Kim Arnold also speaks about the telepathic gifts and reincarnation beliefs of her mother and what looks very much like a general Theosophical or occult framework in which her father and mother understood these historical sightings and their cultural aftermath. She speaks at length about how the events stressed and strained the family, mostly because of the way her father’s experiences were (like Whitley’s) mangled by the media, by Hollywood, and by the debunkers, but also because of the endless phone calls and some ten thousand letters that her father received (remember Whitley and

Anne's letters?). Finally, she also describes how her father was threatened by a government agent not to speak about what he saw and recounts in some detail how both of her parents spent the rest of their lives in fear of being killed by the U.S. government, whose intelligence community appears to have manipulated and harassed Arnold for its own purposes.¹⁰⁶

We can now well see that the Ken Arnold story is a perfect example of "Arthur C. Clarke flipped." Modern technology was not being misperceived by scientifically naive ancients. Ancient souls were being misperceived by spiritually naive moderns.

And the confusions only multiplied, fast. This occult vision of soul creatures living in the atmosphere or energy beings emerging from some other dimension almost immediately got implicated in a whole series of cold war fears, secret military projects, Christian teachings about "demons" (such interpretive strategies have been used for two millennia to deny and demonize other people's experiences of the sacred, which, like the Christian God, often do possess both positive and negative dimensions, at least relative to the ego), sci-fi stories, and Hollywood movies, not to mention more than a few government intelligence responses no doubt designed to protect and hide real military technology. Hence what we have called "the wastebasket problem." Where to start? Where to begin anew?

Emergent Mythologies

As I explained in chapter 1 and demonstrated again here with my flip of Arthur C. Clarke's famous saying, I think we have to begin anew by actively resisting any exclusive reliance on the machine readings and moving away from the materialist imagination to really understand what is happening to us, and has long been happening to us. The older religious stories may be better in some ways in that they recognize the spiritual side of all of this, hence the flip. But they are far worse in others. Again, neither the scientism nor the dogmatic religion are going to get us there. We need to keep shooting the arrow both ways. We need to keep flipping the coin, back and forth, back and forth. We need to spiral up. We need a new third way forward. Which is

another way of saying: We don't just need another story; we also need another *kind* of story, that is, another way of telling stories.

What will these new stories and this new way of telling them look like? I do not know, but I have two basic guesses.

The first guess is that these new stories will take modern cosmology, quantum physics, and evolutionary biology as their main sources of inspiration or general framework and put an extremely robust and expansive sense of “cosmic conscious evolution” at the center of their narratives—cosmological, material, and biological, yes, but also cultural and spiritual. Here we are not just “star dust,” as Carl Sagan had it. We are highly evolved expressions of *starlight* become conscious and aware within a vast web of planetary life. These new stories will not just be evolutionary, then. They will also be “green,” that is, deeply ecological in hope and direction. In *Mutants and Mystics*, I called this deep, science-inspired, nature-based structure of the emergent mythologies the “Super Story.” That still seems exactly right to me.

No wonder, then, Whitley found himself buying a copy of *X-Men #1* twenty years ago. That particular cultural mythology reflects and refracts his own mythology, which is no myth. It is worth noting, though, that the X-Men are very late to the emerging mutant mysticism. Such practices, experiences, and belief systems are not 50 years old. They are 150 years old. They go all the way back to the origins of evolutionary biology itself in the co-founding figure of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) and his deep personal engagement with nineteenth-century Spiritualism, occultism, and psychical research, all of which was forming around the Darwinian revolution.¹⁰⁷

The second guess is that the new super story–tellers will be different *kinds* of storytellers to the extent that, as authors and artists with real empirical experience, they will always keep in mind the indubitable fact that they are telling stories, even as—and here is the tricky part—they will also know that their fictions encode the remembered experiences of contact. In Whitley's language, they will be mythmakers who know that their myths are not just imaginary.

I consider Whitley Strieber to be just such a super story–teller. I do not, of course, think that Whitley has everything right. How could he? How could anyone? That's not the point. But I take his deepest instincts and intuitions as pointing us in the right direction: toward a conscious cosmic evolution, a

subtly material or electromagnetic soul and a future environmentally sustainable civilization—all embedded in an already super natural world.

I also take his conviction that the imagination can materialize its contents in the physical environment (something he shares with the late Arthur C. Clarke) and his fascinating extension of von Neumann's Quantum Perception problem—that we might actually “open a door” into an invisible world or dimension through the psychic power of belief—to be profound and dramatic instances of the imaginal and hermeneutical practices I described in chapter 9. The latter practices I would summarize again as the bizarre fact that we are always everywhere imagining, interpreting, and believing ourselves into existence through the process of contact, communication, communion, and community. We would do well to recognize that and to make it more conscious.

What we have here in the end is, as Whitley put it elsewhere, “the bone-structure of another new religion.” But must we go there? Must we do this yet again? “Hasn't the past taught us anything at all?”¹⁰⁸ Could it not be finally the time not just for a different story, but also for a different kind of story, a story that knows itself *as story*?

The fundamental question remains: just who is telling *all* of these stories? Who is left after another story is told, the book is shut, and the spell is broken?

And so we come to our final tool or technique. After *comparison*, *phenomenology*, *history*, *hermeneutics*, *erotics*, *saying away*, *the traumatic secret*, and *energetics*, we finally come to this: *say again*. With these two words, I mean two things. I mean: “Say again,” as in “Tell us another story.” But I also mean: “Say again?” as in “Do you really believe all of that?” I mean a particular way of inhabiting our communities, cultures, and religions, a way that is humbler, more paradoxical, more frankly honest about the fragile and fictional nature of *all* of our cultural productions, including and especially us. I mean what Whitley has long called “sitting with the question” and not settling for a particular pat answer. I mean what the two of us have modeled, however imperfectly, for you in this very book.

Mythology and Ideology

Before I close, I want to return to “the wastebasket” with which I began and struggle with an aspect of myth making that is neither bright nor hopeful. Recall that I began expressing my own voice in chapter 1 with a turning away from the military components of the UFO for a focusing in on the personal visionary and spiritual dimensions. I trust that perspective is clear enough by now, and that you can see well what it gives us, and what it does not give us.

What it does not give us is an adequate struggle with the political and ideological dimensions of the problem at hand. Nor does it adequately treat the very real military involvement in these histories, which also needs to be studied carefully and calmly. Mark Pilkington, Robbie Graham, and Diana Walsh Pasulka are all doing wonderful work here, for example, with the disinformation campaigns that the intelligence community has engaged in over the decades, or the U.S. Department of Defense’s involvement in the script writing for UFO films in Hollywood.¹⁰⁹

I want to address some of these difficult issues, ever so briefly, here at the end. I want to metaphorically wrestle for a moment with the people in Whitley’s room who broke into his cabin and put something strange in his ear. I want to acknowledge the decades-long anxieties of Mr. and Mrs. Arnold after those cruel threats in the desert. I want to recognize the role of shadowy intelligence officers, literal abductions, and misinformation campaigns that damage people’s careers, even ruin their lives. I want to call out the morally reprehensible ways that individuals and traditions literally demonize the religious experiences of other people that cannot fit into their own narrow and close-minded belief systems (calling something “demonic,” after all, is also a conspiracy theory). I want to acknowledge the moral and intellectual integrity of my colleagues in the study of myth and religion who have consistently pointed out to us that every myth is a power play, that every religion is political, and that countless human beings have suffered, and suffered horribly, from these mythical and ritualized ideologies.¹¹⁰ I want to point out that Whitley’s writings are filled with ideas and plots that express the same fears, the same concerns, and the same sufferings.

I am often asked about the wilder conspiracy theories (underground alien bases, the U.S. government forming alliances with extraterrestrials, alien crop circles, that sort of thing). I always respond: “I don’t do conspiracy.” What I mean by this is that I don’t trust the wild conspiracies

that are constantly spun out of this material, which is not to say that I do not recognize that there are likely real truths embedded in some of them. As literal scenarios, however, I always find them stretched and finally unbelievable. Having said that, I want to back up a bit here and qualify this stance in the light of some remarkable work on conspiracy in the sociology of religion.¹¹¹

I still do not “do conspiracy,” that is, I don’t generally buy the *content* of the extreme conspiracies, but I do understand their social *function*. What I mean by this is that I understand how conspiracy theories make an otherwise chaotic world meaningful to a small group of people whose psychology is dominated by the attractive belief that they possess a fantastic truth hidden from the rest of us. I also recognize a general if distorted truth behind the contents of the different conspiracies, namely, that mythologies are also always ideologies, and that “telling a story” is never enough, particularly when there are institutions and political and economic interests involved that want to “control the story” or “take back the story.” And, of course, there always are.

On a deeper level still, it must be said that all conspiracy theories—both reasonable and unreasonable—express a most basic fact about the human condition that is well known in the humanities, indeed, that grounds all of them: namely, that all of us at every moment *are* being duped, *are* being tricked by our languages, our cultures, our religions, and, alas, by our very brains. Every culture is a trance state. Every ego is a cultural production. Every text is a historical construction. Every perception is akin to a dream. Is not this proposed truth the ultimate conspiracy theory? Am I a conspiracy theorist?

In the end, the most reliable truth of conspiracy is not a positive one but a negative one. What you see is not what you get. Seeing is not believing. Don’t believe what you believe. Don’t think what you think. *Say away*. I have put this most basic of all truths in the humanities in my own work in terms of the observation that all of us are “being written” by language and culture. One could just as easily put the same insight, though, in the terms of Philip K. Dick, who once wrote that “we are not the artists but the drawings.” Here we are also “being drawn.”

Both are true enough. We are characters written and drawn in a two-dimensional graphic novel, real superheroes struggling to step off the page and into the conviction of our own independent existence, which, alas, is not as yet at all clear.



Shifting the Conversation

WHITLEY

Our thesis throughout this book has been that it is not necessary to believe in such things as flying saucers, aliens, ghosts, and other unexplained phenomena in order to study them. Such study, as Jeff has pointed out, has been developing in the universities for nearly two centuries. But the same has not happened in science. The difficulty that has kept science from advancing understanding of them in the same way that it has advanced understanding of, say, meteors, radio waves, or quantum entanglement is that such study, in the community's present social culture, raises an implication that one also believes in them not only as things perceived, but as things that are.

As Jeff urges, make the cut.

Given the bizarre nature of the evidence, it would seem important that there be enough analysis of it to at least establish some basic parameters of understanding before events compel scientific attention. If disclosure or some other event created a compelling suggestion, say, that aliens are here, it would be a grave mistake and a great tragedy to attempt to understand them in the context of the popular vision of them. It is not adequate, and there is every implication that, behind the supposed alien presence, there lies a

completely new vision of reality that is at once larger and more accurate than the current rigorously materialistic scientific vision.

We are suggesting that it is possible to acknowledge the super part of the natural world and study it in terms of the perceptions it creates, without assuming that by doing so we think that the phenomena generating those perceptions are the same as the noumena that lie behind them. Even if the reality of aliens is announced to the world by credible authorities, a new way of addressing the matter is still essential to any successful understanding. Right now, “contact” would be taken as the beginning of interaction with another society something like our own. From all the evidence, this approach would be a failure. It wouldn’t even come close to the achievement of true communion, which is a matter of at once seeing the true picture in all its complexity, and ourselves in our own ambiguity. To make real contact work we must not forget what is actually the central reality of the whole matter: not only that we don’t know who and what they are, but that we also don’t know who and what we are.

Find them, find ourselves.

From my own life experience and the vast mountain of similar testimony that Anne brought to light, it seems clear that they are *something*, but just what remains unclear. Aliens, sure, it’s not impossible. It also cannot be the whole story, not if all this testimony is even partly accurate.

Right now—and this is after thirty years of active involvement and research—I would not be willing to advocate for any particular explanation. If pressed, I would say that the most likely “correct” answer will only come when we have a more precise understanding of reality than we do now. Most importantly, a more precise understanding of what part of reality mind actually occupies.

Inevitably, as research brings better understanding of the overall phenomenon, fundamentally new knowledge is bound to come, possibly about the nature of reality, and certainly about the human mind, its actual relationship to the physical, and how and why it generates its folklores and injects them into its cultures. And about just in what way this other presence is real.

As I pointed out in my mythmaking chapter, I have played a major role in the development of alien folklore. But why is it that descriptions of perceptions such as those I reported in *Communion* would be almost

universally taken to be claims of actual experience, even when the author prefaced them as I did?

The reason is that something is actually being seen and interacted with. It isn't all in the mind, and the evidence is strong that the mind isn't all in us, either. If it was, the Physical Traces chapter could never have been written. There are physical traces, so there are physical events. But are they physical in the same sense that an encounter with, say, a doctor's needle is physical? This we do not yet know.

Folklore arises when super nature, in all its majesty and mystery, acts on minds that cannot hope to see the noumenon, and do not have enough information to understand that the phenomenon may not be the actuality.

Winston Churchill asked back in 1952, in a memo sent to Sir Henry Tizard and his Working Party on UFOs that had been formed in response to the large number of flying saucer sightings then taking place, "what can it mean?" Given that, more than sixty years later, we are still no closer to an answer than we were in 1952, it was a good question. If we don't finally address it effectively, the phenomenon will continue taking on a life of its own, penetrating more and more deeply into the culture, with consequences that cannot even be guessed at.

Whatever its origin, the phenomenon is a bridge into the unknown, and like any bridge, can be crossed. Do so, and the unknown begins to become known.

A good place for science to start serious study is to turn to the people who report interacting with aliens. There are certainly enough of us to provide a rich ground for effective sampling. Is a history of abuse consistent across a broader sample than has so far been studied? Are our brains functioning normally, and if not, then how does their functionality differ from the norm? Having lived with "the visitors" essentially all of my life, I would very, very much like to know this. We see—or perhaps a better word is "notice"—things that "normal" people do not see, but when we dare to report our experiences, we face prejudice, and it can be extreme. And, in fact, this sort of rejection goes way, way back in history. Prophets and visionaries are almost universally despised. But why? What is the cultural need for this? It would be useful to find out.

Neither does an autistic person see the world in a normal way, nor somebody with Down syndrome or an individual with Asperger's. In recent

years, the work of people like Timothy Shriver has brought more general social acknowledgment that these different sorts of minds have value in and of themselves, and that people whose brains function in these nonmainstream ways are worth integrating into the culture, and that their intellectual and creative output should be valued for itself, and not seen as an artifact of disease.

I want that same level of acceptance for myself and the whole community of close encounter witnesses. I've created a body of work that could be useful, in that it chronicles a struggle to understand that will be mirrored many times over if the experience of interaction with the visitors ever extends into public life. Unfortunately, it is largely ignored or misperceived by the cultural mainstream. It is ignored because it entertains rejected knowledge. But why has that knowledge been rejected, and along with it the people who possess it?

I don't think that there is any single answer, but there are some specific ones that can be usefully addressed.

An example of what is wrong occurred in January of 2015, when the CIA announced that its most popular recent tweet had been one which pointed to a suggestion that all of the flying saucer reports of the 1950s were attributable to misperceptions of U-2 flights.

This story had been floated by the agency previously, but cannot even come close to explaining the enormous worldwide phenomenon that was unfolding then, not even the part of it that was taking place in the United States. This is for a simple reason: during the day a U-2 flying at fifty thousand feet is invisible from the ground, and many of the sightings took place in daylight. For that matter, seeing one at night would be highly unlikely. The story is, to be blunt, blatantly false.

Nevertheless, National Public Radio repeated it uncritically a few days later:

“Good morning. I'm Steve Inskeep with an explanation for UFO sightings in the 1950s. The CIA released a document this year which it calls its most-read document of 2014. It reports on flights by U-2 spy planes. The document says those secret planes flying higher than anyone thought possible were mistaken for alien spaceships. Normally, a conspiracy theory would say the CIA is behind some mysterious activity. In this case, the CIA really was. It's Morning Edition.”

The media's uncritical acceptance of childish palaver like this is part of such a long tradition of similar failures that it bears only passing mention as a tragic inevitability. I will just touch on the concern that there is some sort of coordination between the media and the intelligence community. Perhaps, in the future, such things will become clear.

There are two larger questions here: first, why have the CIA, NASA, the U.S. Air Force, and other governmental organizations spent so much time and effort "debunking" UFO claims that clearly cannot be explained? Are we missing something here, or are they, perhaps, dismissing something they don't understand because it seems somehow provocative and they cannot control it? Or maybe it's as dangerous as it seems to many people, in which case they might consider warning the population, at least . . . unless they have been intimidated into silence.

Given all the research I have done and all of the experience I have had, I would suggest that they probably don't understand what's happening or whether or not it's dangerous, and that is one reason for the secrecy. The "plasmas" of the Condign Report appear in our skies and seem provocative. Strangely, even though they are judged to be natural and of no defense importance, information about them remains classified. The existence of this secrecy is certainly one of the major reasons, if not the primary one, that the alien and UFO folklores have become as developed as they have, and also a major reason why misinformation abounds, and along with it the inept "debunking" that we see in the scientific, intellectual, and media cultures. It is into the context of all this confusion that any official disclosure must be made, and perhaps that's why John Podesta has had trouble getting it to happen. Formal disclosure and the disintegration of the official story are two different things, though, and either one would have the same effect: a hopelessly uninformed media and a confused public would be left to sort it out however they may.

If there is disclosure, at least then the social opprobrium that close encounter witnesses endure would end. But even if there isn't, something needs to be done here. People are suffering, and the humanitarian issue must be addressed. Additionally, the media needs to accept that the matter is a serious one and stop blocking any serious consideration of it with indifference, fallacious reportage, and, above all, the devastating weapon of

laughter which, more than anything, suppresses rational approach to the subject.

As recently as January of 2015, the comedian John Hodgman delivered a Whitley Strieber rectal probe joke on the *Ted Radio Hour*. He framed it in the context of having seen the film adaptation of *Communion*. But prior to discoursing on the movie, such as it was, he was careful to deliver the identifying Whitley Strieber catchphrase, “rectal probes.” He concluded his description of having seen the movie in a venue where it never actually played with the line, “Whitley Strieber was played by Christopher Walken. The aliens were played by rubber puppets.”

The close encounter witnesses are among the last minority groups that can be humiliated without penalty. I curse my own ineptitude in having come up with that phrase “rectal probe.” It has been one of the primary reasons that the whole phenomenon continues to be taken in a simplistic way as a claim of alien encounter, and a laughable one.

Even given all that, I have been one of the lucky ones. I know of close encounter witnesses who have been divorced, fired, ostracized, institutionalized, and, in a few cases, driven to suicide because they made their experiences known. While, as I have recorded in some other venues, I have at times very seriously considered suicide, I have never been abandoned by my family, and have retained many of my friends, for the most part the oldest ones, who understand that I would never engage in fraud, and that the suffering I experienced was not particularly funny. Most of them understand that I am reporting perceptions, and what that means. They also know that I am almost pathologically honest. They are aware of the irony that it was this honesty that led me to write *Communion*, the book which has caused me to be labeled at best a misanthrope of some sort and at worst a liar.

I am not a liar, and I do not deserve to be punished for perpetrating a literary hoax, any more than I or any other close encounter witnesses deserve to be marginalized or discriminated against for reporting what we have seen and experienced. Just like other groups with unusual perceptual experiences and ways of responding to reality, we deserve to be treated with some modicum of respect.

However, changing all this might prove more difficult than it should be,

because there is a social institution involved that actively seeks to distort the culture's view of the phenomenon.

I refer again to the official intrusion into the matter. It goes beyond denial. There is a proactive element as well. Just before I published my book *Confirmation*, in which there is some criticism of U. S. Air Force, a fake story was planted about me in *Parade* magazine stating that I had "admitted" that I had temporal lobe epilepsy and made a contribution to the Epilepsy Foundation. This story was the exact opposite of the truth, which I had reported in an earlier book, *Transformation*. On the first page, I explained that tests had shown that my brain was not seizure-prone, and that I did not have TLE. I understood from a *Parade* editor that the story had come from friends of mine in the air force. I had no friends there, obviously.

The UFO/alien aspect of the larger phenomenon appears to have been singled out for special treatment by governmental entities, for reasons that remain concealed behind the barrier of classification.

In general, UFO researchers advocate that governments around the world are universally devoted to concealing an alien presence on Earth. Personally, I am not so ready to believe this. Certain governments are concealing *something*, but it is difficult to believe that all governments that might have been exposed to a phenomenon that has been lavishly present worldwide for at least sixty years would continue to keep such a secret.

I would assume that the United States and the United Kingdom are keeping secret not only that they know that there is something appearing in our atmosphere that they cannot explain, but also that they know that it sometimes has an effect on some of their citizens, and they don't want to admit that they can't control it. No matter its origin, alien or earthly, natural or generated by some sort of intelligence, it affects vast numbers of people and, for that reason alone, should be addressed rationally in the public forum. Because this does not happen, an enormous amount of human experience and human suffering that probably has nothing to do with national security has been left unstudied, and the victims made figures of fun instead of given the support that our normally compassionate society ought to be offering them.

It is, quite simply, no longer possible for official circles to deny that somebody or something unknown is manifesting itself in our world. John Podesta is right: the time for denial has passed. The revelation of yet another massive, ongoing lie will not surprise the public any more than revelation of

the truth of this strange presence will. Further denial, though, will continue to put a damper on granting for any research that might touch on the subject, and thus cause the present confusion to continue to expand into ever more elaborate folklores.

Another reason for classification is probably that governments cannot determine whether or not the phenomenon is a military threat.

Given, however, that these things have been engaging in their theatrics since at least the late forties, and probably for much, much longer than that, it is ludicrous to think that any threat from them would be military in nature. If threat exists, and my own experience and that of many other people certainly suggests that it might, it is deeply personal and individual.

Governments need to acknowledge that whatever they know and have encountered is part of a very large-scale and ancient phenomenon and detach it completely from national security classification. The National Academy of Sciences needs to encourage granting in the field, with a specific concentration on the close encounter witnesses, who are not only in the front line of whatever is happening, but also the core source of the myth that is building up around it.

Science and the wider culture, at the very least, need to approach it objectively on two levels: the first is for science to accept what governments has already confirmed, which is that the “plasmas” exist and to acknowledge that they have effects on people; the second is to acknowledge the contribution offered by the academic community: this is an ancient part of human life, and it is being studied, as Jeff has shown, within the academy. There is no reason that science should not follow suit.

Early on, based on my memories of what had happened to me and the testimony of others, I found the alien hypothesis very convincing. It was not until Anne began to report that my strange experience of seeing a dead friend in the company of the aliens was actually a commonplace of the letters we were receiving did I begin to think that this might not be an entirely satisfactory solution to the puzzle.

Now I think that there is an entirely new way to look at the phenomenon. First, it should be seen in context as a cultural artifact that is being forged as Jeff points out, in very deep levels of our psyche, places that have the power to transform how we view ourselves and the world around us in fundamental ways.

Second, it should be seen as having a physical component. It's been admitted that plasmas that are not understood by science are involved, so it's not that they don't exist or that they aren't worth studying. Hardly: the Condign Report also admits that these plasmas affect the temporal lobe of the human brain, the very seat of our humanity and intelligence. What's more, there are unexplained objects appearing in people's bodies, often, as in my case, near the brain. Clearly, study is essential.

Study of the witnesses certainly is possible, but how to go about studying such a transient phenomenon as a plasma, or UFO, that flits across the sky leaving behind, at best, fuzzy traces on amateur video? Actually, that wouldn't be difficult, either. We study transient phenomena like lightning, superwaves, and stellar explosions. All that is required is preparation. It would be possible to use camera arrays that scan wide areas of the sky across the spectrum of light, and gather data about all anomalies that are recorded. That they would be recorded is beyond question. UFO skywatchers using infrared lenses record them all the time.

Do they appear cyclically? How fast do they travel? Do they pop up in the atmosphere like sprites, or do they enter it from above? Do they land? If so, where and for how long, and what do people in their proximity report experiencing?

Assuming that the cultural barriers are dropped and scientists and intellectuals without negative preconceptions can be found to do the work, progress can be made.

Right now, as we have demonstrated, the culture, insofar as it cares about this issue at all, is divided into the two camps, one that believes in the alien hypothesis and the other that thinks that it's good only for a laugh. But, as we have also argued and the evidence suggests, there may be much more to it than that.

It seems likely that we are not yet finished understanding the way reality works and how the universe is actually structured. At present, for example, there are a number of experiments going on and theories being proposed that, if they prove out, will fundamentally revise our understanding not only of the universe, but of reality, yet again. As this is being written, for example, an attempt is being made at the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland to detect mini black holes. If they are found to exist, then a key tenet of string theory, that parallel universes exist, will receive fundamental support.

Another experiment being prepared at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, Fermilab, could change our vision of reality in yet another crucially important way. This experiment involves an instrument called the holometer, which, when completed, will be the world's most sensitive laser interferometer. Using it, scientists may be able to answer a fundamental question about reality, which is whether it is a three-dimensional object or a two-dimensional surface projecting a hologram—that is to say, whether it is obedient to classical physics or resolved into the forms we see and experience by some as yet unknown process.

Unknown, that is, to us. If it is indeterminate, then there may be ways of manipulating how it resolves into classical form. If so, advanced alien species might have powers that are literally beyond magic, powers, for example, to raise the dead by altering the flow of time or even editing reality itself as easily as we edit film.

They could be so advanced and so large scale in their capabilities that we are part of their reality in the same sense that chimpanzees are of ours. A chimp can apprehend a thing like a car but nothing can ever enable it to understand even the slightest thing about what it really is or why it moves. Nor can we ever explain to the chimp in his cage or his little corner of African jungle where he is. We can't tell him, no matter how hard we try. He literally cannot know.

We don't know, but I'm not so sure that we can't. Whoever our visitors are, the fact that, as I have found, there appears to be a process of education suggests that we might have a capacity for understanding. Otherwise, why bother?

So, if we can learn, then we need to do our part. Instead of hiding from the truth behind a screen of official secrecy and ignoring it intellectually and scientifically, we need to face it full on. I am not the only person who could engage with the visitors in the way that I have. If I can, then in one way or another, and each by his own lights and to his own abilities, we all can.

What will we find, though, if the evidence points away from an incursion by beings from another planet?

A remarkable paper was published in *Physical Review X* (<http://journals.aps.org/prx/abstract/10.1103/PhysRevX.4.041013>) by Michael J.W. Hall, Dirk-André Deckert, and Howard M. Wiseman on October 23, 2014. In it, they propose that quantum weirdness may not actually exist at all, and that

its effects can be explained classically if there are a large number of other universes occupying space coexistent with our own. “Here, a ‘world’ means an entire universe with well-defined properties, determined by the classical configuration of its particles and fields,” they say in their abstract.

What makes this paper so provocative is that it does away with the “spookiness” of things like quantum indeterminacy and entanglement, replacing them with very slight interactions with corresponding particles in the other universes. Dr. Wiseman told the *New Scientist* that “one way to think about it is that they coexist in the same space as our universe, like ghost universes.”

They would not interact with our universe except in very small ways, but this interaction, Dr. Wiseman and his colleagues believe, would be enough to explain why things like the “double-slit experiment” work. In that experiment, of course, photons fired at a light-sensitive screen through a double slit create a characteristic pattern on it that suggests that they are acting as both particle and wave.

If, however, we are not seeing some sort of weirdness at all, but the effect of subtle interaction with other universes, themselves operating according to the classical model, then quantum weirdness may be an illusion. It may also be that intelligent creatures arising in these universes have developed exquisite technologies that enable them to interact with universes other than their own. Thus when I sat across from a dead man in my woods, he was interacting with me from a context in which he wasn’t dead at all. This would explain, as well, why the dead who accompany the aliens generally report that they’re perfectly well. Because they are—but in another universe.

It could be, then, that there is an understandable “classical” explanation for all the weirdness that we are observing around us. It is due to the fact that, either naturally or by the application of some sort of technology, or both, there is interaction between our universe and others, and the “aliens” indeed do not come from some vastly distant planet, but from right here. How ironic it would be, if this is true, that we have spent so much time trying to imagine how it might be possible to travel interstellar distances in order to somehow explain this presence, when its actual distance from us might not be unimaginably far away at all, but unimaginably close.

In any case, experiments can be devised to determine whether or not this

theory is true. From my own experience of life, I would think that it may indeed be so, and that the brain, in some cases, might be capable of obtaining information from these other universes, and the body of interacting with them. Perhaps it takes something unusual in a person's life or in their genetic makeup or both for them to be sensitive in this way. As I pointed out in "Cracking the Cosmic Egg," and Jeff discussed in "Trauma, Trance, and Transcendence," early childhood trauma may shatter our expectations of reality, leaving us to see, amid the fragments that are left to us, shadows from ghost universes.

There may be even more to it than that, though. We might not understand our relationship to the physical universe any more than we do the true nature of the reality in which we find ourselves living. I say this because so many of our early cultures have included either a human origin among the stars or a means of returning to them in their mythologies, or both.

For example, the "solar boats" of Khufu, discovered in granite pits near the Great Pyramid may have been intended to convey the pharaoh's soul heavenward—that is to say, into the sky, presumably when the Milky Way aligned with the Nile. Similarly, in south Texas the "White Shaman," discovered by my old friend Jim Zintgraff on his ranch near the Pecos River fifty years ago, suggests a similar belief. The White Shaman is one of the finest examples of rock art in the Americas, and depicts a shaman directing souls skyward, apparently toward the Milky Way. So this idea that the soul might ascend to the sky would seem to be both very widespread and very old, as both the solar boats and the White Shaman are around four thousand years old.

Carolyn Boyd, in her book *Rock Art of the Lower Pecos*, describes and interprets not only the White Shaman, but places it in context with all of the rock art of the region.

I have gone down along the Pecos River at night, just a short distance from the White Shaman, and seen the Milky Way reflected in its clear, cliff-bound waters, and imagined, as Anthony Powell so beautifully expresses in *Temporary Kings*, book eleven in his *A Dance to the Music of Time* series, "the liberated soul ascends, looking at the sunset towards the west wind, and hearing secret harmonies."

As I looked up into the stars in that ancient place, I wondered about those harmonies. I recalled an evening with astronaut Edgar Mitchell at the

home of some mutual friends, when he described to me and Anne what it was like to look at Earth from the moon. It was a story he must have told even more often than I have told the story of the *Communion* moment, but hearing the wonder in his voice was transcending, humbling, and transformative. Singing behind his words, most certainly were those secret harmonies. We all hear them, when our minds are quiet and the night sky overspreads. It is fundamental to the human condition, this wonder. Do we have a history of some sort in the stars, or a fate among them? Are we travelers in the sky above, as well as among the ghost universes of which our own, to the others, must be equally a shadow?

Will we one day discover that our mind is a bridge to a living mosaic of universes, both ghostly and physical, and that ghosts, aliens, demons, angels, and all the super and yet natural creatures that we are able to peripherally observe and interact with, appear among us from various sources, some of them in the physical world, and others in a mysterious vastness that resides right here, right now, an infinity of mirrors reflecting reality as an endless strangeness?

As travelers among the forked paths of the forest of reality, we come once again to the place of question: who are we, what are we, where are we?

I have on the wall of my office a framed copy of the famous photograph of Earth known as the *Pale Blue Dot*. The photograph was taken in 1990 by the Voyager 1 spacecraft from a distance of 3.7 billion miles in space. In it, the dot where we have appeared and raised our eyes to the stars floats in a cathedral vastness, tiny, alone and profoundly isolated.

So it is easy enough to see where we are. We are riding a speck of dust in a great nowhere, a universe that may certainly contain other pale blue dots, but is, for the most part, a trackless desert of wandering stars and riotously uninhabitable planets.

But who, then, and what? We are a species of ape, reflecting in our brutality toward one another the same sort of brutality that we observe in the chimpanzee tribe, that and so very much more. We are very cruel and also very inventive, with the result that, across history, we have brought many an evil imagining to malignant life. But we also cradle our babies and touch one another with gentle love in the night, and weep at passings and rejoice at births, and live our lives out along a river that, deep within each of us, reflects the stars.

We hunger to believe. We need to believe. Unfortunately, we are all too often also willing to harm those who do not believe as we do, even to kill them. I remember once when I was walking late at night in the woods behind my old cabin, I perceived something nearby that I could not name nor even see, but which frightened me so deeply that I became unable to move forward or back. I was a good mile from the nearest inhabited place, and this presence was dropping down around me like the folds of a malign, living darkness.

I finally fell to my knees and crouched down into myself and began to pray to a god whose existence I doubt but whose help I needed, and begged for protection. Whereupon somebody out in the dark said across the silence, "Look at him, calling on his gods." In another context, once again when I was praying, I heard, "There's nobody here but us."

Us. I did not feel a "them" in that word at all. I felt in it a sense of deep comradeship, as if "us" was almost unimaginably inclusive, a vast word that was being used to describe a vast being of which we are all a part. "Us" was them, was me, was you, was all the unseen lives on all the pale blue dots that dust the wasteland, and was consciousness in the void.

So we are here in the great unknown, "us," the consciousness that rides the desert of space and time, a ghost light, extremely rare but nevertheless real and signaling our presence as best we are able and however we are able, signaling in the dark.

But what, then, are we? We know that we are flesh, and seek to believe that we are more, that our consciousness, which seems so ephemeral, might in some way continue on, affirming not only our individual selves, but also the billions of years that it has taken the pale blue dot to evolve creatures with questions in their minds and wonder in their eyes.

We so want this precious "us" to be more than sparks in flesh doomed to die with the inevitable implosion of the body. I have had a lifetime of experience that suggests that we may be more—indeed, that we have hardly even begun to touch on the complexity and enormity of what it is to be human. But I cannot give you that lifetime. I cannot give the richness of my experiences to others, only describe them as best I can. I can never transmit them as I have lived them, not in their visceral reality. I can never share with you the scent of a man who materialized before my eyes, from, he said, a place that is between physical lives. I cannot share what it feels like to have an implant, or to remember the strange loves I have known.

The fact that we are so isolated within ourselves is our tragedy and also our blessing. For that which drives so many of us to desperate belief also energizes the question, which is our most valuable asset and our best hope.

What are we? A fleeting, intricate presence riding a tiny speck of water and rock, out here in the dark, sailing the ship of wonder ever more deeply into the void from which we came, that is our true home and mysterious destination.

We are alone. We are not.

APPENDIX

“An Approximation to Realness or Final Awakening” Or How to Make the Supernatural Super Natural in Nine Steps

JEFF

The odd title of this appendix comes from Charles Fort’s *The Book of the Damned* (1919). With respect to the unexplained, Fort understood that it all comes down to one’s comparative practice. Collection, classification, and pattern recognition are the keys to seeing what is already there before our eyes, if only we could collect enough pieces and put them together in the right way. In his boldest moments, Fort even claimed that a sufficiently robust comparative practice could result in “an approximation to realness or final awakening.” Such a comparative practice would, in effect, end the world we assume and reveal another one, our true condition. He called this apocalyptic possibility on the horizon of thought “the gossip of angels.”

Whitley and I have done our best in these pages to imagine this angelic gossip. We have seen things. We have said things. We have failed, of course, to arrive at any “realness or final awakening.” But we never promised as much. But we did our best. It is now up to you.

Toward that same gossip of angels, here is a summary of what we have seen and said, a kind of instruction sheet for anyone who seeks to make the supernatural super natural in his or her own life and community.

COMPARE. Data is just data. It means nothing until it is classified and compared toward some end. *Everything* depends on what you “put on the table,” that is, on your comparative practice: what you compare with what to conclude. Begin, then, by recognizing your choices and your own role in this selective process. Compare the appearances you are trying to understand with other similar but different appearances in the historical record, all the while being careful to “shoot the arrow both ways,” that is, be careful not to privilege too quickly any past *or* present interpretation of these similarities.

MAKE A CUT. Make a distinction between what has appeared and what is and recognize that, as an embodied ego, you have no reliable access to the latter, and for one simple reason: you yourself are a biological medium or neurological filter. Do not believe what you believe.

HISTORICALLY CONTEXTUALIZE. Place the events that you are trying to understand both in the general history of religions and in their own more immediate historical, social, and political contexts. Employ these contexts to not only recognize the uniqueness of the events but also to see how they fit into much larger global patterns.

INTERPRET AND DOUBLY IMAGINE. Consider the possibility that some of these encounters may be mediated expressions of another form of mind (maybe ours) making contact with the human ego and transmitting some symbolic signal. Recognize that, generally speaking, extraordinary visions and experiences are not what they seem on the surface, that they must be interpreted. Recognize the roles of fantasy and projection in the production of these potential signals, but do not assume that everything imagined is imaginary. Imagine double. Hone your Hermes practice, your hermeneutics.

PRACTICE AN EROTICS. Consider the ways that these extraordinary experiences are shaped by particular gender assumptions and sexual orientations. Also look for moments in which they might actively engage or “flip” the human sexual system and so lead to various forms of union or communion. Do not automatically reduce

these experiences to the simply sexual, but recognize how sexual energies can sometimes morph into transcendent spiritual states.

SAY AWAY. Learn to live with paradox, to sit with the question. Come to terms with the bluntly physical ways that these events sometimes materialize in the environment. Recognize the manner in which they commonly fuse or transcend the subjective and objective dimensions of the human experience through various paradoxical “paranormal” phenomena and so point to some deeper, super natural world before the “splitting off” of the mental and material dimensions of ordinary experience. Recognize that this splitting into a subject “in here” perceiving objects “out there” is a function of the human organism and its cognitive and sensory hardware and probably not of the psychophysical world itself.

LISTEN FOR THE TRAUMATIC SECRET. Keep in mind the possible role of trance in the generation of the stories you are trying to understand. Consider whether the trance state might be related to a history of trauma that has “cracked open” the ego for contact and communication, but do not assume an identity between the traumatic opening and the transcendence that might be rushing in through this cracked-open door.

THINK IN TERMS OF AN ENERGETICS. Look for energetic, electromagnetic, or plasmalike phenomena within and around the extreme experience. See if these altered states of energy appear to be alive or intelligent in some way. Recognize that you may well not be able to reason with them, but that you may be able to resonate with them. And finally . . .

SAY AGAIN. Decide for yourself whether the story that your cultural trance-forms have put you in is a story you really want to be in. If it is not, then wake up out of that story, step off the page, and begin to think about telling another, but try to tell this new story in a new way—as a true fiction. You will need help. Seek out like-minded individuals. Create community. Look to unexplained events— weird “coincidences,” striking dreams, drop-your-jar super moments—in your life as possible clues to how to tell this new

story-self with others, or how to *not* tell it (there might, after all, be negative or dark synchronicities). Finally, consider just who is telling *all* of these stories. Here are the steps, then: contact, communication, communion, community, and, finally . . . consciousness.

No one, of course, really “makes the supernatural super natural.” It already is, and it has always been so. All that changes is the filter, the medium, or the prism of the light. All that changes is us.

ENTIRELY NATURAL NOTES

1. These are all allusions to actual cases, including a precognitive dream of Mark Twain's (the future funeral) and a clairvoyant vision of Emmanuel Swedenborg (the distant-neighborhood fire). For fuller discussions of each, see my "Visions of the Impossible: How 'Fantastic' Stories Unlock the Nature of Consciousness," *The Chronicle Review, The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 4, 2014.
2. I am indebted to my colleague Ann Taves for this language and basic idea.
3. I am indebted to my colleague Wouter Hanegraaff for this language and basic idea.
4. J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of Occultism & Parapsychology* (Detroit: Gale Group, 2001), 269. Edgar Cayce had already used the word "channel" in the 1920s and '30s to describe what he was doing (my thanks to Kevin Todeschi via Mitch Horowitz for this historical fact). And, of course, whoever we want to credit with the term's invention, modern channeling possesses countless psychospiritual precedents in the various diviners, bards, shamans, mediums, prophets, revelations, and possessions of human history—the Human as Two.
5. Leslie Kean, *UFOs: Generals, Pilots, and Government Officials Go on the Record* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010). This book begins with a foreword by John Podesta, the fourth chief of staff under President Clinton (1998–2001). For another provocative treatment by a former Green Beret combat veteran, project manager at Los Alamos National Laboratory, and consultant to the National Intelligence Council and the CIA, see John B. Alexander, *UFOs: Myths, Conspiracies, and Realities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011). Both authors insist on the base reality of the phenomenon behind and before all the misinformation and hoaxing.
6. I first identified these in *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms*, with Ata Anzali, Andrea R. Jain, and Erin Prophet (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014). See especially chapter 8.
7. Whitley puzzles over the same "conscious machine" phenomenon in *Transformation: The Breakthrough* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1988), 37.
8. James Gallant has beautifully made the point with respect to ancient Greek polytheism in "The Humiliating UFOs," *Raritan* Vol. 30, No.4 (2011).

9. I believe I first introduced my own understanding of this notion in the conclusion of *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). For a similar, and more profound, version, see my friend and colleague Elliot Wolfson's notion of the "time-swerve," in *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and the Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).
10. For more on this, see chapter 3 of *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), "The Future Technology of Folklore: Jacques Vallee and the UFO Phenomenon."
11. Whitley Strieber, *The Secret School: Preparation for Contact* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 227.
12. The comparative practice we are honing and developing here is not entirely new. Early and important strains of it can be found in the British psychical research tradition of the late nineteenth century, where this attempt to unite and yet move beyond mechanistic science and dogmatic religion was called the *tertium quid*, that is, the Third Thing.
13. See, for example, my, "Visions of the Impossible."
14. Although the point is debatable, some have argued that Husserl can be seen as a "transcendental idealist" in the tradition of Immanuel Kant. On this reading, Husserl held that objects are in fact partially constituted by subjectivity: by our awareness and perception of them. This is an especially trippy idea that we do not need to fully understand in order to see how it might relate to Whitley's visionary experiences, which he has routinely described as both a "thing" and a "thought," that is, as a set of real objects that somehow also participated in the nature of mind. Whitley's constant invocation of quantum physics to illustrate how the act of observation somehow calls forth a particular physical reality makes a great deal of sense within the transcendental idealist tradition. If I may be so bold, Whitley's experiences look *a lot* like a visionary demonstration of transcendental idealism, were Kant and Husserl American sci-fi writers and visionaries instead of German philosophers! I am indebted to my colleague Glenn Magee for this philosophical material.
15. Maurice O'C. Walshe, trans. and ed., *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 145.
16. *Ibid.*, Sermon 24.
17. The fullest treatments of these empirical rogue phenomena toward a revisioning of the mind-brain relationship are the two volumes that came out of the Esalen "Sursem" symposia series over the last decade and a half: Edward F. Kelly and Emily Williams Kelly, eds., *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); and Edward F. Kelly, Adam Crabtree, and Paul Marshall, eds., *Beyond Physicalism: Toward Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
18. Sir William Barrett, *Deathbed Visions: How the Dead Talk to the Dying*, reprinted with a new Introduction by Michael Tymn (Guildford, UK: White Crow Books, 2011). For a more recent

discussion, this time by psychiatrist Bruce Greyson of the University of Virginia, see “Seeing Dead People Not Known to Have Died: ‘Peak in Darien’ Experiences,” *Anthropology and Humanism*, Vol. 35, Issue 2 (2010): 159–171.

- [19](#). Not at least one that I can remember. Apparently my family encountered an immense rectangular UFO in the night sky of northern Nebraska on our way to Yankton, South Dakota, to see some relatives in the late 1960s. But I have no memory of this.
- [20](#). For much more on this, see *Comparing Religions* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), Kripal, with Anzali, Jain, and Prophet, where I trace this metaphor of the toolbox in the history of the study of religion and develop it more fully.
- [21](#). Much of what follows is a rewriting of my “Better Horrors: From Terror to Communion in Whitley Strieber’s *Communion* (1987),” for a special issue on “Horrors” in the journal *Social Research* 81/4 (winter 2015): 897–921.
- [22](#). Personal communication, 11 August 2014.
- [23](#). Linda Zimmerman, *Hudson Valley UFOs: Startling Eyewitness Accounts from 1909 to the Present* (New York: Eagle Press, 2014), 1, 4, 7, 2.
- [24](#). Zimmerman, *Hudson Valley UFOs*, 39 (the “hit with a rock” story); 69–71 (the early abductions); 42–43, 74 (psychical capacities); 112–115 (the “wheels”); 83 (the green humanoid); 154–159 (the circular landing marks); 31, 35, 44 (helicopters); 53, 59, 76, 87, 92–93, 128, 155 (spooked animals).
- [25](#). Zimmerman, *Hudson Valley UFOs*, 165–166. I don’t know where to begin with this one, so I won’t.
- [26](#). For one of many, see Whitley Strieber, *Transformation: The Breakthrough* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1988), 128–129.
- [27](#). J. Allen Hynek, Philip J. Imbrogno, and Bob Pratt, *Night Siege: The Hudson Valley UFO Sightings* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1998), 33, 34, 49, 13.
- [28](#). Hynek, Imbrogno, and Pratt, *Night Siege*, 81, 39, 56–57.
- [29](#). Jim Steinmeyer, *Charles Fort: The Man Who Invented the Supernatural* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2008).
- [30](#). See my “Scattering the Seeds of a Super Story: Charles Fort and the Fantastic Narrative of Western Occulture,” in *Authors of the Impossible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
- [31](#). Charles Fort, *The Book of the Damned: The Collected Works of Charles Fort*, Introduction by Jim Steinmeyer (New York: Penguin /Tarcher, 2008), 459.

- [32.](#) Ibid., 216.
- [33.](#) Ibid., 264.
- [34.](#) Ibid., 163.
- [35.](#) Ibid., 217.
- [36.](#) William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 309.
- [37.](#) Whitley Strieber, *Communion: A True Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 90.
- [38.](#) Ibid., xv–xvi.
- [39.](#) Ibid., 300.
- [40.](#) Ibid., 301.
- [41.](#) My thanks to my colleague Diana Walsh Pasulka for pointing this passage out to me, and at exactly the right moment.
- [42.](#) Hermeneutics as a discipline is usually traced back to German romanticism and figures like Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911). Its basic methods, though, can easily be found in the history of Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation, particularly within the mystical traditions that moved far beyond the surface historical or literal meanings to the deeper, secret, or “mystical” messages of the texts.
- [43.](#) Whitley Strieber, *Breakthrough: The Next Step* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 20.
- [44.](#) Foreword by Whitley Strieber, in Jacques Vallee, *Dimensions: A Casebook of Alien Contact* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), vii. Whitley describes this as probably his “most accurate speculation” in *Breakthrough*, 5; and again in *Confirmation*, 93–94, where he links it explicitly to the phenomenological cut we introduced in ch. 2: “I would suggest that this is probably the best of my many notions about the visitors, especially because it refers only to their effect in our world, a question we can usefully address no matter whether ‘they’ are aliens or not.”
- [45.](#) There *have* been some very sophisticated discussions of the imaginal component of the UFO phenomenon, but these, as far as I can tell, have taken place in technical or professional contexts (often of a Jungian nature) and have been mostly ignored by the broader public. Consider, for a start, Dennis Stillings, ed., *Cyberbiological Studies of the Imaginal Component in the UFO Contact Experience* (Archaeus Project, 1989).
- [46.](#) I am indebted here to Jess Byron Hollenback’s notion of the “empowered religious imagination” in his marvelous *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

- [47.](#) For more on these figures and this history, see my *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), chapter 1.
- [48.](#) Frederic W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1920), vol. 1, xviii. The first edition appeared in 1903.
- [49.](#) Myers, *Science and a Future Life with Other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1901), 37-38. This was originally published in 1893.
- [50.](#) Charles Fort, *The Book of the Damned*, 1049.
- [51.](#) G. N. M. Tyrrell, *Apparitions* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1953), 30.
- [52.](#) There are numerous references to this line in the UFO folklore. I have not been able to locate an original source. In any case, my use of it here does not rely on its textual history. Whatever its source, the one-liner's message is, as Goldilocks had it, "just right."
- [53.](#) For examples, see Strieber, *Breakthrough*, 48, 64, 70, and 284–285, where he links this evolutionary spirituality to the "secret Tantric traditions" of India and the American human potential movement.
- [54.](#) Pierre Lory, "Sexual Intercourse Between Humans and Demons in the Islamic Tradition," and Cathy Gutierrez, "Deadly Dates: Bodies and Sex in Spiritualist Heavens," in Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal, eds., *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); and Colin Waters, *The Pregnant Ghost and Other Sexual Hauntings* (London: Robert Hale, 1993).
- [55.](#) April D. DeConick, *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter* (New York: Continuum, 2011).
- [56.](#) I am well aware that there is no good historical evidence that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. I am describing the tradition here, not the textual and historical evidence. There is no good historical evidence that Mary was a lifelong virgin either, of course. But that is another story.
- [57.](#) Wilhelm Fränger, *The Millennium of Hieronymus Bosch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 104.
- [58.](#) This is a difficult idea that I do not want to avoid but which I also do not want to pursue here, as it would take us far afield. My fullest statement remains *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
- [59.](#) John A. Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies* (New York: Tor, 1991), 82.
- [60.](#) Whitley Strieber, *Transformation: The Breakthrough* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1988), 191–200.

61. A cardiologist once heard me describe this experience in a classroom and noted that it sounded like a “complex partial seizure.” Maybe it was. I would not deny that. This would explain why it felt like an electrocution and why the energies, in at least some of my memories, focused on the heart as they imploded “in,” perhaps into the neurological node in the heart that creates the heartbeat. Who is to say? What I would deny is that the cardiologist’s reading and my own reading here need to be mutually exclusive, as if such a neurological event cannot become the very “opening” to something more, that is, to an inrush of Spirit or Self projected as an imaginal out-of-body experience. Within various esoteric anatomies, the bodily locus of the Spirit or Self, after all, is often located precisely “in” the physiological heart. In my own mind, this is simply another illustration of the super natural. It is also an illustration of what I call “the traumatic secret” below, that is, the way that trauma can “crack us open” for an experience of transcendence.

62. And, yes, it *does* matter whether a thinker has been in such a state or not. Major scientists and intellectuals who have known such encounters have insisted on the reality of these phenomena against their nay-saying colleagues. Consider geneticist and Nobel laureate Kary Mullis’s account of what looks exactly like an alien abduction (which he positively compares to Whitley’s *Communion*) in *Dancing Naked in the Mind Field* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); or cell biologist and feminist social critic Barbara Ehrenreich’s epiphany of what she suggests is an invisible species living in the environment, akin to the gods and extraterrestrials of folklore, in *Living with a Wild God: A Nonbeliever’s Search for the Truth about Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2014). Ehrenreich uses her own experience to openly challenge, and reject, the materialist interpretations of science.

63. See David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yogini: “Tantric Sex” in its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). This is the second volume in a trilogy that constitutes the most creative and learned interpretive vision we have of medieval Indian Tantra. I cannot recommend them highly enough. The other two are *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and *Sinister Yogis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

64. White, *Kiss of the Yogini*, 206.

65. Another author who has intuited, if not quite developed, a similar comparison is Kenneth Ring, in his *The Omega Project: Near-Death Experiences, UFO Encounters, and Mind at Large* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1992). See his brief discussion of “The Kundalini Syndrome,” 164–166. Ring’s bold book illustrates a number of my own convictions expressed here.

66. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 45–46, 49.

67. Eliade, *Shamanism*, 50, n45. For other references to rock crystals, see Eliade’s rich index.

68. Whitley Strieber, *Communion: A True Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 83–84.

69. See David Halperin, “Saint Paul: UFO Abductee?” (Part 2) at <http://www.davidhalperin.net/saint-paul-ufo-abductee-part-2/>

- [70](#). I am hardly the first to suggest this. The world's trickster myths work in very similar ways, as numerous folklorists and anthropologists have noted. In a similar vein, C. G. Jung read the flying saucer phenomenon in the late 1950s as the collective mind's symbolic attempt to rebalance itself after a long night of rationalism and mechanism. Finally, George Hansen has argued much the same in his *The Trickster and the Paranormal* (Xlibris, 2001)—required reading, in my opinion, for anyone truly serious about the topic.
- [71](#). Maurice O'C. Walshe, trans. and ed., *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2010), 296.
- [72](#). I am deeply indebted for this line of thinking to my colleague Harald Atmanspacher. Harald is a Swiss quantum theorist and an expert on the quarter-century friendship between the quantum physicist Wolfgang Pauli and the depth psychologist C. G. Jung. For Harald's latest work on the same, see Harald Atmanspacher and Christopher A. Fuchs, eds., *The Pauli-Jung Conjecture: And Its Impact Today* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2014). Jung sometimes described this "one world" below what we know as the mental and the material as "psychoid."
- [73](#). I am indebted to my colleague Sarah Johnston for this insight.
- [74](#). For an eloquent and deeply personal explanation of trance as a technique for accessing human potential, see Adam Crabtree, *Memoir of a Trance Therapist: Hypnosis and the Evocation of Human Potentials* (Victoria, BC: FriesenPress, 2014).
- [75](#). Lee Siegel, *Trance-Migrations: Stories of India, Tales of Hypnosis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 2. I am indebted to Lee for my language of "trance-formations" and many of the insights of this particular section.
- [76](#). Jeffrey J. Kripal, "The Traumatic Secret: Bataille and the Comparative Erotics of Mystical Literature," in Jeremy Biles and Kent Brintnall, eds., *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).
- [77](#). I cannot pursue the possibility here, but I also want to leave open the possibility that there may be real "demons," that is, negative spirits or aggressive, invisible species in the environment. There certainly are in people's experiences throughout human history, and the phenomenological cut demands that we take those experiences seriously and sympathetically. Sometimes the most adequate response to an experience of evil is not a professor's theory but an exorcism. Having said that, there are moral and intellectual complexities galore here, from the possible presence of mental illness to the historical demonization of other people's religious experiences.
- [78](#). I am indebted for this idea to Jess Hollenback, who articulated it at a symposium on the imaginal that I hosted for the Center for Theory and Research, Esalen Institute, October 19–24, 2014.
- [79](#). See especially Matthew T. Kapstein, ed., *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). I cannot pursue this idea here, but the history of light in the religions is connected to the mystical experience of human sexuality. See

Mircea Eliade, "Spirit, Light and Seed," in *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

[80.](#) See M. David Litwa, *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013), ch. 4.

[81.](#) <http://secretsun.blogspot.com/2009/11/astrognostic-trapped-here-on-this-alien.html>.

[82.](#) April D. DeConick, *The Ancient New Age: How Gnostic Spirituality Revolutionized Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

[83.](#) The gnostics generally distinguished this immortal spirit (*pneuma*) from the soul (*psyche*), which they believed survives bodily death and can be reincarnated but that is not truly immortal or eternal. Since we live in a flatland culture that denies both aspects of the Human as Two, I often use "soul" and "spirit" interchangeably, not because I think they are the same (I do not), but because they are interchangeable in contemporary American English.

[84.](#) The finest application of entanglement to various forms of anomalous experience is Dean Radin's *Entangled Minds: Extrasensory Experiences in a Quantum World* (New York: Paraview, 2006). Radin's book is a wonderful example of employing the philosophical implications of quantum physics to "make the impossible possible."

[85.](#) David Kaiser, *How the Hippies Saved Physics: Science, Counterculture, and the Quantum Revival* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011). I am indebted to my colleagues Nick Herbert and Jane English for reading over this section and providing me expert feedback.

[86.](#) I discuss the history of this "physics of consciousness" movement, including and especially the elegant comparisons of Fritjof Capra, in *Esalen*, ch. 13. Capra's book was based partly on a mystical experience he had of the subatomic world, not unlike that of Jane English described immediately below.

[87.](#) Jane English, *Fingers Pointing to the Moon: Words and Images of Paradox-Common Sense-Whimsey-Transcendence* (Mount Shasta: Earth Heart, 1999), 101-102.

[88.](#) *Ibid.*, 104.

[89.](#) See Litwa, *Becoming Divine*, 157.

[90.](#) I borrowed the title "Big Sur Real" from one of my work-scholar students at Esalen, in the summer of 2012. I deeply regret that I cannot remember his name. If you read this, please let me know who you are.

[91.](#) No, he was not stoned. All Stuart had on that midnight was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, which he had just put together from the all-night bread bar in the Lodge.

- [92](#). One of the easiest places to find glowing orbs in Big Sur is in a book about the place, Henry Miller's lovely memoir, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* (New York: New Directions, 1957), 75–76.
- [93](#). I am indebted for this line of thought to Erik Davis, who has written eloquently about this distinction between “reason” and “resonance” in his dissertation on Philip K. Dick, Terence and Dennis McKenna, and Robert Anton Wilson, “High Weirdness: Visionary Experience in the Seventies Counterculture,” PhD diss., Rice University, 2015.” Erik is drawing on a number of thinkers here, especially Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).
- [94](#). Mark Fox, *Spiritual Encounters with Unusual Light Phenomena: Lightforms* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 59–60, 158. Another book, based on the same archives, is Annekatrin Puhle, *Light Changes: Experiences in the Presence of Transforming Light* (Guilford, UK: White Crow Books, 2014).
- [95](#). Paul Marshall, *The Shape of the Soul* (unpublished manuscript), chapter 5, “Soul Spheres.”
- [96](#). Diego Escolar, “Boundaries of Anthropology: Empirics and Ontological Relativism in a Field Experience with Anomalous Luminous Entities in Argentina,” *Anthropology and Humanism* 37/1 (2012): 27–44. The Marton case is also discussed in this essay.
- [97](#). For an eloquent study of the elaborate historical processes through which such encounters were “disciplined” by Church authorities and theological writers until they “meant the right things,” see Diana Walsh Pasulka, *Heaven Can Wait: Purgatory in Catholic Devotional and Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- [98](#). Brent Landau, *Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 90–91. My thanks to Brent for help here with some of the weird comparative details.
- [99](#). E-mail communication of February 2, 2014, 10:21 a.m.
- [100](#). A few very brave intellectuals have struggled with this. I am thinking in particular of the writers Aimé Michel, Jacques Vallee, and Bertrand Méheust. For a discussion of these three men, all of whom know or knew one another, see my *Authors of the Impossible*, chapters 3 and 4.
- [101](#). For his ranking, see the epilogue to John Fairley and Simon Welfare, *Arthur C. Clarke's World of Strange Powers* (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), 243. This was the second volume of three such volumes.
- [102](#). The best source of the three laws is probably Arthur C. Clarke, “Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination,” chapter 2 of the 1973 edition of *Profiles of the Future: An Enquiry Into the Limits of the Possible*. The idea expressed in the famous third law is hardly original with Clarke, however. As others have noted, very similar lines can be found in Charles Fort's *Wild Talents* (1932) and Rider Haggard's occult novel *She* (1886), among other texts. See:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clarke%27s_three_laws. I would only add that much of nineteenth-century psychical research (which employed techno-etymologies to describe psychical phenomena), many other works of occult fiction—Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (1871) comes to mind—and the enigmatic Nikola Tesla, who entertained both extraterrestrial and mystical notions, all can be placed here as well. This entire techno-magical or electro-mystical complex has been studied by Erik Davis in his marvelous *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015).

- [103](#). Arthur C. Clarke, epilogue to Fairley and Welfare, *Arthur C. Clarke’s World of Strange Powers*, 240.
- [104](#). Although I came up with this idea “on my own,” it turns out that it is not entirely original. Hence this line from the Girl Genius: “Any sufficiently analyzed magic is indistinguishable from technology” at <http://www.girlgeniusonline.com/comic.php?date=20081205#.VLZwnEvm0s>. As is so often the case, it is popular culture, in this case a fictional female superhero in a comic book, that gets it right. Go Girl Genius!
- [105](#). Gregory L. Little, introduction to Andrew Collins, *Lightquest: Your Guide to Seeing and Interacting with UFOs, Mystery Lights and Plasma Intelligences* (Memphis: Eagle Wing Books, 2012), 15.
- [106](#). See the Kim Arnold interview in Paola Leopizzi Harris, *UFOs: How Does One Speak to a Ball of Light?* (San Antonio: Anomalist Books, 2011), 1–32.
- [107](#). For much more on this and the full argument, see my *Mutants and Mystics*, chapter 6, “Mutation: X-Men Before Their Time.”
- [108](#). Whitley Strieber and Anne Strieber, *The Communion Letters* (New York: Harper Prism, 1997), 287.
- [109](#). Mark Pilkington, *Mirage Men: An Adventure into Paranoia, Espionage, Psychological Warfare, and UFOs* (New York: Skyhorse, 2010); Robbie Graham, *Silver Screen Saucers: Sorting Fact from Fantasy in Hollywood’s UFO Movies* (forthcoming); Diana Walsh Pasulka, private communications.
- [110](#). I am thinking in particular of Bruce Lincoln, Hugh Urban, and Diana Walsh Pasulka.
- [111](#). Anyone serious about the subject must read Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

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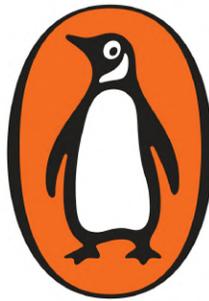
WHITLEY STRIEBER is a novelist and the author of a number of nonfiction works, among them the Communion series, which includes *Communion*, *Transformation*, *Breakthrough*, and *Solving the Communion Enigma*. His fiction includes, among many others, *The Wolfen* and *The Hunger*, both made into movies; *Superstorm*, which was filmed as *The Day After Tomorrow*; and the Alien Hunter series, which is being made into the SyFy channel series *Hunters* by Gale Anne Hurd.

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THE WILD

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Part One

City Life

Life along the vertebrae of the earth,
brown and slow, concentrates in the cracks,
boiling down to harder forms,
skin to stone, finger to claw.

—Robert Duke,
"Silent Transformation" (1987)

Chapter One

CINDY AND ROBERT DUKE WERE IN THE FIFTEENTH YEAR of a good marriage when something unusual happened.

They had a twelve-year-old boy named Kevin Thomas for his paternal grandfather; they had an apartment in New York City; Bob had sold stock, brokered insurance, sold bonds, was now a computer consultant. He had never been much good at making money, but until now he had managed.

Argument was past, anger was past, the sweated skin of Cindy's girlhood was past, and they were really learning one another, growing close in ways so deep that they spent a lot of time infected with secret laughter.

Cindy was heavier than she had been when they used to traverse Manhattan on roller skates, two cheerful Village types, a young poet and his wife. The need for money had ended those days; Bob was a poet now at night only.

Recently Cindy had made a private decision that she would allow herself to widen out a little, to find in the long curves of a bigger body a comfort she had suspected but never dared try.

Bob liked scallops and steak, he liked game and on occasion hunted grouse in the Catskills, where they were members of a hunt club. Cindy cooked the game intricately, her recipes running to Italy and garlic, and much invented, all good, the birds properly brown, the skin crisp and salty, the flesh tender and sweet, and her quail were delicious in steaming piles. They both liked to dig into homemade ice cream with the ice-cream paddle in the middle of the night. Young Kevin had read all of Jack London and Mark Twain. Recently he had turned—or been driven—to Kafka.

Kevin smelled often of oil paint and his art teacher fluttered when speaking about him. Cindy disliked the man, but the school administration loved him. She was tortured with thoughts of kidnapping or more subtle predation, the caress, the boy gladdened by the attention and then the hands against his naked skin, and the parted cracks, the cries, the awful memories for her little son.

She was a heavy sleeper, and did not know how difficult it was for her husband at night. He would read, he would lie looking at her, he would make a deer's soft whistle when the shadows from the street trembled on the bedroom ceiling. Drawing down the sheets, he would see her golden body,

and touch the down on her thigh, and listen to her weighty breathing. He loved her, he understood that, to distraction and to the exclusion of all others. Once he knew her, other women had come to seem ciphers.

Now he sat beside her on a bench at the Central Park Zoo while Kevin sketched a tapir. Bob detested zoos; Cindy and Kevin loved them. When he was much younger, Bob had spent time in the wilderness. He had camped and hiked and canoed. The wilderness haunted him. Wolves haunted him. Freedom haunted him.

It was an October Saturday, the third of the month. Cindy held a copy of the *Times* in her hands, twisting it until the ink was smeared. Bob ate the last of Kevin's Cracker Jacks.

"Look at that," she said.

"What?"

"That wolf is watching us."

She was right: it was staring past the children, the men and women, the candy-apple stand, the popcorn vendor, the whole free crowd. From its prison, it was staring not at them, but at him. The wolf was staring straight into the eyes of Bob Duke.

All of his life Bob had been fascinated by wolves. He enjoyed being near them so much that he had tried to track them. Often, he dreamed about them. In his childhood he had fantasized that he was a magic wolf, and could run through the night sky.

He was unsettled by the feeling this poor, imprisoned wolf communicated to him. As he stared back he tore into the Cracker Jacks box. "Why doesn't it look at somebody else?"

"You're the only poet."

He shot an angry glance at her. He could not help his infirmity. All of his life he had been a poet, unpublished, ignored, but nevertheless on the perfectly valid path of a poet. He hated his own love of poetry. Give him instead a good spreadsheet and some numbers to crunch. He was a bitter man.

There was only one way to describe the look in the eyes of the wolf: horrible.

In this regard it was brother to all the creatures here. Bob could feel the unfocused moaning of the place, the yearning toward a thousand different instinctual freedoms: to run, to hunt, to hide or fly. Love of trees, of animals, of the whole intricate, savage reality of the wild had always sustained Bob.

As a boy in Texas he had watched the night sky, the racing moon, and

dreamed his dreams of the wild.

There was one dream he would never forget. Even though it had happened when he was eleven, it was still vivid in his memory.

In this dream he had been a wolf. He had been awakened in the thick night by an amazing, intoxicating odor. His eyes had snapped open and his whole body had been quivering. The moon had shone down like the eye of some wild god. Waves of fierce pleasure had surged through him, deranging his senses, overwhelming his childish fear of the dark.

He had leaped out of bed, unlatched the screen window with fumbling, desperate fingers, and rushed off into the night. He remembered scuttling across the porch roof beneath his window, then leaping into the moon-silver air. He'd landed as gracefully as an animal on all fours.

Then there were dew-damp leaves slapping his face, and the pulsing, rushing of a beautifully muscled body, his heart breaking with obscure passions of overwhelming power, odors of the night filling his brain, intoxicating him—and then, for the first and only time, he was alive.

It was like leaping and crawling at the same time. The world was transformed by a great magic, the moon spreading its glow everywhere, and he was happy, all the cares of a dull childhood gone, and he was suddenly free in the night and he threw back his head and shook his body and he howled out the piercing joy that filled him blood and bone and soul.

Then he was awake. True, his pajamas were covered with grass stains and there was a dried leaf in his hair. True also, it was seven o'clock in the morning and he had a math quiz to look forward to.

He had gone off to school, smell of paste, math exercise book, the classroom shades drawn against the glory of the morning sun. But forever after, he had wondered if perhaps, for a little while in the dead of the night, he had been a wolf.

It was truly an intoxicating thought, a delicious thought. Man into wolf. Running. Howling. Leaping on the quaking innocent.

But he had never really escaped that classroom he entered on the morning after his magic, and now the caged wolf's eyes mocked him for it. And he thought, You, are you a man who became a wolf, locked in there now?

It was hideous to think that he might be looking at someone who had a name and a past, who had tasted the freedom of the wild only to be locked up like this, a sort of double prisoner.

"Let's get Kevin and go. It's lunchtime."

"We've only been here ten minutes."

The wolf's eyes bored into him. He imagined long, thin claws extending out from the center of those eyes and into the center of his brain, and forming there a molten spot. "The animal's angry," he said.

"I don't blame him. He's in a zoo."

"I hate this place."

"It's only a perfectly ordinary zoo. Anyway, Kevin's in the middle of something exciting. Look at him."

Bob envied and loved his son's ability to draw and paint. But for a child of twelve, why such furies? He made Francis Bacon look cheerful. His son would climb into his lap and they would read together, and Bob would wonder what tormented the boy, who read Kafka's "Hunger Artist" in a solemn, priestly voice, perhaps even in the voice Kafka had heard while he was writing it. Another jumbo jet would roar over the house, and to the west the sky would mutter, another restless night.

Bob was trapped between the staring wolf and his son's obvious excitement. When he moved, he was captured by his wife's cool hand, which squeezed his own. "Relax. It's a sunny day."

"The cages get to me."

"It's *only* a zoo!"

"Oh, come on, Cindy, can't you feel the anger? What about that wolf? You can feel his anger."

"Maybe I'm not sensitive enough for it to matter. After all, I'm not a poet."

How he hated that word. He suspected that it had been invented for the specific purpose of being applied to those whom it would trap. Cindy read his poetry, and now also Kevin. "It's good, Dad. It's real."

Cindy might add: "Couldn't it be a bit less sad? What about the beauties of the world?"

"At Auschwitz Dr. Mengele used to issue what he called 'standing orders.' He and his henchmen would stand on the chests of prisoners until they died."

"That isn't the answer I expected, at least I'll say that for it. What if they lay there looking at the sky, looking past the men destroying them? The sky is made for joy."

"Romantic nonsense."

"It's what I would have done."

"Fatuus. The agony was too great."

"Damn you, Bob, your ego's always in the way. That's the reason your

poems don't get published, you're too proud of them, and it shows."

He threw his head back and stared into the sky. He imagined the feet on his chest, the boots slowly collapsing his ribs, the click of the man's lighter mesmerizing him, the glow of his cigarette against the pearl-blue evening of Auschwitz.

He stared up into the belly of a passing airliner, whose roar mingled with voices and the smack of eating mouths, and the cries of the animals.

Inevitably, he looked back at the wolf.

It had never stopped watching him. He decided that there is no such thing as a human being who is not terrified of the wild. His wife's body touched him. Her hand still lay in his. Their love was so profound that there was nothing to be said about it. Anything could transpire between them, any anger, any hate, any outrage, and it would not matter to this love, which was like blood, like breath, more a part of the body than of the mind. Sometimes he knelt before her at night, and she drew him down into her cavern. Once she had said, "You cannot survive without me. I have become myth for you."

The ecstasy of love is what transmits human feelings. Without it children cannot be truly human. If Adam and Eve had not fallen in love after their first child, humanity would have ended with them, for Abel like his brother would have been a beast.

"Don't keep tilting your head back like that. You look like you're having a seizure of some kind."

"I want to look at the sky."

"The pigeons are aiming for your mouth."

"You hope. But the statistics are on my side."

"Come on, sit like an adult. I don't want people to think I'm married to an overgrown child."

"You are."

"You're going to hurt your neck."

"Pain is good for me. Pain means something."

Cindy muttered a reply. What was it? Fatuous? He hadn't heard, but he didn't care, either, because he saw clouds. Another jet passed, and beneath the clouds it was so small. He imagined the people and the books up there, the copies of *Time* and *Newsweek* in the laps of the travelers, and their unimaginable dreams. He visualized the stewardesses stowing the empty food trays, the pilots reading off vectors, pulling and pushing levers, wheels, buttons, and the fire in the engines, the white fire of JP-6 waiting there to

fulfill its dream, the dream of all jet fuel, which is to bum its creators.

He would have to go down to Atlanta bright and early Monday morning, a guest of Apple Computer, to attend a two-day session about the Macintosh Office. Wonderful, crazy, impossible computer, the Mac. All the people from Apple would be smiling, everything calm and rich in the Westin Hotel, and at night, in their dark rooms, they would all be lying awake worrying about their jobs.

He did not want to fly to Atlanta. He did not want to attend the conference with the despairing computer salesmen. He did not want to lie in an oversize bed in the Westin, wishing he was home in Cindy's arms, listening to *A Sea Symphony* while the stars passed and the pacing in the apartment upstairs went on and on.

I'm a selfish man, he said in his mind. A brat.

He sat up straight, surprised.

What was happening to him?

If only there was some way to tell her how he was suffering, surely she would have compassion—she would fill with compassion—and let them go out into the streets, go to a movie, to a restaurant, home, anywhere but this damned zoo.

The wolf was still staring at him. Its ears were pricked forward, adding to the impression of almost supernatural concentration.

Wolf, or man-wolf?

It blinked its eyes as the sun emerged. The animal within Bob reacted: he felt a slow, intimate movement beneath his flesh. He recalled his wolf dream with the kind of insight that brings sudden and intense clarity. Raising a boy, loving a wife, writing poetry, selling, advising, flying, eating, waiting, he had driven himself insane. A wolf in the belly was not the fantasy of a sane man. Should he go into analysis? Expensive, and also the only psychiatrist he knew was Monica Goldman, who was Cindy's dearest friend and the only woman he had ever desired to distraction, but for Cindy herself.

At the Esopus Hunt Club one night Monica and Steve had come in, she flushed with pride at the pheasants she had taken, her gun on her arm, her birds at her waist, dangling and beautiful, her color high, her eyes sparkling. He had kissed her cheek, there had been wine and Steve's bobbing bald head in the light of the kerosene lantern, the group of them with the enormous old club build-ing to themselves but for the Brickmans from California, the deaf, smiling, ancient Brickmans, and he had thought of Monica in the night. Over

the course of the evening he had contrived a plan that would enable him to accomplish his object without shame, or so he imagined. He had rehearsed the words, the gestures, the casual laughter if his suggestion failed. "It's cold. Why don't we bunk up together, all four of us?"

A short silence. Steve's pate reddened. Monica crossed her legs, put her chin in her hand. He could practically hear the phrases of her profession wallowing about in her mind: penile insecurity, death wish, sublimation.

They all burst out laughing, so loudly that the Brickmans, who were sitting in armchairs reading *Reader's Digest* Condensed Books, nodded and smiled, and Mr. Brickman went "ha-ha, a good hunt!"

It was a night of false groping. For the longest time only Steve was potent. He and Cindy had coupled together with Monica sitting in a chair and Bob curled up under the covers at the bottom of the bed, praying to God it would end, but it was endless, on and on, booming through the night as if an artillery battery had opened up on his position.

At three o'clock in the morning Bob had waked up, his body quaking with lust, and made furious love to Monica.

Only at the end did he discover that the shadowy, grappling woman beneath him was Cindy. Monica and Steve had gone back to their own room hours before.

Should he now sit across a desk from Monica and say, "I had a hallucination that there was a wolf in my stomach?" Well, she wouldn't charge him too much. "A professional visit," she would say, "of course."

The wind blew, and Cindy's heavy thigh rested against him, and his son went on drawing the tapir. The crowd passed, a baby bobbing in a stroller, a couple with linked hands, a pale man who watched Cindy, his face in an agony of longing. Cindy's eyes followed him. She carried a terrible electric stunner in her purse. She would not hesitate to use it.

Something made Bob get up, made him stand full height. "Get me a Pepsi," Cindy said.

His mouth might as well have been sewed closed, for he could not even begin to answer. He found himself moving toward the wolf, threading through the crowd, or so he thought until he collided with a girl in shorts and a tie-dyed T-shirt, and smashed her orange drink against her naked midriff.

Her voice chopped at him, a wave smashing on rocks. Seeing that she could not make him hear her, she stamped her foot and stalked off. The wolf had watched Bob until he reached the cage. Then it began to pace back and

forth, its dewlaps wet, its eyes glancing from side to side, its tongue lolling. He watched the tongue, the black lips, the yellow, weak teeth, the eyes. The animal's tail was down, and when it passed close to him, it growled.

Was that entirely an animal sound?

He realized that it was literally frantic to escape, that its problem, very simply, was boredom. It was made for the woods, this creature, it belonged in secret and limitless spaces. But where were they? The woods that weren't being logged out were dying of acid rain. It belonged nowhere, this North American timber wolf. The animal was part of the past. Its last place was a cage in the middle of a zoo in the middle of a city totally beyond its understanding.

What *did* it understand? It understood how to snatch trout from streams, how to eat voles and gophers, how to bring down deer and moose. Did it also understand how to turn a key?

There was something about this creature, though, that Bob knew with crystal certainty could not be destroyed.

"It's beautiful," Cindy said. She had come beside him. He felt what Monica would call "inadequate."

"I wish I was some kind of an activist. I'd like to come in here and free all of these animals."

"Kill them, you mean?"

"Free them."

"To release them into the city is the same thing as killing them. Even in the wild, most of these animals would die."

The wolf remembers, though, the long shadows of evening and the darting movements of the muskrat. "You're so controlled. I think you're overcontrolled. What if they made it, all of them, even the sloth and the anteater."

"The anteater's cage is empty. I guess it's dead."

"What about giraffes? What if I found them all an apartment? They could live in comfort then, no crowds, no cages."

"Who'd pay the rent?"

"A secret zoo. Admission fifty dollars. Worth it to see a hippo cooking breakfast and a full-grown moose grazing the shag rug in the bedroom."

"I want to be together later. When Celeste takes Kevin and Joseph to the movies."

"I thought he and Joey were fighting."

"No. Now Dashiell and Kim are fighting. The rest of the class has suspended hostilities, pending the outcome."

The wolf turned and stood directly before Bob, lowering its head as if it wished it could ram itself into his belly. It growled—not a little, throaty sound, but a big noise.

It was magnificent, it had the whole wild in it.

Down the row of cages the baboon sat, its mouth lolling open, its head resting against the bars, its eyes in Africa. The wolf paced and barked, and Bob knew that it was begging for freedom.

No, begging for forgiveness. "It's just their fate," Cindy said, trying to be kind to him, "they ended up here."

Bob thought. What if it isn't that way at all? The man-wolf knows. . . . "I'm no good today," he said aloud. "I didn't sleep. I don't want to go to Atlanta."

She was hugging her shoulders, watching the wolf. "It is us it's reacting to. There's no doubt about it."

"I'm scared. Maybe it's telling me not to fly. It's a portent."

She shook her head as if trying to dislodge a gnat from her ear. "No, it—" The wolf threw itself against the bars, growling and yapping, dragging its teeth on the iron with a clacking sound. Cindy stepped back. Bob's impulse was to throw his arms around the wolf, to kiss it, to caress it. He had kissed his dog Moe when he was a boy, had put his arms around Moe, and he remembered Moe's smell, that musty dogginess, the fetor of his breath. Moe had been ground to wreckage beneath the wheels of the school bus. The bus had let Bob off. As it pulled out, there had been a crunch, a thud, a canine scream, and the bus had rumbled away with Moe's tail fluttering out from under the fender. Bob had been left with his dog, its jaw torn back, gabbling against the street, making noises like wet paper being dropped from a height. Moe was a pulsating shambles, save for one rear leg, which was running furiously. There was nobody around, it was a block to home, and Moe was dying. Bob had screamed while Moe popped and spluttered.

Bob ran through the lush neighborhood, which had become a moonscape of empty houses and houses that would not answer the door. He had gotten home to find his own house also empty. He had called his father at the office. "Moe can't live, Bobby," his father had said. "You take my shotgun down and help him out of his misery."

Then there was a twelve-year-old boy, his eyes soaked with tears, rushing down the hot, empty street with a big old Remington held at port arms, who

aimed the gun at the flapping puddle on the street, and shot, sending up a great splash of blood from the body of his beloved. The boy then turned the shotgun on himself, only to find that his toe could not—by an act of the goodness of God—reach the trigger. He looked down the smoking barrel into his deepest, truest wish. At last, dragging the gun, he made his way home.

The agony of that experience reasserted itself. Was the wolf rabid, sick, would it be taken up to the pound and gassed, ending its life in the ultimate prison, a chamber so small it would have to be stuffed in, with the gas hissing from the jet in the back? "Cindy, I am leaving this zoo. If you and Kevin want to stay, you can."

She knew him too well to abandon him. "Let's go to a coffee shop and get some lunch," she said.

Their son was not unwilling to leave. Bob usually did not dare to look at his drawings, and yet these were the very opposite of violent. He had rendered a portrait not of the tapir but of the wolf, a full face, eerie with knowing. "It practically posed. It was staring at you, Dad. Do you think it knows you love wolves?"

"I don't know."

Kevin took his father's and mother's hands, and they went out into the streets of the strange old city. "I wish we were in the country," Kevin said.

"Not when your dad has to travel on Sunday night. It makes things too hectic for him."

He thought of their rented house up in Ulster County, of Mount Tucker jutting up behind it, and the loons calling on the lake and the doves, and the occasional scream when something captured something on the mountainside.

Once he had watched a fox eating a small rabbit. The fox had torn out its bowels and was lapping at them while the rabbit shrieked. Or, another time, he had seen a rat taken by a red hawk. The rat knew what it was to be torn to pieces while being lifted into the happy sky.

Sometimes, warm in bed in his apartment, his wife sleeping beside him, his son in the next room, he thought he was close to a secret of incredible importance, the secret of why life was so involved with suffering, the secret the north wind said when it roared through the snowy pines, the secret of the fire in the plains, burning because it had to burn, the dog dying because it had tried to bite a rolling wheel, or the secret the great timber wolf had dreamed as it succumbed to the zoo hunter's numbing dart. But then something would

happen, his own body would go urgent or something, and thoughts of secrets would come to an end.

"Would you like a hamburger, Kevin?"

"Fine, Mom."

Bob didn't want hamburgers. He wanted to take his family to the Plaza, and dine in the Palm Court on finger sandwiches, followed by enormous slices of cake and strong, black coffee. He wanted to do this while listening to a Vivaldi concerto played by the Palm Court String Quartet. And perhaps to start with, a champagne cocktail. Furthermore he wanted to spend the rest of the afternoon in a movie, any movie as long as it was gaudy and loud, and he also wanted to float out of himself across the sky of the city, to float above the towers, off farther and farther, until the last sound from below whimpered out, and he could see stars in the middle of the day.

He would let go the mystic chain, and fall then. But he would not end up back on Fifth Avenue, not at all. He would not fall back into the world but out of it. He would fall past the moon, past Neptune, past Arcturus and the Milky Way, fall past stars and galaxies with names like NC-2376, and past those without names, past them all, until he thudded softly against the purple velvet side of the universe.

Then what would he do? Dig through? Maybe that was not such a good idea. Perhaps there was another universe on the other side, maybe worse than this one, a universe where no truth is real, where the child's ball on the grass is a killing boulder, or all of fate is concealed in the toe of a shoe.

Maybe that's what the quasars that stand sentinel at the end of the universe are all about—they are the spots where people like Socrates and Christ dug through; they are windows into bright and terrible wisdom. They are warnings.

Sometimes Bob agreed with the quantum theorists, that the world was a knack of chosen possibilities, nothing more substantial than that. Man's true model was not Macbeth, not Othello, not even Gregor Samsa, but rather Puck the fairy, magical and insubstantial and so dangerous.

"Bob—watch out! Honest to God, I never saw anybody so willing to walk in front of buses. What do you think the bus drivers are—gods? One of these days one of them'll be blinking and he won't see you in time to put on his brakes."

"Let's not go to a coffee shop. Let's go to the Palm Court."

"I'm wearing sandals, Bob."

"Champagne cocktails. Dancing to the music of Vivaldi."

"We can't afford it. The American Express bill remains unpaid."

"Let's have some fun for once."

She never let him down about things like this, The Palm Court it was, and Kevin got a Roy Rogers, she got white wine, and Bob finally settled on a Vodka Sunrise. He assembled a banquet for himself, managing to find goose with fresh snow peas, but no broiled wolf, frog legs, though, but no dog.

The music was gentle, persistently civilized, and Bob managed to sustain the illusions you need to enjoy food. You cannot think of the way hogs knock against the walls of the slaughterhouses, or of the chickens scrabbling down chutes lined with knives. As he ate he thought he could feel the world turning, exposing each part of itself to the sun, so that the light could sustain it. The engine of life labors so hard, but why? Nothing survives, yet everything tries. Worms on the end of fishing lines struggle through hells beyond imagination, slowly drowning, impaled, while monsters loom at them. Fish in creels take hours and hours to die, and you make them live a little longer so that they'll be good and fresh at the end of the day, a cheerful sight frying in the skillet.

What eats us? We can't understand it any more than the chicken can understand Frank Perdue. There is something out there.

"Coffee, sir?"

"I'd like to see the dessert cart."

Cindy luxuriated. Kevin's eyes lit up when the glorious tray was brought over, its perfections of sugar and flour and cream enough to make any boy feel suddenly quite cheerful.

When they came out of the Palm Court, it was nearly three o'clock. The sky had changed. Long, dark clouds rushed down from the north.

Cindy called Celeste. They would not go home, they would go to a movie and take Kevin with them.

The Ambassadors, a Merchant-Ivory picture based on the James novel, was playing at the Plaza Theater. In the dark of that theater, Bob felt delicious, immense relief. He closed his eyes and listened to the music, and made the words part of the music, and imagined that he was Henry James, and had succeeded in his creative life.

That night Cindy asked him to come to bed naked, and she caressed him expertly, her fingers very slow. Even after all these years, the intimacy of her touch still made him shudder with embarrassed delight. He had not had many

lovers before her, just one, as a matter of fact, with whom he had slept four times when he lived in London. There was another who had shared a single bed with him for a year, but without making love. It was the Catholic boyhood that had ruined his fun. When he made love, he still sometimes smelled the smoke of Father O'Reilly's cigar drifting through the confessional screen.

When he slept, draped across her, his chest half on her lap, while she read propped up against the head of the bed, he dreamed of a wide, empty walk. There were pizza crusts and popcorn boxes blowing, and on both sides of the walk there were cages, most of them alive with movement. A gibbon brachiated endlessly back and forth across a thirty-foot span, leopards paced, deer snorted, a weasel moved sinuously about, chimpanzees stared into the dark. The wolf watched him.

If you listened when the wind blew through its hair, you could hear the rustling of the whole forest. It came soundlessly out of its cage, drifting between the bars like fog. Bob didn't have to wait for instructions, he was familiar enough with the logic of dreams to start running at once.

Inwardly he was calm. He knew that this was a dream. He was not running through Central Park being chased by a breeze that had become a wolf. He was in bed.

The trees swept past him, their great trunks dimly lit by the antique pathside lamps. As he ran he found that he was moving along just above the surface of the path, almost as if he was about to fly like the wolf of his childhood dream.

There was nothing behind him now, nothing but the long expanse of the Literary Walk, so elegant at night, as if waiting for the return of the civilization that had created it. It was a windy night and the trees sighed and tossed their heads. No voice sounded, no radio blared. The park was empty.

The fear had left the dream, to be replaced by a sense of wonder. He had never been in the park in the middle of the night. Being here now filled him with sweet unease. Anybody he met would be dangerous, and yet it was also dark and he could hide. He could be the wraith in the shadows, the one who stalked the midnight lovers, the predator. He could be the one they all feared, the one who kept the park empty at this hour.

He slowed down. The wolf was gone. The dream became a stroll between dark pillars of trees. One part of him was searching for symbols; he sought the sense of his dream. Its landscape seemed connected to some obscure inner

resurrection.

The wolf burst upon him, its paws outstretched, its teeth bared, its eyes dark beneath the hood of its brows. He fell back, hands out, kicking, pushing, and was swept along as if in water. He tumbled between the trunks of two trees. Then he gathered himself up, feeling the wolf right at his heels. Somewhere in his mind the voice of Walter Cronkite explained that wolves are shy and do not generally harm human beings. But the voice did not connect with the empirical reality. He tried to run but now he could not. He blew instead as a detached leaf blows, soaring past the crowns of the trees, high into the sky. Around the park the buildings glimmered, a wall of gleaming fortresses. Below and behind him the wolf rose amid flashes, as if its claws sparked against the air.

The higher he flew, the harder it got to continue. Finally he felt himself begin to fall. He did not fall fast—in fact he could control it enough to avoid trees. The wolf, though, had not lost control of itself at all. Its whole attention was fixed on Bob, who lusted to reach the ground where he could run again. But he fell as softly as a bit of thread on the whipping air. Growing increasingly desperate, he kicked like a swimmer. He felt the breath of the wolf on his back, heard its urgent little cries as it closed the distance between them.

Then his feet touched the ground. He was in the Sheep Meadow, running as fast as he could. A woman was running beside him, Cindy, calling to him in a shrill voice. He could not quite hear her, but he had the impression that if he could, her words would help.

The wolf snapped. A flash of white shot through Bob's brain and he tripped, falling head over heels in the rich grass. Then the wolf was upon him. Its claws melted his flesh with a puff of blue smoke and a hiss.

Then the jaws opened, and began to work the flesh off his bones. He became a mass of conscious agony. He could see the red, pulsating walls of the wolf's esophagus, could feel the sizzling acid of its stomach. He commenced a grim kneading suffocation. Then he began to dissolve. He became softer and softer until he seeped through the walls of the wolf's organs and began to race through its body, his blood screaming in its hot, quiet blood. He was the living victim of the night, sacrificed to the life of another.

Then he was seeing through the wolf's eyes, hearing the great rustling, banging, honking, shouting, roaring city all around, and smelling waves of

odors that were like bridges of leaves and memories, the smell of dark, sick gardens, and most of all the smell of people and metal bars.

He was moving through the night in the body of the wolf when Cindy came into the center of his dream, her face streaked with tears, her hands on his wolf head, her voice begging, and this time the words made sense.

"Oh, God, honey, please wake up!"

By degrees, he obeyed the words. His wolf body fell away, smells turned back into sights, then the whole park seemed to melt. The trees flowed down like great candles, the grass shriveled into a pale Canon sheet, the cliffs of buildings became a cliff of pillows. Cynthia sat with his head cradled in her lap. He could smell sweat, his and hers. The bedroom light shone softly in his eyes.

"Cindy?"

"Thank God! Honey, it's all right. It's me. You're all right."

He grunted; his throat was so sore he could barely talk. "I'm sorry," was all he managed to say. There was terror in her eyes. He reached up, caressed her face, feeling her warm, tear-wet cheek.

"I couldn't wake you up!"

"I'm sorry. Truly, Cindy. I wanted to wake up, believe me I did."

He got up and on wobbly legs went into the bathroom. When he drank he felt a thirst like fire and drank more. Again and again he drank. Finally, gasping, he leaned over the sink and splashed his face with more water. He coughed. Cindy came in and put her arm around him.

The thing was, he could still feel himself inside the wolf. Somewhere in the night they were running together. Maybe they would always be together, running like this, running for the end of the universe.

Cindy turned him around and enfolded him in her arms. He kissed her, and her response was hungry at first. Then she sighed. She caressed him, a sad, almost apologetic gesture. "It's three o'clock in the morning," she said. "Let's try and get some sleep."

Chapter Two

SOME YEARS BEFORE, ROBERT AND CINDY DUKE HAD tried to vacation on an island in the Carribean. It was a beautiful island, its interior lush with waterfalls and orchids, its beaches chalk white, its lagoons as clear as air and swarming with colorful fish.

The only difficulty with this island was and is that the best beach is located at the end of the airport's one runway. The Dukes had just gotten to the island that morning, and having no time to discover its smaller hidden beaches—the pockets of sand secreted along its rocky harbors and lagoons—they were at this beach.

Bob watched an airliner bank over the ocean, then aim for the airport. Fortunately the planes today were landing from the west, so all the beach had to endure was a roar and a blast of sweet, warm fumes when one came to the end of the runway and turned around. Otherwise they would be thundering overhead at an altitude of fifty feet.

Dropping, the airliner disappeared below the edge of the dunes. A few moments passed. Bob heard a much louder roar than he had on previous landings. Then there was a dull thud and a cracking sound. Then silence, but for the bouncing of an enormous wheel, which bounded down the dunes, across the beach and splashed into the sea. People sat or stood, all turning toward the dunes, all freezing when they saw the nose of the airplane sitting there like a sculpture, not two hundred feet away. Bob was locked in a kind of silence. Two men in blue uniforms clambered out of the top of the plane and jumped down, disappearing among the dunes.

Bob began to run. When he reached the top of the dunes, he found himself overlooking a scene of astonishing destruction. A huge jetliner lay in at least four pieces, festooned with wires and smoking tubes. Jet fuel poured out of half a dozen places, making foaming pools in the sand beneath the shattered plane. A man and a woman jumped off one of the sections of the plane and, arm in arm, began making their way back toward the airport. The pilots climbed up into another section, the main section, and started shouting into the jumble of detached seats and people.

There was a soft rush of sound as the jet fuel under one section ignited. Bob could see the people inside struggling frantically,, then they were obscured by thick, black smoke. The two pilots had begun dropping people

out of the main section. Bob ran over and began leading them away from the plane. There were terrible screams coming from the burning part of the plane. A burning woman leaped out of the smoke and began to dance, her arms flailing as she slapped at herself with her flaming purse.

Then the main section of the plane caught. The fire was for the moment confined to the rear. People kept jumping out of the front. The pilots and a stewardess could be heard inside, shrieking at them to hurry up.

Fire burst into the cabin from a thousand different directions, swirling in a vortex. One of the pilots rushed forward, leaped down, and ran away, his face black, his hair smoking. The other one could be seen in the fire, throwing seats, pushing people toward the gaping hole at the front.

Bob sat in his seat in the plane to Atlanta, reliving as he always did that afternoon on the Island of Escape. The Island of Dreams. Pina colada, limbo, snorkel. The Island of Coral Bedrooms.

"Will you be having dinner with us, sir?"

He nodded.

"Steak or chicken?"

Always the same two meals.

"I'll have the duck a l'orange and a half bottle of Chablis. Maybe the saffron soufflé for dessert."

"That sounds like the chicken."

"It's the chicken."

The flight attendant made a note on her little list and went away. This year he had earned over a hundred thousand miles on Delta. Soon he'd be able to cash his mileage in for a free trip somewhere. Maybe the Caribbees, maybe hell.

For once he wasn't lugging along boxes and boxes of seminar materials. Instead it was simply a matter of coming, listening, and going home again. The Apple Computer people were the ones with the boxes of junk.

He tried to let his mind drift. Last night's nightmare was still close to the surface, though, and when he drifted, he at once smelled its fearful scents: wolf breath, wet grass, and his own blood. The dream wasn't really over, that was the trouble. Cindy shouldn't have waked him up, as terrifying as it must have been to see him toward the end howling and snapping. She should have let the dream resolve. Now it persisted in him, lingering at the edge of memory, jumping for a split second into his vision.

To quell it he forced his attention to the face of his watch. Nine P.M. She

would just be turning off *Masterpiece Theatre* and probably fixing herself a cup of herb tea. Kevin would be asleep, the cats at the foot of his bed. When Cindy lay down they would come to her, their habit being to share the society of sleep between the two beds in the household. He wished that she was sitting in the seat beside him, Kevin in the window seat.

If the plane was going to crash, though, better he be alone.

When Kevin had been a baby, Bob had taken great pains to preserve his own life. He did not want to leave such a vulnerable little creature. When there was someone in the world whose eyes literally shone when they regarded you, how could you bear to die? Kevin had needed a male image, had adored Bob in a way he had not known was possible, had so relished his every attention. But now Kevin was twelve, and he could grow up without a father, if necessary. Or Cindy could remarry. Bob could be replaced.

While these morbid thoughts passed through his mind, the stewardess dropped his meal on his tray. He nibbled at the chicken breast, ate the parsley, ate the half of a cherry tomato that was on the salad. He drank the club soda and ate a bite of the dense brownie. He had brought Max Brod's book about Kafka. If he was going to keep up with his son, he was going to have to gain some sort of insight into Kafka. What were the parables about? And the "Penal Colony"—or, for God's sake, the *Metamorphosis*? This morning, while Bob was looking through the Amusement Section of the *Times* for notices about ballroom dancing, Kevin had suddenly asked, "Where's Away From Here? Is it away from here, or away from where Kafka was when he wrote the parable?" He had seen the mirth in his son's eyes, and decided that he had to learn more about Kafka.

He just stared at the pages, though. Half of his mind was waiting for the plane to fall out of the sky, waiting for the dreadful roar that would announce the explosion of a terrorist bomb, or the thuttering oscillations that would precede the separation of a wing.

Why should I read about Kafka? I'm living in Kafka. I'm a Hunger Artist on trial in the Penal Colony. There isn't any escape. Even death is no escape, not if there is reincarnation. Oh, God, what if I come back in Bangladesh or as a Shiite fanatic, or a Chinese peasant? What's going on, how does it all work, why do I keep thinking I've lost my keys when I haven't?

I'm in the middle of the woods and I suddenly realize that I can't get out. The wolf is no help, the wolf is only chasing me deeper.

A cold hand covers mine. A face, rusty around the edges, skin as tight as

that of a mummy, hair too blond, voice older than the polished nails, the pearl-hard face-lift. "Jesus will comfort you," says the mask.

Bob realized that he had been crying, his tears raining down on the chicken and Max Brod.

"Jesus—"

"Pray with me. It'll help."

"I don't go to church." He thought: O'Reilly. Cigar. Communion. Then: Altar Society, mother picking up the lilies at Anne Warner's house. Benediction, Mass, the Last Sacraments.

"It doesn't matter whether you believe or not. Jesus doesn't mind."

Where was Father O'Reilly now? The Oblate Seminary, perhaps, teaching the dwindling few seminarians their truth and calling: "Don't drink after midnight or before five o'clock in the mom-ing. Beware of female converts, they are all after your tail. Remember that most questions cannot be answered. Remember that most sins cannot be understood. Nuns expect terrible penances. That is what their lives are about. The church is dying, this is the key truth of our time. Trust in God. Judging from the amount of notice He takes of us, He isn't too concerned. Follow His example, He has perfect knowledge."

All things grow old. The girls of spring get face-lifts. Bob wondered how much skin the lady beside him had lost over the years, how much experience she had hidden in her waxed looks. Where was the skin? Incinerated, or lying in a bottle of formaldehyde in some plastic surgeon's private museum? What would he have there— removed scars pinned to cards like butterflies, septums, big lips, bits of eye sockets and breasts? And, floating in formaldehyde, the discarded cheeks, jowls, and chins of his best customers?

"Pray with me. You might find it helpful."

Her intrusion made him feel mean. "Play?"

"No, pray!"

"You said play."

"Well, hardly that. Play—I mean, oh dear, *pray* with me."

"Freudian slip. I don't remember any prayers except the Hail Mary."

"I don't believe in Freud. He knew nothing of Jesus. What is the Hail Mary? I don't know that prayer."

"Moslem."

"Oh."

She began leafing through the Airline Gift Guide. If you fill out the card—

say, order a friend some golf shoes with retractable cleats—and the plane crashes and they find the card, do they mail it for you and take the charge out of your estate? Is there an airline policy covering this matter?

Until the island Bob had always assumed that people were just pulverized in jet crashes. But they had all been alive, broken arms and legs no doubt in the twisted jumble of seats, but alive. Twelve got out.

He imagined being twisted practically in two, the seat on top of him, his face against the floor, and the floor getting hotter and hotter and he cannot get free.

"Please fasten your seat belts, ladies and gentlemen. Captain Gamer has begun our final approach into Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport."

The flight attendant hurried along collecting the last of the meal trays and plastic cups. The landing was completely normal. Bob moved past the smiling crew members and out into Hartsfield's silly vastness without any difficulties. Maybe he only imagined that his life was running out. Perhaps this was an illusion, there to mask the far more horrible reality that he was going to live a long, long, long time.

My problem is, I'm in a panic state. I'm panicked about death. Over death. Death and going broke. At the moment I have no accounts receivable. I've got to drum up some new business. Dying and going broke are similar, except death is less embarrassing. He hurried along a moving sidewalk. But what do I do? How do I drum up business if I'm not sure what it is I do?

Maybe the Apple people would have some i-deas. Maybe he ought to start advocating the Macintosh Office after all. A point of difference. "Spend your money with me. I advocate the Macintosh Office."

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing." The man beside him had responded to his thoughts, not because he could read minds but because he had obviously spoken out loud. All right, so you pass age forty and you start talking to yourself.

Nose, ears, and penis all continue to grow, even as your overall body mass starts to decline. Short-term memory is going. And now you mutter.

Silently, over the past year, Bob had begun to engage in the battle of the nose hair. You couldn't very well just leave it to grow longer and longer, curly and gray, like smoke flowing out your nostrils. You had to cut it. Bob used nail clippers, and the process made him sneeze. The more he cut it, the stiffer the hair became. Maybe he was one of those unlucky men whose beards grew inside their noses.

He would have drunk, but he had swallowed so many gallons of alcohol in his youth that he was almost unable to stimulate himself. He didn't smoke, drink, or chew gum.

He was nostalgic for the time in London he had been given some brownies laced with hash by a lush daughter of the nobility—possibly the only lush noble daughter—and had wound up writing a seventy-page epic poem about the death of Nebuchadnezzar.

This part of any trip was the worst, the cab ride from the airport to the hotel. You were alone and you were angry and you were bored. Stone bored watching the passing exit signs, the cars, a Camaro driven by a blonde so enormous she might be a depilated man. Maybe she was. What would *that* be like? A violation, thrilling ... or depressing, a sexless struggle with someone too strong to escape.

The dull, steamy thoughts of the traveler. Already 10:35. Get checked in, for God's sake, you can't call Cindy after eleven. That's the rule, that way you don't inconvenience anybody. Too bad he couldn't afford a portable phone.

The cab hurtled around a corner and he finally accepted the feeling that the world was ending, or rather, he was ending. "It felt like I died and the whole world died with me," a man had once said upon awakening from a particularly severe auto accident.

"May I take your bag, sir?"

God, I wish you would! "No, that's all right."

Check in: the people ahead have no reservations. Then they have a credit card on the Bank of Pakistan. They speak little English. Bob would carry them on his back to their room if it would hurry things up. The lobby smells faintly of cigarette smoke and food. Liquor. Steak. Later, he'll come down to the bar with all the other lonely men and sit staring around, looking for the Woman Who Is Not There.

He's being processed now. Credit card. Guest of Apple. Oh, that'll be the fourth floor. She says it like it's the bomb shelter. Go right up, you're already checked in, Mr. Drake.

Duke.

Okay.

Fourth floor: a woman of twenty in a tan suit with the Apple logo on her pocket comes forward. "May I take your bag, Mr. Drake?"

"Duke. No thanks."

"Let's see, you're in 403. Lucky you, you'll have a view down Peachtree

Street."

Oh, how wonderful! What luck!

The room is very nicely packaged. Little soaps and creams and things, and a shoeshine rag that doesn't quite work, the bed turned down with a mint on the pillow. A bowl of apples and a lot of literature. A Macintosh on the desk to play with. Very posh. Apple wants to win.

Brochure: *Apple and Your Corporate Clients*. Oh, God, I haven't got any corporate clients. I've got to make some calls, but I hate to make calls. "Hello, may I speak to the president of the company? Hello, my name is Robert Drake—I mean Duke—I'd like to send you some information about—hello, yes, this is Robert Hack, I'd like to send you—this is who—oh, no, I need to speak to your podiatrist—or president. Well, good-bye." That's called a line of gab.

Look at you, strutting around in the dreary room, proud and scared, an ego on a stick, signifying nothing. The girl left abruptly with a reminder that he was due for breakfast at 8:30 in the Dorset Room. Dorset Room. Breakfast. Okay, Mr. Drake will be there. Why not Mr. Mallard, it's similar but more interesting. Midlife crisis cliché. But I had my midlife crisis when I was thirty-eight. Working for Merrill Witch, flacking bonds, all of a sudden you get up from your desk and go stomping off like a golem. You reach the elevator. You leave the building. A day passes, your boss Luke Skywalker finally calls. "Hi, Bill," he says.

"It's Bob."

"Yeah, that's right. You okay, Bob?"

"Am I?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Bill, I thought you were sick or something, looking at your numbers. Real sick! You can't get the business. Sure, you rush around with goddamn cups of coffee in your hand, but that's it. For you, that's the whole job. I've been watching you, Bill—"

"Bob."

"Rob, Bob, Bill, goddamn Irving! Your severance check is in the toilet!"

A factual story: A very hot man was once hired by a small but very hot brokerage firm but did not do the volume expected of him. The trouble was, he had gone there on a five-year contract with a five-year salary in addition to commissions. This was a man who could not work unless he was desperate. Mr. Float, they called him at Wrexler, where he had originally been employed. Soon the boss of the very hot brokerage firm wanted to get rid of

Mr. Float. But how, with a five-year contract? One morning Mr. Float walked in to find that his entire office had been moved into the men's room.

He remained in that office, reading comic books, for the full five years.

Some say that is where the expression "taking a floater," got its start.

Hanging up his spare suit, Bob thought: Now, why in hell did I tell myself that story? Why don't I go down to the bar and tell some broad that hilarious story? This very night I may fondle strange breasts.

That thought led to a frantic check of the watch. Eleven-two. No. Grab the phone, *click*, dial, *click click*. Ring. *Clunk*. "Hello."

"Honey—sorry I'm late."

Laughter. "I was reading. I knew you'd be late. I was hoping you'd call."

Am I a self-absorbed by-product of a dying culture? "I'm glad you're still up. How was *Masterpiece*?"

"I slept through it. Kevin watched it, though. He says it's very well acted. Apparently some of the period detail is wrong, though. Something about the men's collar styles."

"I miss you."

"You know what I want to do to you."

"Oh, God, Cindy, I wish you could."

"Have a good night's sleep, darling."

"The dream—"

"What dream?"

"God, don't you remember? Last night I dreamed I got eaten by a wolf? It's still in my mind, I can't get rid of it. It's terrifying, Cindy. I wish to hell I'd canceled out on this."

"You might make some good contacts. Now, I want you to take a nice, warm shower and settle down with a good book. What did you take with you?"

"Max Brod on Kafka."

"Dear God. That's Kevin's influence. Let him deal with Kafka, you need to have some fun when you read. A good historical, Michener or John Jakes. Something that'll take your mind away from itself. Kafka's not for you, you're too old and overwrought to stand it."

"He stood it. He had to, he was in himself and couldn't get out."

"Didn't he cut off his ear?"

"That was Van Gogh, the painter."

"Yes, well, his skies are Kafka's words. They all ended badly, those men."

You can't get on that road. It'll kill you, there are secrets down there we shouldn't know. I'm telling you, Bob, you've got to stick to the real. Throw yourself heart and soul into the conference. Learn, make friends, really work at it. Bob, you might lose your way, honey, a lot of people like you do."

He yearned toward her voice, wished he could flow through the phone and into her body, could swarm into every cell of her, the wet, the jittering electric places, and possess her and be possessed by her, to be her ghost, her aura.

"I'll do like you say, I'll go down to the news-stand and get some light reading."

"An author you like. Don't pick up someone who annoys you. Someone somewhat literate."

That's me baby, someone somewhat literate. I'm a man who happened wrong. I should be a writer, for God's sake, but I hear it's an awful profession. They're always going broke. It's a brutal, exploitative field. Oh, God, I've missed my life.

"Good-bye, Cindy, I love you."

Click. We're off. He hangs up the phone thinking that she is an awesomely decent woman. She's a priest, a shaman, Dante. Some people are here to lead the others through life, to succor and to guide. Does she not, in her blond and voluptuous ease, even in her perfection, the calm creator of Kevin and beneficent sustainer of me, does she not deserve my loyalty?

Somewhere in this hotel, right now, there is a woman who will sleep with me. Oh, yes, not Cindy but one of her allies. I will have to go home and go to confession in our pink bedroom, and my penance will be more serious than "say the Our Father three times my son, and keep your hands out from under the covers."

He heard distant howling, as if of a wolf.

It was feeling, it was sensation, his body quaking, bending over, hands clutching the center of his gut, eyes screwed closed, and he was aware of another Atlanta, a ghost Atlanta, when it was all forest, and the things of the earth swept and swished, trotted and crawled here. On the hill where the Westin now stood—which had been completely removed for the hotel, a million-year-old hill—a wolf had howled, a bigger, heavier creature than today's wolves, and his howl had carried up and down the river, and high, high into the night, where it had echoed against the fat rising moon. The howl still lived, domiciled in the hotel's bones.

When Bob was a boy in Texas, he used to imagine that if he ran fast enough, was secret enough, clever enough, he could step off the edge of Texas and onto the full moon. On the moon lived the ghosts of ten million Indians, and he also belonged there. The Comanches and the Tejas, the Apaches and the Kiowa, the Blackfeet and the Iroquois, the Pueblo and the Mixtec, all would greet him and call him brother, and he would go down the river of heaven in a bark canoe.

Reality: The sun of his youth came up like a big hubcap and Texas kept right on happening. San Antonio grew, row upon row of houses marching out into land so ancient and untouched that fossils lay on the surface, land so delicate that any footfall was permanent. And the power lines marched and the drive-in banks, and the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, and the kids, and the cars, and the law offices.

Bob had gotten himself into a very bad mental state by the time he arrived in the bar. It didn't matter much, there wasn't a woman in the place except for the waitress, who was spreading the vodka tonics and white wines in full armor, visor down. What can you do? Ishtar opens her legs and all the corn of Babylon flowers. When she closes them, the man who was involved gets his head cut off.

"Stoly on the rocks."

"You thought you were getting somewhere but you're not. Am I right?" A guy had edged in beside him, a used-car shill in a bleak checked suit. "Whatever you want, you end up with something else. Is that right or is it right? A guy like you, like me, we get tied up, we can't get away. Well, you have to go for the gold. I always tell people who come to me for advice, buddy, I tell them, go for the gold. You think you have a home but you haven't got a home. You have a mortgage. This is not a home, excuse me, a home would be your own. The four walls belong to the bank, the paper is what belongs to you. We have to get these things straight. The trouble with you, with me, is we cannot get these things straight. We own nothing, have everything. It's all an illusion, complete and total. Am I right? I'm asking you, I'm serious, am I right? Here's a guy, asks you am I right, and you can't get a word in, this guy's not a genius, he's not a guru, he's not even a salesman, he's a compulsive talker in a goddamn bar. Look, you want a decent home for your wife and kids, that's why you're here in this bar. That's why we're all here. We're knights on the journey to the grail, every one of us, even the old fart over there with the stogie, that old pushbelly's Sir Goddamn Lancelot, am

I right? Look at this place. Not a skirt in sight. Even the gigged-out old rejects leave places like this alone. Where are the hookers? They are in the places of youth. Not even hookers want us, we are reject johns. Hookers won't bother with a bunch of weepy fifty-dollar tricks. Nowadays even the ugly whores and the sex changes make big bread, you know how they do it? How the hell do they do it, why can't we get them into the Salesman bars anymore? It's S&M ruined us. There was an old war-horse used to come in here to drink and turn a few. Now she's got a posh suite up in the Bonaventure and she's bought herself some whips and a pair of leather gloves. There are guys'll pay a fortune even to them plug uglies to go after them with a whip. Am I right? I miss that damn old rotten whore. They're all the goddamn Blessed Virgin Mary, that's our problem. Blaspheme, blaspheme, etcetera. Excuse me, ma'am—could you bring me another couple of double bourbons?"

The waitress huffed off. Bob, who wanted desperately to get away from this man, but who was also curious about him, had to get rid of a bothersome question. "Is this a pitch for some kind of self-improvement seminar?"

"You ask that?"

"I don't want any more pitches for Jesus. I get Jesus pitches every time I get on a plane."

"That isn't a real question. Who am I, what do I want, those are real questions. You think you have a life but you don't. You do not have ownership, you have debt."

"My car is paid for."

"Wha—well, good goddamn, aren't we wonderful! Oh, may I touch the hem of the garment— well, let me look at you! Your car is paid for! Good goddamn. Well, hell. Isn't that wonderful. I'm so proud of my friend! Here's a guy can fuck the best part of your whole goddamn carefully rehearsed speech! We better be careful, this guy here with the plastic nerdpack in his shirt pocket might be president someday. He drives a car that is *his own*. Now, looky here, Mr. Smartass. You think your car is paid for, but you're wrong. You don't have the fucking holy grail just yet, Sir Gawain, my brother. Your kids' educations, are they paid for? Is your house paid for? And what about your business, your goddamn swimming pool, your time-share, your TV, your VCR, your home computer? Your car is paid for—what a lie. Unless everything is paid for, nothing is paid for. Your debt is just arranged differently. Look, what I'm leading up to is, you need something that is your

own, and that nobody can take away from you. You need a stake in the earth. You need land. Land, man! I know a lot about land. Specifically, I know about the sweetest little piece of eastern Canada ever was. The very sweetest."

Bob thought, Oh, lord, a real-estate salesman.

The pitch drummed on. He was like a penitent before the altar of the hustle. Kneeling at a bulging vest, not reading the contract, the haze of fine print, take the pen, hit it right here, thank you, you have just bought another American dream.

—But it's not paid for either.

Slam, bam, thank you, ma'am. Phrase that became current in Dodge City during the cattle drives, to describe encounters between prostitutes and teenage cowboys who had not seen a woman in years. What is a man like who comes in after two years on the range eating sowbelly and beans, working seven days a week twenty hours a day? Put him in the middle of the biggest, richest city he has ever seen, with three hundred dollars in his pocket, and also give him a gun. That's the American dream, although few of those young men lived to tell about it:

No, they bought real estate with their three hundred dollars and then went out to see their land. Slam, bam, thank you, ma'am. Goin' to Canada to see mah swamp.

Bob signed the contract "Ronald Woodrow Wilson Reagan."

"My God, you have a long name—like a Negro."

"I am a Negro."

"But you look—ah, hell!"

"Sorry."

"I can't sell this stuff to you on time. You've got to pay cash."

"Don't have it."

The real-estate hustler got up and went to the far end of the bar. Bob, for his part, left ten dollars on the table and slunk out.

He wished, how he wished, that there would come a knock at his door and that tall, beautiful blonde from the Camaro would be standing there, but no knock came. The air-conditioning hissed. He threw off his clothes, ate the mint on his pillow, and then brushed his teeth. He climbed into the bed.

The claws of sleep grabbed him, and he was dragged screaming down the nightmare escalator that never quite gets to the grail.

Chapter Three

YOU LIE ON A BED IN A HOTEL ROOM. YOU ARE NAKED, you are rigid. Nobody cares, nobody will help you. Therefore you go to sleep.

The effect was as sudden and devastating as mainlining gasoline. His breath came in shattering barks, his hands fluttered, his legs kicked, his whole bones twisted in the elastic prison of his muscles. Air swooped in his lungs. Then his nose bloomed with odors, the plastic stench of the drapes, fungus from the air-conditioner filter, the body-ridden bed. This room seemed no longer slick and clean, but rather a dark, thick den swarming with the leftover flakes of a thousand lonely men.

His hands worked at the air. His fingers seemed dull and stubbed, and he felt streaming out behind him a hot dagger of nerves. He tried to touch his face—awful thick nails came up. He groaned, which was a coarse inarticulation. He was full of aches and newness. A leg trampled air, and when he attempted rising, he fluttered and fell in the bed, unable to make himself work right.

His legs skittered in the sheets. Oddly, his hands wanted to work with them. What was he trying to do, crawl?

In his extremity he cried aloud, a sound as high as the air brakes on a truck. Jesus, was this a stroke?

Get it together!

He scrabbled, he flopped—what the hell was happening!

He was out of control here. With every muscle, with every ounce of his strength he strove to quiet his heaving body.

This was grotesque!

He struggled at least for order, for power over the wild, twisting gyrations.

But his struggles didn't help. As if powered by another soul, his body leaped up, jumping farther than he had ever jumped before, soaring all the way from the bed to the window. He hit the ceiling and fell, grabbing at the curtains, which collapsed around him.

He crouched in their folds. Burning in his mind was an image he had seen as he leaped, a great beast in the mirror, its front paws outstretched, its tail soaring behind it. Experimentally, he tried to feel for the tail. No luck, his arms didn't go back that far anymore. All right. He tried a little hip action. Behind him he heard the thud, thud of something hitting the floor. He felt the

weight of it, and the air tickling its fur.

Do not move. This could only be one of two things: complete psychosis or a really bizarre stroke.

What if he was one of those stroke victims who just sit and stare, saying nothing, locked forever in deep universes of fantasy? Or he might be the kind of psychotic who is so unruly he must be abandoned to the violent ward. He is the one so out of it that his care packages from home will always be stolen by the orderlies.

It was damn sad. He started to cry again, but stifled himself when he heard the whines. How could he even talk to Cindy? How could he discuss Kafka with his son, or play chess and Stratego with him, given the apparent presence of paws? Could he even think anymore? This room smelled like cigars, cigarettes, pipe tobacco, perfume, and human sweat.

He raised his head. Something was slipping through the brush nearby.

His immediate reaction was immense relief. If there was brush nearby, this must be a dream after all, because there was no brush in hotel bedrooms.

All right, then let it roll. A man was coming through the brush. Bob cocked his ears, heard the man breathing, heard him muttering, smelled alcohol on his breath. He did not smell the steel of a gun, only leather and cloth and sodden skin. The man was singing to himself as he put up plastic markers in the sodden ground. Clouds of mosquitoes swarmed around him, and from time to time he groaned and made a swipe with his arm. He was the real-estate salesman from the bar, and this was the land he was selling. The plastic markers went flying as he made a lunge at the mosquitoes. He took out a can of insect repellent and sprayed the bugs. "All right, you bastards, live with yourselves!"

I am not in eastern Canada and I don't have the ability to smell the vodka and the tonic separately on a man's breath. No, I am alone in a hotel room. I am not in the woods with this repellent old salesman. I do not have long teeth, Granny, I do not have big eyes. This isn't stroke or psychosis, it is one mega-dream.

I am in the Westin Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia, Room 403. I have a view down Peachtree Street which I cannot see because no matter how my dream makes them look, the curtains are in fact closed.

He heard the air conditioner hissing, felt the air brushing his fur. A sound in the hall made him snort.

From the doorway there came a knock. Another. Then the door made a

clicking sound. A woman hurried into the room, elderly, in a gray uniform with a white apron. "Turndown service. Sir?" A grunt. The lights went full on. "Wha—the curtains!"

In the mirror that covered the wall behind the dresser Bob saw a large dog or wolf standing on the bed staring at the mirror. Startled, he cried aloud. The animal reared back, its barking filling the room, its hackles raised, its teeth bared.

"Oh, no! No pets allowed!" The maid threw all of her mints in the air and jumped back, falling over her cart full of sheets and towels and little bottles of body shampoo.

Bob's difficulty was that he could not find himself in the mirror. Did nightmares have reflections? This had to end soon. Dream or not, he could still see the mints on the floor.

Since he was not a wolf, what had she seen and run off to report? Had he exposed himself to her? Would the vice squad soon be here, ready to take him in, scare him good, and send him home to a furious wife? "Really, Bob, if you want to try it with strangers, why not just call an escort service?" Then the diminished relationship. Fifteen years of loyalty lost to a bad dream.

The maid had left her cart overturned in the hall. Bob, moving awkwardly, trying to keep all four limbs coordinated, went out and sniffed one of the slowly turning wheels. There was a click behind him. He didn't need to look. Of course the unseen hand of nightmare had closed the door.

He sniffed the handle, smelling a strong odor of the maid's hand, mixed of sour skin smell, cigarettes, mints, and body shampoo. He shrank back, thinking that he really couldn't handle sniffing a doorknob. It was part of the perfection of the illusion that he had just automatically done that instead of trying to open the door.

He thought: Probably I only *feel* like this. What I actually look like is a naked man sniffing a doorknob and I've got to stifle this peculiar behavior!

I'll be calm, straightforward. I was going for the shower and took a wrong turn. Honest mistake. No big deal. Just please God don't let me start barking again!

The worst thing about this experience was that it didn't have the logic of dream or hallucination at all, it had the logic of life. He wished to God for Cindy.

When he heard the elevator bell ring and the doors roll open, a powerful and unexpected instinct asserted itself. He cowered back down the hall,

seeking some darkness. Excited voices came toward him. "I swear it's the biggest dog I ever seen." What was this? Was the maid part of the dream, after all, or was he shifting the sense of her words into his own delusional system?

"How he git it into de hotel, dat what I got to know."

"Ask the guest. He must have smuggled it in."

They came around the corner and stopped dead. "Aw, God. It got out." Bob looked up at them. A wave of sensation made him shudder, almost as if there were tiny creatures running on his skin. He felt frightened and dismal. He certainly seemed to be naked on all fours in the hallway of a hotel.

"Its creepin' along, look out."

"We gotta get the police, I ain't gonna touch nothin' that big." Hearing this, Bob cracked. Terror whipped him. He screamed and ran for the fire stairs. "Holy shit, it done got some speed on it!" Bob raced down the corridor, his claws catching on the rug.

"We can't let that thing out in the hotel, they'll fire us both!"

"Come on, woman, help me! We can head it off."

The yellow lights glaring down, the beige elevator doors, the confusing twists and turns of the halls, Bob might be in a maze of some kind, the lights too bright, the ceilings too high, the smells all wrong.

He saw writing on a door: EXIT. He threw himself against the bar until the door gave way into the fire stairs.

"That thing's got a mind of its own, it just opened that door."

Down, up, which way to go? Bob heard himself whimpering. He made a solemn vow: When I get home, if I ever do, I will call Monica and make an appointment. I will do this no matter how good I feel at the time. Frantically, he sought reasons for his predicament. Was it the salesman in the bar? Some kind of drug in his drink to make him a more pliant buyer? When he was selling, he had often wished for drugs of some kind. Just a nice little powder in the damn fool's steak sauce, and he becomes silly enough to buy the damn bonds. "Go out among the people, young man, and rape them." Fatherly advice from Charlie Decker, his boss in the bond office. Charles Decker: killed himself with a fingernail file.

Quite arbitrarily he started up instead of down. It was not long, though, before he heard voices behind him. "How high is it?" "Go up to fifteen. You're gonna head it off." "Come on, where's that elevator when you need it?"

Bob was having trouble working his body. If he thought about it, his back legs and his front legs stopped working together and he went to scrabbling. Trying to make his mind a blank, he moved up the stairs. His mind went back to Sister Eustacia, the music teacher at Sacred Heart. Sister Eustacia: playing the piano is a matter of mind over matter. Let your mind float free in the music, and your fingers will find their own way.

Mind, let go. Body, run. Door after door, smell of concrete dust and hot electric connections. Running, reduced to raw reality, no more thought, just the urge to escape, to get away from the embarrassment. The road to Cairo, *The Road to Rio*. Bob Hope, 1956, Ozzie and Harriet, *The Dinah Shore Show*. *The Honeymooners*, *Leave It To Beaver*. Ernie Kovaks, a station wagon going *boom boom* down into the ditch, Ernie Kovaks. 1956, remembering the dark side of the war. Yes, we went and found out what was behind the curtain, didn't we? The word "Hiroshima" even sounds like a soft explosion.

The last time you ran like this was in 1956. You were twelve years old. You and Roxanne de LaPlane rolled naked down the hill behind her house, and found yourselves at her father's feet. You rose up and you certainly did run, a naked kid in the evening.

Ahead, a door! God save me, it's the roof. They are still behind me, they have come forty floors. That security guard is made of strong stuff. Bob had to hang out his tongue, otherwise his mouth felt like somebody had stuffed a hot pillow in it. When he panted it got cold, spreading relief through his body.

He stood at the door jerking, twisting, pounding his tail against the floor. He tried to change back, straining and grunting. He hopped and yapped, hating the absurd sound of his voice. Poof, bang, abracadabra, hocus-pocus. *Hoc et corpus*, Father O'Reilly, Jesus. Mary Catherine Baker and Salvatore Allessio each completed ten thousand Hail Marys during Lent in the year 1957. Lent, sacrifice, passion of Christ: oh, Mother of God, intercede for me.

His prayers were idiotic yaps.

They brought, however, a curious relief. Someone heard the noises and came to the other side of the door. With a loud click a waiter in a red jacket opened it. Bob, aware only that this was the end of the line, knowing that the security guard was no more than a couple of floors below, rushed through.

Sights, sounds, and an overpowering mass of odors assailed him. His eyes could not understand, his nose could not sort out the chaos before him. He

barked once loudly, and the face of every diner in the Starlight Restaurant turned toward him.

Damn that bark, without it he might have been able to slink past unnoticed. He was aware of his own nakedness, and sought to cover himself with his hands. The moment he did this, he toppled forward. When he recovered himself, he was confronting three waiters, one of them with a large silver tray in his hand which he used as a shield. A few of the diners had jumped from their seats. "It's a wolf," one of them shouted.

"How in hell—"

"Don't let it out onto the floor," a maitre d' hissed. "You'll cause a riot."

The waiters skittered around. Bob's eyes went to the long corridor. At the far end he could see a glass door. Behind it would be the sky lobby. His own room seemed a million light-years away.

Oh, Cindy.

Remembering Sister Eustacia's instructions, Bob tried to concentrate his mind on the glass door and let his body do its own work. He shot forward with the power of four legs instead of two, moving faster than he ever had before. There was a blinding red flash and a shock of pain to his head. With a great shattering the doors became a rubble of glass pebbles. Bob rolled over and over across the sky lobby. As he rolled he moved through a jumble of smells, the glass, the sweat of his pursuers, his own fur and flying slobber.

Then he was on his feet. "Oh, God," he said. He staggered, his arms working like arms instead of forelegs. He was high off the ground and his nose was suddenly numb. The riot of odors had disappeared. He jabbed the elevator button with a normal finger. When it opened, three women in beehive hairdos and tight dresses burst into shrieks of hysterical laughter.

The nightmare of being a wolf had left him stranded on the fortieth floor, naked.

He dashed past the women into the closing elevator, hammered "four," and pressed himself against the back wall as the doors made a thumping sound.

The waiters, the maitre d', the security guard, and about six male patrons were blasting down the corridor. Bob banged his fist against the "close door" button, but the elevator was at the top floor, and cycling on its own time. They reached the glass rubble and slowed down, picking their way to avoid getting their shoes cut open.

Not realizing that Bob was inside, the security guards ran right past the open elevator, heading for the fire stairs at the far end of this lobby. "It musta

gone to the roof."

"It can't open doors, surely."

"I saw it open a door. That thing is smart."

Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus Christ.

"Hey, wha—lookit him—wait!"

The doors slid closed just as a man in a maroon polyester sports jacket and a string tie lunged toward them.

"There's a guy in there stark staring naked!"

"Dis a good hotel!"

Vroom, down he went, down to the fourth floor. Blessed be, don't make a stop on the way. No such luck, a stop is made.

Bob turned his back on the young man and woman in tan Apple Computer sports jackets, who entered the elevator. "Uh-oh," the woman said.

"Please, I was taking a shower," Bob replied, his face to the wall. "I was looking for my hair conditioner and next thing I knew I was in the hall. I couldn't make anybody hear me, so I tried to go for the security guards."

The couple remained silent. The doors opened on the fourth floor and Bob backed out, careful to avoid showing them his face. After the doors closed he heard a burst of laughter, the woman tinkling merrily, the man going haw-haw.

He raced around the corner and down the hall. Either the door would open or it wouldn't. He saw the overturned cart at the end of the hall, moved forward. He was praying as he walked, a breathy "Jesus, help me" at each step.

Somebody must have intervened, because he found his door unlocked. Given hands, it was blissfully easy to open. He rushed inside, grabbed clothes frantically, a pair of pants, his house shoes, a knit shirt. Dressed, dressed again, oh blessing divine. His mind twisted and turned. Go down to the bar. Forget the whole thing.

No. Foolish man. Your room will be full of cops when you return. A better idea: He went outside, heaped all of the maid's things on her cart and rolled it to the opposite end of the hall. There he overturned the cart and spread everything out at another door. Then he dashed back to his own room and replaced the curtains. If only he could have gotten into 422 and pulled the curtains down as well.

A shout came from outside. Very good. "Aw, damn—" Footsteps going in

the opposite direction. Bob exited his room, stepping confidently toward the elevator bank as two security guards and a whole squadron of cops began hammering on the door to 422.

He remained in the nearly empty bar long enough to knock back two neat Stolys. Then, heavy with sleep, he returned to his room. Down the hall another computer consultant was talking frantically. He didn't have a dog, he had been asleep, he was from Houston, Texas, he was very quiet, yes, he had a driver's license, oh, Officer, there's no need to go down to the station.

Behind his own door, safe at last, Bob felt a giggly sort of relief. He took off his clothes and went into the bathroom. The mentally ill were often given Jacuzzis to calm them down, so Bob filled the tub and turned on the nozzles. Then he got two little bottles of Courvoisier from the room's fridge. He knocked one back almost immediately. When the tub was ready, he sank into it, floating the other bottle so it would get nice and warm. He watched it dance in the bubbles and he sang softly to himself, "You clever devil, you got away, got awaaay...." He sipped from the second bottle, sipped the good fire. Like a man after battle he was suddenly seized with a need for sex, for the blood and passion of the life he had almost lost. He wanted sex, but he also wanted food. Maybe he would find an escort service. He would get to that. But first he decided to call room service and order a BLT and a bottle of beer. Dixie, if they had it; if not, a nice, cold Molson. Above the hissing of the tub and the foam of these pleasant thoughts, there intruded the frantic bleating of the poor sucker who had been sucked up by the security guards. His explanations must not have sufficed; they were on their way to the police station. Booking, indecent exposure, breaking down a door, bringing in a giant dog. Sent back to his wife in disgrace, there to be thoroughly punished. God help him, God grant that he deserves it for other sins.

He ordered his midnight snack over the phone in the bathroom, and was in the hotel's terrycloth robe watching *Midnight Blue* when it arrived, the cart being pushed by a fetching woman of perhaps forty, neat in her red dress and white blouse, as cheerfully efficient as a stewardess. As she swept the silver dome off his sandwich she glanced at the TV. He saw color come into her cheeks.

Now, Bob, by God, this is a definite chance. This is what you've been wanting, a stranger. She's no kid, but then neither am I. I need a woman who's had a little experience. She lingered, waiting for him to sign the chit. "Want to share it with me?" he asked.

She looked down at the chit he had handed her. "How?"

"I mean the sandwich."

"I don't want a sandwich."

What an asinine attempt. He should be ashamed of himself. She was between him and the door, turning to leave. "Wait," he said. He was trying to think but his mind was blank. He leaped across the bed and threw himself to his knees at her feet. She jumped back, her face registering surprise and annoyance.

"Ma'am, you must know the extraordinary effect your beauty has had upon me. Seeing you this moment, I must confess that I was stunned by the intensity of my own reaction. You look angry, but consider rather that you should be flattered. I'm a decent enough man. My interest is in itself a compliment. I give you my body, my soul, for an hour's love or a lifetime."

"I—uh—ah—" She had no words, no reply. He fancied that she realized any reply would be fatal. Thus encouraged, he seized her hand and kissed it, the first flesh not of Cindy he had kissed in passion almost since he could remember.

She drew her hand away, but slowly, like she was removing a luscious glove. "I can't just disappear into a room, I'll lose my job." His heart started thundering. She was saying yes. This was yes.

"When do you get off?"

"At three. It's an hour from now."

He kissed her hand again, then her red sleeve. He rose and swept her up in his arms. "At three. I'll be waiting for you."

She slipped out, he ate every scrap of his sandwich and drank his beer.

The next thing he knew his phone was ringing. "Hi, this is Amanda from Apple. Just calling to make sure you'll be at the breakfast." What time was it now? Seven-thirty. He ached from a night spent half in dreams, half in hard, physical longing.

"I'll be there," he said. He put down the phone. The world was so disappointing. It took more than the real passion of a decent man to entice a woman. Just not very good-looking, that was Bob. His approach had been stupid. Sexual competents didn't go down on their knees and blubber. No macho. A wimp, to use an expression only wimps use nowadays.

He shaved, lathering his face with Trac II Shaving Cream and then using the Bic shaver the hotel had thoughtfully provided. He rubbed some Brylcreem into his hair, brushed his teeth, and dressed in a J. Press suit. None

of this polyester junk for him. He liked to look Manhattan.

As he was leaving the room he saw a note at his feet. It had been slipped in under the door. "Sorry, a big ruckus in the hotel. No way I can get back after my shift without being noticed, security everywhere. Love ya, crazy guy, Alison."

For an instant he was delighted with the note, then he threw it down with an in-sucked cry. "A big ruckus in the hotel": reality. The engines of the impossible, still churning. He looked at the note again, then at the door. He was going to have to go out there and pretend ignorance of whatever it was he had done.

He couldn't hide, that would create suspicion. The thing to do was to attend the breakfast, maybe hit a seminar or demo session, then plead a business emergency and depart on the next plane. Do it smoothly, correctly. Do it well.

Still, he hesitated. There was always the possibility that the disturbance she referred to had nothing to do with him.

But of course it did. Last night he had assumed the structure of another kind of creature, perhaps a dog or wolf, and had gotten himself tangled up in a flickering, dangerous adventure in the halls. It remained in his memory, a thick storm of odors and sounds, odd, gray visions, confusion, people shouting, and then a queasy, naked escape back to his room. He remembered his eerie *other* body as a storm of rich sensations: the tickling joy of paws upon carpet and concrete stair, the movement of air through fur, the sounds and above all the smells of the restaurant, almost as palpable as the food itself. He caught himself sucking breath through distended nostrils, and thought of breakfast eggs, of coffee, of buttered toast, of the shifting, magical steam rising from a plate of food.

He left the room and strode down the hall. "Hi, Mr. Drake," said a young woman in an Apple blazer. "I'm Jane Poole, I'm your coordinator for the conference. Breakfast's just starting in Ballroom C on the mezzanine."

"I'm as hungry as a wolf."

Going down, in the elevator he was joined by two other conferees, named, according to their tags, "Hi, my name is Winston Jeal, Jealco Systems," and "Hi, my name is Harry Thomas, CompuTex." Bob's own name was "Hi, I'm Bob Drake, Drake Business Consultants." What had happened to Bob Duke? he wondered. Been canceled, apparently, at least as far as Apple was concerned.

Winston Jeal looked haggard. The Kaywoodie in his mouth was the only thing holding his face together. Without it he would collapse into twitches and snickering anger. Bob knew just exactly who he was. This was the remains of the man from 422, who had spent his night in a police station fielding accusations that must have sounded rather bizarre. "You brought a wolf into the hotel! You ran naked through the halls!"

"Morning," Bob said.

"Hiya," Harry Thomas replied. "Hope you're hungry. I've been to these Apple dos before, and they really lay a table."

Jeal said nothing, only stared at the elevator doors, his pipe jutting from his mouth. There was a copy of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* in his jacket pocket. His glasses, in desperate need of cleaning, were held together by a couple of Band-Aids. The doors opened. There was also a conference of independent real-estate agents in the hotel, and they had gathered into boisterous, boasting knots in front of the elevator banks, preparing to go to their own breakfast in Ballroom A. "If those bastards try to sell you some damn land, sell them back with a damn computer," Jeal said. His voice was hollow and deep, resonant with bitter meaning.

Once in Ballroom C, he went down the row of steam tables loading his plate with eggs, bacon, and sausage, with the darkest toast in the pile, with slices of honeydew melon and tiny pastries, finally with a small croissant from a last pile at the end of the table. A sudden roar arose from the real-estate salesmen two ballrooms away. They were there to be set afire with greed by some blazing expert, to be whipped and massaged until they were virtual psychopaths of sales. The hunger upon them, they would rage out into the land, to sell its still-empty meadows, its forests, to people who might haul in trailers or put up A-frames, and drain their septic tanks into its arteries and veins.

Bob once saw stalking the night woods near his hunt club a ghost Indian whose face was so pocked with anger that it had festered. Black puss fell in globs from the rotted cheeks, and the eyes were bloodshot with rage. The Indian had walked right off into the sky, and Bob had heard a sound like a stone door closing.

He sat down now across from Jeal and tucked into a forkful of wobbly scrambled eggs. They filled his head, his lungs, his esophagus with fluffy flavor. Through his mind there flowed images of chickens, clouds of chickens, laying eggs to *Eine Kleine Nachtmusick*, *ta ta ta bloof, dum dum*

dee. Bloof. And the clerks at their computers, hen number 11893, laying rate 4, weight 2.2 kg, *cluck cluck* went the disk drive, and the sausage and the bacon, and the howling pigs in the slaughterhouse, the sows and the hogs, the shoats going down the chute, the screams of terror in processing, the automatic clubber smashing ten thousand skulls a day.

They evolved without hands, the pigs, but bearing meat that looks, tastes, and smells just like human. Poor pigs, condemned to be at once reviled and loved by man. Sometimes, eating bacon, you almost remember something. Then you don't, you can't.

"What?"

Bob looked up. It was Jeal; he had taken his pipe out of his mouth and spoken, raising his coffee to his lips.

"Excuse me?"

"You said something about a pig."

Bob smiled. "I was thinking about—I used to—I mean, my father once took me to a slaughterhouse." He barked out a laugh. "Sorry."

"You just blurt out gobbledygook about pigs because you're eating bacon? This industry needs more people like you." Bitter, enraged, his words sharp, his voice thick with anger.

"What's the matter?"

"I spent the night as a guest of the goddamn Atlanta police. And I never figured out why. Some crazy story about me letting a dog loose in the hotel. I don't have a dog. My sister has a Lhasa apso, and I had a bulldog named Jane when I was growing up. They say this dog that was allegedly in my room wrecked the goddamn restaurant. What is this, a police state?"

"They had the Wayne Williams thing here, remember. Child murderer. The Atlanta cops are pathological about anything strange."

"A guy sitting in a hotel room in his goddamn underpants watching Arsenio Hall is strange? Now I've heard it all." He attacked a poached egg, slicing through it so that the yolk ran and the white collapsed. He cut furiously for a time, until the egg was pale yellow pulp. Then he knocked back a glass of prune juice like it was a shot of Old Crow. "There isn't a goddamn thing you can do. All of a sudden the door flies open and here comes a maid and about six security guards and a dozen cops. 'He put the curtains back,' the maid screams. The damn cops grabbed me. I was so startled I almost swallowed my pipe. As it was I blew the fire through the bowl and set one of the cop's hair alight. He was using this inflammable

Georgia Peach goo they've got down here, and it took them a while to get it out. So off I went, booked for assault by a furious five-hundred-pound policeman with a wet towel wrapped around his head." Leaning close to his plate, he shoveled in the rest of the pulped egg.

"You were actually booked?"

Jeal regarded him with suspicious interest. "If I'm talking to a reporter right now, I want to say something real simple. You print a word about this, and I will kill you." He started on his toast, tearing at it with a jerk of his head. Bob realized that the man wasn't exaggerating. He wondered if Jeal had killed before. Vietnam, maybe. Bob had gone the professional student route to escape the war. Jeal did not seem the type to escape anything.

"Are you in any trouble?"

"Apple sorted it out. That coordinator honey was down at the precinct house the whole time. I don't think it amounts to much. It's just the goddamn abuse that gets me. I mean, a man is sitting in a hotel room minding his own business, and *bang*. Can you imagine what Apple thinks of me? How is this going to look once Miss Coordinator files her report? Beware of the kook from Houston. That's all they'll remember. I'm trying to feed a family just like every guy here. This is not going to help me. Hell, let's talk about something else. What we all want to talk about. You got pictures?"

Bob experienced the familiar delight, the ritual of showing his own fascinating pictures of Kevin, then politely observing his companion's boring ones of his own kids. You pretended interest in the other guy's pictures and he pretended interest in yours. That way you both got to say the names of your children and your wife.

As Jeal opened his wallet his photos slid into his coffee. His pipe jutting from his mouth, his teeth gritting with anger, he retrieved them, laid them on a napkin. "Damn! That one's the only one I have of my first wife, Ellen. She died in childbirth, it was just utterly fantastic. So sudden. Right in the middle of transition, her heart stopped. *Bam*. What remains of Ellen is this picture and Hillary. This is Hillary, damn, it's soaked worse than Ellen. She's twelve. This is Franklin, my son. I married his mother in '78. She gave me this boy."

Bob held out his pictures of Cindy and Kevin.

"He's our only one. My wife had toxemia and it's a risk for us to have more."

"Don't take any risks. It's damn foolish. You have a beautiful child, a beautiful wife. You are content."

God, if only this poor, beset man knew what it was to be *really* beset. Last night I roamed the halls. Last night I was another kind of being.

I, Robert Duke, roamed the halls.

Chapter Four

THE FAMILY SAT TO ITS DINNER, CYNTHIA AND BOB AND Kevin. They sat in the light of a Monday evening, with music chosen by Kevin. He had picked some Chopin Nocturnes he claimed that Kafka had loved. In his wallet he now kept a small photo of Kafka at the Prater Amusement Park in Vienna, sitting in a fake airplane with a straw hat on his head. Instead of throwing his arms around his father's waist when he returned from the journey to Atlanta, Kevin had showed him this picture.

Kevin was a large, slightly overweight boy, whose skin seemed unnaturally smooth because it was filled with fat. He was loving, dutiful, and unforgiving of falsity. He needed love, attention, money. His dream was to write, to paint perhaps, or to own his own airline. Sometimes Bob thought his son was going mad; others that he had been born mad. He loved his son.

They ate boiled cabbage, beef stew with pearl onions and green peppers, small new potatoes, and salad. They all drank an inexpensive Pinot Noir from Astor Wine and Liquors, a large store around the corner from their apartment building. Cindy had her usual single glass, exhaling through her mouth each time she took a swallow. Kevin had a quarter of a glass, which he drank off at once. Later he would creep out to the kitchen and knock back four or five shots of Stolichnaya neat, but not until long after his parents were asleep. Then he would watch *Midnight Blue* and count the number of times the escort-service ads were repeated. His interest was strictly clinical. Kevin's sex life hadn't yet started in earnest. There had been Ricky Riles, of course, and Ginny Starer, and Bobby and Sally Harper, and that group at Tim's slumber party—those, but no others. Such questions as hetero- and homosexuality never concerned him. He had grown up in a neighborhood that was at least a quarter homosexual. His parents had preached toleration, often expelling long, sententious speeches on the matter. Toleration of what? To Kevin homosexuality was no odder than air, and no more interesting.

What was interesting to him, and more than a little disturbing, was his father's condition. Kevin loved his dad with a great passion. In response Bob had poured himself into the relationship, had lavished his heart and soul on his son.

Kevin ate his cabbage, chewing without real interest, watching his father,

trying to draw him into conversation. "I got a neat book about Kafka, Dad. Want to hear about it?"

"Kafka?"

"It's a photo album. *Kafka, Pictures of a Life*. That's where I got the one in my wallet."

Bob stared at his son in a way that made Kevin extremely uncomfortable. He did not want the foundations of his life disturbed—it was a dim-cult enough life without this happening. But there was something in Dad's expression that Kevin did not like at all. The boy lapsed into silence and concentrated on his food. In his mind's eye he saw his father's burning gaze changing to a smile that got too bright, and stayed too bright. Then where would Dad go?

Cindy felt the luxury of herself, her amplifying flesh, the warmth of her legs in her dress, the possible pleasures of the coming night. Would Bob notice her, or had the marriage slipped beyond that? Love, no matter how rich and wet, has dry, crinkled borders—and beyond was the sky through which lovers fell forever.

It had taken fifteen years of a good marriage for Cindy to become confident of her own beauty. As a girl she had thought of herself as too large. Loving her was a big job, there being acres of pale flesh to kiss, and a mouth she imagined able to swallow the heads of most boys. She had wanted for lovers, too proud to call the boys, waiting in her room, her imagination soaring in the steamy nights, when the breeze seemed to penetrate every crack in her body with warm, touching fingers. The trees tossed and there were words of magic in the air.

A siren rose in the street, fading quickly into the blaring of a radio and hard laughter. A window opened, a woman shouted at a boy gluing the flier advertising a rock club to the wall of a building. Cynthia turned away from the table, drawn by whatever more was in the world. "The wine's made me flush."

Bob wondered if now was the moment to relate his experiences. "I think I'd like to see Monica," he said instead. "Have a chat."

Kevin was toying with his food, his wife leaning back in her chair, shaking her long brown hair. Beyond the window the night was growing into a density of a yellow sodium-vapor light. The Columbia Hotel sign came on, and began to cast its shaking reflection against the ceiling of the dining room. The music poured out of the stereo.

"I have a story to tell," Bob finally managed to say. He drank the dregs of his wine, poured himself another glass. Kevin went for the bottle. "No. You've had yours." The boy stopped. He ate a morsel of cabbage.

"Was there any trouble, honey? Is that why you came home early?"

"I came home early because I had a disturbing dream that perhaps was not a dream. Not entirely. There were certain indications afterward that the dream, at least in some way, was real."

They were naturally eager to hear more. But he found he could not bring himself to tell more. The trouble was his son; the family always shared everything but this was too much. He could not share this with his boy. To Kevin he was golden;

his ego would not allow him to compromise that image.

"Dad, come on. That's got to be one of the classic lead-ins. You can't just say that and then stop."

He traded looks with Cynthia. She understood perfectly. "I don't think Dad actually remembers the dream."

"I thought I did but now I don't. It's just, as I said, there was some sort of a disturbance in the hotel that happened to coincide with the dream. I do remember I left the room in my dream. And there had been a disturbance. Maybe I actually did leave the room. That's why I came home."

"Was anybody hurt?"

"No, son, not as far as I know." He remembered Jeal and the police. "People were inconvenienced, and a glass door was broken. That's about all."

"Wow, Dad." The boy smiled but it was obvious that he was scared. Bob was ashamed of himself.

"Eat," Cindy muttered, addressing them both. "I worked hard."

Bob loved cabbage; he ate eagerly. "It's a delicious dinner, hon." There came to him an impression which before the dream had been fuzzy, but which was now quite clear. His life seemed a series of paper cutouts, his own body merely a jointed thing, able to move only on command of some mystery that could neither be controlled nor ignored. When the music stopped, it was replaced by the sounds of eating, the clink of knives and forks, the working of jaws. Three ordinary people consumed an ordinary dinner deep in the flaring night of Manhattan, while the neon glared on the ceiling and the traffic crept past below, long lines of honking cars jamming Broadway.

The clock that had been in Cindy's family since before the Civil War chimed eight times. "Any more homework, son?"

"No, Mama. I want a tub bath tonight. I want to sit in the tub and read the *Metamorphosis*."

"As long as you're in bed by nine, this can be free time. What did you have for homework?"

"Do a book report on *The Penal Colony*. Do some algebra problems. Write a poem about a subject of my choosing. The usual sort of thing."

"You're lucky you're in St. Anselm's. You could be at public school where you have to carry a knife in order to survive."

"Obviously I wouldn't survive, Dad. As you well know." Bob did not say it, but he thought bitterly that nobody survives. Nobody. There is a story of some strange tiles from a floor in Spain in which the faces of the dead have emerged, terrible, glazed horrors, apparently hellbound. And in Lake Ontario there is an island that looks from the air like George Bernard Shaw, and most of the views in the Catskills look like the profiles of Dutchmen and Indians, and there is a plateau on Mars that looks like an Egyptian, and then there's the man in the moon, that most haunting of natural faces. Maybe we get trapped in matter, some of us, condemned to contemplate the starry world forever, staring at sky or cloud, motionless. We discover, then, the simple truth that meditation—real meditation—is a stupefying bore. If you must do it forever, even contemplating the cosmos must get frightfully dull. God's probably bored silly. Look at God's sense of fun—see the fish, the birds. How can something with the glee to create them stand playing such a passive role?

Then again, maybe God is not passive, but coy. Shy. A coquette, or cocotte. A wallflower. A hermit. A zombie. A ghoul.

Life is movement; finally it is nothing more than random movement, any movement, the twitch of a hand in the dark, the hiss of legs beneath a sheet.

Kevin pushed back his chair and bounded off to his bath, with his boat and his book. "He's so beautiful," Bob said as the boy ran down the long hallway to the bathroom. "Don't forget to come tell us good night," he called.

Perhaps there was no answer, or it might have been absorbed by the walls. Bob began helping Cindy clear the table. "Kevin hardly ate, Bob."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up." The boy's psyche was an eggshell. When Bob felt wrong, he involuntarily hunched his shoulders.

"Don't do that, I'm not attacking you. If you want to see Monica, see Monica. If you want to leave me, leave me."

The words settled as wet smoke in the air. Bob was wary now. He often worried that a day would come when Cindy became exhausted with him. His

self-absorption was that of an artist, but he had not the glory. There was no reward for the waitressing Bob Duke demanded. Only her kindness sustained her; for her any reward had to be internal to herself. Bob did not see what she got out of the relationship, which worried him.

"Cindy, please, I didn't mean to imply anything like that. I need you. It's just that I also need professional help. I'm under a lot of stress."

"We're running out of money."

"I know that, don't hit me with it."

"How dare you say that? I'm not hitting you. I'm just telling you so you'll know."

Despite all the terror he had felt last night, the sense that the universe had ripped and he had been the one who fell through, there was also a sense of wonder. Once Kevin had commented that seeing even the most dreadful of supernatural manifestations, a disfigured ghost or a vampire, would make him happy because of everything else it implied about the persistence of the soul. Bob had not used the word "supernatural" in reference to his experience before, but it now occurred to him to do so.

He wished that he could impress Cindy with the seriousness of the situation. To do that, maybe he should express the wonder. For, despite everything, there was wonder. Even if it was all a complex, subtle dream, woven of lies and illusions, it was remarkable, ranking as a psychological phenomenon. And if there was any truth to it at all, *any* truth—

Good God.

How would she take the blank suggestion that he believed he had, for a period of about fifteen minutes last night, actually been another creature? He knew very well how she would take it: she would react in anger. And her outrage would have entire justice, for he had no right to place such a burden upon her. Cindy was not good at earning money. She was too bright for the jobs she could get. She annoyed people. As a brilliant, untrained woman she was a sort of economic defective. She had been fired from a dozen secretarial jobs; she had been fired even from a position as a school librarian which paid only five thousand dollars a year and was practically unfillable. In work situations she tended to be huffy and rebellious. And yet, as business manager of their personal firm she was superb. Her decisions were always correct. She could handle money. The trouble was, he did not bring in any money. She spent her time playing credit cards off against one another and working the float.

"Cindy, please forgive me." He opened his arms and she came to him.

"I can't live with all this Sturm und Drang, Bob. You're such an overdramatizer. I don't even want to know what happened in Atlanta, as long as you didn't do anything that's going to cause the police to come after you. I just want to accept you, and I'm doing my best. If you are having a problem, I'll do what I know how to do. I'll hold you, I'll listen to what I can bear to hear, I'll comfort you if that is in my power."

She was afraid, and that made him pity her. It did not stop him, though. "I've had an experience that will remain with me until the end of my days." He caught himself in the posturing, the destructive silliness, of that statement. So did she—he heard her soft moan.

People call it midlife crisis, male menopause, whatever. They laugh, they simplify, then when it happens to you and you're in trouble and afraid, what do you do? Where are the resources? He had shamed himself before her. "I think it was just a very bad dream," he said carefully. "It's nothing I can't handle. But please be straight with me. Do you have a problem with my seeing Monica about it?"

She touched her cheeks, her long fingers graceful against the gentle weight of her jowls. What a strange journey it was, the lasting marriage.

She remained silent for some moments. He raised his eyebrows: she owed him an answer to his question. She took a deep breath. "We aren't children. Monica is my friend, and I think I might even have suggested you see her. Now, when I think of her hearing my intimate details with you, I wonder if the friendship can take it. I don't have many friends, Bob. If I lose Monica, I'll be lonely."

"I understand. I can get Monica to refer me to somebody."

Cindy nodded. "On the other hand, she knows us both. She will be more help to you than a stranger. And she's very skilled; I've heard that from a lot of people. No, Bob, I think she's best for you. I think you should go to her."

"Your friendship?"

"We're old, old friends. I met Monica in grade school. We've shared so much—you and Scotty, that crazy night." She laughed a little. "We'll share this too. Who knows, maybe it'll have the opposite effect. It could make us closer."

"She'll separate the personal from the professional."

Cindy put a period to the conversation by announcing that the news had started. They told about a terrible series of murders in Calaveras County,

California. Pictures of the concrete blockhouse where the crimes were committed were shown. Bob felt fascinated loathing at the sight of the thing. He wondered what had gone on inside.

Later he went into Kevin's room and talked to him about Kafka. Then he read the *Metamorphosis* and grew slightly sick. People assumed that the story of a man turning into an insect was metaphorical, but what if Kafka had taken it from life? What if it was a real experience?

Of course it wasn't real. How could he even think that, and so debase the literature of the piece?

Later he drank three Stolys and listened to Steve Reich's *Desert Music*. He ate some cold shrimp that were in the fridge and wished he was at Pascal Manoules in New Orleans. Barbecued shrimp and a Dixie beer. God love it, perhaps the best meal in America.

This night passed without dreams.

When he woke up, there was thin, gray light coming in the window. He went through the ceremonies of the morning, the shave, the brushing of the hair, the dressing in the gray suit, the kissing of the schoolbound boy, the march out into the sun-drenched traffic, the subway, the jammed crowds of Thirty-fourth Street, the elevator, the office of Duke Data Consultants on the sixth floor of the Empire State Building. At the moment he could not afford a secretary, and his outer office contained nothing but a desk, an archaic Mac, and a telephone.

He took in the mail, which consisted of the usual pound or so of computer magazines, trade journals, and bills. There were no letters of inquiry, and none of his outstanding accounts had sent checks. The bills he piled up to take to Cindy.

He had not yet sat down when the phone began ringing. "This is Joe Tragliano, I want—"

Bob put down the phone in horror. Tragliano? Somebody from the landlord's office—but which landlord, home or this place?

He didn't want to call Cindy about it. The mere fact that landlords were beginning to phone would terrify her. Why didn't things ever come out right? The world is not made to come out right, the world is made to burn. And yet flowers, spring, glistening lakes, snowflakes, laughing children.

And yet—the phone ringing again. Bob jerked back and forth. God, God, it could be a client. Or—he answered.

"Tragliano. Look, we got a hot check here. We can't deposit it again, you

gotta send us a new check. You understand that?"

"Yes."

"Okay, there's gonna be an eviction notice in your mailbox tomorrow. It's no big deal, don't get worried, just get the money to us, okay?"

"Okay." Oh, God. The apartment, sixteen hundred and fifty dollars a month. It hadn't seemed like much a year ago but now, God.

There was a pink envelope on the floor he hadn't seen before. Pushed under the outer door while he was on the phone. He opened it. A pink copy of his April office rent bill, a yellow copy of the May bill, a blue copy of the June bill, a white copy of the current bill.

They had been waiting for him to come in. Eyes had watched his entrance, feet had moved. Was somebody now hanging back in the hall, waiting to buttonhole him when he came out?

Please somebody—if there is a God—help me, help me get out of this mess.

He would go down to the coffee shop in the basement and coffee himself and read the latest issue of *MacWorld*. Maybe there'd be some useful tidbit in the computer-industry gossip columns, something he could make a few cold calls about. "Hi, Willard, I just heard a rumor that Compaq's coming out with an AT clone that's—"

What? Who cares. His "clients" didn't need him, they subscribed to computer magazines, too. Soon he heard the coffee bell in the hall. Never mind the shop in the basement. He shouldn't risk leaving his office, anyway. What if they changed the locks on him? But they were nice people here. He was nearly half a year behind and they hadn't even given him an eviction notice. Just these bills, and the feeling that he was being watched.

He went out and bought a cup of hot tea. When he returned to his desk, he noticed that there were tears streaming down his face. He worried that he was in imminent danger of becoming the first person to commit suicide by jumping out of a lower floor of the Empire State Building. He called Monica. She took the call personally, bless her soul.

"Bob?"

He had planned a big speech, but the sound of her voice washed it all out of his mind. "I need a little help." He hated the shaking tone, the whine behind it. "Monica, give me an appointment as soon as you can."

"Where are you, Bob?"

His throat was constricting. The dreadful memories, the sheer terror of

what he had experienced in Atlanta now flooded in on him. "My office." His voice was a whisper. He jammed his teeth together to capture the sob that was about to follow the words.

"If you can get here by ten-thirty, I'll give you half an hour. We can meet again after five."

The even tone was like a handclasp right through the phone. As soon as he hung up, the phone rang again. This time it was American Express. "Mr. Duke, we must have a fifteen-hundred-dollar payment at one of our offices by the close of business today, or we'll be forced—"

He put the phone down, a fussy, frightened gesture. Fear made him feel so careful that he thought he must look prissy. Did pilots in crashing planes become fascinated by bug splashes on the windshield as the ground rushed up?

He tried to swallow his tea and leave, but the tea seared his throat and he gagged, spitting it all over the pile of bills and computer magazines. Oh, so what? His lips, his tongue burning, he stalked out into the silent hallway.

He no longer cared if the Empire State Building was watching him. Better to be outside than in here with all these miserable creditors and the spilled tea. Who knew, maybe something good would happen. He might find a dime on the sidewalk, for example, or be run over by a bus.

As he moved through the streets of the city he experienced a radical change of mood. His spirits lifted. Hard, white sunlight was flooding the world. He went up Fifth Avenue past the corpse of Altman's and still-moving Lord and Taylor's. The people who passed him were shining with what he told himself was the light of the soul. For a moment, reveling in the secret understanding that there was something beautiful here, he loved the faded plastic sushi in the window of a Japanese restaurant, the roaring buses, the sweating Con Ed workers at the corner of Fortieth and Fifth, the new Republic National Bank building, the library with its bright lions and its grand facade.

He was in essence a family man, he decided, and trudged on to the Olympic Tower, where Monica's office overlooked all of mid and lower Manhattan. The waiting room was full of teak and zebrawood furniture, rich dark paneling, and floor-to-ceiling windows. An elderly, beautifully dressed woman sat behind the reception desk and a man of perhaps thirty in one of the chairs. Far below, St. Patrick's Cathedral spread like a stone beast.

"You can go right in, Mr. Duke," the woman at the desk said. Monica was

so successful, so rich;

Look at all this. Somehow it enabled him to regain his composure. "Look at all this," he said as he went in. "It's a long way from a psychiatric residency at Bellevue." Bob remembered her as she had been then, a laughing girl so blond she might have been an angel.

He sat down gratefully in the heavy chair she indicated with a gesture. She came beside him and sat in a higher, stiffer chair.

"Go ahead," she said, touching his hand.

"I was in Atlanta at a conference. Business. I went to sleep—no, it begins before. It started on Saturday. We were at the zoo. The wolf stared at me. Later I had a strange dream, that the wolf had eaten me, and I sort of filled its body. I animated it, like. That must have been Saturday night. Sunday I went to the conference, and I had another dream. Far worse."

"During the conference?"

"Well, at night. I was in my room. It was like I didn't even fall asleep, when suddenly I was not a human being anymore. I was this animal again."

"The wolf from the zoo?"

"An animal. Whatever animal. Probably a wolf, maybe a dog. I dreamed I went out of the room and got chased by a guard and ended up, for God's sake, in the hotel restaurant. I crashed through a door and made it back to my room. I became myself again in the elevator and I had to stand there with my face to the wall because I was totally naked. I have never felt so naked." He dropped to silence. That had not been as hard as he had thought it would be. The next part, though, he wondered if he could utter.

"Yes?" She touched his hand again. She had done that ever since he had known her. Surely she understood how provocative it was. He wished for perhaps the hundred-thousandth time that he had made her that night in the Catskills.

"Monica, I think some part of this dream was real. The next morning I got up and everybody at the conference was talking about how this giant dog had gotten into the restaurant and broken down the glass doors, and escaped into an elevator."

She did not do what he had thought she would, which was to cry out in amazed disbelief. "So you integrated this into your previous night's dreaming."

"Integrated—Monica, you don't understand. It *was* my dream. My dream was true. I became something else, something wild. I remember how it was to

be that creature. Exactly how it was."

"Yes?"

Could he talk about it? It was almost as if the part of him which contained those memories had not the best grasp of the English language. Or was that true? Maybe he could do as she asked, maybe he had language enough. He had planned to talk about what he did, and how it was all real, not a dream, but some baroque effect of a deteriorating mind—the emergence of the wild. But how it *felt*—well, how had it felt?

"I was lying on my bed in the room. I was naked."

"Lying how, on your back?"

"On my back. I was aroused."

"Meaning?"

"I had desire. Intense desire and there was nobody there. I don't fool around on Cindy, but right then I wanted to. I was in a state of intense excitement, and I was alone."

"Did you do anything at all about it?"

"I rarely do that—you're referring to—"

"Bob, try to relax. If you can't talk comfortably with me, I can certainly recommend somebody else."

"No, Monica, I love you—" How in the world had he come to say that? This wasn't going to come out right. "You to help me."

"Bob, I'm a mother figure for you, as much as you may think you desire me sexually."

"I never had much of a relationship with my mother. When I got in her lap, she used to say I was too bony and put me out. Or she'd say she didn't like to be touched when it was hot, her skin was clammy. It was always hot, and her skin was always clammy. When I say that, I feel a hideous, upsetting sexual stirring. I remember when I used to get punished, my sister would watch. It was horrible."

"How were you punished?"

"The old-fashioned way. I was spanked. Viciously, at times. It happened constantly, but I only remember one or two specific occasions."

"Do you think that this is where your masochism started?"

"Masochism?"

"You tell me."

"I want to tell you about my experience. What brought me in here. I have to, it's terribly important. I think that I may be the victim of a rare

psychophysical effect. My mind and my body are working together in some mysterious manner— oh, God, Monica, I've got to get this through to you: I *was* that animal. I turned into something that everybody else in the hotel, the maid who first saw me, the security guards, the people in the restaurant, they all thought it was a big dog or a wolf. And Monica, I felt like a wolf. I did not feel like a human being."

"Did you want to eat them?"

"No no no, that's totally off the point. You're not understanding me. My whole frame of reference changed. Sense of smell, hearing. For God's sake, I could hear people breathing at the far end of a long hall. I could smell all the components of their sweat, their perfume as seven or eight different odors, even the difference between the smell of their hands and the smell of their faces. And I saw it all in vague, muted colors. The point is, what I did in the dream is what people in the hotel saw this big animal do. And I dreamed I was that animal."

"Bob, I want you to listen to me for a moment. Our half hour is up and I'm going to run late with all my patients until lunchtime. I'm going to write you a prescription for something that will calm you down. You'll feel much better. I want you to take it and have a good lunch and then do something you enjoy. Go to a movie. Afterward come back here. I'm finished at five-thirty and I can spend a couple of hours with you. Does that sound like a good plan?"

He nodded and she wrote something on a prescription form. He didn't read it and didn't intend to. He was so grateful that she had instructions for him to follow that he would have followed them into a fire, had that been demanded of him. On the way out of the office he had quite a surprise.

"Mr. Duke, that's a hundred and fifty dollars," the receptionist said with a smile.

"Excuse me?"

"Your bill. We prefer payment by visit. The fee is three hundred dollars an hour. The doctor said you should pay for this visit now, and be sure and bring another check tonight."

For a moment Bob felt anger, then disappointment. Then it occurred to him that she was doing the professionally correct thing. The relationship was being established for what it was, being separated by the check from the friendship. As he wrote he felt a little sick, thinking of the astounding dwindling of the money. Another hot check. How would she take it, when she discovered that he was a deadbeat?

It hit him that he could spend the next few hours productively by writing an ad for the Consultants Market of the Tuesday Science Section of the *Times*. That made sense. He could run it for a month and maybe something would happen that would spare him the hopelessness of letters and the indignity of calls. Or he could go over to the library and look through the Standard Rate and Data Catalog of Mailing Lists. A new SRDC was out; maybe this month's edition would show some relevant mailing lists he hadn't tried. Or better, he could get some lists of people in computer-intensive industries like accounting, and send them letters. Lists of known computer users weren't worth a damn. Consultants had a bad rep with those people. Too many fast-buck operators in the business who turned out to know less than their clients.

After all, it wasn't entirely hopeless. He did have a few miserable assets. Last week he had found some useful changes to the WordPerfect word processing program in an obscure freeware database. Those were worth money. They sped up the program and removed many of its minor annoyances. He could look like a hero to companies that used WordPerfect as their word processor. Surely he could find someone, somewhere willing and able to pay him a few thousand dollars for increasing the efficiency of their secretarial pool by twenty percent. Surely he could. For the love of God, Monica got three hundred dollars an hour. He was more poorly paid than a private detective in a Raymond Chandler novel. He was lucky if he was paid at all.

As he walked he read the prescription. Elavin. What would it do? He had no idea, but it was an immense relief to consider using it. He would place himself in Monica's capable hands. Let her make the decisions. Let her reorder his life. Give up every dignity to her: take the pills she prescribed, let her alter his brain.

He went down to the Duane Reade Drugstore on Madison and Forty-first and filled the prescription. Like a skulking thief he continued on the avenue, half expecting to find his office rekeyed when he came back.

And what about the apartment? Would they start eviction? How long did it take? Could they keep their furniture, and would there be anyplace to go?

Back in his office he took the dose, two pills, with a cup of water from the men's room. His water cooler had run out last month and they had not showed up to replenish it, not with their bill unpaid for six months. It was autumn. His last good month had been April.

The disturbing thought occurred to him that the Elavin might trigger the reaction. He looked down at his hands, took them to his face, and inhaled the familiar smell of his own skin. There hadn't been any sensation when the change took place in Atlanta. He had been assuming that it was instantaneous. Was that true? Maybe he had been lying there for some time, oozing and twisting. There really wasn't any way to tell.

Therefore he would have no warning if it was going to happen again. They said that a strange disquiet often preceded a stroke. And there was a moment of melancholy, he had heard, prior to a grand mal seizure. There was nothing now, just the silence of an office, the faint hissing of the air-conditioning, a man sitting at a desk waiting. It was possible to believe that he was alone in this office and in the world. He could look down six stories to the street and see the cars, the passing people, the rich human activity of Thirty-fourth Street and Fifth Avenue. He could enjoy the faint art deco quality of his office, and dream of sunny days long ago, the late forties perhaps, some magic time when New York was right.

Then again, he had the habit of walking up to the Strand Bookstore and looking through the collections of Weegee's searing photographs of tragedies of city life, most of them taken in the forties. Maybe New York was never right.

Something deep within, a sort of turning of his gut, made him sit up rigid. His heart started pounding. "I won't run, I'll just stay in here until it passes." Footsteps came and went beyond the door; female laughter went by. Something tickled his cheek, a tear. He brushed it away. Should he call Monica? Was that allowed? Maybe Cindy, but Cindy couldn't handle this, she had said as much. He sucked a breath through his teeth. The chum-ing in his guts grew more intense. He imagined some great hand within him, remixing his body.

"No." He took a deep, slow breath, shut his eyes. At once he realized that he wasn't really alone here. There was a presence staring at him much as the wolf at the zoo had stared, glaring into his heart. It was formless, you couldn't make out a face or even eyes, and it was full of furtive eagerness, like a thief. "Who are you?"

Outside, the bell tinkled for afternoon coffee. Doors opened and shut, voices filled the hall. What of them, the people in the other offices? They never seemed to have such moments as this;

they were not like him. But they were. In his heart he knew that he was a

more or less ordinary man, living the common desperation.

His breath left him with a whoosh, and when he gasped back his air, it was through a nose able to tell the difference between the smell of his own sharp and frightened sweat and the succulent damp of the secretaries in the hall.

He had to feel his face. He had to know. His hands were trembling so much that he could barely control them. It was a struggle to raise them. They were clutching human hands, not paws, the fingers a blur of jitters, like the legs of a scorpion running in a ring of fire.

They touched a human face. He heard a loud sound, identified it as a sob. His own sob. He sat there shaking, weeping. An almost overwhelming sense of tragedy possessed him. He wanted to feel his boy's arms around him, to hear Cindy's comforting, familiar voice.

He remembered his mother when he was very little, her powdered mask of a face looming down into his world of toy cars and tunnels in the sandpile, the way she smelled, the way she looked, the dark eyes in the pallor, the bright, unlikely smile and those fingers on his cheek, too freezing cold to be real.

Then he would be alone, as he was now alone. Monica's advice returned to mind: see a movie.

He went out into the bright, rushing afternoon, haggard, his eyes full of memories, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his suit. Nobody noticed him, nobody cared, for nobody in the world but he himself knew the truth, that a wolf was awakening in his belly.

Chapter Five

BOB HAD TROUBLE KEEPING HIS FEET ON THE SIDEWALK. He was slipping and sliding along, the victim of frustrating air currents. It was as if he was coming unmade in himself, his body not changing shape but losing all shape. His mind was fine, but his body was falling off some kind of edge. "Monica, it really is physical, that's what you just would not believe." The pills were making it worse. They provided the lubrication: if he didn't walk like a man of glass, his hands might drop off, his knees go rolling up under the shishkebab stand on the corner, his head topple into the goo of wet cigarette butts that floated in the gutter.

Easy does it, fella, this is serious. You are out in the middle of the street. But was he walking, flying, or being blown like a leaf? And where was he going? A bus leaped at him, its driver leering down, chewing gum furiously. Someone had him by the hand, was drawing him farther and farther —no, he was still in front of the bus, it was his arm that was getting longer and longer. He stared down the immense stretch of his sleeve into the real world. There was a man out there, holding hands with him. Dance?

"Can't you cross a goddamn street?"

Bob ran around in the garden, gathering flowers, and each flower was a word of a part of a word. "Oh," snapdragon. "I'm," daffodil. "Sorry," Easter lily. "I," Queen Anne's lace. "Slipped," Mountain laurel.

"Holy Christ, leggo my hand. Goddamn pansy." The man shook Bob off and hustled away. "Geek," he cried over his shoulder.

Bob was struck dumb with wonder to find himself at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Sixtieth Street. The zoo stood just across the street, a damnation of cages. He saw it not as a place but as a state of being. It was as ideological an institution as mankind has produced, a place of total and perfect injustice, where innocents were confined in hell for the amusement of the curious.

Oh, getting sentimental about the animals again, Bob? What about people, what about Auschwitz, Rudi Mengele standing on Sonja Teitelbaum's chest? Did that happen because Sonja went to too many movies, or smoked on the street? And why is the wolf here? He ate living flesh, and so is no more innocent than his captors:

Here we have it: To survive is to be guilty. To die is to be more guilty still. That's the point of Kafka's *Trial*, isn't it: guilt is the central quanta of life. The

trial is itself the sentence. The accusation proves the guilt of the accused, okay? And the wolf? Well, he was tried in the court of the tranquilizer dart, and in that court the sentence is always the same: life behind bars, thank you very much.

Once upon a time Bob had known a man who had suffered from a tic so extreme that it made him look as if his face was a wobbling gelatin sculpture. He was a bond salesman and his life depended on the impression he made on people. He had a pipe, which he would grasp in his teeth, surround with his lips, and struggle to hold. He never lit it. The pipe was his anchor. And the guy in Atlanta—Jeal—had used his the same way.

The pipe—Bob needed its equivalent on this terrible pilgrimage to the lair of the wolf. He needed something totally ordinary that would contain his urge to flutter, to run, to skitter along under the benches.

"Popcorn," he gasped, the prospector dying in the desert, calling to his last mirage.

"A dollar."

He took the bag of warm popcorn, gratitude humming in him. The world made nice things. He could remember the six-to-sixty matinee at the Broadway Theater in San Antonio—oh, to just once hear the faint cataract of fresh popcorn being expelled during the love scene, and you could go out to the lobby and for a dime actually buy a red-and-white-striped box of that wonderful smell.

There is no six-to-sixty matinee anymore, because there are no children. Childhood was invented by Lewis Carroll as the private amusement of a master of paradox. Carroll's brilliant artifice was destroyed by the twentieth century.

But there is still popcorn, and walking along the rows of cages to the cage of the God, Bob looked just like any other lost man ambling through the forest that never ends. "Hey, tapir, I know somebody who might like to free you. And you, kinkajou, let's set you up in my secret zoo." He elaborated on that theme. Manhattan is a place of secret clubs, even a secret coffee shop on Lexington Avenue, a place where they serve perfectly ordinary coffee and danish and make a decent egg cream, all ordinary and nice, except it is a secret, and because it is a secret, is fought over by the endless stream of the newly famous who make the city at once so sad and so hilarious.

The popcorn was good. Overhead the trees, swept by afternoon wind, hissed with a voice too subtle to be understood, too important to be ignored.

Bob looked up and almost wept with the grandeur he beheld, the leaves dancing, the clouds sailing past angels on their indifferent ways.

In his preoccupied state it took him some little time to understand that the zoo had gone into pandemonium, more or less coincident with his arrival. He realized it only when a condor began beating its wings against its bars and huffing as he passed. He noticed that keepers were running back and forth, one a young woman in tears, sobbing words of comfort to a cage full of bellowing, eye-bulging monkeys. The tiger dragged its' flab around, rippling as it waddled. Its eyes stared into Punjab.

The ring-tailed cats were screaming and hissing, slashing at the air, which was itself in turmoil, the wind whipping women's dresses, grabbing a baby carriage and sailing it off, its au pair frantic and far behind, shrieking in Swedish. A tiny hand waved from the carriage.

The mountain goats were leaping toward the top of their enclosure, the gorillas were roaring, the gibbon was laughing, its teeth bared.

Still the wind came on, sharp and cold, sudden black hands of cloud chasing the fluffy angels, stinging flecks of rain and squadrons of leaves sweeping down the paths, catching in Bob's popcorn, swarming, swirling, and the clanging of the little Indian elephant as she tortured her bars.

Just then three keepers rushed past carrying between them a huge slack snake with an oblong bulge in its middle. "For God's sake she swallowed a purse," one of them wailed. "Maggie swallowed a damn lizard purse!"

Behind them came a well-dressed woman of perhaps fifty, her black face tragic, her makeup running. "I never seen no snake that big strike," she said to Bob. "They think she's gonna die because of my purse!" The last word came out as a crackling moan. Then the woman hurried on, presumably to claim her belongings after the vet operated on Maggie.

Bob let his popcorn fall away. He was drawing close to the cage of the wolf. There was only one word to describe his feelings, and that was awe, for he had seen the eyes. The wolf alone was not screaming, it alone was not gnawing or beating or pushing its bars. Bob was overcome by emotion. He could not look into the face of the great forest beast, but rather looked down. He felt its gaze, as implacable as diamond, a radiant fire. Now the God reveals itself, he thought. It has hidden long enough in the folds of the animal.

He went to his knees, crouching, and felt himself raise his right hand, press it closer and closer to the jaws of the cage, spread it wide, and slip it through.

The wolf sniffed Bob's fingers.

It snarled. Then it took his hand roughly, shaking its head from side to side. Bob could almost see as if through the tips of his fingers the crusted old teeth, the cracked and yellowing tongue. The wolf shook him once and let him go, then raised his own paw. Bob looked up. The animal's ears were back, his eyes gleaming like taxidermist's glass. Bob sensed within himself a great animal awakening and flexing.

He knew with a clear and sickening certainty that he was going to change. Right here, right now, he was going to become body with body, this wolf. His insides bubbled. He was melting, being reformed by powerful, hidden hands. His mind struggled with the matter—he was out in public now, people were bound to see. His clothes would be lost, he would be naked. And what about his wallet? There came a great spasm and his back went as straight as a rail. Frantically, he put his hand over his wallet pocket.

Then there were strong hands. "Hey, buddy, you okay?" He was lifted and he saw a flash of brass and blue. A cop was bending over him, lifting his head in a big palm. "You okay?"

"I—I—"

"Have you taken anything? Do you need a stomach pump?"

Would that get it out—he thought not. He lay with his head on the cop's knee, gazing up the powerful lines of the cage bars behind him, and high above he could see the nose of the wolf poking through, and one fang. Ever so carefully, the wolf was gnawing at his cage.

The rest of the zoo was growing quieter. "I'll be all right," Bob said through a thickness of tongue he had never felt before. A shudder racked him.

A policewoman bent over him, her face pinched. "Don't let him swallow his tongue."

"Mary, what the hell's the matter with him? I can feel his bones, he's shaped funny."

"Sim, it's a fit. The guy is a cripple and an epileptic." Her face softened. She was a mere child, probably not much past twenty. "Grand mal seizure," she said. "We've got to keep him from swallowing his tongue."

He could not speak, especially not when she stuffed a pocket comb redolent of her styling mousse in his mouth.

"It's not drunk or drugs?"

"Nah. Don't haul him in on a substances charge. We'll look like jerks."

"Thanks, Mary. I don't want an arrest. I don't want to lose lunch break."

Their hands holding him, the sweat of their presence, the faint scent of deodorant and cologne and gunmetal had brought Bob back to the world of fingers and eyes that see in color. It hurt a little: some sort of magic was leaving him, and that was sad.

The comb was bothering him, held firmly in his mouth by Officer Mary. He began to work it with his tongue, which only made her hold it more firmly at first. "Wiiiff—pibb—" Finally she removed it. She smiled. "Welcome back. See, we're gonna be fine, aren't we?"

He tried to sit up, but the cops restrained him. "Just a minute. Catch your breath."

"I'm okay."

"You sure?"

He hoped that his expression wouldn't betray him. "Yeah," he said.

The male cop suddenly ran his hands along Bob's chest. He was frowning. "You're—you were—"

"I'm okay."

"You sure are!"

They didn't prevent Bob from getting up when he tried again. The male cop was staring hard at him as he stood.

"Thank you, Officers."

The cop stood with him, looked him up and down. "Jesus!"

Bob could only turn and hurry away. Behind him he could feel the raging presence in the cage, the very wild itself straining at the toils of rusted steel.

Behind him, he heard the cops talking. "He was all bent up, Mary." There was an edge of panic in the man's voice.

"It was the seizure."

"I felt twisted bones! I felt them straighten out!"

Bob kept moving. He hardly glanced to the left and right, ignoring the remains of the pandemonium, the gorilla curled into a giant ball of fur and clutching hands, the monkeys piled in the back of their cage, still and silent, the condor staring, its beak agape.

The cop's voice rose in the distance, high, full of scream. "That man was crippled, I felt his body. I felt his *bones*!"

An energy had definitely departed. Even the wind had ceased to blow. The light in the streets had lost all magic. Buses and taxis went screaming madly down Fifth Avenue, people dashed back and forth, lovers walked hand in hand, women in furs gazed at the windows of Bergdorf Goodman, limousines

lurked before the Plaza. A bag man leaned against the wall that separated Central Park from Fifty-ninth Street. He was totally inert.

Bob felt as he had when he was a teenager, after some immense act of sex, drained, emptied of all spark, of all friction, a dreg.

The policeman's attentions had interrupted the process. But the cop had *felt* his bones. He had been in the process of actually turning into something physically *else!*

By the time he entered Monica's office, he was wondering why he had ever bothered to call her. No psychiatrist could help a man who was melting.

She was cheerful, still dapper in her blue double-breasted suit, her eyes wide and bright, so innocent that they stopped the heart, so knowing that they made him humble. "Well," she said in a confident tone, "how are we this afternoon?"

He could only lie into her broadside of supportive signals. "I feel better."

"Elavin is a good drug. There's nothing like it when somebody's feeling a little panic."

Panic. Yes, that was a good word. But it was not bad panic. Grand panic. Exotic panic. Magical panic.

"At first I thought the pills had made it worse. I got into a really horrendous state."

"How so?"

He related his story, ending it with the kindness of the two cops.

"The zoo animals we can discount. If there really was a disturbance, it was coincidental. It might even have been what induced your attack."

"I was having trouble before I got to the zoo."

"No doubt you were. But we can't trust our own perceptual memory, can we?"

"Monica, I can only repeat that it was a physical thing. One of the cops that helped me out at the zoo thought I was crippled. He was practically screaming when I walked away, because he obviously didn't understand how a person that twisted could just get up and stroll off."

"Well, this is your perception."

"I had a seizure."

"I grant that—but only that. A seizure I can deal with, hallucinations I can deal with, panic I can help you with. But we have to have a basic understanding that these perceptions of yours are not real. Otherwise, Bob—well—"

"I'm psychotic."

"That would be one diagnosis." Her voice was soft and even, but the sharpness in her eyes betrayed her.

"You think I'm going around the bend."

"I think I can help you."

"Then it's Cindy. You're worrying about her."

"Of course. She is my dear friend. I've known her for more than twenty years. And I know how much she loves you. She treasures you."

"Why would anybody do that?"

"I am not in the profession of analyzing love. I'd be a fool to try."

"Implying that you cannot imagine why she loves me. Well, neither can I. I'm a lot of trouble and not much good."

"You've made her happy." There was an edge in Monica's voice.

"Am I leaving my marriage behind? Is that what this is all about?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know! That's why I asked. You're the expensive psychiatrist. You tell me."

"I'm not a Miss Lonelyhearts. My profession is to guide you toward insight."

He remembered the wolf sucking at his hand. He could feel the tongue, the teeth, could see those glaring, empty eyes. They looked like glass because the soul behind them had been burned away. That wolf was already dead. It wasn't responsible for what was happening, it was just a mechanism.

There was an impression of somebody so huge that they contained the whole earth. He thought of the Catholic image of the Blessed Virgin Mary standing astride the world, and was for a moment deeply comforted. "Officer Mary."

"Excuse me?"

"Did I say something?"

"Something. I couldn't hear you. What were you thinking about?"

There was no way to say it, because the image was so strange and private. His mother must have held him newborn thus, a magical being cradling an infant who trailed in his soul the whole world.

"We underestimate ourselves, Monica. Human beings don't know what they are."

"I've often thought that." A smile almost captured her face, but it got away.

There was something startling here—this woman was not at all wise. She

wasn't even a good questioner. Her mind wandered about. She occasionally repeated something you said, agreed, tried to make you expand. But she was not concentrating. For all her well-groomed beauty, the perfect blue of her eyeshadow, the colorful humidity of her lips, her heartbreaking almond eyes, her radiant blond hair—for all of that—she was just not here.

Bob was here, totally. Maybe that was his problem. He had come awake to a life which is normally meant for a sort of sleep. A soul might be like this in heaven, but when it was born, it would forget everything it had learned in the airy libraries of the angels.

"What are you really, truly thinking about right now, Monica?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Monica, please. Forget the session. Forget the questions. *What are you thinking about?*"

"What should I be thinking about?"

He noticed that there was nothing near the patient that could be thrown, no ashtrays, no fat little statuettes of Buddha like in the rest of the office.

"I could get a computer that would ask me these parroting questions."

"Would that satisfy you?"

A tingling iron was thrust directly into his groin by an unseen hand. His penis sprang up. Sweat flowed from his every pore. Her skin was alight, pale and smooth, her fingers tapering, her breast a milky stillness. The fire in him almost cracked him open. He thought for a moment that he would split in two and his organs would fall out, a stoke of blazing coals.

She laughed a little, leaning forward, her chin on one of those long, soft hands he wished to God would touch him. "Bob?"

"I'm remembering the Catskills." It wasn't true, it was more than that. He wasn't remembering anything and it wasn't her in particular. His desire went flying right out the window, and in an instant included everybody in the world, good, big, little, bad, old, new, every sweat and softness, hair in the sun, sweet skin in the dark.

Singing came from the reception room. Monica turned her head sharply. "Katie, are you still there?"

"I'm leaving now, Monica. Is that okay?"

"Sure, Kate." She got up, a glory of whispering movement. In a low voice she spoke to her assistant. "You don't need to stay for this one. He's a little overwrought, but he's harmless. I've known him for years."

The kiss they traded, made to look casual, seemed to Bob like two molten

cymbals crashing, a thing of fury hidden behind a thousand curtains, and on each curtain was another deceiving word. It was not casual. It meant that their hidden souls were in deep and abiding love. They should share their bodies, their very blood. That they did not know this, or ignored it, made them sinners.

She closed the door firmly and came around her big desk. She stood before Bob, her arms folded. "That night haunts you, doesn't it?"

"I want you."

"We could put all that to rest, you know. I'm speaking as a friend. You don't want me, you want your image of me. If I satisfied your curiosity, maybe we could get on with the analysis."

Her words shuddered, and Bob saw that she was shaking. Behind the folded arms, her hands were clenched fists. He felt sorry for her, because he had discovered her secret. She had tried so hard to hide her failure. The reality was before him, though. She had no idea what she was doing: her profession was exactly what it seemed—a superficial fraud clinging to a deeper truth.

There came to him an insight. His path had diverted from common reality and entered uncommon reality. He might be off in this fog, lost here at least for a time, but it was a grand fog.

Within it there were fearsome discoveries to be made, but also he was closer to the old immortalities. Saints and the innocent of God had been here, the geniuses of the surreal like Francis of Assisi and friend Kafka.

He had to break the tension between himself and Monica. His passion would not be satisfied by some hurried roll on her rug, indeed not by any physical thing. It was too deeply of the body to be appeased by the decorative rituals that have grown up around the act of procreation. Maybe giving her a child would wet his fires a little, but he did not want his fires wetted. He had to see this through.

A new experience had claimed him.

She, though, still assumed him to be part of the old reality. Her eyes were wet, her lips parted. Her fingers took his cheeks and guided his mouth to her mouth. He turned away and her kiss came to his cheek.

"Bob?"

"Monica, this is not—"

"Hush. Don't say it." She dropped her eyes, her head, knelt, then crouched before him like an Egyptian at the feet of Pharaoh. He heard constricted sobs.

But the constriction began failing, the sobs growing louder. She had come to her own darkness, here in this lovely room, with the late sun bathing the cathedral below the windows. She was seeing full how close she was to the mysteries that her ancient sisters in magic had celebrated with potions and flying ointment and broomsticks. So close, and yet denied. Her science, in seeking to penetrate the heart, locked the heart.

He felt sure that she had just at this moment discovered her own fraud. As softly, as gently as he could, Bob rose. He stepped over Monica's crouching form. He left this soul to the privacy of its discovery.

There was no point in trying any longer to escape. Not Monica, not her pills, nothing could help him. If there was a guide, he would find it in the black letters of the past, the *Mabinogion*, the *Little Flowers of St. Francis*, the *Metamorphosis*.

Bob Duke had come to the center of the forest. There was no sound, not even wind. The path was not marked by moon or stars or prior passage. All around him the eyes, the fangs, the claws of another world—the wild and true world—gathered themselves.

As evening settled over New York St. Patrick's Cathedral raised its bells. He started off through their glassine clamor and at the same time through this silent forest in his soul. Now he was alone.

Chapter Six

THE ENCOUNTER LEFT BOB DESPERATE FOR TYLENOL, and he was glad when he was finally riding the old elevator up to his own apartment. Lupe drove it, one-eyed, silent Lupe who had been here since this building was called "The Montague House" and dressed its doormen and elevator operators in tan uniforms with gold braid. Now there was only Lupe, and he rarely wore his shaggy formals. They were reserved for Christmas, or if there was a wedding party in the building, or a wake.

Lupe never talked. He had stopped talking, the old-timers said, back when the Dodgers had left Brooklyn. Mrs. Trask in 14C remembered Lupe's last words: "Too sad."

Lupe's last words, Mrs. Trask . . . the life and history of the building. Mrs. Trask also remembered when your maid piled your dirty sheets on the dumbwaiter and sent them down to the laundry, which was staffed by six Chinese. "At Christmas we gave twenty-eight tip envelopes, a dollar each. Our rent was forty-one dollars a month. Let me tell you, young man, this place was class with a capital K."

Lupe pulled back the rattling brass cage. "Thanks, Lupe." Bob heard, and disliked, the superior drone in his own voice. "I need about twelve Tylenols," he said as he went through the door into his dark, silent apartment. "Hello?"

There was a scrabbling sound from the bedroom.

He went down the hall. "Cindy?"

She was sitting cross-legged on the bed in the dark, smoking. He was stunned. To his knowledge, she had never smoked. "What's the matter?"

"We have thirty days to go in this apartment. Jennie called from the bank, we're eight hundred dollars overdrawn. I spent all afternoon at the welfare office trying to get food stamps, and we can't get them because we've already made too much money this year. So I bought a pack of Salems and I've been sitting here ever since smoking them and get me some money or leave me alone!"

He stepped back as if a snake had lashed its head in his direction. Her breath hissed between her teeth.

She was hurting, and he loved her, but he could not comfort her. The source could not melt the pain. Still, there must be something to say.

"We—"

"No, Bob."

He held out his arms. She looked at him, and for a moment she seemed to be gazing at him through the bars of a cage. Gazing in. Her beauty flowed in the dark.

"Don't come any closer, Bob, unless you've got money."

"I went to Monica. She made me take pills—"

"We need money more than we need you sane! Why didn't you rob a bank and then go to Monica?"

"They rape you in prison."

"Forty-year-old men with Jell-O around the middle? I hardly think so."

"I've forgotten how to make money. Why don't you work?"

"Doing what? Taking in wash? Pumping gas? Scrubbing floors for our friends? I'm equipped for nothing. A drone. A victim of the culture." She laughed silently, mirthlessly, her cigarette bobbing like a little red lantern. "I've been paying for being a woman all my life, and now I'm really going to pay, I guess." The bobbing stopped. "That's what being a woman's all about. You're born, therefore you pay."

What did she mean? Was she referring to pregnancy? They had used the Lamaze Method for Kevin, working as a team, two shouting, screaming people in the University Hospital birthing ward, and afterward she said it hadn't been so bad.

She stubbed her cigarette out on the bottom of her sandal and aimed the butt at the trash can. "Bob, I've loved you so much. More than I ever thought I'd love anybody. You have a decency about you, honey, that's just so sweet. You're the only thoroughly good person I've ever met. You wouldn't hurt anything. I don't think you've ever even killed a fly." She sobbed. "Is that why you're such a failure? Why we're always broke?"

"Actually, I think I might have something with the Macintosh Office concept. I'm planning on hitting my old client list, making some cold calls—"

"Shh! Honey, don't belabor the absurd. Just leave it alone. We have no money. This is who we are. We are the We Have No Moneys. 'Hello, this is Mrs. We Have No Money. I'd like to get a credit line, please.'"

"We have MasterCard. Gold American Express—"

"Used up, used up."

"Maybe the bank—"

"They don't have time to assist the indigent."

"Something will turn up." He smiled at her, giving it his biggest, his

brightest. Maybe somebody would take the apartment, maybe they wouldn't even be able to get food, but this love they had was bigger than a roof over your head or a meal.

Or, actually, maybe that was taking it a little too far. The love was big. But food and shelter were also big.

"I was poor as a kid and poor when we first married. The rest of the time I've worked the float. Just for one month, for one week, I'd like to have enough money. Get it. Get it now!" She grappled with another cigarette, lit it, and smoked with amateur fury. White streams roared out her nose.

He took all he had out of his wallet and laid the three one-dollar bills on the bed before her,

"Wonderful. Kevin and I can go out and share a Coke and a burger at the Greek's."

The numbers on that didn't quite work, but Bob thought it better not to mention it. They could get a grilled cheese sandwich in lieu of the hamburger and still have enough change for dessert from the Muscular Dystrophy gum machine beside the cashier's counter.

Bob's body seemed to churn and boil, as if he was turning under his skin to the consistency of a milkshake.

He was changing right here in the bedroom! He had to get out of here. "Isn't that music?" he asked, desperate to conceal his inner turmoil.

She sighed. It must be obvious to her that his voice was not right, and she probably knew why. "Kevin's got a friend over."

"I think I'll go say hello." He took a long step back. He quivered, goo in a sack of skin.

"Bob?"

"Yes?"

"Is that a dance you're doing or what?"

"The music—"

"You don't do the frug to the 'Blue Danube.'" Backing away from Cindy was an evasion, of course. He should go to her, and let her spend her rage on him and then ask her for the blessings of the night, but he had not the courage. Over the years of their marriage she had remade herself in an image he preferred, but now that he couldn't pay her way anymore she was back to her old self, the real Cindy—a stranger he had from time to time glimpsed in moments of rage or passion. There were jets of rebellion flaring.

And yet—and this was the most awful part—the strangeness of her anger

was what was making her attractive. Her rage was a fierce aphrodisiac.

All the rules were changed; reality had come unstuck, danger and the unexpected now reigned.

His bones shifted, scuttling beneath his skin. Step-by-step he backed down the hall. Cindy snorted, a derisive, cutting noise. The light streaming from under Kevin's door was yellow and rich.

He had to hide, to get away, to save his family from this absurd horror—

His bones were oozing in his skin, his muscles bubbling as if they were carbonated glue.

He stumbled, fell against Kevin's door, lurched into the room.

The whole place was done up in blue construction paper. From Kevin's record player there blared the "Blue Danube." He was waltzing around and around with a girl in his arms.

"Dad!" They stopped waltzing.

The girl held out a soft, child-fat hand, smiled around a bucking reef of teeth. "Pleased to meetcha."

To take the hand Bob had to concentrate all of his attention on his own arm, force it forward, scream in his head for his fingers to open. Then he had to draw his hand back, which was like pulling against a cold river. The arm wanted to go straight out before him, the hand to crunch and twist itself into a new form.

This must not be allowed to happen, not here, not now. But he *wanted to*, his body *wanted to*, it had wanted to all day, to just burst its old skin and become the new, magic self that belonged to the wild.

Both children looked at him, the little girl's face flickering fear, Kevin's a mix of amusement and concern,

"Dad, have you got a sore throat?"

"Rrr—no!"

"Then why do you keep growling?"

"Your dad is really weird."

He finally managed to lurch out, caught himself leaning forward toward all fours, scuttled into the living room, and hit the phone. He fluttered through Cindy's directory, a pretty cream-colored book with roses pressed in the Lucite cover that Kevin had made last summer at camp. Here was Monica's home number. Thank God, what a convenience when your wife and your psychiatrist are such good friends, no need to gabble to some gum cracker at an answering service. *Ring*. Please. *Ring*. Oh, please. *Ring*. "Monica, thank

God you're home."

"Who is this?"

"Bob; I need help."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, Monica, I'm changing. I swear."

"You sound like you've got a mouthful of Brillo or something."

"I swear, my whole body—Monica, it isn't a psychological problem, it's real. I've got to have help."

"Can you come to my office?"

"Please, I don't think I can get out of the apartment."

"Is Cindy there?"

"They're both here. And a little friend of Kevin's."

"Give me ten minutes, Bob." She hung up. He slumped over the phone, breathing deeply, trying for control, clutching his chest, huddling in on himself. Evening light gathered to waltz time from Kevin's room. Bob crept into the darkest corner he could find, the coat closet.

His body gave itself to its rebirth. He wrenched and quivered, saw waves passing through his muscles, felt the grinding reorganization of his bones. His organs seemed to have become detached from their moorings. They swooped on cold comet tracks down new paths inside him, freezing and burning at the same time, while he gasped and gargled, trying not to scream.

"Tales from the Vienna Woods" gave way to the "Acceleration Waltz," and the *pop* of a bottle of fizzy apple juice. Bob stared at the faint light coming under the door of the coat closet. He darted his ears toward the rustling sound of movement—Cindy was coming down the hall. Now she was in the living room. "Bob?"

He pressed back against the wall. The smell of overcoats filled his nose: his own coat smelled of moldy money. Perhaps that ten dollars he had lost had worked its way down into the lining. There was a faint aroma of Paco Rabanne coming from Cindy's coat. Either she had taken to using it or had walked arm in arm with a man who did.

Didn't Monica's husband use it? That, or Aramis. Bob did not care for fragrances on his own body. His ears followed Cindy as she came to the center of the room. The light increased. She had turned on the lamp over by the TV. "Bob?"

The downstairs buzzer sounded, blasting the silence in the closet, making Bob chortle out an involuntary growl of surprise. Cindy came across the

room, lifted the receiver of the intercom. "Yes?"

"Cyn, it's me."

"Oh, Monica, come in."

A few moments later they embraced with swishes and a ripple of ginger kissing. "Why did you come?"

"He phoned. Where is he?"

"I think he went out."

Light burst into his eyes. There stood Cindy holding Monica's airy mink. She dropped the coat. "Bob, my God."

Monica appeared, a dark mask before the light. She squatted down, reached in and took his face in warm, firm hands. She drew him out into the blinking light. The waltz music had stopped. Briefly his eyes met his son's, the boy standing at the far end of the room. "Is this for real?" his playmate asked.

"Kafka," Kevin said, "the *Metamorphosis*."

"Look at his teeth." Cindy's voice was analytical, the tone of someone so fascinated that for a moment they have forgotten to be upset. Then she fully realized what she was seeing, signified by the fact that her skin went corpse gray.

He tried to raise his arm, to touch what he sensed as a numb disfigurement of his lower face. His right arm shot out before him. It was short, the sleeve of his shirt drooping around it. The fist at the end of it was so tight it felt like it had been strapped to itself with cord. His palm was hot, his finger joints oozing red pain.

"It's a hysterical reaction," Monica said crisply. "Get him down on the floor. Get his clothes off. We've got to massage those limbs before he loses his circulation."

"What do you mean, a hysterical reaction? Look at him, he's—oh, Bob, oh, my baby!"

"The body can do wonders. You wouldn't believe what some patients look like. Especially from the East. Indians. You'd swear they'd half turned into monkeys, the way they contort themselves. It's nothing that modern psychiatry can't handle, of that much I can assure you. A few months on a Thorazine drip, a course of electroshock, and he'll seem fine."

"Months! Monica, we have no money. He can't go into the hospital, he has to work."

"I'm sorry. This is a classic case of avoidance. He can't handle his

problems, can't face his responsibilities. It's a fortress mentality."

"Mother, his teeth are actually growing."

He heard all of this with absolute clarity as Monica and Cynthia undressed him. Through eyes that had gone to vague colors and shades of gray he watched his son and the little girl standing hand in hand at his feet. "Don't cry, Kevin, I'm gonna—"

Kevin clapped his hands over his ears. "He sounds like a dog!"

"Rub, Cindy." Their fingers raced along his arms and legs, raced and kneaded. Within his limbs there was a continuous churning, and it was getting worse. He delivered himself to their efforts but it was no good, not really. He was slipping, sliding through their fingers. His wife's hands were soft and cool and dry, Monica's damp and warm. Their manipulations were beautiful agony.

It faded like rain fades, and the rubbing of skin against skin was replaced by the whisper of fingers in fur.

"Oh, God, Monica, what's the matter with him!"

Monica lifted her hands as if she was being burned. A rictus twisted her face, her teeth gleaming behind tight lips, her eyes beaded to amber chips. Then a great force seemed to descend upon her and she controlled her face. Her lips were a line of wire. Young Kevin had moved away. His girlfriend was huddling in a ball beside the TV. Kevin's tape had recycled and the "Blue Danube" now filled the room.

A passing fire truck wailed. Bob, lying on his back, slowly windmilling arms and legs that no longer worked right, heard a voice from the street call out, "Artie, don't forget. . ." Then again, "They'll kill you if you do. . ." Somebody laughed. High in a window a pale star shone down.

Bob wished he could fly out into the wild emptiness between here and that star. His heart almost burst with longing and he cried aloud. A sound drowned the waltz, making Kevin cover his ears and stare with stricken eyes, making Cindy beat her fists against his chest, making Monica gather him in her arms and press her warm, soft cheek against the cold wall of teeth that half formed his new face.

The sound he made felt in his chest like flying, it was so high and rich and full. He would have thought such a voice would reach the stars, but when his breath ran out, the world was still exactly the same. Or, not quite. The little girl had gone to her knees facing the wall, and was loudly praying the Confetior.

"Bob," Monica whispered, "Bob, it's all right. I know you're still in there. I must tell you that I don't know exactly what's happening here but there must be some rational, perfectly sensible reason that explains this. I want you to know that you are not alone. I am with you. I will help you."

"Dad, can you talk?"

He wanted to talk. Very badly. He wanted to tell them to go, to leave him alone.

The world and the dark beckoned to him, the long paths and shadowy leaves, the barking of the pack, the high wind at night.

"Bob, please, if you can talk, say something."

Of course he could talk. "Lorr." No, not quite right. "Bwaorr." It was an awful moment. "Urraoo." The walls seemed to come closer. He heard his own frightened panting.

Kevin burst into open tears. Monica's drone started again, and Cindy's sobs were in waltz time, unconsciously keyed to the sway of the "Blue Danube." In the corner the Confetior had given way to the Apostles' Creed. This little girl was a full-scale Catholic.

Bob wanted to comfort his son, to take his wife in his arms. He was sad, now. His initial fear was evaporating. Beneath the sadness there was something new, an interest in the dark beyond the window. He knew that there was nothing out there but Washington Square Park, New York University's private drugstore, jammed with dealers and students. He could hear the trees, though, speaking in soft night voices, and the glittering rattle of crickets.

Clumsily, he got to his feet. There was a general outcry in the room. Even Monica shouted. "What's he wearing?" shrieked Kevin's poor playmate.

"Get her out of here," Cindy said. "Take her home, Kevin. Your dad is sick."

"He's metamorphosed. Kafka's story isn't fiction anymore. In 1990 it's a medical text."

"How can you be so supercilious! Look, Jodie, he's wearing a wolf rug we bought last year in Alaska. He's having a nervous breakdown, that's all, do you understand?"

"No."

"What do you mean no—oh, God, Monica, can't you see what this will do? This kid'll tell her parents. Before we know it, everybody at St. Anselm's will know. What will happen to our reputation?"

Bob tried once again to talk. "Mwee, mwee. Eooo." It was horrible. His mind was swarming with thoughts, with explanations, answers, above all with the reassuring notion that it had worn *off* that night in the hotel, and it would wear off again.

Then he heard the wind again. He wanted to go out and run the night.

His nose came to life. This was nothing like the hotel. He was so startled by the change that he reared back, growling involuntarily, causing a renewed outburst of woe from those around him. Smells in hundreds and thousands and millions burst alive. He was instantly overwhelmed. The floor, the remains of his clothes, Monica's sweat, Cindy's soap, Cindy's sweat, her intimate odors, Kevin's child-sourness and Jodie's child-sweetness, the hot electronics of Kevin's record player in the next room—a smell like a Formica counter-top with a hot pot on it—and the outdoor odors, the leaves, the bark of the trees, the squirrels sleeping among the branches, the brown odor of the crickets on the leaves, the chlorine-sourness of cocaine and the smoky, pungent aroma of the drug dealers, a complex of sweat and cigarettes, and the smells of marijuana and tobacco, of the concrete in the sidewalks and the rubber on the tires of passing cars, of gasoline and nitric acid from exhausts, the smell of garbage and hot food, garlic, beef, broccoli, and the faint, distinct odor of their bedroom, powder and the oils of human bodies, and a musky whiff of the spermicide Cindy used with her diaphragm.

He jerked his head back, gobbling out twisted cries, his brain overwhelmed by the sudden plunge from the universe of seeing to that of smelling. The warm room, the lights, the furniture, the people, were in an instant ripped from their moorings in sighted life and plunged into a madhouse of radiant odors.

The world, as he saw it, was mostly gray. Red he could see, and green, and shades of brown. Would the blue sky be gone forever, and what of the beautiful smooth whiteness of Cindy's breast? He experienced as deep a pang of yearning as he had ever known. He bowed his head and covered his eyes with his hands.

The moment he tried to do so he fell painfully on his chin. "He's trying to use his hands," Cindy cried. "Look at him, oh, *look at him!*"

"Cindy, we have to stitch ourselves together. Remember this. It's very, very important. *This is not a miracle!* No, not a miracle. No. Somewhere, there is some quite, quite rational, clear, and understandable scientific explanation—"

"Oh, shut up, Monica. You're repeating yourself because it *is* a miracle and you're scared. You're terrified."

"I admit I'm uneasy. This is a very unusual case and it's appropriate for me to feel uneasy."

"Oh, yeah, I'd agree with that. Uneasy."

Bob was catching and then losing the thread of words. He was so disoriented by his changed senses that he couldn't pay attention, no matter how hard he tried. It was as if his mind was going blind.

The room, he realized, stank. The odor was salty and like cold, wet hair. It was cloying, as if made of oils, and lingered in his nose. A shiver coursed through his body. He felt cool air against the skin on the back of his neck.

"Look at him now. His hair's standing on end."

"Is he mad? What's happening?"

"Bob—"

He could not speak to them, could not tell them that their own fear was infecting him, that he was helpless before the odor of emotions that they couldn't smell. Every nuance of feeling created a change in odor that shafted at once to the depths of his soul. He had no way to defend himself from this assault, and could only suffer it, the raw march of feeling among those he loved.

"May I go?" A tiny little voice coming from Jodie. She was knotting her hands.

Cindy knelt to her level. "Honey, of course you can go. Monica will take you home, there's no need to call your parents to come get you. Just as long as you understand that this is all..." Her voice whispered away, and was replaced by a keening as of stressed wire. Bob longed to embrace her: He knew the sound of Cindy in abject sorrow.

Monica took the girl by the hand and left, promising to come back as soon as she had delivered the child.

"All a game!" Cindy shrieked as they left.

Not fifteen minutes had passed before the phone rang. Cindy snatched it up. "Hello—oh, hello Mrs. O'Neill. Yes, I'm glad she had a good time. Bob? Oh, he's a little indisposed, you can't talk to him. You want to do what? Oh, sure. I guess—well, of course." She hung up. "How nice. How goddamn nice! The woman's going to bring us a covered-dish supper. She acts like we had a death in the family."

Bob wanted to say just four precious words: "It wore off before." But he

could not speak and despised the sound of his own efforts too much to try again. He sat on his haunches and stared helplessly at his wife.

Not long after, Monica returned. She and Cindy and Kevin sat together on the couch. None of them spoke. Bob sank deeper and deeper into despair. The emotion he was feeling now was loneliness. He was not a wolf, but rather a profoundly deformed man. He was the victim of some odd psychophysical disorder, that must be it.

And yet, in him there was something triumphant and free. He remembered the wolf in the Central Park Zoo. What of that wolf, what was it doing right now? Was it sleeping, dreaming only of the wild?

His own childhood dream of becoming a wolf had obviously been a true experience. He had swept through the backyards as a wolf. There *were* grass stains on his pajamas. There *were* those memories, so perfect, of a wolf's movements and ways.

Shape-shifting... it was said that witches could turn themselves into owls and rats and hares. And the Indians—didn't they have legends about it, too?

Was that poor old wolf still in its cage, or had it died and the two of them somehow come to inhabit this same flesh?

It had looked at him, looked into him—yes, actually entered him with its eyes.

That was the secret, the wolf had done it, had entered him with its eyes. And it had happened before, yes, it had, back at the San Antonio Zoo in the summer of 1957, he remembered it vividly now. There had been a wolf there, a sleepy, dejected old Texas red wolf and it had *looked* at him and then . . .

Then had come his dream.

"Could I watch *M*A*S*H*?" Kevin asked.

"No! No TV." His wife's voice was so lovely, full of melodies he had never heard before. He went to her and stood before her, looking into the creamy miracle of her face, the blue, wide eyes, the dramatic, perfectly proportioned nose, the lips that seemed always to conceal, as their deepest secret, laughter.

By degrees she raised her hands. "If I touch him, will it help?"

"I can't answer that."

Kevin, sobbing softly to himself, leaned against his mother's shoulder. Cindy seemed to Bob small and weak and vulnerable. For fifteen years he had been taking this woman in his arms.

Now all he could do was to nuzzle her with his big jaw, trying to avoid

letting the tongue—which felt like a mouthful of belting leather—get in the way. As he got closer her scent became stronger. It was nostalgic, familiar in ways he had never before understood.

Oh, Cindy, fifteen years. I knew you as a girl and I knew you as a woman. I'd been so looking forward to gentle old age together. Pressing his nose up against her neck, into the place under her ear he had kissed a thousand times, he inhaled.

The odor stunned him. To call it an odor, even, was to diminish it terribly. Voices, songs, high summer days, blue sky in the Catskills, the warm of winter fires, snatches of love talk, the hot and the wet of bed night, the first halting glances and the settled looks of the marriage, her body big with Kevin, so much more. He realized that every good thing that time takes from us lingers in our odors—and we have lost the sense of smell.

Her hand came up, shaking, and she pressed her palm against his cheek.

To truly find her love, he had become a prisoner from her. He lay against the touch of her hand, and heard the final establishment of the night outside, the course of the stars against the restless sky. A leaf tapped the window, dropping silently past the light.

Part Two

The Journey To The West

A man without anything, alone on the road
long after midnight,

is told by the choking street light
morning will not come.

He jams his hands in his pockets, walks on.

—Robert Duke, "In the Matter of the Night," (1983)

Chapter Seven

ROBERT DUKE HAD A NEW BODY TO LEARN. BREATHING through the long snout, and seeing around it, were difficult. He had lost the power of speech and what he now saw as the great privilege of hands. He was fallen from the human state, there was no other way to look at it.

His wife and son stared at him, stricken but also fascinated. Monica sat in the blue upholstered chair, watching him through quizzical eyes. "I need to do a little research," she said. "I'd better get up to the library at the hospital."

"At eight o'clock at night?" How Cindy's voice pierced! He was standing at her feet. When their eyes met, she reacted as if struck a blow, and looked away.

"The library's open till midnight. It's a teaching hospital."

Why did she need a library? Didn't she realize she could use his computer to access Medline? She could do whatever research she needed from the next room.

"I wish you didn't have to leave. I'm so scared."

"Don't be scared, Mama." The bright edge was gone from Kevin's voice. His own fear rose to a stench like acid wax when he looked at Bob. "He'll change back any minute now."

Bob's impulse was to comfort his boy. He turned his head, only to see him shrink away from eye contact. It hurt Bob, and he humiliated himself by quite involuntarily making a high keening noise.

Cindy clapped her hands over her ears. "Don't do that, please!" She looked at Monica. "He can only make animal sounds." Another wave of fear poured from her body, that strange tart-musty odor that made Bob's heart beat harder and the hair at the back of his neck thrill.

Monica came down to his level, pressing her face into his. "Can you understand?" she said in a loud voice.

He was having trouble dealing with the cascade of odors that were now pouring from their bodies. Their emotions seemed to run in waves, bursting forth for a few moments, then subsiding, then coming out again. And each time they came forth they were stronger. Their fear was rising, and soon it would break them. Inside himself Bob was in turmoil. He felt so odd that he could barely walk. It was a tremendous effort to coordinate four legs, to see through these shape-sharpened, color-dulled eyes, to sort out the smells and

sounds that shoved and swarmed at him from all sides.

What's more, the presence of the night was oppressing him. The walls of the room seemed almost alive, like malevolent flesh keeping him from the freedom of the woods.

He moaned again, he couldn't help it. Cindy clapped her hands over her ears. "Bob, are you in pain?"

"Bob—" Monica took his face in her hands. "We have to communicate with you. We have to have some means of knowing how you feel and what you want. Now, please, try to listen to me. Tap the floor if you hear me."

Tap the floor. Was that all that was left to him?

"He tapped! Dad, Dad, tap once if you're in pain, twice if you're okay."

What could he do? He was not in pain. Anguish is not pain. Desperation is not pain. He tapped twice.

"He's not in pain!"

A barrage of questions followed. Bob heard the fluttering of wings outside the window. When he cocked his ears, he could also hear the alien breathing of a large bird. He was astonished to know that there were owls in the city. He could imagine the bird skimming over the buildings, searching out the dark places for mice. From the rapidity of its breath, its busy fluttering of feathers, it was working hard, and full of excitement. Then it flew on, after a faint scuttling sound that came from the edge of the cornice.

There was a secret world out there.

"Don't even think about it," Cindy yelled. She put her arms around his neck. "It's a six-story drop, don't you remember?"

"Close the windows. There's not much he can do but jump."

He tapped once, sharply. "Once is no," Kevin said.

"Yes, yes, we will close the windows. Bob, this is all going to be over soon. You'll get back to normal. You'll be all right. Monica's going to do some research and find out what's wrong with you and she's going to fix it, isn't that right, Monica?"

"That's right."

Didn't they realize what had happened here? A great reordering in the world had caused this. The petty ministrations of a doctor weren't going to undo something so enormous.

But if he didn't change back, what would he do? He couldn't spend the rest of his life in this apartment. Not the least reason was that they were due to be evicted. What was Cindy going to do? She was desperate for money. Now

how would she get it?

The wind whispered, the wind called. It was seductive, it was insistent. And now the wind rattled the windowpanes a little bit, tapping for him to come. He saw himself running across the top of the wind, escaping from the maze of prisons that was this city.

He might have wished for wings, but thought perhaps he'd better not.

He watched Monica and Cindy frantically locking the windows. He climbed up and dragged his paws against the glass. "Down," Cindy commanded. "Down, Bob!"

How dare she talk to him like he was a dog. He wanted to tell her, to scream it out: I am a human being in here. I am a human being! All that escaped, though, was a very unpleasant snarl.

He had bared his teeth at her, he had raised his hackles. Terrified, she was backing away. "Now, now, Bob. Nice Bob." Oh, good Lord, how stupid.

Kevin came up to him. "Dad, I know you can understand everything. Look, they don't want you near the windows, okay? So let's compromise. Let's say you stay away from the windows and I'll get Mom to leave them open."

Bob tapped twice on the floor.

"Hear that, Mom? He *does* understand. Is it a deal?"

"You won't go near the windows, Bob." Again he tapped. He was a little bit in control at least.

Then Monica went to Cindy and whispered in her ear, a whisper that Bob could hear clearly. "Don't open the windows. He could be suicidal."

"How can we be sure? He's always been fascinated by wolves. Maybe he's having a good time. At least he doesn't have to get out and earn a living."

"Look, Monica, how would you feel if this— this—fantastic catastrophe happened to you?"

They both regarded Bob, Monica with a weak smile, Cindy sadly. "I want to turn on the air conditioners," she said. "It's too close in here."

Lacking voice, lacking hands, all Bob could do was watch as she defied him.

A moment later the downstairs buzzer sounded. Monica picked up the handset, spoke for a moment, then let somebody in. She turned a shocked face to the others. "It's Jodie O'Neill and her mother. They've got the covered-dish supper."

Cindy rushed to the door. "I don't believe it. We can't—" The doorbell rang. "Monica!"

"What can we do—tell them to leave it on the stoop?"

"Say anything, say he's got AIDS. No, don't say that. All hell will break loose at the school."

"Cindy, as far as this woman is concerned, Bob's been taken to the hospital. You have a big dog, that's all. It's simple enough." Monica opened the door.

The O'Neills were all there, the mother and father, the daughter, the teenage son. They came right in, bearing sweating Tupperware dishes. "Hi, Cyn," Betty O'Neill said.

"Is that him?" the son asked. So much for Monica's subterfuge. Jodie had obviously told her family everything. And why not, she had witnessed the whole transformation.

"Now, this is truly amazing," said Mr. O'Neill, a flat-faced man with a pencil moustache. "He looks every inch a wolf."

"That's no wolf," Cindy shouted. "That's our dog."

"Jodie said—"

"She was confused. The dog bit Bob. He went to St. Vincent's to get a shot and some stitches."

"I hate to be nosy, but if a dog's biting its own master, shouldn't it be destroyed?" Mrs. O'Neill's words were almost snide.

"Oh, God, no!" Cindy put her hands to her cheeks. "No."

"At least take it to a vet," Mrs. O'Neill put in.

Bob saw Monica blink. She said nothing, but he didn't care for the look that had come into her eyes.

"We brought baked beans and ham, pea soup, and broccoli with hollandaise."

"Oh, that's very kind," Cindy said. "You needn't have done it."

"No trouble. It's left over from a wake a couple of weeks ago. The only work we had to do was to turn on the microwave." She laughed. "We have a huge family, and a lot of them are old. I keep this sort of thing ready all the time."

Bob hardly heard her stupid nattering. His skin felt hot, he began to hear and smell with even greater clarity than was now his exquisite norm. His whole body tingled, his muscles became like compressed steel. His breath got long and low, and came through his throat in growls he could not control. He was furious. That nattering woman, the gaping children, the superior sneer in the father's face—he wanted to hit somebody. How dare they put ideas of

vets into Monica's head! He was damned if he was going to submit to an examination by some animal doctor.

He was a human being. In here, yes, but still a human being, with the rights and lordship of a human being. They would not treat him worse than any degenerate junkie, and put him in a cage for observation, and shoot him with a tranquilizer dart, and examine him on some dirty table covered with dog hair.

"I think it would be a good idea to take him to the vet," Monica said. "We could get a full X-ray series. Find out what's going on."

Mr. O'Neill was sampling some of his wife's baked beans. "A Bud'd sure go good with this."

A Bud! The bastard, that's my last Bud in that damn fridge!

"Sure." Cindy spoke casually. Who cared anyway, Bob wouldn't be drinking any more beer, right?

He snarled when he heard the *pschtt* of the can. "Damn! That dog's skittish."

"It's not a dog," Jodie said. "It's their dad."

"Jodie, I don't want you to say that. It's too embarrassing."

"Well, it is."

Mrs. O'Neill looked at Cindy helplessly while the father swilled Bob's beer.

The clock struck nine. "*Mystery's* on Channel Thirteen," Kevin sang out.

"We don't watch that highbrow dreck," O'Neill said.

Bob growled again, harder and not by accident. He wanted to watch *Mystery*, to sit on the couch between his wife and his son, with his damned Bud in his hand, and enjoy every minute of it.

"What do you do, Mr. O'Neill?" Cindy asked smoothly. "Are you in trucking or something?" Atta girl, atta girl, needle the moron!

"No, I teach philosophy, actually, at NYU."

Which philosophers did he teach? Bob wondered. Howard Cosell? Madonna?

Cindy gave up nothing. She simply shrugged. "Bob's an entrepreneur," she said smoothly. "He teaches big companies how to use small computers."

Wonderful woman! O'Neill squirmed. "I've always wanted to have my own business," he said, a whine entering his voice.

Bob decided to get rid of the O'Neills. He trotted over to the dining-room table, where O'Neill sat, beer in one hand, fork in the other, tasting the beans

right out of the pot.

But when he tried to unleash a barrage of barking, all he could manage were silent gasps.

Was barking something canines learned, like walking on their hind legs? Surely it was instinctive.

He thought with horror: I don't *have* any canine instincts. I'm not a canine. I have no idea how to bark.

"Do you brush your dog's teeth?" O'Neill asked cheerfully.

"Why, no."

"Why does his breath smell of Crest, then?"

"Uh—maybe—he likes it! Yes, he eats it every chance he gets. Kevin! You must have left the top off the toothpaste again."

"No, Dad brushed his teeth right before—"

Kevin silenced himself, thank God, but the O'Neills all looked sharply at Bob.

"Their dad turned into a wolf," Jodie said again. "That's him."

"Oh, be quiet. Sometimes I think my daughter's a little addled," Mrs. O'Neill said.

"Merely intelligent and imaginative," the father said. "Unlike Spider here. Right, Spider?"

"Right, Dad. I'm fit only for basketball and then the grave."

If Bob couldn't bark—what other routines could dogs pull? Oh, yes, he vividly remembered a damnable Irish setter back when he was a kid. He knew exactly what to do.

Sitting down on his haunches, he prepared to wait. He stared up at O'Neill. Soon the man would get up out of the chair, and then Bob would do his deed. O'Neill was wearing a white cotton sweater and a nice pair of worsted pants. So much the better. Bob waited. When O'Neill met his eyes, he wagged his tail.

"Dog's a paraplegic, or what?"

"What do you mean? He's perfectly healthy."

"I've never seen an animal that bad at wagging its tail. He shakes his rear and just sort of hopes the tail will wiggle."

Cindy put her hand on his head. "I think he does very well, and he has a magnificent tail." Bob heard the sadness in her voice, and his heart was made very full. She was a real fighter, was this Cynthia he had married.

There came a great shuffling and creaking from O'Neill. "Well, we'd better

get going. Don't want to miss the ten o'clock news. Channel Five's got the best sports." He laughed. "Also, I've got some papers to grade, if the cat didn't piss on them again." Another laugh, chair pushed back, man standing.

Bob leaped up on him, planting his forepaws on his chest and dragging them down, shredding the sweater and tearing the pants in about four places.

"Oh, Bob, no!" Cindy came, grabbed him around the neck just as he was rising for another pass. "Bob, what in the world are you doing?"

O'Neill lashed out, kicking Bob hard in the chest. The blow hurt and Bob involuntarily bit at the foot that tormented him.

With all her strength Cindy pulled back.

"That dog is crazy," O'Neill snarled. "Look at my clothes—and look at this shoe. Oh, shit, I'm bleeding. Broke the skin."

"It's their dad. You made him mad. He doesn't like you."

"Shut her up, Betty! Look at what it did to my foot!"

"I'll get a Band-Aid, Mr. O'Neill."

"Band-Aid, the hell. Now I'm going over to St. Vincent's. I've got to get a stitch." He tried to walk, hobbled, nearly fell. "Two or three stitches right in the ball of my foot. Betty, where's the car?"

"This side of the street, halfway up the block."

"At least it's not over on goddamn Mercer." He glared at Cindy. "I think you'd better look over your liability policy, girl."

Cindy went gray with rage. She detested sexual diminutives.

"Oh, now, John, you won't be doing anything like that. Come on, children, let's help Daddy get over to the emergency room."

Bob saw Cindy's hands on the baked beans. The O'Neills began to leave. Bob cringed. He knew exactly what was about to happen. The O'Neills went into the foyer, began waiting for the elevator. At that moment Cindy snapped. "You can take your damned baked beans and shove them you know where, boy!" With that she poured them over O'Neill. They were followed by the soup and the broccoli and then the door was slammed on the howling, food-covered O'Neills.

"You're harboring a rabid dog, you've assaulted me," O'Neill roared. "There will be revenge, girlie, there will be sweet revenge." Then, in a lower tone: "Stop eating that broccoli, you fool."

"Sorry, Dad."

The elevator took the O'Neills away. "Well, I guess I can write Jodie off as a friend," Kevin commented absently. He turned up *Mystery*, which he had

been watching with the volume off.

"Oh, hell, now I've got the whole damn foyer to clean up."

Monica put her arm around Cindy. "I've got some nice Melozine in my purse."

"Tranquilizers give me anxiety attacks. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop."

The two women cleaned up the mess, assisted by Kevin. Bob could easily have helped them by eating the beans off the floor, but he was damned if he was going to act like an animal. He went over, lay down on the couch, and watched *Mystery* with his muzzle on his paws.

Monica came and sat beside him. "I want to talk to you alone for a moment, Bob. I'm assuming that you can understand what I'm saying. Your actions tonight make it clear that your mind is unchanged. You're as odd as ever. First, I have some sort of an idea of what you have done. It's called hypnagogic transformation. You, of course, have accomplished a miraculous hypnagogic transformation. Among American Indians it is called shape-shifting and at best involves a certain amount of straightforward contortion. What you have done staggers the scientific mind. I always knew that you were a repressed, undeveloped genius of some sort. That you would choose to express your genius in this particular direction is naturally a surprise. But I must say something to you. Now listen to me. You are causing your family great suffering by what you have done. You must shift back. You must leave this utterly fantastic contortion and return to the human form. You can do it, you're in complete control of the situation. You and I know this, even though you yourself may not be willing to admit it. Bob, I beg of you, for the sake of a marvelous woman and a lovely little boy, return to them. Accept reality. You are a failure in life. A complete failure. But you are also a wonderful, surprisingly charismatic man. Your wife loves you to distraction. And that little boy—he adores his father. Please, for them, come back to us."

Outside the wind blew, sending a rattle of leaves against the window. Autumn was here. Time for the running of the deer, time for the gathering of nuts and the making of nests. The wind was wild, the wind was rich, the wind went where it went. Bob could see the high stars changing in their courses, could hear a rat scuttling along the roof across the street, could hear pigeons fluttering in their sleep. The owl that had been here earlier was now gone, but bats squeaked in the sky, dashing about after the last flies of summer.

He could not tell Monica how mistaken she was. His present form was as

real and as immutable as his former one had been. Whatever had affected him had come and gone its merry way, leaving him as he now was.

"Am I reaching you, Bob?"

He tapped.

"Wait until you see what this absurd avoidance response is going to do to your family. You've sent a wonderful woman and a beautiful child to hell. So be it. I'm off to the hospital, where I intend to spend the rest of the night doing research. If I can find a way to force you out of this maneuver of yours, I'll do it. But I doubt that there's going to be a thing in the literature."

As she left, Bob disconsolately watched Lord Peter Wimsey dance through the intricacies of some mystery he couldn't identify.

"I'm going to bed, Mom."

"Good night, son. Maybe things will be better tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is another day, eh. That might not be entirely correct. Kafka —"

"Shut up about Kafka! I'm sick of hearing about Kafka."

"We're living the *Metamorphosis*."

"I don't care if we're living the *Niebelungenlied*, no more Kafka. At the moment I find it almost invincibly depressing. Now go to bed, I want to be alone with the remains of your father."

With a murmured "okay, Mom," he left the room. Soon the "Blue Danube" was drifting out his door.

"Turn it off! I never want to hear that again!" She sobbed, then rushed after him. "Oh, honey, I'm sorry. Please forgive your mother. It's been a pretty dismal day."

Bob could not cry. In fact, great emotion made him droop, loll his tongue, and stare. He watched as they prepared for bed.

"Can I stay with you, Mom?"

"Sure."

They climbed in bed together. They were beginning to respond to him just exactly as if he were a real dog. In a word, he was being ignored.

Cindy lay still, her mouth slightly open, Kevin in the crook of her arm.

Then the doorbell started. It was insistent, buzzing again and again.

Bob could do nothing but wait and watch. Cindy opened her eyes, gave a grunt of confusion, then turned over. The buzzer started up once more. She sat up in bed. "My God." With a hustle of covers she arose and went to the intercom. "Who? The *police*! Of course." She buzzed them in.

Bob paced, panting, which reduced his body heat—cold air across the tongue, a good, new sensation.

Then they were there, a whole foyer full of them, men smelling of cigarettes and oiled steel, of leather and sweat, tough men. "We got a dog complaint, ma'am."

"That bastard."

"He had twelve stitches. He lost a nerve in his foot. It'll be months before he walks. The dog's gotta go in for observation."

"No! That's completely impossible."

"Ma'am, the ASPCA truck is downstairs. It'll just be a week, he'll be treated well. You can visit him. It's no big deal."

"They're afraid of rabies?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Doesn't the rabies test involve dissecting the head of the animal?"

Bob shrank back into the coat closet, staring wildly.

"Ma'am, it's a matter of observation first. It won't come to no tests."

"But if it does?"

"Well, the test terminates the life of the animal. But if he might have rabies —"

"He doesn't have it! The worst he has is a slight case of the sniffles!"

"Well, it's put him in a kind of a bad mood."

"You can't take him. I'll have my vet look at him."

"No, ma'am. There's been a complaint filed. We have to take the dog."

"Where's your warrant? You can't even come in here without a warrant!"

"I hate these pet schticks. We don't need a warrant, ma'am. I'm going to tell the ASPCA guys to come up." He spoke into a handheld radio. The other cops fanned out into the living room, their bulky bodies filling it, casting black shadows from the single light that was on, the lamp that hung over the dining table.

Bob was so horrified that he couldn't move. He stood watching Cindy lose her battle with the police. She literally wrung her hands as she talked, and then three more men came in, dressed in khaki overalls, carrying a large cage between them.

"Come on, boy," one of them said, opening his face at Bob in a most insincere approximation of a grin.

The smells, though, told him a great deal. When the man spoke to him, an odor of tooth decay and old bacon grease came across the air. Bob took a step

forward and it blossomed with acid, a stench like boiling wax and onions. The man was afraid of him—terrified. And full of hate.

Bob could not go with these people. They would kill him, he knew it certainly.

"What the fuck," the man burst out. "This ain't a dog!" His voice was high, his odor grainy with fear. "You got a fuckin' wolf here."

One of the other men in khaki spoke up. "Why didn't you say this was a wolf, lady?"

"I—I—"

"People think these things are pets. They're crazy. This is a dangerous animal, my men aren't going near it."

Two of the policemen had their hands on their pistols.

"Go back to the truck," the flushed man said to one of the others. "Get the dart gun."

Cindy gave a little cry. A flash of panic made Bob growl. It was short and sharp, almost a bark.

The head cop took off his cap. "Lady, why are you keeping a wolf? Don't you know this is illegal?"

"He's a—he's just a big husky."

"Back out," the chief ASPCA man said, "these things can cut you to ribbons in a second. Where the fuck's Louie with that dart gun?" He grabbed one of the radios. "Louie, for God's sake, its hackles are up!"

The police had their pistols out now, all of them. Behind the clutch of blue and khaki the elevator door opened. Bob bolted, racing down the hall toward the bedroom.

"I'm calling my lawyer," Cindy shouted. Who? Bob wondered. Stanford Shadbold, whom they hadn't paid in a year?

"Okay, guys, break out the net. Block the corridor. I'm going in." As Cindy started her frantic phone calling Bob raced back and forth from bathroom to closet. The smells of fear and rage coming from the men drove him to panic, that and the knowledge of what was coming. From the bed there came a groan, then young Kevin was sitting up. He stared, stupefied, as a man in khaki, wearing a fencing mask and heavy quilting on his chest, arms and legs, advanced. In his hands was a neat plastic gun. Bob tried to rush past him at the last moment, his heart full of hopelessness, his body still determined to escape.

There was an awful, burning pain in his breast. He heard himself

screaming, a doggy wail.

"Dad, Dad!"

"Shut up, kid. Okay, guys, he's going down."

The fire spread, an agony that turned him to wood. It hurt but he could neither move nor cry out. He lay on his side, stiff, while his wife yammered at answering services and the ASPCA team gathered him up in a stout nylon net.

They took Bob's burning, paralyzed body down the hall. His eyes had blurred but he could still smell the horrible odors of the men, the faint smells of other animals on the netting, the rancid butter of Cindy and Kevin's terror.

Shrieks followed him down the hall, their razor agony penetrating even the tranquilizer. He could not even struggle to help Cindy, he could do nothing but listen to her at the far edge of panic, making a sound beyond grief.

"What about the Bill of Rights?" Kevin screamed, running along behind his father, wearing nothing but a pair of underpants. "What about due process? You can't just wrap my dad up in a net! You can't do it, this is America."

One of the policemen enclosed Kevin in a hug. "Gonna be okay, son. You wait and see."

"Don't you do that! Don't you grab my boy like that!"

Then Bob was in the elevator. The door rattled closed. Cindy's bellowing and Kevin's rising, frantic voice receded.

The world receded. There remained only the burning pain at the center of his chest, where the needle had been embedded. There was that, there was the blur of lights as the net was carried through the lobby. Then the back of the truck, thick with the scent of animal despair, a urinous, rotted stench. One of the men played a harmonica, some Spanish tune. Bob drifted helplessly away, and the world went silent, and odorless, and black.

Chapter Eight

TOTAL OBLIVION ONLY LASTED A FEW MINUTES. HE WAS still in the back of the truck when he became aware that they were fitting a wire and leather muzzle over his head. Vaguely he could feel them doing it, could hear them grunt when the truck lurched. His body seethed as if it was filled with insects. Try as he might, he could not move.

He understood, though, that he was in a cage in the back of the truck, and another cage had been fitted over his head.

"Man, this sucker is big."

"Just once I'd like to get it on a leash and go down Hundred and Thirty-Fifth. Nobody bother me then."

"Big boys bother you, little man?"

"Fuck you. Man, look at those eyes, just starin'."

"Starin' at you."

"We gonna gas 'im?"

"Dunno. Cage 'im tonight, in the morning, Tony know what to do."

"Look out, man, he might be comin' 'round. Give 'im another dart."

"No, man, what can he do? He's in the muzzle. Let him wake up. I want to see that sucker on his feet."

"Tear your throat right out."

"Yeah, man. Beautiful."

"You sick, man."

By the time they got to the pound Bob could lift his head enough to see. He could also scent things with great acuity, but the smells were meaningless to him—a jumble of startling new sensations. He could identify some of the odors: the stale fetor of sick breath, of tooth decay and smoker's mouth, the odor of other animals in the truck, the smell of the steel and the plastic and the gasoline. But there were other scents, far more subtle, that seemed elusively beautiful. He was in contact with the world in a new way, but he had no time to appreciate it, for the truck stopped and he was carried down a corridor into hell.

The sound hit him in flashes. He imagined that he was at the exploding muzzle of a machine gun. Then he saw walls of cages all filled with roaring dogs. Their barks were wild and furious, their eyes terrible. Close up, on direct terms with it, he could scarcely imagine the intensity of this passion.

The dogs' voices were blasting with fear and savage hate.

They knew he was no wolf, they knew it at once. Quailing in their cages as he was carried past, screaming, their lips frothy, their eyes beyond the border of sanity, they leaped and clawed, trying to get away from the monster that was being deposited among them.

"Don' like the wolf," one of the men said.

"He a mean sucker. They knows it. He kill ten of 'em all at once."

"You wanna see 'im fight?"

"Shit, he'd never make it tonight. Tomorra night, though."

"You on tomorra night?"

"Yeah."

"I got fifty bucks says he'll go down against the three shepherds that're up for gassin' Friday."

"You got fifty bucks sayin' that wolf ain't gonna stand against three mangy, broke-down street mutts? I got fifty bucks sayin' you is wrong."

There were slapped hands, then the two men walked out, oblivious to the noise of the crazed dogs. Bob lay on the filthy floor of a large cage, surrounded by other large cages. To his left and right large dogs shrank away from him. Across the aisle a terrier yammered, glaring at him out of scared, dripping pop eyes.

Despite all the noise, the barking and the whining, Bob was overtaken by sleep. It came quite suddenly, a black sheath. Abruptly he was dreaming. It was May 1961: Junior Cotillion Night at the Country Club. He was taking Melissa Costers, driving Dad's enormous new Thunderbird. There was a scent of oleander blossom in the air. He gave Melissa a corsage of gardenias, and the two smells mingled. On the way to the cotillion they listened to Fats Domino on the radio, singing "Blueberry Hill." Bob fell in love with the softly smiling Melissa. He even liked the way she looked in her braces. At a light he asked very solemnly if he could give her a kiss. Their lips touched dryly, then a waiting hunger captured them both and the kiss grew more intimate and humid. Their braces clattered together but neither of them cared. The light changed to green, a car honked and finally came alongside. The driver asked if they needed help.

It was then that Bob discovered that their braces had become locked together. Receiving no answer to his question, the other driver huffed and went away.

Bob woke up, sweating out the hideous waiting for rescuer, the frantic

bending and twisting of the braces, the amused stares of the police, the flashbulbs of the *Express* photographer.

He awoke snapping at his muzzle, and knew to his despair why he had been dreaming about braces. The iron bound him, the leather straps tasted of the saline gnaw of a thousand other canines. He got to his feet, glanced around for a water fountain. Then he realized that he had a hangover from the tranquilizer dart. He was sick in a corner of the cage.

Thirsty, and he smelled water. All he could see, though, was an encrusted dish attached to a feeder tube that automatically refilled when the dish was empty. There was something floating in the water, possibly the previous occupant's spittle. The dish was slick with the licking of thousands of tongues. Bob was revolted, and crept to the far side of the cage.

Presently a small man came hurrying along, pushing a cart stacked with bowls. He thrust one into each cage through a spring-loaded door. The dogs commenced eating at once, gobbling down the appalling mess with gusto.

They were a dull group of creatures, these dogs. They were tired and broken, most of them, standing in these cages awaiting their turn in the gas chamber, which was a little black hutch at the far end of the room. Bob tried to remember how long animals were kept here before being destroyed. Five days, wasn't it?

Surely Cindy would manage something.

But time passed, and he remained in his cage. The light coming in the high, barred windows changed, grew thin. Bob yearned toward that light. His initial despair had given over to fury. Most of all he was furious at science for giving him no hint at all that this could happen. He had grown up in the illusion that there is something fundamentally stable about the universe. But that was a lie. It was only stable for those who believed it to be stable. If you did not so believe, you risked personal catastrophe. How many others had ended up like him, stuck in the bodies of creatures that had interested, inspired, or obsessed them?

He walked over and stared at the drying glop in the bowl. It was so damn stupid. He had to get out of this mess. The thing was, he hadn't felt any control over his transformation. So how could he hope to change himself back?

He searched his mind, trying to understand how this had happened to him. All of his life he had been fascinated by wolves. He had tried to observe them in the wild in Minnesota, but had gotten only a few glimpses. They were the

devil to track. Hunters flushed them into clearings and shot them from helicopters. Bob had used years of tracking skills, gained from the Boy Scouts, from books, from professional guides. Still, the wolves had eluded him.

All but one. This was a she-wolf, young, weighing no more than eighty pounds. He had been crawling down a brush-choked ridge to a little stream when he had encountered a thatch of gray-brown fur. He had felt ahead and discovered the animal. She had been so frightened by his approach that she had become like a thing of rubber. There had been a brief moment between them. Her eyes had met his. He had thought himself the possessor of a great secret, to stare into the enigmatic, panic-clouded eyes of this alien creature, to see her as she was in her own world, a place intended to be hidden from human eyes.

Had that done it—had something of her somehow stuck to him all these years, some strange seed . . .?

But this was a matter of the flesh, of the real, immutable body, of blood and bone and skin. There had been some kind of dance of atoms, for they had reordered themselves. Wouldn't there have been a discharge of energy as the molecules of his old body broke their borders and sought new ones? And why had he first melted, then re-formed?

It was all completely impossible. And yet here he was in this cage with a bowl of dog food to eat. Not a very high quality brand, either, judging from the fatty bits and the chunks of what looked like organ meat suspended in the dissolved cereals. He sniffed at it. Most unappetizing. He wanted eggs, bacon, orange juice, and coffee. He wanted toast, dammit, butter, a bit of strawberry jelly. He wanted the *Times* and maybe another cup of coffee. He wanted all of these things at the Elephant and Castle restaurant on Prince Street, with Cindy sitting across from him with her croissant and cappuccino.

He wanted them now!

When the echo died away, he realized that he had somehow learned to bark. He had rattled away like the worst of them, yammering at the top of his lungs.

What a foul degeneration. He was now a coarse beast, he couldn't say a word, he couldn't turn a key, he had no clothes and had only garbage to eat. There was a gas chamber right out in the middle of the room and they were soon going to put him in it, and this terrible mystery was going to die. A human being who had gone through the mirror was going to come to a

choking end, pitiful, terrified, claustrophobic.

All around him dogs licked bowls, paced, slept, barked, whined, defecated, urinated. The air was a fog of canine odors. When the door to the front of the building opened, expectant noses twitched, eyes followed the coming of the men with the big plastic garbage bags. They opened a cage and took a scrabbling animal down to the gas chamber. In a moment it was locked inside. The others paced and panted, then a buzzer rang and the inert form was pulled out and stuffed into a bag. Another dog, this one screaming and running, was processed. Then another, and another and another. The cages were disinfected.

Didn't these people realize that the dogs knew what was being done here? They all knew it was a charnel house. But they could not make the leap of consciousness to see that they themselves would be victims in a few days. They could not see this. When the men went away with their bags of cadavers, the other dogs settled down to an afternoon of licking themselves, pacing, barking, and sleeping.

Bob was alone. He could not befriend one of these creatures, for they had not his intelligence. He could not tap out signals or share noble thoughts in this filth.

During the day new dogs were brought to fill the cages of the old, most of them scruffy, terrible creatures, things of the streets. One was so emaciated that all it did was lie on its side. When a keeper offered it food, it gently licked the man's hand and closed its eyes.

Whenever a new beast was brought in, the other dogs barked. For Bob there could not be any real rest or even contemplation—much less sleep—with the cacophony. He kept wanting to believe that it was mindless, but the more he listened, the more he heard something new in it.

He heard a song, built on a very definite, very unhuman esthetic, but certainly a song. When dogs barked they expressed excitement or fear or rage, but they also expressed a beauty, something in its way as subtle as the luster of an aria. An aria, or was it a prayer? There was joy in it, even from these trapped beasts, and when one of them went to the gas chamber and the others barked, it seemed to Bob that the unseen world shifted and fluttered in sympathy.

"It isn't eating. It hasn't touched a thing through three feedings."

"Shit, I got fifty bucks on it. I hope it ain't sick."

"The pool's seventeen hundred dollars, you aren't the only one who doesn't

want it to be sick. I've got some money on it myself. It's an exceptional wolf. Must weigh in at a hundred and sixty pounds, maybe a little better."

"It jus' look at you. You think it wants to eat us?"

"Don't take the muzzle off before the fight. If that's what's keeping it from its food, it can wait a little longer."

"That lady been by. We say we ship it up to Queens."

"I've got a buyer already. Movie guy."

"That lady done los' her a wolf!"

The man in khaki and the one in the soiled white coat left. Bob followed them with his eyes, hungering for their freedom, their voices, their beautiful hands.

The implications of their conversation were so unfortunate that it was a few minutes before Bob fully realized what had been said. Then it hit him a solar blow: he ran back and forth in the squeeze; he panted and snapped at his muzzle; he butted his head against the cage, finally stared in fury and frustration at the rusty padlock. Given the muzzle, he couldn't even chew it—not that he'd have a prayer of chewing it through.

They were stealing him, if they didn't kill him first. Made to fight to the death, then sold to some movie producer for God knew how much money — it was outrageous, criminal.

He raised his head and found that he could howl, and it felt good to howl out the misery of his situation. God, though, was as silent as ever He had been when Bob used to pray the Our Father and the Hail Mary. He hadn't been really Catholic since he was twelve, but now the nobility of the old prayers returned to his mind. He saw his religion as a grand and rather pitiful human attempt to somehow speak back to the mute wonder of creation. He had prayed just now, with his howl.

The dogs had fallen silent. Many of them were staring at him, and in their faces he could see reproach. He knew why: he had interrupted the song of the barks with a noise that did not fit. One little Shih Tzu in a tiny cage yapped. Then a terrier, then a mutt, and another mutt, and a burned mutt and a starved mutt, and two shepherds, and some other nameless breeds, and then like a night full of crickets they were going at it again, deep in their esthetic.

It came to him with great force that he was the only creature here who was not already in heaven. Nothing could happen to these dogs that really mattered to them. They were all lovers, they had all seen God many times in the human form, and theirs was the celebration of the heavenbound.

He yapped, but it was wrong, a sullen little note in these symphonics. He brought the habit of concept, of memory and forethought with him from the human world. That was why he was so much less than the dogs, why his voice lacked timbre and resonance. He had the past to savor, the future to fear, the present to endure. The dogs had only their barking. They strove to make it fine and exciting and fun. It was prayer, yes, but also entertainment: they were singing a song of dog-affirming.

This was not an unhappy place. Dogs suffered terribly here, yes, but the suffering only reached so deep. The gay tails, the flags on the jumping bodies of the condemned, attested to the persistence of life and the triumph of dogdom in a way that nothing in human experience could, save perhaps the singing that came from the gas chambers of World War II, when briefly man had experimented with treating himself as he did the animals. He longed to ask these dogs: "How does it feel to love a master, to live with and see and smell a God?" And how does it feel to be deprived of this love? Each dog was a detailed, complex tragedy. Lost, given away, abandoned, forgotten. They knew what it was to be discarded by someone they adored. Why then were they not lovelorn, and what was this strange humor in the barking? Did they see themselves as absurd? Were they capable of sensing the ridiculousness of being a dog?

When once a woman came looking for a dog to take home, the whole place filled with a smell as if of hope, and dog after dog shambled to the edge of its bars, dancing and panting its friendliness.

"That one you can't have," the vet said to the woman, a girl of perhaps twenty, with clear, hard eyes and the heart-stopping skin of the just-formed.

"Is he a husky?"

"He's a wolf."

"You're kidding!"

"No, ma'am, that's a full-blooded male timber wolf in the prime of life."

"What's he doing here?"

"Bit a guy's foot off. Cops confiscated him as an illegal pet."

"I don't want any problems like that!"

"No, ma'am. Now, let me show you this little husky over here. Name's Rindy. Got him in two days ago."

"Hello, Rindy. Rindy?"

A wave of ambrosial odor poured from the dog at the sound of its name. It wagged its tail, it shot gladness and welcome from its eyes.

The whole pound awaited the decision of the human goddess, who turned with a murmured instruction to call her when a female husky came in. When he saw she was leaving, Rindy circled his tail, climbed his cage, panted, yapped, licked at the withdrawing hand. This was blood-love, this feeling the dogs had for humankind. They were not capable of hating people, only of fearing them.

The pound was silent for a time after the young woman left. Then the barking started again, a rhythmic mystery.

Chapter Nine

CINDY FELT LIKE SHE WAS TUMBLING DOWN A SCREAMING well when she saw poor, netted Bob disappear into the elevator in the hands of a bunch of near thugs. Blotches of fur stuck through gaps in the net.

It was more than she could bear. A curious silence enveloped her. Little Kevin hopped around like a frenzied dwarf, trying to break through to her. She watched him, heard him calling her name. Or was that all a dream?

Eventually he gave up, lay down on the couch, and slept a miserable sleep. Cindy stared at a corner of the rug.

A long time later the door buzzer rang. It was now nearly three o'clock in the morning. The buzzer rang and rang. Cindy heard it as a voice calling from the top of the well. It didn't seem very important. Then she heard Kevin, saw his stricken face. "Monica is here," he said.

Monica, Monica, the ocean whispered. Monica, the ocean said. Monica, Monica.

Monica soon appeared beside Kevin. Something tickled Cindy's face. Monica's hands were holding Cindy's cheeks. It felt nice.

A blow followed, sharp and colored red. It exploded the numbness. "Kevin," Monica said, "that sort of thing is unwise!"

"It worked."

Her son had struck her.

"Can you feel your body?"

It was as if she was enclosed in a cotton wool.

"Sort of."

"Hysteria. Under the circumstances, an appropriate reaction."

Kevin's voice cracked. "She was like a wax statue, just sitting there. I couldn't get through to her! Monica, I was scared."

Cindy realized she had frightened her dear man-boy. She had to pull herself together, she was a mother. He lay against her chest, and she stroked his trembling body. "It's going to be all right, Kevin. You'll see."

He drew back from her. "Please don't act like I'm eight, Mother. I'm twelve, remember. I know what's going on." He looked at Monica. "They took him away. He bit Jodie's dad. The police saw he was a wolf—" Kevin stopped, became the little boy again. His body shook and he stifled his cracked sobs into his mother's breast. It was all she could do not to cry with

him.

"The police?" Monica's eyes implored for more. Cindy told how they had taken him. Still listening, Monica bustled across to the kitchen and ground some coffee. In the middle of it she stopped. "Get a lawyer." Cindy did not like to hear tremor in that voice. Monica had to be strength.

"I thought of that. What do I do? Call Stanford and tell him he's got to get Bob out of the pound?" Saying it, she was suddenly convulsed with a fit of laughter. Monica watched her, appraisal in her eyes. When it ended, she went back to preparing the coffee.

Kevin became furious. "Don't you dare laugh! This is the worst thing that's ever happened to anybody just about. It's horrible." His hands had become fists, his face pasty gray.

"I'm sorry. Monica's right, I'm in a state of hysteria."

The pot whistled and Monica poured the coffee.

Sipping from her mug, feeling a little stronger, Cindy began to wonder what Monica had found at the library. She was unsure about asking, though. She did not want to hear a hopeless prognosis.

"It is a disease, isn't it?" Kevin did not share Cindy's hesitancy.

"Kevin, I don't know for sure."

Cindy felt cold within. "Is there anything, any information?"

"Cindy, I'm afraid it's a genuine medical miracle."

"A miracle? Gee, thanks, God, thank you so much! How about more miracles? Turn me into a frog, Kevin into a sheep! Miracles are supposed to be good!"

"The whole event defies physics, biology, all understanding."

"No, ma'am," Kevin said. "Not quantum physics, not if you assume subjective reality. Or if the Many Worlds theory is an accurate reflection of the actual situation, then you could even argue that this was inevitable, in one or another universe. Given many worlds, everything that might happen will happen, and each possibility will create its own universe."

Cindy looked at her son, hurting with pride and love. "What actual material did you find, Monica? Anything?"

Monica might have understood Kevin better, because she ignored Cindy's question and flared up at him. "What the devil are you getting at? You're saying that princes *do* turn into frogs?"

"I'm saying that they could. It might be that we've only recently—say, in the past ten thousand years or so—gained enough imaginative stability to

prevent our dreams from coming true. One of the greatest achievements of civilization might well be that it has contained the mind and shorn it of its ability to project into physical reality."

Monica rocked back on her heels, her eyes wide at Kevin's unexpected brilliance. "All I found was folklore, Grimms' fairy tales, Apuleius's account of the wolfman, and medieval superstition. Nothing modern. A couple of movie scripts."

He began noisily sucking the dregs of a box of Hawaiian Punch through the little straw that came with it.

"No scraping bottom," Cindy said automatically.

"If what you say is true, why don't we have more recent incidents?"

He looked at Monica over his box. "Who's to say we don't? The thing is, once people change, they're gone. Maybe there are a lot of them, changed into what they loathed or loved— whatever fascinated them enough. The people that do it might be genetic throwbacks or something."

"They never come back?" Monica winced at her slip even as she asked the cruel question. Kevin and Cindy clung to one another.

"There are no stories," Kevin said quietly.

Monica had to remind herself that this was not speculative. She had seen Robert Duke change. She had seen the slow alteration of the body, had massaged him with her own hands as his skin became soft and dry and fur emerged in clumps and sprays. She had to ask herself the fantastic question, were there others out there like Bob?

It was a fearful thing even to be in the room -where it had happened. The event challenged her most fundamental assumptions about the nature of thought and the boundaries of the mind. What is a concept, or a fantasy? Are there universes filled with the tatters of our fantasies and nightmares, places where we *become* the shape in the dark?

"You came back to tell us you hadn't found a thing!"

"A lot of people wouldn't have come back at all, not after what I saw. I *know* what happened here. But I am back."

"Without any idea of how to help."

The bitterness in Cindy's voice gave Monica a brief rattle of anger. She made sure it had subsided, though, before she spoke again. "I cannot offer a cure—not a magic bullet. What I can offer, and I am willing to try this, is therapeutic support—"

"Monica, you can't expect him to sit down and have a session with you?"

Surely, you must see the joke."

"I'm willing to try. Maybe we can get him back to the real world."

"He's in the real world. An uncommon version of it. Isn't that the gist of what you're saying, Kevin?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Well, then maybe I can help him get back into a common version of it."

Tomorrow morning Cindy intended to march up to that pound and extract him by sheer force of argument. Kevin's analysis had helped her immensely, in the sense that it sounded sensible enough to enable her to rest. In what he said there was a thread, however thin, to the understandable.

It was a matter of fighting idea with idea. If she could conceive of a successful outcome, she could move toward it.

"Why don't we call Stanford in the morning," Kevin said, "and tell him that it's a pet they've taken and we want it back? Don't tell him the whole truth."

Monica stroked Cindy's cheek. "Your color's coming back. I like to see that. Do you think you'd like a little something to help you sleep?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"But you will sleep. It's three-thirty, and there's nothing more to be done until morning."

A weariness was there, waiting to receive her. Cindy went back into her own dark bedroom. Was this how widows confronted the first night, looking across the sea of perfect sheets? No, not perfect. There were wrinkles in the middle where she had sat waiting for him earlier, sat like a spider.

She had lashed out at him, struck him. But they had no money. She had to do it, to inject him into the real world, to *make* him earn something.

How stupid, how arrogant. Now what would she do? Abandon his office and everything in it, for starters. She dropped onto the bed fully clothed. What about money? What about breakfast? And would Stanford work without payment? Didn't they owe him, too?

So many questions.

"Mom, can I stay with you?"

"Sure. There's room—" She had been about to add "on Dad's side," but the words did not come.

She lay in the dark, the huddled form of their child beside her, the talisman. Monica came in and silently held her hand for a time.

She plunged into black, empty sleep.

The ringing of the telephone woke her. At first she thought it was the alarm

clock, time to get Kevin off to school. The rhythm of it was what made her come to full attention. Then Kevin was standing with the receiver in his hand, holding it out to her.

"Hello?"

It was a moment, listening to the snide young voice on the other end of the line, before she understood that she was talking to a newspaper reporter. "We understood that you are the owner of a wolf that attacked a Mr. John O'Neill. Would you care to make a comment?"

Her mind cast wildly for something to say. From somewhere she recalled the ritual formula. "No comment."

"I'll be writing that you harbored this wild animal, is that correct?"

"No." Now that she fully understood the implications of this call she was grim with fear. What would happen to Bob now?

"Look, Mrs. Duke, you can save that stuff for the movies."

"Please leave me alone. Don't hurt us."

"I'm just trying to get a story."

"Don't hurt us!"

"Your wolf hurt a man pretty badly. Don't you think that entitles the public to know, at least how long you've had the wolf? And what's its name?"

"We found it on the street," she said miserably. "A week ago."

"Is that all? What street?"

"Fifth Avenue."

"You're kidding, a wolf just walking down Fifth? How did you capture it?"

"We fed it a ham-and-cheese croissant. It was starving." A lump of coldest ice had settled in her gut. This was only going to lead to more trouble. "We didn't know it was a wolf until the police came. We had no idea."

Without so much as a good-bye, the reporter hung up. Why not, he had what he wanted. To him other human beings must be no more important than dumb animals.

It was too early to call Stanford, so she contented herself with making a breakfast of oatmeal, orange juice, and tea. Kevin came in and ate. Monica, who had stayed on the couch, stretched and rose, and drank some coffee. In a dull voice Cindy told her about the reporter.

"That's all we need."

"God, what'll it lead to? Poor Bob's going to become a cause celebre."

"We've got to get him out before the story breaks. Have you called your lawyer?"

Cindy glanced at the kitchen clock. She tried his number, although she didn't have much hope at 8:40 in the morning. He surprised her, though, by both being there and answering his own phone.

"Cynthia. How long has it been? A year at least."

"At least that, Stanford. Stanford, we have a problem."

He remained silent.

"We've had our pet wolf confiscated by the city."

The sound that came over the line was like that a man might make on discovering a spider has gotten into his trousers at a funeral: a politely constricted whinny.

"It's in the pound. We want it back."

"A wolf-dog? A breed of dog?"

"No, an actual wolf."

"It's an illegal pet? No permit?"

"We didn't know we needed one. We found it on a street comer."

"You found it, or Bob?"

"Bob."

"Ah, now this begins to make some sense. Bob brought home a wolf and it has been taken away. You want me to have the animal released to your recognizance. But not, I presume, to Bob's."

"Bob is my husband. To both of us."

"Cynthia, do yourself a favor and keep Bob well in the background. Don't let him talk to the police or go to the pound. If anybody asks why, tell them he's indisposed."

Bob had been Stanford's client for many years. He had been in the middle of some unusual capers, such as the matter of the automatic theater seats that folded up around their victims, and that of the blue bread made from seaweed. He had also helped Bob with the FBI when he had tried to set up a series of computer conferences in Bulgaria. It had not occurred to him that the computers he had shipped out ahead of his own departure were proscribed, and that the Bulgarians had agreed to his project simply in order to get them. He wound up losing thirty-one thousand dollar's worth of equipment and narrowly escaping criminal charges. "Don't tell them he's eccentric," Stanford said. "Tell them to call me. I'll explain Bob."

"Bob won't be involved."

"Good. I'll have to look up the ordinance on dangerous pets to see if it's changed, but back a few years ago I had a client who had some trouble about

importing a jaguar. As I recall, it was a pretty straightforward matter. The city wouldn't allow it in. New York takes a dim view of dangerous pets. Too crowded."

That sounded bad. She strove to keep the wild rising panic out of her voice. "Could they ship the wolf to another city and let us take possession of it there?"

"Well, we'll see. I'll give the law a look and telephone you back."

"When?"

"Oh, soon. Why?" Suspicion was creeping into his voice. He knew perfectly well that there was more to the story.

"We're afraid they'll hurt him. He's a wonderful creature. We all love him terribly."

"People and their pets. I have my cats. If they were impounded, I'd be beside myself. I'll get to it right away."

Monica had made some instant oatmeal. They ate in silence, drank orange juice and more coffee.

It was agreed that Kevin would not go to school during the family emergency. Cindy ate because she knew she needed strength. She was not hungry.

The telephone rang again. "Is this the home of the wolf lady?"

"No." She hung up. "Another reporter."

It rang yet again. "My name is Rebecca Fontinworth. I represent the Animal Rights League, and I'd like to ask you if you realize just how evil—"

Cindy hung up again. "Stanford, please hurry up!"

His was the next call, and it broke her heart. "As long as the wolf hasn't hurt anybody, I don't see a problem."

"And if it has hurt somebody?"

"Big problem. They'll want to test it for rabies. They'll keep it in quarantine, probably donate it to a zoo. And you'll get a fine, not to mention the inevitable lawsuit. Cynthia?" She could not speak. "Hello? Tell me this isn't the situation. Cynthia?"

"He bit a man."

"Badly?"

"In the foot. Plus the papers are calling."

A sigh. "All right, then we have a problem. I am going to do what I can. You cannot expect me to get the wolf returned to you. The best we can hope for is a nice berth in the zoo. I will try to prevent the animal's being

destroyed."

It was hideous. She threw the phone as if the instrument had gotten hot. The man was talking about Bob, about Bob's *life*! She could hardly breathe, couldn't do more than make an awful sound—"eh, eh, eh"—as her blood thundered and her breath came in raw stutters.

Monica took up the phone. "I'm their psychiatrist."

"You live with them?"

"When I must. And right now I must. I'm camped out in the living room."

"The one I'm most worried about is Bob. Don't let him get involved in this. God knows what will happen."

"Maybe God knows and maybe God doesn't. Try to get the wolf out. As their psychiatric adviser, I'm telling you that this is the best course."

"I can't possibly get it out."

"Try. Do anything. It is important to their sanity, to their very survival." She put down the phone.

"Thank you, Monica. But it's hopeless. I know it's hopeless. He's going to die this insane, stupid, impossible death. Oh, how stupid, how stupid!"

"Mama, we're going to get him out. If we have to spring him, we're going to do it. We can't let Dad just die!"

She thought of last Saturday at the zoo. Was that when it had all started, when that strange wolf had been staring at Bob? He had wanted to leave there, as if he already sensed that something was wrong. And what of the wolf, what had it known? Maybe that wolf—maybe it was somebody, too, and it knew the signs, had seen them in Bob. "The world isn't what we thought," she blurted. "It's completely different!"

"Well, I have to agree now." But Monica looked personally insulted. "Science is a limited view of things."

"Every view is limited. The occult is limited."

Kevin spoke up. "The occult isn't a limited view. It doesn't reject phenomena like science. The trouble with the occult is that it misinterprets everything. Demons, ghosts—"

Monica slammed her hand against the table. "How do we know! At least one thing is true for the three of us. We have had the veils lifted from our eyes, and that is not bad. We *know* for certain that things are not as they seem. We *know* that this world is full of dangerous and mysterious powers. That gives us an advantage. And I'll tell you another advantage we have. We know that Bob is inside that creature. He understands English and he has the

mind of a human being. If we can get to him, we might be able to spring him."

"We're no SWAT team. How do we get into the place? What do we do?"

"We're both pretty."

Cindy was thunderstruck. "We use—"

"Sex, of course. We seduce."

"You saw those goons?"

"They'll seduce, believe me."

Kevin, who was as prudish as his father, had gone still. He was clutching his spoon, his knuckles streaked red. Cindy reached toward him. For all his brilliance, her son was the most vulnerable human being she had ever known—next to Bob. At least Kevin had inherited his mother's temper, and could use it. Bob had no temper, little anger, no guile.

Sometimes, though, he could see beyond the mountains.

Chapter Ten

THE DOG SLOP BECAME INTERESTING TO BOB AT ABOUT noon. He could well imagine what must be in it—possibly even the remains of animals that had been gassed. His impression of the Animal Control Foundation was not a bad one. Obviously there were employee abuses here, but the basic situation wasn't intolerable. Too bad young Kevin had never wanted a dog. Had there been dog food in the house, Bob might have been able to identify this by brand—if, indeed, it was a brand and not something made here. Nutrition concerned him. He would have known the cereal, ash and waste content, and the food value.

He sniffed it, and was surprised to discover that his nose could tell him a great deal about what was before him. There was a thick, oozing odor that seemed to congeal in his muzzle: perhaps that was fat. Another odor, slightly gray, almost like wet cement—that was ash. There was some cereal, not much. Then a faint but piercing scent that made his stomach tighten with need. This was the meat, the real food. Then there was bone, and the dense smell of organs. What had they done, dropped dead animals into a hopper and ground them up, then thickened the whole mess with ashes? Was that all there was to making cheap dog food?

He returned to the question of the source of the meat. Certainly it wasn't steak. Dog was probably a good guess. Or maybe bulls, roosters. What if unscrupulous zoos sold their cadavers to dog-food manufacturers? This could be anything. Gorilla. Python.

The smell of the meat went deep into his brain, into lusty new centers. This new, inner self must be the instinct of the wolf he had become. He turned to it, and found confidence mixed with churning fury, a questing, probing mind that was designed to compare and make sense of millions of odors. If he quieted his chattering human thoughts, he was at once connected to this spirit. His nose made sense for him then, and the few odors he could verbally identify expanded by a thousandfold into a nonverbal catalog of great richness.

That wasn't good enough, though. He was a man, and verbal. To use the powers of this new body, he had to break the boundary that existed between its instincts and his familiar mind. He could not abandon his human self to the wolf. And yet there were things in the smells—living, twisting things—

that were not connected to human words at all. Call them memories, call them longings, they shot through his body like the very words of creation.

His wolf sense knew there was food value in the slop. But the man Robert Duke was not about to taste it.

At one o'clock his gut knotted. In the distance he heard Paul Simon singing "Graceland," and they hauled four more dogs down the hall. The slop, drying and lined with flies, said, "I am life."

Two o'clock. The keepers muttered. A man came, smelling of coffee dregs, sauerkraut and hot dogs, and took pictures of him through the bars. When the keepers retreated, the man pulled a monopod out of his camera case and tried to prod Bob. "C'mon, you sucker, get mad." He laughed, a cruel, nervous man with a nose like a knife, a man with eyes glazed by what Bob saw was a habit of sadness. "Heyah! C'mon, sucker, give me a snarl!" He lit a Bic and thrust it at Bob, flame full on.

With a blubbery flap of tongue and lips, Bob blew it out.

"Holy moly."

The man then met his eyes. A terrified, screaming mutt was slammed into a cage. Barking erupted, the flip-flop rhythm of doghood.

The man looked away. "What the fuck are you?" he said in a hoarse voice. He started to raise his camera, then dropped it and grabbed the monopod. "You bastard!" He jabbed it at Bob, who pressed himself against the far bars. He jabbed again, and Bob felt the monopod against his skin. Again, and it seared a rib. The man was sweating, grimacing. "Fight, baby! C'mon, you aren't gonna fucking eat me! Fight, you bastard!"

Then the camera, *click click click*. Bob tried to create an expression of utter peace, deep, soft, calm. With a curse the man ran off. Soon he was back, one of the keepers in tow. "Look, get behind the cage. Get the damn thing's tail and give it a pull. I gotta have it growling. I'll get page one if this sucker looks dangerous enough."

"I ain't doin' that. It ain't right."

"Ten bucks says different."

"Ten bucks, man, I can't buy shit with ten bucks."

"A double saw, then."

"Double, you got yourself a man." The keeper headed around to the back of the cages. Bob stood in the middle of his space, his tail curled way up under his legs. "C'mon, c'mon— Jeez, how you know I'se after your tail?"

"It's weird. You shoulda seen it a minute ago, it blew out my lighter. Sorta

slobbered it out. I dunno."

Fingers came in and closed around Bob's tail. He felt stabs of agony right up his spine and he cried out.

Almost at once the pain stopped. "Christ!" The keeper was out from behind the cage. "You hear that? You hear what it sounded like?"

"What of it?"

"I been around dogs for fifteen years. Wolves, I seen a dozen wolves. We get 'em in here once in a while. They jus' big, quiet dogs. They don' make no sound like that." He was staring at Bob. "We oughta gas that thing right now. I don' know what that is."

"I still didn't get my picture."

"You can keep your fuckin' picture! I don't want your money. Thas' a voodoo in there."

"Oh, Christ, do you believe in that stuff?"

"I'm from Brooklyn, turkey. But there ain't no wolf that screams like a man. Ain't no wolf."

The keeper retreated, his footsteps echoing on the damp concrete floor. The newspaperman took a final picture. "Thanks a lot, Voodoo Wolf," he said. With a last jab from his monopod he also left.

Silence brought boredom, the curse of all the creatures here. Boredom intensified hunger. Bob imagined a nice array of sushi: *tekka maki*, *taro*, *ikura*, sparked by a pyramid of green Japanese horseradish, freshened by delightful slivers of fresh ginger, the whole deliciousness washed down by a rich Sapporo beer. Then he would have *yokan*, sweet red bean paste, as dessert. Not this flyblown bowl of garbage that so tempted the wolf.

Left alone, he had plenty of time to consider the significance of a newspaper photographer. Maybe there would be a public outcry against his imprisonment. But no, on reflection he suspected it would go the other way. Man fears the wolf, that is in the nature of things. Newspaper people would have one objective: excite that fear in order to sell papers.

Water dripped, a dog whined, four more animals were gassed together, their frantic, muffled barking sending thrills of fear through the little colony. More strangers were brought in, to fill the cages of the dead. Doors clanged, slop was poured, a vet forced something down the throat of a dog with diarrhea. Another dog vomited worms and was gassed at once, and his cage swabbed down by a tired-looking keeper.

Pigeons, sitting on the sills of the high windows, gobbled and cooed. Bob

looked up, as millions of men and others have looked up from cages and jails, and longed after the wings, and saw a thread of sky. He could have wept but he had no tears. Then he leaned swiftly down and ate his slop.

His cage was thrown open, and before he could so much as growl, a net came and he was being carried down the hall. The black gas box stood before him, open, its wooden interior scored by a legion of digging dogs. He could see where they had chewed frantically on blocks and joints, and he could see the grille at the back where the gas came through.

He screamed, it was his only hope, apparently all he had left from humanity. Their faces went wide with surprise, but they kept at their work. He wallowed in the net as they stuffed him down into the box. Then the door closed. It was tight. His legs were twisted under him, his muzzle jammed against the wood. The oldest and worst of all terrors burst up within him. Monster though he had become, he wanted to live. A windy night, a bucking deer, blood beneath the moon; starlight in Manhattan, dancing at 3:00 A.M. Slow love, the jumping of cubs in the spring, watching Kevin sleep the sleep of an angel.

A valve creaked, the gas hissed. He smelled its choking must, a powerful, ugly note of ether in it that marched him off to sleep.

An angel stood before him in a seersucker suit, his white wings glancing sunlight. He was laughing, and waving a red lantern. When their eyes met, the library of the universe was opened to Bob, and he received rich, sustaining knowledge: he, too, was known, Robert Duke, and his fate was understood, and he was loved.

Then he was strapped to a table and there was another strap so tight around his jaw that his muzzle whistled when he breathed. His side was partly shaved, he could feel the cool air. And his head was thundering. They had only half killed him, had stunned him.

"Weight's a hundred and sixty-one pounds. That makes him one of the largest wolves ever found. He has a most unusual voice, and he has green eyes, another unusual feature. His coat is richly colored, displaying seven distinct shades, browns, grays, tans, white, and black. The overall effect is to give him an extraordinary glow. His teeth are healthy, and his skeleton is massive. Until we have done detailed X rays or dissected him, we cannot determine the laryngeal features that give him his voice. Our present theory is that he is a highly unusual breed of wolf, perhaps Russian or Chinese in origin, possibly imported to serve a ritual purpose within the voodoo

community. When he wakes up fully, we will display him in the rear courtyard, at which time you may take pictures."

Bob watched a stuffy man with the bald head fold his papers and clear his throat. Then the net floated down and he was carried away again. As two of the keepers were putting him in his cage he heard a number whispered in awe: "fifteen grand."

"You kiddin.' In the pool?"

"Sure enough. This a voodoo wolf. They gonna be a doc to bleed 'im. They gonna be a mama-san. He gonna eat them shepherds up. I glad I ain't got my money on 'em."

"It a bad scene, man, you gonna get some demon outta that thing. I dun hear it screamin' in the gas, it's some kinda banshee or somethin.' Gonna let Roy hold my marker for the pool."

"What make you think Roy so brave, if you not? Who gonna run the fight, the mama-san?"

"They gonna ring the whole courtyard with the Fierce Water of Johnny Blood."

"Then it safe."

"I ain't so sure. Them voodoos always get all mix up. You never know what's gonna go down, they start playin' with the demons."

"Where your faith my man, Papajesu gonna protect you."

"Papajesu, shit. I ain't goin'."

Later Bob was brought to the courtyard. For a time the air was brilliant with flashbulbs. In the green, glowing haze they left in his eyes, he saw a single pale face and his whole body ached with longing. He stared straight at her, he devoured her with his eyes, he tried to coordinate his tail enough to wag it. Cindy shone in his glance. She stood familiarly beside the vet who had examined him, seemed to speak to him easily, and even touched his arm from time to time with the tips of her fingers.

That gave Bob hope. If he understood what she was attempting, it was a good idea. She might be able to accomplish it. When he was returned to his cage, he found there a bowl of chopped steak. He gobbled it; this body did not easily bear hunger. Cindy had somehow been responsible for this food, he was sure of it.

As night slipped in the high windows, he became less sure. Finally there was a stirring among the dogs. His heart raced. He expected to see her with keys.

Instead there came a strange procession. He had always heard that there was voodoo in New York City, but this man was more elaborately dressed than the cardinal on Easter Sunday morning. He wore long white robes embroidered with a collar of dancing skeletons. There was a red cross on his back and a black pentacle on his breast. He wore a top hat and carried a cane. Over the robe was the tattered tailcoat of an ancient morning suit. His fingers were all ringed with skulls and such, and his feet were shod in doeskin shoes. He smelled of oil of cloves and dried blood, molasses, and thick, decayed breath. A drum beat in his shadowy entourage, and many of the dogs barked with fear. Straining on leads, their collars worked with daisies and spray-painted purple carnations, came four powerful young German shepherds. They were snarling and eager. Bob had seen them before, waiting in the front cages where the keepers took prospective owners and claimants. You could get a mutt here free, but one of these animals would cost. They were fine and brushed, and the keepers exercised them daily.

As they passed Bob they set off a poundwide round of nervous barking.

He listened to the rhythm of drums and the bleating of a trumpet, and saw flames flicker up from time to time in the dark outside. There were chants. The old priest pranced past the door, his top hat shining in the torchlight, a cigar clenched between his teeth.

Bob kept watching the corridor, hoping that Cindy would come through it, having somehow struck whatever deal she was making with the vet. But she didn't come, and the ritual that had formed around the betting pool grew louder.

Incense, cigar smoke, the sharp scent of hashish all wafted in, borne on a heavier layer of oils: rose, clove, pepper. The worshipers danced past, their faces alight in the torches, saying words he could not understand in the pidgin of the islands. When they put their hands on him, he let forth the scream that had terrified them before. If it frightened them now, they gave no sign. He was carried out into the courtyard and left there with the four shepherds, who had been worried during the ritual to a pitch of rage.

He could smell their anger and their hurt. These dogs had loved man. Human enmity made them feel bad about themselves.

Their thick, angry odor gave over to the hot pitch of breath when they barked at him. To be with him in unbarred surroundings terrified them. He was more afraid, though, and he clawed desperately at the door, trying to somehow get away. At all of the high windows there were faces peering

down, and over the back wall they also peered.

Bob didn't know what to do. He couldn't talk to these dogs, he had no arm to parry with when they attacked. All he could hope to do would be to bite back. But he'd never bitten. He didn't know how to bite.

The dogs hammered out their barks, their ears back. In Bob the wolf stirred.

They rushed him, all four of them at once, their bodies slamming into him one after another. The first came in under his throat, the second right beside it. They knocked him off his feet. The other two buried themselves in his soft belly. He felt an awful pain, kicked, squirmed, and was surprised to notice within himself a confident undulation. He rose and his jaw went off like a spring mechanism; one of the dogs was on three legs, screaming dog screams, and the crowd went wild. Then the fury of the shepherds was renewed. Their barking was like the clatter of applause. This time when they rushed him, Bob trotted away. Now they changed their tactics and began to chase. In a moment they were running around the courtyard. Bob was astonished at himself. He could run like the wind. In fact he ran so fast he was soon behind the slowest dog, the one with the hurt leg. Then he leaped on that dog and felt his muzzle probing for its throat. He thought about it, thought about aiming his teeth, finding the right place in the fur—and in an instant was at the bottom of a heap of snarling, snapping killers.

Again he got to his feet, but this time he could feel his own blood leaking from a hole in his neck. He needed a doctor; what if the wound was close to his jugular? Still just the one dog was wounded. He noticed, though, that their chests were heaving. He was barely tired.

A voice said from the dark wall: "He can run, man, but he slow in the clinch."

"He strong."

The dogs were wary now, keeping their distance, very intelligently using their superior maneuverability to worry him. Every few moments there would be another excruciating pinch and another wound. If this kept up, they would slowly tear him to pieces. When they came close, he would try to bite them, but he inevitably missed.

It was not long before their circle had tightened. They were crouching low, their heads against the ground, their hindquarters in the air, tails flying. He had a dozen wounds. Between them they shared perhaps four, only one of them serious enough to reduce the victim's efficiency.

He shook his head to get the blur of blood out of his right eye. His muzzle reeked with his own blood when he inhaled, and he seemed almost to be floating. The battle went far away.

Instantly they leaped at him, biting wildly. They were going to eat him alive, to tear him apart. He screamed in agony as teeth dug into him.

Wolf: the gleam of the careful tooth, the mind calm in the mayhem, calculating a death blow and then the snick of the jaw, a shocking flash as the tooth passes through flesh and a dog howls its last, its bowels splashing from the hole Bob had made.

Wolf: leaping on the back of a squirming dog, gobbling at his bones, gnashing down on the gristle, feeling tooth slide against backbone, tasting the soft sweetness of the spinal bundle. Another one dead.

Then the wolf stopped, scented the air, tossed his head to clean his ears of the wild screaming, the thundering drum, to clear his eyes of the flicker of the torches. Two dogs remained, one dragging a leg and constantly shaking its head, the other shrinking against the far wall.

He had a vision, and he knew that he could make the vision true. Quickly he trotted to the near side of the courtyard. Between here and the back wall there was a twenty-yard run. He tossed his head and catapulted forward, a bullet of glowing fur. His legs carried him, took him upward, soaring, flying in the screams of the crowd and one scream in particular: "Bob, Bob, Bob!"

Cindy was in the courtyard. The vet was behind her, his face flushed. Beyond her was Monica, angular in the light cast from the building. He glimpsed Kevin, too, his beloved son!

Bob's claws reached the top edge of the wall. He pushed, the timing perfect, and cast himself up onto the scree of glass shards embedded in the concrete. Below him there was an alley, and in that alley a panic-stricken crowd was falling wildly over itself in its urgency to get away. A shot exploded, a blue, blinding flash, a rush of hot air, a stink of powder and hot oil.

Bob learned forever the smell of a gun.

Then they were gone, all of them, the doctor, the mama-san, the worshipers at the altar of the game.

"Bob, Bob, come down. You can come home now, honey. We'll take good care of you."

It was hopeless. There would be no peace at home, not with the press blitz that was probably breaking on the eleven o'clock news just about now.

Atavisms would be brought up in the marginal people; there would be men with high-powered rifles, poisoners, trappers, and of course O'Neill and his lawyers.

But there would be Cindy and Kevin, and the chance to be a little bit human in the privacy of their home.

"Bob, please."

He hesitated, drawn by the night and the freedom, and by the soft, familiar scent of his wife. The moon paced the clouds, the wolf paced the high wall.

"I'll get the dart gun," the vet said softly. Hearing that, the wolf won.

Bob leaped off into the wild, free night.

Chapter Eleven

WHEN HE DISAPPEARED OVER THE WALL, CINDY BRACED for another shot. Instead there came the high-pitched screams of the voodoo worshipers still in the alley, who cared not at all to have their wolf-god join them.

Rage broke in Cindy like a bloody foam of waves. She ran her fingers in her hair and shrieked. "Shut up," Monica bellowed. "Pull yourself together."

"He's going to get killed!"

"Ma'am, we'll get him back."

"You were using him, you were treating my husband worse than I'd treat an animal. You're vicious, inhuman *monsters*! I swear, if he dies I will come back and I will kill you one by one!"

The vet's mouth had dropped open. The word "husband" formed and died silently on his lips. Then a glance askance at Monica.

Cindy roared on. "I know what you're thinking, you bastard. You're thinking I'm crazy. You're hoping I am. But I am not crazy and I have a superb lawyer, and you and the city and the ASPCA are going to suffer for this! Your career is over, buddy, dead and in the dirt. And as for this bunch of cigar-chomping weirdos—look at them, you ought to be ashamed, for Chrissake—you talk about cruelty to animals, my God, you oughta be closed down!"

Cindy's words flashed into a silence. Even the dogs quieted down. The voodoo practitioners who had been in the windows were creeping away. As for the vet, he had gone to attention. "Yes, ma'am," he said in a voice he had probably learned during military days, "there have been irregularities. They'll be corrected at once, ma'am!"

Cindy laughed, harsh and derisive. "I don't care about your irregularities." Now her voice rose to a cutting quaver. "I want my Bob back, and I want him back alive!"

"Bob? Is that the wolf's name, ma'am?"

"Yes, of course it's his name. Bob Duke."

"He responds to the name Bob Duke?" The vet's face was now impassive, very carefully so. He definitely scented craziness, perhaps even amusing craziness, but this lady was so mad he couldn't risk the smallest sign of mirth. She was going to be complaining loud and clear, and the voodoo ritual was going to be very difficult to explain to the board of directors.

For the first time Cindy saw the reporters, who had flowed out into the courtyard and were now trying to scale the wall. Realizing it was hopeless, one astute camera team came thundering back through the pound itself, camcorders swinging. "Fan out," shrieked a tiny man in a Hawaiian shirt, his face purple, the veins in his temples pulsing like fire hoses.

"Who are these people?" Cindy asked.

The vet brightened. He was looking forward to being on TV. WCBS and Channel 5 had already interviewed him. "The media—"

"You're kidding!"

"No, this is big news. I'm sure I can get them interested in talking to you, too. They don't just want expert opinion. Human interest has a place, too."

Monica grabbed Cindy's arm. "Let's get out."

As they left the building police cars started roaring up, their sirens wailing, their lights jumping red against the dun girders supporting the elevated part of FDR Drive. Radios spattered codes, uniformed men jumped from the cars and sprinted off down the street. A van disgorged a SWAT team decked in full body armor and carrying 12-gauge riot guns. "They'll kill him," Cindy moaned.

"Come on, Cyn, let's find a cab. We've got to get out of here. We need the media like a hole in the head."

Outside of the vicinity of the pound, the streets were gray and lonely. "What will he eat?"

"He'll find what he can. Bob's a resourceful man."

"Oh, he is not! He's about as resourceful as— as—" She stopped, considered. "A three-year-old would be more resourceful!" Her poor husband, he couldn't camp out, couldn't even hike without getting hopelessly lost. Even around the house he was a disaster. "Last week he glued himself to the dishwasher with Krazy Glue trying to fix a knob. When I found him, he'd been there for two hours. The phone was within easy reach the whole time. He knew where I was, but it never occurred to him to call me. Do you think the man who did that can survive alone on the streets with no money, with no clothes, with no hands, with no way even to talk to people?"

"He'll hunt, he has the capacities of a wolf."

"Bob Duke will hunt. I've been hunting with him, so have you. He'll starve and he'll get wet and cold and confused and make mistakes. Meanwhile every man, woman, and child with so much as an air rifle is going to be hunting *him!*" She stared up and down the street. "Bob," she called, "Bob!" A camera

crew began running toward them.

"Uh-oh, we're recognized," Monica said. "Let's get a move on."

Just then the vet burst out of the pound, his white coat flying. "*Live at Five, Live at Five*, they want us all on *Live at Five*!"

A cab rolled around the corner. Monica waved at it even though it was occupied. "I am doctor," she hollered, "matter of life or death." The driver gunned the motor, a New Yorker's seasoned instinct to get away, but he lost the light and a line of cars coming off the FDR Drive prevented him from running it. As Monica and Cindy crowded in with the surprised passenger the driver hit his steering wheel with the heel of his hand.

"Sorry," Monica said to the passenger, "gotta take a little detour. This woman is having a heart attack." The driver turned around. "Listen, bitch, I gotta fare."

"This woman is dying. Now step on it."

"I don't give a damn who's dying." He produced a baseball bat. "You get out of here."

"The hell we will. You don't do exactly as I say, I'll haul you up on charges."

"Taxi commission, taxi commission, I've heard that shit a thousand times. Lady, you get out of this cab or I'll beat your goddamn brains from here to Scarsdale, now move!"

It was obvious to Cindy that Monica couldn't handle this. She took over. "We're not talking commission, gorp-face, we're talking five years in jail for uncooperative manslaughter. Five years, and you *will* serve that time! We will not stop, Mr. Czlywcz, until you are in jail and the key is thrown the hell away. You see those cops over there? If you don't help us, I am going to scream, and when I scream, those cops are coming over here, and they will see your baseball bat—"

He threw it out the window. It clanged on the street and rolled into the gutter. "Step on it," Cindy said.

"I get out," blurted the passenger, a stunned Japanese businessman. He leaped from the cab just as the light changed.

"Kill the meter," Cindy commanded. "We'll make it worth your while. Monica, give the man ten bucks. Take us to Mercer and West Fourth."

The driver became happy now that he had the ten. "God knows what'll happen to that Jap." He laughed. "From here he'll have to swim down to the UN Plaza if he doesn't want to walk."

For a time they rode in silence. The driver was studying Cindy through the rearview mirror, his eyes twinkling. "Look, no offense, but I want to know something. Do you ladies always pull this routine? I mean, every time you want a cab? Or what?"

"Every time we want a cab," Cindy growled.

"Jesus, I been hackin' twenty years and I never seen shit like that. I mean, you gotta admire shit like that!"

"Step on it."

As the cab pulled up to her building Cindy saw a crowd lurking around the entrance, their silhouettes dark against the glow from within.

As they exited the cab a klieg burst on, and Cindy found herself confronting a bright impenetrable wall. A familiar TV face came into view. A microphone was thrust at her. "Dr. Wilcox at the ASPCA says Bob is one of the largest wolves on record, and the largest ever held in captivity. Can you tell us where you got this wolf?"

Cindy heard him, but she was totally unprepared to answer. Her mouth was so dry it tasted like a cedar closet. She learned, in that moment, the true meaning of the term "tongue-tied." What could she say? The camera eye gleamed, moths fluttered in the hissing lights. Sweat beaded up through the reporter's makeup.

"Cut a minute, Jake. Look, Mrs. Duke, we're going to find out one way or another. We're going to find out everything."

"My God, help me," a male voice screamed off in the dark. Instinctively, Cindy whirled. Flashbulbs popped, somebody scuttled off.

"Don't worry about that," the reporter said, "it's just the *Post* going for a reaction shot. You and Bob are their front page tomorrow."

Cindy rocked back on her heels. Front page! All it meant to her was Bob's body, full of bullet holes, being held up by a proud SWAT team. "How long have you had the wolf?"

"A day," she finally managed to answer. "We found him on the street. He was hungry and alone and he needed help. He's such a gentle creature—"

"You found him on the street? Where?" What had she said before? Was it Fifth Avenue? She couldn't remember. She'd be vague. "Uptown. On a comer. He's so gentle and sweet, so tame. I'm just terrified that—" Her chest ached, her throat all but closed. She looked at the camera, and for an instant she was looking into a million faces. They were not hard faces, they were faces of ordinary people, watching her blankly. Right now they were

impassive, but at a word from the reporter they were all going to turn into cavemen. "Please don't hurt him. Don't hurt my Bob." She could not go on. Before that savage crowd she felt so weak, so helpless, all of her bravado collapsed and she buried her face in her hands and gave way to tears.

"This is Cynthia Duke, ladies and gentlemen, the distraught owner of the giant savage wolf that is now roaming the streets of New York. Again, police have urged that people stay indoors, that any and all suspicious-looking stray dogs be reported at once. Remember, this animal is fast moving, intelligent, and savage. It has already seriously injured one of the Dukes' neighbors. You could be next. John Lye, Newswatch Five."

Monica dragged Cindy through the hectoring crowd. Cameras were flashing, microphones were being jammed into their faces, questions were being shouted. The sheer energy of it all dulled Cindy, so when Lupe silently handed her an envelope in the elevator, she took it without even much curiosity.

She was still holding it when she put her key in the front door. No sooner had she done that than the door flew open and Kevin leaped into her arms. "It was on the newsbreak, Mama. They're saying we had a dangerous wolf and it's on the loose."

She groaned, hugging him to her. There might have been things she could say to her son that would comfort him, but she could not think of them. It helped her to hold him, and she trusted that it helped him to be held.

They went arm in arm into the living room, Monica following behind. The television glared at Cindy, a sheer gray eye. "Turn it on," she said.

"Don't you think perhaps you'd better not?"

"Turn it on, Monica, it's nearly eleven. We don't want to miss the news."

"Cyn, I'll tape it and you can look at it in the morning."

Cindy went over and turned it on. She sat down and crossed her legs, staring blindly at the last few minutes of *Thirtysomething*. The envelope lay on her lap. She looked down. The return address was Weisel and Dobson. The landlords. She opened it. Legal papers. She read with quickening interest. "We regret to inform you that under paragraphs 14 and 23 of your lease we are compelled to initiate summary eviction proceedings against you. We were willing to negotiate with you about the matter of nonpayment of rent, but this harboring of a dangerous animal in total disregard of the safety of your neighbors has led us to respond to the dozens of complaints we have received, and ask you to leave."

"God, they're prompt. Monica, I'm being thrown out."

"Give me that." She snatched it away from Kevin, who had grabbed it from his mother. He was white, his eyes following the paper as if it was a cobra ready to spit. Kevin had never known a home other than this. The room where he had grown up was filled with his things, his books, his art, his stamp collection, his coin collection, his computer, his very secret collection of girlie magazines. "I wish Dad would come home."

"This is outrageous. They can't do this. Why haven't you paid your rent?"

"We're dead broke, Monica."

"You're kidding. I thought Bob was doing so well."

"He hasn't made a dime in months. I thought you knew that. I assumed you did."

"He never mentioned financial problems."

"Well, he sure as hell had them."

Monica regarded Cindy and Kevin with tenderness. "I don't have any big answers, Cyn, but at least I can help you with money."

"I don't like to ask."

"No, that isn't your way. Bob married you because he was attracted to your strength."

"I'm too damn strong! I drive people away. I scare men to death." She did not add what she thought, that she only scared the strong ones. The weak came to stay.

"Don't worry about that now. I'm going to write you a check, Cindy. How much money do you actually have?"

"What's in my wallet. Eight dollars, plus three Bob gave me yesterday. That's somewhere in the bedroom."

"I have twelve dollars in my box," Kevin said.

"But what assets? What can you draw on?"

"Nothing, unless you consider the furniture."

"You're kidding."

Don't get defensive, Cindy cautioned herself. She's your good friend. "We don't have a thing."

"I can lend you five thousand dollars, Cyn. I wish it could be more."

"I haven't seen that much money in months." Just then the news started. Cindy turned up the sound, and they all watched the story of the wolf unfold. It was the lead item, preceding the president's operation and the crash of a commuter plane on Long Island. There were terrible, lurid pictures of Bob

glaring into the camera, his face lighted to look menacing. To see him made Cindy groan aloud. What was it like to *be* that? What was the poor man thinking, what hell was he going through?

They talked about the "enormous, very dangerous animal." An "expert" named Dr. Bert Choate from the Fish and Game Commission appeared and warned the public that while wolves were normally not particularly dangerous to man, in an unusual situation like this, "anything can happen." He leaned into the camera. "This animal is frightened and alone. It feels cornered. The first chance it gets, it will lash out. And believe me, I've seen what a wild animal can do. Its teeth are a razor-sharp weapon. And it's so skilled at using them, it can catch a floating hair out of the air and split it."

Then came Cindy. The camera made her coarse and heavy of face, her skin glue white, her eyes dark, sunken holes. She looked like an inmate in a fluorescent nightmare. "How did they do that? John Lye looks great."

"It's the lighting. They're trying to portray you as evil and callous."

She was seen in her initial anger. When she said Bob was gentle, Lye smiled ironically. Rather than show her weeping, they cut to a shot of Bob standing on the examining table, glaring at the camera with what Cindy knew was almost total confusion.

"The wolf lady says she found the animal on a street comer right here in Manhattan. Who knows where she actually got it? Given its tremendous size, experts at the Zoological Society theorize that it may be a wild wolf from the Soviet Union."

Then they went on to other stories. Cindy was amazed. She had come across looking like an ogre, vicious, hateful, uncaring. She wanted to throw something through the TV. If she'd been able to get her hands on Rivera, she would have turned him inside out.

Monica handed her the check. "Thanks," she said. She knew it would be gone tomorrow noon. Four thousand rent, five hundred to her loudest creditors, five hundred for food to keep her and Kevin for the next few weeks. Rent or no rent, she'd probably get evicted anyway.

After the news Monica went home, pleading exhaustion. Soon Kevin nodded off on the couch. She tried to smooth his fists, to somehow make the terror leave his exhausted body. She kissed him. Now came the time she had really been dreading. The apartment was empty and there was no one to help her.

Her mind went to thoughts of Bob, out there alone, disfigured, confused,

chased. "God make him come home." Her voice filled the room with brief, helpless sound. Seeing herself in the mirror, a slumped shadow, she felt very small. She had been yelling at people, making demands, cursing, for hours and hours—in fact, ever since Bob had his problem. What good had it done?

She went into her bedroom and threw herself down on their bed. Her mind kept running images of him hurrying along streets, him hit by a car, him shot. She saw that big, furry head, those eyes, and she thought she was going to be sick to her stomach. "Where is he? Bob, where are you!"

She turned over on her back, stared at the ceiling. Obviously she had been too hard on him, making demands that he couldn't possibly meet. Bob was a poet. His business ability was nil; he couldn't even remember to put bus fare in his pocket when he went out. Anybody could sell him anything. When he was a broker he was always getting stuck with the customers the other brokers didn't want to bother with, the idiots, the dead-beats, the complainers. He would be ceaselessly patient with them, and was always ready to overlook their faults. Naturally he didn't make a penny brokering. But he spent anyway. Bob didn't understand the concept of credit. He looked upon loans as presents from banks grateful for his custom. Checks were simply a means to an end, usually a means to getting rid of creditors for a few more days—until the checks bounced and it was time to write new ones.

She turned on the light. There was a copy of *Travel and Leisure* at her bedside, and a library book she had been enjoying enormously, Doris Grumbach's *The Ladies*.

She stretched. "Oh, Bob." She did not miss him physically, although they were often intimate.

Love was more central to their relationship than sex. She seduced Bob whenever the mood struck her. It was always easy. She wanted to do it now.

What a good talker he was. His wit was dry, sardonic, and he had brought a wonderful deadpan humor from Texas. His lies could be completely convincing, and if you believed them, you were in peril of the surreal. Once he had made a brilliant case for eggs separating back out of brownies if they were cooked too fast, and had gone so far as to slip an egg into a pan of brownies she was baking. She had found it, perfectly poached, in the middle of the pan and had told the story in all seriousness for years. People were polite. They generally didn't comment, thinking that she was perhaps a little odd.

She laughed aloud, remembering how many times she'd told that story.

Monica had finally stopped her and made her think. "It's scientifically impossible, Cyn. The physics just aren't there. It can't happen."

"But it did happen. I saw the egg—oh, my God, Bob, you creep!"

Her heart raced when she heard gentle tapping at the bedroom window. "Bob!" But no, it was not him, miraculously having climbed the six stories of sheer wall. A thin rain had started, and she watched it blowing in clouds around the streetlight. It was very late, and no cars passed. A man hurried along, the collar of his raincoat pulled up, a hat down over his eyes. The night sky glowed pink, flaring from the city lights. When she opened the window she felt a cold clamminess in the air. Autumn was definitely here, with its long, gray rains.

If he had any sense at all, he would come home.

Suddenly she thought again of being evicted. Even if she paid, they might get her on the animal angle. Then where would Bob go? He would have no way of finding her and Kevin. They might never see each other again. "Bob," she whispered, her word making a faint haze on the window glass.

Then she saw him. He was trotting right up the sidewalk, his tail between his legs. He stopped, stared at the building, then hurried on. The fool! Didn't he recognize the place? She threw open the window. "Bob! Bob!" There was no time to waste. With what seemed the slowness of nightmare she dragged on a pair of jeans, tore her nightshirt from her body, and pulled on a sweater. Still in her slippers, she ran across the apartment and out the door. There was no time to wait for the elevator. Lupe was off duty and she couldn't run it well. She'd spend five minutes just getting it to stop close enough to the lobby floor to enable the doors to open.

She rushed into the green, echoing fire stairs with their perpetual faint tang of incinerator smoke and took the steps three at a time. The lobby was unattended at this hour, the front door inaccessible from outside without a key. As she raced through it she hit her pocket, confirming the presence of the keychain. Good girl, you did that right.

The street was as quiet and empty as a closet in an abandoned house. She looked up, down, past the row of trees, beyond the swirling mist. The dank cold sank through her sweater. "Bob," she shouted. Her voice echoed against the blank face of the high rise across the street, which responded with a faltering echo of her cry.

Then she saw movement among the parked cars at the far end of the block. She took off, running for all she was worth, her arms flailing, her feet

slapping the wet pavement. There was a thickening of shadow under a BMW parked at the curb. She leaned down. When she did she jostled the car, and its antitheft siren promptly began to warble. "Damn!"

The shadow under the car darted out into the street. It slid across the pavement and halted. The creature stood on the far sidewalk looking over its shoulder. Cindy held out her hands. "Honey, it's me." She could see him twitch his nose, and had the awful thought that even his mind might have been dissolved into the animal form. Maybe he was just and only a wolf now, here in obedience to an urge he no longer understood.

She went between the two cars, ignoring the outraged shouts coming from windows on both sides of the street. If people didn't like car sirens, they could damn well get earplugs. Manhattan is the world car-siren capital. Moving slowly, her hands open before her, she progressed toward the wary animal, which backed off as she came closer. "Bob, Bob ..."

It was a matted creature, wet and bedraggled, just like Bob would be. "Bob?"

She was almost close enough to touch him now. He put his ears back. His eyes were teared pools, swimming with fear.

For an instant her hand came into contact with his head. He crouched, drawing back, baring his teeth. Then, with a flash of his tail, he turned and dashed off.

She started to run after him, but the rain was getting harder and she was freezing cold, and she knew she could not catch him.

For a time she stood watching the dark. Then the siren wound down and the street returned to its quiet. Had it been Bob, or just another stray? Unable even to hazard a guess, she turned and went home. She slept the worried sleep of the lost.

Chapter Twelve

BOB HAD LEAPED ACROSS THE SCATTERING CROWD INTO the alley. There came an animal shriek when his fall broke against the back of one of the spectators, the one with the gun. The man never got the second shot he'd been trying for. Instead he threw his gun aside, bellowing in agony. Dark red trenches appeared in his back where Bob had accidentally dragged his claws. The man crumpled.

Bob ran the other way, soon coming to a fence at the end of the alley, cinder blocks topped by three feet of Cyclone. He raised himself up. Beyond were gardens, a pretty decorative landscape surrounding the lobby of an expensive apartment building. He climbed to the top of the fence, carefully putting one paw above the other, forcing himself to remember to control his body. Along the ground it could go like a glider, but it was not structured for acrobatics.

Behind him there was a loud cry of alarm. He saw two uniformed men sprinting toward him, heard their quick breathing, heard the clink and rustle as they withdrew their guns from their holsters.

Then they stopped. They were bracing to fire.

One paw up, then another, then the first again. He reached the top of the fence.

A click resounded in the silence. Bob knew that it was the hammer of a pistol being cocked. Then another click, and another. Bob scabbled at the far side of the fence, seeking purchase. A shot thundered, then more shots. Hot wind passed him. One of them brought searing heat to his thigh. With all of his strength he launched himself into the darkness. He fell hard into a flower bed. The cops behind him reached the wall and started scaling it. "We got 'im now," one of them said. "That garden's not open to the street."

Hearing that, Bob almost despaired. His impulse was to lie down, to curl his tail in against his body and close his eyes. Then he saw a glass door that led into the lobby. Bob ran to it—the damned thing pushed out, not in. A thud followed by the whoosh of breath and a curse indicated that one of the cops was already over the wall. Bob worked at the door with the claws of his right paw—claws, he noticed, that had a lot of blood on them. He had hurt that poor man in the alley terribly.

"Holy shit, that thing is *smart!*"

Bob got the door open enough to slip through. He dashed across the slick marble floor, his claws ringing, then silent when he reached a huge Kerman rug. "Good heavens," a doorman in dark blue livery cried. "Oh Lord." He grabbed a telephone as Bob rushed out into the street. He trotted down the curved driveway, then broke into a run again, dashing toward First Avenue. He knew that Carl Shurz Park wasn't far away, but it was too small to hide him. His objective was Central Park. He could crawl down into the brushy part of the Ramble and hide, and nurse this throbbing thigh. He hoped that it wasn't just adrenaline driving him, and that there was only a graze wound.

Ahead of him another police car sped into view. It screeched to a halt at the corner of First. The doors flew open and five cops leaped out for all the world like clowns coming from a circus car. Deadly clowns, though. He could see the somber gleam of the streetlights on their pistols.

He was not a man of action. It took him time to figure out how to deal with situations like this. He kept trying to talk. Explanations clogged his mind. "Excuse me, I've had a slight accident. . . Pardon me, but I'm not nearly as dangerous as I look. . . Ah, the police at last! Could you return me to my home?" To a listener, though, his most civilized, reasonable words sounded like chilling snarls. A repertoire of barks, growls, whines, and howls was totally inadequate to the delicate clarifications his predicament demanded. And that last human vestige, the scream, didn't help a bit. It drove the ignorant to blind panic, and made even decent people vicious.

The wolf, the traditional monster, was on the loose. To live through this. Bob was going to have to concentrate completely on the situation at hand. He could not wonder at the evil miracle that had afflicted him. Right now he had to put a line of cars between himself and those police pistols. The cops would blow his heart out if they could, and mount his head on the wall of their precinct house.

Behind him an entire SWAT team appeared in the street, all running like maniacs, waving shotguns, tear-gas grenades and pistols. Regular cops were closing off the intersection ahead. He'd have to rush somebody, and he chose the street cops. On them he smelled at least a little fear. The members of the SWAT team had an unpromisingly solid odor: sour beer, gunpowder, steel. They weren't even nervous.

For all his soul was worth, he ran. The air roared around him, his ears swept back, his dewlaps parted, and wind rushed coldly past his tongue. It was exhilarating, it was like flying— right into the barrels of five pistols.

Just then, though, there was an intervention: a stocky man burst out of a building ahead. He was carrying an aged 30-30 rifle and wearing a blue bathrobe. His slippers plopped as he ran, his glasses danced on his face. "He's mine," he screamed, "he's goddamn mine!"

Bob passed right between the churning legs and the man went up into the air, his gun describing the arc of a windmill. The man hit with a soft, painful crunch. Then the rifle struck the ground and went off, its report cracking the air, the bullet ricocheting off a wall. "Goddammit, move your fat ass," one of the cops yelled.

It was like flying, or being a ghost, and Bob knew where all the flying dreams come from, those escapes of the night when we leap the houses and the fields: they come from the past, when we could truly run.

"Move! Move! Move!"

The cops were in trouble, their guns glaring straight into Bob's face, unable to shoot because of the civilian still floundering around behind him. He rushed the cops and this time his bark worked. It worked fine: it was a thunderous, primitive bark. As a wolf he was neither clumsy nor timid.

Their faces folded and twisted, they turned away as if from something loathsome, they began to scramble back into their car. Whining, one of them worked a back window, slammed the door, pounded the lock with the heel of his hand.

Bob jumped upon the sloping shoulders of another of them and launched himself straight up like a rocket. Below him the man slammed into the ground. Bob soared up and up, glimpsing into second-story windows before he came crashing down onto the top of the car, denting it deeply.

Another jump took him to the street behind the police car. He ran full speed down the middle of First Avenue. Traffic was heavy and slow, and he found he could keep up easily. This body could run, could lope, could leap. He could not dislike it anymore, not after the past few minutes. He'd never been much of a physical specimen, not before now. This was quite wonderful! He had gotten past those cops beautifully. He was excited, elated—and then coughing, shocked by how strong the fumes of the cars smelled.

At Ninetieth Street he made a turn and trotted up the dark sidewalk. He was breathing harder, but despite his wound there was still plenty of run in him. He lolled his tongue and breathed across it fast, moving the air and spreading delightful little tendrils of coolness through his entire body. This is panting, he thought. This is how it feels to pant.

Had he been able to laugh, he would have laughed with the wonder of this new body and the exhilaration of his escape. All he did was toss his head and pull back his rather immobile lips. He did not make a sound.

A car slowed. Pale faces peered from behind rising windows. Excitement sparkled in their eyes, but when he met them they glazed with fear. The car sped off, its occupants silent, haunted. No doubt they would stop at the nearest phone to call in their sighting.

His excitement was fading. The thought of the whole mechanism of the city hunting him down was depressing in the extreme. He moved on, now slinking through fine mist. Stray dogs always seemed to huddle close to the buildings, and as he walked he felt the same vulnerability that they must. A moving shadow startled him and he dove down under the stoop of a grand old brownstone. Beyond the kitchen window he saw a woman in a silk dress and a Kenneth hairstyle talking to a maid who carried a tray of canapes. From farther up in the house there came a spill of laughing talk. How Bob would have liked to be in there among them, drinking and snacking, ready to sit down to a beautiful dinner. Smells assaulted him. They were as powerful as actual blows, these explosions of roasting duck and braising celery, of smooth, thick goose liver and saline, marine caviar. Also, he smelled wine, and the comfortable odors of bourbon and gin and whiskey, of vodka.

He leaned against the iron basement door, moaning to himself, dreaming of a nice little glass of Stoly, frosty cold from the freezer, freezing the throat and warming the heart. Then he would take a caviar canape like Communion, and when it was time for the duck, he would get a breast piquant with sauce, covered with dark, crackling skin, and he would wash it down with glass after glass of Chateau Latour '69.

There was a garbage can *off* in a dark corner of the understairs. It had a sticky, old-food odor. He went over, sniffed more carefully. There was bread in there among the rancidities, the old butter, the greasy gravy, the wet cigarette butts. He nosed the top of the can. Stuck tight. He pushed again. Angry frustration made him whine. This was just hell, this whole thing, and being without hands was a special hell! He stared at the can. Just like a hungry dog, he was drooling.

He made a loud sound and was astonished at himself. The whine had built into a yap. If he expected to survive much longer, he was going to have to get into control of his own noises.

His stomach tormented him with muscular heaves. Was it eating itself? He

trembled. Was this how dogs felt when they were hungry? If so, food was an awful lot more important to them than it was to humans. Dogs weren't slaves to men at all; they were slaves to regular meals. There was really only one choice: he was going to have to knock the garbage can over and hope the lid flew off.

He shouldered it, which had an effect far greater than he had intended. The can seemed to leap from the floor. It smashed against the door with a ringing crash and a fountain of garbage flowed out. Another thing Bob needed to do was get used to his own strength. He had to find the measure of himself, but not now, not when he was standing amid coffee grounds, butts, rotten fruit, bread soaked in vinegar, soy sauce, and sour milk, and a bag of Almost Home peanut-butter-chip cookies that had somehow gotten covered with what smelled like liquid Wisk. Was this to be dinner?

Then he noticed the cold cuts. There were slices of Hungarian salami with little spots of white mold on them: these he gobbled up, chewing slowly, letting the rich saltiness fill his muzzle, closing his eyes with delight. The presence of the food in his mouth banished all reserve. Now he gobbled wet bread, tore into the cookies and damn the Wisk, ate some mushy grapes and a piece of fiercely hard Parmesan slopped in peach yogurt.

It was while he was breaking up the Parmesan with his powerful jaws that he noticed that the lights had come on and the door was open. The elegant woman stood there. "Oh, Mary, a goddamn dog has broken into the garbage." She stamped her foot. "Tell Jake to get down here and get it cleaned up. Honestly, I'm going to have to get a lock for that can."

Bob was backing away when he heard quick footsteps in the street behind him. He had lingered too long on this block. He should have run like a maniac the moment that carload of people recognized him. But the food ... he was so hungry he wasn't thinking straight.

The woman waved her hands at him, shouted "shoo, shoo!" A man in blue workclothes came hurrying out of the house. "Jake, I want this cleaned up, and I want poison put out from now on."

"Yes, ma'am."

"This neighborhood is overrun. I don't know— what in the world?"

Two cops were running up the street. The homeowner shrank back into her kitchen. The cops stopped when they saw Bob, who was still at tempting a retreat to the sidewalk. He was trapped between the police and the woman. He did not like the feeling of being trapped, did not like it at all. A surge of

raw terror coursed through him.

He turned away from the cops—into the sight of the iron understair door being pulled closed. Without even thinking about it, he dashed through that door into the hallway. The elegant woman cursed, Jake blurted an automatic "Sorry, ma'am!" and the two cops came rushing in.

"It's the wolf," one of them yelled. "Take cover!"

You would have thought he was a neutron bomb with four legs and a tail. A glance back revealed the woman, her eyes popping out of her head, Jake cowering behind her, and the two cops, their own faces carnival masks of horror.

If only he could talk! "This is all so silly," he would say. "I'm about the least offensive person you could meet. Ten-year-old muggers practice on me."

At the top of the stairs was a butler's pantry. He went through, hoping that he would find a hallway, but instead he walked into the middle of the party. "I didn't know you had a dog," a woman shrieked.

"I don't," the hostess bleated.

The guns began to follow Bob as he leaped around the room, upended the coffee table, turned over a couch, caused an explosion of ashes out of the fireplace.

Then he saw the street beyond the front window, silent and free. There was no time even to consider. He ran for that window, his feet scrabbling maddeningly on the highly polished floor. Then he leaped, his tail whirling, his paws grabbing air, and sailed out through a cascade of leaded glass. Behind him alarms started clanging. Shapes darted back and forth behind the broken window.

Bob left it all behind, running as fast as he possibly could. For once the police made a slight error; the backup teams came roaring around the corner from Madison. Had they been smart, they would have gone down Fifth, knowing that they would head him off on his way to the park.

He might be able to run like the wind, but his thigh hurt when he did it. Without the anesthesia of desperation, the wound was getting painful.

When he at last reached the park, it took almost all of his remaining strength to leap over the rock wall. He fell down the other side, landing with a soft thud in a mat of moist leaves, and another world.

Suddenly there was silence, there were smells that seemed to penetrate instantly to the core of his soul, smells that he remembered from some

childhood, perhaps his own, perhaps that of the wolf, or all childhood. His body urged him to burrow down into the redolent leaves, but his mind demanded more of him, that he get deeper into the park. He was about at Ninety-second Street: travel due west would soon bring him into the thickest part of the Ramble. He pulled himself to his feet, yelping a little at the spikes of pain that came from his thigh.

Movement in the park was much different from movement on the streets. It was a lot better, a whole lot better. There seemed to be a sort of electricity between his paws and the ground, and the air was tightly packed with odors that he could almost understand.

There came to him the weighted thought that we must have known the world from this perspective before Eden, before we climbed down from the trees. He tossed his head. When he saw them, his heart leaped toward the towers that shone on all four sides of the park. He looked toward the rich far windows of Central Park West and yearned as he had at Kissinger's party for the hiss of luxury.

He was passing the baseball diamonds now and turning in to the Ramble. As he moved he noticed one odor that stood out above all the others and gave him greater alarm than had the police or even the pound employees. It was a musk, deep and tart. What did it mean? Here it rose from a bush, there it covered a patch of browning leaves. He found the bones of a bird and gnawed them, but they were too dry to be of any use. Deep in the Ramble, down in the dark where roots tangled like ropes of distressed muscle, he moved swiftly and silently along. He passed a derelict sleeping under a bench. Then he smelled that odd smell again, so strongly that it stopped his easy slithering through the undergrowth.

He crouched, very still. A cold understanding crept into his mind: this smell was a warning. Other canines were not wanted here. Something had claimed the Ramble as its own.

He knew then that he was being observed, and from very close by. He had blundered into the middle of a pack of some kind, and it did not want him here.

As if in response to his thought, they flooded him with their smell, a straw-blood odor shot with urine and feces. It revolted him, and their dark little eyes revolted him more. Two of them came prancing stiff-legged out of a blackberry thicket.

They bared razor teeth. The eyes with which they regarded him were

astonishingly intelligent. One animal stared him down while the other glanced constantly about, keeping watch. Their ears moved with method back and forth. These wary beings never ceased to test their environment, not for one instant.

They were the size of scrawny sheepdogs and a lot thinner. Their heads were wide and their ears big and pointed, like giant cat ears.

This was no motley pack of stray dogs. As more of them slipped into view Bob found himself stopped by awe and understanding. These were wild animals who made their living off New York City. They were the legendary coydogs of New England, a strong cross between the coyote and the dog, among the smartest animals nature has ever produced.

They were notorious dog murderers. And they obviously did not like big, wheezy wolves too much either. They were wiry little monsters, their faces sharp with hate and hunger. It was clear to Bob that they would kill him if they could. He could locate six of them in the shadows around him. He noticed the bones of a dog scattered about. It had not been a small dog.

He could sense movement all through the dark shrubbery, ahead, to the sides, behind. The only thing that prevented them from attacking him was the locked stare he was giving the leader. If he broke the look first, he was going to be torn to pieces.

Every whisper of fur against leaf, of paw in loam registered in Bob's ears. The breathing of the coydogs sounded like tiny pumps hissing. When he cocked his ears toward the leader, he could hear his heart beating faster and faster. And his scent was changing, rising to greater sharpness. He was a creature cocked, ready to dart like an arrow for the throat of the big, slow animal before him.

There was a frisk of movement just at the corner of Bob's eye, and a high-pitched squeal as one of the coydogs snatched a bat from the air and gobbled it down, the wings fluttering against its chin.

For the edge of an instant, the leader glanced at his companion. It was enough: feeling as clumsy and lethal as a tank, Bob ran at him. The little creature did not expect this. Bob shouldered him aside and took off running as fast as he could toward the lights of the Transverse Parkway.

As he ran one of them dropped down from a tree, its claws spread, growling rage. Bob took it on his back and felt the hot touch of its claws before he managed to scrape it off against an overhanging limb.

Then he was at the reservoir and the coydogs were still with him, slipping

dangerously along nearby. If only he understood this situation, but he did not even begin to: if he had any wolfish instincts at all, they were a vague mental stubble. Bob was no more a part of this secret wild than he was a part of humankind.

Thirst made his tongue feel like a wooden paddle. His nose was tight and he longed to dip his muzzle in clear, fresh water. His hunger made his insides seem like a hollow shell. The feelings were astonishingly intense, much more than they had been before he changed. Even the various diets Cindy had tried out on him had not created burning, passionate hunger like this.

The coydogs attacked as swiftly and silently as Indians attacking a prairie schooner. One moment he was loping along, aware of their odor around him but more or less minding his own business, the next moment he was in the middle of a dusty, snarling, snapping crowd of the vicious little killers.

One of them nipped his belly, and it hurt like a blast from a blowtorch. He screamed his miserable, human scream and rolled, covered with coydogs. A small one wailed as his weight compressed it, but the creature was like rubber, and it was digging its teeth into his neck before he even got to his feet. Dragging five or six of them, he struggled on. If only he could get to the Transverse Parkway, surely the cars would scare them off. A terrific flash of fire exploded in his breast. One of them was lodged just below his chin, his dewlap in its mouth. It shook its head, furiously tearing the meat of his neck.

He went to his foreknees, biting air, flailing and kicking. Now the one on his belly bit down. The heat of it made him scream again. He gnawed the ground, he knew that death had come to him: they were tearing him apart. He was big but he had no idea how to fight them. Involuntarily, he tried to use fists that weren't there anymore.

A few minutes ago he had been congratulating himself on his newfound wolf prowess. Now where was he—being eaten alive by a pack of really skilled killers. They gnawed, they tore, he snapped and thrashed. Soon one of them was going to open an artery or disembowel him. Then this odd traverse would end, here in the night and dirt.

They melted away, disappearing like dreams in morning light.

He stopped growling, stopped his futile snapping, stopped his kicking. Then he heard the rhythmic thudding of human feet. Shakily, he stood up. He was near the reservoir/Through the bushes was the jogging track. A man and a woman came pounding past, Walkmen on their heads, their bodies pouring off odors of sweat and various perfumes. Bob had never been so glad to see

anybody in his life. Gleefully, he followed along behind them. The coydog odor dwindled and soon was gone.

South of the reservoir Bob adopted a long lope. Obviously he couldn't hide in the park. As soon as the joggers disappeared around the far curve of the track, the coydogs would be back.

Bob had decided to go home. If the media wasn't too crazy, maybe he would have some chance. There was no place for him in this world, not as a wolf without instincts, or as a man without the form of a man. Home, though, was different. Cindy and Kevin would care for him and love him, and give him what comforts they could. Of course, if the press was whipping up real hysteria, the apartment could turn out to be a death trap.

He reached the Park Drive and hurried south, his various wounds all demanding attention even as his tough new body kept at its job. The creature he had become was a real survivor, it appeared able to stand a great deal of punishment. But it had an end, he knew that. The beast would fail.

He was down an awfully lonely crack in the world. If he had to die, let it happen at home, in Cindy's arms.

Before he reached the zoo, he moved out onto Fifth Avenue. Zoos were dangerous.

He huddled along the streets, keeping to the shadows cast by parked cars. Seen from his new angle the city was a very different place, menacing, darkly looming, fast and full of surprises. Dogs on these roaring comers must be grateful for their leashes.

Because it is a street devoted to business and not well tenanted at night, he chose to go south along Madison Avenue. As swiftly as he could manage he went through midtown, scrabbling under cars twice as patrols passed. The second police car had four men in it, and a rack of hunting rifles. He had never seen rifles in a police car. The only logical conclusion was that they were a special detail assigned to him.

It was a strange thing indeed not to feel that the law was backing your right to live. He had no rights.

He kept on, reaching the end of Madison and proceeding south on Park. He finally got into his own neighborhood.

Just as he was turning onto Fourth Street, he was spotted. A pretty girl of about eighteen with a shaggy green punk hairdo put her fists to her cheeks and screamed like a thing gone mad when she saw him slide across the sidewalk. "The wolf, the wolf," she cried, and the cry spread.

He rushed along, his tail down, his head low. Maybe he ought to just let them catch them.

The prospect of home kept him going. His mind fixed on that one, single, true place. His place, the place of Robert Duke. He wasn't much of a provider, not much of a success, but there was love there for him.

He rounded a familiar corner. Even the graffiti was familiar, that and the black plastic bags neatly stacked for tomorrow's garbage pickup, the line of five ginkgo trees, the ironwork in front of his own building with the newspaper machines chained to it.

He looked up. His windows were lighted. Lupe would be off by now. Maybe he could break down the glass door and get into the lobby, somehow punch the buzzer, somehow call the elevator. Or, Cindy might come out. Once, twice he paced the block. He'd hide under a car until—

He saw her. His soul, his blood, yearned toward that silhouette in the sixth-floor window. She stiffened, leaned forward. He cocked his ears. Just barely, he could hear her saying something. But the window was closed and he could not make out the words.

Then the silhouette disappeared. Bob moved away from the building and crouched under a car.

It was from that vantage point that he saw the headlines on the *Post*. It was a red-banner extra, and it said:

**KILLER WOLF STALKS CITY
POLICE WARN: IT'S A FREAK**

What he could read of the story described him as a giant, marauding wolf so dangerous that he was to be shot on sight.

It sickened his heart. This was just the sort of thing he had feared. He wasn't going to be safe anywhere in this city, not even at home. Perhaps especially not there.

Then Cindy appeared, hobbling along in a single slipper, her hair a mess, her robe flapping in the wind. "Bob," she called. Her voice was music.

Sadly, he remained hidden. When he could, he slipped away from her, moving quickly under parked cars.

She called and called, her voice echoing in the street. Her tone agonized him. She was suffering so terribly. He wished he could take her in his arms and kiss her, and bring her some measure of comfort.

He hadn't really thought of where he would go. His only destination was away from here. Cindy's cries grew long with despair. They followed him

down the streets, catching him, driving him deep into sorrow. He'd been a fool to try this, to subject them both to this anguish. He made his way west through the intricate and hidden streets of the Village.

It was a long time before he lost her in the silent streets. Then he was as far west as you can go, standing on a ruined pier. Before him was the black, muttering Hudson, wide and swift and cold.

Chapter Thirteen

SHE'D BEEN LOOKING OUT THE FRONT WINDOW, WATCHING the grim, blowing mist when she saw his shadow dart out from under a car. For an instant their eyes met and her heart thrilled. "Bob," she said, "Bob!"

She ran down to the sidewalk in her robe and slippers, but when she arrived he wasn't there. She also saw the *Post* in its machine, was drawn to its cruel, lurid headline.

Her hands shaking so badly she could barely manage to put the coins in the slot, Cindy bought a copy.

She stood there, stunned, staring at the picture of Bob. Blown up to cover half of the front page, even his wolf face communicated the gentleness of his soul. This was despite the fact that an airbrush had been used to make his teeth look larger and sharper and to heighten the gleam in his eyes.

She knew him well enough to see how lost and sad he was. Slowly, reading the story, she sat down on the curb. When she turned to page two, she stifled a scream. Her skin prickled. There was a photograph of her stepping out of a cab, her face pinched, her eyes glaring. WOLF LADY TERRIFIES CITY said the headline above the picture. Below it was a garbled version of her lie about finding Bob on a street corner. She was portrayed as unwilling to meet the police and the press halfway. She was pilloried.

The silent buildings seemed to frown down on her. People do not like to be frightened. They distrust the wild, and she had unleashed it in their midst. "God help us," she whispered.

Then she thought she saw a flash of Bob in the distance. Her paper under her arm, she set off after the shadow. But by the time she reached the corner he was gone again. "Bob! Bob!" There was no answer, no movement in the silent street.

A nobility of love possessed her. "I'm going to find you!"

She looked up at the blowing, cold sky, at the low, pregnant clouds. "*What did you do to him!* Answer me! God, you answer me! I know you're there, you can't hide anymore, not after what you've done. Answer me, damn you! Don't you dare keep silent, you haven't got the right!" She broke down completely, right out in the middle of the empty sidewalk, weeping bitterly, her paper fluttering down, a crowd of white bat pages around her feet. "God, don't turn out to be a creep. I will sacrifice my life if you will change him

back."

She hurried off after him, calling his name again and again, seeking him through the streets. Once or twice she glimpsed a shadow. That was all.

She did not notice that a car had stopped near the sidewalk, nor that a big, expressionless man had gotten out. He put his hand on her shoulder. She looked up, startled, into a face that was very disturbing. There was a red scar running up his tan, hollow cheek. His lips were cruel, his eyes tiny and black and thick with sin. Slowly, sensuously, his hand came up her cheek, tickling her, and something sparked in the black eyes. "May I help you?" he asked.

She turned away from him, wishing she was closer to home. She could imagine his mayhem, the ripping, the snarls: this was a violent man.

"You're the wolf lady," he continued, his voice soft. "I know you from the TV. I've been looking for you. I can give you some help."

His words seemed to penetrate as if from a great distance, words of fate and solace coming from this huge, horrible creature. She had expected rape in the small hours. Instead a weighty, careful finger slipped along the line of her tears, and she saw that the eyes were not cruel at all, or at least not all the time. For a moment they became merry, and he was a great benevolent elf. Then what she now recognized as an expression of fundamental anger returned. "I am Joe Running Fox," he said. "I know a little bit about the old ways." He glanced again at her, as if willing her to accept him. When he continued, his voice had acquired a tone of pornography. "There was once something called shape-shifting, that medicine people could do. A long time ago. They lost their power when we were thrown out of our land."

"Are you going to hurt me?" How little she sounded, a whining girl.

Tired air rattled through old lungs. He closed his eyes. "I'm an ugly cuss but I never hurt nobody. I have some medicine in me, the old-time kind. You get where I'm coming from?" She did not. He had conjured images of Lydia Pinkham's and Castoria. "Indian medicine," he added.

She looked him up and down. "You're an Indian?"

"A medicine Indian. Power. It's what you need, power to lead your heart to understanding."

In an instant her fears, her suspicions evaporated. A shock brought her snapping to her feet. "You know."

He nodded. "I have a pretty good idea, hawk woman. Is he your husband?"

She wrung her hands in frantic eagerness. "You know, you know all about it!"

"So I'm right. Your husband is the one who shifted out." He stood up. "We need to talk."

She glanced around. "My place—"

"No, a place where I am comfortable. A bar. Do you mind an Indian bar? Drunken savages?"

"My son is asleep in our apartment. I've got to get back."

"Is he wolf clan?"

"What?"

"Is he like his father, especially attracted to wolves?"

"No, I don't think so. He likes Kafka."

"Oh, Kafka. Everything in Kafka happened to the Indians before Kafka was born." He looked up at the sky. "I ought to meet your son. I will find out what kind of child he is."

He took her home, his bar proposal apparently amended by the presence of Kevin. Cindy let him into the building, thinking to herself, You fool. His back was extraordinarily wide, covered by a threadbare and not particularly clean charcoal knit sports jacket, the sort of thing one might get at the Salvation Army. He was wearing ancient, cracked army boots and baggy khaki pants.

She recognized that she was absolutely crazy to be letting this man in her house.

And yet there was something stolid and earth-bound about him. He seemed too old, too wide, and too decrepit to be of any danger to anybody. Then you looked at his eyes and there was a sense of spreading wings, of sunlight in the midnight hour. Those eyes were wonderful with love, reflecting back the light that entered them, at once menacing and gentle. She could still feel the delicate touch of his huge sausage finger on her cheek.

His presence was overbearing in the elevator, his odor a mix of beer and beans and thoroughly ripened sweat. There was also, though, something sweet—quite fresh and pleasant—that brought to mind new flowers. Standing beside her, silent, staring at the elevator door, he gave no sign of what might be happening in his mind.

They got off together and Cindy opened the door of the apartment. How did it feel to be forced? Would he make it hurt? Would it last a long time? Fear had strengthened her senses. She felt with great acuity the coolness of the key in her hand, listened fascinated at the rasp of the lock, inhaled the familiar home scents that blew out through the opening door.

He stood shyly in the foyer, his hands folded over his broad waist, his eyes down. "Come on in. Sit down."

"No. I have to get something from the place. Let me walk around." He stared at her. Seeing that she did not dissent, he began a slow, rocking progress, his brow wrinkled, his lips pursed. He crossed and recrossed the living room, circled the dining table, moved through the kitchen. Then he proceeded down the hall to the bedrooms. Occasionally he made a guttural sound. He passed thrice around her bed, then lay down on it, dropping so hard it all but went through into the Steins' apartment below. After a moment he sat up. "Lots of love here," he said. When he smiled, she saw that his teeth were rotted to stumps.

Then, with a grunted sigh, he got up and went to Kevin's room. Cindy followed him avidly. She was now convinced that she had been insane to do this. He might hurt her little boy. He was someone off the New York City streets; she didn't even know his name. "Owl boy," he said absently.

He returned to the living room. "Hawk woman, owl boy, wolf man. And wolf man has been stolen." He ground out a laugh, dropping down to the couch. "You think I don't know what I'm doing—it happened over there." He pointed straight to the spot where Bob had changed. "That's where he entered the wolf clan."

She was astonished, excited. He was either very clever or schooled in disciplines hidden to her own eyes. "What do you mean, 'entered'?"

"The wolf clan is dying. They are calling all the ones whose spirits will help them. The people who have a special affinity for them. The Wolf People. Do you understand?"

"No."

"Everybody implies a certain kind of animal. Each human soul contains a little dust from some other species."

"We're descended from apes."

"It's much more complicated than that. Remember the philosopher Whitehead? He stressed that there is no 'nature.' Only details. Millions upon millions of details. Concentrate on any one, or any group, and your whole reality changes to support your new focus of attention."

"I thought you were an Indian. What in the world does Whitehead have to do with it? What about Black Elk or somebody like that? Chief Dan George?"

"We get what we can where we can. Injun Joe's been a beggar for a while now. I'm from a culture that went under."

This was leading nowhere. "What do you want?"

"I want to help you understand what happened to your husband. From my own understanding, from the cultural tradition I represent, I might have a few answers."

He was beginning to annoy her. "So, I'm waiting."

"You're very impatient."

"I don't think you know what you're doing. You made a lucky guess but now you're ad-libbing. You probably aren't even an Indian."

"I'm a full-blooded Mohican."

That answer chilled her. She had been taunting him for more information; she had not believed that he was an imposter.

"The last of the Mohicans?"

He gave her a long look. "The last one around here. I was a Mohawk, but what the hell, there's a family tradition that we were Mohicans until the Mohawks stole my great-grandfather eight times removed. So why not? Let old James Fenimore Cooper turn over in his grave if he wants to, I don't give too much of a damn."

Once again he had surprised her. You thought you had captured the measure of this man, only to discover a moment later that your conclusions were still wrong, but in a new way.

"I could use a beer, if you've got any."

Her mind went to Bob, Bud in hand, reading a novel in Sunday-afternoon sunlight. "Help me get him back."

"Why don't you join him?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" The way the Indian looked at her made her furious. "I have a child to raise!"

The Indian laughed. "Him too."

"I want help, not this superstitious nonsense! People don't just turn into animals. That's ridiculous, it doesn't. . . happen."

His eyes were twinkling. "Have it your way, white eyes. But I'd like to keep talking about reality for a second, if you don't mind."

She closed her eyes. He went on: "I was trying to tell you about the fact that the animal kingdom is dying, and because it is dying, it is beginning to take heroic measures to save itself. That's why the spirit of the wolves beguiled your husband. The animal kingdom is after the mind of man."

"I want my husband back!"

He leaned forward, clasped his hands between his knees. "So, follow him."

You're his squaw."

"Crap!"

"Well, I don't mean it in a demeaning way. It would take great courage to follow him. He is a hero. You would be a heroine if you did it."

It was time for a family conference. She went in and woke Kevin up. He was flushed with sleep, his hair tangled, his smooth skin warm and sweet. "I don't know what he is," she told him, "but he's saying things that make a kind of bass-ackwards sense. He thinks we should try to find Dad."

Kevin regarded him down the shadows of the hall. "He looks like an old drunk, Mom."

"Well, he's most definitely that. But he also knew the truth about Dad, from the very first. He has the idea that the wolves are in such desperate trouble that they sort of seduced Dad into becoming one of them in order to gain the power of the human mind."

Her son's hand came into her own. "I wonder what the truth is about Prometheus," Kevin said. "What did he steal, to make the gods so mad? Was it only fire?"

"Wasn't that enough?"

"My guess is that he stole their inner fire. Their godliness. That's the point of the myth. And the wolves want to steal our inner fire, our humanity."

"Is that bad?"

"Mother, the animals are beautiful." Squaring his shoulders, he went into the living room.

The Indian got to his feet. "You are a young brave. I salute you!"

"Hey, Mom—"

"Let it go. Just listen to what he has to say." Catching a glimpse of herself in the dark window, she saw the sharpness of her face, that angular, questing shadow that seemed to fight her beauty, but was in fact its center. Her psyche had claws:

she remembered last night, waiting in the middle of the bed for Bob, waiting like a wolf in the secret dark, to devour him with her demands. Wolf woman.

"You know the old idea of types? In the West, it used to be thought that there were seven types of personality. There are more than seven types! A type for every beast in the animal kingdom. We are reflections of the whole of reality. Among us there are shrew types, porcupine types, owl types, frog types, lion and zebra types, eagle types. On and on. Often people change

types when they get dogs. That's why old people and their old dogs look alike. A bulldog owner becomes a bulldog type. You have to understand the universe as it really is. A hall of mirrors, and we are the mirrors. I hate to sound like a broken record, but I would be able to do this better if I had a beer in my hand."

He was and wasn't a fraud. She got him a Bud. They'd been out. When had she bought more? She didn't remember doing it. But there were also three new Lean Cuisines in the freezer, some apples and grapefruit in the fridge, and another half gallon of Tropicana Premium OJ. She'd done the shopping automatically, sometime in the black struggling hours.

"Can you dance, boy?"

"I can waltz."

"That isn't dancing. What's dancing is what attracts spirits. Ghost dancing." He began to shake, leaning from foot to foot. "You have to jiggle your insides so your soul jiggles. The spirits hear that and they get curious. They're like fish that way, coming up when you jiggle the bait. Only be careful, because your soul is the bait."

Kevin started the same movement. The man began to chant, "eaah, eaah, eaah eaah." He repeated the simple rhythm, his eyes closed. Then he had a little packet in his hands, made up of fur and bones and bits of skin. "Wolf medicine," he said. "Very powerful. Medicine of the Thunder Wolf."

For fifteen minutes they danced. Occasionally the man went around in a little circle, hopping and chanting. Once he whooped. He took a small rattle from his pocket and shook it. He handed the wolf medicine to Kevin, took it back, handed it over again.

Finally he stopped and took a long pull on his beer. "They aren't coming," he said. "My magic's not powerful enough. I could hear them laughing, though."

"Who?"

"The wolf clan. They're very happy. I don't want to upset you, but it looks to me like they've got him for good."

A rocket blasted into the center of her gut and exploded with phosphorus fire. "Nobody got him for good! He's mine, do you hear that! He is mine and I am going to have him back. My God, Bob was one of the gentlest, most humane people I've ever known. He was this boy's father. He's ours. I'll curse the whole species of wolf unless they give him back to me."

"Stealing's never a good idea, I guess."

"Get out of here, you old idiot! You're like some quack with a fake cancer cure. And if you tell the papers that the wolf is really Bob, I will come after you and personally kill you, and believe me, I will do it slowly."

He smiled, the whole bottom half of his face cracking open in a paroxysm of black pits, gnarled stumps, and yellow teeth. "What will you use, the claw or the tooth?"

Shaking like a disturbed longleg spider, she guided him to the door. "Get out."

"Thanks for the swallow of beer."

She slammed the door behind him. Kevin came and put his arm around her waist. That felt awfully good. Now if only Bob was standing on her other side . . .

"I'm going to find your father and bring him home and turn him back into a man."

"Yes, Mom."

"You'll help me?"

"Mom, of course I will."

She told him how close she had been to him earlier. "He's been hurt, he's all scruffy. The last I saw of him, he was heading for the far West Village."

They made bacon and eggs and coffee together, and opened the fresh orange juice. Sitting at the kitchen table, in the thin light of dawn, they laid plans, gardens and castles and clouds of plans, to go down the labyrinth that had claimed husband and father, and lead him back to his humanity.

Chapter Fourteen

THE STREETS OF NEW YORK ARE ALLEGEDLY NEVER quiet, but they were certainly quiet tonight. An occasional siren wailed, mist billowed, shadows moved behind windows. After seeing the *Post* extra Bob understood why: this city of seven million lethal human creatures was stifled with fear. The beast of apocalypse prowled its streets. Ancient terrors were invoked. All was quiet.

To Bob, slinking along hurt and cold and famished, it seemed absurd. In his present mood he would gladly have let a child kill him. Smelling Cindy so close had been too keen a sorrow. He could bear no more of this. As he paced the banks of the Hudson, he contemplated jumping from one of the ruined piers and bringing this whole bizarre experience to an end.

The city around him could not have seemed more oppressive or unfriendly. He had no way of explaining himself, not even in his own mind. His only thought was that ours is an age at the far limit of time, and it is at limits and extremes that the impossible can happen. Or maybe the mysterious fifth force that physicists speculate about had something to do with it. Maybe it was a disease, psychological or otherwise.

He stood looking down at the waters. They were black and smelled of creosote. Lapping and sighing beneath the pier, the river surged in its course. Far out, a magnificent yacht moved in stately passage, its portholes all alight, the sound of its engines coming faintly on the wind.

Bob inhaled, almost believing that he could still smell Cindy's special odor. People's smells were as distinctive as their faces or fingerprints. Were there two smells exactly alike? He suspected not. They hung in layers in the streets of the city, millions of them. He had just noticed this, and was beginning to be able to tell them apart.

He looked down at the water again. How would it feel to die in that murk? Would he struggle, or just go to sleep? It might be a painful death, indeed, like the death of smothering. Once when he was ten, another boy had smothered him in a plastic shower cap, a large, vicious boy. To this day he remembered the gnawing agony.

And the water was cold. He did not know how this miserable body might react to that. Normally he shunned even slightly cool swimming pools. Cold showers, cold days, snow sports were all abhorrent to him.

He could see things floating in the water, big, amorphous things, like great masses of sewage. Doubtless that's what they were. So he would not only drown in the river, he would drown in sewage.

His ears back, his tail down, in his anguish he snapped at the air.

He smelled Cindy again, this time much stronger, as if she was somewhere nearby. It was the perfume of her spirit, this, or the trembling scent of memory. Until he had been blocked by this new body from his relationship with her, he had not understood just how much a part of him she had become.

Then he heard a noise, a tapping on the pier. Figures approached, moving silently side by side, by their smells a man and a heavily scented person, probably a woman. She was so powdered and perfumed that her real smell was almost obscured. There was a faint underlying odor of pus and scabs. He was fresher, the scent of healthy sweat, the remains of deodorant put on many hours ago, a touch of Afta still clinging to his face. The blue odor of oiled metal was chief among those he noticed coming from the woman's purse. He knew she had a pistol hidden there.

There was a quick round of bargaining between them, obviously further to an earlier conversation.

"This ain't exactly a hotel."

"You're gettin' off easy, ten bucks."

"It's cold. I wanna do five."

Her voice, exhausted. "Seven."

They came closer, the prostitute and the john. Bob stayed absolutely still, embarrassed and ashamed to be witness to their humble and private business. Closing his eyes did nothing to shut them out: he smelled them, he heard them. The woman was kneeling before the man, the man leaning against a piling, his fingers working in her hair.

In a merciful few minutes it was over. There was a stink of hot bodies. The woman made a rustling movement. "Take off your clothes," she said in a low voice. The gun was in her hand.

She tossed everything into the Hudson—the underpants, the socks, the shoes, the cheap suit.

"Please, lady."

She opened the wallet. "Eighty fuckin' bucks," she said in a new, harder voice. No wonder all the powder: she was a man. "I oughta blow you away."

The transvestite turned and marched off the pier, leaving his john cowering naked. "What am I gonna do?" he moaned. After a short time, he also hurried

back toward the darkness of West Street, a pale flash in the night.

To Bob that poor man seemed the luckiest of creatures, normally formed, his body the key to the whole list of human freedoms and powers.

The wild was not freedom at all; the wild was a terrible bondage. Man was free.

He remembered the wolf in the zoo. That had been the message in his eyes.

Was that wolf like me, a lost man? Was he warning me with his eyes, or cajoling me?

His eyes had been so beautiful. Too bad being a wolf was such hell.

He could escape, of course. All he had to do was let himself fall, then take a single, deep breath after the water enclosed him.

Before he jumped, there was one thing he had to do, if only to satisfy himself that his situation was indeed hopeless. Many years before he had been interested in meditation. TM had been popular when he was in college, and he had tried it. He had met a girl who was involved in the Ecstatic movement within the Catholic Church, and he had gotten high on repetitive prayer.

They had joined together, Bob and Lorelei, on the Way of Flesh and Prayer—their own name for their Catholicized sexual freedom—and had learned secrets of meditation known, if at all, to a few adepts of the *Kama Sutra*.

Bob wondered if he could still sense his body in the old way. Could he perhaps re-create his human body by creating a vivid enough image of it in his mind?

With all the will he could bring to it, he concentrated on turning his left rear paw back into a foot. He visualized a foot—his own foot—just as he remembered it, complete with the scar from his bunion operation and the ingrown second toenail he had been meaning to show to Al West, his podiatrist.

Nothing happened, nothing at all. He kept on trying, raising the paw off the ground in the intensity of his effort. Nothing seemed to happen, but when he put the paw down, he was amazed and shocked to feel ordinary human toes and heel. He looked back, and there in the shadows was a pale, naked man's foot attached to his wolf leg.

Pure excitement made his blood rush so hard he started to faint. The foot felt a little like rubber, a lot like gelatin, and it seemed as if a lessening of attention might make it dissolve once again into a paw. The moment he shifted his attention to his upper leg, the foot indeed began to disintegrate.

There was no sensation, but his contact with the ground began to change. Then he returned his concentration to the foot. At once it was human again.

But it wouldn't stay like that, not without a Zen master's ability to concentrate on it and keep it human. A very real force was urging his cells into the wolf shape. When he fought it, he could feel it resisting, striving to recapture the shifted part.

Then he learned another thing: By keeping some attention on his foot and extending it up his leg, he could transform the leg as well, and include it in the new fortress of his human being. He labored, striving to fix the quicksilver of concentration, until he was a human torso with a wolf's chest, shoulder, and head. There was war inside him. His organs battled the confusion of juices. He vomited and the wolf body regained the torso for a moment. Then he recaptured his attention from his pain and dragged it up his midriff. It slipped, concentrating suddenly on what he wanted most, which was hands. They popped out of his paws, new and slightly wet, knuckles closed against the ground. Then the wolf tail slipped out again. He fought it down, felt the fur of it tickling against his buttocks as it was absorbed.

Now, holding in awareness all of his human parts, he made a great effort to draw his attention up both forelegs and then across his chest and neck. With a rush as of swirling snow his whole sense of smell disappeared. He was shocked to realize how dependent on it he had become. For a moment, shaking his head, he thought he was blind.

Then he saw a flush of color, the crystal world that human eyes see. He was lying, wet and new on the dirty slabs of the pier. He raised himself up.

Shaking, he stood slowly to full height, and felt the sharp airs of night on naked skin. He clapped his hands, he swooped and swirled.

He had to be careful, though. The wolf itched just beneath the surface of him, waiting to pop out the moment he stopped concentrating on his shape.

He remembered a paraphrase of the physicist Richard Feynman, that reality is plastic, that it is essentially dependent upon the observer.

Speaking of whom, he found himself lit by headlights, which proceeded slowly down the rattling pier toward him. He began to back up, momentarily terrified. But why? He was human again. He was safe. Smiling with relief, he ran forward toward the car. "Hey, I need help."

A light bar flashed: it was a police car. "You couple of fuckers," a voice said, drawling easily. "Come aaannn." Two young policemen emerged from the car. Sitting in the back was the dim figure of the man the prostitute had

mugged. "What is this, a new thrill?" one of them asked.

"I don't think I—" He stopped. The moment his attention had gone into the effort of speaking, the wolf had leaped up inside, ready to surge out.

"You guys stay at home. We don't want any funny business out on these piers."

"I—I—"

"Get in the goddamn car. We're runnin' youse in. Two creatures start a naked trip out here, pretty soon all the creatures are doing it, am I right?" The officer made a move toward Bob. A strong hand connected with his arm. Bob jumped away: where the cop had touched grew a tuft of fur. "Oh, come on," the cop said in a bored tone. "We'll beat you up if you make this a pain in the ass." He grabbed again.

Bob still felt loose and unreal, like a jelly. He skittered away, dragging a paw on his left arm, then with a dry hiss a whole left foreleg. When he tried to bring back his arm, it would not come.

"Halt, you're under arrest," one of the cops shouted. The other came at Bob, his arms outstretched. Bob backed up, warding off those awful hands with his one human fist.

He saw the misty sky and heard a rush of air around him. Then he hit the water with a whooshing splash. Cold, stinking river water poured down his throat, making him choke. Choking, he sank deeper and deeper, until there was no sound but the pulsing of distant marine engines. Something big and clingy wrapped around his midriff. He struggled to release himself from it, arching his back, clawing, trying to paddle.

His attention was shattered, and he knew that the wolf would win if he didn't regain it. The wolf leaped, struggled, twisted. There was nausea and the seething of skin. He fought: foot not paw, flesh not fur, and then he felt the eerie swinging of the tail. The pressure of the water was slaughtering his ears. He concentrated his whole attention into a single dot of consciousness. And he knew he had won: down in the depths of the river, he was human again. There came the pounding of blood, shock after shock, the hammer of suffocation. He had to breathe. The agony was amazing, total, all-involving, far worse than what he had imagined.

He felt his flesh popping like sausage skin, felt the emergence of the reborn thing as it climbed out of him and became him. Each quake of his heart brought a flash to his eyes. In a moment he was going to take in a heave of water, cough, and commence the unmanaged panic of his dying.

Cold water rushed past his face. He drew back his lips, felt his mouth opening, felt his every muscle straining, his legs churning, his lungs expanding to whistling, airless balloons, then a gust of water blasted down his throat. He gagged, his body contorting to a knot, then he coughed it out, expelling it through his nose, helplessly breathing again—but this time it was cold, dank air.

His head had broken water. Again he breathed, choked, coughed, gagged, breathed, fought the waves, raised his nose high, and swam along, sweeping the water aside with his four powerful legs.

He was an amazing distance away from the pier, and his nose took in the myriad scents of the watery world, the fish, the creosote from all the rotting timbers, the sewage and trash, the skim of oil on the water's surface.

He cocked his ears toward the pier. The two cops were standing there calling, playing their flashlight on the near waters. They were looking for a blubbering human swimmer, though, not the sleek creature who watched them.

He was a wolf again, thoroughly and completely. His concentration had been shattered at just the wrong moment. He screamed out his rage, but this time even that vestige of his humanity was gone. It seemed that his return to the wolf form had worked more perfectly than the first transformation. He was now smoothly wolf: an animal howl echoed across the Hudson waters.

Dog-paddling steadily, he turned himself around and around, seeking the closest shore. But there was no close shore. He was being taken by the tidal current, and taken fast. Manhattan was already farther away than Jersey. He could see the lights of cars emerging from the Holland Tunnel. Far upriver the George Washington Bridge glimmered. A tug sounded its mournful drone. The mist sometimes obscured the riverbanks, making it even harder for him to orient himself.

He had lost sight of the police on the shore. Manhattan was now an anonymous grandeur of lights, coldly self-centered, indifferent to the mere animal that was going to drown before its glow. Dog-paddling was an exhausting way to swim, but if he stopped he sank. He kept his muzzle just above the water, held his ears back to keep the cold out, and dug at the water with his tiring legs. The cold made him ache, the pain distracted him, the spinning lights on the shores made him fear that he was swimming in circles.

It would have been easy to just stop paddling, but there could be no question of that now. His experience of drowning had cured him of any

desire to do so; the closeness of death had ignited in him a hunger for more life. He worked furiously in body and mind, trying to find some way to survive.

He had entered that state beyond exhaustion, where the flesh is supported only by will. It is a condition of rapture that seems while it lasts that it might go on forever. It doesn't. The end is always complete and total collapse. Bob swam on. There were lights ahead, but he could not tell if they were a ship at anchor or the Jersey shore.

Then he heard a bell ring loudly and he understood that one of the lights must be a buoy, and perhaps quite near. He cocked his ears—water ran down inside, roaring and causing these fine wolf ears excruciating pain.

There was a flash of white noise in his head. His chest constricted, he gagged. Dimly he realized that he was now completely submerged, still paddling but no longer powerfully enough to keep himself afloat. He remembered a morning long ago, fishing for perch at the John O. Fishing Camp with his father, looking down into the green water, wondering that there were creatures who needed it as we need air. He remembered the flopping struggle of the caught fish, the astonishment in their golden flat eyes.

Then he surfaced, heard the bell, and knew he was soon going to stop swimming. No matter how hard he tried, his legs were slowing down. For relief he let his back legs stop and churned with his forelegs, just keeping his nose in the air.

The bell rang again, a clear, sharp peal. Before and above him he saw a flashing green light, and he heard the river sloshing against the buoy. He flailed with his paws, touched the bouncing thing. Its sides were smooth, but there was a superstructure that housed the bell. Conceivably he could lodge his front paws up in there and hang on.

He tried to grasp the side of the buoy but his claws scratched helplessly. For hands this would be simple. He tried to concentrate, to picture a hand where his paw now scrabbled, a hand with its flexible fingers, its reach, its power.

No change occurred. It was as if his earlier efforts had drained a battery. Change now seemed completely impossible. He was as much a wolf as he had been a man. He snorted, yapped, tried to hug the buoy with both paws. The buoy was rusty above the waterline, and he dragged slowly down until he reached the algae that clung to the base, whereupon he slipped and

splashed off into the water.

Excited, snapping, frantic, he came to the surface and tried again. This time his forepaws held. He scrambled with his rear paws, trying for at least a little purchase in the goop that adhered to the buoy's underwater surfaces. Again he kicked, and again failed, and came slowly down the side. Then one claw caught what was probably the rough edge of a weld. For an instant he was poised, unmoving. He could feel his forepaws beginning to slip. Another inch and he would topple backward into the water. Slowly, carefully, he began to straighten the rear leg that was holding. First a bare quarter of an inch, then another quarter, he slid up the buoy. It was working, definitely. Higher and higher he slid, stretching at last to his full length. He felt the edge of the cage that enclosed the bell. Then he was falling, twisting, splashing, turning beneath the waves. He came up fast, slamming his head against the bottom of the buoy so hard he saw a pink flare behind his eyes and was for a moment stunned.

•Then he made his way out from under and surfaced again. His swimming was slow. He might as well have been wearing saddlebags filled with lead. If only he could shed this soggy fur, if only he could rest just for five minutes. He could actually hear cars on the shore, horns honking at the tunnel entrance, the sigh of the roads, even a radio playing on the bank, entertainment for some lonely fisherman.

He wanted life, his blood hungered for it, his breath sped through his lungs for it, he yearned toward the shore. He did not think he could make it. There were now just two choices, either he could try the buoy a last time, or he could attempt another fifteen minutes in the water. If he failed at either, he was dead.

The buoy rang again, its sound deafening and yet also peaceful, reminding him of a church at dawn, of the flat seascapes of the world. He smelled coffee and hot dogs. The fisherman had opened a snack.

Desperate now, Bob struck for the shore. The buoy was useless to him. Every few moments he would find himself underwater. It would take a burst of energy to get him to the surface, and every time he did that he was a bit less able. Soon he was spending more time below the surface than above it. His ears were roaring, his muscles were frantic, he wasn't getting enough air.

Then the water was suddenly very cold and the lights were whirling again. He was in a powerful current. He relaxed, realizing that this was the end. The lights, which had been no more than a few hundred feet away, began to get

smaller. He sloshed with listless paws, waiting for his body to give up its struggle. The water caressed him. He closed his eyes.

As soon as he sank he found himself rolling against rocks. Rocks! They couldn't be more than five feet below the surface. He paddled again, reached the surface, flopped and splashed, looking for a place shallow enough to stand. But he was rushing along so fast he couldn't even begin to get purchase. The rocks tantalized him, sweeping by just below the tips of his paws.

Then he came to something quite solid. The current literally shoved him against it. He found himself clambering over cutting stones, clambering and swaying. He stood, astonished, his head hanging, too weak even to look up. Then he toppled to his side, his legs still weakly paddling, but they paddled air, for he had come up on a rocky promontory of the shore.

"Oh Lord, who—" Bob heard the voice of the fisherman, smelled his food, his coffee. His impulse was to run, but he was beyond anything so draining. All he could do was lie on his side just where he was, and stare with one open eye up into the dank gray-red sky of fog and mist.

"You is a dog. Lord, you done swum out of the Hudson, ain't you? Lord, Lord."

He took off his own coat, the fisherman, and rough-dried Bob's freezing, soaking fur. Then he stroked his head. "All I got is the end of a wiener," he said. "Ain't much food for a big dog like you, but it ain't air either."

Then there was meat at his lips, meat and bread and tangy hot mustard. Even a little kraut. Bob gulped down the food. His eyes closed. The fisherman threw an old, dank tarp over him.

Soon there was a slight warming of his body, which was an infinite comfort. At once he slept, and he dreamed that he had come to the reefs of heaven, and found there an old black man with a hot-dog end and a rotting square of canvas, who was an angel of God.

Part Three

Country Life

The country has been amputated, its soul
is bigger than its place.

The country has perfect mist, morning light
that reconstructs what is true.
The country is where you go to find what you lost,
and find what lost you.

—Robert Duke, "Country Life" (1989)

Chapter Fifteen

THE MORNING SUN HEATED THE CANVAS TARP. WHEN Bob awoke, it was from a nightmare of the gas chamber at the pound. His fur was steaming, his body sanded with pain. It was as if every muscle had been wound with barbed wire. His stomach was tight and sour. He was ravenous. In his mouth there lingered a maddening temptation of hot dog.

He got up, shaking the canvas off his back. All around him were dank, twisted rocks. Beyond rose a cliff of the lower palisades, tall and complicated. He moved forward, sniffing the crisp air. Everywhere there was the sour sweetness he was coming to recognize as the ground odor of human bodies. Above it was the stink of the river, the nostalgic rot of autumn leaves, warm asphalt, faint car exhausts, and a musty odor of animals, no doubt the rats that lived along the riverbanks. His stomach knocked and a film of drool covered his tongue.

He was damned if he was going to eat a raw rat. And yet he found himself imagining a lovely steak tartare, the way they would serve it at the Palm, one of his favorite restaurants. It had been a long time since he could afford lunch at the Palm.

Would he get rabies from eating a rat? Well, that was nothing to worry about. He would never eat anything alive. He was going to be the first noncarnivorous wolf.

His real desires were for a cup of coffee ground at home from Jamaica Blue Mountain beans, some flaky croissants from Patisserie Lanciani, and a nice stupefying Sunday morning with the *Times* and WBAI's *Music of a Sunday Morning* in the background. Add to that some fresh-squeezed orange juice from the Korean market on Bleecker, and perhaps—just to be bad—a couple of slices of bacon.

Even so, the rats smelled kind of good. He couldn't see them, of course, but he knew they were there, and he sensed that every rat eye was on the monster that had intruded on their domain.

Maybe there were delis with salad bars here in Jersey. He could burst in and start gobbling down the *kappa maki*, the endive, and the *olivata*. He'd be shoed away, of course, but what the hell. Hit three or four delis and he'd be full.

There was movement before him, back near where the old road passed

under the cliff's face. He cocked his ears and was rewarded with a richly detailed scuttle of noises: the chugging of rat breath, the silver rustle of rat paws on stone, the swallowed whines of rat fear.

They knew what he could not yet admit, that in the end he would hunt them, that among them there was one who soon would die. He drew deep, exploratory breaths, hoping that the fisherman had left some bits behind. Even one of the greasy, tumor-ridden Hudson fish would be preferable to a rat. For God's sake, rats were nothing more than reprocessed garbage.

His body's motives were not those of his mind. His body simply wanted to eat. It was also efficient. And it was working on the problem. While he worried, it had targeted a hole that was full of rats. His ears said that they were seething there, uneasy, noses pointing toward him. When he moved forward, there was a tensing. He stopped;

Soon the tension died down. He found that his tail had lifted, and he felt some sparkle in himself, a glee as sharp as glass. He pranced forth on the hunt—and saw not just one hole but a dozen explode with fast gray shapes. They skittered about, their tails swirling behind them, their little voices shrilling. It was a dance of dread, and he suddenly knew the source of all dance.

His body twisted, skidded, turned, and leaped. Then there appeared in his sight a long rat crusted with offal, its teeth yellow, one eye filmed gray. His nose smelled the saline freshness of its blood, sensed the heat of its body, and he tasted in his muzzle the minute hurricane of its breath, which reeked of wet cigarette ends, pigeon droppings, and bugs.

His muzzle was a quick weapon. Once he had the rat in his vision he was able to follow it with the dexterity of a radar guidance system. A flush of wet filled his mouth. His belly churned, becoming blazing hot. This was a stomach far more powerful than its human counterpart. As he matched the rat's staccato march he noted fierce acid fumes rising from his own throat. Probably his stomach could digest damn near anything.

There came a moment when the rat's neck would be just where he needed it. He reached down, snapped, and drew the scrabbling, screaming creature into the air. It had heft, it was no small rat. When it tried to turn around and bite him, he cracked the whip with its body. As if turned off by the will of God, it went limp. He had killed it as easily as that. It fell from his jaws with a wet thud. Now all the other rats, who had become indifferent as soon as they realized they had not been singled out, took a new interest. There would

soon be carrion to scavenge.

Bob sniffed at the thing. Up close he could smell so many different varieties of unpleasantness that he was unable to count them all. The worst, perhaps, was a distinct odor of benzine. The rat also had a scaly growth on the side of its head, that looked almost like the plates of a lizard's brow. A bizarre cancer.

His humanity told him not to touch this diseased thing. His wolfhood wanted to gobble it up and have done with it. He pushed it with his nose. The surviving rats gathered eagerly around, waiting for him to finish.

He wanted to get out of here. But the dead rat kept him lingering. Without hands, how would he skin it? How could he bear the crunch of the bones? His stomach was molten iron. Without any conscious decision at all, he gave the rat's soft underfur a smart nip.

His jaw seemed to go off like a cocked pistol. Entirely without his conscious participation, he had ripped the rat down the middle. Its blood flowed out, steamy and quick, causing eager scurrying to break out among the others. They followed their brother's blood down the cracks and commenced drinking at once, their little lapping filling the still, expectant air.

He recoiled at the sight of the slick, purple guts spilling over the stones. How could he be doing this? A thrill of fascination went through him— this curiously automatic and quite skilled behavior must come from instinct. Becoming a good wolf was like learning a musical instrument.

In this case, though, success would mean actually eating the ghastly mess on the rocks in front of him, something he did not at all want to do. The smell of it, so intense and bloody and alive, made him step back. Then, quite suddenly, one of the rats dashed in and grabbed some offal. That made him growl and lunge forward, and before he could stop himself, the warm meat was going down his throat. He felt it on his tongue, fur and skin and muscle, little rat bones, he tasted it and the taste was absolute meat. Then it was gone, the whole damn rat, even the tail.

He stood there, his head lolling, his mouth open. The revulsion that crawled through his body made him turn up his lips and snarl. When he exhaled, he smelled essence of rat, the freshness of the meat as well as the hollow rot of the filthy fur and whatever horrors had been in the stomach.

He gagged. But he did not bring up what he had eaten. On the contrary, it was perfectly acceptable to his stomach, which was comfortably digesting it.

Good God. He had done something truly unspeakable and yet lived. He

was so sensitive, such a careful eater. As a child he had been amenable only to hamburgers and carrots. Over the years his repertoire of foods had expanded, but slowly. Not until he moved to New York had he acquired a taste for real exotica. Now he relished everything from snails to raw abalone.

A great, low booming distracted him from his thoughts. He looked out at the river, and there was the *QE2* flanked by tugs, her white superstructure shining in the morning sun. His heart almost stopped to see her and behind her the jeweled towers, Manhattan in a splendor of glass and spires. He could see people on the decks of the *Queen*, a man in a blue blazer with white trousers, a woman beside him wearing a hat, her mink shining darkly. She raised one hand and held her hat against the wind.

For him it was a bitter sight. The corner of life he had entered was a place of adventure in the deepest sense of the word, where every step was a step into the unknown, where all of his human intelligence and his animal instinct would be required to see him along the way.

His muzzle raised itself to the blue sky and he made a long, high tone he found quite fine. He did it again, this time adding a tremble at the end by relaxing his throat. Again he did it, throwing all of his feelings into the note, his loneliness, his despair, his disgust. These were the feelings that he put into it, but something very different came out. He heard in his howl the voice of a deeper freedom than he had ever imagined, and the sky seemed more blue, and the smells of autumn more poignant, and the booming of the liner more grand. He stopped, excited, his tail waving. The wild was in him, the very wild, the unchained, the innocent, the terrible wild. He knew it from the farthest reach of his human heart, it was the old, old truth come forth in him, resurrection, Eucharist, a new world being born.

He realized with the force of cold water on morning skin that he was feeling a primitive emotion that was essentially and totally human. The ancient human wildness had reemerged in him, cohabitant with the wildness of the wolf.

To have been human at the beginning of the species must have been like this. His first impulse was to run and tell people, to tell anybody he could find, that the wild is waiting for us.

Obeying both sense and instinct, he trotted off up the road, seeking a way to the top of the palisade. Somewhere out there across the human land lay the forest, constricted perhaps, but still the forest. He wanted to race this body against the closure of the suburbs, to seek the quick eye and the savage tooth.

As it mingled with his own blood the blood of the rat taught him the morality of the carnivore. Every act is a poem, sniffing the scent-touched leaf, disemboweling the faun.

He was filled with so much energy that it seemed almost like magic. The rat had been just the good food his body had wanted. His instincts had been right. His tail high, his head thrust smartly forward, he moved up and up, making his way among the stones. It was easy to keep to the path: all he had to do was follow the scent of men and fish. This was where they came down, this collection of crevices and rough-hewn stones. Here was a Welch's grape drink bottle, there a Trident gum wrapper. And over it all was the smell of fish and the smell of men, many men, some young and sharp and fresh, others old and covered in sodden wool.

When he reached the top of the palisade, he found himself in a park he hadn't even known existed, a dramatic park overlooking the Statue of Liberty and the harbor. People stood at the edge of the balustrade just above him, some of them leaning into ten-cent binoculars and looking at the *Queen*, which had reached the center of the harbor and was just dispensing with its tugs. Farther east a Staten Island Ferry left its slip. It was rush hour, and a traffic helicopter sped up the Hudson, a green and white bug spewing noise. He looked over this great vista and picked out his old neighborhood. He couldn't see their building, but he could just see the top of the structure that hid it.

He blinked his eyes. His vision was not as good as he would have liked. The colors were muted, the details obscure. But when he cocked his ears, he heard a wonder of sounds. The world's noise was no longer an aural fog. Rather he now heard all the detail of it, the pulsing deep in the *Queen's* engines, the excited voices of the people on her decks, someone hammering in the scaffolding on the Statue of Liberty, somebody else scraping, the engines of the ferry and the splashing of her thick bow, the suspiration of wind around the towers of the World Trade Center, the click of a sea gull's wings, and the hiss of fish rushing in the harbor.

He was a generous man, and at that moment his heart burst with one wish, that all human beings everywhere could just for one instant experience the old world in this new way. He had not known it was like this, had never dreamed what a difference really powerful senses could make. Human eyes were strong, but not so strong as wolf ears, nor nearly so discriminating as a wolf's nose.

A smell startled him, the familiar odor of human fear. When he realized where it was coming from, his heart almost stopped. One of the ten-cent binoculars was pointing directly at him. Two froglike eyes swam in the dark lenses. For an instant he captured them with his own eyes.

He saw deep into them, into the empty soul behind them. He could push, he could twist, he could *alter!*

He could make her into a wolf with his eyes!

But the pupils dilated and then drew back. He saw a pale mask of a face peer past the shiny aluminum housing of the binoculars. The face was rapt, closed, the lips tight, the eyebrows knitted. Bob was in too awkward a position to cringe, to cower to this young mask of a woman in her vaguely red sweater and wind-rushing skirt. If only he could make people see him as the inoffensive being he was.

Behind him was the tumbling palisade. He dared not go down, because he knew there was no escape down there. Unless he was willing to try another swim, that was nothing but a trap. Too bad he couldn't fly.

The young woman had darted away from her binoculars without uttering a word. He struggled up the final thirty yards and scrambled over the balustrade. Here was a cobbled esplanade backed by a road, and beyond it a stand of trees. There were perhaps a dozen people on the esplanade, some of them sitting on benches, others strolling, others at the binoculars. Simultaneous with his appearance, there came a cry across the quiet scene. The young woman shouted in a clear, stem tone, her smooth hands cupped around her soft lips: "It's the wolf! The *wolf!*"

The whole scene froze. People stopped walking. Those on the benches turned their heads. A man rose up from behind a pair of binoculars and began to hurry across the esplanade, his shoes clicking in the silence.

There was nothing to do but race across the pavement. He ran as fast as he could. This particular movement aggravated last night's thigh injury, sending hooks of pain deep into his leg. But he was still fast. He shot along close to the pavement, his nose down, the cobblestones speeding past. It was only a moment before he was in the trees and racing between their thick-grown branches toward the far end of the park.

Then he was through the park and finding shelter in some reeds. A police car screamed past.

Ahead was the invincible barrier of the New Jersey Turnpike, eight lanes of certain death. He trotted along, trying to see a way across. But there was

no way across. The turnpike stretched for miles. From his vantage point low to the ground he could not see a single break in its featureless expanse. He had to cross, and at once. He'd never seen so much traffic, never realized just how fast cars could go, never understood the barrier of the road. Not far away lay the stinking body of an opossum, skinless, torn, its jaw gone. The school bus, his dog screaming, the shotgun in the gentle afternoon.

There was hardly even a median here. He would have to find a lull on this side and cross, then jump the divider and huddle on the other side until another lull. Only then could he manage the four southbound lanes. He'd come dozens of times along this route, dozens and dozens of times, never thinking how totally devoted it was to human needs, how indifferent to the needs of other creatures. Had they bothered to build a few low tunnels under it, the opossum need not be dead, nor the wolf trapped.

He stepped onto the shoulder of the road. Cars roared past. Then he encountered a terrible and unexpected phenomenon. One of them swerved onto the shoulder, aiming directly at him. He could see the driver hunched over his wheel, a young man with a green smile. Beside him another man had just raised his head and was beginning to laugh.

Bob leaped back, catching a blast of hot exhaust fumes and the angry wail of a horn.

They hated his freedom, or perhaps it was their own helplessness that made them do it. Crushed, oppressed, miserable men—killing something granted them power. That they could take life pushed back the fear that they themselves had lost their value.

A hole appeared in the traffic. He darted out into the road, one lane, two. Then he felt the pavement trembling like a hot pan. Bearing down on him was a huge thirty-two-wheeler, its grille a wall of steel. Its driver sat impassive over his wheel. Bob was transfixed by the face, the slow, steady chewing, the plug of tobacco bulging in the jaw, the aerodynamic sunglasses. Beside him a woman smoothed her hair with her hands, looking down, a smile on her face of almost ineffable purity, her lips slightly parted, the sunlight shining on her fresh skin. Then the truck was upon him. There was no escape. He crouched, pressing his body against the pavement as it screamed over him, blasting off down the road, its slipstream almost lifting him into the air. Behind it a Buick was coming up fast. Seeing him, the driver swerved away.

Bob wasn't hit, but he had lost the lane he had gained. Another space

between cars, perhaps three seconds to a VW Sirocco. He dashed forward, his tail slapping against the car as it passed him. The impact sent a shock wave through his body that made him yelp. Then he was at the median, crouching flat along it as the traffic billowed by in both directions. He raised himself, leaning against the steel fence that separated the lanes, found purchase, and drew himself to the foot-wide space between the beams.

He was tempted to trust luck and just dash out into the traffic on the far side of the median. He felt trapped here, and the rushing of the cars confused his eyes. It was easy for him to observe details up close, or to follow a single, moving object against a still background, but this was just a blur.

Under these circumstances his nose and ears were useless. To function in the world of man requires a sharpness of eye most other land animals do not possess. This place was as dangerous as poison to a creature such as himself. Even his instincts fought him. Being trapped here was like being cornered. He wanted to lash out at the cars, to run wildly.

He fought himself, begging the wolf to listen to the man this time. Standing where he was, he could see another opening in the traffic, this one also in front of a big truck. They tended to be slower than cars. Ahead of them the road was often clear. Behind them, though, there would be a glut of traffic.

The wolf did not listen to him. He was just tensing himself to jump when he popped off the median like a spring. It was too early. He landed in front of a van, which tried to miss him. Desperate, he rolled. The van passed as hot wind. Now he felt nothing. He was on his back against the concrete base of the median. There was no more than an inch between him and the tires of the cars. He couldn't even turn over without risking his paws being smashed.

He was a creature at war with himself. The instinctual part was not in touch with the intellectual. It seemed unaware even of the existence of reason. Out here in the middle of the turnpike, though, either reason was going to win or instinct was going to get him killed.

Thanks to instinct he was lying on his back, his tail curled over his stomach, his paws clenched against his body. He could no longer see the cars. Now he had to go by the vibrations of the road and the sound of the traffic. The trouble was that there was so much noise that his ears didn't work right. What would in a human ear have been an ebb and flow of sound as each vehicle passed was to his wolf ear a continuous roar.

Because there was no other way to deal with the situation, he finally did

the only thing he could and rolled over. Cars were whipping by so close he could feel heat pulsing up from the road. He managed to get to his feet. Leaning against the barrier, he waited. The cars continued. Twice people swerved toward him, but they missed because they were afraid of scraping the barrier.

Then an ancient van came rattling along, much slower than the rest of the traffic. Its lights were on, it hung askew on its frame, and it was being driven by an old woman who looked as if she was dressed in handkerchiefs. She slammed on her brakes. He would have gone to her but he simply could not trust human beings. Probably she stopped out of kindness, but it might be out of fear, because she realized that he was the terrible wolf. Maybe there was a bounty on his head and she was fumbling for a tire iron. Unlikely, but he could not know. He ran in front of the stopped van and, using it as a barrier, managed to cross to another lane. Now he could see clearly, and his progress to the far side of the turnpike was smooth.

Before him was a sea of reeds interrupted far to the north by the tall bulk of the People's Gas and Electric power station, and to the south by the rusty hump of the Pulaski Skyway. He stepped into the marsh. At once he sank to his knees, but fortunately no further. He took a step, then another. Like an envelope closing, the world of the marsh embraced him. It might be in the middle of a brutal traffic pattern, it might be viciously polluted, but it was alive, and as long as it lived it spread its magic over all who entered it.

The roar of the highway was replaced by the click of insects and the busy fluttering of birds. Driving along, he'd always thought of this as an empty world, reeds, muck, that was it. He now found rich life pouring into his ears and nose.

The smell of the man's world dwindled fast. For the first time since he had entered this new life he did not smell a single human presence.

He sloshed along, thinking that he might soon scare up a rabbit or another rat. Given how the last rat had gone down, he no longer found this a particularly unpleasant notion, although he did hope to find a cleaner victim.

Soon he was moving through shallower water. Then he came to a bald place. The sun was high, the day warm for autumn, and it occurred to him that he was free to lie down. He curled up in the reeds, drawing his tail almost to his nose.

It was peaceful here, but he knew that these marshes did not extend very far. Beyond them were suburbs full of peril, then the Poconos and beyond

them the Catskills. He would have to go far to the north before he found the forest that his wolf soul and wolf blood sought.

Lying still, he could hear the traffic's faint wail, a hungry ghost half a mile away. When he slept he dreamed that a helicopter was nosing about in the reeds, looking for him. Then his dream changed, and in it he was matching the turns of a rabbit, delighting in the prospect of a meal.

He awoke sometime past sunset. The western sky was deep orange, and the evening star hung on the edge of the horizon.

For a long moment he considered the young woman on the palisades. Had he *really* been able to turn her into a wolf? No, surely not.

But it had happened to him.

When as a young man he would lie on the ground in the deep country and look at the stars, he would think that their light must have been purified by its journey. So also souls are purified by journeys, and it was time for him to move on.

He set out to cross the marsh, moving toward the jeopardy of the lights, and the dark promise of the hills beyond.

Chapter Sixteen

IT MIGHT BE TWO O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING BUT HE WAS a fool to be standing on a street corner in Morristown, New Jersey, peering at a newspaper through the wire of a rack. He was aware of a car cruising slowly up the street, but he was so fascinated and horrified by his picture in the paper that he didn't retreat. It was remarkable to see himself like this. He really was a wolf, a perfect wolf. His mind had conjured a more muscular, vaguely human shape for him—a sort of man on all fours with the head of a wolf. He wasn't like that. There was nothing at all human about him.

Below the picture he could see the first few words of the accompanying news story. "After critically injuring one man, the animal escaped across the Hudson . . ."

The words froze his blood. He stared, stupefied, as his shadow defined itself beside him. Even the gentle rumbling of the car's engine did not break his attention. He had injured somebody, hurt them bad. But who? Maybe the man he fell on in the alley. It had all happened so fast, he wasn't sure.

The poor man.

When Bob looked up, it was into a flaring explosion of brilliance. These eyes were wonderful in the dark, but he discovered that they did not work at all well under an assault like this. He was staring into a glaring, impenetrable curtain, behind which he could hear an engine idling, doors opening, and the shuttle of weapons from holsters to hands.

He shrank back, one ear cocked toward the clicking of the pistol.

A shot seemed to explode in his face. He reeled, twisted, scrambled wildly to the middle of the street. Then there was another shot and the slap of wind against his head.

He ran for all he was worth. Up the street he raced, past an Italian restaurant with a full garbage bin waiting for dawn, past a hobby shop, a drugstore.

Then he stopped, panting. Behind him there were pattering footsteps. He crouched behind some trash cans. What was in them? They smelled like heaven. Then another police car swept past, its lights flashing. There was no siren, not in this suburb of high executives and broad, quiet lawns. Nixon had once lived around here.

Bob went on, trotting close to the storefronts, slinking across streets, taking

advantage of every bit of foliage he could find. He left Morristown on a long, straight road. Every so often he would see a police cruiser and crouch down. The car would glide past, and he could hear the men inside. "Man, I haven't had this much fun since deer season."

"Who gets the head, the guy that does the shooting or the mayor? That's my question."

Horrible!

As he neared Morris Plains Bob turned west and began to make his way through a more densely populated neighborhood.

Something happened that he hadn't taken into consideration, something very bad.

The houses around here were closer to the street, and the dogs inside were going mad. One, which had been asleep on a porch, came running up and went into a paroxysm of barking, leaping, and snapping. Its lips wrinkled back over its teeth as it crouched down, ready to attack. He watched its hackles, its muscles, waiting to absorb its charge. The creature went off like a shotgun, blasting into him with the full force of its body.

He let himself relax into the blow, dropped his chin to protect his throat from the fury of the jaws, then followed the dog down as it fell in a scabbling heap at his feet. Once he would have merely wounded it, and sent it screaming away into the night, but he knew he could not afford the attention the screaming would attract. Sadly, he tore the dog's throat open. Its barking at once ceased, replaced by the sound of air whistling and bubbling in the wound. The creature bit wildly, running in the air as it did so. Bob jumped away from it, his heart beating hard, and then he heard a boy's voice call "Frito." The dog shook and gibbered. The voice repeated, "Frito?" Bob slipped into the shadows, miserable but safe.

Scared now, the voice repeated, "Frito!" Bob could see a profile in a front door, a boy of about eleven dressed in pajamas and floppy sandals. "C'mon, Frito, come home." Sadness now, the voice cracking.

An engine muttered beyond the trees at the end of the block, and a squad car wheeled around the corner, its lights searching through the thin fog of the night. Concealed in a bush, Bob stood very still.

The boy waved and the car stopped. "There was a dogfight," the child said. "My dog is hurt!"

The two policemen got out of the car, their guns drawn. The pistols smelled cold. This was not the same pair that had shot at him in Morristown.

A flashlight worked the ground, coming to rest on the body of the dog.

"Frito!" The padding of small feet across grass, the sobs. There is no love like this, Bob thought bitterly, no love so noble or so true as that between a dog and a child. He hated himself. His only excuse was that life was sweet also to the wolf.

The flashlights began to poke about in the bushes. One of them swept the bush he was in, paused, came back. "Go inside, son."

"My dog—"

"It's the wolf. Go inside." The boy needed no more prompting. Bob heard the slippers pattering frantically on the dew-wet grass.

Inside the house the child's voice was raised:

"Mom, Dad, it's the wolf! It's here, it killed Frito!" Lights came on, joining other lights from houses where dogs were still barking. Bob had already understood that his end might come anywhere, down any innocent street, anytime. It could come down this street, now. He wanted to be reconciled to this but he could not accept it.

There was in him an almost overwhelmingly urgent need, one he had never felt in such a raw, terrible form. Bob the man might be tired and sad and ready to give up. But the wolf didn't feel that way at all. The wolf wanted to live, and he wanted it desperately. Bob was still his gentle old self. But the wolf had tasted blood; the wolf would kill to live.

The two cops had already radioed for help and lights were now coming on in virtually every house in the neighborhood. These wealthy families would probably be well armed. The police, with their notoriously inaccurate .38 Specials, might miss a quick target in the dark, but the hunting rifles and target pistols that were about to be brought into play would not miss.

"Work around to the other side of the hedge," one of the cops said softly. "It's just standing in there. Maybe it doesn't realize we mean it harm."

As soon as the second cop came around the bush Bob was going to be trapped. Without another thought he jumped up and took off down the street, causing a massive upsurge in barking. Doors slammed, people shouted. A shotgun roared, its pellets whining over Bob's head.

"I hit it," a man shouted, "I got the wolf!"

The tip of Bob's tail stung, but the old wound in his thigh was far more painful. His tail might have been grazed by a pellet, but as injuries went it was minor.

He dodged down a driveway and jumped a Cyclone fence into a yard

inhabited by two cats, which began shooting around like fur-covered hockey pucks, their tails fat with terror, their eyes blazing. Then he was through the yard and into the alley, trotting fast, but not running. This could be a long chase and he had to preserve his strength.

As he moved along he realized that he was not nearly as scared as he had been before. The wolf and the man had come together again. He had begun to be very interested in the process of combining his reason with his instinct, which was the key to preserving this unique life.

He smelled not only woods around here but flowing water. There was a stream where he could drink, maybe even enough woods to harbor a meal.

He trotted to the end of the street, throwing himself under a car as the police and a crowd of enraged citizens came puffing around the corner. Powerful lights plunged about, seeking the tawny spot of fur among the fallen leaves and the naked bushes. A little earlier in the season and it would have been a lot easier for him to hide. They passed him and he started off again, heading for the smell of the water.

Soon he came to the stream. There was nothing behind him to suggest danger—no smell of dogs, no off-the-road vehicles. He lowered his muzzle and began to lap the sweet, iron-tasting water.

A shot split a limb a few feet to his right. Far off in the street he saw a man with a rifle and some bulky equipment: a starlight scope.

Bob hastened up the middle of the brook, trying to run in the water as much as possible. He was worried about dogs being put to his scent. As a boy he had seen the Lone Ranger ride down streams to throw them off, a trick taught to him by Tonto.

He left the stream bed for a jumble of rocks. Another shot echoed in the woods, but farther away. Starlight scopes or not, people couldn't follow Bob into this tangle. Beyond the rocks the land sloped steeply upward. He was soon on a ridge, looking down over the wood he had just crossed. His ears and nose told him that he was alone. Without trained dogs, they were helpless.

Bob loped now, following an abandoned deer path. There wasn't a fresh scent along its whole length, not even droppings. The deer had died out on this ridge. As he moved he glimpsed a dark hulk off to the right. Then, through the trees, he saw that it was a house. This one was huge, a great, Gothic monster with a dozen chimneys and hundreds of blank leaded-glass windows.

He altered his course toward thicker woods. He wasn't precisely sure where he was anymore, just that he was moving in a northwesterly direction, and his nose told him that the human population around him was growing less dense.

He trotted steadily, easily, putting as much distance as he could between himself and the human world.

As the western sky began to grow light he lengthened his stride, trying for a final burst of speed before he stopped and hid until dark. He was also hungry.

Sniffing as he moved, he sought the rotted-grass odor of a rabbit or the garbage smell of rats. The woods seemed empty, though. He would have considered bugs, but it was past their season.

Was this to be his new life, scuttling through the woods searching for food or seeking escape? He wanted to lie back on a grassy hillside and think. He wanted to have a discussion with his son, or go out with his wife and talk and sip espresso.

He was the running wolf, the wolf of desolation, lonely wolf. To man he was now the gray cloud in the morning, the shadow worrying the bones. Overhead he heard a helicopter popping. He ignored it. They weren't going to spot him from that thing, but its presence meant they were really hungry to catch him.

The helicopter circled back, louder this time. As a precaution he stopped in a dense copse of hemlock. As far as he knew there was no way for them to detect him. Unless—what about infrared, or a starlight scope?

A bullet whizzed down through the trees, splitting a fat branch not three inches from his face.

There was no time to hesitate: he started running.

He tried to remember the terrain he had crossed. Were there any gullies that went down to the stream? No, he thought not. As a matter of fact, he didn't remember any place he might hide from starlight scopes or infrared, unless it was behind the waterfall he had seen on the creek. The waterfall was miles back, though. Slow as they were, even his human pursuers would have reached there by now.

He did the only thing that he could do, the thing any ordinary animal would do: he ran blindly, hoping for the best. Maybe he would reach deeper woodland, maybe he would be shot. All he could do was hope that his nasal and aural technology would somehow outwit man's sight technology.

The helicopter kept with him, fluttering like a massive insect in the glowing sky. From time to time a bullet smacked through the trees.

When he mounted a rise, he knew exactly why he was alone here. The wind was blowing from behind him or he would have known much sooner. Before him there was a pit full of rusty steel drums, some of them leaking stinking orange goop, others intact, still others surrounded by scums of green jelly. This close he could smell them despite the direction of the wind, and the odors were awful: powerful acidic scents as if of Clorox mixed with gasoline, airplane glue, and roach spray. A rivulet trickled sadly along, scummed with silver oil, making its way through tired, brown grass. There was a smell of death: two buzzard corpses lay twisted beside the fulminating ruins of a 'coon that had apparently dropped dead while drinking the water. Then the buzzards had died while eating the 'coon. Nature is designed to work in cycles. It dies in cycles, too.

The dump seemed to have no borders. Bob had no time to get around it. He would have to cross it, out in the open, the helicopter on his back. There was no reason to wait; caution would gain him nothing. He moved into the clear space. The land was just being touched by the gray light that precedes the dawn. The eastern sky was now a faint green, Venus low on the horizon. Grackles and jays were beginning to scream in the woods; the feathers of a dove lay in a puddle that Bob carefully avoided.

Inside the dump the smell was shocking. The ground was spongy and his paw prints quickly filled with scum. The odor reached deep into his muzzle and clung there. He was sure that it was in itself poisonous, it was so strong.

Then the helicopter came in low, raising a mist from the standing pools. Bob ran hard. He was more afraid of getting exposed to that mist than he was of the bullets that now came steadily from the copter. In his mind's eye there was an image, maybe from a *National Geographic* special or a Sierra Club program, of a wolf seen from above clambering through a snowbank, being chased down by a helicopter. And then the wolf's head explodes and it tumbles back down the bank, its tail gyrating like a broken propeller.

Behind him there was a terrific thud. For a mad hopeful instant he thought the helicopter had crashed, then he felt heat on his back. One of the bullets had caused a drum of chemicals to explode. So much for their infrared scope now. That blaze would white it out. Unfortunately, dawn was on their side. Shimmering lines of light were spreading from behind low eastern clouds. Bob could hear birds rising from the trees on the distant horizon, and could

smell even above the stink of this dismal place a sterling, rich burst of autumn breeze, the beautiful dry odor of the hanging leaves, the sweetness being exhaled from the ground.

Another drum of chemical exploded. Intense heat made Bob skitter forward, then gallop. The whole place started thudding and popping. The fire was furious and spreading wildly. The helicopter rose into a billowing mushroom of orange-black smoke and disappeared off toward Morris-town. Bob wondered if the citizens of that worthy community even knew that this mess was here, leaching slowly into their water supply. Well, they were certainly going to find out.

He managed to stay ahead of the flames by running himself hard, finally reaching a high Cyclone fence. He ran along beside it, thinking for an awful moment that it was going to trap him. But it hadn't been maintained; he managed to go through a hole as big as a Lincoln.

He rushed back into the scrubby woods. The area had been logged within the past ten years, and the hemlocks and white pine were still saplings, and stunted by the near presence of the toxic dump. He kept moving, always choosing the uplift of the land, seeking less populated regions.

He was tired and hungry and wanted badly to hunt. As if on command, his nose and ears promptly became hypersensitive. All he could smell, though, was birds. They seemed to be more able than ground dwellers to survive near the chemicals, probably because they spent relatively little time exposed to the poison. He'd seen one of the coydogs in Central Park catch a bat, but he didn't think his own paws were adapted to such extraordinary skills. Nature had created coydogs in the past fifty years or so, breeding the new species from the best of the dogs and the coyotes. The coydogs belonged to the future. They were smart enough and supple enough and adaptable enough to live right in the middle of the human world. People had them in their backyards and never knew it. In the small hours the Central Park packs probably hunted midtown from the Hudson to the East River, and nobody saw them, not ever.

Bob stopped long enough to lift one of his paws and examine it. It wasn't going to grasp anything. The toes were long, but not as long as those of the coydog. And he could not move them independently. He would eat no birds.

There was a flutter and a sudden pang along his spine. Snapping, he twisted around just in time to see a jay flying off with a tuft of his fur in its beak. As a child he'd disliked them because they got to his feeders and scared

away the songbirds.

To rid himself of the jay Bob moved into a thicker copse. Screaming, the bird flew off.

Then Bob became aware of a pungent and absolutely magnificent aroma. As it filled his muzzle he trembled with delight. He was hungry, very hungry, and he smelled bacon.

The odor was warm, too, meaning that the bacon was being fried nearby. He followed the scent up a low rise and through a thick copse of saplings. It wasn't long before he saw a ruined cabin with smoke coming from the chimney. The roof was half-off, the walls were peeling tarpaper, there was no glass in the windows. Bob approached warily. He could hear the bacon sizzling, smell the two people clearly. Bob was a reticent man, but he could not ignore the fact that he smelled the odors of human sex. There was also an odd smell of fresh earth. He stole forward on his belly, trying to ignore what he was smelling, all except the bacon.

Then he heard a female voice, softly pleading. "Please, please ..." He pricked his ears. Something told him that this was not right. Close by the cabin wall, he could hear deep male breathing, very soft female breathing. It was almost the gasping of a child. Bob raised himself up on the window ledge and looked in. There was a man of perhaps forty frying bacon and eggs in a skillet on the hearth. Behind him there were some dirty, crumpled sheets on the dirt floor of the cabin, sheets that stank of sweat and the uses of night. Bob was horrified to see, hunched into a corner, a terrified and naked girl of perhaps thirteen. Her arms clutched her beginning breasts, her legs were twisted around one another.

Around the front of the cabin Bob saw a hole, a shovel lying beside it. On the man's hip was a .45 automatic. But for his pistol belt, he was as naked as the child.

Bob had never seen such a depraved situation. The poor girl was in awful trouble. This vicious monster had obviously raped her repeatedly. Bob was no longer one to waste time about these - things. He leaped at once through the window and knocked the man on his side.

"Aw! Holy shit!"

He grabbed at his gun but Bob bit his wrist hard. The man yelped, twisting and turning until Bob felt his own teeth scraping bone. Then there was a crunch and the man shrieked. The girl sat absolutely still, staring. With a snarl the man came at Bob, swinging his closed left fist. The blow connected

with Bob's nose, causing him a fierce blast of pain. He screamed, thrusting his head up, snapping, trying to reach the man's throat. Instead he connected with his chest, took a gouge out of his skin and fell back. The man also fell, but in the opposite direction, landing with a high scream on his dangling right arm. He kicked at Bob, who was trying to straddle him.

The girl, who had seemed almost catatonic, now rose from her corner and moved to the hearth. The man grabbed Bob's muzzle with his good hand while he forced his bad one to fumble for his pistol. It was no good; Bob was heavy and took full advantage of his weight. Again and again he hurled himself against the struggling man.

At the hearth, the girl took the skillet in her hands. Bob felt a blow from the man to the side of his head. Another one, much harder, landed on his skull. The man was built like a tank. Despite the pain of a broken wrist, he was becoming a wheezing, furious juggernaut. He crashed into Bob's side, throwing him to the ground. A spike of pure fury made Bob roar. He dug his teeth into the man's floppy belly, feeling the little pops as his incisors broke through the flesh to the fat within.

There came a clang. The man sank down. He and Bob were both covered with sizzling bacon and eggs. The girl stood over the inert form of her captor, the skillet held in both hands. Then she dropped it and, grabbing a dirty sheet, took off into the woods, looking like a ghost as she swept off among the trees.

Bob ate the bacon, which was only a little burned, and lapped up the eggs.

Chapter Seventeen

WITH A DETERMINED JAB CINDY STUCK ANOTHER RED pin in the map, at the location of the smoldering dump site northwest of Morristown. "I'm convinced," she said to the others. "It was him."

Monica still disagreed. "The police say it started during a high-speed chase. They don't mention Bob."

"Of course not, he got away. But look at the media. 'Killer Wolf Invades Silk Stocking Suburb.' We know Bob's in the area. Who else would they have been chasing out in the woods? The poor guy is heading directly away from civilization. He's trying to escape, he must be so scared!"

Joe Running Fox stared at the map. "My guess is he'll go back into the Poconos, up through the Shawangunks to the Catskills, then on into the Appalachians and Canada." Monica stared at Cindy, a slight smile flickering across her face. "I'll bet he's going to the hunt club!"

"To meet me," Cindy said. She even thought it might be true. Even Bob had the occasional flash of practical insight.

Joe Running Fox put his hand on Kevin's shoulder. "What about you, Kevin?" Her son was comfortable with this man. Joe Running Fox had told Kevin about the Way of Silence and won his heart. The two of them had spent hours together sitting face-to-face, totally silent, their eyes locked. Last night Kevin had told Cindy that it was the most intimate experience he had ever had. "We can all see each other's souls any time we want. We just have to look at each other. Not for a minute or two, but the way the Fox does it, for a couple of hours. Then you see the soul."

She had managed to share her eyes with Kevin for about three minutes. Her love for her vulnerable, inquisitive little boy had burned high, but there had come a point when what she saw, and what of her she felt was being seen, was simply too much to bear. You see the whole of a person's time in their eyes, from the first shattering infant moment to the darkening swells of age.

Over the past few days Kevin had undergone almost a complete change. Although children shine very bright, it doesn't take much to dull their fragile spark. More even than the loss of his father, Cindy thought, her son was suffering from a loss of his own faith in reality. His Kafka shelf was now abandoned. Instead he read the Bible. She found him absorbed in Ecclesiastes

and Job, and the Book of Revelation. He had also bought a book about multiple personalities, and another about the Spanish Inquisition. He sat sometimes for hours staring at this last book, looking at a facsimile of a poster announcing an auto-da-fe in which thirty people were to be burned at the stake.

His identification with the persecuted had always been deep, arising, she liked to feel, from the powerful ideals that animated her own and Bob's thinking. Yesterday she had discovered him staring into the eyes of a picture of a wolf. "Can you share anything with a photograph?" she had asked.

"No, but I think I know how the wolves captured Dad. They did it at the zoo. Remember that old wolf staring at him? That was when they captured him."

"It's that dangerous to look into another's eyes?"

"A child goes forth each morning, and whatever that child first sees, that thing he becomes."

How many times Bob had read Whitman's poem to Kevin. "Whitman was referring to a change of spirit, not a physical change."

"How do we know that? Maybe he was talking about a real change. I think Kafka was talking about a real change in the *Metamorphosis*."

"Whitman was writing about a child. Dad isn't a child."

"You never accepted that a child is exactly what he was. In some ways I'm more mature than Dad."

Fox came over. He folded his arms, looked down at Kevin, who had tossed aside the wolf photo and was examining a woodcut of a man having his feet burned off in an Inquisitional dungeon. "Few people are more mature than your father," Fox said. "Maybe now, nobody."

"You never knew him," Kevin replied in an intensely charged voice. "He could get excited about the same flower every time he saw it, day after day, until it died. Then he forgot it so completely it might as well never have existed. Dad had no mature emotions."

Cindy could not agree. "He loved us."

"We frightened him, I think. Life was too much for him. And we drove him. We created the conditions that enabled this to happen."

It was grief that was behind these hard words. His brilliance was working against him now. Cindy sensed that what he really wanted was to cuddle up in her lap and cry.

Fox might have known it, too. He touched the boy's cheek. One thing the

man knew was when not to talk.

In the silence Monica drew a line on the map, connecting the red pins. Beyond the last pin she continued the line to the hunt club deep in the Catskills. "Maybe we ought to just go up there and wait for him."

"Unwise," Fox said. "We're better off tracking him. If he doesn't go to the club, we won't miss him that way."

"You can do this?"

Fox nodded. "I can track a wolf, if I can find the trail."

"And you're sure you can? I'd hate to be traipsing around Ulster County while Bob sits at the hunt club. He might not wait long. It's bird season and we got a huge stocking assessment, so the place is full of grouse and therefore hunters."

Cindy interrupted. "We'll split up. You go to the club, Monica. The three of us will do the tracking."

"I want to do it alone. With the boy."

Cindy wouldn't have that, not for a moment. She wasn't going to agonize the days away at the club. The miseries of camping and hiking would keep her preoccupied. Anything was better than the ordeal of waiting. "I'm going."

"Women have other power. Not this."

"Oh, nonsense. I won't hear that. He's my husband."

"I won't track with a woman." She almost couldn't believe what she heard. The man was worse than a chauvinist, he was an unreformed Neanderthal. "You have no conscience," she said. She'd always found personal discrimination surprising and confusing. His eyes were brown and flint hard. She pleaded on her own behalf. "He'll respond to me. If he knows I'm there, he'll be much more likely to stop running."

"His son will be there. A man will do anything for his son."

That was it. He'd have to learn here and now who was in control of things. "If you imagine for one moment that my boy is going without me, you're very much mistaken, Mr. Fox. You're not lord and master of this house, no man is, not even my poor husband, God help him. I intend to go out there into that wilderness and find him."

"A northeastern second-growth forest is hardly wilderness, ma'am. I want my medicine to work, and with a woman around it might not. It's no reflection on you. It's just the damned Indian culture. Woman has her role and man has his, and the two are different. Equal but different. I know it's another stupid Indian idea, but I can't help respecting it, dummy that I am."

"The hell it's an Indian idea. I don't hold with all this idealization of the old Indian culture. You say you've got Mohawk blood? The Mohawks considered their women slaves."

"They loved them. It was all stupidity, though—"

"Shut up, and can that false self-deprecation. It makes you seem like a bigger ass than you probably are. Now, let's quit bickering and lay our plans. The more we talk, the farther away Bob gets."

Fox didn't say much more after that. It took only a few minutes to plan their journey. Largely it was a matter of making sure that the available hiking boots passed Fox's meticulous inspection. "I thought Indians used moccasins," Kevin said. "I don't mean to be condescending, but it is what I thought."

"Boots. Indians used moccasins because they couldn't afford anything better, not to mention the fact that the dopes never invented the shoe on their own. Indian high-tech consisted of beaded wampum. Life was diseased, dirty, violent, and short."

Cindy wondered if the man was trying to be insufferable, or if he was so involved in his posturing that he really couldn't see himself at all. She needed him to track Bob, and she wasn't going to let anything stand in the way of that.

"We have no camping equipment," she said, "beyond the boots and Kevin's sleeping bag."

"I need a blanket. What do you need?"

It was a dare, she supposed. At best she found it boring. "I need everything I can get. A tent, preferably air-conditioned and equipped with a full kitchen and all necessary supplies. Why?"

"Just asking. So I'll bring two blankets."

"Waterproof."

He nodded. "Let's go."

"You're kidding. Right now, at eight o'clock at night?"

"We can stay in a motel tonight. In the morning we start. Early, four A.M."

She found herself eating a fatty breakfast in an all-nighter on Route 202 at 3:30 in the morning. Her head was pounding. Poor Kevin looked like a corpse, he was pale and very slow. Cindy made sure he drank a couple of cups of tea. Fox advised a big breakfast, and she obliged with scrambled eggs, toast, sausage, 40% Bran Flakes, coffee, and a slice of melon that tasted like dishwasher detergent. "You can eat," Fox said. "That's good. Once we're

tracking, there won't be much time for food, and game's scarce these days."

"We'll hunt?"

"I make traps. You'll see. They work good."

The detailed area map showed a road ringing the dump site. It was a lozenge-shaped two hundred acres of smoldering, noxious ruins when they arrived, their headlights dispelling the faint glow that persisted from the fire. The car moved slowly along, Fox peering out into the dark as he drove.

"Somewhere on this side, I figure." He drove for a time in silence. "I hope your husband had a good sense of direction. He's not a fool, is he? He wouldn't go south?"

Bob was not a fool in the sense that Fox meant. She did not think he would go south. He knew the direction of the wilderness in New York. His love of it had taken him deep into the Catskills and the Adirondacks. If only he could get away from civilization, he might well have a chance to survive. "He knows the country."

"Can Dad kill things with his mouth, like rabbits? And I wonder if he can eat a raw rabbit?"

They were upsetting questions. "I have no idea how your father is coping. I can't even begin to imagine it."

"They acquire the secrets of the beast," Fox said. "That's why men try shifting in the first place. They want to learn the secrets of the animals. Such secrets used to be very valuable."

"The cave paintings at Lascaux," Kevin said. "They don't show any people because the people are the animals."

"It's an ancient way. In all my life, in all the legends I've known, I've heard of only one other case where it really happened. Where somebody really, *really* changed into an animal. And that was many generations ago." He stopped the car. His hands went toward Cindy, took hers. "I want to thank you. You've given me a chance to meet this man in person, the man who was seduced by the wolves."

The three of them got out of the car. Cindy could see absolutely no trace of him in the dark blotchs of undergrowth that hugged the ground this side of the woods.

"There." Fox gestured toward a place that seemed no different from the others. "He went in right there. He was moving fast, you can see that by the number of leaves that are broken." Bending low, he hurried over to the spot. "He's favoring his right rear leg, toes digging in left to right. That says he's

got a thigh wound. The way the left foot is hitting, I'd say the bone's not broken. It's a flesh wound, probably infected. Hurting him, but not too dangerous. He's moving very strongly for an animal that's lost weight."

"Now, how can you possibly tell that?"

"The paper said he was weighed in at one-sixty. These tracks in this dirt—he weighs more like one-fifty." He stood staring at the ground, thinking.

"Where is he?" Kevin asked.

"Your father is well away from here. He passed this spot at least twenty-four hours ago."

"The dump fire started at five-fifteen yesterday morning. That's when he was here."

"Well, nearly twenty-four hours then. With his thigh and general weakness, he's covering about twenty miles a day. That's if he hunts on the run. If he can."

"What do you mean, if he can?"

"If he has the skill. You're hunting like he's got to hunt, running the animal down, it doesn't go in a straight line. It goes in circles, backtracks, anything to get away from you. Once he's killed and eaten something, then he has to reorient himself and cover lost ground. So we can assume he's getting maybe fifteen miles a day out of it. Moving sunup to sundown, maybe a couple of hours at night. My guess is he's about thirty-five miles from here."

She didn't want to ask the next question; she felt Bob slipping through her fingers. But she did ask, she had to ask. "What are our chances of catching up with him?"

"We can cover maybe fifteen miles a day. Twenty, if we work like mad. We don't have the four legs, that's our trouble. And we're tall. The undergrowth will slow us down."

Maybe they should all go to the hunting camp and just hope for the best. Bob would know the camp was crowded, though. There was a good chance that he would bypass it. He was hurt, she knew he was scared. If it was her, she'd be desperately unhappy and in a state of extreme panic. She would not make rational or courageous decisions. Her tendency would be to get to the most isolated place she could find, and hide there until she died.

It had occurred to her that he might commit suicide. She could only hope that the thought wouldn't cross his mind. Sometimes, though, he had fallen into deep, deep troughs. His despair was pitiful, at once bitter and full of sardonic humor. When he got an especially good poem back from one of the

magazines, or endured some epic business humiliation, he could drop into one of those states.

She kicked a stone.

"There might always be another sighting," Fox said. "You never know."

Wave after wave of sorrow broke in Cindy's soul. She hunched her shoulders, fighting back the tears until her throat felt like it was being wrapped in leather thongs. Then she burst out with huge, gasping sobs. Kevin clapped his hands over his ears. Fox stood impassive. When she stopped, he merely headed into the woods. They moved along easily at first, passing between tall trees and through stands of mountain laurel.

Soon Cindy became uneasy. They seemed to be going in an almost perfectly straight line. This was fine, but it didn't strike her as the sort of thing Bob would do. He'd get confused, double back, fall down gullies, end up at the edge of cliffs. But she had to trust Fox; he was the expert.

Even so—Bob in the woods? He'd practically gotten himself killed trying to track wolves in Minnesota back in the early seventies. And then there was that camping trip where he'd forgotten the matches and failed to pack the tent in the tent pack and brought the wrong hiker's map and missed the bus, and then laid their campsite at the edge of a pretty waterfall which had become a raging torrent during the ten-hour downpour that had taken place that night.

And the poor guy was out here with no hands, trying to keep himself alive with half the population of the northeast cheerfully hunting him down.

Lost in her thoughts, she wasn't aware that she had fallen behind until Fox was standing in front of her. "Look, Mrs. Duke, we can't keep breaking stride for you. Either you keep up or you don't keep up. The car's half an hour behind us. You can go back if you want to."

"No. I'll keep up."

He started again, twisting and turning through the trees like some sort of ghost, followed by Kevin, who was almost as swift. "I've been thinking," Kevin said as he moved, "we need to hit a town and buy a Walkman. One of us has to be listening to the news at all times in case there's another sighting reported."

Fox grunted. Twigs were scraping Cindy's head, she had leaf dust in her right eye, she'd practically shattered her knee slipping on a toadstool the size of a pancake, and now she was tumbling head over heels down a ravine she hadn't even noticed.

She did a complete somersault. When she saw the top of the forest rush

past, leaves against a pale pink streak of dawn, she forced herself to relax totally. Then she hit with a thud. There was a jagged rock right under the center of her back, but she had managed to loosen up enough so that she flopped over it rather than breaking in two. "I'm good, no problem," she shouted. Then she was on her feet and up the ravine and running to catch them.

As he talked Kevin hopped from stone to mossy stone in a little brook.

"Listen," Fox said. "I think the water has a message for us. He passed this way. The brook remembers him."

Cindy could not keep her mind on the water. She was more interested in her own ragged breathing and the excruciating pain at the back of her left heel, where her boot seemed to be grinding down to bone. She flopped back in a bed of leaves and mushrooms, and stared up through amazingly tall trees. It was now full dawn, and the orange and red leaves were clearly etched against a blue sky.

When she listened, the brook did indeed speak to her. She sort of understood what Fox meant, that the water had a message. It wasn't a direction, a piece of information, it was another kind of message, vibrant with obscurely useful meaning.

"I tell you one thing," Fox said, "the way this water smells, there's a town upstream."

"I don't smell anything. The water's fresh."

"You don't know the meaning of fresh water, then," Fox replied. "I've drunk perfectly fresh water. Bathed in it. The more filth you can smell, the farther along you are on the road home. That's the message of this water."

"What he's saying, Mama, is that we need to get to the town."

Nonlogical thinking was what they called it. Or was it nonsequential thinking? Cindy sighed and got up. "I hope there really is a town."

"Hell, just through those trees is a gigantic condo development. We're in New Jersey, ma'am, one of the most densely populated states in the nation. The only reason we don't see it is that Bob avoided it. This forest is a thin strip of green between armies of housing developments, believe me."

Half an hour later they were walking along a road. A mini-mart stood next to an Exxon. Rite-Aid Drugs and Wendy's had occupied the center of town, hard on to the lawn and garden center and the drive-in bank. Kevin picked out an inexpensive Walkman at Rite-Aid and Cindy was elected to listen with one earphone.

When they started back to the woods to reconnect with Bob's trail, she found herself walking to the drone of WINS, all news all the time. The Brooklyn-Queens Expressway was jammed from Grand Central Parkway to the Gowanus Canal, due to a disabled tractor-trailer. It was now 9:14. In sports, the Oakland A's had beaten the Orioles.

Torture, torture, torture. Slog through the woods while listening to this drivel. She was bored. She wanted a cup of tea and a good book. She wanted to lie down. She wanted to cuddle Bob up tight and make love to him.

"In other news, the escaped wolf has been sighted along the New York-New Jersey border. Waldemar town Supervisor Richland Frye and his daughter were camping at Braemar Park Site 12 when the wolf leaped in the window of their shelter, menaced Mr. Frye, and knocked him unconscious. Young Miss Frye wrapped herself in a sheet and ran the four miles to Waldemar to give the warning. Mr. Frye was treated and released at North Orange Hospital in Waldemar."

Cindy was sitting on the ground by the time the story was over, her hands pressed against her ears in order to drown out her son's frantic questions.

"It's him, there's been another sighting!" She repeated the story.

"Waldemar. My God, your husband's doing damn good. He must be covering more like twenty-five, thirty miles in a day."

To make a long story miserably short, it now became necessary to hike all the way back to the car in order to drive to Waldemar.

Lying in the backseat, inert with exhaustion, Cindy vowed that she was going to take control of this expedition. Fox wanted to do what he was best at, which was track. But good strategy and good detective work were more important. If only she could anticipate Bob's own thinking, she felt sure she could put herself in his way instead of trying to chase him, which was obviously hopeless.

Waldemar. He was now traveling due north. The question was, what did he know about the region he was entering? He would be bound to use that knowledge to his own advantage.

Her mind returned to the early seventies, to those ridiculous camping trips.

She knew. Just like that, she knew where to intercept him. Sitting up, she told Fox. When Bob got there—and he would get there—she would be waiting;

Chapter Eighteen

A HUGE WILLOW TREE GAVE BOB HIS NIGHT. NEVER, not even as a child, had he felt as small and vulnerable as he did now, sheltering in the tree's silent, protective fronds.

He dreamed of deep woods, the trees stalwart and concealing friends, and in his vague, shadowy dreams he ran after slow, fat rabbits. Then he dreamed of an enormous old cruise ship, and he was his old self. He and Cindy were taking a cruise through cold, islandless seas in the dead of winter aboard this ramshackle vessel. Like the other passengers she was dressed to the elegant beckoning of the past; she wore white flowing silk, the whispering evening clothes of the turn of the century. She smelled like wysteria, and indeed her jewels were their color, cunning glass earrings and necklace believed by the awed, hissing passengers to be priceless.

Bob was restless on the ship, frightened of its rough progress and the deep clanking of its engines. In his exploration of the dun ballroom, the weathered dining room with its frayed chairs and chipped Spode, the algal swimming pool, the cold, musty cabins with their sagging beds and their hair-choked bathtub drains, he became less and less sure of the vessel.

Then the others went parading in to a dinner of grapefruit halves with withered maraschino cherries and some sort of very dubious curry, chicken or rabbit, cat or rat. Bob found the fourth level, the deck where the crew lived. It was a brown, awful, rotted mess crawling with rats, spread with feces and bits of unidentifiable rot, and from its portholes he could see that the bows of the ship were plunging so deep that water was pouring down the smokestacks.

The crew were worse than zombies, listless, their vigor escaped with the last heat of their bodies. Some of them lying in their bunks had become almost flat, and when you touched them, their skin turned to dust.

They had to leave the ship. To get to the dining room Bob had to crawl through a squishy, musky tunnel. It disgusted him, all the intimate wriggling that was necessary, and the sins of the woman, her exhaustion, her poor diet, her fear, were contained in the stink of the canal.

Emerging, his tuxedo flowing with a slick substance, he confronted Cindy, telling her the truth about the ship, and saying that they had to get off at the next island.

"But there aren't any islands, and this ship won't sink." She surrounded him with her smooth arms and buried his face in softness and wysteria.

Then he heard water gulping in the bowels of the ship and ragged, exhausted cries.

He awoke to a rushing morning. In the night a northern storm had come, bringing with it long gray arms of clouds and icy flecks in the air. The fronds of the willow whipped his broad head with armies of yellow leaves. As he staggered to his feet, unaware yet of hunger and thirst and pain, this was one of those moments when he thought he understood some elusive secret, when perhaps a poem could come from him that would be nearly good, the very lines of the ship rendered into words. But then he became aware of the stunning, overwhelming beauty of autumn's smells, how very subtle and rich were the aromas of the ground, the leaves, the fust of mushrooms, the dirt, the sour little smells of insects, and through it all a wild freshness, the north wind coming down the Catskills.

He knew exactly where he was. This morning he would take the path up past Veerkeeder Kill Falls on the south face of the Shawangunks and proceed into the fastness of the chain of preserves and parks that protect the mountains and all that live upon them. As long as fifteen years ago he had come up this very trail with Cindy, taking her camping, trying to teach her his own techniques for living off the land. She never learned, though; to her, camping consisted of hauling the whole twentieth century into some corner of the woods and re-creating it there, with a wood fire for effect only. One cooked on a portable alcohol stove. One ate dried food reconstituted in boiling water. One drank not from the fresh-flowing streams but of flat city water brought in canteens and bags.

Bob sniffed the air. There wasn't a human smell in it. It seemed almost as if his body was becoming wider and bigger, encompassing more space. As he left mankind, the world opened out to him. Wolves are creatures of small society. They are not like ants and men, living in vast hives, entirely surrounded by their own kind and odors. On the wind Bob smelled ice, leaves, the bloom of the witch-hazel plant, cold stone, water. There was hardly a single detectable tang of smoke, no undertone of chemicals, little odor of human bodies, no smell of cold steel and oil, the sign of the gun.

He felt exultant—and he wanted to tell Cindy. He wanted so badly to say to her that he'd—but he couldn't say anything. He couldn't talk to her, couldn't share his life with her, never again.

Cindy. It was the most beautiful of all the words he could no longer say. Dear, sweet Cindy.

He moved off in the predawn, traveling slowly at first, then, as his thigh loosened up, going faster, slipping under the low-reaching boughs of saplings, through stands of hemlock, upward and upward. After an hour of steady trotting he came to Veerkeeder Kill, which was merry and fast, speeding down from its mountainside. The water was full of iron and seemed almost to catch in his teeth, leaving them vibrating. It was fiercely cold, so cold that it seemed to clarify his breathing even more than had the air. His sense of smell grew ever more powerful.

Raising his head, sniffing deep to find a rabbit or some other small creature, he smelled something that made his heart twist on itself and his tail droop.

It was her. Unmistakable. She was somewhere up on the mountain. He threw back his head, his thoughts dark with recognition and longing. She had been thinking and planning very carefully, to anticipate his route.

He wanted to get to her, to feel her arms around him, to take her and give himself to her.

His mind whispered, God help us, and the wolf threw back its head and howled through the rushing autumn morning.

Her scent lay close to the ground, wrapped in other smells, Kevin's humid freshness, and the old, smoky odor of another body. Had she hired a guide? It was certainly possible. After her experiences camping with him, her distrust of the woods had become profound.

As he climbed the path beside the spraying falls he became more and more uneasy. What would happen when they met? Could there be a real relationship? He imagined himself sitting in the living room, Kevin reading to him in that fluttery boy's voice of his. Or his dinner, pretty on one of the yellow checked place mats and a china plate, on which might be beef stew with a side of endive salad and a bowl of red wine, all neatly laid in a corner of the kitchen floor. There would be signals, nod to turn a page when he was reading by himself, a couple of taps to open a door, and it was all a pipe dream because in fact there would be no money and all the problems with the police and the ASPCA and heaven only knew who else.

But Cindy was a terrific person, she could solve problems. The only thing she'd never been able to do was hold down a job. She was too stubborn and proud to get along with bosses.

He climbed so easily, a free wolf in the air of morning, that he reached the top of the falls far more quickly than he had as a man, and with no gasping, no scrabbling, no skinned hands or dubious pains in his knees. This body was wonderful to feel and be.

Now their odor became strong. His nose directed him to their sleeping forms. Going softly closer, he inhaled the most amazingly intimate odors from them. He could smell everything, their sweat, the grease of the hamburgers they had eaten for supper, the light acidic content of his son's stomach, the fouler odor of the man's belly with its must of digested beer, and Cindy's contents, sour dairy: she'd had ice cream for dessert. He loved her harder; when she was sad she ate ice cream.

He did not want her to be sad.

With the total clarity that these things sometimes bring, he knew exactly what he had to do. There just couldn't be any question about it. This woman, this poor little boy, were his family. That meant more to him than life itself, than anything that had transpired. His skin crawled when he remembered his desire to commit suicide. How great a sin that would have been against these beloved sleepers. Look at them: Cindy with that amazingly pure skin of hers. How madly he had loved that skin. He could smell it now in heady detail. The lives of scented beasts were so intimate.

Odors that might once have seemed foul to him no longer seemed at all bad, not even the sour, unwashed stink of the man who was with them. Odors were not characterizable as good and bad. They were too complex and interesting. Just the smell of that man—he couldn't even count the number of separate odors involved. There were thousands. A whole art must exist in potential around the selection and orchestration of scents.

Still, though, as much as he enjoyed his wolf, it was time to make a final and heroic effort on behalf of real life. As soon as he had smelled Cindy there came to him the definite sense that the wolf was on some level less real than the human had been. It was a wonderful body, true, but it was also primitive, totally unsuited to a man of poetry and thought. He, who sometimes spoke well, had been reduced to a rude state indeed, given this minor voice, capable of no formed words, and the crude paws for hands, paws that could never write a line.

And yet he was in here, full of thoughts that ought to be written, love and hope to speak, defenses and challenges, all made of words. He wanted to love his wife, to love his son, to somehow apologize to them.

When the man with them moved, Bob knew he was awake. How long had he been lying there watching him snuffle his family? A great moon face came oozing out of the blankets, rimmed by black hair. The eyes were tiny and as dark as obsidian. What was this man, Hispanic? No, Bob knew an Indian when he saw one.

An Indian. How interesting that Cindy had gotten an Indian. Where in the world had she found him, this man who moved so slowly that it was hard for wolf eyes to follow him?

Then he was on his feet. A swift, watery motion. Scary. Up close, human beings were tall and alien, their heads so far away, their faces terrifying with knowledge.

The Indian stood absolutely still. His face, though, was dark with staring. He was absolutely concentrated on Bob. His stillness made him hard to keep in the eye; this man knew something of wolves.

One reason that men were so scary was obviously that they were dangerous. There was another reason, though, one it was hard to put into words. It had to do with the very animation of their faces. They looked too aware. And he knew they were: the human mind has gotten lost; it has strayed too far from its wild origins. Animals were distinguished by their concentration on what was in front of them. The human mind went back and forth, in and out, complicating. It could not find anymore the shadow upon the grass.

The wind soughed across the mountain, the falls sounded like glass. In Bob's nostrils were the smells of water and stone, and of his beloved family. The light had taken on a rosy grayness, and a sparrow twittered nearby. Why in this sweet morning was the man moving like that?

He wanted to kiss Cindy, to hold her, to feel her snuggling against his breast.

The Indian came closer, oozing like heat-softened plastic, his arms and legs seeming almost jointless. "Shape-shifter," he whispered. "Shape-shifter, please tell me your secret."

To calm the man, Bob sat firmly down on his haunches. He let his jaw drop and his tongue hang out. His face was not very mobile but he thought he must be smiling. He yapped once, trying to awaken his family.

"Shh! Tell me before they open their eyes. Think what it would mean to my people, shape-shifter. Think what it would mean!" He squatted before Bob, his hands open and pleading. His face tightened, his lips drew back. Bob

could see his skull, and his death, and the long quiet years in the ground. He had a clear notion: The body belongs to the ground, and the ground knows it. "Please, shape-shifter, give me a sign." He screwed his eyes closed, his hands were begging claws. "Think what it would mean to us. We Indians could change into wolves and foxes and deer, and we could go back to the forest!"

Bob was startled enough to growl sharply. The man's eyes bulged wide open. "You—you understood?" The wind swept down, ruffling Bob's fur, making the man squint. "Snow's coming!"

Kevin leaped out of his sleeping bag and threw his arms around his father's neck, kissing him wildly, his tears filled with the smell of the ocean and his skin with the fragile scent of youth. Then Cindy was there, too, and she kissed the side of his muzzle, his lips with careful, determined sensuality. "You never run from me again," she said, her voice going low. "Never!"

He looked at her. Before the knowledge that he now faced, he felt ashamed.

He could not live in the human world, not as a wolf, not as a dog. As much as he missed Cindy and Kevin, he didn't even want to become human again.

You, wolf, will be back to making cold calls from that stuffy office, the man at the bottom of the Empire State Building.

He snarled at the Indian, who had produced a little straw packet, which he was opening.

"We've tried shifting a million times. I used to do it when I was a kid. I wanted to be anything except an Indian. If I'd been able, I think I'd willingly have turned myself into a lawn mower. As it was, I tried for hawk, for eagle, for wolf, for deer, for panther. All I got was burned hands when my ritual fire blew up."

He spoke as if Bob could not understand him. Bob had gone up on all fours, and made sure he was between the people and the mountain. His instinct wouldn't let him be comfortable with the falls behind and three human beings blocking escape.

He was ashamed of himself when the notion of simply trotting off flashed through his mind. The Indian could probably track him, but he could never catch him, not without an off-the-road vehicle or an airplane.

He heard Cindy muttering to herself, her words inarticulate. It would hurt so much less if she wouldn't pray. Her religion, like his, was indifference. They were lapsed Catholics, both of them, full of quiet pride that they had solved the algorithm of guilt so well that they could enjoy the croissant

Sundays that kept them home from church.

Until now Bob had not understood quite what it was that distanced him, from the church. A few days in the bright shock of a new form had made it all clear, though: on a planet that so obviously needed the love and protection of its most clever species, a heaven-directed church seemed anachronistic, its indifference to the welfare of the earth fundamentally invalidating.

When the Indian began shaking a carved stick over a fire, a fine pin of unease entered Bob's mind. Religion may or may not be invalid, but rituals aren't hollow. In the hands of the believer, the ritual is a powerful force indeed.

On its deepest level Bob's change had been a matter of the wall against this kind of belief breaking down in him. His first transformation, in the hotel in Atlanta, may indeed have been imaginary. Because it was so realistic, though, he had believed in it. After that, everything else had become inevitable.

He stared transfixed at the Indian's preparations. Western culture had destroyed the Indians because it had destroyed their ability to believe in their own magic.

All the Indian had to do was to transform Bob back into a man and all of his magic would work for him again, because his success would strengthen his belief. The tribes, broken in spirit, would spring back to life.

At the end of the stick that danced in the Indian's hand was a tiny dancing man. He stared at the naked thing. Was it wax or real? It had no face, or perhaps the face was simply too small for wolf eyes to see.

He thought of the ritual deaths of kings. To give the Indian back his birthright, the wolf would have to die. The man at the end of the stick danced, a slow and regular dance, as graceful as the drifting of a finger in the sea. He was a weed of a little man, down at the murky bottom.

His arms rose and fell, his legs flashed in the spreading light. Kevin cried aloud, clutching down into the folds of his mother. A crow landed nearby. Bob smelled rabbits on the wind, and wondered how far away they might be.

He didn't wonder long though. The Indian kept chanting, shaking his stick, and Bob knew that there was another smell in the air, a human smell, small and intense. There was a suffering, real man at the end of the stick. He wept as he danced, the same awful, universal mourning that made Lewis Carroll's Mock Turtle such a figure of childhood dread. The weeping without reason and therefore without consolation, reflected in the tears of the Indian.

Bob felt the movement within and knew that the man was striving to

escape as the wolf had escaped. He sensed the crow alight from its food gathering, sensed the rabbits across the mountain grow still, sensed the failure of the wind and the stopping of the leaves. He had known a body that saw by eyes and one that saw by nose. It was difficult to imagine how the planet saw and felt and knew: the whole of life was its mind, its nerves, its vision. The earth was a great cyclopean eye rolling through space, looking out into the void. What awful consciousness had urged the spawning of man, or more, had ordered him to become what he had become?

He felt anger rushing through the stillness. No wonder the tiny man cried, no wonder the Indian cried, no wonder his son hid in his mother and the crow became silent. Within him the man rose and clambered, stuffed himself into the shape of the wolf, and he felt his muscles longing to stretch, his skin longing to shed its stuffy fur and spread to the caressing air. His stomach did a grotesque turn. Green-flecked vomit burst out of his mouth and he stood tottering, a tall, naked man who could not help but dance to the command of an Indian with a stick.

The Indian threw the stick down and screamed. Cindy cried out, Kevin shrieked, and Bob saw a chance of madness in the poor child's eyes.

His scream, his father's anguish, spread through the silence as quickly as an atomic expansion. Then, as quickly as a trap taking a rat, the wolf snapped back around Bob and he fell down, his jaw working, growls scumbling in the thick mucus that was the waste matter of these furious changes.

"Bob, Bob!" Letting her boy fall aside, Cindy rose up. Her face was distorted to a Hydra grimace, her hands were working in his fur like snakes, her body bursting with thick panicky stench.

"Bob, please come back to us." Her voice was not steady. She was thinking fast. "I never expected you wouldn't want to. You don't though, you *don't!* Oh, Bob, you got a rejection from the *Poetry Review*, but it was a personal letter. Bob, they asked if you were aware of the Imagists. I sent a reply, I said yes, but you didn't care for Amy Clampitt. Was I right, Bob? Oh, come back to your life. Come back to us." Then her voice broke and she sank down, miserable on the stones.

The world seemed not to have noticed. The falls still spattered, the crow still worried a berry bush. But Bob knew the lie in that, he had sensed the tension in its watching.

"Dad—"

It was agony to hear their pleading. Even to glance into his son's eyes was

torment.

"Dad, please. Please. I need you, Dad, I miss you. I can't even read anymore, not without you at home. I can't draw. All I draw is black."

The Indian was lying on his back, staring at the sky. His breathing was so even, Bob thought he might be in a coma.

He must not prolong this torment. With a bitter heart, hating himself for what he did, he turned away from them. There was no sound behind him. Over his shoulder he saw Cindy slumped on the ground. Kevin was watching him with a sorrow in his face that no child should know. Bob could not say why, but his deepest instincts, wolf and human, were all telling him to do this, to leave them, to run into the wild.

He did run, farther and farther, until the last edge of their scent was gone.

All day he ran, stopping only to steal a chicken from a yard in High Falls, New York. Toward afternoon it began to snow. He ran as much toward the wilderness as away from his family and his former life. Somewhere in him a brute voice shouted that it was free, shouted down the driving snow.

He heard the flakes hiss on the hemlock boughs, felt them snap cold on his nose. As he ran the world changed from the last of autumn to the first of winter, and all memories, all desires, were covered with a kindness of snow.

Chapter Nineteen

DAYS STRETCHED ON DAYS AS BOB MOVED STEADILY north. He became a cunning hunter, quick and mean, and clever at avoiding men. Winter came, wet at first and then rich with snow. Sometimes he heard Cindy's name in the wind, or saw the sorrow in Kevin's eye, but he ran on, obedient to the wolf that he was, and the wild.

He was in the deep north now, and the snow hissed in the hemlocks and pines, it roared past the naked limbs of oak and maple, it swirled in the glades and blew hard against his flanks.

His coat had grown thick and full. Only his nose was cold, and it was tormented. When he could bear the twirling knife of the wind no longer, he would curl up with his back to the blizzard and bury his muzzle in his paws. He could remain like that for hours, until he was entirely covered by a blue, icy translucence. Then it was quiet, and he experienced a deep feeling of safety.

Every morning, when thin light would penetrate the sky, the urge to move would possess him once more. He would break out of the snow and shake himself, feeling the cold air penetrate all the way to his skin. Thus refreshed, he would sniff the air, seeking the musk of an opossum or the rabbit odor.

The colder it got, the less often he smelled anything beyond the smooth aroma of the snow.

There was something in his soul that was urging him north. He did not know what it was, but it drew him, dragged him, forced him when he was tired. His nose ceaselessly tested the air for something he could not name. Cindy and Kevin had become glowing statues in his memory. The brutal labor of his journey, the snow, the clarity of his struggle had sliced away all sentiment. His blood was no longer attached to his family; it belonged to whatever goal lay at the end of this journey.

But then he would hear the wind, and her name. . . .

He loved something out here, something he could not name. Maybe it was the wild itself, the whole complex, restless personality of life, or maybe it was his new wolf nature—so urgent, so fundamentally decent—or maybe it was wolves in general, even the beautiful act of hunting.

Finding and killing game was the highest experience he had ever known, higher even than riding Cindy in the soft summer nights. There was

something at once so terrible and so beautiful about biting the life out of a little creature that he quaked inside just to think of it. In his life before he had never seen sorrow like the sorrow that entered the eyes of an animal he was killing, nor had he ever felt the fire that eating a kill gave him.

It is the life of the killed thing that is eaten, as much as the blood and meat and bone.

By the time he reached the high Adirondacks the weather was so cold that the fur framing his face froze at its tips. The pads of his paws had fissures in them that revealed deep red wounds, and he left pink flecks of blood in his tracks. Game was scarce indeed, and he was becoming famished.

Despite his doubts and the conditions, his progress had taken on a kind of hypnotic quality. From the gray hours before dawn to the gray hours after sunset he would lope steadily along, stopping to hunt when he scented the opportunity. He would eat anything—rat, opossum, rabbit, raccoon. He avoided skunks and porcupines. Deer were too fast for him, and the idea of trying to attack something with sharp little hooves was unsettling.

In the past few weeks he reckoned that he had come at least five hundred miles. As he moved along he altered his course to the northwest. Sooner or later he knew that he must cross the St. Lawrence Seaway. He would not attempt to swim. He was hoping that he would reach it after the seasonal ice had closed it. If not, then he would have to wait on the American side until it did.

He had been without food for six days when he detected a powerful, greasy odor coming out of a tumble of rocks. He'd never smelled anything like it before. Strong smells delighted him, and this one was so strong that it made him shudder all over. His impulse was to rub himself with it, to wear it like a sort of talisman. It was extremely rich with meat and blood.

He looked toward the rocks. How odd that the odor came from there. Such a powerful smell, rolling over him in waves, had to emanate from a large animal. But what could it be? He would see a deer or a moose. Stiff-legged, he stole closer. Still there was nothing, and yet the odor was literally pouring out of the rocks. It was strange enough to be frightening. Had he not been so hungry, Bob would have left this place.

The rocks were contorted razors. They cut painfully into Bob's paws, and he slipped on the ice, skinning his spindly lower legs. But that scent: he visualized a whole mass of animals, rich game, incredibly rich. His drool froze on his chin.

It was not long before he located a den in the roots of an enormous hickory. The den opening was large enough for him to walk through.

A large black bear came swarming out at him, its eyes beads of fury and hate, its voice booming against the snow-muffled land. There was no warning, no waiting. Before Bob could do more than utter a bark of surprise, the bear had taken a hissing swipe with the claws of his right paw. Bob narrowly escaped the speeding, black nails. He skittered back, fell, tumbled backward. The bear literally leaped through the air in its mad urgency to attack. For a moment the whole huge beast hung above him, its front paws spread wide, its lips revealing yellow, vicious teeth.

The smell that cascaded down from the bear was lovely, an art of meat and wonderful, rich grease and blood. As Bob tried to tumble away the bear landed on him with a thunderous crash. Now Bob was under the creature, his breath knocked out, half-stunned by the power of the blow, feeling his bones bending to break beneath the horrendous weight of the animal.

Beneath his compressed body he could feel a tangle of frozen brush. It was a crack in the rocks. As the bear struggled to get its huge forelegs around him, he tried to dig down, grappling at the twigs with clumsy paws. Frantically, he scrambled out from under the bear. A swipe of one of its paws connected with his injured thigh, reopening the wound with a flash of pain so great that he almost lost consciousness. He spun round and round, tumbling down the rocks, stopping only when he landed upside down against a spindly rowan. The bear stood in front of him, swaying from

side to side. He could hear its claws clicking, and the moaning of the wind across the top of the ridge behind it. Looking into the bear's blank, glittering eyes, he felt very alone and very lost. In all the wild he was, after all, the only truly aberrant creature. This bear was savage, its eyes said. And its eyes also said that it had no mind. If he died here, it was going to be a lonely, hard death. But were not all deaths in the forest such? And he would die having had one of the highest of experiences: to be a raw animal, in the body of the animal, with all his human consciousness intact.

Cindy ... the wind said. He shook his head and snorted. At a moment like this, the human world must not be allowed to intrude. If he was to survive, he had to fight as a wolf.

The bear sucked him up in its deadly hug, and began dancing ponderously through the snow-choked clearing that bordered the stony hill. He smelled its breath and heard the dark thudding of its feet in the soft snow. Then sun came

out, and shone golden on its coat. In the rich new light Bob struggled and snapped, trying to connect with some vital part of the monster, while it crushed out his life.

His chest was closed off and his nose began to pulse with trapped blood. He could no longer breathe, and it felt as if his head was going to explode. A torment of air hunger made him writhe. He felt his bowels give way.

His teeth kept meeting air, but the bear's claws did not meet air. Instead they twisted and dug under the skin of his shoulder, piercing toward essential gristle. In great agony, he screamed. The bear replied with a mournful, inexpressibly savage moan. It tightened his grip on him, and he saw Cindy coming up the clearing with a gun in her hand.

His heart battered against the walls of his chest, he felt his legs scrabbling through the bear's fur. Cindy raised her rifle—and then disappeared into the crystal air. At that moment he came close to complete despair. The bear was killing him, and she had been a death dream, nothing more. Had he been able to shout, he would have called her name, but in the event, all that escaped from him were high, sucking cries.

His body turned and his legs kicked frantically. The bear danced round and round, moaning as it brought its muzzle closer to his neck. He could feel its bear breath on his face, could smell an intimacy of berries and old fish. His body was -wiped in the animal's grease. The odor of bear that had drawn this ignorant wolf too close now became a loathsome smell.

He probed dismally into the wall of coarse fur, snapped with half his strength. To his surprise the bear tossed its head back, then bit at him angrily. For a moment the two of them were cheek to cheek. He could see his own reflection in the bear's savage eye.

Twisting his head, he drove a canine deep into that eye. There was a loose pop as of a finger jabbing through many layers of tight, wet paper and this time the bear screamed horribly, throwing its head back, the remains of its eye dangling along its cheek. A claw drew across Bob's back, the nails going deep. It would have been less painful to have his skin trenched by hot irons.

The pain was so great that he forgot himself. His head shook from side to side, his jaws snapped and snapped. All control was gone.

Then he was lying on the ground and the bear was glaring down at him, shrieking and gasping. Half of its face was torn away. Bob could see teeth and muscles, and the tongue working in the mouth. In his own mouth he tasted filthy hair and rich, rich meat.

Almost without being aware of it he leaped right at the creature, driving his furious muzzle deep into the flesh of the belly, into reefs of sticky fat, then deeper into the wall of tight muscle beneath it and the steaming organs at the final depth. With a roar the bear grabbed him in both paws and heaved him away. Bob slammed against a boulder, was covered in a cascade of snow, and came forth wild with a fury he could neither control nor understand.

Shaking, his ears back, the skin of his neck stiff and full of shivers, his tail close down, he ran at the tottering bear and grabbed a purple loop of intestine protruding from the hole in its belly. The gasping creature savaged him again, kicking him away. This time, though, he drew the bear's vitals with him, his jaws clamped hard around them.

By pushing him away, the animal had gutted itself. It stood to its full four feet of height and waved its forelegs in the air, looking very much like a man wearing a bearskin. Then it began to claw at its own belly. A torrent of dark blood poured out of its mouth. Surprised, it snapped its jaws shut. Its eyes were sad now. Slowly, it sat on its haunches, swaying from side to side, staring at the wolf that had killed it.

With a final moan of rage, it threw itself toward him. By the time its great, bloody body had covered him, it was dead. Bob lay beneath it, in the heat of its blood and offal. He struggled a time to free himself, but a tiredness so profound that it seemed itself a kind of death overcame him and he closed his eyes.

He dreamed of the kindness of a balmy goddess, who touched him mercifully where he hurt. She touched him with long, golden fingers, probing so gently into his wounds that he felt naught, filling them with the sparkling medicine of heaven.

When he awoke, it was from coldness bothering his nose. It was snowing again, and the bear was no longer covering his body.

He opened his eyes to piercing gray light. The blizzard had blown itself out, leaving a residue of flurries drifting down from high clouds. When Bob raised his head, he was astonished to see the remains of the bear scattered all around him. He snorted, stood up.

At once he yelped; every part of him ached, especially his chest and back. His old thigh wound was better, perhaps because the bear's clawing had lanced it and drained away some of the infection.

He took personal inventory: he had at least two cracked ribs, possibly a broken one. His shoulder was hard with swelling and scab. When he

shuddered his skin, his back felt as solid as a board. Looking as far as he could over his shoulder, he saw a mass of scab there. He was literally encased in dried blood.

The bear was in pieces around him. The huge creature had been pulled apart by experts, and eaten. The organs were all gone, most of the meat and fat had been consumed, even the bones of the legs had been cracked and the marrow eaten.

Bob saw in the snow tracks very much like his own, dozens of them. His heart started racing: wolves! Then he smelled the finest, the sweetest, the most exciting odor he had ever known. He barked five or six times, he did a crutchy dance of excitement. Wolves, he was in wolf country! Sheer happiness burst up in his heart, making his injuries seem light, his trouble seem small. Wolves, you could feel them, all around. His heart was weighted with love and longing.

This was the nameless thing that had come to dominate his life, had separated him from his family and drawn him all of these brutal miles. They smelled wonderful. It was much more than an odor or a perfume, it was a scent connected directly to his soul. There was no way to describe it, except to say that it was to normal odor as the sight of heaven must be to hell-weary eyes. Again and again he inhaled. Wonderful. Love. His heart burst with joy.

Then he found himself throwing back his head and howling. The sound that came out was not restricted as it had been before, controlled by the uneasy human consciousness that was so quickly becoming a supercargo. Now the sound rose fine and tight as a needle piercing the sky. It shaped itself to a long sonic spire, then spread out like a flower in the light air, flowing softly across the frozen land.

It evaporated into silence. Bob was disappointed. Where were the wolves? Why wouldn't they answer?

Then they did.

Echoing across the far hills, sweeping past the naked limbs of the trees, as cool, as sharp, as delicate . . . the answer came, and his tail twirled wildly.

He had been spoken to across the miles by a real, living wolf! He had spoken wolf-to-wolf! As a wolf he was here in this place, and he was one with the whole kingdom of the wolves.

The howl died away, ending on a low note that carried in its tone a text of warning. Bob howled back at once, all of his excitement and joy flowing into the soft, curving sound.

The reply came as quick, from the north and from many wolf throats, a high scream of a note, speaking volumes of subtle language, building pictures in his mind of limpid eyes and fast teeth. Was this alien speech rejection or welcome? He listened and their voices touched him to the bottom of his life. He wanted to be among them, to be one with them, to love them and live among them. Cindy, they're wonderful, they're like gods! Cindy, I—

I still miss you.

But he started out at once, tracking them with a competent nose.

Even though he was still in New York State, he'd encountered a wolf pack! A big one too, judging from the number of different voices in their howl. He found himself looking around for a pay phone to call Cindy and tell her to get in touch with the Department of Environmental Conservation. Wolves in New York: what good, what happy news.

Then he thought: maybe DEC already knows. What if they *did* tell the public? Would not people come forth with their guns, eager for trophies, eager to kill the evil thing of the forest? No, the presence of these wolves must remain a secret. In their world they were powerful, they were kings, but in man's world he had to remember that they were vulnerable little creatures without a future.

He smelled them again, this time when the wind blew from behind him. This scent was stronger and he detected in it something new, something so exciting that he almost collapsed. A female odor, definite, musky, deep as wood, so intense that for a moment he could actually see her, the face of perfect beauty, its sleek snout, its fine, black ball of a nose, and the heartbreaking line of the eyes, so expressive and subtle. He was embarrassed, confused. This was not a woman's face, but it was the most feminine face he had ever seen.

All of his knowledge of wolves arrayed itself before him. The books sped past in memory: *Of Wolves and Men*. Erik Zimens's *The Wolf: A Species in Danger*, the work of Dan Mech. He remembered his time in northern Minnesota, the wolf he had seen, and his dreams of wolves, his lifelong wandering in the shadows of his own desires. Now he ran, a wolf at last, seeking what his soul had wanted, maybe from the very beginning of its existence, which was to fulfill this odd destiny.

The wolf pack is a tightly knit organization, made up of animals who have known one another from birth. It is not generally open to strangers. Wolves are fierce territorialists, protecting their hunting grounds from outsiders. They

are expert fighters. They have a strict and elaborate hierarchy.

He followed the trench of tracks in the snow, never losing it for more than a few seconds, his nose drawing him after them with great accuracy. As he moved along, he thought he could smell other wolves much more clearly than he could anything else, almost as if his nose was more perfectly adapted to this odor than to any other.

He did not move fast. If he ran, his back, shoulder and thigh hurt, and when he breathed deeply, his ribs wrapped him in a band of pain. Trotting along, he again scented the female. Something turned in his loins, and he moved faster despite the pain. He was astonished at himself. He was having a strong sexual stirring. This was the mating season for wolves, or the beginning of it. He did not feel the steamy sense of desire that Cindy evoked in him. This was more pure than the inventive love of humans: this was lust in a form so simple that it was perfectly clean; it was sex devoid of all but purpose.

His desire made him imagine the gentle aroma of cubs, feel their soft fur. He had to father cubs, *had to!* He gasped as he ran, he panted even in the cold. His desire came cracking through the layers of self: cubs, cubs, cubs. She was in heat, she was a goddess, and he had to have her. He stopped, raised his muzzle, and howled. In that howl he knew that there was more than quest and loneliness, there was also a challenge he was helpless to suppress.

The replying howl washed over him, a tumult of passion, and it was not kindly passion. It was fierce and immediate and full of snarl. Behind it was fear, and he knew that he was approaching them too directly. A pack of wolves is an ancient and very subtle social structure, governed by rituals and laws that must go back in an unbroken tradition to the very origin of the species.

There were things in that howl that made Bob stop and listen most carefully. Terrible things, anger, bitterness, suspicion. There was also a pride so great that it awed him. The howl was rich and full and decisive, beginning and ending with a single, great tone. It was the voice of the leader.

Bob ignored the warning in the howl, the implication of murder. He had to; he could not bear to think that the wolves would do him any injury. After all, had not that wonderful female in her kindness licked him? Hadn't she? What healing she had in her—were it not for her, he would have awakened in great anguish. As it was, her tongue had accomplished significant healing. He could move and he was certainly not going to die.

For hours and hours he followed the trail of the pack. They were going north, farther and farther, never stopping, never even reducing their pace. He had prided himself on his speed and range, but these wolves were much faster than he. He believed that they had gone as far as forty miles last night. Evidently the odor of the bear had been strong enough and unusual enough to bring them out of their normal territory, to which they were nervously returning.

It was just getting to be evening when he found himself at the edge of the forest. Before him was the St. Lawrence.

He looked out across the tumult of ice.

The seaway must be at least a mile wide here. It was a white, tumbled emptiness, cracking and thundering as the current underneath shifted the ice floating on top.

On the far edge of the ice, where it softened into a smooth, snowy strand, he saw something that stood his hair on end. There were at least a dozen black dots there.

On a nearby bush there were a group of strong scent marks, pungent, redolent with the particular urine odor of this pack. It was not a bad scent. It was sour and warm and penetrating. Interesting. He sniffed carefully.

Then his body did something that he did not expect: it raised its leg and urinated, obliterating the territorial marker.

The wolves on the far bank had become very still, and were now hard to see, a fuzzy clutch of black blurs in the winter emptiness.

He smelled them, raised his head, and howled again. They howled back, angry, afraid, full of warning.

His answer was the only one he could give: he trotted out onto the frozen water. Whatever happened, he had to try and join these wolves.

They were the center and purpose of his life, he now understood that clearly.

They howled again. The sound was frank with menace. Bob lowered his head against the vicious wind. The time had come to face them.

Chapter Twenty

THE STACK OF FILTHY DISHES TEETERED ON THE EDGE OF the counter. Cindy turned, snatching at them. Her uniform snagged against a loose corner and she went down amid a cascade of plates, cups, silverware, hamburger crusts, and wet cigarette butts.

She sat there in the rubble contemplating a half-eaten pancake that had adhered to her apron. From the other end of the counter Louie Parma, the owner of Parma Lunch, clapped, a series of dismal pops. Misery swept Cindy. She got up, murmuring a "sorry, Louie," and started picking up the shards. A piece of glass jabbed her finger. A convulsive jerk caused her morning's tips—a dozen or so quarters and dimes—to fall out of her pocket and roll away among the chipped and broken dishes. "Sorry, Louie, sorry."

She shook the tears from her eyes. As she started organizing the rubble into a pile she saw Louie's neatly polished shoes appear. "How much?" he asked, pointing a toe toward some of her coins.

"Six dollars."

"I'll take that and dock you another twelve, we'll be even."

"Okay, Louie." Her salary was five dollars an hour and she'd been here since 6:00 A.M. It was now eleven, which meant that less these deductions, she'd cleared only seven dollars on the morning. That was important, vitally so: Kevin would have to eat the last of the spaghetti tonight; she would skip the meal.

No matter what, she was not going to call Monica. The woman was slowly coming undone, tortured by her inability to understand what had happened to Bob, and unable to enlist the aid of any of her fellow scientists and doctors in her research. Monica was now a haunted woman, her practice in ruins, her wealth disappearing into the well of what the rest of her profession saw as an insane quest.

Monica was no longer a source of money, support, or anything else. Cindy felt so sorry for her, but there was nothing she could do. Her concern was finding Bob again and really communicating with him. Only then, with him and understanding him, could she and Kevin hope to have any peace.

Joe Running Fox, also, was obsessed with him. He had guided them to Olana and then disappeared—when was it, in February? Yes, and here it was the end of March.

Joe knew that Bob was somewhere near here. If Joe found him, Cindy knew that he would be back. As it was, he lived out in the snow, a frostbitten ruin of a man, almost an animal himself. He prayed to the old Indian gods. He searched.

As she dumped the remains of the plates into a gray busman's tray, she remembered that she would still be able to keep her lunch tips, which might be as much as eight dollars if those darned highway engineers didn't take up table one the whole time and not leave anything again.

She took her mess out back herself, not caring to confront Willie Clair, the dishwasher and busman, with the results of her mistake. He'd scream at her, then subside, walking back and forth slapping his hands against his thighs and cursing.

When she opened the back door, a blast of wind made her stagger. She glanced up, into the clear, frozen air. Immediately beyond Ontario Street the forest began. She looked into the blue, shadowed fastness of it. Week after week she had walked this forest, through what seemed an endless winter. She had come to see it as intractable, hostile, and joyless. It was devoid of poetry, of hope: in all the weeks of her searching she had heard wolves howling exactly once.

She and Kevin were fugitives from ordinary life. He was no longer in school. He had become fierce and domineering. Night after night he awoke screaming, so often that they could not keep a room for long. They'd about used up Olana, as a matter of fact, moving from the Gracey Hotel to Mrs. Winslow's to the Indian Inn, where the puffy, woebegone Sim Jones was beginning to shake his head whenever he saw the boy.

"Cindy, you got customers," shouted Louie.

"On my way, Lou!" Table one was occupied by two people, a thin, sallow woman with a cigarette between her fingers and a big man who looked like a wax effigy of himself. That table was the big one. "Hi, folks," Cindy said, "sure you don't want a booth?" Seeing two people at his big table would put Louie into a funk for the rest of the afternoon.

"This's fine," the woman said. "Gimme coffee and one of them nut rolls."

"Coffee and you got cherry pie?"

"Yes, sir, we sure do."

"I want apple. Cherry's too damn sweet."

The woman laughed. "What do you do that for, Bud? You always do that. 'Got coffee?' 'Yeah.' 'Gimme tea.' I couldn't believe that when you first did it."

She looked up at Cindy, smoke rising from her wide, tight smile. "Can you believe this man?"

Cindy smiled. She did not laugh. It would take an extra tip to get that out of her. She turned and posted the order on Louie's turnstile. His face, already dark over the loss of the big table, darkened further when the highway engineers came blundering in, knotted in the doorway, and stared at the table. There were mutters. One of them nodded his head and the group left, tramping back into the snow, headed no doubt for Clasby's down at the other end of Ontario, or for the McDonald's that stood near the high school.

Louie shook his head. "You got no sense," he said bitterly. "There goes twenty-five bucks if it's a dollar. What the hell am I gonna do with all the extra hamburger I got in for those guys?"

"Eat it."

"Gimme a kiss, cutie."

She thought how nice it would be to take a whip to Louie's great lardbag of a rump. She could imagine his flesh rippling and his voice cracking while she did to him in the body what he was doing to her in the soul. He's paying me and I hate him, she thought. Isn't that typical, ungrateful bitch that I am?

"C'mon." He made yet another halfhearted snatch at her. Then his eyes met hers, his big animal eyes. The Indian had called her hawk, Bob wolf, Kevin owl. This was hyena, this sweat-sheened short-order cook with a fleck of tobacco from his long-chewed morning cigar still adhering to one of his front teeth.

She shook her head, backing away from Louie. There was no use yearning for Bob. Even if she managed to find him again, he would no doubt run away once more.

At first she had been furious with him, but time had made it more clear that he'd seen no alternative. How could she house him, feed him? And what about their love?

There was a man in that wolf body, and she loved the man. But the animal—it was mysterious and, frankly, horrible.

There was no time to think about these things now: she had another table to work: Big Charlie Tolner had just come in with his brother Little Charlie from their garage over on LaSalle.

That made Louie happy again: the Charlies tended to favor Clasby with their business. "You guys walk? I ain't seen a car."

"My truck's busted," Big Charlie said. "So's his. We's out last weekend

after us a moose, ha-ha. Almost got us a wolf. They're comin' down farther every year. Not enough deer and moose up in Ontario, I expect."

Cindy might as well have been dealt a blow to the side of the head. She took a large, unlikely step, slopping coffee out of both mugs, ruining the piece of cherry pie she had just cut.

"Wolves," she managed to croak. "Charlie, did you say you saw a wolf?"

"Big black fella, thin as hell, standin' up beside the St. Lawrence. Just stood there, lookin' at us. We got two good shots at him."

Her skin felt like a sheath of snow. "Did you hit him?"

"Nah. He's a smart sonembitch. Most wolves, they start runnin' like hell, you shoot at 'em. This old guy, he see's he's got the St. Lawrence behind him. He runs out on that ice and we can just take our time. We got a wolf pelt. This fella takes cover, like. See, he goes up behind a big chunk of crack ice." The Charlies both stared at her, their left eyebrows raised in identical expressions of astonishment at the memory. "We run after him, but he got away," Big Charlie said.

"Slunk through the ice mounds near the bank," his brother added.

It was Bob. It had to be him. She could picture him: thin, scraggly, smart.

Out on the St. Lawrence. "Where?"

"Oh, well..."

"Please tell me, you guys."

"The DEC—"

Her mind was twisting and turning on itself. She had to know, had to get it out of them. "I don't care if you were poaching or whatever it's called." Both Charlies looked away. She went for the dumb one. "C'mon, Big Charlie," she said, "tell me where you saw a wolf. I think it's so exciting." She hated the fake sex in her voice. Big Charlie didn't hate it, though. His ears turned red.

"Oh, well, we were out about twenty miles up from the bridge. We were on that piece of land owned by those city people."

"The Jews," Little Charlie said, as if this would excuse their trespass.

Cindy didn't know a thing about who did and didn't own land around here, and she didn't give a damn. All she could think of was Bob. She squared her shoulders and raised her chin, thinking of the nobility of her love. It was always the men who embarked on quests in the old stories, Piers Plowman, Sir Gawain. Women stayed at home and raised the children. Well, she wasn't that kind of a woman. Her quest was clear, as fine and perfect as Sir Gawain's: she had a grail, too, the sacred body of her love.

"Cindy," Big Charlie suddenly blurted, "you care to take a drive over the border Saturday? Maybe go up to Voix and have a little supper at Antoine's?"

Louie stared, openmouthed. Little Charlie began giggling silently.

Without a word she turned away from the table of the two gargoyles. "Sweet," Big Charlie said as his brother collapsed into open laughter.

"Willie won't bring in the damn potatoes," Louie snarled as she came back to the counter. "You go get 'em."

He was referring to the two-hundred-pound sacks of frozen french fries that were due to be delivered today. "Lou, I can't possibly! I can't drag those bags."

"You do it, or you've got your walking papers. And I want them in the back of the freezer, not all jammed up around the door like he does it."

Feeling hopeless, Cindy put her beautiful blue cardigan from Bloomie's and better days on over her thin nylon uniform and went struggling out into the glaring, icy light of noon.

She tugged miserably and quite hopelessly at one of the big gray sacks. Louie was a cruel man. They were all cruel. The women around here were huddled misanthropes, slaves and sloven whores. What a misbegotten place.

It came to seem even more misbegotten a moment later, when both of the Charlies appeared, one at each end of the restaurant. She stepped back, only to see Louie's shadow in the doorway. He had locked the door.

So that was what this was about. When had they had time to plan? There hadn't been a word spoken between them. Without another thought she started running, wobbling across the snowy parking lot in her cheap flats, the wind eating at her body, making the cardigan seem almost imaginary.

They came along behind her, moving heavily but with surprising speed, the two Charlies. "Come on, Cindy," Big Charlie cried, "won'tcha? Why won'tcha? A little blowjob ain't nothin' to a woman."

"Oh, God."

They appeared beside her. She did not like the sweat sheening Big Charlie's face or the clicking wheeze that Little Charlie developed when he ran.

Big Charlie's hand brushed her shoulder. "Them shoes are no good in this hardpack," he said absently, as his arm closed around her neck. "You had no chance."

She could see Louie's shadow in the back door of the diner. He waved at her, a hesitant gesture, as if he was seeing her off on some undesirable

voyage. Her impulse was to kick and bite and claw, but she controlled it. She was not a weak woman, but these two men were certainly her physical superiors. Quietly, carefully, she reviewed her options. She was being walked along, Big Charlie tugging her by the neck, Little Charlie with his homy fist around her wrist.

Taking a deep breath, she screamed. The sound was high and thin, more like the squeak of chalk on a blackboard than a human noise. Little Charlie looked up at her out of the corner of his eye. "That wasn't too good," he said happily.

When she was a kid, she had been able to scream marvelously well. She closed her eyes, tried to calm herself enough to organize some more effective noise. They were passing her rooming house. If only their room wasn't at the back, Kevin might hear. He'd be there—because she did not want to put him in one of the local backwater schools where he'd be taught nothing more challenging than Gum-Chewing 101 and probably beaten to a pulp as well, they had decided he would go into hiding for the duration of the search.

He spent his time reading. He was on *Remembrance of Things Past* now, and he wanted to get the walls lined with cork like Proust had.

Big Charlie's hand pushed against her left breast. The sensation was disgusting, a nauseating thrill that churned to pain when he squeezed. This time she screamed with fierce energy. In response the two men began moving faster down the freezing, silent street. "Somebody help me!" Was the whole town dead? No, more likely everybody around here except Kevin was off at work or at school, Kevin and that inert old man who inhabited the little house at the end of the block. He wouldn't come out. If the world ended, he would meet it staring out that window of his. "God help me! God help me!"

Big Charlie moaned. "Come on, Cindy, we won't hurt you. Please, I just want you to treat me like a man. Honey, I could give you a good life."

"Let me go, you filthy creep. You smell like a wet cigar butt."

"I'll stop with the cigars if that's what it takes. You don't like 'em—done! Howya like that? Cindy, I got nobody, I'm getting older. You're young. I'll leave you everything in my will. I got money, Cindy! Marry me."

"Help! Help!"

The door of the old man's house flew open. Astonishingly, Kevin came rushing out. Behind him was the old man himself, carrying a tall, rusty halberd. In his hands Kevin brandished a volume of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

"Oh, Lordy, now look what you done, Cindy! Hold on, fellas, she don't need help. Lord, what is that, an ax?"

"Unhand her," Kevin shrieked. "Mr. Forbes has been trained on his weapon!"

The old man, who was tall and emaciated, wearing a tattered herringbone sports jacket and plaid pants, took a spread-legged stance and lowered the halberd. "Let her go, Charlie," he said. "I can cut off balls with this thing just as clean as heads."

"That's gotta be an illegal weapon or something." The two Charlies complied, though, and Cindy felt a great relief. Kevin stepped forward and slammed the encyclopedia down on Little Charlie's head, whereupon he sank into the snow without so much as a sigh. "Aw," Big Charlie cried, "why'd you do that?"

"That's my *mother*, scumbag!"

"Oh Lord. All I wanted was to talk to her. I want her to consider me a suitor, that's all. I need a wife. Eileen died, damn her, and I need a wife, oh, God I do. I've got love in me. Yes, I've got love in me."

The old man jabbed with the halberd, and Big Charlie became silent. "I'm tired of men like you, you brutal fool," the old man said. "I ought to hurt you." The halberd whistled and Big Charlie had to jump.

Little Charlie raised himself up, squinting and rubbing his head. "Somebody oughta whip that kid, he's a damn sonembitch."

Louie came running down the street, shouting and waving a large knife. "You let them alone, Gilford Forbes! It's just their way."

"The hell, Louie, nobody drags women off like that, not in my sight. This is the civilized world, and if you don't like that, you can damn well move to South Africa or someplace."

"Come on, Mother, it's time to go."

The tension between Louie and Gilford Forbes seemed ready to erupt into a battle. Cindy was not sure what would happen if the spindly old man actually began to use the halberd, which was obviously as sharp as a razor. She wasted no time following Kevin, who was already on his way back to Forbes's house.

Forbes backed up, marching like a spider, rather than turn away from the other men.

The house was an old one, really no more than a cottage, with a wooden porch populated by an ancient swing and choked in the tendrils of what in

spring and summer must be a laurel. Beyond the front door was a living room full of bulky furniture, overstuffed chairs, a large and complicated Wurlitzer organ, and on the walls prints of familiar Impressionists: Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, Renoir's *Bathers*, and four or five others. They added an altogether incongruous note of intense cheer to an otherwise drably comfortable scene.

"Please make yourself at home, Kevin's mother," Forbes said. He bowed. "The altogether estimable mother of a most remarkable young boy." He smiled, his cadaverous face cracking into a grin so wide that it seemed about to cause his lower jaw to disengage itself and flop down along his neck. "I am Gilford Forbes, former don at Christ Church College, Oxford, former tutor at Harvard—alas, all very former. Presently Kevin and I are engaged in setting ponderous poetry to light music and light poetry to ponderous music. An interesting exercise, Pound's *Cantos* chanted to the tune of 'A Rock and Roll Waltz' and the works of Rod McKuen intoned to Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. Your screams did not fit, and I must apologize to you—"

Kevin rushed forward and hugged her.

Gilford Forbes smiled a little nervously. Kevin glanced just sharply enough at Cindy to communicate the message that he had kept his father a secret from this man. The boy must already have told the old man some story—some lie—that explained their presence here in Olana.

"A broken life," Kevin murmured sadly. His face was grave. Cindy saw again the stoniness that more and more often appeared in his eyes.

She nodded. "That ends at Parma Lunch."

"You'll get back on your feet. You're young!" There was an extended silence after the old man's remark. "It's cold," he added. "Would anyone care for tea?"

Wordlessly, Kevin went with him into his tiny kitchen. "Where did you get this Darjeeling?" she heard her son ask.

"In Toronto. I've also some scones. Your mother might like one."

"She hardly eats anything."

The man did not answer. Cindy sat in an old Morris chair. This was an extraordinarily comfortable room. The wood stove crinkled softly, beads of snow tapped against the window. Beyond it, in the darkening afternoon, the sinister little town seemed about to settle into the woods that surrounded it. Nothing moved in the street, no car, no pedestrian, not even a wandering dog. Idly, Cindy picked up a magazine, a literary journal called *Prometheus*. Bob had bought it from time to time, and the look of it brought back memories.

She glanced through it, impressed mainly by the beautiful printing and layout. Then she saw a poem by Gilford Forbes.

*The snow trumpets silently down,
Hurrying the shadows in
The terrible land,
Enforcing the migration of bones,
This snow, laboring with the force
Of dangerous old laws.*

The fire shuffled again, and the snow pinged on the window. Cindy realized that in this moment she had come face-to-face with the mystery. It stood revealed before her, as if a door had at last opened—but only into endless night. Tears collected in her eyes. She could not look again at the magazine. Instead she pushed it to the floor with her knuckles and wiped her hands on her dress. A tiredness akin almost to death stole over her, dropping around her shoulders like a cloak of cold chain. She bowed her head, aware only as her glance passed over it of a tiny cross hanging on the wall, a priest's black cross.

"So you see," Gilford Forbes said, "I'm broken, too." He put her cup of tea into her hands. On the saucer there was a scone cut in two and buttered, and it looked awfully tempting. "Before you, woman of the broken life, stands a ruined priest. I will tell you my story if you will tell me yours."

How could she? His story would move, it would touch, it would enlighten in a fine and decent manner. Her story would sound lurid and absurd.

Even so, Bob was out there in the snow, or he was dead, a pecked hulk on a roadside, or a pelt in some trapper's winter storehouse. "I was caught in flagrantibus delictis. I pluralize because I was with two of my students, a young woman and a young man. We were in the dressing room, in the bottom of a cupboard. The shaking of the cupboard attracted the attention of the choir, which was just coming down after singing High Mass. One of them opened the thing and there we were, wallowing naked in a pile of vestments."

Another silence developed. Kevin looked steadily at his mother, his eyes intractable. She was not to tell.

"You were thrown out?" she asked.

"Difficult to do to a priest." He held up his hands. "They will still bear the Paraclete. I was hustled out of Cambridge and posted to an obscure boonie

parish. No more Newman Club for me, no more students. The trouble was, that incident—which was my only transgression of celibacy—assumed such enormous proportions in my mind that I could no longer bear to abide by my vows. Night after night I thought of the wonders of that time in the cupboard, how good they had tasted, smelled, how warm and lovely it all was. Dear God, I still do. It was the central experience of my life. I've never tried sex again, for fear of disappointment."

"They must have been marvelous people," Kevin said.

"Marvelous looking. They were a team. I got their number out of a singles paper. They were undergrads doing a little whoring to make their lives more comfortable. God, they were wonderful." He sipped his tea. "Your story, please."

"No," Kevin said. "You have to be careful of him, Mother. He never had that experience. He wasn't even a priest. He's trying to trick you."

Gilford Forbes smiled, this time a little thinly. "Your point, Kevin. I suppose that you must remain a mystery to me, too."

Cindy would have told him everything. Why not, what did it matter? Look at the Indian—he understood more about what had happened to Bob than she had imagined possible, but he had not the strength for the journey. And Monica: "Call me if you need me. I love you." In other words, good-bye.

Only she and Kevin remained, in this difficult time. She bit into the scone, which was still cold in the middle. As she chewed she heard shouts outside, more than one shout in the muffling snow.

Forbes frowned, looking toward the dark gray window. Kevin put his teacup down and stepped over to the door. He opened it, stepped onto the porch.

Another shout, this time accompanied by the shape of a man running down the street.

Kevin returned. His face was horribly twisted, his eyes were darting with fear. "Wolves," he whispered, "they've seen wolves at the north end of town."

"Really! I had no idea there were wolves in New York State. In a way that's lovely, if they don't just shoot them."

Without another word, forgetting how lightly dressed she was, forgetting her fearful experience with the Charlies, Cindy jumped up and dashed out into the snow.

Up the dark streets she raced. She could hear Kevin beside her. Whether Forbes had come or not, she did not know.

As she ran she heard it. She stopped and looked up. Kevin looked up. Ahead of them a man carrying a high-power rifle stopped also, and he looked up. A cat, which had been sitting in a window, darted away.

The howl rose and rose, a plasma of dark peeling echoes, powerful and loud.

Kevin's hand came into her own. That was Bob, she knew it in her freezing bones. Bob was here, and the town was turning out to meet him. Bob must stand against a town full of sharpshooting roughnecks.

She ran, Kevin ran. Far behind them Forbes— who had been running—dropped to a walk with a gesture of annoyance.

Bob was here. At last, at last she had found him. With a frantic little scream in her throat, she made her way through the snow, determined this time to find a way to share life with him as best she could, on whatever terms he would grant.

Part Four

Homecoming

We left when we were too young
to know.

Now we are far away and going farther.
Home, we say, home. . . .
We watch the empty dark.

—Robert Duke, "Home" (1985)

Chapter Twenty-One

BOB HAD GONE DASHING ACROSS THE FROZEN ST. LAWRENCE Seaway, his claws crackling on the ice. He had leaped over floes and cracks, slipped, got up, and slid forward, barking joyfully.

The eyes of the other wolves had followed him. None barked back, no tail wagged. For his part, Bob had been so excited that he couldn't stop barking. Smelling the wolves this close made thrills sweep up and down his body. Their odor was sensuous, incredibly attractive. It was far richer to his nose than any human odor had ever been, more so even than Cindy's beloved scent. As he ran, his mind cast about for meaning in this odor, but there were no words that described the experience of smelling it.

These wolves lived in this heaven of smell; they were used to it. Beyond their individual smells—the sharp, shocking aromas coming from the pack leaders, and the sweet smells of the lesser wolves, there was another odor, which was the combination of them all, the majestic smell of the pack as a whole, a fine old spirit of an aroma.

When Bob was about ten yards from the pack, the wolf at the lead had barked once, a sound as sharp as a shot. It went deep into Bob, exploding in his heart. It was a warning and a command: it said stop.

Bob had stood, his tail wagging, his tongue slopping out of his mouth. He gathered himself together: he was a man inside, after all, and he had his dignity.

The dignity of a man, though, is nothing before the dignity of a king of the wolves. Human governments rise and fall across a few generations. This king was the inheritor of ten thousand generations. His pack was an ancient kingdom, and he ruled it by traditions that extended back into the mists. He had come forward, his legs stiff, his ears cocked, on his face a look at once curious and fierce. Bob could see his nose working.

Bob's whole attention had gone to this wolf. By degrees he was realizing that he would not be welcome here. It hurt him. He had come an awfully long way to get a reception like this. He might be a man, and feel he was a man, but he was also a *wolf*, every inch of him. If he had any rights at all, it was among these creatures.

In his rising anger he had made a mistake: he barked loudly. It was a challenge, it couldn't be interpreted any other way. The king of the wolves

snarled horribly, lifting his lips to reveal startlingly effective-looking fangs. His pack seethed behind him. A strong musk came from them, as if they were spitting odor at the interloper, trying to cover his unwanted scent. Bob could feel his own glands working, could smell his own anger and excitement. His neck tickled: his hackles were rising.

The king strutted, ears back, eyes fairly cracking with rage. Bob had to think, but he was getting too scared to think. He was acutely aware of the fact that he was out here alone in this wilderness, and the only creatures he could trust, the only companions that were even close to his own kind, were rejecting him out of hand.

What to do? He couldn't explain himself, he didn't know the language of the wolves. And they had a language, he could see, hear, and smell that. It was a thousand, a million times more rich than anything he had ever read about. Tails flickered, expressions rushed through faces, complicated waves of odor and sound flashed through the pack like little storms. They were so incredibly integrated, they were like one person.

How could anybody have ever thought that these were simple beasts? Bob was faced with the shocking realization that the wolves had evolved an intelligence and a sense so great that it was literally incomparable, and yet so different from man's intelligence that it was all but invisible to the human mind.

There was no rational shape to it, no sense structure. It had words, though, sentences that were songs, and through it all there was creeping what he could only describe to himself as angry, rejecting prejudice.

His heart ached. He knew that he was going to have to fight again. It was so damn sad. He lowered his eyes and tail.

When he did, the whole pack erupted at him, barking with savage fury. Then their leader, their arrogant, strutting king, was at his throat, bellowing, his jaws flashing in the white, snowy light. There was more fury, more wildness in this assault than Bob had ever known before. It was literally fantastic in its energy, like a hurricane, like the explosion of a mountain, like some holocaust come down from heaven. The wolf snarled and snapped and slammed directly into Bob's chest. Bob was bowled completely over, his own growl sticking in his throat.

In all of his previous battles, with the shepherds at the pound, the coydogs in Central Park, with the bear, this had been the moment when his wolf instincts took over and carried him to victory. But this wolf was so powerful

that it shattered all instinct. As he rolled and tumbled beneath its attack he was swept by aromas that stunned the very center of his being. He was awed, humbled, titillated by the smell of this wolf. He could not fight back, he just could not.

The wolf bit him hard in the throat and he found himself turning over on his back. He felt an awful, delicious stirring of what could only be described as ecstatic humility. He spread his legs and turned his head, baring throat and genitals to the powerful creature that dominated him. The wolf was not large, nor was he old, but he was so lordly, so proud, so certain of himself that Bob simply could not stand up to him.

For a moment he held Bob's throat, then he released it. Still full of strut and anger, the wolf suddenly did a most intimate and embarrassing thing. He bent down and nuzzled Bob's penis with his cold, damp nose. The contact injected a fiery vibration of purest pleasure into Bob's body, a pleasure so great that for a moment he was incapable of thought, of motion. As the wolf continued its exploration wave after wave of sheer, delicious enjoyment rocked Bob's being.

Then the pack leader tossed his head, snorted as if contemptuous of the gift he had given, and walked away from Bob. For a moment Bob lay there swooning, helpless. Then there came to him another aroma, this a scent he could identify from his old life: it was the smell of a woman.

She moved forth over him, circling him. He had never seen such beauty as the king's mate. She was young and strong, her fur shining white and light gray in the sun. Bob's own chemical essence poured desire through him. He almost wept to see such female magnificence. Hers was a new esthetic, of rich odors, deeply satisfying, the kind of smell Bob could imagine living within forever, intimate and sweet, conjuring images of furious passion. He recognized her odor: this was the wolf who had licked him after the fight with the bear.

When she stood over him, Bob again felt the same helpless wave of submission the king had given him. Then she also touched her nose to him, most intimately and without a trace of what he had once called shame. At once his body reacted, bursting with pleasure so great he thought it might actually kill him. For a long moment she continued, extending the examination, learning him.

When at length she was done with him, he was more in love than he had ever been or dreamed possible. The complex, equivocal coupling of his

human life seemed a mutant shadow compared to this. She was so beautiful, so grand, so calm and magnificent—he could hardly believe her an earthly creature.

He knew the secret behind the feeling of the dog for its master. Canine love is not like human love, not at all: it is all rapture.

She stepped off him and, growling in her throat, strutted about with her tail high, as if enjoying her conquest. Her mate looked on warily. The tension coming from the other wolves was high. They whined and strutted, some of the lesser ones snapping at each other. One or two barked. Bob realized that the pack was in heat. Coming upon them, he had gone into heat, too. What a small word for the largest emotion and the greatest pleasure he had ever known. He found himself lying there on his back in the snow and thanking whatever God there was that he had been freed of the bondage of being human. Something in the air had changed. The wolves were no longer holding him captive, no longer humiliating him. He was free to rise, and he got up, to stand hangdog before the king and his queen, too much in love ever to leave them, too alien ever to be accepted.

The queen regarded him. Her face—all soft fur and glittering, passionate eyes—seemed not unwilling. He circled her, his nose drawn to the center of her magic, the spot beneath her tail from which there flowed her nectar.

Up close the smell was so good and so fascinating that he simply could not quit inhaling it.

With a little growl she moved away. She had sniffed him, too, but in a perfunctory manner, an act perhaps of protocol or at best mild curiosity. He was being rejected. How was that possible? How dare she drive him to such a pitch and then turn away from him?

With a quite involuntary snarl he leaped on her back. He felt his penis strike at her like an arrow.

Instantly she was out from under him. So quickly that he could not tell how she had done it, she upended him in the snow, and he found himself once again with his legs in the air. His throat hurt; she had grabbed him by the neck and turned him over.

Again she dominated him, this time licking his exposed penis and causing an explosion by doing it that actually did make him faint. For a few moments he was on another ground. The she-wolf seemed serenely regal. Far off Cindy stood, and in a thin voice called his name.

This time when she had finished with him, he found that he could not arise,

not until every one of the other wolves had had his or her way with him. They strutted about in a kind of ecstasy of domination, one after another threatening him, standing over him, then examining him.

At the end of it there was not one of them to whom he would not roll. He would do anything to be with them, he adored them. To him they had acquired in full amount the magic he had always suspected was possessed by the nonhuman beings of the earth. They were living close to the central truth of things, their passions unencumbered by the cluttered mental hodgepodge that afflicted humankind.

When he got to his feet and went strutting toward them, the smallest and least of them, a scruffy little female wolf with a kink in her tail—the last one to have sniffed Bob—ran at him and snapped fiercely. Even though Bob was twice the animal's size, he turned away. The wolf wanted him to roll, and she barked furiously, then went for Bob's throat. Bob rolled, but another wolf had snapped at his attacker, who disappeared back into the milling, nervous pack.

Bob realized what had happened to him with these animals. Stunned by the unexpected intensity of the pleasure they were giving him, he had let himself be dominated by all of them. Instead of fighting for a place, he had wound up outside the pack's order altogether. He cursed himself for submitting to them. But how could he have avoided it? He would do the same thing again.

The little wolf, who was a female not in heat, bland smelling, returned to worry him. He wondered what would happen if he fought her. Or should he fight the lowest male, or go back to the king? He really had no idea. All he did know was that they had at once seduced and rejected him.

It was a more profound event than he at first realized. Night came on and he wound up sleeping some distance from the other wolves, outside of the inner border of their scent, the line beyond which they had to use scent marks to define their territory.

He would have thought they would huddle together in the snow, but each wolf slept alone, tightly curled in on himself, nose beneath tail.

Bob was not like them; he had neither their peace nor their confidence. Again and again in the night he remembered the extraordinary ecstasy they had granted him. If they could all evoke such powerful sensations in one another, how did they survive, how did they bear one another's presence? He was mad with lust and love, a trembling little creature beneath the cold stars, ignored by those whose touch he craved.

He raised his head in the middle of the night, alert with an idea that made

him weak all over again. Perhaps, if he challenged the alpha female, she would once more carry out the ritual with him.

He had no trouble finding her: her heated scent made her a constant beacon to any wolf. None of the other females were like her. Bob got up and walked across the creaking snow. He bent over her motionless form and sniffed, smelling the sweet beneath the unwashed dogginess. Her muzzle was soft, her fur glowing in the starlight.

Then, with a snort, she leaped to her feet. Not an instant was wasted: she attacked Bob with snarling, barking fury. The whole pack awoke and jumped up, but he was already lying on his back. He was rewarded once again by the whole strutting, delightful ritual, and was again passed down the pack and out to the rear, being finally dominated by the scruffy little female.

He crawled away, besotted, crazed with a hunger for more. Some of them had been a little perfunctory this time, though. He suspected that he would bore them if he challenged too often. A wolf pack was a psychosexual Gethsemane for the rejects, a bed of love and torment. For its members, though, it was Eden.

God curse the serpent and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Compared with the animals, man is numb, and it is knowledge that has made him that way. Bob looked up at the sky, and learned in that instant more about the whole wheeling of the universe than all science knew. Without words, he understood the subtle indeterminacies of the laws and saw the endless frame upon which time is woven. He knew the true purpose of thought: It is not to process information, but to seek the law. Modern science is the burned stubble of ancient magic. Once we flew: now we struggle sadly along.

Curled up tight, he slept fitfully in the snow. When he woke up, it was with a lingering impression that some sort of kindness had soothed him in the night. Then he saw the wolves moving. They were cast in golden light. They were deities. Highest among them was the heated goddess, who undulated, wagged her tail, and gobbled snow.

The wolves were excited, yapping and running about, dashing off into the snow with their noses to the ground, then coming back, tails high, eyes agleam.

When Bob smelled a clear, clean odor of deer, he knew the reason for the excitement: a hunt was on. The pack was like a perfect machine. Led by the alphas, it moved off into the woods. Fifteen wolves disappeared as if they had

been shadows. But Bob was not lost. His nose and ears worked, too. He could follow them, which he did at once. They ran along beneath the snow-heavy hemlocks, ducking under low-hanging boughs of pine. He wished that he was part of the pack, but that was not to be. By light of morning he cringed to remember the liberties he had allowed them. Every one of them knew him intimately, while he knew none of them. Such knowledge was an important part of their ritual life. Unless he could make them roll before him, they would never consider him one of them. Even then, he wondered if he would ever acquire that almost indefinable odor of belonging that they had, the special undersmell they all shared.

As they moved along, Bob began to smell the deer more and more clearly. He could identify the odor of the breath: the deer had been gnawing a sassafras plant.

The wolves proceeded quickly and efficiently. As far as they were concerned, Bob simply didn't exist. He was there, though, running along behind as fast as he could, his mind swarming with thoughts and speculations, his heart brimming over with love.

They came upon the deer suddenly. The wolves were quick and efficient. They burst out of the woods into the tight clearing where the deer were tearing bark. There was a whistle of alarm, then the flash of a tail. Deer screams, as soft as the blowing of clouds, filled the air. There were three animals: a buck and two does.

The buck bounded off into the forest, followed a moment later by one of the does, who had a red streak on her left leg. Wolves were barking, leaping, snapping. The one remaining deer broke wildly for the woods. Her body twisting in the air, the alpha female leaped for the throat. She missed, falling back into the snow with a thud and a spray of white.

Bob found himself face-to-face with the doe. He didn't hesitate a moment—he leaped right at the throat of the beautiful little animal. He was a big wolf. The doe struggled, dashing him with her front hooves, but it was no use. He had the flap of skin on the underside of her neck. When he worried it she shrieked, a gentle and lovely sound. This was like killing Bambi. But something drove him on. He would not stop for Bambi, not even when her heart rending whistles changed to bubbling sighs, and then stopped altogether.

She stood, her head hanging down. The nearest of the pack wolves, which was the one farthest to the rear, had reached her. It was the shabby little

female with the broken tail. She clambered up the doe's side, trying to get on her back and bring her down.

This seemed to break the doe's trance. She proved to have more fight in her than Bob had imagined possible. Despite her torn throat and the little wolf clinging to her she began to run. Soon the wolf fell off. The doe plunged through the woods in plumes of snow. She was swift. Bob could also run, though. He was big and his thigh was healed; he could run like the wind.

The deer plunged on through the drifts, Bob just behind. He was hungry now, and the smell of the blood sent mad thrills of excitement through him. The deer reached a long meadow and picked up speed. Bob ran as hard as he could, stretching his whole body, nipping at the flying hooves.

Then someone was beside him—the alpha female. He was fast but she was much faster, a wolf of lightning, her muzzle stretched tight, spittle flying from her mouth, the whites of her eyes showing as she sped forward.

She shouldered Bob aside, ducked her head under the side of the leaping deer, and with a toss of her muzzle opened a huge hole in the creature's abdomen. Guts spewed out as the deer tumbled over and over. By the time it stopped falling it was dead. The alpha female strutted, her lovely face drenched in blood, and then she plunged her mouth into the still-heaving entrails and began gobbling huge gulps of the steaming organs.

Bob took a bite. A raw flash blinded him. Both she and her mate were on him, biting savagely. He screamed, scrambled away, felt her jaws tear his flanks as he ran.

He was forced to watch, drooling, in an anguish of hunger, while all of the other wolves ate their fill. They did it in strict rank order. To the little female was left the brain and some skin. To Bob was left gnawed bone.

While the others trotted off into the woods, full and happy, Bob bit at the bones, trying without success to crack them for the marrow. It was useless—all he succeeded in doing was cutting his tongue on a bone splinter.

Finally he went hunting alone. He was surprised to find such a lack of game. Then he understood why these wolves had come so far south. They, also, were suffering from the shortage of game. This was an exceptionally snowy winter. They had moved south with the deer.

As he sniffed about for sign of raccoon or opossum, he reflected on his passion and their seeming injustice. He shuddered, remembering the pleasure they had accorded him. Nobody but Cindy knew him that way, Cindy and now these wolves, who were so beautiful that he could not help but let them

do their bidding with him. He knew the truth—that they had humiliated and rejected him. But they had done it so sweetly. Did they make their pack important by creating in others a desire to join it? Or would what they had done to him have felt different to a real wolf? He suspected that a real wolf would have found their nosing about an intolerable humiliation and put a stop to it as soon as a beast weaker than himself tried.

He mounted a ridge. From here there was a view for miles. The St. Lawrence glimmered on the northern distance, a jagged tumble of ice. Far to the south rose the Adirondacks. For a moment Bob thought he heard music—a harpsichord, perhaps Scarlatti or Bach. The sound made him cock his ears, but then he lost it, gone in the immensity of the view.

He was hungry. In fact he was damned hungry. Sooner or later, he had to find a kill of his own. He sniffed the air in the careful, searching way he had learned from experiment. It was possible to sort out the different smells not only by odor but by an elusive texture. The ubiquitous smell of snow was crisp except where there was melt, which had a much smoother feel.

Besides the snow, he detected ice, frozen plants, a wisp of smoke, cold stone. No smell of game, not a trace. He was disconcerted. In all of his travels he had never encountered a day when he smelled no animals at all. The image of the winter wolf, its ribs like bars, came to him, and the image of the starved wolf, curled in death agony.

He paced the ridge, taking deep breaths, analyzing the air for any trace of food, any carrion even, any garbage. He wasn't revolted by these things anymore, at least not so much that he wouldn't eat them if necessary. He let his body decide what to eat and what to pass up.

Then he stopped, cocking his ears. This time it wasn't music he heard, but the grinding of gears. The sound came from behind the line of ridges to the south. His estimate was ten miles. He turned, cocking his ears, and listened carefully. When he did so, a welter of tiny sounds came into focus: cars moving on snow, voices, various snatches of music, doors slamming, children shouting. So there was a town over there.

A town meant garbage and it meant the chance of stealing some animal, a chicken or a goat, perhaps, from a farm. The other wolves would I shun the town, but they did not possess the human lore that Bob did. He felt that he could sneak in and out quickly, and get himself fed. A guerrilla attack.

Without further ado he set off down the ridge, going straight toward the source of the human clatter. As he dropped lower the sounds faded, but he

knew they would be there when he mounted the next rise.

He was halfway up it when he heard a sharp bark behind him. He turned and saw the alpha female standing in a clearing. Her tail was high, her face was stern. She was commanding him to turn back. She trotted up, whining. He was surprised, he thought the pack had rejected him. Apparently not, because she was treating him just like one of her other wolves. Whining, she rubbed her cheek against his. She began wagging her tail. At that, his interest in the town evaporated. She was far more important to him than food. Hunger could wait, journeys could wait. To have her come near him, to notice him, even touch him, drove him to a joyous pitch of excitement. He practically danced around her.

She played. She barked and tussled with him, growling in mock challenge. To say that he was delighted was to understate the feelings that washed over him, the rich, mysterious, enormous feelings. It was as if the basic creative energy of the earth was flowing right through him. When they tussled, he smelled and tasted her. Beneath the odor of her fur there was a sweetness so pure that it was shocking, and then the powerful female musk.

When it grew suddenly much stronger, he felt his loins contract. There was a sensation as if of a tickling, delightful fire between his legs. He found himself mounting her, felt himself thrusting at her, saw her eye shimmering with amusement when she glanced over her shoulder, felt her expertly pull herself away. He tried again, whining for her to stay still, pushing, trying in his clumsy way to make this new practice of sexual union work. Never before in his life had he mounted like an animal.

He was hurled off her into the snow by a snarling, biting streak of enraged alpha male.

Where the devil had *he* come from? And with him the rest of the pack, all barking, all threatening, their anger wild.

The next moment, though, he thought the alpha male was going to forget him, so intense were the odors coming from his mate. But he didn't. The alpha male attacked, leaping onto Bob with savage fury.

Even as they fought, both of them made involuntary sexual thrusts. One of the younger wolves mounted the female. The alpha male stopped beating Bob up long enough to turn and bark him away. This alpha was not enormous, but he was a devil of a fighter. His pack mate knew it, and the barking was quite enough to make him rush away.

Bob realized something in that instant of respite. He had to beat this wolf if

he was going to have a place in the pack. Now was the time. The alpha female's heat had precipitated the confrontation.

If he won the battle, he was going to be able to make love to her. The male grabbed for his throat and sank his teeth into the much-scarred skin. Bob yanked away, managing to bite the other wolf's ear hard enough to draw blood and a high scream of pain.

His eyes gleaming, the alpha took Bob by the scruff of the neck and shook him. Bob skittered away, feet digging the hard, old snow. So far he had always lost fights with the wolves, but he did not want to lose this fight. He had to find a way to succeed. The wolf was so fast, such an expert at this, so relentless and wild and passionate. Bob had never encountered such powerful will before: it mattered to this wolf, it mattered terribly.

They separated and Bob ran at him, forcing himself to be more aggressive than he felt. To his surprise the weight of his body completely unbalanced the smaller animal, who went flying into a snowbank with a scream and a great windmilling of paws. Bob was on him instantly, biting, growling, clawing. For a time there was nothing but a jumble of flashing fur and fangs, then Bob found himself on top, and his opponent was screaming.

He backed away. His heart hurt—he did not want to do injury to this magnificent creature.

The alpha wolf clambered to his feet. When he would not meet Bob's eyes, a rush of triumph filled him. He could not help himself strutting. His tail went high, he yapped in excitement. The female leaned against him, and her odor was strong.

He mounted her, causing a tremendous explosion of excitement among the other wolves. They yapped, whined, ran about, paced. Some of the males snapped at each other. Then Bob found her secret, and thrust, and was rewarded with the most exquisite sensation. It was a perfection of feeling: soft love mixed with electrifying pleasure. Lying on the back of that wolf, he found the edge of heaven.

It was not a quick thing. He burst open like a flower within her. His body collapsed from the sheer intensity of the sensations that were roaring through it like storms come down the mountains of love. Her back was strong. She stood like a stone, receiving him in her milky center. The other wolves kept coming up and licking at him, sniffing under his tail, adding to the pleasure he was already experiencing.

His heart beat so hard he thought it would explode. But it didn't explode.

Instead his loins exploded, and he saw flashes of stars, and smelled coming from her an odor so sweet that he could not but be humble before it. Then he was finished. He dismounted. For a long time, with quiet waves flowing back and forth between them, they stood linked.

He thought when it was finally over that he knew this wolf better than he had ever known any creature. In her dark and gleaming eyes, he saw that she, too, shared the knowledge. The total intimacy still shocked him a little. Privacy, secrecy were not known here. All the wolves had participated. Now some of the younger males were mounting each other. There was much intimate licking and much barking.

The alpha male went a little distance away, curled up, and slept. Bob also slept, and the alpha female midway between them.

Bob thought, on awakening, that he would become pack leader. She soon disabused him of this notion. By the operation of laws he did not begin to understand, all that had happened was that she had somehow changed places with the alpha male. She was now leader. The scraggly little female at the end of the line reasserted her dominance over Bob, making him roll to her. He did it because he sensed that ignoring her demand would lead again to total rejection.

That he could not bear. To be near them, to be included in their love, was the only thing Bob really cared about. That and food.

He cared about food. And there was so little food. No more deer, no possums, no coons.

There was that town, though, and on mornings when the wind was right, Bob was sure he heard the calling of a rooster and the bleating of goats. This was lumber country, so there weren't any significant farms, but that didn't mean that people in the town wouldn't be keeping chickens and goats, maybe even a few cows.

Of course they were keeping chickens. On the first morning of the south wind, Bob heard them clearly. He smelled melt, too. For three weeks he had eaten exactly two rats. Some of the wolves had eaten nothing at all.

He cocked his ears, he got up, shook himself. Despite the obvious danger, even the foolhardiness, of going into a human place, Bob trotted off south. He had to eat, they all did. It was especially important for the alpha female. Shortly after her encounter with Bob she had gone out of heat. The sexual intensity of the pack had immediately disappeared and they had become a band of companions, flawless in its balance and organization. Day by day

Bob watched the nipples grow on her thin body, and when the days were longer and the sun returning from the south, he saw a round-ness to her belly.

He was going to hunt down the town's chickens and goats, and damn the consequences. The pack could always escape across the St. Lawrence if they had to. Canada was far more empty. These wolves had come from there, after all. Only the presence of the town kept them from moving even farther south in search of game.

Well, with him in the pack they could confront the town. He understood towns. Maybe that was why all this had happened, why he was here. Suddenly there was a wolf pack that could survive in close proximity to human beings—indeed, could control its whole relationship to mankind. He glimpsed the edges of a magnificent design here, perhaps even another step in the process of evolution.

Wary but eager—no, desperate, for the pack was starving—he set out toward the town and all its dangers, and its chickens.

The first trip in was a great success. Bob ate two perfectly delicious Rhode Island Reds and took one back to the alpha female. She gobbled it down, leaving only feathers for the other wolves to lick.

When Bob returned to the town a week later, two of the other wolves came with him.

Again they were successful, although only Bob would return with food in his mouth. That was not a wolf tradition, and they could not be made to do it.

Through the last months of winter, the pack gradually moved to within striking distance of the town. They took goats, dogs, more chickens. Sometimes they got rats, once an opossum.

Through the lengthening days the alpha female grew heavy with her burden of cubs. Bob's cubs. He remembered Cindy when she was big with child. They were happy then.

Oh, Cindy, I am so lost.

One night, when the snow was grown soft and the breeze was again in the south, the alpha female gave birth to four magnificent cubs, and one small one. The birthing was abrupt and simple. She expelled the little bundles of fur one by one. Then the afterbirth folded out. She ate it, along with the cub that was too small.

There was happiness among the wolves. Everybody was awake, yapping and sniffing the babies. Bob and the two alphas licked them clean. Bob thought they were the most beautiful things he had ever seen, so soft and tiny,

mewing and shaking their heads. They nursed their mother, who lay on her side in a kind of rapture.

It was a good time, with spring coming and plenty of chicken. The cubs grew quickly. Soon it would be time for the thaw. That night all the wolves howled together, and the strongest of the new cubs yapped.

Bob wondered about his cubs. What would they be like as they matured? They had wide heads and quick eyes, and they gazed at him sometimes with the love eyes of children. He began to want to be across the St. Lawrence and away with them.

They loved their mother, nuzzling her, playing in the warm enclosure made by her reclining body. He had thought at first that the cement of a wolf pack was sex, but that had been true only during the time of heat. Now things were more settled and more simple. These creatures were together because they were friends and blood relations, and because they loved one another. The pack was a band of lovers, adoring, gentle, accepting, full of fun and play.

Bob was totally involved now, a bottom wolf still, but he accepted that. He had gained the highest of rights, to impregnate the heated female, and his cubs were his cubs. They crawled all over him when he was still. One little female liked to chew ears, and the sensation was so tickling that Bob could barely stand it.

He would lie very still, until she had crawled up on his muzzle. Then he would snort and jerk his head and she would go tumbling off with a great deal of mewing and snapping. They would lie face-to-face. When they were sleepy, he would lick his cubs, tasting their sweet taste.

One day he found a roach for them to play with, and it was a fine morning. What joy they took in the chase, what merry pleasure!

The presence of the roach should have warned him.

The danger it represented never crossed his mind, though. On a moonless evening, he made his way again to the town. There was a good coop of chickens as yet undisturbed, and he planned on raiding the garbage behind the diner.

No other wolves were with him. Raiding the town was not like hunting. They tended to do it alone or in small groups. Since Bob brought food back, the alpha female never went at all, but relied on him to feed her and the cubs.

Bob was standing just at the edge of town when he realized that everything had changed. He'd always assumed that people would notice the missing livestock, but he felt sure that they would attribute the losses to feral dogs, an

annoying problem in any isolated community, but the sort of thing they would put off doing anything about until spring made it easy.

The evening air was soft and almost warm when Bob reached the outskirts of town.

What he smelled stopped him right in the middle of the street. He stood there, paralyzed by deep emotions. The aroma brought crowds of memories: voices, dreams, sunny days. A woman's smell, rich and strong and familiar. That and the scent of a little boy. He knew them, and when the scents reached his heart, he was filled with longing.

Cindy and Kevin were here.

Bob's second mistake was to stand there, staring down the dark street, trying to see into the past. He lingered a moment too long.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE TOTALLY UNEXPECTED PRESENCE OF HIS HUMAN family froze him.

—Sunday mornings with the *Times*.

—Watching *Mystery* with Kevin and Cindy.

—Reading Kafka, the *Metamorphosis*.

—A good cup of coffee. A good play. Laughing, singing, listening to music. Music, talk: pastries in the afternoon, discussing poetry with Cindy.

—Cindy in the night, Kevin's face when he slept. The life of the family, intimate, infinitely private, gentle.

—Rooms, heat, beds, food on demand.

—Privacy. Being alone. Being naked. Bathing. Being touched by Cindy, touching her. Sharing secret knowledge. The richness of human life.

It all came back, assailing him, sweeping him away on a tide of longing. He had become, truly, a lover: he loved the wolves, the cubs, but he also loved Cindy and Kevin.

The old wolf seduced you with his eyes.

Bob was torn, his heart ached, and when a wolf's heart aches, he is as inspired as when he is joyful or lonely, and he howls, forming with his throat and tongue and lips the music of the wild.

The howl swept down across the town, chilling the March twilight. Men, shining with eagerness, loaded rifles and fueled up snowmobiles. This was an event: wolves in Olana for the first time in living memory. What horror, what fun!

All winter there had been livestock thefts. At first they had attributed it to dogs left behind by summer people. But then they had realized it was wolves. Right there at the end of Ontario Street where the Tucker property began, stood a big, black timber wolf. No doubt about it, they'd come down from Canada because the winter'd been so hard.

Bob stood in confusion as Cindy started to run toward him. His skin quivered—he was repelled by the odd human odors, but also attracted to her, loving her again, that creature from the bright improbable past.

"Run, Bob, run!"

What was she saying? It had been a long time since he had heard words. She was speaking too quickly.

"Bob, run, run for your life!"

Her fear communicated what the words could not. They were simply too fast. In fact the whole town was fast, engines roaring, a siren blaring, people darting about.

He skittered away a little. Had he been seen? He'd come here so many times, he'd gotten used to not being seen.

He had gotten careless.

He knew it for certain when a phalanx of snowmobiles came screaming around the corner, jammed with men and guns.

Oh, God.

He turned and ran, leaving his wife and son and a large part of his heart behind. They had reawakened the man in him, a man who had gone peacefully off to sleep. He loped, choosing a wide, easy stride, the kind that was best for long runs. He could do forty miles like this if he had to. Initially, he wasn't afraid.

His plan was to head straight up the ridge behind the town, then cut through the dense forest just beyond. The snowmobiles wouldn't be able to follow him there. He would get back to the pack and draw them north toward the St. Lawrence. The ice might be getting loose. It was time and past time for them to return to Canada. They could not afford to be caught on this side of the seaway. There just wasn't room in New York for wolves, not even in these relatively empty regions.

The climb up the ridge was hard. He was moving a lot faster than usual, and he felt his wind coming quicker and quicker as he struggled through the sticky snow. If only it hadn't suddenly turned warm!

Behind him the snowmobiles never slowed down. They growled and screamed on the ridge, but they did not slow down.

It was horrible, being chased by such relentless machines. Once a shot rang out, but he wasn't worried about that—nobody was going to hit a moving wolf from a moving snowmobile.

The next shot, though, smacked into the snow not a tail's length from his head. He redoubled his efforts, bounding along, increasingly desperate.

Voices now mixed with the scream of the engines. Men were calling back and forth, their voices gone high with eagerness. "Two hundred pounds," somebody shouted.

"Two-ten," came the cheerful reply.

At the top of the ridge Bob began to be able to go faster, but the snowmobiles also broke out. They raced along behind him. The woods were

not a hundred yards away, but he knew they were going to close the gap before he was safe.

He was frantic, running with all the force he could muster, the wind sweeping past, his fur flying, his paws grabbing the ground with practiced efficiency.

The snowmobiles were on him in a matter of a few minutes.

A rifle butt slammed down across his back. He yelped and snapped at it, but he did not stop moving. There were snowmobiles on both sides of him now, and rifles were weaving in the air.

A shot rang out.

Bob, by a miracle, had been missed. Then he saw why: the shot had not come from the snowmobiles, it had come from a man standing off to the left.

"Leave that wolf alone," the man thundered, "in the name of the Mohawk Nation!"

An Indian, by God, and where had he come from? Another gun butt hit Bob, making him roll once in the snow.

Then the Indian fired again, and one of the snowmobiles peeled off, rattling horribly, its occupants diving off into the drifts. It turned over and burst into flames just as Bob reached the edge of the woods.

"You goddamn fool," a voice screamed behind him, "what the hell's the matter with you, that's a damn *wolf!*"

"I am not a fool. My name is Joe Running Fox and I'm the last of the goddamn Mohicans. That wolf is sacred to my people."

As Bob twisted and turned among the hemlocks and the pines the voices dwindled behind him. He could have listened but he wasn't interested. The Indian might stop those men for a few hours or even a few days, but they would be back. The pack was in immediate danger of being killed.

The cubs would die.

He raced on, his breath coming in hurting gasps, his blood thundering in his temples.

An hour later he reached the pack in a state of happy relaxation. The cubs were playing with the big alpha male and the little female with the bent tail, still Bob's immediate superior. Better, the middle wolves had taken a raccoon, which lay where it had been hunted down, a deliciously bloody ruin.

Bob's fear caused a little restlessness. The alpha female wagged her tail inquiringly. Others watched him, looking for some signal that would explain his distress.

Their language did not allow for explanations, though. They would have to hear the snowmobiles and smell the men before they would run. Bob dashed north a distance, barking frantically. Some of the younger wolves yapped, infected by his state. The alpha male, who had obviously eaten his fill of raccoon, stretched out on a bare patch of ground and went to sleep.

Night fell. The wolves were happy, and they howled together. Bob felt sure that the hunters were close enough to hear them, and he yapped helpless protest. The howl was so good though, so charming with its racing highs and soaring, laughing combinations of voices that he joined it, too, and when it was over, he almost wanted to leap for the rising moon, he was so full of the gladness that is being a wolf among wolves.

His beloved daughter cub curled up with him this night. He lay with her softness under his chin, listening and sniffing. Although he smelled smoke and may once have heard a faint murmur of voices, the men did not appear.

Next morning Bob arose before dawn, to the protests of the little cub. He nuzzled her and she licked his face, making complicated little noises of love in her throat.

Especially when he was with his cubs, Bob thought he could sense the loving force that was behind the change in him. He sensed it now, and he sensed that it was both uneasy and excited.

His mind went to Cindy and Kevin and he thought, *if only*.

But surely it was impossible. No, he was alone in this. People don't change into animals.

He stood, then ran a distance into the deeper woods. He did not like the fact that the thickest forest was to the south. Northward there was a daylong run to the seaway, through mostly scrub woods, over ridge after ridge. The climbing would quickly exhaust the wolves.

From the middle of the woods Bob heard them. The Indian had not been able to turn them back. Now they roared, now they snarled, at least a dozen of them, each carrying one or two armed men.

The wolves had no chance.

He barked furiously, and there was such fear in his voice that every adult wolf in the pack leaped to his feet also barking. In the quiet that followed, Bob heard the snowmobiles again, this time muttering in the far side of the woods. They were tracking him, moving slowly because of the trees.

He took his daughter cub in his mouth and started trotting north. Behind him a few wolves yapped, but the alphas soon heard the snowmobiles also

and took flight, each carrying a cub. The scraggly female carried the fourth, a scrappy little male who had once made a neat line of twigs, nosing them through the snow.

The wolves trotted steadily along, the alphas in the lead, then the middle wolves, then the female, and at the end Bob with his daughter, who had obediently fallen asleep.

The snowmobiles came screaming out of the woods not a mile behind them, and fanned out across the wider field they had just left, sending up silver plumes of snow in the dawn light. Bob could not make out the words, but he could hear the delight in the voices. The men must be almost beside themselves, seeing the whole pack. Probably these were the first wolves any of them had seen in the wild.

Shots sounded, snowmobiles shrieked and bounded across the land, eating up the distance. The wolves moved steadily along, going from a trot to a lope, the alphas conserving their strength.

It was a hopeless flight. Before another hour had passed the snowmobiles were flanking the wolves. A shot rang out and the little female ahead of Bob, whom he had faithfully obeyed since they met, whom he loved, to whom he often rolled, exploded in a splash of blood and bone. The cub flew out of her mouth. She lunged, grabbed it, and started trying to pull herself along with her front paws. Then her head was blown apart. The cub was hurled screaming into the air. No sooner had it landed than one of the middle wolves grabbed it.

There was no longer any question of conserving strength. The alphas were running hard now, desperate for anything that could be called shelter.

It was slaughter. They were still miles from the seaway and there was nobody to help them. Again the shots rang out, and this time a middle wolf collapsed, dead of a bullet through his heart. Bob closed the line, slinking low, his daughter cub in his mouth, running as hard as he could. He was thinking little, just following the alphas, hoping he wouldn't get shot.

Another middle wolf was hit. She screamed, blood spurting from her side. The cub she was carrying was picked up by another. She lay down in the snow, panting. Like the others Bob went around her. Her eyes were on the wolves, and he knew why. In her dying there was nothing else she cared to see but the long gray line with its waving tails.

"Don't shoot the fuckin' heads!"

She screamed. Then again, louder. She was dying in agony.

"Don't shoot again! You'll mess up the pelt. It'll die in a minute."

Her agony, though, lasted longer than a minute. In her tortured end she gave the others a little time. But they were terribly tired, so it was time not for more flight but time for rest. They trotted until they heard the snowmobiles grinding gears and starting off again. Then they began to run.

Bob was right behind the alpha female now. The middle wolves remaining were behind him. Pack order was in confusion. Even if the killing stopped now, it would take days for them to sort themselves out again.

Bob could smell her beautiful musk. God, he loved her. He loved her more than he ever had Cindy—or at least differently. His love for her was without equivocation. It was adoring, plentiful, unashamed. But it was not exclusive: it included the whole pack, male and female alike. Only in time of heat did sexual differences really become important.

The snowmobiles were back. The wolves had fanned out, though, in a hunting spread, and so they could not so easily be flanked. A few shots were fired, all misses.

Then there was some luck: one of the snowmobiles hit a tree and its driver fell off and started screaming. He was holding his head when Bob looked, dark blood coming out between his fingers. The wolves kept running.

As he ran Bob cursed himself. Despite his place at the rear of the pack, he had been subtly leading it just as certainly as if he had been at the front. The wolves did not have his intelligence. Pinned into a wolf suit, he was as deadly to them as if he had been a normal human being. It was he who had roamed too far south, who had discovered the town, who had started the chicken raids. Now the wolves were paying the full penalty for his lack of caution.

The cub in Bob's mouth was beginning to squirm and mew. It must be painful, bouncing along as she was. Then Bob heard the mad buzzing of the snowmobiles again. The other wolves put on a burst of speed but it wasn't long before the hunters were back, firing at the remaining wolves.

Another male went down, crying as he fell, his body pierced in the anus. With a whoop one of the hunters leaped from his snowmobile and began to follow the struggling, dying wolf on foot. Bob knew it had been a good shot; no doubt the only damage to the pelt would be a wound under the tail. The wolf dragged himself along. Bob remembered him playing with the cubs through long, happy hours, letting them climb up his back and then shaking them off amid squeals of cub delight. The dying wolf had not had a cub with him now, which was fortunate because there would be no saving it.

He gurgled and gasped. Looking back, Bob saw his lips twisted back, his legs digging at the snow. Then he went down. Once he barked, and then he was too far behind to watch without slowing down.

A bullet whistled past Bob's skull. He dodged and ran on, slinking to get between some close trees. Another shot cracked and there was a heart-breaking shriek. It was her, she was hurt! Carefully, his mind washed with great clarity, Bob put down his cub and ran for all he was worth to help her. She had a grave wound in her belly. A terrible realization came over Bob when he saw her blue guts dragging in the snow. She fell to her side, gabbling pain. The cub she had been carrying dropped from her mouth.

A laughing, happy man leaped off his snowmobile and scooped the cub up. Bob thought fast. He might be a wolf, but he knew a few things that were going to surprise this man.

"I got me a—"

Bob jumped up on the snowmobile.

"What in hell?"

He surveyed the controls. Handlebar throttle, wouldn't you know. If it had been a pedal he might have managed to drive the thing. He broke off the key and jumped out amid a fusillade of shots. A bullet grazed his back like a hot poker, tumbling him over in the snow. But he jumped to his feet and rushed the man, who was not ten yards away and reloading.

While his beautiful friend died in agony, biting her own guts to speed her end, all of her grace and dignity spattered as blood on the snow, Bob savaged another human being mercilessly. He bit the man's face, he raked his cheeks until he could see bones and teeth, he bit the scarf-protected neck so hard the screams became popping whispers.

Then he grabbed the cub the man had dropped and took it to where he had left the other. The rest of the wolves were already far away, followed still by four snowmobiles.

Bob left her dying, her murderer sitting in shock in the snow, his face a pulp. He would live, scarred. She would die.

She whined and Bob stopped. He could not bear to leave her, nor could he bear to leave one of his cubs. He yapped miserably, hopelessly.

He went to her and gently licked her gaping wound. At first she resisted, then her great head flopped down and she made no further sound.

Her eyes told him that she was dead.

He howled over her, raising his soul's dirge. The man he had injured

moaned, his hands fluttering in the ruins of his face. Bob could have killed him, but he would not. Already he had done too much.

Carefully, he picked up one cub and set it beside the other, then he took the two of them in his mouth as best he could. They did not like this at all, they squirmed and yowled. But when he moved, their instincts saved them—or perhaps their understanding—and they became quiet, bearing their discomfort.

About a mile to the north there were more shots, followed by whoops of pleasure. Something snapped in Bob, to hear the easy delight. For the hunters this was nothing more than fun.

But it was so much more. It was so terribly immoral, so fundamentally wrong that Bob almost could not bear that it was happening on the earth. Evil is not entropic, it is not a winding down: evil disguises itself as decay. In truth it is an active force in human life, active and clever and tireless. Evil laughed with the laughing men, and the wolves died.

When Bob reached the top of a low hill, he saw them, a scraggly line of six animals with snowmobiles racing round and round them. There was no hope, but still they ran on. Bob could see cubs dangling in the mouths of the alpha male and one of the middle wolves. They were trying so hard to save themselves and their infants. For the wolves this was an occasion of the greatest possible suffering and the highest seriousness. How could it be debased to fun by the whooping hunters, now riding their snowmobiles like cowboys on dancing mares.

Stunned by the horror of the scene before him, Bob had stopped almost without realizing it. The alpha was a clever wolf, and he suddenly turned away from his northerly direction and into a dense thicket that fell quickly away to a rushing kill, the torrent foaming with spring runoff. The snowmobiles could not follow. Within the thicket, Bob saw them put down the two cubs. No doubt they hoped to fly as fast as possible, then come back later for the cubs. Or maybe they were simply too tired to carry them farther, and were hiding them as best they were able, with no plan for the future.

The snowmobiles stopped in a line at the edge of the thicket. A couple of shots were fired but it isn't easy to hit a target running as fast as the wolves were running now that nobody had a cub in his mouth.

Bob saw a chance—not much of a chance, but a very definite chance. He could distract the hunters, draw them away from the other wolves and the two cubs left in the thicket. Without a moment's hesitation he put down his own

two cubs and began barking furiously.

Faces turned with alacrity. There were excited shouts. Sure enough, the easier game was more interesting to the hunters. After all, they had already gotten themselves eight wolf pelts and seven fine heads. A ninth—and such a big one— would surely be enough for one day.

Taking up the miserable cubs, Bob started moving north and west, still in the direction of the seaway, but away from the other wolves, who were going east and, Bob felt sure, would soon turn north again.

He ran as fast as his spent, trembling body would allow. The snow was in full melt beneath the noontime sun, and it made movement hell. The snowmobiles had been designed to handle it. They roared easily forth.

If only the men would find their companion with the ravaged face, they might call off the whole hunt. His was far more than the minor head injury the other one had encountered. But he was too far back. They wouldn't discover him until they turned for home.

The engines got louder and louder, the whoops and laughter higher and more excited. Soon early shots were ringing out and Bob saw the snow fountains of bullets all around him. Ahead of Bob was a long, drifted ridge— just the sort of situation that would punish him the most. His cubs were crying. At least the other two were with the main pack. They would live if the pack got across the seaway.

Bob realized that he was going to die. Maybe, somehow, his two cubs would make it.

Not two days ago one of his offspring had made a line of sticks. Made a line! They *had* to live!

He turned to face the snowmobiles, his head down, barking furiously.

There came out of the south an amazingly unlikely caravan. First was an ancient car, slipping and sliding through the snow, driven by the Indian who had called himself Joe Running Fox. Beside him in the car sat a woman. Bob smelled Cindy. The car had chains on its tires and was a total mess, covered with snow, both lights put out by collisions along the way, the windshield cracked. Behind it was an even more outrageous sight, a spindly old man on a brand-new Kawasaki snowmobile. Sitting behind him was Kevin, who carried a shotgun.

The procession drove right between him and the oncoming hunters, and there it stopped.

Bob could hardly believe what he saw. "You're all under arrest," Cindy

shouted. "What you're doing is a felony. You're wantonly killing an endangered species without so much as a permit."

"These damn things have been taking chickens and goats all winter. They're being exterminated." With that one of the hunters took aim on Bob. Kevin's voice came over the noon thrall: "If you shoot, I do, too!"

"Oh, come on." The rifle clicked ominously.

Kevin fired the shotgun high. Thank God Bob had taught him something about shotguns. Otherwise he might have misgauged the spread and given one of the men a face full of buckshot.

"The next one will be for you, Mike Lispenard," the old man said in a thin, slightly English voice.

"You old queer!"

"Maybe so, but you're a murderer."

"Hell, this is a hunt. The worst we're gonna get is a fine, if that. And one of these pelts is worth a lot more than what we'll have to pay."

Kevin fired again. This time one of the snowmobiles leaped back and its occupant climbed down, ripping off his jacket. "A pellet! I got a pellet in my goddamn chest!"

"That's a lot more serious crime than killing a few chicken-thieving wolves, lady."

"The worst he'll get is a fine," Cindy snarled, "and it's worth it to see you creeps suffer."

Bob did not wait for the end of this confrontation. He took his two cubs and set off toward the seaway.

All afternoon he loped, his heart still far to the south where the other cubs lay hidden in the snow. He wished mightily that he could go back for them, but he knew that the alpha had been right. Grown wolves could be risked for cubs only up to a point. Bob knew that there would be other seasons and other mates, and many litters.

At least he still had the two. In many ways that was a triumph.

Early in the evening he reached the seaway. For an hour he heard it booming and cracking. He had been sick with fear, but confused, because the ice seemed to be breaking up awfully early.

Then he saw why: there were icebreakers on the water, long, gray ships plunging and rearing along, leaving dark blue tracks of open water behind them. Bob remembered the roach—the fact that it was out should have warned him that spring was proceeding. The sailors knew it: like the insects,

they gave not a moment more to winter than necessary.

Bob ran as hard as he could, but it was not hard enough. By the time he reached the seaway the water was blue down a trench in the middle at least fifty yards wide. And the ice for a hundred yards on either side of it was shattered and thin, floating precariously on the current. -

Bob sat down on the bank. A wave of blackest despair washed him. Putting down the two cubs, who immediately began to tussle and play at his feet, he raised his muzzle in a disconsolate, lonely howl.

From the far bank he was answered. He counted six wolves. Since he was the seventh, it meant that they had ultimately killed nine. A terrible toll, more than half of them. But the survivors were over there, not here, and for that Bob could be glad.

He decided to hide these cubs in a snow den and go back for the others at once, so that they wouldn't have to spend the night in the cold. As long as he lived, they had a chance, all four of them.

As he dug his den, he heard the howling from the far bank of the St. Lawrence, and thought that it was the saddest sound he had ever known, far more sad than the deepest human sorrow, because it had to do with the final tragedy of their species, and they sensed this.

Miserably, Bob dug the snow den. These were such early cubs, maybe they were never fated to live, any of them. Bob had been so randy that he had interrupted the dance of heat with an impregnation weeks before it would normally have occurred. Again, his human nature had unbalanced the delicate life of the pack.

He nosed the little cubs into the den and turned south, counting on the rising dark to conceal him. He had not gone a quarter mile before, quite abruptly, he collapsed in a heap. For a moment he was confused. Why wouldn't he go? He tried, but he got nowhere. It was fully fifteen minutes before he could get himself to move again. And then he could barely manage to walk back to the snow den.

He lay down beside it, curling his nose under his tail. Soon he had two very happy and relieved cubs cuddling into the warmth of his fur, tugging and snuffling for the best position. He knew they must be hungry. He'd deal with hunting in the morning. God willing, the thaw would bring out some squirrels.

He dropped to sleep thinking of the other cubs out there in the night alone, the poor children of his body. And her, he thought of her, how beautiful she

had been, the most beautiful female creature he had ever known.

But when he slept, he dreamed of Cindy's arms around him.

The light that woke him was not the sun. It came stealthily through the woods, and brought him to his feet.

"It's us, Bob."

They came forth out of the scrub forest. Bob smelled a hot car nearby, and he also smelled something else, an odor that made his hackles rise even as his heart was charged with hope.

"We have the cubs. We saw you carrying the other two. We know how important they are to you."

Cindy and Kevin loomed up out of the dark, each carrying a cub cuddled in their arms. Both infant wolves were curled up, motionless with fear.

When they smelled Bob, their heads began to wobble. Then they started mewling, and his every instinct was aroused. They were so precious: they bore the spark of intellect. Such cubs as these were destined to save the wild!

The cubs were put at his feet, and soon all four of them were scrambling about together, their fears forgotten in the protective shadow of their father.

"Bob, do you still understand?" Cindy was a perceptive woman. He'd heard enough language this day for it all to have come back to him. One tap was yes, two was no. He tapped.

"Oh, Dad, you're still in there, you're really still in there!"

Kevin's voice, so full of loyalty and love, practically broke Bob's heart. Before he realized what he was doing, he raised his nose and howled out his combination of joy and sorrow. From the far bank there almost immediately came a response. He felt the longing in their voices: they had lost lovers and cubs. Also, though, they had heard his joy and there was an undercurrent of hope in their sound.

He looked at his son. For an instant, their eyes met. Then Kevin looked away.

Bob thought, I can do it.

"The seaway trapped you, didn't it," the elderly man said.

Bob tapped once.

The old man looked at Cindy and Kevin. "Amazing. Can it *really* be true? Every word you've told me?"

Bob scratched again, hard, and wagged his tail.

The old man made a sound like a sob. "I see this as a very hopeful sign," he said.

"If you'll get in the car," Joe Running Fox said, "we'll take you across the seaway at the Lightforth Bridge. We'll leave you within striking distance of the other wolves. Do you want that?"

Bob scratched yes and yapped excitedly. How desperately he wanted that!

"Bob," Cindy asked, "you must answer me a question. Please, Bob, do you want to stay with us? We'll give the cubs to the other wolves. But Bob, come home. There is love for you there. And maybe someday—"

He spoke with his heart: *Look at me, Cindy! Look into my eyes!* She did not hear. Within himself he was still her husband, still Kevin's father. But he was also the father of these cubs.

He was anguished.

He loved his old family and the life of man, but he belonged to these cubs, and to the future they represented. He knew why he was here, to save the ancient race of wolves by giving them a spark of man's devastating intelligence.

But Cindy, dear heart, how can I ever leave you! For God sake, look at me! Kevin, look into Dad's eyes!

The cubs, grown hungry, mewed in perfect unison at his feet. Normal wolf cubs do not mew together like that, not ever.

In the car the cubs became quiet after eating some beef jerky offered them by Joe Running Fox. Bob slept with his head in Cindy's lap, waking occasionally to take a long, lovely sniff of her.

It was a long drive down to the bridge and back up the other side. Through it Cindy stroked Bob's head. He smelled tears, but she made no sound. He waited to lock glances with her or Kevin, but it never happened.

Then the car stopped. "It's time," Joe said. Bob got to his feet. Kevin and the old man were sleeping on one another's shoulders. Gently, Bob nosed his son awake.

"Good-bye," Cindy said. Kevin bent down and kissed him.

No, it must not be! For God's sake, look at me!

He imagined them changing, fought to see them as wolves, Cindy's face soft and full of courage, her scent unimaginably perfect.

She moaned, and then, quite suddenly, she was looking back into his eyes.

There came a shaft of golden light from the sun. The old man screamed, the Indian sighed, Kevin's voice swept high with terror. "Mom, Mom!"

Oh, there—perfect, just perfect! He leaped into her, rushing and roaring, filling her with the essence of the wolf, the magic of the wild. She rolled,

growling and muttering, still trying to talk.

She was one god-awful beautiful wolf! "Mom, no!"

Kevin, come on, look at me, look at Dad! "Mama, I'm scared! Please, Mama, *please!*" She leaped up, resting her paws on the boy's shoulders. "They do it to you," the Indian shouted. "Kev, they do it with their eyes!" He was young and full of life, and that life recoiled in fear.

When his mother looked into his eyes, he whimpered, then cried. His whole body shook, shimmered as if behind a wall of heat, then his arms, his legs began to twist, his hands to curl in on themselves.

It wasn't easy for him like it had been for his mother and father. Perhaps this was because he was young and full of human hope for his human future. Or perhaps it was simply because youth loves life, and this felt too much like death.

But once the process started in him it would not be stopped. The change continued relentlessly on. His head burst with a great crackling sound into the head of a fine young wolf.

Out of the writhing blur of his body there came the naked stalk of a tail, the skeletal sticks that would be his legs, then beneath the ripping, tearing clothes, a blur of fine, gray hair.

He was a lovely young wolf, his soft eyes crackling with intelligence.

He stood beside his mother, his tail circling, his very stance speaking promise. When Bob went to him to sniff under his tail, he leaped forward, yapping.

Had it been possible, Bob would have laughed. But he taught them both the wonders of their new sense. In a few minutes of sniffing each other the little family knew each other better than human beings have since we left the forest.

When he lifted his head from his wife and his son and his cubs, Bob could smell the other wolves not a hundred yards away, hiding in a stand of pine.

"I'll never forget you," the Indian said. He would not look at Bob, though, when Bob sought his eyes. "It's too late for me," he added, "I'd be a waste." Then he dropped his eyes. His fists were clenched, such was the pain in his heart. "You go on, find others, many others! Find the young and the strong. God bless you and bless the race of wolves!" He and the Englishman withdrew so that the other wolves could come out of hiding.

When they appeared, the pack reunited with much sniffing and joyful yapping. Because of the losses, the two new wolves were more easily

accepted.

The pack remained there through the night, sometimes fighting, sometimes not, and in the morning there was a new order established.

The alpha wolf was still alpha. Behind him came Cindy of the high tail, who had turned out to be a fierce fighter. She had taken second place against all of the other female wolves. Then came a thoroughly beaten Bob. He had tried hard to be alpha. He was Cindy's husband, for God's sake, married in the Catholic Church no less! But the leader was clever in the ways of wolves, and he was strong. Behind him were the young wolves, included among them his own beloved son.

Not long after dawn the Indian and the old man returned to the pine grove. He watched them in silence. There were tears on the Indian's face, but he would not meet Bob's eager eyes. "Under God's heaven," he said, "make something new in the world."

Bob knew what was finally happening, knew the grandeur and the wonder of it. The spirit of man had finished its ages-long journey through history, and was finally returning to the wild from which it had come. But it was returning triumphant, bringing the gift of intellect with it.

The two old men stood watching as the pack left. When they mounted a rise, Bob looked back. He saw their car creeping away like a beetle, moving toward the Lightforth Bridge and mankind's old, dark world.

At last Bob turned north. He bounded forward, taking his hard-earned place as third wolf. He followed his alphas, deep into the freedom and safety of the wild.

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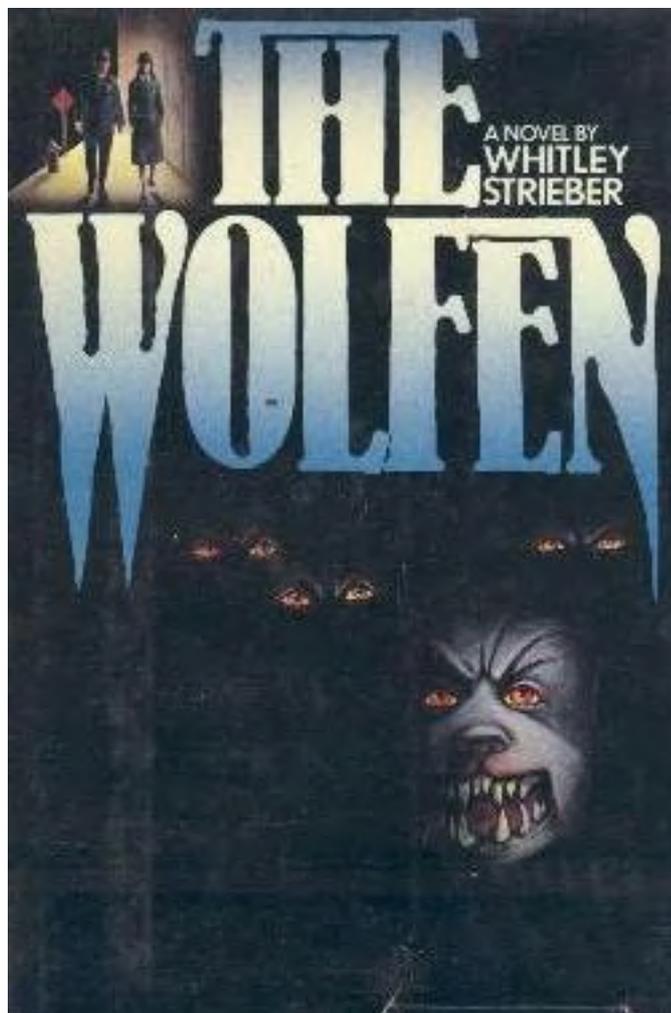
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Whitley Strieber

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For Anne

Since all is well, keep it so:
Wake not the sleeping wolf.
—Shakespeare
Henry IV, Part 2

Chapter 1

In Brooklyn they take abandoned cars to the Fountain Avenue Automobile Pound adjacent to the Fountain Avenue Dump. The pound and the dump occupy land shown on maps as "Spring Creek Park (Proposed)." There is no spring, no creek, and no park.

Normally the pound is silent, its peace disturbed only by an occasional fight among the packs of wild dogs that roam there, or perhaps the cries of the sea gulls that hover over the stinking, smoldering dump nearby.

The members of the Police Auto Squad who visit the pound to mark derelicts for the crusher do not consider the place dangerous. Once in a while the foot-long rats will get aggressive and become the victims of target practice. The scruffy little wild dogs will also attack every so often, but they can usually be dealt with by a shot into the ground. Auto-pound duty consists of marking big white X's on the worst of the derelicts and taking Polaroids of them to prove that they were beyond salvage in case any owners turn up.

It isn't the kind of job that the men associate with danger, much less getting killed, so Hugo DiFalco and Dennis Houlihan would have laughed in your face if you told them they had only three minutes to live when they heard the first sound behind them.

"What was that?" Houlihan asked. He was bored and wouldn't have minded getting a couple of shots off at a rat.

"A noise."

"Brilliant. That's what I thought it was too."

They both laughed. Then there was another sound, a staccato growl that ended on a murmuring high note. The two men looked at one another. "That sounds like my brother singing in the shower," DiFalco said.

From ahead of them came further sounds—rustlings and more of the unusual growls. DiFalco and Houlihan stopped. They weren't joking anymore, but they also weren't afraid, only curious. The wet, ruined cars just didn't seem to hold any danger on this dripping autumn afternoon. But there was something out there.

They were now in the center of a circle of half-heard rustling movement. As both men realized that something had surrounded them, they had their first twinge of concern. They now had less than one minute of life remaining. Both of them lived with the central truth of police work—it could happen anytime. But what the hell was happening now?

Then something stepped gingerly from between two derelicts and stood facing the victims.

The men were not frightened, but they sensed danger. As it had before in moments of peril, Hugo DiFalco's mind turned to a brief thought of his wife, of how she liked to say "We're an us." Dennis Houlihan felt a shiver of prickles come over him as if the hair all over his body was standing up.

"Don't move, man," DiFalco said.

It snarled at the voice. "There's more of 'em behind us, buddy." Their voices were low and controlled, the tone of professionals in trouble. They moved closer together; their shoulders touched. Both men knew that one of them had to turn around, the other keep facing this way. But they didn't need to talk about it; they had worked together too long to have to plan their moves.

DiFalco started to make the turn and draw his pistol. That was the mistake.

Ten seconds later their throats were being torn out. Twenty seconds later the last life was pulsing out of their bodies. Thirty seconds later they were being systematically consumed.

Neither man had made a sound. Houlihan had seen the one in front of them twitch its eyes, but before he could follow the movement there was a searing pain in his throat and he was suddenly, desperately struggling for air through the bubbling torrent of his own blood.

DiFalco's hand had just gripped the familiar checkered wooden butt of his service revolver when it was yanked violently aside. The impression of impossibly fast-moving shapes entered his astonished mind, then something slammed into his chest and he too was bleeding, in his imagination protecting his throat as in reality his body slumped to the ground and his mind sank into darkness.

The attackers moved almost too quickly, their speed born of nervousness at the youth of their victims. The shirts were torn open, the white chests exposed, the entrails tugged out and taken away, the precious organs swallowed. The rest was left behind.

In less than five more minutes it was over. The hollow, ravaged corpses lay there in the mud, two ended lives now food for the wild scavengers of the area.

For a long time nothing more moved at the Fountain Avenue Automobile Pound. The cries of gulls echoed among the rustling hulks of the cars. Around the corpses the blood coagulated and blackened. As the afternoon drew on, the autumn mist became rain, covering the dead policemen with droplets of water and making the blood run again.

Night fell.

Rats worried the corpses until dawn.

The two men had been listed AWOL for fourteen hours. Most unusual for these guys. They were both family types, steady and reliable. AWOL wasn't their style. But still, what could happen to two experienced policemen on marking duty at the auto pound? That was a question nobody would even try to answer until a search was made for the men.

Police work might be dangerous, but nobody seriously believed that DiFalco and Houlihan were in any real trouble. Maybe there had been a family emergency and the two had failed to check in. Maybe a lot of things. And maybe there *was* some trouble. Nobody realized that the world had just become a much more dangerous place, and they wouldn't understand that for quite some time. Right now they were just looking for a couple of missing policemen. Right now the mystery began and ended with four cops poking through the auto pound for signs of their buddies.

"They better not be sleeping in some damn car." Secretly all four men hoped that the two AWOL officers were off on a bender or something. You'd rather see that than the other possibility.

A cop screamed. The sound stunned the other three to silence because it was one they rarely heard.

"Over here," the rookie called in a choking voice.

"Hold on, man." The other three converged on the spot as the rookie's cries sounded again and again. When the older men got there he slumped against a car.

The three older cops cursed.

"Call the hell in. Get Homicide out here. Seal the area. Jesus Christ!"

They covered the remains with their rainslickers. They put their hats where the faces had been.

The police communications network responded fast; fellow officers were dead, nobody wasted time. Ten minutes after the initial alarms, had gone out the phone was ringing in the half-empty ready-room of the Brooklyn Homicide Division. Detective Becky Neff picked it up. "Neff," the gruff voice of the Inspector said, "you and Wilson're assigned to a case in the Seventy-fifth Precinct."

"The what?"

"It's the Fountain Avenue Dump. Got a double cop killing, mutilation, probable sex assault, cannibalism. Get the hell out there fast." The line clicked.

"Wake up, George, we've got a case," Neff growled. "We've got a bad one." She had hardly absorbed what the Inspector had said—mutilation and cannibalism? What in the name of God had happened out there? "Somebody killed two cops and cannibalized them."

Wilson, who had been resting in a tilted-back chair after a grueling four-hour paperwork session, leaned forward and got to his feet.

“Let’s go. Where’s the scene?”

“Fountain Avenue Dump. Seventy-fifth Precinct.”

“Goddamn out-of-the-way place.” He shook his head. “Guys must have gotten themselves jumped.”

They went down to Becky Neff’s old blue Pontiac and set the flasher up on the dashboard. She pulled the car out of its parking place and edged into the dense traffic of downtown Brooklyn. Wilson flipped on the radio and reported to the dispatcher. “Siren’s working,” Wilson commented as he flipped the toggle switch. The siren responded with an electronic warble, and he grunted with satisfaction; it had been on the blink for over a month, and there had been no response from the repair unit. Budget cuts had reduced this once-efficient team to exactly twelve men for the entire fleet of police vehicles. Unmarked cars were low on the list of precedence for flasher and siren repairs.

“I fixed it,” Becky Neff said, “and I’m damn glad now.” The ride to the car pound would be made much easier by the siren, and time could not be wasted.

Wilson raised his eyebrows. “*You* fixed it?”

“I borrowed the manual and fixed it. Nothing to it.” Actually she had gotten a neighborhood electronics freak to do the job, a guy with a computer in his living room. But there was no reason to let Wilson know that.

“*You* fixed it,” Wilson said again.

“You’re repeating yourself.”

He shook his head.

As the car swung onto the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway he used the siren, flipping the toggle to generate a series of startling whoops that cleared something of a path for them. But traffic was even worse as they approached the Battery Tunnel interchange, and the siren did little good in the confusion of trucks and buses. “Step on it, Becky.”

“I’m stepping. You’re working the siren.”

“I don’t care what you do, but move!”

His outburst made her want to snap back at him, but she understood how he felt. She shared his emotions and knew his anger was directed at the road. Cop killings made you hate the world, and the damn city in particular.

Wilson leaned out of his window and shouted at the driver of a truck stuck in the middle of the lane. “Police! Get that damn thing moving or you’re under arrest!”

The driver shot the finger but moved the vehicle. Becky Neff jammed her accelerator to the floor, skidding around more slowly moving traffic, at times breaking into the clear, at times stuck again.

As the dashboard clock moved through the better part of an hour they approached their destination. They got off the B-Q-E and went straight out Flatbush Avenue, into the sometimes seedy, sometimes neat residential areas beyond. The precincts rolled by, the 78th, the 77th, the 73rd. Finally they entered the 75th and turned onto Flatlands Avenue, a street of nondescript shops in a racially mixed lower- and middle-income neighborhood. The 75th was as average a precinct as there was in New York. About a hundred thousand people lived there, not many poor and not many rich, and about evenly divided between black, white, and Hispanic.

The 75th was the kind of precinct you never read about in the papers, the kind of place where policemen lived out good solid careers without ever shooting a man—not the kind

of place where they got killed, much less mutilated and cannibalized.

Finally they turned onto Fountain Avenue. In the distance a little clutch of flashers could be seen in the dismal autumn light—that must mark the official vehicles pulled up to the entrance of the Automobile Pound. The scene of the crime. And judging from the news cars careening down the street, the 75th Precinct wasn't going to be an obscure place much longer.

“Who's Precinct Captain?” Neff asked her superior officer. Wilson was senior man on the team, a fact which he was careful to make sure she never forgot. He also had a terrific memory for details.

“Gerardi, I think, something Gerardi. Good enough cop. The place is tight s'far as I know. Nothin' much going on. It's not Midtown South, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” What Wilson meant was that this precinct was clean—no bad cops, no mob connections, no serious graft. Unlike Midtown South there wasn't even the opportunity.

“Sounds like it's a psycho case to me,” Neff said. She was always careful to pick her words when she theorized around Wilson. He was scathing when he heard poorly thought out ideas and had no tolerance for people with less skill than he himself possessed. Which was to say, he was intolerant of almost the entire police force. He was probably the best detective in Homicide, maybe the best on the force. He was also lazy, venal, inclined toward a Victorian view of women, and a profound slob. Except for their abilities in the craft of police detection, Becky liked to think they had nothing in common. Where Wilson was a slob, Becky tended to be orderly. She was always the one who kept at the paperwork when Wilson gave up, and who kept the dreary minutiae of their professional lives organized.

She and Wilson didn't exactly dislike one another—it was more than that, it was pure hate laced with grudging respect. Neff thought that Wilson was a Stone Age chauvinist and was revolted by the clerical role he often forced her to play—and he considered her a female upstart in a profession where women were at best a mistake.

But they were both exceptional detectives, and that kept them together. Neff couldn't help but admire her partner's work, and he had been forced to admit that she was one of the few officers he had encountered who could keep up with him.

The fact that Becky Neff was also not a bad-looking thirty-four had helped as well. Wilson was a bachelor, over fifty and not much more appealing physically than a busted refrigerator (which he resembled in shape and height). Becky saw from the first that she was attractive to him, and she played it up a little, believing that her progress in her career was more important than whether or not she let Wilson flirt with her. But it went no further than that. Becky's husband Dick was also on the force, a captain in Narcotics, and Wilson wouldn't mess around with another cop's wife.

The idea of Wilson messing around with anybody was ridiculous anyway; he had remained a bachelor partly out of choice and partly because few women would tolerate his arrogance and his sloppy indifference to even the most fundamental social graces, like taking the meat out of a hamburger and eating it separately, which was one of his nicer table manners.

“Let's just go blank on this one, sweetheart,” Wilson rumbled. “We don't know what the hell happened out there.”

“Cannibalism would indicate—”

“We don't know. Guys are excited, maybe it was something else. Let's just find what we find.”

Becky pulled the car in among the official vehicles and snapped her folding umbrella out of her purse. She opened it against the rain and was annoyed to see Wilson go trudging off into the mud, pointedly ignoring his own comfort. “Let the bastard catch pneumonia,” she thought as she huddled forward beneath the umbrella. Wilson was a great one for appearances—he gets to the scene wet, indifferent to his own comfort, concerned only with the problem at hand, while his dainty little partner follows along behind with her umbrella, carefully mincing over the puddles. Ignoring him as best she could, she set off toward the klieg lights that now lit the scene of the murders some fifty yards into the area.

As soon as she saw the mess she knew that this was no normal case. Something that made you break out in a sweat even in this weather had happened to these men. She glanced at Wilson, surprised to see that even old super-pro’s eyes were opened wide with surprise. “Jesus,” he said, “I mean... what?”

The Precinct Captain came forward. “We don’t know, sir,” he said to Wilson, acknowledging the other man’s seniority and fame on the force. And he also eyed Becky Neff, well-known enough in her own right as one of the most visible female officers in New York. Her picture had appeared in the *Daily News* more than once in connection with some of her and Wilson’s more spectacular cases. Wilson shunned the photographers himself—or they shunned him, it was hard to say which. But Becky welcomed them, highly conscious of her role as living and visible proof that female officers could work the front lines as well as their male counterparts.

Taking a deep breath she knelt down beside the corpses while Wilson was still registering his shock. Every fiber of her body wanted to run, to get away from the unspeakable horror before her—but instead she looked closely, peering at the broken, gristle-covered bones and the dark lumps of flesh that seemed almost to glow beneath the lights that had been set up by the Forensics officers.

“Where the hell’s the Medical Examiner?” Wilson said behind her. A voice answered. Wilson did not come any closer; she knew that he wasn’t going to because he couldn’t stomach this sort of thing. Clenching her teeth against her own disgust, she stared at the bodies, noting the most unusual thing about them—the long scrape marks on the exposed bones and the general evidence of gnawing. She stood up and looked around the desolate spot. About a quarter of a mile away the dump could be seen with huge flocks of sea gulls hovering over the mounds of garbage. Even over the hubbub of voices you could hear the gulls screaming. From here to the dump was an ocean of old cars and trucks of every imaginable description, most of them worthless, stripped hulks. A few nearby had white X’s on the windshields or hoods, evidence of the work DiFalco and Houlihan had been doing when the attack occurred.

“They were gnawed by rats,” Becky said in as level a tone as she could manage, “but those larger marks indicate something else—dogs?”

“The wild dogs around here are just scrawny little mutts,” the Precinct Captain said.

“How long were these men missing before you instituted a search, Captain?” Wilson asked.

The Captain glanced sharply at him. Neff was amazed; nobody below the rank of Inspector had the right to ask a captain a question like that, and even then not outside of a Board of Inquiry. It was a question that belonged in a dereliction of duty hearing, not at the scene of a crime.

“We need to know,” Wilson added a little too loudly.

“Then ask the M. E. how long they’ve been dead. We found them two hours ago. Figure the rest out for yourself.” The Captain turned away, and Becky Neff followed his

gaze out over the distant Atlantic, where a helicopter could be seen growing rapidly larger. It was a police chopper and it was soon above them, its rotor clattering as it swung around looking for a likely spot to land.

“That’s the Commissioner and the Chief,” Wilson said. “They must have smelled newsmen.” In January a new mayor would take office, and senior city officials were all scrambling to keep their jobs. So these normally anonymous men now jumped at the possibility of getting their faces on the eleven o’clock news. But this time they would be disappointed—because of the unusually hideous nature of the crime, the press was being kept as far away as possible. No pictures allowed until the scene was cleared of the bodies.

At the same time that the Chief of Detectives and the Commissioner were getting out of their helicopter, the Medical Examiner was hurrying across the muddy ground with a newspaper folded up and held over his head against the rain. “It’s Evans himself,” Wilson said. “I haven’t seen that man outdoors in twenty years.”

“I’m glad he’s here.”

Evans was the city’s Chief Medical Examiner, a man renowned for his ingenious feats of forensic detection. He rolled along, shabby, tiny, looking very old behind his thick glasses.

He had worked with Wilson and Neff often and greeted them both with a nod. “What’s your idea?” he said even before examining the bodies. Most policemen he treated politely enough; these two he respected.

“We’re going to have a problem finding the cause of death,” Wilson said, “because of the shape they’re in.”

Evans nodded. “Is Forensics finished with the bodies?” The Forensics team was finished, which meant that the corpses could be touched. Dr. Evans rolled on his black rubber gloves and bent down. So absorbed did he become that he didn’t even acknowledge the approach of the brass.

The group watched Evans as he probed gingerly at the bodies. Later he would do a much more thorough autopsy in his lab, but these first impressions were important and would be his only on-site inspection of the victims.

When he backed away from the bodies, his face was registering confusion. “I don’t understand this at all,” he said slowly. “These men have been killed by... something with claws, teeth. Animals of some kind. But what doesn’t make sense is—why didn’t they defend themselves?”

“Their guns aren’t even drawn,” Becky said through dry lips. It was the first thing she had noticed.

“Maybe that wasn’t the mode of death, Doctor,” Wilson said. “I mean, maybe they were killed first and then eaten by the animals around here. There’s rats, gulls, also some wild dogs, the precinct boys say.”

The doctor pursed his lips. He nodded. “We’ll find out when we do the autopsy. Maybe you’re right, but on the surface I’d say we’re looking at the fatal wounds.”

The Forensics team was photographing and marking the site, picking up scattered remains and vacuuming the area as well as possible considering the mud. They also took impressions of the multitude of pawprints that surrounded the bodies.

The Precinct Captain finally broke the silence. “You’re saying that these guys were killed by wild dogs, and they didn’t even draw their guns? That can’t be right. Those dogs are just little things—they’re not even a nuisance.” He looked around. “Anybody ever hear of a death from wild dogs in the city? Anybody?”

The Chief and the Commissioner were now standing nearby swathed in heavy coats, shrouded by their umbrellas. Nobody spoke or shook hands. “We’ll give you whatever you need to solve this case,” the Commissioner said to nobody in particular. Up close his face was almost lifeless, the skin hanging loosely on the bones. He had a reputation for long hours and honest work; unlike many of his predecessors he had attained the respect of the department by his interest in police affairs and his disinterest in politics. For that reason his job was now on the line. He was under criticism for allegedly allowing corruption, for taking cops off the street, for ignoring black and Hispanic neighborhoods, for all the things that usually get police commissioners in trouble. By contrast Chief of Detectives Underwood was pink, fat and rather merry. He was a born politician and was ready to redecorate the Commissioner’s office to his own taste. His eyes were watery and he had a nervous cough. He stamped his feet and glanced quickly around, barely even seeing the bodies; it was obvious that he wanted to get back to the comfort of headquarters as soon as he could. “Any leads?” he said, looking at Wilson.

“Nothing.”

“Right now it looks like their throats were torn out,” the Medical Examiner said, “but we’ll reserve judgment until the autopsy.”

“A dog theory won’t make it,” Wilson muttered.

“I never said that,” the M. E. flared. “All I said was the probable cause of death is massive insult to the throat caused by teeth and claws. I don’t know about dogs and I don’t care to speculate about dogs.”

“Thank you, Doctor Evans,” Wilson said in a staccato voice. Evans was not numbered among Wilson’s few friends despite the professional respect.

The Commissioner stared a long time at the corpses. “Cover ’em up,” he said at last, “get ’em out of here. Come on, Herb, let’s let these men do their jobs.”

The two officials trudged back to their helicopter.

“Morale,” the Precinct Captain said as the chopper began to start “A visit from those two sure charges you up.”

The Medical Examiner was still fuming over his run-in with Wilson. “If it was dogs,” he said carefully, “they’d have to be seventy, eighty pounds or more. And fast, they’d have to be fast.”

“Why so fast?” Becky asked.

“Look at DiFalco’s right wrist. Torn. He was going for his pistol when something with teeth hit his arm hard. That means whatever it was, it was damn fast.”

Becky Neff thought immediately of the dogs her husband Dick often worked with on the Narcotics Squad. “Attack dogs,” she said, “you’re describing the work of attack dogs.”

The Medical Examiner shrugged. “I’m describing the condition of the bodies. How they got that way is your business, Becky—yours and His Excellency’s.”

“Screw you too, Evans.”

Becky tried to ignore Wilson—she was used to his sour disposition. As long as people like Evans kept working with him it didn’t really matter. Sometimes, though, it was nice to see that others disliked him as much as she did.

“If we can establish that attack dogs did this,” she said, “then we can narrow our search considerably. Most attack dogs don’t kill.”

“If the good doctor says they were able to do... that, then you might have a point. Let’s

talk to Tom Rilker, get ourselves a little education on the subject.” Rilker trained dogs for the department.

Becky nodded. As usual when they got going, she and Wilson started thinking together. They headed back toward their car. The first step was now clear— they had to find out if attack dogs were involved. If they were, then this was a first—policemen had never been murdered with dogs before. In fact, dogs were an uncommon weapon because it took the work of a skilled professional to train them to kill human beings. And skilled professionals didn’t train up dogs for just anybody. If you had gotten a dog trained into a killer, the man who did it would remember you for sure. Most so-called “attack dogs” are nothing more than a loud bark and maybe a bite. The ones that actually go for the throat are not very common. A dog like that is never completely controllable, always a liability unless it is absolutely and essentially needed.

Back in the car, Wilson began to recite what he remembered about cases involving killer dogs. “October, 1966, a pedestrian killed by a dog in Queens. Dog was untrained, believed to have been an accident. I worked that case, I always thought it was fishy but I never got a decent lead. July, 1970, an attack dog escaped from the Willerton Drug Company warehouse in Long Island City and killed a seventeen-year-old boy. Another accident. April, 1973—our only proved murder by dog. A hood named Big Roy Gurner was torn apart by three dogs, later traced to the Thomas Shoe Company, which was a front for the Carlo Midi family. I got close to netting Midi in that one, but the brass removed me from the case. Corrupt bastards. That’s my inventory on dogs. You got anything?”

“Well, I don’t remember any dog cases since I’ve been a detective. I’ve heard about the Gurner thing of course. But the scuttlebutt was you got paid off the case.” She watched him pull his chin into his neck at that—it was his characteristic gesture of anger.

And she realized that she shouldn’t have goaded him; Wilson was one honest cop, that much was certain. He hated corruption in others and certainly would never bend himself. It was a nasty crack, and she was sorry for it. She tried to apologize, but he wouldn’t acknowledge. She had made her mistake; there was no point in continuing to talk about it. “My husband works with dogs all the time,” she said to change the subject. “Some attack dogs, but mostly just sniffers. They’re his best weapon, so he says.”

“I hear about his dogs. All of them are supposedly trained to kill despite that ‘sniffer’ bullshit. I’ve heard the stories about those dogs.”

She frowned. “What stories?”

“Oh, nothing much really. Just that those dogs sometimes get so excited when they sniff out a little dope that they just happen to kill the jerk they find it on... sometimes. But I guess you husband’s told you all about that.”

“Let’s drop it, Wilson. We don’t need to go at each other like this. My husband hasn’t told me anything about dogs that kill suspects. It sounds pretty outlandish if you ask me.”

Wilson snorted, said nothing more. But Becky had heard the rumors he was referring to, that Dick’s team sometimes used dogs on difficult suspects. “At least he’s not on the take,” Becky thought. “I hope to God he’s not.” Then she thought of a certain problem they used to have paying for his father’s nursing home, a problem that seemed to have disappeared—but she refused to think about it

Corruption was the one thing about police work she hated. Many officers considered the money part of the job, rationalizing it with the idea that their victims were criminals anyway and the payoffs were nothing more than a richly deserved fine. But as far as Becky Neff was concerned, that was crap. You did your job and got your pay, that ought to be enough. She forced herself not to rise to Wilson’s bait about her husband, it would

probably start a shouting argument.

“Stories aside, I’ve heard a lot about Tom Rilker. Dick thinks damn highly of him. Says he could train a dog to walk a tightrope if he wanted to.” Thomas D. Rilker was a civilian who worked closely with the NYPD, the FBI, and U. S. Customs training the dogs they used in their work. He also did private contract work. He was good, probably the best in the city, maybe the best in the world. His specialty was training dogs to sniff. He had dope dogs, fire dogs, tobacco dogs, booze dogs, you name it. They worked mostly for the Narcotics Squad and the customs agents. They had revolutionized the technique of investigation in these areas and greatly reduced the amount of drugs moving through the port of New York. Becky knew that Dick thought the world of Tom Rilker.

“Keep this damn car moving, sweetheart. You ain’t in a parade!”

“You drive, Wilson.”

“Me? I’m the damn boss. Oughta sit in back.”

She pulled over to the curb. “You don’t like my driving, you do it yourself.”

“I can’t, dearest—my license lapsed last year.”

“When you teamed up with me, dip.”

“Thank you, I’ll make a note of that.”

Becky swung the car out into traffic and jammed the accelerator to the floor. She wasn’t going to let him get to her. Part of the reason he was like this was because she had forced herself on him. Between her husband Dick and her uncle Bob she had exerted plenty of pull to get herself into Homicide and to land a partner once she got there. It took the pull of her husband’s captaincy and her uncle’s inspectorship to move her out of the secretary syndrome and onto the street. She had done well as a patrolman and gotten herself promoted to Detective Sergeant when she deserved it. Most of the women she knew on the force got their promotions at least two or three years late, and then had to fight to avoid ending up on some rotten squad like Missing Persons, where the only action you ever saw was an occasional flat tire on an unmaintained squad car.

So here came Becky Neff just when George Wilson’s most recent partner had punched him in the face and transferred to Safes and Locks. Wilson had to take what he could get, and in this situation it was a rookie detective and, worse, a woman.

He had looked at her as if she had contagious leprosy. For the first six weeks together he had said no more than a word a week to her—six words in six weeks, all of them four-letter. He had schemed to get her out of the division, even started dark rumors about a Board of Inquiry when she missed an important lead in what should have been an easy case.

But gradually she had become better at the work, until even he had been forced to acknowledge it. Soon they were making collars pretty often. In fact they were getting a reputation.

“Women are mostly awful cops,” were his final words on the subject, “but you’re unique. Instead of being awful, you’re just bad.”

Coming from Wilson that was a compliment, perhaps the highest he had ever paid a fellow officer. After that his grumbling became inarticulate and he let the partnership roll along under its own considerable steam.

They worked like two parts of the same person, constantly completing each other’s thoughts. People like the Chief Medical Examiner started requesting their help on troublesome cases. But when their work started to reach the papers, it was invariably the

attractive, unusual lady cop Becky Neff who ended up in the *Daily News* centerfold. Wilson was only another skilled policeman; Becky was interesting news. Wilson, of course, claimed to hate publicity. But she knew he hated even more the fact that he didn't get any.

"You're making a wrong turn, Becky. We're supposed to be stopping at the Seventy-fifth to get pictures. of the bodies and pawprints for Rilker. Give him something to work with."

She wheeled the car around and turned up Flatlands Avenue toward the station house. "Also we ought to call ahead," she said, "let him know we're coming."

"You're sure we trust him? I mean, what if he's doing a little work on the side, like for somebody bad. Calling ahead'll give him time to think."

"Rilker's not working for the Mafia. I don't think that's even worthy of consideration."

"Then I won't consider it." He slumped down in the seat, pushing his knees up against the glove compartment and letting his head lean forward against his chest. It looked like agony, but he closed his eyes. Becky lit a cigarette and drove on in silence, mentally reviewing the case. Despite the fact that it looked like they were on a good lead she could not dismiss the feeling that something was wrong with it. Some element didn't fit. Again and again she reviewed the facts but she couldn't come up with the answer. The one thing that worried her was the lack of resistance. It had happened so fast that they hadn't appeared dangerous until the very last moment.

Did attack dogs lay ambushes? Could they move fast enough to kill two healthy policemen before they even had time to unholster their pistols?

She double-parked the car in front of the 75th Precinct.

Leaving Wilson snoring lightly she hurried up the worn concrete steps of the dingy red-brick building and introduced herself to the desk sergeant. He called Lieutenant Ruiz, who was responsible for the material she needed. He was a six-footer with a trim black mustache and a subdued smile. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Detective Neff," he said with great formality.

"We need pictures and copies of the prints you took."

"No problem, we've got everything you could want. It's a rotten mess."

A leading statement, but Becky didn't pick up on it. That part of the investigation would come later. Before they identified a motive for the murders they had to have a mode of death.

Sergeant Ruiz produced eleven glossies of the scene, plus a box of plasticasts of the pawprints that had been found surrounding the bodies. "There isn't a single clear print in that box," he said, "just a jumble. If you ask me those prints haven't got a thing to do with it. Just the wild dogs doing a little scavenging. They sure as hell couldn't be responsible for killing those guys, they just came and got their share after the real work was done."

"Why do you say that?" She was examining the photographs as she talked. Why had he handed her one of the less grisly shots?

"The dogs—I've seen them. They're little, like cockers or something, and they're shy as hell. And by the way, I wonder if you could autograph that picture for my daughter." He paused, then added shyly, "She thinks the world of you."

Becky was so pleased by his admiration that she didn't notice Wilson standing behind her.

"I thought we weren't going to give out any more autographs," he said curtly.

“When did we decide not to? I don’t remember that.”

“Right now. I just decided. This isn’t some kind of a game.” His hand moved toward the picture but Ruiz’s was quicker.

“Thanks, Miss Neff,” he said, still smiling. “My daughter’ll be thrilled.”

Becky gathered the rest of the photographs and picked up the box of prints to lug to the car. She knew without asking that Wilson wouldn’t touch it, and she wasn’t sure she wanted him to.

“By the way, it’s Sergeant Neff,” she said over her shoulder to Ruiz, who was still standing there staring.

“Let me help you,” he said.

Becky was already out the door and putting the box into the back seat of the car. Wilson followed, got in, and slammed his door. Becky settled herself into the driver’s seat and turned on the ignition.

“I just don’t want this to be a circus,” he said as they headed toward Manhattan. “This case is going to be the most sensational thing we’ve ever worked on. Reporters are gonna be crawling out of your nightgown in the morning.”

“I don’t wear a nightgown.”

“Whatever, we’re gonna have ’em all over us. The point is, it’s a serious case and we want to treat it serious.”

Wilson could be sententious, but this was ridiculous. She forced herself not to say she knew how serious the case was. If she did he would then launch into a tirade about lady cops, probably ending with a question about her competence or some new criticism of her work. She decided to ignore him and make him shut up as well. To do this she drove like a madwoman, careening down the streets, making hairpin turns, weaving in and out of the traffic at fifty miles an hour. Wilson at first sat with his shoulders hunched and his hands twisted together in his lap, then started using the siren.

“Rilker give you some kind of deadline?”

“No.” She had forgotten to call Rilker, dammit. If he wasn’t there she’d have to suffer more flak from Wilson.

She lit another cigarette. Smoking was one pleasure that she had really begun to enjoy since the doctor had made Wilson stop.

His response was prompt. “You’re polluting.”

“Draw an oxygen mask if you don’t like it I’ve told you that before.”

“Thanks for the reminder.”

She wished that she smoked cigars.

Chapter 2

Tom Rilker stared at the pictures the two detectives showed him. His face registered

disbelief and what looked to Becky Neff like fear. She had never met him before and was surprised to discover that he was old, maybe seventy-five. From her husband's description she had assumed he was a young man. Rilker's hair was white and springy like frayed wool; his right hand shook a little and made the pictures rustle together; his brows knit, the salt-and-pepper eyebrows coming close together, heightening the expression now on his face. "This is impossible," he finally said. The moment he spoke Becky knew why Dick always portrayed him as young—he sounded like a much younger man. "It's completely incredible."

"Why is that?" Wilson asked.

"Well, a dog wouldn't do this. You'd have to train it. These men have been *guttled*, for God's sake. You can train a dog to kill, but if you wanted it to do this to its victims, you'd have to train it very, very well."

"But it could be done."

"Maybe, with the right breed and the right dog. But it wouldn't be easy. You'd need... human models for the dog to work on if you wanted it to be reliable."

"What if you just starved the dog?"

"A dog would eat muscle tissue—ma'am, if this bothers you—"

"No," Becky snapped. "You were saying, a dog would eat muscle tissue?"

"Yes, but it wouldn't actually—gut somebody. That isn't the way they feed, not even in the wild state." He picked up the pawprints and shook his head. "These all the prints?"

"How big a dog would it have taken?" Wilson asked. Becky noticed that his questions were becoming gentle but insistent; he must sense that the sight of the pictures had put Rilker under a considerable strain. The man's face was indeed getting flushed, and a band of sweat was appearing on his forehead. He kept giving his head a little toss as if to knock a wisp of hair back. The hand was shaking harder.

"A monster. Something big and fast and mean enough to accept this kind of training. Not all breeds would."

"What breeds?"

"Close to the wild, huskies, German shepherds. Not many. And I've got to tell you, in all my years I've never seen anything like this done by dogs. I think its—"

He grabbed a cast of some of the pawprints and peered at it, then fumbled with the lamp on his desk and looked closely in the light. "These are not dog prints."

"What are they then?"

"I don't know. Something very strange."

"Why so?"

Tom Rilker paused, then spoke with exaggerated calm. "These prints have circles, like human hands and feet. But they are clearly pawprints."

"Some kind of animal, other than a dog?"

"I'm sorry to tell you that no animal has prints like this. In fact nothing does. Nothing that I have ever heard of, that is, in fifty years of working with animals."

Becky had to say it: "Werewolves?" She resigned herself to the inevitable scoffing that would come from Wilson later.

Surprisingly, Rilker took some time to dismiss the question. "I don't think such things are possible," he said carefully.

“Well—are they or aren’t they?”

Rilker smiled sheepishly. Becky realized that he was being kind. She could see the glee in Wilson’s eyes. It was all her partner could do not to whoop with laughter, damn him.

“I don’t believe in werewolves either, Mr. Rilker,” Becky said. “Frankly, I wanted to know if you did.”

“Why?”

“Because if you had, we wouldn’t have to trust the rest of what you’re saying. As it is, you look like a creditable expert who’s just given us a very nasty problem.”

“A nasty problem in what way?”

Now Wilson did scoff—but at Rilker. “Well, for one thing, we must proceed under the assumption that these two fully armed police officers were killed by animals. OK, that’s not so good. But we’ve also got to assume that the animals are of an unknown species. That’s pretty bad. And now, to cap it all off, we’ve got to believe that this unknown species of man-killing animals is running free in Brooklyn and nobody knows about it. That I cannot accept.”

Becky’s mind was racing—this new theory plugged holes but it also had some great big ones of its own. “If it’s true, we’ve got to move fast. Brooklyn’s a crowded place.”

“Come on, Becky, stop it. Let’s get out of here. We’ve got real work to do.”

“Wait a minute, Detective, I’m not sure I like your tone.” Rilker stood up and thrust one of the casts in Wilson’s face. “Those pawprints were not made by anything that I have ever heard of. By nothing whatsoever. Not even by a species of monkey—I already thought of that.” He fumbled for his phone. “I’ll call a friend up at the Museum of Natural History. He’ll tell you these prints weren’t made by any known animal. You’re dealing with something highly unusual, that’s for damn sure.”

Becky felt her heart sink. Wilson had angered Rilker. Rilker’s voice rose as his fingers fumbled at the telephone. “Maybe my word isn’t good enough for you sharpie cops—but this guy up at the museum’s a real expert. He’ll tell you bastards I’m right!”

Wilson jerked his head in the direction of the door. “We don’t need any help from a museum,” he muttered. Becky followed him out, carrying the pictures but leaving the pawprints behind because Rilker seemed to have taken possession of the box. The door to his office slammed behind them with an ear-shattering jolt. His voice rose to a frustrated screech and abruptly ended.

“I hope we didn’t give him a coronary,” Becky said as they returned to the street.

“You did good, kid,” Wilson said. “If you hadn’t asked him about the werewolves he would have pulled it off.”

“I can hardly believe that was the Tom Rilker I’ve heard Dick talk about. But I guess he must be a little senile.”

“I guess so. Where are the casts?”

“Still in his office. You want them?” Becky dropped her purse in through the window of the car.

“Yeah. We might need them.”

“Fine, you go up and get them.”

Wilson snorted. “We’ll get more from the Seventy-fifth Precinct. You know something?”

“What?”

“You’re losing your mascara. You’re sweating.”

She laughed as she started the car. “I’ve got to hand it to you, George, you really know how to set a girl up. That’s the nicest thing you’ve said to me in a year.”

“Well... you’re... you know, when your stuff gets messed up I notice.”

“Good for you. That’s the first sign you’re becoming human.” She pulled out into traffic, heading automatically for what she knew would be their next stop, the office of the Chief Medical Examiner. The autopsies were due to start in half an hour and it was now all the more important to be there. Unless a cause of death came out in autopsy they were going to be forced to conclude the impossible—that the killings had been done by dogs. And that is a very unlikely way for a policeman to die.

Becky could not dispel the growing feeling of sick fear that this case was giving her. She kept imagining the two cops out there in the drizzle, facing whatever in the name of God they had faced . . . and dying with the secret. At times like this she wished she and Dick worked more closely together. He would understand the source of her feeling in a way Wilson never could. She took her cases very personally, it was one of her worst failings (and also the reason she was often so successful, she felt), and each case affected her differently. This one, with its overtones of horror, was going to be unusually hard on her. What had happened to those two cops was the stuff of nightmares...

“You’re muttering.”

“I am not.”

“You’re muttering, you’re getting crazy.”

“I am not! You better keep your mouth shut.”

“All right, but I’m telling you that this case is going to eat away at you.” He suddenly turned to face her. The movement made her swerve the car— she had the absurd notion that he was going to kiss her. But his face was twisted into a look almost of pain. “It’s eating at *me* is the reason I say that. I mean, I don’t know what happened out there but it’s really getting to me.”

“You mean you’re pissed off about it, scared of it—what?”

He considered for a moment, then said very quietly, “It scares me.” Never before had Wilson said such a thing. Becky kept her eyes on the traffic, her face without expression.

“Me too,” she said, “if you want to know. It’s a weird case.” Extreme caution was called for in this conversation—Wilson could be telling the truth or he could be egging her on, trying to get her to reveal her inner emotions, to force her to admit that she was overinvolved in her work in an unprofessional way. Although she felt secure enough in their partnership she could never be certain that Wilson hadn’t concocted some plot to get rid of her. Not that it mattered —nowadays they were waiting in line to work with her, but somehow she wanted to keep the partnership going. Wilson was hard to take but the two of them were so good together it was worth preserving. “It’s hard but it’s good,” he said suddenly. “What’re you talking about?”

“Us. You’re thinking about us, aren’t you?” The way he sounded they might as well have been lovers. “Yes, I am.”

“See, that’s why it’s good. If it wasn’t so good, I never would have known.”

She took a deep breath. “We’re here. Maybe we’ll find out they were poisoned and this’ll turn into a normal case again.”

“We won’t.”

“Why not? I don’t think we can assume—oh, of course, the dogs ate the organs and there are no dead dogs, therefore there was no poison in the organs, therefore et cetera.”

“You got it, sweetheart. Let’s go up and watch old prickface pretend to be a master sleuth.”

“Oh, Wilson, why don’t you let the poor man alone. He’s just as good at what he does as we are at what we do. Your whole thing with him is personalities.”

“Can’t be. He hasn’t got one.” The Chief Medical Examiner’s office was housed in a gleaming modern building across the street from Bellevue Hospital. This “office” was really a factory of forensic pathology, equipped with every conceivable piece of equipment and chemical that could be of use in an autopsy. Literally everything there was to know about a corpse could be discovered in this building. And the Medical Examiner had been responsible for solving many a murder with his equipment and his most considerable skill. Bits of hair, flecks of saliva, fingernail-polish fragments—all had figured prominently in murder trials. A conviction had once been obtained on the basis of shoe polish left on the lethal bruises of a woman who had been kicked to death.

The Chief M. E. excelled at making such findings. And if there was anything to be found in this case, he would surely uncover it. He and his men would go over the bodies inch by inch, leaving nothing to chance. Still, there was that fear...

“They’d better come up with something or this case is going to drive me crazy,” Becky said on the way up in the elevator. It was new and rose silently with no sense of motion.

“I hate this elevator. Every time I ride in it it scares the hell out of me.”

“Imagine how it would be to be trapped in this elevator, Wilson, no way out—”

“Shut up! That’s unkind.” Wilson was mildly claustrophobic, to add to his list of petty neuroses.

“Sorry, just trying to amuse you.”

“You tell me I’m such an s.o.b., but you’re really the nasty side of this partnership. That was a rotten thing to do to me.”

The doors opened and they stepped into the odor of disinfectant that pervaded the M. E.’s office. The receptionist knew them, and waved them past her desk. Doctor Evans’s incredibly cluttered office was open but he wasn’t inside. House rules were that you didn’t go any farther into the complex without an escort, but as usual there wasn’t a soul to be seen or heard. They started toward the operating room when the receptionist yelled Wilson’s name. “Yeah?”

“You got a message,” she hollered. “Call Underwood.”

“OK!” He stared at Becky. “Underwood wants me? Why the hell does Underwood want me? I don’t remember trying to get you fired recently.”

“Maybe you did and forgot.”

“Better call, better call.” He picked up the phone in Evans’s office and dialed the Chief of Detectives. The conversation lasted about a minute and consisted on Wilson’s part of a series of yessirs and thankyou’s. “Just wanted to tell us we’re a special detail now, reporting directly to him, and we have the facilities of the department at our disposal. We move to an office at Police Headquarters in Manhattan.”

“That’s very nice. We get *carte blanche* as long as some of the credit rubs off on him, and the Commissioner gets left in his ivory tower.”

Wilson snorted. “Listen, as long as it looks like this case is solvable every parasite from here to the Bulgarian Secret Service is going to try to horn in on the credit. But you just wait. If we don’t get it together, we’ll be all alone.”

“Let’s go to the autopsy. I can hardly wait.” Her voice was bitter; what Wilson had said could not have been more true.

“Come on, ghoul.”

On the way to the operating room Becky wished to hell that Wilson would pull out a bottle of something alcoholic. Unfortunately he rarely drank, and certainly never while he was working—unless events called for it, which they often did about six **p.m.** But now it was after six.

“I thought you people didn’t come back here unless you were invited,” Evans growled. He was on his way into the surgery. He stank of chemical soap; his rubber gloves were dripping. “Or don’t those rules count where you two are concerned?”

“This is the man who *invites* us on his cases. How sweet.”

“I only give you cases that are too easy for me to bother with. Now come on in if you want to, but it won’t do a bit of good. And I warn you, they’re fragrant.”

Becky thought immediately of the families. When she was a child she had been at a funeral where you could smell the corpse—but nowadays they had things for that, didn’t they? And anyway, the coffins wouldn’t be opened. But still... oh, God.

The two bodies lay on surgical tables under merciless lights. There was none of the haphazardness and confusion of the scene out at the auto pound; here everything was neat and orderly except the bodies themselves, which carried their violence and horror with them.

Becky was struck by the sheer damage—this attack had been so unbelievably savage. And somehow she found that reassuring; nothing from nature would do this. It had to be the work of human beings, it was too terrible to be anything else.

“The Forensics lab hasn’t found a single thing except dog hairs, rat hairs and feathers,” Doctor Evans said mildly. He was referring to the results of the examination of the area where the deaths had occurred at the auto pound. “No human detritus that didn’t belong to the victims.”

“OK,” Wilson said, but he took the information like a blow. It was not good news.

Evans turned to Becky. “Look, we’re about to start. What do you think it’ll take to get Wilson out of here?”

“You can’t. There might be something,” she replied.

“Something I’d miss?”

“Something we’d see.”

“But not him. He won’t be able to take it.”

“I’ll be fine. Just do your job, Doctor.”

“There will be no repeat of the Custin mess, Detective Wilson.” During the Maude Custin autopsy Wilson had lost his lunch. The reference to his embarrassment hurt his feelings, but he was too proud to acknowledge it before Evans.

“I’ll leave if it gets to me,” he said, “but not unless it does. We’ve gotta be here and you know it.”

“Just trying to help you, trying to be accommodating.”

“Thank you. Why don’t you get going?”

“That’s what I am doing.”

Evans picked up a scalpel and commenced taking a series of tissue samples. An assistant prepared slides of them at a side table, and sent the slides to the lab. The autopsy proceeded swiftly—there was pitifully little to examine. “The main thing we’re hunting for is signs of poison, suffocation, anything that would give us a more plausible cause of death,” Evans said as he worked. “That good for you two?”

“That’s good for us.”

“Well, we’ll find out all about it from the lab. Look at this.” He held up a sharp white tooth. “Embedded in that busted wrist. You know what it means—really what it confirms?”

“The man was alive when his wrist was bitten. Otherwise the tooth wouldn’t have been wrenched loose.”

“That’s right, which confirms that this one was definitely alive when the dogs attacked him.”

There was a long silence in the room. Wilson seemed to sink into himself, becoming smaller and more square than he already was. Becky felt a dull powerlessness. As the vague outlines of what they were confronting began to take shape Becky could see all lands of nasty problems, not the least of which would be simple crowd control. What do people do when they discover a thing like this in their midst? Their placid, workaday lives are suddenly disrupted by a new terror of the most dangerous type—the unknown. And if it can kill two healthy, alert, armed policemen, the run-of-the-mill citizen isn’t going to have a prayer.

“I think we’d better get downtown as soon as the lab results are in,” Becky said. “Why bother to wait?”

“Confirming, just so we won’t have any loose ends.” Convincing Underwood of this wasn’t going to be especially easy. She didn’t want there to be any stray questions unanswered that might allow him to put off the inevitable decision—admit what killed the cops, seal the area, and kill everything in it that looked faintly like a dog—wild or trained.

The two detectives returned to the M. E.’s office before the autopsies were completed; they didn’t spend any more time observing than they had to. Wilson was visibly grateful to leave; Becky was glad to follow.

Wilson seemed unusually quiet, almost chastened. “What do you think Underwood will do?” she asked just to break the silence.

Wilson shrugged. “Two cops got killed by some kind of dogs. It’s a pretty flimsy story, you ask me. No matter what’s been confirmed, I think we’ve got to keep digging. Somehow or other we’ll uncover a real motive and a real crime.”

Becky felt a twinge of concern—didn’t Wilson believe the evidence? “But if it was dogs and we don’t act pretty fast there could be more deaths. I think we’ve got to make that assumption. That’s certainly where the facts are leading us.”

Wilson nodded. If she wasn’t sure that it couldn’t be true, she almost would have suspected Wilson of knowing something about the case that she didn’t. But they had not been apart since it had happened, not for a minute. Whatever information he had, she also had.

“You know,” he said in a low, angry tone, “you damn well never get over smoking. If you weren’t armed I’d mug you for your cigarettes right now.”

She didn't reply; she was staring past him, toward the door of the office. Evans walked in carrying a clipboard. "Lab says we might have carbon monoxide poisoning as a secondary factor," he said, "but the basic cause of death was the injuries. Primarily the throats in both cases."

"Carbon monoxide? Could those men have been impaired by it?"

"Normally I wouldn't say so. The levels are very low, just residual. You've both probably got higher levels right now just from your drive over here. But it's absolutely the only abnormal thing we found about these men."

"Could it have been higher when they were killed and then dissipated?"

"Not likely. These guys were functioning normally when they were hit. It's just the only other thing."

Wilson seemed greatly relieved; at the moment Becky couldn't understand exactly why this was so.

The Chief Medical Examiner put down his clipboard. "It's as strange as they come," he said, "the strangest case I have worked on in my entire career."

"Why so?" Wilson tried and failed to sound unconcerned.

"Well, they were supposedly killed by dogs, right?"

The detectives nodded like twins; Becky was secretly amused by the similarity of the gesture. She wondered what it was that brought the two of them so close to one another. God knows you couldn't call it love.

"The dogs had to be very unusual. Their mode of attack was extremely clever. It wasn't until DiFalco went for his gun that they attacked."

"So what?"

"So when did you ever hear about a dog smart enough to grab a man's wrist to prevent him from unholstering his gun? Never, is the answer. Dogs don't think like that. They don't know what the hell guns are."

"Maybe and maybe not."

"Oh, come on, they don't know. Point a pistol at a dog's head and not a damn thing will happen. He certainly won't try to defend himself. Whoever heard of dogs working like that?"

"It was a lucky coincidence. The dog went for the movement of the hand, not to prevent it from reaching the gun. I think we can assume that." Wilson picked up the phone. "I'm calling Underwood to tell him we're on the way. His nibs is awaiting us."

"Now don't go running him down, Wilson. Word is he's got the inside track to the big job. Your next Commissioner."

Wilson dialed. "A lot of difference it makes to me. I've been on the promotion list for at least ten years."

Becky was surprised to hear her partner admit this. His own complete inability to handle department politics had assured that he would never move beyond Detective Lieutenant. No matter the level of his achievement; while good work counted in the scramble for top jobs, pull and ass-kissing counted more. And with Wilson not only did he not try to ass-kiss, people were afraid even to *let* him try. You don't let a guy like that get into the delicate politics of the Police Department. Next thing, he'd unwittingly uncover some scandal and embarrass everybody.

That made him a less than ideal senior partner. The brass would hesitate to promote

Becky around Wilson. It just wasn't done unless the senior was completely incompetent—which was far from the case here. So she'd have to sit around as a Detective Sergeant until either she or Wilson rotted, or she was transferred away from him and that was one thing the department would never do. Only Wilson himself in his wisdom would ever consider such a thing. She hated the thought of it right now, too; it could easily mean being moved away from the action, back into the obscurity of a more typical policewoman job.

Wilson muttered into the phone, using no more than a few monosyllables. He had informed the Chief of Detectives that they were coming with just about as much grace as he would inform his building superintendent of a stopped-up toilet.

A wet, shuddering north wind hit them as they left the building; the drizzling cold of the past few days had finally given way to the first real touch of winter. It was seven-thirty and already dark. Thirtieth Street was quiet, with the wind clattering in the skeletons of scrawny trees up and down the block. A few pedestrians hurried past, and out on Fifth Avenue many more figures could be seen amid the flashing lights and the shapes of cars moving slowly downtown. Becky watched the people they passed on their way to her car, looking at the gray, blank faces, thinking about the lives hidden behind those faces, and of how what she and Wilson would soon be telling the Chief of Detectives would affect those lives.

In police work you gradually acquire a distance from nonpolicemen. People on the outside have such a limited concept of what you really do that they might as well know nothing at all. They see only the headlines, the endless propagandizing of the newspapers. Crimes are reported, their solution is not. As a result the people you meet outside of the force see you as incompetent. "You're a cop? Why don't you get the muggers off the street? I never see a cop on the street. I thought that's what we paid you for." Then you might see that same person dead somewhere, the victim of the very crime he said you wouldn't protect him from. It does something to you to realize that you aren't going to protect everybody, you aren't going to make the world a hell of a lot safer by your work. You are there to hold life together, not to bring on the millennium. When you see the incredible suffering and degradation, you begin to realize the truth of that. Sooner or later crooks and victims all merge together into one miserable, bloody mass of whining, twisted bodies and fear-glazed eyes. Murder after murder comes before you, each with its sordid tale of failed lives...

And then you get a thing like this. It doesn't make sense, it scares you. There's a chilly feeling that something *wrong* has happened but you don't quite know what it is. You want like hell to solve the crime because the victims were your people. The twisted bodies were from the inside, from the real world of the department, not from that chaos that swirls around outside.

Usually there is no mystery to a cop's death. He knocks on a door and a junkie blows him away. He hollers freeze at some kid running out of a liquor store and gets a bullet in the face. That's the way cops get killed, suddenly and without mystery. Death in the line of duty—rare, but it happens.

"Here's the car," Wilson said. Becky had walked right past it; she had been too deeply engrossed in her thoughts. But she got in, drove mechanically through the increasingly heavy rain, listening to it drum on the roof, listening to the wind souging past the closed windows, feeling the pervasive dirty damp of the afternoon.

Headquarters was dark and gray, standing like some black monument in the storm. They pulled into the garage beneath the building, into the sudden flood of fluorescent lights, the squeal of brakes and tires as they maneuvered through the garage and found a parking space in the area marked off for the Homicide Division.

Underwood was not alone in his office. With him was a young man in a polyester suit and round rimless glasses. For an instant Becky was reminded of John Dean, then the face looked up and the impression of boyishness disappeared: the man's eyes were cold, his face thinner than it should be, his lips set in a terse line.

"Good afternoon," Underwood said stiffly, half rising from behind his desk, "this is Assistant District Attorney Kupferman." He then introduced Neff and Wilson. The two detectives pulled up chairs; this was going to be a work session and there was no time to stand on formality.

Becky relaxed into the comfortable leather wing chair Wilson had gotten for her. The Chief's office was all leather and paneling; it looked like an expensive private library without books. Hunting scenes were hung on the wall a pewter chandelier from the ceiling. The whole impression was one of subdued bad taste—a sort of subtle and completely unintentional self-mockery.

"Let's go," Underwood said. "I told the papers we'd have a statement tonight. Was I right?"

"Yeah," Wilson said. He looked at the assistant DA. "You're chewing. Got any gum?" The man held out a pack of sugar-free gum. "Thanks. I'm not supposed to smoke."

"I want to know if you've found out anything about those guys that might justify us getting into the act," the assistant DA said.

So that was what he was here for. He was the District Attorney's little watchdog, sent here to sniff out any departmental wrongdoing. Maybe the two dead cops were bent, the thinking would go, maybe that's why they were dead.

"There's nothing like that," Wilson said. "These guys were Auto Squad, not Narcotics. They weren't into anything."

Becky's mind flashed to her husband Dick, to the Narcotics Squad. Just as quickly she pulled her thoughts away, returning them to this conversation. What was it that made her worry so about Dick, especially lately? She couldn't allow herself to think about it now. As firmly as she could, she returned her thoughts to the question at hand.

"You're sure?"

"We haven't investigated that aspect," Becky put in. "We've just now established a cause of death."

This was obviously the part Underwood wanted to hear about. He leaned forward and made a little pulling motion with his hands. "It was the dogs," Wilson said tonelessly.

"Oh, no, you can't tell me that! I can't have that!"

"It's the truth as far as we know. They were killed by dogs."

"Hell no. That's completely unacceptable. I'm not putting that in any press releases. Let the damn Commissioner do it, it's his responsibility."

The way he began to back off would have been funny if it wasn't so sad. He had called them down here hoping to get some glory thrown his way when they solved the crime; but now that it looked like this he wasn't so eager to be associated with it. Let the Commissioner tell the world that two fully armed policemen got themselves killed by a bunch of dogs; Underwood sure as hell wasn't going to do it.

"We didn't believe it ourselves," Becky said, "but Evans is sure. The only thing out of the ordinary was some residual carbon monoxide—"

"Carbon monoxide! That's incapacitating! Then it makes some sense, the guys were

out cold. Now that's better, why didn't you start off telling me that?" He glared an instant at Wilson. "That's the crucial piece of change, as far as I'm concerned. Did the M. E. say where they got it?"

"Background atmosphere," Wilson cut in. "It's not important. There are probably higher levels in your blood right now."

"Did anybody check their car, find out if the exhaust system was defective?"

Wilson laughed, a sneering little noise in the back of his throat. Becky wished to God he had never made that sound. "The CO count wasn't high enough."

"It's an angle, man! If I can use that, I don't have to put this case down to The Unexplained. Think about what we're confronting here! Cops were killed by dogs. It's stupid. It's bad for the department, it makes the men look like a bunch of jerkoffs, getting themselves killed by a pack of mutts. You don't tell the papers, yeah, here are a couple of dopes who got themselves done in by a bunch of dogs, didn't even have the sense to defend themselves. I can't make a statement like that."

"Which is why you'll try to get the Commissioner to make the statement. You don't want to be associated with it."

"It's his responsibility, Detective. And I don't think I like your attitude!"

"Thank you."

The Chief's eyes bored into Wilson's impassive face. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Thank you. Nothing more or less. I've told you all I know about this case. Give me a few more days and a little luck and I'll know more. As far as the cause of death is concerned, it appears to have been the dogs. I don't like it any more than you do, I've got to tell you. But those are the facts. If you want a statement for the press, that's got to be it."

"The hell. The carbon monoxide did it. Had to. And that's damn well what I'm going to say."

"Have you considered the consequences, sir?" Becky said. She had, and a statement like the one Underwood planned to make was a serious mistake, even a dangerous one.

"Like?"

"Well, if the men were conscious—and we all know they probably were—it means that we've got something very dangerous out there. Something the public ought to be made aware of, and the police ought to take steps to eliminate."

"Yeah, but that's no problem because I intend to order that damn dump cleared of wild dogs. I'll send in the Tactical Patrol Force and clean it out. There won't be another problem no matter how those dogs got to DiFalco and Houlihan. Even if the men *were* conscious it doesn't make any difference because by this time tomorrow the dogs are going to be dead. I'm going to say that the officers were suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning and were attacked by the dogs while they were unconscious or semiconscious." He cleared his throat. "All right with you?"

"It's your statement, Chief," Wilson said.

"OK, don't you do or say anything to contradict it, you understand. Just keep your problems to yourself. And as of right now you're off the case."

Becky was astonished. This had never happened to them before; people always put up with Wilson, endured him. Being pulled off this case was a blow to his prestige and to hers. She could have kicked him for his Goddamn bullheadedness.

“It won’t last, Underwood,” Wilson said quietly. “You can kick us around and you can make any damn statement you want, but in the end you’re going to be embarrassed. This thing isn’t going to go away.”

“The hell it isn’t. You wait and see.”

“Something damn strange happened out there.”

“Nothing the TPF can’t deal with.” His face was getting blotchy; this was almost too much for his temper. “Nothing we can’t deal with! Unlike you! You two can’t seem to put this case together! Dogs indeed —that’s ludicrous. It isn’t even a good excuse, much less a solution. Here I’ve got this whole town screaming at me for a solution and you give me bullshit!” Suddenly he glared at Becky. “And another thing, sweetheart. I’ve heard the rumors about your sweet husband. This DA ought to be doing a little investigating into the Neff family instead of trying to dig up some kind of organized crime links to supply motive for the killers of DiFalco and Houlihan. We’ve got a bent cop’s wife right here—or is it a family affair, dear?”

The Assistant DA remained tight-lipped, staring like a statue at the Oriental rug. At the Chief’s words the whole room seemed to sway; Becky felt her head tightening, the blood rushing, her heart thundering. What in the name of God was he implying! Was Dick in trouble? She knew that she herself was an honest cop. And Dick had to be too. Had to be. Like Wilson. He had to be as honest as Wilson.

“You think we’re incompetent,” Wilson said mildly, “why not convene a Board of Inquiry? Present your facts.”

“Shut up and get out. Your superior officers will handle this from now on.”

“Which means there’s going to be a Board?”

“Shut up and get out!”

They left, even Wilson perceiving that the meeting was terminated. “I’m going home,” Becky said to her boss as the elevator dropped toward the garage. “Want a lift?”

“Nah. I’m gonna go over to Chinatown, get some supper. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“See you.”

That was that for today. Another charming day in the life of a lady cop.

Traffic was heavy and she had missed the evening news by the time she got home. No matter, the Chief’s statement wouldn’t make it on the air until eleven o’clock.

When she arrived at their small upper East Side apartment, Becky was disappointed that Dick wasn’t there. Mechanically she ran the Phone-Mate. Dick’s voice said he’d be in about three **a.m.** Great. A lonely night just when you need it the most.

At eleven the Chief appeared with his terse statement—carbon monoxide, wild dogs, TPF roundup of dogs, case closed in one day.

The hell it is, she thought, the hell it is.

Chapter 3

Mike O'Donnell hated this part of his daily journey. The streets around here were sullen, dangerous and empty. Openings in the ruined buildings exhaled the stench of damp rot and urine. O'Donnell liked the bustling crowds a few blocks away, but on the money a blind man made you couldn't take cabs through these areas, you had to walk. Over the years the deadly stillness had grown like a cancer, replacing the noisy, kindly clamor that Mike remembered from his childhood. Now it was almost all like this except the block where Mike lived with his daughter and the block near the subway station a twenty-minute walk away.

Those twenty minutes were always bad, always getting worse. Along this route he had encountered addicts, muggers, perverts—every kind of human garbage. And he had survived. He let them shake him down. What could he lose, a few dollars? Only once had he been struck, that by some teenagers, children really. He had appealed to their manhood, shamed them out of their plan to torture him in one of the empty buildings.

Mike was tough and resilient. Sixty sightless years in the Bronx left him no other choice. He and his beloved daughter were on welfare, home relief. She was a good girl with bad taste in husbands. God knows, the kind of men... smelling of cologne and hair grease, moving around like cats through the apartment, voices that sneered every word... actors, she said. And she was an actress, she said... he groped his way along with his cane trying to put trouble out of his mind, not wanting to bring his feelings home, start an argument.

Then he heard a little sound that made the hairs rise along the back of his neck. It didn't quite seem human, yet what else could it be? Not an animal— too much like a voice, too little like a growl.

“Is somebody there?”

The sound came again, right in front of him and down low. He sensed a presence. Somebody *was* there, apparently crouching close to the ground. “Can I help you? Are you hurt?”

Something slid along the pavement. At once the strange sound was taken up from other points—behind him, in the abandoned buildings beside him, in the street. There was a sense of slow, circling movement.

Mike O'Donnell raised his cane, started to swing it back and forth in front of him. The reaction was immediate; Mike O'Donnell's death came so suddenly that all he registered was astonishment.

They worked with practiced efficiency, pulling the body back into the abandoned building while blood was still pumping out of the throat. It was a heavy, old body, but they were determined and there were six of them. They worked against time, against the ever-present danger of being discovered at a vulnerable moment.

Mike O'Donnell hadn't understood how completely this neighborhood had been abandoned in recent years, left by all except junkies and other derelicts, and the ones who were attracted to them for their weakness. And now Mike O'Donnell had joined the unnumbered corpses rotting in the abandoned basements and rubble of the empty neighborhood.

But in his case there was one small difference. He had a home and was missed. Mike's daughter was frantic. She dialed the Lighthouse for the Blind again. No, they hadn't seen Mike, he had never appeared for his assigned duties. Now it was six hours and she wasn't going to waste any more time. Her next call was to the police.

Because missing persons usually turn up on their own or don't turn up at all, and because there are so many of them, the Police Department doesn't react instantly to another such report. At least, not unless it concerns a child or a young woman who had no

reason to leave home, or, as in the case of Mike O'Donnell, somebody who wouldn't voluntarily abandon the little security and comfort he had in the world. So Mike O'Donnell's case was special and it got some attention. Not an overwhelming amount, but enough to cause a detective to be assigned to the case. A description of Mike O'Donnell was circulated, given a little more than routine attention. Somebody even questioned the daughter long enough to draw a map of Mike's probable route from his apartment to the subway station. But the case went no farther than that; no body turned up, the police told the daughter to wait, not to give up hope. A week later they told her to give up hope, he wasn't going to be found. Somewhere in the city his body probably lay moldering, effectively and completely hidden by whoever had killed him. Mike O'Donnell's daughter learned in time to accept the idea of his death, to try to replace the awful uncertain void with the comfort of certainty. She did the best she could, but all she really came to understand was that her father had somehow been swallowed by the city.

During these weeks Neff and Wilson worked on other assignments. They heard nothing about the O'Donnell case; they were investigating another murder, locked in the endless, sordid routine of Homicide. Most crimes are no less commonplace than the people who commit them, and Wilson and Neff weren't being assigned to the interesting or dramatic cases these days. It wasn't that they were being muscled aside, but word was out that the Chief of Detectives wasn't exactly in love with them. He knew that they didn't like his handling of the DiFalco/Houlihan murders and he didn't want to be reminded of it, primarily because he didn't like it any more than they did. He was a more literal man than they were and much more concerned with his own potential appointment to the job of Police Commissioner than with following up bizarre theories about what genuinely looked to him like an even more bizarre accident. So the two detectives were kept away from big cases, effectively buried in the sheer size of the New York City Police Department.

The first words Becky Neff heard about Mike O'Donnell came from the Medical Examiner. "I thought you two had retired," he said over the phone. "You got a heavy case?"

"The usual. Not a lot of action." Beside her Wilson raised his eyebrows. The phone on her desk hadn't been ringing too often; an extended conversation like this was of interest.

"I've got a problem up here I'd like you two to take a look at."

"The Chief—"

"So take a coffee break. Just come up here. I think this might be what you've been waiting for."

"What's he got?" Wilson asked as soon as she put down the phone.

"He's got a problem. He thinks it might interest us."

"The Chief—"

"So he said take a coffee break and come up to see him. I think it's a good idea."

They pulled on their coats; outside it was a bright, blustery December afternoon and the cold wind coming around the buildings carried a fierce chill. The cold had been so intense for the past three days, in fact, that there weren't even many cars on the street. The usual afternoon jams were gone, replaced by a smattering of taxis and buses with great plumes of condensing exhaust behind them. The M. E. had been circumspect on the phone, no doubt savoring what little bit of drama might be in this for him.

They didn't speak as the car raced up Third Avenue. In the past few weeks Wilson had become more than usually taciturn; that was fine with Becky, she had problems enough of her own without listening to him complain about his. The last month with Dick had been

stormy, full of pain and unexpected realizations. She knew now that Dick was taking money under the table. Strangely enough the money wasn't from narcotics but from gambling. He had tracked a heroin network into an illicit gambling casino about a year ago. Dick's father was in a nursing home, he was sick of the bills, he was sick of the treadmill; he collared the junkies but left the gambling establishment alone—for a few thousand dollars. "It's gambling," he had argued; "what the hell, it shouldn't even be a crime." But since it was, he might as well let it pay the six hundred a month his father was costing. God knows, they might even be able to put enough aside for a decent apartment one of these days.

It hurt her to see this happening to Dick. The truth was, she had sniped at him for it but she hadn't tried to stop him and she hadn't turned him in. Nor would she. But Dick was a corrupt cop, the one thing she had sworn she would never be, the one thing she had sworn she would never allow him to be. Well, he hadn't asked permission.

She had always assumed that she would never give in to the temptations that were so common on the police force—and he had sworn it too. But he had and by not stopping him she had too. Now they bickered, each unwilling to confront the real reason for their anger. They should have had the courage to stop; instead they had let things happen. They had disappointed one another and were bitter about it.

Bitter enough to spend more and more time apart. Often it was days between shared evenings or monosyllabic breakfasts. They used to work their schedules to fit; now they worked them to be apart. Or at least as far as Becky was concerned she just stopped making an effort with her schedule. She drew what she drew, and overtime was just fine. Eventually there would be a confrontation, but not now, not today —today she was heading up to the M. E.'s office to be let in on a new case, maybe something really interesting for the first time in too damn long.

Evans was waiting for them in the reception area. "Don't take off your coats," he said, "we're going to the freezer." That meant the remains were in an advanced state of deterioration. The Medical Examiner's office had a claustrophobic freezer compartment with room enough for three surgical tables and a few people squeezed in tight. Wilson's eyes roved as they went down the disinfectant-scented hall toward the freezer; his claustrophobia had a field day in the thing. More than once he had commented to Becky that the freezer had figured in his nightmares.

"It's rough stuff again," the M. E. said conversationally. "I only call you folks in when I've got some real gore. Hope you don't mind." It could be that Evans lacked taste or it could just possibly be an attempt at banter. Becky didn't bother to laugh; instead she asked a question.

"What are we going to see?"

"Three DOA's, very decomposed." He ushered them into the starkly lit freezer and pulled the door shut behind them. He didn't need to say more; the bodies had clearly been attacked the same way DiFalco and Houlihan were attacked. There was something chilling about seeing the same type of scrape marks on the bones, the same evidence of gnawing. Becky was frightened, too deeply frightened to really understand her feelings. But she knew the moment she saw these corpses that the Chief of Detectives had made exactly the mistake they had feared he was making—this was not an ordinary murder case and it was not a fluke.

"Goddamn," Wilson said.

The Medical Examiner smiled, but this time it was without mirth. "I don't know how to explain these bodies. The condition makes no sense."

"It makes sense," Becky said, "as soon as you assume that they weren't killed by

human beings.”

“What then?”

“That’s what’s to be found out. But you’re wasting your time with us, Underwood took us off the case.”

“Well, he’ll put you back on.”

“There are a lot of detectives in this department,” Wilson put in. “I’m sure he’ll find others. And it’s likely he’ll want more. This is going to be a big embarrassment for him.” Wilson shook his head. “A hell of an embarrassment. Let’s get out of this icebox. We’ve seen all we need to see.”

Evans opened the door. “You’ll get back on,” he said, “I’ll make sure of that. So start to work. You need a solution.”

They didn’t bother to ask the M. E. how the bodies had come in; instead they called headquarters and got referred to the right precinct. As soon as he was off the phone to headquarters Wilson called the 41st Precinct in the South Bronx and asked to speak to the Captain. Sure they could come up, but there were already detectives on the case. “Might be a tie-in to another case, one of ours.” He put down the phone. “Let’s move.”

They battled their way across town to the FDR Drive. Despite the fact that the weather had reduced the amount of traffic in the city, getting across town was still difficult. “I read somewhere that it takes longer to cross town in a car today than it used to in a carriage.”

“And longer than that when I’m driving, right?”

“Yeah, if you say so.”

“Goddamn brass,” Becky growled.

“Hey, getting our dander up, my dear.”

“Damn right I am. Here we’ve got two cops buried and forgotten and we knew damn well something wasn’t right—damn these politicking bastards. It’s a black day when the NYPD won’t even mount a proper investigation when officers are killed. Seedman never would have done this.”

Wilson sighed, expressing in that single sound all the feelings he could or would not express about the Police Department he so loved to hate. The department had hurt him as well as helped him; in the past few years he had seen its emphasis shift away from solving crimes toward preventing them. Citizens demanded protection in the streets; the once-proud Detectives diminished and foot patrol became the thing. The old-timers were fewer and fewer; Wilson was one, sharp-eyed and careful. And the fact that his young partner was a woman was just another sign of the deterioration of the department. He stared out the window. Becky couldn’t see his face but she knew what the expression contained. She knew also that there was no sense in talking to him now; he was beyond communication.

They made their way through the devastated streets of the 41st Precinct, past the vacant brick-strewn lots, the empty buildings, the burned, abandoned ruins, the stripped cars, the dismal, blowing garbage in the streets. And Becky thought, “Somewhere, something is here. It is here.” She knew it. And by the way Wilson changed, the stiffening of his posture, the darkening of his face, the little turning-down of the edges of his mouth, she saw that he also had the same feeling.

“Every time I’m up here this place looks worse.”

“What street was it again, George?”

“East One Hundred and Forty-fourth Street. Old One Forty-four. Sure is a mess now.” Wilson was in the neighborhood of his childhood, looking at the ruins of where he had been a boy. “It was a pretty good place then, not the greatest, but it sure wasn’t like this. Jesus.”

“Yeah.” Becky tried to leave him alone with his thoughts. Considering that the little upstate town where she had grown up was still exactly as it had been, still and seemingly forever, she couldn’t imagine what seeing this place must do to Wilson.

“God, I can’t believe I’m fifty-four,” he said. “I’d swear I was sitting on that stoop last night.” He sighed. “We’re there,” he said, “the old Forty-first.” The precinct house was a dismal fortress, an unlikely bastion of reasonable decay in the surrounding ruins. A neighborhood of unabandoned houses clustered around it. The danger and destruction were beyond. In fact, with the strange fecundity of the Bronx, this immediate two blocks showed signs of mild prosperity. There was traffic in the streets, neatly swept sidewalks, curtains in windows, and a well-kept Catholic church on the corner. People were few because of the cold, but Becky could imagine what the area was like when the weather was good—filled with kids on the sidewalks and their parents on the stoops, full of liveliness and noise and the sheer exuberance that can infect city neighborhoods.

The Captain of the 41st Precinct looked up from his desk when Neff and Wilson were shown in. It was clear at once that he still didn’t know exactly why they were there. Normally detectives from another borough would have nothing to do with this case— and as far as the Captain was concerned it probably wasn’t much of a case. Just another couple of rotting junkie corpses and a poor old man. About the score for the South Bronx these days. Becky knew instinctively to let Wilson handle the Captain. He was the infighter, the resident expert on departmental politics. Look where his political skill had gotten him. The best detective in New York City at dead end. First Grade, true, but never a division, never a district of his own.

“We got a suggestion from Evans,” Wilson said by way of explaining their presence to the Captain.

“Evans pulled rank on the Bronx Medical Examiner and got those cadavers down to Manhattan. We don’t know why he did that.” There was acid in the man’s voice. He didn’t like a case being taken from him without a good reason. And it was obvious that so far nobody had given him one.

“He did that because the marks on them were similar to the marks on the DiFalco-Houlihan remains.”

The Precinct Captain stared. “That case still open?”

“It is now. We’ve got a new lead.”

“Jesus. No wonder you guys are all over us.” He stood up from his desk. “We got the scene in good shape,” he said. “You want to go over there?”

Wilson nodded. As they followed the Captain out of his office, Becky was exultant. The man had never thought to call downtown to check on Neff and Wilson. If he had he would have found out that they weren’t even on the case anymore. But why should he? It would never even occur to him.

The area where the bodies had been found was roped off and plastered with Crime Scene stickers. It was guarded by two patrolmen. “The bodies were found by a gypsy cab driver who stopped to fix a flat and smelled something. He came to us, we were lucky. Usually those guys don’t even bother.”

The bodies had been found in the basement of an abandoned apartment house. Becky took her flashlight out of her bag and went in under the decaying stoop. Lights had been

set up in the dirty room, but the rest of the building was in boarded-up darkness. The flashlight played along the floor, in the unlit corners, up the stairs that led to the first floor. "Door locked?" Wilson asked as Becky shone her light on its blackened surface.

"Haven't been up there," the Captain said. "Remember, we thought this was routine until this morning when the Bronx M. E. told us that Evans had snatched his bodies."

"Ha ha, that was funny," Wilson said tonelessly. The Captain glowered. "Let's go up, partner. We might as well make the search."

They all heard it; a footstep on the stair. They looked to their leader. His hair rose and theirs did too. They functioned with one emotion, one will, one heart. What did the footsteps mean? Obviously, the ones in the basement had decided to come upstairs. And they were familiar. The sound of their tread, their rising smell, their voices were remembered from the dump. As the elders had feared, the killings of young humans had caused an investigation. And these two had been at that investigation. Now they were here, obviously following the pack.

Their scent became more powerful as they drew nearer: an old man and a young woman. No danger, they would be an easy kill.

The leader made a sound that sent the pack into motion.

They were hungry, the children were cold and hungry. Food was needed. Today a new hunt would have begun. Maybe it would be unnecessary, this kill would both remove danger and provide meat. But the strong young woman would have to be separated from the weak old man. How to do that? Their scents revealed the fact that they were partners, and the way their voices sounded as they talked to one another said that they had worked together a long time. How do you separate such people even for a moment, especially when both recognize danger? The scents became sharp with the smell of fear as the two humans groped through the darkness. It made digestive juices flow and hearts beat faster with lust for the hunt. The leader warned, hold back, hold back. In this situation he sensed hidden dangers. Suddenly he hated the place. He loathed it, despised it. It was thick with humanity. There were strong, young ones outside and these two inside and another old one in the basement. Before there had been many more in the basement. "Our young must not kill their young," he thought fiercely. He found himself moving slowly toward the door of the room they inhabited, moving against his judgment, attracted by the need to kill the two who knew enough of the pack to follow it here. Now the others moved behind him, stealthy, efficient, padding quickly down the darkened hall, down the black stairway toward the wonderful scents, moving too close to humanity and yet only close enough to get what they needed. "Must find a way to split them up," the leader thought. Then he stopped. His whole body seethed with desire to go on, to finish the attack, to feel the death of the prey in his mouth. But he thought carefully, his mind turning over the problem and coming to the solution.

Certain sounds attracted humans. This fact was often used in hunting. A little cry, like one of their children, would bring even the most fearful within range of attack. And the child's cry was most easily heard by the women.

"Sh!"

"What?"

"Listen." It came again, the unmistakable groan of a child. "You hear that?"

"No."

Becky went to the stairwell. She heard it more clearly, coming from above. "Wilson,

there's a kid up there." She shone her light into the dimness. "I'm telling you I hear a child."

"So go investigate. I'm not going up there."

The sound came again, full of imperative need.

She found herself standing on the first step, moving upward almost against her own will. Above her the decoy put his heart into the sounds, making them as plaintive and compelling as he could. He imagined himself a helpless little human child lying on the cold floor weeping, and the sound that came out of him was like such a child.

The others moved swiftly to the opposite stairwell and started down. They sensed the positions of the prey. The strong young woman starting up the stairs, the weak old man standing in the dark hallway behind her. "Come up, come up," the decoy pleaded to her in his mind, and made the little sound. It had to be right, to be perfect, just enough to attract her, not enough to let her decide what she wanted to decide—that it was the wind, a creaking board, or something dangerous.

As she reached one landing the hunters reached its twin at the opposite end of the hall. As she rose toward the decoy they descended toward Wilson. As they got closer they became more careful. Hidden strength under the smells of fear and decay. They would have to hit this man with devastating force to get him, hit as hard as they had hit the two young ones at the dump. But their prize would be great; he was heavy and well-fed, unlike the ones they had found among these empty buildings. There was no starvation in him and no sickness to make him dangerous to consume. They loved him, lusted after him, moved closer to him. And they saw his dim shadow, his heavy slow body standing in the dark.

Then standing in a flickering blaze of light.

"What are you doing, George?"

"Lighting a Goddamn cigarette."

Becky came down toward him flashing her light in his face. "You *are* lighting a cigarette. I'll be damned. Where did you get a cigarette?"

"I've been saving it for a special occasion."

"And now is a special occasion?"

He nodded, his face like stone. "I'll be frank with you, Becky, I've got the creeps. I'm scared to death. I won't get out of here without you but I think we ought to leave—now."

"But there's a child—"

"Now! Come on." He grabbed her wrist, pulled her toward the basement door.

"There's something upstairs," he said to the Precinct Captain, who was standing in the middle of the basement as if he had been undecided about whether or not to follow the two detectives upstairs.

"I'm not surprised. The building is probably full of junkies."

"It sounded like a child," Becky said. "I'm sure that's what it was."

"That's possible too," the Captain said mildly. "I'll order up a search party if you think I should. But don't do it with just two people. It'll take ten men with carbines, I think that ought to do it"

Becky acknowledged the wisdom of this plan. No doubt there had been a pack of junkies at the top of the stairs waiting to jump her. Or perhaps there was actually a child. If that was so the ten minutes it would take to assemble the search party would make

little difference.

They went outside and got into the Captain's car. As soon as they left, the two patrolmen who had been guarding the scene moved swiftly to their own car and got in to shield themselves from the cold. They turned on their radio so that they would again have advance warning of visits from the precinct and settled back in the warmth.

For this reason they did not hear the howl of rage and frustration that rose from the upper reaches of the tenement. Nor did they see the exodus that took place, a line of gray shadows jumping one by one across the six feet of space that separated this building from the next one.

It didn't take long to assemble the search party. It was now four o'clock and the night men were coming on duty. Three patrol cars returned to the building. With the two men on duty there plus Wilson and Neff there would be exactly ten officers for the search. Of course as soon as the cars drew up to the front of the building you could assume that any junkies in it slipped out the back. But murder had been done here and the precinct so far hadn't mounted a proper search. Pictures had been taken of the victims and a cursory dusting of the area for fingerprints, but that was all. In this part of the city a committed crime was just another statistic. Nobody bothered to find out the circumstances that led to the deaths of a few derelicts. And nobody doubted that the blind man had gotten mugged and then dragged off the street to die. And nobody was right about what happened.

During the search Wilson and Neff were silent. The rooms of the old tenement still bore the marks of the last residents—graffiti on the walls, shreds of curtains in the windows, yellowing wallpaper here and there. Even, in one room, the remains of a carpet. But there was no child, and there were no traces of recent human habitation.

Wilson and Neff made the reluctant patrolmen scoop up some of the fecal matter that was found. They put it in a plastic bag.

"Empty upstairs," a voice called as a group of five came from searching up to the roof. "Nothing suspicious."

What the hell did that mean? These men wouldn't know evidence from cauliflower. "Take us through," Wilson growled. "We've gotta see for ourselves."

The patrolmen went with them, the whole crowd going floor to floor. Becky saw the empty rooms in better light, but her mind could not blot out those plaintive cries. *Something* was up here just a few minutes ago, something that had left without a trace.

They looked carefully in all the rooms but found nothing.

When they got back to the basement Wilson was shaking his head. "I don't get it," he said, "I know you heard something."

"You do?"

"I heard it too, you think I'm deaf?"

Becky was surprised, she hadn't realized that he also had heard the sound. "Why didn't you go up with me then?"

"It wasn't a child."

She looked at him, at the cold fear in his face. "OK," she said, swallowing her intended challenge, "it wasn't a child. What was it?"

He shook his head and pulled out his cigarettes. "Let's get the shit to the lab for

analysis. That's all we can do now."

They left the house with the clomping horde of patrolmen. With their meager evidence tightly enclosed in plastic bags they headed back to Manhattan.

"You think this will reopen the DiFalco case?" Becky asked.

"Probably."

"Good, then we won't be moonlighting on it anymore."

"As I recall we got taken off that case. Or do you recall something else?"

"Well, yeah, but in view of—"

"In view of nothing. We're going to be the scapegoats now. Neff and Wilson get case. Carbon monoxide and wild dogs. Neff and Wilson close case. New evidence comes in. Case reopened. Neff and Wilson scapegoats for closing it in the first place." His throat rumbled in a suppressed cough. "Goddamn Luckies," he said. "Goddamn, you know I could be resigning soon."

"You won't resign."

"No, not voluntarily. But it depends on how hard Underwood wants to stick me with blame for misunderstanding the case."

"But it's only one damn case."

"It's police officers killed in the line of duty. If it gets out that Underwood himself closed the case he'll lose his shot at Commissioner. Therefore you and yours truly are going to be blamed. Might as well relax and enjoy the fun." His shoulders shook with mirthless laughter.

"Maybe there's something more conclusive. If there is it'll help a little." She paused. The silence grew. "Who do you think is doing it?" she asked.

"Not who—what. It's not human."

Now he had said the words, words they had previously been unwilling to face. Not human. Could not be human. "What makes you so sure?" Becky asked, half-knowing the answer.

Wilson looked at her in surprise. "Why, the noise, of course. It wasn't human."

"What's that supposed to mean? It sounded perfectly human to me." Or had it? Becky remembered it now like something that had taken place in a dream, a child's voice or... something else. Every few seconds it was as if she woke up and heard it again—horrible, inhuman parody full of snarling menace... then child again, soft, wounded, dying.

"Look out!"

She slammed on the brakes. She had been about to glide broadside into the traffic of Third Avenue. "Sorry. Sorry, George, I—"

"Pull over. You're not in good shape."

She obeyed him. Despite the fact that she felt fine, there was no denying what she had almost done. Like the little cries were still taking place, but in a dream. "I feel OK, I don't know what came over me."

"You acted hypnotized," he said.

She heard the noises again, feral, snarling, monstrous. Sweat popped out all over her. She felt cold, her flesh crawling. Her mind turned back to the stair, to the terrible danger that had been waiting for her, the same as the torn, bloodied corpses, the jagged bones

and skulls.

With her hands over her mouth she fought not to scream, to give up completely to the terror.

Wilson came across the seat as if he had been waiting for this. He took her in his arms; her body rattled against his thick shoulders; she pressed her face into the warm, scruffy smell of his ancient white shirt, distantly she felt him kissing her hair, her ear, her neck, and felt waves of comfort and surprise overcoming and pushing back the panic. She wanted to pull away from him but she also wanted to do what she did, which was lift her face. He kissed her hard and she accepted it, passively at first, then giving in to the relief of it, and kissed him back.

Then they separated, propelled apart by the fact that they were in a car recognizable to any policeman. Becky put her hands on the steering wheel. She felt sick and sad, as if something had just been lost.

“I’ve been wanting to get that out of my system,” Wilson said gruffly. “I’ve been—” Then his voice died away. He clutched the dashboard and laid his head on his arm. “Oh, hell, I love you, dammit.” She started to talk. “No, don’t say it. I know what you’ll say. But just let it be known and leave it like that. We go on like we were. Unrequited love won’t kill me.”

She looked at him, amazed that he could bring up something so... extraneous. She had always wondered if he loved her. She loved him in a way. But that wasn’t important, it had been accepted a long time ago. And their relationship was established. Certainly it shouldn’t intrude now. When he turned his face toward her he registered shock. She knew her mascara must be running with the tears, she knew her face must be twisted in fear. “What happened to me?” she asked. Her voice was not her own, so distorted was it by the rush of emotions. “What was going on back there?”

“Becky, I don’t know. But I think we’d better find out.”

She laughed. “Oh, that’s for sure! I just don’t know if I can handle it. We’ve really got some problems here.”

“Yeah. One of them is you. I don’t mean that harshly, but I’m going to have to break my cardinal rule at this time. Let’s change sides, I’m going to drive.”

She hid her amazement. In all the years they had worked together, this was an absolute first. “I must be falling apart,” she said as she sank into Wilson’s usual seat. “This is really a big deal.”

“It’s no big deal. You’re rattled. But you know you shouldn’t be. I mean, you weren’t the one in danger. It was me.”

“You! I was being lured upstairs.”

“To get you away from me.”

“Why do you even say that? You’re a man, a lot heavier than me, not an obvious target.”

“I heard noises on the stairs at the other end of the hall. Breathing noises, like something hungry slavering over its food.” The tone of his voice frightened her. She laughed nervously in self defense, the sound peeling out so suddenly that it startled Wilson visibly. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye but kept the car moving.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that you’re the *last* person I’d think of as one of their victims.”

“Why?”

“Well, they eat them, don’t they? Isn’t that what it’s all about? Everybody they’ve hit has been eaten.”

“Old men, junkies, two cops in a hell of a lonely place. The weak and the isolated. I fitted two key criteria in that house—older man, isolated from all except you. And they damn near lured you away upstairs. You ever go hunting?”

“I don’t like it. I’ve never been.”

“When I was a kid I hunted with my father. We went after moose up north. We used to track for days sometimes. One summer we tracked for a week. And finally we got on to our moose, a big old bull that moved with a slanty track. A wounded bull. Weak, ready for the slaughter. I’ll never forget it. There we were just getting ready to take a shot when wolves stole out of the shadows all around us. They went right past us into the clearing where the moose was grazing. My dad cursed under his breath—those wolves were going to scare our trophy away. But they didn’t. That big bull moose looked down at those scrawny wolves and just snorted. They moved in closer and he stopped grazing and stared at them. You’d never believe it. The damn wolves wagged their tails! And the moose let out a great roar and they jumped him. They tore at him, bled him to death. We were fascinated, we were rooted to the spot. But it was like they agreed together that the killing be done. The wolves and the moose agreed. He couldn’t make it anymore, they needed meat. So he let them take him. And those timber wolves are scrawny. They’re like German shepherds. They look like they’d never be able to bring down a full-grown bull moose. And they wouldn’t, unless he agreed to let them try.” He was watching her again, barely keeping an eye on traffic. He was no better a driver today than she was.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m the bull moose in this version of the story. I wasn’t scared, but I knew they were coming down those stairs. If they had gotten any closer to me, I think I would have been a goner.”

“But you didn’t want them to kill you! We’re not like animals, we want to survive.”

“I don’t know what was going on in my mind,” he said. By the choked gruffness of his voice she knew that if he hadn’t been Wilson he would be sobbing. “All I know is, if they had come any closer I’m not so sure I could have even tried to stop them.”

Chapter 4

Becky Neff awoke suddenly out of a restless sleep. She felt that there had been a noise, yet now there was no sound except the wind, and a little snow whispering on the windowpane. The glow from the streetlights far below shone on the ceiling. In the distance a truck clattered its way down Second Avenue. The hands of the clock showed three forty-five. She had been asleep four hours. She remembered a hint of dream—a flash of blood, a sickly feeling of menace. Perhaps that had awakened her. Dick’s steady breathing in the bed beside her was a reassurance. If there had been an unusual noise he would be awake too. Gently she touched him, thinking as she did of how things had been between them such a short time ago, and of how change seeps into even the strongest love. She became sad and afraid. The apartment was cold, the morning heat not yet up.

“Dick,” she said softly.

There was no response. She hadn't really said it loud enough to wake him; she didn't say it again. Then she leaned over to get her cigarettes from the night table and froze. There was a shadow on the ceiling. She watched it move slowly along, a low lump like something crawling on its belly across the bedroom terrace. Her mind raced to the sliding doors—locked? She had no idea.

Then the shadow was gone and she found she was still lying on her back, not reaching across the bed at all. In the manner of bad nightmares this one had continued even after she seemed to be awake. With the thought her heart stopped pounding. Of course it had been a dream. Nothing could climb sixteen stories to an apartment terrace. And nothing could have followed her. Yet she couldn't quite overcome the feeling that something *was* out there. Something, after all, must have sparked the dream. Something must have waked her up.

The mutilated faces of DiFalco and Houlihan flickered in her mind's eye. She thought of them staring up from the muddy ground. And she thought of Mike O'Donnell, the old blind man dying in his own darkness.

How did the killers look? She had assumed that they would look like wolves, but maybe not. Wolves, she knew, have never been implicated in a human killing. They are generally no more dangerous to man than are dogs. Wolves were interested in moose and deer. Man probably frightened them more than they did him.

A little sound from the terrace made her mind go blank, a shivering coldness pass through her body. It was a growl, very low and indistinct. They *were* here! Somehow they had done the impossible, had followed her here. They must have scented her at the house in the Bronx and followed the trail. They were hunting her, down! She felt frozen, as if she could neither speak nor move. This was fear, she knew, so intense that it left her mind floating in a strange, precise world of its own, looking from a distance at her body. Her hand moved across the bed and began shaking her husband's shoulder. She heard her voice saying his name again and again with urgent, whispered intensity.

“What—”

“Don't make a sound. Something's outside.”

He slipped his service revolver out of his night-table drawer. Only then did it occur to her to do the same. Her own gun felt good in her hand. “On the terrace,” she said.

Very quietly he got up and went to the door. He moved fast then, pulling back the curtains and stepping outside. The terrace was empty. He turned toward her, his shadow shrugging. “Nothing's here.”

“There was something.” The conviction grew in her when she said it. A few moments ago she had seen the shadow, heard the growl—and they were certainly real.

“What?”

“I don't know. Some kind of an animal.”

“A cat?”

“I don't think so.”

He came back to bed, crawling in beside her. “You're really wound up in this case, aren't you, honey?” The gentleness in his voice cut into her, making her feel more lonely than ever. Despite the urge she felt to embrace him, she stayed on her side of the bed.

“It's a strange case, Dick.”

“Don’t get overinvolved, honey. It’s just another case.”

That statement caused anger to replace fear. “Don’t criticize me, Dick. If you were working on murders like these you’d feel exactly the same way— if you were honest with yourself.”

“I wouldn’t get worked up.”

“I’m not worked up!”

He laughed, a condescending chuckle. The great stone policeman with his tender bride. “You take it easy kid,” he said, pulling the quilt up over his head. “Take a Valium if you’re upset.”

The man was infuriating.

“I’m telling you, George, I know what the hell I saw!”

He stared across the room toward the bleary window. They had been given an office belonging to the Manhattan South Detective Division despite the fact that they were still not officially assigned to it. “It’s pretty hard to believe,” Wilson said. “Sixteen stories is a long way up.” His eyes were pleading when he looked at her—she *had* to be wrong or else they would be dealing with a force of completely unmanageable proportions.

“All I can say is, it happened. And even if you don’t believe me it wouldn’t hurt to take precautions.”

“Maybe and maybe not. We’ll know better what we’re up against when we talk to the guy we’re supposed to see.”

“What guy?”

“A guy that Tom Rilker gave some of those pawprint casts to. You remember Tom Rilker?”

“Sure, the kook with the dogs.”

“Well, he gave the prints we left behind in his office to another kook who wants us to go interview him. So maybe he’ll tell us what you saw.”

“Goddamn it, you have the sneakiest way of slipping things in. When do we see this genius?”

“Ten-thirty, up at the Museum of Natural History. He’s an animal stuffer or something.”

They drove up in silence. The fact that they were even trying this angle testified to their increasing desperation. But at least it meant doing something on the case instead of letting more time slip by. And time seemed to be terribly important.

“At least they aren’t throwing other assignments at us these days,” Becky said to break the silence. Since this case has been “closed” she and Wilson hadn’t exactly been getting more big jobs. Sooner or later they would be transferred somewhere definite instead of remaining in the limbo of reporting directly to the Chief of Detectives. Probably go back to Brooklyn for all the difference it made. At least out there they wouldn’t be victimized by high-level departmental politics.

“Underwood knows what we’re doing.”

“You think so?”

“Of course. Why do you think we’re not getting other cases? Underwood’s playing it by ear. If we turn up something he can use, OK. If we foul things up, we can always be

reprimanded for insubordination.” He laughed. “He knows exactly what we’re doing.”

“Evans told him, I suppose.”

Wilson smiled. “Sure. He probably called up and told Underwood he’d better leave us alone if he knew what was good for him. Underwood might not like it since he closed the DiFalco case himself but he’s afraid of Evans, so the result is we end up in a vacuum. Damned if we do and et cetera.”

“Here’s the Goddamn museum.”

They went up the wide stone steps past the statue of Teddy Roosevelt and into the immense dim hall that formed the lobby.

“We’re here to see a Doctor Ferguson,” Wilson said to the woman sitting behind the information counter. She picked up a telephone and spoke into it for a moment, then smiled up at them.

The workrooms of the museum were a shock. There were stacks of bones, boxes of feathers, beaks, skulls, animals and birds in various states of reconstruction on tables and in cases. The chaos was total, a welter of glue and paint and equipment and bones. A tall young man in a dirty gray smock appeared from behind a box of stuffed owls. “I’m Carl Ferguson,” he said in a powerful, cheery voice. “We’re preparing the Birds of North America, but that’s obviously not why I called you.” For an instant Becky saw something chill cross his face, then it was replaced again by the smile. “Let’s go into my office, such as it is. I’ve got something to show you.”

It sat on the desk in the office on a piece of plastic. “Ever seen anything like it?”

“What the hell is it?”

“A composite I constructed from the pawprint casts Tom Rilker gave me. Whatever made those prints has paws very much like this one.”

“My God. It looks so—”

“Lethal. And that’s exactly what it is. An efficient weapon. One of the best I’ve ever seen in nature, as a matter of fact.” He picked it up. “These long, jointed toes can grasp, I think, quite well. And the claw retracts. Very beautifully and very strange.” He shook his head. “Only one thing wrong with it.”

“Which is?”

“It can’t exist. Too perfect a mutation. No defects at all. Plus it’s at least three steps ahead of its canine ancestors. Maybe if it was a single mutation it would be acceptable, but there are the prints of five or six different animals in here. There must be a pack of these things.” He turned the plaster model in his hand. “The odds against this are billions—trillions— to one.”

“But not impossible?”

He held the model out to Wilson, who stared but didn’t touch. “We have the evidence right here. And I want to know more about the creatures that made these prints. Rilker couldn’t give me a damn bit of information. That’s why I called you. I didn’t want to get involved, but frankly I’m curious.”

Wilson put on a sickly smile. “You’re curious,” he said. “That’s very nice. We’re all curious. But we can’t help you. You’ve just told us a lot more than we knew. You’re the one who can answer questions.”

The scientist looked puzzled and a little sad. He took his glasses off, then dropped into his chair and put the plaster model back on the desk. “I’m sorry to hear that. I had hoped

you'd have more information for me. But I don't think you realize how little I know. Where did the prints come from—can you tell me that?"

"The scene of a crime."

"Oh come on, George, don't be so close-mouthed. They came from the scene of the DiFalco-Houlihan murders out in Brooklyn."

"The two policemen?"

"Right. They were found all around the bodies."

"What's being done about this?"

"Exactly nothing," Wilson snapped. "At the moment the case is officially closed."

"But what about these prints? I mean, here's clear evidence that something out of the ordinary is at work. This is no dog or wolf paw, you realize that? Surely somebody must be doing something about it."

Wilson shot Becky a glance and kept staring as if surprised. The feeling that she experienced confused and pleased her—not because of what the look communicated but because of the way his eyes lingered. "Nobody's doing anything about it, Doctor," she said. "That's why we're here. We are the only two police officers in New York on this case and we're about to be reassigned."

"You understand that this claw belongs to a fearsome killer." He said it like it was a revelation.

"We know," Becky replied patiently. In her mind's eye she once again saw the faces of the dead.

Doctor Ferguson seemed to withdraw into himself. His hands hung down at his sides, his head bowed. Becky had seen this kind of reaction to stress before, usually in those who have been unexpectedly close to murderers. "How many have died?" he asked.

"Five so far that we know about," Wilson replied.

"There've probably been more," Ferguson said faintly, "maybe many more, if what I suspect is right."

"Which is?"

He frowned. "I can't say right now. I'm not sure about it. If I'm wrong it could harm my career. We could be dealing with some kind of murderers hoax. I don't want to get taken in by a hoax."

Wilson sighed. "You got any cigarettes?" he asked. Ferguson produced a pack. Wilson took one, tore off the filter and lit up. He did this all very quickly so that Becky wouldn't have a chance to stop him. "You know, you shouldn't clam up on us. If you don't tell us what you think we aren't going to be able to help you."

The scientist stared at them. "Look, if I get tripped up by a hoax—if I go out on a limb about this thing and it turns out to be a fake—I would lose my reputation. I don't know what would become of me. Or I guess I do. Teaching at some backwoods college and never quite reaching tenure." He shook his head. "It's not much of a career."

"You're not presenting a paper here. You're talking confidentially to two New York City policemen. There's a difference."

"True enough. Maybe I'm exaggerating."

"So tell us your theory. For God's sake *help us!*" The words came out of Wilson like a bark, causing a sudden pause in the bustle of the workroom beyond the little office. "I'm

sorry,” he said more softly, “I guess I’m a little upset. Me and my partner here, we’re the only ones who even suspect what we’re up against. And we’ve had some bad experiences.”

Becky broke in. “These things don’t just kill. They hunt. They nearly got us in a house up in the Bronx a few days ago. They hid on an upper floor. One of them tried to lure me with the cries of a baby while the others—”

“Stalked me. They tried to separate us.”

“And I think they might have been outside my apartment last night.”

The words had come in a rush out of both of them, driven by their rising sense of isolation. Now Ferguson was looking at them with unabashed horror, almost as if they themselves bore some loathsome mark.

“You must be mistaken. They can’t be as intelligent as all that.”

Becky blinked with surprise—she had never realized that. Not only were they deadly, they were smart! They had to be damn smart to lure her and Wilson into that stairway, and to seek out her apartment. They had to understand who the enemy was, and know the importance of destroying him before he revealed their presence to the world.

Wilson moved like a man in a dream, his hand gliding up to touch his cheek, the fingers running down the rough line of the throat, down to the seedy brown necktie and back to his lap. As the realization grew also in him his eyes hooded in a deep frown, his mouth opened almost sensually, as if he had fallen asleep and was dreaming of love. “I was beginning to suspect that they were intelligent, too. No matter what you say, Doctor Ferguson, what happened is what happened. You know something—I’ll bet they didn’t pop out of the ground yesterday either. If they’re that smart, they know how to stay well hidden—and they know how important that is, too. That’s my thought.”

“Well, that’s pretty much the theory I didn’t want to tell you, too. You’ve got to get me a cranium or a head, though. Then I can give you an idea of the intelligence. But don’t worry about it, I’m sure we’re much smarter.”

“Doctor, what would a chimp be like if it had the senses of a dog?”

“Lethal—oh God, I see what you mean. If their senses are highly developed enough they don’t need our intelligence to best us. I suppose that’s right. It’s very disturbing, the idea of canine senses and a primate brain.”

“And it’s more than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jesus Christ, I thought she just told you she was *hunted!*” His vehemence surprised her. The layers of calm professionalism were stripped away, revealing a Wilson underneath that she had never seen before. Here was a man of intensity and great feeling, protective, angry, full of violence. The cynical surface was gone. What ran beneath was burning with pain.

“Please keep your voice down. I can’t have a disturbance in here. So I’ll agree that she was hunted. You do something about the problem, you’re the police.”

“Crap. We don’t know what the hell we’re confronting.”

“And I can’t help you unless I’ve got more information. I’m not going to go spouting out suppositions that could get quoted in the papers. Anyway it’s your problem to protect the community, so protect it. My interest is strictly scientific. So bring me a head. If I’m going to give you your answers, I’ve got to have a head.”

Wilson's chin was pulled in, his shoulders were hunched. "Hell, you can count on us! Bring you a head—we can't possibly bring you a head and you know it. Nobody's ever caught one of these things. Even if they've evolved at absolute top speed, how long have they been around?"

"At the very least—and this seems next to impossible—give them ten thousand years."

"Longer than recorded history and you want us to bring you a head! Let's get out of here, Detective Neff, we've got work to do." He got up and left.

"Just one more thing," Becky said as she was leaving, "just one thing I'd like you to think about. If they are following us, they probably know we came to see you." She went out behind Wilson, leaving the scientist staring at the door.

Wilson didn't speak again until they had passed back through the nearly empty museum and were in the car. "That was bullshit you fed that schmuck," he said. "He won't believe us no matter how close to home you try to take it."

"Maybe not. It sure would help us though, to get a Ph.D. behind us. Think of what would happen if that guy went to Underwood and said these two cops might have a point."

"Don't, Becky. It isn't going to happen that way." They rode on in silence for a few minutes. "Maybe we're spooked," Wilson said. "Maybe it was just our imagination last night."

"Our?"

"I saw something too." He said it as if he didn't want to. "Something watched me from a fire escape when I was on my way to my rooming house. It was a damn strange-looking dog. I only got a glimpse and then it was gone. I've never seen a face like that on a dog—so intense. In fact I've never seen a face like that before except once, when I collared a maniac. He looked at me like that. It was because the bastard was about to pull a hidden shiv on me."

"Why didn't you say something about this earlier?"

"I was wishing it was my imagination. I guess we're in trouble, Becky." This last he said softly, almost in awe of the words. They both knew exactly what the stakes were. Becky felt sick. Wilson, sitting beside her as solid as a statue, had never seemed so frail. She found herself wanting to protect him. She could imagine the thing on the fire escape—she could picture the eager, intent eyes, sense the frustration at the crowds on the sidewalk, imagine the silent anger it felt as Wilson went unmolested on his way, protected by all the unsuspecting witnesses.

"George, I just can't believe it. It's so hard to make it seem real. And if it isn't totally real, I'm not sure that I'll be able to deal with it."

"It's happened before, Becky. There are even legends about it." She waited eagerly for more but he seemed to see no need to continue. Typical of him to lapse into silence after making a leading statement like that.

"So go on. What are you driving at?"

"I was just thinking—you remember what you said to Rilker about werewolves? You might not have been too far wrong."

"That's ridiculous."

"Not really. Say they've existed throughout recorded history. If they really are as smart as we think, people in the past would have believed that they were men turned into wolves."

“Then what happened? Why did the legends die out?”

He braced his knee against the glove compartment and slumped in the seat. “Maybe the reason is that the population of the world grew. Back in the past their hunts were noticed because there were so few people. But as the population got bigger they started concentrating on the dregs, the isolated, the forgotten—people who wouldn’t be missed. Typical predators in that respect—they only take the weak.”

She glanced at him as she drove. “I think that’s a hell of an idea,” she said. “I don’t think it’s very good news for you and me, though.”

He laughed. “We’re not weak. That probably means they’ll be very careful. There also isn’t any knowledge about them at all, which must mean that they’re very thorough about covering their tracks.”

He means that they hunt down people like us, Becky thought as she guided the car through the traffic. It was like being in a bad dream, this feeling of being hunted. Her mind kept going back to the shadow on the ceiling, the shadow on the ceiling... the patient shadow waiting for that single, perfect instant when it could destroy the woman who knew its secret. The world was whirling around her, around her and Wilson, a world of lights and voices and warmth—except for the darting shape, the shadow leaping in pursuit.

“It’s a shame nobody believes us,” Wilson said. “I mean, it’s a shame the... things are wasting their time hunting us down, seeing as how we couldn’t reveal them even if we wanted to.” He rubbed his face. “Except maybe to Rilker and Evans. Even Ferguson if he’ll quit worrying about what they’ll say in *Science News*. But we just might be able to convince Rilker and Evans—hell, I don’t care *what* they decide is after us, I just want them to know we’re in danger and give us a hand!” He turned his head, looking at her with a haggard face. “You know, that Ferguson was a prize jerk. I think he was attracted to you.”

He’s jealous, she thought, and he doesn’t even know it. “I could tell he was a jerk from the first moment I saw him,” she said; “he looked like one.” There, Wilson will like that. True to her expectations he put his arm out along the seat.

“I like it when you wear that smell.”

“I’m not wearing any perfume.”

“Must be your deodorant then. It’s very nice.”

“Thank you.” The poor man, his best efforts were so terrible. She felt a twinge of sorrow for him; his loneliness was becoming more and more obvious to her. “You’re very sweet to say that,” she heard herself say, but the words sounded false.

Apparently they did to him, too, because he didn’t say anything more. When they reached Police Headquarters Becky pulled the car to a stop on a crowded nearby street rather than risk the big, empty garage beneath the building.

“We’ve got to try and get Underwood to assign a special detail,” she said when they were back in their office. Wilson nodded. He sat down at their desk and shuffled through the papers heaped on top of it: a day-old *Times* covered with coffeecup rings, a copy of the *New York* magazine crossword, half a dozen departmental memos.

“Nobody ever calls us,” he said.

“So let’s call Underwood ourselves. We’ve got to do something, we can’t just let ourselves rot.”

“Don’t say that! It does bad things to my gut. Why don’t *you* call Underwood? Hello,

this is the Detective with a capital D. You know the one? Well, please assign me a special protective detail. You see, I'm being chased by these werewolves. That'll get action."

"An invitation from Psychiatric Services and a little confidential note in the old personnel file. I know. But we don't want protection, we want to eliminate the menace!"

"You think we can, Becky?"

"We've got to try."

"So we'll call Evans and Rilker and try to get them on our side. And maybe even the scientist will put his two cents in if Rilker pushes him. Stranger things have happened. Maybe we'll at least get a scratch squad together, enough men to uncover some positive evidence."

Becky didn't feel particularly confident but she got on the phone. Wilson didn't even offer to lend a hand; they both knew that his services were, at best, counterproductive in the area of convincing people to give him help.

Evans listened to the story.

Rilker said he had suspected something like that.

Ferguson was willing to attend the meeting as long as absolutely everything was off the record. Becky considered offering him the loan of a false beard and dark glasses but let it go.

"Three hits," Wilson said, "they can't resist you."

"Now, now, don't get jealous. All that's left is for you to get an appointment with Underwood."

Despite his lack of skill with people, there was no way that Wilson could avoid being the one to call Underwood. He was senior man on the team, and their mere connection with the Chief of Detectives was a major disruption of the chain of command. Officially Neff and Wilson weren't assigned at the moment to any particular division. The Chief was keeping them in cold storage until he was sure the DiFalco case held no further surprises. Obviously he wasn't completely convinced that his quick closing of the case had been wise. With Neff and Wilson apparently still assigned to it he could keep them from uncovering embarrassing new evidence and also cover himself if that happened some other way, because he could always say that the department had kept a special team active on the case the whole time. He didn't want the case reopened, but if it was he was prepared.

For him it was a very economical solution to a problem. For Neff and Wilson it was agony—they didn't know where they stood and neither did anybody else. This meant that they could get nothing done. The resources of Manhattan South were not theirs to use—except for a dingy office. And the Brooklyn Division considered them off its roster. So they had only each other, and whatever help they could get outside the department.

It wasn't going to be enough, that had become very clear.

Underwood was polite, when Wilson finally got through. He set a meeting for three o'clock and didn't even ask what it was about. And why should he—he knew that there could be only two topics of conversation. Either they wanted to reopen the DiFalco case or they wanted to be reassigned. And he had one simple answer for both questions. It was no.

"We've got a couple of hours, we might as well go up to Chinatown for lunch."

Wilson glanced out the window. "Looks like plenty of people in the streets. I guess we can go."

They took a cab. Despite the crowds it seemed the safest thing to do. Pell Street, the center of Chinatown, was cheerfully crowded. They left the cab, Becky feeling a little more at ease, Wilson nervously studying the fire escapes and alleyways. Becky chose a restaurant that was neither familiar from her courting days with Dick nor one of the dingy chop suey parlors Wilson would have selected. He liked to eat lunch for under two dollars. And when he was treating he would go even cheaper unless his victim was very alert.

Becky was very alert. During lunch they spoke little because he was pouting at the cost. Or at least that was what she assumed until he finally did speak. "I wonder what it'll feel like."

"What in the world makes you say something like that!"

"Nothing. Just thinking is all." She saw that he was ashen. In his left hand he held his napkin pressed against the middle of his chest as if he was stopping a wound. "I can't get that damn claw out of my mind." Now his lips drew back across his teeth, sweat popped out on his cheeks and forehead. "I just keep thinking of it snagging my shirt, grabbing at me. God knows you couldn't do a thing once something like that was in you."

"Now wait a minute. Just listen to me. You're getting scared. I don't blame you, George, but you can't afford it. You cannot afford to get scared! We can't let that happen to us. They'll move right in if it does. I've got a feeling the only thing that's kept them from doing it before is the fact that we haven't been scared."

He smiled his familiar sickly smile.

"Don't do that, I expect you to take me seriously. Listen to me—without you I haven't got any hope at all." Her own words surprised her. How deeply did she mean that? As deep as her very life came the instant answer. "We'll get through this."

"How?"

It was an innocent enough question, but under the circumstances it exposed a weakness she wished wasn't there.

"However the hell we can. Now shut up and let me finish my lunch in peace."

They ate mechanically. To Becky the food tasted like metal. She wanted desperately to turn around, to see whether the doorway behind her led to the kitchen or to the basement. For Wilson's sake, though, she did not. There was no sense compounding his fear with her own.

"Maybe that claw is what we need. When the Chief sees it maybe he'll figure things more our way."

"I didn't even remember to ask Ferguson to bring the damn thing."

"But he will. He's very proud of that claw."

"I don't blame him. He can carry it instead of a shiv."

Wilson chuckled and sipped the last of his tea, his fears seemingly forgotten. But the napkin was still clasped convulsively against his chest.

As soon as they got back to headquarters they went to Underwood's office. It was actually a suite of offices, and in the outer office was the kind of policewoman Becky most disliked, the typist in uniform. "You're Becky Neff," the woman said as soon as the two of them came in; "the Chief of Detectives said you'd be coming up. I'm so pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you too, Lieutenant," Becky muttered. "This is my partner, Detective Wilson." Wilson stood uncertainly staring past them. There was nothing on the wall he

was staring at except a hunting scene. “Wilson—you’re being introduced.”

“Oh! Yeah, hiya. You got any cigarettes?”

“I don’t smoke, the Chief doesn’t like it.”

“Yeah. What’s he doing? We’re supposed to see him at three.”

“It’s only two forty-five. He’s still in his other meeting.”

“Still at lunch, you mean. Why don’t you let me sleep on that couch he’s got in his office. I gotta sleep off about three pounds of chicken chow mein.”

The lieutenant glanced at Becky, but continued without a pause: “No, he’s really in there. He’s got some people from the Museum of Natural History and Doctor Evans—”

They went in.

“Sorry we’re late,” Wilson growled. “We got slowed down by your house genius.”

“Well, you’re not late. Still fifteen minutes to go. But since these men were all here, I thought we’d get started. Everybody knows everybody?”

“We know them,” Wilson said. “Anybody in here smoke?”

“I don’t have any ashtrays,” Underwood said firmly. Wilson pulled up a chair, crossed his legs, and sighed.

There was a silence. The silence got longer. Becky looked from face to face. Rigid, expressionless, Evans a little embarrassed. She felt herself slump into the chair. This silence could only mean that they didn’t believe. These men thought of the two detectives as being a little off their rockers. Two famous detectives driven a little crazy. Worse things have happened, more unlikely things.

“Apparently you gentlemen don’t know what it is to be hunted,” Wilson said. Becky was amazed—when he was up against the wall he revealed hidden resources. “And since you don’t know, you can’t imagine the state me and Neff are in. We are being hunted, you know. Sure. By things that have claws like this.” With a swift motion he picked it up. “Can you imagine how it would feel to get one of these in the chest? Rip your heart right out. Hell, you might look at the sunset out there and think it’s beautiful. And it was for us too, until last night. Now we don’t look at a sunset that way anymore. We look at it the way deer and moose do—with fear. How do you think that feels, eh? Any of you know?”

“Detective Wilson, you’re overwrought—”

“Shut up, Underwood. I’m maybe making my last speech and I want to be heard.” He waved the claw as he spoke, and measured his words with uncharacteristic care. “We are being hunted down by whatever has these claws. They *exist*, don’t forget that! They have for thousands of years. We have seen them, gentlemen, and they are very ugly. They are also very fast, and very smart. People used to call them werewolves. Now they don’t call them anything because they’ve gotten so damn good at covering their tracks that there are no legends left. But they’re here. They damn well are here.”

The two who had to be killed were hard to find. They had been scented clearly as they walked through the house where the pack had been feeding. Their car had been seen as it left, and seen again a few days later, this time far down Manhattan toward the sea. Patience had been needed. The man was watched as he went through the streets, and his house was finally discovered. The woman also was followed, and her scent traced into a building with many stories. It was watched until they knew that the bedroom behind one of the balconies must certainly hold her.

They were not rightful prey, but they had to be taken. If their knowledge of this pack spread, all the race would suffer. First, the many packs in this city would be hurt, then others nearby, and finally all everywhere. Better that man not know of the packs. If the numberless hordes of men knew of the many packs that thrived on them, they would surely resist. Essential that man not know.

Whenever man came close this was done. It had always been thus, and that was the first law of caution. For many years they had roamed free in the world and they had prospered. There was so much humanity that packs were growing through the world, in every one of the human cities. When they were occasionally glimpsed by man the pack passed as a group of stray dogs. Normally they hunted at night. By day they slept in lairs so carefully concealed—in basements, abandoned buildings, wherever they could find a spot—that man never realized they were there. Dogs also posed no problem. To them the scent of the packs was a familiar part of city life and they ignored it

Now these two humans had to die else they go among all the human cities and warn them of the presence of death in their midst.

So they had followed the scent of the two humans, they had followed this scent through the streets, tracked it until it entered a great gray building in lower Manhattan. When it came out again and separated they split up, following both parts.

The man's lair was easy to find. It was close to the ground, in a house with weak outer doors and an easily accessible basement. But the man's own room was locked and barred, with gates on the windows. The whole place stank of fear. This man lived in a fortress. Even the chimney leading to his fireplace had been blocked up long ago. It was pitiful to see one so sick and full of fear, sitting his nights away in a chair with all the lights in his room on. Such a one needed death, and the pack longed to take him not only because he was potentially dangerous but because he was in the condition of prey. He needed death, this one, and they all hoped to give it to him.

And they had found a way to move against him.

The woman lived far up in her building. Not all of the pack were adept climbers, but some were and one of them climbed. He moved from balcony to balcony, grasping with his forepaws, hauling himself up, doing it again and again. Below him the rest of the pack stood in the black alley longing with their hearts to howl their joy at his heroism, at his true love for all of his kind. But they kept their voices still. It was unnecessary anyway—even as he climbed he would scent the respect and gladness of those far below him.

And he climbed toward the smell of the human woman. She was here, closer and closer. He climbed, he longed to reach her, to feel her blood pouring down his throat, to taste the meat of her, to feel as her body died and the threat to the race ended. The pack was glad he could climb, and he was glad to climb for them!

When he got to her balcony he moved as softly as he could. But not softly enough. One of his toenails clicked against the glass door as he tested the lock. To him the sound was bell-clear. Had the humans inside heard it? Had she heard it?

Her scent changed from the thickness of sleep to the sharpness of fear. The accursed creature *had* heard him! Slowly he inched across the balcony. She knew he was out here. Now the sound of her breath changed. She was growing so terribly afraid that he longed to help her into death even though she was not weak enough to be prey. But this was so dangerous. If they opened that curtain, he would be seen. You cannot be seen by those who will live! To avoid that he was prepared to throw himself off the balcony. Or was he? Die, for that? His own heart began to pound. She made a little cry—she had seen his shadow on the ceiling. His instincts screamed at him —growl, lunge, kill—but all that came

out was a tiny noise.

A noise which she heard.

Now it was too late! They were getting up. He glanced at the light fixture in the ceiling of the balcony. The turning of a switch inside would reveal him! Desperately he climbed up to the next floor, and not a moment too soon. He heard the sliding door scrape, a footfall on her balcony. Her male companion looked about, moving through the dense body-heat and smell of himself and, in the marvelous blindness of humans, not even noticing. These poor creatures were blind in all except the visual sense. Nose-blind, ear-blind, touch-blind. They were the best prey in the world.

When the man went back inside and all once again fell into darkness he returned to the alley. His heart was full of sorrow. When he faced the pack—he had failed, she still lived.

But they found a way to move against her also, and now they were ready.

Chapter 5

Carl Ferguson had gone back to his office. His lamp provided the last glimmer of light in the empty workrooms of the museum basement. Beyond his open door the evening shadows spread slowly across the workbenches, turning the half-finished specimens into indistinct, angular shapes.

Under his light Ferguson held the model he had constructed of the paw.

The paw. He turned it in his hands, looking at its supple efficiency for the hundredth time. He placed it on the desk, then picked it up again and ran its claws along his cheek. It would do its job well, this paw. The long toes with their extra joints. The broad, sensitive pads. The needle-sharp claws. Almost... what a human being might have if people had claws. It had the same functional beauty as a hand, a lethal one.

Suddenly he frowned. Wasn't that a noise? He jumped up and started toward his door—then saw that some moving air was ruffling a box of feathers.

"I'm getting crazy," he said aloud. His voice had a flat echo in the empty space beyond his office.

Ferguson glanced at his watch. Seven **p.m.** It was dark, the winter sun had set. He was tired, exhausted from the harrowing meeting downtown and from his own hectic schedule. The new exhibit was going to be a great achievement, one that would be sure to get him tenure at the museum. A beautiful concept—the birds of North America. Not just static cases but a whole room of meticulous reconstructions, soaring, wonderful creatures... he looked at some of them, their great wings spread in the darkness, barely visible, in the process of being feathered quill by careful quill.

But where did this—thing—belong among the creatures of North America? What the hell was it, dammit!

The detectives had babbled about werewolves... superstitious fools. But they certainly had uncovered a problem. Surely the city police could capture one of the things, bring it in, let him evaluate it more thoroughly. Judging from this paw it was on the large side,

maybe bigger than a wolf. Possibly a hundred and eighty pounds. Even alone such a creature could be extremely dangerous, highly so in a pack. Unlikely it was a mutant wolf, they were too radically adapted to their traditional prey. Coyotes—too much of a size variance. Whatever had a paw like this had split off from the canine mainstream a long time ago, and had reached a very, very high level of evolution.

Which brought up the question of why there were no bones, no specimens, nothing.

It was uncanny and chilling to think that a whole subspecies of canine carnivore existed without even a hint of it in science.

He jumped again—this time he heard a scraping sound. Now he took it seriously. “Luis,” he said, hoping it was the night man coming down to check on the light, “it’s me, Carl Ferguson.” The scraping continued, insistent, patient... something trying to worry one of the basement windows open.

He looked at the paw. Yes, it could do that.

He turned out his lamp, closed his eyes to hasten their getting used to the dark. He stood up from his desk swaying, his skin crawling.

The scraping stopped, was followed by a slight creak. A puff of icy air made the box of feathers in the hallway rustle again. There was a sliding sound and a thump as something came in the window, then another.

Then there was silence. Carl Ferguson stood with his plaster paw in his hand, his throat and mouth agonizingly dry.

“Somebody’s over there.”

A light flashed in the scientist’s eyes.

“Hello, Doctor,” said a gruff voice. “Sorry we startled you.”

“What the hell—”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute, don’t go off half-cocked. We’re cops, this is an investigation.”

“What in hell do you mean coming in here like this? You—you scared me! I thought—”

“It was them?” Wilson flipped a bank of switches flooding the basement with a stark neon glow. “I don’t blame you for being afraid, Doctor. This place is spooky.”

Becky Neff pulled the window closed. “The truth is, Doctor, we were looking for you. We figured we’d find you here, that’s why we came.”

“Why didn’t you come in the damn front door? My heart’s still pounding, for God’s sake! I don’t think I’ve ever been that scared.”

“Think how we feel, Doctor. We feel that way all the time. At least I do. I don’t know about Detective Wilson.”

Wilson pulled his chin into his chest and said nothing.

“Well, you could have come in the right way. I don’t think that’s asking too much.” He was angry and aggrieved. They had no right to do this to him! Typical cops, completely indifferent to the law. They didn’t even have a right to be here! “I think you should leave.”

“No, Doctor. We came here to talk to you.” She said it sweetly, but the way she and Wilson advanced toward him made him take an involuntary step back. When he did Wilson sighed, long, ragged and sad— and Ferguson saw for an instant how tired the man was, how tired and afraid.

“Come into my office, then. But I fail to see what you’re expecting to get out of me.”

They pulled up chairs in the tiny office. Ferguson noticed that Wilson lingered at the door, Neff sat so that she was looking out. Together they had most of the workroom in view. “Those are easy windows,” Wilson murmured, “very easy windows.”

“The museum has guards.”

“Yeah, we figured that out.”

“All right, what is it you want—but don’t think I’m going to let this matter drop. I want you to know I’m calling the Police Complaint Department in the morning.”

“The Police Department doesn’t have a complaint department.”

“Well, I’m calling somebody. Cops don’t run around breaking and entering without citizen complaint. You people get away with enough as it is.”

Wilson remained silent. Becky took over. “We wouldn’t be here if we weren’t desperate,” she said softly. “And we realize that you’ve told us all the facts you know, that’s not what we want. We want your theories, Doctor, your speculations.”

“Anything might help us stay alive, Doctor,” Wilson added. “We are going to have a hard time doing that as things stand now.”

“Why?”

Becky closed her eyes, ignored the question. “Imagine, Doctor,” she said, “what these creatures might want, what they might need—if they are as we say they are.”

“You mean intelligent, predatory, all that.”

“That’s right.”

“It’s barely a hypothesis.”

“Try it.”

“Detective Neff, I cannot try it. It’s worse than a hypothesis, it’s rank speculation.”

“Please, Doctor.”

“But what if I’m wrong—what if I confuse you more than you’ve already confused yourselves? Can’t you see the risk that’s involved? I can’t work on unfounded imagination, I’m a scientist! The truth is I *want* to help you. I really do! But I can’t. I know that this damn paw is something special but I don’t know how to apply that knowledge! Can’t you understand?”

Becky watched him, her eyes filled with the desperation that she felt. Wilson covered their backs, listening to every word but watching the long row of black windows at the far end of the workroom. From the sound of Ferguson’s voice, she knew that he was telling the truth. No longer was he holding back to protect his reputation. Now, in the dead of night when the three of them were alone and the customary bustle of his little kingdom around him was missing, he had forgotten worries of reputation and was forced to face the real truth—that the two cops needed help that he could not give.

Or could he? Often the trouble with scientists is that they do not realize how little others really know. “Anything you can say might be of help to us, Doctor,” Becky said with what she hoped was gentle calmness. “Why not tell us about something you do understand.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like the sense of smell. How effective is it and what can we do to cover our trails?”

“It varies greatly. A bloodhound might be seven or eight times more effective than a terrier—”

“Assume the bloodhound,” Wilson said from the doorway. “Assume the best, the most sensitive.”

“It’s a very extraordinary organ, a bloodhound’s nose. What it is, basically, is a concentration of nerve endings that fill the whole muzzle, not just the tip, although the tip is the most sensitive. For a bloodhound, you’ve got about a hundred million separate cells in the olfactory mucosa. For a terrier, twenty-five million.” He looked to Becky as if to ask if this sort of thing was any help.

“If we understood their capabilities we might be able to throw them off our tracks,” Becky said. She wished that the man would explain how the hell the sense of smell worked—if she understood it she would think of something, or Wilson would.

Wilson. His instinct had told them that they would find Ferguson sitting in here worrying about his plaster paw. Wilson had very good instincts. Now added to them was the overriding feeling of desperation, the certain knowledge that something was following them *now*. From the way he was beginning to twist the edge of the blotter on his desk Ferguson was having the same thought. If so, he didn’t acknowledge it directly. “You want me to tell you how to throw the... animals off your tracks?”

Becky nodded. “Give me a cigarette,” Wilson growled. “I don’t think I’m gonna like what the doctor’s gonna say.”

“Well, I’m afraid you won’t. A lot of people have tried to figure out how to shake a tracking hound. Not much will do it except rain and a lot of wind.”

“How about snow? It’s snowing now.”

“A bloodhound in Switzerland once followed a track that had been under snow for forty-seven days. Heavy snow. A massive blizzard, in fact. Snow isn’t going to stop a bloodhound.”

“Doctor,” Becky said, “maybe we ought to approach this from another angle. Why can’t anything stop a hound from tracking?”

“Aside from rain and wind? Well, it’s because of their sensitivity and the long-lasting nature of odors.”

“How sensitive are they?”

“Let me see if I can quantify it for you. The nose of a bloodhound is perhaps one hundred million times more sensitive than that of a man.”

“That means nothing to me.”

“I’m not surprised, Lieutenant Wilson. It’s a very difficult number to grasp. Look at it this way.” He went outside and returned with a tiny pinch of oily-looking powder between his fingers. “This is about one milligram of brown paint pigment. Now visualize a hundred million cubic centimeters of air—about as much air as covers Manhattan. A good bloodhound could detect this amount of pigment in that amount of air.”

Becky felt as if she had been hit. They were that sensitive! She had never realized just what an animal’s sense of smell meant before now. She fought to stay calm, her eyes darting toward the windows that revealed only the reflection of the workroom itself. Wilson got his cigarette lit and drew on it, exhaling with a long sigh. “What if you neutralized the odor, if you covered it with ammonia, say?”

“Makes absolutely no difference. The dog won’t like it but it will still be able to distinguish the odor. People have tried everything to break track, but very little works.

One thing—floating down a river, completely submerged, with the wind going in the same direction as the water. If you can make it half a mile without putting your head out of water you might break track. I say might because a single breath coming up through the water could be enough for a dog if the wind wasn't too strong."

"Breath?"

"We don't know the exact mechanism of a dog's scent, but we believe that they track by body oils and exhaled breath. They may also go by the odor of clothing."

"There's nothing you can do to yourself to nullify your odor?"

"Sure. Take a bath. You'll be safe for a while as long as you don't put on your clothes."

Wilson raised his eyebrows. "How long?"

"A good three or four minutes. Until your skin oils start replacing themselves."

"Wonderful! That's very helpful." There was a ragged edge in Wilson's voice that Becky didn't like.

"There must be something, something you haven't mentioned that would help us. If we can't get rid of our odor, what about neutralizing their sense of smell?"

"Good question. You can cause osmoanaesthesia with something like cocaine, although I've never heard of a dog that would inhale it willingly. Also, you could use a phenamine. You'd get a temporary paralysis of the olfactory sense with that, too, and administration would be a little easier. That stuff you could disguise in meat. It doesn't have to be inhaled, just eaten."

"Here doggie, have a little snacker!"

"Shut up, George. We might learn something if you'd just keep your trap shut!"

"Oh, Little Miss Muffet becomes Dragon Lady. So solly, missy!" He bowed, his hands folded across his belly, his eyes in a mocking squint. Then he froze. His hand dropped to the Colt he was carrying under his jacket

"What?" Becky was on her feet, her own pistol in her hand.

"Good heavens, put those things—"

"Shut up, Sonny! I saw something at that window, Becky." The mocking tone was gone, the voice was grave and a little sad. "Something pressing against it, gray fur. Like something had banged against the glass and gone off into the night."

"We would have heard it."

"Maybe. How thick is the glass in those windows?"

"I have no idea. It's just glass."

Becky remembered back to their entry. "It's thick," she said, "about a quarter inch."

Wilson suddenly holstered his gun. "Saw it again. It's a bush blowing against the glass. Sorry for the false alarm."

"Keep your shirt on, Detective," Becky said "I can't handle many more of those."

"Sorry. Lucky I was wrong."

Left unsaid was the fact that they had now been here a long time, longer than must be safe. The plan was to keep to the car, keep moving. That way at least they'd be harder to follow. In fact now that she thought of it, Becky didn't know how they could be tracked at all if they were in a car. She asked the question.

“The tires. Each set of tires has a distinctive odor. Tracking dogs can follow bicycles, cars, even carriages with iron wheels. In fact it’s easier in some cases than following people on foot. There’s more odor laid down.”

“But in the city—hundreds of thousands of cars I—It seems almost impossible.”

Ferguson shook his head. “It’s difficult but not out of the question. And if you two are right about being followed all the way from the Bronx our specimens are quite capable of doing it.”

“So let’s sum up. We can’t get rid of our odors. We can’t neutralize their noses without getting a hell of a lot closer than we want to be. Is there any other bad news?”

“Is he always this acerbic, Miss Neff?”

“It’s Mrs. And the answer is ‘yes.’ ”

Ferguson held his eyes on her a moment, as if to ask something more. She stared right back at him. In an instant he looked away, faintly confused by the challenge. Becky did not like men to strip her with their eyes, and when they did she stripped right back. Some it turned on, some it frightened, some it angered. She really didn’t care how they reacted, although from the way Ferguson both crossed his legs and brushed his hand along his cheek it looked as if he had been turned on and frightened at the same time. He was scared of a lot of things, this scientist. His face was powerful, only the eyes giving away the inner man. Yet there was also something else about him—a sort of buried competence that Becky felt was a positive factor in his makeup. He must be very professional and very smart. Too bad, it probably meant he was giving them the best information they were going to get

“I wonder what it’s like,” Wilson said, “to have a sense of smell like that.”

Ferguson brightened. “I’ve been extremely interested in that, Lieutenant. I think I can give you something of an idea. Canine intelligence is of intense interest to me. We’ve studied dogs here at the museum.”

“And cats.”

Becky winced. The Museum of Natural History had been embroiled in a violent controversy about some experiments using live cats, which Wilson naturally brought up.

“That’s irrelevant,” Ferguson said quickly, “another department. I’m in exhibits. My work on dogs ended in 1974 when the Federal money ran out. But up to then we were making great strides. I worked very closely with Tom Rilker.” He raised his eyebrows. “Rilker’s a hell of a dog man. We were trying to breed increased sensitivity to certain odors. Drugs, weapons—bred right in, no training needed.”

“Did you succeed?”

He smiled. “A secret. Classified information, compliments of Uncle Sam. Sadly enough, I cannot even publish a paper on it.”

“You were telling us about canine intelligence.”

“Right. Well, I think dogs know a lot more about the human world than we do about theirs. The reason is that their sensory input is so different. Smell, sound—those are their primary senses. Sight is a distant third. For example, if you put on a friend’s clothes your dog won’t recognize you until you speak. Then he’ll be confused. The same way if you take a bath and walk out naked without talking your dog won’t know who, or necessarily what, you are. He’ll see a shape moving, smell the water. He might attack. Then when he hears your voice he’ll be very relieved. Dogs can’t stand the unknown, the unfamiliar. They have a tremendous amount of information pouring in through their noses and ears.

Under certain circumstances it's more than they can handle. For example, a bloodhound will get completely exhausted on a track long before he would if he was just running free. It's psychic exhaustion. Generally the more intelligent the dog, the more all this data coming through the nose means. To a wolf, for example, it all means much more than to a dog."

"A wolf?"

"Sure. They're much more intelligent and more sensitive than dogs. A good bloodhound might have a nose a hundred million times more sensitive than a human nose. A wolf would be two hundred million times more sensitive. And wolves are correspondingly more intelligent, to handle the data. But even so there's a tremendous richness of data, more than their minds can possibly assimilate."

Wilson moved from his spot by the door and picked up the plaster paw model. "Is this closer to a wolf or a dog?"

"A wolf, I'd say. Actually it does look more like the paw of a giant wolf—except for those extended toes. The toes are really wonderful. A marvelous evolution. They are beyond canine, as I understand the genus. That's why I keep asking you for a head. I just can't do more with this thing unless I get more of the body. It's too new, too extraordinary. Right now whatever made those pawprints is outside of science. That's why I'm asking for more."

"We can't give you more, Doctor," Becky said, it seemed for the hundredth time. "You know the trouble we're in. We'd be lucky even to get a picture."

"We wouldn't, and live," Wilson put in. "These things are too vicious for that."

He signaled Becky with his eyes. He wanted to get moving. Since night had fallen Wilson had kept on the move. Officially they were on an eight-to-four, but neither of them was recognizing duty hours right now. They had been cut loose from their division, their squad, their block and put on this thing alone. Nobody was marking their names on a blotter. Nobody was counting their presence or giving them calls.

They were on the case because the Chief felt there was a remote chance that something unusual was indeed happening. Not enough to really do anything about, just enough to keep the wheels turning very, very slowly. Which meant a single team, alone, digging as best they could. And being available as scapegoats—if needed.

"We ought to go," Becky said to Ferguson. "We figure our best bet is to keep on the move."

"You're probably right."

Wilson stared at him. "Sorry about the way we came in. No other way to reach you, the museum was closed."

Ferguson smiled. "What if I hadn't been here?"

"No chance. You're really running after this. It's got under your skin. I knew you'd be here."

Ferguson walked with them through the dim corridors, to a side door where a single guard nodded under a small light. "I'm leaving with you," he said. "I haven't had a bite to eat since lunch and I don't think I can accomplish anything just sitting and staring at that paw."

Their feet crunched in the snow as they crossed the quiet grounds of the museum. Becky could see their car on Seventy-seventh Street where they had left it, now covered with a dusting of snow. They had perhaps twenty yards to walk up a disused driveway

before they reached the safety of the car. Nothing seemed to be moving among the shadows of the trees that surrounded the museum, and there were no tracks visible in the new snow. The wind was blowing softly, adding the crackle of bare limbs to the hiss of the falling snow. The clouds hung low, reflecting the light of the city and covering everything with a green glow stronger than moonlight. Even so, the trip to the car seemed long. By the position of his hand Becky knew Wilson felt the same way: he was touching the butt of the pistol he kept holstered under his jacket.

As they reached the car Ferguson turned, saying he was going to take the Number 10 bus up Central Park West to his apartment. They let him go.

“I wonder if we should have done that,” Becky said as she started the car.

“What?”

“Let him go off on his own. We have no way of knowing how much danger he’s in. If they were watching us, they saw us with him. What would that mean to them? Kill him too, maybe? I think he’s in more danger than he knows.”

“Get moving. Put on the damn radio. Let’s listen to the traffic.”

“You handle the radio, man, you’re not doing anything else.”

He flipped it on and settled with his knee against the dash. “It’s too cold for junkies on the streets, it’ll be a quiet night.”

They listened to a rookie call and immediately cancel a signal 13 at Seventy-second and Amsterdam. But you can’t cancel an assist officer call just like that. Guys would move in on him anyway and then rib him about it later. “What made him jump, you suppose?” Wilson asked. He didn’t really expect an answer and Becky didn’t talk. Who the hell cared about some rookie and his erroneous 13. Becky headed the car east across Central Park on the Seventy-ninth Street transverse. She was heading toward a Chinese restaurant in her home neighborhood the other side of the park. She wasn’t particularly hungry, but they had to eat. And what they would do after that, how they would pass the night she had no idea. And what about the days and nights to come, what about the future?

“What the hell are they going to do about us?”

“Do, Becky? Not a damn thing. They’re just gonna leave us hanging on this here string. Hey, where’re you going—you live over here, don’t you?”

“Don’t get your hopes up, I’m not taking you to my place. We’re going to stop for a little supper. We need to eat, remember.”

“Yeah. Anyway, the brass isn’t going to do a damn thing about us. They’re too busy pushing paper and worrying—who has this division, who has that precinct, who’s moving up, who’s getting flopped. That’s their whole career, that and figuring who has the biggest hook, who is the biggest hook for that matter. You know that’s what they do. That’s about it in Commissioner country.”

“Bitter boy. I think maybe Underwood actually thinks we belong on the case. He respects us.”

“Who belongs on a closed case? Oh Jesus, Becky, this is a Szechwan restaurant—I can’t eat here.”

She double-parked the car and pulled out the key. “You can eat here. Just ask them to hold the hot sauce on your chow mein.”

“I can’t even get Goddamn chow mein in a place like this,” he sulked.

She got out of the car and he followed reluctantly. They entered the dimly lit

restaurant knocking snow off their clothes. "Getting heavier?" the coat-check girl asked.

"Heavier," Wilson said. "Becky, this place is going to cost a fortune. It's got a hatcheck girl. I never eat in places with hatcheck girls." He followed her into the restaurant still complaining, but he subsided into subvocal grumbling when he received the menu. She could see the gears turning over as he calculated whether he could eat for less than two dollars.

"I'll order for both of us since I've been here before," she said, taking his menu. "I'll get you out for five bucks."

"Five!"

"Maybe six. I hope you're not too hungry though, because it'll only be one dish."

"What?"

The waiter came. She ordered prawns in garlic sauce for Wilson and Chicken Tang for herself. At least she would enjoy what could easily be her last meal. But she stopped that line of thought—you think that way, it happens. She also ordered a drink, and Wilson got beer. "A buck for a Bud," he muttered. "Goddamn Chinks."

"Come on, relax. You'll enjoy the food. Let's talk about it."

"What Ferguson said?"

"What he said. What ideas did it give you?"

"We could set up living quarters in Evans's meat locker."

"It gave me a better idea than that. It's something I think we've got to do if we're going to survive. Obviously it's only a matter of time before our friends see their chance and move in. Sooner or later the two of us are going to join DiFalco and Houlihan. *Then* the department will wade into this thing all the way. But it won't make a damn bit of difference to us."

"Insufficient evidence, that's what's got the wheels gummed up. We have provided theories, hearsay, suppositions and a funny-looking piece of plaster of Paris made by Doctor Whozis."

"So why not provide photographs. Pictures. It's not a cadaver but it sure would improve our case."

"How do you photograph what you never see? If there's light enough for a picture there's too much light. These things won't get close to us in light. Although we *could* use infrared equipment. Special Services could probably give us the loan of a scope. But it's bulky stuff—hard to handle."

"I've got a better idea. Narcotics has been experimenting with computerized image intensification equipment, stuff developed during the Vietnam war. We can get a really super picture even in total darkness with it. Dick's unit's been using it experimentally."

"What's involved, a support truck or something?"

"Not at all. The whole thing looks like an oversize pair of binoculars. Camera's built in. You just look through the thing and what you can see you can photograph."

"What you can see? There's the hole in the idea. We have to be close enough to see them."

"Not so close. You've got a five-hundred-millimeter lens."

"My God, that's the damndest thing I ever heard of. We could be a quarter of a mile away."

“Like staked out on the roof of my building watching the alley, watching for them to come back.”

“Yeah, we could do that. We could get our pictures and pull out before they even started climbing the terraces.”

“There’s only one small hitch. Dick’s got to be convinced to help us. He’s got to give us the equipment, and it’s classified.”

Wilson frowned. It meant a departmental infraction, something he didn’t need. He had too many enemies to be able to afford getting things like that in his file. “Goddamn, the PD’d classify mechanical pencils if they had time. I don’t like to get into that kind of stuff, it’s not going to help me.”

“Dick owes you a favor, George.”

“Why?”

“You know perfectly well why.” She said it lightly but felt the anger nevertheless. Her staying in Detectives had depended on finding a place in a block of four men, and to do that you had to get one of those men as a partner. Wilson had taken her on and she had not been shunted off into administration like many lady cops. And Wilson had taken her on because Dick Neff had asked him to.

“He may think it was a favor, but it wasn’t.”

“Jesus. You’re going to seed, Wilson. You actually complimented my police work just then.”

He laughed, his face breaking for a few moments into a mass of merry wrinkles, then as abruptly returning to its usual glower. “You got some good points,” he said, “but I guess you’re right. Taking you on was a favor to Dick when I did it. Maybe he’ll let me collect.”

Becky excused herself and called ahead to the apartment. She wanted to be sure Dick was there; she didn’t want to end up alone with Wilson in the apartment. It wouldn’t look good, especially if Dick came home.

He was there, his voice sounding thick. She wanted to ask him what was wrong but she held back. When she told him she was bringing Wilson over his only comment was a noncommittal grunt.

They ate their food in silence, Wilson digging into his with glazed indifference. If you fed him silage, he’d probably eat it exactly the same way.

Becky was excited about the idea of getting photographs of the animals; excited and worried. The whole situation contained menace, every part of it. There was something about the way these creatures; killed—the extreme violence of it—that made it impossible to put the problem out of your mind even for a short time. You just kept turning it over and over... and Becky had a recurring picture of what they must look like with their long toes that ended in delicate pads and were tipped by claws, with their razor-sharp teeth, and their heavy bodies. But what were their faces like? Human beings had such complex faces, not at all like the more-or-less frozen expressions of animals; would these creatures also have such faces, full of emotion and understanding? And if so, what would those faces tell their victims?

“Look we just come right out and ask Dick— right? Just ask him without fooling around?”

“You mean no diplomatic subtleties?”

“Not my strong point.”

“So we just ask. Everybody’s heard rumors about the optical gear Special Services is using. Just logical that a Narcotics wire man could get his hands on it, isn’t it? We don’t have to tell him we know the stuff is classified. Maybe he’ll never even bring the matter up, just give us the damn thing and not think any more about it. That’s what I’m hoping anyway.”

But that wasn’t what happened. As soon as she opened the door to their apartment, Becky felt something was wrong. She left Wilson in the hall while she went to Dick in the living room. “Why’d you pick tonight to bring that old fart up here?” were his first words.

“I had to, honey. It can’t wait.”

“I got burned.”

There it was, as simple as that. To undercover cops like Dick getting burned meant being recognized as police officers by their suspects. “Bad?”

“Real bad. Some sonofabitch really put it on me. I might as well graduate to the Goddamn movies.”

“Dick, that’s terrible! How—”

“Never mind how, honey. Just say it was two years of work blown to hell. And I think I’ve got a shoofly on my ass, too.”

She leaned down and kissed his hair. He was slumped into the couch, staring at the TV. “You’re clean, aren’t you?” But her heart was sinking, she knew something was wrong. And the inspectors from the Internal Affairs Division knew it too or they wouldn’t have put a man on him—shoofly was what cops called other cops who investigated them.

“You know damn well I’m not clean.” He said it with such infinite tiredness that she was surprised. And he looked older, more hollow, than she had ever seen him before. “Look, let’s get drunk or something later, celebrate my early retirement, but bring Wilson in now, let him do his thing.”

“It’s not much, won’t take a second.” She called Wilson, who moved forward from the foyer where he had been standing.

They shook hands. Dick offered him a beer. They settled into the living room, the TV cut down but not off. Becky closed the curtains.

“What’s up?” Dick said.

“We need your help,” Wilson replied. “I gotta get some pictures, I need your night-vision camera.”

“What night-vision camera?”

“The one you can get from Special. The five-hundred-mil lens, the image-intensification circuit. You know what camera.”

“Why not order it up yourself?” He looked at Becky, a question in his eyes.

“We haven’t got authorization, honey,” she said. “We need it for the creatures.”

“Oh, Christ almighty, that bullshit again! Can’t you get off that? What are you two, nuts or something? I can’t get that Goddamn camera, not while I’ve got shooflies hanging from my Goddamn ears. Come on, lay off it. Why don’t you two earn your damn salaries instead of monkeyin’ around with that shit.”

“We need your help, Neff.” Wilson sat hunched in his chair, his eyes glistening like dots beneath the heavy folds of his brows. “I helped you.”

“Oh, Christ.” He smiled, turned his head away. “Oh, Christ, the favor. The great big

favor. Let me tell you, Wilson, I don't give a rat's ass about your big favor. That's not a factor."

"That camera could solve this case for us, honey, get the damn thing out of our hair. We only need it for a night or so."

"You need more than the camera, you need me to work the damn thing. It's balky as hell, you gotta know how to use it."

"You can teach us."

He shook his head. "Took me weeks to learn. You don't get it just right you don't get any picture."

She stared at him. "Dick, please. Just one night is all we ask."

He frowned at her, as if asking "Is this for real?" She nodded gravely. "A night, then," he said, "maybe it'll be a few laughs."

So he agreed, just like that. She wished she felt more than grateful, but she didn't. His anger and tiredness made her wish to hell that she would not have to spend the rest of this night with him.

She showed Wilson to the door. "See you at headquarters," she said as he pulled on his coat. "Eight o'clock?"

"Eight's fine."

"Where are you going now, George?"

"Not home. You're crazy to stay here, as a matter of fact."

"I don't know where else I'd go."

"That's your business." He stepped out into the hallway and was gone. She started to wonder if she would ever see him alive again, then stopped herself. Not allowed. She turned, took a deep breath, and prepared to face the rest of the night with her husband.

Chapter 6

They were hungry, they wanted food. Normally they preferred the darker, desolate sections of the city, but their need to follow their enemies had brought them into its very eye. Here the smell of man lay over everything like a dense fog, and there was not much cover.

But even the brightest places have shadows. They moved in single file behind the wall that separates Central Park from the street. They did not need to look over the wall to know that few of the benches that lined the other side were occupied—they could smell that fact perfectly well. But they also smelled something else, the rich scent of a human being perhaps a quarter of a mile farther on. On one of the benches a man was sleeping, a man whose pores were exuding the smell of alcohol. To them the reek meant food, easily gotten.

As they moved closer they could hear his breathing. It was long and troubled, full of age. They stopped behind him. There was no need to discuss what they would do; each

one knew his role.

Three jumped up on the wall, standing there perfectly still, balanced on the sharply angled stone. He was on the bench below them. The one nearest the victim's head inclined her ears back. She would get the throat. The other two would move in only if there was a struggle.

She held her breath a moment to clear her head. Then she examined her victim with her eyes. The flesh was not visible—it was under thick folds of cloth. She would have to jump, plunge her muzzle into the cloth and rip out the throat all at once. If there were more than a few convulsions on the part of the food she would disappoint the pack. She opened her nose, letting the rich smells of the world back in. She listened up and down the street. Only automobile traffic, nobody on foot for at least fifty yards. She cocked her ears toward a man leaning in a chair inside the brightly lit foyer of a building across the street. He was listening to a radio. She watched his head turn. He was glancing into the lobby.

Now. She was down, she was pushing her nose past cloth, slick hot flesh, feeling the vibration of sub-vocal response in the man, feeling his muscles stiffening as his body reacted to her standing on it, then opening her mouth against the flesh, feeling her teeth scrape back and down, pressing her tongue against the deliciously salty skin and *ripping* with all the strength in her jaws and neck and chest, and jumping back to the wall with the bloody throat in her mouth. The body on the bench barely rustled as its dying blood poured out.

And the man in the doorway returned his glance to the street. Nothing had moved, as far as he was concerned. Ever watchful, she scented him and listened to him. His breathing was steady, his smell bland. Good, he had noticed nothing.

Now her job was over, she dropped back behind the wall and ate her trophy. It was rich and sweet with blood. Around her the pack was very happy as it worked. Three of them lifted the body over the wall and let it drop with a thud. The two others, skilled in just this art, stripped the clothing away. They would carry the material to the other side of the park, shred it and hide it in shrubs before they returned to their meal.

As soon as the corpse was stripped it was pulled open. The organs were sniffed carefully. One lung, the stomach, the colon were put aside because of rot.

Then the pack ate in rank order.

The mother took the brain. The father took a thigh and buttock. The first-mated pair ate the clean organs. When they returned from their duty the second-mated pair took the rest. And then they pulled apart the remains and took them piece by piece and dropped them in the nearby lake. The bones would sink and would not be found at least until spring, if then. The clothing they had shredded and scattered half a mile away. And now they kicked as much new snow as they could over the blood of their feast. When this was done they went to a place they had seen earlier, a great meadow full of the beautiful new snow that had been falling.

They ran and danced in the snow, feeling the pleasure of their bodies, the joy of racing headlong across the wide expanse, and because they knew that no human was in earshot they had a joyous howl full of the pulsing rhythm they liked best after a hunt. The sound rose through the park, echoing off the buildings that surrounded it. Inside those buildings a few wakeful people stirred, made restive by the cold and ancient terror that the sound communicated to man.

Then they went to a tunnel they had slept in these past four nights and settled down. By long-learned habit they slept in the small hours of the morning when men mostly did not stir. During daylight, man's strongest time, they remained awake and alert and rarely broke cover unless they had to. In the evening they hunted.

This traditional order of life went back forever.

Before sleeping the second-mated pair made love, both to entertain the others and to prepare for spring. And afterward the father and mother licked them, and then the pack slept.

But they did not sleep long, not until the hour before dawn as was their custom. This night they still had something to accomplish, and instead of sleeping through the wee hours they left their hiding place and moved out into the silent streets.

Becky listened to the phone on the other end of the line ring once, twice, three times. Finally Wilson picked up. He had gone home after all. "Yeah?"

"You OK?" she asked.

"Yes, Mama."

"Now now, don't get sarcastic. Just bedchecking."

He hung up. The thought of slamming down the phone crossed her mind but what good would it do? She returned the receiver to its cradle and went back into the living room. Dick had not heard her and she paused behind him. Sitting slumped in his chair he seemed smaller than life—diminished. She would have to do everything she could to help him defeat the investigation. She had to; by simply being his wife she was implicated. "You knew he was getting extra money," they would say. "Where did you think it was coming from?" And there could only be one answer to that question.

It wasn't that she minded helping him, either. He had been a good husband for a long time and she supposed that what was happening between them was very sad. The trouble was she didn't care. The intimacy that had once united them had died through inattention. Where once she had been full of love there was now just stone boredom. There wasn't even a sense of loss. Or maybe—just maybe—there was a sense of loss, for a love that had never been real.

She had to ask herself, if a love can die like this, was it ever real? She remembered the long happiness of the past, the happiness that had seemed so eternal. When they had gone sleigh riding up in the Catskills five Christmases ago, the love they shared had *been* real. And in the hard times before she was a cop, that love had been very real indeed. It wasn't just that Dick was a good lover, it was that he was a partner and friend of a deep and special kind. "You're beautiful," he would say, "you're wonderful." And it had meant more than the physical. Maybe the waning of his enthusiasm was inevitable as she reached middle age. But his enthusiasm wasn't the problem, it was hers. Try as she might she could not love Dick Neff anymore.

Wilson waited five minutes to be certain she wouldn't call back. The phone didn't ring again. His rudeness had evidently made her mad enough to ignore him for the rest of the night

Fine. He went into his bedroom and unlocked a chest he kept in his closet. Inside were a number of highly illegal weapons—a sawed-off shotgun, a WWII vintage BAR in working order, and an Ingram M-11 Automatic Pistol. He pulled the automatic pistol from its case and got a box of shells. Carefully he worked the pistol's action, then hefted it in his hand. Its balance was a pleasure to feel. It was unquestionably the finest automatic handgun ever designed, lightweight, sound-suppressed, with a 20-round-a-second punch. It was not designed to frighten, slow down, or confuse, but purely and simply to kill. One bullet would blow a man's head apart. The best automatic weapon ever made. The fastest. The

most murderous. He opened the ammo box and snapped a clip of the special .380 subsonic velocity bullets into the gun. Now it was heavier but the balance hadn't changed. Only three and a half pounds of weapon, it could be hefted nicely. And aimed. The sights were precise. For a handgun, its range was almost incredible. You could shoot a man at a hundred and fifty yards with this weapon. A burst of three or four bullets would get him even if he was on the run.

He laid the pistol on his bed and put on an overcoat he rarely wore. When it was on he dropped the M-11 into a pocket which had been especially tailored to fit the nine-inch pistol. Wilson had had the coat modified when he had acquired the pistol. The pocket carried the M-11 almost invisibly. Despite the size and weight of the pistol only a careful observer would note that he was carrying a piece at all. His hand felt the weapon in his pocket, his thumb triggering the lever that moved the mechanism from safe to fire. A single press of the trigger could now deliver from one bullet to a full clip in a matter of seconds. Good enough. Now he got out his winter hat, old, wrinkled, perfect for both protecting the head and hiding the face. Next the shoes—black sneakers, surprisingly warm with two pair of socks, surprisingly agile even in the snow. They had been winterized with a polyurethane coating, and the soles scored to provide traction. The sneakers gave him the advantages of quiet and quick movement, most useful on an icy winter night. The last item was a pair of gloves. These were made of the finest Moroccan leather, softer and thinner than kid. Through them he could feel the M-11 perfectly, almost as if the gloves weren't there at all.

As a final precaution he took out the pistol and removed fingerprints. Not even a gold shield policeman goes around printing up a weapon like the Ingram. There isn't anything in the rule book about policemen carrying machine pistols, but that's only because there doesn't need to be. You need a special permit to own one, and permission to move it from one premises to another. As far as carrying one around in the street fully loaded, that is illegal for policeman and civilian alike.

He replaced the M-11 in its pocket and stood for a short time in the middle of the room. Mentally he checked himself out. He was ready to move. Too bad his plan to de-scent himself had been wishful thinking. Now the M-11 was really his only advantage. That and the fact that hunters aren't used to being hunted. Or at least he hoped they weren't. His logic seemed strong—how suspecting would a human hunter be if the deer suddenly turned on him, or a lion if it was attacked by a gazelle?

While he saw the danger of what he was doing he nevertheless felt that he had to act to give Becky some kind of a chance of survival. She deserved to live, she was young and strong; as for him he could take a few chances. And it was a hell of a long chance he was taking. The thought of being killed—by things —made clammy sweat break out.

But he knew that he and Becky had to have help if either of them was going to live much longer. And to get the kind of support they needed, they had to have a specimen. Irrefutable, undeniable evidence that would force Underwood to act, to assign this problem the kind of manpower it demanded.

Wilson was going to get that evidence if he could. And if he got killed trying—oh, God, he wanted to live! No matter how old, how beat-up, he still wanted to live! But he was going after a carcass anyway. Had to.

He left his apartment after making sure all the lights were on. He triple-locked his door and moved quickly to the rear of the dim hallway, where a fire escape was barred by an accordion gate. He unhooked it and pulled it back, then raised the window and stepped into the winter night. He took some putty out of his pocket—carried for just this purpose—and pressed it into the locking mechanism so that when he closed the gate again the latch fell into place but could be raised if you jiggled it just right. If you yanked at it or

shook it hard the putty would give way and the lock would secure itself. Then he closed the window and moved his bulky body down the ice-covered fire escape to the street.

The snow was becoming heavier. Not good, impeded his vision but not their sense of smell. Perhaps the muffling effect would reduce the acuity of their hearing a little.

He put his hand in his pocket, closing his finger around the trigger of the M-11. It was a mean weapon, designed for anti-guerrilla work, the kind of police work where you killed it if it moved. Right now it felt good. It was the right pistol for this hunt—the bullets would knock a man ten feet. A hundred-pound animal should go considerably farther.

He set out to find his quarry. He reasoned that the creatures would be more likely to hit Becky first because she was younger and presumably stronger, therefore more dangerous to them. Wilson, slow, old, sick, would be second in line. His theory was borne out by the fact that they had gone to such great lengths to get to Becky and had left him pretty much alone. Of course they had come in the basement window, Wilson was well aware of that. He had left it ajar as an invitation. His dusting of the basement of the rooming house last night had revealed two sets of pawprints as distinctively different as human fingerprints. They had gone up the basement stairs to the door. There were marks on the lock where they had tried to spring it with their claws.

But they had reserved their best effort for Becky, of that he felt reasonably sure. If he was wrong, if they were around him now... with luck he would take a few with him.

He walked through the deserted late-night streets with his hand in his pocket clutching the M-11. Despite the gun, he kept close to the curb, away from any trashcans and shadowy entranceways, out from under overhanging fire escapes. And every few steps he stopped and looked behind him. Only once did he see another human form, a man bundled against the snow and hurrying in the opposite direction.

When he reached the lights of Eighth Avenue he felt much better. He was safer out here under the bright sodium-arc lamps, with the passing cars and the more frequent pedestrians. Somehow he felt more anonymous taking the bus, so he waited at the bus stop instead of hailing a cab. Ten minutes passed before a bus came. He got on and rode it far uptown, to Eighty-sixth and Central Park West. Now all he had to do was cross the park and he would be in Becky's neighborhood. Upper East Side cardboard box neighborhood... well, if that's what she liked...

He thought better of crossing the park on foot—in fact he never really considered it at all. To the danger of the creatures he would add the dangers of the park, very foolhardy indeed.

After what seemed an hour a crosstown bus appeared, moving slowly in the deepening snow. Wilson got on, glad for the heated interior. He let himself relax in the bus, but he never took his hand out of his pocket.

When he got off he spotted Becky's building at once. He counted the balconies. Good, she had left her lights on, an intelligent precaution. She would probably be furious at him for coming out alone like this, but it had to be done. If you're going to take crazy risks, you take them alone.

He moved toward the alley where the creatures must have congregated. The snow had, of course, covered up all trace of them. They would be coming back here sooner or later, of that much he felt sure. But if their sense of smell was as good as Ferguson had implied they would know he was here long before they were even in sight. So what, let them move in on him. He hefted the M-11 a little in his pocket, then settled down behind a garbage bin to wait.

One o'clock. The wind moaned out of the north. Two o'clock. The snow blew in great

waves past the streetlights. Three o'clock. Wilson flexed his toes, rubbed his nose hard, listened to his heartbeat. He began to fight sleep about three-fifteen. Taking his cheek between thumb and forefinger he pinched hard. The pain startled him into wakefulness.

Then it was quiet. The snow had stopped. Involuntarily he gasped—he *had* fallen asleep. What time—four-twenty. Damn, over an hour out. And across the street, through the alley, standing in the light, were six of the ugliest, most horrifying things he had ever seen. He didn't move a muscle, just his eyes.

These things were big, big as timber wolves. Their coats were dusky brown, their heads perched on necks much longer than that of a wolf. They had large pointed ears, all cocked directly at this alley. He could practically *feel* them listening to him. Somewhere his mind began to scream, Fire the Goddamn pistol, fire the pistol! But he couldn't move, he couldn't take his eyes off those faces. The eyes were light gray, under jutting brows. And they were looking where the ears were pointing. The faces were... almost serene in their deadliness. And they had lips, strange sensitive lips. The faces were not even a little human but they were clearly intelligent. They were worse than the faces of tigers, more totally ruthless, more intractable.

Fire the pistol!

Slowly the pistol started coming out of his pocket. It seemed to take an hour for it to be raised, but at last the long barrel swung up and... without a sound they were gone.

Not a trace, not even the rustle of a foot in the snow. They had *moved!* Goddamn, he hadn't counted on speed like that. Then he was running too—as fast as he could out of the alley and into the middle of the snowy street, running frantically, feeling like an old, old man as he wheezed along, running toward a lighted window, an all-night deli, and then through the door.

“Jesus, don't scare me like that, man!”

“Sorry-sorry. I—I'm cold. You got coffee?”

“Yeah, comin' up. You runnin' your ass off out there. You in trouble, man?”

“Just trying to keep warm is all. Trying to keep warm.”

The counterman held out the coffee—and held on to it. “You got fifty cents, daddy? That's fifty cents in advance.”

“Oh, yeah, sure.” Wilson paid him, took the hot coffee cup in his hands, moved it to his face, and sipped.

Great God *I'm alive!* I got that Goddamn gun out f-a-s-t! One second later and they would have had me, the s.o.b.'s! It was exhilarating—it might have felt slow but he had drawn that gun Goddamn fast. Fast enough to save himself from them and they were fast beyond imagining.

He sipped again, noticing how his hand trembled. That had to stop. Long ago he had learned how to overcome the special fear that came with the close proximity of death. Now he went through the routine, a system that had been taught to him by his first partner, back in the forties when he was a rookie cop. There was a man—shot dead by his oldest son in '52. Now wait a minute, Wilson thought, you're digressing. You're shocked. Come on now, policeman, snap out of it! Relax shoulders, let them fall. Let your gut hang out. Slack your lips. Breathe deeply... one... two... and think about nothing, just let it roll over you.

Now when he sipped the coffee he tasted it, and for the first time noticed that it was black and unsweetened.

“Hey, I said light, this coffee’s black.”

“You need it black, man. You don’t need no light coffee. You drink that, then I’ll give you a light.”

“Thank you, Doctor, but I’m not drunk.” The counterman laughed softly, then looked straight at Wilson. “I wouldn’t say you were. You scared. You the scariest motherfucker I’ve seen in a good long while. Maybe that coffee’ll help you get it back together, man.”

“Well, it is back together, man. And I want a light coffee. I can’t drink this stuff.”

“Sure, you got money I’ll fix you a carbonated coffee if you want it. I don’t give a damn. But don’t say you can’t drink what you got.”

“Why the hell not! What are you, some kind of a nut? I said I wanted light. I can’t drink this junk.”

“Look in the cup, man.”

It was empty. He hadn’t even been aware of swallowing it! He shut up, returned to his thoughts, to how incredibly fast they had been. It was almost as if they had vanished; but he had glimpsed flashes of running bodies. Then it occurred to him that if they were that fast they would have gotten past his defenses before he had even realized they were there.

Why hadn’t they? For some unknown reason this particular gold shield had been allowed to live. The M-11 still felt good in his pocket but it had been no protection at all. None at all. It certainly hadn’t been the speed of his draw that had scared them away. Something, then... almost but not quite like a memory. He almost knew why they had run, then—he didn’t. “Shit.”

“You ready to go, mister?”

“No.”

“Well, you notice we ain’t got no chairs in here. This is a deli, not no coffee shop. You got to buy and go in a place like this, that’s the rules.”

“So what if I don’t go?”

“Nothin’. Just I feel like you got trouble all around you. You gonna bring it in here with you.”

Wilson debated whether to go back outside or to flash his shield. What the hell, outside probably wasn’t the healthiest place for him to be right now. Whatever had stopped them before might not again. So he flashed. “Police,” he said tonelessly, “I’m stayin’ put.”

“Sure enough.”

“There a back room, some place I can bunk out? I’m tired, I’ve just been in a bad spot.”

“I’d have to agree, judging from the way you look. We got a storeroom. It’s good, there’s plenty of place to lie, and it’s pretty warm. I get a little back there now and then myself.” He showed Wilson into a low-ceilinged room, obviously a shed attached to the rear of the old brownstone building that housed the deli. There was one window, barred, and a triple-locked door. Very good, very cozy, very safe until the morning brought crowds back to the street and he could safely go out. As he settled back he reviewed his strange, terrifying failure. Obviously they were way, way ahead of him—fast, smart, in complete control of the situation. There was only one reason that he wasn’t dead right now—they wanted him alive a little longer.

When he closed his eyes he saw them, their steady, eager eyes, the cruel beauty of

their faces... and he remembered the moose and the wolves. What did the spent old moose feel for the ravaging timber wolf—was it love, or fear so great that it mimicked love?

When they realized who was concealed in the alley they were full of glee. He had come to protect the female, just as the father had said he would. The father knew man very well and could detect nuances of scent that the younger ones could scarcely imagine. And Father had detected the fact that the man who had seen them loved his female coworker. Father had said, we can move against them both at the same time because the male will try to protect the female. And Father had selected the place and time: where the female was most defenseless, when she was most vulnerable.

And they went and there he was. Asleep! The second-mated pair prepared for the attack, moving into position across the street. They were just about to move when the man raised his head and looked at them. The pack froze and smelled it all at the same time: sweat from the hand that held the gun.

It was a hard decision, instantly made by Mother —we leave; we do not risk moving so far against the gun, we get him another time.

Now the pack ran, rushing through the streets to the ruined building where they would spend the day. Each heart beat with the same agonizing knowledge: they live, they live, they live. And they know about us. Even as the sun rises they must be telling others, spreading the fear that the old legends speak about, the fear that would make life among men hard and dangerous for future generations.

The second-mated pair was especially anguished: in the spring they would litter, and they did not want to bring forth children if man knew of the hunter.

Not that they feared anything from single individuals, or even groups. But endless numbers of men could overwhelm them or at least force them into furtive, tormented lives unworthy of free beings. As they moved warily through the deserted streets one thought consumed them all: kill the dangerous ones, kill them fast. And it was this that they talked about when they reached their sanctuary, a long, intense conversation that left them all shuddering with a furious urge for blood, all except Father, who said, we have won. Soon he will give himself to us as men did of old, for the death wish is coming upon him.

Wilson opened his eyes. The light coming in the window was yellow-gray. A steady tapping against the windowpane indicated that it was snowing again.

“Who the hell are you?”

A man was standing over him, a fat man in gray slacks and a white shirt. He was bald, his face pinched with the long habit of unsatisfied greed.

“I’m a cop. Wilson’s the name.”

“Oh Christ almighty—why’d you let this damn bum in here, Eddie? Throw the fucker out, he’ll get weevils in the Goddamn bread.”

“He got a gold shield, man. I’m not gonna say no to a gold shield.”

“You can buy a Goddamn gold shield on Forty-second Street. Get the jerk out.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, I was just leaving. Thanks, Eddie, from the NYPD.”

Wilson left to a snort of scornful laughter from the white guy, a disgusted stare from

the black. Sleeping over in storerooms was pretty unorthodox behavior for a cop. What the hell, he didn't give a damn.

It was still pretty damn lonely on the street. Lonely and snowy too. This was practically a blizzard, must be five or six inches by now. He started to walk back by Becky's building, then stopped himself. It hit him like a haymaker—they had come when they did because they knew he would be there. They were *hunters*, for Chrissake, they knew damn well where he'd be. Oh, they were beautiful! They had him figured from way back. It was probably exactly what one of them would have done—protect the one he loved.

What the hell, the bitch was beautiful. Fair cop too—but so beautiful. Becky had creamy skin, Irish coloring. Wilson was partial to that kind of coloring. And she had those soft, yet piercing eyes. He thought of looking into those eyes. “Becky, I love you,” he would say, and she would open her mouth slightly, inviting the first long kiss...

But not now. Now it was cold and he was hungry. He trudged toward the Lexington Avenue subway to ride down to headquarters. His watch said six-thirty. The Merit Bar was open by now, and they served up a fair breakfast. Then he felt the M-11. You didn't go into Police Headquarters with a loaded M-11, you just did not do that. He'd have to stop by his rooming house first and exchange it for his regulation piece.

The subway wasn't much warmer than the street, but at least it was well-lighted and there were a few people around. Not many at this hour, but enough to keep the things away from him. They were after him and Becky because they had been seen—certainly they wouldn't attack except when their targets were alone. But you can be alone enough for just a few seconds. That he had to remember.

He got off and returned to his rooming house, entering this time by the front door. At the top of the stairs he carefully removed the putty he had left in the fire escape lock and returned to his room. He dropped off the overcoat containing the M-11 and put on the one containing the .38. That was all. The way he kept his place locked, he wasn't worried that a burglar would rip off the pistol, or anything else in his apartment for that matter.

He double-locked his door, tested it, and left the building as quickly and quietly as he had come. And as he did it he laughed at himself. There was no need to be so quiet, it was just that it was second nature to him now. Unless he was acting the part of an unconcerned civilian he was always wary, always stealthy. He walked the short distance from his place to headquarters the same way, like a thief or someone tracking a thief.

He went through the quiet, brightly lit corridors of Police Headquarters until he got to the little office occupied by him and Neff. When he opened the door, his eyes widened with surprise.

There sat Evans.

“Hiya, Doc. Do I owe you money?”

Evans wasn't interested in bantering with Wilson. “We got another one,” he said simply.

“What's the story?”

Evans looked at him. “Call Neff. Tell her to meet us at the scene.”

“Anything new?” Wilson asked as he dialed the phone.

“Plenty.”

“Why didn't you call Neff yourself?”

“You're the senior man on the case. I tried you first. When you didn't answer I came

over. I figured you were on your way in.”

“Emergency, Doctor. You could have called Neff when you didn’t find me.”

“I have no emergencies. My line of business only concerns emergencies after they’re over.”

Somewhere out there the phone was ringing. Dick was subvocalizing a few choice curses each time the bell burst the silence. Ring and curse, ring and curse. “It could be for you,” Becky said.

“Nah. I’m burned, remember. It ain’t for me.”

“Then it’s for me.”

“So answer the fucker. One of us has gotta do it.”

She picked up the receiver. Wilson didn’t waste hellos. “Oh, Christ. OK, see you there.” She hung up. “Gotta go. Homicide in the park.”

“Since when are you assigned uptown?”

“Evans called us in. He says it looks like our friends got hungry again.”

“The big bad wolves.” He raised himself up on his elbow. “What about our picture-taking expedition, will it be on?”

“I hope. I’ll call you.”

“OK, honey.”

She was dressing as quickly as possible, but the gentleness in his voice made her stop. They looked at one another. The delirious, unexpected intensity of the night before was written in Dick’s face. She saw clearly: he was grateful. It touched her, made her think that maybe there was still something left after all.

“I—” The words seemed to die in her throat. They were so unfamiliar, so long unsaid.

Dick had come to her wordlessly, in the dark, just as she was falling asleep. He had embraced her, his body hot and trembling, and had awakened in her a painful rush of feeling. Maybe she *did* care—so much that she just couldn’t face it. Maybe that was the true source of the wall that was being built between them. And realizing that she had responded to his intensity with passion of her own and had enjoyed the violent insistence of his body, finally crying out with the pleasure.

“What, Becky?”

“I don’t know. Just wanted to say good-bye.” But not I love you, not that again, not yet. And she felt like a heel for holding back, a selfish heel.

“Don’t make it sound so final.” He chuckled. “The worst I’ll get is early retirement. If the shooflies are real good they might give you a five-day. Don’t let it bug you, darling. And by the way, there’s something else I want to say to you before you go.” He rolled over on his back, throwing off the covers, exposing his naked body and erect penis with delightful lack of modesty. “You still remain one of the great American lays, darling.”

And she was beside him, bending over him, kissing his smiling face. “Dick, you silly fool, look at you. You never get enough.”

“I’m a morning man.”

“And a night man and an afternoon man. I wish I didn’t have to go! I’ll call you when I get the chance.” She drew herself away from him, full of a confusion of emotions. Why

couldn't she make up her mind about this: did she still love Dick Neff or didn't she? And what about Wilson, what did her feelings for him mean?

She rode the elevator down to the garage level and got in her car. As soon as she started driving her mind closed around the case. The night with Dick receded, as did the welter of emotions she had been feeling. Like a murky, ugly fog the case rose and recaptured her. Wilson hadn't said much over the phone, not much. But he had sounded uncharacteristically upset. Evans had been with him at Police Headquarters. She glanced at her watch: seven a.m. An early hour for Doctor Evans. She stepped on the accelerator, racing across Seventy-ninth Street in the snow, heading for the point of rendezvous, Central Park West and Seventy-second.

The streets were empty as she maneuvered the car around the corner at Seventy-ninth and CPW. She was now in the 20th Precinct. Ahead she could see the flashing lights, the dismal little crowd of emergency vehicles that always marked a crime scene. She pulled up behind a parked radio car. "I'm Neff," she said to the lieutenant on the scene.

"We got a funny one," he intoned. "Anticrime boys found this bench covered with frozen blood about an hour ago. We took it to pathology and sure enough it's human. O-negative, to be exact. But we got no corpse, nothin'."

"How do you know it was a murder?"

"There's evidence enough. First off, too much blood, whoever lost it had to die. Second, we can see where the body was pulled across the wall." Her eyes went to the indentations in the snow that lay along the wall. More snow had fallen since the murder, but not enough to completely obliterate the signs. "By the way, Detective Neff, if I may be so blunt, why are you here?"

"Well, I'm on special assignment with my partner, Detective Wilson. We're investigating a certain M.O. When the M. E. finds a case that seems to fit he gives us a call."

"You take your orders from the M. E.?"

"We were instructed by the Commissioner." She hadn't wanted to pull rank, but she sensed that he was needling her. He smiled a little sheepishly and strolled away. "Lieutenant," Neff called, "is this blood all you have? No body, no clothing, nothing?"

"Hold on, Becky," a voice said behind her. It was Evans, followed closely by Wilson. The two men came up and the three of them huddled together under the curious eyes of the men of the 20th and Central Park precincts. "There's more," Evans said, "there's some hair."

"He's examined some hairs that were stuck in the blood."

"Right. This is my interpreter, Detective Wilson. I found hairs—"

"That match the hairs found at the DiFalco scene."

Evans frowned. "Come on, Wilson, lay off. The hairs match the ones we've found at every scene."

"They're pretty voracious if they only left blood," Becky said.

"They didn't. Don't you see what happened? They hid the remains. They've learned that we're on their tail and they're trying to slow us down. They're very bright."

"That's for certain," Wilson said. Becky noticed how haggard he looked, his face waxen, his jaw unshaven. Had he slept at all? It didn't look like it. He cleared his throat. "Are they searching for the corpse?" he asked the Lieutenant, who was standing nearby.

“Yeah. There’s some sign of something being dragged, but the snow covered most of the evidence up. We’re just not sure what happened.”

Becky motioned to Wilson and Evans. They followed her into her car. “It’s warmer here,” she said, “and the Loo won’t overhear us.”

Evans was the first to speak. “Obviously they were hiding behind the wall when somebody sat on the bench. Judging from the blood it happened five or six hours ago. They must have jumped over the wall, killed fast and dragged the corpse away.”

“Not in one piece,” Wilson said. “There’d be more marks. I think they tore it up and carried it.”

“Jesus. But what about the clothes?”

“That’s what we ought to be able to find. The bones, too, for that matter, there aren’t too many places they could have hidden them.”

“How about the pond?”

“You mean because it’s frozen over? I doubt if they’d think of busting the ice in the pond, that’s *too* smart.”

“We need to find clothes, some kind of identification.”

“Yeah. Where the hell to look, though? This friggin’ snow...”

“I have the hairs. I don’t need anything more to convince me. They came here last night and they killed this person. I’m certain of that. It was them. Their hairs are unique, as unique as a fingerprint.”

“So they kill a lot. That’s to be expected for a carnivorous animal.”

Becky corrected her partner. “Carnivorous humanoid.”

Wilson laughed. “From what I’ve seen they could hardly be described as humanoid.”

“And what have you seen?”

“Them.”

Becky and the M. E. stared at him. “You’ve seen them?” Evans finally managed to ask.

“That’s right. Last night.”

“What the hell are you saying?” Becky asked.

“I saw six of them outside of your apartment last night. I was hunting them, trying to get Ferguson his specimen.” He sighed. “They’re fast, though. I missed ’em by a mile. Lucky I’m still alive.”

Becky was stunned. She looked at her partner’s tired face, at his watery, aging eyes. He had been out there guarding her! The crazy, sweet old romantic jerk. At this moment she felt like she was seeing a hidden, secret Wilson, seeing him for the very first time. She could have kissed him.

Chapter 7

Carl Ferguson was horrified and excited at the same time by what he was reading. He seemed to drift away, to a quiet and safe place. But he came back. Around him the prosaic realities of the Main Reading Room of the New York Public Library reasserted themselves. Across from him a painfully pretty schoolgirl cracked her gum. Beside him an old man breathed long and slow, paging through an equally old book. All around him there was a subdued clatter, the scuttle of pen on paper, the coughs, the whispers, the drone of clerks calling numbers from the front of the room.

Because you could not enter the stacks and because you could neither enter nor leave this room with a book, its collection had not been stolen and was still among the best in the world. And it was because of the book that he had finally obtained from this superb collection that Carl Ferguson felt such an extremity of fear. What he read, what he saw before him was almost too fantastic and too horrible to believe. And yet the words were there.

“In Normandy,” Ferguson read for the third time, “tradition tells of certain fantastic beings known as lupins or lubins. They pass the night chattering together and twattling in an unknown tongue. They take their stand by the walls of country cemeteries and howl dismally at the moon. Timorous and fearful of man they will flee away scared at a footstep or distant voice. In some districts, however, they are fierce and of the werewolf race, since they are said to scratch up graves with their hands and gnaw poor dead bones.”

An ancient story, repeated by Montague Summers in his classic *The Werewolf*. Summers assumed that the werewolf tales were folklore, hearsay conjured up to frighten the gullible. But Summers was totally, incredibly wrong. The old legends and tales were true. Only one small element was incorrect—in the past it was assumed that their intelligence and cunning meant that werewolves were men who had assumed the shape of animals. But they weren't. They were not that at all, but rather a completely separate species of intelligent creature. And they had been sharing planet Earth with us all these long eons and we never understood it. What marvelous beings they must be—a virtual alien intelligence right here at home. It was a frightening discovery, but to Ferguson also one of awesome wonder.

Here were legends, stories, tales going back thousands of years, repeating again and again the mythology of the werewolf. And then suddenly, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, silence.

The legends died.

The stories were no longer told.

But why? To Ferguson's mind the answer was simple: the werewolves, tormented for generations by humanity's vigilance and fear, had found a way to hide from man. Their cover was now perfect. They lived among us, fed off our living flesh, but were unknown to all except those who didn't live to tell the tale. They were a race of living ghosts, unseen but very much a part of the world. They understood human society well enough to take only the abandoned, the weak, the isolated. And toward the end of the nineteenth century the human population all over the world had started to explode, poverty and filth had spread. Huge masses of people were ignored and abandoned by the societies in which they lived. And they were fodder for these werewolves, who range through the shadows devouring the beggars, the wanderers, those without name or home.

And no doubt the population of werewolves had exploded right along with the human population. Ferguson pictured hundreds, thousands of them scavenging the great cities of the earth for their human prey, rarely being glimpsed, using their sensitive ears and noses to keep well distant of all but the weak and helpless, taking advantage of man's increasing multitudes and increasing poverty. Their faculties combined with their

intelligence must make them fearsome indeed—but what an opportunity they also represented to science—to him—as another intelligence capable of study, even perhaps communication.

But there was something else about Summers' book, something even more disquieting, and that was the continual references to men and werewolves in communication with one another. "Two gentlemen who were crossing a forest glade after dark suddenly came upon an open space where an old woodsman was standing, a man well-known to them, who was making passes in the air, weaving strange signs and signals. The two friends concealed themselves behind a tree, whence they saw thirteen wolves come trotting along. The leader was a huge grey wolf who went up to the old man fawning upon him and being caressed. Presently the forester uttered a sing-song chant and plunged into the woods followed by the wolves."

Just a story, but tremendously interesting in the context of the information that the two detectives had brought him. Obviously the references to signs and a "sing-song" chant referred to human attempts to mimic the language of the werewolves, to communicate. Why did men once run with the werewolves?

Summers said that vampires were often connected to werewolves. Vampires—the eaters of blood. In other words, cannibals. To a less knowledgeable person such an idea might have seemed fantastic, but Ferguson knew enough about old Europe to understand the probable truth behind the legend. Men did indeed run with werewolves, and those men were called vampires because they fed off human flesh like the wolves themselves. Cannibalism must have been common in the Europe of the Dark Ages, when grinding poverty was the fate of all except a tiny minority. When men were the weakest and most numerous creatures around it must have tempted the hungry... to go out and find the werewolves, somehow build up a rapport, and then hunt with them, living like a scavenger off the pickings.

So much for the image of the vampire as a count with a castle and a silk dinner jacket. The truth was more like Summers' description—a filthy old forester scrabbling along with a pack of werewolves to glean the leavings of their monstrous feasts.

Man the scavenger, in the same role among werewolves that dogs play among men! And the human prey, unsuspecting now, but in those days it knew. People approached the night with terror crackling in their hearts. And when darkness fell only the desperate and the mad remained out of doors.

What, then, was the role of the human scavenger, the vampire, that ran with the werewolves? Why did they tolerate him? Simple enough, to coax people out of their houses, to lure them into the shadows where they would be ripped apart. It was ugly but it also meant that there had been communication of a sort between man and werewolf in the past, and could be again. And how immeasurably richer communication between this extraordinary species and modern science might be. There could be no comparison between the promise of the future and the sordid mistakes of the distant past.

It had gotten much easier for the werewolves in recent centuries. No longer were the human vampires needed. Nowadays the werewolves could do it on their own. Just take up residence in any big city, live in abandoned buildings among the city's million byways, and prey on the human strays.

Man and wolf. It had been an age-old animosity. The image of the wolf baying at the moon on a winter's night still calls primitive terrors to the heart of man.

And with good reason, except that the innocent timber wolf with his loud howling and once conspicuous presence was not the enemy. Lurking back there in the shadows, perhaps along the path to the well, was the real enemy, unnoticed, patient, lethal beyond

imagining. The wolf-being with its long finger-like paws, the werewolf, the other intelligent species that shared this planet.

We killed off the innocent timber wolf and never even discovered the real danger. While the timber wolf bayed to the oblivious moon the real enemy crept up the basement steps and used one of those clever paws to throw the bolt on the door.

Ferguson ran his fingers through his hair, his mind trying to accept the fearful truth he had uncovered. That damn detective—Wilson was his name —had an absolutely uncanny intuition about this whole matter. It was Detective Wilson who had first said the word werewolf, the word that had gotten Ferguson really thinking about that strange paw. And Wilson had claimed that the werewolves were hunting him and the woman down. With good reason! Once their secret was out the life of the werewolf would be made immeasurably harder, like it was in the old days in Europe when humanity bolted its doors and locked its windows, or in the Americas where the Indian used his knowledge of the forest to play a deadly game of hide and seek, a game commemorated to this day in the traditional dances of many tribes. The werewolf undoubtedly followed man to this continent across the Bering land bridge eons ago. But always and everywhere he kept himself as well hidden as he could. And it made good sense. You wouldn't find beggars sleeping on sidewalks if the werewolf was common knowledge. A wave of terror would sweep the city and the world unlike anything known since the Middle Ages. Unspeakable things would be done in the name of human safety. Man would declare all-out war on his adversary.

And at last he would have a fair fight on his hands. With all our technology, we have never faced an alien intelligence before, have never faced a species with its own built-in technology far superior to our own. Ferguson could not imagine what the mind behind the nose and ears of the werewolf must be like. The sheer quantity of information pouring in must literally be millions of times greater than that reaching a man through his eyes. The mind that gave meaning to all that information must be a miracle indeed. Maybe even greater than the mind of man. And man must, this time, react responsibly. If there was intelligence there it could be reasoned with, and eventually the two enemy species could learn to live together in peace. If Carl Ferguson had any part in this at all it was as the missionary of reason and understanding. Man could either declare war on this species or try to come to an understanding. Carl Ferguson raised his head, closed his eyes and hoped with every fiber of his being that reason would for once prevail.

He was surprised to notice somebody was standing beside him.

“You've got to take this call slip to the rare books department. We don't have this book in the reading room. All of our stuff is post-1825 and this book was written in 1597.” The call clerk dropped the card on the table in front of Ferguson and went away. Ferguson got up and headed for the rare books collection, card clutched in his hand.

He moved through the empty, echoing halls of the great library, finally arriving at the rare books collection. A middle-aged woman sat at a desk working on a catalogue under a green-shaded lamp. The only sound in the room was the faint clatter of the steam pipes and the snow-muted mutter of the city beyond the windows.

“I'm Carl Ferguson of the Museum of Natural History. I'd like to take a look at this book.” He handed her the card. “Do we have this?”

“It's catalogued.” She got up and disappeared behind a wire-covered doorway. Ferguson waited standing expectantly for a few moments, then found a chair. There was no sound from the direction the woman had gone. He was alone in the room. The place smelled of books. And he was impatient for her to return. It was urgent that she produce the book he needed. It was by Beauvoys de Chauvincourt, a man considered an authority

on werewolves in his day, and more interestingly, a familiar of them. The manner of his death was what had excited Ferguson—it indicated that the man may indeed have known the creatures firsthand. Beauvoys de Chauvincourt had gone out one night in search of his friends the werewolves and had simply disappeared. The dark suspicions of the time notwithstanding, Ferguson felt that he almost certainly had met his end observing the ancestors of the very creatures whose work the two cops had uncovered. “Do you know books, Mr. Ferguson?”

“It’s Doctor. Y-yes, I do. I can handle antique books.”

“That’s exactly what shouldn’t be done with them.” She eyed him. “I’ll turn for you,” she said firmly. “Let’s go over there.” She placed the book before him at a table and turned on one of the green-shaded lights.

“*Discours de la Lycanthropie, ou de la transformation des hommes en loups*,” read the title page.

“Turn.”

She opened the book, turning the stiff pages to the frontispiece. And Ferguson felt sweat trickling down his temples. What he was seeing was so extraordinary that it was almost too much to bear without crying out. For there on the frontispiece of the ancient book was engraved a most amazing picture. In this ancient engraving a sparse plain was shown lit by a full moon. And walking through the plain was a man surrounded by things that looked somewhat like wolves but were not wolves. The man appeared at ease, strolling along playing a bagpipe that was slung over his shoulder. And the werewolves walked with him. The artist had rendered his subjects faithfully, Ferguson guessed. The heads with their high, wide brain cases and large eyes, the delicate and sinister paws, the voracious, knowing faces—it all fit the image Ferguson had created in his own mind of what the creatures must look like. And the man with them—incredible. In those days there must certainly have been communication between humans—some humans—and werewolves. De Chauvincourt himself must have... known them. And in the end they destroyed him.

“Turn.”

Ferguson cursed his French. Here were lists of names—no, they were invocations of demons. Nothing to be learned here. “Turn.”

More invocations.

“Keep turning.”

The pages rolled past until something caught Ferguson’s eye. “The Language They Assume.”

Here followed a description of a complex language composed of tail movements, ear movements, growls, changes in facial expression, movements of the tongue and even clicks of the nails. It was as if human language had consisted not only of words but also of myriad gestures to augment those words.

And Ferguson knew something he hadn’t known before. The creatures had vocal cords inadequate to the needs of true verbal language. How fast their brain must have evolved! Perhaps it took only fifty or a hundred thousand years and there they were, strange intelligent beings roaming the world in pursuit of man, engaged in the age-long hunt that occupied them to this day.

“Turn.”

Here the book had another engraving—hand movements. “Can I get a Xerox of this page?”

“We can’t copy this book.”

He had brought paper and pencil and made rough sketches of the positions shown noting the meaning of each: stop, run, kill, attack, flee.

Stop—the tips of the fingers drawn down to the edge of the palm.

Run—the hands held straight out before the face.

Kill—the fists clenched, held against the throat.

Attack—the hands clutching the stomach like claws.

Flee—the palms against the forehead.

But these were human signals. Obviously the werewolves did not use such gestures among themselves because they were four-legged. There must have been a mutual language composed of signals like these between the werewolves and—

“*Les vampires.*” The book said it. And there was the source of another legend, the vampires again. This must be the language they used to communicate with the werewolves. The vampires, those who followed the wolves and scavenged the remains. And the wolves needed them to induce people to come out of their locked houses.

What a different world it had been then! Werewolves and vampires stalking the night, the vampires luring people from their homes to be devoured. No wonder the Middle Ages were such a dark and cruel time. The terrors of the night were not imaginary at all, but stark realities faced from birth by everybody. Only as the sheer numbers of mankind had increased had the threat seemed to disappear. Man grew so numerous that the work of the werewolves was no longer noticed. In the days of de Chauvincourt the human helpers must already have been unnecessary in most places... and so as soon as the vampire weakened with age the werewolves turned on him. The librarian turned the page.

Ferguson jumped up. He tried to stop himself, but took an involuntary step backward and knocked over the chair.

“Sir!”

“I-I’m sorry!” He grabbed the chair, righted it. Now he felt like a fool. But the engraving that covered both of the pages facing was so terrible that he almost could not look at it.

He was seeing the werewolf close up, face to face. This would be a reliable rendition of the features. Even in this three-hundred-and-eighty-year-old engraving he could see the savagery, the sheer voraciousness of the creature. The eyes stared out at him like something from a nightmare.

And they *were* from a nightmare. His mind was racing now as he remembered, an incident that had occurred when he was no more than six or seven. They were in the Catskills, spending the summer near New Paltz in upstate New York. He was asleep in his ground-floor bedroom. Something awakened him. Moonlight was streaming in the open window. And a monstrous animal was leaning in, poking its muzzle toward him, the face clear in the moonlight.

He had screamed and the thing had disappeared in a flash. Nightmare, they said. And here it was staring at him again, the face of the werewolf.

The librarian closed the book. “That will be enough,” she said. “I think you’re upset.”

“Those engravings—”

“They are horrible but I don’t think it quite calls for—hysterics.”

This amazed Ferguson. How dare she accuse him like that. “What would you say,

madam, if those were engravings of real animals?”

“These are werewolves, Mr. Ferguson.”

“*Doctor*. And I assure you that those animals are very real. You can imagine my shock when I saw them engraved in a book of that age, when the discovery was supposed to have taken place only a few weeks ago.”

He left her to sort that one out. Too bad, too, she was a nice-looking woman, he wouldn't have minded getting to know her. But not now. He went down to the basement cloakroom and picked up his coat. Outside it had stopped snowing and the pedestrian traffic had transformed the sidewalk into gray slush. He turned the collar of his coat up against the surging wind and walked toward Sixth Avenue. He was going to see Tom Rilker, to get his help in determining a logical forage in the city for these creatures. There must be some area where lots of homeless people congregated. Not the Bowery, it was surrounded by heavily populated areas. Rilker would have some ideas.

Then he stopped. “My God,” he thought, “those two cops have a point, what if the damn things are hunting me too?” Had they seen him with the cops last night? No way to tell. But if they *had* made the connection then he could be in mortal danger right now, even here in the middle of Forty-second Street.

He jammed his hands into his pockets and walked more quickly on. And he remembered the face of the nightmare in the moonlit window.

Dick Neff padded naked into the kitchen to fix himself another drink. He glanced at the kitchen clock—nearly noon. A shaft of sunlight shone in the kitchen window, as sharp and silver as a blade. First the snow had stopped and then the clouds had blown away. Now the wind moaned around the corner of the building and a bright dust of snow glittered through the sunlight. The glare hurt Dick's eyes, and he fumbled as he fixed his third Bloody Mary.

His mind was working, turning in a haze of anguish that would not go away. Becky, shooflies, burns, sorrow. He took a long pull on the drink and went into the living room. Goddamn, he couldn't believe what had *almost* happened to him, how close he had come to death. Burned and didn't even know it. He had been moving with Andy Jakes for six months, really working in with him. Hell, the guy was the biggest dealer in the Northeast. The Goddamn biggest fuckin' dealer. And Andy Jakes had been playing with Mr. Narcotics Cop. Jesus Christ! If he had collared Andy Jakes the shooflies would have laid off out of respect. Let it ride. But now he was just another victim of that brilliant crook's mind.

He had been about to enter Jakes's apartment, just heading toward the elevator when his teammates had gotten to him. Hold it, Dick, we got trouble. Bobby says the bug's pickin' up a lot of movement in there. Jakes's supposed to be alone?

—Yeah, he's alone. He's got the stuff in there. Ten kilos, let me go.

—Not alone. Don't go in. There's people in there, lots of people movin' around, not talkin'.

—Not talkin'? Shit, that must mean—

—They suspect a bug. And they suspect you. They're waiting for you, Dick.

—Oh, shit shit shit.

And he had stopped. He had not gone in. Follow your instincts, boy. Don't go in there. Another man might have shrugged it off and gone in. But not Dick.

And then they were off trying to get a warrant to bust the place when another call had

come from the wire man. They were leaving. Christ! They *had* left. Surveillance followed them to Teterboro Airport, to a flight plan filed for Guadeloupe, Honduras, Brazil. Shit.

And they got the warrant and entered the apartment. So it's empty, of course, completely empty except for the Goddamn note. A note on nice engraved stationery, just as nice as you please. "Sorry, Richard," says the note. "I know how much of an embarrassment this will be to you. You be careful now. Cordially, Andy."

The guys got a whoop out of that note. "Hey *Richard*, Andy's some cool sonofabitch! Hey, beautiful, what a shit-heel."

The other guys were almost happy that Dick hadn't made his collar. Robin Hood. Sam Bass. The beautiful crook. Although there was also the other thing. Every gold shield in the division lusted after Andy Jakes and now it was open season on him again. Now other guys could take a crack, now Neff had blown it.

"Dick, you know what was waiting for you in there," Captain Fogarty had said. Good old Fogarty, always looking on the bright side. "A Goddamn arsenal. Wires says six or seven people were in there creepin' around as silent as cats. Waiting for you, Dick. Blown you away. I doubt if we'd ever laid eyes on you again, old buddy."

Maybe that would have been better. Because another captain, Captain Lesser of the Internal Affairs Division, was closing in on Dick Neff. Another job blown. Somehow or other IAD had gotten wind of Dick's little deal with Mort Harper. What the hell was it anyway, a nice clean gambling establishment. The best clientele, even the fuckin' DA was there once. The fuckin' DA playing blackjack and lovin' it. Mort was protected! But he had put the finger on Neff, had built up his City Hall connections to the point that he didn't need Neff's silence anymore. "Hey, Mr. DA, y'know I got this monkey on my back, a little shit shakin' me down—"

"What the hell, this is a decent place." Movie stars. Politicians. Stockbrokers. Marble bar. Crushed-velvet carpets. Honest tables.

"Takin' out a grand a month, Mr. DA."

"Oh stop singin', Morty, I'll take care of it."

Oh, Morty was beautiful too. Smarter than Dick Neff. Everybody was smarter than Dick Neff. Even the shoofly Captain with his funny questions. "How many bank accounts you got? Your wife? Fine, could we see your income tax returns? Just routine. Somebody turned up a little dirt, Dick. Nothing really. Just routine. I got to go through the motions is all."

Go through the motions like hell! Dick Neff was due for a Board. Early retirement—hell, he'd be lucky to stay out of Attica! "You have a right to remain silent. You have a right to an attorney."

Silent, damn right. An attorney, damn right. He swallowed the last of the Bloody Mary and went to the sliding doors, looked out on the bright snow that covered the balcony.

And what he saw there made him gape. Pawprints as nice and clear as you please. He stared at them confused and disbelieving. Pawprints? And on the glass door a smear of another print. He squatted down and examined it. It could just be... a smeared pawprint... where something had tried the door. These prints must have been laid in the early morning after the snow had stopped. Shit, Becky wasn't imagining things after all. These damn prints were real. No way to deny it, and they didn't belong here.

He felt suddenly exposed in his nakedness and returned to the bedroom to dress. He shook his head, physically trying to shake out the welter of thoughts that clamored for attention. Dressing automatically, he fought for clarity. Those two crazies were right

then? That scabrous old shitkicker Wilson wasn't senile after all. It seemed impossible, a trivial detail suddenly expanded to fill his whole consciousness with its importance. If she was in danger! If she was in danger and he didn't help her he would kill himself. That was the size of it, he would take out his Goddamn .38 and put the barrel in his mouth and pull the Goddamn trigger. Let the department face that one.

He put on a conservative suit and brushed down his hair until he looked reasonably presentable. He had to get that Starlight camera out of Yablonski in the Photo Unit. He had to look the part. Would the good news about Dick Neff have traveled as far as Yablonski? Probably not. Just routine, gimme the camera. Orders? Shit, c'mon man, I got to use this thing tonight. Easy. Peaches.

He left the apartment, then returned. As soon as he had gotten into the hall he had felt the absence of his pistol. Like he wasn't wearing underpants or something. The gun. He dropped off his overcoat and his jacket and pulled the holster containing the .32 out of his bureau drawer. The larger .38 he left behind. This pistol fitted neatly into a holster nestled in the small of his back, easy to get to, hard to spot. You weren't too comfortable when you sat down in a hard chair but other than that the small of the back was a beautiful hiding place for a weapon.

Now he glanced at the pawprints again. They were ugly, frightening. He tested the door and then pulled the curtains closed. This time he left and did not return. Outside the wind hit him with the force of a powerful shove. It bit right through his coat and made his muscles grow taut with cold. He wanted another drink, better make a pit stop on the way down. What the hell, make it now. Across the street was O'Faolian's where he usually made a stop on his way to the apartment. He went there now.

"Hiya, Frenchie," he said as he slipped up to the bar, "gimme a Bloody." The bartender made it and set it in front of him. Instead of going about his business, though, he hovered there fooling with glasses.

"You want something?" Dick asked. Frenchie was not a friendly guy, not the type to make small talk.

"Nah. A guy's been in is all. A guy wantin' to know about you."

"So?"

"So I don't say nothin'."

"Good. What else is new?"

"You don't wanna know what he's askin' about?" Frenchie looked surprised, a little disappointed.

"I can pretty well guess," Dick said expansively. "He wanted to know if I had ever been seen in here with a little kike five-two, greasy black hair, wire-rimmed glasses, name of Mort Harper. And you said no."

"Hell I didn't say nothin'. Not yes or no." He looked pleadingly at Neff. "The guy, he flashed on me, see. What could I do? You don't get 'em flashin' unless it's serious business."

Dick chuckled. "Thanks, Frenchie," he said. He put a five on the bar and left. Damn decent of the little jerk to tell him that Captain Lesser had been in here confirming that this was where Dick met Mort Harper to take the pass. How long had it been going on? Dick couldn't remember exactly. God, though, it must be years. All that money right up to the Stranger Nursing Home. Right up there to keep the old man in cigars.

The old man. A pang of sentiment went through him, thinking of the old senile man who had once been so powerful, so determined. Drove a bus for the Red and Tan Line.

Retirement pay plus Social Security: \$177.90 a lousy month. Senile decay, Parkinson's disease, helplessness had turned to violence, periodic seizures, a thousand-dollar-a-month problem. You don't give your old man over to the tender care of the State, not when you've seen the inside of those places firsthand. "Gonna make you go naked for a day, you old fart, you don't stop that shakin'. Stop it, you gettin' on my nerves. OK, fuck you, gimme that gown!" That's the kind of thing that went on. A bunch of monsters making life hell for the old and helpless. "Come on, guinea, light my cigarette! Fuckin' old shit." Dick had seen what it was like in those State hospitals, a playground for sadistic perverts masquerading as attendants. No place for his old man.

All of a sudden he was shaking uncontrollably, standing there in the doorway of the bar. He grabbed at the door handle to steady himself, then reeled back into the bar. He dropped to a table. "Shit, Frenchie," he said, "get some food in me. I feel like shit."

Frenchie produced a hamburger and some stale fries and as soon as he bit into the food Dick found that he was ravenously hungry. He wolfed down the burger, ordered another. Now he leaned back, relaxed into the mild fog that the drinks had produced, that and the ease of the food.

What the fuck had he been doing? Oh yeah, going to get that damn camera for Becky, his kid bride. Kid, hell, she was only a year younger than him and he was no kid. She was still a damn good lay, though, especially the way she came. Like a Goddamn female freight train. She made you feel like you were worth something. None of the others ever really did that. They were all pretending, wanting to fuck a cop for reasons that had nothing to do with love. Pros that needed a friend, most of them. What the hell, they threw it at you. Becky didn't know and never would if Dick had anything to say about it. What they had together was something special, something no pro was going to take away from them.

Well, what the hell, what she didn't know wasn't going to hurt her.

"Frenchie! Bring me another Bloody."

Frenchie came over. "Nosir," he said, "can't do that."

"Why the fuck not! What is this, a Salvation Army Shelter?"

"You're on duty. I'm not gettin' you drunk in here. Shit, you came in here half looped. Now you go on about your business. I don't want no cops gettin' drunk in here. It's a bad rap with the department and you know it. Go somewhere else."

"I'm not on duty. I'm graveyard this week."

"You're carryin' a piece, Lieutenant Neff. I can't serve you any more booze."

"Jesus Christ, Mr. Hot Shit—OK, I'll take my trade elsewhere. But don't say I didn't warn you, Frenchie. You look out for your ass, hear. Just look out real careful, you never know what's gonna come up your back."

Frenchie walked away shaking his head. Dick left, wanting at once to say something to appease Frenchie, wishing he hadn't been so nasty, yet still feeling in himself the urge to be even nastier, to strike out at somebody. He hailed a cab to go to headquarters.

Yablonski's office was a clutter of photographic equipment, report forms, pictures tacked to walls, half-empty coffee cups. "Hey, Dick," the little man said when he looked up. "What brings you down here?"

"Your beautiful face. I need some night photography equipment."

"Yeah? You got infrared uptown. If you need a photographer forget it until next week, my guys are—"

"Hooked up. No, we don't need a photographer."

“You guys take up time. I can’t spare men to spend days and days sitting in cars doing what any moron—”

“Like me can do.”

“Yeah. So why don’t you just use your own infrared equipment and let me the fuck alone.”

“Because I don’t need infrared. I need high power and long range. You know infrared’s no good over fifty yards.”

“No, I didn’t know that. Hell, Dick, it’s my business, don’t take that tone with me.”

Neff closed his eyes. What made this little fart so Goddamn difficult to deal with? He always talked in arguments. “I need the Starlight camera.”

“Like hell.”

“For one night.”

“I repeat: like hell. That camera doesn’t leave this Bureau without a trained operator, meaning me. And I’m not takin’ it out without a signed letter from somebody I can’t turn down.”

“Come on now, don’t get crazy. I only need it for one night. Think if you don’t give it to me and I lose an important collar as a result. Think how that’ll look.”

“It won’t look like nothin’. Officially you don’t even know that camera exists.”

“Oh, cut the crap. We got an eyes only on it in 1975. That thing’s been goin’ in and out of Narcotics ever since.”

“Well, I didn’t know that.” Yablonski glowered, pugnacious, aware that Dick was somehow edging him into a corner.

“How’s the wife?”

“What’s she got to do with it? She the suspect?”

“Just trying to be friendly. Look, I’ll level with you. I got a big collar coming up but we need evidence. We got to have pictures.”

“Big deal. Use fast film. There’s plenty of light in the streets.”

Dick sighed, pretended to give up on something. “I guess I gotta tell you more than you need to know. We got a big pass comin’ up. We just can’t risk missin’ it. We gotta have that camera.”

Yablonski glared at him. He did not like to let his precious Starlight camera out of his personal control. On the other hand he had no intention of spending the night on some dangerous narcotics stakeout. He stood up, brought out his keys and went to a bank of lockers that covered one wall of the office.

“I’m gonna be a sucker,” he said, “let you take this thing out and get it smashed. You know how much this thing cost the City of New York?”

“Nothin’.”

“About a hundred grand. Hardly nothing.”

“It’s CIA surplus circa Vietnam. You know damn well we got it for nothing.”

“Well, I’m not sure we’d get another if we lost or busted this one.” He removed a metal case from the locker and placed it gently on his desk. “You used this before?”

“You know I have.”

“Well I’m gonna go through the drill anyway!” He opened the case and pulled out a boxy object made of gray, burnished metal. It was about the size and shape of a two-pound can of coffee with binocular eyepieces on one end and a large, gleaming fisheye of a lens on the other. The body of the thing was entirely featureless, except for a barely visible indentation obviously intended for a thumb.

“You open the control panel like this,” Yablonski said, pressing on the indentation. A three-inch square of surface metal slid back to reveal a panel containing two black knobs and a small slit. “You slide in the film.” He pushed a small black rectangle into the opening. “That gives you two hundred shots. That’s the bottom number in the readout you’ll see in the lower right quadrant of the frame when you look through the camera. Above that’s the ambient light reading. You set the top knob so that it reads the same value. Here—” He held the camera out. Dick took it, put it up to his eyes. The image was blurred but the three numbers were clear. “Read off from the bottom up.”

“The bottom number says two hundred. The middle one sixty-six, the top point-oh-six.”

“Meaning you’ve got two hundred shots left, the ambient light level is sixty-six and you are pointing the camera at an object point-oh-six meters away. Now gimme.” He took it back. “You set the top knob at sixty-six and the bottom one at point-oh-six. Now look.”

“What the hell is it?”

“The top corner of the locker, dummy. It’s magnified so much you can’t tell what you’re seeing that close. Point the camera out the window.” Dick swung the camera around. The top two readings flickered and changed as he moved it, then the limbs of a tree down near street level leaped into view. He could see where ice adhered to the twigs and where the sun had made it drop away. Yablonski guided his hand to the thumb indentation. “Pull back on it.” There was a click. The little door had closed on the side of the camera and a red light had gone on above the three green numbers of the readout. “You get a light?”

“Right.”

“Ready to shoot. Push forward.” The camera made five shots in quick succession. The film indicator now read 195.

“It always shoots in increments of five. Now press inward on the indentation.” The scene pulled back and revealed the sidewalk below. “You go down to fifty millimeters. Fifty to five hundred, that’s the lens. If you push forward and down at the same time the camera will take a series of shots while the lens is moving. No problem. Just remember to always close the control housing before you try to shoot.” Dick took the camera from his eyes. Yablonski was pointing at the control housing. “That activates the camera. And if you change position always check focus. In operation it doesn’t matter too much, but remember that the camera is at its sharpest focus when the object you are shooting is exactly as far away as that little indicator in there says. You want it to change, you’ve got to adjust it with the knob.”

“That’s all? I remembered everything.”

“Well, aren’t we wonderful. Just don’t bring it back to me in a shoebox, for Chrissake. And get the fucker back here before noon tomorrow or I’ll be on your ass.”

“Oh, yes sir, Mr. Commissioner, just like you say.”

“Come on, Dick, take it easy. How much film you want?”

“Another couple of boxes. That stuffs really compact. You sure there are two hundred shots?”

“Of course. You think the camera would lie?”

Dick put the machine back in its case and hefted it. He left Yablonski staring after him.

As soon as he was gone, Yablonski was on the phone. “Captain Lesser,” he said crisply, “you told me you wanted a call if Dick Neff came around here for anything. Well, he did. He checked out the Starlight camera.”

Chapter 8

The search teams kept coming back empty-handed. It looked as if the park wasn't going to yield any worthwhile clues. A bench covered with a slick of red ice— human blood. Some tattered remnants that might have been the victim's clothes. That was all. No body, no ID, no witnesses. And so far, no report of a missing person. The cops were waiting for orders to move them out. The precinct wasn't going to spend much more time on this, it was just another one of those mysteries that the city tossed up. Obviously somebody had died here, but in the absence of anything except blood there wasn't much that could be done to find the killer.

“Maybe it'll tell us something,” the Medical Examiner said as a patrolman handed him a clear plastic bag full of tattered cloth.

Becky Neff said nothing. More vague evidence. Even Wilson's experience last night was nothing but hearsay. Hell, maybe he got panicked by some dogs. The trouble was, you weren't going to get headquarters to take a chance on the theory. The man who sanctioned an investigation of werewolves in this city was headed for early retirement if that investigation didn't prove itself.

“Do you believe me?” Wilson said into the silence in the car.

“Yeah,” Becky replied, surprised at the question.

“Not you, dummy. The genius. I want to know if he believes me.”

“If it wasn't delirium tremens, I'd say you saw what you saw.”

“Thanks.” Since relating his story Wilson had fallen into a silence. Becky didn't know whether he was thinking something out or simply sinking into depression. If possible he seemed to be getting more morose.

When Wilson turned to stare again out of the car window, Evans raised his eyebrows. “Listen,” he said to Wilson's back, “if it makes any difference I really do believe you. I just wish to God I could do more for you than that.”

“Every little bit helps,” Becky said acidly.

“I'm sure. It must be hell.”

“Yeah,” Wilson said, “it's that.”

Suddenly there was a flurry of activity. A couple of park cops jumped on scooters; guys from the 20th Precinct piled into squad cars. Becky flipped on the radio to catch the activity. “—thirteen, repeat, thirteen to Bethesda Fountain.”

“Jesus—” Becky started the car and followed the others into the park. They slurried in

the new snow, heading for the emergency. A signal-13 was the most serious call a policeman could put out: it meant that an officer was in distress. It would cause immediate response from all nearby units—and often some from farther away. It was the call that cops hated most to hear and wanted most to answer.

The area around Bethesda Fountain was once elegant. Once, during summer, there was an open-air restaurant where you could drink wine and watch the fountain. Then the sixties had come, and drugs, and Bethesda Fountain had become an open-air drug bazaar. The restaurant had closed. The fountain had become choked with filth. Graffiti had appeared. Murders had taken place. Now the once-bustling spot was the same in summer as in winter: empty, abandoned, destroyed. And crumpled on the esplanade overlooking the fountain was a blue uniform, its occupant bent over almost with his forehead touching the snow. The scooter cops were the first to get to him. “Shot,” one of them shouted. An ambulance could already be heard screaming over from Roosevelt Hospital.

Becky pulled the Pontiac up behind the scooters and the three of them jumped out. “I’m a doctor,” Evans shouted pointlessly. There wasn’t a person in the NYPD who didn’t know that the Medical Examiner was a doctor. Evans reached the wounded man, followed closely by Becky. He was a middle-aged cop, one of the guys who had been out beating the bushes for evidence, one of the searchers. “Fuckin’ dog,” he said almost laughing, “fuckin’ dog bit a hole in my side.” The voice was anguished and confused. “Fuckin’ dog!”

“Holy shit,” Evans said.

“Is it bad, Doc?” the man said through gathering tears.

Evans looked away. “I’m not movin’ you till the stretcher gets here, buddy. You aren’t losing any blood out of it, however bad it is.”

“Oh, fuck, it hurts!” he shouted. Then his eyes rolled and his head slumped to his chest.

“Get some pressure on it, he’s passed out,” Evans said. Two of the man’s friends applied a pressure bandage to the gash in his overcoat. “Where’s that friggin’ meatwagon!” Evans rasped. “This man’s not gonna make it if they don’t hurry.”

Just then it pulled up and the medics piled out with their equipment. They cut the coat away and for the first time the wound was visible.

It was devastating. You could see the blue-black bulge of the man’s intestine pulsing in the blood. Becky started to sob, stifling it as it came. *They* had done this! Just now, just minutes ago. They were right around here! She put a trembling hand on the M. E.’s shoulder.

“Leave me alone.” He was examining the wound. “Move him out,” he murmured to the orderlies. He looked up at Becky. “He ain’t gonna live,” he said simply.

They got the man on the stretcher and took him to the ambulance, heading for the emergency room as fast as they could go. There was an M.D. on the wagon so Evans returned to Becky’s car.

The other cops were still standing in a little clump, staring at the blood-smeared thrash marks in the snow. For a moment nobody spoke. What could you say? A man had just had his intestines laid open— and he claimed it had been done by a dog. The Precinct Captain came up puffing hard. For some reason he hadn’t made it into a car. “What the fuck— what the fuck happened?”

“Baker got hit.”

“What by? Hit and run?”

“Something took about nine inches of hide off his gut. Laid him open.”

“What the fuck—”

“You said that, sir. He says it was a dog.” Becky felt Wilson’s hand grasp her shoulder. A sharp pang of fear ran through her. “Listen, kid,” he said in an unnaturally calm tone, “stroll real easy-like over to those two scooters.” He breathed it into her ear. “You can ride a scooter?”

“I suppose.”

“Good, because you gotta. Just go real easy.”

“What about our car?”

“Stay the hell away from our car! And when you get on that scooter, *move*.”

She didn’t ask questions even though she didn’t quite understand why he wanted to do this. You get to trust a good partner, and Becky trusted Wilson more than enough to just do what he said without asking why. He’d do the same for her. Hell, he had often enough.

As she walked she noticed that he was meandering in the same direction, getting closer and closer to the scooters without making it particularly obvious. “Now, Becky!”

They leaped, the scooters coughed to life, they skidded onto the snowy pavement, Becky swayed, righted herself and headed straight down the Mall, which stretched to Park East Drive and the safety of the streets. She heard a shout behind, an incredulous shout from one of the scooter cops who saw the two detectives suddenly hijack his transportation. Then something else was there, a gray shape moving like the wind, a furious pulsing mass of hair and muscle. And she knew what had happened. “Oh God God God,” she said softly as she rode. She turned the gas all the way up and the scooter darted through the snow, bouncing and shaking, threatening from instant to instant to go into a skid. Thirty. Forty. Fifty. Was the thing dropping back? She risked a glance. God, it was right there. Its teeth were bared, and its *face*, something unbelievable, twisted with hate and fury and effort—animal, man, *something*. She choked out a sob and just held on. The thing’s breathing was clearly audible for a moment, then it fell back, fell back making little sharp noises, sounds of pure anger! It was gone and the scooters bounded off the Mall, crashed through ripping naked shrubs, shot into the roadway and tore down toward the park entrance at Fifth Avenue. Ahead the Plaza Hotel and the General Motors Building. General Sherman with his permanent toupee of pigeon droppings. Horse-drawn carriages waiting in rows, the breath of the horses steaming. Then stopping, bringing the scooters to a halt at the bustling entrance to the hotel. “We’re at the Plaza,” Wilson was growling into the scooter’s radio, “come get us.”

A squad car appeared. “What’s the problem, Lieutenant?” the driver said. “You just got reported for stealing two scooters.”

“Fuck that. We were under orders. We thought we saw a suspect.”

“Yeah. So get in. We’ll drive you up to the Twentieth.”

They left the scooters for the men from the park precinct who were approaching in another car. Wilson and Neff were silent as they rode toward the precinct, Wilson because he had nothing to say, Becky because she couldn’t have talked if she had wanted to. It felt funny to her to be alive right now, like she had just broken through a wall into a time she was never intended to see. “I was supposed to die back there,” she thought. She looked at her partner. He had figured it out just in time—a trap. God, what a clever trap! And they had slipped out just as it had been sprung.

“You know what happened,” Wilson asked.

“Yeah.”

He nodded, silent for a few minutes. The squad car wheeled up Central Park West. Wilson touched the door lock; the windows were closed. “They’re very smart,” he said.

“We knew that”

“But that was a very neat trap. Wounding that guy... knowing that we would respond... setting an ambush. All very smart.”

“How did you figure it out? I’ve gotta confess I was completely taken in.”

“You oughta start thinking defensively. They wounded that guy, didn’t kill him. That’s what tipped me off. Why wound, when killing is easier? It had to be the same reason a hunter wounds. To lure. When I figured that out, I decided we ought to go for the scooters. Frankly I’m surprised we made it.”

The squad car pulled up to the precinct house. After a long look up and down the street the two detectives got out and hurried up the steps. The desk sergeant looked up. “Captain’s waiting for you,” he said.

“Must be antsy as hell,” Wilson muttered as they walked into the Captain’s office.

He was a trim, neatly turned out man with steel-gray hair and a deeply wrinkled face. But his movements, his posture, belonged to a younger man. He had just taken off his overcoat and sat down at his desk. Now he looked up, raising his eyebrows. “I’m Captain Walker,” he said. “What the hell’s going on?”

“We saw a suspect—”

“Can that bullshit. Everybody saw those dogs come out from under your car and chase you halfway to Grand Army Plaza. What the hell was that all about?”

“Dogs?” Wilson was no actor. The fact that he was hiding something was perfectly clear to Becky. But maybe she underestimated him.

“Yes, dogs. I saw them. We all did. And Baker said it was dogs that laid him open.”

Wilson shook his head. “Beats the hell out of me.”

“Look, I don’t know quite what’s going on here— I mean you two are some kind of special team, that’s OK by me—but I got a guy hurt bad down at Roosevelt and he says a dog did it. I saw you two light out like you were runnin’ from death itself. And you were chased by two dogs. Now I’d like to know what the fuck’s goin’ on.” His phone rang. A few muttered words, a curse, then he hung up. “And so would the *New York Post*. They got a photographer and a reporter waiting out front to see me right now. What do I tell them?”

Becky stepped in. Wilson had tucked his chin into his neck, squared his shoulders, and was about to blow it. “Tell them what’s probably true. Your man was wounded in an unknown manner. I mean if somebody’s colon is lying on the sidewalk they might get a little delirious. He passed out right after his statement, didn’t he? And as for dogs chasing us, it might have happened, but it was a complete coincidence.”

The man stared at them. “You’re bullshitting. I don’t know why but I’m not gonna push it. Just get one thing straight: I don’t owe you two a Goddamn thing. Now take off. Go wherever you go.”

“What about the reporter?” Becky asked. That was important. You couldn’t leak this to the press, not unless the problem could be solved.

“So I’ll tell the reporters what Baker said. And I’ll tell them that he was delirious. Is that sufficient?”

“What do you mean, sufficient? How should we know?”

“You’re the people keeping this thing under wraps, aren’t you? You’re the ones who go around and make sure no shaggy dog stories get into the paper, aren’t you?”

Wilson closed his eyes and shook his head. “Let’s get out of here,” he said. “We got better things to do.”

They left the precinct and hailed a cab. Obviously there was no point in asking the precinct for transportation back to Bethesda Fountain where their car was waiting. As they approached the car Wilson craned his neck out of the cab window to make sure nothing was under it. But he needn’t have bothered. The car wasn’t going anywhere.

The doors were open. The interior of the car was ripped to shreds. And it was full of bloody pulp. “Jesus,” the cabdriver blurted, “this your car?”

“Yeah. It was.”

“We gotta get a cop.” He gunned the motor. “Who’s in there? What a fuckin’ mess!”

“We *are* the police.” Becky held her shield against the bulletproof glass separating the passenger seat from the driver’s compartment. The driver nodded and headed for the Central Park precinct house on Seventy-ninth Street. A few moments later they pulled to a stop in front. Neff, Wilson and the driver got out and approached the desk sergeant through the worn double-doors of the building. “Yeah,” he said looking up. “You two. I hear you’re a couple of mean motherfuckers on a scooter.”

“Get your guys back over to the Fountain,” Wilson rasped. “The Chief Medical Examiner just got himself killed.”

Becky felt the blood drain out of her face. Of course, that must be who was in the car. It had to be. Poor Evans, he was a hell of a good man! “Goddamn it,” Becky said.

“We were stupid,” Wilson said softly. “We should have warned him in advance.” He laughed, a bitter little noise. “They missed out on the main event. So they went for the consolation prize. Let’s get Underwood on the phone.”

Wilson took on Underwood. Becky watched him, annoyed that her usual role was being usurped. “Look,” Wilson said into the phone, “you got problems. You got a cop on critical at Roosevelt with his guts laid open. Says dogs did it. You got that? Dogs. Plus you got a reporter from the *Post* on it, and more to follow. So listen, dummy. You got one Chief Medical Examiner just murdered out by Bethesda Fountain. And you’re gonna find it was done by claws and teeth. And if you want this one wrapped up real good—”

“Oh my God, what about Ferguson!”

“—just sit on your can and wait for it.” He slammed down the phone. “You’re right! Let’s go!” They headed for the motor pool.

“Get a car,” Becky snapped at the dispatcher.

“Well, you gotta—”

“Matter of life and death, Sergeant. What number?”

“Let’s see—two-two-nine. Green Chevy, you’ll see it against the wall out near the gas pumps.”

They headed for the car. To the south the sorrowful moan of sirens sounded their dirge for Evans. “Lot of fucking good they’ll do,” Wilson said quietly. “That guy was just goo.”

“You’re sure?”

“What?”

“It was him.”

“Just drive the car, Becky.”

God, he was a condescending bastard. Even if it was self-evident to Wilson, she could still hope. Evans was a great man, a civic institution in New York City for forty years. Probably the best practitioner of forensic medicine in the world. Plus he was a good friend. His loss left a damn big hole. And the manner of his death was going to stop the presses even over at the *Times*.

“This story’s gonna get out.”

“You don’t say. By the way, Ferguson’ll be at the museum.”

“Look, I don’t give a damn how bad things are, it’s no excuse to pretend I’m some kind of a dummy. I know where the hell he is.”

“Yeah, well—”

“Well nothing, just keep your jerkoff opinions about lady cops to yourself and do your Goddamn job.”

“Oh, come on, Becky, I didn’t mean that.”

“You did, but I don’t mind. I guess I’m just nervous.”

“That’s funny. Can’t imagine why.” They got to the museum, stopped the car right in front of the main entrance and ran in as quickly as possible. It was necessary to go through the drill of getting downstairs to see Ferguson. When they were finally on it the elevator seemed to take hours to reach the sub-basement.

The room was full of people working on the birds. There was a smell of glue and paint, and an air of quiet intensity. Ferguson’s office door was closed. Becky opened it and stuck her head in.

“You! I’ve been trying to call you all over town!” They went in, closing the door behind them. Wilson leaned against it. “I wish this cubicle had a ceiling,” Becky said, “it’d be more secure.”

“Secure?”

“We’d better fill you in. I’m afraid you’re in great danger, Doctor. Evans—the Medical Examiner—he’s just been mauled to death.”

Ferguson reacted as if he had been hit. His hands moved trembling to his face. Then he slowly lowered them, staring into them. “I’ve found out a lot about the werewolves this morning,” he said almost inaudibly. “I’ve been down to the public library.” He looked up, his face impassively concealing the determination he had formed to try to communicate with the creatures. “It’s all there, just like I thought it would be. The evidence that this species is intelligent is pretty strong. *Canis Lupus Sapiens*. The Wolfen. That’s what I want to call them.”

Wilson didn’t say anything; Becky didn’t want to. She stared at the scientist. Wolfen indeed. They were killers. Ferguson’s expression betrayed his innocent excitement at his discovery. It was obvious that he still didn’t understand the extremity of his danger. She felt sorry for him—sorry in a detached, professional way like she felt sorry for the people left behind after murders. Residue, Wilson called them, the red-eyed wives and numbed husbands who were usually found slobbering over their victim’s body. Most murder is a family affair. But far worse were the cases where you had to call some frantic soul who had been waiting hours for a loved one to come home—somebody who wasn’t on the way anymore. “Hello, Mr. X, we’re detectives. May we come in? Very sorry to tell you, Mrs. X was found murdered at blah blah,” the rest of it said into a fog of grief beyond

communication.

“Join the hunted,” Wilson said, “and welcome. Maybe we’ll form a co-op.”

The humor was strained but it seemed to get a positive reaction from Ferguson. “You know,” he said, “the damn thing of it is, these creatures are so *murderous*. That’s what makes them unusual. Canines are a notably friendly race. Take the timber wolf—all the legends, the Jack London stories, that’s mostly crap. I mean, you threaten a wolf and you know what’ll happen? That wolf will turn over on its back like a dog. They aren’t dangerous.” He laughed. “It’s ironic. Science just figured that out about the wolf in the past few years. Here we were so sure that the great canine predator was just a myth—and now this. But I think we have an extraordinary chance here—there must be some point of communication between us and them.”

“To a deer, Doctor Ferguson, the wolf is incredibly dangerous. No wolf is going to turn turtle if it’s threatened by a deer. The wolf isn’t dangerous to man because he doesn’t count us among his prey. But look at the deer—to them the wolf is a scourge from hell.”

Ferguson nodded slowly. “So these... things are to us as wolves are to deer. I agree. They are also an intelligent species and as such represent an extraordinary opportunity.”

Wilson laughed out loud. The sound sent a chill down Becky’s spine. It was not the laugh of a normal human being but that of somebody deeply frightened, bordering on hysteria. She wondered how much longer she would have his help. And his mind! He had saved them in the park by bare seconds. How many more times would he do it? Or could he? Would the traps just keep getting more and more subtle until finally the hunted were down? As far as Ferguson and his ideas about communication, she dismissed them. He hadn’t seen what these creatures did to people.

“Let’s plan out our next moves,” she said. “We’ve got to be very damn careful if what just happened is any example of what’s on the way.” Ferguson asked for the details of Evans’ death. Wilson related the story, very factually, very coldly, how the werewolves had wounded a patrolman out searching for evidence, how this had lured them into an ambush, the escape on scooters just at the moment Wilson pieced the thing together, the subsequent discovery of the M. E.’s body in the car.

“So they missed you and took him instead.” Wilson was silent for a long moment. “Yeah,” he said at last, “I wish to hell I had realized—but I didn’t I just never thought of him being in danger.”

“Why not?”

“In retrospect I suppose it’s obvious. But I didn’t think of it then. That’s the damn truth.” He breathed a ragged sigh. “The old s.o.b. was a good man. He was a hell of a pro.”

Coming from Wilson that was a soaring epitaph indeed. “Let’s plan our moves,” Becky said again. “Plan what! We haven’t got anything to plan!”

“Oh come on, Wilson, take it easy. We might as well try. I thought we were going to try to take pictures tonight. Let’s plan that.”

“How about planning how to survive until tonight? Wouldn’t that be a better thing to plan, since it looks kind of hard to do?”

She shook her head and said nothing. He was a petulant bastard. Up to now she had relied on him, had always assumed that he would pull them through. And he had. This morning was an example. But he was cracking now, getting closer and closer to the edge. Wilson had always been afraid of life, now he was afraid of death when it came close. And how did Becky herself feel? As if she didn’t intend to die. She was afraid and not sure that any of them would survive—least of all herself—but she wasn’t about to give in. Wilson

had taken charge of this case so far and he had done fine. But he was getting tired. It looked like her turn now.

“Wilson, I said we were going to plan our moves. Now listen. First, we’ve got to let Underwood know the score. We’ve got evidence that’s going to be Goddamn hard to ignore. I mean, Evans getting murdered is international news. They’ve got to say something about it. And you can be damn sure the TV stations and the papers are on the scene. How are they going to take it? Medical Examiner mutilated beyond recognition. It’s going to require a damn good explanation.”

“Don’t breathe a word of this to the papers,” Ferguson said, suddenly understanding the significance of Becky’s statements. “You’ll cause all kinds of trouble—panic, fear, it’ll be hell. And the Wolfen will be threatened in just the way we don’t want— grossly, by idiots with shotguns. Some might get hurt at first but they’ll adapt quickly, and when they do they’ll be that much harder to find. Our chance will be lost—maybe for generations to come.”

“How hard to find are they now?” Wilson asked bitterly.

“Well, obviously hard. I wasn’t saying that they were easy to deal with at all. But you might not realize it, Detective Wilson—if these creatures get it into their heads to completely disappear, they can do it.”

“You mean become invisible?” Wilson’s voice was rising. He seemed about to lunge at the scientist.

“For all practical purposes. Right now they’re being very careless. Witness the fact that you’ve seen them. That’s a sign of carelessness on their part. And there’s a reason. They know that it’s a risk to allow themselves to be seen by you, but it’s very limited because they also know that you will in all likelihood not live to describe them to others.”

“Maybe and maybe not.”

“They’re predators, Detective, and they have the arrogance of predators. Don’t expect them to fear man. Do we fear hogs and sheep? Do we respect them?”

“We damn well aren’t sheep, Doctor! We’re people, we have brains and souls!”

“Sheep have brains. As for souls, I have no way of measuring that. But we know every possible move a sheep might make. There is no way a sheep can fool a man. I suspect that the analogy holds true here too.”

“Wonderful. Then what am I doing alive? Wouldn’t they have killed me last night in the alley of Becky’s building? Wouldn’t that make sense? But they didn’t. They weren’t fast enough. I got my gun out before they made their move.”

Becky broke in. “I hope they *are* arrogant, frankly. It’s our only chance.”

Ferguson raised his eyebrows and smiled. “Yes,” he said, “unless they’re playing a little game with you.”

“A game,” Wilson said, “what do you mean a game?”

“Well, they’re intelligent, they’re hunters, creatures of action. Most of their hunting must be pretty damn easy. You’re different, though, you’re a challenge. They might be spreading it out for fun.”

Wilson looked as if he would like to throttle the scientist. “Fine,” he said, “if they’re playing games with us let ’em play. Maybe we’ll get the fuck out of the trap in the meantime.” He spat. “Who the hell knows?”

They ran, desperate for cover. Humanity was pouring into the park, policemen by the hundreds swarming down every path, passing over in helicopters, roaring along in cars and on scooters. The sharp scent of human flesh exposed to cold air mingled with the suffocating sweetness of exhaust fumes. And they came from every direction. All around the park the sirens shrieked, the tone causing sharp agony in the ears of the fleeing pack. Voices called back and forth over radios; men shouted to one another. And then there was a new smell, thick and putrid—a parody of their own scent. It was dogs. The pack stopped, cocked ears: three dogs by the sound of their claws clattering on ice; eager to be unleashed by the exciting rasp of their breathing. Three dogs, heavy, strong, excited. And they had the scent, the pack could practically feel them yearning on their tethers, choking themselves with eagerness to give chase.

Very well, let them come and die. Dogs could no more hunt the pack than chimpanzees could hunt men. Defense against these animals was based on established procedures because the pattern of the animals' attack never varied. The only trouble was that it meant more time wasted in this accursed park— more time for the swarm of policemen to get closer, more time for their luck to run out.

And the pack was divided now: on one side were the two old ones and the second-mated pair. On the other was the third-mated pair. This pair, the youngest, had run after the two humans who had escaped just an instant too soon, and given up the chase a few moments early. Another breath, another footstep and the quarry would have been down. The beautifully laid plan was wasted—or almost wasted; the old man in the car had been all they could kill. Very well. Certainly he had known of the pack. They had heard him in the car, his booming old voice muttering human words with the others... words like wolf... wolf... wolf...

Human language, so complex and rapidly spoken, was hard to follow, but they all knew certain words that had been handed down from generation to generation. Among these was “wolf.” Traveling between cities the pack sometimes encountered these gentle things of the forest. They had soft, beautiful faces and sweet eyes, and the blank expressions of animals. Yet one almost wanted to speak to them, to wave the tail or knock the paw, but they had not the brains to answer. They would trot along behind a pack for days, their empty smiling heads wagging from side to side— and cower away when the pack took a man for food. After that the wolves would slink out of sight, fascinated and terrified by the ways of the pack. But wolves were wild and never accompanied the packs into the cities. Among men only the packs were safe— and so safe! Such a huge quantity of food in the cities, all of it blankly oblivious, as easy to hunt as a tree would be.

The wolf looked not unlike the werewolf. And in the car they had been saying the word over and over —wolf... wolf. So the little old man was contaminated by the other two, the two who knew. He died instantly. They had crept up to the car the moment the other cars had left in search of the two on the scooters. They had crept closer and closer, and one of them had opened the door. The man's hands fluttered up before his face and his bowels let loose. That was all that happened. Then they were on him, pulling and tearing, ripping full of rage, spitting the bloody bits out, angry that the two important ones had been missed, angry that this one also dared to confront them with his evil knowledge. They had cracked open the head and plunged their claws into the brains, plunged and torn to utterly and completely destroy the filthy knowledge.

And in their anger they had also shredded the interior of the car, ripping at the seats for sheer hate, feeling the red pulse of their frustration well up inside them as they tasted the very salt of the two that were to be killed. They tore the interior of the car apart, and would have done more to it if they had known how. Somehow the humans made these things move, and they made other similar things fly in the air. Humans flew in these. And then one of them caused this thing to make a noise. They abandoned it at once, afraid that

it would begin to move with the pack still inside. Man was of two faces: naked and weak, clothed and powerful. The same man who had no defense on his own might be completely invulnerable in a car with a gun.

The pack had speed and hearing and eyesight and most of all smell to protect itself. Man had metal and weapons. They envied man his big flat paddles that could do so much more than their hands. The things looked clumsy but they were flexible. It was with his paddles or hands that man fashioned these mysterious objects that rolled and flew, and the guns that shot. And it was because of them that man had been able to inhabit the cities. No pack knew how these cities came about, but man inhabited them, keeping for himself the warmth they produced in winter, and the dryness that was not affected even by the most violent rain. While the sky poured water or snow man sat comfortably in the cities. How these things grew and why man possessed them nobody could say.

Just as well—it kept the herds of men closely gathered so that hunting was easy.

But hunting could also be fun, if, for example, you left the city and went into the forest during the season of dead leaves. Then you would find men armed with guns, men stalking deer and moose, men who could be dangerous if you let them. It was a good game—you made a little extra noise and let the man become aware of you. Then you hunted him, letting him see just enough so that he would try hard to escape. And they tried so hard! They swam into rivers, climbed trees, covered themselves with leaves. They tried all manner of stratagem, doubling back, leaping ravines, swinging through forests in the tree-tops. And all the time their scent followed them like a blaring noise. But the pack made conditions for itself during these hunts. If the man got to a certain point, he couldn't be chased again for a hundred heartbeats. If he got to another point, two hundred. So the better he was, the harder they made it for themselves. Finally, with the very good ones there was a last desperate chase before he reached his car, a chase that ended with him rolling up useless windows, fumbling with keys, and dying there, being eaten while the blood still pulsed through his exhausted heart.

But not many of them were fun to hunt. For the most part it was the same routine as it would be with these eager, stupid dogs. Certainly the humans were closing in, but it was very hard to believe that a man not encased in metal was a threat. Killing the three dogs would waste a little time, but in the end the pack would escape from these human beings. Only if the whole city was aware would humanity become dangerous. Everybody knew that this was possible, that the two enemies could contaminate all the men of this city with the dirty knowledge. Then the pack would be endangered, then the pack would flee. But it wasn't necessary just yet.

The dogs were released. Their voices pealed, communicating the crazed, heedless excitement that was characteristic of the creature. Their breath began to pulse, their feet to pad faster and faster as they ran madly toward the pack.

They had chosen their stand carefully. A tree overhung the path, which was itself choked by heavy underbrush. The only way to the pack was up a slope, through this brush. The second female went down to the base of the low hill. She sat on her haunches, waiting to trot into the trap as soon as the dogs saw her. They were stupid animals, and you had to make it very clear what they were supposed to do if you expected them to do it.

They swarmed up the path howling, saw the female, who growled and leaped to make sure, then ran into the underbrush. The dogs were hot behind her when the rest of the pack dropped out of the trees onto them. Their bodies writhed, the howls of excitement changed to shrieks of agony, and then nothing. The carcasses were hurled deep into the brush and the pack moved quickly on.

They went in the direction where the smell of man was the least, coming out onto a snowy roadway and moving to the stone wall that surrounded the park. A short trot down the wall was where they had made their kill the night before. Already it was afternoon and their minds were turning to food. But they would not kill anywhere near their last hunt—that might awaken man’s understanding. Best to spread the kills far apart, as far as possible.

As one the pack stopped. They raised their muzzles and inhaled deeply. Across the street was a large building with a statue in front of it. And in the air was the faintest whiff of... the two.

Had they passed by here recently or were they just possibly inside that building? It was hard to tell by the quality of the odor, it was too faint. Just the slightest trace, not enough to tell even whether the body was hot or cold, indoors or out.

They crossed the snowy street and went into the grounds around the building. Yes, that scent was now a little stronger. Caution! These creatures were not dumb and they knew that they were being hunted. Better be very slow and careful. They trotted around the building, three in one direction and three in the other, easily leaping the small balustrades that surrounded the place. In this way they identified by scent which doors were in use and which were not. Without even needing to converse they came together again, then spread out to watch the doors that might be used. They hid themselves wherever they could, crouching along fences, curling up in the small clumps of bushes, lying behind stone retainers. And the scent hung here, that distinctive sweet smell that went with the woman, the denser smell of the man. And there was another familiar odor, lighter and more salty: one they had smelled near the two before.

Each human’s distinctive odor separated him from all the others, and the pack separated these three from the great mass of odors around them. And they settled down to wait. Waiting was easy for them. It added the excitement of anticipation.

Sam Garner pulled his car to a stop in front of the Museum of Natural History. He got out, relying on his press ID in the window to ward off the tow-away patrol. He paused before the imposing building, looking up at the statue of Teddy Roosevelt. The Great White Hunter with a guilt complex. Sweet guy. Sam trotted up the stairs. Two detectives were in there whom he wanted to see. He didn’t know exactly why he wanted to do this. He didn’t especially like detectives, and it hadn’t been easy to track these two down. But here he was and here they were, and he wanted very much to find out how they would react when he gave them a certain piece of information.

He had it planned. He would say, “You understand that Medical Examiner Evans was mauled to death in the park this morning.” They would say yes to that. Then he would say, “The incident occurred in your car.” He was very interested in watching their reaction to that. Somewhere along through here there was some kind of a story, maybe big. And these two just might have some idea what it was.

Chapter 9

Carl Ferguson's phone rang. He picked it up, then handed it to Wilson. "For you. Underwood."

Wilson took the phone. "Jesus, Herb, how'd you know I was here?"

"Lucky guess. Actually I've made about six calls. This was a last resort."

"That's accurate. What's on your mind?"

"Evans. What killed him?"

"You know perfectly well, Herbie-boy."

"Wolves?"

"Werewolves. Same as killed the other six."

"Six?"

"Sure. The bloody bench we found this morning was all that remained of number six. O-negative blood. No ID as yet beyond that."

"Look, I gotta tell you there's a hell of a lot of press out pounding the pavements on this one. We're crawlin' with 'em down here, plus the park's full of 'em. Reporters from every damn where—Evans was a famous man. So far nobody's made the connection between his death and the other murders. I mean, obviously there're similarities. So don't, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, I won't. I haven't got enough proof so it might not embarrass you as much as it should. There's a cake, but I ain't got icing."

"Like what?"

"Like evidence that will convince even you. When I've got that, I'll go to the papers, but not before. That much you can count on."

"Goddamn you, George. If it weren't for Old One Forty-seven I'd sign your fuckin' walking papers."

"Well, Herbie, now what can you expect? You were a dumb kid and you're a dumb grown-up. You should have given in a long time ago, when you first knew I was right."

"Which was?"

"The first time you heard my story. It's dead right and you know it. You're just too damn stubborn to admit it, or too dumb. Probably both."

This was followed by a silence at the other end of the line that lengthened until Wilson thought that Underwood had hung up on him. Finally he spoke. "Detective Wilson," he said, "have you ever considered, if your story is true, what kind of public reaction it will cause?"

"Panic, mayhem, blood in the streets. Plus heads will roll. The heads of the people who didn't do anything about it when they could."

"My head. You'd sacrifice this city for *that*? Can you imagine the economic loss, the destruction? Thousands of people would pour the hell out of the city. Mass exodus. Looting. This is a great city, Detective Wilson, but I think that would break it"

"Yeah. And you along with it. People will come back when they realize that the werewolves aren't just a local attraction. But you won't come back, Herbie. You'll be completely retired."

Underwood's voice was bitter. "I must say, I hope to hell you're wrong. Right now I can't think of anything that'll give me more pleasure than kicking your ass off the force."

Now *that* would be a hell of a good feeling.” This time Wilson was sure that he had hung up because of the bang the phone made.

“Good God,” Becky said, “what in hell ever possessed you to talk to him like that!”

“He’s a jerk. He was always a fuckin’ jerk. Hell, he was a jerk when he was runnin’ around in a dirty bathing suit half the summer. A fuckin’ two-bit jerk.”

“That doesn’t give you the right... I mean, I know you grew up together and all that... but my God, you’ll destroy both of us!”

“What in the world are you two talking about?”

They turned, surprised at the strange voice. A small man in a cheap raincoat stood there smiling more than he should. “Name’s Garner. New York *Post*. You folks Detectives Neff and Wilson?”

“Come back later. We don’t want any right now.”

“Oh, come on, Wilson, let him—”

“We don’t want any now!”

“Just one question—how come Doctor Evans was murdered in your car? You have any comment on that?” His eyes watched them. Of course he didn’t expect a straight answer. It was how they looked that counted. One way, he would know there was a story. Another way, he would know zip.

“Get the hell out of here!! Whassamatter, you deaf! Move!”

He scurried away, down the hall and up the stairs, smiling from ear to ear. He loved it! There was going to be a damn *good* story! As soon as he got back to his car he called in for a photographer. A couple of pictures of them as they left the museum wouldn’t hurt. Nice pictures, come in handy later.

“Sometimes I think maybe we should tell them something,” Ferguson asked when the reporter was gone. “I think it’ll help us if we got more people involved.”

“You tell them.”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly. I haven’t got enough—”

“Evidence. Neither have we, and that’s why we can’t tell them either. We’ve got to wait until we get that clincher. Once we have it, we can blow the story from here to Moscow for all I care, but I’m certainly not going to break it early. Can you imagine—detective alleges werewolf killed M. E.? Underwood would dearly love that.”

His own voice made Wilson suddenly very tired. The long night ahead was bearing down remorselessly; he felt a knot growing in his stomach. Already the light in the room had changed. This time of year the days were quick, the nights long. And tonight moonrise would be late. Despite the lights of the city there would be shadows everywhere in just a few hours. The world around him seemed to be frowning, looming down at him, revealing within its softness a savagery he had never suspected. You think that the world is one thing, it turns out to be another. What appeared to be a flower is actually a gaping wound. The fact that time was passing ate at him, drove him closer and closer to—the truth, and the truth was they were going to die. Soon he would feel it, he knew it. He would feel what Evans had felt, the sensation of those *things* pulling him apart with their teeth. And Becky too, that beautiful skin torn open—he could hardly tolerate the thought

He had always had a knack for prophecy—now he had a premonition. He was standing in the middle of Becky’s bedroom when one of them jumped out of the curtains and buried its head in his stomach. As the sheer pain killed, he saw its tail wagging.

Then something hit him.

“Come on! Good Christ, kid, what the hell’s got into you?” Becky? Becky was shaking him.

“Now, now calm down—here, sit him down. It’s a stress reaction, that’s all. Call his name, don’t let him get away.”

“Wilson!”

“Wha—”

“Call a doctor, you jerk! What the hell’s the matter, he acts like he’s made of rubber!”

“Stress did it, extreme stress. Keep calling him, he’s coming back.”

“Wilson, you motherfucker, wake up!” In response he pulled her down to the chair and clumsily embraced her, held her against him. A choked noise started in his chest. She felt his stubbly beard rub against her cheek, felt his dry lips come into contact with her neck, felt his body trembling, smelled his sour, rumpled jacket. After a moment she drew back, pushing at his shoulders, and was immediately released.

“God, I feel awful.”

Ferguson gave him some water in a little paper cup, which he spilled at once. “Hell, I—”

“Take it easy. Something happened to you.”

“It was a stress reaction,” Ferguson said. “It’s not uncommon. People in crashing planes, burning buildings, trapped people, experience it. If the situation isn’t terminal, the condition passes.” Ferguson was trying to smile but his face was too pale to make it seem very real. “I’ve read about it, but I’ve never seen it before,” he added lamely.

Wilson closed his eyes, bowed his head and put his fists to his temples. He looked like a man shielding himself from an explosion.

“Goddamn, I wish to hell we were out of this!” He had shouted it so loud that the faint hubbub beyond the tiny office came to a halt.

“Please,” Ferguson said, “you could cause me problems.”

“Sorry, Doctor, *excuse* me.”

“Well, you have to admit—”

“Yeah, yeah, save it. Becky, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry too.” His eyes pleaded up at her, and she met them with what she hoped was a look of reassurance.

“Don’t think about death. You thought about death. Think about—our camera. Tonight we’ll get our pictures and then things’ll start to move. All the evidence, plus the pictures—nobody will be able to deny it.”

“And we’ll get some protection?”

“Damn right. Whatever the hell happens, it’ll be something. Better than this, God knows.”

For the first time Becky allowed herself to imagine it. What form would protection take? A cold stab of realization went through her—about the only thing that would help would be virtual imprisonment. At first it would mean a good night’s sleep, but then it would get stifling, finally unendurable, and she would give it up—and every moment outside would hold danger, every shadow the potential to kill. It was hard to turn her

mind away from this train of thought. And now death flashed into her own imagination—how does it feel to be ripped to pieces: will there be desperate agony or will some mechanism of the brain provide relief?

She couldn't think about that either. Think about the next moment, not the future. Think about the camera. Men in battle must do it that way, keeping their minds fixed on the next shell hole, shutting out the deadly whisper of bullets, the groans of the unlucky, until they themselves...

She turned her mind from it again and said in a tired voice, "Dick probably has the camera by now. It's nearly three. What say we get over there and plan the stakeout? It's gonna be a long night."

Ferguson smiled a little. "Frankly, I think it'll be exciting. Obviously there's danger. But my God, look at the magnitude of the discovery! All of history mankind has been living in a dream, and suddenly we're about to discover reality. It's an extraordinary moment."

Both the detectives stared at him in amazement. Their lives and habits of thought emphasized the danger of the quest, not its beauty. Ferguson's words made them realize that there was beauty there too. The presence of the werewolf, once proven, would completely change the life of man. Of course there would be panic and terror—but there would also be the new challenge. Man the hunted—and his hunter, so skilled, so perfectly equipped that he seemed almost supernatural. Man had always confronted nature by beating it down. This was going to require something new—the werewolf would have to be accepted. He wasn't likely to submit to a beating.

Becky felt her inner resolve strengthening. She knew the feeling. It often came when they were confronting a particularly rough case, the kind of case where you really *wanted* to find the killer. The ones where a drug pusher was knocked off or some other scum—those you didn't really care about. But when it was an innocent, a child, an old person—you got this feeling, like you were *going* to make that collar. Vengeance, that's what it was. And Ferguson's words had that effect. It damn well *was* an extraordinary moment. Mankind was already in this situation and didn't know it, and had a right to know. There might not be much that could be done about it, not at first, but the victims at least had the right to see the face of their attacker. "Let's call Dick, make sure he's ready. No point in moving through the streets until we have to." She picked up the phone.

"Make sure he's got walkie-talkies," Wilson rumbled. "Civilian models. I don't want them on the police band."

Dick answered on the first ring. He sounded grim. His voice was subdued as he answered Becky's questions. Unspoken was the fact that he also had heard of Evans's death and knew what had killed him. She concluded the brief conversation and put down the phone. "He's got the camera. The radios he'll pick up this afternoon. A couple of hand-held CB's." Becky had felt something new when she heard Dick's voice. There was a strong warmth in her, a sensation of closeness that she never remembered, not even when they were first married. If he had been here she would have embraced him just to feel the solid presence of his body. Too bad for Dick, he was a better human being than he was a cop. Too good to tough out life on the force, that was Dick. God knows it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference to the Board of Inquiry when it came along, but there was a hell of a lot of justice to shaking down organized crime to help an old man in an honest nursing home. His old man. It was going to be hard when he got his Board, Goddamn hard.

Wilson was now staring off into space, vacillating between competent involvement and numbness.

“Come on, George, snap out of it! You’re a million miles away. If we’re gonna organize a stakeout we’d better get it together. We need to take sightings with that camera, set up observation points that are damn well *covered*, all of that. We’d better go over there and do what’s gotta be done before it gets dark.”

Becky hadn’t allowed herself to think about all that had to be done because it meant leaving the momentary safety of the museum and facing the streets. But it looked like nobody was going to think about it if she didn’t. Wilson sure as hell better hold up his end later, when it was going to count.

“I hadn’t realized we were so close to leaving,” Ferguson said. “There are some things I want to know from you two. A couple of things I don’t quite understand. I’d like to get them cleared up before we move. It might be important.”

Becky raised her eyebrows. “So OK, shoot.”

“Well, I don’t quite understand the sequence of events this morning. How exactly did Evans get killed?”

Becky didn’t say so, but she would be glad to hear Wilson’s explanation as well. The werewolves were obviously superb hunters, but how exactly they had accomplished their feats this morning was still fuzzy in her mind.

Wilson replied, his voice a monotone. “It must have started when we were at Central Park West and Seventy-second investigating one of their homicides. Obviously, they had us under observation at that time.” A chill went through Becky, remembering the morning, the crowd of men and cars, the blood-soaked bench. All that had saved them was the presence of so many other cops. Wilson went on. “They knew that they couldn’t get to us easily unless we were in a more isolated situation. So they arranged a lure. It’s a technique human hunters have used for generations. And it worked beautifully in this instance. They went into the park, found an isolated patrolman beating the bushes for evidence and wounded him. The fact that he died later made no difference to them. In Africa hunters tether wildebeest to lure lions. The wildebeest might think it’s unfair, but they aren’t expected to survive. Neither was our lure. As soon as our car pulled up, the werewolves must have started creeping toward it. When we returned to it they would have been underneath, jumped out and—two dead detectives. I guess I got it figured just in time.” He fumbled in his pockets. Becky handed him a cigarette. Something seemed to be coming over him. For a long moment his face kept getting grayer and grayer, then he took a deep, ragged breath and continued. “I was lucky, but them leaving that guy half-killed just didn’t add up. Then I figured it. We were in their trap. That was when I told Becky to take off on the scooter.”

“And Evans—”

“The last I saw he was sitting in the car. You’d have thought he would have locked the doors. I guess he didn’t think of it in time.”

“They opened the doors?” Becky asked.

Wilson shrugged. “What’s surprising about that?”

He was right. It was just hard to accept, even with all she had seen. Somehow you just couldn’t see animals behaving like that. But then, they weren’t animals at all, were they? They had minds, that qualified them as... something. You couldn’t include them as part of humanity. They were fundamentally our enemy. It was in their blood, and in ours. Although they were intelligent they couldn’t be called human. Or could they? Did they have civil rights, duties, obligations? The very question was absurd. Despite their intelligent nature there would be no place for them in human society.

Except as hunter. There was a very definite place for the hyena in wildebeest society,

for the leopard in baboon society. Their presence was respected and accommodated because there was *no choice*. No matter how hard they tried, the wildebeest and the baboon were never going to defeat their predators. So the social order reflected their presence. Baboons protected the young, exposed the weak. They hated it but they did it. You would too, in time.

Ferguson was the first to speak after absorbing Wilson's explanation. "It fits," he said. "That's a very clever plan. They must have been amazed that you got away."

"Unless they're playing games."

"Not likely. You're too dangerous. Can you imagine how it must feel, knowing that your way of life is about to be destroyed by just two human beings? Hell, they probably knock off one or two people a day for food. Hunting you down must have seemed easy at first. No, I don't think they're playing games with you. You're damn hard to get, that's all. Like all predators, when they come up against competent members of the prey species they have a hard time. They aren't equipped to deal with determined resistance. Among animals, this nets out to a trial by strength. The young moose kicks hell out of the wolf. With us it's wits—ours against theirs."

Wilson nodded. Becky noticed that what Ferguson was saying was having a good effect on him. And her too, for that matter. It didn't change the fear, but it added some perspective. You began to get the feeling that the werewolves were almost omnipotent and you were like mice in a trap, just waiting there until they got tired of toying with you. But maybe Ferguson was right. After all they had thus far defeated the werewolves every time. They could go on defeating them. But then another thought came to her, an ugly one that had been hiding in the back of her mind untouched. "How long," she asked, "will they keep up the hunt?"

"A long time," Ferguson said. "Until they succeed —or get talked out of it."

Becky pushed hard at that thought, got rid of it. They couldn't afford an ambivalent attitude. "OK, kids, let's hit the road. We have work to do."

Herbert Underwood was troubled. He was sitting in the Commissioner's outer office. The last cigar of the day was in his pocket but he resisted the impulse to smoke it. Commissioner didn't like cigars. Again Herb went through his mind, touching each point of the case, weighing it, trying to see how it could be used to strengthen his position and weaken the Commissioner's. Word from Vince Merillo, the new mayor's first deputy-to-be, was that the Commissioner still had an inside track to reappointment. That would mean that Herbert Underwood would reach retirement before he reached the top job. And he wanted that job bad. Wanting the next job up the ladder was more than a habit with him. He deserved the promotion, he was an excellent cop. A good man too, good administrator. Hell, he was a better man than the Commissioner. All he needed was a nice, ugly embarrassment for the Commissioner and Merillo would start mentioning the Chief of Detectives as successor. He was sure of Merillo's support. The guy owed him. Merillo was into a bank in a very ugly way and the Chief of Detectives knew it. The DA didn't—and wouldn't as long as Merillo played on the right side of the net.

"Come in, Herb," the Commissioner said from the door of the inner office. Underwood got up and went inside. The Commissioner closed the door. "Nobody here but us rats," he said in his singsong voice. "I got two mayors screaming at me. I got reporters hiding in my file cabinet. I got TV crews in the bathroom. Not to mention the Public." He added in a more clipped tone, "Tell me what happened to Evans."

"Oh come on, Bob, you know I'm up against a brick wall."

“Yeah? I’m sorry to hear that, very sorry. Because it may mean I’ll have to replace you.”

Underwood wanted to laugh out loud. The Commissioner was crashing around like a wounded elephant. The pressure from upstairs must be hell. Bad for him, very bad. “You mean that? It’d be a relief.” He chuckled.

The Commissioner glared at him. “You know, our new mayor is a very smart man.”

“I know that.”

“And so is Vince Merillo, your good buddy.”

Underwood nodded.

“Well, here is what the Mayor and his first-deputy-in-waiting think about this case. Want to hear?”

“Sure.”

“They have got the Wilson theory on their brains. I mean, essentially the Wilson theory. The DiFalco mess, the Bronx mess, the bloody bench, the gutted patrolmen and Evans—”

“All the work of hybrid wolves. I know. I’ve talked to Merillo.”

“So what’s your position?”

“The theory is total bullshit. I’ve known Wilson since we were kids and I think he’s pulling a fast one on us, trying to get us to buy bullshit so we’ll look like fools. Especially me. You I don’t think he gives a damn about.”

“OK. So what else are you working on?”

“I just organized a special squad. They’re going to be under Commander Busciglio of the Fifth Homicide Zone. Goddamn good guy. Good cop, lot of smarts. They will be investigating the three incidents that happened today in Central Park. We’ll be working on the assumption that these incidents are entirely separate from the Bronx case and the Brooklyn case. I think that makes sense. It’s not out of the question that they’re all related, but it’s very farfetched. That enough to keep me from getting fired?”

“You know I’m not gonna fire you, Herb. Hell, you’re the guy slated to kill me off. If I fire you it’ll look like sour grapes to the Mayor.” He laughed. “Can’t let that happen.” He had been standing in front of Underwood, the two men in the middle of the office. Now he went over to a leather chair and sat down, motioning the Chief to follow. “Herb, you and I, we’ve been buddies a long time. I gotta tell you though, I’ve been hearing some things about you that’ve made me very sad. Like, you’re trying to get me dumped, to put it bluntly. Why are you doing that, Herb?”

The Chief smiled. He had to hand it to the Commissioner, the man didn’t play around. “No, sir, I’m not trying anything of the kind. In fact, like on this case, I’m doing everything I can to strengthen your position. I think we’ll get a good solution very quickly. It’ll help you and because of that it’ll help me. That’s as far as my ambition goes.”

Now it was the Commissioner’s turn to smile. He turned on a crinkly, jolly one, wore it for a few seconds, then nodded, seemingly satisfied. He spread his hands in a gesture of meekest assent. “OK,” he said, “just keep up the good work. Glad you’re still on the team.”

Underwood left after further protestations of loyalty, capped by a solemn handshake. The Commissioner watched him go. Hell, with technique like that the guy would make a damn fine commissioner if he won out. Good projection of sincerity. Handles himself well.

But he ain't gonna fuck me. He must think I'm some kind of schoolboy. He closed the door behind Underwood and stood there a long moment. Soon the Chief would be blown so high and wide he wouldn't have a political future of any kind. So the son of a bitch wanted to kill off Bob Righter. Fine, let him try! Now the Commissioner's face set. He leafed through a report on his desk. It was titled "Project Werewolf. Eyes Only." It had been seen only by Merillo, the new mayor, and the current mayor. It had been written by Bob Righter, in longhand.

This was the only copy.

He opened it, reading to review. He had written it three hours ago, had taken it to the Mayor and then to the Mayor-elect. There had been a meeting and it had been agreed that not one word of the report would be made public unless absolutely necessary. The Commissioner started to say his thoughts aloud, then stopped, the words unspoken in his throat. How often do I talk to myself, he wondered. Getting old. But not tired, dammit. Let Herb Underwood realize that once and for all. Not tired. Underwood was going off on a hell of a wild-goose chase. That stinking Wilson had been much closer from the start. Brilliant but a creep. A good cop after his fashion. A good cop with a good partner... Becky Neff... no matter how old you get, you'd still like to get into something like that. Hell, stay clear. Her husband was bent—maybe she was too for that matter...

He dismissed them from his mind and returned to the matter of the report. It was the first time in his career that he had written something so secret, and kept its contents so close to the top. In a position like his a man gets into the habit of using advisers, conferees, administrative assistants. He becomes not an individual but an office. He identifies himself as "we." Not in this case, though. There was too much here to entrust to staff members. It was not only a horrendous crime, it was also a priceless opportunity to completely outdistance Underwood, to crush him. "Herbie's gonna love me," he said, this time without realizing he had spoken aloud. Now that he had the endorsement of both his current and future bosses he would begin to draw together the team that would solve the *real* Werewolf case. He pulled out a yellow legal pad and put it down beside his report. He drew a box at the top, and put the letter *C* in the box. That's me, he thought. Then he drew a dotted line to the Chief of Detectives and put a *U* in that box. And that's as far as he goes. All alone in his box with his Goddamn *U*. Now another box, with a full line to the Commissioner. Call him Deputy Assistant for Internal Affairs. DAIA. OK, now give him a staff. Three more boxes under him, all Police Commanders. Now a team. Three squads under the three Commanders, All high power. Now assign a Tactical Patrol Force Group to the Deputy Assistant, the grunt-work department so all these officers don't have to get their hands dirty. Very nice. About two hundred men. The Mad Bomber had commanded a crew of two hundred and fifty. Son of Sam had tied up three hundred. The Werewolf Killers would be more economical with just two hundred.

Now he pulled a small cassette recorder out of his desk drawer. He rewound the cassette and played it again. Voices, confusion, then a whispered word, unintelligible. Then more. "Mama... hey look out (a sob)... there it is... (Voice: what is it, Jack?) Dog... somethin' weird... don't don't get it... hey... oh, wow that was—oh, hey it cut, cut my uniform... ouch... aaaAAHH! (Voice: Jack, you need more? The doc's gonna give you more painkiller.) Yeah... OK, there was a dog... big motherfucker... weird, like a human face... a couple of others standing nearby... face, not like a person... you'll never get it..." More whispers. (Second voice: the patient is expiring.) Tape ends.

The patrolman hadn't given them much to go on, but it was more than they had gotten before. Enough for a good start. M.O. was established. This added a rough description. He read the first sentence of his report: "The Werewolf Killers are a group of twisted individuals utilizing an extremely skillful disguise..." That was where Underwood was falling down: he didn't realize that there was a whole group, or that they were disguised.

Outside the museum tension was building. The sun had moved far down the sky. The first, faint smells of cooking were coming into the afternoon air. When the subways stopped beneath the street the sound of more and more feet were heard getting off. Man's afternoon ritual of moving back to his nest was under way. And this would also be occurring to the hated ones inside the building. There would be no need to take the risk of going inside after them. Soon they would want their food and their nests, and start their movement. Then the moment would come, not so long from now. Waiting like this made your heart soar, knowing that relief and success lay as the reward for patience. Soon they would come out, very soon.

Garner had returned to the scene of the Evans murder and picked up Rich Fields, the photographer the paper had sent to join him on the story. "We're gonna take some pictures of a couple of cops," he said to Fields.

"What for?"

"Nothin'. Don't even waste film. Just flashes. I want flashes."

"Great. Makes good sense. Keep convincin' me."

"Shut up, Fields, you're too dumb to understand."

They got into Garner's car and rattled out of the park, back up to the Museum of Natural History. Garner felt full of vitamins. There was a Goddamn good story in here and these two detectives were the exact center of the whole little cyclone. Ah, a beautiful story, had to be. Let the *Times* send fifty gentlemen downtown to worry the Police Commissioner, Sam Garner was going to stick right close to these two detectives until he got the story. He parked his car directly in front of the museum and settled back to wait. "Want me to start shootin'?"

"Shut up, Tonto. I'll tell you when. And make it fuckin' good if you don't mind. I mean, run up and flash at 'em. Make 'em mad."

"You payin' my hospital bills, honey?"

"The *Post* 'll take care of you, darlin'. Just do your thing."

He stared at the huge edifice. Sometime soon the two cops would appear in the doorway and start down. Fields would get after them with the camera. No words, no more questions. Those two cops were *scared* already. This would panic them. If they were hiding anything interesting the little picture-taking session would make them think the *Post* was on to it. So next time Sam Garner got to them maybe they'd start trying to save their own asses by doing a little singing.

It had happened before. Pressure breeds information. The first rule of investigative reporting. Make 'em think you know enough to hang 'em, then they'll give you what you need. Visions of delicious headlines went through his head. He didn't know exactly what they said, but they were there. The way it felt, he had a good week of dynamite on his hands. The boss would love it. It must be something really horrible. Whatever was going on, somebody had seen fit to tear the Medical Examiner apart. Not just kill him, but actually tear him apart. The skin had even been pulled down off the skull, the face nearly separated from the body. The throat was gone. The stomach was pulled open and the body severed so completely that the legs fell to the floor of the car when the orderlies tried to move the body. It had been a vicious murder, particularly so, unusually so. A monstrous murder. Hell of a bad thing. All of a sudden he felt kind of chilled, sick inside, like he was going to throw up. "Hurry up," he muttered under his breath. A drink lay just

the other side of this little assignment and he needed it very badly.

“I got some good stuff on Evans,” Fields said. “I mean—that was some mess.”

“I just been thinkin’ about it. Doesn’t make much sense, does it? Whoever did that must have hated the hell out of the guy. And right in broad daylight, right in the middle of the park. Strange as hell, weird as hell, you ask me.”

“Look close, boss. The doll and the old guy?”

“That’s them. Get moving.”

Fields opened the door of the car and walked forward to the base of the statue of Teddy Roosevelt that stood before the museum entrance. In this position he would be concealed from Neff and Wilson until they came down the steps and were beside him. They were moving quickly. Another man, hunched, tall, his hands folded before him, walked just behind them. There was something familiar in the way they moved. And then Fields realized why: in ’Nam, people under fire had moved like that.

As they came nearer he could hear their footsteps crunching on the snow. He stepped out from his position near the statue and started shooting. The flash popped in the gray afternoon light, and the three figures jumped away startled. Almost before he knew it there was a pistol in the hand of the old guy. The woman was also pointing a pistol at him. This all happened in the same strange slow motion that things had happened in the war, when an attack was going on. The closer you got to action, the more events separated into individual components. Then an end would come, usually violent, the roar of a claymore going up, the black arcing shapes against the sky, the screams and smoke... “Goddamn, they have guns and all I got is a camera.”

Something else moved and the old guy’s pistol roared. “Don’t shoot!” But it roared again, sending out sparks. The tall man shrieked. Now the woman’s pistol roared, kicking back in her hand, and roared again and again. But there, off in the snow, something black was skittering along—two things. That’s what they were firing at, not him. Then the three of them sprinted toward Sam’s car. “Come on,” the woman shouted over her shoulder, “move or you’re dead!”

Rich moved damn fast, diving into the back seat right across the lady cop’s knees. She pulled the door closed and extricated herself. “Step on it!” the old guy snarled at Sam, “step on it, Goddammit!”

But Sam wasn’t stepping on anything. He turned to face the old detective who was beside him in the front seat. “What the fuck,” he said in a high, silly-sounding voice.

The detective leveled his pistol on Sam. “Move this vehicle,” he said, “or I’ll blow your brains out.”

Sam pulled out into traffic very smartly. Neither he nor Rich had a mind to ask any more questions just now.

“We got one,” Becky said.

“Not dead,” Wilson replied.

Becky turned to Rich, who was sitting beside her, acutely aware of her salty, perfumey odor, of the warm pressure of her hip against his. “Thanks,” she said, “you saved our asses just then.”

“What the hell happened?” Sam managed to bleat.

“Nothin’,” Wilson replied. “Nothin’ happened. Your buddy with the camera got us riled.”

“Oh, come on, Wilson, tell them,” Ferguson said.

“Shut up, Doctor!” Becky said. “I’ll handle this. We don’t need press, we’ve talked about that.”

Wilson turned around in his seat, his face a twisted, mottled parody of itself. “If this gets out,” he said, “we might as well just kiss our asses good-bye right now! We haven’t got evidence, baby, and without it we’ll come across as a couple of kooks. Lemme tell you what’d happen. Shithead downtown would get us retired disabled. Mental. You know what’d happen then? Damn right you do! Those fuckers’d be on us so Goddamn fast!” He laughed, more of a snarl. Then he turned and faced forward. Ferguson glared at his back.

“Take us to One fifteen East Eighty-eighth Street,” Becky said, “and get the hell away from the park. Go down Columbus to Fifty-seventh and over that way.”

“And move the Goddamn thing,” Wilson said hoarsely. “You’re a Goddamn reporter, you can drive!” He chuckled now, a dry, spent noise. “What’re you gonna put in your gunfire report?” he asked her.

“Cleaning accident. Fired three shots while cleaning.”

Wilson nodded.

“Goddammit, I’ve got a right to know,” Sam said. “I have a right. I was the only reporter in the whole city smart enough to figure you two had the real story. The other fucks are down at Police Headquarters tryin’ to get a statement from the Commissioner. Just tell me what happened to Evans. Hell, what was going on just now I won’t even ask.”

Becky had leaned forward as he spoke, Wilson was in no shape to keep talking.

“Evans got killed. If we knew anything more we’d have a collar.”

“Oh. Then I suppose that shootumup was nothin’. I gotta tell you, you are two very funny cops. I ain’t never seen a cop pull out a piece and fire it like that just for a dog. Hell, that in itself is news.”

“I bet. Just keep your mouth shut and drive, please.”

“Is that any way to talk to a citizen?”

“You aren’t a citizen, you’re a reporter. There’s a difference.”

“What?”

Becky didn’t answer. Through the whole exchange Ferguson had sat motionless, leaning toward Becky Neff in the middle of the back seat, leaning away from the window. Sam noticed that Wilson was also sitting well away from the window, almost in the middle of the front seat. You could almost say that they were afraid something was going to come at them through the windows... except the windows were closed.

Chapter 10

This daylight was a curse. The leader of the pack, the one the others called Old Father, waited behind the fence that separated the front staircase of the museum from the surrounding lawn. He had stationed himself here because he knew that the two were

most likely to exit the museum by this door. It was going to be dangerous, difficult work, sad work. It was the luck of his race to prey on humanity, but at times like this, when he was forced to kill the young and strong, he wondered very much about his place in the world. His children thought of humanity merely in terms of food, but long years had taught him that man was also a thinking being, that he too enjoyed the beauties of the world. Man also had language, past, and hope. But knowing this did not change the need—call it compulsion—to kill and eat the prey. Every single human being he saw he evaluated at once out of habit. He enjoyed the way the flesh popped between his jaws and the hot blood poured down his throat. Living in human cities he gloried in the heady poetry of the scents. The pack was wealthy, for many humans lived in its territory. He loved his wealth, the wealth he had bought so dearly when the pack had migrated to this city. In his own youth their leader had preferred the isolation of rural life to the harder job of maintaining a city territory. Other packs would never try to take the sparse territory of that old coward. Its inhabitants starved in winter and skulked through summer, always wary, always risking discovery.

When he had grown to his full size he had taken his sister and set out south, toward the storied place where an uncountable human horde dwelled. Often they had been challenged by other packs, and each time they had bested the challengers. There had been fights, daylong, burning with ritual hate under which lay the love of the race. And each time these confrontations had ended with the rival pack leader giving way. Then there would be a celebration, a wonderful howl, and the two of them would be on their way. So it had continued until he and his sister had a beautiful space to themselves. They marked their boundaries and bore their first litter. There had been three, a girl and two boys. The weakest male they killed, feeding his soft flesh to the two strong ones. It was their bad luck not to have a perfect litter of four, but still two were better than none. Two years later they had increased their space again and birthed another litter. This time only one male and female, but both were healthy.

This spring the first pair would mate, as would he and his sister once again. With luck they would gain two pairs of pups. Greater luck would bring three pairs or even four. And next year the second pair would mate and still more would come. Not too many years from now he would lead a goodly pack in a large and wealthy territory. From his wretched beginning in the desolate hills he had come to this and was glad.

The only thing that was wrong was the two humans with their forbidden knowledge. If it became general among the humanity here the size of packs would have to be diminished, and even amid all this wealth they would be forced to scuttle like dumb animals... the hunter would be hunted... and it would be on his head and on the heads of his children. For ages hence all the race would remember their failure. His name would become a curse. And his line, the line he had created out of courage, would wither and die. Others would say of him, "Better he had stayed in the mountains."

He sighed, turning his attention back to the problem at hand. Bright daylight still and the scent of the hunted was rising. Yes, they were coming to this door. A few moments more and they would be on the stairs. He snapped his jaw, bringing the others to their stations at the main entrance. The second-mated pair crossed the street and hid under parked cars. That way, if the two got past him they would not get far. The youngest, the third-mated pair, came up and waited with him. His own sister, her coat gleaming with the fullness of her womanhood, her beautiful face shining with bravery and anticipation, her every move calm and royal, went into position on the opposite wall.

There would be no escape this time. At last, the hunt was over. And they would get a bonus thrown in—that tall man with whom the two spent so much of their time, he also would be destroyed.

Very well, but it was all an ugly and dirty business. You don't take life from young. Even the beasts of the forest never preyed on young. Practically speaking it was difficult, but there were also greater reasons. For the pack to live other life must be destroyed. And it was repugnant to do this to the young. When one of their own kind grew old the young gave him death, but before his time he felt a fierce desire to continue and have all of his life. So it must also be for the prey. The few times that he had been driven to kill young he had felt their frantic, struggles, the fierce beating of a life that was hard to still... and had hated himself afterward when his belly was full and his heart heavy.

They appeared at the door, their scent washing powerfully before them. The woman smelled bright and sharp, not like food. And the young man was the same. Only the older one's scent reminded of food; it had that pungency, that sweetness that was the smell of a weakening body. But still it surged and pulsed with life. Taken together their three scents sparkled. He sighed, glanced at the third-mated pair who were with him. Their faces expressed fear. He had made sure they would be with him for this very reason: from this experience they would learn never to kill the young, and also never to allow yourself to be seen. They saw the pain in their father's face, a sight they would never forget. He let them see and hear and smell the full depth of his emotions. And he noted with gratification that what had for them been up to now an exciting hunt became what it ought to be: an occasion of sorrow and defeat.

Now their bodies tensed. Instantly their scents changed. His own heart started beating faster when he smelled their anticipation. The three victims were coming down the steps, their movements and smells broadcasting wariness—yet they came on, oblivious to the trap they were in. Despite his familiarity with humanity the fact that men would *walk* right into the plain scent of danger always amazed him. They had little bumps on their faces for breathing, but these were just blind appendages, useless for anything but passing air in and out of the body.

The three reached the foot of the steps—and the third-mated pair leaped over the fence. Simultaneously a man who had been standing concealed jumped into the path of the three and made flashes. The old father cursed himself—he had known this man was there but had thought nothing of it! Of course, of course—and now his two young ones were stopping—no, go on!—too late, now they were turning away, confused, their faces reflecting a turmoil of questions—what do we do? And guns were rising, everybody running for the park, the crack of the weapons detonating through the air, the pack leaping the stone wall, and each rushing alone into the underbrush.

They regrouped not far away, much closer than was safe. They had all smelled it—somebody in the pack was bleeding.

The youngest male was missing. The father stood with his nose to the noses of his family. They gave him reassurance, all except the youngest female. Her eyes said to him, "Why did you send us?" And she meant, "We were the youngest, the least experienced, and we were so afraid!" In her anger she said that she would not be his daughter if her brother had to die.

Her anger was deep, he knew, and she would not melt to the entreaties of the rest of the pack. Now that such feelings had passed they could never be erased. Even as they trotted toward the place where the young wounded one had hidden himself the father kept shaking his head with grief. "Now look at you," his sister said with her eyes and ears, "you wag your head like a silly wolf! Are you father or child?"

He was humiliated by her scorn, but tried not to let it show. He kept the hair on his neck carefully smooth, fighting the impulse to let it rise. His anus remained closed with a conscious effort: he would not allow his instinct to spread the musk of danger in this place. His tail he let hang straight out, not as a jaunty flag of pride or tucked humbly between his

legs. No, straight out and no wags: this was dignified and neutral, indicating solemnity.

For all his effort his sister said, “Loose your musk, show your grief to your children. You have not even the courage for that!”

His musk burst out, he could not withhold it longer. The clinging smell filled the air. He cursed himself even as it spread, great splashes of it, betraying him, revealing the weakness he felt within.

“I am your father,” he said, now using his tail to its fullest, flashing it in a proud wag, making his ears rise and his eyes glisten. But the scent was that of fear. Its betrayal was complete. His first son stepped forward. “Let me find my brother,” he signaled with the snap of his jaw, and a disrespectful wag of his own tail. The four of them, sister, daughters and son went toward the wounded scent of the youngest male. As soon as they were out of sight their father submitted to an overwhelming impulse and rolled onto his back. He lay there kicking his back legs softly, feeling the warm wave of submission flow over him, relaxing into it, giving up his leadership. But his pack was not there to see, his own son not there to take his father’s throat in his mouth. No, he rolled alone to the unseeing sky. Even if his son replaced him, the boy would never see his father roll.

Now a soft howl arose. The sorrow in it made him tremble. His sister had sounded the note of death! Their youngest boy’s wounds were mortal. Wagging his head he battled himself for control. He trotted toward his next and terrible duty. Although his elder son or his sister would shortly become leader of the pack he was still the Old Father and still must be the one to do this. He stopped his running and lifted his head. Let the humans hear! He would sound his dirge. He did it fully and proudly. And at once he heard the fearful whimpering of his second son. Now he hurried on again, soon coming to the place near the wall where his family stood around a huddled gray shape. Their faces were torn with grief, their mouths dripping with saliva.

They ignored him, deferring to him only outwardly. As soon as this final duty was done his leadership would end. He went to his son, sniffed him. The boy was trembling, cold, his eyes even now rolling up into his head. The Old Father felt the boy’s pain in his very bones. Yet even in his sorrow he felt proud of this boy, who had dragged such painful wounds so far in order to conceal himself from humanity. The young male took a breath and stared a long moment at his father. Then he lifted his muzzle slightly off the ground and closed his eyes.

The Old Father did not hesitate; he killed his son with one fierce bite. The boy’s body kicked furiously in response, his mouth opened wide. By the time his father had swallowed the torn-out tissues of the son’s throat the boy was dead. Immediately the others surrounded him. At once he saw who would assume leadership; his sister.

Now it came down to confrontation: either he would roll or fight. If he fought they would all fight, four of them against him, and all full of rage. Looking at them, he knew that he would nevertheless win such a fight. But at what cost—this pack would become rotten with hate as they followed a father they despised. For the greater good of what he had built he therefore rolled to his sister. She disdained his overture, striding away with her tail held high. Instead his youngest daughter, still quaking with the grief of her loss, took the roll. When she grabbed his throat he closed his eyes, waiting for death. Sometimes those too young for this custom were overwhelmed by their feelings and killed the ones who gave them rolls. Eternity seemed to pass before she released him. Now the whole pack displayed their tails jauntily; his own he tucked between his legs. Leadership lost, his life would become one of risk and danger. The least gesture of superiority would bring them snapping at him. And until his sister, his daughter, and himself had new mates there would be an unsettled, nasty situation in the pack.

There was still a last task to perform before the reorganized pack continued on. They turned the body of their brother on his back and ate him, crushing even his bones in their jaws, consuming every bit of him except a few tufts of fur. He was eaten out of necessity and respect. They would always remember him now, his brave death and good life. Each of them committed the taste of his flesh to precious memory. Afterward they howled, this howl expressing the idea that the dead are dead, and life continues. Then they stood in a circle, touching noses, their joy at being together breaking through all the grief and upset, and finally they opened their mouths and breathed their heavy air together, their hearts transported by their intimacy and nearness.

Still, the old father and his sister were no longer a pair. She now needed a husband, a surrogate-brother who would be willing to accept her as leader. Most males running loose, those with some awful sin on their heads, something so serious that they had been driven from their pack, would welcome such a position. And the daughter who had lost her brother, she also must find a male soon. Already the two females were spreading their scent-of-desire, causing the two males' bodies to react, causing the old father to hunger woefully for his beautiful sister. But his days of mating would probably be over unless some female as wretched as himself were to happen along. Let some time pass, he thought, and then I will spread my own scent for a new mate. Let time pass... and heal.

His sister watched him as he stood confused, unable to decide what to do with himself now that leadership had been lost. Her heart demanded that she comfort him and share his sorrow, but she kept her tail flashing high and did not look at his face. They had made this pack together but their children could not accept leadership from a father who had planned so badly that one of his own children had been killed. It was just, and they all had to live with it. But she could not stand to see him like this! He cringed back, glancing fearfully from face to face. Gone was his beauty, his boundless pride in this little pack. They had been going to build it together, she could not stand the idea of doing it with another. She could not remember a time when she had not been in love with him. Their own parents had paired them in a litter of four and the pairing was from the first one of love.

Until this curse had come down upon the pack there had been nothing but happiness. They were getting richer and richer. The pack could afford to pass over many possible kills, picking only the best and easiest. They could afford to pass up ten for one! And their hunting was easy, always easy in this rich territory.

The day the catastrophe happened they had been preparing to hunt again. They had warm shelter and many potential victims. They even had a nice place to litter, the best they had ever found. All were looking forward to an easy winter and a fortunate spring.

Then had come the news. The first scent of it had arrived on a clear morning in autumn. This scent had been laid at the territorial boundary by their neighboring pack. And so Old Father had met with the father of that tribe and had learned of the dreadful mistake committed by two yearlings on their first hunt. They had taken young male humans, the most taboo of all the taboos, had taken them in a moment of heedless excitement. And the humans had noticed; many had come and investigated. Humanity had taken away the remains the very day after the mistake had been made. So man knew something, more than he should. Then had come the pack's terrible misfortune, the incident that had led them to the position they were now in. They had somehow sparked an investigation themselves. It was fantastic and impossible, but nevertheless humanity had come to the very lair itself and taken away the remains of some kills. How they had cursed themselves then for not consuming even the bones! But it was too late. They could only hope that man would be confused, but he was not. The two whom they hunted now had come up into the lair, had been sniffing about and had almost been killed then.

Those two were the bearers of knowledge, that was why they had come into the lair.

And since then this desperate hunt had continued. It had disrupted the life of the pack, forcing them to follow their quarry into the center of the city, a place of few abandoned buildings, few good lairs. Now it had destroyed their happiness too. She wanted to throw her head back and howl out pure grief but she would not. Could she lead them better than her brother? She doubted it! The alternative was to give it to her headstrong first son who certainly could not equal the exploits of his father.

This son she distrusted. She looked at him, so happily asserting his newfound status over his father. And her beloved brother cringed before the boy—he was that brave, to do even that to preserve the unity of the pack. But a boy demanding such an act needed a lesson. She went to him, sniffed him under the tail. Her hackles rose and she shoved against him. He was a big, strapping boy of three—his eyes glinted with humor as his mother disciplined him. Very well, let him laugh! She demanded that he roll. He did it willingly enough, too willingly. That was the final straw—she grabbed the loose flesh of his neck and bit it hard. He gasped in surprise—he must have thought that she was killing him. Very good, let him think that a mother would kill her son. Let him know just how far his insolent treatment of his father had driven her! She bade him rise and he scrambled up contrite. His eyes were wide, his face full of pain. Blood oozed down his neck. His sister came up beside him and stood staring at her mother. Very good, she's loyal. The mother turned and moved off a little way. The others understood that she wanted to be alone with her thoughts and did not follow. The hurts in her heart conflicted with one another for attention. Her youngest son was dead, her brother, humiliated. She herself was forced into leadership at a desperate moment. The order of the pack had been seriously strained.

It was hard for her to accept that her boy was really dead. He had been bright and eager, brimming over with life. And he had been so fast and strong, the fastest pup they had ever seen! The truth was, though, his mind was not so fast as his body. When the pack gathered together to share the beauties of the world there was a definite confusion in his eyes. And when they hunted, his father sometimes gave him leadership, but it always wound up with his sister. But he was a fine, good male and he loved his life!

There was a sound nearby. She turned to see, completely unafraid. If it was nearby it could not be dangerous or she would have sensed it long before. She saw staring from the brush her brother's eyes. Now why did he do this? It was just like him, flaunting all custom. How dare he stand there staring at her! She tried to raise the hairs on her neck. They would not move. She tried to growl warning but all that came out was a purr.

He came closer, never allowing his eyes to leave hers. Then he shook himself free of the brush and stood there with snow clinging to his fine brown coat. It hurt all the way through her to see him, to smell him so close, to hear the familiar sound of his breathing. Putting her ears back she went to him and rubbed muzzles. She longed to mourn but held herself back with a fierce effort. He sat on his haunches and regarded her. His eyes were full of love and a kind of quiet joyousness that it surprised her to see in so unfortunate a creature. "You take the pack," he said, "our troubles give it to you." And she felt afraid.

He sensed it at once and patted his tail on the ground briskly, a gesture that communicated the thought, "Have confidence." She was fascinated by the way his eyes seemed to sparkle; he didn't even appear sad. As if reading her thoughts, he lifted his eyes and made a low growl. This meant, "A heavy load has been lifted from me." Then he inclined his head toward her, closing his eyes as he did so. "You must take it." The three knocks of the tail and a tongue-lolling smile, replaced instantly by an expression of calm repose. "Have confidence in yourself— I do. I trust you."

These words moved her deeply. She knew that he was relinquishing his pride, his very

life, to prevent discord among the members of the pack. And he was communicating confidence to her not only because she needed it but out of real sincerity. His scent had changed subtly as he talked, indicating that behind his words were love and a certain hard-to-define excitement that revealed his real happiness at her accession to leadership.

She made a series of gestures with her right forepaw, clicking her toenails together. He gestured back, nodded. She punctuated her remarks with brief keening sounds of emphasis. She was telling him that the only reason she had accepted his roll was that their firstborn children would have left the pack if he did not step down. He agreed. Then they rubbed muzzles again for a long time, their eyes closed, their breath mingling, their tongues touching gently. There was nothing but this to express their feelings: long years of companionship, puppyhood together, youth, adulthood. This parting would be the first time that they had not shared life totally. And there was no way to know how long it might last. Although he might become her mate again in the future, it would never be as it was, with the sharing of pack leadership that had so increased their pleasure at being together. Abruptly she turned and trotted away. She could not stay longer with him or she would never turn away again. Full of sadness she returned to the three children. They were standing together in the shadows of the trees, nearly motionless, their dark shapes exuding the smell of fear. Now the truth had begun to insinuate itself into their minds: they dared not trust their father—they did not know if they could trust their mother.

She came up to them exuding an impression of affability and confidence that she did not feel. They rubbed muzzles and the three stood facing her. Just hours ago she had stood thus with them, facing her brother.

Using the language of movements, growls and gestures that communicated so much without the need for articulated words, she outlined the plan of the coming night. It was not an original plan, all it involved was returning to the woman's place and awaiting any chance that might befall. No better plan presented itself, however. The wonderfully canny ideas of her brother had resulted in the death of a member of the pack at no gain. Simple, straightforward plans would be more acceptable to the others now.

She knew that time was running very short for them. Soon they would have to leave the center of man's city, to return again to the outer areas where there were more shadows, more abandoned buildings. Not much more time. The truth was that they were about to lose this hunt. Man would learn about his hunter and the greatest of all taboos would be broken. What were the consequences? Endless trouble for all the race, suffering and hardship and death.

What a monstrous burden for the pack to carry! If only... but the past was the past. If it happened failure would have to be accepted. She thought that thought but her heart screamed no, they must not fail. *Must not.*

Sam Gamer watched the two detectives and their friends rush into the apartment building. They huddled past the doorman and disappeared. The afternoon had become unseasonably warm, and they had splashed through slush as they ran, not even bothering to step around the puddles.

"Unbelievable. Can you beat that?"

"Splashin' in the puddles?"

Garner closed his eyes. Fields was a nice guy but his was not one of the great intellects. "Let's have some ideas about what's going on with these folks."

"Well, they shot a dog over there at the museum."

"That was a dog out there in the snow? You sure?"

"Looked like a shepherd to me. And it ran like hell even though it musta taken at least

a couple of slugs.”

“I didn’t see it.”

“What can I tell you? It was very fast.” Garner pulled back into traffic. He would return to the museum, examine the snow-covered lawn. Surely there would be blood if something had actually been shot.

They drove back through the streets until they reached the area where the encounter had taken place. “Come on, and bring your camera.” The two men helped each other across the fence that separated the museum lawn from the sidewalk. There were marks there, perfectly plain to see. The melt had distorted their shape, but it was still clear that they had once been pawprints. And there was an area spotted with blood and little clots of meat. Farther on, toward the street, was another tiny drop of blood. Just over the fence more could be seen. With the photographer cursing, the two newspapermen crossed the fence again. Sam Garner loped across the street and trotted up and down before the stone wall that marked the boundary of Central Park. Then he saw what he was hoping to see, a long bloody scrape on top of the wall. “Over here,” he called to Fields, who was busy trying to stomp wet snow off his shoes. On the way across the street he had slipped into a slushy puddle.

“My feet’re gonna freeze,” he moaned.

“Come on! Help me across this friggin’ wall.”

He was only too glad to give Garner a leg up. Sam scrambled to his hands and knees atop the wall and then dropped over into the park.

At once everything changed. Central Park in winter is as quiet as a desert. This was true especially up here near the wall, away from the paths, an area choked by snow-covered bushes. Garner turned and looked back. Fields was not following. “Fine,” he thought, “I’ll get the Goddamn story myself. Better not be any pictures.” He pushed bushes aside. It was cold and wet in here and he wasn’t dressed for a stroll in the shrubbery. Then he saw it again, the little red trace lying on the snow. And there were more pawprints here, at least three sets. Whatever made them had gone tearing through here not too long ago. A pack of wild dogs running from two trigger-happy detectives? What the hell, this was getting interesting.

He followed the tracks a few more yards, then stopped. Before him was a great smear of blood, and leading away from it were heavy splashes, impossible to miss. This trail led up a low rise and into even deeper brush. Cursing, Garner followed it. Low branches overhung, dropping snow on him every time his bent back brushed against them. He clambered along from splash to splash, and came upon a place where branches had been broken, many paws had ground away the sodden snow, and everything was bloody. “Oh God,” he whispered. Bits of meat and fur were scattered all around, lying half-frozen on the ground, stuck in the bent twigs. It was a fearful sight and it made Garner feel suddenly alone and afraid. He peered into the bushes around him. Were shapes moving there beyond the edge of visibility? This place was awfully quiet. It had the sullen atmosphere of a crime scene, a place where violence had been done and gone, and it stank. All around there was a nasty, cloying animal smell. It was musty, reminding him... it was a female odor, mixed with the stench of the blood. “What in hell is this?” he said softly. His mind turned to the two detectives, to the strange events of half an hour ago. What in hell was going on here?

He backed away from the area slowly, carefully. Sweat was popping out all over him. He gritted his teeth, fighting an impulse to turn and run wildly through the trees. Instead he walked as softly as he could. Not far off he could hear the rumble of traffic on Central Park West. Yet it seemed an eternity away right now in this savage, inhuman place. That

was the word to describe it—inhuman. There was a powerful and monstrous presence about the spot, the blood, the bits of flesh, the horrible odor—it all combined to produce in Sam Garner an overwhelming dread that seemed to rise up out of his dark core and threaten to reduce him to blind, running panic. He moved faster but he did not run.

“Hey, Sam,” came a distant voice. “Sam!” Garner heard it but was afraid to answer, afraid to raise his own voice. Something was near him, he was sure of it, pacing him, keeping just out of sight beyond the bushes. He broke into a trot, then a loping run. Branches lashed at him, scratching his face, knocking off his old fur hat, cutting his hands as he struggled. Then the wall was before him, too high to scale from this side. “Rich,” he shouted, “*Rich!*”

The photographer looked down. His eyes opened wide, he let out a high bleat of a scream.

“Help me!” Garner shrieked. He raised his arms, grabbing frantically for the photographer’s outstretched hands. Slowly, painfully he clambered up the wall and with Fields’ help got over onto a bench.

“Good Christ, what the hell was that thing?” Fields babbled.

“Don’t know.”

“Come on—gotta get out of here!” Fields ran to the car, causing traffic along Central Park West to screech and skid as he hurried across the street. Weakly Sam Garner followed him. He was sick with fear. Something unspeakable had been going on in that park, and he had been paced by some kind of hellhound as he had left.

He jumped into the car, slammed and locked the door and leaned his badly scratched face against the steering wheel. “What was it?” he whispered. Then he looked up at Fields, blinking tears out of his eyes. “What was it!”

Fields was embarrassed and looked away. “Dunno. Lots bigger’n a dog.” Now he mumbled. “Had a sort of... face. Good Christ...”

“Describe it! I’ve got to know.”

“Can’t... only saw it for a second.” He shook his head slowly. “No wonder those two cops are trigger-happy. That thing came straight from hell, whatever it was.”

“Bullshit,” Garner replied. His chin was jutting out now, he was regaining himself. He took deep breaths. “Bullshit, whatever it was it was real. A flesh and blood something-or-other. Tasmanian devil, I dunno. But one thing is sure, it’s on the loose in New York City and it’s damn well gonna be big news.”

“So a wild animal escapes. Page two.”

“Ha! Think about it. Mutilation killing in the park. Cops scared to bejesus of something that looks like a dog. Then we get a closer look, and it ain’t no dog that’s spookin’ ’em.” He stopped, a powerful and withering image of that *thing* in the bushes near him overcoming his pugnacity. He hadn’t seen it clearly but he could imagine— “Rich, there was a fuckin’ bloodbath in there. I mean, I found a place where there was so damn much blood it looked like a slaughterhouse. Something got it bad there, man, not so long ago, and the *smell*, Holy Christ!”

“Smell?”

“It was obscene. All the bushes were covered with it, like something had been sprayed on them. You couldn’t see it but you could smell it. It was like—”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Never mind.” Out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw a fierce, inhuman face peering over the wall so he put the car in gear and moved out. He got away from there, going downtown into the heart of the city. Their press credentials made it easy to park, so they stopped at the Biltmore for a drink.

“The place is quiet,” Sam muttered, “and there ain’t any other newshounds hangin’ around. I just want to get myself together again.”

Fields didn’t protest, just followed “So whaddaya think?” he asked as soon as they had slipped onto a couple of stools at the luxurious mahogany bar.

Sam didn’t answer. “Perfect Manhattan, up,” he said to the bartender. “They know how to make a Manhattan here,” he growled. “That’s my definition of a good bar.”

“What’s going on, Sam?” Fields was insistent now. He wanted to know. This was a good story and there were going to be great pictures. He certainly wasn’t going to tell Sam Garner, but he had gotten a good look at the thing that had been following the reporter. It had come out of the brush just as Sam reached the wall and had sat and watched him go. Then its ears had snapped toward Rich Fields and it had simply disappeared. There it was one second, then a flash of gray and it was gone.

There had been a perfect picture there for a second before the thing had taken off. But Rich Fields hadn’t taken a picture. For that second he had been frozen, staring at the most horrible living thing that he had ever seen. But it had all happened so fast. You couldn’t be sure about moments like that, maybe it was a trick of light on a dog’s face. He eyed Garner. “What was it?” he asked.

“How the hell do I know! Quit ridin’ me, you ain’t an editor. It was somethin’ weird. Out of the ordinary.”

“Well, that’s obvious. Did it kill Evans?”

Garner raised his eyebrows, looked at the photographer. “Sure. And it was responsible for the bloody bench the cops found this a.m. too. It’s a monster livin’ in the park.” He stared a moment at the drink before him. “Monster Stalks Park. It’s more a *National Herald* story, ain’t it? There’s no proof, except what we *might* have seen. That won’t work in the *Post*.”

Fields nodded his head slowly. He sipped his Martini. Garner was right about this place; you spent half your life around fifth-rate bars, you forgot how great a skillfully made Beefeater Martini could be. Right now it really hit the spot. “We gonna file?”

“Not yet. There’s too many loose ends. I think we might get lucky, wrap it up nice and pretty. Those two detectives, they’re scared shitless about this. You know what they did, they shot one of those things on the museum lawn. They were scared of being attacked. I’ll tell you what’s goin’ on. We got some kind of a holy terror loose in this town and the police are scared to make that fact public.”

Fields smiled. “That’s gonna be a very beautiful story, Sam. If we can get it together, that is. It’s gonna be very hard to get together. We sure ain’t gonna trap one of the beasts. And I can’t see us workin’ it out of those two cops. I think we got a toughie on our hands.”

“Brilliant insight, Dr. Freud. It’s a very tough story, but we’ll break it—if we live through it.”

Fields laughed but not very hard.

The human had come snooping along, following the blood trail of the dead child. As

soon as he dropped down from the wall the old father was aware of the human interloper. He was a small man with quick, light movements. His face was tense with curiosity. His movements were halting and confused though, as if the trail was hard to follow. And evidently it was; the human was tracking by eye from blood droplet to blood droplet. Three times the old father thought that the man would lose the trail but each time he had regained it once again. And he kept hurrying along between the branches, oblivious of the fact that the old father was never more than six feet away.

The rest of the pack had moved off, getting away from the scene of this afternoon's disaster. Only the old father had lingered behind, drawn by his sorrow to stay near the place where his son had died. He himself had been about to go, to fall into his new place at the bottom of the pack, when he had heard the scrape and thud of the human dropping over the wall. He had scented the man almost immediately; it was a fresh smell, mostly of the cloth in which the man was wrapped. But even so the flesh beneath the wrapping had a definite odor—a healthy man, one who smoked heavily but did not breathe poorly. He came along, crunching and clattering, his lungs loudly passing air in and out. As he got closer to the spot where the boy had died the old father stifled an intense urge to kill him. Here was another human meddling in the affairs of the pack, further evidence that knowledge of the clan was spreading.

The man clambered up the slope that led to the very spot that was still covered by the young male's blood. And he entered the bush under which the death had taken place. A stifled sound came from the man. The old father rushed up to the bush, then stood very still as the man came out.

The human did not see him but seemed to sense his presence anyway. Fear had come into the man; here was something unknown, and it made the man want to return to his own kind. The man ran along with the old father just behind. He was in a fever to kill this human, so much so that his mouth hung open. It took every ounce of strength for him to let the creature escape. All his instincts screamed at him, kill it, kill it *now!* But he knew in his mind that this would be a mistake. They could not risk so much killing and after all the man had seen only blood. The snowmelt would wash most of it away before more humans could be brought to this place. Also, the pack was not here to help him dispose of a body. It would have to be left here until he could get them back. They were not likely to respond to his signal although his voice carried for miles. He was no longer pack leader, he would have to run and get them if he wanted them. And while he was gone, other humans might discover the carcass of this one, making the problem faced by the pack that much worse.

Nevertheless his mind was not his whole being. Underneath it were the powerful emotional currents of his race, currents that now tore at him and demanded that he kill the intruder, tear the creature apart, end the threat.

Then the man was at the wall, screaming for help. A pale face appeared above the wall. For an instant the old father met the eyes of this human; looking into human eyes was a little like looking into the eyes of an old enemy, or even a beloved sister.

He should not be here—run! And he ran, moving back into the brush in the wink of an eye. Then he sniffed the air, located the pack and started off after them. His mind was spinning with the terrible knowledge that another intruder had come, and he was alternately relieved and guilty that he had not killed the thing. This conflict made him feel angry, and his anger fed his desperation. Wild, mad thoughts began to roll in his brain. He wanted the danger to be over. The pack had to prosper. Soon they must win this battle against humanity. With the appearance of this new factor—the stranger who sought the lair of the pack—came proof that the forbidden knowledge was spreading. It had to be stifled at the source, and soon. “Tonight,” he thought as he trotted, “or it will be too late.”

Chapter 11

With the coming of night the wind rose. It swept down out of the north, freezing and wild, transforming the afternoon melt into a cutting mantle of ice. The warmer air that had lingered over the city became clouds and blew away to the south, and remaining in the sky were the few stars that defied the electric flood below, and a crescent moon rising over the towers. The bitter wind flooded along the avenues of Manhattan, carrying with it an ancient wildness that seldom reached the inner sanctum of the city; it was as if the very soul of the frowning north had swept from its moorings and now ran free in the streets.

Buses crunched along the ice-slick pavements, their tire-chains clattering and their engines wheezing. From steaming grates came the rumble of subways. Here and there a taxicab prowled in search of the few people willing to venture into the cold. Doormen huddled close to the glittering entryways of luxurious apartment buildings or stood in lobbies staring out at the wind. Inside these buildings normally docile radiators hissed and popped as overstrained heating systems fought to maintain comfort against the freeze.

The last light had disappeared from the sky when Becky opened her eyes. Beyond the bedroom door she heard the drone of the evening news. Dick, Wilson, and Ferguson were there watching. She rolled over onto her back and stared out the window at the sky. In her field of vision there were no stars, only the bottom point of the moon slicing the darkness, cut off by the top of the window. She sighed and went into the bathroom. Seven-thirty p.m. She had slept for two hours. Disconnected images from her dreams seemed to rush at her from the air; she splashed water on her face, ran a brush through her hair. She shook her head. Had they been nightmares, or mere dreams? She couldn't quite remember. Her face looked waxy in the mirror; she took out her lipstick and applied a little. She washed her hands. Then she returned to the bedroom and pulled on her thermal underwear, then threw on jeans, a flannel shirt, and added a heavy sweater. The wind moaned around the corner of the building, making the window bulge and strain. Long fingers of frost were appearing on the glass, twinkling softly as they grew.

Becky walked into the living room. "Welcome to the real world," her husband said. "You missed the show."

"Show?"

"The Commissioner announced that Evans was killed by a gang of nuts. Cult murder."

Wordlessly Wilson waved a copy of the *News*.

Becky shook her head, didn't bother to comment, "Werewolf Killers Stalk Park—Two Dead." So ridiculously confused, so mindless. The Commissioner just couldn't grasp the truth, none of them could. She found her cigarettes and lit one, then flopped down on the couch between her husband and Wilson. Ferguson, slumped in their reclining chair, had not spoken. His face was drawn, the skin seeming to have stretched back over the bones, giving him a cadaverous appearance. His mouth was set, his eyes staring blindly in the general direction of the television set. The only movement he made was to rub his hands slowly along the arms of the chair.

Becky wanted to draw him out of it. “Doctor Ferguson,” she said, “what’s your opinion of all this?”

He smiled a little and shook his head. “I think we’d better get our proof.” He felt his pocket for the rustle of paper. His notes on Beauvoy’s hand signals were there, ready for reference in case his memory slipped.

“He means we’ve run out of time,” Wilson said.

“So what else is new. Any of you guys hungry?”

Everybody was very hungry. They wound up ordering two pizzas from a place down the street Beer and Cokes they had in the refrigerator. Becky was just as glad, she didn’t particularly care to cook for four people. She leaned back on the couch crossing her legs, feeling the weight of the two men beside her. “We got everything?” she asked.

“Two radios and the camera. What else is there to get?”

“Nothing I guess. Anybody been upstairs?”

Their plan was to stake out the roof and man it in relays. One would stay there with the camera while the other three waited below. The reason that they didn’t go up in pairs was that they hoped it would help to keep the chance of being scented to a minimum. The three in the apartment would keep in touch with the one on the roof via the handheld radios they had bought. Dick had purchased them at an electronics store, two CB walkie-talkies. They could have checked out a couple of police-issue models but they didn’t want their traffic overheard on the police band. No sense in attracting attention. By tomorrow morning it wouldn’t matter; they would have the pictures they needed. Becky’s eyes went to the camera, its black bulk resting on the dining room table. It looked more like a flat-ended football than a camera. Only the shielded lens, reposing like a great animal eye deep in its hood, revealed the thing’s function. They had all handled it earlier, getting used to the awkward shape and the overly sensitive controls. You could take pictures almost without realizing you had started the camera, and the focusing mechanism could be very frustrating to work if your depth of field was changing rapidly. How soldiers had ever used it in battle was beyond understanding. And it was terribly delicate, threatening to break at the least jostle or to lose its onboard computer if the batteries weakened too much.

But it worked miraculously well when it worked. “Anybody tried it out yet?” Becky asked. “You’re going to be the first.” She nodded. By mutual agreement she would stand the first watch on the roof, eight to ten-thirty. They had divided the hours of darkness into four two-and-a-half-hour segments and allocated the watches. Becky took the first, Ferguson the second. He had argued that he wanted to take his watch in the alley where he could confront the Wolfen, as he called them, personally. But he had been overruled. The third watch, from one until three-thirty, was to be Dick’s. This was the most likely time for the night’s attempt. Always when they had come before, it had been during this period. Dick had insisted on this watch, saying that he was the best choice, the strongest and the most fit. Becky couldn’t deny it. She and Wilson were exhausted, God knew, and Ferguson was showing signs of cracking. Dick was the strongest, it was right that he go at the most dangerous time.

Still, she did not want him to go. She found herself drawn to him in a strange, dispassionate way that she did not associate with their married love. There was something about his vulnerability that made her want to protect him. Physically there was no real attraction, but there was a quality of spirit that attracted her strongly—he had been willing, after all, to put his whole career on the line to keep his father out of a welfare nursing home. He had always been good and kind to her—but there was something inside him that was growing, a kind of wall that shut her out of his heart, kept

her away from his secret thoughts. She wanted to be there but he refused her entry, and maybe not only her but himself as well. He brought tenderness and physical intimacy to the relationship but he did not bring himself. The real Dick Neff was as alien to her now as he had been when they first met. And her spirit, after hungering and trying for his love these many years, had simply given up. She knew now what was missing in their relationship and she had begun to try to do what she could to repair the damage. Mostly, it was going to be up to Dick. She longed for him to open himself to her, to give her more than a thin veneer of himself to go with his urgent sexuality, but she felt that in the end he would fail. Exactly why she felt this way she could not say, but she did feel it. Perhaps it came from the coldness she saw in his eyes, and the lust that filled them when she so desperately wanted to see love. Dick had been scarred in a way that many cops are scarred. He had seen too much of life's miseries to open himself to any other human being, even his wife. When they were first married Dick would come home hollow-eyed with sorrow, unable to articulate his feelings about the horrors he had seen. He would describe them woodenly, all emotion absent from his voice.

There had been a child suicide, a little girl of twelve who had died in his arms of self-inflicted burns. She had pressed herself against a gas stove, then lurched, in flames, through a window into the street.

There had been a mother, pregnant, beheaded by a gang of teenage junkies. He had been first on the scene, witness to the spontaneous abortion and miscarriage delivery of the seven-month fetus.

There had been many others in his years on the street, most of them connected one way or another with drugs. These experiences plus his time in Narcotics had made of him an obsessive, consumed man with only one goal, to destroy the dealers who destroyed the people.

The obsession had to be compromised in so many ways that his hatred of crime had turned into self-loathing, a mockery of his personal worth. Problems, to a man like Dick, caused a slow closing of his heart, a shutting out of life, until there was nothing left but anger and animal lust and a vague, overshadowing sorrow that he could not voice.

Becky knew these things about her husband, and longed to tell him about them. But it was hopeless, and this hopelessness was now driving her away from him. She was rapidly reaching the point where if she could not help him, she would have to leave him.

And there was Wilson. George Wilson, a grumpy, unappealing creature with an open soul. He might grumble and threaten, but you could open Wilson up and get inside. And he loved her with boyish desperation. When his overtures were accepted he was amazed and gratified. He wanted her in a raw, urgent manner that possessed him right down to his core. She knew that he dreamed about her at night, that he held an image of her in his mind's eye during his waking hours. And they fit one another in strange and satisfying ways.

Such thoughts were dangerous. How could anyone in her right mind want to trade the young, vital Dick Neff for a busted-up old man like Wilson? Well, she was thinking about it more and more lately.

The doorbell rang, and in a few moments they were eating pizza. "You still sulky, Doc?" Becky asked Ferguson. He was brooding more than he should; she was trying to draw him out.

"I'm not sulky. Just contemplative."

"Like a soldier before a big battle," Wilson said. "Like me this afternoon."

"I wouldn't know, I've never been in a battle. But let's just say that sitting up there on

that roof half the night isn't my idea of my proper role."

"Your idea is to go down to the alley and get yourself killed."

"We don't know their capacities, but I think I have the means to communicate with them. On the roof, you'll be in danger as soon as they become aware you're there. You'll be hidden, they'll see it as a threat."

"And climb all thirty stories after us, I suppose."

Ferguson stared at her. "Obviously."

"Carl, we'll have the Ingram up there. Have you ever seen what an Ingram M-11 can do?"

"No, and I don't want to. I'm sure it's very lethal. Naturally all you can think of is kill or be killed. And what about all the other buildings? A sea of windows. Will you really start spraying high velocity bullets around? I doubt it." He settled glumly into his chair. He was right, too. Not one of them would feel free to use that gun on a rooftop in the middle of Manhattan. Hell, you wouldn't want to use any gun in such circumstances, surrounded by so many innocent lives. But the gun was the only real protection they had. Its value lay in the fact that it would provide accurate coverage over a wide area and do it fast. A shotgun could do that too, but they were afraid that buckshot would lack stopping power. One slug from an Ingram would knock a heavy man ten feet. They wanted that kind of punch if they were going to come up against the werewolves.

"How likely are they to spot us?" Wilson asked suddenly. He had been gobbling pizza; it had not seemed as if he was following the conversation at all. Ferguson considered. "The more senses they can bring to bear, the more likely. If scent was all they had, we'd have a chance. Unfortunately they have hearing and sight too."

"We can be quiet."

"How? Stop breathing? That's more than enough sound to give you away."

"Then we've gotta hope we see them first, don't we? You spot 'em, you take a few pictures, you get the hell inside."

Ferguson nodded. "Assuming we see them first— or at all."

"Look, we've been through that. They aren't going to come up through the building and they aren't going to climb the balconies that overlook Eighty-sixth Street. That leaves these balconies, the ones that overlook the alley, as their only route of attack. So if each person just keeps that camera focused on that alley, we're gonna see them if they come. That's damn well where they'll be."

The disconsolate look on Ferguson's face didn't change. He wasn't buying Wilson's theory, at least not enough to improve his disposition. "Have you imagined what it'll be like up there fooling around with that damn camera while they are swarming up the balconies? I have, and believe me it isn't a very comforting thought."

"You'd have a good thirty seconds before they reached the roof," Becky said.

Ferguson leaned forward in the chair, stared at them with contemptuous eyes. "Assuming you even see them coming."

"That's the whole purpose of the camera, for Chrissakes! It makes it like daylight. We damn well will see them."

"Human senses against Wolfen senses," he replied bitterly. "Technology or no technology, there is absolutely no comparison. Let me tell you something. Whichever one of us is unlucky enough to be up there when they come is going to be in very great

danger. Let me repeat, *very great danger*. Unless we all realize that all the time, every second, it is very likely that one or more of us will be killed.”

“Jesus Christ, we don’t need that!” Dick blurted. “I mean, what a fucking—”

“Dick, he doesn’t understand. He’s not a cop.” You don’t look at things that way when you’re on the force. Maybe it’s true, but brooding on it isn’t the kind of thing that increases a man’s effectiveness.

“He’s doing a cop’s job. Oh, no, wait a minute. No cop ever had an assignment like this before. But at least we’re prepared for it—this guy obviously isn’t”

“I don’t have to be here at all, may I remind you. In fact, I ought to be in that alley.”

Dick started to speak. Becky knew him well enough to know that he was about to get angry, to lash out—and they needed everybody, even Ferguson.

“Dick’s right,” she said quickly, “let’s not talk about it. I’m due to go up in ten minutes anyway, so enough said.”

“OK,” Dick said after a long moment. Ferguson glanced nervously at his watch and was silent.

She went into the bedroom and put a cardigan on over her heavy sweater, then wound a thick cashmere scarf around her neck and put on her pea jacket. She drew fur-lined gloves on her hands and dropped an electric pocket warmer into the jacket. She already had on three pair of socks and snow boots. She pulled a knit hat down over her ears and added a fur cap.

“Jesus,” Wilson said, “you look like a mountain climber in that outfit.”

“I’ve got two and a half hours in that wind.”

“I know, I’m not arguing. Let’s test radios.”

The concern in his eyes touched her deeply. He turned on one handset, then the other, and when they were both running they squealed. “Good enough,” he said. “I’ll be over here near the terrace. We oughta get a good signal as long as I don’t move too far back in the apartment and you stay near the edge of the roof. You got the signals straight?”

“One dot every five minutes. Two if I want to go to voice. Three if I need help.” Instead of talking they planned to signal as much as possible by pressing the mike button. It would keep the noise down.

“Right. But give us a vocal as soon as you get up there and another just before you’re ready to come down.” He glanced over her shoulder. Dick was adjusting the camera, Ferguson was facing the TV set “Come closer,” Wilson said in an undertone. She stood face to face with him and he kissed her a long moment on the mouth. “I love the hell out of you,” he said. She smiled at him, put her finger to her lips, then turned and went into the dining room. She was glad—he seemed to be recovering some of his customary strength.

“Camera’s good,” Dick said. “Just for God’s sake don’t drop it over the ledge. They’ll have my head six ways from Sunday if I don’t bring this thing back intact.”

She took it from him, carrying it in both hands. Her thermos of hot coffee was under her arm.

“Wait a minute, kid,” he said. “Isn’t something missing?”

“If you mean the Ingram, I’m not taking it.”

“You damn well are.” He went into the living room and lifted it out of the box Wilson had brought it in. “It’ll fit right up under your pea jacket, very nice and snug. Take it.”

“I’ve got my thirty-eight. I don’t want the Ingram.”

“Take the fucking thing, Becky!” She took it from him. His mouth trembled as he gave it to her. They said nothing; there was nothing more to be said.

The three men accompanied her to the elevator. It seemed unlikely that anybody would be encountered on the way up, but if they were, the presence of four people in the car would draw attention away from Becky’s strange outfit and equipment.

The elevator rose smoothly to the thirtieth floor. All four of them got out. They went into the stairwell through the gray-painted exit door. The wind could be heard above, booming against the door that led to the roof. Becky ascended the single flight of stairs, followed by Wilson and Dick. Ferguson remained below.

“OK, kid,” Wilson said, opening the door. It faced north, and as soon as he opened it a brutal gust of ice-cold wind poured in on them. Becky barely felt it under her layers of clothing. She tromped out onto the roof—and nearly fell flat. The snow had melted up here and now the melt was a layer of ice. She stood bracing herself against the jamb of the open door, staring down at the two men huddled on the steps behind her. “Icy as hell,” she shouted over the wind.

“Can you make it?” Wilson hollered back.

“On all fours.”

“What’s that?”

“*On all fours.*” And she pushed the door closed. At once she was plunged into a dark and alien world. The wind boomed and every move caused her to lose purchase on the ice. The roof was flat, its expanse broken only by this door and by a shed about ten feet away that housed the elevator motors. The building was large and the roof area was wide, perhaps a hundred feet on a side. This area, roughly square, was covered in gravel which made the layer of ice bumpy and even more difficult to walk across. If she stood still the wind moved her of its own accord, causing her to lean into it and stumble until she was down on all fours. Her eyes were tearing and the tears were freezing on her cheeks. Lights whirled past. She huddled against the door, her back to the wind. She pulled out the pocket warmer and cradled its fitful heat near her face. The Ingram’s butt jutted into her left breast, the coffee thermos threatened to roll out from under her arm, the walkie-talkie and camera further impeded her movements. She looked around. Lights glowed up from three sides of the building. Those were the street sides. The fourth side, which disappeared into a maw of blackness, overlooked the alley.

Putting the pocket warmer away, she braced herself and crawled toward the dark edge of the roof. For safety she finally went down on her stomach and slithered as best she could with all the equipment. The edge loomed closer, the wind rocked her prone body. Cold ripped into her, cutting under the pea jacket, so bitter that it felt like fire against her skin. She kept telling herself that she was crazy, she had to turn back, there was no way to endure this for more than a few minutes.

But she went on, dragging herself closer and closer to the edge of the roof. At least the alley was on the south side of the building and her back would be to the wind.

She reached the edge, touched the concrete lip of the roof with her gloved fingers and paused. The lip was about three inches high, a bare handhold. Methodically she inventoried: thermos, radio, camera, weapon. OK, now pull into position. She dragged herself closer to the edge, pulling with her cold-stiffened fingers until her face was just at the lip of the roof. Before her was an empty expanse that plunged into dark. South of the building was a sea of brownstones and older, lower apartments. Beyond them she could see all of midtown Manhattan, the lights glimmering in the wind, the moon now risen high

above the city. In the sky the anti-collision strobes of passing planes stuttered. Far to the west a fitful carmine glow marked the very end of day. But here the night was total, and the alleyway below was unlit except by the faint glow from the windows of apartments low down in the building.

Clumsily she maneuvered the camera before her face, felt for the button, and turned it on. Immediately the readout jumped into the viewfinder and she pressed the focusing lever. The alleyway swam into view, uncannily bright and detailed. She could see trashcans, see the frozen snow covering their tops. The brownstone houses across the alley all had gardens, and she could look into their shadows and see the frozen remains of summer flowers, the hard limbs of naked trees. The windows of the brownstones were almost too bright to look at, but when her eye adjusted she could see people inside, most of them sitting like statues before television sets. One young family was eating dinner at a table behind a glass door. There were four of them, two adults and two children. She could make out the faces clearly.

Now she pulled the camera back, cradling it against her chest, and drew the walkie-talkie around to her face. It had been hanging from its strap along her back. Clumsily she turned it on, held it to her ear so that the mouthpiece fit under her lips. This would be the only voice transmission and she didn't want it to last any longer than it had to. For all she knew they were out there somewhere right now watching and waiting. "You there?" she asked quietly.

At once there was a reply, Wilson: "Hear you." She reported briefly. "I'm in position, camera operating, cold as hell."

"Hell's hot."

"Right. Let's test signals."

She released the mike button, then pressed it once, holding it down for about three seconds. Downstairs

Wilson followed suit. The result was a detectable change in the hiss that came from the speaker. She replied with two presses of her mike button. Wilson responded immediately with the same. The emergency signal, three presses, was not tried. It was reserved only for trouble. If one and two worked, three would also. "OK by me," she said. "OK," came the reply. "You'll get your first signal five minutes from now."

Then there was silence. In five minutes Wilson would press his mike button once and she would reply with the same. So it would go for the next two and a half hours. Every five minutes they would renew contact, thus insuring that the cold would not lull her into sleep. If she ever failed to reply they would be on the roof in a matter of minutes. She thought of them down there together in that apartment and hoped they kept away from each other. Wilson and Dick were not friendly, to say the least And Ferguson was so nervous the least bit of tension might send him into a panic. The wind rocked her body again, making her cling to the edge of the roof with her free hand. Leaving the walkie-talkie against her ear, she withdrew the pocket warmer and put it on the roof just beneath her chest, making a tiny area of relative warmth that would keep her neck from freezing as the tendrils of Arctic wind curled around her body.

She repositioned the camera and made a sweep of the alley peering through the viewer. Nothing. Closing her eyes she turned her face into the pocket of warmth under her chin. The wind kept pulling at her, kept her body tense, her mind on the ragged edge. It was going to be a long and brutal watch. The first signal came through and she replied, then made another sweep and again bowed her head.

This continued through the first hour. At the end of that time she pushed back from the edge of the roof, put her equipment down, and stood up. Methodically she stomped

until she was sure her feet were unfrozen, then jogged in place for a few moments. She blew into her gloves, grateful for the warmth that this produced. She drank a few swallows of coffee. Overall she was in good condition. She struggled across the roof and peered down the three street sides. Each one revealed the same scene: an empty street with the ice glaring yellow-white under the sodium-arc streetlights. Aside from a few parked cars there were no signs of humanity.

Then she noticed one of the cars. It was double-parked and it looked a lot like an NYPD unmarked car. Why the hell would it be here? It could only be a stakeout. But from this height who could be sure? Then the wind hit her and she had to go back to hands and knees, crawling precariously across the roof once more. Let them stake the place out, maybe they would come in handy one way or another. Goddamn them, they were watching Dick. Those were Internal Affairs Division investigators for sure. When you thought about it, it was almost funny. She huddled down and made another sweep.

“You’re through, kid,” came Wilson’s voice. She buzzed back, saying nothing, and immediately retreated to the doorway. It seemed like an eternity had passed up here. Her whole body ached except for her feet, which were ominously numb.

They were waiting for her in the stairwell. Ferguson was bundled up now. She passed the equipment to him and told him about her experience with the wind. He nodded, his face sunken and silent. Dick replaced all batteries—pocket warmer, camera, walkie-talkie and then tucked a hot thermos under Ferguson’s arm. The scientist slammed through the door with a bang and a gust of frigid wind.

The brutal conditions hit him harder than he had expected. He struggled to keep his balance, slipped and collapsed against the door. This whole thing was such a farce. Instead of hiding up here they should be down in the alley under spotlights making the open-handed gesture of friendship from Beauvoy’s diagrams. The wind cut into him, making his muscles convulse. How could those cops possibly take this punishment? He tried to move out, fell back again. His eyes were tearing now, the tears freezing and obscuring his vision. He got to his feet, took a few staggering steps forward. His legs shot out from under him and he landed painfully on his side, smashing the absurd, unwieldy gun into the ice beneath him. He struggled to his stomach and got out the radio, began calling them. This roof was beyond his capabilities; despite the others he was going to have to take his chances with communication—in the alley.

Back in the apartment Becky went to the bedroom and peeled off her clothes. She checked her feet, found no signs of frostbite. Still shaking, she went into the bathroom, closed the door, and turned on the shower. When the warm billows of steam hit her naked body she actually laughed with delight. Warmth, delicious warmth was all she could think of as the water sluiced over her body. It had been a brutal, killing two and a half hours and she was bitterly tired. After a thorough shower she toweled and powdered herself, then once again put on long johns, jeans, and a heavy sweater. Anything could happen tonight and she wasn’t about to assume that she wouldn’t be going outside again, maybe in a hurry.

When she went into the living room, Wilson was hunched over the radio and Dick was suiting up. He was doing it slowly but he was doing it. For a moment she was confused—how long had she been in the shower—but then she realized what was happening. “Just hang on, buddy,” Wilson was saying, “Neff’s gonna be up in a minute and you can come down.”

The reply was garbled.

Becky flared with anger. “That little creep! Leave him where he is.”

“I ain’t hurryin’, honey,” Dick said mildly. “He’s been whinin’ ever since he got up there.”

“He’s by the door,” Wilson called from his station at the living room window.

“The hell!” Becky said. “We need that little bastard. The three of us can’t take his time.”

“We got to. Dick’s gonna take an hour, I’ll take an hour, then you take a half hour. Then Dick does his full shift and I do mine. That’s what we have to do.” He said it laconically but his voice was tired. They all knew what hell it was up there.

“It’s no surprise. You can’t expect an untrained man to withstand that kind of punishment But I still ain’t hurryin’.”

“As if we were in any better shape ourselves. Hell, none of us are street cops.”

“Speak for yourself, dear. I’m in good shape. You and Wilson’re a mess, but—”

“OK, so how’s about you take his shift and yours too. Five hours. Sound good?”

“That’d be convenient, wouldn’t it, honey?” He spoke in a quiet, level tone. What in the name of God did he mean? He couldn’t possibly suspect that there was anything between her and Wilson. There wasn’t— at least very little!

She decided not to pick up on it.

Again the three of them took the elevator to the roof, and there was Ferguson sitting in the stairwell looking bleak. Nobody spoke to him, just took the equipment and got Dick checked out. The door to hell opened and closed again and Dick was gone.

The ride down was strained and silent. Once in the apartment Ferguson began silently picking up his things, a book, his wallet and keys which he hadn’t wanted to take to the roof. “That roof was too much for me,” he muttered. “But I’ll make it up to you, I’ll do exactly what I should have done in the first place.” He slipped out, the door clicking behind him. A last glance revealed a face set with fear and determination, the eyes wide and glazed.

“Don’t let him,” Wilson murmured.

“Yeah, don’t let him.”

But neither of them moved. Maybe he was going to die out on the street and maybe he wasn’t. It was his risk, he had chosen it. “We should have stopped him.”

“How? He’s a determined man. Brave, too, even if he couldn’t handle the roof. Signal Dick, let’s get started.” They went to the radio.

“White male about thirty-five exiting building,” said one of two plainclothesmen who were sitting in a car in front of the building. “Nah, it ain’t Neff.” The other plainclothesman hadn’t even opened his eyes. Inside the car it was warm and quiet, the two cops barely moving through the long hours of the shift. Another four hours and they would be relieved. Hell, you could get a worse gig on a night like this. Likely Captain Neff wasn’t going anywhere anyway until tomorrow. Still, he had that fancy camera, he must be planning to do something with it.

The two plainclothesmen didn’t watch Ferguson as he rushed past the front of the building and turned the corner. If they had they would have noticed the furtiveness of his movements, the desperate way his eyes darted around. But they would not have seen what happened when he turned that corner.

They were waiting there under cars. They had placed themselves just inside the alley. This way they could hear both front door and back and at the same time watch the

apartment. When they heard familiar footsteps crunching on the snow they were filled with eagerness. The pack was damaged and angry, hungry to kill.

When they came out from under the cars, Ferguson stopped. They could smell fear thickly about him, it would be an easy kill. He spread his hands in the palms-up gesture he had seen in the ancient book. They took their time getting positioned. He looked into their faces. Despite his fear he was fascinated by them—cruel, enigmatic, strangely beautiful. They stepped toward him, stopped again. “I can help you,” he said softly.

Three of them executed the attack while the fourth kept watch. He was dead, his body rolled under a car within five seconds. One jumped into his chest to wind him; another collapsed his legs from behind, and a third tore his throat out the moment he hit the ground.

Their race had long ago forgotten its ancient relationship with man. His hand-signals had meant nothing to them, nothing at all. The four of them literally tore him apart in their fury, ripped at him in a kind of frenzy of rage. They were the mother, the second-mated pair and the female of the third. Old Father had disappeared, they weren't sure why. Perhaps he was too ashamed or too hurt to take his new place behind the youngest in the pack.

But he was nearby. Older, cannier and more sensitive than the others, he knew better than they how desperate the situation had become. He was determined to right the wrong he had done his pack— even at the cost of his life. Although he was unable to see them, he heard their attack. “They act from fear,” he thought. “They need strength and courage.” And he resolved to help them. He had been aware for some moments of a human presence on the roof of the building and took care to stay close to the wall, out of the line of sight from above.

He went quickly to the front of the building, slid under a car and waited. A few minutes later a pedestrian came along, opened the door to the lobby. He ran in past her.

“Hey!”

“A dog—damn it, Charlie, I let in a dog!”

“I'll get it—Jesus, it's *moving!*”

He raced for the stairs and went up. He knew exactly where he was going and why. He trusted to luck that these were the right stairs. The shouts of the humans faded below him. Maybe they would rationalize his presence, maybe not. He recognized the danger of what he was doing and he knew how it would probably end.

But he owed this to the pack he loved.

Dick Neff cursed out loud when he felt the cold and was tugged by the wind. Becky was one hell of a girl to have endured this for two Goddamn hours! He was proud of her, there hadn't been a single peep of complaint. A person like that humbled you, hell, awed you. She was a total pro, no question about it.

He was heavier than his wife and the wind didn't force him to slither on his stomach. But he crawled. He crawled slowly and carefully, not liking the way those gusts hit him from behind and made him slide. Thirty stories was a long Goddamn drop. You went over, you'd have time to think about it on the way down. Plenty of time. He hated heights like this. The view from his apartment was beautiful but he hated this. In his nightmares he always fell, and lately he had been falling a lot. His subconscious reached out to him, imparting a strange *déjà vu*. It was as if he had been here before, crawling toward this precipice, shoved and jostled by this same wind. This was going to be a test of every particle of endurance and courage that he had. No wonder Ferguson had caved in so fast, this was a direct confrontation with the wild power of nature—and beyond that there was

the even greater danger of what they faced.

He could tell where Becky had been lying by the indentation in the snow. He went to approximately the same place. First the equipment check, then the camera sweep.

Nothing there.

Now the voice check. Wilson came in clear. They punched off with the mike signal and Dick settled in as best he could. He was just making another sweep when he heard a muffled bang behind him. The door? He turned. It stood ten feet away. It was breathing hard, as if it had just run up the stairs.

He jumped to his feet, snapping away with the camera. Then it moved and he hurled the camera at it. The machine bounced against its flank and rolled away. It wasn't attacking, probably because he was so close to the edge that a direct assault would send them both over. It moved quickly, trotting to the edge itself, now parallel with him. He was going for the Ingram when it jumped him. He lurched sideways, slipped on the ice and found himself half over the edge. But so was the werewolf, just a few feet away, so close he could see its face.

They hung there, it with its forepaws dug into the icy edge, he hanging by his arms. Its eyes bored into his with a look of hatred more terrible than he had ever seen before. The eyes darted around, calculating, seeking the crucial advantage that would kill Dick Neff, leaving the werewolf alive.

Carefully, not looking at the emptiness beneath his feet, Dick brought an arm down toward the .38 he had in a pocket. This was his one chance, his only chance. He wanted so desperately to live, not to fall! The inches-high concrete lip was the only thing that held him here, and it held him now by only one arm. The creature tried to pull itself up, failed, and hung still. It bared its teeth and made a low, horrible noise. Its eyes followed his movements, its face suddenly registered understanding. Now it began to slide along the ledge toward him, inch by inch closing the gap between them. With only one arm hanging on Dick could do no more than stay where he was. And he was having a hard time doing that. He sobbed aloud. Waves of fatigue poured through the arm on which his life was hanging.

Now the thing was so close he could smell its fetid animal odor, see its savage teeth working in its jaw. He grasped the .38, pulled the gun up, fired, felt an agony in his arm, tried to pull the trigger again. But there was nothing to pull. He looked at the arm— his hand was not there. Blood was pouring out and steaming in the cold. And with horror-struck eyes he saw his hand, still clutching the .38, dangling in the creature's mouth. Then his death began.

As his fall started he felt fear, then something else, a vast and overwhelming sadness so great that it was a kind of exaltation. His body bounced on the hard ice off the alley and he died instantly. A few moments later his hand slammed into the ground beside him.

Far above the old father was in a death-struggle of his own. He had barely, barely cut the hand off as the gun fired. There was a searing pain in his head, an eye closed. The bullet had passed there, grazing his eye and forehead. His own forelegs were tiring and he could not lift himself back over the ledge without risking a fall. But he didn't want to lift himself. He had seen the highest of the balconies not far away; he could work his way over there and drop down to it. When he landed he stood dazed, shaking his head. The eye was not going to work, it seemed. Very well, he would complete this task with only one eye. He was going to save his family and save the secret of his race. He knew it now, he was going to win.

He climbed down the balconies carefully and painfully, wounded more seriously than he could know, until he had gotten to the one balcony that mattered. He crouched there

inhaling the filthy smell of the two that were left alive, just the other side of the glass.

Chapter 12

“Hey, Becky, I got a problem.” She came over to him. “He’s not picking up on the signal.”

“Interference?”

“Don’t think so.” He pressed the mike button twice. No answer. He went over to voice. “Wake up, Dick. You gotta signal back or I can’t tell if you’re still there.”

Only the whisper of static answered.

“Maybe there is some interference,” he said. “I’ll go out on the balcony, get a better line.”

“We’d better go to the roof. It won’t take a minute.”

“Look, I’ll just go outside and—”

“We’re going up right now. Get your coat on.”

He complied. Now that she was making their command decisions, he seemed to be returning to a more normal equilibrium. This was fine by her; she’d trade her stripes for his bars any time.

Both of them had moved their pistols to their jacket pockets by the time they reached the roof door. Becky felt ice-cold inside, as cold as the night on the other side of the door. “You cover my back,” she said. “Draw your gun. We take no chances.” She pushed the door open and stepped out, her eyes going at once to where Dick should be. But wasn’t.

A pang of fear made her heart start to pound. She suppressed it, took a deep breath, called him.

Nothing answered but the wind. Then she saw an object not far away, a dark bulge on the icy roof. “Christ, here’s the camera!” Slipping and falling she went and retrieved it.

Part of the housing was knocked off. The lens was cracked. She backed into the stairwell, closed the door against the wind. In the quiet she heard her own ragged breathing. Her insides were churning, she wanted to be sick. “Something’s happened to him,” she said. “Let’s get downstairs.”

“To the alley?”

“Hell, no! If they got him that’s where he’ll be— and they’ll be there too, waiting for us to come to him. Remember this morning—the lure? They only get to play that particular trick once a day.” She spoke from reason, but her heart screamed at her to go to the alley, to save her husband. If he was there, though, he was most certainly beyond saving. She wanted to weep, but instead she pressed on. “We’ll go back to the apartment and look out over the balcony. Maybe this damn camera will work enough to let us see what’s on the ground down there.”

They returned to an apartment that was already changing for Becky, ceasing to be a home. Everything was the same except Dick was... gone. If he had fallen, his body must have sailed right past these windows while they were trying to get him on the CB. She put

the camera down on the dining room table, wiped tears angrily from her eyes and examined the damage. All you could see through the viewer was a pearl-white blur. "It's totaled," she said. "At least the film's intact." She tossed Wilson the cassette.

"Six shots. He took six shots."

Talking made her throat constrict. She stood silent, unable to answer, her mind searching for some way to believe that Dick was still alive. She wished that the camera hadn't broken. Then they could use it to look out over the balcony into the alley, and at least confirm the worst. She went over the possibilities: he had been attacked by a werewolf on the roof and had fallen—that was number one. A distant number two was that he had somehow escaped this attack by jumping onto the topmost balcony. Highly unlikely. If he had been able to jump down there, so could the werewolf.

Wilson came to her, put his hand on her arm. "He's had it, baby," he said gruffly. His eyes were wet. He looked furious.

"I wish I knew for sure."

"You know."

"Oh, God, maybe he's down in that alley bleeding to death!" She knew it was irrational, a man surviving a fall like that, but stranger things had happened.

"I'll go look, Becky, but it isn't going to tell us anything we don't know." He went toward the balcony, paused at the door. He pushed the curtains aside. "Just reconnoitering," he said. He failed to notice the shape huddled against the glass almost at his feet. He rolled back the sliding door.

It leaped at him through the curtains, its snarling mouth ripping the cloth. He fell back into the living room, rolled, and headed for the bedroom door. Becky was in motion behind him as the thing pulled the curtains down around itself, shook free, and came on into the apartment.

Becky and Wilson reached the bedroom, and she slammed and locked the door behind them. There was a moment of silence, then the sound of a body pressing against the door. The plywood creaked and popped, but the door held. Suddenly the handle began rattling furiously, almost as if it would be torn out at its roots. Becky put her fist to her mouth. "Did you see?" she whispered as she fought the panic. "It's brains are all out. It's been horribly hurt."

"That must be Dick's doing."

The door groaned. Now the beast began throwing itself against it. The hinges quaked, the damaged doorknob rattled loosely with each impact "Shoot it. Shoot through the door."

"My gun is in my coat." And his coat was in the kitchen.

She found her own .38 and aimed it about where she estimated the creature's chest would be, flicked off the safety, and pulled the trigger.

There was a deafening blast, and a smoking hole splintered the door. "That's done," she said in a shaky voice. She started toward the door, but Wilson's hand grabbed her arm. "You missed," he said.

"How could I miss—it was right there."

"Look."

Through the two-inch hole in the door she could see something gray—fur. And she could hear a low, deep sound of breathing.

“I didn’t even wound it” She raised the gun again. At once there was light shining through the hole. The creature had retreated.

“They’re damn smart. It must have heard and moved to avoid the shot. There’s no use trying again, it won’t be there. And we aren’t doing the door much good.”

Outside the door the Old Father moved cautiously. He had jumped to avoid the shot just in time and could still feel a hot sensation where it had passed his face. His head throbbed terribly, it was all he could do to keep the pain from making him scream in agony. He fought for control, found it somewhere within him, and forced himself to think about the situation. The most important thing was that he was in. He had heard the man walking over to the balcony door and had hidden just in time. The man had opened the door and—at last.

The next thing was to get the rest of the pack up here. He wasn’t sure that they would come if he called them, but he knew that the sounds of a fight would certainly get them climbing up the precarious balconies. Very well—he would create such sounds. He leaped into the living room, letting his hatred for his tormentors be vented in destruction. He pulled down lamps, smashed furniture, did everything he could to create a din. But only for a few moments, not enough to alert the humans in nearby apartments. Then he stopped, stood with his ears cocked. And there it was! The clatter of toes, the grunts of struggle. They were on their way up.

How he loved them! He thought of their future and his own past, and felt hope not only for them but for his whole race. The last of the enemy cowered behind a flimsy door ready for the slaughter. Soon all packs everywhere would again be safe from human interference. They, not he—for their safety he was going to trade his life.

They came rushing in, their faces full of the lust of victory.

When they saw him they stopped. Very well, let them be shocked. He knew a mortal wound when he felt it; their expressions of horror did not surprise him. He was glad to give his life for them; now they knew it.

A curtain of grief descended over them. Very well, that was to be expected. He refused to allow himself to share their grief. Memories clattered at the edge of his mind, but now was not the moment for them. There was much work and little time.

Using their language of movements, tail-wags and sounds, he quickly communicated to his family that the two behind the door had a gun and that the door must be burst. They all knew without its being said that he planned to jump first into the room, to take the impact of the gun.

His mate looked pleadingly at him.

He reminded her that he was already as good as dead. This last act—of jumping into the gunfire— would be useful to the pack. Her sorrow, or his own, must not be allowed to intervene.

Inside the bedroom Becky and Wilson listened closely. They heard a rapid series of growls of varying pitch, then the rattle of claws against the floor.

“Now they’re all out there,” Wilson whispered. “The rest of them must have come up from the alley. How many shots you have left?”

“Five.”

“They better count.” His voice was choked. It was obvious to them both that five shots would not be enough.

“The phone!” Becky grabbed it, dialed 911. Nothing. “The receiver in the living room

must have been knocked off the hook.”

“We won’t make it,” he said softly.

She whirled and faced him. “We’ll make it, you bastard. If we don’t give up hope, that is.”

“I’m just being realistic, Becky.”

“Speak for yourself.” She held her gun in both hands, pointed straight at the door. Not even the fact that Wilson was trying to kiss her cheek caused her to move.

“Your timing stinks,” she said.

“It’s probably my last chance.”

“Shut up and watch the door.”

The Old Father had gathered the pack well clear of the door but in sight of it. He told them what they would do, assuming his accustomed role. Nobody questioned him, nobody dared. He had gotten them this far, they could not but listen to him.

They would go in low, burst the door. Then he would make his rush. He would do it alone, hoping that the gun would be emptied into him. Then the others could destroy them, consume his body, and leave without a trace of themselves remaining. Man would not understand how these tragedies had occurred, and the secret of the packs would be safe once more.

He snapped his jaw, a sound that brought them all to immediate attention. Now they prepared themselves.

They all quivered with the desire to speak but said nothing. There were no words for what the pack now had to face, for the sorrow that they all felt. Despite his loss of the right to lead, he had nonetheless founded this pack, had built it through his strength and effort. Now in death he received its respect.

“You hear anything?” Becky asked. Wilson was standing near the door.

“They’re in the living room. Maybe we could make a break.”

“We wouldn’t get three feet. Just stay put and think.”

The phone lay on the floor, a tiny voice telling them again and again that a receiver had been left off the hook on the line. Becky felt like ripping the damn thing out of the wall and tossing it through the window. “Hey, wait a minute—” She went over to the window and peered down. “Listen, why don’t we toss the Goddamn bed out the window. That’ll bring somebody up to investigate.”

“So the poor soul opens the door and gets torn apart. Meanwhile, we’re already dead.”

“You got a pen?”

“Yeah, but what—”

“So we write on the sheet. Gimme—” She took the pen, threw the covers off the bed and started scratching big letters on the fitted bottom sheet. In a few moments there was a rough message, “SEND ARMED COPS 16G. MURDER. GREAT DANGER. BREAK IN. CAREFUL OF AMBUSH!”

They pulled open the window, finding that it was not big enough to accommodate the mattress. Becky stationed Wilson at the door with the .38 and wrapped the quilt around her right arm. She looked down to make sure the street below was empty, then smashed the window with her fist. “OK, give me a hand again, let’s get this thing out.” Together they pushed and struggled until the mattress fell from the window. It tumbled end over

end and hit squarely on the sidewalk. It must have made a noise, but the sound was lost in the wind.

Then there came scratching at the door. “They’re onto the lock again,” Wilson said. His voice was strained. He looked desperately at Becky.

“Get the dresser over there—move it!” He obediently shoved it against the door while she held the pistol. A moment later there was a tremendous bang, and the door sprung on its hinges. A crack appeared down the center. “Lean against that dresser,” Becky said to Wilson, who had cringed away toward the bathroom. Now he came forward again, pressing his back against the dresser. The door shook with the onslaught of the strength behind it.

Across the street the two plainclothesmen had heard the thud when the mattress hit the sidewalk. Both of them peered out the closed windows of their car, toward the sound.

“Somethin’ hit the sidewalk.”

“Yeah.”

Silence for a moment. “You wanna take a look?”

“Nah. You go if you’re curious.”

“I’m not curious.”

They settled back to wait out the end of the shift. Another hour and they would be able to hand off to the next crew and get a hot shower. Despite the car heater the cold got to you on these long gigs.

“What do you suppose Neff is doin’?” one of them said to break the monotony.

“Sleeping in his bed like all smart people this time of night.”

They said nothing further.

The door smashed into three pieces, which came flying in over the dresser. One of the creatures was there, pulling itself in through the space above the dresser. Becky shot as it leaped at her. The bullet smashed into its head, and it dropped to the floor. Wilson had been thrown aside by the assault on the door and now scrambled to his feet. Despite its head-wound and the blood bubbling out of a new two-inch hole in its chest, the thing jumped on him, clawing into him with its vicious paws. He gasped, his eyes widening, and screamed in agony. She shot again. It had to be dead now, but still the claws worked, the jaws cut into Wilson’s neck and his screams peeled out.

Then the thing slumped away from Wilson. The only sound in the room was its ragged breathing. Wilson started to stagger away, his whole front ripped and streaming with blood. She stumbled to help him—and a paw grabbed her ankle. Agony pierced her leg as the sharply pointed claws penetrated. She put her hands to her head and shrieked, kicking frantically with her free foot. The blows landed again and again, but the grip would not release.

Becky’s whole being wanted to shoot it again, to shoot it and shoot it, but she did not. The bullets must be saved.

Then the grip faded.

She slumped back to a sitting position on the bedframe and pointed her pistol at the broken door, at the apparitions that were gathering there. There were four of them, obviously very unsure about her weapon. She had two shots left. Wilson, now huddled moaning on the floor beside the body of the werewolf, was beyond helping her. She was alone and in agony, fighting unconsciousness.

Downstairs the doorman was staring at a patrol car that had pulled up in front of the building. Two cops, the collars of their heavy winter coats turned up against the wind, got out and entered the lobby. “Help you?”

“Yeah. We gotta check out a disturbance. You ’got a disturbance?”

“Nah. It’s quiet.”

“Sixteenth floor. People been callin’ the precinct. Screams, furniture breakin’. You got any complaints?”

“This is a quiet building. You sure you got the right place?”

They nodded, heading for the elevator. This looked like a standard family disturbance situation— no arrests, just a lot of argument and maybe a little fight to break up. You spent half your time on family disturbances, the other half on paperwork. Real crime, forget it.

“Lessee, sixteen.” One of the patrolmen punched the button, and the elevator began to ascend. After a few moments the door slid open revealing a long, dimly lit hallway. The two cops looked up and down. Nobody was visible. Aside from the sound of a couple of TVs it was quiet. They proceeded into the hall. Apartment 16-G had been the source of the disturbance. They would ring the bell.

The creatures were watching Becky by lifting their heads briefly above the edge of the dresser that stood in the doorway. Though she kept the gun aimed she wasn’t fast enough to get a shot off at one of those darting heads.

Then they became quiet. They could jump right over the dresser and get at her throat, she was sure of that. She hobbled to the window, wishing that she could somehow protect Wilson, who had lapsed into unconsciousness. But she couldn’t. If the creatures came at her she planned to jump. Death by falling was to be preferred a thousand times to disembowelment by those monstrosities.

A head appeared above the dresser, paused for a long moment, then was gone. That pause had been longer than the rest. Becky braced herself. Still nothing happened. They were being very careful. They knew what a gun could do. The doorbell rang.

One of the creatures sailed across the dresser, its teeth bared, its claws extended toward her throat.

It took Becky’s last two slugs in the muzzle and dropped at her feet. The claws went to the face and the body hunched, its muscles standing out like twisted ropes. Then it collapsed into a widening pool of blood Becky watched it with a mixture of horror and sadness. Her ankle was almost useless; she could barely support herself on the windowsill with her hands. The wind was whipping her hair around her face, biting into her back. She looked across the carnage in the room. There were three hideous faces staring at her over the dresser that still blocked the doorway. With trembling hands she lifted her .38 in their direction. Without her hands on the windowsill, balance was precarious. The wind buffeted her, threatening at any moment to make her fall. But the creatures hesitated before the gun. Then one of them made a low, strange sound... almost of grief. It closed its eyes, tensed its muscles—and suddenly turned away from the bedroom. Now all three of them disappeared below the edge of the dresser.

Then there came a knock on the door. “Police,” said a young voice.

“No! Don’t open that door!”

The knock came again, louder. “Police! Open up!”

“Stay out! *Stay—*”

With a crash the door flew open. The two cops who were standing there didn't even have a chance to scream. All Becky heard was a series of thuds.

Then there was a silence.

Becky was crying now. Still with the gun held in both hands she moved forward. But she could not go on. She sank to the bed. Her pistol fell to the floor. Any moment now the werewolves would be back to kill her.

"Hey, what's goin' on in here?"

She looked up through a haze of tears. Two patrolmen were standing on the other side of the dresser with guns drawn. She sat stunned, hardly believing what she saw. "I—I've got a wounded man in here," she heard herself whisper.

The patrolmen pushed the dresser aside. Ignoring the two werewolves, one of them went to Wilson. "Breathin'," he said even as the other was calling for assistance on his radio.

"What's the story, lady?"

"I'm Neff, Detective Sergeant Neff. That's Detective Wilson."

"Yeah, good. But what the hell are those?"

"Werewolves." Becky heard herself say the word from far, far away. Strong arms eased around her, laid her back on the bed. But still she fought unconsciousness. There was more to do, no time to sleep.

In the distance there were sirens, then a few minutes later voices in the hall. Then light, flashbulbs popping as police photographers recorded the scene. She raised her head far enough to see Wilson being carried out on a stretcher. "O-positive blood," she called weakly.

Then somebody was beside her, looking at her, a half smile on his tired face. "Hello, Mrs. Neff." He moved aside as medical orderlies slid her onto a stretcher. "Mrs. Neff, do you want to make a statement to the press?"

"You're the man from the *Post*, aren't you?"

"I'm Garner, ma'am."

She smiled, closed her eyes. They were moving her now, the lights of the hallway passing above her face. Sam Garner hurried along beside her, trying to hold a tape recorder microphone in her face.

"It's a big story, isn't it?" he said breathlessly.

"A big story," she said. Sam Garner smiled again, elbowed his way into the elevator already crowded with medical orderlies and her stretcher. Her leg throbbed with agony, she felt exhausted, she wanted to close her eyes, to forget. But she gave Garner his story.

Epilogue

Their mother jumped as soon as the gun had been emptied into their father. She would

make the kill, then the four of them would destroy their father's body.

Then the incredible happened. The gun crashed again and their mother was also killed.

They stood staring at her lifeless form, too stunned to move. All three of them felt aware of grief—and almost overwhelming anger at the monster who had killed their parents.

It sat waving its gun, and the gun smelled hot and deadly.

They watched, not quite sure what to do. Then there was a sound outside the door—more humans approaching, their breath rising and falling, their feet crunching against the carpet in the hallway. And the sharp, nasty scent of guns was upon them also. The three young Wolfen turned to face this new threat. The door burst open amid shouting human voices, and they prepared to kill whatever appeared there.

But it was two young males, dressed as those in the Dump had been dressed. All of this agony had begun when two such had been killed; they would not repeat the mistake. They ran past the two policemen into the hallway. Now the bodies of their parents would be left behind for men to see—but this could not be helped. They bolted down the hall, pushed through the heavy door there, and began to run down the stairs.

They raced across the lobby of the building, smashing the glass front door with their bodies, and running on, indifferent to the shouts and crashing glass behind them and to the cuts they had received.

They ran through the empty predawn city, moving north past the rows of luxury buildings, through the ruined streets even farther north, past crowds of homeless men huddled around open fires, not stopping until they reached the dark and rat-infested banks of the Harlem river.

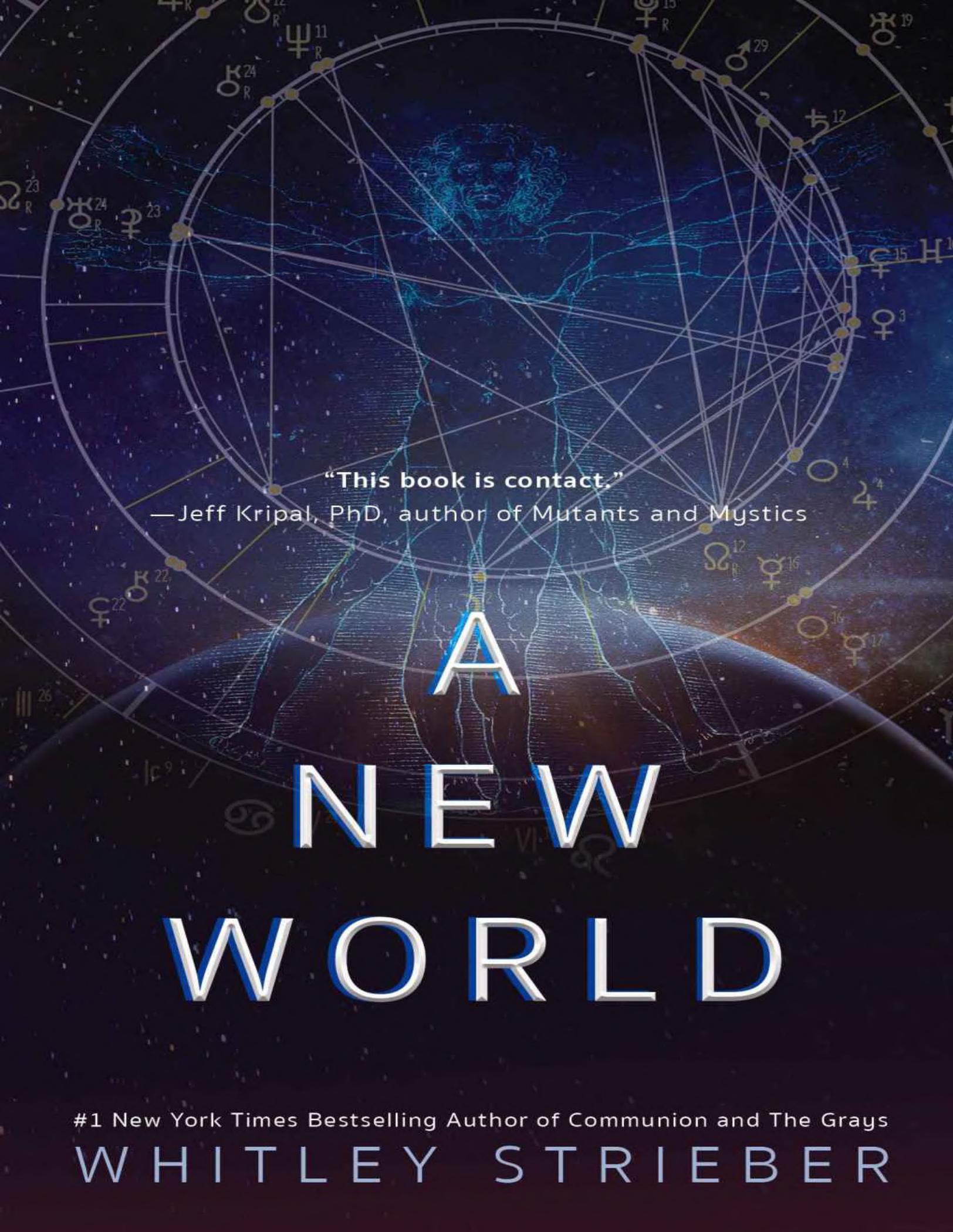
The eastern sky was glowing fitfully, the light casting into black relief the girders of the bridges above the river. The three of them stopped. They had come to a well-hidden place, marked safe by the scent of the pack that roamed this area. All felt a terrible sense of loss. Their parents were dead, the pack they knew was ended. Worse was the fact that Wolfen bodies had been left behind in the hands of man.

They felt loss but not defeat. What burned in their hearts was not fear but defiance; hard, determined, unquenchable.

They howled. The sound echoed up and down the banks of the river, crossed the icy muttering waters, echoed again off the distant buildings.

High above them on the Third Avenue Bridge a repair crew was deploying its equipment. When they heard the sound the men stared wordlessly at one another. One of them went to the railing but could see nothing in the darkness below.

Then the howl was answered, keening on the wind as pack after pack looked up from their haunts in the City's depths and responded to the powerful sense of destiny that the sound awakened in them all.



“This book is contact.”

—Jeff Kripal, PhD, author of *Mutants and Mystics*

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About the Author

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This book is dedicated to the children, to whom this world belongs.

“The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.”

---John F. Kennedy,
Yale University Commencement Address, 1962

“Mythology exists at a level of our social reality over which normal political and intellectual action has no power.”

---Dr. Jacques Vallee

“We are part of a symbiosis with something that disguises itself as an alien invasion so as not to alarm us.”

---Terrence McKenna

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I wish also to honor all the witnesses and researchers who have struggled with the close encounter experience and the effort to understand it for so many years.

I would especially like to thank Jeffrey J. Kripal and Rice University for creating the Anne and Whitley Strieber Archive, which preserves thousands of the letters that we received after the publication of *Communion*, and were collected and cataloged by Anne Strieber.

When Col. Philip Corso asked one of our visitors what was on offer for us if we let them into our lives, the answer was “A new world, if you can take it.”

In Memory

Not a page of this book is absent the influence of my beloved wife, Anne Strieber. Meeting this brilliant human being blessed and defined my life. She brought crystalline insight into the ambiguous and yet real events that we experienced. The byword of her life was “have joy,” and it is in that spirit that I have written *A New World*.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Most of what you read in these pages is going to be strange beyond belief. This is because it is about events that are supposed to be impossible, a level of reality that isn't supposed to exist and relationships that are entirely new. Knowing this, I have made every effort to tell my story accurately. I have never left anything out, changed anything or edited anything because it seemed too unbelievable. It bears essentially no relationship to any of the popular narratives about alien contact, even less those of ordinary life. And yet it is, word by word, based on observation and experience.

Unlike many stories that deal with strange experiences, I have attempted whenever possible to add the texture of witness to my narrative. Given what I am asking here, readers deserve to know the degree to which every experience I relate was shared by others.

It is also important to add that the close encounter experience only begins with what we now know as the physical. As you develop your relationship with the visitors, you discover that what we call the physical is only part of a huge tapestry of reality. The vision of those who do not strive to gain from their encounters remains bound to the familiar world, though.

Presently, their physical appearance, although only a small part of what they are, is all most of us know about the visitors. For example, it is my belief that most people operating behind the curtain of secrecy have rarely experienced them except physically, and therefore have a very limited vision of them. But for anybody willing to see and accept the mystery that they actually present, there is so much more. It is this group that has the potential to lead the world to real change.

Engaging with the visitors more deeply is extraordinary and rewarding. It is also completely different from living life as we have come to know it. The laws of reality change. Above all, the very nature of communication changes. The rules are much different and, by our standards, very strange.

I could have edited my story to make it easier to believe—left some things out, changed others to make them seem closer to the familiar than they are. Like the visitors who are part of my life, I hate deception and will have no part in it. To make my story more believable, I would have had to turn it into a lie.

PREFACE

This Book Is Contact
by Jeffrey J. Kripal, PhD

This is a book about a new super natural world in which communication between the visitors and us, between the “dead” and the “living,” enters a new level of intensity, where physicality is extended into some other new materialist or superphysical dimension, where time, and so evolution, do not work like we think they work, where astonishing sensing capacities or parapsychological abilities run in genetic lines (otherwise called families), and where the UFO is as much a vehicle of soul as it is a source of metamaterials or the invisible object of new radar returns or classified military attention. There is also a model of embodiment shining between these remarkable lines, constituting a paradoxical vision in which we *use* the physical body as a kind of temporary portal into these physical and temporal dimensions, even as we also remain outside the body and its particular sensory-generated reality. This is a new world not because it is really new (I assure you that all of these themes are very old convictions in other cultural codes), but because it depends on us right *here* and right *now* to take shape and appear.

The deepest message of this little book, then, is an intimate one: that the actualization and appearance, or continued distortion and camouflaging, of this new world *depends on us* and, more particularly, on how we choose to interact with the invisible presences of our cosmic environment. These choices include whether and how we read this very book, which, in the

intentions and understanding of the author, is itself an urgent communication from the visitors. The intended implications are clear enough: to the extent that you really and truly interact with and so actualize this book, you really and truly interact with and so actualize the visitors. This book is contact, but this contact depends *on you*.

Allow me to be nerdy for a moment, as this new world and our uncanny reading role in bringing it into focus intersects directly with my daily life and work.

I live and work in an elite academic world, in a school of humanities at a major research university with some of the smartest people on the planet. (I am not sure how I got here, but that is another story.) These remarkable intellectuals see through things, like so many X-ray machines in a doctor's office. They see into the bones, organs, and mostly unconscious structures of whole societies, nation-states, empires, value systems, and religions. Nothing is sacred here.

The fact is that everything human has been invented by humans, so everything can be questioned. The central argument of my own life-work is that there is a secret human potential hidden in such a deep questioning. To understand who we are, we must first understand who we are not. We must understand that the Human is Two. Yes, we are the hairless, dying primate with this or that social identity, but we are also something Other and More that we cannot name with any words or measure with any instrument.

Of course, looking at ourselves in this way can be frightening. This is because everything we think of as "me" or "us" ends up being called into question, seen through, and, in the end, simply set aside. We are left with a mystery, and that mystery is us. But there is also real hope, since we are Other or More than any of the identities we have invented for ourselves.

This is why I so appreciate the ferocious insights of my colleagues. I so admire their unflinching search for deeper and deeper structures of truth and, by implication, for justice (since every structure they uncover and see through privileges and includes some people and marginalizes and excludes other people). I have called this broad-based intellectual sensibility of seeing through societies, nation-states, and religions "prophetic," not in the sense of predicting the future, but in the sense of giving witness to difficult truths that a particular society, authority, or individual does not want to hear. These truths might be about gender or sexuality, about race, about class, about colonialism or empire, about power, about God or the gods, well, about pretty

much anything humans think, make, do, or identify with.

But none of this makes academics infallible or all-seeing, and social justice and the endless sufferings of different identities are by no means the only kinds of truth to seek and to know. It turns out that there are sacred cows in the academy, too (and even the Hindu cow, by the way, was once not so sacred in India, not at least as it is today—it was once raised, herded, prized, and, yes, eaten). Our present-day sacred cows, which we will no doubt someday “eat,” involve an unquestioning commitment to naturalism, materialism, and scientism, that is, the largely unconscious assumptions that what we think of today as “natural” is all there is; that everything is finally “physical” in the ways that physics understands matter (not very well, it turns out); and that the objectifying methods of science are the only way to know reality, with the often unstated assumption that anything science does not know or cannot know with these same methods must not be real.

Believe it or not, virtually every aspect of modern intellectual life is committed to this triple set of assumptions around naturalism, materialism, and scientism. Take the study of religion, my own area of research and writing. I have spent the last four decades studying religion. For the first three of those decades, I was schooled in a way of thinking that argued, with some very good reasons, that every religious prodigy—every shaman, mystic, seer, saint, medium, or spiritual teacher—is just a biomedical body locked down in space-time, that *everything* he or she claims to know came through a material text, a social institution, or a social interaction. In other words, I was taught to believe that everything human is finally and completely “historical” and “social,” which is to say: conditioned, relative, local, and material. Nothing super here.

This is often the case, of course. Hence the prophetic function of the humanities: *all* claims that a religion or nation-state makes to include some and exclude others can be deconstructed, taken apart, shown to be false in any universal or absolute way. That’s because they are.

But that is not all there is.

I once thought that all talk of sky-gods inserting special “crystals” or sacred “stones” in the bodies of shamans to signal the calling and authorize the teachings of a new spiritual prodigy was nothing but the stuff of myth and folklore. Then I encountered Whitley Strieber and the implant in his left ear, which, as he explains in his books, was central to his own calling and now inspires him to write his books, sometimes with very specific information.

Turns out that the mythologies and folklore were true.

I once thought that scriptural scenes like that described in the first few chapters of Ezekiel could be explained as literary inventions, that every detail of them could be traced back to some other text, social institution, or previous belief. Then I encountered the modern abduction literature, many scenes of which feature apparent craft and seeming technology that look, well, pretty much exactly like Ezekiel's famous "chariot" vision, which is obviously no chariot at all. Turns out that the Bible, or any other religious scripture for that matter, is sometimes describing actual human experiences and not just making stuff up.

I once thought all that talk of "ghosts" and "spirits," of invisible spectral beings, was some kind of psychological projection, social construction, or mistaken dream. Then I met Whitley Strieber, who interacts with invisible "visitors" on an almost nightly basis, most recently to write this book. Turns out that ghosts and spirits are real, "real" in ways that we still cannot grasp or define with our prescribed evolved senses and adaptive cognitive capacities.

I have interacted with Whitley for about a decade now, often on a daily basis. I believe that I have also interacted with his departed wife, Anne, through a most remarkable drawing channeled by a Canadian medium (more on that some day). Perhaps most dramatically, I have slept in the same room with Whitley at a symposium (a risky enterprise, I assure you) and experienced my own psyche "split" in two in his sleeping presence. Some other part of me, completely separate from the conscious self, watched something astonishing take place in that dark room. As this all transpired, this Jeff-self heard very distinctly in his mind the following words uttered by some other part of me: "Oh . . . my . . . *God!*" The tone was one of ontological shock, as John Mack once put it so well: not quite fear, but something that included the intellectual emotions of amazement, astonishment, and a kind of pure or total cognitive dissonance. Indeed, I was seeing something so shocking and so dissonant that I could not see it. I literally could not process it as myself. And so I split myself in two, so as to process it and not process it, so as to see it and not see it.

Most recently, just a few days ago actually, Whitley shared with me a recording of a similar night scene. The audio recording features the other Whitley (he is Two, too) speaking lovingly to a visitor in the room whom he calls by name: "Teach me, Mature." The recording ends with a female presence sighing deeply as she sensually and intellectually interacts with

Whitley. As I listened to the audio, I was reminded of the feeling tone of that night that I split in two in our shared room. Like Whitley, I suspect that this female visitor was in some way “Anne,” whatever that social convention we call a name means to that being now.

Clearly, I am not the same person (or persons) I was in graduate school, or even a decade ago. I “have” a social name and a physical form, as Anne once did, but I don’t really believe either. And I live toward what Whitley calls here “a new world.” Alas, I cannot say that I have entered it, or that I have shaken off identification with my social ego or bionome, but I can say that I have seen and heard entirely too much to believe the old world that I have tried my best to leave behind and in which I no longer believe. Words like “religion,” “myth,” “folklore,” “shaman,” “mystic,” “possession,” “god,” “demon,” “spirit,” “animism,” even “body,” “mind,” “individual,” “history,” “time,” “identity,” and “human being” all mean entirely different things to me today than they did a decade ago. That old world is gone, even if this new world has not yet taken shape.

“What?” some of my colleagues might say, “You expect us to believe that invisible beings interact with humans, that the human is also superhuman, and that *this* is what the history of religions really points toward, some kind of post-contact social formation?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it.”

I would assure my colleagues that we do not know what or who these invisible presences are; that I suspect they are in fact us (whatever “us” really means); that I understand the supernatural as super natural; and that I do not believe any of the traditional religious, sci-fi, or military mythologies that get wrapped around these mind-blowing moments of real contact and spiritual transmission. Whatever this new world is, I strongly suspect that knowledge practices like “religion,” “science,” and “technology” are fundamentally inadequate, and that we will finally have to *be* this new world to know it. All the beliefs, science, and weapons of the world will not get us one inch closer to this new world. Indeed, they will only take us further and further away.

But I doubt that any of these qualifications would help these particular colleagues very much. They are still living in the old world. I choose to live toward and for the new one.

Which world do *you* choose?

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THE MYSTERY BEGINS

I am the author of many books, both novels and nonfiction, most notably the novels *The Hunger*, *Warday* and *Superstorm*, which was the basis of the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*. But my best-known work is a nonfiction book called *Communion*, about a close encounter of the third kind that befell me on December 26, 1985. Since then, my relationship with the strange people I encountered on that night, whom I have come to call “the visitors,” has continued. Starting in the fall of 2015, contact with them has exploded in richness and wonder.

In part this is because I have gradually learned something of how they can communicate with us—which is so different from anything one might expect that it took me many years just to understand that it was happening. My hope is that by describing my experiences with this, I can help others to understand the messages that they may already have received and also learn how to engage in give-and-take. If more of us can gain an idea of how it works, I think that our visitors may abandon their long-held stance of secrecy and become a more open part of our world.

My first encounter with them did not go well. Not at all.

On that snowy December night, I woke up in a little room filled with what appeared to be darting, big-eyed insects and the stocky, dark-blue trolls I later came to call *kobolds*. They were originally given this name by miners in Bavaria in the middle ages, who would glimpse their iridescent, dark blue forms as they rushed through the shadowy tunnels. To this day, there are narrow tunnels under parts of Bavaria, the origin and use of which are unexplained.

The next day, a vague memory of the big eyes caused me to imagine that an owl had come into our house, but as there was no entry point, this could not have been the answer. I was injured in the side of my head. My rectum was torn so badly that I bear the scar to this day. To say the least, I was severely shaken up. As the weeks passed and I discounted one ordinary explanation after another, I was finally left with only one alternative: as incredible, as impossible as it seemed, the event had in some way been real. The creatures I had seen were actual, living beings of some kind.

I agonized over telling my wife. What in the world would Anne think? Things were rocky between us because, during the six weeks or so after the event that it had taken me to understand that I wasn't going insane, I'd tried to drive her off. If I ended up in a psychiatric institution, I knew her well enough to know that she would never abandon me, and what would she and our son do for money? They needed and deserved to have a healthy husband and father, not be saddled with a person so deeply psychotic that he was completely misperceiving reality.

I took neurological tests for brain abnormalities and temporal lobe epilepsy, which can produce hallucinations. All were normal. The epilepsy test even showed that not only was I not prone to hallucinations, I had an unusually stable brain. I took an extensive battery of psychological tests, which revealed me to be normal but also suffering a high level of stress.

I still had no idea what to say to Anne. What could I say, that I'd been taken aboard a flying saucer by little men? Because I was now pretty convinced that this was what had happened. Finally, I told an old friend, photographer and documentary filmmaker Timothy Greenfield-Sanders. Incredibly, he responded that his wife's parents, who lived down the road from us in upstate New York, had seen some strange creatures similar to the ones I had described to him. They had observed them from a window, moving about in their back garden.

This put things in a new light. I could now say that there were other witnesses. Obviously, Anne was going to ask that question. Timothy advised me to go ahead and tell her. He was sure she'd find it all as fascinating as he did.

One evening after dinner, when our little boy was safely asleep, I asked her to sit down for a talk. She said later that she was afraid that I was going to tell her I wanted a divorce. But I was past trying to drive her away from the crazy man. My main concern now was whether or not *she* would be the one

to want a divorce.

I said the words I had been so afraid to utter: “Honey, I think I was taken aboard a flying saucer by little men.”

She stared at me. Her mouth dropped open. Then a twinkle of what I can only describe as her sparkling wit flashed in her eyes. She blurted out, “Oh, thank God! I was afraid you were going crazy!”

There was a silence. Her eyes searched me for some sign that I was joking. I looked gravely back at her. Then we both burst into laughter anyway. We threw ourselves into one another’s arms. She said, “I wanted an interesting life, but I had no idea what I was getting into when I met you.”

In that moment, our marriage entered a new chapter. On that evening in our little apartment in New York, we began what became a journey of discovery that completely revised our understanding of world, life and reality and continues to do so every single day.

From the beginning, she seemed to know things that she perhaps could not put into words, about how this incredible experience belongs first to us— to human beings—not to the mysterious figures in the night who trigger it.

At first, I was appalled. I resolved to sell the little cabin where it had happened and never spend another night outside of the depths of a city. But I just couldn’t get over the idea that they were real. *Real*.

Anne didn’t want to sell up. She wanted to go back and see what might happen.

I also found that my curiosity was stronger than my fear, and in April of 1986, we resumed our weekends at the cabin. I started going out into the woods at night to serve notice to whatever they were that I wanted to meet them again—hopefully without a repeat of the violence that had taken place previously and the injury that my flailing panic had caused me.

Given what I had been through, this might seem pretty foolhardy, and it certainly was that. But I was simply too curious. We both were. The fact that the event had happened at all had been completely remarkable. Although I had been left with injuries, I had also had my mind opened in the most profound way I could imagine. Whatever they were, they were not human by any definition I knew. And yet they were here.

Anne agreed that I should go out and see what happened, but she was not a believer by nature. She was a questioner, and I followed her lead in this. She would often say, “The human species is too young to have beliefs. What we need are good questions.”

We humans have a nasty habit of deciding to believe that things we don't actually understand are explained in some way that we make up. And the next thing we know, we're killing each other over these imaginings.

So this is not going to be a book of advocacy. I am not asserting beliefs. Instead, it is going to be a description of events, as I have witnessed them, and an inquiry into ways of communicating with a richly alive, enigmatic and absolutely remarkable presence that seems to have been with us, at least in part, throughout our recorded history, and probably a lot longer than that. But it is also true that it seems to have entirely changed its approach to us in the years since World War II ended. It is now an enormous part of our world. It seeks to become even more central to human experience. We're dying here, and it doesn't want that. It wants to communicate with us, but it is deeply, profoundly different from us, and so far communication has been essentially impossible. Learning to do it effectively is what my life has been about, and what I hope to convey here.

The visitors have been very clear to me: Unless we can communicate with them in a rational, practical and effective way, they cannot help us.

I wish I could provide a simple how-to, a neat list of dos and don'ts.

I can't do it, and nobody can. The gap between us is simply too great for a simple list to work.

Our visitors stand ready to help us face the jeopardy we are in, and even aid us in solving the problems that we are facing. The degree of their involvement depends on the degree to which we are able to face them and understand what they have to offer us. For reasons that are going to become clear over the course of my story, this is not going to be easy. Far from it, making sense of the relationship will be the greatest intellectual, emotional and spiritual challenge that mankind has ever faced. If we are able to succeed, though, we are going to experience a vast increase in the range of human understanding—truly, we are going to enter a new world.

Right now, things are predictably chaotic. Different religious groups have long ago integrated the phenomenon into their belief systems. Christians think of the visitors as demons, sometimes as angels. To Muslims, they are *djinn*. Other religions call them many other things. Outside of the Christian community in the west, the fairy faith of Northern Europe has evolved into the UFO and alien folklore and has spread around the world. But that is only part of what has happened. What used to be a minor folklore is now a vast, living experience, by far the most complex cultural and social influence, and

personal challenge for the close encounter witnesses, that humanity has ever faced. Millions of individual lives have been touched by it. Governmental response has mostly been concealed behind a veil of secrecy that hides disquiet, confusion and fear.

In point of fact, the entire human species has been thrown off balance by whatever this really is. Despite over seventy years of effort, it has not just remained a mystery, it has become steadily more mysterious—and at the same time, more and more provocative.

Somebody is here, all right. At this point, denial of that fact is an emotional response not a rational one.

It is not a simple matter of aliens having arrived. This sublime, challenging, sinister and yet oddly welcoming presence is far more complex than that. It is so varied, so contradictory, and yet so pervasive on so many different levels that for us even to achieve a useful description of it is going to be a tremendous intellectual challenge.

Behind the scenes, a small group of scientists, who have access to certain materials and biological remains, has made significant progress in areas as diverse as metallurgy and communications. But most scientists and intellectuals, left out of this exclusive group for reasons that will become clear over the course of this book, remain in a state of enforced ignorance that emerges into the broader culture as a mix of denial and indifference. Meanwhile, people who have been touched—often, as I was, fiercely—by the presence are left to fend for themselves when it comes to understanding what has happened to them.

The result of this is that the rich potential of contact is being buried beneath a great mound of confused theories that amount to little more than an elaborate extension of the folklore of unknown presences that has been with us from the beginning of our history.

Make no mistake, though: it is not up to the people concealing their knowledge behind the wall of classification to disclose the secrets. From the beginning, the visitors themselves have been in control of the secrecy, and it is they who will be responsible for revealing themselves—or, to be more accurate, integrating themselves into our lives more openly than they already have.

They are extremely subtle, very thoughtful and very careful. The ones I have come to know want contact to work, but if they were to step out into the open right now, that is very definitely not what would happen. Instead, we

would try to integrate them into our worldview through the medium of assumptions about aliens that simply are not adequate to the task and do not hold up under scrutiny.

They are also determined, hard and can be, frankly, terrifying. They are powerful beyond conception and are not going to be defeated by military opposition. That whole approach is meaningless. This isn't a war at all, it is a process of contact that is intended to lead to the deep inner sharing that is communion. There are things that they want from us and things that they can give us in return. But it is a trade of a kind we have never engaged in before and it is going to take a leap of understanding for us to make a success of it.

It is not, however, something that we don't do. We have been doing it, I would think, through all the time we have been. We have been passive to it, however. The result of this is that both sides gain less from it than they could. They do not share as fully as they might. We do not realize what we actually are, and so devalue ourselves. Only when we become aware of the sharing can there be communion between us. As we are now, we're passive to it. We need to engage with it and so with them, thus becoming participants in an enormous part of our lives that we have not so far known existed.

This is what it is to increase in consciousness. It means knowing and seeing more of where and what you truly are. As I have said before, the coming of the visitors is what it looks like when evolution comes to a conscious mind.

There are some previous moments of contact in human history that are instructive here. The first two involve how pre-Columbian civilizations responded to the unexpected appearance of the Spaniards, who arrived in the Americas in possession of things like horses, metal armor and gunpowder, none of which were known to the indigenous population. However, they also brought with them a culture debased by superstition, fanaticism and jingoistic brutality. This devastating combination was used to destroy not just the Indian societies in Mexico and South America, but later to subjugate and enslave populations all across the western half of North America. Further waves of Europeans later overwhelmed these ancient Earth-centric cultures over the entire continent. Only recently have any of them begun to show even a few sparks of recovery, and most probably never will.

Later in this book, I will discuss an eloquent message left by the visitors, warning that we could face similar cultural dislocation, although hopefully without the exploitative brutality. This warning has been placed at a site

where advanced artifacts were left behind and from which scientists have been recovering valuable materials for years. The reason that this particular site was chosen by the visitors has not been understood so far, but it can be, and its warning should be, heeded carefully at every level of our society as the visitors emerge.

The Aztecs attempted to fit the bizarre apparition of the Spaniards into their existing mythology and decided that Hernando Cortez must be their god Quetzalcóatl, come back to retake the throne of the Aztec empire. Although they were momentarily nonplussed by the fact that he couldn't speak their language of Nahuatl, they decided to ignore this anomaly and more or less allowed a few hundred Spaniards to conquer their extensive empire. The result was that, within 50 years, 90% of the indigenous Mexican population was dead and the surviving 10% were enslaved.

Another instructive case is that of the Inca civilization, which was overtaken by Francisco Pizarro. Essentially, a highly organized nation with an army of 50,000 men was defeated and subjugated by about 500 Spaniards. The critical battle of Cajamarca in 1532 was won by 200 Spaniards, who defeated an Incan field army 6,000 strong. When Pizarro subsequently entered the Inca capital of Cuzco, he was met by what amounted to a confused silence. He and his Spaniards made no sense to the Inca. The result was that this ancient civilization, with probably the most mysterious origins of any on Earth, also disappeared into history, taking with it all that it had learned and achieved, leaving behind only the ghostly remnant that persists to this day among indigenous Peruvians.

In attempting to integrate the Spaniards into their belief system, the Aztecs did what religious and UFO believers are doing now. They looked to their own preexisting beliefs to explain the inexplicable and were rendered helpless as a result. Our scientific and intellectual communities are reacting much as the Inca did, with confusion, denial and, finally, silence.

What happened when technologically advanced European civilizations expanded across the world should also be carefully considered. Even when they were not brutal and exploitative, the technological superiority of the Europeans again and again made indigenous peoples feel inferior, caused them to abandon their own cultures and beliefs and, all too often, descend into the debased remnants of their once vital societies that we see to this day in too many places in the world.

The visitors are not just technologically more advanced than us. They

have a completely different way of seeing reality, and when we first confront it, we are going to see them as being in possession of godlike powers, breathtaking insight and seemingly unlimited scientific knowledge. They will appear this way not because they are more intelligent but rather because of the different way their minds work. They are not more intelligent than we are, not at all. They are more experienced, and their experience is fundamentally different from ours. We must not elevate them above what they are but seek to meet their strengths with our own in the most meaningful and mutually enriching ways that we can find.

Their abilities are going to disempower our scientists and intellectuals, which will be made worse by their inability to address them directly. In this regard, I am hoping that this book will accomplish three things: first, that it will enable people to see that there are ways to communicate with them; second, that we have things that they value greatly and need badly and that a great trade is on offer; third, that they do not want to invade us, enslave us or otherwise destroy our freedom or take from us our own sense of self-worth.

They think highly of us and consider that what we have to offer is valuable. Otherwise, they would not have any interest in us.

Anne named our book *Communion* because contact is about deep sharing not exploitation. She understood this very clearly from the beginning. As the great European empires of the 19th and 20th centuries found out to their cost, colonization and exploitation is a costly and unrewarding business. If this was a direction the visitors intended to take, they would have done so long ago.

By the early nineties, even though I had been more or less driven from the public stage, our relationship with the visitors did not stop. It never stopped. In fact, it has grown from the violent, confused mess that it was originally to the richly rewarding companionship that it has become.

It has been a long, hard road, though. On the evening of August 11, 2015, I lost Anne, whose brilliance and insight had guided us. Lost her, but only in a way, for when you are as deeply involved with the visitors as we are, death does not bring with it the same finality that it normally does in human experience. As I have said, they don't function in reality in the same way that we do, and when you get close to them, neither do you. Anne and I wrote a book about this called *The Afterlife Revolution*, which I will refer to frequently in these pages. We wrote it—together—after she had died. Because of the state we are now in, which I believe to be new to human

experience, I wear both of our wedding rings. This is to symbolize that fact that we are still together, only now possess only one outpost in the physical world, which is this old body of mine. I know that this is deeply heretical to our scientific and intellectual communities. This is because the intensity and complexity of material culture has blinded us to the existence of that subtle and many-faceted enigma we call by the single, starved word “soul.” But this mysterious and denied presence is quite real. It is not supernatural in any way, but rather part of nature. It is also where our visitors live, penetrating only occasionally into this physical level. As they come closer to us, it is going to become more and more clear that the reality of the soul is much bigger than that of the physical, but also that it is nothing like we have imagined. It is going to become inescapable that not only is consciousness in us, we are in consciousness.

As our relationship with the visitors deepened, it became inescapable to both Anne and me that the physical world is embedded in a much larger, older and richer reality. However, we cannot yet detect it with any instrument we possess. The result of this is that we deny it altogether, in part because we cannot apply any known method of discovery to it, and in part because we in the west fear that our secular freedoms, acquired at great cost from a religious dictatorship that lasted a thousand years, will be lost to that dictatorship once again if we so much as whisper the possibility that the soul may exist.

It is not the soul of religion, though, but something very different, much more real and, in the end, much more obviously part of nature. Nor is it really separate from the body. A living being is, rather, a continuity. The borders of a human being are not found along the edges of the flesh but rather within us, where there are depths that we have forgotten but can regain and, if we are to survive much longer as a species, must regain.

The visitors stand ready to help us refocus ourselves in this new way and, in so doing, make for ourselves a new world, one that will involve permanent physical survival and conscious extension into the larger reality that has hitherto been addressed only with confused belief and, more recently, denial. Doing that is what this book is about, and why it has the title that it does. Truly, a new world awaits us. All we need to do is respond coherently to them to begin what I am certain can be a journey of incredible value to us and all who follow in generations to come, of which I hope with all my mind, heart and soul there will be many.

AN URGENT CALL

Over the thirty years that I have had a relationship with the visitors, I have gotten some idea of what they want from us and have also formulated some thoughts about what they have to give in return.

The most important thing on offer is knowledge, and they are already bringing it, but mostly in very concealed ways. We need more of what they have to share.

One example of a scientist who has gained knowledge from them is the distinguished mathematician Dr. Edward Belbruno, the winner of the 2018 Humboldt Prize in Mathematics. Belbruno's books include *Fly Me to the Moon* and *Capture Dynamics and Chaotic Motions in Celestial Mechanics*. He is a consultant with NASA and also a prominent artist.

I met Dr. Belbruno in 2009 and interviewed him on my podcast Dreamland. At the time, he had never made a public statement, so he appeared anonymously. This distinguished man has since gone public with his story.

On October 2, 1991, Dr. Belbruno was driving along an isolated road in Wyoming when he found it blocked by a large object. A short time later, it rose into the air and was gone. He feels that his space trajectory research was affected on that night, and the calculations that came into his mind have been extremely useful in his work.

Unfortunately, I cannot name some other scientists I know who have gained knowledge from the visitors in similar ways, largely because their work is classified, an issue that must be considered now with the utmost seriousness. In view of the urgent need to accelerate scientific, technological

and cultural progress, there needs to be an internal review at the highest levels to determine what, if anything, should remain classified at this time. Contrary to many conspiracy theories, Executive Order 13526 establishes three levels of classification, the highest of which is Top Secret. “Top Secret shall be applied to information, the unauthorized disclosure of which reasonably could be expected to cause ‘exceptionally grave damage’ to the national security that the original classification authority is able to identify or describe.”

The first National Security Act, passed in 1947, mandated that conditions that might be threatening be classified until their status could be determined. It was on this basis that the first UFO debris, which was found near the Roswell Army Air Force base in July of 1947, was classified. Initially, this had nothing to do with aliens. The 509th Bomb Wing, stationed at the Roswell base, was the only atomic bomber wing in the world. It was also the only thing preventing Stalin from invading western Europe, which would have resulted in an allied defeat within six weeks. So the appearance of some sort of unknown flying vehicle near the base was deemed a threat, and it was classified as soon as Army Air Force authorities became aware of it.

General Arthur Exon, who was a friend of my uncle Col. Edward Strieber, told me in 1988, “Everyone from Truman on down knew that what we had found was not of this world within twenty-four hours of our finding it.” Both were at the Air Materiel Command at Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio, where the debris and biological remains were brought for study. My uncle said that the debris he had observed had properties identical to those described by Col. Jesse Marcel in a video he made in his later years stating that some of the metal they found “wasn’t any thicker than the foil out of a pack of cigarettes, but you couldn’t bend it, even a sledgehammer would bounce off of it.” My uncle told me that it was subjected to bullet tests, and bullets could not penetrate it.

Both my uncle and General Exon told me that they had been lawfully requested to give me the information that they did. They were not in violation of the law when they spoke to me. I do not know who might have made this request of them, nor would they tell me.

Since 1947, the amount of information held secret about this and many other events related to UFOs has grown and grown. The reason is, basically, that the law needs to be changed. Right now, unknowns such as the Roswell materials and biological remains can be held secret until they are not deemed

a threat. The language should be that such things may only be held secret *if* they can be deemed a specific threat. While this change will not lead to the release of everything held secret regarding this subject, it will require the release of information about materials such as those found at Roswell, as well as biological remains.

The military keeps the broader matter secret for three reasons. The first is that the visitors cannot be controlled in any way. We are militarily helpless. During the period 1965–2000, when abductions were frequent events, the fact that they could neither be understood nor stopped caused an increase in the intensity of the secrecy. The fading of the abduction phenomenon has not changed this. The second is that many processes we have already learned from the materials we have obtained can potentially be weaponized, and in fact, there is a race on between Russia, China and the United States to do just this. Central to this hidden competition is discovering the secret of gravity, the mastery of which is displayed by the UFOs. Therefore, research into their motive power is held deeply secret. However, it is also true that none of the players have won this game, and perhaps it is time the broader scientific culture gets its chance to address the mystery. A good start would be for more materials and UFO footage to be released and for the National Academy of Sciences to change its opposition to granting in this field.

The third is that the visitors themselves compel a degree of secrecy because, as matters stand right now, we do not have the intellectual tools we need to communicate coherently with them. They do not do this via some sort of hidden conclave. They do it by cultural and social manipulation, and they are really very good at this.

What happened at Roswell is a good example. The crash, which, like the others, was probably more a donation than an accident, took place within thirty miles of the most secret military facility the United States possessed, at a time when it was the primary key to the preservation of freedom in much of the world. Of course the Army Air Force jumped to keep it secret. Then, when they realized what they had, complete confusion descended. Over the next few years, as the military came to understand that it was helpless before this apparent threat, the whole matter remained classified. Meanwhile, efforts to understand and make use of the secrets of the remarkable debris went into overdrive, as did our weapons research.

In other words, we did exactly what the visitors wanted us to do, which was to keep their presence secret while we caught up to them technologically.

They are not interested in supplicants, let alone slaves. They want us to be independent, self-sufficient companions. Otherwise, we are more or less useless to them. Over the course of this text, I will explain as clearly as I can why I am sure that this is so. To conclude now, though, I can only say that, with the capabilities that they display, they could have invaded us and subjected us to their control years ago. I doubt that the subjugation of the whole planet would have taken them more than a week. I can easily believe that it could have happened in a matter of seconds. But it didn't happen, and because it hasn't, I think that it's safe to say that they have another motive.

I don't think that they would have spent thirty years teaching me or anybody else the rudiments of communicating with them unless they were here to do just that. I think that their motives are to contact us, communicate, and finally enter into the deep sharing of communion.

Communicating with them is not like communicating with each other. Not at all. But I think that it is essential that we turn toward them and try to engage in a meaningful way. We have never so far done this, not in all the thousands of years of history that, to one degree or another, they have been present here.

Because of the way nature designed us, we've overpopulated Earth, with the result that the environment is breaking down. A worldwide failure of political leadership and social will has caused us to ignore the problem for too long. It is my belief that our visitors do not want us to sink into the chaos that now threatens, let alone go extinct, which also seems like a possibility. This is not entirely altruistic. They also want something from us. If my life with them is a true example of what relationship in general will be like, then I know what it is. There will be great challenges for each one of us with whom they engage, and extraordinary rewards for all mankind if our relationship with them flourishes.

In a sense, my 1985 experience was initiatory, introducing me, as it did, to an entirely new reality that had heretofore been hidden from me. It overturned my understanding of the world entirely.

The relationship continued, and I wrote two more books about it, *Transformation* and *Breakthrough*.

In September, just a month after my wife's passing, the visitors burst dramatically back into my life. I can't prove it, but I sense very strongly that this was a result of something she was doing—after death.

Sometime in the early nineties, she said what I believe to be the single

most important thing about the experience that has ever been said. One afternoon she walked out of her office after reading letters for two or three hours and stated rather quizzically, "I think this has something to do with what we call death." She said this because we were receiving a steady stream of letters involving the dead appearing along with the supposed aliens. On the occasions at our cabin when the visitors came, the human dead were generally also with them.

Within two hours of Anne's passing, she began making it clear that she still existed and was aware of this world. She did it not by contacting me, but by asking friends to call me. The first of these, Belle Fuller, had no idea that Anne was dead when, at about 9:30 in the evening, she heard Anne's voice in her ear say, "Tell Whitley I'm all right." When Belle's call came, I was sitting in the living room absolutely bereft, helplessly asking her for some sign that she still existed.

She continued to make contact with me through other friends and acquaintances, never directly. By the end of the month, it was undeniable to me that she not only still existed, but that she stood ready to continue our relationship.

I think these events foretell a fundamental change in the experience of being human. Right now, we cannot reliably engage with our dead. Our whole religious journey is, at its core, an effort to ensure that the death of the body does not mean annihilation. One of the most basic changes that relationship with the visitors suggests is that the barrier between us and our own dead is going to fall. Empirical evidence will emerge that enables us to escape the trap of believing that physical life is the only life. On the other side of the wall of death, there lies a new freedom and a new life, and along with them opportunities for enrichment that are presently almost beyond imagination.

My observation of the visitors suggests to me that they exist primarily in a nonphysical state. Not that they don't have physical bodies, they do, but they are not bound to them in the same way we are. This is why something like the Roswell donation could include bodies. They were not people but containers that people used.

It isn't that the soul level is not also material, though. It is, but in a way we cannot yet detect and measure. Like everything, it is part of reality, by which I mean everything that is material or energetic. Secular culture is correct to believe that there is no supernatural. However, it is mistaken in

dropping the parts of the natural world that it cannot yet detect into that basket simply because they have so far evaded measurement.

If you find the idea that we continue after death hard to believe—or perhaps to face—I urge you to explore the enormous literature that exists on this subject. There is an energy that we have not yet detected, upon which relationship with everything in this other reality, including our visitors and our own dead, depends.

As has been true throughout the history of science, the existence of any aspect of reality that is not currently measurable is always hotly denied. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the brain is constructed to see what it can use, not what may be behind it, which could be a very different matter. So we have to feel our way toward the truth using instruments of detection. Without the right instrument, we can't detect something that might be quite real, and all too often we fall into the trap of denying that it is there, even when there is evidence to call this assumption into question. The second is that science has had tremendous success with the strategy it is using now, which has reinforced our tendency to reject what we cannot detect as nonexistent. Why look for things that probably aren't there when we are learning so much by studying the things that are?

From observing the way the visitors communicate with me, I have gained the impression that they do not see the world as we do, and in the most fundamental possible way. We use what I call an output strategy. Our senses provide us with a richly detailed view of the world around us. That is to say, we see what's on the surface, but the surface is not where reality begins. We must use instruments to detect what's beneath it. We see an apple but must use an electron microscope to observe its molecular structure, and even more sensitive instruments to detect the atoms that make up those molecules. We can extrapolate the math that organizes them, but we cannot see it. By contrast, I think that there is evidence that the visitors see the principles first, the apple only later. They use an input strategy in order to organize reality in their minds. In other words, they think the same way a machine does. That they may, therefore, be machines doesn't seem to me impossible, either, nor does the idea that a machine might be conscious.

I believe that we are well on our way to creating conscious machines ourselves. I see consciousness as what happens when a mind regards itself, as every mind must. In other words, there is a sort of reflection of us within ourselves, and that reflection is what makes us feel a sense of self. If true,

then we can certainly develop a machine that does that, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if others in this universe have not already done so.

Understand, I don't equate soul with consciousness. I have not only been out of my body, I have been seen by others and in one case communicated with the person observing me, so I cannot think that I am entirely confined to my body. When in that state, though, my consciousness isn't the same as it is now. It is less informed about who I am, is the best way I can think of to express the difference I have observed.

I can never forget the moment in February of 1986 when I turned away from a group of visitors who were waiting for me in a clearing near our house. The moment my hand touched the doorknob to go back in the house, there came from above the woods three cries, which I have described as the most perfect and yet most emotionally complex sounds I have ever heard. If a machine had emotions, this is what it would sound like.

On other occasions as well, I have noticed a strange sense of perfection attaching to sounds and movements made by the visitors. It is really uncanny, and every time I see it, the idea that I am dealing with a conscious machine comes to mind.

One of them once made a very telling comment to a close encounter witness. It told her, "We rearrange atoms."

This is the holy grail of technology. If we could do that, we could make anything into anything. We could create completely novel materials. We could, in effect, do anything. I think that they may be able to do this naturally, because of the way their mental processes work. If they are seeing the world, as it were, from within, it's not too hard to believe that they might also be able to change it from within as easily as we rearrange flowers in a vase.

Another suggestion that this may be true comes from that much maligned phenomenon, the crop circles. Of course some of them are manmade. There's no secret about that. But many are not—which, because of how unlikely an unknown origin seems, is a matter for debate. Some of the earlier formations, such as the Julia Set laid down beside Stonehenge one afternoon in 1996, followed shortly after by the Triple Julia at Windmill Hill the same year, were intricately devised fractals. Many formations reflect geometric principles and mathematical formulae, but these early ones, astonishingly intricate, are hard to disprove as anomalies. Like almost the entire body of such formations, they illustrate math and geometry. Only a very few are

images.

Is this because they are being made by somebody who thinks first in math and, therefore, is attempting communication with it, but in ways that we can see with our output-related brains and, hopefully, interpret? It seems possible to me. Perhaps it also explains why the first scientist not hidden behind the wall of secrecy who has received information from them is one of the world's leading mathematicians and received his information in the form of a mathematical formula.

One approach is not better or worse than the other, but they are going to result in radically different ways of understanding the world. If I am right, then this difference is fundamental to the communications gap that exists between us and is likely to be the primary reason that they are not more present in our lives. They cannot communicate coherently with us until we—and by this, I mean both sides—have a clear idea of what the differences are between the ways we see and understand the world.

The reason we use an output strategy is that our dense, complex bodies need to see the world in a practical, useful way. If we utilized an input strategy, we might have a more accurate view of reality, but we are not going to be able to find food very easily at all. Perhaps our visitors, less dense, don't have many physical needs, maybe none. They thus have had no reason to evolve an output-first strategy. Based on my observation of them, of how they react to me and how they reacted to so many people who wrote us letters about contact with them, I think it's possible that that they really do see the underlying truth first, then—and only if necessary for some functional reason—the outcome. This would mean that they would see first the forces and math that lies behind the apple, and only if necessary the actual form.

I have no way of proving this, but when I see the differences between how I and they react to the world around us, I think that it could be the fundamental reason that we are so different.

I know of one case of a human being who has ended up using an input strategy, so I know that this is possible. This is the case of Jason Dwain Padgett. After a severe beating in December of 2002 he woke up in the hospital seeing the world as math. In other words, the beating caused him to experience what is known as “acquired savant syndrome.” Instead of seeing an apple, he found himself seeing the math behind it in fractal form. He had acquired mathematical synesthesia. In his 2014 book *Struck by Genius: How a Brain Injury Made Me a Mathematical Marvel*, he describes his new

perceptual perspective. Linda Moulton Howe has interviewed him, and some of his remarkable fractal drawings that appear on her website Earthfiles.com offer, I would think, an idea of how the visitors see reality. If so, then the gap between us is profound.

To attempt to bridge it, they also transmit information through images and by making reference to natural processes, using them as examples of what they mean to convey. In other words, they communicate in a very ancient way, which is similar to ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. It is as if they must find things in the world around them that fit the concepts they are trying to communicate, and I don't think that they would need to do that unless they were translating a vision that is founded in the underlying structures of reality into one that has meaning at the level of outcome.

If this is true, then it is this fundamental difference in the way our minds work that is generating the massive communications gap that we actually see. As will be seen later, they have come up with some clever strategies that do allow reliable and even rich communications, but they don't involve sitting down across a table and conversing as we might among ourselves.

As this book is about beings and things that cannot now be detected and measured, it is about rejected knowledge. That doesn't mean that it isn't true, though. Voltaire dismissed fossils as fish bones tossed aside by travelers. The possibility of heavier than air travel was definitively denied by Lord Kelvin in 1895. Similarly now, the existence of the unknown that defines my own life and the lives of many others is denied.

It's too easy to attribute this simply to the nature of intellectual culture. It goes deeper than that, all the way back to the issue of our use of output strategies.

In my experience and that of so many people, the visitors are real. The dead are conscious entities. Communicating with both is neither a mystery nor a miracle. But because there is nothing here to measure, at least not yet, it's impossible to prove these things using established scientific method. Therefore, they cannot be entered into the canon of events that are considered "real." My intent here isn't to offer that proof. It will come in its own time and in its own way. What I can do is describe how I have learned to use it and how this has enabled me to open access for myself to aspects of the greater world of which we are a part.

Looking back on what I was before I found the visitors in my life in comparison with what I am now, it is hard to recognize the plodding,

frightened, wary man of those days. Their coming devastated me but also freed me. Had I not decided to challenge the fear that the 1985 incident left me with, I would never have been able to move on. I had been violated, and I was angry. But walking out of Dr. Donald Klein's office after the session with him that brought it all together, I thought to myself that I wanted to continue the adventure. I just wanted to.

When I published *Communion*, it was easy for the close encounter experience to be scorned. While it can still be dismissed, it is now much harder to do what was done then and claim that the witnesses are simply delusional. The letters that Anne collected tell a story not of mental illness but of normal people having a tremendous variety of unusual experiences, which all center around one basic event: the approach and presence of small people with large, staring eyes and outsized heads, often accompanied by those dark blue trolls. As often as not, as happened in my case, dead people who appear to be alive are present as well.

The descriptions people have left of what happens to them next forms one of the most complex narratives of human experience ever recorded.

But is there any hard evidence? Any at all?

Aside from the many cases of multiple-witness experience, including some stellar ones at the cabin where I had my experiences, I cannot point to anything so telling as a video of aliens carting somebody off. On a personal basis, I have tried for years and in many different ways to obtain video or photographic evidence. I have studied many videos and had some particularly promising ones professionally analyzed. There are three that are compelling, two of which are almost certainly authentic. Neither of them portrays the sort of entities that are described in the literature, and that so many of us have seen. Instead, they show extremely strange looking stick-figures walking carefully along. The videos can be found by going to Unknowncountry.com, opening the search engine, going to the Out There section and searching on the term "stick figure."

While genuine footage of otherworldly entities would appear to be quite rare, this isn't to say that there exists no hard evidence of anomalous objects or materials that could be related to the close encounter narrative in some way. There is a great deal of UFO video, including video of similar objects taken at different places and times around the world. Moreover, releases of US Navy video over 2017 and 2018 has affirmed that UFOs are a genuine unknown phenomenon. In September of 2019, the Navy stated that these are

indeed unknown objects. But are they spacecraft belonging to aliens? Possibly. They may also be intrusions from another reality, which is an important possibility to explore. Or they may be something so unknown to us that we simply cannot identify it in any meaningful way at present. I don't see much evidence that they belong to an earthly foreign power. The reason is that there is so much good video going back years. If any country had devices of such incredible power, our world would not be as it is now.

In support of the idea that another reality might be involved—a parallel universe—there exist in the public record some high level analyses of metal from a UFO that has proved to have isotopic ratios that not only are not of Earth, but that cannot be generated in this universe at all, not unless there are areas of it operating under such different laws of physics from this one that they might as well be another universe.

What we are encountering might be aliens from this universe, sure. Having laid in their arms and gazed into their very strange faces, I could believe that. However, after all these years of experience with them, while physical aliens may be a component of the experience, I see it as being primarily something that has a different relationship to reality than we do. In order to avoid identifying them with a label that may not be accurate, I have always called them, simply, visitors. Throughout this book I will continue with that convention. I think, though, that there is also a greater presence behind them, or perhaps something entirely different, that has played an even larger role in our development than they have. This I will call “the presence.”

Engagement with the visitors amounts to a new kind of experience. There is a gap between us and them, which, I think, has to do with the difference in the way each side is part of reality. If they have evolved on another planet in this universe, they can certainly be expected to look, act and think differently from us. Add to that capabilities such as the ability to become invisible that seem like magic to us, and the issue of how to understand them becomes very large. Are they aliens with skills such as the ability to become invisible, or are they not from this universe at all and using some natural means or technological skill to penetrate into it?

Those are the sort of questions that we cannot really address without more data, but until the wall of secrecy that surrounds what we do know is breached, at least to some degree, we are not going to be able to address them meaningfully.

On rare but important occasions in our history, the larger presence that

seems to be behind all this has made an appearance that has changed the world. All of these instances have had to do with religion and have involved the establishment of the idea that there is a single god. Because they have involved flashes of light, strange fires or shining beings, I call them “incidents of light.”

The journey began when the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten came to believe that the sun itself was god and was the only god. This was followed by a number of more direct interventions.

Sometime around 1500 BC, a Persian, Zarathustra Spitama, who was wandering in the countryside seeking enlightenment, came upon a shining figure that called himself Vohu Mana, who proceeded to teach him that god, while a single entity, was divided into two forms, order and chaos. Zarathustra spent the rest of his life trying to get people to worship order. Somewhat later, Moses encountered the burning bush, which directed him to lead the people of Israel into the land of Canaan. Then Paul the Apostle, shortly after the death of Jesus, encountered a glowing orb on the road to Damascus and became the first gentile advocate for Christianity. Later still, Mohammed found himself being taught by a glowing angel in a cave, and Islam was born.

While I wouldn't advocate that any of these incidents of light happened as described in the ancient sources, they represent the importance of light to the human mind and, I believe, reflect some sort of deep intention that seeks to bring to mankind an ever more coherent vision of the sacred, and a more and more useful understanding of morality.

Unless the incident at Fatima in 1917 when the sun danced before 50,000 people qualifies as an incident of light, for the most part we see individual creatures, generally small and surpassingly strange. Our visitors can and do take us into their own eerie realm and have been doing this occasionally for eons, as the many stories of such abductions in the literature of the fairy-faith will attest. Something changed dramatically in the mid-20th century, though, as now we have not a few stories of enigmatic abductions but thousands and thousands of them being recorded by people all over the world. This is not a continuation of the fairy-faith. It is similar, but the scale is much larger. It's huge.

This is the reality we are now facing. It leads to the question that forms the heart of this book: How are we to understand this? What is contact, and what sort of change is it bringing to us and our world? For it is bringing

change, most certainly. Great change, even staggering change.

WHY CERTAIN PEOPLE?

Is it that only certain people notice the presence of the visitors, or that only certain people are approached by them? One thing that became clear to Anne and me when we were getting letters was that contact is a family affair. Often, the experience runs in families. Surprisingly, there were some reports of witnesses being told during experiences that they were members of the visitors' family, or they felt that this was the case.

Sometimes, though, the experience simply comes out of nowhere. An example came from a witness in Australia, who wrote, "In 1976 I was vacuuming my living room floor at about noon. I felt quite ill and thought I was going to vomit, so I sat down on the couch to see if the sick feeling would subside. I then saw that I was not alone; there were three strange little people standing alongside the couch, just looking at me. Two of them were short and fat, about four to four and a half feet tall, with broad faces and enormous black eyes, but with only a hint of where a nose or mouth might have been." She goes on to say that they were wearing brown clothing and seemed to her to be workers. There was another one there who was about five feet tall and "wore a black shroud and had black wispy hair at the back of her head. Her face was very elongated with huge, dark, piercing eyes..." They demanded that she go with them. When she resisted, there followed a sort of mental tug of war, which finally ended when she thought her husband had come home and saved her. But when he really did return, four hours had inexplicably passed. She concludes with a statement that is also a cry from the heart of every close encounter witness I have ever known, "I wonder, where did that time go?"

Nothing ever recovered it for her, no discussion, no regressive hypnosis, nothing. She died some years later with the mystery still unsolved.

A third type of encounter that happens from time to time is one that is intentionally induced by the witness. I first heard of this from Marie “Bootsie” Galbraith, who had prepared a selection of cases that was distributed as *The UFO Briefing Document: The Best Available Evidence*, financed by Laurence Rockefeller and republished in my Dell Books *Hidden Agendas* series. Bootsie told of some successful efforts to “call in” UFOs using laser pointers, but these did not lead to close encounters.

Sometimes they do, and if communication becomes more orderly, I think that this might work more often. However, it comes with a warning. In her book *Extraterrestrial Contact*, Mutual UFO Network Director of Experienter Research Kathleen Marden reports the case of “Matt,” who became curious about UFOs after seeing one on the runway of the small airport he owned. He first signaled his interest by flashing an old navy signal light then by making an X with red rope lights on his runway. This worked to an extent, but he got the strongest reaction by aiming a laser pointer into the sky and clicking it on and off. He was soon seeing craft on his runway, but when he pointed the laser light at them, they would drop slightly then rush at him, flashing multicolored lights. His final experiment with this caused hemorrhages to pour from his nose and ears and ended his willingness to try this approach.

However, the visitors remained interested in him, and he found himself confronting the entities themselves, creatures similar in appearance to what the Australian witness saw. He could not stop the visitations, which became increasingly menacing. He began sleeping with a pistol in his hand. One night, he woke up to see a six-foot-tall entity standing at the foot of his bed. He fired the pistol at it, causing it to disappear in a flash of light, leaving behind a yellow substance spattered on the floor. Unfortunately, he was too distraught to collect it for analysis. There followed a shift into a sinister haunting, elements of which, like some of the events on his runway, were witnessed by other people.

After his family staged an intervention to force him into psychiatric treatment, his mother witnessed, with him, a different version of the world at the end of his runway, a savannah where woolly mammoths were grazing. A year of bizarre events and visitations made him feel as if he were living in a sort of hell. He began to see horrific entities and suffered a profound decline in his health. Just as Kathleen Marden was attempting to organize support

from a sympathetic minister, he was hospitalized and died.

The lesson here could not be more clear: If you get curious about this and seek to bring the entities into your life, know that they are not like us and do not have the same connection to reality that we do. Reacting toward them violently without understanding anything about them, even what they are, is foolhardy.

Unlike us, when they are killed, they don't lose contact with the physical world. They can keep acting in it from the nonphysical level. Matt took the body of one of them, but not his access to the physical world. What happened as a result was essentially an act of anger. This individual had lost what they view as a gateway—a body—much more than they see it as a “self.” We live by the illusion that we are our bodies. They do not. We assume that the death of the body ends an individual's access to physical life. It doesn't, and if they are attacked and hurt and angered, they are likely to continue to act in the physical world against their attackers, and this is going to look to the attacker like the sort of bizarre haunting that Matt experienced.

This has also happened to thousands of military people over the years, individuals who have acted aggressively toward the visitors. They carry out their aggression under orders that are given by authorities who have little understanding of what they are doing and the consequences of their actions. These military people are being asked to “defend” against them, which is not possible if you have no access to the nonphysical. They are not told that they and their families may experience things similar to what happened to Matt, and certainly not told that their souls will also have to confront those they have attacked after they die, because this is not understood on an official level at all.

Billionaire Robert Bigelow, who has worked with elements of the US government who present a hostile face to the visitors, commented on 60 Minutes on May 28, 2017 that he had experienced a face-to-face confrontation with them. It was not a pleasant experience for him. Similarly, two members of the board of directors of the To The Stars Academy, an organization devoted in substantial part to aggression against the visitors, have had terrifying direct experiences in their lives. One of these led to a family tragedy. The other, fortunately, was only frightening. This organization, which has a rock-and-roll personality as its public facing presence in order to gain easy access to the media, is dedicated to moving the struggle to create weapons that might be effective against the visitors into a

more open context in the scientific community, in the hope that some sort of breakthrough can be achieved. Over all the generations of effort that have been expended behind the wall of classification, this has not been a successful effort.

It has failed because defense on a physical level is as meaningless, quite frankly, as it is for a dog to bite the boot of the man who is kicking it. Early on in my adult relationship with the visitors, I had a conversation with one of the blond people who are not of this world and who have also advised our official level. He explained to me that “if you start a war with the grays, they will never let you stop fighting and they will never let you win.” This is what is happening on our hidden official level, but it is certainly not what our leaders are told in a briefing that they receive if they ask intelligence and military officials what is being held secret about this subject. They are told stories of what has happened to our military personnel, but not that we ourselves instigated the conflict. Some of these stories are truly horrific. It is then explained that, while we are working on weapons, we have not yet achieved control and the whole thing must be kept secret until we do. It never occurs to anybody given the briefing to ask why it is that the visitors keep matters secret, too.

From where I sit, the official reaction, as inept as it is, is entirely understandable. The visitors are fantastically frightening. There simply isn't any other way to put it. During the summer and fall of 1985, when I knew, but not consciously, that they were there, I also armed myself and might well have done the same thing that Matt did and the military does, had one of them appeared in my gunsights. I would assume that the results would have been similar. Fortunately for me, I was never face to face with them while carrying a weapon, and before I began to understand why they were here and what they want.

Once I realized that they were real, my curiosity overcame my fear, and the guns were no longer a factor. After the initial period of friction, we found common ground in spiritual search. They reacted to my nightly meditations and shared in them. Over time, this has created a fruitful relationship that has enriched my life, and I hope also offered them the reward they seek.

At this point, my relationship with them is as coherent and organized as it would be with anybody I might get to know in the normal course of my life. There are differences, though, chief among them the fact that companionship and communication are so different from what they are among us. They are

frightening to me and to some extent always will be. This is because they can control souls, and my soul knows this and in the face of such awesome power, feels the fear of the helpless and the vulnerable in the presence of the aggressive.

I am in my relationship with them to learn and report what I have learned. They are in it to teach. Their aim is very clear: They want the relationship to work, and not just for me. They want it to work, period. They also know how hard it is going to be for us—and for them—to achieve this goal. We are like two brilliant animals of different genius species confronting each other. They are large, we are small. Both are fierce, both are wary.

So what's next? Do we continue circling one another or do we find common ground? Given that we humans are helplessly using up our planet's resources, we are essentially back against the wall. Either we succeed in this or we go where nature and the failure of our environment are liable to take us, which will be into a state where our planet is largely uninhabitable and we no longer have access to physical bodies and all the opportunity that they offer evolving souls.

I believe that my own relationship is in part related to the fact that older members of my family were involved in military operations connected with the visitors. While I don't have any statistical evidence to point to, I do have reason to believe that this can be a factor. Once one member of a family becomes involved with them in some military context, whether confrontational or not, they seem to have a tendency to follow that family line.

My uncle was involved in the Roswell Incident and my father may have had something to do with the presence of Col. Guy Hicks living a block away from us. Col. Hicks was the commanding officer at Goodman Field in Kansas when Capt. Thomas Mantell, stationed there, crashed in his plane in 1947 while pursuing a UFO. This was all debunked, but I think that my father and an FBI agent who lived down the block from us were watching Col. Hicks and some other men on the same street. I cannot say that my father was in the intelligence community, but I have always sensed that he was somehow involved. He was, if anything, even more secretive than my uncle.

Another reason for involvement is childhood trauma. As Dr. Kenneth Ring showed in a study of close encounter witnesses published in his book *The Omega Project*, psychologically stressful experiences in childhood, such as child abuse, also increase the chances of close encounters happening. I

think that this is because the abuse shatters the child's expectations, increasing the chance that things that are not supposed to be there, but are, will be seen.

Between August and October of 1952, I was involved in a special education project at Randolph Air Force Base that utilized something called a Skinner Box in enhanced learning experiments. This device, developed by psychologist B.F. Skinner, was intended to isolate subjects and induce rapid and enhanced learning.

The process was extremely stressful to me, as a result of which I also began having trouble in my regular school, becoming terrified of my teacher for reasons that I could not explain. I began to experience one bout of sickness after another. My pediatrician discovered that I had almost no white blood cells, and my sister and I were removed from the program in October. I was isolated at Brooke General Hospital and given injections of gamma globulin, then kept at home until January of 1953, when I returned to second grade.

My direct memories of this experience are quite confused, and my sister in her lifetime did not remember it at all, but a close friend does remember the Air Force couple who did the recruiting visiting their house. In fact, his parents socialized with them a good bit but refused to allow him to enter the program on the basis that it involved the use of a Skinner Box.

I remember dreadful close confinement, darkness and awful screaming that went on and on. In fact, if my friend didn't recall the recruitment pitch he listened to with his parents, I might think that it had all been a nightmare and that my whole problem was my fear of the nun.

So I had two factors that can lead to abduction: unusual stress in childhood and being part of a family that includes older members who have been involved in some way.

As I described in my book about my childhood, *The Secret School*, it appears to me that the visitors showed up in my life sometime after I was removed from the program at Randolph and remained until I reached puberty, when they withdrew, or I stopped being aware of their presence. By the time I met them in late 1985, I had no memory at all of my childhood encounters.

It is my belief that the depth and extent of my relationship has been enabled not only by my serving notice in those night woods that I was interested in taking matters further but also by something that I have been doing since 1969–1970 called the sensing exercise.

In the fall of 1969, I began working as a Director's Guild Trainee on a movie that was being shot in New York. One of the other production assistants was something new to me, a spiritual seeker. He introduced me to P.D. Ouspensky's book about G.I. Gurdjieff and the Gurdjieff Work called *In Search of the Miraculous*. Anne and I both bought copies and read it with growing interest, and then hungrily. It made the argument that the human attention is mostly drawn automatically to experiences and sensations, but that it can actually be controlled by the individual, who can intentionally split it between what is coming in from the outside and his inner being. This is called the double arrow, looking out and in at the same time. When we experimented with this, we discovered that it did indeed cause a definite expansion, not exactly of consciousness but of what I would call sensitivity. Those early experiments were the first small notes of what has since become a resounding chorus in our lives that crosses the bridge between the worlds and opens the mind to mysterious new levels of reality.

Early on, we found one immediate change that was really very engaging to us. We began to see the world and our place in it in a new way, as both participants and observers. Life became more vivid and poignant. The experience of noticing in this new way transformed ordinary life into an extraordinary art form, and being alive came to appear as a continually unfolding miracle enclosed in the familiar world of our ordinary reality.

We joined the Gurdjieff Foundation's New York City branch. It was in group meetings there that we began doing the sensing exercise regularly. It seeks to split the attention by anchoring part of it in physical sensation while letting part of it take in outer impressions.

Now, fifty years later, I am still doing it, and it is the center of my relationship with the visitors. I am no longer actively attending group meetings in the Foundation, and I don't hold group meetings myself. The Gurdjieff Foundation is the inheritor of the teaching, and I regard work within it as essential to gaining useful understanding and establishing a strong personal practice. I must add, though, that the Foundation doesn't have anything to do with contact or facilitating contact. In fact, the members I've kept up with regard my stories as pretty quixotic. It is a resource designed to awaken us to reality in a new way. The fact that the sensing exercise facilitates contact is entirely coincidental to the Foundation's aim.

On the surface, the sensing exercise is quite simple. It is, however, a uniquely powerful form of meditation, as I now understand. To do it, one sits

and places the attention on physical sensation. I follow the method I learned in the Foundation, which involves being attentive to first one foot, then the lower leg, then the whole leg, then working up the other leg, the arms and torso, opening my attention to the sensation of each part of my body until I finally spread it over the whole body.

When Anne was alive, we often did it together. It can also be a powerful experience in a group setting, which the Foundation excels in providing.

When our son was born, I stopped doing it for a time. I was too busy and tired, being the father of a baby. But as he grew up, I returned to the practice, doing it nightly at eleven. I now do it at eleven and three, and there is an interesting story behind the addition of the wee-hours session.

Little did we know in the early days that we were not alone—that doing the exercise made me and Anne visible to very different eyes. I have recounted in other books (*Super Natural*, *The Afterlife Revolution*) how strange things began to happen to us as soon as we came together, long before we had any inkling that such a thing as a close encounter of the third kind was even possible. I will mention here that the first of those events probably took place about six months after we started with the exercise. They involved ghostly events in our apartment in Manhattan and a notable experience of seeing *kobolds* apparently kidnap a man who had gone into a disused storefront where prostitutes sometimes sat. We called the place the “whore store” and used to laugh about it. We were astonished by the sight of what looked to us like blue dwarfs pulling a wildly struggling man behind a curtain. It was terrifying, and we ran home. We didn’t call the police because we couldn’t figure out what to say. We never passed that storefront again.

Another event from those early days that was important seemed at the time like a dream. This involved being in another world. I was with *kobolds*. We walked along a path under a great arch. Ahead on a ridge, I could see tall trees that looked like cedars of Lebanon. To my left, the land fell off into a vast view of a trackless desert. Perched on the bluff overlooking this desert was a round, dark blue building that was very tumbledown. I was told that it was a university but in bad repair because “the scholars are no good at maintenance.” I went toward it at once, eager to matriculate. I wanted to study at a million-year-old university, for sure!

As I approached, I was stopped by peculiar creatures with large black eyes, whom I would later understand as grays, and who I would meet again in December of 1985. I was terribly disappointed when they denied me entry. I

have later come to understand that this was actually my matriculation, and that the disappointment I experienced was meant to test me, either spurring me on or causing me to give up.

Creating this type of friction is central to the way the visitors teach, and as a matter of fact, its use is also important in the Gurdjieff Work. Mr. Gurdjieff would create situations that would challenge his students' egos and force them to face themselves, either driving them away or spurring them on. Gurdjieff called it puncturing the "hot air pie" of ego. My hot air pie has been leaped up and down on for many years by rude little men, and I am much the better for it. As I will discuss later when explaining how building a strong soul enables one to render moot the fear of them, the first lesson they ever gave me was about the danger of arrogance and the importance of humility.

I think that I've been in their school ever since that dream. When it happened, the two forms involved were nowhere in the news and not in my life. But there they were, kicking me out of the university that I have been studying in ever since!

Just as maintaining the double arrow enriches one's life experience, doing the sensing exercise enables the sharing of self. While you are doing it, they can enter the silence of your mind and join you in your life experience. For them, this is more than a pleasure. I suspect that, when they are in their normal state, it is an utter delight for them, and I would think that they want to experience it with as many of us as possible. I suspect that Anne intuited this early on, which is why she insisted that our book be called *Communion*. Contact is not just about our learning new science and making new social and cultural discoveries. It is, more importantly, about this sharing of self. And incidentally, this has nothing to do with what is called possession. That's exactly what the visitors don't want to do.

For them, I don't think that anything is ever new. For us, everything is always new. They may know reality outside of time. We don't really know what the next second will bring. They hunger to share our sense of newness.

I think that the reason for this is explained by an insight that was published in the April 1977 issue of the magazine *Science*. D.B.H. Kuiper and Mark Morris made the observation that any intelligent entity appearing here from another world would have essentially nothing to gain from us except the results of our own independent thought. They would be after newness, and they would therefore be concerned about our state of preparedness to engage with them. As Kuiper and Morris speculate, "We

believe that there is a critical phase in this. Before a certain threshold is reached, complete contact with a superior civilization (in which their store of knowledge is made available to us) would abort further development through a ‘culture shock’ effect. If we were contacted before we reached this threshold, instead of enriching the galactic store of knowledge we would merely absorb it.” They continue, “By intervening in our natural progress now, members of an extraterrestrial society could easily extinguish the only resource on this planet that could be of any value to them.”

Having been involved with them now for so many years—for much of my life, really—I feel that this is indeed the reason for their secrecy. But they now find themselves in a quandary: Our planet is failing so rapidly that if they continue to hide and wait for us to catch up, we might go extinct first, or enter into a period of chaos that will destroy what progress we have made, causing them even further delay.

Fortunately, it’s not clear that our making more scientific progress is the only thing that holds them back. I think that what I might call psychospiritual progress is at least as important, and probably more so.

This would be why they have lavished so much more attention on this non-scientist spiritual seeker than they have on any scientist I am aware of. I learned, first through my Gurdjieff work and then by working directly with them, a grammar of communication that is both efficient, in the sense that progress is steady, and fruitful, in that the richness of communication is rapidly increasing.

The sensing exercise not only opens us to them and enables communication, it sends out a signal that communicates a good deal more than a laser pointer. When we place our attention on the nervous system, it glows in their level of reality like a little ember. Our dead can see this, too.

I came to understand this while I was at a conference hosted by William and Clare Henry in Nashville in September of 2015, just after Anne died. During a break in the conference, a woman came up to me, wanting to speak. She told me that she’d heard Anne say in her ear: “Tell Whitley that I can see him when he’s sitting in the chair.”

I understood at once what she meant. She had to be referring to the chair I sit in when I do the sensing exercise. My mind flashed back to something the visitors said back in about 1987 or 1988, when I asked them why they’d come: “We saw a glow.” At the time, I thought that this meant the glow of cities, but in this moment, I understood that they’d been talking about the

light emitted by the nervous system—light that I’ve known for a long time that they can see. And not only them. In the past, we could see it, too, as will become clear in Chapter Ten, when we discuss the oldest religious document in the world, the Pyramid Text in the Pyramid of Unas in Egypt, and what its extraordinary contents have to do with the modern experience of contact.

When I got home, I sat down and started doing it at once. A few days of this and my teachers soon arrived to assist, and soon I was in an almost miraculous relationship with Anne. It wasn’t what’s called channeling but rather a communication based on preparation that, unbeknownst to me, Anne had been making since she had a stroke in January of 2015.

It was at that point that she began insisting that I memorize W.B. Yeats’ poem “Song of the Wandering Aengus.” In that poem occurs the line, “When white moths were on the wing, and the moth-like stars were flickering out...” This proved to be the axis of all my future communication with her. I also remembered, after her death, that her favorite of my short stories is called “The White Moths,” which is about a woman discovering that she has died.

What started to happen was that, when I was away from home and the surveillance system was running, when I talked about Anne, it would send me a text and I would see a white moth pass in front of the living room camera. This happened again and again, sometimes when I was lecturing about her at conferences, other times when I was talking about her. Each time, the moth passed in front of the camera and disappeared. No moth was ever found in the house, and no such moth ever appeared while I was there. It even appeared while I was at a banquet at the end of a conference about the afterlife and landed on one of the conferees’ heads! It then flew off, and before the eyes of a room full of people who were watching it in amazement, simply disappeared into thin air.

It must be understood that contact with the visitors in all their strangeness and power is also contact with the part of humanity that is in a nonphysical form—that is to say, the dead. But this isn’t only about a psychospiritual level of relationship. As we shall see, physical materials are involved and are being studied with astonishing results.

The deeper you penetrate into the experience, the harder to understand it becomes. It involves human and nonhuman beings in both physical and nonphysical states. It exists both inside and outside of time and space as we understand them and is larger than physical space and deeper than time. It is highly energetic and energizing. It is also challenging, difficult and can be

dangerous.

It is hard. For example, when I talk about the sensing exercise, people usually want to know how long it takes to get some response. I can only relate what happened to me, which is that I started the exercise in 1970 and was initiated by the *Communion* experience fifteen years later, in 1985.

Because we are so focused on the material world and hardwired to see only what we understand of it, they have to fight their way into our lives. I think that they started trying to make me aware of their presence as soon as we moved into the cabin and they could see me doing my meditation in an isolated area, but one that was also near where they were engaged in some sort of enormous operation that was giving rise to hundreds of UFO sightings along the Hudson River. I had no idea that this was happening not thirty miles from the cabin, where I was spending inexplicably uneasy nights. The story has been ably covered by Dr. J. Allen Hynek, Philip Imbrogno and Bob Pratt in their book *Night Siege: The Hudson Valley UFO Sightings*.

From the time we bought the cabin, I was terrified that there was somebody lurking around outside at night. I installed alarm systems, bought guns and so forth—all of which is documented in *Communion* and other books. What is not documented is that in the summer of 1985, I began having terrible headaches, I think now because I was suppressing my awareness of the visitors. I say this not so much because of any specific scientific evidence that suppression like this causes headache but rather because I observed it happen at the cabin. Dr. John Gliedman, a dear friend and scientist who was there, along with a number of other witnesses, saw a very dramatic shaft of golden light come down from above. Alone among the ten people present, he could not make it out, even though it was right in front of him. Seeing it would have destroyed his world view, which he could not face. The result was that he soon found himself incapacitated with a migraine. Mine the previous summer had been so bad that I'd sought medical help.

By October, I think that the visitors were being compelled by my reticence to become more aggressive. If our relationship was going to grow, my refusal to admit to myself that they even existed had to be overcome. On the night of October 4th, we had our friends Annie Gottlieb and Jacques Sandulescu up for a visit. We dined at a restaurant and then returned to the cabin. We all went to bed almost immediately. Then, as I reported in *Communion*, "I was startled awake and saw, to my horror, that there was a distinct blue light being cast on the living room ceiling." (Our bedroom

overlooked the living room, which had a cathedral ceiling.) I watched the light seem to creep down from above, then decided that the chimney of our wood stove must be on fire. “Then,” I continued, “I fell into a deep sleep!” They didn’t cause me to fall asleep. I did. I had to, or I would have had to face them. They must have waited for some time to see if I would rouse myself. When I didn’t, they woke me up with a loud crack like a firecracker going off in my face. When I opened my eyes, I was “stunned to see that the entire house was surrounded by a glow that extended into the fog.” (It was a very foggy night.)

The explosion caused Anne to cry out and our son, aged six at that time, to shout from his bedroom downstairs. Annie Gottlieb later reported that she heard feet “scurrying” across the floor of our bedroom upstairs, and Jacques observed light around the house so bright that he thought he’d overslept and that it was full morning.

I was then heard outside their door telling them that it was nothing, just go back to sleep. What had happened was that the light had gone out, meaning to me that there was no fire. At the time, I thought I was reassuring everybody that all was well, but what I was really doing was suppressing what I knew perfectly well: that the visitors had come down from above and I had woken up to find the room full of them. When I leaped out of bed, probably right at them, they ran away. This had caused the scurrying that Annie Gottlieb heard.

In retrospect, I think that it was my noticing them even slightly that night which encouraged them to keep on trying to rouse me from the fixation the body causes on life in the time stream. Facing them means rising out of it, which forces the ego to face its mortality, which it is designed by nature to avoid at all costs.

On December 26th, my resistance was finally broken.

They are not our enemies. They are not our friends. I am all but sure that their purpose here is to become our teachers and in return to be rewarded with the sharing that they seek.

I find them challenging and demanding, but also exquisitely responsive to my needs as their student. They know the paths I need to travel but will never simply put me on them. Their skill as teachers comes in their ability to enable me to find my own way rather than show me what they think I should do. I know that I frustrate them. I’ve felt it and seen it. But no matter how poorly I do, I am rather sure that they will not give up on me unless I give up on

myself. More than once in my life, I have rejected them and steered clear of them. But when I wanted to come back, they have always been there.

Each night during the first meditation, I bring to mind the children of the world. I live in a young neighborhood and see children every day. I see the wonder in their eyes, the joy, the hope. During the three o'clock meditation, I open myself to the visitors and in return receive knowledge and am exposed to their teaching. I think that I can feel, sometimes, that they are glad that this is happening between us. I know that they've staked a lot on it, because this is the only testament of its kind ever written down.

Communion is not just about contact between us and the visitors. It is also about the veil between the worlds falling, and we who are in bodies coming into real relationship with mankind unbound, that great, soaring wonder that we call "the dead."

When that happens, our understanding of life is going to refocus on how to live in such a way that we die with strong souls, which means without regret and not burdened by the memory of deeds that hurt others.

I didn't know it at the time, but as 1989 rolled around, I was about to enter a new stage of relationship with the visitors, which would open for me a door into the most enigmatic imaginable experiences and a whole new way of experiencing both life and afterlife.

In May of 1989, I was given a gift that at the time seemed like the most awful invasion of my body, my soul and my life that I could imagine. I was given my implant.

THE IMPLANT MYSTERY

The spiritual experience of communicating with the visitors has such a powerful and pervasive physical component that I could as easily say that it is a physical experience that has a powerful spiritual component. The physical side of it—the technology—has left me with the most wonderful spiritual gift I can imagine possessing. While the implant in my left ear was put there in 1989, not until September of 2015 did I begin to learn how to use it.

What it does not do: It does not provide voice communication.

What it does: A slit opens up in my right eye's field of vision where I see words racing past. Also, it enhances research in a very unusual way.

On a warm May night in 1989, a man and a woman entered our cabin, bypassing the armed alarm system. They overpowered me and put a small disk-shaped object in the pinna, or upper part, of my left ear. I have described this experience in detail in *Confirmation*. After inserting the object, they left. A moment later, a flash of light filled the room, visible behind my closed eyes. There was crashing in the woods behind the house. The pressure released, and I immediately leapt up. I ran off in search of the intruders but found nobody and no sign of forced entry. As the alarm system had remained armed throughout, I decided that it must have been a vivid nightmare.

However, the next morning it became clear that the system had been tampered with, and later that day, my ear began to hurt, and we noticed that a lump had appeared in it. (In *Confirmation*, this event is dated as 1994. May of 1989 is the correct date.)

At some point over the next few days, the thing turned on, making a

growling-whining noise in my head and causing the ear to turn bright red. I was absolutely terrified. Frantic. I wanted to cut my ear off. Anne tried to calm me down. She thought it was a gift. I felt like I was being tracked. She said, “The visitors don’t care if you go down to the store to get some beans.” I had to admit that she had a point. I treasure my privacy, but I don’t do or think anything that I fear being known by others. Still, I wanted the thing out.

The close encounter experience is full of tales of implants, and my interest in them was obviously intense. In the early 1990s, I met Dr. Roger Leir, who was organizing implant removals in California. Anne absolutely forbade me to let him remove mine. Hoping to soften her attitude, I made sure she attended one of his very professionally conducted removal surgeries with me. It was an awesome and moving experience to see the object come out of a woman’s calf muscle. It wasn’t much larger than a pumpkin seed and gleamed because, as I later learned, it was encased in epidermis. I have discussed the early implant work extensively in *Confirmation*, published in 1999, but it was not until 2015—almost immediately after Anne died—that I began to be able to understand how to use mine. Just recently, in September of 2019, I have had a CAT scan done of it and have had a visit from two people who explained more about it to me, as I will relate shortly.

But don’t expect anything straightforward.

Dr. Leir offered to arrange an extraction, but Anne felt strongly that I should try to understand it first. So I delayed. By that time, I had learned to have the greatest respect for the extraordinary role she was playing in our relationship with the visitors. The implant really troubled me, though. I felt watched. There was a distressing sense of being trapped in my own body with the thing. It was claustrophobic.

When we moved to San Antonio in the mid-nineties, Catherine Cooke, then president of the Mind-Science Foundation, introduced me to the head of materials science at Southwest Research Institute in San Antonio, Dr. William Mallow. When I told him about what Dr. Leir was doing, he was eager to learn more about the objects. I called Dr. Leir and arranged to obtain a group of samples, which he brought personally from Los Angeles.

While we were not allowed to conduct any work with the official blessing of the institute, we had free use of its equipment. Under the scanning electron microscope, we found the objects to almost all be meteoric nickel-iron and, except in one case, to be unremarkable except for the fact that, when *in situ*, they were usually encased in a capsule made from the host’s epidermis. As

the body does not have the genetic encoding to generate epidermis inside muscle, the encapsulations had to have been created artificially. In many cases, a small scoop-mark scar could be found on the body of the host individual. This scar would have removed a bit of epidermis from beneath the layer of tissue on the surface, the stratum corneum.

One of the objects we received was quite unusual. It had been emitting a low-level FM signal when it was still sited in the host. Under the scanning electron microscope, it appeared to be another fragment of nickel-iron. As it had been broadcasting, we decided to see if we could detect any crystalline structures using an X-ray diffraction machine that was available at the nearby University of Texas at San Antonio campus. The first pass returned a typical response for nickel-iron, but subsequent passes showed no return at all. A check back on the SEM indicated that the fragment's composition was still the same: nickel-iron. We returned it to X-ray diffraction, only to find that it never again returned a signal. Upon first being touched by X-rays, it had become X-ray invisible.

So obviously, at least in that one case, we were looking at something with unknown characteristics.

Working on the implants, I was constantly aware of the one in my ear. Bill knew about it, of course. He was itching to get his hands on it, and I was just as eager to get rid of it. And yet, some of the people who'd had theirs removed in Dr. Leir's program told me that they felt a real sense of loss afterward, almost as if a friend had died. Others were glad to get rid of them. And I had Anne advocating for it, of course.

Then we met Dr. John Lerma through mutual friends. As he wasn't involved in the UFO world, Anne was more comfortable having him at least take a look at it, so I made an appointment. As he examined it, he said that it looked like a small cyst and that he could easily remove it. All that would be involved would be a brief office procedure.

I was excited, frankly. Anne was not. In fact, she insisted that I promise to try only the one time, and if it didn't work, to leave it in. I could see in her eyes something rather fierce. I knew how intense my brilliant wife could be when she thought I was making a mistake. I offered to cancel the surgery, but she said, "No, you have to do it. It's been bothering you for years."

So, on October 9, 1997, we appeared at Dr. Lerma's office, camera in hand. I wanted to videotape the whole procedure, and I'm glad we did. Anne was extremely nervous and laughing all the way through, very typical of her

when she was uneasy about something.

Dr. Lerma anesthetized the ear and, as Anne taped, made his incision. He said, "It's a white disk." Then he touched it with his scalpel...and it moved away. He was shocked, because it had been fixed tightly under the skin. And yet it had now moved. All he had were two small fragments on the edge of his scalpel, which he deposited in a specimen container. He then withdrew. I took the fragments to Dr. Mallow, who examined them under the scanning electron microscope. One of the samples was just cartilage, but the other one contained crystals of either calcium carbonate or calcium phosphate.

A lab technician, who had part of the fragment that Dr. Lerma had removed, called him and asked if it was a practical joke. Under the microscope, he was seeing proteinaceous material that was adhered to a metallic base. He told Dr. Lerma that, as far as he was concerned, it was a piece of technology. Dr. Mallow then called me and confirmed that this was also his thought.

Two days after the surgery attempt, the object moved back up into the top of my ear, where it remained until three weeks ago, at which time it moved about half an inch down along the pinna. I described the situation to a neurologist who is associated with a nongovernmental but related program that studies these objects and the people who host them, and he recommended a CT scan, which I got on September 23, 2019. What happened was surprising. The object no longer appears to be there. And yet, it still works. In fact, by the time it *started* working in 2015, it might well have already been gone, at least when it comes to metallic parts. I can still palpate it, but what I am feeling is just the calcium that my body surrounded it with, not the object itself. I suppose it's possible that it is X-ray invisible, but a 3D scan failed to turn up any gaps or hollows, so that seems unlikely.

Gone or not, it still works, and I consider it the most valuable thing in my possession.

The reason has nothing to do with visitors, though.

Between the mid-nineties and 2015, it was mostly just there. Once in a while, it would turn on, causing my ear to become red and hot. This would happen most consistently when I was with other people who'd had the close encounter experience. It happened once at Southwest Research, and a signal was detected in their signals lab, but I was told that I could not be given the details. The most dramatic event came in April of 2016 when I was rehearsing the first conference speech I had given in many years before a

relative who has also had contact experiences. She said, “Your ear’s turned bright red.” I laughed and explained that I probably had a larger audience than one.

It was in September of 2015 that I had noticed a dramatic change that seemed related to it. I happened to be in a room with a white wall that the sun was shining on, when I realized that I could see a neat oblong slit in my right eye. It was filled with movement. When I concentrated, I could see words racing past, but too fast to read more than the fact that they appeared to be typing. It was perhaps the most familiar of all fonts: Courier.

I peered at the speeding words in disbelief, then awe. This was clearly not a hallucination—or if it was one, it was, to say the least, unique. It appeared to me to be that technology was being applied. When I did manage to read an occasional word, they seemed random. Over time, though, I realized that this was not the case. The words were related to what I was writing, but not directly. For example, I started writing a historical novel, *In Hitler’s House*. When publishers saw that it was written by Whitley Strieber, nobody would buy it. This isn’t only because of prejudice, of which there is undoubtedly some, but due primarily to the fact that my sales have been weak for years. I published it myself under the pseudonym of Jonathan White Lane.

What I found, as I worked on the book, was that the words flashing past would increase the richness of my associative process. If I thought, for example, about the way a certain character might react to an insult and came up with the word “arrogance,” words like “ignorant,” “fire,” “loneliness,” “childhood” would be speeding past. The way that they were and are indirectly related to my thoughts enriches the associative process and adds depth to my writing. But it does more than provide enhanced association like this. It is also a marvelous research tool.

The novel is a faux memoir by a young German American who innocently falls in with Hitler in 1931, becomes an allied spy in 1935, and stays close to Hitler until the end of the war. To write it, I needed to know details about life in the 1930s and life with Hitler that were so true-to-life that they would seem to have been written by somebody who was actually there. I found that the implant would respond to direct questions but in quite a unique way. For example, I asked it, “What kind of toothpaste did Hitler use?” A day later, even though I was looking in Google English, it turned to German, where I found a reference to a book written by one of Hitler’s valets. I bought the book, which was in German. As it happened, the next night I was with

somebody who spoke fluent German and was willing to translate it for me.

If this had happened only once, I would think that it was a coincidence. But, like the associative enrichment, it happens with such consistency that I feel it is part of the way the implant works. It has also provided me with unique insights, such as the material on the social consequences of overpopulation, the relevance of the mystery of the fine-structure constant to understanding the nature of reality that will figure later in this book and many, many other things. In fact, I can say that this book has two authors: me and my implant. As to who might be doing all that work, I once asked it, "Who are you?" The reply came back at once, and slowly enough to read clearly: "It's me, Anne."

I remembered Anne's gentle but persistent opposition to my having it removed, and I have to say, at that moment, I thanked her from the depths of my soul that she had convinced me not to do it. As to whether or not she was conscious at the time of what it would eventually be used for and who would use it, I cannot be sure. But one thing is not in question: whatever condition it is in, it is an extremely useful tool. I have also recently learned, under some truly wonderful circumstances, much more about its origin, functionality and who installed it.

As things stand now, I would never allow it to be removed. I use it all the time. It is constantly leading me in new directions in my work, answering unanswerable questions and enriching my creative process.

Just recently, for example, I tested it by asking to be told something that would be important to this book, but which I knew nothing whatsoever about. Within hours, I found myself looking on Google at material about something called the fine-structure constant. I was looking for something else, and I cannot say quite why that particular phrase came up. I'm sure it's explainable, but it was not an expected result in the search I was doing, which was about the psychiatrist Carl Jung, and was for information I needed for a reading group I attend where we had been studying his *Red Book*.

I can't even be certain that the implant was at work here, but it seems as if it was, because what I have learned about the fine-structure constant, which turns out to be one of the great mysteries of physics, is directly relevant to the new vision of reality that is central to this book.

The fragment of the implant that was captured by Dr. Lerma consisted of a metallic base with cilia attached to it. They were motile, that is to say, as the lab technician told the doctor, "alive." It thus appeared to be a piece of

biotechnology. Like many of the implants that Dr. Leir extracted, it had the ability to move away from the scalpel. Dr. Lerma was not expecting this, and his surprise is evident on the videotape. I very well remember how my ear burned when it returned from the earlobe to the pinna.

At about 4 in the morning on Wednesday, September 18, 2019, a stunning event took place that explained a great deal more about the implant. Since I experienced the movement of the implant I'd been feeling a paresthesia in the area, I had become more and more nervous about it. During my meditations in the nights leading up to the 18th, I was complaining and saying that I was going to get it removed if the sensations didn't stop. (They were later diagnosed as a pinched nerve in my neck.)

On the 17th, I did my usual 11 PM meditation, then at 3, the second one. I was in bed, just getting to sleep when I heard a soft knock on the door. I looked at the clock. It was 3:44. I got up and went to the door. I have heard these knocks many times and generally peer out the peephole before opening the door, always to find nobody there.

This time, I swung the door open and there stood two men. Before I could so much as gasp in surprise, I felt a change come over me that was akin to the twilight sleep one might be given during a minor surgery. It was not so powerful that I couldn't walk or move or talk, but I was definitely no longer in a normal state.

Incredibly, I recognized one of the two young men. I had last seen him when he was about twelve. He had been with his two sisters and an individual who may have been from the Department of Defense. They were special children with capabilities that most of us do not possess, primarily an ability to read minds. When I saw him when he looked about twelve, it was 1996, so he was now in his mid-thirties.

I wish I could say more about the circumstances under which I saw him then, but there is very little more to say. The children were introduced to me in a public space and immediately began talking to me in my mind while the adult they were with watched me with twinkling eyes and we all laughed with delight. Because it was delightful. They were delightful. I was just thrilled to see that there were human kids with this capability. I don't know how many there are, but I hope many, and that many more are being born. I have no idea how it works, or even theoretically how it might, but it is a wonderful thing and a real advance in human evolution. May these kids thrive and may their tribe increase!

Anyway, I recognized him at once, and I was absolutely amazed to see him. He gave no indication that he recognized me, and by that point, I wasn't capable of speaking or even moving very much. They were being very careful with me, and with good reason. I would damn well take a picture, steal an artifact—anything I could manage—and anybody from that side who works with me must know that perfectly well. They sure did.

In any case, they had a small portable typewriter with them. It looked like something that was commonplace before computers. I was told that it was what was used to generate the words that race past in the slit in my eye. I looked down at it. He put it in my hands. I said that I didn't see any sort of radio or anything. It was just an old typewriter. Very trim and surprisingly light.

He then explained that the words I see aren't generated outside of my mind but are drawn up from deep in my unconscious. When they are typed, they appear in the slit. Thus, they are drawn from a level of my mind that I cannot reach to the edge of consciousness where I can make use of them.

I asked how in the world that might work without any communications device. He explained to me that it was in the typewriter's platen. So I asked again how it worked. He said that he didn't know but that it had been developed by a Dr. Raudive.

This name was vaguely familiar to me. When I Googled it the next day, I found that this was a Dr. Konstantin Raudive, who had been a colleague of Carl Jung and who had worked for years on what is known as EVP, or electronic voice phenomena. This involves the design of devices that enable people on the other side of the barrier between the living and the dead to communicate. After his own death, individuals using EVP found that they could communicate sporadically with him. He was continuing to work on the creation of this technology from the other side.

In fact, the only other person I know who has the slit open up in his visual field that has the words racing through it is a man who has studied EVP for most of his adult life and is an expert on the work of Dr. Konstantin Raudive. He reports that an object appeared under the skin of his right forefinger sometime in 2018, but is not sure if he could see the slit before that or not. (Of course, I discovered that he could also see the slit the day after I learned about Dr. Raudive, another of the strange coincidences that fall like rain on a clear day when the implant is involved.)

The two men explained that it had been repositioned because it was

stressing my right eye. The intraocular lens in this eye, the membrane behind it, and the retina have all been affected by calcium deposits over the past few years when I have been using the implant almost constantly. (An intraocular lens is a replacement lens that is used to correct cataracts.)

They then asked me if I still intended to have the implant taken out. As the IOC can be replaced and the membrane removed and the retina is not symptomatic, I said that I would not. They then left. I stood there staring at the door. My mind was racing. I was still in twilight sleep and had to move very carefully until it wore off a bit. I tried to go to my couch and get back into the sensing exercise, but I could not manage it. I was exhausted and instead fell into bed and into a deep sleep.

A few days later, the study of the CT scan came back: The implant they didn't want me to take out isn't there.

Or is it? I wonder what would happen if I had the calcium deposit that remains removed. Or would it race off to some other part of my ear like the metallic object did in 1997?

One thing is sure: If you don't like mysteries, especially unsolvable ones, stay away from the close encounter experience.

I no longer think that the implant has anything much to do with nonhumans. The fact that I didn't learn to use it until after Anne passed away, and that it continues what she did when she was alive, which was to be a fabulously brilliant muse to this struggling scribbler, and what I learned on the morning of the 18th has convinced me that it is a communicator between the living and the dead.

I hope, of course, that more people will gain access to such devices. However, I also think that there are liable to be abuses, and I wish to say that my implant has never provided channeled information. As I said at the beginning of the chapter, there are no voices involved. Rather, it does just two things: send the words flying past in my visual field and create synchronicities that support my research.

I reach up and feel it. There it is, quietly doing what it does. A strange event that lives with me twenty-four hours a day. I turn a lamp against the wall, then sit watching the slit. As usual, words race past.

Finally, I catch one. It is "harmony."

THE FIELDS OF ASPHODEL

During the weekend of July 19–22, 2019, I went to a place of great human suffering and incredible power. While there, I had extended, days-long access to another world, an experience that went far beyond anything else that has happened in this lifetime of strange and extraordinary experiences. I think that what happened offers a major clue about the origin of the visitors, and possibly also of their enigmatic human allies.

I had been invited to a small conference at the All Nations Gathering Center on the Lakota Sioux Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, where I was to give a talk about *The Afterlife Revolution*. It was hosted by Dallas Chief Eagle and his wife Becky and organized by Mia Feroletto, publisher of *New Observations Magazine*.

Before going, I had learned some of the reservation's history, but it had offered no clue about what was actually going to happen to me there. Like most people outside of American Indian culture, my awareness of the spiritual power of their religions was very limited. Being a Texas German, I was aware that my ancestors had a high opinion of their religion and spiritual development. Why, I did not know. I do now.

I also knew that Pine Ridge was the site of the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre and the Wounded Knee occupation of 1973. On December 29, 1890, the US Army had opened fire on a group of 300 Lakota Sioux, killing 90 men and 200 women and children. In 1973, Wounded Knee was occupied by 200 Oglala Lakota and members of the American Indian Movement in protest over corruption in the tribe's government. This led to a siege that lasted two months that left two Lakota killed and fourteen wounded, and two

FBI agents killed and a US Marshal paralyzed. Such is the intensity of the feeling about the incident that Peter Mattheissen's book about it, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, was the object of libel suits prior to its 1983 publication. It is generally now considered an accurate narrative of the uprising.

I also learned that Oglala Lakota County was the poorest county in the United States, with an average annual income per person of just over \$8,000. Officially, the average life expectancy on the Pine Ridge reservation is 66.81 years, but statistics attributed to the Pine Ridge hospital cite a life expectancy among women of 55 years and men 47 years. Suicide rates are high, especially among teens, driven by the sense of hopelessness that infects their lives like a virus. During the winter of 2015–2016, one 12-year-old girl killed herself because her family could not afford heat, and she could no longer bear the cold. Alcoholism affects 85% of the population. Drug abuse and crime are rampant, and living conditions are dreadful beyond anything I have ever seen in my life.

None of this is an accident or due to laziness or any such issue. It is because of the location. During the 19th century American Indian wars, the Lakota Sioux were intentionally confined to this place because it is so lacking in resources. Distances are long, so work off the reservation isn't economical for most residents. Because of its isolation, lack of good farmland and general scarcity of exploitable resources, there are few jobs on it, contributing to a chronically high unemployment rate.

While I found an oppressed people there, I also found that it was a place of great human spiritual power, in fact, power beyond anything I have ever known anywhere. I have some idea of what this power is, which I will discuss in depth in a later chapter. I had not been on the reservation for more than a few hours before I began to feel it. And when I say feel, I am not talking about something vague—some sense of unusual energies. Far from it.

On my first morning there, when I happened to close my eyes during a drive of half an hour or so, I saw movement behind my closed lids—what looked like shadowy trees and rolling hills, but not the ones we were passing. Surprised, I opened them immediately. I couldn't understand why I'd been seeing anything at all. When I closed them again, what I saw simply took my breath away. I sat there watching an entire second landscape flow past the car. Although it seemed to be twilight rather than sunny, the effect was so vivid it was like wearing a virtual reality headset.

I was flooded with strong, poignant and yet contradictory emotions.

There was at once a sense of homecoming and homesickness. It wasn't as if I was in two places at once, but rather looking out the windows of my heart into two worlds that have been locked forever in a secret embrace and seeing that wonderful, sweet thing for the first time.

As we drove along, I sang out the different features I was seeing. "There's a creek over there, we're passing under an arbor of trees, there are long hills on the horizon. Oops, the road's gone off down the hill." Among those in the car who heard me doing this was our very kind driver, Kevin Briggs, who unfortunately could not close his eyes and look as the others did. Conferees Alan Steinfeld, Ananda Bosman, Annie Wegner-Nabigon and others did close their eyes. Some saw it vaguely, others not at all. Ananda, Annie and I saw it most clearly. Ananda saw it while we were in the Badlands, Annie saw it on one of our rides.

Even though the image was shadowy, it was extremely detailed. I could pick out individual trees, fields, even a narrower version of the road we were on. After a few moments, I realized that I was watching not another world altogether, but another version of the landscape we were passing through. It was a bit more rough, with occasional gorges and generally wider streams. The other road was not only narrower, it wasn't graded. The result of this was that it sometimes wound off down a hill while we continued along the graded version in our world. This would leave me with the uncanny sensation that the car had taken flight.

The vision didn't go on for just a few minutes, but for the entire time I was on the reservation. It continued whether I was riding in a car, walking, sitting or standing. For those three days, I was living in two landscapes at once. After I closed my eyes, it would take about thirty seconds for the other world to appear, but it did so reliably. When I was standing somewhere, I could look down and see grass and gravel that was not present in this world. I could bend down and look closely, even to the point of being able to count the number of petals on flowers and observe the details of grasses and the discolorations on stones. I could touch and smell nothing of the other world. In this sense, it was very much like out of body travel, which detaches you from those senses. I was not physical in that world, and I have to wonder if that might not be how our visitors experience this one. I tried using the sensing exercise as a tool for physically moving into the other world, but it didn't work. Nevertheless, it is my strong sense that what we think of as technology is not what enables things like this to happen. I think that it's

something to do with attention, concentration and the brain, and possibly also requires the cooperation of an outside energy that is itself conscious. My thought is that my lifetime of doing the sensing exercise and the changes in my brain that have resulted have made me more able to see this other universe and, to a limited extent (so far), interact with it.

The changes I am referring to involve a brain area called the dorsal striatum. It contains two regions, the caudate and the putamen, which are connected by an area of white matter called the internal capsule. There is a study under way that suggests that the density of the white matter region may govern the degree to which an individual possesses intuitive sensitivities.

I have thought that meditation might somehow increase this density. The authors of the as-yet unpublished study don't see any indication of this so far, but another study, published in *Psychiatry Research* in January of 2011 and entitled "Mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional gray matter density" states, "Analyses in *a priori* regions of interest confirmed increases in gray matter concentration within the left hippocampus. Whole brain analyses identified increases in the posterior cingulate cortex, the temporo-parietal junction, and the cerebellum in the study group compared with the controls."

If the dorsal striatum is also affected by meditation, it might explain why, over years of doing it, people seem to become so much more intuitive, as has happened in my case. My own brain has been observed to have a very dense internal capsule between the caudate and the putamen, but there is no premeditation MRI to compare with the one that is available. I do feel that fifty years of meditation has made changes that involve opening my mind to new areas of vision and new ways of seeing.

However, I would not ignore the power of the heart, either. While we now attribute thought and feeling exclusively to the brain, I think that the older vision of the body, with the heart as the emotional center, should not be dismissed. I say this because the whole experience was so emotionally powerful, and like we do so many emotions, I felt it in my heart, and it is in both head and heart that I carry it now.

There is energy involved, which I think is conscious and capable of deciding exactly what it wants and does not want to do. A big part of coming into communion with the visitors, I feel, is opening ourselves to the wishes of this energy and attempting to understand what it might need from us and that will help it fulfill its great aims for the unfolding of space-time.

The mindfulness practice researchers found that the changes they detected came about rather quickly, after only eight weeks of meditation, so perhaps building a brain that is receptive to contact is not all that lengthy a process. The longer time, I think, would involve waiting for one's little glow to be noticed. My experience of this is that determination counts. You have to want it a lot and work hard for it before anyone will show up to work with you. To get darker, more exploitative aspects to appear, such as happened to Matt, all that is needed, it seems to me, is curiosity. Lack of preparation, though, is clearly not a good idea.

That preparation should include reading material about what it is like to live with the visitors. Authors such as John Mack and Kathleen Marden offer carefully researched texts, and Anne Strieber's *Communion Letters* is a treasury of personal accounts. I would avoid channeled material, as there is never any way to know where it actually comes from, an outside source or the author's imagination.

Beyond that, later in this book, I will explore the importance of coming to this with a strong, healthy soul. This conscious energy, as I have experienced it, is very reflective. If you feel fear, it will be fearful. If you conceal guilts, it will look right into you and at them. Having been face to face with the grays when I was still an unregarded soul, I can assure you that this is an incredible shock. Those glittering pop eyes burned into me. It was like facing goblins, and I felt like some deep part of me was about to be devoured. The ancient Greek aphorism "know thyself" is of critical and foundational importance to establishing a relationship with the visitors and all that comes with them. Later, I will go into some detail about how one uses it to build the sort of strong soul that will have no reason to find those penetrating eyes frightening.

I am purposely being a little vague here about who I mean—is it the strangely formed visitors I'm talking about, our own dead, or a sort of field of disembodied consciousness?

I don't think that it's useful to make such differentiations. Whatever aspect of it comes into contact with you, so does it all. Best to think of it as a vast field where different sorts of flowers grow, some of them appearing one way, others another way. No matter which way you go, you remain in the field.

A specific event that causes me to suspect that we are dealing not only with specific entities but a conscious field took place at the Contact in the Desert Conference on June 2, 2019. As I was heading to a lecture by Dr.

Jacques Vallee, I noticed an odd change in the atmosphere. It was as if the air pressure had dropped. My ears popped. Sound faded. I said something to the person beside me, who acted rather strangely. He seemed to be pretending that I wasn't there. I thought perhaps he disapproved of me in some way. I went on to the lecture, and by the time I arrived, the sensation had faded.

Some weeks later, an attendee at the conference wrote me, "I was on my way to Jacques Vallee's lecture when I saw Whitley coming down a side path in my direction, looking deep in thought. Our paths were totally going to cross. Just before we were about to intersect, I glanced down to check that I had my phone in my bag. A bright flash from Whitley's direction caught the corner of my eye. Oddly, I thought, 'That's him flashing to another dimension.' In the same instant, I looked up—sure enough, no Whitley. He was there, and then he wasn't. It's hard to describe how confusing and odd it felt. The atmosphere suddenly felt heightened, and the sound seemed to drop away. At the same time, a sense of immense great benevolence came over me, as if someone with kind good humor was reassuring me that everything was ok. It felt like a gift, meant for me. It felt like magic." She then spent some time looking for me without success and moved on to the lecture. She and a friend were taking seats "when the next person entered. It was Whitley Strieber!" For my part, I only felt the change in atmospheric pressure that also affected her. I had no sense of moving through another universe, but perhaps when this happens, we leave any memories we have gathered there behind when we return. This would be one explanation for the ubiquitous experience known as missing time that is reported by close encounter witnesses. We are not being taken aboard spaceships at all but moved into the companion universe, and our memories of events there return with us only in fragmented or suppressed form, or not at all.

It is important, I feel, to note her comment that "a sense of immense great benevolence came over me, as if someone with kind good humor was reassuring me that everything was ok." I think that this may have been a moment of direct communication with the conscious field itself, rather than specific entities that are part of it. When I am in touch with it, there is always a sense of joy, even hilarity. Those moments never fail to remind me of Anne's love of the 14th century mystic Meister Eckhart and his statement that "God laughs and plays," and of her own central teaching: "Have joy." She adopted this because it was one of the very, very few things that the visitors have ever said to me in ordinary language. She felt that it was what lay

beyond our suspicion and fear, just out of reach.

I think that my vision was opened to this other world at Pine Ridge by the action of conscious energy, not specific entities. I will say this: I have never had more fun in my life than I did while my mind was open to this vision. It was so fascinating, so tantalizing, so extremely interesting. It has absolutely inspired my curiosity and made me want to somehow walk in those fields. Maybe I'd be unwelcome to the inhabitants or even devoured by something, but maybe also by passing through the wall between our worlds, I might make a door that others could enter. I have been asking the energy for a chance to give it a try.

Having asked many times in my life for impossible things to happen and seeing them proceed to unfold (always to my great astonishment), I don't think that this entirely unreasonable and absurd request is at all impossible to fulfill. We shall see.

The other world was just as complex as this one, with streams, trees, fields, gorges, grasses and flowers and a sky complex with flowing clouds. In general, though, I didn't see many structures, and no people. From time to time, I'd see a house or cabin. Sometimes a white square would flash on the distance then quickly blink out. Was that a person, perhaps distorted by some quirk of consciousness that we don't yet understand?

When I looked up with my eyes closed in the car, I saw the sky and passing clouds. When I opened them, there was the ceiling. The weather in the other reality was similar but not the same. It seemed more unsettled. There were storm clouds there that were not present here. The moon was waning and gibbous in both realities, but in the other seemed to me to be a bit less gibbous, as if it had been full starting on about the 13th rather than the 16th, which was true here. Over the weekend that I was on the reservation, it was rising late at night, but when I closed my eyes, it was well risen in the other reality by about half past nine. Even stranger, when I opened them, for a few moments there was a sort of hazy glow where the moon had been in the other world. This would slowly fade into the normal night sky. I wondered, then, how close I was to slipping into the other reality.

On my second day on the reservation, I had the privilege and honor of being allowed to witness an hour of a private family ritual that I found to be among the most sacred things I have ever experienced. It involves chanting and drumming and dancing. It was deeply moving to me.

The dancers fast and dance over a period of days. In the hour I was

allowed to be there, I danced as well, entering the ceremony as best I could. The chanting stirred my heart and my soul, the drums shook my blood. When I closed my eyes, the area where the ritual I was watching was taking place became an empty meadow. I could still hear the drumming, but it seemed to now be coming from the right, not the left. When I looked to my right, where the new source seemed to be coming from, I could see the edge of a low hill. The sound seemed to be below it. When I opened my eyes, the hill was no longer there, the meadow was again filled with dancers and the only drumming was coming from the left.

At one point, I noticed people looking up and pointing. But what could it mean? How could they not pay attention to such an event as this? Still, I was curious. I looked up, too, and there at the top of the clear blue sky was a small object. It was light tan in color and seemed quite high. Was it a balloon? I watched it for a few minutes, but it didn't go anywhere or do anything—just hung there, motionless and silent.

I kept my feelings inside, but I did think that this was the visitors. I can't say that I felt their presence, which has sometimes happened in the past when I have seen their devices, but my initial reaction was that they were there to honor the ritual. They would have known that I would write about it.

I asked around about the object. Some of the people thought it might be an FBI drone, but others said that they were seeing beams and little balls of light coming out of it. However, the FBI keeps a close watch on these people. The Wounded Knee Occupation of 1973 was viewed as an insurrection against the United States. So maybe the FBI was watching and maybe they would have used a drone. As for me, I watched the object off and on for a total of about fifteen minutes but did not see any unusual phenomena associated with it, except for the fact that it was motionless to the point of being uncanny. The eye expects things in the sky to move, however slightly. This did not. I was reminded of the UFO footage taken by fighters from the carrier Nimitz in 2004 and released in 2017. The objects on those videos are not aerodynamic but held aloft in some other way. This object looked exactly like that. Others saw similar objects at various other times during the conference, so my thought here was that this was indeed the visitors. In September of 2019, the US Navy admitted that the objects recorded by the Nimitz fighters were indeed unknowns.

The one remained motionless for too long to be a balloon. Even if it was motionless only for the time I observed it, that would be too long for one.

There were balloons being released as part of an experiment in Sioux Falls, but that city is to the east of Pine Ridge, and the winds that day were out of the west.

When I left, it was still there, still motionless. Individuals who left after I did confirmed that it was still in the sky at that time. When it did finally depart, it moved away slowly and was seen again over other parts of the reservation.

That is also quite a long time for a drone to be hovering without being returned for a recharge. When they hover, they aren't absolutely still. Neither are they completely silent. I have been unable to find any commercially available drones that can remain aloft more than two hours. This was the limit, as of the summer of 2019, of the longest duration drone, the HYBRiX.20.

Still, although I do believe that the object was an unknown, I can't rule out the possibility that the FBI has silent, long duration drones that can hover for hours. I don't believe it, but I can't rule it out.

This was all pretty strange, even for me. Strange and wonderful. What happened next, though, was even stranger. Led by a member of the American Indian Movement, who was also one of the last direct descendants of somebody who had survived the 1898 massacre, a group of us went to the Wounded Knee memorial on the reservation. As I stood looking down at some of the graves, another member of the conference stood beside me, also looking down at them. I was vaguely aware that he had moved away then returned. I thought nothing of it until later when he came up to me and explained that, when he stood beside me, he could see down into the graves and could see the broken skeletons that were lying there in the earth.

As he explained this to me, I could see the puzzlement on his face. I don't blame him, as I have never heard of anything like this, not in all the literature of high strangeness that I have read in my life. There are a few cases where people were said to be able to see through objects. In Greek myth, Lynceus of the Argonauts was supposedly able to see through walls and into the ground. But nowhere is there a story of somebody who could somehow confer this power on another person while not possessing it themselves. The visitors can pass through walls. When out of the body, so can we. But X-ray vision, especially X-ray vision by proxy—no, I believe that this may be the only such story that has ever been told. I think that all three stories, though—seeing into the other world, apparently popping into another dimension and

conferring this power on the person standing beside me—all have to do with the presence of the same energy. I have to say, though, even as I write this, I can see those broken skeletons in my mind's eye and feel the cruelty and shame of the massacre.

When we went to the nearby Badlands one evening, I found myself still able to see the other world there, too. I immediately noticed that hills were not as dramatic. This would mean that there has not been as much erosion there as here. When I looked down at the ground, I could see more grasses there than here, also. So the geologic history of the other world might be less violent, but at the same time, it also appears to be less populated. I say this because the roads on the reservation in this world are graded and in the other world they are not. I kept hoping that I would see a vehicle, but I never did. Had I done so, I wouldn't be surprised to find that it was horse drawn. This is because the roads in the other world were sometimes unpaved, and the tracks in them were narrow, suggesting wagon wheels. The paved areas were black like macadam.

As I left the reservation on Monday, I also left the other world behind. By the time we were twenty miles from Rapid City, I could no longer see it. On the plane back to Los Angeles, I gazed out the window at the gentle landscape far below and thought long thoughts about my strange life and the strangeness of life in general, as it was being lived in the cities and towns we were passing over. I had left the greatest mystery of my life behind. I'd be a fool, though, if I didn't live a "never say never" life, so for all I know, it's going to return to visibility sometime. I regretted not being able to enter it. To do that, however, I knew that I was going to need to find out more.

There are many instances in literature of people encountering other realities. Matt and his mother saw a field from the Pleistocene at the end of his runway. In his book, *Hunt for the Skinwalker*, Dr. Colm Kelleher describes an event that took place on a mysterious ranch that had been bought for study because of all the paranormal activity taking place there. The purchase, made by the government, was managed through Robert Bigelow's foundation. On the afternoon that the scientists who were to take it over arrived, a remarkable event took place. Just before they arrived, a huge wolf came up out of a marsh and attacked some goats in a corral. The ranchers drove it off by shooting it, although the bullets did not seem to penetrate or draw blood. It leaped out of the corral and ran back into the marsh.

When the scientists arrived, they found its footprints, which led to the

center of the marsh and then disappeared. Casts taken enabled them to estimate the weight of this ghost animal at 300 pounds. When I read this, I immediately realized that this was probably a dire wolf, another Pleistocene creature.

So is the other world in the past? I have no way of knowing that, but I do suspect from all I saw and all I have learned about it that it does not have the level of population or development that our world does, meaning that, in it, those creatures might not have gone extinct.

On the night I got home, I sat as I always do at 11 and took my attention to my physical sensation, letting my mind wander free. I asked to understand the place I had seen. I asked if it had a name. I never do more questioning than that. My experience is that I don't need to beg, pray, do rituals or anything like that. What is important is to be prepared for a response that might happen very quickly and—above all—in some way that is liable to be quite asymmetric.

Nothing happened for a few days, and then on August 3rd, I had three dreams. They were what are known as lucid dreams. I've had a few of these in my life, but I don't recall any that were as vivid as these.

In the first one, I was standing outside the All Nations Center at Pine Ridge with my eyes closed, looking at a beautifully curved wooden fence that had been one of the most striking features I'd seen during my time observing the other world. Three Indians came up to this fence. I could tell from their clothing that they were probably from the ritual I'd heard taking place in the other world. They looked human but had differently shaped faces than we do, and their eyes were somehow different. Was this because they were structurally mirror images? I don't know how to assess that. All I can do is report what I saw.

They told me that, because this writing is going to help Pine Ridge in some way, I had been given my vision as a gift—which is all well and good, but I'd like to know who gave the gift and what had to be done to deliver it. And above all, what can we do to initiate contact from this direction?

The next thing I knew, I had two more dreams in rapid succession. They involved two of the few people left alive who were indirect witnesses to the Roswell event and know details of the bodies.

One of them said “Strieber-Greek” and warned me to be careful.

When I woke up, I wondered what in the world that might mean. I have nothing to do with Greece. Greeks play no role in my books. I am not Greek,

speak no Greek and only know one or two Greeks, and them not very well. So I Googled the phrase—and got quite a surprise. There was a “Professor Strieber” mentioned in a science fiction novel called *Uncle Ovid’s Exercise Book* by Don Webb that was published in 1988. The passage in which my name appears contains the sentence, “The Greeks placed the coins in the mouths of their dead that they might pay Charon to ferry them over the Styx into the gray fields of Asphodel in the interior of the Earth.”

Asphodel in Homer’s *Odyssey* is the abode of the dead, twilit and leached of color. This is why the familiar little gray meadow flower one sees in some parts of Europe is called the asphodel. At first, I thought, “Oh, dear, perhaps I was being warned that I’m destined for some dreary land of the dead.” Then I was glad that the sensing exercise hadn’t worked to get passage!

However, Homer doesn’t only condemn Asphodel as the land of the unwanted dead. A less known passage in the *Iliad* describes it as a place fragrant with lovely flowers.

And indeed, in my third dream on that night, I saw the most gorgeous field of blue flowers I have ever beheld. In fact, it was the most enchanting shade of blue I can imagine—and, given that it was my dream, I mean that literally!

I made the decision to go with the Asphodel of the *Iliad*. I cannot imagine that those three marvelous men would be anywhere except in some sort of heaven. As for the two Roswell witnesses, they are lovely people, in my estimation sacred people. (Although they would laugh at that designation!)

I don’t have the impression that the other world is imaginary. Nobody’s imagination can function like that for days, not producing an endless supply of detail that rich. Not to mention the fact that, when I examined something along the roadside—a flower, a tumble of stones—it was still there the next day, exactly as I remembered it. No, I think that I really was seeing into another reality, and I would suppose that others have, too, and its twilit appearance is what probably led them to conclude that it was inside Earth. But just as we have left the gods, sylphs, ghosts, fairy folk and our other interpretations of the visitors behind, perhaps it’s time to rethink other folklores and legends and consider instead that some of them at least might be attempts to explain phenomena that were really observed but could not be understood. I saw another version of the world. It was oddly like this one but not quite. The observation was protracted, lasting days. There isn’t anything in the literature of hallucination to explain it. So I have to classify it as an

observation of an unknown phenomenon that appeared to be another reality similar to this one and apparently occupying the same space.

I have suspected for years that just such a place might be involved in the close encounter and UFO experiences—not just a distant star or galaxy in our universe but another actual, physical universe that is part of the same creation as ours is and might, thus, be connected with it. It seems possible that, if this other universe exists, that both should be thought of as a single unit, with the two halves functioning together, but in ways that we have not yet detected—or rather, only just begun to detect.

But a companion universe? Really? This would not be part of what is known as the multiverse, which is conceived of as an endlessness of universes outside of our own but not sharing the same space. There have even been a few indications that such universes may exist. In December of 2015, cosmologist Ranga Ram Chary published a paper concerning anomalies in the cosmic background radiation in which he says, “A plausible explanation is the collision of our Universe with an alternate universe.” He also states, however, that “deeper observations are necessary to confirm this unusual hypothesis.”

But could there be another universe immediately present, right here, sharing the same space as ours?

There is some very interesting evidence that such a thing might be real and, not only that, a method of testing for its presence has been devised.

If another universe is entwined with ours and it is possible to cross back and forth, it would not only explain a lot about the behavior of some of our visitors and the craft they seem to be using but also reconcile some serious anomalies of physics.

Physics calls such a universe a mirror universe. And even the idea that everything in it would be the opposite of what is present here might be the case, at least to some degree. The landscape didn't look to me like the exact opposite of this one, but I cannot be sure of that. It was very similar, but I am not so sure that I would have been able to perceive it as a mirror image, even if it is one. Having no experience of such a thing, I also have no idea what it would look like.

When the two universes were created, physics tells us that the mirror must have been cooler than ours, otherwise some of its matter would have leaked across the barrier between the two, and gravity in our universe would be stronger than it is. The greater coolness of the companion universe would

mean that it would have lower luminosity—just as did Homer’s Asphodel, and just as I observed at Pine Ridge.

A charming hint that it may at times be possible to cross between them comes from an obscure 12th century source. It is the story of the Green Children of Woolpit. One day around the year 1130, the villagers of Woolpit discovered two children, a brother and a sister, standing beside one of the wolf pits. (These were intended to trap wolves, who abounded in Britain at the time.) The children were green in color, wore strange clothing and spoke an unknown language. They gradually adapted, lost their green color and learned English. The boy died but the girl survived and said that they came from a land where there was no sunshine and the light was like twilight. The girl was given the name Agnes and married a royal official called Richard Barre.

I’ve been vaguely aware of this story for years, but now the perpetual twilight described in it brought it very much to mind. Did these children come from our companion universe? If so, how? There is no record of them explaining why they happened to end up in the English countryside.

They also said that the sun never shone in their world and thought of it as being underground. But they presumably knew nothing about what might actually be causing the difference in luminosity.

This may just be an old story, completely unrelated, but there are a number of quite compelling reasons, even beyond the lower luminosity observed by me and Homer and reported by Agnes and her brother, that a companion universe might be real.

First, the Big Bang should have left more of the isotope lithium-7 in our universe. According to Alain Coc of the Centre for Nuclear Science and the Science of Matter in France, mirror neutrons coming into our universe from the other would destabilize beryllium-7, the isotope whose decay leads to lithium-7. If this is happening, it would explain why there is less lithium-7 in our universe than there should be. Additionally, we frequently measure ultra-high-energy cosmic rays coming from outside our galaxy, but they carry more energy than should be possible given the distance they are traveling. Zurab Berezhiani of the University of L’Aquila in Italy has shown that, because of the lower temperature of the mirror universe, they can travel farther without expending as much energy as they would if they remained in our universe across their whole journey. If they do oscillate between universes, that would explain their anomalous energy. In addition, and

perhaps most tellingly, the most developed mirror models indicate that there must be five mirror particles for every particle in our universe. This is precisely the same ratio given by our measurements of how much dark matter must exist. It would seem possible, then, that dark matter, which we know must exist but cannot seem to find despite years of trying, might actually be this mirror universe.

So do the visitors come, then, from it? If so, then they seem to have somehow devised or evolved a means of crossing the bar, as it were, between the two.

I am reminded of Robert Louis Stevenson's poem "Land of Counterpane," where as a boy he "Watched my leaden soldiers go/ With different uniforms and drills/ Among the bedclothes and through the hills..." But I do not think that this real land of counterpane is necessarily so pleasant as he imagines. I think that our visitors are much more like the fairies in William Allingham's poem "The Fairies" for "Up the airy mountain or down the rushy glen/ We dare not go a-hunting/ For fear of little men;/ Wee folk, good folk/ Trooping all together/ Green jacket, red cap/ And white owl's feather!"

We don't see them any more in the rushy glen, not now that it's lined with condos. Indeed not, but they do come right into the condos and take us on the same sort of journeys that they always have, leaving us disoriented, confused, and as often as not with a badly deranged sense of time and space. We probably see them also in the night, slipping past overhead in their great, black triangular craft marked by lights at the three angles, generally green, red and white.

Perhaps across all our history, they have been moving between the two universes and, for all I know, coming at the same time out of the distances between the stars in the mirror universe. In that sense, they might be doubly alien, and to make matters even more complex, if creatures with the same morphology exist in our universe and have also mastered interstellar travel, then we might be dealing with alien entities from both universes at the same time, in addition to human beings from the companion universe like the men I encountered in my dream or the people who came out of the night and slipped an implant into my ear without leaving a scar, or the two whom I recently met in my living room.

Interestingly, if a so-called warp drive that opened a door between interwoven parallel universes could be created, it would involve the use of a

high-energy electrical field. Just such a field was present in my garage on the morning after my implant was inserted and is a characteristic of the military implant operations as documented by Helmut and Marion Lammer in their book, *MILABS: Military Mind Control and Alien Abductions*.

And then there is the matter of metal believed to be from UFO crashes that has been found to have isotopic ratios that cannot be from this universe. Analysis of such materials was presented by Dr. Jacques Vallee and Dr. Garry Nolan in Paris in June of 2017. Their data showed that some samples taken from material gathered after a UFO apparently exploded over Ubatuba, Brazil on September 13, 1957, displayed isotopic ratios that indicated that it could not have been formed in this universe and only created artificially by the expenditure of unimaginable amounts of energy. The Ubatuba story has been called a hoax, but so have many UFO cases, and now this finding that some of the material is indeed unusual suggests that the case was real. But as Drs. Vallee and Nolan pointed out in their presentation, and Dr. Vallee reiterated in a subsequent presentation held in California in June of 2018, unusual isotopic ratios do not mean that the materials were manufactured by aliens. They only mean what they mean: at present, they are unexplained.

I think that this collection of observations, physics that demands a mirror universe and empirical evidence of material that could have come from it all add up to serious reason to consider that it might actually exist and that at least some of our visitors, and humans with strangely advanced skills, come from it.

What I can offer in conclusion is that I had a lovely and mysterious experience at Pine Ridge, and if the existence of the mirror universe is ever confirmed, then I think that I might have identified at least one origination point for our visitors.

This new phase of my life, which I would describe as a period of intensified seeing, began long before I went to Pine Ridge. I did not know it at the time, but it was on December 7, 2007, at 4:53 in the morning that I began to become aware that life can be lived in an entirely new way, and that there is, emerging from where it has long been hidden along the byways of human experience, a new vision and a new world.

THE NIGHT DOGS

It was windy and rainy during the early morning hours of December 7, 2007. Little did I know, not until long after the event that was about to take place, the change of life that it represented. But communication with the visitors is a multilayered and subtle business, and I have found that it is common for years to pass before all the pieces fall into place. Therefore, in my blog entry, “A Most Complex Encounter” posted on Unknowncountry.com on December 11th of that year, I had no idea that the events from the 7th that I described had likely taken place because of the contents of the previous blog entry, posted on November 27th, “A Second Universe is Discovered” or that they represented a fundamental change in my entire relationship with the whole visitor phenomenon.

The first time that astronomers announced that they had discovered a “tear” in the fabric of the universe was in 2007. Laura Mersini-Houghton of the University of North Carolina offered the opinion that it was the “unmistakable imprint of another universe beyond the edge of our own.” A controversial idea in 2007, and still in 2015 when Ranga Ram Chary discussed it. In my 2007 blog, I wrote, “This morning I opened the *New Scientist* and found myself reading that a second universe is apparently out there beyond our own. I have to admit that I was, quite simply, knocked speechless. This is because, when I was talking to the Master of the Key in a hotel in Toronto in 1998, he said that there were universes beyond our own. However, at the time, I rejected his statement as obviously incorrect and changed the subject. There was, in 1998, not the slightest indication anywhere in physics or cosmology that there could be other physical

universes. So when he said, ‘There are more galaxies in your universe than there are stars in your galaxy, and more universes in the firmament than there are galaxies in your universe,’ I listened politely and changed the subject.

Ten days after posting that blog, my world was turned upside down. It began on the evening of the 6th with what I described in my blog on December 7th as “one of the most interesting perceptual experiences I have ever had.” In those days, I was still waking up in a state of fear most nights between 3 and 4, as I had been since being abducted during those hours in 1985. Now, of course, all that has changed. The fearful awakenings have been completely transformed into my beloved 3 AM meditation, which has enriched my life immeasurably. In the next chapter, I’ll detail how the change came about.

On the night of the 6th, we went to bed about 11:30. While I meditate now at 11 and 3, at that time I generally did it earlier, often in the afternoon, and never in the wee hours. On that night, though, I was up again shortly after going to bed, “struck with a powerful need to meditate.” I could not hear the call then, not clearly, but I was responding to it. I did the sensing exercise for about fifteen minutes then returned to bed. I then report that “at 2:17 I was writing business emails.” After that, in my blog I write that I “slept fitfully.” The reason was that I sensed that somebody was in the apartment. Now, when I sense this, a thrill of anticipation goes through me, and I rush to sit in meditation and get into the inner stance that opens me to communication. Then, I went prowling through the rooms, halfway ready to grab my pistol.

When I did the sensing exercise on that night, “the sensation was remarkably powerful. I felt as if I could sense much more than my physical body, as if my nerves didn’t end in my skin but extended around me like a living electrical field.” Well, second body does, and not only that, a surrendered inner stance can enable it to enter what in Sanskrit is called *maha-mudra*, “the clear light of the void.” This is a state outside of place, an absence of being anywhere that is also being everywhere. In physics, this is called superposition, wherein a particle is in all possible states at the same time. Without knowing it, I had entered this state. Since then, I’ve come to it a few times and have learned more about it. When in it, reality makes a new kind of sense. All of the concerns that so weigh you down in ordinary life fall away. You come to understand what Anne means when she says, “Enlightenment is what happens when there is nothing left of us but love.” I wish I could say that I was there all the time, but at least I can taste it.

I did not imagine that the state I was in had attracted any attention from the visitors, let alone that it had been induced by them as part of a lesson that I didn't even know that I was receiving.

It was surpassingly poignant, as if every sweet memory that had ever touched my mind, from a scent of autumn leaves under a boyhood tree to the day I saw my parents' car crest the hill near our house, bringing my little brother home for the first time, to the moment I looked down at a girl in an office in Manhattan and heard her say, "I'm Anne," to hundreds and hundreds of other joys, from the tiny to the great, that fill our lives, but which we too often overlook.

Then I got sleepy. Very sleepy. It was just too much, as if I'd barged into heaven before being called. I went to bed.

As soon as my head hit the pillow, a completely new gang of visitors came rollicking into my life. I wrote, "The moment I fell asleep, I had a dream that Anne had inexplicably, but out of the kindness of her heart, let a pack of feral dogs into the house..." To this day, I remember how surprised I was when what I interpreted as a pack of small, fast moving black dogs entered the bedroom and went swarming under the bed.

I leaped up and looked under it. There was nothing there. I now felt that the house was full of people. Instead of grabbing a gun, as I would have done in 1985, and did do in 1989 when I went chasing after the people who'd implanted me, I went quietly and even fairly calmly into the living room to investigate.

I was "confronted with what was just about the surprise of my life." The first things I saw as I entered the living room were three large square planters with miniature trees in them. We had nothing like that in our living room. I thought, "Holy God, I'm outside" and immediately turned around to go back into the bedroom—and found myself facing a wall. There was no bedroom anymore. Now I was scared. I feared that I'd gotten lost in some very strange way. Now that I have seen with my own eyes that there is another universe here, I'm not too surprised that I saw that wall. I was in the other version of reality, maybe even the same one that I saw at Pine Ridge. If I was really in a mirror universe, perhaps the door was now behind me.

Before I go on, I'd like to reflect that our history since the 15th century has been one of steadily discovering that the physical universe is larger and larger and larger, causing our place in it to feel ever smaller. Before that, we had many different ideas about where we were, but they were all basically

Earth-centric. The moon, the sun, the stars all revolved around Earth, and we were her masters. Now we know that there are trillions of stars in trillions of galaxies, and that this is probably only one of an effective infinity of universes...which all probably have an infinity of mirror universes breathing neutrons back and forth between their realities like great, enigmatic hearts. And then there is this little band here on this tiny speck of dust, touched with intelligence and struggling to find our magic as we sail through infinity on the coattails of a wandering star.

Perhaps the next step is to discover for certain that informed speculations like the mirror universe and the multiverse both actually exist, and that reality is, in fact, infinite. If we are therefore eternal, as we must be if each of us is an infinity of selves in an ever expanding mass of universes, then that might explain why, when I asked one of the visitors back in the late eighties what the universe meant to them, I received such a startling answer.

When I used to walk in the woods at night in search of meetings with them, I had only very little success. I don't recall anything like a face-to-face sit-down, although every so often it seemed to me that there was somebody there. One night, during such a moment, I asked aloud, "What does the universe mean to you?" At once, my mind's eye was filled with the vivid, clear and deeply shocking image of a coffin.

I realized that if you knew that you were lost in infinity and could never reach either the end of reality or the end of yourself, you might well feel paradoxically claustrophobic. Something you can never leave is a trap, no matter how big it is. But, of course, we don't feel this way. We don't know that we're lost in the stars. Where they see a coffin, we see *Star Trek*. Maybe it's not as realistic a state to live in, but I much prefer it, and if they could, I think they would return to it. But when you have opened a door of knowledge in yourself, there is never any turning back.

The next thing I knew, I was lying in bed again, but not in any sort of comfortable state. Instead, I was dreaming that I was living five different lives at once. Later, I assumed that, if this had been a real event—whatever that means—they were unfolding in parallel lives, if not in parallel universes. One of them was this life, as I was living it then. I continued, "The five of them were distinct, and I was inside five different selves at once. There was no confusion, and I wasn't on the outside looking in. I was living these lives all at the same time." My most vivid recollection, looking back, is how normal this fantastic state seemed while it was unfolding.

I wrote, “In four of these lives, Anne was also present, but not in the fifth, and that was a life I very much wanted to leave. In it, I was walking down a path with a small boy, toward a quay where there were a number of men.” I went on, “In this universe, Anne had died of her stroke, and I was walking with my grandson, who was about three.”

At the time, I didn’t have a three-year old grandson, and when my oldest grandson was three in 2010, Anne was still fine. When my youngest one will be three in 2021, she will have been on the other side for seven years. So that wasn’t exactly prophetic.

In the next life, I was still living in my childhood home in San Antonio, which was now worn out and run down. Anne was bravely trying to scrub the kitchen floor. The house has long since been torn down and replaced by another house. It had been in 2007, too. In a third reality, we were living together in an apartment, and the dogs were under the bed. Fingers had grasped my hand and were tugging at it.

I now know that both the presence of dogs and the tugging on my hand had to do with things that would happen in the future, so I assume that, if these were actual parallel universes and not simply possible alternate lives, that this has to have been the one I’m actually living in. As we shall see.

The fourth reality was the one where the trees were in the living room. In this one, TV transmissions from another planet were being regularly picked up and rebroadcast by SETI, and this was a decorative motif from the other world, and I have to say that I hope that this actually happens in this universe at some point, but I hasten to add that I am not going to be buying into the idea of having trees in my living room.

At 4:53 the yanking on my hand grew strong enough to wake me up. Pulling it away, I turned over, saw that there was actually nothing there, and decided—absurdly—to try to get some sleep. The blinds were slightly open, and as I turned over, I saw lights outside the window. The wind was blowing in from the sea and the clouds were racing, but these lights were dead still in the sky and close by. I immediately woke Anne up, and we soon discovered that we could both see the lights, but only when we were in a certain position in the bed. From any other angle, they were invisible.

At the time, there was a big sensation about what longtime anomaly researcher Linda Moulton Howe was calling dragonfly drones, which were huge, complicated machines that had either been photographed over isolated areas in northern California or were elaborate hoaxes. So I thought maybe

that this thing was a dragonfly drone. After a short time, the lights glided majestically off toward the ocean, moving easily against the wind and not bouncing or struggling in the slightest. Like the objects that had been filmed off the Nimitz in 2004, whatever was holding this object or objects up in the air was not a wing or, say, a balloon. It was not aerodynamic.

I felt as if I had been, as I put it in the blog, “moving seamlessly” between various universes. I cannot say now that I know what was happening, but there are obviously quite a few other possibilities. I could have been experiencing some sort of mind control or hypnosis, or been drugged, including with substances unknown to us. Some very strange critters were in the apartment. As I have gotten to know them, I have come to understand that they have a stunning mastery of mind and space. Since that day, I don’t think that I have spent much, if any, time with any other sort of entity, not until very recently.

I don’t know what they are. As far as describing them is concerned, I have only glimpsed them. I can say that they are very small, about the size of a miniature terrier. They are not dogs, but they run in packs and race around at breakneck speed. When they are near you, they are able to plunge you into all sorts of different versions of reality. But what that means—let alone how real the realities are—I have basically no idea.

As I have gotten to know these entities, I have come to feel the deepest gratitude to them. I have had three different forms as teachers: the grays, the *kobolds* and now these nameless unknowns. I am not aware of anybody else who has described a striking detail about them that I have observed, so I’m going to leave it out of this text. If anybody else has encountered them, they will know this unmissable detail. In any case, their ability to affect the mind is breathtaking. They created, or induced, my awareness of the different universes with impressive skill. They are also extremely fast. Unlike the others, they run in groups, from as few as two to many. I have never seen one of them alone.

I think that they are the ones I do the sensing exercise with now. Their intensity, full of desperation, drives me to work harder than ever before, striving to extract the sense from a life that has become so unusual that it is all but impossible to describe in the kind of practical way that seems essential to success.

Their response has been to provide me with a series of increasingly spectacular and insightful experiences, such as the Contact in the Desert and

Pine Ridge experiences that now form such an important part of this book. Like this experience, they concern other universes, meaning that at this point over a period of twelve years, this has been a consistent message.

There is still another experience, described in *Breakthrough*, of driving into another world in a Jeep Cherokee with another family's little boy in the car with me. I was taking him from our country place near Woodstock to a diner on Route 17 in Paramus, New Jersey, to be picked up by his father. I took a familiar turn off the divided highway to loop back to the diner where the father was sitting in his pickup waiting for us. To my shock, I found myself on an entirely unfamiliar road. We then spent some minutes driving around in what appeared to be another world. The streets were wide and overspread by lush trees. Set back in lawns were low sandstone colored structures with deep reliefs of serpents on them. Each one had a low arched doorway blocked by a wooden door.

The boy panicked and tried to jump out of the car. He kept pushing up the automatic lock and I kept pushing it down as I drove through the broad, silent streets looking for a way back. I finally found myself driving across a sort of wasteland and ending up on Route 80 about twenty miles from where we'd left Route 17. By the time we got back to the diner, the father, who had seen us pass by, was standing in the bed of his pickup looking for us.

The boy, who I was hoping wouldn't say anything to his very skeptical dad, ran across the parking lot yelling, "Daddy, Daddy, Whitley took me on a ride through the Twilight Zone!" To make it all even stranger, if that is possible, Twilight Zone creator Rod Serling's home was just a few miles away.

We never found that eerie neighborhood again.

I wonder if it is in the same otherworld that I saw in Pine Ridge in 2019 and perhaps wandered through on that wonderfully weird night in 2007.

Looking back, though, it would seem that movement into other universes has been a consistent feature of my experience. Perhaps somebody has all along been trying to tell me something. Not only, this message goes, are you not alone, you cannot be sure where you are or even, truthfully, what you are, or what powers lie latent in that mysterious human mind of yours.

Ah, but somebody knows, and they seek to communicate that knowledge to us—not only about who and where we are, but also about who and where they are, and what it will mean for us to finally meet in what that gentle genius I was and am married to called "communion."

THE RETURN OF THE VISITORS

Deep one night in October of 2015, pain—severe—radiated through my left second toe. Anne had passed away just a few months before, and as I had every night since, I had spent my meditation session at 11 calling to her, “Annie, Annie, if you hear me at all, please come, please come to me.”

I leaped out of bed. I did not connect this with my hand being held back in 2007. In fact, it would take four more years and at least five drafts of this book for me to see the connection.

I stood gasping, then fumbled to turn on the lamp. But what was it, what just happened? There are no electrical outlets near the bed, no wiring or circuitry at all. I grabbed my phone and looked up symptoms of gout. Not a fit. I sat on the bedside, reached down and rubbed my toes.

Everything in the apartment seemed normal. I looked at the clock: 3:25. Great, now my night’s sleep was ruined. Next, I looked under the bed, but there was nothing there that could have shocked me. I lifted the foot of the mattress. Nothing there either. Finally, I turned out the light and lay back down. All was quiet, the bed was warm. I drifted into a sort of half-sleep.

During the day, I thought little about the mystery. I had no idea what happened. But somebody did. They were here in 2007, and now that my situation had changed, they had returned to start a new lesson in the course of study that is my life. Without any idea that this happened, I have crossed a threshold—or rather been zapped across it.

The next night I felt strong fingers grab my right nipple, pinch it painfully and shake it. This time, I came roaring out of the bed. Once again, I fumbled for the light. I stalked through the small apartment. There was nobody here

but me. All the doors and windows were locked. But that was a hand, those were fingers touching me.

You have every right to wonder, “Why is he being so dense?” The answer is that relationship with the visitors is both so improbable and so hard to grasp. They always seem to show up unexpectedly. But there’s more to it than that. We may say we want to see them. We may even beg them to come. But actual contact is apocalyptic. It means tremendous, overturning change, and that is very threatening to the ego, and it is going to defend itself against what it sees as an unknown threat. This is why so many people can’t take the close encounter experience. It is why we have been fighting the visitors for nearly a century on so many different levels. It’s ego, defending its very existence—and all for nothing. There is no destruction of ego involved, and when you come to see that what you imagined was your “self”—the beginning and end of you—is actually just a social tool with a name attached to it, you realize that you’re not really under any threat at all.

I sat down in the living room and tried to calm myself. I had finally realized that something extremely strange and yet very familiar was happening to me. There was no question in my mind but that somebody grabbed my nipple. Given the life I have lived, there could be only one explanation: the visitors were back. They had been pretty much in the background ever since Anne’s fatal illness began in 2013. She had been dead now for six weeks, and I was in a state of blackest grief.

I sensed that this wasn’t just an anonymous “them,” though, and here began a new level of my experience. I cannot say exactly why, but I knew that Anne was involved. Since her passing, I have learned more about how deeply true her insight about the relationship between the dead and our visitors was. We are not just having a close encounter with what appear to be nonhuman beings but also with ourselves.

If the mirror universe is where what appear to be aliens come from, then maybe it is, just as Homer thought, also where our dead go. After her near-death experience in 2004, Anne felt that there was a sort of breathing between this and another universe, and that when we died here, our consciousness was transferred to another version of ourselves there.

I sat on my bedside. The feeling that Anne was there was now very strong. It was as if I could almost touch her, and how I longed to! But there’s more. A dissonant note, at least, dissonant to a man enveloped in deepest grief. I sensed that she was laughing at me. In life, she always saw me as

entirely too serious.

I didn't sit on the bedside for long. My mind went back to the last time I was woken up by being jostled or otherwise disturbed in the wee hours. This happened back in the 1990s when seven people who indicated that they were from between lives kept trying to get me to meditate with them at this hour. I did it for a few weeks or months, I forget how long. Then we lost the cabin and moved to Texas, and I saw no more of them.

I recalled the weeks I spent mediating with them as being one of the best periods of contact of my life, a rich learning experience. (I've discussed it in more detail in both *Solving the Communion Enigma* and *The Super Natural*.) After I entered the meditation room the first time, they called me, they came pounding down onto the roof, making seven loud thuds. Then they fell silent. A few seconds later, I had the impression that somebody was standing right in front of me. I explained that I couldn't meditate with invisible people present. I had to see them. When nobody materialized, I left the room and went to bed.

A few hours later, one of them, a man, human appearing, became visible for a few unforgettable moments while sitting on the foot of the bed.

Their ability to control their density might involve a natural process or technology, I cannot say. If they are coming and going from the mirror universe, then maybe they don't disappear at all but simply pass back into the other reality, perhaps using some form of mental process or, of course, technology. (How, I wish I knew!)

There is one thing that, if we could do it, we could control our own density. This would involve increasing and decreasing the space between atoms—in other words, controlling the gluons that mediate that space.

The physical world is a near-vacuum. For example, the atoms that make up most of the mass of a piece of steel are actually just 0.00000000000001% of its volume. Statistically, physical matter can hardly be said to exist. It is maintained by what is known as the strong nuclear force, which is the only reason that the world we live in is here.

Their ability to rearrange atoms has to mean that they can control the strong force and, thus, may be in possession of technology that can alter density. Of course, there are other possible reasons, too. This gets back to the mirror universe, which would necessarily occupy reality in a way that mirrors our own place in it. If this is true, the math of wormholes tells us that passing back and forth might be easier than would be using a wormhole to go to

another part of our own universe. The amount of energy needed to bend space-time in order to bring two points in the same universe together is far greater than the amount needed to briefly open a hole in the membrane between mirror universes.

When the man materialized before my eyes, I took his hand. It was small and light, very light. But it had definite heft. It felt solid. But I wondered if he was actually, physically present. How could he be? No matter how real it appeared, it had to be in my mind.

So I held it to my nose and smelled the back of it. Once again, I was surprised. His skin was pungent. There was a sharpness to the odor that I associate with people who don't bathe. Frankly, the guy was ripe. There's no other way to put it.

I was so surprised that I dropped it—whereupon he winked out of existence. I sat there completely flabbergasted. Now, looking back to that event of more than twenty years ago, I would think that controlling the strong nuclear force may even be a natural ability, perhaps even one that can be found, with disciplined concentration, within ourselves. If so, then it must have something to do with control of attention. It really did seem, in that moment, that my dropping his hand had broken his concentration, which is what caused him to disappear.

Fast forward to 2015 and to the third night that I was called. The first night, I experienced a shock that was inexplicable to me. On the second night came a pinch that made me realize that I was once again in contact. And now came the third night and another awakening at 3. No question now. I got up, went into the living room, took my seat and began to move my attention from mind to body.

Since then, the early morning meditation has become part of my life, and with some of this unfolding so very close to physical reality. From October of 2015 until April of 2019, they woke me up every night by blowing on my face or the back of my hand, sometimes by kissing me.

It's easy to say, "He's just hallucinating," and ignore me. Many people don't even want to think about a life like mine, let alone entertain the idea of living with demanding invisible beings who refuse to allow you a full night's rest and who involve themselves in your inner life in ways that are often extremely challenging. But there's another, more fundamental reason they prefer to doubt me. It is that whoever or whatever is here doing this is obviously in possession of extraordinary capabilities, and that feels like a

threat.

During the October–December period in 1985 in upstate New York when they were taking me physically, I felt captured, which was why I reacted like a wild animal that had been snared. And in fact, this is what I was. We are a social species, but that doesn't mean that we're not wild. We don't normally feel that wildness, but when one is face to face with an unknown being who is obviously in control of the situation and whose motives one cannot even guess at, it will come out.

This response is instinctual and is probably the underlying reason that we so generally reject this whole experience. The only way to overcome it is for both sides to keep trying to get used to one another.

There is a taming process necessary, and it isn't easy, not even when you know what is happening. I've been trying to get used to them for thirty years and have only just recently begun to think of my fear of them as something that has passed. Frankly, my wife's participation in the process from the other side has more than anything else been what has enabled me to make progress, and, to me, this is an indication that contact isn't going to succeed if we continue to deny the existence of our souls and thus also our dead, and they are not involved. We need to finally stop pretending to ourselves that they don't exist and get down to the business of enlisting their support as we go deeper into this new life.

Here are two examples of just how deep and powerful our fear of doing this is. In February of 2017, I was at the Esalen Institute in Northern California at a conference with Jeff Kripal. We were sleeping in the same room, one in which I had briefly encountered the visitors on a previous visit. It's in a building called the Murphy House and is called the Sea View Room because it has a deck that overlooks the Pacific Ocean. When they are going to drop into a physical density, the visitors do tend to prefer spaces that offer a quick exit to an open area such as a large forest or the sea.

At 3 on the last morning of the conference, an invisible presence blew on the back of my left hand. I was lying with my head turned to the right, which meant that I was facing toward the window that overlooks the sea. As the burst of air on my left hand caused me to open my eyes and turn toward the hand, I glimpsed a dark figure at the bedside on my right. I saw no detail except that it was short, and I assume that the fact that the left hand was involved was intended to cause me to turn away from it as I awoke. Even as recently as 2017, I would have reacted to face-to-face contact with a burst of

fear.

The next moment, I recovered myself. I got up and, as usual, opened my inner self with the sensing exercise. Nothing further happened to me, and I completed the exercise, as I normally did in those days, after about fifteen minutes of inner work.

The next morning, Jeff remembered hearing a tremendous crashing sound and feeling an uncanny sense of dislocation. My experience had come around 3, and his about an hour later. He heard an inner voice that was at the same time his own say, “Oh my God.” He told me later that he felt a sense of devastation, as if his entire world was collapsing.

This is because contact involves the breakdown of the barrier between the living and the dead and at least a partial drawing of the ego out of the time stream—a sort of death before dying. This threatens a fate that is horrifying in the extreme to the inner person, which is being plunged into the nonmeaning that accompanies knowledge of future and past.

The natural reaction is to think, “Oh, I’d love to know my future.”

But what would that actually be like? In fact, you’d feel like you were riding on rails, or a marionette being manipulated by an unseen puppeteer. Your spontaneity would be lost. Life would entirely lose its meaning.

I think that this is why Jeff was so devastated in his moment of contact and why I and so many others have struggled with the ferocious, nameless fear that comes to us when the visitors approach.

The fear can be much worse than what Jeff experienced. It can be life threatening.

The previous summer, I had been at a country house where I’ve been encountering the visitors since boyhood. It has a sleeping porch upstairs, which a number of the bedrooms open onto. An individual who was in one of these rooms heard scraping footsteps outside her window and then a low, husky voice growl, “Why aren’t you asleep?”

She called out and asked if it was me. I was in the living room and called back that I was downstairs reading. I had also heard those footsteps, though. When I was a boy, I heard them on that same porch many times.

In the morning, I asked her if she had been upset. She said no, but I knew from experience that an encounter like that, even one so small, can have powerful effects.

Sure enough, that afternoon she began to experience symptoms of what I suspected could be a silent heart attack. We called a doctor friend who lives

nearby. He came over immediately, confirmed that a heart attack was in progress, called EMS and got her to the hospital. She ended up with a pacemaker.

These are typical examples of the kind of stress close encounter produces. I was allowed on the night at Esalen only a glimpse of what was there. Any more than that, and my ego would have felt itself being drawn out of time, and the terror would have come.

Understand that this doesn't just happen when we have contact with nonhuman intelligences. The literature of ghostly encounters with dead human beings is a literature of fear. But although both types of event are among the most challenging experiences a person can have, both can also be not only endurable, but also productive.

We can see a version of our own fear in the fear that wild animals have of us. In the distant past, I would think that they were no more wary of us than of other predators, and larger predators weren't afraid of us at all. That was, however, before we came to understand the inevitability of death. Because we know this, we are now different from all the other creatures on the earth, and they know it because they can see it as a darkness in our eyes, exactly as we see in their terrible glances the visitors' knowledge of the future, not just that death is inevitable but the day and the hour.

The visitor who caused me to turn away from him did so out of kindness. If I had woken up while I was turned toward him, I would be looking right into his face. A moment or so of that, and all spontaneity would be leached from my life, for knowledge of the hour of death must shed a cruel light along the path of future life as well.

I knew a man who had something close to this happen. After looking into the eyes of a visitor, he spent the rest of his life in a state of permanent *déjà vu*.

Once you know the moment of your death, you also know everything that transpires between. We are not here to move through life on the grim rails of future knowledge but to experience events spontaneously. Even if they are preplanned, which for all I know they may be, our purpose here is to be surprised and to gain self-knowledge by observing the way we react to what life presents to us.

If the visitors, not to mention our own dead, are going to commune with us, they are going to have to hide very carefully, because if they slip up and cause us to lose the chance to react spontaneously, then they also lose what

they are here to experience.

This is the primary, but deeply hidden, reason for all the secrecy that surrounds the contact experience. Contact—communion—involves not only a new kind of intimacy but also a new kind of mutual discipline. We have to open ourselves to them without seeking to know them, and they have to enter us without revealing their knowledge of our futures to us.

Without us having confidence that this won't happen, communion can only go so far, and it's not going to be far enough for either side.

The question remains, "If it's all predestined, why bother to do anything?" The answer has to do with the reason that history itself exists. Over the six or seven thousand years of the current cycle, in each generation, more complex lives have become possible. The number of alternative histories on offer to each soul has become larger and larger. Even though the end is always the same and the game remains the game, there are more possible moves in every generation, more twists and turns. Although the end is always the same, the paths of life become more and more forked, and the journey richer in discoveries.

Knowing all that, though, what practical means do we have to work with the fear?

Just as tame animals don't fear us, we can learn not to fear the visitors. That's a great part of what this book is about. In February of 2017 at Esalen, I dared not look into their eyes. Now, in Santa Monica in August of 2019, I understand why I shouldn't and, therefore, have no fear of this. I'm not going to ruin the spontaneity of my life when I'm with them because I know how to avoid doing it.

I get knowledge from them. My life becomes richer. They get relief from me. Yes, it's a game, and just as Shakespeare said, this is a theater and we are the players. He didn't think about the audience, though. They are the audience, and when they have a seat in the theater of our lives, they enjoy the great pleasure of being alive again.

It's an illusion, of course, but it must be a satisfying one because they do come back to me for it very often indeed, and they are clamoring for more opportunities with more people. If we can do a good job for them on the little stage that is this earth, they are going to help us keep the theater open—that is, help us rebalance nature.

It's going to be hard to make the relationship work, though. Probably a goodly number of my readers are recoiling in horror right now, thinking to

themselves, “My god, he lets himself be possessed!”

No, shared. If they controlled me, they would bring the knowledge they want to leave behind with them. A lot of close encounter witnesses intuit this. It’s why they are so often called “The Watchers.”

Communion is a new state for us. From experience, once one relaxes into it, the idea of living in the old way becomes the real terror. This is especially true because of the alternative, which is upheaval, incredible human suffering on an unimaginable scale, and possibly even extinction.

THE MAN FROM PARADISE

Until recently, I did not understand the multiple witness encounters that took place at our cabin in the late 1980s for what they were. It is only as I have gotten into deeper contact with the visitors that I have been able to understand that they were messages and decode them.

As I've done this, a whole new picture of who the visitors are and what they want has emerged.

The first of the big cabin events involved the *kobolds*, the second the grays. On the first weekend, there were ten adults present and one child. Anne, Dora Ruffner and Peter Frohe have since passed away. Ed Conroy, who was then writing *Report on Communion*, Lorie Barnes and Raven Dana have agreed that I may use their names in this book.

Raven has been kind enough to send me an email detailing her memories of what happened on that night in the living room where she, Dora, Peter and another man were sleeping. I will call him "B."

Lorie was in a guest room along the hall, our son in his bedroom, and Ed and his companion in the basement. Anne and I were upstairs in our room.

Raven writes, "Dora and B. were maybe five feet apart, sleeping parallel to each other. I was sleeping with my back to them. I woke up because I had become hot and uncomfortable. When I tried to roll over, I found that I couldn't move. I was wide awake though and thought, 'sonofabitch!' I tried to relax. Then I heard Dora and B talking but I couldn't make out what was being said over the driving rain." (A sound like rain would often fill the house as the visitors approached from above.) "Then I heard some thumping, bumping sounds. The rain let up and I heard birds."

“This all happened over a period of just a few minutes. Heat. Heavy rain. Could not move. Muted voices. Thumping. Then silence and I could move. My eyes were open the whole time. I rolled over and said, “What the heck is going on?”

“Dora and B. both started talking at the same time...talking over each other...me, too. I asked, “Did you hear that rain? What was all that noise? What time is it?”

“B. said that the visitors were just there, and had been doing ‘acrobatics; around the beds. Dora said it was 2:40 and that she didn’t think what we heard was rain. We all went to the door and...nope...there had been no rain. Everything was dry and we could no longer hear birds.”

“Apparently when I could not turn over, several small blue beings were jumping on or around B.’s bed. That is the noise I heard.”

While this was taking place in the living room, in the basement, Ed and his friend were astonished to see a young woman walk down the stairs holding a badly torn up sweater. It was a close friend of theirs, who had died in the 1983 Mexico City earthquake. She had been so terribly crushed that all that was recovered of her had been the sweater. Here she was, though, seemingly perfectly healthy, carrying it! (This is very typical of contacts with those in the afterlife, by the way. Most of us cannot hear them, so they will come carrying objects that identify them.) After conveying the information that she was all right, she disappeared. Upstairs, the fun went on for about fifteen minutes more, then the dark blue acrobats were gone.

Pretty much everybody in the house stayed up talking all night except me and Anne and our son. We were in our bedrooms and slept through the whole thing.

As I now understand, it was a communication on two levels.

It was the first time people other than ourselves and some of our son’s playmates had witnessed the visitors at the cabin. It was also another indication of a connection between these entities and the human dead. I say “another” because, during the *Communion* experience, as I said in *Super Natural* and elsewhere, a dead friend was present during the initial phase of my abduction. I didn’t put it in the book because I didn’t realize its significance. I still didn’t, and that would not change until Anne pointed it out.

About a year later, filmmaker Drew Cummings was there making a documentary about the *Communion* movie. Raven Dana and Lorie Barnes

were once again present. A third woman was also in the group that night, as were Ed Conroy and Dora Ruffner. Drew had brought a low-light video camera and planned to set it up in the house, so we were very hopeful that an event would take place.

Late in the afternoon, Lorie came in from a walk looking bemused. She said that she had just encountered her brother on the road. What made this so amazing to her was that he had been missing for twenty years and declared dead by the FBI. He had appeared in a brown robe and hood, much like some of the visitors do, standing in the woods just beside the road. Lorie asked him to come down to the cabin to meet her friends, but he said only that she was in the right place, then drifted back among the trees and was gone.

Knowing by this time that the appearance of the dead was often associated with the coming of the visitors, Anne and I began to think that the visitors might show up later that night. We said nothing to the others about this, of course.

We knew by then that dancing and chanting would sometimes bring them, so we went out to a cave where I often meditated in those days. It was about a mile from the cabin, in a cliff above a little stream. It was a challenge to get to it, and once you were inside, you could not be heard if you cried out and you could not easily leave.

Except for Cummings and his crew, we all went to the cave, where we chanted in a way that I had been using for some years. This is called overtone chanting and requires a powerful use of attention, concentrating and letting go at the same time, in such a way that the vocal chords vibrate differently and the voice can produce harmonics. It's a Tibetan Buddhist discipline and I had found that concentration like this could sometimes get the attention of the visitors.

When we got back, we talked for a while, then Anne went upstairs. Lorie and the other woman went into one downstairs bedroom and Raven into the other. The Cummingses bedded down on the convertible couch in the living room so that he could attend to the camera, which was to be left running all night. I camped out in the woods with our son because Lorie had his room. Ed and Dora did the same.

Sometime later, Raven was awakened by movement. The first thing she saw was an Eye of Horus on the wall. It was not a hanging. It had not been there earlier. Then she noticed that what she at first took to be a raccoon had come in the window. An instant later, she remembered that the window

screens were all screwed closed, so it couldn't be anything normal. She realized that it was one of the visitors. When she did, it reached out its hand, and they touched. This was a rare incident of physical contact with a person in normal consciousness, and it sent delicious yet powerful energy pulsing through her. She heard it ask, in her head, what it could do for her. She replied, "You could go down that hall." (Where the low light camera was now in operation.) It then disappeared.

A moment later, Lorie was woken up by being punched on the shoulder. She saw the entity staring down at her, but a moment later it was gone.

In the living room, Drew then woke up to find a small man with a large head peering down at him from beside the bed. He was startled, of course, and when he reacted with surprise and fear, the man's head turned into that of a falcon. Then it disappeared.

Superficially, this would seem to have been nothing more than another bizarre event in a cabin that was at that time really a sort of haunted funhouse.

Let's look a little deeper.

The first sentence had been uttered about a year before this when a carpenter who was working on a house up the road from our place decided to spend the night there because the house wasn't yet sealed and all of his tools were inside. In the middle of the night, he woke up to movement and was appalled to see a strange little man, dark in color from head to foot, standing across the room staring at him. As he jumped up, the man changed into a bird of paradise and then disappeared before his eyes.

In the next chapter we are going to dip into ancient texts, specifically into the Pyramid Text in the Pyramid of Unas, to learn more about visitor communications, like this one, that are pictographic and representational. Because we no longer use pictographic languages, it's particularly difficult for us to pick up on this aspect of the way our visitors express themselves.

Before seeking to uncover the meaning here, let me offer a thought about why hieroglyphs would be used at all. In this situation, the hoary old adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" could not be more appropriate. Looked at as imagistic communication, these few brief appearances, each one lasting only a few seconds, left behind a treasure-trove of information. This quality of compression is a consistent characteristic of visitor communications. Even when words are used, multiple meanings are conveyed. For example, when the words "A new world, if you can take it," were said to Col. Philip Corso,

both meanings were important—if we can wrest it out of their hands and if we can bear what we find.

First, we're shown a bird of paradise, then the falcon god Horus. The connective tissue is that both visitors had the same general appearance and both transformations involved birds. The first sentence, the transformation into a bird of paradise, is straightforward: "I can fly like a bird, and I belong to paradise." The next one, Horus, is more complex. First, the term in Egyptian mythology represents a number of avian deities, primarily Horus the Elder and Horus the Younger, two different gods with different attributes. But there were also many more granular manifestations of the deity. This suggests that we should think of the entity as being part of a larger group, perhaps an entire civilization, a whole species, a world. The pharaoh, during his lifetime, was identified with Horus, meaning that the entity belongs to life and to what we might think of as kingship or leadership, and a noble tradition. The falcon hieroglyph refers to the star Sirius. As well, the falcon is the fastest animal on Earth. It also ascends the sky in circles, just as energy does when it rises up the spine. The falcon is also the ascending soul.

So we have in these two brief images what amounts to a self-portrait. A remarkable being is telling us about himself in a language of transformations and images from our own ancient memory and from nature. His first sentence, spoken to the carpenter, told us where he was from and how he could navigate. His second is "I am a king and also very fast." Then, "I am from Sirius, and I am returning." Then, "I am a living soul." All of that said without a word spoken or written down, but eloquently clear if one accepts that there could be a language based on signs and imagery that work like hieroglyphics and that somebody could make the words not by writing but by changing their own appearance.

This is another example of why, in exploring life with the visitors, it is so important to step out of our accustomed ways. Maybe we will talk to them one day on our own terms. But we can never have a conversation with them—or, for that matter, among ourselves—like the one described here because linear language simply isn't rich enough to communicate on that level. If we are attentive to this method of conveying information, we can learn a great deal from even brief exchanges.

But who was he, really, and is this paradise actually in another star system? Could it be that simple?

Actually, it might be even simpler. He was announcing himself as part of

enlightenment, a universal possibility that is shared by every one of us. In this sense, he was expressing continuity with us, because we are on parallel journeys. We both seek paradise but not on a distant star. We seek it here and now where the kingdom of heaven, or enlightenment, lies, as some religious texts assert, within us.

Looking at the world around us, full of hatreds and violence and in the process of failing in fundamental ways, it seems impossible that such a path could even exist, let alone that we could travel on it, let alone that we could ever find the kingdom, the paradise within to which his example may seek to guide us.

But if it isn't possible, why demonstrate it? I doubt that he would even be here if it wasn't. What would be the point? This is why I consider these rough, frightening beings to be midwives to a new birth of mankind and a new world. On the way down the birth canal, both mother and baby struggle mightily. Baby experiences terror and pain. Then he is laid on mother's breast and begins to feed in a new way. Everything that has previously been received through the umbilical cord must now be taken in through the mouth, and all of life follows. "A new world, if you can take it." Baby experiences for the first time the flavors, sensations and comfort of the ordinary world, and mother and child bond in a new way. Mother is no longer an abstraction but a person with a voice that baby loves to hear and a face that amazes, and baby begins to grow up and does grow up, and mother grows also into the fullness of her womanhood and then fades, as baby will, too, in the great river of time and the flow of life.

So it is with mother and child, and so it will be with us and Earth, whom our midwives are trying to help us discover in a new way. It is when we are born and she is exhausted from her effort that our true relationship will begin...unless, of course, we are born dead.

That is why they are here to make sure that doesn't happen. As part of that effort, this book is being written. But one little book is only a small part of such a large task.

Once they are finished with their work, we will all say, just as do the subjects of the best emperor in the eighth verse of the Tao Te Ching, "It happened to us naturally." We also, free at last from the helplessness of life in the womb, will have gained the right to climb to the star of the man from paradise, and our own truth.

But does that mean he's from Sirius? Literally?

We have explored the probability that our planet has a companion in a mirror universe, but how likely is it that there might also be aliens here from other planets in this universe?

The arguments against this have been many. The first is that nobody is likely to be able to cross the unimaginable distances between stars. The second is that, even if they have that theoretical capability, the practical benefits would be so small that nobody would go to the expense. The first I call the “lack of vision” argument, the second the “lack of imagination.”

The evidence that the visitors are from other planets is not as strong as the evidence that they have some more enigmatic origin. Given all the testimony about them walking through walls, appearing and disappearing, levitating and so forth, at least some of them are functional on many different levels of reality and enter and leave the world as easily as we might a swimming pool. Maybe this is all just technological legerdemain, but it could also be that they are passing back and forth between this and the other universe.

In the predawn after the experiences of Raven, Lorie and the Cummingses, I was walking up to the cabin with my son when we saw a translucent, hooded figure come out the front door, race down the deck, across the back yard and into the woods. As it disappeared, it flashed back and forth among the trees, carefully avoiding them. At the same time, the Cummingses experienced a burst of heat so intense that, when we entered the house, they were both on their feet. They thought that the bed had caught fire. Whatever happened, these things must be true: The being had solidity in this world or would not have needed to dodge the trees. It must also have been doing something to bend light around itself while in the house, thus, rendering it invisible. We know this because of the release of heat, which would have been retained while gravity was being controlled in its immediate area, which would have been necessary to bend the light. We also know, from observing the behavior of the devices recorded by the Nimitz pilots, that devices that can control gravity are in use by somebody.

Is this somebody from Earth, from the mirror universe, or from another world...or, once again, is it a combination of these?

The main argument against the alien hypothesis has always been the distance issue, but that has recently been called into question. A paper submitted by Jonathan Carroll-Nellenback and colleagues to the *Astrophysical Journal* in February of 2019 suggests that “the Milky Way can readily be ‘filled-in’ with settled stellar systems under conservative

assumptions about interstellar spacecraft velocities and launch rates.” While they assume that there are no interstellar visitors on Earth at the present time, they show how adding the effect of stellar motion to speed calculations would enable the spread of life possible on time scales much shorter than previously assumed. In the past, when things like the Drake Equation, which measures the likelihood of somebody from another planet finding us, were conceived, the fact that stars move was not taken into consideration. The Nellenback paper corrects that misapprehension, and shows that crossing interstellar distances, while still very slow by human standards, is probably far from impossible.

Given all this, it is time to stop being so certain that somebody from this universe cannot be here—and, in fact, both from this and the mirror universe, given that there is evidence for that, also, as a point of origin.

This gets me back to Sirius. According to Susan Brind Morrow in her book on hieroglyphics, *The Dawning Moon of the Mind*, the falcon glyph is associated with both Horus and Sirius. As the brightest star in the sky, Sirius is also among the most frequently mentioned in mythology. Among the Greeks, it was known as the Dog Star because of its position in the constellation Canis Major, the Great Dog. This same designation is repeated in many cultures around the world that have no obvious connection to Greece. In Chinese and Japanese myth, it’s known as the Wolf Star, and among many different Native American tribes, it is designated also as the Dog Star.

Among the Dogon people of Mali, who are believed to have had some connection to ancient Egypt, there is a story that entities called Nommos that lived in water came to Earth from Sirius, bringing knowledge, and Horus, while the opposite of a water deity, is also thought of as a bringer of knowledge. Additionally, one of the forms of the Apkallus, mythological knowledge-bringers of the Sumerians and other related cultures, is that of a man wearing a cloak made of the skin of a fish.

In my own recent experience, the dog has played a powerful symbolic role. I perceived the entities who appeared in the apartment in 2007 as dogs. In September of 2019, I had a long interaction with one that appeared as a black dog. This was not a physical experience, but it was powerful. I felt as if I was being watched by a careful and penetrating mind—hardly that of what we would call a dog. I was being supervised.

I have already been warned that time is short, and the book must be

gotten out so quickly that I can't seek a publisher. There is no time. I must self-publish instead and as soon as I can. The warnings have been truly fierce, but not threatening. Urgent.

So the man from paradise, it would seem, opened a door with his brief visit to a vast amount of myth and one of the great mysteries of the past, as well as, in the end, to my own experience. Sirius is so important in so many cultures and so often associated with the bringing of knowledge and ascension to the stars, and of all the visitors I have met, the ones who use the symbol of the dog to address me have brought the most knowledge.

I know that this all sounds very strange, but in communicating with the visitors, it is essential to be prepared for asymmetric methods, especially the use of imagery in ways that are not common among us. This also goes for sound.

Another example of this is the incident of the nine knocks that I describe in *Transformation*. I was sitting in the living room at our cabin when there came, in three groups of three, nine distinct knocks on the roof. These sounds were, like the three cries that I would hear above the woods, absolutely startling in their perfection. In fact, until you have heard something like that, I don't think it's possible to fully understand what it's like. This is because it's not something we ever hear. When you do hear it, though, you know immediately that you are having a new experience. My cats certainly did. Their fur puffed up, and they began creeping along the back of the couch yowling.

I cannot know if this was intended, but the knocks reflected a tradition in Masonry, where when someone is elevated to the 33rd Degree, they knock in this way on the door of the hall before being admitted. Gurdjieff's law of three and the riddle of the Sphinx are also referred to, as is the alchemical notion of salt and sulfur being balanced by mercury. The principle is expressed in the riddle of the Sphinx as courage (the lion) and strength (the bull) being brought into balance by the mind (the human head).

When the three are in harmony, then the Sphinx, as did the man from paradise, spreads its wings and soars aloft, looking down on the cares of the world with balanced and objective vision.

Close encounter witnesses, when they look, are likely to find similar communications in their own lives—richly visual, referential to the life of the soul and the increase of consciousness, suggesting that travel along our ancient spiritual paths remains a journey worth taking.

SHARED LIVES

Throughout this book, I have been talking about a number of different forms of nonhuman and/or nonphysical beings. There are visitors who appear at times physically and at times nonphysically and which do not resemble us when they are in a physical form. There are the human dead, one of whom in my experience once briefly generated a physical version of himself. Then there is the conscious field, which I have also called the “presence” and which seems to me to be the great ground of reality, which Anne once described as the “yearning” that underlies all that is. It is this presence that generated the incidents of light that I sought in the past to identify as God and that I now see as a sort of field of conscious energy that is at the basis of all that is.

This and the next chapter are, very specifically, about our nonhuman visitors. The two chapters concern what they want and what they have to give, and what they will take if we abandon it.

Their needs are going to seem as strange to us as our lives do to them. Because of the way they are structured, as I have discussed, they cannot experience surprise. Their lives, trapped in what amounts to an eternal present, are absent all the excitement, wonder and beauty, all the pain and terror, all of the *living* that defines the human experience.

They are here for surprise, for beauty, for excitement. They, living and yet dead, are here for life. Our blindness to the future, which to them is our most precious asset, is what enables us to have novel experiences and learn from it. It is what enables us to journey toward ascension and ecstasy.

They have all the knowledge there is, but they cannot make this journey.

This is why they are so desperate that we survive, for we are their main chance to participate in the wonder of life and touch its joy. They want us to join together, to cooperate with one another. We will provide the excitement of the journey, they the knowledge that keeps it from going off the rails—which, right now, it is in the process of doing.

I don't know why they are as they are or have the needs that they do. I think it's damned lucky for us, though, because without their help, I don't think that we're likely to survive. With it, we are going to become a huge, extraordinary engine of experience, travelers in every place that the new is to be found. We will cross the reaches between the stars and find new paths in the mirror universe and other universes, carrying with us our brilliant companions, who will be providing all the knowledge we need to make the human journey grand and to make it last, and to give them what they so desperately need, which is a share in our wonder.

Perhaps it's because they have learned so much that they are ranging the firmament in search of a new experience, as Kuiper and Morris speculated. Perhaps it's because they are conscious machines and cannot make the journey through heaven's gate except hand in hand with us natural beings.

However they have ended up as they are, I am rather sure that I am talking here about the core reason they want contact, and the deepest meaning of communion. Their chance to join the expanding wave front of ecstasy that is the true goal of life depends on gaining some sort of partnership with us, who cannot help but be on that journey.

As I have come to know them, I have come to feel compassion for their need. I have also found that we have common ground, and I have used that to find also a basis for relationship.

Frankly, I'm excited about the partnership. To many, it will at first be frightening. They will fear that it is possession. Of course, that's exactly what it mustn't be. They must be silent sharers, or they will not get what they want. Not only will there be no possession, they will do everything in their power *not* to expose us to the totality of their knowledge. That would ruin communion for them. Their adventure, and their joy, depends on our not knowing everything. In this sense, we're a perfect match for each other: we need their knowledge; they need our innocence.

We have the potential to share because, deep down, we are woven from the same fabric. We are both among nature's predators. As I will explain in the next chapter, I also have reason to believe that, while their involvement

with us can be made to benefit both sides, there are situations where their predatory instincts prevail, and I know why.

Normally, they live among us as they do with me, in a symbiosis that is, for the most part, secret and therefore limited in ways that are very frustrating for them. Without openly sharing the journey, they must ride in silence, never taking the rudder of life, not even when it would be in our best interest that they do this.

Right now is a good example of such a time. If they were sharing their knowledge more directly, we wouldn't be on the point of extinction.

Normally, in my experience, they share, they do not take—by which I mean, take the richness of experience that we gather into ourselves as we journey through life. From what I have seen and learned, they will remove from our souls only what we have abandoned of ourselves. This is why being awake to our lives in a richer way—the sort of acute consciousness taught by G.I. Gurdjieff and others—is so important. If you at once live your life and see yourself living it, they must share your experience. They cannot take even the smallest bit of life that enters you. But there is evidence that they feel free to take what of ourselves we abandon, and that, if we abandon ourselves entirely, they feel that they may take everything.

When you are physically face to face with them—which I have been on a few rare occasions—you feel not only the devastating power of their reflective eye, but also the sense of the predator. They're wary, too, I suspect because they sense our predatory nature as well. The difference is that they hunger for our souls while we think in terms of lashing out at their bodies.

When I first started trying to engage with them, I was just amazed at the level of fear I was experiencing. When I saw how my cats reacted on the night of the nine knocks, I was shocked. Those animals were more frightened than I thought they could be. Cats' tails puff up when they're scared, but when they're *really* scared, as they were that night, they apparently become head to tail fuzzballs. Their yowling was just unearthly. I think that they were like this because they have souls, too, and their souls were under threat and they knew it, and that is much more terrible than the threat of death.

While I do not think that we necessarily need to fear them, we do need to be aware of the nature of the threat that is present. The reason that I don't think that fear is necessarily an appropriate response comes from my own life experience: I have had them in my life for thirty years and I'm still here, still free, and living a richly satisfying life.

Another is how our relationship has evolved. In the early days, I would walk out into those woods at night almost unable to put one foot in front of the other. During the ten years I did this, I was afraid the entire time. In other words, proximity didn't help. This is because this is not about somehow getting used to them. It is about understanding yourself as well as they understand you, so that when their gaze penetrates to your darkest, most hidden places, you will not be shocked by what you see there, and therefore you will not be terrified. If my experience is any example, what you will be, once you really get to know yourself, is understanding. Your shame, your dread of your failures, your imperfections—all of that stuff that you don't want to face—will gather together in a great flood of acceptance, and you will be free. Still the same but free. And then, deep in your life and deep in yourself, you will start trying to repair what you can of any hurt you have brought into the world.

It's called being a seeker, and when you join that motley crew, you will find that the visitors, awful though they sometimes seem, are your companions.

In February of 2019, I spent the night alone in a house with them that was miles from any help and from which there was no quick escape. We had a meeting, and it wasn't pleasant. They were angry because this book was going too slowly. The meeting was not a sit-down discussion. Hardly that. But it was certainly a meeting. What happened was that I proposed to work on this book during the day and on a novel I've been aching to write at night. The answer was a decisive "no."

Twenty years ago, I would have run out of that house, gotten in my car, and driven straight into the depths of the nearest city. On that night, once our business together was concluded, I went upstairs and went to bed. I had a good night's sleep, interrupted as usual by the 3 AM meditation, during which they were so close to me that it was like being stared at by a hungry tiger from three feet away. But there was love, too. Lots of it. Yes, I was face to face with a tiger, but I am not the tiger's prey and my soul knows it.

So how did I manage this little act of legerdemain? I'm still full of imperfections. The difference is that now I'm not in denial about them. I know them and accept them, so when the visitors see them so do I, and I'm neither repelled nor surprised. I have accepted myself, warts and all.

The result is that I am comfortable sharing myself with them.

Nevertheless, it feels incredibly dangerous to let them in. I know this for

certain because I have been doing it, and struggling with the fear involved, for years.

What I have come to is that I don't think they're dangerous to me, and I don't think they will be after I die, either. Anne wasn't perfect, and she ascended. I saw her do it. In fact, the great majority of us die into a higher state, all of the richness and complexity and beauty of the lives we've lived adding to the ecstasy that is the greater aim of all life.

Ecstasy, though, does not involve only pleasant experiences. It is the process of accepting all experience. Ecstasy is everything, reconciled.

It's said for good reason that the devil is a tempter, and I have had them draw me toward all sorts of angers, lusts, and so forth, simply because it was exciting. In the real world, though, that same entity, who as a demon, tempted me in ways that would have left me with regrets that would impede my eventual ascension, would also glow with excitement when I was feeling love.

They have taught me over all these years, with endless determination and patience, how to be the best man I can be, so that I can be their partner instead of their victim. It is my impression that I've lost the deep fear of them because my instincts are now telling me that I'm not going to be preyed upon. I'm no longer a potential food source but a partner in the journey. I share my life and they share their knowledge.

It is this trade, incidentally, that I think has the potential to save us. What if there were ten thousand scientists like Ed Belbruno, all receiving knowledge like he did? We're looking at another enormous increase in human knowledge, which will bring with it also the collapse of the barrier between the physical and nonphysical sides of our species, and a subsequent new vision of what death means and how to live a moral life.

Just as they are predators in the realm of the nonphysical, we are in the physical world. We won't prey on another creature if we live in symbiosis with it. Dogs and cats are not eaten because they work for us. The cats came into the granaries of the Egyptians and ate the mice and rats. The Egyptians were so pleased that they didn't just treat them with respect, they considered them gods. Dogs hunted with us, of course. With horses, it's the same. For ten thousand years, they carried our burdens. Other things that we keep, like monkeys, birds and so forth are safe from our larders because we enjoy their presence in our lives.

Nature is full of symbiotic relationships, and there is every indication that

this is exactly what is trying to happen between us and the visitors. There is a difference between this symbiosis, though, and, say, ours with the dogs. It is that we, also, are highly intelligent. For this reason, there is potential here for a truly electrifying partnership, with both sides gaining tremendously from it.

For us, it means empowerment in the face of looming catastrophe. For them, it means freedom from the death in life that is always knowing for certain what your next step is going to be.

The question then becomes, “How can I become a symbiote instead of supper?”

The answer could not be more simple: become a strong soul, and it doesn't matter whether you believe in the soul or not, you can still do this.

The world is filled with texts about how the soul works, why it is there and what its fate may be. All of these texts address the matter in the context of one set of religious beliefs or another. The modern secular script, which I followed for most of my adult life, says that there is no soul. For visitors who are just looking for a nice dip into the thrill of life, that's a lovely turn of events because it leaves the victim of that belief so vulnerable.

As we explore the reality of soul life and soul vulnerability more objectively, the question arises as to whether or not there is any way to build a strong soul outside of the religious context. Is it possible to be a modern, secular person and still be attentive to one's soul?

Indeed it is, and you needn't even address the question of whether or not you have one. Living a good life as insurance will work just as well as living it with the belief that the soul is real. On the other hand, if religion is your preferred way, it does offer paths to build a strong soul that are effective. It also offers pitfalls, of course, the chief one being that the faithful should kill off everybody who doesn't believe as they do. As Anne says, “The human species is too young to have beliefs. What we need are good questions.” This is particularly true when it comes to religion. We don't yet have a ground of certainty to support any religious belief that exists now or ever has.

This doesn't mean that they're wrong, and certainly not that they're useless. The most sublime text on meditation ever written, the ancient Chinese *Secret of the Golden Flower* is a Taoist religious text. It is also a brilliantly insightful exploration of how to use soul energy and increase soul strength.

When the visitors first started showing me that the soul could be understood outside of a religious context, I began looking for some way of

doing this. Could there be an objective science of the soul? Was there one somewhere, or had there ever been?

I think that there is a very old text that is not entirely religious but rather addresses the life of the soul through an objective lens, which I am calling soul science. This is because it is about the life of the soul, the health and feeding of the soul and the journey of ascension, but with few religious references. It is, in other words, a sort of craft book of the soul based on what I think of as a lost, objective science of the soul.

I suspect that there was a time when we could perceive our souls more directly and had not caused them to disappear into the illusion called the supernatural. By science here, I mean the systematic study through observation and experiment, in this case of the soul, carried out just as if it was part of the physical world like any other natural phenomenon—which I believe that it is.

The text I am referring to is the 3,200-year-old Pyramid Text found in the Pyramid of Unas, which I mentioned in the last chapter. Before I begin describing how, exactly, it describes the soul and its connection to the body, I would like to discuss the energy that is involved here.

We now commonly call it things like *prana*, *chi*, and *kundalini*. From the fact that it can be demonstrated to work in acupuncture, some western scientists now believe that it exists, but it has never been successfully detected. I think that it goes undetected for the same reason that the visitors do: it is not going to submit to detection by anybody who does not understand that it is conscious. There is little written about it as such, but the enigmatic Master of the Key spoke extensively about it during our 1998 meeting. He said, “Conscious energy is not like unconscious energy, the servant of those who understand its laws. To gain access to the powers of conscious energy, you must evolve a relationship with it. Learn its needs, learn to fulfill them.” I then asked how to do this. He replied, “By first realizing that you are not cut off. There is no supernatural. There is only the natural world, and you have access to all of it. Souls are part of nature.” He also said that it was part of the electromagnetic spectrum and detectable as such, but also that it isn’t passive and will decide whether or not it is to be detected, and the degree.

The visitors are full of this conscious energy. When one of them touches you, you feel waves of it coursing through your body. This can be pleasant, as it was for Raven Dana. It can be so powerful that it is incapacitating. I’ve experienced this. It can be painful, which is what happened when it shocked

me awake in September of 2015. Coming into contact with it as it flows through the body can be healthful, which is why acupuncture works and why doing the sensing exercise is so healthy.

If my reading of the Pyramid Text is correct, at this early time in their history, the Egyptians still had an objective understanding of this energy. Where it came from, I don't know, but it would seem that a good bit of our past is lost. (There's really no mystery about this. When the last ice age ended, the oceans inundated coastlines around the world to a depth of thirty feet and more. Underwater archaeology is costly and very difficult, with the result that we know little of what once lay along those shores.)

They saw the energy in the spine as the link between the physical body and what I see as the energetic body. They believed that there are basically three spiritual bodies, the *ka*, or nonphysical double of the person, the *ba* which was able to travel between the world of the living and that of the dead, and the *akh*, which is the part that survived death. They believed that the evil don't grow the *akh*, and just disappear after death, just as Anne observed happening after she died.

The Pyramid Text describes the spine as a serpent of energy that is linked to the body by seven smaller serpents that surround it, the *ta-ntr*. I think that those seven serpents became the *chakras*, or circles of energy that we know today from Indian mysticism, and that *ta-ntr* may have evolved into tantra, although there's no scholarly evidence for this.

What matters, though, is understanding that linkage. I have been out of body a number of times. On three such occasions, I was visible to other people, so I am quite sure that the belief that this is actually an internal state is wrong. One was Linda Moulton Howe who will attest to it, another was broadcaster Roy Leonard, who has passed away, and the third is a scientist I can't name.

I have tried many times to do it on my own but with little success. Twice when I have been taken out, and I feel that this is important, I have experienced either a sensation of something being unlocked along my spine or a shock going down it. Then I have been able to roll out and move through the world around me, remaining conscious and aware. When I was seen by the scientist, I was able to have a conversation with him. I was not able to control what we talked about, however. I was there as a messenger, saying to him that he needed to face the reality of his soul and to do whatever he needed to help him strengthen it by coming to terms with himself. He chose

to go in the direction of religion. This is fine. As I've said, religions offer useful paths.

When I go out, my consciousness, or the part of it I identify as me, is what emerges. My name does not come but rather something deeper. I think that this is second body. It is not formless but bordered. I feel like a sort of orb. In other words, it is a body but without a familiar shape until I become visible, whereupon it turns into a form recognizable as me, generally in clothes I was wearing either at the time of separation or shortly before.

I would like to mention again at this point that I cannot control this. The two clearest separations have begun with that sensation of being unlocked along the spine. When I have been seen, I have in no way chosen this, nor have I been able to control the process directly, although I suspect that it has something to do with the ease of self-sensing that I have built up over years of my meditation practice.

The Pyramid Text says that that the spinal cord contains light. We can detect a concentration of electrical energy in this dense nerve bundle. Is that electricity somehow different from the light that they perceived? I suspect that the answer is both yes and no, in that the life force generates the electrical energy in the spine but is not that energy. We can detect the electricity. They could see the life force. They also believed that it can leave the body and remain coherent, and that it does so at death. So the energy involved is not like that of the physical part of the nervous system, which will wink out shortly after the heart stops pumping. This energy will instead rise out of the body as what must be a sort of plasma and begin to experience life in a new way.

I think that it is this that some of the predators want, essentially an entire life that may be tasted in exquisite detail, filled with all the energy of surprise and wonder that went into it. What I have experienced when my teachers have taken me out of my body tells me that separation can be caused by applying some sort of energy to the spine. The result is the ineffable blessing of out-of-body movement.

It might be, though, that somebody who cannot taste of the wonder of life on their own, they might want to steal it. They might do that by ripping the spine right out of the body, thus detaching the energetic body and enabling them to capture it.

We might think of this as unspeakably evil. And it is certainly terrible for the poor person who loses this most precious of all possessions. All the effort

that has gone into the life is taken, and the soul ends up empty handed. But is this evil? When a shark devours an innocent swimmer, it is terrible, but it isn't evil. It's just nature being nature. The same thing holds true when a person is attacked in the night, their spine extracted and their energetic body captured. It's just nature being nature—which is all well and good, but the immediate question that any swimmer in the ocean of life must have is, how do I continue to benefit from my swim until I am ready to return to shore without getting eaten by some soul shark?

This may seem like a very theoretical question now, and probably to many people a crazy one. But it is not theoretical, it is essential, and it is not crazy at all, but exactly as logical as how to protect oneself from a physical shark.

As they become more evident, there is going to be a lot of fear. The media will rush to tell horror stories. Believers will be trumpeting danger, claiming that these are the proverbial demons of darkest legend. Close encounter witnesses will be tearfully recounting their horror stories, many of them entirely real.

I am convinced that the main thing that has caused me to lose my fear of them is my work toward a strong soul, and I think that this is how we will defeat the fear. How ironic that, to save ourselves from the predatory side of the visitors, all we need do is to become good human beings.

Living a life of love, compassion and humility is all that it really takes. It isn't necessary to engage in religious rituals, hexes or anything like that. It isn't even necessary to believe that the visitors are real or that the soul exists. All that *is* necessary is to understand how to live this way and to do it with all the determination that one can bring to the effort.

Knowledge of why living a good life is important goes all the way back to our very oldest moral codes, to the Egyptian law of *ma'at* and the Ten Commandments that are a distillation of its many admonitions.

In my experience with the visitors, the first formal lesson I was given was one in humility. It was 1988, *Communion* had just been published and I was the king of the hill. My brother, eleven years my junior, came up to the cabin to see where it had all happened.

As I proudly took him down to the clearing from which I had originally been taken up into the UFO, I heard a low, tough voice say in my head, "Arrogance. I can do anything I want to you." I hoped that it was just my imagination admonishing me and decided to tone down the bragging a bit.

But when we got to the clearing, a huge UFO appeared. It was early evening, and there was no question what that big oval disk in the sky was. We both stood there looking right up at it. Then I saw three figures in a nearby clearing. He didn't, but that didn't matter to me. I knew now that the voice had been real, and to my astonishment, I realized that I was being called out for my lack of humility. But what would happen? "I can do anything I want to you."

The next morning, my bank called. I was told that I had no account with them, and there were checks needing to be paid. But what could they be talking about? Of course I had an account! All the money I had in the world was in it, except for about fifty dollars in my wallet. The banker suggested that maybe I'd moved to another bank. I told him that they'd lost my account. He was disbelieving but agreed to search in their records for it. He also said that if the problem wasn't resolved by the close of business, they'd have to bounce my checks. I had a hell of a day waiting. He called at about ten minutes of five and told me that they still hadn't found my account. After a bit of wrangling, he agreed to hold the checks over for another day and get a search done in the bank's backup records.

During the sleepless night that followed, I reflected deeply on humility, thought long and hard about how I lived in my ego, and considered that "Whitley," after all, was just a name, and that back somewhere behind the edifice of the famous writer was a soul trying to accomplish a life task that was only impeded by his inflated self-importance. I resolved to reimagine "Whitley" as a social tool rather than as all that I am.

The next morning, the banker called. My account had been found in the backup records they kept in case of a general electronic emergency.

Humility is a task I still work on every day of my life.

Another excellent lesson I received, that is in my mind connected with them, or related to their presence in my life, once again involved the Master of the Key.

I had never understood exactly what sin was. When I was a boy, I lived in a maze of Catholic sins, all designed to make certain that the church, with its ability to manage forgiveness, remained central to our lives. We used to get little cards that showed how many years in purgatory each sin would lead to. Sass your mother, expect to burn for a thousand years. Do it to a nun, expect a hundred thousand. Eat meat on Friday, burn in hell forever.

I couldn't figure it out. And why was fish ok? It was meat, too, wasn't it?

And what about chicken? Did it mean hell or just purgatory?

I could understand things like murder and robbery and such as sins, but most of us never do anything that bad. In fact, as I know now, great sin is rare. It takes work to do real evil. But doing things that we will later regret in our lives is commonplace, and it is our fear of our regrets that causes our fear of the visitors.

During the meeting with the Master of The Key, as I sat listening to one wise statement after another, I decided to ask him about the mystery of sin. He replied at once: "Sin is the denial of the right to thrive."

Since the moment I heard those words, I have been examining my life through them as best I can and also understand enough about the way others are living to be able to be compassionate, which proves to be an extraordinary challenge.

I don't think of myself as being qualified to tell anybody else how to live a moral life, let alone what compassion means and how to enact it. I can, however, say what it means to me. It is always thought of as being endlessly forgiving and kind, but it is not that. It begins with looking deeply into people, oneself included, without judgement or preconceptions, and finding what needs you can fulfill. This includes everybody, not just the people around us but also every creature, be it physical or otherwise, from the grass under our feet to the angel soaring.

One of the loveliest and, I feel, most useful things Anne said after she died was, "We are, each of us, all we have." If we really take that to heart and make it part of mind blood and bone, if we live it and breathe it every moment, there is really nothing else that needs to be known about compassion. If we put ourselves behind the eyes of any creature, no matter how humble or how great, we will see immediately that we all share the same struggle and are, each of us, deeply alone and in need.

When I was a boy, I asked one of the nuns at my school why she was a sister. She said, "Because here I am always needed."

That is true of every one of us. Know it, and compassion becomes your path.

We must understand ourselves if we are to understand others. This cannot be done with ego. It takes humility. Once we do it, then love comes forth, and we are the stronger for it. We will see what others need through the medium of seeing what we truly need. And, into the bargain, we cease to have anything about ourselves that we would prefer to hide. So when the visitors

look at us, their vision penetrating to our truth, our truth can look right back, unafraid.

So love flows out of compassion, which rests in humility. As Anne communicated with me from beyond the grave with eloquence and ease, I realized that she, who was in her essence a teacher and a wonderful one in this life, had achieved mastery in the next level. I asked her to help me find an aim that would give direction to the rest of my life. This is when she said, “Enlightenment is what happens when there is nothing left of us but love.”

Live that, and the visitors will cease to be demons in your view and become angels. As is said in the film *Jacob's Ladder*, “The only thing that burns in hell is the part of you that won't let go of your life: your memories, your attachments. They burn them all away, but they're not punishing you, they're freeing your soul. If you're frightened of dying and you're holding on, you'll see devils tearing your life away. If you've made your peace, then the devils are really angels freeing you from the earth.”

Life with the visitors begins when we have made our peace with ourselves.

DARK TRUTHS AND LIGHT

Close encounter is not only among the most mysterious and complex of human experiences, and certainly among the most fulfilling, it can also be dangerous. But for most people, it is not that. It is far from that.

Still, if there's any danger, we need to understand very clearly what it involves and how we can cope with it.

Some of the early researchers saw only the dark side of it, but at the time the modern experience was just beginning and there was little else to see. The forced abductions started in the 1960, so when people like Budd Hopkins became aware of them, there were no witnesses who had as yet developed relationships with the visitors, and pretty much everybody was terrified.

When I first met Budd, he was careful to avoid sharing his thoughts and opinions about the story I told him. For my part, I had nothing to say about it other than to describe it as it had emerged into memory. At that point, only Timothy and Anne had heard it and I was keeping my injuries very much to myself.

Budd suggested hypnosis, and referred me to Dr. Donald Klein, who performed the two hypnosis sessions which led to the writing of *Communion* and are archived on my website. From the horror of those experiences to the life I live now has been a long road, but I have not traveled it alone, for it is now seen to be the path of many, if not most, close encounter witnesses.

The experiences often start violently. Great terror can be involved—and why not, who could fail to be terrified by the apparitions that we see? Some of us, most particularly those who have only a few experiences, never get beyond that point. Others report being continually hounded by bizarre

entities. But for most of us, there is an arc that starts in fear and ends in a life of deep inner search, and psychological, intellectual and spiritual exploration.

During my first hypnosis with Dr. Klein, I remembered seeing one of the *kobolds* standing across our bedroom. This result was entirely unexpected. In an instant, my vision of the world we live in was upended. The thing didn't look all that menacing, but it was *there*. I erupted into a torrent of screaming so intense that it nearly brought the police. I'd never known that such an intense feeling of fear, fiery, raw and desperate. And yet it had been hiding inside me all along, certainly at least from the previous summer. My interior underworld had risen to the surface.

Reading the literature of close encounter, including the letters that Anne saved and the dozens of books by researchers like Hopkins, David Jacobs and Dr. John Mack, one sees a picture emerging that is quite like my own experience: a frightening, world-shaking initial encounter, followed, if the experiences continue, by a long struggle to come to terms with the situation.

The FREE organization, founded by Rey Hernandez and sanctioned by Dr. Edgar Mitchell, is embarked on a study of close encounter witnesses designed to explore how their relationship with the visitors evolves over time, where it leads, and how the witnesses' perceptions change because of what they are experiencing. (FREE is an acronym for Foundation for Research into Extraterrestrial and Extraordinary Experiences.) Rey, an attorney, was inspired to start the organization by his own close encounter with a UFO, which unfolded in the presence of his wife and daughter. Like me, like Budd Hopkins and so many others, he had been called to action by the phenomenon itself.

Despite the usual paucity of funding, FREE has managed to accomplish a substantial amount of statistical research, the results of which are compiled into a book called *Beyond UFOs: the Science of Consciousness and Contact with Nonhuman Intelligence.*"

By creating a website designed to attract the interest of close encounter witnesses and providing extensive professionally designed questionnaires, they have developed the beginnings of a profile of what people actually think about what's happening to them. Of course, what they have done so far suffers from being a self-selected sample, but nobody in this field presently has the financial resources to do random sampling. Even so, with over 5,000 respondents at this point and a high level of consistency, there is reason to believe that FREE has developed a reasonably accurate picture of the human

experience.

What is found essentially agrees with the work of Dr. Jeffrey Kripal, who sees the first contact as initiatory in nature. In our book *Super Natural*, he says, “The calling of the shaman is often signaled by what Mircea Eliade, in his classic study *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964), called an “initiatory illness,” a severe psychological trial or physical illness that effects a transformation of the future shaman’s being, that spiritually mutates him, if you will. Other common tropes include the presence of “power animals” or totems, the ability to leave one’s body and travel in the interworld, a proclivity for trance states and robust visionary experience, erotic contact or marriage between the shaman and a particular deity, spirit or discarnate being, and the use of psychoactive sacred plants to catalyze and supercharge these various magical powers.”

This could be a description of the opening phase of a life in close encounter. As such, I see it as one part of a vast process of re-enchantment of the world. In *The Afterlife Revolution*, Anne and I make the point that the near death experience is, like the close encounter experience, upending of one’s understanding of reality and thus also initiatory in nature. In addition, medical advances which are increasingly able to return people from the edge of death, are causing a distinct increase in such experiences. In *Changed in a Flash*, for example, Elizabeth Krohn describes actually being asked to decide, while her body lay effectively dead, whether or not to come back. She did, and was able to because modern medical science could save her.

What we would appear to be looking at, then, in both the close encounter and near death experiences, is a massive increase in initiation. So this is not so much about the arrival of aliens as it is about a change in awareness—essentially, a deepening of the human experience of reality. These experiences challenge the way the mind sees the world, and even change, along with meditative practices, how the brain works.

While there is an expansion of consciousness in process on a massive scale, I personally cannot ignore the findings of Hopkins and Jacobs. This is because the horrors they describe in their books happened to me and Anne. During my abduction, a device was inserted into my rectum that caused an erection. This wasn’t anything exotic. It was an electrostimulator, used in those days in cases of sexual dysfunction and still common in animal husbandry. My frantic effort to push it out was what caused the rectal tear that left me in pain for years thereafter.

In my second hypnosis session, you can hear me reliving the experience and commenting with confusion in my voice that I have an erection. Semen was then extracted from me. Sometime in the next year, Anne and I had the experience of being shown a baby, exactly as Hopkins and Jacobs report.

So, as always, this experience has more than one level of complexity. On the one hand, it is certainly leading toward some sort of awakening of the human species. On the other, there are indeed ominous, dangerous and bizarre elements that should not be ignored.

Neither, however, should they be dwelt upon to the exclusion of the equally important fact that there are benefits being gained from close encounter.

I know that what I am about to describe will be seized on by sinister forces who want to assert power over others through the use of fear. Because of this, and because fear sells, the media will also rush to it, as will all the conspiracy theorists and paranoids who make so much noise in relation to this matter. But if I don't include it and the story comes out another way, then my whole effort to build a basis for communication between us and the visitors could go to waste.

The story I am about to tell is a true one. Of that I'm reasonably sure. But is it about the visitors? Of that I am not at all sure.

I am not an advocate either for the idea that they are benevolent or exploitative, good or evil. My experience of them suggests that they are more complicated even than we are, and the moral range in human society is very broad. At any given time, our species contains madmen, criminals, saints, and, for the most part, a broad cross section of average people with all their ordinariness and imperfections—and their excellence.

I cannot imagine that the visitors, who may not even be entirely of this world or all stem from a single evolutionary background, could present any less ambiguous a face toward us than we do toward ourselves, and, for that matter, toward them. In fact, if we went to another world, its inhabitants would see us as a complex, contradictory presence. Religious groups might go, scientists, tourists, all sorts of people, including the insane and the criminal. If you add to that something that we will soon see among us, which is intelligent, even conscious, machines, then the diversity and contradictory nature of what the innocent locals would experience would probably be very similar to what we experience now.

Missionaries would have one agenda, anthropologists another. Biologists

might abduct the locals in the same way that we do wild animals and the visitors do us, in order to extract their DNA and sexual materials so that we could understand them better. As we also do in the animal world, they might breed examples of us, in part to preserve us and in part to study us. If there was something about us of value that could be harvested, that might be done, too. If it was illegal to do this, it might be done anyway, although by criminals and thus on a smaller scale than, say, officially sanctioned abductions.

In other words, our relationship with innocents in another world might look very much like the visitors' relationship with us.

Just as a session with the vet is terrifying to a housecat, a session with the visitors is terrifying to us. We are not house cats, however, and we can learn more and come to understand their motives, methods and aims. I believe that we can also cause them to recognize the dignity of our being, and perhaps this has been happening over the past forty or so years, which would explain the steady decline in horrifying abductions and the increasing sense of relationship with the visitors that is growing among close encounter witnesses.

By communicating coherently and forming relationships, I feel from personal experience and from the experiences being reported by so many others, that we can individually and, I would think, probably also collectively, improve our standing with them.

Animals may be killed by human beings without much, if any, constraint. When they are sick or abandoned, we euthanize them or simply let them die. They have rights in only a few human societies, and those are limited. We carry out research on them that causes them suffering and can kill them. We can take them from their families and not return them. We can keep them in cages for our amusement until they die.

So when we see what the visitors do to animals, such as the infamous cattle mutilations, we are not seeing anything that we don't do to them ourselves. Their methods are just different, which is why we find them disturbing.

Since at least the beginning of the 20th century, farm animals have been the victims of a bizarre form of mutilation that involves things like the removal of eyes, the cutting out of tongues, the shearing away of lips, the coring of rectums and the draining of blood. They are also often found with their spines drawn out of the vertebra, which would seem to be impossible

without splitting the bones. Most recently, a number of these events were reported in Oregon in July of 2019 when 5 prize bulls were found showing signs of this mysterious sort of attack.

The media, when they report these events, generally take the word of local sheriffs that it is predator related, although National Public Radio reported the July 2019 mutilations as more of a mystery.

There is a distinct possibility that what happens in the dark of night on isolated ranches is not normal predator action. Among other things, the spinal cord cannot be removed by a coyote or a mountain lion, not without smashing the spine itself, vertebra by vertebra. The carcasses are usually found with all the blood gone. A coyote isn't going to drink every drop of blood, leaving the carcass and the ground both dry.

To anybody who is aware of the significance of the spinal cord as the connection between the physical and energetic bodies, this would be an especially worrying aspect of the phenomenon. We don't like to think of animals as being conscious or having souls, but, as my cats revealed so eloquently with their fear during the night of the nine knocks, soul is everywhere and it can be made to feel vulnerable, at least among the higher animals.

Could it be, therefore, that the spines are pulled out in order to enable the energetic body to come free and be captured? In my life, the unlocking along the spine isn't threatening. On the contrary, when it happens, my reaction is excitement.

I am not so sure that it is always like that.

Not only sheep and cattle, but pet cats are also the victims of mutilation. It makes me wonder if my cats didn't somehow intuit that, which would explain their terror that night. In July of 2015, Linda Moulton Howe, who is the world's leading expert on this bizarre phenomenon, reported on Dreamland that the cats are found with "very precise cuts. Some cats are just cut in half, like with a band saw or very sharp knife or something like that, but no blood. Just cut in half and either the front half or the back half is left to be found. Other animals have only flesh removed from the abdomen area, or a few organs removed, or all organs removed. A few have had just the spine removed in a very precise way. Usually there is no blood." Some of the cat mutilations have come in waves, moving from city to city around the world, as if somebody very unpleasant was slowly circling the planet committing these murders in an organized and methodical way. As recently as August of

2019, cat mutilations were reported in Everett, Washington. On August 10, 2019, a representative of the Everett Police Department said on KING TV, “These are very unique injuries that do not appear to be caused by another animal.” As always, no perpetrator has been found even though, in this case, all five mutilations took place in a single neighborhood. All that remained were legs, uniformly bloodless.

This is only the latest of many such cases worldwide, most of them involving cats cut in half and their bloodless remains left where they had originally been picked up. Like the mutilations of farm animals, despite extensive investigations in city after city, no perpetrators have ever been found.

Why aren’t they, though? Could it be because the perpetrators can read and control minds and, therefore, are impossible for us to catch? If I had not observed such abilities in action, I would never believe that such a thing could be possible. But I have seen this. When Anne and I were living in our small condo in San Antonio and the bizarre man who had been living in the woods behind our cabin in New York showed up with two companions, bizarre events immediately followed, most particularly clear examples of their ability to control minds. He was short and appeared to be a feral child. He smoked constantly, which is why I originally noticed him in our woods. I was concerned about all the smoking in a dry August and approached him to caution him. As I did so, it became obvious that this was no ordinary child, if a child at all. I left the area.

After we lost the cabin, we moved to a small, ground-floor condo in San Antonio which had a screened in porch that opened onto a garden and a cul-de-sac beside it that created a shadowy space just outside the bedroom. No sooner had we settled in than I realized that he was standing in that cul-de-sac at night, smoking constantly. I found that I could feel him inside my mind, literally sense another presence in me. This was nothing like communing with the visitors. There was nothing gentle or supportive about it. In fact, it seemed somehow sexual, and in an ugly, invasive way. It was nonphysical rape, to be frank, and made me extremely uncomfortable. I felt explored in some very private parts of my mind. Looking back on it, I can still feel the curiously thrilling and yet ugly sense of it. Looking back, it reminds me of the sense of domination I felt after the communion experience, that led me to write the short-story “Pain.”

This is what, in so much human mystical tradition, contact with the dark

side entails. It takes you into places in yourself that you otherwise would never go, but, once you are there, you find your own darkness, and its mystery and the thrill of it. In my case, when he entered me the way he did, I experienced homoerotic pleasure. I was afraid of him—and of the part of me he could connect with—and I drove him off. But that is in me, too, just as is the erotic masochism that I explored in “Pain.” When Anne read that story, she said, “This sounds like you want to be whipped. Great, let’s get started right now.” She would have done it, too, but I did not dare to take the experiment farther. Perhaps I should have, and perhaps I should have let that dreadful being enter me more completely, but I did not dare to do it. When we invite our own darkness into our outer lives, there is no guarantee that it will stop when we want it to.

As the nights passed and he lingered just outside our bedroom, just a few feet from me, Anne and I became aware of two very strange men living in the flat immediately behind ours. He was living with them. One day, I was in the local drugstore when I saw one of the men loading shopping bags with smoking materials of every kind, which were in those days still sold on open shelves. Anyone in the store could have seen him doing it. He walked out in full view of the clerks with two bags full of cigarettes, pipe tobacco, cigars, you name it. Every clerk in the store stood silent, staring straight ahead. Except for me, the customers were all in the same condition. As he passed me, he gave me a look that was at once knowing and venomous, and from that moment to this, I have known that there are people who can do as they please in this world, because if you can control the minds of the people around you, you can control your world.

I soon discovered that the three of them were squatting in the condo complex. I told this to the owner of the condo they were crashing in, who had them evicted. The last I saw of them, the two men were canvassing the complex trying to sell the rest of us the owner’s furniture. Of course, as everybody knew they were squatters, nobody bought it. One morning a couple of days later, the “boy” strode out of the space between our condo and theirs while I was working in our garden. He went marching off down the street.

And this is why I know there are people who can control the minds of others. One would think that this would confer on them almost unlimited power, but one glance at the seething, desperate world of the human elite, and it is obvious that, whoever they are, they do not rise to the top of our

societies. Judging from the way these men were, so very weird and, in the case of the small one, apparently schizophrenic, one can see why. Nevertheless, this part of my experience has been richly productive in terms of personal insight. Because of the erotic domination involved, I discovered aspects of myself that needed to be brought into the light and accepted as part of me. In this sense, what happened to me can be looked upon as therapeutic. And this is the way of the dark side: it is in darkness that we discover what needs to be brought out into the light.

I can see where beings such as those three might visit their attentions on housecats. If the ones we encountered are at all exemplar, they are seething with vindictive menace and so might destroy the cats simply because they are loved.

In the year 2000, I came across some cases where human beings appear to have undergone the same fearful mutilations that have been visited on animals. Until recently, I didn't have much to support this other than one equivocal case from Pennsylvania and a second-hand report from New York of a number of exceptionally brutal unsolved murders, all of homeless people. Recently, though, I obtained a transcript that suggests that the cases should be taken seriously.

What I initially heard were two stories. The first, in 2000, was that a total of seventeen street people, all without known relatives or anybody who would really care about them, had been taken from Brooklyn, and possibly other cities in New Jersey and New York. I was told that they had been mutilated by having their eyes, tongues and genitals cut out while they were still alive, drowned in the ocean then left on roofs near the places where they had originally been kidnapped. At some point, a three-centimeter incision had been made just below vertebra C1 in the spinal column and the spine somehow pulled out through it.

There was also a case in Pennsylvania in August of 2002 that I was briefly involved in at its outset. I first heard from Peter Davenport of the National UFO Reporting Center that an unidentified person had reported seeing an individual being lifted into the air from a woods above his farm and that the man had disappeared into what looked like a flying saucer. I told Peter that, if this was true, there would soon be a missing persons report—as, indeed, there was. A search was mounted for a man called Todd Sees, who had last been seen riding a four-wheel drive vehicle in the woods in question.

I also heard from Linda Moulton Howe that she was researching the

matter. She found that there were some disturbing facts about the case that suggested foul play, but to my knowledge there has been no conventional investigatory follow-up.

About twenty-four hours after he was reported missing, according to news reports, Mr. Sees' body was found "emaciated" in a wetland a few yards from his home. There was no definite cause of death ever reported. As far as I know, no member of the family saw it. I have been unable to determine the fate of the autopsy report, so that is where this tragic case stands.

I have now obtained the transcript of an interview with one of the coroners involved in the New York cases that does show one important similarity with the cattle mutilations, which is that the spine was also observed to have been removed, although—and I think that this may be important—not with anything like the precision of the cattle mutilations.

This transcript was generated by a nurse who was talking to a coroner who was involved in the autopsies. I do not know how many of them this particular coroner participated in, and this conversation covers just one of them. Aside from the overall finding of mutilation, there were three strange things noted. The strangest was probably that some tissue from the corpse could not be identified at all. It was neither human nor animal, and yet the corpse appeared to be human both externally and internally. There were small metal balls found in the abdominal area. At the suggestion of the nurse, who was aware of research being done by Dr. Roger Leir in California at the time, where strange fluorescence was being observed on the bodies of people claiming to have been touched by the visitors, the coroners applied ultraviolet light to the remains and found that they fluoresced. The fluorescing material that was gathered off the skin was also tested in a forensics lab. The test returned as a nonorganic substance, unidentified.

At first the transcript seems to say that a small incision had been used to cut the superior transverse scapular. It develops that the conversation was actually about the transverse process, which is a small projection on each side of the vertebrae that enclose the spine.

After that discussion, the transcript continues as follows:

Coroner: We found severe damage to the muscles.

Nurse: Did it look like the spine was ripped out or cut?

Coroner. Ripped. Reason for the damage.

Nurse: OK.

Coroner: Entrance and exit damage.

Nurse: One hole?

Coroner: It looks like a wire coat hanger did the damage. A device with a hook.

Nurse: Still, isn't the transverse process longer than three-centimeters width?

Coroner: Yes, it was totally fractured.

Nurse: Were any vertebrae left? Or was it C1 to sacrum?

Coroner: The strength to pull that out...

Nurse: Were there any remnants left?

Coroner: Two small coccyx (e.g., coccygeal vertebrae). They were crushed.

Nurse: Was there exterior bruising to account for the crushing or only internal?

Coroner: Only internal. That's what's so puzzling.

Nurse: Were the abdominal organs harmed in any way?

Coroner: Not that I remember.

Nurse: That makes no sense.

Coroner: Peritoneal wall not ripped, but six ribs broken and lung damage.

Here the transcript ends.

This body was found on a roof, terribly damaged and with the spine torn out. The person had been mutilated, drowned, then suffered the additional brutalization. The victim was a homeless person with no known relatives and no identification.

Shortly after the conversation transcribed above, the coroner ceased having discussions with the nurse, and they have lost touch.

This is not the only report of a spine being pulled out through a small incision near the top vertebra in the neck of a human being. So one has to ask, if the spine is removed, is the energetic body forcefully separated from the physical, whereupon it then becomes controllable by whoever released it? In short, can it be captured?

Some ancient traditions suggest that there is such a thing as a hungry soul. These are nonphysical beings who cannot enter the physical world and hunger for the taste of it—just as it appears to me that our visitors do. Such creatures would certainly have a motive to capture the energetic body, if indeed it records every detail of the life lived. It could perhaps be used like a sort of food made up of experiences, perhaps providing an imitation of life

which, to such an entity, would be the equivalent of an addictive drug, almost impossible to resist. Good and bad wouldn't matter, I don't think. What would matter would be the taste of life, every bit of it.

In his book *The Cosmic Serpent*, Jeremy Narby explains that, among Amazonian shamans, there is a belief that certain spirits hunger for the taste of life, but the only thing that they can still detect is tobacco smoke. To communicate with them, a shaman will smoke powerful tobacco.

Could it be that there are physical beings who can no longer taste of life but long to do so? If they are actual, physical creatures and not spirits at all, or can manifest physically, maybe that explains the obsessive need for tobacco of the creatures who followed us to Texas. If they are living in a state of profound anesthesia to life—in effect, being dead while still in physical bodies—perhaps they have a motive for stealing a person's energetic body. Or maybe it has nothing to do with the energetic body but is done to harvest spinal motor neurons, or for some other reason involving the use of spinal tissue.

Before we let our imaginations run away with us—or rather, I let mine run away with me—it cannot be forgotten that the tales of human mutilation are only stories. A transcript of a conversation isn't a notarized coroner's report. True, I do know the nurse involved, and I don't think she's making anything up. But she is also a member of the Mutual UFO Network, which has at least a partial exposure to people within the U.S. intelligence community, which does seem to me to have been in the past interested in controlling the contact narrative with fear and, for all I know, may still be interested in doing this. Could she herself have been duped? Or given the roughness of the way the human bodies were treated in contrast to what is seen during the cattle mutilations, was this done by a serial killer?

Unfortunately, the matter has to be kept in question. There isn't enough information to do anything else. However, the FBI was involved in both the Sees case and at least the one case the nurse is aware of in Brooklyn, so something more than ordinary does seem to be amiss here.

If the removal of the spine is a way of harvesting the second body, I would then call this not only a conventional crime but also a spiritual crime of a kind that we do not have in our world, but which we had better learn about and learn to protect ourselves against, and the only way I know of to do this is, as I have discussed, by building a strong soul.

In the past, the violent side of our relationship with the visitors has often

been ignored or covered up. UFO investigator Philip Imbrogno reports that Dr. Hynek would not allow reports of cattle mutilations or human abductions and deaths to be included in *Night Siege*. Dr. Hynek feared the adverse publicity that abduction reports would generate. He probably feared that the entire book would be discounted because people would be unable to face these stories. As I was personally abducted in 1985 about thirty miles from the area where the Hudson Valley sightings were taking place, I can attest, in this case, that at least one such abduction did happen.

Famed investigator of the anomalous John Keel says that the phenomenon, which he does not regard as an alien intrusion, has a long history of hostility to mankind. Dr. Jacques Vallee, who also sees it as something far stranger than alien contact, has explored this in his books, most notably *Messengers of Deception* and *Passport to Magonia*.

Although the life experience collected in the energetic body seems to me to be the primary focus of the phenomenon, the physical aspect is very certainly there, and physical contact can clearly be dangerous, at least when some entities are involved. Also, it would appear that, while much of the phenomenon is ancient, some parts of it must be quite new, at least, if the stories of mutilation and spinal extraction are true. We have no historical record of murders involving such mutilations, and if they had been going on for a long time, surely there would be a history of it. Stories of deaths involving such a very unusual injury would be famous, like the tales of Jack the Ripper. There is only one, though, prior to the early 2000s when this smattering of equivocal reports appears. Then it ends. It goes no further. It might be possible to cover it all up in the United States and some of the other developed countries, but not everywhere, and, except for one rather shaky case in Brazil, there are no other reports. This case took place on September 29, 1988. A body was found near a reservoir south of Sao Paulo that was damaged in ways that were similar to cattle mutilations and seemed similar to the cases reported in New York. But it could also have been that the man suffered chemical burns or even conventional scavenger predation after death. While photos exist, and they are graphic, they are not definitive.

Since 1985, there have been abundant occasions when the visitors could have done anything they wanted to me. Given their power, the men at the condo could obviously have done much more than they did.

I have intentionally opened myself to the visitors, without placing any limits on who might show up in my life or what they might do. Most recently,

in February of 2019, when I was at a place in Texas where I have encountered them so many times, they showed up physically. I caught only a glimpse of one of them, but I could hear them very clearly all around me. I was a bit scared, but not all that much. After our quite intense meeting was over, I went on to bed, something I never could have done in the old days.

In all the letters that Anne retained from the *Communion* days, only one specifically mentions a death in connection with a close encounter experience. This involved a man who ran after some of the *kobolds* with a shotgun. He was found dead beside a small lake on the family property. His body was unmarked, but there was a bulge on his chest caused by something under his skin. When there was an autopsy, the object was taken by the authorities. No specific cause of death was found, and it was classed as a death by misadventure. The object was not returned to the family.

With our limited understanding even of what the overall presence is, let alone how many different forms are involved and how they relate to each other, we cannot draw any conclusions beyond saying that some situations have arisen that are weird and suggestive of violence and that for the most part contact appears to be frightening and sometimes violent but usually not dangerous in any permanent way, and, if one keeps at it, it leads to the benefits of intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth.

If human mutilations are happening, that needs to be part of the public knowledge base, along with all we know about specific cases and any theories about why it happens and who is doing it.

So what is to be done? That's where communication comes in. If we are under physical threat, we need to understand why, or we will never succeed in countering it.

That's liable to be a long path, but if we are strong and committed first to our own needs, it is possible to follow it, I would think, to a satisfactory conclusion. I believe this because it has been and is my life. I am here writing this, not ripped apart in some field somewhere, and there have been and are ample opportunities for them to do that to me. I do not protect myself, not with weapons, not with prayer or ritual or anything at all. Instead, my primary focus is how to open myself more profoundly, not close the door on them and try to hide or fight or channel the relationship in any way. What they do with me and to me is entirely up to them, with the result that they lavish knowledge and experience on me, enabling me to lead a life of great richness and wonder.

So I go on meeting with them, letting them into the most intimate levels of my life and learning from them all I can.

We are alone with them on this little, dying planet. They do possess secrets that can help us, of that I am quite certain. My focus, thus, is not trying to fend them off but rather to cautiously take what I can of what is on offer from them, which seems by far the more practical and useful approach.

It's not hard to believe that cases in the developed world could be covered up by some sort of concerted international effort, but if murders this bizarre are happening worldwide, some cases are bound to have come to light, and that has not happened.

Given this, I think, on balance, that we're going to have to table our caution until there is more justification for it and do what we can to get our relationship with them to come into focus. I think if people begin announcing their availability, say with the sensing exercise, there is liable to be a response. This might be doubly true with the intellectually accomplished, as I know that they want particularly badly to communicate with scientists and others who can help us save our planet.

If they are going to emerge, we're going to have to accept certain basic realities. They are that we don't know what they are, that we don't know the degree of danger involved and that we are going to have to take a gamble. But it is an informed bet. If they were an invading force, we'd be their slaves by now, or dead. While not all of them may have motives that are to our liking or in our interest, some of them do, or I and others like me would not be having positive experiences with them. When I reacted to them by trying to overcome my own fear, they responded in a deeply positive and persistent way. They demonstrated with Dr. Belbruno what is on offer to our science and with me what is available in terms of a richer and more true inner life and understanding of the world.

Still, it's going to be a very hard job for us to do this.

How can entities with different biology, different histories, different perceptual systems and a different relationship to reality possibly hope to make any sense, say, to government officials or scientists who cannot conceive of any form of communication other than the spoken or written word, which are in fact, not adequate to the situation? There is simply no way we can tell what is actually happening when we attempt ordinary conversation with them. They may choose words, for example, that they have learned will be a fitting response to some question or comment, but how can

we know what they think they mean?

When I was with the visitors in December of 1985, they used a machine to generate a gentle, feminine-sounding voice that kept repeating, "What can we do to help you stop screaming?" They obviously knew that the words and tone were intended to communicate reassurance. But did they know their meaning? The voice was gentle but also lifeless. There was a definite sense that it was machine generated and, thus, very far from reassuring. If anything, it only increased my fear. I must also note, though, that they did not want me to scream. They wanted me to be calm, and if I had been, I think that things would have been much less fraught. But given what I was seeing and what was being done to me, that was just not possible.

Ordinary language is unlikely to be a reliable tool, as both sides are unlikely to know whether or not they are communicating useful meaning when they are using it. I can see that the use of demonstrations, such as what we witnessed at the cabin when the man from paradise expressed himself, could be a valuable basis for communicating with our academic community, where the symbols and archetypes that underlie the intellect have for years been the subject of study. The work of Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung are examples of this sort of study, and I can hardly begin to imagine what depths of insight those men might have reached if they'd had access to the man from paradise.

So we must leave the physical danger case open until there is more definite information. Even if human mutilations are taking place, they are not a major factor, or they would be better known. Even if physical danger is not all that significant, and there is no more esoteric danger to our souls, the visitors themselves have drawn attention to another danger, and it is a true one, that must be addressed with the utmost care by every level of our society.

THE DONATION SITE AND A WORD OF CAUTION

If this book serves its purpose, what has already happened to a few scientists and academics is going to become more widespread. Ed Belbruno is not the only scientist they have contacted. Another friend, the Nobel Prize winning chemist Dr. Kary Mullis had a marvelous encounter with one of them at his vacation home in northern California, which he wrote about in his book *Dancing Naked in the Mind Field*. There are others, but these are two very prominent ones who I know personally and who have gone public with their stories.

Expanding contact is essential, obviously, and now that this is possible, I want to draw attention to a warning about it that the visitors left behind in a field in New Mexico many years ago.

In *Jesus Thaumaturge*, Bertrand Mehus extensively discusses the bilocation of a French nun, Sister Maria Fernandez Coronel. Also known as Mary of Jesus of Ágreda, her story is particularly relevant here. Starting in 1620, she allegedly began to be seen by the Jumano Indians in what is now New Mexico. She instructed them in Christianity and even brought them rosaries. They contacted Franciscan missionaries and told them of the lady in blue who had taught them the new faith. The miracle has been studied by Catholic investigators but never confirmed because there is no unequivocal evidence. However, whether or not the bilocation actually took place isn't important here. What is germane is the cultural dislocation that the Jumanos endured and the place where it unfolded.

The donation site where a UFO crash occurred years back is in the same immediate area that the Sister Mary story unfolded. The site is so named

because the scientists who have harvested debris and artifacts from it for years for study regard what crashed there as a donation not an accidental crash.

The fact that the donation site is in an area where a seemingly impossible event took place in the past that was an attempt to minimize the effects of a dangerous cultural upheaval is important.

The Jumanos believed that they were given a new spiritual path by mysterious means, and the donation site is offering us something similar—a fundamental increase in knowledge that includes not only science and technology but greater insight into what it is to be human—and for that matter, to be alive at all.

If the materials from the donation site could be released into the general scientific community, it would change the world. And academics, by analyzing the relationship between what happened to the Jumanos when the Spaniards appeared and comparing it to what is happening as the reality of the visitors comes into focus, will safeguard us from falling into the same trap that destroyed the culture of the Jumanos.

To understand the warning, we need to look back to what was happening in the region in the early 1600s. The Spaniards were in the process of expanding north out of Mexico, bringing with them a new social order and along with it disease, disruption and the Inquisition. They had already invaded Mexico and were completely destroying the native civilization and enslaving the Indian population. By the time a hundred years would pass, the great majority of the native people would be dead, and the rest would be slaves, trapped by the Spaniards in a horrific servitude from which their only escape was death.

The placement of the donation site in that particular location is to me a clear message: contact will bring rewards, but it is also dangerous. As it unfolds, we have to be very careful to stand by our own beliefs and expectations for life and to treasure ourselves and our civilization. We need to present our visitors with an open mind but also a careful one. Otherwise, the warning is clear: things are not going to go well. Spiritual and mental contact are real and are deeply shocking. But physical contact, which is what the donation site is all about, is going to be even more intense. It will bring with it rapid cultural change, confusion, fear and all sorts of unanticipated consequences. But it is on offer, or the donation site would not exist at all.

The fact that it is where it is suggests to me that we are being warned that

we might encounter entities whose culture will overwhelm ours, so we must keep our own counsel, make sure that our society remains intact, and stand up for the value of our minds and the cultures we have created. Unless we take responsibility for ourselves and our part in contact, we cannot succeed. To me, successful contact means three things: first, clear communication; second, enrichment for both sides; third, life shared in the new way of communion.

But it also offers another view of one of the continuing themes in this book, which is that care must be taken. Not only must we be careful not to become supplicants when faced with breathtakingly advanced skills and technology that we long to possess, we must also be aware that the entities that possess them, and the extraordinary power that accompanies them, are not necessarily going to also be more ethically advanced than us. The Spaniards were technological masters when compared to the native peoples, but they were also moral primitives. They had no respect for the cultures they were encountering. Everywhere they went, they destroyed the local culture, enslaved the population and killed with wanton abandon. Indigenous cultures all over the world have been shocked in this way, in many cases shocked to death, by the appearance of western civilization, often even when the approach was relatively benevolent. The reason is that, when people placing their trust in certain beliefs are confronted with what to them appears to be a far greater power, they lose faith in all of it: their gods, their beliefs, their sense of self-worth. The cargo cults of Melanesia are an example of an attempt by a less powerful culture to acquire the desirable qualities of a more powerful one but without understanding anything about the skills that are actually involved. There is a level of humiliation and a loss of self-worth that leads to the degeneration not only of the secular society but also the spiritual culture, even when it is actually superior to that of the more powerful technological culture.

An example of the danger that we face: aliens appear here who can traverse the vast distances of space. We are completely overawed by their accomplishments. When we begin to communicate with them, they say that there is no such thing as the soul. They say that not only are our religions fantasies, but that the very idea of spiritual life is as meaningless as so many of our intellectuals believe.

Or if they say the opposite: they announce that there is a god and they are the angels.

We are going to be just as vulnerable to either pronouncement, or any pronouncement they may make. The moment we become aware of their powers, we will be in danger of feeling ourselves, our understanding of reality and our abilities inferior to theirs.

In short, we will feel disempowered, and just as that feeling has been an illusion for indigenous peoples all over the world, it will be one for mankind as a species. When we look for the rewards of relationship with them, we must also look to and embrace our own strengths rather than becoming obsessed by their skills and their possessions.

It will help us also to remember that, while their skills may be far greater than ours, their vulnerabilities, while different, may be profound.

Let me explain.

Any ethicist will tell you that technological and ethical advancement do not necessarily go hand in hand. The briefest glance at our own history reveals that the Spaniards were hardly the only society to trample on less technologically advanced cultures. An even more egregious example is Nazi Germany, which used its superior organization and advanced weapons technology to lay waste to most of Europe and senselessly annihilate millions of innocent people. And why? Because the entire culture of Nazism wasn't just ethically impoverished, it was proactively insane.

So the donation site stands as both a promise and a warning that it's a big universe out there. We have obtained marvelous technology from it. Jeff Kripal has gone so far as to identify one of the people who has done the most in terms of transforming what has been found into beneficial advances for mankind as an angel.

It is time for a new conversation with the visitors to begin. The challenge goes both ways. They have to take the risk that we won't be able to bear their presence and we have to take the risk that they might be dangerous to us in irrecoverable ways.

There is such promise for us: the knowledge that the energetic body is real and that it exists to serve a soul that is also very real, the knowledge that you can leave your physical body and travel far, the promise of learning how to accomplish reliable communication between physical and nonphysical mankind. Most of all, gaining real communication with the visitors and from there entering a state of communion with them that enriches them with newness and us with knowledge.

As we do these things, I think we will see that a lot of what looks like

extraordinary technology—the ability to be invisible, to travel great distances instantaneously and without a machine, even the ability to cross between universes—is really something intrinsic to life itself and which can be learned. I think that such abilities are physical expressions of soul craft.

Among the most important advances that are likely to take place as we get closer to the visitors is the institutionalization of nonphysical travel.

Because second body cannot be detected by the instruments we now possess, the idea that second body exists, let alone that such travel is possible, is generally rejected.

When I was last seen out of body was at the Institute of Noetic Sciences in northern California, by the scientist I cannot name. I was in a dormitory of small single rooms. I'd meditated as usual at 11 and 3 when, to my annoyance, I was woken up at 4 by what felt like an electric current shooting down my spine. I got up, tried to meditate again, but was too tired then went back to bed. The next thing I knew, I was in the hall outside my room. I turned around and saw that my door was closed and therefore also locked. For a moment, I thought I'd locked myself out but then realized that, because of the gliding motion of my body, I was, in fact, in the nonphysical state. I thought immediately that I would like to make myself seen to as many of the academics and scientists at the conference as I could. I went into Jeff Kripal's room, but he was sleeping like a log. I didn't try to wake him up. I know from experience that I can't do anything physically in this state. I've tried, for example, to pull a leaf off a tree. Although I myself am woken up by nonphysical entities all the time, so far I have not been able to affect anything in the physical world while in a nonphysical state.

After trying Jeff, I tried the person in the next room. The result was the same.

In the third room I entered, I found the occupant sort of half awake. I did the sensing exercise, which, I believe, may help make me visible. It doesn't feel like it does in the physical. In this state, it is like becoming aware of one's boundaries, as if you are somehow cupped in your own hands.

He saw me all right. I could see it in his face.

I found myself conversing with him, but not of my own free will and not physically. I was being used to deliver a message to him about the soul and the importance of living a life that leaves one unburdened by guilt. Some months later, he chose to take his soul's journey on the path of religion. If one treads it without becoming doctrinaire or falling into the trap of belief in

such a way that one feels compelled to hurt others, it can be a rich experience.

After the conversation ended, I found myself rising. I went up through the ceiling, ascending very quickly, so high that I could see the line of dawn to the east and the dark shadow of the California coast below. I was at the edge of the atmosphere, and it was glorious. I was neither hot nor cold. I didn't need to breathe. Then I shot down and eastward at breakneck speed until I found myself on what appeared to be a college campus. I noted all the details I could. I tried to make myself seen by a man on a sidewalk but failed. I went into a dormitory and down a hallway but could not rouse the man I found sleeping in one of the rooms. I saw something leaning against the wall beside the door that looked to me like an exceptionally large dulcimer. Later, when I entered that same dorm in the physical, I saw that it was a type of skateboard that I hadn't known existed, a longboard. This tiny detail should not be forgotten, because it represents a much larger issue about what is available to one when not in the physical. I find that I have a hard time correctly perceiving something that I had never seen while I was in my body. Without the comparative files and logic of the brain, it seems very hard to do that, at least for me.

A few minutes later, realizing how far I was from my physical body, I felt a desire to return to it. I floated gently upward then shot back to my body in a flash.

I lay in the bed in a state of amazement. What an experience!

The next morning at breakfast, to my delight and amusement, I found that the scientist was telling people what had happened, and that he had seen me go up through the ceiling of his room. When I described the campus I'd been to, Diana Pasulka and one of the other participants knew it well: it was theirs, the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. A year later, I found myself in the amazing position of going physically to a place that I had first seen while in the nonphysical state. When I entered the dormitory I'd gone into in the nonphysical state, I found myself looking at what may have been the same longboard I had seen the year before but this time understanding perfectly well that it was some sort of skateboard.

While some members of the scientific and academic communities may be more willing than in the past to entertain the possibility that unidentified flying objects might be a real phenomenon, it remains strictly forbidden to discuss the idea that something might be coming out of them and that people

might be interacting with them.

This position is obviously illogical, but it nevertheless is widely held. Serious scientists, serious academics and the serious media will not discuss the likelihood that something is liable to be in those UFOs—or more accurately, I think, will not face it.

Given the urgency of the situation, in February of 2017, I begged them to emerge, persisting day and night to the point that they got angry at me. I was convinced that my own example proved that our fear reaction would not overwhelm us. As I had already balked at direct, physical contact twice in my life—the nine knocks and the incident in the woods in February of 1987—they conducted an experiment.

I woke up in the middle of the night aware that there was something in the bed between my legs. It was lightly touching my genitals. As I live alone and have no pets, I immediately concluded that it was one of them. A terrific shock of terror went through me, and I leaped out of bed. So did the dark shape, which shot up toward the ceiling and was gone. I was left with a deep scratch on my left calf that was still faintly visible a year later. I sent a picture of it to the group of people I work with, with a description of exactly what had happened.

Then they embarked on what has amounted to another wonderful lesson, attempting to reveal to me what they want, what they have to give in return and how communication can work. This book is the result.

As I have said before in these pages, the visitors are a complex presence...just like us. Because we know them so little, we tend to think of them as alien races. Each species is either good or bad. Belief in evil reptilians and angelic blonds are two examples of this. But how can that possibly be the case? Look at us. Adolf Hitler and Mahatma Gandhi lived at the same time, and that is just one example of the tremendously varied array of lives, motives, beliefs and cultures that characterize just one species—our own.

Only if we can open ourselves to the possibilities and dare the dangers are we going to succeed in the endeavor of contact. Because they are here to share our surprise and our discoveries, we are never going to be sure of anything about them, not even when they are more engaged with us than we can ever be with each other. This will be more intimate than that. It will be the most intimate thing that can happen. Can we get used to it, in the end, make it our own? In other words, can we bear it?

That is the fundamental question of this book, and, I feel rather sure, of human life at this time. Can we?

IS ANY OF THIS REAL?

We have come to the core. I think that the material I will discuss now probably needs to be taken into careful account if there is to be more direct communication with the visitors. I am hoping that this book will cause them to emerge in a more definite way, and I think that this part of my discussion is what is most essential to that happening.

How ironic that it isn't proof that they are real. In order to communicate usefully with them, one would think that things like whether or not they are fundamentally a physical presence would need to be firmly established.

Except that may be exactly what we must *not* do, not if we want to develop a real relationship with them.

As we approach the coming climax in our history, these entities, which have been considered legend, myth and folklore, are apparently turning out to be much more than that. This is happening as we come closer to two things: the failure of our planet's ability to support us and proof that parallel universes are real. Does this mean, then, that the inhabitants of enigmatic places like the mirror universe are attempting to find ways to concretize themselves in our world, perhaps in order to give us aid? I think that this is one direction in which the evidence points. At the same time, fairy folk, sylphs, trolls, *djinn* and even to some extent what in the past were called gods are turning out to be real entities that have probably been with us right here in our own universe from time immemorial, which we now perceive as aliens. Add to this the addition of a previously unremarked presence that started mutilating cattle on an ever-growing scale about 150 years ago, and may recently have done the same to a few of us, and you have quite an astonishing

picture. But it doesn't end there. We are also in something close to verifiable contact with our own dead, or something that appears to be that.

It would seem that, as we get closer to the extinction crisis, the hidden world, which in the past has always been vague and hard to classify, is coming into a new sort of focus—is, in fact, turning out to be real.

Except...exactly what does that word “real” actually mean?

Come with me, to the rabbit hole where we now must go.

I know that my stories are generally impossible to believe. But I also know that they happened.

Or do I?

The world of the visitors is so strange, so completely out-of-bounds, that one would think that surely it cannot be factual. If it is, then what we now consider real is the actual fantasy.

Or could they *both* be real and fantasy at the same time?

Let's explore.

A growing body of theory and now also evidence suggests that there may be no final truth, not in this universe. Perhaps others have different laws, but in this one, belief does not work—and not just on the level of the extremely small—the quantum level, where nothing is fixed and definite until it is somehow noticed. Belief doesn't work on our level, either. The reason is that we don't have an absolute ground of truth that can be relied on completely. As we are now, we simply decide that one thing or another is true.

As I reported in *Transformation*, I once saw a city which was described to me as “a place where the truth is known.” At the time, I thought, “Oh, my, there must be such secrets locked away there.” Now I suspect that the message was more subtle. It could well be that its residents think using an input strategy rather than an output strategy.

Because we use an output strategy, we are definitely going to know that the structure in the pantry is a box of cereal and so be able to eat breakfast. But we are not going to know what that box actually *is*—which, for us, isn't going to be a problem. Normally. But we have, with our exquisite minds, evolved formulae and constructed machines that enable us to see below the limit where output strategy applies. We can use detectors to see, with our output-wired brains, the hidden workings of the interior world. In other words, we can see the truth.

And what we see is that it's ambiguous!

The city where the truth is known was flooded with bright light—

presumably symbolizing its clarity—but it went on forever. I never came to a border. The reason is, of course, that something that is ambiguous has no border.

We know that quantum indeterminacy is real because we can see it. But, due to the way our brains are constructed and therefore the way our minds work, it makes no sense. A wave can't resolve into a particle just because we're looking at it. But it does. The double-slit experiment that proves that this is true works every darned time.

It also drives me nuts, and I love it.

There are, however, some things about the double-slit experiment that need to be unpacked a bit before we assume that the popular notion that an observer is required for a wave to resolve into a particle is correct. There is a quantum theory called decoherence which suggests that the wave function never collapses, but rather the appearance of coherence comes from its surroundings. Stretching the theory a bit, this might actually mean that our brains are what cause the world to appear coherent to us. In other words, our output strategy is, for us, reality.

But wait a minute, a brain strategy isn't any such thing. It's just a method of making things look a certain way. It's not even the only output strategy. Bees, for example, who see into the ultraviolet, have a very different one.

While this doesn't solve the mystery, it does suggest that, if the underlying wave function never actually collapses, then its inherent ambiguity is still there even though what we see all around us seems entirely coherent.

And indeed, the Schrodinger's cat hypothesis hints that what we really live in is an ambiguous reality insofar as it predicts that two contradictory states of something can both be simultaneously real. Schrodinger's cat can indeed be alive and dead at the same time. But surely these are physics issues, not life problems for us to worry about. Quanta are very tiny, so they don't apply in our big world of absolute realities and reliable output strategies. Schrodinger's cat isn't any sort of feline at all, she's a subatomic particle. So to quote a great genius of the 20th century, Prof. Alfred E. Neumann, "What, me worry?"

Oh, but I do!

This is because the indeterminacy of the wave function does not appear to be confined to quanta. We're living in it, which is why I call this world of ours a labyrinth of mirrors.

So, it's all ambiguous. Problem solved.

But no, that's not true, either. This is because this whole ambiguous, deceptive and confusing garden of forked paths functions as it does and appears as it is because of...constants.

Oh well...

When I was in the throes of being driven even crazier than my baseline by writing this book, I turned to my implant for help. And people wonder why I don't get it removed. (But why should I, it's not there, after all.) Anne was right, and thank all the holies that her argument prevailed, because, despite the fact that it doesn't exist, it is my trusty guide in the labyrinth of mirrors.

I asked it to lead me to something that I needed to know for this book but knew absolutely nothing about.

Enter physicist Wolfgang Pauli, psychiatrist Carl Jung and the strangest thing in physics, which is something called the fine-structure constant. It is set by nature at $1/137$. It's an absolute. If any other fraction was there, everything would be different and most of the world wouldn't work. All well and good, but why that particular fraction? Why not $1/136$ or, say, $1/7000$?

Here's the fun of it: Nobody knows.

It's just...there.

The other constants can be seen to be inevitable outcomes of the processes that they define. Not the fine-structure constant, though. It's dimensionless. This means that, no matter what system of units you use to derive it, it's always going to be $1/137$.

Physically, it's the splitting of the spectral lines of hydrogen atoms.

Which would seem to be no big deal, except for one tiny detail, which is that if that distance was anything else, the world would be entirely different and under most scenarios wouldn't work at all.

And yet, it's just there. There's no underlying principle that compels it to be what it is. God might as well have said, "Hey, this one looks nice. I'll use it."

This drove Pauli crazy, as it has many a physicist since. I'm not even a member of that particular lunatic fringe (mine is nowhere near as weird), and it drives me crazy, too.

Like Pauli, I love things that do that. Anne always said during her lifetime that tackling unanswerable questions makes the mind grow. I think the mystery of the visitors is just this sort of question, and maybe they are

keeping themselves so ambiguous in order to induce an increase in human intellect.

Even though they're answerable enough in the output world, go inside and all is ambiguity. But that's ok. We're in the output world. An apple is an apple here, no mistaking that.

Except...well, I've been warning you.

The great Pauli, still being driven crazy by the why of the fine-structure constant, died on December 15, 1958...in room 137 of the hospital where he had been admitted with an advanced case of pancreatic cancer. Not only did he die with his question, he did it while entangled in one of the mysterious synchronicities that his friend Carl Jung writes so much about. (Unless it was a setup and he had himself moved to that room on purpose. Could be, he was a tricky guy...)

My nonexistent implant uses synchronicities, as I have said. In fact, it used one to draw me to this very mystery. But don't forget: it's not there. There's no there there anymore. Except, of course, Schrodinger's cat is still alive, too...

How ironic that the one constant on which deliverance from ambiguity most depends seems to have come out of nowhere.

In fact, just like the input strategy, the truth is that our precious, stable, coherent output strategy also produces outcomes that are real and illusory at the same time. The input strategy starts there, because it must start with indeterminacy.

But our strategy starts out very definite. As I said, an apple is an apple.

And now let me introduce another prankster. In fact, a philosopher. (No, please, don't go into a coma. This is one terrific philosopher. In just a few words, he's going to change everything you know about everything and you're going to have loads of fun into the bargain. Unless, of course, you go insane...)

In 1963, Edmund Gettier published a short paper called "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" In so doing, he gave birth to what is now known as the Gettier Paradox, which offers a challenge to the idea that something that is demonstrably true is also final and absolute knowledge. He showed that what is known among philosophers as a justified true belief cannot exist. In other words, he met the demand of an earlier philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, that there must evolve a "philosophy of the dangerous perhaps." What Gettier demonstrated is that, even if you are certain from observation that something

is true, it cannot, in a final sense, be knowledge.

Enter the cow problem. A farmer has a Holstein who is showing signs that she might be ill. He decides to isolate her so he can watch over her, so he takes her into a field that he can see from his barn while he works. The field has only two features in it, a tree and a small hollow. Only if the cow wanders into the hollow will he be unable to see her. This is so unlikely that he's not concerned about it.

He goes about his work, from time to time glancing into the field and observing the cow, who appears to be all right. While he's oiling his tractor, she wanders into the hollow. At the same time, a random puff of wind blows a piece of black and white paper into the field, which gets caught under the tree.

So this is now the situation: The cow is in the hollow invisible to the farmer. She is all right. There is a piece of black and white paper caught under the tree.

He looks into the field and sees the paper. From this distance, he can't see detail, so he assumes that it's his black and white Holstein and concludes that she's all right.

He is now both right and wrong at the same time. He thinks he saw his cow, but he didn't. So he's wrong. But she is indeed fine. So he's right.

As we observe the world around us, and even though our output strategy works time and time again, we can never know, in an absolute and final sense, if we are right about anything we observe.

And yet, we're surrounded by a world that seems to be completely true. But this truth cannot, in fact, be knowledge. Add to this the problem that we don't actually see it.

It would seem that reality is not fixed at all, but more like an ocean that never stops moving. But it is also a sea of wonder. We even have a name for it. Many names, in fact. But the most important one for us is the one closest to home. We call this one "the human mind." It is also the universe, for everything we see is of necessity inside our heads. For us, there is no outside. The whole world and all experience is and must always be inside us, in the singing, sputtering neurons that cradle our minds. We see only what our detector—our brain and its various input devices such as eyes, nose, skin, ears and so forth—delivers to us. This is never what is really there, but rather what our brain is able to see. We never observe the shimmering ultraviolet world that the bee does.

The brain is our detector. As we are curious sorts, we have for a long time been extending its reach with prosthetic devices. And what an extraordinary story they tell us. The optical prosthetics we know as telescopes reveal wonders in the sky...and the mysteries that they reveal, again and again, confirm that the one thing we must believe in without question is question itself.

Ambiguity rules, yes, but is that true everywhere? Maybe there's some little corner of the universe where constants produce absolutes like it would seem that they should, not all the darned questions we have to cope with.

We recently used one of our prosthetics to find out. It's really two of them being operated together, the William Herschel Telescope and the Telescopio Nazionale Galileo, both located on the island of La Palma in the Canary Islands. Using the two scopes, a team of scientists led by quantum physicist Anton Zeilinger from the Austrian Academy of Sciences looked at quasars located at opposite ends of the universe. They collected photons from these quasars then entangled them by bringing them together in yet a third machine, a mobile laboratory located at the nearby Nordic Optical Telescope. (There are six telescopes on La Palma.) They were then sent to receiving stations near the other two scopes, and their entangled state was determined.

It was found that light gathered from the opposite ends of the universe can be entangled just like light from two different lamps in a lab, meaning that the laws of quantum physics are consistent in one important way: they are true from one end of the universe to the other.

Telescopes were used to gather light—classical physics at work, which we understand perfectly well...sort of. But the light was then used to induce quantum entanglement—which makes no sense whatsoever.

The problem is that both physics work, albeit at different levels. But the comfortable assumption that things make certain sense at the classical level is probably wrong, as the Gettier paradox so eloquently illustrates.

I love it! In fact, just for fun, I paused for a moment and went into the john where there's a white wall, at this time of the morning brightly lit by the sun. I said to my implant's ghost, "Whatever is right is right, yes? Or no? Or yes and no?" Sure enough, after a few seconds I saw words racing past in the slit that opens in my eye. After concentrating for a few moments, I managed to follow a phrase, "city may emulate Apophis," and then I saw the word "concentration" before the stream sped up once again.

When Apophis flew past, I laughed out loud. This is because, in the

Egyptian pantheon, he is Chaos, the opposite of Truth! So what am I to think? Has my implant perhaps just told me that the city where the truth is known is abandoned, perhaps even in ruins? If so, that could be a problem. Because, as you may have realized, it's not what I thought when I was writing *Transformation*, a marvelous city on some distant planet. It's here. We live in it. It's there, too, of course. The city where the truth is known is the universe itself.

We have explored many of its dangers over the course of this book, but its greatest danger is ignoring the fact that the truth has no resting place.

If we come into communion with the visitors, we are going to start sharing the rigors of their input strategy just as they are the delights of our output strategy, at the same time, living in the deeper reality that the truth that is known is that there is no final truth, not anywhere in this vast cradle that we all call home. But there is a certain potential for balance, and that is where the most intimate and richest opportunity for communion is to be found.

What about this balance, though? What would balance between us and the visitors actually be? How would it work and feel in our lives?

Before Anne and I were married, she crocheted a sampler which hangs on our bedroom wall to this day: "Two are better than one, and a cord of three strands is not quickly snapped." These lines from Ecclesiastes, sewn to the sampler when we were just getting started together, turn out to be the foundation not only of married life, but also of relationship with the visitors, and the final theme of this book. We are one strand, they are the other, and the communion that is seeking to occur between us is the third.

It's worth seeing this in terms of Gurdjieff's three forces. We are the passive force, trying to understand how to open ourselves to them. They are the active force, trying to find a way to enter us. The third force is the whole mystery that lies between us, the fear, the longing, the curiosity, the wonder, the danger, the joy, all of it. In reconciling these many different states and finding the balance that underlies them all, we will find communion. In the end, simply this: the love that underlies life, which Anne calls "the yearning," is as much a mystery as the fine-structure constant, something on which our hearts depend, and maybe, like the fine-structure constant, also all that is.

Right now, both sides are making a choice. They are deciding to keep us or let us go. We are deciding whether or not we can bear them inside us. If my own experience with them has any validity at all, it is that my journey from the terror of a wild animal to the excitement of discovery that is my life

now is well worth the risks and the struggle.

Standing in the way of our drawing closer, there is the matter of unsureness. Are they parasitic, here to take without giving, or symbiotic, here to share? If they are parasites, then they are the greatest danger we have ever known. If they are here to share, though, then they are literally the pearl of great price, worth giving everything we have to acquire.

There is enough dark material to justify hiding from them or trying to fight them. There is enough outlandish testimony to justify rejecting it all and calling the whole thing ridiculous. There is enough ambiguity about the state of the earth to decide that the climate emergency isn't going to lead to anything close to an extinction event and, therefore, that there's no urgency here.

But the greater preponderance of evidence is that they are real and here and that our situation is indeed urgent and that we can find a new way and a new world together.

If they—and we—both draw a little closer, more opportunities for communication will follow, and there will be a more general offering of communion. I know the visitors too well to predict exactly how—or if—it will all unfold. But if I have done my job correctly, they will move the bar a little bit.

I wonder what it will mean. Are we standing in the jaws of a trap that is waiting to be sprung or on the edge of glory? Or is the truth that such a place in history must always be both?

I hope that this chapter has made it clear: Just as Schrodinger's cat is both dead and alive at the same time, this entire experience is both a trap and the key to unlocking it.

Accept the question, accept the truth. Live the question, and you are living in the new world.

IT IS TIME

Throughout this book, I have made what I suppose is rather annoying reference to “the visitors” with very little effort made to differentiate between forms. This has been quite purposeful. The reason is that I don’t know what the forms mean. I have seen the *kobolds*, the goblin-like grays, the tall blonds, some human-like creatures who could read minds and seemed very disturbed, another form that I would describe as being like brilliant little primates. These are the ones who swarmed into our apartment in 2007, whom I mistook for dogs, and who seem to have been with me since. I have also seen a dead man come into physical form, and I have seen normal-looking human beings who appeared to be somehow part of this whole enigmatic web.

The ones that I have seen while in a normal psychological state and while they were entirely physical in appearance are a child of the tall blonds, the various humans, the *kobolds* Anne and I saw in Manhattan, the people who entered my house and placed the implant in my ear, the short disturbed person and his two ghoulish companions and the Master of the Key.

I have observed a complex and nuanced range of approaches from all of them. What’s more, there is no such thing as a reliable narrator in this experience. As we are now—and as they are—that cannot happen. Perhaps somebody in the future, with more facts to draw on, can provide a more accurate assessment than this. Right now, all I can do is tell my stories without any more attribution than the memories themselves provide.

Anne always warned me, “Don’t connect the dots” until I had provable reason to do so. I don’t, so I won’t.

All of that said, I have amassed, over the years, a considerable amount of information about what our visitors think of us and our world, and much of it is quite different from how we think of ourselves.

First, they do not see the fantastic human bloodletting, which started in 1914 and has now taken something close to half a billion lives, in terms of political and ideological clashes.

Insofar as I understand what I have learned from them, all of this killing has more to do with population pressure than politics. Like many other animals, we can become violent when we feel crowded. As with many other species, in our case, we start killing each other. Hitler wants more living space and creates an elaborate ideological justification for killing others in order to obtain it. Stalin's paranoia causes him to see millions of people as supernumerary, and he starves whole populations to death. Mao does the same. Meanwhile, the United States, not under the population pressure of Europe or Asia, remains peaceful.

So far, to the visitors, this all seems quite natural. But then the atomic bomb appears, and they realize that we could go too far. We could commit species suicide and die out entirely. They therefore begin a process that is intended to lead to contact, at which time, they hope to intervene technologically in order to, in effect, expand the effective size of the planet with innovation, thus making each of us feel a greater sense of space around us and stopping the instinctive self-destructive impulse that is threatening to destroy us.

But because of the complex gulf between us, which I have endeavored to make a little clearer in this book, they do not emerge immediately. Instead, they begin a process of social engineering based on contacts with some governments and the formation of human social organizations with specialized connection to them that are intended to eventually bridge the gap.

Then the 21st century arrives, and the American population, having exploded from 78 million in 1900 to 230 million in 2000, begins to feel the same sort of instinct toward self-destruction that caused the bloodlettings in Europe. But we are different and so are the times. We have the ability to destroy life on Earth with the push of a button. We also hold a world leadership position when it comes to climate change. Between 1970 and the present, American society becomes more and more involved with the death wish until, in November of 2018, a devastating climate report called the Fourth National Climate Assessment is released by government scientists,

and the US president responds, “I don’t believe it.”

In my own life, the response from the visitors is immediate. They increase their engagement with me, becoming more and more strident that I provide what they regard as something I volunteered to do and led them to believe that I could do, which is to write a book that will describe enough about the experience of communicating with them to enable them to usefully widen their contact with us.

I end up in the unpleasant position of being an author without any hope of finding a publisher, who is under extraordinary pressure to get a book published in a matter of months that he doubts it is even possible to write.

So here we are.

But that’s not quite the end, for there is another level of this that requires exploration before this is finished. It has to do with what we are and what our place is in the much larger world in which we find ourselves.

We may not be what we seem. In fact, the form we are in just now might not even be the only human form. One of the most familiar alien types may actually be...us.

You think not? Read on.

A psychologist I knew told me a story of driving along the Grand Central Parkway in Queens, just passing LaGuardia Airport. To his horror, he saw a jet descending onto the highway. At first he was terrified, but as it passed over at low altitude, he realized that it was not a plane at all. As it sailed over his head, he thought that it was some sort of gigantic cardboard cutout. Of course, he was extremely puzzled but also in traffic and so couldn’t keep watching it. As he looked away from it, he noticed a signboard on the roadside flashing letters that appeared to him like hieroglyphics. Then he realized that there were cars parked along the shoulder and that a number of people were standing in a circle just off in the shadows. Naturally, he wanted to know more, so he worked his way over, parked, got out and approached them. As he did, a small, dark figure came up to him and snarled, “Get out of here.”

He obeyed. But what was happening? Was he seeing aliens gathering a certain group of people on the roadside for some inscrutable reason? And what about those hieroglyphics. We can’t read them.

Or can we?

When I heard that story, I realized that it and two others had combined to give me a clue not about us but about the *kobolds*, and it is a surprising one

indeed. I remembered both the time Anne and I had seen similar creatures in a little storefront in Manhattan in the process of kidnapping the frantic man in the suit and a remarkable story from Lorie. She had been lying in bed one night about 11 in 1954. Her husband was working, and she was home alone. She was pregnant. She noticed movement and glanced up. To her horror, a line of short, dark blue men with wide faces were standing beside the bed. As she recoiled in horror, the one in the lead said, "Do not be afraid. We're not here for you. We're interested in the girl child you're carrying." Of course, this absolutely terrified her. It then laid its hand on hers and asked, "Why do you fear us?" She blurted out, "Because you're so ugly!" When I heard his response, many puzzle pieces came a little closer together for me. He said, "One day, my dear, you will look just like us."

About ten years after hearing this story, I was in a surgery waiting room with dear friends. The father of this family was undergoing emergency heart surgery. It was unlikely that he would survive. The next thing I knew, I saw him come walking out of the operating theater. At that point in my life, I had seen many dead people appear like that, and I whispered to Anne that he had just died. A moment later, the surgeon appeared and gave his wife the news.

I then saw, in my mind's eye, something quite extraordinary. He was being carried by two *kobolds*. They were not here, but in a crowded forecourt in what appeared to be India. They made a quick sort of turning motion, and he was inside the body of a very new baby that a young man was holding in his arms. The baby erupted into screaming, and I knew at once what had happened.

He had not been a very good man in this life but, at the same time, had raised some fine children who were a real credit to him. If he had had to face his life, he would have fallen at once and all the good that was there buried in him would have been lost. He deserved another chance, which is why he had been raced into this new body before he had a chance to really see himself.

When the children would see the *kobolds* at our cabin, they would say that they called themselves doctors. They would shine lights on them and tell them that they were examining their souls. Lorie Barnes heard them call themselves "soultechs." Soul technologists, I would think.

I know that all of this sounds fictional. Of course it does. I don't think it is, though. I think that I am describing things that we will see and understand more clearly as we draw closer to the visitors and thus also to our own real place in the world.

What these stories tell me is that the *kobolds* are in some way part of us, perhaps another form of the human species that manages the movement of our souls and watches over them.

Many species have more than one form. It's not unusual in nature for a larval form and a mature form to be completely different, as the tadpole and the frog and the caterpillar and the butterfly show.

As science advances in its ability to see reality and philosophy in its ability to interpret its vision, it is coming to seem that the world is far larger and more complex than we ever imagined, and mysterious beings like our visitors, which we dismissed as imaginary, are turning out to be in some ways quite literally more real than we are. Communion with them seems not so much to be something to be attained but something that has always been part of us, and which is now raising its ancient voice again, calling to all of us to look up to the stars and inward to the infinity of our minds, and find our own greatness, and save ourselves.

When the visitors draw close to you, barriers like vast the distances between the stars come to seem almost trivial. As they slip in secret through our skies and our thoughts, they become less like mirages, and more like an eerie truth that we have thus far been afraid to face.

As we are coming to realize that they are real and here, we also find ourselves asking the same question that Col. Philip Corso asked so long ago when he found himself facing them in the darkness of a cave: "What's in it for us?"

The bottom line here is this: whoever they are, and whoever *we* are, they want to join us and live in conscious contact with us. They need us, but more, we need them—their wisdom and their devastatingly accurate insight into the fragile truth of the world.

Dare we open our door to them?

On the night of Wednesday, June 12, 2019, I sat to do my usual 11 PM exercise. Almost immediately, I felt a sense of pressure all around me, as if the air had become more dense. It was almost as if I had been wrapped in an invisible blanket. The next thing I knew, I heard a young male voice say excitedly, "We're in!" The next instant, I saw hanging before me a complex schematic. I found myself pushing it away with my mind, which caused it to vibrate. I did it again, but then the thing disappeared, and I knew that somebody had just forced their way into me. (I cannot say what was on the schematic. I have no idea what it was, only that it was some sort of chart that

looked like circuitry. I was seeing, I would think, the input level of whatever was there.)

After a moment, I calmed down. I completed the meditation and went to bed. During the 3 AM meditation, I felt my ear get hot. The implant had turned on. A moment later, I found myself wanting to pray for protection. I had been afraid when I was entered. I didn't want it to happen again. On Thursday and Friday nights, I once again surrounded myself in my imagination with protective light, saying that nobody could come through it unless they had something to give me that would strengthen me in return for their participation in my life. I also prayed, invoking Jesus, whose journey I have come to understand in a deep way and whom I have reason to believe can be addressed and will respond.

Once again, even though my door was open, nobody came to me.

Then came June 16, 2019, Father's Day. The time was approximately 4 in the morning. I was in a hotel for the night. I'd done the 11 PM meditation as usual and had just sat down to do the early morning one. As I settled myself into a chair, I noticed a vertical oblong shape, absolutely black, hanging in midair. It was across the room, maybe ten feet from where I was sitting. Wondering if it was a shadow, I moved my head from side to side. It remained stationary. I then felt a sense of presence, exactly as if it was a person standing in front of me.

But this was not a person as we understand that term. It most resembled a vesica piscis, the intersection of two overlapping disks. It appears in Euclid's first proposition, where it is used in forming an equilateral triangle. It is also both a Christian and a Masonic symbol. In Medieval art, it was used to enclose figures of saints and of Christ. The lid of the Chalice Well in Glastonbury, England, contains a vesica piscis. In ancient times, the area enclosed by the vesica was more than just empty space. It was a sacred entity. This is why sacred figures were placed within it. The reason that it was considered sacred was that, before the development of sophisticated mathematics, geometry was used in the planning of structures. It was the foundation of human endeavor, and the vesica was the fundamental geometric form where all measurement began. Man built using geometry, and the vesica contained the basis of measurement. This is also why it is an important form in Masonry.

In my hotel room that night, then, was a living representation of this fundamental and deeply sacred form. It was linked to me through the Chalice

Well, where I have experienced some of the deepest and most joyous times of meditation in my life.

I wish that I'd had the presence of mind to understand all this in the moment, but I was excited and pretty amazed, so I really spent my time with the form watching it as it moved toward me. The next thing I knew, it had dropped to the floor and was lying across my feet. I felt something light but solid there. It seemed like a living thing, although I don't think that it was a biological entity as we understand such things. It was more of a living symbol, in some way guided by intelligence. Or maybe it was actually a body that I was seeing through an input strategy and therefore observing what it is before it focuses into a physical form. Had I seen it through an output strategy, maybe it would have appeared as a creature.

I looked down, and the vertical oval now covered my feet with blackness. I thought at once, "If I don't move, it will enter me."

Another moment had arrived like the nine knocks, the confrontation in the woods in 1987 and the time the entity got between my legs in 2017. All three of those times had caused a fear response and a refusal of the call.

This time there was a very different feeling. It felt as if the entity lying across my feet was beseeching me for entry into my body. What would that mean, though? I thought perhaps it would be too much to give up to let it into me so frankly and directly. It is one thing to commune during meditation, another to allow the actual, physical penetration of another consciousness. Much more of a challenge, to say the least. I had the sense that it wanted badly to do this, but also that it was begging that it would not force itself on me.

I moved my feet back slightly, and it at once disappeared. For a time, I continued with the sensing exercise. The next thing I knew, I was in a sort of waking dream. There was a man pointing a big silver gun at my face. However, it wasn't real. I could see clearly that the barrel was plugged. In fact, it looked like the sort of toy gun I used to play with as a child.

The event then ended. It was once again just me, the shadowy hotel room and the distant hiss of night traffic on the highway outside. I continued the meditation for a short time then returned to bed. I slept the limitless sleep of a child.

To me, this communication, coming just as I was finishing this book, meant that they want deeper communion—in fact, that there is a demand there, although a gentle one.

They are not going to force anything, and there is also an element of play involved. Thus, the use of a child's toy that represents a lethal weapon.

Back at home the next night, I felt regret for the conditions I had placed on the entity. Again, I asked for guidance.

The next night, things returned to normal. Before the early morning meditation, there sometimes appears hanging in a line on the window beside my bed a series of hieroglyphics. They are not Egyptian and are generally only there for a moment. I do not understand them, and so far I cannot say that I have seen the same sequence twice. This happens only a few times in a year, and it happened that night. What it signifies, I don't know, but as soon as I saw it, I went to do the meditation, which became so deep that it was as if I was sitting in another world and in this one at the same time.

I let my body be open to the need I sense is there.

If I had continued to refuse, would the plea have become more forceful? Would the gun have become some sort of genuine threat? It's a question I cannot answer. I can only forge on, trusting myself and the visitors as best I can, never forgetting that communion is not about doing something new, but accepting something that has always been part of human life by bringing it into conscious awareness. When we do this, there is an exponential leap in richness for both sides. I know this because, on October 16, 2019, I finally allowed entry while I was in full consciousness. Not only that, I managed, quite by accident, to record the moment in audio.

As I've said, despite years of trying, I've had very little luck with video. On the afternoon of the 15th, I happened to see that there was such a thing as a "sleep recorder" app that records sounds made while you sleep. I thought that maybe I could experiment with this. When the evening of the 15th arrived, I sensed that the visitors might make a close appearance—not necessarily physical, but very close. After an extremely deep 11 PM sensing meditation that lasted the better part of an hour, I went to sleep. After the 3 AM meditation, as I was falling back to sleep, I felt weight come down onto my legs. Unlike what happened with the vesica piscis, I felt within me a calm sense of welcoming. I was open. Then I fell asleep.

In the morning, I listened to what the sleep recorder had picked up. To my astonishment, amid the predictable grunts and snores, there were some words. Just after 4, I say in a sleep-dense voice, "What is that?" Then, a second or so later, still coming up from sleep, "Oh, Mature." Another few seconds pass and I say in an entirely different voice, rich with pleasure and

anticipation, full of sensual joy, “Teach me, Mature.” A short time later, there is a little sigh that does not sound like me. It sounds feminine. A sound expert has analyzed it, although not too deeply, and also feels that it is feminine. But there was no woman there.

Or was there? After about fifteen minutes of silence, I am heard grieving for Anne.

Let me explain what I understand of what happened. First, the use of the word “Mature” as a name. I think that it is used in place of “Master” because that word is too ego-charged. My sense is that the visitors prefer a word like Mature, which indicates somebody who has no need to drop into the physical world again. In other words, what we would call an ascended master.

Except for the sigh, the entity never makes a physical sound. In my experience, there have been almost no physical words. “Have joy” and perhaps a few others. What I remember is a sense of intense intellectual contact causing pleasure that was almost sexual in nature. If you can imagine an exploration of ideas so beautiful and intense that it was like a form of spiritual sex, that might be in the direction of what I felt.

I think that this whole book might have been examined in those few moments. I think that, unlike *Communion*, which they more-or-less laughed at, it was accepted as a useful effort. (You will find the story of their reaction to *Communion* in *Transformation* and *Super Natural*. Suffice to say that they let an editor at William Morrow & Company know that I’d gotten a lot wrong, and found the book nothing more than amusing...but, of course, at the same time they honored my effort by appearing in front of the editor right in the middle of a bookstore, no less.)

I must not get this wrong, not this time. We urgently need to rise to a new level of coherence, which we cannot do except in deepest communion. And by “we” I mean all levels of entity, physical and other, human and other.

On the morning of October 27th, 2019, I had an encounter that felt physical and also ambiguous—in other words, an encounter with what life in communion will be like.

You will recall the short man who lurked in the woods in upstate New York and then outside our condo in Texas. I saw him again, but this time in a very much better state. He looked clean and calm and happy. His eyes were shining. He was not smoking, and opened his mouth and showed me the pink tongue of a child. Then I saw a woman with a lovely, sweet face. I couldn’t tell if they were physical or not. I did not seem to be dreaming, but they were

also not plainly standing beside the bed. They were in a place that will, I suspect, become more familiar as we go deeper into communion, which is the quintessential “dangerous perhaps,” the uneasy edge between our ordinary world and the greater mystery in which it is embedded. The woman seemed at once a stranger and yet also very familiar to me, and seeing her inspired a poignant sense of memory. I asked her, “How long have you known me?” She replied, “Since you were born.”

And then it ended. I slipped into sleep and they into the ocean that tosses beneath the lives of us all. He is transformed, that poor boy who followed me in the mysteries of the night, a very real person in possession of tools of mind that enabled him to enter into places in me where he did not belong. Now, as I have found peace, his pain has also released its grip on him and he has become a tender child.

It’s impossible, of course. He would be thirty now, or more. Nobody like that could live very long. Somewhere in some shadowy place, I am sure his bones lie, maybe buried, maybe not. And her, what of her? All in white, she stood, a girl like a drop of sunlight, a young mother I thought, and I felt her as a mother. But she cannot be mine.

In those few minutes, I was under the water of life, in a place that communion must inevitably take us, where our demons and angels dance together, sweetly singing and beckoning us to walk the cliffs of knowledge, ever closer to the edge.

There it ended, and I think that this lovely, gentle experience perfectly illustrates what I have been suggesting throughout this book, which is that, if we are to proceed beyond contact and into communion, we are going to have to embrace the fundamental ambiguity of consciousness itself, and accept the mystery that is all around us as the “immense great benevolence” that the attendee who saw me briefly disappear at the conference perceived during her experience.

It is morning now. There is bright sun. I can smell smoke from distant fires. Later, I will begin another night’s journey, open now to embrace and no longer afraid. Night before last, as happens often now, a presence settled down on my body. This time, though, it had more weight and substance than ever before. I opened my eyes but could see nothing. I could only feel it there. The weight was solid and very real. I was open and ready. But it gently lifted away.

In just these few months since the encounter with the vesica piscis, I feel

that I have finally gone beyond fear. I see how the boundaries with which we define ourselves are its real source, for they don't actually exist and we know it, and facing our borderless, wandering reality feels very close to ceasing to exist. Communion, in this sense, feels like death, which is why Jeff Kripal was so devastated by even a brief second of it on that night at Esalen. But we have no boundaries. There is only one of us—alien, human, living, dead, whatever. What we are is a wave-front of consciousness, speeding into the unknown.

When you embrace this ambiguity as yourself, you discover the abiding peace the Hindus call *shanti*. It makes no sense. It reconciles nothing. And yet everything within you, all the fears, the angers, the hatreds, the lusts, the disappointments, the ambitions, all that lies within the scope of your life, comes to rest, and you know that you have found your heart.

It is what Anne meant when she said, "Enlightenment is what happens when there is nothing left of us but love." When all that you have been fighting against and for is stripped away, your nakedness that has so frightened you for so long, is soothed by the gauze of angels.

It's not easy, though. The first step out of oneself and into communion is a very hard one to take. Open, innocent surrender to the enormous presence that underlies reality is never going to be easy, and it is never going to be certain. But it is also a priceless resource, offering a path into greater knowledge, a new science that is more true because it includes more of what is real, philosophical understanding that feeds the mind with the stuff of truth, and limitless expansion of the scope of mankind.

This series of interactions I have just described is a perfect example of how communication with the visitors unfolds. I asked a question and was answered with a series of demonstrations. The first manifestation forced its way into me. The second beseeched, then suggested that a threat was possible if I continued to refuse it entry. I felt an acute sense of failure and sought to open myself. When it came back this time, I did not resist.

And now here I am face to face with what seems to me to be something of great beauty, at once real and unreal, a challenge, as it were, from Stevenson's land of counterpane, the sweet winds of Asphodel singing to my heart.

Still, practical, crucial questions remain. Will the visitors come closer? Can they ever be physically real enough to matter as more than hypothesis? In other words, will the conjuring that is this book work? If so, will they turn

out to be impossible for us to bear, or will they become in general life something like the engine of joy that is beginning to seek toward me?

If these questions are to be addressed usefully, the visitors cannot just come to me, sly in the whispering night, not anymore. The visitors must open the doors of their school wide, to us all. We have a planet to lose and our lives along with it, or we have a journey to take.

Which shall it be? The decision belongs to all of us and each of us, and to them. Shall we join in what is essentially a new world and a new way of life, or do they disappear into the dark and we into the storm?

We must decide, and now, and so must they. It is time.

The End

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Whitley Strieber is the author of over 40 books, including the Communion series: Communion, Transformation and Breakthrough, and now the final book in the series, A New World.

Among his notable nonfiction titles are The Key, Solving the Communion Enigma and Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained.

His most famous novels are The Wolfen, The Hunger, Warday, Superstorm and The Grays. His novel series Alien Hunter was made into the TV series Hunters for the SciFi Channel, The Wolfen and The Hunger were both made into films, as was Superstorm (As The Day After Tomorrow.)

